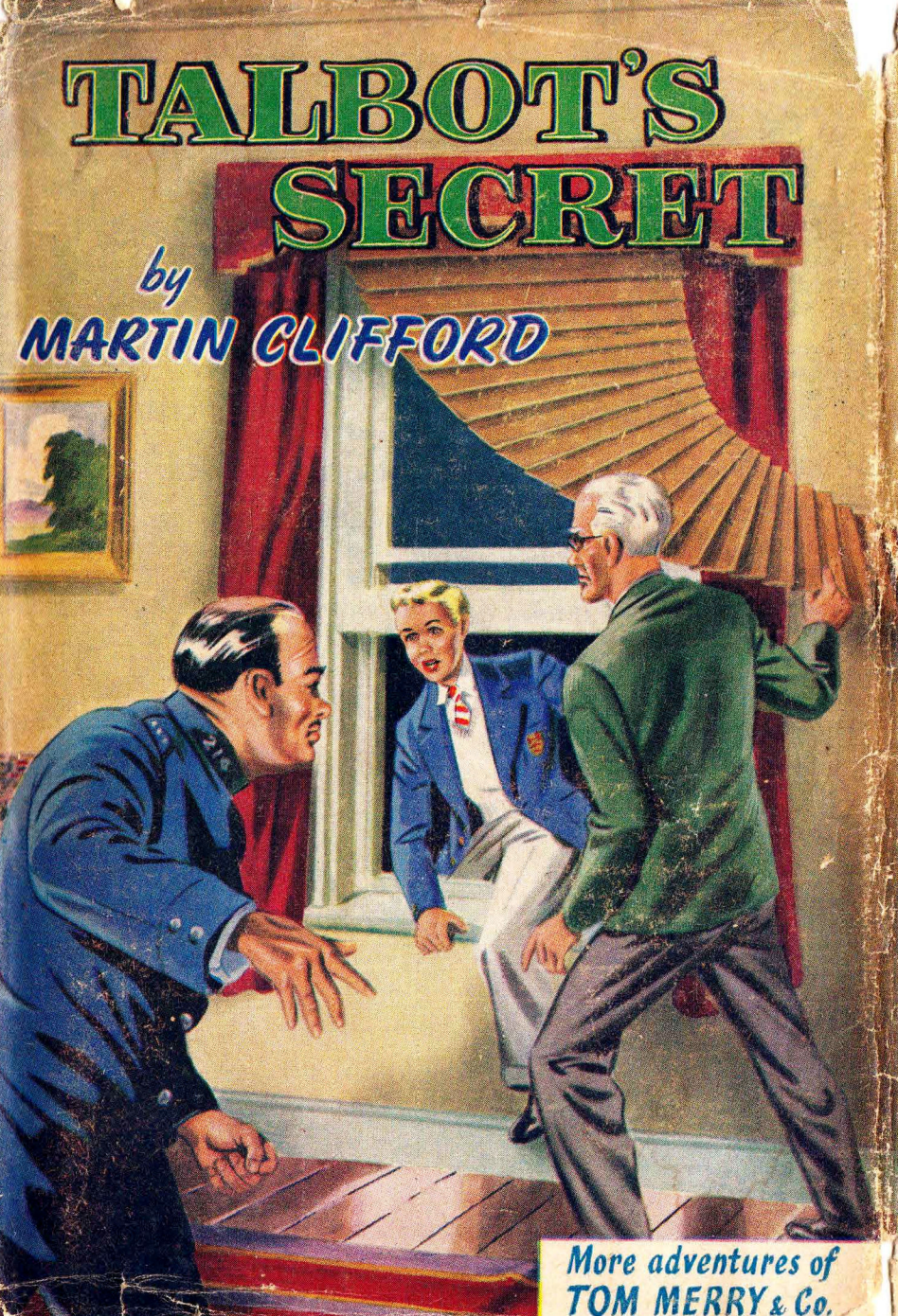
TALBOT'S SECRET

by MARTIN CLIFFORD



More adventures of TOM MERRY & Co.

Talbot's Secret

by

MARTIN CLIFFORD

Those immortal characters, Tom Merry & Co., reappear in this new exciting tale of St. Jim's and its boys.

The presence of a mysterious person in the neighbourhood causes much worry to Talbot, another member of the school. When a new master arrives, who is recognised by Talbot as having somewhat sinister qualifications for the post, the mystery deepens and resolves into a thrilling story.

7/6

By the same Author

TOM MERRY AND CO. OF ST. JIM'S
THE SCAPEGRACE OF ST. JIM'S
THE SECRET OF THE STUDY

TALBOT'S SECRET

MARTIN CLIFFORD

SPRING BOOKS
LONDON

First Published in 1949

PRINTED BY DRAGON PRESS, LTD., LUTON, BEDS.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.

NOT AS PER PROGRAMME!

"GUSSY, you ass—."

"Gussy, you goat——."

"What on earth's that game?"

Blake and Herries and Digby, coming along from Study No. 6 in the Fourth, stopped on the study landing, to stare in astonishment at their aristocratic chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus's occupation, at the moment was enough to astonish any fellow.

He was handling a large can of water. The can was so large and so full of water, that it was not easy to handle. Arthur Augustus had heaved it up on the old oak balustrade on the edge of the landing, overlooking the well of the great staircase. Several splashes from it had damped the best-fitting waistcoat and the most elegant trousers at St. Jim's. But Arthur Augustus, usually very particular indeed about his clobber, was not heeding these trifles.

He glanced round at his three astonished friends. His noble face did not wear its accustomed expression of cheerful good-humour. His brows were knitted. His eye gleamed through his eyeglass. Something, it was clear, had stirred the ire of the swell of St. Jim's, deeply.

"Pway don't woar, deah boys," he said, "I don't want that wottah to be warned what's comin' to him."

"But what——?" exclaimed Blake.

"Who——?" demanded Digby.

"That wottah Cutts of the Fifth," said Arthur Augustus, "I know he's comin' up to his study. He may come up any minute now. I'm weady for him."

"Oh, crumbs!" said Herries.

"You've got that can of water ready for Cutts of the Fifth?" exclaimed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

"You howling ass——."

"Weally, Blake——."

"If you mop that water over a Fifth-form man, he will strew you all over St. Jim's in small pieces," hooted Blake. "Think you can mop a can of water over a senior man?"

"I shall wely on my fwiends to stand by me, if Cutts cuts up wusty," said Arthur Augustus, calmly, "I wegwet vewy much that I cannot handle him on my own. If I could, I should alweady have given him a feahful thwashin' for tippin' my hat into the fountain in the quad."

Blake and Herries and Dig grinned. They had the clue now to Arthur Augustus's unusual mood of wrath.

Arthur Augustus, carefully balancing the can on the old oak, gave him a frigid stare.

"There is nothin' whatevah to gwin at," he said, coldly, "I do not wegard it as a laughin' mattah to tip a fellow's toppah into the fountain. I wegard it as an act of bwutal wuffianism."

"Awful!" said Blake.

"Frightful!" said Dig.

"Dreadful!" said Herries.

"Yaas, wathah," agreed Arthur Augustus, "The vewy last word in wuffianly bwutality, in my opinion. The cheeky wottah said I was puttin' on woll, and knocked my hat off, wight into the watah. Bai Jove! Pewwaps he will be sowwy for himself, when he gets a couple of gallons of watah on his own nut. What?"

"But look here——!" urged Blake.

"I wefuse to look there, Blake! Cutts dwenched my hat, and I am goin' to dwench his head. Makin' the punishment fit the cwime, you know! Pway don't make a wow and warn him—he may come up any minute."

Arthur Augustus glanced down over the balustrade. Cutts of the Fifth, if he was coming up, was not coming yet. The staircase was quite uninhabited.

"Now look here, Gussy," said Blake, "Cutts is rather a swanking ass, but you can't mop gallons of water over a Fifth-form senior——."

"I wathah think I can, Blake. I am certainly goin' to."

"There'll be a row!" said Dig.

" Yaas, I wathah think that Cutts will make a wow, when he gets this can of watah on his nut."

" You can't chuck water about on the staircase, ass! " hooted Herries, " Do you want Lathom to stick you in Extra for playing potty tricks on the stairs? "

" Wats! "

" Cutts might go to Railton about it——!" urged Blake.

"Cutts can go to Wailton, Blake, if he likes, aftah I have dwenched his cheeky head for knockin' off my hat into the fountain. He can go to the Head if he likes, or he can go to Jewicho! I am certainly goin' to dwench him."

Arthur Augustus's noble mind was evidently made up. Cutts of the Fifth deserved almost anything, for laying lawless hands on Gussy's topper. Gladly would Arthur Augustus have punched him right and left. But it was not quite practicable for a Fourth-form junior to punch a hefty Fifth-form senior. Drenching Cutts' head as Cutts had drenched Gussy's hat, was the next best thing. And that was what was scheduled to happen—unless Gussy's friends succeeded in restraining his righteous wrath.

Blake and Herries and Dig exchanged a glance, and moved nearer to the swell of St. Jim's. It was time for gentle restraint to be exercised. What happened to Cutts of the Fifth did not matter a boiled bean: but what would happen to Arthur Augustus for swamping the staircase did matter.

" Now, old chap," said Jack Blake, in his most persuasive tones, " Give it a miss. If you let that can loose over Cutts, he will slay you bald-headed, then Railton will whop you, and Lathom will stick what's left of you in Extra. It's not good enough old chap! Lift that can down."

" I am keepin' this can weady for Cutts, Blake, and I uttahly wefuse to lift it down," answered Arthur Augustus.

" I'll help you," said Blake.

" I do not wequiah any help, Blake."

" I'll help you all the same, fathead!"

Jack Blake grasped at the can. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy held it fast. It rocked on the oaken balustrade.

At the same moment, there came the sound of footsteps on the stairs below. Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

" Leave go, Blake, you uttah ass! He's comin'! "

"Lend a hand Dig."

"What-ho," said Dig.

Footsteps on the stairs were ascending. The newcomer was coming up the curve of the staircase under the landing. In a moment more he would be just under the balustrade—beautifully placed to receive the contents of the can in readiness for him. After that, he would be beyond the danger-zone. And at that moment—the psychological moment—Blake and Dig held on to the can to prevent their aristocratic chum from up-ending it over the head below. It was a friendly action, considering the possible consequences for Arthur Augustus: but it had an intensely exasperating effect on Gussy.

"Will you welease that can?" he fairly hissed, "Will you let go at once?"

"Hardly," said Blake.

"Not quite!" said Digby.

"You uttah asses! You intehfewin' wottahs! If you do not welease that can this instant, I shall no longah wegard you as fwiends" breathed Arthur Augustus.

Even that deadly threat did not move Blake or Digby. They held on to the can.

"Dwag them away, Hewwies, will you?"

"No fear!" grinned Herries, "Chuck it, Gussy, old man."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus, with both hands grasping the can, wrenched. He was unable to wrench it away: but it rocked under the wrench, and tipped. A flood of water shot out, and streamed down, swamping in a torrent on the staircase below —and on the head that had just come into range.

Splash!

"Oooooh!" came a startled splutter.

"Oh, you ass!" breathed Blake.

"Oh, you goat!" hissed Dig.

"Oh, you chump!" said Herries, "You've done it now!" Arthur Augustus grinned. Wild splutters from below told that the flood of water had reached its target, drenching a head.

"Yaas, wathah! I've got him all wight! That wottah Cutts ——." Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly, as a voice floated up from below. "Oh, cwumbs!"

"What—what—who did this? I am drenched! It is—is—is water! I am soaked with water! Goodness gracious, what—— what——."

It was not the voice of Cutts of the Fifth. It was the voice of Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth: Gussy's form-master.

"Oh!" gasped Blake, "You born idiot——."

"Lathom!" muttered Dig, in horror.

"Our Beak!" mumbled Herries.

"Oh, cwikey! It was all your fault, Blake—if you had not barged in, I should have looked——."

"Cut!" hissed Blake.

For a moment, the chums of Study No. 6 were quite overcome with horror. Below, their form-master, Lathom, invisible but extremely audible, was tottering on the stairs, drenched to the skin, streaming with water, spluttering, gasping, gurgling.

Blake was the first to recover. He clutched the empty can, and cut across the landing. Herries and Dig cut after him. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy followed fast.

Had Cutts of the Fifth captured the contents of that can, there certainly would have been a row. But what would happen now that Mr. Lathom had caught the sudden flood, hardly bore thinking of. Prompt retreat from the scene was indicated: and Blake and Co., like the guests in Macbeth, stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once. Long before Mr. Lathom had finished spluttering on the stairs, the landing above was totally uninhabited.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST!

"TALBOT, old chap."

Tom Merry stared a little, as he received no answer.

There was a cheery smile on Tom's face, as he looked into Talbot's study: in the Shell, next to his own. But that smile faded out, as he looked at the clouded handsome face of the Shell fellow sitting in the window.

A "row" was on in the School-House. It was about tea-

time, and a good many fellows had been in the studies. All or almost all of them had been drawn forth by the "row." The study landing, lately uninhabited, was crowded with juniors, most of them talking at once. Railton, the house-master, and Linton, master of the Shell, were there: and Kildare and Darrell and Langton of the Sixth, prefects: and six or seven of the Fifth. Indeed the startling happening on the staircase seemed to have "got the house": and there was a very large spot of excitement. Voices and footsteps woke the echoes: but Talbot of the Shell, in his study, had evidently remained unaware of what was going on.

He was alone in the study, seated in the window-seat, the sunshine on his handsome face showing it clouded, troubled, almost worn. A newspaper lay open on his knee, but he was not looking at it. So deeply was he sunk in thought that he had not even heard the door open, or Tom Merry's voice.

And Tom's own cheery face clouded.

Tom Merry's own special chums in the Shell at St. Jim's were Manners and Lowther, who shared No. 10 Study with him. But his friendship with Talbot was very deep, dating from the days when the one-time "Toff" had put a strange and chequered past behind him, and faced a new life as a St. Jim's fellow. It was Tom's loyal friendship, as much as anything else, that had enabled Talbot to pull through and make good. The dark days were gone: and Talbot, though a little unusually grave and thoughtful for his years, was as cheerful and happy as any fellow at St. Jim's, popular in his form and in his House: resolutely determined never to let his thoughts wander back to the past that was gone.

But sometimes, as Tom knew, some word or incident would recall that shadowed past and all its bitterness. And the look on Talbot's face—a strangely old look on a face so young—told him that such was the case now. The boy in the window seat, plunged deep in gloomy thought, was living the past again.

For a moment or two Tom Merry hesitated, undecided whether to rouse Talbot from his gloomy meditations, or to step out of the study again, as the junior had not heard him come.

But he decided on the former. He came into the study with a heavy tread, to draw Talbot's attention.

Talbot gave a sudden start, and turned towards him. Doubtless, for the moment, he supposed that it was one of his study-mates, Gore or Skimpole, who had come in: and in a split second his look changed. The "Toff" from of old had been master of his countenance, and never gave anything away. The face Tom Merry had seen, as he looked in from the door, had been dark, clouded, gloomy, plunged in dejection. The face that now turned to him was cheerful and smiling, as if Talbot of the Shell had not a care in the world. It gave Tom a pang to see it: it was as if his friend had suddenly put on a mask.

But the mechanical smile became genuine and cordial, as Talbot saw who it was that had come in.

"Oh! You, Tom!" he said, "Trot in, old chap! Jolly glad you looked in. "He threw the newspaper aside, and rose to his feet.

"What's up, old fellow?" asked Tom.

"Eh! Nothing! I'm afraid I'd forgotten, just for the minute, that I was coming to tea in your study—am I late?"

"Never mind that," said Tom Merry, "Tea will be a bit late too—Manners and Lowther have gone to join the crowd —you haven't heard the row?"

"No!" Talbot coloured faintly, "I—I was thinking of something—in a bit of a brown study. What's on?"

"Some mad ass has been swamping Lathom with a bucket of water, on the stairs. He's sneezing his head off," said Tom, "Beaks and pre's looking for the silly ass—goodness knows who it was. Can't make it out—everybody likes old Lathom: just can't imagine who'd duck him. But never mind that now." Tom Merry kicked the study door shut. "I asked you what's up—and you said nothing."

Talbot's colour deepened, and he was silent.

"If that mean's you'd rather I minded my own business, I'll cut and join the mob on the study landing," said Tom, bluntly, "But if there's a spot of trouble of any kind, and a pal could help——."

Talbot drew a deep, deep breath.

"There's no trouble, Tom," he said, quietly, "Nothing's happened—only a reminder of a time I'd rather forget." He

smiled faintly, and sat down again, turning his face from the window, so that it was a little in shadow, "Squat down, old chap, if you're not in a hurry for tea—I'll tell you."

"Not if you'd rather not——."

"I daresay it will do me good to get it off my chest."

"O.K., then." Tom Merry sat down on the edge of the study table. He gave a nod towards the newspaper. "Something in that?"

"You've guessed it."

"Not—not about——?" Tom caught his breath for a moment, at the dismaying thought that something about the "Toff" of other days might have recurred.

"No! No!" Talbot read his unspoken thought, and the colour in his face deepened still more, "All that's forgotten, Tom—except by me. Even the fellows here who knew something about it have forgotten it. There were few who knew the whole story—but you knew, Tom, and I can't forget. Though sometimes," went on Talbot, musingly, "It seems like a dream, quite unreal: and I can hardly believe, Tom, that there was a time when I was called the Toff, and was in Hookey Walker's gang of cracksmen."

Tom shivered.

"Don't think of it, old chap," he said, "You never had a chance—till you came here. And then you made the most of it. Put it right out of your head like a nightmare."

"That's what it seems like, when it comes back," said Talbot, "And I'm no fool to brood on what's past and can't be helped, Tom. Only sometimes——." The dark look settled on his face again.

"There's something in that paper?"

"Yes. Look at that!"

Talbot picked up the paper, and handed it to the captain of the Shell, indicating a paragraph with his forefinger.

Tom looked at it, and read:

> "There is still no clue to the perpetrators of the robbery at Messrs. Goldstein's offices in Manchester. It is now known that entrance was effected by a very small window high up in the building: a window so small that only a boy or an extremely slim man could have passed through

it. £600 was taken from the safe, which was opened without a trace being left, evidently by a very skilled hand."

Tom threw the newspaper down, and looked at Talbot, puzzled.

"What about that?" he asked.

"Only this," said Talbot, in a very low voice, "That was how the gang used me, Tom, when I was a mere kid, and had never known anything better. What's printed there might have referred to me, once—and not so very long ago, either."

"I understand," said Tom, softly. "But——."

"And that's not all," muttered Talbot, his face paling, "That happened in Manchester, Tom—far enough from here. But if it had happened in Wayland or Abbotsford—and it might have—how do I know what they might have thought—anything like that within easy distance of St. Jim's——."

"Talbot!" gasped Tom, aghast.

"Inspector Skeat, at Wayland, knows my story," said Talbot, "I believe that he believes in me—but you never can tell. Oh, Tom, if that had happened anywhere near St. Jim's——." His voice trailed off.

"There's nothing in it, Talbot—nothing!" said Tom, earnestly, "All that's past and dead and gone—you're a St. Jim's man now, liked and trusted by the Head, who's been the best of friends to you: adopted by your uncle, Colonel Lyndon: even fellows who were against you are your friends now: my dear old chap, you're whole worlds away from the 'Toff' of that wretched time. Nobody could dream——."

Talbot nodded.

"Perhaps you're right, Tom. But reading that, brought it all back with a shock. And—and even that's not all. The police have no clue to the man who clambered up a high building and pushed through a little window. The Toff could have done it in the old days—but there was another who could have done it—Jimmy the Cat——."

"Jimmy the Cat!" repeated Tom, blankly.

"He wasn't in the gang," said Talbot, "I saw him only a few times, in those days—and never had anything to do with him. He was a slim dandy of a fellow, in the top class of crooks—he could climb anything, anywhere—that was why they called him the Cat—and he could crack a safe as cleanly

and neatly as the Toff himself," added Talbot, with a bitter smile.

"Oh! Don't!" breathed Tom.

"Of course, I don't know," went on Talbot, "But—I've no doubt that the man they want is Jimmy the Cat! It's exactly his work—just his style. I know too much about such things, Tom—goodness knows I'd be glad to have a mind and a memory as clean and clear as yours, old chap."

"You never had my chance, old fellow — but when your chance came, you took it, and never looked back," said Tom, "There's more to your credit than there is to mine."

Talbot stared at him, for a moment, and then laughed.

"You've done me good, Tom," he said. "If ever a chap had a better pal than you, I'd like to see the colour of his hair!" He picked up the newspaper, tore it across and across, and tossed the fragments into the fireplace. "There's an end of that—and of thinking about it! It gave me a jolt, but—it's over, Tom! Let's join the mob."

They left the study together, Tom greatly relieved to see Talbot in his accustomed cheery mood, and joined the excited crowd on the study landing. If dark thoughts still lingered at the back of Talbot's mind, there was no sign of them in his handsome face.

CHAPTER III.

ARGUMENT IN STUDY No. 6!

CRACK!

"Yawoooh!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom Merry.

"That's Gussy," said Manners.

"Sounds like trouble in the happy family," remarked Monty Lowther, with a grin.

It certainly did!

Prep was over in the junior studies. The "Terrible Three" of the Shell were about to call for Blake and Co. in Study No. 6 in the Fourth, to go down with them. But as they came

along to No. 6, sounds from within that celebrated study indicated that peace, perfect peace, did not reign therein.

That sudden crack was the sound of a head establishing contact with something harder than a head. And the yell that followed was on the top note of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Tom Merry threw the door open. Quite a startling scene met the eyes of the three Shell fellows.

Arthur Augustus, in a somewhat rumpled state, his eyeglass flying at the end of its silken cord, his cheeks crimson with wrath, was wriggling in the grasp of his three faithful chums, who, only too evidently, had just banged his noble nut on the study table.

On that table stood a large can of water. What a large can of water was doing in a junior study, was quite a mystery to Tom Merry and Co. But there it was!

"Welease me!" Arthur Augustus fairly roared, "You uttah wuffians! I will thwash you all wound!"

"What on earth's the row, you fellows?" asked Tom.

"Any charge for admission to the show?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus stared round at the Shell fellows in the doorway, "Wescue, deah boys! Dwag these wuffians off, will you?"

"That's how Gussy thanks his pals for standing by him, and keeping him out of trouble," said Blake, "That's what he calls gratitude!"

"You uttah wottah," roared Arthur Augustus, "Welease me at once."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless Gussy!" said Blake sorrowfully, "Look at the trouble we're taking for the sake of friendship—we don't mind keeping on banging his head till dorm, if necessary. Do we, you chaps?"

"Not at all," said Dig.

"Ready and willing," said Herries, heartily.

"You uttah wottahs, I wefuse to have my head banged," shrieked Arthur Augustus, "I am goin' to mop that watah ovah Cutts, for knockin' my hat into the fountain this aftahnoon——."

"Not in your lifetime," said Blake.

"You silly ass, it would have been all wight befoah, if you had not butted in," hooted Arthur Augustus, "You made me get the wong man, I am goin' to get the wight man next time."

"There's not going to be a next time," said Blake, "Won't you give up the idea?"

"Nevah!"

"Then go it again, you men," said Blake.

Crack!

"Oh, cwumbs! Oh, cwikey! Wow!"

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther exchanged rather startled glances. Manners closed the study door hastily.

In spite of searching inquiry by beaks and prefects, no discovery had been made so far about the swamping on the staircase. Study No. 6 had been well off the scene in time and it was anybody's guess who had done it. Nobody, certainly, had thought of Study No. 6—nobody could have supposed that they would ever have dreamed of drenching their form-master with water. But the Terrible Three, at least, were enlightened now.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry, "Was it this study?"

"Keep it dark," said Blake hastily, "Gussy never meant it for poor old Lathom—but he's caught a frightful cold, and if it comes out, the howling ass will have to go up to the Head ——."

"It was entiahly your fault, Blake, that I mopped the watah ovah Lathom. I was expectin' that wottah Cutts to come up, as you know vewy well: and if you had not barged in, I should have looked——."

"Gussy all over!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——."

"And now," said Blake, with a deep breath, "The potty image isn't satisfied with putting poor old Lathom on the sick list. He's got another can of water to try it on again—next time I expect he'd get Railton——."

"Or the Head," said Digby.

"Or anybody, except Cutts," remarked Herries.

"It was entiahly your fault, Blake and I wefuse to take the wesponsibility for poor old Lathom catchin' a cold. I am vewy

sowwy indeed for poor old Lathom. But I am goin' to dwench Cutts of the Fifth for dwenchin' my hat——."

"He doesn't even know that if he plays games with a can of water, the pre's will jump to it at once that he's the man," said Blake, "That's the sort of brain they hand out to the tenth possessor of a foolish face!"

"They jolly well would, Gussy," said Tom Merry, "You can bet that anybody larking with a can of water will get all the pre's on his track."

"Asking for it, old bean," said Lowther.

"Might as well go to Railton and confide to him that you did it," said Manners.

"Wubbish!"

"But, my dear chap——!" urged Tom.

"I said wubbish, Tom Mewwy, and I wepeat, wubbish! Cutts dwenched my toppah and I am goin' to dwench Cutts. I am quite wesolved on that. I wefuse to listen to argument on the subject!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"Argument's wasted on Gussy," sighed Blake, "We've talked to him like Dutch uncles, and it rolls off him like water off a duck. That's why we're banging his nut. We're going on banging it till he promises, honour bright, to give it up, or until the study table breaks down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, Gussy, be a good boy——," urged Tom Merry, laughing.

"You uttah ass, I wefuse to be a good boy—I mean, I wefuse to listen to your wot! I am goin' to dwench Cutts——."

"Sticking to that?" asked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Give him another tap!"

Crack!

"Yawoooooh! Oh, cwumbs!"

Arthur Augustus struggled and wriggled frantically. But he was firmly held by his three faithful friends. He simply had no chance.

"Ow! ow! Oh, my nut! Tom Mewwy, will you dwag these wuffians off?"

Tom shook his head.

"No fear," he answered, "I'll lend them a hand if they need it."

"Will you dwag them off, Lowthah?"

"Not so's you'd notice it, old bean."

"Will you dwag them off, Mannahs?"

"Ask again next term."

"Oh, you wottahs! Blake—Hewwies—Dig—if you do not immediately welease me, I shall wefuse to wegard you as fwiends fwom now on."

"Are you chucking it up, Gussy?"

"Nevah!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Give him another!"

Crack!

"Whoooop!"

"Now chuck it, old man, before we damage the study furniture with your nut," urged Blake, "I won't say this hurts us as much as it does you—it doesn't!—but it's a lot of trouble! Will you chuck it?"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! I am goin' to dwench that wottah Cutts, and I am goin' to thwash you all wound——."

"Give him another!"

Arthur Augustus put up a terrific resistance, as his three friends essayed to tap his noble nut once more. The four juniors fairly rocked to and fro.

"Gussy, old man——!" urged Tom Merry.

Gussy did not heed. His noble blood was roused, and he was exerting every ounce to break loose from his comrades. They wriggled, and wrestled, and plunged, and rocked, and bumped into the study table. Then the table rocked.

"Look out!" gasped Tom Merry.

But it was too late! As the table rocked, the big can of water tipped over: and its contents streamed out in a flood over the four Fourth-formers.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Lowther.

"Urrrrggh!" gasped Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy in chorus. Arthur Augustus was suddenly released. That sudden flood had put a sudden end to the tussle in Study No. 6.

Arthur Augustus had got most of it—but Blake and Herries and Dig had a fair share.

"Oh, cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "I'm all wet!"

"Ow! I'm soaked!" howled Herries.

"Groogh! My collar's full of water," yelled Dig.

"Look at me!" hissed Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry and Co.

"Think it's funny?" bawled Blake, "Here, there's some more water in the can—you can have it, as you think it's so funny——."

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther faded out of the study as Blake grasped the can. They went down the passage laughing.

But they were not laughing in Study No. 6. Three juniors there were wet, and one was very wet! The comic side of the occurrence was quite lost on Blake and Co.

"Oh cwumbs! You uttah asses—you feahful wuffians—I am all wet—my clobbah's all wet—my waistcoat's dwenched—my twousahs——."

"Bump him!" hissed Blake.

"Bai Jove! I——."

Arthur Augustus sat down, suddenly and hard, on a wet carpet. Blake crammed the can over his noble head, bonneting him with it, the remnant of water running down his aristocratic neck. Then Blake and Herries and Digby tramped out of the study, heading for the nearest bathroom in search of towels—leaving Arthur Augustus spluttering frantically and striving to extract his noble nut from the can.

Chapter IV.

THE COLD SHOULDER

Talbot smiled.

Really, he could not help it.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, was the cause. Arthur Augustus, quite often, was the unintentional cause of smiles.

Talbot of the Shell had gone down to the bike-shed for his machine. He found Study No. 6 there.

Tom Merry and Co. were at football practice that afternoon. With the Greyfriars match in the offing, Tom was keeping his men up to the mark. But Talbot, perhaps with some lingering of the dark thoughts of the previous day in his mind, had not joined his friends on the football ground: he was going out on his own. Blake and Co. were due for footer, and he was rather surprised to find them in the bike-shed. But he soon learned that there was trouble in the happy family.

Blake and Herries and Dig were arguing with their noble chum. Arthur Augustus, with his eyeglass screwed in his eye, surveyed them with lofty disdain. There was a rift in the lute.

D'Arcy had taken down his handsome jigger from the stand. Apparently he was, like Talbot, going out on his own, instead of joining his friends at footer, after class. His chums were objecting.

"Now, look here, you image!" said Jack Blake, "Don't be an ass! I know it's asking a lot——."

"Weally, Blake——."

"Can he help it?" sighed Dig.

"Weally, Dig——."

"Look here, leave that bike alone, and go and change for footer," hooted Herries, "Do you want to be left out of the Greyfriars match?"

"I hardly think that Tom Mewwy would be ass enough to leave his best forward out of the Gweyfwiahs match, Hewwies."

"It's going to rain," said Blake, "You'll get wet Gussy—what about your clobber?"

Even that appeal failed!

"Pwecious little you fellows care about a fellow's clobbah," said Arthur Augustus, with deep indignation, "Look at the way you tweated my clobbah in the study."

"If you lark about with cans of water, you must expect to get damp," said Blake, "Now, don't be a sulky ass because your pals looked after you and kept you out of mischief——."

"I wefuse to wegard you fellows as pals! I warned you vewy sewiously that if you persisted in bangin' my head, I should

no longah wegard you as fwiends. Did you bang it, or did you not? " demanded Arthur Augustus, hotly.

" We didn't bang any sense into it," said Dig.

" Come on, Gussy! Tom's expecting you——."

" Tom Mewwy can expect anythin' he likes. I do not wegard Tom Mewwy as a fwiend any longah. I am givin' the whole cwowd of you the cold shouldah! "

" You howling ass! " roared Blake.

" Wats! "

" You burbling chump——! " said Herries.

" Wats! "

" Gussy, you goat——! " said Dig.

" Wats! " said Arthur Augustus, for the third time. " I have told you fellows that I pwefer you not to speak to me, as we are no longah fwiends. I shall be vewy much obliged if you will keep your distance."

" Fathead! "

" Ass! "

" Chump! "

Having made those remarks in unison, Blake and Herries and Dig tramped out of the bike-shed, leaving the swell of St. Jim's to his own devices. Soccer called, and they had no more time to expend in arguing with their aristocratic chum. Arthur Augustus cast a freezing glance after them, as they went, evidently very much upon his noble dignity. Gussy, it appeared, was done with them—temporarily, at least. No doubt, in the long run, he might come round. But for the moment he was adamant.

Talbot smiled: Gussy on the high horse had his comic side. But he checked the smile as Arthur Augustus glanced round at him. Gussy was quite unaware that his noble dignity had its comic side, and it would have been tactless to apprise him of the fact.

" Goin' out, deah boy? " asked Gussy.

"Yes, a run on the jigger."

" Anywhah special? "

" Oh, no, just a spin."

" Then I should be vewy glad of your company, deah boy, if mine will not bore you," said Arthur Augustus, graciously.

Talbot nodded cheerfully. As a matter of fact, he would

have preferred only his own company, while thoughts of the shadowed past persisted in lingering in his mind. But he liked Arthur Augustus, as almost everyone at St. Jim's did, and it was his way to accommodate himself to the wishes of others.

"Blake says it looks like wain," went on Arthur Augustus, "Well, if it wains, it will wash out the football anyway. I'm not afwaid of a little wain, if you're not, deah boy."

"Not at all," said Talbot, with a smile. "But my dear chap, you're not really going to row with your pals, are you?"

Arthur Augustus's noble brow knitted.

"They have wowed with me," he explained, "They had the awful cheek to butt in when I was goin' to dwench Cutts of the Fifth for knockin' my hat into the fountain, and caused me to dwench the wong man——."

Talbot gave a start. He had wondered, like most other fellows in the School House, who had swamped Lathom on the stairs. Now he knew.

"It was vewy wuff on poor old Lathom," continued Arthur Augustus, "He has caught a fwightful cold, and is laid up in sanny, and I heah that the Head has engaged a tempowawy mastah to take his place till he pulls wound. It was all the fault of those young asses buttin' in."

"So it was you——!"

"Pewwaps I had bettah not tell you anythin' about it as you might let somethin' slip, and there will be a feahful wow if it comes out," said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, "Least said soonest mended, you know. What are you gwinnin' at?"

"Oh! Nothing."

"And aftah that," resumed Arthur Augustus, in tones of thrilling indignation, "I got anothah can of watah for Cutts, aftah pwep last night—and those young wuffians actually banged my head on the study table, and the can upset and swamped me all ovah——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Talbot, there is nothin' to laugh at in a fellow's clobbah gettin' swamped with watah. Lathom has been swamped, and I have been swamped, and nothin' whatevah has happened to that wottah Cutts——."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Talbot. He did not mean to laugh,

but Arthur Augustus's extraordinary adventures with cans of water seemed too much for him.

Arthur Augustus screwed his eyeglass a little more firmly into his noble eye, and surveyed the Shell fellow frigidly. His glance was as icy as the glance he had bestowed on Blake and Co.

"I am vewy glad you are amused, Talbot," he said stiffly, "It does not seem vewy amusin' to me. Pway cackle as much as you like."

And Arthur Augustus, with his noble nose in the air wheeled out his bike, mounted the same and rode out at the gate—apparently no longer desiring Reginald Talbot's company on his spin. But as he rode away down Rylcombe Lane, there was a whirr of a bicycle behind him, and Talbot came up, and rode level.

"Which way shall we ride, D'Arcy?" asked Talbot, amicably.

"Weally, Talbot——."

"What about a run round Abbotsford, and back across Wayland Moor?"

For a moment Arthur Augustus's look was frigid. But Talbot's cheery good-humour was not to be resisted, and he melted, and gave a nod.

"Wight-ho, deah boy! Come on."

And all was calm and bright, so far as Talbot of the Shell was concerned, at least: though Blake and Herries and Digby, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, were still in the unhappy state of being no longer regarded as friends by the Honourable Augustus D'Arcy.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN AT THE MOOR HOUSE

WAIN!" said Arthur Augustus, sadly.

"Blake was right, after all," said Talbot with a smile.

"Yaas, wathah! We are goin' to get wet."

"Looks like it!"

It had been quite a fine and pleasant afternoon for the time

of year. Talbot and D'Arcy had enjoyed their spin—so far. It had been an extensive spin, round Abbotsford, and now they were on their way back to the school by the rather rugged track over Wayland Moor. And then it came!

Dark clouds banked over the sky, and the rain came down and every minute it came down more heavily. Wayland Moor was not an attractive spot for getting caught in heavy rain. It was wide and open and windy, desolate and deserted, and there was no building in sight of the cyclists where they could look for shelter. They pushed on under the spattering rain: Arthur Augustus's noble countenance growing more and more serious at every push of the pedals.

Arthur Augustus was not, as he had said, afraid of a little rain. But though it was only a little so far, obviously it was going to be a lot. It was, in fact, the beginning of a rain-storm that was going to drench Wayland Moor, and turn every hollow into a pond: and drench any hapless person who might be abroad on the wide shelterless expanse.

"Bai Jove! It's fwightfully wet!" remarked Arthur Augustus, a few minutes later.

"Push on a bit faster," suggested Talbot.

"Howevah fast we push on, deah boy, it will be comin' down in sheets long befoah we get to the school," answered Arthur Augustus, "In fact it will pwobably be ovah by then. We had bettah look for a spot of sheltah."

"O.K.," assented Talbot, "No good getting soaked if we can help it. But where?" He glanced round over the desolate moor, more desolate than ever in the falling rain.

