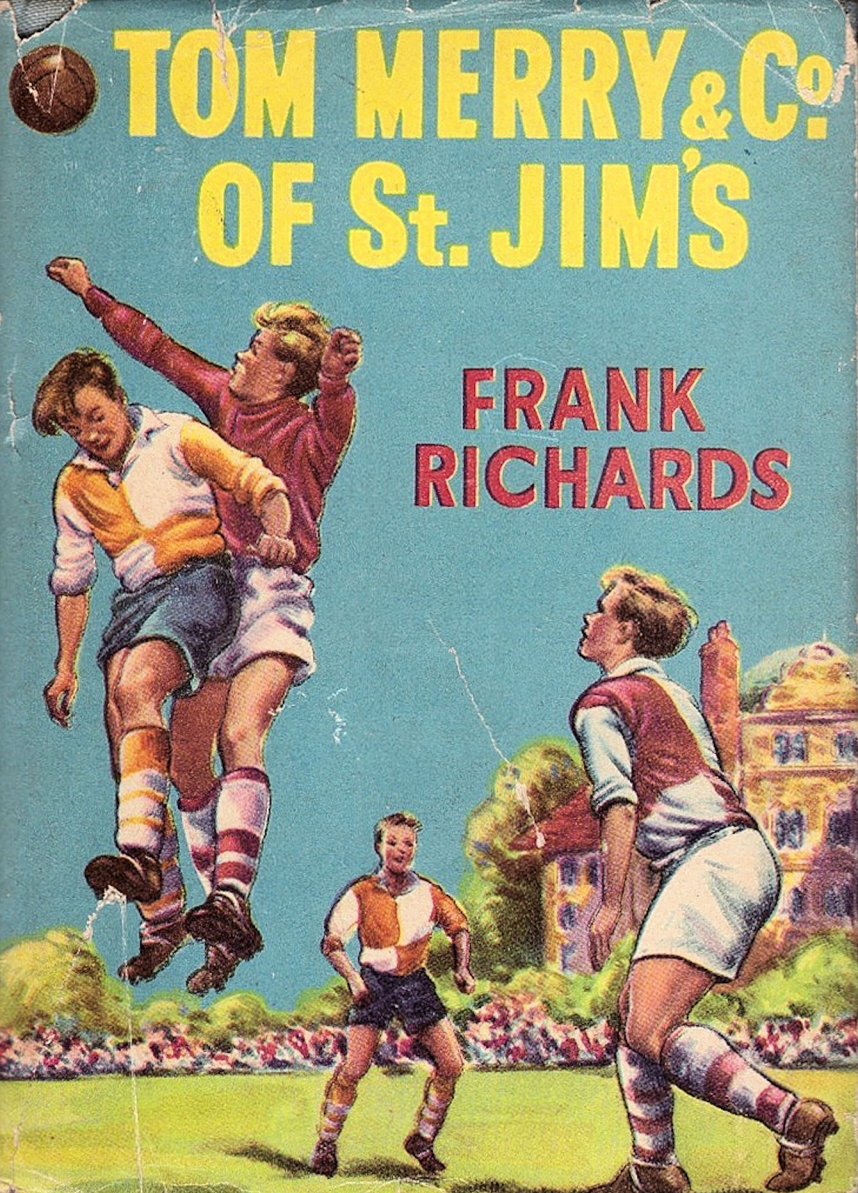
TOM MERRY & Co. OF St. JIM'S

FRANK RICHARDS



By the same Author

THE SECRET OF THE STUDY
CARDEW'S CATCH
DOWN AND OUT!
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TOM MERRY
THROUGH THICK AND THIN
TROUBLE FOR TOM MERRY

'Figgins!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff. 'What are you doing here?'

FRANK RICHARDS

TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S

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CHAPTER I

THREE IN HASTE!

'Blow away!'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy——!'

'Scat!'

An eyeglass gleamed in at the doorway of No. 10 Study, in the School-House at St. Jim's. Behind it was the cherubic countenance of Arthur Augustus d'Arcy, of the Fourth Form.

Generally, Arthur Augustus was persona grata, indeed gratissima, in almost any study at St. Jim's, School-House or New House. But he had called on No. 10 in the Shell at an awkward moment.

They were busy in No. 10.

Three fellows were seated round the study table: Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther. Three Virgils were propped up round the inkstand. Three faces were set and serious. Three pens raced. Seldom, or never, had P. Vergilius Maro been transcribed at such speed. Evidently, moments were precious.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy surveyed that busy scene through his celebrated eyeglass, with a sympathetic eye.

'Lines, deah boys?' he asked.

It was rather a superfluous question. It could hardly have been supposed that Tom Merry and Co. were transcribing Virgil at such a rate for the pleasure of the thing.

The Shell fellows did not trouble to answer. They raced on. Each of them had a hundred lines to write for Mr. Linton, their form-master: and those lines had to be delivered in Linton's study before tea, or else——! Really there was no time for conversation. Only ten minutes remained. There was not a second to spare.

Arthur Augustus paused, like Brutus, for a reply. But he had no better luck than Brutus. There was no reply.

'Am I intewwuptin' you?' he further inquired.

The second question, being as superfluous as the first, passed equally unheeded. The three pens whizzed on.

Tom Merry and Co. had started at 'arma virumque cano.' Monty Lowther, who was the quickest worker of the three, had already got as far as 'Aeolus haec contra.' Tom Merry who came second, had reached 'portans victosque Penatis.' Manners was a bad third at 'hic vasto rex Aeolus antro.'

'You fellows seem to be wathah wushed,' remarked Arthur Augustus. 'Howevah, I only came in to say——'

'Don't!' hooted Tom Merry.

'Eh! Don't what?' asked D'Arcy, in surprise.

'Don't say!'

'Weally, you ass——!'

'Cut!' said Manners, without looking up.

'Weally, Mannahs, I have only looked in——'

'Look out again!'

'——to say——'

'Is that image going to stand there talking for ever?' exclaimed Monty Lowther. 'Go and tell Blake, Herries or Dig about your new necktie, your latest waistcoat, or whatever it is.'

'I was not goin' to tell you anythin' about neckties or waistcoats, Lowthah. You fellows don't undahstand clothes. You are wathah wagbags in this study. I was merely goin' to say——'

'Do shut up, old chap!' said Tom Merry. 'Can't you see we're busy?'

'Yaas. But——'

'If we're late with these lines for Linton,' said Monty Lowther, in a sulphurous voice, 'I'll come to Study Six afterwards and scrag you, Gussy.'

'I should certainly wefuse to be scwagged, Lowthah. If you fellows would give a fellow time to uttah a single word—'

'Dry up!'

'Hook it!'

'Bunk!'

'I must wemawk that you have wathah wotten mannahs in this study,' said Arthur Augustus, 'I quite undahstand fellows bein' in a huwwy with lines, for a tart old twerp like Linton, but you should not suffah your mannahs to detewiowate undah the stwain. It will not take me a minute to tell you what I looked in for, if you will allow a fellow to speak.'

It did not occur to the Honourable Arthur Augustus to tell the Shell fellows what he had looked in for, without that exordium. Arthur Augustus's aristocratic brain worked at a leisurely rate, when it worked at all.

'The fact of the mattah is——!' he went on.

'Will you ring off?' shrieked Manners. 'Run away and play marbles.'

'You are perfectly well awah, Mannahs, that I do not play marbles,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. 'Pway do not be widiculous. I have a gweat

mind to wetire without saying what I came heah to say, aftah such a weception. Howevah, I think I had bettah tell you—'

Tom Merry glanced at Lowthers' impot.

'You're ahead,' he said. 'You heave him out. Or buzz something at him.'

Monty Lowther jumped up and clutched a cushion.

'Bai Jove! If you buzz that cushion at me, Lowthah—!'

Whiz!

'Oh, cwumbs! Oh, cwikey! Yawooooh!' roared Arthur Augustus, forgetting, for the moment, the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere, as the cushion crashed on the most elegant waistcoat at St. Jim's. 'Oh! Bai Jove! Ooooh!'

Arthur Augustus went backwards in the doorway under the impact. There was a heavy bump as he sat down in the Shell passage. His eyeglass fluttered to the end of its cord, and Arthur Augustus sat and gasped for breath.

'Oooh! Lowthah, you wuffian—ooh! Ow! You have winded me—woooh!'

'Good!' said Lowther. 'Come in again, and I'll let you have the inkpot.'

'Oooooh!'

Three pens raced on. Arthur Augustus, unheeded, staggered to his feet, with one hand pressed to his waistcoat. With the other he recaptured his eyeglass and jammed it into his noble eye. The glare of wrath that he cast into No. 10 Study might almost have cracked the eyeglass.

'Ooooh! Aftah this wuffianly weception, I wefuse to say anothah word!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I will not say anythin' about the cake now.'

'Eh!'

'What?'

Tom Merry and Co. looked up. They were pressed for time. Those lines had to be delivered in a matter of minutes. There was not a split second to spare. Still, cakes were cakes, in a time of dearth.

'Not anothah word!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I have a pain in my tummay, and I am quite out of bweath. I wefuse to tell you now that I have had a whoppin' cake from home and that I am askin' all my fwiends to my study to whack it out. I shall not mention the mattah at all now. Wats to you!'

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy revolved on his axis and stalked away down the passage to the study landing, still gasping.

Tom Merry and Co. looked at one another.

'Oh!' said Manners.

'Oh!' said Lowther.

Tom Merry laughed. 'Cut on!' he said.

And three pens raced once more till they reached the welcome goal of 'sub undis.' That 'sub undis' came in the middle of a sentence was a trifle light as air — no fellow with a hundred lines could be expected to write a hundred and one for the sake of a full stop. It was the hundredth line: and that was that!

CHAPTER II

LOST LOOT

'Hold on, you chaps!' said Jack Blake.

Blake, Herries and Digby, of the Fourth Form, were punting an old footer in the quad till tea-time. Jack Blake paused in that healthy and vigorous occupation to stare across at a fellow at a little distance who was heading for the New House with a bundle under his arm.

That fellow was George Figgins, also of the Fourth Form —but a New House man: and therefore the deadly foe— though not in a very deadly sense—of Blake and Co., who were School-House men.

Herries and Dig followed Blake's glance.

'Oh, get on,' said Herries. 'Never mind House rags now. On the ball, Dig.'

'Hold on, I tell you!' snapped Blake. 'It's nearly tea-time——'

'We've got ten minutes yet,' said Dig.

'Yes—and what have we got for tea?' said Blake. 'Precious little! Looks as if that New House swob has plenty, to judge by the size of his parcel. If that's tuck from the tuck-shop——!'

'Oh!' said Dig, his eyes gleaming.

'All's fair in war,' said Blake. 'To the victor, the spoils! Luckily Kerr and Wynn aren't with him. It's just pie. That bundle's ours.'

'But——!' said Herries.

'No time for butting,' said Blake, decisively. 'Cut across and head him off from his mouldy old House.'

'But——!' repeated Herries.

'If you're going to stand there butting like a billy-goat, Herries, we shall lose that packet of tuck.'

'Yes, but Lathom's in the quad, and Tom Merry and his pals got lines this afternoon for ragging with the New House men——.' Herries made a gesture towards Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, who was walking under the elms.

'Lathom's not Linton,' said Blake. 'He never notices anything. Chance it, anyway.'

'But——!' said Herries, for the third time.

'Pack it up and follow your leader!' rapped Blake, and he settled the matter by starting at a run. Digby cut after him, and Herries, still dubious, followed Dig.

They bore down on Figgins with a rush.

The New House junior glanced round at the sound of running feet. One glance was enough. Figgins of the Fourth was quick on the uptake, and he did not need telling that his bundle was in danger. Alarums and excursions between the rival Houses of St. Jim's were frequent and free: and neither side ever lost the chance of a raid on the enemy. Figgy's long legs went into rapid action at once, and he fairly flew in the direction of the New House.

Figgins feared no foe, and it was not his way to turn his back on the enemy, even if the odds were against him. But the bundle precious. Figgy raced—and the three School-House juniors raced to intercept him. Blake was an easy first. Only a few yards from the House doorway, he charged into Figgins, who went spinning, dropping the bundle as he spun.

Figgins rolled, and Blake, staggering from the shock, sat down. For a moment the bundle lay where it had fallen—then Herries and Digby came breathlessly up and clutched it together.

But Figgins was on his feet the next second. He hurled himself at Herries and Dig, and once more the bundle dropped. Figgins, struggling in two pairs of hands, kept Herries and Dig too busy to touch the bundle again. But Jack Blake leaped to his feet and then leaped to the bundle. He grabbed it up with a chirrup of triumph.

'Our win!' he gasped. 'Roll that New House smudge over, and bunk.'

'Oh!' spluttered Figgins as he rolled.

Another second, and the triumphant trio would have been cutting off to the School-House with the loot. But in that second, a window on the ground floor of the New House shot open, and a head was projected therefrom—that of Mr. Ratcliff, house-master of the New House.

'Stop!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh!' gasped the three. They stopped—in dismay, blinking at the New House master. In the excitement of the moment they had rather forgotten that House rags were scarcely judicious, under the very window of a house-master.

Mr. Ratcliff gave them a grim glare. No beak could approve of the incessant House rows and rags that added colour and excitement to life in the Lower School at St. Jim's. Mr. Ratcliff, being a very acid gentleman, disapproved more emphatically than all the other beaks put together.

'Blake! Herries! Digby! How dare you? I shall report this to your form-master,' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'It's only a lark, sir!' stammered Figgins. The School-House men might be his deadly foes; but Figgins was not the man to benefit by a beak's intervention, if he could help it.

'You need say nothing, Figgins!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff, 'I saw all that occurred. Blake, give that parcel back to Figgins this instant.'

Jack Blake breathed hard and deep. But there was no help for it. With deep feeling he held the bundle out for Figgins to take it.

'But, sir—!' Figgins began again.

'If you say another word, Figgins, I shall cane you. Take that parcel and go into the House at once.'

Figgins did not say another word. He took the parcel and went into the New House. Blake, Herries and Digby watched him disappear with it and exchanged an eloquent look.

Mr. Ratcliff waved a long thin hand at them.

'Go!' he snapped.

And his study window shut with a slam.

Blake and Co., in glum silence, marched off. They had lost the loot: and a report to their form-master impended over their heads. They seemed likely to be as busy with lines after tea, as Tom Merry and Co. before tea.

There was only one gleam of comfort in the gloom. On their way to the School-House, they came on Clampe of the Shell, a New House man, and kicked him. Clampe, certainly, was not responsible for Figgy's escape with the bundle, or for Mr. Ratcliff's acid temper, but he was rather a blot, and he was a New House man, anyway: so they kicked Clampe and went on their way a little consoled.

CHAPTER III

A STARTLING DISAPPEARANCE

'Twickle in, deah boys—waitin' for you!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy spoke very cheerfully as Blake, Herries and Dig arrived in the doorway of Study 6, in the School-House.

The three juniors trickled in: three glances going all at once to a rather large cardboard box that stood on the study table. Three faces brightened. Tea in the study had been rather a doubtful proposition, funds being low with the chums of the Fourth: and nobody liked tea in Hall. But that box looked as if Arthur Augustus might have received one more of his many parcels from home.

'What's in that?' asked Blake.

'From home?' asked Dig.

'Yaas, wathah! A whoppin' cake,' answered Arthur Augustus, 'and a bag of sausage-wolls, and a toppin' pineapple. All wight for tea—wight as wain. Have you fellows got anythin'?'

'Nothing at all!' grunted Blake, 'we jolly nearly had—but Figgins got away with it—a bundle of tuck as big as that box.'

'Bai Jove! Did you let that New House boundah get away with a bundle of your tuck?' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

'It wasn't exactly ours—it was his!' explained Blake. 'It would have been ours if we'd bagged it.'

'Oh!' Arthur Augustus shook his noble head. 'I am not at all suah, Blake, that I quite approve of caw-wyin' House wags to the extent of baggin' a fellow's

tuck! I twust that you do not mind my mentionin' it.'

'Not a bit, old chap! I'm used to you talking rot by this time.'

'If you wegard my wemarks as wot, Blake——'

Arthur Augustus looked disappointed.

'No "if" about it! Just rot!' said Blake. 'We should have had it, if Ratty hadn't butted in. But he shoved that pain in the neck he calls a face out of his study window just as we got it. Now we shall get lines from Lathom.'

'I am sowwy you will get lines, Blake, but weally you wathah asked for it. I wepeat that I do not quite appwove—'

'I'll tell you what,' said Blake, as struck by a sudden bright idea: 'Suppose you open your box and shut your mouth, Gussy, old bean. You're much nicer that way—and we're ready for tea.'

'Hear, hear!' said Dig.

'Good egg!' said Herries, heartily.

'Weally, you fellows——'

'He's wound up,' said Blake. 'But never mind—we can open the box while he runs on. Keep it up till your chin's tired, Gussy—and we'll scoff the cake.'

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Pway don't be in a huwwy, Blake. I have asked some fellows here to whack it out—Levison, Clive and Cardew—they'll be here any minute——'

'Might have asked Tom Merry and his gang while you were about it.'

'I was goin' to, but when I went to their study, they weceived me in a vewy wuffianly way,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I was knocked ovah by a cushion bangin' on my waistcoat—!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'If you wegard that as a laughin' mattah, I do not agwee,' said Arthur Augustus, stiffly. 'I have had a lot of twouble bwushin' the dust off my twousahs. Oh, heah are our fwiends—twot in, deah boys.'

Levison, Clive and Cardew of the Fourth appeared in the study doorway. They duly trotted in. Behind them appeared three other figures — those of Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther of the Shell. They gave Arthur Augustus smiling looks—receiving a severe frown in reply.

'You fellows want anythin'?' asked Arthur Augustus, with frigid politeness.

'Yaas, wathah!' answered Monty Lowther, with an unexpected imitation of D'Arcy's delightful accent, which caused all the other fellows in Study 6 to burst into a chuckle.

'Weally, Lowthah, you uttah ass—!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

'We thought you'd like to know that we got our lines down to Linton on time,' said Manners, blandly.

'I am not in the slightest degwee intewested in your lines, Mannahs.'

'Not after interrupting us, and jolly nearly getting them doubled?' asked Tom Merry, reproachfully.

'It would have served you wight, Tom Mewwy, aftah tweatin' a fellow with such gwoss diswespect,' said Arthur Augustus, warmly. 'I had a feahful bang on the waistcoat, and made my twousahs all dusty, sittin' down in the passage——'

'That's really what we've come about!' said Monty Lowther, solemnly. 'At the time, we were rather rushed with those lines. But afterwards, we — wondered whether you'd made your trousers dirty and thought we'd better come along and inquire.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's frowning brow cleared.

'That was vewy wight and pwopah, Lowthah,' he said, graciously. 'Vewy wight and pwopah indeed.'

'Are the trousers all right?' asked Manners, with an air of deep anxiety.

'I am glad to say that they are all wight, Mannahs, now I have bwushed them.'

'We breathe again!' said Lowther.

'Well,' said Tom Merry, 'if Gussy's trousers are all right, everything's all right, and we'll push on now our minds are relieved—'

'Pway don't wun away, deah boys—pway come in and help us whack out what's in that box,' said Arthur Augustus hospitably. 'I've had a whoppin' cake fwom home.'

'Which, of course, those Shell fellows never knew anything about!' remarked Cardew of the Fourth.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'How could we?' asked Lowther. 'After Gussy got the cushion on his equator, he told us he wouldn't mention the cake at all, so of course we were left quite in the dark.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' shrieked all Study No. 6.

'Bai Jove! I don't quite see the weason for all this mewwiment,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Howevah, now we're all heah, what about gettin' out the cake and tuckin' in?'

'Even Gussy talks sense, in the long run, if you wait long enough,' remarked Blake. 'Get on with it, Gussy.'

Nine juniors were crowded round the table in Study No. 6, as Arthur Augustus proceeded to remove the lid of the cardboard box. Blake, Herries, Dig, Levison, Clive, Cardew, Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther all wore smiles of cheery anticipation, and there

was a kind and hospitable smile on the aristocratic countenance of Arthur Augustus. But that smile vanished, as if wiped off by a duster, as he lifted the lid and looked into the box.

'Gweat Scott!' he ejaculated.

Arthur Augustus stared into the box. He jammed his eyeglass a little more tightly into his eye and stared again. The expression on his face was quite extraordinary.

'Bai Jove!' he gasped. 'The wottah!'

'What——?'

'The fwightful swob——'

'Who——?'

'The feahful wuffian! Look!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

They all looked. Once upon a time that box had contained a cake—a very large cake. Its aroma still clung to the box. But there was no other sign of the cake. There was no sign at all of the sausage-rolls or the pineapple. The box was empty, save for a half-sheet of paper that lay in the bottom. On that paper was written, in capital letters:

THANKS!

Signed,
GEORGE FIGGINS.

CHAPTER IV

A KIND INVITATION

'Oh!' gasped Blake.

'Oh!' gasped eight other fellows.

'Figgins!'

'That New House rotter——'

'He's been here——'

'Why, it must have been Gussy's cake in that bundle!' roared Blake, a light breaking on his mind. 'Figgins was walking off our cake when we got him in the quad, and Ratty butted in——'

'That was it!' said Dig. 'Our cake all the time.'

'Bai Jove! That New House boundah must have nipped in while I was goin' wound askin' the fellows to tea!' said Arthur Augustus. 'And the awful wottah put the lid back on the box so I nevah missed it when I came back to the study, and he had the neck to leave that impertinent message for us.'

'Gone!' said Monty Lowther. 'Gone from our gaze like a beautiful dream.'

'What a jolly old feast of the Barmecides!' remarked Cardew.

'And to think that we nearly had it back!' groaned Herries. 'But for Ratty butting in, we should have bagged it off Figgins——'

'You fellows were wathah asses to let him get away with it,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Weally, Blake, I am surpwised at you, lettin' a New House tick walk off our cake wight undah your nose. You weally ought to have collahed Figgins and wecaptured it.'

'Why, you image, only five minutes ago you were

telling us that we shouldn't carry House rags to the extent of bagging a man's tuck!' roared Blake.

'It is no use woarin' at a fellow, Blake. Waisin' your voice will not set mattahs wight,' said Arthur Augustus severely. 'I am sowwy, deah boys, that there will be no spwead in the study aftah all, owin' to Blake lettin' Figgins get away with the pwog.'

'You howling ass—' shrieked Blake.

'Weally, Blake——'

'Thanks all the same, Gussy,' said Levison, laughing. 'Come on, you men, we'd better cut down to hall before it's too late.'

Levison and Co., grinning, quitted Study No. 6. The Shell fellows, grinning also, moved to the door, where Monty Lowther paused.

'Sorry I buzzed that cushion at you, Gussy,' he said.

'That's all wight, deah boy.'

'It isn't,' said Lowther. 'I'm sorry I didn't buzz the inkpot instead. I will, next time!'

With which valediction, the chums of the Shell left.

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus, 'I weally think——!'

'Oh, don't gammon!' growled Blake. 'Catch you thinking! If you've got anything to think with, why didn't you think of keeping an eye on the cake? Now we've been diddled, dished, and done by the New House, and we've got to scrounge doorsteps and dishwater in hall. You ought to be jolly well bumped.'

'Weally, Blake, that is wathah thick, aftah you let that New House boundah walk off the cake wight undah your silly nose——'

'I tell you——!' roared Blake.

'And I tell you that I wefuse to be woared at. It

thwows me into quite a fluttah. You have done it now, Blake, and woarin' at a fellow will not undo it.'

'By gum! I'll jolly well——!'

'You fellows here?' A podgy face looked into Study No. 6. It belonged to Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth. 'Oh, here you are! I've got a note for you.'

The interruption was timely: they were getting a little excited in No. 6. Blake and Co. stared round at the podgy Baggy.

'What the thump do you mean?' growled Blake. 'Who's sending us notes? Rot!'

'Figgins asked me to bring you this note——!'

'Figgins!' exclaimed the four, all together.

'Yes. Some joke, I suppose,' said Trimble. 'He was grinning all over his face when he spoke to me in the quad. Here it is.'

Baggy Trimble tossed over an envelope and rolled away. Blake and Co. stared at the envelope. It was addressed to 'Study No. 6' in Figgy's sprawling hand.

'Some more New House cheek, I suppose,' grunted Herries.

'Thwow it into the fiah,' said Arthur Augustus, 'I should tweat any message fwom that New House tick with disdain, in the circs.'

'Better see what he says,' said Dig.

Blake tore open the envelope and unfolded a sheet of paper from inside. Study No. 6 all looked at it—Blake, Herries and Dig curious, Arthur Augustus loftily disdainful. It ran:

'G. Figgins, F. Kerr, and D. L. Wynn will be glad of the company of J. Blake, G. Herries, R. Digby, and A. A. D'Arcy, at tea in their study.

'Sausage-rolls, cake, and pineapple.'

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus, 'what a fwightful nerve! Our sausage-wolls—our cake—and our pineapple!'

Blake chuckled.

'Good old Figgy!' he said. 'We'll go.'

'Yes, rather!' said Dig.

'What-ho!' said Herries.

'Come on, Gussy!'

'I wefuse to come on!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I wegard this as addin' insult to injuwy. I wefuse to be asked to my own tea by a boundah who has waided it. I wegard it as cheek! I would vewy much wathah punch Figgy's head than go to tea with him. Wats!'

'You won't come?' asked Blake.

'Certainly not!'

'Not if we ask you nicely?'

'Wats!'

'Will you come if we help you across to the New House?'

'I do not wequiah any help, Blake.'

'You do!' assured Blake, 'and we're the men to help a pal when he needs it. Take his arms, you fellows—'

'Bai Jove! Welease me at once!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, as Herries grasped one arm and Digby the other. 'I wepeat that I wefuse to go ovah to the New House to tea—I wepeat that I wegard this invitation as cheek, and I wepeat—'

'I'll help him from behind,' said Blake. 'Get going.'

'I wepeat that I wefuse to go!' hooted Arthur Augustus. 'I wegard it as beneath my dignity! And I am bound to say—yawooh! Stop punchin' me in the back, Blake. Oh! cwumbs!'

'Quick march!' said Blake.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

It was not really much use for Arthur Augustus to refuse to go, with Herries and Digby dragging him by the arms, and Jack Blake thumping him in the back. Gussy really had to go— and he went. He went wriggling, but he went.

'Hallo! what's the game?' asked Talbot of the Shell, meeting the four as they surged across the study landing to the stairs, and staring at them in surprise.

'We're going to a tea-party,' explained Blake. 'Gussy prefers to go this way. Heave ahead, my hearties.'

The four went wriggling down the staircase, leaving Talbot staring.

'Will you wottahs welease me?' shrieked Arthur Augustus as they reached the middle landing.

'Not on your life,' answered Blake, cheerily. 'Will you come quietly?'

'Nevah!'

'Then we'll carry you! Keep his arms, you men—I'll take his legs.'

'Oh, cwikey! You uttah asses! You are wumplin' my clobbah! I—I—I will come if you like!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I—I wegard it as extwemely undignified to go, in the circs, but—but I will certainly not be cawwied about, you fwightful asses I—I—I will walk.'

And four School-House juniors, three of them smiling and one frowning, walked across to the New House to tea with Figgins and Co.

CHAPTER V

JUST LIKE RATTY!

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Mr. Ratcliff paused.

He was passing the door of the box-room, in the New House, when that sound of merriment fell on his ears.

Sounds of boyish merriment are pleasing to most ears. But Mr. Ratcliff, housemaster of the New House at St. Jim's, was not easily pleased. Mr. Railton, the housemaster of the School-House, would probably have smiled and passed on his way otherwise unheeding. But Railton was a cheery young man with a cheery outlook on life. Mr. Ratcliff was neither young nor cheery. He did not smile—and he did not pass on his way. He frowned, and stopped.

Something was going on in that box-room. Boys had no business there, unless something happened to be wanted from a box or trunk. It had been known for surreptitious fellows, like Clampe or Chowle, to sneak into the box-room to smoke secret cigarettes. Mr. Ratcliff was a somewhat suspicious gentleman. He had a captious temper, and a love of interference which he mistook for a meticulous sense of duty. He was going to look into this.

'Will Gussy be pleased?' came a voice from the hallf-open door of the box-room. It was the voice of George Figgins of the Fourth.

'Sort of!' came Kerr's voice, with a chuckle.

'I'd like to see his face!' came a fat chuckle from Fatty Wynn.

'Well, we had his spread yesterday, and it's only fair to send him something in return,' said Figgins. 'Poor old Gussy! His beautiful manners almost failed him when he came over to tea in the study yesterday. Not quite—but nearly! But this parcel may set the matter right! What?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Kerr and Wynn.

Mr. Ratcliff's frown intensified. He understood now what was on—some rag on the School-House. One more of those unending House rags, of which Horace Ratcliff so deeply disapproved. Certainly he was not going to allow these boys of his House to proceed with it.

He stepped into the doorway.

Three fellows were in the box-room—Figgins, Kerr, and Fatty Wynn. Three faces wore happy grins. The trio were gathered about a box that stood on top of a trunk. Evidently they were about to wrap it up—Kerr had a sheet of brown paper in his hand, and Wynn a ball of string. Figgins had a label, which Mr. Ratcliff could see was addressed to A. A. D'Arcy. What was in the box, Mr. Ratcliff could not see, as the lid was on it.

'Oh!' ejaculated Figgins, as he saw his housemaster. Three happy grins faded out at the sight of Mr. Ratcliff.

'What does this mean, Figgins?' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh! Nothing, sir!' stammered Figgins.

'What are you doing here?'

'Only—only wrapping up a parcel, sir.'

'I see that it is addressed to a School-House boy,' said Mr. Ratcliff, sourly, 'and I have no doubt that it is some sort of an absurd, practical joke. I have told

you more than once, Figgins, that I will not allow these perpetual quarrels with the boys of the other House.'

Figgy gave his friends a look. It was just like Ratty to describe a House rag as a 'quarrel.' It was Ratty all over!

'What is in that box?' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh! Nothing special, sir,' mumbled Figgins. 'It—it was only something we—we're going to send to D'Arcy at the School-House, sir, I—I'm wrapping it up for the post, sir.'

'I shall certainly insist upon knowing what is in that box!' said Mr. Ratcliff acidly.

He stepped to the boy, and Figgins and Co. watched him in dismay as he removed the lid. Evidently the game was up now, and their intended jest on the swell of St. Jim's was off. Ratty was always a spoil-sport.

Mr. Ratcliff peered into the box. It contained something packed in a tissue-paper bag. Mr. Ratcliff's bony fingers clutched at it to lift it out and examine it.

'Oh, sir!' gasped Figgins, in alarm. 'Don't touch it—!'

'Look out, sir!' exclaimed Kerr.

But the warning came too late. Mr. Ratcliff jerked the paper bag out of the box as the juniors were speaking. He was naturally unaware that there was a slit cut in the bottom of the bag, designed to allow its contents to escape when it was lifted out. Neither had he the remotest idea what those contents were. There was a sudden rush of something black and smelly, and Mr. Ratcliff jumped almost clear of the floor, as a stream of soot flowed down his gown.

'What—what—what——!' stuttered the New House

'What—what—what!' stuttered the New House master

master! 'What—what—this is soot! Soot! SOOT! Upon my word! Soot! Ooogh! Aytishoo!'

Mr. Ratcliff sneezed in a cloud of soot.

Figgins and Co. jumped back. Soot swamped over Ratcliff's gown, over his legs and feet, and rose in clouds round him. Figgins and Co. did not want any of it.

'Oooooch!' spluttered Mr. Ratcliff. 'Ooooh! Aatcho-oh—atchooh—atchooh! Ooooh! Aytishoooh!'

'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Figgins.

The juniors gazed at their house-master in horror. That packet of soot had been intended as a happy surprise for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in Study No. 6 in the School-House. Arthur Augustus's elegant clobber had had a narrow escape. But Mr. Ratcliff hadn't escaped. He had the soot in full measure.

'Upon my word! Aytishooh. Atchoooh!' Mr. Ratcliff sneezed, and sneezed, and sneezed. He hurled the bag to the floor and went on sneezing.

'Oh, sir,' gasped Figgins, 'we—we're sorry——'

'Aytishooooooooh!'

'We—we——,' stammered Kerr.

'Oooogh! Atchooh! Wooogh!'

'Oh, crikey!' murmured Fatty Wynn, 'that's torn it.'

There was no doubt that it was 'torn'. For a full minute Mr. Ratcliff sneezed and spluttered, while Figgins and Co. gazed at him dismayed. He recovered his voice at last—not his temper, which was past recovery.

'Figgins! Kerr! Wynn! I shall punish you—severely—for this outrageous action—oooogh——!'

'But, sir, we never meant——'

'If you hadn't touched it, sir—!' stammered Fatty Wynn.

'Silence! Figgins, go to my study—you are the ring-leader in this. I shall cane you. Kerr and Wynn, you will each take two hundred lines.'

'But, sir—'

'Not a word, Figgins! Go!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff. 'I will not hear a word—I will—aytishooh! aytishooh! Ooooh! Go!'

