

THE STICK-AT-NOTHING SCHOOLBOY!

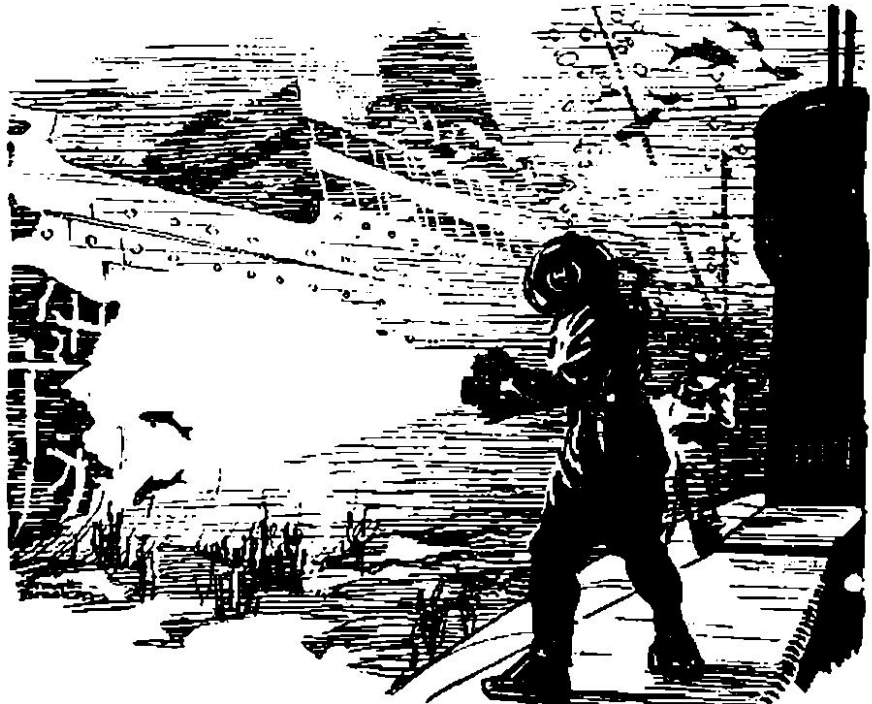
by MARTIN CLIFFORD



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The STICK-AT-NOTHING SCHOOLBOY!

by

MARTIN CLIFFORD

Author of the Grand Long Complete School Stories of TOM MERRY & CO., at St. Jim's, appearing in the GEM Every Wednesday.

Having succeeded by his cunning and trickery in wresting the junior captaincy of St. Jim's from Tom Merry, of the Shell, Ralph Reckness Cardew, the slacker of the Fourth, sticks at nothing to gratify his spite against the ex-captain. But Cardew is riding for a fall . . . swift and sure.

CHAPTER 1.

Awkward!

"M'wowed, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, confided that circumstances to Blake and Herries and Digby in Study No. 6.

Blake & Co. stared at him.

Arthur Augustus had been sitting in deep thought for some time, and he made his statement seriously and solemnly, as if it were the outcome of deep reflection.

"You don't can it?" asked Blake.

"Don't worry. Christmas is coming," remarked Herries.

"I am quite awah of that, Hewwies. But I am feahfully wowwied."

Arthur Augustus looked worried. There was a deep line in his noble brow, showing that his powerful intellect had been given some unusual exercise.

Blake & Co., on the other hand, looked anything but worried. They looked particularly cheerful. The coming of Christmas certainly did not have a worrying effect on them.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Blake. "Anything gone wrong at home?"

"Nothin', deah boy."

"Pater and mater all right?"

"Wight as wain."

"Has Lord Eastwood changed his mind, and doesn't he think he would like you to bring three nice chaps home with you for the vac?"

"Nothin' of the kin

"Then there's nothing the matter," said Blake. "It's all right, Gussy. Don't worry."

"But it's not all wight, Blake!"

"Blessed if I see what's wrong, then.

Isn't Cousin Ethel coming for Christmas?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Has your tailor sent in a specially big bill?" asked Digby sympathetically.

"Wats! I am fwightfully wowwied. You see——"

"I don't!" remarked Blake.

"I have asked Tom Mewwy and Man-nahs and Lowthah for Chwistmas——"

"That's all right. They can behave themselves," said Blake. "If they put on any Shell swank we'll jolly soon take them down a peg."

"Yes, rather!" said Herries and Dig together. "That's all right!"

"But it is not all wight," said Arthur Augustus distressfully. "Because I have asked Cardew and Clive and Levison also."

"Oh!" said Blake.

"It was all awwanged long ago," said D'Arcy. "I weally considahed that it was goin' to be a vewy pleasant Chwistmas-partay. And now Tom Mewwy and Cardew are at daggahs dwawn."

"Hum!" said Herries thoughtfully.

"Cardew is a distant wrelation of mine, as you are awah," continued Arthur Augustus. "The pater expected me to bwing him. When the awwange-ments were made there had not been any wow. Since then Cardew has bagged Tom Mewwy's place as juniah captain of St. Jim's, and they are on fwightfully bad terms. I must admit that Cardew tweated Tom Mewwy vewy wottenly."

"He did!" grunted Blake. "And he treated this study rottenly, too."

"As a matter of fact, he's a bit of a rotter," said Dig. "That accounts for it."

"I do not appwove of Cardew's conduct," said Arthur Augustus. "His election methods were wathah ticked. As juniah captain, he has not played up in a way I can appwove. Tom Mewwy took it vewy well, and backed him up as skippah, and Cardew seems to have gone out of his way to make

himself unplesant to Tommy. At the Wookwood match, f'winstance——"

"We know!" growied Herries. "Cardew made out he was playing me in goal, and let me down at the last minute."

"And dropped Tom from the team!" growied Blake.

"And all of us!" said Dig. "After making out that the whole study would be wanted for the match."

"It was wotten!" said Arthur Augustus. "I don't think Cardew meant any harm, weally; but it was vewy thoughtless and inconsiderate, to say the vewy least."

"The very, very least!" assented Blake.

"Tom Mewwy vewy natuwally we-sented his conduct," went on Arthur Augustus: "They do not speak now."

"That's so."

"That is why I am fwightfully wowwied," continued the swell of St. Jim's. "They are booked to spend Chwistmas at Eastwood House with us, and they are not on speakin' terms. It's feahfully awkward."

Blake nodded.

"I suppose it is a bit awkward," he assented. "You had better drop Cardew out, Gussy."

"Imposs, deah boy! Some of his wrelations will be there—Lord Lilburn, and pewwaps his old gwandfathah. And my patah is a sort of second uncle twice wemoved, or somethin', to Cardew, and he expects to see him at Chwistmas."

"You can't drop Tom Merry."

"Wathah not! Besides, I don't want to! Tom is goin' to bwing ovah his old governess, Miss Fawcett, on Chwistmas Day, and it would be weally imposs to say anythin' to upset that estimable old lady. It is all fixed, and cannot be altahed without makin' a feahful lot of people feel dweadfully awkward and uncomfortable. And yet how can two fellows who are not on speakin' terms stay at the same house?"

Blake grinned.

"They can stay without speaking," he suggested.

"Weally, Blake——"

"After all, Tom Merry isn't so gone on talking as you are, Gussy. He can shut up a bit."

"You uttah ass!"

"And Cardew might be induced to hold his tongue," went on Blake. "They can be civil, I suppose?"

"Yaas; but it is feahfully awkward, and I am howwibly wowwied. Besides, Chwistmas is the time of peace and good will, you know, and fellows ought not to be on bad terms. Cousin Ethel will notice that there is somethin' up, so will Levison's sister, Dowis. And it was awwanged to fix up a football match one day if the weathah permits, and on football mattahs Tom Mewwy and Cardew are vewy likely to get as fah as punchin' noses."

"My hat! What an entertainment for Christmas!" said Blake. "You seem to have landed yourself, Gussy. The only thing I can suggest is that you take them under your wing—Tom Merry under one wing and Cardew under the other—and exercise all your tact and judgment."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus rose to his feet, and jammed his celebrated eyeglass into his eye, and regarded his grinning chums more in sorrow than in anger.

"You fellows do not seem to know how to take a sewious mattah sewiously," he said. "It is a fwightful wowwy, and there is only one way out. Tom Mewwy and Cardew must make fwiennds befoah Chwistmas."

"Not much time, as we break up tomorrow," remarked Blake.

"I shall twy to do my best as peace-makah," said Arthur Augustus. "Aftah all, a fellow of tact and judgment ought to be able to bwing about a weconciliation."

He moved to the door of Study No. 6.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Blake, in

alarm. "Better let them alone, Gussy. You know what an ass you are."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Yes, you ought to know that by this time," assented Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"They can be civil to one another without speaking," said Blake. "But if you butt in, Gussy, you'll make matters worse."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked out of the study, evidently bound upon a peace-making mission, with the noble object of bringing about peace and good will between Tom Merry and Cardew—a state of affairs highly desirable at Christmas-time, and indeed at all times.

Blake & Co. looked at one another and grinned.

"Good old Gussy!" sighed Blake. "Always putting his cheery old foot in it!"

"They won't make friends," said Dig.

"Hardly!"

"What do you think will happen, then?"

"A fight, most likely."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Let's hope for the best," said Blake cheerfully. "Let's hope, at least, that Tom Merry and Cardew won't take a black eye each to Eastwood House for Christmas."

And there was a chortle in Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 2.

Follow Your Leader!

CRASH!

"Oh!" gasped Tom Merry.

He sat down suddenly in the snow.

There was snow in the quadrangle of St. Jim's, snow ridged on the old walls and the ancient chimneys. The leafless branches of the elms were gleaming with it. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell came up the path towards the School House,

tramping in the newly-fallen carpet of white. And suddenly, from somewhere, a volley of snowballs whizzed, raining on the Terrible Three.

Tom Merry caught one with his nose, one with his chin, and one with each ear. He sat down.

There was a roar of laughter, and a shout in the well-known tones of Figgins of the New House.

"Give 'em socks! Dow with the School House!"

Whiz! Whiz! Whiz!

"Look out!" gasped Manners.

Figgins & Co. of the New House rushed from their ambush. There were Figgins, and Kerr, and Fatty Wynn, and Redfern, and a dozen more fellows. They rushed down on the School House trio, hurling snowballs as they came. Figgins & Co., apparently, were bent on winding up the term with a House row.

Tom Merry scrambled up.

"Collar them!" roared Figgins. "Roll 'em in the snow!"

"Give 'em socks!" yelled Fatty Wynn.

"Hook it!" said Tom breathlessly.

"They're too many for us!"

The Terrible Three ran for the School House. Behind them came the New House crowd, whooping and whizzing snowballs.

"Rescue, School House!" shouted Tom Merry.

"Back up, School House!" came a roar from a dozen quarters. And School House fellows rushed to the rescue.

From one direction came Levison, Givv, and Cardew of the Fourth; from another, Talbot and Kangaroo of the Shell. Julian and Kerruish, Hammond and Reilly appeared from somewhere and rushed into the fray. The Terrible Three halted and turned on their pursuers.

In a moment a battle was raging.

Snowballs whizzed and crashed, and overturned juniors rolled in the snow and yelled.

Out of the School House crowd came pouring—Wally of the Third and a crew of fags, Fourth-Formers, and Shell fellows. Blake and Herries and

Digby, hearing the alarm in Study No. 6, dashed downstairs and out into the quad without waiting for caps or coats. In a couple of minutes the odds were against the New House enemy, and Figgins & Co. retreated in their turn.

"After them!" roared Blake.

"Down with the New House!"

"Hurrah!"

Tom Merry led the rush at the enemy. He was manfully backed up by the School House crowd. The air was thick with snowballs, and ringing with yells and howls and cheers.

From the window of his study Dr. Holmes, the Head of St. Jim's, looked out with a smile. Mr. Railton looked out of his window and laughed. There was no harm in a snow battle between the juniors of the rival Houses, especially at the end of the term, when the bonds of discipline were relaxing. Kildare and Darrell and the other prefects heard the shindy without heeding it. Only one prefect—Knox of the Sixth—who had a genius for interfering where interference was not needed—sallied out with an ashplant. And Knox of the Sixth—perhaps by accident—was overwhelmed by a rush of the juniors and rolled in the snow, and trampled over, till he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels, and wished from the bottom of his heart that he had stayed in his study. And the snow battle went on vigorously, and Figgins & Co., outnumbered but plucky, were driven back towards their own House, disputing every foot of the way.

"Down with the New House!"

"Yah! School House cads!"

"Give 'em beans!"

"Hurrah!"

Tom Merry led the rush fairly up to the steps of the New House. Under a rain of whizzing snowballs, Figgins & Co. were driven in to the shelter of their own House. And then Tom Merry sighted a thin, acid face in the doorway—the face of Horace Ratcliff, House-master.

"Hoo! . . . he called out.

And the attacking party backed. They did not want trouble with a Housemaster.

"Follow on!" shouted Cardew.

"Yah! School House cads!" came a howl from the enemy. "Go home! Funks!"

"Come on!" shouted Cardew. "Follow your leader!"

"Ratty's there!" panted Tom Merry.

"Hang Ratty!"

"Look here, Cardew——"

"Hold your tongue!"

"What?" roared Tom Merry.

Cardew gave him a mocking look.

"You seem to have forgotten that you're not junior captain now, Tom Merry! Allow me to remind you!"

"You cad!" burst out Tom.

"That's enough! Back up, School House!" shouted Cardew. "Follow your leader!"

And he led the way in a rush up the New House steps, much to the amazement of Figgins & Co., and still more to the amazement of Mr. Ratcliff, who had expected the mob to melt away at his appearance on the scene.

There was a momentary hesitation in the School House ranks. But Tom Merry did not care to stand back where Cardew went forward. He rushed on, with Manners and Lowther, and Blake & Co. followed, and Levison and Clive, and the rest.

They came swarming up the New House steps, and in at the wide open doorway. Snowballs whizzed right into the House.

"Boys!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff furiously.

Mr. Ratcliff was not heeded. Cardew dodged round him, and a rush of his followers sent the Housemaster spinning against the wall. Mr. Ratcliff staggered there and gasped.

"Back up!" roared Figgins.

"Figgins—Merry—boys!" gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

The New House rallied, and met the School House invaders manfully. The last snowballs whizzed, and the rivals of St. Jim's came down to their fists.

In the hall of the New House a terrific combat raged, amid tremendous excitement. But in their own domain the New House had the advantage, and the School House were driven out at last, and driven down the steps.

Then Monteith and Baker, and several other New House prefects, came on the scene with their canes, and the School House crowd hurriedly retreated. Even Cardew, reckless as he was, did not seem disposed to enter into combat with prefects of the Sixth Form. As the crowd broke up, Mr. Ratcliff sallied forth like a lion from his lair, his eyes glinting with rage. His grasp fell upon Tom Merry's collar.

"You are the ringleader in this," he panted. "I—ow!—I shall see that you are properly punished!"

"Let go!" gasped Tom.

"Come with me!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

He fairly dragged Tom Merry into the New House. Properly speaking, Mr. Ratcliff had no right to cane School House juniors; they were under the authority of their own Housemaster. On this occasion Mr. Ratcliff stretched a point. The invasion of his House enraged him, and he supposed—without inquiry—that Tom Merry was the leader in the raid. He propelled the Shell fellow into his study. There he grabbed up a cane.

"Hold out your hand, Merry!" he shouted.

Tom Merry kept his hands down. In the first place, he was not guilty, as Cardew had led the attack on the New House against Tom's judgment; in the second place, Tom had no intention of submitting to any Housemaster but his own.

"Do you hear me?" thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

He did not wait for an answer. He caught Tom by the collar again, and brought down the cane over his shoulders.

"Oh!" roared Tom.

Whack, whack, whack!

Tom Merry tore himself loose and leaped out of the study.

"Come back!" shouted Mr. Ratcliff.

The Shell fellow did not heed. He scudded for the door, and dodged a clutch made at him by Monteith of the Sixth. A few moments more and he was in the quad, sprinting for his own House. A crowd of fellows in the doorway of the School House greeted him.

"Ratty bagged you, old bean?" asked Blake.

"Yes," gasped Tom.

"Must be an ass," drawled Cardew. And Cardew of the Fourth walked away as Tom turned on him with flashing eyes, and what Tom Merry would have answered remained unuttered.

CHAPTER 3.

Gussy Butts In!

"TOM MEWWY, deah boy!"

The elegant figure of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy appeared in the doorway of Study No. 10 in the Shell. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were at tea there—the last study tea of the term. On the morrow St. Jim's was breaking up for Christmas, and the chums of the Shell were discussing that matter when D'Arcy appeared in the offing.

"Trot in, old man," said Tom. "Just in time. There's some of the cake left."

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, coming in. "I have not come to tea, howevah. I have had tea. I suppose you chaps wemembah that Chwistmas is comin'."

"We had a sort of vague idea that it was," said Monty Lowther gravely. "But it's good of you to remind us. We might have forgotten."

"These little things do slip the memory!" remarked Manners, with a nod.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Have you trotted along to remind

us that it is Christmas-time, Gussy?" he asked.

"Not entiahly, deah boy. But, bein' Chwistmas-time, no doubt you chaps are awah that it is a pwopah time for peace on earth and good will to men, and so forth—what?"

"Peace be with you, Gussy!" said Lowther solemnly.

"Also good will!" added Manners.

"May your shadow never grow whiskers," went on Lowther.

"I am speakin' sewiously, deah boys—especially as wegards Tom Mewwy. I am in fact, goin' to speak a word in season to Tom Mewwy."

"Little me!" exclaimed Tom, in surprise. "My hat! Are you winding up the term with a sermon?"

"Not exactly, Tom Mewwy. But

"Keep it for the House supper to-night!" suggested Manners. "You'll have a bigger audience."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"And the whole House will listen with rapt attention—perhaps!" said Monty Lowther.

"Pway don't wot, deah boys. It's about Cardew, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

"The less said about Cardew in this study the better, D'Arcy," he answered curtly.

"That is quite a mistake, Tom Mewwy. I have come heah specially to speak about Cardew."

"Then ring off before you get any further," suggested Tom.

"Cardew is not persona grata here," explained Monty Lowther. "Put the brake on the giddy exuberance of your verbosity, old bean."

"Wats! About Cardew, Tom Mewwy—"

"Blow Cardew!"

"I admit that he has acted wot-tenly."

"He has acted more than rottenly," said Tom, his eyes gleaming. "I want to have nothing to do with him, and

nothing to say about him. I know you mean well, Gussy, but don't butt in."

"I am bound to butt in, Tom Mewwy, in the circs," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "I want you to make fwiends with Cardew."

"Rats!"

"Bein' Chwistmas-time——"

"Have you come from Cardew with the olive-branch?"

"Oh, no! I have not spoken to Cardew. I am goin' to."

"Then go and do it," said Tom. "If he wants to make friends with me it's easy enough. He will have to leave off acting like a cad, and he will have to resign the junior captaincy, which he got hold of by treachery, and has abused since he got hold of it. In a word, he will have to become a decent fellow—and, as that's impossible for Cardew, it's no good talking."

Tom Merry spoke with unusual heat. Manners and Lowther glanced at him, slightly surprised. It was not like Tom to nourish wrath; but he was angry with Cardew, and he did not feel that he was wrong to be angry. Tom had lost the junior captaincy to his rival, simply because he disdained to combat Cardew with his own weapons. He had backed up the new captain loyally till Cardew made it clear that he was using his new position to humiliate the fellow who had previously held it. The raid on the New House that afternoon had been the finishing touch. Tom Merry was feeling much more inclined to seek Cardew in his study and give him the thrashing of his life than to make friends with him.

Arthur Augustus coughed. He seemed to have started rather badly on his peace-making mission.

"Howevah——" he said.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Tom. "I tell you I want nothing to do with Cardew. Isn't that enough?"

"Yaas; but——"

"Well, chuck it!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I hoped that you would be willin' to come along with

me to Cardew's studay, and give him the wight hand of fellowship."

"I'll come to Cardew's study, if you like——"

"Good!"

And give him my right hand——"

"Vewy good."

"On his cheeky mouth!" added Tom.

"Is that what you want?"

"Oh, cwumbs! No! Not at all! Weally, Tom Mewwy, I——"

"If the fellow were a match for me in a fight, I'd go to him and make him put up his hands," added Tom. "But he's not—and that's the only reason why he hasn't seen me already. Let it drop, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus polished his eyeglass thoughtfully. Considering the way in which Ralph Reckness Cardew had won the junior captaincy, and his conduct since to Tom Merry and Tom's best chums, Tom's feelings were not to be wondered at. They were quite natural, in fact. But certainly they were of no use to the self-constituted peace-maker.

"You have disappointed me, Tom Mewwy," said the swell of St. Jim's at last.

"Sorry!" said Tom. "Have some cake?"

"Thank you, no!" said D'Arcy, with dignity. "I did not come heah for cake. I came heah for peace."

"Piece of cake?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Certainly not, you ass! When I say peace I mean peace, not piece! Pway do not make wotten puns. I twust, Tom Mewwy, that if Cardew should come to you to make it up, you will not wepulse him."

"On the terms I've stated," said Tom Merry, half-laughing, "Cardew isn't likely to play up."

"I am goin' to speak to him vewy sewiously."

"Poor chap!" said Lowther.

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked very thoughtfully out of Study No. 10. Tom

Merry went on with his tea with rather a flushed face. Tom Merry had had his enemies, but he had never been anybody's enemy himself. It was seldom, or never, that he allowed the sun to go down on his wrath. But at the present time undoubtedly the mere mention of Ralph Reckness Cardew was enough to rouse his ire.

"It was a bit awkward," Manners remarked after a long pause. "We're meeting Cardew, I understand, at Gussy's place for Christmas."

"I know it's awkward," said Tom. "I've thought of telling Gussy I can't come. But Miss Priscilla would want to know why—and Lord Eastwood, too—and old Conway."

"We shan't go if you don't!" said Monty.

"Well, you must go. Your uncle will be there, Monty. And Manners' sisters are coming for Christmas Day. It's awkward all round. But I suppose in such a crowd as there will be I can keep clear of Cardew without anybody noticing anything."

"Will Cardew let you," said Manners.

Tom breathed hard.

"Well, I suppose Cardew won't want anything like a scene in another fellow's house," he said.

"No, he would draw the line at that. But it would be just his way to provoke a scene if he could."

"I know. I shall take care to keep clear of him. I don't see how I can possibly keep away now—unless Gussy should give me a hint, of course." Tom set his lips. "Besides, I'm not going to allow Cardew to make any difference to my plans. He's given me enough trouble at St. Jim's, with his dirty tricks! I'm not going to let him muck up my Christmas holidays!"

"I say, Tom Merry!" Baggy Trimble put his fat face in at the door of Study No. 10. "I say——"

"Oh, hook it!" snapped Tom. He was not in a humour for Baggy Trimble just then.

"I say, the fellows say that Cardew is going to speechify at the House supper this evening," said Baggy, blinking at Tom. "Some of the fellows think you ought to do it, as you were captain. Cardew's only been captain a couple of weeks. I hear that Cardew says——"

"Bother what Cardew says!"

"Yes; but he says that if you butt in he will shut you up fast enough," said Baggy, grinning.

Tom Merry crimsoned.

"Shut up, you fat mischief-maker!" growled Manners.

"Well, I'm only putting Tom on his guard," said Trimble. "I say, Merry, what will you do if Cardew shuts you up?"

Tom Merry did not answer the question. He jumped up and caught hold of Baggy Trimble's collar.

"Here, I say——" roared Trimble, in alarm.

Bump, bump, bump!

Baggy Trimble roared as his bullet head was knocked thrice on the door of Study No. 10.

"Yow-ow-ow! Oooop! Leggo! Oooop!"

Tom Merry, with a swing of the arm, pitched Trimble into the passage. Baggy sprawled there with a wild roar.

He seemed disposed to fellow the fat junior and help him along the passage with his boot. But he restrained himself, and closed the study door with a slam.

"Yah!" Trimble's voice came through the keyhole. "I'll tell Cardew! Yah!"

Tom Merry made a movement, but Lowther caught him by the arm.

"Nuff's as good as a feast, old bean!" murmured Monty. "What's the good of taking any notice of a worm like Trimble? Most likely Cardew never said anything of the kind! You know Trimble. He loves making trouble!"

"It's like Cardew!"

"Yes, but——"

"I've a jolly good mind——" Tom paused.

"Don't let's wind up the term with a scrap," urged Manners. "Keep clear of Cardew till school breaks up. It isn't long now."

"You're right," said Tom.

He dropped into his chair again. But his brow was clouded over tea. Tom Merry was angry, and, like the ancient prophet, he felt that he did well to be angry. But it was not a happy or comfortable frame of mind for any fellow to be in.

CHAPTER 4.

Peace-making Extraordinary!

RALPH RECKNESS CARDEW rose from the tea-table in Study No. 9 in the Fourth, sat down in the armchair, and took a gold-tipped cigarette from his pocket. Meeting the rather grim glances of Levison and Clive, he smiled and tossed the cigarette into the fire.

"Forgettin' again," he remarked.

"It's time you remembered," said Ernest Levison rather gruffly.

"High time!" said Clive.

Cardew nodded agreeably.

"You fellows are 'always right," he said. "That, I suppose, is why you bore me so." Cardew sighed. "Are you fellows looking forward to Christmas at D'Arcy's place?"

"I am," said Levison.

"It's jolly decent of him to ask us, I think," said Sidney Clive. "I'm glad to go!"

"We shall have to be on our best behaviour," sighed Cardew. "That won't come hard on you fellows, I suppose. Though from what I've heard, Levison, it would have come rather hard to you once upon a time."

"Oh, let that rest!" grunted Levison.

"Tom Merry and his crowd will be here, too," said Cardew, with a mocking gleam in his eyes. "That may run out entertainin' in some ways

There's such a pleasure pullin' Thomas' innocent old leg."

"Weally, Cardew!" murmured a voice in the doorway of Study No. 9.

"Dear old Gussy!" said Cardew, turning to smile and nod at the swell of St. Jim's. "How good of you to give us a look in. We were just discussin' your jolly old Christmas party, and I was warnin' Levison that he must be careful to keep clear of his wild old ways."

Arthur Augustus looked severely at Ralph Reckness Cardew. But Cardew's beaming good-humour was not to be withstood, and D'Arcy's severe expression melted.

"I twust you fellows will find it all wight at my place," he remarked.

"Top-hole, I'm sure!" said Cardew.

"Tom Mewwy will be there."

"Yes, that makes it all the more interestin'. I've such a high opinion of Thomas, though unfortunately we've had our little differences lately," said Cardew gravely.

Arthur Augustus smiled cheerily. He had found Cardew in a more promising mood for peace-making than he had found Tom Merry. At all events, it seemed so to him.

Levison and Clive looked glum. It was all very well to pull Arthur Augustus' leg, but this was neither a proper time nor a proper subject, in their opinion. But Ralph Reckness Cardew was quite indifferent to their disapproval.

"I am vewy glad to heah you speak like that, Cardew!" said D'Arcy.

"Such a pleasure to confer pleasure!" murmured Cardew.

"The fact is, I have come heah in the wole of peace-makah!"

"Oh, gad! I mean, just so! Fire away!"

"I want you and Tom Mewwy to make fwiends," said Arthur Augustus genially. "It ought to be quite easy, I think."

"You think so?" smiled Cardew.

"Yaas, wathah! You see, all the w'ong is on your side, Cardew, so you have nothin' to forgive."

"Oh, my hat!"

"And Tom Mewwy has weceived all the injuwies, but he is a wathah forgivin' chap," continued Arthur Augustus brightly. "All you have to do is to expwess some wegwet for havin' acted wottenly. See?"

"I—I see!" gasped Cardew, while Levison and Clive stared blankly at the swell of St. Jim's, almost overcome by this sample of tact and judgment.

"I am suah that will set it wight," continued Arthur Augustus. "In fact, I have already seen Tom Mewwy, and he actually said that he is willin' to make fwends if you would leave off actin' like a cad."

"What?" ejaculated Cardew.

"I twust I make myself cleah."

"Oh! Oh, yes! Keep on! You're puttin' it so tactfully!" gasped Cardew.

"Yaas, I wathah pwide myself upon my tact and judgment, you know," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "I have no doubt I shall be able to awwange this little mattah satisfactowily. Tom Mewwy is pwepared to make fwends if you will be a decent chap, Cardew."

"Is—is he?"

"Yaas. In fact, he said so."

"Oh!"

"He con idahs that it is impossible

"For me to be a decent chap?" gasped Cardew.

"Yaas. But it is up to you to show him that it is fah fwom impossible," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly.

Cardew sat and stared at the swell of St. Jim's. Gussy had many interesting and curious manners and customs of his own. But this method of peace-making was amazing.

"Is it all wight?" asked Arthur Augustus. "Can I go back to Tom Mewwy and tell him that you are pwepared to speak to him?"

Cardew's eyes glittered.

"You can tell him that I shall be in the Common-room presently, and that if he is there I shall be glad to speak to him," he said.

Arthur Augustus' kind face beamed with satisfaction.

"That's wight, deah boy!"

He walked out of Study No. 9. Cardew sat silent, his brow wrinkled in thought. There was an unpleasant gleam in his eyes.

Levison eyed him rather uneasily.

"What are you thinking of, Cardew?" he asked at last.

"Dear old Thomas, and his flatterin' opinion of me," said Cardew, with a smile. "So kind of Gussy to come and tell me how he speaks of me behind my back."

"Gussy meant nothing of the sort."

"I know that—he's an innocent old bird. But he was statin' the facts."

"Rot!" said Clive abruptly. "Tom Merry's said nothing to Gussy that he wouldn't say to you, and you know it."

"I know. That's why I'm goin' to ask him."

"If you mean that you're going to wind up the term with a row with Tom Merry——"

Cardew yawned, and rose from the chair.

"I'm goin' down," he remarked. "No prep this evenin', thank goodness. Let's get down to the Common-room and have a jaw with the fellows."

"Look here, Cardew——"

The dandy of the Fourth left the study. Levison and Clive, with troubled looks, followed him. Obviously, Arthur Augustus, with the best intentions in the world, had not succeeded in pouring oil on the troubled waters. Rather he had added fuel to flame.

There were a good many fellows in the junior Common-room, discussing the House supper or the break-up or the coming holidays. The Terrible Three were not present just then, and Cardew joined in the chat, with a smile on his face that gave no clue to

the thoughts in his mind. It was a little later that Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther strolled in and crossed over to the fireplace, taking no heed of Cardew.

A gleam came into Cardew's eyes, and he followed them. Levison gave him a look, but he did not heed.

Cardew leaned against the mantel-piece, a few feet from the chums of the Shell. Tom Merry glanced at him, but made no sign. He had heard from Arthur Augustus that Cardew was prepared to speak to him, but he was not at all keen on a talk with Cardew. The less they had to say to one another, in Tom's opinion, the better it would be.

Something in Cardew's manner, though he was still smiling, drew a good many eyes upon him. There was something like trouble in the atmosphere of the Common-room just then.

"So you've shown up at last," said Cardew, in quite a pleasant tone.

Tom looked at him again.

"D'Arcy kindly told me what you were pleased to say about me—in my absence," continued Cardew.

Tom's eyes gleamed.

"I've said nothing in your absence that I'm not prepared to say in your presence, Cardew," he answered. "Do you want me to tell you what I think of you?"

"Well, that would be better than rummin' a chap down behind his back, wouldn't it?" smiled Cardew.

"That's not my way," said Tom, his lip curling. "What I said to D'Arcy I've said before, and I'm ready to say again. I forget the exact words, but my opinion of you is that you are a tricky cad, that you don't even try to be decent, and that a decent fellow naturally would not want to have anything to do with you."

Manners and Lowther chuckled.

"Straight from the shoulder!" said Manners. "Hear, hear!"

"Passed unanimously!" added Lowther.

Cardew still smiled.

"If there's anything else," said Tom Merry, "you've only to remind me, and I'll repeat it fast enough. Yes—I remember I said that you got hold of the junior captaincy by treachery, and that you've made a rotten use of the job since you got hold of it. I said that, and I repeat it. I'll repeat it as often as you like."

"And I'll give you an answer!" said Cardew.

He stepped forward and struck full at Tom Merry's face. Quick as the blow was, Tom's movement was as quick. His arm came up like lightning, sweeping the blow aside. The next second his knuckles rapped on Cardew's nose, and the junior captain of St. Jim's went to the floor with a crash.

In those very moments Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was coming down the passage with Blake and Herries and Digby in a highly satisfied mood.

"It's all wight, you chaps," he was saying. "Quite all wight! They're both in the Common-woom now, and they're goin' to make it up."

"I don't think!" murmured Blake.

"Little mattahs of this kind, deah boy, can always be awwanged by a fellow of tact and judgment," said Arthur Augustus reassuringly. "Just come in and see— Oh, cwumbs! Bai Jove!"

The chums of Study No. 6 entered the Common-room. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's eyeglass fell from his eye in his startled amazement. They were just in time to see Ralph Reckness Cardew scramble up furiously from the floor and spring like a tiger at Tom Merry.

CHAPTER 8.

Hand to Hand!

S^{TOP} them!"

"You fellows—"

"A fight! A fight!"

"Bai Jove! This is weally wotten!"

There was a rush of the fellows round the combatants at once. Tom Merry and Ralph Reckness Cardew were fighting fiercely.

Tom's eyes blazed with anger; and it was easy to see, by the look on Cardew's face, that all the evil in his nature was aroused.

There were no rounds and no rests in that sudden fight; it was hammer and tongs all the time.

"Go it, Cardew!" squeaked Baggy Trimble.

"Give him beans, Tommy!" gasped Lowther.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

"Stop it, you fellows!" exclaimed Talbot of the Shell. "Separate them!"

"Rats! Let 'em fight it out!" said Grundy. "It's about time that cheeky cad Cardew had a licking!"

"Hear, hear!" said Kangaroo.

"It was bound to come," said Blake.

"Put your beef into it, Tommy!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, you fellows——"

"Cave!" shouted Wildrake from the door. "Housemaster!"

"Look out!"

But Tom Merry and Cardew were too angry and excited to heed, or even to hear. They were still punching furiously as Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House, walked into the room.

"Stop that at once!" rapped out the Housemaster.

And he strode at the combatants, grasped one in either hand, and swung them away from one another.

"Good!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry panted for breath. His face was flushed crimson and his eyes flashing. But he made an effort to control himself, as he saw that it was Mr. Railton who had intervened.

