

PEELE'S IMPERSONATION!

A SPLENDID LONG COMPLETE
STORY OF THE
CHUMS OF ROOKWOOD SCHOOL.

By . . .
OWEN CONQUEST.



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Chopper Comes Down!

TROUBLE for somebody!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

It looked like it.

All the Fourth Form at Rookwood, both Classical and Modern, were in the Form-room when Mr. Bootles entered.

There was a stern frown upon the brow of the Fourth Form-master.

A stern frown was so rare upon the kind face of the benevolent little Form-master that the Fourth were on the qui vive at once.

Somebody, evidently, had been "up" to something, and the "chopper" was about to come down.

There were quite a number of uneasy consciences in the Fourth Form.

Jimmy Silver & Co. and Tommy Dodd & Co. wondered whether their latest "scrap" was the cause of Mr. Bootles' frown. As a rule, the little rags between Moderns and Classicals were taken no notice of by the Form-master. But you never could tell. Form-masters were always an uncertain quantity.

Leggett, the cad of the Fourth, wondered whether any of his little money transactions had come to light, such as lending a shilling to a fellow who was hard up at an interest of twopence a week. Leggett kept his eyes on his desk and quaked. He was always in dread of being found out.

Townsend and Topham the dandies of the Fourth, surmised that perhaps Mr. Bootles had become aware of their snobbish persecution of Rawson, the scholarship junior, and they sat there looking very uneasy. They knew what opinion the Form-master would have of their conduct if he knew of it.

Then there was Peele, the pal of Tomy and Topy, one of the "Nuts." Peele looked quite white as Mr. Bootles came in.

Mr. Bootles stood regarding his class with a grim look, little dreaming of the number of guilty consciences before him. In the innocence of his heart Mr. Bootles fancied there was only one guilty conscience in the Fourth—the one he had to deal with.

The juniors waited on tenterhooks. Mr. Bootles seemed in no hurry to begin. He coughed his little dry cough significantly. A pin might have been heard to drop in the Fourth Form-room.

Jimmy Silver and Tommy Dodd regarded each other with glances of eloquent sympathy. Classical and Modern ragged each other without mercy out of class, but if the chopper was to come down they could join in mutual sympathy.

"Peele!"

Mr. Bootles jerked out that name, and all the Fourth Form, with one exception, breathed more freely.

Peele was the delinquent.

The rest of the Fourth brightened up, and almost smiled. Peele did not smile, however.

"Peele, stand out before the class!"

With dragging steps Peele of the Fourth moved out, and stood before the grim, frowning Form-master.

"What on earth's the row?" murmured Jimmy Silver. "Peele hasn't been ragging Moderns; he's too slack."

"Betting on gee-gees, you bet!" murmured Lovell. "That's Peele's little game, and he's been spotted."

"Serve him right, if that's the case!" said Jimmy unsympathetically.

Mr. Bootles glanced round.

"Silence in the class!" he exclaimed.

There was dead silence. Mr. Bootles adjusted his glasses, and blinked at Peele.

"Peele!"

"Ye-es, sir?"

"I have received a report from a prefect concerning you."

"Ye-es, sir!"

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"Last evening," said Mr. Bootles, his voice growing deeper, "you were seen in conversation, Peele, with a man of the name of Hook—Joseph Hook—a person of the most disreputable character. This person, I understand, is a bookmaker, and is regarded as a man of bad character even among men of his own profession. You were seen in conversation with him by Dickinson major. You ran away immediately, doubtless to escape recognition. Walter Dickinson, however, recognised you. I have received his report. What have you to say, Peele?"

"I—I—I—" stammered Peele. "I am willing to hear any explanation you have to make, Peele. Have you been engaged in any betting transaction with the man?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"Has any money passed between you?"

"N-n-no, sir."

"Then for what reason did you meet him?"

Townsend and Topham watched Peele with deep anxiety. They were in terror of their own transactions with Joey Hook coming to light if Peele blurted out too much.

Peele drew a deep breath.

"I—I met him by chance, sir. He insisted on stopping to speak to me. I didn't want him to—"

"Peele! You were seen to speak with him for more than five minutes."

Peele gasped.

"I—I didn't mean to, sir, but—but he wouldn't leave me."

"Have you ever spoken to him before, Peele?"

"No, sir!" gasped Peele.

"You have never had any dealings with him?"

"Oh, certainly not, sir!"

Jimmy Silver's lip curled involuntarily. If expulsion had been hanging over his head Jimmy would not, and could not, have lied like that. But Peele was made of different stuff.

"I am glad of that, Peele. I accept your assurance," said Mr. Bootles, stroking his grey whiskers thoughtfully. "I trust you are speaking the truth. I cannot exonerate you, as you were greatly to blame for allowing such a character to enter into conversation with you. I shall come you, Peele, but not severely. But, for your own sake, Peele, I shall keep you within gates for a considerable time. You will understand that you are not, for any reason whatever, to go out of the school bounds until further notice. Now hold out your hand!"

Swish!

"You may go to your place, Peele. I am glad the matter does not seem so serious as I had at first feared."

Peele went to his place without a word. His hand was tucked under his arm, and his eyes were burning.

"We will now proceed," said Mr. Bootles. And they proceeded.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Painful Duty Done!

JIMMY SILVER glanced at Peele when the Fourth Form came out of the classroom.

He was feeling a little sympathy now. To be "gated" indefinitely was a hard lot, though, certainly, the punishment was light enough and most judicious. While he remained within school bounds Peele was removed from all danger of further attentions from the disreputable Hook.

Peele was looking savage and morose. "Cheer up, kid!" said Jimmy Silver, tapping him on the shoulder. "It's hard cheese, but it might have been worse, you know."

"Gated for the rest of the term!" muttered Peele.

"Oh, Bootles will come round," said Jimmy. "Just think what might have happened if he'd known the facts."

Peele scowled.

"And I'll tell you what," said Jimmy. "Why not chuck it and stick to games instead? Footer's better than slacking about betting on gee-gees, kid."

"Mind your own business!" growled Peele. "I'll do what I like, Bootles or no Bootles!"

And he stalked away angrily.

Jimmy Silver looked after him, greatly inclined to take him by the scruff of the neck and mop up the passage with him.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome, who had listened, burst into a chuckle in chorus.

Jimmy Silver looked at them rather morosely.

