

The hapless swell of St. Jim's hardly breathed

FRANK RICHARDS

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TOM MERRY

SPRING BOOKS - LONDON

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CHAPTER I

TOM MERRY IS WANTED

'TOM MEWWY!'

'Quiet!'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -'

'Dry up!'

'But I came heah -'

'Yes, yes ... now go away again.'

'Bai Jove!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, frowned. He was looking in at No. 10 in the Shell. His reception in that study was really neither hospitable nor polite. Arthur Augustus's own manners were extremely polished. Tom Merry's, at the moment, seemed quite the reverse.

But Tom was busy: too busy to want interruptions. He was sitting at the table, writing lines. Those lines were due -- in fact over-due - to be delivered to his house-master, Railton. Manners and Lowther

were in the study with their chum: Manners was looking over some of his latest photographs; Lowther was composing one of his limericks. Manners did not draw Tom's attention to his snaps: Lowther did

not murmur his limerick aloud. Both of them were tactfully silent while Tom's pen raced over the impot paper. Those lines had to be handed in before tea: and the bell might ring at any moment. Tom did

not even look up at the elegant junior in the doorway. At any other time Arthur Augustus would have been a welcome visitor in No. 10 Study. But not when a fellow had only a minute or two left to complete his impot on time.

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -!' repeated D'Arcy.

This time Tom did not answer at all. He concentrated on Latin lines. He had a dozen yet to do, and every moment he expected to hear the bell.

'Blow away, Gussy,' said Monty Lowther.

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'Don't interrupt, old chap,' said Manners. 'Tom will get his lines doubled if they don't go in on time.'

'It is wathah weckless for a fellow to leave lines to the last minute like this, Mannahs. Tom Mewwy has had plenty of time since class.'

'We've been boxing in the gym,' explained Lowther. 'Only remembered the lines ten minutes ago.'

'I wegard that as vevy thoughtless,' said Arthur Augustus. 'On anotheah occasion, Tom Mewwy, I should strongly wecommend you to get your lines done before you go boxin' in the gym.'

'Fathead!' Tom found time for that one word.

'I considah -'

'For goodness' sake, dry up, Gussy,' said Monty Lowther. 'Run away and play, old boy.'

'Hook it,' said Manners.

'I ,should be vevy pleased to hook it, Mannahs, as you wathah slangily expvess it,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. 'But -'

'Pack it up!'

'But I came heah to tell Tom Mewwy-'

'Go and tell somebody else!' suggested Lowther, 'never mind what it is - go and tell somebody else.'

'I weward that suggestion as widiculous, Lowthah. It would not be any use tellin' somebody else that Wailton wants Tom Mewwy in his study.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Tom Merry. He looked up at that, 'Did Railton send you to tell me that!'

'Yaas, wathah.'

'You prize ass, why couldn't you say so?' hooted Tom.

'Weally, Tom Mewwy, I have been twyin' to say so for sevewal minutes -, ' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly. 'If you fellows will not listen to a fellow when a fellow comes heah to delivah a message from the house-mastah -'

'Ass!'

Tom Merry half rose from the table. Then he sat down again, and dipped his pen in the ink. Lines raced from his pen once more.

'Better go, Tom,' said Manners.

'I've got to take my lines -'

'How many more?'

'Only eight.'

'Better not keep Railton waiting, though,' said Lowther. 'House-beaks don't like to be kept waiting.'

'Quiet, old chap.'

Tom scribbled on.

Arthur Augustus was turning away from the door. But he turned back, and fixed his eyes, and his eye-glass, on the busy junior at the table.

'I advise you to cut off at once, Tom Mewwy,' he said. 'Wailton said you were to go to his study instantly.'

'Instantly!' repeated Manners and Lowther together.

'Yaas, .wathah! That vevy word.'

'Is anything up?' asked Manners.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

'I weally do not know,' he answered. 'But Wailton was lookin' vevy disturbed about somethin'. I hope you are not in a wow, Tom Mewwy.'

'Hinc mihi prima mali labea .. .' murmured Tom aloud, as he scribbled.

'Wailton certainly looked as if somethin' was up,' continued Arthur Augustus.

'He asked me first if I knew whethah Tom Mewwy was in the House, and when I replied in the affirmative he told me to send him to his study instantly. I

think .he had just been on the telephone ... the weceivah was off the hook. I weally think you had bettah go, Tom Mewwy -'

'Hinc semper Ulixes criminibus ...'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy-'

'... terrere novis .. .' Tom's pen raced on.

Manners and Lowther looked rather serious. Certainly it was advisable for Tom to

take his lines with him to Railton's study: but this looked as if the matter was more serious than lines.

'Tom, old man -' said Manners.

'Better cut, Tom,' said Lowther.

'Hinc spargere vocem...!' mumbled Tom.

There was a step in the Shell passage. Arthur Augustus, in the doorway, was pushed aside and another face looked in: that of Kildare of the Sixth, head prefect of the School House, and captain of St. Jim's.

'Merry!' he exclaimed.

'Oh!'

Tom jumped up. He could disregard Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth. But he could not disregard Eric Kildare of the Sixth.

'Railton wants you in his study,' said Kildare, sharply. 'Hasn't D'Arcy told you?'

'Oh! Yes! But - '

'Go at once.'

'It's my lines,' explained Tom. 'Only two more, Kildare ... I've done ninety-eight out of the hundred. Just a minute more -'

'You young ass, go this minute,' exclaimed Kildare. 'It can't be your lines, from the way Railton looked. Cut off this instant.'

'It can't be anything else -'

'Cut off, I tell you.'

'Just a couple more lines?'

'Go, I tell you.' Kildare caught Tom by the shoulder, and twirled him to the door. 'Now cut off, you young ass.'

'Oh, blow,' said Tom, crossly. And, as there was no help for it, he cut off, and the Sixth-Form man followed him down the passage - the unfinished impot left lying on the table.

In No. 10 Study, three juniors exchanged dismayed glances.

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus.

'What on earth's up?' muttered Manners.

'Something!' said Lowther. 'Goodness knows what!'

That 'something' was up, was quite clear: it was not for nothing that so important a person as a Sixth-Form prefect had been sent for Tom. But what was 'up' was a mystery. It could hardly be the lines: but what else it could be? Tom's friends could not begin to guess - and they waited very anxiously for his return from the house-master's study.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERY

'PRAY BE patient, madam - '

'I must speak to Tommy - '

'Yes, yes ... I have sent for him.'

'I am so terribly anxious - '

'Yes, yes, but I assure you, Miss Fawcett -'

'I must hear his voice ... I cannot believe that he is safe unless I hear his voice. Mr. Railton, I must - '

'Yes, yes, yes, he will be here in a moment, and speaking to you on the telephone.'

Tom Merry almost wondered whether he was dreaming. That strange colloquy in Railton's study was not merely surprising. It was not merely astonishing. It was amazing - astounding!

Tom had wondered, as he came down to his house-master's study, what Railton could want. Like his friends, he guessed that it was not merely a matter of the lines being late. But he could not imagine what was the matter. As he arrived at Mr. Railton's study door, which had been left ajar, two voices from within reached him: one, the deep voice of his house-master, the other, a high-pitched voice he knew well: that of his old governess and guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett. The latter came from the telephone, raised much more loudly than Tom had ever heard it before, audible at quite a distance from the instrument. Evidently, Miss Priscilla was in a state of great agitation. Apparently, also, she was in a state of alarm for her ward: why, Tom could not begin to imagine.

He coloured a little as he stepped into the study.

To the kind old lady of Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath, Tom was still the dear little boy who had once toddled about her garden at home in a velvet suit with a lace collar. That he was now a schoolboy at St. Jim's, a strenuous footballer, junior captain of his House, a boxer without equal in the Lower School, made no difference to Miss Priscilla: to her he was still darling little Tommy. She was still concerned about his health, cautioned him in her letters never to get his feet wet, and not to over-exert himself in rough games. All of which Tom, grateful for her affection and kindness, took in good part: but what he now heard in Railton's study really was the limit. Miss Priscilla was not only concerned about her dear Tommy, which was usual: not only anxious about him, which was also usual: but evidently wildly alarmed, as if in fear of some overwhelming catastrophe. Tom's cheeks burned as Mr. Railton, standing at the telephone, looked round at him.

'You sent for me, sir!' stammered Tom.

'Yes Merry! I -' Railton was interrupted by the high-pitched voice on the telephone: almost a shriek.

'Where is Tommy? Why does he not speak to me, if he's safe? Mr. Railton, is he safe -?'

Mr. Railton breathed very hard.

'Calm yourself, Miss Fawcett. Merry is here. Merry, speak to your guardian at once, and assure her that nothing has happened to you.' 'But what - !' stammered Tom. 'Why?'

'Take the receiver.'

'Very well, sir.'

Tom took the receiver from his house-master's hand. Mr. Railton stood with compressed lips. He was disturbed - and not a little annoyed.

'Tom speaking!' said Tom Merry into the transmitter.

There was a gasp at the other end. The sound of his familiar voice evidently brought immediate relief to the old lady at Huckleberry Heath, a hundred miles away.

'Tom! It is really you, Tommy?'

'Yes" dear! What is the matter?'

'You are safe?'

'Safe? Of course! Why shouldn't I be safe?'

'You have not been kidnapped?'

'Wha-a-t?' stuttered Tom.

'You have not been in danger?'

'How could I be in danger, at St. Jim's? Of course I haven't been kidnapped. I don't understand you!' gasped Tom. He almost wondered, at that moment, whether the kind old lady at Huckleberry Heath had taken leave of her senses.

'Oh! I am so thankful!' came almost in a wail. 'My dear Tommy, I am so thankful that you are safe.'

Mr. Railton's voice broke in: 'Someone appears to have alarmed your guardian, Merry, by telling her that something had happened to you here,' he said. 'I cannot understand it ... it must have been a cruel and unfeeling hoax.'

'Oh!' gasped Tom.

'That was why I sent for you, to reassure Miss Fawcett,' said the house-master. 'She could not believe that you were safe till she heard your voice. It is most extraordinary.'

'Tommy!' the high-pitched voice came through again. 'Oh, dear Tommy, I have been so alarmed for you since I had that telephone call -'

'What telephone call?'

'Someone telephoned - I do not know who - to tell me that you had been kidnapped, and demanding a thousand pounds ransom.'

'Oh!' breathed Tom. He could imagine how such a communication had startled and terrified the old lady at Huckleberry Heath.

'I was quite overcome,' wailed Miss Fawcett. 'I was overwhelmed, Tommy. Then Mr. Carker came in, and I told him, and he advised me to telephone to your school immediately, Tommy ... and -'

'That was good advice, dear,' said Tom. 'But who is Mr. Carker? I don't remember ever hearing of him before.'

'A very kind young man who is now staying at Huckleberry. He is a - what do you call a person who digs up old buildings and examines stones and things? - I forget - '

'An archaeologist?' asked Tom.

'Oh! Yes! That's it -: an archaeologist! He was formerly at your school, but that was of course before your time, my dear boy. It was very fortunate that he came in, as I was quite overwhelmed by distress and alarm -'

'I can understand that, dear,' said Tom. He set his lips. 'I'd like to know who it was telephoned you - it was only a silly hoax, of course. Haven't you any idea who it was?'

'No! No! It was a man's voice - a husky voice - but I cannot believe that it was really his name that he gave -'

'What name did he give?'

'Nemo!' came the answer. 'That is a Latin word, I think, Tommy.'

'Nemo!' repeated Tom, blankly. 'Yes dear, it's a Latin word - it means "Nobody". So he called himself Nemo?'

'Yes, Tommy! I was so terribly alarmed, thinking that you were kidnapped. -'

'The rotter!' breathed Tom. 'It must have been some potty practical joker - wouldn't I like to punch his head!'

'And you are quite sure that you are quite, quite safe, Tommy?'

'Quite, dear.'

'You have not seen any suspicious person lurking about the school?'

'No, no! Nothing of the kind.'

'Oh, I am so relieved, Tommy. It must have been some cruel practical joke. Of course, I should have paid the money, if it had been true. I said so at once to the person who called himself Nemo. And it was only a wicked hoax! I am so thankful that you are safe, Tommy.'

'Safe as houses, dear,' said Tom. 'Don't worry.'

'No, I will not worry any more, now that I know you are safe. Now Mr. Carker would like to speak to you.'

Another voice came through: a clear, quiet, slightly metallic voice.

'Master Merry -'

'Speaking,' said Tom.

'I am sorry that you should have been so disturbed, Master Merry, and your house-master also. But I found Miss Fawcett in such a state of distress, that I thought it best to ring up the school without delay.'

'I'm very glad you did, Mr. Carker,' answered Tom.

'And very glad you happened to be on the spot. I suppose you haven't any idea who it was that telephoned that silly story to my guardian?'

'I am afraid not, Master Merry. The telephone call came a quarter of an hour before I called at Laurel Villa about some excavations Miss Fawcett has been kind enough to allow me to carry out on her property. I can only conclude that it was some foolish practical joke.'

'More than that,' said Tom, between his teeth. 'It was a dirty, rotten, cowardly thing to do: and I'd give a lot to handle the sneaking rat that did it.'

'Good-bye!' came rather abruptly on the telephone: and the archaeologist at Laurel Villa rang off.

Tom Merry put up the receiver, and turned to his house-master.

'I'm sorry you've been bothered like this, sir,' he stammered.

Mr. Railton smiled faintly.

'I can understand your guardian's anxiety, Merry,' he answered. 'It is a most extraordinary occurrence, and she was naturally alarmed. You may go, my boy.'

'My lines, sir - '

'You may bring them to me after tea.'

'Thank 'you, sir.'

Tom Merry quitted the study. His brows were knitted, as he returned to his own study in the Shell.

Three juniors there looked at him inquiringly as he came in.

'Row with Railton?' asked Monty Lowther.

Tom shook his head.

'No! Something worse than that!' he said. 'Some rotten rascal has been scaring my old guardian - I can't imagine why -'

'But what - how?' asked Manners.

Tom Merry explained, his chums listening in blank surprise.

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. 'I would vevy much like to be within punchin' distance of that wottah who phoned Miss Pwiscillah.'

Tom clenched his hands.

'I'd like to punch him black and blue,' he said. 'Who could be brute enough to play such a trick on an old lady? There's no sense in it - what can he have done it for? She has no idea who it was - and Mr. Carker hasn't either. If I had the least idea where to look for him, I'd get leave from the Head to go down to Huckleberry and give him what he's asked for. But -' He shook his head again. 'Not much chance of finding out who the rat was. It's just a mystery.'

And Tom Merry, with a frowning brow, sat down to finish his lines.

CHAPTER III

LOWTHER'S LIMERICK

'HA, HA, HA!'

'Better not let Knox see that!'

'Or a beak, either.'

'Bai Jove! What's the joke, deah boys?' asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he joined the laughing group of juniors in the quadrangle.

It was a bright autumn morning, with a high wind that scattered leaves from the old elms, and caused fellows to clutch at their caps. Nine or ten juniors were gathered in a group near the School House, and in the centre of the group stood Monty Lowther of the Shell, with a paper in his hand. Other fellows, looking at that paper, chuckled: it was apparently some humorous effort of the funny man of the Shell. And as the name of Knox, the most unpopular prefect at St. Jim's was on every lip, it seemed that it referred to Knox of the Sixth Form.

'Only one of Lowther's limericks,' said Tom Merry, laughing. 'For goodness' sake, Monty, mind who sees it. If Knox spotted

it -'

'Or Railton,' said Manners. 'It's funny, old chap: but it wouldn't be funny to get six from the House-beak for guying a prefect.'

'Why not shove it under Knox's study door?' suggested Cardew of the Fourth.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Would he be wild?' chuckled Jack Blake.

'Mad as a hatter,' said Herries.

'Madder!' said Digby. 'Don't you let it get anywhere near Knox, Lowther.' Monty Lowther chuckled.

'I'll watch it!' he said. 'Knox doesn't know that his face would stop a clock - though really he might guess, every time he looks into a looking-glass.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! Let a fellow see it, old boy,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Is it somethin' funnay about that wottah Knox?'

'Sort of,' assented Lowther, and he handed the paper to Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's chuckled as he read it. It ran:

There's a bullying fellow named Knox,
Whose face might give anyone shocks.
I think we should ask
Him to put on a mask
For his features might stop all the clocks.

'Ha, ha, ha!' trilled Arthur Augustus. 'Vewy funnay, Lowthah - vewy funnay, indeed. I should weally like Knox to see that, only it would mean a feahful wow! Bettah keep it dark, deah boy. Oh, cwikey!' added Arthur Augustus, clutching at his cap as the wind caught it and nearly whipped it from his noble head.

'Look out!' yelled Tom Merry.

'Catch that paper -'

'You ass, Gussy - '

'Grab it!'

'Oh my hat!'

Arthur Augustus, clutching at his cap, had inadvertently let go the paper in his hand. He saved his cap: but the paper whirled away on the wind. There was a rush of the juniors after it.

'Bai Jove!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus. 'Sowwy, Lowthah -'

'Fathead!'

'Ass!'

'After it!'

'Quick!'

The whole crowd scampered after the fluttering paper. Laughing faces had become serious - Lowther's most serious of all. That limerick was, undoubtedly, funny from the point of view of the juniors. But it was quite certain that the result would not be amusing to the perpetrator, if it fell into the hands of a master or a prefect. And it was whirling high on the wind, and might land anywhere.

Knox of the Sixth was to be seen in the quad, at a distance, talking to Kildare. Mr. Lathom and Mr. Linton, masters of the Fourth and Shell, were not far away. Gerald Knox glanced at the scampering mob of juniors in pursuit of the fluttering paper and frowned. Frowns came easily to Knox, and he seldom lost an opportunity of displaying his prefectorial authority. The paper, borne on the wind, fluttered by a few yards from him, with the juniors after it; and Knox called out sharply.

'Stop rushing about like that! Do you hear?'

'Oh, let them rip, Knox,' said Kildare. 'They seem to be after something one of them has dropped.'

Knox grunted, but he acquiesced, turning his back on the juniors - much to their relief. Certainly he would not have done so had he been aware of the nature of the slip of paper the juniors were chasing. Fortunately, Knox had not the remotest idea that anything on that paper referred to himself.

'Got it!' gasped Jack Blake, plunging at the paper as it dropped.

But he had not quite 'got it'! Even as he grasped at it, a gust of wind caught it again and whirled it away.

The wind carried it off, high out of reach towards the School House. After it raced Tom Merry and Co.

'Oh gum, if it blows in at a window -!' gasped Lowther.

'Get it, for goodness' sake.'

'Oh! Look!'

The paper fluttered down. It landed on a broad stone window-sill and lay there. The window above the sill was open. It was Mr. Railton's study.

'Oh crumbs!' breathed Monty Lowther.

If the house-master was in his study - if his eyes fell on that paper -! Not for the first time, the funny man of the Shell wished that he had not been quite so funny! If Railton saw that paper -!

But no face appeared at the open window. By good fortune, Railton was not in his study. Lowther made a desperate rush to clutch the paper resting on the window-sill.

He was too late! Still a yard away, he saw that wretched paper shift under another strong gust of wind. It rose, fluttered, and blew in at the window - and disappeared.

Lowther came to a dismayed halt. His friends gathered round him, equally dismayed.

'Gone!' muttered Lowther.

'And in Railton's study - of all studies!' said Manners. 'What rotten luck!'

'Bai Jove! This means a wow!' gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Monty Lowther gave him a ferocious glare.

'You dithering ass!' he roared.

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'You clumsy chump!' hooted Manners.

'Weally, Mannahs -'

'Oh, you dummy!' gasped Tom Merry.

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -'

'Well, Gussy's done it now!' said Blake. 'Trust Gussy!'

'Weally, Blake -'

'Kick him!' said Cardew.

'Weally, I do not considah that it was my fault,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus hotly. 'I could not help that wetched papah slippin' fwom my fingahs when I was twyin' to hold on my cap -'

'Fathead!'

'Wats!' Arthur Augustus peered in at the study window. 'It is all wight, Lowthah. Wailton is not in his study. I will go in aftah it.'

'You silly ass!' hooted Blake. 'If Railton catches you in his study - ' 'I will wisk that, Blake.'

Arthur Augustus grasped the stone sill and in a moment had his knee on it. Then he plunged headlong in, leaving the crowd of juniors staring.

Tom Merry cast an anxious glance round. Kildare and Knox had walked away, and Lathom and Linton, luckily, had their backs turned. No authoritative eye had seen Arthur Augustus clamber in at the window: which was just as well for Arthur Augustus, for clambering in at a master's study window was an exploit that certainly would have evoked the vials of wrath! Once inside the study, D'Arcy was out of sight from the quad, and all was safe for the moment.

'Quick, Gussy!' called out Tom.

'Buck up, image!' hissed Blake,

'I am buckin' up as fast as I can,' came back a voice from the study, 'but the wotten thing has blown somewhah -'

'Look for it, fathead!'

'I am lookin' for it, Tom Mewwy.'

'Quick, you ass!' hooted Manners.

'Weally, Mannahs - '

'Here comes Knox!' breathed Monty Lowther. He whispered at the open window, 'Keep doggo, Gussy - ware prefects.'

Knox of the Sixth came striding up. Evidently he had seen nothing, and knew nothing, of Arthur Augustus's clamber into the study. He did not glance at the window; he stared frowning at the little crowd of juniors. Kildare was not present now, and Gerald Knox was able to indulge his propensity for ordering fellows about, without restraint.

'What are you hanging about here for?' he snapped. 'You know you're not allowed to crowd under master's windows. Clear off at once.'

In silence, glad at least that Knox did not know that D'Arcy was in the study, the crowd of juniors cleared off, Knox standing and frowning after them as they went. Having no eyes in the back of his head, Knox did not see an eyeglass gleam for a moment at the study window and then pop back out of sight.

CHAPTER IV

CORNERED!

'BAI JOVE!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

He stood in Mr. Railton's study, keeping well back from the window. He had had a glimpse of the back of Knox's head - and that was enough for him. He did not want Gerald Knox to spot him in those forbidden precincts; very much indeed he did not. He hoped that Knox would be gone by the time he found that wretched limerick. He had not found it yet.

The wind had blown it in at the window, and landed it somewhere in the study - but where? Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass in one direction after another, but failed to spot it. He looked round the room; he looked under the table; he scanned the papers and books on the table; he looked under and round Railton's swivel-chair; he looked round and under the other chairs, and into the seat of the big arm-chair in the corner of the study. Then he looked behind that arm-chair, and at last he was in luck.

'Euwekah!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

That elusive paper had blown into the corner behind the arm-chair. There it lay - with the written side uppermost. Had the house-master come in and moved the arm-chair, he must have seen it; with results to Monty Lowther that would certainly have been severe. Railton, certainly, would have come down heavily on such disrespect to a School House prefect. But Arthur Augustus had spotted it now - there it lay in the corner. He pulled the arm-chair out from the angle of the corner, reached behind it, and captured the limerick. He jammed the paper into his pocket, and turned to the window.

With great caution, he peered out.

'Wottah!' he breathed, referring to Knox.

Several persons were in his view, as he peered. In one direction, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were visible - in another, Black and Herries and Digby - in another, Cardew and Clive and Levison. Cardew was grinning - doubtless amused by his noble relative's predicament. Nearer at hand, Knox of the Sixth was loafing, with his hands in his pockets. A dozen or more juniors were looking at him, hoping that he would walk away and give D'Arcy a chance of escaping from Railton's study. But Knox did not walk away.

'Bothah him!' muttered Arthur Augustus.

Obviously, he could not drop from that window, with a Sixth-Form prefect in the offing. He had to wait where he was, hoping that Knox would go. But waiting in his house-master's study, where he had no business, was far from comfortable. Railton might come in at any moment, and how was he to explain why he was there? Certainly he could not mention Lowther's limerick. In a very uneasy frame of mind, D'Arcy waited - hoping that Knox would go, or that Railton wouldn't come in!

'Oh, cwikey!' he breathed, suddenly.

There was a step in the passage outside the study. If it was Railton ... For a moment, Arthur Augustus stared at the door. Then, without stopping to think, he popped into the corner behind the arm-chair, and ducked below the high back. His only idea, at the moment, was to duck out of sight and avoid being discovered in his house-master's study, if somebody was coming in. It might not be Railton - it might be anybody - perhaps Selby, or Monsieur Morny, or some other master looking in to speak to the house-master. If so, it was all right for Arthur Augustus, so long as he was not seen.

The door opened.

'Pray step in, sir!' It was Railton's voice.

'Oh, cwumbs!' breathed Arthur Augustus, inaudibly.

It was, after all, Railton, and he was not alone. He was accompanied by some other person whom he addressed in tones of respect. Arthur Augustus wondered almost dizzily whether it might be the Head! In a few moments, he knew!

A slow and majestic tread came across the study.

The door closed. Then Railton's voice was heard again.

'Please be seated, sir!'

'Thank you, Mr. Railton.'

It was the Head!

Arthur Augustus could not see him, but he heard that majestic gentleman seat himself in the armchair - evidently quite unaware that a scared junior was hidden behind it!

The hapless swell of St. Jim's hardly breathed.

Only the high back of the chair was between him and his Headmaster. Dr. Holmes was little more than a foot from him, as he sat. Railton alone would have been bad enough! But the Head was worse! The bare thought of his Headmaster detecting him, huddled behind that arm-chair, made Arthur Augustus feel cold all over.

He could only hope that Headmaster and house-master would continue in ignorance of his presence, and that he might yet have a chance of escaping unseen and undiscovered.

It was not uncommon for the Head to drop into the house-master's study for a brief chat, on matters connected with the House and the School. Such matters were of no interest to juniors, and even Baggy Trimble of the Fourth would hardly have taken the trouble to listen-in. Arthur Augustus, assuredly, was incapable of playing the eavesdropper, but there could be no harm in the two masters discussing timetables and such details in his hearing or anyone else's.

He was silent as a mouse in his corner.

'I should like your opinion, Mr. Railton,' said Dr. Holmes, as the house-master, in his turn, sat down, at the swivel-chair at the table. 'You may perhaps remember the name of Carker!'

'Carker!' repeated Mr. Railton.

'It is the name of a former St. Jim's boy,' said the Head. 'It was, I think, before your time that he was here; but you may have heard the name.'

'I have heard it quite recently, sir,' said Mr. Railton. 'A young man of the name of Carker is a friend, I think, of Miss Fawcett, Tom Merry's guardian. He spoke on the telephone a few days ago. An archaeologist -'
'An archaeologist, certainly,' said Dr. Holmes, 'so he tells me in his letter. I am a little surprised that he has taken up so very respectable a profession, considering his record here as a boy.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'To be plain,' said the Head, 'he was a most unsatisfactory character in every way. Even as a junior boy he had a bad name. He was cruel to animals, which appears to me the most detestable fault that can exist in any boy.'

'I agree, sir.'

'He had other faults, also,' said the Head. 'He was in the Fifth Form when he had to leave.'

'He had to leave?' repeated Mr. Railton.

'For a very good reason,' said Dr. Holmes. 'For the sake of his people there was no expulsion, but he was quietly sent away. I have never seen him since, or heard from him, until I received his letter this morning.'

'Yes?' said Mr. Railton, inquiringly.

'He desired to come here -'

'To visit the school?' asked Mr. Railton.

'Precisely - in connection, he tells me, with his archaeological work. The ruin of the old abbey here is, I have no doubt, a rich field for archaeological investigation. Many archaeologists have, as you know, visited it, and there seems no reason why Carker should not do so in his turn -'

'Quite!' assented Mr. Railton.

'But - !' said Dr. Holmes, slowly.

'But -?' said the house-master, as he paused.

'It would be necessary to accommodate him in this House,' said the Head.
'No doubt you could arrange that without difficulty - '
'Quite easily, sir, if that is all.'
'It is not quite all, Mr. Railton. It does seem to me extremely indelicate on his part, to say the least, to ask to come here, considering the circumstances in which he left, many years ago. On the other hand, it is a long time ago, and he may be quite a reformed character - his occupation in so harmless a pursuit as archaeology looks like it. But -' Dr. Holmes paused again. Then he went on, slowly. 'I had better tell you the reason why he left, Mr. Railton. You will, of course, understand that I desire nothing to be said about it - it is past and forgotten and it would not be fair to Carker to revive it. What I tell you is in confidence.'
'I understand, sir.'
'Very well, then - it was - '
Dr. Holmes was suddenly interrupted.
To the utter amazement of the two masters, there was a sudden sound of a movement behind the armchair in which Dr. Holmes sat. Mr. Railton, looking past the Headmaster seated in the arm-chair, almost doubted his vision, as a head and shoulders rose into view in the corner. His eyes popped at the crimson face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form.
'D'Arcy!' he stuttered.
'I am sowwy, sir - !' gasped Arthur Augustus, 'I - '
'What - what -!' Dr. Holmes, in amazement, rose from the arm-chair, and stared round at the junior standing behind it. 'Who - what - is that D'Arcy?'
'Yaas, sir! I - '
'Upon my word!'
'D'Arcy!' Mr. Railton gave the swell of St. Jim's a thunderous look. 'You - you are here - concealed in my study - what does this mean? Come out of that corner at once.'
'Yaas, sir.'
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came out of the corner, and stood facing the two masters, with burning cheeks.

CHAPTER V

GUSSY ALL OVER!

'D'ARCY!'
'Yaas, sir.'
'You have been listening -!'
Arthur Augustus's face, already crimson, looked as if it could not possibly become redder. But it did grow a little redder at those words.
'Weally, Mr. Wailton - !' he exclaimed, indignantly.
'You must have heard - '
'I twust, sir, that you do not suppose me capable of listenin' suwweptitiously,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.
'You were hidden here!' said Mr. Railton, sternly.
'Yaas, sir! I - I popped out of sight when you came in,' explained Arthur Augustus, 'that is all, sir.'
'How did you enter my study? It must have been by the window.'

'Yaas, sir.'

'And why?'

'I - I - I came in aftah a papah that blew away on the wind, sir,' said Arthur Augustus. 'It blew in at your window, sir, and I climbed in to get it. I am awah, sir, that it is vevy much against the wules for a fellow to climb in at a mastah's study window, that is why I popped out of sight, sir, when I heard you comin'.'

'And why, D'Arcy, have you now revealed yourself?' Dr. Holmes asked.

'I should suppose, sir, that that was quite cleah,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. 'I could not help hearin' what you were sayin' to Mr. Wailton, sir, and you were just goin' to say something in confidence, sir. So I had no choice but to weveal my pwesence befoah you did so, sir, or I must have heard it.'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head.

'So long, sir, as you were speakin' of mattahs of no importance, I considahed that it was quite wight and pwopah for me to wemain in covah, sir. But I could not possibly wemain hidden and listen to pwivate mattahs not intended for my eahs, sir! That would have been eavesdwoppin' of which, sir, I twust I am quite incapable!' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

'Bless my soul!' repeated the Head.

'I am sowwy, sir, to intewwupt your conversation,' added Arthur Augustus, 'but I am suah, sir, that you will wealise that in the circumstances I had no choice in the mattah.'

The thunder faded out of Mr. Railton's brow, and the Head smiled faintly. They gazed at D'Arcy's flushed face.

Neither of the masters had had the remotest idea that a third person was in the study. It would have been quite easy for the swell of St. Jim's to remain concealed, his presence unsuspected. An inquisitive or unscrupulous fellow certainly would have done so. In which case, the Head's confidential communication to the house-master would have reached his ears. Arthur Augustus had shown up, only just in time. The fact that he had shown up, of his own accord, was sufficient evidence of his motives, especially as he could have had no doubt that 'six' would be his reward for clambering in at his house-master's window. That 'six' Arthur Augustus was prepared to take, rather than play the dishonourable part of an eavesdropper!

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton exchanged glances.

Then the Head spoke.

'I am glad, D'Arcy, that you revealed your presence here, before I had spoken further with your housemaster.'

'I weally had to, sir -'

'It was an honourable action on your part, D'Arcy, and in view of it, I think perhaps Mr. Railton will pardon you for your foolish and disrespectful conduct.'

Mr. Railton nodded.

'Certainly, sir,' he said. 'You may leave my study, D'Arcy.'

'Bai Jove!' murmured Arthur Augustus. He had not expected that. But he was very glad to hear it.

'I am sowwy, sir -'

'You may go.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Arthur Augustus crossed to the door. The two masters exchanged a smile as the door closed on him, and then sat down to resume the conversation

Arthur Augustus's unexpected apparition had interrupted. Arthur Augustus, greatly relieved in his noble mind, went out into the quad, where he was immediately surrounded by Tom Merry and Co.

'Copped in Railton's study?' asked Blake.

'Licked?' asked Tom Merry.

'Did you get my limerick?' exclaimed Monty Lowther.

'Yaas, wathah.' Arthur Augustus extracted the crumpled paper from his pocket, and Lowther clutched at it.

'Anybody seen it?' he asked.

'Nobody, deah boy. It was in my pocket when Wailton came in with the Head.'

'Oh, my hat! Did the Head catch you?' exclaimed Blake.

'Not exactly, deah boy. You see, I took covah, and they did not see me,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'I should have got away all wight, when they left the study, only -'

'Only what?' asked Tom.

'Only they began to talk about confidential mattahs, to which it was impossible for me to listen, so I had to show up.'

'Oh, scissors!' said Herries.

'Good old Gussy!' chuckled Blake. 'Gussy all over! Did Railton take your skin off, or are you going up to the Head for a flogging?'

'Neithah, deah boy. It is all wight,' said Arthur Augustus. 'They let me off, appawently in considewation of my havin' acted in a wight and pwopah mannah. If I had wemained parked behind that armchair, I should have heard the secwet.'

'The secret?' repeated Tom, staring.

