

**CAPTAIN OR SLACKER?**

What is the matter with Valentine Mornington? That is the question for which the Rookwood Chums cannot find an answer. Morny is fast falling back into his old ways, in spite of his chum's desperate attempt to head him off disaster and the road to ruin!

**A MYSTERY AT ROOKWOOD!**

# Heading for Disaster!



A Splendid, Long, Complete Tale of Jimmy Silver & Co., the Chums of Rookwood School.

By Owen Conquest.

**THE FIRST CHAPTER**

**The Vials of Wrath.**

"H E'S got to resign!" Arthur Edward Lovell spoke hotly.

Jimmy Silver was silent, with a rather troubled wrinkle in his brow; but Raby and Newcome nodded a hearty assent.

The Fistical Four were discussing Mornington of the Fourth, the new junior captain of Rookwood; or, rather, three of them were discussing him, and Jimmy Silver was listening patiently.

"If he don't resign," went on Lovell angrily, "he's got to get the sack!"

"And the sooner the better!" remarked Raby. "We don't want him to play the fool with any more of our matches!"

"What do you think, Jimmy?" demanded Lovell.

Jimmy Silver's wrinkle deepened, but he did not answer.

"He left us in the lurch over the Bagshot match yesterday," continued Arthur Edward Lovell, with deep indignation. "Walked off without a word of explanation, and simply cut the match! Is that the right thing for a cricket captain to do?"

"Hardly!" said Raby.

"When he came in, and we tackled him, he told us to go and eat coke!" said Lovell, breathing hard. "That's all the explanation he's given! The Bagshot fellows were kept waiting, and finally we had to play without Morny, putting in another man at the last minute! And he's captain! I tell you Rookwood won't stand that sort of thing!"

"No fear!"

"Morny was elected skipper in your place, Jimmy; and now you've only got to raise your finger to get the captaincy back again," said Lovell.

No answer.

"Why don't you speak?" exclaimed the exasperated Lovell. "Don't you agree with what I'm saying, you dumb image?"

"To some extent," he admitted.

"Only to some extent!" snorted Lovell.

"Yes. I'm not putting up against Morny. The fellows made the change of their own accord—"

"If you're going to sulk—"

"I'm not sulking, ass! But you can't put in a skipper one day, and drop him the next. Morny's a bit uncertain, but all the fellows knew that before they elected him. They took him with their eyes open. I'm as waxy as you can be about the match yesterday; it was simply rotten to cut it as he did. But I'm not starting a campaign against Mornington. I told him I'd back him up, and I'm going to do it. If he's booted out of the captaincy, I decline to have a hand in it!"

"Rot!"

"Rot or not, that's how I look at it, and that's what I'm sticking to," said Jimmy Silver. "If I put up against him, it would look as if I'd been on the watch to catch him tripping—"

"What does it matter how it looks if it isn't so?"

"Well, it does matter. If the fellows aren't satisfied with Morny as captain, they can drop him and find somebody else; but I'm not the man. Leave me out!"

"Look here—" roared Lovell.

"Jimmy—" began Raby.

"Fathead!" said Newcome.

Jimmy Silver strolled out of the end study, as the easiest way of putting an end to the discussion.

"Obstinate ass!" growled Lovell. "He means that, you know. Blessed if I haven't a jolly good mind to put up for skipper myself!"

"Well, you wouldn't be much good as skipper, old chap," remarked Raby, with friendly candour.

"Better than Morny, ass, anyhow!"

"Well, Morny isn't much good, the way he's turning out; but he's a jolly good skipper when the spirit moves him. Of course, we can't stand what he did yesterday. That's the limit!"

"There's something queer about it," said Newcome thoughtfully.

Lovell snorted.

"Erroll backs Morny up through thick and thin, because he's his chum!" he growled.

"Well, he was mistaken, anyway; for I met Morny loafing about in Coombe Wood while the match was on," said Newcome. "He seemed upset about something; but he was only loafing around. It's a bit too thick for a cricket captain to go loafing round and forgetting matches!"

"Never heard of such a thing! But, unless Jimmy backs up against him, I don't know that the fellows will turn him out. I suppose they'll get fed-up in the long run. Jimmy ought to take the lead and down him."

"He ought. But—"

"But he won't!" said Raby.

"Obstinate ass!"

"Morny's got to explain to the committee," said Newcome. "But he will pull through if Jimmy Silver doesn't take a hand against him. It's all very well to be loyal, but Jimmy pushes that too far."

"Much too far, the ass!"

"Anyhow, I'll jolly well tell Morny what I think of him!" growled Lovell. "Let's go and see him."

"Right-ho!"

Lovell and Co. left the end study, and proceeded along the Fourth Form passage to No. 4.

Arthur Edward Lovell opened the door of No. 4 by the simple process of jamming his boot against it with a crash.

He was in rather a war-like mood.

The door flew open, and Lovell marched into the study. But Valentine Mornington was not there. His study-mate, Erroll, looked up from a book in surprise.

"Hallo! Are you understudying a cyclone?" he asked.

Lovell glared round the study.

"Where's Morny?"

"Downstairs, I think," answered Erroll.

"He had a paper he was going to put on the board."

"Oh!"

