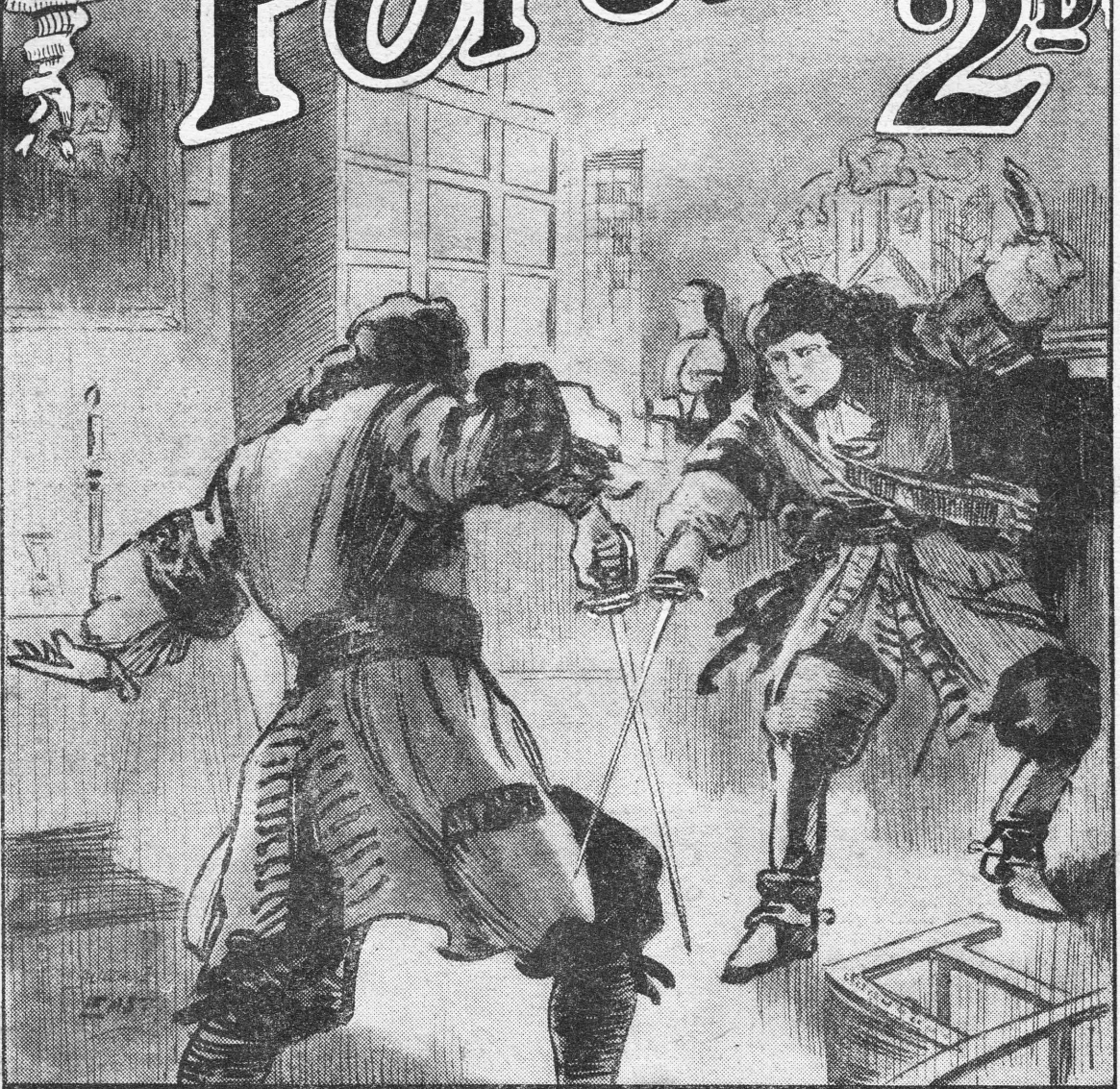


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—AT ROOKWOOD SCHOOL!



The Page-Boy's Secret!

By
Owen Conquest.

**A dramatic story of Jimmy Silver & Co.,
at Rookwood School.**

*By the Author of the stories now
appearing in "The Boys' Friend."*

**THE FIRST CHAPTER.
A Staggering Surprise!**

THE silly duffers!" growled Jimmy Silver. "Fancy going and getting a dose of mumps on the eve of our practice match against the Moderns!"

"It was jolly thoughtless of them," agreed Arthur Edward Lovell. "There are four of them in the sanny. Morny was the first fellow to get it, and Errol caught it as a matter of course. And then Conroy and Van Ryn took it into their heads to get the beastly mumps. It's disgraceful! They ought to be ashamed of themselves!"

Jimmy Silver & Co.—the Fistical Four of the Classical side—were in their study. They wore football garb, and they also wore worried frowns.