'Yaas, it seems that the Head pwefers to keep it quite pwivate about the weasons why Carker left - '

'Carker?' repeated Tom.

'Who on earth's Carker?' asked Manners. 'Carker! Isn't that the name of the man who was at Laurel Villa the other day, Tom, when Miss Priscilla phoned about the scare she'd had - '

'That's the name,' said Tom.

'I wathah think it is the same man,' said Arthur Augustus. 'But pewwaps I had bettah not say any more. If Carkah is comin' here -'

'Coming here?' said Manners.

'Yaas, wathah! Somethin' to do with archy-archy-archy-what-d'you-call it!' explained Arthur Augustus lucidly.

Tom Merry laughed.

'Archaeology?' he asked.

'That's it! Sort of diggin' up stones, and fussin' about old wuins and things, and tappin' with a hammer, and all that. That's archy-archy-archy-thingamebob! These archae-what-d'you-call-ems find out all sorts of things by poking into old mounds and buwyng places, and so on - I believe they have discovered, from excavatin' and all that, that the human wace is thousands of years oldah than it we ally is - '

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Carkah seems to be an archae-what's-it's name,' continued Arthur Augustus. 'A vevy harmless sort of thing, as the Head wemarked, for a wottah like Carkah.'

'How do you know he's a rotter?' asked Tom.

'The Head mentioned that he was cwuel to animals when he was a boy heah, Tom Mewwy. So he must have been a wottah - a vevy wotten wottah.'

'When he was here!' exclaimed Blake. 'You mean that he's an old St. Jim's man - an Old Boy?'

'Yaas, wathah! So the Head was saying, though it was a vewy long time ago, it appeahs. Vewy fah fwom bein' a ccredit to his school!' added Arthur Augustus. 'I have no doubt that the Head had ample weason for sendin' him away.'

'Sacked?' exclaimed Blake.

'Not exactly, Blake - but sent away fwom the school.'

'Why?' asked three or four voices. All the juniors were interested in an old St. Jim's man who had been, if not exactly 'sacked', sent away from the school.

'I did not heah why, as I showed up just as the Head was goin' to tell Wailton,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'I could not, of course, listen to any thin' secwet or confidential, so I had to weveal my pwesence. But I have no doubt whatevah that the Head had good weason for kickin' him out. There is somethin' vewy howwid and sneakin' about a fellow who is cwuel to animals.'

Arthur Augustus shook his noble head.

'But pway do not ask me any more questions,' he added. 'On weflection, I think I had bettah say nothin' about that man Carkah. As he is comin' heah to stay, the least said the soonest mended. So I wathah think that I had bettah not tell you fellows that Carkah was a bad chawactah, and was kicked out of St. Jim's in disgwace -'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the listeners.

'Weally, you fellows -'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his celebrated monocle in his noble eye, and surveyed the laughing crowd of juniors with icy dignity.

'Pewwaps you will tell me what you are cacklin' at!' he said, stiffly. 'I am quite unawah of havin' said anythin' funny.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh wats!' said Arthur Augustus, and he turned and walked away, with his noble nose in the air, leaving Tom Merry and Co. still laughing.

CHAPTER VI

ROUGH LUCK

'BWUTE!' breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

His eye flashed with wrath and indignation behind his eyeglass. Arthur Augustus was sauntering gracefully down Rylcombe Lane, towards the stile that gave on to Wayland Wood. Other fellows had their various occupations that afternoon. Tom Merry was at football practice, urging the flying ball, in company with Monty Lowther, and Blake and Herries and Digby, and a crowd of other School House juniors; Manners had gone out with his camera, Cardew had joined Racke and Crooke for a surreptitious smoke in the top garret, out of view of beaks and prefects. Arthur Augustus, like Gallio of old, cared for none of these things. Certainly, he was a keen footballer, and keen to keep in form for the Carcroft match which was coming along; but another matter of even greater importance occupied his noble mind - a visit to his tailor at Wayland. As he sauntered down the lane in the autumn sunshine, Arthur Augustus was thinking chiefly of

coatings and trouserings: a matter of which, in Gussy's opinion, the importance could scarcely be exaggerated.

But coatings and trouserings, neckties and handsome waistcoats, faded from his mind at what he saw ahead of him in the lane.

He was still a little distance from the stile, when a man came in sight on the other side, from the footpath in the wood. He was a young man of about thirty-five, well dressed, carrying a suitcase.

Having crossed the stile he did not walk on, but dropped his bag, and sat on the top bar, and lighted a cigarette. Probably he had walked through the wood from Wayland, and was taking a rest before proceeding further on his way.

Arthur Augustus, so far, gave him no special heed, though he noticed that the man had a hard-featured face, under his bowler hat. But what followed fixed Arthur Augustus's very special and indignant attention.

A straying dog from the village was nosing along the hedges. The man on the stile glanced at it, called to it, and made friendly gestures, causing the animal to run up to him. It seemed that he was about to give the dog a pat on the head. Arthur Augustus, who was kindness itself to all living creatures, and had been known to rescue a fly from the milk-jug in Study No. 6. with a careful hand, and place it gently on the window-sill to flyaway, could hardly believe his eyes, or his eyeglass, at what came next. The hard-faced man on the stile bent down - but not to pat the shaggy head that was held up to him. Instead of that, he suddenly jammed the hot end of his cigarette on the dog's damp nose.

There was a startled, anguished howl from the hapless animal, and it jumped away and scoured down the lane, still howling.

The man on the stile laughed.

Apparently he was amused.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not amused! Wrath and indignation were depicted in his speaking countenance. The howling died away down the lane. The man on the stile was still grinning, as Arthur Augustus strode up to him.

'Bwute!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

The man gave a little start and stared round. He had not noticed the swell of St. Jim's coming down the lane. But he had to notice him now, as Arthur Augustus addressed him, with a glance of ineffable scorn.

'Eh, what?' he exclaimed.

'I saw what you did, you wottah!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly. 'I wegard you as a bwute!'

The man's stare became a glare.

'You cheeky young sweep, do you want me to smack your head?' he exclaimed.

'What business is it of yours?'

'It is ewevybody's business to stop cwelty to animals. If I had known what you were goin' to do, I would have wun up in time and knocked you ovah that stile!' hooted Arthur Augustus. 'I have a vewy gweat mind to knock you ovah it now, you bwute!'

An extremely unpleasant look came over the hard face under the bowler hat. The man slipped from the stile, and came towards the swell of St. Jim's.

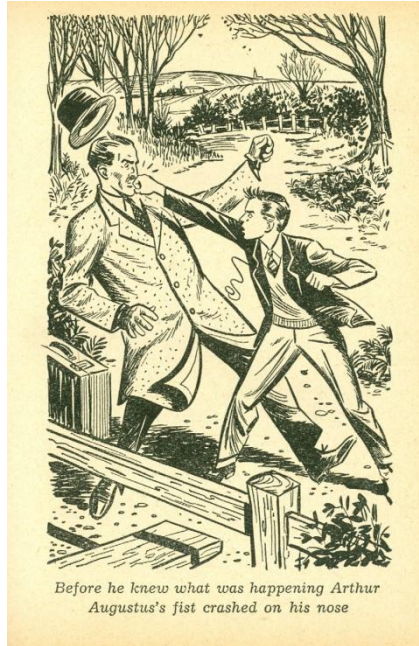
'Take that!' he snapped.

Smack!

It came so quickly that Arthur Augustus had to take it! A sounding smack on his noble head made him totter.

'Oh!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

He tottered, and stumbled over the suit case lying near the stile. Then he landed on his back, with a bump.



'Oh!' repeated Arthur Augustus, breathlessly. He sat up, blinking. Then he bounded to his feet, his face ablaze. He rushed at the man in the bowler hat, his fists up, his eyes flashing over them. Arthur Augustus did not reflect, at the moment, that the man was twice his age, twice his weight, twice or thrice a match for him. His noble head had been smacked, and that was enough for Arthur Augustus to think of, for the moment. Arthur Augustus feared no foe! He rushed right at the man who had smacked his aristocratic nut, and hit out. Crash!

The man, evidently, had not expected that. Before he knew what was happening, Arthur Augustus's fist crashed on his nose, with all the force of a quite muscular arm behind it, and with a startled yell he went staggering backwards.

'There, you wottah!' panted Arthur Augustus. 'Pewwaps you will keep your cheekay paws to yourself aftah that.'

The young man staggered and almost fell. His hand went to his nose, and a stream of crimson trickled through his fingers. Arthur Augustus's noble knuckles had landed hard and drawn the claret.

Then, with a face that was disfigured with rage, he made a spring at the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus, nothing daunted, met him, with right and left. At that point, it dawned upon his aristocratic mind that he had, so to speak, bitten off more than he could chew. His pluck was unlimited, and he stood up gamely to his assailant. But he crumpled up in a muscular grasp; struggling in vain as smack after smack descended on his hapless head.

'Oh, cwumbs!' gasped Arthur Augustus, 'You wottah - you wuffian - oh cwikey!'

Smack! smack! smack! smack!

'Oh, cwikey! Ow! wow! Bai Jove! Wooooh!'

Smack! smack! smack! smack!

'Welease me, you wottah! Oh, cwumbs!'

Smack! smack! smack! smack!

It really looked as if the savage-tempered man would never tire of smacking Arthur Augustus's hapless head. Dazed and dizzy, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, Arthur Augustus sagged in his grasp. But at length the rain of savage smacks ceased, and the man flung him in a breathless heap into the grass.

This time Arthur Augustus did not bound to his feet. There was no bound left in him. He lay gasping for breath, his head spinning.

The man gave him a final glare, picked up his suitcase, and walked away up the lane. He carried his suitcase in his right hand, and with his left dabbed his nose with a handkerchief, as he went. That nose, like Marian's in the ballad, was red and raw. It was likely to show signs, for quite a time to come, of his contact with Arthur Augustus's knuckles.

'Oh cwikey!' moaned Arthur Augustus.

He sat up dizzily. The man had disappeared from sight up the lane. He had left Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in a sad state. His head was singing from innumerable smacks. He dragged himself to his feet, at last, and leaned on the stile, panting for breath.

'Oh, the wottah!' breathed Arthur Augustus. 'The wuffian! The weptile! The wascally wuffian! I am vevy glad I punched his nose, at any wate! I am vevy glad that I punched it hard! If I evah come acvoss him again, I will give him anothah punch on his beastly nose, the wuffianly wapscallion.'

It was quite a long while before Arthur Augustus felt equal to resuming his way to Wayland. And when he arrived at Mr. Wiggs's, even coatings and trouserings, neckties and waistcoats, failed quite to console him for a lingering ache in his noble nut.

CHAPTER VII

THE OLD BOY

'WHO'S THAT merchant?' asked Manners.

'Where did he get that nose?' smiled Tom Merry.

'Won it in a raffle, perhaps!' suggested Monty Lowther.

The Terrible Three of the Shell were strolling in the quad, after football practice. They could not help noticing the man who walked in at the school gates.

He was a young man, well dressed, carrying a suitcase; and there was nothing particularly noticeable about him - excepting his nose. That nose, in its normal state, would not have been particularly noticeable. But it was not in a normal state. It was a little swollen, and it was more than a little red - in fact, it almost flamed.

Many other fellows glanced at him. Figgins and Co., of the New House, exchanged smiles. Blake and Herries and Dig glanced at him; and Jack Blake winked at Herries and Dig. Baggy Trimble of the Fourth stared at him, and giggled. Knox of the Sixth gave him a stare, and grinned. Kildare, glancing at that flaming nose, suppressed a smile. The man was a stranger at St. Jim's; apparently a visitor to the school. Visitors to the school were not uncommon; but it was extremely uncommon for one to arrive with a nose looking as if Rocky Marciano had recently dealt with it.

Old Taggles, the school porter, was at the door of his lodge. Old Taggles stared at the new-comer.

But it was not only the flaming nose that attracted old Taggles's

attention. It looked as if Taggles knew the man who came in, though he was a stranger to other eyes.

'Im!' ejaculated Taggles, 'Im 'ere!'

The new-comer glanced at him, and stopped.

'Still here, Taggles?' he said.

'Yes, I'm still 'ere,' said Taggles, 'and I'd like to know what you're doing 'ere.'

'You seem to know me again?'

'I ain't forgotten you, not after twenty year,' answered Taggles, 'and I'd like to know what this means, you young rip.'

'It means that I am a guest of the Headmaster, and it also means that you'd better keep a civil tongue in your head, if you want to keep clear of trouble.'

Taggles blinked at him.

'You - a guest of the 'Ead!' he ejaculated.

'Precisely.'

'Arter what 'appened - '

The hard face under the bowler hat hardened still more. The cold steely eyes glinted at the ancient porter of St. Jim's.

'That will do, Taggles.' The voice was sharp and savage.

'Look 'ere - '

'I've said that will do! I hardly expected to find you still here, after so many years. The less you chatter about the past, Taggles, the better it will be for you. I shall speak to Dr. Holmes on the subject.'

'Look 'ere - !' repeated Taggles.

'That's enough.'

The man walked on, leaving Taggles staring. Half a dozen fellows who happened to be near at hand had heard the colloquy between the new-corner and the old porter, and they exchanged glances.

The man walked on towards the School House. St. Jim's fellows had good manners, and though they could not help noticing that flaming nose, they were careful not to let its owner see them smile. But a good many smiling glances were exchanged behind him as he passed on.

The Terrible Three were almost directly in his path, and they, like the polite youths they were, composed their features into gravity as his eyes fell on them. As he glanced at them he gave a little start, and his eyes fixed on Tom Merry. He stopped again, his eyes on Tom.

'That johnny knows you, Tom,' said Lowther.

'Blessed if I know how - I don't know him,' answered Tom. 'Never seen him before that I know of.'

'He knows you all right, all the same,' said Manners. 'He's coming to speak to us - don't look at his nose, for goodness' sake.'

The man came up to the three Shell fellows. There was obvious recognition in his look; he knew Tom, if Tom did not know him. All three were careful to take no notice of the flaming nose. Though really that was not easy, for it fairly leaped to the eye.

'Tom Merry?'

'Yes,' answered Tom; in wonder.

'I am Gilbert Carker.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Tom.

The man smiled.

'We have never met,' he said, 'but I spoke to you on the telephone one day, you may remember -'

'I remember,' said Tom, with a nod.

'I have, of course, heard a good deal about you from your guardian, Miss Fawcett,' said Carker. He smiled again, and doubtless it was intended for a friendly smile; but the hard features were probably unaccustomed to friendly smiles, and it had an un-consciously sardonic twist. 'Miss Fawcett was very kind and hospitable to me, while I was staying at Huckleberry,' he went on, 'and she often talked of you.' Tom Merry coloured faintly. He was aware that old Miss Priscilla often talked of him; that he was, in fact, her favourite topic. He could not help feeling a sneer underlying Carker's words, though the man was evidently intending to make himself agreeable.

'In fact, I have felt quite acquainted with you, from what Miss Fawcett has told me,' said Carker. 'You have a very affectionate guardian, Master Merry.'

'I know that,' said Tom, rather abruptly, 'but I don't see how you know me by sight, Mr. Carker, as we have never met.'

Mr. Carker smiled again, his smile still more sardonic.

'You forget that Laurel Villa is very much adorned with your photographs,' he said. 'There was one that I liked very much, of a very pretty little boy in a velvet suit and a lace collar - '

'That was taken a long time ago, when I was a little kid,' Tom said, flushing deeply.

'Oh quite,' assented Mr. Carker, 'but there were many more - in all stages of your career, I think, up to the present moment. Any person who visited Laurel Villa could hardly fail to know you by sight.'

'I understand,' said Tom, curtly. It seemed to him that Carker could not help sneering, even without intending to do so,' and he was conscious of a feeling of dislike for the man.

There was, perhaps, something a little absurd in Miss Priscilla's fixed belief that her dear Tommy was the most important person in the universe, and that everybody ought to be interested in his sayings and doings as a matter of course. Probably she had bored Mr. Carker on that subject. But any good-natured person would have been tolerant of an old lady's foible, while Tom could not help feeling that Carker had been sardonically amused.

'I am very glad to meet you, Master Merry,' Carker went on. 'I hope we shall be friends during my brief stay here. Perhaps you are interested in archaeology?'

'I've never given it a thought.'

'Quite an interesting subject,' said Mr. Carker. 'If you would care to join me at any time in my rambles over the ruined abbey here, I should be greatly pleased.'

'Thank you,' said Tom, inwardly quite resolved that he was not going to join in any of Mr. Carker's archaeological rambles, or to see any more of him than he could help during his stay at the school.

'Miss Fawcett gave me a message for you,' added Carker.

'Yes?' said Tom.

'She specially wishes, if you go out in this uncertain weather, that you take care not to get your feet wet.'

Tom's face became almost as red as Mr. Carker's nose. He was aware, without looking at them, that Manners and Lowther were striving to suppress chuckles. He changed the subject abruptly.

'Has anything been heard of that rat who telephoned to my guardian, and gave her that scare?' he asked.

Mr. Carker's steely eyes glinted for a moment.

'Nothing,' he answered. 'It seems to have been some foolish practical joke - nothing of the kind has occurred since.'

'I'm glad of that!' said Tom. 'I can't understand anybody playing such a dirty trick - but I'd jolly well like to punch him hard, whoever he was.'

'I fear that you will never have that pleasure,'

said Mr. Carker. 'Well, I am glad to have met you, Master Merry, after having heard so much about you from my kind friend Miss Fawcett, and I hope I shall see something more of you while I am staying here - even if you are not interested in archaeology.'

And, with a nod, Mr. Carker walked on to the School House.

'Nice man!' murmured Monty Lowther, shrugging his shoulders.

'I don't like him,' said Tom, frowning.

'Same here,' said Manners. 'From what Gussy said, he was as good as sacked when he was here - he must have a nerve to show up here again.'

'I wonder who gave him that nose,' said Tom.

'Whoever it was, I've no doubt he asked for it. I shall jolly well keep out of his way while he's here, I know that.'

Mr. Carker, perhaps unaware of the far from favourable impression he had made on Master Merry, disappeared into the School House. Toby, the House page, showed him to Mr. Railton's study - with a sidelong eye on his glowing nose as he conducted him there.

'Mr. Carker, sir!' announced Toby.

Mr. Railton rose from his chair. His eyes fixed, involuntarily, on the red and swollen nose of his visitor. Probably the house-master had wondered what that Old Boy of St. Jim's might be like. Certainly he had not expected Carker to present himself looking as if he came fresh from a 'scrap'.

'Pray come in, Mr. Carker,' said the house-master, quite cordially. 'Toby, you will take Mr. Carker's suitcase to his room.'

'Yes sir.'

Toby disappeared with the suitcase, and Mr. Railton shook hands with his visitor.

'An accident?' he asked.

Carker passed one hand over his nose.

'Yes! I walked from the station at Wayland, and unluckily slipped in getting over the stile,' he explained. 'It was quite a knock!'

Mr. Railton murmured a sympathetic reply. Probably he would have been less sympathetic, had he known the real cause of that damage to Mr. Carker's nose. But he was not likely to guess that that Old Boy's nose, only half an hour ago, had contacted the knuckles of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form!

CHAPTER VIII

BACK UP!

'THAT WOTTAH!'

'Eh?'

'That wat - !'

'What?'

'That wotten wuffian!'

'Who-what-and which?'

'That uttah wascally wapscallion!' gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus looked excited.

His eyes gleamed behind his eyeglass. His cheeks were flushed. His manners, at the moment, absolutely lacked the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. Four juniors gazed at him in surprise.

It was the following day, in morning break. Four Shell fellows were talking soccer: Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Talbot of the Shell, in a group by the wall of the Head's garden. That 'soccer jaw' was suddenly interrupted by the excited swell of St. Jim's. He appeared quite suddenly round the corner of the wall, from the direction of the old abbey ruin. What was the matter with the usually stately Arthur Augustus was quite a puzzle to the Shell fellows. But evidently something was.

'That uttah wottah - that bwute - that wat!' Arthur Augustus almost spluttered.

'Knox -?' asked Monty Lowther.

'Wats! No! That wuffian - that wapsCALLION that I told you about yestahday - that bwute who smacked my head ovah and ovah again!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'Oh!' said all the juniors together.

Arthur Augustus, on his return from Wayland the previous day, had related to his friends, in tones that thrilled with indignation, his disastrous encounter with the hard-faced young man at the stile in Rylcombe Lane. They had, perhaps, a little forgotten it since. Now they were reminded of it.

'That chap - ?' said Tom. 'What about him Gussy?'

'I have just seen him.'

'You've seen him?' exclaimed Manners.

'Yaas, wathah!'

Monty Lowther wagged a warning forefinger at the swell of the Fourth.

'Naughty!' he said, severely.

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'Out of gates in break!' said Lowther. 'Against the rules, kid.'

'I have not been out of gates in bweak, Lowthah, you ass! I was takin' a walk to the old abbey when I saw him.'

'You mean that he's here!' said Tom.

'Yaas, wathah! I was quite suwpwised to see the wottah within the pwecincts of St. .Jim's! But there he was - leanin' on the old arch smokin' a cigawette.'

'What the dickens can the man be doing there?' said Talbot.

'I have told you - he was smokin' a cigawette -'

Talbot laughed.

'He couldn't have come there specially to smoke his cigarette,' he cried.

'The public aren't admitted there without leave. He must have got over the fence.'

'Twespassin'!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Now I want you fellows to back me up. I nevah thought for a minute that I should evah see the wottah again. I was weally astonished to see him there. But it is wathah lucky. I have told you how he smacked my head - ovah and ovah again? I was goin' to give him a feahful thwashin' but he was too big for me. Instead of thwashin' him as he wichly deserved, I was smacked wight and left -'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! If you fellows think that funny -!'

'Not at all,' said Tom Merry, laughing. 'But what do you want us to do, old chap?'

'I want you to back me up! He is too big for me to thwash as he deserves, so I request you to wally wound, and wag him.'

'My dear chap -!' murmured Talbot.

'I have told you what he did - you are awah that he is a wuffian, a wat, and a wotten wascal!' said Arthur Augustus, hotly. 'He smacked my head! He smacked it vevy hard! I am not goin' to let him get away with it.'

'But he hasn't got away with it!' said Monty Lowther. 'There it is on your shoulders, Gussy.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'If you are goin' to be a funnay ass, Lowthah - ' Tom Merry laughed.

'If you're sure it's the same man, Gussy -'

'I am quite suah it is the same man, Tom Mewwy. I would know his beastly face and his wat's eyes anywhah. Will you fellows back me up, and give him a waggin', now he has had the cheek to butt into the pwecincts of our school?' demanded Arthur Augustus. 'I have told you that he did a beastly cwuel thing, simply because he is a cwuel bwute, and then he smacked my head wight and left - '

'Anything in it to damage?' asked Lowther.

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'He seems to be rather a brute, whoever he is,' remarked Tom Merry. 'Might give him a bump, as a warning not to smack St. Jim's fellows' heads.'

'Might do him good,' agreed Manners.

'Pway come at once, deah boys,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus. 'He may be gone if I go to look for Blake and Hewwies and Dig. Are you backin' me up?'

'Let's,' said Talbot.

'Come on,' said Monty Lowther, 'lead the way, Gussy, and we'll strew the churchyard with his hungry bones.'

'Huwwy up, then!' said Arthur Augustus. And he led the way, at a pace much more rapid than his usual graceful saunter. The four Shell fellows followed him. They did not, perhaps, attach so much importance to the smacking of Gussy's noble head as did Gussy himself. But there was no doubt that the unknown man, whoever he was, was a quite unpleasant character; and by butting into the precincts of the school he had as good as asked for reprisals.

Why he was there, Arthur Augustus had no idea, but he was uneasy lest the man should be gone before reprisals accrued. As a matter of taste, he would have preferred to give the hard-faced young man a thrashing, but that was not practical politics; and a ragging was the next best thing. That unpleasant young man was going to learn that an aristocratic nut could not be smacked with impunity.

Arthur Augustus led the way into the abbey ruins at a trot, with the Shell fellows at his heels, a war-like gleam in his noble eyes.

Little remained of the ancient abbey that had once stood on the site of St. Jim's. Massive old walls still stood in places, with here and there a trace of window apertures. The ruins were mostly rubble. But in the midst of rubble and shattered old walls, an ancient stone arch was almost intact. Under it, mossy old stone steps led downwards into impenetrable gloom. Adventurous St. Jim's fellows sometimes explored the old place on a half-holiday, but there was little to reward their curiosity, for the steps led down only into a dark old vault, with nothing beyond. No doubt it would have been an interesting spot to an archaeologist, but to schoolboys its interest was quite limited.

'Well, where is he, Gussy?' asked Tom. Nothing was to be seen of a stranger in the old abbey ruins.

Arthur Augustus frowned.

'He was heah when I saw him fwom a distance, leanin' on that arch and smokin' a cigawette,' he said.

'I twust that the wottah has not cleahed off befoah we could wag him.'

'Listen!' said Talbot.

From the old archway came a faint sound. It was the sound of a footfall. Evidently, someone was there!

'He's gone down into the vault,' said Tom.

'Yaas, wathah!' Arthur Augustus chuckled, 'explorin' the place, the cheeky wottah. We shall get him all wight when he comes up.'

'Like his cheek to be rooting about the place,' said Manners. 'Wait here, and collar him when he pokes his nose out.'

'Yaas, wathah.'

The juniors, grinning, backed behind rugged masses of old masonry near the opening of the arch.

They had not long to wait. The footstep was heard again, coming up the stone steps. Footsteps came nearer, and the juniors, in their cover, exchanged glances. The man, whoever he was, was coming out. They could not see him, but they could hear him, and in a few moments more he would be coming out of the archway; and they were ready for a rush.

'Weady!' breathed Arthur Augustus. He peered round the old masonry at a figure emerging from the arch, and his eyes gleamed at the man who had smacked his head so energetically at the stile in Rylcombe Lane. There was no mistake; it was the same man; the hard-faced young man whose heavy hands had established such unpleasant contact with Gussy's noble nut the day before. 'It's that wottah all wight! Come on, you fellows.'

And Arthur Augustus rushed.

CHAPTER IX

A SPOT OF TROUBLE

'STOP!'

'Hold on!'

'You ass, Gussy - '

Four fellows shouted at once.

But Arthur Augustus did not stop. He rushed right at the man who had emerged from the dusky old arch. Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther and Talbot were at his heels - but they stopped, suddenly, as they saw the man, and shouted to Arthur Augustus to stop also. For as their eyes fell on him, they recognized Mr. Gilbert Carker, the archaeological young man who had arrived at St. Jim's the previous day, and was staying at the school as the Head's guest.

They had all seen him when he came, though they had not seen him since. But Arthur Augustus had not seen him; Gussy had been at his tailor's at Wayland at the time. So while four fellows recognized the man in the abbey ruins as the Head's guest, Gussy recognized him only as the unpleasant person who had smacked his head at the stile.

'Stop!'

'Gussy -'

'Hold on - '

'That's Carker - '

But it was really too late for shouting to stop Arthur Augustus. He was already hurling himself at the man.

'Collah him!' he panted.

'Stop, you ass - '

'Stop, you fathead - '

'Oh, my hat!'

'Man down!' gasped Monty Lowther.

Mr. Carker was taken utterly by surprise by D'Arcy's sudden rush. Before he knew what was happening, Arthur Augustus had rushed him over.

He sprawled on his back in rubble, spluttering for breath. Arthur Augustus grasped his collar.

'Come on, deah boys,' he shouted. 'Quick! Collah him! Bump him! Wag him!'

The four 'Shell fellows rushed on, but not to collar Mr. Carker. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy that they collared, and they dragged him back forcibly.

'You dangerous lunatic!' gasped Tom Merry, 'Stop -'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -'

'That's Carker!' hooted Manners.

'I do not know the person's name, Mannahs, but I know that he is the wuffianly wottah who smacked my head yestahday.'

'He's Carker!' yelled 'Tom. 'The Head's visitor!'

'Bai Jove! What?' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'You howling ass!' said Manners. 'You've done it now.'

'Oh, cwikey! Is that wottah the Head's guest?' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'Bai Jove! He certainly is the wuffianly wascal I met at the stile yestahday. I would know his wat's face anywhah. He is the wottah whose wascally nose I punched.'

'Oh crumbs! Was it you gave him that beak?' exclaimed Monty Lowther.

'Yaas, wathah! He smacked my head.'

'Well, this tears it!' said Talbot.

'It does - it does!' agreed Lowther.

The juniors gazed at Mr. Carker. Most of the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him by his crash on the rubble. He had raised himself on his elbow, and was panting and panting. The rage in his face was not pleasant to see. It looked like trouble when Mr. Carker got on his feet again.

Even Arthur Augustus was not thinking of a ragging now. The discovery that the hard-faced man was the Headmaster's guest was dismaying. It was clear now, too, that he was not 'trespassing' in the precincts of the school. It was for archaeological exploration of the old abbey that he had come to St. Jim's, and it was quite natural that he should be there. What was going to be the outcome of this, Tom Merry and Co. did not know, but it was a dismaying situation.

Carker, panting, got on his feet at last. Tom whispered hurriedly to Arthur Augustus.

'Tell him you're sorry, old chap - quick, before he goes off at the deep end.'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -'

'Cough it up!' breathed Lowther.

'Weally, Lowthah -' Arthur Augustus shook his head. 'I cannot tell him I am sowwy, as I am not sowwy. That person acted like a wotten wuffian yestahday, and I wegard him with uttah contempt, whethah he is the Head's

guest or not. I shall not wag him now, but I certainly shall not tell him that I am sowwy, as I am not sowwy at all.'

'Fathead!' hissed Manners.

'Weally, Mannahs -'

Whether an apology from Arthur Augustus would have poured oil upon the troubled waters was doubtful. In any case it was not going to be forthcoming. There was no time for more. Carker, having recovered his breath, came towards the group of juniors, with gleaming eyes.

'You young cub!' His voice was husky with rage, 'You young rascal!' He made a sudden grasp at Arthur Augustus, and seized his collar with his left hand. With his right, he smacked at Gussy's head, even more energetically than he had smacked the day before. 'Take that - and that - and that - and that.'

'Yawooooooh!' yelled Arthur Augustus. He struggled frantically. 'Wescue! Yawooh! Oh, cwumbs! Wescue, deah boys!'

'Mr. Carker -!' exclaimed Tom.

'Yawooh! Wescue!'

Smack! smack! smack! smack!

Tom Merry's eyes flashed. No doubt Mr. Carker had cause to be angry. But there was a limit. Tom ran forward.

'Stop that, Mr. Carker!' he shouted.

Carker did not heed him. He smacked and smacked again.

Tom caught at his arm, and dragged it away. Carker gave him a glare, and jerking his arm free, delivered a smack at Tom's head that sent him reeling. Then he resumed smacking D'Arcy's.

But he had time for only one more smack. Tom, reeling back, stumbled over rubble, and fell. But Manners and Lowther rushed at Mr. Carker, and Talbot was only a moment behind them. All three of them grasped him, and wrenched him away from Arthur Augustus.

In his fury he struck at them, but the next moment he was pitched over, sprawling in the rubble.

Tom scrambled to his feet. His eyes were blazing.

Tempers had risen on all sides now. The juniors were prepared to handle Mr. Carker, and to handle him quite unceremoniously, if he carried on.

'Oh, cwumbs!' gasped Arthur Augustus, rubbing a dizzy head. 'The uttah wottah - the cheekay wapscallion - oh, cwikey!'

Carker staggered up.

The juniors drew together, as he made a movement towards them. It was so plain that he would be roughly handled, if he proceeded further, that he checked himself. Anyone of the schoolboys he could have handled with ease, but he had to realise that the five of them were much too much for him. He stood panting with clenched hands.

'Hands off, Mr. Carker!' said Tom Merry, quietly.

'You young scoundrel -'

'That will do!' snapped Tom. 'If you weren't here as a guest of our Headmaster, we'd jolly well give you what you've asked for.'

'Yaas, wathah!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

Carker gritted his teeth.

'I shall complain to your Headmaster of this!' he said, and with that he turned and tramped away out of the old abbey.

Monty Lowther gave a whistle.

'Breakers ahead, my hearties!' he remarked.

'Not much doubt about that,' said Manners. 'That swob will give us all the

trouble he can, after this.'

'We're for it,' agreed Talbot.

'The rotter!' muttered Tom Merry. 'That chap's a bad egg all through, you fellows.'

'Yaas, wathah! No wondah he was kicked out of St. Jim's when he was heah yeahs ago!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I should vewy much like to kick him out again, the uttah wapscallion. I am weally suwpwised that the Head allowed him to come heah at all, and I considah -'

'Hallo, there's the bell.'

It was the bell for third school. The juniors hurried out of the old abbey to join the crowd heading for the form-rooms.

They sat through third school with quite unpleasant anticipation of what was to follow, after Carker had laid his complaint before the Head.

That he would do so, without delay, they could hardly doubt, in view of the savage temper he had displayed.

It was a far from pleasant prospect - that of facing Dr. Holmes on a charge of manhandling his visitor.

In third lesson, in the Shell, four fellows were a little inattentive to Mr. Linton; while another, in the Fourth, was more than a little inattentive to Mr. Lathom. What was in store weighed on all minds.

When the forms were dismissed, the five went out into the quadrangle, in momentary expectation of being rounded up by a prefect, and marched off to the Headmaster's study. Blake and Herries and Digby joined them there, and having been told of what had happened in the old abbey, they too had no doubt that there were 'breakers ahead' for the five.

And when Knox of the Sixth was seen to come out of the House, looking about him as if in search, Tom Merry and Co. exchanged glum glances. They could guess of whom Knox was in search.

'Now for it!' murmured Monty Lowther.