Lovell and Co. went downstairs, and they found Valentine Mornington standing before the notice-board in the hall. The three juniors glanced at the paper Morny had pinned up. It ran:

"BICYCLE FOR SALE.

Cost fifteen guineas. Ten pounds cash.

—Apply Study No. 4, Fourth Form."

"My hat!" ejaculated Lovell. "Selling your bike, Mornington?"

"Yaas, if I can find a purchaser," he answered. "Like to take it on?"

"I've got a bike. And I haven't got ten pounds," answered Lovell. "Bother your bike, anyway! I was looking for you, Mornington!"

"Well, here I am!" said the junior captain of Rookwood coolly.

"About your playing the goat yesterday," snorted Lovell.

"Yaas?"

"Is that what you call playing the game?" demanded Lovell.

"Not at all."

"Oh, you admit that!"

"Certainly!"

"Are you going to resign?"

"Oh, no!"

"You're sticking to the captaincy?"

"Yaas."

"Well, you'll be turned out!"

"My dear man, I'm not deaf!" said Mornington, with polite impertinence

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"No need to shout. All the county doesn't want to know."

"Why, you—you—"

"You can raise the matter in committee, if you like," said Mornington. "Let it rest at that, old top. Ta-ta!"

And Valentine Mornington strolled away, leaving Lovell in a state of almost speechless wrath.

**THE SECOND CHAPTER.**

**The Chance of a Lifetime.**

"I T'S risky!" said Adolphus Smythe. Smythe of the Shell was reclining gracefully in a luxurious armchair in his study, and he made that remark through a cloud of cigarette-smoke.

Howard and Tracy, his chums and study-mates, were smoking cigarettes, too. The Giddy Goats of Rookwood were feeling no end doggish. The door had been carefully locked, however, before the cigarettes were lighted. Doggish as the nuts of Rookwood were, there was a certain amount of fear and trembling associated with their doggishness.

"I don't deny that it's risky," continued Adolphus. "But it's no end sportin'."

"But what's the game?" asked Tracy. "Roulette!"

"Phew!"

"That swindling game they play at casinos on the Continent?" asked Howard. "That's it."

"My hat! It's risky enough. Why it's against the law in England!"

"This old country is rather slow," yawned Adolphus Smythe. "I had a vac. in Switzerland once with my people, when I was a fag. I remember seein' the punters goin' in a casino there—a game of the same kind. I'd have tried my luck, but I couldn't do it under the pater's eye. This is really the chance of a lifetime."

Howard and Tracy looked a little uneasy, and Adolphus smiled a superior smile as he noted it.

Adolphus Smythe was a great sportsman—in any sport that was not of a manly character. He had no love for cricket or football, or for rowing or swimming; but a considerable amount of his pocket money went in backing "gee-ges" strictly under the rose, of course. "I got the tip from Joey Hook," he went on. "I was seein' him about a horse. He told me about this man Tickey Tapp."

"Ye gods! What a name!" "I'd heard of him before," said Adolphus. "A chap at St. Jim's told me about him. He started his precious game near that school once, and got a lot of the fellows there. Made lots of money out of them, I've no doubt. Chap named Merry—you've heard of Tom Merry?—took some friends there, and smashed up his game."

"Like his cheek!" said Tracy.

"Oh, yes, rather! But he did it. But I dare say Tickey Tapp made more than he lost. Well, the long and short of it is that Tickey Tapp has pitched his giddy tent near Rookwood, and he's open to receive custom. He's got one of those bungalows on the moor—not a mile from Coombe, just off the edge of Coombe Wood, you know. Quite a solitary spot—and the bobbies won't tumble to his game in a month of Sundays."

"The police?"

"You see, it's against the law, and the police mop up such places when they get to hear of them. But Tickey Tapp is wide—very wide! He won't get mopped in a hurry."

"You've been there?" asked Tracy. "Not yet; but I'm goin'. I'm takin' you two fellows, if you'll come. Of course, it's risky, and it's got to be kept awfully dark. No good tellin' Peele, or Lattrey, or Gower. Can't trust such a secret with those Fourth Form kids. It's strictly among ourselves."

"But, I say—"

"Of course, the risk isn't really so great as long as we're careful," said Smythe. "And it's the chance of a lifetime. Just the same as goin' to Monte Carlo, you know."

"People don't generally bring any money away from Monte Carlo, I believe," remarked Howard.

"People don't generally have any sense or nerve," answered Adolphus sapiently.

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"I believe there's lots of money to be made at the game, if a fellow keeps his wits about him. As good as backin' horses, anyhow. You watch the run of the numbers, you know, and lay your money accordingly. I'm awfully keen to give it a trial."

"It's frightfully risky. It would mean bein' expelled from Rookwood, if the Head got to know."

"He won't get to know."

"Suppose the police raided the place while we were there?"

"They won't! But Hook tells me that there's a way out, if they did, and we should walk off safely enough."

There was silence in Smythe's study.

The thought of the roulette-wheel and the fortune that might be made upon it—perhaps, was a strong attraction to the three young rascals. But they could not help thinking of the risk.

"Any other Rookwood fellows go there?" asked Howard, at last.