Mr. Ratcliff hurried away. He was in a state of towering wrath, and evidently anxious to get going with the cane. But he realised that he was more in need of a wash and brush-up than anything else, and he hurried away to get them.

Figgins and Co. exchanged eloquent looks.

'Isn't that just Ratty?' groaned Figgins.

'Ratty all over!' sighed Kerr.

'Anyhow, he had the soot!' said Fatty Wynn, 'that's something.'

George Figgins proceeded to his house-master's study, not in his usual cheery spirits. There he waited for Mr. Ratcliff.

He had rather a long wait. There was a great deal of soot on Mr. Ratcliff, and it was not easy to get rid of it. Figgins, who had a hopeful nature, hoped that Ratty's wrath might have faded out a little by the time he came to the study.

That hope was vain. When Mr. Ratcliff rustled in, at last, he did not look as if his wrath had faded out. Rather, he looked as if it had improved, like wine, with keeping. He picked up a cane from the study table.

'Bend over that chair, Figgins.'

'We—we never meant—!' mumbled Figgins.

'I have told you to bend over, Figgins.'

Figgins bent over the chair. Six times in succession

there was the rhythmic sound of cane meeting trousers. Figgy set his teeth and was silent, till the last swipe came—but Mr. Ratcliff seemed to put all his beef into that last swipe, and it was too much for Figgy. He roared.

Then Mr. Ratcliff pointed to the door with the cane.

'Leave my study!' he snapped.

Figgins was only too glad to leave it. He went down the passage wriggling like an eel, and like an eel he wriggled up the staircase. Kerr and Wynn were waiting for him in their study in the Fourth, and they gave him sympathetic looks as he wriggled in.

'Had it bad?' asked Kerr.

'Ow! Yes! Wow!'

'Did it hurt, old chap?' asked Fatty Wynn, sympathetically.

Figgins glared at him. 'Hurt? Oh! No! I rather liked it! I'm wriggling like this because it was so jolly nice! Ow! You silly fat-head! Wow!'

After which, George Figgins's remarks were chiefly 'Ow!' and 'Wow!' and 'Yow!' for quite a considerable time.

CHAPTER VI

HATS OFF!

Crash!

Monty Lowther did it.

Monty of the Shell suffered, a little, from an overdeveloped sense of humour. He never lost a chance at a pun, good or bad—generally bad—which his pals

in Study No. 10 tolerated with manly fortitude. They were not always quite so tolerant when Monty's little jokes took a more practical form. Sometimes Monty seemed to them too funny to live. But even Monty generally had a limit. He quite forgot the limit, however, on this particular bright winter's morning, when he yielded to the temptation of buzzing a footer at a house-master's hat.

They were punting an old footer in the quad after third school. Tom Merry, Lowther and Manners began, and Kangaroo, Wildrake, Glynn, Levison, Clive and Cardew—in fact, quite a swarm of School-House juniors. Then Figgins and Co., passing by, rushed in—not to join in the punt-about, but with the idea of capturing the School-House ball, and rushing it over to the New House as the prize of victory. They were all mixed up when Mr. Ratcliff came out of the New House, in coat and hat, to walk down to the gates.

Mr. Ratcliff glanced at the crowd of busy juniors, not amiably. He was still annoyed with Figgins, over the incident of the soot of the day before.

Figgins had charged over Tom Merry and was rushing at the ball and did not even see Mr. Ratcliff who, after that sour glance, walked on. But Monty Lowther, rushing at the ball also, did see Mr. Ratcliff.

Monty was a second or so ahead of Figgins. His intention was to keep the ball away from the New House junior. But the sight of Ratcliff in the offing changed that intention. Monty did not pause to think —he seldom did. Moreover, there was no time to think —another second, and Figgins would have shouldered him off the ball, and rushed it on. Monty was tempted

—and he fell—that muddy footer whizzed from his foot, in a well-directed kick, and crashed fairly on Mr. Ratcliff's hat, spinning it from his head.

Ratcliff's back was to the punters as he walked on. The whizzing ball caught his hat in the rear, spinning it over his eyes. It dropped in front of an astonished and startled housemaster, the ball rolling a few yards further on. Utterly startled and bewildered by that sudden unexpected happening, Mr. Ratcliff tottered forward and fell on his knees, spluttering.

'Monty! You mad ass!' gasped Tom Merry.

'You potty chump!' breathed Manners.

'Bai Jove! Look at Watty!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

'Lowther, you fathead——!' exclaimed Levison.

The instant he saw what he had done, Monty Lowther realised that all these epithets were more than justified: he was a mad ass, a potty chump, and a fathead—all that and more. He stared at Mr. Ratcliff's back, as that gentleman sprawled on his knees, his hands on the ground, in horror.

Monty had only meant to carry away the hat with the footer. That alone would have been awful. But he had not anticipated that Ratcliff would go over. That was too awful for words.

'Cut!' Figgins jerked at Lowther's arm. 'Get out of it, you fathead—he never saw you—all the rest of us can say we never did it—cut!'

That advice was too good to be disregarded. Monty Lowther backed swiftly out of the swarm and vanished under the old elms, while Mr. Ratcliff was still on his knees, groping at the ground, wondering in bewilderment whether it was an earthquake or whether the skies had fallen.

'What an uttah ass—!' murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

'One for his nob!' grinned Cardew. 'Good shot, what? If Lowther puts in shots as neat as that at Greyfriars next week, we shall pile up the goals.'

'It is vewy diswespectful to knock off a housemaster's hat with a footah, Cardew! I considah——'

'Here he comes!' said Manners.

'He looks cross!' remarked Cardew.

'Bai Jove! He looks feahfully fuwious!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Ratcliff certainly looked more than 'cross'. He gained his feet, picked up his hat, and stared at the football. Then he spun round, came across to the dismayed group of juniors, with an expression on his face that the fabled basilisk might have envied.

He realised now what had happened. It was not an earthquake. The skies had not fallen. One of those young rascals had kicked the football at him, and it had knocked off his hat. And Mr. Ratcliff had no doubt which young rascal it was. It was, of course, the young rascal he had caned severely the day before. He had seen Figgins rushing at the ball just before he turned his back on the punters. He did not need telling who had done it—he knew; at least he was assured that he knew.

The crowd of juniors, a few moments ago so noisy and active, were now still and silent. There was, of course, going to be a row. But Lowther, who had done it, had faded out of the picture: and every other fellow present was able and ready to state, with perfect truth, that he hadn't done it. So, alarming as the situation was, the juniors felt that Mr. Ratcliff's wrath would glance off them, as it were.

'Figgins!' Mr. Ratcliff's voice was husky with excitement and anger. 'How dare you, Figgins?'

Figgins fairly jumped.

'I, sir!' he stuttered. 'I never——'

'Figgins! Do you dare to deny that you kicked that football at my head!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh, crumbs! I mean, yes, sir! I never touched it!' gasped Figgins.

'You will hardly expect me to believe that statement, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff, bitterly. 'But if it is true, the boy who kicked the ball is here present, and I order him to speak.'

He glanced round at dismayed faces.

'It was not Figgins, sir!' ventured Tom Merry.

'Was it you, Merry? I should not be surprised!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'It was not I, sir.'

The boy who had kicked the ball was not, though Ratcliff was unaware of it, present. Monty Lowther, by that time, was strolling round the further side of the gym, out of sight, and quite unaware of the turn matters were taking.

Mr. Ratcliff glanced from face to face. He was quite certain that the offender was Figgins: but he was willing to hear any other fellow own up, if some other fellow had played that reckless trick.

'Figgins!' he rapped.

'I—I give you my word, sir——' stammered Figgins.

'That will do! Go into the House at once.'

'But, sir——!'

'Obey me this instant, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff, in a deep, rumbling voice.

'Weally, Mr. Watcliff, sir, it was not Figgins!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

'Was it you, D'Arcy?'

'By Jove! Certainly not, sir! I twust I am not such a diswespectful ass as to buzz a footah at a housemastah's hat, sir,' said Arthur Augustus. 'But it was not Figgins who kicked the ball, sir.'

Figgins had started for the House, with a glum and gloomy face. Kerr and Wynn followed him, also gloomy. Mr. Ratcliff gave Arthur Augustus a sour frown and followed the gloomy three.

'That ass Monty——!' breathed Tom.

'That lunatic Monty——!' grunted Manners.

'It's all wight, deah boys,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Lowthah will own up at once when he knows. He wouldn't let anothah man take his gwuel. Go aftah him and tell him that that old duffah Watty has nailed Figgins, and he will own up like a shot.'

Tom Merry nodded. It was the only thing to be done. It meant a terrific row for the funny ass of the Shell: but that could not be helped. No St. Jim's man could, as Arthur Augustus expressed it, let another man take his gruel. Tom Merry and Manners cut off at once in search of Monty Lowther—with rather dismaying news for that too-humorous youth.

CHAPTER VII

LET OFF LIGHTLY!

Mr. Ratcliff picked up the cane from his study table, and George Figgins breathed hard and deep. Only the day before that cane had swiped on Figgins, and he was still feeling the effect of the swiping—

Ratcliff had a heavy hand with a cane. Figgins was tough, and he had unlimited pluck, and he was not the fellow to make a fuss about a licking. But the prospect of another 'six' from the same heavy hand gave him rather a sinking feeling, which was expressed in Figgy's rugged face.

But, to his surprise, Mr. Ratcliff did not order him to bend over. He had marched him to his study with the obvious intention of caning him and had picked up the cane for that purpose. But Mr. Ratcliff, too, remembered that swiping on the previous day—though not so keenly as Figgins remembered it. Ratcliff was a hard man, with a harsh temper, and seldom spared the rod. But he was by no means without feeling, and he had a sense of duty, in his own sour and suspicious way. He laid the cane down again: and poor Figgy's face brightened.

'I caned you yesterday, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'A somewhat severe caning, as you very richly deserved.'

'Yes, sir!' murmured Figgins, hopefully.

'I do not feel,' said Mr. Ratcliff, 'that I should cane you again. But what you have done, Figgins, merits the most condign punishment.'

'But I never, sir——!'

'Silence! Say another word, and I shall certainly cane you.'

Figgins did not say another word!

Mr. Ratcliff regarded him with a grim and angry frown. He was convinced that Figgins had 'buzzed' that footer at his head: on that point he had not the slightest shadow of doubt. His desire to lay on the cane was strong. Yet he felt that he could not do so, which was very annoying. His hand strayed to the

cane again as if instinctively. But, to Figgy's great relief, he withdrew it.

'You will be gated, Figgins, and I shall give you a book,' he said, at last. 'It is an inadequate punishment, and you may realise that you are getting off very cheaply. You will be gated for six half-holidays, and you will write out a book of Virgil. Now you may go.'

Figgins's first feeling was one of elated relief. Certainly, gating on half-holidays was not agreeable: and a 'book' was a tremendous imposition. But anything was better than the swiping cane while the twinges of the earlier swiping yet lingered.

'Thank you, sir,' said Figgins. And he moved towards the door with a much brighter face.

True, he hadn't done anything to merit that punishment, but his house-master believed that he had, which came to the same thing for practical purposes: and so he was, as Ratty said, getting off cheaply.

But the next moment Figgins remembered something, and he turned back towards his house-master with a troubled face.

'If you please, sir——!' he stammered.

Mr. Ratcliff waved an angry hand at him.

'I desire to hear no more from you, Figgins. Leave my study at once.'

'But, sir,' gasped Figgins. 'Next week—next Wednesday, sir—it's the match at Greyfriars, sir—we go over to Greyfriars to play football, sir—I'm in the team—I'm outside right, sir——!'

'That will do, Figgins.'

'Yes, sir, but—but I—I mean, I—I can't let Tom Merry down, sir—it's one of our biggest fixtures—I—I—I'd rather you caned me, sir!' gasped Figgins, desperately.

Mr. Ratcliff stared at him—or rather, glared at him.

Of junior football matches Mr. Ratcliff knew little or nothing: even First-Eleven matches did not interest him. No doubt he knew that St. Jim's juniors played Greyfriars juniors at soccer; but Horace Ratcliff did not care for games, and never had, even in his younger days, and he attached no importance whatever to the circumstance. Indeed, Kerr had remarked sarcastically that Ratty probably hardly knew whether the men of his House played soccer or hopscotch. Figgy's words seemed, to Mr. Ratcliff, sheer impertinence—and ungrateful as well. He had let this junior off lightly, after an unexampled outrage—he had refrained from caning him as he deserved: he had been, indeed, remarkably lenient—and this was the young rascal's thanks!

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff. He stretched out his hand to the cane again, powerfully tempted to take Figgins at his word. But he felt that it would not do: neither was Mr. Ratcliff the man to change his decision to please an unreasonable and ungrateful junior.

'You—you see, sir—it—it's a big thing!' stammered Figgins. 'The—the other half-holidays don't matter, sir, but I've got to go over to Greyfriars with the team next Wednesday—I've just got to, sir. I—I must go, sir.'

It was rather an unfortunate way of putting it. It implied, though Figgy did not mean it, that his football arrangements were of greater importance and weight than his housemaster's authority!

'Figgins!' Mr. Ratcliff almost gasped. 'I almost doubt my ears! You must go out on a half-holiday, though I have told you that you are gated! Are you in your right senses, Figgins?'

'I—I—yes—no—I—I mean, you see, sir, we're playing Greyfriars, and—and I just can't be left out of the team——'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Ratcliff, grimly. 'I think you are mistaken on that point, Figgins. You certainly will not play in any match outside the school during the next three weeks, as you are gated for six half-holidays. If you should venture to leave the school on any half-holiday next week, Figgins, I shall report you to Dr. Holmes for a flogging.'

'But, sir——!'

'I have dealt very leniently with you, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff, picking up the cane. 'You show no gratitude for this but add impertinence to outrageous disrespect. If you utter a single word more I shall cane you—in addition to your other punishment, which will not be rescinded in any circumstances. Now leave my study.'

Figgins gave him a look, and left the study in silence. Ratty was adamant—he knew that of old. Ratty did not even understand what he was doing—on the subject of games he was deaf and blind. It was just useless to argue with Ratty—and Figgins gave it up.

Mr. Ratcliff gave an angry grunt and threw down the cane. He brushed his hat, which was rather muddy from the impact of the footer, and left the House. He had to walk down to Rylcombe before dinner, and he had been considerably delayed. In a state of great annoyance with things in general, and with George Figgins in particular, Mr. Ratcliff walked out of the gates, with a frowning brow. He left behind him, in the New House, the most dismayed junior at St. Jim's or anywhere else.

CHAPTER VIII

STICKY!

'You silly ass!'

Three voices spoke in unison. Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn all seemed to have the same opinion of Monty Lowther of the Shell. It was a case of three souls with but a single thought: three tongues that spoke as one.

Monty grinned ruefully. More than once, in fact many times, Monty had had occasion to repent him of his exuberant sense of humour. Now it had landed him in trouble once more.

He had hurried over to the New House at once, as soon as his chums had told him. He found Figgins and Co. in the doorway, all looking glum. They gave him inimical looks. To Mr. Ratcliff, cutting a football match was a trifle light as air: to George Figgins, it was an overwhelming disaster.

'I've just heard—!' began Lowther.

'You potty chump!' said Figgins. 'What did you want to buzz that ball at Ratty for? Haven't you as much sense as a bunny rabbit?'

'You blithering cuckoo,' said Fatty Wynn. 'Didn't you know there'd be a row if you knocked a beak's tile off?'

'Oh, bump him!' said Kerr. 'Bump him down the steps, and boot him back to his mouldy old House.'

'Good egg!' said Figgins. 'Collar the silly ass——!'

'Hold on!' exclaimed Monty Lowther, dodging. 'I came over as soon as I heard—I'm going to tell Ratty I did it——'

'Oh!' said Figgins. His face cleared. 'That's all right,

Lowther—I suppose you can't help being a funny idiot. If you set it right with Ratty—'

'Think I'd leave you to it, when I knew!' snapped Lowther. 'How was I to guess that that old duffer would jump on the wrong man? Our house-master wouldn't. Old Railton's got more sense. Ratty's the limit.'

'You leave our house master alone, you School-House smudge,' said Figgins. Figgy had been feeling that boiling in oil was rather too good for Mr. Ratcliff—but he was not going to hear a School-House man slanging him. Ratcliff, after all, was his house-master—a poor thing, but his own, as it were. 'Ratty's all right—in his own way. Think Railton would like to have his hat knocked off by a potty ass who ought to be parked in a home for idiots?'

'Has he whopped you already?' asked Lowther.

'No, he hasn't!' growled Figgins. 'I've got a gating for six half-hols, and a book. And that washes me out of the Greyfriars game next week, if Ratty sticks to it. But if you own up—'

'Of course I'm going to own up, bother you,' said Lowther. 'Not that it matters much whether you go over to Greyfriars next week or not. If you're left out, Tom may put in a School-House man. After all, we want to win.'

That remark very nearly caused Figgins and Co. to get on with the bumping!

'Why, you blithering, blethering, burbling cuck-oo—!' gasped Figgins, 'I—I'll—'

Monty Lowther dodged again.

'Chuck it,' he said, 'I've come to see Ratty, not to wipe up the New House with you, Figgy. I'll go to his study now.'

'Ratty's gone out,' growled Figgins. 'He was going out when you played that potty trick. Well, he's gone. You'll have to wait for him. He won't be long—he has to get back for tiffin.'

'B-r-r-r-r!' grunted Lowther, and he went into the House, to wait at Mr. Ratcliff's study door for that gentleman's return.

He left Figgins and Co. looking much more cheerful. Monty, on the other hand, was much less cheerful than was his wont. He had to own up—there was no doubt about that. But it meant a report from Ratty to his own house-master—and Railton was certain to be grim about it. Six of the best was the least that Monty could expect from Railton, and it was not a happy prospect.

It was all the worse because he had to wait for it, instead of getting it over and done with. It was just like Ratty to be out, when he was wanted to be in, Monty morosely reflected. He leaned on the study door, with his hands in his pockets, impatiently waiting for Ratcliff.

As Ratcliff was out, and Monty expecting to see him come up the corridor sooner or later, the Shell fellow naturally supposed that there was nobody in Ratty's study. Certainly nobody had any lawful business there. The very last thing Monty Lowther expected was the opening of that study door from within.

But it is often the unexpected that happens.

That study door suddenly opened from inside, and as Monty was leaning on it, he was suddenly left without any visible means of support, and he had no time to get his hands out of his pockets and clutch at anything. He went over backwards into the study.

'Oh!' gasped a startled voice.

'Oh!' spluttered Lowther.

The back of his head tapped on the carpet, and he sat up quite dizzily and blinked at Pratt of the Fourth—a New House junior. Pratt's eyes were almost popping from his face. He was even more startled than Lowther.

'Oh!' repeated Pratt, gasping, 'Only you! Wharrer you doing here, you School-House tick? I—I thought it was Ratty—oh, gum!' Pratt was evidently alarmed by the idea of his house-master finding him in that study.

'You—you—you howling ass!' stuttered Lowther, rubbing the back of his head. 'What the thump—' He tottered to his feet.

'Thank goodness it wasn't Ratty!' breathed Pratt. 'Look here, you've no business here—cut, see? Ratty's coming—I spotted him from the window.'

'I've got to wait to speak to Ratcliff—'

'Well, look here, don't you let on that you saw me here—I should get into a fearful row!' breathed Pratt.

'But what—?'

Pratt did not wait to answer, or listen. He had been about to leave the study when Lowther entered so suddenly and unexpectedly—backwards. Now he left it—in haste. He cut up the passage, at a run, leaving Monty Lowther rubbing the back of his head.

'Look here—!' exclaimed Lowther.

But Percival Pratt had vanished.

Monty Lowther grunted. He had had rather a shock, and rather a knock. A head could not tap suddenly and unexpectedly on a floor without an ache lingering therein. What Pratt of the Fourth had been doing in Mr. Ratcliff's study he did not know: apparently

something that made hasty departure essential when he spotted Ratty from the window. If a New House junior took advantage of Ratty's absence to play some trick in that study, it did not concern Monty—but the rap on the back of his head did. He was rather sorry that he had not kicked Pratt before that youth departed. However, it was too late for that: and he stood and rubbed his head and grunted expressively. He was thus occupied when a lean figure appeared in the study doorway, and two sharp eyes fixed on him, and an acid voice rapped:

'Well?'

'Oh! I—I came here to speak to you, sir,' stammered Lowther. 'I——'

'You should not have entered my study in my absence!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh! Yes! No! I——'

'You should have waited at the door, as you know very well.'

'Oh! Yes! I——'

'Boys of my own House are not allowed to enter this study without leave, Lowther—certainly not a School-House boy. Why are you here?' Mr. Ratcliff came into the study, and sat, or rather plumped into his armchair. Ratcliff was not an athletic gentleman, and his walk had tired him. When Mr. Ratcliff was tired, he was irritable. 'Do you mean that you have a message for me?'

'Oh! No, sir! I——!'

'It is not a message from Mr. Railton?'

'No, sir! I came——'

'Then I fail to see why you are here,' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'If you have entered this study during my absence to play some trick here, Lowther——'

'Oh, no, sir! Nothing of the kind!' gasped Lowther, 'I——'

He was suddenly interrupted. Mr. Ratcliff had sat only a few moments in that chair, but those few moments had been enough to apprise him that there was something very unusual about it. He jumped up—or rather bounded up—with a startled exclamation.

'Upon my word! What—what—what—?'

He gazed at his coat. He gazed into the seat of the armchair. Both were sticky—exceedingly sticky. The seat of the armchair was, in fact, swimming in gum. Mr. Ratcliff had not noticed it when he sat down. He noticed it now!

'Oh!' gasped Lowther.

He understood now what Pratt of the Fourth had been doing in his house-master's study!

CHAPTER IX

MONTY LOWTHER'S LUCK

'So this—this—this——!' Mr. Ratcliff seemed to choke. 'This—this is why you are here, Lowther. This is why I found you in my study—this! You—you came here to play this revolting trick, and I have caught you almost in the act!'

Mr. Ratcliff caught up the cane from his table and came towards Monty Lowther. The School-House junior, in alarm, circled round to the other side of the table. It was only too clear what Mr. Ratcliff was going to do with that cane.

'Oh! No, sir!' gasped Monty. 'I never knew——I—I

had no idea—I—I came here to speak to you—to tell you something, sir—I'd been waiting for you——'

Mr. Ratcliff paused. He was gummy, he was sticky, and he was furious—which indeed was not surprising in the circumstances. A good-tempered man might have been exasperated by sitting in a lake of gum: and Mr. Ratcliff was not good-tempered. But angry as he was, he gave the hapless Monty a chance to speak.

'Explain your presence in this study!' he thundered, 'why are you here, where no School-House boy has any business?'

'I—I wanted to speak to you, sir—,' stammered Lowther, 'I—I had to tell you, sir, about the football——!'

'The football?' repeated Mr. Ratcliff, blankly. 'What do you mean? I have nothing to do with the games, as you know very well. If you are seeking to invent some story, Lowther, to delude me——'

'I—I mean about the footer this morning, sir—you thought that Figgins had kicked it at your hat, sir——'

'That does not concern you, a School-House boy. Will you explain why you are in this study, or will you not explain why you are in this study?' demanded Mr. Ratcliff, categorically.

'It's that, sir! It wasn't Figgins at all——'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed the exasperated New House master. 'Do you dare to pretend, Lowther, that you came here to talk this impertinent nonsense? Do you imagine for one moment that I shall believe——?'

'I'm owning up, sir!' stuttered Lowther. 'It was I kicked the ball, sir, and you thought it was Figgins—I—I—came to tell you so, sir.'

'Grant me patience!' exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff. 'I find you, a School-House boy, in my study, I find my chair drenched with some adhesive substance—I find that a revolting, disrespectful trick has been played here, and I find you here—and you dare attempt to deceive me with such a preposterous story!'

'It's true, sir—I—I came——'

'I know why you came!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff. 'Why you came is abundantly clear, and such an invention will not save you from the consequences. As a rule, Lowther, I should not punish a School-House boy—I should report you to your own house-master. But as you have chosen to intrude into my House and into my study, I shall deal with you as if you were a boy of this House. Bend over that table, Lowther.'

Mr. Ratcliff came round the table, cane in hand.

Lowther circled it again.

Mr. Ratcliff, almost foaming, circled it after him. Really it looked as if junior and beak were playing the game of going round the mulberry bush.

Lowther was utterly dismayed. Mr. Ratcliff did not believe a single word he had uttered. It was all that ass Pratt's fault. But for Pratt, Lowther would have been waiting for the New House master outside his study door, and no doubt Ratcliff would have given him a hearing. But it hadn't happened like that—Ratcliff had found the School-House junior in the study, he had sat in sticky gum, he had no doubt that Monty Lowther had put the gum there for him to sit in, and invented this flimsy tale on the spur of the moment—and really, it did look like it. Appearances were against Monty: and Mr. Ratcliff judged by appearances. He whisked round the table after the Shell fellow.

'I tell you, sir——!' Monty gasped across the table.

'I shall cane you, Lowther! I shall cane you severely. I order you to bend over this table!' almost shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

'But I tell you—if you'll let me speak, sir—I only want to say— Oh, crikey!'

A bony hand grasped Lowther's shoulder. He was brought to a halt: and at the same moment the cane, in Mr. Ratcliff's other hand swiped. Lowther yelled.

He wriggled in the New House master's grip.

'Leggo!' he roared. 'Look here, I'll go to my own house-master if you like. You've no right to cane me. I——'

Swipe! swipe! swipe!

Mr. Ratcliff was exercising the right, whether he had it or not. The cane in his energetic hand swiped and swiped, and the last speck of dust vanished from Monty Lowther's trousers. Never had they been so thoroughly dusted.

'Oh! Ah! Ow! Oh, crikey! Look here, sir—yarooh!' roared Lowther. 'Oh, crumbs! Whoop!'

How long Mr. Ratcliff would have gone on with the cane cannot be said. He seemed disposed, like the little brook in the poem, to go on for ever. But Monty settled that by fairly wrenching himself away from the bony grip, and making a bound for the door.

'Stop!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff.

Lowther was not likely to stop. He tore open the door, a last swipe from the cane just missed him, as he dived into the passage. He went down that passage as if it had been the cinder-path.

'Stop!' Mr. Ratcliff, in the doorway of his study, brandished the cane. 'Lowther! Stop!'

Monty vanished round the nearest corner.

Mr. Ratcliff seemed inclined, for a moment, to follow on. But no doubt he realised that the School-House junior had had enough—even for the gum in the armchair. Monty's own impression was that he had had too much. Mr. Ratcliff snorted and turned back into his study—what time Monty Lowther was doing the New House steps in one, and bolting like a rabbit across the quadrangle.

Tom Merry and Manners were waiting for their chum at the School-House door. They had been wondering what was keeping Monty so long. They stared at him as he arrived, red, breathless and panting.

'What the thump—!' exclaimed Tom Merry.

'What's happened?' asked Manners.

'Ow! wow!' groaned Monty. 'I'm glad I'm not a—wow!—New House man. Ratty can whop! Wow!'

'But what—?'

'Wow! wow!' Monty wriggled spasmodically. 'Ow! He can whop—I'll say that for him. Railton's a mere dud to him! Wow! Oh, crumbs! Ow!'

'Did Ratty——'

'Ow! Yes! Sort of! Wow! I shall have to eat my dinner standing up, like a horse. Oh, crumbs! Ow! Wow!'

Monty Lowther gasped out his tale of woe. Tom Merry whistled.

'Rotten luck,' he said. 'You haven't done Figgy much good——'

'Ow! Blow Figgy! Wow!'

'Well, I'm sorry for old Figgy——!' said Manners.

'Wow! Bless old Figgy! I'm sorry for me!' yapped Lowther. 'Never been so sorry for a chap in my life! Wow-ow-ow!'

And Monty Lowther tottered into the House, much too sorry for his unlucky self to bother about old Figgy—for the present, at least.

CHAPTER X

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS TO THE RESCUE!

'Pewwaps I had bettah take the mattah in hand.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that remark in a very thoughtful way. Seven or eight fellows, in No. 10 Study in the Shell, stared at him.

There was a wrinkle of thought in Arthur Augustus's noble brow. He had been silent for several minutes while the other fellows talked. Evidently his aristocratic brain was on the move. His remark was the outcome of deep reflection.

Several days had passed since the episode of Ratcliff's hat. Figgins of the Fourth was under sentence of 'gates', as decreed by his house-master. One half-holiday had elapsed so far. On Saturday afternoon there had been a junior House-match, which was not affected by 'gates'. So far, therefore, no great damage had been done. But on the coming Wednesday there was a junior School match due—an away match—and it was a match with Greyfriars School, which Tom Merry and Co. counted the biggest fixture in the list, Rookwood and Carcroft coming second and third in importance. Figgins was wanted in that match — and he couldn't go.

Tom Merry was worried. Mr. Ratcliff regarded the matter as settled and done with. Quite possibly he

had dismissed it from his mind. But the junior footballers, naturally, could not dismiss it so easily.

There were plenty of men available to take Figgy's place, if it came to that. But the junior football captain did not want it to come to that. Many School-House men were of the opinion that the fewer New House men in the team the better—but Tom Merry did not carry House patriotism to that length. House rows and rags and rivalry were all very well, within the walls of St. Jim's: but in a School match, the football captain had to pick the best men: and Tom Merry would not have hesitated to play ten New House men in the eleven if he had judged them better at soccer than his own pals. As the matter stood, however, there were three from the New House—Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn. And Figgins, whose long legs covered the ground like lightning, and who had an unerring eye, a sound wind, a quick judgment, and the team spirit strongly developed, was one of the very best. Against Harry Wharton and Co. at Greyfriars, St. Jim's had to go all out, and even then victory was on the knees of the gods. And Figgy was gated: and Ratcliff, deaf and blind to games, was no more likely to let him off to play soccer than to play marbles.

A crowd of fellows were discussing the thorny matter in No. 10 after class on Monday. Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, Blake and Co. from Study No. 6, Talbot of the Shell, and Levison of the Fourth, were there. Whether a last appeal to Ratty would do any good—whether Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, might be asked to use his influence—whether Mr. Railton might be begged to speak to Ratty about it—these and other ideas were discussed, not very hopefully: while Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, unusually

silent, reflected. Then, at length, the swell of St. Jim's polished his eyeglass, jammed it into his eye, surveyed through it the worried faces of his friends, and gave tongue.

The other fellows looked round at him, not enthusiastically. In point of fact, nobody expected anything very bright from Gussy.

'You!' said Tom Merry.

'Yaas, wathah!'

'A Daniel come to judgment!' said Monty Lowther, solemnly. 'Go ahead, Gussy! Spill the words of wisdom.'

'Weally, Lowthah——!'

'Speech may be taken as read!' interrupted Jack Blake. 'Now, look here, if we go to Kildare and ask him—he's Head of the Games——'

'You are intewwuptin' me, Blake.'

'I know! Kildare might be able to do something, you fellows——'

'Oh, let Gussy rip!' said Tom Merry, laughing. 'What's the big idea, Gussy?'

'No good wasting time,' said Blake. 'We're talking soccer, not fancy waistcoats. You go to sleep again, Gussy.'

'You uttah ass, I have not been asleep. I have been thinkin'——'

'What have you been doing that with?' asked Monty Lowther, with an air of deep interest.

'I wefuse to ansah that widiculous question, Lowthah. I wepeat that pewwaps I had better take the mattah in hand,' said Arthur Augustus, firmly. 'In fact, there is no pewwaps about it. Leave it to me.'

'But what——?' asked Tom, patiently.

'Watty is wathah a gwim old stick,' said Arthur

Augustus. 'But he is bound to listen to weason, if the thing is put to him pwopahly, by a fellow of tact and judgment. I will speak to Watty about it—'

'You'll talk to Ratty?' asked Blake.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Well, serve him right!' said Blake. 'He deserves it, and more.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Pway don't be an ass, Blake. Watty is down on Figgins because he has got it all w'ong. It only needs settin' wight.'

'Lowther's tried that,' said Tom. 'He wouldn't listen to Monty.'

'I am not suggestin' that Lowthah should speak to him, Tom Mewwy. Lowthah is wathah a tactless ass. What is wequiahed is a fellow with tact. I believe,' added Arthur Augustus, with dignity, 'that that is wathah my long suit.'

'Is that all?' asked Blake. 'Good, now, let us get on—'

'Weally, Blake—'

'Ratty isn't likely to listen to you, D'Arcy, old chap,' said Talbot, with a smile. 'He might listen to Kildare, or Railton, but—'

'I feel quite suah, Talbot, that Watty will see weason if the mattah is put to him pwopahly. It simply needs explainin'. Watty is wathah a cwusty old bird, but he doesn't mean to be unjust—in fact I am suah that he would be quite howwified if he wealised that he was committin' an injustice. Now, he is bein' unjust to Figgins, in gatin' him because that uttah ass Lowthah buzzed a footah at his hat. If I make the mattah clear to Watty—'

'If!' remarked Levison.

'Weally, there is no 'if' about it—I shall make the mattah cleah to Watty. I have no doubt that he will be welieved to know the twuth, and I expect him to thank me for openin' his eyes.'

