

The Ghost of the Priory!



By
Owen Conquest.

THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN

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Jimmy Silver & Co.

CHAPTER I.
Startling News!

"TWO thousand quid!" Jimmy Silver, the captain of the Rookwood Fourth, uttered those words in tones of the deepest dismay.

"Two thousand quid! Oh, my hat!"

The end study in the Fourth Form passage at Rookwood looked very bright and merry. It was the day before break-up, and the Fistical Four had gathered for the last tea of the term.

There was a cheerful fire in the grate, there was holly on the walls, and there was an unusually excellent spread on the study table. Lovell, with a ruddy face, was making toast, Newcome was opening a new pot of jam, George Raby was buttering toast as fast as Arthur Edward Lovell made it. And Jimmy Silver was reading a letter from home.

His cheeks looked round at him.

"Two thousand quid!" repeated Lovell.

Jimmy nodded.

"Somebody sent you that for a Christmas present?" inquired Arthur Edward humorously.

"No, sir!"

"Lost it?" asked Raby, also humorously.

"Let it slip through a hole in your pocket! Careless!"

"Fithend!" said Jimmy politely.

"Won it in a raffle?" asked Newcome.

"Oh, don't cut!" said Jimmy Silver.

"This is jolly serious. This letter is from my paier."

The Co. became serious at once. On the morrow the four juniors were to leave Rookwood together for Jimmy Silver's home, in company with Mornington of the Fourth. They had been looking forward weekly to the Christmas holidays, and news

from Jimmy's home came rather as a damper.

"You fellows remember a giddy picture at my place, hanging in the library?" asked Jimmy. "It hung over my pater's desk. Looked like a sort of smudge with all the colours of the rainbow bunged in!"

"I noticed it once," said Lovell. "What about it?"

"It's been pinched!"

"Pincher must have wanted something to occupy his time, then," said Lovell, with a stare. "It wasn't worth anything, was it?"

"Only two thousand pounds!" answered Jimmy Silver, slightly sarcastically.

Lovell jumped.

"That blessed smudge worth two thousand pounds!" he yelled.

"Just that! An American collector offered the pater that sum for it once," said Jimmy. "You see, it was a giddy Rembrandt. Now somebody has stolen it. The poor old pater is so end cut up, though he doesn't say much; that smudge was the apple of his eye. By Jove! I'd like to get within hitting distance of the lighter that pinched it!"

"Not likely to, if it's worth two thousand pounds," said Baby. "I say, will this make any difference about the vac? Your pater mayn't want to be bothered by even a nice set of boys like us, in the circus."

Jimmy shook his head.

"Not that's all right. The pater expects us to-morrow and he says specially he'll be very glad to see Mornington—"

"Good!" said a voice in the doorway. "That shows excellent taste on the part of your pater, Jimmy."

And Valentine Mornington lounged into the end study.

"Just in time, old bean," said Lovell, rising from the glowing fire with a face like a beetroot. "That's enough toast, Baby. I say, Jimmy, I'm awfully sorry about the smudge. Perhaps it will cheer your pater up to see us, though."

"Perhaps!" murmured Newcome.

"Bad news!" asked Morry.

Jimmy Silver explained. The five juniors sat down to tea. Bad news was bad news, but tea was tea; and the chums of the Rookwood Fourth were hungry. It was simply rotten that such a misfortune should happen on the eve of the Christmas vacation; the juniors agreed on that

Unless the stolen picture was recovered, Mr. Silver's own Christmas was likely to be a worried one, and Jimmy could scarcely help being worried in sympathy. But the captain of the Fourth tried to clear his face and to talk cheerfully. He was taking his friends home for the holidays, and he did not want to be a wet blanket at his own party.

"I dare say they'll get it back," said Mornington. "I suppose the police are on the job?"

"Yes, that's so."

"I should think a stolen picture would be traced easily enough," said Lovell.

"It's value is in being a Rembrandt, not in being a smudge. Chap who bagged it will have to sell it as a Rembrandt, not as a smudge. Well, all the Rembrandt pictures are known and catalogued. I don't see how the rotter will be able to sell it at all. No dealer would touch it."

"Some collectors will touch it, though," said Jimmy ruefully. "Some giddy collectors aren't particular how they lay hands on what they collect. Once it's smuggled to a foreign country, it will find a sale quickly enough; in fact, most likely it's been stolen to fill an order from some unscrupulous art collector—the pater thinks so. When the rotter gets it, he'll keep it dark, and gloat over it in secret."

"Must be an art!" commented Lovell.

"When did it happen?" asked Mornington.

"It was missing from the frame when my pater came down yesterday morning," said Jimmy. "Cut out of the frame, you know. The police found that a window had been forced; no other clue that's known, so far."

"Then the thief's far enough away by this time," remarked Newcome.

"Looks like it!"

"It's rotten!"

Mornington looked very thoughtful.

"But with a thing of that value in the room, surely your pater took some sort of precaution, Jimmy," he said. "Wasn't there a burglar-alarm, or anything?"

"Yes; electric. It didn't work as it happens."

"Why not?"

"I suppose the thief must have managed to disconnect it somehow. It ought to have rung when the window was opened, but it didn't."

"That's odd."

"Well, such things do happen," said Jimmy. "Electric bells don't always ring when they ought."

"That's different," said Morny. "Electric bells are often run on a wet battery that peters out at the wrong moment and wants shaking up. But a burglar-alarm would be on the house current. The electric lights hadn't petered out, had they?"

"I suppose not."

"Then the current was all right, and the alarm ought to have rung," said Mornington. "A thief from outside couldn't have got at it without opening the window—which would have set it off. Is there anybody inside the house who might have had a hand in it?"

Jimmy Silver started.

"The pater doesn't seem to have thought of that," he said. "The police may have, of course. But—"

"Good man, Morny!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "I'll tell you what, Jimmy—we'll take the matter in hand when we get there to-morrow. If there's anything in Morny's idea, we'll spot the man at once. I could do that on my head."

"How?" demanded Jimmy.

"Why, if a servant or anybody has bagged that picture, of course he's bolted with it," he said. "If we find that somebody has cleared off suddenly, that's the man! What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Morny.

Lovell stared at Mornington.

"Where does the cackle come in?" he demanded.

"Well, if some servant bolted the same time that the picture disappeared, I fancy the police would have been on his track long before this," chuckled Morny.

"The police don't think of everything," said Lovell. "You can see that from reading any detective story."

"I fancy they'd think of somethin' as obvious as that," said Morny. "If the thief's in the house, about the last thing he would do would be to bolt, unless he wants to feel the handcuffs on his wrists."

"Um!" said Lovell.

"That's where we come in, though," said Mornington. "We'll jolly well look into the matter, Jimmy, when we get there."

Jimmy Silver smiled and nodded. He was already thinking himself, of looking into the matter. But he could not help

thinking that a party of Rookwood juniors were not likely to have much luck in seeking for the purloiner of the missing Rembrandt.

CHAPTER 2.

Home for the Holidays!

ROOKWOOD School broke up next day.

Crowded brakes bore the crowds of fellows to the station. For hours the old quad rang with footsteps and cheery voices, gradually to fall into silence and solitude.

At Latcham Junction the Fictical Four and Mornington parted from a crowd of their friends, and took their own train. The winter afternoon was growing dusky when they alighted at Hadley Priory, the village close by Jimmy Silver's home, the Priory. Jimmy Silver's face was rather grave and thoughtful as he led his flock into the house. But his father met the Rookwood guests with a calm and cheerful face. Whatever he was feeling about his loss, the old gentleman locked in his own breast, and did not allow it to cast a shadow over the Christmas festivities. And his cheerful, smiling look relieved his son and his son's comrades.

Mr. Silver presided at the tea-table with a smiling face also; and cousin Phyllis, who was there for Christmas, was very bright.

After tea, Mr. Silver retired to the library; and Jimmy Silver & Co. went out for a tramp in the frosty grounds round the Priory. But they did not stay out long. All the juniors were keen to know the precise details of the robbery at the Priory; and all of them had a vague hope that they might be able to do something. How Mr. Silver was likely to accept an offer of assistance in the affair from a party of schoolboys was rather a question; but anyhow, the Rookwooders were going to help if they could.

"We'll put it to your pater, Jimmy," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "We'll make him tell us just what happened and all the clues, and so on; then we'll go on to try and unravel the mysterious robbery."

"Hem!" murmured Jimmy.

"It won't do any harm, if it doesn't do any good," remarked Baby.

"Something in that!" assented Jimmy.

And having made up their minds, the Rockwood party made their way to the library. Mr. Silver was not alone there. A plump young man in spectacles was seated at a desk, pen in hand, apparently busy; while Mr. Silver, in an armchair by the blazing log fire, had his eyes fixed on an empty frame that hung on the wall. It was the frame from which the missing Rembrandt had been cut, and fragments of the gashed canvas still adhered to the wood. The expression on the old gentleman's face was extremely mournful; but it changed as the juniors appeared, and he smiled and nodded.

The fat young man glanced up from his papers for a moment, and then rose to his feet. Jimmy glanced at him.

"Come in, my boys!" said Mr. Silver cordially. "You have not met Mr. Spencer before, I think, Jimmy. My secretary."

Mr. Spencer made the juniors a bow with a good-humoured smile on his fat face, blinking at them through his big spectacles in a rather owlish way.

"I am very pleased to meet Master Jimmy," he said in a rich, fruity voice. "Perhaps you would prefer, sir, to leave these accounts till later?"

"Busy, dad?" asked Jimmy.

"We are going through some of the estate accounts," said Mr. Silver, with a smile. "I wish to get everything in order before Mr. Spencer leaves for his Christmas holiday, and he goes on Christmas Eve. But we can spare a few minutes."

He looked inquiringly at the juniors, evidently in expectation of some explanation of the call.

"Go it, Lovell!" murmured Raby.

Arthur Edward hesitated.

"Pile in, old chap!" said Nawoome.

Mr. Silver looked puzzled.

"The—the fact is, sir—" stammered Lovell.

"Yes?"

"About the robbery, sir—"

"Oh," said Mr. Silver. "Jimmy has told you, I suppose. There is no news from the police, so far."

"That isn't all," said Lovell. "The fact is, we want to help."

"Help!" repeated Mr. Silver, in astonishment, while the secretary blinked curiously at the junior through his big spectacles.

Lovell reddened. But he stuck to his guns.

"You see, we're Boy Scouts, sir," he said. "I don't see why we can't help. It would make it no end of a jolly Christmas if we could bag that smudge."

"That what?"

"That picture, I mean—the giddy Rembrandt," said Lovell hastily.

"Oh!"

"We've talked it over," continued Lovell, a little disconcerted by Mr. Silver's amazement, and by the secretary's half-concealed grin. "We've got an idea on the subject."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Silver. "If—if you can—can help, the police will be under a deep obligation to you. What is the idea?"

Lovell went on:

"Why, sir, we think the burglar-alarm ought to have rung, and so we've a suspicion that there was somebody inside the house who had a hand in it."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir, and if somebody has suddenly left since the robbery, we want to get on his track."

"Bless my soul! But nobody has left."

"Oh!" said Lovell.

"As for this idea of yours in connection with the burglar-alarm, the same thought, naturally, occurred to Inspector Stenson, of Denwood, who has taken up the case."

"Oh!" said Lovell. "The police thought of it!"

"Naturally!"

"Ahem!"

"Every member of the household has been questioned," said Mr. Silver, with a slightly amused smile. "If any person had left, undoubtedly the police would have made a very strict examination of that person. On Mr. Spencer's suggestion, too, a search was made of all the rooms, in order to clear everybody in the household of possible suspicion. Not that I suspected for a moment that any member of the household could have been guilty of complicity in the robbery. As for the alarm not working, that is easily explained."

"How is it explained, sir?" asked Mornington.

"The burglar cut a piece of glass from the window, reached through, and cut the wire. That placed the alarm out of action."

Moray glanced towards the library window.

"The damage was repaired after the police had finished here," said Mr. Silver, with a faint smile. "I am afraid there is nothing left for amateur investigation."

The juniors looked at one another. Mr. Spencer lowered his face over his business papers, to conceal his grin.

Mr. Silver tried not to smile, but did not quite succeed. The Rookwooders looked, as they felt, sheepish.

"So there's nothing doing," remarked Jimmy.

"I fear not."

Jimmy Silver & Co. retired from the library. Two smiling faces were bent over the accounts when they had gone. The offer of the Rookwooders to supplement the action of the police had at least had the effect of cheering up Mr. James Silver.

CHAPTER 3.

Lovell Has His Way.

"**R**URRISH, old chap!" said Jimmy Silver uneasily.

"Boosh!" retorted Lovell.

"But you can't—"

"I can!"

"But—"

"It's settled!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, in a tone of finality.

And Cousin Phyllis, coming along to the firelight where the Rookwooders sat talking, asked what the argument was about.

"Lovell's keen on playing the goat," explained Jimmy Silver.

"As per usual!" remarked Baby.

Phyllis laughed.

"I'm going to sleep in the haunted room to-night," Lovell explained. "Jimmy promised that I should, if I wanted to, and I'm keeping him to it. I've said I would, and I'm going to."

Phyllis' eyes opened wide.

"But—" she said.

"Why, if I backed out, these chaps would make out that I'd got cold feet," said Lovell indignantly. "I've said all the term that I'm going to do it, and I'm jolly well going to. I held Jimmy to it."

"But the haunted room is never used," said Phyllis. "I believe it's very cold and draughty."

"I'm not soft," said Lovell.

"Lovell's an ass," said Jimmy, with a sigh. "I said I'd let him if he wanted to; but he doesn't really want to. In the middle of the night there will be yells for help."

"There won't!" roared Lovell.

"I jolly well shan't turn out to go for the ghost," declared Baby. "If you wake up the ghost, Lovell, you can deal with him."

Lovell snorted.

"You jolly well know there's no such thing as a ghost," he said. "The haunted room is all rot, and I'm going to prove it by sleeping in the blessed room. The ghost always walks at Christmas time, according to the yarn Jimmy spun us. Well, I'm going to prove that he jolly well doesn't walk."

"But—" said Jimmy.

"Uncle James' giddy word is his bond," chuckled Lovell. "You've told me I can camp in the haunted room while I'm here, if I like. Well, I do like! The haunted room for me!"

Jimmy Silver looked thoughtful, and a little worried.

In the cheery firelight, amid his cheery companions, Arthur Edward Lovell was full of cheery confidence. But Jimmy could not help thinking that in the dead of night Lovell would feel quite differently. The haunted room at the Priory was at a little distance from the inhabited part of the rambling old building. It was seldom or never entered; and though Jimmy did not believe, of course, that the phantom of the murdered Prior haunted the scene of his unhappy despatch, he himself would not have cared to pass a night alone in the room.

There was nothing to be afraid of, certainly. But a lonely midnight, with the winter wind howling round the old roofs, the solitude of the haunted room was quite likely to get on a fellow's nerves.

But Lovell was not much given to reflection; he seldom looked ahead. He had said that he was going to put up in the haunted room, and he was quite determined on it. Jimmy's half-forgotten promise had to be kept if Lovell insisted—and Lovell did insist, most emphatically.

Phyllis looked grave, too. She could not help thinking that Lovell would repent of his rashness when he was alone in the haunted room in the dark, still hours.

THE GHOST OF THE PRIORY

"Suppose we go and look at the room," she suggested. "I have not seen it for ages. It is a very interesting room, at least. The furniture has not been changed for a hundred years or more."

"Let's!" said Jimmy at once.

He divined Phyllis' thought, that after seeing the lonely old room Lovell would probably change his mind.

"Come on, then," said Lovell cheerily.

"We shall want a light," remarked Jimmy Silver. "There's no electric light in the room. I'll get a bike lantern."

"And I've got a torch," said Lovell.

In a few minutes the five juniors and Cousin Phyllis were in the old oak-walled corridor that led to the haunted room. The windows in the corridor looked on the grounds, dim with the December mist. There were four rooms on the corridor, but none of them in use. Three were in a dismantled state; but the haunted room was still in order—it was cared for on account of its historical associations.

Once upon a time, according to the legend, there had been a Prior, who was murdered when the estate was taken possession of by a favourite of Henry VIII. The ghost of the slain Prior haunted the scene of the crime—walking when the snow was on the ground, so the legend declared. And the grounds about the Priory were now white with snow; so it was time for the ghost to walk, if there was any truth in the story.

The heavy old oak door was pushed open, and the lights gleamed into the room. It was a large room, with oak-panelled walls, and a heavy old bedstead with a canopy occupied a large portion of one wall. The furniture was ancient and heavy—of dark oak.

Jimmy held up the bike lantern, and two or three electric-torches were turned on. The room was cold, though not damp. It struck rather a chill to the juniors, though Lovell would not admit as much, even to himself. He laughed as he stepped into the room, and his laugh rang in a rather hollow way, with a dull echo.

"Shivery, isn't it?" said Ruby.

"Not at all," answered Lovell.

"The original bloodstains are here, or supposed to be here," said Jimmy. "Look!"

He turned the light upon the dark oak planks of the floor. Certainly the old wood was discoloured in several places.

"That's where the old Prior fell—with

a sword through him," said Jimmy, indicating the centre of the room.

"I don't think!" said Lovell decisively.

"The murderer slept in the room the same night," continued Jimmy impressively. "In the morning he was found a gibbering maniac."

"Down now!"

"Now, look here, Lovell—"

"I'm sticking to it," said Lovell. "That old bedstead looks jolly comfy. I can camp here first-rate."

"And we'll find you a gibbering lunatic in the morning," remarked Newcome. "We shan't notice much difference."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rate!" said Lovell.

"Well, if you really mean it, old chap, I'll speak to the mater, and we'll get the room fixed up," said Jimmy.

"Boosh! Leave it as it is!" said Lovell.

"I don't want to give a lot of trouble; only to sleep in the haunted room."

"You're not going to catch a cold for Christmas, are?"

The view of the haunted room had evidently not changed Lovell's determination. If there was any change, he was more determined than ever. As a matter of fact, it was too late for Lovell to retreat; for, unwilling as his chums were to let him have his reckless way, there was no doubt that Arthur Edward would have been considerably clipped if he had retreated from his declared intention.

That was more than enough to make Lovell obstinate. If he felt any inward doubts, he gave no sign of them.

So Jimmy Silver approached his mater diplomatically on the subject, and when the good lady found that a promise was involved, she ceased to object to the idea. As Mrs. Silver had resided at the Priory for twenty years without seeing or hearing anything of the ghost, she did not take the phantom Prior very seriously. She only thought that Master Lovell was a foolish young fellow, in which, no doubt, she was quite right.

So a huge log fire was built on the ancient hearth of the haunted room, and a new bed was arranged on the ancient oaken bedstead and Arthur Edward's baggage was transferred to the room.

A large lamp was placed on the table, illuminating the room. By that time the old apartment looked very cosy and cheery, and Lovell was comforted in his resolve.

He was unpacking his bags in the room,

in dress for dinner, when there were foot-steps in the echoing corridor, and a tap came at the door.

"Trot in!" called out Lovell.

To his surprise, it was Mr. Spencer who entered.

Lovell looked inquiringly at the fat young man. What Mr. Silver's secretary could want with him was a puzzle.

"Pray excuse me, Master Lovell," said the young man, blinking at the junior in his owlish way through his big spectacles. "I hear that you are going to pass the night in this room."

"That's correct," said Lovell.

"You are aware that it is haunted?"

Lovell laughed.

"I've heard the yarn," he said. "That's why I'm going to sleep in the room. Do you believe in ghosts, then?"

The secretary blinked at him curiously.

"You have a great deal of nerve for a schoolboy," he said. "Perhaps I am taking a liberty, as I know you so little, Master Lovell, but I should like to advise you strongly not to pass the night in this room."

"Why not?"

"Its associations—"

"What rot!" said Lovell. "I'm going to stay in this room all the while I stay at the Priory. I've said I would. I'm not nervous, I can tell you. And I don't believe a word of that yarn about the murdered Prior."

"That is a mistake," said Mr. Spencer quietly. "Since I have been in Mr. Silver's service I have examined a good many old records in the library. There is no doubt that Prior Aylmer was murdered in this very room, and the body was buried at night in the fields, in unconsecrated ground. And there are records of the phantom having been seen."

"Boh!" said Lovell.

"It is quite certain that on a Christmas twenty-five years ago a guest in the house passed a night in this room, out of bravado," said Spencer. "At midnight he ran out of the room, shrieking in fright. This is known to Mr. Silver, who was here at the time."

"Boh!" repeated Lovell, rather uneasily, however. "I dare say the chap had been keeping up Christmas a bit too merrily."

"Possibly," assented the secretary. "I thought it my duty to warn you. It

will be a severe test for your nerves, alone here, in the dead of night—"

"My nerves are all right," said Lovell carelessly. "Thanks all the same."

And he turned to his unpacking, and Spencer quitted the room. Arthur Edward Lovell came down cheerily for dinner. He found Mr. Silver looking grave. The old gentleman tapped Lovell on the shoulder.

"I think you would be wise not to sleep in the haunted room, Lovell," he said kindly. "Jimmy tells me it is a promise, or I should be strongly inclined to forbid you to do so. At least, it would be wise to have one of your friends with you." He paused a moment, then, as Lovell did not speak, he added: "Of course, the ghost story is all moonshine; if I thought otherwise, I could not allow this. I shall, of course, let you have your own way."

"Thank you, sir!" said Lovell.

And Lovell had his way. It was one of the weaknesses of Arthur Edward Lovell that he always knew best and consequently considered it always judicious to have his own way, and sometimes that little failing had landed Arthur Edward into trouble.

CHAPTER 4.

The Ghost Walks!

"WELL, good-night, old chap!"

Lovell smiled sorely.

Jimmy Silver & Co. escorted Arthur Edward as far as the haunted room when bed-time came. They felt rather reluctant to leave him there.

The logs still blazed on the wide old hearth, the flames reflected on the massive oak furniture and the bed canopy. The lamp burned steadily, casting a subdued light through the room. Certainly it looked very cosy and comfortable. But Lovell, though he smiled, was not feeling so cheery as his smile would have indicated. During the evening, Mr. Spencer had filled up a thrilling half-hour by relating the history of the ghost of the murdered Prior, and Mr. Eustace Spencer had an effective way of telling a story.

Christmas, certainly, was the time for ghost stories, and the Priory party had quite enjoyed the thrilling narrative. But now that he was in the haunted room, Lovell rather wished that Spencer had found some more exhilarating topic. But

nothing would have induced Lovell to betray a hint of uneasiness.

"Good-night, you fellows," he said carelessly.

"Sure you won't change your mind, old fellow?" asked Mornington.

"No fear."

"Look here, one of us had better peg in with you," said Jimmy.

"Rats! Nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

"No. But——"

"Dear old man, my nerves are all right," said Lovell. "Wouldn't you jolly well cackle if I changed my mind?"

"Well, you are an ass, all the same," said Baby.

"Bow-wow!"

The juniors had departed at last. Lovell closed the door of the oak room and walked across to the fire.

The blazing fire was a comfort. The leaping flames banished the seriousness of the haunted room.

"It's rot!" said Lovell. "Utter rot!"

He was in no hurry to turn in, however. He stood and watched the flickering flames for some time; and then he gave a sudden start as a faint creak sounded from somewhere.

Lovell spun round, looking about him with startled eyes. The blood rushed to his heart. He realised at that moment that his friends were the length of a long corridor away from him, and that there was no help at hand—if anything happened.

Then he burst into a laugh. What could happen?

"I'm getting nervy," he muttered. "All because of that secretary ass and his silly ghost stories. B-r-r-r-r!"

He crossed to the door to lock it. Somehow, the thought of the long, dark, deserted corridor without and the empty rooms made him desirous of securing the door. He felt a sense of relief as he turned the big, old-fashioned key in the lock.

Then—though he would not have let his chums see him so occupied—Lovell explored the room, looking into the deep, old wardrobe in the wall, and even under the bed. By that time the rest of the household had gone to bed, and it was close on midnight. Lovell realised that he was getting more and more nervy, and he wisely resolved to turn in and forget the ghost story in slumber. He was sleepy, fortunately.

He hesitated whether to turn off the lamp. Undoubtedly he would have pre-

ferred a light if he had awakened. But leaving the lamp alight was a confession of nerves; there was nothing to be afraid of. With a firm hand Lovell turned out the lamp.

The room was lighted now only by the flickering of the fire that cast ghostly lights and shadows on the glimmering old walls. Lovell felt his heart beating uncomfortably. He realised that this was quite different from what he had anticipated. The solitude and silence seemed oppressive to themselves. He told himself angrily that there was nothing to fear, but he could not ignore the fact that his nerves were getting jumpy. He plunged into bed and had to exert his will-power to refrain from pulling the bedclothes over his face.

It was some time before Lovell slept.

The thought came into his mind of the burglary of a few nights before, when the Rembrandt had been stolen, but he did not mind thinking of that. The haunted room, safely locked, was secure from burglars, at least. Lovell tried, in fact, to think of the burglars in order to keep from his mind Eustace Spencer's shuddery narrative of the phantom Prior. But, somehow or other, the ghost story would recur to his mind.

The old house was full of strange sounds in the bitter December wind that whistled and sang about it. Even the old oak wainscot creaked. Lovell shut his eyes hard, determined to sleep.

He slept at last.

But the ghost story was still in his mind, and it recurred in his dreams. In his troubled sleep he lived through the scene that had been enacted in that very room hundreds of years before: the murdered man sinking on the old oak planks, which were drenched with his blood—and the murderer starting out of slumber, in that very bed, to see the ghostly figure gliding in the dimness, with an accusing finger raised to point—

Lovell stirred and turned and numbed in his troubled sleep. And suddenly he awoke, with his heart throbbing and a sense of nameless fear upon him.

He lay quite still, trying to collect himself.

The fire had died almost out; only a faint rasy glow from the embers on the hearth pervaded the room.

Lovell lay and stared into the darkness, his heart beating in painful throbs, his

very flesh creeping. For he knew that he was not alone in the room.

It was not his nerves merely; he knew that.

There was no sound save the faint fall of an ember in the grate. Faint as it was, it sounded almost like thunder in Lovell's frothing ears. And—was that a sound that followed it?

A faint, swishing sound—a sound as of a dragging robe on wood. Lovell heard it, and his heart almost ceased to beat.

For some moments he remained still, motionless, paralysed. Then, with a hoarse cry, he sprang up in bed.

With staring eyes he gazed out from under the old canopy.

What was it he saw?

