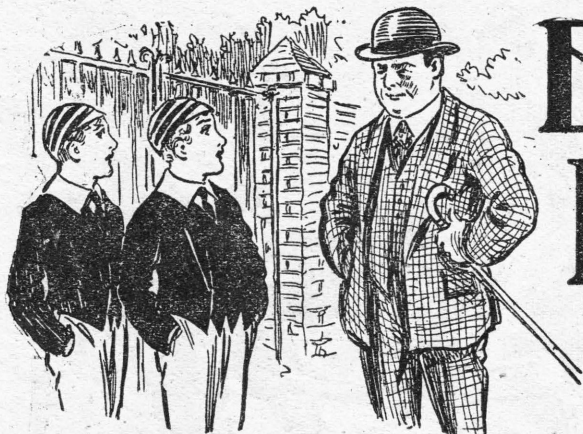


ANOTHER OF THE FAMOUS CO. IS SPIRITED AWAY FROM THE SCHOOL ALMOST UNDER JIMMY SILVER'S VERY NOSE! WHO IS THE MYSTERIOUS KIDNAPPER?



BY WHOSE HAND?

Another Great School Story
by

OWEN CONQUEST.

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Under the Shadow.

"SILVER!"

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

Jimmy Silver did not reply.

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

His usually sunny face was deeply overcast. His chum Newcome looked glum, too. The two juniors were giving no attention to lessons; they couldn't!

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

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

"Yes, sir?" he stammered.

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

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

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

"I—I can't help it, sir!" stammered Jimmy.

"I—I can't help thinking about—about—"
His voice faltered.

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

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

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

Gladly enough they quitted the Form-room, leaving the rest of the Classical Fourth to grind Latin.

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

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

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

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

Jimmy Silver nodded.

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

"Goodness knows!" muttered Newcome. The mystery of the juniors' disappearance oppressed the two chums like a weight upon their minds and their hearts.

They had had little sleep the previous night, since they had learned of George

THE POPULAR.—No. 194.

Raby's disappearance, following that of Arthur Edward Lovell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The stranger was a short, fat man, dressed in tweeds, with a bowler-hat and a big walking-stick.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good-morning!" he said pleasantly.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, this is Rookwood," answered Jimmy.

"Fine place!" said the stranger, with a glance of his shifty eyes over the green quad and the grey old buildings. "Very interesting, these old places, to a man from the city—very! And you young gentlemen are going to play cricket, I suppose?"

"The young gentlemen grinned.

"Next summer—certainly!" said Jimmy Silver. "Football happens to be on just now."

"Quite so—quite so! My mistake! Many a long day since I was at school," said the podgy gentleman. "I never was at Rookwood—never; hadn't the advantage of attending a public school myself. Great advantage that! Lucky young fellows—what! Once a Rookwooder, always a Rookwooder! Never quite lose sight of the old school—eh?"

Jimmy Silver nodded.

The two juniors remained where they were, as the podgy gentleman seemed disposed to be chatty, out of politeness.

"Lots of the Old Boys come down at times, I suppose? Old Boy matches, and all that—what?"

"Oh, yes!" said Jimmy.

"And you play the Old Boys at cricket—eh?"

"The seniors do," said Jimmy, with a smile. "Juniors don't figure in the Old Boys' matches. We're in the Fourth."

"I see—I see! Quite so! But you watch the games—eh? And cheer the boundary-hits, and all that?"

"Oh, yes!"

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

"Sometimes."

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

"Very likely."

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

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

"Baumann!" repeated Jimmy Silver.

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

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

"Never seen him!" said Jimmy.

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

"Perhaps you mightn't have heard the name, but might have seen him all the same," remarked the podgy gentleman. "Great friend of mine—very! Man like that to look at."

To the astonishment of the juniors, the podgy gentleman whipped a photograph from his pocket and held it up for them to see,

his shifty eyes watching their faces keenly the while.

They looked at the photograph. It was that of a man about thirty, with a somewhat heavy face and rather unprepossessing features.

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

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

"Sorry! No."
 "It's a pity—very. Never mind Good-morning to you, young gentlemen!"

The visitor slipped the photograph back into his pocket and started for the House with his quick, jerky walk.

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

Jimmy Silver's face was deeply thoughtful. "It's jolly queer," he said—"jolly queer! That man's after Baumann, who used to be here; and he's not a friend of his, either. Looks to me like a plain-clothes detective, Newcome. There was one came here about that affair of Bulkeley last term; and they all have the same look, I believe. He was pumping us, as plain as anything. He sprung that photo on us suddenly, to see in our faces whether we knew it."