'More likely to pick up his cane and dust your bags,' said Lowther. 'I know—I've been there.'

'I should certainly wefuse to allow Watty to dust my bags, as he is not my house-mastah. But on the whole,' added Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, 'I won't go to him in his study. Pewwaps it would be bettah to speak to him somewah where there isn't a cane handy, in case he should cut up wusty.'

'Much better!' grinned Manners.

'As that Indian chap at Greyfriars would say, the betterfulness is terrific,' chuckled Monty Lowther.

'I will catch him in the quad,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I have no doubt it will be all wight—anyhow he doesn't cawwy his cane in the quad.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Arthur Augustus rose and threaded his way through the rather crowded meeting to the door. Blake winked at the other fellows, who grinned. In the numerous gathering, there was only one fellow who had any faith in the tact and judgement of the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—and that was the Honourable Arthur Augustus himself. But Gussy, at all events, had no doubts. He turned in the doorway with a reassuring smile.

'You may as well bweak up the meetin' now,' he said. 'You can wegard it as all wight, Tom Mewwy.'

'Thanks,' said Tom, laughing.

'Not at all, deah boy. Whenevah you're up against a spot of bothah, wely on me,' said Arthur Augustus, graciously, and he walked away down the Shell

passage, nothing doubting that he left his friends with their problem solved.

But Tom Merry and Co. did not look at it quite in that light. Gussy had settled the matter—but after his departure, the juniors went on discussing it, just as if he hadn't!

CHAPTER XI

NOT A SUCCESS!

'Pway excuse me, Mr. Watcliff.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was nothing if not polite.

He raised his hat respectfully to the New House master. He addressed him in his most courteous manner.

There was nothing about Arthur Augustus to which the most dignified beak could have taken exception. Even Mr. Ratcliff, crusty gentleman as he was, did not frown at him, though he looked impatient.

Mr. Ratcliff was taking a walk under the elms after class, doubtless with affairs of his own to think of, and he did not want to be bothered by a Fourth-form junior not belonging to his House. However, he paused in his walk, and glanced inquiringly at the swell of the School-House.

'Well?' He rapped out that monosyllable like a bullet. Mr. Ratcliff was always short and sharp—not to say acid.

'I twust, sir, that you will excuse my speakin' to you, and not wegard it as cheek on my part,' said Arthur Augustus, elaborately polite.

'What? what? You may speak to me if you have

anything to say,' said Mr. Ratcliff, testily. 'Kindly be brief.'

'Thank you, sir. I was suah that you would give me a hearin', and not snap a fellow's head off befoah he had time to uttah a word, as most of the fellows think,' said Arthur Augustus.

'Eh?'

'It's about Figgins, sir——'

'Figgins?' repeated Mr. Ratcliff. 'What do you mean? Have you come to me to make a complaint about a boy of my house, D'Arcy?'

'Oh, cwikey!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

'What has Figgins done?' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Nothin', sir,' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'Nothing? Then what have you to complain of?'

'Nothin' at all, sir. You misappwehend me entiahly, sir. Figgins is wathah a fwiend of mine, barrin' that he is a cheeky New House tick—I—I mean a New House man. Figgins is all wight! We all like old Figgy, sir, and want him to come ovah to Gweyfwiahs with the team on Wednesday——'

'Figgins is under orders to remain within gates and can do nothing of the kind,' snapped Mr. Ratcliff, turning away.

'Pway listen to me a moment, sir! You are pwobably awah that Figgins is outside wight in the juniah team——'

'That will do, D'Arcy.'

'But I have not explained yet, sir. I know that you are not vewy much intewested in games, sir, so pewwaps you do not undahstand how important the Gweyfwiahs fixture is. Mr. Wailton would undahstand at once——'

'What?'

'But I do not expect you to undahstand, sir,' said Arthur Augustus, brightly.

Mr. Ratcliff gazed at him.

'But this is not merely a mattah of soccah, but a mattah of justice,' Arthur Augustus went on, unobservant of the signs of gathering wrath in Horace Ratcliff's expressive countenance. 'I feel suah, sir, that when I point out that you have tweated Figgins with injustice——'

'Injustice!' gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Yaas, sir. Of course I undahstand that you did not mean to be unjust—but evewybody makes mistakes at times. Havin' tweated Figgins with injustice, I feel suah that you would weally wish to set the mattah wight, so I came to you to say—Yawooh! Oh, cwikey! Oh, cwumbs!'

Smack!

Had that interview taken place in Mr. Ratcliff's study, probably Mr. Ratcliff's cane would have been featured in the scene. As Gussy had sapiently remarked, Mr. Ratcliff did not carry his cane with him in the quad. But it transpired that he had other resources. He had a hand at his disposal, which was bony, but hard and heavy: and that bony hand landed with a sudden smack on Arthur Augustus's noble ear.

It was quite a resounding smack.

Arthur Augustus tottered, taken quite by surprise. His hand shot to his ear, which was crimson, and had a pain in it. He blinked at Mr. Ratcliff, dumbfounded. They did not smack fellows' ears at St. Jim's. Even Mr. Ratcliff never did. Now he had done it!

Having done it, he turned and walked on, with a brow of thunder. Arthur Augustus stood with his hand to his ear, staring after him blankly.

'Bai Jove!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'He has—has smacked my head—or am I dweamin' this?'

Really, Arthur Augustus might almost have fancied that he was dreaming so incredible an incident. But the pain in his noble ear was real—it was only too real! The incredible had happened! Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the ornament of the Fourth Form, had had his head smacked!

Why, he did not know. So far as Gussy could see, he had been getting on quite nicely with the conversation, when Mr. Ratcliff had lost his temper so suddenly and inexplicably, and smacked his head.

Blankly, he stared at the bony figure that jerked along the path under the elms. Deep wrath and indignation gathered in his aristocratic brow.

'The fwightful outsidah!' breathed Arthur Augustus. 'Smackin' a fellow's head, bai Jove! The uttah wottah! I have a gweat mind to go aftah him and tell him what I think of him! The howwid wuffian!'

Slowly, Arthur Augustus turned away and walked back to the School-House. He was feeling quite dazed, as well as angry and indignant, at that unexpected outcome of the interview. Why Ratty—even Ratty—had broken out in that extraordinary way, he could not guess. But it was clear to him that he was not going to set things right for Figgins. He had not made matters any better—indeed, it rather looked as if he had made them worse. Ratcliff, evidently, was not a man to be reasoned with—even by a fellow of tact and judgement!

'Hallo! What's up, Gussy?' Tom Merry and Co. were coming out of the House—the meeting in No. 10 Study was over. They all stared at the swell of St. Jim's. They could see that something had happened.

'Been talking to Ratty?' grinned Lowther.

'Yaas,' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I—I say, you men, do you fellows think that Watty is mad?'

'Mad?' repeated Tom Merry.

'Yaas wathah! That would account for it! Othahwise, it is simply a mystewy.'

'But what's happened?' asked Blake.

'Watty smacked my head——!'

'Smacked your head!' exclaimed all the juniors together.

'Yaas—a feahful smack, that made my head wing! It's wingin' now. I have a pain in my yah! I was explainin' the mattah to him vewy politely and pleasantly, and all of a sudden he flew into a wage and smacked my head and stalked off. He must be off his wockah—quite cwackahs.'

'Cheek to smack a School-House man's head,' said Digby, indignantly. 'Did you cheek him?'

'Certainly not, Dig! I twust that I am not capable of the bad form of cheekin' a mastah!'

'Then why did he smack your head?' asked Tom.

'I weally do not know, deah boy, unless he has gone cwackahs. Look at my yah! Is it vewy wed?'

'Red as a rose, old bean. You must have said something to make him frightfully shirty——'

'Nothin' of the kind, Tom Mewwy.'

'What did you say exactly?' asked Talbot.

'I was wemarkin' that he had tweated Figgins with injustice——'

'Wha-a-t?'

'Oh, my hat!'

'And befoah I could get any futhah, he suddenly smacked my head and stalked off——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! I do not see anythin' to laugh at in this mattah, you fellows. If Watty has gone mad, it is vewy sewious.'

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

'Weally, you cacklin' asses——!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ain't he the limit?' asked Blake. 'Ain't he a prize-packet? Did Ratty give your napper only one smack, Gussy?'

'Yaas.'

'I wonder why,' said Blake.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'And you haven't put matters right with Ratty after all?' asked Lowther. 'That's odd, when you put it so tactfully.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'If you fellows persist in cacklin' in that widiculous mannah——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh wats!' snapped Arthur Augustus. And he went into the House, still rubbing his noble ear—leaving Tom Merry and Co. still cackling!

CHAPTER XII

A SPOT OF GOOD NEWS

'No!'

'But, sir——!'

'I cannot discuss the matter, Kildare.'

'But——'

'I cannot discuss a matter affecting the discipline of

my House with a School-House prefect,' said Mr. Ratcliff, acidly.

'I am not speaking as a prefect, sir, but as Head of the Games,' said the captain of St. Jim's. 'If you will hear me——'

'That is immaterial,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'The matter is closed and cannot be re-opened.'

'But, sir——'

'I have said that the matter is closed, Kildare.' Mr. Ratcliff picked up his pen. 'I must add that I am very busy.'

Kildare of the Sixth breathed a deep, deep, breath. There was nothing more to be said, and without another word the captain of St. Jim's left Mr. Ratcliff's study.

Mr. Ratcliff gave a grunt, as the door closed on him.

He was deeply annoyed.

The matter was, as he had said, closed. Mr. Ratcliff was not the man to re-open a matter that was closed to his own satisfaction. He was already deeply annoyed about the whole affair, and Kildare's intervention only added to his annoyance. Mr. Ratcliff was not only angry: but, like the prophet of old, he felt that he did well to be angry. He was not only angry but hurt.

Mr. Ratcliff was a severe gentleman. He had a harsh temper, and he was doubtful and suspicious. But he was, like most of us, unconscious of his own little faults and flaws. His intentions were good, and he was—or believed himself to be—a just man. Indeed he prided himself upon his severe justice. He would not willingly have committed an act of injustice—it would have troubled him very deeply, if he had rea-

lised that he had actually done so. The fact was that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with all his tact and judgement, had touched Mr. Ratcliff on a very tender spot. To have his justice impugned was the very last thing that Mr. Ratcliff was likely to tolerate.

He was right, and he was just—he had no doubt about that. Figgins had been guilty of an act meriting a flogging, or at least a severe caning, and his housemaster had let him off very lightly. He had tempered justice with mercy. And this was his reward! Nothing like gratitude—only resentment and impertinence—and now even the captain of the school, whose duty it was to uphold discipline and authority, had intervened in the matter—on the wrong side! It was very hard for a just man, conscious of strict justice, to find himself regarded almost as a tyrant. Very likely no junior at St. Jim's supposed that Mr. Ratcliff had any feelings at all. But he had—and they were hurt. He was indignant as well as angry.

And he was adamant. Nothing would have induced him to recede an inch, or even to listen to a word on the subject. Figgins's sentence was as fixed and immutable as the laws and customs of the Medes and Persians.

Frowning, Mr. Ratcliff resumed the task that Kildare had interrupted, of correcting Form papers for the Fifth. Ratcliff did not like interruptions. But he was booked for another, that afternoon.

Buzzzz! It was the telephone bell.

Mr. Ratcliff almost snorted. He laid down his pen, picked up the receiver and barked into the mouthpiece:

'Well?'

'Is that Mr. Ratcliff?'

'Speaking.'

'Good-afternoon, Ratcliff. This is Hacker speaking from Greyfriars.'

'Oh!' Mr. Ratcliff's frowning brow cleared. It was not some bothering parent: it was Mr. Hacker, the master of the Shell at Greyfriars, who had rung him up—an old friend of Ratcliff's. He had not seen Hacker for a very long time—the distance between the two schools was considerable. They had last met in the holidays a year ago. Mr. Ratcliff was quite pleased to hear Hacker on the telephone.

'Oh!' repeated Mr. Ratcliff. 'Good-afternoon, Hacker. Good of you to give me a ring.' His expression was quite genial. Even Figgins and Co., had they seen him at that moment, would have realised that their house-master was, after all, a human being.

'You haven't kept your promise yet of coming across to see me,' said Mr. Hacker, from the Greyfriars end.

'I certainly mean to do so, Hacker. It will be a pleasure. But there are so many things, during the term——'

'Quite! But it is easier for a house-master to get away than for a common-or-garden form-master like myself,' said Mr. Hacker. 'Look here, why not run across to-morrow? It's a half-holiday at both schools, and we're getting a spell of lovely weather for the time of year. I shall be free in the afternoon, and you can get here in time for lunch—a house-master can always give himself a morning off, what?'

Mr. Ratcliff smiled. Matters at St. Jim's had been annoying and irritating, and this friendly call from Hacker came very agreeably.

'One moment, Hacker—I shall have to think about arrangements,' he said. 'I shall be very glad to come

over, my dear fellow—very glad, if I can arrange it. I have no doubt that I could do so. One moment.'

Mr. Ratcliff reflected. He would have to leave fairly early to arrive at Greyfriars for lunch. The ten-thirty from Wayland, with a change at Sevenoaks, would do it in time. He was booked to take the Fifth in third school on Wednesday morning; but he could arrange a French set for that lesson—Monsieur Morny was always obliging. There was really nothing else in the way. The weather, as Mr. Hacker said, was remarkably good for the time of year—and Mr. Ratcliff had reached an age when he had to consider the weather. Really, it was an excellent opportunity to visit his old friend Hacker, as he had long intended to do. Mr. Ratcliff was not long in deciding.

'An excellent idea, Hacker,' he said. 'I will certainly come. I can arrange matters quite easily, and catch the ten-thirty at Wayland to-morrow morning.'

'Glad to hear it, Ratcliff,' said Mr. Hacker, cordially. 'Then I shall expect you here to lunch to-morrow.'

After a few words more, Hacker rang off, and Mr. Ratcliff put up the receiver. He had quite a pleasant expression on his face as he returned to his table and the pile of Form papers.

An hour later, Mr. Ratcliff walked across to the School-House to speak to Monsieur Morny. Matters were easily arranged with the French master: and a notice duly appeared on the board, in Mr. Ratcliff's rather crabbed hand. It apprised the Fifth form of a change in the time-table on the morrow. Mr. Ratcliff was form-master of the Fifth—not a very popular form-master. Perhaps the St. Jim's Fifth lacked appreciation of so just a beak.

'Spot of good news,' remarked Cutts of the Fifth,

when he happened to look at the notice-board later, after Mr. Ratcliff had gone.

'What's that?' yawned St. Leger.

'Ratty's cutting third school to-morrow. We're gettin' a nerve-rest with Mossoo instead.'

'Oh, good egg!' said St. Leger. 'What's the matter with Ratty, though? Sick?'

'Let's hope so,' said Cutts, charitably.

Happily unaware of such comments in his form, Mr. Ratcliff was looking forward with considerable pleasure to his excursion on the morrow. And when, that evening, it was known in the New House that Mr. Ratcliff was to be away the next day, there was a flutter of excitement in a junior study in that House—the study belonging to Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn. Figgins and Co. discussed it with a deep and keen interest that would have astonished Mr. Ratcliff—apparently regarding it, like Cutts of the Fifth, as a spot of good news!

CHAPTER XIII

THE PROBLEM SOLVED

'Blow!' said Tom Merry.

He wrinkled his brows over a scribbled paper. It was a football list: and in that list an alteration had to be made. Tom did not want to make an alteration—and any alteration could only be for the worse. But it was a case of needs must!

Up to the last moment, almost, Tom Merry had

hoped that somehow or other he would be able to leave that list as it was, with the name of G. Figgins as outside-right. But it was the last evening before the fixture now, and the last hope was gone.

Arthur Augustus's intervention certainly had not improved matters. It had, in fact, made matters worse. The last chance had been to ask Kildare, as Head of the Games, to speak to Mr. Ratcliff. The captain of St. Jim's had complied—and nothing had come of it. So that, once more, was that.

'Blow!' repeated Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther were sympathetic. But there was nothing they could do to help. Lowther had remarked that Ratty ought to be boiled in oil, and Manners that such a fate was altogether too good for him. These remarks expressed their feelings, but were no present help in time of need.

'Blow!' said Tom, for the third time, with his boyish brow wrinkled over the list. 'It's a winning team, if that smudge Ratty would leave it alone.'

The list ran: D. L. Wynn; G. Herries, H. Noble; M. Lowther, S. Clive, F. Kerr; R. Talbot, J. Blake, T. Merry, A. A. D'Arcy, G. Figgins.

It was a good team—a winning team—at all events, the best junior team that both Houses of St. Jim's, combined, could put into the field. Fatty Wynn, in goal, was a tower of strength to his side; Herries and Harry Noble were stout backs, Lowther, Clive and Kerr were excellent halves and the forward line were all first-class. Tom Merry did not want to make any change—very much indeed he did not—but his outside-right had to go, and had to be replaced.

'Levison's a good man,' said Tom, 'and he's keen. But is he in the same street with Figgins?'

'Hardly,' said Lowther.

'Redfern of the New House is a good man, if we wanted a half-back—but we don't. So are you, Manners, old man. But——'

'I've played forward,' Manners remarked, in a casual sort of way.

'Yes—if this were a House match we could manage all right. But we've got to put tip-top men into the field to beat Wharton's crowd at Greyfriars,' said Tom, his eyes still on the list.

Manners coughed, and Monty Lowther winked at the ceiling. Tom Merry and Co. were great chums, loyal and inseparable: but to a football captain, football had to come before friendship.

'Bother you, Manners,' went on Tom.

'Eh! What are you bothering me for, I'd like to know?'

'If you put in more soccer practice, instead of rooting about with that fatheaded camera of yours, you might be of some use.'

'I'm not exactly a dud,' said Manners, a little tartly.

'Eh! Oh, no! Not at all, old chap! But the question is, who goes in, in Figgy's place. Bother you, Lowther.'

'Bothering me now?' asked Monty. 'I'm playing half—I can't play forward, too. I'll try, if you like.'

'Fathead! What did you want to buzz a footer at Ratty's silly head for?' growled Tom. 'That's what started all the trouble, you funny ass.'

'Well, I went over and owned up——'

'Fat lot of good that was, when Ratty believed you were pulling his skinny leg. And that ass D'Arcy had to butt in and put Ratty's back up so that it wouldn't ever come down again!' grunted Tom. 'Well, Figgy

will have to go, and I suppose it will have to be Levison, and—'

There was a tap at the door of No. 10 Study, and it opened to reveal the rugged face of George Figgins of the New House.

The chums of the Shell stared at him. It was close on lock-up and rather late for paying a call. And there was a glow of excitement in Figgy's face that surprised them.

'Heard?' asked Figgins, as he stepped in.

'Which and what?' asked Tom.

'About Ratty.'

'Ratty?' Tom looked eager. 'Has he let you off? Has he—'

'Not in your lifetime,' grunted Figgins. 'Catch Ratty letting a man off. When he's made his mind up—what he calls a mind—it sticks like cement. No chance of Ratty letting me off.'

'Then what—?'

'He's going away to-morrow,' said Figgins.

'Treat for St. Jim's,' remarked Lowther. 'Nice of him to go away and make everybody happy.'

'I've talked it over with Kerr and Wynn,' said Figgins, 'From what I hear, Ratty is going off for the day—goodness knows where and why, but that doesn't matter—the point is that he's going. Mossoo is to take his form in third school—Ratty's catching a morning train.'

'What about it?' asked Tom, puzzled. He was not in the least interested in Mr. Ratcliff's proceedings—unless Mr. Ratcliff let Figgy off the gating. 'Who cares whether Ratty goes off for the day or doesn't?'

'I jolly well do for one,' said Figgins. 'Don't you see? Ratty goes off in the morning and doesn't get

back till night—a chap heard him tell Monteith, our pre., to see lights out, as he wouldn't be back in time. Think I'm going to stick in gates with Ratty miles away all day?'

'Oh!' said Tom.

'I don't believe in kicking over the traces, as a rule,' said Figgins. 'That ass Cardew thinks it's clever—but I don't. But I jolly well oughtn't to be gated because that ass Lowther is a funny idiot——'

'Thanks,' said Monty.

'I'm coming over to Greyfriars with the team to-morrow.'

'Oh!' said Tom, again.

'Ratty won't know a thing,' said Figgins, eagerly. 'See? He goes off in the morning, hours before we start: he comes back at night, hours after we've got home. How's he to know a thing? He can fancy that I'm kicking my heels about school on a half-holiday, while you're playing soccer over at Greyfriars, if he likes. More likely to forget all about me—I shall be jolly glad to forget all about him.'

'By gum!' said Monty Lowther. 'But——'

'But——!' said Manners, dubiously. 'Ratty would be frightfully wild if he found out.'

'Let him!' said Figgins, recklessly.

'After all, though, how's he to find out?' said Monty Lowther. 'Figgins isn't in detention—it's not a case of turning up with a detention master. Nobody's likely to notice if Figgy cuts—with Ratty away.'

'That's so,' said Tom, slowly. 'If it were a home match, Figgy could play—gates wouldn't stop that. But——'

'Easy as falling off a form,' said Figgins. 'Nobody but Ratty cares a boiled bean what I do tomorrow

afternoon. I won't come with the crowd to the station in case he may have spoken to a pre. I can slip out and join you on the road. You pick me up half-way to Wayland. See?'

'I see. But——'

'It will be a score over Ratty,' said Lowther.

'Oh, can it!' snapped Figgins. 'Who wants to score over Ratty? I didn't come here for School-House swank. Look here——'

'It's jolly risky,' said Tom Merry. 'It looks safe enough—safe as houses—but you'd get into a fearful row if it came out, Figgy.'

'Who cares?'

'And so would you, Tom,' said Manners, quietly. 'You'd be blamed as much as Figgy for playing a man you knew was gated by his house-master.'

'Oh!' said Tom. 'I—I suppose Railton would be down on it.'

'You bet he would.'

'Where's the harm?' demanded Figgins. 'I oughtn't to be gated, as you jolly well know. Am I wanted at Greyfriars or not?'

'You jolly well are,' said Tom. 'I've been worrying for the last hour over a man to fill your place. But——'

'Well, if I can risk a row, you can,' said Figgins. 'And a row with Ratty is worse than one with Railton, by long odds. Is it a go?'

Tom Merry did not answer immediately. He was deep in thought. Figgins was wanted in the game at Greyfriars School—badly wanted. His 'gating' was due to a mistake of Mr. Ratcliff's—it was, in fact, unjust, as Arthur Augustus had so tactfully pointed out to the New House master. And it all looked absolutely safe, with Mr. Ratcliff away for the day. But

Tom was a steady fellow, not in the least given to kicking over the traces, like the volatile Cardew, of the Fourth, or Racke, the black sheep of the Shell. He hesitated. Figgins looked at him, knitting his brows.

'Look here, is it a go?' he demanded. 'I'm ready to come over to Greyfriars tomorrow and chance it. If you're funky—'

'Oh, don't be an ass!' said Tom, sharply.

'Well, is it a go?'

'Yes,' said Tom, at last. 'It's a go—if Ratcliff clears off in the morning? It's a go, Figgy.'

'Good egg!' said Figgins. 'That's settled then.'

And he left No. 10 Study with a cheery grin on his face. Tom Merry looked at his football list again—which no longer required that unwelcome alteration. He had a lingering doubt—but it was now, as Figgins said, settled. The name of G. Figgins was down in that list as outside-right—and the name of G. Figgins remained there. Where Mr. Ratcliff was going, and why, nobody knew and nobody cared—but he was going, and George Figgins was going too!

CHAPTER XIV

O.K.

'Wippin'!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

'Top-hole!' said Blake.

'Fine!' remarked Levison of the Fourth, but with rather an effort. If George Figgins's place had had to be filled, Ernest Levison would have filled it. And

he was very keen to play at Greyfriars. But he tried to feel as pleased as he could.

It was now certain that Figgins would go. For in break that Wednesday morning, eager seekers of news had the best of news—Mr. Ratcliff was gone. A taxi had taken him off to Wayland Junction while the fellows were still in class. It was known that he was not expected back before lights out that night. There was a whole day clear of Ratty and all his works: and it was now plain sailing for the St. Jim's junior footballers. And everybody rejoiced.

Mr. Ratcliff might, or might not, understand what a very important affair was the fixture with Greyfriars School. Its importance was clear enough to the football fraternity. Indeed, to Tom Merry and Co. it loomed larger than even First Eleven matches, in which mighty men of the Upper School, like Kildare, Darrell and Langton of the Sixth, upheld the colours of St. Jim's. It was a tremendous weight off Tom's mind to know that he was not, after all, to lose his best winger. It was a weight off everybody's mind. Mr. Ratcliff was a somewhat unpopular gentleman: but he had done an extremely popular thing for once, in taking himself off for the day on that particular Wednesday. As Monty Lowther remarked, he couldn't have timed it better.

All the footballers, and a good many fellows who were making the journey with them, were in the secret. But outside that select circle, nothing was to be said on the subject. A St. Jim's man, who was going out of gates for the whole of the afternoon, in disregard of his house-master's stern prohibition, had to be careful about it. Indeed, he could not be too careful.

Tom Merry and Co. and their accompanying enthusiasts were to roll off in the motor-coach for the station at the appointed time—leaving George Figgins conspicuously behind. Figgins was going to see them off—remaining in the public eye afterwards, lest any New House prefect might have been tipped by Ratcliff to keep an eye on him.

After which, nobody was likely to be interested in Figgy's movements. Within gates, he was free to do as he liked. He was not bound to keep in sight—even if anybody wanted to see him.

He could, if he liked, retire to the seclusion of his study, to get on with writing out the 'book' his housemaster had given him; or to dive deep into mathematics or deponent verbs, in the unlikely event of the spirit moving him so to do. He could sit in the school library if he chose, neck-deep in valuable literature. He could, if so disposed, explore the old ruined tower, as fellows sometimes did on a half-holiday. Or he could join the crowd watching the senior House-match on Big Side, an unnoticed unit among a hundred others. He could do a dozen things that would account for nobody seeing him about the school. So long as he was not seen to leave St. Jim's with the footballers, it was all right, and safe as houses.

But, as a precaution, as a fellow could not be too careful in the circumstances, he was going to keep in the general view for quite a little time after the footballers had departed. Then, by taking short cuts on a bike, it was as easy as pie to overtake them halfway to the station. The bike would be put up in Wayland, and Figgins would take the train with Tom Merry and Co. It was all cut and dried.

Who was likely to notice that Kerr, immediately

after third school, went out on a bike, and came in later at the gates on foot? Nobody—neither was anybody likely to get wise to the fact that the bicycle was parked in a thicket waiting for George Figgins. Even Ratty wouldn't have known anything about that, had he been at home. And Ratty wasn't at home.

It was all so easy, and all so safe, that Tom Merry dismissed his lingering doubt, and thought only of the game at Greyfriars, which was so much more important than a disgruntled house-master and his edicts.

'Wight as wain!' declared Arthur Augustus, and the other fellows agreed that it was right as rain.

'Okay, so long as Figgins is careful,' said Blake.

'Yaas, wathah! Figgy is wathah a weckless ass,' said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully. 'Pewwaps I had bettah speak to him and impwess upon him to be vewy careful.'

'Perhaps you'd better give your chin a rest!' suggested Blake. 'We don't want to shout this all over the school.'

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus, cheerfully, and he went to look for Figgins, whom he found in the quad with Kerr and Fatty Wynn.

Figgins was looking very merry and bright. Monteith of the Sixth, coming out of the New House, glanced at him rather curiously. Mr. Ratcliff had, as a matter of fact, spoken a word to his head-prefect on the subject, doubtless realising that while the cat was away the mice might play. It was Monteith's duty to see that Figgins did not join the footballers when they went. The Sixth-form man was sorry for the kid, but he had his duty as a prefect to do. The merry brightness in the junior's looks surprised him

—he would have expected to see him looking down in the mouth. Figgy was no actor—he felt merry and bright, and he looked merry and bright. He grinned cheerfully at Arthur Augustus as the swell of the School House came up.

'All wight now, Figgay,' said Arthur Augustus.

'Couldn't be righter!' agreed Figgins.

'But pway keep in mind, deah boy, that it is necessary to be vewy careful—vewy careful indeed, said Arthur Augustus, impressively. 'You don't want to wun into twouble at the last moment, you know. So I came acwoss to say—Yawooh! Oh, cwikey! Kerr, you mad ass, what are you stampin' on my foot for? Oh, cwumbs! You have cwushed my toe, you clumsy ass! Woooooh!'

Kerr did not explain why he was stamping on Gussy's noble foot. He only gave him a ferocious glare. The wary Scotsman had spotted Monteith, with the corner of his eye, and stopped Arthur Augustus just in time.

'What——?' began Figgins, in astonishment. Then he, too, saw the prefect, and jumped.

Monteith of the Sixth walked on, taking no heed of the juniors. But they knew that he must have heard.

'Kerr, you wuffian—!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'Hadn't you better cut after Monteith and tell him all about it?' hissed Kerr, 'or would you rather sing it out in the middle of the quad?'

'Bai Jove! I did not notice Monteith. But that is no weason for stampin' on a fellow's foot. You have cwushed my toe.'

'Good!' said Kerr.

'You have given me a feahful pain——!'

'Fine!'

'Bai Jove! I wegard you as a bwutal wuffian, Kerr!' gasped Arthur Augustus, and he limped away in a state of great indignation.

When the time came for Tom Merry and Co. to roll off to the station, a good many fellows saw them off. Among them was George Figgins—and quite near to Figgins was Monteith of the Sixth, with his eye on Figgy. That eye did not leave Figgins till the footballers were gone. There was no doubt that the prefect was suspicious. Figgins had no chance of insinuating himself into the departing crowd, if such had been his intention.

'Rough luck, kid,' said Monteith, kindly. 'But you've got to toe the line, you know.'

After which he dismissed Figgins from mind. He was playing in the Senior House match that afternoon and had more important matters than a gated junior to think of. But during the next quarter of an hour he might, if interested, have seen Figgins in the quadrangle, 'mooching' about with his hands in his pockets, a good many fellows coming up to tell him what rough luck it was to be left behind on that great occasion.

After which, Figgins faded out of the picture. And if the New House prefect gave him another thought, certainly he did not think that Figgins had dropped over a wall in a quiet corner, or that he was driving a bike at top speed by short cuts: or that he arrived at Wayland station with a crowd of jubilant footballers.

'Okay!' said Tom Merry, cheerfully, as the train rolled out of Wayland.

'What-ho!' said Figgins, with a chuckle.

But was it?

CHAPTER XV

MINUS BUNTER!

'I say, you fellows!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'When are you fellows going?'

'When we start.'

'I mean, when are you starting?'

'When we go!'

'You silly ass!' roared Billy Bunter.

The Famous Five, of the Greyfriars Remove, smiled. Billy Bunter did not smile. He frowned. Indeed he seemed to be trying to produce a good imitation of the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner.

It was a fine winter's day: could but clear, with a little nip in the air: ideal weather for football. Harry Wharton and Co. of the Greyfriars Remove were strolling in the quad after dinner, when Billy Bunter happened. Tom Merry's team from St. Jim's were on their way, but had not yet arrived. The Greyfriars fellows were looking forward keenly to the game that afternoon. And Billy Bunter, too, was interested.

In soccer, Bunter was not deeply interested. It was doubtful whether he would have accepted a place in the junior team, had it been offered to him. The fat Owl of the Remove was not keen to heave his extensive weight about a football field. He was not even likely to roll down to the field and watch Greyfriars beating St. Jim's—or being beaten by them, as the case might be. His interest was of a different sort.

'You fellows are going to the station to meet the

St. Jim's crowd,' he snapped. 'You needn't say you're not, Harry Wharton, because I jolly well know.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Is there anything you don't jolly well know?' he asked.

Bunter looked blank.

'You're going in a taxi,' he continued. 'I heard you ask Quelch to let you use his phone to ring one up, so I jolly well know that, see?'

'It's surprising how many things Bunter jolly well knows,' remarked Bob Cherry. 'Shall we jolly well kick him for jolly well knowing so many things that jolly well don't concern him?'

'Here, don't you fellows play the goat!' exclaimed Bunter. 'Look here, I'm coming, see? You can find room for one more in the taxi.'

'That wouldn't be much use to you,' said Bob, shaking his head. 'You want room for two—if not three.'

'Yah!' said Billy Bunter, elegantly. 'Now, look here, there's an old pal I particularly want to see in Tom Merry's crowd—chap named D'Arcy. I want to see him very specially.'

'Does he want to see you very specially?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Oh! Yes! Keen on it.'

'Is the keenfulness terrific?' asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

'You see, we're great pals,' explained Bunter. 'I went over to see him at St. Jim's last term, and we had tea in his study. I should have gone over again this term, if fellows weren't too jolly mean to lend a fellow a railway fare. You can bet that he will be pleased to see me again.'

'Must be jolly easy to please!' remarked Johnny Bull.

'I wouldn't be jealous, old chap, because I've got aristocratic friends and you haven't,' said Bunter. 'It's rather rotten, if you don't mind my mentioning it. I'm coming to the station with you, Wharton, specially to see Gussy. I call him Gussy, you know, because we're so pally. So I want to know when you're starting, see?'

