

French Leave!

by
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A bright and breezy story of Jimmy Silver & Co., the cheery chums of Rookwood

THE FIRST CHAPTER

Left to Lovell!

“LEAVE it to me!” said Arthur Edward Lovell.
“‘Um!’”

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome seemed dubious.

Arthur Edward Lovell, of the Classical Fourth at Rookwood School, had no doubts.

He never had!

Lovell's confidence in himself was without limit. In a case of doubt or difficulty, all that Lovell's friends had to do—in Lovell's opinion—was to leave it to him. Then it would be all right!

Unfortunately, Lovell's friends' confidence in him did not equal Arthur Edward's confidence in himself. Hence the dubious tone in which his comrades remarked:

“‘Um!’”

Lovell frowned a little.

“If you're going to argue——” he began.

“You see——” remarked Jimmy Silver.

“Leave it to me!”

“But——” murmured Raby.

“I've got a wheeze,” Lovell condescended to explain. “I've thought it out, and I know what to do.”

Even then his comrades did not look enthusiastic.

Arthur Edward Lovell was convinced that he was the brainy man of the end study. But he had that conviction all to himself.

“Well, give it a name, anyhow!” said Newcome resignedly.

“Leave it to me, and I fancy I can pull it off,” said Lovell. “Leave it to me, and I guarantee that we get over to Latcham this afternoon to see the circus.”

“Well, that's what we want,” said Jimmy Silver. “But it's class this afternoon, and Dicky Dalton isn't likely to let us off to see a circus. Form-masters don't think a circus so important as class.”

“Silly of 'em, but they don't!” said Raby. “Still, if we asked Dalton very nicely, there's a sporting chance——”

“A ghost of a chance,” agreed Newcome. Lovell shook his head.

"Not an earthly!" he said. "If we told Dalton we wanted to cut class to see a circus, he would merely glare. No good telling him that it's only at Latcham for one day. He simply wouldn't understand. We've been at Rookwood long enough to know that it's not much good expecting a Form-master to see sense."

"Well, then——"

"There's such a thing," said Lovell, "as strategy. Leave it to me to work the oracle."

"Well, how?" asked Raby, showing signs of impatience.

"It's not jolly long to class now," said Newcome. "If we don't manage it before the bell rings——"

"We shall manage it all right, if you give a man a chance to speak, instead of keeping on interrupting him," said Lovell. "You fellows know that Bohun, the master of the Third, is in sanny with 'flu."

"What the merry dickens——"

"Let a fellow speak! A man is coming to Rookwood to take Bohun's place while he's knocked out—man named Bright, I've heard."

"What the thump——"

"He's coming this afternoon," pursued Lovell.

Jimmy Silver & Co. gazed at Lovell.

The Fistical Four, of Rookwood, had gathered in the end study to discuss the possibility—the bare possibility—of getting off classes that afternoon to visit the circus which was performing at Latcham that day, positively for one day only.

What Mr. Bohun's influenza had to do with the matter in hand, and how Mr. Bright was connected with the subject, were mysteries to three members of the Co.

It seemed to them that Arthur Edward Lovell was wandering in his mind—admitting that he had any mind to wander in, which they doubted.

Lovell smiled the smile of superior wisdom.

"You don't see the connection?" he asked.

"I jolly well don't, for one!" answered Jimmy.

"Nor I!" said Raby.

"Same here!" concurred Newcome.

"You wouldn't!" said Lovell. "I'll explain—and put it in words of one syllable, if I can."

"Look here, you ass——"

"Let a fellow open his mouth," said Lovell. "I've heard about this man Bright who's coming to take Bohun's place. The Head's got him from the usual agency, and he's a stranger to Rookwood—never been here before, of course—just one of those johnnies that the agency sends along when a man is wanted for a week or two——"

"What about it?" demanded Raby.

"What the merry thump——"

"Let a fellow say a word or two. This man Bright being a stranger in the land, wouldn't it be civil for Rookwood fellows to meet him at Latcham station, and bring him to the school?"

Lovell's chums stared at him.

"I dare say it would!" said Jimmy Silver. "But——"

"Well, that's the idea," said Lovell.

"My hat! Is that an idea?" asked Newcome, in astonishment.

"Yes!" roared Lovell. "It is! That's the wheeze! I'm going to Dalton, not to ask leave to go to the circus at Latcham—that's rot! I'm going to ask him to give us leave from class to meet this Mr. Bright at the station, and bring him to Rookwood."

"Oh!"

"Dalton's bound to be pleased," said Lovell. "It will seem jolly kind and thoughtful, to say the least."

"But——"

"It's not common for fellows to care much about a master, or to worry whether he loses his way or not, or anything like that," said Lovell. "Dalton's bound to think that it's jolly thoughtful of us, and kind, and considerate, and all that. Well, we get leave to go to Latcham and meet this new master at the station——"

"Do we?" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"We do! Well, we met him at the station, according to arrangement. We're bound to do that, of course, if we're given leave to do it. But what's to prevent our dropping in at the circus afterwards?"

Lovell gazed triumphantly at his chums.

Evidently he considered that he had propounded a masterly wheeze that could scarcely fail.

His opinion was not shared by his comrades.

This wonderful wheeze, so far from convincing them that the matter had better be left to

Lovell, only convinced them that Arthur Edward was the fathead they had always thought him.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Lovell.

"My only hat!" said Raby. "Think Dicky Dalton will have his leg pulled so easily as all that? Rot!"

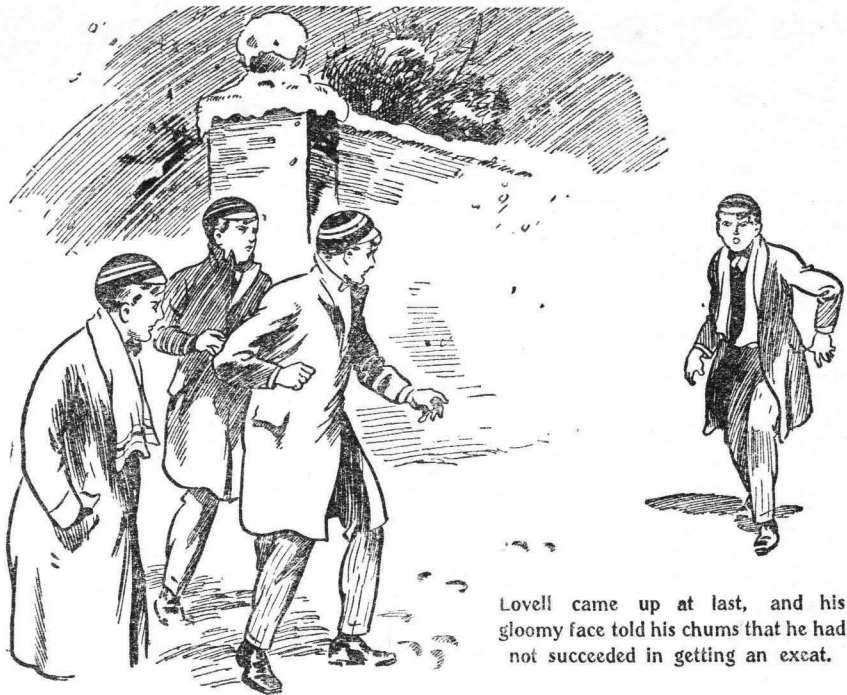
"Rubbish!" said Newcome.

"Piffle!" said Jimmy Silver.

There was no doubt that Lovell's comrades lacked faith in Lovell's wheeze. Their remarks left no doubt whatever on that point.

Lovell glared.

Opposition always confirmed Lovell in his opinions. He had, in the first place, regarded this as a sporting chance. Now he immediately regarded it as infallible. It was his idea—a poor thing, but his own, as it were. If other fellows regarded it as rot, rubbish, and piffle, nothing remained but for Arthur Edward to regard it as the last word in wisdom, to assert that it was



Lovell came up at last, and his gloomy face told his chums that he had not succeeded in getting an exeat.

unfailing, and to defend it, so to speak, with his last breath.

"So that's what you think?" snorted Lovell.

"Just that!" said George Raby. "Utter rot!"

"Frightful rot!" said Newcome. "You haven't a dog's chance of pulling it off!"

"Tosh!" said Jimmy Silver. "If we go to Dicky Dalton and put that up to him, it will simply be a wash-out!"

"If we all go—yes!" said Lovell. "I admit that much—if you fellows have a hand in it, it will be a wash-out. Everything you have a hand in is a wash-out! That's nothing new! But I'm not proposing to go to Dicky Dalton with three silly idiots to spoil the whole game. I'm proposing to go by myself, and put it tactfully and carefully—and pull it off."

"Rats!"

"Rot!"

"Rubbish!"

Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard and deep, gazing at his chums.

"Well, that's the idea!" he said, with a take-it-or-leave-it air. "Leave it to me, and I'll get you to the circus at Latcham. If you prefer class, of course——"

"Fathead! I tell you——"

"Oh, give Lovell his head," said Raby. "It won't do any harm—though, of course, it won't do any good. Let him try to stuff Dalton, and let him come back and own up that he's a silly ass!"

"Look here——" roared Lovell.

"Piffle!" said Newcome. "There's nothing in it. Let's try to think of some way——"

"What are you going to try to think with?" asked Lovell sarcastically. "Not with your brains—you haven't any. But have your own way—no good arguing with fatheads! Leave it to me, and I guarantee that we get to the circus! If I don't pull it off, you can use my head for a football!"

Lovell spoke with heat.

He had not been quite certain before, but he was quite certain now. Adverse criticism had that effect on Arthur Edward Lovell.

No longer did he entertain the slightest doubt that his wheeze would be a howling success—if his chums left it to him. Any lingering doubt had been banished by opposition.

"Look here, old chap——" urged Jimmy.

"Chuck it!" said Lovell. "Let it drop! Let's go in to class, instead of going to the circus. It's maths this afternoon. I've no doubt you'll enjoy maths more than the circus!" Lovell was growing bitterly sarcastic. "Maths are so jolly compared with a circus! What?"

"Oh, try it on, if you like," said Jimmy Silver resignedly.

"Do you leave it to me, or don't you leave it to me?" demanded Lovell categorically.

"Anything for a quiet life!" said Raby. "Go ahead!"

"Well, you fellows get your coats on, and wait for me at the gates," said Lovell. "There's no time to lose if we're going to get to Latcham in time. We shall have to

start the minute I've got an exeat from Dalton. Don't keep me waiting."

"But——"

"If you're leaving it to me, you're leaving it to me," said Lovell. "For goodness' sake don't argue!"

"Oh, all right!"

So it was left to Lovell. Three members of the Co., in coats and caps, walked down to the gates, to wait there for Lovell, while Arthur Edward, brimming with confidence, took his way to Mr. Dalton's study.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Nothing Doing!

MR. RICHARD DALTON, master of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, did not look pleased to see Lovell. He was rather busy, preparing some papers that would be required in class that afternoon. His expression indicated that he did not want to be interrupted. However, he bade Lovell come in, and inquired tersely what Lovell wanted.

"If you please, sir——" began Lovell very politely. Then he paused.

"Kindly be brief," said Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, sir. We——"

Lovell paused again.

His Form-master was obviously busy and impatient. And in the actual presence of Mr. Dalton, under his searching eye, it was borne in upon Lovell's mind that "stuffing" Dicky was not an easy task. Not nearly so easy as it had appeared, in the heat of argument with his chums, in the end study.

