

ROOKWOOD SCHOOLBOYS - GOOD'UNS AND BAD'UNS, AND THOSE IN BETWEEN

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Presented at the Old Boys' Book Club Meeting, 9th October 2022

NOTE: Rookwood was written for *Boys Friend*, with readers' favourite stories reprinted in *Popular* and *Schoolboys' Own Library*. Importantly, the *Popular* reprinted several stories out of sequence, with stories about Mornington's villainy not only published in *Popular* AFTER his heroic exploits appeared in *Boys' Friend*. Therefore, I quote the original *Boys' Friend* papers. I omit the story titles as they differ between papers.

Earlier, I noted how George Orwell accused Hamilton of perpetuating imperialist views. Hamilton, however, was teaching his readers about how to behave like the heroic actions of the ancient Romans found in Thomas Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. These have physical courage, and the moral courage behind it which leads to other behaviour Hamilton admires – honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, bravery in the face of great peril, and - above all - no surrender, even in the face of death: heroic values Hamilton transferred to fictional schoolboy archetypes of good and bad.

As Jimmy Silver (schoolboy hero of Rookwood's Fourth Form Classical Side) tells new boy Kit Errol 'all schools have right'uns and wrong'uns', and we certainly see the worst of Hamilton's wrong'uns at Rookwood. They're irredeemably mean-spirited idle snobs who despise poorer boys, and smoke, drink and gamble – disloyal moral and physical cowards and liars, who'd run a mile to avoid a fight. The 'good'un's of course are their exact opposites and display the heroism of Macaulay's heroes.

Hamilton's most interesting schoolboys, though, are the ones found between the perpetually heroic good'uns and the invariably unheroic wrong'uns. They're stuck in the middle, with a mix of good and bad attributes they are more complex characters. These the boys have all the heroic qualities. However, like Shakespeare's great tragic characters, they also have a serious character flaw. Harry Wharton, for instance, has hot temper and begins his school career badly. For Hamilton, if such boys don't learn self-discipline early in life they'll act like wrong'uns until they come under the influence of a friend and mentor who's a good'un.

One of Hamilton's most complex characters, who starts out as a wrong'un till he gradually changes, is Valentine Mornington, or Morny, of Rookwood School, heir to a fabulous fortune. His journey is the longest, most believable and in some ways the darkest. I think he's the only boy behaving like 'wrong'un' who plans cold-bloodedly to murder another schoolboy for personal gain (the diehard 'wrong'uns', after all, haven't the nerve).

He arrives at Rookwood on 8th April 1916 in *Boys' Friend* 774, and we see him at his worst. Jimmy and his friends have to drag him as he wants to get a taxi.

