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THREE HALFPENCE.

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## The Tribulations of Tubby!

By Owen Conquest.



TUBBY MUFFIN IS ALARMED!

A CONVERSATION OVERHEARD!

### The 1st Chapter. A Sudden Scare.

"Muffin!"  
"What the dickens—"  
"Tubby, you ass—"  
Jimmy Silver & Co. halted in blank astonishment.  
The chums of the Fourth were sauntering down to the school gates, when they sighted Tubby Muffin.  
Tubby was loafing in the gateway helping himself occasionally from a store of toffee in his pocket, apparently at ease with himself and all the world. Suddenly—for no reason that Jimmy Silver could see—the fat junior turned from the gateway, and came bolting across the quad.  
So sudden and headlong was his flight from the gates, that he had no time to see where he was going. He came charging straight at the Fistical Four, his fat little-legs going like machinery.  
"Tubby—"  
"Stop!"  
"What the thump—"  
The Fistical Four separated as Tubby charged them down, and avoided the rush. It was no joke to meet a charge with Muffin's weight behind it.  
As Muffin swept by, breathlessly, Jimmy Silver caught him by the collar to stop him. But it was not easy to stop Tubby in full career. Instead of stopping, he swept round Jimmy Silver in a circle, as Jimmy gripped his collar, and Jimmy had to revolve upon his own axis, as it were, to keep from falling.  
"Ow!" spluttered Muffin.  
"Leggo!"

"You ass—"  
"Leggo! He's after me!"  
"Eh! Who's after you?"  
"Leggo!"  
Tubby Muffin struggled to free himself.  
"What on earth's the matter with the fat duffer?" exclaimed Lovell in amazement.  
"Off his rocker. I should think," said Jimmy Silver. "What's the matter with you, you potty porpoise?"  
"Help! Leggo! He's coming!"  
"Who's coming?" hooted Newcome.  
"Boggs! Leggo!"  
"Boggs? Bobby Boggs, do you mean?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. Mr. Boggs was the policeman of Coombe—in fact, he was the whole police-force of the village. Save to unmuzzled dogs, Mr. Boggs was not a dangerous character. Tubby Muffin's terror seemed inexplicable to the Fistical Four of the Fourth.  
"Yes! Leggo!"  
Jimmy Silver did not let go. He felt that this required explaining. He tightened his grip upon the collar of the gasping fat junior.  
"What have you been doing?" he demanded.  
"Ow! Nothing! Leggo!"  
"Have you been robbing an orchard?" demanded Raby.  
"Nunno! Leggo!"  
"He's been out without his muzzle!" said Newcome.  
"Ha, ha, ha!"  
"Leggo!" yelled Tubby Muffin. "I've got to hide—he's after me! You awful beast, Jimmy, leggo!"  
"Keep still, you fat duffer. Boggs

won't hurt you," said the captain of the Fourth. "Hallo, there he is!"  
The portly figure of Police-constable Boggs loomed up outside the gates.  
Tubby Muffin gave a gasp of terror. He made an effort to take cover behind Jimmy Silver, which was not easy, as Tubby was a good deal wider than the captain of the Fourth.  
"Ow! It's all up!" he groaned.  
"He's not coming in!" said Lovell.  
"Wha-a-at!"  
"Look, you duffer!"  
"Oh!" gasped Muffin.  
Mr. Boggs, with a stately stride, was passing the gates; and he did not even glance in.  
Evidently the village policeman was merely marching on his beat, without a thought in his head of Reginald Muffin of the Classical Fourth.  
Tubby watched him with bulging eyes.  
In a few moments Mr. Boggs disappeared from sight, and his heavy footfalls died away up the road.  
"Oh!" spluttered Muffin. "He—he's not after me! I—I saw him coming, you know, so I thought he was coming here, to—to—"  
"To what?" demanded Jimmy Silver.  
"Eh! Nothing!"  
Tubby Muffin was beginning to recover himself, as he realised that his fears had been ungrounded.  
Jimmy Silver released him, and the fat Classical put his collar straight, gasping for breath the while.  
The Fistical Four regarded him very suspiciously.

"Now, what does this mean, Muffin?" asked Jimmy Silver quietly.  
"Mean?" stammered Muffin.  
"Yes. Why did you think the bobby was after you?"  
"I—I—"  
"What have you done?"  
"N-nothing!"  
"Then why did you think the policeman was after you?" demanded Lovell.  
"I—I didn't!"  
"What?"  
"Nothing of the sort," said Muffin. The fat Classical was quite recovered now. "What an idea, of course, I never thought anything of the kind. Why should I?"  
"Why, you—you—you— What did you bolt for, then?"  
"I was just pulling your leg, you know."  
"Pulling my leg!" said Jimmy Silver dazedly.  
"That's it! Just stuffing you up," said Tubby Muffin. "I'll bet I made you think I was afraid of old Boggs! He, he, he!"  
"Why, you—you Ananias—you blessed Prussian—you—you—"  
"You fellows are awfully simple," said Tubby Muffin. "Anybody can stuff you! He, he, he!"  
And with that Reginald Muffin rolled away towards the School House Jimmy Silver & Co. staring after him blankly.

### The 2nd Chapter. Up to Uncle James!

Jimmy Silver had a very thoughtful expression on his face when he

came into the Form-room for lessons that afternoon.  
Uncle James of Rookwood was feeling rather worried, and it was Tubby Muffin who was the cause of the wrinkle in his brow.  
It was not exactly Jimmy's business if the fat Classical landed himself in a scrape, but as captain of the Fourth, and Uncle James generally, Jimmy felt a certain amount of responsibility.  
For the past two or three days Tubby Muffin had been rolling in money; simply reeking with currency notes, as Arthur Edward Lovell described it.  
As Tubby was the most impecunious fellow at Rookwood, that fact was in itself sufficiently surprising.  
What was more than surprising and, indeed, alarming, was that Tubby could give no account of the source of his sudden wealth. He had made five or six different statements, each conflicting with the rest. All that was certain was that he had an apparently unlimited supply of pound notes.  
Jimmy Silver had been very uneasy on that score, for it seemed certain that Tubby could not possibly have acquired that extraordinary wealth by any means that would bear investigation.  
Now, the incident of Tubby's flight from the policeman put the lid on, as Jimmy would have expressed it.  
Only a guilty conscience could have made Muffin flee in dire terror at the mere sight of P.-u. Boggs.  
At the sight of that portly gentleman, rolling majestically towards the





Continued from the previous page.

THE TRIBULATIONS OF TUBBY!

school gates. Tubby had jumped to the terrified conclusion that Mr. Boggs was coming to Rookwood—after him!

There could be no further doubt on the matter, and, naturally, Jimmy was worried.

If Tubby had obtained those pound-notes surreptitiously, as seemed certain, discovery and exposure could not long be delayed; and it was distinctly unpleasant to think of the police visiting Rookwood in search of a thief. Moreover, if such an awful thing happened on the Classical side, the Modern fellows certainly would never let the Classics hear the end of it.

Jimmy Silver glanced several times at Muffin in class that afternoon.

Tubby seemed quite at his ease again.

His fat brain could not take in more than one thing at a time, and, having been relieved of his terror, he had apparently dismissed it from his mind.

It was Tubby who was in a scrape; but evidently he was less concerned about it than Uncle James.

Jimmy Silver did not give his whole attention to Mr. Bootles that afternoon. He thought out the problem of Muffin during class, and made up his mind that something had to be done, and that it was up to him to see to it.

After lessons, Jimmy joined the fat Classical as the Fourth came out of their Form-room. He tapped Muffin on the shoulder.

"Come up to my study, Muffin!" he said quietly.

Tubby eyed him suspiciously.

"What for?" he inquired.

"I want to speak to you seriously."

"Rats! If you're going to begin your rotten suspicious again you can leave me alone," retorted Tubby Muffin.

"Besides, I'm going to have tea with Peele."

"You'd better—"

"Rot!"

Tubby Muffin rolled away, leaving the captain of the Fourth nonplussed.

It was not easy to help a fellow who was so amazingly obtuse as Reginald Muffin.

Muffin joined Peele and Lattrey and Gower in the passage, and went up the staircase with them.

Peele & Co. were very cordial to Tubby. Their manners to him had been quite honeyed ever since his remarkable accession to wealth. The black sheep of Rookwood had made quite a good thing out of Muffin during the last day or two. Muffin had become quite a "sport," and revelled in banker and nap in Peele's study, with the result that a considerable number of his mysterious pound-notes had passed into Peele & Co.'s keeping.

"Penny for them, old scout!" said Lovell, clapping Jimmy Silver on the shoulder, as the captain of the Fourth stood in deep thought.

Jimmy started.

"I was thinking about Muffin—"

"Oh, bother Muffin! Come along to the cricket."

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"Something's got to be done about Muffin, Lovell," he said. "You saw what happened this afternoon?"

"Muffin thought he was found out," said Arthur Edward, with a chuckle. "He wasn't, as it turned out."

"But he will be."

"Very likely."

"He can't have come by all that money honestly."

"Of course he can't! Every fellow in the Fourth has made up his mind on that," said Lovell. "Even Leggett won't touch his money. Fellows won't even let him square up his old debts with it. Only Peele, and I fancy Peele will be sorry for it when the truth comes out."

"Tubby's such a silly ass, goodness knows what he may have done," said

Jimmy. "I'm going to see if I can do anything. Come along with me!"

"What about the cricket?"

"Bother the cricket!"

"Oh, all right!" said Arthur Edward, with a yawn.

And he followed Jimmy Silver up to the Fourth Form passage.

There was a sound of cheery voices in Peele's study. Jimmy knocked at the door, and turned the handle; but the door was locked. He rapped again sharply.

"Who's there?" called out the voice of Cyril Peele.

"Open the door!"

"That you, Jimmy Silver?"

"Yes. Let me in!"

"You're not wanted here," answered Peele coolly. "Drop in somewhere else, where your company's wanted, old top."

And there was a chortle in the study.

"If you don't open this door at once, Peele," said Jimmy Silver, very quietly, "I'll give you the licking of your life presently."