"What's the cackle about?" he snapped. "Naughty boy won't take the saintly advice of his Uncle James!" grinned Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, bow-wow! Rats!" said Jimmy Silver crossly. "The silly ass ought to be licked! He was lying to Bootles like a Prussian! We know all about his little games with Joey Hook, and Tomy's and Topy's, too!"

"Bootles will tumble some day, and make an example of them," said Lovell. "No need for you to get your wool off, Jimmy. Let's go and punt a ball about until dinner."

"What about our rehearsal for our play?" said Jimmy.

"Oh, bother the rehearsal! We can do that this evening. Come out!"

And the Fistical Four went out.

They punted a ball about in the keen air of the quadrangle, and soon forgot all about Cyril Peele. Meanwhile, Peele was surrounded by sympathetic friends. Townsend and Topham of the Fourth, and Smythe and Howard of the Shell, were full of commiseration. As Adolphus Smythe remarked, it might have happened to any one of them.

"But you should have been more careful, Peele," said Adolphus. "You shouldn't let yourself get spotted by a prefect. I never do, dear boy."

Peele grunted.

"I didn't know Dickinson was coming across that field," he said. "Confound him!"

"Yaas, confound him, certainly!" agreed Adolphus. "Like his cheek, meddlin' in a fellow's private affairs. But prefects will do these things."

"It's rotten!" said Townsend. "We shall have to go pretty careful for a bit!"

"Look here, you'll have to help me out," said Peele. "After what Bootles said, I can't meet Joey again for a bit—"

"By gad, old man, you'd better not!"

"But I've got an appointment with him for this evening," said Peele.

"You can't keep it," said Smythe, with a shake of his head. "Too risky!"

"I know I can't. One of you fellows must go for me."

The Nuts of Rookwood exchanged glances. They were not unaccustomed to meeting the bookmaker on account of their own little speculations on the Turf, but the incident in the Form-room had scared them.

There was a general shaking of heads.

"Not good enough," said Adolphus decidedly. "Better give it a few days to blow over. I'm goin' to."

And Smythe and Howard strolled away, their minds evidently made up.

"Look here, Tomy," said Peele angrily. "Joey Hook is comin' to meet me this evenin'. It's a special appointment. He'll get waxy if I don't go. He may wait an hour for nothin'."

"Tain't safe," said Townsend.

"I owe him money, too," said Peele; "that's what we were talkin' about when Dickinson spotted us. You know what an uncertain beast Hook is. If he's kept waitin' for nothin' he may cut up rusty."

"We'll have to chance it," said Townsend decidedly. "It's too risky. I'm not goin' out of gates this evenin'."

"Same here," said Topham, with equal

decision. "Don't be an ass, Peele! It's no good lookin' for trouble."

"If you fellows won't go for me, I shall have to go," said Peele. "It's more risky for me than for you."

"Well, it's your bisney, not ours," said Topham.

"And I—I can't go. I'm taking part in that rotten Classical rehearsal."

"Bother the rehearsal!" said Townsend. "What do you take up such rot for, with those awful cads in the end study? I wouldn't waste my time on it."

"Well, they haven't asked you to play a leading part," said Peele unpleasantly.

"Oh, rats! I'm not goin' to meet Hook, anyway."

"If I cut off they'll miss me, and there'll be talk," said Peele. "It makes it all the more likely that I shall get spotted."

"Don't go, then!"

"Look here—"

"Oh, ring off!" said

Townsend crossly. "I tell you I'm not goin' to have a hand in it. I don't want to be sacked!"

"Same here!" said Topham.

Towny and Topy sauntered away to a void impotency. Peele was left alone, scowling.

He had an uneasy fear of what his estimable friend Joey Hook might do if he were left kicking his heels at the stile the whole evening.

Mr. Hook was not wholly a reliable gentleman, and Peele owed him money.

"I've got to go!" muttered Peele savagely. "Those funky cads won't do it for me. I've got to go unless I could let Hook know, and I can't. Hang it all!"

And Peele walked away, alone with his meditations.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

An Interrupted Rehearsal.

"REHEARSAL after tea," said Jimmy Silver, as the Fistical Four came out of the Form-room after afternoon lessons.

Jimmy Silver was very keen about the rehearsal.

It was Jimmy who was the founder and moving spirit of the Rookwood Classical players, and it was Jimmy who had written the great comedy with which the players were shortly to stagger humanity.

Mr. Bootles had helped in that comedy quite unconsciously. Mr. Bootles was a kind little gentleman, and the Fourth-Formers liked and respected him greatly. But it could not be denied that the simple little gentleman simply lent himself to caricature. He was not much taller than the juniors, though considerably wider. His grey whiskers, and the glasses perched on his nose, were the easiest things in the world to imitate. And Jimmy—rather thoughtlessly, perhaps—had introduced a comic character into his comedy, who was the lifelike image of Mr. Bootles.

Peele of the Fourth was to play the part. Peele was a slacker in most things, but he had a taste for amateur theatricals, and he was clever at make-up. When he was in the "clobber" and make-up of the comic master in the play, he was as like Mr. Bootles as Mr. Bootles' twin brother would have been, if he had had one.

And he could very cleverly imitate Mr. Bootles' way of poking his head forward like a tortoise, and blinking over his glasses and saying "What—what!" in his high-pitched voice.

Peele did not get on well with the Fistical Four, but in making up a caste for a school comedy, entitled "Nice Boys at School," personal considerations of that kind were banished. Except for Putty Grace, who happened to be laid up with a sprained ankle, Peele was the cleverest fellow for the part, so he was selected; and as it was the "fattest" part in the piece Peele naturally had jumped at it.

When the play came off, Mr. Bootles was not likely to see it; but even if he did, he was not likely to recognise that caricature of himself. As Jimmy sagely remarked, Bootles hadn't the faintest idea what a funny merchant he really was. He would probably regard the character as exceedingly comical, never dreaming that it bore any resemblance to himself. Which was all to the good, for the merry juniors would have sacrificed the most effective character in the play rather

"Might have punted the ball about a little," said Lovell.