However, Lovell was "for it" now.

He could not retreat.

His comrades were waiting for him—and an exeat—at the gates. Lovell had told them to leave it to him—and they had left it to him. Somehow or other, he had to pull it off. He simply had to!

"I—we—that is, us—I mean——" recommenced Lovell lucidly.

"What do you mean, Lovell?" asked his Form-master, in great astonishment.

"I—I mean Bohun—I mean Mr. Bohun—is knocked out—that is, laid up—with 'flu, as you know, sir."

"I am aware of it, Lovell. I trust that

Mr. Bohun is no worse?" said Dicky Dalton.

"Oh, no; not that I know of. I mean, a man named Bright is coming here to-day to take his place for a time, sir, as master of the Third," said Lovell.

Dicky Dalton's eyes fixed on Lovell, hard.

What the junior was driving at was a mystery to him, and he was beginning to suspect a rag.

If this was a little game, to waste his time and pull his leg, Mr. Dalton was prepared to deal with Lovell in quite a drastic way.

"He—he—he's coming to Latcham by train this afternoon, sir," said Lovell, stammering a little under the Form-master's

uncertain. It looks rather like snow, sir."

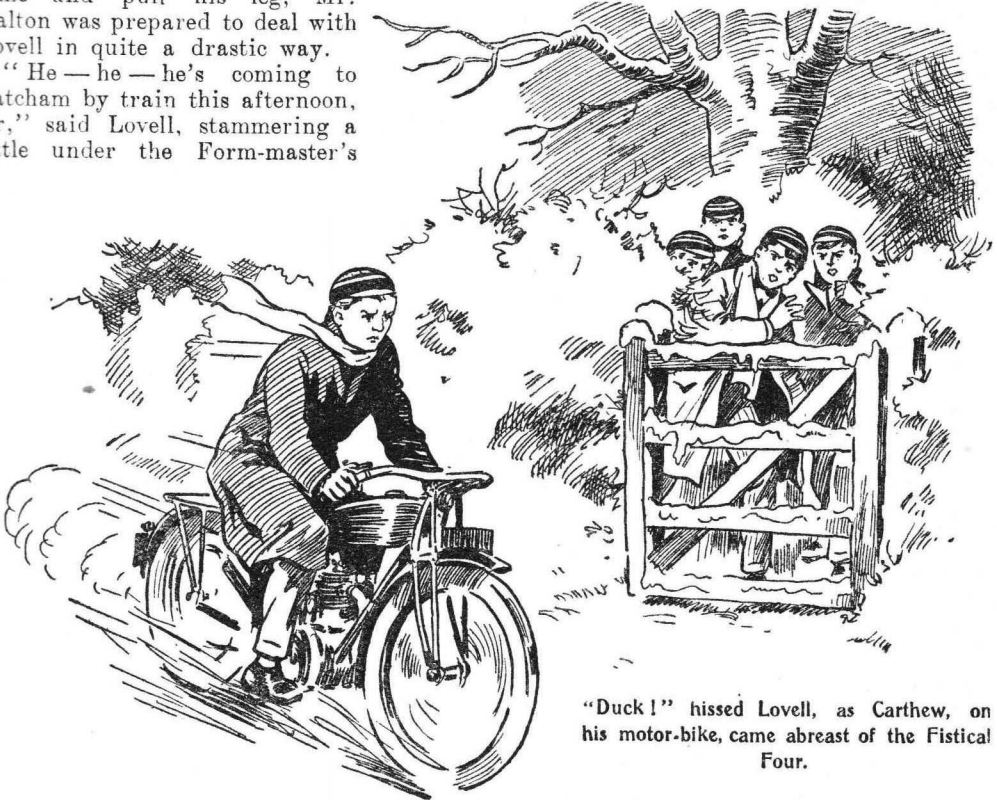
"Snow?" repeated Mr. Dalton.

"Yes, sir. There was a man lost in the snow on Woody Ridge last winter, sir," said Lovell. "He would have been frozen, very likely, if he hadn't been found by the bobby——"

"The what?"

"I mean the policeman, sir."

"You had better say what you mean when speaking to your Form-master,



"Duck!" hissed Lovell, as Carthew, on his motor-bike, came abreast of the Fistical Four.

penetrating glance. "He—he's quite a stranger in these parts, sir."

"No doubt. But what——"

"Latcham's a good distance from Rookwood, sir," said Lovell. "He—he might lose his way."

"What?"

"I—I mean, suppose he did, sir?" stammered Lovell. "The—the weather's rather

Lovell—and please be quick."

"Oh! Yes, sir. Well, sir, if Mr. Bright walks from Latcham, and—and gets lost in the snow or something——"

"Lovell!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"I cannot understand you. If this is a foolish jest, to waste my time——"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Then what do you mean?" demanded Mr. Dalton. "Why have you come to my study and uttered this arrant nonsense?"

"Oh!" gasped Lovell. "I mean——"

Mr. Dalton's glance wandered to his cane.

"I—I mean, I—I was thinking that I'd like to meet Mr. Bright at the station, sir, at Latcham. I—I'm sure he would be pleased at Rookwood fellows meeting him at the station, sir."

"Indeed!"

"As—as he's a stranger here, sir, it would be only—only civil. And—and obliging," said Lovell. "I'm sure he would take it kindly."

"If it were a half-holiday, Lovell, there would be no objection to your doing so, though I fail to see the necessity. But there are classes this afternoon," said Mr. Dalton.

"I—I shouldn't mind missing class for once, sir."

"Eh?"

"In the—the circumstances," stammered Lovell.

"You would not mind missing class?" repeated the master of the Fourth, staring at Lovell.

"Not—not very much, sir. In the—the circumstances——"

A faint smile hovered for a moment over Mr. Richard Dalton's countenance.

"No doubt your friends would not mind missing class, either?" he asked. "Is that the case?"

"Yes, sir," said Lovell eagerly. "Three fellows, sir——"

"I thought so."

"We—we should like to walk over to Latcham, sir, and—and meet Mr. Bright at the station, and—and see that he came to no harm. I mean——"

"A very kind thought on your part, Lovell," said Mr. Dalton. "If there was an inflection of sarcasm in his voice, Arthur Edward did not notice it."

"We—we really mean to be kind, sir," said Lovell. "You see, this Mr. Bright being a stranger in this part of the country, and—and——"

"I have no doubt that Mr. Bright would be pleased and gratified," said Mr. Dalton.

"That's what we thought, sir."

"He could scarcely fail to be gratified by this concern for him on the part of Rookwood boys," said Mr. Dalton. "Especially as your action would involve such a sacrifice as giving up lessons for a whole afternoon."

This time Lovell noted the inflection of sarcasm.

"But I shall not allow this sacrifice to be made, Lovell," added Mr. Dalton. "I have no doubt that Mr. Bright is quite able to take care of himself, without assistance from Rookwood juniors."

"But, sir——"

"And I have no intention whatever of giving you leave from lessons," said Mr. Dalton. "By the way, Lovell——"

"Ye-e-es, sir."

"You have not yet told me why you wish to go to Latcham this afternoon."

Lovell started.

It was well known in the Classical Fourth that Dicky Dalton was a "downy bird." But Lovell had not expected him to jump to conclusions like this. But apparently Dicky Dalton guessed that he had some ulterior object in view. Lovell wondered, for a dismayed moment, whether Dalton had heard of the circus at Latcham.

"I—I—I——" stammered Lovell.

"For what reason do you and your friends desire leave from classes this afternoon, Lovell?"

"To—to meet Mr. Bright," stammered Lovell.

"And for no other reason?"

Lovell was silent.

There was another reason, certainly, but not one that he could state to his Form-master.

He stood crimson and dumb.

Mr. Dalton smiled again. He was a good-tempered young gentleman, and it was not very, very long since he had been a boy himself. So he could make allowances.

He turned to his papers again.

"You may go, Lovell."

"But, sir——"

"That will do, my boy! You may go."

Lovell's heart sank almost to his boots.



"This is the footpath to Coombe, I think?" asked the stout gentleman. "That's right, sir," answered Jimmy.

His friends were waiting for him—expectant. He could picture the derisive grins on three faces when he came along to tell them that there was no leave that afternoon.

"I—I say, sir——" he gasped.

"Come, Lovell, it is useless to say more."

"But, sir, we—we—we——"

Mr. Dalton's hand strayed to his cane.

"Kindly leave my study, Lovell," he said.

"But, sir, c-c-can we go to the circus—I mean, can we go to meet Mr. Bright at Latcham?" stammered Lovell, losing his head a little in his dismay.

"You may leave my study," said Mr. Dalton, "and if you utter one more word before you leave I shall cane you, Lovell! Go!"

And Lovell went.

Obviously there was nothing doing.

Lovell went, in utter dismay. He had told his friends to leave it to him. They had left it to him—and this was the result!

THE THIRD CHAPTER

French Leave!

JIMMY SILVER & Co., standing at the gates, watched Arthur Edward Lovell come down from the House.

They were getting tired of waiting for him.

Not for one moment did they believe that Lovell's wonderful wheeze would prove a winner. Not for one second did they expect him to arrive with an exeat for four. And it was cold at the gates. The sky was overcast, and light flakes of snow were beginning to fall, and a sharp wind blew along the road. The three Classical juniors stamped their feet to keep them warm, hugged their coats close about them,

and waited, each revolving in his mind the things he was going to say to Lovell when that masterful youth came along and owned up that he had failed. And when he appeared in the offing at last, the expression on his face did not hint at success.

Lovell's look was gloomy and thoughtful.

Three faces assumed grinning looks at once. Lovell spotted those derisive grins from afar, and coloured uncomfortably.

"The silly ass!" murmured Raby. "Keeping us hanging about here in this wind for nothing!"

"The burbling chump!" said Newcome. "Of all the fatheaded wheezes I ever heard of, that was the fatheadedest!"

"Only a few minutes to class now!" sighed Jimmy Silver. "And we might have been helping the fellows punt that ball instead of getting frozen here!"

There was an uproarious scrimmage going on in the quad. Mornington and Erroll, Conroy and Putty Grace, and a crowd more Classical juniors had bagged a ball belonging to Tommy Dodd & Co., of the Modern Fourth. They had punted it over to the Classical side, and a crowd of Moderns were making desperate attempts to retrieve the ball.

From their cold and lonely post at the gates, Jimmy Silver & Co. had watched the lively scene, longing to join in it.

But they had told Lovell they would wait at the gates, and they waited.

Lovell came up at last.

He gave his comrades a gloomy look.

"Nothing doing, of course?" asked Raby.

"What's the good of asking?" said Newcome. "We knew jolly well there was nothing doing, and we were silly asses to waste our time hanging about here. Let's go and help rag those Modern bounders!"

"Come on!" said Jimmy. "We've still got a few minutes before the bell goes. Never mind, Lovell! We know you can't help being an ass, old chap!"

Lovell drew a deep breath.

"What did Dicky say?" added Newcome sarcastically. "Did he see right through it at a glance?"

"Did he lick you?" asked Raby.

"Oh, don't waste any more time!" said Jimmy Silver. "We're not going to the circus, that's a cert."

"Of course it is!" said Newcome, with intensifying sarcasm. "We left it to Lovell! That makes it a cert!"

Lovell made up his mind with a jump, as it were. He could not, and he would not, own up that it was a frost. He had said that they should go to the circus that afternoon. What he had said, he had said! Leave was not to be obtained, but there was an alternative—French leave!