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

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

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

**THE SECOND CHAPTER.
 The Veil of Mystery.**

"COME in!" Captain Lagden's voice called out cheerily as Jimmy Silver tapped at the door of the Oak Room.

The captain was stretched upon a sofa under the window, and he gave the juniors a friendly nod as they entered.

"Not at lessons?" he smiled.
 "Mr. Bootles has let us off for this morning, sir?" answered Jimmy Silver. "We're a bit worried."

"I understand. Sit down! Very kind of you to give me a look-in!"
 "We were going to speak to you in the quad, but—"

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

The juniors were sympathetic at once. They understood now why the captain had come indoors so suddenly.

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

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

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

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

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

The captain became very grave. "I heard this morning that Raby has gone away suddenly," he said. "It is very extraordinary!"

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

"Have his people heard?"
 "The Head's telephoned, but his people have heard nothing of him—same as Lovell's," said Newcome.

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

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

Newcome nodded assent. "That's rather a queer idea," said Captain Lagden thoughtfully. "What could have happened to Raby within the walls of the School House?"

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

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

"I wish you luck, my boy! Have you found anything out yet, then, to give you any idea—"

"That's what we wanted to tell you, sir. Last night we were making a sort of investigation. You remember poor Lovell, when he disappeared, had left the dormitory to come down here and play a trick on you," Jimmy coloured. "I'm sure you've forgiven him for that, sir."

"With all my heart!" said the captain. "It was simply a misunderstanding, but Lovell had taken a dislike to me. Never mind that."

"Well, he had a can of ink that he was going to—to play that trick with," said Jimmy. "We thought that getting about in the dark he might have spilt some, and we might find the traces. He came down by the little oak staircase that's hardly ever used. We traced it out, and found that he had spilt some of the ink, as we had supposed. He left inky marks here and there all the way to this room."

Captain Lagden started.

"To this room?"

"Yes. It's clear that he got as far as this door," said Jimmy. "There was a smear of ink, just perceptible, close to the door-handle, and Lovell must have got to the very door and taken hold of the handle. We'd found that much out last night, when, finding the door was locked, and not being able to make you hear, we thought you must be ill, and went down to call Mr. Bootles. Raby stayed outside your door, and when we came up you told us he had been gone some minutes. Well, he never came to the dormitory that night. He's never been seen since. After leaving you he simply vanished!"

"Extraordinary!"
 "We were going to tell you what we'd found out about Lovell, you see," went on Jimmy Silver. "It's extraordinary that he had reached the door of this room, and then disappeared; and it simply knocked us over when we found that Raby had done exactly the same thing. Is it possible, sir, that Lovell could have entered this room the night he came here?"

The captain looked very thoughtful. "I was asleep in the next room, I suppose," he remarked. "I certainly did not wake up and hear him. He could scarcely have entered without awakening me, I should think. I rather fancy he gave up the idea of playing such a trick, and went back. Then he appears to have left the house. I hear that a window was found open in the morning."

Jimmy Silver nodded slowly. "But Raby, sir?" he said. "He didn't leave the house—at least, it can't be found out that he did."

"But he must have gone, as he is no longer here!" said the captain, with a faint smile. "I am afraid it will turn out that there was some scheme between them for running away from school together—some romantic idea—and they will probably be found together in a few days."

Jimmy Silver shook his head. "They wouldn't run away, sir; and if they'd had any idea of that kind, they wouldn't have kept it secret from us," he said.

"But what is the explanation, then?" asked the captain. "Dr. Chisholm is of my opinion."

"I can't guess what has happened, sir, except that there's been foul play," said Jimmy. "But we sha'n't rest till we've found out everything."

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

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

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

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

"Certainly, sir!"
 The two juniors left the Oak Room, Captain Lagden taking up a book.

Their faces were clouded as they went downstairs.

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

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

He was coming away from the Sixth Form room.

"Is the Head there, Tupper?" asked Jimmy. Tupper's grin widened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He opened the door a little timidly.

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

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

"Well?" rapped Dr. Chisholm.

Jimmy delivered Captain Lagden's message in a plain, simple manner.

"Very well!"
 And Jimmy retired from the study, glad to go.

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

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

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

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.
 Wanted!**

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

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

THE POPULAR.—No. 194.

A SPLENDID STORY OF ROOKWOOD SCHOOL.
 By OWEN CONQUEST.

NEXT TUESDAY! **"THE PRISONERS OF ROOKWOOD!"**

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

"Sorry to be taking up your time like this—very!" said Mr. Brown cheerfully. "Duty, sir! If you can give me any information—"

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

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

"That is so."