"I asked Hook, and he said there were one or two," said Smythe. "He wouldn't give me their names, though. I've got a suspicion that some of the Sixth drop in there in the evenin'—fellows like Carthew and Frampton, I fancy. We're not to go in the evenin'. Tickey Tapp runs his games twice a day, afternoon and evenin'. We're booked for the afternoon."

"In case we see too much, I suppose?"

"Very likely."

There was another pause, Adolphus Smythe finished his cigarette.

"Of course, we shall have to be careful," he said. "We've got to be wary of the beaks. And Morny seems to have taken a leaf out of Jimmy Silver's book, now he's captain, and he's liable to interfere, if he knew. We won't go there in Etons. We can change our clobber, and nobody there will guess that we belong to Rookwood. It will be quite an adventure, by gad, you know."

"I—I suppose we might win something," murmured Tracy, with a greedy gleam in his eyes.

"I hope so."

"What time do we start?"

Adolphus Smythe looked at his big gold watch.

"Any time now," he said. "In fact, the sooner the better, now we've had tea. We shan't stay there long."

"I—I say, it might attract attention if we went out in other clobber."

Adolphus smiled his superior smile again.

"We don't," he said.

"But you were sayin'—"

"What's the matter with takin' our lounge clothes in a bag, and puttin' them on in the wood? We have to go through the wood to get to the bungalow."

"Oh, that's a good stunt!"

"You rely on me for stunts," said Smythe loftily. "I'm rather wide, I think. Now, are you fellows comin'?"

Howard and Tracy exchanged glances, and rose from their seats. There was no doubt that they were coming. The appeal of the green table was too strong to be resisted by Howard and Tracy.

Ten minutes later the nuts of the Shell strolled out of the School House, Smythe carrying a valise in his hand. Jimmy Silver and Co. were chatting on the steps, and they noted the valise.

"Hallo! Goin' off for the week-end?" asked Lovell.

Smythe smiled.

"Merely a little run to Monte Carlo," he answered.

"Eh?"

Smythe and Co. walked on, grinning, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell considerably mystified.

Valentine Mornington was heading for the gates, and he turned out into the road at the same time as the nuts of the Shell.

He glanced at them, but walked on, without speaking, towards Coombe.

"Walk a bit slowly," murmured Adolphus. "Let that cad get ahead. We don't want him to spot where we're goin'."

"What-ho!"

The Giddy Goats slacked down, and Mornington disappeared round a turning of the lane ahead.

He was out of sight when the nuts of the Shell came round the turning, much to their satisfaction.

There had been a time when Mornington

of the Fourth was a member of the select society of the Rookwood Goats; but that time was past, and especially since he had been elected junior captain, Morny had been heavily down on the "fast set" in the Lower School at Rookwood. He had been, as Adolphus complained, as much a beast as Jimmy Silver himself.

Smythe and Co. turned into the foot-path through the wood, and at a certain point left the path, and followed a scarcely-marked track that led through the wood towards the open heath.

The sight of a Rookwood cap ahead of them on the track startled them suddenly. They could only see the back of a head beneath the cap, but they knew that it was Mornington's.

"That cad 'again!' muttered Smythe. "He's goin' to the heath I suppose. Bother him!"

"Slow down!" said Tracy.

The Shell fellows slowed down once more, and Mornington's head disappeared among the underwood. They changed clothes in a thicket and went on. It was some time before they came out on the open heath, where it was bordered by Coombe Wood.

At a short distance lay the wooden bungalow, one of several that had been erected on the heath for summer visitors. There was no other building in sight of this one, however. Mr. Tapp had judiciously chosen a very solitary spot for carrying on his precious game. Smythe and Co. were heading for the bungalow, when they spotted a Rookwood junior on the heath. It was Mornington again.

Morny was pacing to and fro, with his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the ground. There was a deep wrinkle in his brow. He glanced up as Smythe and Co. stared at him, and gave a start. Then he strode quickly towards the nuts of the Shell.

"What are you doing here?"

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.**

**Nipped in the Bud.**

VALENTINE MORNINGTON rapped out the words sharply, with a glitter in his eyes.

Smythe and Co. stood silent, taken aback.

Morny's eyes scanned them.

The valise was still in Smythe's hand, but it was packed now with the Etons the juniors had worn when they quitted Rookwood. They were clad now in grey lounge clothes, and looked very different. And Morny was far too keen a fellow not to be aware that the change of clothes signified a good deal. Unless the Shell fellows were bound upon some extremely surreptitious expedition, they would certainly not have gone to the trouble of changing their clothes in the wood.

"What are you doing here?"

Mornington's tone was almost fierce.

Smythe pulled himself together, Tickey Tapp's bungalow was in sight, and he wondered uneasily whether the junior skipper guessed his destination. But he told himself that Morny could not possibly know anything about Tickey Tapp and his little game.

"Eh, what are you so jolly curious about, Morny?" yawned Smythe, affecting an ease he was far from feeling.

"Yes, what do you mean, you cheeky ass?" exclaimed Tracy. "I suppose we can take a stroll after lessons if we like?"

"I should think so," chimed in Howard. Morny's eyes gleamed at them.

"You've changed your clothes since I saw you leaving Rookwood," he said.

"Can't we change our clobber if we like?"

"What have you done it for?"

"No bizney of yours!" said Smythe. "Still, I don't mind tellin' you that we've put on some old clothes because we're goin' for a ramble on the heath, lookin' at the old quarries."