"What do you want?" growled Peele. "We're busy here."

"I know that! I want Muffin!"

"Oh, go away, Jimmy Silver!" came Muffin's voice. "I don't want any more of your gas. You buzz off!"

"Let me in at once, Peele."

There was some hesitation in the study, but Cyril Peele unlocked the door at last. Jimmy Silver strode in, followed by Lovell.

The 3rd Chapter. The Exact Facts!

Tubby Muffin was seated at the table, and there was a "hand" of cards in his fat, grubby fingers. Peele and Lattrey and Gower were standing, and they were looking black.

"Well, now you're here, what do you want?" demanded Peele, his narrow eyes glittering at the captain of the Fourth.

Jimmy kicked the door shut behind him.

"Put those cards away!" he said.

"Look here—"

"You'd better!"

"Do you want to be chucked out of this study on your neck?" demanded Lattrey belligerently.

"Yes, if you can do it," said Jimmy contemptuously. "Try it on, the three of you!"

"Do!" grinned Arthur Edward Lovell, pushing back his cuffs.

Peele & Co. scowled, but they did not "try it on." They had had experience of the hard hitting of Uncle James, of Rookwood, and it was not an experience they cared to repeat.

Peele gathered up the cards, and threw them into the table-drawer.

"Well, what now?" he said, between his teeth.

"Look here, Jimmy—" began Tubby Muffin.

"You fat idiot—"

"I say, Jimmy, you sit down and take a hand," suggested Muffin. "Be a sport, you know—be a man—like me!"

"You crass duffer!" said Jimmy.

"Well, then, leave a chap alone!" said Muffin. "It's no bizney of yours if I have a little flutter, I suppose. I can afford it."

"Can you?" said Jimmy Silver grimly. "Suppose I were to tell you that Bobby Boggs is downstairs, asking for you?"

"Wha-a-ah!"

Tubby Muffin leaped to his feet, his fat face blanching.

"Oh! Ow! D-d-don't tell him I'm here!" he gasped. "I—I say, Jimmy, stand by an old pal! I—I say—"

"He's not downstairs," said Jimmy.

"He's not at Rookwood at all, you chump!"

"Oh!" gasped Muffin.

He sank into his chair again, palpitating.

"You—you rotter to scare me like that!" he stammered.

"Why should it scare you?" asked Jimmy caustically.

"It—it doesn't, of course. I—I was only joking." Tubby Muffin blinked uneasily at Peele & Co. "Don't you fellows take any notice of Jimmy Silver. He's only talking out of his hat."

But Peele & Co. were looking startled now. Tubby's sudden terror had impressed them queerly.

"You fellows have been getting money out of Muffin," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

"We may have won a little," said Lattrey sourly. "No bizney of yours!"

"It may be the business of the police."

"What?"

"That money does not belong to Muffin. I suppose you know that currency notes are numbered, and can be traced? If you pass a single note that you've got from Muffin you can be arrested along with him when the police get on the track!"

"The police!"

"Arrested!"

"Good gad!"

Peele & Co. were grave enough now.

"I—I say—" began Muffin.

Peele interrupted him.

"Do you mean to say that Muffin stole those notes, Silver?"

"Where else could he have got them?" snapped Jimmy. "Certainly he never came by them honestly."

"I—I say—"

"He told us—" began Gower, looking very scared.

"He's told no end of yarns, all disagreeing with one another. He was frightened out of his wits by the sight of a policeman to-day. You all saw how he looked when I mentioned Bobby Boggs just now."

Peele gave the fat Classical a bitter look.

The black sheep had taken a good deal of trouble to relieve Tubby of his pound notes; and it was not agreeable to learn that they had to part with their plunder for their own safety.

"Where did you get the money, Muffin?" asked Peele.

"My uncle sent it—"

"You told us your father," growled Lattrey.

"I—I mean my father—"

"You all know that Muffin's people are poor," said Jimmy. "And if they were rich, his father wouldn't let him have a stack of money like that. Muffin, why don't you have sense enough to own up? Can't you see I'm trying to help you?"

"Look here—"

"You must take that money to the police-station," said Jimmy Silver.

"And the sooner the better. Or you can go to the Head."

"You silly ass!" howled Tubby Muffin. "It's my money!"

"He says it's his," said Gower. "I don't see how he can have stolen it. How could he?"

"Do you think I'm a thief, Jimmy Silver?" hoated Muffin.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think!" answered Jimmy. "I know the money isn't yours, and I know you are afraid of a policeman coming after you for it. Tell me the truth, Muffin, for your own sake. Where did you get it?"

"The—the fact is—" Tubby paused.

"Now, I'm going to tell you the exact facts, Jimmy. The—the other day, in Rookham, I—I met a kind old gentleman—"

"What?"

"A kind old gentleman—same as you read of in story-books," said Tubby. "He patted me on the head,

and told me I was like his own dear little boy—"

"Eh?"

"And gave me a hundred pounds," said Tubby.

The juniors stared blankly at Tubby Muffin.

Tubby was well known to be the biggest duffer at Rookwood; but that even Tubby should suppose that a yarn like this would go down, was amazing.

"You—you met a kind old gentleman," said Lovell dazedly. "He—he patted you on the head and gave you a hundred pounds."

"Exactly!"

"Well, my hat!" said Peele.

"Now I've explained, perhaps you'll let the matter drop," said Tubby Muffin, with dignity.

"You—you—there isn't a word for you!" stammered Jimmy Silver. "Peele, I suppose you can see now that Muffin is lying, and the money doesn't belong to him."

"I suppose so!" growled Peele.

"You'd better give him back the notes you've welshed from him," grinned Lovell. "Otherwise, you'll go to chokery with him when the time comes."

"You haven't anything more to tell me, Tubby?" asked Jimmy Silver, not unkindly.

"Nothing; I've told you the exact facts now."

"Well, if you won't be helped, I can't help you," said Jimmy. "You will have to take your chance. Come on, Lovell!"

The captain of the Fourth quitted the study with his chum. Tubby looked relieved when they had gone, and bestowed a genial grin on Peele & Co.

But the black sheep of the Fourth did not look genial. They were not at all particular; but they did not dare to touch money that had obviously been obtained by "ways that are dark."

The three young rascals were going through their pockets now. They were feeling deeply thankful that they had not, as yet, passed any of the pound notes they had obtained from Reginald Muffin.

"Shell out!" said Peele gloomily.

"Yes, rather! I—I say, we've had rather an escape!" gasped Gower. "Suppose—suppose they'd been found on us, by the bobbies—"

"Oh gad!" said Lattrey.

Tubby watched the three juniors in surprise, as they threw the pound notes on the table before him. There was quite a pile of them.

"Wha-a-at's that for?" asked the fat Classical.

"Take them up!" snapped Peele.

"But—but I—"

"Take them up, every one, or I'll wring your fat neck!" said Peele savagely.

"Oh, I say—"

Peele made a stride towards Muffin, and the fat Classical hastily gathered up the notes.

"Now get out of this study, you fat thief!"

"I—I say, ain't we going to play banker?" exclaimed Muffin.

"No, you crass dummy! Get out!"

"But—but I say—here, hands off, you beast!" roared Muffin, as Cyril Peele grasped him by the collar.

Tubby Muffin went spinning to the door.

"Kick him out!" shouted Peele.

"Yaroooooh!"

Tubby Muffin scrambled up in the doorway, and the three young rascals rushed after him. It was some solace

to Peele & Co., after the loss of their plunder, to "take it out" of Reginald Muffin.

Three boots landed together on Muffin's fat person, and he went headlong into the passage, roaring.

Peele slammed the door after him.

"What a go!" mumbled Gower, "I—I'm rather glad Silver came here and—and told us—"

"We're well out of that, anyhow," said Peele. "But that fat idiot—he's been changing the notes at the school shop and at the tuckshop in Coombe. He will get landed!"

"Serve him right!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Yah! Rotters!" came a howl through the keyhole. "Yah! Welshers! Yah!"

And then Tubby Muffin departed.

The 4th Chapter. The Blow Falls!

"Old Sharp!"

Mornington of the Fourth made the remark, as he glanced out of the doorway of the School House.

Tubby Muffin was coming along from the staircase, and he gave a jump as he heard Morn's words.

"Old Sharp!" he repeated faintly.

"It's Inspector Sharp, of Rookham," said Erroll. "What's the matter with you, Muffin?"

Tubby Muffin blinked at him dazedly. His fat face had changed colour, and his podgy knees were knocking together.

Valentine Mornington looked at him, with a grin.

"I suppose he's comin' for you, Muffin, what?" he said genially. "This is what comes of gettin' rich quick."

There was a chuckle from some of the juniors. Tubby Muffin did not heed. He dragged himself to the doorway and looked out. The tall figure of Inspector Sharp, of Rookham, was in full view, striding from the gates towards the house. Tubby Muffin jumped back.

"Is—is—is he coming here?" he gasped.

"Yes, he's comin'!" grinned Mornington.

"Oh dear!"

Tubby Muffin scuttled away along the passage. The juniors looked at one another.

"Well, my hat!" said Putty Grace. "That looks—"

"We shall know now, soon, where Muffin got his vast wealth from!" chuckled Mornington.

Tubby Muffin had taken cover in a recess in the distance. But he peered out, and discerned Tupper, the page, showing the inspector to the Head's study.

The police-inspector from Rookham had come to see Dr. Chisholm! For what?

It seemed to the wretched Tubby that he could already feel the cold contact of handcuffs on his wrists!

He crept out of his hiding-place, and blinked along the corridor on which the Head's door opened. It was empty; and Tubby, taking courage in both hands, as it were, crept along the passage to Dr. Chisholm's door. He felt that he had to know. And Tubby was not particular about the method by which he obtained information.

As he crouched, palpitating, outside the study door, the deep voice of the Rookham inspector was plainly audible from within.

"Four notes have been traced—"

"Surely not in connection with Rookwood!" interrupted the voice of the Head.

"I am sorry to say—yes."

"Bless my soul!"