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

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

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

"Certainly not!"

"No old friends here, fr'instance—"

"Most decidedly not."

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

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

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

The Head shuddered.

It was bitter enough to him to learn that a fellow who had once been at Rookwood School had had such a record in later life.

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

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

"Hardly a profitable transaction for the Army, I should think," said the Head dryly.

"Quite so!" assented Mr. Brown. "His military record was a bad one. His earliest exploit was to steal an officer's cheque-book, and pass false cheques upon tradespeople. He was at the Front when that was discovered, and he would have been dealt with in the usual way, but in an attack during the Somme fighting he was wounded. From that time it was not easy to trace him, but I have ascertained that he was sent home with a batch of wounded, put in hospital, and deserted from there. From that time he disappeared; and he is wanted for theft, forgery, and desertion. That is Mr. Baumann's record, sir."

"A disgraceful record," said the Head.

"Very!" assented Mr. Brown.

"Still, I do not quite see your object—" "I will explain, sir. Although Baumann has not been heard of since, his work has been heard of. I have mentioned that he was sentenced once for counterfeiting banknotes. Lately, sir, there has been a flood of counterfeit paper money—banknotes and currency notes—and experts have recognised the undoubted hand of Mr. Baumann. He is at work again. Where, is a mystery; but he is at work, and turning out hundreds of pounds in excellent forgeries, which pass muster almost everywhere."

"Shocking! But—" "I have twice had the pleasure of arresting Mr. Baumann," resumed the podgy gentleman. "I am looking forward to that pleasure a third time. In short, I am on the case, sir. That is why I am here."

Dr. Chisholm raised his eyebrows.

"Surely, Mr. Brown, you have no expectation whatever of finding that this unmitigated rascal has kept up his connection with his old school!" he exclaimed. "Really, sir, I—"

"Not at all; but in the absence of any clue, THE POPULAR.—No. 194.

a man must not neglect the slightest chances, sir. Baumann certainly was here in his schooldays, and he must have acquaintances among Rookwood men of his time. My object is to inquire whether you, sir, have heard anything of the man."

"Nothing whatever."

"Whether he has been seen in this neighbourhood—"

"I am certain that he has not."

"And whether you can give me the names of some Rookwood men of his time, who may possibly know something of his later movements."

"I fear that I can give you no assistance there, sir."

Mr. Brown coughed.

It was plain to see that the Head was shocked and annoyed by the whole story, and only wished to hear the last of Baumann, and to see the last of Mr. Brown himself at the earliest possible moment.

Mr. Brown could understand that perfectly, but he had no intention of gratifying the Head on that point. Business came first.

"Quite so, sir," said Mr. Brown. "But a singular circumstance is that the man has certainly been in this direction."

"Is it possible?"

"Banknotes and currency notes of the undoubted Baumann brand have been passed in certain places during the last week," said Mr. Brown calmly, "all at a distance from Rookwood. But—here is the singular circumstance—they have been traced in towns lying, as it were, in a circle round the school. The nearest is Lantham, to the west—ten or twelve miles away, I think."

"That is hardly sufficient to connect the rascal with Rookwood in any way."

"Quite so; but the notes have been traced in a town fifteen miles east—and, again, in distant towns north and south," said Mr. Brown.

"The inference is that the man is working from some centre, and goes as far as possible afield to pass the products of his secret press; a very natural proceeding—very! The singular circumstance is that, tracing his movements on the map by means of the discovered counterfeits, I find that the centre of his field of operations is Rookwood School."

"Bless my soul!"

"Not this building precisely, of course," said Mr. Brown, with an agreeable smile. "I mean, of course, this vicinity. Judging by the distribution of counterfeit notes within the past week, the rascal certainly has his headquarters within easy distance of this school—his old school, sir. That fact, taken in connection with the fact that he was formerly at Rookwood, has brought me here. He must be known by sight to several persons, at least, here, and he may have been seen."

"I have heard nothing of it," said the Head, looking very distressed. "If he dared to present himself here, I should, of course, immediately hand him over to the police."

"Naturally. But, under the circumstances, my work will naturally lie in this neighbourhood," said Mr. Brown. "I trust that you have no objection to my looking about here—that you will, in fact, allow me the freedom of the place?"

Dr. Chisholm pursed his lips.

"You will please yourself," he said. "It appears to me useless to look about you here; but you will do your duty. I am aware that you have the power to insist—"

"Oh, sir!" murmured Mr. Brown deprecatingly.

"In any case, I should certainly not place any impediment in your way. I will give instructions for you to come and go as you please."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

"I have left the Sixth Form to see to you."