With reeling brain, he stared at it. A figure in trailing robes of white—a dead white face with staring eyes—a hand that was raised to point—that fearful figure stood by the bedside, and the junior's horrified eyes fixed upon it in utter terror.

Another ember fell, and for an instant a flame shot up and the room was bright. In the red light Lovell saw the figure distinctly—the white trailing robes—the white, dead, awful face—the glittering eyes that held his own with mesmeric intensity. Then the light died as suddenly as it had arisen, and all was dark.

Lovell sank back in the bed, almost fainting. Something touched him—and at that touch the unhappy junior hurled himself from the bed, screaming and striking out with clenched fists. But his hands sawed only the empty air.

There was a faint rustle as of trailing garments. Then silence—save for Lovell's frantic cries.

"Help! Help! Help!"

Loud and clear, in tones of fearful terror, the cries rang through the sleeping house from the haunted room.

"Help! Help! Help!"

CHAPTER L

The Alarm!

"HELP!"

Jimmy Silver opened his eyes and blinked round him drowsily in the darkness of the room.

From somewhere, far off in the December night, a cry rang in his ears—unless it was a dream.

"Help! Help!"

Loud and sharp, high above the howl of the winter wind, came that frantic cry.

It was the voice of Lovell—Lovell, who was sleeping alone in the Haunted Room at the farther end of a deserted corridor!

Jimmy leaped from his bed.

Something was wrong with Lovell—something very wrong. Jimmy switched up the electric light in his room. A door from the next room opened, and Valentine Mornington looked in with a startled face.

"You're awake, Jimmy. That's Lovell!"

"Something's up!" said Jimmy breathlessly. "I'm going to see. Come along, Morny!"

The night was bitterly cold, but Jimmy Silver stayed only to throw on a coat over his pyjamas. Then he opened the door on the corridor and ran out, with Morny at his heels.

Raby and Newcome emerged into the passage from their rooms at the same moment.

"It's Lovell!" exclaimed Newcome. "The silly ass has got a fright! I warned him."

"He's dreamed of the ghost!" said Raby. "Help! Help!"

Louder sounded the frantic calling from the haunted room. The same thoughts was in the minds of all the juniors—that Lovell, awakening in the darkness in the haunted room, had lost his nerve, and was shrieking for help in unreasoning terror. Jimmy Silver fairly raced into the next corridor, and along it to the old oak door of the haunted room. No light gleamed there; all was dark within. The corridor itself was dark; the electric light was not installed in that disused portion of the old house.

Jimmy grasped for the door-handle. Within, the wild cries of Lovell were incessant.

"Help! Help! Help!"

A flash of light came in the corridor. Mornington had turned on an electric pocket-lamp.

Jimmy turned the handle, but the door did not open. He wrenched at the big knob, but the door remained fast. It was locked on the inside.

"Lovell!" shouted Jimmy.

"Help!"

"Let us in!"

"What can have happened to him, with

"the door locked!" gasped Raby. "It's only fright. It can't be anything else."

Thump, thump, thump!

Jimmy Silver hammered on the door.

"Let us in, Lovell! Unlock the door, old chap!"

The juniors heard Lovell groping his way in the dark room, and there was a rattle of the door-knob, then a click of the turning key.

The door opened.

Jimmy Silver & Co. crowded into the room.

Mornington held up the light. It shone on Lovell's face—white, drawn, fixed with terror.

Jimmy glanced round him hastily.

The room presented its usual aspect. There was nothing alarming to be seen apart from Lovell's terrified face.

Raby caught Lovell by the arm.

"What's the matter, old chap?"

"Did you see it?"

"What?"

"Did you see it?" panted Lovell.

"Did we see what?" asked Newcome.

"The ghost!"

Lovell covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out a terrible apparition. The chums of the Rockwood Fourth stared at one another. They had wondered what would be the result of Lovell's reckless temerity in sleeping alone in the Haunted Room—whether in the dark hours of the night he would be seized with sudden fright. Apparently their misgivings had been justified.

Jimmy led Lovell to the bed, and Lovell sat down on the edge of it, trembling in every limb.

"My hat!" murmured Raby, glancing round him uneasily. "He—he thinks he's seen something!"

"I did see it!" muttered Lovell huskily.

"Don't you fellows think I fancied it! I saw it!"

"What did you see?" asked Jimmy Silver quietly.

"A figure in white. It was in the room when I woke up!" said Lovell, with a shudder. "It—it stood beside my bed, pointing—"

He broke off, shivering from head to foot.

"You were dreaming, old chap!" murmured Newcome. "There's nothing here!"

Mornington was lighting the lamp. The

light filled the room, and showed up the ransomed bed, the glistening old oak furniture, the almost extinct embers on the wide hearth. But it showed nothing to account for Lovell's terror.

"I wasn't dreaming!" said Lovell in a broken voice. "I saw it—I tell you I saw it!"

"But——" said Raby.

"I saw it, I tell you!"

"What is the matter?"

Mr. Silver, in dressing-gown and slippers, looked in at the doorway. His face was very grave.

"Lovell thinks he's seen the ghost, sir," said Newcome.

"I saw it!" repeated Lovell.

Mr. Silver fixed a curious look on the white-faced junior, sitting shivering on the edge of the tumbled bed.

"It was foolish of you to occupy this room, Lovell," he said gently. "I was wrong to allow it. You must remove to another room for the remainder of the night, Lovell."

"I—I want to," murmured Lovell faintly.

"I—I wouldn't stay here alone for anything! But it wasn't a fancy, sir. I saw it—saw it quite plainly."

Mr. Silver did not reply in that. It was obvious that the old gentleman attributed the whole affair to nerves.

Lovell gave a haggard look at his chums. "You fellows think I've been scared about nothing!" he muttered.

"Well, old fellow——" said Jimmy.

"There's no such thing as ghosts, you know," said Raby.

"I don't say it was a ghost—now," said Lovell. "I—I thought it was when I saw it. But I saw it, ghost or not."

Mr. Silver's brow grew stern.

"Surely one of you boys has not been playing a trick?" he exclaimed.

"No fear!" answered Jimmy. "Besides, the door was locked when we got here. Lovell had to unlock it to let us in."

"Then no one can have entered the room," said Mr. Silver. "Come, you had better return with Jimmy to his room, Lovell at once."

There was a footstep in the corridor, and Estace Spencer, Mr. Silver's secretary, looked in. His fat face had a startled expression, and he was blinking through his big spectacles with a look of scared inquiry.

"I thought I heard a call for help——" he began.

"Probably you did, Spencer," said Mr. Silver dryly. "Lovell has been frightened, and he awoke all of us. Jimmy, you will see that Lovell does not remain in this room. Good-night, my boys."

And Mr. Silver departed, still polite, but obviously a little cross—to call a reassuring word through Phyllis' door, and then to acquaint Mrs. Silver with the fact that the alarm was due to nothing more than a foolish boy's fright. Lovell's white face reddened as the old gentleman went; he could read Mr. Silver's opinion easily enough.

"Come on, old chap," said Jimmy. "You can bunk in with me for the night."

"You must excuse me for remarking that you have acted very thoughtlessly, Master Lovell!" said Mr. Spencer, blinking at the Rockwood junior through his spectacles. "You have alarmed the whole house."

"I know that!" said Lovell gruffly.

"I think I had better go and speak to the servants," said Mr. Spencer. "I can hear one of the maids screaming. Really, Master Lovell, you should not do these things from a spirit of bravado."

Eustace Spencer walked away with that, leaving Lovell with a deeper colour in his cheeks. And he was not comforted by seeing a grin on the faces of his comrades.

CHAPTER 8.

The Watch in the Night!

VALENTINE MORNINGTON was roaming about the haunted room, looking into corners, and making a keen examination of the room. The other juniors hardly heeded him. Jimmy and Raby and Newcome were gathered round Lovell—upon whose face there was a far from pleasant expression. The secretary's words had stung him. Possibly it was from a spirit of bravado that Lovell had insisted upon occupying the haunted room, but it was no business of Mr. Silver's secretary to tell him so. What business was it of Spencer, anyhow? Lovell asked himself angrily.

"Well, let's get moving, old fellow," said Jimmy. "It's pretty cold, you know."

"Clocky cad!" muttered Lovell.

"Kek!"

"If I wasn't a guest here, Jimmy, and that fellow wasn't in your father's service, I'd jolly well punch his nose for his cheek."

"Well, you've waken him up in the middle of the night," said Raby. "I dare say he felt a bit rattled."

"Jimmy's pater isn't pleased," said Newcome. "Dash it all, Lovell, you oughtn't to have camped in this room. You can't say we didn't tell you so. You were bound to get nerry when you woke up in the dark."

Lovell's eyes gleamed.

"You think it was just nerves?" he asked.

"I know it was."

"I tell you I saw——"

"Oh, rot!" said Newcome impatiently. "You saw some dashed shadow, or a flicker from the fire. What's the good of spinning us ghost stories?"

"Look here——"

"Be reasonable, old fellow," said Jimmy. "Now there's a light, and we're all here, you must know there wasn't a ghost."

"I know there was something."

"Only fancy!" said Newcome.

Lovell's brows contracted.

"Well, let's get off to bed, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver amicably. "No good freezing here. It's beastly cold, ghost or no ghost."

Mornington looked round.

"You claps don't feel inclined to sit up for the ghost?" he asked.

"What rot!"

"You believe I saw something, Morn?" exclaimed Lovell.

"I think you must have," said Mornington. "You're rather an ass, but you're not a funk. You wouldn't have pulled out for nothing."

"Oh!" said Lovell, greatly comforted by this unexpected support. "You're not an ass, anyhow, Morn."

"But it's all rot!" said Newcome impatiently. "Look here, I'm jolly well going back to bed!"

"Same here!" said Raby.

And they retired. It was cold enough in the haunted room, and there was a bitter draught through the open doorway

from the corridor. Raby and Newcome were fed-up.

Lovell rose from the edge of the bed. "Come on!" he said.

Jimmy slipped his arm through his chin's as they left the haunted room. He could see that Lovell was still very much shaken. He took Lovell to his own room, and then, perceiving that Mornington had not followed, he went back along the corridor.

Valentine Mornington was standing in the middle of the haunted room, looking about him with a keen, thoughtful face.

He nodded and smiled to Jimmy.

"Going back to bed?" he asked.

"Yes; I'm turning in with Lovell. You don't want to hang on here, I suppose?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes."

"Morny!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Come in, and shut the door," said Mornington quietly.

Jimmy obeyed, in astonishment. Morny knelt by the old hearth, and began to relight the fire. The captain of the Rockwood Fourth eyed him.

"Look here, Morny, what's the game?" he asked. "You don't want to dig in this room, after Lovell's been nearly frightened out of his wits."

"That's exactly what I want," answered Mornington. "And I want you to stay with me, Jimmy. We'll have the fire, and keep the light on; and as we'll be together we can handle the giddy ghost if he comes."

"But there's no giddy ghost."

"There's something."

"Both, old fellow!"

"Lovell wasn't yelling for nothing," said Mornington quietly. "He saw something—and I don't believe in ghosts, so I believe it was a trick of some sort."

"But it's rot," said Jimmy. "The door was locked. There's no other way into the room. The walls are solid stone behind that oak. You're not thinking of a secret door or such rot, I suppose?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Mornington did not reply for a moment. "Besides, who could have played a trick?" said Jimmy impatiently. "Not one of us—and there's nobody else in the house, excepting the pater and mater and Fagella, and the gent with the backache,

and the servants. Do you think one of them has been playing the ghost?"

Morny gave him a very curious look.

"I won't tell you what I think, Jimmy," he said at last. "I don't think anything very clearly yet. But I'm suspicious. It's a jolly odd coincidence that this ghost alarm should happen just now."

Jimmy stared at the dandy of the Rockwood Fourth.

"Where does the coincidence come in?" he asked.

"It's only a couple of days since there was a robbery here, and your father's picture, the Rembrandt, worth two thousand pounds, was cut out of the frame in the library, and pinched."

"What on earth's that to do with this?"

"Nothing, probably—and perhaps something," said Mornington coolly. "At least, it's a coincidence that the two things should happen about the same time."

"Blessed if I quite see it. Where's the connection?"

Morny did not answer.

"I'm staying in the room to-night," he said, after a pause. "Stay with me, Jimmy, and if what I expect to happen does happen, I'll explain."

"What do you expect to happen, you say?"

"Wait and see."

"I believe you're as big an ass as Lovell," said Jimmy, laughing a little impatiently. "But, anyhow, it will be a joke on old Lovell to stay here and shaw that there's no giddy ghost. We'll stay."

The log-fire was burning up now, and the two juniors wrapped blankets round themselves and sat up in two deep old armchairs on either side of the cheerful blaze. Neither felt disposed to turn into the bed.

Jimmy, in the warmth of the fire, soon nodded off to sleep; but Valentine Mornington did not close his eyes.

Jimmy awakened suddenly as there was a sound in the room. He glanced at Mornington, whose gaze was fixed on the door.

Jimmy followed his glance with a start. But he smiled as he saw the fat figure and glimmering spectacles of Eustace Spencer in the open doorway.

The secretary stepped in.

"Hallo!" yawned Jimmy drowsily.

"Trot in, Mr. Spencer!" said Mornington.

"May I ask what this means?" said the secretary, rather grimly. "Mr. Silver is under the impression that you boys have come back to bed."

"No doubt," assented Mornington.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for the ghost."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, that's right, Mr. Spencer," said Jimmy Silver. "It's all rnk. But Mornington has a fancy for it, so I'm giving him his head. No need for you to stay up."

"You had better go to bed at once, as your father supposes you have done, Master Silver!" snapped the secretary.

Jimmy was upright and looked at him. Jimmy was an easy-going fellow, but he had no intention whatever of being dictated to by his father's secretary.

"I shall please myself about that, of course, Mr. Spencer," he said.

Eustace Spencer looked at him. He seemed about to make an unpleasant rejoinder; but he restrained himself, and quitted the haunted room, closing the door after him.

Jimmy smiled at his chum.

"The dear old been's ratty at being woken up at night," he remarked. "But, I say, Morny, you were waiting for something to happen, you told me."

"That's so."

"Has it happened?" grinned Jimmy Silver.

"Yes."

"Wha-a-at?"

"I'll tell you about it in the morning." The dandy of the Fourth yawned. "Let's get to sleep now—there won't be any more ghosts to-night."

And Valentine Mornington closed his eyes, and in a minute or less, was fast asleep. Jimmy stared at him in amazement. But he was too sleepy to waste much thought on the matter. He followed Morny's example, and was very soon sleeping as soundly as his comrade.

CHAPTER 7.

A Startling Discovery!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL looked very edgewise at breakfast the following morning. It was Christmas Eve, and the snow was banked up round the old house, and a bitter wind

howled round the roofs of the Priory. But, within, all was merry and bright. Only Arthur Edward Lovell did not succeed in sharing the merriment and the brightness. He had expected to be chipped about his ghost adventure in the haunted room, and in that he had not been disappointed.

The Brookwood fellows felt that on this occasion Lovell had fairly asked for it, that he wanted it, and that if he got it so much the better. And Arthur Edward "got it" in large and generous measure.

Smiling faces round a cheery breakfast table were quite in keeping with the joyous season of Christmastide, but to Lovell it seemed that there were far too many smiles, his noble self being the object of most of them. Only Mornington did not join the general merriment at Lovell's expense, which was rather unexpected, as Morny might have been supposed to welcome such an occasion for his satirical humour. But Morny, at least, refrained from chipping; a circumstance that considerably increased Lovell's estimation of the dandy of the Fourth.

After breakfast the haunted room was a centre of interest. That morning Inspector Stancon came over from Denewood to see Mr. Silver on the subject of the stolen Rembrandt; and he had no news excepting that there was no news.

The interview did not have a cheering effect on the old gentleman, who was beginning to despair of ever seeing his masterpiece again. By that time, he feared, it was in the clutches of an unscrupulous collector, who had doubtless commissioned the thief to purloin it, and the recipient of the stolen Rembrandt was certain to keep it well hidden. It needed all Mr. Silver's self-command to keep up a cheery and smiling aspect for the sake of his son's guests. He would not allow his own trouble to cast a shadow over the festive season.

While Mr. Silver and the Inspector were talking in the library, the juniors visited the haunted room.

Lovell did not accompany them. He had had enough of the haunted room, and he was fed up with chipping. Lovell went out for a tramp with cousin Phyllis through the snow, and as Miss Phyllis tactfully avoided the sore topic of ghosts, Lovell enjoyed his morning very much.

Jimmy Silver and Raby, and Newcomb

and Mornington repaired to the haunted room. It looked bright and cheery enough now, with the shutters flung wide back, and the wintry sunshine streaming in at the high deep windows.

"No giddy ghosts walking this morning!" chuckled Raby. "Poor old Lovell! He's getting quite wary about it."

"About time we gave him a rest," said Jimmy Silver, smiling.

"Oh, rot!" said Newcome. "Lovell shouldn't swank! Sleeping in the haunted room and then yelling out the alarm and waking up the house is rather too thick."

"Yes, rather," said Raby.

"What the dickens is Morny up to?" asked Newcome, staring at the dandy of the Fourth.

Mornington was making a close examination of the old oak walls. Jimmy watched him with a smile.

"Looking for a giddy secret door?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Mornington, without turning his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Raby and Newcome.

"This is a jolly old house," said Mornington. "You've told me there are secret passages in it, Jimmy."

"Yes, but they're well known," said Jimmy Silver. "Nothing of the kind in this room. If you tap all the panels, you'll find solid stone behind."

"It looks like it!" confessed Mornington.

"Let's know what you find, Morny," grinned Newcome. "I'm going out." And Newcome went out with Raby.

"What about skating, Morny?" asked Jimmy Silver. "The lake's frozen over."

"I'll join you later, old chap. I'm amusin' myself in my own way, you know."

"Oh, all right."

And Jimmy Silver carefully left Morny to his own devices. He preferred skating himself, but Morny was welcome to potter about the haunted room as long as he liked.

And Mornington did potter about till it was close on lunch time, and then he was interrupted. Mr. Spencer looked in.

"Hunting the ghost in the daytime?" the secretary asked with a smile.

"Just that," assented Mornington.

"Isn't that rather absurd?"

"Little things please little minds, you

know," said Mornington, unmoved. "I find it amusin'."

"Your friends seemed to be enjoying themselves on the lake," said Mr. Spencer, eyeing the junior curiously.

"I'm glad of that."

"You are not going to join them?"

"Not at present."

Spencer nodded and smiled and walked away. Mornington smiled, too, when he was gone, and resumed his pottering. But he desisted at last and came to a halt in the middle of the room, his hands driven deep into his pockets, and a wrinkle marking his handsome brow.

"Nothin' doin'!" he muttered. "There's no secret way into the room, that's a cert! Floored in all directions! But Lovell saw somethin'—though they're chippin' him almost into believin' that he didn't. But how could that dashed somethin' have got into the room?"

He glanced from the window.

Below was a sheer drop of thirty feet, without even a rain pipe to be seen. And the shutters, which had been closed overnight, were heavy and strong.

"Nothin' doin'!" said Mornington again.

He whistled softly.

"Fool!" he ejaculated suddenly.

That complimentary epithet was addressed apparently to himself. He crossed over to the door and drew in the big, heavy key from the old-fashioned lock.

He took the key to the window, in the clearest light and made a minute examination of it.

Then his eyes glittered.

On the end of the key were two little marks. The key itself was an ancient one, of massive make, and a little rusted. But on the rusty and showed two clear marks, as if the metal had been gripped in a pair of fine pincers.

"By gad!" muttered Mornington.

He knew now how the locked door had been opened. It was no ghost that had visited Lovell—ghosts would scarcely require to unlock a door; a bodiless phantom would not be stopped by a door or a lock. The door had been unlocked from the outer side by means of a pair of powerful tweezers that had gripped the end of the key—such instruments as burglars use. Morny's ears fairly blazed over his discovery. He replaced the key in the lock and snatched away. There was a smile on his face when he turned up at lunch.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mystery of the Night!

"SO the Spencer-bird is postponin' his holidays!"

"Is he?" said Jimmy Silver carelessly.

"Isn't he?" answered Mornington.

"Blessed if I know."

"You didn't know I was a giddy thought-reader, did you?" asked Valentine Mornington, with a smile. "Now I'm givin' you a proof. Your pater mentioned to us the other day that Mr. Spencer was goin' away for Christmas, an' startin' on Christmas Eve."

"That's so," said Jimmy. "He hasn't gone yet, but I suppose he's going."

"Twa to uno in mince pies that he doesn't."

Jimmy stared at the dandy of the Fourth. He could not make out in the least what Mornington was driving at.

"He may have changed his mind, Morny—blessed if I know or care whether he has or not," said the puzzled Jimmy.

"But, anyhow, I don't see how you know anything about his plans. Are you talking out of your hat?"

"I'm a giddy thought-reader."

"Rot!"

"Well, just inquire, and you'll learn that the Spencer-bird isn't flyin' away to-day!" said Morny.

"Boosh!" said Jimmy.

Jimmy Silver was puzzled and a little curious, and, in order to settle the point, he made an inquiry of his father on the subject. Mr. Silver shook his head when the inquiry was made.

"Spencer has caught a slight cold," he said. "He's putting off his departure till Boxing Day."

In great amazement Jimmy Silver returned to Mornington. The dandy of the Fourth met him with a grin.

"Well?" he asked.

"He's not going till Boxing Day," said Jimmy. "But how did you know?"

"Perhaps a little bird whispered," said Mornington, "or perhaps I got the tip from the ghost."

"The ghost?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"The ghost that Lovell saw in the haunted room," explained Mornington.

"Catch on!"

"I suppose you're trying to pull my leg," said Jimmy. "I haven't the faintest idea

what you're driving at, Morny. Suppose you explain?"

"All in good time, old chap. I've been doin' a lot of thinkin'," said Mornington, his handsome face becoming serious. "Your father is no end cut up about losin' the jolly old Rembrandt, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so," said Jimmy ruefully.

"He's been thumpin' decent to me," said Morny. "What a rippin' idea if a chap could bag that stolen smudge and hand it back to your pater as a Christmas present."

"I jolly well wish it could be done," said Jimmy. "But as it can't, it's not much good talking."

"Who knows," said Mornington.

"Stranger things have happened. When ghosts walk in a house jolly soon after a robbery, it makes me suspicious. Jimmy—to come back to the ghost—are you game to sit up in the haunted room again to-night?"

"I'm afraid the pater wouldn't like the idea after the terrific fuss Lovell made last night."

"He won't mind if there are two or three of us together—and we'll keep the light burning," said Mornington. "I've got a fancy for that room. I've given the jolly old maid the glad eye, and she's keeping up the fire there."

"You are!"

"I'm going to read the 'Holiday Annual' there this afternoon, while you others are leading the strenuous life out of doors."

"What rot! Better come out and skate! What do you want to stick indoors for?"

"Mr. Spencer's caught a slight cold—"

"What has that to do with it?"

"No reason why I shouldn't catch a slight cold, too. Havin' a slight cold, I'm staying in for a bit."

And Mornington walked away whistling, leaving Jimmy Silver in a state of most profound astonishment.

Mornington spent the afternoon reading by a big log fire in the haunted room. He received no visitor there, except that Mr. Spencer looked in for a few minutes. Mornington chatted with him cheerily, and asked after his cold, and confided in him the fact that he had a slight cold also just about as bad as Mr. Spencer's.

The secretary did not stay long. As he was gone, Mornington winked to

space and resumed his entertaining perusal of the "Holiday Annual."

When, at a rather later hour, Jimmy Silver & Co. came up to bed, Jimmy looked Mornington up.

"Enjoyed yourself?" Jimmy asked, rather sarcastically.

"Lots!" answered Mornington, with a cheery nod. "Mr. Spencer looked in for a few minutes; otherwise I've been on my own, enjoyin' my own fascinating society no end. The fellows gone to roost?"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Lovell doesn't want to sit up for the ghost?"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"I fancy Lovell's had enough of ghosts," he answered. "But if you're keen on it, I'll stay up with you, Morny. I think it's rot!"

Jimmy Silver stretched himself on the bed. Mornington, with a dressing-gown about him, sat in the deep chair by the fire. The lamp was put out, and the fire burned low. The deep and steady breathing from the bed soon announced that Jimmy Silver was sound asleep.

But Mornington did not sleep.

His eyes never closed for a moment. The theory which Morny had formed in his mind, and which he had not explained to a soul, was a startling one; and more than enough to keep him very wide awake through the long watches of the night.

He leaned back in the chair, his eyes open and unwinking, waiting and watching with the patience and fortitude of a Red Indian.

Iron-nerved as he was, Morny was glad that Jimmy Silver was with him. If there was danger that night, it was not from ghosts—and he knew it. But he was glad that he was not alone.

Midnight had long passed, and the night was still, save for a faint whine of the wind among the chimneys. The fire died lower, till all was dark save for a faint red glow in the smoking embers.

Mornington did not move, but he breathed harder as he heard a faint sound at the door. The door swung open, and a chill draught penetrated from the gloomy corridor.

In the darkness there was a glimmer of white.

Several moments passed—long moments to the still, watching junior.

The white figure moved at last.

It advanced soundlessly into the room. For a second it hovered near the bed, the steady breathing of the sleeper there went on, calm, uninterupted. Then, for another moment, the ghostly figure hovered in the dim glow of the fire over the still form of the junior in the chair.

Morny's eyes were closed now; he breathed deeply. Only when a faint rustle of trailing garments moved farther away did Morny's eyes reopen.

Still he did not move.

His eyes were fixed on the glimmering patch of white in the darkness of the great room. The ghostly figure had risen from him, and was now in a corner of the room by the window—bending low.

Silently, Mornington sat bolt upright, watching. A sudden flash of light broke the gloom, and the watching junior grinned. "The 'ghost' had turned on at electric flash-lamp in the corner.

Mornington rose to his feet, still without a sound. His hands grasped a heavy cushion from the chair.

Whiz! Crash!

The cushion struck the bending figure in the corner, and the light of the electric lamp was instantly blotted out. There was a sharp, startled cry in the darkness.

The next instant a glimmer of white raced across the room, and the door closed. The ghost was gone!

Mornington laughed softly. From the bed came a startled exclamation as Jimmy Silver sat up and stared about him. The crash of the falling cushion had awakened him.

"Morny—what—"

"Hallo, old top!" yawned Mornington.

"What—what's happened?"

"Lots of things; but the jolly old happenings are over for the night. Go to sleep, my little pizeninny," said Mornington airily. He stirred the fire, piled logs, lighted the lamp, and grinned at Jimmy Silver's startled face.