"You will doubtless remember, Dr. Chisholm, the arrest of a couple of counterfeiters in this neighbourhood. A quantity of forged currency notes was found, but it was known that more existed, and one of the prisoners confessed that he had thrown away several packets of them in his flight, on Coombe Heath. Some of them have been found, but not, I think, all. The notes recently passed in Coombe are clearly the work of the same gang. Whether a confederate is still at large, or whether someone has found the forged notes, is what we have to ascertain."

Tubby Muffin trembled.

"But—" began Dr. Chisholm.

"Four notes were passed at Mrs. Wicks' shop in Coombe on Wednesday afternoon," said the inspector.

"These notes are now in the possession of the police. They were passed by a Rookwood boy."

"Is it possible? His name?"

"Muffin!"

"There is a boy here of that name, in the Fourth Form. But surely it is not possible—"

"Unfortunately, there is no doubt about the matter. Mrs. Wicks is positive. She was greatly surprised

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at finding so much money in Muffin's possession, as she states that he is generally far from flush with money—he has often sought to run an account at her shop. On this occasion he had an apparently unlimited supply.

"Bless my soul!" "Of course, the boy may have come innocently into the possession of the forged notes. It is—ahem!—possible. But I must see him, and—"

"I will send for him at once—" Tubby Muffin jumped away from the Head's door, and darted down the passage.

To get away—to hide himself somewhere—that was the only thought in the wretched junior's brain.

He scuttled up the stairs two at a time, and fled along the Fourth-Form passage.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were at tea, when the door of the end study was burst suddenly open, and the fat Classical bolted in.

"Jimmy—" Tubby reeled breathlessly against the table. There was a yell from George Raby, who was raising a teacup to his lips. The tea went into his collar instead of his mouth.

"Yoon! You fat villain!" howled Raby, jumping up.

"Jimmy!" "Hold on, Raby, old sport!" said Jimmy Silver, restraining his excitement.

"There's something the matter with Muffin—" "There's going to be! I'll—" "Hold on!"

"Jimmy!" Tubby Muffin fell on his fat knees. "I—I say—Jimmy—save me, old chap! Hide me somewhere!"

The Fistical Four were all on their feet now. Even Raby restrained his wrath, as he saw the deadly terror in Muffin's blanched face.

"What on earth's the matter with the dummy?" he exclaimed.

"Hide me!" babbled Muffin.

Jimmy Silver hastily closed the study door. He could see that the climax had come at last.

"What's happened, Muffin?" he asked quietly.

"He—he's here!" "Who's here?"

"Old Sharp—Inspector Sharp, from Rookham!" "Well?"

"He's after me!" moaned Tubby Muffin.

"What for?" "The—the counterfeit notes!"

**The 5th Chapter. Uncle James Does His Best.** "Counterfeit notes!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. repeated the words in a sort of chorus.

Tubby Muffin groaned.

"I—I didn't know they were counterfeit—till I heard Bulkeley telling Neville last night. Oh dear! I—I thought they were all right. Now I shall be sent to prison! Oh!"

Jimmy's face was very grave.

"Why couldn't you tell me the truth when I asked you, you utter idiot?" he muttered. "I wanted to help you. Now it's too late!"

"Ow! You—you can help me, somehow—hide me—" "You can't be hidden, you duffer! How do you know Inspector Sharp is here after you?"

"I've heard him speaking to the Head. The Head's going to send for me—" "Phew!" murmured Lovell.

Jimmy compressed his lips.

"Tell me the truth now, Muffin—quick! Where did you get the notes?"

"I—I found them!" "Found them!"

"Yes, last Wednesday, on the heath." Even Tubby realised now that it was time to be explicit. "You fellows remember—I came after you for the picnic, and you dodged me. Then some of the Bagshot Bounders got after me, and I fell into a hollow—and there—it was a packet, you know, and I found it, and—and opened it, and it was chock full of pound notes. I—I never knew they were forged notes—I'd forgotten all about those counterfeiters—that was months ago—"

Tubby Muffin gasped, out of breath.

"You thought they were genuine notes?"

"Yes, yes!" "And you kept them?" shouted Lovell.

"I—I—findings keepings, you know," stammered Muffin.

"Good heavens!" muttered Jimmy.

For once even Uncle James, of Rookwood, was taken utterly aback, and hopelessly nonplussed.

Had he been dealing with any other Rookwood fellow, Jimmy would have washed his hands of the matter there and then. But with Tubby Muffin it was different. Unscrupulous young rascal as he confessed himself to be,

Jimmy knew that it was rather crass stupidity than dishonesty that had actuated him. The wretched pretext of "findings keepings" had been enough to impose on Muffin's obtuse brain, and silence the voice of conscience.

Jimmy felt that he could not leave the young rascal to his fate. But how was he to help him?

"You've passed some of the notes, haven't you?" said Raby, aghast.

"Ye-e-s, four, in Coombe. The inspector's got hold of those now. And about six at the school shop—" "And the rest?"

"I've got the rest in my study and—" "You say Inspector Sharp is here now?"

"He's with the Head. They were talking—I heard—" "There was a step in the passage. Tubby Muffin, with a gasp of terror, bolted under the table.

The door opened, and Bulkeley, of the Sixth, looked in. He glanced round the study.

"Muffin not here? Dash it all, where has the fellow got to? The Head wants him at once. If you see Muffin, Silver, tell him he's wanted in the Head's study immediately."

Without waiting for a reply, the Rookwood captain passed on along the passage.

Lovell shut the door softly.

"Oh dear!" came a groan from under the table.

"He's gone; you can come out, Muffin," muttered Jimmy Silver.

"What on earth's going to be done, you fellows?"

Arthur Edward Lovell shook his head.

"Blessed if I know! We can't help him. He'd better go to the Head and make a clean breast of it."

Tubby Muffin crawled out from under the table with a face like chalk.

"I—I can't go to the Head," he whimpered. "I—I shall be arrested. I—I can't, you know!"

"You see, he's passed the notes," said Jimmy, helplessly. "He didn't know they were forged, but he knew they weren't his. I—I don't know what they'll do to him. Take him into custody, I suppose."

There was a dismal howl from Tubby.

"C-c-can't you help a fellow, Jimmy?" he stammered. "I say, old chap, it's up to you, you know. You help me out, old fellow. I—I—I'll never do it again."

Jimmy wrinkled his brows in thought.

"If only you'd been decent enough to take the notes to the police-station, as you ought—" he muttered. "I suppose you're more fool than rogue! But now—Hold on; you say you've got all the notes, excepting six you've handed in at the school shop, and four in Coombe?"

"Yes, Peele's given me back all he won!"

"That's ten missing," said Jimmy. "We can get the six back from the sergeant at the shop. I'll see him. Muffin can sell his bike later and pay him—"

"I—I say, Jimmy—" "Well?"

"I—I don't want to sell my bike. C-c-couldn't you sell your bike?"

"You fat fool!" said Jimmy Silver, in concentrated tones. "Do you want to be kept out of a reformatory, or not?"

"Ow! Ye-e-es, of course! I—I'll sell my bike—" "You're not supposed to know, so far, what the Head wants you for. They don't know you were spying at the keyhole. If you could get clear, and take the notes to the police-station in Coombe, now—"

"If!" said Lovell.

"We've got to help the fool somehow, you fellows; he can't help being a born idiot; but a magistrate wouldn't know him as we do. Look here—Jimmy Silver spoke rapidly—"this is the best I can think of. I'll cut down to the school shop and get the notes back from the sergeant. You got Muffin's bike out on the road, Lovell—"

"And what then?"

"Muffin must sneak out by the back stairs, without being seen, and buzz down to Coombe, and hand in the notes at the police-station. That is all he can do now. He will have to face the inspector, and the Head after. But it will be something in his favour if he's done the right thing—what he ought to have done at first. You understand, Muffin?"

"Yes," gasped Muffin. "I—I suppose I shall have to part with them. It's rather hard!"

"What?" yelled Jimmy.

"I—I mean, I'm anxious to part with them!" gasped Muffin. "That's what I—I meant to say."

"If you don't do exactly as I tell

you, I'll leave you to face the music on your own," said Jimmy Silver, with compressed lips. "If you've got any sense, you may get off with a flogging; but if you play the ox, you'll go to a reformatory. Understand?"

"Ow!" "You cut along to Muffin's study and get the notes, Raby. Tell him where they are, Muffin. I'll see the sergeant. Wait here till I come back, and keep under the table if anybody comes along."

"Ye-e-es!" gasped Muffin.

Jimmy Silver hurried out of the end study.

He realised very clearly that he was taking a risk in helping the wretched junior whose greed had landed him in such a scrape, but Uncle James of Rookwood felt that it was up to him. Tubby's punishment, in any case, was likely to be severe enough.

Downstairs, a general inquiry was going on for Tubby Muffin. Great excitement reigned among the juniors. Jimmy Silver hurried out of the School House, and cut across to the shop in the old clock-tower, kept by Sergeant Kettle. The old

counterfeit notes, which Raby had fetched from their hiding-place in his study.

"Here you are, Muffin—put these with the rest!" said Jimmy Silver. "Now you've got to get to Coombe as—"

Arthur Edward Lovell came into the study.

"I've put the bike out on the road—"

"Good! Now Tubby's got to get out without being seen. Come on, Tubby. You watch at the end of the passage, Newcome!"

"Right-ho!" "I—I say!" stammered Tubby. "Suppose I'm seen—" "You've got to risk that!"

"Oh dear!"

Mornington was in the passage when the juniors came out of the end study. He grinned at the sight of Muffin, but made no remark.

Jimmy Silver led the fat junior hastily down by the back stairs. That gave access to the unexplored regions "below stairs," where, of course, the search for Tubby did not extend. In a few minutes Tubby and Jimmy were in the kitchen garden, and

Sixth had to return to the Head's study at last with the information that Muffin could not be found.

"Doubtless the boy is out of gates, Mr. Sharp!" the Head remarked, when Bulkeley was gone. "If you would care to wait—"

"I am bound to wait," said Mr. Sharp. "It is absolutely necessary for me to see, Muffin. It may be necessary for me to take him away with me."

Whereat the Head bit his underlip hard.