The first practice match of the season was to take place that afternoon. Jimmy Silver was to skipper a team of Classics, and Tommy Dodd was to lead the Moderns. In the ordinary way the match would have been a "walk-over" for the Classics, for they had a fine array of talent in their ranks. But with four of their best players on the sick-list, the prospect was far from rosy. As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver found it difficult to raise a team at all. Even now, half an hour before the match was due to start, he found himself a man short.

"Just like Mornington, to set the giddy fashion by getting mumps," said Newcome. "Why couldn't he have waited till after the match? And the others, too. They might have shown a bit more consideration."

"They're silly chumps to get the mumps!" said Raby, without meaning to be poetical.

Jimmy Silver gave a grunt. He stood at the window, and gazed out over the wind-swept quadrangle, and inwardly abused the four fellows who had unavoidably left the team in the lurch.

"Wonder if the epidemic's going to spread?" he muttered.

"If it does, we shall be in a bad way next Saturday, when we play the first real match of the season," said Lovell. "We shall need to take a strong team over to St. Clive's. If half our fellows are on the sick-list, we shall be licked to a frazzle!"

The others nodded glumly. They were roused from their reflections by the sudden appearance of a stranger in the quad. He was a fellow of about their own age, and he was well dressed, though not in Etons. He seemed to have just emerged from the Head's study.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver. "I didn't know there was a new kid expected this afternoon."

"Neither did I," said Lovell. "Why doesn't the Head take us into his confidence about these things? He ought to have sent for us and said: 'I have arranged for a new boy to arrive this afternoon. Have you any objection?'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, if he happens to be a good footballer, we've no objection in the least," said Jimmy Silver. "In fact, we can fix him up

with a game right away. Rather a novelty to play a new kid in the team, but it's only a practice match."

"He seems an athletic sort of fellow," said Newcome. "Look at that!"

A number of juniors were punting a football in the quad. Rawson of the Fourth took a mighty kick, and the ball went in the direction of the newcomer, who cleverly trapped it, and sent it whizzing back with a powerful drive of his right foot.

"He's a footballer right enough," said Raby. "He trapped that ball like a giddy pro."

Jimmy Silver moved towards the door. "Let's go down and jaw to him, and find out who he is, and who his father and mother are, and what wars his ancestors fought in," he said, with a grin.

The Fistical Four trotted down into the quad. They bore down upon the stranger, who stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the football.

"You're a newcomer—what?" said Jimmy Silver.

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Perkins, sir."

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked surprised. There were two reasons for their surprise. In the first place, the newcomer looked rather an aristocrat, and the name of Perkins didn't seem to fit him in the least. Had he given his name as Montmorency, or Cholmondeley, it would have sounded far more fitting. But Perkins, though a good old English name, suggested the commoner rather than the aristocrat.

Secondly, Jimmy Silver was surprised to hear himself addressed as "sir." And his chums were equally surprised. They could only conclude that the new boy was trying to be funny.

"Cut that out!" said Jimmy Silver sharply.

"You know jolly well that you don't have to address a junior as 'sir.'"

Perkins raised his eyebrows.

"I was merely acting on the Head's instructions," he said.

"What! You mean to say that the Head instructed you to say 'sir' to your equals?"

"You are not my equal. You are my superior."

"My hat!"

"Seems to me, Perkins," said Lovell, "that somebody's been pulling your leg, and telling you that it's the custom for a new kid to eat humble pie, and 'sir' all the other fellows."

"But it's my duty to be respectful to my superiors—"

"Fathead! We're not your superiors!"

"If you will kindly allow me to explain, sir—"

But before Perkins could embark on his explanation, Tommy Dodd of the Moderns hailed Jimmy Silver & Co. in stentorian tones.

"You fellows ready for the match?"

"Yes. We'll be along in a minute," replied Jimmy Silver. "Wait for us on the ground. I say, Perkins, are you a footballer?"

"I can play a passable game, sir."

Jimmy Silver snorted.

"If you call me 'sir' again I'll cuff you!" he said. "It may be very flattering, and all the rest of it, but the only people who are entitled to that mark of respect are the masters. You say you play a passable game of footer. What's your position?"

"Outside-left."

"The very position we want to fill!" said Jimmy Silver. "Have you brought your footer togs with you?"

"Yes; but—"

"But me no buts," said Jimmy. "No time for jawing. Buck up and change your togs, and then join us here."

Perkins hesitated.

"You don't understand—" he began.

Jimmy Silver made an impatient gesture.

"Don't try and tell us you're not up to form," he said. "We've already seen what you can do with the ball. Cut off and change!"

"Is that an order?" asked Perkins.

"Yes!" almost shouted Jimmy Silver.

"Very well. The Head told me I was to obey orders, and I don't want any trouble on my first day at the school, so I'll do as you ask."

And Perkins hurried into the building.

"Well, of all the queer cards!" said Newcome. "Dashed if I know what to make of him. He insists on treating us as if we were his betters, instead of his equals."