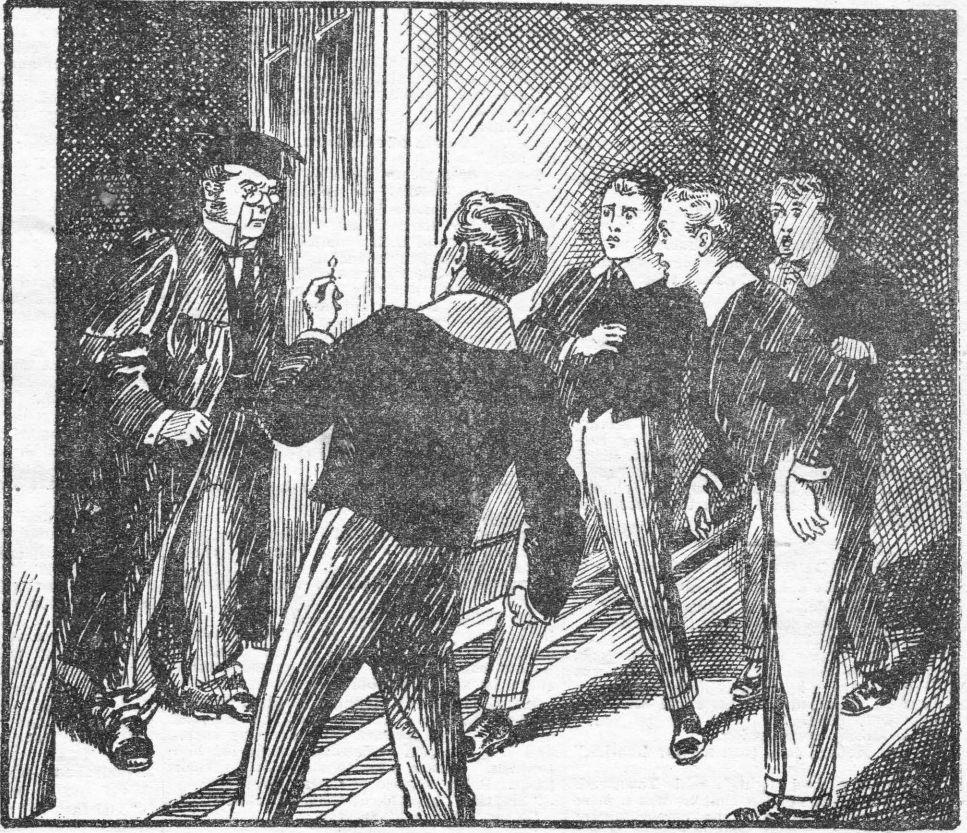
"Well, it's early or not at all, so far as I'm concerned," said Peele. "And I'm keen on the play."

"Oh, all right!"

Jimmy Silver proceeded to call together the other members of the caste of "Nice Boys at School." A box-room had been selected for the rehearsal—quiet and secluded, and not liable to interruption. Rehearsals in the Common-room were subject to interruptions from the merry Moderns.

The Fistical Four and Peele and Oswald and Conroy were all there, and Tubby Muffin joined them. Tubby had been offered a small part, which he refused with a fat sniff, but on second thoughts he had taken it.

Considering that they were only a junior club, the Rookwood players had quite a large stock of effects. There were quite a number of beards and moustaches, and wigs



Scra-a-atch! The match spluttered alight. Peele, struck by a sudden inspiration, stepped forward in the dim light. "Boys!" he exclaimed in his high-pitched tones, in imitation of Mr. Bootles. "Boys, what does this mean?"

than hurt the kind feelings of the little gentleman.

Amateur theatricals filled the long evenings very pleasantly, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were very keen about their play, though Lovell and Raby and Newcome agreed that Jimmy was an ass to assign the "fat" part to Peele. Lovell and Raby and Newcome were quite sure that each one of them could play it better, though they had their doubts about one another. Oswald, too, felt quite equal to the part, and so did Conroy and Tubby Muffin, and even Rawson. But Jimmy Silver's word was law.

Peele joined the Fistical Four in the hall, in a clouded mood.

"What about the rehearsal this evening? Is it coming off?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!" said Jimmy Silver, with a stare. "Rehearsals every evening now. We've got to get into order, you know."

"That's all right," said Peele. "Suppose we have it early? I—I've got some extra French to do with Mossoo after tea."

"Well, I don't mind," said Jimmy. "What do you chaps say?"

"All serene!"

and spectacles, and coats and trousers, and other articles in the property-box. It was a dress rehearsal, and the juniors proceeded to make themselves up.

Peele's part was certainly the piece de resistance.

Clad in man's clothes, padded out to a suitable size, with elevators in his boots, he looked as big as Mr. Bootles. With his face made up, and artistic wrinkles added, and grey whiskers, and glasses perched on his nose, he looked wonderfully like the Fourth Form-master, and with an old mortar-board belonging to Mr. Bootles himself, the resemblance was complete.

Jimmy Silver chuckled as he watched him. "It's jolly good, Peele!" he said. "Blest if I shouldn't almost take you for Bootles!"

"Yes, I must say it's rather good," Lovell had to admit. "Not exactly as I should do it, but good."

A remark which caused Peele to sniff. "Nice Boys at School!" was in full process of rehearsal, when steps were heard outside, and a whispering voice:

"This is where the fatheads are!"

Jimmy Silver jumped.

"Modern cads!" he muttered.

It was a Modern raid. Tommy Dodd & Co. had evidently "nosed out" the secret retreat of the Classical players, and were on the warpath.

"The rotters!" said Lovell. "If there's a rag here the props will be mucked up."

Jimmy Silver turned out the gas.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "We don't want a scrap now; we're in costume. Don't breathe!"

The Classical juniors remained quiet. The footsteps were still audible in the passage without, and the door suddenly opened.

"Not here!" came the voice of Tommy Cook. "There's no light here!"

"Faith! There was a light under the door a few moments ago, Tommy!"

"They've turned it out!" said Tommy Dodd. "Somebody's here, anyway. Strike a match!"

Scra-a-at!

The match spluttered alight. The Moderns crowded into the doorway, and peered forward into the box-room. Peele, struck by a sudden inspiration, stepped forward into the dim light.

"Boys!" he exclaimed, in his high-pitched tones, in imitation of Mr. Bootles. "Boys, what does this mean? What—what!"

"Faith, it's Bootles!"

"Cave!"

The match went out instantly. There was a sound of gasping breath, and scurrying feet in the passage, and then silence. The Moderns were gone.

Tommy Dodd & Co. had vanished with remarkable suddenness.

Jimmy Silver burst into a chuckle.

"My hat! Peele, old man, that was a corking good idea! My aunt! They took you for Bootles! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Peele grinned.

"Better shove a trunk against that door, as there's no key," he remarked. "They might come back!"

