

Chums on Tramp!

By
OWEN CONQUEST.



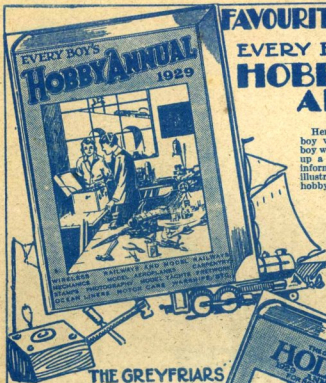
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CHAPTER 1.

Putty is Too Funny!

"IF a chap had lots of money—"
Jimmy Silver spoke in regretful tones.

Raby and Newcome and Arthur Edward Lovell all answered together:

"If!"
The Fistical Four of the Rookwood Fourth were discussing the holidays. Exactly what they were going to do with the holidays, they were not sure, only that whatever they did, they were going to do it together.

That was a settled point. Also it was going to be something in the open air. That was another settled point.

"The open road, you know!" Arthur Edward Lovell had remarked, when the subject first came up; a rather vague remark which seemed, however, to express the views of the chums of the end study.

The thought of open roads, winding over rolling downs, and by sunny sands, was very attractive on a blazing hot day.

"If a chap had lots of money," continued Jimmy Silver thoughtfully, "what price a motor-caravan?"

"Topping!" said Newcome. "Shall we trot out this afternoon and see if we can pick one up for eighteenpence or so?"

"But suppose—" said Jimmy, apparently in a richly imaginative mood, "suppose a chap had lots of money—"

"Well, what about an aeroplane, if we're going to suppose?" suggested Arthur Edward Lovell. "I've never had a really long holiday in an aeroplane."

"My choice is a trip to the Rocky Mountains, and home by Japan," said Raby, with a grin.

"Come back to earth, old chap!" said Lovell. "The question is, Jimmy, not what we want, but what we can get."

"I suppose it is!" said Jimmy Silver. "And if we're going to make a trip of it, we want motor-caravans and yachts; but what we can get is—"

"Shanks' pony!" said Raby.

"That's about it!" assented Jimmy.

"After all, you can't beat a walking tour for really seeing the country!" argued Lovell.

"Some people are satisfied with seeing it from the window of a Rolls-Royce!" remarked Newcome. "But we'll have a better time than that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, there's the question of baggage," said Jimmy Silver. "We should have to have a tent—"

"And some cooking things," said Newcome.

"And a change of collars, at least!" remarked Raby.

"Oh, we can manage," said Lovell.

"Robert Louis Stevenson used to go on travels with a donkey——" said Jimmy.

"Hallo! Talking over the holidays?" Putty Grace of the Fourth put his cheerful face into the doorway of the end study. "Just what I was going to speak to you about. I'm looking for recruits for a holiday tramp."

The Fistical Four eyed Putty Grace rather doubtfully.

They liked Putty—everybody liked Putty more or less—but they were not at all sure that they would enjoy Putty's company on a holiday tramp. Putty of the Fourth was an excessively humorous youth, and his humor was sometimes misdirected.

"No end of a lark, you know!" said Putty.

"Might be too larky, with you in the crowd, old scout!" said Lovell. "There wouldn't be any room for your little jokes. If the tent came down suddenly on our heads, or we found glue in the tea-pot, we should slaughter you on the spot!"

"We're thinking of a tramp, Putty," said Jimmy Silver, "but it's a question of carrying props. What's your idea?"

"Easy as winking!" said Putty cheerily. "Suppose you could get a little horse for nothing?"

"Eh! What? That would be ripping! But we couldn't."

"I know a way."

"Oh, good!"

The Fistical Four were all interested at

once. If Putty of the Fourth could solve the difficulty of baggage, Putty was the right man in the right place.

"Not pulling our leg?" asked Lovell suspiciously. "Mean to say you know somebody who would lend a horse for nothing?"

"Not exactly that," said Putty, "but I can tell you an easy way of getting a little horse without expense."

"Gammon!" said Lovell.

"Straight as a string!" said Putty.

"Well, go ahead!" said Lovell, still unconvinced. "If you're trying to pull our leg there'll be ructions! What's the way?"

"Just trot down to the end of the passage——" said Putty.

"What for?"

"There's a tap there——"

"What about the tap?"

"Turn it on!" said Putty,

"Turn on the tap?" repeated Arthur Edward Lovell, almost dazedly. "What good would that do?"

"Then put your head under it."

"Put my head under the tap!" roared Lovell.

"Yes. Then leave it wet——"

"Look here——"

"And—in a couple of hours or so there you are!" said Putty, with a perfectly serious face.

"What——"

"You see, you would catch a cold——" explained Putty.

"I know I should!" hooted Lovell, "and what——"

"That would make you a little hoarse!" said Putty.

"Wh-a-at?"

"A little hoarse. And that's what you want."

It was some seconds before Arthur Edward Lovell realised that this was a pun! When he realised it, he made a sudden spring from his chair, and grasped the humorous junior in the doorway. Putty of the Fourth had probably been expecting a burst of laughter. Instead of which, he was suddenly seized and yanked headlong into the study.

Crash!

"Ow!" roared Putty—struggling. "You silly ass! Leggo!"

"Bump him!" roared Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fistical Four collared the struggling

Putty, and he smote the study carpet, in the grasp of four pairs of hands.

Bump!

"Oh, crumbs! Ow! You silly asses——"

"Give him another!"

Bump!

"Whooop!" roared Putty.

Then the humorist of the Fourth was tossed into the passage, where he landed with another bump. The door of the end study closed on him.

Jimmy Silver & Co. resumed their discussion, without the assistance of Putty of the Fourth.

CHAPTER 2.

"Some" Bargain!

"THE very thing!"

Arthur Edward Lovell uttered that exclamation aloud. It was the "very thing," there was no mistake about that, and Lovell looked at it with great admiration.

It was two or three days since the discussion in the end study, and plans were not settled yet. Arthur Edward Lovell was taking a walk down the lane to Coombe, when he came upon the object that so excited his admiration. It was a light two-wheeled cart, nicely painted in dark green, drawn by a sturdy little pony. It struck Lovell at once that this was exactly what the Rookwood tramps wanted for their "walk," to carry the tent and the bags. It was the very thing; and Lovell, in his interest, stopped to look at it and survey it critically.

The pony was tethered to a tree by the wayside, and was cropping the grass in plump contentment. For a moment or two Lovell did not discern the owner. Then he spotted a pair of baggy knees that emerged from the grass—all that could be seen of a gentleman who was lying on his back there. Apparently the owner had tied up the pony while he was taking a rest. So Lovell concluded, at all events.

"What a little beauty!" murmured Lovell, aloud. "Looks as if it's built for the very purpose—perhaps it was. Perhaps that chap is on a walking tour with it. Lucky bargee!"

The man in the grass seemed to become aware of Lovell's presence. He sat up. The baggy knees disappeared, and a round,

red face, with a shabby cap over it, rose into view.

If this gentleman had been camping out, as Lovell supposed, he had obviously been roughing it. He was dusty, and his clothes were exceedingly well worn.

"Good afternoon!" said Lovell politely.

"Eh? Afternoon!" said the gentleman sleepily. "Warm—what?"

"Yes, rather!" said Lovell. "I was looking at your little cart."

"My what?"

Lovell pointed to the handsome little turn-out.

"It's a little beauty!" he said. "Looks as if it was built to carry the baggage for a walking party. Nice little pony!"

"Eh? Oh, yes!"

The man rubbed his eyes and blinked at Lovell. There was the dawn of a grin on his face, which needed a shave.

His manner was agreeable enough, and Lovell was encouraged to pursue the topic. If such a turn-out as this was within the means of the Rookwooders, certainly it could not be improved upon for their purpose. It would carry the tent, the bags, the cricket outfit, and a few more necessary things. It was as Lovell had said, the very thing.

"On a walking tour, I suppose?" asked Lovell.

"Sort of," assented the sleepy gentleman.

"I wonder if you'd mind telling me how much a turn-out like that would run to?" said Lovell. "You see, we—my friends and I—are thinking of a walking tour this vac, and we want something to carry the props. Something like that would suit us to a 't.'"

"Like that, eh?"

"The very thing!" said Lovell. "I suppose it's pretty expensive?"

The drowsy gentleman looked at him, and looked at the pony and cart. He glanced up and down the sunny road, and seemed to reflect.

"'Lookin' for a turn-out like that?" he asked.

"That's it!"

"Like to buy one cheap?"

Lovell's heart thumped.

"You bet!" he answered. "If you were selling yours——"

"Well, that depends," yawned the sleepy gentleman. "The fact of the matter

is this—I'm fed up with the business. My friends have gone home; that's how it is, and I don't care to carry on on my lonesome own. I'd just as soon sell that turn-out as not."

"Give us a chance, then!" said Lovell. "Of—of course, funds are limited—we're schoolboys. But we'd club together, and if the price was anything like reasonable—"

The man looked at him attentively.

"Well, how I look at the matter is this here," he said. "I'm gettin' back to London. Costs somethin' to get that turn-out home, you see, and I'm not walking it. Fed up with that. I'd like to get it off my hands. I'd let it go for twenty pounds, blessed if I wouldn't!"

"My only hat!" said Lovell, his eyes gleaming.

He did not know in the least what the pony and cart were worth; but he knew that they must be worth very much more than twenty pounds.

"I mean it!" said the man, with another yawn. "And mind, they're good stuff. The pony is a oner to go; Neddy, I call him. Neddy's a real corker! The cart—well, see for yourself, sir! You couldn't get that alone made for twenty pounds!"

"I agree!" said Lovell. "My hat, don't I jolly well wish I had twenty pounds! Look here,"—he thought rapidly—"there's four of us—in fact, five—who are going on the tramp; among us we can raise the money—we can borrow some, as we shall be getting tips for the holidays. Will you trot along to Rookwood with me—that's our school—and we'll see what can be done?"

"I'm going to the railway-station, now I've had my rest," answered the man in the grass. "I'd rather not have the trouble of putting that pony and trap on the railway; but I'm starting now, anyhow. Sorry we can't do business!"

"Hold on, though!" said Lovell. "Look here, I know it's a bargain. I've got some tin about me—suppose I pay you a deposit on it?"

Lovell ran his hands through his pockets. Arthur Edward had received several handsome tips in anticipation of the holidays. His uncle Arthur Edward, after whom he had been named, always came out well on such occasions. There was a crisp five-pound note in Lovell's pocket, and he was also the happy possessor of three pound

notes. He turned out his whole store—eight pounds in paper, and ten shillings in silver.

The gentleman in the grass glanced at the money, and a glimmer came into his sleepy eyes.

"It's a go!" he said. "I can see you're a gentleman, and I can take your word. Hand over the deposit and send the balance to me by post."

"You'll trust me to do that?" asked Lovell, much flattered by this frank confidence on the part of a stranger.

"Certainly! I know a gentleman when I see one."

"Thank you very much!" said Lovell gratefully. "Of course, I'll send you the money at once; I know we can raise it by clubbing together. Will it do if I send a money-order to-morrow morning?"

"First-rate!"

"Then it's a bargain!" exclaimed Lovell eagerly. "You give me a receipt for eighteen on account, to show the fellows."

The tired gentleman felt in his pockets.

"Got a bit of paper," he asked, "and a pencil?"

"Here is a fountain-pen," said Lovell. "Make the receipt to A. E. Lovell."

"Good!"

Lovell tore a leaf from his pocket-book, spread it on the cover, and handed it to the gentleman, with the fountain-pen. The sleepy gentleman scribbled on the sheet, and looked up.

"Got a tuppenny stamp?" he asked. "This ain't legal without a stamp."

Lovell groped an old stamp out of his pocket. He was glad to see the man so business-like. The stamp was affixed to the sheet, and the tired gentleman signed over it. He handed the paper to Lovell. The junior read it carefully. Arthur Edward was somewhat methodical in business matters.

"Received from A. E. Lovell, Esq., £8 10s. on acct. of £20 for pony and cart."

"H. WALKER."

"Your address—for sending on the balance?" asked Lovell.

Mr. Walker had forgotten that important item.

"Oh—ah—yes!" said Mr. Walker. "Better send it to my club—just address it to the Idlers, Piccadilly."

"Right-ho!" said Lovell. "And I can drive away the pony and cart now?"

"Certainly! They're yours!"

Mr. Walker detached himself from the grass.

"Jolly glad I met you this afternoon, Mr. Lovell," he said. "You've saved me a lot of trouble. Good-afternoon!"

"Good-bye, and many thanks!" said Lovell.

The baggy-kneed gentleman nodded, and walked away up the shady lane at quite a good pace, considering how tired he looked. Arthur Edward Lovell, fairly bubbling over with satisfaction, unfastened the pony, mounted into the little cart and drove away to Rookwood in triumph.

CHAPTER 3.

Glorious for Arthur Edward!

"LOVELL—" "What the merry thump—" Jimmy Silver & Co. fairly shouted in their surprise. The three chums had gone down to the school gates to look for Lovell, expecting him in to tea. Lovell arrived, driving a pony, in a handsome little green cart. He came in at the gateway with a flourish, the juniors jumping aside out of the way.

Lovell jumped down, and smiled at the astonishment of his comrades.

"Like the look of it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, jolly!" said Jimmy Silver. "But what—Somebody lent it to you!"

"Not at all! I've bought it," said Lovell, with studied carelessness.

There was a yell from three juniors at once.

"Bought it!"

"Just that!" smiled Lovell.

"Gammon!" said Raby. "You jolly well couldn't bag a thing like that for your uncle's fiveer. It's worth fifty or sixty pounds at least."

"All that, I fancy," assented Lovell. "I happen to have got it at a bargain. Some fellows have an eye to a bargain. Some fellows know how to manage, you know, when they're given a chance."

Perhaps a little swank was excusable in Arthur Edward Lovell, at that proud moment.

Jimmy Silver eyed the pony, and the handsome cart, and then eyed his chum.

"You've really bought it, Lovell?" he asked.

"Twenty pounds. I've paid Mr. Walker eight-ten on account, and we've got to send the rest on."

"He trusted you with it?"

"Looks like it!" said Lovell coolly.

"Of course, we're all buying this together—it's going Co.. Four of us whack out five pounds each—or five of us four pounds each. After the vac. we can easily get our money back—that thing would sell for more than twenty pounds at any time, anywhere."

"I'm jolly sure that it would," said Jimmy Silver. "Blessed if I can understand a man selling it so cheap."

"He was fed up with his walking tour, and his friends had left him," Lovell explained. "He was glad to get it off his hands. Of course, he knew he was selling cheap. Still, he saved the expense of getting the turn-out back to London by rail—and that's a consideration in these days, when the railways stick you so steep for freights. Anyhow, I suppose he knew his own business."

"I suppose so," assented Jimmy, still in wonder.

He felt a new respect for Arthur Edward. Much as he liked that cheery youth, Jimmy had never given him credit for unusual abilities. But a fellow who could bag a bargain like this was most certainly an able youth.

The chums of the Fourth surrounded the cart, and peered into it, and patted the pony, and caressed him, in unbounded satisfaction. This handsome turn-out was their very own.

"Of course we shall have to speak to the Head about having it put up here for a day or two," said Lovell. "But that will be all right."

"No doubt about that," said Jimmy. "My hat! What a beauty! This cart must have been made for the purpose! Look at it! Lockers in it! And there's a couple of ground sheets there! They go with the cart, I suppose?"

Putty Grace came up, sighting the prize from afar. Putty almost fell down when he heard that Lovell had bought the turn-out for the tour.

"Bought it cheap!" explained Raby proudly. "Lovell's bagged it for twenty pounds."

"If you're going in with us, Putty, your whack will be four pounds," said Jimmy Silver. "Then we can easily manage."

"I'm on!" said Putty at once. "Put me down for four quid. I—I suppose there's no mistake about it?"

"Mistake!" said Lovell. "How could there be a mistake?"

"Well, it's jolly odd to pick up a thing like that at a moment's notice, for a mere song," said Putty doubtfully.

"Some fellows can make bargains!" explained Lovell.

"I know. But you're not one of them, old chap."

"Look here!" roared Lovell.

"Oh, choose it, Putty!" said Newcome hotly. "Lovell's bagged a corking bargain this time. It will see us through. Lovell ought to have a vote of thanks."

Quite a number of juniors were gathering round the turn-out now. There was great admiration on all sides.

And there was great amazement when the news spread that Arthur Edward Lovell had secured that handsome property at bargain price.

Tubby Muffin immediately offered to accompany the Fistical Four on their holiday tour, on condition that he was allowed to drive all the time. Gunner of the Fourth told them that he would come along, and look after them, and manage the whole thing if they were civil and kept their places. Both kind offers were refused with thanks.

Old Mack was routed out of his lodge at last, and requested to take temporary charge of the turn-out, which half-a-crown, slipped into his horny hand, induced him to do with a good grace.

Then the Fistical Four went into the School House to tea, in great spirits.

There was a little more consequence than usual in Arthur Edward Lovell's manner as he walked with his chums.

Lovell had always had a secret opinion that the brains of the end study were, for the greater part, concentrated in his own skull. This secret opinion sometimes transpired in Lovell's conversation. Jimmy and Raby and Newcome, on the other hand, had never been willing to admit that Lovell had even a fourth part—his fair share—of the brains of the study. Indeed, more than once it had been averred that, on the occa-

sion when brains were handed out, Lovell had been overlooked!

All that was changed now.

Lovell, for the time, was a shining light in the end study—a fellow whose gift for bargain-hunting, at least, his chums were delighted to honour.

The Fistical Four sat down to tea in the end study, and to a discussion of holiday prospects, in a merry mood. That delightful little cart was going to be packed with their impedimenta; that hefty little pony was going to pull it—they would walk and wander wheresoever the spirit moved them, enjoying the summer vacation to the fullest extent. Lovell had been the right man in the right place on this occasion—he said so himself and his chums assented heartily.

After tea the chums of the Fourth took a stroll round to the stables to have another look at the new purchase. They were more than ever delighted with it; and Lovell fairly purred with satisfaction under the unstinted praises of his comrades. He was receiving his full meed of justice at last—it was, indeed like the King coming into his own! What Arthur Edward had always thought of himself it now appeared that his chums thought of him—and he could not have been held in higher estimation than that.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had strolled back into the quad, and Conroy of the Fourth sauntered along.

"Something's up!" he remarked.

"What's that?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Conroy gave a nod towards the gates.

A young man with a sun-browned face, in dusty Norfolks, had entered, and by his side was the well-known portly form of Mr. Boggs, the village constable of Coombe.

Mr. Boggs' fat face wore an expression of the most portentous solemnity. He marched ponderously towards the School House, the tall young man in Norfolks striding by his side.

"What on earth can the bobby want?" said Lovell.

"Something's up!" repeated Conroy. "Boggy looks as if he's come to arrest the whole school for highway robbery or petty larceny."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Boggs and his companion disappeared into the School House, a good many fellows glancing after the village policeman, and

wondering what might be his business at Rookwood School.

Jimmy Silver & Co. sauntered on in the summer sunset, under the old beeches, discussing the holidays and the walking tour, in a happy mood. Bulkeley of the Sixth came out of the School House and went down to the porter's lodge. He came back, after speaking to old Mack, and looked round, evidently in search of someone. He spotted the Fistical Four under the beeches, and came over to them.

"Come with me, Lovell!" he said brusquely. "You're wanted!"

"What's up?" asked Lovell.

"The Head wants you. Come at once!" "Boggy is with the Head, isn't he?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Bulkeley nodded, and signed to Lovell to follow him.

Arthur Edward looked restive.

"Look here, is it a row, Bulkeley?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so, you young ass!" said the captain of Rookwood. "I hope you'll be able to explain to the Head, anyhow."

"I've not done anything that I know of," said Lovell. "If it's about knocking off Smythe's topper this morning——"

"It's a more serious matter than that. Do you mean to say you don't know what you're charged with?" exclaimed Bulkeley.

"Charged! What do you mean? Charged! My hat! And what am I charged with, then?"

"Stealing a pony and cart!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Come!" said Bulkeley. "The Head's waiting!"

He led Lovell away—dazed. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome blinked after them, and blinked at one another.

"Stealing——" said Jimmy faintly.

"A pony——" murmured Newcome.

"And cart——" breathed Raby.

And then there fell a silence that could almost be felt!

CHAPTER 4.

Awful for Lovell!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL staggered rather than walked into the Head's study.

He was not quite sure whether he was on his head or on his heels, as he entered that august presence.

Arthur Edward blinked dizzily round the study. He seemed to see in a kind of mist the stern, awful face of Dr. Chisholm; still more mistily the fat, perspiring face of P.-c. Boggs. He hardly noticed the sun-burnt young man in Norfolk, who was eyeing him very curiously.

Lovell tried to pull himself together. He did not understand—he couldn't understand. How could he possibly be charged with stealing a pony and cart? He had never had any dealings with a pony and cart in his life—excepting the turn-out he had purchased from Mr. Walker for hard cash.

What did it mean—what could it mean? The awful face of the Head seemed to expand before him, and grow larger and more terrifying. His voice, when he spoke, rumbled in Lovell's ears like thunder.

"Lovell!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Lovell. "I never——"

"What?"

"I didn't—I—I never—wasn't——" stammered Lovell incoherently.

"You inquired of the porter, Bulkeley?"

"Yes, sir," said the Rookwood captain. "Mack informed me that the pony and cart had been driven in by Lovell of the Fourth. Lovell requested Mack to take charge of them, and they are in the stables now. A green-painted cart, and a plump brown pony, such as Mr. Richards described."

"Then there can be no mistake, amazing as the matter is!" said Dr. Chisholm. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Richards, for—having testified a very marked unbelief——"

"Not at all, sir," said the young man in Norfolk politely. "I am sure it must have been a great shock to you."

"A very great shock, indeed!" said the Head. "Even now I can scarcely believe a Rookwood boy capable of so wicked a theft—and of such open and crass folly in committing it!"

"I have not spoken of theft, sir," said Mr. Richards. "I brought the officer with me in case there should be need of assistance. Also, he is aware that the pony and cart are my property. If the person who purloined my property should dispute the matter, of course, I must call upon the law. But I hope—I trust—that it may turn out to be nothing more serious than a foolish schoolboy practical joke."

Lovell heard, but without comprehending. His brain was in a whirl.

"We shall see!" said the Head. "Lovell, do you admit having brought this gentleman's pony and cart into the school?"

Lovell gasped.

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Have you brought any pony and cart into the school, as Mack has informed Bulkeley?"

"Yes, sir; my own!"

"Your own!" exclaimed the Head.

"Yes; my pony and cart!" stammered Lovell. "Certainly, sir! Bought and paid for with my own money, sir!"

"Bless my soul!" said the Head.

"If this gentleman has lost a pony and cart I can't help it," said Lovell, recovering a little. "It's like his cheek to think that I know anything about it!" Lovell gave Mr. Richards a defiant look. "You've no right to suggest anything of the kind!" he blurted out.

Mr. Richards eyed him very curiously.

"Listen to me, Lovell," said the Head, in a grim voice. "Mr. Richards has explained to me that he was on a walking tour in Sussex with a little pony and cart, which carried his baggage. He left the pony tied up in the lane——"

"There wasn't baggage in the cart I bought, sir!" said Lovell.

"Let me explain," interposed Mr. Richards. "I have reached the end of my tour, and my baggage has been sent home by train. The pony and cart I intended to leave with a friend who lives near Coombe, to be taken care of for the present. I was on my way to his house with them when I went into the wood to take some photographs, leaving the pony tied up by the roadside on the grass. When I returned, about half an hour later, they were gone. I immediately called at the local police-station, and Mr. Boggs was kind enough to assist me——"

"Not at all, sir!" murmured Mr. Boggs.

"We soon learned that more than one person had seen the cart driven away by a schoolboy, who wore the Rookwood colours," said Mr. Richards. "I therefore came on here at once with Mr. Boggs to claim my property. But I repeat I charge no one with theft. I'm inclined to believe that the whole thing is an exceedingly foolish practical joke."

Lovell felt his head spinning again.

Was it possible that there had been two little green carts, with little fat brown

ponies attached in Coombe Lane at the same time—one outfit belonging to Mr. Richards, and the other to Mr. Walker?

It seemed highly improbable.

Then what did it all mean?

"Well, Lovell!" The Head's voice was grinding. "What have you to say now? Mr. Richards is taking a lenient—a very lenient view—of the matter. To my mind it is undoubted that you took possession of his property, whether for a foolish joke or with a darker purpose."

Lovell wiped his perspiring forehead. It was borne in upon him, in spite of himself, that there was only one pony and cart in the affair. But if that was Mr. Richards' property, where did Mr. Walker come in?

"You state," continued the Head, "that you bought a pony and cart—a sufficiently remarkable proceeding for a Fourth Form boy. I will give you a hearing, however. At what establishment did you make this extraordinary purchase?"

"I—I bought it of a man——" said Lovell weakly.

"His name?"

"Walker," said Lovell.

"Walker!" repeated Mr. Richards, with a faint smile.

Only at that moment did the slangy significance of the name strike Lovell.

"And where was this man?" asked the Head.

"In—in Coombe Lane."

"What?"

"The pony and cart were tied up by the roadside," faltered Lovell. "The—the man Walker was snoozing—I mean, napping—that is, resting in the grass. He—he told me he was fed up with touring with the outfit, and—and offered to sell it to me. I—I've got his receipt for the money."

The Head adjusted his glasses, and gave Arthur Edward Lovell a very special scrutinising blink.

"Give me the receipt," he said.

Lovell handed it over, without a word. His face was crimson now. The terrible truth was dawning on his mind.

The Head glanced at the paper, and laid it on his desk. The corners of his mouth twitched.

"You incredibly stupid boy!" he said. "Had you any reason to believe that this Walker was the owner of the pony and trap he sold you?"

"I—I—I supposed so!" groaned Lovell,

"He—he—he was resting just near it—just as if he had just tied it up. Oh dear!"

"I accept your statement, Lovell," said the Head. "It is clear to me that you have acted with crass stupidity in allowing yourself to be swindled in the most palpable manner by a worthless character. The man was probably some disreputable person, and it is clear that he had no right to sell the pony and cart at all."

Lovell suppressed a groan. He knew that now.

"Mr. Richards, I trust you take the same view—that you recognise that this foolish lad had no dishonest intentions?"

"Most certainly, sir," said Mr. Richards. "I never dreamed of such an explanation of the incident; but I believe every word the lad has uttered. It is clear that he has been cruelly taken in by an unscrupulous rascal. Certainly, he should not have been so—so confiding."

"So crassly stupid, you mean, no doubt," said the Head grimly.

"Ahem!" murmured Mr. Richards.

"I've been done, sir," said Lovell. "I—I'm sorry you've had this trouble, sir. It's rotten enough for me. My money's gone, and we shan't have the turn-out for our holiday! Oh dear! It—it's in the stables now, sir; you can take it away with you."

Lovell's voice almost broke.

The Head, with something of compassion in his severe face, signed to Lovell to leave the study. Arthur Edward almost tottered out.

He limped out into the quadrangle, where he found the Co. waiting for him, with scared faces. They surrounded him at once.