So the inspector waited, and there was a dismal intermittent conversation in the Head's study for some time.

A shout in the quadrangle drew the Head's attention to the window at last. He glanced out. The fat figure of Tubby Muffin was rolling towards the house, and a crowd of fellows were gathering round him.

"You're wanted, Muffin—" "The Head—"

"Don't shove a fellow!" said Tubby Muffin. "If the Head wants me, I don't mind going!"

"Old Sharp's with him!" said Peele, uneasily.

"I don't mind!" said Tubby Muffin airily.

He rolled into the house, where he found Jimmy Silver & Co. waiting for him with anxious faces.

"Go to the Head at once, Tubby!" said the captain of the Fourth, in a low voice.

"I'm going." "Tell him the whole truth—" "I hope you don't think I'm likely to be untruthful, Silver."

"Eh?"

"I've nothing to be ashamed of, I suppose," said Tubby Muffin, blinking at him. "I've done the right thing, haven't I? If you ask me, Silver, I think I come out of this affair with credit."

Jimmy Silver stared.

"Well, I hope the Head will think so," he gasped. "My hat!"

"You leave it to me," said Muffin. "It's all right!" And he rolled on towards Dr. Chisholm's study, evidently well satisfied with himself.

The Fistical Four exchanged glances.

"The fat rotter seems to have got his nerve back," said Raby. "Has he made up some yarn to spin to the Head?"

"Blessed if I know! I hope he won't be taken away to chokery, that's all—not that he doesn't deserve it!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. waited at the corner of the corridor. A number of other fellows gathered round, and there was a low buzz of voices as the juniors discussed the situation. Every fellow there concluded that the inspector was "after" the money Tubby Muffin had been showing off of late; and Algy Silver, of the Third, stated his opinion that Tubby Muffin was going to leave Rookwood, like Eugene Aram, with "gyves upon his wrist." All the fellows were intensely curious, and rather anxious, to learn how the affair would end.

"He's coming!" breathed Lovell at last, as a door opened down the corridor.

It was Inspector Sharp who came. The tall gentleman passed the breathless crowd of juniors and disappeared; and he went alone.

"Here comes Tubby!"

Tubby Muffin emerged from the Head's study, and came along the corridor, looking quite cheerful. He grinned as he reached the corner of the passage, and came to the waiting crowd.

"Well?" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Not licked, sacked, or arrested?" asked Mornington, with a chuckle.

Tubby raised his fat eyebrows.

"Nothing for me to be licked for, is there?" he asked. "I've done nothing, I explained to the Head how—" "You told him the truth?" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Certainly!"

"And what did you tell him?" inquired Mornington.

"The exact facts."

"That your uncle sent you a hundred pounds—" "That a kind old gentleman padded you on the head and gave you—"

"Nunno! You fellows know how it was," said Tubby Muffin hastily. "I found a packet of currency notes on the heath. I didn't know they were forged notes—how could I? I've just taken them to the police-station, the proper place for them. I've told the Head so. That's all!"

"You've been spending the notes!" yelled Mornington.

"Not at all. Only four were missing—Jimmy got the others back from old Kettle—I mean only four were missing," said Tubby. "The bobbies have them already—got them from Mrs. Wicks. So that's all right."



**TUBBY'S APPEAL!** "Jimmy!" Muffin fell on his fat knees. "I—I say—Jimmy—save me, old chap! Hide me somewhere!" The Fistical Four were all on their feet and were started by the terror in the fat junior's blanched face. "What on earth's the matter with the dummy?" exclaimed Raby. "Hide me!" babbled Muffin. "What's happened?" asked Jimmy Silver quietly. "Old Sharp—Inspector Sharp from Rookham—he's here!" howled Tubby.

sergeant came out of his little parlour as Jimmy ran in. Jimmy lost no time in explaining.

"Muffin's changed some notes with you lately, sergeant—" "Yes, Master Silver."

"Have you still got them?" "They're in the till, Master Silver," said the sergeant, in surprise. "I hope there's nothing wrong with them?"

"The fact is, there is. I—I'm afraid they're not good," said Jimmy. "Muffin never meant to pass bad money on you, of course. He didn't know. Will you give them to me, sergeant? Muffin's going to take them to the police-station. I'll see that you are paid the amount. You can take my word, Mr. Kettle."

"Certainly, Master Silver. If they're bad, I don't want them, but I can't afford to lose the money—" "My word on that, sergeant!"

"All right, Master Silver; I know I can trust you—which I wouldn't say the same of Master Muffin."

And the sergeant sorted out the half-dozen pound notes, and handed them to Jimmy Silver. Greatly relieved, the captain of the Fourth hurried back to the School House.

In a few minutes he was in his study. Raby and Newcome were there, with Tubby Muffin. Tubby's pockets were bulging with the packages of

Jimmy helped the fat Classical out over the tradesmen's gate.

Tubby grunted, and dropped into the road outside.

"Now cut off! Lose no time, Tubby!"

"Ow! All right!"

A minute later, and Tubby was heard grunting over his handle-bars. Jimmy Silver returned slowly to the School House. He had done all he could. It was for Tubby Muffin to face the rest.

**The 6th Chapter. Muffin's Reward!**

"Where's Muffin?" "Where on earth is Muffin?"

Fellows were asking that question up and down and round about, and nobody seemed able to give an answer.

Bulkeley and the other prefects were searching for Muffin, with frowning faces.

Dr. Chisholm, in his study, was waiting for Muffin—actually waiting for a junior of the Fourth Form! Inspector Sharp, of Rookham, was waiting with him; but that did not matter so much.

But Muffin was not to be found. The fellows who knew anything about him were careful to keep their own counsel, and Bulkeley of the



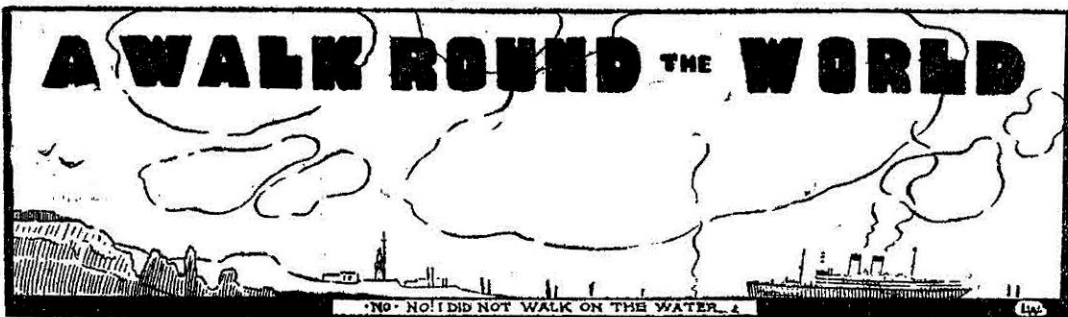
Inspector Sharp asked me why I had not taken them to the police-station immediately I found them."  
 "And what did you tell him?"  
 "The truth, of course—I had to get back to Rookwood for call-over," said Tubby. "After that I thought it out, not knowing what to do with the stuff, and consulted Jimmy Silver, as head of the Form. Jimmy advised me to take them to the police-station, so I took them. The Head said I ought to have taken them earlier. Still, as I'd taken them it was proof positive that I never meant to keep them, wasn't it?"  
 "Oh!"  
 Jimmy Silver gazed blankly at the fat, self-satisfied Tubby. Tubby Muffin did not seem to be aware that he had departed in any way from the straight and narrow path of veracity.  
 "So it was simply a question of the four notes that were given to Mrs. Wicks, on Wednesday," continued Tubby Muffin calmly. "That was easily explained, of course. With my pockets full of currency notes, I

mixed some of the counterfeit ones with my own."  
 "Wha-at?"  
 "And handed the wrong ones to Mrs. Wicks by mistake."  
 "Eh?"  
 "Simply a mistake. Any fellow might make a mistake like that, mightn't he? But what do you think?" added Tubby Muffin warmly. "That inspector chap looked as if he didn't half believe me!"  
 "D-d-did he?" stammered Lovell.  
 "He did! Distrustful beast, you know. As if a Rookwood chap would tell any rotten whoppers about such a thing!" said Tubby Muffin. "Of course, I said I was sorry for the mistake, and I shall pay Mrs. Wicks her four pounds immediately. Some of you fellows can lend me the money, as I happen to be short of tin. It wouldn't be right to let a poor woman suffer, would it? That inspector chap glared at me like a hawk all the time, though I explained everything in the frankest possible way. I asked

him if I was going to have any reward."  
 "Reward!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.  
 "Yes; for finding the notes, you know, and taking them to the police-station. 'Tain't every fellow who'd do it. Some fellows," said Tubby loftily, "would have said that findings were keepings, and stuck to the lot."  
 "My only hat!"  
 "So—so—so you've got off?" gasped Lovell.  
 "Got off? Of course! I haven't done anything wrong, have I?" asked Tubby Muffin, in surprise. "I think what's happened is very much to my credit. Old Sharp didn't seem to think so."  
 "Well," said Jimmy Silver, with a deep breath, "I'm glad you're not going to ohokey, though you deserve to. But I think you ought to be flogged, you young rascal. I don't believe the Head will let you off."  
 Tubby Muffin sniffed.  
 "The Head said he would think

over the matter, and decide how to deal with me," said the fat Classical. "That means he's thinking of handing me a reward, of course. I believe old Sharp would have made a fuss, like a suspicious beast, only for his respect for the Head. Blessed if I see why. He's got the notes now, and that's what he wanted; and it was I that found them. I think the Head is going to give me a reward—or at least, some sort of a testimonial. Don't you, Jimmy? Don't you think I deserve it?"  
 "Oh crumbs! I only hope you won't get what you deserve!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "That's all!"  
 But Tubby Muffin did get what he deserved.  
 It did not come in the shape of a reward or of a testimonial.  
 It came in the shape of a flogging in Hall.  
 The Head had thought over the matter, as he had promised, and decided how to deal with Master Muffin. And that was how he decided!