"Lovell said that if he didn't pull it off we could use his head for a football!" grinned Raby. "Anybody got any use for a wooden football?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That settled it, in Lovell's mind. He had said that they should go to the circus! They were going!

"Are you fellows coming?" asked Lovell, and he walked out at the gates.

The three juniors jumped.

"What?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Mean to say you've got leave?" yelled Raby.

"My only hat!" gasped Newcome.

They stared after Lovell. Then they hurried after him. Jimmy Silver caught him by the arm.

"Lovell, old man, mean to say——"

"I mean to say that I'm going to the circus, as I said!" snapped Lovell. "You fellows can come or not, as you like."

"Of course we're coming!" said Jimmy.

"I never supposed for a moment that you'd get leave, old bean."

Grunt from Lovell.

"Well, I'm blessed if I understand it," said Raby. "Lovell's pulled it off, but it beats me! I thought Dicky Dalton would tumble at once!"

"Must be getting jolly unsuspecting in his old age!" said Newcome. "If Dalton's as easy to stuff as all that——"

"Well, we've got off, and that's the principal thing," said Jimmy Silver cheerfully. "Lovell's done it! Bravo, Lovell!"

"Hear, hear!"

Lovell made no remark.

While Rookwood Slept!

FOUR days before Mary Queen of Scots set out from her cell at Fotheringay Castle to suffer a tragic and ignominious end at the hands of Queen Elizabeth's headsman a band of Londoners planned an attempt to rescue the ill-fated queen. Among them was a Donald Bruce, who had left the ivy-clad walls of Rookwood but a year since. Head prefect, captain of games, and generally popular, Bruce's name and his exploits were still subjects of discussion and admiration among the schoolfellows he had left behind him. Thus it came as a blow to his youthful hero-worshippers when the news leaked out that Bruce was flying for his life, with a posse of Elizabeth's soldiers hard on his heels.

For three days Bruce, making in the direction of the Hampshire school, eluded them, only to fall into their hands when his escape seemed a certainty. The officer in charge elected to lodge his captive in the Rookwood tower over-night, with a sentry on guard at the foot of it.

Three Rookwood Fourth-Formers, however—Ashbooth, Marks, and Finlay—all hero-worshippers of Bruce, conceived the plan of liberating him. The night was favourable when the three juniors, having laid their plans carefully, stole out of the Classical House, carrying a long ladder between them. The heavy, stertorous breathing of the sentry, who was leaning against the tower, told the plucky juniors that he was asleep. Without a sound, the long ladder was reared against the wall of the tower. Then followed an anxious half-hour while Ashbooth made desperate efforts to file away two of the iron bars at the window. The job was accomplished at last, and Ashbooth, perched precariously on the narrow ledge, beckoned Bruce to essay the descent. The Rookwood old boy squeezed through the gap, and rapidly climbed to the quad. below, and, after shaking his rescuers by the hand, darted off into the night, eventually making good his escape from the country.

THE END

In a few minutes the Fistical Four would be missed from their places. By that time it behoved them to be at a safe distance from the school. It would not have been a happy ending to the adventure had they been marched back to Rookwood by a master or a prefect.

And the four juniors trotted, and Rookwood was soon left at a safe distance behind.

Lovell breathed more freely when they passed through Coombe, and took the road for Latcham.

The snow was falling in earnest now.

But the cheery juniors did not mind the snow. Snow was seasonable in December, anyhow, and their rapid motions kept them warm.

By the road, it was a good distance to Latcham; but the juniors were not going by the road. There was a short cut to the town across Woody Ridge, by a footpath that the Rookwooders knew well.

It was a wild and lonely path in winter, by a dark, dank wood, and wayfarers had been known to lose themselves there when the snow was on the ground, covering the path that wound among the old trees and dragged thickets. But the chums of Rookwood knew every inch of the way, and had no fear of losing themselves if the snow had been a foot deep.

A heavy mist hung over the wood as they entered it, hanging low and grey among the trees. The leafless branches over the path were ridged with snow, and gleamed white; but the well-trodden path was plain to the view, only strewn here and there with flakes of snow.

There was a mile to walk by Woody Ridge, and the four Rookwooders tramped cheerily along.

Lovell by that time had dismissed from his mind the thought of the consequences of taking French leave.

His friends, anyhow, were safe from the consequences, for, of course, he intended to explain to Mr. Dalton that they had left the school in the full belief that he had obtained leave for four. Dicky Dalton was a sportsman, and he could take a fellow's word. All the more because he had drawn unsuspecting fellows into his escapade,

punishment was certain to fall severely upon the headstrong Arthur Edward. But what couldn't be cured had to be endured. And what was the use of worrying, anyhow? As he was "for it," the best thing Lovell could do was to enjoy the freedom of the afternoon, enjoy the circus, and leave the consequences to take care of themselves. Consequences could be dealt with when they came along. Taking that philosophic view of the situation, Lovell, so to speak, packed up his troubles in his old kit-bag and smiled.

"This is jolly!" said Jimmy Silver as he tramped cheerily through whirling white flakes. "Beats the Form-room!"

"Beats maths hollow!" grinned Raby.

"What-ho!" chuckled Newcome.

"Lovell, old scout, you're a giddy genius!" said Jimmy. "I admit I never believed for a minute that you'd pull it off! But——"

"But here we are," said Raby. "Good old Lovell!"

"I take back a lot of things I've thought about you, old chap," said Newcome.

Lovell coloured rather uncomfortably.

"Well, we're going to see the circus, anyhow," he remarked. It was useless to tell the cheery trio that a terrific row was going to follow the circus.

"We are!" agreed Jimmy Silver.

"Put it on," said Raby. "We don't want to be late, as we're going to see the jolly old circus after all!"

The Fistical Four tramped on rapidly and cheerfully. They came down the slope of Woody Ridge at last to the gate at the end of the foppath, on the Latcham road.

Latcham was in sight from that point, its old red roofs white with snow, looking a good deal like a Christmas card. In a field close by the little country town was a large circus tent. From that spot strains of merry music proceeded, reaching the ears of the Rookwooders.

In spite of the falling flakes, a good many people were heading for the circus field.

Circuses came seldom to a little place like Latcham, and when they came they did not remain long. Chumgum's Celebrated Circus was staying for positively

one day only, and giving only two performances, afternoon and evening. But it was likely to have a full house on both occasions, in spite of unpropitious weather. The strains of the circus band were not, perhaps, very harmonious, but they came like the music of the spheres to the four Rookwood juniors.

"There's the jolly old circus!" said Newcome.

"Come on!" said Jimmy Silver briskly.

Chug-chug-chug!

Lovell glanced round, over the gate.

Mingled with the sounds of the circus band from one direction on the Latcham road came the chug-chugging of a motor-bike from the other.

Lovell gave a start.

"Hold on!" he breathed.

"What——" began Newcome.

"It's Carthew."

"Who—what——"

"On that motor-bike!" whispered Lovell.

The juniors glanced round.

The motor-bike, at a short distance, was coming up the road towards Latcham, and the rider was recognisable as Carthew, of the Sixth, a Classical prefect of Rookwood.

With the snow-flakes dropping round him and on him, Carthew was giving all his attention to his jigger, and did not glance towards the roadside gate where the juniors stood looking over.

"Carthew!" said Jimmy. "Going to the circus, too, I suppose. He's got off class same as we have. Let's get on."

"Keep back!" whispered Lovell.

"But what——"

"We don't want Carthew to spot us."

Jimmy Silver stared at him.

"Why not?"

"He's a prefect and a beastly bully, and——and——"

"That doesn't matter as we've got leave. We've only got to tell Carthew we're on leave, if he thinks we're out of bounds."

"Keep back!"

Jimmy was opening the gate, but Lovell grasped him by the arm, and by main force jerked him back.

Chug-chug-chug!

The motor-bike was almost abreast of the gate now as Carthew, of the Sixth, drove it on towards Latcham.

"Duck!" hissed Lovell.

"But——" stuttered the bewildered three.

"Duck, you idiots!"

Lovell ducked down behind the gate. His comrades followed his example, in utter wonder.

The motor-bike chugged by, and Carthew disappeared in the direction of Latcham. The chug-chug-chugging died away in the distance, and Lovell gasped with relief.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

Meeting Mr. Bright!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL breathed hard and deep.

It had been a narrow escape.

His comrades, on seeing the Rookwood prefect heading for Latcham on his motor-bike, might conclude that Carthew was going to the circus. Lovell knew better.

A Sixth Form man was extremely unlikely to get off class to visit a circus. Lovell had no doubt whatever what had brought Carthew of the Sixth to Latcham. He had been dispatched by Mr. Dalton to find and bring back the four truants. If Carthew was going to the circus tent, it was to look for the four juniors, to hook them out, and to march them back to Rookwood.

Lovell hadn't thought of that!

Arthur Edward, as a matter of fact, was not quite so bright as he supposed, and it

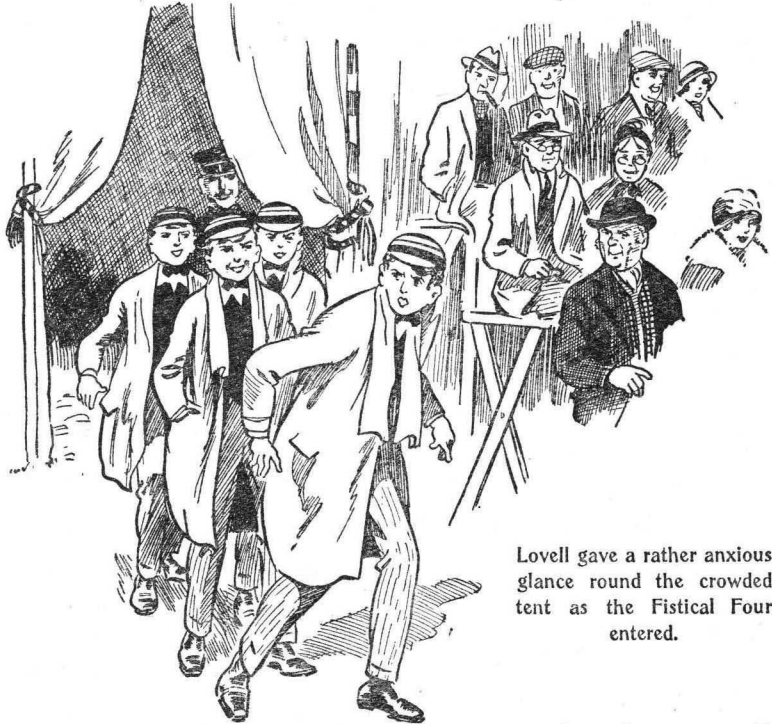
had not even occurred to him that the master of the Fourth might take any steps to round up the truants. Yet it was quite an obvious step for Mr. Dalton to take.

Being perfectly well aware that Lovell and his friends had cut class to go to the circus at Latcham, it was quite natural for Mr. Dalton to call on a prefect to fetch them back. Lovell had concluded that the matter would be left over till roll call. But Lovell's conclusions were not always well founded.

"My hat!" murmured Lovell as he rose from cover and peered over the gate at the vanishing figure of Carthew. "That was a close thing!"

Three fellows stared at him blankly.

"Look here, Lovell, are you off your rocker?" demanded Raby.



Lovell gave a rather anxious glance round the crowded tent as the Fistical Four entered.