Lovell made a defensive gesture.

"Don't pile it on me, you fellows!" he groaned. "It's bad enough. "I—I was diddled by some awful rotter—just a beast, you know, who took me in! He hadn't any right to sell the contraption at all; it belongs to Mr. Richards. Oh crikey!"

"Some fellows," said Raby, addressing space, "know how to make a bargain. Some fellows know how to manage."

Lovell only groaned by way of response. He was so utterly crushed by the awful outcome of his wonderful bargain that his chums took pity on him, and forbore to rub it in. They were only too glad that Arthur Edward was not, after all, to be

charged with stealing that marvellous bargain.

The portly form of P. c. Boggs came out of the House. There was a grin on his fat face as he passed Lovell. A few minutes later Mr. Richards came out, and he glanced about him, and came towards the Fistical Four. There was a smile on his handsome, sun-browned face.

Lovell looked at him speechlessly.

"You've had bad luck, my young friend," said Mr. Richards genially. "Another time you must be a little more careful about placing so much faith in strangers. I am afraid you stand to lose eight pounds ten shillings over this unfortunate affair."

"I'm not likely to see it again!" mumbled Lovell.

"We'll whack it out, old chap, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver. "It's all in the Co."

"You were saying something," went on Mr. Richards, "about having bought my pony and cart—I mean, the pony and cart—to use on a holiday trip."

"That was the idea, sir," said Lovell, "I—I—"

"Well, perhaps your loss need not be so very serious, after all," said the sunburnt young man. "I mentioned that I had finished my trip, and was going to leave the pony and cart with a friend to be taken care of. Suppose, instead of doing so, I lend them to you for your vacation?"

"Wha-a-at?"

"When your holidays are over, you will return them to the address I will give you. You are very welcome," added Mr. Richards, with a smile. "I am sure you will use my little pony kindly, and that is all I care about!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. simply blinked at the young man. This was like the sun coming out after a very cloudy day. Lovell brightened up wonderfully.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped. "You—you mean it?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Richards, with a smile. "I have already mentioned my little idea to your headmaster, and if you care to use my little outfit for your holidays, it is at your service."

"You—you—you're a brick, sir!" gasped Lovell.

"Hurrah!" chortled the Co.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked down to the

gates with Mr. Richards, like a guard of honour round a very distinguished visitor. Never had they seen a young man whom they liked so well as this cheery sunburnt young gentleman. And after he had departed, overwhelmed with thanks, the Fistical Four gathered in the end study, and there, at last, now that the clouds had rolled by, Lovell's chums told him what they thought of him. But Arthur Edward did not mind; he was too happy for that.

CHAPTER 5.

The Pony that Wouldn't Go!

"SEEMS an awful lot of stuff!" Putty Grace of the Fourth made that remark.

He was looking into the little cart which was to accompany the chums of Rookwood on their holiday tramp.

It was a handy little cart, fitted with lockers, and with an amazing amount of storage capacity considering its diminutive size.

It was full now almost to overflowing.

Everything that was necessary for the trip—or that was considered necessary—was dumped into the little cart, and it had grown fuller and fuller.

Arthur Edward Lovell had remarked that they would sort the things out and get them into order later on; and it really looked as if a lot of sorting out and getting into order would be needed.

Half a dozen ground-sheets were spread over the top of the load, which rose in a pyramidal form in the cart.

"Plenty there for Trotsky to carry!" Putty added.

Trotsky was the pony.

The juniors had named him Trotsky; not because of his trotting powers, but because he hated work.

"Oh, he's a good pony!" said Raby. "He'll pull that little lot all right. We can give a shove up the hills."

"We shall want it all," said Newcome. "Can't do without the cricket things."

"The blessed load seems to have grown a lot bigger than I thought," said Jimmy Silver; "but when it's all packed it will be all right."

"We ought really to pack it before we go," said Putty.

"Well, we think of something fresh every minute," said Newcome. "We'll turn it out at the first camp and pack properly. How long is Lovell going to be with that pony?"

Arthur Edward Lovell was fetching Trotsky from the stables.

All was ready now for the start.

The Co. had made all arrangements about their boxes, they had said their good-byes; and now all that remained was to harness Trotsky and take the road from the school gates.

Many hands assisted to harness Trotsky. That intelligent animal allowed himself to be harnessed with admirable placidity.

Then the Rookwooders led him away.

A grinning crowd followed them into the road. The heavily-laden cart rocked a little behind Trotsky, and several times a false alarm was raised that the baggage was coming down with a run. On the open road Conroy and Van Ryn and Pons and Oswald pushed behind to give Trotsky a start with his burden. But Trotsky did not move.

"He wants the stump," said Raby.

"Come on, old hoss!" urged Jimmy Silver.

"If you won't leave him to me you can't expect him to go," said Lovell. "You see

"Cheese it! Come up, you brute!"

"Stump him!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, waving back Raby, who was grasping a cricket stump. "He's doing his best, I believe. The wheel's caught, or something."

There was a sudden roar from Lovell.

"Those funny idiots are holding the cart."

"Why the—the—the—" gasped Jimmy Silver.

The Fistical Four rushed round the cart. Conroy & Co. were supposed to be pushing behind, instead of which they were holding on, with their feet firmly planted in the ground. It was no wonder that Trotsky couldn't get going, in the circumstances.

Conroy & Co. were grinning, enjoying their little joke. But Raby found a use for his stump, and the practical jokers ceased to grin.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

"Here, stoppit!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Whooooop!"

Trotsky started quite suddenly as the cart was released.

"Off at last!" said Jimmy Silver. And the Rookwood tramps started.

CHAPTER 6. Unexpected!

"WE shall have to get rid of some of it," said Jimmy Silver decidedly.

He was referring to the baggage in the cart.

Trotsky appeared now to be in a willing humour. Either he was willing to work, or unwilling to take any more stumps. Whether it was willingness or unwillingness, he was doing his best, and no pony could do more than that.

But the laden cart was a hefty proposition for Trotsky. On the hills he simply couldn't do it, and the juniors had to help. They shoved behind the cart and strove at turning the wheels when the road was steep, and there are some very steep roads in the Sussex downs.

Downhill the going was easy—too easy in places; but on the rises it was a case of all hands to the mill.

"We've only put in what was necessary," remarked Lovell. "Of course, we shall have to pack it in better order."

"That won't make it lighter," observed Putty Grace.

"Here's another blessed hill!" said Newcome, after a time. "Now, then, all hands shove at the bus!"

Jimmy Silver paused. Ahead of the Rookwooders the road rose to the brow of a down, and the ascent was a good mile in length, with a fairly sharp rise to it. Shoving a baggage-cart up that acclivity was not really an attractive occupation on a hot, sunny afternoon.

"Hold on!" said Jimmy. "If we're going to clear off some of the lumber, the sooner the better. Let's go through it now."

"What can we get rid of?" demanded Lovell. "Want to throw the cricket things overboard?"

"No; but—"

"Or the tent?"

"We shall want the tent. But—"

"Lovell's boots!" murmured Raby.

But Arthur Edward looked so ferocious that he did not finish.

"Perhaps we can carry a few more things in our rucksacks," said Jimmy Silver mildly. "Anyhow, let's see what can be done."

"We want the lot!" said Lovell doggedly. "I'll eat anything you find in that cart that we can do without."

"Let's see, anyway."

"Waste of time!" said Lovell.

Lovell seemed to be in an argumentative mood that day.

But a halt was made, notwithstanding, and the baggage-cart drawn up on the grass by the roadside. Trotsky contentedly cropped the grass there, seeming to like that occupation better than pulling uphill.

Jimmy Silver & Co. began to unpack the baggage. Arthur Edward Lovell looked on with a lofty expression of sarcasm.

There were plenty of things in the cart—cookery utensils, ground-sheets, tents, and bats and stumps, and some books, and a writing-case, and other things. But the juniors had really been rather careful in keeping their luggage within limits, and it was rather a puzzle how the load came to be so very heavy.

The ground-sheets were taken off, and then the tent was unloaded. And then there was a sudden yell of astonishment from Jimmy Silver & Co.

From the bottom of the cart, amid the various articles there, a fat, red face stared at the juniors, and two round, sleepy eyes blinked at them.

"Tubby!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"Muffin!"

"You fat villain!"

Tubby Muffin blinked at the juniors. They did not blink at him, they glared.

It was easy to understand now why the load had been so heavy. Tubby Muffin was not a feather-weight. His circumference was considerable, and his avoirdupois in proportion.

"I—I say—," gasped Muffin.

"Tubby!" howled Lovell. "Why, the fat villain's hid himself in our cart!"

"Under the baggage!" gasped Raby.

"I—I say, Jimmy—"

"Lynch him!" roared Lovell.

"I—I say, I knew you chaps wanted me to come!" said Muffin. "I—I say, I knew it was only your little joke, you

know, so I—I got in, you know. I say, it was awfully warm under all that stuff! I don't mind, though, as—as you're glad to see me!"

"I—I—I'll——" stuttered Jimmy Silver. "I wish you hadn't stopped so suddenly," said Tubby Muffin. "I was having a little snooze, and you woke me up. I was dreaming of pork-pies."

"I'll give you something else to dream about!" roared Lovell. "Hand me a stump!"

"I—I say, old chap——"
"Roll out, you fat villain!" snapped Jimmy Silver.

"I'm all right here," said Muffin, blinking at him. "I told you that if I came I should have to ride. I can't hoof it like you fellows. If you're camping here, I'll get out, of course. I'm ready for tea, if you come to that. I hope you've brought plenty of grub. I—— Yaroooooh!"

Tubby Muffin was interrupted. A grip of iron fastened on his collar, and he came out of the baggage-cart and landed in the road with a resounding bump. And the yell that Muffin gave as he landed woke the echoes of the downs far and wide.

CHAPTER 7.

Tubby, Too!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. gathered round Tubby Muffin with deadly looks.

For miles—long, weary miles—they had shoved along the baggage-cart over hilly roads, helping Trotsky to do his duty. And all that labour had been expended on Reginald Muffin.

It was Muffin's weight that had made all the difference. Without him Trotsky's task would have been a mere promenade.

"Slaughter him!" said Raby.
"Give him five hundred with a stump, and sling him into the ditch!" said Lovell.
"Yaroooooh!"

"Lovell was going to eat anything we found in the cart that we could do without!" chuckled Newcome.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I think we can do without Muffin!" grinned Jimmy.

"I—I say, Jimmy, you can't, you know!" gasped Muffin. "Suppose—suppose you meet a gang of tramps. You'll want a chap with you who can put up a fight."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The fact is, I'm not going to leave you," said Tubby. "I've refused a lot of invitations to come with you, and it's too late now. There's plenty of room in the cart for one passenger, so what have you got to grumble at? You fellows were going to walk, anyway."

"Oh, bump him!" growled Lovell.

"Hold on," said Jimmy Silver. "Now Tubby's here, let's make the best of him."

"That's right," said Tubby. "You really can't do without me, you know. You want the excursion to be a success, don't you?"

"Look here——" began Lovell.

"Tubby's joined up," said Jimmy Silver. "We'll keep him as long as he likes to stay. Shut up, Lovell, old chap! I don't think he'll want to stay long. Let's get going again."

"But——" expostulated Lovell.

"Oh, cheese it, Lovell!" said Tubby briskly. "My old pal Jimmy is leader of this party. If you think there's too many, you can hop out!"

"What?" roared Lovell.
"You're not indispensable," said Tubby. "Now, I am. That's where the difference comes in, you know."

"Why, I—I'll——"
"You talk too much, old chap," said Tubby.

Jimmy Silver jerked his incensed chum away in time to prevent a serious case of assault and battery.

"Pack up!" he said.
Arthur Edward Lovell snorted emphatically, but he acquiesced. It dawned upon Arthur Edward's rather slow understanding that Jimmy was pulling the fat leg of Reginald Muffin.

Tubby sat on a knoll, while the juniors re-packed the baggage-cart. When the cart was drawn out into the road again Tubby prepared to mount.

He was jerked off.
"Walk!" said Jimmy Silver tersely.

Tubby expostulated.
"Now, I told you that I wasn't going to walk, Jimmy," he said. "If I'm to be a member of this party, I've got to ride. I told you so. I'm getting into the cart."
"I'll soon get you out again!" grunted Lovell.

"This is a walking party," explained Jimmy Silver. "You can walk in which

direction you like, Tubby, but you're walking. Catch on?"

"Look here, Jimmy——"

"Start!" said Jimmy Silver.

"I'll jolly well go back to Rookwood and take the train home!" roared Tubby Muffin.

"Go hon!"

The Rookwooders re-started after the interval, so to speak; and Tubby Muffin blinked after them wrathfully. He finally decided that he would walk.

He rolled after the party with a frowning face.

Tubby was quite determined to bag a cheap holiday that vacation; and as walking was a sine qua non, Tubby walked. But he grunted and groaned and complained at every other step.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not heed.

They tramped on cheerily; and Trotsky, with a lighter load, pulled cheerily too, and the Rookwooders made a good speed.

The speed was too good for Tubby Muffin. As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver & Co. were putting on a speed they did not intend to keep up permanently, for the special benefit and behoof of Reginald Muffin. They covered the ground in great style, and Tubby's little fat legs went like machinery to keep pace.

"I—I say, when are you camping?" gasped Tubby at last. The perspiration was pouring down his fat face.

"Camping?" repeated Jimmy. "Oh, about midnight, perhaps!"

"Midnight!" yelled the hapless Tubby.

"Feeling a bit fagged, Tubby?" asked Putty Grace sympathetically.

"Ow! Yes!"

"Why not sit down in the grass and rest?"

"You fellows will wait for me?"

"Oh, no."

"Why, you rotter, I should be left behind, then."

"Exactly."

"Yah!"

Tubby Muffin did not sit down to rest. He tramped on doggedly, determined that by hook or by crook he was going to be a member of the holiday party. But with every mile his fat little legs covered, Tubby found that prospect less and less attractive.

There was room in the cart for one, be-

sides the baggage; and Tubby did not see why he should not be that one. He had quite made up his fat mind that he was going to be that one.

But if Jimmy Silver & Co. meant business, there was a prospect before Tubby of endless tramping up hill and down dale—a prospect that had no fascination for him whatever.

That was not Tubby's idea of a holiday. His idea of a holiday was to ride while other fellows walked, and to rest while other fellows worked. On those lines Tubby had intended to enjoy quite a happy time.

But it was growing obvious that the affair was to be run on quite other lines.

Tubby's footsteps lagged more and more. He tried hanging on behind the cart by way of a rest, but he was jerked off by his fellow-travellers. It was Shanks' pony or nothing!

Tubby was not in a condition for strenuous exercise—and he hated exercise, anyway. His fat legs were developing an ache that was really stupendous.

Jimmy Silver & Co., in point of fact, were getting tired, and they would have camped, but for Tubby Muffin! For Tubby's benefit, the march was prolonged, as the sun sank lower and lower in the west; and the cheery juniors carefully concealed all signs of fatigue, and chatted of the uncounted miles they were going to cover before morning.

The sight of a long stretch of road ahead, rising steeply for a couple of miles, finished Tubby.

It had rather a dismaying effect upon Jimmy Silver & Co., though they gave no sign.

"Going to camp now, Jimmy?" asked Tubby in an expiring voice.

"My dear chap, we've got miles before us——"

"You can't get over that hill this evening," urged Tubby.

"You never know what you can do till you try."

"I—I say, I've got a pain."

"That's all right, you'll get used to it."

"I—I think my ankle's sprained."

"Hop on the other foot, then."

"Yah!"

Tubby Muffin tramped on drearily. Then suddenly he gave a howl, and fell! Jimmy

Silver & Co. stopped. On the dusty road Tubby Muffin lay, without a sign of life! "He's fainted!" said Jimmy Silver gravely.

CHAPTER 8.

Tubby Is Too Clever!

TUBBY MUFFIN lay with his eyes closed. He opened one eye cautiously, but closed it again very quickly as he found the juniors standing round him, looking at him.

"Fainted!" said Jimmy. "Can't leave him lying in the road unconscious. Might be run over by a motor-car."

"Poor old Muffin!" said Putty. "Shall we put him into the cart, as he's fainted?"

For a second there was a grin on the fat face of the unconscious youth. But Tubby remembered, and composed his fat features again.

Jimmy Silver winked at his comrades.

That Tubby was shamming was obvious, but the fat youth was under the impression that he had completely taken in the walking-party.

"Well, I don't know about putting him into the cart," said Jimmy. "As he's fainted, we'd better be very careful with him."

"Awfully careful!" said Raby in a tone of deep seriousness. "What are we going to do, Jimmy?"

"Well, suppose we camp?" suggested Jimmy Silver, closing one eye at his comrades. "We'll make Muffin a comfortable bed in those trees, and let him rest for a bit. I dare say he will come round by the time supper's ready."

"The smell of cooking will revive him, if anything will!" grinned Putty.

"None of your jokes, Putty, when poor old Muffin's fainted!" said Jimmy Silver severely. "Lucky there's a village close handy. Muffin couldn't have fainted in a more convenient spot for camping."

"There's a railway-station there," said Lovell. "Suppose we put him into a train for home?"

That suggestion caused the unconscious Muffin to make a sudden movement which nearly made the juniors burst into a roar of laughter. Fortunately, they succeeded in preserving their gravity. In spite of his

unconsciousness, Muffin was listening eagerly to every word.

"That won't do," said Jimmy. "Of course, if Muffin wanted to get home he could take a train from there. But Muffin is really such jolly company, so considerate, you know, and so unselfish, that it would be very painful to part with him. Let's find him a comfy place and give him a good rest, unless he comes to. If he comes to, of course, we'll go on, and Muffin can go on walking."

Tubby Muffin had been debating in his fat mind whether it was time to "come to." But at those words he decided to remain unconscious. His sudden faint was evidently having the desired effect—at least, so it seemed to the fat and fatuous Tubby.

"Lift him carefully," said Jimmy Silver.

The fat junior was lifted from the ground.

Gently and tenderly he was carried out of the dusty road into the shady wood by the roadside.

It was no light task, even for the sturdy juniors. Carrying Muffin made them comprehend even more clearly why Trotsky had found his load so heavy when the journey started.

But they managed it, and Tubby was laid gently in the grass a score of feet from the road in the shade of the trees.

"Now he'll be all right," said Jimmy Silver. "Leave him here for a bit, and he'll soon be recovered, I dare say by the time we come back for him."

And the juniors trod lightly away.

Tubby Muffin opened one eye cautiously. Then he opened the other. He grinned as he had a view of the juniors' backs disappearing through the trees.

"Fairly diddled, by gum!" murmured Tubby Muffin. "He, he, he! I hope they won't be long getting supper. He, he, he!"

He sat up to look after the juniors. As Lovell glanced back, Tubby hastily lay down again.

For a moment he was oppressed by a dread that Lovell had observed him, and he half expected Arthur Edward to rush back, proclaiming that he had been spoofing. But Lovell didn't. Apparently, he had observed nothing.

Tubby breathed more freely as the minutes passed, and there were no returning footsteps. Evidently Jimmy Silver & Co. had been completely spoofed, and they

were going to camp, and Tubby was going to be treated as an interesting invalid.

Meanwhile Jimmy Silver & Co., screened from Tubby's view by the trees, were not selecting a spot for camping. Jimmy had said that Tubby would probably have recovered by the time they came back for him. It was highly probable, unless Tubby remained in a permanent state of shamming.

The five juniors trod out softly into the road, and Trotsky was drawn on the grass beside the highway so that his departing footsteps would make no sound.

Then the Rookwooders marched on.

They grinned, but they did not venture to laugh till they had covered quite a good distance. Then they chortled gleefully.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were still on the march, with the miles lengthening behind them, when Tubby Muffin "came to." He was growing surprised at being left so long, and he was growing hungry.

He decided at last that he had better recover without being called for, and he rose to his feet and started looking for the Rookwood camp. He did not find it.

For about an hour Tubby Muffin sought for the camp, and scanned the road for a sign of Trotsky and the Rookwooders.

Then it dawned upon his fat brain that he would not see Jimmy Silver & Co. again till the next term started at Rookwood School, and with feelings too deep for words Tubby rolled away to the railway-station, no longer rejoicing in his astuteness and presence of mind.

CHAPTER 9.

Trouble on the Road!

"IT'S a giddy block in the traffic!" said Jimmy Silver.

The Rookwooders grinned.

There was not much "traffic" in that narrow, sunken lane on the borders of Sussex and Kent—in fact, Jimmy Silver & Co. had not had the slightest expectation of meeting any vehicle there.

The lane was not only narrow, but the earth was banked up on either side to a height of several feet, with hedges at the top of the steep slopes up to the fields.

Along the lane the Rookwood holiday tramps were cheerfully wending their way when the farm-cart came in sight ahead.

Jimmy Silver was leading Trotsky, the pony, with the little baggage-cart thumping over the ruts behind Trotsky's whisking tail. Arthur Edward Lovell walked on the other side of Trotsky. Raby and Newcome and Putty Grace strolled along beside the cart.

Narrow as the lane was, there was plenty of room for the Rookwood outfit. But the farm wagon ahead, coming towards them, filled the lane from side to side, the hubs of the wheels brushing against the ferns and nettles on the banks.

The wagon had turned suddenly out of a field gate—the fat, ruddy man who was driving it calmly taking possession of the whole road, without a glance ahead to see whether the way was clear.

A few minutes more and the Rookwood outfit would have passed the gate, leaving a free road for the wagon. Now the road was completely blocked for them, and also for the farmer, for there was no room for either party to pass the other.

"Halt!" said Lovell.

Jimmy drew Trotsky to a stop. Trotsky was always very obedient at such moments. It was in moments of starting that Trotsky revealed the fact that he had a will of his own.

But the wagon did not stop. It came rumbling on, as if it would overwhelm the little baggage-cart with its bulk.

Jimmy waved his hand to the ruddy-faced man.

"Hold on!" he shouted.

"Gerrouf of the way!"

"What?"

"Clear the road there!"

"Why, the cheeky ass!" exclaimed Lovell indignantly.

The man in the wagon was not a pleasant-looking gentleman. Perhaps the hot weather affected his temper. He had bulldog features and bushy red whiskers, and a very cross countenance. He cracked his whip and waved it at the juniors. He did not stop the wagon until his horse's nose was nearly touching Trotsky's—the gigantic farm-horse looming over the little pony like an elephant.

"Don't you hear me?" roared the big man with the whiskers. "Get that thing out of the road."

"It's for you to get out of the road," retorted Jimmy Silver. "Back into the gate again."

"Likely!" said the gentleman with the whiskers.

"We should have to back a mile or more," said Jimmy Silver. "That's the nearest where you could pass on."

"Well, do it!"

"Go and eat coke!" roared Lovell, in great indignation. "Don't you know the rules of the road? You've only a dozen yards to back."

"Clear the road, I tell you!"

"You oughtn't to have turned out of the gate before we'd passed," said Jimmy Silver. "You should have looked first."

The big man cracked his whip again.

"I've no time to waste talking," he said. "If you don't shift, I'll run you down."

The five juniors simply glared at him. Having matters in his own hands, the big man was carrying it off high-handedly, without the slightest regard for fair play or the rules of the road.

"Look here, Whiskers——" shouted Raby. "Oh, my hat!" George Raby jumped back just in time to escape a flick of the long whip from the wagon.

"You confounded rotter!" roared Lovell.

"Are you shifting?" inquired the big man. "I'm driving on, anyhow. You can take your chance if you don't shift."

And he set the gigantic horse in motion.

Jimmy Silver grabbed at Trotsky and backed him hastily. He suspected that the red-faced man had been drinking; anyhow, it was evident that Whiskers did not mean to listen to reason. And as the Rookwood outfit had been lent to the juniors for the holidays, they certainly couldn't have it run down—apart from other considerations.

There was no room in the narrow lane for even the pony and the little baggage-cart to turn. It had to back; and it backed, first of all, into the bank, and when it was steered off that bank, it promptly backed into the other. Trotsky was a useful pony, but he was not accustomed to back-pedalling, as it were.

Five excited and wrathful juniors clung round the baggage-cart and guided the wheels, and backed the pony; and all the time the big farm-horse and the wagon loomed over them, and the big-whiskered man grinned down at them in a most exasperating way.

For a quarter of a mile the Rookwood outfit backed, in hot haste and hot sun-

shine, with tempers reaching boiling-point.

Fortunately, there they reached one of the little "bays" which are arranged in narrow country lanes for carts to draw into when other vehicles have to pass.

Trotsky and the baggage-cart were successfully backed into that little space, leaving the road clear for the farmer.

He cracked his whip and grinned as he drove by.

The Fistical Four glared at him in speechless wrath; but Putty Grace, with great presence of mind, jerked a pea-shooter out of the cart. Putty was a good shot. In an instant he was ready with his weapon of offence, and as the grinning farmer drove by, the first pea flew almost like a bullet, and it caught the big man under the ear.

"Yow!" ejaculated Whiskers, suddenly.

"Go it, Putty!" gasped Lovell, in great delight.

Whiz, whiz, whiz! Putty was going it! The tiny but stinging missiles fairly rained over the fat, red-whiskered face. The big man did not grin any more, the humour of the situation was now lost on him. He drew the wagon to a halt, jumped down, and rushed at the Rookwood juniors, brandishing his long whip.

CHAPTER 10.

Rough on Whiskers!

"LINE up!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

The five Rookwood juniors lined up promptly to meet the rush of the big gentleman with the whiskers.

In the wagon, Whiskers had had all the advantage over the little two-wheeled baggage-cart, but hand to hand, the Fourth-Formers of Rookwood had no doubt that they could give a good account of themselves—no doubt whatever.

With his red face redder than ever with wrath, the big man rushed down on them, his whip lashing through the air. Putty Grace just dodged the lash, and before the big man's arm could go up again, the Fistical Four had closed in on him.

Four pairs of hands grasped him at once, and he came over with a crash in the grasp of the four.

He gave a loud, breathless grunt as he

handed in the lane. What happened next Whiskers probably never knew clearly.

But he found himself lying on his back, half in the lane, half in the nettles, on the sloping bank, with a couple of juniors standing on his legs and one sitting on each of his arms, and another gripping him by the collar.

He struggled terrifically, and he was a powerful man, but he was not quite good enough for five sturdy fellows who were quite as resolute as himself.

"Let go!" bawled Whiskers, crimson with fury. "Gerrup! Lerrup! Gerroff!"

"Keep smiling, old bean!" said Jimmy Silver, rather breathlessly.

"I—I—I'll——"

"You're a road-hog, old nut," said Putty Grace severely, "and you're bad-tempered! In these sweet and pastoral surroundings you ought to be calm, placid, and good-tempered. You see that?"

"Let me up!" roared Whiskers, struggling furiously. "I'll smash you! I'll wallop you! Lemme up!"

"What an inducement to us to let him up!" murmured Putty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—groogh!—young scoundrels—oooch——"

The enraged man struggled and heaved beneath the juniors, but they held him fast. Putty looped the long lash of the whip, and Lovell and Raby dragged the big hands together.

The loop was slipped over the wrists and drawn tight. Putty knotted it scientifically in the best style of a first-class Boy Scout.