"Don't tell lies!"

"Wha-at?"

"Do you think you can take me in with a silly yarn like that?" snapped Mornington contemptuously.

Smythe flushed.

"Well, don't ask questions!" he said savagely. "Then you'll get no lies told to you, you cheeky, interferin' cad!" Morny raised his hand.

"You'll go back to Rookwood!" he said. "We jolly well shan't!" exclaimed Smythe hotly. "Who the merry dickens are you to give us orders?"

"I'm junior captain of Rookwood," said Mornington quietly. "I've dropped on you fellows before for playing the goat. Do you think I don't know why you're here?"

"No, you don't!"

"You're goin' to Heath Bungalow!" Smythe jumped.

"Wha-a-at do you know about Heath Bungalow, hang you?" he ejaculated.

"Well, I know somethin'," said Mornington grimly. "I know that your book-maker friend Joey Hook goes there, for one thing!"

"I don't know anythin' about it if he does!"

"You're goin' there to gamble!"

"I—I—"

"Oh, don't spin me any more yarns!" snapped Mornington. "I know as much about it as you could tell me!"

"And how do you know, hang you?" said Smythe between his teeth.

"Never mind that. Perhaps I've been keepin' my eyes open to prevent silly fools from playin' the goat and gettin' themselves sacked from the school. That's my bizny, as junior captain, you know. You're goin' back to Rookwood at once, all three of you!"

The nuts of Rookwood looked at Mornington as if they could eat him.

This was rather a "facer" at the beginning of their sportive expedition.

"You interferin' cad—" began Tracy.

"That's enough! Are you goin' back?"

"No!" howled Smythe.

"Then you'll be reported to the captain of the school!" said Mornington. "It's my duty to stop you, an' I'm goin' to do it. If you don't go back at once you'll be called upon to explain to Bulkeley—after I've told him all I know about that bungalow!"

Smythe and Co. stood rooted to the ground.

They exchanged glances, and then turned back towards the wood.

There was no help for it.

Mornington, if he knew the character of the place they were intending to visit, was certainly doing his duty as junior captain in keeping them away from it.

He was acting as Jimmy Silver would have acted in his place had he still been junior captain; and there was no possibility of resistance. The bare thought of being brought before Bulkeley of the Sixth for inquiry made the nuts feel cold all over.

With bitter looks and deep bitterness in their hearts, they turned back to the wood, and entered the trees. If they had any hope of dodging Mornington and re-visiting the spot, it was soon knocked on the head, for Mornington followed them to see them through the wood.

Smythe and Co. looked savagely back at him.

"The cad's watching us!" muttered Tracy.

"Another time!" murmured Smythe.

"Oh, I'll make that meddlin' cad pay for this somehow!"

"You can change your clobber here," said Mornington.

Without a word, but with black looks, Smythe and Co. changed back into their Etons.

Then they resumed their way.

Valentine Mornington followed them until they crossed the stile into Coombe Lane. Then he turned and went back into the wood, and disappeared.

With feelings almost too deep for words, Smythe & Co. tramped back to Rookwood School.

"How did the cad know?" muttered Smythe again and again. "How did he know anythin' about Tickey Tapp and his game? He never sees Joey Hook now, that I know of. Hook can't have told him."

"Well, he does know, an' he knows Rookwood fellows go there!" growled Tracy. "He's on the watch there for them, that's plain enough."

"Hang him!"

"We'll go another time, when that cad isn't spyin' round!" said Howard.

And the disconsolate nuts tramped into Rookwood. Lovell caught sight of them as they crossed the quadrangle.

"Hallo! You're soon back from Monte Carlo!" called out Arthur Edward.

"Oh, rats!" grunted Smythe.

Kit Erroll met them as they entered the schoolhouse. He stopped to speak.

"Been out of gates?" he asked.

"Yes," growled Smythe.

"Seen anything of Morny? He seems to have gone out."

"Hang Morny!"

With that polite reply, Smythe and Co. went on, leaving Erroll surprised.

Morny's chum walked down to the gates and looked into the road, and then strolled in the quadrangle with a thoughtful brow. It was not the first time, of late, that Valentine Mornington had gone out without a word to his best chum; and without a word of explanation when he returned. And Erroll's uneasiness for his chum was deep and increasing.

**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.**  
**Trouble for Morny.**

**J**IMMY SILVER had much food for thought during the next few days.

He gave a good deal of thought to Mornington; though he did not often speak to him.

The affair of the Bagshot match had blown over. The resentment of the Rookwood juniors had been deep; not only because he had treated the whole matter without a word of explanation, but because he had treated the whole matter with flippant disdain when taxed with his conduct. If Jimmy Silver had chosen to make the least effort, he could, without question, have recaptured the position he had lost. His chums urged him to do so; Arthur Edward Lovell being especially emphatic on the subject. And a good many fellows were of Lovell's opinion.

But Jimmy had marked out the course he intended to follow, and followed it.

The Lower School had chosen their captain, and Jimmy Silver had promised to support him. And Jimmy held to that.

Unless Mornington resigned, Jimmy had

no intention of accepting the captaincy, even if it were offered to him. He made it very plain that if there was another election he would not stand as candidate.