Cardew staggered back from the Housemaster's powerful grasp. He found it less easy to control himself. He made as if he would spring at Tom Merry again, and Mr. Railton stepped quickly between them.

"Cardew!" he exclaimed sternly.

Levison caught his chum's arm.

With a great effort Cardew calmed himself.

"Excuse me, sir," he said; "I am afraid I was a little bit excited. Sorry!"

"How dare you fight in the Common-room, either of you?" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "And on the last day before break-up, too! Are you not ashamed of yourselves?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Railton," said Tom, with an effort. "I lost my temper."

"I shall not punish you," said Mr. Railton severely. "But I require you both to promise me that this shall not recur."

"Very well, sir," said Tom.

"Certainly, sir!" said Cardew at once.

Mr. Railton eyed the two juniors. Both of them were very flushed, and both bore traces of the encounter, brief as it had been. Cardew's handsome Greek nose did not look quite Greek now. It had, as Monty Lowther whispered to Manners, a list to port.

"I accept your word," said the Housemaster, after a pause. "See that there is no more of this."

And he left the Common-room.

"Dear man!" remarked Cardew lightly. "He was bound to come buttin' in! I suppose he's saved somebody from a lickin'."

"Not much doubt who the somebody is," said Manners.

"Little me?" smiled Cardew. "I think not! But I suppose we mustn't put the matter to the test, now we've promised our kind master to be good little boys. Still, if you're keen on it, Merry, I'll stretch a point and oblige you."

Tom gave him a scornful look.

"I shall not break my word to Mr. Railton, if that is what you mean, Cardew," he answered.

"High sense of honour, and all that," smiled Cardew. "Very convenient sometimes—what?"

Tom breathed hard.

"Let's get out of this, you fellows!" he said to his chums. "I can't keep my hands off that cad if I stay here!"

"Hold on!" said Cardew coolly. "There's somethin' else I've got to say, dear boy. I hear you've been bullyin' Trimble."

"What?"

"Trimble complains that you've banged his head on a study door."

"That's true."

"I'm bound, as junior captain, to put a stop to bullyin'," said Cardew. "Mind you don't do anythin' of the sort again."

"I shall do exactly as I please, without any sort of reference to you, Cardew."

"Then you'll find yourself up against trouble," smiled Cardew. "I don't want to have to report you to the prefects for bullyin', but if you make a habit of it you give me no choice in the matter. I'm just givin' you a friendly warnin'."

Tom Merry's eyes blazed, and he made a stride towards Cardew. Manners and Lowther caught him quickly.

"Come on, Tom!"

"Railton, old chap——"

Tom nodded, and dropped his hands and walked out of the Common-room with his chums. Arthur Augustus called to him as he went, but Tom did not answer. Perhaps he had had enough of Gussy's peace-making.

Cardew remained in possession of the field of battle, so to speak. But what satisfaction he felt vanished when he looked into the glass and saw the dark bruise on his handsome nose—no longer handsome. Blake was watching him, and he grinned.

"You'll have an ornamental boko over the Christmas holidays, Cardew," he remarked.

Without answering, Cardew left the room, evidently to attend at once to the damage, in the hope of reducing it. The dandy of the Fourth was particularly careful about his personal appearance—and a bruised nose was the last thing in the world that he desired to take with him to a Christmas party.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus to his chums, in great distress. "This is uttably wotten!"

"What did you expect, when you butted in?" asked Blake.

"I was goin' to make peace, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is not a laughin' mattah, deah boys. I werged it as vewy awkward and fwightfully unfortunate."

"Yes, it's a bit awkward and unfortunate, Railton butting in like that," said Blake, with a nod. "Cardew would have had the hiding he's been asking for so long."

"I do not mean that," said Arthur Augustus.

"I do," said Blake.

"In the circs, deah boys, I do not see how I can vewy well do anythin' more! I shall have to let them wip."

"Hear, hear!" said Blake. "That's a jolly good idea of yours, Gussy. Why didn't you think of that sooner?"

To which Arthur Augustus only rejoined:

"Wats!"

CHAPTER 6.

A Row En Route!

"**R**OTTEN term!" said Monty Lowther.

It was a bright and breezy morning. There were banks of snow along the lane down which the big motor-car rolled from St. Jim's. The old school was breaking up for Christmas, and among the earliest to depart were some of our old friends.

In the big car were packed more fellows than it had ever been designed to hold, large as it was. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were there, and Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy. Also there were D'Arcy's young brother, Wally of the Third, and his special pals Manners minor and Levi-son minor. Wally was in front with the chauffeur, but the rest were packed somehow into the big car. It was the first contingent of D'Arcy's Christmas party, and the swell of St. Jim's was taking them direct to his home in the family car.

Levison, Clive, and Cardew were to come later. Arthur Augustus could not help feeling glad that they were not coming direct to Eastwood House at break-up. Perhaps the car might have held them, with some skilful packing; but it was a great relief not to have Cardew and Tom Merry travelling together.

D'Arcy's peace-making having proved such a ghastly failure, he had, fortunately, given up any further attempts in that direction. He had left matters worse than he had found them, but no doubt he could have made them worse still by the exercise of a little more of his inestimable gifts of tact and judgment.

But as peace had not been made, and Tom Merry and his rival were on worse terms than ever, it would have been decidedly awkward to pack them in the same car, to arrive on the same day.

By the time they met at Eastwood House Gussy hoped that wrath would have cooled on both sides.

Certainly, Tom Merry looked very bright and cheerful now. He seemed to have forgotten the unpleasant existence of Cardew of the Fourth.

Monty Lowther pronounced that it had been a "rotten" term, and most of his companions agreed with him. Lowther was not thinking of the school work, and the number of marks that might have been gained, and hadn't been gained. He was thinking of the more important matter—from his point of view—of the junior captaincy and the football.

"Rotten!" agreed Manners. "But we'll make a change next term. Of course, there will be a new election."

"Oh, of course!" said Blake.

"I fancy the whole show will be fed up with Cardew," said Manners.

"All the same, a junior captain ought to belong to the Fourth Form," remarked Blake in an argumentative sort of way.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What utter rot!" observed Manners.

"Piffle!" concurred Lowther.

"Weally, you know——"

"Bosh!" said Wally of the Third decidedly, looking round.

"There!" grinned Lowther. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! Even the Third know that a Fourth Form captain isn't any good."

"That's so," said Wally cheerfully. "What the school wants is a captain belonging to the Third."

"You cheeky young ass!"

"Weally, Wally!"

"Hear, hear!" chortled Frank Levison and Reggie Manners together.

"Hallo, there's Cardew!" sang out D'Arcy minor. And he yelled: "I say, Cardew, where did you dig up that nose?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The car was overtaking a trap, in which sat Cardew, Levison, and Clive. Cardew was driving, and he glanced round at the car. His nose was showing signs of the trouble in the Common-room of the day before—very plain signs. Possibly it was painful; but Cardew cared nothing for the pain. For the appearance of his handsome nose, nowever, he cared a great deal, and he was not in a good temper.

"Where did you get that boko?" howled Wally, as Cardew glanced round at the car behind.

"Dwy up, Wally!"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!" implored Wally of the Third.

"You young wapsallion, wemembah that Cardew is our guest for Chwist-mas!" said Arthur Augustus severely.

"Hs isn't our guest till he comes to Eastwood, I suppose?" retorted Wally.

"When he's there, I'll tell him his nose would take a prize in a beauty show, if you like. Just at present he's only a measly Fourth Form boulder, and I'm going to chip him, see?"

"You are to dwy up at once!"

"Bow-wow! Are you going to have it amputated, Cardew?" roared Wally.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew looked straight ahead now, without heeding, though his face was

flushed with anger. Levison and Clive smiled. If a fellow chose to butt into unnecessary trouble, and get his nose punched, it was his own look-out if his nose looked ornamental afterwards; that was how Cardew's chums looked at the matter. His deep annoyance on the subject did not win any sympathy from them.

The chauffeur was tooting his horn incessantly for the trap ahead to make room for the car to pass. Cardew kept steadily to the middle of the road, and the car had to slow down. There was no room to pass unless Cardew drew in.

"Clear the road, there!" shouted Blake.

"Cardew, deah boy, would you mind lettin' us pass?" called out Arthur Augustus politely.

Cardew seemed deaf. Levison touched his arm.

"Let them pass, old fellow!" he said.

"Rot!"

"You can't keep them hanging up like that all the way to Wayland," urged Levison.

"Can't I?" grinned Cardew.

Hoot, toot, hoot, snort! came from the motor-horn.

"Drive on, and push 'em out of the way!" shouted Wally in great excitement. "Yah! Road-hog!"

"Pull to one side, Cardew!" shouted Tom Merry. "You know we've got a long run ahead of us."

Cardew drove steadily on. He was driving to Wayland, to take the express at the junction there, while Tom Merry & Co.'s way lay through Wayland for the road to Hampshire. All the crowd in the big car stared after the trap in great exasperation. The trap was going at a fair pace—for a one-horse trap—but it was a crawling pace for the car. Evidently Cardew was pleased that morning to make himself as annoying as he possibly could.

The chauffeur drew close to the right, to make an attempt to pass, but it was impossible. He had to dawdle behind the trap.

"Look here, we're not standing this!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "It's just Cardew's cheek. Let's shift him!"

"Good egg!"

"Bai Jove, it's weally wotten!"

"Stop, driver!" said Tom Merry.

The car stopped and the party turned out. With a rush they came at the trap. Two or three fellows hung on behind, two grasped at the horse, and one or two grasped handfuls of snow, and whizzed snowballs at Ralph Reckness Cardew.

Cardew's hat was knocked off by a well-timed ball, and another crashed in his neck. He stood up, grasping his whip.

"Stand off!" he shouted angrily.

Unheeding that angry shout, the juniors fairly dragged the horse to the side of the road. The reins were torn away from Cardew, and Tom Merry coolly tied them to a fence.

"Now we can pass!" he remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew brandished the whip.

"Let that horse loose!"

"Rats!"

The whip came down with a crash across Tom Merry's shoulders. The chauffeur was already tooling the car past the trap. Tom Merry sprang away from the horse as the whip lashed at him, and, as he did so, Cardew struck again. The next moment Tom, with a furious face, was scrambling into the trap, and a moment more, and he and Cardew were rolling out of it, struggling.

"Bai Jove, this is weally howwid!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Tom Mewwy—Cardew—weally, deah boys—"

"Punch the cheeky cad!" roared Wally of the Third.

Cardew wrenched himself loose from Tom Merry and sprang back. He was close to the ditch at the side of the road, and as he sprang back he slipped over the edge. There was a crash as he went through frozen rushes and landed in the ditch. A thin crust of ice cracked, and Cardew sat in water and mud.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from the car-party as Cardew sat down, with muddy water and fragments of ice floating round him up to the armpits.

The anger faded out of Tom Merry's face, and he chuckled.

"That will do!" he gasped. "All aboard!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. took their places in the car again, and the big car rolled onward. Cardew struggled frantically out of the ditch, anxious to get to close quarters with his rival again. Levison and Clive watched him without a helping hand. Squelching out water and mud, Cardew scrambled into the road and gave his comrades a furious look. The car was vanishing in the distance.

"Why didn't you help me out, you grinning fools?" yelled Cardew.

"We've had enough rowing," said Clive coolly. "Better for the other party to get clear, I think."

"Much better," said Levison, with a nod. "You asked for that, Cardew, and now you've got it, I hope you like it!"

Cardew stared after the car. It turned a corner and vanished as he stared.

"Better get on," suggested Clive. "You'll want some cleaning before you can take the train, Cardew."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"You got what you asked for. What are you grumbling at?" asked Levison.

"Are you fellows my friends or Tom Merry's?" asked Cardew between his teeth.

"Both," said Levison.

"Well, you can't be both. I'm up against him all the time, and all along the line," said Cardew savagely. "If you're not with me, you're against me. You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds."

"Rats!"

"What?" shouted Cardew.

"Rats! When you're cooler you'll forget all that," said Clive cheerfully. "Look here, are you coming on? We've got a train to catch at Wayland."

Cardew choked down his rage and mounted into the trap again. His face was savagely set as he drove on to Wayland, reeking with mud. There was once more a rift in the lute among Levison & Co. But it was not for the first time, and it was not likely to be the last.

CHAPTER 7.

Gussey's Christmas Party!

TOM MERRY & CO. enjoyed the long run through the frosty air.

The encounter on the road was soon forgotten—or, at least, left unmentioned. As Cardew was due at Eastwood House a few days later, the situation was rather awkward for Arthur Augustus, and his comrades felt that it was so. D'Arcy minor did not feel the same concern as his noble major. His opinion was that Cardew had asked for, and got it; and the row on the road had had a rather cheering effect on him. Indeed, Wally confided to his Third Form chums that if Cardew put on any "swank" at Eastwood House, he would not find all the members of the D'Arcy family so long-suffering as the polite and polished Arthur Augustus. Wally of the Third was prepared to show Cardew of the Fourth who was who, and what was what; at least, he told Levison minor and Reggie Manners so emphatically.

Tom Merry was not feeling wholly comfortable. In so large a party as the gathering at Eastwood House, it would be easy enough for two fellows who weren't on good terms to keep out of each other's way. That was Tom's intention. But he doubted very much whether it was Cardew's intention. And Tom realised, rather ruefully, that when it came to trickery he was no match for his rival. He knew very clearly that Cardew would give him all the trouble he could, and he could only resolve to be on his guard.

But he forgot Cardew when the party arrived at Eastwood House. Lord East-

wood and his lady greeted them with urbane hospitality; and they found Lord Conway—Gussy's elder brother—there, and Monty Lowther's uncle and guardian, Mr. Lowther, M.P., J.P., as well as two uncles of Cardew, Lord Lilburn and Commander Durrance. Cousin Ethel had not yet arrived, but was due in a day or two with Aunt Adelina. Arthur Augustus marched his numerous guests off to their rooms, and with great care saw that they were comfortably bestowed. Nothing could have exceeded the polished urbanity of Arthur Augustus. He was an ideal host.

In that respect, his happy minor did not come up to the standard set by the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

Wally of the Third marched his special guests—Frank Levison and Manners minor—off to the stables, to show them round there—that spot being the most interesting part of the Eastwood establishment from Wally's point of view. Moreover, he was anxious to see Pongo. Pongo showed great delight at seeing his master, and clambered over him, and clambered also over Reggie Manners and Frank Levison in the exuberance of his spirits. Frank did not mind, but Reggie Manners did—strongly; and an argument was the result, and before long Wally of the Third and one of his guests were busily engaged in punching one another's noses.

However, they were good friends again when they met at supper. Incidents of that kind were not unusual in Third Form friendships. But Aunt Matilda turned her tortoiseshell glasses on Wally.

"Dear me! What has happened to your nose, Walter?" she inquired.

"Ran it against something in the stables, auntie," answered Wally cheerily.

And Reggie Manners chuckled.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass very severely upon his minor. Wally closed one eye at him.

A couple of days later Levison and Olive arrived. Cardew was expected to arrive with them, but he sent an explanation instead.

Nobody, probably, was disappointed at the postponement of Cardew's arrival.

"Waiting to get his jolly old boko mended before he shows it to the giddy party!" Monty Lowther remarked to Tom Merry and Manners.

That was probably the reason for the delay. Levison's sister Doris came with Levison; and the same day Manners departed, to return, accompanied by three sisters. The next day the Terrible Three motored to Huckleberry Heath to fetch Miss Priscilla Fawcett. That kind old lady and her inseparable Hannah arrived with the three Shell fellows, all smiles, feeling that life was really worth living with her dear Tommy at her side. They reached Eastwood House in time for tea, and found that Cardew was there.

Tom Merry looked at Cardew as he came in, wondering whether the dandy of the Fourth would display any sign of the ill-feeling between them. Cardew was not likely to be guilty of bad form; but Tom did not trust him. He would have been best pleased if Cardew had ignored him and allowed him to return the compliment. Somewhat to his surprise, Cardew made it a point to be very cordial.

The dandy of the Fourth seemed to be in great spirits. He contrived to seat himself next to Miss Priscilla, and looked after that old lady with a kind and gentle attentiveness that quite won her heart. She could not help observing that Cardew's nose showed signs of damage. In spite of the care he had lavished on it, the lapse of time had been too brief. Nobody could look at Cardew without knowing that he had recently been engaged in fisticuffs. Miss Priscilla certainly did not think of fisticuffs; she supposed that there had been some sad accident.

"What a very nice boy!" Miss Pris-

cilla murmured to Tom Merry while Cardew was gone away with her teacup.

"Mmmmm!" was Tom's reply.

"Is he a great friend of yours, Tommy?"

"Oh, we—we're in different Forms, you know," said Tom.

"He speaks of you very nicely. He seems to have a great admiration of you."

"Does he?" said Tom grimly.

"I think he would be a very nice friend for you, Tommy. His manners are so kind and gentle, and he seems so open and frank."

"Oh, my hat!"

"He seems to have been hurt in some accident," pursued Miss Priscilla. "Was it at cricket?"

"We're not playing cricket in the winter, you know," said Tom, with a smile.

"Dear me! Of course not! I suppose it was at football. I have heard of dreadful accidents to the wicket-keeper. Does Cardew keep wicket when you play football?"

"Oh! Ah! No! Not quite!" gasped Tom.

Cardew came back with the teacup. He gave Tom Merry a curious look, as he received a sweet smile from Miss Priscilla. He had evidently heard some of the old lady's remarks.

"I hope you've not let out that I got this nose fightin', old bean," he remarked.

"Dear me!" said Miss Priscilla, shocked. "My dear, dear little boy, surely—surely—"

"Not my fault, madam," said Cardew. "I'm the most peaceable fellow at the school, as Tommy—dear Tommy—can tell you. But as it happens, I came up against a very ruffianly chap."

"How very horrid!" said Miss Priscilla.

"A perfect beast," went on Cardew. "I felt bound to lick him, as he had been bullying a fellow—a chap named

Trimble. I simply had to do it. I hope you don't blame me, madam."

"My dear boy, it was brave, noble of you!" said Miss Priscilla, without noticing the expression on Tom's face, which was rather extraordinary at that moment. "It is just like what we read of in those nice books for young people. I hope you defeated that dreadful bully."

"Well, I should have given him the licking of his life, only a master came in and he sort of skulked behind him," said Cardew. "But he had enough, I think."

Tom Merry felt like choking.

"Was not that very noble of Cardew, my dearest Tommy?" said Miss Priscilla.

"Oh! Ah! Yes! Very!"

Tom Merry moved away and went to talk to Manners' sisters. He felt that if he had any more of Cardew, there was danger of his punching Cardew's nose again, in the presence of the distinguished company assembled for tea in Lady Eastwood's drawing-room. Which certainly would never have done.

CHAPTER 8.

Cardew's Little Game!

"COUSIN ETHEL is comin' this aftahnoon."

Arthur Augustus made that remark to the Terrible Three the next day. He was looking a little thoughtful.

"If you fellows would like a little wun—" he went on.

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry, with a smile.

"Count us in!" said Manners.

"Ethel awwives at Easthorpe Station with Aunt Adelina at two-thirtay," said Arthur Augustus. "Of course, a cah will be sent to meet them. If you fellows care to go in the cah—"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's awwanged, then," said Arthur Augustus, with satisfaction.

The Terrible Three were quite pleased

at the idea of meeting Cousin Ethel at the station and escorting that popular young lady to Eastwood House. Moreover, Tom Merry had fallen into the way of concurring with every suggestion made by Arthur Augustus. Gussy, with deep diplomacy, was labouring to keep the rivals of St. Jim's as far apart as possible, and had not the slightest suspicion that his little manoeuvres were perfectly palpable to both parties.

Having arranged with Tom Merry & Co. to use up that afternoon looking after Cousin Ethel, and having already arranged that Cardew was going on a motor-drive with Levison and Clive, Arthur Augustus felt that he had been very diplomatic indeed.

Of course, he felt that he could rely upon the good manners of his two guests. Nevertheless, it was only tactful to keep them out of each other's way as much as possible.

After lunch that day, the Terrible Three joined a party skating on the frozen lake, till it was time to start for the station. Blake and Herries and Digby seemed to find plenty of entertainment in leading Manners' three sisters through the mazes of skating, and Sidney Clive was equally occupied in looking after Doris Levison. Cardew was strolling by the lake, not skating, and the Terrible Three passed him when they left.

He gave them a curious look and smiled when they passed, which Tom Merry remembered later.

"Levison, old bean!" called out Cardew.

Levison came off the ice, Clive looked round, but shook his head with a smile. Apparently he preferred skating to motoring that afternoon, possibly because Doris Levison was skating.

"I suppose you're comin'?" said Cardew.

"Right-ho!" said Levison. "Leave Clive to it—he wants to stay."

"That's all right."

"They've lent us a four-seater," said Cardew, as the two juniors walked to

the garage. "It would hold five all right—"

"Are you taking some of the other fellows?"

"Oh, no!" said Cardew, with a smile. "I was just thinkin'. As Clive's standin' out, there will be plenty of room."

"Lots, I should think, for two."

"Might pick up some passengers," said Cardew carelessly.

Levison looked puzzled. They were soon in the car, which the chauffeur tooled down the drive to the gates. The other car, in which the Terrible Three were going to the station, stood waiting. Cardew glanced back at it and smiled.

"The dear boys are indoors, puttin' on their best bibs and tuckers," he remarked.

"Yes; they're meeting Cousin Ethel at the station," said Levison.

"Are they?"

"Gussy said so."

"Let her out," said Cardew to the chauffeur, and the four-seater began to hum.

In a few minutes the car was through Easthorpe, and keeping on towards Redmay, the next village.

"Where are we going?" asked Levison.

"Redmay."

"No farther than that?"

"There's a station there," said Cardew.

"My hat! We're not motoring out to look at a country railway-station, are we?" asked the perplexed Levison.

"Why not? The two-thirty at Easthorpe stops there for three minutes, at two-twenty."

"Does it?"

"It's the station before Easthorpe, you know," said Cardew. "I've looked it all out in the jolly old time-table."

"What on earth for?"

"My dear chap, you know my thirst for knowledge. No end of information to be extracted from a railway time-table."

"Fathead!" said Levison, and he gave it up. He knew that Cardew had

something "on," and he knew, too, that Cardew did not intend to tell him what it was yet.

The car ate up the distance between Easthorpe and Redmay. The chauffeur drew up at the little station. Cardew alighted.

"Going in there?" asked Levison, in surprise.

"Yes, only a few minutes. Wait in the car, old bean."

"All right!"

Cardew disappeared into the station, followed by Levison's puzzled glance. Levison looked at his watch; it was a quarter-past two. It came into his mind that Cardew was there to see Cousin Ethel in the train, which stopped at Redmay. But why?

Cardew strolled on the platform, with a smile on his face. His cheeks were ruddy from the rapid run through frosty air, and he looked very handsome, save for the disfiguring mark on his nose. A few minutes later a train came in and stopped.

One glance along the carriages, and then Cardew stopped at a window and raised his hat to Ethel Cleveland and Aunt Adelina.

"How do you do, Miss Cleveland? How do you do, madam?" Cardew opened the carriage door. "The car's waitin' outside."

"Dear me! Are we at Easthorpe already?" asked Aunt Adelina, giving Cardew a gracious nod and smile.

"No, this is only Redmay," said Ethel. "Has Arthur sent the car to this station?" She looked at Cardew.

"Car's outside," said Cardew easily. "Did you expect to be met at Easthorpe?"

"Yes, But——"

"Dear me! If the car is here, we had better get out," said Aunt Adelina, gathering up her muff and other articles, of which the good lady carried a goodly number. "Dear me!"

Cardew politely relieved the old lady of most of her impedimenta. Cousin Ethel alighted from the train without a

suspicion. It was rather unusual for a guest at Eastwood House to be met at Redmay; but she supposed that there was some reason for the arrangement.

Levison, waiting in the car outside, started as Cardew issued from the station with Miss Cleveland on one side of him and Aunt Adelina on the other, and a porter following carrying several bags.

Levison was so astonished that he almost forgot to raise his hat. But he jumped from the car and saluted the ladies.

"You know Levison, of course," said Cardew. "Put the bags here, porter. I hope you'll find the car comfortable, madam. That's a nice cushion, and I had a hassock put in for you—yes, there it is!"

Aunt Adelina had an impression that Cardew was an exceedingly nice boy. Certainly he made the old lady very comfortable in the car, without failing in attentions to Cousin Ethel. Levison hardly spoke a word—he just looked on blankly.

He knew that, by this time, Tom Merry & Co. would be waiting at Easthorpe Station for Cousin Ethel. He understood, at last, what Cardew had planned, but he could say nothing. His look, for a moment, showed Cardew what he thought of his trick; but it was impossible to speak out in Ethel's presence. Moreover, it was quite certain that nothing would have made Cardew give up his little scheme.

"Jump in, Ernest, old bean," said Cardew lightly.

Levison followed the others into the car.

The engine throbbled, and the four-seater moved off. The chauffeur had already had his instructions from Cardew, and he took a roundabout way back to Eastwood. Aunt Adelina settled down comfortably in her fur and wraps among the cushions. Ethel looked out of the car rather curiously. Cardew understood her look, and answered it.

"It's such a rippin' afternoon, I thought you'd like to run round the country for a few miles before gettin' in," he said. "Say the word, of course, and I'll tell the chauffeur to head right home at once. Otherwise we're gettin' in for tea."

"Oh, I shall like it!" said Ethel, with a smile. "Do you mind, auntie?"

"Not at all, my dear!"

Cardew chatted cheerily while the car ran on, eating up the miles. Levison sat almost silent, and must have seemed rather dull beside his lively companion. Cardew could be very entertaining when he liked, and Cousin Ethel was soon laughing merrily at his drollery, and Aunt Adelina smiling sweetly. The minutes flew by, and it was half-past four when the four-seater turned in at last at the gates of Eastwood House.

At the door Arthur Augustus was standing, to meet the new arrivals. He ran down to the car.

"Bal Jove, I'm jolly glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "I was afwaid somethin' must have happened!"

"Why, what could have happened?" asked Ethel.

"It is weally vewy puzzlin'. You must have left the twain befoah weachin' Easthorpe—that is the only way of accountin' for it!" said the perplexed swell of St. Jim's. "Did you happen to meet Cardew?"

"Did you not send the car to Redmay for us?" asked Ethel, equally perplexed.

"Eh! Tom Mewwy is in the othah cah, at Easthorpe, waitin' for you now!"

"Then—I do not understand——"

"Come, my dear, the wind is very cold," said Aunt Adelina gently, and explanations had to be postponed.

Levison gave Cardew a grim look when they were alone. Cardew gave him a cheery smile in return.

"Dear old Thomas—still hangin' up at the station!" he murmured. "What a life!"

"Do you call this playing the game,

Cardew?" asked Levison, after a pause.

Cardew nodded.

"Yes—my game!" he answered, and he walked away cheerily.

CHAPTER 9.

Coming to a Crisis!

TOM MERRY was feeling puzzled and rather worried. The two-thirty at Easthorpe had come and gone without landing Cousin Ethel and Aunt Adelina. The Terrible Three decided that the newcomers had lost their train, and would come by the next. The next was due in an hour, and the chums of the Shell walked about the village for an hour, and returned to the station in good time for the train. It came in without bringing the expected guests.

"It's jolly odd!" said Tom Merry. "It's not like Cousin Ethel to lose trains. I wonder if Gussy made a mistake about the time?"

"Just like Gussy," remarked Lowther.

"I think I'd better telephone."

Tom Merry called up Eastwood House on the telephone from the station. Arthur Augustus came to the 'phone, and could only say that he was quite sure of the train Ethel had been coming by, and that he couldn't account for the delay.

"All serene!" said Tom. "We'll hang on, then!"

And the Shell fellows "hung on" and waited for the next train, which was at four-thirty. That train also came in without the expected arrivals.

"Well, this is a jolly afternoon!" said Manners. "Is it any good kicking our heels about here any longer?"

Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"We haven't heard of any accident on the line," he said. "They may be coming down by car, after all, and there's some mistake somewhere. Hallo, this Johnny wants to speak to us!"

The rubicund stationmaster of Easthorpe came out and came over to the

car, by which the juniors were standing.

"Call from Eastwood House, sir!" he said. "Master Arthur's sent a message."

"Oh, good!"

"He's asked me to tell you that the ladies have arrived at Eastwood House, sir."

"Oh, thanks!"

In a puzzled and perhaps slightly exasperated frame of mind the Terrible Three got into the car and drove back to Eastwood House. They arrived there, and Arthur Augustus met them in the hall with a slightly disturbed expression on his noble face.

"It's weally too bad, you fellows——" he began.

"All serene, if it's all right," said Tom. "I suppose they came down by car—what?"

"Oh, no! It is vewy perplexin'," said Arthur Augustus. "They got out of the twain at Wedmay, befoah weachin' Easthorpe, you know."

"What on earth for?" asked Manners.

"Cardew was out in a cah, and he met them there and bwrought them home," said Arthur Augustus.

"Cardew!"

"Yes, wathah! It seems that he was unawah that it was awwanged for you fellows to meet them at Easthorpe."

"He was not unaware of it," said Tom Merry quietly. "He knew it perfectly well!"

Arthur Augustus looked more distressed than ever.

"It's wathah wotten," he said. "Cardew seems to have acted in good faith—at least, I twust so. Of course, he ought to have known that a cah would be sent to the station for Cousin Ethel and Aunt Adelina. It does not seem to have occurred to him. I must say it was fwithfully thoughtless of Cardew!"

Tom Merry compressed his lips.

"But it's not a long run from Redmay," he said. "They should have

been here long before three o'clock, and you could have let us know."

"It's fwithfully unfortunate. Cardew had the ideah of takin' them for a wun wound the countwy, and gettin' in to tea, you know. So, weally, they have only just awwided."

"So as to leave us kicking our heels in Easthorpe, waiting for nothing!" remarked Manners.

"Bai Jove! Do you weally think so, Mannahs?"

Manners grunted. Cardew's scheme was clear enough to him, and, indeed, to Arthur Augustus too, only the swell of St. Jim's hated to realise it or admit it to himself.

"I can only apologise, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus, after a long and painful pause. "It is fwithfully wotten!"

"All right, old man," said Tom. "It's not your fault. Anyhow, there's no harm done."

"Not at all," said Monty Lowther.

The Terrible Three got away to their quarters, having made as light of the incident as possible, in order to soothe the troubled spirits of their host. In Tom Merry's room, however, they looked at one another gainly.

"Cardew's keeping up the feud—here, in Gussy's house, under Lord Eastwood's roof!" said Tom Merry. "This is going to be a merry Christmas, if this goes on."

"I suppose we can't punch him here?" said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Hardly! And we can't go. I couldn't possibly give Miss Priscilla any reason."

"And my sisters," said Manners.

"And my jolly old uncle," said Lowther ruefully. "It seems to me that Cardew has us in a cleft stick, and can do as he jolly well likes. We'll take it out of him next term at St. Jim's."

"Let's get down to tea!"

The Terrible Three found all the party assembled when they came down to tea. They were ratifer late. Cardew

made it a point to address some cheery and cordial remarks to them, apparently oblivious of the fact that the Shell fellows were yearning to take him by the scruff of the neck. It was not even possible to avoid Cardew. He persisted in being agreeable, and, with Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison and others within hearing, it was impossible for the Terrible Three to answer him as they would have liked to answer. The mocking gleam in Cardew's eyes showed that he read their thoughts clearly and thoroughly enjoyed their discomfiture.

With all his diplomacy, and all his tact and judgment, Arthur Augustus could not help feeling that matters were getting strained.

Arthur Augustus felt that it was decidedly "wotten," for he had, as a matter of fact, other and more important matters on his noble mind that day. For it was Christmas Eve, and there was to be a dance that evening, and on such occasions Gussy, as the best-dressed fellow at St. Jim's, felt it his duty to turn out looking a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

With such tremendous considerations to be pondered over and determined, it was really hard lines for Gussy's attention to be drawn away to more trifling matters.

But it couldn't be helped. In the midst of weighing the pros and cons, the rival claims of the pearl and ruby studs, Arthur Augustus found himself wondering whether there would be open trouble between Tom Merry and Ralph Reckness Cardew before his Christmas-party came to an end. He shuddered at the thought, and almost forgot the important subject of his appearance at the dance—but not quite!

CHAPTER 10.

The Limit!

MY dance, I think?"
A band discoursed sweet music. In the ball-room at Eastwood House all was merry and

bright. Light feet glided to merry music; bright and happy faces exchanged glances and smiles.

Cardew, very handsome in his evening clothes, his good looks marred only by that unforgotten mark on his nose, bowed gracefully to Cousin Ethel. Ethel glanced at her programme.

"No; this is Tom's dance," she said.

Cardew smiled.

"In me you behold an unworthy substitute," he said. "Tom Merry has been called away."

Ethel raised her eyebrows.

"I heard him asking Gussy to make his excuses," smiled Cardew, "so I came first to avoid the crush, if you'll excuse the expression. There'll be a rush when it gets out that you've got this dance free."

"You're sure that Tom——"

"A message came in for him," explained Cardew. "He didn't confide the matter to me——"

Arthur Augustus slid gracefully up.

"Ethel, deah gal, Tom Mewwy is feahfully cut up, but——"

"I've just explained to Miss Cleveland," said Cardew airily. "She is givin' me the dance."

Ethel hesitated a moment, and then inclined her head. A moment more and Ethel and Cardew were gliding with the dancers. Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass a little more firmly into his eye and gazed after them. Then he shook his head thoughtfully and glided away to seek his own partner.

A good many admiring eyes rested on Cardew and Cousin Ethel. There was no doubt that Cardew was an excellent dancer. He excelled Tom Merry in that respect. Ethel liked dancing, and a partner like Cardew made a dance very enjoyable. Her face was bright. Tom Merry came back into the ball-room with a face that was far from bright, and looked round for Ethel. His brow grew almost black as he saw her in the throng with Cardew.

A surprised glance from Lowther, who

passed him with Doris, recalled him to himself, and he remembered that a Christmas Eve dance was no time or place for black looks. He composed his face, and stood back behind a mass of ferns, watching. His eyes gleamed as he watched.

The dance ended, and Cardew led Cousin Ethel back to the seat between Aunt Matilda and Miss Priscilla. Tom Merry joined them, and Cardew gave him a cheery smile.

"Gussy told you——" Tom began, speaking to Ethel, without looking at Cardew.

"Yes," said Ethel.