"Now the dear gent won't do any harm," said Putty. "Can't waste any more time teaching him manners!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Rookwooders rolled the big man into the nettles and left him. He rolled and struggled and sat up, jerking savagely at the bonds on his wrists. But for the fact that his hands were tied, most certainly there would have been a terrific affray on the spot.

Jimmy Silver & Co. returned to Trotsky, who was cheerfully cropping the grass.

"Good-bye, Gilbert!" called out Putty Grace, waving his hand.

"Farewell, Freddy!" chuckled Lovell.

The farmer struggled to his feet.

"Take this here off!" he roared. "How am I to drive my hoss with my hands like this here?"

"Is that a conundrum?" asked Putty.

"You young rips——"

"You'll work it loose in time," said Jimmy Silver consolingly. "Say half an hour. That will give you time to reflect on the trouble caused by bad temper, dear man!"

"You—you—you——"

"Ta-ta, Whiskers!"

The chums of Rookwood wended their way onward again with Trotsky, leaving Whiskers struggling with the whiplash.

He disappeared behind a bend of the lane, though his voice could be heard for quite a long time across the intervening fields.

Jimmy Silver & Co. passed the gate of the field whence the wagon had emerged, having lost a good hour's time owing to the obstinacy of Mr. Whiskers. But they were comforted by the knowledge that Whiskers had probably lost as much.

"That would be a jolly good field for camping," remarked Arthur Edward Lovell, with a glance over the gate.

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"As it probably belongs to Whiskers, we'll give it a miss," he replied. "I hardly think he would be hospitable if we camped on his land."

"Perhaps not!" chuckled Lovell.

The Rookwood tramps pushed on till they came to a cross-roads. The sun was sinking in a blaze of purple and gold, but it was still very hot. At the cross-roads the adventurers paused and looked about them.

There was a signpost, which, like so many signposts in the rural parts of England, was too weather-battered to be read.

The juniors had the satisfaction, such as it was, of learning from it that it was five miles to some place of which the name could not be read, and three miles to another place of which the name was obliterated.

That information might be interesting, but it was not useful.

"We've done about twenty miles to-day," said Lovell. "Time we had a rest."

"Not much more than ten, I think," said Raby.

"Twenty-two or three, I fancy," said

Lovell, who always had a strong bias in favour of his own opinion. "If we'd come under twenty I shouldn't feel fagged. I do feel fagged."

Which was a clincher!

"Well, there's water yonder," said Putty of the Fourth, pointing down one branch of the lane. "We want water for camping. Let's try in that direction."

"I can't see any water," said Lovell.

"It runs low between the banks."

"That's all very well," said Arthur Edward. "But as it runs low between the banks, out of sight, I don't quite see how you know that it's there, Mr. Cocksure Putty!"

"Dear man!" said Putty.

"Well, how do you know?" demanded Lovell.

"You see, there's a bridge. The lane runs over a little wooden bridge yonder," said Putty patiently and kindly. "Bridges often mean water under them—not always, of course."

"Oh, so there is!" said Lovell, making out the rustic bridge through the trees. "Well, a bridge means a stream always."

"Not always. Often!" murmured Putty.

"Always," asserted Lovell, "unless it's a railway cutting, and you can see it isn't that."

"My dear chap, there's another bridge here that hasn't anything under it but a huge gap," said Putty.

"I don't see it!" said Lovell, staring round him.

"I do!"

"Well, where is it?" demanded Arthur Edward warmly.

Putty tapped him gently and unexpectedly on the nose.

"There!" he explained.

It took Lovell, whose intellect did not work rapidly, about a minute to realise that it was the bridge of his nose that Putty was alluding to. By that time Putty was well along the lane, going ahead so as to lose Lovell's further remarks, which were emphatic and personal.

Trotzky and the juniors followed on behind Putty, who reached the little wooden bridge well ahead of them.

He stopped and sat on the low parapet to wait for them, looking down at the stream that ran beneath between steep, rushy, and reedy banks.

Then all of a sudden, to the amazement of his comrades, Putty jumped on the parapet, threw his hands together, and dived off, and vanished from sight.

CHAPTER 11.

Rookwooders to the Rescue!

"WHAT the thump——"

"Putty!"

"What the dickens——"

In their amazement, Jimmy Silver & Co. stood and stared at the empty bridge ahead from which Putty of the Fourth had so suddenly vanished.

Why a fellow should dive into a stream with his clothes on was a deep mystery to the Fistical Four.

"He's potty!" growled Lovell.

"There's something up!" said Jimmy Silver quickly.

And, leaving the outfit, the captain of the Rookwood Fourth raced forward to the bridge, reaching it in a few seconds.

He stared over the low wooden parapet into the stream.

"Good heavens!" gasped Jimmy.

He could see now why Putty had dived from the bridge. Down the stream a little girl's hat was floating on the current, and Putty, swimming strongly, had just reached its owner and dragged her to the surface. It was a child of five or six. And a number of red poppies, scattered on the steep bank and floating on the current, showed that the little girl had been gathering flowers, when she had lost her footing and fallen in. The stream was not deep, but it was swift, and Putty was only just in time to save the child from being swept away under the bridge to certain death.

"Hold on, Putty!" shouted Jimmy.

"What's up?" bawled Lovell, from the road.

Jimmy Silver did not heed that question if he heard it. He could see that Putty was in difficulties, and he stayed only to throw off his hat and his jacket, and then he dived.

He came up a yard or two from Putty, who was swimming with one hand, and supporting the child with the other.

Jimmy was with him in a twinkling, and relieved him of his burden. But there was no hold on the banks, and they were

swept under the bridge together, the child between them, quite unconscious.

Lovell reached the bridge, and stared over in bewilderment.

"Well, of all the potty duffers!" ejaculated Lovell. "Fancy fellows jumping into the water with their clobber on! I'd jolly well like a swim after that dashed dust, but—"

"Help!"

Raby and Newcome ran to the other side of the bridge. Then, seeing what was on, they scrambled down to the bank.

"Come on, Lovell!" yelled Raby.

"What about the pony?" howled back Lovell. "Are you going to leave the pony to wander away?"

"Come on!" bawled Newcome.

"Rot! The pony will clear off if I do. What's on, anyway?"

Raby and Newcome did not answer that. They were wading waist-deep in the water, holding on to long branches of willows, to help Jimmy Silver and Putty of the Fourth. The current was swift and strong, but with a determined effort the two swimmers reached them, and Raby and Newcome clutched hold of them—anyhow, anywhere, so long as they got hold. Jimmy was captured by his collar, and Putty by his hair. But they were secured.

"All serene now!" gasped Raby, dragging at Putty.

"Yaroooh!"

"You're all right!" panted Raby, dragging Putty into the willows.

"Ow! Wow! Yow!" shrieked Putty. "Leggo my hair! You're pulling it out by the roots! Yooop!"

Putty got his head away from Raby's helping hand at last. Jimmy Silver, with Newcome's help, scrambled up the steep bank with the little girl in his strong grasp. The whole party, drenched to the skin and dripping, clambered back to the bridge, where they found Arthur Edward Lovell holding the pony, still in sublime unconsciousness of all that had been going on.

"Well, of all the idiots—" began Lovell. Then he caught sight of the little girl, and stopped suddenly. "Why—why—what—what—" He left Trotsky to his own devices, and blinked at the child.

"Nice for our clobber—what!" said Jimmy Silver. "But thank goodness you got hold of the kid in time, Putty!"

Putty rubbed his head.

"I've been nearly scalped!" he groaned. "Ow!"

"Did—did—did you go in for that kid, Putty?" stuttered Lovell.

"Oh, no!" answered Putty, with deep sarcasm. "I went in to wash my clothes. Still, I thought I'd pick up the kid while I was there."

"Oh!" gasped Lovell. "I—I thought—"

"Don't exaggerate, old chap," urged Putty. "Your mental processes can't really be described as thinking, you know."

For once Arthur Edward Lovell made no rejoinder. The juniors gathered round the little girl, and Jimmy wrapped her in a ground sheet from the cart, the best thing he could think of in the circumstances. Her eyes opened, wide and blue and frightened, and she began to cry, with a force of lung that quite surprised the juniors.

"She must belong to somebody near here," said Jimmy. "Too little to have walked very far. If we could find the show—"

"Hark!"

A woman's voice was heard calling:

"Poppy! Poppy! Pops! Where are you, Popsy darling?"

Jimmy grinned faintly.

"This'll be Poppy, and that'll be Poppy's mater," he remarked.

The voice came from the bank above the bridge. A woman came through the trees and went out on the bank, and as she saw the scattered flowers on the slope, and the child's hat on the rushes on the water's edge, she gave a loud, piercing cry.

"Poppy!"

Jimmy darted from the bridge.

"It's all right, ma'am!" he shouted. "She's safe!"

The woman, a buxom, plump dame, evidently a farmer's wife, looked up at him. Putty hurried after Jimmy, with the child in his arms, wrapped in the ground sheet. The plump dame gave another cry as she clutched the little girl.

"Poppy darling!"

"Mummy!" howled Poppy.

For several minutes Poppy's relieved parent was fully occupied in hugging Poppy and smothering her with kisses. The Fistical Four stood looking rather sheepish in that interval, while Putty

felled the hat from the rushes, and brought it up the bank in triumph.

"How did it happen?" gasped the good dame, at last.

"I fell in!" wailed Poppy. "Woo-woo-woo-boo-woooooh!"

"We got her out of the water, ma'am," said Jimmy Silver. "Or, rather, this chap did, and we helped."

"Heaven bless you!" exclaimed Poppy's mother, while Poppy still howled resolutely. "You have saved my little girl's life. She wandered away from me in the plantation."

"Better get her home and dried, ma'am," suggested Jimmy Silver. "Like to borrow the ground sheet?"

The woman smiled faintly.

"No, thank you. But thank you again and again for saving my little girl. You are all wet!"

"Oh, we'll soon get dry in this sun," said Jimmy cheerfully. "Good-afternoon, ma'am! Jolly glad we came by in time to be of use!"

The farmer's wife nodded, and hurried away with Poppy, evidently very grateful to the schoolboys, but also in a great hurry to get Poppy home.

"Well, even that ass Putty is some use in the world!" remarked Lovell. "I say, you fellows are wet. We shall have to camp at once now, and you can rub down."

"That's so," agreed Jimmy Silver. And the Rookwood tramps lost no time in looking for a camp.

CHAPTER 12.

Awful Luck!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. were in camp ten minutes later. They had found a quiet, ideal spot by the purling stream, some distance below the bridge. It was shaded by trees, and green fields stretched on all sides. That it was some farmer's land was certain, and private property, though the footpath by the stream crossed it. But in the circumstances the heroes of Rookwood felt that they could chance it. Four soaked and dripping juniors simply had to get their clothes changed. They were prepared to pay for the privilege of camping, as they had done before, and they had generally found farmers of a reasonable and accommodat-

ing frame of mind. The gentleman with the red whiskers, with whom they had had trouble on the road, was an exception.

Four fellows felt ever so much more comfortable after a rub down and a change of clothes. The wet garments were hung on branches to dry in the sun, and it looked, as Lovell remarked, like washing-day. Lovell, for once not argumentative, started the camp fire and boiled eggs and made tea while his comrades were otherwise occupied.

Supper and rest were very welcome to the Rookwooders after their long tramp on dusty roads and the adventure that had followed. There were eggs and cheese and milk galore in the baggage-cart, as well as other supplies, and the hungry schoolboy tramps exerted themselves at supper in a way that was almost worthy of Tubby Muffin.

After a tremendous supper they sat in the grass by the dying fire and watched the golden sunset, and chatted contentedly.

"Topping place," said Jimmy Silver, looking away across the stream and the glowing fields to the blue Downs beyond in the distance. "Some silly asses waste time buzzing off to Switzerland in the summer, when they might be here! Give me old England."

"Yes, rather!" said Lovell emphatically. "My people hiked me off to Zernatt one summer vac. Nothing like this here! Stones and smells, if you like. Beastly streams with colourless stones in them, and hardly a bit of green anywhere. Expensive, if you like; nothing else in it! Merry England for me!"

"Why, this is a spot for a giddy poet to poetise in," said Raby. "I could write poetry here myself."

"Don't, old chap!" murmured Newcome. "Hallo, here comes one of the giddy natives!" yawned Jimmy Silver, as there was a heavy step on the footpath by the stream. "Hallo! My only summer chapeau! It's giddy Whiskers!"

"His nibs, and no mistake!" said Lovell. The big man of the wagon was tramping along the path, evidently heading for the camp. His red face was more ill-tempered than ever in expression. Indeed, he seemed to be in a spasm of rage. A savage-looking bulldog followed at his heels, and the animal gave a deep, menacing growl at the juniors.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rose to their feet. The big man looked as if he meant trouble, and the dog was decidedly dangerous-looking. But they faced the situation coolly.

So far as they could see, Whiskers had no right to interfere with them, and they were not going to stand any nonsense, dog or no dog.

The big farmer came to a halt on the other side of the expiring camp-fire, from which a column of smoke was rising. He glanced at the juniors across the embers.

"You!" he spluttered.

"Little us!" assented Jimmy Silver.

"Camping on my land!" roared the farmer.

Jimmy gave a jump.

"Oh, my hat!" he ejaculated. "Is—is this your land?"

"My land!" roared Whiskers, purple with wrath. "You know it's my land. Any man hereabouts could have told you that this was River Farm and on Farmer Pudsey's land. You knew it well enough!"

"My dear man, we've never even heard the giddy name of Pudsey before," said Jimmy Silver. "How should we know?"

"Think you've a right to camp out and light fires wherever you like," roared Mr. Pudsey, "without even saying, 'By your leave, by gad!'"

The juniors looked serious enough now. They realised that they had put their foot in it. If this whiskered gentleman was the owner of the land where they had camped without asking permission, the complexion of the whole matter was altered. In their previous encounter the big man had been utterly in the wrong. Now they realised very uncomfortably that they were in the wrong.

"Lighting fires, burning up my timber, scorching up my grass!" roared Mr. Pudsey. "I never did!"

"We're ready to pay for camping here," said Lovell.

"Do I want your money?" roared the big man.

"You see, we were in rather a hurry to camp, or we'd certainly have found out the owner and asked permission," explained Jimmy Silver. "We——"

"That's enough!"

"Let me explain, Mr. Pudsey."

"I don't want to hear you. Saw your smoke from my very window!" roared the angry man. "Never reckoned it was you again. I came here to set my dog on a gang of gypsies! And it's you, is it? I'll make you smart."

"Oh, bother your old land!" snapped

Lovell. "We'll get off it just as quick as we can pack our cart."

"Will you?" said Mr. Pudsey grimly. "You won't! You're trespassers 'ere, and you're goin' to smart for it. I'm going to lock you up in my barn for the night, and hand you over to the police in the morning."

"What?" yelled the Rookwooders.

"That's the programme," said the big man. "Now pack up your traps sharp, and get along where I tell you."

"We shall do nothing of the sort," said Jimmy Silver coolly, though his heart was beating. "We'll move on if you like——"

"You'll move into my barn, and you'll be locked in there!"

"Rats!" retorted Jimmy Silver.

"Here, Toothy!" roared the big man. "Toothy! Mark 'em, boy!"

The great bulldog growled deeply, and made a movement towards the juniors, showing a terrific set of teeth. Jimmy Silver & Co. drew together, rather alarmed. The savage brute evidently only awaited a signal from his master to fly at them, and a struggle with a ferocious bulldog was a decidedly serious matter.

"Like him to start on you?" hooted Mr. Pudsey. "If I give the word he'll begin, and he won't let go in a hurry, you mark my words! Now, are you going to march, or are you not?"

He turned and looked along the path.

"Here, Bill—Harry!" he roared.

Two farm hands came hurrying into sight.

"See those young tramps locked up in the big barn!" said Mr. Pudsey. "Give 'em the hiding of their lives if they raise a hand!"

"You rotten bully!" roared Lovell.

"That'll do! Are you going to obey orders?" demanded Whiskers. "I'll teach you to camp on my land without asking leave! I'll teach you to 'andle a man and pepper him with a pea-shooter! Take them along, there!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged looks of utter dismay.

They had handled Mr. Pudsey once, and got the better of him, though it had been a struggle. But it was obvious that they could not handle Mr. Pudsey and his two men with the savage bulldog thrown in.

There was nothing for it but surrender, bitter pill as that was to swallow.

Jimmy Silver compressed his lips.

"Nothing doing!" he said quietly to his

comrades, "We've got to toe the line for the present."

"And the sooner the better for you!" sneered Mr. Pudsey. "You'll get a hiding all round if you don't look sharp! I 'ope to see you in prison to-morrow."

"That's all silly rot, and you know it!" said Jimmy Silver coolly. "But you can lock us in your barn, if you're ruffian and bully enough! We'll make you smart for it somehow!"

"Enough cheek!" roared Mr. Pudsey. "Another minute and I'll set the dog on you!"

With furious looks, but feeling that there was nothing else to be done, Jimmy Silver & Co. struck the tent, and hurriedly packed their belongings in the baggage-cart. Trotsky, as if realising the seriousness of the moment, made no objection to being harnessed again.

"Now foller me!" snorted Mr. Pudsey.

And with heavy hearts and angry faces the Rookwooders set Trotsky in motion, and followed Whiskers, the two grinning farmhands bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER 13.

A Change for the Better!

MR. PUDSEY led the way up the stream, and over the little bridge, the scene of Putty's adventure. On the other side of the water, evidently, was Mr. Pudsey's farmhouse, though the trees had hidden it from the sight of the Rookwooders.

They followed the lane for a hundred yards or so, and then turned into a rutty path up to the farm gates.

Mr. Pudsey hurled a wide wooden gate open, and Jimmy Silver & Co. led Trotsky onward into the yard, past several up-ended carts and a wagon. Ahead of them was the farmhouse, an old building massed with ivy, and on the right a range of barns. In the porch of the farmhouse a woman stood, with a little girl clinging to her skirts, both of them apparently interested in the tramps who had been caught camping on Mr. Pudsey's land.

The Rookwood juniors glanced at them carelessly, and then they started and exchanged glances. They knew that buxom dame again, and the little girl, too!

"Poppy!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"And Poppy's mater!" said Putty. "My

only hat! Do they belong to that ferocious old Hun with the whiskers, then?"

"Looks as if they live here," said Lovell. "Get across to that there barn!" shouted Mr. Pudsey. "Hear me? Get right in, and don't waste time."

"Oh, go and eat coko!"

Dspiritedly the Rookwooders tramped in the direction indicated by Mr. Pudsey's whirr, the farmhands and Toothy still bringing up the rear and watching them.

But, suddenly from the farmhouse porch, the buxom dame came running. Evidently she had recognised the Rookwood juniors.

"John!" she called out.

"Don't you interfere here, Mary!" snorted Mr. Pudsey. "They're a gang of young tramps, and I'm going to lock them in the barn for the night. Do 'em good!"

"They are—they are the boys—" gasped Mrs. Pudsey. "John, I told you—they are the boys—"

"En—what?"

"This is the brave lad who saved Poppy's life, and the others helped him!"

Mr. Pudsey gave quite a jump.

He stared at the buxom dame, he stared at Poppy, and then he stared blankly at the Rookwooders.

"Them!" he ejaculated at last.

"Yes, yes, yes!" exclaimed his wife, with tears in her eyes. "But for this lad"—she touched Putty on the shoulder—"you would never have seen Poppy alive again!"

"Well, dang my buttois!" gasped the big man. "You told me Poppy was fished out of the river by some young gentlemen—"

"Yes, yes, yes—these boys—"

"These here tramps!" ejaculated Whiskers.

"We're not tramps!" bawled Arthur Edward Lovell. "Don't you know a tramp when you see one?"

Mr. Pudsey seemed a prey to conflicting emotions. He blinked at the Rookwooders with quite a queer expression on his face.

"Why couldn't you tell me, blow you?" he ejaculated at last.

"You see, we couldn't guess by your features that you were Poppy's father!" explained Putty of the Fourth gravely. "The resemblance is there, but is not striking."

"We were in a hurry to camp because our clothes were wet," said Jimmy. "If you'd let me explain to—"

"Nuff said!" said Mr. Pudsey. "I've had a lot of trouble with tramps on my land, stealing chickens, and once they set fire to

a hayrick. But—but I'm sorry I was rough with you young fellows. And—and—and— The words came out in jerks. "And—and I was wrong—I own it—in that row in the lane. I was ratty, and—and I own up I was wrong. Can't say fairer than that. Now I know it was you helped Poppy out of the water, I'm only too thankful you came along this way. Camp on my land for the rest of your lives if you want to."

"We won't do that," said Jimmy, with a chuckle. "But if your not so keen now on locking us up in your barn, we'll get back to the road."

Mr. Pudsey shook his head. Evidently there was a kindly heart somewhere under his rough exterior, and doubtless his experience with tramps who had set fire to hayricks had been painful enough.

"No, you don't!" he said. "You'll camp where you was, my lads, and I'm sending you some farm stuff to pack in that go-cart of yours before you take the road again; and I tell you you can't beat the milk, eggs, and cheese of River Farm—eh, missis?"

"And the dear boys are coming in to supper," said Mrs. Pudsey.

"My hat!" murmured Putty. "This looks like a giddy change in the jolly old barometer—what?"

It was! Mr. Pudsey, alias Whiskers, all hospitality now, would not take "No" for an answer. The Rookwood tramps had supped once, but they supped again quite cheerfully in the farmhouse; and when they went back to camp, Mr. Pudsey lighted them on their way, and with his own powerful hands helped in putting up the tent. And they parted on the best of terms.

The next morning Jimmy Silver & Co. were on the road again—Poppy waving them good-bye, and Mrs. Pudsey kissing them all farewell, rather to their embarrassment. And the baggage-cart fairly groaned under farm produce, heaped there by Whiskers himself.

CHAPTER 14.

A Camp by the Sea!

"THE giddy sea!" said Jimmy Silver. Five dusty and rather tired schoolboys came round a bend in the chalky lane, and the wide, blue sea burst upon their view.

"Looks jolly decent, doesn't it?" said Lovell. "Just what we want—a plunge, to clear off this thumpin' dust! Now I know what those giddy old Greeks felt like when they saw the sea after hoofing it across Asia Minor!"

"Kim on!" said Raby and Newcome together to the pony.

Trotsky, the pony, stopped.

Perhaps he was stopping to contemplate that fine view of the sea. Or perhaps he did not care for the sea at closer quarters.

Trotsky had a way of stopping when he was specially desired to put his best foot foremost.

"Move on, you brute!" hissed Raby.

"Kim on, Trotsky!" said Lovell.

Putty Grace lifted a cricket-stump out of the little baggage-cart.

He did not use the stump—that was not necessary.

Trotsky was a most intelligent animal, and the sight of the stump was generally enough for him. As soon as it was produced, Trotsky would buck up to save unpleasantness.

Trotsky moved on slowly, and the baggage-cart rumbled after him on its two wheels. In a few more minutes the Rookwood tramps were treading on shingle.

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

The sea-breeze blew in the heated faces of the Rookwood holiday-tramps, cooling and invigorating.

Jimmy Silver looked up and down the shingly beach.

"I wonder where we are exactly?" he remarked. "According to the map—"

"Somewhere in Kent, anyhow," said Lovell.

"Must be somewhere near Hythe, I think," said Jimmy.

"Not very near, as it's not in sight," said Putty Grace. "Anyhow, we can camp here if we want to."

"Yes, rather."

"Nobby place for a camp," said Lovell, his eyes glistening. "If we buck up there will be time for a bathe before dark. Doesn't seem to be anybody about, and none of their dashed notice-boards. If I ever become Prime Minister I shall make a law against sticking up notice-boards where fellows want to camp."

Arthur Edward Lovell spoke with feeling. The chums of Rookwood had been on their holiday-tramp for a week now, and the number of notice-boards they had discovered was enormous. Quite a large proportion of

their fellow-citizens seemed bent on impressing on the general public the unpleasant fact that trespassers would be prosecuted.

On this blazing day the Co. had been looking for a camp for hours, and they had observed a number of extremely suitable spots. Each suitable spot, however, was barred to stray campers.

"Keep smiling!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "Everything comes to him who waits!"

"Must be a jolly life, then, to be a waiter!" remarked Putty Grace thoughtfully. Putty was never too tired for a joke, good or bad. But the Fistical Four did not always appreciate Putty's humour. It fell upon deaf ears now.

Lovell was already unharnessing Trotsky. Jimmy Silver turned the tent out of the baggage-cart. The sun was sinking low, and there was not much light left for camping.

"Simply a nobby place for a camp!" Lovell declared again. "By the way, though, Trotsky can't eat shingle, I suppose. There ought to be some grass for him."

"Give him some oats for to-night," said Jimmy Silver. "There's some in the cart."

"Good!"

"Isn't this a bit close to the sea for camping?" asked Putty.

Lovell grinned.

"Do you think the sea-serpent will come out 'n the night?" he asked.

"Or the merry old shark?" chuckled Raby.

"Nunno! But——"

"Lend a hand with this gear, old chap, and never mind 'butting.'"

"But——" said Putty dubiously.

"Lend a hand, ass!" said Lovell warmly.

"Have I got to handle this stuff on my own, while you butt like a billy-goat?"

"But——"

"There you go again!"

"But," roared Putty, "what about high-water mark?"

"Which?"

"Hadn't we better be careful to camp above high-water mark?" demanded Putty. "We don't want a sea-bathe in the middle of the night, I suppose!"

"Is the sea out now?" said Lovell, looking round at the stretches of sand beyond the shingle. "Yes, I suppose so. Well, there's high-water mark. Can't you see that

ridge where the water's banked up the shingle at last high tide?"

"That looks like it!" agreed Newcome.

Putty still looked dubious. But Putty had a way of looking dubious when Arthur Edward Lovell made his positive statements. Lovell, perhaps, erred a little on the side of positiveness.

"Is that high-water mark?" asked Putty.

"Is it?" snorted Lovell. "Haven't I told you it is?"

"Yes; but do you know?" asked Putty.

Another snort from Lovell. He was tired, he was dusty, he was hungry—three powerful reasons against indulging in frivolous argument.

"If you'd got any sense," said Lovell, "you'd see that that shingle-ridge is high-water mark; and we're yards and yards on the safe side of it. But if you feel nervous you can sit up to-night and watch for the tide. I'll swallow all that comes past the ridge!"

"What bothers me is that I might have to swallow it, if it mopped down on us in the middle of the night. I think——"

"Draw it mild!" said Lovell. "You don't, and you can't. All you can do is to make rotten puns. Give your chin a rest, old man, and let's get this tent up before it's dark. There won't be any tide up here, but there will be plenty of spray—when the water comes in as far as the ridge."

Putty still seemed unconvinced. But he ceased to argue, and lent a hand with the camping arrangements. And when the camp was completed, and Trotsky safely pegged so that he could not wander, the Rookwood juniors ran down the shelving sands, and plunged into the curling waves that broke gently on the beach, and thoroughly enjoyed the swim. After which they returned to camp, so hungry that even an advancing tide, or a tidal-wave, would scarcely have driven them away before supper.