"Good egg!"

A big trunk was backed against the door, but the Moderns did not come back. Having discovered their Form-master, as they supposed, in a box-room, they were not likely to venture there again intent on a "rag." And the rehearsal of "Nice Boys at School" went through without a hitch to a successful conclusion.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Peele's Little Game.

"WHY don't you change, Peele?" Townsend asked the question.

The rehearsal being over, Jimmy Silver & Co. were gone, but Peele, in his disguise, lingered. He was seated on a trunk apparently in deep thought. Townsend remained with his chum after the others were gone.

Peele looked up, grinning.

"Those Modern cads took me for Bootles," he said.

"Yaas, in a bad light," said Townsend. Townsend was of opinion that he was a more suitable person to play the comic master in the comedy. "They wouldn't have if the gas had been full on."

"Well, that's so. But—but Joey Hook will!" snapped Peele. "I'm almost his image in this rig."

"He lends himself to it with his looks," remarked Townsend pleasantly. "Anybody could make up as Bootles with a chivvy and whiskers like his."

"Oh rats! I'm not braggin', you ass!"

"What are you doin', then?"

"I'm thinkin'. I've got to get out this evenin' to meet Hook, and it's risky!"

"Too jolly risky for me," said Townsend, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You're a fool if you go."

"I've got to!"

"All the prefects will be keepin' an eye on you for days," said Townsend. "If you're seen out in the quad after dark, you'll be ordered back into the House."

"I know. But suppose I go like this?"

Townsend jumped.

"Like that!" he gasped.

"Why not?" said Peele argumentatively. "Old Bootles has gone out this evening. He went out soon after lessons. It's his evening for whist in Coombe, you know. So he couldn't see me. Any chap who saw me would simply think I was Bootles."

"Not in a good light," said Townsend obstinately.

"Well, I'll keep out of a good light."

"Well, you might risk it," said Townsend.

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"Blest if I should like to go out of doors in that rig, though!"

"It's after dark," said Peele. "I don't see there's much risk—less than going in the ordinary way, too."

"Well, that's so. But—but Joey Hook will take you for Bootles if he sees you, and he'll clear off."

"That would be all right. He'd know then that it would be impossible for me to get out, if he thought Bootles was on the watch. What I'm afraid of is the beast thinkin' I'm leavin' him hangin' up and gettin' ratty."

Townsend burst into a sudden chuckle.

"Oh, my hat! Peele"—his voice sunk to an excited whisper—"Peele, old chap, if he takes you for Bootles—"

"Well," said Peele, "what are you cackling at? Suppose he does?"

"Don't you see?" whispered Townsend excitedly. "If he takes you for Bootles, you could keep up that you are Bootles—"

"Wha-a-at!"

"And make a bet with him as Bootles, and—and tell him to come up to Rookwood!" gasped Townsend. "It would make old Bootles' hair simply curl, and perhaps get him into a row with the Head."

"By gad!" ejaculated Peele.

"You owe him one for gatin' you," grinned Townsend, "and I owe him one for lickin' me, when I called Rawson a workhouse rotter. We both owe him one. You can pay off both."

"Peele's eyes gleamed behind the spectacles. "What a wheeze!" he ejaculated.

"Now I come to look at it, he's sure to take you for Bootles," said Townsend. "The Modern cads did with a match alight. Well, Hook will see you in the dark—there's only a moon, and there's trees over the stile, you know. I don't see why he should have the least doubt. Bootles supposed to be on the prowl there will be your excuse for not comin', and at the same time—"

Peele chuckled.

"Blest if I don't try it!" he said.

"Just walk out of the House, and see if the fellows don't take you for Bootles," said Townsend. "That'll be a test."

"Good! You go and sneak one of Bootles' coats for me—that giddy ulster with the big check that can be seen a mile away on a dark night," said Peele. "He went out in a mac, so it's in his room."

"Right-ho!"

Townsend hurried out of the box-room, and returned in a few minutes with the check ulster. Peele slipped it on, still keeping on the mortar-board. Then he went down the stairs.

His heart was beating a little faster. But he had to pass through the junior quarters first, and detection there would mean no serious consequences. If he passed muster there, he had no doubts about going farther.

He made his way through the Shell passage towards the big staircase. Adolphus Smythe and Tracy and Howard were chatting there, and they stepped respectfully aside for him to pass. There was no suspicion in their looks. Peele stopped to speak to them.

"Smythe!" he said, in a high-pitched voice. "Yaas, sir?" said Smythe.

"Have you been smoking?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"What about that packet of gold-tipped, scented cigarettes you had in your study this afternoon, Smythe?"

Adolphus started. He had supposed that that packet of gold-tipped, scented cigarettes was known only to himself and his nutty friends.

"Oh, sir, I—I—" he stammered.

Peele chuckled and spoke in his natural voice.

"All serene, Smythe. I'm not Bootles!"

"By gad!" gasped Smythe.

"Peele!" exclaimed Tracy.

"Yes, rather! Bootles is out. I'm goin' to meet Joey. I think I shall pass now," said Peele, grinning. "Ta, ta!"

He walked on with Mr. Bootles' solemn walk. He left the Nuts of the Shell staring blankly.

"By gad!" said Adolphus. "What a nerve! Blest if I didn't think it was Bootles, and he'd bowled me out! Gave me quite a shock, by gad!"

Peele went down the big staircase and hurried into the quad. He did not wish to linger in a clear light. Outside, in the dusk, Bulkeley of the Sixth passed him, and saluted him unsuspectingly.

Peele hurried to the gates. He had intended to clamber over the wall, but his confidence in his disguise was complete now. The gates had been locked since the real Mr. Bootles had gone out, and Peele called

the porter. Old Mack blinked at him. He had seen Mr. Bootles go out a couple of hours ago, but he had not seen him come in again.

"Kindly unlock the gates, Mack!" squeaked Peele. "I have mislaid my key to the side-gate."

"Yessir!" said Mack.

He brought out his keys and unlocked the gates, and Peele passed into the road. The gates clanged shut after him.

Peele burst into a chuckle. After running the gauntlet in that way, he had no doubt whatever of passing off as Mr. Bootles to Joey Hook. And he walked cheerily down the lane to the stile.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Turf Transaction!

"MY hey!"