Arthur Augustus released one of his handlebars to point to a clump of trees at a little distance from the moorland track.

"That's the old Moor House behind those twees," he said, "You can't see it fwom heah, but it's there all wight."

"That old place has been locked up for donkeys' years, and nobody lives there," said Talbot, "We couldn't get in."

"Might be a porch or a shed or somethin', where we can take covah till the wain stops."

"Oh, all right," said Talbot.

"Of course, I'm not afwaid of a spot of wain, old boy," explained Arthur Augustus, "But a fellow has to think of his clobbah, what?"

"Oh, quite," assented Talbot, with a smile.

"This blow won't last vewy long, you know—if we get undah sheltah for half-an-hour or so, it will be all wight."

"Come on," said Talbot.

They turned from the track, and rode across the rugged moor towards the clump of trees. From a distance, nothing could be seen of the house: but as they drew nearer, they could glimpse it through the trees that surrounded and screened it. It was a tumbledown old place, and had been unoccupied for many years: so lonely and out of repair that even in a time of housing shortage nobody had seemed to want it.

But as the two juniors drew nearer, Talbot gave a little start, and exclaimed:

"Somebody's there now. The place must have been taken."

"Vewy unlikely, deah boy," answered Arthur Augustus, shaking his head, "There's been nobody there for years. It weally isn't habitable. What makes you think somebody's there?"

Talbot laughed.

"Only the fact that there's smoke coming from one of the chimneys," he answered.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus concentrated his eyeglass on the chimneys that showed through the trees. Gussy was not an observant fellow: but now that Talbot pointed it out, he discerned that smoke was rising from one of the old chimneys: indubitable evidence that a fire was burning in one of the old grates within.

"That's wathah luck, Talbot," he remarked, "Man must be fond of solitude, and wain comin' thwough the woof, to take a place like that—but it certainly looks as if somebody is there. Whoevah they are, they're bound to let us out of the wain."

The two juniors dismounted at a gateway, from which the gate had long disappeared. A weedy, muddy path ran through a garden that was like a wilderness, to the front door of the house. They wheeled the bikes up the path, through the falling rain.

But for the smoke rising from the chimney, they could never have guessed that the old Moor House was now inhabited.

There was no sign of life about the place, excepting that curl of smoke going up into the rain. All the windows were shut, curtainless, and looked blank. In front of the door was an old wooden porch, falling to pieces from age and neglect, and affording no shelter from the rain, which was now pouring hard. The new tenant of the Moor House, if tenanted it was, seemed to have done nothing so far in the way of repairs. There was an old, rusty iron knocker on the door, and Arthur Augustus stretched out his hand to it.

"Bettah knock," he remarked, "Nobody's seen us comin'. They can't wefuse to let us step inside out of this howwid wain, can they?"

"Hardly," agreed Talbot.

Arthur Augustus plied the knocker.

Knock!

They heard the sound echoing and re-echoing through empty spaces within. The echoes died away into silence: but there was no sound of footsteps coming to the door. Arthur Augustus looked puzzled.

"They must have heard that, Talbot," he said, "I wondah why they don't come to the door. Pewwaps I had bettah give them anothah knock."

Knock! knock! knock!

With rain falling on his noble head, and his elegant clobber getting damper and damper, Arthur Augustus was feeling a little impatient. He put his beef into it, and the crashes of the knocker almost thundered through the house.

Still there was no sound of anyone coming to the door. Certainly the inmate must have heard, unless he was stone deaf. But if he heard, he did not heed. The echoes died away into silence again.

"Bai Jove! that's wathah queah, deah boy," remarked Arthur Augustus, "I am jollay well goin' to make them come to the door, bothah them. I am gettin' fwightfully wet. Heah goes!"

Bang! bang! bang!

The knocker fairly thundered.

"Hallo! Somebody's coming," said Talbot.

There was a sound of footsteps at last. But they did not come to the door. Heavy feet could be heard tramping over

bare boards, and then there was a creaking as a window was opened, a couple of yards to the right of the doorway. The old sash creaked and groaned as if in protest as it was pushed up, and a face looked out into the rain, with an angry frown on it.

"'Ere! Who are you and what do you want?" snapped a surly voice.

Arthur Augustus turned an indignant eye, behind a damp eyeglass, on the frowning face at the window.

"I am vewy sowwy to disturb you," he said, with polite sarcasm, "But we are gettin' feahfully wet in the wain. Would you mind lettin' us step undah sheltah till the worst of it is ovah?"

The man stared at him, surlily. It was a request that few would have refused: but the man at the window did not look like acceding to it. He did not look in the least hospitable: rather the reverse. He was a stocky, bull-necked man, with an unshaven chin, and a prominent nose of the "pug" variety, with a spotted muffler round his neck, a cap on the back of his head, and a short pipe sticking out of the corner of his mouth. And his expression was quite unpleasant.

"Guess again," he snapped.

"Weally, my good man——," protested Arthur Augustus.

"You ain't wanted 'ere! Go your way!" snapped the pug-faced man, and he put up his hand to the sash to close it.

Arthur Augustus's eye gleamed through a damp eyeglass.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, "If you wefuse us sheltah, in this howwid wain, we will certainly go our way: but I wegard you as an uttahly inhospitable bwute. Pway why cannot you let us step inside out of the wain?"

"Because I don't choose," said the man at the window, "Get out of it."

"Then I wepeat that I wegard you as an inhospitable bwute!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly.

Talbot touched the indignant swell of St. Jim's on the arm.

"Come on, Gussy," he murmured, "We've got to push on, and the sooner the better."

"Oh, gosh!" came a sudden exclamation from the man at the window. He had had his eyes on Arthur Augustus, hardly glancing at Talbot. Now, however, his gaze fixed on the Shell

fellow's handsome face: and astonishment dawned in his own. "You!"

Talbot gave him a quick look.

There was recognition, as well as astonishment, in the pug face. The man was staring at his face, as at a face he knew, but which he had not expected to see.

"You!" he repeated.

"Bai Jove! Do you happen to know that person, Talbot?"

"Not that I know of. I——."

"By gosh! The Toff!"

CHAPTER VI.

A RIDE IN THE RAIN

"THE TOFF!"

The man at the window of the old Moor House repeated that name or rather nickname, staring blankly at the handsome Shell fellow of St. Jim's.

Talbot caught his breath, and the colour wavered in his cheeks.

That name, by which he had once been known in Hookey Walker's gang, had been left behind him, with the old life that was now like a half-forgotten evil dream. Now that he heard it again, it struck him like a blow.

At St. Jim's, amid surroundings that made the past seem unreal, there was nothing to remind him of it: and it seemed unlikely that anyone who had ever known him as the "Toff" would ever drift into that quiet Sussex countryside. But the man in the Moor House evidently knew him: not as Talbot of St. Jim's, but as the "Toff" of other days.

"The Toff!" said the man at the window, for the third time. The surliness faded out of his pug face. "Fancy seeing you 'ere, Toff! If I'd knowed it was you, I'd 'ave opened the door in a jiffy. You 'old on—I'm coming to the door. You're welcome 'ere, Toff."

The window was slammed shut, and the man's boots were heard clumping on bare boards again. The discovery that one

of the fellows at the door was the "Toff," had evidently wrought a change.

Arthur Augustus looked at his companion, rather bewildered. Gussy was aware of Talbot's strange story, but he never thought about it, and it had rather faded from his noble mind.

"Bai Jove! That fellow seems to know you, old chap, if you don't know him," he remarked. "Is anythin' the mattah, Talbot? You're lookin' quite queeah."

Talbot's face was almost white.

"Judgin' by his looks, he is hardly the sort of fellow a fellow ought to know, deah boy," went on Arthur Augustus, in his most fatherly manner, "He looks to me wathah a wuffian, like one of those gangstahs you wead about. I twust, Talbot, that he is not a fwiend of yours."

"I've never seen him before, that I remember," muttered Talbot, "But—I suppose he's seen me—and remembers me. Let's get out of this, D'Arcy."

"He is comin' to the door deah boy——."

"Yes—but——."

"He looks wathah a wuffian, and appawently has not washed lately," said Arthur Augustus, "On the othah hand, it is wainin' vewy hard, and a fellow has to think of his clobbah, you know——."

Talbot stood hesitating, his hand on his bicycle.

It was probable that, sometime in the past, he had seen that pug face, among many others of a like kind, without heeding it: he did not remember the man. But that the man knew him, and remembered him, was clear. It was a bitter reminder of all that he wanted to forget: and he wished, from the bottom of his heart, that he had never come within a mile of the old Moor House.

What was the man doing there—camping in that dismantled old deserted building on the lonely moor? He was a gangster—his natural place was in the dingy alleys of the metropolis.

In hiding, very likely—keeping out of the way of the police for a time. Talbot shuddered. Once more he was brought into contact with the shadowy underworld. It seemed as if the past could never die.

His impulse was to mount his bike at once, and ride away—

the faster the better, before the door opened. Had he been alone, he would have done so at once. But Arthur Augustus, already dripping with rain, had to be considered.

The heavy tramp was heard on the bare boards of the hall within. The pug-nosed man, who had been ready to turn Arthur Augustus off, was willing—more than willing—to give shelter to the "Toff." Of Talbot's new life he could know nothing: it was as the "Toff," as a bird of the same feather, that he welcomed him. It made Talbot's heart sick within him.

He caught Arthur Augustus by the arm.

"Get out of this, D'Arcy," he muttered.

"Bai Jove! I don't like that fellow's looks any more than you do, Talbot, but it is weally wainin' feahfully hard——."

"Cut, I tell you."

"But weally, deah boy——."

"I'm going."

Talbot threw a leg over his machine, and started. A hand within was fumbling at a bolt on the door.

Arthur Augustus gazed after the Shell fellow, as he pedalled away down the weedy path to the gate, in surprise. Talbot, as a rule, was so considerate, and so thoughtful for others, that it was rather startling for him to take the bit between his teeth in this way. Really he seemed to have quite forgotten, for the moment, the important consideration of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's clobber.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

He mounted his dripping jigger, and rode after Talbot.

They had reached the gateless gateway, by the time the door opened, and a pug face stared out into the rain.

Talbot did not look back. He drove hard, almost fiercely, at his pedals, and his bike almost flew. Arthur Augustus had to go all out to overtake him on the moor. The machines bumped heavily over the rugged ground, splashing up pools of water: while from above it came down hard and fast.

"Oh, cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Talbot seemed, for the moment, to have forgotten his noble existence. He reached the moorland track, turned into it, and pedalled on as fast as ever. Arthur Augustus laboured after him, splashing through the rain.

But after a few minutes, the Shell fellow remembered. He

glanced back over his shoulder, and slowed down. By that time, the old Moor House had disappeared, and the trees surrounding it were little more than a blur on the rainy moor.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as he rode level at last, "You are wathah puttin' it on, deah boy."

"Sorry," stammered Talbot, "But——."

"What is the feahful huwwy?" demanded Arthur Augustus, just a trifle crossly, "That man at the old Moor House was a wathah unpleasant lookin' sort of person, but he was willin' to give us sheltah fwom the wain. Now we are gettin' soaked to the beastly skin."

Talbot did not reply.

They rode on in silence, in the pouring rain. There was a faint frown on the aristocratic brow of Arthur Augustus. He was getting wetter and wetter: his cap was a drenched rag, and water was trickling down his noble back. Unpleasant as the man at the old Moor House had looked, anything in the way of shelter would have been better than this. Arthur Augustus could not help feeling a little annoyed.

"It's easing off," said Talbot, as they came out, at last, from the moorland track into the road. The rain was no longer pouring hard.

"That won't make much diffewence now," said Arthur Augustus, stiffly, "We couldn't vewy well get much wettah."

"Sorry, old chap——."

"Oh, quite!" said Arthur Augustus, still stiffly, "But weally I fail to see why we should turn our backs on sheltah, and wun out into the wain like this! Pewwaps you like bein' dwenched to the beastly skin, Talbot."

"No more than you do, old chap. But——."

"The beastly watah is twicklin' down my back. Bai Jove, I shall be glad to get in and change."

"Same here, old man."

"I cannot help wegardin' you as wathah an ass, Talbot, if you do not mind my sayin' so," said Arthur Augustus, severely, "That wuff bwute at the Moor House was willin' to let us in out of the wain, as he seemed to know you——."

Talbot coloured.

"That was why," he muttered.

"Weally, Talbot, you seem to be talkin' in widdles," said

Arthur Augustus, "Any sort of a woof, and even the company of that wuff-lookin' boundah, would be bettah than gettin' dwenched to the skin, I should think."

"You heard what he called me," said Talbot, with an effort.

"Eh? Oh! Yaas."

"That was what I was called before I came to St. Jim's,"

"Oh!"

"You knew the wretched story, at the time—I daresay you've forgotten, and I'm glad you have, but—but——. I wanted to get clear——."

"Bai Jove! It is not you who are an ass, Talbot, old boy—it is I who am wathah an ass!" Arthur Augustus's face was deeply concerned, "Do you mean that that howwid-lookin' person knew you when—when—when—."

"He must have, I suppose—he knows me now."

"Sowwy, deah boy! I should have wealised how mattahs stood, if I had not been so wowwied about my clobbah. But when a fellow's clobbah is bein' pwactically wuined by the wain, you know——."

"Quite," said Talbot, with a smile.

"It's wathah wotten for you, old chap—must have been wathah a jolt. Pewwaps we had bettah say nothin' about it—no good wakin' up an old stowy, what? Bai Jove, there's the school—put it on, old boy."

Arthur Augustus, aware that the subject was painful to his companion, tactfully dropped it: and his thoughts probably reverted to the shocking state of his clobber. They rode on to the school without saying more.

CHAPTER VII

THREE IN HASTE!

"PUT it on, Fatty," said Figgins.

"Run, rabbit, run!" grinned Kerr.

"Ooooh!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

David Llewellyn Wynn, of the St. Jim's Fourth and the New House, was plump. In goal, in junior football matches, he was

a mighty man, a tower of strength to his side. It was not easy for the best shots from Carcroft, or Greyfriars, or Rockwood, to get the ball past him. School House men, indeed, declared that that was because David Llewellyn Wynn very nearly filled the goal from side to side, and that there wasn't really room for the ball to pass. But that was only a playful exaggeration.

But good man as he was on the football field, Fatty Wynn found that weight told when he was running to catch a train. Figgins' long legs covered the ground at a great rate—Kerr was almost as fleet as a deer: either of them could have caught that train at Abbotsford with ease. But they had to accommodate their pace to Fatty's, and Fatty puffed and blew as he ran. And in spite of urgings from his chums, Fatty dropped behind again and again.

"Train ain't in yet," he gasped, "Give a chap a chance."

"If we lose that train, we're late for call-over," said Figgins, "And that means lines from Ratty."

"Or Extra School, very likely," said Kerr, "Like to be sitting in Extra when Greyfriars come over, Fatty?"

"Oh!" gasped Fatty, "No!"

"Put it on, then."

And Fatty Wynn puffed, and blew, and put it on.

The chums of the New House had visited Abbotsford that afternoon, which was a half-holiday, to watch the Ramblers play. The weather, which had turned out so unpleasantly wet for Talbot and Arthur Augustus the previous day, was perfect, and Figgins and Co. had enjoyed it, and the football and the excursion generally. But they had left it a little late to catch their train at Abbotsford station, to get back to Wayland. From Wayland there was a rather long walk to St. Jim's: and if they missed that train, there was no doubt that they were going to be late for call-over in the New House: which meant an interview later with Mr. Ratcliff, their house-master. So they simply had to catch that train, whether Fatty Wynn could propel his weight along at the required speed or not.

"Oooooogh!" gasped Fatty, "I say—oooooh!"

"Come on!" said Figgins.

"Buck up!" said Kerr.

Fatty Wynn did not reply. He needed all his breath, which was running short, and he did not waste it in speech. It was

rather a cold day: but perspiration trickled down Fatty's plump face as he ran.

"Train's signalled!" said Kerr.

"Jump to it, Fatty!" urged Figgins.

"Oooooooh!"

"Lend him a hand," said Kerr. And Kerr grasped one of Fatty Wynn's plump arms, Figgins grasped the other, and they helped him on—almost dragging him between them.

Two almost breathless fellows, and one winded to the wide, burst into the station. They gave up return-halves of tickets and ran on the platform.

The train was in, and was about to start. There was barely time—if indeed there was time. A porter called out "Stand back"—unheeded by Figgins and Co. They tore at the nearest carriage.

Figgins dragged open the door. There was time for Figgins and Kerr to leap in, with ease, before the porter, who was running up, reached the door to slam it. But poor Fatty was at his last gasp.

"Jump in!" howled Figgins.

"Quick!" panted Kerr.

"Oooooer!" moaned Fatty, "Oooogh! Oooooer!"

"Chuck him in," breathed Figgins.

In the grasp of his two chums, Fatty Wynn was fairly hurled into the carriage. There was only one passenger inside: a young man who was sitting in the corner seat. Figgins and Co. did not even see him, in their haste. They hurled Fatty in and scrambled after him.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Fatty Wynn, staggering helplessly inside, and catching at anything that came to hand for support.

The nearest object was the young man sitting in the corner. Fatty Wynn's arm, quite unintentionally, was thrown round his neck, dragging him headlong from the seat as Fatty pitched forward and stumbled over.

There was a startled exclamation from the passenger.

"Oh! What—what—you young ass—Oh!"

Figgins and Kerr were in, the next second. The porter clammed the door after them. Figgins and Co. had caught that train—though only by a hair's breadth.

"O.K.," gasped Figgins.

"Oooooogh!" spluttered Fatty Wynn.

The passenger shoved him off, rather roughly, and Fatty sprawled between the seats, spluttering for breath. The young man righted himself. His hat had been knocked off, his hair was wildly untidy, and he looked a little excited, which was not surprising in the circumstances.

"You clumsy young ass!" he hooted, "What the dickens do you mean—banging into a railway carriage like a cannon-ball. What?"

"Ooooooooh!" was all that Fatty Wynn could reply, for the moment, as he sat up dizzy and gasping.

"Sorry, sir, said Kerr, politely, "We only just caught the train."

"Here's your hat, sir," said Figgins, picking it up, and presenting it to the untidy and excited young man. "Sorry that fat ass upset you—we had to get him in."

The young man smoothed his rumpled hair with one hand, took the hat with the other, and replaced it on his head. He sat down in the corner seat again, frowning. He looked a rather pleasant young man of about thirty, but at the moment he did not seem in the best of tempers. He was considerably rumpled, and rather breathless, and undoubtedly annoyed.

"We hadn't a second to lose, sir," said Figgins, apologetically.

The young man stared at him.

"You should have had a second to lose," he answered, or rather grunted, "Catching trains should not be left till the last moment."

"Hem!"

"And that fat young donkey deserves to have his ears boxed," added the young man, with an inimical stare at Fatty Wynn.

"Hem!"

Fatty Wynn scrambled up, and took his seat, in the corner furthest from the irritated passenger. Figgins and Kerr sat down with him at the end of the carriage: leaving the irritated young man the other end to himself. They could make allowance for his irritation, in the circumstances: it must have been somewhat disconcerting to be dragged over headlong by a plump schoolboy suddenly hurtling in. However, the young man took

no further notice of them, settling down to read a newspaper as the train ran on to Wayland Junction.

"Jolly glad we caught it," remarked Figgins, "It's a bit of a trot from Wayland to St. Jim's, but Fatty will have got his second wind by that time."

"Look here, I'm winded," grunted Fatty Wynn, "I'll jolly well race you to the school, if you like, when we get out at Wayland."

Figgins and Kerr chuckled.

"I can't see you racing anything but a tortoise, old man," said Figgins.

"Or a snail!" remarked Kerr.

The young man in the corner glanced over the top of his newspaper at the three juniors. He could not help hearing what they said: and what they said seemed to interest him. He seemed, indeed, about to make a remark: but he checked it, and returned to reading his paper.

"We've got to make it," went on Figgins, "Even if we have to roll Fatty along like a barrel."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Fatty.

"Greyfriars are coming over next Saturday," said Figgins, "And if we got bunged into Extra for being late for House roll, it would be——."

"Awful!" said Kerr.

"Well, you can't be too jolly careful, when your House beak is a Tartar like Ratty," said Figgins, "Ratty's the jolly old limit."

The young man looked up over his newspaper again. This time he spoke.

"Do you boys belong to St. James's School?" he asked.

The three looked round at him, in surprise.

"Yes—St. Jim's, we call it," answered Figgins, surprised by the question from a stranger, but answering politely.

"You were speaking of your house-master, I conclude?"

Figgins stared at him.

"What about it?" he asked.

"And describing him as a Tartar, and the limit."

"Why shouldn't I, if I jolly well like?" demanded Figgins.

"It might be injudicious," said the young man, "You never

know who may hear such remarks. As it happens, I am going to your school——."

"Oh!"

"I suggest that the less you say about your house-master, in my hearing, the better," said the young man.

"Oh!" repeated Figgins, rather blankly.

The young man retired behind his newspaper again—leaving the three juniors staring at the paper.

They exchanged glances, and resumed their talk in a lower key.

A few minutes later, the train rattled into Wayland Junction. The young man in the corner rose, lifted down a suitcase from the rack, and stepped out on the platform. Figgy watched him go, with a rather inimical eye.

"Who the dickens is he?" grunted Figgins, when the young man was gone, "Like his cheek to butt in."

Kerr smiled.

"I think I can guess," he said.

"Blessed if I can," said Fatty Wynn, "Somebody going to St. Jim's, that's all."

"I've heard that the new beak to take old Lathom's place is coming to-day," said Kerr, "Looks as if that might be the chap: Man named Spender, I've heard."

"Oh!" Figgins whistled, "Oh, my hat! Jolly decent of him, if that's so, to give us the tip! Might have said anything. Come on."

They jumped from the train, and followed the young man with the suitcase to the exit. Outside the barrier, a porter came up, and relieved the young man of the suitcase.

"Taxi, sir?"

"Yes, please."

The young man followed the porter to the station entrance. Fatty Wynn caught Figgins by the arm.

"I say, old chap, if Kerr's right, and that's our new form beak, he might give us a lift in his taxi——."

"Let's go and ask him, and say please we've got a fat tortoise who's too jolly lazy to walk," suggested Figgins, sarcastically.

"Oh, rot," said Fatty crossly.

The young man did not, however, take a taxi after all. Out-

side the station a car was waiting: and the chauffeur, a stocky man with a pug nose, came across immediately he appeared with the porter and the suitcase. Figgins and Co. going their own way, did not hear what was said, but they noticed that the young man and his suitcase went in the car, driven by the stocky chauffeur. It disappeared down Wayland High Street—Fatty Wynn's eyes following it rather mournfully, as a possible lift vanished.

There was no lift for Fatty Wynn. He had to walk by the footpath through Wayland Wood—which was a short cut, but nevertheless a mile long: and it was a tired Fatty who arrived at St. Jim's just in time before Taggles closed the gates.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOUNDER OF THE FEAST!

"TALBOT, deah boy!"

Talbot of the Shell stopped, eyeing Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form curiously. There was an expression of deep thoughtfulness on D'Arcy's brow, as if he were struggling with some very knotty problem. If that was so, Talbot was very willing to help.

"What's the spot of bother, old chap?" he asked.

"I am in wathah a difficult posish," explained Arthur Augustus, "Wathah on the horns of a dilemma, you know. Pewwaps you can advise a fellow."

"Pleased if I can. Cough it up," said Talbot, encouragingly.

"You are awah," continued Arthur Augustus, "That I am no longah on fwiendly terms with my formah fwiends in Study No. 6. They tweated me vewy wuffly and diswespectfully, and I have turned them down. I have also turned down Tom Mewwy and Mannahs and Lowthah. But——."

"My advice is, turn them up again!" said Talbot smiling.

"This is a sewious mattah, Talbot," said Arthur Augustus, a little stiffly.

"Oh! Quite!" agreed Talbot, his face becoming grave again.

"The posish is awkward—doocid awkward, you see. I am certainly goin' to dwench that cad Cutts for dwenchin' my toppah—that is not the kind of thing that any fellow could ovahlook, is it?"

"Hardly!" agreed Talbot, with a face as grave as that of a graven image.

"But those young asses butted in, and even went to the length of bangin' my head on the study table. So fah fwom expwessin' wegwet, they seem to tweat the whole mattah as a joke. In that state of things I do not see how I can extend my fwiendship to them again. But——."

"But——," repeated Talbot.

"But it is vewy awkward. You see, I have had a hampah fwom home to-day—Taggles has taken it up to the study. It is there now, and it is tea-time."

Talbot gazed at him. This, apparently, was Arthur Augustus's problem, though where the problem came in, the Shell fellow quite failed to see.

"As it happens," went on Arthur Augustus, "I am awah that Blake and Hewwies and Dig are uttahly stony. These things happen, you know."

"They do," assented Talbot.

"Which means that they will have to tea in hall," said Arthur Augustus, "And all the while, there is that hampah in the study, which, if no twouble had awisen, I should, of course, have whacked out with them."

"Whack it out anyway," suggested Talbot.

"Yaas, but how can a fellow whack out a hampah with fellows with whom he is not on speakin' terms?" asked Arthur Augustus, "It's quite imposs."

"Oh!" said Talbot. He understood the problem now.

"In the ordinaway course of events," went on Arthur Augustus, "The hampah would be whacked out all wound, and we should ask Tom Mewwy's gang in to tea. That would be all wight—wight as wain! But as I am not speakin' to any of them, how can it be done? On the othah hand, how can I let Blake and Hewwies and Dig go down to the door-steps and dish-water in hall, when I have a hampah in the study? You see how vewy awkward it is!"

"I see," agreed Talbot. With an effort, he remained quite

grave, as Arthur Augustus propounded this unusual and peculiar problem, "If you want my advice, Gussy——."

"I should be vewy glad of it, deah boy. The posish is so vewy difficult that I quite fail to see what I had bettah do."

"You'll have to make friends again," said Talbot, decidedly, "You simply can't scoff a hamper on your own, while the other fellows in the study go down to the scrum in hall. And you can't ask them to share the hamper while you're not friends. So you've simply got to make it up."

"Pewwaps you are wight, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, "I see no othah way out except keepin' the hampah to myself which is a vewy wepugnant ideah. On the othah hand, a fellow has to considah his dignity. What weally wowwies me is, whethah I can wesume my formah fwiendship with Blake and Hewwies and Dig, without a sewious infwaction of my personal dignity. What do you think, deah boy?"

Talbot suppressed a gurgle.

"I'd chance it," he said.

"I wathah think you are wight," said Arthur Augustus, "I think I will go up to the study now, and tell them that I am pwepared to wesume the old fwiendship on the old footin'. Then we can whack out the hampah. Pway come to tea in my study, Talbot—there's lots and lots in the hampah, and your company will be a weal pleasuah, deah boy."

"Pleased," said Talbot, with a smile.

And they went up to the Fourth-form studies together, Arthur Augustus looking, as he no doubt felt, considerably relieved. Possibly, during the past day or two, he had found dignity a rather cheerless companion, and certainly, he was very keen to whack out the hamper from home with three old pals who were in the sad state known as "stony."

As Study No. 6 was—with the sole exception of Arthur Augustus—stony, at tea-time, they would hardly have expected to hear sounds of cheery festivity proceeding from that study as they approached it.

Yet such was the case.

Judging by the clatter of crocks, and the cheery voices, a feast was toward in that stony study: which was rather puzzling to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, if not so much so to Talbot of the Shell.

"Try the cake, Tommy!"

"I saw, these eggs are a treat!"

"This pie is a real corker."

"Have some of these cheese cakes, Manners."

"Like the cold chicken, Lowther?"

"I hope Gussy will come up before we've cleared the table."

"Yes, Gussy really ought to be in on this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gussy's still standing on his jolly old dignity, because we won't let him lark about with cans of water, and send Railton or Linton to sanny after Lathom."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But he really ought to be in on this!"

Arthur Augustus opened the door of the study. He gazed in. Six fellows were seated round the table—Blake and Herries and Dig of the Fourth, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell. And they all seemed to be enjoying life.

Far from looking like a stony study, No. 6 rather resembled a land flowing with milk and honey.

The table was fairly loaded with good things. Six juniors with healthy youthful appetites were making good progress, but lots and lots remained. Evidently there had been something in the nature of a windfall in Study No. 6.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

Talbot grinned.

In a corner of the study, he could see a hamper, which, though the lid was closed, had evidently been unpacked. So the source of the feast was no mystery to him. But Arthur Augustus's aristocratic eye never noted such details, and he was quite mystified.

Six fellows looked round, and gave the new arrivals a hearty welcome in chorus.

"Trot in, you chaps!"

"Glad to see you!"

"Find a chair for Talbot, somebody."

"You take mine, Gussy!"

"Here you are! Sit down."

Talbot, smiling, sat down. Arthur Augustus, standing, regarded his friends through his eyeglass rather uncertainly.

"You fellows appeah to be well-pwovided for tea," he remarked.

"Lots and lots," said Blake, cheerily, "All we wanted was your jolly old company to make it a real celebration, Gussy."

"Appawently you have had wathah a windfall," said Arthur Augustus, "I was undah the impwession that there was nothin' for tea heah."

"Something turned up in time," explained Blake, "Do sit down, Gussy! Will you begin on the eggs?"

"You are vewy kind, Blake, but——." Arthur Augustus hesitated, "The fact is, I came heah to make fwiends again, so that I could whack out my hampah with you fellows. But as you are so well pwovided——."

"Good old Gussy," said Blake, "Isn't he a little angel, you fellows, as well as the biggest ass at St. Jim's?"

"He is—he are!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, I wefuse to be descwibed as eithah a little angel or the biggest ass at St. Jim's," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly, "And as you are so well pwovided, there is no need for me to offah to whack out my hampah——"

"No need at all," grinned Herries.

"Hardly!" chuckled Dig.

"Not at all," said Blake, "We've got lots, and more, and then some, so we'll stand you a spread instead of you standing us one, Gussy. So sit down and let me help you to this cold chicken before it's all gone."

"Thank you vewy much," said Arthur Augustus, "But——."

"Never mind the buts. Bung him into that chair, Herries."

"Weally, Blake——."

"Here you are, Gussy——."

"Weally, Hewwies——."

Arthur Augustus sat down. After which, the important consideration of his noble dignity having been relegated to the back of his aristocratic mind, he joined in the spread—and all was calm and bright.

It was really a noble feast. Eight fellows combined did not quite clear the table, though they all did very well indeed. And

when it was over, and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther rose to take their leave, they exchanged a wink with Blake and Co., and addressed Arthur Augustus.

"Thanks for the spread, Gussy!"

"We've enjoyed it no end."

"Many thanks, old man."

"Eh? What?" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, in surprise. The three Shell fellows, laughing, faded out of the study, and Talbot rose.

"Thanks, Gussy!" he said, in his turn.

"Weally, Talbot, I do not quite undahstand——."

"Many thanks, old man! It was topping!" And Talbot followed the "Terrible Three" from the study.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass on Blake and Herries and Dig, in perplexity.

"What did those fellows mean, you fellows?" he asked, "I was not the foundah of the feast!"

"That's all you know," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Herries and Dig.

"Weally, Blake, I fail to compwehend," said the perplexed swell of St. Jim's. "It was nothin' to do with me——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows, if you will explain what you are laughin' at——."

"Thanks, Gussy!" said Blake and Herries and Digby, all together.

"Bai Jove! What are you thankin' me for, like those silly asses who have just gone out?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"For the spread, of course, old tulip."

"But it wasn't my spwead," almost shrieked Arthur Augustus

"Wasn't it?" chuckled Herries.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Certainly it was not. I had nothin' to do with it. I came up heah to whack out my hampah, but——."

"And you've done it," said Blake.

"Eh?"

"Thanks for the spread, Gussy"

"What——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake and Herries and Dig left the study, laughing. Arthur Augustus stared after them. Then he crossed to the corner where the hamper stood, and lifted the lid. And the expression that came over his aristocratic face as he gazed into an empty hamper, was really extraordinary.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAN IN THE TAXI

"SPENDAH!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, thoughtfully. fully.

"Who?"

"What?"

"Which?"

Blake and Herries and Dig asked those questions, not with much interest. They were talking Soccer when Arthur Augustus made his remark.

In fact, all the fellows gathered in the big bay window of the junior day-room in the School House were talking Soccer, with the exception of the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Tom Merry, as junior captain, was naturally full of the Greyfriars match scheduled for Saturday. Monty Lowther, who was in the team, was very keen, and Harry Manners, who was not was nevertheless interested. Talbot of the Shell was keenness itself, likewise Kangaroo. They all talked Soccer while Arthur Augustus's noble mind was otherwise occupied.

"Spendah!" repeated Arthur Augustus, "That is the name."

"Name of what or which?" asked Blake, "Nobody at St. Jim's named Spender, that I've ever heard of. Now on Saturday——."

"Our new beak, Blake."

"Oh! I've heard that the new beak is coming this afternoon," said Herries, "Is his name Spender?"

"So I heah, Hewwies. And as it happens, the name is vewy

well known to me," said Arthur Augustus, "His name is Sylvestah Spendah: and my bwothah Conway had a tutah once of that name: and it is not a vewy common name, is it? So I wegard it as extwemely pwobable that it is the same chap."

"Oh, good," said Dig, "If you've seen him, you can tell us what he's like."

"I have nevah seen him, Dig, but I have heard old Conway mention him. It was yahs and yahs ago that he was Conway's tutah."

"Old bean like Lathom?" asked Blake.

"Quite the contwawy, deah boy. No oldah than old Conway I believe—quite a young man. If it is the same chap, it will be wathah a change aftah Lathom, who is evah and evah so old."

Blake and Co. were mildly interested, while the Shell fellows went on talking Soccer. It was known that Mr. Lathom was not likely to be able to resume his duties in the Fourth-form room for two or three weeks at least: and during that period the Fourth would be "up" to the new beak, who was to carry on till Lathom came back. So what he was like, was rather a matter of interest to the Fourth-formers. They had a fairly easy time with little Mr. Lathom, whom they often compared favourably with Linton, the master of the Shell, and Ratcliff, master of the Fifth and house-master of the New House. Certainly it would have given the Fourth a jolt had the new and temporary "beak" turned out to be another Linton or Ratcliff. If he had been tutor to Gussy's elder brother, Lord Conway, that was no doubt a point in his favour.

"Of course, he may not be the same chap," went on Arthur Augustus, "There may be more than one Sylvestah Spendah knockin' about. But I twust that he is the same chap, because I wemembah old Conway mentionin' that he was vewy pleasant and good- tempahed. It is not fah off lock-ups now, and he may blow in any minute. I wathah think I shall give him a look-in duwin' the evenin', and ask him whethah he is Conway's old tutah."

Jack Blake glanced from the window.

"There's a taxi coming in," he said, "May be the new beak! I suppose he would take a taxi from the station."

"Pwobably, deah boy."

"They won't find it easy to get past Fatty Wynn in goal," said Tom Merry, "But they've got some jolly good men—Wharton and Cherry, and Vernon-Smith—we shall have to pull up our socks on Saturday——."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——."

"We're all at the top of our form," said Talbot, "We shall give them a jolly good game, at any rate."

"I wathah think that is our new beak, Tom Mewwy."

"Eh! Who?" Tom Merry looked round, "Did you speak, Gussy?"

"I did, Tom Mewwy," answered Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "And if you can possibly dwy up about Soccer for a minute or so, I will wemark that our new beak is a chap named Spendah, and I wathah think he is the same chap who was tutah to old Conway yahs and yahs ago——."

"Oh! Yes." Tom Merry laughed, and dried up about Soccer. "Is that the chap, in that taxi?"

"I wathah think so."

"Well, we can all see him from here," said Monty Lowther. "But don't keep Tom off Soccer for more than a minute—it would give him a pain."

"Fathead!" said Tom laughing. ...

From the window, the fellows in the day-room had a good view of the taxi and its occupant as it drove up to the House. They all looked at the young man sitting in the taxi, more or less interested.

He looked about thirty, well and quietly dressed, with a rather handsome face, and extremely keen dark eyes. On his looks, the members of his future form were disposed to pass him as satisfactory. He was smallish in build, and even in an overcoat looked slim. They had a better view of him when the taxi stopped, and the young man stepped out.

There were nearly a dozen juniors in the big window, and they all looked at the young man stepping from the taxi. One of them—Talbot of the Shell—rose suddenly to his feet, moved near the window, and fixed his eyes on the newcomer with a strange, startled, fixed look.

"Looks O.K. if that's the man," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Hallo, there's Railton."

Mr. Railton, the house-master of the School House, had doubtless seen the taxi coming in, for he appeared on the House steps to greet the newcomer. The taxi drove away, and the house-master and the new arrival went into the House together.