CHAPTER 15.

Round the Camp-Fire!

THE little two-wheeled baggage-cart, which the kind-hearted Mr. Richards had lent the Rookwooders for their holiday travels, was a distinctly useful article. It was small and it was light—small enough to follow bridle-paths and even footpaths, light enough to be lifted by a combined effort over such an obstacle as a

stale. But its stowage capacity was great, and its set of lockers held almost everything imaginable. The Rookwooders had all the "traps" with them that they needed for comfortable camping, and plenty of other things—and a good supply of provisions.

Jimmy Silver had the great gift of forethought, which came in very useful now. There was nothing like firewood to be seen on the shingle—but there was a faggot in the baggage-cart, as well as some cut logs, which Jimmy had laid in stock at the last village. So there was no difficulty except that caused by the ocean breeze, which blew out Lovell's matches as fast as he struck them.

Lovell was lighting the fire—he was quite an industrious youth, and he had an inward conviction that he was the only fellow in the party who really could do things. He always had doubts about a fire that was lighted by anybody else. Putty offered to lend him a hand, but Lovell declined aid.

"You see, we want to get the fire going!" he explained.

"You don't seem to be getting it going, old bean!" Putty remarked.

"I shan't be any quicker if I'm interrupted by silly asses!" retorted Lovell.

And he struck more and more matches. "Let's sit round and watch," suggested Putty of the Fourth. "This is worth watching."

Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard, and started on a second matchbox. There was quite a fresh breeze off the sea, and a heavy murmur from the waves as they dashed and broke on the shingle. Every time Lovell succeeded in getting a match alight it was promptly blown out. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome and Putty sat down round Lovell and watched him—which was rather exasperating to the fire-lighter. They were frightfully hungry, and the camp-fire was badly wanted to cook the supper. Four gentle voices urged on Lovell to renewed efforts.

"These rotten matches!" said Lovell, breathing hard. "Rotten foreign matches, you know; they ought to be kept out of the country. The blessed heads fly off—nearly got one in my eye! What are you silly owls blinking at?"

"Let me——" began Jimmy Silver.

"Do you think I don't know how to light a camp-fire?" asked Lovell.

"Well, I believe we've only got a dozen boxes of matches," said Jimmy, "and we

shall want to light the fire again in the morning. At that rate——"

"Oh, dry up!"

Putty Grace rose from the shingle and went to the baggage-cart, and returned with a can of paraffin.

"You don't need paraffin to light a camp-fire," said Lovell.

"I don't," agreed Putty; "but you do, old chap."

"Look here——" roared Lovell.

"Suppose I held up a ground-sheet to keep the wind off?" suggested Putty gently.

Lovell was about to growl out an indignant refusal, but fortunately he thought better of it.

"You might have done that already!" he grunted.

"Well, I offered to help, and you——"

"For goodness' sake, Putty, don't argue and jaw, when I'm waiting for you to hold up a ground-sheet."

Putty closed one eye at the other campers, who grinned. But he forbore to argue with Arthur Edward, who was getting a little excited. He held up the ground-sheet to keep off the wind, and Lovell—on second thoughts—dashed some of the paraffin from the can over the faggots and the crumpled newspaper under them. To his great satisfaction, the fire flared up at last.

"It's going!" said Lovell. "You needn't stand there, Putty, like a graven image, with that ground-sheet. The fire's all right."

Which was Arthur Edward's way of expressing his thanks for assistance! Putty obediently dropped the sheet, and the sea-breeze blew hard right into the fire. It flared up high, to Lovell's great satisfaction; but the flame, after flaring, suddenly went out.

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Lovell, in great exasperation.

"The fire hadn't quite got a hold, you know," said Putty. "The wind's pretty strong."

"If you hadn't dropped the sheet just then——"

"You told me to!"

"Of course, you must argue and jaw!" said Lovell, with bitter sarcasm. "The question is, do we want any supper, or are we going to hang around listening to Putty Grace arguing and jawing?"

Whereupon Jimmy Silver & Co., being too hungry to display further patience, took a hand in the proceedings, and lighted the

camp-fire. Arthur Edward Lovell shrugged his shoulders, and watched them with a satirical smile, without the slightest expectation of seeing the fire burn. To his surprise, it burned quite nicely, and once it was fairly going, the breeze only stirred it to greater activity.

The iron stewpot was slung over glowing embers, from which sparks flew far and wide over the shingle. It was quite dark now, and the murmur of the sea came through dusky gloom. One by one the stars came out in a calm sky.

An appetising scent of cooking comforted the hungry campers. But they were too famished to wait for the stew, and they started on hard-boiled eggs left over from the last camp, and cold potatoes, and huge slices of bread-and-butter. And when the stew was done, they did that full justice, too. Tramping and the keen sea air gave them an appetite which Tubby Muffin himself would not have disdained.

After an ample supper the logs were piled on the fire, and the juniors stretched themselves on the shingle in luxurious ease. Strange lights and shadows were cast around the camp by the flickering flames. Trotsky, having negotiated his oats, lay on the shingle and regarded the fire with his usual thoughtful expression—occasionally testing his rope to make quite sure that it secured him from wandering. The baggage-cart stood tilted forward with its shafts half-buried in the shingle. Through the gloom of the summer night the deep murmur of the sea came musically. Down by the sea it was a little chilly in the wind, and the juniors were glad of the glowing fire.

"This is something like!" yawned Jimmy Silver. "I'm jolly sleepy! I say, this is a ripping way of spending a holiday!"

"Topping!" said Putty, echoing Jimmy's yawn. "Tip-top, in fact!"

"Lucky we've got the tent up already," murmured Raby. "I'm too jolly tired and sleepy to put it up now, after supper. What about turning in?"

Putty rose to his feet, and looked away towards the sea. Through the darkness he caught the glimmer of starlight on curling waters, touched into broken lines of silver. He strolled out of the camp, sleepy as he was, towards the sea.

"Hallo! Going to have another bathe?" bawled Lovell. "Mind you don't fall in, fathead!"

Putty did not heed. He tramped through

the shingle, down to the soft sand that was churning under the lapping water. Lovell burst into a chuckle.

"Poor old Putty's afraid of the tide," he remarked. "We're miles above high-water mark—yards, at least."

"Not much difference!" murmured Newcome.

"Oh, rats! Putty's as nervous as a giddy old hen," said Lovell. He looked round to make sure that Putty of the Fourth was not within hearing. "I'm jolly well going to give him a lesson. As soon as he's asleep I'll mop some water over his chivvy, and he'll think the tide's coming in over the tent."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose we're pretty safe, here?" said Jimmy Silver, looking round. "It would be no joke—"

"I tell you it's all right," said Lovell. "I looked out high-water mark, and it's that pebble ridge yonder—not a drop ever comes past that. You can see where the sand's piled up."

Jimmy Silver was too sleepy to argue the point, though later on he had reason to wish that he had not left the decision to Arthur Edward Lovell. Putty Grace came back through the darkness.

"Tidal wave coming?" asked Lovell cheerily.

"The tide's turned," said Putty.

"Anybody got a 'Daily Mail'?" asked Lovell.

"What on earth do you want a 'Daily Mail' for?"

"To sign the insurance coupon before we're all drowned," answered Lovell humorously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I leave it to you," said Putty. "But if I'd pitched the camp I'd have pitched it a good dozen yards further up the shore."

"Take your giddy blankets, and walk a mile inland!" suggested Lovell. "You'd be almost safe there. Still, there might be a landslide—or an earthquake."

"Oh, let's turn in," said Raby. "I'm simply nodding off."

The Fistical Four turned into the tent, and Putty stood looking round him thoughtfully before he followed. He was tempted to take his blankets further up the beach, and camp in the open air. But he let himself be influenced by the prospect of Lovell's derision in the morning—if after all it was

all right; and he followed the Fistical Four into the tent at last. And in a few minutes more, the five Rookwood juniors were fast asleep.

CHAPTER 16.

Wet!

SPLASH!
Swish! Swoosh!
"Oh!" roared Putty of the Fourth, suddenly awakening from balmy slumber.

He started up blindly in the dark. Water had dashed over his face—and startled him out of his sleep. He awoke to an instant realisation of his fears—the tide was on them! Putty dashed the water from his eyes with his hands and yelled to his comrades.

"Wake up! Turn out! The tide's on us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

To Putty's amazement, he was answered by a yell of laughter from the darkness.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"You silly ass!" shrieked Putty. "I'm wet already—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, what's the thumping row?" came Jimmy Silver's sleepy voice.

"The tide—"

"Bucket of sea-water!" roared Lovell. "That's all! I've just dabbed Putty's face with a little water! Ha, ha, ha!"

"What?" howled Putty.

Jimmy Silver & Co. gave a sleepy chortle. "All serene, Putty," chuckled Jimmy. "Only one of Lovell's fatheaded jokes. It's all right."

Putty breathed hard. He was a great humorist himself; and like many great humorists, he did not wholly appreciate humour when he was personally the object of it.

But he realised that it was a false alarm, and he groped round him—nothing was wet but his own face. Evidently the tide had not after all reached the tent.

"You silly ass, Lovell!" breathed Putty. "I've a jolly good mind to punch your silly head, for waking me up with your rot."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"If you cackle again I'll punch your cheeky nose—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That does it!" snorted Putty, and he

groped in the darkness, and captured a head, and punched.

There was a fiendish yell from Arthur Newcome.

"Wharrer you at? Leggo! I—I—I'll—"

"Oh, my hat! I—I thought it was Lovell—" gasped Putty.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Lovell. "Go it, Putty!"

"I—I—I'll—" stuttered Putty.

"Order!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "You're treading on me, fathead! Go to sleep, and punch Lovell's silly head in the morning."

Putty rubbed his face and hair dry, in indignant silence, and turned into his blankets again. The Fistical Four chuckled sleepily, and turned over to seek slumber once more. Putty followed their example, and he was soon fast asleep again.

Once more calmness and repose settled upon the Rookwood camp.

The juniors were thoroughly tired, and they slept as if for a wager, deaf to the growing murmur of the sea, and to a series of uneasy whinnies from Trotsky, who, instead of sleeping, was exerting himself, in vain, to get away from his tether.

Arthur Edward Lovell was the first to awaken.

Lovell had been dreaming, and gradually the idea of being splashed and wet mingled with his dreams. He seemed to be floating in water with his clothes on, in his dream; and gradually he passed from sleeping to waking, and realised that he was really wet.

Water was creeping round him and streaming into his blankets. Lovell sat up, startled, feeling wet all over.

"That silly ass, Putty!" he gasped.

His immediate idea was that Putty of the Fourth had retaliated his practical joke on him—on a liberal scale. But if that was the explanation, Putty had been very thorough; for Lovell was fairly swamped.

"My hat! I'll smash him!" roared Lovell. "This isn't a joke! Putty, you born idiot, I'll give you an awful hiding for this."

"Wharrer marrer?" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"I'm wet!" roared Lovell.

"Oh, go to sleep."

"How can I go to sleep when I'm swamped with water!" shouted Lovell.

angrily. "That silly chump must have chucked two or three pailfuls over me."

"Hallo, I'm wet, too!" exclaimed Jimmy, starting into broad wakefulness. "Why, the place is fairly swimming."

"That idiot Putty—"

"What on earth's the row?" exclaimed Putty, waking up. "Hallo! I'm wet! Have you been at your silly tricks again, Lovell—"

"I haven't!" howled Lovell. "You have, you born dummy. You've swamped me, you dangerous jabberwock."

"Eh! I've been fast asleep."

"Haven't you swamped me with water?" hooted Lovell.

"Not unless I did it in my sleep," answered Putty.

"Well, somebody has—"

"Hallo, I'm wet!" exclaimed Newcome's voice. "Why, my blankets are simply soaked! Is it raining?"

"I'm wet!" shouted Raby. "Grooogh! I—groogh—I've got a—moogh—mouthful of water—grooogh—salt!"

Jimmy Silver started up. The shingle under the tent was swimming with water. As he stood, it splashed over his knees. Outside the tent there was a sound of lapping water close at hand. Evidently the flooding of the tent was not a practical joke, as Arthur Edward had supposed. Either there was a terrific downpour of rain, which had found entrance, or—

"The tide!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"The what?" ejaculated Lovell. "Tide! Rot! How could the tide touch us when we're miles above high-water mark?"

"Putty was right after all—"

"What utter rot!"

"Fathend!" roared Jimmy Silver. "Can't you see the tent's flooded?"

"How can I see anything in pitch dark?"

"Can't you feel it, then, ass?" Jimmy Silver groped to the tent flap and tore it open. "Oh, my only hat!"

A swamping rush of water caught him at the knees and sent him staggering back into the tent. There was a breathless yell from the other fellows as the wave subsided over them, drenching them in every spot where they were not already drenched.

"Why, what—what—" spluttered Lovell. Even Arthur Edward could no longer doubt.

Now that the juniors were wide awake they could hear, and heed, the shrill cries that came from the tethered pony. Outside

the tent there was a ceaseless rush and dash of water. The shingle under them was alive with moving water, and their feet sank deep into it as they staggered about in the dark.

"The tide!" gasped Putty. "Caught in the tide! Oh, you asses—"

The tide was not only coming in, but it was coming in hard and fast—and it was only too sorrowfully clear that Arthur Edward Lovell had been mistaken about high-water mark. The tent had been pitched well within the reach of the sea at high-tide—in spite of Arthur Edward's absolute positiveness that it hadn't!

Only the froth of the incoming waves had reached the camp at first, and soaked through the shingle. But solid water followed, and followed fast. While the juniors were still groping blindly in the darkness the water was over their knees, and the tent itself began to shake and reel as the pegs came loose in the drenched single.

Jimmy Silver got his head out at the opening, and his startled glance swept round. Luckily the stars were bright, and gave a light over sea and shore.

What he saw in the starlight made Jimmy Silver gasp.

Seaward was a boundless extent of rolling waves—rolling and booming over one another in the sharp breeze from the ocean. Round the tent the waves rolled and broke, and landward they ran on for a dozen yards farther, breaking in foam. The tent was completely surrounded by water, and at any moment it might "go." Trotsky, half-buried in water, and quite buried when an extra large wave rolled in, was trampling round his peg and squealing frantically. The baggage-cart had sunk deeper, and was full of water from the breaking waves.

Jimmy Silver seemed to be looking out on a world turned wholly to water and foam.

"Good heavens!" he gasped.

"Is—is—is it the tide?" stuttered Lovell.

"Get outside!" yelled Jimmy. "For goodness' sake get a move on! Never mind your clothes—never mind anything—we shall be drowned in another minute."

"Great Scott!"

The juniors plunged wildly out of the reeling tent. They were only just in time. A high roller, driven by the wind, came swamping in, and it broke over the tent and the juniors with a terrific crash. The

tent crumpled up under it, and went flying on the wave, and five breathless and scared juniors were hurled headlong on the shingle, and the wave passed right over them.

CHAPTER 17.

Something Like a Wash-out!

"O H!"
"Ooooooh!"
Overwhelmed by rushing water the five juniors were swept away, rolling and sprawling in a wild mingle of shingle and sea. Jimmy Silver came with a bump on something hard, and threw out his hands and clutched and held on. The wave passed on, spreading over the beach and subsiding, and his head came out clear.

He was clinging to the baggage-cart, which swam with water. It was too deeply rooted in the sand to shift, however. Jimmy stared round him dazedly. Lovell had hold of the pony's tether. The peg had come out, and the pony and Lovell went swamping away up the shelving beach together. The tent had disappeared; but Jimmy Silver caught sight of three heads dotting the foam. Then another heavy wave came rolling in, churning up the shingle and swamping over his head.

He clung desperately to the cart and waited for it to pass.

It passed and spread, higher and higher up the beach. Jimmy Silver was clear again, and he panted for breath. He realised that the baggage-cart was not a safe refuge—it would soon be entirely covered with water. And when the next roller came heavily in, Jimmy let go his hold and went with the wave.

It bore him whirling away landward, through shallower water, and he clutched and caught at shifting shingle, trying to get a hold. The subsiding wave left him sprawling breathless.

He scrambled and staggered to his feet, and scrambled landward, the stones crunching and shifting under his feet in pools of water.

The next wave rolling after him gave him a gentle lift, and then he staggered beyond the reach of the sea.

He stood in safety at last, under the gleam of the stars, drenched and dripping, half-choked by the sea-water he had

swallowed. He rubbed salt water out of his eyes and blinked round for his chums.

"Here you are, Jimmy!" gasped Lovell.

"Where are the others?"

"There's Raby——"

Raby was sitting on the shingle above the margin of the lapping water in a dazed state, gasping. Newcome came tramping along the sands, streaming. The Fistical Four were all safe.

"Putty!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Can't see him——"

"Must be safe—we're all here——"

"Putty!" yelled Jimmy Silver in alarm.

And his comrades shouted with him above the roar of the incoming sea.

"Help!"

It was a shout that echoed back. A dark object was beating and flapping on the water—the dismantled tent. And Putty's shout came from it. In the dim, uncertain light it was difficult to make out; but Jimmy discerned Putty of the Fourth at last, struggling amid the wreckage of the tent. Apparently he was caught in the wreckage, for he seemed to be unable to detach himself and swim for it.

"The whole thing will come ashore!" breathed Lovell. "Bound to."

Jimmy watched with breathless anxiety. A rolling wave caught the tent and rolled it shoreward, and the Fistical Four stood ready to rush to their comrade's help. But a whirl of receding water caught the tent again and swept it out, and Putty of the Fourth with it, struggling.

And after it, on the retreating wave, went Jimmy Silver, without stopping to think. By luck he bumped into the tangled tent and ropes and blankets, and he shuddered as a rope tangled round his leg, and kicked it away in haste. Floating on turbid water, he stared for Putty, and found him—clinging to the tent-pole, his face white and almost rigid. Jimmy's grasp was on his shoulder the next moment.

"Putty!" he gasped.

"I'm caught!" panted Putty Grace.

"There's a dashed rope caught round my waist. I can't get it loose! Look out!"

Jimmy could only cling, as a rushing wave caught the tent again and the whole thing went reeling and rolling up the beach. The waters seemed to be boiling round him. Lovell and Raby and Newcome came trampling through the foam, but they could not reach the tent—it went out again on the water, with Jimmy and Putty. And the

soaked canvas was sinking and dragging them down.

Jimmy drove down under the water and groped for the rope that held Putty a prisoner. Somehow it was tangled right round the junior, as tightly as if tied in a scientific knot. Jimmy dragged at it fiercely, but there was no loosening it. He came up again half-suffocated. The tent was not being driven shoreward now. It was being sucked out in an eddy, and the beach looked distant to Jimmy's wild glance round. The bare thought of being whirled out into the rough, rolling sea sickened him. Putty put his mouth close to Jimmy's ear to speak in the roar of the waves.

"Cut off! You can't help me! Clear!"

Jimmy did not answer; but he did not think of obeying the injunction. It was sink or swim together for the Rookwood juniors.

"If I only had a knife!" he groaned.

Something gripped Jimmy in the swirling water—Lovell's face loomed over his shoulder in the starlight. Something flashed white—it was an open clasp-knife in Arthur Edward's hand. From the beach Lovell had seen what was wanted.

"Give it to me!" panted Jimmy.

He gripped the knife from Lovell, and groped round Putty again. With his head under water, half-choked, dazed and dizzy, he sawed at the circling rope. It parted.

Putty's movement told Jimmy Silver that he was free. A moment more and the three juniors were fighting their way shoreward. Shifting shingle swirled treacherously under their feet, and an eddying wave caught them and drove them out; and then a heavy roller came thundering in, lifted them, and swept them up the beach. All three of them were too dazed and dizzy to do anything but sprawl helplessly in shallow water, but Raby and Newcome rushed to them and grasped them. With a last effort the juniors staggered out of reach of the next wave that came swamping in. It flooded round their knees and sucked at them, but they staggered out of its reach, and sank down on the shore in safety at last.

There they lay, how long they never knew, too exhausted to move, dizzily watching the sea breaking at their feet and churning up the shingle into little hillocks.

Jimmy Silver was the first to move. He staggered up, with spray raining on him.

"Better get out of this!" he gasped.

And the juniors tramped higher up the beach, beyond the fall of the spray. A glimmer of pale rose on the horizon announced that dawn was at hand. And never had the sunrise been so welcome to the Rookwooders.

CHAPTER 18.

After the Wash-out!

"PRETTY state of affairs!"

Thus Arthur Edward Lovell.

It was a bright, clear morning, and the sun was already hot. The warmth was very grateful and comforting to the soaked juniors.

They fairly basked in the sunshine as it grew stronger and stronger. The danger of the night was past, and they were recovering their usual spirits. But their situation was quite dismaying.

The tide was turning; but it was likely to be some time before their night's camp was uncovered. Whether the baggage-cart was still there they could not tell; they could only hope that it had sunk too deep in the wet sand for the waves to detach it and bear it away. There was no sign of the tent—and Trotsky had long since vanished.

Jimmy Silver rose at last and stretched himself.

"Keep smiling!" he said as cheerfully as possible. "Might have been worse. We came jolly near getting drowned."

"Jolly near!" said Raby, shivering.

"Lucky Lovell came along with that knife!" remarked Putty Grace. "Better still if we'd camped above high-water mark."

"We won't leave it to Lovell another time!" grunted Newcome.

Arthur Edward snorted.

"I was jolly sure that that shingle ridge was high-water mark," he said.

"You always are so jolly sure, old chap!" remarked Raby.

"My idea is that the tide's come in farther than usual this time," said Lovell obstinately. "As a rule——"

"Rats!" said Jimmy Silver tersely.

"You were a silly ass, Lovell, and so were we to leave it to you."

"Look here——"

"Anyhow, no good jawing," said Jimmy.

"Let's look for Trotsky, and when the tide's down we must save what we can of the outfit."

Hunting for Trotsky kept the Rookwood juniors busy for some hours. They were ravenously hungry; but there was nothing to eat. Trotsky was sighted after an hour's search, but he seemed unwilling to be caught. He led the juniors an infuriating dance up and down and round about for quite a long time. But for the rope still trailing from his neck, he would probably never have been caught at all; but, fortunately, Jimmy Silver succeeded at length in capturing the whisking end of the rope and hanging on to it. After that Trotsky was compelled to listen to reason.

Trotsky was led back in triumph; and by that time the juniors found their camp uncovered by the receding tide. To their great satisfaction they found the baggage-cart safe and sound, though more than half-buried in sand. They scrambled round it and dug it out, and Trotsky was secured to it, and the cart was dragged out.

Everything in the baggage-cart was soaked, but there were tinned things, and on these the juniors made a late and famished breakfast. Then they tethered Trotsky securely and went to hunt for the tent, hoping that it might have been cast ashore somewhere. They found it at last—high and dry on the shingle, half a mile away. A good many things were missing, but the tent was there, and that was a great comfort.

It was late in the afternoon when Jimmy Silver & Co. were prepared to start on their travels again.

"And we won't camp by the sea any more!" Jimmy Silver remarked thoughtfully, as he took charge of Trotsky's head to lead him on. "Too jolly exciting."

"All right if you're careful to keep well above high-water mark," said Lovell.

"What!"

The juniors looked at Lovell. They glared at him. Evidently Arthur Edward was quite himself again.

"Oh, bump him!" said Raby.

"Here, hands off! Wharrer you mean? I—you—yooop!" roared Lovell, as he was collared by his indignant comrades and duly bumped.

And Arthur Edward Lovell was silent for at least five minutes as the Rookwooders marched on their way.

CHAPTER 19.

Trotsky Gives Trouble!

ACCORDING to Jimmy Silver, Raby, Newcome and Putty Grace, it was the fault of Arthur Edward Lovell—Lovell the pony.

According to Jimmy Silver, Raby, Newcome and Putty Grace, it was the fault of Arthur Edward Lovell—Lovell the ass!

It was a warm afternoon. The Rookwood holiday tramps were rather tired, and very dusty. Trotsky, pulling the little baggage-cart, grew more and more laggard. He evidently thought that it was time to camp. Jimmy Silver & Co. agreed with him; but there was no suitable spot at hand. Trotsky would have been satisfied with the strip of grass by the roadside—but the Rookwooders naturally were not so easily satisfied as Trotsky. Trotsky slowed more and more, even refusing to heed the cricket stump when Putty of the Fourth flourished it over his head. And at length the pony came to a dead halt, and refused to put one foot before the other.

Trotsky was fed-up.

It was just his way to choose the most inconvenient spot possible for that abrupt and obstinate halt.

The holiday tramps were just opposite the open gate of a mansion that lay back from the country road. In the distance, beyond a gravel drive and some beech-trees, the mansion could be seen, its old red brick front glimmering in the sun. On the drive there was a rather tall, thin gentleman with a white moustache, a thin nose, and a cold grey eye. That cold grey eye rested at once with disfavour on the dusty party passing the gates—and the disfavour grew more pronounced when the dusty party came to a halt in the middle of the road, and just opposite the middle of the gateway.

Jimmy Silver pulled at the pony. Raby pushed. Newcome smacked. Putty Grace gave a touch of the cricket-stump. Arthur Edward Lovell watched their efforts with a slightly superior smile. Lovell's conviction was that he was the only fellow in the party who could handle the pony. But he looked on patiently. He was prepared to go in and win, as it were, when the other fellows had failed.

Even Putty's stump did not persuade Trotsky to get moving. Generally, when Trotsky mistook the time and fancied that it was "lente," the stump convinced him that it really was "presto," and a second

application of the stump urged him to "prestissimo."

Now he only turned a reproachful eye upon Putty and did not budge.

"Of all the obstinate beasts!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Give him the stump, Putty!" growled Raby.

Whack!

Trotsky persisted in looking reproachful, and remained where he was.

Whack!

Putty could not find it in his heart to whack very hard. And half-measures were absolutely useless with a thoughtful and intelligent pony like Trotsky.

"That's no good!" said Lovell.

"Perhaps you can make him move!" snapped Putty, heatedly.

"No perhaps about it," answered Lovell calmly. "I can make him move. Leave him to me, you fellows."

"No time for your swank now, old chap," said Raby, a little crossly.

"Well, if you want to stay here all the evening—" said Lovell, in a tone of patient resignation.

Patient resignation ought really to turn away wrath; but somehow it had an irritating effect on four warm and dusty juniors. "You silly owl!" began Newcome.

"Oh, let Lovell try!" said Jimmy Silver. "Make way for the giddy wonder-worker, you fellows!"

The Co. stepped back, and left Trotsky to Lovell. Arthur Edward Lovell took on his task with cheery confidence. That was his way of taking on any task—uninfluenced by a long record of "muck-ups."

Lovell pulled, and then Lovell pushed; and Trotsky might have been a pony carved in granite, for all the effect Lovell's pulling and pushing had upon him. Jimmy Silver & Co. began to smile. Lovell began to frown.

He talked to the pony—he called him everything from a "good old boss" to a "knock-kneed brute," and Trotsky remained deaf to the voice of the charmer.

Meanwhile, the white-moustached gentleman on the drive beyond the open gates was approaching the road, with stronger and stronger disfavour marked in his severe face.

"Give me the stump!" exclaimed Lovell, at last.

Putty smiled.