"What the thump does it matter if Carthew sees us when we've got leave from our Form-master?" demanded Newcome.

"He's pretty certain to see us, anyhow, if he goes to the circus—and I suppose

that's what he's come to Latcham for," said Jimmy Silver. "You've only got to show him your exeat, Lovell, if he butts in."

Lovell did not reply.

He did not desire to explain that he had no exeat to show the prefect, if Carthew butted in—as he was quite certain to do if he spotted the four truant juniors.

"Blessed if I make you out, Lovell," said Jimmy. "Carthew's a bit of a bully, but he wouldn't interfere with fellows on leave."

"He couldn't!" said Newcome.

"Oh, don't jaw!" said Lovell.

"Anyhow, he's gone now," said Newcome impatiently. "There's nothing to be afraid of, if he wasn't. But he's gone!"

"Give him time to get clear," answered Lovell.

"Look here——"

"Don't jaw, old chap!"

"We're wasting time. The circus will have started."

"A few minutes won't hurt."

"But look here——"

"For goodness' sake, don't jaw!" said Lovell crossly.

Lovell leaned on the gate, evidently not intending to walk on to Latcham yet awhile. His chums stared at him, perplexed and impatient. The merry strains from the distance showed that the performance was beginning, or about to begin, and the juniors naturally did not want to miss any of it. But Lovell was not to be moved. Carthew of the Sixth had to be given time—plenty of time—to get clear. That was important, though the juniors, who did not know that they had taken French leave, did not realise its importance.

"If you're tired——" said Jimmy, at last.

"Well, a bit of a rest won't hurt us," said Lovell.

"We're missing the show!" grumbled Raby.

"Oh, rot!" grunted Lovell. "Better miss a bit of it than miss the lot."

"Eh? No reason why we should miss the lot, is there?"

No answer.

There was no doubt that the juniors would miss the lot if the prefect spotted them. But Lovell was not disposed to explain that to his comrades.

They waited at the gate—three of them with growing impatience. In the distance, they could see that most of the crowd had gone into the circus tent, which was filling rapidly.

"The best seats will be gone!" growled Raby.

"Oh, let Lovell have a rest, if he's tired!" said Jimmy. Uncle James of Rookwood was always considerate.

"I'm not tired!" grunted Lovell.

The suggestion that he was tired by a mile's walk was an aspersion upon his powers of endurance.

"Then what are we stopping here for?" demanded Newcome.

Grunt!

More and more perplexed, and more and more impatient, the three juniors lingered, waiting for Lovell to move. Still Lovell did not move. The coast had to be clear before Lovell moved.

The snow was falling more thickly now. Light, whirling flakes had been replaced by a steady, heavy fall.

The leafless branches overhead did not afford much protection. Standing there in the snow was neither grateful nor comforting.

Still Lovell did not stir.

"For goodness' sake shift, Lovell!" snapped Raby. "Here's somebody wants to come through the gate."

Lovell had to move at that.

From the direction of Latcham, a stout gentleman, in an overcoat, a bowler-hat, and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, arrived at the roadside gate.

He paused there, glancing over the gate into the snowy footpath and then at the schoolboys.

Lovell, who had been leaning on the gate, moved back, and Jimmy Silver opened it politely for the horn-rimmed gentleman.

"Thank you, my lad," said the stout gentleman as he passed through.

"Not at all, sir," answered the polite Jimmy.

The stout gentleman gave another glance along the footpath, winding away among leafless trees, and then again looked at the juniors.

"This is the footpath to Coombe, I think?" he asked.

"That's right, sir," answered Jimmy.

"I was directed at the railway station," said the stout gentleman. "They told me that this footpath led direct to Coombe, and from Coombe it is only a short walk to Rookwood School."

"Quite right, sir," said Jimmy.

The juniors regarded the stout gentleman with some little interest on hearing that he was bound for Rookwood.

"Perhaps you boys are well acquainted with this neighbourhood?" said the stout gentleman, blinking at the four through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Quite!" said Jimmy.

"Then perhaps you could tell me where to obtain a taxi."

"Not nearer than Rookham, sir," said Jimmy—"about five miles from here."

"Dear me! That is more than twice as far as Rookwood School, is it not?"

"That's so."

"You should have got out of the train at Rookham if you wanted a taxi, sir," said Raby. "There's none at Latcham—only an old horse cab."

"I have already discovered that," said the stout gentleman ruefully, "and the driver has declared that his horse could not make the journey in this weather. It is a long way by road, I understand."

The juniors smiled. They had no doubt that the ancient horse that drew the ancient hack at Latcham would have

Jimmy Silver gave a sudden start as he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind. He looked round, to see Carthew of the Sixth.



perished dismally had it undertaken the long journey by road in the thick snow.

"Well, as I must walk, I must walk by the shortest route," said the stout gentleman. "Fortunately my bag is not heavy. You are sure that this footpath is the shortest way to the school?"

"Oh, quite!" said Jimmy. "We belong to Rookwood, sir, and we've used this path dozens of times."

"You are Rookwood boys?" asked the stout gentleman, with interest. "I am glad to make your acquaintance, especially if you belong to the Third Form."

The Fistical Four suppressed their feelings. A man who supposed that the heroes of the Fourth might be Third-Formers was, of course, a benighted ass; but, after all, he was a stranger in the land, and allowances had to be made for his state of ignorance.

"We're in the Fourth, sir," said Jimmy Silver, with undiminished politeness. "The Classical Fourth."

He regarded the stout gentleman with renewed interest. A man who was going to Rookwood School on that especial afternoon, and who was especially interested in the Third Form, could scarcely be any other than Mr. Bright, the gentleman who was to replace Mr. Bohun, the master of the Third—the gentleman who, as three members of the Co. believed, they had come to Latcham to meet at the station.

"Perhaps you're Mr. Bright, sir?" said Jimmy.

"That is my name," said the stout gentleman, with another blink at the juniors. "No doubt you have heard that I am expected at the school, my young friends."

"The fact is, we were going to meet you at the station, sir," said Jimmy, "and—and direct you, and—and so on."

Mr. Bright blinked again.

"I am sure that is very kind of you, especially as you are not members of the Form I am to take at Rookwood," he said. "Is it a half-holiday at the school to-day?"

"Oh, no; we've got leave——"

"We're delaying Mr. Bright," inter-

rupted Arthur Edward Lovell hastily. "If you're going by the footpath, sir, you'd better get along as quickly as possible, before the snow's thicker."

"You are right!" assented the stout gentleman, with a dubious glance into the snowy wood. "Perfectly right! I had better lose no time. Good-bye, my boys, and thank you very much!"

And, shifting his bag from one hand to the other, the stout gentleman tramped away down the footpath, and was soon lost to sight in its windings under the trees.

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome looked curiously at Arthur Edward Lovell. He avoided their eyes.

"Well, that's Bright, and we've put him on the right way for Rookwood," said Jimmy Silver. "But——"

"But didn't Dicky Dalton tell you what time his train got into Latcham, Lovell?" asked Raby.

"No," grunted Lovell.

"Didn't you ask him?" exclaimed Newcome.

"No."

"Well, you must be an ass—and Dicky Dalton another!" said Newcome, in astonishment. "We come over here to meet a man at the railway station, without knowing the time his train gets in!"

Lovell coloured.

His friends, of course, were under the impression that Mr. Bright was to have been met at the station, though Lovell, in the circumstances, had not given that matter a thought.

"We've run into him entirely by chance," said Raby. "If we hadn't stopped at this gate we should never——"

"Well, we did stop at this gate!" interjected Lovell. "And whose idea was it to stop at this gate for a bit? Mine!"

"Mean to say you knew that Bright was coming along?"

"I mean to say that if you leave things to me it will be all right," answered Lovell obstinately. "We've met the Bright bird, and put him on the right road for Rookwood, and what more do you want?"

"But you never——"

"Oh, don't jaw! Are we going to hang on here for ever, while you fellows wag your chins?" demanded Lovell.

"Why, you fathead, it's you that's hanging on here, and we're only waiting for you to get a move on."

"Well, we've waited long enough, and if you fellows have done jawing, we may as well get along to the circus," grunted Lovell.

"Oh, come on!" said Jimmy Silver.

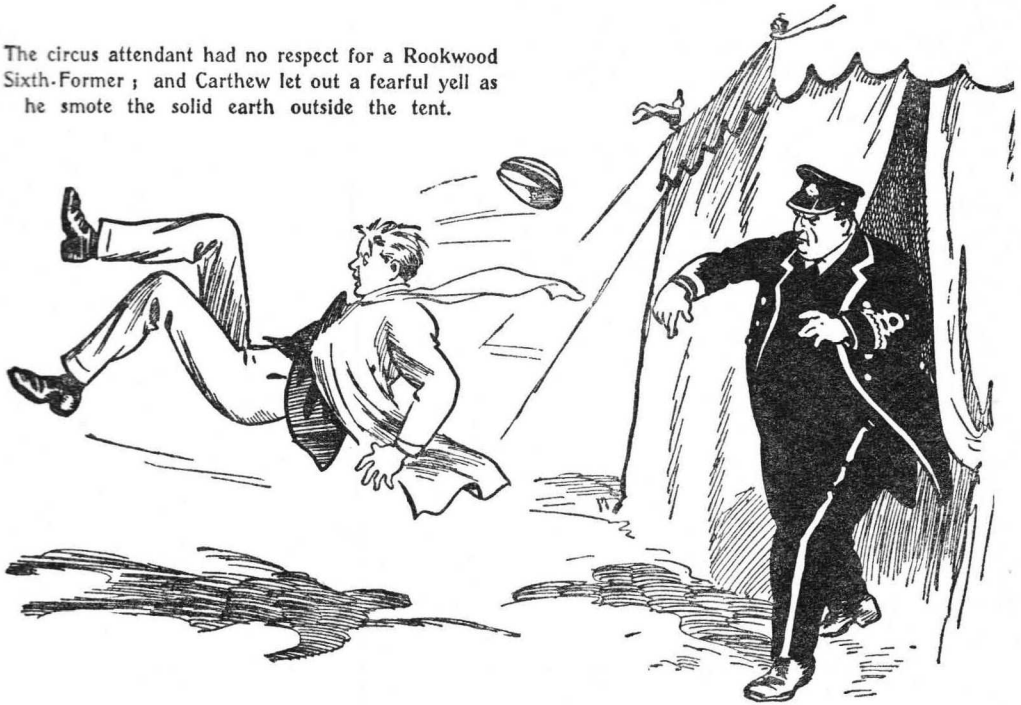
And the juniors went on at last towards

With cheerful faces, they walked into the tent, paid their money, and sought their seats.

Lovell gave a rather anxious glance round the crowded tent as they entered. The tent was fairly full, but there were plenty of benches at the back, and seats—though not front ones—were easily to be had.

"This way, Lovell!" said Raby. "What are you staring about for? There's no empty seats in front."

The circus attendant had no respect for a Rookwood Sixth-Former; and Carthew let out a fearful yell as he smote the solid earth outside the tent.



Latcham and the circus tent. Three of them were puzzled and rather irritated. They simply could not make out Arthur Edward Lovell that afternoon.

The snow ceased to fall almost suddenly as they reached the circus tent. A gleam of wintry sunshine came out in the overcast sky.

That burst of sunshine and the merry strains of the circus band had the effect of banishing the irritation of the juniors.

"I was looking round for Carthew," muttered Lovell.