"Dreamin' of ghosts, Jimmy?"

"N-n-no! I heard—"

Jimmy stared at him. Mornington laughed lightly.

"Don't worry!" he said. "And if you want something pleasant to dream of, dream of my givin' your pater his jolly old Rembrandt back as a Christmas present in the mornin'! What?"

"But—"

"Good-night, old bean!"

But before Mornington slept, he locked the door and dragged a heavy table against it. Then he settled down for the remainder of the night with a smile on his lips that remained there when he slept. In his own peculiar way, Valentine Mornington was enjoying his Christmas holiday.

CHAPTER 5.

Mornington is Mysterious!

KNOCK!

Valentine Mornington awoke, and yawned.

The wintry sunshine glimmered in at the windows of the Haunted Room at the Priory. The log fire had died out on the old hearth, and Mornington shivered a little as he sat up in the armchair and rubbed his eyes. Jimmy Silver, on the bed, was still asleep.

Knock!

The sharp rap was repeated at the door. Mornington, yawning again, glanced round.

"Hallo!" he called out.

The door-knob rattled.

"Let me in, please!"

It was the voice of Mr. Silver. Mornington whistled softly as he rose to his feet. Jimmy sat up in bed. He was awake now.

"That's the pater!" he said.

"And a little waxy," to judge by his merry old voice," murmured Mornington, with a grin. "He didn't know we were keepin' watch in the jolly old haunted room last night. Who's told him?"

"Somebody has," said Jimmy. "Open the door, Morny!"

Knock, again.

Mornington crossed to the door and turned back the big, old-fashioned key in the massive lock. He opened the door wide. Mr. Silver stepped into the room with a frowning brow.

As Valentine Mornington was a guest at the Priory for the Christmas vacation, it was a little difficult for Mr. Silver to display a "waxy" attitude towards him. So it was upon Jimmy Silver that his severe glance turned. Jimmy rolled off the bed. Neither of the juniors had undressed during the night's watch in the haunted room, and both of them looked rather dazed and tousled.

"I am surprised at this!" said Mr. Silver. "Anythin' the matter, sir?" asked Mornington blandly.

"I will say nothing to you, Mornington, as you are my son's guest here," said Mr. Silver. "But you, Jimmy, should have known better. After the fright your friend Lovell received in passing a night in the haunted room, you should not have done this."

"Nothing's happened in the night, father," said Jimmy. "You see, we—"

He paused. Mornington chimed in. "It was really all my fault, Mr. Silver. I fairly drove Jimmy into staying in this room with me. I should have stayed alone if he hadn't."

"You should not have done so, Mornington," said Mr. Silver. "I was very much perturbed by what happened to Lovell. Had I been aware of your intention, I should never have allowed you to occupy this room."

"The ghost hasn't worried us, sir."

"There is, of course, no ghost," said Mr. Silver, smiling a little. "But there are such things as nerves, which you should not have put to such a test. You know very well what happened in Lovell's case."

"But how did you know we were here, sir?" asked Mornington.

"Mr. Spencer mentioned to me when I came down that he thought the room was occupied," said Mr. Silver. "I came here to see. Now, I will say nothing on the subject further, but I must ask you not to repeat this foolhardy action. This room must not be slept in by you, Jimmy, or any of your guests."

"Very well, father," said Jimmy.

And with that Mr. Silver quitted the room. Jimmy gave the dandy of the Hookwood Fourth a rueful glance.

"I was afraid the pater would get his rag out if he found we'd camped in the haunted room," he said. "Of course, there was nothing to be afraid of, but Lovell made an awful fuss the other night, and after that—"

"Queer that your father's secretary should happen to know that we were here," remarked Mornington. "This room is a good distance from his quarters."

"Yes, it's odd," said Jimmy.

"And queer that he should take the trouble to tell Mr. Silver," remarked Mornington. "Not nice of Spencer, was it?"

"Well, I dare say he needn't tell," said Jimmy. "Lovell got an awfully fright the other night, and probably Spencer thinks we might be scared, too."

"Possibly!" said Mornington.

There were footsteps in the passage, and Lovell and Raby and Newcome looked in. Lovell had a serious expression, but there were grins on the faces of his companions.

"Seen anything?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Did the ghost walk?" grimed Raby.

"Did the jolly old phantom prior drop in?" chuckled Newcome. "Not civil of him to miss, after calling on Lovell."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Raby.

"Oh, cut the cackle!" said Lovell crossly.

"Nothing to chortle at! Did you see anything, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Nothing," he answered. "I slept pretty soundly."

"Did you see anything, Morny?"

"Yes."

"What?" exclaimed four voices together. Mornington nodded coolly.

"Jimmy was asleep," he said. "But I was keepin' awake. I was wide-awake when the ghost come in."

"The ghost?" yelled Raby.

"Yes."

"Are you pulling our legs?" demanded Newcome.

"Nor at all."

"What was the ghost like, then?"

"Ghastly figure in white—just as Lovell described," answered Mornington.

"Boah!"

"Honest Injun!" said Morny.

"And what did you do?"

"Bunged a cushion at it!"

"And what did the ghost do?" demanded Newcome.

"Tumbled over when the cushion cushed, and velped. Then he bolted as if he had been sent for suddenly."

"What utter rot!" said Raby.

"Look here, Morny, what are you drivin' at?" demanded Jimmy Silver, eyeing the dandy of the Fourth in amazement. "I heard some row and woke up, but I saw nothing—"

"The ghost had vanished then," explained Mornington. "He would have vanished the other night if Lovell had lifted a pillow at him. Pity you didn't think of that, Lovell."

Arthur Edward blinked at Mornington.

"It really happened?" he asked.

"Really!" Mornington yawned. "I shan't be able to tell him again when he walks tonight: Mr. Silver won't let us wander in the haunted room again. The Sparrow bird left it his duty to give us

away, and Jimmy's pater came down on us like a wolf on the fold. I dare say the Sparrow bird had his reasons. Jimmy's pater is a bit waxy, but I am going to make him a present and set that right."

"What on earth do you mean by that?" asked Jimmy.

"I'm going to give him a picture, to replace his jolly old Rembrandt that was stolen the other day," said Morny.

"You said That Rembrandt was worth two thousand pounds."

"I'm goin' to produce one just as good."

"Fathead!"

"Well, I'm going down to brekker," said Raby. "You fellows can hang on and listen to Morny talking out of the back of his silly neck."

And Raby walked away, followed by Newcome and Lovell.

Mornington laughed.

"Blessed if I can make head or tail of your chatter, Morny," said Jimmy Silver. "Not getting loose in the top story, I hope?"

"I hope not!"

"Then what the thump do you mean?"

"Nothing at present, but lots presently," answered Mornington; and he strolled out of the haunted room whistling.

CHAPTER 10.

Puzzled!

"JIMMY!"

Jimmy Silver was coming down to a rather late breakfast, refreshed after his night in the haunted room by a cold bath, when Mornington met him on the stairs. He stopped.

"They're all at brekker," said Mornington. "I want you, Jimmy."

"I want brekker," remarked Jimmy.

"That can wait. The telephone's in the library, I think."

"Yes."

"I suppose I can use it?"

"Of course. Trunk call!" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, no—local!"

"Well, you don't want me to help you telephone, do you?" asked Jimmy, in astonishment.

"No, I want you to keep watch."

Jimmy jumped.

"Keep watch!" he repeated.

"Yes: to see that nobody butts in and catches what I say."

"You're getting jolly mysterious, Morny," said Jimmy Silver, with a faint touch of impatience. "Who the thump do you think would listen to what you say on the telephone?"

"Well, there's your father's secretary, Spencer," said Morny. "He does some of his work in the library, and might butt in."

"He wouldn't be interested in your telephone jaw."

"He might be."

"Oh, rot!" said Jimmy.

But Mornington passed his arm through Jimmy Silver's and led him away to the library. The lofty room, with its book-lined walls and cheery log fire, was deserted just then. From the direction of the breakfast-room a buzz of merry voices could be heard faintly.

Morny closed the door.

"Now keep your hoof against the door," he said. "You can listen to what I say, Jimmy—it's goin' to be an interestin' talk. But it's understood that you keep it dark."

"Oh, all right!" granted Jimmy.

Mornington crossed to the telephone and picked the receiver off the hook. He gave the number—Dorwood 10.

Jimmy glanced across at him.

"That's Inspector Stenson's number," he said—"the inspector who has the case of the stolen Rembrandt in hand!"

Morny nodded. He spoke into the transmitter.

"Inspector Stenson? Good! My name's Mornington—a guest at the Priory. I dare say you saw me when you called yesterday, Mr. Stenson. I have some information for you."

Jimmy simply stared. What information Mornington could possibly have for Inspector Stenson was a mystery to him. But Mornington's next words made him fairly jump.

"Quite valuable information, Mr. Stenson. I can point out the man who stole the Rembrandt, if you want to make his acquaintance."

"Morny!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"And I hope to point out the stolen picture, too, Mr. Stenson. Will you come out for your bird?"

"Morny!" yelled Jimmy.

Mornington put up the receiver and rejoined Jimmy, with a smile on his handsome face. He seemed in great spirits.

"Now for brekker," he said.

"Is Inspector Stenson coming over?" demanded Jimmy.

"Yes; he'll be here by the time we've finished brekker. He's coming right over in his car."

"What do you mean by pulling the police-inspector's leg like this?" gasped Jimmy.

"Dear man! I'm not pullin' his leg!"

"The pater will be awfully wary at a fool joke like this," said Jimmy, looking deeply vexed. "You're bringing the inspector over here from Dorwood for nothing!"

"For somethin', dear boy."

"For what, then?"

"For the man who burgled your father's jolly old pictur!"

"Oh, rot!"

"Dear old man, have a little patience," said Mornington cheerfully. "I'm not talkin' out of my hat. Straight goods, old dear!"

"But—"

"What about brekker?" asked Mornington. "There'll be excitin' times when the inspector arrives. Let's get some grub first."

"It's all utter rot!" said Jimmy uneasily. "I begin to believe that you've really got a screw loose somewhere, Morny."

Mornington laughed lightly, and left the library, Jimmy Silver following him in a state of mingled wonder and impatience.

"Come on, old man, I'm hungry!" said Morny.

"You've been down long enough to have your brekker," said Jimmy.

"I've been otherwise engaged, old top," explained Mornington. "Did you know I was somethin' of an amateur carpenter?"

"No."

"Well, I've been doin' some carpentry. I borrowed some things out of your tool box, Jimmy, and put in a quarter of an hour at puttin' up a plank in a floor. Sorry if I've done any damage, but you know what an amateur carpenter is when he gets goin'."

Jimmy Silver was too astounded to reply. He was beginning to wonder seriously whether Mornington was wandering in his mind. Ever since Jimmy Silver's Christmas party had arrived home at the Priory there had been something strange and mysterious, as well as subtly mocking, in Mornington's words and manner.

Jimmy went into the breakfast-room, where a merry party was assembled. Mornington followed him in a minute later, and Jimmy noticed that the dandy of the Fourth had put on his overcoat. Why Mornington should don an overcoat to come into a well-warmed room to breakfast was a mystery—unless Morny was going out of his senses.

The breakfast-table at the Priory was crowded with merry faces. Breakfast was an informal meal in holiday-time, and the guests arrived at what time they pleased. Lovell and Baby and Newcome had already finished, and so had cousin Phyllis, but they were still at the table chatting in cheery tones. Mr. Silver was a little gravo; at the back of the old gentleman's mind there was always the thought of his lost masterpieces. But Mrs. Silver was smiling sweetly, and there was an expansive smile on the fat face of Eustace Spencer, the secretary, whose eyes blinked cheerily through his big spectacles.

Arthur Edward Lovell seemed chiefly interested in cousin Phyllis; while Baby and Newcome were finding much interest in Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn.

"Hallo, slackers!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, as the two late-comers dropped in. "Feeling cold, Morny?"

"Didn't I tell you yesterday I had a slight cold," said Mornington.

"Must be more than slight, if you have to wear an overcoat indoors," said Lovell, with a stare.

"Pass the merry provender, old fellow, and don't worry."

Mornington turned to Eustace Spencer. "I hope your cold is better, Mr. Spencer?"

"Thank you—almost gone," said the secretary. His eyes, through his glasses, lingered curiously on Mornington for a moment.

"You had that you should have to put off going on your Christmas holiday," said Mornington. "I hope you'll be able to travel in May."

"Tomorrow, probably," said the secretary. "Mr. Silver's hospitality makes it impossible for me to regret postponing my journey."

Mr. Silver smiled.

"My dear Spencer," he said, "we shall all miss you."

Mornington's eyes were lingering on the

fat face of the secretary. There was a smocking glimmer in their depths.

"You've had an accident, sir," he said, with an air of concern. "Slipping, what? Tumble on the ice?"

Mr. Spencer passed his pudgy hand for a moment over his forehead, where a slight bruise showed on the skin.

"No," he answered. "I do not skate, Master Mornington. I had the ill-luck to knock my head, entering my room in the dark."

"Not painful, I hope?" asked Mornington.

"A mere nothing."

The secretary turned his head to address a remark to Mrs. Silver, having apparently had enough of Mornington's conversation. Valentine Mornington deviated his attention to his breakfast. He ate with an exceedingly good appetite and a smiling, good-humoured face. It was long since Morny had been seen in such excellent spirits.

"Well, let's get a move on," said Lovell. "No good waiting for these slackers to finish. The ice is a treat this morning!"

And Lovell and Baby and Newcome and the three girls made a move. Mrs. Silver followed.

There was the hoot of a cat on the drive. Jimmy Silver glanced at Mornington, who smiled. Jimmy guessed that this was the inspector arriving from Denewood in response to Morny's amazing message on the telephone. What was to happen now, Jimmy simply couldn't imagine. Morny's jape—for Jimmy could only think that it was a jape—was likely to cause something like a sensation.

Morny rose from the table.

"Inspector Stenson!" he remarked, glancing from the window.

Mr. Silver started.

"The inspector!" he exclaimed. His face lightened. "News—perhaps—" He quitted the room.

"News of the missing picture—what?" asked Mornington. "Think it likely, Jimmy?"

"I hope so," said Jimmy Silver.

"What do you think, Mr. Spencer?"

"I think it very probable," said the secretary. "Perhaps my opinion is coloured by my wishes—and my regard for my employer, who feels his loss so deeply. But certainly I have every confidence that the

police will succeed in tracing the rascal who robbed Mr. Silver."

"That's good!" said Mornington. "My belief is that you are quite right."

The secretary gave him a quick look over his glasses.

"We must hope so," he said.

"Now look out for squalls, Morny, you awful ass!" murmured Jimmy, as his father reappeared in the doorway, with the burly figure of the inspector by his side.

CHAPTER II.

Rather a Surprise!

MR. SILVER'S face was dark and stern. Evidently, Inspector Stenson had explained the reason of his morning call, and the host of the Priory had learned of what he could only regard as an utterly reckless practical joke.

"Mornington!" exclaimed Mr. Silver.

"Here I am, sir!"

"Inspector Stenson tells me——"

"Quite so, sir! Good-mornin', Inspector!" said Mornington smoothly. "Glad you came over so soon. Don't go, Mr. Spencer—I want you to corroborate some things I have to tell Mr. Stenson."

The secretary blinked at him.

"I cannot imagine what you have to tell the inspector, Master Mornington," he said. "But certainly, whatever it is, I have no knowledge of it."

"Your mistake, sir," said Mornington, with icy coolness. "I shall be able to refresh your memory, I think."

"What?"

"Kindly tell me what this means, Mornington," said Mr. Silver sternly. "You have brought Inspector Stenson here, with a statement that you can point out the thief who took away my picture."

"Yes, sir."

"You know nothing of the matter——"

"Lies, sir."

"Nonsense!"

"Let the boy speak, sir," said Inspector Stenson, with a curious look at the dandy of Rookwood. "If he has any information, it is his duty to pass it on to me."

"That's what I'm going to do, sir. But will you see that Mr. Spencer remains here? He will be able to corroborate some of my statements, though just at present he doesn't remember."

"This is utterly inexplicable!" exclaimed Mr. Silver. "I can scarcely believe, Mornington, that this is simply a foolish and unfeeling practical joke on your part."

"Nothing of the kind, sir."

"Something, then, has actually come to your knowledge?"

"The whole bizney, sir."

"Upon my word! Mr. Spencer, kindly remain for the present."

The secretary was breathing hard. His eyes, as they lighted on Mornington, gleamed behind his glasses. Jimmy Silver, watching him, realised that it was only by an effort that Estace Spencer retained his calmness and urbanity.

"As you wish, Mr. Silver," said Spencer. "But surely this boy is talking the most arrant nonsense! I have no knowledge of what he has to say—if, indeed, he has anything!"

"However, remain for the present, Spencer," said Mr. Silver. "The matter must be thrashed out at once. Now, Mornington, kindly tell the inspector what you know, if you know anything."

"Ready and willin', sir. Soon I spin the yarn from the beginning!" drawled Mornington. "You may recall, sir, that when we arrived here we offered to help to look for the thief and the missing picture. It was Lovell's idea, but I thought it a good one."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Silver brusquely.

"Come to the point, Morny!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"Comin', dear boy. Inspector Stenson made an examination of the place," resumed Mornington. "He found that the electric burglar alarm had not worked. It had been disconnected—the wire cut from outside, perhaps, by the thief after he had cut through the glass. I thought the thief was very lucky in hittin' on the wire in that way. In fact, I've no doubt that Inspector Stenson turned over in his mind the possibility that somebody found the house had had a hand in the robbery."

The inspector did not speak.

But he was regarding Mornington with a quiet attention that somewhat surprised Jimmy Silver and his father. Apparently the inspector did not approve of the dandy of Rookwood was "talking through his hat."

"Well, I had that idea, and I thought it out," resumed Mornington slowly. "I figured it out that the thief, if you like the

house, wouldn't bolt and draw suspicion on himself at once. There was a far better dodge ready to his hand. Christmas bein' close, he could leave for a Christmas holiday, an' take the plunder with him, without excitin' any suspicion."

"Nobody has left the house for a Christmas holiday!" said Mr. Silver, with a glance at the inspector.

"No! Mr. Spencer was goin' on Christmas Eve, but he was held up by a slight cold," said Mornington. "Looks as if there's nothin' in my idea, but let's see it through. That nobby idea was workin' in my powerful brain, but nothin' much seemed likely to come of it; only then it happened that Lovell was put up in the haunted room for the night."

"That has nothing to do with the matter."

"Lots, sir! You see, durin' the night in the haunted room Lovell saw a ghost."

"Nonsense!"

"The fellows thought it was nerves," drawled Mornington. "Now, though old Lovell is a bit of an ass, he really isn't so much enough to rouse a whole household on account of silly nerves. Lovell saw something that night in the haunted room."

"I knew nothing of this!" said the inspector, with a very keen look.

Mornington smiled.

"Now you know it, sir, you're beginning to draw conclusions from it, even as I did," he said. "Lovell's stunt of sleepin' in the haunted room came as a surprise to everybody—it was a thing that couldn't possibly have been foreseen by the thief. And a ghost appearin' to frighten Lovell off seemed to indicate to my feeble intellect that somebody had a very deep interest in keepin' the haunted room unoccupied."

"I see nothing in all this," said Mr. Silver.

"Inspector Stenson does!" said Mornington dryly.

"Pray allow the boy to proceed," said Inspector Stenson. "You concluded, Master Mornington, that the thief was in the house, that he had hidden the picture in some safe, remote place until the time came when he could leave without excitin' suspicion; and the ghostly visit to the haunted room made you suspect that that room was the actual hiding place of the stolen picture!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

Mr. Silver started violently.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I thought it possible," smiled Mornington. "And after Lovell's ghost, I had a jolly keen eye on the giddy haunted room. My idea was that the thief dropped in to secure his plunder, hidden in that room, and got himself up as a jolly old ghost in case Lovell woke up—as he did. Lovell roused the house, and the rascal had to give it up for that night. And, with that little theory in mind, I took to haunting the haunted room myself. Slight colds bein' in fashion, I caught one myself, and nursed it in the haunted room, to make sure that the jolly old thief didn't collar the picture in the day-time."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Catchin' on, old top?" grinned Mornington. "I wasn't wanderin' in my mind, old bean. Quite sane an' sober, I assure you."

"This is absurd!" said Mr. Silver. "You may recall, Mornington, that the room door was locked when Lovell saw, as he supposed, a ghost. You do not suggest that a thief, playing ghost, could pass through a locked door!"

"That beat me at first, sir, until I examined the key."

"The—the key?"

Mornington slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out a heavy old-fashioned key. He handed it to the inspector.

"What do these marks on the top end of the key mean, Mr. Stenson?" he asked.

The inspector's eyes glanced.

"They mean that the key has been turned from the outside of the door, by means of a pair of steel nippers, such as burglars use," he answered.

"Just so!"

"Blow my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Silver, quite taken aback.

"That's the key of the haunted room," said Morley, "and now you know how the ghost got in."

Mr. Silver caught his breath.

"Mornington, if there is anything in this amazing statement, my picture—the Rembrandt—is now in the house, hidden in the haunted room!" he exclaimed.

"In the house, sir," said Mornington, "but not now in the haunted room."

"Then where—what—"

"Here, sir!"

Mornington threw open his overcoat; Jimmy Silver understood now the the

dandy of the Fourth had done it. From under the seat Morny drew out a roll of thick canvas. He held it up.

"The giddy Rembrandt!" he drawled.

CHAPTER 12.

A Fight at the Finish!

"MORNY!" gasped Jimmy.

Mr. Silver did not speak. He made a spring at the canvas and grasped it from Mornington. With trembling hands he unrolled it.

Mr. Spencer was moving in a careless way towards the door. Inspector Stenson stepped back, till his burly figure filled the doorway. Then the secretary strolled towards the window. But Mr. Silver did not notice that little by-play. His eyes were glued upon the famous picture—the Rembrandt which he had hardly dared to dream of seeing again.

Mornington smiled cheerily. He was enjoying the moment of his triumph. Jimmy clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good old Morny!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Quite a jolly old surprise, what?" grinned Mornington. "Didn't I tell you, Jimmy, that I was goin' to try to make it up to you and your pater for bein' so decent to me? That's why I brought my giddy intellect to bear on this little problem."

"That is your picture, sir?" asked Inspector Stenson.

Mr. Silver looked up from the precious canvas at last. There were tears in his eyes.

"It is my Rembrandt!" he said. "Mornington has saved me from a loss of two thousand pounds—from a loss, indeed, that could not be computed in money. This wonderful picture is an heirloom in my family, and I could never have ceased to regret its loss. My dear, dear boy, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Thank you, sir," said Mornington earnestly. "I treated your son badly some time ago, and you and he forgave me. But for that I shouldn't have been here for Christmas, and I really think the rotter who stole your picture would have got away with the goods."

Mr. Silver smiled at his son.

"This is a lesson we should remember, Jimmy," he said. "We cast our bread on

the waters, and it has returned after many days."

"You have something more to tell me, Master Mornington?" asked Inspector Stenson; and Jimmy Silver noticed now that the corner of his eye was upon Eustace Spencer at the window. And Jimmy Silver understood further, as he noted it.

"Yes, sir," said Mornington brightly. "Just a little more. Mr. Silver has his picture, but you'd like the thief. I made Jimmy watch with me last night in the haunted room. Jimmy went to sleep; I sat up. I left the door unlocked to make the way easy for the ghost. He came in, found Jimmy asleep, and found me pretending to be locked in the arms of jolly old Morpheus. So seeing the coast clear, the merry phantom went to work. I watched him with my eyes half-open."

There was a quick-drawn breath from Eustace Spencer.

"He went to a corner of the room and stooped down," said Mornington. "I caught him bending with a cushion. He pitched over, and gave quite a substantial bowl for a ghost. Then he mizzled; but I did not mind that. I figured it out that I knew where the picture was hidden. This morning, while the other fellows were busy with brekker, I borrowed some tools from Jimmy's tool-chest and prised up an oak plank in a corner of the haunted room."

"So that was it!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Just that. The plank had been loosened before, so it came up fairly easily," said Mornington. "Under the board I found that roll of canvas tucked away—as the giddy ghost would have done if I hadn't caught him with a cash. So I lugged it out, and there it is."

"And the man?" said Inspector Stenson.

"Yes, the thief," said Mr. Silver. "You have hinted, Mornington, that the thief is a member of this household."

"Quite so."

"You stated that Mr. Spencer could corroborate what you said," said Mr. Silver. "In what way?"

"Speak up, Mr. Spencer!" said Morny encouragingly.

The secretary wetted his dry lips.

"I have nothing to say," he exclaimed. "I have not the slightest knowledge—"

"Oh, come," said Mornington, in a rallying tone. "Tell the inspector why you postponed your departure on Christmas Eve. Was it because the haunted room

was occupied, and so you couldn't take a picture with you as a souvenir?"

"Mornington!" exclaimed Mr. Silver, aghast.

"Tell us all how you felt when you heard that the haunted room was to be occupied—with the stolen picture hidden under the floor all the time!" grinned Mornington. "It would surely be thrilling. And why you kept on dropping into the place to see whether anybody was still there! And why you told Mr. Silver about us sleeping in the haunted room, so as to get a clear field the next night to lift the Raudbrandt. And how you banged your face on the floor when I knocked you over with the cushion and got that mark on your manly brow."

The secretary seemed scarcely to breathe. Mr. Silver's face was quite pale as he listened to Morry's mocking indictment.

"Spencer," said the old gentlemen huskily. "You—you can explain; I cannot believe—"

"I know nothing of it," said the secretary, with a hunted look in the round eyes behind his spectacles. "I—I assure you—"

"Where do you keep the nippers you open locked doors with?" grinned Mornington. "Somebody here is provided with burglar tools. In your pockets, or in your room—what!"

Spencer clenched his hands hard. One look at his haunted face was enough to show that either on his person or in his room was evidence in proof of Mornington's accusation.

Inspector Stenson made a step towards him, his face very grim.

"You—you dare not accuse me!" panted the secretary.

"It will be my duty to detain you for the present," said the inspector. "That, at least—Ah!"

Crash!

There was a terrific splintering of glass as the desperate man grasped a chair and dashed it through the window, smashing glass and sashes far and wide. A second more, and Eustace Spencer had leaped out. The inspector's hurried clutch missed him by a foot.

"Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Silver. Even his incredulous mind needed no more proof than that.

"After him!" roared Jimmy.