'Yaas, wathah!' sighed Arthur Augustus. 'I am sowwy, you fellows, that I seem to have landed you in a wow.'

'Gussy all over!' remarked Blake.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Same old fathead!' said Herries, with a nod.

'Weally, Hewwies -'

'Trust -Gussy to play the giddy ox!' said Digby.

'Weally, Dig -'

'Well, after all, we can explain to the Head,' said Talbot. 'Carker won't show up very well if the Old Man hears the whole story.'

Tom Merry nodded.

'That's so,' he said. 'After all, it was Carker who started the trouble, pitching into Gussy yesterday in the lane.'

'Yaas, wathah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'It all started with that wow at the stile, when that wottah played a cwuel twick on that dog, and I called him a bwute, and he smacked my head, the cheeky wat. The Head will certainly know what a wottah he is when the whole stowy comes out.'

'Here comes Knox!' muttered Manners.

Knox of the Sixth came up.

'Was it you, young ruffians?' he asked. 'One was Tom Merry - there were four others - I want their names. In the abbey in break this morning.'

'Us!' said Manners.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Adsum!' said Monty Lowther.

'Are we wanted, Knox?' asked Talbot, quietly.

Knox gave them an unpleasant grin.

'You are - in Railton's study,' he said. 'Cut in!'

And five juniors trailed off rather glumly to Mr. Railton's study in the School House.

CHAPTER X

UNEXPECTED!

'COME IN!'

Mr. Railton stood by his table, a frown upon his brow, his eyes on Tom Merry and Co. as they presented themselves in his study doorway.

The house-master was not alone in the study, Gilbert Carker stood by the window, and his eyes, too, fixed on the delinquents as they came in. But, somewhat to the surprise of the juniors, there was no animosity in his look. If his feelings were inimical, he had them well under control, for his expression was quite good tempered, a remarkable contrast to his looks when they had last seen him, in the old abbey that morning.

'Merry!' rapped Mr. Railton.

"Yes, sir," said Tom.

'You and your friends appear to have acted in an extremely uncivil and indeed outrageous manner, towards a visitor of your Headmaster,' said Mr. Railton, sternly.

'Weally, sir -' began Arthur Augustus.

'Do not interrupt me, D'Arcy,' rapped the housemaster.

'Certainly not, sir, but I weally think -'

'That will do.'

'Vewy well, sir, but -'

'Silence! I have learned from Mr. Carker that there was what I suppose you would call a rag, in the old abbey this morning,' said Mr. Railton. 'I should certainly take a very severe view of the occurrence, had not Mr. Carker specially requested me not to do so.'

'Bai Jove!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

'Oh!' murmured Tom Merry, blankly.

It was a surprise all round.

Not one of the five had doubted, for a moment, that Carker would make the very most of it. That he had not only a savage and vicious temper, but an unpleasant vein of cruelty in his nature, they knew quite well. They had fully expected him to exact for them the severest punishment that their house-master could be prevailed upon to inflict.

Instead of which, it seemed that while he had reported the affray to Railton, he had begged them off. It seemed that he had reported the matter merely as a 'rag'. Why, they could not begin to guess; unless he was, after all, a much better-natured man than they had supposed.

'I gather,' continued Mr. Railton, 'that you juniors went into the old abbey, and rushed upon Mr. Carker as he came out of the vault there, taking him by surprise, and causing him to fall.'

'Yass, wathah, but -'

'I have told you not to interrupt me, D'Arcy. Such a foolish and unthinking prank is utterly inexcusable,' said Mr. Railton. 'But for Mr.

Carker's request that I should take a lenient view, I should certainly deal with you severely.'

'Boyish, exuberant spirits, sir!' said Mr. Carker, speaking for the first time. 'I should be sorry, sir, if you thought it necessary to punish these boys.'

All I ask is that nothing of the kind shall occur again.'

'It is very kind of you to say so, Mr. Carker.'

'Not at all, sir! Boys will be boys,' said Mr. Carker, tolerantly. 'I should not have reported the matter at all, Mr. Railton, but it is necessary for me to be undisturbed while carrying on archaeological work in the old abbey. So long as that is assured, I have no complaint to make.'

'Certainly measures will be taken to that end, Mr. Carker. I shall speak to Dr. Holmes on the subject, and the old abbey will be placed out of bounds for all the school so long as your work here continues, as I have already told you. If that will satisfy you -'

'Quite, sir!'

'You hear that?' said Mr. Railton, with another stern glance at the culprits. 'The matter ends here, and you may thank Mr. Carker for it. The abbey ruins will be out of bounds, and any boy breaking bounds in that direction will take the consequences. A notice will be placed on the board this morning, as soon as I have spoken to the Headmaster. Now you may go.' Glad that the affair had turned out so well, Tom Merry and Co. marched out of the study. Still in a state of great surprise, they went into the quad, where Blake and Herries and Dig were waiting for them, with several other fellows who had heard that they were 'up' before the House-beak.

'Whopped?' asked Blake.

'Six all round?' inquired Herries.

'Did it hurt?' asked Dig.

Tom Merry laughed.

'Nothing at all - only the surprise of our lives,' he said. 'Carker asked Railton to let us off, and he did.'

'Oh, my hat!' said Blake. 'He can't be such a rotter after all.'

'Decent of him,' said Cardew.

'I fail to undahstand it,' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, slowly. 'The man is a wottah -'

'Oh, draw it mild, old man,' said Blake. 'He's just got you off a licking.'

'I wepeat that I fail to undahstand it,' said Arthur Augustus. 'He is not only a wottah - but a wank wottah. He is cwuel to animals, and such a person is a weal wank wottah, and I uttably fail to undahstand why he wequested Wailton to go easy.'

Manners shrugged his shoulders.

'I can make a guess at that,' he said. 'He didn't want the whole story to come out, and it would have come out, if Railton had gone into the matter.'

'By gum!' said Monty Lowther. 'That's it, I expect.'

'Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah,' said Arthur Augustus.

'But - !' said Tom Merry.

'But what?'

'Well, if that was the idea, he needn't have reported the row to Railton at all,' said Tom. 'Why did he?'

Manners wrinkled his brows.

'That's so,' he said. 'He could have said nothing about it at all. He had some reason for reporting it to Railton, but I'm blessed if I can guess what it was, as he didn't push it so far as getting us licked.'

'That's pretty clear, I think,' said Talbot of the Shell.

'How come?' asked Monty Lowther.

'You heard what Railton said. The old abbey is to be placed out of bounds so long as Carker stays here. That's what Carker wanted.'

'I don't see why,' said Blake. 'Fellows rambling over the abbey wouldn't interfere with his archaeological stunts, that I can see.'

'Neither can I,' admitted Talbot, 'but that was his reason-he's made what happened this morning an excuse for asking it. I don't know why he wants to keep the place to himself, but he does.'

Tom Merry nodded, thoughtfully.

'I think Talbot's hit it,' he said. 'Well, if that was what Carker wanted, he's welcome to it, so far as I'm concerned. Perhaps he fancies that he's going to make some wonderful archaeological discoveries there. It won't hurt us to keep clear of the place.'

'Wathah not.'

'And we'll keep clear of him, too,' added Tom. 'My advice to you, Blake, is to keep Gussy on a chain after this.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy -'

'Hallo, here he comes!' murmured Lowther.

Mr. Carker came out of the House. The juniors glanced at him curiously. He gave them a friendly nod as he passed the group, apparently quite forgetful of the spot of trouble that morning, and sauntered on.

'Mayn't be such a bad chap, after all,' said Blake.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus.

'Look here, you old ass -!'

'I wefuse to be called an old ass, Blake! And I wegard that person as a wottah - a wank wottah! I wegard him with despision - I mean contempt, and -'

'You howling ass!' hooted Blake. 'If you kick up any more shindies with the Head's visitor -'

'Weally, Blake -'

'Better keep him on a chain,' said Tom Merry, laughing.

'I shall certainly not deal with that person as he deserves, now that I know he is the Head's guest!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I shall ignore his existence, and tweat him with contempt fwom a distance. But I shall continue to wegard him as a wank wottah, as an uttah outsiders, and I shall be vewy glad when he winds up his archaeo-who-do-you-call-it, and cleahs off. And he can have the abbey wuins all to himself, if that is what he wants - I should certainly wefuse to step inside the place at the wisk of encountewin' such a wottah!'

Evidently, Arthur Augustus's opinion of the Old Boy of St. Jim's was quite unchanged.

When the St. Jim's fellows came out after dinner that day, there was a new notice on the board, placing the abbey ruins out of bounds until further notice.

If that had been Carker's object he had gained it, but so far as Tom Merry and Co. were concerned, he was welcome to it, and it was not long before they had dismissed the whole matter from their minds.

CHAPTER XI

BREAKING BOUNDS

'OUT OF BOUNDS!' said Kerr.

'Rot!' said Fatty Wynn.

'Um!' said George Figgins, thoughtfully.

There was a pause.

Three juniors of the New House at St. Jim's were in a state of doubt. The autumn dusk was falling thickly. It was past lock-ups; and the three were out of gates. It was not yet calling-over in the Houses, but the school gates were closed; Taggles was always prompt to close the gates on time. Indeed some St. Jim's fellows declared that old Taggles took a sort of fiendish pleasure in banging the gates shut right on a fellow's nose. Not a moment's grace would old Taggles allow.

Figgins and Co. had been hardly a minute late. They had been down to Rylcombe, after class, and Fatty Wynn, who had more weight to carry than his chums, had lagged a little on the way home. That little had done it. Quite possibly Taggles may have seen three shadowy forms approaching at a trot. If so, Taggles did not give them another minute. He did not give them another second. The gates were shut and locked when Figgins and Co. arrived, breathless.

All that remained was to ring, and give in their names for report to their house-master, which they were extremely unwilling to do. Mr. Ratcliff, housemaster of the New House, was a somewhat more severe gentleman than Mr. Railton of the School House. He might give them lines-he might give them Extra School. And they were still in ample time for call-over, if the problem of getting in could be solved.

So Fatty Wynn suggested going round by the old abbey, clambering over the wall that enclosed the ruins, and so obtaining an unseen admittance. To which Kerr replied that it was out of bounds: to which again Fatty Wynn rejoined that that was 'rot'.

'Rot!' repeated Fatty, with emphasis, 'look here, we can get over that wall easily enough, and cut into the quad from the old abbey. We shall be in time-the bell hasn't rung for call-over yet.'

'The Head's put the old abbey out of bounds,' said Kerr.

'Rot!' said Fatty, for the third time. 'Even if it's out of bounds, nobody will see us, and that's all that matters. It's getting jolly dark! And it oughtn't to be out of bounds, anyway-it never was.'

'Never mind whether it ought or oughtn't,' answered Kerr. 'The Head's put it out of bounds, after some School House fatheads ragged that archaeological johnny there -'

'I know that!' grunted Fatty Wynn. 'But who wants to go up to old Ratty for coming in late?'

'Um!' said Figgins again, thoughtfully.

'Who's going to spot us there?' he demanded. 'Nobody ever goes there after dark, and it's as good as dark now. I suppose you don't fancy that Carker will be doing his archaeological stunts there now, do you, Kerr?'

'Not likely!' said Kerr, 'but -'

'Chance it,' said Figgins. 'I don't want to go up to Ratty, for one.'

'Come on,' said Fatty Wynn.

'But - !' said Kerr.

'Oh, chuck it, and come on.'

'Look here -'

'Rats! Come on-I'm going.'

And Fatty Wynn started. Figgins followed him, and Kerr, with a shake of the head, followed on. 'It won't make matters any better with Ratty, if we're spotted out of bounds, as well as getting in late!' he said.

'Who's going to spot us?' said Figgins. 'Come on, old chap, don't be such a jolly old croaker.'

'Oh, all right!' said Kerr.

Figgins and Fatty, at all events, had no doubt that it was 'safe as houses'. For what eye was likely to fall on three shadowy figures stealing through the old ruins in the deep dusk? Since the abbey had been put out of bounds, Mr. Carker had had it to himself, and he could scarcely be supposed to be carrying on his archaeological activities in dusk deepening to darkness. So Figgy and Fatty, disregarding their more cautious Scottish chum, started at a trot, and Kerr, yielding the point, followed.

A little shady lane ran beside the high wall that enclosed the abbey ruins, on the side farthest from the school. There was a gate in the wall, but that was of no use to Figgins and Co., as it was always kept locked. Mr. Carker, no doubt, had a key to it; if so, he did not forget to turn that key, for when Figgins gave the gate a shove, it did not stir. They moved on, and stopped under the brick wall. Figgins, the tallest of the three, made a jump, and caught the top, and pulled himself up actively. He sat astride of the wall, and reached down a helping hand to Kerr. The Scottish junior joined him on top of the wall.

Then they both reached down helping hands to Fatty Wynn, who clambered up more slowly, gasping for breath, and joined them.

They did not linger there. One after another, they dropped on the inner side of the wall.

'Okay!' said Figgins.

'Safe as houses,' gasped Fatty Wynn, 'nobody about-who could be about? We're all right.'

'Out of bounds -!' said Kerr.

'Oh pack that up, old chap.'

'Well, the sooner we're through, the better,' said Figgins. 'After all, Head's orders are Head's orders. It would be lines for getting in late, but it would be whops if we're caught here. Come on.'

They moved off, picking their way through the rubble and the masses of old masonry that loomed dimly in the dusk. All about them was shadowy and silent. But suddenly, through the silence, came a sharp sound.

Click!

It was the sound of a key in a lock.

Figgins halted.

'What's that?' he breathed, 'did you fellows hear that? What -'

'It's the gate - ' whispered Kerr. 'Somebody's coming in.'

'But who -?'

'Never mind who-cover, quick!' muttered Kerr.

He caught Figgins's arm. 'Get out of sight-sharp-if we're seen here -'

'Oh, crumbs!' murmured Fatty Wynn. 'Who the dickens -?'

'Quick!' hissed Kerr. 'Under that arch - quick! It's not too dark for him to see us, whoever he is. Quick.'

He dragged at Figgins, who was staring back towards the gate in the wall on Abbey Lane. They were close to the old stone arch that covered the steps to the vault. Within the arch, all was black darkness. Kerr dragged Figgins into the archway, and Fatty Wynn followed them in.

'But who the dickens - ?' muttered Figgins. 'I say, be careful here, you chaps - we don't want to tumble down the steps-it's not more than a dozen feet to the top step - careful!'

'I say - !' mumbled Fatty Wynn.

'Quiet!' breathed Kerr.

'He can't see us here, whoever he is - '

'He's got ears, fathead! Quiet!'

Feeling their way in the darkness with their feet, the three New House juniors moved cautiously, deeper into the archway. They stopped, and stood in silence, listening. Someone had entered by the gate, they knew that, and was now in the ruins. Whoever it was must be an inmate of the school, as he had a key to the gate. Had the three remained in the open, they must have been seen, dusky as it was. But in the darkness under the arch they were invisible, even to one another. In that safe cover they had only to wait till the coast was clear; unseen and unsuspected.

'Hark!' whispered Figgins.

There was a sound of footsteps, clinking among the rubble.

'Quiet!' breathed Kerr. 'He's coming this way.'

'Can't be coming here - '

'Quiet!'

They listened. The footsteps drew nearer. Apparently the unseen man was going to pass quite close by the old arch. That mattered little, for even if he glanced into it he could have seen nothing in the blackness. So long as they remained silent, all seemed safe. But -

The footsteps came closer and closer-and stopped.

The three hidden juniors hardly breathed.

Dimly, at the opening of the arch, they made out a shadowy form in an overcoat, apparently carrying a large bag. The man, whoever he was, seemed to be fumbling with one hand in his overcoat pocket.

Then, with startling suddenness, came the bright glare of a flash-lamp, shining into the archway; the man holding it followed it in, and in its light they recognized the Head's guest, Mr. Gilbert Carker.

CHAPTER XII

CAUGHT!

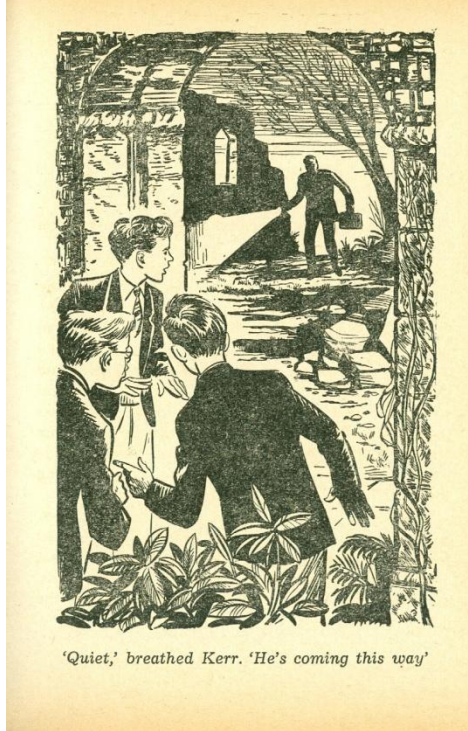
FIGGINS and Co. stared blankly at the man holding the flash-lamp.

They were utterly amazed.

That Mr. Carker spent a great deal of time in the old ruins they knew: that was natural enough, if he was making archaeological explorations; it was in fact the only reason for his presence at the school at all. No doubt it suited him sometimes to come and go by the gate on Abbey Lane. But why he should enter that dark old archway at such an hour was inexplicable. They had expected the footsteps to pass on, leaving them unseen in their cover. Utterly unexpected, Mr. Carker walked into the archway, flashing the light before him as he came.

There was no hope of avoiding discovery now.

At that moment, Figgins and Fatty Wynn wished fervently that they had heeded their more cautious chum. The Head had placed the abbey out of bounds, and there they were-breaking bounds-caught in the act.



'Quiet,' breathed Kerr. 'He's coming this way'

For the moment Mr. Carker did not see them. Obviously, he had not the slightest expectation of finding anyone there, and for the moment, his light did not fall on their startled faces. It could only be a matter of moments before they were seen, but for the moment he was unaware of them, and of three pairs of startled eyes fixed on him.

He dropped the bag he was carrying to the stone flags of the floor. They heard him give a grunt, as he did so. Apparently the bag was heavy. That large, heavy bag added to the astonishment of the staring New House juniors. They could not imagine why Mr. Carker had entered the archway at all—but why he should have brought a heavy, packed bag with him was still more inexplicable. He was a muscular man, but the weight of the bag had evidently told on him a little; he had been glad to be relieved of its weight, and he stood breathing hard.

The three stood silent, staring. Perhaps they nourished a faint hope that Carker might go, without discovering them. They were deep in the archway, close to the top of the stone steps that led down into the vault, and Carker had stopped just within the entrance, a dozen feet from them. If he had simply come there to dump that bag, and was going, there was a chance yet.

A long, long minute dragged by.

Carker was standing by the bag, breathing deep. But at length he stopped, and picked up the bag again. Apparently he had placed it on the flags only to rest for a minute or two, and recover his breath. Now he picked it up again, and with the flash-lamp in his other hand, advanced deeper into the archway, towards the steps that led downward. Obviously, he was going to carry that bag down into the vault, though for what reason was beyond the

imagining of the New House juniors. Not that that mattered - what mattered was that discovery was now inevitable.

A moment more, and the light was full on them. Mr. Carker gave a violent start, as three staring, dismayed faces came into his view, with three pairs of eyes blinking in the light.

He stopped dead.

For a second the look on his face was one of startled surprise. It was immediately followed by an expression of such savage anger that it startled Figgins and Co.

He came a little nearer, keeping the light on their faces.

'What are you doing here?' he rasped. 'You are out of bounds here! You are defying your Headmaster's orders. How dare you come here?'

'Sorry, sir -!' stammered Figgins.

'We - we were late for gates,' mumbled Fatty Wynn, 'we - we - we just got in this way, sir -'

'No harm done, sir!' said Kerr. 'We only want to cut in, in time for call-over in our house.'

'You spying young rascals!'

Three faces reddened in the glare of the flash-lamp.

'Look here, Mr. Carker -!' began Figgins, hotly.

'You were hiding here -'

'We dodged into cover when we heard you coming,' said Kerr. The Scottish junior's voice was calm, and a little contemptuous. 'You've no right to say we were spying. What is there to spy on, I'd like to know.'

'Think we want to know anything about your dashed archaeology?' snapped Figgins.

The man gave him an angry glare. It was plain that he was disturbed as well as angry; though why he should be disturbed the New House juniors could not begin to guess. But he made an effort to control his angry temper. When he spoke again, it was more quietly.

'You are breaking bounds here, disregarding a special order of your Headmaster,' he said.

'We know that,' grunted Figgins.

'Your names?'

'Do you want our names to report us to our housemaster?' asked Kerr, his eyes very keenly on the hard face.

'Yes, give me your names at once.'

'You're not a master in the school,' said Kerr, quietly. 'It needn't worry you if a fellow's out of bounds. We've told you that we cut in this way because we were late for gates, and we wanted to be in time for calling over. We've done no harm. Can't you let it drop?'

'If you refuse to give me your names I shall identify you in your House,' snapped Mr. Carker. 'Are you School House boys?'

'No, we're jolly well not!' snapped Figgins.

'Wouldn't be found dead in the School House, if you want to know.'

'You belong to the New House?'

'Yes, we do.'

'Then I shall report this to Mr. Ratcliff, your house-master. Now give me your names.'

The three juniors exchanged glances. There was no help for it.

'Figgins,' grunted Figgy.

'Wynn,' growled Fatty.

'Kerr,' said the Scottish junior, quietly.

'Very well! You will hear of this again! Now go!'
'Come on, you chaps,' muttered Figgins, 'We're for it now.'
Kerr compressed his lips.
'Come on,' he said.

Mr. Carker help up the light, and watched them as they trailed out of the archway. He followed them to the entrance, and stood there, watching them, as they picked their way through the rubble. From the abbey grounds, a narrow path, between a building and the wall of the Head's garden, gave access to the quadrangle. There was a gate on the quad, closed at lock-ups, over which the three had to clamber. From that gate they glanced back. The light had disappeared, but they made out a dim, shadowy form in the dusk. Mr. Carker had followed them, apparently to make sure that they were gone.

'Blow him!' muttered Figgins.
'Bother him!' growled Fatty Wynn.
'I wonder -!' muttered Kerr.
'You wonder what we shall get from Ratty?' groaned Figgins.
'No-I know that in advance. I wonder what that man's up to.'
'Eh? Archaeology, isn't it?'
Kerr shrugged his shoulders.

'I can't make him out,' he said. 'I've heard Gussy say that he's a rotter - and I think Gussy's got him right. What does it matter to him if fellows cut in through the old abbey because they're late for gates? He's not a beak. It's no business of his. What did he fancy we were spying on?'
'Only his temper, I expect.'

'I wonder,' said Kerr.
'Oh, come on,' grunted Fatty Wynn, 'We're late enough already. The bell's gone long ago.'

The three cut across to the House. But too much time had been lost, and they were late for calling-over in the New House, for which they only received lines from Mr. Ratcliff. The lines did not worry them very much; they were well aware that they had something tougher than lines to expect when Mr. Carker reported them. Prep in Figgins and Co.'s study that evening was not a cheerful function.

CHAPTER XIII

TOUGH FOR THREE

'FIGGY, OLD MAN - '
'Ow!'
'What the dickens -!'
'Wow-!'
'Anything up?' asked Tom Merry.
'Owl' said Figgins, again.
'Wow!' said Kerr.
'Ow! wow! wow!' said Fatty Wynn.

It was a bright morning. Three St. Jim's juniors, of the New House, did not look so bright as the morning! Far from it. Tom Merry, on the other hand, was looking, and feeling, like a fellow on top of the world. It was Wednesday: a half-holiday that day, and that afternoon a football match was due. Tom Merry's team were going over to Carcroft to play Harry

Compton and his merry men there. On a fine, clear day, with a soccer match in prospect, Tom found life extremely well worth living. When the Shell came out in break, Tom's face was as bright as the sunshine in the blue sky. The faces of Figgins and Co., when he came on them under the old elms, presented quite a contrast to his own. They looked glum. They seemed to be afflicted by wriggles. They mumbled.

Obviously, at the moment, the heroes of the New House were not enjoying life. It looked as if trouble had accrued.

'Well, you look a cheery lot,' said Tom. 'Brace up a bit before we go over to Carcroft.'

'Ow!' mumbled Figgins.

'Wow!' mumbled Kerr.

'Blow!' groaned Fatty Wynn, 'Ow! wow! wow!'

'Bai Jove!' Arthur Augustus D'Arcy ambled gracefully up. 'Anythin' the mattah, deah boys?'

'Ow! wow! wow!'

'Lathom whopped you?' asked Tom.

'Ow! wow! wow!'

'Nothin' of the kind,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Lathom was all wight in form. Anythin , happened since, Figgy?'

'Ratty!' grunted Figgins. 'Did he lay it on? Ow! wow!'

'Six of the best!' mumbled Kerr.

'Six all round,' said Fatty Wynn, 'Oh! That rotter Carker - ow!'

'Carkah?' repeated Arthur Augustus. That name brought a frown to his noble brow.

'Carker?' said Tom, blankly. 'What had Carker to do with it? You haven't been treading on Carker's corns, have you?'

'The rotter!' said Figgins.

'The rat!' said Kerr.

'The blighter!' groaned Fatty Wynn.

'Yaas, wathah;' said Arthur Augustus, with a nod of approval, 'he is all that, and more. I wegard him as a wottah, a wat, and a weptile. I weally wish that he would wind up his wubbish and go away. But what has the wottah been doin' this time?'

'Reporting us to Ratty,' grunted Figgins. 'The rat! What does it matter to him if fellows cut in through the old abbey?'

'Did you?' asked Tom.

'Yes, we did - we were late for gates, and the brute happened on us. What did it matter to him?' hissed Figgins. 'He's not a beak! He hasn't come here to run the school, I suppose!'

'Bai Jove! The old abbey is out of bounds now, Figgy, and it is wathah sewious to bweak bounds -'

'Not Carker's business, is it?'

'Wathah not,' agreed Arthur Augustus. 'He has no wight to weport a fellow, if a fellow diswegarded bounds. Did he go to Watty?'

'Did he?' snapped Kerr. 'Yes, he did! We got a message to turn up in Ratcliff's study after second lesson this morning. Did Ratty lay it on? Owl!'

'Wuff luck, deah boy,' said Arthur Augustus, sympathetically, 'but you cannot weally blame Watty. He had to make it whops for fellows diswegardin' the Head's ordahs.'

'I'm not blaming Ratty, fathead!' snorted Kerr.

'We knew what to expect if we were spotted there by a beak or pre. But Carker might have held his tongue. It doesn't concern him.'

'Not at all,' said Tom, 'he seems to want to keep that old show to himself - goodness knows why.'

'Yass, wathah! It was weally sneakin' for Carkah to go to Figgy's House-beak about it,' said Arthur Augustus. 'He is a very unpleasant chawactah in evey way. I am vewy glad that I punched his nose once. I should vewy much like to punch it again.'

'Wouldn't I!' said Figgins. 'The rat!'

'I can't make him out,' said Kerr. 'We explained to him why we were there, and he might have let us cut, and said nothing about it. Instead of that, he flew into a temper, and goes yowling to Ratty. Looks as if he wants to make sure that fellows don't break bounds in that direction - but why? And what was he up to there at dark, anyway?'

'Was it dark?' asked Tom, puzzled.

'Dusk - jolly nearly dark,' said Figgins. 'He couldn't be archaeologising after dark, I suppose, with a flashlamp. You see, we took cover in that old arch, and thought we were quite safe there - and then in he marches with a big bag to go down to the vault -'

'Bai Jove! What the dooce was he cawwyin' a big bag down into the vault for?' asked Arthur Augustus, in astonishment.

'Ask me another!' grunted Figgins.

'That's jolly odd,' said Tom.

'It beats me,' said Kerr. 'He doesn't and can't care a boiled bean whether a St. Jim's man is out of bounds or not. He was fearfully shirty because we were there and saw him-that's what it boils down to. He said we were spying.'

'Spying!' exclaimed Tom.

'That was his word,' said Kerr, savagely. 'And what was there to spy on? What is he up to that fellows mustn't see?'

Tom Merry whistled.

'Blessed if I can make it out,' he said. 'He can't be up to anything but his archaeological stunts, so far as I can see. I don't see why he should mind fellows going there-but it seems that he does.'

'He does,' said Kerr. 'He's contrived to get the abbey put out of bounds, and now 'he's got fellows licked for being there, as a warning to other fellows to keep clear of the place. I'd like to know what it means.'

Tom Merry shook his head.

'Beats me hollow,' he said, 'the man seems to be an evil-tempered brute, no doubt about that. But I don't see how he can have anything to hide.'

'What made him suspect that fellows were spying, then, if there was nothing to hide?' asked Kerr.

Tom shook his head again.

'I give that one up!' he said.

'Ow! wow!' Figgins gave another wriggle, 'Ow! Blow the man! Wow!'

'Wow!' chimed in Fatty Wynn, 'Ow! Bother him! Bother Ratty! Blow!'

Kerr's eyes glinted.

'Spying!' he repeated. 'On what? What is that man up to? He was a rotter when he was here years ago, and he's a rotter now. He's got something to hide.'

'But what?' asked Tom Merry.

'Yaas, wathah-what, deah boy?' asked Arthur Augustus.

But Kerr could find no answer to that question.

CHAPTER XIV

EXTRA!

'D'ARCY!' rapped Mr. Lathom.

'Oh! Yaas, sir.'

'You will go on!' said Mr. Lathom, sharply.

'Oh!'

The aristocratic features of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the St. Jim's Fourth, registered dismay.

Arthur Augustus was not prepared to 'go on'.

The St. Jim's Fourth were in their form-room, and 'con' was the order of the day. Every fellow in the form-room should have been concentrating on Latin.

But Arthur Augustus was not the only fellow whose thoughts were wandering. Sad to relate, Arthur Augustus was thinking not of the deathless verse of Virgil, but of the great game of soccer.

There were excuses for him. That afternoon the Carcroft match was due, and Arthur Augustus was outside left in Tom Merry's team. At the very moment that Mr. Lathom rapped out his name, Arthur Augustus was whispering to Jack Black, on the subject, not of Virgil, but of soccer. Fellows were not supposed to whisper in class, especially on subjects quite unconnected with the lesson. Possibly Mr. Lathom had detected that whisper. He frowned at Arthur Augustus, as he called on him to go on.

Arthur Augustus, detaching his noble mind from the fascinating subject of soccer, looked at his book.

But as he had not been listening to the last fellow on 'con', he had no idea where to begin.

'I am waiting, D'Arcy,' said Mr. Lathom, ominously.

'I am sowwy, sir -'

'Go on at once.'

'I feah I have lost the place, sir.'

'You should not have lost the place, D'Arcy. You have not been giving attention to the lesson,' said Mr. Lathom, severely. 'You have been very inattentive indeed this morning. Go on at Line 281.'

'Oh! Yaas, sir.'

Arthur Augustus fixed his eyes on Line 281. He proceeded to read it out.

'O lux Dardaniae, spes o fidissima Teucrum -' He paused.

'Construe!' rapped Mr. Lathom.

But Arthur Augustus's pause continued. It was really quite an easy line, and normally Arthur Augustus would have had no difficulty with it. But at the moment, the circumstances were not quite normal. The previous evening there had been so much 'football jaw' in Study No. 6, that little attention had been given to prep, and Arthur Augustus had hardly glanced at the passage that had to be tackled in form in the morning. And he had not given it a thought since. Soccer had filled his mind till he was suddenly called on to construe. There was hardly a fellow in the Fourth who couldn't have translated that line without stumbling, but Arthur Augustus stared at it hopelessly.

His chums, Blake and Herries and Digby, regarded him rather anxiously. Lathom, it was clear, was getting 'shirty'. His frown was deepening, boding trouble for the unfortunate Gussy. Cardew, who sat next to D'Arcy, grinned, apparently amused by his perplexity.

'D'Arcy!' Mr. Lathom's voice was very deep, 'You are wasting the time of the class. Construe immediately.'

'Oh, yaas, sir!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

At that moment, Cardew whispered.

It was a faint whisper, which did not reach the form-master's ears. But it reached D'Arcy and gave him immediate relief.

'O lucky Dardanian, fiddler of the Trojans.'

Fellows near at hand, who caught that whisper, almost gasped. It was like Cardew, with his peculiar sense of humour, to pull a fellow's leg, in class or out. But that Arthur Augustus, innocent and unsuspecting as he was, would fall for it, perhaps even Cardew himself did not quite expect. But Arthur Augustus had no doubts. In his anxious hurry to get on with his 'con', the absurdity of such a translation did not occur to him. He repeated Cardew's whispered words with cheery confidence.

'O lucky Dardanian, fiddler of the Trojans -'

Mr. Lathom jumped.

He almost bounded.

He had heard 'howlers' before, from the most aristocratic member of his form. Gussy's noble intellect did not assimilate Latin very easily. But this was the limit. It was a long way over the limit.

'D'Arcy!' gasped Mr. Lathom.

'Gussy, you ass -!' breathed Blake.

'Gussy, you fathead -!' breathed Herries.

'D'Arcy!' Mr. Lathom's voice gave a very good imitation of the rumble of thunder. 'D'Arcy! What - what - what did you say?'

'O lucky Dardanian -' recommenced Arthur Augustus.

There was a howl of merriment in the Fourth.

Really, they could not help it!

'Silence in the form!' Mr. Lathom almost bawled, 'D'Arcy! What do you mean by this?'

'Isn't that wight, sir?' asked Arthur Augustus, innocently.

'Upon my word! The translation of that line, D'Arcy, is "O light of Dardania, surest hope of the Trojans".'