"I had a message from Lord Eastwood, asking me to come to the library at once and speak to him," said Tom. "I hoped I should get back in time for our dance. I wasn't more than a minute——"

"I—I didn't understand——"

Cardew, with a cheery smile on his face, bowed to Ethel and retired, as her next partner came to claim her. Tom Merry stood for a moment or two, and then followed Cardew.

Lord Eastwood, after opening the dance, had retired from the ball-room, and Tom, receiving that unexpected message, had supposed that something was "up," and obeyed the message at once.

He joined Cardew, and slipped his arm through that of the dandy of the Fourth. Cardew stared at him.

"What's this game?" he asked.

"I want to speak to you," said Tom, in a choking voice.

"Not here, I think."

"Will you come along, then?"

"No. Let go my arm."

"I'll speak here, or in private, as you choose," said Tom Merry with a blaze in his eyes.

Cardew breathed hard. He made a motion with his head of assent, and they passed through the ferns, and then through french windows to the terrace.

"Now, will you let go my arm, or do

you want a hooligan row in D'Arcy's house?" asked Cardew in suppressed tones.

Tom released his arm and faced him.

"A servant brought me a message," he said.

"I know."

"I went to the library, and found Lord Eastwood there. He told me he had sent no message."

"Indeed!"

"It was a spoof message to dish me and make me lose my dance with Cousin Ethel."

"Surely a servant here would not play such a trick?" said Cardew airily.

"Not unless he was put up to it by a treacherous cad," said Tom.

"Dear me! I advise reporting the bad man to his employer."

"Never mind the servant," said Tom. "You may have deceived him, or bribed him—I don't know and don't care which. My quarrel isn't with him."

"I!" said Cardew. "What have I to do with it?"

"Do you deny it, then?"

Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"Will you give me your word that you had nothing to do with it?"

"I decline to say anything about it."

"That's good enough," said Tom. "You've got to the limit, Cardew, and you've got to stop. Any decent fellow would have chucked rowing, when we're both Gussy's guests. You've kept it up all the time, and in a way I can't deal with without making a scene."

"You are rather handicapped in the way of brains, aren't you?" assented Cardew.

"It's got to stop!" said Tom between his teeth.

"Didn't you tell Gussy that it was impossible for me to be decent?" grinned Cardew. "What's the good of askin', then?"

"I'm not standing any more," said Tom in a choking voice. "If we were at St. Jim's now, I'd knock you spinning for your dirty tricks!"

"But we're not at St. Jim's—we're at

Eastwood House," said Cardew, laughing. "And you've got to stand it, dear man, unless you'd like to vary the entertainment at Gussy's Christmas Eve dance with a scrap?"

And Cardew laughed mockingly:

Smack!

Tom Merry's open hand struck him across the face, and Cardew's laughter died away suddenly.

He staggered back.

"What—you—you——" he panted.

There were steps on the terrace, and a well-known voice was heard.

"Yaas, it is wathah warm; pway walk on the tewwace for a few minutes, Miss Dows. Hallo, Tom Mewwy, old bean!"

Cardew was springing forward with clenched fists and blazing eyes. He stopped suddenly and dropped his hands, and stood quivering with passion.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon them alternately, and there was a curious expression on Doris Levison's face. Tom Merry muttered something indistinctly and walked away to the ball-room. Arthur Augustus gave Cardew a look, and walked on with Doris.

Cardew remained alone. His face was white, save for a deep red mark on one cheek. He was still standing there, motionless, when Arthur Augustus and Doris repassed. He did not seem to see them; but Arthur Augustus glanced at him, and the look on Cardew's face haunted the swell of St. Jim's the rest of the evening.

Christmas Day dawned upon the party at Eastwood House, the day of peace and good will and happy faces. Tom Merry and Cardew met at the breakfast table, and Tom carefully avoided looking at his enemy; but Cardew's glance rested on Tom with a look that was calm, smiling, and implacable. But that day, at least, there was no hostility between the rivals of St. Jim's, and it was, after all, a merry Christmas.

CHAPTER 11.

A Sporting Proposition!

"TROT in!" called out Tom Merry cheerily, as a tap came at the door of his room at Eastwood House.

Tom Merry was standing before the glass, arranging his tie to his satisfaction.

Tom was not, as a rule, very particular about his tie. But dinner at Eastwood House, on Christmas Day, was a rather special occasion.

"That you, Gussy?" asked Tom, without looking round, as the door opened.

"No."

Tom turned quickly.

It was Ralph Reckness Cardew, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, who had entered.

Cardew closed the door, and stood looking at Tom Merry, with a smile on his face. The dandy of the Fourth had already dressed for dinner, and he looked very handsome in his evening clothes.

The cheery expression faded from Tom Merry's face. Cardew of the Fourth was the last fellow he would have expected to drop into his room, and certainly the last fellow he would have wished to see there.

"Well?" said Tom curtly.

"Am I interruptin' you?" drawled Cardew.

"Well, yes."

"Sorry! I've been lookin' for a chance to speak to you," said Cardew. "With so many people buzzin' about all day it's rather difficult—so here I am."

"I can't see that you've got anything to say to me," said Tom coldly. "If you've come here to quarrel, Cardew, you've come for nothing. I don't intend to row in D'Arcy's house."

"Isn't it a little too late to think of that?" smiled Cardew. "We were enemies at St. Jim's, and we're enemies here."

"I never wanted to be," said Tom;

"and on Christmas Day, at least, you might give the subject a rest, Cardew. Plenty of time for rowing when we get back to St. Jim's next term."

"You should have thought of that sooner. It's an unlucky thing that we're both D'Arty's guests for Christmas. But there it is. One of us will have to go."

Tom smiled slightly.

"I've no objection to your going," he said. "The sooner the better, so far as I'm concerned."

"My view is exactly the same towards you. One of us has got to spin a yarn to keep up appearances, and get out to-morrow morning," said Cardew.

"I've already thought of that—but I can't go," said Tom. "Miss Priscilla is here, and she would want to know why. My friends are here, and I can't very well leave them. As a matter of fact, Cardew, though the position's awkward enough, I don't choose to go."

"Same with me—my uncle's here, and he would want to know—and I don't choose to go, either," said Cardew. "At St. Jim's, as junior captain, I can give you orders. But I suppose you won't take orders from me here?"

"Hardly," said Tom, laughing.

"Well, we've got to settle it, here and now," said Cardew. "That's why I've come to speak to you."

Tom Merry turned to the glass again, and proceeded with his tie. There was a contempt in his manner that brought a gleam to the eyes of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"I've got a sportin' proposition to make," continued Cardew. "The situation's too awkward to last—and neither of us chooses to go, and leave the enemy in possession of the field. I'm willin' to toss us for it."

"What!" ejaculated Tom.

"Heads you go, tails I go," said Cardew. "Here's a half-crown. Are you agreeable?"

Tom shook his head.

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"It's a fair offer," said Cardew.

"I dare say it is, in its way," said Tom. "But I can't leave Eastwood House now, and I'm not going to. There was no need for us to have any trouble here, if you'd chosen to keep the peace. I wanted to keep it, and I want to keep it now."

"You should have thought of that before you laid hands on me last evening," said Cardew.

Tom coloured a little.

"I lost my temper—and I'm sorry I did," he answered. "But you fairly drove me into it, Cardew. You've played rotten trickery on me ever since we've been here, and last evening you bagged my dance with Cousin Ethel by a sneaking trick. You couldn't expect a fellow to put up with that kind of thing for ever."

Having finished his tie to his satisfaction, Tom Merry put on his dinner-jacket. Cardew stood with his back to the door, watching him, his eyes gleaming.

"I'm givin' you a chance," he said. "We can't fight in Lord Eastwood's house. It would be fairly bad form to turn up at Christmas dinner with a black eye aplece."

"Well, rather," agreed Tom.

"But I hardly suppose you imagine I'm the kind of fellow to take a blow quietly, lyin' down," said Cardew.

"Not at all. I'll meet you, with or without gloves, on the first day of term at St. Jim's."

"That's not good enough—if you stay here. If you go, well and good."

"I'm not going."

Cardew drew a deep breath.

"Then I'm afraid that good form will have to be thrown to the giddy winds, and that I shall have to give you your blow back with interest, without waitin' till next term," he said.

He came towards Tom Merry as he spoke.

Tom backed away.

"Are you off your rocker, Cardew," he exclaimed. "Haven't you the least sense of decency? We can't fight here."

"I'm not insistin' on it—if you choose to take back the smack in the face you gave me, without puttin' up your hands."

"Oh, don't be a fool."

"You want it all your own way, old bean," said Cardew. "I'm afraid there's nothin' doin' You're takin' the smack, anyhow, and you can please yourself about fightin' afterwards."

CHAPTER 12.

By the Strong Hand!

TOM MERRY'S eyes blazed.

He leaped back as Cardew came at him. But, as the Fourth-Former came on, Tom Merry closed with him and grasped him. Cardew was by no means a weakling; he was slim and elegant, but he was sturdy, and he was known at St. Jim's as a good fighting-man. But as soon as Tom's sinewy grasp closed on him, Cardew realised that he had taken on too large an order. Tom's grasp slid to his wrists, and he held Cardew's slim wrists in a grip of iron, and the dandy of the Fourth struggled in vain to release them.

For a full minute he wrenched and struggled, to the detriment of his immaculate shirt-cuffs—no longer spotless. They were decidedly crumpled by that silent, furious struggle. Tom Merry did not speak; and Cardew was silent, save for his hurried, furious breathing. But Tom's grasp did not relax.

Cardew broke the tense silence at last.

"Will you let go my hands?"

"No!"

"You rotter! You coward!"

"I think you're out of your senses," said Tom coldly and quietly. "You provoked me yesterday till I lost my temper. You did it intentionally. I shall not lose my temper again. You're not worth it. But I'm not going to fight you here. You must be mad to think of such a thing. In Lord Eastwood's house—"

"Let go my hands!"

"We're both D'Arcy's guests. We've got to face a crowd of people this evening—girls among them. What would they think of us?"

"Let go!"

"And you such a stickler for good form!" said Tom contemptuously. "You want to act like a hooligan! Well, I'm not playing up! As soon as we're out of D'Arcy's house I'll fight you as quickly as you like. Not here."

"Will you release me?" hissed Cardew.

"Not till you give me your word to let this drop till after we're both gone from Eastwood."

"I won't!"

"You will!"

Tom Merry spoke calmly, quietly, but resolutely. His grip on Cardew's slim wrists was like the grip of a steel vice. Cardew struggled again—silently, persistently, savagely. But he could not release his wrists. He was in the grasp of a fellow stronger than himself, and quite as determined.

He stood panting at last, white with rage and humiliation.

There was a tap at the door.

Some other member of the party was calling on Tom Merry. The strange scene was interrupted.

"Let go!" breathed Cardew.

"Will you promise?"

No reply

Tom Merry compressed his grip on the wrists as the door opened. Manners and Lowther, his chums in the Shell at St. Jim's, came into the room.

"Ready, old bean?" said Monty Lowther. "Hallo! What—"

"Cardew here!" exclaimed Manners.

"My hat! What's the game?"

The two Shell fellows stared blankly.

"Cardew's looking for trouble," explained Tom Merry. "I'm trying to persuade him to keep the peace."

"Looking for a row—in D'Arcy's house!" said Manners contemptuously. "Even you ought to know a bit better than that, Cardew."

Cardew writhed with rage.

"You're stronger than I am, Tom

Merry," he said, in a low, choking voice. "I have to admit that."

"I'm sorry to use my strength like this," said Tom. "But if you were cool, you'd understand that we cannot make a scene in another fellow's house; and if you're bent on it, I must stop you."

"I should jolly well think so!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

There were footsteps and voices in the corridor outside Tom Merry's room. Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy were there, apparently about to go down. Levison's voice was heard:

"Seen Cardew, you fellows?"

"I think he went along to Tom Mewwy," came the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Monty Lowther softly backed to the door and planted his heel against it. Arthur Augustus was not wanted on the scene just then. There was a tap at the door.

"Cardew heah, Tom Mewwy?" called out Arthur Augustus cheerily.

"Yes," called back Tom.

"You fellows comin' down?"

"Yes."

"Wight-ho!"

Cardew breathed harder. The vice-like grip was still on his slim wrists, and at any moment the St. Jim's fellows might come in. He looked at Tom Merry's face and read inflexible determination there.

"Let go!" he breathed. "You've got the better of me this time. I—I promise not to touch you."

Tom Merry released him at once.

"I only want you to keep clear of me while we're both staying here," he said. "I shall keep clear of you, if you'll let me."

Cardew rubbed his wrists. There were dark marks on the white skin, and the bones ached. It had not been a gentle grip that Tom had laid on him; but a gentle grip would not have controlled him. Cardew had had what he asked for.

The door opened.

Arthur Augustus, in evening clothes,

a thing of beauty and a joy for ever, stood in the doorway, and nodded and smiled to his guests.

"You fellows havin' a chat?" asked.

"Just that," said Cardew, with a smile. He drove his hands deep into his pockets.

A minute before his face had been almost convulsed with rage. Now it was calm, smiling, cheery. It was a startling change, and it made the Terrible Three stare. In spite of his recent conduct, it was clear that Ralph Reckness Cardew desired to keep up appearances, and to prevent his host, Arthur Augustus, from discovering that he had come to Tom's room with hostile intentions.

"Just goin' down," added Cardew; and he gave the Terrible Three a cheery nod and strolled to the door.

"Well, my hat!" murmured Manners.

Arthur Augustus remained to exchange a few words with the Terrible Three. Cardew joined Levison and Clive in the corridor. Ernest Levison gave him a quick, searching look.

"Anything up?" he muttered.

Cardew raised his eyebrows.

"Up? What could be up?" he drawled.

"I was afraid you'd gone looking for trouble," said Levison curtly.

"What rot, old chap," said Sidney Clive. "I suppose Cardew isn't capable of kicking up a shindy while he's a guest here, is he?"

Cardew laughed.

"Why not?" he said. "Old Ernest knows me better than you do, Clivey."

"You don't mean to say you've been rowing with Tom Merry—here!" exclaimed Clive, quite aghast.

"Dear man, so far from rowing, I've given him my word not to touch him so long as we're D'Arcy's guests."

Sidney Clive looked relieved.

"That's good," he said. "Blessed if I see at all why you're so up against the chap, Cardew. You bagged the junior captaincy from him at St. Jim's,

and it's for him to feel ratty, if for anybody, I should think."

"Don't you remember what the jolly old poet says," grinned Cardew:

"'Forgiveness to the injured does belong:

But they ne'er pardon who have done the wrong.'"

"Oh, rot!" said Clive.

"Well, let's get down," said Levison uneasily. There was a look in Cardew's eyes that Levison of the Fourth did not like.

"I've got to change my shirt," smiled Cardew. "I've got these cuffs a bit rumpled. Dear old Thomas has been showin' me some wrestlin' tricks, and he's got a rather heavy hand."

"Cardew!"

The dandy of the Fourth sauntered away to his room. Levison and Clive looked at one another very uneasily, but they did not speak. They waited, however, till Cardew joined them before they went downstairs. And they were glad to get him into the drawing-room, where the presence of Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison and Manners' sisters and the other ladies of the party made "trouble" impossible.

Tom Merry came down soon afterwards, with Manners and Lowther Arthur Augustus D'Arcy moved among his guests with a bright and beaming countenance, evidently utterly oblivious of any recent trouble between two of the party. Indeed, Arthur Augustus remarked to Jack Blake that it was "very decent" of both Tom Merry and Cardew to bury the hatchet so thoroughly, and forget their old differences during the Christmas holidays—a remark at which Blake smiled, without making any comment.

At the dinner-table, under the shaded lights, Tom Merry glanced once at Cardew.

Cardew's face was cheery and smiling, and he chatted to Cousin Ethel, at his

side, like a fellow who had not a care in the world.

Seemingly, he had forgotten the scene in Tom Merry's room.

Tom Merry was glad of it.

He knew that Cardew was not a fellow to forget or to forgive; but he knew, too, that Cardew was a fellow of his word. The promise he had given, he would keep.

That was good enough; and the Christmas festivities at Eastwood House would not be marred by any further trouble. Tom Merry was not the fellow to guess the deep, black, bitter rancour that lay under the smiling exterior of the dandy of the Fourth; and he would have been startled had he been able to read the thoughts that were passing through Cardew's mind, even while he smiled and chatted so cheerily.

CHAPTER 13.

Wally Butts In!

"WALLY, you ass——"

"Wally, you dummy!"

Reggie Manners and Frank Levison spoke simultaneously, with emphasis

"Oh, dry up!" grunted D'Arcy minor.

It was Boxing Day, and the dusk was falling thickly. The snow was falling more thickly than the dusk.

The three Third-Formers of St. Jim's were tramping through a "ride" in Eastwood Park, thick with snow, swept by the wind. The snow had started suddenly, and it was coming down almost in masses, and the wind dashed it in the faces of the three fags.

"Look here, I'm fed-up!" exclaimed Manners minor.

"Same here!" said Frank Levison.

Snort from Wally of the Third.

"We've got to find Pongo!" he said.

"Blow Pongo!"

"Who's afraid of a little snow?" demanded Wally.

"Fathead! Call this a little?"

"I'm hungry, too."

"On, rats!" said Wally crossly.

Levison minor and Reggie Manners were the guests of Walter Adolphus D'Arcy for Christmas. But manners were not polished in the Third Form at St. Jim's. Host and guests generally forgot that they were not in the old Form-room, when they addressed one another. And in the Third Form-room at St. Jim's, language was very plain.

"Pongo's got off his chain," said Wally. "He's gone wandering. I'm bound to find him. You asses said you would come."

"We've been searching for the brute for two hours," said Reggie sulkily. "I can tell you I'm fed up with Pongo, Wally."

"Rats!"

"I'm jolly well going in!" roared Reggie.

"Sooner the better," said D'Arcy minor. "You can't stand a little snow and wind. You're rather soft."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

Reggie Manners tramped off in the direction of Eastwood House. Frank Levison looked as if he would like to follow. But he hesitated.

"You backing out?" demanded Wally crossly.

"Nunno! But what's the good of looking for Pongo in this snowstorm?" argued Frank. "We'll never find him."

"Well, you wouldn't," agreed Wally. "You haven't much sense. I'm going to find him somehow."

"You're an ass, Wally."

"You're another."

"Look here——"

"Bow-wow!"

"I'll jolly well leave you to it, then."

"Do! Make the job easier if you don't help."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Levison minor. And he started off in the tracks left behind him by Reggie Manners.

Wally of the Third was left alone, looking and feeling cross. He was very much concerned about Pongo, his favourite mongrel. Nobody but Wally

of the Third was able to discern any lovable qualities in Pongo—but Wally's fixed belief was that there never had been such a dog as Pongo. Pongo had gone wandering, and Wally was determined to find him somehow. How, was rather a problem.

"Pongo! Pongo! Pong! Pong!"

If Pongo was within hearing he did not listen to the voice of the charmer. At all events, no answering bark or whine came.

Wally tramped on doggedly.

He knew that he would be late for tea, and that after tea there were going to be great festivities, participated in with keen enjoyment by the younger members of the Christmas party, and with cheerful tolerance by the elders. But tea and festivities failed to appeal to Wally when Pongo was in trouble. Possibly the elusive Pongo was miles away—possibly he had returned to his kennel while his master was hunting for him; but possibly he was being buried in the snow in the wide, bleak park, and frozen—and that possibility kept D'Arcy minor keenly on the search.

In the thickening dusk, the St. Jim's fag pursued his quest, determined to keep it up till dark at least. It had come into his mind that perhaps Pongo had taken refuge from the falling snow in the summer-house in the park—an open structure, used only in the summer, open to the winds, but sheltered from falling snow. Wally of the Third tramped up the "ride" to the summer-house.

He came up rather wearily through the thick snow, in the dusk. As he had almost reached the open doorway he was startled by the sound of a voice within.

"You've kept me waitin'."

Wally jumped.

It was the voice of Ralph Rectness Cardew. He wondered what on earth Cardew could be doing there.

A hoarse, husky voice answered:

"Sorry, sir! The snow came on, and——"

"Never mind."

There was the scratch of a match; Cardew was lighting a cigarette. Wally stepped in.

In the light of the match, he saw Cardew's handsome face, and caught a glimpse of the man Cardew was talking with. He knew the man by sight—a disreputable character, well-known to be a poacher and a pilferer, who was generally to be seen at the Spotted Dog in Easthorpe, loafing about the bar or the billiards-room.

Cardew blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Well, look here, Lomax——"

"Careful, sir," said the poacher hurriedly. He had caught sight of the St. Jim's fag.

Cardew stared round.

"What the thump——" he exclaimed, with an angry look at the fag.

Wally eyed him.

"I'm looking for Pongo!" he explained. "Have you seen anything of him?"

"No! Bother your rotten mongrel!"

"You seem to be palling with a mongrel yourself, Cardew," said the fag sarcastically. "Do you know that that man is Mike Lomax, who's been in gaol more times than he can count?"

The poacher gave Wally a savage look, and a thick cudgel, that he carried under his arm, slipped down into his hand. The fag looked at him fearlessly.

Cardew gave the man a warning look, and Lomax muttered something under his breath, and turned away. The match had gone out, and the dusk was deep in the summer-house.

"Your dog isn't here, kid," said Cardew, controlling his annoyance, and speaking civilly. "I've seen nothing of him, and I've been in here ten minutes or more, sheltering from the snow—as this man seems to have done."

"Lomax has no right on my father's land," said Wally. "If a keeper found him here, he would be shifted off fast enough. He's a bad hat, and the less you have to say to him the better."

Cardew gritted his teeth. But he answered cheerily:

"My dear kid, thanks for the tip—it's kind of you fellows in the Third to look after your elders like this."

"Oh, rats!" grunted Wally.

"But I suppose I can wish a merry Christmas, even to a bad hat," went on Cardew, with a laugh.

"You can do anything you jolly well like, so far as I'm concerned," snapped Wally, and he went out again into the snow, to look further for Pongo.

Wally was quite well aware, from the words he had heard accidentally, that Cardew's meeting with the poacher was not by chance.

What Cardew's business could be with such a character was a mystery, but Wally did not think about it. It was no concern of his. Moreover, he was deeply concerned about Pongo just then.

But a few minutes later Wally stopped with a surprised exclamation. Mike Lomax, poacher and pilferer, was a dog-stealer among his other activities. Pongo was missing—and Lomax was on the spot! That Pongo was worth stealing Wally had not the slightest doubt, though Reggie and Frank would have chortled at the idea.

"He's got him!" gasped Wally.

And he turned round and tramped back towards the summer-house. If Mike Lomax had got Pongo, Wally meant to have him back, even at the cost of a battle royal with a six-foot ruffian.

All was dark in the little summer-house now, and Wally wondered whether the poacher was gone. But the husky voice came to his ears.

"I ain't see'd him. How shall I know him, sir?"

"You can see him to-morrow morning." It was Cardew's voice. "He's taking an old lady to see the ruins of the abbey. Just hang round and watch for him there."

"And then——"

"Nothing in the presence of Miss Fawcett, you fool! You'll watch, and get a look at him, so that you will know him again."

"Leave it to me, sir."

D'Arcy minor stood quite still. The words, muttered in low tones, came quite clearly to him, and they amazed him so much that he stood and blinked at the dark summer-house like a fellow in a dream.

"Good enough! I'm going now!"

There was a sound of footsteps. Cardew left the little summer-house by the door on the opposite side. Then Wally heard the heavy steps of the poacher coming out. In the doorway, not six feet from Wally, Mike Lomax stopped to light his pipe and to turn up the collar of his rough coat and to mutter a curse on the snow and the wind. Then he came tramping along, and almost ran into Wally of the Third on the dark path.

"Who's that?" muttered the ruffian.

"Little me," said Wally, recovering himself. "I want to know whether you've got my dog, Lomax?"

"You young fool!"

"Look here——"

The poacher gave him a savage shove, and Wally went sprawling in the snow. Lomax laughed gruffly and tramped on, disappearing into the darkness.

"Ow! My only Aunt Jane! Ow!"

Wally scrambled to his feet. He was greatly inclined to rush after the poacher and take summary vengeance, but he realised that this was a proposition of considerable difficulty. Moreover, he was fairly certain by this time that Lomax had not been there on account of Pongo. There was something between the ruffian and Cardew—something that was odd and underhand—but evidently Pongo was not concerned in the matter. D'Arcy minor shook his fist after Lomax, instead of pursuing him, and then started off on a further search for his valuable mongrel.

CHAPTER 14.

Tom Merry's Substitute!

BAI Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his celebrated monocle into his noble eye and gazed at his young brother with horror.

Wally had returned at last.

He was in a parlous state.

"Gweat Scott!" said Arthur Augustus faintly. "Is that weally you, Wally? Or is it some howwid twamp?"

"Oh, come off!" said D'Arcy minor. "I've been looking for Pongo. Has he come in?"

"Weally, Wally, I take no intewest whatevah in the movements of that howwid mongwel of yours. Pway huvwuy up and change your clothes befoah anyone sees you!"

"Bow-wow!"

"You young wapsallion——"

"Pongo's come in, Wally!" shouted Reggie Manners from the distance. "He's in his kennel now."

"Oh, good!" said Wally.

"Come on, old kid—we're doing charades!" shouted Frank.

"Right-ho!"

Wally of the Third tramped away to change his clothes. He was wet to the skin, and smothered with snow and mud. He had searched for Pongo, not wisely, but too well.

But he was very bright and cheery when he joined the festive party, Pongo being all right, everything was all right, from D'Arcy minor's point of view.

But during the festivities of that merry evening Wally did not forget the curious incident of the summer-house in the wood.

He found himself thinking of it a great deal, and more than once he glanced curiously at Cardew, who was cheerful and smiling and debonair as usual.

Cardew's secret meeting with Lomax meant mischief of some kind. He had told the poacher where he could see and watch Tom Merry, so that he would know Tom again on another occasion.

That it was Tom who was spoken of Wally knew, for he was aware that Tom Merry was to take Miss Priscilla to see the abbey ruins in the morning.

Wally wondered. He could not help wondering.

He knew all about the St. Jim's feud, and he had seen more than one sign during the Christmas holidays that Cardew had not forgotten his enmity.

Some trick was to be played on Tom Merry by means of the poacher—that much was clear to Wally. For that purpose Lomax was to get to know Tom by sight.

That anything worse than a trick was intended did not cross the fag's mind for a moment. Some jape, such as snowballing the Shell fellow from behind a hedge, or something of the kind—that was what Wally considered probable. He was not likely to suspect anything more serious than that.

He wondered whether he ought to speak to Tom on the subject. What he had heard, he had heard by accident—and a jape was only a jape, though certainly Eastwood House was not a proper place for japes.

Wally of the Third had not made up his mind on the subject when he went to bed that night, and the next morning Wally was busy. The lake was frozen, and most of the younger members of the Christmas party were going on the ice. Wally and Reggie and Frank were among them, and for the time Wally forgot about Cardew and his schemes. It was not, after all, an important matter—so far as the fag could see, at least—and there was plenty of time to speak to Tom Merry if he decided to do so.

Wally & Co. were the first on the ice, disporting themselves gleefully, after the manner of the Third Form. Blake & Co. came on, and Manners and Lowther, and Sidney Clive, and Cousin Ethel, and Doris, and Manners' sisters. Ralph Reckness Cardew joined them, skating with remarkable skill and grace. Levison of the Fourth had lingered to speak to Tom Merry, who was waiting

in the hall for Miss Priscilla to come down for the walk to the abbey.

"I haven't had a chance of speaking to you quietly, Tom," said Levison in a low voice. "I—I hope that there wasn't any trouble when Cardew came to your room Christmas Day?"

Tom Merry looked rather uncomfortable.

"Well, there was a bit of an argument," he said. "But it's all right. Cardew's agreed to a truce while we're here with Gussy."

Levison looked very relieved.

"I'm glad of that," he said. "It would be pretty rotten if there was anything like a scene in D'Arcy's house. I really can't quite understand Cardew lately. I should have thought him the last fellow in the world to make a scene at any time. But I'm afraid he's been rather near it."

"It's all right now," said Tom. "He's given his word to keep clear till we've both left Eastwood House."

"That's good!" said Levison. "If Cardew keeps clear, I know you will, and it's all right!"

"Right as rain!" said Tom, with a smile.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett came down, wrapped in furs, her kind old face looking very frail and delicate under her bonnet.

"My dearest Tommy, have I kept you waiting?"

"Not at all!" said Tom cheerily. "Luckily, the snow's stopped, and it's a lovely morning for a walk."

Levison walked down the drive with Tom and Miss Fawcett. He had his skates under his arm. And then occurred an incident which, trifling as it was, was destined to have strange results. Miss Priscilla dropped her muff, and Tom Merry's foot slipped in the snow as he stooped to pick it up, and he went with a plunge into the drift of snow piled beside the drive.

He jumped up with a laugh and shook the snow from his clothes.

"My dearest Tommy!" ejaculated Miss Priscilla.

"All right, dear!" said Tom hastily.

Miss Priscilla never could quite understand that Tom Merry was no longer the fascinating little baby of years ago. Tom was deeply grateful for her kind affection; but at fifteen he felt a certain discomfort of being coddled, especially before other fellows. But that little incident, trifling to Tom, was of deep import to his kind old friend.

"My darling, you will catch cold," said Miss Priscilla tenderly. "Run in and change your clothes at once."

"I'm not wet——"

"And warm yourself thoroughly before the fire——"

"But——"

"Change down to the skin, said Miss Priscilla. "And, oh, my dearest child, be careful that your things are well aired, and be very careful to put flannel next to your skin, and——"

"I—I——"

"Quick, my dearest boy!"

Levison contrived not to smile. Tom Merry's face was crimson.

"But we're going to the abbey——" gasped Tom.

"That is nothing! We can go another time. Run into the house at once, Tommy—at once!"

"But——" stuttered the hapless Shell fellow.

He broke off. Miss Priscilla was looking deeply distressed, and Tom would not have distressed the kind old lady for worlds.

"All right!" he gasped. "But——"

"Leave it to me, Tom," said Levison. "It will be a pleasure to me to walk to the abbey with Miss Fawcett."

"Thanks, old man! Right-ho!"

"Darling Tommy——"

Levison passed his skates to Tom, and Tom Merry hurried back to the house. Levison of the Fourth, with great politeness, walked on with Miss Priscilla. Tom went into the house, left Levison's skates in Levison's room, and then went to his own room. He did not trouble about changing his clothes; Miss Priscilla's tender fears for her darling's health were quite unfounded. He had some

letters to write—that duty having been rather neglected during the holidays, a not unusual circumstance—and he filled in the next hour with pen and ink.

Meanwhile, Levison of the Fourth walked to the abbey ruins with Miss Priscilla. He showed the old lady round the ruins with indefatigable politeness. A rough-looking man was loafing about the ruins, smoking a pipe, with his hands in the pockets of a frowsy woollen jacket. Levison glanced at him carelessly; but the rough-looking fellow gazed at Levison in a very fixed way. Had Levison taken any heed of him he might have guessed that the man was observing him carefully, fixing his features upon his memory.

After a few minutes the man lounged away, with a grin on his stubbly face.

CHAPTER 15.

Struck Down!

"CARDEW, old man!"

It was the following day, and Ralph Reckness Cardew was lounging in an easy-chair before a log fire in his room at Eastwood House. A spiral of smoke curled up from a cigarette between his slim fingers.

"Hallo! Trot in, Levison!"

Levison came in, and Cardew pointed to a chair. Levison sat down and looked at his chum.

Cardew blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Have a cigarette?" he asked.

"No."

Cardew laughed.

"We're not on duty now," he remarked. "I've sneaked up here for a quiet smoke. Gussy's an ideal host; he let's a fellow do as he likes. Have you come to fetch me for anything?"

"I'm a bit worried!" said Levison.

"Reel it off," said Cardew encouragingly. "Confide it to your old pal. Droppin' money on steeplechases?"

"Don't be an ass!" said Levison gruffly. "Look here, Cardew, I'm jolly uneasy about you!"

"About me?" Ralph Reckness Cardew raised his eyebrow. "Dear

man, I'm all right—enjoyin' myself at the present moment, in fact. A good smoke, and particularly agreeable company——"

"I thought when we came here for Christmas you were going to leave St. Jim's troubles behind," said Levison. "But——"

"I've a good memory," said Cardew.

"You seem to me to have set out to provoke Tom Merry in every possible way," said Levison.

"That's so."

"You seem to have depended on his unwillingness to make a scene to keep on worrying him," went on Levison.

"Right!"

"Oh, you admit it?"

"Quite!"

"Isn't that rather rotten, Cardew?"

"I dare say," assented Cardew coolly. "It's my way! I detest the fellow, and I never forget a grudge. Under a jolly old screen of politeness and good manners, I set out to make him writhe. Havin' been endowed by Nature with about ten times as much brains as the excellent Thomas, the task was an easy one."

"It's a risky business," said Levison. "He might lose his temper some time, and then——"

"He lost it on Christmas Eve when I bagged his dance with Cousin Ethel," smiled Cardew.

"Was there a row, then?"

"Somethin' like it! He smacked my face."

"Oh!" ejaculated Levison.

"Then, as your charmin' sister appeared in the offing, I couldn't take action," said Cardew, still smiling, but with a deadly gleam in his eyes. "I nursed my injury till a more favourable moment. That's why I looked into his room on Christmas Day—to give him back what he had given me. But, alas! the excellent Thomas is sadly lackin' in brains, but he shines in the muscular line. I was held."

"I guessed something of the kind," said Levison. "I saw the state of your cuffs and your wrists. You must have

been mad to act in such a way, Cardew!"

"Think so? Well, nothin' came of it," drawled Cardew. "I was held; and I promised not to touch him again while we were at Eastwood House. I didn't promise that he shouldn't be touched. Only that I wouldn't touch him. There's a distinction there, though it did not dawn on the powerful intellect of Thomas."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothin'!" yawned Cardew. "I never mean anythin'. Shall we go down and play billiards?"

Levison shook his head. He was deeply troubled.

"What's the worry?" asked Cardew lightly. "I've been smacked and I've been held like a helpless baby and I've been made to toe the line and make a promise. Dear old Thomas triumphs all along the line, and I'm left to swallow my own smoke and grin and bear it. You know my patient, lamb-like nature—how meek I am in endurin' injuries and humiliation."

He threw the stump of the cigarette into the fire. Levison noticed that his hand was shaking.

"What are you thinking of, Cardew?" asked Levison very quietly.

"Nothin'!"