"What about him?"

"He might be in here."

"What does it matter if he is?"

Lovell only grunted in response to that question.

"Sit down!" said Jimmy.

The juniors sat down in a row, and their eyes fixed on the performance that was going on in the ring. And three of them,

at least, dismissed all other matters from their minds.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

Trouble at the Circus !

"BRAVO!"
"Ripping!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. were enjoying their afternoon.

Chungum's Celebrated Circus was, as its show-bills announced to the public, unrivalled. It had performed to a large number of crowned heads, and doubtless a much larger number of uncrowned ones. Chungum's strong man was the strongest man on earth; his acrobats were the activest acrobats in the universe; his tight-rope walker was the most agile rope-walker in the solar system; his riders were the most wonderful riders ever! All this Mr. Chungum told the world, in bills large and small, and if Mr. Chungum drew the long bow a little, at least it was certain that the Celebrated Circus satisfied its patrons at Latcham, and not least the four juniors from Rookwood, who were so happily there, while their schoolfellows were grinding in the Form-rooms.

Jimmy Silver & Co. felt that it was their lucky day.

They joined vociferously in the cheering at every turn, and when the rest of the audience clapped, the Fistical Four clapped their hands like pistol-shots.

The chums of Rookwood had come there to enjoy themselves, and they were doing it.

They enjoyed every one of the time-worn wheezes of the circus clown. They gazed with breathless interest at the wild riders. They listened with joy to the beat of galloping hoofs, and to the strains of the band. It really was a ripping afternoon.

"Good old Lovell!" said Jimmy Silver, with genuine gratitude, in a pause of the performance.

Lovell glanced at him.

"Eh, what?" he asked.

"You've done this, old scout," said Jimmy. "You got leave for us to come

here, when we thought there wasn't a dog's chance."

"Oh!"

"We thought it wasn't worth trying on, old chap," said Newcome. "But you did it! Goodness knows how you managed to work the oracle, but you did! Good old Lovell!"

"Um!"

"We've often pulled your leg, old fellow," said Raby. "But we own up now that leaving it to you was the right stuff! We left it to you, old thing, and here we are!"

"I fancy a lot of the fellows would like to be here, too!" grinned Newcome. "What?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Only we had Lovell to work it for us," said Jimmy Silver. "Lovell did the trick! I can't guess now how a downy bird like Dicky Dalton fell for it, but here we are! What?"

"What-ho! We ought to pass a vote of thanks to Lovell," said Raby heartily.

"Hear, hear!"

Lovell did not speak.

It was not modesty that kept him silent while he listened to the hearty praises of his chums. He was wondering what they would have said had they known that they were at the circus without leave, and that a frightful row awaited them when they returned to Rookwood.

But it was no use spoiling their pleasure by telling them that. It was no use meeting troubles half-way. Lovell judiciously kept that trifling detail to himself.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Newcome. "This is the cowboy bareback act. Jolly good, I think."

"Bravo!"

Attention was riveted on the ring again.

Jimmy Silver gave a sudden start as he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind. He looked round.

A newcomer had passed along the empty row at the back, and arrived just behind the Fistical Four. It was Carthew, of the Rookwood Sixth.

"Oh, you!" said Jimmy Silver indifferently. "You're rather late, Carthew!"

You've missed a lot of good things."

"More than half over now," remarked Raby, glancing round at the prefect.

Carthew gave them a sour grin.

"I've been looking for you," he said.

"Have you?" ejaculated Jimmy, in surprise. It was not usual for a Sixth Form prefect to seek the company of Fourth Form juniors. "Well, you've found us now. Sit down!"

Lovell sat as if turned to stone.

He did not speak.

He couldn't!

"Sit down?" repeated Carthew, staring. "Do you think I've come here to see this silly show?"

"Eh? I suppose so, or what have you come for?" asked Jimmy, staring in his turn. "And it's not a silly show—it's jolly good! Ripping, in fact! Anyhow, sit down, and don't interrupt!"

"I suppose you think it won't cost you anything extra to be cheeky, considering what you're going to get, anyhow," said Carthew.

"What the dickens do you mean?"

"You jolly well know what I mean!" sneered Carthew.

"Blessed if I do!" said Jimmy. "Anyhow, it doesn't matter. Look here, you're interrupting the show. I want to see what's going on. See? Sit down and be quiet!"

"That's enough!" said Carthew. "I'm here to take you back to Rookwood. Follow me from this tent at once!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"You hear me. Silver?"

"I'm not deaf."

"Follow me at once!" said Carthew, raising his voice. "Do you think for one minute that I'm going to let you see the rest of it?"

"Yes, rather!" said Jimmy, with emphasis. "What the thump are you butting in for, Carthew, I'd like to know?"

"I'm taking you back to the school——"

"Rats!"

"What?" roared Carthew.

"Look here! You're making a fat-headed mistake," explained Jimmy Silver patiently. "We're not breaking bounds,

as you seem to suppose. We're here on leave from our Form-master."

Carthew laughed.

"You want me to swallow that?" he asked banteringly.

"It's the truth," grunted Newcome.

"Dalton gave you leave to cut class and come to this circus, did he?" grinned the bully of the Sixth.

"Yes, he did. That is, he gave Lovell leave for the lot of us."

"Well, of all the cheek, I think this takes the cake," said Carthew, in sheer amazement. "You've got the neck to tell me that, when Dalton specially sent me after you to fetch you back?"

Jimmy Silver jumped.

"Dalton sent you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, he did."

"Gammon!" exclaimed Newcome angrily. "As if Dicky would send you to fetch us back, after giving us leave!"

"He never gave you leave, you young rascal!" exclaimed Carthew. "What's the good of telling me crammers like that, when I'm here on Dalton's instructions."

"Gammon!"

"Dalton sent me after you, knowing that you were going to the circus. I've been hunting through the tent ever since the show started. Now I've found you, you're coming! Get a move on!"

"Sit tight!" said Jimmy.

His comrades sat tight.

"Follow me!" snapped Carthew.

"You've got it wrong," said Jimmy.

"I keep on telling you that we're here on leave, and you can't gammon us. Lovell's got the exeat, signed by our Form-master."

"Let him show it, if he has!" sneered Carthew.

"Show up, Lovell," said Jimmy.

Lovell did not stir. He did not speak. He sat on his bench as if he were turned to stone there. Jimmy nudged him.

"Let Carthew see it, Lovell. A prefect has a right to. He's making a silly mistake, but as soon as he sees Dicky Dalton's fist he will know it's all right."

No answer from Lovell.

"Look here, I'm fed up with this

foolery," exclaimed Carthew impatiently. "Dalton sent me to fetch you back, and if you don't walk quietly out of this tent at once, I'll walk you out—sharp! Now then!"

"Sit down there!" called out several voices. "Quiet!"

"Order!"

"Sit down!"

Carthew gave a supercilious glance round. At Rookwood, a prefect of the Sixth Form was a great man. In the circus tent at Latcham he was a nobody. But Carthew did not realise that there was anywhere where he could be considered a nobody. After that supercilious glance, which expressed the contempt he felt for Latcham and all its inhabitants, he turned his attention to the Fistical Four again. Not one of them had stirred, and Carthew dropped a heavy hand on Jimmy Silver's shoulder.

"Up you get!" he remarked.

He jerked at Jimmy. Jimmy held on to the seat. He was powerfully inclined to hit out, and Uncle James' left was famous at Rookwood for its dire effects. But punching a prefect was a serious matter, even when the prefect was making a silly mistake, and intervening where he had no right to intervene. Jimmy restrained the impulse to hit out, and clung to the seat.

"No, I jolly well won't!" answered Jimmy Silver determinedly.

Lovell found his voice at last.

"Pip-pip-perhaps we'd better——" he began stammeringly.

"Rot!" exclaimed Jimmy hotly. "We're here on leave, and we're staying! Let go, Carthew, you bully!"

Carthew wrenched, and Jimmy Silver held on. The bench rocked, and two or three people farther along almost slipped off. There was a buzz of anger and indignation.

"Stop that!"

"Quiet!"

"Sit down, there!"

An attendant came along behind the seats. He touched Carthew on the shoulder, and the Rookwood prefect stared round angrily at him.

"Hands off!" he snapped.

"You must not make a disturbance here, sir," said the man, civilly enough. "Please sit down and be quiet. You're disturbing the folks."

"I'm taking these boys away!"

"If you young gentlemen are going, please go quietly."

"We're not!" bawled Raby. "We're jolly well staying!"

"We're not going!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver indignantly. "Rather not! Let go, Carthew, you rotter!"

"Get up, you young sweep!" roared Carthew, thoroughly out of temper now, and he gave Jimmy a wrench that almost dragged him over backwards.

The bench rocked again. Jimmy Silver held on to it, and Raby and Newcome, on either side, held on to Jimmy. Three or four people were on their feet now, bristling with indignation, and voices shouted from all sides.

"Sit down, there!"

"Chuck him out!"

"Order!"

"Are you coming?" roared Carthew.

The attendant touched his arm again.

"Stop that, sir, please."

"Mind your own business!" hooted Carthew. "Stand back! These schoolboys are playing truant, and I——"

"That's nothing to do with me, sir. Stop that row at once!"

"Hold your cheeky tongue!" snapped Carthew, and as the man, who was getting angry himself now, seized him by the arm in a muscular grip, the Rookwood senior struck his hand away savagely.

That tore it, so to speak.

"Out you go!" said the circus attendant, grasping Carthew with both hands now, in a grip that was much too strong for Carthew. "I've 'ad to deal with your sort afore! Out you go!"

"Hands off!" shrieked Carthew, struggling frantically.

"Outside!"

"Chuck him out!" roared a score of voices. "Put him outside!"

"Order!"

"Sit down!"

"Leggo!" raved Carthew as he was hooked along the benches by the muscular circus attendant. "You rascal—you scoundrel—you cheekey ruffian! Yarooogh! Oh, my hat! Whoooooop!"

Carthew disappeared.

From the distance, at the exit, a bump was heard and a fearful yell. Both proceeded from Carthew as he smote the solid earth outside the tent.

Carthew was gone! Jimmy Silver & Co. and the people round them settled down again to watch the performance. Carthew was gone, and certainly was not likely to return. He was welcome to wait outside the tent till the chums of the Fourth emerged if he liked.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

Not so Clever of Lovell!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. came out of the circus tent, in the midst of a streaming crowd, at the end of the show. They came out with cheery faces, into a world of white. No snow was falling, but fields and hedges, trees and roofs, were carpeted with it, gleaming in the wintry sunshine that was now fading to early dusk. Across the field to the road lay a trampled, muddy track, but on either side of it and all around the glimmering white of the snow was unbroken. Some of the younger members of



"You've got a licking waiting for you when you get in!" yelled Carthew, with a grin, as he passed the Fistical Four on his motor-bike.

"Of all the cheek!" said Jimmy Silver, breathing hard. "Jumping on us like that when we've got our Form-master's leave!"

"Cheekey rotter!" said Newcome.

"Beastly bully!" said Raby.

Lovell did not speak. But his brow was very thoughtful as he watched the performance. He was thinking, and not wholly of the unrivalled entertainment provided by Chungum's Celebrated Circus.

the audience disported themselves with snowballs as they departed, and the Fistical Four were rather disposed to follow suit. Then they came on Carthew.

Carthew was waiting for them, watching the stream of people passing and dispersing to their homes. At the sight of the four juniors, the Rookwood prefect started towards them.