Joey Hook was leaning on the stile. He was smoking a big black cigar, the fiery end of which glowed through the gloom. He was waiting for Peele of the Fourth, and growing impatient and bad-tempered. Peele owed him a little bill of money lost on gee-gees, and Mr. Hook was anxious for a settlement.

He was inwardly resolving to make matters warm for Master Peele if he did not turn up soon, when he spotted a gentleman in an ulster and a mortar-board bearing down upon him.

Mr. Hook had seen the master of the Fourth Form at Rookwood many times, and he knew the little, portly figure, the gleaming spectacles, the little jerks of the head, and the check ulster.

He murmured "My hey!" and went on smoking his cigar. Joey Hook's connection with the sporting fellows at Rookwood, was, of course, a dead secret from the authorities, but it looked to Mr. Hook as if something had come out now, and the Form-master was coming to interview him—probably to threaten him. Mr. Hook's unprepossessing face set doggedly at the idea.

The ugwomer halted, and peered over his spectacles at the scowling bookmaker in Mr. Bootles' well-known manner.

"Ah, you are Mr. Hook! What—what!" he asked.

"S'pose I am?" said Mr. Hook surlily. "I have come to see you."

"Which I didn't know I'd asked you to, Mr. Bootles!"

"Pray do not misunderstand me, Mr. Hook. My visit is not of an unfriendly nature."

"Wot!" said Mr. Hook, in surprise. "I have reason to believe that a boy in my Form had an appointment here, and he is forbidden to leave school bounds."

"Ho!" said Mr. Hook, surprised to receive that information from the master of the Fourth. He had fully expected a "slanging."

"I took this opportunity of seeing you, Mr. Hook. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance—what—what?"

"My hey!" said Joey Hook.

"The fact is," went on the supposed Form-master, sinking his voice, "I have a fancy for a certain horse in the Scrumper's Plate to-morrow. I understand that you are a bookmaker—what—what?"

"Yes, sir!" said Joey Hook, astounded, but all civility now.

In an underhand way he had done business with Rookwood fellows of a sporty and shady character, but he had never dreamed of doing business with a Rookwood master. Naturally, the prospect delighted him. Mr. Bootles would probably be worth pounds where his youthful dupes were worth shillings; and with a Form-master on his books, his dealing with Smythe & Co. would be on a much more secure footing.

"You are open to take bets?"

"This ain't a place within the meanin' of the Act, sir," said Joey Hook, with a grin. "But bless yer 'eart, sir, I'm always ready to do business with a real good sportsman! What's your fancy for the Scrumper's Plate?"

"I really am not very well acquainted with racing matters," said the little gentleman. "But a friend has given me a tip—a very valuable tip, he said. Why should I not make a little money? What—what?"

"No reason at all, sir," said Joey Hook, "and very pleased and honoured, sir, to 'elp you in any way. Which I take this werry kindly, sir, and I'm intirely at your service."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Hook—very kind! I understand that there is a horse

called Wood-Pigeon running in the Scrumper's Plate?"

Joey Hook suppressed a grin. Mr. Bootles was quite correct; but Joey was well aware that Wood-Pigeon was a rank outsider, and without the slightest chance of getting anywhere near the winning-post. He was willing to take Mr. Bootles' money up to any figure on Wood-Pigeon.

"Yes, sir, and a fine 'oss 'e is!" said Mr. Hook mendaciously. "Is that your fancy, sir? I see you know somethin'!"

"Really, I know very little of the matter; but I have received a tip from a racing friend. I desire to lay a bet on Wood-Pigeon."

"I'm your man, sir, though you'll rook me—I've no doubt about that. But Joey Hook never refused a sporting offer."

"What are the odds against Wood-Pigeon?"

Mr. Hook was well aware that the odds were seven to one against, but he replied with perfect composure:

"Three to one agin, sir."

"Dear me! I understood that the odds were larger."

"It's leaked out that 'e's a dark 'orse, sir," explained Joey Hook.

"What—what! Oh, I see! Very well. Are you prepared to take me at that figure?"

"Up to hany amount, sir."

"Ahem! My means do not allow me to make large bets!" said the little gentleman. "I desire to lay ten pounds!"

Joey Hook's eyes glistened. Ten pounds did not often come his way so easily as that.

"I'll take you, sir. 'And me the money, sir, and I'll book the bet!"

"Ah! Is it necessary for me to put the money down? I did not think of that. I have very little to do with racing matters."

"Bless yer 'eart, sir, I'll trust a gen'lman like you, Mr. Bootles!" said Joey Hook. "I'll make a note of the bet, and that'll be all right. If Wood-Pigeon loses you pay me ten quid, if e wins I 'and you thirty."

"Done!"

"I'll see you agin to-morrow arter the race," said Joey Hook. "Where shall I see you?"

"Oh, come up to the school! Come up as early as you can after the race. I shall be anxious to know the result."

Joey Hook started.

"Up to the school, sir?"

"Yes, yes; ask for me—Mr. Bootles."

"But—but—"

"Ah!" Perhaps you will be too busy to-morrow; is that it?"

"Nunno, sir; but—but it won't do you no good for me to come a-visiting you at the school, will it, sir?"

"Ah! Ahem! But I shall explain the matter. Let me see, I shall explain that you have called to assure me that you have no connection whatever with any Rookwood boys."

Joey Hook chuckled. He had never suspected the master of the Fourth, who looked so simple and innocent, of being so ingenious a rascal.

"That's good, sir—that's prime!" he said. "He he, he! I'll come, sir, with pleasure. Wot time would suit you?"

"Shall we say five? Lessons would be over by then?"

"Rely on me, sir!"

"Thank you so much! And—and you will bring the money with you, the thirty pounds, if Wood-Pigeon wins. I am sure he will win!"

"Depend on it, sir!"

"Thank you! Good-night! I must hurry back!"

"Good-night to you, Mr. Bootles!"

The little gentleman hurried back towards the school, and Joey Hook blew out a cloud of smoke and grinned. If, by a wonderful chance, Wood-Pigeon should pull off the race, Mr. Bootles had as much chance of seeing Joey Hook at Rookwood as of seeing the Pope of Rome there.

But Mr. Hook was not doubtful about that. He was booked to visit Mr. Bootles to-morrow to collect ten pounds. It was a very pleasant prospect for Mr. Hook.

It was a very pleasant prospect for Peele of the Fourth, too. Mr. Bootles would certainly have a very uncomfortable time; and Joey Hook, in all probability, would be kicked out of the school—a just punishment for worrying Peele for his little debts, in Peele's opinion.