All the details of the matter the Head could not know, and Tubby's explanations had been plausible enough; but it was clear that the Head did not consider that he had come out of the affair with credit.  
 Tubby Muffin's howls were both loud and deep, and his indignation was deeper still. By some mental process peculiar to his own fat brain Tubby had decided that his conduct throughout the whole affair was extremely meritorious, and the flogging came as quite a shock to him. But there was a plentiful lack of sympathy for the fat sufferer in the Fourth Form. The juniors agreed that Reginald Muffin had received just what he wanted, and they charitably hoped that it would be a lesson to him. Certainly Tubby was likely to think twice before he decided, on another occasion, that findings were keepings.  
 THE END.  
 (Next Monday's long, complete story of Rookwood is entitled "A Stolen Name" By Owen Conquest.)



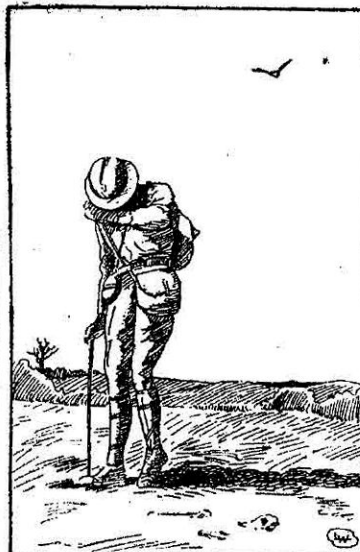
By LESLIE WILSON.

(A Splendid Series of Articles dealing with the Author's Experiences in Different Parts of the World.)

How many of my readers would like to walk 400 miles in twelve days over the fine and almost perfect roads of England? Work out the number of miles per day that one would have to average on such a walk, and you will see that it would take some doing. But consider what such a walk would be over lonely desert land, following at times a beaten, uneven track, broken up with deep ruts, and lying under many inches of grey, choking dust, called a road; or keeping alongside or walking between the rails of the railway for company; or more often than not finding one's way over strange and waterless country by the aid of a small pocket compass!  
 To walk across desert country and average thirty-three and a third miles per day for twelve days in succession indeed takes some doing, but that is what a friend and I accomplished in South Africa, when we tramped across the Great Karoo in Cape Colony.  
 This was the only occasion on which I had another walker for a companion, and the taste he got on that journey was enough for him, and he "gave up." We had to return for the time being to Cape Town, from where I set out later alone, taking another route on my march northward. My friend was a walker of some note, and it had been his ambition to keep me company during my "African tour."  
 We set out from Cape Town in the early morning of a certain day, under most promising conditions, accompanied by a well-known sportsman in South Africa, who walked the first five miles with us.  
 The days were stifling hot, and the nights were cruelly cold. The piercing cold winds that always sprang up at nightfall at this time searched out the very marrow of our bones and froze it. Although the days were so unbearably hot, there was always a heavy frost at night, and in the early morning we would wake to find our blankets deep under a white mantle of frost. We only carried one blanket each, and so at night we lay close together, covered by our two kaffir blankets, thin, highly-coloured, and almost useless articles. The blankets were on the small size, and would not cover two persons comfortably, so that whenever we moved to slightly change our position in the night the other would instantly become uncovered, and at such times tempers would be going cheap, and language not always carefully chosen.  
 About midnight it would become too cold to sleep, however tired we were, and towards two a.m. the temperature would become so unbearable we would have to rise, stiff, miserable, and aching in every limb, and stamp about until the sun arose and

became warm enough to ease our torture.  
 Night after night we would lay in the early hours of the evening talking of various things—discussing the day's walk, our future plans, or even the desert around us.  
 Our first experience of note occurred one dark night soon after we had crossed the Drakenberg Range. We were finishing a long day's walk, and were walking along in the dark trying to locate a certain Dutch village. It was early evening, and should have been moonlight, but heavy clouds obscured the heavens, and the darkness was intense. It was about nine o'clock, and as usual at that hour it was beginning to get very cold. As we had lost the poor track that we had been following all the afternoon soon after dark, the finding of the railway track seemed a godsend to us, and we decided to follow up the line to our destination.  
 The rail lay on the top of a high embankment, with not enough room at the sides for walking, so we had to make our way in Indian file between the rails.  
 The track was a very bad one, and in consequence we had to step from one sleeper to another, a very tiring way to get along, and one needing a deal of care. Ordinary conversation was out of the question, and after we had been walking for some considerable time in silence, my chum, who was just behind, called to me, "I say, take care you keep to the sleepers! Don't step in between, for Heaven's sake!" I instantly stopped, for I, too, had noticed something peculiar about the track we were on.  
 It did not take us long, by careful feeling around, peering into the darkness, and listening, to come to the conclusion that we were on a long bridge of some sort, though of what description we could not tell. Far, far below we could hear the faint noise of swift running water, but nothing could be seen, even the sleepers were not easy to discern in that pitch blackness.  
 There was no rail or sides to the bridge, and nothing between the sleepers and the river far below. It gave us a bit of a shock to realise our position, and, to make matters more uncomfortable, we saw in the distance behind us the headlights of an approaching train. We knew that already we had walked a good distance across the bridge, but we had no means of knowing how far we were from the other side.  
 We decided to go ahead, trusting to reach the farther side before the train would be upon us. Picking our way carefully, but as rapidly as possible, from sleeper to sleeper, every now and then turning to note the distance of the rapidly approaching

train, we made our way. Soon we heard the faint roar of the fast oncoming train, and shortly after we experienced a new and horrible sensation as the train reached the bridge and we felt the tremble of the structure.  
 Behind was the train, ahead a wall of blackness, and nothing to show



Under the scorching sun of the desert.

how near to safety we might be; beneath a black void, and somewhere far below a swift-running river. It left us no choice but to decide quickly what we were going to do, and within a second our decision was made, and we were trying to climb beneath the bridge.  
 I learnt afterwards of the terrible experience my chum went through, but he was more fortunate than I, for he happened by luck to be just above one of the few supporting columns of the bridge, and on climbing beneath the bridge he was able to get astride of a steel girder, to which, though nearly thrown off at times, he managed to cling until the train had passed over his head and beyond.  
 I was less fortunate than my chum, for on lowering myself from the girder supporting the sleepers to the full length of my arms, I was only able to get the toe of my left foot on a slight projection—the head of a nut, I believe—after feeling around with my feet for some seconds of dreadful torture.  
 The pain in my arms and fingers became greater every moment, and the cold sweat of fear stood out on my forehead as I felt my fingers slowly slipping from their grasp.

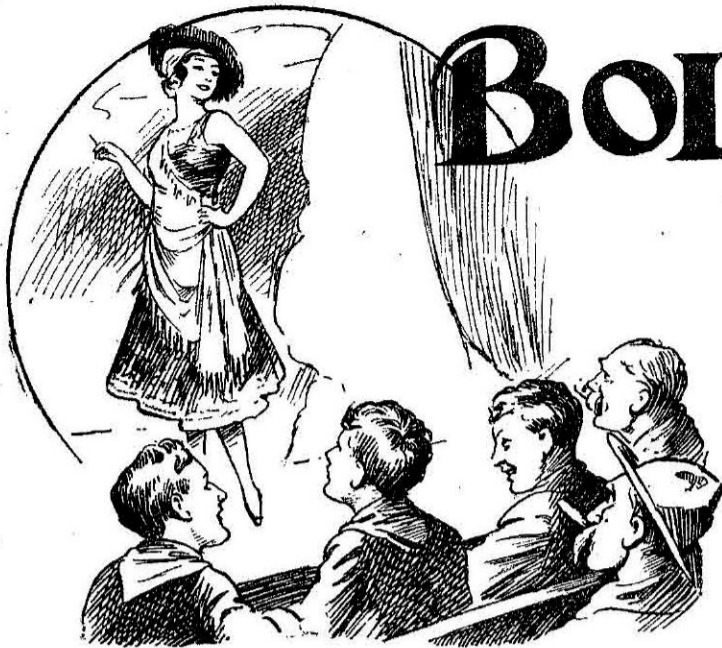
It is a wonder I did not go mad in those minutes of agony, minutes by the clock, but an eternity as to suffering.  
 I had just decided that it would be impossible to hold out another minute in that position, when the terrible train went thundering by overhead, the flying wheels being but a few inches from my hands. My grip during this time must have instinctively become tighter, for it is nothing short of miraculous how I managed to hold out. The noise of the flying train was like dreadful thunder, and the wind caused by its passing rushed at me as if determined to tear me from my frail hold.  
 I would have been unable to get back on to the bridge without the assistance of my chum, who was able from his own position to easily regain the top of the bridge, and he was just in time to render me aid.  
 We did not stop on the bridge, though both of us were near a state of collapse, but, picking our way again from sleeper to sleeper, we at last arrived at the end of that awful bridge, and then, within a few yards of the line, we threw ourselves down on to the ground, absolutely done for.  
 After we had been lying there for what seemed a long time, the moon came from behind the clouds, and we had our first sight of the bridge, and the great valley it crossed, and the sight we had of that scene only made the safe crossing of the bridge and the successful outcome of our terrible adventure seem all the more wonderful.  
 On the second occasion when I set out from Cape Town—this time alone—I walked along the south coast to Port Elizabeth, and from there I turned northward once more. At George Town I went through the wonderful Montagne Pass to Oudtshoorn, the greatest ostrich farming district in the world, returning again through the pass on my way to Knysna and its forest, where one will find elephants even to this day.  
 Proceeding north from Port Elizabeth, I passed through Grahamstown, East London, into the native territory of the Transkei.  
 I had a wonderful native guide through most of the Transkei, who only asked 2s. 6d. per week wages, and 1s. worth of mealies per week for food. I had a nasty stretch across the Orange River Colony to Bloemfontein, but I received such a wonderful welcome in this town—the capital of the state—that all the hardships I had been through seemed worth the while, just to experience the wonderful hospitality and kindness of the people.  
 And so it was all through South Africa, with few exceptions—the "glad hand" everywhere, and a wealth of kindness so great that I never before could have believed one man could receive or deserve.  
 Natal came in for a visit, then Pretoria, Johannesburg; down to Potchefstroom, and from there across one of the most barren stretches of country I had yet experienced; through Ventersdorp and Litchensburg to Mafeking. This stretch of country reminded me of some parts very similar, in India on the plains.  
 Mafeking is a name no doubt familiar to all of my readers, for it is closely associated with the name of the chief scout-master, Sir Robert Baden Powell; I heard a good many tales here, first-hand, about Sir Robert and his doings in that town during its siege in the Boer War, but space will not allow me to set them down here. Soon after leaving Mafeking I entered that great native