'Can't wait till he blows in here?' asked Bob.

'Well, when they get here it will be all hustle and bustle, and every silly ass thinking of soccer and nothing else,' said Bunter. 'Not much chance for a quiet chat with an old pal. But in the bus coming from Courtfield—I say, you fellows, don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you!' bawled Bunter.

'That's why!' said Bob.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The famous five did walk away. But William George Bunter rolled in pursuit.

'Will you fellows tell a chap when you're starting?' he howled.

'I've told you,' answered Bob. 'We start when we go. Likewise, we go when we start. And we do both together when we get off. Is that clear enough for you, Bunty?'

'Beast!' yapped Bunter. 'I—I mean, do talk sense, old chap. When does the taxi pick you up here?'

'When it reaches the school.'

'You silly ass!' shrieked Bunter, 'when does it reach the school then?'

'When it arrives at Greyfriars.'

'You—you—you!' gasped Bunter. He gave the grinning five a glare that might almost have cracked his

spectacles. 'Look here, you beasts—I—I—mean, look here, old chaps, I really want to see old Gussy and have a bit of a chat with him. Now, I understand that you're bringing the St. Jim's crowd along in a bus from Courtfield——'

'You understand that!' exclaimed Bob.

'Isn't it so,' demanded Bunter.

'Yes, it's so,' admitted Bob. 'But fancy you understanding it—or anything else. Have you been oiling your understander?'

'Will you talk sense!' yelled Bunter. 'Now, in the bus I shall be able to have a quiet chat with my old pal. I'm not thinking of borrowing anything from him.'

'Not?' chuckled Bob.

'Certainly not. If you think I'd touch a chap for a loan because he's soft——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. Besides, why shouldn't a chap cash a postal-order for a chap if he jolly well likes?' demanded Bunter, warmly.

'If that's all, Smithy will cash it for you, old fat man. Smithy's stuffed with oof. Roll away and ask Smithy.'

'It hasn't come yet,' explained Bunter. 'I think I told you fellows that I was expecting a postal-order——'

'I think you did!' agreed Bob.

'It's bound to come today,' said Bunter, 'as it didn't come by the morning post, it will be here this afternoon. Smithy's a suspicious beast—he wouldn't cash a postal-order unless he saw it. D' Arcy ain't a suspicious beast like Smithy.'

'Just the man you want to meet, in fact,' grinned Bob.

'Well, I want to meet him because he's a dear old pal. I had a letter from him only yesterday saying how he was looking forward to seeing me. I've got it in my pocket now.'

'Good! let's see it.'

'I mean, I left it in my study. Never mind that,' said Bunter, hastily. 'Now I'm coming to the station. If you don't jolly well make room for me in the taxi, I'll jolly well hang on behind. There mayn't be a chance here of telling Gussy about my postal-order —I mean, of having a chat with my old pals from St. Jim's——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, cackle!' snorted Billy Bunter. 'I'm coming all the same. So I want to know when you're going, see? When are you going, Wharton?'

'When we start,' said the captain of the Remove, laughing.

'Beast!' roared Bunter.

Harry Wharton and Co. walked on. This time Billy Bunter did not pursue them. He realised that there was no information to be derived from the Famous Five.

But the fat Owl of the Remove was not to be beaten. He rolled down to the gates and there took up his stand, leaning fat shoulders against an ancient stone pillar.

How long it was going to be before the taxi arrived to pick up Harry Wharton and Co. Bunter did not know. But he knew that it could not roll in at the gates without being spotted by his little round eyes and his big round spectacles, so long as he remained on the watch.

So he waited and watched.

He did not expect to have to wait long. Certainly, he did not want to wait long. The fat Owl did not like standing about. Sitting about was more in his line. Still, it couldn't be long.

But the minutes passed. Leaning on the stone pillar, Billy Bunter shifted from one fat leg to the other.

It was a much longer wait than he had expected. Half-an-hour passed—and lengthened to an hour. By that time, Billy Bunter was in a state of considerable exasperation, and his little fat legs were weary of the weight they had to support. But Bunter was a sticker—and he stuck. He was going to squeeze himself into that taxi when it came. But really, Harry Wharton and Co. seemed to be leaving it very late.

Herbert Vernon-Smith came down to the gates, at length, and stood looking out into the road in the direction of Courtfield. Billy Bunter blinked at him through his big spectacles, and the Bounder gave him a glance.

'About time they blew in,' he remarked. 'Waiting to see the St. Jim's crowd roll in, Bunter?'

'Eh! They won't be in yet,' said Bunter. 'Their train can't be in yet at Courtfield. Wharton and his gang are going in a taxi to meet the train.'

Smithy stared at him.

'They went nearly an hour ago,' he said.

Billy Bunter jumped.

'What?' he stuttered. 'Wharrer you mean, you fathead? The taxi hasn't come yet—I've been waiting here for it all the time. I'm jolly well going in it, see—I've got a special pal in the St. Jim's crowd. I'm jolly well going——'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Smithy. 'Are you waiting here to go in the taxi?'

'Yes, I jolly well am. And—'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Vernon-Smith. 'Is that why they went out at the side-gate and walked up the road to meet the taxi—'

'Wha—a—a—t?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'They—they—went out at the side-gate, and—and—and walked up the road to meet the tut—tut—taxi!' stuttered Bunter. 'They jolly well knew that I was waiting here to go along—'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Smithy.

'Then—then—then they're gone—!' gasped Bunter.

'Nearly an hour ago,' chuckled Smithy. 'They'll be along any minute now with Tom Merry's crowd.'

'Beasts!' roared Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter rolled away. He had an ache in his little fat legs, and a pain in his temper. His feelings were too deep for words. Smithy chuckled as he went. Smithy seemed amused. Never had a fellow been less amused than William George Bunter at that moment.

CHAPTER XVI

UNEXPECTED

'Bai Jove!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

There was a cheery crowd in the changing-room. Brightest of all was the face of George Figgins.

Tom Merry and Co. had arrived at Greyfriars in great spirits. Tom was not thinking of the terrific row

that impended, at St. Jim's, if it came out that he had played a man at Greyfriars who was 'gated' by his house-master. It wasn't going to come out—how could it?

He had not, after all, lost his best winger, and his carefully-selected team was the best that St. Jim's could put into the field—that was enough for Tom to think of, for the time being, at least.

As for Figgins, he had almost forgotten Mr. Ratcliff's existence. St. Jim's was far away—and Mr. Ratcliff still further—at least, so Figgy supposed. It was time to think of goals against Greyfriars.

A fat face, adorned by a big pair of spectacles, looked in at the door of the crowded changing-room.

Whiz!

Splash!

'Oooooogh!' spluttered Billy Bunter.

Bob Cherry had spotted that fat face in the doorway. A wet sponge, with unerring aim, whizzed through the air. It splashed on the plump features of William George Bunter.

The footballers stared round. Arthur Augustus ejaculated 'Bai Jove!' Billy Bunter tottered in the doorway, spluttering.

'Goal!' chuckled Johnny Bull.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oooogh! I'm all wet!' gasped Bunter. 'What beast threw that sponge? I say, you fellows—'

'Stand steady, Bunter!' roared Bob Cherry. 'There's a boot coming next! Don't move!'

Billy Bunter gave him one alarmed blink. Bob was whirling a football boot round his head, ready to hurl.

One blink was enough for Bunter. Then he disap-

peared from the doorway. Billy Bunter wanted a word with his pal from St. Jim's: but he did not want the boot. He rolled away: and like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly.

'I believe I know that chap, Tom Mewwy,' remarked Arthur Augustus. 'His name's Puntah—or was it Gwuntah? —somethin' of the sort.'

'Bunter, I think,' said Tom, laughing.

'Yaas, wathah: that was it—Buntah. He came over to St. Jim's to see me last term—I didn't wemembah askin' him, but I suppose I must have, as he said so. I have wathah a good memowy as a wule: but it had slipped my memowy entiahly.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Is that Bunter again?' ejaculated Bob Cherry, as a shadow fell in the open doorway. He picked up the boot.

But he dropped it again—it was not Bunter this time. A lean figure appeared in the doorway: that of Mr. Hacker, the master of the Shell at Greyfriars.

Mr. Hacker glanced in, and then turned his head, to speak to someone who was with him, but as yet unseen from within.

'This is the changing-room,' he said.

Nobody specially heeded Mr. Hacker. Some of the Greyfriars fellows knew that he had a visitor that day, who had lunched with him in Common-Room, and whom, apparently, he was now showing round the school. They were not interested in Hacker or his visitor, and the St. Jim's fellows, naturally, knew nothing of either.

But Mr. Hacker's next words made every St. Jim's man sit up and take notice, as it were.

They all jumped, as if moved by the same spring. Figgins, sitting with one football boot on, and the

other in his hand, jumped more spasmodically than any other fellow and then remained as if paralysed, his jaw dropping and his eyes popping.

Mr. Hacker's words were quite casual. Certainly he had not the remotest idea of the electric effect they could produce in the changing-room. What he said was:

'A match is being played here today — boys from your school, I think, my dear Ratcliff.'

'Quite so,' came another voice—a familiar voice, a voice that sounded about as musical as the filing of a saw, to the startled ears of the horrified St. Jim's juniors.

They knew that voice. Only too well they knew it. They gazed at one another in horror.

'Oh!' breathed Tom Merry.

'Oh, scissors!' murmured Blake.

'Watty!' said Arthur Augustus, faintly. 'Oh, cwumbs! Is that weally Watty, or is this some dweadful dweam?'

It was dreadful, but it was no dream. Another lean figure appeared beside that of Mr. Hacker in the doorway. A well-known—only too well-known—face looked in.

Tom Merry and Co. gazed at it. Figgins's eyes popped at it. What, in the name of wonder, could have brought Mr. Ratcliff there, at Greyfriars, on that day of all days in the year? There he was!

He looked in—with quite a genial expression on his face.

Mr. Ratcliff had had a pleasant day, so far. He had lunched with the Greyfriars staff in Common-Room, quite a good lunch. He had had an agreeable chat afterwards, with his old friend, in Hacker's study.

Now they were taking a walk round the school, Mr. Hacker showing the sights.

As boys from Mr. Ratcliff's school were there to play soccer, Mr. Hacker perhaps supposed that Ratcliff would be interested. Mr. Ratcliff was not deeply interested, but he was in a genial mood and prepared to take more or less interest, for a few moments.

He glanced at the crowd within, with a crusty smile. He did not, for the moment, notice one paralysed junior who sat with one boot on, and the other in his hand.

Tom Merry and Co. gazed at him—rooted! Every man in the eleven, and six or seven who had come over with them to watch the game, gazed at Mr. Ratcliff, as if he had been a Gorgon and had turned them to stone.

Nobody had known, or cared, where Mr. Ratcliff was going that day. They knew that he was to be away from St. Jim's, and that was all they wanted to know.

Had they conjectured where he had gone, Greyfriars School was probably the last place they would have thought of. They did not even know that he was acquainted with a member of the Greyfriars staff—and if they had known, how could they have surmised that he was visiting that acquaintance on this particular day out of the three hundred and sixty five? Mr. Ratcliff came on them like a bolt from the blue.

'Ah! Um! Kerr—Wynn.' Mr. Ratcliff nodded graciously to those juniors of his House. 'You will have a good game, I hope! Um! A good game. I——'

Mr. Ratcliff broke off suddenly.

The genial expression faded from his face, as if

wiped away by a duster. His eyes had fallen on a paralysed figure with one boot on and one boot off. For a moment Mr. Ratcliff stared blankly at that unexpected figure. Then thunder gathered in his brow. His eyes almost flashed. He stepped in.

Mr. Hacker glanced at him in surprise. The Greyfriars fellows stared, realising that something was wrong, but not understanding. There was a moment of awful silence. Then—

'Figgins!' thundered Mr. Ratcliff. 'Figgins! What are you doing here?'

CHAPTER XVII

ORDERED OFF!

George Figgins tottered to his feet. Still with one boot on, and the other in his hand, he stood before his house-master, dumb. Tom Merry and Co. stood equally silent, with dismay in every face.

This was the limit!

They were only too conscious of the astonished looks of Harry Wharton and his men. Bob Cherry moved along to where the St. Jim's junior captain stood and nudged his elbow.

'Who's that bargee?' he whispered.

'Beak from our school,' muttered Tom.

'But what——?'

'Man here without leave.'

'Oh, scissors!'

'Bai Jove!' murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy,

'this teahs it! Watty is goin' to kick up a wow! Fancy even Watty kickin' up a wow heah! Fwightful bad form.'

'What rotten luck!' groaned Blake. 'How on earth did Ratty get here? Who'd have thought of seeing him here?'

'Poor old Figgy!' breathed Monty Lowther. 'Figgy's for it.'

'Yaas, wathah.'

Figgins realised only too clearly that he was 'for' it. He did not mind that prospect so much, unpleasant as it was, as he minded this unexpected and discomforting scene in the Greyfriars changing-room. His face was crimson as he felt all eyes upon him. His ears burned.

'Do you hear me, Figgins?' rumbled Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered Figgins.

'What are you doing here?'

'I—I—I—' Really, it was a superfluous question, as it was quite clear what Figgins was doing there. But the unfortunate New House junior had to answer his house-master. 'I—I—I—I'm changing for footer, sir.'

'You have come here to play football?' articulated Mr. Ratcliff. Obvious as it was, Mr. Ratcliff seemed hardly able to credit that his authority in his House at St. Jim's had been so recklessly and totally disregarded. 'You have come here to play football, Figgins, in spite of the fact that you have been ordered to keep within gates—in spite of my strict command that you should not leave the school on a half-holiday!'

Figgins made no reply.

'Answer me, Figgins!' rapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Yes, sir!' mumbled Figgins.

'Upon my word!' said Mr. Ratcliff.

Mr. Hacker gave a cough. He was looking, and no doubt feeling, very uncomfortable. But Mr. Ratcliff did not heed the Greyfriars master. He gave Figgins a devastating glare and turned to Tom Merry. Tom breathed hard.

'Merry!'

'Yes, sir!' said Tom, quietly.

'You are captain, I believe——'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you not know that Figgins was under strict orders to remain within gates at the school today?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Yet you have brought him here to play football, setting his house-master's authority at defiance?'

Tom Merry coloured. It was not pleasant to hear it put like that. Really, that was not exactly how the juniors had looked at it. Still, it could not be denied that that was how it was! He hardly knew how to reply, and as he hesitated, Mr. Ratcliff went on:

'You are responsible for this, Merry! As you are not in my House I cannot deal with you, but I shall report your disrespectful conduct to your own house-master, immediately I return to the school, and you will take the consequences.'

'Very well, sir!' said Tom.

His face was burning. He was feeling, like Figgins, that anything that might await him at St. Jim's was a mere nothing compared with this scene in the changing-room at another school.

'Figgins!'

'Yes, sir!' groaned Figgins.

'You will not, of course, be permitted to carry on

this defiance and disobedience. You will not be permitted to play in the football match here.'

'Oh!' gasped Figgins.

'Weally, Mr. Watcliff—!' began Arthur Augustus.

'Shurrup, ass!' whispered Blake.

'Weally, Blake—'

'Quiet, fathead!' breathed Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies—'

'You need not speak, D'Arcy!' rapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'I was about to wemark, sir—'

'That will do!'

'Yaas, sir, but pway allow me to finish my wemark,' said Arthur Augustus, calmly. 'Figgins is vewy badly needed to help us beat Gweyfwiahs, sir—'

'Be silent!'

'Yaas, sir, but pewwaps, as Figgins is heah, you will allow him to play in the match. We should wegard that as sportin' of you, sir,' said Arthur Augustus.

The fabled basilisk had nothing on the glare that Mr. Ratcliff bestowed upon the swell of St. Jim's.

'If you say another word, D'Arcy, I shall box your ears!' he snapped.

'Bai Jove!'

'Figgins! You will leave here immediately and return to the school. Lose no time—I shall wait here for you.'

Mr. Hacker coughed again. Again he coughed unheeded. Ratcliff seemed to have forgotten his existence. All his attention was concentrated upon that junior of his House who had disregarded his authority.

'You hear me, Figgins?'

Figgins did not answer. He looked at his housemaster, convulsively grasping the football boot in his

hand. For a wild moment Figgins had an almost irresistible temptation to hurl that boot at the angry, frowning face that was glaring at him. Luckily, he resisted that temptation. The boot dropped from his hand.

He was more than half changed for football. Now he had to change back. He proceeded to do so, with a set face and glinting eyes, in silence, and with feelings that were only too visibly expressed in his face.

'Rough luck, old man!' muttered Kerr.

'Rotten sell!' mumbled Fatty Wynn.

Figgins nodded without speaking. He was soon changed, losing no time. The game was up, and he was anxious to end that discomforting scene. Mr. Ratcliff did not seem to realise that he was setting nerves on edge all round. Or perhaps he did not care.

Frowning, he waited for Figgins. Another cough in the doorway reminded him, at last, of the existence of Mr. Hacker. He turned to that gentleman.

'You will excuse me, Hacker. A case of deliberate disobedience, and absence without leave. I was astounded to see the boy here.'

'Oh, quite!' said Mr. Hacker, drily.

'I must see that this boy, Figgins, returns to his school, without delay.'

'No doubt!' said Mr. Hacker, in the same tone.

Perhaps Mr. Ratcliff did not notice the dry manner of the Greyfriars master. He turned back to Figgins.

'I am waiting, Figgins,' he said, ominously.

'I'm ready, sir!' muttered Figgins. Kerr helped him on with his coat—Fatty Wynn gave him a sympathetic dig in the ribs. Figgins gave the St. Jim's junior captain a glum look.

'Sorry, Tom Merry,' he muttered. 'Lucky that Levison came over with us—you can play him. Sorry to let you down like this.'

'Can't be helped!' said Tom.

'No!' muttered Figgins. His eyes glinted. 'Perhaps Ratty will be sorry, too, later on! I've got to cut now, anyway.'

'I cannot wait here while you talk to Merry, Figgins. Follow me at once,' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'You have wasted enough of my time already.'

Figgins followed Mr. Ratcliff from the changing-room. There was a moment's silence, while the St. Jim's footballers looked at one another very expressively. Then Tom called to Levison of the Fourth. Ernest Levison had come along as a reserve, not expecting to be wanted. He was wanted now but did not look very happy about it. His face was as glum as the rest.

'You'll be wanted, Levison! Get changed.'

'Right-ho!' answered Levison.

When the St. Jim's footballers went into the field, Figgins was already on his way back to St. Jim's on his own. He went in the lowest of spirits.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GREYFRIARS MATCH

'Goal!'

'Good man, Smithy!'

'Well kicked!'

Herbert Vernon-Smith smiled cheerily. He had put

in the ball for Greyfriars, in the first ten minutes of the match. Fatty Wynn, generally all eyes, hands and feet, in goal, had failed to save—rather clumsily, some of the fellows thought. Fatty, relied upon as a tower of strength between the sticks, did not seem in his usual form. There was a cloud upon his usually sunny, plump face, and he did not seem able to concentrate on the duties of custodian. Perhaps his thoughts were following his chum Figgins on his solitary journey back to St. Jim's with trouble awaiting him there.

But the St. Jim's goalkeeper was not the only fellow who was not quite able to concentrate. The whole team had been 'rattled' by that scene in the changing-room. They felt that they had been made to look fools before the Greyfriars men—they hardly dared to think what Harry Wharton and Co. might be thinking of it. Arthur Augustus had remarked dismally to Blake that a 'wow' at another school was the very worst of bad form, and though the other fellows were not perhaps quite so sensitive as Gussy in such matters, they all felt the same. Gussy, indeed, declared that it had made his flesh 'cweep'. It was not quite so bad as that with the rest, but it was bad enough.

Tom Merry had a worry on his mind. It was not only the loss of his best winger. Levison filled Figgy's place manfully, though admittedly not in the same street with Figgy. But Tom could not help realising that he ought not to have played Figgins at all, and that as football captain he had erred. He had taken a chance which it had been very unwise to take—that was what it boiled down to. And the result had been that scene, which had upset everybody.

Kerr, like Fatty Wynn, could not help thinking of poor old Figgins, trailing dismally home to St. Jim's

on his lonely own. And he blamed himself. The canny Scottish junior was accustomed to giving his more unthinking chum good advice, to which Figgy always listened. On this occasion he had to realise that his advice had not been good—his keenness to see Figgy in the game at Greyfriars had rather clouded his usual judgment. He had a miserable feeling of having let poor old Figgy down.

All the team were feeling more or less disgruntled, upset, and out of sorts. That was not the mood in which to go into the field against Harry Wharton and Co., keen and determined players from start to finish.

The Greyfriars crowd cheered, and the Bounder smiled, when the leather went into the net, Fatty Wynn's grab missing it by inches. But Blake growled to Herries that it was Ratty's goal, and Herries nodded assent.

'Pull up your socks, men,' said Tom Merry, as they went back to the middle of the field. 'We haven't come here to be walked over.'

'Wathah not,' said Arthur Augustus. 'But to tell you the twuth, deah boy, that howwid smeah Watty has thwown me into quite a fluttah.'

'Never mind Ratty now,' said Tom. 'He's done damage enough, without losing the match for us.'

'Yaas, wathah.'

The teams lined up again, and there was a general effort on the part of the St. Jim's men to pull themselves together. And it was a successful effort, for though they did not score, Greyfriars did not get through again to the same extent. Twice, thrice, and a fourth time, Harry Wharton and Co. came down on the visitors' goal like wolves on the fold, but Fatty Wynn was as watchful as a cat, and was once more

all eyes, hands and feet, and he cleared every time. Twice Tom Merry and Co. forced the home team to pack their goal, but they did not land the leather—Johnny Bull, between the posts, seemed impregnable. The game wore on, ding-dong, to half time, and when the whistle went Greyfriars were still one to nil.

'Not too bad, Tom,' remarked Monty Lowther, as he rubbed a knee that had come into accidental contact with Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's foot.

'No!' said Tom. 'But not good enough, Monty.'

'All Ratty's fault!' growled Lowther.

'All mine, I think,' said Tom, with a wry face. 'I was a fool to play Figgins, as he was gated, and he was a fool to ask me. Of course, we couldn't dream that Ratty was here, but that makes no difference. Old Manners knew I was playing the goat, if I'd listened to him. I could kick myself—if that would do any good. Or Figgins—if that would do any good either.'

'Ratty ought not to have gated Figgins——'

'Oh, I know all that,' grunted Tom. 'But a fellow has to toe the line at school and take the rough with the smooth. Masters make mistakes like everybody else—but fellows can't take matters into their own hands because of that. Ratty is rather a smudge, but he's a beak.'

Lowther nodded without speaking. Tom was right—though he was right a little too late for it to be of any use.

'Anyhow, we're going to beat them,' said Tom, more cheerfully. 'We're a bit weak on the right wing, with Figgy gone, and Gussy looking like a moulting fowl, but we've got to pull up our socks and beat them.'

'Yes, rather,' agreed Lowther, more hopefully than he felt.

'Weally, Tom Mewwy——!'

Tom looked round. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave him a very severe look.

'What's biting you, Gussy?' asked Tom.

'Nothin' is bitin' me, Tom Mewwy, but I object vewy stwongly to bein' compared to a moultin' fowl!' said Arthur Augustus, warmly. 'I was not awah of bearin' the wemotest wesemblance to a moultin' fowl.'

Tom Merry laughed.

'You're aware now,' he said. 'So pull up your beautiful socks and remember you're playing soccer.'

'That howwid Watty has upset me feahfully, Tom Mewwy. It was such a howwid and nerve-wackin' scene—Watty seems to be absolutely ignorant of the wequirements of good form. Fancy tellin' a fellow that he would box a fellow's yahs—with a lot of Gweyfwiahs fellows lookin' on! I wegard that as the uttah limit—the vewy outside edge.'

Arthur Augustus shook his noble head sadly.

'Howevah, wely on me, Tom Mewwy,' he added, 'we're goin' to beat them all wight.'

'That's the stuff to give 'em!' agreed Tom.

The sides lined up again, and the ball rolled. From the whistle the game was hard and fast. A long struggle, mainly in the. St. Jim's half, was followed by a hot attack on goal, and Fatty Wynn jumped to it with the activity of a kangaroo. Twice and thrice he saved, but the attack was pressed, and the ball came in from Harry Wharton's foot, just missing David Llewellyn Wynn's finger-tips.

Goal!

The Greyfriars crowd shouted. Manners, and the other St. Jim's fellows who had come over with the team, looked rather grim. The home team were two up, and though there remained half an hour to go, it was only too obvious that the St. Jim's men did not look like making up their lee-way.

They looked still less like it, ten minutes later, when the ball went in from the foot of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, beating Fatty all along the line.

'Goal!' came a Greyfriars roar.

'Three up!' muttered Manners. 'Fat lot of good that New House man is in goal!'

'Best man we've got,' said Redfern of the New House, at his elbow.

'He's let three through!' grunted Manners.

'A School-House man would have let six through by this time.'

'Ass!' said Manners, politely.

'Fathead!' retorted Redfern, with equal politeness.

And they watched the game again, not very hopefully. A rot seemed to have set in, in the St. Jim's team. Not a man seemed to be up to his usual form. For the next ten minutes the tussle was all in the St. Jim's half. Then came a sudden change, as Talbot of the Shell, on the left wing, got away with the ball. He passed to Blake as he was tackled, who centred to Tom Merry. Tom kicked just a second before he spun from Bob Cherry's shoulder, and Johnny Bull leaped at the ball a second too late.

'Goal!' yelled Manners.

'Wippin', deah boy!' gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

That goal seemed to give new life to the team. It seemed to have stopped the rot, and from that mo-

ment, the St. Jim's men played up in something like their old style. Fatty Wynn had nothing to do—it was hot attack all the time in the Greyfriars half. Given time, Tom Merry and Co. might yet have made up their lee-way. But there were ten minutes to go; and though the attack was determined and pressed with vigour, the defence was good and sound. Nine of the remaining minutes had elapsed when the ball shot in from the noble foot of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

'Goal!'

'Good old Gussy!'

But it was the finish, and the footballers came off with Greyfriars winners by three goals to two.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHOPPER COMES DOWN!

'Merry!'

'Here, Darrell.'

'Railton's study at once.'

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

There was a crowd of fellows in the junior day-room, when Darrell of the Sixth, a School-House prefect, looked in and called to Tom Merry.

It did not seem a very happy crowd. The topic under discussion, naturally, was the football match at Greyfriars School that afternoon, from which Tom Merry and Co. had returned much less cheerfully than usual. Most of the fellows were telling one another what they thought of Horace Ratcliff.

Tom Merry and Co. were sportsmen to the finger-

tips and good losers, but as Blake emphatically pointed out, they hadn't lost that match—Ratty had lost it for them. They had, after all, scored twice—Harry Wharton and Co. had beaten them only by the odd goal. Every man in the eleven agreed that, but for Ratty and the 'row' he had kicked up in the changing-room, added to the loss of their best winger, that odd goal would have been on the St. Jim's score, and perhaps another goal or two along with it. It was one thing to lose to good play—but quite another to lose a football match because a disgruntled beak did not know, understand or care a boiled bean about games.

'Watty is no sportsman,' said Arthur Augustus, sadly, 'I pointed out to him that it would be sportin' to let Figgy cawwy on, as he was there—but it only seemed to make him wattiah. And what a scene, deah boys!'

'I wonder what the Greyfriars men thought of it—and him—and us!' growled Jack Blake.

'Bai Jove! It weally does not beah thinkin' of,' said Arthur Augustus. 'For goodness sake, Tom Mewwy, do not wisk it again when we go ovah to Wookwood.'

Tom gave a curt laugh.

'Am I likely to?' he said.

'Well you are wathah a thoughtless ass, deah boy, if you don't mind my mentionin' it,' said Arthur Augustus, 'and pewwaps——'

'Fathead!'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy——'

It was then that Darrell of the Sixth called in at the door of the day-room, and Tom Merry left the crowd of juniors, with a dark shade on his brow. The other fellows exchanged glances. Tom was up for a row with his house-master—evidently Ratcliff had

reported to Railton. It was only to be expected, in the circumstances, but that did not make it any the more pleasant. Arthur Augustus shook his noble head.

'Tom Mewwy is for it,' he said, dismally. 'Wailton is bound to wag him for takin' Figgy ovah to Gweyfwiahs, as Watty has complained. Weally, Watty is the limit.'

'Blow Ratty!' growled Monty Lowther.

'Bother him!' grunted Manners.

'Figgins will be going through it, in the New House,' said Blake.

'Poor old Figgy!'

'It's rotten all round,' said Talbot.

'Might have been worth a spot of trouble, if we'd pulled off the match,' said Herries. 'But——'

'Ratty lost it for us!' growled Blake.

'Yaas, wathah!'

'Ratty's a tick——!' said Digby.

'And a smudge,' said Levison.

'And a smear,' said Kangaroo.

And the chorus recommenced. Really, Mr. Ratcliff's ears ought to have been burning, over in the New House. Every fellow in the day-room had something to say about Ratty, and everything they said was frightfully uncomplimentary.

Meanwhile, Tom Merry arrived in his housemaster's study. He found Mr. Railton looking very grave. Victor Railton was generally kind and genial and much liked in his House. But he looked severe enough now.

Tom Merry coloured as he met his glance. It was not often that Tom was called on the carpet in that study; and this time he had little or nothing to say in his defence.

'You know why I have sent for you, Merry,' said Mr. Railton.

'I—I suppose so, sir. If it's about Figgins——'

'It is about Figgins. Mr. Ratcliff has made a very serious complaint. It appears that this New House boy, while under strict orders from his house-master to remain within gates, accompanied your team to Greyfriars today.'

'Yes, sir.'

'So far as Figgins is concerned, that is a matter for Mr. Ratcliff to deal with,' said the School-House master. 'Figgins is to go to Dr. Holmes in the morning. That is Mr. Ratcliff's decision with regard to Figgins.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Tom, in dismay.

He set his lips. He knew now what was coming to him. There could not be two weights and two measures. If Figgins was 'sent up' to his head-master, Tom Merry had the same to expect. Apparently Mr. Ratcliff regarded the matter as so extremely serious that it was necessary for the Head to deal with it. It was, Tom bitterly reflected, just like Ratty to make a mountain out of a molehill.

'You were aware, Merry, that Figgins was "gated" by his house-master?' went on Mr. Railton.

'Yes, sir,' said Tom in a low voice.

'Yet you included him in your team to play football at Greyfriars, totally disregarding Mr. Ratcliff's authority over boys of this House!'

Tom was silent.

'You have nothing to say, Merry?'

'No, sir.'

'Very well! Mr. Ratcliff takes a very serious view of this matter. He demands that you, like Figgins,

shall be sent up to the Head. In the circumstances I cannot refuse.'

Tom remained silent. He knew, just as well as if Railton had told him, that his house-master would have preferred to deal with the matter himself, without dragging the Head into it. But he was not in a position to refuse Ratcliff's demand. If there was blame in the matter, the junior captain was at least as much to blame as Figgins, and had to face the same consequences.

'That is all, Merry,' said Mr. Railton, curtly. 'I shall report the matter to Dr. Holmes, and you will go to his study after third school tomorrow morning.'

'Very well, sir.'

'You may go, Merry,' said Mr. Railton, and Tom left the study, leaving his house-master frowning. Mr. Railton was angry; quite possibly as much with Ratcliff as with Tom Merry.

Tom did not return to the crowded day-room. He went up to his study in the Shell, with a dark set face. It was very unusual for Tom to look either glum or resentful, but he looked both now, as he was feeling.

It was not a light matter to be sent up to the headmaster. It was a black mark against any fellow. Cardew of the Fourth had been sent up more than once, but the scapegrace of the Fourth did not mind—he rather boasted of it in the day-room, as if it were some sort of distinction. Racke of the Shell had had the same experience—a dingy black sheep who had been caught out of bounds in unsalubrious quarters. Tom had nothing in common with either Cardew or Racke, and it was a blow to him.

He had expected the 'chopper' to come down, but

not to this extent. His feelings towards Mr. Ratcliff were deep.

Manners and Lowther came into the study after a time and found their chum with a dark and moody brow.

'Oh, here you are,' said Monty. 'Licked?'

'No,' said Tom.

'Detention?' asked Manners.

'No.'

'Then what——?' asked both together.

'Sent up to the Head,' said Tom between his teeth. 'I'm going up with Figgy in the morning. Nothing less would satisfy Ratty.'

Monty Lowther whistled, and Manners looked very grave.

'Railton might have stood by you,' said Monty.

'How could he? I'm as deep in the mud as Figgy in the mire, and he can't seem to favour a man of his own House. But—' Tom Merry breathed hard, 'sent up to the Head, as if I were a cheeky tick like Cardew, or a dingy bad hat like Racke! After all, soccer's soccer, and Ratty was in the wrong——'

'It's tough,' said Manners. 'If you'd taken my advice, old chap——'

'Well, I didn't,' said Tom, tartly.

'I know you didn't—but if you had—'

'Shut up, old bean,' said Monty Lowther. 'Look here, Tom, it's tough, and it can't be helped, but we'll jolly well make Ratty sit up for it. There's lots of way and means——'

'Oh, rot,' said Tom gruffly.