"I know you better than the other fellows do. I knew something must have happened—I knew you were brooding over it. You've let Tom Merry alone the last day or two. Cardew, I know, quite well that you've got something in your mind—some silly scheme. What is it?"

"Guess!" said Cardew, smiling.

"I can't guess—I want to know."

"So that you can stop me?" grinned Cardew.

"So that I can save you from making a fool of yourself," said Ernest Levison sternly. "So that I can save you from doing something that you'll be sorry for later, when you're cool."

"Dear man!" said Cardew.

"You won't tell me?"

"No."

"You admit that you've got some scheme in your mind?"

"I don't admit anythin'."

Levison sat in silence for a few minutes. Ralph Reckness Cardew stared at the fire. The forced smile had faded from his face; he looked hard, and bitter, and revengeful. Only too well Levison knew how bitterly Cardew must be resenting his humiliation—how it must have roused everything that was evil in his wayward nature. And Levison's uneasiness intensified. He was oppressed by a fear that the Christmas holidays would not terminate without some outbreak on Cardew's part, though what form it would take he could not imagine.

"You're a cheery sort of companion," said Cardew, breaking the silence at last. "Are you understudyin' the jolly old Quakers?"

"I'm worried," said Levison. "Cardew, if you can't keep your enmity to Tom Merry in check, wouldn't it be best to leave? Your uncle, Lord Lilburn, is leaving to-day."

"Not till I've finished with Tom Merry."

"But how——"

"Better not ask questions," yawned Cardew. He glanced at the clock. "I'm goin' down to play a hundred up with Olive. Comin'?"

"I'm going down to Easthorpe," said Levison. "Like to come with me?"

"Not in this snow, thanks. You know what a slacker I am."

"You'll keep clear of Tom Merry while I'm gone?"

Cardew laughed.

"My dear chap, haven't I promised not to touch Tom Merry? Isn't my word my bond?"

"Well, yes, I'm sure you'd keep your word," said Levison. "But—but I wish

"What's the good of wishin'?"

Levison made an impatient gesture, and left Cardew's room. The dandy of the Fourth shrugged his shoulders. At St. Jim's, Levison of the Fourth had

seemed to have a great influence over Cardew, but that influence was quite gone now. Ralph Reckness Cardew was going on his own way, spurred on by the bitterness of his humiliation, which blinded him to all else.

Ernest Levison, muffled up in a thick coat against the falling snow, tramped away by the footpath through the park, a short cut to the village of Easthorpe. He had a purchase to make in the village, and he would have been glad of Cardew's company in the walk to Easthorpe, if only to keep him away from Tom Merry.

But it never occurred to him that there was any danger in that walk in the winter dusk by the woodland footpath.

Once or twice he heard footfalls behind him, faint on the snow, but he did not look round. He was near the spot where the footpath joined the road when the footfalls behind him hurried, and then Levison noted them and glanced round.

A man in a rough coat and cap was close behind him. In the dusk and the falling snow recognition was not easy; but Levison's eyes were keen, and he knew that this was the man he had seen loafing about the ruins on the morning he had walked there with Miss Priscilla. Something in the man's manner warned him of hostility, and he jumped back.

Mike Lomax peered at him sharply.

"You're my bird, I reckon," he said.

Levison backed away.

"What do you mean? Stand back!"

Lomax chuckled hoarsely and made a spring at him. In a moment Levison was struggling in the grasp of the ruffian.

"Help!" shouted Levison.

His voice rang through the park, echoing among the frozen, leafless trees.

But the place was too lonely; there was no help. Mike Lomax had chosen his time well.

His powerful grasp was on the junior; Levison, sturdy as he was, was like an infant in his hands.

But he struggled desperately. He could only suppose that this ruffian, a stranger to him, was a footpad, and designed to rob him.

He freed his right arm and drove his clenched fist full in the ruffian's stubbly face. The blood spurted from Mike Lomax's mouth.

The ruffian panted out a curse, and then rushed madly at Levison.

Levison went to the ground with a crash. His face was driven into the snow, and a savage grip on the back of his neck held it there.

The stick Lomax carried under his arm had dropped to the ground. He picked it up and gripped it savagely.

Lash, lash, lash!

The blows descended like rain on the struggling junior.

Levison struggled, and writhed, and panted. Twice he kicked at the ruffian, and Lomax's howls showed that he was hurt. But the junior's desperate resistance only provoked his savage temper. The blows of the stick descended with more savage force.

Lash, lash, lash!

It seemed to Levison that he must be in the grip of a madman. The man, a stranger to him, was not seeking to rob him—he was beating him savagely, brutally. To the last Levison struggled and resisted, but he was powerless in the ruffian's grip. The blows descended harder and faster as the junior writhed with his face in the snow. His struggles ceased suddenly.

Lomax rose, panting.

The junior lay quite still. The ruffian realised that he was insensible.

He looked round quickly, stealthily, and then hurriedly plunged into the wood and disappeared.

On the lonely footpath Levison of St. Jim's lay unconscious, with the snow falling thicker and thicker upon his motionless form.

CHAPTER 16.

Not Tom Merry!

"LOOKING for Tom Merry?"

Ralph Reckness Cardew asked that question in a casual sort of way. Manners and Lowther were standing by a window in the hall, looking out at the falling snow in the thickening December dusk.

"Not yet," said Lowther.

"I dare say this snow's delayed him," remarked Manners. "He may have stayed at Dawes' cottage for shelter."

"I wonder!" said Cardew musingly.

Manners and Lowther glanced at him rather curiously. They did not see why Cardew should be interested in Tom Merry's movements that afternoon.

Cardew strolled away to the billiards-room, where some of the St. Jim's party were amusing themselves by knocking the balls about. Blake was performing a series of cannons, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood watching him, cue in hand. Herries and Digby looked on, and Cardew joined them.

"Good shot!" he remarked, as Jack Blake brought off another cannon.

Then he strolled restlessly away. In a deep window-seat he came on Sidney Clive and Doris Levison, reading a "Holiday Annual" together. Cardew exchanged a few words with them and wandered away.

He seemed strangely restless and ill at ease.

Wally of the Third and Manners minor and Frank Levison came downstairs muffled in coats and scarves.

"Goin' out?" asked Cardew.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said Wally cheerily. "We ain't afraid of a little snow in the Third, are we, you fellows?"

"No fear!" said Levison minor.

"Besides, we're taking out Pongo," remarked Reggie Manners, with a slightly sarcastic inflection in his voice. "What does the weather matter when we've got Pongo?"

"Look here, young Manners!" began Wally warmly. "If you don't want to come for a run with Pongo——"

"Could a chap like anything better," demanded Reggie, still sarcastic, and Levison minor chuckled.

"Some chaps might like to have their heads punched!" said Wally darkly.

"Some chaps might be able to punch them!" retorted Reggie. "Not you."

"I'll jolly well——"

"Begad!" It was Lord Conway's voice. "Are you always as polished as this, Walter, in dealing with visitors?"

"Oh, my only Aunt Jane!" ejaculated Wally, and he turned quickly at his eldest brother's voice.

"Oh, it's only Wally's gas!" said Reggie cheerfully. "We just let him run on, don't we, Frank?"

"We do," chuckled Frank.

"Oh, rats!" said Wally. "For goodness' sake get a move on, and don't stand cackling like a lot of old hens. Like to come for a run with Pongo, Conway?"

"At the present moment I beg to be excused," said the viscount, with a smile. "Even the delightful company of Pongo will not tempt me out in this weather."

"You mustn't get soft, you know," warned Wally, and he grinned and walked off with his comrades, leaving the heir of Eastwood staring.

Cardew smiled, and strolled away. He looked into the dining-room and found Manners' sister there, trying over things on the piano, with Miss Priscilla and Aunts Adeline and Matilda listening and knitting. Cardew backed out and moved along to the library. Cousin Ethel was there helping Lord Eastwood with his correspondence, and Cardew did not enter. He went to his own room at last and smoked a cigarette.

But he was too restless to remain there. He came down to the drawing-room again. Miss Priscilla gave him a kind smile.

"Has dear Tommy come she asked.

Cardew started a little. The kind old face seemed to give him a twinge of pain or remorse.

"I—I think not," he stammered.

"Is Tom out?" asked Doris Levison, looking round from the piano. "Perhaps he has met Ernest. Ernest has gone to the village, I think—they may have got shelter from the snow."

"I hope dear Tommy has taken shelter," said Miss Priscilla. "He is so delicate." Doris smiled. "The dear boy has gone to Mrs. Dawes' cottage," said Miss Priscilla. "He has taken the woollen comforter I knitted for her husband, who has rheumatism, or bronchitis, or lumbago, or something—I quite forget which, but I know it is something very unpleasant. It was so kind of Tommy to go; but he's always such a good little boy."

Cardew drifted out again.

Manners and Lowther were sitting by the big fire in the hall, playing chess, now. Cardew glanced at them without speaking. A few minutes later, muffled in a thick coat, Cardew was tramping through the snow and wind into Eastwood Park. Dusky as it was under the leafless, frozen trees, Cardew tramped on without a pause, and he reached the deserted summer-house in the wood.

From the interior of the little building, open on two sides to the wind, he caught a red glow, which he knew came from the bowl of a pipe. A scent of strong tobacco came to him. He stepped inside, and there was a husky exclamation.

"That you, sir?"

"Yes. Anything happened?"

Cardew drawled out the question in his usual lazy tones. But his eyes were keen and anxious as he peered at Mike Lomax in the gloom.

The ruffian chuckled hoarsely.

"Yes, sir! I've carried out your orders."

Cardew drew a quick, hard breath.

"Tom Merry——"

"I follered him on the footpath," said Lomax. "He put up a fight—look at my mouth! But I paid 'im!"

"On the footpath?" repeated Cardew,

puzzled. "I understood that he was gone to the Dawes' cottage. That's in another direction."

"I was watching on the drive, and saw him start," answered Lomax. "I follered him—I don't know where he was going, but he went by the footpath in the park, and I collared him there."

"What—what did you do?" breathed Cardew.

"What you told me, sir—gave him the hiding of his life," answered Lomax. "I reckon I've earned that five pun, sir."

Cardew's face was pale now.

"You—you did not go too far?"

Lomax did not answer. Cardew made a step towards the ruffian and caught him by his sleeve.

"You fool! I told you to thrash him. If you've hurt him—really hurt him—I'll have you landed in prison for it."

"He hit me in the face," muttered the ruffian sullenly. "He kicked and struggled. I gave it to him harder for that."

"Where did you leave him?"

"On the footpath."

"He was unable to get home?"

"I dunno."

"You fool—you brute!" hissed Cardew. "Do you dare to tell me that he was not able to get home?"

"I reckon he's home by this time, or ought to be," muttered Lomax. "He's all right. I reckon he'll bear the marks for a good time to come. That's all. I want my money, sir."

There was a threatening growl in the ruffian's voice.

Cardew stood silent.

"You hear me, sir. I've earned my money, and I shall have to get out of this neighbourhood for a bit—the feller might have knowed my face."

With a gesture of scorn Cardew flung a five-pound note at the ruffian.

"Get out of my sight," he muttered.

Lomax gave him a savage look, crammed the note into his pocket and slouched away.

Cardew stood motionless after he had

gone. For a long time he stood there, forgetful of his surroundings, his heart beating painfully.

What had he done?

The fierce, black, bitter resentment that had spurred him on till that moment seemed to have died away in his breast. His brain seemed to clear—in those moments he saw his conduct as it really was—and it sickened him. He had fallen to this—a depth to which he would never have dreamed of falling! It seemed to him now, as he stood there in the silence and solitude, like some evil dream.

He shook himself at last, as if shaking off troubling thoughts, and left the little building. With his head bent to the wind he tramped back to Eastwood House.

It was done now!

It was done, and could not be undone. He had been insulted, and had had to endure the insult. In revenge his enemy had been beaten by his order. After all, he began to reflect cynically, there was nothing in that to make a bother about. Nothing! Only if the ruffian had gone too far—if he had struck too hard—

Cardew hurried his steps.

He was glad to see the lights of Eastwood House gleaming through the winter dusk and the falling snowflakes. Had Tom Merry come in? Surely he had come in! He could not have been hurt—seriously hurt—surely Lomax could not have been such a fool—such a brute—Ralph Reckness Cardew's heart was throbbing when he entered the house.

"Hallo! You've been out in the snow?"

Cardew started violently.

It was Tom Merry's voice.

He stared blankly at the Shell fellow. Tom Merry looked ruddy and cheery, and there was no sign of damage about him. With what Mike Lomax had told him fresh in his mind, Cardew stared at Tom like a fellow in a dream, utterly confounded.

His strange expression did not escape Tom Merry's notice, and Cardew saw the wonder in his face, and tried to pull himself together.

"Yes—no——" he stammered. "You've been out? Caught in the snow?"

"Yes, rather, said Tom. "It's pretty thick, isn't it? I stayed at the Dawes' cottage for a bit to see if it would blow over, but it didn't, so I chanced it."

"You got home all right?"

"Eh! Looks like it—here I am," said Tom.

Cardew's brain was in a whirl. Had Lomax lied to him—lied to obtain his reward unearned? Was that the explanation? It was possible, but Cardew did not believe so. What fearful mistake had the ruffian made?

It seemed to Cardew, for some moments, that the walls were whirling round him. He saw Tom Merry's ruddy face as in a mist. And he saw the wonder growing there.

"Did you meet anybody coming back?"

Cardew knew, vaguely, how incautious such a question was in the circumstances. But for his life he could not have helped it. He wanted to know—he felt that he must know.

"Meet anybody?" repeated Tom. "No—the lane's pretty lonely. Are any of the fellows out?"

"Oh, yes! Levison's gone to the village," stammered Cardew. "I—I thought you might have met him."

"No, I haven't been near the village."

Cardew moved away. As soon as possible he sought his room, anxious for solitude, to think the thing over. Tom Merry had escaped the designed attack—that was clear now; he had escaped the danger without even knowing that it had threatened. Yet Lomax had carried out his orders—Cardew felt sure of it. What had happened? Had the brutal ruffian, in the winter dusk, made a mistake—attacked some other person in mistake for Tom Merry? Yet how was that possible, when he had watched

Tom at the abbey ruins a few days before in order to know him again without possibility of mistake?

What had happened?

Cardew hoped—he almost prayed—that Lomax had cheated him—that the ruffian had claimed his wages for a service unperformed. But if it was not that—what had happened?

CHAPTER 17.

By Whose Hand?

"PONGO!"

Pongo did not obey his master's voice.

The little mongrel was scuttling through the snow on the footpath, and the three fags of St. Jim's scuttled after him. The dusk was thickening into darkness, and Wally & Co. felt that it was time to return from their ramble in the snow. But Pongo seemed to have other intentions.

"Pongo!" shouted Wally.

"Stop, you horrid mongrel!" yelled Reggie Manners.

"Stop, you beast!" shouted Frank Levison.

Pongo scuttled on. Something seemed to have attracted his attention, and he declined to stop.

"Oh, let him rip!" said Reggie crossly. "Let's get back. They'll be having tea."

"Bosh!" said Wally.

A loud, prolonged whine came from Pongo. The dog had stopped of his own accord, and stood over something that was stretched in the snow. Loud and sharp and eerie in the darkening woods sounded the whine of the dog.

"He's found something," said D'Arcy minor.

"Rot!" said Reggie.

"You're a silly chump, Wally!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, cheese it, you two," said Levison minor. "Let's go and see what he's found, and nail him before he can scoot."

The three fags ran on. Pongo, whining over the still form in the snow, showed no desire to "scoot." He whined and whined again as the fags ran up.

"My only Aunt Jane! It's somebody!" exclaimed Wally.

"Phew!" Reggie Manners whistled.

Frank Levison ran quickly forward. He raised the head of the fallen figure in his arms, and a faint moan was heard.

"Strike a match, Wally," said Frank. "Let's see who it is."

Wally fumbled for a matchbox. The first match was instantly blown out by the wind; the second Wally sheltered in the cupped palm of his hand, holding it over the white face that was turned from the snow. A loud, terrible cry broke from Frank Levison.

"Ernie!"

"What?" gasped Wally.

"It's my brother."

"Great Scott!"

"Ernie!" panted Frank. "He's hurt—he's hurt! Ernie!"

Levison moaned faintly. His face was white as chalk, his eyes closed. His hands were frozen.

Frank dragged him to his feet. Wally grasped him, and the two fags held Levison between them.

"What—what's the matter with him?" exclaimed Reggie Manners.

"I don't know—he's hurt," sobbed Frank. "Ernie, old man. Can't you speak, Ernie?"

"Something's happened to him," said Wally sagely. "Look here, he's half frozen. We've got to get him up to the house, quick."

"We can carry him somehow," said Reggie. "He ain't a heavy-weight. Take hold, you fellows."

"Can't you speak, Ernie?"

But Ernest Levison could not speak. He was partly conscious, but his lips were frozen and numb. Only a faint moan came from him.

Frank choked back his rising terror. That there was something seriously

wrong with his brother was clear, and it was no time for grief and fear; it was a time for rapid action. The three fags lifted Ernest Levison in their arms and tramped away with him up the snowy path.

It was a good distance to the house—and it seemed like miles to the fags, in the wind and snow, with the weight of Ernest Levison on their arms.

But they tramped on with dogged determination.

Wally led the way by a short cut across the grounds, when the park was left behind, and they came out on the drive near the great portals of Eastwood House.

"Cut ahead and tell them, Reggie," panted D'Arcy minor.

Manners minor shot ahead at a breathless run and clamoured at the door. Wally and Frank followed, panting, labouring under the weight of their burden.

The great door was wide open when they arrived, with light streaming out into the winter dark.

Reggie had spread the news. A crowd of startled faces greeted the fags as they arrived with their burden.

"It's Levison——"

"What's the trouble?"

"He's ill——"

Lord Conway received Levison from the arms of the fags and carried him in. Lord Eastwood came hurrying from the library with a startled face.

"What is it, Conway?"

"Something has happened to Levison, father! Will you telephone for the doctor at once while I take him to his room?"

"But what——"

"He has been brutally attacked, I think—has lain in the snow since."

"Good heavens!"

The viscount carried Levison up the stairs. The junior's weight was nothing to him. Frank Levison followed—he did not mean to leave his brother. He did not even think of Doris in those terrible moments.

Lord Eastwood was busy on the telephone. A few minutes more and a car was grinding away on the snowy drive to fetch the doctor. The Christmas party gathered, discussing the strange affair in hushed tones. Cardew, shut up in his room, was the only one of the St. Jim's party who did not know what had happened.

Lord Conway carried Levison into his room, switching on the electric light. Frank followed him. Clive had come up, his face pale and startled. With deft, quick hands Lord Conway removed Levison's clothes and put him into bed; and in a few minutes more there were hot-water bottles at his feet, and the blankets were piled on him. The viscount sat by the bed to await the arrival of the medical man. Frank sat down quietly, his face colourless, to wait, too. Clive sat on the edge of the bed, his face the picture of misery.

Downstairs, Tom Merry & Co. were discussing the occurrence, when a soft hand was laid on Tom's arm. He turned to see Doris Levison.

"What has happened?" whispered the girl.

Tom hesitated.

"My brother——"

"Something's happened to him," said Tom reluctantly. "He—he seems to have been knocked down—somehow—I—I think it's not serious, Miss Doris."

"Where is he?"

"In his room."

The girl ran lightly up the stairs.

The Terrible Three looked up at one another with dismal faces. They knew what a shock this would be to Doris. The three Levisons—the two brothers and the sister—were bound to one another by a strong tie of affection.

"Poor Doris!" muttered Manners.

"But who—who could have done it?" breathed Lowther.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Some footpad, I suppose—I can't make it out! Poor old Levison!"

"Bai Jove! This is feahful, you fellows!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy

dismally. "Poor old Levison! What howwid wuffian can have pitched into him?"

"It beats me," said Blake. "Hallo! Here's the doctor! Thank goodness for that."

The medical gentleman had arrived. He was taken up to Levison's room at once.

The whole party waited anxiously for news. It came at last.

The doctor's explanation was heard with amazement. Levison had been cruelly beaten—his back and arms showed weals and bruises caused by a rain of brutal blows. Someone unknown had beaten him savagely; but an examination of his clothes showed that he had not been robbed; the attack seemed to have been inspired by sheer unmeaning brutality. He had suffered as much from exposure as from the brutal beating; but he was in no danger. He would be ill—that was certain—but all he needed was careful nursing. That last item of information was a great relief to the St. Jim's party.

But who had done it—and why? That was a mystery—a mystery that puzzled and baffled all at Eastwood House.

CHAPTER 18.

Cardew's Punishment!

"YOU'RE lookin' glum!" Ralph Reckness Cardew strolled into Sidney Clive's room. He was tired of his own company; tired of speculating on the problem that troubled him. With an effort, Cardew had dismissed the matter from his mind, and he had strolled along to speak to Clive, feeling the need of company.

He expected to find Clive dressing for dinner at that hour. He found him sitting by a low fire in his room, with a dark and gloomy face.

"Haven't you heard?" muttered Clive.

"Anythin' happened?"

"Yes."

"Well, I haven't heard it," said Cardew. "I've been in my room, workin' out problems." His manner was light, but there was a shade of anxiety on his handsome face as he looked at Clive. The thought was in his mind at once that some news had been heard of Max Lomax's blunder—if, after all, Lomax had blundered. Cardew realised that it was necessary for him to be very careful.

Whether he repented of the wickedness into which his fierce resentment had hurried him, he hardly knew himself. But he knew that it was ruin to him if the truth ever came out. Even his nearest and dearest chums, Clive and Levison, must never suspect.

"Levison come in?" he drawled.

Clive nodded without speaking.

"Well, what's the jolly old happenin' that you're lookin' like an owl about?" asked Cardew cheerily. "Has Gussy lost his latest top-hat in a snowdrift?"

"Don't!" muttered Clive.

"Somethin' serious?"

"Yes."

"Well, give it a name," said Cardew impatiently. "What's happened?"

"Levison——"

Cardew's face changed.

"Nothin' happened to old Ernest?"

"Yes."

"He told me he was going down to the village," said Cardew. "What's happened to him? Run over by a car——"

"No, no! He—he was found on the footpath——"

"The footpath?"

"Yes."

"In the park?"

"Yes."

"Found?" repeated Cardew, in a voice so unlike his own that it sounded strange and jarring to his ears. "Found? Did you say found? Was he hurt?"

"Yes."

"On the footpath in the park? Hurt?"

It seemed to Raiph Reckness Cardew

that an icy hand was clutching at his heart. What had he done—what had he done?

He made a spring towards Clive, and caught him by the arm so savagely that Clive gasped with pain. He shrank a little from the strange, terrible expression on Cardew's convulsed face.

"What had been done to him?" panted Cardew. "Quick—tell me—you fool, tell me!"

"He's been beaten——"

"Beaten!"

"Some ruffian seems to have set on him," groaned Clive. "He wasn't robbed—his watch and money are in his pockets. He was beaten with a cudgel horribly—and left lying in the snow. He was insensible—when they found him—— I—I think he hasn't come to yet."

Cardew stared at him. His grasp dropped from Clive's arm. His face was white, his eyes almost wild.

"Levison!" said Cardew in a broken voice. "Levison! Old Ernie! My own pal—as good a pal as a fellow ever had! Oh, Heaven, I suppose this is what I deserve!"

"What do you mean?" muttered Clive. There was something in Cardew's look that almost scared him. "What——"

Cardew did not answer. He hurried out of the room and went along to Levison's door. He tapped very softly, opened the door a few inches, and looked in.

He caught a glimpse of Ernest Levison in the bed, his unconscious face on the white pillow—of Frank, sunk deep in a chair, motionless, soundless. Doris, sitting by the head of the bed, glanced round swiftly and put her finger to her lips.

Cardew made her a sign—an imperative sign; the girl rose silently and crossed to the door.

"How is he?" breathed Cardew.

"He has not spoken yet."

"He is hurt?"

"Yes."

"But"—Cardew choked over the words—"is there any danger?"

"The doctor thinks not."

Cardew felt his heart throb. A terrible fear had been upon him. He breathed more freely.

"I had to know!" he whispered, and he withdrew as silently as he had come. Doris returned to her chair by the bedside.

Cardew lingered in the broad corridor. He leaned on the oaken banister. He felt strangely tired and ill. There was a step below—Tom Merry was coming up.

Cardew's eyes gleamed at him.

The vengeance he had planned to fall upon Tom Merry had fallen upon his own chum—his best chum! It was a just punishment, so far as Cardew was concerned, for his wickedness. He felt that it was so, yet the sight of Tom Merry, well and fit, while his chum was stretched on a bed of sickness, roused deep bitterness in his breast. Wally of the Third was following Tom up the stairs, but Cardew hardly noticed the fag. He stepped towards Tom as the Shell fellow reached the landing.

Tom's face softened as he saw the white misery in Cardew's handsome face. Evidently the disaster to Levison had hit the dandy of the Fourth hard.

"You've heard, of course?" said Tom.

"Yes—I've seen him. I—I suppose they don't know who did it," said Cardew.

"No. But the police will find him, I fancy, when Levison is well enough to give a description of him," said Tom. "The villain who did this won't escape unpunished, I'm sure of that!"

Cardew winced.

Tom Merry paused a minute outside Levison's room, in the hope, perhaps, of hearing his voice. But all was silent, and Tom went to his own room.

Cardew leaned on the banisters, sick and miserable. His wickedness had come home to him, and, like Cain of old, he felt that his punishment was

more than he could bear. A wild impulse was upon him to descend to proclaim his guilt to all the assembled house-party—to take as his just reward the horror and scorn and indignation in every face; then to go forth alone, despised, for ever shamed.

The voice of Wally of the Third came to him, low but distinct. He had hardly noticed the fag, but he realised that Wally was speaking to him—strange words for him to hear.

"You cur! You cur! You cur!"

Cardew turned a dull look on the fag. What was the boy assailing him for now—assailing a guest in his father's house? He hardly cared. He only stared dully at the red, almost flaming face of the indignant fag.

"You cur! You cur!" Wally's words came almost in a hiss between his teeth. "You've got to get out! Do you hear? You've got to get out of this house, you cur!"

Then Cardew understood.

Wally knew!

CHAPTER 19.

Get Out!

WALLY of the Third came closer to Cardew. He was trembling with passion, his hands were clenched. It seemed that it was only with difficulty that the fag restrained himself from dashing his clenched fists full into the face of the white, stricken junior standing before him.

"You cur!" Wally seemed unable to think of any other epithet. "Oh, you cur! You meant it for Tom Merry—and Levison got it! Your own pal! Oh, you cur!"

Cardew tried to pull himself together. How did Wally know? What did it all mean? He seemed dazed.

A minute or two before, the impulse had been on him to confess, to proclaim his guilt, to rush recklessly on his punishment. That impulse was gone now. At the thought of what would follow he shuddered in every fibre of his body.

The look on Doris' face—when she knew—on Frank's! And to save his life he could not have lied now. He looked at the indignant fag, with haggard eyes.

"You're to go!" said Wally. "Do you understand? Do you want me to speak to my father—to Gussy? Will you go without a scene, or wait till you're kicked out, like the cur you are?"

Cardew made a gesture towards Levison's room.

"I can't go while he's like that!" he whispered.

"You're going, and at once! You shan't sleep another night in this house!" said Wally between his teeth. "You cur!"

Cardew recovered himself a little.

"Come into my room," he said.

"No need! I've told you——"

"Come in, kid!"

Cardew went to his room, and after a moment's hesitation Wally followed him. Cardew closed the door and faced the fag in the bright electric light.

"What do you know about this?" he asked. He seemed almost himself again now. His face was white, but calm; his voice cool and steady. Little outward indication was there of the misery and remorse that gnawed within.

"I saw you in the summer-house that day with that brute Lomax," muttered Wally. "I heard something. You told him to watch Tom Merry, the day he went to the abbey with Miss Fawcett, so that he would know him again. Lomax has done this."

"You've told Tom Merry?"

"No!"

Cardew breathed more freely.

"I'd have warned him," said Wally. "I thought some rotten trick was going to be played—snowballing him, or something—some sort of a jape. I never thought of anything like this! I never knew there was a cowardly villain in this house!"

Cardew shrank a little.

"Only afterwards," continued Wally,

"I found that Tom hadn't gone to the abbey ruins at all. Something happened to stop him."

"He did not go?"

"No; Levison went——"

"Levison!"

"Yes," said Wally savagely, "Levison went instead, for some reason. And your scoundrel, who was watching, must have taken him for Tom Merry, as he was with Miss Fawcett at the time and place you told him. When I found that that had happened I thought I'd hold my tongue. I didn't want to meddle, and I thought Tom was all right. I never dreamed it was anything but a jape of some sort. But when we found Levison I knew the kind of jape you'd planned with that brute. I knew then!"

"So—so that was how!" Cardew spoke almost unconsciously. "And I—I never knew!"

"If you'd happened to know, you'd have warned your brute to be more careful, and Tom would have got this instead of Levison!" said Wally fiercely. "That's it, isn't it? Oh, you cur! That hound was watching the place for Tom, and if he'd known Tom by sight he'd have set on him. Tom was out at the same time as Levison. But he believed that Levison was Tom Merry! You couldn't even make a cowardly plot like this without bungling! I'm glad you bungled, too! I'm sorry for Levison—but better him than Tom Merry! You cur!"

"Are you going to tell them?"

"Yes, if you don't clear! You're not fit to stay in this house—or any decent house! If my father knew, he'd have the servants fling you out! If the Head knew, you'd never be allowed to go back to St. Jim's next term! You cur!"

"That's enough," said Cardew.

"You're going?"

"I'm going!"

"The sooner the better," said Wally. "When Levison's able to speak he will give a description of the brute, and Lomax will be caught. He will give you away, most likely."

"He won't," said Cardew coolly "It's worth his while to keep his mouth shut—even if they get him."

Wally clenched his hands.

"I've a good mind to go straight to the pater and tell him all that I know!" he said.

"There might be some difficulty in proving it," drawled Cardew. "A great deal of difficulty, I think."

Wally's face flamed at him.

"Let me pass! I'm going to my father!"

"No need for that," smiled Cardew—a ghastly smile. "I don't want a scandal—proved or unproved. I'm going. Will you give me time to pack my trunk, dear boy, after this exhibition of hospitality?"

Wally stepped to the door. His face was hard and set.

"If you're not gone in half an hour I shall go to my father and tell him the whole story!" he said.

And, with a look of scorn and loathing that brought a rush of crimson into Cardew's white face, the fag left the room.

Cardew stood for some minutes, silent, without movement. This was the end of it.

His dastardly plot had recoiled on his own head. His scheme of vengeance had laid his own chum on a bed of sickness. His wickedness, instead of being buried deep in the deepest secrecy, was known. He was ordered out of the house by a Third Form fag! And he had to go! He had to go—without a word to Levison, without a word to the faithful friend who had been struck down by this bravo's blunder!

This was the end and outcome of his long and bitter feud with Tom Merry—a feud begun in sheer idleness, perverse waywardness—which had led him from bad to worse, till it had landed him in crime! For this was crime!

This was the end—the end that he deserved. The brute whom he had employed had exceeded his instructions

—as Cardew might have expected, from the nature of the man. And it was upon Levison that the man's savage brutality had been wreaked. This was what he deserved—and now he was going, creeping away like a thief in the night, leaving surmise, perhaps suspicion, behind him.

And there was no help!

A quarter of an hour later Ralph Reckness Cardew slipped quietly from the house. A note left on his dressing-table, addressed to D'Arcy, made his excuses—explained that he was called suddenly to his grandfather's home. That was Cardew's only farewell. He went without a word—and it was not till some hours later that Tom Merry & Co. knew that he had gone.

CHAPTER 20.

Forget and Forgive!

FOR three days the doctor's orders kept Levison of the Fourth to his bed; and for two or three days further he had to keep his room. Then he was able to rejoin the house-party, looking a little pale, but very like his old self. There was keen sympathy from everyone; but Levison was not a fellow to ask for sympathy or to care for it; he seemed to wish chiefly that the whole episode should be forgotten as speedily as possible.

But it was not so easy for such a matter to be dismissed. The brute who had attacked him had to be found and punished, and Levison had two interviews with the police on the subject. But he was able to give no description whatever of the man.

That was a disappointment to the police, and a surprise to Levison's comrades. The winter dusk, the suddenness of the dastardly attack, explained it, perhaps; yet it was strange that so keen and observant a fellow as Levison should have seen and noted nothing of his assailant. Whatever he knew or had seen, the fact remained that he

gave no description of Mike Lomax; he simply stated that he had nothing whatever to say on that point. Neither did he advance any theory as to why the attack had been made.

Of all the St. Jim's party, only Wally knew why Levison was silent. From Levison's silence Wally realised that Levison knew or suspected. He was silent because to speak might have involved his own chum in disgrace and shame. And as Levison was silent Wally kept his own counsel—he did not even speak to Levison on the subject. He shrank from the terrible scandal that would have followed the exposure of the facts; and if Levison, the injured party, chose to hold his tongue, it was not for anyone else to speak. Cardew was gone, and it was best for the matter to die away into oblivion.

Levison was told that Cardew was gone, and made no comment. Only Wally of the Third knew that he guessed why the dandy of the Fourth had left.

Cardew certainly was not missed by the Christmas party at Eastwood House. Tom Merry & Co. wondered a little at his abrupt departure, but it came as a relief to them.

It was on the second day after Levison came down that he set out on a ramble by himself in the park, avoiding the company even of Doris and Frank. His ramble brought him to the little summer-house in the wood—lonely, banked round with drifting snow.

He glanced round him before he entered.

"You've come, old bean?"

Ralph Reckness Cardew stood there. His manner was light and airy, as of old; but there were lines in his handsome face, the imprint of troubled thought. Cardew's days had not been happy since the disaster to his chum.

"Yes—I had your letter," said Levison. He held out his hand frankly.

"Better let me tell you somethin' be-

fore you shake hands with me," smiled Cardew.

"You need tell me nothing," said Levison quietly.

Cardew started.

"You know?"

"Yes."

"Then D'Arcy minor has told you, after all?"

"Wally?" repeated Levison. "He has told nothing. Does he know anything? How could he know?"

"He knew so much that he ordered me out of the house," said Cardew coolly. "That's why I went. I wasn't keen on leaving you without a word."

"Well, he has said nothing," he knew," said Levison.

Cardew looked relieved.

"Then how do you know anything?" he asked.

"I've thought it out. I knew you were planning something, as I told you—something foolish, something wrong," said Levison. "I warned you, as you remember. When this happened—I knew. Not at the moment, of course—but thinking it over afterwards. I knew the man; I'd seen him at the abbey ruins, where I went instead of Tom Merry—"

"That's what did the mischief."