"I will detain you no longer, sir," said Mr. Brown, rising, and taking his bowler-hat. "I am very much obliged to you—very!"

And the podgy gentleman cheerfully took his departure, leaving the Head biting his lip.

For, with all Mr. Brown's politeness, it was quite clear to the Head that he fully expected to pick up some clue to the man he was seeking near Rookwood School, if not in the school itself.

Dr. Chisholm was very thoughtful as he returned to the Form-room, and the Sixth Form of Rookwood had the pleasure that morning of discovering for themselves that their headmaster was in a "wax."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Brown is Busy.

"JIMMY, old chap, is there any news?" Tommy Dodd, of the Modern Fourth, asked that question when the juniors were released from lessons.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"What on earth do you make of it?" asked the Modern junior. "The fellows are saying that Lovell's run away from school, and that Raby's gone to join him."

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

"What do you think, then?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Hallo! There's that beggar Brown!" exclaimed Newcome suddenly. "He's still here."

The two chums had walked into Little Quad, feeling rather "down," and not in the humour for the company of the other fellows.

In Little Quad they sighted the podgy gentleman in tweeds, with his bowler hat pushed back on his bullet head, and his big walking-stick under his arm.

Mr. Brown was strolling round, his shifty little eyes very bright, apparently taking stock of his surroundings.

He smiled and nodded as he saw the juniors, and came towards them.

"Splendid old place, young gentlemen!" he said. "Quite a treat for me to be permitted to inspect such an historic place! I've been enjoying a little conversation with the school sergeant. Rare old character!"

"Oh, ripping!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Through the Boer War, and all that," said Mr. Brown. "Medals and things. Fine old specimen of the British soldier—what? And he remembers my old friend Baumann, who was here years before your time—long ago—very. Knew his photograph at once. Fine old character!"

"So you've been pumping the sergeant, as you were pumping me!" said Jimmy Silver deliberately.

Mr. Brown started.

"Pip-pip-pumping!" he stammered.

"Yes, I don't know whether it's struck you, Mr. Brown, that anybody could see a mile off that you are a detective," said Jimmy.

"Well, my word!" said Mr. Brown, evidently taken aback.

The two juniors walked on, grinning, Jimmy feeling that he had repaid Mr. Brown for his attempt at pumping.

The podgy gentleman blinked after them for a moment or two, and then hurried to overtake them.

"Very sharp of you, young gentleman—very!" said Mr. Brown amiably. "The fact of the matter is, it's not a secret, my young friend, and I never had any idea of concealing the fact that I belong to the police. As you are so sharp, you have no doubt guessed that I want to find Mr. Baumann for professional reasons."

"Naturally!"

"You don't happen to know anything that would be of use to me?" said Mr. Brown persuasively.

"I don't know that I should tell you if I did," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "It's not my business to act the informer. But I don't know anything about Baumann, and that's the fact. I don't believe he's ever been to Rookwood since he left, ten or fifteen years ago."

"Nobody here who remembers him, excepting the masters and the school sergeant," murmured Mr. Brown.

"Captain Lagden does," said Newcome. "Baumann shut him up in the abbey vaults once, when they were boys here together."

"Captain Lagden!" repeated the detective.

"A visitor to the school?"

"Old soldier, disabled," said Newcome. "He's come here as football coach. He lost his arm on the Somme."

"Poor gentleman!" said Mr. Brown. "Splendid man, though! Splendid! And he knew Master Baumann when he was here. Friend of his, perhaps?"

"No fear!" said Jimmy Silver, smiling. "They were study-mates, but not friends. Baumann was a bad lot, and Lagden is one of the best."

"Yes, he was a bad lot," said Mr. Brown, shaking his head. "I learn that he used to break bounds here at night and consort with low characters. A bad lot—very!"

Mr. Brown had evidently pumped Sergeant Kettle to some effect.

"And he used to get in and out of the

school in a very cunning way," went on Mr. Brown. "Nobody quite knew how he did it, and it was never found out, Mr. Kettle says. Very extraordinary—very! And he shut up a boy in the vaults, did he? What vaults?"

"They're under the old abbey, in the school grounds."

"I wonder whether you young gentlemen would care to show them to an interested stranger?" said Mr. Brown, with a smile. "I should take it as an act of kindness."

"Out of bounds for us."

"But I have your headmaster's leave to go where I like. With me—"

"Oh, all right!" said Jimmy Silver. He did not care whether he showed the stranger round or not; but time was hanging heavy on his hands, and he assented. "You'll want a lantern."

"I have a little pocket-lamp," smiled Mr. Brown.

"That will do, then. This way!"