"And he seems jolly reluctant to play," said Raby. "He was trying to explain something, but we didn't give him a chance."

"He was going to say that he wasn't up to form," said Jimmy Silver. "But that's all rot. I could tell by the way he trapped that ball, and booted it back to Rawson, that he was every inch a footballer. And we're quite justified in playing him, as he's a Classical. If he'd been going into the Modern Side the Head would have sent him to Manders."

"That's so," agreed Lovell. "He's a queer sort of cove altogether. I shall be curious to see how he shapes."

A moment later Perkins rejoined the Fistical Four. He had made a lightning change, and in footer garb he looked more of an athlete than ever.

"You're a quick-change artist, and no mistake!" said Jimmy Silver. "Come along!"

And Perkins was hustled away to the football ground.

Tommy Dodd & Co. were impatiently awaiting the arrival of the Classical team. They stared at the new recruit in great surprise. But there was no time to ask questions. The start had been delayed already, and if it was postponed any longer the match would finish in semi-darkness.

"Come on, you spalpeens!" shouted Tommy Doyle. "Faith, an' if we'd waited much longer for you, we should have grown beards!"

"On the ball!" said Tommy Dodd.

Bulkeley of the Sixth was referee, and the game started at once.

There was a lot of wild and aimless kicking at the start. The footer season was very

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"Tubby in the Toils!"—Amazing Rookwood Yarn Next Week!

young, and the fellows had yet to find their form.

Presently, however, the players got into their stride, and the Modern forwards were very dangerous.

There were weak spots in the Classics' defence, owing to the absence of Conroy and Van Ryn. And it came as no surprise when Tommy Dodd put the ball in, after twenty minutes' play.

"Goal!"

"Go it, the Moderns!"

"Put it across them!"

George Raby, who was keeping goal, fished the ball out of the net with a rueful countenance, and punted it up the field.

So far, Perkins had had nothing to do. He had spent his time wandering to and fro along the touchline, waiting for the pass that never came.

But the Classics took a turn at attacking now. Jimmy Silver gained possession, and raced away. A couple of opponents closed in upon him, and it looked as if he would be "sandwiched" between them. But out of the corner of his eye he saw Perkins waiting for a pass, and he whipped the ball across.

Perkins went away like the wind. He had a dazzling turn of speed, and the opposing halves were helpless. Perkins was past them in a flash. He pulled up sharply at the corner flag, and sent across a perfect centre.

Lovell was standing unmarked, and it was the easiest thing in the world for him to nod the ball into the net.

"Goal!"

"Bravo, Lovell!"

Lovell waved his hand towards Perkins.

"That's the fellow you've got to thank," he said. "I simply couldn't help scoring from a perfect peach of a centre like that."

The scores were level at half-time. And they remained level for the first half-hour of the second half.

The Moderns' attack had fizzled out now, like a damp squib. And it was the Classics who threatened to get the winning goal. On two occasions Jimmy Silver shot inches wide, and a terrific cross-drive from Perkins just skimmed the bar.

But the Classics were not to be denied. In the last few minutes they literally bombarded their opponents' goal. Tommy Cook held the fort in valiant style, but he was beaten at last. An unstoppable shot from Jimmy Silver did the trick, and Jimmy had had the ball placed at his very toes by Perkins!

When the final whistle rang out, Jimmy Silver & Co. trooped off the field in great spirits. Their faces were radiant. In spite of the fact that four of their players were in the sanny, they had won on the post.

"Perkins," said Jimmy Silver, clapping that youth on the back, "you played a glorious game! After that exhibition I shall have to find you a place in the regular eleven."

"That's very good of you," said Perkins, "but isn't it rather unusual?"

"Eh? Isn't what unusual?"

"For a person in my position to mix with the sons of gentlemen in this way."

Jimmy Silver stared blankly at the speaker. "You're talking in riddles, man!" he said.

"What do you mean—a person in your position?"

Then Perkins exploded his bombshell.

"You appear to think," he said, "that I'm a pupil here. But I'm not, as I've been trying to explain to you. I'm the page-boy!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Perkins Holds His Own.

JIMMY SILVER fell back a pace. Like the prophet of old, he was amazed with a great amazement. And his chums were equally staggered.

"The—the page-boy?" stuttered Jimmy. Perkins nodded.

"I'm taking Tupper's place for a week," he explained. "Tupper couldn't take a holiday during the vacation. He had to stay here and do duty because some of the resident masters didn't go away. So the Head's given Tupper a week's holiday, and he advertised for a temporary page-boy. I applied for the job this afternoon, and got it. I start to-morrow."

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Lovell slowly. "You could knock me down with a feather! We quite thought you were a new kid, Perkins. You were dressed differently, for one thing, and you don't seem like one, and all that sort of bizney."

Perkins smiled.

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"It's not necessary for a page-boy to wear shabby togs and talk badly, is it?" he said. "Of course not," said Jimmy Silver. "But—but you don't look the part, somehow. You're as different from young Tupper as chalk from cheese!"