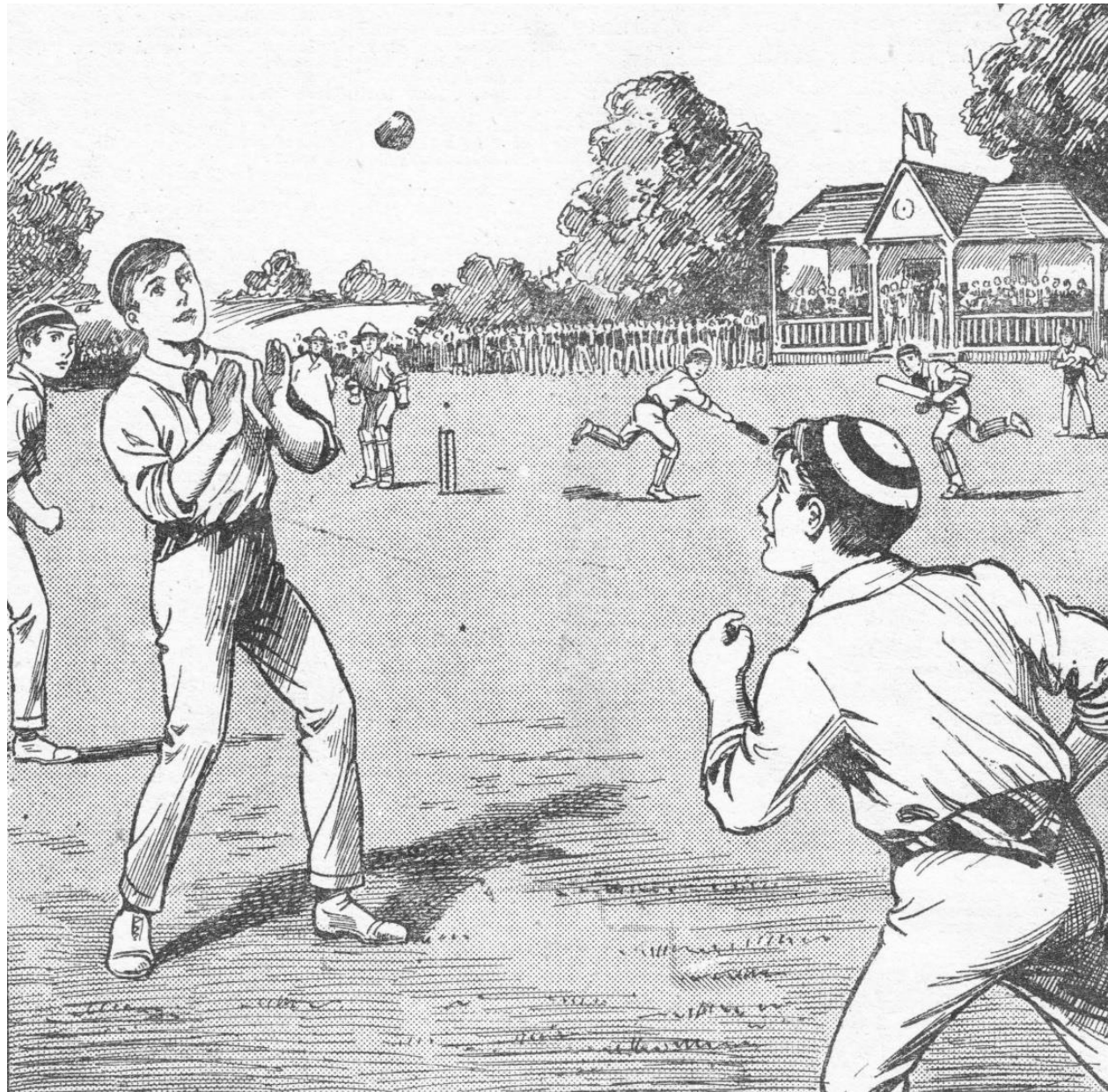


His form master Mr Bootles finds a boy who's 'been allowed to run wild by a careless guardian for years', so that he's 'self-willed and passionate tempered, utterly inconsiderate of others and selfish to the last degree'. The 'right'uns' of course reject him, but the 'wrong'uns' befriend him for his wealth and reinforce his earlier bad influences. Soon he's their ringleader.

In issue 775, Morny and his new friends skip lessons and go to the races, where they gamble and get drunk. Coming back, they visit a local pub. When they're thrown out Morny gives his name as 'Jimmy Silver', who's only saved from expulsion when the truth comes out and Morny's flogged.



He carries on this way for some time. He and his cronies bully the scholarship boy Rawson, for instance in issue 776. His self-centred arrogance on the sports field means he's excluded from the Junior Eleven teams. When he sets up a rival cricket team he's made to look a fool. (issues 778 and 779).



Resentful, and spiteful, he frames Silver for theft so he'll be expelled. When Jimmy's father ensures the truth comes out Morny's the one marked for expulsion. (issues 802-805).



In issue 805, Morny dodges expulsion by malingering in the School Sanatorium (he can't be sent home if he's ill).



At this point, canny readers will have noticed Hamilton's authorial voice identifying the potential for Morny's redemption. Morny indulges in all the vices of a 'wrong'un' but doesn't lack nerve. When he's faced with a fight on his arrival we're told 'he did not want for courage of a wild-cat kind', such as lying to Mr Bootles so he can go to the races. 'Whatever were his faults he did not want for coolness and pluck', says Hamilton.