Jimmy and Newcome led the way to the old abbey, their companion chatting all the time with inexhaustible cheerfulness.

"You'll have to ask the porter for the key," said Newcome. "The vaults are kept locked."

Mr. Brown stopped at Mack's lodge, and the porter, who had received his instructions from the Head, handed him the key without question, but with a very curious look.

A few minutes more, and the door of the abbey vaults was unlocked, and Mr. Brown entered, flash-lamp in hand, followed by the juniors.

Mr. Brown's curiosity and interest were unlimited.

He explored the long series of vaults most thoroughly, and it was time for the juniors to go in to dinner before he was finished.

They left him still in the vaults, and went back to the School House.

After dinner curious to see whether Mr. Brown was still exploring, they visited the abbey ruins; but the door at the bottom of the steps was locked.

"He's gone!" said Newcome.

The two juniors sauntered away, and near the gates old Mack called to them.

"Is the gentleman gone with that there key?" he demanded. "I've got the Head's orders to be careful with that there key."

"Hasn't he given it to you back?" asked Jimmy, in surprise.

"I ain't seen him."

"Well, the vaults are locked up," said Jimmy Silver. "He must have gone off with the key in his pocket."

"Careless hass!" said old Mack emphatically.

And, having delivered that opinion of the gentleman from Scotland Yard, old Mack retired, grunting, to his lodge.

Mr. Brown, apparently, had gone out, as he was not seen about Rookwood School that afternoon.

It was close on locking-up time when he tapped at the door of old Mack's lodge, and the porter opened it surlily.

Mr. Brown held out the key of the vaults, with an apologetic look.

"Walked off with it in my pocket," said Mr. Brown. "Careless of me—very! But here it is, Mr. Mack, and thanks to you!"

"Lucky as you 'aven't lost it!" said Mack, with a grunt. "I've 'ad trouble enough with that key, what with the young gents borrorin' of it without asking leave, to risk their blessed necks exploring the vaults, and so forth. And if a man asks for that key, he's bound to carry it off in his pocket and forget it, and make a man worrit. They can't ever remember to bring it back!"

Mack was crusty. But Mr. Brown only smiled in a genial way.

"They!" he repeated. "You don't mean that some other visitor borrowed your key, Mr. Mack, and forgot to bring it back? That would be a queer coincidence!"

"Well, it was so!" snapped Mack. "Twice it's 'appened, and I 'ope that nobody won't want that blessed key any more!"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Brown, his shifty eyes brighter than ever. "What a very curious coincidence, Mr. Mack! Very!"

Grunt!

"You don't remember the other man who borrowed the key, did you say?"

Mack stared.

"Course I didn't say anything of the kind!" he answered. "I s'pose I remember, when it only 'appened last week."

"I see. You lent it to a friend with a taste for exploration?"

Next Tuesday: "THE PRISONERS OF ROOKWOOD!"

THE POPULAR.—No. 194.

A SPLendid STORY OF ROOKWOOD SCHOOL.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

"I lent it to a gentleman what's staying 'ere," grunted Mack. "And a very nice gentleman, too, if you ask me. I ain't grumbling, am I?"

"Why, certainly not! The Head has several visitors staying here now, I believe?"

"Not that I knows on," answered Mack. "There ain't nobody but Captain Lagden that I'm awcer of."

"Oh, I see! A splendid man, sir, Captain Lagden!" said Mr. Brown. "Disabled in his country's service—an old Rookwooder, too! Very natural for him to borrow your key, and revisit some of his boyhood's haunts—very!"

"Well, I ain't much of a taste for slugs and spiders myself," said old Mack.

"And the captain forgot to return you the key, just as I did?" smiled Mr. Brown.

"Quite a coincidence. Shell-shock, perhaps; bad memory."

"Nothing of the sort. He jest forgot, same as you did. Now, if you're nect wanting anything else, sir, I'll just shut the gates."

"Quite so—quite so! Good-evening, Mr. Mack!"

Mr. Brown, with his stick under his arm, walked away in the gathering dusk, and the gates clanged behind him.

The shifty eyes were glittering.

His hand slid into his pocket, and felt the key there—a key that was an exact reproduction of the key he had "forgotten" to return to Mack before he went out, and which Mr. Brown had had made at a locksmith's that afternoon at Lantham.

It was for that purpose that he had "forgotten" to return the vault key, though old Mack was far from suspecting it.

"Curious!" murmured Mr. Brown, as he walked on in the dusk. "Odd—very! Used to know Baumann—study-mates. H'm! Forgot to return the key, just as I did. For the same reason, I wonder?"