"I could have done it with the stump!" he remarked, as softly as a cooing dove.

"Give me the stump!" roared Lovell.

He was in no mood for argument, or for admitting failure. He grabbed the stump, and proceeded to convince Trotsky that the time of the march was not "lente," but "prestissimo con fuoco."

Whack!

It was a real whack—such a whack as Trotsky had never, probably, experienced before—certainly not at the hands of the Rookwood tramps. It electrified Trotsky.

He moved.

Swerving away from Lovell and the stump, he was through the gateway in the twinkling of an eye, and speeding on, with the baggage-cart rocking behind, and gravel flying from his dashing heels.

Lovell stared after him blankly.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

"You awful ass!" gasped Jimmy Silver in utter dismay.

"Well, I've started him!"

"After him!" yelled Jimmy.

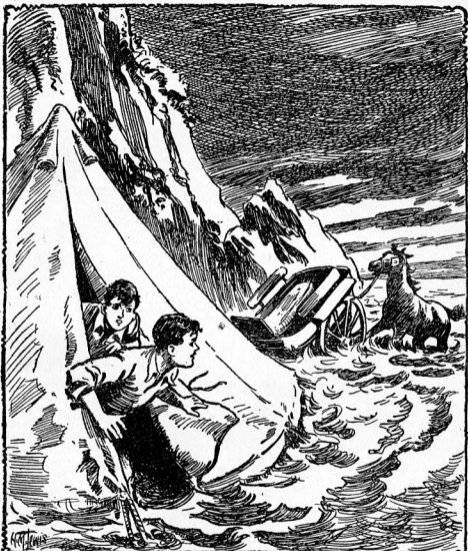
The juniors rushed in at the gates, in pursuit of their baggage-cart and the elusive pony. In the middle of the drive the white-moustached gentleman stood stock still, staring incredulously at this lawless invasion of his well-kept grounds. Trotsky kept straight on—right at the old gentleman. Jimmy Silver's heart was almost in his mouth—it seemed inevitable that the old gentleman would be hurled flying by the charging pony.

Fortunately, almost at the last moment, the gentleman realized his danger, and leapt aside, with an activity quite creditable to a person of his years.

He just escaped a collision, lost his footing, and went plunging headlong into the gravel.

Trotsky, unheeding, raced on, while the old gentleman sat up in the gravel, and roared.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rushed on after the runaway. They had no time to attend to roaring old gentlemen. They were too terrified to think of what Trotsky might do next. If he landed through the glass of the conservatory, it would be a serious matter—and quite in keeping with Trotsky's peculiar character. Panting and excited, the five Rookwooders raced after the rocking cart, leaving the old gentleman roaring behind. The drive curved round in front of



"Good heavens!" Jimmy Silver gave a gasp as he looked out through the opening. The camp was completely surrounded by water, and the pony, half-buried in water, was squealing frantically. The baggage was in the sand, and in a short time would be submerged beneath the breaking waves. (See Chap. 16.)

the house and there was an exit by another gate further down the road. Two slim youths in Panama hats were lounging by the wide stone steps—at the sight of the charging pony and cart, they leaped up the steps as if for their lives. A Panama hat floated down, and the next instant was crunched under Trotsky's flying hoofs.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Jimmy Silver, tearing on.

Two fists were shaken from the steps; two enraged voices objugated the Rookwooders.

"You impudent rascals——"

"You confounded cheeky ruffians——"

Jimmy Silver & Co. had no time to stop for conversation. They raced on past the steps, unheeding. Trotsky was going strong round the drive, heading for the "out" gate. Trotsky seemed to think that he was on the race-track. Jimmy Silver, panting on ahead of his comrades, could not get near enough to grab the cart from behind. And if Trotsky escaped into the open road with all the Rookwooders' possessions trailing behind him——

Trotsky reached the exit an easy first. He whirled out into the road, with the light cart dancing behind him on one wheel. Jimmy Silver & Co. rushed into the road a few seconds later. Trotsky was going as strong as ever. But a dozen yards further on, a youth in a straw hat, who was strolling idly along with his hands in his pockets, glanced round at the sound of clattering hoofs, and, suddenly waking from lounging idleness to surprising activity, leaped into the road, caught the pony, and dragged him to a halt.

And Jimmy Silver & Co. came panting up, full of the deepest gratitude to the stranger.

"Your outfit?" asked the youth, glancing at them with a smile. "Why—— My only aunt! You!"

And the Rookwooders yelled in chorus: "Mornington!"

CHAPTER 20.

Camping with Mornny!

"MORNNY!"

"You!"

"Great pip!"

Jimmy Silver & Co stared at the smiling face of Valentine Mornington, formerly of the Classical Fourth at Rookwood.

They were glad to see him, but more amazed than glad. It was an utterly unexpected meeting.

Only once had they seen Mornington since he had been expelled from Rookwood. They had hardly expected ever to see him again. All they knew of him was that he had gone home to his guardian, Sir Rupert Stapoola, at Stapoola Lodge, and that he was far from happy there.

"Fancy meeting you!" exclaimed Lovell. "Old Mornny, by gad!"

"Jolly glad to see you!" said Newcome heartily.

"No end glad, old chap!" said Jimmy Silver cordially. "Lucky for us, too, that you happened along. That dashed pony would have led us half a dozen miles, most likely. You see, we trusted him to Lovell."

"Look here——" began Lovell.

"Serve us right!" remarked Raby.

"It was all Trotsky's fault——"

"Yours, old chap!"

"You silly ass——"

"You born duffer——"

"My hat! This sounds like the old Fourth Form passage at Rookwood again," exclaimed Mornington. "Go it, you chaps, it's like old times! Slang away!"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Thanks no end for stopping the fiery untamed, Mornny," he said. "But what are you doing in this part of the giddy globe?"

"I was just goin' in to dinner when I heard your gee-gee cavortin'," answered Mornington. He glanced at his watch. "Ten to seven! Just ten minutes to change. I shall be late, and my beloved uncle will get his rag out."

"Don't let us stop you then, old chap," said Jimmy Silver hastily. Jimmy knew that relations were strained between Mornington and his guardian, and he was anxious not to make matters worse.

"My dear old bean, I'm not leavin' you yet, after this unexpected merry meetin'," said Mornington coolly. "You fellows in a hurry?"

"No fear; only looking for a camp."

"Then I'll help you," said Mornny. "That is," he added, with a sardonic curve of the lip, "if you care for the company of a fellow who was kicked out of school in disgrace."

"Oh, don't be an ass, old scout. We were all sorry you went," said Jimmy Silver. "You asked for it, and got it. But I wish

you could come back to Rookwood next term."

"Don't I wish I could!" said Morny. "Anyhow, I can show you where to camp. I know this quarter like a book."

"But your dinner," said Raby.

"Won't you fellows ask me to supper at your camp?"

"Yes, rather; jolly glad. But your guardian—"

"Oh, never mind the dear old uncle."

"Won't he be ratty if you cut dinner at the Lodge?"

"Yaas."

"Well, then—"

"Dear man, Sir Rupert is most amusin' when he's ratty," yawned Mornington. "Besides, probably he will take it out of Aubrey and Augustus. My cousins, you know—the Stacpoole cousins. They're home for the holidays now, and makin' my life one long enjoyment. This way." Valentine Mornington led the pony on.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked with him—a little worried. It was pretty clear that Mornington, after his severe lesson at Rookwood, was the same self-willed and perverse fellow they had always known.

The chums of Rookwood were very glad to see him again. They had often thought of Morny, and the heavy blow that had fallen upon him had quite banished all resentment against him. They tried to forget that they had ever been on bad terms with the junior who had paid so dearly for his perverse folly.

And Mornington was evidently delighted to fall in with the Rookwooders again, and wanted to have their company for a time. Jimmy Silver & Co. could sympathise with that. But they realised that Morny, under his uncle's roof, was bound to respect his uncle's wishes, and that, evidently, Morny had no thought of doing. In his usual way he was following his latest impulse—careless of what might follow.

But it was scarcely the thing for Jimmy Silver to begin to "preach" at Morny, and he had to let the wilful fellow have his way, only hoping that a "row" at the Lodge would not follow.

And Mornington was a useful guide. As he had said, he knew the surrounding country thoroughly. He turned off the high road into a little lane, banked with ferns and shaded by trees; a grateful and com-

forting shade after the glare of the August sun on the dusty highway. From the lane a gate opened into a green paddock. Morny threw open the gate.

"That all right?" he asked.

The juniors' faces brightened.

"Tip-top!" said Jimmy Silver. "Can we camp here?"

"Certainly!"

"Just the very spot," said Lovell. "Lovely! Why, there's a pump over by the shed in the corner. We can get water there. But are you sure we can camp here. Morny? What about the owner?"

"I know the owner, old chap, and that's all right," said Mornington.

"Well if you're sure—"

"Take my word for it," said Mornington.

"Right-ho!"

Trotsky was led into the field, and the gate closed. It was an ideal spot for camping—rich green grass, and shady trees, and above all, the pump with a supply of pure water.

Trotsky was taken out of the harness and tethered to a peg, with a long rope to give him a wide feeding range. In a further corner of the paddock, two riding-horses were cropping the grass contentedly. They raised their heads to look at the intruders, and then went on contentedly feeding. Jimmy Silver & Co. camped in the opposite corner.

The tent and the cooking utensils were turned out of the cart. Jimmy Silver set up the oil stove for cooking—it was too hot for a camp fire. Mornington looked into the baggage-cart and helped to turn out the contents with great appreciation.

"That's a toppin' outfit," he remarked. "Just the thing for a walking-party. Beats a caravan hollow. Where on earth did you fellows pick it up?"

"Lent to us for the vacation," said Jimmy Silver, smiling. "Not our giddy property. The cart's a treasure, it holds no end of things, and weighs next to nothing. The pony's another treasure, only he's got his little weaknesses. Still, he's all right, except when Lovell takes him in hand!"

"Look here—" bawled Arthur Edward Lovell indignantly.

"Nearly killed a jolly old gent just before you met us," said Jimmy. "Lovell will land us with an inquest yet."

"You silly owl!" roared Lovell. "I tell you—"

"Bow-wow!"

"It was the fault of the pony."

"The fault of the donkey, you mean," said Putty.

"Just—that!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "Lovell, old man, dry up. What are you putting into that oil-stove?"

"Paraffin, of course!" snorted Lovell. "What the thump do you think I'm putting into it—coffee?"

"No—water," answered Jimmy, with a chuckle. "It's water in that can."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That comes of a silly idiot stacking water in an oil-can!" roared Lovell. "What silly chump wanted to put water into a can exactly like the oil-can to look at?"

"Lucky there's a pump," said Raby. "If there wasn't, I'd like to know what we'd boil the spuds in now."

"Well, there is!" growled Lovell. "And it was a silly mistake to have cans for oil and water looking exactly alike. The silly idiot who bought them ought to be boiled in oil—hem!—" Arthur Edward Lovell broke off quite suddenly, as he remembered that the cans had been among the articles of the outfit purchased by himself. That little circumstance had quite escaped his memory for the moment.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the campers.

"For goodness' sake, don't waste time cackling when we're frightfully hungry!" said Lovell. "Never saw such a crew for cackling. I'll draw some water while you empty the stove."

Lovell took the water-can and started for the pump. He set down the can under the pump and worked the handle. But the water did not flow.

Arthur Edward gave an angry snort.

"The dashed thing's dried up!" he growled. "Now we're out of water."

"Lots of water there, if you pump for it!" called out Mornington.

"Can't you see me pumping?" demanded Lovell, working away at the handle. "Blow the thing! It's quite dried up—or else the spout is stopped up! That's it, I suppose."

Lovell relinquished the handle for a moment, and twisted his head under the spout to look into it.

But the pumping had told—the water was coming. It was only a little late in arriv-

ing, as water often is in pumps that are not in frequent use.

As Lovell twisted his face under the spout to peer up into it, the gush of water came—belated, but ample.

Swooooooosh!

It smote Arthur Edward Lovell fairly in the middle of his features.

There was a choking yell from Lovell, and he bounded back from the pump, streaming. There was another yell from the campers.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Groogh! Gug-gug—I'm drenched—oouch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the campers.

"You silly, cackling geese—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell, with feelings too deep for words, made a dive for the baggage cart to annex a towel. Jimmy Silver smilingly filled the can, while Lovell mopped his face and head, and looked daggers. It was not till supper was ready, and an appetising smell pervaded the camp, that the smile returned to Arthur Edward's face.

CHAPTER 21.

The Order of the Boot!

VALENTINE MORNINGTON leaned back against the trunk of an old beech, with a cheery smile on his face.

He had enjoyed supper with the Rookwood tramps—much more, certainly, than he would have enjoyed dinner in the dining-room at Stacpoole Lodge with the severe old baronet and the two Stacpoole cousins.

Supper was over, and Putty Grace was washing up, Raby handling the tealoth. Newcome packed away the remnants of the supper. Jimmy Silver gave the pony a rub down, and Arthur Edward Lovell was making up beds in the tent.

Mornington watched them.

He was happy where he was, and extremely unwilling to return to Stacpoole Lodge. Once more he was feeling himself a Rookwooder, feeling as if his disgrace had never happened, and he was what he had once been, and might still have been, but for his perverse and passionate temper. That reflection came into his mind, too; and perhaps it re-

minded him that his fall had been the result of wayward self-will, and that he was now indulging his waywardness as thoughtlessly as ever. His uncle would be surprised at his non-return—moreover, probably angered; for Sir Rupert was a severe and methodical old gentleman, and he was, too, in a normal state of resentment against his nephew and ward. Morny's disgrace had banished whatever regard his uncle might have had for him. He had always been a trial to the old gentleman; he had always given him trouble. Now he was expelled from school in addition, and his uncle had the problem of the future to think out. That was not likely to make him more affectionate towards his troublesome nephew.

Morny yawned, and rose from the grass, and stretched himself.

"Not going?" asked Lovell.

"I think I'd better; nunky will have his rag out, anyhow," answered Mornington. "The poor old gent has to put up with me. I've just been thinkin' that I really ought to make it easy for him if I can."

"Well, that's not a bad wheeze," said Jimmy Silver, smiling.

"No end glad to have met you fellows," said Mornington. "Thanks for the supper—it was great! Well, good-bye!"

"We'll see you off."

The Rookwooders walked with Mornington to the gate of the paddock, and there they shook hands, and the one-time dandy of the Rookwood Fourth walked away.

Jimmy Silver & Co. returned to their camp in a thoughtful mood.

They would have been glad of Morny's company longer, and as they sat round the camp and chatted, they amicably and regretfully talked of him. With all his faults, Morny had his good qualities; they were sorry they were not going to see him at Rookwood School again. There were fellows at Rookwood no better than Morny—worse, in fact, but they had escaped the "chopper" which had come down so heavily on Morny.

"Hallo, we're getting visitors!" remarked Raby, about half an hour after Valentine Mornington had gone.

Two youths came in at the gate, and started towards the portion of the paddock where the riding-horses were grazing. They were two rather elegant-looking fellows, and they wore Panama hats.

Jimmy Silver looked at them, and started.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

"You don't know the chaps?" asked Lovell.

"Not from Adam! I've seen them before—once." Jimmy grinned a little. "They belong to the show that Trotsky raided. They jumped up the steps when he came charging round the drive. One of those giddy hats was trodden on."

"Phew!"

"They're looking this way!" remarked Puffy of the Fourth. "I fancy they know us again."

The two youths had sighted the camp, and stopped dead, staring at it. They exchanged a few words, and then came striding towards the Rookwooders. Their looks boded trouble.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rose to their feet. Who the two fellows were they had not the faintest idea, but it was plain from their manner that they had a right in the paddock.

"What the thump are you doin' here?" demanded the elder of the two.

"Camping," answered Jimmy Silver mildly.

"Cheeky cads!" said the younger. "This is the gang that came chasing up the drive this afternoon, Gus."

"I know the rotters," said Gus. "Get out of this paddock!"

"What?" exclaimed Jimmy.

"You heard me, I suppose! You're trespassin' here. Get on the other side of that gate, sharp!"

"Unless you want to be run in," chimed in the younger brother—for it was evident that the two were brothers.

"But we've got leave to camp here," said Jimmy, feeling a little uneasy, however. "Who may you happen to be?"

The youth called Gus sneered.

"We happen to be the sons of the owner of this paddock," he answered. "We happen to have come for our horses, and I dare say we happen to have come just in time to prevent a gang of tramps from stealin' them."

"Looks like it, Gus!" chimed in the younger.

Jimmy Silver flushed. The manner of the two fellows was as unpleasant as possible, and all the Rookwooders were feeling annoyed. Gus pointed to the gate.

"Get out!" he said.

"We're camping here for the night," said Jimmy quietly. "If the owner of the show comes along and tells us to trek, we'll trek, but we're not budging an inch for you!"

"So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!" snorted Lovell.

"And now take your face away, Gus!" said Putty sweetly. "It's unkind to show that face in public without a mask on! You ought to think of people's nerves!"

"You cheeky cad!" roared Gus.

"Same to you, dear boy, and many of them!" the imperturbable Putty said.

"Are you clearin' out of this paddock?"

"Not just at present," said Jimmy Silver.

"You're trespassin'! Clear out, or I'll clear you!" said Gus, and he let his riding-whip slip from under his arm into his hand. "Now then, are you goin', or do you want a thrashin'?"

Jimmy Silver looked him steadily in his rather pasty face.

"If you handle that whip here, sonny, it will be the last thing you'll do for a bit!" he remarked. "You won't know what hurt you!"

"Are you goin'?"

"Hardly!"

"Then I'll jolly soon shift you! Back up, Aubrey!"

And with that the cheery Gus brought down his riding-whip across Jimmy Silver's shoulders, and the other fellow lashed out at Lovell.

It was something like an earthquake that happened next—from the point of view of Gus and Aubrey.

They hardly knew what was happening, for the whole globe seemed to have turned upside down.

A couple of minutes later they rolled over the gate into the lane, and sprawled there. They had a dim sort of feeling that they had been yanked along by the ankles, with their faces trailing in the grass. But they were too dazed to realise anything clearly—excepting that they were now sprawling in the dust, aching all over.

Five cheery faces smiled at them over the gate.

"Time you travelled on!" remarked Jimmy Silver.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Wow, wow! Oh!"

"We give you ten seconds," said the captain of the Rookwood Fourth. "Then we're coming out to help you!"

The two dusty youths staggered up.

Apparently they did not want to be helped. As Lovell swung the gate open Gus and Aubrey took to their heels, and they fled at top speed down the lane, followed by a yell of laughter from the Rookwood campers.

CHAPTER 22.

The Vials of Wrath!

"SO you have returned, Valentine?"

Sir Rupert Stacpoole was smoking his after-dinner cigar at an open French window looking on the drive at Stacpoole Lodge, when Valentine Mornington came up.

Mornington—his usual reckless mood a good deal softened by his meeting with his old schoolfellows—had returned home with unusual good resolutions in his breast. Instead of going to his own quarters, he determined to speak to his uncle first, and excuse himself for having stayed out; and so he came up to the window of the smoke-room, where he caught sight of the baronet.

"Yes, uncle," answered Morny, with unaccustomed meekness.

"You were not in to dinner," said Sir Rupert coldly. "I think I have told you a score of times, Valentine, that I will not allow you to set the rules of my house at naught!"

"I'm sorry, uncle!" said Mornington. "I happened to meet some old friends, and they asked me to supper."

"There was no reason why you should not accept that invitation, Valentine, if you apprised me of your intention. But I suppose it is useless for your guardian to expect any respect from you—any more than for your cousins to expect any considerations at your hands."

"I'm sorry, uncle!" said Mornington, in a low voice.

"I hope so," said the baronet dryly. "I had something to say to you at dinner, Valentine. You have been quarrelling with Augustus again."

"Isn't it possible that Augustus quarrelled with me, uncle?" asked Mornington bitterly.

"Augustus is not quarrelsome, and you

are extremely so!" answered his uncle. "Augustus has come back from school with an excellent report from his headmaster, and you——"

"And I've been expelled," said Mornington wearily. "I know. I've heard enough of it from my dear cousins. If I called the tune, I'm havin' to pay the piper, by gad!"

The baronet's hard face softened a little.

"What you suffer, Valentine, you have brought upon yourself by your own conduct," he said. "But I will say no more. I wish to do my duty by you, though you make my task a hard one."

"I—I was goin' to ask you somethin', sir," said Mornington, after a pause.

"I hope it is not money!" said the baronet, his face hardening again. "Your extravagance——"

"It isn't that, sir," said Mornington quickly. "I told you I'd met some friends—they're Rookwood chaps, on a holiday tour. I've let them camp in the paddock. I hope you don't mind."

"I suppose it would be too much to expect you to ask my permission before giving your friends leave to camp on my property?" said Sir Rupert satirically. "However, there is no harm done. Why, what—what——Augustus—Aubrey——"

Sir Rupert dropped his half-smoked cigar in his amazement, as two hatless, dusty, and excited youths came racing breathlessly up the drive.

They stopped, and panted for breath, crimson with exertion. Valentine Mornington stared at them, and grinned slightly.

"Lost your hats?" he asked.

"Father——" gasped Gus.

"What has happened?" exclaimed Sir Rupert, springing to his feet.

"That—that gang of hooligans——"

"Those—those rotten tramps——"

"What? Explain yourselves! Have you been attacked?"

"Ow! Yes!" gasped Augustus Stacpoole. "You—you remember that dusty gang that chased a pony in the grounds this afternoon——"

"I am not likely to forget that I was nearly run over!" answered Sir Rupert.

"But what——"

"They're camping in the paddock!" gasped Aubrey.

"What?"

"We ordered them off," panted Augustus, "and—and they pitched into us, and—and assaulted us—ow! We—we had to run for our lives! Half a dozen of the beastly ruffians——"

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the old baronet, red with anger. "Those wretched young ruffians—they have dared to camp on my land—to assault my sons, after endangering my life on my own drive." He choked with righteous wrath.

"Oh, gad!" murmured Mornington, in utter dismay.

"Shall I telephone for the police, father?" gasped Augustus.

"I will do so myself," answered Sir Rupert. "They shall be arrested at once, and I will prosecute them—I will prosecute them with the utmost rigour of the law."

"Uncle!" exclaimed Mornington. He caught the incensed baronet's arm as he was turning away.

"Don't delay me now, Valentine."

"Uncle—I must—they're my friends."

"What!" roared Sir Rupert.

"I—I told you my Rookwood friends had camped in the paddock," stammered Mornington. "Must be the same party. They—they told me somethin' about the pony runnin' into somebody's grounds. I never guessed it was this house; they never knew, either——"

"Nonsense!" stormed Sir Rupert. "That dusty crowd of young tramps could not have been Rookwood boys."

"Friends of Morny?" sneered Augustus Stacpoole. "Just the kind of friends Cousin Val would have."

"Oh, just!" sneered Aubrey.

Mornington did not heed his Stacpoole cousins. He was too alarmed by his uncle's wrath, with regard to his Rookwood friends, to care for the sneers of Augustus and Aubrey, just then.

"They—they didn't know you, uncle," he stammered. "You see, they were in such a hurry after their pony, most likely they hardly looked at you—or they'd have remembered seein' you at Rookwood once or twice. They couldn't help the pony boltin'."

"They could help attacking my sons on my land!" thundered Sir Rupert Stacpoole.

Mornington gave his cousins a bitter look at that.

"I dare say they were given plenty of cause," he answered.

"Yes, you would say so—I expected that!" thundered his uncle. "No doubt you have been laughing with them over the incident—a very amusing incident—your uncle knocked over by a pony on his own drive—no doubt you have enjoyed it thoroughly. Go to your room at once, Valentine, and remain there."

"But—but my friends, sir—"

"I forbid you to speak of those young ruffians as your friends—or to speak to them again if you see them! Go to your room."

"What are you goin' to do, uncle?"

"I will tell you that much!" fumed Sir Rupert. "I am going to telephone to the police to go to the paddock at once, and to arrest any persons they find camping there, on the charge of trespass and violent assault. Now go to your room."

And with that Sir Rupert Stacpoole strode away; and a few moments later his excited and agitated voice was heard at the telephone.

Augustus Stacpoole glanced at Aubrey, and both smiled. In this utter discomfiture of their cousin they found some compensation for their rough handling in the paddock.

"Looks like trouble for your dear friends, Mornington!" grinned Augustus.

"I hope they'll get three months!" said Aubrey.

Valentine Mornington clenched his hands. But he restrained himself, and turned away down the drive. Sir Rupert reappeared at the window.

"Valentine! I have ordered you to your room!" he thundered. "Obey me! Do you hear?"

Valentine Mornington certainly heard. But he did not heed. A moment more, and he was in the road.

"Turn in, what?" yawned Lovell.

"About time," agreed Jimmy Silver.

"Hallo, here's Morny again!"

The Rookwood campers stared at the breathless figure that leaped over the gate, and came speeding towards them across the grass.

"Anything up, Morny?" called out Jimmy Silver. Valentine Mornington halted, and panted for breath.

"Just a few!" he returned. "I'm awfully sorry, you fellows—"

"For what?"

"I made a little mistake in givin' you chaps leave to camp here. The giddy owner is on the war-path."

"Well, you ass!" said Arthur Edward Lovell blankly.

"He happens to be the old gent you nearly ran down with your jolly old pony this afternoon," explained Mornington.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"He also happens to be my respected uncle, Sir Rupert Stacpoole."

"Morny!"

"I'm awfully sorry—but the sooner you clear, the better it will be for your health. You seem to have handled my Stacpoole cousins rather severely—"

"Those two cads—"

Morny grinned.

"Exactly! Those two cads. I'll help you pack; for goodness' sake lose no time; there'll be trouble."

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another, and then they proceeded to strike the tent, in grim silence, and pack the baggage-cart. Morny did not waste time going into details; but they realised that there was need for haste. With great celerity the juniors packed the cart, harnessed Trotsky, and prepared to go. Mornington held the gate open as the cart was driven through. The last glimmer of the sunset was sinking away in the west. Jimmy Silver & Co. did not speak, for their feelings were too deep for words. Mornington walked with them as far as the high-road.

"I'm awfully sorry!" he said at length.

"Not your fault, old chap!" said Jimmy Silver. "We've had night marches before, and another won't hurt us. Good-bye, old fellow."

"Good-bye!"

The Rookwooders trudged on, Valentine Mornington standing quite still, and watching them as they disappeared in the deepening dusk. He made a step after them, and stopped again, and then, with a clouded brow, watched them till they were out of sight.

CHAPTER 23.

Lovell Does It!

"WHERE are we?"
 "I believe," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully, "that we're about ten miles or so from Reigate—more or less."

"Where's the Reigate road?"

"Goodness knows!"

Snort from Arthur Edward Lovell.

It was close on midnight. And the Rookwood holiday tramps were rather in a difficulty.

There was no moon. On such an occasion, as Lovell remarked, there was bound to be no moon! There were stars in the sky, beautiful to look at, but just then the Rookwooders would have given them all in exchange for one good street-lamp.

The baggage-cart had halted. Trotsky, the pony, had halted with great readiness. The juniors could only hope that he would display equal readiness when it was necessary to move on again. Five rather irritated juniors blinked round them in the deep summer night.