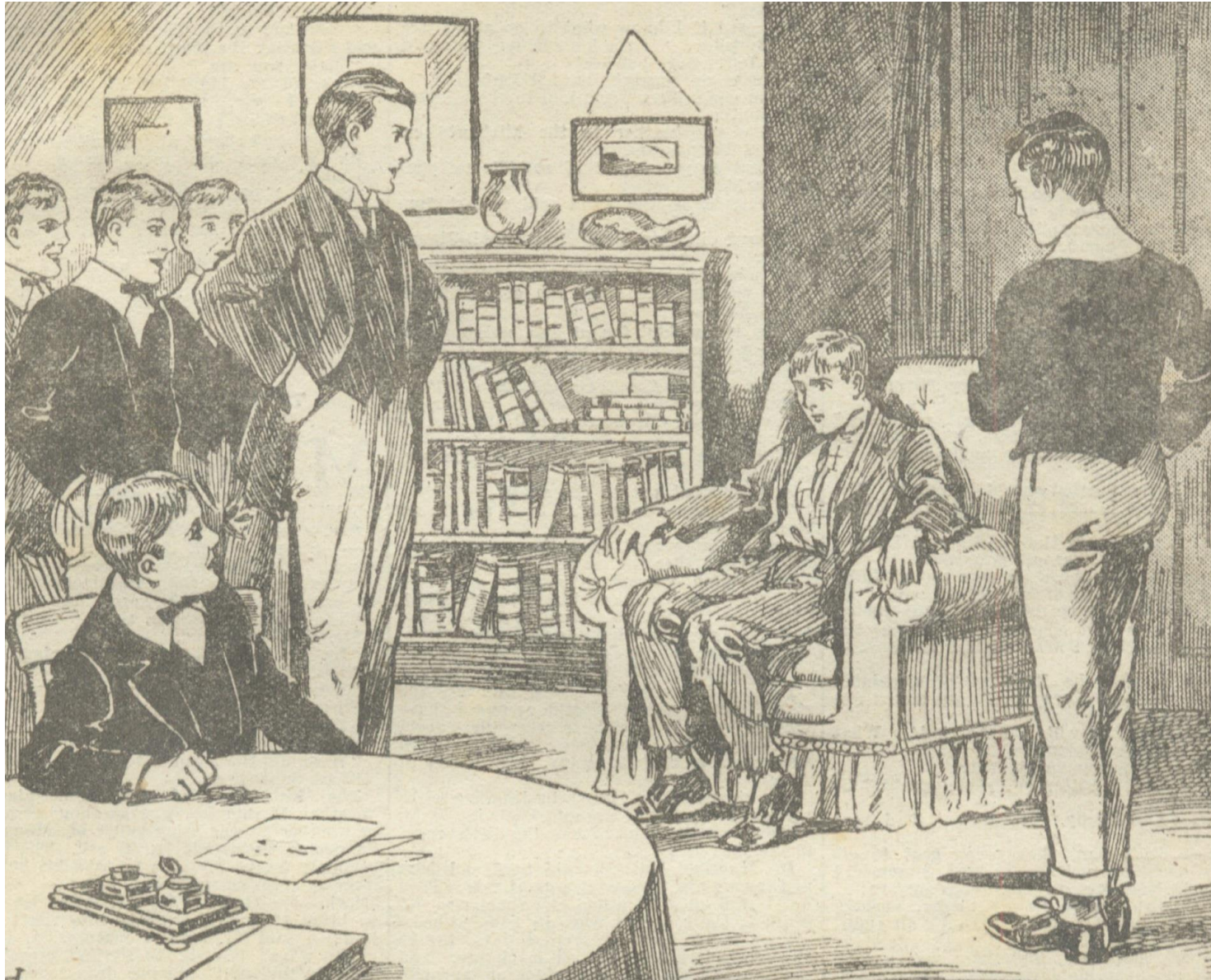
Having shown Morny at his worst, issue 779 sets up the start of Mornington's long redemption.



The Head's house catches fire with his little daughter inside. The others are forbidden to rescue her. 'It was death, and the sacrifice would have been useless', Hamilton comments. Mornington, however, leaves the Sanatorium and plunges into the flames for no other reason than because it had to be done and he had the wild, reckless nerve to do it. He almost dies in the process, and ends up in the Sanatorium for real – 'terribly ill, torn with pain, and enduring his pain with grim, cool stoicism'. Needless to say, he's not expelled, and he admits to Silver that while malingering he'd done a lot of thinking, and he apologises.

Jimmy Silver visits Morny again when he's out of the Sanatorium saying 'you've got something jolly decent in you' and 'for fit for better than for smoking and slacking ... you're too good a chap to go to the dogs'. But he finds Mornington smoking and gambling as usual and leaves in disgust.

Soon, though, we see exactly what that 'something decent inside' Morny is. As Morny and his friends drive to the pub in a hired car (issue 809), they see a young tramp faint in the road. His friends are scornful, but Morny 'sees the suffering in the boy's face'. He smuggles the boy into school, gives him a meal and clean clothes, and listens to his story.



The boy is 'Erbert, an orphan whose guardian died fighting in the Great War leaving him alone and penniless. Refusing to send him out into the rain to sleep in a haystack Morny takes 'Erbert to the Headmaster – after all, he says, hasn't the Head just preached a Sunday Sermon on charity.

The Head enrolls 'Erbert at the school. When Silver next visits Morny, though, Morny's he is still smoking and gambling - 'the dandy of Rookwood was not to be plucked like a brand from the burning'. He 'was the same shady black sheep he had always been' concludes Jimmy.

So why did Mornington do all this for 'Erbert? For mischief? Fun? Astute readers listen to Hamilton authorial comments during his stories, and Hamilton says:

'it was the sheer audacity of the thing probably that appealed to Mornington's reckless nature more than anything else. But certainly the black sheep of Rookwood must have felt a kindly, charitable impulse in the first place'.