The hairy inspector rushed for the door. But Mornington, reckless of broken glass, sprang through the smashed window, and Jimmy Silver was after him in a second.

Morry stumbled, but recovered himself, and dashed away in pursuit of the fleeing figure. Hatless, desperate, panting, Eustace Spencer was tearing across the park, powdering the snow with hurrying feet, his plunder lost, everything lost but his liberty, and making a frantic effort to save, at least, that. But Mornington, with the speed of a deer, was close on his track, and Jimmy Silver came speeding on behind the dandy of the Fourth. Inspector Stenson rushed from the house, but he was hopelessly out of the chase.

"Stop him!" roared Morry.

From the frozen trees about two or three figures emerged. Lovell and Cousin Phyllis, Raby, Newcome. They stopped and stared in blank amazement at the wild chase.

"Stop, thief!" bawled Jimmy Silver.

The running man paused a second, panting, desperate. The juniors, coming back from skating on the lake, were directly ahead of him.

Eustace Spencer gritted his teeth and swerved to the right and then on. Mornington cut across to intercept him, gaining ground now at every stride. And Lovell & Co., not understanding what had happened, but understanding clearly enough that the fleeing man was to be stopped, rushed at him from the other side.

The girls stood in amazement and wonder, staring after the chase. The Fictical Four and Mornington bore down rapidly on the hunted man. He stumbled in the snow, and as he scrambled up again Morry was upon him with a swift spring.

Spencer dodged him and leaped back, snatched a revolver from his pocket. The weapon gleamed up.

"Stand back!" he yelled hoarsely. "Back, or—"

Whiz!

It was Arthur Edward Lovell who weighed in with a well-timed snowball. The snowball crashed in Spencer's face, sending him staggering backwards. The pistol dropped in the snow.

The next instant Mornington was upon the staggering man, and Spencer went backwards in his rush, falling heavily to the ground.

"Lend a hand!" panted Mornington.

Spencer struggled desperately, and Morry alone could not have held him. But the Fictical Four rushed in at once. Hand grasped the man on all sides.

"Our game!" grinned Mornington breathlessly.

Spencer, with a groan of despair, yielded to his fate. In the grasp of five sturdy Rookwooders he could scarcely stir a limb, and the struggle was over. In the distance Inspector Stenson came tramping up through the snow, with great satisfaction in his stolid face.

"But what's the chap done?" asked Lovell.

"Patched the giddy Rembrandt——"

"What?" gasped Lovell. "This chap argued the missing snudget?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This infant," asserted Mornington. And it may interest you to know that he's the jolly old sneak that made you jump the other night!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Lovell.

Inspector Stenson came up breathlessly. His handcuffs were in his hand; they clicked on the wrists of the captured thief. In silence and despair, Emface Spencer was led away, and the Rookwood juniors followed triumphantly.

The Rembrandt hung in its old place in the library, and the face of Mr. Silver looked twenty years younger. The discovery that his trusted secretary was the thief was a great shock to the old gentleman, and, indeed, to everyone else but Mornington. But Mr. Silver found consolation in the contemplation of his restored treasure.

In Spencer's room ample evidence was found—as the inspector had anticipated, after the man's desperate attempt at escape. It transpired that Spencer had been employed by an unscrupulous collector in America who desired to possess the Rembrandt, and who had sought in vain to purchase it from its owner. A reward equivalent to the value of the picture had been promised to Spencer in the event of success; and how near he had come to success was only too clear. The wretched man confessed before his trial, and told how he had cut the picture from its frame, and tampered with the electric alarm, and forced the window, to give an impression that the burglary had taken place from without. He had felt perfectly secure in concealing the plunder in the haunted room, a room never used and seldom visited.

But Lovell's stunt of sleeping in the haunted room had spoiled his plans. After scaring Lovell in the guise of the Prior's

ghost, he would certainly have found the room unoccupied but for Mornington.

Lovell, by chance, and Mornington, by design, had completed baffled the rascal!

"It was jolly clever of Morny," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Of course, I knew it wasn't a real ghost. Sensible chaps don't believe in ghosts. It really was clear from the start that the ghost business was a trick to clear people out of the haunted room."

"Not quite clear," said Jimmy Silver, with a laugh. "Clear enough now we know the facts, of course."

"Oh, quite clear, if a chap had thought of it, you know," said Lovell. "The amazing thing is that I never thought of it."

"The amazing thing, old chap, would have been if you had thought of it," remarked Mornington.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

To which Arthur Edward Lovell replied with a snort.

In Mr. Silver's library the Rembrandt adorned its old place, none the worse for its adventures, and affording infinite satisfaction to its owner. And at the Priory, Valentine Mornington was a much-distinguished guest during the remainder of the Christmas holidays.

CHAPTER 13.

The High Hand!

"DO you know the way back, Potter?"
"No!"
"Do you, Greens?"
"No!"

"Precious pair of asses!"

Jimmy Silver heard those remarks as he came tramping along through the thick snow in the lane. Snow was falling, and fields and hedges were sheeted in white.

At the cross-roads, three fellows had halted; three rather big fellows who looked like senior schoolboys, wrapped in coats and mufflers. Apparently they had lost their way, and they did not look good-tempered.

Jimmy Silver quickened his steps a little and hurried on with the kind intention of being of service to the trio in distress.

He thought he knew the fellows, too. They did not belong to Rookwood; but he had seen them before somewhere.

"Precious pair of asses!" repeated the

first speaker. "I'd like to know how we're going to get back for lunch!"

"Well, do you know the way yourself, Coker?" demanded the other two fellows simultaneously and wrathfully.

Coker grunted angrily.

"Oh, don't jaw!" he said. "Jawing won't find the way, will it? Never saw such chaps for jawing!"

Coker stared at him morosely, and caught sight of Jimmy coming up. He waved his hand to Jimmy.

"Here's a kid!" he said. "I'll give him sixpence to guide us back to the Fox and Feathers. Hi!"

Jimmy came up. He was smiling now. He recognized Coker and Potter and Greene of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars. He had seen them more than once when a Rookwood team had gone over to Greyfriars to play the House.

"Hallo!" said Jimmy cheerfully.

"You live in these benighted parts?" asked Coker.

"Yes."

"Then you can guide us," said Coker.

"I'll give you sixpence!"

Jimmy stared at him.

"I've seen that kid before," remarked Potter. "Aren't you one of the Rookwood lads, young 'un? You were playing the Lower Fourth at our school at Easter last term."

"I'm a Rookwooder," said Jimmy.

"You can keep your sixpence, Coker—keep it towards your expenses at Colney Hatch when you get there."

"Hi, what?" complained Coker. "Don't be cheeky, kid! How do you know my name. I'd like to know?"

"He's one of the Rookwood kids," said Greene. "You've seen him at Greyfriars, Coker."

Coker scouted.

"I'm not likely to take notice of lads, and remember them, I suppose," he said. "Don't be an ass, Greene!"

"Look here, Coker—"

"Dry up, for goodness' sake!" said Coker fiercely. "Here we are lost in the wilds, and you want to keep on wagging your chin instead of getting back!"

"Who lost the way?" roared Greene. "You turned off the road and told us you were taking a short cut!"

"Looks like a jolly long way on one!" said Potter.

"Dry up!" roared Coker. "Look here,

kid—I think I remember you now—your name's Copper, or Gold, or something, isn't it?"

"Silver!" said Jimmy cheerfully. "I remember you, too—your name's Poker, or Stoker, or Choker, or something, isn't it?"

"Don't be cheeky!" roared Coker. Losing his way in the wilds had not improved Horace Coker's temper—never very reliable. "We're putting up at the Fox and Feathers, between Unwood and Hadley Priors. Do you know the place?"

"Of course I do!"

"Good! Guide us there!"

"Sorry!" said Jimmy politely. "I'll direct you, if you like. But I can't guide you. I'm on my way to the station to meet a chap who's coming down to visit me!"

"Never mind that!" said Coker. "He can wait at the station, I suppose!"

"My only hat!" said Jimmy, staring at the Fifth-Former of Greyfriars.

Coker, at his own school, had what he called a short way with lads. It was, he said, his system. Outside Greyfriars his "system" was likely to cause astonishment and wrath. Coker of the Fifth never seemed quite able to remember that.

That Jimmy should leave Putty Grace of the Rookwood Fourth hanging up at Hadley Priors Station while he guided Coker about, seemed to the lofty Horace the most natural thing in the world. But the suggestion seemed to astonish Jimmy.

"Well, start!" said Coker impatiently.

"Start!" repeated Jimmy.

"Yes. Don't I keep on telling you I'm late for lunch?"

"I rather think Putty and I would be late for lunch if I put in an hour leading you about the country, Coker!" gasped Jimmy.

"Sorry! I don't see how that's to be helped," said Coker. "Come on!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"For goodness' sake, Coker, have a little sense!" urged Potter. "Do you think you can bully every kid in the kingdom, as if he were a Third-Form lad at Greyfriars?"

"I've no time to punch your cheeky head now, Potter. I'm jolly hungry. Get on with it, silver!"

"The kid will tell us the way," said Potter. "Just give us a hint how to get back to the Fox and Feathers, young Silver, will you?"

"Certainly!" said Jimmy. "Cut across

"A field, take the lane on the left, then cross the corner of the field with a barbed wire fence, then follow the footpath for about a quarter of a mile, bear to the right to the tin barn—"

"Do you think I can remember all that?" asked Coker.

"You silly owl!" said Jimmy Silver. "If you fellows are his keepers, I advise you to look after him a bit more carefully. He's out in a fit mental state to be wandering about. Good bye!"

And with that, Jimmy Silver tramped on towards the village, having done—as he supposed—with Coker & Co.

But he was not quite done with them yet.

Coker made a jump at him, and grasped him by the collar of his overcoat. Jimmy Silver was jerked back so suddenly that he sat down in the snow with a bump and a roar.

CHAPTER 14.

Till the Tat!

JIMMY SILVER sat and blinked up at Horace Coker. He was so surprised that he could do nothing else for the moment. Coker's high-handed methods quite took Jimmy's breath away.

The Greyhairs Fifth-Former glared down at him.

"Now, do you want a hiding?" he asked.

"A—a—a hiding?" gasped Jimmy.

"Just that!" said Coker darkly. "I don't stand on ceremony with cheeky kids, I can tell you."

"You—you—me——" stammered Jimmy.

"Now, then, young Silver, I'm waiting! Get up!"

Jimmy got up.

"Now lead the way!" said Coker.

"You frazzled chump!" howled Jimmy Silver. "I won't lead the way, but I'll help well punch your cheeky nose!"

"Ow!" gasped Coker, as the Rookwood junior came at him like an arrow from a bow.

Crack!

Jimmy's knuckles landed. Coker of the Fifth was a hairy fellow, so much bigger than Jimmy Silver that it was not easy for the Rookwood Fourth-Former to reach his nose, but he succeeded in reaching it—

Coker went over in the snow as if a pole-axe had hit him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Potter and Greene, apparently perceiving something come in this sudden downfall of their great chief.

Coker leaped up like a Jack-in-the-box.

"My hat!" he gasped. "My nose! Why, I—I—I——" He rubbed at Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy hands were up for defence. Jimmy was a great fighting man in the Rookwood Fourth; but against so hefty an antagonist as Coker he had little chance of holding his own.

Coker grasped him, headless of two or three hard knocks, and fairly swept him off his feet.

"Now, you cheeky little waster!" gasped Coker.

"Leggo, you rotter!" spluttered the Rookwooder.

"Yes, when I've licked you! Lay on that cane, Potter, while I hold him across my knee."

"Look here!" gasped Potter.

"Don't jaw! Do as I tell you! Here, give me the cane!" Coker grabbed Potter's walking-cane. "Now, you young rascal!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Jimmy Silver struggled desperately, but he was well held by the hairy Coker. His overcoat protected him a good deal; but Coker was putting his heel into the whacks, and Jimmy felt them—severely.

Potter and Greene stared on at the scene. They were used to Coker, and they gave him his head, for the sake of a quiet life. Besides, Coker was paying the expenses of that little holiday tour. When a fellow was footing all the bills he had to be given his head to some extent.

"Leggo!" raved Jimmy Silver.

Whack, whack, whack!

"There!" said Coker, setting the Rookwood junior on his feet again. "Now lead the way before I give you some more."

Jimmy Silver gazed at him speechlessly. Jimmy had met all sorts and conditions of fellows, but Coker was something novel to him. How Coker had reached his present age without being massacred was a deep mystery to Jimmy.

"I'm waiting!" rapped out Coker.

Jimmy controlled his feelings. He was no match for the hefty Horace at fist-fighting, that was certain; but there were other

"Follow me!" he said.

"Mind, if you try to cut and run I shall be after you, and I'll lam you till you fairly squirm!" warned Coker.

"This way!" was Jimmy's answer.

"And put some pace on, young 'un! Don't dawdle!" snapped Coker.

Jimmy Silver obediently led the way across a field, and then down a lane. Coker followed him triumphantly, and Potter and Greene followed Coker, perhaps thinking that Harace's drastic methods were going to be useful, after all. Certainly they were very anxious to get back to their inn and a belated lunch.

For a good mile Jimmy Silver led the Greyfriars Fifth-Formers on, till they reached a running stream, full to the brim with melted snow, which was crossed by a single plank. Jimmy led the way out on the plank.

It was obvious that the plank was not safe for more than one at a time, so Coker waited till Jimmy was across before he set foot on it.

Jimmy crossed it very quickly.

Then he turned back and stooped over the end of the plank, which rested in frozen rushes barely above the level of the running water.

"That's right," said Coker approvingly.

"Hold it while I cross. It looks a bit rocky."

Coker stepped on the end of the plank. At the same moment Jimmy jerked his end out of the rushes and lifted it. Coker slid back off the plank, and sat in frozen reeds on his side, with his feet in running water. There was a terrific roar from Coker.

"Yoooooop!"

Jimmy cheerfully pulled the plank away and landed it on his side of the stream.

Coker scrambled up, his legs drenched and dripping, raving.

"You clumsy young idiot!" he bellowed.

"You wait till I get across! I'll skin you!"

Jimmy chuckled, and landed the plank in the reeds. With twelve feet of running water—deep in the middle—between him and Coker, he did not quite see how the Greyfriars senior's threats were to be executed.

Coker glared across the stream at the Rockwood junior.

"Silver, put back that plank at once!"

"Done now!" said Jimmy.

"Till much you—"

"How!" inquired Jimmy sweetly.

"I—I—I—," gasped Coker.

"You're landed, old bean!" said Jimmy.

"Next time you ask a stranger the way, I suggest a little more politeness. It might pay better in the long run, you know, Good-bye!"

"Hold on!" shouted Potter. "How do we get to the Fox and Feathers from here?"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"That's a little problem for you to work out," he explained. "I've led you a mile out of your way—"

"What!" gasped Coker.

"You've got three miles to do if you can find the short cuts, which you can't do," exclaimed Jimmy. "If you find the road—and you may in time—you'll have six miles."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You'll have to ask the way six or seven times at least. Better be a bit more civil next time."

And, with that, Jimmy Silver turned his back on the stream, and the Greyfriars fellows on the other side of it, and started at a run. He had a roundabout course to follow now to reach Hadley Priory, and he was late for Putty Grace's train; but he was feeling fairly well satisfied with himself as he trotted off.

Behind him three voices were raised in wrathful discussion and argument. Coker, Potter and Greene, hopelessly lost in a snow-covered and apparently uninhabited country, required all their breath to get back to their inn, and they ought to have saved it for that purpose. Instead of which they expended a great deal of it in slanging one another.

They were still slanging at the top of their excited voices when Jimmy Silver passed out of hearing, and the Rockwood junior cheerfully left them to it.

CHAPTER 15.

An Unexpected Meeting!

"SLACKER!" said Putty Grace severely.

Putty of the Fourth was cooling his heels outside the little railway station at Hadley Priory when Jimmy Silver arrived there—an hour late for his appointment. Jimmy came up crimson and breathless with running.

"Sorry, old chap!" said Jimmy. "It's bad! But it wasn't really my fault. I've been kidnapped on the road by a wild man."

"What?" ejaculated Putty.

Jimmy Silver explained his adventure to Coker & Co. of Greyfriars.

Putty Grace stared at first, and then chuckled.

"I remember Coker at Greyfriars," he said. "I've seen him there. Silly as a pig."

"Wonderful man at football," he heard. "Kicks the ball through his own goal, and all that!"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"The worst of it is, we're jolly late for lunch," he said. "I suppose you're pretty peckish?"

"Famished!" said Putty feelingly. "Two hours in a giddy train—one hour kicking my heels waiting for a silly man."

"We'll grab at the inn here," said Jimmy, laughing. "They give you jolly good grub at the Priors Inn."

"Good!"

It did not take Jimmy Silver many minutes to telephone to the Priors from the station, asking the Co. and Mornington to stroll down to meet them after lunch.

Then he walked with Putty to the Priors Inn, where mine host was an old acquaintance of Jimmy's.

Mine host produced turkey and other good things for lunch, and Putty's face beamed over the festive board.

A big fire blazed at the end of the panelled, low-ceiled ancient room, and a diamond-paned window near the junction gave them a view of the village street, white and gleaming with thick snow.

"Jolly old place!" said Putty. "You're a lucky beggar, Jimmy! I live in a beautiful town. I say, Tubby Muffin would like this turkey! I've had three helpings! I'll make it four! I'd make it five, but I want to leave room for the Christmas-pudding!"

The two juniors enjoyed their lunch. They had finished it, and were further enjoying coffee, when there was a tramping of footsteps under the low bow window.

Jimmy glanced round lazily.

"Isn't he Lovell and the chaps yet," he said. "Oh, my only summer chaps!"

Through the window he sighted three figures—he knew. Coker

and Potter and Greene of the Greyfriars

Fifth. The wandering footsteps of the Greyfriars trio had not led them back to their own quarters evidently.

Coker's voice came booming through the window.

"This looks a decent show, and we can get some grub here. Don't argue, for goodness' sake!"

"Who's arguing?" snapped Potter.

"We're over two hours late for lunch, and I could eat a horse!"

"For goodness' sake let's get something, if it's only bread and cheese!" said Greene.

"The landlord will be able to tell us the way back to Denewood, too. But let's feed first!"

"If you two silly asses hadn't lost the way—"

"Look here, Coker—"

"And if you hadn't let that young scoundrel Silver strand us in the middle of a howling desert—"

"You lot him!" roared Peter.

"I'm frozen!" moaned Greene. "Do shut up, you fellows, till after grub, at least!"

"I'm going to look for that young end Silver later!" said Coker. "I'm going to smash him! The moment I set eyes on him again I'm going to knock him into more pieces than he can count!"

Putty looked expressively at Jimmy Silver across the table.

"That looks lively for you, Jimmy!" he murmured. "They'll be in here in a minute, too!"

Jimmy made a grimace.

"That's all right, Coker!" said Potter. "Smash him as hard as you like! I'll smash him, too, the cheeky young rascal! But never mind him now. Let's see if there's any grub going!"

The three seniors of Greyfriars tramped into the inn. From some dusky retreat the rubicund innkeeper emerged to show his new guests into the dining-room.

"Well, this looks comfy!" said Coker, as he sighted the blazing fire. "This is all right! Why, what—what—"

He fixed his eyes on Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy jumped up. A Public-school fellow, especially a senior, might have been expected to know better than to kick up a shindy at an inn. But it was quite clear that Horace Coker did not know better, and there was going to be a shindy of a terrific character.

"Silver!" stuttered Coker. "Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

Here he is, you chaps! Here's that young scoundrel who led us astray!"

"Cheeky little beast!" said Greene. "We'll thrash him after lunch! For goodness' sake let's get some lunch!"

"I'm going to thrash him now!"

"Coker, old man——"

"Dey up, Potter! I'm simply going to thrash that cheeky young scoundrel!"

"Look here——"

Coker did not look there. Coker was cold and Coker was hungry; four or five hours of wandering on a frozen countryside had made him both hungry and cold. But vengeance came first. Coker's lofty dignity had been affronted; he had been treated with disrespect and contumely, just as if he had been an ordinary mortal and not Coker of the Fifth at all.

Coker rushed across at Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy dodged round the table.

"Hands off, you silly hooligan!" he shouted.

"I'm going——"

"Order, gentlemen!" exclaimed the startled landlord.

Coker did not heed. The inn might have been Coker's private property, to judge by his proceedings. He rushed between the table and Jimmy Silver.

"Yooop!" roared Jimmy as the big Fifth-Former's powerful clutches fastened on him.

"Gentlemen!" gasped the landlord.

"Coker!" shouted Potter and Greene.

"Now, you cheeky young villain!" gasped Coker. "Take that—and that—and—— Yaroooooooop!"

Patty Grace, always quick to act, weighed in with his coffee-cup. The coffee was hot—extremely hot, it seemed to Coker as it jerked out of the cup and landed full upon his rugged features.

Coker staggered back, spluttering.

"Ooock! Ooooop! Grooooh! Guggug!"

"Good man, Patty!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "He may as well have mine, too!"

Swoosh! Splash!

Ooooooh! Oh! Ow! Wooooop!"

Coker dashed steaming coffee from his face, and fairly leaped at the two Rookwooders. The landlord dashed between, holding up his plump hands to save Coker off.

But Coker was not to be saved off.

He rushed right into the plump gentle-

man and sent him spinning. Mine had crashed on the table, and there was another crash as several dishes and plates went to the floor.

Coker staggered from the shock.

"Better slide out of this!" murmured Jimmy. "The dear man looks dangerous!"

And the Rookwooders retreated from the inn, leaving Coker in possession of the field of battle. Coker rushed to the door after them.

"Come on, you fellows!" he roared. And he dashed in pursuit.

"We're going to feed!" howled back Potter.

"Come on, I tell you!"

"Lunch, you see——"

"You'll get no lunch here, you young ruffians!" booted the innkeeper, spluttering with wrath. "Get out, the lot of you! Hear me? Get out of my inn! Here, Gargo! Gargo, let the bulldog loose!"

"Look here——" gasped Potter.

"Gargo!" bawled the innkeeper.

Potter and Greene were hungry. But they realised that there would be no lunch at that particular inn. They decided not to await the arrival of George and the bulldog. In a very hurried manner they followed Horace Coker from the inn.

"Come on!" bawled Coker.

Coker was going strong in pursuit of the two Rookwooders. And as there seemed nothing else to be done, Potter and Greene followed him—keen enough for vengeance upon Jimmy Silver, but probably keener still for vengeance upon Horace Coker, if that had been practicable.

CHAPTER 10.

Mine for Coker!

"O H, my hat! They're after us!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

He looked back along the snowy lane. Out of the village street came Horace Coker, going strong. Farther behind Potter and Greene came into view. There was no lunch for the heroes of Grefrarians, and apparently they had decided upon vengeance instead.

"Put it on!" panted Patty. "Coker will be a bit rough, I think, if he catches us!"

"Ha, ha! I fancy so!"

The two juniors trotted on. Patty had

bag to carry, and it was rather heavy running with. Both the Rookwooders are good sprinters, but they did not in ground. Horace Coker's long legs forced the ground at a great rate.

He gained on the two Fourth-Formers Rookwood. Potter and Greene hung behind, but they did not gain on Coker.

Jimmy glanced back again.

"Coker's going to overhaul us unless we chuck that bag away, Putty!" he hid. "You can't do that! I think we'd better stop for him!"

"Three seniors against us two——"

"The other two are a good way back, don't stop till I do!" said Jimmy Silver. "Right-ho!"

Jimmy dropped a little behind his hum. Coker, his long legs going like machinery, came up hand over fist.

He was soon close behind Jimmy Silver, breathing hard, his rugged face flaming with exertion. His outstretched hand almost touched Jimmy's shoulder as his heavy feet pounded behind.

"Got you, you young villain!" gasped Coker.

Jimmy stopped suddenly.

He braced himself for the shock, and it came. Coker, quite unanticipative of that sudden stop, crashed right into him.

The impact was terrific.

Jimmy pitched forward under it, and Coker, gasping like a punctured tyre, sat down with a bump in the snow.

"Oooooooh!" gasped Coker.

Jimmy Silver turned on him in a twinkling. Before Coker knew what was happening Jimmy had both hands on his collar, and Coker's features were jammed into thick snow.

"Back up, Putty!"

Putty rushed back. Coker was struggling up when Putty's bag smote him on the head. With a wild roar Coker went down again.

Then the two juniors grasped him hard and rolled him in the snow and over the edge of the ditch beside the lane. There was snow in the ditch, but there was water under the snow and mud—plenty of mud. Coker's lower half vanished from sight with a horrid sound of squelching.

Potter and Greene were coming up hand over hand, and it was time to go. The two juniors ran on, gasping with laughter.

Coker squelched in the ditch and roared.

There was mud and water up to his knees, and snow up to his waist. Potter and Greene came to a breathless halt.

"Help me out, you idiots!" bellowed Coker. "Can't you see I'm stuck in the mud, you burbling jabberwocks! What are you standing there gaping for, you cuckoos!"

Thus politely adjured, Potter and Greene each took a hand of the wriggling Coker, and with a combined effort dragged him out of the ditch, and landed him sprawling on the road.

Coker sprawled and roared.

He had been wrathful before; but his previous wrath, compared with his present wrath, was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine, so to speak. He sat up and raved.

"You dummies! Ooooo! Why didn't you keep up with me? Goooooh! Smoothed with mud—Ow! Look at my bags! Ooooo! Oh, you fatheads!"

He staggered to his feet. For a moment it looked as if Coker intended to commit assault and battery upon his faithful chums, and they backed away in alarm. But he turned his fiery eye on the two juniors disappearing in the distance, and checked his wrath.

"Come on!" he spluttered.

"Look here——"

"I'm going to smash those cheeky young cads! Look what they've done to me. Come on! If you don't help, don't you trouble ever to speak to me again! I'm done with you!"

And Coker rushed in pursuit of the Rookwooders, boiling. Potter and Greene exchanged a glance. There was nothing for it but to follow Coker, and they followed. They comforted themselves with the prospect of giving the Rookwood juniors a terrific thrashing. They would rather have had lunch; but there would be solace in thrashing Jimmy Silver and Putty Grace. So they sprinted after Coker.

Jimmy and Putty were going strong. They were more than half-way now to Jimmy's home, the Priory. At every moment Jimmy hoped to see his chums come in sight. Lovell and Rahy, Newcome and Mornington, had had Jimmy's message on the telephone, and they were in walk down to the village to meet Jimmy and Putty on their way. Jimmy would have been extremely glad to see them just then. For it was only too likely that the fugitives

would not reach safety before the enraged Greyfriars fellows came up. And once Coker & Co. were at close quarters, the result—though perhaps selecting to Coker & Co.—would have been extremely painful for Jimmy Silver.