'Bai Jove!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence!'

Cardew winked at his friends, Levison and Clive.

They gave him a glare in return. Mr. Lathom came towards the form, with thunder in his brow.

'D'Arcy!'

'Oh! Yaas, sir.'

'You have not prepared this lesson. Your construe would disgrace a boy in the Third Form. You will go into Extra School this afternoon, D'Arcy!'

'Oh, cwumbs! I - I say, sir -'

'That will do.'

'But I say, sir -!' gasped Arthur Augustus, in utter dismay. Extra School that afternoon meant no football at Carcroft. It was quite overwhelming.

'If - if - if you please, sir -'

'Silence, D'Arcy! You will go on, Figgins.'

'But weally, sir -!' stammered the dismayed Gussy.

His form-master gave him a concentrated glare.

'Another word, D'Arcy, and I shall cane you. Go on, Figgins.'

Figgins, of the New House, went on 'con'. Arthur Augustus sat like a fellow stunned. Too late, he wished fervently that he had found time for

prep the previous evening, and that he had banished soccer from his mind in class! Too late he realised that the whispered translation from Cardew was quite idiotic, and more than enough to incense the most patient of form-masters. Arthur Augustus's face, generally sunny, was serious, indeed solemn, during the remainder of that lesson. When the Fourth were at last dismissed, he lingered behind the rest for a moment, to speak to Mr. Lathom.

'If you please, sir -'

'Extra School from two to four,' rapped Mr. Lathom. 'You may go, D'Arcy.' Evidently, an appeal to Lathom was hopeless.

Slowly and sadly, Arthur Augustus quitted the form-room. In the passage he came on Cardew. That too-humorous junior was looking a little more serious than usual.

'Sorry, D'Arcy,' he muttered.

Arthur Augustus gave him a gracious nod.

'All wight, deah boy,' he answered. 'You twied to help me out, though you seem to have got it feahfully wong. Thanks all the same.'

It had not yet dawned on Gussy's noble intellect that Cardew had been pulling his leg! He walked on, leaving Cardew staring.

CHAPTER XV

A SUDDEN SURPRISE

'MASTER MERRY.'

Tom Merry stopped - unwillingly.

Mr. Carker spoke in civil, indeed amiable, tones. But howsoever civil, and howsoever amiable, Mr. Carker might be, Tom Merry wanted nothing to do with him.

He did not like Gilbert Carker, and he had carefully kept out of his way, so far.

At the present moment, however, he could hardly do so. After dinner, Tom had walked over to the New House to speak to Figgins on the subject of the soccer match at Carcroft that afternoon. Figgins and Co. were all in the junior team, which on occasion of School matches, was picked from both Houses. Arthur

Augustus D'Arcy, doomed to 'Extra', was out of the team, and Tom, much to Figgy's satisfaction, had decided on Redfern of the New House to fill his place. Figgins had assured him that, with one more New House man in the team, St. Jim's was absolutely certain to wipe Carcroft off the face of the earth.

Leaving Figgins and Co. quite happy on that subject, Tom was strolling back to his own House, when Mr. Carker came up. Little as he liked the man, Tom did not want to be uncivil, and he stopped.

To his surprise, Mr. Carker was limping a little.

Tom noticed it, and wondered whether he had taken a tumble among the rubble and ruins of the old abbey.

'Not in a hurry, Master Merry?' asked Mr. Carker.

'Well, we shall have to be getting off pretty soon,' said Tom. 'We're playing football at Carcroft this afternoon, Mr. Carker.'

'If you could spare a few minutes -'

'Oh, certainly,' said Tom. He glanced at the limping leg. 'I hope you haven't had an accident in the old abbey, Mr. Carker.'

'I am afraid I was careless,' said Mr. Carker. 'I slipped on the steps coming up from the vault, and hurt my knee.'

'Sorry,' said Tom, politely.

'Oh, it is nothing serious, only a little painful,' said Mr. Carker. 'I shall have to be inactive for a time, that is all. I was wondering whether you would do me a little service, in the circumstances.'

'Willingly,' said Tom.

'I left my note-book in the vault,' explained Mr. Carker. 'I wanted to go back after lunch but I shall have to rest in my room. Will you fetch it for me?'

'Certainly, if you like.'

'I wouldn't bother you,' said Mr. Carker, apologetically, 'but my knee is painful, and those steps are very steep, and I should not like to have another fall. Here is a flash-lamp, if you would be kind enough to fetch the note-book for me. I am much obliged, Master Merry.'

'Not at all,' answered Tom. He took the flash-lamp, and slipped it into his pocket. 'I'll be back in five minutes.'

'Thank you so much,' said Mr. Carker.

'That's all right,' said Tom, cheerily.

He left Carker standing under the elms, and headed for the old abbey. The man stood watching him, with a strange glint in his eyes, as he went. But Tom did not look back. He walked quickly, and disappeared from Mr. Carker's sight beyond the wall of the Head's garden. And Mr. Carker, with a faint smile on his face, lighted a cigarette.

Tom Merry lost no time.

In a couple of minutes he was in the old abbey, and stepped into the archway that covered the entrance to the ancient vault. It had been densely dark when Figgins and Co. had taken cover there the previous evening. But in the bright afternoon sunshine, the interior of the archway was only a little dim. Tom walked across to the steps.

There he had to take the flash-lamp from his pocket, and turn on the light. Hardly a glimmer of the sunshine reached the steps, and, below, all was in the deepest gloom.

Flashing the light before him, Tom descended the steps, taking care of his footing. The ancient steps were rough and irregular, and he did not want to take a tumble, as Mr. Carker apparently had.

There were more than a dozen steps down into the vault. Not a glimpse of daylight penetrated there.

Having reached the vault, Tom stood and flashed the light about him, looking for the note-book. It was not his first visit to the vault; two or three times before he had explored it, as many other St. Jim's fellows had done, on a half-holiday. The floor was of large square flagstones, chilly and damp, but firm to the tread. Tom moved to and fro, flashing the light. 'Bother!' he murmured.

Tom did not like Mr. Carker, but he was quite willing to oblige him in so slight a matter, if the man had hurt his leg. Any St. Jim's fellow would have done so. But he was rather impatient to get through, and get out of the dark, chilly vault; and he wished that Mr. Carker had been a little more explicit as to precisely where he had left that note-book. It did not seem easy to find.

'Bother!' repeated Tom.

He tramped round the vault, from one grimy flagstone to another, casting the light into every corner.

'Oh! There's the dashed thing!' he exclaimed, suddenly.

There it was - a fat note-book - lying close to the old stone wall, on the farthest side of the vault.

Catching sight of it there, Tom cut across to it at once.

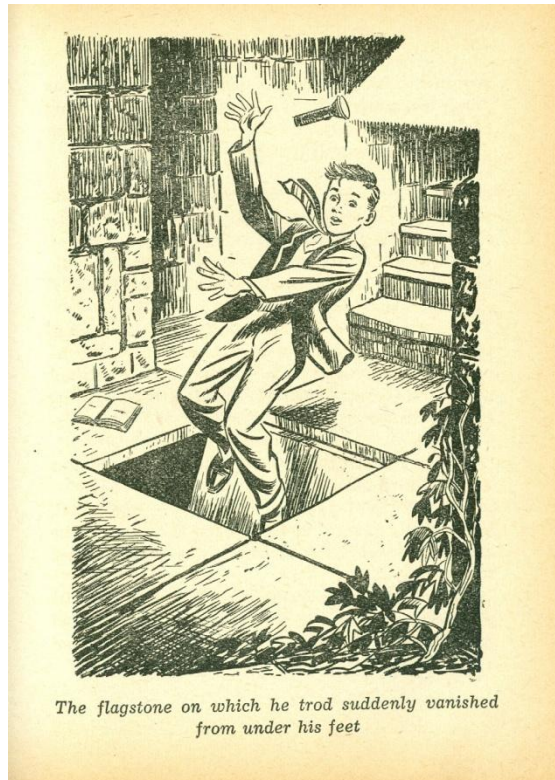
What happened next took him utterly by surprise. He had almost reached the wall where the note-book lay when the flag-stone on which he trod suddenly vanished from under his feet.

That the floor of the old vault was not safe, that there might be hidden pitfalls under the old flagstones, no one had ever dreamed. Generations of St. Jim's boys had explored that old vault under the abbey ruins; and nothing had ever happened. Except since Mr. Carker's visit, the place was not out of bounds, and there was hardly a fellow in the school who had not, at one time or another, penetrated there.

Not for a moment had it occurred to Tom that there could be any danger in the old vault. On other occasions, he, and uncounted other fellows, had trodden on that very flagstone, and it had been as firm as the solid earth. And now -

He had no time to think. He was falling-falling through a gap that had suddenly opened under his feet in the floor of the old vault. He threw out his hands instinctively as he fell, but there was nothing of which he could catch hold. He was falling - falling the flash-lamp still clutched in his fingers.

'Bump.'



The flagstone on which he trod suddenly vanished from under his feet

He landed on his feet, stumbled over and fell. Utterly amazed and bewildered by the sudden happening, he lay dazed.

He had fallen six or seven feet. Apart from the bewildering shock, he was not hurt. He sat up dazedly.

'Oh!' he gasped.

He scrambled up. The flash-lamp was still burning. He stared about him dizzily. The pit into which he had fallen was enclosed by stone walls. It was not more than six feet across. He stared upward, holding the light above his head. What he saw was almost unbelievable. The gap in the floor of the vault above him was closing. As the stone flag had collapsed into a hidden pit, he would naturally have expected it to fall as he had done. But it had not fallen. It was slanting under the gap it had left. And it was in motion! It was rising back into its place. Even as his dazed eyes fixed on it, it filled the gap again. There was a sound of a faint thud as it fitted into its place. Tom's staring eyes looked up at a solid roof over his head! The floor of the old vault was intact again. 'Good heavens!' breathed Tom. Holding the light with one hand, he reached up with the other, and his fingers touched the stone. But the flag was immovable. It had shut over him in the pit, and he could not stir it. 'Good heavens!' repeated Tom. He realised that he was a prisoner in the pit under the old abbey vault. The flag-stone on which he had trodden had not, as he had imagined, collapsed under him: evidently it had turned on a pivot, and, released from his weight, it had resumed its former position. How could it have happened? The pivoted stone must have been fastened underneath - till now - or this would have happened before. Somehow that fastening must have failed. Tom drew a deep, deep breath. The stone flag above his head could not be moved from below. It could only be tilted over from above. There was no escape for him up into the abbey vault. He flashed the light round him. Stone walls shut him in. He opened his lips to shout. But he knew that it was useless to shout. The loudest shout could not have penetrated the stone above him; neither, if it could have done so, were there ears to hear. On any other half-holiday, St. Jim's fellows might have been rambling over the old ruins; but they were now out of bounds, and what had happened to Figgins and Co. was fairly certain to warn off other fellows who might be disposed to break bounds in that direction. Nobody was likely to enter the ruined abbey - excepting Mr. Carker. And even Carker would not come, if, as he had told Tom, he had hurt his leg, and intended to suspend his archaeological investigations for a time. Tom's face paled a little in the glimmer of the flash-lamp. He had to get out of that deadly trap-but how?

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE IS TOM MERRY?

'WEMARKABLE!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Other fellows agreed that it was remarkable, in fact, more than remarkable. It was mystifying. 'Where's Tom Merry?' a crowd of fellows were asking.

Nobody could answer that question.

Manners and Lowther, who generally knew where their chum was, were quite in the dark. They had not seen him since he had walked across to the New House after dinner, to speak to Figgins. Study No. 6. had seen nothing of him-Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy, had not the remotest idea what had become of him. Talbot of the Shell, Kangaroo, Levison, Clive, and a dozen other fellows, asked one another, and everybody they met, where Tom Merry

was. Nobody knew.

The motor-coach was ready to take the party across to Carcroft. It was waiting-and the St. Jim's footballers were waiting. Everyone was puzzled and perplexed, and not a few impatient and irritated.

Arthur Augustus, due for Extra School, had come down to see the team off, but he had almost forgotten Extra School now. Where was Tom Merry?

'Can't have gone out, I suppose,' said Blake.

'Wathah not.'

'Well, if he'd gone out, he would come back, I suppose,' said Lowther. 'He knows the time we start for Carcroft.'

'He said nothing about going out,' said Manners.

'He's not gone out! But where the dickens is he?'

'Where the jolly old thump -!' said Kangaroo.

It was really amazing.

'Not much good looking for him,' said Talbot. 'We've looked everywhere, I think. Where can he be?'

'Who saw him last?' asked Blake.

'Well, we saw him, in our House, soon after dinner,' said Kerr. 'He came over to tell us a new man was wanted in the team.'

'And I told him it was a jolly good idea to play another New House man,' said Figgins, with a nod, 'just what the team needed to give it a backbone.'

'Fathead!' remarked Blake.

'Look here, you School House ass -!' began Figgins, hotly.

'Well, you look here, you New House ditherer -'

'Don't rag, you chaps,' said Kerr. 'This is rather serious. We can't go over to Carcroft without our skipper, and we can't hang on much longer. Where on earth has Tom Merry got to?'

It seemed a question to which there was no answer. They had looked for Tom everywhere, as Talbot said - in the studies, in the day-room, in the gym, up and down the passages - not that he was likely to be hanging about in any of those spots when he was due to start for Carcroft; still, as he seemed to be playing the part of the Invisible Man, they looked for him in likely and unlikely spots, and all were drawn blank.

Every moment they hoped, and half-expected, him to appear from somewhere or other, hurrying to join the crowd waiting with the coach. But he did not appear. Why, no one could begin to guess. It seemed incredible that he could have gone out and forgotten the match. Yet, otherwise, where was he?

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Tom Mewwy weally seems to have dissolved into thin air, like that chap Hercules - was it Hercules -?'

'Mercury!' said Kerr.

'Yaas, wathah-Mercury!' assented Arthur Augustus, 'like that chap Mercury in the-in the-in the Iliad, was it?'

'In the Aeneid,' said Kerr.

'Yaas, of course-like that chap Mercury in the Aeneid,' said Arthur Augustus. 'But I suppose he hasn't dissolved into thin air like jolly old

Mercuwy all the same, so what the jolly old dooce has become of him.'

'Anybody seen him since he came back from the New House?' asked Blake. Heads were shaken. Nobody, it seemed, had seen Tom since his visit to the other House across the quad.

'We should have seen him, if he had,' said Manners. 'He never came back to the House.'

'Well, he didn't stay in our House,' said Figgins.

'He left, after we'd had a jaw, and I'd told him that Redfern would be worth three or four School House men in the team -'

'Weally, Figgins -'

'Must have gone out of gates,' said Talbot. 'Goodness knows why, or why he hasn't come in. But-we can't wait much longer, if we're going to play Carcroft at all.'

Cardew of the Fourth came sauntering up. Cardew was not in the eleven, nor was he particularly interested in the Carcroft match. But he was curious, seeing the group of footballers hanging about by the coach, instead of getting off on the ten-mile trip to Carcroft.

'Anything up?' he asked.

'Seen Tom Merry?' asked five or six voices at once.

Cardew raised his eyebrows.

'Isn't he here?' he asked.

'Can't you see that he isn't?' snapped Blake. 'Got any eyes?'

'Yes, I can see that he isn't, now I sit up and take notice,' drawled Cardew. 'Shoved into Extra like D'Arcy, or what?'

'Nothing of the kind. Have you seen him about?' asked Manners. 'Nobody seems to have seen him since he called on Figgins in the New House just after dinner.'

'I saw him speaking to that archaeological johnny in the quad.'

'When was that?'

'Must have been after he saw Figgins,' answered Cardew. 'He was coming away from the House, and I noticed that man Carker stop him and speak to him.'

'Where did he go, then?'

Cardew shook his head.

'Haven't the foggiest,' he answered. 'I just happened to see them, at a distance, that's all. Last I saw of him he was talking to Carker.'

'That must have been nearly an hour ago, if it was when he was coming away from our House,' said Figgins. 'You haven't seen him since?'

'Not the ghost of him.'

'Bai Jove! I wondah whethah Carkah may know where he is gone!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Pewwaps we might ask Carkah if he saw him go anywhah.'

'D'Arcy!' came a sharp rap.

'Oh, bai Jove!'

Arthur Augustus gave a little jump, at the voice of his form-master. He spun round, and blinked at Mr. Lathom. The Fourth-form master gave him a frown.

'You are late for Extra School, D'Arcy,' he said, severely.

'Sowwy, sir-but -'

'Go in at once.'

'Weally, sir -'

'At once!' rapped Mr. Lathom.

There was no help for it. Arthur Augustus left the group of worried footballers, and walked away to the School House. Extra School claimed him

for the next two hours, and he had to occupy his noble mind with French irregular verbs, instead of the mystery of Tom Merry's strange disappearance.

But some of the juniors had caught at his suggestion. From what Cardew had said, it seemed that Mr. Carker must be the last person who had seen Tom Merry. It was possible, at least, that he knew something of Tom's subsequent movements.

'Anybody know where Carker is?' asked Manners.

'Might ask him - !' said Talbot. 'We've got to find Tom somehow.'

'If Tom doesn't turn up, we've got to go without him,' said Blake. 'We can't keep the Carcroft men waiting for us - we shall be late as it is. You'll have to captain the side, Talbot, and pick up an extra man.'

'Better pick a New House man - !' said Figgins.

'Oh, can it,' said Blake.

'Look here -'

'Rats!'

'We'd better see Carker, and ask him,' said Talbot, decidedly. 'It's just possible he may know where Tom went ... may have seen him go out, if he's gone out, and it looks as if he must have. I'll cut in and speak to Carker.'

Talbot hurried to the School House. The other fellows waited, impatiently. The time was passing, and it was a ten-mile run before them. If Tom Merry did not choose to turn up, evidently the team had to go without him, and it did not seem useful to wait longer for a fellow who seemed to have walked out on them. However, they waited till Talbot came back.

'Well, Carker know anything?' grunted Blake.

Talbot shook his head.

'I haven't been able to see him-he's not in the House,' he answered.

Snort, from Blake.

'Digging at that rubbish in the old abbey, I suppose,' he said. 'Bother the man - and bother his archaeological stunts! Well, you can't go there and look for him - it's out of bounds.'

'Well, in the circumstances - !' said Talbot.

Another snort from Blake.

'Blow the circumstances,' he snapped. 'Are we playing soccer this afternoon, or aren't we playing soccer? Tom could turn up if he liked, I suppose.'

'I suppose so, But -'

'We're late already! Get in, and let's go! We shall want another man, as Tom Merry's walked out on us.'

'He hasn't,' said Manners, warmly. 'Something's stopped him -'

'Well, what?' snapped Blake.

'How should I know? Something must have happened -'

'Oh, rot!'

'Look here, we can't hang on any longer, if we're going to play Carcroft at all,' said Figgins. 'Better pick a New House man, an -'

'Talk sense,' said Blake. 'Plenty of School House men -'

'Little me any use?' drawled Cardew.

Talbot nodded. He had to make up his mind. Soccer was soccer, whether Tom Merry chose to turn up or not.

'Cut in and get your things, Cardew,' he said.

Cardew was among the footballers as the motor-coach rolled off for Carcroft. Talbot of the Shell was captaining the team in place of Tom Merry, whose unaccountable non-appearance was the subject of discussion all the

way to Carcroft School. After which, soccer was the order of the day, and Harry Compton and Co. gave the St. Jim's men enough to think about.

CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER ALARM

BUZZZZZZZZ!

The telephone bell rang in Mr. Railton's study.

Mr. Railton was seated at his table, Kildare of the Sixth by the window. The house-master, and the captain of the school, were discussing House matters when the buzz of the telephone interrupted. Mr. Railton picked up the receiver and Kildare half-rose. But at a sign from the house-master he sat down again.

'Wait a few moments, Kildare. It is probably nothing important.'

'Very well, sir.'

A faint frown came over the house-master's face, as he listened to a voice from the telephone exchange.

'Upon my word!' he murmured. 'A trunk call -'

'Shall I go, sir?'

'No! It is a trunk call from Huckleberry,' said Mr. Railton. 'I have no doubt that it is from Miss Priscilla Fawcett.' His expression was something between a frown and a smile, and Kildare smiled too. Both of them were very well aware of Miss Priscilla's tender interest in her dear Tommy. 'I hope that the poor lady has not had another scare from that unfeeling practical joker. You may remember, Kildare, that a week or so ago she was alarmed by some silly jest to the effect that her ward had been kidnapped, and I had to send for Merry to reassure her with his own voice.'

'I remember, sir,' said Kildare, smiling, 'but surely she would not take a second such trick seriously.'

'I hope not,' said Mr. Railton, 'but -' He broke off, as a well-known high-pitched voice came over the wires. He was through to Laurel Villa at Huckleberry.

'Mr. Railton -'

'Speaking, Miss Fawcett.'

'Is Tommy safe?'

'Quite,' answered the house-master, 'really, Miss Fawcett, if you have been alarmed again by a foolish trick -'

'You are sure?'

'Yes, yes!'

'You are quite sure that Tommy is safe?'

'Yes, yes, yes.'

'I have been so upset, Mr. Railton! I am sure you will forgive me for troubling you, but I have been so upset -'

'Oh! Quite! Quite Miss Fawcett. But I do assure you that your ward can come to no possible harm.'

Mr. Railton spoke very kindly and patiently. If poor Miss Priscilla tried his patience, it was equal to the strain. Evidently the old lady at Huckleberry had had another scare, no doubt as groundless as the former one.

'Merry is quite safe here, Miss Fawcett-quite! How could it be otherwise? I assure you that you have no cause for alarm.'

'But that man has spoken to me again on the telephone, Mr. Railton,' came the agitated voice. 'He has told me that Tommy is kidnapped -'

'Absurd!' said Mr. Railton. 'Are you sure that it was the same person, Miss Fawcett?'

'Oh! Yes, yes! It was the same husky voice - I knew it immediately, and I was much alarmed as soon as I heard it -'

'He gave no name?'

'No! No! Only Nemo, as before. Tommy said that that meant "Nobody". It was the same wicked man.'

Mr. Railton compressed his lips. It was not agreeable to have his time wasted by hysterical telephone calls from a scared old lady, but his chief feeling was a desire to get to close quarters with 'Nemo', whoever 'Nemo' was, and give him a sound thrashing.

'You have no idea who the man really is, Miss Fawcett?'

'Not in the least, Mr. Railton! But - but - but are you quite, quite sure that it is not true?'

'Yes, quite.'

'He said that Tommy had been kidnapped, just the same as before, and that he would not be released until a ransom of a thousand pounds had been paid.'

'The rascal!' breathed Mr. Railton. 'You may be assured, Miss Fawcett, that nothing of the kind has occurred, or could occur here. How could danger threaten a boy, among several hundred other boys, in a school?'

'Yes, yes, but - but -he spoke so positively,' wailed Miss Priscilla. 'He said that Tommy was a prisoner in his hands, taken a hundred miles from the school- '

'Mere nonsense.'

'And - and imprisoned in a place where he could never be found, unless a thousand pounds was paid for his release. I said at once that I would pay the money - indeed, I would pay every penny I possess, if my dear Tommy was in danger -'

'That was somewhat injudicious, Miss Fawcett. I strongly advise you to acquaint the local police with this matter, and they will take steps to see that such tricks are not played on you.'

'But if dear Tommy has been kidnapped, I would=-'

Mr. Railton breathed rather hard.

'Nothing of the kind, Miss Fawcett. You cannot suppose that such a thing could happen without your ward's house-master becoming aware of it, surely.'

'No! Yes! No! I am so sorry to trouble you, Mr. Railton, but - but I shall not - I cannot - feel assured, unless dear Tommy speaks to me. Do please call dear Tommy to the telephone.'

'Really, Miss Fawcett -'

'I know I am a great trouble-and I am so sorry-but - but - but I - I must hear dear Tommy's voice, and know that he is safe,' came a wail from distant Huckleberry.

Mr. Railton breathed harder than before. But his patience still stood the strain.

'Wait a moment, Miss Fawcett.'

'Yes, yes! I am so sorry, so very sorry, but - but -'

'Yes, yes. Wait a moment.'

Mr. Railton looked across at Kildare, whose expression was one of mingled compassion and amusement.

'You heard what was said, Kildare -'

'Yes, sir! Poor old soul!' said Kildare. 'I'd like to handle that rascal who has been scaring her.'

'She will not be reassured until Merry speaks to her. Will you find him and bring him to this study as quickly as you can.'

'I'm afraid that can't be done, sir! The junior football team is away at Carcroft. They won't be back for some time yet.'

'Upon my word! I had forgotten,' said Mr. Railton. 'There is no doubt, I suppose that Merry went with the junior team?'

'He's captain of the side,' answered Kildare. 'I did not see them go, but they could hardly have gone without their captain. Tom Merry is playing football at Carcroft, sir, ten miles away.'

'Then he certainly cannot come to the telephone,' said Mr. Railton. He turned to the instrument again.

'Miss Fawcett -'

'Yes, yes, yes! Is dear Tommy there?'

'He is absent from the school at the moment -'

'He is kidnapped -!' came a wail.

'No! No! No! No! It is a half-holiday here, Miss Fawcett, and Merry is captain of the junior football team. They are playing football at Carcroft. As soon as they return, I will tell Merry to telephone you immediately.'

'If you are quite sure -'

'Yes, yes, yes.'

'If he has been kidnapped -'

'No! No! No!'

'I am so upset, Mr. Railton! One word from Tommy would reassure me! When will the little boys return to the school?'

Mr. Railton - a worried face relaxed - and Kildare, could not repress a grin as they heard that. To the old lady at Huckleberry, those hefty young footballers were 'little boys'. The St. Jim's junior team would never have recognized themselves from that description!

'Do you know when they will be back, Kildare?' asked Mr. Railton, his lips twitching.

'Not till after five, sir, I think.'

The house-master spoke into the transmitter again.

'The junior team will be back soon after five o'clock, Miss Fawcett -'

'Oh, dear! That is more than an hour to wait!'

'I assure you -'

'Are you quite, quite sure that dear Tommy is safe at Bancroft - I think you said Bancroft -'

'Carcroft,' said Mr. Railton.

'Yes, yes, Carcroft! Are you sure -'

'Quite! Quite! Do please calm yourself, Miss Fawcett, and remember that the person who telephoned you gave you a false alarm last time -'

'Yes, yes, that is true! I - I will wait! But - but you will let dear Tommy telephone the moment he returns to the school -'

'Certainly - immediately - without a moment's delay.'

'Thank you, Mr. Railton! I shall sit by the telephone and wait till I hear his voice. I cannot feel sure until then. If anything has happened to dear Tommy -'

'Nothing-nothing at all-he is playing football, and I am sure enjoying the game -'

'He will telephone -'

'Yes, yes.'

'The moment he returns -?'

'The very moment. Good-bye, Miss Fawcett.'

Mr. Railton put up the receiver. He looked at Kildare, and Kildare looked at him. Both smiled.

'Poor old soul!' said Kildare.

Mr. Railton nodded, and house-master and Sixth-former resumed their discussion, which had been interrupted by the trunk call from Hampshire. To neither of them did it occur, for one moment, that this time Miss Priscilla's alarm was not groundless.

Tom Merry, so far as either of them knew, was playing football at Carcroft School, and would return to St. Jim's with the team. Miss Priscilla, at Laurel Villa, had only to wait till then - so far as they knew!

They were to learn very differently before long.

CHAPTER XVIII

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS WANTS TO KNOW

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was glad to hear the chime of four that afternoon. At four o'clock, Extra School was over, and the delinquents who had suffered under the detention-master were dismissed. That was a relief for which the swell of St. Jim's was duly thankful, but his aristocratic brow was clouded as he walked out into the quadrangle. Soccer was going on at Carcroft, ten miles away, Gussy's place in the team filled by Redfern of the New House, and Gussy, with all his elegant manners and customs, was the keenest of footballers. It was rough luck for Arthur Augustus, and he could not feel very cheerful about it.

He was wondering, too, whether Tom Merry had, after all, turned up in time to go with the team. If not, it looked like a rough passage for them at Carcroft; if they had lost their captain, as well as their best forward - Gussy having an innocent but quite fixed belief that he was just that! So after release from Extra, he proceeded to inquire.

'Seen Tom Mewwy, Wacke?' he asked, as he came on Racke of the Shell in the quad.

'Lots of times,' answered Racke,

'Weally, Wacke, I mean, do you know whether he went with the team to Carcwoft or not?'

'Blessed if I know-or care.'

'Oh, wats!'

Arthur Augustus turned his back on the slacker of the Shell. Then he came on Dick Julian, who had been among the fellows seeing the football team off.

'Did Tom Mewwy turn up, Julian?' he asked.

Dick Julian shook his head.

'No - they had to go without him,' he answered.

'Bai Jove!'

'Can't make it out,' said Julian. 'Tom can't have gone out and forgotten the match, I suppose. But he never turned up.'

'You haven't seen him about since?'

'No-he hasn't come in, so far as I know.'

'Wemarkable!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I weally fail to undahstand what Tom Mewwy fancies he is up to. I have nevah heard of a fellow cuttin' a football match like this befoah. It is vevy odd indeed.'

Five or six fellows were asked, in turn, whether they had seen anything of Tom Merry. None of them had.

Tom, it was clear, was not in the school. If he had gone out, he had not yet come in. Yet it seemed impossible that Tom, captain of the team, could have gone out and failed of his own accord to reappear.

Arthur Augustus began to wonder what could have happened to him-it certainly began to look as if something had. He remembered his own suggestion that Mr. Carker, the last person who had been seen with Tom, might know something about it, and he went back into the House to look for Mr. Carker.

He looked into the Common-room, where the Head's visitor was sometimes to be found. Two or three masters were there, but no Carker. Mr. Selby, master of the Third, glanced at the inquiring face at the door.

'Do you want anything here, D'Arcy?' he snapped.

Mr. Selby generally snapped.

'I am lookin' for Mr. Carkah, sir.'

'He is not here.'

'Pewwaps you could tell me where he is, sir.'

'I know nothing about it.'

'Pewwaps you might know, sir,' said Arthur Augustus, with an inquiring look at Mr. Linton.

The master of the Shell shook his head.

'I have not seen him since lunch, D'Arcy,' he said, 'probably he is engaged in his archaeological work in the abbey, or he may be in his room.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Arthur Augustus retired. It was probably, as Mr. Linton said, that Carker was at the old abbey, but as the old abbey was out of bounds, D'Arcy decided to draw his room first. So he went up the stairs, and tapped at Mr. Carker's door, in a passage opening off the dormitory landing, where several of the masters' rooms were situated.

There was no reply from within, and Arthur Augustus, having tapped again and received no reply, opened the door. The room was vacant-Mr. Carker was not there. He closed the door again, and descended the stairs. Unless Mr. Carker had gone out, it seemed fairly certain that he would be in the old abbey - a spot forbidden to St. Jim's fellows by the Head's recent order. Breaking bounds was an exploit not in Gussy's line, but he was going to see Mr. Carker - if he could, and in the special and unusual circumstances, he had no doubt that his house-master would give him leave. So he proceeded next to Mr. Railton's study, and tapped at the door.

'Come in!'

Arthur Augustus came in. Kildare was still with Mr. Railton, and both of them glanced at D'Arcy as he entered.

'What is it, D'Arcy?' asked Mr. Railton.

'If you please, sir, may I have leave to go into the old abbey -?'

'Certainly not.'

'In the circumstances, sir -'

'The old abbey is out of bounds, as you very well know, D'Arcy,' said Mr. Railton severely. 'You were concerned in the disturbance there which caused Mr. Carker to request that it should be put out of bounds.

Certainly you may not have leave to go there.'

'But weally, sir -!'

'You may leave my study, D'Arcy.'

'But it is wathah important, sir, for me to see Mr. Carkah - it is weally important, sir, for me to speak to him -'

'Indeed! And why?'

'I want to ask him about Tom Mewwy, sir.'

'Tom Merry? What do you mean?'

'I mean that he might know somethin' about Tom, sir, and I am weally gettin' wathah anxious.'

'I fail to understand you, D'Arcy! What do you mean? Merry is now at Carcroft with the junior football team -'

'He is not at Carcroft, sir.'

'What?'

'He did not go with the team, sir -'

'D'Arcy!'

'And I am weally feelin' wathah wowwied, sir. I cannot imagine any weason why Tom should disapeeah like this -'

'Disappear!' ejaculated Mr. Railton.

'Yaas, sir, he seems to have disappeared in the most wemarkable and unaccountable way, and unless there has been an accident, sir, I cannot imagine what has become of him.'

'Good heavens!' breathed Mr. Railton, while Kildare stared at the swell of the Fourth with startled eyes.

To both of them, Arthur Augustus's words came as a startling shock-after that telephone call from Laurel Villa. The School-House master rose to his feet.

'D'Arcy! Explain yourself at once! I understood that Merry of the Shell had gone to Carcroft with the football team. You thought so, Kildare?'

'Certainly, sir! I see no reason why he should not have gone,' answered the St. Jim's captain.

'Are you sure that he did not go, D'Arcy?'

'Yaas, wathah, sir! He nevah turned up when the team went, and they had to go without him.'

'Upon my word! Is he now in the school, then?'

'I cannot find him anywhah, sir, and all the fellows I have asked know nothin' about him. I should like to ask Mr. Carkah, if you will give me leave to go to the old abbey -'

'Mr. Carker is not likely to know anything about a junior's movements, D'Arcy,' snapped the house-master. 'What do you mean?'

'Tom Mewwy was seen talkin' to him in the quad, sir, soon aftah dinnah, and nobody has seen Tom since,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'I thought that Mr. Carkah might have noticed where he went, and if he went out; and pewwaps Tom may have said something to him about it. As he was the last person with Tom Mewwy, sir, he might know something.'