"That must be Spendah," said Arthur Augustus, "Wailton was expecting him. I shall certainly give him a look-in latah and ask him whethah he is old Conway's Spendah."

"Talbot, old man," exclaimed Tom Merry.

Talbot of the Shell turned from the window. His face was so pale, that it drew every eye upon him at once. He put his hand to the back of a chair, as if he felt a sudden weakness.

Tom Merry jumped, his face full of concern. The other fellows looked at Talbot in wonder.

"Bai Jove! Are you ill, old chap?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "You are lookin' as pale as a ghost, Talbot."

"My dear chap——!" exclaimed Kangaroo.

"Talbot, old bean——."

"My dear chap——."

"What the dickens——."

"Oh! Nothing!" stammered Talbot. With a visible effort, he pulled himself together, "I—I thought for a moment—I—I mean—it's all right! Nothing!"

With that, he walked quickly out of the day-room. The other fellows looked after him, as he went, blankly.

"What on earth's the matter with old Talbot?" asked Manners, "He looked quite sick."

"Yaas, wathah; I twust it isn't the flu," said Arthur Augustus, "We were both caught in the wain yestahday, you know, and old Talbot isn't quite as tough as I am——."

"Oh, my hat!"

"So pewwaps he is feelin' the effects. I weally twust that he is not goin' to develop flu."

"Rot!" said Tom. "Talbot's always as fit as a fiddle. Don't talk about flu with the Greyfriars men coming on Saturday."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, flu is no wespectah of persons, you know——."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Tom.

He was puzzled. Talbot had been looking, or rather staring at the new arrival, Mr. Sylvester Spender, when that sudden change came over him: it was as if the sudden sight of the new "beak" had given him a shock. But that was scarcely imaginable: the new master of the Fourth was a stranger at St. Jim's whom Talbot certainly could not have known, and even if he had known him, why should the sight of him have affected the Shell fellow in any way?

Soccer "jaw" was resumed in the bay window: but even Tom Merry's thoughts were not wholly concentrated on Soccer now: he could not help thinking of Talbot, and that strange look on his face. He did not know that Talbot, tramping under the old elms in the quad, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, and an almost haggard look on his face, in the falling autumn dusk, was thinking of the man who had come in the taxi—and wondering, almost wildly, whether he had been startled by some strange resemblance, or whether, in the man who had arrived at St. Jim's as the new master of the Fourth, he had indeed recognised an acquaintance of other days—Jimmy the Cat!

CHAPTER X

A FACE FROM THE PAST!

"GOING out?" asked Figgins, in surprise.

"Eh? Yes."

Figgins and Co. had arrived at the school gates just in time. Figgins and Kerr were fresh as paint after the trot through the wood from Wayland: but Fatty Wynn, whom his comrades had not permitted to slacken once during the trot, was puffing and blowing. Taggles was coming out of his lodge with a big key in his horny hand. Taggles was popularly reputed to be rather keen on shutting the gates in a fellow's face if he was

only a couple of yards off at the appointed time—after which it was necessary for a fellow to give his name for report to his house-master. However, Figgins and Co. were just in time, and as they came rather breathlessly in, it was a surprise to see a School House man just going out, and all three of them stared at Talbot of the Shell.

"Got an exit?" asked Figgins.

"Oh! No," stammered Talbot.

He stopped, colouring a little with confusion.

How long he had paced to and from under the old elms, thinking of that strange and startling glimpse of a face from the past, he did not know. But he had not realised that it was so near lock-up, and he wanted to be alone, to think: and seeing Tom Merry and Co. in the quad had caused him to head for the gates to go out: he did not want to see his friends just then. But he stopped as he met the New House juniors in the gateway.

"Want to be locked out, fathead?" asked Figgins, staring at him, "Old Taggles would jolly well like to bang the gates after you."

"Wouldn't he just!" said Kerr.

"Oh! I—I forgot——I—I suppose it's gates now," stammered Talbot, "No, I'm not going out." He realised that the New House trio were looking at him curiously, and he made an effort to be casual. "You fellows were jolly nearly late! Here comes Taggles with his key."

"Done you this time, Taggles, old bean," said Figgins affably, "Another minute and you'd have had us!"

Taggles grunted, and clanged the gates shut. Figgins and Co., grinning, went on into the quad with Talbot.

"Jolly close shave," remarked Figgins, "We've been over to Abbotsford to see the Ramblers. Good game. Jolly nearly missed the train back—we had to push Fatty along like a broken-down lorry——."

"Look here——!" hooted Fatty Wynn.

"And we had to keep him on the trot all the way from Wayland," said Kerr, "Poor old Fatty nearly perished."

"I jolly well didn't!" hooted Fatty Wynn, "I'm right as

rain! And we needn't have walked at all, if you'd asked that chap Spender to give us a lift in his car. Ten to one he would have."

Talbot gave a little start, and glanced quickly at the fat Fourth-former.

"Spender!" he repeated. The man who had arrived at St. Jim's under the name of Spender was very much in Talbot's thoughts just then.

"Our new beak," said Kerr, "He was in the train, when we got in at Abbotsford. Fatty fell over him when we chucked him in, and he was rather waxy. Not a bad chap though."

"Oh!" said Talbot, "Not a bad chap?"

"Well, no! Figgy was jawing about Ratcliff—not compliments—and he weighed in and told us he was going to St. Jim's and that we'd better drop the subject," said Kerr, laughing. "I guessed from that that he was our new beak."

"That was decent, to give Figgy the tip," said Talbot.

"Oh, quite," said Figgins, "Of course, we don't know for certain that he's our new beak, but that looked like it. He said he was coming to the school, anyway—and I don't see why he should have butted in unless he was a beak."

"He's our new beak all right," grunted Fatty Wynn, "And he seemed a good-tempered sort of chap, and there was lots of room in his car, and if we'd asked him——."

Figgins chuckled.

"Fatty wanted to stick him for a lift to the school," he explained, "And we weren't even sure he was our new beak, only it looked like it. I expect he's got in long ago—seen anything of him, Talbot?"

"A—a man arrived in a taxi," answered Talbot, his voice a little unsteady, "The fellows who saw him thought it would be Spender."

"In a taxi?" repeated Kerr.

"Yes, a taxi from Wayland, I think."

"Then that wasn't our man," said Figgins, "He was going to take a taxi, because we heard him tell the porter so as we came out—but it turned out that there was a car waiting for him, and he went off in it. Sure the man who came in the taxi was Spender!"

"I—I think so——."

"If so, you got it wrong, Kerr, and the chap on the train wasn't our beak, but only some jolly old visitor coming here," said Figgins.

Kerr looked puzzled.

"I'm pretty certain he was the new beak," he said.

"Fathead!" answered Figgins, politely, "How could he be Spender, when he went off in a car with a giddy chauffeur, and Spender turned up here in a taxi from the station? Think he changed out of a car into a taxi on his way to the school?"

"Hardly. But——"

"Well, here we are," said Figgins, "Lots of time for roll, after all. Cheerio, Talbot, old thing."

Figgins and Co. cut into the New House, happily in ample time for calling-over under the acid eye of Mr. Ratcliff, and Talbot moved away slowly towards the School House. He was a little perplexed by what the New House juniors had said. If the man they had met on the train had left Wayland Station in a car driven by a chauffeur, he could hardly be the man who had arrived at St. Jim's in a taxi, driven by a Wayland taxi-driver whom many of the fellows knew by sight. Either they had been mistaken in taking the man for the new master, or else the new arrival was not, after all, Sylvester Spender.

As he came into the School House, Talbot came on a group of Fourth-form fellows—Roylance, Wildrake, Hammond and Baggy Trimble. Trimble's squeaking voice fell on his ears.

"I can jolly well tell you he won't go easy like Lathom. I jolly well wish Lathom wasn't laid up at all."

"He's not half old Lathom's age," said Hammond, "Awful prospect for you, Baggy—he will make you work."

"I guess he looks O.K.," said Wildrake.

Talbot paused.

"Seen your new beak?" he asked.

"Yes, Railton's been showing him round," answered Roylance, "Bit of a change after Lathom, but he looks all right."

"D'Arcy seems to know something about him," said Wildrake, "His brother had a tutor or something of the same name, anyway."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"Then that chap who came in the taxi was Spender?" he asked.

"That's the chap."

Talbot moved on, leaving the Fourth-formers discussing the new "beak". So there was no mistake about it, the man in the taxi was the new master of the Fourth, and Figgins and Co. must have been mistaken about the man in the train. Not that that mattered much—so far as Talbot could see, at all events. The question that hammered in his mind was, whether he had been deceived by a strange resemblance, or whether the man who called himself Sylvester Spender was, in actual fact, the man who had been known in the underworld as "Jimmy the Cat." It was impossible—impossible! He told himself so a dozen times: and yet——! He stood staring from a window, into the darkening quad, but what he saw in the shadows was a hard handsome face with dark eyes as keen and watchful as a hawk's—the face of Jimmy the Cat, and the face of the man in the taxi. They could not be the same—they could not! And yet——.

A sudden smack on the shoulder startled him from his gloomy reverie. He turned quickly, to see Tom Merry at his elbow.

"Penny for them, old man," said Tom.

Talbot smiled.

"Not worth it," he answered, lightly.

"Feeling all right?"

"Eh! Yes. Why?"

"Well, you looked as if you'd seen a ghost, when that man Spender blew in," said Tom, "Gussy thought you might be starting flu. If you've got that in your mind, old bean, leave it till after Saturday, for goodness sake."

Talbot laughed.

"Nothing of the kind," he said, "By gum, there's the bell: time we were getting into hall."

Talbot's face was calm and unconcerned, as he answered "adsum" to his name, in hall, and he was smiling cheerily

when he came out with his friends. The "Toff" had learned self-control in a hard school, and he was not the fellow to wear his heart upon his sleeve. But a smiling face hid a heavy heart and a troubled mind—troubled and tormented by a face from the past.

CHAPTER XI

NOT NICE FOR GUSSY!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY tapped at the door of Mr. Lathom's study—now tenanted by Mr. Sylvester Spender, Lathom's substitute.

The young man reclining at his ease in Mr. Lathom's deep leather armchair frowned a little, and did not immediately respond to the tap.

Mr. Spender was, perhaps, a little tired, after his journey, and after some rather busy hours at St. Jim's.

He leaned back in the chair, his legs stretched out, smoking a cigarette: his face very thoughtful, and the hard lines in it showing very clearly. Mr. Spender had seen Dr. Holmes, and the Head's greeting had been kindly, if a little perfunctory. He had had a walk round the House with Mr. Railton, the housemaster, he had seen some members of the form of which he was to take charge during Mr. Lathom's absence from duty, he had been made acquainted with most of the other masters in the Common-Room, where he had dined with the Staff, and now, no doubt, he was glad to get a little repose in the study which was to be his while he remained in the school. So that tap on his door was not very welcome: he did not want some kindly member of the staff to drop in for a little kindly chat. Judging by the expression on his face when he was alone, and secure from all observation, there was little that was of a kindly nature in Mr. Spender, and anyone who had watched him, off his guard, would probably have set him down as a man of cool

and calculating character, with very little indeed of the milk of human kindness in his composition.

Tap!

Mr. Spender removed the cigarette from his lips, tossed it into the study fire, and breathed rather hard. But a smiling expression came over his face, and his voice had a cordial note, as he called out "Come in."

The door opened, and an extremely elegant figure presented itself to Mr. Spender's view. It was that of a junior whom Mr. Spender remembered that he had seen while Mr. Railton was walking him round the House. Why that junior had come to his study Mr. Spender did not know, but as the boy was no doubt a member of the form he was to take on the morrow, he gave him a pleasant look.

"Pway excuse me, sir," said Arthur Augustus, gracefully, as he came elegantly in, "I twust I am not intewwuptin' you."

Mr. Spender smiled.

"Not at all," he answered, "I have not yet met many of the boys in my form. Are you in the Fourth?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! My name is D'Arcy."

"Very good," said Mr. Spender, "And why do you want to see me, D'Arcy?"

"You do not wemembah the name, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus, with a respectful smile, "I thought that it might pewwaps be familiah to you, as yours is to me, Mr. Spendah."

The young man in the armchair sat suddenly upright, alert as a hawk in a moment. His eyes fixed sharply on the swell of St. Jim's. For a split second, there was swift suspicion in his look. His keen black eyes seemed almost to penetrate the innocent face. But the innocence of that face no doubt disarmed him, and he relaxed the next moment.

"I do not seem to remember the name, at the moment," he said, "Have I met you somewhere before, D'Arcy?"

"Oh, no, sir, but I think you have met my bwothah."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Spender, "Is your brother in this school?" His look was very intent as he asked that question. and his breathing a little hard.

Arthur Augustus smiled.

"I mean my bwothah, Conway, sir," he explained. "He was a St. Jim's man in his time, but he left yahs and yahs ago."

"Your brother, Conway?" repeated Mr. Spender, "You have told me that your name is D'Arcy."

"Oh, yaas, sir—I mean my bwothah Lord Conway," said Arthur Augustus, "Of course his name is D'Arcy too, but——."

"Oh! I see. You have an idea that I may have met your brother Lord Conway?" asked Mr. Spender, smiling.

"I thought so, sir, as the name is the same."

"The name?"

"I mean, old Conway's tutah was named Sylvester Spendah," explained Arthur Augustus, "So when I heard that our new beak—I mean our new form-mastah—was named Sylvestah Spendah, I wathah thought it would be the same chap, sir."

"Oh!" said Mr. Spender.

He sat back in the armchair, looking at the swell of St. Jim's with intent glinting eyes. Even Arthur Augustus, unsuspicious and unobservant as he was, was conscious of a chill in the atmosphere. If this Mr. Spender had been Lord Conway's tutor, he did not seem to be pleased or exhilarated by making the acquaintance of Lord Conway's younger brother at St. Jim's.

"So I thought I would dwop in, sir," said Arthur Augustus, a little discouraged, "Old Conway used to think a lot of his tutah, sir, and I wathah thought that you might be pleased to see his bwothah heah——."

"Indeed."

"Yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus, still more discouraged, "I twust, sir, that you do not wegard this as an intwusion."

"Have you ever seen your brother's former tutor?"

"Nevah, sir! You see, old Conway was in London at that time, and he was cwammin' for somethin', that was why he had the tutah, for a few months. But he talked about him at Eastwood House, natuwally."

"Where is your brother now?"

"He is twavellin' abwoad at the pwesent time, sir," answered Arthur Augustus, never even dreaming of noting the relief that flashed, for a moment, into the face of the man in the armchair, as he made that reply.

"Indeed," said Mr. Spender.

He sat staring at Arthur Augustus, who could not help feeling more and more discouraged. Indeed, Gussy began to doubt whether this was, after all, the same Mr. Spender, whom Lord

Conway had described as a young man of very pleasant manners. He could not possibly consider this Mr. Spender's manners pleasant. It was clear, even to Gussy, that the man in the armchair was not feeling pleased at all by this interview, though he could not see why. There was a rather uncomfortable silence, which the swell of St. Jim's broke, taking a backward step towards the door as he did so.

"I weally did not mean to intwude, sir——," he faltered, rather wishing that he had not come to the study at all.

"You did not?" asked Mr. Spender, coldly.

"Certainly not, sir."

"Then why have you done so?"

"Weally, sir——," stammered Arthur Augustus, "If you wegard my dwoppin' in on you for a few moments as an intwusion——."

"Precisely," said Mr. Spender.

Arthur Augustus's face became scarlet.

"Pway allow me to expwess my wegwets for havin' called at your study, sir," he said, with great dignity, "I supposed that, as old Conway's formah tutah, you might be pleased to see his bwothah, and have a chat about old Conway——."

"I see no reason why you should have supposed anything of the kind, D'Arcy," answered Mr. Spender, icily.

"Weally, sir——."

"You seem to me a very stupid and intrusive boy," said Mr. Spender, deliberately, "And you are wasting my time to no purpose."

"That is all," said Mr. Spender and he turned his shoulder to the swell of St. Jim's, "You may leave my study, D'Arcy."

Arthur Augustus stood looking at him, almost trembling with indignation. Intrusiveness was the very last fault of which Arthur Augustus was capable, and to be termed intrusive, and snubbed in this marked manner, was as unpleasant as it was unexpected. Words could not have expressed Gussy's feelings at that moment. He could only gaze at Mr. Spender in silent, breathless indignation.

The young man in the armchair looked round, sharply.

"I have told you to leave my study," he snapped, "Why do you not go?"

"I am goin', sir," said Arthur Augustus, "I am vewy sowwy

I came. I conclude that you are not the Mr. Spendah, sir, of whom my bwothah Conway had a vewy high opinion. I am goin', sir."

And Arthur Augustus went.

The door closed on him, and Mr. Latham's substitute sat staring at the door for several minutes, before he shrugged his shoulders, and lighted a fresh cigarette.

CHAPTER XII

IN DOUBT!

"LIKE his cheek!" said Figgins.

"Well——!" said Kerr, slowly.

"Nothing to do with him, what I said about Ratty, unless he was a beak. And it turns out that he wasn't."

Talbot of the Shell, leaning idly on one of the old elms in break the following morning, glanced curiously at Figgins and Co.

Fatty Wynn, seated on one of the old oaken benches, was methodically travelling through a bag of bullseyes. Figgins and Kerr were discussing the episode of the previous afternoon. Figgy seem to be indignant.

"Like his cheek to butt in as he did," he repeated, "Who the dickens was he to butt in?"

"He said he was coming to the school," said Kerr. "Must have been just a visitor, I suppose, coming to see the Head or one of the masters."

"Must have been, if he was coming here," said Figgins, "You fancied that he was our new beak——."

"Well, from what he said——."

"What he said was just cheek," said Figgins, "No business of his if a chap slates his House beak, unless he's a beak him-

self—and he wasn't! We've seen our new beak now, and he's nothing like him."

"Blessed if I make it out," said Kerr, "I felt quite certain——."

"You had it wrong, old chap! He wasn't Spender."

"Couldn't have been," agreed Kerr, "Queer that he should have butted in as he did, though——."

"Cheeky ass!" said Figgins. "And if I see him again, I've a jolly good mind to tell him so."

Kerr made no reply. He seemed quite perplexed. He had felt absolutely certain that the young man on the train was the new master of the Fourth, coming to St. Jim's to take over Mr. Lathom's form. But the Fourth that morning had been taken by Mr. Spender, who was nothing at all like the young man in the train, except that he was about the same age.

There was a very intent look on Talbot's face, as he listened to the talk of the New House juniors. Everything in connection with the new master of the Fourth was of a deep and almost painful interest to Talbot.

The man was not, and could not be, the crook he had known in other days under the nickname of "Jimmy the Cat." He was like him, strangely like him, but it was impossible—fantastic! How could a temporary master, engaged from the usual scholastic agency in London, have even the remotest association with Hookey Walker's gang of other days? Yet the haunting misgiving would not leave Talbot's thoughts. It was as if he knew, at the back of his mind, what he could not believe to be true.

And now there was this queer episode—the New House juniors had met a man on the train, whom they had not doubted was the new master of their form. Yet it was the man who so strangely resembled Jimmy the Cat who had arrived. No doubt they had been mistaken, but it was a queer episode, in connection with the man of whom Talbot had such strange and startling doubts.

"How are you fellows getting on with your new beak?" asked Talbot, "Like him?"

"Oh, he's all right," answered Figgins, "But sharper than old Lathom, and keeps a fellow up to the mark."

"Up to his job, what?" asked Talbot.

"Oh, quite! We got on all right with him this morning."

"Gussy doesn't seem to like him much," remarked Kerr, with a grin.

Figgins chuckled.

"Not a little bit," he said, I fancy Gussy would cut him dead, if a fellow could cut his beak! He gives him the marble eye, as much as a fellow can."

Talbot was intent again.

"But why doesn't Gussy like him?" he asked, "I heard him saying yesterday that Spender had been tutor to his brother, and he seemed to think well of him."

"Turns out that it isn't the same Spender," explained Figgins, "I hear that Gussy called on him in his study last evening, thinking it was the same Spender, and the man cut him short and bundled him off. Gussy's opinion of him now is that he is a bounder."

"There he is," remarked Kerr, glancing towards the School House.

"And there's Gussy!" chuckled Figgins. "Look!"

Mr. Spender, the new master of the Fourth, had come out of the House, in company with Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell. Blake and Co. were in a group near the House steps, and as the masters came out, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy detached himself from the group, and walked away.

Probably neither Mr. Spender nor Mr. Linton noticed the action but the juniors under the elms noticed it, and grinned. In form, Arthur Augustus had to put up with the man he regarded as a "bounder," but out of form, he was able to keep his distance, and he was doing so. In fact, if a junior schoolboy could have been imagined to be "cutting" his form-master, that was precisely what the swell of St. Jim's was doing. Which caused Figgins and Co. considerable entertainment.

"Gussy bars him!" chuckled Figgins. "Good old Gussy! If it ever dawns on Spender that a lad in his form is barring him, I fancy somebody will get six on the bags from old Lathom's cane."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Leaving Figgins and Co. chuckling, Talbot of the Shell sauntered away, to meet Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as he strolled

elegantly across the quad. Arthur Augustus's noble countenance wore a slight frown, but he gave the Shell fellow a cheery nod and a smile.

"Feelin' all wight, deah boy?" he asked.

"Eh! Yes."

"Not gettin' the flu?"

"The flu? No." Talbot laughed, "That spot of rain the other day did no harm, old chap. Right as a trivet."

"I am vewy glad to heah it, especially with the Gweyfwiahs match comin' on this week," said Arthur Augustus, "I was wathah afwaid that was it, when you looked so queeah yestahday—you wemembah, when that boundah blew in in his taxi——."

"That bounder?" repeated Talbot.

"I mean Spendah," said Arthur Augustus, "I wegard him as a boundah, Talbot. His mannahs are deplowable."

"Isn't he the man you supposed——?"

"Wathah not," said Arthur Augustus, emphatically, "Old Conway spoke vewy highly of that tutah-wallah, Spendah. Quite anothah chap, as it turns out. You see, I called on him in his study, thinkin' he was the same Spendah, and might like a chin about old Conway, and he was positively wude." Arthur Augustus reddened at the recollection, "Even if I was mistaken, there was no harm in takin' one Spendah for anothah Spendah, I pwesume. But the fellow actually called me intwusive."

"Oh!" said Talbot.

"Fwightful mannahs," said Arthur Augustus, "It is wathah awkward to have to be wespectful to him in form, as I wegard him with despision—I mean contempt—but out of form I shall be vewy careful to keep out of his way. In fact, I wegard him with disdain."

"But are you sure he's not Lord Conway's Spender?" asked Talbot.

"Quite!"

"Did he say so?"

"Oh, no! But I am quite suah he is not the same Spendah because old Conway would nevah have had such a boundah for a tutah," explained Arthur Augustus, "I am suah that Conway would not have touched him with a barge-pole. I shall

certainly nevah speak to him again if I can help it—except in form, of course, where a fellow is not his own mastah. But even in form I intend to cut him vewy short," added Arthur Augustus.

Arthur Augustus sauntered on, leaving Talbot with a deeply thoughtful expression on his face. It was another episode as odd as that on the Abbotsford train. Mr. Spender, it was clear, had deeply hurt Arthur Augustus's noble feelings, in that interview in his study. He had effectually barred off any talk on the subject of the Mr. Spender who had been tutor to Lord Conway. Had he a reason for so doing—a secret reason of which Arthur Augustus could never have dreamed, but which came very easily into the mind of the fellow who had seen in Sylvester Spender's face the features of "Jimmy the Cat"?

And yet——!

It was all very vague and nebulous. This Sylvester Spender, whether he had been Lord Conway's tutor or not, must be what he represented himself to be—how otherwise could he have come to St. Jim's at all? And yet——!

Talbot had to know.

If by some strange, fantastic, unheard of piece of trickery, "Jimmy the Cat" was at St. Jim's under a false name, there was no doubt what his game was—the old game. Fantastic as it seemed, Talbot had to know. His mind swayed in doubt—and he had to know. And by the time the bell rang for third school, and Talbot went to the form-room with Tom Merry and Co., he had thought it out, and decided how he was going to know.

CHAPTER XIII

FACE TO FACE!

"THE TOFF!"

That ejaculation was quite involuntary.

The man was taken suddenly and utterly off his guard.

It was after class. Talbot had waited till the masters had finished tea in Common-Room. Several of them had gone to

their studies—among them, Mr. Spender, the new master of the Fourth. And having, from a distance, seen Mr. Spender's study door close. Talbot went quietly to that study and tapped. And in response to the "Come in" from within, he opened the door and walked into the study.

Mr. Spender was seated at the table, with a little pile of papers before him, and a pen in his hand. Whoever he was, and whatever he was, he was taking his work in the Fourth Form seriously. He glanced up as the Shell fellow came in, his expression indifferently inquiring—but that expression was wiped from his face, as if by a duster, as his eyes fixed on the handsome face of Reginald Talbot. He started to his feet, his eyes dilating widely, and that involuntary ejaculation falling from his lips, "The Toff!"

And a grim, bitter smile curved Talbot's lips. This was what he had planned—to surprise the man in his study, and take him off his guard. If he was what he called himself, a temporary master, merely that and nothing more, the sight of Talbot would mean nothing to him. He would simply inquire why a junior in the Shell had come to his study. But if he was "Jimmy the Cat," he could hardly fail to betray himself, at the sudden sight of one who knew him in his real character, and could expose the cheat. Some sign, at least, would escape him—Talbot was sure of that. But it was more than a sign that escaped the startled man—it was a complete betrayal. He stared at Talbot of the Shell as at a spectre, uttering the old nickname by which the boy had been known in Hookey Walker's gang. He knew the "Toff" at a glance, as Talbot had known him, and for the moment, he was startled out of all self-control.

"The Toff!" he repeated, quite blankly.

Talbot stood looking at him.

He knew now. It was "Jimmy the Cat" who was staring at him across the study table: the man who was wanted by the police for a dozen "cat" robberies: the man who, as Talbot had no doubt, was wanted for the affair in Manchester, of which he had spoken to Tom Merry. Whether his name was Spender or not, it was Jimmy the Cat.

There was a long moment of dead silence in the study.

Then the man pulled himself together. He had had a shock

—a startling shock—but Jimmy the Cat was a man to recover very quickly from a shock.

He sat down again.

"Shut the door!" he said, quietly.

Talbot stood by the half-open door, and did not move.

"Why?" he asked, coolly.

"Better, I think, while we have a little chat," said Jimmy the Cat, "Do you want other ears to hear?"

"Why not?" said Talbot in the same tone.

Mr. Spender breathed hard.

"Do you want a scene here?" he asked.

"There will be more than a scene here, if you remain at St. Jim's half-an-hour from now," said Talbot, "There will be an arrest, and you will leave as Eugene Aram left—with gyves upon his wrist."

The man sitting at the study table looked at him long and hard.

"Let us have a talk first, shut the door, and sit down."

Talbot, after a moment's hesitation, shut the door. But he did not sit down. He remained standing, his eyes fixed on the man at the table. The man met his gaze calmly. Mr. Spender was quite cool and self-possessed now.

"You startled me, when you came in," he said.

"I meant to," answered Talbot, "I saw you when you came, yesterday, and knew you, but I could not be sure — it seemed too fantastic. I came here to find out."

"And to catch me off my guard?"

"Exactly."

"The Toff always had his wits about him," said Mr. Spender, "We were never in anything together, but I often heard of you —I know as much of you, as you do of me, Toff. If I'd been on my guard, and bluffed it out, you might have taken me at face value—a case of a strange resemblance, and nothing more —what?"

"Possibly."

"But now—it's cards on the table." He eyed Talbot curiously, "What are you here—a schoolboy?"

"As you see."

"The Toff—a schoolboy! "I knew you had disappeared—and never heard what had become of you, but if I'd made a hundred guesses, I'd never have guessed you were a schoolboy at a public school. Don't you find it a big change from Angel Alley?"

Talbot winced.

"What are you called here?"

"My name is Talbot."

"One of your names, do you mean?"

"It is my name," said Talbot, quietly, "We may as well have this clear. If you fancy that I am here on the same game as yourself, forget it. You can tell my head-master, and my house-master, and all my friends here, nothing that they do not know already. By whatever name I may have been called, my legal name is Talbot: my story is well known to everyone concerned with me, and I have been adopted by my uncle, Colonel Lyndon. The King's pardon was granted me for what is past, and if you stood in the middle of the quadrangle, and shouted out all you know of me, it would not do me the slightest harm. You can do so, if you like, before the officers of the law come for you."

"So it's true," said Jimmy the Cat, musingly, "I heard a story that you had taken up new ways and were on the level. I never heard the details, and I did not know if it was true."

"It was true, all the same," said Talbot, "That is why I have come here now—to clear you out. If you go without trouble, you can go—I will grant you that much, because there was a time when I was no better, and I found mercy and kindness when I needed them sorely, and, after what I once was, it is not for me to judge. But you will go, and at once—you can take your choice of going of your own accord, or in charge of Inspector Skeat. If you are still here in half-an-hour, I shall report the whole matter to my house-master, and he will deal with you."

The man sat looking at him in silence.

"You turned over a new leaf?" he asked, at last.

"Yes," said Talbot, briefly.

"And you've gone straight ever since?"

"Yes," said Talbot, wincing.

"And Hookey Walker let you go—the cunningest hand with a safe in the gang?"

"Hookey Walker threw over the old game, just as I did, and he is now an honest man in another country," answered Talbot.

"And you have now nothing to fear from the law?"

"Nothing."

"Or from the old gang?"

"Nothing." Talbot smiled faintly, "You can do me no harm, Jimmy, if that is what you are thinking of. Try, if you like."

"I am not thinking of that," said the man at the table, quietly, "I am thinking of something very different, Toff. Why do you fancy I am here?"

Talbot stared at him.

"That's easy," he answered, "I read in the newspaper of your latest exploit at Manchester——."

"I have never been in Manchester in my life."

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"I also read the case you mention, if you mean Goldstein's," said the man at the table, softly, "And do you know what I suspected—that the Toff was at work again."

Talbot started violently.

"You—you thought——!" he stammered.

"Why not? You thought of me—I thought of you! Apparently it was neither of us—some other enterprising johnny in the line of business we used to follow."

"Used?" repeated Talbot, staring at him.

The man's lips curled.

"Used!" he repeated, "You have reformed, Toff, and made a success of it. What if I have done the same?"

Talbot could only stare.

"How do you imagine I came here?" went on the man at the table, "Do you suppose it possible for Jimmy the Cat to obtain a post at a public school under a false name? It would not be easy, Toff—investigation into a man's bona-fides is too thorough for that."

"You are here," said Talbot, "And you are here under the name of Spender."

"Why not, as it is my name?"

Your name?"

"You never knew—no one knew—my name, in the old days I was "Jimmy the Cat." But I had been something else, Toff. I had been Sylvester Spender, Master of Arts. It was a hard life, Toff—tutoring, temporary posts at schools—that kind of thing, and I fell for easy money. But I pulled out in time—as you did, and as you tell me Hookey Walker did. I threw that game behind me, resumed my old name and my old work, and I am here as exactly what I appear to be—a temporary master of a form. It is not an easy life, or a well-paid one—but there are compensations—I can walk abroad without fear of a policeman's hand on my shoulder, an honest man fearing nobody. It's worth it, Toff—and Jimmy the Cat has ceased to exist, and will never come to life again—never, even if you, who know what I once was, make it harder for me."

Talbot did not speak.

He stood staring at the man blankly.

Not for a moment had such an idea entered his mind.

He had known, in the old days, that Jimmy the Cat was a man who had seen a better side of life. He had known little of him, but he had known that. Seeing him at St. Jim's he had taken it for granted that he was there for some lawless purpose, under a false name. But if the name was his own—if indeed, he had cast evil behind him, as the Toff himself had done, and resumed honest ways under his own name——!

The man smiled faintly.

"Think a minute, Toff," he said, "You jumped to a conclusion, when you recognised me—Jimmy the Cat, at his old game, under a false name—but think a minute! Sylvester Spender was engaged by your head-master, from Lashford's—well-known agency, Toff. Do you think they have a man on their books whose history they do not know, from his prep school to his University?"

"I—I suppose not."——

"Jimmy the Cat was an interlude—an unsavoury interlude I want to forget, Toff—as I daresay there are many things you want to forget."

"Yes," muttered Talbot.

"Let me forget it, Toff. I was Sylvester Spender, Master of Arts, junior master in schools, before Jimmy the Cat existed—and I have been Sylvester Spender, Master of Arts, junior master in schools, since he ceased to exist. My record, as Sylvester Spender, is open to investigation—unless it were so, I could not be here now. Jimmy the Cat was an episode—no one but you would ever dream of him in connection with me. Do you want to drive me back to that, Toff?"

"No!" breathed Talbot, "No!"

"Give me a chance, Toff." The man leaned across the table, his look and tone earnest, "You had your chance, and you made good—why should not I have my chance? I am here for only a few weeks—until Mr. Lathom is recovered. Keep silent, and let me go as I came—give me a chance."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"Then—you really are Sylvester Spender?" he asked, "It is not an assumed name, as I supposed?"

The man laughed.

"How could I be here otherwise, Toff? Have a little sense. Could I be in the books at Lashford's under any name but my own?"

"No, it does not seem possible," said Talbot, slowly, "And—and if what you say is true, I'd be the last to stop you from getting clear of the old life, as I did. If it's true——."

"You'll see that it's true, if you give me a chance, Toff! That's all I ask."

Talbot stood silent. Was it true? After all, why should it not be? A man irked by the hard life of respectable poverty had fallen into evil ways, tempted by easy money, but he had pulled out of it. Why should it not be true? And if it was true, was it for the Toff, whose struggle to escape from evil had been so long and hard, to judge him and condemn him? If this man was indeed Sylvester Spender, tutor and Master of Arts, in whose life "Jimmy the Cat" had been nothing but an ugly episode which he was anxious to forget, was it not for the Toff to give him the chance he asked? And he must be Sylvester Spender, or he could not be at the school at all.

The man watched his face narrowly.

"What's the verdict, Toff?" he asked, at last.

"I—I must think." Talbot spoke slowly, "I—I must think it out—goodness knows mine would never be the hand to push you back into—that—if you've thrown it behind. But—I must think——."

"Take your time. And in the meanwhile—silence."

"Yes," said Talbot.

With that, he left the study.

When he was gone, the man called Sylvester Spender, once known as Jimmy the Cat, wiped a bead of perspiration from his brow. Jimmy the Cat had often, too often, been in danger of feeling the handcuffs click on his wrists: but never had the danger been nearer. But the danger had passed—if what he had told the Toff was true. And if it was not true, how was Talbot ever to know?

CHAPTER XIV

WET!

GERALD CUTTS, of the Fifth Form, came out of the School House after class on Friday, with a leisurely saunter. Several fellows glanced at him as he came, and noted that Cutts of the Fifth was looking very "posh." Cutts was rather a dressy fellow, perhaps over-doing it a little: and from the tips of his shiny shoes, to the summit of his silk topper, he looked spick and span. And among the fellows who glanced at him was one who glanced with an inimical eye and an inimical eyeglass.

"That boundah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Eh, what?" said Blake.

On the day before the Greyfriars match, Blake and Co. were thinking chiefly of Soccer. However, at D'Arcy's remark they looked round, supposing that he was alluding to Mr. Spender, their new beak—whom Arthur Augustus described on all

occasions as a boundah, an outsidah, or a wude wottah. But it was not Spender this time—it was Cutts of the Fifth.

"Dwessed up to the nines," said Arthur Augustus, "That is, what Cutts calls dwessed! That boundah does not know how to wear clothes."

At which Blake and Herries and Digby grinned.

"Listen to the oracle!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I twust I know somethin' about clothes," said Arthur Augustus, "It is a mattah to which I have often given a gweat deal of attention, as it deserved. You fellows are wathah wag-bags, if you don't mind my sayin' so——."

"Not at all, old man," said Blake, affably, "Talk any rot you like."

"Wats! I regard it as up to me to keep up the weputation of the study in the mattah of clothes. There ought to be at least one well-dwessed fellow among four. But there are ways of doin' these things," said Arthur Augustus, sagely, "Some fellows spend evah so much on clobbah, and nevah look anythin' but boundahs—and Cutts is one of them. If he were a fwiend of mine I should give him some tips. The cwease in his twousahs is much too pwonounced. I daresay that tail-coat wan him into no end of guineas, but it is not weally well-cut. And a self-wespectin' fellow wouldn't be found dead in that necktie."

"You ought to be a tailor, Gussy," said Dig admiringly.

"I wegard a tailah, Dig, as one of the most necessawy, one of the most intelligent, and one of the most admiwable membahs of society. Anybody might be a doctah, or a lawyah, or an architect, or a school-mastah, but a man wequiahs vewy uncommon gifts to be a good tailah."