"There was no motive for the attack on me; the man was evidently put up to it. Nobody had a motive for that. But somebody had a motive for putting up an attack on Tom Merry. Cardew, I should never have dreamed that you were capable of it!"

"Neither should I—until I did it!" said Cardew. "But I never meant it to happen as it did. A thrashing—that was all I meant. And I never dreamed that the brute would make a mistake in his victim. But I'm not makin' excuses. It was the limit—the outside edge—I know that now. I knew it all the time, of course, but wouldn't see it till too late. They haven't got the man?"

"I gave no description of him."

"For my sake?"

"Yes."

Cardew was silent for a minute or two.

"I asked you to meet me here, to confess," he said. "That's not needed, as you know already. I'm prepared to face the music."

"There's no music to face," said Levison, with a faint smile.

"You mean you're takin' it quietly?"

"What else can I do? I don't want you disgraced—I don't want you punished. You know that. If it had happened to Tom Merry, and I'd guessed the truth, I should have been bound to speak out. It happened to me, and it's my own business—so I shall say nothing."

Another long silence. Cardew's face was quivering.

"I'd better go, then," he said. "I understand that it's all over—you've done with me. You can tell Clive, or he'll be puzzled when we go back to St. Jim's. Good-bye!"

He turned to the doorway.

"I shall tell Clive nothing," said Levison; "and it will make no difference when we get back to St. Jim's. You must have been mad to act as you did, Cardew. I've had a rotten time; but I'm glad I went through it instead of Tom Merry. It can be kept secret now. We've got to forget it."

"You mean that, Levison?"

"Of course I do."

Levison held out his hand again. This time Cardew took it.

Ernest Levison said nothing of that meeting when he returned to Eastwood House. Cardew's name was hardly mentioned again among the St. Jim's party so long as the Christmas holidays lasted. As the vacation drew to its close and the new term neared Tom Merry thought of his rival, and wondered what would be the outcome of the feud when he met Cardew again at St. Jim's. Only Levison knew that there was a change in Ralph Reckness

Cardew—and that his long contest with Tom Merry would take a new and surprising turn when the juniors met once more at the old school.

CHAPTER 21.

Back to St. Jim's!

"HEAH we are again, deah boys!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that remark.

A swarm of St. Jim's fellows crowded the platforms at Wayland Junction. From all corners of the kingdom they were gathering for the new term.

There was a buzz of cheery voices, an incessant trampling of feet, a bumping of baggage, and shouting for porters. Fellows who knew one another exchanged greetings at the tops of their voices over countless intervening heads.

"Hallo, Tom Merry!"

"Cheerio, Gussy!"

"Haven't you washed during the vac, Trimble? You don't look it!"

"Keep off my feet, you ass!"

"Is that Gussy, the one and only

"

"Weally, deah boy——"

"Buck up, you fellows! The local's going!"

There was a swarming across the bridge over the line to the platform where the local train for Rylcombe waited. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy waved a delicately gloved hand to his chums, Blake and Herries and Digby.

"Wally wound, you chaps! We shall be left behind at this wate!"

Study No. 6 linked arms and shoved through the crowd. There were loud and wrathful protests on all sides as they shoved.

"Keep back!"

"Don't shove, you School House cads!" roared Fatty Wynn, of the New House.

"Weally, Wynn, you are in the way," said Arthur Augustus. "In the cires, deah boy, we have no wesource but to shove."



Wally D'Arcy struck a match and held it over the still form in the snow. Next moment, a loud, terrible cry broke from Frank Levison. "Ernie!" "What?" gasped Wally. "It's my brother!" panted Frank, his face as white as chalk. "Ernie! He's hurt—he's hurt! Ernie!"

"Yoop!" roared Fatty, as he sat down suddenly, and Study No. 6 trod gently over him.

"Whom are you shoving?" demanded Figgins, also of the New House, in heated tones.

"You, old bean!" answered Blake genially; and, suiting the action to the word, he strewed George Figgins by the side of Fatty Wynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're catching the first local," remarked Blake. "These New House bounders can wait for the second train."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"There's Kerr! Give him a shove for luck!"

Kerr of the New House was not really in the way. But the chums of the School House were in great spirits, and they gave Kerr of the Fourth a shove for luck. Kerr sat down with a bump.

"Ow!"

"Take a little west, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, as Study No. 6 pursued their destructive course.

Kerr scrambled up behind them.

The swarm of fellows had closed up, and a dozen pushing juniors intervened. Kerr could not reach the enemy, but he jerked an apple from his pocket, and took aim over a dozen heads. The silk hat of Arthur Augustus gleamed in the wintry sunlight, high over the tumult, like the plume of Navarre at the battle of Ivry. Only for a moment more did that gleaming topper gleam in the sunlight. Then Kerr's apple smote it, and it flew.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus, suddenly hatless, halted.

"Come on!" roared Blake.

"My hat——"

"Come on!" shouted Herries.

"Yaas, but my hat——"

"Blow your hat!" howled Digby. "We shall lose the train!"

"Blow the twain!" retorted Arthur Augustus warmly. "I would wathah lose the twain than lose my hat!"

And Arthur Augustus plunged among innumerable legs in pursuit of his topper.

"Clear the way, there!"

"Gerrouit!"

"Come on, Gussy!"

"Wats!"

The throng surged on to the local platform, carrying on Blake and Herries and Digby. Arthur Augustus was left in chase of his hat. It was a difficult chase. Redfern found the hat floating against his knees, and passed it on with a really good kick, considering how quick it was, and the hat sailed away across the platform. It almost bonneted Levison of the Fourth, who, however, headed it, and sent it sailing on. After it rushed Arthur Augustus, red and wrathful, with his celebrated eyeglass flying at the end of its cord.

He rushed into Clive and Cardew of the Fourth, and sent them spinning. Clive staggered against an automatic machine; Cardew staggered against Kangaroo of the Shell, and Kangaroo staggered in his turn.

Arthur Augustus had almost reached the elusive hat, when Levison minor of the Third passed it to Manners minor, Reggie Manners sent it sailing again, with a well-directed kick, over the head of its owner.

"You young wottahs!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The swell of St. Jim's spun round after the hat.

It had dropped behind him, at the feet of three Shell fellows who were coming off the bridge over the line.

"Don't twead on my hat, Tom Mewwy!" yelled Arthur Augustus, "Keep your feet off my hat, Mannahs!"

The Terrible Three of the Shell halted.

"Dear me!" said Monty Lowther. "Here's Gussy playing a game of chasing his hat, like a kitten chasing its tail. All right, Gussy, we'll play!"

And Monty Lowther, who had evidently returned for the new term in

his accustomed humorous state, proceeded to dribble the hat along the platform.

"You wintah wottah——"

"Pass!" roared Figgins.

"Here you are!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Figgins, you bwute——"

"Take the pass, Fatty!" yelled Figgins.

"This way!" roared Fatty Wynn.

"You fwightful wottahs!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "You are wuinin' my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you are askin' for a feahful thwashin'——"

"Pass! Pass!"

The hat sailed up and down the platform, looking less and less like a hat every moment. Fellows seemed to care little even whether they lost their train, so long as they obtained a free kick at the sailing topper. Even Blake took a kick at it—which could not be considered chummy, good chum as Blake was.

"Blake, you wottah!" gasped the breathless swell of St. Jim's.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dig, you beast, if you kick my hat——"

Crash!

"Oh cwumbs! Stop it, somebody!"

Somebody stopped the hat. Kildare of the Sixth, captain of St. Jim's, came striding along the platform with Darrell, and he stopped the wrecked hat, quite unintentionally, with his nose. Kildare uttered a sharp exclamation as the unexpected missile smote him.

"Oh gad!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Goal!" yelled Monty Lowther.

The shattered hat fell at Kildare's feet. Arthur Augustus rushed up breathlessly, to be transfixed by the glare of the captain of the school.

"D'Arcy! Is that your hat?"

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Take a hundred lines!"

"What-a-at?"

"Play any more silly tricks, and I'll cane you."

"Bai Jove! Weally, Kildare——"

The great man of the Sixth walked on, unheeding. Arthur Augustus gathered up what was left of his hat. Blake yelled to him from an open carriage door.

"Come on, Gussy! We're moving."

Arthur Augustus raced for the carriage and jumped in. The train moved out of the station, crammed with St. Jim's fellows. They waved their hats and sent cat-calls at the fellows left crowding on the platform. But Arthur Augustus did not wave his hat, or his hand, or utter a word. He sat with his silk topper on his knees, gazing at it, and gazing, as if by force of gazing he could gaze it back into something like the shape of a hat. Until the train arrived at Rylcombe, Arthur Augustus sat in mournful contemplation of that which had been a thing of beauty, but had not been destined to be a joy for ever.

CHAPTER 22.

Not a Double Event!

TOM MERRY looked thoughtful.

The new term was only a day old, and the Terrible Three were in their study, No. 10 in the Shell. Winter mists lay thick on the old quadrangle of St. Jim's, but inside Study No. 10 all was bright and cheery. Tom Merry stared at the glowing fire, and wrinkled his youthful brow in thought.

Manners and Lowther watched him, perhaps guessing what was in his mind, and waiting for him to speak.

"Give it a name!" said Monty Lowther suddenly.

Tom looked up.

"You're thinking about Cardew?" asked Manners.

"Well, yes."

Monty Lowther glanced at the study clock.

"You've been thinking for about ten minutes," he remarked. "Now let's have the result."

Tom laughed.

"It's a bit difficult," he said. "You know that Cardew of the Fourth bagged the junior captaincy last term, and I _____"

"And you let him do it," said Monty.

"Well, it wasn't for me to make a fuss, if the fellows wanted a change," said Tom. "But never mind that."

"We do mind it, in this study," said Manners.

"We did, we do, and we shall!" added Lowther categorically. "But what about it now?"

"I thought I ought to give Cardew a chance to make good, and back him up," said Tom. "It turned out badly. He's made a fairly rotten junior captain, as I think all the school knows."

"Perfectly rotten!" agreed Lowther. "If you made up your mind to it, Tom, you could hook him out of it, and down him, and it would be a case of as-you-were."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Tom thoughtfully. "I've been thinking of it during the holidays."

"I'm glad to hear it!"

"When he was bothering me so much at D'Arcy's place, in the vac, I made up my mind to give him the licking of his life as soon as we were back at school. But he left, and I cooled down. I'd rather the thing dropped, if Cardew is willing. There's no need for us to punch one another that I can see."

"You never could let the sun go down on your giddy wrath, old scout," grinned Lowther.

"Well, I believe I've never felt vindictive," said Tom. "I hate to keep anything up against a fellow, if it can be helped. I'd rather let Cardew severely alone, all the more because I'm on friendly terms with his friends, Clive and Levison. That's what I was thinking out. There was an understanding about a meeting with the gloves on,

but if Cardew says nothing about it, I suppose I need not."

And Tom looked inquisitive at his chums.

Both of them smiled.

It was like Tom Merry to forget old offences, even in the case of so persistent and irritating an enemy as Ralph Reckness Cardew had been to him.

"I'd rather you licked _____ said Manners.

"Much rather," said Lowther.

"But if he doesn't begin——"

"Oh, he'll begin right enough," said Monty Lowther confidently. "Cardew hasn't done with you yet."

Tom looked a little worried.

"Blessed if I see why he should be so much up against me," he said. "I've never done him any harm, and he's done me a good deal. But suppose we let it go at that—leave Cardew alone, unless he goes on the war-path of his own accord?"

"I suppose you can let it go at that," assented Monty Lowther, rather reluctantly; and Manners nodded, after a pause. Both Tom's chums resented his loss of the junior captaincy more than Tom himself did.

"That's settled, then," said Tom cheerily. "It's rotten to begin the term with a row."

And Tom proceeded to sort out his books for prep, his chums following his example.

There was a tap at the study door, and it opened to admit Aubrey Racke of the Shell.

Racke of the Shell lounged into the study with an insolent air. The Terrible Three looked at him rather grimly. The blackguard of the Shell was not a welcome visitor in Study No. 10.

"Want anything?" asked Manners, with more directness than politeness.

"Nothin'."

"Take it and go, then," suggested Lowther.

"I've got a message for Tom Merry."

"Well, here's Tom Merry," said the owner of that name.

Racke sat on the edge of the table and swung his legs.

"I've come from Cardew," he explained.

"Oh!" said Tom, his brow darkening.

Monty Lowther grinned at Manners, who laughed. It did not seem, after all, that Tom's peaceable desires would be realised.

"Cardew's expected to hear from you before this," said Racke.

"Has he?"

"You had a row at D'Arcy's place over Christmas, I understand," drawled Racke. "You undertook to fight it out when you got back to St. Jim's. As Cardew hasn't heard from you, he's asked me to call in, as his second, and make the arrangements."

"I should have thought he would have asked Levison or Clive," said Tom.

"Well, he asked me. Are you backing out?"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed at the cad of the Shell.

"You can tell Cardew that I'll meet him when and where he likes," he answered quietly.

"Hear, hear!" said Manners and Lowther together.

"Mean that?" asked Racke.

Tom half-rose from his chair. Aubrey Racke's manner was as insulting as he could make it. But Tom sat down again.

"Yes, I mean it. Now get out, please!"

"Well, you see, you seemed so backward in comin' forward, you know," drawled Racke, "I really began to think it was an attack of cold feet in this study, or somethin' of the sort."

Monty Lowther rose to his feet with a gleam in his eyes.

"You really thought that, Racke?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!"

"Quite a mistake on your part," said Monty. "Quite, I assure you. Tom's ready to meet Cardew and give him the licking he was asking for all last term.

Manners will second him, and I shall be at liberty to make a double event of it, with your assistance."

"What?"

"A double event will be quite interesting, and start the term in style," said Lowther. "Tom and Cardew, and you and little me, Racke. Who's your second?"

"I—I'm not fightin' anybody, you silly ass!" exclaimed Racke, with a considerable diminution of insolence in his manner.

"Your mistake. You keep on making mistakes," said Lowther genially. "You're fighting somebody. You're fighting me, you know."

"I'm not."

"You are, old man! Who's your second?" persisted Lowther.

"I'm Cardew's second, and so——"

"My dear man, Cardew can get another second, and a third and fourth, if he wants them. You're my mutton."

"Look here——"

"You wouldn't care to stand idly by while a fight is going on, with the war-like blood of the Rackets boiling in your veins," continued Monty Lowther. "You'd be yearning for a scrap, Racke, and I'm going to oblige you. It's arranged?"

"It's not!" growled Racke, slipping from the table and moving towards the door. "I'll give Cardew your answer, Merry."

"Do!" said Tom, laughing.

"Don't forget your appointment with me, Racke," said Lowther.

"I've no appointment with you, you ass!" snapped Racke.

"Dear me," said Monty. "I begin to think that there must be cold feet in this study, after all; only dear old Racke must have brought them in with him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sure you don't want to fix up that appointment, Racke?"

"No, you dummy!"

"Then take your cold feet away, and yourself along with them," said Monty

Lowther; "and you may as well take my boot, too!"

Racke made a jump into the passage as Monty Lowther advanced on him.

Crash!

A boot caught Racke as he escaped, and he staggered across the Shell passage.

"Ow!"

Racke spun round in the passage and glared at Monty Lowther, smiling in the doorway, with a glare that ought to have withered the cheerful Monty on the spot.

"You rotter—ow!—you cad—wow! I—I——"

"Like to fix up that appointment, after all, and make a double event of it?" asked Lowther blandly.

Aubrey Racke slouched away down the passage without replying. Apparently it was to be, after all, only a single event!

CHAPTER 23.
Cardew's Way!

RALPH RECKNESS CARDEW yawned.

He seemed tired.

It was not prep that had tired him; he had not touched his prep. But since the opening of the new term Cardew had had several things to do, and a number of matters that required attention. The post of junior captain at St. Jim's was not all "beer and skittles," as Cardew found; and, although he cheerfully neglected all the duties that could be neglected, there were some that couldn't be treated in that easy manner. And so Cardew found his post a tiring one.

Levison and Clive were at work, setting Cardew an example that he did not follow. Cardew was stretched elegantly in the study armchair; a place he often occupied while his study-mates were at work. Possibly he found exertion enough in watching them.

"No prep this evening, Cardew?" asked Sidney Clive, rather sarcastically.

Cardew shook his head.

"Too exhaustin'," he explained.

"You may find Mr. Lathom still more exhausting in the morning."

"Old Lathom's an easy-goin' bird at the beginnin' of the term," said Cardew easily. "Luckily, we're not in the Shell, under the eagle eye of Linton. I can manage Lathom."

Clive grunted, and dropped his eyes to his books again.

"There's a lot of work and responsibility on my hands, you see," went on Cardew plaintively. "I've had a lot to do. Interviews with Kildare, as head of the games—interviews with the Housemasters—no end of jawin'. Lots of things to fix up. I've made no end of arrangements for the term——"

"Good!" said Levison.

"I've forgotten most of them already."

"What?"

"Can't remember half of them," said Cardew coolly. "Dash it all, fellows here seem to want to make work of football. I always thought football was a game."

"You needn't have butted into Tom Merry's job if you didn't want to take the trouble he took," said Clive.

Cardew nodded.

"A hit—a very palpable hit!" he replied. "You're right, as you always are, with your solid common-sense, Clivey."

"Oh, rats!"

"But I did butt in, and here I am," said Cardew, "junior captain with all sorts of worries and woes on my young shoulders. There's only one way of gettin' through my herculean task."

"What's that?"

"Leavin' it alone," said Cardew. "Jobs often do themselves if they're thoroughly left alone. Otherwise, they remain undone, and usually nobody's a penny the worse. There's a lot of unnecessary work done in this world. Leave things alone, and they right themselves somehow. What do you think of that for a programme?"

"All right for a lazy slacker," said Clive.

"Exactly; then it will suit me down

to the ground. Hallo! Here's the one and only!"

Cardew smiled and nodded to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as he appeared in the doorway of Study No. 9 in the Fourth.

But Arthur Augustus neither nodded nor smiled.

He fixed his eyes upon Cardew, and his eyeglass gleamed at the slacker of the Fourth.

"So glad to see you, old bean," said Cardew affably. "I missed you sorely, Gussy, when I was so suddenly called away from your hospitable home during the vac. I'd been goin' to ask you lots of important things, about silk hats and neckties and socks, and I never had the opportunity."

"Weally, Cardew——"

"Take a pew, old man. Let's have a friendly pow-wow," said Cardew. "It will interrupt these fellows' work, and it's always painful to me to see work goin' on."

"You are an uttah slackah, Cardew."

"Right on the nail," assented Cardew. "But take a pew. It makes me tired to see a fellow standin'."

"Wats! I have come heah to speak to you sewiously, Cardew!"

"Here beginneth the first lesson," said Cardew. "Go it, Gussy. Anythin' to interrupt work."

"I heah that you have fixed up a fight with Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus sternly.

Levison and Clive started and looked quickly at Cardew. That cheery youth smiled and nodded.

"You've heard right, old bean," he said.

"Is that how you are startin' the term, Cardew?"

"Just like that."

"I wegard it as wotten," said Arthur Augustus. "There were wows enough last term. Tom Mewwy has kept clear of you this term as I know vewy well. I heah that you sent Wacke of the Shell to him as your second."

"Never thought of you," said Cardew regretfully. "I'd have asked you if I'd thought of it, Gussy."

"I should have uttally wufused to act for you, Cardew."

"Then it wouldn't have been much use askin' you, would it?" asked Cardew agreeably. "What are you grousin' about, then?"

"I wepeat that I wegard it as wotten! I twust," said Arthur Augustus sternly—"I twust, Cardew that you will with-draw this wotten challenge and pwe-serve the peace."

"What a trustin' fellow you are!" said Cardew admiringly. "I like a fellow with a trustful nature. So refreshin'!"

"Is that all you have to say, Cardew?"

"Oh, no! It's a fine evenin'!"

"What?"

"For the time of year, of course. We must expect a little mist," said Cardew gravely.

"You uttah ass!"

"But I hope the weather will get worse——"

"Worse?"

"Yes. That will stop the football!"

Arthur Augustus' eyeglass gleamed with scorn.

"It is weally not much use speakin' to you, Cardew," he said at last.

"Not much," agreed Cardew. "Yet you keep on doin' it. I suppose you find the impulse to wag your chin irresistible?"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

"I wecommend you, Cardew, to drop this fight with Tom Mewwy and to give your whole attention to the duties you have taken on yourself," he said sternly.

"Jolly good advice!" assented Cardew.

"Then you will act on it?" asked Arthur Augustus, his noble brow clearing a little.

"Oh, no! I never act on good advice!" said Cardew cheerily. "Give me some bad advice and I'll see what I can do for you."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked at Cardew—a long look—and then turned and walked out of the study. His temptation was strong to administer a

"feahful thwashin'." Fortunately, he resisted the temptation.

"Dear old Gussy!" smiled Cardew, when the swell of St. Jim's had shaken the dust of Study No. 9 from his aristocratic feet. "Always a pleasure to see him and hear him chin-wag. I believe his mission in life is to cheer fellows up and make a brighter St. Jim's."

"You're fighting Tom Merry?" asked Levison abruptly.

"Yes."

"You've asked that cad Racke to act as your second?"

"Yes." Cardew nodded. "You see, I knew you fellows would be against it, so it saved argument not to mention it to you till it was fixed up. Argument is a waste of energy."

"You're satisfied with what you are doing?"

"Quite!"

"Very well, then, said Levison quietly, and he said no more.

"You will come, of course?" said Cardew. "You disapprove, but you'll come. Only as 'lookers-on in Vienna,' as the johnny says in the play."

Levison shook his head without speaking.

"You, Clive?"

"No!"

"Then there will be only old Racke to see me through," sighed Cardew. "As Racke seems to be my only friend, I think I'd better amble along to his study and give him a friendly word. Ta-ta!"

Ralph Reckness Cardew detached himself with an effort from the arm-chair and strolled out of Study No. 9. Clive called to him.

"Banker in Racke's study, I suppose?" he said.

Cardew smiled back from the doorway.

"You know Racke's little ways," he said. "When a fellow's in Rom he must do as Rome does—what?"

And Cardew walked away. Sidney Clive compressed his lips a little, and his eyes met Levison's for a moment.

Ernest Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it's no good talking to him!" said Clive.

"It never is!"

"This won't do!"

"I know it won't."

And prep went on in Study No. 9 rather moodily.

CHAPTER 24.

Cardew Takes the Matter in Hand!

CUTTS—"

"The cad—"

"The cheeky rotter—"

"The rotten bully—"

Cutts of the Fifth was the topic. Gerald Cutts of the Fifth Form at St. Jim's often was the topic of indignant discussion among the juniors.

Cutts of the Fifth was not only a sportsman and a good deal of a black-guard—which did not concern the Lower School very much—but also he was a bully, which concerned them very much indeed.

In the junior Common-room a dozen fellows were discussing Cutts of the Fifth in tones of indignation and wrath.

Cardew strolled into the room while the discussion was going on. Cardew had been out of gates—possibly because he had business out of gates, and possibly because there had been games practice that afternoon.

Certainly it was not a junior captain's business to go out of gates when games practice was on. But Cardew had his own peculiar methods of dealing with the captaincy.

"Oh, here he is!" exclaimed Tompkins of the Fourth.

"Talkin' about me, dear boy?" asked Cardew cheerily.

"You've cut games practice this afternoon," said Blake.

"Yaas, watah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Pressure of important business," explained Cardew gravely. "I asked Talbot to take my place. Surely Talbot gave satisfaction?"

"Better than you could!" grunted Herries.

"Thee! all parties ought to be pleased," said Cardew. "But what's the matter with Tompkins?"

Clarence York Tompkins was the centre of the indignant group in the junior Common-room. Tompkins was red with wrath—which was very unusual with him, for Clarence York was a decidedly mild youth as a rule.

"It's that cad Cutts!" said Tompkins.

"Awful bounder, isn't he?" assented Cardew. "Quite a bad hat! And, what is worse, he has serious errors in taste. No harm in a chap bein' a blackguard—I'm a blackguard myself—but there are ways of doin' these things. But what has the unspeakable Cutts been doin' this time? You fellows look waxy."

"He has been twyin' to fag the Fourth," said Arthur Augustus. "A cheeky cad in the Fifth, you know, makin' out that he can fag fellows, like a Sixth Form prefect!"

"What a neck!" yawned Cardew.

"Made me fag for him!" howled Tompkins. "Fag for the Fifth, you know! Made me light the fire in his study, and laid into me with a fives-bat when I said the Fourth didn't fag for the Fifth!"

"It is impos for this to be tolewated, you know," said Arthur Augustus. "Cutts would nevah have dared to fag the Fourth when Tom Mewwy was captain!"

"No fear!" said Digby.

"Tom Merry would have brought him up sharp enough!" said Blake. "But what's a chap to expect when the fellows have been crass asses enough to elect a lazy slacker captain of the House and the school?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Gently, old beans!" murmured Cardew. "Bein' kept out of gates by games practice—I mean by pressin' business of a personal nature—I wasn't on the scene when Cutts committed this crime. Therefore, how could I stop him? Even the great Thomas

couldn't have done anythin' without bein' on the scene at the time."

"Well, you're on the scene now!" grunted Kangaroo of the Shell. "What are you going to do? I hear that you've got a fight on with Tom Merry for Saturday afternoon."

"Quite so!"

"Well, most of the fellows will tell you that a junior captain has more important business than picking rows with the most peaceable chap in the House!" snapped the Australian junior. "And among other things, it's his business to keep our end up against the seniors when they get over the limit."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What's the good of talking to Cardew?" said Blake scornfully. "What does he care about Cutts bullying and fagging the Fourth? He's too jolly busy dodging games practice or playing banker in Racke's study."

Cardew's handsome face coloured a little. Whatever popularity he had had as junior captain seemed to be diminishing fast.

"Give a fellow a chance," he said.

"If Cutts has committed this crime

—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"It is a crime to fag the Fourth," said Cardew gravely. "Why, I belong to the Fourth myself. He might have tried to fag me! That makes the matter really serious."

"Weally, Cardew—"

"If he has done this awful deed," said Cardew, "Cutts must be dealt with. I shall regard it as my bounden duty to strew the hungry churchyard with his bones."

"You uttah ass—"

"Or—as that would perhaps be a little too drastic even for Cutts of the Fifth—I think perhaps a raggin' would meet the case," said Cardew. "Cutts laid into you with a fives bat, Tompkins?"

"Yes, he did!" hissed Tompkins.

"How many?"

"Six—just as if he was a prefect!"

"Then I sentence Cutts of the Fifth

to six," said Cardew calmly. "It only remains to carry out the sentence."

"Only!" jeered Dig.

"That's all!" said Blake, with deep sarcasm.

"That's all," assented Cardew. He glanced at the Common-room clock. "Cutts will be in his study now at tea. If Cutts is at home, it's a good opportunity to call on him. Anybody comin'?"

There was a buzz among the juniors.

"You mean it?" asked Blake.

"Naturally. I'm takin' this matter up as junior captain, and I'm goin' to try to prove myself worthy of my famous predecessor, the great and admired Thomas. I shall want some help. Cutts has asked for it, but he's not likely to take it from me without raising irrelevant objections. His objections will have to be overruled."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Cardew, if you mean business——"

"I—I say, it's jolly serious to rag the Fifth," said Tompkins. "The Housemaster might butt in."

"Or a prefect," said Crooke of the Shell. "You'd better go a bit slow, Cardew."

"Cutts has asked for it," said Cardew cheerily. "We can't refuse Cutts what he has asked for so earnestly. It wouldn't be kind."

He glanced over the juniors.

"I shall want you, Blake—and Herries, Digby, D'Arcy, Julian, Tompkins, Kerruish, and Kangaroo. I think that will be enough to overrule any irrelevant objections Cutts may raise to receivin' what he has so earnestly asked for. Are you ready?"

"Bal Jove!"

There was a momentary hesitation. A raid on the Fifth Form passage was not a simple undertaking, nor an easy one. Cutts of the Fifth was a powerful fellow, and it was probable that one or two others of the Fifth might be in his study. And certainly, at a call from Cutts, a crowd of the Fifth would turn out to drive an invading mob of

juniors from the seniors' quarters. And the best fighting-men in the Lower School were not, of course, of much use against hefty seniors.

Cardew's eyes roamed over the group of juniors ironically.

"I asked you if you were ready," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus firmly.

"Yes!" said Blake. "We'll follow if you'll lead—if you don't dodge round the corner and scoot!"

Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"Follow on, then!" he said.

With rather grim faces, the juniors he had named followed him from the room. They reached the corner of the Fifth Form passage in the School House. There Clarence York Tompkins paused.

"I—I say——" he stammered.

"Well?" smiled Cardew.

"I—I say, I—I hardly think it's worth while going for Cutts," said Tompkins. "I don't want a row."

"Dear man," said Cardew, "it's a little too late for that! There's going to be a row—a royal row! But if you've got cold feet you can clear."

"I—I got some lines to do!"

"Go and do them," said Cardew politely. "You mustn't neglect lines—it would be disrespectful to our kind masters."

Tompkins disappeared.

"Any more of you fellows got lines to do?" asked Cardew satirically.

"No!" grunted Blake.

And the party marched on to Gerald Cutts' study in the Fifth Form passage.

CHAPTER 25.

Six for Cutts!

CUTTS of the Fifth was at tea in his study, with Gilmore, of the same Form. It was quite a nice tea, and there was a cheery fire blazing in the grate—the fire lighted by the hapless Tompkins under persuasion from the fives bat.

Cutts was in a good humour. Having licked Tompkins of the Fourth, and finally kicked him out of the study, Cutts was naturally in a good humour—such proceedings had a mollifying effect on his temper.

There was a tap at Cutts' study door, and he called out "Come in!" expecting to see Prye or St. Leger enter.

Instead of which, the door was opened by Ralph Reckness Cardew of the Fourth Form.

Cardew gave the Fifth-Formers a cool nod.

Cutts stared at him.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "Get out!"

"I hear that you've been lookin' for fags in the Fourth," said Cardew amiably. "We've come."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Cardew walked in, and D'Arcy followed, then Blake, and then the rest of the junior crowd. Cutts rose to his feet, puzzled. Gilmore stared at the juniors. The last of the invaders being in the study, the door was closed, and the key turned in the lock.

"Look here, what does this mean?" exclaimed Cutts. "If you kids are thinking of a rag—"

"Not a rag, old scout," said Cardew chidingly. "We've come to fag. We're goin' to fag for you, Cutts."

"I don't want a fag."

"Changed your mind?" asked Cardew. "A short time ago you were lookin' for fags in the Fourth Form. Now we've come to oblige you. Begin with the tea-table, you fellows, and make it nice and tidy."

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

The fags, or ragers, whichever they were, began with the tea-table. It was a simple process, though it certainly did not make it nice and tidy. They up-ended the table, and the crockery and provisions shot off it in a crashing stream.

Crash! Crack! Smash!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You young villains!" roared Cutts.

He made a rush at the mob of juniors. They were ready for him. Five or six received him as he came on, and the next moment Gerald Cutts was rolling on his carpet, with the juniors clinging to him like cats.

"Back up, Gilmore!" yelled Cutts.

Gilmore backed up, but it was not of much use. Gilmore of the Fifth went to the floor, and Kangaroo sat on his chest, and Herries on his legs, while Kerruish took a businesslike grip on his ears, and banged his head on the floor.

Gilmore's wild yells filled the study.

"Keep that chap quiet!" yawned Cardew. "Sit on his head, or stuff somethin' into his mouth. Sorry, Gilmore, but you've got a rather unmusical voice, and my nerves are delicate."

"Groooooogh!" was Gilmore's reply, as a handful of loaf sugar was crammed into his mouth.

"You keep quiet, Gilmore, old top, and you won't get hurt," continued Cardew. "It's Cutts that we're here to deal with. You'd better take it quietly. Bang his head if he moves, Kerruish."

"What-ho!" grinned Kerruish.

Gilmore seemed of Cardew's opinion, that he had better keep quiet. At all events, he kept quiet. The odds were too heavy, and the door was locked against reinforcements. Gilmore decided to take it philosophically.

Cutts was struggling with savage determination.

But the ragers were equally determined, and there were too many of them for the bully of the Fifth.

Gerald Cutts was spread-eagled on the floor, with his nose grinding into the carpet.

A junior knelt on each arm and leg, and Cutts was pinned to the floor.

Cardew looked round the study.

"Where's the fives bat, Cutts?"

"You young hound—"

"I don't seem to see it. Where is it?"

"Help!" roared Cutts.

"Will you tell me where the fives bat is—the one you whacked Tompkins with?"

"No!" howled Cutts.

"Pull his ears till he does, Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow-ow-ow-woop!" came in a fiendish yell from Cutts of the Fifth.

"Will you tell me now, dear boy?"

"In the cupboard!" gasped Cutts, almost speechless with rage.

"Thanks!"

Cardew sorted out the fives bat.

"Keep clear, you fellows!" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Whack!

"Yow!"

There was a heavy knock at the door, and the voice of Lefevre, the captain of the Fifth, shouted through. Two or three more of the Fifth could be heard outside.

"What's this row?" shouted Lefevre.

"Not a row, dear man," answered Cardew coolly. "I've come here in my official capacity, as junior captain, to give Cutts six."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Gettin' deaf, old bean?"

"Open this door at once!" shouted Lefevre.

"But Cutts hasn't had his six yet."

Whack!

"Rescue, Fifth!" shrieked Cutts.

Whack!

"You cheeky young rascals, open this door!" roared the captain of the Fifth. "I'll teach you to come here ragging!"

"Thanks. We're not in need of any instruction on the subject, Lefevre. We know how!"

Whack!

"They're really whackin' Cutts," came St. Leger's voice from the passage. "Poor old Cutts!"

Whack!

"Fancy Cutts gettin' six from the juniors!" chuckled another Fifth-Former. "Oh, my hat! Poor old Gerald!"

Gerald Cutts writhed with rage and pain. Cardew was laying on the strokes with great energy, and there was no doubt that Cutts was hurt. But he felt the bitter humiliation more keenly than the strokes of the fives bat.

"One more!" chuckled Black. "Make it a good one, Cardew!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Whack!

Undoubtedly the last whack was a good one. It elicited a fiendish yell from Cutts of the Fifth.