The Modern fellows were in favour of another election, in the hope that their leader, Tommy Dodd, would get in. For that very reason the Classics were opposed to it, unless Jimmy would stand; Jimmy Silver being the only Classical candidate who could hope to beat the Moderns and to beat Morny's supporters at the same time.

As Jimmy Silver distinctly refused to move in the matter, the subject dropped after a day or two.

Jimmy felt that he was acting rightly; that he was bound to give Mornington every chance of "making good."

But he was rather exercised in his mind on the subject.

There could be no doubt that the new junior skipper was losing his keenness. He did not turn up regularly for practice as of old, he did not take his former interest in the affairs of the Fourth Form, or of the Lower School generally. He had begun a campaign against the manners and customs of the Giddy Goats; but that had dropped, and Peele and Co., of the Fourth, went their own shady way without any interference from Morny.

The junior captain was, in fact, slacking down all round. Bulkeley of the Sixth, who had a fatherly eye to keep on the juniors and their affairs, more than once gave Mornington a very expressive look, when he came across him loafing in the quad or about the passages. But as yet Bulkeley had not seen fit to interfere.

It was pretty clear to all the juniors interested in the matter, that Mornington had some interest at heart that he did not communicate to the other fellows; that his thoughts were set on matters not connected with cricket or the school at all.

His frequent absences from the school after lessons and on half-holidays, and the



**ORDERED BACK BY THEIR SKIPPER!**—Mornington raised his hand. "You'll go back to Rookwood!" he said. "I'm junior captain, and I'm going to stop you fellows going to Heath Bungalow to play the giddy goat!" "We jolly well shan't go back!" cried Smythe, hotly. (See Chapter 3.)

secrecy that attended them, were a pretty plain proof of that.

And Jimmy could not help wondering whether the dandy of the Fourth was falling into his old ways again.

Jimmy Silver was not exactly friendly with Mornington; but he had a regard for him, since Mornny's reform; and he was very seriously sorry to think of him going on the shady path again, which could only lead him to trouble, and probably to disgrace and disaster. But Mornny was not the kind of fellow who could be advised or remonstrated with.

Moreover, if his own chum failed to influence him, it was not likely that Jimmy Silver would succeed in doing so.

So Jimmy held his peace; but he was troubled. With Mornny in this peculiar mood, Jimmy was worried about cricket prospects, and he could not help seeing that Mornny was not giving much thought to cricket, if any. On Saturday, there was a House match between Moderns and Classicals, and Jimmy wondered whether Mornny would even take the trouble to be present at it. He felt that this state of affairs could not last.

On Saturday morning, Mr. Bootles, the master of the Fourth, was very sharp with Mornnington in class. Mornny had omitted his prep the evening before—as he had done a good many times lately.

Mr. Bootles had no idea whatever of Mornny's preoccupations; his view was that junior schoolboys were at Rookwood to learn—rather a natural view for a Form-master to take. And that especial morning he gave Mornnington a very severe lecture on slackness and carelessness.

Mornnington listened with the eyes of all the class upon him, some of the Fourth Formers grinning. His cheeks were a little flushed, and there was a sullen expression on his handsome face.

"The report your uncle will receive at the end of term," Mr. Bootles wound up, "will be very unfavourable indeed, Mornnington, if you do not mend your ways."

"I don't care!"

"What!"

Mr. Bootles almost jumped as he heard that disrespectful reply. He came closer to the desk, his eyes gleaming over his spectacles.

The kind little gentleman was not often angry, but he was very angry now. Erroll gave his chum an anxious look; Mornny's eyes were fixed sullenly on his desk.

"Mornnington!" said Mr. Bootles, with ponderous indignation. "You inform me that you do not care what report of your conduct is given to Sir Rupert Staepoole at the end of the term."

"Well, I don't!"

"Is that dutiful, Mornnington?"

Grunt!

"Well, Mornnington, if you do not care, I am afraid you must be made to care," said Mr. Bootles sternly. "I have attempted to appeal to your better feelings. I have failed. Mornnington, you will be detained this afternoon, and you will do the work you have neglected under my supervision."

Mornnington gave a start. His manner changed at once.

"Oh, sir! I—I—"

"Enough!" said Mr. Bootles majestically. Valentine Mornnington sat in dismay. The juniors supposed that he was thinking of the afternoon's cricket match; but Jimmy Silver had his doubts on that point.

When the Fourth Form were dismissed that morning, the junior captain paused on his way out, and after a moment or two of hesitation, he approached Mr. Bootles' desk. His manner was very submissive now.

"Well, Mornnington?" said Mr. Bootles severely.

"I—I am sorry, sir, that I answered you as I did this morning."

"I am glad of that."

"If you would kindly let me off detention this afternoon, sir—"

"I am glad, Mornnington, that you have repented of your impertinence," said Mr. Bootles. "That, however, does not alter the fact that you have neglected your work, and that it must be done. I am afraid, Mornnington that I cannot excuse you."

"But, sir—"

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"That will do!" said Mr. Bootles, in a tone of finality.

And Valentine Mornnington, with a black brow, followed the rest of the juniors from the Form-room.

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.**

**Given a Chance.**

"AND that's our skipper!" Arthur Edward Lovell made that remark in contemptuous and rather loud tones in the corridor as Mornny came out.