"Absolutely!" chimed in Raby. "This is a staggerer, and no mistake. I haven't got over it yet. We all took you for a new kid, Perkins, and we thought you were coming into the Classical Fourth. I can't picture you running errands, and blacking boots, and doing other menial jobs."

Perkins was still smiling. "Perhaps I shall look the part more when I blossom forth in buttons," he said. "I start work in real earnest to-morrow morning. And now I must be going. It won't do for me to be seen in your company. There's such a thing as social status, and I must remember my position."

"Rats!" said Jimmy Silver. "We're not snobs. We make no distinction between dukes and commoners at Rookwood. You played a stunning game this afternoon, and we're going to celebrate our victory with a study feed, so it's only right that you should come along."

"Hear, hear!" said Newcome. "Can't leave the giddy match-winner out in the cold."

Perkins protested that it wasn't "the thing" for a page-boy to sit down to table with his superiors. But the Fistical Four marched him away willy-nilly to their study, and they warned him what would happen if he persisted in addressing them as his superiors.

It was a very merry tea-party. Teddy Grace and Tom Rawson dropped in, and ample supplies were obtained from the tuck-shop.

Jimmy Silver & Co. chatted mainly about footer.

Perkins was an excellent listener, but he did very little talking himself. Perhaps he felt that he had no right to be there, and that his proper place was with the domestic staff.

The juniors liked the newcomer immensely. But they could not help feeling that there was some mystery about him. He was so utterly different from the usual type of page-boy. He had the bearing and the breeding of a gentleman. He was well spoken and well mannered.

It was strange—passing strange—that a fellow like Perkins should come to Rookwood in the capacity of page-boy.

Jimmy Silver & Co. felt very curious. They wanted to ask Perkins where he came from, and what he proposed to do when his week at Rookwood was up. But, after all, this was no business of theirs, so they held their peace.

Perkins departed when the meal was over. And he was not seen again that evening.

Next morning, however, he blossomed out in uniform. The tight-fitting tunic, with its row of buttons, certainly made him look more like a page-boy.

The duties of the school page were many and varied. And Perkins took those duties seriously. He had to be up with the lark, and clean several dozen pairs of boots. He was also at the beck and call of the Head, the House Dame, and the cook. He obeyed orders smartly and cheerfully, and he got through the work in half the time that Tupper had taken. He did it more thoroughly, too.

When breakfast-time came, Perkins felt that he had earned his meal. He had got through mountains of work, and he was hungry.

He was on his way to the kitchen, when he found himself waylaid by three elegant youths.

Cyril Peele & Co., the "nuts" of the Fourth, had heard all about Perkins. The page-boy's dashing display on the football field had brought him into the full glare of the limelight. And Peele & Co. didn't consider it right that a mere menial should receive the plaudits of the crowd, as it were. Peele, in particular, was an out-and-out snob, and he gave it out that he was going to put this brat of a page-boy in his place.

"Hi, you!" said Peele, addressing Perkins as if the latter had no right on the earth.

The page-boy halted.

"Do you want me, sir?" he asked politely.

"Yes. Why haven't you cleaned out my study?"

"Because it's not my job," was the prompt reply.

Peele scowled.

"It is your job, an' you're jolly well goin' to do it!" he said grimly. "My study's in a

shockin' state. It hasn't been touched for weeks."

"That's so," said Gower. "The floor wants scrubbin', an' the chairs want dustin', an' all that sort of thing."

"In fact, the place needs a sort of spring-clean," chimed in Lattrey. "And it's your place to see to it, young Perkins. You didn't come here just to play footer. You've got to put your nose to the giddy grindstone. You understand?"

Perkins looked perplexed. "You don't mean to say it's my duty to clean up all the junior studies?" he said.

"No; not all of 'em," said Peele. "Only ours. We're the nobility an' gentry, you see. The other fellows don't count."

"Really!" said Perkins, in surprise. "I should have thought it was the other way round. The fellows I played footer with yesterday seemed to be the gentlemen. You are just cheap imitations."

Peele turned crimson.

"You—you cheeky cub!" he spluttered. "I don't take cheek from anybody—least of all a low-down menial! I've a good mind to give you a hiding!"

Perkins put himself into a fighting attitude.

"I'm quite ready for you," he said quietly.

Peele backed away a step. He could tell a good fighting-man when he saw one, and Perkins looked as if he knew what his fists were for.

"It—it's all right," said Peele, rather hastily. "You can put your hands down. I don't fight with guttersnipes."

"If you use that expression again," said Perkins, "you'll have to fight me, whether you like it or not." And he lowered his hands.

Peele, noting the gleam in the page-boy's eye, did not venture to use the opprobrious epithet again.