Outside, there was a sound of chuckling. Cutts of the Fifth was so lofty and supercilious a fellow that his humiliation was not wholly unsatisfactory to his Form-fellows in the Fifth. The Fifth intended to avenge this affront to their dignity; meanwhile, they chuckled over Cutts' discomfiture.

"Is that enough, Cutts?" asked Cardew politely.

"Ow, ow! I'll—I'll—Ow!"

"Are you sorry you fagged the Fourth?"

"Ow! I—I—"

"Are you sorry? If not, I regret to say that I shall have to begin again with the fives bat."

"I'm sorry!" gasped Cutts. And there was a fresh chuckle from the Fifth-Formers outside, as they heard that confession. They could hardly believe that the lofty Cutts had been brought so low. But he had!

"Good!" drawled Cardew. "Now, as we've done the business quite in the style of the late lamented Thomas, we may as well clear."

"You see what you'll get as soon as you open the door!" came the voice of the captain of the Fifth.

All eyes turned on Cardew. Cutts had been punished and humiliated in a way he was not likely to forget for the remainder of the term. The dignity and independence of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's had been vindicated. But there was still retreat

from the enemy's quarters to be contrived—and that was a problem for Cardew's strategy.

Cardew picked up the poker and thrust it between the bars of the grate.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"Good!" grinned Blake.

As soon as the poker was heated red and glowing, Cardew twisted a handkerchief round the handle and drew it from the fire. Blake unlocked the door and threw it open.

"Now!" exclaimed Lefevre, making a stride into the study.

He halted suddenly.

"Put down that poker!" he roared.

Cardew made a pass at him with the glowing end of the poker, and Lefevre jumped back hurriedly into the passage. Cardew followed him out.

"You young rascal——"

"Put down that poker——"

"Keep back——"

"Follow the man from Cook's!" said Cardew, and he led the way down the Fifth Form passage, red-hot poker in hand.

The Fifth Formers backed into the study. They were prepared to mop up the passage from end to end with the cheeky juniors, but for the poker. But a red-hot poker put quite a different complexion on the matter.

Instead of handling the juniors, they hurled remarks from their study doorways as the enemy retreated—under guard of the red-hot poker.

"Bai Jove!" grinned Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, when the avengers were safe in the junior Common-room again. "Bai Jove, you know, Cardew is not such a wotten skippah aftah all, you know."

And all the fellows agreed that he wasn't.

"But Cutts will remember this, Cardew," remarked Blake. "You'd better keep your weather eye open for Cutts."

Ralph Reckness Cardew shrugged his shoulders carelessly. Evidently he was not alarmed.

CHAPTER 20.

Foes!

TOM MERRY paused before the notice-board, and glanced at a paper there, written in Cardew's elegant hand.

It was the list of players for the House match on Saturday afternoon; the first junior match of the new term.

Cardew's name, as captain, certainly should have been there; but Cardew's name was not there. Tom Merry's name, as that of the best junior footballer at St. Jim's, certainly should have been there also. But neither was Tom Merry's name there.

Tom wrinkled his brow a little.

After all the trouble that had occurred between him and the new junior captain, it seemed hard to believe that Cardew seriously planned to keep him out of junior football for the season. If that was really Cardew's object, there was strenuous resistance to be expected on Tom's part.

Cardew, through his second, had arranged the fight with Tom Merry to take place that afternoon in Rylcombe Wood. He had chosen that retired spot to avoid interruptions; and, perhaps, too, Cardew did not want an audience. Bitterly determined as he was to beat his rival in fisticuffs as in other matters, Cardew probably knew very well that he had taken on an extremely difficult task, which it was doubtful if he could carry through.

If the fight ended in his defeat—as was likely enough—probably Cardew preferred not to have a ring of spectators staring at him at the time.

As Tom had agreed to meet him at any time and place specified, he had no objection to raise. But as the junior House match was taking place at the same time, it kept both of them out of the football.

A good many fellows were commenting on the football list. Talbot of the Shell was named as captain in Cardew's place. That was a wise choice on Cardew's part. Talbot was a good

man for the post. But the comments of the juniors were derisive.

"Might as well make Talbot captain for good and all," remarked Blake. "Precious sort of a skipper to fix up a fight simultaneously with a House match!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm down to play for School House," remarked Manners. "That means I shan't be able to second you, Tom—if I play."

"You must play," said Tom at once. "I'm down, too," said Lowther, frowning. "Look here, Tom, this looks to me as if Cardew's bent on keeping us both off the scene when you meet him and lick him."

"Pewwaps he doesn't want you fellows to see Tom Mewwy lick him," suggested Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

There was a laugh.

"I would act as your second with pleasuah, Tom Mewwy," continued the swell of St. Jim's. "But Cardew has put me down to play—and Blake and Hewwies and Dig, too."

Herries grunted.

"He's put me down for goal," he said. "He did it before, and changed his mind. I rather think I shan't give him a chance to change his mind again. I'm not keen on playing under Cardew's lead."

"Well, he's put the whole study in," said Blake. "Better back up the House, Herries. Cardew can't very well let you down again, now your name's posted up in the list."

"Well, that's so," assented Herries.

"Tom Merry's left out!" giggled Trimble of the Fourth. "I agree with Cardew there! I never did think Merry much of a player."

"Weally, Twimble, you silly ass——"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Cheek" from Baggy Trimble was not likely to disturb his equanimity.

"It's silly rot!" growled Kangaroo. "He's got my name down, and I've a jolly good mind to tell him to cross it out and put yours in, Tom."

The captain of the Shell shook his head.

"Don't do that," he said. "Anyhow, I couldn't play this afternoon, as I've got to meet Cardew."

"Utter rot! No need for the scrap at all; and, anyhow, it could be put off. I'd speak to Cardew about it, if I were you."

Tom Merry nodded, deciding to act on the Australian junior's advice.

He looked for Cardew, and found that youth sunning himself by the steps of the School House in the quadrangle. Cardew gave him a nod, with a steely look in his eyes. Levison and Clive had been talking to Cardew, and both of them were frowning as they moved away. Both were down in the House eleven.

"Look here, Cardew," said Tom abruptly, "it's awkward our scrap coming off the same time as the House match. If you're going to keep on as junior captain you ought to be in the match."

"Thank you for tellin' me my duties," said Cardew. "When I want another tip from you I'll ask for it."

Tom set his lips.

"Most of the fellows think I ought to be in the team," he said.

"Most of the fellows seem to be rather asses."

"You don't care to postpone the scrap?"

"Not at all."

"If you hold me to my word, I shall turn up in Rylcombe Wood as arranged," said Tom. "But I think——"

"Never mind what you think, it's a fixture," said Cardew. "Will you excuse me mentionin' that you bore me?"

"You've got my second down to play," said Tom.

"Can't you find another?"

"Yes; but——"

"What's the good of seconds?" yawned Cardew. "If you're left without one I'll tell Racke I don't want him, and make it square. I don't see why we can't settle our little differences by ourselves."

"I don't care one way or the other," said Tom curtly. "As a matter of fact, nearly every fellow I should care to ask is down to play football this afternoon."

"Well, Racke isn't down to play," grinned Cardew. "But I dare say he'd rather go off for a quiet smoke than turn up to second me in a scrap. I'll give him his head."

Tom looked at him fixedly.

"I think I know why you've arranged all this," he said. "You want the fight to take place without any witnesses."

"Why should I?" yawned Cardew.

"I don't know; unless it's to save your face when you get licked."

Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not licked yet," he remarked.

"You will be," said Tom. "I fancy you know that you're not up to my weight. But have it your own way—with or without witnesses is all the same to me. The old oak in Rylcombe Wood at three."

"That's it."

"I shall be there," said Tom. "Are you taking gloves?"

Cardew's eyes glittered.

"No!" he said.

"Do you want me to take them?"

"No."

Tom knitted his brows.

"I don't like the idea."

"Dear me," said Cardew lightly. "Racke said somethin' the other day about cold feet in your study. Was he right?"

Tom Merry did not answer that question. He turned his back on the dandy of the Fourth and walked away. Cardew, perfectly well aware of how narrow an escape he had had of being knocked spinning off the steps, smiled. Cutts of the Fifth came out of the School House as Tom walked away, and he looked at Cardew with gleaming eye. Cardew gave him a cool nod.

"Feelin' better for that battin', Cutts?" he asked genially.

Cutts made a motion towards him, clenching his hands. But he thought better of it and walked on. There were plenty of juniors within call, and

Cutts was not looking for another ragging. He had already learned how little Cardew recked of his lofty position as a Fifth Former.

Cardew laughed, dismissing Cutts of the Fifth from his careless mind. But, as a matter of fact, he would have done well not to dismiss Gerald Cutts so lightly from his thoughts.

CHAPTER 27.

The Worm Turns!

FIGGINS of the New House grinned. Figgins seemed amused.

It had been the opinion of George Figgins at the time of the election that, for the sake of the school generally, the St. Jim's fellows should have rallied round and elected a New House chap skipper. New House chaps saw the matter in the same light as Figgy, without a dissentient voice. School House fellows, on the other hand, saw it in quite a different light; and even fellows who did not like Cardew had voted for him, to escape the irretrievable disaster of getting a New House chap in as skipper. Views on this subject in the two Houses at St. Jim's were wide as the poles asunder.

The School House vote being numerically much stronger than that of the New House, Cardew had been elected, and Figgins & Co. gloomily prognosticated that St. Jim's would go to the dogs. And now, in Figgy's opinion, signs were strong that the school was already on its way dogwards.

"First House match of the term, and the giddy captain absent!" said Figgins to his chums Kerr and Wynn. "That lazy slacker Cardew is junior captain of the School and School House, and he's not turning up the first time his House goes into the field."

"Just like him!" remarked Fatty Wynn.

"I wonder how long the chaps will stand," said Kerr. "Tom Merry was a good captain enough, School House

chap as he is. But Cardew—"Kerr shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"I hear that he's put the Fifth in their place in his House," remarked Redfern.

Figgins sniffed.

"That's neither here nor there. Ought he to be here on the football-ground, or ought he not?"

"He jolly well ought!" agreed Redfern.

"So glad to hear your opinion," said a gentle voice behind the New House juniors, and they turned to see Cardew. The dandy of the Fourth was in Etons and an overcoat. Evidently he was not thinking of football that afternoon. He gave the rather grim-looking juniors a cool smile and nod.

"Not playing for your House—what?" said Figgins.

"Quite so—not!"

"Call that playing up as captain?"

"Dear man, my ambition is not to play up as captain. I find it a bore," explained Cardew.

"Why not chuck it up, then, and let a better man in?" demanded Figgins.

Ralph Reckness Cardew shook his head seriously.

"I've been thinkin' of chuckin' it up," he answered. "But I couldn't let a better man in—there isn't one at St. Jim's! Ta-ta!"

Cardew strolled on, smiling. Figgins resisted a strong inclination to go after him and punch him.

Cutts of the Fifth was strolling at a little distance. It was very unusual for the lofty Fifth Former to turn up on Little Side; he could not be supposed to be interested in lower-school football. Kerr glanced at him, and saw that Cutts' eyes were on Cardew.

"He's stalking Cardew!" grinned the Scottish junior. "Look at him! I've heard that Cardew gave him six the other day for fagging the Fourth! I fancy Cardew would be safer on the footer-field this afternoon than off it!"

"Oh, that fellow can look after himself," said Figgins carelessly. "Hallo,

here come the School House bounders!"

Smith major of the Fifth, who was refereeing, appeared with the School House team. Cardew walked down to Little Side with the School House footballers, but not to play. Cardew strolled round the field, nodding and smiling to fellows, apparently unconscious of the general condemnation of his line of conduct. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave him a glance of great severity.

"The cheek of that boundah weally passes all limits," he told Blake. "The least he could do is to keep out of sight if he is goin' to desert the side this aftahnoon."

"Sheer neck!" agreed Blake.

"He weally seems to be twyin' to make the whole school fed up with him," said D'Arcy. "He hasn't vewy fah to go, at this wate."

"Cheeky cad!" grunted Herries.

Cardew called out cheerily to Levi-son and Clive as they lined up with the School House side.

"Play up, you chaps! Keep up the credit of the study."

His chums did not answer. They felt that Cardew was showing the worst of taste in sauntering on the field in that nonchalant manner in the circumstances. It really seemed that D'Arcy was right, and that Cardew was seeking to make the fellows "fed up" with his captaincy.

"If they keep up the credit of the study, it's more than you will do, Cardew!" called back Blake.

"Right on the wicket, old bean!" assented Cardew.

"Oh, get out of sight, do!" growled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Just goin', old top. So happy to oblige you," drawled Cardew; and, without waiting to see the ball kicked off, he strolled away towards the school gates.

And Gerald Cutts of the Fifth, who had been looking carelessly on, with his hands in his overcoat pockets, strolled

in the same direction. Cardew was not giving a single thought to Cutts of the Fifth, and it never occurred to him to glance back.

Had it occurred to him, and had he noticed the glitter in the eyes of Gerald Cutts, even Cardew might have taken the alarm. But he was thinking of other things, and he had forgotten the existence of the Fifth Former to whom he had given six, and who, since that incident, had writhed under the mockery of his Form-fellows. It was an incident that Cutts was not likely to forget, even if the other seniors had allowed him to forget it, though Cardew dismissed it from his mind so carelessly.

Cardew turned out of the gates and sauntered down the lane, between the hedges that glimmered with frost.

He turned into the footpath in Rylcombe Wood, and sauntered on at a leisurely pace, whistling. He was early for his appointment with Tom Merry, and had plenty of time on his hands.

The old oak in the glade was a well-known landmark, and it was by the old oak that the meeting was to take place. Cardew turned from the footpath and plunged into the wood. Once, as he thought he heard a footstep and a rustle, he glanced round; but he saw nothing in the frosty woods.

He reached the glade where the gnarled old oak stood, and found Aubrey Racke of the Shell there, smoking a cigarette.

Racke took the cigarette from his mouth, and nodded and grinned at the dandy of the Fourth.

The careless expression faded from Cardew's face; his features hardened and his eyes glinted.

"Early on the spot, you see," grinned Racke.

"I see.

"Merry won't be here till three."

"It's not far off three now, I think."

"Then I suppose I'd better get out of sight," chuckled Racke. "I suppose Tom Merry hasn't smelt a rat?"

Cardew shook his head.

"He wouldn't," agreed Racke. "I'm

blest if I thought you'd pull it off, Cardew; but it was a good wheeze fixing it for the same time as the House match. That settled the matter for most of the fellows; otherwise, a good many would have managed to get on the spot somehow."

"I know that."

"As the matter stands, Tom Merry will be here without even a second."

"Yes."

"And he doesn't suspect foul play?" said Racke, with contemptuous scorn.

Cardew winced.

What he contemplated could scarcely be called by any other name than the one Racke applied to it. But the words jarred on Cardew's nerves.

"He suspects nothin'," said Cardew, with a lightness he found it difficult to assume. "I don't like the fellow; but, to do him justice, he isn't your sort—or mine. He never suspects foul play, and if a fellow told him I was plannin' to get him alone here to take a rotten advantage of him he wouldn't believe a word of it."

"More fool he!" sneered Racke.

He extended his cigarette-case to Cardew. The dandy of the Fourth selected a smoke, but threw it away unlighted. Racke nodded.

"Wiser, when you're just goin' to fight," he agreed. "Smokin' won't help your wind. Not that it's likely to be a strenuous tussle—what? Ha, ha!"

Cardew did not reply. The black look was settling deeper on his handsome face. Racke watched him with a grin. He was quite ready to oblige the grandson of Lord Reckness in fair play or foul—especially if it was a move against Study No. 10. Racke had not forgotten Monty Lowther's boot, and other offences of the Terrible Three.

"It's all cut and dried?" he asked. "You're sure Tom Merry will come alone?"

"Quite sure."

"He's not to see me, and I'm to watch. If you get the better of him, I'm to remain simply a witness. That's the game."

"That was it!" said Cardew, in a low voice.

"If he begins to get the upper hand, somethin' is to hit him and give you a chance," grinned Racke. "Well, I must say he's askin' for it, in comin' here alone to meet a fellow he knows is his enemy. Catch me playin' the fool like that!"

"Not likely!" said Cardew, with a curl of the lip.

"I fancy not! I shall have to take jolly good care that Merry doesn't see me," said Racke. "A story like this wouldn't sound well in the Common-room, would it?"

"No!"

"But it's all right. You can't lick him——"

"Can't I?" said Cardew fiercely.

"No, you can't," said Racke coolly.

"You know you can't, or you wouldn't be fixin' up this trick. You can't lick him, as I said; but you'll keep him too busy to be lookin' round him. I'll choose the right moment—you can trust me for that. I'll see that this stone catches him fair and square—and after that you ought to have a walk-over."

Cardew did not speak.

"He'll never know what hit him," went on Racke, with great enjoyment. "Afterwards, he may fancy it was some village kid chuckin' stones. Even if he suspected you of fixin' it up he couldn't prove anythin'. And he won't even see me."

"You're safe," said Cardew contemptuously.

"If I weren't safe I shouldn't take a hand in it," said Racke coolly. "I don't intend to be sent to Coventry by the whole school, and perhaps bunked by the Head! Not this infant!" He looked at his watch. "Merry's not due for ten minutes yet. Time for another smoke."

Racke of the Shell lighted a fresh cigarette. Cardew took a turn or two up and down the glade. His brow was growing blacker and blacker.

He had planned this, and his plan had been a success. Tom Merry—the last fellow in the world to suspect black

treachery—had fallen blindly into the trap; it was not a difficult matter to hoodwink an open, frank nature like that. Cardew was to beat him by fair means if he could—he passionately hoped that he could. All his strength, all his courage, should be spent in the attempt. But if he could not beat his foe by fair means, defeat must be staved off. Fair play if possible—otherwise, foul!

Blacker and blacker grew Cardew's brow.

He had planned this—in cool blood, with a smile on his face, over a cigarette in Racke's study. He had carried through his scheme without repentance. But——

There was a "but."

Cardew was not the only fellow in the world who fancied himself to be worse than he was, and whose better nature rose within him, when the test came. As he paced there, thinking—thinking, the blackness grew in his frowning brow, and the dark blood surged in his cheeks. Was it really he, Ralph Reckness Cardew, who had planned this thing with the worst blackguard at St. Jim's—or was he dreaming? He turned suddenly on Racke.

"You rotter!"

Racke stared at him, as well he might. The cigarette dropped from his lips in his astonishment.

"Wha-a-at?" he stammered.

"You reptile! Get out!"

"What?" yelled Racke.

"Get out, while I keep my hands off you!" said Cardew, between his teeth. "I'm fed up with you! Get out!"

Racke stared at him, his eyes blazing with rage. He clenched his hands, and his voice was husky with rage as he spoke.

"You cur! You've changed your mind?"

"Yes. Get away from me!"

"You've changed your mind—after bringin' me here, and now you turn on me and call me names!" Aubrey Racke choked with rage. "Why, you cheeky cad, you—you——"

"I'm done with you! Get out!"

"Do you think Tom Merry won't keep the appointment?" hissed Racke. "Do you think you are gettin' out of the fight? Is that it? You're afraid to stand up to him in a fair fight, and you know it! You insolent rotter——"

Smack!

Aubrey Racke staggered back against the tree.

"Oh, you rotter!" he panted. "I—I——"

Cardew had broken with his valuable ally now, with a vengeance. Perhaps he was glad to make it impossible for himself to change his mind again. Certainly Aubrey Racke was not likely to help him now, in fair play or foul.

"Is that plain enough?" asked Cardew. "I'm done with you! You'd better go, Racke!"

"I—I'll go, but—but——"

There was a footstep, a rustle of branches. Racke broke off, and the two juniors turned, expecting to see Tom Merry. But it was not the captain of the Shell who appeared. It was Cutts of the Fifth—Cutts, with a mocking grin on his hard face, and a merciless glitter in his eyes.

CHAPTER 28.

Cutts' Vengeance!

CUTTS of the Fifth stopped, and fixed his eyes on the two juniors. There was a light cane under his arm. He let it slip down into his hand. Cardew eyed him coolly. It was easy to guess that Gerald Cutts' intentions were hostile; but Cardew was insensible to fear. Racke looked from one to the other, and the rage in his face gave place to a grin of triumph. He knew all about the ragging of Cutts, and he knew that the vengeful Fifth Former had followed Cardew to this lonely spot to "take it out" of him.

What Racke would have done but for his sudden break with Cardew was uncertain. It was not likely that he would have backed up the Fourth Former in a struggle with so redoubtable an adver-

sary as Cutts of the Fifth Form. As matters stood, he openly rejoiced in seeing Cardew cornered by his enemy.

Cutts raised his hand, and pointed in the direction of the distant footpath.

"You can hook it, Racke!"

"Just goin'," said Racke coolly.

And with a leer at Cardew he went, and his footsteps died away in the wood. Ralph Reckness Cardew did not move. He knew that Cutts' grasp would be upon him the moment he attempted to follow Racke. He knew that there was serious trouble for him now, and he faced it with his usual icy coolness.

Gerald Cutts stood silent, without moving, till Racke's footsteps had died away in the underwood. His eyes were on Cardew's like a cat's.

"You're takin' it coolly," he remarked.

"Takin' what?" drawled Cardew.

"You know what I've run you down for."

"Because you're so fond of fashionable society?" suggested Cardew. "Because pushin' outsiders always like to thrust themselves on a gentleman, asked or unasked."

Cutts set his teeth.

"You batted me the other day," he said.

"Oh, yes!" said Cardew, as if making an effort to remember. "I believe it was you I batted, Cutts. I know it was some bullyin' cad!"

"The Fifth haven't let me forget it yet."

"Bit of a come-down, wasn't it?" agreed Cardew. "You carry your head so jolly high, Cutts—though there's little or nothin' in it—that there's bound to be a sort of general rejoicin' when you're taken down a peg or two. And it's a bit of an event for a Fifth Former to be given six by the Fourth."

"I think you'll be sorry for that six, by the time I've given you sixty!" said Cutts, with deadly calmness. "You're for it, Cardew! I can't imagine what made you come here, to this lonely place, alone, exactly as I should have

wanted you to. But it's very convenient."

A dark and bitter look came over Cardew's handsome face. It was his own intended treachery that had brought him alone to that lonely place. There was self-mockery in the bitterness of his look. His treachery, so tardily repented, had placed him at the mercy of an enemy who knew no mercy. He might have said, with Laertes of old, "I am justly slain with mine own treachery!"

Cutts made a stride towards him. Cardew put up his hands. He knew that he was no match for the Fifth Former; there was only one junior at St. Jim's who could have hoped to stand up to Cutts of the Fifth in a fight, and that was Tom Merry of the Shell. But there was no escape, and Cardew intended to fight as long as his strength lasted. At least, he would not submit tamely.

Cutts burst into a harsh, mocking laugh as the Fourth Former put himself in an attitude of defence.

"You'll make it worse for yourself," he remarked.

He came on grimly.

Cardew was fighting the next moment. So fierce and savage was his resistance that for a few moments the powerful Fifth Former was held. And luck favoured Cardew at the outset, and he landed a heavy blow fairly in Cutts' right eye that made him stagger back dizzily.

An oath dropped from Gerald Cutts' lips, and he rushed furiously on the junior.

It was impossible for a Lower boy, of Cardew's light build, to resist that savage rush. He went down like a ninepin.

Cutts lost his footing and sprawled over him. A second more, and he had a sinewy knee planted on Cardew.

"Now, you young cad——"

"You coward!" breathed Cardew.

He twisted round and struck up at the Fifth Former. Cutts' bending face caught the blow, and his nose streamed

red. He returned it with a savage blow that dazed the junior.

Cardew still resisted; but Cutts dragged him over, dragged his hands together, and knotted a short, thick cord about his wrists. It was evident that the bully of the Fifth had come prepared. Cardew, with his hands tied, was wrenched to his feet.

"Now!" breathed Cutts.

He dragged the junior to a tree-stump and forcibly bent him over it. The ends of the cord were securely tied to jutting knots in the stump.

Cutts stepped back.

Cardew was quite harmless now, and "bending over" in the approved fashion for punishment. The dandy of the Fifth paused to dab his nose with his handkerchief, and to feel his eye with his finger—an eye that was already growing purple. Cutts' face was white with rage. He had intended to thrash Cardew without mercy; but he had not expected any serious resistance—far less any serious damage to himself. But he knew now that he was going to have a black eye, and that knowledge enraged him to a pitch of ungovernable fury.

He looked about in the frosty grass for the cane he had dropped, and picked it up. Then he stood over Cardew, swishing the cane in the air.

Lash!

The blow came down with all the force of Cutts' powerful arm. In spite of Cardew's courage, a cry of pain burst from his lips.

"That touches you, does it?" snarled Cutts.

He raised his arm again.

"You rotten bully!" breathed Cardew. Cutts laughed.

"You gave me six!" he said. "I'm givin' you sixty—and a few over for this eye! Look out!"

The cane slashed down again. This time Cardew uttered no cry; he set his teeth like iron, and by sheer force of will kept back every sound of pain. Again the cane lashed.

Lash! Lash!

Cardew's face was white, and set hard. A Head's flogging was nothing to the punishment he was receiving now. But still he bore it in iron silence. Lash!

"What's this—what—" It was a breathless voice, as Tom Merry of the Shell ran through the bushes. "Cutts—you brute—you bully! Stop!"

CHAPTER 29.
Just Like Tom!

TOM MERRY was a few minutes late for his appointment. He had stopped to see the kick-off in the House match; and then a vigorous attack by Figgins & Co. on the School House goal had held him chained to the spot, to see how it turned out, and then a smart rally of the School House held him enchained. But he remembered at last his appointment with Cardew, and tore himself away from the football field, leaving New House and School House going great guns, cheered by crowds of juniors of both Houses.

Tom Merry looked at the clock tower, and hurried away towards Rylcombe. It was already close on three o'clock, and his meeting with Cardew was to take place at three, in the heart of Rylcombe Wood. The Shell fellow broke into a run.

He was sprinting along the footpath when he almost ran into Racke of the Shell. Racke called to him.

"Hold on, Merry!"

Tom paused in his sprint.

"Can't stop, Racke; I'm late already."

"It's all right; Cardew doesn't expect you," said Racke. The cad of the Shell was keenly anxious that Tom should not arrive on the scene until Cutts had had time to finish with Cardew. Racke's was not a forgiving nature, and Cardew's change of mind—and of manners—dwelt bitterly in his revengeful mind.

"Not expecting me!" said Tom, stopping. "How's that?"

"It's off, you see," explained Racke. "Cardew got me there——"

"You!"

"Yes; I was to chuck a stone at you from behind a tree, if you began to get the better of him," said Racke coolly. "Catch on? That's why Cardew fixed it up for the same time as the House match, and managed to have no seconds, and the fight out of gates."

"Impossible!"

"Honest Injun!" said Racke.

"And you——" exclaimed Tom, his eyes blazing at the blackguard of the Shell.

"I was only pullin' his leg, you see," said Racke, backing away a pace. "I let him run on, till a few minutes ago, and then I told him I'd have nothin' to do with it. See?"

Tom eyed him.

"It looks as if there's some truth in what you say, Racke," he answered quietly. "Cardew's rather queer arrangements look like it. If he thought of playing such a dirty trick, I hope he changed his mind."

"He didn't; it was I——"

Tom interrupted him scornfully.

"You'd have played it out—that's your sort, Racke," he said. "It's not Cardew's sort, I believe. Anyhow, I know he isn't dodging a fight; he's got plenty of pluck. I'm going on."

"I tell you——"

"Oh, rats!"

Tom Merry started on again, and Racke caught him by the arm and pulled him to a halt.

"Look here, Tom Merry, I tell you——"

"Let me alone!"

Tom Merry angrily shook off the grasp of the Shell fellow, and ran on. Racke stood in the footpath, and looked after him with a sneering grin.

"After all, he can't handle Cutts," he murmured. "And I suppose he wouldn't chip in to help Cardew, anyhow! I know I wouldn't, in his place! Cardew's for it!"

And with that satisfactory reflection,

Aubrey Racke walked on towards the school.

Tom Merry, giving no further thought to the cad of the Shell, ran lightly along the grassy footpath, and turned off through the wood towards the glade of the old oak. Cardew's first—and only—cry of pain reached his ears as he hurried on through the thickets. He started as he heard it.

"What the thump——" he ejaculated. He quickened his pace, and ran breathlessly into the glade. Then he saw.

Tom Merry burst on the scene, breathless with haste, his eyes blazing with indignation. He had come there to fight Ralph Reckness Cardew—he had almost come there to be a victim to Cardew's treachery. But he did not think of that now. The junior, his hands tied to the tree-stump, was writhing under the savage lashes of the cane, and Tom caught a glimpse of his white, set face and the bitter pain in it. That was more than enough for Tom.

"Cutts, you bully!" he panted.

Cutts spun round in astonishment. Tom Merry's arrival there was a complete surprise to him.

He glared angrily at the Shell fellow.

"Clear off!" he exclaimed sharply. "You've no business here, Tom Merry!"

Without answering, Tom Merry sprang at him and wrenched the cane from his hand. So sudden was his action that the cane was whirling away among the tree-tops before Cutts realised what was happening.

"You rotten bully!" shouted Tom.

"You—you——" stuttered Cutts.

Cardew looked round. He could not escape from his position, bound as he was; he could render no aid to Tom Merry if the captain of the Shell took up his cause against so formidable an adversary as the Fifth Former. Not to save his life would Cardew have called to his enemy for aid. But there was a gleam of hope in his pale face now. Tom Merry's look and words showed that there was little doubt of the line he would take.

Cutts raised a hand that trembled with rage.

"Get out of this, Merry, or I'll give you the same as I'm givin' Cardew!"

"Let him loose at once!" rapped Tom Merry.

"Wha-a-at?"

"Stand aside while I do it, then, you rotter!"

Tom Merry came fearlessly on. Cutts sprang in his way, his fists clenched.

"You—you dare to stand up to me, Tom Merry——"

"Yes, you cur!"

Tom Merry sprang back, but only to throw off his coat and cap, and then his jacket. Cutts glared at him in angry amazement, scarcely believing that the Shell fellow seriously intended to stand up to him in defence of Cardew. But he soon had proof of it.

"Now, you cad!" exclaimed Tom.

"I'll smash you!" roared Cutts.

He came on with a rush. Cardew had been swept under by such a rush; but Tom Merry was made of more sinewy stuff. He met the rush with left and right, and it was Cutts who staggered back, and, stumbling over Cardew, fell to the ground.

"Well hit!" shouted Cardew involuntarily.

Cutts of the Fifth sprawled, breathless, amazed to find himself on the ground, amazed, and boiling with rage.

"Look out!" panted Cardew.

Tom Merry was looking out. Cutts scrambled to his feet, and came at the Shell fellow like a tiger.

What followed was wild and whirling. Cardew, staring on, strained frantically at the cord on his wrists, passionately eager to get loose and go to the help of his defender. But he could not get loose—he was too securely tied for that—and he could only look on at the hardest fight Tom Merry had ever put up since he had come to St. Jim's.

For in weight, in muscle, in strength, in reach, Cutts of the Fifth was far and away ahead of the junior. And he had skill in boxing, too—which he needed now. At the first glance it

would have been said that Tom Merry had no chance of success—that in a minute or less he would be as helplessly at the bully's mercy as Cardew now was.

But it did not prove so. Tom was as light as an eel on his feet, and a great deal quicker in movement than the big Fifth Former. And he was strong and sturdy, though nowhere near the size and weight of Gerald Cutts. And he was the best boxer in the Lower School at St. Jim's, and that counted for a great deal.

Again and again a quick leap, a side-step, a backward spring, saved him from Cutts' heavy attack; and when he had a chance he never lost it. Cutts' right eye, already half-closed by Cardew, was quickly closed entirely, and there was a blue bruise forming under the other. His nose streamed crimson.

Tom Merry showed signs of severe punishment, too. But he did not heed his punishment.

It was Cutts who first drew back from the struggle. Deep down, the bully's heart was craven.

He backed away, panting; and as he backed Tom Merry came on with a lightning rush. Cutts' defence was nowhere; and Tom's right crashed into his face, followed up by his left under his chin. Cutts staggered back and fell heavily.

Tom Merry stood over him, panting. The Shell fellow seemed hardly aware that blood was streaming from his nose, oozing from his mouth, and that a dozen bruises showed on his face. He was ready for Cutts when the Fifth Former came up to the scratch.

Gerald Cutts staggered up.

But he did not come on. Possibly if he had pushed the fight to the last extremity Cutts might have triumphed. But a fight to a finish with an adversary who was game to the last gasp was not in Gerald Cutts' line. He did not come on.

"Beaten, by gad!" yelled Cardew, as the Fifth Former backed away.

Cutts' face flamed with rage. That

taunt brought him on again, and he rushed savagely at Tom Merry.

Tom Merry went down, but he was up again like a cat, fighting desperately—hammer and tongs, hammer and tongs—till Cutts panted:

"Stop!"

The Fifth Former dragged himself loose, and, without a look at Tom, plunged into the bushes. He disappeared, and Tom Merry stood panting, almost reeling with his exertions, and wondering whether he had, in actual fight, beaten Cutts of the Fifth in a stand-up fight. But there was no doubt of it—he had!

Cutts was gone, and Tom Merry leaned against the old oak to get back his breath. He passed his hand dazedly before his eyes and blinked at Cardew.

There was a strange expression on Cardew's face as Tom stepped towards him and cut the cord with his penknife. Cardew rose from the stump, his eyes strangely on Tom Merry.

"You're hurt!" he said at last.

"Yes, a bit," gasped Tom.

"I never saw such a scrap! And I—I was goin' to scrap with you!" Cardew laughed. "You wouldn't have left much of me, I suppose."

"Cutts hasn't left much of me, I think," said Tom Merry ruefully. "We shall have to put off our little affair, after all, Cardew. I couldn't stand up to a bunny rabbit now."

"Put it off!" said Cardew slowly.

"Oh, yes, we'll put it off! You came here to fight me, Tom Merry. What did you interfere with Cutts for?"

Tom stared at him.

"Wouldn't you have interfered?" he demanded.

Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope so; but probably not."

"Rot!" said Tom, dabbing his streaming nose with his handkerchief. "Oh, my hat! I feel pretty done! Ow!"

"I should have been pretty done if you hadn't come up!" said Cardew quietly. "Cutts was givin' me jip, and he meant to give me more! But I think you've got worse than I should have got.

You chipped in on my account—like a fool!"

"Thanks!" said Tom, still dabbing.