'Hem!' murmured Monty.

Evidently Tom Merry did not derive much comfort, either from Harry Manners' reminder of his good

advice, or Monty Lowther's proposition to make the obnoxious Ratty 'sit up.'

Neither, in fact, was a present help, and Tom's usually sunny face was still clouded when the Shell went up to their dormitory.

CHAPTER XX

TAKING CARE OF GUSSY

'Watty is a wat!'

'Tell us something we don't know!'

'I am goin' to tell Watty so, Blake.'

'What?'

Jack Blake, George Herries, and Arthur Digby all uttered that startled exclamation together. They stared at their noble chum blankly.

Plenty of fellows, in both Houses at St. Jim's, would have been glad to tell Mr. Ratcliff what they thought of him. But no fellow in either House had any idea of doing so—with the exception, it seemed, of the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Ratty might be a rat, a tick, a smudge, a smear, a blot, the limit, the outside edge, and many other things. In the day-room or the studies, fellows could tell one another so, at their ease. But telling Horace Ratcliff so was quite a different matter. You really couldn't talk to a house-master in that manner. Apparently Arthur Augustus fancied that he could.

'You're going to tell Ratty——!' gasped Blake.

Study No. 6 were not looking merry or bright after

third school that morning. They were concerned about Tom Merry, not to mention Figgins. Both those luckless youths were booked to go up to the Head. Lowther and Manners were glum—Kerr and Wynn equally so. Study No. 6 were sympathetically concerned. So were many other fellows. But only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's mighty brain had evolved the idea of telling Mr. Ratcliff what they were all thinking.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Glad you've told us first, then,' said Blake. 'We'll take jolly good care you don't, you frabjous, foozling, footling fathead! Do you want to go up to the Head after he's through with Tom and Figgy?'

'Weally, Blake—'

'Keep an eye on him,' said Blake. 'Grab hold of his ears if he tries to go anywhere near the New House.'

'You bet!' said Herries.

'What-ho!' agreed Dig.

'You misappwehend me, deah boys,' said Arthur Augustus, calmly. 'I am not goin' to march into the New House and say to Watty "You are a wat!" That would be altogethah too wisky. I am goin' to keep a safe distance when I call him a wat.'

'Shout it across the quad?' asked Blake, sarcastically.

'Nothin' of the sort, Blake. It is vewy bad form to shout in the quad. I have often spoken vewy severely to my young bwothah Wally about shoutin' in the quad. Besides, if I shouted it in the quad, Watty would know. I don't want Watty to know who is callin' him a wat! I am goin' to keep that feahfully dark.'

Blake and Herries and Dig gazed at him.

'You're going to cheek Ratty and keep it dark?' asked Blake.

'I do not wegard it as cheekin' Watty, Blake. I wegard cheek as bad form, as you know vewy well. Watty has mucked up a football match and sent poor old Tom Mewwy up to the Head—and I am goin' to tell him what the fellows think of him. I shall keep it dark because it would mean an awful wow if Watty knew who had called him a wat. It is bound to make him feahfully shirty.'

'Bank on that,' agreed Blake. 'Home-truths seldom make people happy. Ratty will go right off at the deep end if anybody calls him a rat. Do you know it might mean a Head's flogging, you image?'

'Yaas, if Watty knew!' chuckled Arthur Augustus. 'But Watty can't weport a fellow when he doesn't know who a fellow is.'

'And how——?' yelled Blake.

'Easy as fallin' off a form, deah boy, though of course it wequiahs bwains to think it out. That is where I come out wathah stwong.'

'Help!' gasped Blake.

'Have you nevah heard of the telephone?' asked Arthur Augustus. 'Can't you say anythin' you like on the phone without bein' spotted? Get the ideah, deah boy? There's a phone in Wailton's study. See?'

'Oh, my winter bonnet!' gurgled Blake. 'Is that the big idea?'

'That's it, deah boy. I shall bowwow the telephone for a couple of minutes. I wing up Watty at the New House, and of course he will answah the phone in his study. He will say "Hallo"—and I shall weply "Watty, you are a wat!" Then I shall wing off—and scud. I have it all cut and dwied.'

'Fan me!' murmured Blake.

'There's a phone in Wailton's study,' went on Arthur Augustus. 'Wailton doesn't stick in his study like Watty, who is always fwowstin'. I shall dodge into Wailton's study when Wailton isn't there, bow-wow his phone, and there you are! Wight as wain, what?'

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye and surveyed his three staring chums, apparently expecting a burst of enthusiasm, which that masterly scheme obviously merited.

But Blake and Co. did not 'enthuse'.

'You unutterable ass!' began Blake in measured tones.

'I wefuse to be called an unuttewable ass, Blake,' said Arthur Augustus, indignantly. 'I wegard this as a wippin' ideah for lettin' Watty know where he gets off.'

'You don't think he'll know your voice?' shrieked Blake. 'You don't think he'll tumble to it at once which particular idiot is asking for a Head's flogging?'

'Wubbish! Lowthah played a twick on him, on the telephone, once, and he nevah knew Lowthah's voice.'

'Oh, help!' moaned Blake. 'You howling ass——'

'It will be all wight,' said Arthur Augustus, reassuringly. 'I shall say "Watty, you are a wat!" I shall go on to say "We all wegard you as a weally wevoltin' wat!" Then I shall wing off, leavin' Watty to twy to guess who it was! See?'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Digby.

'Oh, scissors!' stuttered Herries.

'Oh, holy smoke!' said Blake.

Evidently it had not occurred to Arthur Augustus

that his somewhat distinctive accent might give him away. It occurred to his chums!

'Wailton may go out any minute now,' said D'Arcy. 'As soon as he is out of the House I shall nip into his study——'

'Not while I can hang on to your ears!' gasped Blake. 'You're not going to be flogged or bunked, Gussy—we should miss you in the study.'

'Weally, Blake——'

'Now, look here, you image——'

'Wubbish! As soon as Wailton is gone out, I shall——'

'Cave!' breathed Herries.

The athletic figure of Victor Railton appeared in the offing. Mr. Railton glanced at the group of Fourth-formers, as he passed them and went out of the House.

'All sewene now,' said Arthur Augustus. And he turned and walked away quickly in the direction of Masters' Studies.

'Stop!' howled Blake.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus, over his shoulder. And he walked on.

Blake and Herries and Dig looked at one another. They had no objection, in principle, to any fellows telling Ratty what was thought of him in the School House. But they had a very strong objection to Gussy rushing into trouble. No doubt it was true that Monty Lowther had once pulled Ratty's leg, over the telephone, undetected. But they had no faith in Arthur Augustus getting by as luckily—no faith whatever.

'After him!' breathed Blake.

'What-ho! Come on, quick,' said Dig.

And Gussy's devoted chums cut in pursuit, to grab

Arthur Augustus while there was yet time, and walk him off to safer quarters.

Arthur Augustus glanced round at the patter of feet. He did not need telling what his chums intended. Promptly, he broke into a run and disappeared round the corner of Masters' Studies.

'Quick!' breathed Herries.

They tore round corner. Arthur Augustus, putting on speed, had almost reached the door of Railton's study. In such quarters it was not judicious for juniors to race as if they were on the cinder-path. Lower boys, when they went to Masters' Studies, had to be circumspect. They had to understudy Agag of old, and walk delicately! But Arthur Augustus had no time to think of that, with his pursuing pals at his heels. Neither had Blake and Co. if they were to save Gussy from going up to the Head for cheeking a housemaster. Gussy ran— and Blake and Co. ran—and an outstretched hand reached Arthur Augustus just as he grasped at the study door-handle.

'Now——!' panted Blake.

'Welease me, Blake,' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'You uttah ass, do you fancy for a moment that you are goin' to stop me waggin' Watty?'

'Sort of! Get his other arm, Dig.'

'I wepeat——'

'Take hold of his ears, Herries.'

'Yawoooh!'

'Now come on, you footling image——'

'I wefuse to come on,' roared Arthur Augustus. 'I uttahly wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I ordah you to welease me at once, or I shall give you a feahful thwashin' all wound. Hands off, you cheekay duffahs.'

But it was a case of 'hands on', not off. Blake and

Blake and Herries and Digby all had a grip on their noble chum

Herries and Digby all had a grip on their noble chum. Arthur Augustus had a grip on the door-handle, and he clung to it as his only visible means of support. It was quite a tug-of-war, as three fellows dragged at Gussy, and Gussy clung desperately to his hold on Mr. Railton's door-handle.

But three were thrice as strong as one. Gussy's grip had to go—and it went. He came away from the door-handle suddenly—so suddenly that Blake and Co., all tugging at him together, went staggering over as resistance suddenly ceased. They crashed—and Arthur Augustus, in their grip, crashed over them. Never, probably, had such a crash been heard before in the masters' quarters at the School-House.

Crash! Bump! Bump! Yell!

'Oh, cwikey!'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Oh, you fathead!'

'Oooooooh!'

Two study doors up the corridor opened. From one looked the severe face of Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell—from the other, Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, blinked through his spectacles in astonishment at those four boys of his form. Mr. Linton gave an angry sniff.

'Your boys, Lathom!' he snapped. And he went back into his study and closed the door with unnecessary vigour.

'Boys!' gasped Mr. Lathom. 'Blake! Herries! Digby! D'Arcy! How dare you make this disturbance here? Upon my word Such horse-play—such unrestrained horse-play—almost at your form-master's study door! What do you mean by it?'

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Blake.

The four juniors disentangled themselves and picked themselves up, panting. Mr. Lathom gave them a glare. Generally he was a good-tempered little man, kind and benevolent. But wild and noisy horse-play outside the doors of masters' studies was altogether intolerable. He glared at four crimson and breathless members of his form.

'Take a hundred lines each!' he rapped. 'And go! Go immediately. If you enter this corridor again without being sent for, I shall cane you. I shall cane you most severely! Go!'

Blake and Co. went. Even Arthur Augustus did not think of carrying on with the big idea after that. Study No. 6 departed—in haste. Over in the New House, Mr. Ratcliff was left in happy ignorance of the fact that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy regarded him as a 'wat'.

CHAPTER XXI

FIGGINS ON THE WAR-PATH!

'Figgy, old man—' murmured Kerr.

No reply.

'The sosses are done, Figgy,' ventured Fatty Wynn.

Still no reply.

George Figgins was standing at his study window in the New House. He was staring from that window, apparently at the rain—it was a rainy afternoon. But probably Figgy did not even see the rain, or hear the drops that pelted on the study window. Figgins's face was dark and gloomy, and there was a glint in his

eyes—a very unusual glint, which neither of his chums quite liked. Figgins, it was clear, was not in his usual mood. He had not been in his usual mood since his visit to the headmaster that morning—and his comrades were feeling a little uneasy. It was so unlike rugged old Figgins to nurse resentment or grievance, that it worried them.

Kerr, canny as he was, was rather at a loss how to deal with Figgy in this new mood. Fatty Wynn, whose conviction it was that there were few troubles that a really good feed could not alleviate, had prepared an unusually handsome tea. Fatty was a past-master in the cooking line—and the dish of sausages really did look tempting. But Figgins, though he had come up to the study to tea as usual, did not give the table a glance. He stood staring moodily from the window, lost in dark and resentful thoughts.

'Tea's ready, old chap,' said Kerr.

Grunt!

'I say, Figgy, the sosses are done to a turn,' said Fatty.

Grunt!

'We've got a cake to follow—'

'Blow the cake!' Figgins found his voice at last, but it was not to express appreciation of his plump chum's efforts. 'And some jolly good bikkers, Figgy—'

'Bother the bikkers.'

Fatty Wynn gave Kerr a hopeless look. If a fellow was so far gone as to care nothing for sausages, done to a turn, and cake and biscuits, Fatty was at the end of his resources. He wished that the study funds had run to a pineapple. Still, he doubted whether even a pineapple would have tempted Figgy out of his mood.

Figgy did not seem quite himself. He had said hardly a word when he came away from the Head's study that morning. But it was clear that his feelings had been deep. In the afternoon, he had paid no attention whatever to Mr. Lathom in the form-room. He made random answers, and obviously did not care a bean how random they were. It was rather lucky for Figgins that Mr. Lathom was a kind little gentleman who could make allowance for a member of his form who had been up before the headmaster. Figgy's chums hoped that he would pull round and that they would see the cheery old grin on his rugged, honest old face. But so far there was no sign of a grin—not the ghost of one.

'May as well have tea, old fellow,' said Kerr.

Grunt again from Figgins. However, he turned from the rainy window at last and dropped into his chair at the study table. Fatty Wynn helped him generously to sausages, in which he still hoped that his afflicted chum might find comfort. Figgy hardly looked at them.

'The smudge!' he said, at last.

Kerr nodded. He did not need to inquire to whom Figgy was alluding.

'The rat!' said Figgins.

'Don't let those sosses get cold, old chap,' said Fatty. Fatty Wynn sympathised and agreed with all Figgy's remarks about Ratty: but sosses, after all, were sosses.

Figgins grunted. However he proceeded to handle a fork, to Fatty's relief and satisfaction. His next remark came through a mouthful of sausage: 'The hunks!'

'Was it very tough with the Head?' asked Kerr.

So far, Figgins had said nothing about it—but he seemed to be getting more communicative now.

'Did he lay it on hard?' asked Fatty Wynn.

Snort from Figgins.

'What do I care whether he laid it on hard or not, you ass? Think I can't take a whopping? It's not that. The Head can whop—but he doesn't whop like Ratty. I'd rather have had that six from the Head than a couple from Ratty. But it's not that!' Figgins banged his fork on the table. 'It's being sent up to the Head to be whopped. As if a fellow had done something really rotten. Is there anything rotten about playing soccer?'

Figgins jammed his fork into another sausage.

'I cut gates,' he said. 'I ought never to have been gated—you fellows know that. Well, I cut gates. Fellows have cut gates before, without a beak putting up song and dance. But Ratty had to send me up to the Head—as if I'd been caught coming out of the back door of the Green Man, like that mouldy tick, Racke of the Shell. Ratty all over! The Head was pretty decent. Of course he had to jaw me, and give me six. That's nothing. But——'

Figgins seemed to choke over his sausage.

'I know, old chap,' said Kerr, softly.

'Well,' said Figgins, the glint in his eyes more pronounced. 'If I'm a bad hat that has to be sent up to the Head, I'll jolly well have the game as well as the name. See? Ratty can't have it both ways. If I'm a fellow that has to be sent up to his headmaster, I'm the fellow to rag Ratty for sending me there. And I've thought out how I'm going to do it, too.'

'Good egg,' said Fatty. 'We'll jolly well help. I say, you've only eaten one soss, Figgy. Ain't they good?'

'Oh, rot! I—I mean fine, old chap,' said Figgins jabbing another sausage. 'I shall want you fellows to help—if you don't funk it.'

'We don't funk in this study,' said Fatty. 'Don't be a goat, Figgy. We'll back you up all along the line.'

Kerr did not speak. He looked, as he felt, worried. A 'rag' on a house-master was not unheard-of, but it was a dangerous game. And in Figgy's present mood Kerr could see that it was not likely to be a mild rag, like Pratt's game of gumming Ratty's arm-chair. He was a little alarmed. Fatty Wynn, a fiery Welshman, indignant on his chum's account, was ready for anything, recklessly regardless of consequences. Kerr, a canny Scotsman, looked rather further than either of his chums. Figgins was in a mood to get himself 'sacked' and he had never needed Kerr's sagacious counsel so much as he needed it now.

'I've thought it out,' repeated Figgins, grimly. 'Ratty's going to get it where the chicken got the chopper—and that's in the neck. He can't expect a young rascal who has to be sent up to his headmaster to be very particular how he handles a beak.'

'Handles him!' repeated Kerr, aghast.

'Why not?' said Figgins, recklessly. 'I must be a pretty bad character if I have to be sent up to the Head. Bad characters ain't particular what they do.'

'Figgy, old man——'

'You needn't "Figgy old man" me, Kerr. I've got it all cut and dried. But you can stand out if you like. I'm not asking any fellow to take the risk of getting bunked from St. Jim's.'

'Bunked!' repeated Fatty Wynn, with a jump. Half a sausage on Fatty's fork stopped half-way to his mouth. It remained suspended, like Mahomet's coffin,

in space, while David Llewellyn Wynn stared across the table at Figgins.

'It might some to that,' said Figgins. 'It jolly well would, if we get bowled out. Steer clear, if you like.'

'Oh, don't be an ass,' said Fatty. 'I'm game.' But he looked very startled as he resumed operations on the suspended sausage.

'And what's the big idea, Figgy?' asked Kerr, very quietly.

'What do you think Ratty would feel like headed up in an old sack?' asked Figgins, with a savage grin. 'Left to wriggle out—if he could! What?'

'Ratty—headed up in a sack!' gasped Kerr. There was a clang, as Fatty Wynn dropped his fork, and gazed at Figgins with bulging eyes.

Figgins laughed—not his usual pleasant laugh.

'That's it,' he said. 'I can get the sack from Taggles' shed—and a bit of cord to tie up the neck—over Ratty! We shall have to be wary, of course—we're not going to be asked to be bunked. We can work it! And when we've got Ratty in the sack, he can stick in it and think how jolly it is to send a chap up to the Head for nothing.'

'You're mad!' gasped Kerr.

Figgins shrugged.

'Steer clear if you like,' he said. 'I can get a man to help me, if you fellows won't back me up. That man Cardew over in the School-House—he's game for anything——'

'Never mind that man Cardew,' said Kerr, quietly. 'You've got pals in your own House, Figgy, if it comes to that. But——'

'Speech taken as read,' said Figgins. 'I know what you're going to say—if we're spotted, it's the long

jump—and it won't be easy to sack Ratty without being spotted. I know all that. And I'd do it just the same, if I was going up to the Head to be bunked the next minute. So you can save your breath.'

Kerr saved his breath. He was utterly alarmed and aghast—but he realised that Figgins was not in a mood to listen to reason. He could only hope that, before Figgins found an opportunity to carry out that wild and whirling scheme, he would have cooled down sufficiently to give ear to wiser counsel.

CHAPTER XXII

CUT BUT NOT DRIED!

'Rot!'

Tom Merry's voice pronounced that word very distinctly.

'Bai Jove!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

D'Arcy of the Fourth was coming elegantly up the Shell passage, after tea, to the door of No. 10 Study. That door was half-open, and the sound of voices from within came out into the passage. And it sounded as if an argument was going on in the study.

'Look here, Tom——!' said Monty Lowther.

'Tom's right,' said Manners' quiet voice. 'He's played the goat once—that's no reason for doing it twice.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's eyeglass gleamed in at the doorway. None of the Shell fellows noticed him, for the moment.

Tom Merry was sitting on the corner of the study

table, with a clouded and flushed face. Monty Lowther, straddling a chair backwards, was arguing. Manners, in the window-seat, was calm and judicial as usual. Monty was a little bit excited.

'A fellow wants to help you in a scrape, and you call it rot!' he snapped. 'Perhaps you like being sent up to the Head.'

'Oh, don't be an ass.'

'Perhaps you like Ratty chivvying Railton into sending you up. Hadn't you better trot over to the New House and thank him?' asked Monty, sarcastically.

'I said don't be an ass,' said Tom, gruffly.

'Hem!' D'Arcy coughed to draw attention to his arrival. 'I twust that you fellows are not waggin' in this study.'

Tom glanced round.

'Monty's wagging his chin, if that's what you mean,' he said.

'Bai Jove! I did not say waggin'—I said waggin',' said Arthur Augustus, innocently. 'Pway don't wag, deah boys—this is a time for fellows to stand togethah and make that wat Watty sowwy for himself.'

'Rot!' said Tom, curtly.

'Pack it up,' said Manners.

'Gussy's talking sense for once,' remarked Monty Lowther. 'Blessed if I can make you out, Tom. We've been beaten at soccer, all through Ratty—'

'All through my being an ass, and Figgins being another,' growled Tom. 'We could have pulled off the game without Figgins. It was only an odd goal anyhow. But the team was rattled and upset—that's what did us in.'

'And Ratty did it—'

'Oh, I know that! Didn't we ask for it?' grunted Tom. 'Ratty is a tart old Tartar, and Figgy never ought to have been gated. I know all that. But he was gated, and he ought to have toed the line, and when he came over here to put up his idea of cutting gates I ought to have told him to go home and forget it. It seemed safe—and it wasn't. I shouldn't have taken the chance. Now I've been up to the Head.' Tom knitted his brows. 'I've had a royal jaw. I'm junior captain of the House, and I've been jawed like a silly fag—and I hadn't a word to say for myself. I don't care for the swipes—they'll wear off. But I do care for a Head's jaw when I hadn't a word to say.'

'It was Ratty pulled the strings—Railton never wanted to drag the Head into it——'

'Oh, I know all that, too. He's a grim old Tartar. Bother him!' grunted Tom.

'Not much use bothering him—that won't make him sorry for himself. But a jolly good rag——'

'Bosh! Ragging Ratty won't set matters right. Blow Ratty!' said Tom Merry, impatiently. 'I'm feeling sick enough with Ratty. I'm feeling dashed sick about going up to the Head. Think it would make me feel better if you dabbled gum in Ratty's top hat, or put drawing-pins in his armchair? Rot!'

Monty Lowther sniffed.

Tom resented deeply having been sent up to the Head, and he was, like Figgins, rather taking it to heart. But he was not taking it quite like Figgins. While Figgy's fierce resentment pushed him on to reckless retaliation, Tom was feeling more inclined to kick himself than anybody else. No doubt Ratty had been unduly severe and unpleasant, making a mountain out of a molehill, as was his sour way. But

Ratty would not have come into the picture at all but for Tom's own error, and he was well aware of it. Most of the fellows agreed in laying all the blame on Ratty—Tom laid it at his own door and was in the uncomfortable position of being angry with himself.

Monty Lowther did not 'see' it. Monty Lowther lived, moved, and had his being in japes, jests and rags. Perhaps it was that propensity, as much as Ratty's unpleasantness, which made him so keen to make the New House beak 'sit up'.

'I've thought out a jolly good stunt—!' said Monty, almost pleadingly.

'Forget it,' said Tom.

'It will make Ratty pink and blue——'

'Rot!'

'It's the jape of the term,' urged Lowther. 'On Rookwood day——'

Tom Merry stared—or rather, glared.

'On Rookwod day!' he repeated. 'Thinking out how to get the Rookwood match mucked up like the Greyfriars game. You footling chump——'

'Look here, you might be civil when a pal's backing you up!' exclaimed Lowther, tartly.

'One word for Tom and two for yourself, old man,' said Manners. 'You and your rags! Wash it right out.'

Snort, from Lowther! Apparently some 'rag' of uncommon dimensions and attractiveness had germinated in his fertile brain, and he did not want to wash it right out! But there was a plentiful lack of enthusiasm in No. 10 Study, and Monty expressed his feelings in an expressive snort.

'Bai Jove!' said Arthur Augustus. Gussy's eyeglass had turned from one face to another during that ar-

gument. Now he chimed in. 'I must say that I agwee with Lowthah. Genewally I wegard Lowthah as a japin' ass, but this time I weally do agwee with him that Watty ought to be wagged.'

'That ought to settle it for you, Monty,' remarked Manners. 'If Gussy thinks you're right, you must be wrong—that stands to reason.'

'I wegard that wemark as asinine, Mannahs. My ideah is that we ought to stand shouldah to shouldah, and make that wat Watty cwinge. A blightah who tells a fellow befoah a lot of fellows that he will box a fellow's yahs—' Arthur Augustus breathed hard. 'I am quite resolved to wag Watty, Tom Mewwy. I should have wagged him this mornin' if those cheeky asses in my study hadn't dwagged me away fwom Wailton's study when I was goin' to telephone. I was goin' to wing Watty up and call him a wevoltin' wat——'

'What?' gasped Tom.

'That would have made him cwinge, what?' said Arthur Augustus. 'The cweam of it was that Watty would nevah have been able to guess who had called him a wat——'

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

'He would have been in a feahful wage and quite in the dark——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'But Blake and Hewwies and Dig butted in, like a lot of silly kids, and it nevah came off,' said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. 'We simply got lines from Lathom for kickin' up a wow in Mastahs' Studies. Howevah, a bwainy chap can think out more ideas than one. They wefuse to back me up in my study,' added Arthur Augustus, sadly. 'They don't seem to

twust my tact and judgment. So I came along to put it up to you, Tom Mewwy.'

'Take it home and boil it,' said Tom.

'What about you, Lowthah?' asked Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass on the funny man of the Shell.

'Um! What's the big idea?' asked Monty, dubiously. Monty Lowther had unlimited faith in his own bright ideas. He had much less in Gussy's.

'It's wathah a wag,' said Arthur Augustus, grinning. 'I've got a squirt in my pocket, full of ink. Watty is goin' to have the ink. It's a vewy big squirt and there's neahly half-a-pint of ink in it. I've got it in the bweast pocket of my jacket, inside—quite safe fwom bein' seen.'

Tom Merry and Co. gazed at Arthur Augustus. What would happen to a fellow who squirted ink at a 'beak' would hardly bear thinking of. But Gussy seemed quite happy about it.

'Pewwaps it will be wathah wuff on Watty,' went on the cheery Gussy. 'But he has asked for it—sat up on his hind legs, begged and pwayed for it, bai Jove. And he is goin' to have it. I've got it all cut and dried. We get out of the House aftah lock-ups——'

'Do we?' asked Monty, still more dubiously.

'Yaas,' said Arthur Augustus. 'You see, we can't be seen aftah dark, and even if we are seen shall not be wecognized. A fellow can't weally be too careful when he's inkin' a house-mastah, you know.'

'I should say not!' gasped Tom Merry.

'Twust me to take care of that,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Next, you buzz pebbles at Watty's study window, Lowthah.'

'Do I?' said Monty. He seemed to doubt it.

'That's where you come in,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'Blake and Hewwies and Dig have wefused, but I can't cawwy on without a chap to buzz pebbles at Watty's window. What do you think Watty will do, when pebbles keep on tappin' at his study window?'

'Come out with a cane to look for the silly ass that's doing it,' said Manners.

'Yaas, wathah!' chuckled Arthur Augustus. 'And I shall be waitin' for him by the door—in the dark, you know—and I shall let him have the squirt of ink wight on his chivvay. Ha, ha! We cut off, leavin' him moppin' ink! Ha, ha!'

Arthur Augustus laughed merrily.

'You don't think he'd grab you?' gasped Tom Merry.

'I should take care not to be gwabbed, Tom Mewwy.'

'You don't think you'll be spotted out of the House after lock-ups?' howled Manners.

'I shall take care not to be spotted out of the House, Mannahs.'

'You've got it all cut and dried?' asked Monty Lowther.

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Well, you may have it cut, but I don't think you've got it dried!' chuckled Lowther. 'What's that trickling down your waistcoat?'

'Eh! What!'

'Looks to me as if that squirt leaks——'

'Oh, cwikey!'

Arthur Augustus stared down at his well-fitting waistcoat. Then his hand shot to the inside pocket of his elegant jacket. It came out again as black as any hand in Central Africa, with a dripping squirt in it.

The swell of St. Jim's gazed at that hand in horror.

Tom Merry and Co. burst into a yell. They had not laughed when Arthur Augustus propounded his wonderful scheme. But they made up for it now. They shrieked.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, cwumbs! That beastly squirt leaks——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! It's nearly empty, and my pocket is soaked with ink—it is cwammed with beastly ink—I am dwenched and dwippin' with ink——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, scissahs! There is wotten ink twicklin' all ovah me!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I gave Twimble half-a-cwown for this squirt, and he said it was all wight—he nevah told me it leaked——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'There is nothin' to laugh at in a fellow bein' dwenched with beastly ink,' roared Arthur Augustus. 'I am inkay all ovah——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I shall have to go and change my clobbah—Bai Jove, I will kick Twimble—I am smothahed with ink—I—I! Oh, cwumbs! Oh, cwikey! My jacket's wuined! Look at my waistcoat! If you fellows think this is funny——'

'Ha, ha, ha,' yelled Tom Merry and Co. Apparently they did.

'Crash! Arthur Augustus hurled that leaky squirt into the grate. Then he rushed from the study, leaving Tom Merry and Co. still yelling.

CHAPTER XXIII

THREE IN AMBUSH!

'No footer!' said Fatty Wynn.

'Blow footer!' said George Figgins.

Fatty just stared at him. Never before had Figgins of the Fourth been known to 'blow' footer! Only too plainly, Figgins was not his usual self.

It was the following day, after class. The old quadrangle of St. Jim's was thick with heavy mists. There had been rain all night, all through the morning and most of the afternoon. The rain had ceased now, but a worse affliction in the shape of foggy mist had descended on the old school, and fellows going out of the Houses had to grope their way.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, going across to their House after coming out of the form-room, went very slowly, peering through mist. Other fellows only a few feet from them were out of sight. It was only too certain that, as Fatty Wynn remarked, there would be no football practice that day. Figgy's reply seemed to indicate that he didn't care a hoot.

'Push on, you fellows,' said Kerr. 'This isn't nice, and the sooner we get into the House, the better.'

'Don't race,' grunted Figgins.

Kerr, who was putting on speed a little, slowed down again. Kerr was a tactful fellow, and he was very tactful indeed with his chum Figgins in these troubled times. If Figgins wanted to hang about in the misty quad, Kerr was prepared to hang about, without arguing.

A day had passed without marking any change in

Figgins, in his new and disquieting mood. He had let the sun go down on his wrath—and rise upon it again, undiminished. He had said nothing more of his wild scheme of 'sacking' Ratty, but both his chums knew that it was still in his mind. Kerr and Wynn would have been glad of an invigorating spot of football, which might have done Figgy good. But the hardiest footballer would hardly have thought of 'urging the flying ball' in a thick drizzling mist.

'Filthy weather,' said Fatty. 'Looks like getting worse, too. Like a blessed blanket. Better get in, Figgy.'

'Couldn't be better,' said Figgins, in an argumentative tone. 'Isn't he as regular as clockwork? Isn't he a rusty old machine? Is he ever a minute late, or a minute early? Can't you set your watch by him? Every Friday after class he goes over to old Bompas's—does he ever miss?'

Kerr compressed his lips. Only too clearly, Figgins was thinking of the sacking scheme. Never before had he been interested in the circumstances that once a week, always at the same time on the same day, Mr. Ratcliff was accustomed to walk over to old Colonel Bompas's, to play a game of chess. Ratcliff never altered his manners and customs by a hair's breadth, unless driven to do so. He was, as Figgins said, as regular as clockwork. Figgy's eyes were glinting.

'Won't he go, what?' he said. 'I know he's rather a frowster, but he never misses old Bompas. Does he?'

'No!' said Kerr. 'But on a day like this——'

'He'll go,' said Figgins. 'It's only a short walk, and he knows every inch—he's walked it often enough. He'll go.'

'I say, Figgy, push on,' murmured Fatty Wynn. 'It's beastly out here—and I've got some chestnuts to roast in the study——'

'Easy as falling off a form,' said Figgins, in a low voice, unheeding Fatty as if he had not spoken. 'Ratty will let himself out at Master's gate, as usual —it will be thicker there, under the trees, than it is here in the quad. He won't see a thing when the sack comes down over his head——'

'Oh!' gasped Fatty Wynn. He forgot the chestnuts in the study. Kerr's face was dark with uneasiness.

'We're not going into the House,' said Figgins, in the same low concentrated voice. 'We're going round to Taggles' shed for that sack. Then we're going to park ourselves under the trees at master's gate. Then——'

'Ratty may not go, in this weather,' muttered Kerr.

'He'll go. If he doesn't, it's a frost—but does he ever miss? If you mean that you're not keen on it——!' growled Figgins.

'It's awful rot, old chap.'

'Is it?' jeered Figgins. It was not like Figgins to jeer, but he seemed quite a changed Figgins now. 'Well, if that means that you funk it, cut into the House and keep safe. You do the same, Fatty! I'll manage it alone.'

'You won't!' said Kerr, quietly.

'No jolly fear,' said Fatty Wynn. 'but——'

'Safe as houses,' said Figgins. 'You can hardly see your hand before your face in this filthy mist. Ratty won't know us from Adam, if he spots us at all.'

'And how shall we know him from Adam?' asked Kerr. 'Might jolly easily bag the wrong man, if we can't see him—and we can't if he can't see us.'

'So many people are likely to be going out for a walk in this lovely weather, what?' jeered Figgins. 'Don't be an ass, Kerr. You say yourself that Ratty might chuck it because it's such a foul afternoon, though he's got a regular appointment to keep. Nobody else will be going out. Don't be an ass. If anybody goes down to Masters' gate in the next quarter of an hour, it will be Ratty—and you know it as well as I do.'

Kerr was silent.

'I don't want to drag you fellows into it, if you think it too risky,' added Figgins. 'Cut off to the House—and leave me to it. I'm carrying on.'

And Figgins, to settle the matter, started off in the direction of Taggles' wood-shed. Kerr and Wynn exchanged a sort of hopeless look and followed him. If Figgy persisted in his hare-brained scheme, they were going to back him up—there was no hesitation about that. Obviously it was safer for him to have his friends with him—and it was Figgy's safety of which they were chiefly thinking.