Mr. Railton compressed his lips.

'This is most extraordinary,' he said. 'If you are absolutely certain that Merry did not go with the footballers, D'Arcy -'

'Plenty of fellows saw them go, sir, and they will all tell you that Tom Mewwy was not with them when they went.'

'Are you sure that he is not in the school?'

'I have looked for him eveywhah, sir, and asked a lot of fellows, and nobody knows any thin' about him.'

Mr. Railton and Kildare exchanged a quick glance.

It seemed impossible, indeed fantastic, to suppose that there could be any grounds for Miss Priscilla's alarm. Yet only a quarter of an hour ago she had said that 'Nemo' had telephoned that Tom Merry was kidnapped - and

now, it seemed, he had disappeared from all knowledge! It certainly seemed to fit together.

'Impossible!' muttered Mr. Railton.

'Quite, sir,' said Kildare, 'but -'

'If you will give me leave to go to the old abbey, sir and ask Mr. Carkah whethah he knows anythin'-!' recommenced Arthur Augustus, anxiously.

'Yes, yes. You may certainly go, D'Arcy - and return at once and tell me what Mr. Carker says.'

'Vewy well, sir.'

Arthur Augustus left the study. He left the house-master and the prefect looking at one another rather blankly.

'Nothing can have happened to Merry!' said Mr. Railton.

'Nothing, sir! But-after what Miss Fawcett said -'.

'It is odd-unaccountable-that Merry should be keeping out of sight in this way-a very extraordinary coincidence. But it can be nothing more. D'Arcy may be mistaken - But we must ascertain at once, Kildare, whether anything has happened. Merry may have met with some accident out of gates - indeed that seems to be the only possible way of accounting for his absence. Will you make inquiries at once, Kildare, and ascertain whether anything is known of Merry in the school?'

'At once, sir,' answered Kildare, and he left the house-master's study. Mr. Railton was left with a very perturbed face.

Ten minutes later there was a tap at the door, and Arthur Augustus looked in.

'Well, D'Arcy?'

'I have been to the old abbey, sir -'

'What did Mr. Carker say?'

'I have not seen him sir! He was not there,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I looked all ovah the place, sir, but Mr. Carkah is not there.'

'No doubt he has gone out,' said Mr. Railton. 'You need trouble about the matter no further, D'Arcy, I will speak to Mr. Carker when he comes in. You may go.'

It was more than ten minutes later that Kildare of the Sixth came back to the study.

'Have you any news of Merry, Kildare?'

'None, sir! It seems certain that he did not go with the footballers - Talbot, of his form, took his place as captain, I have learned. And he certainly is not in the school. I cannot find anyone who saw him go out, and Taggles at his lodge saw nothing of him. But he must, I suppose, have gone out, and - and - and ...'

Kildare hesitated, '... and something must have prevented him from coming back, sir.'

'An accident -!' muttered Mr. Railton.

'It looks like it, sir.'

'Thank you, Kildare. I will telephone at once to Inspector Skeat, at Wayland, and inquire whether there has been any accident known at the police station.'

In a few minutes the house-master was speaking to the police station at Wayland. But the police station was drawn blank. There was no news there of any accident to a schoolboy. Mr. Railton put up the receiver, with a deeply troubled face. Miss Priscilla, at Huckleberry, had been told on the telephone that Tom Merry was kidnapped, a prisoner for ransom; and at the same time, Tom seemed, to have disappeared! Was it only coincidence-or was

it something more? The School-House master could not help feeling that it was something more.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN IN BLACK

'WHO ARE YOU?' gasped Tom Merry.

The last gleam of the flash-lamp had flickered out. Tom Merry was in utter darkness, in the pit beneath the ancient abbey vault.

How long had he been a prisoner there? It seemed like hours - endless hours - yet he knew that it could not have been long. But in the silence and the solitude the minutes dragged.

There was no escape.

Again and again he had reached at the stone above his head. He knew that it turned on a pivot, tipping over at one end if trodden on at that end, sinking under the weight. From above, it could have been pushed down; from below it could not be pulled, there was nothing on the under-surface of the flat stone to give the slightest hold. He was shut in - a prisoner - there was no escape from that deep and dismal pit.

He had groped round the stone walls, in the faint hope of finding some possible opening. But the surrounding walls of stone blocks were solid to the touch.

One of the blocks, it seemed to him, was detached from the rest; as if the old cement had mouldered away; but he pushed and pushed at it without stirring it; it was immovable.

And now the battery of the flash-lamp was exhausted, and the light failed; darkness was added to the silence and solitude.

Tom Merry had a stout heart, but it was heavy now. What was going to be the end of this? Utterly unexpectedly, amazingly, he had been trapped in this remote corner, far from sight and sound of every other fellow in the school. It seemed more like an evil dream than reality; yet it was terribly real. How was it going to end?

He had given up thinking of the football match at Carcroft. Long ago, the team must have gone without him, if they were going at all. What they thought of his unexplained absence he could not imagine. But as the long minutes dragged by, he gave less and less thought to that. He had to think of his own position, a prisoner in a hidden pit - when would he be found and rescued?

He was glad to remember that Gilbert Carker knew that he had gone into the old abbey. When he was missed, and failed to return, Carker would mention it, and he would be looked for there. There could be no sign in the vault above to show how he had disappeared, but the flagstone would tilt if stepped upon, as it had tilted under him; and it could hardly fail to be stepped upon, if a search was made in the vault for him; as surely it was bound to be. He had only to wait - though how long he had to wait, he could not tell.

The footballers must have missed him-he would be missed later at calling-over in the School House.

Then there would be inquiry-then if not sooner.

Carker would hear that he was missing, the old abbey would be searched, and the secret of the tilting stone in the floor of the vault could

scarcely fail to come to light. He had only to wait - but how long? It was chilly, dreary, in the darkness, after the lamp had expired. The deadly silence seemed even more oppressive than the darkness. It was hard to believe that he was only a few hundred yards from the School House, from the quad where there would be dozens of fellows - he had a feeling of being utterly remote. Not a sound broke the oppressive stillness, and the blackness about him was like a heavy cloak.

Suddenly there came a glimmer of light in the dark. It was a tiny beam. It came from the wall of the pit, and Tom, blinking at it, discerned that it was from the edges of the stone block which had seemed to him detached from the rest.

Strangely, eerily, that glimmer outlined the block, in a faint oblong of light.

There was something beyond that was not solid earth. It flashed into his mind that that great block of stone was movable, by some means; that beyond it lay some other pit, or perhaps an underground passage. The light came from beyond it and that light must be carried in a human hand. Someone was coming to the hidden pit.

It was amazing - bewildering. He had hoped that a search would be made in the vault above - that the tilting flag would be discovered by the searchers, but he had not dreamed of help from any other quarter. Yet now, as that strange light glimmered into the pit, he knew that someone was coming - obviously by some passage in the earth under the old abbey. He panted for breath, his heart beating. Was it help - was it rescue? What else could it mean?

He stood with his eyes fixed on the stone block outlined by the glimmer. A low rumbling sound came to his ears.

The stone block was moving!

'Tom had been unable to stir it. But from the other side, evidently, it could be stirred. For it was moving, and as he watched with starting eyes, he saw it slide slowly out of its place.

An aperture was left in the wall of the pit; narrow, and only two or three feet high. The light gleamed full in.

Behind it a stooping figure appeared. Tom could hardly believe his eyes as he watched it. It was that of a man dressed in black overalls, with a black cloth drawn over his face and fastened there. One slit appeared in the lower part of that strange mask, over a hidden mouth: two slits higher revealed two glinting eyes. Tom gazed at that strange apparition, dumb. The man in black, stooping, came through the gap in the wall. Then he straightened up.

Tom found his voice: 'Who are you?'

There was no reply. The strange figure passed him, stopped under the tilting stone, and reached up. Tom heard a faint clicking sound.

Dizzily, he realised what the strange man's strange action meant. It was possible for the tilting stone to be secured below; formerly it must have been so secured, or it would have been discovered long ago.

Now the man in black was securing the hidden fastening, whatever it was. Now, if a search was made in the vault above, any number of feet might tread on that flagstone, and it would be as firm as it had always been hitherto. From that direction, no search could be successful now.

The man in black turned to him. His eyes gleamed strangely from the eye-slits in the black cloth.

'Follow me!' he said, in a low husky voice.

Tom passed a hand over his forehead, dazedly.

'I'm dreaming this!' he muttered. 'Who are you?'

'Nemo.'

'Wha-a-at?' stuttered Tom.

'You have heard the name.' There was a sardonic inflexion in the husky voice. 'It is not strange to you.'

'Nemo! Nemo means nobody,' panted Tom. 'Oh!'

He suddenly remembered his talk with Miss Priscilla on the telephone. 'Oh! Nemo! You are the man who telephoned to my guardian at Laurel Villa!'

'Exactly.'

'Your name is not Nemo - cannot be -'

'It is a name that will suffice! Follow me.'

'You've come here to get me out of this?' asked Tom. He could not imagine any other purpose for which the man had come, yet even as he spoke he knew that it was not so. This strange man was not a friend, he was an enemy. It was as an enemy that he had come, inexplicable as it was. The hapless junior felt it - knew it.

There was a low sarcastic laugh under the black cloth.

'You will not get out of this very soon, I fear!' came the answer. 'But that depends on others.'

'How do you mean?'

'Never mind - follow me.' The man stooped his head to pass through the gap in the wall.

Tom hesitated a moment. But it was useless to remain where he was - and he followed, ducking his head. He followed the man in black into an arched passage, with stone walls reeking with damp. Never, so far as Tom knew, had it been known that there were subterranean passages under the old abbey; if they had ever been known, the knowledge of them had been forgotten. Yet their existence might have been guessed, for the old abbey had been built centuries ago, in the dangerous old days when secret passages for escape in times of peril had been rather the rule than the exception.

Who was this man, who had so carefully hidden his face, and who spoke in a disguised voice, and who evidently knew secrets of the old place unknown to others? It could be nobody connected with St. Jim's - it must be someone from outside the school. Yet how could an outsider be aware of secrets unknown to anyone at St. Jim's? It was a bewildering puzzle.

In the subterranean passage, there was a space to stand upright, though Tom's head almost touched the vaulted roof. The man in black pushed him inside and grasped the stone block. There was a creak, as of rusty iron, as it rolled back into its place.

'Come!'

The man in black moved on along the passage. Tom Merry followed him, his heart beating and his fists clenched. The mystery man did not intend to help him out - he knew that. What his intentions were, Tom did not know and could not guess; but he did know that the strange man was not leading him to freedom. He followed on, watchful for a chance of escape. If Nemo's intention was to keep him a prisoner, he was prepared to fight as hard as he could for his liberty.

Slowly, it dawned on his mind what this must mean, as he remembered more of that talk on the telephone with Miss Priscilla and Mr. Carker. Nemo had scared the old lady with a tale that he was kidnapped. It was not true then - but it was true now!

That knowledge forced itself into his mind. Who the man was, how he knew

the secrets of the old abbey, how he could possibly have known that Tom had fallen into the pit beneath the vault, were questions to which he could find no answer. But he began to understand the man's motive. What had been false before was true now—he was kidnapped! He set his teeth hard. He would not be kidnapped without a struggle. But for the moment he followed Nemo quietly, waiting and watching for a chance.

The man in black moved on ahead, the light gleaming before him, Tom Merry following at his heels.

The passage ended in a stone-walled cell some ten or twelve feet in diameter. A light was burning there - that of a paraffin lamp set on a small trestle-table.

The air was heavy, clammy, but it was fairly fresh; evidently there was some hidden means of ventilation.

Tom stared round him in the lamplight. In one corner of the cell were blankets, apparently intended for a bed; there was a stool by the table, and several packages. It looked as though the cell had been prepared for habitation, though with a parsimonious hand. All the articles he could see were new - they could not have been there many days. Perhaps they were so few in number because of difficulty in conveying them to the cell unseen. One of the packages had been opened, and revealed several loaves, and a variety of tinned foods. Tom's lips set harder as he noted it. It could only mean that he was to remain there—that he was to be a prisoner for an indefinite period.

His searching eyes scanned the stone walls. There was no sign of a door. But he knew that there must be some secret door - no doubt a pivoting stone like that giving access to the pit under the vault. By that hidden way, the man in black had come - by that hidden way, he would go. Not, if Tom could help it, leaving his prisoner behind!

The eyes in the slits in the black cloth glinted at him.

'Your quarters, Master Merry!' came the husky, sardonic voice.

'You're going to leave me here?'

'For the time - yes.'

'Till when?'

No answer.

'You mean, till a ransom is paid for my release?' asked Tom, quietly.

The man in black shrugged his shoulders.

'Do you imagine that I have taken all this trouble for nothing?' he asked.

'You villain -'

'That will do!'

He stepped to the wall, and pressed upon a stone block. With a faint creaking sound, it moved, revealing a low narrow doorway. As he stooped his head to pass through, Tom Merry made a desperate spring, and grasped him. It was now or never - once that stone had closed on him, he was helpless. With all his strength he grasped the man in black and dragged at him.

There was a savage snarl under the masking black cloth. The man in black gave grasp for grasp, and Tom, strong and sturdy as he was, sagged in a powerful, muscular, grip. The man was too strong for him.

'You young fool!' breathed the man in black.

He exerted his strength, and pitched the St. Jim's junior bodily across the cell. Tom Merry stumbled over, and fell. He was on his feet the next moment, panting - but that moment had been enough for the kidnapper. He had darted through the narrow doorway, and the stone swung shut behind

him. Tom sprang at it, grasping over it with his hands - but it was fixed and immovable. The man in black was gone, and he was left in the hidden stone cell, a prisoner!

CHAPTER XX

NO NEWS

'MR. CARKAH!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.
'Well?'

Mr. Carker snapped that monosyllable at the swell of St. Jim's. No doubt he was unaware that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been waiting and watching anxiously for him to come in.

D'Arcy was not the only fellow who was anxious. The footballers had returned from Carcroft, and everyone now knew that Tom Merry had somehow mysteriously vanished. Manners and Lowther and the rest had fully expected to find him at the school when they returned, and they were alarmed as well as amazed to learn that he was still absent. It was impossible to doubt, by this time, that something had happened to Tom Merry; though what had happened, no one could guess. It was known that Mr. Railton was in communication with Inspector Skeat, at Wayland, and that inquiries were going on in various directions.

The footballers had come back not in the best of humours. Carcroft had won the match, two to one, which result might quite probably have been reversed had Tom Merry been in the ranks - as he should have been. Tom, it seemed, had let them down - and some of them intended to talk to him in very plain language about it. But all such feelings were wiped out when it was learned that he was still missing. There was no resentment now - only keen anxiety. Something must have happened to Tom Merry - but what? Nobody could guess.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was glad to see Mr. Carker. He disliked Mr. Carker very much indeed, but he was anxious to see him now. Carker, as the last person known to have spoken to Tom, might possibly know something. Arthur Augustus, overcoming his reluctance to speak to a man whom he disliked and despised, came up to him at once.

Mr. Carker did not seem pleased to be addressed by the swell of the Fourth. He frowned and snapped. No doubt he fully reciprocated Gussy's feeling of dislike. His nose still showed traces of the punch it had received in Rylcombe Lane. However, he stopped, to hear what Arthur Augustus had to say.

'Do you know anythin' about Tom Mewwy, Mr. Carkah?'

Mr. Carker raised his eyebrows.

'Tom Merry?' he repeated.

'Yaas, You see -'

'I do not see,' interrupted Mr. Carker, acidly. 'Why should I know anything about Tom Merry? What do you mean, you stupid boy?'

Arthur Augustus breathed rather hard.

'I mean that Tom Mewwy seems to have disapeahed -!' he said.

'What?'

'He cannot be found anywhah -'

'Nonsense.'

'Weally, Mr. Carkah -'

'Do not waste my time talking such nonsense, D'Arcy,' snapped Mr. Carker. 'Keep your absurd legpulling for your schoolfellows.'

'I am not leg-pullin', Mr. Carkah! Tom Mewwy has disappeahed -'
'Rubbish!'

'I wepeat that he cannot be found. He failed to turn up for the football match at Carcwoft, and he is not anywhah in the school. He has not come in for lock-ups, and eveybody knows that somethin' must have happened to him.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Carker. 'I fail to see what could have happened to Merry. I do not know him very well, of course, but he certainly did not impress me as a boy likely to get in the way of a car, or anything of the kind -'

'Somethin' must have happened, Mr. Carkah -'

'I trust not,' said Mr. Carker.

'It is not much use twustin' now, Mr. Carkah, when it is perfectly cleah that somethin' has happened to Tom Mewwy. As you were the last person seen with him, I thought you might know somethin' about where he went.'

'Nonsense,' said Mr. Carker.

'Cardew, of my form, saw you talkin' to Tom Mewwy aftah he went ovah to the New House, soon aftah dinnah. Nobody has seen him since. Pewwaps he may have said somethin' to you about goin' somewhah, or pewwaps you may have noticed where he went. If you know anythin' at all about it, Mr. Carkah, we should all be vewy glad to heah it.'

Mr. Carker seemed to reflect.

'It was many hours ago that I spoke to Merry,' he said. 'I understood from what he said that he was going to play football this afternoon -'

'Yaas, but he nevah turned up.'

'Surely he has been seen since?'

'Nobody at all has seen him, Mr. Carkah.'

'That is very odd, if true,' said Mr. Carker. 'I remember, from my time here years ago, that rules on the subject of lock-ups are very strict. Is Merry the sort of boy to disregard such rules?'

'Certainly not, Mr. Carkah. Tom Mewwy would not have let the team down if he could have helped it, and he would not stay out aftah lock-ups if he could help it, eithah. Somethin' has happened to him.'

'I should be very sorry to hear of an accident to Merry,' said Mr. Carker, 'but no doubt he will come in later.'

'He did not say anythin' to you about goin' anywhah, or anythin'?'

'Oh yes! He told me he was soon off to Carcroft -'

'I mean anythin' else?'

'Not that I remember. Oh, yes,' added Mr. Carker, as if suddenly remembering, 'I recall that I asked him to fetch a note-book for me that I had left in the old abbey, and I understood that he intended to do so, but as he did not bring it to me, I concluded that he did not wish to oblige me in that small matter, or else that he had forgotten.'

'Bai Jove! Did he go to the abbey?'

'I did not observe where he went, but I imagine not, as he certainly did not bring me the note-book.'

'You didn't notice where he went?'

'Not in the least.'

'Then you don't know anythin' about him?' asked Arthur Augustus.

'Nothing at all. Probably he will come in late for lock-ups,' said Mr. Carker, 'I hardly see any cause for alarm.'

With that he walked on, and went into the Common-room. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave his back a frown as he went. Then he ambled away to the junior day-room, where a crowd of fellows were discussing Tom Merry and his inexplicable absence.

'Something's happened,' Monty Lowther was saying. 'A fellow might be late for lock-ups, but Tom wouldn't miss a football match if he could help it -'

'He couldn't help it,' said Manners.

'That's quite certain,' said Talbot, 'Something prevented him from turning up - something's keeping him away - but what?'

'A chap couldn't disappear,' said Racke.

'Tom Merry's disappeared,' said Blake, 'disappeared just as if the quad had opened and swallowed him up.'

'Puzzle - find Tom Merry!' drawled Cardew.

'Oh, don't be a funny ass, Cardew,' snapped Monty Lowther. 'This is jolly serious. Nobody's seen Tom since you saw him with Carker.'

'Yaas, wathah,' chimed in Arthur Augustus. 'And I have just spoken to Carkah, and he says he knows nothin' about him.'

'Well, he wouldn't, I suppose,' said Blake. 'Didn't he even notice the way Tom Merry went, after they chin-wagged?'

'He says not. But it is vewy odd,' said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully, 'He says he asked Tom Mewwy to fetch a note-book that he had left in the old Abbey -'

'Like his cheek!' said Lowther.

'Did Tom fetch it?' asked Manners.

'Carkah thought he was goin' to, but he didn't. Tom Mewwy nevah bwrought him that note-book, though Carkah undahstood that he was goin' to bwing it. And that is vewy odd - vewy odd indeed. If Tom Mewwy said he would do a thing he would do it, even so small a thing.'

'But he didn't!' said Cardew.

'I am suah that he would have if he could have, as he said that he would,' said Arthur Augustus, firmly. 'Whatevah has happened to him must have happened immediately aftah he left Carkah, or he would have done what he had said he would do.'

He must have meant to go to the abbey for Carkah's note-book.'

'Think he went, and is still there?' grinned Cardew.

'He is certainly not still there, Cardew, because I went ovah the whole place lookin' for Carkah, and nobody was there,' answered Arthur Augustus.

'Wailton gave me leave to go there to speak to Carkah - but he wasn't there-nobody was there. Tom Mewwy must have meant to go, but for some weason he nevah went - and that is vewy odd indeed. Appawently he went out of gates instead, as he is not in the school - but why?'

Nobody could answer that question. That Tom Merry must have gone out of gates, as he was no longer within the walls of St. Jim's, seemed certain. But why, was a question to which there was not a clue. Some of his friends hoped that he might come in later, with some sort of explanation. But at calling-over in hall, there was no voice to answer 'adsum' when Tom's name was called, and when the bell rang for dorm there was still no Tom Merry. Tom Merry had disappeared - and his disappearance was an impenetrable mystery.

CHAPTER XXI

A CASE OF KIDNAPPING

INSPECTOR SKEAT frowned thoughtfully. The plump police-inspector from Wayland was seated in Mr. Railton's study. He had listened to Mr. Railton quietly, with an occasional interjected question. A School-House boy was missing from St. Jim's, and inquiry in many directions had brought no news of any accident; but that was not all. In view of Tom Merry's disappearance, the house-master had to take serious note of what he had heard from Miss Priscilla. That was a matter not merely for inquiry, but for police investigation. Mr. Railton realised that it could not be simply a coincidence, in which Mr. Skeat agreed with him. Nemo had told Miss Fawcett on that telephone that Tom Merry was kidnapped-and Tom had vanished at the same time. Both the house-master and the police-inspector knew that it was a case of kidnapping with which they had to deal. But that was all they knew. How a schoolboy, in a crowded school, could be kidnapped, was a mystery.

Nemo had stated that the boy was a hundred miles from the school. That implied the use of a car. How had the boy been induced to enter the car - and by whom? - and if force had been used, how and where could it have been used, in broad daylight? It was no wonder that Mr. Skeat frowned as he pondered over the puzzle.

Mr. Railton regarded him anxiously. He was deeply troubled, all the more because he dreaded every moment to hear a ring on the telephone from the alarmed old lady at Huckleberry. Already Miss Priscilla had telephoned to ask whether Tom had returned, and the house-master could only reply that he had not yet come in - without adding what he feared, but adding that he would telephone later himself.

With that Miss Priscilla had had to be satisfied-for the time being. But it was quite certain that her voice would soon be heard again over the wires. Most fervently did Mr. Railton hope that, by that time, Inspector Skeat might be able to help. But the inspector's thoughtful frown did not seem very encouraging.

'What is your opinion, Mr. Skeat?' asked the house-master, at last, breaking a rather long silence.

The inspector coughed.

'It certainly looks, Mr. Railton, as if the boy has been taken away by some unknown person,' he said, slowly. 'But the circumstances are very singular. You are sure that none of the other boys can tell you anything?' 'I have gathered all that they could tell me,' answered Mr. Railton, 'and I have told you all I have learned - little enough.'

'It seems that Merry, soon after dinner here, went across to the other House to speak to a boy of that House about a football match - '

'Yes, that is so. I learned that a member of the team was under detention, and Merry called on a New House boy to take his place - and at the New House, he saw several boys - Figgins, Kerr, Wynn, and Redfern. I have spoken to all of them, and they have told me that Merry left the New House, after a little talk, to return to his own House. They know nothing more.'

'But he did not return to his House?'

'He cannot have done so, or he certainly would have been seen by some of his friends.'

'And the last person who did see him -?'

'A Mr. Carker. I have learned that he spoke to Merry soon after he had left the New House.'

'Who is this Mr. Carker?'

'An old boy of the school. He is here on a visit, occupied in archaeological work in the old abbey adjoining the school grounds.'

'He knows nothing, then?'

'Nothing! It appears that he asked Merry to fetch some article for him from the old abbey, but the boy omitted to do so, and he did not see him again.'

'It is not known whether Merry went to the old abbey?'

'Nothing is known of his movements.'

'I have seen those old ruins.' The inspector paused a moment. 'Some accident might happen to a thoughtless boy, clambering among ruins-but you tell me that you have examined the place since.'

'I have searched every foot of it since,' answered Mr. Railton. 'It occurred to me that he might even be disabled and unable to stir - it was extremely unlikely, but barely possible, so I made the search. Merry was not there.'

'Nor any trace of him?'

'None whatever.'

The inspector pursed his lips.

'No reason is known why Merry should have left the school?' he asked.

'None, but there was every reason why he should not do so,' answered Mr. Railton. 'The football team were almost due to start for Carcroft, and he was captain of the eleven. That he would let them go without him, of his own accord, appears impossible. Yet he did so.'

'We have this much clear, at least,' said Mr. Skeat. 'Merry must have disappeared in the interval between his talk with Mr. Carker and the time he was due to start for Carcroft, when he did not appear. That would be -'
'Approximately, between one o'clock and half-past one.'

'And he was not seen to go out!' said the inspector, musingly.

'No! I have questioned Taggles, the porter, and he saw nothing of him. But he must, I conclude, have gone out. A kidnapping could scarcely take place within the precincts of the school.'

Mr. Skeat nodded, slowly.

'Now about this man who calls himself Nemo, and who claims to hold the boy a prisoner,' he said.

'Nothing is known of him excepting the name, evidently a false one, which he gave to Miss Fawcett.'

'Nothing.'

'She could tell you nothing of him?'

'Only that he had a husky voice. I have little doubt that it was a disguised voice,' said Mr. Railton.

'No doubt a disguised voice,' said Mr. Skeat. 'Miss Fawcett might have recognized it otherwise.'

The house-master started a little. 'You think that the man, whoever he was, was known to Miss Fawcett?' he exclaimed.

'I think that goes without saying,' answered Mr. Skeat. 'He must be well acquainted with all the circumstances at Laurel Villa. He knows that Miss Fawcett is Merry's guardian - he knows that Merry is at school here-he knows all that he need know to play this lawless game. That implies acquaintance with Miss Fawcett, sir.'

'True!' said Mr. Railton. 'Then it will be necessary to investigate in Hampshire, rather than in Sussex.'

'Perhaps! The man certainly was in Sussex today, if he is the kidnapper. But undoubtedly he has been at Huckleberry in Hampshire, and must be numbered among Miss Fawcett's acquaintances. His knowledge of Merry and his guardian proves that. Undoubtedly a very cunning rascal, as his first telephone call to Laurel Villa shows.'

'That was a false alarm,' said Mr. Railton; 'I concluded at the time that it was an unfeeling practical joke on an old lady. I called Merry to the telephone to speak to her and soothe her alarm. Even now, I cannot understand why the man played such a trick.'

'I think that is fairly obvious,' said Mr. Skeat. The house-master shook his head.

'Not to me, Mr. Skeat,' he said. 'The rascal phoned Miss Fawcett that her ward had been kidnapped, when he certainly was quite safe in this House. Why should he have done so?'

The inspector smiled faintly.

'To ascertain her reactions,' he explained. 'His scheme was to kidnap Merry, and demand ransom from the boy's guardian. He could not know, in advance, whether Miss Fawcett would yield to that demand, or place the matter in the hands of the police, as a reasonable person should. By telephoning that false news he was able to ascertain precisely how Miss Fawcett would react, if the boy really was kidnapped.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Mr. Railton.

'Some persons,' continued the inspector, 'faced with such a demand, would call in police aid and leave it at that. That would not have suited Mr. Nemo. He did not want to take so much risk and trouble and end up with a prisoner on his hands, and nothing but risk to show for it. By alarming the old lady in that way, he learned how she would act in a case of kidnapping - that she could, in fact, be induced to pay money in her fears for the boy's safety. That was what he wanted to know - and now the actual kidnapping has followed, as a matter of course.'

'I see it all now,' assented Mr. Railton. 'That false alarm was simply to take his bearings.'

'Precisely. It was a cunning move, and it told him all that he wanted to know before he proceeded with his kidnapping scheme. If Miss Fawcett had told him, there and then, that the police would be called in, and that he should not receive a penny from her, I doubt whether she would ever have heard of him again. But having learned that her anxiety for the boy outweighed every other consideration, he knew that he was on safe ground - and went ahead.'

The outcome has been Tom Merry's disappearance today.'

'Kidnapped,' said Mr. Railton, 'to be held for ransom!' He knitted his brows. 'The villain! I fear, Mr. Skeat, that unless Merry is found at once, he will succeed in extracting money from Miss Fawcett.'

'We shall see!' said Mr. Skeat, 'I shall certainly do my best to persuade Miss Fawcett to be firm, and to refuse any compliance. The next move is up to Mr. Nemo. So far, he has told Merry's guardian that the boy is kidnapped, and that a thousand pounds must be paid for his release. He will communicate with her again, to give particulars how the money is to be paid. No doubt this will be done by telephone-but telephone calls may be traced. We shall see!'

Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

It was the telephone-bell in Mr. Railton's study. His face clouded. He had little doubt that it was a trunk call from Huckleberry in Hampshire. He looked at the inspector.

'She must be told!' he said. 'I must tell her that her ward is missing from the school! It cannot be concealed from her. But -'
'Add that the police are searching for him, and that they have every hope of finding him in a very short time,' said Mr. Skeat. 'That may reassure her.'
'I hope so!' said Mr. Railton, doubtfully. His face was troubled as he lifted the receiver, and the agitated voice of the old lady at Huckleberry came through.

CHAPTER XXII

NEVER!

CREAK!

Tom Merry gave a little start, and looked round quickly, as that slight sound broke the deep silence. It was the first sound he had heard since the mysterious man in black had left him.
It could only have been hours, but it seemed ages, since he had been left alone in the hidden cell beneath the ruined abbey.
After he was left alone he had paced, within the narrow limits of his prison, till at length he had thrown himself on the blankets to sleep. When he had awakened, his watch had indicated eight o'clock in the morning, he supposed, for he could hardly have slept the clock round. But he could not tell whether it was day or night. The lamp was still burning, the air was heavy and clammy, but it was certain that the cell was ventilated by some hidden pipe, for heavy as it was, it could be breathed. There was food at hand; the kidnapper had conveyed a supply there ready for his prisoner, obviously having planned well in advance. Tom made a meal of bread and corned beef, washed down by water from a can.
Then the hours passed - slowly, slowly. In the oppressive silence and solitude, he was glad to hear a sound indicating that the man in black was returning - even the kidnapper's return was a relief.
He watched the pivoted stone in the wall move, and reveal the gap by which Nemo came and went.
The black-garbed figure appeared in the gap, stooping to enter the cell. Tom's hands clenched almost convulsively.
But he knew that a struggle was futile. He had tried that, and failed. The man in black was too strong for him.
His eyes burned at the masked kidnapper as he entered. Who was this man - how was it that he knew the secrets of the old abbey, unknown to others? Tom had puzzled over it, again and again, during his hours of imprisonment, but he could think of no answer. Once or twice he had fancied that there had been a familiar note in the husky voice he had heard from under the black cloth, as if it was a voice he had heard before somewhere. He wondered whether, if the mask was removed, he would know the face it hid.
The man stood looking at him, his eyes glinting from the slits in the black cloth that covered his face.
'Are you tired of this?' he asked, in the same husky voice that Tom had heard before, and which Tom was almost certain was a disguised voice.
'You don't need to ask me that, you villain!' answered Tom. 'How long do you fancy you are going to keep me here?'

'That depends on yourself.'

'How do you mean?'

'You will remain till your ransom is paid - the sum of one thousand pounds. You are worth that, I imagine, to the dear old lady whose affection for you is so unbounded.'

The sneer in the man's voice was very perceptible. Vaguely it reminded Tom of a sneering voice he had heard before.

'I hope that Miss Fawcett will not pay you a single penny!' he said. 'If I could get word to her, I would persuade her not to do so.'

'You would rather remain here?'

'A thousand times rather than let you get away with this, you villain.'

The man in black shrugged his shoulders.

'Brave words!' he said. 'Perhaps a week of solitude will change your mind.'

'Do you think you can keep me here so long as that?' exclaimed Tom. 'You must be mad if you do. They must be searching for me long ago - and my house-master will call in the police to help, when I cannot be found.'

'They are welcome to search for you, Master Merry. They will not think of searching for you only three hundred yards from the School House.' He laughed softly. 'The secrets of this old place are known to me - but to no other. Who could dream that you are here?'

One person, at least, knows that I came to the old abbey, and never came back,' answered Tom.

'Indeed! Who is that?'

'Mr. Carker.'

'Who is Mr. Carker?'

'A man who is staying at the school-an archaeologist,' answered Tom. 'When he hears that I am missing, he will certainly mention that he sent me to the abbey to fetch a note-book for him.'

There was a mocking glitter in the eyes behind the slits.

'What then?' asked the husky voice, 'No doubt Mr. Carker will mention the circumstance, if, as you say, he sent you to fetch a note-book for him. But what then?'

'He must mention it,' said Tom. 'Everyone in the school will be asked whether he knows anything of my movements, since I have disappeared - Mr. Carker could not fail to mention it. If he did, he would have to explain why, when I am free again. He has certainly mentioned it.'

'I have asked you, what then?'

'What then?' repeated Tom. 'Well, then it will be known that I come to the old abbey, and that is where a search will be made.'

'A search of the old abbey has already been made. Your house-master has searched it from end to end, every foot - every inch! Did he find you?'