The two juniors ran their hardest.

They came round a bend in the lane, between the high, snowy hedges, at top speed; and there was a sudden yell. The two fugitives ran full tilt into four fellows who were stinking down the lane towards them.

"What the thump—" roared Arthur Edward Lovell, as he went spinning in the snow.

"Oh, gad!" gasped Mornington, sitting down in the snow, with Putty's bag on his knees. "What the—"

"Sorry!" gasped Jimmy.

"You wait till I get up—I'll make you sorry!" spluttered Lovell.

And he scrambled to his feet and rushed at Jimmy Silver.

CHAPTER 17.

HEP III

"HOLD ON!"

Jimmy jumped back, and waved off his excited chum.

"What's the row?" asked

Raby.

"What the dickens—" exclaimed Newcome.

Jimmy Silver hurriedly explained. By that time the heavy pounding steps of Coker & Co. could be heard approaching the corner. The Fifth Formers of Greyfriars were not yet in sight, but they were close at hand now.

"Oh!" ejaculated Lovell. "Well, there's enough of us to handle all the Greyfriars Fifth, if you come to that!"

"What for?" grinned Mornington. "Let 'em all come!"

"They're coming!" grinned Putty. "I can hear their fairy footsteps. Take cover, you chaps; don't let them see you till they come up. We don't want them to turn back till we've interviewed them."

"He, he, ha!"

Lovell & Co. backed among the trees by the lane, grinning. Louder and louder sounded the trampling footsteps.

Jimmy and Putty stood in the middle of the lane with smiling faces. They had

ample help at hand now, and they went not at all reluctant to see Coker & Co. at close quarters.

Round the corner came Horace Coker, running hard, and still muckelching mud from his boots. Close behind came Potter and Greene.

"Here they are!" roared Coker. "They've stopped! Collar the young cad!"

"Come on, Coker!" sang out Jimmy Silver.

Coker came on with a rush. Probably the great Horace would not have turned back, even if he had known the odds against him. But he did not know, and he rushed right into the trap.

"Now, you young villains—" he gasped. He seized Jimmy Silver in a herculean grasp; and a second later Potter and Greene had hold of Putty.

"Show up!" shouted Jimmy.

Lovell & Co. did not wait for his call. They rushed out of ambush, and hurled themselves upon the enemy.

The sudden rush of four sturdy juniors caused a complete change in the programme. Coker had supposed that vengeance was within his grasp; but a change came over the spirit of his dream, as it were, as Lovell & Co. rushed in.

Hands seized the mighty Coker on all sides, and he was dragged off Jimmy Silver and bumped down in the snow.

He hardly knew what was happening till he realised that he was on his back, with Jimmy Silver sitting on his chest and Arthur Edward Lovell trampling recklessly on his long legs.

"Oh!" gasped Coker.

Potter and Greene were struggling with Raby and Newcome, Mornington and Putty Grace. Two to one was long odds, as Potter and Greene quickly found. They went down in the snow, and were sat upon.

"Sort of turned the tables, what?" asked Jimmy Silver with a smile, as he playfully pulled Coker's nose.

"Ow!" spluttered Coker. "Lemme gerrup! I'm going to smash you! I'm going to pulverise you! Lemme gerrup at once!"

"Likely to!" grinned Jimmy. "Don't wriggle, old scout, or I shall have to dot your nose—like that—"

"Ooooo!"

"And like that!"

"Yaaaaaah!"



Onker, his arms and legs tied with his braces and his tie, lay on the floor and glared. Jimmy Silver and Co. stood round him, grinning.

"Look here," gasped Potter, "we'll make it pass! Don't show that snarl into my face, you young rascal—Grooch!"

"Don't you—" began Greene. But he had to stop as a handful of snow was jammed into his mouth. After that he gurgled.

"Roll 'em over, and then let them go!" said Jimmy Silver. "We're keeping Coker for a bit!"

"Look here!" howled Coker. "I—Groooooogh! Mmmmmmm!" A handful of snow choked Coker's utterance.

Potter and Greene were rolled in the snow till they hardly knew whether they were on their heads or their heels. Then they were released, with the order to travel. Potter and Greene were only too glad to travel. What happened to Coker they did not care in the least; only they hoped it would be something very severe. They fled back the way they had come, with snowballs raining after them till they disappeared.

Then the Rookwooders turned their attention to Coker. Coker, in Jimmy Silver's opinion, was in need of a lesson. Jimmy felt sure of that, and he felt still surer that Coker was going to get it.

Coker's necktie was used to tie his wrists behind his back. Then his muffler came in handy to tie his right leg, bent up at the knee. Then the great Coker was lifted up, and he stood on one leg like a meditative stork.

He hopped to keep his footing, and spluttered.

"You young villains, I—I—I'll—"

"Travel!" said Jimmy Silver.

"How can I travel like this?" roared Coker. "Let my leg loose!"

"You'll have to wait for some good Samaritan to do that, old dear!" said Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "Hop it!"

"I—I can't! I—"

"Try—we'll help!"

The Rookwooders gathered snowballs and proceeded to help. With that kind of help in plenty, Coker found that he could "hop" it.

He hopped it, in fact, at a great rate, and disappeared in the distance hopping, followed by a yell of laughter from the merry Rookwooders.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked home in

cheery spirits. What became of Horace Coker they did not know; possibly he found Potter and Greene, and was released—or possibly somebody else found him and released him. But the heroes of Rookwood did not worry about it. Fortunately, it did not matter what became of Coker!

CHAPTER 12.

Unexpected.

"COKER!"

"Phaw!"
Jimmy Silver & Co. started.
It was a sharp January morning. Jimmy Silver & Co. had turned out after breakfast for skating.

The six Rookwood juniors were heading for the lake in the grounds of the Priory, Jimmy's home, when they caught sight of a burly and somewhat ungainly figure coming up the drive. They recognized the figure at once.

It was Coker.
"Looking for trouble?" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Plenty ready for him," remarked Mornington.

Jimmy Silver looked rather serious.

The egregious cheek of Horace Coker had led the Rookwooders to handle him somewhat severely. Jimmy had no special objection to handling him again, if it came to that. But naturally he did not want the hounding to take place under the windows of his father's house.

"Silly ass to come here," said Jimmy. "Surely he can't be looking for a row."

"Of course he is," said Newsum. "Let's meet him on the way, and give him what he wants, before he asks for it."

Jimmy hesitated.

"Come on!" said Baby. "We can skate afterwards."

"Hallo! He's seen us!" said Putty Grace.

Coker of Greyfriars stopped and waved his hand to the Rookwood juniors. His bawling voice came through the frosty air.

"Here! Come here at once!"

"Better, I suppose," said Jimmy. "If he's looking for trouble, the farther from the house the better. The pater and mates wouldn't understand—"

"We can rush him out into the road in two ticks," said Mornington. "Come on!"

And the six Rookwood juniors headed for

Coker, who stood waiting on the drive for them to come up.

Considering the circumstances in which they had parted last, Jimmy Silver & Co. took it for granted, naturally enough, that the Greyfriars fellow had come hunting for trouble. Coker had threatened vengeance; and now he was here for vengeance!

So they did not stand upon ceremony. Without wasting words on the Fifth-Former of Greyfriars, they collared him.

There was a roar from Coker.

"What—how—stop—it—oh!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not heed. Six pairs of hands grasped Borneo Coker, and he was swept off the ground.

Almost in the twinkling of an eye he was rushed back to the gate, which stood open, and rushed out into the road.

There he was out of sight of the house, and the chums of Rookwood were free to deal with him.

Coker bumped on the ground in a breathless heap.

"Good!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "Now, the best thing we can do is to dribble him away! Take it in turns to kick."

"Hear, hear!"

Coker sat up.

"Groogh! Oh! Ow!" he spluttered.

"You young idiots—groogh! Ow! Wharrer you up to? Ooooh! This what you call civil when a fellow comes along to do you a favour? Wow!"

"What!"

"Didn't you come here for a row?" asked Jimmy, rather taken aback.

"Ooooh! Ow! No! Wow!"

"Oh dear! What on earth did you come for, then?"

Coker staggered up.

"You silly dummy—" he spluttered.

"Just a friendly call!" grinned Putty of the Fourth. "Ba, ha, ha!"

"Sorry!" gasped Jimmy. "You see—I thought—"

"You knew what you deserved, you mean!" hooted Coker. "I've a jolly good mind to thrash the lot of you. You deserve it! You've asked for it. By Jove, I've a jolly good mind to mop up the ground with the lot of you, and not let you play in the football match at all."

"The football match?" repeated Jimmy.

Evidently there had been a misapprehension.

Coker did not answer immediately. He was breathless, he was wrathful, and he was indignant. He looked as if he were

strongly inclined to run amok among the Rookwooders, hitting out right and left. It was not the odds that stopped him; Coker of the Fifth never counted odds. But he controlled his righteous wrath.

For some minutes he spluttered and glared. Jimmy Silver & Co. waited politely. After giving the visitor such a very unceremonious reception, they felt that it was up to them to wait till he had finished spluttering.

"I happen to want you," gasped Coker at last. "But for that, I'd mop you up. But I want you."

"What an honour for us!" murmured Putty.

"I came here," gasped Coker. "to see you, Silver."

"Well, here I am," said Jimmy. "Take a good look! No charge!"

"Don't be a young ass! I want you fellows this afternoon. I've got a football match on, and I want you to play."

"Oh!" said Jimmy.

"This is how it is," said Coker. "I'm putting up for the present at the Fox and Feathers, near Denewood. There's a football crowd in Denewood—not much in the way of players, of course; but they think they can play. Their skipper, young Bates, is a cheeky cad."

"Well!"

"They were punting a ball about the other day," said Coker, "clumsy young asses! I chimed in, to show them how to kick. By an extraordinary fluke, the ball went through a window. I had to pay for it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't cackle when I'm talking to you. I'm not in the habit of standing cheek from lags, I can tell you. Well, that cheeky cad Bates had the neck to chip me afterwards—making out that I couldn't kick a footer, you know. I told him I'd mop up his team in a match, anyhow. That's how it came about. It's fixed for this afternoon."

"Well!" said Jimmy, still inquiring.

"I thought of you kids," explained Coker. "You're only lags, but I suppose you play footer of sorts at your school."

"Just a little!" smiled Jimmy.

"We know a football from a foot-warmer," said Raby gravely. "Do you?"

"Don't be cheeky! Your footer won't amount to much, of course," said Coker, "but you'll help to fill up a team. Six of you, and Potter and Greene and me—that

makes nine. Nine will be enough to walk over that set of joinkies—with me captaining. Practically I could beat the lot on my own—my footer's something a bit out of the common."

"I've heard from Greyfriars chaps that it's a bit out of the common," assented Jimmy Silver. "Do you always break windows?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up your silly cockling. The match is fixed for three this afternoon, on the village green at Denewood," said Coker. "They've got a local football ground there—of sorts. Anyway, there's a dressing-room there they can lend us. You kids had better turn up at half-past two or thereabouts. Mind, I'm not expecting much of you. But do your best."

"But—" said Jimmy.

"That's all," said Coker.

"But—"

"That's all, I tell you."

And Horace Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth turned and walked away, the matter being finished, leaving the Rookwooders staring after him blankly.

CHAPTER 12.

Jimmy Silver Says "Yes!"

"GREAT SCOTT!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, of all the cheeky dummies—"

The Rookwooders stared after Coker, whose burly figure was disappearing down the road.

Evidently it had not even occurred to Coker that his request might be declined, with or without thanks.

He had made his request—or, rather, had issued his command—and there was an end! That was how Coker looked at it apparently.

He had not even waited to hear whether the Rookwooders consented to play for him. He took that for granted.

Jimmy Silver burst into a laugh.

"Doesn't he take the biscuit?" he said.

"Blessed if I should believe in Coker if I hadn't seen him."

"Rather a facer for him when we don't turn up!" remarked Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The cheeky ass!" said Mornington.

"Let's get on with the skating."

And Jimmy Silver & Co. repaired to the

lake, and were soon cutting merry figure on the ice.

Coker was dismissed from their cheerful minds. The Rookwooders had no intention whatever of receiving commands from Coker of the Fifth.

But when the juniors went indoors to lunch, Jimmy Silver thought the matter over. The idea of a football match that keen, cold day appealed to him. Coker was a cheeky ass, that was certain; but a football game would not come amiss. And Jimmy, as it happened, had met Master Bates of Denewood, and knew that this young gentleman could put up a good game.

If Coker had had just a little more sense—if he had only put it with bare civility—Jimmy would have been willing to oblige him. But there was a limit, and Coker was the limit.

Jimmy, too, remembered some talk he had heard at Greyfriars concerning Horace Coker's football, which, by all accounts, was fearful and wonderful. Coker's antics as a footballer might be entertaining to watch, but would not be likely to entertain fellows playing on the same side.

So Jimmy began to arrange a ramble for that afternoon, regardless of Horace Coker and his football fixture.

Soon after lunch the telephone bell rang, and Mr. Silver came to look for his hopeful son.

"Someone wishes to speak to you, Jimmy," said the old gentleman. "He gave the name of Potter. Go and take the call."

"Yes, dad."

Jimmy Silver wondered what Potter of Greyfriars had to say. He soon discovered.

"Hallo! Is that you, young Silver?"

"Yes. Is that you, young Potter?" inquired Jimmy cheerfully.

"Young Potter" probably did not please the Fifth-Former of Greyfriars. But he made no comment on it.

"Coker's asked you to play for him this afternoon in a silly match he's fixed up here?"

"Yes."

"Are you playing?"

"No!"

"Coker thinks you are."

"No accounting for what a chap thinks with a brain like Coker's."

"Well, I couldn't get out of Coker that you'd actually agreed," said Potter. "He's such a silly ass—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Such a burbling champ!" said Potter.

Potter of the Fifth, apparently, was a very candid friend.

"You know him?" assented Jimmy.

"Such a rabidous burler, you know," said Potter. "But the fact is, we're in a scrape. That dummy—that crass ass—has set up a football match without a team to play in it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, it may be funny, but it isn't funny for us," said Potter. "Greene and I have to turn up with him, and precious fools we shall look if the match doesn't come off because there isn't any team."

"You will?" agreed Jimmy with a chuckle.

"Well, couldn't you play?" asked Potter. "Never mind Coker, he can't help being a born idiot. But it's jolly weather for a football match, and I've seen you kids play the Remove at Greyfriars. I know you're good at the game. Never mind Coker—just come along and play."

"Well!" said Jimmy slowly.

"We'd be no end obliged," said Potter. "You'll get a good game, too, I think. We've got to turn up—there's no arguing with Coker. You've noticed that he's a born chump?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that's how it stands. Come along for the match, and help us through. Coker's quite capable of playing eight men short if you don't come."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You'll come?"

Jimmy Silver considered a moment or two.

"All serene!" he said at last. "We'll come. Rely on us."

"Thanks! You're a good kid."

Jimmy Silver hung up the receiver and rejoined his chums. He found them getting ready for the ramble.

"Well, what about Potter?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell.

Jimmy Silver explained.

Arthur Edward granted.

"Play for that cheeky chump—"

"Well, it will be a game of football, anyhow," said Jimmy. "I've answered for you fellows, so you must play up. It will be a good many. Bates and his men can play."

"Oh, all right!"

And so it was arranged. In good time, Jimmy Silver & Co. started for Deneswood. They walked cheerily through the frosty lanes in the keen winter air in very good spirits. George Mounier of the party was a

good footballer, and Jimmy Silver and Mornington were first-class. What sort of a captain Coker would prove was as yet unknown. Jimmy had his doubts on that point. But in his most dubious moments he did not dream of the kind of footballer Horace Coker actually was. That was a discovery that Jimmy Silver had yet to make.

At a quarter to three Jimmy Silver & Co. were on the football ground at Deneswood. They found Bates and most of his men already there, and Jimmy and Bates exchanged greeting. Coker & Co. had not yet turned up, but they came along soon afterwards.

Coker gave his companions a lofty grin.

"You see, they're here!" he said. "I told you you were a silly idiot, Potter, thinking the kids mightn't turn up. I know I was right."

Apparently Potter hadn't mentioned the incident of the telephone. Coker was satisfied that his lordly behests had been obeyed.

"Got changed, you kids!" said Coker.

"Hallo, Bates! You're going to see what football is like now! Rather a discovery for you."

"I don't think!" remarked Bates.

"My team isn't much class, as you can see!" said Coker with a lofty disregard of the feelings of that team. "A set of scrubby fags, excepting two. But a good skipper can do a lot even with poor materials. You'll see!"

"We're waiting to see!" grinned Bates.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were shown into their dressing-room, where they changed for the match. During that process Coker gave them some directions.

"I shall play centre," he told them. "What you kids have got to do is to keep your eye on me and play up to me. Listen to every word I say, and obey promptly."

Arthur Edward Lovell opened his lips, but closed them again. It was useless to begin the proceedings with a row with Coker. But it was not in the most optimistic mood that the Hookwooders followed Horace Coker into the field.

CHAPTER 20.

Football Extraordinary!

HORACE COKER lost the toss, and was given the wind to kick against. He arranged his team with some care. Having asked the Hookwood juniors in what positions they were accus-

tomed to play, he proceeded to allocate the places in lady disregard to their answers. Greene was put into goal; Potter was made centre-half—a position that Jimmy Silver was accustomed to. Jimmy was put in the front line; Lovell, who was also accustomed to playing half, was made forward; while Baby and Newcome, who were best as forwards, were settled upon as halves. Mornington was a brilliant forward; and he was given a place at back, with Potty Grace. The two blank places were in the front line; but Coker was there, and no doubt Coker was equal to filling many places beside his own.

Jimmy Silver ventured a modest protest. Coker eyed him like a basilisk.

"You play footer at Rookwood?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Haven't you learned there not to argue with your skipper on the field of play?"

Jimmy did not answer that.

Coker was right—in theory. Argument with a skipper on the field of play must certainly was not in the fitness of things.

And Coker was the skipper!

The Rookwooders having agreed to play for Coker, were bound to accept his word as law, as their captain. His display of obstinate obtuseness did not alter that fact. But it did not promise well for the game.

The referee, a local young man, blew the whistle, and the ball was kicked off. Bates and his merry men started with a rush.

The country team were not bad players; but they were not up to Rookwood's form. Jimmy Silver's team from Rookwood would have given them some startling surprises. But it was not Jimmy's team that they had to deal with. It was Coker's team.

The Denewood attack came right through, and there was a hot assault upon goal. Greene drove out the ball, and Morny would have cleared to midfield in a second move—but the second was not granted him. Coker was there!

Coker was centre-forward; but evidently he felt that it was his duty to put in some work for the backs. Coker did his duty.

He bumped into Morny and hurled him off the ball, with the intention of clearing right up the field. Only it did not happen; for Bates was there, and he hooked the ball away from Coker with perfect ease and drove it into the goal.

"Goal!"

"Bursali!"

There was a shout from the villagers round the field. The home team had scored in the first five minutes of the match.

Mornington picked himself up dazedly.

"What did you shove me off the ball for, Coker?" he raved.

"You clumsy young ass!" roared Coker. "What did you get in my way for? Didn't I tell you to play up to me?"

"You—you—you—" stammered Mornington.

Coker lined up his team again with a frowning brow. The game had not started according to Coker's programme. Coker was not blaming himself. Far from that. He felt that he had done the best that was possible, with a rotten team of fags to back him up. But he was annoyed.

By that time Jimmy Silver was repenting deeply that he had listened to the urgings of Potter on the telephone. But repentance came too late. Certainly he had never anticipated anything like this. It was almost incredible that a fellow who landed himself as a footballer could play the game quite so rotfully as Horace Coker. Jimmy Silver & Co. were in for it now; and they could only go through with it and hope for the best. They presented the spectacle, dear to the ancient dramatist, of good men struggling with adversity!

But it was not of much use struggling with adversity in the shape of Coker of the Fifth.

Coker was marvellous.

As the game went on, he developed amazingly. The villagers looking on at the game almost rubbed their eyes. Bates and his men were laughing most of the time, sometimes laughing too much to take the chances Coker handed over to them.

Coker's ideas of the duties of a football captain were extensive. His view of centre-forward's place was that it embraced the whole field, from one goal to the other, from touch-line to touch-line.

Coker's charges were worth watching. They were powerful charges—Coker was a hefty fellow. Never a foul charge—for Coker, like Brutus, was an honourable man. Their chief defect was that his own men got more of them than the enemy did.

Coker was busy on both wings—but he had a lot of work to do for the halves, and he bestowed his support upon the backs. Nobody would have been surprised if he had dropped into goal to give Greene a lift.

The mere ground covered by Coker, it

frantic rushes into all sorts of places where he had no business, must have been miles. It was no wonder that he got into a breathless state.

Meanwhile, the home score went up by jumps. Four goals were marked when half-time drew near.

Then came a chance for Coker's team.

Jimmy Silver and Lovell succeeded in getting the ball up the field, with only the goalie to beat. Considering how they were handicapped that was very creditable. For the moment, they seemed to be safe from Coker. But nobody on the field was really safe from Coker—indeed it would have caused no astonishment if he had charged the spectators.

Jimmy sent the ball in, and it was fisted out—beautifully to be headed in again. Just as Jimmy was heading it in an earthquake struck him from behind. That is, it seemed like an earthquake. But it was only Coker.

Jimmy went sprawling, with a wild howl. Where the ball went he did not see—he could not see anything but stars for some time.

But as he sat up, in a dazed state, the roar of the crowd enlightened him.

"Goal!"

Hates & Co. had put it in again, at the other end!

The referee managed to blow the whistle—a difficult task, when he was gasping with excitement. The first half was over; with five goals to the credit of the home team, against nil.

Jimmy Silver staggered away to the dressing-room. There he sat down and gasped. Arthur Edward Lovell, rubbing a bruise that had been caused by Coker's elbow, breathed fire and slaughter.

"I'm off!" gasped Lovell. "No good playing this out! I'm going to kill Coker and then I'm off!"

"Ow, ow!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Oh dear! The idiot caught me in the back with his knee!" moaned Puffy Grace. "His knee—in my back! Ow!"

"Where's Potter?" gasped Jimmy.

"Let's slaughter Potter, for getting us into this."

But Potter and Greene—perhaps with a view to their own safety—had not come into the dressing-room.

"No more for me!" said Mornington.

"No fear!"

"Hold on!" said Jimmy Silver. "We

can't chuck a match in the middle. I've got a whizzo."

"Look here——" roared Lovell.

Jimmy Silver rose. There was a very determined expression on his face.

"We've got to play this out!" he said.

"We've got to win, if we can——"

"With Coker!" snorted Lovell.

"Without Coker."

"He won't agree, you ass!"

"He won't have any choice about that," said Jimmy Silver grimly. "We'll leave him in the dressing-room."

"Do you think he'll stay in the dressing-room, you ass?"

"I do—if we fix him up so that he can't move."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The voice of Coker of the Fifth was heard without. The interval was nearly up.

"Now, then, you dacking fags! Show up!"

Jimmy Silver made a sign to his chums. There was no answer to Coker's hail. His heavy footsteps came tramping in.

"Now, then——"

Coker put his head in at the door.

The next moment the surprise of his life happened to Horace Coker. There was a rush, and Coker, in the grasp of many hands, went with a crash to the floor.

CHAPTER XI.

Minus Coker!

"SIT on him!"

"Pin him down!"

"Got him!"

"Enough! Ow! What—wharree Onoooh!"

Coker struggled desperately.

He was a hefty fellow; but six Rookwood juniors were much more than a match even for the hefty Coker.

He was fairly squashed to the floor, with juniors sitting or standing on him; and Jimmy Silver thoughtfully shaved a handkerchief into his mouth, so that Coker could not yell.

"Mmmm!"

That was Coker's next remark.

He glared up at the Rookwooders in rage and astonishment. For the life of him, Coker could not understand this.

He had played a wonderful game—cruelly handicapped by a rotten team. He

had told them so. He had told them that they weren't any good, that he had been a fool to play them, and that he had a good mind to thrash them all round when the match was over. He had told them those things, and a good many more. And still they had turned on him in this amazing and unaccountable manner!

"Mumma!" mumbled Coker helplessly.

Coker's arms were securely fastened down to his sides with his own braces. Coker wondered whether he was dreaming.

His necktie, and some other articles, came in useful for fastening his legs. Then the juniors left him on the floor.

The Greyfriars Fifth-Former glared up at them. He could not speak, and he could hardly move. And he could not understand.

There was a step outside.

"You fellows ready?" called out Potter.

Jimmy Silver hurriedly slammed the door.

"Minute or two!" he called back. "We're talking to Coker."

Potter, a little puzzled, retreated again. Jimmy Silver turned back to the hapless football captain.

"We're landed in this match now, Coker, and we're going to play it out—without you. Do you understand, you dummy!"

Coker's eyes rolled wildly.

"We're going to leave you tied up here for the second half. Got that into your wooden skull?"

"You're gettin' off well without bein' lynched," said Mornington, with a glare at the hapless Coker.

"Mumma! Grrr!"

That was all Coker could say, faintly. What he would have liked to say was obviously something much more personal and emphatic. But he couldn't.

His face was scarlet with wrath. His eyes rolled. He wriggled and struggled frantically. But he was quite secure. The Rookwooders had tied him up thoroughly and carefully. They did not intend to run the risk of Coker joining in the game again before the final whistle. It is said that desperate diseases require desperate remedies. And it could not be doubted that Coker was a desperate disease in a football eleven.

Coker would possibly have been speechless with rage, anyhow; certainly he was speechless now. The handkerchief stuffed

into his mouth had cut off the gas, as it were, very effectively.

"Ready, you fellows?" said Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Good-bye, Coker!"

"Mumma!"

The Rookwooders trooped out of the room in high good humor now. There was a chance, at least, of pulling the game out of the fire—without the assistance of the great Coker. Anyhow, the rest of the match would be football, whether it was won or lost.

So the chums of Rookwood came out very cheerily, surprising Potter and Greene by their smiling looks.

"Where's Coker?" asked Greene. "The fellows are waiting."

"Coker's standing out of the second half," explained Jimmy Silver.

"Great Scott!"

"Thank goodness!" said Potter fervently.

"But—but he wouldn't—" said Greene in amazement. "He's going to muck up the match to the finish—that's Coker!"