There was no stopping Figgins, that was clear. Kerr's only hope now was to see him safely through.

It was, in a way, a relief that Figgy had sense enough to choose such a time as the present, when the thick clinging mist made recognition difficult, if not impossible. He was reckless enough to have tried it on at a much less propitious time. But such an exploit as 'sacking' a 'beak' was certain to lead to a tremendous row and a rigid investigation—with dire consequences to all concerned if they were discovered. All the more for that reason, Kerr was going to see his hotheaded chum safely through, if he could.

It was not easy to grope and fumble a way to Taggles' shed in the thick mist. But they found it, and Figgins left his chums at the door—rejoining them a minute or two later with a dusty old sack over his arm. Round the neck of the sack was a looped cord, all ready to be pulled tight and knotted. Figgins was grinning—a rather savage grin.

'Okay,' he said. 'Come on.'

There was groping and fumbling through the mist again, till they found themselves at the wicket gate, under shady trees, in the old wall, to which only masters had keys. If it was thick and dim in the quad, it was thicker and dimmer under the trees by the gate. Figgins and Co. could not even see one another.

'Keep close,' whispered Figgins. 'We don't want to lose one another. We may have to wait ten minutes yet.'

Kerr drew a deep breath. It was of no use, he knew, but he made one more effort to recall his chum to reason.

'Figgy, old man, I wish you'd chuck it,' he muttered. 'You're not cool now, but later on, you'll be sorry—'

'Pack it up, old man.'

'It's a bit thick, Figgy. Ratty's a smudge, but this—'

'I said pack it up.'

Kerr was silent. He peered through the thick mist, in the direction from which Mr. Ratcliff would come, if he came at all. From the bottom of his heart, Kerr hoped that Ratty would not come. There was a chance, at least. Regular as clockwork as Ratty was, reluctant as he would be to depart from fixed and accus-

tomed habits, the weather really was vile, and it was quite on the cards that Ratcliff might change his mind for once. Most devoutly Kerr hoped that he would.

But five or six minutes later that hope faded out. Figgins pressed his arm suddenly.

'Listen!'

There was a sound of footsteps on the misty path under the trees leading to the gate. Silently, Figgins opened the neck of the sack, to have all in readiness. He whispered again.

'You two bump him over! I'll whip the sack on his napper before he knows what's happening——!'

'Quiet!' breathed Kerr.

The footsteps were slow and uncertain, as of someone groping his way, careful not to bump into the trees in the mist. But they steadily approached, till they were quite close to the three juniors ambushed by the gate. Faintly, something like a shadow was glimpsed in the mist — and then Figgins and Co. rushed.

CHAPTER XXIV

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS CARRIES ON!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy polished his eyeglass, jammed it into his noble eye, and looked out from the School-House into the misty quadrangle. There was a shade of deep thought on the brow of Arthur Augustus. Like some other fellows in the Fourth Form, Arthur Augustus was interested in the thick

mist that clothed St. Jim's like a clinging garment.

'Wight as wain,' he said, at last.

'Like the weather?' inquired Jack Blake, sarcastically.

'Yaas, wathah.'

Blake and Herries and Digby looked at their noble chum. What Arthur Augustus could see to 'like' in that drizzly mist was rather a mystery.

'Well, if you like it, you can have it all to yourself,' remarked Herries. 'I'm going up to the study.'

'Pway don't wun off, you fellows. I shall want you,' said Arthur Augustus. 'This mist is a twemendous stwoke of luck, as it's Fwiday.'

His chums looked at him harder. Digby tapped his forehead and Blake nodded, sadly. Herries put it into words.

'Potty?' he asked.

'Weally, Hewwies——'

'Well, what do you mean, if you mean anything?' demanded Blake. 'Are you wandering in your mind — if you've got one to wander in?'

'I am goin' to wag Watty,' said Arthur Augustus, calmly, 'and I shall want my fwiends to lend a hand. If you wefuse to back me up, as you did before, I shall cawwy on all the same, of course. But I would wathah you helped.'

'And what's the big idea this time?' asked Blake. 'What are we to do to Ratty? Collar him in the New House and strew the hungry churchyard with his bones?'

Herries and Dig chuckled. Arthur Augustus frowned.

'Pway be sewious, Blake. You are awah that Watty twots out evewy Fwiday aftah class—evewybody

knows. Suppose some fellows are waitin' for him at masters' gate—and suppose they tip him up—?'

'Tip Ratty up?' ejaculated Dig.

'Yaas, and sit him down in a puddle——'

'Oh crumbs!' said Herries. 'I can see myself tipping up a beak and sitting him down in a puddle!'

'Sort of!' chuckled Blake.

'That is where the fog comes in,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'Watty couldn't possibly see us, and he won't know a thing. All he will know is that he is sittin' in a big puddle left by the wain. Havin' tipped him in, we disappeah at once. I was not thinkin',' added Arthur Augustus, with sarcasm, 'of hangin' on and explainin' to him that we did it! We keep that dark.'

'And what are you going to say to your pater when you get home?' asked Blake.

'Eh! I am goin' home, Blake?'

'You are—if you tip a beak into a puddle. You'll get bunked so quick it will make your head swim.'

'Wats! I tell you Watty won't know a thing! You can wely on my tact and judgment, old chap. All you fellows have to do is to back me up, leavin' the leadahship entiahly in my hands. That will make it all safe.'

'I don't think!' grinned Blake. 'Now come on up to the study. You're safer in the study, old tulip, while Ratty's trotting in the fog.'

'Are you goin' to back me up or not, Blake?'

'Not—with a capital N,' said Blake.

'What about you, Hewwies?'

'Same, with knobs on,' said Herries.

'Are you goin' to stand by me, Dig?'

'Yes, rather—and see that you don't get out of the

House,' answered Dig. 'We'll all stand by you to that extent, Gussy.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gazed at his chums. They were grinning—but while they grinned, they moved between him and the doorway. Not only, it seemed, were they not going to back him up in his new scheme for dealing with the obnoxious Ratty—they were going to stop him. Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

'You cheekay asses,' he said. 'Do you think you are goin' to keep me fwom leavin' the House?'

'We are—we is!' assented Blake.

'I am goin' out this minute!' snapped Arthur Augustus.

'Only over three dead bodies!' said Blake.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Arthur Augustus breathed harder.

'If you mean that you are goin' to kick up a wow, like you did yestahday when I was goin' to Wailton's studay, Blake—'

'We mean exactly that!' agreed Blake.

'In that case,' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. 'I wefuse to continue this discush. I wegard you as a cheekay ass, Blake. Wats!' And with his noble nose in the air, Arthur Augustus turned and walked away —not out of the House.

'That's that!' remarked Blake. 'Tipping a beak into a puddle is the sort of thing a fellow can dream about —not the sort of thing a fellow can do! Gussy isn't going to get himself bunked while he's got pals to look after him.'

'No fear!' agreed Dig. And Herries nodded assent. Three members of Study No. 6 were quite determined to steer Arthur Augustus clear of Ratty. They entirely lacked faith in his abilities as a bold bad ragger.

That lack of faith, however, was by no means shared by Arthur Augustus himself. Arthur Augustus had not, as his friends supposed, given up the idea, when he turned his noble back on them, at the doorway, and walked away with his nose in the air. He had told them that if they did not back him up, he would carry on—and that he was now proceeding to do. He had walked away, simply because he realised that he could not go on the war-path with Blake and Herries and Dig hanging on to him. But he did not go to the day-room or up to the study. He went into the junior lobby. That lobby had a door on the quad.

Only one fellow was there—Talbot of the Shell, brushing mud off a coat. He glanced at D'Arcy as he walked across to the outer door.

'Going out, Gussy?' he asked. 'Rotten weather, old man.'

'Pway don't mention that you saw me goin' out, Talbot.'

'Eh! why not?'

'I mean, there will be wathah a wow when it comes out that Watty has been wagged. Keep it dark, old fellow.'

Talbot jumped.

'Gussy, old man! I say, Gussy——!' he exclaimed.

But Gussy was gone. The door closed on him, and Arthur Augustus found himself groping in thick mist. He groped on his way, peering to and fro.

'Bai Jove! It's feahfully thick!' murmured Arthur Augustus. 'Howevah, that is weally all the bettah—Watty won't see a thing! He won't know what's happenin' till he's bumped ovah—and sittin' in the puddle!'

And Arthur Augustus chuckled.

But he ceased to chuckle as he groped and groped on his way. It was really very damp and unpleasant, and the visibility was decidedly not good. It was some little time before Arthur Augustus found the path that led to Master's gate, but he found it and followed it, groping, and once or twice bumping into dim trees that loomed out of the mist.

Under the trees near the gate it was thicker and darker. Arthur Augustus could not see an inch before his noble nose. But it was impossible to miss the path, and he groped and stumbled on.

Suddenly he heard a sound. It was a swift patter of unseen feet. He stared blindly in blinding mist. The next moment it happened!

What happened Arthur Augustus hardly knew. Something or somebody unseen crashed into him and spun him over. He sprawled on his hands and knees, and, as he did so, something rough and rather smelly —and he was too startled and confused even to realise that it was a sack—came whipping over his head. Hands—many hands—seemed to be grasping him. Something—it was the sack—enveloped him, covering his head and shoulders, covering him down below the knees. Inside it he gurgled and spluttered in frantic bewilderment. He hardly felt the cord that was dragged tight and knotted round his legs. His brain was in a wild whirl. He sprawled and spluttered in the sack, the most utterly and hopelessly bewildered fellow in the county of Sussex, or in the wide world.

CHAPTER XXV

SACK FOR SOMEBODY

'Got him!' breathed Figgins.

'Cut!' muttered Kerr.

He grasped Figgins by the arm and dragged him away, Figgins gave a breathless chuckle.

They had 'got' him—there was no mistake about that! It had worked like a charm. They had glimpsed only a dim shadow in the clinging mist under the branches of the trees by the gate—but they had got that shadow! It had tumbled over as Kerr and Wynn barged at it, Figgins had whipped the sack over its head—in a split second he had drawn tight the cord, in another second knotted it. At his feet, somebody in the sack wriggled and wallowed, and a suffocated sound of spluttering came from the prisoner within. They had 'got' him—but it was not judicious to linger. Kerr dragged at Figgy's arm—Fatty Wynn gave him a push. Figgy might chuckle—but neither of his chums felt like chuckling. They were anxious to get Figgins away and to get away themselves.

'Hurry!' breathed Fatty Wynn.

The three plunged away in the mist, leaving the wriggling sack behind them. They ran for the New House, regardless of the blinding mist. Even Figgins realised how necessary it was to get to a safe distance, from the spot where a house-master had been 'sacked.'

They ran—but it was a case of more haste and less speed. There was a sudden crash, as they collided with an invisible figure in the mist.

'Oh!' gasped Figgins, as he staggered back.

'Oooh!' spluttered Fatty Wynn, as he sat down.

Kerr jumped clear.

There was a startled exclamation. They could not see who it was—but they knew the voice of Monteith of the Sixth, head prefect of the New House. That voice sounded cross.

'Oh, gad! Who's that rushing about in the fog?' The Sixth-Form man was tottering from the shock. 'What benighted idiot——?'

Monteith groped, looming dim in the mist. Kerr jumped back, and Figgins dodged the groping hand. But it booted not—for the next moment the prefect stumbled over Fatty Wynn, and then he grasped him.

'Ow!' gasped Fatty. 'Leggo!'

'Is that Wynn of the Fourth?' Monteith peered at him. 'You young ass, what do you mean by barging about like a mad rhinoceros? You jolly nearly barged me over. I've a good mind to smack your head, you young lunatic. Who are the others—Figgins and Kerr, I suppose. I've a jolly good mind to whop you all round. Can't a man walk over to the School-House without being barged over by a bunch of young lunatics?'

'Sorry, Monteith!' gasped Figgins.

'We didn't see you—!' stammered Kerr.

'Oh, cut off!' snapped Monteith, and he disappeared again into the mist on his way to the School-House and soccer 'jaw' with Kildare.

'What rotten luck!' breathed Figgins.

The three cut off again—at a more moderate pace. In a few minutes more they reached their House and were glad enough to get in.

All three had very grave faces as they went up to their study. Nothing could have been more unlucky than that collision with a New House prefect, and all three realised it.

They did not speak till they were in the study, and the door shut. Then they looked at one another.

'Putrid luck!' muttered Figgins.

Kerr nodded.

'Think Monteith will remember running into us, when it comes out about—about Ratty?' mumbled Fatty Wynn.

'Will he not?' said Kerr.

'Oh, crikey!' said Fatty.

'After all, fellows might be out in the quad,' said Figgins. 'May be other fellows out, for all we know. I don't see why Monteith should connect us up with what's happened to Ratty.'

'Will he not?' said Kerr.

There was a long silence. Then Fatty Wynn picked up the kettle from the fender.

'May as well have tea,' he said. 'May as well, even if there's going to be a row. You get out the sardines, Kerr.'

Kerr smiled faintly and got out the sardines, while Fatty filled the kettle. Figgins stood staring glumly from the study window into the thick mist without. He was not in a happy mood.

It was not only the sense of danger that troubled him, though that was real enough. But Kerr had told him that he would be sorry when he was cool—and Kerr was right. Now that it was done, and could not be undone—now that Ratty was headed up in the sack—now that it was too late—Figgy's mind seemed to clear somehow, and he was worried and troubled.

'—I—wish—' He turned from the window. 'I—I wish—well, it's not much use wishing now, is it?'

'Not a lot,' agreed Kerr.

'It was too thick,' said Figgins, uneasily. 'I—I wish——' He paused. 'Look here, Kerr! If it comes out, it's up to me. It was my idea from start to finish—I did it——'

'We all did it,' said Kerr.

'You fellows only helped—and I made you. It's up to me,' said Figgins. 'Look here, I've been rather a fool. I—I wish I'd listened to you, Kerr.'

'Never mind that now,' said Kerr. 'Let's have tea, old man. It can't be helped now—let's hope for the best.'

But it was not a very hopeful trio that had tea in the study. Even Fatty Wynn seemed to have lost his usual appetite. They did not linger over tea—they were anxious to hear whether there was any news in the House of a sacked house-master. They passed Pratt of the Fourth as they went downstairs.

'Ratty got in yet, Pratters?' asked Figgins, carelessly.

'Eh! He hasn't been out that I know of! answered Pratt.

'Nothing heard yet, at any rate,' muttered Figgins, as they went on down the stairs. 'By gum! Is he still tottering about in that sack?'

At the hall-window they stood looking out into the quad. Thick, grey mist blotted the view, with a drizzle of rain. Figgins and Co. stood staring glumly into the mist. Suddenly a voice behind them made them jump, as if they had received an electric shock.

'The weather does not look like clearing, Baker.'

'No, sir. Looks like getting thicker.'

'Um! I must telephone to Colonel Bompas. No one could go out in this fog.'

Figgins and Co. jumped—and then stood rooted. A lean figure joined them at the window, looking out at the weather.

Figgins and Co. gazed at it, like fellows in a dream.

Mr. Ratcliff did not even glance at the three juniors. He stared at the drizzly mist, with a frowning brow.

Then he shook his head decidedly and walked back to his study. Figgins and Co. stared after him, still like fellows in a dream.

Kerr was the first to find his voice. He called to Baker of the Sixth, to whom the New House master had been speaking.

'Hasn't Mr. Ratcliff been out, Baker?'

The Sixth-form man glanced at him.

'Eh? No. It's as thick as a blanket outside,' he answered.

Figgins and Co. looked at one another.

Ratty had not been out! He had been waiting, hoping that the weather would clear. Now he had made up his mind to telephone to Colonel Bompas and call it off. But somebody had been out—somebody had walked down the path to Master's gate—somebody had walked into the ambush, and had been collared and headed up in the sack! Who?

Not, evidently, Ratty!

'Oh, my hat!' breathed Figgins. 'We—we—we got—somebody—I—I thought it was—was Ratty! Who else could it have been?'

'Goodness knows,' said Kerr.

'Who—?' said Fatty Wynn, helplessly.

'Who the thump——?'

'Who the dickens?'

But echo answered 'who'—it was impossible to guess. Somebody was in that sack—not Horace Ratcliff. It was a relief, perhaps, to know that, after all, they had not sacked their house-master. But they had 'sacked' somebody—on that point there was no doubt, no possible probable shadow of doubt, no possible doubt whatever! They could only wonder dizzily who it was!

CHAPTER XXVI

ONLY GUSSY!

'Seen that fathead?'

'Seen that chump?'

'Seen that burbling cuckoo?'

Tom Merry laughed. He did not need telling about whom Blake and Herries and Dig were inquiring. He recognised the description.

'No!' he answered. 'What's Gussy up to now?'

'He must be out of the House,' said Blake, breathing hard. 'We stopped him a quarter of an hour ago. We thought he'd stayed in. But we can't find him——'

'Sneaked out another way,' said Herries. 'We've looked for him everywhere.'

'If he's got Ratty—!' muttered Dig.

'Ratty?' repeated Tom.

'Oh, that's the latest!' said Blake. 'He wanted us to ambush Ratty at Master's gate and tip him into a puddle—'

'Oh, holy smoke!'

'Now he's gone out on his own—we can't find him in the House. We shall have to hunt for him and roll him home. We'll boot him all the way back—if he hasn't tipped Ratty into that puddle. If he has, of course, he'll be catching an early train home tomorrow. Is that chap enough to turn a fellow's hair grey?' said Blake, despairingly.

Tom Merry whistled. 'Better get after him, if he's gone out after Ratty,' he said. 'Ten to one he will miss him, in this—it's thick as soup out of the House. But——'

'Come on, you men,' said Blake. 'We've got to stop him if we can. Oh, won't I jolly well boot him!'

Tom Merry joined the three Fourth-formers, and they went out of the House together. It was not quite so thick as soup in the quad, but it was thick—very thick and had they not known where to look for Arthur Augustus, the quest would have been hopeless. But they knew that the ineffable Gussy would be in ambush at Master's gate, so it was only necessary to find their way to that spot. They groped and stumbled in the mist, found the path, and groped along it—in a state of mingled anxiety and exasperation. There could be no doubt that Arthur Augustus was already on the spot—and they could only hope that Ratty had not appeared yet! If he had—and if Arthur Augustus had tipped him into a puddle—but that would hardly bear thinking of!

'Somebody's here!' whispered Tom Merry. 'I can hear somebody. Listen!'

The four juniors halted under the dim trees whose shadows made the gloom gloomier over the path near the gate. They could see nothing but mist, and a

spectral glimpse here and there of a tree. But they could hear.

'Urrrrrrggh!'

That strange sound came to their ears. What it meant they could not begin to guess, but it sounded like somebody in trouble. It was a strange, eerie, half-suffocated gurgle.

'Wurrrggh!'

'There it is again!' whispered Tom. 'That can't be Ratty——'

'Ratty—in a puddle—perhaps!' breathed Blake. 'If that dangerous maniac has done it already——'

'Gurrrrggh!'

'Might have his face in the puddle——!' muttered Herries. 'Mouth full of mud, perhaps.'

'Sounds a bit like it!' said Tom.

'Yurrrrrgggh!'

They peered at one another in dismay and horror. If those suffocated gurgles came from Ratty it was clear that Gussy must have done it and that they had arrived too late.

'Look out,' muttered Blake. 'He's coming——!'

A dim shadow loomed up. It was a strange shapeless object, looming in the mist. From it came a gasping gurgle.

'Urrrggh! Goooooh! Ooooch!'

The shapeless object was lurching blindly about the path.

The juniors peered at it, in utter wonder. Obviously it was not Mr. Ratcliff. But what it was, they could not make out. It looked like a sack walking about, which was hardly imaginable. It lurched, and stumbled, and tripped, and fell with a bump on the earth. Then the gurgle changed to a howl.

'Ow! Oh! Oh, cwikey! Oh, cwumbs!'

Choked as it was, that voice was familiar to their ears. It made them jump almost clear off the ground.

'Gussy!' gasped Blake.

'Gussy!' stuttered Tom Merry.

'What the thump——!'

'Oh, cwikey! Gwoogh! Oh, Chwistophah Columbus! Oooh.'

The strange shapeless figure scrambled and staggered up. Tom Merry and Blake and Herries and Dig surrounded it. Close to it, they could discern what it was. Unimaginable as it was that a sack could be walking about St. Jim's, that was exactly what it was. But they realised that there was somebody inside the sack—and that somebody was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form.

The sack was over his head, enveloping him; it descended below the knees and was tied there. Only his ankles and feet emerged below it. It was no wonder that he was lurching and stumbling blindly. Nothing could be discerned of Arthur Augustus, but his feet and trouser-ends. Locomotion, in such circumstances, was a matter of difficulty.

'Urrrgh!' came a suffocated gasp from the sack. 'Oh, scissahs! Woooogh!'

'That—that—that's Gussy!' gasped Herries. 'It's Gussy all right! What the thump has he done this for?'

'Better help him out!' said Tom.

'Oh, cwumbs! Is—is that somebody?' The voices apparently reached the occupant of the sack. 'Help! Pway let me loose, whoevah you are! I am suffocatin' in this beastly sack! Lend me a hand! Oooooh!'

The cord round the neck of the sack was knotted.

The shapeless object was lurching blindly about the path

Blake whipped out a pocket-knife and cut it. Then the juniors all grasped the sack and dragged it off over the head of its inhabitant.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was revealed. He was not looking his usual self. He was dusty from head to foot—he was rumpled and crumpled, his hair was a tousled mop, his face was crimson, his breath coming in gasps and gurgles. They gazed at him—a dimly-discernible but very startling object.

'Gussy!' breathed Blake. 'You mad ass——!'

'Is that you, Blake? Oh, cwikey! Have you been lookin' for me? Gwoogh! You might have started soonah, you ass—I have been staggewin' about for houahs and houahs in that filthy sack——'

'It's only half-an-hour since class, fathead.'

'Wats! Wubbish! It is houahs and houahs and houahs! At least, it seemed like houahs and houahs and houahs!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'Oh, cwumbs! I have had a feahful time!'

'But what did you do it for?' exclaimed Herries.

'You uttah ass, Hewwies, I did not do it! Do you think I like staggewin' about in a dusty sack?' shrieked Arthur Augustus.

'But what—who—how?' gasped Tom Merry.

'I—I hardly know how it happened, I was taken uttahly by surpwise,' gurgled Arthur Augustus. 'I was comin' along the path to the gate, you know, to wait there for Watty— and all of a sudden this howwid sack was ovah my head, and I was tied up in it—and evah since I have been staggewin' about tryin' to find my way back to the House—houahs and houahs and houahs——'

'Can't have been ten minutes,' said Blake.

'Wats! Wubbish! Wot! Houahs and houahs——'

'But who did it?' howled Dig.

'I have not the wemotest ideah who did it, Dig. Somebody must have been heah. I am goin' to give him a feahful thwashin' when I find out. Oh, cwumbs! I am all dusty and wumpled—I am in a howwid state. Fancy bein' headed up in a sack, you know—a howwid, dirty, dusty old sack——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Bai Jove! I do not see anythin' to laugh at, in a fellow bein' headed up in a howwid, dirty, dusty old sack——!'

'We do!' chuckled Blake.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, stop that silly cacklin'!' howled Arthur Augustus. 'There is nothin' whatevah funnay in this. I wegard it as a howwid outwage. And I have missed Watty——'

'A miss is as good as a mile!' chuckled Tom Merry.

'The whole thing is a wotten fwost,' continued Arthur Augustus. 'He must have gone by this time, while I was staggewin' about in that howwid sack for houahs and houahs and houahs.'

'A jolly old spot of luck, if you ask me,' grinned Blake. 'If you'd got Ratty, the Head would have sacked you. Thank goodness somebody else sacked you instead.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I feel howwid——'

'Serve you jolly well right, old bean. If I find out who sacked you, I'll stand him a twopenny bun.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, wats!' snapped Arthur Augustus. 'I wegard you as a set of cacklin' asses, and I am fed up with your cacklin'. I wepeat, wats!'

And Arthur Augustus groped away to the House, in a simmering state of indignant exasperation—followed by his friends, still cackling.

CHAPTER XXVII

NOT FIGGINS!

'Goal!'

'Good old Figgy!'

'Blow Ratty!' muttered Tom Merry, crossly.

He was standing with his hands in his overcoat pockets, watching. It was a pick-up game on Wednesday afternoon. St. Jim's junior footballers were going through their paces, as it were, under the eye of their captain, who had his eye specially on the right wingers. Tom had not finally made up his mind about outside-right, for the game at Rookwood, on Saturday. One thing was certain—George Figgins would not be there. But whether Levison, of the School-House, or Redfern, of the New House, should go in his place, Tom was not yet sure.

It was a pick-up, but with full sides, and a good game. Jack Blake was captaining one side, Figgins the other. Tom Merry, for once merely a 'looker-on in Vienna' while soccer was going on, watched and judged and calculated. And when George Figgins put the leather in for a second time, a crowd of fellows of both Houses cheered him, and Tom 'blowed' Ratty, with deep feelings. Figgy seemed in splendid form—and he was more than ever the winger Tom wanted to take over to Rookwood on Saturday. But it could not be—and he 'blowed' Ratty with emphasis.

'Goal!' came another roar.

Right at the finish, Figgins put the ball in for a third time. Then the players came off, and Figgins, shoving on coat and muffler, came over to where Tom Merry was standing.

There was rather a peculiar expression on Figgy's rugged face. In rather a peculiar way, he eyed Tom Merry.

'Not a bad game,' he remarked.

'No!' said Tom. 'Rotten that you can't come over to Rookwood, Figgy. Blow that man, Ratty!'

'Who's going?' asked Figgins.

'It will have to be Levison, I suppose.'

'Levison was no great shakes at Greyfriars a week ago, from what I've heard.'

'Nobody was any great shakes at Greyfriars, after what happened there,' growled Tom. 'We were all rattled, and off colour. But at Rookwood——'

'Look here.' Figgins blurted it out. 'Suppose I come?'

'What!' howled Tom.

'You needn't yell,' said Figgins, peevishly. 'Just think of it sensibly for a minute. Ratty happened to be at Greyfriars that day, visiting some other dashed beak or something—well, that won't happen at Rookwood. It couldn't happen twice. I get away quietly, same as I did before—and how's Ratty to know?'

Tom Merry looked at him. He looked at him with a very expressive expression. The fabled basilisk could hardly have looked more expressive.

'You unlimited idiot!' he said, in measured tones. 'We were both sent up to the Head for playing the goat last time. We both jolly well asked for it. I know

Ratty couldn't be at Rookwood. But think he won't be keeping an eye open for you, after what happened last week? Think he wouldn't miss you if you cleared—ten minutes after you'd gone? Why, you potty ass, Ratty's capable of coming after you and butting into a football match to yank you off, if he found you playing against his orders. Mad?'

'I don't see why he should miss me——!' argued Figgins.

'You mean you don't want to see. Ratty will have both eyes wide open for you next Saturday—of course he will. If you're out of sight for a quarter of an hour, he'll suspect that you've gone with the team. You know him!'

'I'd chance it, if you would.'

'Lucky I've got more sense than you then,' growled Tom Merry. 'I'm not going up to the Head again in a hurry, and I'm not risking Ratty barging in at Rookwood as he did at Greyfriars.'

'He wouldn't——!'

'He jolly well would! He would be after you like a cat after a mouse. Forget all about it,' said Tom impatiently.

'Then you don't want me?' snapped Figgins.

'You know I do, fathead! But you can't play on Saturday, and that's that.'

'I tell you Ratty wouldn't know——'

'And I tell you he would!' growled Tom, 'and even if he wouldn't it cuts no ice—you're gated, and I can't play a gated man. I was a fool to do it once, but I'm not fool enough to do it twice.'

'Look here——!'

'Oh, pack it up,' said Tom, exasperated. 'Isn't it bad enough to lose my best winger, without being

ragged about it? If you want something to do on Saturday afternoon, go and look for Ratty with a sack and get him instead of Gussy, as you did the other day.'

'Yes, it's funny,' said Tom. 'But it wouldn't have been funny if you'd got Ratty, you ass. You'd have been bunked, and very likely Kerr and Fatty Wynn along with you—and where should we be at Rookwood without Fatty to keep goal?'

'And where will you be without me on the right wing?' yapped Figgins. 'Look here, take my advice——'

'I'll take your advice when I want to head my Housemaster up in a sack, and especially if I want to get the wrong man in a fog,' said Tom, sarcastically. 'But as it is, Levison's going as outside-right.'

'Well, that's rot,' said Figgins. 'Redfern's a better man any day in the week, and you want New House men to give the team a backbone.'

'Redfern's a first-rate man in the half-way line,' said Tom, 'but he's not so good in the front line as Levison.'

'He's a better forward than half—and he's a New House man——'

'Bow-wow! Hallo, Monty, what on earth's the matter?' Tom gave Monty Lowther an anxious look as he came up with a pronounced limp.

Lowther made a wry face.

'Only a game leg,' he answered. 'Wilkins mistook my knee for the ball, I suppose—anyhow he landed his hoof on it like a coke-hammer. Talk about a kick from a mule!'

'Don't say you're crocked for Saturday!' exclaimed Tom in dismay.

'I won't, if you don't want me to, old chap. If you

think I can play soccer on Saturday standing on one leg like a stork——!'

'Fathead!'

'Thanks,' said Monty. 'When you want to pay me some more compliments you'll find me in the study, swimming in Elliman's. Until then, adieu!' And Monty Lowther limped away.

'Well, of all the rotten luck!' growled Tom. 'That means that Monty's out of the team. I've got to find a half, now.'

'Redfern's the man—!' said Figgins. 'You want a New House man, really——'

'Oh, bother the New House——'

'He's a better half than forward——'

'Wha—a—t?'

'Much better,' said Figgins. 'One of the best halves we've got in our House, and that's saying a lot.'

Tom Merry laughed.

'Didn't you say a minute ago that he was a better forward than half?' he asked.

'Oh, did I? Well what I mean is, he's the man you want—'

'Okay,' said Tom, laughing. 'If Lowther's crocked, Reddy goes in.'

'That's sense,' said Figgins, 'and if you've got sense enough to play me in the front line——!'

'Br-r-r-r-r!' grunted Tom. And he walked away to end the argument, leaving Figgins frowning. He was still frowning when he joined Kerr and Wynn, going to the New House.

'That man Merry is a silly owl,' Figgins confided to his chums. 'He won't risk playing me on Saturday. I've asked him. He says no. I'm willing to cut, and risk it——'

'You blithering cuckoo,' said Kerr. 'It wouldn't be a risk, but a cert. If you cut, Ratty would cut after you.'

'Oh, rot!' said Figgins.

'He jolly well would!' said Fatty Wynn. 'It's no great distance to Rookwood, and I'll bet Ratty would follow on your track.'

'Rubbish!' said Figgins.

'Thank goodness Tom Merry's got more sense than you have,' said Kerr.

'Look here, Kerr——'

'Fathead!' said both Figgy's chums, together.

'Well,' hooted Figgins, 'I can jolly well tell you that I've a jolly good mind to cut, anyhow, and——'

'Hush!' hissed Kerr, grabbing him by the arm. 'Do you want Ratty to hear you, you chump?'

Kerr spotted Mr. Ratcliff, standing at his open study window, looking out into the quad.

'Oh!' murmured Figgins.

Whether Mr. Ratcliff had heard Figgy's words, the juniors did not know—but he gave them a very fixed look, as they passed into the House. In the House, Figgins eyed his chums dubiously. 'Think he heard me?' he asked.

'Most likely.'

'Um!' said Figgins.

Figgins was very keen to play soccer at Rookwood School on Saturday. He was very exasperated with Tom Merry for not seeing it as he saw it. But after that, it dawned even on Figgy that he had better give up the idea. And he gave it up.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PLOTTING A PLOT

'Watty!' murmured Arthur Augustus.

'What an honour!' said Blake, sarcastically.

It was Saturday, and Tom Merry and Co. were about to roll off to the station to take the train to Rookwood. A good many fellows gathered to see them off—among them Monty Lowther, with a limping leg, and George Figgins, with a wry face. Kildare of the Sixth came along to wish them luck. But nobody expected to see Mr. Ratcliff. If Mr. Ratcliff was taking an interest in a junior eleven going forth to uphold the colours of St. Jim's on the football field it was the first time in history that Mr. Ratcliff had done so.

But Tom Merry and Co. did not suppose that Mr. Ratcliff's presence indicated an unusual interest in soccer—a sudden awakening of intelligence on his part, as it were. They could guess that Figgins was his game.

Ratcliff had not forgotten the Greyfriars episode. Obviously he was going to keep an eye on Figgins that afternoon. He was going to see that Figgy did not go with the footballers—and no doubt he was going to see that he did not 'cut' later, as he had done before. Mr. Ratcliff's expression was, as usual, severe, and a little sour, and when his glance fell on Figgins in the little crowd, he frowned.