And speaking to the Head:

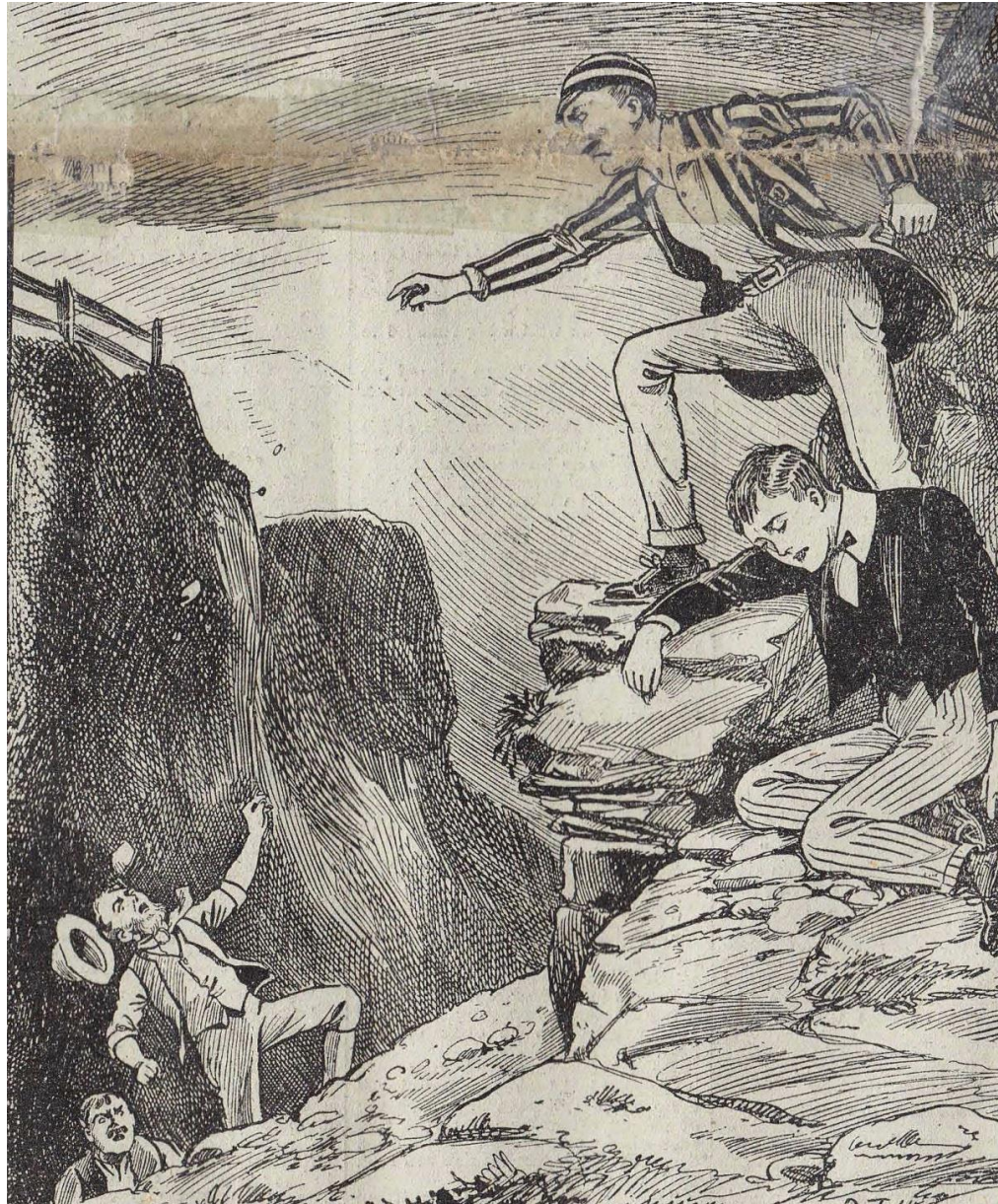
'Mornington was not in his usual flippant mood. Something deep and earnest had been stirred in his strange, wayward nature.

Not something you expect from a wrong'un. And when Morny tells Jimmy and his friends that he's taking the Head's sermon seriously, there are none of the authors frequent barbed authorial comments about hypocrisy.

Although Hamilton might lay out the possibility of change as part of Morny's character, good intentions aren't enough. He still needs a shove in the right direction. That comes with the support of a friend whose opinions and actions Morny respects, when Kit Errol arrives at Rookwood (issues 833-836).

Errol recognises the worst in Morny but accepts him anyway for the good qualities he sees in him. Errol provides a critical but real friendship and a role model. He listens, gives gentle encouragement to make some different choices in life and doesn't abandon Morny when his advice is ignored.

Kit Errol's another interesting character. He's accepted as a good'un. But 'Erbert, brought up in the slums, tells Morny he's recognised Errol's 'father' 'Captain Errol' as the career criminal 'Gentleman Jim', who's appropriated someone else's identity. Morny realises that 'Captain Errol' plans to rob the school, but he's kidnapped and imprisoned before he can tell anyone. Kit, though, really is a 'good'un'.