"Like a fool!" repeated Cardew deliberately. "But—but I'd give most of the things I possess, Tom, to be a fool like you! Can you guess that I had Racke here to play foul if you got the better of me? I'm glad to say I changed my mind and kicked him out—some rag of decency left that I'd overlooked, I suppose. When we were at Eastwood House at Christmas, Tom, you smacked my face, and I've thought of nothing since but revenge. You can smack it again if you like."

"I don't like—and I'm sorry——"

"That's all right! I asked for it, same as I've asked for what you've given Cutts. This fight of ours isn't postponed; it's off. No need for you to demonstrate that you can lick me; you've licked Cutts, who is good for three of me. Still, we'll have it out one of these days if you're keen on it."

"I'm not keen on it."

"There's a pool in the wood where you can bathe your face," said Cardew. "Let me help you; you're fairly done! And—and if you feel inclined to kick me, go ahead! I don't mind!"

"Fthead!" said Tom, laughing.

He leaned on Cardew's arm as they went through the wood. No one seeing them then would have guessed that the two juniors were rivals and foes.

Tom Merry, indeed, did not know whether Cardew was still his enemy in the following days. Cardew seemed to avoid him. He was still junior captain, and Tom Merry's name did not appear in the football list. On all sides it was felt that Cardew's tenure of the junior captaincy was precarious, and that a struggle was coming between Cardew and Tom Merry—a struggle the result of which was doubtful, but which was certain to be determined and obstinate. Possibly even Ralph Reckness Cardew himself did not fully know whether, after what had happened in the wood, he was still Tom Merry's foe.

CHAPTER 30.

Fed-up with Cardew!

"LEAVE the talkin' to me, deah boys."

"Br-r-r-r!"

"I do not wegard that as an intelligible wemark, Blake. You fellows had better leave the talkin' to me——"

"You've done enough talking for a dozen already," remarked Herries. "Take a rest."

Bang!

Jack Blake knocked at the door of Study No. 10 in the Shell, in the School House at St. Jim's.

It was a forcible knock, and it sent Tom Merry's door whirling open.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Tom.

Tom Merry was kneeling before the study fire, making toast. Manners and Lowther were busy with the tea-table. Tom was giving his whole attention to the toast, but there was an air of expectation about his study-mates, and they had looked at one another, and at the door several times, before Blake of the Fourth hurled it open.

Tom Merry looked into the passage in surprise. It was crowded with juniors.

Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy, were in the van. Behind them came Talbot of the Shell, and Kangaroo, and Dick Julian, and Wildrake, and a dozen more fellows.

Manners and Lowther did not seem surprised. In fact they seemed to have been expecting this numerous visit.

"Oh, here you are!" said Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah, heah we are," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I was just mentionin' that the fellows had better leave the talkin' to me. I am goin' to put it vevy plain to Tom Mewwy."

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"We've come——" began Digby.

"It's a deputation," explained Blake. "A deputation to interview you, Tom Merry, in the name of the House."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh!" said Tom. "You haven't come to tea? I was just thinking that the toast wouldn't go round."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

Tom Merry rose from the fireplace with a ruddy countenance. He looked rather regretfully at the tea-table. Having lately come in from a tramp in the snow, Tom was ready for tea—more than ready. But a House deputation was a House deputation, and Tom Merry politely gave the deputation his best attention.

"You see——" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah, you perceive, deah boy——"

"This is how it is——" began Julian.

"We——" commenced Kerruish.

Tom Merry raised his hand.

"One at a time!" he suggested. "It's easier to follow a solo than a chorus. What's the game?"

"Bai Jove!"

The deputation crowded into the study. Manners and Lowther took their places along with the deputation; evidently they were "in it," whatever the game was. There was not room for the whole deputation in Study No. 10, so fellows who could not squeeze in formed an overflow meeting in the passage outside.

"Pway leave the talkin' to me, you fellows," repeated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As a fellow of tact and judgment I——"

"Dry up, Gussy!"

"I wefuse, in the circs, to dwy up, Blake. I am goin' to point out to Tom Mewwy——"

"Order!"

"The fact is——" said Blake.

"Leave it to me," said Manners. "You see, Tom——"

"It's like this," explained Monty Lowther. "The long and the short of it is, Tom, that the House is fed-up with Cardew, and wants you back as junior captain."

"Hear, hear!" said the whole deputation.

"That's it!" said Blake.

"Just that!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh!" said Tom, frowning a little.

"In the circs, deah boy——"

"As matters stand——"

"With the school going to the dogs——"

"The football mucked up——"

"Order!" bawled Blake. "For goodness' sake let a fellow speak!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Better choose a spokesman, said Tom Merry, laughing. "At this rate you won't be finished by bed-time. And there's prep, not to mention tea."

Blake glared round at the deputation. Blake had constituted himself spokesman. Unfortunately, D'Arcy had done the same, and so had Julian and Kerruish. And all the other fellows appeared to think that the matter could not be properly elucidated without parenthetical remarks from themselves.

"Let a chap speak!" said Blake.

"Yes. I'm the chap!" remarked Lowther. "Now——"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"I'm the chairman of this deputation!" roared Blake. "Shut up, the lot of you. Now, here's the case in a nutshell, Tom Merry. Last term you were junior House captain, and junior captain of the school. Cardew managed to boost you out of the job."

"Yaas, wathah! I considah——"

"Cardew was elected junior captain," said Tom Merry mildly. "I'm sorry if the fellows are not satisfied with their choice. But there it is. Cardew of the Fourth is junior captain."

"We're fed-up with Cardew."

"What sort of a captain is he?" demanded Blake. "He goes wandering out of gates when there's a House match on. He forgets the dates of School matches. He shirks games practice. He's just a slacker."

"A fweightful slackah!"

"He was elected," continued Blake. "It was a pity, but there it was. Lots of us only voted for him to keep out

the New House candidate. But I'm blessed if I don't almost think a New House man would have made a better captain. Figgins, for instance——"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course, the junior captain ought really to be selected from the Fourth Form, and from Study No. 6," said Blake. "In our study we're agreed on that."

"But other studies seem to differ," grinned Kangaroo.

"But for the good of the school, and to save St. Jim's from going to the dogs," continued Blake rather grandly, "we're putting aside all personal claims, and we're going to back you up, Tom Merry."

"Yaas, like anythin', old scout."

"That's what this deputation has come for," said Blake. "We want you to put up again for the captaincy, Tom Merry, and we promise you our hearty support."

"Hear, hear!"

"We want you to appeal to Kildare of the Sixth, as head of the games, to order a new election," went on Blake. "That's easy enough. And, if you put up as a candidate, you'll sweep the board."

"And then things will be as they used to be," said Julian. "We've had enough of Cardew."

"More than enough."

"Too much—tons too much!" said Kerruish. "I dare say he's all right in his way, but he's no good as captain."

"Rotten!" said Wilkins of the Shell. "Why, he leaves you out of the matches, Tom Merry!"

"I don't believe he ever wanted to be captain, seriously," said Monty Lowther. "It was one of his stunts. Anyhow, he doesn't want to do a captain's duties."

"He wanted to show what he could do if he liked," remarked Manners. "I really fancy that Cardew is as much fed-up with the captaincy as we are with him."

"Anyhow, we're fed-up with him, right up to the chin," said Blake. "We want you back, Tommy."

"Hear, hear!"

"Now, are you putting up?"

The deputation looked at Tom Merry, and waited for his answer. There was a silence.

Tom Merry's face was very thoughtful.

"I twust, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, breaking the silence, "that you are not goin' to wefuse to wally wound at the wequest of your loyal followahs?"

"Play up, Tom!" said Talbot of the Shell, in his quiet way. "You know that we've got a rotten skipper, and we want you back. If you'd put up a fight for it, Cardew would never have got in."

"Well, he was elected," said Tom slowly.

"There was a feahful lot of twicewy in the election, deah boy"

"I dare say there was; but fellows were not bound to vote for him if they didn't choose. They wanted a change, and they got a change," said Tom. "I know jolly well, of course, that Cardew isn't any good as skipper, especially in football. I think the House and the school want a new captain. But I——"

"Cut out the buts," said Herries.

"But," repeated Tom firmly, "I don't feel disposed to go against him. If the House and the school wanted me—well, they had me, and they changed me for Cardew. I don't think I ought to try to turn him out——"

"As he did you!" grunted Herries.

"I'm not taking Cardew as an example to follow," said Tom, rather dryly.

"Yaas, but——"

"You say yourself that we want a new captain!" growled Blake.

"I agree to that. I suggest Talbot——"

"Rot!" said Manners and Lowther together, and Talbot of the Shell smiled.

"Well, that's not a bad suggestion," admitted Blake. "If you won't stand,

Tom, we'll back up Talbot against Cardew."

"Hear, hear!" said the deputation.

"And I'll back him up!" said Tom heartily. "Let it go at that!"

"Very well. Talbot's the man!"

"Bravo, Talbot!"

"Hold on!" broke in Talbot of the Shell quietly. "I'm not the man! I'm not standing! Tom Merry's the man we want; and, in any case, I shall not put up as a candidate."

"Now, look here——" said Tom persuasively.

"Bosh!" said Talbot. "You're the man, Tom, and sooner or later you'll have to come round. Make it sooner."

"Make it now!" urged Julian.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"If there's a new election, I'll agree to put up as a candidate," he said. "That's all I can say. I can't take any steps to turn Cardew out. It would be a bit too much like the way he treated me. Which, as I've said, is an example I don't care to follow. You'd better tell Cardew you're fed-up with him, and leave it at that."

"That would only make him hang on!" growled Blake. "You know what an obstinate mule he is."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Look here, Tom Merry! We jolly well want you, and if you don't take the lead, you'll take a ragging!" roared Herries.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bump him!"

"'Yes,' or 'No'?" demanded Blake.

"No!" said Tom.

"Bump him!"

"Here, hands off, you silly asses!" roared Tom Merry, as the deputation made a rush at him. "Hold on, you chumps! Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump!

Tom Merry smote his own study carpet forcibly with his person. It was a heavy smite, and he roared.

"There!" gasped Blake. "That's a

warning. Now you'd better think it over, Tommy, or there's more in store!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The deputation crowded out of the study, leaving Tom Merry sitting on the carpet, gasping for breath. Manners and Lowther remained in Study No. 10, grinning.

"You silly asses!" gasped Tom. "Why didn't you back me up? Ow!"

"Serves you jolly well right!" said Manners.

"Jolly good mind to bump you again!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ow!"

Tom Merry picked himself up, and set his collar and tie straight. There was no doubt that the deputation of the Lower School had been in earnest; they wanted Tom Merry, and they had shown it forcibly. But Tom's determination was unchanged. Ralph Reckness Cardew, duly elected junior captain of St. Jim's, had no attack on his position to fear from the rival he had supplanted.

CHAPTER 31.

A Ragging in Study No. 9!

NOW for Cardew!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The junior deputation, having finished with Tom Merry—for the present—proceeded along to the Fourth Form passage. They stopped at No. 9, the study that belonged to Cardew, Levison, and Clive. Blake thumped at the door and hurled it open.

Levison & Co. were at tea. Levison and Clive looked rather surprised when the crowd appeared in their doorway. Cardew smiled—perhaps guessing why they had come. Cardew could not have failed to be aware that his system was not popular with the School House fellows—or the New House, for that matter. Indeed, on a good many occasions the new junior captain seemed to have deliberately set out to make his followers fed-up with him.

The actual fact was that Cardew,

having attained the goal of his idle ambition, had tired of it, as he tired of most things. He had set out to give Tom Merry a "fall," and in that he had succeeded completely. He had started the contest idly, in his whimsical humour, and it pleased him to show what he could do if he liked. But the duties and responsibilities of the post he had gained did not please him in the very least, and he coolly let them slide.

Bitterness had crept into the contest, on Cardew's side, at least; but for that, it was probable that Cardew would have thrown the thing up before now. He had been Tom Merry's rival—and he had become Tom Merry's enemy—and for a time his enmity had been black and bitter. But that, too, had changed, partly owing to circumstances, and partly to Cardew's own volatile and changeable nature.

That his followers were fed-up with his ways was no secret to him; and, if he had not known it, the looks of the deputation would have enlightened him. But he greeted Blake and his army with a polite nod and smile.

"Trickle in, old beans," he said. "So glad to see you! You ought to have told me you'd asked these fellows to tea, Levison. I'd have given a more extensive order at the tuckshop."

"But I didn't!" said Levison.

"Then, you, Clive——"

"I didn't, either," said Sidney Clive, laughing.

"Dear me!" said Cardew. "Then they must have come unasked. I take this as a great compliment, my young friends—one more proof of the irresistible attractions of my society."

"We haven't come to tea!" bawled Herries.

"Wathah not!"

"Never mind. Stay to tea now you're here," said Cardew gracefully. "Sit down—there's some chairs—and a box or two—and the floor is clean and com-mo-dious."

"We'll, Cardew——"

"We've come on business!" exclaimed

Blake, planting himself in front of the dandy of the Fourth, with a grim brow.

"What a horrid word," said Cardew. "I never could give my attention to business matters. Call another time, if you don't mind."

"We do mind!" hooted Herries.

"It's about the football, and the captaincy!" said Blake.

"Dear me!"

"The Abbotsford match comes off on Saturday."

"Does it?"

"Have you forgotten the Abbotsford match?" howled Dig.

"Abbotsford!" said Cardew, in a reflective sort of way. "Bless my soul! Now I come to think of it, there is a cricket match with Abbotsford."

"Cricket!" shrieked Blake.

"Yes—no—football! Football, of course," said Cardew, with a cheery smile. "Right you are—football!"

The deputation glared at Cardew.

"Have you thought about the team yet?" asked Blake, breathing hard.

"Is there any hurry?"

"Have you thought about the matter at all?"

"Oh, yes! I was thinkin' only yesterday what a bore it is."

"Bai Jove!"

"It is, isn't it?" asked Cardew. "But the fact is, I've been havin' a little argument in committee. I'm goin' to think the matter out very seriously, of course."

"When?"

"Dear man, you mustn't fire questions at your skipper in this way. I may find a few minutes some time."

"I suppose that's meant to be funny?" asked Blake, after a pause.

"Not at all. I fully intend to find a few minutes, to think about the Abbotsford match," said Cardew blandly.

"Do you think that's good enough for us?"

"I think it will have to be."

"You weren't at games practice this afternoon," continued Blake.

"Games practice is a bore, like most other things."

"Do you intend to play in the Abbotsford match, or are you standing out, as you've done before?"

"Who knows?" said Cardew.

"Don't you know?" roared Blake.

"I least of all," said Cardew cheerily. "It depends largely on how the spirit moves me at the time."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "I wegard that as sheeah cheek, Cardew."

"Go hon!"

Blake looked round at the deputation. They were all footballing fellows, who played for the House, or were eager to do so. Cardew's nonchalant way had an exasperating effect on all of them.

"That's the sort of captain we've got," said Blake. "We could get a new election if Tom Merry took it up, and put it to Kildare. He won't. We seem to be landed with this rotten slacker. Well, if he's going to stick on to the job, he's going to do the job, or take the consequences."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Collar him!"

Cardew made a bound out of the arm-chair. His nonchalance vanished all of a sudden as the deputation reached for him.

A dozen hands grasped him.

"Put his head in the coal-box first," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew struggled desperately. What effect he had expected his "cheek" to produce upon the juniors cannot be said; but, apparently, he had not expected this. This was what happened, however.

"Bear a hand," Cardew yelled to his chums, as he was dragged struggling to the coal-box.

Levison shrugged his shoulders, and Clive laughed. They had exhausted their eloquence on Cardew, without producing any perceptible effect on the slacker of the Fourth. Now the fellows were taking more drastic measures, and Levison and Clive had no sympathy to waste on the slacker.

"You've asked for that," said Sidney Clive. "I hope it will do you good, Cardew."

"You rotter!"

"If you don't want the job, chuck it up," suggested Clive. "Nobody asks you to keep it on."

"Yaas, wathah—wesight, and we'll let you off the waggin', Cardew," said Arthur Augustus.

"Go and eat coke!"

"Bai Jove! Wag him, deah boys!"

Cardew, struggling furiously, had his well-brushed head jammed into the coal-box. Blake stirred up the coals with a poker, while the dandy of the Fourth's head was held there.

When Cardew's head was withdrawn, there was a yell of laughter in the study. He was as black as a sweep, and gurgling with rage.

"Hand us that ink, Levison," said Blake.

Levison shook his head. He would take no hand in the ragging of his chum, though he was not prepared to intervene on his behalf.

But Kerruish handed over the ink, and Blake proceeded to pour it on the thick coal-dust on Cardew's head.

Ink ran down in streams, streaking Cardew's face, and running inside his collar.

"Any jam in the cupboard?" asked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

Arthur Augustus handed out a pot of jam. Blake ladled it out over Cardew's coally and inky head.

Cardew had ceased to struggle now; he was held too firmly for resistance. Under coal dust and ink and jam, his face was white with rage.

"There, I think that will do," said Blake, surveying him. "He looks a ripping object, I must say."

"You rotters!" panted Cardew.

"This is a tip," explained Blake. "Just a warning of what you've got to expect, if you go on as you've started. The football list is to be out by Friday afternoon. See?"

"Hang you!"

"If it isn't, look out for more squalls. And you've got to play in the match."

"I'll suit myself about that," gasped Cardew.

"You won't, if you stick on as skipper. You'll play up, and if you shirk it, you'll get a real ragging—this is a joke to it Understand?"

"Get out of my study"

"I think we're finished here," said Blake. "Come on, you fellows."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The deputation crowded out of the study, laughing. Cardew stood in the middle of the room, almost unrecognisable under coal dust, ink, and jam. He gave his chums a glare, and then glared into the glass. Then he rushed from the study in search of a bath-room.

That evening there was much chuckling in the junior Common-room over the ragging of Ralph Reckness Cardew. The fellows expressed the hope that it would do him good. But fellows who knew him well did not think that that hope was likely to be realised.

CHAPTER 32.

A Chance for Grundy!

GRUNDY of the Shell bestowed a lofty frown upon Cardew, the following day, as he came on him in the Form-room passage. Cardew greeted him with a pleasant nod—Grundy's frown was the grim response. George Alfred Grundy, apparently was not feeling kindly towards the dandy of the Fourth.

"Lookin' for you, old bean!" said Cardew.

"Look for somebody else, then," growled Grundy. "You're a slacking rotter, Cardew, and I'm done with you."

"Not really! Unsay those cruel words!" urged Cardew, and Wilkins and Gunn, who were with Grundy, chuckled.

Grundy reduced them to gravity with a ferocious glare.

"I'm done with you," he repeated, waving a large hand at Cardew. "You

ought to be sacked from your job. You got me to back you up in the election, making out that you'd give me a chance in the matches—a chance I've never had from that ass Merry. You promised me—"

"I don't remember makin' any promise," said Cardew meekly. "But—"

"Practically," said Grundy "You said you'd give every good man a chance as soon as you had the football in your hands."

"But that doesn't apply to you, old bean!"

"I don't want any cheek!" roared Grundy. "For two pins I'd dust up the passage with you, junior captain or not. You're no good. The election ought to be cancelled. Lot of silly rigmarole about elections at this school, in my opinion. I think—"

"But I want you—"

"No good wanting me," interrupted Grundy. "I refuse to have anything to do with you."

"But I was going to ask you—"

"The answer's 'No' before I know what you want," said George Alfred Grundy, "and I don't want to know."

"I want you—"

"Bosh!"

"To play—"

"Eh?"

"In the Abbotsford match."

"What?"

"Centre-half," said Cardew "Are you on?"

Grundy & Co. gazed at Cardew in sheer astonishment Grundy was astonished at having his claims recognised at last, after so many rebuffs and disappointments. Wilkins and Gunn were still more astonished. Grundy being the very worst footballer at St. Jim's, and, indeed, in the whole wide world, it was amazing to hear that he was selected to play in a school fixture.

"Is this a joke?" gasped Wilkins.

"Not at all," said Cardew blandly. "I'm making up my team for Abbotsford. Grundy's my man if he'll play."

"But he can't play!" ejaculated Gunn.

"What's that?" roared Grundy.

"I—I mean——"

"I'm your man, Cardew," said Grundy cordially. "Let bygones be bygones. If you're able to see my form now I can excuse you for being a silly idiot before. I'm your man."

"Then you're down to play," said Cardew.

"Good!"

Ralph Reckness Cardew strolled on, smiling. Wilkins and Gunn wore an expression that could only be described as flabbergasted. George Alfred Grundy smiled genially.

"Not a bad skipper, Cardew," he remarked. "A bit of a slacker, but after all he's got an eye to a fellow's form. Tom Merry would never have played me for school or House either."

"I should jolly well think he wouldn't!" gasped Wilkins.

"What?"

"I—I mean——"

"Cardew's the man for my money," said Grundy. "I can see now that I did right in backing him up in the election. Fellows are talking of a new election now."

"The sooner the better, I should think," murmured Gunn.

"I shall back Cardew up, of course—a really good skipper," said Grundy. "Of course, properly speaking, I ought to be junior captain of the school. But I must say we've got a good man in Cardew."

George Alfred Grundy strolled away in a state of great satisfaction. Naturally, he was not slow to impart the glad news to others.

It was the first time Grundy had been asked to play for school; and he was greatly elated. The fact that any side Grundy played for was doomed to defeat did not worry Grundy; he was unaware of the fact.

The news was received in the Common-room with a roar of laughter. Fellows did not seem to take it seriously.

That was natural enough. Grundy's style in football was uncommon—it was

a style that could not be sufficiently uncommon. Charging his own forwards off the ball from behind, tripping up the halves in his own team, barging into the backs at critical moments, were among Grundy's minor sins as a footballer. He had been known to send the ball right into his own goal—he had been known to punch the referee for a difference of opinion. The bare idea of Grundy in a school or House team made the St. Jim's fellows shriek.

"But it's true!" roared Grundy, indignant at this reception of the glorious news.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, you know, Gwunday will be the death of me," gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "My weal opinion is, Gwunday, that you are too funnay to live."

"Cardew's told me——" howled Grundy.

"What a joker that fellow Cardew is!" chuckled Blake. "It's too bad to pull Grundy's silly leg like this."

"Yaas, wathah! But Gwunday ought not to be ass enough to take it seriously."

"It's quite serious!" yelled Grundy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, you're a set of puddenheads!" snorted Grundy. "You'll see my name up in the list."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were no believers. Indeed, Grundy's great news was soon banded about the house, as a screaming joke, under the title of "Cardew's Latest." Fellows roared over it in the studies. The cream of the joke was that Grundy took it seriously and really supposed that he was going to play for St. Jim's against Abbotsford.

But George Alfred's vindication was coming.

After tea Ralph Reckness Cardew was seen to post up a paper on the Common-room wall and walk airily away. There was a rush to read the paper, which contained the list of the team for the Abbotsford match on the morrow.

A crowd of fellows read the paper, and there was a gasp of stupefaction. For prominent among the names written there, in Cardew's elegant hand, was:

G. A. GRUNDY.

"Grundy!" shouted Kangaroo of the Shell. "Rot!"

"Trimble, too!" roared Blake.

"Twimble, bai Jove!"

"And Racke——"

"And Croke——"

"And Mellish——"

"And Clampe, and Chowle! Great pip!"

The juniors could scarcely believe their eyes. Tom Merry, indeed, rubbed his eyes as he read. Grundy of the Shell—Baggy Trimble, the fat slacker of the Fourth—Racke and Croke, the black sheep, who hated football—and the rest of the list almost on a par with them! Yet there it was—the official list of players selected for the match at Abbotsford. Ralph Reckness Cardew's own name was there—the only footballer's name in the list. Even his chums, Clive and Levison, was left out.

"This must be some sort of silly joke!" said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Grundy of the Shell came into the Common-room. He glanced round with a grin on his rugged face.

"I hear the list's up," he said. "My name's there, I fancy, what?"

"Oh, yes—and a lot more to match!" said Blake sarcastically.

Grundy pushed through the crowd and looked at the list. The sight of his own name gave him satisfaction. But he started at the others.

"Trimble—Racke—Croke! Great Scott! Cardew can't really be thinking of playing that lot!" he ejaculated.

"Might as well play them as you," grunted Herries.

"It can't be serious," said Monty Lowther. "It's one of Cardew's idiotic jokes. Let's go and see him about it."

A dozen fellows rushed away to Study No. 9 in the Fourth to interview the

junior captain and ask him what the thump he meant. Cardew was not there—and Levison and Clive knew nothing of the matter. In fact, they declined to believe in the existence of that remarkable football list until they had gone down to the Common-room and seen it with their own eyes.

Cardew, for reasons of his own, kept out of sight. There was deep discussion on the subject; and it was Blake who hit upon what was soon generally considered as the explanation.

"This is Cardew's answer to the ragging we gave him," he said. "He's going to chuck the Abbotsford match away just to show that he can do as he likes."

"But are we going to let him?" demanded Manners.

"No fear!"

Cardew was not seen till nearly bedtime. Then he was surrounded by an angry and inquiring crowd. He assumed an expression of surprise.

"Not satisfied with the list?" he asked, elevating his eyebrows. "My dear man, I've given the matter a lot of thought, as I told Blake I would. The team's all right!"

"All wrong, you mean!" hooted Herries.

"So glad to have your opinion," said Cardew politely. "I stick to my own, all the same."

"You're really thinking of taking that crew over to Abbotsford?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Cardew gave him a curious glance.

"Why not?" he asked.

"About a thousand reasons why not, I should think!" exclaimed the captain of the Shell. "It will be throwing the match away, and making us all look asses."

"You really think so?" asked Cardew.

"Certainly I do."

"What a pity your opinion isn't of any consequence, then!" smiled Cardew.

"Wha-a-at?"

"You ought to have remained junior captain," said Cardew, with a smile.

"Then you'd have had the job on your hands. At present it's on mine. My idea is to try new blood, you know—give new fellows a chance."

"Such as Grundy!" hooted Blake.

"Such as Grundy," assented Cardew.

"You silly ass!"

"Dear man, and you voted for me in the election!" sighed Cardew.

"Only to keep out the New House man."

"I jolly well wish we had the New House man!" howled Kangaroo. "Figgins wouldn't play the fool like this."

"It's a bit too late to think of that, isn't it?" smiled Cardew.

"Look here——"

"You howling ass!"

"You cheeky chump!"

Cardew smiled, and walked away with his hands in his pockets. Bed-time came, and Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth, came to shepherd off the Shell and the Fourth to their dormitories. But it was long before the juniors slept that night. Discussion raged long and fiercely on the subject of the Abbotsford match, especially in the Fourth Form dormitory. In that dormitory Cardew was subjected to a running fire of oburgations, to which he did not pay the slightest heed. While the Fourth Form told him what they thought of him, Ralph Reckness Cardew slumbered peacefully.

CHAPTER 33.

Drastic Measures!

THERE was considerable excitement in the Lower School of St. Jim's the following morning.

Even yet the fellows could scarcely believe that Cardew was serious in intending to take that hopeless crowd over to Abbotsford for the match in the afternoon.

The members of Cardew's eleven found themselves extremely unpopular; but they did not seem to mind.

Grundy was satisfied with his own selection, and, though he was not

satisfied with the rest, he felt that his own wonderful play would probably pull the game out of the fire. Racke and Crooke openly grinned at the exasperation of the juniors. They were looked down on as slackers and black sheep, and it was quite certain that they would not exert themselves in the match. The school record was nothing to them. Certainly, they liked to be able to say that they had played for the school; but their play certainly was not likely to reflect any credit on their school. Baggy Trimble was quite gleeful at the prospect, especially at the exasperation of all the fellows he disliked.

Levison and Clive were dismayed. But their remarks to Cardew on the subject were received only with an airy persiflage, and they soon gave it up. It was clear that Cardew meant to go on his own wilful way. He was junior football captain, and he had the final voice in the selection of the team. He declared that he was trying "new blood"; quite a good idea in its way, but evidently only a pretext in this case.

It was difficult to see what was to be done. Blake of the Fourth, and other fellows, took the resolve of appealing to Kildare, as senior captain of the school and head of the games. Kildare heard them out, with a thoughtful brow, and shook his head.

"You had a good skipper in Tom Merry," he said. "As a majority voted for Cardew, it appears that you wanted a change. Now you're asking me to interfere and over-rule the captain you elected yourselves. I can't do it."

"As head of the games you've got authority," said Blake.

"Quite so, and I shall exercise it if it's needed. But I don't feel called upon to interfere with Cardew."

"But——"

"That's all!" said Kildare.

And Blake & Co. went, furious.

"After all, we did elect Cardew," remarked Dig. "It was to keep the New House man out; but there it is. It's a bit thick to ask Kildare to drop down on the man we elected ourselves."

"Yaas, wathah! All the same——"

"Cardew's not going to turn St. Jim's junior football into a farce," said Blake, between his teeth. "If he won't chuck it, and if Kildare won't make him chuck it, somebody else will make him. We'll jaw this over, and find a way."

And Blake and a few choice spirits retired to Study No. 8 to jaw the matter over, after dinner, and find a solution. Meanwhile, Tom Merry was giving the matter some deep thought.

The outcome of Tom's cogitations was a visit to Cardew's study. He found that cheerful youth sprawling in the armchair, smoking a cigarette. Cardew nodded to him genially.

"Trot in, old bean! Glad to see you!" he said airily.

Tom Merry came in.

"It will soon be time to start for Abbotsford," he said.

"Yes; I've asked Trimble to let me know when the bus appears in the offing. Trimble's my inside-left, you know."

"Are you serious about that, Cardew?"

"Quite."

"You think you've got a winning team?"

"Well, football is full of chances," said Cardew gravely. "I think that I've mentioned that I'm trying new blood."

Tom Merry made an effort to keep his temper. He knew that it was of no use quarrelling with the airy dandy of the Fourth.

"I'm not asking to play myself," he said quietly. "You seem bent on keeping me out of the football this season; but let that go. But surely, Cardew, you don't want to muck up the school football?"

"Why not?"

There really was no reply to be made to that question, and Tom Merry did not attempt to answer it.

"I suppose it's no use my asking you to think better of it?" he said, after a pause.

"Well, no; though I'd like to oblige

you," smiled Cardew. "You did me a good turn a week or two ago, you know."

"I know you're my enemy, though I never gave you any cause," said Tom. "We've had plenty of trouble, I know. But what have the other fellows done for you to serve them like this?"

"Haven't you heard of the raggin' in this study?"

"So that's your motive?"

"That and other things," Cardew laughed. "You wouldn't understand if I explained. But you're mistaken on one point. I'm not your enemy, Tom Merry."

"If you feel under any obligation to me over that Cutts affair," said Tom, "you can wipe it out by playing square in the football. I don't ask you to play me or my friends. But don't take a rotten side into the field from sheer silly caprice."

Cardew smiled.

"That's all right," he said. "The fellows elected me, didn't they? Oughtn't they to have a lesson, after turning down a jolly good skipper and electing a jolly bad one?"

Cardew's tone was final.

"Then there's nothing more for me to say," said Tom, and he turned his back on Cardew and quitted the study with a gloomy brow.

Cardew smiled and finished smoking his cigarette. Having finished it and thrown the stump into the ashes in the grate, he rose and stretched himself and strolled from the study.

He did not stroll very far.

Three paces from the doorway of Study No. 9 he was stopped by a sudden rush. Before he knew what was happening he was whirled off his feet and rushed away.

CHAPTER 34.

Left in the Lurch!

"WHERE'S Cardew?"

A dozen fellows asked that question, but nobody seemed able to reply. The motor-bus was

waiting to take the footballers over to Abbotsford, and Cardew's remarkable team were ready to start. But Ralph Reckness Cardew did not seem ready to start with them.

Baggy Trimble had gone to his study to tell him that the bus was ready. But he had not found Cardew there.

"The silly ass!" exclaimed Grundy. "Keeping us waiting! We shall be late for the match at this rate!"

"Oh, never mind," yawned Racke. "What does it matter?"

Grundy snorted.

"Bai Jove, where's Cardew, you fellows?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy coming up to the waiting group.

"Goodness knows!" growled Grundy.

"What are you goin' to do if he doesn't turn up?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with a smile on his face.

"Oh, I can captain the team, if it comes to that!" remarked Grundy. "I'll put another man in."

"Bai Jove!"

"Levison, seen Cardew?" shouted Chowie.

"No!" answered Levison curtly.

"He's got to be found!" growled Croke. "The silly ass! Is this another of his silly tricks?"

A good many fellows were looking for Cardew. But the dandy of the Fourth was not to be found. It really looked as if Cardew, after arranging for that remarkable team to represent St. Jim's on the football field at Abbotsford, had deliberately absented himself. Some of the fellows remarked that it was not surprising. Nobody could really want to show up at football with players like Grundy and Trimble and Croke. Quite an army of fellows gathered round the bus discussing Cardew's strange absence.

Where was Cardew?

The question was asked on all sides without an answer being forthcoming.

It might have been noted that Study No. 6—Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy—smiled at one another and exchanged glances of intelligence. But

most of the fellows were thinking of Cardew, not of Study No. 6.

Tom Merry was brought on the scene by the news that Cardew had disappeared, while the team was waiting to start. It was a puzzle to Tom. It was hard to believe that Cardew had deliberately gone out and left his team in the lurch; but if that was not the case, where was he? A score of fellows pointed out to Tom that, Cardew being off the scene, it was up to him to take the Abbotsford match in hand. Tom Merry shook his head very decidedly.

"Rot!" was his answer. "I'm not even a member of the eleven! It's up to Talbot."

"Talbot!" repeated Grundy.

"Talbot's vice-captain," said Tom Merry. "If the captain chooses to vanish just before the match, it's up to the vice-captain, isn't it?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Grundy slowly. "But Talbot isn't playing in this eleven at all, as it happens."

"He will be!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, I've no objection to Talbot as captain," said George Alfred Grundy generously. "Let him come along!"

Study No. 6 grinned at one another. Half a dozen fellows rushed in search of Talbot of the Shell.

Tom Merry walked away. He had the interests of St. Jim's junior football at heart, but he was not disposed to butt in where he had no official concern.

It was agreed on all hands that, as Cardew evidently was not going to appear, it was "up" to Talbot. Even the remarkable eleven did not dissent from that.

Their dissent would have made no difference, had they dissented. Cardew, in his official capacity, had to be regarded. Nobody was likely to regard Racke or Croke or Trimble or Grundy.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther walked together to Big Side, to look on at a senior match. Kildare's eleven were playing the New House that after-

noon. But the Terrible Three had been only a few minutes on Big Side when Wally of the Third came panting up to them.