"With regard to cleaning up your study," said Perkins, "I'm pretty certain that it doesn't come within the scope of a page-boy's duties. But if you insist—"

"I do!" said Peele. "Durin' mornin' lessons I shall expect you to give my study a thorough cleanin' an' scourin'. You'll take up the carpet an' beat it, you'll scrub the floor, an' you'll see that all the furniture is dusted an' put tidy."

"An' you'll clean the window an' whitewash the ceilin', an' polish up the handle of the big front door," said Gower humorously.

Perkins nodded gravely.

"It shall be done," he said.

Peele & Co. passed on, chuckling with subdued merriment. They had no right to issue such orders to the school page, and they knew it. But they had traded on the newcomer's ignorance. They had made Perkins believe—at least, they fancied they had made him believe—that it was part of his job to clean up their study. And they had visions of the page-boy being busily engaged all the morning for their benefit.

But Perkins had lots of other things to do before he could tackle Peele's study.

There were errands to run for the House Dame, and there were several summonses to the Head's study.

It was fairly late in the morning when Perkins found himself free to tackle the task which Peele had forced upon him.

The page-boy did not seem a bit dismayed by the big task which confronted him. He was, in fact, grinning broadly.

"They want their study overhauled," he murmured, "and I mean to do the job thoroughly—so thoroughly that they'll never ask me to do it again! One of them said something about whitewashing the ceiling. He may have been joking, but I'm not to know that. Anyway, I'll take him at his word."

And Perkins sallied forth in search of some whitewash.

He found some—a whole pailful—in the woodshed. There was also a brush.

Perkins had never done any whitewashing in his life, and he was rather looking forward to the experience. He carried the pail of whitewash through the deserted corridors—for all the fellows were at lessons—and he halted at Peele's study. He had inquired earlier in the morning which study it was.

Having taken off his tunic and rolled up his sleeves, Perkins got busy.

The ceiling certainly needed whitewashing. There were smears of ink on it, and sundry cracks in the plaster.

Perkins heaved the pail of whitewash on to the table. Then he hopped up beside it.

"Here goes!" he said cheerfully.

And he started slapping away with great vigour.

The art of whitewashing a ceiling is one that calls for previous experience. A novice is inclined to make rather a mess of it.

Perkins had had no previous experience, and he certainly made a mess of it. Perhaps he intended to! Anyway, he was very liberal with the whitewash, which flew in all directions. In fact, it seemed to be raining whitewash.

Perkins was soon smothered, but he didn't seem to mind. He continued to slapdash at the ceiling, until he had half emptied the pail of whitewash.

By this time Peele's study was in an appalling state. There was whitewash on the table, and on the chairs, and on the carpet. The glass panel of the bookcase was splashed with the white, clinging substance, and quite a pool of whitewash had formed on the hearthrug. It was a case of "whitewash, whitewash everywhere."

"Nothing like doing a job thoroughly," muttered Perkins, with a chuckle.

There was a sudden scurrying of feet in the corridor. The Fourth had been dismissed from morning lessons.

The door of Peele's study stood wide open. Jimmy Silver & Co. were first on the scene, and they stared into the study in blank amazement.

"What the thump——" began Jimmy Silver. Perkins turned a cheery face towards the Co.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" he said. "I'm up to my eyes in work, as you'll observe."

"And in whitewash, too, by the look of it!" gasped Lovell. "What's the merry game?"

"I was ordered to whitewash the ceiling and clean up the study generally. It's the wrong time of the year for spring-cleaning, I know, but orders are orders."

And Perkins went on with his slapdashing.

"Do you mean to say that Peele has been giving you orders?" said Jimmy Silver.

Perkins nodded.

"He said I was to overhaul his study," he said. "I think you'll agree that I'm doing it pretty effectively!"

The juniors stared at the miniature rivers of whitewash which flowed on the carpet. Then they broke into peals of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a fresh scurrying of feet, followed by a strangled cry from the doorway.

Peele and Gower and Lattrey had arrived on the scene. They stared into the study, and horrified cries burst from their lips.

Peele looked daggers at the industrious Perkins.

"You—you—you——" he spluttered. "What do you mean by this, you madman?"

"I'm simply carrying out orders, sir," said Perkins meekly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Jimmy Silver & Co.

"You—you dangerous imbecile!" shrieked Peele. "You've swamped my study with whitewash!"

"Well, you wanted the ceiling done. And it can't be helped if a few drops of whitewash happen to go on the floor."

"A few drops!" yelled Gower. "Why, there's whole pints of the stuff scattered about! It will take us about a week to clear up this mess!"

Cyril Peele was purple with rage. The vials of his wrath fairly overflowed. He turned to his cronies.

"Let's smash the cheeky bounder!" he said fiercely.

And the three furious juniors charged into the study.

Perkins gathered up the pail, which was still half-full of whitewash, and raised it threateningly.

"Keep your distance," he said, "or I shall have to give you a shower-bath."

"You—you wouldn't dare!" panted Peele.

But Perkins did dare. The infuriated trio showed no sign of retreating, so the page-boy promptly heaved the contents of the pail into their faces.