'Oh!' exclaimed Tom.

'The flag-stone that let you through is since as solid as the rest of the floor of the vault,' continued the man in black. 'Your house-master may have trodden on it in searching for you.'

'Oh!' muttered Tom.

'You have not been found, and you cannot be found. Miss Fawcett believes that you have been taken a hundred miles from your school.'

'Oh!' gasped Tom.

'Inspector Skeat of Wayland has been called in, if that is any comfort to you!' went on the sneering voice. 'I have no doubt that he is looking for the car in which you were taken a hundred miles away.'

'Oh, you villain!'

Tom Merry felt his heart sink. The fact that Mr. Carker knew that he had gone to the old abbey had seemed at least a glimmer of hope. Carker could not fail to mention it, when the inquiry for the missing junior became general. Tom knew that Carker did not like him, and probably cared nothing what became of him, but even if he wished, he could not keep silent about what he knew, for later he would have to account for his silence, when Tom was free to tell what had happened. There could be no doubt that Carker had spoken. But the hapless junior realised now that that could not help him. No doubt it had caused Mr. Railton to make a search in the old abbey. But Railton had found out nothing - he could find out nothing. Not for a moment could he guess that a flag-stone in the vault, firm as a rock under his feet, had opened to engulf the missing junior.

Tom stood silent, his heart heavy.

The glinting eyes from the slits watched him.

'Well,' said the man in black, at last, 'do you still fancy that what this Mr. Carker may have said will be of any use to you?'

Tom did not answer.

'You are a prisoner here! You will remain a prisoner here till a thousand pounds is paid for your release.'

'Is that what you have come back to tell me?' asked Tom, contemptuously.

'No! I need your aid.'

'My aid!' repeated Tom, staring.

'I will explain. I put your guardian to the test by a false alarm that you were kidnapped. The result satisfied me that she would be willing, indeed eager, to pay any sum for your release, if you fell into the hands of a kidnapper. But - ' He paused.

'I hope she will pay you nothing,' said Tom, steadily.

'You have your hope, so far!' sneered the man in black. 'I imagine that your house-master has influenced her to refuse, with the assistance of Inspector Skeat - at all events she has refused.'

'I'm glad.'

'For that reason, I need your aid,' said the man in black. 'You will write a letter to your guardian-'

'I will do nothing of the kind.'

'In that letter,' continued the man in black, as if Tom had not spoken, 'you will tell her that you have been taken a great distance in a car - 'Never !'

'And that you beg her to do as Nemo asks -'

'Never!' repeated Tom.

'You will tell her that you fear for your life unless the ransom is paid, and beg her to carry out Nemo's directions for paying it, whatever they may be. You will write that letter and sign it, and I will see that it is placed in the post - at a post-office a hundred miles from here. I think that that letter will outweigh the influence of Mr. Railton and his police-inspector Do you not agree?' added the man in black, with a sneer.

'I've no doubt of that,' said Tom, 'but I shall not write the letter-I shall not write one word.'

'Here are the materials.'

The man in black laid a blotter and a fountain-pen on the trestle-table.

'Now sit down and write as I dictate!' he snapped.

Tom did not stir.

'You refuse?'

'Yes.'

'I have asked you if you were not tired of this place. If you are not yet tired of it, you may stay here so long as you choose. There is no hurry, so far as I am concerned,' sneered the man in black. 'I shall leave you to it - and return later. I shall expect to find you ready to write that letter when I return.'

'You will be disappointed,' said Tom Merry, between his teeth. 'I will not write one word to help you in your villainy, if you could keep me here for years.'

'You may change your tune, when the supply of food runs out! It will not be renewed,' said the man in black. 'But I hardly think that your obstinacy will last so long as that, Master Merry. Twenty-four hours more of this den may bring you to a more reasonable frame of mind. We shall see.'

He stepped back to the secret doorway, ducked his head, and passed through. The pivoted stone rolled back into place.

Tom Merry stood, breathing hard.

He was left alone again; alone to silence and solitude. Was there a hope that he might be found in that hidden cell under the old abbey? If so, it was the faintest of hopes. There was something like despair in his heart. But he did not falter.

CHAPTER XXIII

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS SURPRISES HIS CHUMS

'THE FELLOW IS a wottah!'

'Eh?'

'And a wascal!'

'Who?'

'Carkah!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Blake and Herries and Digby stared at him. The four were in Study No. 6, at tea, It was not the accustomed cheery study tea in No. 6. Four faces were clouded. Many faces, indeed, were clouded, in the School House that day. The mystery of Tom Merry's disappearance weighed upon almost all minds.

It was known now, to all the school, that Tom had been kidnapped. How, and by whom, was a perplexing mystery, but the fact was known. School House and New House alike buzzed with it. Some person or persons unknown had, somehow, spirited him away, and a demand had been made on his guardian for a ransom for his release; a demand which, acting on official advice, she had not so far heeded. It was the talk of the whole school by this time. At tea in Study No. 6, Blake and Herries and Dig were discussing what was now the universal topic at St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat silent, which was not his wont. Apparently he was thinking, which also, perhaps, was not his wont. He came out of his silence, suddenly, with his remarks on the subject of Mr. Gilbert Carker, a subject which, so far as his chums could see, had no connection at all with the matter under discussion.

'Wandering in your mind, old man?' inquired Blake.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Well, what the dickens do you mean, about Carker?' said Blake, testily.

'Blow Carker! Bother Carker ! We know he's a rotter, and very likely he's

a rascal too, for all we know, but what's that got to do with Tom Merry being kidnapped?'

'It may have a lot to do with it, Blake.'

'What?'

'Dreaming?' asked Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies -'

'What on earth are you talking about, Gussy?' asked Dig. 'Carker knows no more about it than we do.'

'Pewwaps not!' said Arthur Augustus. 'But -'

'But what, fathead?' demanded Blake.

'I wefuse to be called a fathead, Blake. I wepeat that that man is a wottah, and a wascal, and I have vevy stwong doubts about him!' said Arthur Augustus firmly. 'You wemembah that day Lowthah's limewick blew away, and I got into Wailton's study aftah it, and quite inadvertently heard what the Head was sayin' to Wailton about that person -'

'What about it?'

'He was once here, and was a disgwace to the school,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I do not know why he was turfed out, because I was bound in honah to weveal my pwesence when the Head began to talk of mattahs not intended for other yahs; but I do know that while he was heah he was a bad hat. The Head said quite distinctly that he was cwuel to animals.'

'Well?' said Blake.

'A person who is cwuel to animals, Blake, is a person capable of pwactically any thin'. I would not put anythin' past him.'

'Might have reformed since,' said Dig.

'He has not weformed since, Dig. The wow I had with him at the stile in Wylcombe Lane, the day he came, was because he was a cwuel beast, playing a cwuel twick on a dog, burnin' his nose with a cigawette. He was a wat when he was heah in formah yahs, and he is the same cwuel wat now.'

Jack Blake nodded.

'Looks like it,' he agreed, 'but what's all that got to do with Tom Merry being kidnapped?'

'I have been thinkin' it ovah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am, as you fellows know, wathah a bwainy chap -'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! What are you fellows cacklin' at, I would vevy much like to know!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly.

'Oh, carry on,' said Blake, grinning, 'we all know exactly how brainy you are, Gustavus. Nobody at St. Jim's knows more about top-hats and neckties. You could teach a tailor something about trousers. Brainy, and no mistake.'

'Certainly I know somethin' about clothes,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. 'You fellows are wathah wag-bags, if you don't mind my mentionin' it. But I wepeat that I have been thinkin' this out, and I wegard Carkah with suspicion.'

'Suspicion of what?' asked Blake, staring.

'Of knowin' something about what has happened to Tom Mewwy,' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, very distinctly. 'Of havin' had a hand in it, to be pwecise.'

Three fellows jumped.

They gazed blankly at their aristocratic chum. They did not, as a matter of fact, regard the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as a very brainy fellow. That he had an unerring judgement in clothes, and an excellent taste in neckties, was admitted. In other directions, they did not believe

that his aristocratic intellect extended very far. That he could put his finger on the mystery of Tom Merry's disappearance, alone among some hundreds of fellows who were mystified by that disappearance, certainly was not likely to occur to them.

'Mad?' asked Blake, at last in a gasping voice.

'Potty?' inquired Dig.

'Crackers?' asked Herries.

'Weally, you fellows -'

'You awful ass,' said Blake, in measured tones.

'None of us likes that man Carker, and I daresay he deserved that nose you gave him, and very likely he was a bad hat when he was here as a boy years ago. But all that's got nothing to do with what's happened to Tom. If you said a word like that outside this study, you'd be up before the Head.'

'I have not said a word outside this study, so fah, Blake. I am tellin' you fellows, because I desiah to heah your opinion. If you will kindly allow me to speak,' went on Arthur Augustus, sarcastically, 'I will explain.'

'Fathead !'

'If you do not wish to heah me -'

'Oh, go ahead,' said Blake, resignedly, 'get it off your chest, Gussy, and then for goodness' sake, forget all about it.'

'Tom Mewwy has been kidnapped -'

'Tell us something we don't know!' urged Blake.

'The person who kidnapped him is a wascal -'

'Did you work that out in your head?' asked Blake. 'Fact is, we knew that, Gussy. Nobody supposed that a kidnapper was a shining example of integrity.'

'Pway twy to be sewious, Blake. When an act of wascality takes place, and there is a wascal on the spot, it is a mattah of puttin' two and two togethah. A wascal has kidnapped Tom Mewwy. Carkah is a wascal. Therefore I wegard it as quite wight and pwopah to think of Carkah in the circumstances.'

'Is that all?'

'That is not all, Blake. I thought of Carkah first, knowin' him to be a wotten wascal, because he is cwuel to animals. But since I have pondahed ovah it, I have thought up some more. Carkah was the last person who saw Tom Mewwy -'

'Somebody had to see him last,' remarked Dig.

'Yaas, wathah, but it happened to be Carkah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I wegard that as a wathah suspicious circumstance, added to our knowledge that he is a wascal.'

'But suppose Carker hadn't happened to speak to Tom in the quad,' said Blake, with a wink at Herries and Dig, 'then old Figgins would have been the last chap to see Tom Merry! Would you think that a suspicious circumstance, and work it out that Figgy had kidnapped him, and hidden him under a bed in the New House?'

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

'Weally, Blake -'

'Dear old boy, don't you start in the Sherlock Holmes business,' advised Blake, 'it's not your line. Stick to suitings and trouserings. That's where you. come in strong.'

Arthur Augustus D' Arcy screwed his eyeglass a little more firmly into his noble eye, and surveyed his comrades, like the elder Hamlet, more in sorrow than in anger.

'So you fellows think there is nothin' in it?' he asked, with a great deal of dignity.

'Nothing at all,' answered Blake.

'Just nothing!' agreed Dig.

'Less than nothing,' said Herries.

'I am afraid that you fellows are wathah dense,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I do not expect you to be bwainy like me, but -'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! If you fellows are goin' to cackle at a fellow evewy time a fellow opens his mouth -'

'I think you'd make a stone image cackle, Gussy,' said Blake. 'Stick to neckties, old chap, and don't try the detective business. What on earth put Carker into your head?'

'I have told you, Blake! He is cwuel to animals -'

'That doesn't make him a kidnapper, man.'

'A person capable of cwelty to animals is a person capable of cwime, Blake. When a cwime is committed, with such a person on the spot, I wegard it as quite weasonable to suspect him.'

'You see, old chap, you're rather crackers on that subject,' Blake pointed out kindly. 'Lots of people aren't so particular about cats and dogs as you are. But that doesn't mean that they kidnap chaps and hold them to ransom.'

'Hardly!' grinned Dig.

'The man's a brute,' said Herries, 'that's all Gussy's got to go on. Why don't you suspect Knox of the Sixth, Gussy? He smacks the fags' heads.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Pway don't be an ass, Hewwies,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, testily. 'Twy to be sewious, in a sewious mattah.'

'It's a serious matter enough,' admitted Blake, 'but it isn't easy to be serious, Gussy, when you start at Sherlock Holmes. Carker's rather a brute. We all know that. But that's the lot. There isn't the slightest reason to imagine that he knows more about Tom Merry than we do.'

'Not in the least,' said Dig, 'for goodness' sake, Gussy, not a word of such rot outside this study.'

'Six of the best from Railton, if you start a yarn like that,' said Herries. 'Have a little sense, old chap.'

Arthur Augustus sniffed.

'If you fellows had as much sense among you as I have in my little fingah, you would be twice as sensible as you weally are!' he retorted. 'Of course I am not goin' actually to accuse Carkah of kidnappin' Tom Mewwy-'

'Oh! You're going to stop short of that?' grinned Blake. 'I rather think I would if I were you.'

'But I wegard him with suspicion -'

'Fathead!'

'Vewy gweat suspicion -'

'Ass!'

'There is no othah clue to what has happened to Tom Mewwy. I have found the only clue, I wathah think -'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Blake, 'I wonder what Inspector Skeat would think of your clue, Gussy. What is it exactly? Carker burnt a dog's nose with a cigarette - therefore he kidnapped Tom Merry! Sort of convincing - I don't think.'

'I wegard it as a clue, Blake,' said Arthur Augustus, firmly. 'I shall not say anythin' about it at pwsent -'

'I wouldn't!' chuckled Blake.

'But I shall keep an eye on Carkah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'A cwime has been committed, and we have, heah in this House, a person capable of cwime. I wegard that as quite sufficient to go on. I shall keep a vewy watchful eye on Carkah. I suspect him vewy stwongly - vewy stwongly indeed. A person who would torment animals would do kidnappin' or anythin' else, in my opinion. That is the clue I have to go upon, and I twust that it will lead somewhah.'

'Fathead!'

'Ass!'

'Ditherer!'

Having thus expressed their opinion of the Honourable Arthur Augustus and his clues, and tea being finished, Blake and Herries and Digby left the study to go down to the day-room - with a faint hope of hearing news of the missing junior, but without the slightest belief that Arthur Augustus had put his aristocratic finger on the mystery.

Arthur Augustus gave them a frown as they went.

The doubts of his chums did not shake his own opinion in the very least. Logic, perhaps, was not Gussy's long suit, and perhaps his method of reasoning would not have seemed very convincing to a police-officer. But, such as it was, it satisfied Arthur Augustus himself, and he had resolved that he was going to keep a watchful eye on the man he suspected - a very watchful eye indeed.

CHAPTER XXIV

WANTED ON THE PHONE

BUZZZZZZZZ!

Mr. Railton suppressed a sigh.

His telephone-bell had been ringing quite often of late. There had been several trunk calls from Huckleberry. Now he feared that there was another coming from that quarter. And deeply as he sympathised with Miss Priscilla in the present distressing circumstances, he rather dreaded another agitated talk on the telephone from Laurel Villa.

He had nothing to tell Miss Fawcett. A new day had dawned, and there was still no news of the missing junior. It was now morning break on Friday, and innumerable fellows in the quad were discussing what was now the one topic at St. Jim's. Where was Tom Merry? School House and New House discussed it, and discussed it again, and again, at endless length - but nobody knew anything-unless indeed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did! That elegant youth was not taking part in the discussions that were going on - he was pacing near the House, with a thoughtful wrinkle in his noble brow, no doubt meditating on the 'clue' he fancied he had found; Mr. Railton picked up the receiver; as he had feared, it was a trunk call. And it came from Laurel Villa at Huckleberry.

'Mr. Railton -' It was the high-pitched, agitated voice of Miss Priscilla Fawcett.

'Speaking!'

'Is there any news of dear Tommy?'

'I am sorry that there is none so far, Miss Fawcett. But Inspector Skeat has the case in hand, and he is a very capable officer -'

'He has not found dear Tommy?'

'No so far, but -'

'He has been taken hundreds of miles. That dreadful man Nemo told me so. He will never be found. He is in that wicked man's hands, Mr. Railton. He must be saved -'

'Yes, yes, but -'

'I have refused to pay him the money, on your advice, and on that of the police. But this cannot go on. I must pay the ransom if Tommy cannot be found.'

'I trust, Miss Fawcett, that you will do nothing of the kind,' said the house-master earnestly.

'Please let me speak to Mr. Carker! I understand that Mr. Carker is now at the school -'

'Yes, but -'

'He will advise me. I have great faith in that young man. He was very kind indeed on the occasion when that dreadful man Nemo first telephoned. I am sure that he must be deeply concerned about Tommy. I should like to have his advice in these terrible circumstances, Mr. Railton.'

The house-master breathed hard.

'Mr. Carker is not in the House, at the moment, Miss Fawcett. He is generally busy with his archaeological work in the old abbey here. In fact, I am aware that he is so engaged at the present moment.'

'Please send for him.'

'But -'

'I am sure that he will not mind leaving his architectural work - , did you say architectural work? - to come to the telephone, knowing how terribly anxious I am about dear Tommy -'

'No doubt! But -'

'Please let him be called -'

'Really, Miss Fawcett, Mr. Carker can give you no advice other than that given you by the police inspector.'

'Will you please let me speak to him?'

'Very well!' sighed Mr. Railton. 'Pray hold the line, Miss Fawcett, and I will send someone to call him here as quickly as possible.'

Mr. Railton laid down the receiver, and crossed to the open window. He called to a junior who was pacing, thoughtfully, near at hand.

'D'Arcy!'

Arthur Augustus looked round.

'Yaas, sir!' He came up to the window.

'Please go as quickly as possible to the old abbey, D'Arcy, and tell Mr. Carker that Miss Fawcett desires to speak to him on the telephone, and that she is holding the line.'

'Certainly, sir.'

The house-master picked up the receiver again.

'I have sent a boy to fetch Mr. Carker, madam, and he will be here in a very few minutes,' he said into the transmitter. 'If you will hold the line -'

'Yes, yes! Thank you, Mr. Railton. I am afraid I am giving you a great deal of trouble. '

'Not at all, madam,' answered the house-master, perhaps with more politeness than strict veracity.

And he laid down the receiver again. He glanced from the window; Arthur

Augustus was already disappearing in the distance. Mr. Railton hoped that Mr. Carker would not be long in coming to take over the telephone. Arthur Augustus was losing no time. Mr. Railton had told him to go as quickly as possible, and he went at a trot. He was not, in fact, sorry to be given that errand. He had told his friends, in Study No. 6., that he was going to keep an eye on Carker, but as yet he had had no opportunity of doing so, and he had had to realise that such opportunities were likely to be few and far between. Mr. Carker was often out of gates, where no eye, obviously, could be kept on him; and at other times he was in the old abbey, which was out of bounds. Arthur Augustus had been thinking over those difficulties in the way of an amateur detective, when Mr. Railton called him, from his study window, and despatched him to fetch Mr. Carker. He trotted into the old abbey. It was silent and deserted, the old ruins glimmering under the autumn sunshine.

His eyeglass gleamed round in search of Mr. Carker. Nothing was to be seen of him, or heard of him, at the moment. As Railton had sent him there for Carker, D'Arcy had to conclude that the house-master knew that he was there - but if he was there, he was not visible.

'Mr. Carkah!' called out Arthur Augustus.

Carker might easily have been out of sight, among the masses of old masonry, or behind the old arch that was still standing. So, after looking round, Arthur Augustus called.

There was no reply to his call.

'Mr. Carkah!' This time Arthur Augustus shouted.

If Carker was out of sight, he could not be out of hearing, if he was there at all. That shout reached every corner of the old ruins.

But there was still no reply.

'Bothah the man!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

He ran to the old archway, and shouted down into the vault.

'Mr. Carkah! Are you there, Mr. Carkah? Pway answah me if you are there, Mr. Carkah!'

His shout echoed back from the vault. But no other voice came back. Carker could not have failed to hear him, if he was in the vault. Obviously, he was not in the vault. But where was he?

'Bai Jove, this is wathah wotten, with Miss Pwiscillah waitin' on the telephone,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, 'he must be heah, as Wailton said that he was heah! Where the dooce has he got to?'

As there was no reply to his shouting, Arthur Augustus gave it up. He proceeded to ramble among the ruins, looking for Mr. Carker. Possibly the man did not choose to answer, if he was in a surly mood.

Anyhow, Arthur Augustus had been sent for him, and he had to find him, if he was there at all.

But he did not seem to be there. Arthur Augustus rambled among dismantled walls, blocks of old masonry, but he saw nothing of Mr. Carker. He stopped, at last, near the old archway that gave access to the vault. If Mr. Carker, for some surly reason of his own, did not choose to answer his call, the deep vault was the only place where he could be out of sight, since Arthur Augustus had looked everywhere else. So, once more, D'Arcy stepped into the archway and shouted down the steps that led down into darkness.

'Mr. Carkah! Pway answah me, Mr. Carkah, if you are there! You are wanted on the telephone, and Mr. Railton has sent me for you! Mr. Carkah! I wepeat that you are wanted on the telephone.'

That, certainly, should have brought an answer, if Mr. Carker was within hearing. But it brought no answer. Nor was there any footstep. The only sound that came back from the vault was the echo of D'Arcy shout.

Arthur Augustus stood, perplexed.

A good many minutes had passed. Obviously, Mr. Railton must have known, or at least believed, that Carker was in the old abbey, when he sent for him. If he had been there, it seemed that he must have left since. There seemed nothing for Arthur Augustus to do but to return to the School House, and report that he had failed to find the man in the old abbey.

'Bai Jove! I suppose I had bettah go back to Wailton!' reflected Arthur Augustus. 'That wottah cannot be heah, he would have heard me - and even if he is in a wotten tempah, he would show up when he heard that he was wanted on the phone! Bothah him! He must have made Wailton believe that he was doin' his archaeo-what-do-you-call-it heah, or Wailton would not have sent me heah for him. I shouldn't wondah if he is up to somethin' he is keepin' dark, the wottah - I have a vewy stwong suspicion of him, whatevah Blake and Hewwies and Dig may think about it. I wondah -'

Arthur Augustus's train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a sound that came up from the dark silence of the old vault. He started. Carker was not there - he was sure of that, or why had not the man answered? And if Carker was not there, no one could be there. Nevertheless, there was an unmistakable sound from the silence.

'Bai Jove!' breathed Arthur Augustus.

The sound was repeated, nearer at hand. And then he knew that it was a footstep, and that it was coming up the stone steps from the dark vault.

CHAPTER XXV

TOM MERRY'S LAST WORD

TOM MERRY paced, and paced, in the stone well, his face pale in the glimmer of the lamplight. At moments it seemed to the imprisoned schoolboy that this must be some horrid dream from which he would awaken. So short a time ago he had been care-free, enjoying life at St. Jim's, in a crowd of fellows, thinking chiefly of football, and the Carcroft match, and now -! He looked round at the stone walls that shut him in, and shivered. How long was this to last? How long before he breathed the fresh air again, and saw the blessed light of the sun? What was to be the end of it? He had been careful to keep his watch wound, and he knew now that it must be morning - overhead!

But no ray of light, no sound from the outer world, could penetrate that hidden den under the old abbey.

It was morning overhead - the green fields glistening in the sunshine, the fresh winds blowing - St. Jim's fellows in the form-rooms, his own form-fellows with Mr. Linton, his Fourth-form friends with Mr. Lathom; and he was here - so near to them, if they could only have known it, and yet so far!

Search for him must be going on, he knew that.

But he no longer had a hope that it would be successful. No one could suspect that he was still anywhere near the school. The Head or Railton must have called in police aid before this, but what could they do? His chums, Manners and Lowther, who would have done anything to help him, could do nothing - they could only be hopelessly puzzling about the

mystery of his disappearance. There was no help - no hope, unless his guardian paid the ransom demanded by the wretch who called himself Nemo and whose real identity was a mystery to him.

He clenched his hands at that thought. Never, if he could help it, should that rascal profit by his rascality. Never!

Who was the man? He tried to puzzle it out. He must be some man who knew Miss Priscilla, and knew of her affection for her ward. He must have known of that when he thought up this scheme. He had made sure of his ground by the false alarm; but he had known all he needed to know before that.

Some person at Huckleberry, it looked like - but who? And how did he know anything about St. Jim's? His knowledge of the hidden pit under the vault, of this den where he was keeping his prisoner, showed an intimate acquaintance with the place - how could he have gained it? And how was it that he came and went unnoticed - he seemed to come and go as he pleased, and yet a stranger within the precincts of the school could scarcely have failed to be remarked. It was all utterly puzzling and perplexing, and the more Tom thought it over, the more hopeless a tangle it seemed. The man must have been about the place when Tom came to the old abbey on Wednesday afternoon - he must have seen him, and prepared that deadly trap for him - yet how could a stranger have been lurking about the place unseen, unnoticed? The abbey, it was true, was out of bounds for St. Jim's fellows, since the trouble with Carker there, but Mr. Carker, at least, was often there, and how could the kidnapper have lurked about the place, unseen and unnoticed by him? Yet he must have been there, on the watch, or he could not have entrapped Tom as he had done.

How was it to end?

The hapless junior paced and paced. In the deadly silence, he almost wished that the man in black would come again. And at last, he came. The pivoted stone moved, and Tom, stopping in his weary pacing, fixed his eyes on it. The secret doorway opened, and the strange figure in black, now familiar to his eyes, stooped and entered.

'You young fool!'

These were the man's first words. His glance was on the blotter he had left on the little trestle-table. Perhaps he had expected to find a letter already written.

'So you are still obstinate?' he muttered, his eyes glinting at Tom through the slits. 'You young fool!'

Tom did not answer.

'I have given you time to think! Will you write that letter to your guardian, as I dictate it, or not?'

'Not!' said Tom.

'You choose to remain here?'

'Yes.'

'Do you fancy that you will be found, fool?' snapped the man in black.

'Have you still that idea in your head?'

'I may be found,' said Tom, steadily, 'You can't keep up this game for ever. You will be seen coming, or going, sooner or later. I cannot understand why you have not been caught already.'

'Fool!' snapped the husky voice. 'Who is to see me? I have my own way of coming and going. Do you think that, if it were not so, I could have conveyed these things here?' He made a gesture towards the blankets, the trestle-table, the stool. 'You must know that they were brought here in readiness for you, one at a time. How could I have done that if I were not free to come and go in safety as I please?'

Tom was silent again. He realised that the man in black spoke no more than the truth. In some mysterious way, he was able to come and go unnoticed. The articles he had prepared in that hidden den, few as they were, must have made it necessary for him to come and go a good many times before the day of the kidnapping; yet no one had known or suspected what was going on in the ruined abbey.

'You will be wise not to delude yourself with any idea of that kind,' went on the husky voice. 'No one has the remotest idea that Nemo is anywhere near the school, or in Sussex at all. You are a prisoner here - to remain one until the ransom is paid.'

Tom set his lips.

'It will not be paid, if I can help it!' he said.

There was a muttered oath under the black cloth that covered the mystery man's face.

'Will you write as I dictate?'

'No!'

'For the last time?'

'Never!'

He could see, in the mouth-slit in the black cloth, that the man was breathing hard. But he did not falter. He stood quiet and steady, his eyes on the masked rascal; his face pale, but unflinching.

'Very well!' The words came in almost a hiss, 'We shall see! So far you have been fed - that will cease! A day without food may help to bring you to your senses. Neither food nor drink shall pass your lips till that letter is written.'

'You villain!'

The glinting eyes from the mask scanned the table.

Tom had unpacked the package of foodstuffs, and helped himself from it from time to time. There was little remaining, and the water in the can was exhausted. It could not have been easy for the man to convey a supply of water to that remote, hidden den, but Tom had supposed that the supply would be renewed. He realised now that it would not be renewed. He set his lips hard.

'You have little left.' The eyes glinted at Tom again, 'When it is gone, there will be no more. The can is empty - it will remain empty! Do you understand?'

'I understand!' said Tom.

'And you will face that? Is that your last word?'

'I will face it,' said Tom, quietly, 'That is my last word!'

'Fool! Fool! Write as I dictate, and have done,' snarled the man in black.

'I will not write a word.'

The man stood looking at him, with smouldering eyes from the mask.

Evidently he had not expected such steady resistance, and was perhaps a little nonplussed by it. For several long moments he stood in silence, and then, turning, ducked his head and disappeared through the secret doorway. The stone rolled on its pivot, and the doorway closed. The man in 'black was gone; and the kidnapped junior of St. Jim's was left - to what?

CHAPTER XXVI

MR. CARKER IS TOO HASTY

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stood, staring blankly, under the old stone archway in the ruined abbey. There was nobody in the vault below—he had been sure of that. Again and again he had shouted down into the darkness and there had been no reply, not a sound but the echo of his own voice. Yet now, as he was about to turn away, there were footsteps coming up from the vault. Someone, after all, was there, and it could only be Carker. Why had he not answered — why had he not shown up before, if he had been there all the time? He might perhaps, in a disgruntled mood, have passed the calling voice unheeded — but how could he pass unheeded a message that he was wanted on the telephone? He could not have been within hearing of D'Arcy's call — yet here he was, coming up the steps from the vault, and Arthur Augustus's staring eyes watched him emerge from the shadows below.

It was Mr. Carker — and his brows were knitted in a black frown. Obviously he was in a bad temper — that was very clear. Something had irritated and exasperated him. But it was not D'Arcy who was the cause of it, for plainly he did not know that the junior was there. It was not until he emerged from the stone staircase that he saw Arthur Augustus standing under the arch, and then he gave a violent start at the sight of him, plain proof that he had not heard his calling voice, and did not know that anyone but himself was in the ruins.

The angry blaze that came into his eyes startled Arthur Augustus, and involuntarily he backed out of the archway, into the open air. The man looked, for a moment, as if he would spring on him.

Carker followed him out, his eyes glinting.

'You young rascal!' he breathed.

'Weally, Mr. Carkah —'

'How dare you come here? What are you doing here? It seems that your Headmaster's orders are not enough for you! You come here although it is out of bounds, disregarding your Headmaster and your house-master!'

It was clear that Carker had not heard D'Arcy calling voice, though how, in the vault, he could have failed to hear it was inexplicable. But plainly he had heard nothing, and did not even surmise that the junior had been sent with a message to him. Neither did he give Arthur Augustus time to explain.

'You have come here, in spite of orders, you young rascal! I will give you a lesson myself —'

'Bai Jove!' Arthur Augustus jumped back, as the man came at him. 'Weally, Mr. Carkah — pway allow me to speak — oh, cwiskey! Hands off, you bwute! Oh, cwumbs!'

Smack! smack! smack!

'Yawoooooh!'

Smack! smack! smack!

'Oh, cwumbs! You uttah wuffian

Smack! smack! smack!

It was Arthur Augustus's experience at the stile in Rylcombe Lane over again. Already irritated, for some reason unknown to the junior, the angry man's savage temper blazed up unrestrained. Arthur Augustus reeled right and left as the savage smacks landed on his hapless head.

Arthur Augustus was not the fellow to have his noble head smacked with impunity, if he could help it. But he could not help it. He hit out, and

landed a punch on Carker's chest, then he was grasped by the collar, and held helpless in a muscular grip, while the smacks rained on him.

'Stop that!'

It was a sudden, sharp voice.

It was followed by a grasp on Carker's shoulder, and he was wrenched away from the gasping, panting swell of St. Jim's. He spun round with a fierce glare, to find himself face to face with Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

'Oh, cwikey!' gasped Arthur Augustus, tottering, and clasping a dizzy head. 'Oh, cwumbs! Keep that bwute off, Kildare! Oh, bai Jove!'

'Leave that kid alone, Mr. Carker -'

'Don't meddle here!' Carker's voice was thick with rage. 'Mind your own business, and don't meddle -'

He jerked his shoulder from Kildare's grasp, and made a movement towards D'Arcy.

Kildare promptly stepped between them.

'Stand back!' he snapped.

'I've told you not to meddle -'

'You brute! How dare you handle a boy like that?' exclaimed Kildare. 'Lay a finger on him again, and I will knock you spinning.'

It looked, for a moment, as if the angry man's rage would turn on Kildare. But the big, hefty Sixth-form man was a very different proposition from the elegant swell of the Fourth. Kildare was quite able to handle Mr. Carker, if he asked for it, and evidently he was quite ready to do so. The man checked his fury.

'That young rascal is breaking bounds here, against his Headmaster's orders,' he panted. 'My - my work is interrupted - by that boy breaking bounds -'

'He is not breaking bounds,' snapped Kildare, 'he was sent here by his house-master with a message to you.'

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Carker.

He tried to control his temper. Whatever the reason of D'Arcy's presence in the old abbey, Carker certainly would have liked to go on with the head-smacking. But that had to stop, with the stalwart captain of St. Jim's standing between him and his victim. And Kildare's words took him quite aback.

'A - a - a message?' he stammered.

'Did you not tell Mr. Carker, D'Arcy?'

'The uttah wuffian did not give me a chance to speak to him,' gasped Arthur Augustus, 'he wushed at me and pitched into me, the uttah wuffian -'

'I - supposed that the boy was out of bounds, naturally -' stammered Carker. Even the evil-tempered man realised that he had been hasty, and perhaps regretted that he had not allowed Arthur Augustus time to speak.

'Even if you did, you had no right to touch him,' snapped Kildare. 'You could have reported him to his house-master! If you were not my Headmaster's guest here, Mr. Carker, I would have knocked you down when I saw you handling him like that. You had better keep your temper.'

Carker gritted his teeth.

'That will do,' he snarled. 'If the boy came with a message -'

'He did! You are wanted on the telephone in Mr. Railton's study.'

'Oh!' breathed Carker.

'D'Arcy was sent to tell you so. As you did not come, Mr. Railton asked me to come here and see that the message was delivered, as Miss Fawcett is

holding the line, waiting for you -'

'Miss Fawcett?'