"Pull up your socks, Tom Merry!" bawled D'Arcy minor. "You're wanted!"

"How's that?" asked Tom, looking round.

"Talbot wants you!" grinned the fag. "He's making some changes in the team. Lowther's wanted, too!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Looks as if Cardew's wonderful eleven is doing a fade-through," he remarked. "I suppose there isn't a man in it that Talbot would be willing to take over to Abbotsford."

The Terrible Three hurried away. In the quad Racke and Crooke passed them, scowling. Evidently the two black sheep had been dropped out of the team.

"Look here, Tom Merry!" It was Baggy Trimble's voice. "I jolly well object to your bagging my place in the eleven!"

"Your place!" exclaimed Tom.

"Talbot's turned me down!" said Trimble, with a deeply injured look. "Turned me down after I was specially selected to play!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Terrible Three.

"Look here, you know, I think——"

But the Shell fellows did not wait to hear what Baggy Trimble thought. They hurried on to the bus. Loud yells greeted them as they arrived. Clampe and Chowle, who were New House fellows, were arguing with Figgins & Co., also of the New House. It appeared that Talbot had called on Figgins and Wynn and Kerr for their services, and Clampe and Chowle raised objections to leaving the team. Figgins & Co. were overruling their objections by the simple process of knocking their heads against the side of the bus. The wild yells of Clampe and Chowle rang far and wide, amid howls of laughter.

Clampe and Chowle were soon convinced that they were no longer members of the St. Jim's junior eleven. They escaped from the grasp of Figgins & Co., and fled for their lives.

"I shall want you, Tom," said Talbot of the Shell, with a smile. "I'd rather you captained the team——"

"Bosh!" said Tom. "I'll play under you as skipper, if you like."

"Right-ho, then!"

"How many of Cardew's men have you got left?" asked Manners.

"None!" answered Talbot briefly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here——" Grundy of the Shell was roaring, with a voice like unto that of the Bull of Bashan. "Look here——"

"Dry up, Grundy!"

"I'm a member of this team, ain't I?" bellowed Grundy. "Am I a member of this football eleven or not?"

"Not!"

"Cardew specially told me——"

"Blow Cardew!"

"My name's up in the list——"

"That list's cancelled."

"It isn't cancelled!" roared Grundy.

"I don't consent to its being cancelled. I object strongly!"

"Well, you can go on objecting, while we get off to Abbotsford," said Blake.

"Buck up, you fellows, or we'll be late."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Talbot's hastily recruited team was complete. They crowded into the bus—Talbot, Tom Merry, Lowther, Blake, D'Arcy, Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, Redfern, Kangaroo, and Levison. As many other fellows as the bus would hold crowded in to accompany them to Abbotsford.

George Alfred Grundy, crimson with wrath and indignation, voiced his objections at the top of his voice, and made a rush to get a place in the bus. Grundy did not get into the bus—he found himself sitting on the hard, cold ground in a breathless state. The bus rolled off without him.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Grundy, as

Wilkins and Gunn helped him to his feet. "Oh, crumbs! The cheek of it!"

"Come away, old fellow," said Wilkins, trying not to grin.

"Come away!" repeated Grundy wrathfully. "I'm going to play at Abbotsford, you dummy."

He rushed after the motor-bus.

"Oh crumbs!" said Gunn, staring after him.

Grundy flew down the road after the bus. There was a roar of laughter from the footballers in the vehicle.

"Here comes Grundy!"

"Bai Jove! Gwunday's aftah us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stop!" roared Grundy.

The bus slowed on the rise in the lane, and Grundy overtook it, and grabbed hold. He was seized by half a dozen hands above, and held. His cap was jammed down his back, and Redfern squeezed an orange into his collar. Then he was dropped into the road, on the top of the rise, and the bus rolled on.

Grundy sat, breathless, in the road.

"Ow! Oh! Gug-gug-gug!" were his remarks, as he sat and blinked after the disappearing bus.

"Ha, ha, ha! Good-bye, Grundy!"

"Groooogh!"

The bus was out of sight when Grundy felt equal to staggering on. Pursuit was hopeless; moreover, Grundy did not want any more oranges squeezed down his neck. In great wrath and indignation, George Alfred gave it up, and he tramped back to St. Jim's a sadder if not a wiser Grundy.

CHAPTER 35.

In Durance Vile!

RALPH RECKNESS CARDEW sat silent.

He was seated on an empty trunk, in the top box-room in the School House. A box-ropo fastened him to the trunk; it was wound and knotted

about him with great security. And there was an ample reason for his silence—a large duster that was fastened over his mouth.

Fortunately, Cardew had the healthy habit of breathing through his nose. Otherwise, he might have been in danger of suffocation, for the duster was fastened very effectively.

His eyes were gleaming with rage as he sat.

There was another fellow in the box-room—George Herries of the Fourth. George Herries was standing at the little window, looking over a wide view of frosty roofs and frosty branches.

He took no notice of Cardew—save when he moved a little. Then Herries' eyes would dwell upon him for a watchful moment.

Cardew quivered with rage as he sat.

It had not even occurred to his mind, wary as he usually was, that drastic measures like this would be taken.

But they had been taken—and they had been completely successful. Study No. 6 had collared the junior football captain, and rushed him away, struggling, up the box-room stairs. In the little room they had secured him with the box-ropo and the duster, and left him with the door locked on him. Not till the bus had started for Abbotsford did George Herries arrive to keep him company.

Herries, at the little high window, had a view of the distant senior football-ground, and he was interested in Upper School football. He would have preferred to accompany the team to Abbotsford, but Study No. 6 had agreed that somebody should be left in charge of Cardew; and as Herries was not playing, he remained.

Cardew, sitting on the box, stared at him with furious eyes. He had heard three strike from the clock-tower, and he knew that St. Jim's junior footballers must have arrived at Abbotsford, and that the game would have started.

He knew why he had been kidnapped

in this extraordinary manner. Study No. 6 had told him that much.

Cardew had carried matters with a high hand, and he realised now that other fellows could be high-handed, too—and still more so!

"Good man!" ejaculated Herries suddenly. Kildare of the Sixth had just scored against the New House.

Herries turned from the window. He grinned at the furious face of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"Feel a bit cramped?" he asked.

Cardew did not answer—for good reasons. George Herries consulted his watch.

"It's half-past," he remarked. "I'm afraid you'll have to sit there till four, Cardew."

Cardew glared at him.

"You see, you're not to be depended on," explained Herries. "It would be just like you to scoot across to Abbotsford and butt in somehow. Blake thinks the match had better be over before you are let loose. What do you think?"

No reply came from the angry mouth under the duster.

"Talbot's taken over a winning team, if that's any comfort to you, old scout," added Herries. "I rather fancy we shall beat Abbotsford. Don't be sulky—you asked for this, you know."

Herries turned to the window again and resumed watching the game on Big Side.

Cardew sat motionless, consumed with rage. He had already tried his strength on the box-ropes, and found that there was nothing doing. He had to wait, with what patience he could muster, until George Herries chose to release him.

It was fortunate for Herries that he was able to watch the senior House match from the window. Otherwise, he certainly would have found his vigil a tiresome one. Cardew found it tiresome enough. The minutes crawled by on leaden wings to the bound junior sitting dumb on the trunk.

It was not till the senior House match was finished that George Herries turned to the prisoner.

"You can cut now," he said.

And he started unfastening the box-ropes. The duster was jerked off, and Cardew had the use of his voice.

"You rotter!" he gasped.

"Go it!" said Herries.

"I'll smash you when I get loose."

"You're welcome to all the smashing you can do. I shan't be sorry to give you a hiding," answered Herries cheerfully.

The rope was loose at last, and Cardew staggered from the trunk. He chafed his wrists, breathing hard. Herries opened the box-room door.

"Getting on with the smashing before we go down?" he asked.

Cardew's answer was a savage rush.

"Ready, old man!" chuckled Herries.

They were fighting fiercely in a moment more. Cardew's fury, so long pent up, found a vent in a fierce attack, and Herries was driven round the box-room. But Herries was a sturdy fellow, and he knew something about boxing. The dandy of the Fourth found himself stopped, and Herries stood up to him, giving blow for blow, and certainly handing out as much punishment as he received.

For fully five minutes the combat raged, and then the two juniors, breathless, separated and glared at one another.

Both of them had streaming noses and other damages.

"Minute's rest?" suggested Herries, and he took out his handkerchief to dab his nose.

Cardew gave him a look, and walked out of the box-room. It was not much use fighting Herries; though the attack had solaced him a little when he was released. He went down the box-room stairs, and as he came into the Fourth Form passage there was a shout from Baggy Trimble.

"Here's Cardew!"

"He's turned up!" shouted Julian. "I say, where have you been all this time, Cardew?"

Cardew did not answer. He strode away to his own study, entered it, and slammed the door. But the news had spread that Ralph Reckness Cardew had reappeared after his mysterious absence; and a few minutes later the door was thumped open, and George Alfred Grundy strode into Study No. 9.

"So you've turned up?" bawled Grundy.

Cardew gave him a scowl.

"Where have you been?"

"Find out!" snapped Cardew.

"You left us in the lurch."

"Oh, get out!"

"Do you call that playing the game?" roared Grundy. "Do you know that I was dropped out of the team by that ass Talbot?"

"Don't worry, you silly ass."

"Worry?" roared Grundy. "I'll worry you! This is one of your jokes, I suppose—pulling my leg, by Jove! I'll worry you."

He rushed at Cardew. That exasperated youth met him half-way, and Study No. 9 was the scene of a terrific combat. Grundy was a hefty fellow, and Cardew, good boxer as he was, was scarcely a match for the burly Shell fellow. The uproar in the study brought a crowd of fellows along the passage, and they stared into Study No. 9 and chortled.

"Cardew's getting it!" yelled Baggy Trimble. "Serve him jolly well right for letting us all down! Go it, Grundy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Give him jip, Grundy!" howled Mellish.

Grundy had Cardew's head in chancery by this time. He was wrathful and indignant, as was natural, with his belief that Cardew, in his whimsical humour, had made a fool of him, and let him down at the last moment by way of a joke. Grundy wanted Cardew

to understand exactly how he regarded a joke of that kind, and he certainly made his meaning clear.

"Here, don't slaughter him, Grundy!" exclaimed Wilkins at last. "Leave some of him, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll smash him!" roared Grundy.

Wilkins and Gunn ran into the study and dragged the excited Grundy away. Cardew staggered to the wall, and leaned on it, breathlessly. Grundy gave him a glare.

"Perhaps he's had enough," he panted.

"Looks as if he has," grinned Wilkins.

"Come on."

And the great Grundy suffered himself to be led away. Cardew kicked the door shut after him.

Then he sank into an armchair, gasping for breath. It was not Cardew's lucky day.

CHAPTER 36.

A Slight Mistake!

TOM MERRY & CO. returned in cheerful spirits from Abbotsford in the winter dusk.

Talbot had led his team to victory; Abbotsford School had been beaten by two goals to one; a result very different from that which would have been achieved but for the kidnapping scheme carried out in so masterly a manner by Study No. 6.

Herries met the returning footballers with a rather swollen nose but a grin on his face.

"All serene?" he asked.

"Wight as wain," answered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We've beaten them, deah boy. How's Cardew?"

"What's happened to your nose?" asked Blake.

"Cardew!" explained Herries. "But his nose is the same, only more so. He seemed annoyed."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I hear that he's had a fight with

Grundy since then. Grundy seemed to think that Cardew had let him down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Study No. 6 went in to tea in great spirits. They felt that they had saved the situation, and that they deserved well of their country. Of the kidnaping scheme they had said no word to the other fellows—outside Study No. 6 nobody but Cardew knew why he had failed to turn up for Abbotsford.

"There'll be a wow about it, of course," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the four sat down to tea. "But we don't mind a wow! I considah that we acted with gweat tact and judgment."

Blake looked thoughtful.

"If Cardew makes a fuss, we can stand it," he said. "But I think very likely he won't. The whole school will cackle at him if it comes out—and he don't like looking ridiculous. But I don't care a rap how he takes it, for one."

"Wathah not."

Tom Merry looked into Study No. 6 on his way to his study.

"You fellows heard anything of Cardew yet?" he asked.

"I believe he's in his study," grinned Herries.

"He had gone out this afternoon, I suppose?"

"No, I think he was in the School House all the time."

"It's jolly queer."

"Yes, isn't it?" said Blake blandly.

"Yaas, wathah."

And a smile went round Study No. 6. Tom Merry looked a little puzzled. But Lowther was calling him from the passage, and the captain of the Shell went on without asking further questions.

The Terrible Three were sitting down to tea when the door of Study No. 10 opened, and Ralph Reckness Cardew

looked in. He stepped into the study and fixed his eyes on Tom Merry with a bitter expression.

"So you're back, he said.

"Yes, here we are again," answered Tom cheerily.

"We've beaten Abbotsford," added Monty Lowther politely. "I'm sure that news will please you, Cardew—you're so keen on football."

"And so concerned about the school record in games," remarked Manners satirically.

Cardew's eyes gleamed.

"And you think you can play a trick like this without being called to account, Tom Merry?" he asked.

Tom stared at him.

"Trick! A trick like what?"

"You are not making out, I suppose, that you don't know why I missed Abbotsford to-day," sneered Cardew.

"I haven't the faintest idea why you missed Abbotsford, and I don't care a rap," retorted Tom Merry. "I suppose you were slacking about as usual."

"Liar!"

"Wha-a-a-t?"

"Don't I speak plain enough?" sneered Cardew.

Tom Merry jumped up from the tea-table.

"Quite plain enough to make me throw you out of the study," he exclaimed, and he rushed at the dandy of the Fourth.

Cardew faced him with his hands up, his look black and bitter. But he was no match for the captain of the Shell. He went through the study doorway whirling, and landed in the passage with a crash.

Tom stood in the doorway with flashing eyes.

"Now come back and repeat what you said," he panted.

"I'll repeat it fast enough—I'll shout it from the housetops, if you like," exclaimed Cardew, staggering to his feet,

crimson and breathless. "I'll have you turned out of the junior club for the trick you've played on me to-day."

"Bai Jove!"

The "row" in the Shell passage had brought most of the fellows out of their studies, among them Blake & Co.

"Bai Jove! You are labahin' undah a misappwehension, Cardew," Arthur Augustus tried to explain.

"I think the fellow's wandering in his mind," said Tom Merry contemptuously. "What trick does he think I've played him?"

"The dear man's put it down to you," grinned Blake. "Put it down to Study No. 6, Cardew. It was a little stunt of our own."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Little us, and nobody else, and we're ready to answer for it," said Digby, "and we're ready to play the same game over again, every time you try to muck up the footer."

"You bet!" said Herries.

"But what——" exclaimed Tom Merry, mystified.

Blake waved his hand towards Cardew.

"He can tell you, if he likes. We don't mind. If he cares to take it before the head of the games, we're ready to walk to Kildare's study with him."

"Yaas, wathah! Weady and willin'!"

Cardew panted for breath. He had taken it for granted, without thinking or a doubt, that Tom Merry, his old rival, had been at the bottom of the kidnapping. But he realised his mistake now.

"You—you—— Then you didn't know what had happened?" he stammered, quite taken aback.

"I don't know that anything happened!" snapped Tom. "What the thump are you driving at? What's all this mystery about?"

"You—you didn't know I was kept away?"

"How the thump should I know?"

"I—I thought——"

"Were you kept away?" demanded Tom, something of a light breaking on his mind.

"Yes," panted Cardew.

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"And—and I thought——" stammered Cardew.

"You thought!" snapped Tom scornfully. "You thought! And you come to my study and call me a liar because you thought! I think you ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself!"

Cardew drew a deep breath.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted.

"In fact, I know you are. I—I—I'm sorry!"

And with that rather unexpected apology, Ralph Reckness Cardew turned and walked away, leaving the passage in a buzz behind him.

CHAPTER 37.

The Election!

"ELECTION on Wednesday!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Good news!"

It was good news to a good many fellows, and surprising news, too. But there it was, on the notice-board, signed by Kildare of the Sixth. On Wednesday at three o'clock, in the lecture-room, a new election was to take place for the selection of the junior captain of St. Jim's.

"Wippin' news!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and his view was shared by all Study No. 6.

"Ripping news!" said Monty Lowther, in Study No. 10, and Manners and Tom Merry heartily agreed.

"Ripping news!" said Figgins, in the New House. "We're going to have another chance for this House, you fellows." And Kerr and Fatty Wynn agreed that it was ripping.

There had been a good deal of excitement and speculation in the Lower School, after the incident of the Abbotsford match. The right story of what had happened that day was not generally known. Cardew having decided to keep his own counsel, Study No. 6 had done the same, in spite of many inquiries and much surmise.

But that most of the footballing fellows were thoroughly fed-up with Cardew was no secret, and it was known that trouble must come, and Tom Merry was urged on all sides to take up the gage of battle and give his rival a fall. But Tom steadily declined to take the lead against the junior captain; and then, unexpectedly, it became known that Cardew himself had requested the head of the games to appoint a new election. Some airily explained to Kildare that they didn't seem satisfied with the present state of affairs; and, as a matter of fact, Kildare himself was very far from satisfied, and was glad to take the opening that Cardew's request gave him.

So now it was settled, and the notice was on the board, and the Lower School was in a ferment on the subject.

Why Cardew was taking the chance was a mystery, even to his own chums, Clive and Levison. But he was taking it, and of his own accord. At the last election the School House had rallied round him, to keep out the New House candidate; but crowds of fellows were heard to say now that they would prefer the New House man to Cardew. Which was a proof of how thoroughly fed-up they were with their present captain, for, generally, the whole School House would have agreed that there could not be a skipper chosen from the New House, without St. Jim's going rapidly to the dogs in consequence.

Cardew still had a party—not a party to be greatly proud of, however. Racke & Co., the slackers of the school, backed him up, chiefly from dislike of Tom Merry and his partisans. Some other fellows thought he might be given

another chance. And a few, perhaps, had in view generous spreads in Study No. 9 and invitations to Reckness Towers. A good many fellows who had supported him on the last occasion, regarding it as "sporting" of him to put the matter to the test again, resolved not to vote at all. They did not care to help re-elect him, but did not feel disposed to take a hand in turning him out.

It was probable, therefore, that the poll would be a more limited one than was usual in such cases; a circumstance that inspired hope in Figgins & Co.

When the School House voted en bloc in school elections the New House was too powerfully outnumbered to have much chance for its candidate. But when the School House vote was split, there was a chance for the New House. And the fact that many voters were to abstain from voting at all increased that chance—for there were not likely to be many abstentions in the New House ranks.

Figgins & Co. beat up voters on all sides, and rallied the juniors of their own House. In the School House a crowd of fellows did electioneering business for Tom Merry. Electioneering was not in Tom's own line; he simply declined to have anything to do with it. He was there to be voted for if the fellows wanted him to be captain of the Lower School. And he left it at that. He declined to ask anybody for a vote. Indeed, he told Baggy Trimble that, if Baggy had the cheek to vote for him, he would kick Baggy.

But though Tom Merry went on his way and made no sign, his friends pushed his cause in both Houses, and with great energy. Arthur Augustus went so far as to suggest that anybody who did not vote for Tom should be given a feahful thwashin'.

Cardew did not display the energy he had displayed earlier. There were no royal spreads in Study No. 9, no vague promises; in fact, there was no trickery. Apparently Cardew wanted to be elected

fairly and squarely this time, if elected at all.

All the Lower School looked forward to Wednesday, and there was much counting and recounting of possible votes. Three candidates were nominated—Tom Merry, Cardew, and George Figgins. All calculations showed that the voting was likely to be close.

In resigning his place as junior captain of the school, Cardew had resigned also that of junior House captain. That was an affair that concerned the School House alone, and Kildare had appointed Tuesday evening for the House to choose a new captain. It was a small affair compared with Wednesday's election, but fellows attended it eagerly, regarding it as a straw which would show which way the wind was blowing. And there were loud cheers from Tom's partisans when he was declared junior House captain, with a majority of a dozen votes in his favour.

"It's going our way," Monty Lowther remarked in Study No. 10 afterwards. "You'll be elected junior captain of the school to-morrow, Tom."

Tom Merry nodded.

"It looks like it," he said. "But there's many a slip, you know. Still, let's hope for the best."

"Anyhow, you're junior House captain now, and it's the first step," said Manners. "That was how Cardew started when he began his campaign. He got in as House captain and started giving you trouble. You can give him a Roland for his Oliver now, Tom."

"H'm!" said Tom.

"We'll jolly well make you!" declared Lowther warmly. "This study is up against Cardew all along the line. If he keeps the School captaincy, you're going to give him trouble as House captain, do you hear?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"We've got to think of the school," he said. "Things would go to pot with House captain and School captain jibbing at one another. If Cardew remains

junior captain of St. Jim's, I shall try to make the best of it—not the worst."

"Fathead!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I suppose you're right, Tom," said Monty Lowther, after a long pause. "But you're really a bit too good for this jolly old world, you know. If you play the game, Cardew won't."

"No reason why I shouldn't, if he doesn't."

"Oh, how-wow!"

"But we're going to win," said Manners. "The trouble is so many fellows saying they're not going to vote. They backed up Cardew last time, and don't like to turn him down now. But I believe most of them hope you'll get in, Tom."

"Hoping isn't enough," growled Lowther. "They ought to vote."

"Well, so long as they don't vote for Cardew, it's something," said Manners. "I think we're going to pull it off."

TWO MORE FINE SCHOOL TALES FOR FEBRUARY.

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 6th

Over in the New House there was something like equal confidence in Figgins' study.

"I fancy we're really going to pull it off this time," George Figgins declared to Kerr and Fatty Wynn. "It will be rather a catch for St. Jim's, having a New House junior skipper."

"No end of a catch," agreed Kerr.

"We'll celebrate it, if you get in, Figgy," said Fatty Wynn. "We'll stand the biggest spread that ever was stood at St. Jim's."

"Trust you to think of that!" chuckled Figgy.

In Study No. 9 in the Fourth it was difficult to tell whether Ralph Reckness Cardew was feeling confident or not. Whatever he thought on the subject he kept to himself, and even Levison could not guess his thoughts. Clive and Levison had not voted in the House captain election on Tuesday evening, and they did not intend to vote in the School captain election on the morrow. Cardew was their chum, but they wanted Tom Merry for their captain. Cardew's best friends could not say that he had been a success or a credit to the school in his new role. It was Cardew who gave them the news how Tuesday's election had gone, when he strolled into Study No. 9 afterwards.

"You've got a new House captain," he announced.

"Tom Merry?"

"Yes.

"Good!" said Clive frankly.

"Very good!" said Cardew with a laugh. "Some of the fellows are sayin' that it's an omen for to-morrow, and that Thomas will romp home, back into his old job."

"I think it's very likely," said Levison.

"So do I," agreed Cardew. "It will be a close thing, anyhow." He gave a deep yawn. "Frightful bore, these school elections what?"

"No reason why you should go in for

them, if you find them a bore," said Ernest Levison dryly.

"Is there ever any reason for anythin' I do?" yawned Cardew. "Hallo, here's jolly old Trimble! Roll away, Baggy!"

"I want to speak to you in private, Cardew," said Baggy Trimble mysteriously.

"Shout it out!"

"But it's private."

"Your mistake; it isn't. Say it and bunk, or, better still, bunk without sayin' it."

"Look here, you've been kicked out of the House captaincy," said Trimble warmly. "I offered to vote for you—"

"For half-a-crown," assented Cardew. "You did, old fat bean. I'm glad I kept the half-a-crown in my pocket."

"Of course, I was going to vote out of friendship," said Trimble. "You might have lent me half-a-crown. That would have nothing to do with it, of course. But about to-morrow?"

"Ring off, and roll."

"It's more important to-morrow," said Trimble, blinking at him. "If Tom Merry gets in as junior captain of the school, where do you come in, Cardew? Now, I've got a lot of influence. You know how popular I am in both Houses. Exerting my influence, I can turn the scale in favour of any candidate."

"Oh, my hat!"

"If I throw my weight into the scale, something's bound to happen," said Trimble impressively.

"If you throw your weight anywhere, something would happen, I fancy," agreed Cardew. "Somethin' like an earthquake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" roared the fat junior. "Look here, I'm going to back you up to-morrow. I'm down on Merry, and we don't want Figgins, a New House cad, for captain. I'm your man, Cardew!"

"Thanks!"

"Pure friendship, you understand," said Trimble.

"I understand," grinned Cardew.

"Good! That's settled," said Trimble. "I—I suppose you could lend a fellow five bob?"

"Easily."

"Thanks, old man." Baggy Trimble held out a large, fat, and far from cleanly hand.

Cardew stared at it.

"Soap!" he said.

"Eh?"

"And hot water——"

"What?"

"And a scrubbin' brush, and a little Sanitas."

"You—you—you——" gasped Trimble. "You funny idiot! Are you going to lend me five bob, or are you not going to lend me five bob?"

"I'm lendin' you nothin' but a boot, old bean, and here it is!"

"Yaroooh!"

Baggy Trimble departed hurriedly from the study. He put a fat and furious face into the doorway a minute later, and roared:

"Yah! I'm going to vote for Figgins! Yah!"

Then he disappeared, narrowly escaping a cushion that hurtled from Study No. 9.

"There's a vote gone," sighed Cardew, sinking into the armchair. "By the way, as the votin' to-morrow is sure to be close, do you fellows know whether the rules allow a candidate to vote?"

"It's allowed," said Levison, "but it's not the thing. I'm quite sure that neither Tom Merry nor Figgins will vote for himself."

"But it's permitted?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then I think I shall vote."

"It's rotten bad form to do anything of the kind, Cardew," said Sidney Clive rather gruffly.

"Think so?"

"Don't you think so yourself?"

"That depends," yawned Cardew. "In my case, I don't think so. Anyhow, I fancy I shall vote. Now don't give me a sermon, old bean—give me the Latin dic., and let's have a dig at this rotten prep."

And prep proceeded in Study No. 9 in a rather grim silence.

CHAPTER 38.

Just Like Cardew!

WALLY wound!" said Arthur Augustus impressively.

It was on the following Wednesday afternoon.

After dinner that day the electioneering was fast and furious. The three rival candidates preserved an attitude of lofty confidence, or, at least, indifference. But their followers canvassed for votes on all sides, and there was keen enthusiasm, and many disputes and arguments, and some punching of noses.

But even as three o'clock, the hour of the election, drew near, nobody could make a good guess at the result. All that was certain was that the voting would be close.

It was a fine afternoon, and a half-holiday, and a good many fellows were tempted out of gates, which made the result more uncertain than ever. Nobody was bound to turn up for the election if he did not choose to do so, and fellows who were not keen on it gave it a miss. The immediate followers of the three candidates were keen enough, but there were a good many indifferent, specially among fellows who had backed up Cardew last time and did not care to back him up again, and yet hesitated to turn against the fellow they had once elected.

The lecture-hall was not at all crowded by three o'clock, and it became clear that the number of abstentions would be very considerable.

"Wally wound," repeated Arthur Augustus, as Study No. 6 made their

way to the lecture-room. "I say, Gwunday, are you wallyin' wound?"

Grundy of the Shell gave a snort.

"I'm standing out," he snapped. "Catch me voting for Tom Merry. He's told me plainly that he'll never put me in the school eleven, or the House eleven either."

"But it would be wathah wotten if he agweed to play a dud, wouldn't it, old chap?" asked Arthur Augustus innocently.

"You silly ass!"

"Weally, Gwunday——"

"And I'm not voting for Cardew," said Grundy "He's let me down once, and he'd do it again. And, of course, I wouldn't vote for Figgins, a New House bouncer. So I'm standing out, and so are Wilkins and Gunn. I'd jolly well whop them if they voted when I stood out."

"Bai Jove!"

Grundy stalked away in lofty dignity. No candidate who refused to recognise his football claims was worthy of his support, in his opinion, and the great Grundy was determined to ignore the election. However, in spite of being ignored by the great Grundy, the election proceeded.

Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth came into the lecture-room on the stroke of three to conduct the proceedings. The captain of St. Jim's glanced over the gathering, rather surprised to note that there were so many absentees. However, that was no concern of his, and he directed the door to be closed and locked when the last stroke of three had died away.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his celebrated eyeglass into his eye and glanced round anxiously. Tom Merry, George Figgins, and Ralph Reckness Cardew were all present, and they were duly proposed and seconded, and the two prefects proceeded to the count.

"How many fellows do you make pwent, Blake?" whispered Arthur Augustus, who had already counted the

assembly thrice with three different results.

"A hundred," said Blake, "and nearly half of them New House chaps."

"Ninety-three," said Dig.

"You mean eighty-nine," said Herries.

"Bai Jove—I make it a hundwed and twenty——"

"Silence!"

"Ordah, there, you fellows—don't keep on talkin' while the count's goin' on. I feel suah, Blake, that there are ovah a hundwed——"

"Silence!"

"Weally, you know——"

"Shut up, D'Arcy!"

"Bai Jove!"

Kildare and Darrell completed their counting and compared notes. They were observed to shrug their shoulders, and the juniors gazed at them anxiously, keen to hear the result.

"Weally, you fellows, I feel quite on tentah-hooks, you know——"

"Silence!"

Kildare announced the result—a result that made the St. Jim's juniors stare.

"One hundred and twenty votes have been recorded. The voting is equally divided: Tom Merry, forty; Cardew, forty; Figgins, forty."

"Bai Jove!"

"Oh, my hat!"

There was a buzz of surprised voices. Everyone had expected the voting to be very close; but nobody had looked for this outcome. The three candidates had tied.

"Well, that beats it!" murmured Figgins to his chums.

"Rotten!" muttered Monty Lowther in Tom Merry's ear, and Tom nodded and smiled.

Cardew gave the captain of the Shell a curious glance. He stepped towards Kildare.

"I ask for a re-count," he said.

"The counting is quite correct."

"Very likely; but I believe a candidate is entitled to claim a re-count," drawled Cardew; "I claim it!"

"Very well!" said Kildare quietly. "The votes will be counted over again, you fellows."

"I trust some silly ass will change his mind and vote for Tom Merry," murmured Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, rather!"

"Hands up for Tom Merry!" called out Kildare.

Forty right hands went up. And then, slowly, but surely, a forty-first hand was raised.

There was a gasp throughout the meeting. For the last hand that went up was that of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

Every eye turned on Cardew.

He did not seem to observe it. He stood with his hand raised over his head, his face expressionless.

"Bai Jove! Do you see that, you fellows?" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry stared at his rival blankly.

Kildare fixed his eyes on Cardew grimly.

"What does this mean?" he snapped.

"Candidates are allowed to vote, I understand," yawned Cardew.

"You're voting for Tom Merry?" exclaimed Kildare.

"Why not? He's a better man for the job than I am."

"Wha-at?"

"You're bound to count in my vote, dear man! Get on with it!"

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

In the midst of an excited buzz and some laughter the counting was completed. The result was known in advance now, but the juniors listened while the captain of the school announced it.

"Tom Merry, forty-one votes. Cardew and Figgins, forty each. Tom Merry is duly elected junior captain of St. Jim's."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Tom Merry!"

"Well, it's all right, so long as it's not Cardew," remarked Figgins philosophically.

"Hurrah!"

Tom Merry's supporters closed round him and bore him out of the lecture-room shoulder-high in triumph amid laughter and cheers. Figgins & Co. cheerily joined in the cheering. Ralph Reckness Cardew sauntered away with his hands in his pockets, nonchalant as ever, having once more demonstrated that the only thing that was to be expected of him was the unexpected.

Tom Merry was back in his old place—junior captain of St. Jim's—and there were few fellows who were not, after all, satisfied with that result of the prolonged contest. The contest was over now—Cardew of the Fourth was no longer his rival, and evidently no longer his enemy. Cardew's amazing action had surprised all the school—Tom Merry as much as the rest; but on reflection the fellows agreed that it was just like Cardew, the stick-at-nothing schoolboy!



The END



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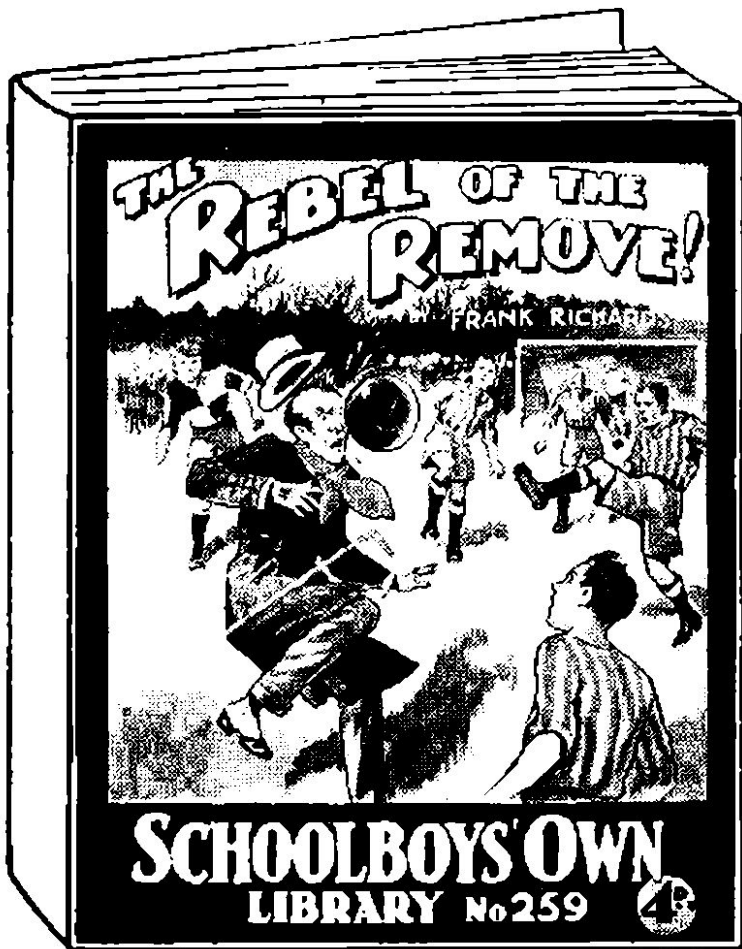
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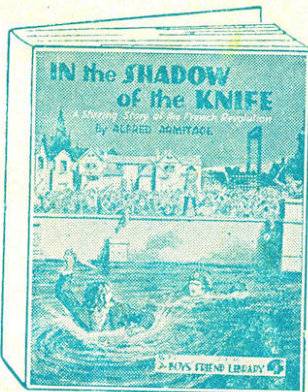
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