He hates the life of crime, and wants to use this chance to make a new 'honourable' life for himself at Rookwood, and he risks his own life to rescue Morny. Amazingly, in Hamilton's favourite trope, the 'stolen child' it's discovered Kit Errol was kidnapped as a baby and really *is* the missing son of Captain Errol. He can stay at Rookwood after all.



This adventure creates a bond between the two boys, and begins Errol's influence on Morny's choices, and the kind of life he leads. At the end of their adventure Hamilton neatly describes Morny's nature as 'a mixture of good and bad'. As Jimmy Silver puts it 'Morny won't do Errol much good, but Errol may do Morny heaps of good.'

Gradually - but not all at once – Morny sometimes listens to Errol's opinions and advice and even occasionally follows it. But while Morny has done some pretty shocking things, he hits rock bottom soon when he faces a disastrous change in his life, and is tempted to commit murder to dodge it. That's set in motion by the arrival of Lattrey, another newcomer to Rookwood's circle of 'wrong'uns'

In issue 840 Lattrey, notices how Morny now avoids his old 'friends'. For spite he provokes Morny's 'unreasonable temper' by undermining his belief he'll be sufficiently accepted by the right'uns to gain a place in the junior cricket team. Soon Morny's skipping practice to join Lattrey on a trip the pub. But it's a trap. Lattrey's tipped off the prefects and he is only saved when Errol discovers the truth from that inveterate eavesdropper Tubby Muffin.



Morny's given a place on the cricket team after all, and Lattrey's disgraced. When Errol asks 'why don't you stick to cricket and let these shady rotters slide?', Morny says he'll think it over, and Errol hopes he will.

At this point, Mornington's at a half-way point. Under Kit's influence he's working at his studies, and at sport, but still sometimes mixes with the 'wrong'uns', and does some shocking things.

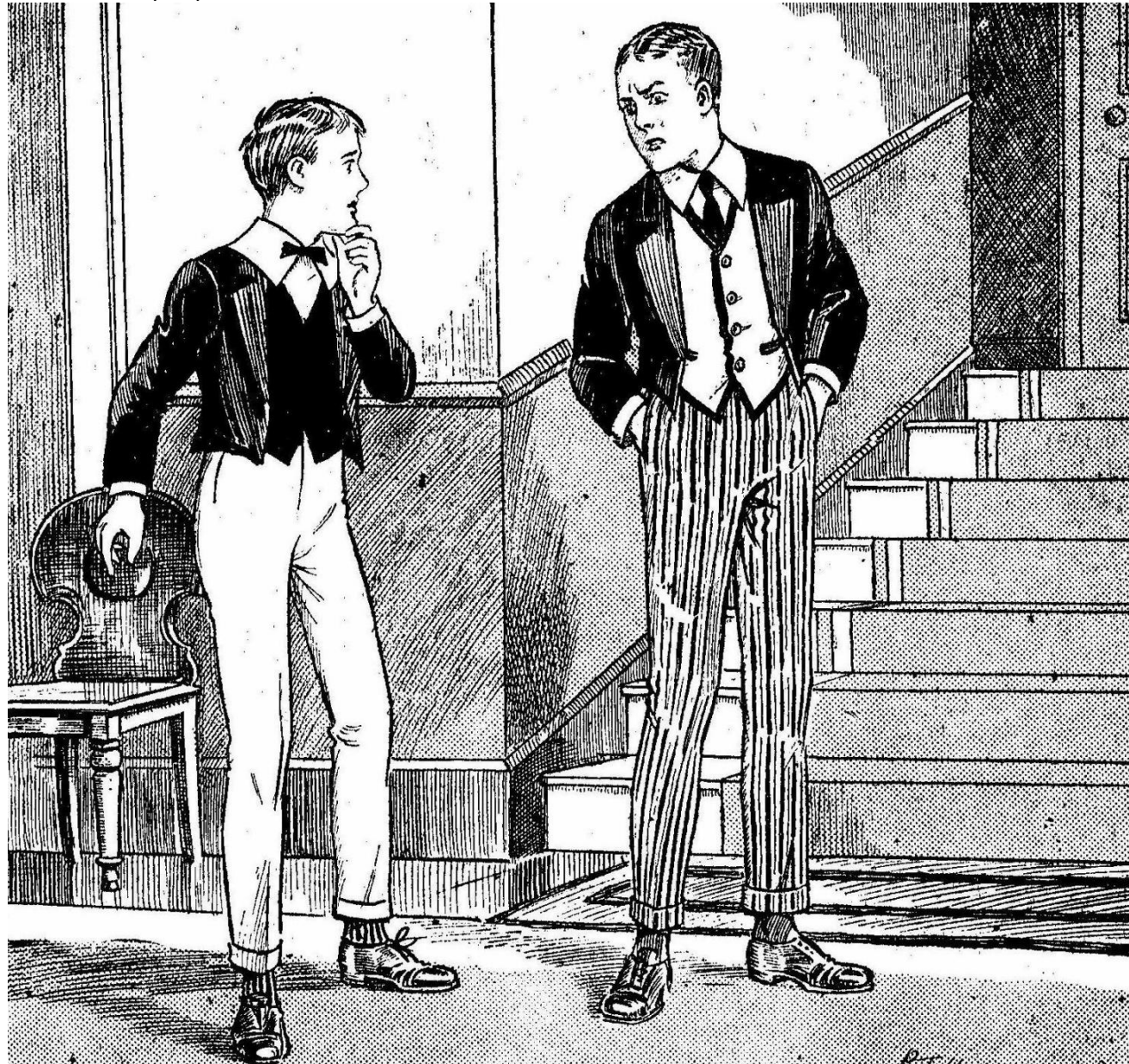
Then Morny almost comes to grief (issues 844-849) when he discovers he's is not the rightful heir to the fortune he assumes he'll inherit. The real heir vanished as a child. If he's still alive he's still the heir. Morny's shocked. Technically, he's poor, not rich and he knows the wrong'uns, whose friendship's 'the fairweather sort' would abandon him if the true heir was found. He confides in Errol, the only friend he's certain wouldn't give a damn about the money. To Errol's relief he says 'I've been a silly fool, old chap', and he vows to change. He quits smoking, cancels all his shady activities and to Errol's delight focusses on cricket. But his troubles have only just begun.