"Well, he isn't," said Jimmy Silver. "I'm captain till the finish."

"You!" said Potter, with a stare. "I don't think! If Coker's standing out, you can leave that to me."

"Rats!"

"Look here, young Silver—"

"You can line up or not, as you choose!" snorted Lovell. "But we're playing under our own captain, and you can go and eat cake!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Greene. "What a game!"

Potter and Greene decided to line up. They had a suspicion of what must have happened in the dressing-room, but they were very careful not to inquire. Being relieved of Coker seemed almost too good to be true. They could not help feeling a little grateful to Jimmy Silver & Co.

The teams lined up for the second half, Jimmy making several alterations for the better in his side. The eleven was now three men short, instead of two; but undoubtedly it was a much stronger team.

"Another man short!" asked Halsey, with a puzzled grin.

"Yes; Coker's taking a rest."

"Good luck for you!" grinned Bates.

The whistle went, and the second half started. It started on quite different lines.

There was no Coker present now, to yell contradictory directions—all of them ill-judged—and to charge the halves, and bump over the backs, and make the enemy a present of the ball. Without Coker, the team pulled up wonderfully.

Bates & Co. discovered that they had quite a different proposition in tackle. Jimmy made a strong front line with Potter, Mornington, Raby, Newcome, and Putty Grove. Attack was the order of the day, and Jimmy, at half, was ever ready to help the forwards; and Lovell behind him, and Greene in goal, were adequate for defence.

From the whistle, Bates & Co. seldom got even across the half-way line.

The fighting was nearly all in the home half, and most of it round about the Denewood goal.

Valentine Mornington was at the top of his form; and two quick goals in succession showed it. Potter put the ball in once, and it was followed up by a goal from Jimmy Silver—a long shot that came off successfully. Then Mornington succeeded again; and, with ten minutes to go, the score was level.

Master Bates was looking quite serious now. His team was outclassed by the Rookwooders, and he realised the fact. It was the handicap of Horace Coker that had given the local players their successes in the first half; and Coker was now out of harm's way.

Coker's feelings, as he lay in the dressing-room, wriggling in his boots, must have been terrific. It was not only that he was out of the game; that he was tied up like a turkey, and left to entertain himself by wriggling on a hard, unsympathetic floor. That was the not the worst. The game, without him, was bound to go to pot—Coker had no doubt about that. With him, assuredly, it had gone remarkably well; but without him—Coker hardly dared to think of the stunning score that would be piled up by the enemy, now that he was not there to play forward, half-back, and full-back, all on his own.

He wriggled and wriggled and wriggled, and mumbled and mumbled and mumbled. At last he began to get loose. But he realised that the game was nearly over by that time.

But he was loose at last!

Meanwhile, the second half of that amazing match was drawing to a close.

Five goals a-side was a rather unusual score; but that game was a rather unusual one in many respects.

Just on the Irish Jimmy Silver & Co. rushed the home goal, and the ball went in again from Morny's foot.

"Goal!"

"Bravo!" gasped Jimmy Silver breathlessly.

The whistle went.

"Beaten then!" gasped Arthur Edward Lovell. "Oh, my hat! Good old Rookwood!"

"Hurrah for little us!" chuckled Mornington. "I wonder what Coker will say!"

"Coker!" Jimmy Silver had forgotten Coker. "Ha, ha, ha! Well, we can let him off the chain now."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Rookwooders walked off to the dressing-room. It was at that moment that Horace Coker, free at last after infinite wriggles, emerged. He stared at the Rookwooders, who grinned cheerily.

"You young scoundrel!" panted Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've thrown away the game—"

"We've won it!" roared Lovell.

"What!"

"Six to five—our six, and your five for the enemy—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Won it!" gasped Coker. "Well, my hat!" The great Coker seemed taken quite aback. "I suppose they hadn't much left in them, the way I put them through it in the first half."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Now I'm going to give you what you've asked for!" roared Coker. "I'm going to smash you—spiculate you—Yo-yo-yaroooooh!"

Coker of the Fifth rushed on, regardless of odds, as usual. But the odds were there!

Coker of the Fifth found himself collared, and bumped hard.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Yoo! Leggo! I—I—I'll—" raved Coker.

Bump, bump!

The Rookwooders crowded into the dressing-room, leaving Coker to get his second wind. By the time they had changed and emerged, Coker of the Fifth was ready for them again. He came on with a rush. Potter and Greene had dis-

appeared—apparently to avoid an argument with Coker.

"Now, you young villains——"

Bump!

"Oh, crumbs! I'll——"

Bump, bump, bump!

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked away with smiling faces. Coker sat up, in a breathless and ruffled state, and stared after them. He did not follow. It was borne in upon Coker's powerful intellect that it was no use asking for more bumping. He sat and gasped breathlessly, and Jimmy Silver & Co. walked home in a merry mood, quite "bucked" by the result of the amazing match.

CHAPTER XX.

LOVELL DRIVES!

"**B**ETTER let me drive!" Arthur Edward Lovell spoke in quite a decided tone.

Jimmy Silver looked doubtful. Raby and Newcome looked very doubtful.

Lovell had full confidence in his powers as a driver. His confidence did not seem to be shared, to the same full extent, by his chums.

"You see——" murmured Jimmy.

"I'm the only fellow here that can really handle the ribbons, you know," explained Lovell.

"Well, we've got to get off!" said Raby. "Jimmy's more used to the horse, Lovell."

"If you think I can't drive, George Raby——"

"Oh, let him drive!" said Newcome, resignedly. "Can't stand here all day."

"After all, it may prolong the run!" said Jimmy. "we can't go back to Rockwood for the new term if we're smashed up."

Lovell breathed hard through his nose. There were many things that Arthur Edward Lovell prided himself upon, and his way of handling the ribbons was one of them. For the safety of the whole party, Lovell considered that he was bound to drive. At school, Jimmy Silver might have requested Lovell to go and eat cake; but Arthur Edward was now a guest at Jimmy's home, and a guest could not be requested to go and eat cake. So Jimmy Silver nodded, and bowed for the best.

"Go it!" he said.

The juniors mounted into the trap. Lovell took the reins and the whip, and the groom let go the horse's head. The trap rattled down the drive and turned into the road to Hadley Priory. And Lovell gave his comrades a lofty glance.

"Looks as if I can handle him!" he said.

"Appearances are sometimes deceptive!" murmured Raby.

"Fathhead!"

Lovell drove on. There was snow on the road, and it was slippery in places, and careful driving was needed. Lovell was rather given to shaking out his reins, and cracking his whip, in a flourishing style. The trap dashed along at a good speed in the keen frosty morning.

The vacation was drawing to an end now, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were already thinking of the new term at Rockwood. Mornington had quitted Jimmy's party, to join Errol for the remainder of the vacation, and Puffy Grace had returned home. The party in the trap chatted cheerily of the approaching term, elaborating a scheme for giving the Moderns the "kyboosh" when they met their old rivals once more at Rockwood. The talk was interrupted by the sight of a burly figure tramping on the roadside.

"Jolly old Coker!" remarked Lovell.

"So he's still about here!" remarked Jimmy Silver. "I thought he was gone by this time."

Hornce Coker glanced round.

A deep frown knitted his brows at the sight of the Rockwood juniors. Coker, evidently, had not forgotten or forgiven.

"You cheeky young sweeps!" ejaculated Coker.

"Where did you get that face, Coker?" called out Raby.

"What?"

"Did you win it in a raffish?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker made a step into the road as the trap came rattling up. It seemed to be in his mind to stop the trap, and collar the whole Rockwood Party, and "wallop" them on the spot. Perhaps it dawned upon Coker's mind that this was too large an order. Instead of making a frontal attack, he stopped, and gathered up handfuls of the snow that lay beside the road.

He rose again, wrathful. A snowball flew. It was intended for Jimmy Silver, so naturally it hit Lovell. Coker was not a good marksman.

There was a howl from Lovell, and he jerked on the rein unintentionally. The horse spun towards the farther bank of snow heaped against the hedge.

"Hold on!" gasped Jimmy, as the trap rocked.

Whiz! Whiz!

Snowballs flew from Coker with great force though with faulty aim. One of them smashed on the horse's nose.

Lovell dragged on the reins desperately. There was no doubt that the horse was a little fresh and Lovell had his hands full without Coker weighing in with snowballs. Coker, grinning, tramped on his way, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell struggling with the horse.

The horse seemed to have a determination to get through the hedge, and as he now had the bit between his teeth, and was in a state of great excitement, Lovell had about as much effect upon him as a fly on his back. The juniors held on as the trap rocked and plunged.

"Keep to the road, Lovell!" yelled Newcome, "you'll have us over."

Lovell gasped.

"The brute won't come round! Oh, my hat!"

The horse's fore-legs went plunging deep into a ditch hidden by banked snow. The trap heeled over and crashed on the hedge.

What happened next, the juniors hardly knew.

Jimmy Silver found himself sprawling on the hedge. Lovell was in the snowy ditch, Raby and Newcome went right over the hedge and landed in the field, fortunately in the thick snow.

"Oh my hat!" gasped Jimmy.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Oh! Wow!"

Lovell dragged himself from the ditch. Then he helped Jimmy Silver to descend from the hedge, in a considerably ruffled and scratched state. Jimmy ran to the horse's head and got him out of the ditch. Fortunately he was not damaged. Raby and Newcome came limping out of the field by the nearest gate.

"No bones broken!" said Jimmy Silver, as cheerily as he could. "I've got a few pains—"

"I've got a few hundreds!" groaned Raby.

"Wow-wow-wow!" was Newcome's contribution.

The Rookwooders were considerably

shaken up. By common consent the drive was given up for that morning. Jimmy drew the horse round in the road.

"Nother time," he said. "Better get back now. Tumble in, you fellows."

"Leave him to me!" said Lovell.

"What!"

"Better let me drive."

"You dangerous lunatic!" roared Newcome, in wrath. "If you're going to drive, I'm going to walk."

Snort from Lovell.

"If you think I can't drive, Newcome—"

"You silly owl!"

"I can't help a silly clump chucking snowballs and scaring the horse!"

"And supposing we meet another snowballer on the road," hissed Raby.

"Oh, rot!"

"You see, we've only got one neck each, Lovell!" said Newcome. "I want mine to last a bit longer."

"Look here—"

"I'll drive back!" said Jimmy Silver.

And Jimmy drove the trap home. Arthur Edward Lovell sat in it in an attitude of lofty dignity. But the party reached home with bones unbroken, which was a more important consideration than the dignity of Lovell.

CHAPTER XL

Lovell's Way!

"THIN!"

"Yes."

"Thick, old chap," said Lovell. —"thick as your head—or nearly."

Jimmy Silver & Co. had decided to skate, if the ice would bear.

There was plenty of ice on the lake in the grounds of the Priory. But there had been a thaw.

Jimmy Silver was of opinion that the ice was too thin; Raby and Newcome agreed with him. Lovell didn't.

"We'll go for a drive instead," said Jimmy Silver.

"You fellows go for a drive, if you're nervous about the ice," said Lovell. "I'll skate."

"It's too thin—"

"You mean thick?" asked Lovell amiably.

"Fathead!"

"Same to you, old chap, and many of them." Arthur Edward Lovell sat down to put on his skates. "You fellows watch me, and when you see that it's quite safe, follow on."

"It's not safe!" howled Newcome.

"Bow-wow!"

"Look here, Lovell, don't be an ass!" urged Baby.

"Poonh!"

Lovell finished with his skates. He grinned reassuringly at his chums.

"Just you watch!" he said.

"Oh, we'll watch!" growled Jimmy Silver. "We shall have to fish you out, I expect. The water's deep in places."

"Better get the pole ready," suggested Newcome.

"I tell you the ice is all right!" roared Lovell. Arthur Edward was always more strongly confirmed in his opinion by opposition.

"I tell you it isn't."

"Oh, you're an ass!"

Lovell slid out on the ice. He went with a skimming rush almost across the lake.

The three juniors watched him with anxiety.

Lovell proceeded to execute figures of eight, thoroughly enjoying the rush through the keen winter air.

"Dash it all, it looks all right!" said Newcome. "We might as well go on, too, Jimmy. Pretty cold standing about here."

Crack!

"There goes the ice!" said Jimmy Silver grimly.

Cra-a-ack-ack!

There was a sudden yell from Lovell. Fairly under his feet the ice cracked, and an arm of dark water spread over the dark surface.

Lovell's expression changed. It was borne in upon his mind that he had been a little too positive.

But repentance came too late, as it so often does. Lovell made a desperate rush for the bank, with the ice cracking under him at a great rate.

Crash!

A skate went through, and the next moment Lovell was sprawling, thrashing the cracking ice with frantic arms and legs.

Crash, crash, crash!

"Ow! Grooogh! Help!"

Under the terrified eyes of his chums Arthur Edward Lovell went through the ice

a dozen yards from the bank, in the midst of broken ice and swirling water.

"Good heavens!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"He's done it!" stammered Baby.

"The ass!" breathed Newcome. "I know he would!"

"Get the pole, quick!" shouted Jimmy; and he ran out on the ice towards the swirling opening.

"Lovell's head came up. His face was white—the water was bitterly cold. He struggled spasmodically, clutching at the sharp edges of the ice, which broke and broke again in his clutch.

Without assistance, Lovell certainly never would have got out of the icy water. But Jimmy Silver was there.

"This way!" panted Jimmy.

Kneeling on the edge of the opening where the ice looked safest—though none too safe—Jimmy held out his hand to his chum. Lovell caught it, and Jimmy pulled.

Cra-a-ack!

Under Jimmy Silver the ice gave, and he plunged in headlong, with a mighty splash.

"Ooooooh!"

Jimmy Silver came up like a cork, and swam strongly. He seized Lovell by the collar to help him.

"Grooogh!" gasped Lovell. "Clumsy!"

"What?" howled Jimmy.

"Grooogh!"

"Help, you fellows!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"We're coming!"

Newcome was racing down to the lake side now, with the long pole in his hand. He stepped out cautiously on the ice, pushing the pole across to the opening. Baby followed him with a rope.

But the cracks in the ice were widening now. Loud and ominous creaking and cracking sounded under the two juniors as they came to the rescue.

"It—it's going!" gasped Newcome.

It went.

Newcome's feet sank through—fortunately in shallow water. The ice was round his waist as he stood in mud. Baby followed him the next moment, with a breathless gasp as icy water washed round his legs.

"Help!" spluttered Lovell. "Can't you fellows hurry up! What are you hanging about for? Grooogh!"

Newcome pushed the pole across the ice. Fortunately, from where he stood half-

submerged, it reached to the opening where Lovell and Jimmy Silver were floundering.

They grasped it near the end.

Then Raby threw the end of the rope. There was a yell from Lovell as it landed on his ear.

"Ow! You ass!"

"Catch hold, you fathhead!" roared Raby.

Jimmy Silver grasped the rope, Lovell clinging to the pole. Then Raby and Newcome tramped shoreward through broken ice and mud and swirling water, dragging the two after them.

How they got ashore the juniors hardly knew. But they floundered out of slippy ice and swirling water at last, and crawled on the bank.

There they stood drenched and gasping and shivering.

"Lovell, you are——"

"Lovell, you dummy——"

"Hook it!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Get to the house as fast as you can go. We shall catch a frightful cold over this! Get a move on!"

"Mum-mum-my skates!" stammered Lovell, through his chattering teeth.

"Oh, blow your skates!"

Lovell's skates were dragged off, and the Fistical Four of Rookwood started for the house at a rapid run. They arrived there breathless, coughing, spluttering, and sneezing.

CHAPTER 24.

Startling News!

"GOODNESS gracious!"

Mrs. Silver held up her hands in horror at the sight of the four drenched and draggled schoolboys who burst into the house.

"Goodness gracious! What—what has happened?"

"You young duffers!" It was Mr. Silver's voice. "Get to your rooms at once! Turn in—sharp!"

"Groooh! Yes, dad!"

"Ow! Yow! Ooooh!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. lost no time. They scooped up the staircases, and hurled off their drenched clothes, and tumbled into bed. With blankets piled on them and hot-water bottles at their feet, they felt better; what time Mrs. Silver was telephoning to Hadley Priore for the doctor.

Mrs. Silver was greatly agitated, and the Hadley Priore doctor received the impression that he had to attend a desperate case, for which a supply of death certificates would probably be required.

He arrived post-haste. Fortunately, he found that the case was not so desperate as he had supposed.

He found four schoolboys in the throes of a severe cold; and he prescribed for them nasty things which contrasted painfully with the Christmas fare the juniors had lately been enjoying.

The next few days were unpleasant for Jimmy Silver & Co.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome drew some solace from the happy prospect of ragging Lovell, as soon as he was well enough to be ragged. But Lovell had no such solace; he had only the cheery consciousness that his obstinacy had caused all the trouble.

Still, there was a silver lining to the cloud.

The opening day of term came round, and found the Fistical Four still sneezing and spluttering, with streaming eyes and noses, and a general feeling that the universe was a nasty place to live in.

Certainly they could not join up at Rookwood for the new term.

That was the silver lining.

While all the other fellows were going into class-rooms, and taking up the reading of the adventures of the pious Arcas at prep, Jimmy Silver & Co. were gradually becoming convalescent—and lessons were still distant.

The term was several days old when Jimmy Silver & Co. were allowed to come downstairs.

"After all, we're in luck!" argued Lovell. "We shall cut the term short by a week. This afternoon all the fellows will be grinding Latin with Mr. Dalton. I'd rather sit in the armchair and eat walnuts."

"Might have had pneumonia!" grunted Raby.

"What's the good of worrying about what we might have had?" said Lovell. "Might have got into a railway accident going to Rookwood, if you came to that!"

"Fathhead!"

"Well, a week's rest won't do us any harm," remarked Newcome.

"There isn't a football fixture the first week," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully.

"The fact is I don't mind if our giddy convalescence runs into the second week."

Convalescence at the Priory, in fact, was not unpleasant when the worst of the sneezing and sniffing was over. The Fiscal Four did not yearn for a clean bill of health from the doctor, which would enable them to return to Rookwood.

But a letter that arrived from the school changed their mood of subdued satisfaction. It was a letter from Petty Grace to Jimmy Silver. Jimmy read it after breakfast one morning, and gave a howl.

"The cheeky rollers!"

"Hallo! What's the trouble?" asked Lovell.

"Lattrey, Peele, and Gower—the cheeky sweeps!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "Our study! My hat!"

"What the dickens?"

"Look!"

Lovell and Raby and Newcome read the letter together. Petty Grace was giving Jimmy the latest news at Rookwood. One item was startling enough to the Fiscal Four, and extremely exasperating.

"Dear Jimmy,—I hear that you're laid up with a cold, and can't join up. Sorry, old bean! I was afraid something would happen to you fellows after I left you to your own devices. Everybody else has turned up. Carthaw of the Sixth is as big a beast as ever. Bauson of the Fifth has come back in a new waistcoat that is a real stunner; you can see him across the quad on a dark night. Tubby Moffin brought a Christmas nudding to school with him, and ate it all one evening, and now he is on the sick list. By the way, Lattrey and Peele and Gower have taken the end study for this term. You fellows will have to shift to their old quarters. Buck up and get well, and come along—especially Lovell. Life is too serious without Lovell to put in his usual comic relief.—Yours,

"PETTY."

"Cheeky worm!" growled Lovell. "I'll give him comic relief!"

"They've bagged our study!" said Raby blankly.

"Our study!" gasped Newcome. "Those cads, Peele & Co., bagged our study! Why, we'll scalp them!"

"We'll smash them!"

"We'll lynch them! Our study!"

Jimmy Silver made a grimace.

"They were first in the field," he remarked. "Any fellow can bag an unoccupied study at the beginning of term."

"Net our study!" hooted Lovell.

"No fear!"

"Do you mean to say that you're going to sit down and let them bag our study, Jimmy Silver?" howled Lovell.

"Not quite! Still, they're within their rights to a certain extent," said Jimmy.

"Of course, they ought to let our study alone—"

"I should jolly well think they ought!"

"They'll have to!" said Raby. "Wait till we get back to Rookwood. We'll show the cads whether they can have our study! Why, it's the best study in the Fourth Form passage."

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"I dare say that's why they've bagged it," he remarked.

"Rate! It's sheer cheek!" said Lovell.

"All Lovell's fault!" remarked Newcome. "Lovell landed us with this cold and kept us away from school. We shall have no end of trouble getting our study out of Peele's clutches; you know what an obstinate cad he is! We haven't ragged Lovell yet for landing us with this cold!"

"Look here!" snorted Lovell.

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet.

"That rounds me," he assented.

"Three bumps!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You silly ass!" roared Lovell, jumping up. "Hands off! I'll—I say—I tell you—Yoochoop!"

Bump, bump, bump!

"Oh, my hat! I'll—"

"And one more for letting Peele & Co. bag our study!"

"I say—Yaroooh!"

Bump!

"Is that a new game, Jimmy?" asked Mr. Silver's quiet voice at the door.

"Oh! Ah! Yes! No!" stammered Jimmy. "Only—only celebrating getting well, dad! I say, do you think the doctor will let us go back to school to-morrow morning?"

The Fiscal Four were eager now to return to school. They were yearning to get in clean quarters with Peele & Co., and settle the question of the ownership of the end study.

But several more days had to elapse before they could start, and in the meantime they consoled themselves with making plans for the discomfiture of the enemy. A letter was concocted, and addressed to Cyril Peele at Rookwood.

All the Fistical Four helped in the concoction of the letter, and all of them signed their names at the end. It ran:

"Dear Peele,—We hear that you have had the cheek to bag our study. Get out of it! If we find you made in our study when we get to Rookwood, there will be trouble!

"(Signed) J. SILVER.
A. E. LOVELL.
G. RAST.
A. NEWCOMB."

That letter was duly despatched to Cyril Peele at Rookwood School, Sussex. A couple of days later the reply came.

It was brief, short if not sweet.

"Dear Silver,—RATS!

"(Signed) CYRIL PEELE.
C. GOWER.
M. LATTREY."

Jimmy Silver & Co. read that polite reply and looked at one another, and breathed wrath. And they were more than ever anxious to get to Rookwood, and to close quarters with Peele & Co.

CHAPTER 25.

The Return of the Native!

"COMEY, what!"

Cyril Peele made that remark, with a lazy grin.

He was leaning back comfortably in the armchair in the end study, in the Fourth Form passage at Rookwood School.

There was a cigarette between Peele's finger and thumb—cigarettes being one of Peele's little relaxations when he was safe from the eyes of masters and prefects.

Lattrey and Gower, Peele's chums and study-mates, grinned and nodded. They were smoking cigarettes also.

There was no doubt that the end study was "cozy."

It was quite a large room, for a junior study; it had two windows, one of which

looked on the quad; it had a capacious cupboard, and several other advantages. Undoubtedly it was a change for the better from Peele & Co.'s old quarters—the study at the other end of the passage.

A good deal of property belonging to the Fistical Four was still there; but Peele & Co. had shifted out a good many things into the box-room, putting in their own property instead. There were articles in the study that certainly would never have found a place there in Jimmy Silver's time, such as a box of cigarettes in the table drawer, and a pink sporting paper hidden under a cushion on the armchair.

Peele & Co. had quite made themselves at home. They had bagged the study immediately on their arrival for the new term, finding that the Fistical Four had not yet arrived.

As clearly they had a right to do—according to Peele; and the other fellows in the Fourth had to admit that there was no law against it.

The rest of the Classical Fourth wondered how the Fistical Four would take it when they came. They did not think Peele & Co. would remain long in possession of the study.

But the usurpers seemed to be determined. They announced that if Jimmy Silver made a fuss they were going to stand up for their rights.

How long they would "stand up" to the Fistical Four, if it came to fisticuffs, was a question with an easy answer. But probably Cyril Peele was thinking of more satisfactory methods than fisticuffs.

"It's a rotten trick!" Mornington told them. "You've no right to bag a chap's study because he's laid up with a cold!"

"Has Silver bought the study?" yawned Peele. "A study belongs to the chap who bags it at the beginning of term."

"Certainly it does!" said Mark Lattrey.

"We're keepin' this!" asserted Gower. "Jimmy Silver can have our old study. It was good enough for us last term, it's good enough for Silver this term."

"Let's hope Silver will think so!" chuckled Mornington. "If not, I'm sorry for your fusturies!"

"If Silver starts any low ruffianism we shall appeal to the prefects, of course," said Peele, loftily. "There's such a thing as law and order at Rookwood, I hope!"

And the usurpers remained in possession

possession of the study, while the Fistical Four were still absent at Jimmy's home in Wiltshire. They knew that the Classical Fourth, or most of them, were against the usurpation, but they did not mind.

"They found the study 'comfy,' and, still more, they felt that it was a score over their old enemies, and they were sticking to it, and intended to stick.

"Comfy, and no mistake!" continued Peele. "We're keepin' this. I say, I hear that Silver and his crowd are comin' along to-day!"

"Let 'em come!" said Gower. "We're within our rights!" said Lattrey.

"Oh, blow our rights!" said Peele. "Between ourselves, of course. We're up against that lot, and we've scored over them, and we're keepin' the odds out. That's the programme!"

The door of the end study bumped open, and the fat face of Tubby Muffin looked in, grinning. Reginald Muffin looked fat and ruddy and pudge as ever, and had apparently recovered from the catastrophe of the Christmas pudding.

"They're come!" announced Tubby. Peele blew out a little cloud of smoke with exaggerated nonchalance.

"Who've come?" he asked carelessly. "Jimmy Silver and his gang," said Tubby.

"Nothin' to do with us," said Peele. "They're not friends of ours. We're not askin' them to tea in this study!"

"He, he, he!" chuckled Tubby. "I fancy they're going to ask themselves to tea! You fellows are going to catch it now. He, he, he!"

"Go and cackle somewhere else, will you?" asked Peele; and as Tubby did not oblige instantly Peele backed up the request with a hurtling cushion, which hurled Reginald Muffin into the corridor.

Tubby departed with a roar. Peele & Co. looked at one another. The crisis had come, and perhaps the study-liggers did not feel quite so easy in their minds as heretofore. "Uncle James," of Rockwood, was not an easy handful to tackle.

"I—I suppose there'll be a row," murmured Gower.

"Bound to be!" asserted Peele.

"If they cut up rusty——"

"They will! But, as I told Moray, there's such a thing as law and order. The

perfects are bound to support us to our rights!"

"Horn! Will they think we're in the right?"