Swish! Swoosh!

Peele & Co. were covered with the whitewash as with a garment. They fell back, spluttering wildly.

The Fistical Four, looking on from the doorway, were almost in hysterics.

As for Perkins, he gazed ruefully at the empty pail.

"Pity to have wasted all that whitewash," he murmured. "I shall have to go and get a refill. Then I can finish the job."

"You—you villain!" spluttered Peele. "I'll have you kicked out of your job for this!"



PAGE-BOY AND FOOTBALLER! Perkins went away like the wind. He had a dazzling turn of speed, and the opposing halves were helpless. The page-boy pulled up at the corner flag and sent across a perfect pass to Lovell, who sped for the goal. (See Chapter 1.)

Get out! And don't dare to show your face in this study again!"

Perkins retired with the empty pail. Peele's threat didn't worry him in the least. The cad of the Fourth was powerless to take proceedings against the page-boy. Peele was entirely in the wrong, for he had no right to give Perkins orders. Therefore his hands were tied, and he could not possibly lodge a complaint against the page.

Perkins had scored all along the line—to the amusement of Jimmy Silver & Co., and to the discomfiture of the "nuts" of the Fourth!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Startling Confession!

PERKINS, the page, won golden opinions during his week of office. He worked hard and he worked well. The House Dame was extremely sorry when Saturday came—his last day at Rookwood.

Perkins worked hard all the morning, and found himself free at midday.

He was strolling under the old beeches in the quadrangle, looking much more thoughtful and serious than usual, when Jimmy Silver bore down upon him.

"Perkins," said Jimmy, "we shall want you this afternoon. It's very unusual, I know, for a page-boy to play in the junior eleven; but there's no help for it. There are two more cases of mumps, and I'm at my wits' end to raise a team."

Perkins brightened up.

"I'll play, with pleasure," he said.

"Good! The charabanc will be along shortly, to take us to St. Clive's."

The page-boy gave a violent start. His manner changed as if by magic. The mention of St. Clive's seemed to awaken unpleasant thoughts in his mind. His face changed colour, and he started to stammer confusedly.

"I—I'm awfully sorry——" he began.

Jimmy Silver stared.

"Nothing to be sorry about," he said.

With a great effort, Perkins pulled himself together.

"I can't play," he said briefly.

Jimmy Silver stared harder than ever. He was utterly nonplussed.

A moment before Perkins had been all

eagerness to play. Now he seemed to recoil from the prospect. What was wrong? Had he suddenly remembered that he had another engagement for the afternoon?

"Well, you're a queer fellow, and no mistake!" said Jimmy Silver, after a pause. "In one breath you say you'll play with pleasure, and in the next breath you tell me you can't play. You haven't got to work this afternoon, have you?"

"No."

"Then what's to prevent you playing?"

"You—you don't understand——"

"No, I'm dashed if I do!" said Jimmy Silver, puzzled. "If you've any special reason for not wanting to play, out with it!"

"I can't explain," said Perkins dully. Jimmy Silver shrugged his shoulders.

"If you had a good reason for standing out," he said grimly, "I'd excuse you. But there's nothing to prevent you playing that I can see, so you're coming along with us."

"I can't."

"You can, and must," retorted the junior captain. "You're coming along to St. Clive's, even if we have to bundle you neck and crop into the charabanc."

Perkins looked startled.

"You—you wouldn't do that——" he began.

"Wait and see!"

And Jimmy Silver walked away rather humbly.

When the charabanc arrived, half an hour later, Perkins was still in his page's uniform. He did not dream that Jimmy Silver would carry out his threat, and force him to accompany the footballers. But Jimmy was in deadly earnest. Unless Perkins played, he would only have ten men, and he was determined to take a full team to St. Clive's.

"Coming along, Perkins?" sang out Jimmy Silver.

"No."

"Your mistake!" said Jimmy. "Collar him, chappies! Cut along to his room, Raby, and fetch his footer togs."

Raby nodded, and sped away into the building.

Perkins tried to resist arrest, as it were. But there was no help for it. He was seized by many hands, and hustled into the charabanc. He had to make the journey now, whether he liked it or not.

Raby came along with the page-boy's footer tugs, tied up in a bundle. He scrambled into the vehicle, and Jimmy Silver shouted "Right away!"

The charabanc rumbled through the school gateway.

Perkins sat wedged in a seat, between Jimmy Silver and Lovell. There was no possible loophole of escape for him. He looked very white and shaken, and it was quite obvious that something was preying on his mind.

Jimmy Silver & Co. watched him curiously. They were quite at a loss to understand what was troubling him.

"Are you ill, Perkins?" asked Lovell at length.

"No; but I can't possibly come to St. Clive's."

Lovell grinned.

"No help for it now, my son," he said. "We're half-way there."

Perkins drew a quick breath.

"I suppose the only way I can get my freedom is to confess," he muttered.