'So Mr. Railton said. I do not know whether she is still holding the line, after all this delay. It is more than ten minutes since D'Arcy was sent here - you should have had his message at once -'

'I couldn't find him, Kildare,' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I went all ovah the place lookin' for him, and shouted down into the vault, and he did not answah. I was goin' to go back to Wailton and tell him that Mr. Carkah was not heah, when he suddenly came up fwom the vault -'

'Oh!' breathed Carker. His eyes almost flamed at Arthur Augustus. 'You could not have called, or I should have heard -'

'I shouted again and again, and you did not answah!' snapped Arthur Augustus. 'You must have heard me unless you are deaf as a post.'

'Anyhow, you had better go now, Mr. Carker,' said Kildare, 'and another time, you had better keep your temper, and let a fellow speak before you jump to conclusions and start smacking his head.'

Mr. Carker's only reply to that was a scowl. He turned and tramped away out of the old abbey - no doubt wishing, by that time, that he had given Arthur Augustus a chance to tell him that he was wanted on the phone. Arthur Augustus was left rubbing a singing head, Kildare regarding him curiously.

'You seem to have got on the wrong side of Mr. Carker, D'Arcy,' he said.

'He is a wotten wuffian!' gasped Arthur Augustus, 'I am vevy much surprwised the Head has allowed him to come back with his archae-what-do-you-call-it -! I wegard him with uttah contempt.'

'You say that you shouted down into the vault for him -'

'Yaas, wathah-ovah and ovah again.'

'He can't have heard you -'

'He must have heard me, if he was in the vault, Kildare - and he must have been in the vault, as he came up just as I was goin' to go back. He must have been there all the time I was wamblin' wound lookin' for him and shoutin' to him. It is vevy odd that he seemed surprwised to see me, when he came up, and fancied that I was breakin' bounds heah, aftah I had shouted out that he was wanted on the telephone. I cannot undahstand it at all, unless he is cwackahs! Do you think that Carkah is cwackahs, Kildare?'

Kildare laughed.

'I think he's got a rotten temper, and that you'd better steer clear of him,' he answered. 'Cut off now - you're late for third school.'

'Vevy well, Kildare.'

Arthur Augustus hurried out of the old abbey. Kildare followed him more slowly, with a puzzled frown on his brow. How Carker, in the vault, could have failed to hear shouting from the archway above, was a mystery, yet his subsequent actions made it clear that he had heard nothing. It was very puzzling, and the captain of St. Jim's had to give it up.

CHAPTER XXVII

RAILTON IS NOT PLEASED

'PRAY BE PATIENT -'

'But -'

'I have sent for Mr. Carker! I have, in fact, sent twice! Pray be patient for a few minutes.'

Mr. Railton had to suppress his own impatience.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett, at Laurel Villa, was still holding the line. How often the official pips had gone, while she was holding it, probably she neither knew nor cared. Telephone bills were a matter of no moment at all, in her anxiety for dear Tommy. Sympathetic as Railton was, he found it very irksome. He could not find it in his heart to be annoyed with Miss Priscilla, but he was annoyed with Mr. Carker - why did not the man come? He had despatched D'Arcy to call him, and, as he did not appear, had asked Kildare of the Sixth to go to the old abbey for him. Still he had not yet come.

That he was in the old abbey that morning, Railton knew for certain, for he had seen him take the path by the Head's garden, which led nowhere else, and that, not ten minutes before the call came from Laurel Villa. Certainly the man was there, and D'Arcy's message should have brought him to the School House at once. This long delay left Mr. Railton under fire, as it were, from Laurel Villa, and little as he liked Mr. Carker personally, he was anxious to see him.

But at length there was a tap at the door, and Mr. Carker came in. His face was a little flushed, and a less keen man than Victor Railton would have discerned that he was in an angry and irritable temper, which he was trying to suppress.

'I am told that I am wanted here on the telephone, Mr. Railton,' he said. 'I am sorry I could not come sooner - the foolish boy who came to tell me did not make it quite clear. Is the call still on?'

'Yes, Miss Fawcett is waiting to speak to you, Mr. Carker,' answered the house-master, 'Please take the receiver.'

Mr. Railton sat down at his table. He had been busy with a Greek paper for the Sixth Form, when the call from Huckleberry interrupted him, and he now resumed it, leaving Miss Fawcett to Mr. Carker.

The man took the receiver, with a sidelong look at him. Perhaps he would have preferred the house-master to leave the study while he took the call. Railton saw no reason for doing so; there could be nothing of a private nature in a talk about Tom Merry and his disappearance; and Railton's time was of value, and enough of it had been wasted already, between Miss Priscilla and Mr. Carker. He did not even notice the look Carker gave him, and certainly it did not occur to him that Carker could have any reason for wishing him to go.

'Miss Fawcett? Gilbert Carker speaking - I am so sorry that I had to keep you waiting, dear Miss Fawcett - I was at a distance from the House, and I came as soon as I could.' Carker's voice was quite gentle, indeed almost unctuous; not a tone betraying that he was in an angry temper.

'Oh, Mr. Carker, thank you for coming to the telephone,' came the agitated voice from Laurel Villa, 'I am so troubled, Mr. Carker -'

'I can quite understand that, Miss Fawcett. Have you had no news yet of your missing ward?'

'No! No! Only from that wicked man -'

'From whom?'

'The person who calls himself Nemo. You remember, Mr. Carker, that he telephoned me more than a week ago, with a false alarm that Tommy had been kidnapped - you remember you came in soon after I had received the call, and -'

'Yes, yes, I remember perfectly -'

'You were so kind and considerate. You advised me to ring up the school at once and ascertain whether dear Tommy was safe. It was such a relief when I was so troubled and distressed. But now he really is kidnapped, and I do not know what to do - oh, I am so troubled.'

Mr. Carker's hard face twitched a little. Hard man as he was, perhaps the wail of distress in Miss Priscilla's voice touched him a little.

'The police are very kind - very kind indeed,' went on Miss Priscilla, 'but they advise me not to pay the ransom demanded by that wicked man. But - but- Tommy must be saved! What would you advise, Mr. Carker?'

It was easy to see that Miss Priscilla, while acting under official advice, was anxious to hear advice of a different kind!

'I hardly know what to advise, Miss Fawcett,' Carker spoke slowly, 'the boy's safety must be the very first consideration.'

'Oh, I am so glad to hear you say so, Mr. Carker!'

'He is certainly in bad hands,' went on Mr. Carker. 'The police are very efficient, Miss Fawcett, but it appears that after this lapse of time, they have been able to do nothing towards effecting his release.'

'Nothing whatever.'

'Has the man Nemo told you how he expects the money to be paid?'

'Yes, yes! I am to obtain a thousand pounds in pound notes from the bank, and make a parcel of them. When I have done so, he will tell me where the parcel is to be placed, secretly, for him to pick up. But if I say a word to the police about it, I shall never see dear Tommy again-he has said so! I do not know what to do Mr. Carker! Can you help me?'

Again Mr. Carker gave the house-master a sidelong look. Railton, busy with his papers, did not look up.

But obviously he was not going to leave the study; and whatever Mr. Carker said to Miss Priscilla had to be said in his hearing. Railton, indeed, was not likely to suppose that Mr. Carker cared whether he heard or not.

'I will try, Miss Fawcett,' said Mr. Carker, at last.

'Since nothing has been heard of Tom, and no discovery made all this while, I fear that the police may fail to find him.'

Mr. Railton looked up at that, sharply.

'I fear so - I fear so!'

'In that case, if the boy is to be released, it may be necessary to think of coming to terms with Nemo,' said Mr. Carker.

'Mr. Carker!' breathed the house-master.

Carker did not seem to hear him.

'You think so, Mr. Carker?' came from Laurel Villa.

'I should certainly consider it, Miss Fawcett. Perhaps it would be advisable to wait another day, and then, if nothing transpires, I think you should consider coming to terms with the man. In my opinion we should think first of the boy, a prisoner in some hidden place at a distance, no one even imagines where.

He must, I suppose, have been taken away in a car, and it may have covered hundreds of miles - he may be anywhere in the kingdom and there appears to be no clue whatever. He must be in a very unhappy state of mind -'

'Oh, my dear Tommy!'

'I cannot advise you to submit to the man's demands. But if there is no news of the boy after the lapse of another day, I think that you should consider the only means by which he can be restored to you.'

'You are right, Mr. Carker - you are right! I was sure that you would be able to give me good advice. Thank you so much, Mr. Carker.'

'Not at all, madam, not at all. I am only too anxious to help, in such distressing circumstances.'

Miss Priscilla, at last, rang off. Mr. Carker turned from the telephone to meet Mr. Railton's eyes, fixed on him sternly. The house-master had risen to his feet.

'Thank you for allowing me to take the call, Mr. Railton,' said Carker, and he made a step towards the door.

'Mr. Carker! I am surprised - very much surprised - by the advice you have given Miss Fawcett,' exclaimed the house-master. 'I think that Inspector Skeat would take a very serious view of it.'

'You do not approve, sir?'

'I do not - most emphatically,' said Mr. Railton.

'It may cause Miss Fawcett, in her distress, to play into the hands of that unmitigated scoundrel who has kidnapped her ward. It has not been easy for the police authorities to persuade her to be firm, and leave the matter in official hands. You have acted contrary to their views and wishes.'

'I am sorry,' said Mr. Carker, 'but Miss Fawcett's distress moves me very deeply, Mr. Railton, and I have little faith in the police finding that unfortunate boy. So far as I know they have not even traced the car in which he was taken away -'

'It is not established that he was taken away in a car.'

'He was, at all events, taken away,' said Mr. Carker, 'and the police seem to be quite helpless in the matter. Miss Fawcett's distress cannot continue indefinitely. I feel for her very much, Mr. Railton, and I could not advise her otherwise than as I have done.'

With that, Mr. Carker left the house-master's study.

Mr. Railton was left frowning. He did not like Mr. Carker, and at that moment, he felt that he disliked him very much. It was some minutes before the house-master settled down to his Greek papers again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LISTENERS HEAR NO GOOD OF THEMSELVES

'NO NEWS?'

'No!'

'It's rotten!'

'Beastly!'

'Poor old Tom!'

'Oh, it's rotten!'

Mr. Carker glanced round, with a slightly sarcastic smile on his hard face. He was leaning on one of the old elms, smoking a cigarette, when two Shell fellows came along. Manners and Lowther did not notice him there, neither would they have heeded him had they noticed him. They were thinking of their missing chum, and their hearts were heavy, their faces clouded.

Where was Tom Merry?

Somewhere - probably at a great distance - in the hands of a kidnapper. Every hour they hoped for news of him. But no news came. No doubt the police were doing all they could, but what could they do, without the slightest, faintest clue? Tom had vanished suddenly, utterly, as if the

old quadrangle at St. Jim's had opened and engulfed him. What had become of him?

'Friday, and he disappeared on Wednesday!' said Monty Lowther. 'They can't do anything about it, 'Manners.'

'Looks like it!' said Manners, glumly.

'How on earth was he got away?'

'Goodness knows.'

'Must have been a car, I supposes -'

'They can trace cars,' said Manners. 'Old Skeat must have been pretty keen in inquiring after a car.'

'How did they get hold of him? He was in the quad when Carker spoke to him, but he must have gone somewhere. If he did go to the old abbey -'

'We don't know whether he did or not.'

'Gussy's sure he did! I think so, myself,' said Lowther. 'He might have been nobbled there, and whisked away in a car - if the villain was on the watch for him - nobody there to see it, now the place is out of bounds.'

'How could anybody be on the watch for him there?' said Manners, shaking his head. 'The kidnapper couldn't be hanging about there, Monty, looking for a chance - how could he? He couldn't know that Carker was going to ask Tom to go to the abbey to fetch something for him.'

'No, he couldn't!' said Lowther. 'But - Oh, I can't make it out! If he went out of gates, why did he, when we were just going to start for Carcroft? I can't begin to make it out.'

The two Shell fellows had come to a stop, under the branches of the elm, still not noticing Carker on the other side of the massive trunk. The sarcastic smile lingered on Mr. Carker's face, as if he found something amusing in the speculations of Tom Merry's chums about his disappearance. 'The uttah wottah!' Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice was heard. 'The uttah, unuttahable wottah -'

Manners and Lowther ceased, for a moment, to look worried and troubled, and grinned faintly. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy evidently was in a state of great wrath and indignation. Blake and Herries and Digby who were with him seemed to be trying to soothe him. But Arthur Augustus was not to be soothed.

Arthur Augustus seemed to be in a seething state.

'The cheeky, wotten, wascally wapsallion!' Arthur Augustus went on. 'The uttah bwute - the wank outsiders -'

'What's the row?' asked Monty Lowther.

'That uttah wottah Carkah!' breathed Arthur Augustus. 'That indescribable bwute, Carkah!'

Mr. Carker's hard face hardened, and his eyes glistened, as he heard that, He was no longer amused!

He had shifted his position round the elm trunk a little, so that he should not be seen eavesdropping, so he could not see Arthur Augustus. But the indignant voice reached his ears very clearly.

Still he did not stir. Possibly he had his own reasons for being interested in discussions of Tom Merry's disappearance.

'What's Carker done this time?' asked Manners.

'He smacked my head this morning', muttered Arthur Augustus, in tones that fairly thrilled with indignation.

'Oh, my hat!' said Monty Lowther. 'At that again? He seems to be making a habit of it.'

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'The man's got a rotten temper,' said Blake. 'It seems that Railton sent Gussy to tell him that he was wanted on the phone, and before he had a chance to get it out Carker was smacking his head.'

'Yaas, wathah!'

'He fancied Gussy was breaking bounds in the old abbey,' said Herries. 'He was there when Gussy went for him. Never gave him a chance to speak.'

'Ill-tempered brute!' said Digby.

'I wegard him as an absolute wottah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'He is a cwuel bwute to animals, and that kind of wottah is capable of anythin'. I wegard him as a vevy suspicious chawactah -'

'Pack it up, Gussy,' interrupted Blake, hastily.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Don't talk rot outside the study, old chap,' said Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies -'

'Nothing about that, fathead!' said Digby.

'Weally, Dig -'

'Carker does seem to be the limit,' said Blake, 'but he won't be here much longer, Gussy - he's only here for his archaeological stunts in the old abbey, and that can't last much longer. The sooner he goes the better.'

'You know what I think about him, Blake - you know vevy well that -'

'My dear chap, I know that you don't think at all,' interrupted Blake,

'Pack it up, I tell you.'

'There is no weason why I should not tell Mannahs and Lowthah what I think about that wottah, Blake-'

'Fathead! Pack it up!' hooted Blake.

'What the dickens is the jolly old secret?' asked Monty Lowther, while Manners stared blankly.

'Oh, nothing,' said Blake, hastily. 'Gussy just maunders on, you know.'

'I wefuse to have my wemarks descwibed as maundewin', Blake, and I am suah that I am wight.

Howevah, I will say nothin' about it at pwesent,' conceded Arthur Augustus, 'but I am certainly not goin' to have that wascally wottah smackin' my head! I landed him one punch, but he was too stwong for me, and he was goin' on smackin' my head if Kildare had not barged in. I have a gweat mind to go to Wailton about it. The wuffianly wascal! No wondah he was turfed out of the school when he was heah yahs ago -'

Mr. Carker, behind his tree, gave a little jump.

'Kicked out, the wascal,' went on Arthur Augustus, unconscious of listening ears, 'and I am weally surprised that the Head allowed him to weturn heah with his silly archeo-thingummy. I should be vevy glad to see him kicked out again, as he was when he was a St. Jim's man yahs ago - oh cwikey!' Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly, as a figure appeared from behind the elm.

Carker strode at him with a flaming face.

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Monty Lowther.

Not one of the juniors had had any idea that Carker was in the offing. But evidently he had heard all that Arthur Augustus had said; equally evidently, it had enraged him, which perhaps was not surprising.

'You young rascal!' Carker panted, 'You - you -' His hand was raised. But Arthur Augustus did not recede a step, and his eyes gleamed scorn at the man.

'So you have been listenin', Mr. Carker,' he said. 'Listenahs nevah heah any good of themselves, Mr. Carkah. And if you lay a fingah on me, you wottah, my fwriends will help me deal with you.'

'What-ho!' said Blake.

Six juniors gathered at once round Arthur Augustus. It was so plain to Mr. Carker that if he let his savage temper take the upper hand, the whole party would collar him on the spot, that he paused.

He stood up with his face aflame, his eyes glinting.

'I heard what you said - !' he muttered.

'I was not awah that you were hidin' behind that twee, Mr. Carkah,' answered Arthur Augustus, with cool contempt.

'You said - you said that I - that I had to leave the school when I was here as a boy.' Carker seemed to choke. 'How dare you -'

'I said that you were turfed out, Mr. Carkah! I am willin' to wepeat it if you like! You were turfed out!' said Arthur Augustus, quite coolly.

'Go easy, Gussy,' murmured Blake.

'Wats!' retorted Arthur Augustus. 'Carkah was turfed out when he was heah. I did not intend to mention it in his heawin', but since he chooses to play the eavesdwoppah, he is vevy welcome to heah it.'

'Who told you anything about what may have happened?' breathed Carker. 'If that old fool Taggles has been chattering -' He broke off. 'You can know nothing of what happened before your time here - if you dare to repeat such a story, I will place the matter before your Headmaster.'

With that, Mr. Carker strode, or rather, stamped, away; evidently deeply exasperated by the discovery that his dubious history as a St. Jim's boy was known and talked of among the juniors of the School House.

Blake whistled.

'You've done it now, Gussy,' he said.

'Gussy all over!' sighed Herries.

'Weally, you fellows, it is not my fault if that wat listens behind a twee to what a fellow is sayin',' said Arthur Augustus. 'Listenahs nevah heah any good of themselves, as I wemarked to him.'

'He's wild,' said Manners.

'He can be as wild as a Wed Indian, and I do not care a wap!' answered Arthur Augustus. 'I wegard him with uttah despision - I mean contempt! And the more I pondah ovah it, the more I believe I was quite wight in what I told you fellows in the study yestahday, and - Leggo, you asses!' added Arthur Augustus in a yell, as Blake and Herries and Digby, with one accord, grabbed him and walked him away.

But Gussy's friends did not release him - they walked him away. Whether what Gussy had said in the study was right or wrong, it was obviously injudicious for it to be said outside the study. So they walked him off, leaving Manners and Lowther staring.

CHAPTER XXIX

FIGGINS IN A FIX

'BLOW,' MURMURED George Figgins.

It was a little dismaying.

Figgins of the Fourth was in a spot where he was extremely anxious not to be found - to wit, in the little parlour of Taggles's lodge. St. Jim's fellows had, of course, no business to be in such a spot, but as the ancient porter of St. Jim's had left his lodge, with the door wide open, Figgins had been able to slip in with ease, unperceived. At the moment he

was standing by Taggles's arm-chair, with a bottle of gum in his hand, from which he had removed the cork.

That gum was due to trickle into the seat of the arm-chair - a happy surprise for Taggles when he came in and sat in it. Which, in Figgy's opinion at least, was a just retribution for Taggles's excessive promptness in banging shut the gates on the tick of time, and getting fellows late for calling-over.

But, just as the gum was about to trickle, the sound of hurried footsteps fell on Figgy's ears, and he turned a startled head and glanced from the window.

If Taggles caught him there, gum bottle in hand, it meant a report to Ratcliff, his house-master.

But it was not Taggles who was coming - the approaching figure he saw from the window was that of Mr. Carker, the Head's guest in the School House. But it was quite plain that Carker was coming to the lodge, and equally plain that he was coming in a very bad temper. His brows were knitted, and his eyes were glinting. Why he was coming there, and why he looked so savage, Figgy had not the remotest idea. But it was plain that he was coming there; in fact, in a few more moments, he had come.

'Blow!' breathed Figgy again, 'this is a fix.'

He heard the man's footsteps in the doorway of the lodge. If he came into the little parlour, there was Figgins! True, it was no concern of the Head's guest if a New House junior happened to be there - but Figgy remembered the episode in the old abbey.

Mr. Carker was not a man to mind his own business; and if Carker caught him there, he might as well have been caught by Taggles himself. Figgy hastily re-corked the gum bottle, and slipped it into his pocket. If he was going to be caught, it was just as well that the gum had not yet trickled into the armchair!

To his relief, however, Mr. Carker stopped in the doorway. Then Figgins heard his voice:

'Taggles! You old fool, Taggles.'

'Phew!' murmured Figgins. Apparently old Taggles was the subject of the wrath so plainly depicted in Mr. Carker's face.

'Taggles! You old fool! Are you there, confound you?'

If Taggles had been there, certainly he would have emerged, in a state of indignant surprise, at that address. As he did not emerge, Mr. Carker gave an angry grunt, and a stamp on the floor, and then stood looking out of the doorway, no doubt to see whether the old porter was in the offing.

'Blow!' murmured Figgins, for the third time.

Apparently Carker wanted Taggles, and was going to wait till Taggles came back to his lodge: which was not pleasant for Figgins, who wanted to be quite clear before old Taggles materialised. However, there was no help for it, and he waited, hoping that Taggles would be delayed, and that Carker would go.

Mr. Carker did not go.

'The old fool! Blabbing old fool!' Figgins heard him muttering, 'I'll get him sacked for it - the babbling old fool.'

Which was quite mystifying to George Figgins.

He kept an eye on the window. Old Taggles came in sight at last, coming back to his lodge with his slow tread. He arrived at the doorway, and stared at Mr. Carker just within. Carker was the first to speak.

'You babbling old fool!'

'Hey?' grunted Taggles.

'I warned you, the day I came, to keep your senile mouth shut,' snapped Carker, 'but you've opened it wide, you chattering old idiot.'

Taggles blinked at him.

'Better language, please, Mr. Carker,' he said, stolidly. 'You call a man names like that, and I'll complain to the 'Ead!'

'You dithering old fool -'

'You was always an impident young raskil, when you was here, all them years ago,' said Taggles. 'You ain't changed, Mr. Carker. But you ain't going to call a man names in his own lodge. You get out of it, Mr. Carker.'

'I warned you to say nothing of the past - and the Headmaster ordered you not to chatter,' hissed Carker. 'Now I find that the whole story is the talk of the junior boys.'

Taggles shook his head.

'I ain't said a word, Mr. Carker,' he answered. 'The 'Ead told me to say nothing about your being turned out of the school, and I ain't said nothing. If they knows you was turned out for pinching, they ain't got it from me.'

Figgins jumped almost clear of the floor as he heard that. Owing to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's inimitable way of keeping things dark, it was rumoured among a good many fellows that that Old Boy had had trouble when he was at the school, and had had to leave - but nobody knew why. Now Figgins knew!

'I tell you I have heard talk among the juniors, only a quarter of an hour ago!' hissed Mr. Carker.

'One of them said that I had been turfed out, as he called it - a boy named D'Arcy. How did he know, if you have not chattered? Hardly anyone is left here from my time - but you -'

Taggles shook his head again.

'So you was turfed out, Mr. Carker,' he said. 'You was turfed out for pinching money from another boy's study, as you knows as well as I do. It ain't my fault that you was a young raskil and got what you asked for, and if it's got out it ain't my fault neither.'

And don't you come 'ere calling a man names, because it's come out that you was a thief when you was in the school. 'Ow it's come out I don't know, but I ain't said a word.'

'That's a lie!' hissed Carker. 'It can have come only from you. You never liked me when I was here, and you've done this -'

'Nobody ever liked you when you was here, Mr. Carker,' answered Taggles. 'You was a bad egg, you was. I remember young Figgins - that's the father of young Figgins who's here now, in Mr. Ratcliff's House - I remember him thrashing you for worrying a cat, like the cruel young varmint you was.'

Figgins, in the parlour, grinned. He was glad to hear that his father, in his old days as a St. Jim's boy, had thrashed Mr. Carker!

'Who's told about you, I dunno,' went on Taggles, 'but I ain't, because the 'Ead told me not to talk, not because you told me, Mr. Carker - I wouldn't care what you told me, not a brass farden. But the 'Ead, he says, don't say anything about the past concerning Mr. Carker, Taggles, he says, and I ain't said nothing, according to 'Ead's orders. And now p'raps you'll be kind enough to walk out of my lodge, Mr. Carker - I ain't got no use for you 'ere.'

'You're lying - you - you -'

Carker, in his rage, made a furious stride at the old porter. Old Taggles, at that moment, was in danger of going through Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's

experience at the hands of the savage-tempered man. He jumped back in alarm, his hat falling off in his haste, spluttering.

'Ere, 'ands off,' spluttered Taggles, 'oh my eye!'

He jumped back again, and again, and then fairly bolted.

'Oh crumbs!' breathed Figgins, in the parlour.

From the window, he had a glimpse of old Taggles, panting at a run, and Mr. Carker striding after him.

But the man checked himself. Savagely angry and infuriated as he was, no doubt he realised that such a scene at St. Jim's was beyond the limit.

Breathing hard he strode away in another direction.

'Holy smoke!' murmured Figgins.

This was his chance! Taggles was gone in one direction, Carker in another; the coast was, for the moment, clear. Figgins darted out of Taggles' little parlour, and out of the lodge, and was gone in his turn.

CHAPTER XXX

SCOTCHMAN WANTED!

'TROT IN, GUSSY!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy trotted in.

Figgins, Kerr and Wynn were at tea in their study in the New House, after class that day. They had been discussing, over tea, the episode in Taggles's lodge earlier in the afternoon. Figgy, naturally, had told his chums; but all three agreed that it had better go no further. Undoubtedly it would have been extremely unpleasant for the Head's guest had it become the talk of St. Jim's that the reason why he had left the school, years ago, was because he had been caught 'pinching' in another fellow's study. Not that the New House Co. had any special desire to make things pleasant for the man they disliked intensely. But it was obviously the Head's wish that that old story should not come out while Mr. Carker was staying at the school. He had cautioned Taggles on the subject, and would certainly have been very much perturbed to hear that it had leaked out. Figgins and Co. discussed it among themselves, but they ceased to speak at once, as a tap came at the study door, and it opened to reveal Arthur Augustus's elegant form.

'Sorry, Gussy,' said Fatty Wynn.

Arthur Augustus's eyeglass turned on him.

'Bai Jove! What are you sowwy about, Wynn?' he inquired.

'We've finished the sosses,' said Fatty.

'Weally, Wynn -'

'But we've got a cake,' said Fatty, 'squat down, old chap.'

'Thank you vevy much,' said Arthur Augustus, 'but I have not come to tea, deah boys. I have called on a much more important mattah.'

To the surprise of Figgins and Co., Arthur Augustus D'Arcy closed the door very carefully. Other ears, it seemed, were not to hear what he had to say in Figgins and Co.'s study.

'Jolly old secret what?' asked Figgins, grinning.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Something new in neckties?'

'Weally, Figgins -'

'New style in top-hats?' asked Kerr.

'Weally, Kerr -'

'Never mind your jolly old secrets,' said Fatty Wynn, 'try the cake.'
'It is a mattah of gweat and vevy sewious importance,' said Arthur Augustus, unheeding. 'Aftah weflectin' vevy sewiously, I have decided that somethin' must be done, but I do not know pwecisely what.'
Figgins and Kerr looked at him curiously. Fatty Wynn was busy with the cake. Arthur Augustus's aristocratic face was not only serious, it was in fact solemn. Some matter of the deepest import seemed to be weighing on his noble mind. What it might be the New House chums could not even begin to guess.

'Spot of trouble of some sort?' asked Figgins.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'What's it all about?' asked Kerr.

'Tom Mewwy!' answered Arthur Augustus.

'No news of him, is there?' asked Figgins.

'None whatevah! But -' Arthur Augustus paused.

'Carry on,' said Figgins, encouragingly.

'I will cawwy on, Figgay, but pway let it be undahstood that nothin' is said outside this study. It is a secwet, so fah,' said Arthur Augustus, impressively. 'There would be a wow if it got about, without any pwoof, you know.'

'If what got about?'

'About Carkah.'

'Eh?'

'That uttah wottah and wapscallion Carkah -'

'All that and more,' said Figgins, 'but what the dickens -'

'It is weally Kerr to whom I want to speak,' explained Arthur Augustus.

'You othah fellows may heah, of course, so long as you say nothin' about it. But it is Kerr what I want to advise me in this vevy sewious mattah.'
Kerr blinked at him.

'Why me specially?' he asked.

'Because you are a Scotchman, old chap, and Scotchmen are vevy bwainy,' said Arthur Augustus.

'Blake and Hewwies and Dig wegard it as widiculous, but I am suah that I have got it wight, and I vevy much want to heah the opinion of a more bwainy chap. You being a Scotchman, I thought of you, and so I have come ovah heah to speak to you about it.'

Kerr chuckled.

'Good man,' said Figgins, with a nod. 'If you're in a jam, old Kerr's the man to help you out. But what the thump -'

'I am wathah bwainy myself,' went on Arthur Augustus, 'but all the fellows say that Kerr is the weally bwainy man of the Lowah School -'

'They've got it right!' said Figgins.

'Right as rain!' assented Fatty Wynn.

Kerr chuckled again.

'If a Scotsman's wanted, I'm at your service, Gussy,' he said. 'Suppose you tell us what it's all about o begin with.'

'About Tom Mewwy! He has been kidnapped, as you fellows know, and an awful wottah who called himself Nemo is twyin' to stick old Miss Priscillah for a wansom! I wathah think I have solved the mystewy of his disappeawance.'

Figgins and Co. all jumped. Even Fatty Wynn forgot the cake, and sat staring at the swell of the School House, with a chunk half-way to his mouth.

'Wha-a-a-t?' stuttered Figgins.

'I wathah think I have spotted the kidnappah -'
'Oh crumbs!'
'Gussy, old man -'
'Draw it mild!'
'Blake and Hewwies and Dig simply called me a fathead,' continued Arthur Augustus, 'but I wathah think I have got it wight.'
'Great pip!' said Figgins, 'and who's the jolly old kidnapper - if you know?'
'Carkah.'
This time Figgins and Co. did not merely jump. They bounded!
'Carker!' stuttered Figgins, blankly.
'Yaas, wathah.'
'Carker!' repeated Kerr, staring.
'That wottah Carkah -'
'Carker!' gasped Fatty Wynn. 'Dreaming?'
'I am not dweamin', Wynn. I have weflected a gweat deal on the mattah and I think I have it wight. I am vewy anxious to heah your opinion, Kerr. You are a more bwainy fellow than my fwiends in my study, and I wathah think you will agwee with me.'
Kerr sat looking at him, a startled expression on his face.
'Anything to go on?' he asked.
'Yaas, wathah! Carkah is cwuel to animals -'
'Eh?'
'Blake thinks that that has nothin' to do with it -'
'Has it?' asked Figgins.
'Certainly it has, Figgins. Such a person is capable of cwime, and a cwime has been committed. There is such a thing as puttin' two and two togethah.'
'Oh, my hat!' said Figgins.
He winked at Kerr. But the Scottish junior did not smile. His face was still startled, and very thoughtful.
'He was cwuel to animals when he was a boy heah,' continued Arthur Augustus. 'He has not changed since - it was because he was a cwuel bwute to a dog that I had a wow with him the day he came. I wegard that as evidence. When a cwime has been committed, and a person capable of cwime is on the spot, I do not think it is necessawy to look much furthah.'
'Fan me!' muttered Figgins.
'Weally, Figgins -'
'Gussy, old man, you're the goodest little man that ever gooded,' said Figgins, chuckling, 'but draw it mild, old top! Draw it just a little mild. Don't make us laugh too much.'
'It is not a laughin' mattah, Figgins,' said Arthur Augustus, warmly.
'It is a vewy sewious mattah, Figgins. Tom Mewwy has been kidnapped by Carkah-'
'He hasn't!' yelled Figgins.
'Rot, old chap,' said Fatty Wynn.
Kerr did not speak.
Arthur Augustus breathed hard.
'If that is your opinion, Figgins -' he began, with a great deal of dignity.
'And yours, Wynn?'
'Yes, fathead,' answered Fatty Wynn, 'forget it, and have some of this cake.'

'Vewy well,' said Arthur Augustus, in the same dignified manner, 'what do you think, Kerr? If you agwee with Figgins and Wynn, I have wasted my time comin' ovah heah, and I shall wevise my opinion of Scotchmen being bwainy chaps!'

Kerr did not speak for a moment. Figgins and Wynn eyed him curiously. They did not expect Kerr, the keenest-witted fellow in the Lower School at St. Jim's, to take Gussy's remarkable theory seriously.

Blake and Co. had told him that he was a fathead, and Figgins and Fatty fully agreed with Blake and Co. on that point. But it began to seem that Kerr did not!

'By gum!' said Kerr, at last. He gave a low whistle.

'Kerr, old man,' said Figgins, 'you don't think -'

'I do,' said Kerr, quietly.

'You think Gussy's got it right?' howled Figgins.

'You think a man's a kidnapper just because he's a brute to animals?'

Kerr smiled.

'No!' he answered, 'but a fellow can get a thing right for the wrong reasons. I think that Gussy's got it right by sheer accident. It never came into my head to think of Carker in connection with Tom Merry's disappearance -'

'Why should it?' said Figgins.

'Exactly!' assented Kerr. 'Why should it? There was no reason why it should - and it didn't! But if it had - !' He paused a moment. 'Gussy thinks it was Carker because he's a cruel brute, and a cruel brute is capable of crime. That isn't evidence that would do for Inspector Skeat -'

'Hardly!' grinned Figgins.

'But if you once think of Carker in connection with it, there's a lot of other things,' said Kerr, very quietly. 'Archaeology, for one -'

'Archaeology!' repeated Figgins, quite blankly.