So both parties were satisfied.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Surprising Visit.

"H OLD ON!" whispered Jimmy Silver. The Fistical Four were taking a sprint round the quadrangle before supper in their study. The sound of someone dropping in from the school wall caught Jimmy's keen ear. The chums halted.

"What is it?" asked Raby.

"Some giddy kipper been breaking bounds!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "One of the Giddy Goats, I expect. Collar him and bump him!"

"Hear, hear!"

The Fistical Four rushed to the wall. A dark figure had dropped in there, from the top of the wall, and was hurrying off. The four Classics closed round him.

"Not so fast!" said Jimmy Silver. "What—what—which, Mr. Bootles! I—I—I beg your pardon, sir!"

The figure had drawn back, panting with alarm. In the dusk the juniors recognised their Form-master, and they stood transfixed. For Mr. Bootles to enter the school by climbing over the wall like a truant fag was simply astounding.

"Jimmy Silver!" gasped the newcomer.

"Peele!" yelled Jimmy Silver, recognising the voice.

"Peele!" howled Lovell. "You've been out like that!"

"Let me pass!" panted Peele. "I want to get these things off before Bootles comes in!"

"Well, you silly ass, what have you been up to?"

"Only—only a lark!"

Peele hurried away, the Fistical Four allowing him to pass. He disappeared around the back of the house. Peele was uncertain whether Mr. Bootles had yet come in or not, so he did not venture to present himself at the gates. And he meant to get in by the box-room window, and leave his theatrical "clobber" there.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another in astonishment.

"The suffer's been out in his Bootle's 'rig," said Newcome. "What on earth's the little game?"

"Something fishy!" growled Jimmy Silver. The chums of the Fourth had little doubt about that, though they could not guess what was the "little game."

They resumed their sprint round the quadrangle very much puzzled.

When they came into the end study a little later they found Peele waiting for them there, in Etons, and with all traces of his disguise removed.

Peele gave them an anxious look.

"You needn't jaw about seein' me come in—" he began.

"We're not going to jaw about it!" said Jimmy Silver curtly. "But what rotten game have you been playing?"

"Nothing. I had to see somebody, and, as I was gated, I thought it safer to go out like that. That's all!"

And Peele quitted the study.

In the dormitory that night it was to be observed that Peele and Townsend were grinning at one another, seemingly enjoying a joke that was confined to their two selves.

"What's the giggle about?" Lovell asked them.

"Nothin'," said Townsend.

"Then what are you cackling like a pair of chattering monkeys for?"

"Just caught sight of your face, that's all!" said Peele cheerily. "It always has that effect upon me!"

And Lovell snorted, and dropped the subject.

The next morning the Nuts of the Fourth seemed still to be in a state of great hilarity. Topham was a sharer in the joke now, and Smythe & Co. of the Shell. But outside their circle nothing was said.

Never had the lessons seemed so long to the Nuts of Rookwood as they seemed that day. But everything comes to an end at last, and at last lessons were over.

Then the Nuts waited near the gate—waiting for Joey Hook. Jimmy Silver & Co. were punting a ball about near the gate, when a fat, red-faced man, with a bowler-hat cocked rakishly on his bullet head, came in. The chums of the Fourth forgot their footer in their astonishment at seeing Joey Hook within the walls of Rookwood.

"That bounder here?" ejaculated Lovell.

Old Mack ran out of his lodge.

"Here, stop, you!" he called out. "Whatever you want here?"

Joey Hook gave him a lofty glance.

"I've called to see Mr. Bootles, by appointment," he replied; "and jest you mind yer

manners, my man, or you can look for the sack!"

"My word!" murmured old Mack, quite overcome.

And Mr. Hook, with a strutting gait, walked on towards the School House.

Eyes were fixed on him from every side. The disreputable bookmaker was a well-known figure in the neighbourhood, and most of the Rookwood fellows knew him by sight. At the door of the School House Bulkeley of the Sixth met him.

"Here, hold on!" said Bulkeley. "What are you doing here?"

"Called to see Mr. Bootles, that's wot I'm doing here!" said Mr. Hook independently. "Gentleman's at 'ome, I suppose?"

"He's in his study."

"I'll take it kindly if you'll show me where the gentleman's study is, young 'opeful!" said Mr. Hook.

"I'll do that!" said Bulkeley.

The captain of the Sixth led the way in. Jimmy Silver stared at his chums, and gasped.

"Well, that beats the band!" he declared. "That awful blackguard calling on Bootles! Well, my hat!"

"Nice example to us!" chuckled Townsend. "I'm shocked at Bootles!"

"Shockin', by gad!" said Adolphus Smythe. "What's Rookwood coming to when masters do these things, dear boys?"

"There must be some mistake," said Jimmy Silver.

"He's gone in, anyway," said Lovell. "I can't catch on! I dare say it's pure cheek! Let's hang round in case Bootles wants him kicked out!"

"Good egg! Come on Smythe!"

"I wouldn't touch such a person, for anything, dear boys!" said Adolphus.

But the Fistical Four and a crowd of other fellows were quite keen to touch Mr. Hook, if they had half a chance, and they crowded round the door joyously, sincerely hoping that there was some kicking out to be done.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

An Astounding Interview.

"WHAT—what!" gasped Mr. Bootles. Bulkeley had tapped at the Form-master's door, and opened it. Mr. Hook stepped past him jauntily, and entered the room.

Mr. Bootles rose to his feet in blank astonishment. If the Kaiser Bill had stepped into his room, instead of a lesser rascal like Mr. Hook, it could hardly have astonished him more.

"What—what! Bless my soul! You are—er—Hook—I mean Hook? Your name is Hook, I believe! What—what!"

"That there's my name, sir," said Mr. Hook cheerfully. "I've called on business, sir."

"If you want that person shown out, Mr. Bootles, I am here," said Bulkeley.

"Bless my soul!"

"Which I've called to explain to Mr. Bootles that there ain't no grounds for supposin' that I got any dealings with his young gentlemen," said Mr. Hook, with dignity. "The gentleman's goin' to give me a 'carrin', and you needn't wait, you young spadger!"

"Oh, I—I see!" said Mr. Bootles. "I comprehend! Thank you, Bulkeley; you may leave the man here!"

"Very well, sir," said Bulkeley, and he retired and closed the door after him.

Mr. Bootles blinked nervously at Mr. Hook over his spectacles. He felt decidedly uneasy at being left alone with such a character.