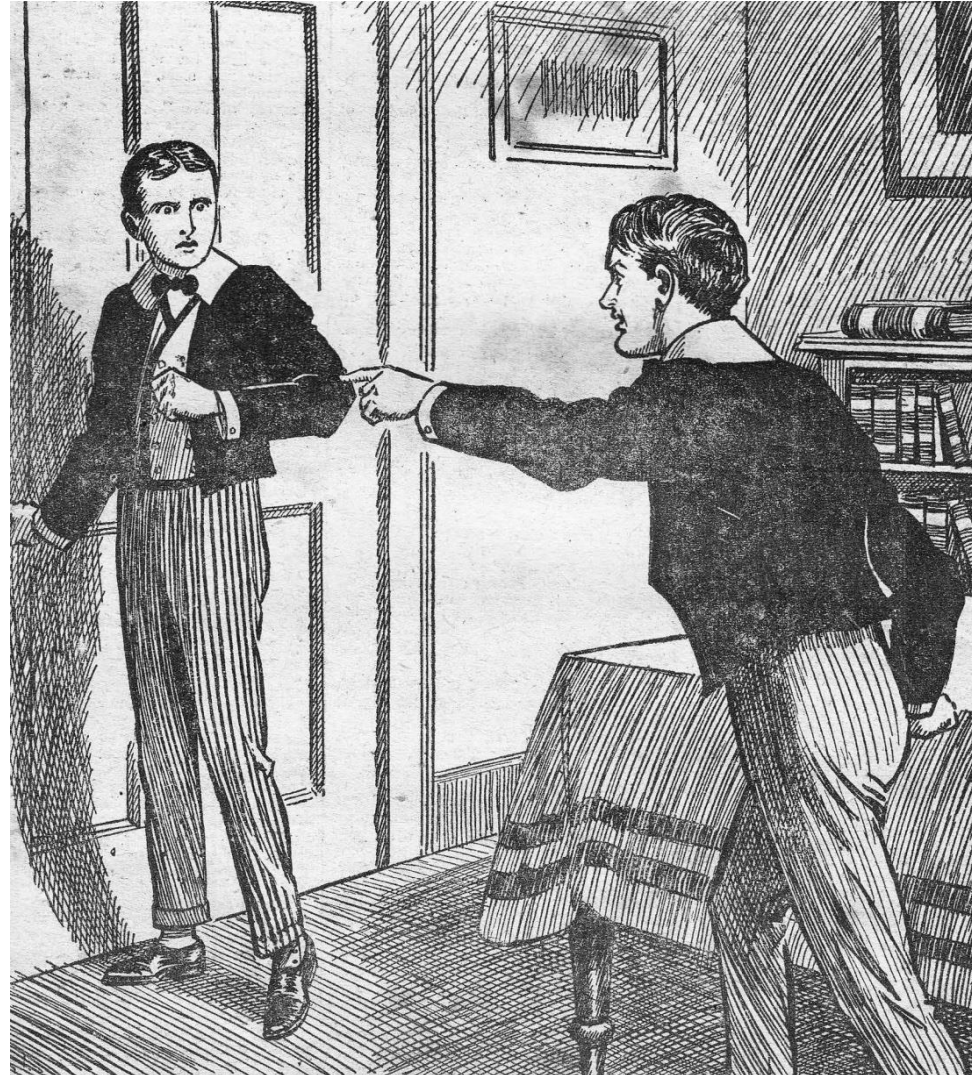
Family members share a distinctive strawberry birthmark. Morny saves some juniors, including 'Erbert. from drowning in the local river. He nearly drowns himself holding the pair above the water till help arrives. At this point, Hamilton says 'he never thought of letting his burden go. The thought of it did not even cross his mind'.