Mr. Brown was deep in thought as he walked to his inn at Coombe.

And it was his intention the next day to make the acquaintance of Captain Lagden at Rookwood.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Jimmy Silver's Suggestion!

JIMMY SILVER and Newcome had gone into the Form-room with the rest of the Fourth that afternoon.

They did their best there; and Mr. Bookles, who understood their worried frame of mind, was very easy with them.

That day there had been telegraphing to and fro between Rookwood School and Raby's home, the missing junior's father being very anxious about his son, but unable to come to the school, being detained by important work.

But he could have done nothing if he had come.

The Head's belief was that Raby had left Rookwood to join Lovell, the two having planned the escapade between them; and the Head's feeling on the subject were of worry and anger.

There seemed no other explanation of the absence of the two juniors.

Jimmy Silver himself wondered whether it was possible that his chums had gone with that wild idea in their heads.

It was barely possible, yet it was inconceivable that they would have gone on such an escapade without letting him know.

He clung to his belief that there had been foul play; but when he tried to think out what it had been, and how, he was completely floored.

The chums were glad when lessons were over, and after tea they ventured to call upon Captain Lagden again in the Oak Room.

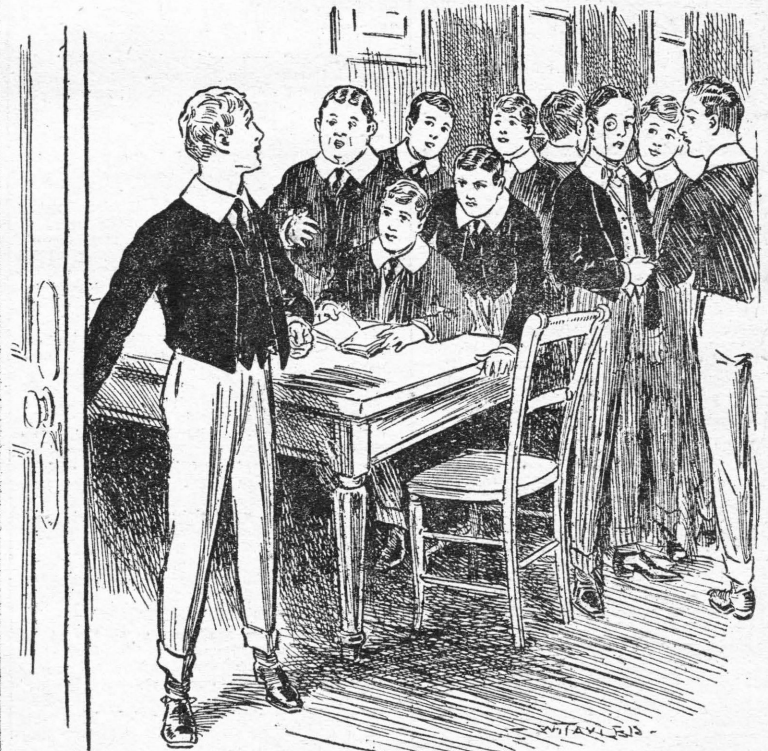
The captain seemed pleased to see the juniors.

"You—you haven't thought of—of anything yet, sir?" said Jimmy, who had been nourishing a vague hope that the captain might have "thought it out," as he had promised, with some result.

"I'm afraid not," said Captain Lagden.

"There's a detective chap hanging around Rookwood," said Jimmy. "I was wondering whether I could speak to him about it."

The captain's scarred face was very grave.



WHERE HAS NEWCOME GONE?—Jimmy Silver glanced over the crowd of fellows in the Common-room, but Arthur Newcome was not among them. "Any of you fellows seen Newcome?" he called out. "No! Haven't seen him for some time. He's not here!" said Mornington! (See Chapter 6.)

"I should advise not," he said. "You see, your headmaster is convinced that foul play is impossible—and I must say I agree with him. If he thought so for a moment he would, of course, call in the police. As he has not done so, you could scarcely do so on your own responsibility."

"No, I—I suppose not," said Jimmy reluctantly.

His face fell. He had felt encouraged at the idea of getting the opinion of a professional detective.

But evidently the captain was right. Dr. Chisholm certainly would have disapproved very strongly of the juniors taking measures he had not seen fit to take himself.

"I advised you before," went on the captain, "not to mention in the school your theory of foul play. It would make the Head very angry."

"We haven't spoken of it among the fellows, sir."

"That is right! It could do no good, and might do harm. We can work on that theory ourselves, without confiding it to others."

The two juniors nodded, feeling rather flattered at being put, in this way, on a footing of equality with the captain.