'Carker's stunt of archaeology,' said Kerr with a nod, 'and other things - what we know ourselves, and what we've heard Gussy saying about his row with Carker in the old abbey this morning - by gum! It all rushed into my head the minute he mentioned Carker. Gussy suspects Carker -'

'Yaas, wathah.'

'For an absolutely idiotic reason -' continued Kerr.

'Weally, Kerr -' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly.

'But I believe that, by sheer fatheadedness, he has hit the nail on the head!' said Kerr. 'I suspect Carker as much as Gussy does, though for quite different reasons'. Gussy's an ass, but he's got it right.'

Arthur Augustus smiled.

'You expwess yourself in a wathah objectionable mannah, Kerr,' he said, 'but so long as you admit that I have got it wight -'

'Right as rain!' said Kerr.

Figgins and Fatty Wynn could only stare.

CHAPTER XXXI

KERR WORKS IT OUT

'WHAT'S ON?' asked Monty Lowther.

'Anything?' asked Manners.

Blake and Herries and Dig shook their heads.
Lowther and Manners came into Study No. 6 in the Fourth, after tea, and asked those questions together.
Three members of the study, it appeared, could not furnish an answer. But the fourth member smiled.
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy looked in high feather.
'Wait and see, deah boys,' he said. 'I have asked you to come heah, as Tom Mewwy's fwriends -'
'Any news of Tom?' exclaimed the two Shell fellows, eagerly.
'Not yet, deah boys, but I twust there will be news,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Wait till Figgins and Co. come in -'
'What on earth do Figgins and Co. know about it, fathead?'
'Weally, Lowthah -'
'Talking out of your hat, as usual?' asked Manners.
'Weally, Mannahs -'
'Wandering in his mind - if any!' said Blake, shaking his head again.
'He's told us that those New House swobs are coming over, and that Kerr's got something special to tell us. Top secret, and all that! Frightfully mysterious, and all that. Just wandering in his mind -'
'Weally, Blake -'
'Kerr can't know anything about Tom's disappearance,' said Lowther, staring.
'He is a Scotchman - !' said Arthur Augustus.
'What on earth's that got to do with it?' howled Lowther.
'Scotchmen are vewy bwainy,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'I am vewy glad I thought of consultin' Kerr. Figgins and Wynn are wathah asses, just like Blake and Hewwies and Dig, but Kerr saw at once that I was wight, and that shows what a bwainy chap he is -'
'About what?' shrieked Manners.
'About Tom Mewwy and that wottah Carkah -'
'Pack that up, fathead!' hooted Blake.
'I wefuse to pack it up, Blake! I have already told those New House chaps that I suspect Carkah, and there is no weason why Mannahs and Lowthah should not heah too.'
'What the jolly old thump do you suspect Carker of?' asked Manners blankly.
'Kidnappin' Tom Mewwy -'
'Oh, jumping snakes!' gasped Lowther. 'Mad?'
'I twust not, Lowthah! Of course it is wathah a secwet at pwesent, and must not be talked of outside this study -'
'Oh, gum! I should say not. You blithering ass -'
'Kerr does not think me a blithewin' ass, Lowthah,' said Arthur Augustus, calmly, 'and he is a vewy bwainy chap. Wait till he blows in -'
'What on earth reason can you have for thinking that Carker kidnapped Tom Merry?' asked Manners, almost dazedly.
'He is cwuel to animals -'
'Tom Merry isn't an animal!' remarked Lowther.
'Pway be sewious, Lowthah! A person who torments animals can only be a thowoughly bad chawactah. That is why I thought of him. A vewy bad man is on the spot when a cwime takes place. What more do you want?'
'Oh, my only summer bonnet! articulated Monty Lowther. 'Mean to say that a keen chap like Kerr listened to rot like that?'
'I do not wegard it as wot, Lowthah. But as a mattah of fact, Kerr thought there were some othah weasons,' admitted Arthur Augustus, 'he thinks that

I have got it wight for the wong weasons. Howevah, he thinks that I have got it wight - and that is the main point. He said he was going to think it out, and they would come ovah heah and we would all go into it togethah - so we will discuss the mattah when they awwive.'

'Here they come,' said Blake.

Three New House juniors came in together. Kerr closed the door after they were in. His face was very serious.

'All here,' said Figgins. 'Go ahead, Kerr.'

'Oh, let's hear,' said Monty Lowther, slightly sarcastically. 'Gussy tells us that that man Carker is a kidnapper, because he pulled a dog's tail or something -'

'Irrefragable evidence!' said Manners, ironically.

'Weally, you fellows -'

'You just listen!' said Figgins, warmly. 'Gussy is an ass, of course -'

'Weally, Figgins -'

'A howling ass!' agreed Fatty Wynn, 'but -'

'Weally, Wynn -'

'Gussy's an ass!' agreed Kerr. 'Quite the limit in that line -'

'Weally, Kerr -'

'But I believe he's right about Carker,' said the Scottish junior quietly.

'And if you'll listen, I'll tell you how I've worked it out. Gussy's reason for suspecting him isn't a reason at all -'

'Look heah, Kerr -'

'But he suspected the right man, all the same, I believe. We know something about Carker that you fellows don't know,' said Kerr. 'He was turfed out of St. Jim's, in his time here, for stealing. He was a real bad hat.'

'Bai Jove! Is that what the Head was goin' to tell Wailton that day I was behind the arm-chair?' exclaimed Arthur Augustus. 'I know that it was somethin' vewy sewious, but of course I could not listen -'

'Is it a fact, though?' asked Blake.

'Solid fact, said Figgins at once. 'I heard Taggles say so to Carker himself, in his lodge, this very day. It's a fact.'

'Bai Jove! So that was it!' said Arthur Augustus. 'That was what the wottah was like when he was heah, was it? Pewwaps you fellows can see now that I was wight about that wat -'

'Not at all,' said Blake.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Not in the least,' said Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies -!'

'Let's hear what Kerr's got to say,' interrupted Manners. 'Carker may have been dishonest, years ago, and we all know he's brute, but that doesn't make out that he knows anything about Tom Merry disappearing -'

'Putting two and two togethah, Mannahs -'

'Dry up, Gussy,' said Digby. 'You've talked enough rot, old chap, now let Kerr have a go.'

'Pway pwoceed, Kerr, and pewwaps these fellows will listen to you, if they will not listen to me,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

All attention was fixed on George Francis Kerr.

Sad to relate no one, not even his dearest pals, regarded Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's mode of reasoning as anything but pure, unadulterated fatheadedness.

But Kerr of, the Fourth was a very different proposition. If that keen and canny Scot thought there was something in it, it was very probable that something was!

Kerr spoke very quietly.

'Carker's a bad hat,' he said, 'dishonest to begin with, and a brute. Gussy's right in thinking such a man capable of a lot. But we want something a bit more substantial than that. And I've thought up a lot of things, since Gussy gave me the tip to think about Carker. Tom Merry's been kidnapped for ransom - that means that the kidnapper knows Miss Fawcett and knows she would be a likely victim. Carker knows her, and visits Laurel Villa. She's a simple old soul that could be imposed on by anyone. She trusts him - I doubt if any fellow here would.'

'Hardly,' said Blake.

'Somebody was at Huckleberry, and later in Sussex. Carker was at Huckleberry, and later in Sussex. Whether he's a genuine archaeologist or not I can't say - but archaeological stunts provided a good pretext for coming here, if he was Nemo, the man after Tom Merry.'

Kerr paused a moment.

'Little enough so far,' he said, 'but there's more to it. Tom Merry disappeared as if he had vanished into thin air. No car has been traced - not an eye fell on him or his kidnapper - and it was in broad daylight. And - he disappeared just after Carker had asked him to go into the old abbey to fetch something.'

'I remarked that Carkah was the last person who evah saw him -'

'Dry up, Gussy.' .

'Weally, Blake -'

'Suppose,' said Kerr, very slowly, 'suppose that he did go to the old abbey, as there's every reason to suppose. He disappeared there.'

'Collared and bundled into a car - !' said Blake.

'Or - !' said Kerr.

'Or what?'

'Suppose he wasn't taken away at all.'

'Eh?'

'What?'

'Bai Jove! Weally, Kerr -'

'Remember,' said Kerr, while the juniors stared at him blankly. 'Carker's an Old Boy of St. Jim's. He knew all about the old abbey, as every St. Jim's fellow knows. Suppose that when he was here, he found out something in the old ruins, and remembered it afterwards - such places are full of secrets, and Carker may have stumbled on one - some secret hide-out -'

'What a thumping lot of supposing!' said Monty Lowther. 'What the dickens has put that into your head, for goodness' sake?'

'I'll tell you! If Carker knew some secret of that old place, from the time when he was a St. Jim's man here, it would serve his turn, if he was the kidnapper -'

'If!' murmured Blake.

'I'm not guessing wildly,' said Kerr, evenly. 'Suppose, for a minute, that it was so. He gets Tom to go to the old abbey - and Tom vanishes. If Tom was trapped there, St. Jim's fellows rambling about the place would be risky for Carker. Did he contrive to get the place put out of bounds, or did he not?'

'Bai Jove! The artful wottah -'

'Did he get Ratty to make an example of us, when we were caught there the other night, as a warning to all other fellows to keep clear?'

'Yaas, wathah.'

'And what was he carrying a big heavy bag down into the vault for, at nightfall?' went on Kerr. 'We all saw it, and we knew that he was wild because we saw it. If he was going to park a kidnapped fellow in some hide-out in the old ruins, he had to make some preparations - food, at least, and other things. What was in that bag, and why was he taking it down into the vault?'

Blake whistled.

'But it is what happened this morning that puts the lid on,' continued Kerr. 'D'Arcy was sent to fetch him from the old abbey, because he was wanted on the phone. He couldn't be found there, and Gussy shouted down into the vault, and he never heard -'

'Must have heard, if he was there,' said Lowther.

'Quite - if he was there,' said Kerr.

'He certainly was there, Kerr, for he came up just as I was about to go away and pitched into me -'

'Not having heard you shout,' said Kerr. 'You've told us all about it, Gussy - he fancied you were breaking bounds there, though you'd shouted out that he was wanted on the phone - '

'Yaas, wathah.'

'He never heard your shouting,' said Kerr. 'He came up from the vault, but he was not in the vault when you shouted, or he must have heard. He had come back into the vault after you gave it up.'

'But there's no way into the vault, Kerr, except the steps where I was standin' -'

'No way that is known,' said Kerr. 'But I think there's a way that Carker knows, and that he must have been out of hearing when you shouted down the steps. That means that there's a secret door in the vault, which Carker knows, and nobody else does.'

'Bai Jove!'

'I don't see how it can mean anything else,' said Kerr.

The juniors were silent, looking at Kerr. The Scottish junior's cool, clear reasoning carried conviction.

Where had Carker been when D'Arcy shouted down the steps to him? Not in the vault, or he must have heard. Yet he had come up out of the vault. What did it - what could it mean, but that there was a secret hide-out behind those old stone walls? Was that why Carker had contrived to send Tom Merry there - to disappear? What did it look like?

'By gum!' said Monty Lowther, at last. 'It looks -'

'It looks - !' muttered Blake.

'It looks,' said Kerr, quietly, 'as if there's a secret hide-out under that old show, and that Carker had gone to it when Gussy was looking for him. He came back into the vault after Gussy had chucked shouting, and never knew that he was there, till he came up the steps and saw him. That's what it looks like to me, at any rate.'

'The uttah wottah -'

'But -!' said Manners, slowly.

'Well?' said Kerr.

'It looks like it! We know that the man's a rotter, and it all fits in. But - would Railton listen to all this - or old Skeat?' Manners shook his head. 'What are we going to do?'

'We have got to do somethin', deah boys. We have got to wescue Tom Mewwy out of the hands of that wottah -'

'We've got to make sure,' said Kerr.

'I am quite suah already -'

'Well, we've got to make assurance doubly sure, then,' said Kerr. 'No good saying a word till we know for certain. If there's a secret door in that vault, Carker found it out when he was here, years ago, very likely by accident or chance - but it can't be easy to find by looking for it. But- if it's there, it could be found.'

'The place is out of bounds - Carker contrived that,' said Kerr, 'and we don't want to put him on his guard, either. We can't go there in a crowd. We've got to be patient - till we're certain. If you fellows are willing to leave it to me -'

'Pewwaps it had bettah be left to me, deah boy,' said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, 'as a fellow of tact and judgement -'

'Shut up, Gussy,' said Blake.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Put a sock in it,' said Monty Lowther.

'Weally, Lowthah -'

'Leave it to Kerr,' said Figgins. 'Kerr's the brainy man in this bunch.'

'But how -?'

'I shall be out of class tomorrow,' said Kerr. 'I'm going to get Lathom to let me off. It's time we got back to our House, now - it's just on lock-ups. But tomorrow -'

'Pewwaps I had bettah -'

'Perhaps you had better pack it up, Gussy.'

'Weally, Figgins -'

'Leave it to Kerr!' said Blake.

There was a general nodding of heads and it was left to Kerr. Figgins and Co. went back to their own house, leaving Tom Merry's friends in excited discussion in Study No. 6. The more they discussed it, the more they felt that the keen, clear-headed Scottish junior had worked it out accurately. But that remained to be proved - and in the meantime they could only wait - and hope!

CHAPTER XXXII

ON THE TRACK

'CARKER!' breathed Kerr.

He breathed that name inaudibly, his eyes gleaming in the light of the flash-lamp in his hand.

Above ground, it was bright morning. In the vault under the old abbey, all was deep darkness, save where the flash-lamp gleamed.

St. Jim's fellows were in their form-rooms in third school, but in Mr. Lathom's form-room there was one vacant place. Kerr of the Fourth had leave from class that morning, though certainly his form-master had not the remotest idea how he was engaged while the rest were in form.

It had been easy enough for him to slip unseen into the old abbey, and descend into the vault - having first ascertained that Mr. Carker was still in the House. He had to take the risk of Carker coming into the ruins while he was there, but he was ready to shut off the light at the sound of a footfall, and trust to the darkness for cover.

For two or three hours he had been searching for the secret of the old vault, which he was sure existed and which he believed Carker had known in

his old days at St. Jim's, and was now putting to use. Tirelessly, he flashed his lamp and groped over the clammy stone walls - his ears on the alert all the while.

But for hours there was only deep silence in the solitary old place. Then, suddenly, there was a sound from above - the sound of footsteps among the rubble that cumbered the ruins.

He shut off his light instantly.

It could only be Carker who was treading in the rubble above. If he came down into the vault - and why else was he there? That his archaeological explorations were a mere cover for his real purpose at St. Jim's, Kerr had no doubt.

In dense darkness he backed away to the farthest extremity of the vault. He backed against the clammy wall there, standing, if he had only known, on the tilting flag-stone that had tipped under Tom Merry.

But that flag-stone was as firm now as the others about it. Deep in the darkness, he listened and watched.

Footsteps came down the stone stairs from the old archway above. Then there was a sudden gleam.

The newcomer had turned on an electric torch.

The beam of light did not reach the end of the vault. Unless the man came across the vault, directly to Kerr, he could not see him. But the man, in the light of his own torch, was visible to Kerr from the darkness. It was Mr. Gilbert Carker.

Obviously he had no suspicion that anyone was there; indeed, he could hardly have suspected the presence of a St. Jim's junior at a time when all St. Jim's fellows were in form. He moved along the side of the vault, his light directed on the old stone wall, and stopped.

Kerr, from the darkness, watched breathlessly.

He saw Carker place his hand against a stone block in the wall. He saw the man push on the corner of the stone. And he saw the stone roll back, leaving a black aperture about three feet high.

The junior's heart thumped.

He had been sure of it-certain of it! Now he knew!

Hardly breathing, he watched the man duck his head and pass through the gap in the wall. The light disappeared.

The stone block rolled back into place with a dull rumble and the vault was in darkness again.

'By gum!' breathed Kerr.

His eyes danced in the darkness. He had searched for the secret - hitherto without success. He could not be sure that he would have found it. But he did not need to search for it now - Gilbert Carker, all unconsciously, had shown him the way.

Kerr crept forward in the dark. He flashed on his own lamp, and it shone on the stone wall where the man had passed through' - solid to the eye, solid to the touch. But Kerr knew now that there was an opening, and he knew how it was worked. His keen eyes had not lost a single detail as he watched Carker.

He groped at the corner of the stone block, where Carker's hand had pressed, and felt a hollow depression in the stone. That, he knew now, was where the secret spring was concealed.

'Eureka!' breathed the Scottish junior of the New House.

He had found it!

What lay beyond?

Some secret passage - some hidden remote den?

Carker was now on the other side of that seemingly solid wall. It was, this way that he had come yesterday morning, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was seeking him in vain. No wonder he had failed to hear Gussy shouting - the loudest shout could not have penetrated that solid stone. Where had he been by that secret way, unless to visit a kidnapped prisoner hidden in the depths below the old abbey?

Where was he going now, unless for the same purpose? Kerr was sure of it; yet so far there was no definite proof. But he was going to find that proof.

He shut off his light again.

Then, his heart pounding, but his nerves as steady as steel, he pressed in the corner of the stone block as he had watched Carker press. With the faintest of rumbles, the stone moved on its hidden pivot, and the black gap opened before the New House junior.

It was as black as he had seen it when Carker had entered. There was no sign of the man's light. He could hardly be there in the darkness. Kerr knew that he had gone farther.

He ducked his head and groped through the gap.

There was no gleam of light - there was no sound!

Carker was not there - he had gone on. Leaving the secret door wide open behind him, Kerr groped on - not venturing to turn on his flash-lamp. In the dense darkness he felt, with his outstretched hands, clammy walls on either side of him - he was in a subterranean passage not more than three feet wide, with a downward slope.

Treading softly, cautiously, silently groping his way, he moved on slowly. Somewhere in the darkness ahead of him was Carker, and he was careful not to make the slightest sound to draw the man's attention. The stone floor under his feet still sloped downward.

He stopped, as a sudden glimmer of light struck his eyes.

But it was not Carker with his torch. The glimmer came from low down - a glimmering oblong of light, at the side of the dark passage. It came from a gap in the stone wall, similar to the gap through which Carker had passed out of the vault.

Dimly, it illuminated the adjacent passage, vacant but for Kerr himself. Carker was not to be seen, and it was evident that he had passed through that gap - where a light was burning, in some recess beyond.

On tiptoe, with beating heart, the Scottish junior crept forward. He peered through the gap. It had been left open by an oblong block of stone that had rolled back from the wall. Breathlessly, he peered through the gap.

Beyond was a stone-walled cell. A lamp burned on a small trestle-table. In its light, Kerr's eyes fell on a figure that startled him, and he had to repress an exclamation. It was the figure of a man enveloped in black overalls. His back was towards Kerr, but the junior could see that a black cloth was tied round his face and head.

He had expected to see Carker - but that was what he saw. But after the first moment of surprise, he understood. If Carker was visiting his prisoner, if Tom Merry was shut up in that hidden den, Carker would never allow the kidnapped schoolboy to be aware of his identity. It would be only in this impenetrable disguise that Tom would see him. He had come down into the vault as Gilbert Carker - but in the subterranean passage evidently he kept his strange garb ready for use, and it was as an unrecognizable man in black that he met the prisoner's eyes.

But was Tom Merry there?

Kerr could see only a portion of the cell. The man was standing with his back towards the gap by which he had entered. Tom was not to be seen - from where Kerr stood. Then, suddenly, he heard a voice:

'You scoundrel! So you've come back!'

Kerr caught his breath.

There was no doubt now. For the scornful voice that came from the cell was familiar to his ears.

It was the voice of Tom Merry!

CHAPTER XXX III

A FRIEND IN NEED

TOM MERRY stood with his hands clenched, his eyes on the man in black. The man had come back. He had said that he would return in twenty-four hours, and he had returned.

To Tom, imprisoned in the hidden cell, it seemed that whole days and nights must have passed, the time dragged endlessly. But the man had come back at last - and he stood there, his eyes glinting from the slits in the black cloth that hid his face.

Tom's face was pale. But if the man in black was looking for a sign of surrender, he looked in vain.

'So you've come back!' repeated Tom Merry. He little dreamed upon whose ears his voice fell.

'I have come back!' the husky voice came from the slit in the black cloth, threateningly. 'I have come back for that letter, Tom Merry.'

'Then you have come back for nothing.'

'You have had twenty-four hours to reflect. You have neither food nor water left. Will you face another twenty-four hours without either?'

Tom Merry did not answer that. But there was no sign of faltering in his steady face.

'Fool!' muttered the man in black, 'Thrice fool!

Write the letter as I dictate, and very soon afterwards you will be free.'

'I will not write a line.'

'Your guardian is eager to pay the ransom for your release. She is held back by official meddling. But a letter from you will settle the matter at once and without delay. Write that you are left without food till the ransom is paid - and that will end it.'

'I've no doubt it would,' said Tom bitterly, 'but I will not write a word! You shall not have my help in robbing my guardian.'

'Perhaps you fancy that I am not in earnest, you young fool! You will find that I mean every word.'

'And you will find that I do!' retorted Tom.

The man in black clenched his hands.

'Sit at that table and write -'

'Never!'

'Never is a long word,' sneered the man in black. 'Another twenty-four hours here will bring you to reason, I think. Take your time, Master Merry - it will not hurt me to wait. Tomorrow -'

'You villain!' breathed Tom.

'Tomorrow, you will see me again at the same hour. You had better write that letter, Master Merry.'

'Never!'

The man in black shrugged his shoulders.

'I think your answer will be different tomorrow,' he said. 'I can wait! It will be twenty-four hours before you see me again! Think - once that stone has closed behind me, it will be too late -'

'Oh,' breathed Tom, 'if only my pals knew that I was here - if they knew where to look for me - if only one friend was here to help me, I'd deal with you fast enough -'

'Your friends know nothing, and will know nothing! Nobody at the school supposes that you are within a hundred miles of St. Jim's. When you are free, after the ransom is paid, you can tell them the secret of this place - they will never dream of it till then!' jeered the man in black. 'But you will never see the light of day, Tom Merry, till the ransom is paid - and you can hasten the day by writing as I tell you-'

'Never! I -'

Tom Merry broke off, suddenly, in sheer wonder, doubting his eyes. Looking at the man in black, his glance passed him, to the gap in the wall by which he had entered.

In that gap, behind the man in black, a face suddenly appeared - a face he knew.

It seemed to him, for a second, that his brain must be wandering, for how was it possible that Kerr, of the Fourth Form, could be there?

But he was there - and even as Tom's amazed, eyes fell on him, he came through the gap, and with a spring like a tiger, flung himself at the back of the man in black.

Before the man knew what was happening he was dragged over backwards, and crashed down on the stone floor.

Tom stood as if stunned. But that was only for a moment.

'Help, Tom!' yelled Kerr.

The man was on his back, breathless and dazed from the sudden crash on the hard stone. Kerr's knee was planted on his chest, as he yelled to Tom. But the next moment he was struggling, panting with rage.

Tom Merry bounded forward.

He fairly hurled himself at the sprawling kidnapper. Single-handed he could not have dealt with him.

He had tried, and he had failed. But with the help of the sturdy Scottish junior, it was a very different matter.

The man was striking furiously at Kerr, struggling to rise - as amazed as Tom by the sudden appearance on the scene of the New House junior. But even as he struck, Tom Merry was upon him, and his clenched fist crashed in the masked face, with all the strength of a vigorous young arm behind it. The man in black gave a gasping cry, and sprawled again.

'Kerr, old man - !' panted Tom.

'Get him!' panted Kerr.

There was no time for words. Amazed as he was, taken utterly by surprise by the unexpected attack, the rascal realised what this meant to him, and what the outcome must be, if he failed to gain the upper hand of the two juniors. He struggled desperately, madly, in their grasp.

But the two of them were too much for him.

They struggled, and rolled, and scrambled, breathlessly, desperately, but Tom Merry and Kerr had the man down, and they kept him down. And at length, utterly exhausted by the desperate struggle, he lay panting, gasping, with Kerr kneeling on his chest, and Tom Merry grasping his wrists. More than a match for one, he was no match for the two; and he had no chance. He gasped and gasped and gasped for breath, at the end of his tether.

'Got him!' breathed Kerr.

'Kerr, old man -!' gasped Tom.

'Hold on to the brute! Don't give him a chance to cut!'

'No fear!' panted Tom.

'Let me go!' A panting voice came from under the black cloth on the kidnapper's face. 'Let me go! I - I will go away - you shall never see me again - only let me go - !'

'We'll watch it!' said Kerr.

Spent as he was, the man in black made one more effort. But it was in vain. He was crashed back on the stone floor. He lay groaning for breath.

'Make sure of him!' said Kerr, 'drag his fins together, Tom! I'll fix him with my hanky.'

'What-ho!' gasped Tom.

Both of them were breathless from the wild struggle. But they were more than able to deal with the panting rascal in their grasp. Tom Merry dragged his wrists together, and Kerr knotted his handkerchief round them, making thoroughly sure of the knots.

'Now the other end of the brute,' said Kerr. 'Find something to fix him up, Tom. We're not giving him a chance of getting away.'

'We're jolly well not,' agreed Tom.

A cord from one of the packages was available.

Tom Merry wound it round the ankles of the man in black, and knotted it as securely as Kerr had knotted the handkerchief round his wrists.

Then they stood panting, to recover their breath: while the masked man, utterly helpless to make an effort to escape, lay at their feet.

'Kerr, old man,' breathed Tom Merry.



'I think I can tell you his name!' said Kerr. 'And I fancy you'll know his face as soon as you see it, Tom'

'Got him!' said Kerr.

'Yes, yes, but - but how on earth did you get here - I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you - how did you know - how did you guess - ?'

Kerr chuckled.

'You owe it all to Gussy,' he said.

'Gussy!' repeated Tom, blankly.

'The one and only!' grinned Kerr. 'He suspected the man, for a reason that would have occurred to nobody but Gussy - but that put us on the track, old chap, and here we are! Know who the man is?'

'Haven't the foggiest,' said Tom. 'But we'll soon see what he's like.' He stooped over the bound man, and stretched his hand to the black cloth that masked the hidden face.

'I think I can tell you his name!' said Kerr, 'and I fancy you'll know his face as soon as you see it, Tom. Gussy put us on Carker's track -'

'Carker!' gasped Tom. 'Do you mean -'

'Drag the rag off his face, and see!'

'Oh!' gasped Tom.

He tore away the black cloth. The hidden face of the man in black was revealed - convulsed with fury. Tom Merry stood staring down at that face - the face of the mysterious kidnapper - the face of Gilbert Carker!

CHAPTER XXXIV

SOMETHING LIKE A SURPRISE

'THAT WAT CARKAH -'

'Shut up, Gussy -'

'Wats! I wepeat, that wat Carkah -'

Mr. Railton stooped, and stared, and frowned.

Third school over, and the forms dismissed. Immediately they were out, Manners and Lowther of the Shell, Blake and Herries and Digby and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Figgins and Fatty Wynn of the Fourth, had gathered in the quad - all of them anxious and eager. They all knew how Kerr had been engaged that morning, while they were in form, and they had hoped to see him when they came out, hoping to hear of a discovery. But Kerr was not to be seen.

In an eager group, the juniors were discussing the matter that filled all their minds, when Mr. Railton came into the offing. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who had his back to him, did not observe him - having no eyes in the back of his aristocratic head - and he carried on regardless.

'That uttah wat, Carkah -!'

'Quiet!' hissed Blake.

'Weally, Blake -'

'Railton -!' breathed Monty Lowther.

'What about Wailton?' asked Arthur Augustus, still happily oblivious of the house-master behind him. 'Wailton does not know what a wat Carkah is, but he will know pwetty soon, I think. I twust that Kerr has got somewhah, but I cannot help thinkin', deah boys, that the mattah would have been much bettah left in my hands. I weally considah -'

'Shut up!'

'Railton -'

'Pack it up!'

Fierce whispers had no effect on Arthur Augustus.

It had been agreed on all hands that nothing should be said till there was proof of what the juniors suspected. Arthur Augustus fully concurred in that. Unfortunately, not aware of Railton, he saw no reason to 'pack it up'.

'Pway don't keep on intewwuptin' me, you fellows,' he said severely. 'I have a gweat wespect for Kerr, as a bwainy Scotchman, but I weally think that if the mattah had been entwusted to me, we should have got somewhah by this time. Pway wemembah that it was I who first spotted that wat Carkah, and told you fellows that it was that wat who had kidnapped poor old Tom Mewwy -'

'D'Arcy!'

It was a voice of thunder.

Arthur Augustus, thus suddenly made aware of his house-master, jumped almost clear of the quad. He whirled round, blinking at Mr. Railton.

'Oh, cwikey!' he gasped.

The other fellows exchanged looks! Arthur Augustus had done it, now! In Railton's face amazement mingled with anger. The secret was out now, with a vengeance.

'D'Arcy!' Railton almost gasped. 'I heard what you said - how dare you make so absurd a statement! How dare you -'

'Oh, cwumbs! I - I - I -!'

 stammered Arthur Augustus.

'You utterly absurd boy!' exclaimed Mr. Railton, sternly. 'Tell me at once what could possibly have put so ridiculous an idea into your head?'

'I do not wegard it as widiculous, sir -'

'Answer me at once,' snapped the house-master.

'For what imaginable reason -'

'Vewy well sir! He is cwuel to animals, sir!'

'What?'

'I wegard such a person as capable of any thin' - !'

'Bless my soul!'

'That was my weason, sir, and I wegard it as a vewy good weason,' said Arthur Augustus, firmly.

'When an act of wascality is pewpetwated, sir, and a wascal is on the spot, I wegard it as quite weasonable to suspect that wascal, sir, of that act of wascality!'

'Bless my soul!' repeated Mr. Railton, blankly.

'It was my intention, sir, to say nothing till we had pwoof. But as you have heard my wemarks -'

Arthur Augustus was interrupted. There was a shout, or rather a yell, from Talbot of the Shell, at a little distance.

'TOM!'

Quite a roar followed, from fifty fellows in different directions.

'Tom!'

'Tom Merry!'

'He's come back -'

'Here he is !'

'Tom!' yelled Manners and Lowther as they spun round, staring.

'Bai Jove! Tom Mewwy-' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'Merry!' gasped Mr. Railton.

Every eye was fixed in one direction. On the path by the wall of the Head's garden, two figures had appeared. One was Kerr, of the New House - the other was - unexpectedly, amazingly, Tom Merry! - The kidnapped junior who had been missing for three days from St. Jim's. He looked a little pale, but otherwise his accustomed self; and there was a faint smile on his face, as he met the countless eyes that were fixed on him.

'Tom!'

'Tom Merry!'

'Kerr's done it!' gasped Figgins.

'What-ho!' chuckled Fatty Wynn.

'Tom Mewwy, bai Jove!'

Manners and Lowther rushed at their chum. They almost hugged him. Blake and Herries and Dig, Figgins and Fatty Wynn, smacked him on the back. A buzzing crowd surrounded him. Through the crowd Mr. Railton came striding.

'Merry! My dear boy-what-how-!' gasped the house-master. 'Where have you been-how-where-what-why-!' Railton almost stuttered.

'I was kidnapped, sir!' said Tom. 'I was trapped in the old abbey, sir, and shut up in an underground cell there -'

'Bless my soul!'

'Kerr found me, sir, and here I am,' said Tom.

'You have been there - so close at hand - all this while -'

'Yes sir! I should be there still but for Kerr - and D'Arcy,' nodded Tom.

'D'Arcy suspected who the kidnapper was, and put Kerr on the track, and he found me -'

'Good old Gussy!' murmured Blake.

'Good old fathead!' grinned Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies -'

'The kidnapper!' repeated Mr. Railton. 'Do you know who the man was, Merry? Can you inform Inspector Skeat - ?'

'Certainly, sir! Kerr and I collared him, together, in the cell -'

'What?'

'And he's there now, sir, tied up,' said Tom. 'It's only necessary for a constable to fetch him away.'

'Upon my word!' gasped Mr. Railton.

'Bai Jove! That wat Carkah -'

'Silence, D'Arcy! If you know the man, Merry -'

'Yes, sir - it's Carker.'

'Carker!' repeated Mr. Railton.

'Yes, sir! I never knew, as he was masked whenever I saw him, but after we collared him, sir -'

'What did I tell you fellows?' Arthur Augustus almost crowed. 'Did I tell you it was that wat Carkah - or did I not tell you that it was that wat Carkah !'

'This - this is amazing!' gasped Mr. Railton. 'Merry, go in at once and report your return to Dr. Holmes - Kerr, you will show me the place where you found Merry.'

'Certainly, sir,' said Kerr.

Mr. Railton followed the New House junior to the old abbey. Everyone else crowded round Tom Merry, and in the midst of a buzzing swarm of fellows, he went on to the House, to report himself to the Head.

Seldom or never had there been such a spot of excitement in the old quadrangle of St. Jim's.

*

Mr. Skeat was probably the most astonished police-inspector in Sussex when he received a telephone call from Mr. Railton a little later. But astonished as he was, he lost no time in collecting Gilbert Carker, alias Nemo, and taking him into official custody. And Tom Merry lost no time in getting on the telephone to Laurel Villa and relieving Miss Priscilla of her anxiety for her dear Tommy.

In a cell at Wayland police station, awaiting his trial on the charge of kidnapping, Mr. Carker no doubt realised that the way of the transgressor

is hard, and had ample time to assimilate the great truth that honesty is the best policy! That old secret of the abbey, which he had discovered by chance when he was a schoolboy at St. Jim's, had seemed to him a sure foundation for his cunning scheme; and, indeed, but for his own hard and cruel nature, that scheme might have worked out as he had planned. Certainly, it was Kerr of the Fourth who had put in the brainwork that had brought about his defeat, but it could not be denied that it was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who had made the first step in solving the mystery of the Disappearance of Tom Merry.

THE END