"There's that rotter again!" muttered Raby.

"Better hook it, I think," said Lovell.

"I don't see it! We're within our rights," said Jimmy Silver. "Carthew asked to be chucked out of the circus, and it can't be put down to us."

"No, but——" murmured Lovell uneasily.

"But what?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Carthew had reached them now. Three of the juniors eyed him defiantly, one uneasily. Carthew's look was black and bitter. Carthew never was a good-tempered fellow, and his experience at Chumgum's Celebrated Circus had not had a mollifying effect on him.

"You young sweeps!" he growled.

"You old sweep!" retorted Jimmy Silver. "What do you want?"

"I want you!" growled Carthew. "I've got to get you back to Rookwood. Dalton never supposed that you would disobey a prefect's order when you were actually caught. I shall report it to him."

"Report and be blowed!" said Raby.

Carthew's eyes gleamed.

"You've got it coming to you for this cheek," he said. "You refused to leave the circus at my order."

"Certainly we did!" answered Jimmy Silver. "You may be no end of a big gun, Carthew, but we've got master's leave."

"You've got nothing of the sort, and you know it," said Carthew. "I can't make out why you keep up that silly tale! You can't expect me to believe it, when Dalton sent me specially after you."

"Oh, rot!" said Jimmy. "He couldn't have, when he gave us leave."

Carthew looked puzzled, as well as angry. He could see that Jimmy was speaking sincerely, and in the circumstances it was perplexing. Certainly Mr. Dalton had sent him after the four truants, and that made it quite impossible that the four had their Form-master's leave.

"Look here, Lovell, trot out that exeat!" said Newcome. "You have to show it to a prefect, if he asks. Well, trot it out!"

Lovell stood silent.

"Dalton can't have given you leave, and

forgotten all about it, and then sent me after you," said Carthew. "That's impossible. Look here, Lovell, if you've got a paper signed by Dalton, show it to me."

"I—I haven't!"

It was out at last.

"You haven't?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver, staring at his chum.

Raby and Newcome stared at him also, blankly.

"No!" muttered Lovell.

"But Dalton gave you leave?" shouted Raby.

"He didn't!"

"Didn't?" gasped the three.

"No."

"But you said——" howled Newcome.

"I never said he gave me leave," said Lovell. "I said I was going to ask, certainly. Well, I did ask."

"And he refused?" stuttered Jimmy.

"Yes."

"But you led us to believe that you'd got leave!" yelled Raby.

"I suppose you supposed so," said Lovell. "You fellows needn't worry. I'm going to tell Dalton I did it. He won't lick you when he knows you supposed you were on leave."

"He'll jolly well lick you!"

"Let him!"

Carthew stared at Lovell.

"So that's it!" he said. "You took these young asses in, and they fancied they were on leave."

"I didn't take them in," said Lovell obstinately. "But they fancied they were on leave all right."

"Oh, my own Aunt Eliza!" groaned Newcome. "You ass, Lovell——"

"You howling ass, Lovell——"

"Of all the burbling chumps——"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Lovell crossly. "You've been to the circus, haven't you? You've had a good time. Ten to one Dicky Dalton will let you off when I tell him."

"You'll get a flogging!" roared Jimmy.

"Well, if I do, I'm not asking you to worry about it," said Lovell sourly. "Give us a rest!"

"You silly chump——"

"You footling ass——"

"Leave it to Lovell!" groaned Newcome. "This is what comes of leaving it to Lovell! Lickings all round!"

"We—we—we've cut class—with-out leave—and me head of the Fourth!" gasped Jimmy. "Oh, you footling fathead, Lovell——"

Carthew burst into a laugh.

"You'll get six all round, and Lovell will get a Head's flogging," he said, "and serve you jolly well right, in my opinion! You young sweeps can make out that you were taken in, but I fancy you weren't so taken in as you make out. Anyhow, you've got to get back to school, and I shall report you for refusing to leave the circus. Get a move on!"

"We're going back to Rookwood now," growled Jimmy Silver. "Give us a rest, Carthew! You don't want to give us a lift back on your stink-bike, do you?"

"I'll see you started!" snapped Carthew.

"Come on, you men!" said Jimmy. "We're for it—and the sooner we get it over the better. Come on!"

Faces that had been very bright were clouded as the Fistical Four started down the road towards the gate on the footpath over Woody Ridge.

Carthew left them, to go into Latham for his motor-bike. But a little later the juniors heard him on the road, chug-chugging along on the motor-bicycle.

Carthew passed them, and grinned back at them as he passed.

"Get on!" he called out. "You've got a licking waiting for you when you get in!"

"Go and eat coke!" growled Lovell.

Carthew laughed, but the next moment his laugh died away in a gasp of alarm. It really was not safe, on a snow-covered road, to look back and relax his attention to his jigger. The bike skidded in the snow, and Carthew shot away dizzily.

"Oh, crumbs!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Ooooooop!" gasped Carthew.



The footprints, clearly defined in the snow, showed that Mr. Bright had taken the wrong turning!

Fortunately the jigger righted, and Carthew regained control. But he did not look back at the group of juniors any more. He gave them no further heed.

The motor-bike chugged on and disappeared in the distance.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked on dismally to the gate on the footpath. As they proceeded, the Co. told Lovell what they thought of him.

They told him at great length and with great emphasis. They told him what they thought of his wheezes, and of his intellect, and of his nerve. All that they told him was uncomplimentary.

They had wondered at Lovell's success in getting leave for the afternoon. They had been driven to believe that there was more in Arthur Edward Lovell than met the eye.

Now they had discovered that they had not been given leave at all, and that Lovell was still the frabjous fathead they had always thought him, only more so than they had ever imagined.

They had cut class—taken French leave—broken bounds—bunked! It was really awful to think of. Mr. Dalton might, or might not, lay all the blame on Lovell when he heard the story. That made little difference to the Co. They did not want a caning themselves, and they did not want Lovell flogged. All Lovell's wonderful cleverness had boiled down to this—that he had broken bounds and taken French leave, as any fellow could do if he was fatheaded enough. And three fellows, generally as well behaved as any at Rookwood, had played truant along with him!

"Leave it to Lovell!" said Raby, with concentrated sarcasm. "Ripping idea, what? We'd better leave it to Lovell to get us out of this awful scrape he's got us into."

"You'd better," said Lovell tartly.

"You howling ass——"

"Oh, cheese it!" exclaimed Lovell.

"Go and eat coke! Rats!"

"You footling duffer——"

"Br-r-r-r-r-r!"

Lovell appeared to have heard enough of the eloquence of his comrades.

He strode ahead, hurled open the gate on the roadside, and tramped through into the footpath.

The gate swung back with a crash.

Jimmy Silver opened it a minute later, and the three passed through. They followed Lovell along the footpath, under the leafless branches that stretched overhead, like white arms.

"Hold on, Lovell!" called out Jimmy Silver.

No reply from Lovell. He tramped on doggedly ahead.

"Lovell, old man!"

Lovell tramped on in silence.

"Now the silly ass has got his back up," said Newcome. "Just what he would do, after landing the lot of us in the soup, if

we don't thank him nicely for getting us into the biggest row of the term!"

Jimmy Silver sighed.

"Old Lovell means well," he said. "Come on! After all, we've had a tip-top afternoon, and if we've got to pay the piper, we've called the tune! Let's catch Lovell up."

The three juniors hurried on. But Lovell, who evidently had his back up, hurried too, and kept ahead.

"The fathead!" said Raby.

"The ass!" said Newcome.

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Keep smiling!" he said cheerily.

The December dusk was thickening in the wood. The thick snow among the trees gleamed eerily in the dusk. Like spectres the gaunt trees stood, whitened with snow. The footpath had totally disappeared under a white carpet, but the juniors knew the way beyond the possibility of mistake. In the white, footprints could be seen leading in the direction in which the juniors were going. Evidently they were the tracks left by Mr. Bright, who had traversed the path a couple of hours ago. The juniors remembered that the snow had ceased to fall soon after the new master had entered Woody Ridge.

"Lovell!" called out Jimmy again. "Hallo, he's stopped! Come on!"

The three juniors hurried on and joined Lovell.

He had stopped at a point where a track left the footpath, winding away into the heart of the extensive and almost untrodden wood.

"That's not the way," said Raby. "Come on!"

Lovell did not come on.

He had not, apparently, halted for his comrades to join him. He was standing still in the snow, staring along the track that led off into the wood, and he did not heed the three.

"Come on, Lovell!" urged Jimmy Silver. "For goodness' sake don't sulk, old man!"

"Who's sulking?" exclaimed Lovell.

"Well, come on."

"You can get on, if you like," answered Lovell coolly. "Leave this to me."

"Eh—leave what to you?" exclaimed Jimmy.

"We're likely to leave anything to you, Lovell, after to-day!" snorted Raby. "But what are we to leave to you this time, fathead?"

Arthur Edward Lovell smiled sarcastically.

"You fellows don't notice anything special?" he asked.

"I notice that it's getting dark," said Newcome testily.

"And we shall get it extra stiff if we're late in for roll call," growled Raby.

"Look here, Lovell, what—" began Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, keep on," said Lovell, with sarcasm. "Leave it to me! I'm a fathead, I know—a frabjous ass—a silly idiot—a footling chump—and all the rest of it. But I'm not going to leave a man to perish of cold and exposure in this wood, all the same!"

"What?" yelled the three.

Lovell pointed to the snow at their feet.

"Look!" he said.

The three juniors looked, and then they noticed what Lovell had already noticed, and they stared at the carpet of snow with suddenly grave and startled faces.

"My only hat!" muttered Jimmy Silver.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

The Track in the Snow!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. stood silent, staring at the snow. What they read there was

startling enough. From the Latham road as far as this spot they had followed the footprints, which they guessed had been left by Mr. Bright. At this point the footprints, instead of continuing along the footpath, turned off and followed the track winding away into the wood.

The man who had preceded them by two or three hours had turned off the footpath at that point.

The footprints, clearly defined in the velvety softness of the snow, showed that he had taken the wrong turning.

That was not surprising, considering that Mr. Bright was a stranger in that part. In the summer the footpath over Woody Ridge was clearly marked, but under several inches of snow every trace of it had disappeared from sight. Any stranger, coming to the spot where the track branched, must have been hopelessly at a loss. Jimmy Silver & Co., who had been over the footpath a hundred times or more, made no mistake. There were a score of landmarks they knew. But the

stranger evidently had made a mistake.

It was no light matter for a stranger to miss his way on Woody Ridge in the snow, and with the December darkness coming on. Once lost, the way was not likely to be found again. Hidden by snow as it was, it might have been crossed again and again by the wandering man seeking it without being discerned.

Obviously Mr. Bright had not, as the



The four juniors, with all the force of their lungs, shouted in unison, but there was no reply from the lost Mr. Bright!

juniors had taken for granted, gone on to Rookwood School and arrived there.

He was still in the wood!

Unless he had found his way out again, which was extremely unlikely, the stout gentleman in horn-rimmed glasses was, even then, wandering hopelessly to and fro in a trackless waste, and booked to pass a bitter winter's night in the open.

"My only hat!" repeated Jimmy Silver.

"The ass!" said Newcome.

"I don't see it," grunted Lovell.

"How was he to know the way, with this snow on the ground? He was as likely to take one way as another."

"That track leads nowhere," said Newcome. "He would soon find that out, and turn back, I should think."