territory, Bechuanaland, the home country of Khama.  
 To Khama I carried an introduction, written in his own language. All speech with this chief had to be done through an interpreter, for though the old fellow could both understand and speak English, he liked to pretend that he could not understand any language but his own.  
 I was made very welcome in his country, and took part in many shooting expeditions, and received an authority to hunt in his territory. A native dance was given in my honour, and when I finally took my departure into Southern Rhodesia I received many native presents from Khama and the lesser chiefs.  
 In Southern Rhodesia I had an experience that I shall long remember. Here I had a "boy," or native guide, to take me up the eastern side of the railway-track through the bush to the Matopo Hills, where lies the grave of Cecil John Rhodes.  
 It was the grave of this great man that I wished very much to see.  
 When I could follow the trail myself my guide walked a little in my rear; and one moonlight night we were walking in this fashion when the native, who had silently crept up to my left side, suddenly snatched my revolver from its holster, which I carried on that hip, always loaded, and ready for instant use.  
 Directly the native got possession of my weapon he turned and ran for a hill a short distance away, with myself close on his heels. We raced up that hill in and out among the bushes, the native getting a slight lead, and near the summit I lost sight of him for a few seconds; but on coming out into a small clearing on the top of the rise I found my guide at bay in the centre.  
 Now, I knew that for a native, my guide—who, by the way, I called "Sixpence"—was well educated. He had been through the mission schools, and had acted on a great number of occasions as guide to big game hunters in the north. I also knew that he was fairly proficient in the use of firearms, and even if I had not known before I saw then, by the way he stood and held the weapon, that he knew the way to handle a revolver.  
 The moonlight was shining very bright, and the scene was almost as light as day.  
 It was maddening to be held up at the point of my own revolver; but



There is no comparison in walking through the beautiful English country and that of a lonely desert land!





### The 1st Chapter.

#### Grand Opera at Gunten's Store!

"I guess half Cedar Creek's here!" "Looks like it," smiled Frank Richards.

There was a crowd swarming into the side entrance of Gunten's Store, in Thompson, that Saturday afternoon.

Frank Richards & Co. had ridden over early, and they were among the first.

Chunky Todgers and a dozen other Cedar Creek fellows were round them, and a crowd of the citizens of Thompson Town.

From within the Assembly Room—as the big room at Gunten's Store was called—came faint strains of music.

The orchestra was tuning up. The door of the Assembly Room was not yet open, and the arriving crowd was wedged in the passage, which was full to the outer door, and there was a crowd in the street outside.

The attraction which drew so many to Gunten's Store that afternoon was announced on large coloured posters on all the dead walls in Thompson. It was a performance by a travelling opera company, which—greatly daring—had ventured up the valley from the railway, in the hope of "making a strike" by breaking up new ground.

"Carmen," performed by the Grand European Opera Company, was billed all over Thompson, and crowds of citizens had called in at the store to take their tickets—prices from one dollar to five.

Grand opera was an unknown mystery to most of the Thompson folk, and it had the charm of novelty for them.

Cedar Creek School was very well represented in the crowd.

As Bob Lawless remarked, half the school had come, and there was also a contingent from Hillcrest School.

Cedar Creek fellows and Hillcresters improved the shining hour while they waited by cat-calling to one another and exchanging uncomplimentary remarks.

"Time the blessed door was open," said Chunky Todgers, who, being short and fat, was at rather a disadvantage in a pressing crowd. "I say, I guess it's jolly warm here! You fellows hammer on the door."

"It won't be long now, Chunky," said Vere Beauclerc. "They're tuning up inside."

"Is that row tuning up?" asked Chunky.

"Sounds like it!"

"Oh gum! I thought they were playing something classical. It sounds just like the Smileys' quartette at the mission on a musical evening."

"Better let the Smileys hear that!" grinned Frank Richards. "You won't be asked for any more musical evenings, you fat boulder!"

"Hallo—doors opening!"

The big wide doors of the Assembly Room were flung open from inside, and there was a rush in.

Wealthy citizens, who had taken five-dollar reserved seats, carefully numbered, were in no hurry; but the common fry were anxious to bag seats, as it was pretty certain there would not be enough to go round. Frank Richards & Co. were numbered among the common fry, and they scuttled into the big room in great haste. Bob Lawless, especially, was bent upon having a front seat. He had his own reasons for that—reasons

which made his chums chuckle. For it was not specially "Carmen" that Bob had come to see; it was Miss Clarissa de Vere, who played the part of Bizet's heroine.

Bob Lawless, for the first time in his youthful career, had become aware of the existence of that troublesome little god, Cupid; and for the present Miss Clarissa de Vere filled up the whole horizon for the rancher's son. It was rather ridiculous—poor Bob was painfully conscious of that himself. If he had not been conscious of it, certainly the remarks of his chums would have enlightened him.

But there it was! For the present,

The orchestra had finished the process of tuning. It was not a large orchestra. There was a violoncello, three fiddles, and a cornet, with a piano to give "body" to it. The piano belonged to the Assembly Room, and had seen service. One or two of the keys refused to move when touched, which was perhaps a little disconcerting to the Grand European pianist who was seated at the instrument.

The stage was of planks, raised a foot or so above the level of the floor. The curtains of ruffled canvas were worked by a couple of men in red shirts in full view of the audience.



### HONOUR, INDEED!

"My dear, brave boy!" said Carmen softly. "Let me bind up your wound." Bob Lawless dared not meet Carmen's eyes as he held out his scratched wrist to be tied up. With a delicate lace handkerchief Clarissa de Vere bound up the slight injury. Perhaps it was as well that Bob did not dare to look the charming young lady in the face. At close view, the greasypaints on Carmen's charming countenance showed up very distinctly, and considerably detracted from her charms.

Bob was fluttering like a moth round a candle—Miss de Vere being the candle!

Probably Miss de Vere would have been greatly amused if she had known of it. Fortunately, she didn't—so far, at all events.

The front benches in the Assembly Room were numbered, for the reserved seats; but the chums of Cedar Creek School secured the first of the unreserved benches. They sat in a row there, and Chunky Todgers wedged in beside them, and Tom Lawrence and his sister Molly, and some more of the Cedar Creek crowd. With a ceaseless trampling of feet, the crowd poured in behind, and the seats filled rapidly.

And when the seats were filled, the crowd still came in, till all available standing room was taken.

Evidently the first performance of the Grand European Opera Company was going to be a success, so far as the takings were concerned.

But details like that were of no consequence; the opera-goers of Thompson were not particular.

The orchestra had turned on the merry prelude, to an accompaniment of scraping boots, creaking benches, and muffled voices. Monsieur Mungo, manager and conductor, was conducting, in evening-clothes—and the audience admired his evening-clothes more than his conducting. "B'iled" shirts were very uncommon in the little frontier town of British Columbia.

Bob Lawless' eyes were fixed upon the stage, which had been revealed after some little difficulties with the curtain had been overcome.

He was waiting for "Carmen." Frank Richards and Beauclerc were smiling. They had come to see the "show," but they were quite aware that their chum was indifferent to the show.

For his eyes, only Clarissa existed. When Carmen entered Bob gave a

start, and his eyes were glued upon Miss de Vere—if that was her name. That was the name, at all events, which appeared on the bills.

Miss Clarissa made a very charming Carmen, and her voice, a very agreeable contralto, was pleasant to hear.

Perhaps Bob was not wholly pleased to see the charmer with a cigarette in her pretty mouth; but he reflected that that was a part of the play, and soon recovered from the shock.

When Carmen proceeded to "canoodle," as Chunky Todgers called it, with Don Jose, Bob frowned for a moment. But he happily reflected that Mr. Charles de Vere, who played Don Jose, was Clarissa's brother, and that it was therefore only stage business. Had Don Jose been anybody else, Bob would have suffered pangs.

Not a word did Bob speak during the whole performance.

His eyes were glued on the stage while the play was going on; and in the intervals between the acts he sat perfectly numb.

When the last scene came, the excitement was intense. Don Jose, in his tatters, had rounded up Carmen, so to speak, at the entrance to the arena, and there was a knife in his hand—just as in the rehearsal which Frank Richards & Co. had interrupted a few days before in the wood.

With his eyes glittering, the jealous lover gripped his knife and closed in on Carmen, who, as Chunky described it afterwards, had made him wild by giving the Toreador the glad eye.

Then there came a sudden interruption.

A big red-shirted gentleman in the same row with Frank Richards & Co. had been watching the scene with breathless attention, and as Don Jose drew his knife and closed in on Carmen, the red-shirted gentleman jumped up. He grabbed a Navy revolver from his belt as he rose.

plainsman fresh from the plains; and partly, perhaps, to the potent fire-water with which he had been refreshing himself from a flask at frequent intervals during the performance.

"Wha-a-at!" stammered the astounded Don Jose, as he looked into the muzzle of the revolver.

"Hands up!" roared Buster Bill. "You low-down, goldarned varmint, do you calculate you are going to stick that purty critter under my eyes?"

"Oh, Lord!" "Drop that sticker, and put up your paws, or I guess I'll make a colander of ye!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Order!"

"Sit down!"

"Good old Buster!" came a roar from a group of cowboys at the back of the crowded room. "Go it, Buster!"

Buster Bill did not need the encouragement. He was going it. His eyes gleamed at Don Jose over the levelled revolver with a deadly glare, and his finger was on the trigger.

Don Jose gasped.

There was no help for it. He dropped the knife with a clank on the stage, and elevated his hands over his head.

He did not belong to the West, but he knew enough of Western ways not to attempt to argue with a levelled revolver, with an excited man's finger on the trigger.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Frank Richards.