Captain Lagden asked a few careless questions regarding Mr. Brown, and the juniors told him all they knew of that gentleman, and rose to go.

Jimmy Silver's glance was wandering round the old, dark, oak-paneled walls of the room, and the captain noted it.

His eyes rested very sharply on Jimmy's face.

"What are you thinking of now, Silver?" he asked.

Jimmy coloured.

"Only—only a thought that came into my head," he said, stammering. "It—it's rot, of course."

"But what was it?" smiled the captain.

"Well, we know that Lovell got as far as this room that night," said Jimmy. "I—I was wondering if—"

"Well, if—"

"There's an old story that there's a secret passage in the School House running from the house to the abbey vaults," said Jimmy Silver his flush deepening, for he realised what a wild idea it was that had come into his head. "I—I was wondering—whether—if Lovell had foul play, it must have been somebody—some stranger—who collared him. How could he have got in?"

"The answer to that, I'm afraid, is that nobody got in," said the captain, smiling.

"Yes, but—but if somebody knew the secret passage—"

"Which is not even known to exist for certain?"

"Well, yes," Jimmy was crimson under the captain's amused smile. "But suppose it existed—suppose it was in this very room; and Lovell got as far as this, we know—"

Captain Lagden burst into a hearty laugh, and Jimmy broke off confused.

"I—I know it sounds rot," he confessed.

"My dear lad, you are letting worry prey on your mind," said the captain kindly. "But I will tell you what. Come up here this evening, and we will make a complete examination of the room together. Who knows but what those old oak panels may cover up some secret?" He smiled. "It will amuse me for the evening, at all events. Don't mention it to anyone, however, or I am afraid we shall be thought three—ahem!—to be plain—three silly asses!"

"You're very good, sir!" said Jimmy gratefully. "It's a shame to bother you and take up your time like this; but you're so kind to—"

"Not at all, my dear boy. Goodness knows I would do anything in my power!" said the captain. "Now I must get ready to dine with the Head, and after that I will come back here. If you come here, say, at nine o'clock—"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"But remember it's our little secret!" said Captain Lagden, laughing.

"Yes, of course, sir!"

Jimmy Silver and Newcome left the Oak Room.

Newcome grinned a little as they made their way to the end study in the Fourth.

"You are piling it on a bit, Jimmy," he said. "The captain looked as if he thought you were a bit barmy!"

"Well, I know the idea's rot," said Jimmy. "But—but, you see, there simply isn't—"

THE POPULAR.—No. 194.

anything to take hold of; and there's a millionth part of a chance—"

"It's jolly good of the captain to take it seriously," said Newcome. "He's a good-natured chap. Let's get our prep done early."

And the two juniors sat down to prep in the end study.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Mystery Deepens!

"FAG!"

Carthew of the Sixth was calling in a very unpleasant tone of voice.

Jimmy Silver and Arthur Newcome were about to turn into the corridor leading to the Oak Room when the prefect spotted them.

"Buck up!" whispered Jimmy.

The Fourth-Formers had no desire to fag for the bully of the Sixth just then.

But Carthew had seen them, and he called to Jimmy to stop.

"Silver! Stop at once! You heard me call, you young rascal!"

Carthew was striding after them, and the two juniors stopped.

"Look here, Carthew, we can't fag now!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver irritably. "You can find somebody else!"

Carthew gave him a scowl.

"I've found you!" he answered. "Somebody has been playing tricks in my study. You are guilty, likely as not!"

"I've not been there!" growled Jimmy.

"I've got something else to think of!"

"Well, my armchair's full of gum, and it's got to be cleaned!" said Carthew. "Cut along to my study, Silver!"

"Look here—"

"Are you going?" inquired Carthew pleasantly.

He had an ashplant under his arm, and he let it slide down into his hand.

Jimmy set his lips.

It was impossible to refuse to obey the prefect, especially when the prefect was within reach, and Jimmy made up his mind to the inevitable.

"Cut along, Newcome!" he whispered.

"Tell the captain I'm kept away, and I'll come on and join you as soon as I can."

"Right-ho!"

"What are you whispering about?" demanded Carthew, in his most bullying tone. "If you don't get a move on, Jimmy Silver, I'll help you along!"

"I'm coming!" growled Jimmy.

"You'd better!"

Jimmy Silver accompanied Carthew to his study, leaving Newcome to make his way alone to the Oak Room.

Carthew grinned as he shepherded in the reluctant junior, and turned on the light.

"Now wire in!" he said. "If you haven't got it done in a quarter of an hour, look out!"

"Br-r-r-r!" was Jimmy's reply, not very intelligible, but expressive of the state of his feelings.