"We shall see Gussy editing the 'Tailor and Cutter" some day," said Herries.

"Bai Jove! I am afwaid that such a posish is beyond a fellow's dweams," said Arthur Augustus, "That wequiahs weal genius. Howevah, to come back to Cutts, he is dwessed in his best—what he fancies his best, though his tout ensemble might make a tailah shuddah. Pwobably he is goin' somewah special——."

"Calling on that relation of his at Rylcombe Grange, I expect," said Blake, "He always dresses to kill when he hikes off there. Rich relations."

"That is his Sunday toppah," said Arthur Augustus, "And he will pass the fountain in a few minutes."

"Eh? What about it?"

"I imagine you have not forgotten that Cutts knocked my toppah off into the fountain last Monday," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "It was his fault that poor old Lathom got that dwenchin' on the stairs. If you fellows think I have ovahlooked that act of wuffianism, you have quite anothah guess comin'. I am going to knock Cutts' toppah off into the fountain," went on Arthur Augustus, with quite a grim expression on his aristocratic face, "That will be a Woland for an Olivah—tit for tat, you know."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Blake.

"Don't be a goat!" said Herries.

"Gussy, you ass——!" said Digby.

"On two sepawate occasions," said Arthur Augustus, "You fellows have pwevented me from dwenchin' Cutts as he dwenched my toppah. The first time Lathom got the dwenchin', and the second time I got it——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is not a laughin' mattah," said Arthur Augustus, warmly. "I am quite wesolved to give Cutts a Woland for an Olivah. This is a vewy favouwable opportunity. As soon as Cutts weaches the fountain, I am goin' to wush at him, tip him, and tip his toppah into the watah."

"And then we shall have to carry away your remains, after Cutts has done with you," said Blake.

"If he cuts up wusty, you fellows will stand by a fellow," said Arthur Augustus, "I shall wetire aftah knockin' off his hat, and if he has the cheek to come aftah me, you fellows will back me up."

"My dear chap——."

"Wats!"

"Look here——."

"I wefuse to look there."

"Hold him by the ears till Cutts has gone out of gates," suggested Herries. "We can't let him kick up a shindy with the Fifth."

"Wats!" repeated Arthur Augustus.

And he shot off, before his anxious friends could carry out Herries' suggestion. In his haste, he almost ran into Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, who were coming along the path. The "Terrible Three," with smiling faces, encircled him, and brought him to a halt.

"Naughty!" said Monty Lowther, severely. "Don't you know that you fags aren't allowed to rush about the quad like that?"

"Weally, Lowthah——."

"Where's the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——."

"Somebody after you?" asked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs——."

"What's up, anyway?" asked Tom.

"Pway don't delay me, you fellows. Cutts will be at the fountain in anothah minute——."

"Cutts!" repeated the Terrible Three, blankly.

"I am going to knock his hat off into the watah."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"My dear ass, he will slay you——."

"Come for a walk with your kind uncles instead."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus burst through the circle of Shell fellows, and cut on towards the fountain, which Cutts had now reached from the other direction. They stared after him.

"Hold on," said Tom, "If Gussy is going to knock a Fifth-form man's hat off, he will need some help soon afterwards."

"Bank on that," grinned Lowther.

"Why didn't you stop him you fatheads?" Blake came up with Herries and Dig, "Look here, back up when Cutts comes after that howling ass——."

"O.K.," said Tom Merry, laughing, "There's enough of us to handle Cutts, Fifth-form man as he is. Oh, my hat! There goes Gussy!"

Cutts had reached the fountain: and, as if to give Arthur Augustus an opportunity, he paused there, to glance at his reflection in the shining water in the big granite basin. Arthur Augustus charged.

Arthur Augustus had it mapped out. To charge Cutts and tip his shiny glossy topper into the fountain—then to retreat in haste to his friends before the big Fifth-form man could collar him—that was the programme. Cutts, no doubt, would pursue, but Study No. 6, all together, could handle him. It was quite well-planned: had it not happened that Cutts, looking at his reflection in the water, saw also the reflection of Arthur Augustus as he charged up. Which considerably disarranged the programme: as Cutts, instead of being taken by surprise, turned round to face the charging Gussy, and collared him as he arrived.

Why a Fourth-form junior was charging at him, Cutts did not know, having forgotten the incident of the previous Monday which lingered in Gussy's memory. But such unexampled cheek on the part of a junior called for drastic action, in the opinion of a Fifth-form senior.

Cutts, with a knitted brow and a glinting eye, grasped the swell of St. Jim's in a grasp of iron, twisted him over the rim of the fountain, and ducked his head in the water.

Splash!

"Groooooogh!" came a suffocated gurgle from Arthur Augustus as his noble head disappeared under water.

"You cheeky young ass!" said Cutts, "Take that!"

"Urrrrrrggh!" floated up through a sea of bubbles.

Cutts left it at that. He strolled away towards the gates, and Arthur Augustus, lifting a drenched and dripping head from the fountain, held on to the granite rim and gasped and gurgled for breath.

"Oooogh! Bai Jove! Wooooogh! I'm all wet! Ooooooch!"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Woooh! The watah is wunnin' down my back——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cwikey! I am soaked——."

"Ooooooooooch!"

Cutts, regardless, walked out of the gates. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, Blake and Herries and Dig, yelled with laughter. Arthur Augustus, his cap gone, his hair a wet mop, water streaming down his elegant clobber, blinking and gasping and gurgling, seemed to entertain them. It was not Cutts' hat but Gussy's head that had gone into the fountain—a result wholly unexpected by the swell of St. Jim's, and which did not seem to him nearly so funny as it seemed to his friends.

"Oh, Gussy!" gasped Blake, "You'll be the death of me! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see nothin' whatevah to laugh at——."

"You can't see yourself," said Monty Lowther, "Where's your pocket mirror?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am dwenched all ovah——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where is that wottah Cutts——?"

"Gone out," chuckled Blake, "And you'd better go in, and look for a towel, Gussy! You look damp!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!"

Arthur Augustus headed for the House, realising that what he most needed was a towel. He left his friends chortling. Gussy's campaign against Cutts of the Fifth really seemed destined to produce no other result than adding to the gaiety of existence at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER XV

NIGHT RAID!

JACK BLAKE awoke suddenly.

He had been fast asleep, in the Fourth-form dormitory in the School House, dreaming of shooting goals that beat Johnny Bull, of Greyfriars, quite hopelessly. From that happy and per-

haps unrealisable dream, he was awakened by something that bumped on his bed, and he lifted his head from the pillow and stared round in the darkness. A shadowy form met his peering eyes, and a well-known voice floated to his ears:

"Oh, bothah!"

Blake sat up.

"Gussy, you ass! What are you up to?"

"Sowwy to startle you, deah boy. I banged into that beastly chair, and it went ovah. It's all wight."

"You howling ass——!"

"Weally, Blake——."

"What the jolly old thump are you getting up for in the middle of the night?"

"Pway don't ask questions, Blake. It is quite all wight, I assuah you. Nothin' for you to wowwy about."

That assurance did not seem to reassure Jack Blake. From the dim darkness of the autumn night, the chimes from the clock-tower came. It was midnight. And dim as it was in the dormitory, he discerned that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was dressed—apparently having dressed himself before he "banged" into the chair and pitched it over against Blake's bed.

Several other fellows awakened at the sound of voices. Five or six sat up in bed, peering at the shadowy figure of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Is that Gussy?" asked Herries.

"What is that chump up to now?" inquired Dig.

"Not going out on the tiles at this time of night, D'Arcy, surely?" came the voice of Ralph Reckness Cardew.

"Bai Jove! I wegard that question as insultin,' Cardew!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly, "I twust you do not think that I am the kind of wottah to go out of bounds aftah lights out pub-cwawlin', like you, Cardew?"

"Railton might think so, if he knew you were up and dressed at midnight," chuckled Cardew.

"Wats!"

"But what on earth's the game?" asked Levison.

"You haven't dressed yourself just to stroll round the dorm, have you?" asked Clive.

"I am not weally dwessed, Clive. I have only put on my twousahs and jacket ovah my pyjamas. It is wathah a cold night, and wathah dwaughty in the passages. I do not want to catch a cold, when we are playin' Gweyfwiahs to mowwow."

"So you're going out of the dorm?" asked Herries.

"Yaas, wathah."

"You're not!" hissed Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"Get back into bed, before we get up and bung you there," said Blake.

"I should uttahly wefuse to be bunged there, Blake. And I weally wequest you to shut up and not make a wow. I do not want to have that boundah Spendah on my twack."

"What are you doing with that jug?"

"Wats!"

Shadowy as Arthur Augustus was in the dimness, half-a-dozen fellows could see that he had lifted the big jug of water from the wash-stand that stood by the head of his bed. What any fellow could want with a jug of water in the middle of the night was a mystery to most. But Blake guessed.

"Gussy, you mad ass, put that jug back! Are you dreaming that you can get after Cutts of the Fifth in the middle of the night?"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Dig, "Is that it?"

"Gussy, you potty ass!" exclaimed Herries.

"Pway do not butt in," said Arthur Augustus, "I have told you, not once but several times, that I am goin' to dwench Cutts of the Fifth for dwenchin' my toppah. I should have been satisfied with knockin' his hat into the fountain, as he did mine, but you know what happened—he got hold of me and ducked my head——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle as much as you like, if you think it was funnay," said Arthur Augustus, with deep indignation, "But Cutts will not think it funnay, when he gets this jug of watah ovah him in bed."

"Oh, you blitherin ass——."

"I have had thwee goes at the bwute, and somethin' has gone w'ong evewy time," said Arthur Augustus, "But nothin' will go w'ong this time, as I am going to catch the bwute in bed, and he will not know what is happenin' till he gets this jug of wathah all ovah him. You fellows keep quiet!"

There was a chuckle up and down the dormitory. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was on the war-path again, and this time he had no doubt of getting away with that important objective, the drenching of Gerald Cutts of the Fifth Form. But if Gussy had no doubts his friends had many. In the opinion of Blake and Co., Arthur Augustus was much more likely to wander into the wrong dormitory in the dark, or if he did arrive in the Fifth, to drench the wrong fellow—even if he did not stumble in the dark passage and drop the jug, and rouse the House with a tremendous crash at midnight. So instead of keeping quiet, as Gussy bade them, Blake and Herries and Dig began scrambling out of bed.

"Stop him!" breathed Blake.

"Collar him!"

"Get hold of his ears!"

There was a sound of splashing. It was caused by water swamping out of the jug, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy beat a prompt retreat doorward. Blake was the first out of bed, and he rushed after the shadowy figure retreating in the direction of the door.

Bump!

"Wow!"

"I say, what's up?" exclaimed Herries.

"Nothing's up—Blake's down," chuckled Cardew.

"Oh! ow!" Blake sat up dizzily on the floor, "That fathead has been spilling water—my foot slipped in it—wow!"

The door was heard to close.

Blake scrambled up, breathing wrath. Arthur Augustus was out of the dormitory: bound for the Fifth-form quarters and reprisals on Cutts.

"Better get after him," chuckled Cardew, "Goodness knows what may happen, if Gussy gets loose in the House at midnight,

with a jug of water. He may get Spender, or Railton, or anybody."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake opened the door, and stared into the dark passage outside. It was black as a hat, and the landing beyond, a wall of darkness. There was no sign to be seen of Arthur Augustus in the deep gloom.

"See him?" gasped Herries, joining Blake at the door.

"I'm not a cat!" yapped Blake.

"Look here, we've got to stop him!" said Dig, "There'll be a frightful row if he mops water over a man in a senior form——."

"Serve Cutts right," said Herries, "But Gussy will be up before the House beak—we've got to stop him——."

"That's all right," came from Cardew, "He won't get Cutts! More likely to walk into Spender's room and get our new beak."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shut up, Cardew," growled Blake.

He stared with exasperated eyes into the dark passage.

"Can't see anything," he growled.

"Wait till you hear him drop the jug, and then you'll know where he is!" suggested Cardew.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, pack it up," snapped Blake.

Blake and Herries and Dig stood in the doorway, staring into the dark. Hunting Arthur Augustus in the dark did not seem very feasible, and it was likely to awaken others who were left sleeping. Mr. Spender occupied Lathom's old room across the landing, and he was a much younger and more alert man than Lathom—and a spot of bother on the landing might very probably bring him out of his room to see what was happening. Blake and Co. were deeply concerned for their noble chum, and anxious to keep him out of the trouble he was hunting—and at the same time they were yearning to bang his noble head on the passage wall! With those mixed feelings they stared into the dark, uncertain what to do—when suddenly from the silence of the night came a startling crash!

Crash!

Nobody had heeded Cardew's playful suggestion that D'Arcy might drop the jug. It was quite unexpected when it happened. In the deep silence of midnight, the sudden crash of a falling breaking jug came almost like thunder to the startled ears of the juniors.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO IN THE DARK!

"OH, cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

He jumped almost clear of the landing floor.

Never had the swell of St. Jim's been taken so utterly by surprise.

It was almost as black as a hat on the landing. But Arthur Augustus knew every inch of it, and he had no doubt of finding his way to the Fifth-form dormitory in the dark. Even Arthur Augustus was not quite capable of wandering into Mr. Spender's room, or Mr. Linton's room, or into the Shell dormitory, by mistake.

With the big jug, almost full of water, held firmly in his hand, Arthur Augustus trod on tiptoe across the landing, heading for the quarters of the Fifth. He had to pass quite near the door of the room once Mr. Lathom's, now Spender's, and he was doubly and trebly cautious as he neared it. Richly as Cutts of the Fifth deserved to get that jug of water on his head, Arthur Augustus was well aware that there would be dire consequences if he was caught out of his dormitory on a night raid to the Fifth. And he did not make a sound—a flitting ghost could not have been more silent than he.

That anyone else could be on the landing, at such an hour, naturally never occurred to Arthur Augustus. There was no reason why anyone should be, that Gussy could have guessed. So when he suddenly bumped into an unseen figure in the dark, he was taken wholly by surprise: so utterly startled that he jumped, ejaculated, and let the jug fall. The crash of the jug, as it smashed on hard oak, echoed far and wide.

Arthur Augustus staggered. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, in his surprise and bewilderment, he caught at a

shadowy figure. He heard startled breath, and caught a glimpse of glinting eyes, and then a violent shove sent him reeling.

"Oh!" he gasped. He reeled and stumbled over, and bumped on the oaken floor. "Ow! Bai Jove! Who's that? Oh!"

A door opened, and a light flashed on and streamed out over the landing. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, appeared in the doorway, with a dressing-gown hastily wrapped round him, and stared out with startled eyes—evidently roused out by the crash of the jug.

"What is that? What——. Is that D'Arcy—is that Mr. Spender—what—what——?" stuttered the master of the Shell.

The light from Mr. Linton's doorway fell in a broad bar across the dark landing, lighting up the scene—Arthur Augustus sprawling in the spilt water, and a slight slim figure in a dark overcoat, and hat, panting.

Arthur Augustus sat up dizzily.

He blinked in the sudden light, and caught his breath, as he saw Mr. Spender, within two or three feet of him, his face almost convulsed with fury. He realised that it was the new beak into whom he had run in the dark.

The man's rage was so deep and savage that, for the moment, he could hardly keep it in control. His eyes fairly burned at the breathless junior, and he made a movement towards him with clenched hand.

"Oh, cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

The man's look was so savage and threatening, that Arthur Augustus bounded up, as if moved by a spring, and jumped back.

"Mr. Spender!" exclaimed the master of the Shell, "What is all this—what has happened—what——?"

With a great effort, the man controlled himself. His face was no longer blazing with fury, as he turned to look at Mr. Linton.

The latter was gazing at him in astonishment. He could see that a junior was out of his dormitory at midnight, which might have awakened Spender and brought him out of his room. But Mr. Spender was dressed, even to his collar and tie and hat, and was wearing an overcoat. That was quite amazing to the master of the Shell, at such an hour.

"I am sorry you have been disturbed by this foolish boy of

my form, Mr. Linton." Spender had himself under control now, and his voice was even. "Apparently he was bent upon playing some foolish trick at night with a jug of water. He is, I think, the most utterly stupid boy in my form——."

"Weally, sir——."

"Silence," snapped Mr. Spender, "I shall deal with you severely for this, D'Arcy. Collect the fragments of that jug, and go back to your dormitory——."

"Yaas, sir. I am sowwy——."

"I have told you to be silent, D'Arcy."

"Vewy well, sir."

Arthur Augustus, still a little dazed by the unexpected and startling encounter in the dark, began to collect the broken crockery. Mr. Linton, staring from his doorway, hardly noticed him, his eyes were fixed on Spender, and his face revealed plainly his surprise and wonder at seeing him fully dressed after the chimes of midnight had sounded.

"Luckily, I was coming out of my room, as this foolish boy came across the landing," said Mr. Spender. "Otherwise, he might have carried out his stupid intention, whatever it was. I have been troubled with neuralgia, and could not sleep: so at last I got up and dressed, to go down and take a turn in the open air. No one would have been disturbed, but for this insensate boy and his foolish tricks. He actually walked into me. Indeed, I think it probable that I was to be the victim of his intended prank——."

"Bai Jove! Nothing of the kind, sir!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "I had not the slightest intention——."

"That will do, D'Arcy."

"But I assuah you sir, that I nevah dweamed——."

"Be silent."

"I think," said Mr. Linton, "That that unthinking boy should be adequately punished for such an unheard of prank, Mr. Spender."

"I agree with you, sir, and I shall deal with him to-morrow. I am deeply sorry that you have been disturbed."

"Not at all, sir," said Mr. Linton, politely.

Arthur Augustus rose from his collection, with his arms full of fragments. Mr. Spender gave him a look.

"Go back to your dormitory, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, sir," said Arthur Augustus, meekly.

He trailed away with his cargo up the passage, Spender's eyes smouldering after him as he went. Mr. Linton and Mr. Spender bade one another a polite good-night, and the master of the Shell retired into his room, and Spender also went back to his room, apparently giving up his intention of taking a turn in the open air, after what had happened.

Arthur Augustus, with deep feelings, arrived at his dormitory. Blake and Herries and Dig, waiting anxiously for him in the doorway, glared at him as he came in. They had heard the murmur of voices from the landing, and knew that their noble chum had been spotted—as, indeed, he could hardly have failed to be, after the crash of the falling jug in the vicinity of two masters' rooms. Two or three candle-ends had been lighted, and nearly every fellow in the Fourth was sitting up in bed, and every eye was turned on Arthur Augustus as he came in, his arms full of the fragments of the jug.

"You born idiot——!" hissed Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"You've been copped?" asked Herries.

"Yaas. I wan into Spendah——."

"Oh, you ass!" breathed Dig.

"Weally, Dig——."

"Didn't I say he would drop the jug?" chuckled Cardew.

"D'Arcy all over," remarked Clive.

"I could hardly help dwoppin' the jug, Cardew, when I suddenly wan into somebody in the dark. I was feahfully startled. I had not the faintest ideah that Spendah was up."

"He wasn't up till you banged that jug to bits a yard or two from his door, I suppose," said Cardew.

"He was up and comin' out on the landin'. That was how it happened. It was vewy unfortunate that he was up."

"Rot!" grunted Blake, "What the thump would Spender be up for at midnight? You roused him out, you ass."

"I wepeat that I did not wouse him out," hooted Arthur Augustus, "And he told Linton that he had neuwalgia, and was goin' to take a turn in the open air: that was why he was comin' out at that unfortunate moment. We did not see one anothah, and wan into one anothah in the dark. Bothah him and his neuralgia. How was a fellow to know——."

"Fathead!" said Blake.

"Ass!" said Digby.

"Goat!" said Herries.

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus, crossly.

"Like to have another shot at Cutts?" asked Cardew, "You can take my jug, old bean, and drop it outside Railton's door."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats!" repeated Arthur Augustus and went back to bed, abandoning the idea of reprisals on Cutts of the Fifth, for that night at least.

CHAPTER XVII

UNEXPECTED!

TOM MERRY frowned.

"The howling ass!" he said.

"And then some!" said Monty Lowther.

"Gussy all over!" sighed Manners.

The "Terrible Three" heard the news, after breakfast in the morning, and it had an exasperating effect on the junior football captain.

D'Arcy of the Fourth, obviously, was booked for trouble. A fellow who was caught out of his dormitory, after midnight, with a jug of water, obviously intended for some hapless victim, had something coming to him. Arthur Augustus had his own way of looking at things, but from the point of view of authority, such a reckless escapade was a very serious matter, and there could be no doubt that it would be dealt with seriously, especially as it was known that Mr. Spender already had a rather grim eye on that member of his form. And Arthur Augustus, with all his little foibles, was a valuable member of the junior football team. Tom Merry was not worrying about whether the happy Gussy bagged a whopping or not. He was looking at the matter entirely from the angle of Soccer.

"The utter chump!" said Tom, "He had to pick the night before the Greyfriars match to play his potty stunts. No other night would suit him, of course. And if he gets a detention——!"

"Spender may whop him, and let it go at that," suggested Monty Lowther, hopefully.

"That would be all right," agreed Tom, with a ruthless disregard of Arthur Augustus's feelings on the subject. "It doesn't matter if Spender whops him. But suppose he gives him detention?"

"Then he's out of the footer," said Manners, "Let's hope it will be six on the bags. Gussy can play Soccer after that."

"And it will serve him jolly well right," agreed Tom, "I've a jolly good mind to boot him, over and above."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——."

Blake and Co. joined the Terrible Three in the quad. All four of them were looking unusually serious. The chopper had not yet come down, it was still suspended, as it were, like the sword of Damocles, over Gussy's noble head, but that it was going to come down, admitted of no doubt. Gussy had not been thinking of the Greyfriars match the night before, but he was thinking of it now. His aristocratic face was clouded.

"You ass!" said Tom. "It will serve you jolly well right to get six, and it would serve you jolly well right to get sixty——."

"Or six hundred," said Lowther.

"Gussy can't help being a born idiot," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"I fancy it will be a licking, though," went on Blake, "I rather think Spender would like to give Gussy a good six. He's as sharp as a needle, and I know he's jolly well spotted the way Gussy turns up his nose at him."

"I do not pwecisely turn up my nose at Spendah, Blake. I wegard him as a boundah and an outsidah, that is all. I am quite wespectful to him in form, as a fellow is bound to be, only my pwivate opinion of him is that he is a fwightful outsidah."

"If it's only six, that's O.K.," said Tom, "But if Spender shoves you in Extra, Gussy, and we have to put another man in your place, we'll boot you all round both Houses and back again."

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus, "But howwid as it will be to be whopped by that boundah I twust he will make it

a whopping, and not detention. We don't want to lose the Gweyfwiahs match."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The innocent remark from Arthur Augustus seemed to furnish a little comic relief to his worried friends.

"Weally, you fellows, I don't see anythin' to cackle at," said Arthur Augustus, in surprise, "Have I made a joke?"

"One of your best," said Lowther.

"It's barely possible that we might beat Greyfriars, even with you stuck in Extra, Gussy," remarked Tom Merry, sarcastically.

"Yaas, but not very pwobable, is it deah boy? Hawwy Wharton and his cwowd are hot stuff, and we need our best men in the wanks."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! If you fellows are goin' to cackle whenevah a fellow opens his mouth——!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly.

"You blithering chump," said Tom, "You couldn't carry on your idiotic stunts without waking up half the House——."

"I did not wake up half the House, Tom Mewwy—only Linton and Spendah, and Spendah was awake alweady. If he had not been comin' out on the landin' as I was passin' his door, it would have been all wight."

"Just a minute Gussy would choose!" remarked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, I do not see how a fellow could be expected to guess that Spendah would have neuwalgia, and would be turnin' out in the middle of the night to walk awound the quad."

"Was he?" asked Tom Merry, in surprise.

"Yaas, wathah! That was how it happened," explained Arthur Augustus, "But for that, I should have cawwied on all wight, and that wottah Cutts would have got the jug of watah on his cheekay nappah. But it turned out that Spendah had got up and dwessed, and was goin' out, bothah him——."

"Cheese it—here he comes!" muttered Blake.

The juniors were silent, as Mr. Spender, coming out of the House and glancing round, came across to the little group.

Arthur Augustus drew a deep breath: and his friends looked anxious. They had no doubt that the "chopper" was coming

down now, and that Arthur Augustus was to be called up for judgment.

But Mr. Spender, rather contrary to expectation, was not looking grim. Indeed he gave the juniors a nod and a smile, as they capped him respectfully.

"D'Arcy," he said, in quite a mild tone.

"Yaas, sir."

"You were guilty of a very thoughtless and reckless action last night. I was very angry at the time. You are well aware that it is strictly against the rules of the House for a junior boy to leave his dormitory at a late hour of the night."

"Oh! Yaas, sir."

"But as I have no doubt that you acted unthinkingly, I shall overlook the matter," said Mr. Spender.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, in great surprise: while six other faces registered surprise mingled with satisfaction.

"I warn you, D'Arcy, to endeavour to be a little more thoughtful, and to remember that rules are not made to be broken," said Mr. Spender, "Bear that in mind, D'Arcy, and the matter ends here."

With that, Mr. Spender walked away.

He left Tom Merry and Co. staring at one another, blankly.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Good luck!" said Tom, his face bright. "No Extra for you, Gussy—and no whopping: not that that matters——."

"Weally, you ass, I wegard it as matterin' vewy much——."

"Dash it all, that's jolly decent of him," said Lowther, "Not many beaks would have let you off like that, Gussy. Linton jolly well wouldn't."

"Or Selby," said Manners.

"Or even old Railton," said Blake, "By gum! And I thought he was rather hankering after an excuse to wallop Gussy! I beg his jolly old pardon."

"O.K. for the footer now, at any rate," said Tom.

"Bai Jove! It is wathah surpwisin'," said Arthur Augustus, slowly, "I certainly nevah expected anythin' of the kind fwom Spendah. He looked absolutely fuwious last night—I was quite startled when Linton suddenly turned the light on, and I saw his face—simply fuwious——."

"I expect you gave him a bit of a shock, butting into him in

the dark," said Tom, "Enough to make him shirty. He seems all right now."

"Yaas, wathah! It is a gweat welief not to be shoved into Extwa, or to get a whoppin'. Pewwaps I have been wathah wuff on him," said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, "He was certainly vewy wude and fwightfully ill-bwed his first day heah. when I called on him in his study. But pewwaps he is not aftah all such a boundah as I supposed. He has wisen vewy considewably in my opinion, deah boys."

"Which would make him happy for life, if he only knew it!" remarked Monty Lowther, solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a great relief all round, and Tom Merry and Co. looked much brighter, when they went into form. Nobody had expected Mr. Spender to be so very easy going, which made it all the more agreeable. And certainly Tom Merry and Co. were not likely to suspect that Mr. Sylvester Spender might have any secret reason for letting the matter drop, and putting an end to talk on the subject, which might draw unwelcome attention to the circumstance that he had been coming out of his room fully dressed at midnight. The matter was at an end now, and was likely to be soon forgotten, and it could not be forgotten too soon for "Jimmy the Cat."

CHAPTER XVIII

ROUGH LUCK!

"MAWIA omniah circum——."

"D'Arcy!"

"Yaas, sir."

"Kindly speak more carefully. Maria omnia circums!" said Mr. Spender, severely.

"Yaas, sir! I said Mawia omniah circum," answered Arthur Augustus, innocently.

At which there was a grin in the Fourth Form.

Mr. Lathom never heeded the delightful accent of the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whether he let it loose in Latin or in English. But no doubt it was new to Mr. Spender, who was new to the Fourth. Or perhaps Mr. Spender, having

felt impelled for secret reasons of his own to overlook the exasperating episode of the previous night, had a special eye on the swell of St. Jim's, and was keen to catch him out. Arthur Augustus was not to be punished for that nocturnal exploit, but it was very possible that Mr. Spender was anxious to punish him for something else, discussion of which would cause "Jimmy the Cat" no uneasiness. Anyhow he certainly had a very sharp eye on Arthur Augustus now, and it behoved that unsuspecting youth to walk warily.

"Construe!" snapped Mr. Spender.

"Yaas, sir."

In the circumstances, it was a little unfortunate that Arthur Augustus had not found time to give his prep more than a glance in Study No. 6 the previous evening. Between his deep indignation at the ducking of his noble head in the fountain, and his astute planning to catch Cutts with a jug of water at midnight's stilly hour, Gussy had rather forgotten prep: which he now had reason to regret.

"Maria omnia circum" would not have perplexed many of the Fourth. Even Baggy Trimble could have taken a shot at it without missing the mark. Had Arthur Augustus gone through it in prep, even his aristocratic intellect could scarcely have produced a "howler": though Gussy's howlers very often did evoke chuckles in the form. Unluckily he had not even looked at it, and now that he did look at it, in form, under Mr. Spender's frowning gaze, the meaning, which should have been quite clear, was dim to his noble eyes.

"All awound Mawia——!" said Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Spender gave quite a jump.

If he was keen to catch D'Arcy out, he was not likely to fail to find an opportunity when the swell of St. Jim's was "on con." But certainly he could not have expected anything like this. This was unusually rich, even for the ineffable Gussy.

"What?" he ejaculated, "What did you say, D'Arcy?"

"All awound Mawia——!" repeated Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a howl from a dozen fellows. Even Baggy Trimble emitted a fat cackle. Arthur Augustus had excelled himself this time.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Kerr to Figgins, "All around Maria—oh, gum!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did you say 'all around Maria,' D'Arcy?" asked Mr. Spender, almost dazedly.

"Yaas, sir! All awound Mawia——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence in the class!" rapped Mr. Spender, "D'Arcy, I can only conclude that this impertinence——."

"Weally, sir——."

"Or is it possible," thundered Mr. Spender, "That you really suppose that that passage means any such thing?"

"Bai Jove! Doesn't it, sir?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, Gussy!" murmured Blake.

"The meaning of that passage, D'Arcy, is 'around all the seas'."

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. Rather late, he remembered that "maria" was the plural of "mare," the sea: and not, as he had apparently supposed, the name of some female character in the Æneid, "Thank you, sir. I——."

"It is clear to me that you have neglected your preparation, D'Arcy," said Mr. Spender, "You will stay in the form-room this afternoon and write out the lesson twenty times."

"Weally, sir——."

"That will do! You will go on, Wynn."

"Oh, cwumbs!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

He sat down, overwhelmed.

Blake and Herries and Dig looked at him. Figgins and Co. looked at him. Arthur Augustus was wanted, to play in the forward line, in the match with Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars that afternoon. By sheer good luck he had escaped the penalties of his exploit over-night: and now he had put himself out of the Soccer by skewing in con. Quite a number of fellows in the Fourth would willingly have kicked Arthur Augustus, just then, on his well-fitting trousers.

"Oh, you goat!" hissed Blake.

"Oh, you born idiot!" breathed Figgins.

"Oh, you chump!" whispered Kerr.

Arthur Augustus did not heed. He was overwhelmed with dismay. Fatty Wynn went on con, followed by others, and Mr. Spender took no more notice of Arthur Augustus. Possibly his sharp eyes did not fail to note the dumb dismay of the

unlucky swell of St. Jim's. But he did not look at him, and seemed to have dismissed him from mind.

When the Fourth were dismissed, Arthur Augustus lingered behind the rest to speak to the new master. Mr. Spender glanced up from papers at his desk.

"Well?" he rapped.

"If you please, sir——."

"Be brief!"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard. Spender had been so unexpectedly lenient in the affair of the night, that perhaps D'Arcy had hoped that he would again find him easy going. But he looked anything but that, as his sharp eyes glinted at the junior.

"I am playin' football for the school this aftahnoon, sir——."

"What do you mean, D'Arcy? You will not be playing football—you will be in detention, till you have written out your imposition."

"Oh! Yaas, sir! I mean, I—I was booked to play football, sir," stammered Arthur Augustus, "And if you would kindly let me off for the match, sir, I would w'ite out the lesson aftahwards——."

"You may leave the form-room, D'Arcy."

"But, sir——."

"You will be here again at half-past two. Now go."

"But——."

"Do you desire me to cane you, D'Arcy?"

"Bai Jove! No, sir."

"Then leave the form-room this instant."

Arthur Augustus, suppressing his feelings, left the form-room, and followed the other fellows out.

He joined Blake and Herries and Digby in the quad with a lugubrious face.

"Nothin' doin', deah boys," he said, "I have so fah demeaned myself as to wequest that boundah to let me off for the match, and he has wefused. You see, I was wight all the time—the fellow is an uttah and incowwigible boundah."

"You have to skew in con," growled Blake. "Blessed if I understand the man—he let you off for playing the giddy ox last night—now he comes down like a ton of bricks for next to nothing. Bother him!"

"I suppose I'd bettah go and tell Tom Mewwy, as he will

have to find anothah man," sighed Arthur Augustus. And the swell of St. Jim's ambled away to look for the junior captain, to impart the sad tidings.

"You chump!" was Tom Merry's remark, when he heard it.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——."

"You burbling blitherer!" said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——."

"If you couldn't get detention for one thing, you had to get it for another," snorted Tom Merry, "Fathead!"

"I am awf'lly sowwy, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, mildly, "I wealise only too cleahly that it is a wotten outlook for the Gweyfwiahs match this aftahnoon."

"May as well make Wharton a present of the game!" suggested Lowther, with deep sarcasm, "There's still time to 'phone Greyfriars, 'You win!' and save them the trouble of coming over, Tom."

Tom Merry laughed.

"You'll be wanted, Manners," he said.

"I was going out with my camera——."

"That's all right! Chuck it into the nearest dustbin, and forget all about it," hooted Tom.

Arthur Augustus walked sadly away. At half-past two he was booked for detention, and the football match to which he had been looking forward to was going to be played without him. And he could not help feeling serious doubts of the result, minus his noble presence in the forward line! But it could not be helped, and the luckless swell of St. Jim's had to make up his mind to it.

CHAPTER XIX

TWO ON THE MOOR!

"GOAL!"

"Good old Talbot!"

"Goal!"

The shouts from the distance floated in faintly from afar, into the dusky old form-room where Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat

with pen in his hand, and a cloud on his brow. It was a fine autumn afternoon, and never had the form-room seemed quite so unattractive to Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Spender had landed him there at two-thirty, and gone. Kick-off in the football match was at three-fifteen. Harry Wharton and Co. had arrived from Greyfriars, and the game started while Arthur Augustus was wearily scribbling at his desk. He was likely to be through his task long before the game ended, but that was no great comfort.

It was not like Gussy to feel bitter or resentful, but he could not help feeling both as he sat there scribbling. Fellows had been sympathetic. It was rough luck to be sticking in detention and cutting a Soccer match, and all for a mere "skew" in con. Lathom would never have come down so hard and heavy: but the new master, perhaps, had not had time to get so accustomed to Arthur Augustus's "howlers." Fellows sympathised, while they could not help grinning over the cause of the trouble: "All around Maria," as a translation from Virgil, could not fail to evoke merriment. But it was agreed that Spender must be a bit of a Tartar to come down so heavy. Certainly it did not occur to D'Arcy, or anyone else, that a hard and angry man had been determined to punish him for what had occurred in the night, while finding some other cause for inflicting punishment.

"Wottah!" murmured Arthur Augustus, for the umpteenth time, "Boundah! Outsidah!" Gussy's early opinion of Mr. Spender was quite confirmed, by his detention on Greyfriars day. The man was a boundah, an outsidah, the limit: in fact the very outside edge!

However, there was no help, either in the sympathy of other fellows, or in applying fancy names to Mr. Spender. Gussy had to sit there and scribble while other fellows played Soccer, deriving only a spot of comfort from the shouts that reached his ears from the distance soon after the game had started. Talbot of the Shell, evidently, had scored for his side, so in spite of the absence of Arthur Augustus, it was possible that the game might not have to be written off as a dead loss!

Arthur Augustus scribbled on.

He scribbled industriously, and at long last, his dismal task

was done. Then he was at liberty to leave the form-room, which he promptly did. It was not in a happy mood that he emerged from the House into the autumn sunshine.

His first proceeding was to walk down to the football ground, to see how Tom Merry and Co. were getting on.

The second-half was now in progress, and the score one-all. Tom Merry and Co. were putting up a good game: and Harry Wharton and Co. also seemed to be in great form. Harry Wynn, in the St. Jim's goal, stopped shot after shot, with ease and grace, but Johnny Bull, at the other end, seemed equally effective. It was, in fact, anybody's game, so far, the result very much on the knees of the gods.

Arthur Augustus could not help feeling that, with a certain elegant figure in the front line the scales would probably have turned in favour of the home team! A crowd of juniors of both Houses were watching the game; but after ten minutes or so, Arthur Augustus wandered away from the Soccer ground, leaving the footballers to carry on unobserved by his eye or his eyeglass.