"That track leads out on the downs, if you follow it far enough," said Lovell. "It's a path that's used in summer. We've been over it ourselves. You can get to Rookham that way, if you follow it far enough."

"My Aunt Eliza! If the silly ass has wandered out on the downs——"

"Phew!" murmured Raby.

Jimmy Silver whistled softly.

In the dusk, under the whitened trees, the Rookwood juniors looked at one another. The man was lost; that was certain. If he had guessed that he was on the wrong path, he would have retraced his steps—and there was no sign of returning footprints.

And the schoolboys knew, though they did not care to utter the thought, that it was not merely discomfort and hardship that threatened the man who had wandered. The shadow of death was over one who lost his way on the downs in the snow. Many a pitfall lurked under the white mantle, and even if the wanderer avoided them by good fortune, his position would be helpless when darkness fell. He could only wander on and on till he sank down exhausted, and that was death.

The schoolboys forgot their own little differences now. They forgot the trouble that awaited them at Rookwood, forgot roll call, and everything else but the peril of the man whose footprints led away into a wild and trackless waste.

"We've got to find him!" said Jimmy at last.

Lovell nodded.

"If he's not found, he's done for," he said. "You know, there was a man lost on Woody Ridge once, in the winter, and they found him—days afterwards——"

Lovell did not complete the sentence.

"I know," said Jimmy, in a low voice.

"I—I say," muttered Raby uneasily, "if—if we leave the path we shall never find it again after dark. You know that."

"We can't leave him to it!" said Lovell curtly.

"No. But——"

Raby was silent.

There was danger—serious danger—for the schoolboys in leaving the path, with the dusk deepening. If they were overtaken by the winter darkness in the wilds of Woody Ridge, they would be little better off than the man they sought.

Jimmy drew a deep breath.

"We can't leave him to it, as Lovell says," he said. "We've got to find the chap. Come on! Every minute of daylight is precious now."

Arthur Edward started, following the footprints along the track, and his chums followed Lovell.

For a quarter of a mile or more they pressed on, with hardly the exchange of a word, covering the ground as quickly as possible.

Then Lovell halted.

"He turned off here," he said.

The track hidden under the snow led, as the schoolboys knew, to the open downs and distant Rookham. But the footprints no longer followed it. They turned off among the whitened trees.

The wanderer had left the track, without knowing that he was leaving it. He had hopelessly lost himself in the trackless woods.

"Shout!" said Jimmy Silver. "He may be near enough to hear us from here."

"Not likely," said Lovell.

"Try, anyhow!"

And the four juniors, with all the force of their lungs, shouted in unison.

"Halloo! Halloo!"

"Hallo—oo—oo!" came echoing back from the snowy woods. But there was no other reply.

They listened intently. Again they shouted. But only the hollow echo of the woods came back.

"Come on!" said Lovell. "No good wasting time."

They tramped on again, following the trail in the snow. It led them through a glimmering glade.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lovell suddenly.

He halted again.

"What——"

"Here's another track."

"My hat!"

The juniors stared at the trail in the dinness. Another track of footprints crossed the one they were following. In one spot it partly obliterated the original trail, and was evidently fresher.

Jimmy shook his head.

"It's the same track," he said.

"But it crosses this!" said Newcome.

"That's easily enough explained. Goodness knows how far he went, but he must have walked in a circle and come back here, and crossed his own trail."

"That's it!" said Lovell, after a moment's thought.

It was clear enough.

Like most persons hopelessly lost, the wanderer had walked in a wide circle, while doubtless supposing that he was proceeding in a direct line.

How much time he had lost in describing that circle the juniors could not guess, but the new trail seemed fairly fresh, and they began to hope that the hapless man was not far away.

"If he's recognised his own footprints, and followed them back to where he started from——" muttered Raby.

"He's done exactly the reverse," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

Lovell stared:

"How do you make that out?" he asked.

"Look!"

Jimmy pointed. The new track crossed the old one, and then, a few yards farther on, turned back to it.

At that spot there were blurred marks in

the snow, which showed that the man had stopped, and hesitated for some little time. From that point the trail vanished, only the old trail remaining. But from that point the old trail was marked with fresh prints.

It was easy enough to guess what had happened. The wanderer had come on that trail in the snow, had observed it, and followed it. Doubtless he had taken it for the track of someone else passing through the wood, and followed it in the hope of coming up with that someone, or at least being led to safety. Not suspecting that he had walked in a circle, he had never dreamed that the trail he had fallen upon was his own.

"My only Aunt Eliza!" ejaculated Newcome.

Lovell whistled.

"He thought that was somebody else's track, and he followed it," said Jimmy Silver soberly. "The poor chap is walking over his own footsteps a second time, and he will go right round the circle again—miles, perhaps!"

"Then," exclaimed Lovell, "we've only got to wait here, and when he gets round again he will run into us."

"Only," said Jimmy, "it will be dark long before that, and as soon as it's dark he will not be able to see the trail, and he will wander off it."

"Oh!" said Lovell.

"He won't get back to this spot," said Jimmy, shaking his head. "Goodness knows where he will get if we don't find him. Let's get on!"

The four juniors pressed on again.

The dusk was growing dimmer and dimmer now, and it was not easy to discern the footprints that were guiding them. Lovell stumbled over something in the snow and uttered an exclamation.

"What's that?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Blessed if I know! Come on!"

"But let's look——"

"You're wasting time."

"Look, fathead! It's a bag."

"A bag!" exclaimed Lovell.

Jimmy Silver dragged a dark object from

the snow. It was a suit-case, and they recognised it as the bag Mr. Bright had been carrying.

Lovell peered at it.

"My hat! He's dropped his bag—and left it there!"

"Must have been fagged out by that time, and too jolly tired to carry it any farther," said Newcome.

"I suppose so. But——"

"I'll carry it," said Jimmy. "Come on!"

They tramped on in the thickening dimness. At intervals they uttered a shout, in the hope that the exhausted man might be within hearing. From the fact that he had left his suit-case behind, it was obvious that the man must be exhausted, and proceeding slowly.

"Halloo! Halloo!" rang echoing through the shadowy woods.

"Hark!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver suddenly.

"Only the echo——" said Lovell.

"Listen!"

"I tell you——"

"Quiet, ass, and listen!"

Lovell grunted and was silent. The juniors listened intently. Faintly, from the deepening shadows of the wood, came a distant cry:

"Help!"

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

The Rescue I

"HELP!"

It was a faint, feeble cry, but it reached the ears of the Rookwood juniors.

"Help!"

"That's him!" exclaimed Raby, joyfully and ungrammatically.

"Hurrah!"

Jimmy Silver shouted again.

"Halloo! Where are you?"

"This way! Help!"

The juniors hurried in the direction of the cry. They no longer needed the guidance of the footprints, now almost lost in the dimness.

"Help!"

They came on him suddenly.

At the foot of a frosty trunk, leaning

back on the tree, where he had sunk down utterly exhausted, lay the stout gentleman in the horn-rimmed glasses.

His face, white as chalk, glimmered in the gloom, the big glasses giving it a strange, owl-like look.

"Help!" he murmured feebly.

"Here we are, sir!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. He bent down and peered at the hapless man. "You're Mr. Bright?"

"Yes," gasped the stout gentleman, blinking at him. "And you—I have seen you before—you are the Rookwood boys I met!"

"Yes. We found where you'd left the path, and followed," said Jimmy. "All serene now."

Mr. Bright gasped dismally.

"I—I think I must have lost my way," he mumbled. "But—but I came on footprints and followed them, hoping that they would lead me to a house, but—but I am quite exhausted——"

"You came on your own footprints, sir," said Jimmy Silver. "You must have walked in a circle."

"Is it possible?" gasped Mr. Bright.

"But it's all right now," said Jimmy reassuringly. "Thank goodness we found you before it was too dark to get back to the footpath."

Mr. Bright shivered.

"You—you—you can find your way back in this dreadful wilderness?" he stuttered.

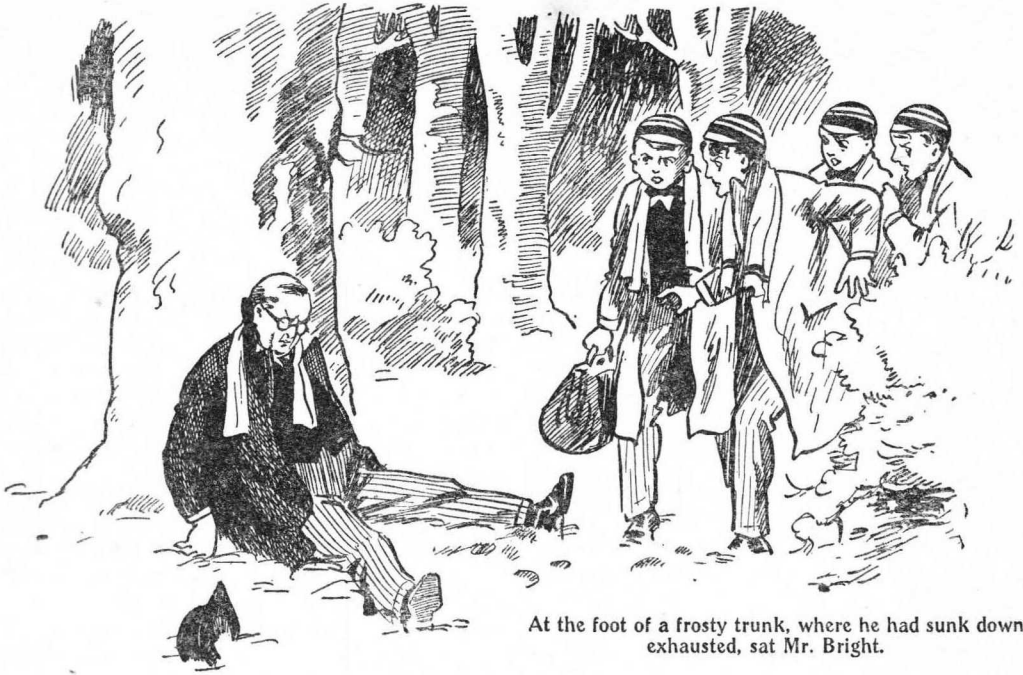
"I think so, sir. But there's no time to lose. Lend a hand here, you men," said Jimmy.

With the help of the juniors, Mr. Bright gained his feet. But he leaned heavily on them. Obviously, he had gone on till he could no longer place one foot before the other, and he was completely at the end of his tether.

"I—I fear I am too exhausted to walk," he mumbled.

"That's all right, sir—lean on us!" said Jimmy. "We'll help you!"

"My dear boy! I—I hardly care to think of what would have happened had you not found me," gasped the hapless gentleman.



At the foot of a frosty trunk, where he had sunk down exhausted, sat Mr. Bright.

Truly, it was not pleasant to think of. Had not the Rookwooders found him, Mr. Bright would have passed the long December night in the snow and darkness, and it was scarcely likely that he would have survived to see the winter sun dawn again.

But the Rookwooders were not out of the wood yet—literally and metaphorically. Darkness was falling fast now.

“Buck up!” said Lovell. “If we lose our way back, we’re dished.”

“Come on, sir!” said Jimmy.

Mr. Bright walked between Lovell and Jimmy, the two heftiest members of the party, and Raby carried the suit-case. Supported by the two sturdy juniors, the stout gentleman found that he could walk. But most of his weight fell on the two Fourth-Formers, and his weight was very considerable.