Lowther winked at Tom Merry, who laughed. Other fellows exchanged grins. Ratty's watchfulness was quite superfluous. Figgins was no longer thinking of

soccer that afternoon, had his place in the team was definitely filled. Ratty had all his trouble for nothing, and he was welcome to his suspicions.

It did not occur to any of the juniors that Mr. Ratcliff was moved by anything but suspicion. They would have been quite surprised to discover that Mr. Ratcliff was anxious that that boy of his House should not repeat his reckless act—for the boy's own sake. If Figgins defied his house-master's authority a second time in the same way, Figgins was booked for dire penalties, which Mr. Ratcliff would have inflicted with unsparing severity. But he was far from desiring to inflict them: he would have been better pleased to see the boy heed authority and not ask for trouble. So it was really from kind motives that Ratcliff was keeping an eye on Figgins—to save him from himself, as it were.

But Mr. Ratcliff's sour and forbidding expression did not give the slightest indication of kind feeling within, and nobody suspected him of it. Ratty was suspicious and watchful, and generally obnoxious—that was the opinion of all the fellows who saw him eyeing George Figgins.

It was Figgy's own impression, and the glance he gave his house-master out of the corner of his eye was expressive.

There was no soccer for Figgy that day, and he could not help feeling sore and mutinous. Neither was he feeling too hopeful of the team's chances at Rookwood. Levison of the Fourth, in his place, was pretty good, no doubt, but Figgins could not help feeling that there were too many School-House men in the team. What it really needed, Figgy thought, was a few more New House men to give it a backbone.

Altogether Figgy was not in his bonniest mood, and his eye glinted in the direction of his house-master.

Nor was Monty Lowther, for once, looking as if he found life on this planet a wholly enjoyable proposition. He had a limping leg, a twinge in his knee, and he was out of the game. He might have found consolation in a remarkable jape on Mr. Ratcliff that had been simmering in his fertile brain for many days before Rookwood day. But Tom Merry had put his foot down on japing Ratcliff—refusing even to listen to a word on the subject—and Monty's great idea had had to remain bottled up and was still in its bottled state.

'Cheerio! Don't let Jimmy Silver's crowd wipe up the ground with you,' said Monty Lowther, as Tom Merry waved a farewell hand.

'Wathah not,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I wathah think we shall wipe up the gwound with the Wookwood cwowd, Lowthah. Sowwy you're crocked, old man—but, aftah all, it might have been worse.'

'How could it have been worse?' yapped Monty.

'Well, I might have been cwocked, you know,' said Arthur Augustus, innocently. 'That would have been pwetty sewious, what?'

'Fathead!'

'Weally, Lowthah——!'

'Ass!'

'Bai Jove! I think——!' But what Arthur Augustus thought was lost on the desert air, as the footballers rolled off for the station.

Figgins gave a grunt.

'Rotten!' he said.

'Beastly!' agreed Lowther.

'Putrid luck!'

'And then some!' said Monty.

'Figgins!' came an acid voice.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' Figgins breathed hard. He tried to answer respectfully, but it did not come easy.

Mr. Ratcliff eyed him severely. Figgins was rather a worry on his mind that afternoon, and Mr. Ratcliff did not like being worried by a junior boy of his House. Also, he was concerned for the boy, and the boy was merely discontented—which seemed ungrateful to Mr. Ratcliff.

'I must speak a word of warning to you, Figgins, in view of your conduct last week,' said Mr. Ratcliff, sternly. 'I must warn you that if you should be so foolish, so ill-advised, so wanting in a sense of discipline and proper respect, as to leave the school this afternoon, as you did before, against orders, the result will be extremely serious.'

Figgins compressed his lips and did not answer.

'I shall take measures,' continued Mr. Ratcliff, with increased sternness, 'to ascertain whether you break school bounds, Figgins, since I cannot trust you to regard my injunctions. And if I should find that you are gone out——'

'I'm not going out, sir,' muttered Figgins.

'If I should find that you are gone out,' repeated Mr. Ratcliff, as if he had not spoken, 'I shall take immediate measures to prevent you from defying authority by playing football at Rookwood School. In such circumstances I should myself take the train for Rookwood and bring you back personally. If you were playing football I should call you off the field. Bear that in mind, Figgins, if you should be tempted to repeat your disobedience.'

With that, Mr. Ratcliff walked off to the New

House, leaving George Figgins breathing very hard.

'That does it,' said Figgins, gloomily. 'If I'd thought of cutting after the team—even to watch the game——!' He gave an angry snort.

Monty Lowther glanced after the lean figure of Mr. Ratcliff, disappearing in the distance. His eyes were glimmering.

'Asking for it, by gum,' he murmured.

Figgins looked at him.

'Anything special on this afternoon, Figgy?' asked Monty.

'No—only mooching about calling Ratty names,' growled Figgins.

'What price a jape?'

'Oh, blow your School-House japes.'

'On Ratty——!'

'Oh!' Figgins showed a slight interest. 'I'm feeling like boiling him in oil. What's the big idea? Thought of it all of a sudden?'

'No fear! I've been thinking it over ever since Greyfriars day—but Tom wouldn't hear a word, and Manners backs him up. They're both gone now—and while the cat's away the mice can play, what?' Lowther chuckled. 'I'd have fixed it up with Manners to stay put, while I went over with the team, and see it through—if they'd been willing. Now I'm left out I can handle it myself—and I'm jolly well going to—if you'll play up.'

'But what——?'

'Ratty's going to watch you like a hawk this afternoon.' Monty lowered his voice, cautiously. 'Suppose you're found missing——'

'I shan't be found missing!' grunted Figgins.

'Suppose you were, ass—what would Ratty do?'

'You heard him say what he'd do!' said Figgins bitterly. 'Kerr said he would—now he's said so himself. He'd cut after me to Rookwood and lug me home.'

'And suppose you weren't there?'

'Well you priceless ass,' said Figgins. 'Think I'd cut and risk going up to the Head again, for anything but Rookwood?'

'But suppose you don't cut?' grinned Monty. 'Suppose you're missing but haven't cut at all?'

Figgins stared at him. 'How the thump could I be missing if I hadn't cut? Talk sense.'

'I'll put in words of one syllable, suitable to the intellect of the New House——'

'Oh, don't be a goat.'

'Shut up and listen! Suppose you park yourself somewhere out of sight—but right in the school!' said Lowther. 'Suppose Ratty can't find you when he looks for you—what does he think? That you've cut over to Rookwood. What does he do? Cuts after you! Get it? Ratty has a happy afternoon in railway trains and makes a dashed fool of himself—and when he comes trickling home he finds that all the while you haven't been out of bounds! What?'

'Oh, scissors!' ejaculated Figgins.

'Why shouldn't he have a Pleasant Saturday Afternoon?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Figgins.

Monty Lowther's face brightened. In No. 10 Study in the School-House that wonderful wheeze had gone begging: neither of his chums had deigned even to give it a hearing. Figgins, evidently, was more appreciative. Figgins knew a good thing when he saw it!

'On?' asked Monty.

'What do you think?' chuckled Figgins.

And they walked away together, grinning and whispering—plotting a plot. Other fellows who observed them thought that they looked remarkably cheerful for fellows left out of the soccer team that had gone over to Rookwood. But George Figgins did not remain long under observation. Shortly afterwards he disappeared from view, and if anyone wondered where Figgins was, nobody was likely to guess—least of all was Mr. Ratcliff likely to guess that that junior of his House, whose pursuit of knowledge was never very enthusiastic, had asked good-natured Monsieur Morny for a little help with French grammar and was spending a half-holiday in the French master's study deep in French irregular verbs.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LEG-PULLERS!

Wally of the Third—otherwise Walter Adolphus D'Arcy, younger brother of Arthur Augustus of that ilk—walked into the New House, with his hands in his pockets, his usual cheeky grin on his face, and a certain stickiness of aspect which hinted of recent contact with toffee.

Four of five New House men glanced round at him, with grim glances. School-House fags were not allowed to breeze into the New House as if it belonged to them. Pratt, Owen and Lawrence moved towards him, with the benign intention of dismissing that

cheeky grin from his face by a prompt and efficacious application of boot-leather to his trousers. D' Arcy minor eyed them warily.

'Chuck it,' he said. 'No larks! Message for Figgins! Is he in his study?'

'Oh! said Pratt. If the School-House fag had brought a message, he was entitled to the diplomatic immunities of an ambassador. 'I suppose you can go up and see. But don't be cheeky in this House.'

'This what?' asked Wally. 'Do you call this mouldy old show a House?'

He cut up the stairs before Pratt of the Fourth could think of an adequate reply to that.

Wally of the Third cheerfully banged open the door of Figgins's study. He found that apartment empty. A New House junior in the passage stared at him, and Wally bawled:

'Seen Figgins?'

'I saw him in the quad with a Shell man half-an-hour ago. Haven't seen him since.'

'Oh, blow!' said Wally.

He descended the stairs again, by way of the banisters. Wally of the Third was a lively young gentleman, packed with exuberant spirits: quite a contrast to his major in the Fourth.

He landed from the banisters with a crash and a clatter. This was sheer cheek on the part of a School-House man in the rival House. Pratt of the Fourth was waiting for him—having thought of an adequate reply to Wally's remark about his House. That reply took the form of a lunging boot—and D'Arcy minor roared as he received it, tumbled over, and sat down.

'Whooop!' roared Wally.' You New House smudge,

keep your hoofs to yourself. Look here, where's that smear Figgins?'

'Give him another, Pratters,' grinned Lawrence.

'I'll give him a dozen,' said Pratt.

Wally dodged actively. But he did not dodge out of the New House, as prudence dictated. He had come there for Figgins, and it seemed that nothing short of Figgins would satisfy him.

'Look here, where's Figgins?' he bawled. 'Figgins is wanted, and I said I'd fetch him. Where's Figgins?'

'You young ass, do you want to bring Ratty out of his study?' snapped Owen.

'Who cares?' retorted Wally. 'I've come over here for Figgins. Where is he, I want to know. He's not in the quad, and I've looked in the gym, and——'

'Shut up!' breathed Pratt, as a door was heard to open.

But it was too late. No doubt that clatter had reached Mr. Ratcliff's ears—as well as Wally's bawl. There was a hurried rustle, and the New House master came on the scene, with an angry brow.

'What is this disturbance?' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'D'Arcy minor! What are you doing in this House? How dare you make such a riot here?'

'Oh! Sorry, sir,' said Wally, meekly. 'I—I was only looking for Figgins, sir. I can't find him anywhere.'

'Figgins! Did you say Figgins?' Mr. Ratcliff's eyes snapped.

'Yes, sir! A School-House man wants him, and I said I'd tell him, but I can't find him anywhere,' answered Wally.

Mr. Ratcliff breathed hard. He breathed deep. He had intended, during the afternoon, to keep an eye open for Figgins. So far he had not given the matter

attention. Now his attention was immediately concentrated upon it. Figgins, it seemed, was not to be found!

'Pratt!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'Go to Monteith and request him, from me, to ascertain whether Figgins is in the House.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You may leave this House, D'Arcy minor,' added Mr. Ratcliff acidly, and Wally of the Third left it, without waiting for more.

The cheerful fag walked away across the quad to where Monty Lowther, of the Shell, was leaning on one of the old elms, with his hands in his pockets, and a happy smile of anticipation on his face. Monty still had a severe twinge in his knee—but he had almost forgotten it in the pleasant occupation he had found for that half-holiday.

'Okay?' asked Monty, as the fag came up.

D'Arcy minor grinned.

'Can't find Figgins,' he said. 'He's not in his House. I got Ratty out of his study all right, as you told me to. What's the game, Lowther? I don't make head or tail of it.'

'No need for you to make head or tail of it, my young friend. So long as Ratty goes hunting for Figgins, okay.'

'You're sure he hasn't cut?'

'Quite.'

'All right for Figgins, then,' said Wally. 'Now where's that toffee? You promised me a second packet if I roused Ratty out.'

Monty Lowther, with a cheery grin, handed over a packet of toffee—with which D'Arcy minor immediately departed, to whack it out with Curly Gibson and

Joe Fayne in the Third. Lowther remained leaning on the elm, with his eyes on the distant door of the New House.

All was going well, from the point of view of the funny man of the Shell. Wally of the Third, bribed with toffee, had 'roused out' the New House master, and once Ratty missed Figgins, Lowther counted with certainty on the success of his remarkable scheme for giving Mr. Ratcliff a Pleasant Saturday Afternoon.

Ten minutes later a lean figure emerged from the New House. The grim frown on Mr. Ratcliff's brow was not attractive, but it seemed to amuse Lowther. Evidently Mr. Ratcliff had ascertained that Figgins was not in his House and was going to look for him in other quarters.

During the next quarter of an hour it was quite a game for Monty Lowther. He strolled, at a respectful distance, in the wake of Mr. Ratcliff, as he went up and down and round about St. Jim's looking and inquiring for George Figgins.

He looked in the gym—he walked round the gym. He explored the path by the wall behind the elms. He penetrated the ruin of the old tower and found several juniors there—but not Figgins. He ambled down to Big Side, where a senior Form game was going on—but Figgins was not in the crowd there. He went into the School-House and inquired of fellows in the day-room—but nobody had seen Figgins. He asked almost every fellow he met — fags of the Third, Fourth Form and Shell fellows, even senior men of the Fifth and Sixth—Mr. Ratcliff was leaving nothing to chance—he had to make absolutely sure before he decided that Figgins really had cut over to Rookwood.

But that prolonged search, and those reiterated inquiries, did make assurance doubly sure—and at length, Mr. Ratcliff could have no doubt on the subject.

It was not likely to occur to Mr. Ratcliff, or to anyone else, that Figgins was spending a happy half-holiday on French verbs, shut up in the French master's study, from which every breath of fresh air was carefully excluded. So far from suspecting that Mr. Ratcliff would hardly have believed it had he been told.

He was satisfied at last, and he went back to the New House with an expression on his face, such as Rhadamanthus probably wore in his least amiable moments. A Shell fellow, at a distance, had an eye on Mr. Ratcliff's study window, and smiled as he spotted him at the telephone. Ten minutes later a taxi drove in and stopped at the New House.

Mr. Ratcliff came out and stepped into it. Monty Lowther, hovering in the offing, caught his snap to the driver:

'Wayland Station.'

Twinges in a game knee did not bother Monty Lowther, as he stood and watched the taxi drive away from St. Jim's. He smiled sweetly, regardless of twinges.

With that sweet smile lingering on his face, he strolled away and, passing the window of the French master's study, whistled 'John Peel' more or less musically. Monsieur Morny, within, heard it, and did not know that it was a signal. Figgins knew! French irregular verbs came to a quite sudden stop.

'It's awfully good of you, sir,' said Figgins, rising from the table. 'I think I've got it pretty clear now,

sir. I don't know how to thank you, sir, for giving me so much time on a half-holiday.'

'Rien, rien,' said Monsieur Morny, amiably. 'Zat is nozzings of nozzings! I am verree, verree please to see zis so great interest in your vork, Figgins—it is not always so in ze French set, n'est-ce pas? You zink he is clear now? I give you yet an hour if you vish.'

'Thank you, sir.' Figgins repressed a shudder. 'You're very kind. I think I've got it all right.'

And Figgins departed with his French grammar under his arm. Monty Lowther was waiting for him in the quad.

'Okay?' asked Figgins, eagerly.

'Couldn't be okayer,' answered Monty.

'He's gone?'

'Buzzed off for the station in a taxi.'

'Oh, holy smoke! Ha, ha, ha!' trilled Monty.

Mr. Ratcliff, sitting in his train, with a frowning brow that made other passengers glance at him, little dreamed that he left such merriment behind him at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER XXX

A SURPRISE AT ROOKWOOD!

'Leave it to me!' said Arthur Edward Lovell, of the Rookwood Fourth, pausing for a moment in sucking a lemon.

Jimmy Silver, Rookwood junior captain, looked rather expressively at Lovell. Raby grinned—and

Newcombe grunted. Mornington sniffed, and Tommy Dodd laughed: Cook and Doyle exchanged a wink. Lovell's remark seemed to amuse some of the Rookwooders, and exasperate others. Self-reliance was Arthur Edward Lovell's long suit: though there were Rookwood men who described it as bumptiousness.

The first half was over, with St. Jim's two up, to nil. Tom Merry and Co. were feeling considerably bucked, and there was a cheery smile on the aristocratic face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who had kicked one for St. Jim's. There was a great deal of mud about, and Arthur Augustus had had his share of it—there was even a splash across his noble nose: unheeded in his satisfaction at having kicked a goal for his school. But the Rookwooders were not feeling quite so pleased with themselves. And as Arthur Edward Lovell was keeping goal for his side and had twice been caught napping by the whizzing leather, his undiminished self-reliance—or bumptiousness—seemed a little out of place to his comrades.

'They've got through twice!' remarked Tommy Dodd, Cook, and Doyle, all together.

'Yes—pretty poor work by the backs,' said Lovell, shaking his head. Cook and Doyle played back.

'Anything wrong with the halves?' asked Jimmy Silver, with gentle sarcasm. Jimmy was centre-half.

'Well, you want to pull up your socks, you know,' said Lovell, with another shake of the head. 'And the forwards might put in a punch too. Leave it to me to put paid to them when they get through—that's okay. But we want goals. You won't do a lot of good by falling over the ball, Raby.'

'That man Merry charged me over—!' hissed Raby.

'And who fell over the ball in the goal?' asked Newcombe.

'My foot slipped! Anybody's foot might slip. Now look here,' said Arthur Edward Lovell. 'If we're going to win this match, you men will have to pull up your socks. Don't put it all on the man in the chicken-run. A goalkeeper can save a match—but it's no good asking him to win one. I'll stop them——'

'Expect when they pot the pill?' asked Mornington.

'Look here——!' roared Lovell.

'Pack it up,' said Jimmy Silver, laughing. 'We're going to beat them. Look out for that chap D'Arcy, Lovell. He may look like a tailor's dummy, but he's just mustard.'

'He won't get past me twice,' said Lovell. 'He wouldn't have once, if my foot hadn't slipped.'

'Did your foot slip when Talbot got past you?' asked Mornington.

'I wasn't looking for a shot like that, from right out on the wing, right into the corner. I mean, I nearly had it—it was as near as a toucher— If you think you can teach me to keep goal, Valentine Mornington——'

'No fear! Nobody could,' said Mornington.

'Well, I don't think anybody could,' agreed Lovell, and there was a laugh from the Rookwood footballers. Arthur Edward Lovell was not quick on the uptake, and Mornington's sarcastic meaning was quite lost on him. 'I fancy I can keep goal.'

'Queer fancies some fellows have!' murmured Tommy Dodd.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Look here——!' bawled Lovell.

'Chuck ragging, you fellows,' said Jimmy Silver. 'Pull up your socks—the whistle's just going.'

Arthur Edward Lovell snorted and tramped away to his citadel. The sides lined up: Tom Merry and Co. in high feather, prepared to add two or three more goals to their tally; Jimmy Silver and Co., in determined mood, resolved to wipe up the muddy field with the visitors from St. Jim's.

But truth to tell, there was no doubt that Arthur Edward Lovell, in the home goal, was not in the same street with Fatty Wynn between the St. Jim's sticks. The plump Welsh junior seemed impregnable to attack, a mighty man of his hands, and feet—the Rookwooders gave him plenty to do, but he did it with promptness and despatch—putting paid again and again to the most dangerous shots. But it was a different story at the other end.

'Goal!' yelled Manners, and other St. Jim's fellows who had come over with the team, as the ball went in from Levison of the Fourth.

'Bai Jove! Thwee up!' chuckled Arthur Augustus.

Arthur Edward Lovell stared at the ball, as if quite surprised to find it in his company. But there it was—St. Jim's had got through again. Lovell tossed it out with deep feelings.

Bulkeley, of the Rookwood Sixth, who was referee, blew his whistle, and the game went on hard and fast. More and more mud was spattered about, unheeded by the men on either side. The Rookwooders, putting all their beef into it, came down on the St. Jim's goal like wolves on the fold, and there was hot work in the St. Jim's half, with some hefty charging and shouldering, and two or three fellows on the ground at a time. Then from a press of muddy players, the

ball shot from the foot of Erroll of Rookwood, and for once Fatty Wynn jumped too late.

'Goal!' roared the Rookwood crowd, glad of something to roar about at last. 'Goal!'

As the sides lined up again, with twenty minutes to go, Manners, who was watching them, turned impatiently at a touch on his shoulder.

The next moment he jumped, and really almost fell down in his surprise. He quite forgot to cap Mr. Ratcliff. He stared at that gentleman, as if he had been the ghost of a house-master.

'Manners!' rapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh' Yes, sir!' gasped Manners.

'Where is Figgins?'

'Figgins?' babbled Manners.

'Is he on the field?'

'Eh?'

'Answer me, Manners, at once.'

Harry Manners could only blink at him. What Mr. Ratcliff was doing at Rookwood, he could not begin to guess. He had a reason for being at Greyfriars, on the day of the unlucky match there: but what could have brought him over to Rookwood was quite a mystery. Manners just goggled at him. Other St. Jim's fellows, looking round, goggled too. The ghost of Banquo did not surprise Macbeth more than his unexpected apparition surprised the St. Jim's juniors.

'I have told you to answer me, Manners,' rapped Mr. Ratcliff.

'But what—what——?' babbled Manners, helplessly.

'I have come here for Figgins!'

'Fuf-fuf-Figgins!'

'I could not arrive earlier,' said Mr. Ratcliff, 'I left the school immediately I was assured that Figgins

had come over here to play football. I presume that he is playing now. Authority cannot be flouted in this manner — I shall take Figgins back with me, directly to the presence of his headmaster. Go on the field and tell him to come here immediately, Manners.'

'But—but—but Figgins isn't here, sir!' gasped the bewildered Manners. 'Isn't he at the school, sir?'

'Do not bandy words with me, Manners. Figgins has come here to play football, in defiance of authority, as he did at Greyfriars. I will not allow you to bandy words with me, Manners. Go and call him at once.'

'But—but he can't be here, sir. If he's cut, he can't have come to Rookwood—I should have seen him,' gasped Manners.

'I have told you to call Figgins here, Manners.'

'But I can't sir, as he's not here——'

'I shall report this to your house-master, Manners.'

'But, sir——'

'Enough!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. And he turned his back on Manners and fixed a glittering eye on the footballers, looking for Figgins.

The ball had been kicked off again, and the game was going on: and by that time most of the men on either side were so spattered with mud that recognition was not easy, and the swift and ever-changing movements were a little bewildering to one unaccustomed to watching games. Mr. Ratcliff quite failed to pick out Figgins.

That was far from surprising, as George Figgins was a good many miles away, at his own school. But Mr. Ratcliff was convinced—he had not the slightest doubt—that George Figgins was there—one of the spattered players under his eyes: carrying on with

soccer in reckless defiance of his house-master. Mr. Ratcliff was not the man to let such defiance pass. He had come there to take Figgins away—and he had no hesitation whatever in barging into a football match—he would not have thought twice about barging into a cup final for that purpose. He whisked on the field of play, unheeding the astonished stares of a hundred pairs of eyes.

'Stop this game!' hooted Mr. Ratcliff. 'A boy is here without leave—stop this game! Figgins, I order you to come off the field.'

CHAPTER XXXI

ROUGH ON RATTY!

'Watty, bai Jove!'

'Ratty!'

'Oh, my hat!'

'What the thump——!'

Tom Merry and Co. became aware of Ratty. Jimmy Silver and Co. also became aware of him. To Rookwood eyes he was a stranger—a sour-faced gentleman who had inexplicably invaded the football field. They did not heed him—though Bulkeley gave him an angry shout: 'Keep off! Get back!'

Mr. Ratcliff apparently expected the game to stop at once at his command. It did not stop. Soccer was soccer. There was surprise, there was anger, there was exasperation—but there was no sign of stopping. The game went on regardless of Mr. Ratcliff, who waved bony hands unheeded.

'Figgins!' shouted Mr. Ratcliff.

There was a roar from the Rookwood crowd round the field.

'Get off!'

'Get out of it!'

'Is the man crackers?'

'Who's that lunatic?'

Unheeding, Mr. Ratcliff plunged into the field of play. Then came a sudden surge of players in his direction. Tom Merry had the ball at his feet – the other forwards were backing him up as one man—the Rookwooders speeding to intercept him, and in the rush Jack Blake crashed into the lean figure of the New House master.

Mr. Ratcliff spun. Blake spun over him. Mr. Ratcliff, with a spluttering gasp, crashed. Blake fell over his long legs—Raby of Rookwood fell over Blake. Talbot and Kangaroo stumbled over them all. Jimmy Silver trapped the ball from Tom Merry's foot and kicked it away—dropping it on the sprawling heap near the touch-line. Mr. Ratcliff wondered dizzily what it was that dropped, like a bolt from the blue, on his bony features. But he had no time for wondering. The rush for the ball surrounded him overwhelming him. He did not know who stamped on his legs, or who rested a knee on his waistcoat, or whose boot jammed in his ribs. Dazed and dizzy and bewildered, Mr. Ratcliff sprawled, and rolled, and gasped, and gurgled, and gathered mud, feeling as if the end of all things had come, and the universe round him breaking up into little pieces.

Then the rush left him stranded. The game swept on, and Mr. Ratcliff lay on his back, gazing up at a winter sky, with an angry Sixth-Form man of Rook-

wood staring down at him and stirring him with the toe of his boot.

'Get off the ground!' rapped Bulkeley. 'Are you mad, or what? Get out of this before you're chucked out, see?'

'Urrrggh!' Mr. Ratcliff sat up, gasping. He was breathless, he was muddy, he was rumpled and crumpled—and he was in a towering rage. 'Wurrgh! I—I am here because—'

'I don't care why you're here! Get out.'

'I tell you——'

But Mr. Ratcliff could not tell Bulkeley anything. St. Jim's were attacking the home goal, and Bulkeley had no time to waste on him—he rushed away, leaving Mr. Ratcliff sitting and gasping. A linesman came running up.

'Here, you! Get off.' He grabbed Mr. Ratcliff's shoulder and helped him, or rather dragged him, to his feet. 'You can't come here—you're interrupting the game. Hook it.'

'I insist upon interrupting the game!' shrieked Mr. Ratcliff.

'Boo! Get off! Throw that man out!' came a roar. 'You old donkey, shift.'

'What! What! I repeat——'

Mr. Ratcliff's words were drowned in a roar from the Rookwood crowd. They forgot Mr. Ratcliff and his startling antics, as Jimmy Silver and Co., with a sudden rally, swept down on the visitors' goal, and a non-stop attack caused Fatty Wynn to jump, leap, wind, and twist, stopping shot after shot—till he missed the leather by the fraction of an inch and it landed in the net.

'Goal! Rookwood! Rookwood!' roared the crowd.

The whistle rang out, and then Bulkeley ran across to Mr. Ratcliff. He gave him a glare and a shove.

'Will you get off, or are you waiting to be booted off?' he bawled. 'Haven't you sense enough not to wander on a football field? Get out, will you?'

'I will not get out!' shrieked Mr. Ratcliff. 'I will not go without the boy I have come to take away. A boy of my school is here against orders, and I insist upon his leaving the field at once. I will not stir one step without him.'

It dawned upon Bulkeley that this extraordinary visitor must be a St. Jim's master.

'If that's so, wait for the finish,' he said. 'There's only ten minutes to go. Now please leave the field at once.'

'I refuse to do anything of the kind! I will not take one step,' roared Mr. Ratcliff. 'I will not allow a boy of my House to remain here against orders for one moment. I shall take Figgins off the field——'

Bulkeley breathed hard. The game had stopped, and he realised that he had better clear this up before restarting it. He called to Jimmy Silver.

'Silver! Ask the St. Jim's skipper to come here.'

Tom Merry ran up.

'Do you know this man?' growled Bulkeley.

'Yes,' panted Tom. 'A house-master at my school—'

'Merry! Tell Figgins to leave the field at once,' thundered Mr. Ratcliff. 'I am here to take him away.'

Tom blinked at him.

'Figgins isn't here, sir——'

'Bai Jove! Figgay isn't in this team, Mr. Watcliff!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'I will not listen to this! I insist upon taking Figgins——'

'He's not here!' bawled Blake.

'Wathah not.'

Mr. Ratcliff did not heed. All the footballers had gathered round now, and Mr. Ratcliff scanned face after face—for Figgins. Many faces were spattered with mud, but at close range Mr. Ratcliff was able to recognise one after another. Even Mr. Ratcliff knew that there were eleven men in a soccer team, and he counted eleven St. Jim's faces—none of which was the face of George Figgins. It dawned even upon Ratty's obstinate mind that Figgins of the New House was not in the field—that he was not a member of Tom Merry's team.

'Well?' rapped Bulkeley. 'Is he here?'

'He—he—he does not appear to be here,' stammered Mr. Ratcliff, greatly confused. 'I—I had every reason to think—'

'Please get off the ground at once.'

'I have no doubt that the boy is here, although not on the football field——'

'That does not concern me. You are interrupting the game. Will you get off the ground at once?' snapped Bulkeley.

There was nothing else for Mr. Ratcliff to do. Muddy, rumpled, exasperated, with more aches and pains distributed about his bony person than he could have counted, he got off the ground.

The sides lined up again and forgot his existence. The last ten minutes of the game were too hard and fast for anyone to bother his head about Mr. Ratcliff.

For some minutes he stood, in a gasping state, staring over the crowd round the field. If Figgins was among them, he was not to be picked out from so many. More likely he had spotted his house-master,

and dodged out of sight. That he was there, Mr. Ratcliff did not doubt for a moment. No doubt he had come over to watch the game, hoping that his absence would not be detected. Mr. Ratcliff's jaw set like a vice, as he walked away at last. When the truant returned to the school, he would find his house-master ready to deal with him. Mr. Ratcliff was gone before the final whistle went, and Tom Merry and Co. hardly remembered him, when they came off the field, winners of the Rookwood match by three goals to two.

CHAPTER XXXII

INNOCENT FIGGINS!

Monty Lowther grinned.

Figgins chuckled.

The lean face in the taxi that rolled in at the gates of St. Jim's was set, acid and grim. Only too plainly, Mr. Ratcliff had not enjoyed his 'Pleasant Saturday Afternoon,' and had not returned to St. Jim's in a happy mood.

'He's got back,' murmured Monty Lowther. 'Shall we ask him if he's had a good time, Figgy?'

Figgy chuckled again.

Mr. Ratcliff, when he had alighted from the taxi, glanced at the juniors in the distance, and gave a little start. He had not expected to find the truant at St. Jim's when he got back. He went into the House, and two or three minutes later Baker of the Sixth came out, looked round, and beckoned to Figgins.

'You're wanted, old man,' said Monty, and Figgins

nodded and grinned and cut across to the prefect.

'Mr. Ratcliff's study, at once,' said Baker. He gave the junior a sharp look. 'What have you been up to, you young scamp?'

'Nothing special,' answered Figgins, cheerfully.

'Well, Ratcliff looks as if you have,' said Baker. 'Cut in.'

Figgins cut in. He was quite cool. He had not been out of school bounds, and he had an indubitable alibi. But his heart beat a little faster, as he tapped at the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study and entered. Seldom or never had he seen such concentrated anger in his house-master's face.

'So you have returned, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff, in a voice compared with which the filing of a saw might have been considered harmonious.

'I haven't been out, sir,' answered Figgins innocently.

'You have been to Rookwood, Figgins.'

'Oh, no, sir! I couldn't play football at Rookwood today as I was gated, sir,' explained Figgins. 'Levison was put in, in my place.'

'I am aware that you did not play football at Rookwood, Figgins. But you went there with, or after, the footballers.'

'Oh, no, sir. I haven't been out of gates,' said Figgins.

Mr. Ratcliff's thin lip curled with contempt. It did not occur to him for a moment to believe that statement. He was too thoroughly convinced to the contrary. He rose to his feet.

'I will not listen to this, Figgins. You may repeat your denial to your headmaster, if you choose. I shall now take you to Dr. Holmes.'

'This is the second time, Figgins, that you have openly flouted the authority of your house-master,' said Mr. Ratcliff, in a deep voice. 'It will be the last time. There is no place in this House for so unruly and mutinous a boy. I shall request Dr. Holmes to send you away from the school.'

Figgins caught his breath. From the bottom of his heart, at that moment, he was glad that Tom Merry had not listened to his plea. It would have been the 'sack'. Ratty, it was clear, was implacable. No doubt the aches and pains he had collected, rolling on the football ground amid innumerable boots, helped to make him so. His face was like iron as he signed to Figgins to follow him.

'But, sir——!' gasped Figgins.

'That will do, Figgins. Follow me!'

Mr. Ratcliff whisked out of the study. Figgins followed him, in dismay. Having made a fool of himself at Rookwood, Mr. Ratcliff seemed determined to repeat that performance in the presence of his Chief. Figgins certainly did not want the jape to go to that length.

'If you'll let me speak, sir—!' said Figgins as he trailed out of the New House at Mr. Ratcliff's heels.

'I will not hear a word, Figgins.'

'Dozens of fellows know I've been in gates all the afternoon, sir——'

'Nonsense.'

'Monsieur Morny knows, sir,' said Figgins, desperately. 'I've been with Mossoo this afternoon, sir. Will you ask Mossoo, sir?'