Mornnington gave him a dark look. Lovell went on, unheeding:

"Detained now! And we're playing the Moderns this afternoon! Detained because he hasn't done his prep. Why hasn't he done his prep like any other fellow?"

"He was out till calling-over last evening!" said Tubby Muffin. "I say, Mornny, where did you go?"

"There was plenty of time after calling-over!" said Lovell. "Other fellows find time to do their prep. Why can't Mornny?"

"Mind your own business, Lovell!" snapped Mornnington savagely.

Lovell gave him a glare.

"This is my business, and every other fellow's!" he retorted. "If you're skipper you ought to be in the match this afternoon. If you're not in the match you oughtn't to be skipper. And if Jimmy Silver had the sense of a born idiot, he would boost you out of the job you're not fit for."

"Oh, cheese it, old chap!" said Jimmy Silver.

"You know you could do it!" roared Lovell. "Why don't you do it, then?"

"Bow-wow!"

"Not that it makes much difference whether Mornny's detained or not," continued Lovell hotly. "He might go out for a walk and forget the match, if he wasn't detained. That's his style as captain!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Mornnington.

"Perhaps you'd like to shut me up?" suggested Arthur Edward Lovell aggressively.

Mornnington clenched his hands.

Lovell followed his example, and there would certainly have been trouble if Jimmy Silver had not intervened, and dragged Lovell away almost by main force. Erroll slipped his arm through Mornny's, and led him into the quad.

"What are you chippin' in for?" growled Mornnington, though he allowed his chum to lead him away. "It would do that cheeky fool good to have his mouth shut up for him."

"No good fighting with Lovell, Mornny."

"Well, I suppose not; but I feel jolly well inclined to fight him, all the same. Confound his cheek!"

Erroll did not reply, and Mornnington jerked his arm away, and gave him a sullen look.

"You agree with him, I dare say?" he sneered.

"Well, you ought to have been careful Mornny, not to get detained when there's a match on."

"How could I help old Bootles getting his rag out?"

"By doing your prep yesterday," answered Erroll quietly.

"I had other things to think of."

"You can't expect Mr. Bootles to look at it like that."

"Oh, hang Bootles!" said Mornnington irritably.

"And what other things, after all, had you to think of?" exclaimed Erroll, speaking warmly for once. "You didn't come into the study at all last evening. I don't see how you could be so very busy mooching about the passages."

"I was thinkin'."

"Of what?"

"Lots of things," answered Mornnington sourly. "How to raise the wind was one thing. I'm hard up."

"But you've just sold your bike."

"That thief Leggett gave me only seven quid for it, and it's gone!"

Erroll compressed his lips.

"Better not let the fellows hear you say that you've spent seven pounds in one week, Mornny!" he said, in a low voice.

"And why not?" snapped Mornny. "They may begin to make surmises about what you've spent it on."

"That's my business!"

"It's not mine, I suppose," said Erroll, with a sigh. "I'm sorry to see you like this, Mornny. But about this afternoon? I dare say Mr. Bootles will let you off, if it's put to him that there's a match on. He doesn't know about that, and he's a kind-hearted man."

"I shall cut detention, anyhow!"

"You can't, and play cricket in sight of Mr. Bootles' window. You would be fetched in by a prefect. But I think Mr. Bootles will let you off if it's put to him. I'll speak to Jimmy Silver if you like, and we'll try."

Mornnington opened his lips to speak, but closed them again. There was rather a peculiar glimmer in his eyes as he looked at Erroll.

"You'd like us to try?" asked Erroll. Mornnington nodded.

"Then I'll speak to Jimmy."

And Erroll proceeded to look for Jimmy Silver, leaving Mornnington "mooching" under the beeches by himself in a sulky mood.

Erroll found the Fistical Fourth in the quad, three of them talking wrathfully on the subject of Mornny, Jimmy Silver silent and thoughtful. Kit Erroll explained his idea, and Jimmy nodded assent.

"I dare say Bootles will see reason," he assented. "We'll tackle him after dinner, and we may get Mornny off. We certainly want him in the match with Tommy Dodd's crowd."

And after dinner Jimmy and Erroll proceeded together to Mr. Bootles' study.

They found the Fourth Form master in a good temper, under the ameliorating influence of a good dinner. He gave them a gracious glance.

"If you please, sir—" began Jimmy. "You may proceed, Silver."

"It's about Mornny, sir—I mean Mornnington."

Mr. Bootles frowned.

"We're playing a cricket-match this afternoon, sir," said Erroll hastily. "Mornny is captaining our side against the Moderns."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Bootles drily.

"If you'd be kind enough to let him off detention, sir—"

"H'm!"

"Otherwise it may mean the loss of the match to us, sir," said Erroll meekly. "It means a lot to us, sir."

Mr. Bootles coughed.

"Mornnington has been very remiss lately," he said. "He seems, indeed, to be returning to his old ways, when he was the most troublesome boy in my Form. However, I do not wish his punishment to fall upon others. You may tell him that I give him another chance."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Erroll gratefully.

"You may tell him, Erroll, that he is excused from detention this afternoon, only on condition that he displays more industry next week," said Mr. Bootles.