Carmen was shrieking.

Don Jose's dagger had not scared her; she was used to that; she had died a hundred times by the same dagger, so she was naturally accustomed to it. But Buster Bill's revolver scared her very much. She was not accustomed to that.

"That's better you skunk!" growled Buster Bill, as Don Jose put up his hands. "Keep them up, or I'll drill you before you can say 'No sugar in mine!'"

"You—you—" gasped Don Jose. "You shet up! I don't want to hear you chew the rag. Keep your hands up, or you're a dead galoot!"

"Go it, Buster!"

"Wing him, Buster!" The cowboys were bawling from the back in great delight. Monsieur Mungo was waving his arms in wild excitement, and jabbering incomprehensible French. "A nous! Helps! C'est un fou! Policemans! Envoyez policemans! Vat is all zat? Allez-vous-en! Go avay vizz you! Ne tirez pas! Mon Dieu!"

Behind the scenes all the startled company were peering out in amazement and terror.

Buster Bill held the stage. Influenced by mingled chivalry and fire-water, he looked very much inclined to make a terrible example of Don Jose on the spot.

"Don't you be afeared, miss!" he said reassuringly to Carmen. "I've got him covered. He won't hurt you now."

"Oh, by Jove!" stammered Don Jose. "You drunken fool, get off the stage!"

"What?"

"Get off!"

"You call me names, you skunk!" roared Buster Bill in great indignation. "I guess—"

"Order!"

"Go it, Buster!"

"Help!" shrieked Carmen.

Bob Lawless jumped up in his place. Two bounds landed him on the stage, and he sprang towards Buster Bill.

He seized the big cattleman's arm and dragged it down.

Crack!

The revolver rang out. Whether Buster Bill intended to fire at the hapless Don Jose or not, the revolver exploded as his arm was dragged down. Fortunately, the bullet only ploughed through the planks.

Most of the audience were yelling with laughter, but with the potent fire-water working on Buster Bill's excited brain the joke might very easily have become a tragedy.

Bob Lawless seized the revolver in the cattleman's hand.

"Let go, you young fool!" roared Buster Bill furiously, struggling to free his hand.

Crack!

The revolver rang out again.

"Bob!" shouted Frank Richards.

He leaped on the stage, with Beauclerc only a second behind him.

Mr. Gunten jumped on at the same moment, and Charles de Vere—otherwise Don Jose—rushed at the excited Buster.

"Hands up!"

Don Jose gave a jump.

There was a buzz in the Assembly Room.

The red-shirted gentleman, known locally as Buster Bill, made a bound through the orchestra, knocking the astounded fiddlers right and left.

With another bound he was on the stage.

His revolver bore full upon the startled Don Jose. His finger was on the trigger.

"Hands up!" he thundered.

### The 2nd Chapter.

"A Good Pull-up for Carmen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Frank Richards & Co. burst into a yell.

Buster Bill was probably paying his first visit to a theatrical performance, and he had evidently taken the stage business too seriously. That was partly due to the simplicity of a



The revolver was jerked away from him and pitched out of harm's way into the wings.

Buster Bill, protesting in a voice like unto that of the bull of Bashan, was hustled off the stage. The curtain was wrung down, and it came jerking and rumpling across the stage. "Carmen" had come to a sudden end in the middle of the final scene.

"Bob, you're hurt!" exclaimed Frank Richards.

"Only a scratch—"

There was a streak of red on Bob Lawless' wrist.

It was only a scratch, certainly, but it might easily have been something worse.

Don Jose clapped him on the shoulder.

"You're a plucky kid!" he said. "That drunken fool might have blown my brains out!"

"My dear, brave boy!" It was Carmen's soft voice. "Let me bind up your wrist!"

Bob Lawless trembled.

He dared not meet Carmen's eyes as he held out his scratched wrist to be tied up.

With a delicate lace handkerchief Clarissa de Vere bound up the slight injury.

Perhaps it was as well that Bob did not dare to look the charming young lady in the face. At close view the grease-paints on Carmen's charming countenance showed up very distinctly, and very considerably detracted from her charms.

Carmen pressed his hand as she said good-bye in a sweet voice.

"I am so much obliged to you. You have perhaps saved my brother's life!" she murmured.

"I—I was thinking of you!" stammered Bob. "I—I was afraid that—"

Carmen smiled.

"You are a good, brave boy!" she said. "Good-bye!"

Frank Richards drew his chum from the stage through the rumpled curtain.

The audience were clearing off. At the back of the room a group of laughing cowboys surrounded the Buster, and were explaining matters to him.

Frank Richards & Co. quitted the assembly-room, Bob Lawless walking like a fellow in a dream.

Clarissa had called him a good, brave boy. Clarissa had admired him and thanked him. That was more than enough to translate Bob Lawless to the seventh heaven of delight.

"Well, it has been an evening!" chuckled Frank Richards, as they came out into the Main Street of Thompson.

"The best part of the performance was unrehearsed."

"She might have been hurt!" muttered Bob Lawless.

"Lucky there was a giddy hero ready on the spot to rush to the rescue!" chuckled Frank.

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"Here's the horses!" said Beauclerc.

The chums mounted for the ride home.

Bob Lawless did not speak a word on the ride home to the ranch. He rode with a rapt expression on his face.

Evidently he was thinking of Carmen.

Once Frank Richards saw him raise his tied wrist to his lips, and press there the lace handkerchief belonging to Clarissa.

But Frank made no remark. Bob Lawless was past reasoning with; and Frank could only hope that he would recover from the state of semi-idiocy to which Clarissa's bright eyes had reduced him.

### The 3rd Chapter. A Wild Scheme.

"Where's Bob?"

Frank Richards asked that question the following morning, Sunday, at the ranch.

Bob Lawless had gone out immediately after breakfast; and Frank had been occupied in his room for some time, having some proofs to correct. Frank was still doing his contributions for the "Thompson Press." He came down in time for the ride to the mission for morning service; but Bob was not to be seen.

"He went out on his horse," Mr. Lawless said. "I dare say you will find him on the trail to the mission, Frank."

Mr. and Mrs. Lawless were accustomed to driving to the mission in the buggy; Frank and Bob preferred riding. Frank Richards left the ranch-house, and led out his horse and mounted. He was rather puzzled by Bob's absence.

On the mission trail he met Vere Beauclerc, but Bob Lawless was not to be seen.

"Bob's not with you, then, Beau?" he exclaimed.

"No; I thought he would be with you!"

"He's vanished somewhere!" Beauclerc smiled slightly.

"He may be gone to Thompson," he remarked.

"Thompson!" repeated Frank.

"Possibly! He has friends there, you know."

"Oh, my hat!" said Frank.

The two chums rode on to the mission together. Possibly they gave less attention than usual to Mr. Smiley's sermon. They could not help thinking of their chum, and wondering where he was.

Bob Lawless had not turned up when the service was over; and, instead of riding home, Frank and Beauclerc galloped to the town. The opera party were at the Occidental Hotel, and they half-expected to see their chum there. They were not disappointed. As they came trotting up Main Street, Bob Lawless came out of the Occidental.

He flushed as he saw his chums.

"Hallo! So here you are!" exclaimed Frank Richards.

"What are you fellows doing here in Thompson?" muttered Bob, apparently not very gratified.

"We came to look for you."

Bob's flush deepened.

"I don't see how you guessed I was here."

"My dear chap, don't we know that a bright particular star shines in the sky here?" chuckled Frank.

"Oh, cheese it!"

"It's really about time you cheesed it, Bob, old chap! You're playing the giddy goat!"

"I called on Miss de Vere to ask how she was, after her fright yesterday," said Bob gruffly. "Only civil, I suppose?"

"Oh, certainly! How is her brother?"

"Eh? I don't know. I haven't seen him."

"But he had a worse fright than the lady—wouldn't it have been only civil to—"

"Oh, dry up!"

Bob Lawless mounted his horse, and rode out of Thompson with his chums, looking back several times till the Occidental was out of sight.

He was very silent at dinner; after that meal was over, he went out of the ranch-house, and Frank followed.

"Not going to Thompson again?" Frank asked, with a smile.

"Nope!"

"You seem rather down, old chap."

Bob granted.

"I guess I feel down! They're going in the morning!"

"Who are?"

"The players!"

"Oh! I thought they had booked the Assembly Room from Old Man Gunten for a week."

"They had; but what happened yesterday has fed them with Thompson. Old Mungo, the manager, is frightened out of his silly wits. He thinks there may be real shooting another time."

Frank Richards laughed.

"Buster Bill was only being chivalrous," he said. "He thought Miss de Vere was in danger, you know."

Bob grinned faintly.

"The silly ass! Of course, he had too much fire-water on board. Old Mungo didn't quite know the frontier, now he's afraid to hang on here; Buster Bill has haunted his dreams. I think. The long and the short of it is, that they're making tracks in the morning for the railway again. They've had enough of touring in the Thompson Valley. They're going to stick to the railroad towns after this."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Lawless did not laugh. His sunburnt face was very grim and gloomy.

"Well, what does it matter?" Frank inquired.

"I—I—"

"Well?"

"I—I shan't see her again, that's all!" blurted out Bob, his face crimson. "I—I—" He broke off.

Frank Richards looked at him very gravely.

"Bob, old fellow," he said, "it's the best thing that could happen, for you not to see Miss de Vere again. You must see that you're playing the goat. You're a kid of fifteen—and she—"

"About twenty!" said Bob.

"My dear old chap—"

"Perhaps twenty-one!"

"She couldn't be such a good actress, or singer either, at twenty-one, Bob. She can't be under thirty, anyhow!"

"Rot!"

"But in any case—"

"Oh, I know I'm a silly ass!" said Bob moodily, kicking a tuft of grass

almost savagely. "I know that! But—but she's so nice, Frank—she's— Oh, it's no good talking! I've never seen anyone like her before. I—I—I only want just to see her—just to speak to her sometimes, and—and to do things for her, you know. I—I almost wish Buster Bill had sent that bullet through me yesterday, so—so that she'd know—I say, Frank, what's it going to be like when she's gone?"

"The same as it was before she came, I suppose."