He set to work on the gummy armchair, a piece of handiwork that was due to the misplaced humour of Flynn of the Fourth.

Carthew sat on the corner of the table watching him, with his ashplant ready in case it should be wanted.

But Jimmy worked hard at the cleaning process.

He was anxious to get it finished, and to join Newcome with the captain in the Oak Room.

The armchair was cleaned at last, and Jimmy Silver was warm and a little breathless, and considerably gummy himself.

"That's better!" said Carthew approvingly.

"You'll think twice before you gum my armchair again, my pippin! You can get out!"

Jimmy Silver got out gladly enough.

He hurried down the passage to the staircase, to go upstairs and join his chum, but he paused as he saw Captain Lagden, standing in the lower hall in conversation with Mr. Bootles.

Evidently the captain was not in his room.

Basil Lagden glanced up the staircase and gave the junior a pleasant nod.

"You did not pay me the visit in my quarters, my boy," he said.

"I was wanted by a prefect, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "Newcome came, though."

"Did he?" exclaimed the captain. "By gad, then he must be waiting for me there! Too bad!"

He made a slight movement, but Mr. Bootles had not finished his little chat yet.

THE END.

(Another grand Rookwood story next week!)

Mr. Bootles went on regardless, so to speak, and the captain had to hear him out.

Jimmy Silver, after waiting a moment or two, went up the stairs, and hurried to the Oak Room to find Newcome.

To his surprise the room was in darkness when he opened the door.

"You here, Newcome?" he called out.

There was no reply from the shadowed room.

It was unlikely that Newcome could be there in the dark, and Jimmy Silver turned away, supposing that his chum had got tired of waiting for the captain to come up.

As the captain might come up any minute now, however, he hurried to the end study, expecting to find Newcome there.

The end study was dark and empty, however, and Jimmy Silver went down to the Common-room.

He glanced over the crowd of fellows there, but Arthur Newcome was not among them.

"Any of you fellows seen Newcome?" he called out.

"He was with us in your study twenty minutes ago," said Mornington. "Haven't seen him since."

There was a squeak from Tubby Muffin.

"Newcome! I say, Silver, has Newcome bolted, too?"

Jimmy Silver gave a violent start.

The blood rushed to his heart, and his face became so white that two or three fellows stepped towards him in alarm.

For the first time it came into Jimmy Silver's mind that something had happened to Newcome.

The bare thought of it that his chum had gone the mysterious way of the others—that some unknown and unseen hand had clutched him from all who knew him—struck Jimmy like a blow.

Eroll caught his arm.

"Jimmy! Are you ill?" he exclaimed.

"What's the matter?"

Jimmy panted.

"Newcome! I—I left him when Carthew called me! I—I haven't seen him since! Where is he? Where's Newcome?"

"Good heavens!" muttered Mornington.

"You don't mean to say—"

"He must be somewhere about!" exclaimed Oswald. "Let's look for the chap! Buck up, Jimmy, old man!"

There was a rush of the juniors from the Common-room.

The Fourth Form studies were visited at once, and then the other junior studies.

Other rooms, passages, every recess and cranny, was searched for Arthur Newcome, but searched in vain.

Two or three fellows cut over to Mr. Manders' house, and came back to report that Newcome had not been seen on the Modern side that evening.

He was not there; he was not in the School House; he was not in the quad.

Where was he?

Jimmy Silver pressed his hands to his throbbing temples and groaned aloud. Where was Newcome? Where were his other chums? What horrible thing had happened to them?

A hand fell on his shoulder.

"Silver!"

It was Mr. Bootles.

Jimmy looked up with a haggard face, from which every vestige of colour had fled.

"Silver! What has happened? What is all this noise and excitement?"

"Newcome!" groaned Jimmy Silver. "He's gone—gone like the others! Newcome's disappeared, sir!"

"Bless my soul!" said the astounded Mr. Bootles. "Is—is it possible? You—you have looked for him—"

"We've searched everywhere, sir!" said Conroy.

Jimmy Silver choked back a sob.

"Come with me to the Head, Silver," said Mr. Bootles. "This is a matter for the police, I think. Come with me!"

Jimmy Silver followed him, dumb with misery.

The juniors were left in a buzz of amazement and alarm, some of the fellows still keeping up the search for the missing junior.

But search was vain. As Lovell had vanished, as Raby had vanished, so Arthur Newcome had vanished from the eyes of those that knew him.

By whose hand had this triple mystery been brought about?

THE END.

(Another grand Rookwood story next week!)

A SPLENDID STORY OF ROOKWOOD SCHOOL.

By OWEN CONQUEST.