"If he keeps on as before I shall find it necessary to use very severe measures."

"Yes, sir," faltered Erroll.

The two juniors left Mr. Bootles' study, and Erroll went at once in search of his chum. He found Mornnington under the beeches, with a sulky brow.

"It's all right, Mornny!" said Erroll cheerfully.

"I'm let off detention?"

"Yes."

"Oh, good! Many thanks."

"It's on condition that you buck up next week, and stick to your work a bit better, old chap."

Mornnington shrugged his shoulders.

"Next week can take care of itself," he said carelessly. "I'm off for this afternoon, so that's all right!"

"Stumps are pitched at half-past two," said Erroll, rather abruptly. "We may as well get along to the ground."

"No hurry! I'll see you later."

And Mornnington lounged away to the School House, and Erroll, with rather a grim look, was left alone.

**THE SIXTH CHAPTER.**  
**The Downward Path.**

**"SILVER!"**  
"Hallo, Morny!"  
Jimmy Silver had come out of the schoolhouse in flannels, with his bat under his arm. He was looking very cheerful, as he was feeling. Mr. Bootles had let Mornington off, so that matter was settled satisfactorily, and Jimmy hoped that he would put a little heart into the House match.  
Jimmy greeted Morny quite cordially.  
"Ready for the match, what?" said Mornington.  
"Quite ready!"  
"I'm goin' to ask you a favour."  
"Want me to make a century against the Moderns?" asked Jimmy Silver, with a smile.  
"Or are you going to ask for the hat trick?"  
"I want you to captain the side."  
Jimmy started.  
"What on earth for? You're playing!"  
"As it happens, I'm not!"  
Jimmy Silver's lips set.  
"Look here, Mornington, this won't do," he said quietly.  
"Erroll and I went to Mr. Bootles and begged you off—to play cricket. Bootles let you off on the understanding that you were playing."  
"I can't help that. I've got an engagement—"  
"You had the engagement, I suppose, before I went to Mr. Bootles?"  
"Well, yes."  
"Then you ought to have told me before I went to him!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver angrily.  
"You've put me into the position of spoofing him. He only let you off detention to play cricket!"  
Mornington shrugged his shoulders.  
"I wasn't askin' you for a sermon," he said.  
"The question is, will you take my place and captain the side? You can easily find another man."  
"I can do it easily enough, of course. I captained the side against Bagshot, as you were not there. But if I'm to captain the eleven, I don't see why you were so keen to shove yourself in as junior skipper."  
"There are lots of things you don't see," answered Mornington coolly.  
Jimmy drew a deep breath.  
"Look here, Morny, this is beginning to look a bit too fishy," he said.  
"I'm beginning to think that you're at your old games again!"  
"You're at liberty to think anything you please. It's a free country!"  
"If you are playing the goat again, and dropping into the Bird in Hand to play billiards with the sharpers there, when you ought to be playing cricket—"  
"I'm not!"  
"Well, I take your word, of course; but it looks fishy, and the sooner you stop it the better!"  
"Thanks! Now, to come back to the point, are you goin' to captain the side, or shall I ask Conroy?"  
Jimmy Silver paused.  
"Will you tell me what your engagement is?" he asked.  
"No."  
"It's one that won't bear the light, I'm afraid, Morny."  
"So kind of you to take an interest in my doin's," said Mornington, with a yawn.  
"Does it concern you in any way?"  
"It does! If you're really playing the giddy goat, like Smythe and Peele and that crowd, you're not fit to be junior captain of Rookwood, and you know it! And if I believed it, I'd take measures to put you out of the job fast enough!"  
"You think you could do it?" sneered Mornington.  
"I know I could."  
"Well, we're wanderin' from the point. Are you goin' to captain the side against the Moderns?"  
"No; not unless you explain candidly why you can't play this afternoon!"  
"Then I'll ask Conroy."  
Mornington turned on his heel and walked away. It was evident that he did not intend to offer any explanation.  
Jimmy Silver joined his chums, on their way to Little Side, with a frowning brow.  
"Wherefore that giddy scow?" asked Raby.  
"Not been rowing with Morny?"  
"No; but he's not playing this afternoon.