"Carthew will, at least," said Peele, coolly. "Carthew's down on Jimmy Silver, and always glad of a chance against him. I've asked Carthew to see fair play, and he's promised to."

"I suppose they can't back up against a Sixth Form prefect?" said Lattrey reflectively.

"Of course they can't! We're done them hollow."

And Peele, to show how confident he was, lighted a fresh cigarette, though he was listening very intently for footsteps in the corridor.

Patty of the Fourth looked in. "You fellows not gone yet?" he asked.

"We're not goin'!"

"Let me advise you as a friend," said Patty. "to get out while there's time. You've played a dirty trick; but there's still time!"

"Go and eat cake!"

"Well, if you ask for it, you'll get it!" said Patty.

And he strolled away, having given his good advice in vain.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not seem in a hurry to arrive in their old study. They were busy downstairs for a time. But there came a tramp of foot in the Fourth Form passage at last—the tramp of many feet.

The Fistical Four were coming, and apparently most of the Classical Fourth were coming with them to see the proceedings, which were certain to be of an interesting nature.

Peele drew a deep breath. He was not a great fighting man, and he was a good deal of a blackguard in his ways; but he was obstinate, and he did not mean to give in. Lattrey and Gower, however, looked as if they wished themselves safe back in their old study just then.

Four juniors walked in at the open doorway—Jimmy Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome. Behind them the passage was crowded with the Classical Fourth, with looks of anticipation.

"Hello, here we are!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver cheerily. "Kind of you fellows to have the fire lighted ready for us!"

Peele & Co. glared.

"Ready for you?" repeated Peele.

"Why, you are—"

"But you shouldn't smoke in our study," said Jimmy Silver chidingly. "You know we bar smoking!"

"It's not your study. You—"

"Still, we'll overlook it, this once, as you've got the fire going, and made everything so comfy and home-like," said Jimmy. "Now, we're going to have tea. Sorry we can't ask you fellows—"

"You're not going to have tea here!" roared Peele.

Jimmy nodded amicably.

"Yes, we are, old chap! We don't care for tea in Hall!"

"Look here—"

"Outside, you chap!" said Lovell.

"This is our study!" howled Gower.

"Your mistake, you're at the wrong end of the passage," said Jimmy Silver.

"Would you mind travelling off?"

"We're not going. This is our study. We bagged it—"

"Now we're going to bag it, then. Good-bye!" said Jimmy Silver.

The truce at tight. Outside, the Classical Trio shoved and squeezed for good places to look into the study.

"Going?" asked Jimmy, still amicably.

"No!" said Peele, between his teeth.

"Chuck them out!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Shush! Let them walk out!" said Jimmy Silver, holding up his hand.

"Go and eat coke!"

That was enough! Arthur Edward Lovell led the rush; and in a moment more, the end study in the Fourth was a scene of wild excitement.

CHAPTER 22.

The Fight for the Study!

CRASH!

Bump!

"Yaroooooh!"

"Help!"

"Gerroff!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a roar from the crowded passage.

Cyril Fisk went over the back of the armchair, in the hefty grip of Arthur Edward Lovell. Where his cigarette went he did not know. Till he felt the burning end inside his collar. Then Peele knew,

and announced his knowledge with a terrific yell.

Gower was in the grasp of Jimmy Silver, struggling wildly. Jimmy was persuading him downward, with the assistance of a grip on Gower's collar and a knee jamming into Gower's back. Gower went, he could not argue with persuasion like that.

Lattrey caught up a cushion to defend himself, and a swipe of the cushion sent Newcome sprawling on the carpet. But Baby was upon Lattrey the next moment, and Lattrey went down, sprawling.

Lattrey forced himself travelling doorward, with his ankles held, on his back.

"Here they come!" chorused Tubby Muffin.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Make room there!" grined Mornington.

Room was made for the exit of Peele & Co. Gower came first, in a gasping bundle. Lattrey followed him, spluttering, and sprawled over Gower. Peele was still putting up a fight with Lovell, his face pale with rage; but he was no match for the hefty Arthur Edward. By main force, Lovell wrenched him to the doorway and hurled him forth.

"Going—going—" chuckled Mornington. "Gone!"

Three breathless and dishevelled youths sprawled in the passage, amid a shortling crowd of the Fourth. They picked themselves up, gasping.

"Good-bye, kids!" called out Jimmy Silver. "Thanks for lighting the fire."

"We're not goin'!" shrieked Peele, in breathless wrath.

"Not satisfied yet that this is our study?" asked Jimmy Silver, in surprise. "What more can we do?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you—" roared Peele.

"They've forgotten the way to their own study," said Jimmy Silver. "It's up to us to show them! Come on."

"What-ho!" chuckled Lovell.

The Fiskal Four rushed out, and promptly collared Peele & Co. The study-raiders would have fled at that point, but it was too late.

In the grasp of Jimmy Silver & Co. they were up-ended, and three pairs of ankles were grasped by three pairs of hands.

In that manner Peele & Co. were led along the Fourth-Form passage, Jimmy

Silver, Lovell, and Baby led them. Newcome walked ahead of the procession, blowing on his mouth-organ.

Wild yells rang out from Peels & Co. as they went, almost drowned by the roars of laughter from the Fourth-Formers.

"Leggo!"

"Help!"

"Prefect!"

"Yahoooooo! Leggo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Headless of the abjurations of the study-raiders, Jimmy Silver & Co. led them along the whole length of the Fourth-Form passage. Newcome opened the door of the first study, now vacant.

"Here you are, you fellows," said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "This is your study, you know."

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"Shave 'em in!" roared Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Peels & Co. were whisked into their own study. They were deposited on the floor there.

"Satisfied now?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"Anything more we can do?"

"Wew-wew-wew."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fistical Four, with cheery smiles, walked back along the Fourth-Form passage. They had the feeling of duty well done, Peels & Co. had a feeling that it had been overdone.

The Fourth-Form crowd broke up, with many chuckles, and the Fistical Four took possession of their old study—what time Peels & Co. groaned in chorus at the other end of the passage.

"Cheeky asses!" grinned Lovell. "Thinking they could bag our study, you know! Well, we've jolly soon put the stopper on that."

And the chums of the Fourth prepared for tea. Jimmy Silver had a rather thoughtful look. The usurpers had been dealt with, but Jimmy wondered whether this was the end of it. In any case, Uncle James was quite determined that the study belonged to its old owners; there was to be no question on that point.

"Jolly glad to get back, after all!" Lovell remarked, as he cracked his third egg. "Bookwood's all right. I dare say the Moderns have been getting their ears up since we've been off the scene. We'll jolly soon put a stop to that."

"Hear, hear!" said Baby.

"Hallo, what does that fat image want?" asked Lovell, as Tubby Muffin grinned in at the door.

"Carthew's coming!" squeaked Tubby.

"Very kind of him to give us a call!" said Jimmy Silver. "I didn't know Carthew was so anxious to see us back. Hallo, Carthew, old buzz! Top of the afternoon!"

Carthew of the Sixth strode into the study. There was a frown on his brow and a cane under his arm.

It was only too clear that the bully of the Sixth had not come on a friendly call. It was clear, too, that he had not forgotten old troubles with the cheery chums of the Fourth.

Peels was behind him—still rather dusty and dishevelled, and pale and spiteful. At sight of Peels the Fistical Four knew why Carthew had come.

"You young ruffians!" was Carthew's greeting.

"Hallo! What's hitting you?" inquired Jimmy Silver.

"Don't talk like that to a prefect, Silver! Get out of this study at once!" snapped Carthew.

"What!"

"This study belongs to Peels for the term. He claimed it before you came," said Carthew sharply. "You know the rules."

The Fistical Four were all on their feet now, with very dogged looks. Carthew was a Sixth-Form prefect, and the word of a Sixth-Form prefect was supposed to be law to such small fry as the Fourth Form. But the Fistical Four did not look like acknowledging the law as expounded by Carthew of the Sixth.

"Blow the rules!" roared Lovell belligerently.

"Lovell! You—"

"Hold on!" said Jimmy Silver quietly. "A fellow generally has his old study back in the new term, Carthew. That's in the rules."

"If he tries up to claim it," said Carthew. "If he stays away a week or more malingering, he takes his chance."

"Malingering!" yelled Lovell indignantly. "We were all laid up."

"So you say!" sneered Carthew. "Anyhow, you weren't here, and Peels has claimed the study, and it's his. Get out!"

"Malingering!" gasped Lovell, much in-

ceased by that accusation. "There's only one malingerer here. I've seen you fall down to dodge a charge at footer, and let the other men go by."

Carthew turned crimson. "You cheeky young rascal! Hold out your hand!"

"Hata!" roared Lovell. Carthew snatched the cane.

"I've come here to see fair play," he said, "and——"

"Fair play!" jeered Lovell. "What do you know about fair play? It's not in your line at all."

"I'm going to cane you for cheeking a prefect, and turn you out of the study!" said Carthew grimly. "Your hand, Lovell!"

"Go and eat coke!"

The prefect made a stride at Lovell. Arthur Edward dodged warily round the study table.

"Look here, Carthew——" began Jimmy Silver.

"Silence!"

"This is our study!" roared Jimmy, his temper getting the better of prudence, "and we're jolly well not going to be turned out, prefect or no prefect!"

Peels grinned in at the doorway. A tame surrender of the study would not have pleased him so much as this. The Fistical Four were setting themselves up in opposition to a prefect of the Sixth, and thereby asked for very serious trouble. Which was very gratifying to the amiable Peels.

Carthew pointed to the door with his cane.

"Outside!" he snapped.

"Hata!"

"Are you going?" roared Carthew, surprised and enraged.

"No!"

"By Jove! I'll show you!"

Carthew closed in on Jimmy Silver, and grasped him. The junior swung round with Carthew's powerful grip on his collar, and the cane came down across his shoulders with a terrific whack.

There was a yell from Jimmy Silver that woke every echo of the Fourth-Form passage.

"Pile in!" roared Lovell.

Arthur Edward rushed recklessly on the enemy. Before Carthew knew what was happening, he was grasped behind and dragged down. Raby and Newcome piled

on him at once. Spluttering and threatening, the hully of the Sixth struggled on the carpet, in the grasp of the excited juniors.

"Kick him out!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy lent his aid to his chums. The astonished and infuriated prefect went whirling to the door. He crashed into Peels, who ceased to grin quite suddenly, as he went hurtling across the passage under the impact.

Carthew of the Sixth rolled in the passage, breathless and dazed. It was time for the skies to fall when a Sixth-Form prefect was handled in this manner. But the skies did not fall—though Carthew did, with a heavy bump. He was not allowed to rest. Four pairs of hands grasped him, and rolled him along the passage to the stairs. He went rolling down—the most astonished prefect at Rookwood!

Jimmy Silver & Co. returned to their study, breathless. They looked at one another.

"We've done it now!" gasped Lovell.

There was no doubt about that. The Fistical Four had "done it," with a vengeance, and it only remained to be seen what the awful consequences would be.

CHAPTER 27.

Going Through It!

"SILVER!" Lovell! Raby! New-

come!" Bulkeley of the Sixth called out the names.

And the Fistical Four of the Fourth Form at Rookwood answered in a rather dismal chorus:

"Yes, Bulkeley!"

"You're wanted!"

"What——"

"Mr Dalton's study—and sharp!"

The great man of the Sixth walked away with that. He had no time to waste upon mere juniors.

Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath.

"We're for it!" he remarked.

"We are!" murmured Arthur Edward.

Lovell. "We is!"

George Raby rubbed his hands in anticipation.

"Oh, come on!" said Newcome desperately. "Let's get it over."

Sympathetic glances followed Jimmy

Silver & Co. as they started for Mr. Dalton's study. Almost all the Classical Fourth sympathised—if that was of any use. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

Jimmy Silver tapped at the door of his Form-master's study.

"Come in!" said the deep voice of Richard Dalton.

The Fistical Four entered.

Mr. Dalton was not alone in the study. With him were four fellows—three of them juniors, and one of them a prefect of the Sixth Form. The three juniors were Lattrey, Peele, and Gower of the Fourth; the prefect was Carthew of the Sixth. Jimmy Silver & Co. had expected to see them there; they knew well enough why Mr. Dalton had sent for them. The young Form-master's face was very stern as he fixed his eyes upon the delinquents.

"Silver, Carthew has made a very serious report to me."

"Has he, sir?" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"It appears," said Richard Dalton severely, "that you four juniors have assaulted Carthew, and, indeed, ejected him from a study in the Fourth Form passage with considerable violence."

"We—we persuaded him to leave, sir," murmured Jimmy.

"We didn't want Carthew in our study, sir," ventured Lovell. "We're not on visiting terms with the Sixth, really."

"This is a serious matter, Lovell. It seems that you four juniors have taken possession of a study belonging to Lattrey, Peele and Gower. So Carthew informs me."

"Carthew's offside, sir," said Roby.

"What?"

"I—I mean he's got it wrong, sir. It's our study—the end study, sir—every fellow in the Fourth knows it's ours. Peele does. Don't you, Peele?"

"No, I don't!" snapped Cyril Peele. "I know it's my study!"

"Look here, you cad—"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton.

"Oh! Ah! Yes, sir! Certainly!"

"It will let me explain, sir," said Jimmy Silver meekly.

"I am waiting for you to explain, Silver, if you have any explanation to give."

"You know, sir, that we got back late this term owing to our being laid up with colds," said Jimmy. "We found that those cads—I—I—mean, those chaps—had bargued our study before we got here. So

we—we took possession, sir. I don't know why Carthew butted in. He knew that it was our study."

Mr. Dalton glanced at the Sixth-Former.

"I intervened to see fair play, as I've told you, sir," said Carthew. "Peele claimed my protection, as he had been turned out of his study. It seems to be the rule that any boys can claim an unoccupied study at the beginning of term. Silver had that study last term—Peele has it now. I was bound to interfere, as a prefect—and those juniors actually seized me and threw me out of the room—"

"You shouldn't have butted in!" exclaimed Lovell. "You know jolly well that those rotters had bagged our study!"

"How dare you, Lovell!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. He rose to his feet, and picked up his cane. "Hold out your hand!"

Swish!

Lovell tucked his hand under his arm and squeezed it hard. Evidently Richard Dalton was not to be trifled with.

"Whatever may be your dispute with other members of your Form, Silver, you are well aware that you have no right to resist a prefect forcibly," said Mr. Dalton. "I shall cane you all severely."

"Oh!"

"With regard to the claim to the study," continued Mr. Dalton, "it certainly seems hard that you should lose your old quarters, but Peele and his friends are acting strictly within their rights."

"Oh!"

"I think it would, however, show a better feeling on the part of Peele and Lattrey and Gower if they would consent to return to their old quarters and allow you to have your old study," continued Mr. Dalton, with a glance at Peele & Co.

The three cads of the Fourth stood grimly silent.

Their consent would have won them the approval of their Form-master; but Mr. Dalton's approval did not tempt them to give way. They were not on the best of terms with Mr. Dalton, anyhow. Mr. Dalton was rather rough on slackers of the first water.

Indeed, so far from desiring to gratify Mr. Dalton, Peele & Co. found some satisfaction in disappointing him.

So they stood silent.

"You do not feel disposed to do this, Peele?" asked the Fourth Form-master, after a pause.

"No, sir," answered Peele sullenly.

"It's our study, sir," said Gower. "It's a better one than our old one. Why should we give it up?"

"Very well!" said Mr. Dalton quietly. "Silver, these boys must be allowed to retain the study, since they insist upon their strict rights in the matter. I cannot say I approve of their conduct, but I am bound to be just. Any further attempt to deprive them of the study by force will be dealt with very severely."

"Oh!"

"I shall now punish you for laying hands upon Carthew of the Sixth Form!"

Peele & Co. left the study, and in the corridor they grinned at one another joyously. They had always been "up against" Uncle James of Rookwood and his thums; and at last they had succeeded, beyond the shadow of a doubt, in giving Uncle James a fall.

Swish, swish, swish!

The study door opened, and the Fistical Four came out. Their faces were set and grim. They did not even look at the grinning trio—they marched down the passage in silence. It was not till they reached the Fourth Form quarters, and were ensconced in their new study—Peele's old study—that they gave expression to their deep feelings. Then there was a painful chorus.

CHAPTER 23.

Lovell's Strategy!

"WHAT'S going to be done?"

Arthur Edward asked that question a few days later, in exasperated tones.

Arthur Edward had asked it, on the average, about seventeen times a day, since the return of the Fistical Four to the classic shades of Rookwood School.

Peele & Co. were victorious, the Form-master's decision confirmed them in their possession of the famous end study.

But that, to Arthur Edward Lovell, was a trifle light as air.

Lovell's view was that the end study was his study; his Form-master's decision to the contrary notwithstanding.

Mr. Richard Dalton was master of the Fourth, and his word was law, or should have been law. Generally it was law to

the Co.; they liked Dicky Dalton, and backed him up. On this occasion, however, they considered Mr. Dalton all-aside.

Lovell was the most emphatic of the four; but his claims agreed with Arthur Edward. The end study was their study; and the only doubtful point was, how to recover the stolen goods, so to speak.

There was the question of prestige to be considered, as well as that of the study itself.

The Fistical Four were great men in the Fourth, and it was simply impossible for them to accept a defeat at the hands of a set of slacking, smoky, ne-account outsiders like Peele & Co.

"We shall have Tubby Mullin chipping us next!" said Lovell bitterly.

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"Fellows keep on asking us if we're going to have our study back!" said Raby. "It's sickening."

"Towmy and Toppo were saying to-day that they're surprised at our letting Peele knock us out!" growled Newcome. "Townsend said we were back numbers now. I punched his nose!"

"Well, what's going to be done?" asked Lovell. "We've got to have our study back, I suppose. I believe you're supposed to be a sort of leader, Jimmy Silver?"

"I believe so!" assented Jimmy.

"Well, lead, then!" said Lovell. "Show us how we're to get those cads out of our study. We shall have all the fellows grinning at us. The Modern cads have been chipping me about it. I had a fight yesterday with Tommy Dodd, and another with Towle. Bad enough if it was anybody else, but to let a smoky, slacking cad like Peele dish us—bah!"

And Arthur Edward expressed his feelings by an emphatic snort.

"Festina lente!" said Jimmy serenely.

"What?"

"That means, make haste slowly!" the captain of the Fourth kindly explained.

Another snort from Lovell.

"Do you think I want you to swallow a silly Latin tag for me?" he asked. "Talk sense! What's going to be done?"

"We're going to be done!" growled Raby, "and Jimmy is going to take it lying down and tell us to keep smiling!"

"The fact is, this Co. wants a good

leader," said Lovell. "Jimmy's played out. Tony's right, he's a back number. He lets himself be licked by a cad like Peele. I'd better take the matter in hand."

"And what's your programme, old chap, if you do?" asked Jimmy.

"Well, I'd give 'em a jolly good hiding all round!" said Lovell.

"That wouldn't capture the study."

"It would be some satisfaction, anyhow."

"Dear man!" said Jimmy Silver. "Leave it to your Uncle James. I'm thinking it out."

"What with!" jeered Lovell. "I'm fed up with leaving it to you, Jimmy. You leave it to me. I've got a plan."

Jimmy Silver smiled. His faith in the planning capacity of Arthur Edward was not great.

"A pretty good plan!" said Lovell. "Look here! Suppose I give Peele a terrific hiding every day till he asks us to take the study back. He's a shabby rotter, and thrashings will do him good. Of course, we can't openly thrash the chaps into handing over the study. Dicky Dalton would be down on that. But I can lick Peele every day, and he will understand in the long run that the study's got to be handed over."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"I'll row with him about something else, see, so that he can't speak to Dalton and say we've hammering him for the study!" said Lovell. "That's strategy."

"Oh! That's strategy, is it!" gasped Jimmy.

"Yes, I'm a pretty good strategist."

"Great pip!"

Lovell jumped up. He had finished tea, and having this great strategic plan in mind, he was keen to put it into operation.

"But—hold on—"

"Rats!" said Lovell.

Arthur Edward Lovell stalked out of the study. Jimmy Silver sighed. When Arthur Edward took the hit between his teeth, as it were, there was no stopping him. But Jimmy was not looking for great results from Lovell's strategy. To Jimmy's mind, it somewhat resembled the strategy of a bull charging a gate.

"There'll be a row!" said Jimmy dubiously.

The three juniors followed Lovell. That energetic and strenuous youth had already found Cyril Peele in the quadrangle.

He was losing no time. A dozen juniors surrounded the two, and the "row" was already in progress.

"Smoking, smoky, shady, slacking worm!" Lovell was saying, as his elbows joined the interested circle.

"Go it, Lovell!" said Mornington.

"Lovell's getting eloquent!" Carry on with the giddy adjectives!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cyril Peele shrugged his slim shoulders, and curled his lip. He was not the fellow to stand up to Arthur Edward in desperate combat; but he did not seem alarmed.

Perhaps some of his confidence was due to the fact that he was standing only a few yards from Mr. Dalton's study window, and that a row in the quad at that spot could scarcely fail to attract the Form-master's notice.

Lovell's powerful voice, undoubtedly, must have been audible in Mr. Dalton's study, a circumstance of which the excited Arthur Edward took no heed.

"What you want," continued Lovell, "is a hiding! You're a disgrace to the Form, Peele!"

"Go on!"

"A slacking rotter!" said Lovell. "How often do you show up at the footer? Only when a prefect takes you by the neck and runs you down to Little Side. Yahi Slacker!"

"Carry on!" said Peele cheerfully.

"Put up your hands!" roared Lovell.

"What for?" asked Peele pleasantly. "Are you going to fight me because I'm not keen on footer?"

There was a chuckle from the spectators.

"Lovell—" urged Jimmy.

"Dry up, Jimmy. I'm managing this!" said Lovell. "Put up your hands, Peele, or I'll dot you on the nose."

"You won't get me out of the end study that way, dear boy," retorted Peele.

"That's for your nose," said Lovell, savagely, as Peele put his hands into his pockets instead of putting them up for defence.

Whack!

Peele accepted that punch on the nose with cheery fortitude. He knew that Mr. Dalton was now at his study window.

"The window went up with a bang.

"Lovell!"

"Oh! Ah! Yes, sir!" gasped Lovell, spinning round to the window, and finding himself face to face with Mr. Richard Dalton.

For once, the young Form-master looked thoroughly angry.

"Lovell, you have deliberately picked a quarrel with Peele, and struck him!" exclaimed Mr. Dalton. "You have acted like a bully, Lovell."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Lovell. "I—I— haven't struck him, sir—only punched his nose!"

"Come into my study, Lovell!"

"Oh dear!"

Arthur Edward Lovell tramped away to the door. The rest of the juniors drew a little closer to the window to have a view, from that point of vantage, of the subsequent proceedings.

Lovell entered the study dismally. He found that Mr. Dalton had his cane in hand, ready.

"Lovell, it is my duty to punish you severely," said the master of the Fourth. "There is no doubt in my mind that you have picked this quarrel with Peele, who has given no offence, solely on account of the dispute about the study."

"Oh!" stammered Lovell, wondering how on earth Mr. Dalton had guessed that.

"Hold out your hand, Lovell! Now the other—and the other again!"

Swish, swish, swish!

Mr. Dalton laid down the cane.

"If there should be any further fighting between you and Peele, Lovell, I shall investigate the matter with great care; and if I find that you are the aggressor, I shall report you to Dr. Chisholm for a flogging," said Mr. Dalton. "You may go!"

Lovell went.

The crowd outside the study broke up, chuckling.

"I wonder what Lovell expected!" Mr.ington remarked. "What a brain, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In the new study that evening Arthur Edward Lovell's prep was incessantly interrupted by the necessity of rubbing his hands. On the following day he did not seek out Cyril Peele for a flogging. That wonderful plan was "off," and Arthur Edward Lovell, for the present at least, allowed his gifts of strategy to rest.

CHAPTER 25.

Caught Out!

"WAKE up!"

"Goosogah!"

"Wake up, fathead!"

Lovell rubbed his eyes, and blinked at Jimmy Silver in the gloom of the dormitory.

The hour was late, and there was silence and slumber in the dormitory of the Classical Fourth. But Jimmy Silver was out of bed, shaking Lovell with one hand, and holding the other over Lovell's mouth by way of a precaution.

It was three days since the failure of Lovell's wonderful strategy. During those three days Jimmy Silver had been understudying the celebrated Brer Fox—lying low and saying "nuffin'." Peele & Co. were in victorious occupation of the end study and the Classical Fourth had come to the conclusion that Jimmy Silver had accepted his defeat. They were yet to learn that the astute Uncle James was only biding his time.

Arthur Edward Lovell blinked in the gloom, yawned, and sat up.

"Don't make a row!" whispered Jimmy Silver. "Don't wake the whole giddy dormitory!"

Lovell grunted and turned out. Reby and Newcome, already awakened and out of bed, were dressing quietly in the dark. Lovell followed their example.

"Is it a raid on the Moderns?" whispered Lovell.

"No, ass!"

"Then what is it?" grunted Lovell.

"You'll see."

Lovell gave a suppressed snort. Jimmy Silver led the way silently to the door, and the Fistical Four stepped into the corridor, leaving a slumbering dormitory behind them.

"And now where?" grumbled Lovell.

"Follow your leader."

Arthur Edward suppressed his feelings and followed his leader. Lights were all out in the upper passages, though from the big staircase there was a glow of light downstairs.

Jimmy Silver led the way to the Fourth Form passage, and, to the surprise of his chums, to the end study.

The Fistical Four entered that study, and Jimmy closed the door. Then Lovell gave a chuckle.

"I catch on!" he said. "Ragging their quarters—what?"

Jimmy Silver smiled in the darkness.

"That's what you'd call 'strategy,' I suppose, old bean!" he remarked. "But I'm not looking for a licking from Dicky Dalton to-morrow!"

"Then what the thump—I say, the window's open!" ejaculated Lovell all of a sudden.

"Quite so!" assented Jimmy. "If you'd looked round the dorm, you'd have seen that three fellows were out of bed."

"Those cads?" murmured Raby.

"That's it! Peele and Gower and Lattrey!" said Jimmy Silver. "The dear boys have gone out of bounds. I've been keeping an eye on them—and that's why we're here. Strategy, old chap, but a different brand!"

"Look here—" murmured Lovell.

"You see, this study is specially useful for that game!" smiled Jimmy Silver. "They've got a knotted rope from the window, and it can't be seen in the ivy. They've left the sash an inch up. Easy enough to get in and out—what?"

"I—I see," said Newcome. "But—"

"But what?"