Poor Gussy was, in fact, feeling rather down and out. It was very unusual for the cheery swell of St. Jim's to feel angry, or peevish, or disgruntled, or pessimistic: but all these uncomfortable feelings were now mingled within him. For once, his noble face wore a settled cloud, and he seemed to be bent on understudying that ancient king who never smiled again.

He went down to the bike-shed at length, and pushed out his jigger. A vigorous spin in the fresh keen air of Wayland Moor was the recipe for the dismals. And he did feel better, as he pedalled on the track across the moor, with the keen wind blowing in his face—blowing the cobwebs away, as it were! The cloud on his brow lifted, and his spirits began to rise.

But the brow that was clearing, set again in a deep frown, at the sight of a figure ahead of him on the track across the rugged moor.

He had only a back view of it, but he knew that slim slight figure in the dark overcoat.

It was Mr. Spender.

Apparently Spender had gone for a walk on the moor that afternoon, for there he was, ahead of Arthur Augustus, walking

briskly. He had almost reached the spot where a scarcely-marked path leading to the old Moor House branched off from the track, when the junior sighted him from behind.

Arthur Augustus's eyes gleamed at his back.

"Wottah!" he murmured.

But for Spender, he would have been playing in the Greyfriars match—kicking goals, as he had no doubt, for his side—instead of pushing a bike on a lonely moorland track on his lonely own. His feelings were deep, as he looked at the slim lithe figure in front.

"Outsidah!" he breathed, "Boundah!"

Mr. Spender, quite unconscious of the cyclist behind him, walked on, at a brisk pace. The bike made little sound on the grassy track, and the wind carried back what sound it made. Spender was quite unaware of a frowning junior in his rear: and Arthur Augustus was tempted to put on sudden speed, and bump into his back! Which Mr. Spender, no doubt, richly deserved, for having kept Arthur Augustus out of a football match.

However, Arthur Augustus resisted that temptation. But he did resolve to ring his bell quite suddenly and loudly, when he was close up, and make the bounder jump! The bounder, undoubtedly, would jump, when a bike brushed past him on the track, and a sudden clang of a buzzing bell crashed on his left ear!

But as the bike shot on towards Mr. Spender's back, the man, having reached the spot where the path forked, turned and walked on towards the old Moor House, half-hidden in its clumps of trees.

That was quite a surprise to Arthur Augustus.

He had supposed that Spender was walking across the moor to the Abbotsford road, and not for a moment had it occurred to him that the man might be heading for that desolate old building, so long unoccupied, and now tenanted by the bull-necked, pug-nosed man who had refused shelter to the St. Jim's juniors on that rainy afternoon a few days ago. But that path led nowhere else.

Mr. Spender was walking quickly, and he was six or seven yards off the track when the bike came whizzing up—too late

to make him jump by clanging a bell just under his ear! But as it whizzed up, he seemed to become aware of it, for he looked round.

Arthur Augustus did not see a sudden savage glint that came into Spender's eyes at the sight of him. Had he observed it, he might have guessed that Mr. Spender did not want to be seen on his way to the old Moor House. For a moment, the man stared at him, as he passed, with smouldering eyes, then he suddenly called out to him:

"D'Arcy!"

Arthur Augustus braked. He jumped down and looked back.

"Did you call me, sir?"

Mr. Spender came back to the track. The dark look had left his face, and he gave the junior a nod.

"Yes. I am glad to see you here—I am not sure of my way. I suppose you know this moorland, quite well, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, wathah, sir."

"Then you can tell me whether this path is a short cut to Wayland," said Mr. Spender, "It seems to go in that direction —but I am quite a stranger in this district, and I do not want to lose myself." He smiled.

Arthur Augustus smiled too. Evidently Mr. Spender did not know his way about Wayland Moor, if he fancied that the path led to the town!

"You are goin' quite w'ong, sir," answered Arthur Augustus, "That path leads to the old Moor House, and nowhah else."

"The old Moor House!" repeated Mr. Spender, "What is that?"

"It's an old half-wuined place, behind those twees, sir. That path ends there," explained Arthur Augustus. "The footpath to Wayland is a quartah of a mile back—you have passed it."

"Then I am very glad you came along, D'Arcy," said Mr. Spender, with a smile, "I shall have to walk back. Thank you, my boy."

"Not at all, sir," answered Arthur Augustus, politely.

Mr. Spender walked back along the moorland track, and Arthur Augustus rode on his way. It did not occur to him to glance back, so he remained happily unaware that Mr. Spender,

after walking a little distance, turned round, and watched him as he went, with a dark grim frown on his face. Arthur Augustus pedalled on, and not till he had disappeared in the distance, did Mr. Spender once more leave the track, and walk very swiftly in the direction of the old Moor House.

CHAPTER XX

A SURPRISE FOR ARTHUR AUGUSTUS

"TALBOT!"

"Bravo!"

"Good man!" yelled Tom Merry.

"Goal!"

"Oh, good man, Talbot!"

It was a tremendous roar. It woke the echoes of St. Jim's. It almost drowned the shrill note of the whistle.

The game had been a hard one. Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars were in great form, every man keen and apparently tireless, and Johnny Bull, in goal, almost as impassable as an iron curtain, when the red shirts swept down on him. Luckily for St. Jim's, Fatty Wynn was also like unto a door of triple steel when the blue shirts came down like wolves on the fold.

Talbot's goal for St. Jim's had been the only one till Vernon-Smith equalised for Greyfriars. In the second half it had been ding-dong all the time, and it looked like a draw right up to the finish. Indeed, Darrell of the Sixth, the referee, was about to blow the whistle, when Talbot, for the second time, got through and Johnny Bull's finger-tips missed the whizzing leather by half-an-inch. But half-an-inch in the circumstances, was as good as a mile and a half: the ball was in the net, and the St. Jim's score stood at two to one as the whistle rang out.

"Goal! Goal!"

"Good old Talbot!"

Smack!.

"Oh!" gasped Talbot, as Tom Merry, in his cheery exuberance, gave him a smack on the shoulder that almost made him stagger.

"Good man!" grinned Tom, "Have another?"

"No thanks," said Talbot, laughing.

"Jolly close shave," said Blake, "But we've pulled it off—without Gussy! Gussy won't believe it when we tell him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a cheery crowd that came off the field. The Greyfriars men were cheery too: they could take a beating.

"Good game," said Harry Wharton to Tom Merry, as they went to the changing-room, "You've got a good man there—what's his name?—Talbot."

"Our best man, bar none," answered Tom cheerily, "But it was a close thing, and anybody's game, really."

"The closefulness was terrific," remarked a dusky member of the Greyfriars team, "But the stitchfulness in time saved the cracked pitcher from going to the well, as the English proverb remarks."

"Eh? What? Oh! Yes," gasped Tom.

"But it was your win, my esteemed Merry, and the gratterfulness is preposterous," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, affably, "Nextfully perhaps the boot will be on the other leg."

"Oh! Quite!" grinned Tom.

It was a cheery crowd in the changing-room. Talbot of the Shell, who had taken both goals, was the hero of the hour, but he bore his blushing honours thick upon him with becoming modesty. No one observing his quiet and unassuming manner would have guesed that he had won the match for the school.

"How did it go, deah boys?"

An elegant figure appeared in the doorway, and an eyeglass glimmered into the changing-room.

"Oh, here you are, Gussy!" exclaimed Blake, "Where have you been? Not sticking in the form-room all this time, all around Maria?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not at all,deah boys. I have been out for a spin," answered Arthur Augustus, "I have just got in. How did it go?"

"Two to one," answered Tom Merry.

"Wotten luck!" said Arthur Augustus, sympathetically, "It was all that boundah Spendah's fault."

"Eh?"

"The man was simply a wank outsidah to give a chap detention on a match day," said Arthur Augustus, "I don't know where he was bwought up, but he does things that are not done, you know. I am feahfully sowwy, Tom Mewwy: but it was all Spendah's fault, not mine, as I twust you wealise."

The footballers stared at Arthur Augustus.

"What are you sorry about, image?" asked Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"What's biting you?" asked Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins——."

"What's the matter with two to one?" demanded Kerr.

"Well, I suppose it might have been worse," said Arthur Augustus, "I was wathah afwaid that the Gweyfwiahs men would walk all ovah you in the unfortunate circs. I am glad you were able to keep down the margin, anyway."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a roar of laughter in the changing-room, as the footballers caught on to Gussy's little misapprehension.

"Bai Jove! I should like to know what you fellows are laughin' at?" said Arthur Augustus, "What's the joke?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry and Co.

"Weally, you know——."

"You see, we had the two," gasped Tom Merry, "It was two to one for St. Jim's, Gussy—two for us, one for the visitors——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Was it weally?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "Gwattahs, deah boys. You must have had a feahfully uphill stwuggle, in the circs——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But, bai Jove, I am vewy glad to heah it. That boundah Spendah did not lose us the match aftah all, then."

"Not so you'd notice it," chuckled Tom Merry.

"Gwattahs, old chap! I am weally vewy bwaced to heah it," said Arthur Augustus, "It is wathah unexpected——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is vewy much to your cwedit, deah boys, to pull it off

with your best forward left out of the team," said Arthur Augustus, innocently.

"Luckily, our best forward was there," chuckled Tom, "Two to one, Gussy, and Talbot bagged both of them, one in each half."

"Gwattahs, Talbot, deah boy. It is a gweat welief to know that that oudsidah Spendah did no damage aftah all, and I am wathah glad that I did not wun him down on my bike as I was gweatly inclined to do," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully.

"My dear chap——!" exclaimed Talbot, staring

"Oh, my hat!" said Blake, "Have you been hunting for more trouble with Spender while we've been playing football?"

"Not at all, deah boy. But I was feelin' vewy watty with Spendah, and when I came up behind him on my bike, on Wayland Moor, I had a jolly good mind to wun into his back and bowl him ovah, for keepin' me out of the match."

"Lucky you had a jollier good mind not to," remarked Monty Lowther. "Life wouldn't be half so amusing here if they sacked you, Gussy."

"Weally, Lowthah——."

"Ass!" remarked Blake.

"It would have served him wight, if the match had been lost," said Arthur Augustus, "Howevah, the man is a beak, although a wank outsidah, and a fellow is bound to tweat a beak with wespect. But I was jolly well goin' to wush by him and wing my bell suddenly and make the boundah jump——."

"Oh, you fathead!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"And did you?" exclaimed Talbot. "My dear fellow, you——."

"As it happens, I didn't," said Arthur Augustus, "Just as I was comin' up behind him, he stepped off the twack and started off towards the old Moor House: othahwise I should certainly have made the boundah jump."

"Lucky for you," said Manners, "You can't play potty tricks like that on a beak, you ass."

"Weally, Mannahs——."

"Isn't Gussy the man to hunt for trouble, when his pals

aren't keeping an eye on him? " sighed Blake, " I've always said that we ought to keep him on a chain."

" Wats!" said Arthur Augustus.

" Did you say that Spender was going to the old Moor House, Gussy? " asked Talbot. His voice was very quiet, and the brightness had faded out of his handsome face.

" Well, he started off towards the Moor House, and I thought he was goin' there, but it turned out that he had missed his way," explained Arthur Augustus, " He called to me as I passed, and asked me whethah it was the short cut to Wayland. So when I told him it wasn't, he had to go back. I wegarded it as wathah like his cheek to speak to me, aftah givin' me detention on a match day: howevah, I answahed him quite civilly—aftah all, the man is a beak, you know."

Talbot nodded, and turned away without speaking again. A few minutes later he slipped quietly into the changing-room. No one else had given any special heed to Arthur Augustus's remarks, but no one else knew what Talbot of the Shell knew of Mr. Spender. In that apparently trivial incident, there was food for thought, to the St. Jim's junior who had once been known as " The Toff."

Chapter XXI

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR!

" Something's up! " murmured Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

It was Tuesday morning, and the Shell were in form with Mr. Linton. Talbot was on " con," when there came a tap at the door, and Toby, the House page, entered the form-room.

Mr. Linton cast a somewhat irritable glance at him. Linton did not like interruption in lessons. Moreover, Talbot was giving his usual excellent construe, which was a pleasant interlude for the master of the Shell, among many that were by no means excellent. In all the Shell, School House and New House, only Manners was as good a man with the classics as Talbot, and

a form-master who had listened to one stumbling "con" after another, found a good and careful scholar rather a nerve rest.

However, he signed to Talbot to wait, and turned his attention to Toby. The House page had a rather startled expression on his chubby face, and as he came towards Mr. Linton, his glance turned on Talbot, as many fellows noticed. It seemed to indicate that Toby's coming to the form-room had something to do with Talbot of the Shell.

What the House page said to Mr. Linton, was said in too low a tone for it to reach the ears of the form. But most of the Shell noticed that Mr. Linton looked for the moment as startled as Toby. Involuntarily, as it were, his glance shot round to Talbot.

After an exchange of words, unheard by the juniors, Toby left the form-room, and Mr. Linton stood by his desk, apparently in thought.

That "something" was up, was quite plain to the juniors, and they wondered what it was. It was some moments before Mr. Linton spoke, and then he addressed Talbot. But it was not to tell him to go on with his construe.

"Talbot!"

"Yes, sir."

"A gentleman has called to see you, and you may leave the form, and go to the visitors' room."

"Oh! Yes, sir," said Talbot, his eyebrows rising slightly. Mr. Linton looked so very grave that he, like the other fellows, had supposed that something was "up" rather more serious than a visitor coming to the school. "Is it my uncle, Colonel Lyndon, sir?"

"No!" answered Mr. Linton, "You may go at once, Talbot."

"Very well, sir."

Talbot quietly left the form-room. He wondered a little why Mr. Linton had not told him who the visitor was, and some of the other fellows wondered too. After he had gone, it was some moments before Mr. Linton gave attention to his form again: then Harry Noble was told to go on, and matters in the Shell resumed the even tenor of their way.

Talbot, a little perplexed, made his way to the visitors' room. As the visitor was not his uncle, Colonel Lyndon, he could not

guess who it might be. Not for one moment did he foresee the surprise and shock that awaited him. As he entered the visitors' room, a portly figure seated by the window rose, and a pair of very keen eyes in a portly ruddy face fixed on him.

Talbot caught his breath.

The man in the visitors' room was Inspector Skeat, from Wayland.

For a moment, the colour wavered in Talbot's face, and his heart beat unpleasantly.

It was a police-inspector who had called to see him. It brought back to the one-time "Toff" the shadowed past, when, the dupe and tool of Hookey Walker's gang, the police had been his natural enemies. Much water had passed under the bridges since those evil days but, for one dreadful moment, all his new life, the life of school, of form with Linton, of football with Tom Merry and Co., of cheery talks round the study fire, seemed to vanish as if it had never been: and he was once more the outlaw, the outcast, the "Toff": the Ishmael, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him.

It was only for a moment—a long moment: but it was a terrible moment to the boy whose life had been so strange and chequered. But the next moment he had pulled himself together.

He walked into the room with a firm step. His clear eyes met Mr. Skeat's searching gaze unflinchingly. His voice was quite steady as he spoke.

"Good-morning, Mr. Skeat."

"Oh! Good-morning," said Mr. Skeat, a little gruffly. His penetrating eyes never left Talbot's face.

"You called to see me?"

"Yes."

"Well, here I am."

Inspector Skeat sat down again. He seemed just a little disconcerted by the junior's calm, casual manner.

"Mr. Linton has given me leave from form to see you, Mr. Skeat," said Talbot, as the inspector did not immediately speak, "I had no idea whom I was to see here. Neither can I imagine what you want with me."

A faintly bitter smile came over his face. He knew now why

Mr. Linton had not said who the visitor was, in the form-room. The master of the Shell knew Talbot's strange story, and he liked and trusted him. He did not want it to become the talk of the school that an officer of the law had called to see Talbot. That was only too likely to revive memories of what was better forgotten. But Talbot knew that the inspector's call had been a shock to Linton.

"You don't know?" said Mr. Skeat, slowly.

"How could I know?"

The inspector coughed.

Talbot's face set, and a gleam came into his eyes. Once he had been an outcast, the useful tool of a cracksman's gang. That was known to Inspector Skeat : and he had never been quite sure whether the hard-bitten police-inspector believed that his reform was wholly genuine and lasting. But whether Mr. Skeat believed in him or not, his conscience was clear, he could look the whole world in the face without fearing any man. And if Mr. Skeat had come there with some vague doubt or suspicion in his mind, it was not the "Toff" with whom he had to deal, but Talbot of the Shell: and he was prepared to make that clear.

"Let's have this plain, Mr. Skeat." His voice was cool and curt, "You've called to speak to me—what do you want?"

"I have to ask you some questions, in the way of duty," said Mr. Skeat, slowly. "No offence, Master Talbot, but duty, you know——."

"You can have no questions to ask me, Mr. Skeat. You're too late in the day for that," said Talbot, with a bitter curl of the lip, "I am at St. Jim's man now, like any other, the past is dead and done with, the law has no claim on me, as you know very well, and you have no more right to come here and question me, than to question Tom Merry or Blake or Figgins or Kildare of the Sixth or any other fellow in the school."

"If that is the line you are going to take, Master Talbot——."

"It is," said Talbot, briefly.

The inspector sat looking at him. He was taken aback, and an obstinate look had come over his face. There was a long pause.

Talbot looked him steadily in the face. He was not afraid of

Mr. Skeat, and he was not afraid of his suspicions, whatever they were. He was a St. Jim's man, his daily life open for all the world to see, and he was not going to be treated as if he had still been the dupe and victim of the gang that had once held him in thrall. If the Wayland inspector chose to regard him still as the "Toff," the outcast of Angel Alley, he could please himself, but the Shell fellow of St. Jim's would have none of it.

"Then you will refuse to answer the questions I came to ask you, Master Talbot?" said the inspector, breaking the long silence at last

"I shall not only refuse to answer them but I shall refuse to hear them," answered Talbot, coolly, "If you have anything to say to me as Talbot of St. Jim's, I will hear it—if you have anything to say to me as what I was before I came to this school, I will not hear a word."

Mr. Skeat's lips set very hard.

"Taking that line will not do you any good, I think," he said, tartly. "People can be made to answer questions put to them by officers of the law."

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"You are an officer of the law," he said, "If you have anything against me, you have the right and power to take me to the police-station, and question me there. If that is why you are here, I am ready."

The inspector breathed deeply. Obviously, that was not why he was there. Some suspicion was in his mind : what it was, Talbot did not know, and did not want to know.

"It would be better, Master Talbot, to listen to me, and answer my questions frankly," he said.

"I will answer any question you have a right to put to me," said Talbot, "But only as Talbot of the Shell. You are not here, I suppose, to make a kind inquiry about my progress in form, or in games? If that is so, I am very pleased to be able to tell you that my form-master, Mr. Linton, is quite satisfied with me, and that the junior captain of my House considers me quite a valuable member of the football eleven."

Inspector Skeat bit his lip with vexation. He rose heavily from his chair.

"That will do," he said, "At present——." He stressed that

word, "At present, you may listen to me, and answer me, or not, as you choose: and as you do not choose to do so, I have no more to say—at present!" Again there was a heavy stress on that word. "I have wasted my time coming here this morning. If I have occasion to call again," added the inspector, grimly, "My time may not be wasted. I wish you a very good-morning, Master Talbot."

He tramped heavily out of the room.

Talbot, from the window, saw him step into a waiting taxi. The junior's face was set hard, and his eyes glinted. What suspicion, after such a lapse of time, was in the police-officer's mind? He did not know—he did not want to know—but there was deep and bitter resentment in his heart. He had proved himself, since he had struggled free of the evil past: he was trusted by his head-master, his house-master, his form-master: by his friends in his form and other forms: by every fellow who knew that dark old story, even fellows who had once been his enemies. If Mr. Skeat nourished lingering doubts, let him get on with it, the junior told himself, with an angry shrug. And as Mr. Skeat's taxi drove away, Talbot returned to the Shell form-room, and his face wore its accustomed calm and cheerful look as he entered it.

CHAPTER XXII

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT!

"RYLCOMBE Grange!"

"Old Rawchester's place."

"Some relation of Cutts of the Fifth, I believe——."

"They made a clean sweep!"

"Cutts went over on his bike, after class. I expect he'll come back full of it."

"But when did it happen?"

"Some time last night, that's all I know. Nobody woke up, so I hear—burglar got in at a little window high up from the ground, so they say—must have been a cat-burglar——."

"The village is buzzing with it. First time anything's happened at Rylcombe for donkey's years."

"Old Skeat was there from Wayland this morning——."

"Catch old Skeat catching a cat-burglar!"

"Bai Jove! It's vewy wuff on old Wawchestah! I heard somebody say that the safe was cwacked and bonds and things taken."

"What a jolly old spot of excitement!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Talbot of the Shell came to a dead halt. He had noticed the group of juniors in the quad, discussing what seemed to be an exciting topic, and he came along to join the little crowd—Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were there, and Blake and Co., and Dick Julian and Hammond, Roylance and Lumley-Lumley, Racke and Crooke, Gore and Glyn, and several other fellows. All were evidently interested in the topic under discussion, and Talbot rather wondered what it was—till he came within hearing. Then he stopped, without joining the group.

He knew Rylcombe Grange, an old place near the village. It belonged to Colonel Rawchester, a relative of Cutts of the Fifth—a rich relative, it was said. And from what he now heard, he knew that a burglary had taken place there, the previous night. A cat-burglary, according to what one of the fellows was saying. And now he knew why Inspector Skeat had called that morning—fresh, evidently, from Rylcombe Grange, and examining the scene of the robbery. It seemed to Talbot, in those moments, that his very heart was sick within him.

A little window high up from the ground, one of the fellows had said. Only too clearly he knew what must have flashed into the mind of the Wayland inspector. A little window—only accessible to a very slim man—or a boy! And a boy who had once been called the Toff, who had once been in the hands of Hookey Walker's gang of cracksmen, was at St. Jim's—hardly more than a mile away! No wonder Mr. Skeat had thought of the Toff, and called at the school to ask him "questions."

Talbot turned away.

He knew that his face had whitened. The sunny autumn after-

noon had turned dark to him. He went away quietly towards the House.

Of all the fellows who were discussing that exciting topic, not one had thought of him—he could see that. No one was likely to remember to rake up his old story in connection with such a happening. That was something for which to be thankful and grateful. But Inspector Skeat had remembered it. Mr. Skeat did not, perhaps, precisely suspect him. But his unexpected visit to the school showed what was in his mind. To the hard-bitten police-inspector, accustomed to crime, unaccustomed to reform, what did it look like—what but the "Toff" at the old game again?

Talbot went up to his study. He wanted to be alone to think. Gore and Skimpole were in the quad, and he had the study to himself. He shut the door, and threw himself into the window-seat. His handsome face was lined, haggard, almost old. The past, almost forgotten, could never die, it seemed—something, something must always bring back those black days to his thoughts.

He knew what was in Inspector Skeat's mind, with sardonic bitterness, he could trace the inspector's line of thought: picturing the boy who had once been the "Toff" stepping quietly from his bed while all others slept: stealing softly through the shadows of the night: at the old game. That was the picture in Mr. Skeat's mind—Talbot saw it clearly as if he had seen it in a film. It was too vague, too totally unconfirmed, for the inspector to take action, but it was there.

Talbot's lip curled bitterly.

That suspicion was in Mr. Skeat's mind, because he knew that the "Toff" of other days was Talbot of the Shell at St. Jim's. He did not know of another who was at St. Jim's—Jimmy the Cat! What would Mr. Skeat have thought, and have done, had he known that?

From what he had heard, it was exactly in the manner of the "Cat," as the affair at Manchester had been. Had the man deluded him with his tale of repentance and reform, planning this all the time? He had asked for a "chance," and Talbot had given him his chance—feeling that after what he had himself experienced, he could do no other. So far as he had been

able to observe—and he was observant—Spender had carried on in a perfectly normal way, if he was not genuine, at least he played the part of a schoolmaster to perfection. He was there only for a couple of weeks: three at the most, and if nothing had happened——!

But this had happened.

There had been a lingering uneasiness in Talbot's mind since what Arthur Augustus had said in the changing-room on Saturday. D'Arcy had seen Spender leave the moorland track and head for the old Moor House. To the innocent and unsuspicious Gussy, Spender's explanation that he had mistaken the footpath, as a stranger in the district might easily do, had been enough. But Talbot had wondered, at the time, whether Spender would not have kept on to the old Moor House, had he not found a St. Jim's fellow in sight of him. At the old Moor House was the pug-faced man who had known the "Toff" in the old days. If Spender had been going there, there was some connection between the two, which could only mean that Jimmy the Cat, whether his name was Spender or not, was still Jimmy the Cat. But had he been going there? It was quite possible that what he had said to Arthur Augustus was true enough. But now——!

Now this had happened.

Talbot sat with a black brow, thinking it out. But at last he rose and left the study. A buzz of voices greeted him, as he went down the passage to the study landing. A group of Fifth-form men stood there—Cutts, St. Leger, Lefevre, and several others. Cutts, evidently, had come back from his visit to his relative's house near Rylcombe, full of news.

"Neat as a whistle," Cutts was saying. "Safe cracked by a master hand—some johnny who knows the game——."

"Not local talent, what?" drawled St. Leger.

"No fear! Some London cracksman," said Cutts, "Nobody heard a sound in the night—nobody knew anything till that little window was found open in the morning. The fellow must have been a real monkey—I looked at the place, and I tell you, that window was forty feet up, and looked as if a cat couldn't have climbed to it—but he did! And the queer thing is, it was too small for any average man to squeeze through—I couldn't have

got through it myself—I don't believe you could, St. Leger, slim as you are—and I'd jolly well bank on it that it was a boy——."

"One of those Cosh Boys you read about in the newspapers, what? " said Lefevre.

"That's what it looked like," said Cutts.

"But can Cosh Boys crack safes?" asked St. Leger.

"Well, this one could, if it was a Cosh Boy, for the safe was opened as easy as cutting cheese, and cleaned right out."

Talbot passed quietly on, and went down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIII

DARK DOUBTS!

"COME in!" rapped Mr. Spender.

The new master of the Fourth was seated at his study table, with a little pile of Latin proses before him. He was marking one to which was appended the aristocratic name of A. A. D'Arcy when a tap came at his study door.

The door opened, and Talbot of the Shell came in.

Mr. Spender glanced up at him and raised his eyebrows slightly. Perhaps he had expected to see a member of his own form, and was surprised to see a Shell fellow. He looked like it.

"Oh, you," he said, "Well, come in. What is it? "

Talbot came in. This time Mr. Spender did not need to tell him to shut the door. He closed it carefully behind him, and came across to the form-master's table.

Mr. Spender watched him, his face indicating more and more surprise. Certainly no one, looking on, would have supposed Mr. Spender to be anything but master of a junior form, surprised by a visit from a boy of another form with which he had no concern.

Since their first interview, the previous week, not a word, and hardly a look, had been exchanged between Mr. Sylvester

Spender and the junior who had once known him as "Jimmy the Cat." Talbot had given him a chance, and left it at that. Why should he not believe that this man was seeking to do as he himself had done—break free from evil associations, and throw an evil past behind him? From talk with Fourth-form fellows, Talbot knew that the man was a capable school-master—he did his work in the Fourth-form room and did it well. If he was playing a part, he had studied the part to good purpose. But it looked, as Talbot had to acknowledge, as if the man was genuine: and he was only too willing to believe so. Till now——!

And now he was puzzled.

If Jimmy the Cat had stolen silently from the school, the previous night, and carried on his old game at Rylcombe Grange, there was nothing in his look or manner to give a hint of it. If it was so, he must have expected to hear something from Talbot. But he only looked mildly surprised by the visit.

"What is it, Talbot?" asked Mr. Spender. He smiled, "I won't call you by that other name. All that is dead and gone, for both of us, and the sooner forgotten the better." Then his face became grave. "But it is a little injudicious to come here, my boy. You are not in my form, and in the circumstances, the fewer remarks that are made, the better. We don't want to draw attention to the fact that you knew me before I came here in Mr. Lathom's place. You see that?"

Talbot stood silent, looking at him.

His mind was in a whirl of doubt.

"But what is it?" went on Mr. Spender, "You had a reason for coming here, I suppose? A message?"

"No!" said Talbot.

"Well, then, what?"

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"You've not heard the news?" he asked.

"Is there any news?" asked Mr. Spender, looking puzzled, "I don't quite understand you. I looked at the papers in Common-Room this morning. I suppose you have not come here to talk politics with me."

"It is local news," said Talbot, quietly, "It is all over the school, and dozens of fellows are discussing it since class."

"I have been busy with papers for my form since class," said Mr. Spender, with a touch of impatience. "It is nothing that can concern me, I suppose?"

"That is what I want to know."

"You are talking in riddles. Come to the point."

"I will come to the point at once, Mr. Spender. There was a burglary at Rylcombe Grange last night—a mile from here. The safe was cracked, and the cracksman had entered by a small window, only possible to a very slim man—or a boy!"

Mr. Spender gave a little start, and then sat staring at the Shell fellow across the table.

"Is that true?" he exclaimed sharply.

"It is quite true."

"Is that why you have come here?"

"That is why."

"You are sure of what you say?"

"Quite."

"I had heard nothing of it," said Mr. Spender, slowly, "I have been busy here, as I told you, since class. Where is Rylcombe Grange?"

"A mile from here, near the village of Rylcombe. An easy walk on a dark night," said Talbot, bitterly.

Mr. Spender set his lips.

"I can see what is in your mind, Talbot," he said, quietly, "I understand. I am a dog with a bad name. Is that it?"

"I also am a dog with a bad name," said Talbot, in a low voice, "Inspector Skeat called here this morning to see me. I did not know why, then—I know now."

"You!" he muttered.

Mr. Spender gave another start.

"Oh, it's natural enough," said Talbot, in the same bitter tone, "Few men could have squeezed through that window—but a boy easily could. An Inspector Skeat knows the whole history of the Toff. What else was he to think?"

"You know nothing of it?" asked Mr. Spender.

Talbot's eyes blazed.

"What? Do you dare to ask——?"

"Keep cool," said Mr. Spender, quietly, "Is not that the very question you have come here to put to me?"

Talbot stood dumb.

"So Mr. Skeat suspects you—as you suspect me, and with as little reason," said Mr. Spender, "The past is not so easily shaken off, Toff. I was sleeping soundly last night, as I have no doubt you were—while someone unknown to either of us was busy at Rylcombe Grange—carrying on the old game that we once carried on." He shrugged his shoulders, "You gave me a chance—but this has shaken you. And if our unknown friend should repeat his performance in this neighbourhood, you will feel your doubts turn into certainty—as will Mr. Skeat—you will believe that it was Jimmy the Cat, while Skeat will believe that it was the Toff."

"Not if he knew what I could tell him," said Talbot, grimly. "He would not waste his time on the Toff, if he knew that Jimmy the Cat was here."

"Go to him and tell him!" said Mr. Spender, "The King's pardon stands between you and the past—nothing protects me. Go to him—tell him—drive me back to what I was——."

Talbot shivered.

"Never that, unless I can be certain," he said, "I do not know what to think—but I know that Mr. Skeat doubts me unjustly, and that my doubt of you may be equally unjust, for all I know. Why should I not believe that you have done what I have done—what Hookey Walker did, and the Professor himself—if only I could be sure——."

He broke off miserably.

"It is good law that a man is innocent until he is proved guilty," said Mr. Spender, "Bear that in mind."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"You know nothing of what happened at Rylcombe Grange last night?" he asked, almost appealingly.

"I have said so."

"Heaven forgive you, if you are deceiving me," said Talbot, slowly, "But I have said that I will keep my word. But keep this in mind. I shall be silent, and give you your chance to make good as I have done. But if I find that you have lied to me—that Jimmy the Cat is still at his old game—I shall have no pity on you. I shall have my duty to do, and I shall do it."

"That is all I ask of you," said Mr. Spender.

Talbot looked at him, long and hard. Then, without another word, he turned and left the study.

Mr. Spender watched the door close on him, and smiled faintly. Then, quite composedly, he resumed marking the Latin prose for the Fourth.

CHAPTER XXIV

SOMETHING COMING TO CUTTS?

"Wow!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Ow!"

"Somethin' seems to be the mattah with Twimble, deah boys."

"Oh, blow Trimble," said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——."

"Bother him!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake——."

"Bless him!" said Dig.

"Weally, Dig——."

"Come on, fathead!" said all three together.

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not come on. Blake and Herries and Dig did not seem in the very least disposed to concern themselves about Baggy Trimble, of their form. If Trimble had been licked, or kicked, they had no doubt that he had asked for the same: and in any case they were not interested in the fat Baggy. And as it was Wednesday afternoon, a half-holiday, and they were going out, they really had no time to waste on Trimble of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus, probably, liked Trimble even less than his chums did. But his kind heart was always susceptible to the troubles of others. And Trimble certainly looked as if he had landed trouble, when Study No. 6 caught sight of him under the elms. He was wriggling in quite a spasmodic manner, and uttering a series of gasping ejaculations. Something, clearly, had given the fat Baggy a pain.

"Weally, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus, mildly, "I think we might ask Twimble what is the mattah."

"We're going out," grunted Blake.

"Yaas, but there is no feahful huwwy, Blake. I wathah think that I will speak a word to Twimble. He looks as if he has had it bad. Pewwaps Spendah has been givin' him six."

And Arthur Augustus bore down on the suffering Baggy, and as his chums did not want to leave him behind, they bore down on Baggy also.

"Yow-wow! Ow!" Trimble was remarking. "Wow! Oh, crickey! Ow!"

"What is the mattah, Twimble?" asked Arthur Augustus, sympathetically, "Spendah been whoppin' you?"

"Ow! No! Wow! That bully Cutts!" groaned Baggy, "Wow! Kicking a fellow—ow! Jolly hard, too! Wow!"

Arthur Augustus's brow set in a severe frown. He had had his own little spot of trouble with Cutts. The drenching of his beautiful topper was still unavenged, in spite of his repeated efforts in that direction. Kicking Trimble was not, of course, so serious a matter as drenching Gussy's top hat. But Arthur Augustus was prepared to be sympathetic and indignant.

"You heah that, deah boys," he said, "That wottah Cutts again! You wemembah how he dwenched my toppah last week——."

"You won't let us forget it!" sighed Blake.

"And now he has been kickin' Twimble! Mattahs are comin to somethin,' I think, when a Fifth-form man goes about kickin' Fourth-form chaps," said Arthur Augustus, warmly, "I wathah think that it is up to our study to let that cheeky wottah know where he gets off."

"What did he kick Trimble for, though?" said Herries, "Twimble's always asking to be kicked. I've kicked him myself."

"So have you, Gussy," grinned Dig.

"Yaas, wathah! I certainly kicked him for listenin' at the study door, and I am pwepared to kick him again for the same weason," said Arthur Augustus, "But that wottah Cutts has no wight to kick a Fourth-form man."

"Ow! wow! Booting a chap all over the shop!" groaned

Baggy, "He was ratty because a fellow knew he was going out of bounds, that's what it was."

"Is Cutts going out of bounds?" asked Blake, staring.

"Yes, he jolly well is, and I've a jolly good mind to give him away," said Trimble, "He was saying to St. Leger that it was to-night at half-past ten—wow! Breaking out after lights out, you know! Wow! That's why he was so jolly shirty! Ow! He don't like fellows spotting his goings on! Wow!"

"And how do you know what he said to St. Leger, you fat prying Peeping Tom?" snorted Herries.

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, "Bai Jove! Have you been eavesdwoppin' again, Twimble?"

"Wow! How could I help hearing what they said, when I was on the other side of that tree," yapped Trimble.

"And didn't let them see you there, what?" growled Blake.

"They saw me when they came round the tree," groaned Trimble, "Wow! I wasn't listening—just standing there leaning on the tree, you know. Cutts said half-past ten to-night, and St. Leger said he wouldn't come, and Cutts asked him if he was funky, and St. Leger said he wouldn't be found dead at the Green Man with Cutts, and Cutts said——."

"Don't wepeat to us what you heard them sayin', you pwyin' wottah," said Arthur Augustus, "If you were listenin' behind the twee, you jollay well deserved to be kicked. Serve you wight."

"Wow!" moaned Baggy, "I jolly well wish a beak or a pre would spot Cutts going out to-night—wow! I never thought they'd come round the tree and spot me—I mean, I wasn't listening to what they were saying—wow!"

Arthur Augustus gave the suffering Baggy a stern look. All his sympathy had evaporated on the spot, when he learned why Trimble had received that kicking.

"You are a pwyin' wat, Twimble," he said, "Cutts is wathah a blackguard, but a fellow who listens behind a twee is a worm. I have a jollay good mind to kick you myself."