Conroy's going to captain us!" grunted Jimmy Silver.  
Arthur Edward Lovell gave a loud snort.  
"This is getting rich!" he said.  
"Is he ever going to play cricket again? Why can't he resign, and have done with it?"  
Conroy came on the ground with his chums—Pons and Van Ryn. All three of the Colonials were playing in the Classical team. Conroy had cheerfully taken on the captaincy for the occasion, but there was a buzz of surprise amongst the Classical cricketers when they knew. Kit Erroll looked dismayed.  
"Isn't Morny playing, then?" he exclaimed.  
"No—some important engagement, he told me," answered the Australian junior carelessly.  
"I'm putting in Rawson. We shall lick the Moderns all right."  
"Not in your lifetime!" grinned Tommy Dodd, as he came along with his merry men.  
"Hallo! Where are you off to, Erroll?" called out Conroy.  
Erroll glanced back.  
"I'm going to speak to Morny—I'll be back in a jiffy!"  
"Well, back up, then; we're going to start."  
Kit Erroll hurried off the cricket-field. He ran down to the gates, and spotted the dandy of the Fourth just starting towards Coombe.  
"Morny!" called out Erroll.  
Valentine Mornington looked round.  
His brow darkened at the sight of Erroll; and he quickened his pace.  
But the next moment he stopped, as his chum came running after him in the road.  
"Well, what is it?" asked Mornington curtly.  
"You ought to be on the cricket-ground!"  
"I know that; I'm afraid I'm keeping the fellows waiting—"  
"Well, don't keep them waiting any longer."  
"Where are you going, Morny?"  
"What does it matter?"  
"Won't you come back with me?" asked Erroll in a low, earnest voice.  
"Morny, old man, I'm not a fool—I've seen things, though I haven't told you so. I know what you're going to do; that list of numbers, I saw in the study was enough for me."  
"I didn't know you were so well up in roulette—a stodgy old fogey like you, Erroll!"  
"I've had some experiences you haven't had, Morny," answered Erroll quietly.  
"My past isn't quite the same as yours; and I've seen things I should have been the better for not seeing, Morny, old chap, you're playing the fool, and you know it. You're cricket captain, and your place is in the field with us. Come back!"  
"Too late; I've asked Conroy—"  
"I'll stand out and give you my place, then—"  
Mornington burst into a laugh.  
"Many thanks; but I've got an engagement. Hallo! There's Jimmy Silver looking for you."  
"Erroll!" shouted Jimmy Silver from the gates.  
"Conroy wants to know whether you're playing or not."  
"Yes, yes—"  
"Then come along, you ass!"  
"Cut along, old chap!" said Mornington.  
"I'll see you later. My dear chap, I've raised five quids, and it's burnin' a hole in my pocket. You shouldn't have chummed with me, old scout. I warned you, you know. Go and play cricket, while I—"  
He broke off abruptly.  
"Good-bye!"  
"Morny!" said Erroll miserably.  
Mornington strode on.  
Erroll stood looking after him for a moment or two, in doubt; then, as Jimmy Silver called to him again, he hurried to the cricket-ground with Jimmy Silver. His face was full of trouble—and Jimmy Silver's of anger.  
Mornington strode on, with a knitted brow.  
**THE END.**  
*(There will be another topping tale of Jimmy Silver & Co. of Rookwood School in next week's extra special issue, entitled "Saved from Himself!" and is one of the finest stories Owen Conquest has written.)*

**A WORD WITH YOUR EDITOR!**

**THREE HUNDRED POUNDS!**  
In case any reader of the "Popular" has had the rare bad luck to miss last week's copy of the famous Tuesday paper, I will draw attention again to the immensely attractive Cricket Competition. The really big sum of £300 is being given away in prizes to the clever forecasters who show their address in figuring out County form, etc. Read up the particulars, and then put on your best thinking cricket-caps. After that send in the result of your cogitations, along with all the necessary coupons. It is easy work altogether, and there are substantial sums to be won.

**"LORD FISH OF GREYFRIARS!"**  
This is a big surprise. You would never have thought that the cute fellow from the land of the Stars and Stripes would blossom out as a lord. Fisher Tarleton Fish, as we all know, is the fellow who has never been had! At least, he says this, and we have to take his word for it, especially as his lordship has clapped a noble handle to his name. One likes Fish. He is so delightfully cocksure and so brainy. Then he has ideas in generous profusion. Make sure of next week's "Popular," and read all about the business.

**"THE SHERIFF'S TRAP!"**  
Down Cedar Creek way those determined ruffians of the Flour Bag Gang are terrorising everybody. These rustlers are always ready for battle, but they are more eager still to drive off cattle which belong to other folks. Nothing is safe from their depredations. The sheriff is a capable officer of the law, and he sets things in motion, but his tactics would never have succeeded had it not been for the good service rendered by Frank Richards & Co. The yarn next week goes with a rush of excitement.

**"SAVED FROM HIMSELF!"**  
Rookwood supplies the third grand school yarn in next Tuesday's issue of the "Popular." It deals with the strange actions of Val Mornington, who appears to be heading for disaster. He carries on like a ship which has lost the steersman. I believe there are heaps of fellows who will understand and sympathise with Mornington in this unlucky phase of irresponsibility. It is the sort of thing which utterly misleads most onlookers, but in Mornington's special case the spell of odd behaviour does not deceive a staunch chum like Kit Erroll. Everything looks pitchy black against Mornington, but Kit stands by. He is the true pal. The wind up is about as effective a bit of writing as Owen Conquest has ever given us.

**"THE MIDNIGHT MYSTERY!"**  
St. Jim's is represented next week by a thriller. A bulgy wallet full of banknotes vanishes. After that there are further strange occurrences. Portable property takes to itself wings and flies away. You realise all through that a particularly smart purloiner of other people's goods is busy in the dark. But who is the thief? That is the question!

**A "FUTURE" NUMBER.**  
A "special" supplement is due next week. The "Future" issue of Bunter's jolly little weekly appears on Tuesday, right as rain. It is another of the Owl's bright little wheezes.

**"THE LEAGUE OF SEVEN!"**  
We get something more than the page of battle in the serial next week. Monmouth has crossed the Rubicon, as it were. His valiant little army is at grips at last with the drilled legions of King James.

YOUR EDITOR.  
THE POPULAR.—No. 237.