"You have—er—called—" he began.

He broke off in sheer amazement as Joey Hook winked at him.

Mr. Bootles could scarcely believe his eyes.

This frowsy, beery-looking, rakish ruffian was winking at the master of the Fourth in his own study. Mr. Bootles gazed at him open-mouthed.

"What—what!" he said feebly.

"Rely on Joey 'ook to play the game," said Mr. Hook affably. "I remember what you told me, sir, and I've stuffed up that young spadger."

"What—what I told you?" stammered Mr. Bootles.

"Yes, sir; the tip you gave me last night, sir. A nod's as good as a wink to Joey 'ook."

"I must be dreaming," said Mr. Bootles to himself.

"I got some rather bad news for you, sir," said Joey Hook. "I'm sorry to say as Wood-Pigeon 'ave lost!"

"Wood-Pigeon!"

"Yes, sir."

"You—you have lost a wood-pigeon?" said Mr. Bootles, unable to understand. "You have come here to look for a pigeon, do you mean? You—you suspect that some Rookwood boy has destroyed your pigeon with a catapult, perhaps. In that case, I am bound to hear your complaint."

Joey Hook wondered whether the Form-master had been drinking.

"I ain't talkin' about no blinkin' pigeons!" said Joey.

"But—but you spoke of a pigeon—a wood-pigeon—lost, I think you said."

"I mean the 'oss."

"The—horse?"

"Yes, sutt'ly."

"The horse is lost! What horse? Your horse? I do not understand you, Mr. Hook," said the little gentleman, trying to pull himself together.

"I trust you have not come here with a misdirected sense of humour."

"Wot?" said Joey Hook, puzzled.

"You have stated that a horse is lost, and now you state that a horse is lost. In either case, how does the matter concern me?"

"Blest if I sorter ketches on!" said the puzzled Joey. "It's your 'orse that has lost."

"My horse!"

"Sutt'ly!"

"You are dreaming," said Mr. Bootles. "I do not possess a quadruped. It is many years since I was given to equestrian exercises."

"Wot!"

"If you have found a horse, and are under the impression that it belongs to me, I can only point out that it is a mistake. I do not possess a horse."

"What the 'oly smoke is 'e gettin' 'at?" said Mr. Hook. "Look 'ere, Mr. Bootles, there ain't nobody 'ere but our two selves. I come 'ere to tell you that your 'oss 'ave lost."

"I must request you to retire from the study. I repeat that I have no such animal in my possession. I can only conclude that you are not sober."

"Your 'orse, Wood-Pigeon!" howled the puzzled Mr. Hook. "He's lost! Have you forgotten? Wood-Pigeon is the 'orse!"

"Pray do not be so absurd, sir! How can a wood-pigeon be a horse?"

"The name of a 'orse!" roared Mr. Hook.

"Oh, I—see. Are you alluding to a race-horse?"

"Course I am. Your 'orse!"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Bootles. "Do you think I am connected with racing? I should be ashamed to have any connection with any such pastime. I have never possessed a race-horse, and I should decline to do so if one were offered to me as a gift."

"Orf 'is 'ead!" murmured Mr. Hook. "Fairly orf 'is bloomin' onion!"

"And now, sir, as you seem to have made a mistake, I beg you to retire from this study."

"Not without the ten quid!" said Joey Hook promptly.

"What—what!"

"You owes me ten quid, sir."

"Am I really dreaming?" said Mr. Bootles, addressing space. "This—this person states that I owe him money! I must be dreaming!"

"Oh, come orf it!" said Mr. Hook angrily.

He had been amazed at first, but he was growing suspicious now. It occurred to him that Mr. Bootles had already learned the result of the race, and intended to deny the whole transaction, and refuse to pay up. The bare idea made Mr. Hook tremble with wrath. He had done a good deal of welshing in his time, but it was not palatable to be welshed himself.

"I must request you to go!" said Mr. Bootles, with a mild wave of his hand to indicate that the interview was at an end.

"And as 'ow I requests you to pay up!" said Joey Hook. "You owes me ten quid. You'd 'av' took the thirty fast enough if the 'oss 'ad won."

"What—what!"

"Wood-Pigeon!" shrieked Mr. Hook. "I can only conclude that you are badly intoxicated. Unless you leave my study immediately, I shall have to call for assistance and have you ejected!"

Joey Hook's red, beery face became purple. "Ave me ejected!" he roared. "Oh, yer woud, woud yer! Without payin' me the money—wot!"

"I shall certainly pay you nothing, as I owe you nothing!" said Mr. Bootles with spirit. "I am astounded at your impudence!"

"So you want to deny making the bet—is that it?" shouted Joey Hook. "That's why you 'adn't no money with you yesterday—hey?—so you could crawl out of it if the 'orse didn't get 'ome! Welsher!"

"What—what!"

"I'm 'ere for the ten quids, wot I 'ave won fair and square, a-risikin' of my hown 'ard-earned money," said Mr. Hook. "An', wot's more, you spadger, I am a-go'in' without the spondulicks, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Are you mad?" shrieked Mr. Bootles. "Are you drunk, sir? Do you mean to accuse me, a master of Rookwood, of making a bet—of any concern whatever with so rascally a transaction as a bet?"

"Oh, come orf it!" said Joey Hook. "That won't do for me. You laid the bet fair and square—one again three on Wood-Pigeon for the Scrumper's Plate. I reckoned as 'ow you was a gentleman, and would pay up. I'm 'ere for the money, and I ain't a-go'in' without it."

"You must be mad! Dare you assert that I have laid a bet with you?" raved Mr. Bootles.

"You know jolly well you 'ave, you bloomin' fat little spadger!"

"Ruffian! Villain! Leave my study!"

"Not without the spondulicks!" said Joey firmly.

Mr. Bootles rose to his feet, almost trembling with wrath and indignation.

"Insulting rascal! Go! Go at once, or I will have you thrown from the door!"

Joey Hook jumped up, too, as enraged as Mr. Bootles. The Form-master backed away as a dirty paw was flourished in his face.

"Ave me thrown out, would yer, you welshin' old spadger!" yelled Mr. Hook. "Why, I'll make mincemeat of yer in about two jiffies!"

"Control yourself!" gasped Mr. Bootles, bounding round the table, as a murmur of voices was heard beneath his study window. Mr. Hook's furious voice rang across the quadrangle. "How dare you make a disturbance in my study! Go! I command you! Go!"