"Let's!" said Herries.

"Jolly good idea," agreed Blake, "Let's boot him all round the quad. First kick to me!"

"Me next!" grinned Dig.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Don't cut off, Trimble," roared Herries, "We haven't kicked you yet."

But Baggy Trimble did cut off, on his highest gear. He did not seem to want Study No. 6 to add to the kicks he had already received from Cutts.

The four juniors resumed their way to the gates: Baggy and his woes dismissed from mind. But there was a thoughtful look on the face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as they walked down Rylcombe Lane towards the village.

Blake and Co. were taking a walk in that direction, for a look at Rylcombe Grange, where the burglary had taken place on Monday night: that occurrence being still a topic of some interest in the school. But other matters were in Gussy's mind now.

"Bai Jove, you fellows," said Arthur Augustus, breaking a long silence, "Accordin' to what Twimble said, that wottah Cutts is goin' out of bounds to-night."

"Bother Cutts, and Trimble too," yawned Blake.

"Cutts is a feahful wottah and outsidah, to bweak bounds aftah lights out, Blake."

"No business of ours," said Dig.

"Pewwaps not, Dig—but if Cutts is goin' out at half-past ten to-night, he will be goin' downstairs in the dark——."

"Not likely to turn a light on," agreed Blake, "Not the sort of excursion he would like Railton to get wind of."

"I have been thinkin'——."

"Gammon!"

"I have been thinkin' it ovah. I wathah think that this is where that wottah Cutts gets what is comin' to him."

"He will, if Railton gets on his track," grunted Herries, "Serve him jolly well right, too."

"It will be dark on the dormitowy landin' when he goes, just as it was the othah night when I wan into Spendah——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There was nothin' funny in that, and I weally wish you fellows would not cackle evewy time a fellow opens his mouth. I have been thinkin' that a fellow might be waitin' on the landin' with a jug of watah——."

"To mop over Spender?" grinned Blake.

"Certainly not."

"Or Linton——?"

"Weally, Blake——."

"Or Railton?"

"Nothin' of the kind! I mean——."

"We know what you mean," chuckled Blake, "You're too jolly dangerous with your jugs of water, Gussy. The only fellow in the House who is safe from you is Cutts of the Fifth."

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Let us hear you turning out to lay for Cutts," said Herries, "We'll jolly well collar you and sit on your head."

"Weally, Hewwies——."

"Forget it, Gussy," said Blake, "You've laid up Lathom in sanny, and barged into Spender in the middle of the night—and that's enough to go on with. Now forget all about it."

"I wefuse to forget all about it, Blake. I am certainly goin' to dwench Cutts for dwenchin' my toppah—that is not the sort of thing that any fellow could possibly ovahlook. Cutts has got it comin'.

"Bow-wow!" said Blake.

"I do not wegard that as an intelligible wemark, Blake, and I wefuse to discuss the mattah furthah," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

And he walked on in silence—cogitating over the details of his latest scheme for making Gerald Cutts, of the Fifth Form, sorry for himself. Blake exchanged a wink with Herries and Dig. Gussy, evidently, was determined to go on the war-path after lights out that night. But as his three friends were equally determined to keep him on the path of peace, the outcome of the plan over which he was cogitating was a little uncertain.

CHAPTER XXV

THE PROBLEM

GORE of the Shell threw down his pen, pitched Virgil into a corner of the study, yawned and rose.

"That's done," he grunted," "Coming down, Talbot?"

"Not just yet."

Gore left the study, followed by Skimpole. Talbot, seated at

the table, had finished prep, but he was still looking at his books, as if he found an interest in the verse of P. Vergilius Maro which few other fellows found there.

But as the door closed after Gore and Skimpole, he rose from the table. His face, while in the presence of his study-mates, had been sedate and calm, and neither of them had noticed anything unusual about him. But now that he was alone, the mask was off, and the handsome face was dark and harassed, revealing the troubled thoughts in his mind.

He moved restlessly about the study.

Many a trial had Talbot had to face, many a problem to solve, since St. Jim's had opened out a new world to him, and the past had faded out behind him. But the problem on his mind was now one that seemed to defy solution.

What had happened at Rylcombe Grange had given him a deeply disturbing shock. And he did not know what to do. He was eager, almost passionately eager, to believe that "Jimmy the Cat" had turned his back on evil ways, as he himself had done at the first opportunity that came. Why should not another do as he had done—and if it was so, was it for him to put difficulties in the way, to refuse the help and trust which he had himself received when so sorely needed?—to push the man back into what he was seeking to leave for ever? No, a thousand times no, was the answer to that question. Kind and trusting hearts had helped him in the hour of need, and it was for him to help another, striving on the same path, to make good.

If he could only have been sure——.

But what if the man was deceiving him, if his post at the school was mere camouflage, a safe hide-out, for carrying on the old game unsuspected and secure? What had happened at Rylcombe Grange looked like it. And yet——!

In that very matter, Inspector Skeat suspected the "Toff," or at least, doubted him. Likely enough, his own doubts had no better foundation than the police-inspector's. What Mr. Skeat suspected, showed how fatally easy it was to give a dog a bad name and hang him. What was he to think? Above all, what was he to do?

If he could but have taken counsel on the subject! He thought of Tom Merry : as loyal and true a friend as a fellow ever had. But Tom could not help him in this. He could not breathe a

word of Spender's secret to Tom or anyone else. And Tom would not and could not look at such a matter as he did. He could imagine Tom's look, if he learned that a man who had been a crook was posing as a form-master in the school. Yet Sylvester Spender undoubtedly was a school-master, it was utterly impossible that anyone in a false name could have been sent to St. Jim's from the agency in London. As Spender had said, they knew the record of every man on their books, from his prep school to his University. "Jimmy the Cat" could have been only an episode—a dark and terrible episode—in the man's life, as he had said. And yet, what had happened at Rylcombe Grange——!

And that perhaps was not all. If the man was deceiving him, that would not be all. There would be other such occurrences—even—Talbot shuddered at the thought of it—at the school itself. Dr. Holmes, his kind friend and protector, might be on the list—if Jimmy the Cat was still Jimmy the Cat, deceiving him. Had he a right to keep silent, taking such a risk? But had he the right to betray a man who, to all appearance, was struggling back to honest paths, even as he himself had done?

The study door opened. Talbot looked round quickly, and strove to compose his face, as Tom Merry came in.

Tom shut the door after him, and stood looking at Talbot, for a moment, in silence. His face was very grave.

"Manners and Lowther gone down?" asked Talbot, lightly.

"Yes. I've come in to speak to you," said Tom, quietly. "I think I know what's on your mind, Talbot—I haven't forgotten what you said the other day, about that affair at Manchester."

Talbot did not answer. No one else, so far as he knew, had noticed anything, but the eye of friendship was keen.

"Talbot, old man," said Tom, in a low earnest voice, "I'm bound to speak. You've not been quite the same since that news about Rylcombe Grange—what happened on Monday night——."

"You think so?" muttered Talbot.

"I am sure of it! And I remember what you said the other day," answered Tom, quietly, "Talbot, old man, you couldn't surely fancy that anyone here would connect your name with

—with that—you said something of the kind the other day, but you couldn't——."

Talbot drew a deep breath.

"I'm let off more lightly than I deserve," he said, "No one, so far as I know, has even dreamed of anything of the kind. No one in the school, at any rate. It's not that, Tom."

"Is there something else, then?"

Talbot was silent.

"We're friends," said Tom, "You can trust me, I think. You've got something on your mind—I've seen that, if no one else has. Can't you tell me what it is—can't I help?"

"I—I——." Talbot stammered.

"You'd rather not tell me?"

"It isn't that! But—you wouldn't understand, Tom."

Tom smiled faintly.

"I'd try," he said.

"I mean, you couldn't," muttered Talbot, "You haven't been through it, Tom—and thank heaven you haven't. To you a crook is something unclean—you couldn't even begin to understand—but I—I've been through it—you know what I was——."

"I know what others made you, till your chance came of getting clear," said Tom, "That's in the past, Talbot." He started a little, "Do you mean that something has cropped up —that you've seen—or heard—something——."

"I'll tell you," said Talbot, abruptly, "Perhaps you can help —goodness knows I need help. Suppose another, who had been what I once was, was making the same effort to get clear of it, Tom—what should I do?"

"Help him all you could," said Tom, at once.

"Yes, yes. But it's not so simple as that, Tom. Suppose I saw a man in a position of trust, unsuspected, and knew that he had been—what the Toff had been. Suppose I believed that he was in earnest, and resolved to keep silent, to give him a chance."

"That's all right," said Tom.

"And then suppose—suppose something happened, to make me doubt again—to torment me with doubt," muttered Talbot, huskily, "Suppose I can't be sure whether this man is on the straight path, or whether he is deceiving me, and deceiving others, planning all the time to carry on the old game?"

"Oh!" said Tom.

"I wouldn't breathe a word of this to anyone else, Tom. But —you've asked me, and you've been a good pal. I can't ask you what you would do in my place, because neither you, nor any other fellow here, could ever be placed as I am—once the Toff of Angel Alley, now Talbot of the Shell. If the man's going straight, Tom—and it looks like it—I can't harm him——."

"No!" said Tom, slowly.

"But—but if it's camouflage——," muttered Talbot, "If he is lying to me, and laughing in his sleeve——."

"Can't you make sure?" asked Tom. He gave Talbot a direct look, "I haven't your brain, old man, and I know it: but I can put two and two together. You've seen some man you knew in the old days——."

Talbot nodded.

"And it's what happened at Rylcombe Grange that has started your doubts?" said Tom. "Up to that, you believed in him."

"Oh! You've guessed that?"

"Not very hard to guess, I think," said Tom, "That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You think he may be the man?"

"If he's deceiving me—yes"

"No evidence?"

"None."

"Then what——?"

"Only his past," said Talbot, in a low voice, "And if a fellow is to be condemned on his past, Inspector Skeat may as well come here for me."

"Don't!" said Tom, with a shiver.

"That's how it stands, Tom. This man and I are in the same boat—he has as much right to be believed as I have. What happened at Rylcombe Grange has made me doubt him—and it has made Inspector Skeat doubt me, in exactly the same manner and for the same reason——."

"Talbot!"

"Perhaps I have no more reason to doubt than Mr. Skeat has. I hope so—I think so. But—but——." Talbot paused, "I shouldn't have told you, Tom—you can't help, old fellow."

"I'm glad you told me," said Tom, quietly, "It's a bit of a puzzle, Talbot. But there's one thing I can say."

"What is that?"

"You've got to make sure somehow. If this man you speak of is going straight, good luck to him. But if it's the other way, you can't leave people trusting him. Somehow or other—I don't know how—you've got to make sure. Unless you can make sure, you can't leave matters as they are."

Talbot nodded, slowly.

"Yes, I've got to make sure," he said, "Yes, I must make sure, Tom. That's what it boils down to—I've got to know, one way or the other. I've got to think out a way—and make sure!"

"If you can do that——!"

"I've got to—somehow. There must be a way—I must find a way." Talbot drew a deep breath, "Leave it at that, Tom—let's go down."

They left the study together.

On the landing, they passed two masters: Mr. Sylvester Spender in conversation with Mr. Linton. And Tom, as he glanced at the slim, neat rather handsome master of the Fourth, certainly did not dream for a moment that this was the man of whom Talbot had been speaking in the study.

Chapter XXVI

NO EXIT!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy raised his head cautiously from the pillow, as the quarter chimed from the old clock-tower.

It was a quarter past ten.

Arthur Augustus looked this way, and he looked that way. But only dim shadows met his eyes, and the regular breathing of sleepers met his ears.

All was silent and still.

The swell of St. Jim's sat up. Now was the time! According to "information received," as Inspector Skeat would have phrased it, Cutts of the Fifth was scheduled to "break out" at

half-past ten. Arthur Augustus was going to be ready for him in good time.

He was extremely cautious as he stepped out of bed. He had only too well-founded a suspicion that his loyal chums, if they woke up, would intervene, and keep him off the war-path, even if they had to sit upon his noble head. This time Gussy was not going to make a sound. The Fourth Form were asleep, and Blake and Herries and Digby would slumber on and know nothing—till the morning. Then, Arthur Augustus would tell them triumphantly that he had got away with it at last; and that the fellow who had laid iniquitous hands on his top-hat had duly suffered for his sins.

Indeed, a mouse with the cat at hand could not have been more cautious than was the Honourable Arthur Augustus, as he slipped on his trousers over his pyjamas, donned a jacket, and a pair of rubber shoes. With infinite care, he detached the jug of water from the washstand basin. Silent as a Red Indian or a flitting spectre, he trod towards the door of the dormitory. The dim glimmer of starlight from the high windows revealed a cheery grin on his aristocratic face. It was all serene this time—not a sound from Blake or Herries or Dig, and it certainly did not occur to Arthur Augustus that they were awake. So far as he knew, he was the only wakeful inhabitant of the Fourth-form dormitory in the School House.

With the jug in one hand, he groped for the door-handle with the other. He turned the handle, and pulled. To his surprise, the door did not open.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus, inaudibly.

This was a quite unexpected obstacle.

Never before, so far as Gussy knew, had that door jammed. Indeed, how could it have jammed? Kildare of the Sixth had seen lights out for the Fourth that night, and when he closed the door on his departure, it had closed as usual, without a sign of jamming. Yet now it would not stir.

It was not locked. D'Arcy soon ascertained that. But it stuck as fast as if it were locked and double-locked, and bolted and barred into the bargain.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus, not quite so inaudibly

He was annoyed. Everything had gone quite well up to that

moment—not a sound of alarm : not a sign of interference from his too-loyal chums. Only that door stood between Arthur Augustus, and his intended ambush for Cutts of the Fifth on the dark landing. And that door, as a rule, opened readily at a touch of a hand. Now it would not open at all. How it could possibly have jammed was a deep mystery—but evidently, somehow, it had.

"Bothah the thing!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

He gripped the door-handle hard, and tugged. He put all his force into that tug. He tugged, and dragged, and wrenched. Then he gave a sudden gasp, as the water in the jug, in his left hand, slopped over, and a shower descended on his feet.

"Oooogh!"

With deep feelings, he set the jug down, and applied both hands to the door knob. Both hands gripped it hard. He braced himself for a terrific tug, and put all his beef into it.

Had the door opened, under that terrific tug, Arthur Augustus would probably have gone heels over head. Perhaps it was fortunate for him that the door did not open.

Anyhow, it didn't! Quite breathless from the effort, Arthur Augustus paused in his labours, and stood gasping for wind.

But the minutes were passing. Already at least five or six had elapsed since he had heard the quarter chime. At half-past, Cutts would be gone : and it would be too late for Arthur Augustus to catch him with the water-jug. Never had the swell of St. Jim's felt so exasperated, as he did now, in the presence of this utterly unexpected and inexplicable obstacle. Once more he grasped the door-handle with both hands and tugged.

But it booted not. The door seemed to be glued in its place. Whatever was the mysterious cause of the jamming, it was beyond Gussy's powers to drag that obstinate door open.

"Oh, cwikey!" he gasped, "Oh, cwumbs! Whatevah is the mattah with the beastly thing? I am quite out of bweath! Bothah!"

Then there was a sound in the dormitory. It was the sound of a chuckle. Three fellows, who had been sitting up in bed, peering with great interest, in the dimness, at Arthur Augustus's gymnastics at the door, seemed to be unable to suppress their emotions any longer.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus jumped. This was his first intimation that anyone, apart from his noble self, was awake in the dormitory.

He stared round at shadowy beds.

"Bai Jove! Who's that? Are you fellows awake?" he called.

"Oh, no," answered Jack Blake, "Fast asleep, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake——."

"What's the game, Gussy?" yawned Dig, "Bit late at night for physical jerks, isn't it?"

"I am not doin' physical jerks, you ass. I am twyin' to get this beastly door open," gasped Arthur Augustus, "I did not intend to wake you fellows—but now you are awake, pway turn out and lend me a hand with this door. It has got jammed somehow, and I cannot get it open."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is not a laughin' mattah. It is vewy annoyin'. The door seemed to be all wight when Kildare shut it aftah him——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And now it simply will not open. Will you fellows turn out and lend me a hand with it?" yapped Arthur Augustus, "If we all dwag on it together, the wotten thing is bound to come open."

"Will we, you fellows?" asked Blake, "Shall we turn out, and help Gussy go and ask for a Head's whopping?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am goin' aftah Cutts," hissed Arthur Augustus, "It is as safe as houses—I suppose you don't imagine that Spendah will be goin' out for a walk again, like he was the othah night. I should be waitin' for Cutts on the landin' alweady, but for the beastly door jammin'. Come and help me, you cacklin' asses."

"What's up?" came Levison's voice. Half the Fourth were awake by this time. All Arthur Augustus's deep caution had been a sheer waste!

"Only Gussy playing the giddy ox!" said Blake.

"This beastly door won't come open," hooted Arthur Augustus, "If I don't get it open at once, it will be too late to catch that wottah Cutts."

"Better late than never!" suggested Cardew.

"Wats! Pewwaps you would like to turn out and lend me a hand, Cardew."

"Perhaps!" chuckled Cardew, "But more probably not."

"Will you turn out and lend me a hand, Clive?"

"Hadn't you better go back to bed?" inquired Clive.

"What on earth's the matter with the door?" asked Julian.

"Goodness knows! It just won't come open, though I keep on dwaggin' and dwaggin' and dwaggin' at the w'etched thing!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "It is jammed in some extwaordinawy way. In a few more minutes it will be too late to catch Cutts. The wottah is bweakin' out at half-past ten, and I am goin' to catch him on the landin' with this jug of watah. I cannot wemain awake till he comes wollin' home. Pway turn out and help me, Julian, deah boy."

"Better go back to bed, old chap."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus gripped the door-handle again. The tug he gave it was more terrific than ever. Every ounce of strength he possessed was exerted to the full. But the door was immovable. It did not budge a fraction of an inch.

"Ooooh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, quite breathless from that tremendous effort, "Oh, cwikey! Ooooh."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I simply cannot undahstand this! We shall not be able to get out of this dorm in the mornin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, there's half-past," exclaimed Blake, as a chime came through the autumn night, "Buck up, Gussy and squeeze through the keyhole, or you'll be too late."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus did not reply. Perhaps his feelings were too deep for words. The half-hour chimed out: and that was that! It was too late to catch Cutts of the Fifth as he went. Reluctantly, but inevitably, Arthur Augustus abandoned his enterprise. He picked up the jug, and replaced it on the washstand—and breathed hard and deep as he discarded jacket and trousers and shoes, to return to bed.

"Not going, old bean?" asked Blake.

"It is too late now, Blake. Cutts will be gone."

"Going back to bed?"

"Yaas"

"Best place for you, old thing," said Dig.

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus turned in. Then Jack Blake stepped out of bed. Arthur Augustus peered after him as he moved towards the door.

"What are you up to, Blake?" he asked.

"Well, as you've chucked up playing the goat, I'd better see that that door's all right for the morning," answered Blake.

"It is quite imposs to open it, Blake."

"I know! But I fancy it will open all right when I pull out the wedge I jammed under it," answered Blake, cheerfully.

"WHAT?" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you jammed a wedge undah the door!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you—you wedged a jam—I mean, you jammed a wedge—undah that door, so that it would not open!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"Sort of," agreed Blake, "I turned out specially after lights out to do it, old chap, to keep you out of mischief. Don't trouble to thank me—speech may be taken as read"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus did not thank his chum for that kindly service. Jack Blake, having extracted the wedge he had carefully jammed under the door, returned to bed, amid chuckles from all the other beds—excepting Gussy's. For several minutes, Arthur Augustus sat up, and told Blake what he thought of him, in tones of deep wrath and indignation. Then, at length, there was once more silence and slumber in the Fourth-form dormitory.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WATCHER!

TALBOT listened.

The faintest of faint footfalls came in the darkness.

But his ears were keen and alert. From of old, the "Toff" had known what it was to watch and listen in the dark hours.

And Talbot of St. Jim's had not forgotten the ways of the Toff of other days.

It was black as a hat on the landing. Below, on the curve of the great staircase, a wide window let in a glimmer of autumn starlight. But that glimmer did not reach the landing. Talbot could hardly have seen his hand before his eyes.

But he could rely on his hearing. Faint as that footfall was, he knew that he was no longer alone there in the dark.

In the Shell dormitory, one bed was vacant. Tom Merry, if he was dreaming, little dreamed how his chum was occupied that night. He had told Talbot, in the study, that he must make sure, and Talbot knew that he must—if he could! And he had thought, and thought, till he had decided what he was going to do.

If Sylvester Spender was playing a straight game, as he hoped and wanted to believe, he was wasting his time by keeping watch, and he would have been glad of it. But if "Jimmy the Cat" was at his old game, he must have crept silently from the House on Monday night : and what he had done once, he would do again. And if he did, Talbot would know the truth.

If that was it, the school was nothing to the man but a safe hideout, secure cover from which to carry on his depredations. And the Grange was not the only wealthy "crib" to be "cracked" in the vicinity. There were others, doubtless already on his list, within easy distance of St. Jim's. It was not for the sake of a single "coup" that he was there.

Talbot hoped, from the bottom of his heart, that there was nothing for him to discover—that his vigil would be idle. But he had to know, and if Sylvester Spender left the House in the dark hours, he would know—and could act. And he would act at once, without mercy, if he found that the man had deluded him. But he hoped that it was otherwise.

If the man stirred, Talbot did not expect it to be till a late hour. But he was early at his post, for he could leave nothing to chance. While the other Shell fellows were sound asleep, he had left the dormitory without a sound, and when half-past ten chimed out dully through the autumn night, he was waiting and listening on the dark landing. And while he hoped and hoped, that he would hear nothing, that faint footfall came to his ears,

and he knew that someone was stirring in the dark : crossing the landing to the staircase with infinite caution.

His heart beat as he listened.

Someone was there. Was it Jimmy the Cat? The lights were out, and all was dark above stairs : but it was very likely that some of the masters were still up, in Common-Room or study. Surely the crook, if he was at the old game, would leave it till later. Yet there was no mistaking that cautious sound—a faint creeping across the landing to the stairs.

Talbot's face set hard.

He moved, without a sound, in rubber shoes, and leaned over the thick oak balustrade on the edge of the landing, over the great well of the staircase. The unseen figure was creeping softly down the stairs, invisible in the dark. But he would see him as he passed the starlit window at the curve of the staircase. Only a dim glimpse in the autumn stars : but he would know whether it was Spender. He watched, stilling his breathing.

A faint creak came from the stairs. Whoever it was, he was descending cautiously, as silently as he could. Talbot watched the window with intent eyes. A figure passed into the starlit space.

Talbot drew a deep, deep breath.

For a moment, there was a glimmer on a face : but it was not the face of Sylvester Spender. It was the face of a senior man of St. Jim's—Gerald Cutts, of the Fifth Form.

He was gone into the lower darkness the next moment. But Talbot had seen him : dim and brief as the glimpse had been, he knew that it was Cutts of the Fifth. A faint creak of a stair came from below, and then dead silence.

Talbot leaned on the balustrade. His lip curled with contempt. He knew something of the ways of the black sheep of the Fifth, as a good many fellows in the School House did. Cutts of the Fifth was " breaking out " after lights out—bound, no doubt, for the Green Man, to see some sporting friends there : probably to " back his fancy " with Joe Lodgey.

But the sporting ways of the blackguard of the Fifth were no concern of a junior in the Shell : and Talbot dismissed Cutts from mind.

He settled down to wait. If " Jimmy the Cat " was going abroad that night, it would be at a later hour. And if he did

not, it was for Talbot to watch, night after night, for so long as Mr. Sylvester Spender remained at St. Jim's. It was the only way in which he could make sure : and he had to make sure. Only too clearly he realised how heavy a responsibility lay upon him, if indeed the school was harbouring a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Eleven strokes came dully through the night. Few fellows could have kept up that silent, patient, alert vigil : few could have faced going through it again and again, night after night. But the Toff's training had been different from that of other fellows at St. Jim's. It was no new experience for him, and he thought little of it. Still and silent in the darkness, he waited and watched, and listened to the quarters as they chimed from the clock-tower.

The deep boom of midnight came at last.

If Talbot was drowsy, he was hardly conscious of it. Keen and alert, he listened as the last stroke of twelve died away. Surely, if the man was going at all, he would soon be stirring. If he did not, the vigil had to go on into the small hours. Talbot could not leave his task half-done. But at midnight, when all eyes were closed in slumber, the man would surely go, if he was going at all.

The silent minutes crawled by. And a few minutes after twelve, faintly from the dead silence of the night, came a sound.

It was the soft sound of a door that opened under a cautious hand.

Talbot's heart gave a leap.

There were only two masters' rooms on that landing : Linton's and Lathom's. Mr. Linton was a middle-aged gentleman who went to bed as regularly as clockwork at ten, and was very unlikely to stir till morning. Lathom's room was now occupied by Spender. Talbot was quite sure that it was not Linton's door that had opened. Was it Spender's? Yet possibly—he could not be sure—possibly it was a dormitory door—Cutts of the Fifth might not be the only black sheep breaking out that night : there might be another, who had left it later. Racke of the Shell, perhaps—that was the kind of fellow he was. Or Cardew of the Fourth—it was possible. There was no gleam of light : whoever it was, he was moving in black darkness.

Talbot waited, his face hard set. Man or boy, he would know

who it was, when the figure, now unseen came into the glimmer of the staircase window. But, as he leaned on the oak balustrade, another sound came to his ears—a faint creak of a stair below.

He started.

Someone was coming up the stairs in the dark, creeping cautiously. He could guess who it was—Cutts of the Fifth, returning from his roystering. Another moment, and he saw him—flitting past the staircase window, making for the upper stairs to the landing.

Talbot hardly breathed.

Someone had come out of a room, or a dormitory, and was making for the stairs, he knew that. If he ran into Cutts, as the black sheep of the Fifth came up——!

The next second it happened.

A sudden sound came from the silence, followed by a gasping startled voice : the voice of Gerald Cutts, husky with fright.

" Oh! Who's that? Oh! What—oh! " There was the sound of a fall.

Cutts had almost reached the landing, when he collided with an unseen figure in the dark. In his sudden terror he staggered, clutched at the banister and missed it, and fell. Talbot heard a breathless scrambling on the stairs, as Cutts, terrified and bewildered, rolled there helplessly.

He heard, too, a sudden catching of breath on the landing. Whomsoever it was into whom Cutts had run, he was as startled as Cutts. But whoever he was, he was quick on the uptake. Talbot heard nothing more from him : only the faintest of sounds that told that a door had closed.

He set his teeth.

Had it been Spender—Jimmy the Cat? He could not tell. That fool, that blackguard, Cutts, had spoiled everything. Talbot heard him scramble to his feet on the stairs, and come up the landing. Then he heard his voice : low and cautious, though shaking with excitement.

" Who's that? Who's there? Is that you, St. Leger, you fool? Who's there? "

Cutts stood listening, for a moment or two, in the silence. Then Talbot heard him creeping away to the Fifth-form dormitory—the most puzzled, bewildered, and scared sportsman that ever returned from a night out!

There was deep silence again.

Talbot could only wait.

Whether the other, the unseen one, was Spender, or some roysterer like Cutts, was he likely to venture out again, after that startling and unnerving encounter in the dark? It did not seem likely. But Talbot could take no chance, and he had to wait and watch—and he waited, and watched, till the hour of two chimed in the night. Then, at long last, he went back quietly to his dormitory, satisfied that for that night, at least, "Jimmy the Cat" had not been active.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALL CLEAR?

"BAI JOVE!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Several fellows in the junior day-room glanced round at him.

It was after class, the following day. Arthur Augustus was standing by the window, with a newspaper in his hands. Arthur Augustus was looking for the football reports, in the evening paper, when something in the columns caught his eye, and caused him to utter that startled ejaculation.

"Anything in the paper, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah."

"What's happened—if anything has?" yawned Blake.

"Somethin' vewy sewious has happened, Blake."

"Give it a name," said Monty Lowther.

"You wemembah that there was a burglawy at Wylcombe Gwange last Monday night——."

"Sort of," assented Blake, "Have they caught the man?"

"It doesn't say so! But——."

"It will take Inspector Skeat about ten years to put salt on his tail," remarked Cardew, "Or perhaps fifteen."

"But what's happened?" asked Herries.

"Anothah burglawy, deah boy."

"Oh, my hat!"

"At Manor Park—that's about half-a-mile from heah," said Arthur Augustus, "Last night——."

Tom Merry gave a start.

"A burglary—at Manor Park—last night!" he exclaimed.

"Yaas! That's the second in a week," said Arthur Augustus, "Looks as if somebody's makin' a wegulah wound in this neighbourhood, what? Bai Jove, you know, he may be dwoppin' in at St. Jim's next."

"Let's look!" said Tom, hastily.

His face was quite startled. What Talbot had said in the study the previous day was fresh in his mind. He glanced quickly round, and was rather relieved to see that Talbot was not present.

Six or seven fellows gathered round Arthur Augustus to look at the brief report in the evening paper. It was quite brief, stating only that during the night, there had been a robbery at Manor Park, near Wayland, apparently by a "cat-burglar," entrance having been effected by way of a skylight in the roof, to which the midnight marauder must have climbed. The barking of a dog had awakened the butler, who had turned out at half-past twelve, only to find the safe cracked and the unknown intruder gone.

"Same chap!" said Monty Lowther, "The man at Rylcombe Grange must have been able to climb like a monkey : and this is the same monkey-trick over again."

"Looks like it," said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Not a bird of passage," grinned Lowther, "Distinguished visitor staying in the neighbourhood—what?"

"Bai Jove! They weally ought to wun him in, you know. He may be cwackin' the Head's safe heah next."

"Or burgling Study No. 6, and getting away with Gussy's toppers," said Monty Lowther, solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, you ass——."

There was a buzz of excited voices in the room. Few exciting events happened in that quiet Sussex countryside : two midnight robberies in the same week were quite a record.

Tom Merry did not join in the talk. He left the day-room quietly and went to look for Talbot.

He could hardly help connecting what Talbot had told him,

with what had now happened, and he was deeply disturbed, and a little alarmed.

He found Talbot in his study. The Shell fellow was seated at the table, working at a Latin paper for Mr. Linton. He glanced up, with a smile, as Tom appeared in the doorway.

"Interrupting you?" asked Tom, a little awkwardly.

"That's all right—trot in." Talbot laid down his pen, "Take a pew. What is it—Soccer?"

"No," said Tom.

He looked at Talbot. It seemed to him that Talbot was more quietly cheerful, more of his old self again, as if somehow his mind had been relieved. He wondered uneasily what would be the effect of the news he had brought.

He closed the study door.

"Look here, Talbot, old man," he said, "You remember what you were saying to me in this study yesterday——."

Talbot's face clouded.

"What about that, Tom? I'm easier in my mind about that now, though I can't be sure yet. What about it?"

"You told me you'd seen some man, about here somewhere, whom you'd known in the old days——."

"Yes, yes."

"And that what happened at Rylcombe Grange on Monday night made you doubt——."

"Yes, yes. What are you driving at, Tom?"

"It's happened again," said Tom, quietly.

Talbot sat very still.

"I hate to give you a shock, old fellow," said Tom, earnestly, "But you'd get the news before long, so I came——."

"I understand."

"It's in the evening paper—same kind of thing as that at the Grange—Manor Park, near Wayland, this time—cat-burglar climbing up to a roof and getting in a skylight——."

"Oh!" breathed Talbot.

"If it's the same man, Talbot—and it looks like it——."

"It's the same man, no doubt. Somebody 'working' the neighbourhood, as we used to call it." Talbot's lip quivered.

"And you haven't made sure about—about the man you spoke of——."

"Not yet."

There was a long moment of dead silence. Then Talbot spoke again, in a low voice.

"When did it happen, Tom?"

"Last night."

"Last night." Talbot remembered his long vigil on the dark landing, "The time—is that known?"

"Between twelve and half-past, from what the paper says."

"Oh!" exclaimed Talbot.

His face brightened. Tom looked at him, rather blankly. He could not guess why his words seemed to have taken a weight from Talbot's mind. But there was no doubt of it. Talbot looked as if a load of care had been suddenly lifted from him.

"You're sure of that, Tom?" he asked, eagerly.

"It's in the paper," said Tom, "The dog awakened the butler, who turned out and found what had happened, half an hour after midnight."

Talbot breathed very deep.

"That does it," he said.

"I don't see——."

"Listen to me, Tom. Nothing could have happened better than this to clear up the doubt thathas been tormenting me. The Manor Park job was by the same hand as that at Rylcombe Grange—that's clear enough. But the man I doubted was not, and could not, have been concerned in it."

Talbot spoke with absolute assurance.

He could not doubt now. For the previous night, from half-past ten till two in the morning, he had waited and watched on the dark landing. Cutts of the Fifth had gone out and returned. Someone else—he did not know whom—had been on the landing in the dark, but had certainly not gone out. Between half-past ten and two o'clock Sylvester Spender certainly had not gone out : and the burglary at Manor Park had taken place soon after midnight. It was as complete an alibi as Spender himself could have desired. And it was an immense relief to Talbot's mind.

Tom looked at him, puzzled.

"How can you know that, Talbot?" he asked, "I'm glad of it, if you're right—but how can you know?"

"I do know, Tom. Never mind who the man is, or where

he is—but as it happens, I have absolute proof that he was indoors last night—that he was not, and could not have been, anywhere near Manor Park. You can trust me, Tom, to be certain of what I say—and I am quite certain."

Tom looked, as he felt, relieved.

"I'm glad of it, Talbot," he said, "If you're quite certain of that, it's all clear—and you can forget all about it."

"I'm going to," said Talbot.

"Thank goodness that's how it's turned out, then," said Tom, "I —I was—was afraid that—that——."

"I know! So should I have been, but it's an absolute alibi. It's all clear now, Tom—and off my mind."

"Good!" said Tom.

Talbot sat down to his Latin paper again, after Tom had left. His face was bright. What could be clearer—a cat-burglary at Manor Park, half-a-mile away, while he, keeping watch and ward in the dark hours, was absolutely certain that Sylvester Spender had not gone out into the night? The man was sincere : and, whoever might be the unknown cracksman who was "working" the neighbourhood, it was not "Jimmy the Cat." Talbot's face was bright and happy, as if he found something enjoyable in a Latin paper : and he was humming a tune when he came down from his study.

CHAPTER XXIX

FIGGINS DOES IT!

"WHO couldn't?" demanded Figgins, hotly.

"You couldn't!" retorted Jack Blake.

"Wathah not," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I jolly well could!" said Figgins. "You think I couldn't, Kerr?"

"Um!" said Kerr.

"You think I couldn't, Fatty?"

"Um!" said Fatty Wynn.

"You jolly well couldn't, and that's that!" said Jack Blake, "So rats to you and the New House."

Figgins breathed a mixture of wrath and excitement. He stood looking up at the rain-pipe, clamped to the old stone wall and clustered over, here and there by ancient ivy, which—in a rather hasty moment—he had declared he could climb, like the "cat-burglar" at Rylcombe Grange and again at Manor Park. And perhaps he was sorry that he had spoken in haste. But what he had said, he had said.

The unaccustomed exploits of a cat-burglar were a constantly recurring topic at St. Jim's, as they were in the village of Rylcombe, the town of Wayland, and everywhere else in the neighbourhood. The man, whoever he was, had the agility of a cat or a monkey, and a nerve of iron, to perform such feats. It was known that he had climbed a narrow rain-pipe, at Manor Park, to reach the skylight in the roof—just such a rain-pipe as the one at which the juniors were now looking. clamped to the old wall of the School House. George Figgins, who was a very agile and active youth, and had explored the branches of most of the trees around St. Jim's, was of opinion that he could do it, just like that unknown cat-burglar—and the derisive scepticism with which his remarks were received,, made him determined to try it on. Figgy would have gone through fire and water, rather than have allowed the rival House to crow.

"I've said I could do it," he snapped, "And if you think I couldn't——."

"I don't think—I know," said Blake.

"Then you can jolly well watch me do it."

"We'll watch you come down wallop if you try it on," said Digby.

"Bump!" said Herries

"Oh, go and eat coke," said Figgins, crossly, "I'm going up, and you'll see."

"Bai Jove! Pway don't twy anythin' of the sort, Figgy," said Arthur Augustus. "You may be able to climb six or seven feet, you know, and then if you come down whop, you will get a feahful bump! Wash it out, deah boy."

"Rats!" said Figgins, "I'll go up as high as Spender's window-sill."

"Figgy, old man——!" murmured Kerr. The Scottish junior looked up anxiously at that rain-pipe. He knew his chum's climbing powers, but he did not believe that Figgy could perform that feat.