Bob Lawless glanced round him, and the sunny, grassy plain stretching away to the thick woods, with the snowy caps of the Rocky Mountains in the far distance. That scene had always contented him; it might have contented anyone. But—

"I shan't be able to stand it!" he said. "Look here, Frank—"

"Well, old son?" said Frank patiently.

"I'm going to see old Mungo—that silly old Frenchman who was screaming at the show yesterday, you know, and—"

"I remember."

"He's the manager. I'm going to see him, and—and ask him—"

Bob paused.

"Ask him what?" exclaimed Frank, in astonishment.

"Ask him to give me a job."

"A—a—a job?"

"Sure!"

Frank Richards gazed at his cousin blankly.

"A job in a travelling show company?" he stuttered.

"Yes. I guess I should be useful—shifting scenery, and so on—looking after the horses and waggons, and all that. I'm not afraid of work!"

"You awful ass!" exclaimed Frank.

"And what about your people? Do you think your father would let you go?"

Bob Lawless looked dogged.

"I shall speak to father after I've asked Mungo. If he doesn't agree—but never mind that now. I've made up my mind!"

"Bob!" exclaimed Frank aghast.

"It's no use talking. Let's go for a ride! I must do something!"

"Right-ho!"

The matter was not mentioned again between the chums; and Frank could only hope that Bob's wild scheme had passed out of his mind.

But the next morning, on the way to Cedar Creek School, Bob Lawless pulled in his horse on the trail.

"You fellows keep on," he said.

"But you're going to school?" asked Beauclerc, in surprise.

"I shall be late to-day."

"But Miss Meadows—"

"You can tell Miss Meadows I shall be late."

"Look here, Bob!" exclaimed Frank Richards.

"So-long!"

Bob Lawless turned his horse, and dashed off by a path through the timber. Frank and Beauclerc looked at one another blankly.

"I suppose he's gone to say good-bye to the players," said Beauclerc, at last. "I hear they're pulling up stakes this morning."

"If that's all—"

"That's all, I suppose. We'd better get on. We can make some excuse for him to Miss Meadows."

Frank Richards nodded, and they rode on to Cedar Creek. But both of them were in a very troubled mood.

### The 4th Chapter. French Leave!

Miss Meadows inquired after Bob Lawless when she came into the lumber school-room to take her class. The schoolmistress of Cedar Creek was a stickler for punctuality.

Frank Richards could not help wondering what Miss Meadows would have said if the exact facts had been stated to her.

Fortunately, Miss Meadows did not know how matters stood; she was the last person who was likely to learn, though a rumour of Bob's amazing infatuation was spreading through Cedar Creek School by this time. To Cedar Creek it was a screaming joke, and the fellows chortled over it without limit.

"Where is Lawless, Richards?" the schoolmistress asked.

"If you please, ma'am, he wants you to excuse him for an hour or so this morning," answered Frank meekly. "Some friends of his are going away to-day, and he wanted to say good-bye."

"Oh, very well!" said Miss Meadows.

And the subject dropped.

Frank Richards and Beauclerc gave more thoughts to Bob than to their lessons during the next hour. They were very anxious to see him come into the school-room.

Bob's words of the previous day lingered in Frank's mind, and they

worried him considerably. If Bob carried out his wild scheme—if he left Thompson with the players—how on earth was it to be explained to his people at the ranch? It was certain that his father would saddle his horse immediately to follow him, and that Bob would be fetched ingloriously back—that was quite certain. But Frank comforted himself with the reflection that Miss de Vere would scarcely allow the schoolboy to "play the goat" to such an extent.

He was very glad, however, when the school-room door opened at last and Bob Lawless came quietly in.

Bob looked very tired and very "down." He went quietly to his place, and did not meet Frank Richards' glance as he sat at his desk.

When lessons were over, and the school was dismissed, Frank and Beauclerc joined their chum going out. Chunky Todgers joined them, with a grin on his fat face.

"Have they gone, Bob?" Chunky inquired.

"Yep!" answered Bob curtly.

"Did you propose?" roared Chunky.

Bob Lawless started. Then a flush of anger came over his face, and he made a fierce stride towards the humorous fat youth.

Chunky Todgers jumped back in alarm.

It was evident that "chipping" was not welcome to the rancher's son on this tender subject, and that it was likely to be a dangerous pastime for the chipper.

Frank caught his chum's arm just in time.

"Hold on, Bob, you ass!"

"I'll—I'll squash the fat idiot!" gasped Bob. "I guess I'll—I'll—"

Chunky Todgers did not wait to be squashed. He travelled.

Bob Lawless shook himself free from Frank's grasp, and strode away with a lowering brow. But his chums followed him. They judiciously determined not to leave Bob to himself just then. They rejoined him as he stood leaning against the school palisade with his hands shoved deep into his pockets, and a wrinkle in his brow.

"They're gone!" said Bob, without raising his eyes from the ground. "You can cackle—"

"We're not cackling, old chap," said Frank mildly.

"I—I saw old Mungo. I asked him—"

Frank whistled.

"You asked him for a job in the show?"

"Yes."

"Bob!" murmured Beauclerc.

"I'd have taken any job if he'd said yes," said Bob doggedly. "He was kind enough—he said he could do with a lad to look after the horses, at least, so long as they were in this region; but I suppose he knew my father's a rancher here; he asked me if my father was willing—"

"Which, of course, he wouldn't be."

"No. So Mungo said I was to ask my father. Of—of course, he didn't know what I wanted. He thought I was stage-struck."

"If you ask your father—"

"He'll say no," said Bob moodily; "I know that. But—but I can't stand it! The company's gone south; they're staying to-night at Silver Creek, and on the railway to-morrow. They give their next show at Silver Creek, and then they're done with this section. That fool Buster Bill—"

"They'd have gone in a week, anyhow."

"I know."

Bob fell moodily silent.

Frank Richards and Beauclerc looked at one another, not knowing what to say. The whole affair was so ridiculous that they were inclined to laugh; but the evident trouble and pain in Bob's downcast looks restrained them. Poor Bob was quite aware himself of the ridiculous side of the situation, but, apparently, he couldn't help it.

"I can't stand it!" repeated Bob, after a long pause.

"You'll forget all about it in a few days, old fellow."

"Rot!"

"Ahem!"

"Leave me alone for a bit," muttered Bob. "I—I'm not coming in to dinner. I—I want to think a bit."

His chums obediently left him, divided in feeling between concern for the unhappy youth and a desire to laugh.

Bob did not come in for dinner in the lumber school.

His absence was not remarked on, as the fellows were at liberty to ride home for the midday meal if they liked. Doubtless Miss Meadows supposed that Bob had been called to the ranch for some reason.

After dinner, Frank and Beauclerc looked for him, but Bob was not to be seen in the playground. It was close on time for afternoon school, when they discovered that his horse was missing from the corral.

"Gone for a ride, I suppose," said Frank, with a smile. "I hope he'll come back in time for lessons. Miss Meadows won't excuse him a second time."

"Poor old Bob!" said Beauclerc, laughing. "He was no end tickled when Chunky fell in love with Molly Lawrence. Now he doesn't seem able to see how funny it is in his own case."

The chums walked away to the gates to look out on the trail for Bob. There was no sign of him there.

Yen Chin, the Chinese schoolboy, came up to them in the gateway a few minutes before the school-bell was timed to ring. He had a note in his hand.

"Letter for Flanky!" he said.

"Letter for me?" repeated Frank.

"Flom ole Bobbec."

"From Bob! What the thump has he sent me a letter for?" exclaimed Frank Richards, in some amazement and alarm. "When did Bob give it to you, kid?"

"Before dinnee, when Bob goey out."

"You young ass! Why didn't you give it to me before, then?"

"Bob askee me givee now," explained Yen Chin. "No givee, till fivee minute before school, Bob sayee. Savvy?"

Frank Richards jerked open the envelope, with a troubled brow. If Bob had left a note for him, it could only mean that he was not coming back to school that afternoon. And the delivery of the note was timed too late for his friends to follow him.

What wild idea was Bob bent on carrying out now, Frank wondered? The letter furnished an answer to that question.

It was hastily scribbled in pencil, and it ran:

"Dear Frank,—I can't stand it here, and I'm going. Make the best you can of it at home, and tell them I am safe and all right. I shall see you again some day. Good-bye, old chap, and the same to Beau.—BOB."

Frank Richards passed the note to Beauclerc without a word. Beauclerc read it through quickly. Then the chums looked at each other. Yen Chin had glided away, and they were alone.

"He—he's gone!" muttered Frank.

"After the players!"

"Of course!"

"He must be out of his senses!" muttered Beauclerc. "His father will be awfully wild. He's sure to ride after him."

"Sure to. And then—"

"There'll be an awful row."

Frank Richards wrinkled his brows in thought. The school-bell was beginning to ring, and the Cedar Creek fellows were streaming towards the lumber school.

"Beau, we can't let him make a fool of himself like that! We can't have any trouble between him and his father. The awful ass—"

Beauclerc nodded quietly.

"We can go after him, Frank. We know where he's gone—the players are at Silver Creek now. But—"

"Let's get the horses out."

"But, Frank, he won't come back for us."

Frank set his lips.

"I know he won't come back for us, Beau. But I'm going to speak to Miss de Vere. I'll ask her to make him come back. She can't know what a silly ass he is making of himself. I'll speak to her. I suppose it will make Bob ratty, but that can't be helped."

"Right-ho!" said Beauclerc.

No more was said; the chums ran to the corral for their horses. The bell was still ringing as they hurriedly led their steeds out of the gates. It meant cutting lessons for the afternoon, and punishment to follow, but, for the sake of their erring chum, they were willing to take that on their shoulders.

"Hallo, you galoots!" roared Chunky Todgers, as they clambered on their horses in the trail. "Can't you hear the bell? You'll be late!"

The chums did not reply. Without even looking at the astonished Chunky, they rode away on the timber-trail, leaving Chunky Todgers staring open-mouthed in the gateway. While the Cedar Creek fellows were going in to class, Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc were riding hard on the trail to the south on the track of their missing chum.