"Har yer goin' to dub up, or har yer not?"

"I will pay you nothing, as I owe you nothing!" said Mr. Bootles, banging his fist on his bell violently. "Go, before I have you thrown out, you vile scoundrel!"

"Then I'm goin' to take it kouter yer 'ide till yer do!" roared the enraged Mr. Hook, and he rushed at the Form-master.

"Help!" shrieked Mr. Bootles as he skipped round the table. "Help!"

At the first call from the alarmed Form-master Jimmy came scrambling headlong through the open window.

He rolled into the study, head first, with a bump; but the captain of the Fourth did not care for a bump. He was on his feet again in a twinkling, and rushing to the rescue. After him, scrambling wildly through the window, came the chums, and half the Classical Fourth after them.

Well was it for Mr. Bootles that his devoted Form were at hand.

Joey Hook was almost blind with rage—naturally, nothing infuriates a swindler so much as being swindled, and Mr. Hook was fully convinced that Mr. Bootles had swindled him. Almost stuttering with fury, the book-maker chased Mr. Bootles round the study table, and caught him.

Mr. Bootles was not built for contests of that sort. He had no chance whatever against Joey Hook.

He fairly collapsed in the grasp of the infuriated bookmaker, and it would have gone hard for him had not rescue been at hand.

But just as Joey Hook grasped the Form-master Jimmy Silver grasped Joey Hook.

He threw his arms round Hook's neck from behind, and dragged him downwards with the sudden attack. The boy and man crashed to the floor together.

"Rescue!" yelled Jimmy Silver. "Pile in, the Fourth!"

Jimmy and the furious rascal were rolling on the floor together, fighting furiously. But Lovell and Raby were in the study now, and they fairly jumped on Mr. Hook. Newcome was only a second later, and he piled in with both fists. Oswald and Conroy and Errol and Rawson came next, all struggling to get a hold on Mr. Hook. The unfortunate black-guard simply disappeared underneath the swarming juniors.

Mr. Bootles stood looking on, dazed, and palpitating, almost thinking that the whole thing was some dreadful dream.

Outside in the quad fellows were shouting. The study window was blocked with active juniors swarming to the rescue.

The door was thrown open, and Dr. Chisholm, the Head of Rookwood, strode in, and nearly trod on the struggling heap on the floor, and backed away just in time. The Head's face was like thunder.

"What does this mean?" he thundered. "Mr. Bootles, this scene in your study—this disgraceful scene—that man, sir, whom I saw enter—his voice, sir, can be heard all over the school. What does it mean, Mr. Bootles?"

"We've caught him, sir!" cried Silver.

Mr. Bootles gasped spasmodically.

"Dr. Chisholm, you cannot imagine that I asked that man to come here! He has forced himself into my study, insulted me most dreadfully, and attacked me—assaulted me, sir! I—I am astounded—stunned! I—I presume he is violently intoxicated! I shall send for the police for protection! I—I—I—"

Mr. Bootles' voice failed him, and he sank, palpitating, into a chair.

"Got him, sir!" said Jimmy Silver, looking up. He was seated on Mr. Hook's head, and the wretched Hook was gasping fearfully. "He insulted Mr. Bootles, sir, and we thought we ought to interfere!"

"Quite so—quite so, Silver! You have acted very well," said the Head. "This scene is unparalleled. The audacity of the man to come here! Bless my soul! He must be ejected at once, and I will communicate with the police!"

"Gerooooogh! Geruggg!" came from Joey Hook. "Yooooooop! You dirty little villains! Yooop!"

"What language!" gasped the Head. "Bulkeley, Neville, Jones, Dickinson"—the prefects came hurrying up—"do you—do you think you would be equal to removing this drunken ruffian from the premises?"

"Certainly, sir!" said Bulkeley cheerfully. "Quite easily, sir! You leave him to us all right! Clear out of the way, you kids!"

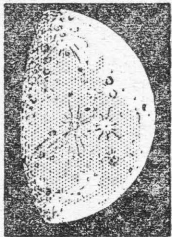
Somewhat reluctantly Jimmy Silver & Co. allowed the Sixth-Formers to deprive them of their prey. Mr. Hook, stuttering and gasping, completely winded, was bundled out of the study in the grasp of the big seniors, and yanked bodily out of the House. There were loud cheers as he was flung down the steps, whirled across the quadrangle, and pitched hard into the road.

In the Form-master's study Mr. Bootles turned to Jimmy Silver & Co. with tears of gratitude in his eyes.

"My dear boys," he said, "thank you—thank you! I am sorry to see your nose is swollen, Silver. I might have been seriously injured if you had not come to my rescue. My dear boys, I thank you!"

(Concluded on page 20.)

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THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

A Little Liveliness.

"RESCUE!" roared Jimmy Silver. Jimmy Silver's idea of hanging around in case there was any kicking-out to be done had been a happy thought.

PEELE'S IMPERSONATION!

(Continued from page 16.)

"Not at all, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "You can always depend on the Classical Fourth, sir!" And the heroes of the Fourth marched off, feeling very pleased with themselves, and leaving Mr. Bootles still palpitating.

The strange affair caused quite a sensation

at Rookwood. In Smythe's study the Classical Nuts yelled with laughter over it, till they howled themselves almost hoarse.

The other fellows were puzzled as to why Mr. Hook should have come. But Peele and his friends weren't puzzled—they knew. But after some reflection Jimmy Silver & Co. were no longer in the dark. From what they had heard the bookmaker say, they gathered that he had come under a mistaken impression—and they remembered Peele's expedition in disguise as Mr. Bootles—and they put two and two together correctly.

The result was that Peele and his friends did not find the affair so funny as they at

first supposed. For they were collared by the Fistical Four and taken to the end study, where judgment was passed on them. As it was not in the game to give them up to punishment, the Fisticals administered the punishment themselves—with the assistance of a cricket-stump—and then kicked Peele and his yelling chums out of the study and out of the Rookwood Players' Club at the same time. So the humorous Peele for quite a long time afterwards felt anything but humorous.

THE END.

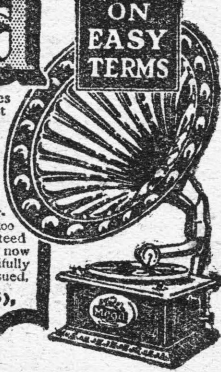
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