"Think I can't do it?" hooted Figgins," I ain't a cat-burglar, but I fancy I could climb wherever that blighter could."

"Yes, but the risk——."

"Blow the risk," said Figgins.

"I say, though, suppose Linton or Spender's in his room, and looks out," said Fatty Wynn, "There'd be a row, Figgy."

"Oh!" said Figgins, and he paused.

The rain-pipe was clamped to the wall between two bedroom windows : Linton's room and Lathom's old room. It was within easy reach of the window-sill of the latter. Certainly, had a master happened to be in his room, he might very probably have spotted the climber, and in that event there was no doubt that there would have been a "row." Adventurous fellows in the Lower School were not permitted to risk their limbs in such reckless stunts.

"Oh!" repeated Figgins, "I don't want six from Spender, of course. Anybody know where he is?"

Jack Blake winked at his chums His impression was that the New House junior was seeking to retreat under cover, as it were.

"Don't you worry about Spender," he said, "Spender went out after class, and he hasn't come in yet."

"Linton would report to Railton, if he saw you, Figgy," said Kerr, "Don't play the goat."

"Linton won't see anything," grinned Blake, "Linton's in Common-Room—I saw him go in ten minutes ago. You needn't worry about Linton."

"Then I'm jolly well going up!" said Figgins.

And with a very determined air, George Figgins approached the rain-pipe to essay the climb As the spot was not overlooked by other windows, there was little danger of being seen performing the feat, if neither Spender nor Linton was in either of the rooms above. But if there was no danger from "beaks," there was certainly danger in a climb up a rain-pipe extending fifty feet from the ground, and Kerr and Wynn looked very

anxious. They knew the dogged determination of old Figgins, when he made his mind, and did not, like the School House fellows, expect him to drop off a few feet from the ground, and own up that he couldn't do it. Figgy, when his back was up, was the fellow to do it, whether he could or whether he couldn't.

"Chuck it, Figgy, old chap," muttered Kerr.

"Bosh!" said Figgins.

"Rats!" said Figgins, over his shoulder

"Figgy, old fellow——," urged Fatty Wynn.

He grasped the iron pipe. Kerr and Wynn could only look on anxiously, and hope for the best. Blake and Co. looked on grinning. Other fellows came up to look on and stared at Figgins as he heaved himself off the ground, clinging rather like a monkey to the perpendicular pipe.

"What's the game?" asked Tom Merry.

"Figgy playing monkey-on-a-stick!" explained Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can't climb that, Figgins," called out Manners, "Don't be an ass."

Figgins did not answer that. He needed all his breath for that difficult climb, and was not going to waste any.

"Come down, fathead," said Monty Lowther, "Nobody could get up that pipe except a cat-burglar."

"Figgins fancies himself as a cat-burglar!" chuckled Blake, "Don't you worry—he won't go up more than three feet. Put your heads under him, you two New House bounders, and let him have something soft to fall on."

"Yaas, wathah!" grinned Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

More and more fellows gathered round to watch—Levison and Clive and Cardew, Kangaroo and Glyn and Gore and Skimpole, Wilkins and Gunn, and many more—Figgy was getting quite an audience. Most of them were amused by Figgy's essay to rival the exploits of the cat-burglar who had been making history recently in the vicinity of the school. Few, if any, expected the New House junior to clamber more than a few feet from the ground.

Faces became graver as Figgins progressed. He was soon exceeding the three feet that Blake had pronounced to be the

limit. He added another three feet to it, and then, hanging on, paused to get his breath.

"Bai Jove! He's goin' up," remarked Arthur Augustus.

"Not so fast as he'll come down," said Cardew.

"Oh, rot," said Blake, rather uneasy now, "The silly ass oughtn't to have tried it on. Look here, Figgins, you fathead, chuck it."

"Chuck it, Figgins," called out Tom Merry.

Figgins did not heed. Having recovered his breath, he pursued his climb. Foot by foot he won his way up : higher and higher, till he was ten feet from the ground. And all faces were very serious now, for a fall from that height could only mean very serious results. Blake, feeling that he had "chipped" Figgins into essaying that perilous climb, could have kicked himself. But it was too late to think of that now.

"Bai Jove! I wish the silly ass would come down," muttered Arthur Augustus, "If he falls now——."

In breathless silence, the crowd of juniors watched. The cat-burglar of Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park could, doubtless, have performed that climb. But not a fellow there believed that Figgins of the Fourth could do it : and the higher he went, the greater was his danger if he slipped, or lost his hold, or became exhausted by his efforts. Every moment they feared to see him come down. But he was still going up, inch by inch, and now he was twelve feet from the earth.

"The ass!" breathed Tom Merry.

"The fathead!" muttered Manners.

"Figgy! Come down!" called out Kerr.

Figgins did not heed. The strain on his arms was great, but his arms were sinewy and muscular. As for fear, that had been left out of Figgy's composition. He was going up that pipe, to demonstrate to the School House fellows that he could do it—that New House could do what School House couldn't! And up he went, inch by inch, and foot by foot, till he was hanging on fifteen feet up. Kerr wiped a spot of perspiration from his brow. Fatty Wynn stood staring up at Figgins with his mouth open, hardly breathing. More and more fellows came along to join the crowd, till there were fifty or sixty fellows staring up at Figgins. And still the New House junior climbed on.

Inch by inch, foot by foot, he won his way, at a dizzy height that made the juniors' head swim as they watched him. In dead silence they watched, their hearts almost in their mouths, till Figgins, at last, reached the level of the windows high above. And they fairly gasped for breath as Figgins, holding on with legs and one hand, released the other hand, reached out, and smacked Spender's window-sill, as an unmistakeable signal that he had done it—and there he was!

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

"He's done it!"

"The ass!"

"The fathead!"

And Figgins, having "done it," came slithering down the rain-pipe, red, breathless, dusty, grubby, but triumphant, to join his anxious friends on terra firma.

CHAPTER XXX

AND D'ARCY DOESN'T!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY screwed his celebrated eyeglass a little more firmly into his noble eye, and gazed up at the rain-pipe, with a thoughtful and concentrated gaze. Figgins, gurgling for breath after that long and sustained effort, was grinning while he gurgled. Kerr and Wynn, relieved of their anxiety, were grinning too. Blake and Co. could not help feeling considerably sheepish. Certainly, they were greatly relieved to see the New House junior land safely after that perilous feat. But they had declared that Figgins couldn't do it—and Figgins had done it. New House had scored over School House, which was eminently satisfactory to New House men, and quite the reverse to the heroes of the rival House.

Indeed, Jack Blake was strongly tempted to essay the climb in his turn, just to show that School House could do it too. But he doubted very much whether he could, and common-sense prevailed.

"Did I hear any chap say that I couldn't do it?" inquired Figgins, when he had recovered some of his breath.

"Yes, I jolly well did, and you were a silly ass to try it on," grunted Blake. "You've done it, but you're a silly ass all the same."

"Silliest ass ever" commented Tom Merry.

"And then some!" said Monty Lowther.

"My dear chap, it was just nothing," said Figgins, airily, "I mean, of course, nothing to a New House man. You School House slackers had better not try it on."

"Too much sense," grunted Blake.

"Pway hold my jacket, Blake, deah boy."

"Eh?"

"What?"

All eyes turned on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he peeled off the best-fitting jacket at St. Jim's.

He handed it to Jack Blake, who stared blankly as he took it

"What on earth's this game?" he asked.

"I do not want to wuin my jacket on that wusty old pipe, Blake. I shall have to wisk the twousahs."

"What?" yelled Blake.

"You howling ass!" roared Herries, "Think you're going up that pipe?"

"Pway do not woar at a fellow, Hewwies. I have said more than once that I gweatly dislike bein' woared at."

"Look here, ass——!" hooted Dig.

"I am goin' up that pipe," said Arthur Augustus calmly, "I uttahly wefuse to permit New House boundahs to swank that they can beat the School House. I am goin' to climb that pipe as high as Spendah's window-sill—in fact, highah. I shall go as high as the woof!"

"Fathead!"

"Forget it!"

"Go to sleep and dream again."

"Gussy, old man——" said Tom Merry.

"Wats! I am goin' up. I twust, Tom Mewwy, that you do not suppose for one moment that New House can beat School House."

"Think of your trousers, old man," said Monty Lowther, "What will they be like after scrambling up a rusty pipe?"

"I am pwepared to sacwifice my twousahs, Lowthah, for the honah of the House," answered Arthur Augustus. "Even a fellow's best twousahs do not mattah, in compawison with that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not wegard that as a joke, deah boys. I wegard it as a vewy sewious mattah. But I am goin' up that pipe, even if I uttahly wuin my twousahs."

And Arthur Augustus stepped to the pipe, and grasped it with both hands, to start the perilous climb. Trousers or no trousers, the swell of St. Jim's, at least, was not going to be beaten by the New House!

"Look here, Gussy——!" said Figgins.

"Wats!"

"You can't do it, old man——."

"I wegard that wemark as asinine, Figgins. You have done it."

"Oh! Yes! But——."

"If you mean to imply that a School House man cannot do what a New House man can do, Figgins, I can only wemark that you are an absolute ass!"

"Leave that pipe alone, Gussy," roared Blake.

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus clambered. He was light and active, and he whisked off the ground, and almost in a twinkling was three or four feet up.

"Will you come down, you ass?" howled Blake.

"I wepeat, wats!"

"Then I'll jolly well hook you down, you burbling image." And Jack Blake ran towards Arthur Augustus, and grabbed at his legs.

Blake was very doubtful whether he could have performed the feat himself. He was quite certain that Arthur Augustus

couldn't. And Arthur Augustus was not going to land on the earth with a terrific bump, if Blake could prevent it.

He grabbed an ankle, and held on.

There was a howl from the climber.

"Oh, cwikey! What's that? My foot's caught in somethin'——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's caught in my fist," roared Blake, "And if you don't come down, I'm going to hook you down—wallop! So come down, you born idiot."

"Welease me, you uttah ass."

"Yank him off," said Herries.

"Are you coming down, fathead?" howled Blake.

"Certainly not."

"You jolly well are!" hooted Blake, and he pulled.

But Arthur Augustus was a sticker. His noble blood was up. He held on manfully, one leg in Blake's grip, the other thrashing the air.

Crack!

"Whoooop!" roared Blake, as a foot came into sudden contact with the side of his head, "Oh! ow! Oooh." Involuntarily he released Arthur Augustus's captured foot, and the other cracked on his head.

The next moment he grabbed again. But it was too late. Arthur Augustus, with a breathless spurt, had whisked up out of reach. His dangling feet were beyond his chum's grasp.

"Come down, Gussy," exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Wats!"

"For goodness sake——!" exclaimed Figgins, "Look here, I'll give you best—I'll own up beaten to the wide—now come down."

"Wubbish!"

Arthur Augustus clambered on. That he could perform that difficult feat nobody believed but Arthur Augustus himself, and the crowd of juniors watched him even more anxiously than they had watched Figgins. And at ten feet from the ground, even Arthur Augustus began to doubt. The strain on his arms was terrific, and though Gussy was far from being a weakling, he was equally far from possessing the muscular

development of George Figgins. But he was going on. School House was not going to be beaten by New House. That was fixed in Gussy's mind.

But at twelve feet up, where the pipe was clamped to the wall, he paused for breath and a rest. At that point the broad iron clamp gave additional hold, and Arthur Augustus held on to it, at a halt. But it was only for a minute. Then he heroically clambered on again.

"Gussy!" almost wailed Blake, "Come down, old chap! Do come down."

"Stop, you ass!" hooted Herries.

"Wats!"

Unexpectedly, Arthur Augustus stopped. Instead of clambering higher up, he began to wriggle in a spasmodic manner. The juniors below stared up at him. Arthur Augustus seemed to be caught on something, and he was wrigging wildly to get loose.

"Oh, cwikey!" came a gasp from above. "Oh, cwumbs! My beastly bwaces have caught on somethin'—that beastly clamp. Bai Jove!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake.

"He's hooked!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Anxiety below changed to merriment, as the juniors realised that Arthur Augustus's braces had caught in the old iron clamp, and that he could go no further. One end of that clamp had, in the course of years, worked loose, and Gussy's elegant braces had hooked over the end—and he was a prisoner. The more he wriggled, the further that brace worked along the clamp from the end, hooking him still more securely.

"Oh, cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hooked like a jolly old fish!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cwumbs! Bothah the beastly thing! I weally wish I had not taken my jacket off now! Oh, scissahs!"

"Come down, you ass," called out Blake, "You're hooked —you can't go any further. Come down, image."

"Bai Jove! I—I can't come down! Oh, cwikey!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors.

"Bai Jove! It's no joke, you fellows—I—I'm hooked on to that beastly thing, and I—I can't go up—and—and I can't come down——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was no joke to Arthur Augustus, hooked in mid-air, unable either to advance or retreat. But evidently it seemed quite a joke to everybody else, and the juniors shrieked with laughter.

Arthur Augustus, clinging to the rain-pipe, wriggled quite frantically. But he could not wriggle himself loose : he could only wriggle the captured brace more securely round the clamp. He was a prisoner, twelve feet from the ground, and could no more come down than he could go up. Unless help came to Arthur Augustus, it really looked as if he was booked to pass the rest of his natural life in the state of Mahomet's coffin, suspended between the heavens and the earth.

"Oh, dear," gasped Tom Merry, "You'll be the death of us, Gussy!"

"Oh, cwikey! There is a howwid spidah cwawlin' on my neck——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better get old Taggles to bring his ladder," chuckled Monty Lowther, "Taggles to the rescue!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Evidently, there was nothing else to be done. Arthur Augustus was hooked—he could not go up, he could not come down and he could not stay where he was for ever and ever! Tom Merry dashed off to call Taggles : and Arthur Augustus had to hang on, amid yells of laughter from below, for long, long minutes, until the old porter arrived with the ladder. Then, at last, Arthur Augustus was released from his predicament.

Safe on the solid earth again, Arthur Augustus panted, and panted, and panted for breath, surrounded by grinning faces. It was some minutes before he could find his voice.

"Bai Jove! I shall wequiah a bit of a west befoah I twy again," he gasped.

"Before you whatter!" howled Blake.

"Twy again, deah boy——."

"So you're going to try again, are you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"No good talking to him," said Blake, "Dribble him into the House."

"Weally, Blake—yawoooh—bai Jove, if you twy to dwibble me into the House, I'll jolly well—yawooooop! Stoppit! Oh, cwikey!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus did not try again. All his energy was needed to dodge lunging feet as his devoted chums dribbled him out of the danger-zone.

CHAPTER XXXI

A SUDDEN JOLT!

"Wotten!"

Talbot of the Shell smiled, as he heard that remark, floating from the doorway of Study No. 6 in the Fourth.

"Blow!"

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice again. It sounded as if the universe, at the moment, was not being run quite to Arthur Augustus's satisfaction.

"Bothah these wotten lines! Bothath Wailton! Bothah Taggles! Bothah that wotten old wain-pipe! Bothah Figgins! Oh, blow!"

Evidently the swell of St. Jim's was not in his usual calm and placid mood!

Talbot stopped at the door and looked in. He had been busy in his study, with his Latin paper for Mr. Linton, and he was unaware, so far, of Figgins' "cat-burglar" stunt, and of Arthur Augustus's rather disastrous essay to rival Figgins

as a cat-burglar! But he could see that something had happened to perturb the serenity of the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus, at the study table, was writing lines. Blake and Co., were enjoying a punt-about in the quad, but their aristocratic chum was not at liberty to urge the flying ball. And he did not seem pleased.

"Lines?" asked Talbot, as he looked in.

Arthur Augustus glanced up.

"Twot in, deah boy," he said, "I shall be glad to west for a few minutes. I have two hundwed to do for Wailton, and I have done only fifty so fah. And they have to be handed in befoah woll. That old ass Taggles——."

"Taggles?" asked Talbot. He came in, and took a seat on the corner of the study table.

Talbot's face was very cheerful. The "alibi" of Wednesday night had relieved his mind of a heavy weight. His doubt and suspicion of Mr. Spender had gone, and he felt that he could breathe freely. It was as if a dark cloud had rolled by, leaving him in sunshine—he was no longer the "Toff" with his dark memories and haunting doubts, but a happy careless schoolboy once more. His bright face was rather a contrast to the frowning countenance of the swell of St. Jim's.

"Taggles is an old ass!" explained Arthur Augustus, "I would have tipped him for bwingin' his laddah, if I had thought of it. I wondah if he would have weported me to Wailton if I had tipped him!"

Talbot stared.

"What have you been up to?" he asked.

"It was weally that New House smudge Figgins's fault," said Arthur Augustus, "Of course, I wasn't goin' to let him get away with makin' out that he could beat the School House at climbin' a wain-pipe or anythin' else. I wegarded it as up to me to uphold the honah of the House."

"But what——?" asked Talbot, a little bewildered.

"Nobody thought that Figgins could climb that wain-pipe It was wathah a climb, you know. But he did it, so I was goin' to do it too, to keep up the weputation of the House!" Arthur Augustus explained, "Unfortunately, I took off my

jacket so as not to wuin it scwapin' on a wusty old pipe, and my bwaces caught on something that had come loose, and I was hung up——."

"Oh, my hat!"

"And there I was, you know, stickin' on that wotten wain-pipe, and I couldn't go up any furthah, and I couldn't come down, and all the silly asses watchin' me, killin' themselves with laughin' for some weason——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Talbot——."

"Oh, sorry!" gasped Talbot, "But what on earth did you do?"

"Tom Mewwy fetched old Taggles with his laddah, and he got me down," explained Arthur Augustus, "And then the uttah old ass weported me to Wailton for climbin' the wain-pipe——."

"It's against the rules, you know," said Talbot, smiling.

"The wules mattah vewy little, in a question of upholdin' the honah of the House, Talbot. I twust I am not a fellow to kick over the twaces, like that ass Cardew, or that wat Cutts of the Fifth, but there are occasions when wules have to go west. A fellow of tact and judgment can be twusted to know when such occasions awise. Howevah, I could not vewy well explain to Wailton, or it would have landed Figgins in a wow too. He jawed me for at least five minutes about takin' what he called weckless wisks, and gave me two hundred lines to be handed in befoah woll." Arthur Augustus shook his noble head, "I was thinkin' of twyin' it on again, just to show those New House boundahs, you know, but I don't want anothah wow with Wailton, so I think I shall leave it alone."

"I should," assented Talbot, gravely.

"As the mattah stands, I have pwactically wuined my twousahs for nothin'," said Arthur Augustus, "I shall send them to the cleanah's, but I am afwaid they will never be quite the same again. And I have two hundwed lines, and all the fellows are laughin' like anythin'—bai Jove! You are laughin' too, Talbot. What are you laughin' at?"

"Oh! Nothing!" gasped Talbot.

"I am quite unawah of anythin' to laugh at," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "It was a vewy awkward and uncomfortable expewience. And those New House boundahs will make out that that ass Figgins can beat the School House, and if my bwaces had not caught, you know, I should have beaten Figgins—I was goin' wight up to the woof, instead of stoppin' at Spendah's window——."

Talbot gave a start. Quite unconsciously, D'Arcy had given him a sudden jolt.

"Spender's window!" he repeated.

"Yaas—it was that old wain-pipe that wuns up the wall between Linton's window and Lathom's—it's Spendah's window now. Pwobably you have noticed it, Talbot——."

"Oh! Yes! No!" Talbot stammered, "Yes, I think I have —I hadn't thought of it—I—I mean—did you say Figgins climbed up the rain-pipe to—to—Spender's window——."

"Wight up, and smacked Spendah's window-sill with his paw, to pwove that he had weached it," said Arthur Augustus, "But that wain-pipe wuns furthah up, you know, as fah as the guttah on the woof, and I was goin' wight to the top to beat Figgins, wight up to the woof, only my bwaces caught—Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus broke off, staring blankly at Talbot, "Whatevah is the mattah, Talbot? You're not ill, deah boy?"

"Oh! No." Talbot slipped off the corner of the study table, "Better get your lines done, old chap——."

"You looked quite sick," said Arthur Augustus, "Just like you did the othah day—that day Spendah came. Pewwaps you had bettah go and see the matwon, Talbot. You weally do look off colah."

"Right as rain," said Talbot, "Buck up with those lines, Gussy—I won't waste any more of your time——."

"That's all wight, deah boy—lots of time befoah woll. Don't huwwy away. I say, Talbot—Bai Jove!" Talbot was gone, and Arthur Augustus gazed at the doorway, "I wondah what is the mattah with old Talbot? He weally looked vewy sick! Oh, bothah these lines! Bothah Wailton! Bothah Taggles! Bothah Figgins! Bothah evewythin'."

And Arthur Augustus resumed his lines.

Talbot of the Shell went down the passage with almost a dazed look. He had looked happy and bright, a fellow without a care in the world, when he went into Study No. 6. But black care, banished for so short a time, had returned, blotting the brightness from his handsome face. He crossed the study landing hurriedly, and went down the stairs. A minute later he was standing where a crowd of fellows had stood an hour before, staring at the rain-pipe that ran up the wall, passing between two bedroom windows to the roof. For a long minute he stared at it, and then turned away, with a cloud on his brow, and black and bitter thoughts in his mind.

Talbot of the Shell was losing the keen wariness of the Toff, he told himself bitterly. He had not thought of it—might never have thought of it, but for what had happened that afternoon : and yet—did it not leap to the eye? It was a risky climb on that rain-pipe, especially after dark. Spender, if he left his room in the dark hours, would naturally creep from the House by way of the staircase, but if there was an alarm, if there was danger of discovery, if, in fact, there was such a happening as actually had happened on Wednesday night, when he had run into Cutts of the Fifth in the dark—then what would he do? If Figgins of the Fourth had climbed that drain-pipe, it would be easy work to " Jimmy the Cat."

Talbot had watched—he knew that the man had not left by way of the stairs. Had he left by way of the window? Had he been sleeping peacefully in his bed, or had he been stealing through the darkness to Manor Park while Talbot was keeping futile watch and ward on the landing?

He did not know. But he knew that the " alibi " was blown to pieces. He had told Tom Merry that he was sure—and he had been sure. Now he was once again where he had been before—he did not know.

He had to know—but how? Watching on the landing was useless, if Jimmy the Cat went by the window and the rain-pipe. Watching under the window was useless, if the man went by the easier way of the stairs and a window on the ground floor. He might do either, if Jimmy the Cat was at his old game, and Talbot could not watch in two places at once. How was he to know?

Arthur Augustus, grinding out his lines in Study No. 6, little dreamed of the turmoil into which he had thrown Talbot's mind. The Shell fellow paced under the old elms in the falling autumn dusk, thinking and thinking—till the bell for calling-over rang, and he came back to the House. But by that time, Talbot had thought it out, and he knew what he was going to do.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ONLY WAY!

TALBOT lifted his head from the pillow, in the darkness of the Shell dormitory, and listened.

The hour was late, all was silent and still.

In the next bed, Tom Merry was sleeping soundly, dreaming probably of Soccer, certainly never dreaming of what was in his chum's mind that dark autumn night. In the other beds, other fellows were fast asleep. Only the sound of regular breathing reached Talbot's ears, as he sat up, listening intently.

No one was likely to wake, at that hour. Neither was the "Toff" likely to make a sound, as he slipped from his bed and flitted from the House into the dark night. Only too well had he once been accustomed to silent activity in the dark. All was safe—or seemed safe—for the enterprise he had planned for that night, and his mind had been made up. But now that the moment had come to put his plan into action, he paused and hesitated.

To carry out his plan, he had to leave the House in the dark hours—to be absent from his dormitory, absent from the school, at midnight. That, in itself, was a serious enough matter for any St. Jim's man. But in Talbot's case it was doubly and trebly serious. He would not be suspected of reckless escapades like Cardew of the Fourth, or of dingy "pub-crawling" like Cutts of the Fifth. Much more than that, much

worse than that, would and must be suspected, in the case of the St. Jim's fellow who had once been the "Toff" of Angel Alley, if his absence at midnight were discovered.

That suspicion was in Inspector Skeat's mind already, since the happening at Rylcombe Grange, strengthened, Talbot could not doubt, by the second affair at Manor Park. It would be in other minds, it must come into other minds, if it was learned that Talbot of the Shell had crept out silently and surreptitiously in the night. The risk was terrible. For physical risk he cared nothing, though that was involved too. But the risk of suspicion, misjudgment, of condemnation—that was harder to face. He had fought his way out of the meshes of evil. He could face the world with a steady eye and a clear conscience. Was all that to be risked, and perhaps lost?

It was no wonder that he hesitated, as he sat there in the darkness, listening : alone wakeful in the sleeping dormitory.

But though he hesitated, his purpose was fixed. He had to know the truth : whether Sylvester Spender, who had once played the part of "Jimmy the Cat," had, in fact, abandoned that part, as an episode to be forgotten, or whether he was the unknown cracksman of Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park. His plan to keep watch had proved futile. But he had to know : the responsibility upon him was too urgent to be eluded.

And there was a way. At the old Moor House was the man who had known the Toff in other days, and Spender had been seen making for the old Moor House, whether by intention, or because he had mistaken his path. If Spender was in touch with the pug-faced gangster at the old Moor House, it was proof—for it was only as "Jimmy the Cat" that he could be in touch with him. That was what Talbot was going to discover—if he could.

On that rainy afternoon with D'Arcy, he had supposed that the man at the Moor House was in that lonely place to keep out of trouble. But if he was in touch with Jimmy the Cat, that put quite another complexion on it. In that case the man was not there merely to keep out of sight for a time—he was there as a cracksman's confederate. If Jimmy the Cat was at the old game if he had been the midnight raider at Rylcombe

Grange and Manor Park, where was the loot he had taken? Certainly he would not run the risk of packing it in his rooms in the school. Where but at the old Manor House, in the keeping of his confederate?

It seemed not merely probable, but certain, to Talbot—if the two were in collusion! That was what he was going to find out. If Spender was in touch with the man at the Moor House, he would find some evidence of it and it was only in the Moor House that he could find the evidence. Spender had been seen making for the place—and was he, after all, the man to miss his way?

Talbot had to know. If the man was deluding him, if he was, in fact, carrying on his old nefarious trade under cover at the school, it was fairly certain that there was evidence of it at the old Moor House. He had to give the man the benefit of the doubt, so long as there was a doubt, but if Jimmy the Cat was still Jimmy the Cat, he had his duty to do, and he was going to do it. If the old Moor House held a secret, he was going to discover it.

There was a stirring in the next bed : and Talbot caught his breath. But Tom Merry was only turning his head on the pillow : he did not wake.

Talbot's heart beat unpleasantly.

What would even Tom think of him, if it came out that he had left the school in the darkness of the night?

Tom would trust him, he was sure of that. But others—his house-master, his head-master—the Wayland police-inspector——?

But, after all, what was the danger of discovery?

The whole House was sleeping. One or two masters might still be up, in their studies : but nobody, certainly, was likely to pay a visit to the Shell dormitory at midnight.

There seemed little danger—but, danger or not, Talbot knew what he had to do.

Tom Merry had told him that, unless he was sure, he could not leave matters as they were, and he knew that he could not. At the old Moor House he might find out the truth. His way was traced for him, and he had to follow it.

He stepped from his bed at last.

There was no sound as he dressed in the dark—no sound as the dormitory door softly opened and shut. Nor was there a sound as he crept away by dark passages and stairs.

Strangely, almost eerily, it came into his mind, as he trod noiselessly in the dark, that this was the "Toff" over again, that he was no longer Talbot of the Shell, but the outcast of Angel Alley—the Toff at the old game! He shivered. It was indeed the "Toff" who moved without a sound, a shadow among shadows. It was the Toff's cunning hand that opened a window without the faintest creak, it was the soft-footed Toff who dropped lightly into the keen night air : it was the watchful, wary Toff that crept away into the darkness.

From the many-windowed House, a single window glimmered. One master, at least, was still up.

Talbot, as he glanced from the shadows at Mr. Railton's glimmering window, wondered bitterly what his housemaster would have thought, could he have known that a boy of his House was stealing away in the dark like some skulking thief of the night—and that boy, he who had once been called the "Toff"!

He set his lips, and hurried on.

At a corner of the old school wall, deeply shaded by branches, he climbed as lightly and actively as Jimmy the Cat himself, and dropped as lightly on the other side.

In the road, he stood quite still, listening, watching.

It was very unlikely that there would be observant eyes at that hour : and the darkness was thick, the sky overcast by clouds. But he was wary. Close in the deep shadow of the wall, he watched and listened before he made another move.

And his heart gave a sudden jump, at a sound in the gloom.

It was the sound of a movement—he was not alone under the dark wall. Some tramp, perhaps—or some belated wayfarer——. Whoever it was, he could not afford to be seen. A movement — a sudden breath — came to his ears. The next moment he was speeding away in the darkness, and his light swift feet made hardly a sound as he ran.

He stopped, in the shadow of trees at a little distance down the road, and listened with keen intentness.

But there was no sound of footsteps. Whoever had been under the school wall had not followed him—could not, probably, have known which way he had gone, for certainly he had not been seen.

For several minutes he listened, but all was still, save the autumn wind in the branches, and at length he resumed his way. Under the cloudy sky, with hardly the glimmer of a star, he tramped on the rugged track on Wayland Moor, the keen wind blowing in his face, silence and solitude all round him, as if he had been in the heart of an uninhabited desert.

But he was not likely to lose his way. The Toff had always been like a cat in the dark. He reached the spot where, on that rainy afternoon, he had turned off the track with D'Arcy, to seek shelter at the old Moor House—and there he turned off, and tramped on an unseen path towards the clump of dark trees that hid the dilapidated old building.

Silently he flitted under the shadowy trees. There was no glimmer of light from the house. Silently, he stopped under the window where, on that rainy afternoon, the pug-faced man had spoken to the St. Jim's juniors. The window was fastened within, but the Toff's hand had not lost its old cunning, and in a few minutes it was open, and he had climbed noiselessly in and stood, with beating heart but cool and steady nerve, within the old Moor House.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GONE IN THE NIGHT!

Mr. Railton gave a sudden start.

Tap!

The light was still burning in the house-master's study in the School House, glimmering through the blinds into the dark

quadrangle. Mr. Railton had sat up late that night, with a pile of papers before him, going through his House accounts. He had finished his task, and was thinking of a last pipe before going to bed, when that sudden tap at the window-pane startled him.

It was almost midnight, and the whole House was silent and still. No other light still burned in the School House, and no one else was still up. A tap at the window, at such an hour, was startling, and the house-master stared round, wondering whether his ears had deceived him.

Tap!

Amazing as it was, someone—he could not begin to guess who—was in the dark quad, tapping at his window. With a puzzled frown, he stepped to the window, pulled aside the blind, and looked through the glass.

A head and shoulders, dim in the dark, met his view. A man standing there had tapped to draw his attention. And dim as the face was through the glass, Mr. Railton recognised it—the ruddy, portly face of Inspector Skeat of Wayland.

Utterly astonished, the house-master raised the sash. Why Mr. Skeat was there in the St. Jim's quad, at midnight, he could not begin to guess. But the recollection of the happenings at Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park flashed into his mind. He leaned from the window.

"Mr. Skeat! What is it?" He spoke in a low voice, "Why are you here?"

"I desire to speak to you, sir," Inspector Skeat's voice was equally low, "I saw your light, and tapped at your window—there is no need to awaken the House, sir. But I must come in."

"I will come to the door——."

"No need, sir! With your permission, I will step in here—there is no occasion to cause an alarm."

Mr. Railton stepped back. Inspector Skeat, with an activity hardly to have been expected in a man of his portly build, drew himself upon the broad stone sill, ducked his head under the sash, and stepped into the study. Then he closed the window

behind him, and carefully drew the blind. Mr. Railton watching him in silence.

Mr. Skeat stood, breathing rather heavily after his exertion.

"I am afraid that I have surprised you, sir," he said, apologetically, "But I was glad to see your light, and to avoid waking others : my business here will admit of no delay. I am here, sir, to make a certain investigation, which I shall be glad to carry out, in your presence, when I have explained——."

Mr. Railton made a gesture to a chair. The inspector shook his head, and remained standing.

"I will explain in a few words, sir," he said, "You will remember that I called here last Monday, to see a boy belonging to this House."

Mr. Railton's brow darkened. He began to understand why the police-inspector was there, and his look showed very plainly how little he relished Mr. Skeat's mission.

"You came to see Talbot, of the Shell, a boy in my House in whom I have the most complete confidence and trust," he said, very distinctly, "I had no choice but to allow you to see him, but I expressed, at the time, my whole-hearted confidence in the boy—which I repeat now."

"Quite so, sir," assented Mr. Skeat, "I am not without sympathy for the boy, sir, and I hope that your confidence in him is not misplaced. That is what I am here to ascertain now."

"I fail to see——."

"On Monday, sir, the boy Talbot refused to be questioned," said Mr. Skeat, "Whether that was a matter of pride, or because he had secrets to keep, is a point that will be cleared up to-night."

"The boy has no secrets to keep, of the kind you mean," said Mr. Railton, "That he was once in bad hands, that he was trained to a life of lawlessness, I know—I know his whole story That he turned his back on it when his chance came, and that ever since he has been above suspicion, I know also. No doubt a police-officer may find it impossible to forget his unhappy past—but it is forgotten here. I can listen to nothing against Talbot, Mr. Skeat."

"I am here to put the matter to the proof, Mr. Railton."

"The matter is already proved, to the satisfaction of his head-master, of myself, and of his many friends here. But proceed."

"At Rylcombe Grange, and again at Manor Park, what was done was the work of a cat-burglar—from all appearance, a boy—at least a man of unusual slimness and agility——."

"There are many such in the underworld, I believe."

"No doubt—no doubt! But there is one whom I know to be on the spot—once called the 'Toff,'" said Mr. Skeat, grimly, "And since Monday, sir, a watch has been kept on this school at night——."

Mr. Railton compressed his lips. But he did not speak.

"Last night, sir—Wednesday—one of my men was on duty here," went on Mr. Skeat, "It was a dark night, and so extensive and rambling a place is not easy to watch—but he reported to me that shortly after midnight, he is assured that someone whom he could not see, but whom he certainly heard, did, in fact, leave these premises, sir."

Mr. Railton was silent.

"It was after midnight, as perhaps you may have heard, that Manor Park was entered," continued the inspector. "To-night, sir, I took this duty on myself. And a quarter of an hour ago, Mr. Railton, someone, invisible in the darkness, but whom I heard with perfect distinctness, sir, dropped from the school wall, and disappeared into the night."

"You are sure of this?"

"I should hardly have disturbed you at this hour, sir, without being sure," said the inspector, drily, "The person, whoever he is, is still absent from the school. His absence can, therefore, be proved. I am here to ascertain, beyond doubt, whether the boy Talbot, once known as the Toff, is still in his dormitory."

"He certainly is," said Mr. Railton.

"I do not question your confidence, sir," said Mr. Skeat, "I may even say that I have a good impression of the boy, and but for recent happenings, should be disposed to share your trust in him. You may believe me, sir, when I say that I shall be glad, and relieved, if we find Talbot in his bed, positive proof

that he is not the person who left the school a quarter of an hour ago. If he is not there——."

"He is there," said Mr. Railton.

"That, sir, is a matter of fact, easily ascertained by a very simple investigation," said Mr. Skeat, "If Talbot is there, it was someone else who dropped from the wall within a few yards of me—but someone, sir, most certainly did."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"There are black sheep in every flock, Mr. Skeat," he said, "Some foolish or reckless boy who may have broken bounds after lights out——."

"Perfectly so, sir," said Mr. Skeat, "If the person was not Talbot, the matter is no concern of mine—it is not my duty to deal with reckless or truant schoolboys. I only desire to make absolutely certain whether it was the boy who was called the 'Toff'——."

"I am quite assured that it was not," said Mr. Railton, "But the matter is, as you say, very easily put to the proof. I will take you up to his dormitory, and you shall see with your own eyes that Talbot is asleep in bed."

"That is all I ask, sir," said Mr. Skeat, "If Talbot is there, the matter ends, and there is no need to awaken anyone, or to make mention of my very late visit here. I do not desire to wound the boy, if he is innocent. I am here simply to ascertain what is the fact."

"Come!" said Mr. Railton, abruptly.

He opened the study door, and switched on a light. The inspector, with a very quiet tread, followed him up the staircase. At the door of the Shell dormitory, Mr. Skeat stopped.

"There is no need for me to enter, sir," he said, "If you switch on the light within, I shall see at a glance whether a bed is unoccupied. Some of the boys may wake, and it is unnecessary for them to see me."

"Thank you, Mr. Skeat."

The house-master quietly opened the door, reached in, and switched on the light. The long dark room was immediately illuminated.