"Confess?" echoed Jimmy Silver. "What have you got to confess?"

"Several things. In the first place, St. Clive's is my old school."

"Great Scott!"

The Rookwood footballers regarded Perkins in amazement. And as the charabanc sped on its way, he told them his story.

"I left St. Clive's last week," he said. "No, I wasn't sacked. I should have been, I expect, but I didn't wait for it. I bolted."

"You—you bolted from St. Clive's?" gasped Newcome.

"Yes."

"But—but what had you done, Perkins?"

The page-boy smiled.

"By the way, my name isn't Perkins," he said. "It's Sylvester—the Honourable James Sylvester. I assumed the name of Perkins when I applied for the temporary job at Rookwood. I had a rare struggle to get the job, too. The Head wanted to see my references, and I hadn't any. But I suppose he thought I looked honest enough, and, anyway, it was only for a week, so I managed to get through."

"But why did you bolt from St. Clive's?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"Thereby hangs a tale. There's a master called Merrick at St. Clive's—he was my Form master. A decent enough sort, but inclined to be heavy-handed at times. I happened to get into his black books, and he lammed me. I called him a beastly old tyrant, and that made him see red, as the saying goes. He lost his wool absolutely, and gave me a most frightful hiding. I'm not a revengeful sort of fellow, as a rule, but I went out of Merrick's study with the firm resolve that I'd get even with him. And what do you think I did? I'm not saying it in a boastful spirit—goodness knows, it's not a thing to boast about. I've been downright ashamed of myself ever since."

"What did you do?" asked Lovell breathlessly.

Sylvester hung his head.

"Merrick was engaged in writing a very important book—a scientific book. He'd been at the job for years and years. The manuscript was awfully precious to him, as you may imagine. It was sacred, almost. In my mad rage, I made up my mind to destroy it."

"Oh!"

"I sneaked into Merrick's study in the middle of the night, and forced open his desk. The manuscript was there. I rammed it into the fireplace, and set fire to it. Goodness knows what possessed me to do such a caddish thing. However hard Merrick may have lammed me, I wasn't justified in taking such a dastardly revenge. I wasn't myself at the time—it seemed as if there were black devils spurring me on. I watched the manuscript burn itself out, and then—then I began to realise what an appalling thing I'd done. I had destroyed what was the work of half a lifetime. Merrick's not a young man, by any means, and he'll never be able to start that terrific task all over again. I'd have given anything to have been able to undo what I'd done—but it was too late."

The speaker paused. For a moment he buried his face in his hands.

After a painful pause Sylvester resumed. "I realised that I couldn't possibly stay on at St. Clive's after the frightful thing I had done. So I sat down and wrote a letter to Merrick, telling him that it was I who had destroyed his manuscript, and that I was most desperately sorry, and was clearing out

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that night. I left the letter on Merrick's desk, and then packed up my belongings and bolted. I had a bit of money, and I put up at a place in Latcham for a day or two. Then I saw that there was a temporary job going at Rookwood, and I applied for it, and got it. My week's up now, and I shall have to start hunting for a fresh job."

Sylvester paused, and lifted his head.

"So now you understand, you fellows, why it is that I can't possibly come to St. Clive's," he said.

"But we're there!" said Newcome suddenly.

Even as he spoke the charabanc turned in at the open gateway of St. Clive's. It began to slow up in the quadrangle.

Sylvester sprang to his feet.

"Let me get out!" he cried hoarsely.

Jimmy Silver & Co. made no attempt to stop him. Sylvester fairly bounded out of the vehicle. He was too late, however, to gain his freedom. For he ran right into the arms of an elderly gentleman in gown and mortar-board.

"Mr. Merrick!" he muttered, as the master's hand fell upon his shoulder. And then he hung his head, not daring to meet the eyes of the man he had so bitterly wronged.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Happy Climax!

S YLVESTER looked up at last.

To his utter astonishment, he saw that Mr. Merrick was not looking at him reproachfully, but with a grave, kindly smile. And the hand that had descended on Sylvester's shoulder had descended in quite a friendly way.

"So you have returned?" said Mr. Merrick.

"Yes, sir—not intentionally, though."

"What are you doing in the garb of a page-boy?" asked the Form master, in wonder. "But stay! I will not question you here. You had better accompany me to my study."

Master and junior set off together. And Jimmy Silver & Co. gazed after them. They were wondering what was to be the outcome of that dramatic meeting.

In Mr. Merrick's study Sylvester explained all that had happened to him since the fateful night when he had destroyed the master's manuscript and bolted from St. Clive's.

"I'm most awfully sorry about your manuscript, sir," he added. "I must have been out of my senses to destroy it. One minute's madness on my part has ruined the work of half a lifetime. It's not much use apologising, sir—I shall never be able to make it up to you for what I've done. They'll sack me from the school, I suppose, but that will be no consolation to you. It won't restore your manuscript."