Four roads—or, rather, lanes—met at this point. Any one of them might have led anywhere. In the middle, where the lanes met, was a scrubby patch of grass, and in the middle of that an ancient signpost with a very ancient sign on the top of it. In the starlight it was impossible to read the sign. The juniors struck matches by the dozen and held them up, and still they could not read the sign.

The fact was that that sign needed repainting, and had needed repainting before Jimmy Silver & Co. were born. Wind and weather had done their worst upon it.

"But for that thumping ass Morny—" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Eleven!" said Putty Grace.

Lovell stared at Putty of the Fourth.

"What do you mean—eleven?" he demanded.

"I'm counting."

"Counting what, you ase?"

"Your remarks on Morny! That's the eleventh!"

"You silly ass!" snorted Lovell. "But for that silly chump Mornington—"

"Twelve!" said Putty.

"Look here—" roared Lovell. It really looked as if Arthur Edward was losing his temper.

"If we've stopped to hear Lovell blowing off steam," remarked Raby, "I'll take a rest in the grass! Wake me up when he's done!"

"Good!" assented Newcome. "If we wait till Lovell's tired his chin, that means staying here till morning! Then we can read the sign!"

Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard.

"We'd camped," he said—"we were fixed for the night! Then that blithering ass Morny—"

"Thirteen!" said Putty Grace.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell pushed back his cuffs, and made a stride towards Putty of the Fourth. Jimmy Silver caught him by the arm just in time.

"Don't be an ass, old chap!" said Jimmy soothingly. "Shut up, Putty! There's a time to be funny, and a time to be serious! We're all jolly tired, and we want a rest—"

"But for that chump Morny—"

"Fourteen!"

Jimmy had to jerk Lovell back again. Lovell's remarks on the subject of Valentine Mornington were, in his own opinion, just and well-founded. It was irritating for Putty to count them in this way, as if there was something funny in Lovell's righteous wrath.

"If that silly ass doesn't shut up—" breathed Lovell.

"We've got a choice of four roads," said Jimmy Silver. "Any one of them might lead anywhere or nowhere. We don't know where we are, and we can't spot a place for a camp. Chance it and keep straight on."

"Best thing to do," agreed Putty.

"Rot!" said Lovell. "I'll read the sign, somehow. I'll climb the post."

"Looks a rather rotten old post to climb," said Jimmy Silver. "Looks as if it's been here since the time of the Druids!"

"Oh, that's all right! It will bear my weight."

"Better take your boots off, then!" said Putty.

"I can climb in my boots!" snorted Lovell.

"I was thinking of the weight—"

"You silly ass!" roared Lovell. "I'll jolly well—"

He jerked himself away from Jimmy Silver, and Putty dodged round the

baggage-cart just in time to prevent a serious case of assault and battery.

"I'll climb the post and strike a match, and then I can read the sign," said Lovell, breathing hard. "We want to know where we are. May be going back the way we came, for all we know, after winding about in these dashed lanes!"

"Well, go ahead!" said Jimmy.

Arthur Edward Lovell clutched the signpost and climbed. His comrades stood round and watched. Putty suggested holding a blanket for Lovell to fall into. And Lovell turned his head to glare at him for the suggestion, then climbed on again.

There was no doubt that it was a very ancient post. It creaked under Lovell's weight and seemed to sway. It had a slant in it, and that slant grew more pronounced as Lovell climbed. But he reached the strip of board which projected from it at the top. He peered at the board and blinked at it, but in the dim light he could not read the almost obliterated letters on it. But he was prepared for that. A match struck and held close to the board would reveal the secret.

Striking a match, with both his hands engaged in holding on, was a matter of some difficulty. But Lovell was not to be beaten, especially with the Co. standing round below watching him.

He threw one arm over the projecting board, and hung on while he sorted the matchbox out of his pocket with the other hand. He stuck the matchbox in his teeth and extracted a match. The rest was simple. He had only to draw the match along the box held in his teeth, and the light would flare right on the sign. Only it unfortunately happened that Lovell's weight thrown on the ancient board was a little too much for it.

Crack!

"Look out!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

It was not of much use for Lovell to "look out." The board broke off short under his weight, and Lovell came down. As he no longer had any visible means of support, the law of gravitation did the rest.

Under the irresistible influence of the law of gravitation Arthur Edward Lovell shot towards the centre of the earth. Fortunately, he did not have to travel so far as that. The surface of the earth stopped him.

Bump!

Lovell sat in the grass, with a fragment of a wayside sign under his arm and an expression of great astonishment on his face. And from Jimmy Silver & Co. there came a loud howl.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 24.

Into the Night!

VALENTINE MORNINGTON stood at an open French window in Stacpoole Lodge and looked out into the drive. There was a rather mocking glimmer in his eyes as he watched three figures coming up to the house from the gate on the road.

His guardian, Sir Rupert Stacpoole, came striding up the gravel drive, his brows knitted, his eyes glittering under his bushy grey eyebrows. It did not need a second glance to discern that the old gentleman was in a towering rage.

Behind him came Morny's cousins, Augustus and Aubrey Stacpoole. Both of them looked angry and bitter.

"Looks as if the merry expedition hasn't been a howlin' success!" murmured Mornington.

The baronet, on his way to the door, saw the figure of his nephew at the French windows, black against the electric light within. He changed his course and came striding up to the window where Morny stood. His hopeful sons followed him.

"Valentine!" gasped the old baronet. "You—"

"Anythin' wrong, uncle?" asked Mornington calmly.

"I have been to the 'paddock!' exclaimed the baronet. "The young rascals who assaulted Augustus and Aubrey have fled!"

"Cleared off, have they?" asked Mornington.

"I took the village policeman with me to give them in charge for trespass!" shouted the angry old gentleman. "They were gone!"

Morny shrugged his graceful shoulders. "Could it be done?" he asked softly. "You see, I gave my friends permission to camp in the paddock."

"You had no right to do so!"

"Quite so. But I hardly think they could be charged with trespass, as I did," said Mornington. "Just as well that you didn't let the bobby loose on them, uncle. The man couldn't have done anything, you know."

"Valentine, I have had enough of your insolence——"

"And I can tell you that I'm fed-up with it!" exclaimed Augustus Stacpoole savagely. "We should have bagged the gang of rotters if they hadn't been warned to clear in time!"

"Mornny warned them!" said Aubrey Stacpoole. "He can't deny it!"

"Is that the case, Valentine?" Mornington's lip curled.

"I'm not thinkin' of denyin' it," he answered. "As soon as I knew there was goin' to be a row I cut off and warned the Rookwood chaps to clear."

"You young rascal!" gasped his uncle. "They'd done no harm——"

"They assaulted my sons!" thundered Sir Rupert.

"My dear cousins butted into their camp and checked them, and got chucked out on their necks," said Mornington coolly. "They asked for it, and they got it!"

Sir Rupert's fingers closed almost convulsively on the riding-whip he held in his hand, which had apparently been intended for the benefit of Jimmy Silver & Co. He looked for a moment as if he would lay it about his nephew's shoulders.

"These young ruffians whom you claim as your friends assaulted my sons on my own land, and that is how you speak of it!" he gasped.

"That is how it was, sir," answered Mornny.

"Enough! Is it not enough, Valentine, that you have brought disgrace upon me and all your relations by being expelled from your school? And must you add personal insolence to your offences?" gasped Sir Rupert. "I warn you that if you do not mend your ways, my house cannot be much longer a home for you! As for these young rascals whom you declare to be friends of yours at Rookwood, they shall not escape the punishment of their ruffianly audacity! They shall be followed and punished! I shall see to that!"

"Good!" ejaculated Augustus.

"That's the stuff!" murmured Aubrey.

"You will go to your room, Valentine!"

I have already ordered you to do so, and instead of obeying me you have left the house to warn those trespassing young rascals that I was coming to the paddock! Disobey me again, and my door will close behind you for ever!"

Mornington drew a deep breath.

His handsome face was a trifle pale. He opened his lips to speak, but he checked the words. For once, he was not really deserving of his uncle's anger; but often and often he had deserved it, and he knew it. He had never been anything but a trial to Sir Rupert, and the culmination of his offences had come when he had been expelled from Rookwood School. He would have been silent, but he caught the sneering grins on the faces of his Stacpoole cousins, and his pale face flushed with anger, and the reckless words were blurted out.

"That's enough, uncle! You don't want me here! My cousins will be glad to see the last of me! Well, I'll go!"

"You will go to your room!"

"I have no room here now, uncle!" said Mornington coolly. "I've eaten the bread of charity long enough."

"Quite long enough!" murmured Augustus.

But Mornington caught the words.

"Quite!" he said bitterly. "That's finished! I'm goin'!"

He picked up his hat from a chair beside him, and stepped out of the French window. Sir Rupert Stacpoole stared at him angrily and incredulously.

"Go to your room, Valentine!" he said. "I am quite aware of your intention—to seek those young rascals and warn them that they are followed! Go to your room! I command you!"

"Excuse me, sir," said Mornington. "As you have cast me off, you no longer have any right to command me." He stepped back. "I don't blame you, uncle. I've given you trouble enough, goodness knows. It was my own fault that I was sacked from Rookwood, and I couldn't expect you to stand it. Good-bye!"

He turned away.

"Valentine!" thundered the old baronet. "Go to your room at once!"

But it was towards the gate that Valentine Mornington went, and in another minute he was lost in the night.

CHAPTER 25.

The Camp on the Grass.

"WE can read it now," remarked Putty.

Lovell picked himself up. He had an ache—several aches, in fact. And his temper was brimming over.

He dropped the fragment of the sign, and Putty picked it up. By the light of a match he read:

"——TT'S END."

The first letters of the word were on the fragment of the board still adhering to the signpost.

"Sold again!" said Putty.

"Ow!" said Lovell. "Ooooh! Wow!"

"There's another board on the left," said Putty, glancing up. "If Lovell likes to go up again——"

"I'm not going up again!" said Lovell, breathing fury. "But if you want a prize nose, Putty——"

"I want to turn in," said Putty placidly. "We've still got a choice of four roads, you fellows. Or shall we camp here on this patch? I'm tired enough to sleep anywhere!"

"Can't put up the tent here," said Raby.

"Blow the tent! Too jolly tired to stick the tent up again to-night, anyhow! And it's fine. Let's root out the blankets and camp on the grass!"

"Not a bad idea!" said Jimmy Silver, with a nod. "We had supper in the camp before——"

"If that ass Morny——"

"Fifteen!" said Putty.

"Oh, choose it, old chap! It wasn't Morny's fault," said Jimmy Silver. "He could have got us leave to camp in his uncle's paddock if those two cads hadn't jumped in and rowed with us. Anyhow, it can't be helped now. I'm dog tired. Let's camp."

"Trotsky's camped already!" grinned Newcome.

The pony, still in harness, had squatted in the grass. He had settled the matter for himself.

"It's a rotten place for a camp!" grunted Lovell.

"Any port in a storm!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "Keep smiling!"

And the Rookwooders, fed-up with their night march after a long day on the road,

proceeded to camp where they were. Trotsky was taken out and tethered to the signpost, ground-sheets and blankets jerked out of the baggage-cart, and the juniors stretched themselves in the grass under the stars. They had had their supper in the camp in Sir Rupert Stacpool's paddock, and now all they wanted was sleep. But they wanted that badly.

About a minute after they were rolled in their blankets they were fast in slumber.

It was about an hour later that Jimmy Silver awoke suddenly. He sat up in his blanket and blinked round him. The starlight fell upon the schoolboy camp; round him his comrades were sleeping. Jimmy Silver wondered what had awakened him. The night was calm and silent; only from the distance, in the dusky fields, came the "moo" of a waking cow. Then he gave a sudden jump as he saw a rather elegant figure leaning on the signpost, regarding the camp with a whimsical smile.

"Morny!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Little me!"

Jimmy jumped to his feet. He was amazed at the sight of Valentine Mornington standing there, and wondered for a second whether he was dreaming. It was past one o'clock in the morning. He stood and stared at the one-time dandy of the Rookwood Fourth.

"You here, Morny!"

"Surprised you—what?"

"Well, yes, rather," said Jimmy Silver.

"What on earth are you doing out of bed at this time of the night?"

The other fellows, awakened by the voices close at hand, opened their eyes and looked up. There was surprise in every face.

"I thought I'd stroll after you," said Mornington coolly. "Lucky you camped in the middle of the road. I hardly thought I should drop on you so easily."

"But why?" asked Putty.

"You wouldn't care for my company for a day or two on the road?" asked Mornington.

"Of course we'd be glad to have you, if you care to come along," said Jimmy Silver. "But your uncle——"

"Leave nunky out of it!" said Mornington tersely. "Never mind nunky! I suppose you fellows are fairly fagged?"

"Fairly!" assented Jimmy.

"You don't feel disposed to break camp now?"

"No jolly fear!" said Arthur Edward Lovell emphatically.

"You'd rather have a scrap on your hands?"

"A scrap? With whom?" asked Newcome. "Who the thump is coming along scrapping in the middle of the night?"

Mornington looked back along the dark road. Faintly, from somewhere in the deep silence of the night, came an echo of galloping hoofs.

"I fancy that's the lot," he said. "I'm sorry, but, you see, nunky's in a blue rage. Your pony nearly ran over him, then you chucked his two bonny boys out of your camp, and cleared before he could get at you. He's on the war-path!"

"You don't mean to say that Sir Rupert Stacpoole is following us, looking for trouble?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"I'm not sure whether nunky's in the party," said Mornington. "I'm not posted in their plans. But I'm fairly certain that my beloved cousins—"

"They won't give us much trouble!" grunted Lovell.

"For which excellent reason they wouldn't come alone," said Mornington. "I fancy they'll bring the two keepers with them."

"That the lot?" asked Lovell.

"Unless they rope in the stableman, too."

"We'll handle them," said Lovell. "I'm jolly well not going to get on the march before morning if every keeper in Surrey was on the giddy war-path!"

"But are you sure, Morny?" asked Jimmy Silver doubtfully.

"Quite!" said Morny lightly.

"But what's their game, if they find us?"

"Nunky said you were to be punished. It's a serious offence to lay lawless hands on Gus and Aubrey, you know. I've done it in my time, so I know. As you can't be run in, I fancy you're going to be thrashed."

"Are we?" roared Lovell belligerently.

Jimmy Silver looked worried. He wished from the bottom of his heart that the erring footsteps of Trotsky, the pony, had never led him anywhere near Stacpoole Lodge. He was glad to have seen Mornington again. But trouble with Morny's relations was about the last thing Jimmy desired.

He gave his chums a worried look.

"We don't want trouble," he said. "What about clearing off, and keeping clear of the silly asses?"

"Rot!" snorted Lovell. "Catch me clearing off because two dashed tailor's dummies are after me! Why, I want to see 'em again! I want to give 'em another punch or two!"

"Hear, hear!" said Raby and Newcome and Putty in chorus.

Jimmy Silver, with his pacific inclinations, was evidently in a minority of one. The Rookwooders were all on their feet now; and they no longer seemed sleepy. They were wrathful and ready for a "scrap," if it came to that. And Jimmy himself, disinclined as he was for trouble with Morny's people, was little disposed to flee from the wrath to come. Sir Rupert Stacpoole doubtless had some cause for anger; but his high-handed proceedings put up the back of Uncle James of Rookwood.

"Well, I agree with you fellows," said Jimmy at last. "We'll see it through, if they come up. You'd better keep out if it, Morny—you don't want a scrap with your cousins—"

"Just what I do want!" answered Mornington coolly. "I'm standin' by you!"

"Good man!" said Lovell approvingly. "I don't want to run your people down, Morny; but those cousins of yours are a pair of sneaking, sniffing, pink-eyed blighters!"

Valentine Mornington laughed.

"All that and more!" he said. "Well, if you've decided on battle, you'd better get hold of some stumps or somethin', for I fancy that here they come!"

Thud, thud, thud! The hoof-beats on the hard road rang more loudly, nearer at hand. Jimmy Silver & Co. looked down the lane in the direction of the sound. In the dusk of the summer night a bunch of horsemen loomed into view. With a rattle of bridle and stirrup and a clatter of hoofs, they came sweeping by the patch of grass in the centre of the cross-roads—five of them. And then one of the party caught sight of the halted baggage-cart and the tethered pony.

"Here they are!"

It was the voice of Augustus Stacpoole.

And the horsemen clattered to a halt.

CHAPTER 26.

The Fight!

FIVE horsemen drew up in the grass within a couple of yards of the group of Rookwooders.

Jimmy Silver & Co. recognised Augustus and Aubrey at once. The other three were men whom they had never seen before—two of them had the look of keepers, and one undoubtedly was a stableman. The juniors were glad to see that Sir Rupert Stacpoole was not in the party. Perhaps the baronet, angry and incensed as he was, felt that his age did not permit him to go carcering on the high-roads at midnight. Evidently he had left the affair in the hands of his hopeful sons—with a strong backing of grown men to see them through. Jimmy Silver and Co. were glad of it. They would not have hesitated to defend themselves; but it would have gone very much against their grain to lay hands on a gentleman of Sir Rupert's age.

Doubtless the testy old baronet had considered his three men more than a match for a party of schoolboys. Augustus and Aubrey had ridden with them to see that the punishment was duly carried out, and to enjoy witnessing its infliction, and to take a hand in it under safe circumstances. The Rookwooders had learned in their previous encounter that Augustus and Aubrey were not cast in heroic mould.

The two Stacpooles grinned with satisfaction as they stared at the Rookwooders over their horses' ears, and recognised Jimmy Silver & Co. in the dim light of the stars. Augustus & Co. had been riding for some time in search of the party, and they looked on the discovery of the camp at the cross-roads as a very happy chance.

"It's the same gang!" said Aubrey Stacpoole.

"That's the lot!" assented Augustus. "I'd know their hangdog faces anywhere!"

"Why, there's Morny!" shouted Aubrey, catching sight of Valentine Mornington leaning idly on the signpost, with his hands in his pockets.

Augustus Stacpoole gave his cousin a bitter look.

"So you found the rotters before we did, Morny?" he said between his teeth. "You came to warn them, just as the water thought!"

Mornington nodded.

"Well, you came a bit too late, anyhow, as they haven't had time to skedaddle!" sneered Augustus.

"You cheuky rotter!" roared Lovell. "We had lots of time, but who the thump do you think would skedaddle from you?"

"You've butted into our camp a second time," said Jimmy Silver mildly. "Will you tell us what you want?"

Augustus gripped his riding-whip hard.

"Yes, I'll tell you, you young black-guard! You've trespassed on my father's land—"

"Rot!"

"And when we came to turn you out of the paddock you attacked us—five to two!" said Augustus Stacpoole.

"We chucked you out," said Jimmy. "But if you were looking for a fight you could have had it, one to one, and the rest would have seen fair play. The same applies now."

"Get off that horse, and chuck up your whip and put up your hands!" bellowed Arthur Edward Lovell. "Give me a chance, that's all, and I'll alter your features for you!"

"Any alteration would be for the better, Gus!" remarked Putty.

Augustus Stacpoole gritted his teeth.

"I'm not lookin' for a fight with rowdy tramps!" he said bitterly. "You cleared off before you could be given into custody for trespass and assault. But you're not gettin' away without punishment, take my word for that!"

Augustus turned to his followers.

"You've got Sir Rupert's orders!" he said brusquely. "These young tramps have got to be thrashed! It's the simplest way of dealing with them, and will be a warnin' to them not to trespass, or check their betters! Give them the hiding of their lives!"

The horsemen dismounted, grinning. They were burly fellows, and they seemed to look on the thrashing of the hapless Rookwooders as more or less of a joke. Probably, too, they were in expectation of a handsome tip from the lofty Augustus for carrying out his instructions. It was not probable that they served that fascinating young gentleman from attachment merely.

Jimmy Silver & Co. drew together, stumps in hand. The horsemen had riding-

whips, which they evidently intended to use. Valentine Mornington caught up a stump and joined the Rookwooders.

"Better keep out of this, Cousin Val!" called out Aubrey Stacpoole.

"I'm in it up to the neck," answered Morny coolly.

"You'll get it pretty hot when you come back to the Lodge if you stand by those scoundrels!"

"I'm not comin' back to the Lodge, old bean."

"So you say!" sneered Augustus Stacpoole. "You came home when you were kicked out of your school, and you'll come home again fast enough to sponge on your relations!"

Mornington's face crimsoned. It was the bitterest taunt he ever heard from his cousins, and he heard it often enough.

"Collar them!" added Augustus to his followers. "Give them a good dozen each with your whips, and my cousin Mornington the same if he takes a hand!"

And Augustus and Aubrey backed their horses to give their "army" room to advance in front.

"I warn you fellows to keep off," said Jimmy Silver very quietly.

"Better take it quietly, young 'un!" said the stableman. "We're going to carry out orders! You shouldn't trespass, or cheek Master Augustus! Now, put down them stumps!"

"Come and make us put them down!" bawled Arthur Edward Lovell.

"We'll do that fast enough!" said one of the keepers.

And the three men rushed at the juniors, brandishing their whips.

They expected the group of schoolboys to break up before that heavy rush, and they expected to follow on, laying their whips on fleeing backs. And Augustus and Aubrey were ready to spur their horses in pursuit and see that no Rookwooder escaped unwhipped.

But those expectations were not realised. Instead of breaking and running, Jimmy Silver & Co. stood as firm as rocks and met the rush.

There was a heavy collision as the two parties met, and as the riding-whips lashed down the stumps retaliated.

Crash! Crack! Slash! Crack!

"Oh! Ow! Oooooop!"

"Give 'em socks!" roared Lovell.

"Play up, Rookwood!"

"Oh, gad!" gasped Augustus Stacpoole, staring at the scene in astonishment.

"My word!" murmured Aubrey.

It was not in the least what they had expected.

Three slashing riding-whips certainly did much execution, and there were loud yells from the juniors. But cricket-stumps in determined hands retaliated with great effect.

One of the keepers rolled over half stunned by a terrific swipe from Lovell. The other backed off, defending himself with his whip against three lunging and slashing stumps.

The stableman was collared by Putty and Raby, what time he received a slash across the head from Morny, and he went down in the grass following.

"Ow, ow! Elp!"

"Give 'em jip!" yelled Lovell.

So far from an easy victory for Augustus & Co. and a thrashing all round for the Rookwooders, the schoolboys were getting the better of it, and they pushed the enemy hard.

In a few minutes the two keepers and the stableman were all sprawling on the ground, yelling for quarter as the stumps rained lashes on them.

"Back up, Gus!" exclaimed Aubrey Stacpoole.

Augustus nodded, and gripped his whip. The two riders urged their horses forward at the Rookwooders, recklessly riding them down and slashing out.

CHAPTER 27.

Not Nice for Augustus!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. had to scatter from the rush of the horses, and they received some severe lashes as they scattered. Augustus and Aubrey rode victorious, while their hapless followers sprawled and roared.

But it was only for a moment.

The juniors rallied to the attack at once. A lash from a stump on his flank sent Aubrey's horse careering down the road at top speed, and the rider dragged at the reins in vain to stop him. The last glimpse the Rookwooders had of Aubrey Stacpoole, that youth was clinging to his horse's neck, and going strong.

Augustus Stacpoole was not so lucky.

He made his horse prance to keep the juniors off, while he lashed out with the whip. But Valentine Mornington closed in on him, and gripped him round the waist and hung on.

The whip came down with a crash on Morny, but he did not heed. He hung on grimly to his affectionate cousin.

Jimmy Silver grabbed the bridle, and held the horse. There was a crash as Augustus came out of the saddle, and rolled in the grass with Mornington.

Aubrey Stacpoole had already disappeared from sight in the distance. The keepers staggered up, gasping and groaning, and looking inclined for anything but a renewal of the scrap. They had had a sample of the Rookwood quality, and the sample was enough.

Mornington set a knee on Augustus' chest. Keeping the wriggling youth pinned down, he glanced round.

"Kick those rotters out," he said, "and drive the horses the other way! They can walk home."

"Good!" roared Lovell.

"Don't you drive away my horse, you blackguards!" yelled Augustus Stacpoole.

The horses, scared by the struggle and noise, were pawing and backing, ready to take to flight. The keepers approached them, but the Rookwood juniors crowded in the way.

"Keep off, unless you want some more!" said Jimmy Silver grimly.

"Give us our 'orses, and we'll go!"

"You'll go without!" said Jimmy Silver coolly. "A walk home will do you good, and you can hunt for your gee-gées to-morrow!"

"Look 'ere—"

"Enough said! Go for them, you fellows!"

The juniors, stumps in hand, advanced on the three in warlike array. The trio exchanged glances, and backed off. The odds were against them, and they had had enough of the stumps. They had a dozen bruises each already, and did not seem to want any more.

Jimmy Silver started the horses, and they trotted down one of the cross roads into a field. The advancing juniors drove Augustus' followers before them, down another of the cross-roads. The three men

backed away, and, as the stumps came to closer quarters, they fairly took to their heels and ran for it.

Jimmy Silver & Co. returned to the camp victorious.

Mornington, with a grin, removed his knee from Augustus Stacpoole's chest, and allowed that ruffled and rumped youth to rise.

"You'll pay for this!" said Augustus, between his teeth. "What do you expect father to say to this?"

Mornington shrugged his shoulders.

"Whatever dear old nunky says, I shan't be there to hear it," he answered. "Go home, dear boy, and be happy, you won't see me at Stacpoole Lodge again. But before you go, by gad, I'm goin' to give you the hidin' of your life!"

"Hear, hear!" chortled Lovell.

"Put up your hands, Gus, dear boy!" said Valentine Mornington, pushing back his cuffs, and advancing upon Augustus.

Augustus Stacpoole, with a livid face, cast a desperate look round him. His brother had long since vanished, and his followers were out of sight now. He backed away, Mornington following him up, with glittering eyes and clenched fists.

Augustus caught his foot in a root as he backed, and fell. The next moment he sprang up, turned his back to Mornington, and ran. Morny's boot shot out, and landed—and Augustus, with a fearful yell, plunged forward on his hands and knees.

"Goal!" roared Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Augustus Stacpoole bounded up, and ran on breathlessly, without a glance behind.

Mornington drove his hands into his pockets, with a careless laugh.

"Our win, you fellows!" he remarked.

"Three cheers for little us!" chortled Lovell.

"If they come back," said Raby, with a glance down the road—"if they come back with some more—"

"They won't come back," said Mornington. "They've got a long way to hoof it home, and then they couldn't be back here before mornin'. Lend me a blanket, and turn in."

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy Silver. "But

"But what, old bean?"

"This means an awful row with your uncle, I'm afraid, Morny."

"It doesn't!"

"You're not going back?" asked Lovell.

"No."

"But——" said Jimmy.

"My dear man, that's settled!" said Mornington. "Not your fault, nor mine—not even old Sir Rupert's. We can't hit it off—incompatibility of temper, you know. I've said a fond farewell to Staepoole Lodge. Nothin' to worry about."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Jimmy Silver blankly.

"Camp with you fellows."

"Yes; but after——"

"Sufficient for the day is the jolly old evil thereof!" said Mornington nonchalantly. "I'm sleepy—what price turnin' in?"