Mr. Railton's eyes fixed upon Talbot's bed. The next moment he almost staggered, the colour changing in his face.

"Good heavens!" he breathed.

He stood as if transfixed, staring at an empty bed. The portly man outside the doorway fixed his eyes on the same bed —that it was Talbot's he knew at once, as it was unoccupied. His ruddy face set grimly.

"That is Talbot's bed?" He spoke in a very low voice.

"Yes," breathed Mr. Railton.

"He is absent—at midnight!"

"Yes. So—so it appears. I—I cannot understand it. I trusted him—I trust him—I am wholly at a loss——."

Mr. Skeat gave a slight shrug of portly shoulders. He had had a more or less open mind on the subject. But his mind was now made up. He remained outside the door, while Mr Railton advanced into the dormitory, his face deeply troubled, but growing very stern in its look.

"Merry!" ...

Tom Merry started out of slumber. His eyes opened, and he blinked in the light, and then stared blankly at his house-master.

"Oh!" stammered Tom, "What—is that you, sir?——— what—." He sat up in bed, and several other fellows, awakening, stared at Mr. Railton. Of the Wayland inspector in the passage they saw nothing.

"Merry! Do you know where Talbot is?"

Tom jumped.

"Talbot! In bed, of course, sir."

"He is not in bed, Merry."

"Oh!"

Tom Merry stared round at Talbot's bed. He stared at it with bulging eyes. He almost wondered whether he was dreaming, when he saw that Talbot was gone, and the bed empty.

"Oh!" he repeated, in a gasp.

All the Shell were awake, by this time. They stared at Mr. Railton, and at Talbot's bed, alternately.

"Oh, gum!" breathed Monty Lowther.

"Where on earth is Talbot?" muttered Manners.

Mr. Railton glanced up and down the long row of staring, startled faces. His own face was stern and angry, but more troubled and distressed than either. He knew what was in the

mind of the man outside in the passage—that Talbot of the Shell was absent at midnight, because the "Toff" was at his old game! He could not think so—he could not believe so—but what was he to believe?

"Can any of you tell me anything of this?" he asked, quietly. "Merry, you are, I think, Talbot's closest friend—do you know anything of this?"

"No, sir," stammered Tom, in bewilderment.

"If you know anything, tell me, for the boy's own sake," said Mr. Railton, in the same quiet tone, "If this is only some reckless escapade—some act of thoughtless folly—some schoolboy trick—tell me, for Talbot's own sake."

There was no answer. Evidently, no one in the Shell dormitory knew anything of Talbot's actions, or had the remotest idea why he was not in his bed like the rest of the form. Mr Railton's brow grew darker. His heart was heavy.

"Very well," he said at last, "You have nothing you can tell me?"

"Nothing, sir," said Tom Merry, "Except——."

"Except what?" asked Mr. Railton sharply.

"Except that wherever Talbot is, and whatever he is doing, there is no harm in it," said Tom, steadily, "I can't understand why he is not here, but I know that much, sir."

Mr. Railton made no reply to that. He went back in silence to the door. The light was switched off and the door closed, leaving the Shell in a buzz of excitement. In silence, the house-master returned to his study with the Wayland inspector. Mr. Skeat's face was set and grim. There was a long silence, while the two men looked at one another—the inspector hard as iron, the house-master visibly distressed.

"The matter is clear now, sir," said Mr. Skeat, at last, "With your permission, I will wait until the boy returns."

"As you please, sir," said Mr. Railton, haltingly, "I am sure that there will be some explanation—some foolish prank, perhaps—the matter is serious, but not so serious as you suppose, Mr. Skeat."

"That is what we shall see, sir, when the boy returns!" said

Mr. Skeat, grimly. His hand slipped, as if unconsciously, into a pocket, and Mr. Railton shuddered as he heard a faint clink of metal. That faint clink sounded in his ears like the knell of doom for the hapless boy who had once been called "the Toff"!

CHAPTER XXXIV

A STRANGE DISCOVERY!

TALBOT stood silent, his ear bent to listen.

All was silent in the old house on the moor. Only faintly came the sound of the autumn wind in the branches of the trees surrounding the lonely building. Within, all was still.

And there was no sound as Talbot moved in the deep gloom. For a second, there was a gleam in the darkness, as he flashed on a little electric pocket-torch. Then all was dark again : and in silence he reached the door of the room, and passed into the hall of the old house.

There he listened again. His face was a little pale, his heart was beating faster than usual. Only too terribly, this strange adventure reminded him of old days—days when he had been the dupe and tool of a cracksman's gang, when he had hardly dared to dream or hope that he could ever be anything else. But his conscience, now, was clear. It was in the cause of law and right, that he was here to learn what he had to know, whether he was the dupe of a cunning and unscrupulous crook, whom his silence was permitting to carry on his nefarious calling with impunity. He was here at the risk of reputation, even, for all he knew, at the risk of his life. For if the old Moor House was, indeed, the headquarters of a cracksman, and the burly gangster with the pug face found him there, he was not likely to get away easily with what he might have learned.

But that knowledge did not make him hesitate for one moment. Fear of what others might believe, if his absence from

the school was discovered, was heavy on his heart and his mind. But he had no other fear.

Silently, with an occasional flash of the torch, he moved about the old house, on the ground floor. There were many rooms, some of them so dilapidated that the ceilings had fallen, and the broken windows were boarded up. All the rooms were bare, save a dark old kitchen, and in that, Talbot found many signs of the occupant of the house : a paraffin cooking-stove, utensils of various kinds, oddments of crockery—all dingy, untidy, slovenly. As he had guessed that rainy afternoon, the pug-faced man was merely camping in the old house—it was in no sense a residence.

There was nothing to be discovered on the ground floor. With silent footsteps he mounted the stairs.

He found himself on a broad landing, where paper was peeling from the dank walls. And a faint sound in the darkness made him doubly cautious.

It was the sound of someone stirring. He stood quite still, listening. A sleeper was stirring on a bed, and Talbot's teeth came together, hard, at the thought that the man might have awakened.

But the stirring ceased, and he heard a grunting sound of breathing. It was only a sleeper who had stirred in his sleep.

But he knew that he was close to the room occupied by the pug-faced man, and he could guess that the door was open, as the faint sounds came to his ears so clearly.

Satisfied, at last, that the man was not awake, he approached the doorway noiselessly. He listened there for a long minute, to the breathing within, and then ventured to flash on his torch for a second.

One glimpse into the room was enough. The pug-faced, bull-necked man he had seen that rainy afternoon with D'Arcy was stretched upon a camp-bed, in his clothes, sleeping. He was fast asleep, and did not stir as the beam of light lingered for a moment on his face.

Talbot shut off the light, and stepped back.

He stood for some moments, in the dark, thinking out his next step. So far, he had seen nothing to indicate that the man at the Moor House was anything but what he had first

supposed—a ruffian keeping out of the public eye for a time. It was likely enough that there was no more to learn. But if the man was the associate of Jimmy the Cat, it was a practical certainty that the loot of the robberies was in his keeping. That was what Talbot had to discover, even at the length of searching the room in which the ruffian lay on the camp-bed. But that—if it came to that—would come last. There were many other rooms, and any of them might hide what he sought.

He moved noiselessly along the landing, and flashed the light on the door of the room next to that where the gangster slept.

Then he gave a start of surprise.

That door was closed. What made him stare blankly was the sight of a bolt on the outside of the door, pushed home into the socket.

He stood there, the light gleaming, staring at the bolted door, for long moments, in his astonishment.

Whatever he had expected, he had not expected anything like that. For what imaginable reason was the door bolted on the outside? He could see that the bolt was new—it had been screwed there recently, for the special purpose of securing that door. On the inside it would have been normal—but on the outside——?

Talbot's heart gave a little jump. He had come to the old Moor House to make a discovery, if he could—to learn whether it was the headquarters of the cracksman—in which case, he would have no doubt that Sylvester Spender had been going there when D'Arcy had seen him on the day of the Greyfriars match, and that "Jimmy the Cat" was the man of Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park. Now it was borne in upon his mind that he was to make another discovery, of which he had never dreamed—that the old Moor House held a secret of which not the faintest suspicion had been in his mind.

For a bolt on the outside of a door could mean only one thing. It was placed there not to keep anyone out, but to keep someone in. Who, in the name of all that was amazing and mysterious, was the occupant of that room? For it must have an occupant—it could not be for no reason at all that the door was bolted on the outside. Was it imaginable that there was a prisoner in the old Moor House, and that the bull-necked gangster was his gaoler?

For a long minute Talbot stood, staring at the mysterious door. A sound of stirring came again from the gangster's room, and he instantly shut off the light. But the man was not awake. Talbot heard him grunt as he turned on the camp-bed, and then there was silence again.

He waited. The Toff knew how to be patient. But when all was silent, he moved close to the bolted door, bent his ear to the keyhole, and listened. And his keen ear picked up a faint sound within—the breathing of a sleeper in the room.

Someone was there—who, why, he could not begin to guess. Whoever he was, for whatever reason he was there, he was a prisoner, that was clear.

The boy stood in the darkness, still amazed, but thinking swiftly and clearly. At length he turned, and moved back noiselessly to the open doorway of the room occupied by the gangster.

Silently, he groped round the door, and felt the key on the inside of the lock. Slowly, patiently, and without a sound, he extracted it, and drew the door shut. There was not the faintest sound to alarm the sleeping ruffian, as he inserted the key in the outside of the lock and turned it. He smiled faintly in the dark. The ruffian was now locked in his room, and even if he awakened, could not intervene.

Then Talbot, turning on the light of his torch, stepped back to the bolted door of the mysterious room, to discover the strange secret of the old Manor House. Quietly, he drew back the bolt, pushed open the door, and flashed his light into the room.

Chapter XXXV

THE SECRET OF THE OLD MOOR HOUSE

"Oh!" breathed Talbot.

He stared into the room.

It was a small room, scarcely furnished. Opposite the door was a small window, boarded up. The floor was bare. A chair,

a folding wash-stand, and a camp-bed, comprised almost all the furniture. On a box, which no doubt served as a table, stood a candle-stick. Clothes were hung on the back of the chair, and in the bed lay a young man, asleep, but stirring restlessly in uneasy repose.

Talbot fixed his eyes on the sleeping face. It was a face he had never seen before. Figgins and Co. would have recognised it, as that of the young man they had met on the train from Abbotsford to Wayland, a week ago. But it was strange to Talbot's eyes.

But that pleasant face was a good deal changed since the New House juniors had seen it in the Abbotsford train. It was thin, and pale and almost haggard : worn by anxiety and hardship. What had happened to the man since that day when Fatty Wynn had stumbled over him in the train, had told heavily upon him.

Talbot's face softened with compassion as he looked at him. The man was a prisoner in the Moor House, and only too plainly, he had suffered from his imprisonment in the dingy room. He was sleeping, but his sleep was uneasy.

Who he was, why he was there, the St. Jim's junior could not even surmise. But he knew that he was a prisoner, guarded and watched by the bull-necked ruffian in the adjoining room. That was enough.

Talbot stepped into the room, and closed the door softly behind him. He struck a match and lighted the candle in the bottle-neck, and put his torch back into his pocket. Quiet as his movements were, they were enough to wake the man from his light uneasy slumber.

His eyes opened, blinked in the candle-light, and then fixed in amazement on the schoolboy standing beside his bed.

"Quiet!" said Talbot, in a low voice.

The man sat up in the dingy blankets. He gazed at Talbot, overwhelmed with astonishment.

"Who are you?" he breathed.

"A schoolboy," said Talbot, "But speak low——."

"You are not one of that gang?"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"No! My name is Talbot, and I am a schoolboy of St. Jim's——."

"St. Jim's!" Evidently that name was known to the prisoner of Moor House, "You belong to the school?"

"Yes!"

The man was about to speak again, but he paused, and shot an uneasy glance to the door, and listened intently. Talbot knew what was in his mind—the fear of the bull-necked ruffian, who evidently has been his gaoler in this strange place. And he whispered, reassuringly:

"That's all right! That brute's asleep, and I've turned the key on him—he's locked in his room——."

"Oh!" breathed the man in the bed.

"If he wakes, he will not get at us easily. But better not wake him! Speak low," whispered Talbot, "You are a prisoner here?"

"I have been a prisoner here for eight days—since last Wednesday," muttered the man in the bed. He looked hard at Talbot, scanning his handsome, frank face, in the candle-light, "You are a schoolboy of St. Jim's—the school where I was going, when I was kidnapped——."

"You were going to St. Jim's?" repeated Talbot.

"Yes, yes, and what they could think, when I did not come, I cannot imagine. No one would be likely to guess what had happened to me. You are a St. Jim's boy, but you are not one of the boys I met on the train——."

"On the train?"

"The day I came—it seems almost years ago, now, after what I have been through—three St. Jim's boys got into my carriage at Abbotsford, and came on to Wayland—you are not one of them—I think I should know them again——."

Talbot started.

This was the man!

He remembered what Figgins and Co. had told him, of the young man they had met on the train, whom they had taken to be the new master coming to St. Jim's in Mr. Lathom's place.

"No," said Talbot, "But they told me about it—you spoke to them in the train, I think, when they were discussing their house-master. They told me you had said that you were going to the school."

"I was on my way here, when I was kidnapped. Why, I cannot imagine—I can think of no reason. That brute who

guards me here has not uttered a word to explain it. I wondered —or at least hoped—whether those St. Jim's boys might remember me, and perhaps suspect something—but you are not one of them—how did you know I was here?"

"I did not know! I came here for a very different purpose," answered Talbot, "I had not the remotest idea that there was a prisoner here, till I found the door bolted on the outside, and guessed—but now I have found you——."

"You say that brute is asleep?"

"Yes, with the key turned on him."

"And the other man is not here?"

"The other man!" repeated Talbot, "Have you seen another man here?"

"I have not seen him, but I have heard them speaking, when he has come—he has come several times during the past week, both by day and night."

Talbot caught his breath. Who was the "other man" who had visited the gangster at the lonely house? Was it Spender—Jimmy the Cat?

"You say that the other man came sometimes by day?"

"Yes, yes."

"Was he here on Saturday afternoon?" breathed Talbot.

The man in the bed reflected for a moment or two. Then he nodded.

"Yes," he said.

Talbot's face set. It was on Saturday afternoon, the day of the Greyfriars match, that D'Arcy had seen Spender heading for the old Manor House. And that afternoon, the "other man" had been there! He had lied when he had told D'Arcy that he had mistaken his path. Talbot could have little doubt of that now.

"When you heard them speaking, did you catch any names?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" The brute who has been guarding me is called Pug—the sort of nickname such a ruffian would have——."

"What did he call the other man?" asked Talbot, eagerly.

"Jimmy!"

"Oh!" breathed Talbot, "You are sure?"

"Quite sure! I heard the name several times."

Talbot's eyes glinted in the candle-light. He had hoped to

make a discovery at the old Moor House—to learn whether the gangster skulking there, and the new master at St. Jim's, were in collusion. He could not doubt that he had made that discovery now.

"The villain!" he muttered, "Jimmy—Jimmy the Cat! I know now—I know how he has deceived me—the dastard——." He broke off, under the staring eyes of the man in the bed. "You did not see him—you know nothing of him, except that he was called Jimmy by that ruffian——?"

"Once or twice, when I heard his voice, I thought it was familiar," muttered the man in the bed, "It seemed like a voice I knew—but I could not be sure—an acquaintance in London. Only—only I had told him of my appointment at the school, and it was on my way to the school that I was kidnapped—yet why should a mere acquaintance wish to do me this harm——." The man shook his head, "But someone must have directed that brute to be ready at the station with the car——."

Talbot remembered what he had heard from Figgins and Co. The man they had supposed to be the new master had been about to take a taxi, but a car had been waiting for him.

"I had no suspicion—how could I have? If it was my acquaintance in London, whom I had told of my appointment, who planned this—why—why? It seems incredible—yet I have thought that I recognised his voice—I cannot be sure. But why—why?"

That question was as much a puzzle to Talbot, as to the prisoner of the old Moor House. He could guess, from the young man's disjointed mutterings, that he had been acquainted with Jimmy the Cat, under some other name, and knowing nothing of his real character : taking him as he was taken at St. Jim's for a respectable member of society. Jimmy the Cat had planned this—Pug had been ready with the car—the room with a bolt on the door had been ready for a prisoner at the Moor House—but why? Jimmy the Cat must have had some powerful motive for this strange kidnapping—but what was it? Why was this man a prisoner?

"If only I had taken a taxi, as I intended—but when the man told me that a car had been sent for me, how could I suspect anything? Even when he drove out on the moor, he told me

that he was taking a short cut, and I suspected nothing, till—till——," he shivered. "Till we were here, and he brandished a cosh over my head, and drove me into this room. But why? What can it all mean?"

Talbot shook his head.

Evidently the hapless man had pondered, and pondered, over it, trying to make out the mystery, and could not begin to guess why he was a prisoner. Neither could Talbot surmise.

"Get up and dress," he whispered, "The sooner we are out of this the better. Make no noise—that brute is locked in, but if we wake him, it will not take him long to break a lock."

The man was out of bed before he finished speaking. He hurried on his clothes in the glimmering candle-light. His muttering voice ran on:

"What must they have thought of me, at the school? I was expected that day—the head-master must have thought that I had carelessly failed to keep my engagement—what else could he think? He could never dream what had happened to me." He gave Talbot a quick, anxious look, "Do you know whether Dr. Holmes has engaged another master in my place—I suppose he must have done so——."

Talbot stared at him.

"Were you going to St. Jim's—as a master?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes. A temporary master, in the place of one of the staff who is on the sick list——."

Talbot almost staggered. Like a flash of blinding light, the truth came suddenly into his mind, and he understood. In his excitement, he caught the young man by the arm.

"Tell me! Those fellows on the train took you for the new master coming to St. Jim's—in Mr. Lathom's place—they thought afterwards that they must have been mistaken—tell me—who are you—what is your name?"

"My name is Sylvester Spender."

"Good heavens!" breathed Talbot.

"You know the name——?"

"Know it?" Talbot clenched his hands, "That man came to the school calling himself Sylvester Spender—I believed him—I knew his record, but he made me believe that he was Sylvester Spender—Oh, the villain! Come—come—let's get out of this——."

"But what—what——?"

"Hark!"

There was a sound of stirring in the adjoining room. "Pug" had awakened. Talbot, in his excitement, had forgotten to subdue his voice, and perhaps some sound had reached the ruffian. At all events, it was clear that he was now awake. Talbot grasped the prisoner of the Moor House by the arm, and almost dragged him from the room. The footsteps must have reached the ears of the gangster, for there came a savage rattle at the door-handle of his room, and then a bellow of rage and alarm as Pug discovered that the door was locked.

"Quick!" breathed Talbot.

Crash! crash! crash!

A bludgeon in Pug's sinewy hands was crashing on the lock. It was not likely to hold many minutes.

But one minute was more than enough for Talbot and the man he had rescued. Before it had elapsed, they were down the stairs, and out on the moor—and the crashing died away behind them, as they hurried away through the wind and the darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A SURPRISE FOR INSPECTOR SKEAT!

TAP!

It was a light tap on the window-pane, but in the dead silence of the night, it sounded loud and sharp. Mr. Railton gave a sudden start, and the Wayland inspector stared round at the window, blankly. Both of them were surprised and startled.

Tap!

"Can it be—Talbot?" breathed Mr. Railton.

Inspector Skeat shrugged his portly shoulders.

"He would scarcely announce his return," he said, with heavy sarcasm, "He can hardly know that we are waiting for him—and if he did, he would hardly walk into our hands."

Mr. Railton made no reply. He stepped to the window, threw aside the blind, and threw up the sash.

"Talbot!" he exclaimed.

The boy's face showed clearly in the light from the study. It was pale with suppressed excitement.

"Talbot!" repeated the house-master, blankly.

"Yes, sir." Talbot's voice was a whisper, "I saw by your light that you were still up—I have something to tell you——."

"Where have you been?"

"I will tell you! Let me get in. For mercy's sake, sir, no noise—there is a man in this House who must not be alarmed —a desperate man——."

The house-master gave him a fixed look, then, in silence, signed to him to climb in at the window.

In a moment, Talbot was in the study, and the blind had fallen into place behind him. He stood panting for breath. Then, as his eye fell on the portly figure and grim face of Inspector Skeat, he started.

"You are here!" he exclaimed. He stared at the inspector, astonished to see him in Mr. Railton's study, at such an hour.

"I am here, Master Talbot," said the inspector, grimly, "I have been waiting for you——."

"Waiting for me?"

"Since you dropped from the school wall at midnight."

"Oh!" gasped Talbot.

"Talbot," said Mr. Railton. There was a faint tremor in his voice, "I could not believe it, when Mr. Skeat came—but you were absent from your dormitory—you have been absent since midnight—tell me what this means. I have trusted you—everyone here has trusted you—and I trust you still—but what have you to say?"

"Thank you sir," said Talbot, quietly, "I know what it must look like—I know what Mr. Skeat thinks—but I can explain——."

"Then what——?"

"You will excuse me, sir," said Mr. Skeat, "It is for me to question this boy—the Toff must answer to a police-officer."

Talbot winced.

"You need not call me by that name, Mr. Skeat," he said, in

a low voice, "It was not as the Toff that I left the school this night."

"That is what we must know," said the inspector, "You left your dormitory, and your school, secretly, in the middle of the night——."

"And I have returned openly," said Talbot. "If the Toff had been at his old game, Mr. Skeat, on some job like that at Rylcombe Grange or Manor Park, he would not have tapped at Mr. Railton's window when he came back."

The inspector looked perturbed and puzzled for a moment. But his face set grimly again as he went on.

"Where have you been? The last time I saw you, Master Talbot, you refused to answer my questions. I must warn you that if you refuse now, I must take you into custody."

"Talbot!" breathed Mr. Railton.

A faint smile came over the junior's face.

"I shall not refuse to answer your questions this time, Mr. Skeat. But I shall answer them, not as the Toff, but as Talbot of the Shell."

"As you please, so long as you answer them!" said the inspector, gruffly, "In the first place, where have you been?"

"On Wayland Moor," answered Talbot.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Skeat, very drily, "If you have broken bounds at midnight to wander on a moor, and nothing else, it is very singular, but it is a matter of discipline for your housemaster to deal with, and does not concern me as an officer of the law. But——."

"I did not say that there was nothing else, Mr. Skeat," said Talbot quietly, "There was something else, which I came here to report to Mr. Railton in order that he might pass the information on to you—but which, as you are present, I will give you myself."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Skeat again, as drily as before. "What else? I am extremely interested to hear."

"I went to Wayland Moor, in the hope of making a certain discovery," said Talbot, "And I made a discovery that I never dreamed of making." He looked at Mr. Railton, "I know, sir, that it was against all rules for me to leave the school secretly at night, but I think that when you know all the circumstances,

you will not blame me. I was placed in such a position that I had to learn the truth, and the only way was by a visit to the old house on the Moor."

"The old house on the moor," repeated Mr. Skeat, staring at him, "You have been there?"

"Yes!"

"For what reason?"

"To learn, if I could, whether the cat-burglar of Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park was in touch with the man who lives there."

The inspector almost bounded.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"Talbot!" murmured Mr. Railton.

"I had to know, sir," said Talbot, "And I will tell you the reason. You can never have heard, but Inspector Skeat must have heard, of a cat-burglar who goes by the name of Jimmy the Cat."

The name meant nothing to the St. Jim's house-master. But the alert look that came over Inspector Skeat's face showed that he had heard of "Jimmy the Cat."

"A man known to the police only by repute," said Mr. Skeat. "His picture is not yet at Scotland Yard. What do you know of him?"

"His picture will soon be added to the Rogues' Gallery at Scotland Yard, Mr. Skeat."

"You have seen him?"

"I have seen him."

"You knew him by sight?"

A bitter look came into Talbot's face.

"In the old days, Mr. Skeat, I knew many by sight, whom I should now be glad to forget," he said, "Jimmy the Cat is one of them. I knew him at once when my eyes fell on his last week."

"Last week?" exclaimed Mr. Skeat, "You saw the man in this neighbourhood last week—and you said nothing. You said nothing even when two cat-burglaries happened in the vicinity——."

"Talbot!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. ...

"Be patient with me, sir," said Talbot, in a low voice, "I saw

the man—but he was under an honourable name, occupying an honourable position. He made me believe that it was his own name, that 'Jimmy the Cat' was merely a disgraceful episode in his life of which he had repented, and that he had done as I did—turned his back on the past, and was leading a new life open to the light of day."

"You believed him?" asked Mr. Skeat, ironically.

"I believed him, till the affair at Rylcombe Grange, Mr. Skeat. Why should it not have been true?" exclaimed Talbot almost passionately, "Was it for me, who had been saved from the underworld by help from kind friends who trusted me, to refuse to believe and trust in my turn? I hoped, and believed, that it was true—as it seemed to be. It was what happened at Rylcombe Grange that made me doubt—and then I had to know the truth. I took counsel with my best friend here, without mentioning names, and Tom Merry told me, what I knew already, that I must make absolutely sure, or I could not leave such a man in a position of trust."

"Merry gave you good advice, Talbot," said Mr. Railton: while the inspector looked very curiously at the junior.

"At the old Moor House," went on Talbot, "I had seen a man who had once known me as the 'Toff.' I had reason to suspect that the man of whom I speak visited the old Moor House, but I was not sure. At that place I hoped to discover evidence that the two were in collusion, if he was indeed deceiving me—and for that purpose I went there to-night—secretly—to make a search. And I made a discovery of which I never dreamed."

"And that——?"

"That discovery, Mr. Skeat, cleared up all my doubts, for then I knew that the man had deceived me. The name he bore was not his own—he was not what he pretended to be—he was a cheat and an imposter, using another man's name and identity for his wicked purpose——."

"And how did you discover this?"

"By finding, at the old Moor House, the man whose name he had stolen, and who was kept a prisoner there to keep him silent."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Mr. Railton, blankly.

"It is true, sir."

"And then?" asked Mr. Skeat, with perceptible irony in his tone. Plainly he was incredulous of this strange tale.

"I released the prisoner from the room in which he was imprisoned, and we left the Moor House together. I had turned the key on the ruffian there, in the rom where he slept, but he awakened, and as we left, he was pounding at his locked door. You have only to put a telephone call through to the police-station at Wayland, Mr. Skeat, for your men to pick him up, unless he has fled already—and if he has, he should not be hard to trace, and with him, I believe, the loot from Rylcombe Grange and Manor Park."

"Oh!" ejaculated the inspector.

He was silent for a moment, his eyes, on Talbot's face, very keen and penetrating.

"You have said that you have seen Jimmy the Cat——?"

"I have seen him."

"Under a false name—a name stolen from the man he had kidnapped——."

"Yes!"

"The name?" said Mr. Skeat, sharply.

Talbot paused, his glance turning again on his house-master.

"What I have to say, sir, will give you a shock," he said, "The man, Jimmy the Cat, is here."

"Here!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, "You do not mean in this school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Impossible," exclaimed Mr. Railton, "What do you mean, Talbot? What can you mean? Such a man—in the school! Are you dreaming? There is no one here who is not well known to the head-master—to myself—to everyone——."

"A newcomer, sir."

"There is no newcomer here, excepting Mr. Spender, who has taken Mr. Lathom's place for a few weeks——."

"That is the man, sir."

"Talbot!"

"I knew it would be a shock to you, sir! The man called Sylvester Spender is Jimmy the Cat—and it is for Inspector Skeat to take him into custody!"

There was a dead silence in the house-master's study following Talbot's words. Amazement and incredulity were mingled in Mr. Railton's face. Inspector Skeat's revealed grim disbelief.

It was Mr. Skeat who broke the silence.

"Let us have this clear! You say a temporary master, arriving in this school to take another master's place, is in reality Jimmy the Cat coming here in the name of a man he has kidnapped and hidden in the old house on the Moor——."

"Exactly that," said Talbot.

"You say that you released the man imprisoned in the Moor House—the real Mr. Spender, from what you tell us——."

"I did!"

"Yet you return here alone," said Mr. Skeat, "You return alone, to tell us this fantastic story. If you found a prisoner at the Moor House and released him, where is he? If he is the real Mr. Spender, he can prove it, and expose the imposter who is here in his name. Yet you return alone——. If what you tell us is true, where is the man?"

Talbot smiled.

"He is not far away, Mr. Skeat," he said, "I left him in the House porch——."

"What?"

"I did not desire to wake the House, and alarm Jimmy the Cat," said Talbot, "I was glad to see that Mr. Railton's light was still burning—and I left Mr. Spender waiting in the porch while I came to this window. You do not believe me, Mr. Skeat—you fancy that this is some fantastic story invented by the Toff to delude you—but if Mr. Railton will let in the man waiting in the porch, I think you will believe me, when you see him."

"Oh!" breathed Inspector Skeat.

He was taken quite aback. He said no more, but looked at the house-master. Mr. Railton quietly left the study.

Talbot stood waiting, the smile lingering on his face. Inspector Skeat's face was quite entertaining in its varying expressions. Doubt still lingered, but he was driven to believe. And in two or three minutes, Mr. Railton returned to the study—not alone. With him came a young man with a pale worn face and haggard eyes—the man who had been so long a prisoner in the dingy room at the old Moor House.

And a few minutes later, Inspector Skeat, followed by the house-master, was quietly ascending the stairs to Mr. Lathom's old room—where "Mr. Spender" was sleeping, little dreaming that the man whose name he had stolen was at St. Jim's, and that all was known. It was a sleep from which "Jimmy the Cat" was to have a startling awakening.

CHAPTER XXXVII
AT LAST!

"Wtally, I am not vewy surpwised!"

That was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's comment, as he sat by the window of Study 6 next morning.

"Not?" asked Blake, staring.

"Not vewy, deah boy. You see——."

"Fathead!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——."

"Ass!" remarked Digby.

"Weally, Dig——."

"I think we're all a bit surprised," said Tom Merry, with a smile.

"Yaas : but——."

"More than a bit!" said Manners.

"Can such things be, and overcome us like a summer cloud, without our special wonder?—Shakespeare!" said Monty Lowther.

It was the following day, and they were in Study No. 6.

All St. Jim's knew that "Mr. Spender" was gone, though as yet few knew that he had left St. Jim's in the dead of night, in charge of Inspector Skeat, with the handcuffs on his wrists : under lock and key at Wayland under the name, not of Mr. Spender, but of "Jimmy the Cat." But it was known that another Mr. Spender was at the school, and all sorts of rumours were afloat. And it was known that Talbot had been discovered out of bounds in the night, and fellows wondered what was going to happen to him, and were interested and surprised

when it appeared that nothing was going to happen. In Study No. 6, in the morning, Talbot related the whole story to his friends to their blank astonishment — with the single exception, it seemed, of Arthur Augustus!

"So you're not surprised, Gussy," remarked Talbot. "I fancied that it would be rather a surprise all round."

"It jolly well is," said Blake.

"I wepeat that I am not wholly surpwised," said Arthur Augustus, firmly, "Of course, I had no ideah that the man was a cwook. But you fellows will wemembah that I said fwom the first that he was a wottah, a boundah, and a wank outsidah. On his vewy first day heah he was absolutely wude to me——."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And fwom that moment, I wegarded him with despision—I mean contempt. Then look at the way he gave me detention on the day of the Gweyfwiahs match——."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry and Co.

"You fellows can cackle," said Arthur Augustus warmly, "But we had a vewy nawwow escape of losin' a Soccah match, as I was unable to help beat Gweyfwiahs——."

"But you did help," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——."

"You did, really and truly," declared Lowther.

"I fail to see how I helped to win the match, when I was standin' out of it, Lowthah!"

"That's how!" explained Lowther, blandly.

"You uttah ass!" roared Arthur Augustus, while the other fellows chuckled, "It was a vewy nawwow escape, and it was all Spendah's fault—I mean that wottah's fault. I wegarded him from the beginnin' as a wottah, a weptile, a smudge, and a wank outsidah, and you fellows see now that I was wight. So I am not weally surpwised that he has turned out to be a shady chawactah, and pwobably I should have spotted him in the long wun if Talbot hadn't."

"You did help in that, old chap," said Talbot, smiling, "If you hadn't seen him that afternoon making for the old Moor House, I might never have spotted him. But for you I should never have seen that gangster there, or known that Jimmy the Cat paid him visits—and should never have thought of the old Moor House at all in connection with Spender."

"Bai Jove! I am vewy glad that I had a hand in showin' him up, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, "And I should nevah have seen him goin' to the Moor House if he hadn't given me that detention on Gweyfwiahs day—so his extwemely wotten action came home to woost, what?"

"Quite!" said Talbot, laughing.

"And that chap Figgins and Co. met on the train really was our new beak, after all, just as they thought," said Blake, "I suppose we shall have him in form to-day."

"And whatevah he is like he will be a gweat impwovement on that wank outsidah," said Arthur Augustus, "I shall give him a look-in, and have a chat about old Conway, you know. Bai Jove! That must have been why that wotten pwetendah cut me so short that evenin'—he nevah was old Conway's tutah at all, and he was afwaid of somethin' comin' out! But this new man is the wight Mr. Spendah, and I am suah that he will like to have a chat about old Conway."

"And being a sort of family friend, he won't give you detentions when you construe 'Maria omnia circum' into 'All around Maria'!" suggested Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Hallo, there's the bell!" said Tom Merry. "Get a move on, you fellows,"

"Come on, Gussy," said Blake, heading for the door.

It was the bell for class. But while six fellows got a move on, Arthur Augustus remained at the window. He was staring down into the quad, with a gleam in his noble eye behind his eyeglass.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

Tom Merry and Co. looked at him.

"What's up?" asked Tom.

"Anything going on in the quad?" asked Blake, puzzled.

"That wottah Cutts——!"

"Cutts?"

"Yaas, wathah! He is comin' along the path undah the windows—he will be undah this window in a minute—Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus stepped back from the window. His friends stared at him, as he stepped hurriedly to the table.

"Never mind Cutts now——," said Blake.

"Bother Cutts!" said Herries.

"Forget him!" said Dig.

"The bell's going, Gussy," said Talbot, "Better get a move on."

Arthur Augustus certainly heard all those remarks. But like the gladiator of old, he heard but he heeded not. Other matters, such as football matches, or cat-burglaries, or the affair of the pretended Mr. Spender, might make other fellows forget the existence of Gerald Cutts, of the Fifth Form. But not Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus had declared that he was going to drench Cutts of the Fifth, in retaliation for the drenching of his topper—and what he had said, he had said!

There was no jug of water available in the study. But there was a large inkpot. And it was full of ink! Arthur Augustus grabbed it up from the table in breathless haste : for the moment absolutely oblivious to the repose which stamps, or should stamp, the caste of Vere de Vere!

He whirled back to the window with the inkpot in his hand.

"Gussy!" yelled Blake.

"Stop!" roared Herries.

"Chuck it!" howled Dig.

"Gussy, old man——!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

But Arthur Augustus was leaning from the window, inkpot in hand. On the path below was Cutts of the Fifth, strolling with his hands in his pockets, unconscious of danger. In another moment, Gussy's anxious friends would have collared him and pulled him back from the window. But that moment was enough for the swell of St. Jim's. Cutts was just under the window—and the inkpot, in Arthur Augustus's hand, was inverted, just over his head!

Swoosh!

Perhaps Cutts heard the voices from the open window of the study above. At any rate he glanced up, just as the ink came swishing down.

Splash!

"Oh!" howled Cutts, as he received the ink in the middle of his features.

He staggered, spluttering, suddenly transformed into a

remarkable imitation of a Hottentot. He spluttered frantically, and clawed at ink.

"Bai Jove!" trilled Arthur Augustus, "Got him!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

The juniors crowded at the window, staring down, at a Fifth-form man, black as the ace of spades, gesticulating, spluttering, almost dancing with fury.

"Got him, deah boys, what?" chortled Arthur Augustus, "That will teach him to dwench a fellow's toppah—what? Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cutts of the Fifth shook a frantic fist at the laughing faces at the window, and rushed away—probably to get a wash. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went cheerfully down with his friends. At last, at long last, that drenched topper was avenged, and Arthur Augustus was satisfied.

And Talbot of the Shell, that day, was looking once more his old cheerful self. "Jimmy the Cat" was gone and with him, the weight of Talbot's secret.

Uniform with this volume

TOM MERRY SERIES

The Scapegrace of St. Jim's	*by Martin Clifford*
The Rivals of Rookwood	*by Owen Conquest*
Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's	*by Martin Clifford*
The Secret of the Study	*by Martin Clifford*

BRENDA DICKSON SERIES

The Hoax of a Lifetime	*by J. Radford-Evans*
Once Upon an Island	*by J. Radford-Evans*
Girls Will Be Girls	*by J. Radford-Evans*