Manfully they stood up to the burden.

What would happen if Mr. Bright gave out entirely, the juniors hardly dared to contemplate. So bulky a gentleman would

not have been easy to carry, even by four sturdy fellows.

Fortunately, Mr. Bright did not give out. Help and renewed hope kept him going.

Progress was slow. The juniors tramped on, with Mr. Bright tottering in their midst, leaning heavily on Lovell and Jimmy.

There was more than one halt to rest and to ascertain the way, for the darkness was settling blackly now, and the footprints that had guided the juniors were lost to sight. Fortunately, by the time the last glimmer of light was gone, the juniors were on a track they knew, and it led them back to the main footpath.

There, all was safe so far as finding the way was concerned, but nearly a mile’s distance had to be covered to reach the village of Coombe.

Mr. Bright seemed scarcely conscious now; he tottered on like a man in a dream, his weight falling more and more heavily on the juniors.

How they got to Coombe, Jimmy Silver & Co. hardly knew.

They tottered into the village at last, with an utterly helpless man on their hands. They gasped with relief at the sight of the glowing light from the diamond-paned windows of the Red Cow.

But now all was plain sailing. The trap from the Red Cow carried four fatigued juniors and an exhausted master to the gates of Rookwood.

And, in spite of what awaited them there, never had Jimmy Silver & Co. been so glad to see the old school.

"Here we are again!" gasped Jimmy Silver as he jumped from the trap and tugged at the bell.

"Two hours late for roll call!" said Raby.

"There'll be a frightful row!" said Newcome.

"Never mind that. We're here at last," said Jimmy Silver, and he rang another peal on the bell.

Old Mack came down to the gate.

"My eye!" said the Rookwood porter as he blinked at the new arrivals. "You, is it? Which Mr. Dalton says——"

Old Mack broke off, to stare at the man who was being helped from the trap.

"Wot's this 'ere?" he ejaculated.

"Mr. Bright," said Jimmy.

"Mr. Bright!" repeated Mack. "He ain't come, and the 'Ead expecting 'im——"

"Lend a hand, old bean, and give your chin a rest," suggested Jimmy Silver.

And old Mack grunted and lent a hand, and Mr. Bright was helped to the House. And Jimmy Silver & Co., as they came in, were hailed immediately by Carthew of the Sixth.

"Here, you!"

"Here we are, old bean," said Jimmy cheerily.

"You're to go to Mr. Dalton's study at once," said Carthew. "I may as well tell you that it's a Head's flogging for you all round! Cut off!"

And the Fistical Four, not in a happy mood, cut off, to take what was coming to them.

THE NINTH CHAPTER

Something Like Luck!

"LEAVE it to me!" said Lovell.

"What?" yelled three juniors.

"Leave it to me——"

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

"Duffer!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. found Mr. Dalton's study vacant. The Fourth Form-master had been called away by the commotion that followed the arrival of Mr. Bright.

The four juniors waited in the study for their Form-master. There was a buzz of excited voices in the House, startled exclamations, and the sound of many foot-steps. The strange and unusual circumstances of Mr. Bright's arrival had caused something like a sensation.

But the Fistical Four paid that no heed. They were thinking of themselves, which in the circumstances was excusable.

They waited for Mr. Dalton to come back, in the lowest spirits. Then Lovell suggested that they should leave it to him. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome looked at Arthur Edward as if they could have eaten him.

"Leave it to me," repeated Lovell calmly. "I'll talk to Dicky Dalton! Don't you fellows say a word!"

"Look here——"

"You know you can't open your mouth without putting your foot in it," argued Lovell, "so leave the talking to me."

"You footling ass——"

"We're likely to leave anything to you, you frabjous ass!" said Raby. "The best thing you can do is to shut up."

"I'm going to talk to Dalton——"

"Rats!"

"I'm going to tell him——"

"Rot!"

"Look how the matter stands," argued Lovell. "I asked Dalton for leave to meet Bright at Latham, and see him safe to the school——"

"Like your cheek!"

"Dalton refused——"

"Yes, you ass, and you never told us."

"Don't jaw! Dalton refused, and look what's happened. Bright lost his way, and

might have been frozen. Well, I'm going to point out to Dalton that I was right, and he was wrong."

"Wha-a-at!"

"Dalton's a sensible man," said Lovell. "I mean, for a Form-master, of course. Well, when I point out to him how utterly in the wrong he was, he's bound to see it."

"Great pip!"

"I shan't tell him he was an ass."



When the trap arrived at Rookwood Mr. Bright had to be assisted by two of the juniors into the school.

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy. "You won't?"

"No; I shall put it politely. But I'm going to make it clear to him that he was wrong, and I was right, and——"

The three juniors gazed at Arthur Edward Lovell. That happy youth seemed persuaded that the matter would turn out all right, after all, if left to him. But his comrades had had enough—more than enough—of leaving it to Lovell. Neither did they think that an angry Form-master might be placated by having it explained to him that he was utterly in the wrong, and that Arthur Edward Lovell was utterly

in the right. It seemed improbable, at least.

"You—you benighted bandersnatch!" said Jimmy Silver at last. "We've got to take what's coming to us, and it will be bad enough without you making it worse."

"If you leave it to me——"

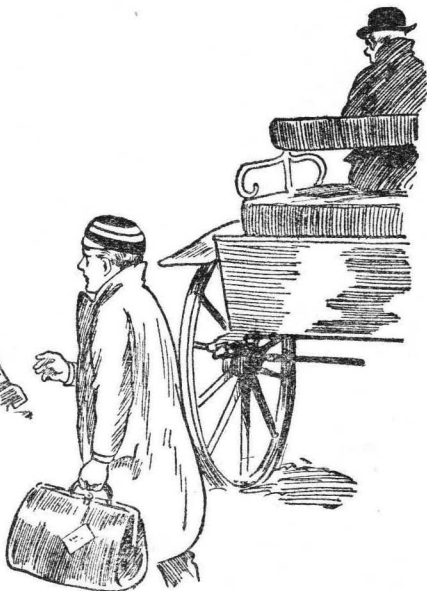
"If you say one word to Dalton," said Jimmy Silver, in concentrated tones, "we'll scrag you!"

"Look here——"

"All you've got to do is to shut up!" hooted Raby.

Lovell's countenance assumed its most obstinate expression.

"I shall certainly tell Dalton what I think," he said. "All you fellows have got to do is to keep your silly mouths shut and leave it to me."



It was the last straw! It really was the thing-too-much! Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome exchanged an eloquent glance, and then they hurled themselves on Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Bump him!" roared Jimmy.

"Yarooogh! Leggo! Mum-mum-my hat! Yoooop!"

Bump!

Ink and papers danced on Mr. Dalton's table as Arthur Edward Lovell smote the floor of the study.

A Form-master's study was not, perhaps, an appropriate place for Lovell's chums to demonstrate thus what they thought of him. But that was forgotten in the excitement of the moment. Arthur Edward had asked for it—he had begged for it—and now he was getting it.

Bump!

"Whooooo!"

"Give him another!"

Bump!

"Yoooooooooooooooooooooop!"

"Now, you fathead——"

"Now, you ass——"

"Now, you burbling chump——"

"Hem!"

That gentle cough in the doorway had a more startling effect on Jimmy Silver & Co. than a thunderclap.

The three juniors released Arthur Edward as suddenly as if Arthur Edward had all at once become red-hot.

They spun round. Mr. Richard Dalton was standing in the doorway of the study. He had come in at a rather unpropitious moment!

"Hem!" he repeated.

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

Three juniors stood crimson and confused. Lovell sat up, crimson and enraged.

"Ow!" he gasped. "I'll—— Ow! Oh! Ooooooh!"

Mr. Dalton stepped into the study.

"You may stand up, Lovell," he said quietly.

Lovell stood up. He gave his comrades a look. In the presence of the Form-master he could give them nothing more than a look, but his look was expressive.

There was a moment's silence. The chums of the Fourth waited for their Form-master to utter the words of doom.

"You have played truant to-day!" said Mr. Dalton at last. "You have left the school without leave, missed classes, and refused to return at a prefect's order, though I sent him specially to fetch you back."

"We're sorry, sir! You see, sir——" said Lovell.

"Shut up!" hissed Newcome.

"Shan't! You see, sir," said Lovell, "I should like to say—— Yow-ow-ow!"

Lovell had not intended to say that. He said it involuntarily as his foot was fiercely tramped on.

"Order, please!" said Mr. Dalton severely. "Silence! You need say nothing! It was my intention to report you to your headmaster for a flogging, but——"

The juniors hung on Richard Dalton's words. It seemed that there was a 'but.'

"But——" said Mr. Dalton slowly.

A pin might have been heard to fall in the study.

"But it appears that your reckless, thoughtless, foolish conduct has led to an unexpected but very happy result," said the Fourth Form-master.

"Has it, sir?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Are you not aware that it has, Silver?"

"I—I don't quite——"

"Had you not broken bounds to-day, as you recklessly and unthinkingly did for the trivial purpose of visiting a circus, you would not have been returning by Woody Ridge, and would not have found Mr. Bright there," said Richard Dalton.

"Oh!"

The juniors saw light.

"By seeking him in the wood, with darkness falling, you ran very considerable risk yourselves," said Mr. Dalton, his severe face relaxing. "You might not have succeeded in saving him, but might have shared his fate."

"Oh!"

"There is no doubt that you have saved this gentleman, Mr. Bright, from severe hardship—possibly from death."

"Oh!"

"I am bound to take this into consideration," said Mr. Dalton.

"Oh!"

"Nothing more, therefore, will be said about your reckless escapade."

"Oh!" gasped the juniors.

"You may go, and may regard the

matter as closed," said the Form-master. "But," he added in a deep voice, "if anything of the kind should occur again——"

Mr. Dalton did not finish. He left the rest to the imagination of the juniors.

He made a gesture of dismissal, and the chums of the Fourth left the study. Very gladly they left it, scarcely daring to believe in their good luck.

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy Silver as they went down the passage. That was all he could say.

He was too astonished at their good fortune, as were the others. Even though they had saved Mr. Bright, not for one moment had the Fistical Four expected Mr. Dalton to take such a lenient view of their taking French leave. But in the circumstances, perhaps, it was the only course left open to the Fourth Form-master.

"This is what comes of leaving it to me," remarked Lovell. "I told you so!"

Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome looked at Lovell with an indulgent smile.

"Another time," continued Arthur Edward, "perhaps you won't need persuading so much——"

This was too much for the others.

"You ass!"

"You burbling chump!"

"You fathead!"

And the Fistical Four walked on down the passage in silence.

"Licked?" asked a dozen voices as they came into the junior Common-room.

"Flogged?"

"Sacked?"



Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome were heartily bumping Lovell when a gentle cough sounded in the doorway. It came from Mr. Dalton!

Jimmy Silver & Co. smiled. They could smile now!

"My dear men," said Arthur Edward Lovell patronisingly, "we're all right! We've been to the circus, and we've had a jolly good time! That's all!"

"And you're not licked?" howled Tubby Muffin.

"Not at all!"

"But you cut class!" exclaimed Mornington.

"We did!"

"You went to the circus!" said Townsend.

"We did!"

"And you're not licked?"

"We're not."

"Then how did you manage it?" demanded Mornington.

Lovell smiled.

"These fellows left it to me," he explained. "When a thing's left to me, it's all right! That's all!"

THE END