Mr. Merrick was smiling. How he could possibly smile in such circumstances passed Sylvester's comprehension.

"That affair of the manuscript has haunted me all the week," he went on, "and it will haunt me to the end of my days. I masked my feelings at Rookwood; I didn't let the fellows see what a state of remorse I was in. But at night, when I was alone in my room, I found it impossible to sleep. The memory of what I had done never left me. I tell you, sir, I'd cheerfully give my right hand to be able to replace your manuscript."

The junior's lips trembled, and he was on the verge of breaking down utterly.

Mr. Merrick laid his hand on Sylvester's shoulder.

"Do not distress yourself, my dear boy," he said. "All is well."

Sylvester looked up, his eyes filled with wonder.

"You are evidently under the impression that you have destroyed many years of laborious desk-work," said Mr. Merrick. "But such is not the case. Fortunately, I possess a duplicate copy of the manuscript. It is locked in my safe."

"Oh!"

Sylvester's face cleared. He drew a quick, sobbing breath of relief.

"It would indeed have been a tragedy had there been only one copy of the manuscript in existence," said Mr. Merrick. "But as there happens to be a duplicate, I have suffered no loss by your—er—hasty action."

"All the same, sir, it was a rotten, caddish thing to do," said Sylvester. "I don't see why I should be forgiven, just because there happens to be a duplicate of the manuscript. I don't deserve any consideration, and if I'm sacked from St. Clive's the sentence will only be just."

"You are not to be expelled," said Mr. Merrick. "There is no question of that. I realise that I myself am by no means blameless in this matter. When I thrashed you last week I completely lost control of myself—a thing that is inexcusable in a master. I behaved with merciless brutality. When, therefore, you destroyed my manuscript, you had every provocation to do so. I am not saying that you were justified in taking such a revenge. Nobody is ever justified in committing an act of revenge. Your conduct, Sylvester, was outrageous; but so was my own, and I ask your forgiveness for the brutal treatment I meted out to you."

"Don't, sir!" said Sylvester brokenly. "It's I who need forgiveness, though I don't deserve it."

There was a long silence. It was broken at length by Mr. Merrick.

"I have placed the whole matter before the headmaster," he said. "He agreed that you were to be exonerated, and restored to your former position in the school. Every effort was made to find you, but without success. Now that you have returned, Sylvester, I want you to forget all the unpleasantness of the past. Let us shake hands, my boy, and start afresh."

Sylvester grasped the proffered hand willingly enough.

A better understanding had now been created between master and pupil, and it was unlikely that they would find themselves at loggerheads in the future.

When Sylvester emerged from the Form master's study, he found a number of his schoolfellows waiting for him. They could tell, from his radiant face, that all was well, and they gave him a rousing cheer, for Sylvester was a general favourite at St. Clive's.

"It's good to be back," said Sylvester, with a catch in his voice. "I thought I should never see you fellows again. Old Merrick's a brick, and everything has turned out rippingly. But, I say! What about the footer? I came over here to play for Rookwood."

"And you're going to, dear boy," said Terence, the skipper of St. Clive's junior eleven. "If you played for us, Silver would be a man short; and he's got a weakened team as it is. We can't have that; it wouldn't be sporting."

So Sylvester discarded the page-boy's uniform for the last time, and changed into his footer togs. And he lined up with the Rookwood team, to enjoy the novel experience of playing against his own school. But he resolved to play the game of his life.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were delighted to hear that everything had worked out so splendidly. And they much appreciated the sporting action of the St. Clive's skipper in allowing them to play Sylvester.

It was a fast and thrilling game.

Rookwood's scratch team battled heroically against heavy odds. St. Clive's seemed to be all over them in the first half, but Tommy Cook kept goal grandly, and the attackers were held at bay.

There was no score at half-time.

In the second half there were plenty of thrills and plenty of goals.

Terence put the ball in for St. Clive's, but Jimmy Silver promptly equalised from Sylvester's pass.

Then Terence, who was playing a dashing game at centre-forward, scored again for St. Clive's. But the lead was short-lived. Lovell broke through on his own, and brought the scores level once more with a lightning shot.

Five minutes from the finish of that breathless tussle, Terence completed his "hat-trick." He put on a third goal for St. Clive's, and it seemed to be all over bar shouting.

In the very last minute of the game, however, Sylvester raced away on the wing. He outwitted the right-half and the right-back, and drove in a fast, fierce shot which found the net.

Thus the match ended in a draw of 3—3, and both sides were highly satisfied.

Eleven players had come over from Rookwood. But only ten returned.

The Hon. James Sylvester—formerly Perkins the page-boy—was left behind at his old school, where he was to start with a clean sheet. And Jimmy Silver & Co. took back with them to Rookwood the amazing story of the page-boy's secret!

THE END.

(There will be another grand complete story of Jimmy Silver & Co. next Tuesday.)

Tubby Muffin Finds Himself in a Strange Position Next Week!