"I don't see what it matters to us. They're rotten rads—I suppose they've gone down in the Bird-in-Hand to play cards with the blackguards there—but we're not giving them away. May as well get back to the dormitory, so far as I can see."

"That isn't very far, old scout," answered Jimmy Silver. "We're staying here till they come back."

"What on earth for?"

"To have a little conversation with them," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "I'm going to point out to them the error of their ways."

"Blessed if I can see what you're driving at!" granted Lovell.

"You wouldn't!" assented Jimmy.

The captain of the Fourth pushed up the sash of the window a little and reached out to the rope. The rope was fastened to the leg of the study table, stretching across to the window; outside it was completely hidden by the thick ivy. Jimmy Silver leaned out and peered into the gloom, broken by a glimmer of starlight. He pulled up the rope till the lower end was six feet from the ground, as he judged.

"I—I say, that'll give 'em a start when they get back!" murmured Raby.

"I think so," assented Jimmy.

"Serves 'em right," said Lovell. "But I

don't see sticking out of bed for an hour or two to jape these shady cads! We can't keep them out."

"Leave it to your Uncle James!" urged Jimmy Silver.

Uncle James had his way, as he generally did. The Fustical Four waited, Lovell taking a seat in the armchair and nodding off to sleep. It was nearly an hour later when three shadowy figures came stealing through the gloom round the School House buildings, and stopped under the eaves of the end study.

The three breakers of bounds had returned. They had not returned in a happy mood or high spirits. They had been "seeing life," as the young rascals considered it—and they had paid for the privilege to the extent of all their available pocket-money, which reposed in the pockets of Mr. Joey Hook, the billiards-sharper at the Bird-in-Hand.

"Where's that dashed rope?" muttered Gower.

"In the ivy, you idiot!" was Peele's polite reply.

"I can't find it!"

"More are you!"

Peele groped for the rope; but he, too, failed to find it. Lattrey, staring upward, discerned the end of the rope dangling overhead. He uttered an exclamation of fright.

"It's been pulled up!"

"Oh gad!"

Peele & Co. stared up at the rope. It was out of their reach—just out! For the moment their hearts stood still.

"Can't be a master or a prefect!" gasped Peele. "They'd have taken the rope in. It's some beast found we're not and japing us!"

"Wha-a-a-ut are we going to do?" stammered Gower.

"Climb on my shoulders and grab the rope; you can reach it."

"Oh, good!"

Gower climbed on Peele's shoulders. But as he grabbed at the rope it was jerked from above, and dangled out of his reach.

"S-s-somebody's pulling it!" gasped Gower. "I—I can't catch it!"

He jumped to the ground again.

Peele gritted his teeth savagely, his face white with rage. He had no doubt that it was a "jape" on the part of some playful junior, who had discovered the absence of the black sheep from the dormitory. But the danger was great.

Brinking bounds after lights-out was a risky business at the best of times. Every minute the black sheep lingered outside the House added to the risk.

By this time three young rascals were deeply repenting that they had gone out of school bounds to see "life" as soon in the smoky back parlour of the Bird-in-Hand at Cottage.

A head and shoulders appeared over the window-sill above, and a smiling face looked down.

In the glimmer of the starlight, Cyril Peele was able to recognise the captain of the Fourth.

"Jimmy Silver!" he breathed.

"Drop that rope down, Silver!" hissed Lattrey.

Jimmy Silver let the rope fall.

"You first, Peele!" he called out.

"Hush!"

Peele clambered desperately up the knotted rope. He reached the broad window-sill of the end study, and thrust his head and shoulders in at the window.

He stopped there; several pairs of hands grasping him and pinning him in that position, head and shoulders inside, and legs outside.

Peele panted with rage.

"Will you let me in, you rotters?"

"Rotters!" Jimmy Silver chuckled. "I hardly think we're the rotters present, Peele. You've been out of school bounds—"

"Mind your own business."

"You smell of baccy!" granted Lovell.

"Let me in!" hissed Peele.

"All in good time!" said Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "I suppose it's no good telling you that we're shocked at you, Peele—"

Peele ground his teeth.

"Serve the rotters right to shut them out!" said Newcome. "My hat! What would the Head say when they were found outside the House in the morning?"

"You—you couldn't—" panted Peele. "Look here—let me in! I—I—I'll do anything you like—"

"You've got to!" said Jimmy Silver coolly. "You're going to do exactly as I tell you, Peele."

"What do you want?"

Jimmy Silver drew the window-sash down gently upon Peele's back. Lovell and Raby held him by the shoulders, Newcome by the collar, Peele, utterly helpless, could only submit to his fate.

Jimmy pulled the study table softly under

the window, and laid a pad of impot paper before Peele, and dipped a pen in the ink. He placed the pen in the hand of the amazed Peele. Then he turned on a glimmer of his electric torch.

"Write as I tell you!" he said.

"But—I—I—"

"Got going! 'Being out of bounds at eleven p.m.'—got that?"

"I—I won't! I—I—"

"Then good-night!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily.

"Hold on, you—you beast! I'll write it!"

"In your usual hand, dear boy," said Jimmy Silver. "Any tricks, and you'll simply have to write it over again. Got that? Now write—'having been to the Bird-in-Hand'—"

"I—I— All right!"

"I hereby promise to turn over a new leaf, and try to become decent on condition of being let into the House." Got that?"

Peele scribbled desperately.

"I—I've done it! Hang you!"

Jimmy snatched the paper.

"Good! Now write it all over again in your usual handwriting," he said cheerfully.

Peele ground his teeth with rage. But

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without a word he obeyed; it was evidently useless to argue with Uncle James of Blackwood.

"Now sign it!" said Jimmy Silver.

Peelo signed the paper.

"Let him in!" said Jimmy.

Peelo rolled into the room. He picked himself up and fixed a look of the deepest animosity on the Fistical Four.

It was evidently in Peelo's mind to make a desperate effort to repossess himself of the paper now that he was safe inside. But Lovell's big fists were clenched ready for him, and Cyril Peelo thought better of it.

"Keep that dark!" he muttered thickly. "You know it's enough to get me the sack from the school if the Head saw it."

"I know it!" assented Jimmy Silver. "You can clear, Peelo."

Peelo left the study, sneaking back silently to the dormitory, with a heart full of rage and all uncharitableness. Jimmy Silver looked down from the study window at Lattrey and Gower, who were staring upward in dumb dismay.

"Gower sent!" called Jimmy.

Gower was very quickly up the rope. He was stopped on the window-sill, half-in and half-out.

"Read that paper, and sign it," said Jimmy.

"Look here—what—"

"Shut up, dear boy, and do as you're told! This is where you obey orders!" snorted Jimmy Silver.

Gower read the paper with a white face. He signed his name below Peelo's with a shaking hand.

"Right!" said the captain of the Fourth. "You can clear, Gower."

"I—I say—"

"Clear!" snarped Jimmy Silver; and Gower cleared.

Jimmy leaned from the window again and called in Mark Lattrey. That youth swarmed up the rope.

The process of reading and signing the paper was repeated. Lattrey realised that he had no choice in the matter, and he did not waste time in wringing.

In a couple of minutes Lattrey was on his way to the dormitory.

And the Fistical Four returned to the Fourth Form dormitory; and a few minutes later they were fast asleep. Sleep did not come so soon to Cyril Peelo, however. That shifty and unscrupulous youth had some thinking to do; and his thoughts were not agreeable. And when he slept at last, he

dreamed that he was being expelled from Blackwood by a wrathful headmaster—and in the morning Peelo of the Fourth turned out of bed in a temper that was more than human.

CHAPTER 31.

Jimmy Wins!

JIMMY SILVER had a smiling face the following day.

So far as Jimmy was concerned, the dispute over the possession of the end study seemed to be forgotten. When Arthur Edward Lovell raised the question, for perhaps the hundredth time, Uncle James smiled, and answered:

"Keep smiling!"

"But what's going to be done?" snorted Lovell.

"Peelo!" answered Jimmy.

"I don't see it!"

"I should be jolly surprised if you did, old chap!" was Jimmy Silver's affable response.

Which was not very satisfactory to Arthur Edward Lovell. His faith in Uncle James was strained almost to breaking-point.

Peelo eyed Jimmy Silver in class that morning, and after class he seemed to expect Jimmy to seek him. But Jimmy did not. He strolled out into the quad with his chums, apparently oblivious of Cyril Peelo's unimportant existence.

Peelo did not seem at ease that day. Lattrey and Gower seemed troubled. They had tea in the end study—still their study—and some fellows in the passage heard sounds of angry argument and recrimination from the room.

But when the three black sheep came out after tea they seemed to be in some sort of sudden agreement. They proceeded to the first study in the passage—now occupied by the Fistical Four.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were beginning prep. Jimmy kindly suspended that occupation as the visitors looked in.

"Hallo! You fellows forgotten that you've changed studies?" he exclaimed. "Or do you want to change back?"

"We're ready to change back," said Peelo.

"My hat!" Arthur Edward Lovell stared at them. "Mean that, Peelo?"

Peelo scowled.

"You know we've got no choice in the matter," he snarled. "You've got that

paper we signed—we'll let you have the study for it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Arthur Edward, a light breaking on his mind.

Jimmy Silver raised his hand.

"If you've come here to bargain, Peele, you've come to the wrong shop," he said. "I'm not bargaining with you!"

"Let's have the paper, Silver, old chap," pleaded Gower. "I—I know you wouldn't show it to anybody; but—but if it got dropped about—if a master saw it, if—if—" Gower fairly trembled. "Silver, old man, we own up we played you a dirty trick in bagging the study while you were on the sick list. Can't say fairer than that."

"We—we want you to have the study, Silver," said Lattrey pleadingly. "It—it was only a jape, anyhow."

Jimmy Silver reflected. His chums grinned.

"If you want to do the right thing, of course we're bound to agree, as model youths and a standing example to Rockwood," he said gravely.

"Hear, hear!" grinned Lovell.

"You'll hand the paper back—you'll promise—" began Peele eagerly.

"That's enough! I've said that I won't bargain with you!" said Jimmy Silver loftily. "If you think it right to hand back our study, go to Mr. Dalton and ask him to give his official permission. I can't trust you to play the game, Peele; but you can trust me. Take your choice, anyhow."

"I'd rather—"

"Never mind what you'd rather—get

out!" said Uncle James. "You make me rather ill, Peele—you're a worm! Go away!"

Peele gritted his teeth and went, Gower and Lattrey following him with dismal faces. There was a discussion in the passage; but it was a discussion that could only have one conclusion. Peele & Co. proceeded to the Fourth Form-master's study.

Mr. Dalton was surprised and pleased when the three erring youths explained that they felt that Silver ought to have his study back. They would be satisfied with their old quarters—in fact, they were quite keen to change back.

"I am glad to hear this," said Mr. Dalton. "I think you have acted rightly. I will send a message to Silver, and inform him of this, and I am very pleased that the dispute has been settled so satisfactorily."

Peele & Co. drifted out of the study. Mr. Dalton visited the Fistical Four personally to inform them of the change. When he was gone, Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged smiling looks.

"Blow prep!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Let's get our study to rights!"

"What-ho!"

The Fistical Four proceeded to the end study at once. Peele & Co. were already taking out their personal belongings. With merry faces and light hearts, the Fistical Four installed themselves in their old quarters. The usurpers had been ejected at last; and from the point of view of Jimmy Silver & Co. all was calm and bright.



THE CASE OF THE FINANCIER.

AN ADVENTURE OF HERLOCK SHOLMES.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

HERLOCK SHOLMES was looking over the current number of the "Daily Picture," when I came into our sitting-room at Shaker Street.

He was seated in the armchair, in his usual attitude of unaffected grace, with his feet resting on the mantelpiece, and the folds of his celebrated dressing-gown draped about his knees.

I glanced at him—expressively.

"My dear Sholmes!" I murmured.

He glanced up, as if surprised by the involuntary reproach in my tone.

"Well, Jotson?"

"Surely, Sholmes, that is an unnecessary extravagance, in our present state of financial stringency," I remonstrated. "Twopence is not, in itself, a large sum, I admit. But considering that the question of fish and chips for supper presents a problem far exceeding in difficulty any to be found in Euclid—my dear Sholmes!"

"Calm yourself, Jotson," said Herlock Sholmes, "you are labouring, as usual, under a misapprehension, my dear fellow. I did not purchase this newspaper—it was a case of fading's keeping."

I was relieved to hear this explanation. At this period of our residence in Shaker Street, money was sometimes tight; though, owing to our simple and temperate habits, Sholmes and I were never so. Sholmes had recently wound up triumphantly the Case of the Missing Mother-in-Law; but the gentleman to whom his amazing skill had restored this long-lost relative had not only refused to pay my fee, but had treated him with the blackest ingratitude. Owing to my devotion to my remarkable friend in his work, I had neglected my practice to such an extent that practically all my

patients had recovered. We were both, therefore, in somewhat low water at this time.

"Forgive me, Sholmes," I said, "I might have known you better than to suppose that you would have blown, at one fell swoop, two-thirds of our remaining cash. The newspaper fell into your hands?"

"To be more exact, it fell on my head," explained Sholmes, "from the top of a passing motor-bus. Some passenger had apparently finished with it, and thrown it away, regardless of the nappers of passing pedestrians. However, I was glad to capture it. It is quite a good paper, my dear fellow; and one who knows a good thing when he sees it, should always be ready to seize a good thing when he knows it. It belonged, I gather, to some naturalist, as the words "Sell Chimpanzees," are scribbled on the margin."

Sholmes' gaze returned to the pictures in the paper. His gaze was dreamy and reflective. I realised that I had interrupted a reverie when I entered, and I was silent. It was not for me to butt into the mental aberrations of so remarkable a man as Herlock Sholmes.

"Criminals, my dear Jotson!" said Sholmes at last.

"Sholmes!" I ejaculated.

I was surprised, and—I confess it—a little displeased.

Sholmes, as he spoke, was gazing at a row of photographs of prominent political personages, celebrated for the skill and resolution with which they applied themselves to the task of relieving their country of the irksome burden of wealth.

I supposed, for the moment, that Sholmes' remark referred to these great

men, and was naturally surprised and shocked.

"My dear Sholmes," I said, "criminals, surely, is a harsh term? The average politician compares a little unfavourably, perhaps, with the ordinary confidence-man, thimble-rigger, or area-sweeper. But criminals, my dear Sholmes—no, no, no!"

Herlock Sholmes eyed me coldly.

"I was about to make a philosophic remark, Dr. Jotson, when you interrupted me."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed!" Herlock Sholmes folded the paper, and slipped it into the pocket of his dressing-gown. "Criminals, my dear Jotson, are deteriorating. Crime is no longer what it was. I am not alluding to politicians, Jotson, but to a more active class of depredators. As a detective, I feel that my way of life is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf. The Victorian age was, after all, a great age. The name of Charles Peace alone redeems it from obscurity."

Sholmes sighed, and sipped his tumbler of cocaine.

"We are fallen upon a degenerate age, my dear Jotson! I cannot help regretting that I did not live in the piping times of Peace."

Tap!

Mrs. Spudson, our landlady, entered, and laid a card upon the table by the side of the cocaine tumbler.

Sholmes glanced at it with some slight interest.

"Sir Isaac Stuart-Macgregor-Gordon!" he read out.

"A client, Sholmes!" I exclaimed eagerly.

"I trust so," said Sholmes. "The surname, it is true, promises little in the way of expenditure. But we shall see. Admit him, Mrs. Spudson."

"You are acquainted with Sir Isaac, Sholmes?" I asked, when the landlady was gone.

"Quite! He is a man of vast wealth," said Sholmes. "He is chiefly known for his bitter opposition to the Zionist Movement."

"Why, Sholmes?"

"Because he sees in it, Jotson, an insidious scheme for the abolition of the House of Lords, and for turning Park Lane into an uninhabited desert."

"True!" I ejaculated.

Herlock Sholmes removed his feet from the mantelpiece, and rose to them, as our visitor entered.

I gazed at the famous millionaire with interest. His eyes were dark, his nose below curved outward like a banded bow. Sir Isaac's manner betrayed considerable agitation.

"Mr. Sholmes!" he exclaimed.

"At your service, Sir Isaac!" said Sholmes.

The millionaire started.

"You know my name?" he ejaculated.

"As you see," smiled Sholmes.

I could not help giving my amazing friend a glance of heart-felt admiration. One glance at Sir Isaac's card had been enough for Herlock Sholmes. His deductions were always made with lightning-like rapidity.

"Pray be seated, Sir Isaac," said Sholmes.

Sholmes sank back into his chair, and I gave Sir Isaac the other. I accommodated myself on the coal box.

The baronet bent forward towards my amazing friend.

"Mr. Sholmes, I require your help! I need not mention that the official police are useless."

"Not at all," replied Sholmes. "That fact is well known in Shaker Street. You may speak quite freely before my friend Dr. Jotson. He is absolutely reliable, except in cases of illness. Proceed."

"The success of a great financial operation is at stake, Mr. Sholmes. You may have heard of the Chimpanzee Gold Mine."

"Chimpanzee!" I repeated.

The word seemed familiar.

"Proceed!" said Herlock Sholmes with his inscrutable smile.

Sir Isaac proceeded.

"Chimpanzee Gold Mine shares, Mr. Sholmes, are now at a very low figure—ninnepence for the pound share. No

doubt they are over-valued; but that is the present price. But there is shortly to be a movement in Chimpanzees. For some time I have been buying them quietly, absorbing large numbers. I am now in possession of the greater part of the shares; and it is time for a boom in them. Reports from engineers have been arranged—glowing tributes from the men on the spot—chatty paragraphs in financial papers—and so on, and so forth. All is ready for a startled public to learn that Chimpanzee shares are the best thing going, whereupon, of course, they will rush in to buy. You understand?"

"Quite," assented Sholmes. "The supply of mugs is unlimited, and I have often wondered why there are any rat-burglars, high finance being so much more profitable and safe."

"The rush begins to-morrow morning," said Sir Isaac. "Everything is arranged—it is too late to stop it. Brokers are already instructed to bid at the top of their voices for Chimpanzee shares, to start the ball rolling—spoof bargains in the shares have been arranged down to the last detail—to-morrow, Mr. Sholmes, Chimpanzees will be booming. The price will go up to par—beyond par. At a pound a time I shall unload upon the public the shares I have been buying quietly at ninepence each—I shall not wait till they reach two or three pounds—I am not a greedy man," Mr. Sholmes. Once I have unloaded the shares, of course, the boom will come to an end, and the price will slowly but surely sink back to ninepence, or less. But"—Sir Isaac made a gesture—"all may be lost, owing to an accident—one of the greatest financial operations of our times, Mr. Sholmes, may be completely ruined, unless you can help me."

"Kindly give me a few details, Sir Isaac."

"This afternoon, Mr. Sholmes, while seated on the top of a motor-bus, I was glancing at the pictures in the illustrated paper, the 'Daily Picture,' said the great financier. "I was thinking, of course, of the coming boom in Chimpanzees, and debating in my mind when

I should give the order to my broker to sell. These operations are delicate affairs, Mr. Sholmes—great experience is required to know the precise moment for getting out. Absent-mindedly I scribbled on the margin of the paper in my hand 'Sell Chimpanzees.'"

Herlock Sholmes' face was, as usual, inscrutable.

"'Sell Chimpanzees' will, of course, be my instructions to my broker at a later date," explained Sir Isaac. "At present, the game is to buy Chimpanzees. But for an accident, this would not have mattered—but the motor-bus gave a most unpleasant jerk when running over a pedestrian, and the newspaper flew from my hand."

"Indeed!" said Sholmes.

"It was lost! I descended as soon as I could and searched for it, but it had vanished! No doubt some person had picked it up."

"Probably!" agreed Sholmes.

"Somewhere in London, Mr. Sholmes, is that wretched paper, with the scribbled note on the margin, in my hand, 'Sell Chimpanzees!' If that should fall into the hands of any of my business rivals, Mr. Sholmes, you can guess the result. My hand is well known—and 'Sell Chimpanzees' written in my hand, would be taken as a tip straight from the horse's mouth. Any man in the financial line, Mr. Sholmes, should he see that pencilled note, will rush in to sell Chimpanzees as soon as the Stock Exchange opens to-morrow morning—and instead of the boom that has been arranged, at a great expense, there will be a slump!"

"You see how the matter stands! The paper may fall into harmless hands—into the hands of some idiot, who will not understand what is meant by 'Sell Chimpanzees.' But there is risk—a great risk—and should it fall into the wrong hands, the boom in Chimpanzee Gold Mines will be an utter frost. Can you help me, Mr. Sholmes? Can you undertake to find that copy of the 'Daily Picture,' and save me?"

Sir Isaac paused, and fixed his eyes harshly on Herlock Sholmes.

"Name your own figure, Mr Sholmes!"

"You may leave the matter in my hands, Sir Isaac," said Herlock Sholmes at last. "I have no doubt that I shall be able to save the situation. Kindly wait here with my friend, Dr. Jotson, while I look into the matter."

"Mr. Sholmes! You think you can find the lost paper?"

Sholmes frowned.

"I never think, Sir Isaac. I know."

"Excuse me, Mr. Sholmes—but—"

"Wait!" said Sholmes.

A gesture, and he was gone.

Sir Isaac waited—wiping his brow in perspiring anxiety. I sought to entertain him, and relieve his stress of mind with a little light and agreeable conversation. But he seemed to take not the slightest interest in my description of an operation I had lately performed for *Xynglyngkzitis*, and even when I touched upon the absorbing subject of *mayghambxeyosis* he scarcely seemed to listen.

I left him to himself at last, and we waited in silence for Herlock Sholmes to return.

My amazing friend was not, however, long gone.

He entered the room, and Sir Isaac leaped to his feet with an exclamation.

"Mr. Sholmes! Have you—"

My amazing friend smiled.

"Look!"

He held up a copy of the "Daily Picture."

Sir Isaac grabbed it. He tore it open. His eyes almost bulged from his head as he read upon a margin in his own hand, "Sell Chimpanzees."

"Wonderful!" he gasped.

"That is the paper you require. I think?" drawled Herlock Sholmes.

Sir Isaac gasped.

"That is the paper! I am saved! But how—"

"I never explain to clients. Powerful as your intellect may be, my dear Sir Isaac, you would never understand my methods. I have succeeded!"

Sir Isaac, gripping the paper in his hand, strode to the door.

"One moment, Sir Isaac," added Herlock Sholmes. "In dealing with captains of industry and princes of finance, I make it an invariable rule to deal on a strictly cash basis. Thank you!"

When Sir Isaac was gone, Herlock Sholmes turned to me with a smile.

"Well, Jotson!"

"My dear Sholmes—"

"You miss your cue, my dear fellow. This is where you say 'Wonderful!'"

"But—my dear Sholmes—was it—was it not by accident that that paper came into your hands?"

"Accident is not a word in my vocabulary, Jotson," said Herlock Sholmes stiffly.

"But the paper was in the pocket of your dressing-gown all the time!"

"Really, Jotson?"

"But, Sholmes, I think—"

"You exaggerate, my dear fellow," drawled Sholmes. "Your mental processes can scarcely be described as thinking. Leave the thinking to me, Jotson."

It will run to fish and chips for supper; and there will be something left over for the young man who calls for the instalments on the furniture. Enough!"



PITY THE "PRO!"

Anything But A Festive Season.

While the majority of us can look forward to Christmas as a time of jollity and feasting, and the once-a-year occasion when the yolk of discipline can be thrown aside, the professional footballer finds himself plunged into the most arduous period of the season. Not for him are the delights of the home fireside, the additional helping of turkey and Christmas pudding; so if you are on friendly terms with a professional footballer be very careful how you wish him "A Merry Christmas." For him it is strict training, strict diet—anything but a festive season!

On Christmas Day, when our appetites have been appeased with such dainties as are peculiar to the occasion, the professional player has to tighten up his belt and forget the age-old slogan, "Eat, drink, and be merry." He has to play football for our entertainment. Ninety minutes of gruelling work in conditions that are usually anything but pleasant, is his lot. And when the final whistle blows he's not finished for the day. Usually he has to pack his bike and entrain for a destination many miles distant for another gruelling match scheduled by the powers that be to take place on Boxing Day. Then once again, with the knowledge that the thousands of spectators in the stands and on the mounds have had a right royal time, the "pro." has to dismiss thoughts of Christmas from his mind and settle down to the job in hand. Even then, with Christmas Day and Boxing Day dropped behind in the calendar, he is left to look forward to another exhausting tussle on the following day.

Three Gruelling Games.

This year the professional player is working overtime indeed. Take the case of West Ham United, as an example. On Thursday, December 22nd, the Londoners are "at home" to Portsmouth. On Friday they play a return match on "Pompey's" ground, and to round off a busy three days they travel from Portsmouth to Huddersfield for a match with the famous Yorkshire side. West Ham's Christmas programme is but typical of most professional teams—three consecutive days of football, strict training, and diet. At the

whole, the professional player accepts the situation cheerfully enough. His team jerseys are brightened up with a song-song or a game of cards, and the trainer goes all out to keep his charges in good spirits.

When those three strenuous days are over the player is allowed to ease up a bit, for in the majority of cases this season his next match will not be until January 2nd 1931. Undoubtedly he has earned that rest, but he still must keep himself fit. Even then he must stave the temptation to "tuck" into the turkey or the pudding, or what's left of them. So in the goodness of your hearts this Christmas give an extra cheer to the footballers you happen to favour with your presence, and don't be too critical of their occasional lapses. Three days of football in unpleasant conditions is apt to try the stamina of the best player, but friendly encouragement and a Christmas cheer will work wonders with him when he's inclined to loaf stale.

No Extra Pay.

In the course of those three huffy days spent in the entertainment of thousands of football fans, bruises, and severe shakings are frequent occurrences. The footballer is expected to take them all in good part, and with very few exceptions he takes his hard knocks with a smile.

A famous footballer remarked recently that in twenty years of professional football he hadn't once spent a Christmas in his own home or with his family. That sounds a bit tough, yet it is typical of the hundreds of players who have "signed on."

It is supposed by many that the professional footballer is paid "extra" for his Christmas football. Such is not the case, for the "pro." is paid weekly. True, he is not compelled to play on Christmas Day or Good Friday, but very few players take advantage of this ruling. Christmas especially is a critical time in the season for points, and the genuine player is as anxious to turn out for his club and pull his weight uncomplainingly as the tatter "fan" is anxious to see his favourite club soar to the top of the table.

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Printed and published on the first Thursday in each month by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 44d. each. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited, and for South Africa: Central News Agency, Limited. S.A.