Jimmy Silver had a good deal more to say, but he did not say it. The Rookwooders turned in, and they were not disturbed again that night. The enemy, wearily "hoofing it" home, had had enough. And in the sunny summer morning, when the Rookwood outfit took the road, Valentine Mornington marched with the Rookwooders.

CHAPTER 28.

The Pursuer!

"COME on, Morny!"

Jimmy Silver called, but Valentine Mornington did not answer.

The Rookwood tramps were following a steep country road in Surrey, and every now and then the juniors gave a shove to the baggage-cart to help Trotsky, the pony, over a rough place.

The road wound up the green hillside, and, looking back from any point, the juniors could see it unwinding behind like a corkscrew, loops of white amid the green.

Mornington had stopped, and was looking back, with his hands in his pockets, and a fixed expression on his handsome, reckless face.

Jimmy Silver & Co. glanced back at him rather impatiently.

It was only the night before that Morny—the expelled junior of Rookwood—had joined the party. Jimmy Silver & Co.

were glad to have him, but their feelings were very dubious on the subject. They knew that Morny had left Staepoole Lodge without his guardian's permission, and it worried them.

It did not seem to worry Mornington in the slightest degree. He was accustomed to going his own way—to following any impulse whithersoever it led. Good or bad, he would follow it till he tired of it, and it was thus that he had come so terrible a "cropper" at Rookwood School. But the lesson seemed to have been lost on Valentine Mornington.

The one-time dandy of the Rookwood Fourth did not seem to hear Jimmy call, as he stood looking back by the way they had come, on the white road winding down the green hillside. Arthur Edward Lovell added his powerful voice.

"Are you staying behind, Morny?" he bawled.

Morny answered then, without looking round:

"Hold on a minute or two!"

"Can't stop on a hill like this!" called back Putty of the Fourth. "If Trotsky stops here, he'll never start again!"

"Come on, Morny!" shouted Raby.

"Go on without me, then!" answered Mornington.

Lovell grunted angrily.

"Let's!" he said.

But Jimmy Silver, who was leading Trotsky, came to a halt. Trotsky halted very willingly. Sometimes he was an unwilling animal, but never when he was called upon to halt.

"Look here, Jimmy," said Lovell warmly. "I'm jolly hungry!"

"Same here," said Newcome feelingly.

"And it's grub time, and we can't stop on this dashed road!" continued Lovell.

"Let's get on!"

"Give Morny his head," said Jimmy Silver resignedly. "After all, he's our giddy guest."

"Oh, blow!" grunted Lovell.

Jimmy Silver walked back towards Mornington.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Only my giddy guardian!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy.

From the spot where Morny had stopped the hillside dropped away from the road almost like the wall of a house. The lower road curved round below, and a biscuit,

could have been tossed easily from the upper road to the lower, though for a traveller following the road round the curve it was a distance of a quarter of a mile.

On the lower road a horseman was coming up at a walk.

He was an elderly gentleman, in riding-clothes, and the sunshine glistened on his silver moustache and his eyeglass.

It was Sir Rupert Stacpoole, Morny's guardian, and his expression showed that his temper was not in its most amenable state. He looked, in fact, very angry indeed. Probably he was not enjoying a ride up a steep hillside in blazing sunshine, with dozens of gnats buzzing round his head.

Mornington looked down on him, a mocking smile curving his well-cut lips.

Jimmy did not smile. He looked grave and concerned. The other members of the party came back to the spot.

"Is that your guardian, Morny?" asked Newcome.

"Yes."

"I think I remember him now. I saw him at Rookwood," said Newcome. "I suppose he's coming after you?"

"Looks like it."

"Are you going home with him?" asked Lovell.

Lovell's look indicated that, in his opinion, that was about the best thing Valentine Mornington could do.

"No!"

"Then the sooner we get on the better!" said Lovell. "We don't want an argument with the old gentleman."

"Cut before he sees you, Morny!" said Raby.

"Too late, dear boy! He's seen me!" said Mornington coolly. "Besides, why shouldn't I have a word with my excellent uncle, if only to wish him 'Good-mornin'?"

The horseman, glancing up, had seen the row of faces looking down from the upper road. He recognised his nephew's face among the others at once. A black look came over his brow. He pulled his horse to a halt, and waved his riding-whip towards Mornington.

"So I have found you, you young rascal!" he exclaimed.

His voice came clearly up the intervening hillside.

Mornington raised his straw hat.

"Good-mornin', uncle!" he called back cheerily. "Are you lookin' for me?"

"You know I am!" thundered the old baronet. "How dare you leave home without my permission—and with those young rascals, too!"

"Little us!" murmured Putty. "Morny, your uncle doesn't know what nice fellows we are!"

"Come down the road at once, Valentine!"

"Thanks! I'm not comin'!"

"I command you, as your guardian, to return to your home with me, Valentine!"

"Anythin' else?" asked Mornington coolly.

Sir Rupert did not reply. He seemed to be gasping for breath.

"I'm not comin' back!" said Mornington. "I'm fed up with the Lodge and with my lovin' cousins! Did Augustus tell you I punched him last evenin'? Aubrey got away before I could punch him! Dear old uncle, I've had enough of Stacpoole Lodge an' cousinly affection an' avuncular duty! I'm not comin' back—ever!"

"Draw it mild!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

Mornington did not heed him.

"This is kind of me, uncle," he continued. "I'm savin' you the trouble of faggin' up this hill after me! I suppose a sense of duty brought you out on my trail?"

Sir Rupert Stacpoole glared up at his cheerful nephew, gripping his riding-whip hard in his hand. If he had been able to push his horse up the steep hillside, certainly Mornington would have felt the weight of that whip. But to reach his nephew he had to follow the windings of the road. He sat in the saddle and glared.

"That's all," said Mornington. "Augustus an' Aubrey will be glad to hear they've seen the last of me—an' you'll be glad, too, when you come to think of it! Good-bye!"

The baronet found his voice.

"Valentine! You insolent young rascal! I will not only take you home, but I will give you the soundest thrashing of your life and lock you in your room!"

Mornington laughed.

"Haven't you ever heard the old recipe for makin' jugged hare, uncle?" he asked. "First catch your hare, you know!"

"You—you—"

Mornington turned away, leaving the baronet sitting his horse and spluttering with rage.

"Time we got on, dear men!" said Mornington.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rejoined Trotsky and restarted. They pushed on up the hilly road, Mornington smiling, the other five fellows looking very grave. The former dandy of the Fourth at Rookwood talked cheerily as they pushed on, but the Rookwooders were silent and worried. And Valentine Mornington at last shrugged his shoulders, and tramped in silence, too.

CHAPTER 29. Lovell's Way!

"HALT!"

Jimmy Silver sang out the command a couple of hours later.

It was well on in the afternoon, and the Rookwood tramps were growing ravenous. But with Morn's pursuer so close on the track, Jimmy Silver did not deem it advisable to halt for lunch at the usual time.

It would have been distinctly disconcerting for Sir Rupert Stacpoole, riding-crop in hand, to ride up to the camp, demanding his nephew.

Jimmy considered it judicious to put a good distance between the Rookwood party and the baronet before halting, and his comrades agreed with him, though they were both tired and hungry, and perhaps growing a little irritable.

No member of the party approved of Mornington's insolence to his uncle—it was impossible to approve of it. Morn might or might not have had adequate reasons for taking French leave; but Sir Rupert was an old man, and his guardian, and there was a certain fitness of things of which Morn did not seem to be aware.

Anyway, if Morn was sticking to the party, the sooner they were at a good distance from Stacpoole Lodge the better. All the Rookwooders agreed upon that.

Whether the old baronet was still on their track they did not know. They had done their best to shake him off. While Sir Rupert was riding slowly up the hill road the Rookwooders had turned off the road and taken a slightly downhill path, changing their intended route.

As the country round them was hilly and wooded, they hoped to escape the observa-

tion of the horseman, however hard he rode on their traces.

Tramping in the fresh, keen air of the Downs gave Jimmy Silver & Co. good appetites. They felt missing their lunch, but there was no help for it.

They tramped on by winding lanes till the leader of the holiday party deemed it safe to halt. And gladly enough the Rookwood tramps halted at the word. The Rookwooders were in a deep lane bordered by grass and hedges, and shaded by trees against the hot sun. They camped on the grassy border of the road.

Trotsky was tethered to a tree, and he began cropping the grass with great satisfaction. But Jimmy Silver & Co. could not turn to lunch so readily as Trotsky.

The spirit-stove had to be lighted and the eggs boiled. They decided not to wait to cook anything more substantial.

Fortunately there was a good supply of eggs, and there was plenty of bread and butter in the larder in the baggage-cart, and the water-can was well filled.

Lovell lighted the spirit-stove—in his hurry swamping it with methylated spirit and setting fire to it, and a patch of grass round it.

As the grass along the road was bone-dry, Lovell had a very good chance of starting a conflagration that might have run for some miles and spread into the hedges and fields.

Fortunately Jimmy Silver mopped a ground-sheet over the fire and extinguished it in time. And then he gently but firmly took the spirit-stove into his own charge and set it going with what was left of the methylated.

Arthur Edward Lovell gave a sarcastic snort; but he was rather busy rubbing lanoline on his burns, so he gave Jimmy his head.

The eggs were soon boiled, and the Rookwooders lunched on them, with cheese to help them out.

It was quite a good lunch, though the hungry juniors would have preferred a more solid one. The eggs were finished, though there was a large supply of them. The cheese went to the last paring, and the butter to the last scrape.

Then the Rookwooders felt a little better. Valentine Mornington seemed to enjoy his lunch thoroughly, and he appeared in great spirits.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were as chummy as possible. They realised that Morn's affairs

were his own, and that they were not called upon to pass judgment on his conduct towards his guardian. And, anyhow, he was their guest, and a very sensitive one.

So peace and goodwill reigned in the Rookwood roadside camp.

After lunch the juniors stretched themselves in the grass to rest. They needed a rest, after a seven hours' march on steep roads.

"I think we'd better camp here for the rest of the day," Raby remarked. "We've done a good day's work, Jimmy."

Jimmy nodded.

"Ye-es—"

"Unless Mornny's uncle comes butting along," said Putty Grace. "We don't want to meet him."

"Hardly!" said Newcome.

"What would it matter?" drawled Mornnington. "We're six—enough of us, I suppose, to handle an old gent."

Arthur Edward Lovell stared at him.

"Do you mean to say you would lay hands on your uncle, Mornnington?" he demanded.

Mornny shrugged his shoulders.

"He means to lay hands on me," he answered.

"That's jolly different!"

"I don't quite see it, dear boy."

"There's such a thing as respect for age!" said Lovell tartly.

"What about respect for youth?" yawned Mornnington.

"Ass!" said Lovell.

"Thanks!"

"Well, I think—" Arthur Edward Lovell began hotly.

"It's all right!" said Jimmy Silver hastily. "We'll take care to keep out of Sir Rupert's way. There's not much chance of his spotting us here. We're miles from where we met him, and we've made a good many turns. All the same, we'll get on when we've rested, and put in a few more miles before sundown."

"I'm game," said Mornnington. "As many miles as you like. I'd rather not meet the dear old johnny, of course; but if he comes along there will be trouble. I'm not goin' back to the Lodge."

"You can't leave your guardian for good, Mornny," said Jimmy gently.

"I can—and shall!" A black and bitter look came over Mornnington's handsome face. "It's not a bed of roses for me at Stacpoole Lodge. I know I was sacked from Rookwood. I know it was my own

fault. I know it was hard on uncle. That's all admitted. But there's a limit. I know he means to do his duty by me, as he sees it; but there's such a thing as the milk of human kindness, and that was left out of Sir Rupert Stacpoole's composition somehow."

Mornnington felt in his pocket, and produced a cigarette-case. Unconscious of the looks of the Rookwood quintette, he selected a cigarette and lighted it. Jimmy Silver & Co. said no word. It was not for them to criticise a guest.

"And my Stacpoole cousins!" said Mornnington. "How would you fellows like to be taunted every other day with bein' sacked from school?"

The Rookwooders made no answer to that. The obvious reply was that they had not been expelled, and had never deserved to be. But they did not care to put it like that to Mornny.

"And told every now and then that you're eatin' the bread of charity!" said Mornnington bitterly.

"That's rotten enough!" said Jimmy Silver.

"That's what I've got often enough. Well, I'm done with the bread of charity, anyhow!"

"We've seen your cousins now," said Jimmy, after a pause. "I can't say a fellow can think much of them. They don't seem nice, that's a fact. Still, you might humour them a little, you know, and get on with them somehow. Are they really wholly to blame for the trouble, Mornny?"

Mornnington laughed.

"No! Six of one and half a dozen of the other!" he answered. "I've got a tongue as bitter as theirs, I dare say. Still, they're a pair of rotters, as you've seen for yourselves."

Mornny blew out a cloud of smoke, and then, remembering, he suddenly threw his cigarette into the road.

"I forgot!" he said.

"That's rotten stuff to march on, anyway, old man," said Jimmy loudly.

"I know."

Arthur Edward Lovell rose to his feet.

"There's a farmhouse across the fields," he said. "Whether we're camping here or going on, we want some grub for the larder. I dare say we can get eggs and butter and cheese—perhaps bacon. I'd better do the shopping."

Lovell had great faith in himself as a

shopper—as most other things. But nobody was anxious to get out of the cool, rich grass and take the shopping off his hands, so Lovell was allowed to appoint himself. He took the shopping-basket out of the baggage-cart. Then he looked for a practicable opening in the hedge.

"Better go round by the gate," said Jimmy Silver.

"Where's the gate?"

"Blessed if I know—but there must be a gate somewhere."

"There's a path in the field," said Lovell. "It will be all right to go across the field. I can't see any gate. The farmhouse isn't a quarter of a mile straight from here—may be miles going round looking for a dashed gate."

"All the same—" said Putty of the Fourth.

Lovell waved his hand.

"Leave it to me!" he said.

Lovell evidently knew best—it was one of his weaknesses. There was no opening to be found in the hedge, which was of hawthorn, thick and strong. But trees grew in it at intervals, and Lovell swung himself on a low branch, tossing the basket over first, and then swung himself over the hedge and dropped into the field.

About a minute later the cheery chat of the Rookwooders was interrupted by a startling sound from the field Lovell had entered.

Bellow!

"My hat!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, springing to his feet.

"A bull!" exclaimed Putty.

In a second the campers were on their feet in alarm. That loud, echoing bellow was more than enough to cause alarm. What had happened to Lovell?

CHAPTER 30.

Run Down!

JIMMY SILVER swung himself upon a branch and stared anxiously over the hedge. Before his eyes was a rich green meadow, stretching away towards the farmhouse in the distance, but enclosed on all sides by thick hedges or barbed-wire. There was a pond in one corner, with a fringe of willows; and from amid the willows a huge form had emerged—a gigantic bull, nearly black, with great threatening head and red, savage eyes.

Lovell was nearly half-way across the field, the big basket slung on his arm—and he had come to a dead stop, and was staring at the bull.

Jimmy's heart almost stood still.

It was not a common bull, he could see that; it was a huge animal, of gigantic strength, and evidently of savage temper. And Lovell was almost in the middle of the field. He had been going at an active trot when the bull emerged from the willows and bellowed. That field, carefully enclosed on all sides, was sacred to the prize bull. The gate on the other side was padlocked. Probably the farmer had never even dreamed that a reckless trespasser would get over the hedge into the field and surprise the big bull with an unexpected visit.

"Lovell!" yelled Jimmy.

"Good heavens!" muttered Mornington.

Lovell was running now. He was coming back towards the hedge at a frantic speed.

Bellow! Bellow!

"He's after him!" panted Raby.

The bull was in full pursuit, head down. To the horrified eyes of the Rookwooders he seemed to cover the ground like lightning.

Lovell ran desperately.

Behind him he heard the thundering hoofs of the bull—hoofs that seemed to shake the ground as the gigantic animal thundered on.

He dropped the basket and ran for his life, Jimmy Silver & Co. watching him with white, strained faces. They could not help—they could only pray that Lovell would win that fearful race.

The big basket lay in the bull's path, and he stopped to toss it on his horns. It stuck there, pierced by one horn, and the bull dashed his head savagely in the grass to get rid of it. The delay was fortunate for Lovell.

He came on with desperate speed and reached the hedge.

"This way!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

He was on the branch over the hedge; he reached down a hand to Lovell. Lovell caught it, and Jimmy pulled. The bull had got rid of the basket now, and was coming on, thundering. With a desperate pull Jimmy Silver dragged up his chum, and Lovell caught the branch and swung himself into safety. A few seconds later the bull was raging under the branch.

Lovell clung to the tree, white as chalk.

The bull, deprived of his victim, returned to the basket, and tossed it and trampled it, reducing it to fragments.

"Oh!" panted Lovell. "Oh—oh!"

It was all he could say.

Jimmy Silver helped him from the tree on the safe side of the hedge. Arthur Edward Lovell sank into the grass, panting and shuddering.

"Jolly close thing!" said Mornington. "All serene now, Lovell."

Arthur Edward did not speak for some minutes. He wiped the perspiration from his face in silence. When he spoke at last, it was evident that he had recovered from the shock.

"Of course, I didn't know there was a bull there," he said. "It was a good idea to cut across the field. Saved time. A fellow couldn't guess that there was a dashed bull."

"Oh, a ripping idea!" said Putty sarcastically. "Topping! All the same, you'd better not do any more trespassing. You've saved a lot of time, haven't you?"

"We shall want a new shopping basket," remarked Newcome.

Lovell granted.

"It was a good idea," he said. "In this particular instance it would have been better to go round and look for the gate. That's all."

Evidently Arthur Edward Lovell still knew best.

"Well, I'll go round by the gate," said Putty, with a grin, taking a rucksack from the baggage-cart. "Too jolly hot to-day for sprinting about with bulls—though it's a good idea, and saves time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell granted, and Putty of the Fourth went to do the shopping. He disappeared down the lane, looking for a gate, whistling cheerily.

For the next ten minutes or so Arthur Edward Lovell was fully occupied in explaining to his comrades that he had been quite right, though it had turned out unfortunately. To which his comrades rejoined with brevity but emphasis:

"Rats!"

It was the sound of a horse's hoofs trotting on the road that interrupted the talk. Mornington gave a glance along the sunny lane—hot and dusty in the sunshine beyond the trees. A hard, grim look came over his face.

A horseman was coming along the lane at

a trot. Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged a startled look as they recognised Sir Rupert Stacpoole.

The rider had come round a bend of the lane, and was almost upon the camp before the Rookwooders saw him.

He did not see them for the moment; he was looking straight before him over his horse's ears. The juniors, sitting in the grass by the roadside, fixed their eyes upon him, and made no movement. They wondered whether he would pass the camp without glancing in their direction—they fervently hoped so.

Not a sound—not a movement—from the camp. Jimmy Silver & Co. almost held their breath as the horseman came abreast of the camp—and then suddenly Sir Rupert saw them, and pulled in his horse. The horse swung round to the grass by the road, and the baronet halted. His frowning eyes were fixed on Valentine Mornington. Of Jimmy Silver & Co. he took no notice.

Mornington did not rise from the grass. He sat where he was, his hands behind his head, leaning against a little hillock, and watched his uncle with perfect composure.

"Valentine!"

The old baronet's voice was like the rumble of distant thunder.

"Good-afternoon, Sir Rupert!" said Mornington cheerily.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rose to their feet, looking—as they felt—extremely uncomfortable. They raised their hats to the old gentleman; but he did not acknowledge the salute or glance at them.

"I have been riding for hours, Valentine, in search of you!" said the baronet, his voice trembling and almost husky with anger.

"What a lot of trouble for nothin'!" yawned Mornington.

"Get up immediately!"

"Thanks! I'm quite comfy where I am."

Sir Rupert's thin lips tightened. His grasp upon his riding-whip was almost convulsive. It was evident that the baronet was tired with his long ride in the hot sun, and in a black rage with his nephew and ward. His fatigue added to his irritation.

"Valentine! I have had enough—more than enough—of your rascally insolence!" he said, in a choking voice. "It was by no choice of mine that you were left on my

hands. You have disgraced me and yourself; you have brought shame on your own name and mine. Now you add to it rank disobedience and rebellion against my authority. I command you, Valentine, to return with me to your home, and there to take what punishment I deem fit for your offence!"

A mocking curl of Mornny's lip was the only answer. He did not trouble to speak.

"And if you do not instantly obey," roared the baronet, his anger breaking out like a torrent, "I will dismount and lay my riding-whip about you, sir! I will thrash you within an inch of your life!"

"Dear old uncle!" was Mornny's reply. "Is it really wise to get excited at your age? What about apoplexy?"

The baronet did not reply to that question. He urged his horse forward on the grass, raising his whip, with the evident intention of thrashing Mornnington there and then.

With a quick spring, the junior was on his feet, and he leaped aside. His mocking nonchalance was gone now, his face was flushed, and his eyes glittered.

"Keep off, Sir Rupert Stacpoole!" he said, between his teeth. "I'm done with you, and you're done with me. Leave me alone!"

Without speaking, Sir Rupert wheeled his horse towards the junior. Mornnington caught up a tent-mallet from the cart.

"Stand back, or——"

"No, you don't!" Lovell grabbed Mornnington's arm, and wrenched the mallet from him. "Don't be a fool——"

Mornnington quivered with rage. He was about to dash his fist into Lovell's face, when the baronet's horse came plunging close, and the whip circled over his head. He leaped away, and, with a spring, reached the bough of the tree that swung over the hedge.

In a second Mornnington had swung himself across the hedge, and dropped into the field. Sir Rupert gave a shout of rage—the thick hedge was between him and his ward now.

"Come back, you young scoundrel!" he shouted.

Mornnington laughed mockingly.

"Good-bye, uncle! Good-bye, Jimmy Silver! You've seen the last of me! I dare say you'll be pleased!"

"Mornny!" yelled Jimmy.

The thought of the bull was in his mind. Mornnington had forgotten it, or, in his recklessness, he did not care.

Sir Rupert gritted his teeth. His anger—not unjustifiable—was boiling now to the pitch of passionate fury. He backed his horse into the road, and then gave him a touch of whip and spur. The juniors, realising then that it was his intention to leap the hedge, shouted to him:

"Stop!"

"Look out——"

"There's a bull! Danger!"

Sir Rupert, if he even heard, did not heed. The horse bounded at the hedge, and rose to the leap. Jimmy Silver & Co. watched, petrified. With a gallant leap, the horse cleared the hedge, and came down with a thud of hoofs in the field. And from the distance there came, like echoing thunder, the bellow of the bull.

CHAPTER 31.

For Life or Death!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. clambered into the tree, their hearts thumping with excitement and alarm.

Mornnington was crossing the field with the speed almost of an arrow. The bull had been in the corner by the pond, but he had looked out and seen the junior, and lumbered out into the field. But Mornny's speed saved him as the huge animal lumbered on his track. He reached the opposite side of the field, and clambered on a high gate. Across the field, in hot pursuit, came the horseman, spurring. And the bull, with a bellow of rage, turned from the victim that had escaped him, to the newcomer.

The gigantic animal charged blindly at horse and rider. A sudden pallor came into the baronet's tanned face as he saw his fearful danger. The charge of the bull would have hurled headlong both horse and rider, if it had reached its aim.

But Sir Rupert, though taken by surprise, was cool, and he was a good rider. The horseman swerved, and the bull went thundering by with lowered head.

Jimmy Silver caught his breath.

"He will be killed!"

The great bull swung round, and rushed back at the horseman.

Sir Rupert's horse came tearing across the field towards the gate. The lowered head of the bull was close; the horns almost grazed the horse's flank as the terrified animal swerved away, and, in spite of the strong hand on the rein, went careering round the field, squealing with terror. What happened next was like a flash. For a second the juniors saw the rearing, plunging, maddened horse, with the rider striving in vain to regain control, the next the baronet was rolling in the grass, and the riderless horse was galloping away.

"He's down!"

"Good heavens!"

In utter horror the juniors stared on. They almost sobbed with relief as the bull, passing the dismounted baronet, rushed on after the horse. Sir Rupert staggered to his feet, dazed, breathless. He gave a wild glance round him. Mornington waved his hand.

"This way! Uncle—uncle, this way! Run—run!" His voice rose to a shriek. "Run for your life! Run!"

"Run! Run!" roared the juniors from the other side of the field.

Sir Rupert pulled himself together, and ran towards the gate where his nephew stood—he was nearer to it than to the road. He ran breathless, stumbling, dazed.

There was a roar of disappointed fury from the bull as the horse cleared a wire fence and vanished into the next field. The maddened animal glared round for another victim, and rushed on the track of the running baronet. Sir Rupert heard him behind.

"He will be killed!" groaned Lovell.

Jimmy Silver scrambled frantically over the hedge. He was too far off to help, if help had been possible; but he could not keep inactive while the old man was gored to death. And it was clear now that Sir Rupert Stacpoole could not reach the gate in time. He knew it, and he swung round desperately, with the charging bull close upon him. He leaped aside and avoided the rush, and stumbled and fell, and the careering animal turned towards him again.

For a fraction of a second Mornington looked at the scene, his face white as death. Then he leapt the gate and ran towards his uncle. In a moment he was between the old baronet and the rushing bull.

"Morny!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

Sir Rupert staggered up, dazed, exhausted, at the mercy of the bull. But Mornington was in the path of the rushing animal.

He tore off his jacket and held it in one hand, standing like a statue and facing the charge of the bull.

Jimmy Silver stopped dead, still at a distance, his face ghastly, for it seemed that nothing on earth could save Mornington now from being overwhelmed by the gigantic animal. The lowered head was within a yard of Mornington when he tossed his jacket on the horns, and leaped aside with a quick activity worthy of a Spanish toreador. The charging bull almost brushed him as he passed.

Roar on roar came from the maddened animal, blinded by the jacket flapping over his eyes. Mornington reached his uncle and grasped his arm.

"Hook it!" he panted.

Half running, half dragged by his nephew, the baronet stumbled on, and reached the gate. But his strength was gone. He held on to the gate, gasping in spasms unable to climb, unable to save himself. Mornington grasped him and fairly dragged him over the gate!

"Thank Heaven!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

He dropped back into the road, and the Rookwooders gathered again in their camp; Mornington and his uncle were safe; they had seen that. But there was no reaching them; the bull was raging and roaring in the field between.

"What a go!" breathed Lovell. "That fool Morny—"

"Thank goodness it's no worse!" said Jimmy Silver.

It was ten minutes later that Putty Grace came back to the camp, with his rucksack full of supplies from the farm. He brought news.

"You've seen them—" began Jimmy.

"Yes. They're all serene," said Putty. "The farmer's taken Sir Rupert in. The poor old chap's fairly knocked up, but he's not hurt. He's resting on the sofa."

"And Morny?"

"He seems anxious about his uncle," said Putty. "I spoke to him, and he didn't answer. He's a queer chap!"

"Queer enough in some ways," said

Jimmy Silver, "but as plucky as a chap could be! Good old Morny!"

It was nearly an hour before Valentine Mornington came back to camp, by way of the lane. His face was very grave, and he flushed as he met the glances of the Rookwooders.