And then.

When he gets them both ashore he's shocked to recognise the starberry birthmark on 'Erbert's shoulder. 'Erbert's the true heir! Should he reveal the truth and lose his inheritance? He doesn't, but people notice how his attitude to 'Erbert has become cold.



Things soon get worse. Lattrey finds out the truth and starts to blackmail him. He forces Morny (and his money) to return to his old friends. Indicating he's really growing into a good 'un, Morny tells Errol everything, but admits he's said nothing, and is therefore a thief - swindling his cousin. Errol advises him to confess everything to his uncle. Morny doesn't take Errol's advice at first. Then Lattrey goes too far and places a small fortune to gamble that Rookwood will lose an upcoming cricket match in which Morny's playing and demands that Morny throws the match.



That's a bridge too far. Morny lets Lattrey place the bet and, knowing the consequences, plays to win. Lattrey loses a fortune. The truth is now bound come out.

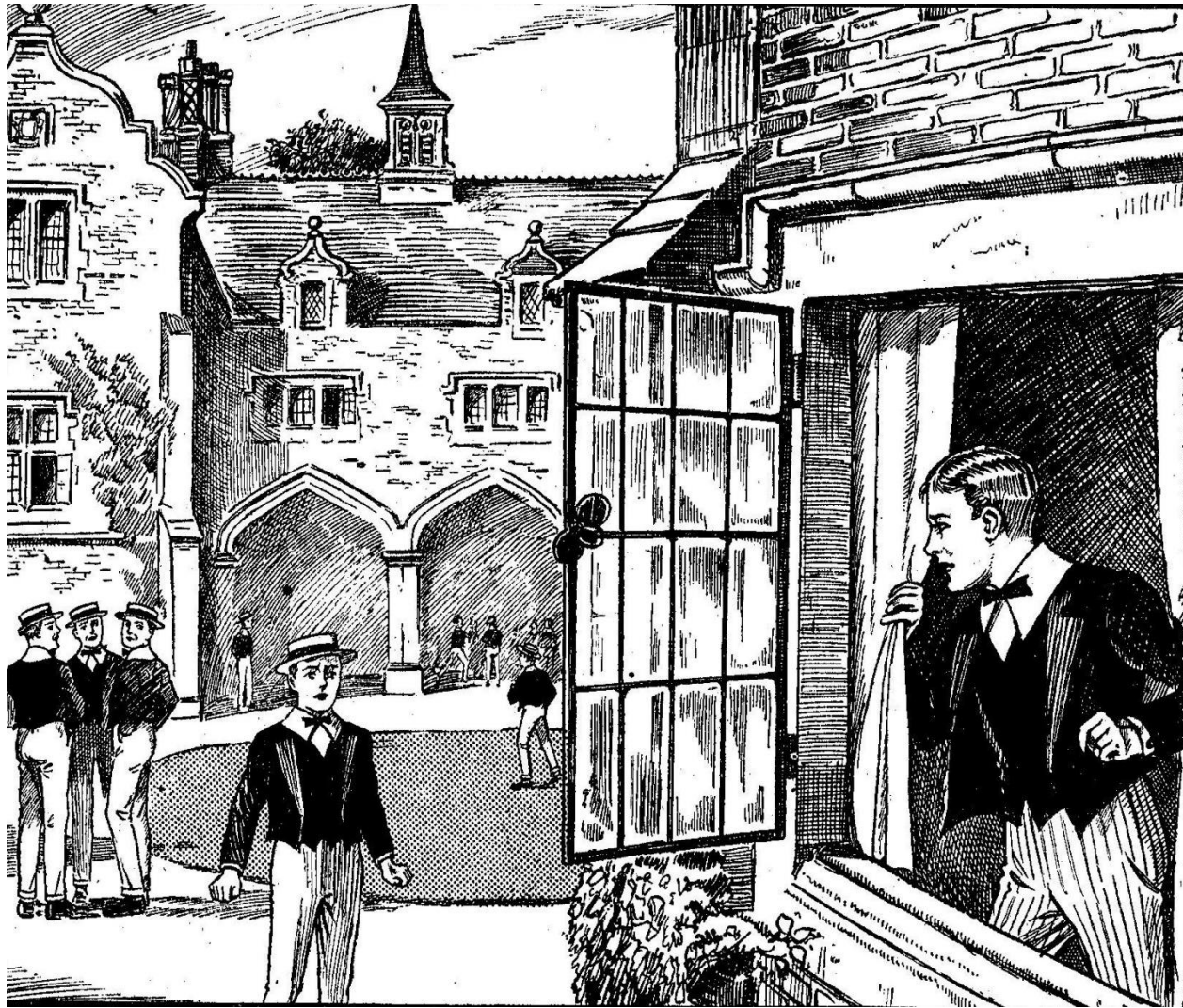


Morny's faced with a choice he can't dodge – to let the truth come out and accept 'charity' from 'Erbert, or tempt 'Erbert to a cliff edge, push him over, and kill him. He actually takes 'Erbert to the cliff top with that intention. But he's a potential schoolboy hero, and of course he finds he can't do it.



He tells 'Erbert the truth, takes 'him back to school, introduces him as the true heir and writes to his guardian to tell him about his discovery. Temptation had 'whispered like an evil spirit in his ear' Hamilton writes. 'Mornington had fought his battle and won it ... he had found the right path, as Errol had hoped he would'

Morny, who's never had any illusions about his fair-weather friends, accepts it when they all drop him now he has no money.



In issue 848 his patience with them snaps, and that mischievous, daring part of his nature prompts him to teach them all a lesson. With 'Erbert's help he pretends that the great discovery was a mistake. Of course, the wrong 'uns immediately shun 'Erbert and flatter Morny again. Until Morny reveals the joke. Finally, he auctions his possessions and after a period of feeling humiliated finds that his wealth isn't essential to his comfort as he thought it was, and that there's many things he can do without. Jimmy Silver and the other 'right'uns' begin to like him a lot more, and they all start to get along much better.



Nothing goes smoothly, of course. This is no 'road to Damascus' moment. Not quite yet. Morny's still tempted by the yearning for excitement that led him into trouble in the past. The real Road to Damascus moment happens in issue 863.

By now, Morny's sufficiently one of the 'right'uns' to accept an invitation to Jimmy Silver's home for Christmas, along with Errol and other boys. Morny's now largely reformed, but he's still restless. As Hamilton says:

'[it's] partly no doubt because his restless nature craved for change; in a word, for the fierce excitement of his old, shady ways. And he was ashamed of it ... despised himself for it.'