"How's your uncle?" asked Jimmy.

"Not hurt, thank goodness!" said Mornington in a low voice. "But he's had a severe shock, of course, and—and he looks pretty sick after it. The farmer's lending him a trap to get home. And—and I'm going with him."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"Sorry to lose you, old scout," he said. "But it's the best thing you can do."

"He was nearly unconscious for a bit," said Mornington, hanging his head. "I—I thought I was going to get a royal jaw when he came to. And—and instead of that he was—was quiet and kind. He thought I ran some risk for him—"

"You did, Morny! Goodness knows why you weren't killed! You ought to have been!" said Lovell, with a faint laugh.

"Well, I suppose it was nearly touch and go," said Mornington. "But—but if you fellows knew what I felt like when I saw him in that horrible danger that I'd dragged him into—" He shivered. "I—I—I'd let him lay his riding-whip round me if he wanted to! But—but he's kind—kinder than I've ever known him before. And—and the long and the short of it is, I'm goin' back with him—to have another try!"

And Mornington shook hands all round with the Rookwooders, and they watched him disappear in the direction of the farmhouse. And Jimmy Silver & Co., from the bottom of their hearts, wished him luck.

CHAPTER 32.

Lovell Loses a Bargain!

"LD on, sir!"

Jimmy Silver held on.

He was leading Trotsky, the pony. His comrades were walking with the baggage-cart behind.

It was high noon, and the sun blazed down on the Berkshire lane. A man detached himself from the grassy bank by the hedge as the Rookwooders came along,

and stepped out into the lane, holding up his hand. Jimmy Silver & Co. stopped to see what he wanted.

He was rather a shabby man, with a stubbly face, looking as if he were on bad terms with his barber and had ceased to have any dealings at all with his soap-merchant. He had a pedlar's haversack on his back and a big stick in his hand.

He looked certainly a rather tough customer, but he touched his ragged hat very respectfully to the Rookwooders.

"Skuse me, young gentlemen," he said. "P'r'aps you'd like to buy some things—watches and clocks—"

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"Thanks—we've got all we want."

"P'r'aps you'd like to buy a bicycle?"

"A—a what?"

"Bicycle, sir," said the pedlar. "I've got some machines I bought cheap—party wanted to get rid of 'em. 'Tain't my usual line of business, and I got 'em cheap, and I'd be willing to let 'em go at a bargain."

Jimmy was shaking his head again, when Arthur Edward Lovell interposed. Lovell had a keen eye for a bargain—at least, he was firmly convinced that he had.

"What do you call a bargain?" he asked.

"I'd let 'em go at two pun', sir."

"Can't be any good at that price," said

Raby. "Anyhow, we don't want any bikes, Lovell. Let's get on."

"Hold on!" said Lovell. "Might as well look at 'em. I've thought several times a bike would come in useful on this tour."

"You'd like them machines, sir," said the pedlar. "Good make—good condition. The poor man had the brokers in, sir, and was glad to get rid of them. That's how I got 'em cheap. Take my word for it, they're good machines, sir. If you know this part, any bloke will tell you about me—Honest John Williams, the pedlar. They call me Honest John in these parts, sir."

"They don't judge by appearances, then!" murmured Putty of the Fourth.

"Let's see them, anyhow," said Lovell.

Honest John, the pedlar, went through a gap in the hedge under which he had been resting. He wheeled three handsome bikes, one after another, out into the lane.

"There you are, gents!" he said. "Look at 'em! Good value for the money, gents!"

There was no doubt that the bicycles were good value for the money. Not one of them had cost less than ten guineas—one of them looked worth fifteen. They were dusty, and scratched here and there, but in quite good condition. The pedlar eyed the juniors expectantly. Lovell looked over the machines and nodded.

"We don't want three," he remarked thoughtfully.

"We don't want any!" remarked Putty of the Fourth.

Lovell granted.

"Don't be an ass, Putty! How often do you get a chance of bagging a bargain like this?"

"Not often!" grinned Putty. "If I bagged a bargain like that I should expect to feel a policeman's hand on my shoulder soon afterwards, old bean!"

The pedlar started a little.

Four members of the Rookwood party were looking—and feeling—suspicious. But Lovell was not suspicious.

"Look 'ere, young gents!" said the pedlar warmly. "If you don't think I come by them machines honest—"

"What rot!" said Lovell. "The man's told us how he came by them! Straight enough!"

"But we don't want any bikes, old top!" said Jimmy Silver. "And it's not safe, buying bikes from strangers."

"That's all rot!" said Lovell. "Why, this Sunbeam is better than my old bike—lots better. If this chap is really selling it for two pounds—"

"That's the price, guv'nor," said Honest John. "I don't mind owning that I give only a pound each. But a man's got to make his profit."

"That's fair enough," said Lovell.

"But—"

"I'm having that Sunbeam."

Arthur Edward Lovell spoke very decidedly. His comrades looked at one another.

Lovell knew best; it was a way he had. But Jimmy Silver & Co., though they often gave Lovell his head, were quite determined that Arthur Edward Lovell should not have his head on this occasion. Honest John might have been as honest as his name implied; but he did not look it. If he was a gentleman of sterling integrity, there was no doubt whatever that appearances were against him.

"So you're buying that bike, are you?" exclaimed Newcome.

"You bet!"

"You couldn't do better, guv'nor," said Honest John.

"I know that!" said Lovell. "And I'm going—"

"You are!" said Jimmy Silver. "You're going on! You're not buying bikes to-day, old bean! Collar him!"

"Look here—" roared Lovell, in great wrath.

Raby and Newcome took Lovell by either arm. Putty Grace fixed a firm grip on the back of his collar. Arthur Edward Lovell was marched on, resisting and protesting, fairly shouting in his wrath and indignation. Jimmy Silver led Trotsky on.

And Honest John, with his three bicycles stacked round him, blinked at the Rookwooders in great annoyance.

"Look 'ere! Ain't it a trade?" he demanded angrily.

"Yes!" roared Lovell.

"No!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Leggo!" howled Lovell. "Raby, I'll punch your silly head! Newcome, if you want a thick ear—"

"Come on!"

"I'm having that bike—" roared Lovell.

"You're not, old top! Come on!"

Arthur Edward Lovell struggled in the grasp of his comrades. But he marched on, notwithstanding. He had to.

Jimmy Silver followed with Trotsky and the baggage-cart. Honest John Williams was left standing in the lane with his three handsome bargains, and a very peculiar expression on his stubby face.

The Rookwood party wound on down the lane, and vanished from the sight of Honest John.

"You silly dummies!" said Lovell in a sulphurous voice. "It was the bargain of a lifetime—"

"We know your bargains, old chap!" grinned Raby, and the Rookwooders chuckled.

"Anybody but a silly dummy could see that that old chap was quite straight!" hooted Lovell.

"Then we're all silly dummies! Come on all the same."

And Arthur Edward Lovell came on; his devoted comrades gave him no choice about that.

But for the next half-hour Lovell was

eloquent; and the Rookwooders listened patiently with smiling faces, while Arthur Edward told them, at great length and with emphasis, what he thought of them.

CHAPTER 33.
Missing Bikes!

"YOU silly owls!"
"I say——"
"That's what you are—owls!
Frabjous owls! Blithering, burbling
owls!"

"I know that sweet voice!" murmured
Jimmy Silver.

The Rookwood party grinned. The loud,
booming voice came to their ears through a
fringe of hawthorns; the speaker was only
a few yards away, Jimmy Silver & Co. could
have heard him if he had been fifty yards
away.

The Rookwood tramps were camped on
the edge of a common. The baggage-cart
was at rest. Trotsky, the pony, having
cropped till he could crop no more, had lain
down and gone to sleep in the grass. The
weather was warm, and the chums of Rook-
wood were taking it easy.

The Fistical Four were stretched in the
grass, with their hands behind their heads,
staring dreamily at the blue sky and green
tree-tops. Putty Grace was sitting up,
rescuing an ant that had crawled into his
collar. Putty of the Fourth did not like ants
inside his collar; but he removed the ob-
noxious insect with a gentle hand and
dropped him into the grass. There was no
reason, so far as Putty could see, why the
ant should not enjoy life that sunny after-
noon, as well as the Rookwooders.

Through the sweet peace of the dreamy
afternoon came that booming voice from
beyond the hawthorns; a voice the Rook-
wooders thought they knew. It was not a
Rookwood fellow's voice, and they were
puzzled a little at first to "place" it, but
they knew they had heard it before. Those
powerful and strident tones once heard
were not easily forgotten. And the voice
went on, loudly and wrathfully:

"Owls! Fatheads! Chumps! You needn't
scowl at me, Wilkins! If you yawn like
that when I'm talking, Gunny, I shall punch
you! A pair of blithering, burbling,
frabjous owls—that's what you fellows are!"

"Look here, Grundy——"

"Oh, don't jaw, Wilkins! Never saw such
a chap for jawing!"

"But——"
"Blessed if you're not like a sheep's head
—all jaw! I've told you that before, Wil-
kins, at St. Jim's, lots of times!" And
that remark was followed by a loud,
emphatic snort.

Jimmy Silver & Co. chuckled softly.
"I know him now," murmured Jimmy
Silver. "Chap named Grundy—he's in the
Shell at St. Jim's. Seen him when we've
been over there for the cricket. Biggest
idiot going!"

"There he goes again!" chuckled Raby.
"Listen to the band!"

The powerful voice of George Alfred
Grundy of the Shell at St. Jim's, was heard
again. His comrades, Wilkins and Gunn,
seemed to have resigned themselves to their
fate.

"My fault! I like that! My fault going
on a cycling tour with two silly owls, if you
like! I'll admit that much. But it's no
good talking to you, you'll never understand
what dummies you are! The question is:
How are we going to get the bikes back?"

There was a general start among the
Rookwooders as they heard that remark.

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Lovell, for a moment, had quite a queer expression on his face.

"They've lost their bikes!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"Three of them!" breathed Raby. "That would be three bikes! And that giddy pedlar—"

It was clear enough to the Rookwooders. They understood now how Honest John had obtained good machines which he was able to sell at such a ridiculous figure. Doubtless Honest John would have been glad to get rid of those three machines at any price.

"We can't get them back, Grundy!" said Wilkins.

"We've been tramping for hours, looking for them!" came Gunn's plaintive voice. "They're gone!"

"Do you think I'm going to let my Sunbeam be bagged like that, and not get it back!"

"His—his Sunbeam!" murmured Lovell.

Arthur Edward looked almost sickly. That, evidently, was the Sunbeam Lovell had so nearly secured at a wonderful bargain for two pounds. Arthur Edward realised that it was just as well that his comrades had overruled him on that point.

"The bikes have been stolen!" resumed Grundy. "It was all your fault, you two. When I left the camp, I naturally supposed you fellows were somewhere about keeping your eyes open."

"We supposed you—"

"You'd no business to suppose anything of the sort. But for goodness' sake don't argue. Some tramp's pinched those bikes and we've got to get them back."

"We fagged about for hours," said Gunn still plaintive. "I can tell you I'm jolly tired, Grundy."

"Think I'm not tired?" snorted Grundy. "But I shall keep going till we get those bikes back, and you're going to do the same! Pair of silly, blithering owls letting a tramp sneak the machines under your noses."

"We'd gone for a swim—"

"Oh, don't argue!"

"You shouldn't have left the camp till we came back, Grundy."

"If you try to put it on me, Wilkins, I shall punch you—hard! I'm getting fed-up with a pair of arguing, blithering owls! Now, we've got to get on the track somehow. No good sticking here."

"I want a rest—"

"There's no time for a rest, Gunn."

Grundy & Co. were evidently unaware that there was a camp on the other side of the hawthorns. Jimmy Silver rose to his feet. It was obvious that Grundy & Co.'s bicycles were in the possession of Honest John, and it was less than an hour since Jimmy Silver & Co. had seen the pedlar. So he had valuable information to give.

Jimmy Silver dragged aside a branch and looked through the thicket.

"Hallo, you fellows!" he said cheerily.

Grundy & Co. started, and looked round quickly as the thicket rustled. Then they stared at the captain of the Rookwood School.

"Hallo!" said Grundy, gruffly. "Who the dickens are you?"

"It's Silver," said Wilkins. "I've played him at cricket. You'd know him if you played for St. Jim's, Grundy."

"If I don't play for St. Jim's, Wilkins, it's because a fool of a skipper is idiot enough to put you in instead of me!"

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"We heard Grundy talking through the megaphone," he said. "So—"

"Megaphone!" said Grundy, staring. "I wasn't talking through any megaphone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the other side of the hawthorns.

"Sounded like it," said Jimmy sweetly. "My mistake, Grundy. But you were talking about having lost three bikes—one of them a Sunbeam!"

"Yes, we were!" growled Grundy. "But we've no time to waste talking to a Rookwood fag. Come on, you fellows!"

Jimmy blinked at him. He had seen Grundy of the Shell several times, while on visits to St. Jim's, and had not been struck by his good manners, certainly. But he had not expected manners like this even from Grundy.

"You silly chump—" began Jimmy.

"None of your fag check!" said Grundy. "I've no time to waste or I'd pull your ear."

"P-p-pull my ear?" stammered Jimmy.

"Yes!" said Grundy. "Hard! And look here, young Silver—if that's your name. We're going to put up at the Red Cow, in Weededge, till we get our bikes back. It's a village across the common. If you see anything of a tramp with our bikes, leave word for us at the Red Cow. Understand?"

"Are you asking me to do that or order-

"ing me, dear old bean?" inquired Jimmy Silver.

"Telling you!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Now come on, you pair of silly owls!" said Grundy to his comrades.

And the three Shell fellows of St. Jim's marched away.

CHAPTER 34.

Lovell Keeps Watch!

"**H**A, ha, ha!" Jimmy Silver & Co. fairly roared.

Even Arthur Edward Lovell, who had been feeling rather worried about the wonderful bargain he had nearly secured, roared with merriment.

Grundy of St. Jim's had had a wonderful cheering effect on them. They laughed till they had to wipe away their tears.

"Jevver come across a chap like that?" gasped Raby.

"Never!" chortled Putty.

"Well, hardly ever!" chirruped Newcome.

"The dear fellow wouldn't let me tell him about the giddy pedlar!" said Jimmy, wiping his eyes. "No time to listen to a straight tip where to find his jigger!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Rookwooders roared again. It had not even occurred to Grundy that the Rookwood junior had had a motive in hailing him. Grundy was cross—in fact, in a savage temper—and he had no politeness to waste on a Rookwood fag. That was how it was. And Grundy had gone off to hunt for his bike without waiting to be told that it was in possession of a pedlar a mile away.

"Fools are born, not made—nascitur non fit!" remarked Jimmy Silver. "Grundy's about the completest specimen I've ever run on! But I suppose we ought to lend a hand?"

"Let him go and eat coke!" said Lovell.

"Well, there's the other two fellows," said Jimmy Silver. "They can't be having a happy time with Grundy, and they've lost their bikes. We've got plenty of time on our hands, and that sneaking thief ought to be made to give up his plunder."

"Hear, hear!"

"One of us had better stay with Trotsky," said Jimmy. "The rest come with me, and we'll look for the pedlar merchant. He

may still be where we left him. He was resting there. Who's hanging on in camp? We don't want Trotsky bagged like Grundy's bike!"

"I'd better stay," said Lovell decidedly. "You know what you fellows are. We don't want Trotsky to get loose, or the baggage-cart to be stolen, or——"

"Bow-wow!"

As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver was glad to leave Lovell on guard. He thought it doubtful whether Honest John would be captured if Lovell lent his valuable assistance in the task.

So four of the Rookwooders tramped back the way they had come, generously giving up their afternoon in the service of the stranded St. Jim's fellows, in spite of Grundy's beautiful manners. They hoped to find Honest John in the shady lane where they had passed him—or, at least, to pick up his track there.

Arthur Edward Lovell stretched himself in the grass again, keeping watch and ward over the camp, and the baggage-cart and Trotsky.

He watched his comrades out of sight, and then took a "Gem" from his pocket to read. Having finished his "Gem," Lovell began to nod. It was a warm and drowsy afternoon. Trotsky was sleeping peacefully, the surroundings were soporific, and Lovell was tired with tramping. He resolved not to sleep, however, as he was on guard. He simply rested his head on a cushion, and rested with his eyes shut.

In a few minutes more he was in sound slumber.

Naturally, being fast asleep, he did not see a head in a ragged hat that poked through the hawthorns and surveyed the camp.

Had Lovell been awake, and looking in that direction, he would have recognised the shiny, stubby face of Honest John, the pedlar. Being fast asleep, naturally he did not do so.

Honest John surveyed the camp cautiously and grinned. He came very carefully through the thicket.

"This 'ere is luck!" murmured Honest John. "Real luck! Spiffing luck! Four on 'em gone rambling, and the other silly fool fast asleep! That there pony and cart is jest what I want to get them bikes away! This 'ere is my lucky day, this is!"

Lovell slept peacefully.

He was awakened suddenly.

He started up with a grip like iron on his neck, and glared up to see a stubby face and a brandished cudgel over him.

"Quiet!" said Honest John grimly.

"The—the pedlar!" gasped Lovell.

"If you wants your brains knocked out, you've only got to give a 'owl!" said Honest John.

Arthur Edward Lovell did not give a howl. The cudgel was too heavy and too close for that. Resistance was out of the question, for it was clear that the ruffian would have stunned him without remorse. With feelings that could not have been expressed in speech, even if he had been allowed to speak, Arthur Edward Lovell submitted to his fate. With a length of cord the footpad bound his wrists together and then his ankles, and then stuffed his own handkerchief into his mouth. Then his light fingers ran through Lovell's pockets, relieving the Rookwood junior of his watch and loose cash. If looks could have slain, Honest John would have dropped in the grass beside Lovell, slaughtered! But looks could not—though Lovell's looks just then might have been envied by a Prussian Hun.

The ruffian grinned and rolled him out of the way into the shadow of the hawthorns. Then he jerked up the pony and harnessed him to the cart. He led the pony and cart off the common, mounted into the cart, and drove away. Lovell, wriggling in the grass, listened to the dying sound of hoofs and wheels until they faded away in the distance.

"Here's the place!" said Jimmy Silver.

The four Rookwooders were dusty and perspiring a little, after their tramp in the hot sun. They had reached the spot in the lane, about a mile from the camp on the common, where they had met Honest John and Lovell had so nearly secured Grundy's bike as a bargain.

There was no sign of Honest John to be seen.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had hoped to find him still there but he was not there. The lonely lane was silent, solitary. In the grass by the road they found tracks of the

bicycles, which Honest John had brought out for their inspection. That was all.

"He's gone!" said Raby.

"Where?" asked Newcome.

"Echo answers where."

Jimmy Silver knitted his brows.

He was very anxious to get on the track of Honest John. In spite of the unspeakable Grundy's weird manners, Jimmy would have been glad to restore him his Sunbeam and still more glad to recover the bicycles belonging to Wilkins and Gunn. And on general principles he would have liked to deal drastically with a bicycle-thief.

Jimmy was skilled as a Boy Scout, and he tried to pick up tracks in the lane. But the sun-baked earth and dust afforded few clues.

"Might have cleared off anywhere," said Raby hopelessly. "There's another lane yonder, and he might have crossed the field to it. And there's the high road across that other meadow. No chance, old chaps!"

"Looks like it!" agreed Newcome.

"What do you think, Putty?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Putty of the Fourth was looking very thoughtful, and not taking part in the discussion.

"I've been thinking," said Putty. "Three bikes are rather a handful for a man to wheel away."

"But he's done it," said Raby.

"You see, a man like that, wheeling three bikes, would attract a lot of notice," said Putty. "Looks to me as if, after bagging them this morning, he got them into this shady spot to hide them. More likely to take them away one at a time, I should think, and most likely to do it after dark. He must know that Grundy & Co. would be hunting up and down for their property."

Jimmy looked at him curiously.

"What have you got in your noddle?" he asked.

"Well, I think very likely the dear man has shoved the bikes out of sight and left 'em around here," said Putty. "He yanked them out of that field to show us. Let's look."

"Oh! Good!" said Jimmy Silver.

He followed Putty through the gap in the hedge. The field was hilly pasture and thickly grown. In the distance cattle were grazing. Putty went along inside

the hedge, and the other juniors, with rather doubtful looks, followed him.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Putty suddenly.

"What—"

"The giddy bikes!"

There they were—three machines, laying flat in a little hollow, and covered with loose branches and brambles. They were quite secure from general observation, but not from a close scrutiny. Jimmy Silver & Co. promptly dragged them out.

"Good old Putty!" said Jimmy. "Well, here are the bikes! I jolly well wish that footpad was along with them. I'd like to hammer him!"

Putty grinned.

"We're in no hurry. He's bound to come back for them. Let's wait."

Jimmy reflected.

"Well, we're in no hurry," he said. "May as well take a rest. The camp will be all right with Lovell there."

"I'd like to catch the rotter when he comes back!" remarked Raby. "It will be no end of a giddy-surprise for him."

"We can give him a couple of hours, anyhow," said Newcome. "If we get back to the camp for supper, that will be all right."

"Right as rain!" said Jimmy Silver.

The Rookwooders returned to the gap in the hedge on the lane. They left the bicycles on the inner side of the hedge and stretched themselves in the grass near the gap to rest and to watch. Sooner or later the thief was certain to return for his plunder; for the bicycles, though carefully hidden from passers-by on the road, might have been seen and found by a farm-hand attending the cattle in the field.

There was a sound of wheels in the lane.

"Somebody's coming!" murmured Putty.

Closer and closer came the tattoo of hoofs and the rumble of wheels. The vehicle came to a halt just opposite the gap in the hedge.

Jimmy Silver jumped.

There—within three yards of him—stood Trotsky, the pony, whom he had left tethered on the common a mile away. Behind Trotsky was the baggage-cart. For a single instant Jimmy supposed that Lovell, tired of waiting, had driven after his chums. But it was only for an instant; the next his eyes were on the man who held the reins. And he fairly gasped at the sight of Honest John.

CHAPTER 35.

Not Honest John's Lucky Day!

HONEST JOHN drew the pony to a halt and jumped down. Jimmy Silver & Co., through the grassy gap in the hedge, blinked at him, almost like fellows in a dream.

They had supposed it probable that the pedlar had gone for some conveyance for his plunder. Certainly it had not occurred to them that the conveyance would turn out to be their own travelling outfit.

They fairly blinked at the pony and cart and the pedlar. Honest John scoured the reins to a branch. Obviously he had no suspicion that the Rookwooders were on the scene.

Leaving the cart, he came tramping through the gap in the hedge. Jimmy Silver made a signal to his chums. They were ready. They had been anxious before to get at close quarters with the bicycle-thief. Now they were simply yearning to get their hands on him.

As Honest John came tramping through the gap, four active figures leaped out of the grass.

Four pairs of hands clutched Honest John, and with a wild howl of astonishment he went staggering back into the lane, with the four juniors clinging to him like cats.

Crash!

Down went the footpad on his back, with Jimmy Silver & Co. sprawling over him.

"Oh! Ah! Ooh!" spluttered Honest John. "Strike me pink! Gerroff! Ooop!"

He struggled desperately.

But Jimmy Silver's knee was on his chest, and Raby and Newcome had his arms; and Putty Grace, with a grip on his collar, was banging his head on the hard road. Honest John bellowed with anguish.

"Yoop! Whoop! Chuck it!"

"Got him!" chuckled Jimmy.

"Chuck it, guv'nor!" groaned the footpad. "Oh, lor! Oh, crumbs! Ow!"

Honest John groaned dismally. It was not his lucky day, after all.

"Let a bloke orf, guv'nor!" he groaned. "Oh, lor! I ain't 'urt the young gent—only tied his 'ands up! Jest woke him up and tied him! Wouldn't 'ave 'urt him for love or money! And 'ere's the ticker, sir, and the spendulics! Let a bloke orf!"

"Woke him up!" murmured Putty.

"Dear old Lovell! That's how he keeps watch!"

Jimmy Silver turned out the tramp's pockets. Lovell's watch and cash were recovered, and then Honest John was turned over in the grass, and Jimmy picked up the big stick the footpad had dropped. Honest John turned his head and blinked up at him in great alarm at these preparations.

"Wharrer you going to do, guv'nor?" he gasped.

Jimmy Silver did not speak; he acted. He laid on the stick till the dust rose from Honest John's baggy trousers in clouds.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

The yells of Honest John woke the echoes of the fields. But the ruffian needed a lesson, and Jimmy Silver did not spare the rod. He laid on the stick, while Honest John squirmed and wriggled in the grasp of Putty and Raby and Newcome, and roared and howled and yelled. Not till his arm was aching did Jimmy Silver cease.

"There! I think that will do!" gasped Jimmy. "I think that's about enough!"

Honest John was released, and he squirmed in the grass and groaned, while the Rookwooders unhitched the pony and drove away in triumph, with three bicycles stacked in the baggage-cart. Honest John stared after them lugubriously, a sadder if not a wiser or more honest footpad.

In the summer dusk a pony and cart, laden with three bicycles and accompanied by five dusty schoolboys, stopped outside the Red Cow, in Weededge. Three Shell fellows of St. Jim's were refreshing themselves with ginger-beer at a bench in front of the inn.

"Hallo, old tops!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily.

Grundy glared round.

"Hallo! There's that cheeky Rookwood fag again! I warn you, young Silver, that I'm not in a temper to stand any of your cheek! I'd whop you as soon as look at you!"

"Dear old Grundy!" said Jimmy.

Grundy jumped up.

"I'll jolly well——"

"Hallo! What have you got in that go-cart?" exclaimed Wilkins suddenly.

"Your bikes!" said Jimmy, laughing. "We've got them back for you, and here they are—if Grundy doesn't think it's cheek on our part to bring them back!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Rookwooders handed out the bikes. Wilkins and Gunn received their machines with heartfelt thanks; they had fairly given up hope of seeing them again. Grundy took his handsome Sunbeam with quite a peculiar expression on his face.

"Well," he said at last, "I'm obliged!"

"Go hon!" said Jimmy.

"And you're a cheeky young cad, Silver——"

"Eh?"

"But I won't lick you!" said Grundy generously. "There you are! I won't lick you! You can look it!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at Grundy. Then, with one accord, they fell upon him, and Grundy, roaring, was swept off his feet.

Bump, bump, bump!

Grundy roared. Wilkins and Gunn roared, too, with happy merriment. But Grundy's roars were not of merriment. They were of mingled wrath and anguish.

Bump, bump, bump!

When Jimmy Silver & Co. marched on their way with Trotsky, they left Grundy of St. Jim's sitting outside the Red Cow with a dazed look on his face, struggling spasmodically to get his second wind.

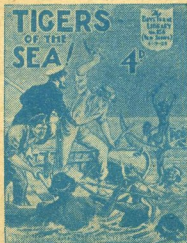
The Rookwooders' holiday tramp was nearing its end, and on the morrow they were turning their faces towards home.

The chums all agreed that they had enjoyed themselves amazingly, and that amongst the brightest incidents of the tour was their encounter with that unique fellow, George Alfred Grundy!

THE END.

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