Lattrey and the other wrong'uns are also staying nearby, and Morny isn't surprised that while his new friends spend their time ice skating, his old friends' idea of having fun is still to smoke and gamble. Worse. They've introduced the younger brother of one of his new friends to the joys of gambling at cards, and they're fleecing him out of his holiday cash. He feels justified in giving way to temptation to win the money back.

He smokes the first cigarette in a long time and makes his plans. That isn't to become one of them again. He's changed a lot since those days. But the prospect of fleecing them at their own game, and cheating at cards to fleece **them** as a punishment, excites him, and he sneaks away to do just that. A dangerous thing to do when you're one person against a group. Once they realise what Morny's doing he's only rescued from a severe beating, if not worse, when Errol realises something's up and comes to the rescue.



Afterwards Morny's ashamed of how he behaved. 'I'm a dashed bad egg, Errol', he says. 'Why don't you just throw me over?' Errol just answers 'rats', and when Morny asks him if he wants him to 'swear repentance' Errol sadly answers 'What's the good.' Which makes Morny even more ashamed. He's found he dislikes mixing with the wrong'uns again, and behaving just like them to teach them a lesson. so they'd want **THEIR** vengeance:

'I've been a dashed fool', he said. 'Blessed if I know what came over me. I don't really care for that rot, an' if I did, I fancy my experiences of this evening would have sickened me of it. It's the last time Kit – and I mean it now. I'm done with that mug's game – done for good.'

Errol of course is delighted and looks forward to a fresh start back at Rookwood. Hamilton ends the story with:

... if Errol had had doubts they were removed at last and he knew that Mornington had said a last farewell to his old ways after that last, reckless plunge.

Morny, then, begins behaving as a wrong'un but also acts with great nerve and courage – a potential schoolboy hero whose bad behaviour results from a bad upbringing. Over the course of his adventures, he meets a true friend who accepts him for the good that friend sees in him. Although that heroic quality is put to the test with the greatest of temptations, murder, under Kit Errol's example, encouragement and unswerving loyalty astute readers aren't surprised when Morny **chooses** to change.

That's the key word here – chooses. Hamilton's message to his readers is that if you have the right qualities of character, whatever your background, you too can change. That Hamilton succeeded at least once is revealed in Robert Robert's book *The Classic Slum* which tells Roberts's own readers how his friends admired Hamilton's schoolboy heroes and wanted to be like them.

It was a long and rocky path for Valentine Mornington of Rookwood School, and Hamilton's readers loved every step of his journey.