Mr. Ratcliff glanced round at him, in contemptuous astonishment. But the earnestness in Figgins's face seemed to impress him a little.

'Figgins! For half-an-hour, before I left for Rookwood, I searched for you and inquired for you throughout the school. You were absent. You may have returned later—that is immaterial. From half-past two till three o'clock you were not to be found in the school.'

'I was with Monsieur Morny at that time, sir.'

'Nonsense!' almost roared Mr. Ratcliff.

'But it's true, sir——!'

'Upon my word! And what were you doing with Monsieur Morny, if there is a vestige of truth in your statement?'

'Verbs, sir.'

'Wha-a-at?'

'Mossoo was kind enough to help me with my French grammar, sir—I—I asked him, and he was kind enough—'

'You asked Monsieur Morny for extra French on a half-holiday!' said Mr. Ratcliff, as it he could not believe his ears.

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Ratcliff, in a grinding voice. 'I will speak to Monsieur Morny before I take you to the headmaster, Figgins. Come.'

Mr. Ratcliff whisked on to the School-House. Figgins followed him in. Not for a moment did Ratcliff believe the junior's statement. That any fellow had taken extra French on a half-holiday of his own accord, really did want some believing! Still, Ratcliff remembered that he had not actually seen Figgins at Rookwood, and that he could not be too careful in so serious a matter as a demand for the expulsion of a St. Jim's man. This absurd tale was to be disproved before he marched Figgins in to the Head.

He tapped sharply at the door of the French master's study.

'Entrez donc!' came Mossoo's cheery chirp from within.

Mr. Ratcliff whisked in. Figgins followed him.

Monsieur Morny, with the window tightly shut, the fire turning the study almost into an oven, and every breath of air carefully excluded, was esconced in his armchair, happily perusing newspapers from Paris. He started a little at the grim look on Ratcliff's face and rose to his feet.

'Entrez, mon cher Ratcliff! Is anyzing ze mattair?' asked Mossoo.

'Yes, sir,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'This boy of my House tells me that he has been with you this afternoon for extra French. I do not believe his statement, but will you tell me——'

'Mais, c'est vrai, sair,' said Monsieur Morny. 'Zat is true! Ce garçon he ask me, and I am verree, verree please to do as he ask——'

'Figgins was with you this afternoon?'

'Mais oui.'

Mr. Ratcliff gave a gasp—partly from astonishment, partly from the close atmosphere of the French master's study. That any junior schoolboy had willingly sat in that atmosphere, doing unnecessary French on a half-holiday, was incredible.

'Monsieur Morny! You are sure——?'

'Mais oui, j'en suis sur,' said Monsieur Morny, in surprise. 'I was verree please to give Figgins ze help he ask—why for not?'

'At what time was this?' gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

Monsieur Morny considered for a moment or two.

'It vas soon aftair two of ze clock zat ze garçon

come,' he said. 'He remain viz me till soon aftair zree of ze clock.'

Mr. Ratcliff gazed at him. It was incredible—but it was true. While he had been rooting over the school in search of Figgins, before pursuing him to Rookwood, the missing junior had not been missing at all—he had been sitting in the French master's study, most meritoriously occupied in improving his French! It was, perhaps, the first time that Figgins of the Fourth had ever been known to be so keen on the pursuit of knowledge. But there it was!

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Ratcliff, at last. 'I—I—I—I——Thank you, Monsieur Morny! Figgins, you—you may go!'

Figgins went. He was careful not to grin till he was safe out of Mr. Ratcliff's sight.

Mr. Ratcliff took his way back to the New House, in quite an extraordinary frame of mind. He had had to put aside many things that afternoon—to spend his time in railway trains—he had made a ridiculous scene at another school—he had been rolled over and trodden on by footballers. And all the while, that wretched boy had not been out of bounds at all—Figgins had not only remained within gates as ordered but had apparently been occupied in the most praiseworthy manner!

The expression on Mr. Ratcliff's face, as he crossed the quad was, in the opinion of a Shell fellow who had an eye on him, worth a guinea a box! Monty Lowther winked happily into space.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS ASKS FOR IT!

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Arthur Augustus laughed—suddenly and unexpectedly. Every fellow in the St. Jim's Fourth turned his head to look at him—and Mr. Lathom, at his desk, blinked at him over his spectacles in great astonishment.

In any other place and at any other time, D'Arcy of the Fourth might have laughed as loud and long as the spirit moved him to do, without attracting any particular attention. But the St. Jim's Fourth were in form. They were doing Caesar with Mr. Lathom. It was neither a time nor a place for merriment. Indeed few juniors felt merry when they were doing Caesar. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's sudden outbreak of mirth was quite unexpected and surprising.

It was fairly clear that Arthur Augustus was not thinking of the lesson in hand. There was nothing in the 'Gallic War' to make a fellow laugh. Arthur Augustus had been looking, for some time, very thoughtful, but his thoughts were not on Julius Caesar's ancient campaigns in Gaul. Something much more amusing had evidently popped into his noble mind—leading to that sudden laugh that made the Fourth Form jump as one man.

'D'Arcy!' Mr. Lathom's voice rumbled. 'D'Arcy! What do you mean? How dare you interrupt the lesson in that unseemly manner, D'Arcy?'

'Oh!' Arthur Augustus crimsoned. 'Sowwy, sir!

I—I quite forgot that I was in the form-woom for the moment, sir.'

'What?' exclaimed Mr. Lathom.

'I—I was thinkin' of somethin' else, sir,' stammered Arthur Augustus. 'I am sowwy, sir, that I quite forgot——'

'Upon my word!' said Mr. Lathom. 'You must learn, D'Arcy, to think of your lessons when you are in the form-room and to dismiss other matters from your mind. You may sit down, Clive—you will go on, D'Arcy, and if you fail to render a good construe, I shall give you the whole lesson to write out after class.'

'Oh, cwumbs!'

'Construe!' snapped Mr. Lathom.

'Yaas, sir. Oh, certainly, sir.' Arthur Augustus stared at his Caesar, blankly. Only too clearly, his thoughts had wandered far away from the lesson, and he did not know where Sidney Clive had left off. 'I—I—I—would you mind tellin' me the place, sir?'

'You should know the place, D'Arcy,' said Mr. Lathom, severely.

'Yaas, sir, but——'

'Prima luce—!' whispered Jack Blake.

'Thanks, deah boy. Pwimah luce, cum summus mons a Labieno teneretur—' Arthur Augustus found his place and eyed his Latin page dubiously. He tried to collect his noble thoughts and concentrate them, but he was a little confused, under Mr. Lathom's stern eye. 'Pwimah luce—um—pwimah luce——'

'At dawn——!' whispered Kerr.

'Thank you vewy much, Kerr, that's vewy decent of you—'

'Shut up, you ass——'

'Weally, Kerr——'

'Kerr! Are you giving D'Arcy the translation?' inquired Mr. Lathom, in an ominous voice.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' stammered Kerr.

'Take fifty lines, Kerr. D'Arcy, if you do not immediately construe, you will be kept in after class to write out the lesson.'

'Bai Jove! I—I mean, pwimah luce—that is, at dawn—cum summus mons a Labieno teneretur—Labienus had got as far as Mons——'

'What!' shrieked Mr. Lathom.

'Oh, crikey!' murmured Blake, and some of the Fourth-formers chuckled. Arthur Augustus was no whale on Latin, but that con was worthy of Baggy Trimble at his worst.

But Mr. Lathom did not smile. Lathom took Latin con seriously and had no use for howlers in the form-room.

'D'Arcy! Have you prepared this lesson?' he demanded.

'Oh, yaas, sir! I did my pwep all wight——!'

'Are you not aware that "mons" is Latin for mountain?'

'Bai Jove! So it is!' agreed Arthur Augustus. 'I—I did not notice that it hadn't a capital lettah, sir! It—it is a beastly mountain, not a beastly town—I—I—I mean——'

'If you do not construe that passage correctly——'

'Certainly, sir. I——'

Bang! Ralph Reckness Cardew, at a little distance, dropped a book on the form-room floor, with a resounding concussion. Mr. Lathom whirled round towards him.

'Cardew! Was that you?'

'Quite an accident, sir,' drawled Cardew. 'It slipped from my hand, sir.'

'You should not allow a book to slip from your hand in the form-room, Cardew. You will take fifty lines.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Cardew imperturbably.

Mr. Lathom gave him a glare. Perhaps he suspected —what all the other fellows knew—that Cardew had dropped that book to gain a few moments for Arthur Augustus.

Arthur Augustus had not lost the chance. Immediately Lathom's eyes were turned towards Cardew, he whispered to Kerr: 'What the dooce does the putwid stuff mean, Kerr, old chap?'

'At dawn Labienus had occupied the summit of the height, fathead,' whispered back Kerr.

'Bai Jove! Are you suah——?'

'Quiet!' hissed Kerr.

The momentary interruption was over, and the form-master's eye on Arthur Augustus again. But the swell of St. Jim's was now prepared to carry on, though he seemed smitten with some doubt of the correctness of Kerr's translation.

'D'Arcy! You are wasting the time of the class,' snapped Mr. Lathom. 'You will construe this instant, or——'

'Yaas, sir! I am quite weady,' said Arthur Augustus, cheerfully.

'Then translate at once.'

'Yaas, sir! At dawn Labienus had occupied the summit of the height, fathead,' said Arthur Augustus, repeating Kerr's words—the last of which certainly did not belong to the 'con', though Gussy did not realise that at the moment.

Mr. Lathom almost fell down.

'What—what—what was it you said, D'Arcy?' he gasped.

'Isn't that wight, sir?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Fourth. For the second time in that lesson, the unusual sound of laughter woke the echoes of the Fourth-Form room. They really could not help it.

'D'Arcy!' thundered Mr. Lathom. 'This is impertinence! How dare you apply such an expression to me, your form-master? I can scarcely believe my ears. Stand out before the form, D'Arcy.' Mr. Lathom clutched the cane from his desk.

'Bai Jove! You uttah ass, Kerr, I had a feelin' that that twanslation wasn't wight——'

'Oh, you priceless chump!' said Kerr.

'Weally, you cheekay New House smudge——' Arthur Augustus continued hotly.

'Do you hear me, D'Arcy?' Mr. Lathom swished the cane. 'Now bend over that desk!'

Swipe!

'Oh, cwumbs! Wow!'

'You will stay in after class and write out the whole lesson, D'Arcy. Now go to your place. You will go on, Figgins.'

Arthur Augustus sat very uncomfortably in his place during the remainder of the lesson. And when it was over, and the Fourth Form surged out, Arthur Augustus had the pleasure—or otherwise—of remaining in his place, writing out a section of the Gallic War. Something or other—nobody knew what—had caused Gussy to break out into involuntary merriment early in the lesson—but all signs of merriment had now departed, and nothing could have been more

serious than his aristocratic visage, as his pen travelled reluctantly from 'Eodem die' to 'castris castra ponit.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SURPRISE FOR FIGGINS—AND FOR MONTY LOWTHER!

'Figgins!'

'Yes, Monteith.'

'Ratcliff's study.'

'Oh!' said Figgins.

The Sixth-Form man passed on, leaving Figgins and Co. looking at one another. A summons to Mr. Ratcliff's study was never grateful or comforting—even when a fellow had nothing on his conscience. Figgy could not help feeling a misgiving that that sudden summons might portend that Ratty had 'tumbled' to the fact that his leg had been pulled on Saturday afternoon. Figgins and Co. had been grinning over Arthur Augustus's misadventure in the Gallic War, when they came out of the form-room. But they did not grin now—they looked awfully serious.

'Think he's got wise to it?' asked Figgins, anxiously. 'He's frightfully sharp—noses into things like a gimlet. That ass Lowther has been talking—he's told half the school the joke against Ratty——'

'It's you that's the ass, old chap,' said Kerr. 'You were a priceless ass to join up with a School-House man to rag our own beak.'

'Well, Ratty asked for it——'

'I know he did. But he's our house-master—and

he's not really a bad sort, under his crust,' said Kerr. 'You'd better cut in—Ratty doesn't improve with keeping.'

'What about shoving some exercise books in your bags, just in case— !' suggested Fatty Wynn.

'Br-r-r-r!' said Figgins. And he walked off to the New House, not in a happy mood, leaving his chums rather anxiously awaiting his return.

He halted at the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study, hesitating before he knocked. He was feeling a good deal like Daniel on the threshold of the lion's den. However, there was no help for it—so he dared to be a Daniel, tapped at the door, and entered the study.

'Ah! Figgins! I sent for you,' said Mr. Ratcliff. To Figgy's surprise and relief, he was not frowning, and the cane was not lying ready to his hand. He was looking very thoughtful, but there were no signs of wrath.

'Yes, sir,' said Figgins, meekly. It was not going to be a row about the happenings of Saturday, he could see that, and he wondered what it was his house-master wanted with him.

'I have been thinking over your case, Figgins. On Saturday, as you know, I was led to suppose that you had again disregarded authority and left the school against orders——'

'Yes, sir,' said Figgins, faintly, as his house-master paused. Was it going to be a row, after all?

'It transpired that that was an erroneous impression,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'So far from having acted in such a manner, I found that you had been spending your half-holiday in a meritorious, indeed praiseworthy, way.'

'Oh!' gasped Figgins, his cheeks crimsoning.

'I have been thinking over this, and I feel that I did you some injustice, Figgins,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'You do not, I believe, always give satisfaction to your form-master in form, or to Monsieur Morny in the French set. So I am very pleased to learn that you asked Monsieur Morny for extra French on a half-holiday, entirely of your own volition.'

Figgy's cheeks grew redder, till they rather resembled freshly-boiled beetroots. He felt that he would rather Ratty had found him out and caned him.

'Oh, sir,' he stammered. 'I—I——'

'I repeat, Figgins, that I am pleased by this,' said Mr. Ratcliff. 'You are a somewhat thoughtless boy, and often careless—and this incident has improved my opinion of you very much. In the circumstances, I shall rescind your gating for six half-holidays, and the matter ends here.'

'Oh, sir! Thank you, sir!' mumbled Figgins.

'That is all, Figgins—you may go.'

Figgins looked at him. It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out a confession. But it was impossible, and he left the study in silence. His face was still red, and he had a worried look, when he rejoined his friends in the quad.

'Licked?' asked Kerr.

Figgins shook his head.

'Not sent up to the Head again?' asked Fatty Wynn, anxiously.

'No!' muttered Figgins. 'Ratty hasn't tumbled. I—I almost wish he had!' Figgins gave an uncomfortable wriggle. 'I never felt such a rotten humbug in my life. I'll jolly well punch Lowther's head, bother him.'

'But what—?' asked Kerr and Wynn together.

'I've had a pat on the back,' growled Figgins. 'Ratty's pleased with that extra French on Saturday afternoon.'

'Oh, my hat!' gasped Fatty Wynn, and Kerr whistled.

'I'm let off the gating,' went on Figgins. 'There's only one "half" left out of the six, but that's something—okay for Wednesday. That's my reward for—for pulling the old bean's leg and making a fool of him, and—and—Oh, I jolly well feel like kicking myself.'

'Ratty's not a bad old bean, in his way,' said Kerr, slowly. 'He's crusty, musty, and worries himself and everybody else, but he means to be just.'

'A beast, but a just beast!' grinned Fatty Wynn.

'Don't you call him names, Fatty,' said Figgins, warmly. 'After all, he's our house-master. Don't you slang him.'

'Well, I like that!' exclaimed Fatty, staring. 'Who was slanging him up hill and down dale only the other day? Who was going to head him up in a sack——?'

'Let me catch anybody heading him up in a sack!' said Figgins, hotly. 'I'd jolly well—Hallo, here's that ass—that chump—that fathead—that School-House smudge—that blithering idiot——'

It was Monty Lowther of the Shell who came up. He had a smile on his face, and a glimmer in his eyes, which hinted of japing thoughts in his active mind. He gave the New House trio a cheery grin, not even noticing the warlike glare of George Figgins.

'Looking for you fellows,' said Monty. 'I've got the biggest wheeze ever, up against Ratty——'

'Who's Ratty?' asked Figgins.

Lowther stared at him.

'Eh! Your beak, of course. What do you mean?'

'I mean that if you're talking about our beak, you'd better call him by his name and not give us any of your School-House cheek.'

'Is that a joke?' asked Lowther, mystified. 'Look here, don't be a goat! We pulled Ratty's leg all right on Saturday. Well, what about pulling it again? I've thought it all out—'

'You have?' asked Figgins, with withering sarcasm, 'and what did you do that with?'

'Oh, don't be funny—listen to a chap,' said Monty impatiently. 'I get Ratty on a School-House phone. He hikes across and finds out that Railton doesn't want him—what would he think?'

'He would think that some howling ass had been let out of a home for idiots, and was playing fool tricks.'

This was not encouraging. Figgins, it seemed, was not in a japing mood! But the funny man of the Shell was not easily discouraged.

'He would think that he had been got out of his study for some reason,' he said, 'and he would cut back to see what had happened. Well, he finds the word 'RATS' written right across his study table—daubed in big capital letters with a folded handkerchief dipped in ink. He finds the hanky, and it's yours—'

'Mine!' ejaculated Figgins.

'That's the big idea,' grinned Lowther. 'Yours, with your initials in the corner, so there can't be any mistake. He gets after you again—same as on Saturday. You can't be found, same as before. Ratty raises Cain all over the school—till he finds you. And where are you?'

'Well,' said Figgins. 'Where am I?'

'In Lathom's study,' chuckled Lowther. 'You've asked Lathom to help you with a passage in the Aeneid. See? Jolly old alibi, same as before. You've been with Lathom all the time, same as you were with Mossoo! Then Ratty can amuse himself by trying to find out who pinched your hanky and left it in his study for him to find! Ha, ha, ha!' Monty Lowther burst into a happy trill of laughter.

He seemed to expect Figgins and Co. to echo this merriment. But they did not even smile. They gazed at him.

'Is that the lot?' asked Figgins.

'That's the lot, except that you'll have to lend me a hanky with your initials on it,' said Monty. 'What do you think of the idea?'

'I won't tell you what I think of it,' said Figgins, 'it would take too long. But we'll show you what we think of a School-House tick fancying he can play fool tricks on our house-master. Collar him.'

'Here—I say—leggo!' roared Monty Lowther, as the three New House juniors collared him as one man. 'I say—can't you understand it's a jape—leggo—a jape on Ratty—don't you want to make the old smudge sit up? Will you leggo?— Oh, crumbs! Yoo-hoop!'

Bump!

Monty Lowther sat down on the cold, unsympathetic quad, suddenly and hard. He yelled as he sat.

'That's for your big idea, you School-House chump!' said Figgins. 'Now give him another for cheeking our beak.'

Bump!

'Leggo!' shrieked Lowther. 'You New House rotters—oh, my hat! Oh, scissors! Will you leggo? If you don't leggo, I'll—yarooop!'

Bump!

'That's one for luck,' said Figgins, 'and there's lots more where that came from, if you cheek our beak, you School-House tick. Go and eat coke.'

And Figgins and Co. walked away, leaving Monty Lowther sitting dizzily on the earth, gasping for breath, and blinking after them in astonishment and wrath.

CHAPTER XXXV

GUSSY ON THE WAR-PATH!

Tom Merry laughed.

It was tea-time, and Tom was coming along to Study No. 6, in the Fourth, with an invitation to tea. There had been a hamper from home, arriving like corn in Egypt in a lean year, and while Manners and Lowther unpacked it in No. 10, Tom went to call his friends in the Fourth to the feast. Blake and Co., it seemed, were not at the moment thinking of tea—judging by the voices that were audible in the passage, there was a warm argument going on in the study.

'I wefuse,' came the dulcet tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. 'I uttahly wefuse to do anythin' of the kind, Blake.'

'Look here, you image——'

'I desiah you fellows to undahstand, distinctly, that I wefuse to let up on Watty. I wegard Watty as a wat——'

'You howling ass!' said Herries.

'You fellows may use all the oppwobwious expressions you like, but it will not make a spot of difference.'

'Have a little sense!' urged Digby.

'I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I mean, I wefuse to let up on Watty. Have you fellows forgotten that he smacked my nappah?' asked Arthur Augustus, in tonest of deep and thrilling indignation. 'Aren't you awah that he actually smacked my head?'

'Nothing in it to damage, was there?' asked Blake.

'Wats! I wepeat——'

'Look here——!' roared Blake.

'Wubbish!'

'Trouble in the jolly old happy family?' asked Tom Merry in the doorway. 'What's the row, Gussy?'

'There is not exactly a wow, Tom Mewwy. Only these fellows keep on arguin' and arguin'——'

'That image,' said Blake, 'that fathead—that illustration out of a tailor's paper—that brainless chump—wants to get himself bunked, and we're jolly well not going to let him.'

'He's after Ratty,' sighed Digby. 'He's thought of a new wheeze for getting the Head to give him a flogging.'

'It popped into his head in class this morning,' said Herries. 'There was plenty of room for it.'

'He had a row with Lathom,' said Blake. 'He hadn't any time to think about Caesar, being too busy thinking out wheezes for ragging Ratty. He made us all jump by suddenly giggling in class——'

'Bai Jove! I did not giggle, you uttah ass—I twust that I am quite incapable of gigglin'—' exclaimed

Arthur Augustus, indignantly. 'I weally could not help laughin', thinkin' of Watty jumpin' when a cwackah goes off in his study——'

'A whatter?' ejaculated Tom Merry.

'A cwackah, deah boy,' chuckled Arthur Augustus. 'I have bought a jumpin' cwackah fwom Twimble—one of those howwid cwackahs that goes on bangin' and bangin' and bangin'——'

'Trimble let him have it for two bob,' said Blake, sarcastically. 'I suppose it cost Trimble about sixpence.'

'That is an ewwah, Blake, Twimble told me he would let me have it for the same pwice that he paid for it, and I thought it vewy good-natured of him.'

'Ain't he a prize-packet?' asked Blake. 'Oughtn't he to be in a museum? Well, he wants to plant that cracker in Ratty's fire-grate, to go off when Ratty puts a match to the fire.'

'Oh, suffering cats!' ejaculated Tom. 'Gussy, you can't do it.'

'Can't I just?' grinned Arthur Augustus. 'That is pwecisely what I am goin' to do, Tom Mewwy. I'll teach Watty to smack my head!'

'He doesn't need teaching—he did it all right,' said Blake.

'Wats! Smackin' a fellow's head!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Do St. Jim's men have their heads smacked? Is it the sort of thing any fellow could tolerate? I pause for a weply!' added Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

'Of course, it was pretty serious,' said Blake. 'It disturbed the parting of his hair—and Gussy spends three hours a day brushing his hair——'

'I do nothin' of the sort!' shrieked Arthur Augustus.

'I have nevah spent more than a quartah of an hour bwushin' my hair, as you know vewy well, Blake.'

'Ratty ought to die the death,' went on Blake. 'Something lingering with boiling oil in it would about to meet the case. But can you do those things to beaks?'

'Give Ratty a miss and come along to tea in my study,' said Tom Merry, laughing. 'We've got a hamper from home——'

'Good egg!' said Blake. 'Come on, Gussy.'

'I wefuse to come on, Blake. Thank you vewy much, Tom Mewwy, but I am not thinkin' of tea just now. Watty has gone out—I saw him from the window—and I am goin' to cut acwoss to the New House, and plant the cwackah in his gwate. You see, I know all about his mannahs and customs fwom a New House man,' said Arthur Augustus, astutely. 'Watty has the fiah laid in his gwate, and puts a match to it when he goes to his study. This time he will be puttin' a match to a jumpin' cwakah too!' And Arthur Augustus chuckled. 'Will he jump? Will he bound? Will he wage a woar? Ha, ha!'

'Is that the cracker?' asked Tom, glancing at a little cardboard box in the study table, over which Gussy's hand hovered.

'Yaas, wathah! It's in this box,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I shall poke the box into the middle of the fiah, you see, with the cwackah in it. So Watty couldn't possibly spot it. He might pewwaps spot the cwackah on its own, bein' such a vewy sharp and wary old bird—but if he spotted the box, he would only suppose that it was part of the fuel, like the wood, papah and so on. See?'

Evidently Arthur Augustus had thought it all out.

'That box isn't going out of this study,' said Blake, positively.

'Wats!'

'Chuck it and come along to tea with Tommy,' urged Digby.

'Wubbish!'

'You'll get spotted!' roared Herries. 'Ratty will know who parked that cracker in his grate, just as if you told him yourself.'

'Wot!'

'Well, there's only one thing for it,' sighed Blake. 'We shall have to sit on his head till he gives up the idea.'

'Weally, Blake——'

'Hold on,' said Tom Merry, glancing from the study window. 'Is that Ratty coming in at the gates?'

'Bai Jove!' Arthur Augustus jumped to the window and scanned the distant gates through his eyeglass. 'I don't see him, Tom Mewwy. If he has come in, that cwabs the whole thing. Where is he?'

Blake and Herries and Digby crowded round Gussy at the window. They would have been rather relieved to see Mr. Ratcliff coming in—even Gussy would not have thought of carrying on with his wonderful wheeze, with Ratty in the offing. But they could see nothing of the long lean figure of the New House master.

Tom Merry stepped back from the window, while the four scanned the quad for Ratty—Arthur Augustus most keenly and anxiously of the four. Behind Arthur Augustus's noble back, Tom swiftly opened the lid of the cardboard box, lifted out the cracker, and slipped it into his pocket. He closed the lid securely and turned back to the window.

'See him?' he asked.

'Nothing like him,' answered Arthur Augustus. 'You must have been mistaken, Tom Mewwy—Watty has not come in. It's all wight.'

'All wrong,' growled Blake. 'You're not taking that box out of this study, Gussy.'

'Wats!'

'Look here—!' bawled Herries.

'Pway don't woar at a chap, Hewwies. I have mentioned more than once that I dislike bein' woared at.'

'Leave that box alone!' hooted Dig.

'It's all wight, Dig. You fellows go along to Tom Mewwy's study, and I will join you when I have planted this box in Watty's gwate——'

'Oh, collar him,' snorted Blake. 'I can see that we've got to sit on his head—may as well get on with it.'

Arthur Augustus picked up the box and made a step towards the door. Blake and Herries and Dig made a step towards Arthur Augustus, all together. But Tom Merry interposed, pushing them back.

'Hold on,' he said.

'You silly ass!' howled Blake. 'You're letting him get away—after him——'

Arthur Augustus stepped out of the study. Generally his movements were leisurely, but he lost no time now. Gussy was determined to carry on with that rag on Ratty, and certainly he did not want his loyal and devoted chums to up-end him in the study and sit on his head. He whipped out of Study No. 6—the door banged, and Gussy was gone.

'Hold on, I tell you!' gasped Tom Merry, as Blake and Co. grasped at him and spun him out of the way.

He staggered against the table, as they rushed for the door. 'Stop, you fatheads! I've got the cracker.'

'Wha-a-at——?'

Tom held up the cracker. Blake, Herries and Digby stared at it blankly.

'Is—is that Gussy's cracker?' stuttered Blake.

'Just the thump——?'

Tom chuckled breathlessly.

'Easy! I snooped it out of the box while Gussy was looking out of the window for Ratty.'

'Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!'

Tom slipped the cracker back into his pocket.

'Safer there than in Ratty's fireplace, what?' he asked. 'About half the New House will spot Gussy going to Ratty's study, I expect. But it won't matter, as he won't be doing any harm——'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled Blake and Co.

Study No. 6 echoed with merriment. Blake and Co. were no longer alarmed for their aristocratic chum. The idea of the unsuspicious Gussy planting the empty box in Ratcliff's fireplace, while the cracker remained in the School-House, made them shriek.

'Oh, dear!' gasped Blake. 'Gussy will be the death of me some day—I know he will! Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Herries and Dig.

'Come on,' said Tom, laughing. 'Tea in my study—Gussy will be late, but if it makes him happy to add a spot of cardboard to Ratty's study fire, why not?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Four merry juniors went along to No. 10 in the Shell to tea; what time Arthur Augustus walked across the quadrangle with his usual elegant saunter, with a cheery smile on his face and an empty cardboard box in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXXVI

CORNERED!

'Oh, cwikey!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy barely suppressed that startled ejaculation, giving as sudden a jump as the jumping-cracker itself could have given.

He caught his breath as the footstep fell on his noble ear. He was kneeling on the hearthrug in Mr. Ratcliff's study in the New House—when, in the corridor without, a creaking tread approached the door.

All had gone well, so far, with the adventurous Gussy. Tom Merry had predicted that half the New House would spot him going to Mr. Ratcliff's study. But luck had favoured Arthur Augustus. Nobody seemed to be about. Figgins and Co., from a landing, glanced at him over the banisters, but as D'Arcy did not look up he remained unaware of Figgins and Co. Monteith of the Sixth gave him a stare from the doorway of the senior day-room, but Arthur Augustus did not glance in that direction, and he passed on unaware. He was prepared to be cautious—very cautious—but caution did not seem, after all, to be necessary, and he whipped into Mr. Ratcliff's study and shut the door after him, with a happy conviction that he had arrived entirely unobserved.

Once in the study, with the door safely shut, Arthur Augustus got busy.

How long Mr. Ratcliff would remain absent, he naturally did not know, but the New House master seldom took long walks, and Gussy was anxious to get through and get out before Ratty blew in.

The fire, as he had told his chums, was laid in the grate, all ready for Mr. Ratcliff to put a match to it. There was a crumpled paper, with a fire-lighter on it, sticks criss-crossed above and surmounted by a superstructure of knobs of coal. A lunge of the tongs upset that neat arrangement in a moment. Then Arthur Augustus, with a chuckle, drew the cardboard box from his pocket and planted it in the grate, on the fire-lighter. Over it he rearranged the sticks and then, lump by lump, the coal was added, each lump picked up carefully in the tongs and placed in position. It was the work of only three or four minutes, and Arthur Augustus surveyed it with satisfaction. Not a sign of the cardboard box was to be seen. It was completely hidden. Nothing would be seen of it, but something would be heard of it, when the flames reached it and set the cracker going! There was not the remotest suspicion in Gussy's mind that the cracker was no longer in the box. Gussy was not a suspicious fellow.

And then——! Then, as Arthur Augustus was about to rise from his noble kness and take a cautious departure, that creaking tread fell on his ears—coming up the passage to the door.

Arthur Augustus gave one convulsive jump and stared round at the door, his eyeglass dropping from his eye and fluttering at the end of its cord. If this was Ratcliff returning, he was fairly caught.

'Oh, cwikey!' breathed Arthur Augustus.

But it might not be Ratcliff. The footstep might pass the door—or it might be somebody coming to see Ratcliff, who, finding that he was out, would go away again. There was a spot of hope! For a paralysed moment or two, Arthur Augustus stared at the door—

then he acted swiftly. One bound carried him to the corner of the study where a screen stood. Mr. Ratcliff was susceptible to draughts, and in the evening, when his blinds were drawn, that screen was placed before the window. At other times it stood across the corner. Arthur Augustus crammed himself in the corner behind the screen, which hid him from view as the study door opened.

Arthur Augustus's heart was thumping. He tried to still his breathing. Behind the screen, he could not be seen—neither could he see. But he could have little doubt that it was Ratcliff who had come in, as the newcomer entered without a knock and shut the door after him. Whoever he was, it seemed that he had come to stay.

Scratch! It was the sound of a match.

That settled it! It was Ratcliff, and he was putting a match to the fire. Arthur Augustus heard a sound of crackling.

'Oh cwumbs!' he breathed, inaudibly.

There was a creak, as somebody sat down in the chair at the table. There was a rustle of papers.

Arthur Augustus could have groaned.

Ratcliff, evidently, was settling down. D'Arcy had noticed a pile of papers on the study table. Form papers that Mr. Ratcliff had to correct for the Fifth. If Ratty had settled down to that pile, he was likely to be occupied for some time.

Arthur Augustus felt a bead of perspiration on his noble brow. Any minute now the explosion might come. The fire was burning cheerily, the flames must be licking round the carboard box. Any minute—any second—the cracker might catch, and then——!

Then there would be bang on bang with a startled

and astounded Ratty jumping almost out of his skin. Everything was going according to schedule, excepting that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was still in the study. According to schedule, he should have been at a safe distance when Ratty came in. Unluckily, he was not! He was parked behind the screen in the corner—absolutely certain to be discovered when the explosion brought a startled crowd to the spot.

He heard a grunt. Apparently Mr. Ratcliff had found something in one of the Latin proses that did not please him. He grunted his disapproval.

'St. Leger—pah—a careless boy.' Arthur Augustus heard an acid mutter. 'Pah!'

Then papers rustled again. Then Arthur Augustus's heart jumped, as he heard the house-master rise from the chair. If he was going out of the study—if only for one minute—Arthur Augustus was already thinking of escape by way of the window.

But that brief hope was speedily dashed. He heard a clinking sound and knew that a poker had been picked up from the fender.

'Oh, scissahs!' breathed Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Ratcliff had risen to poke the fire. The explosion had not come yet—it was strangely delayed. But that would do it! There was not the slightest doubt that it would happen when Mr. Ratcliff poked the fire. It occurred to Arthur Augustus that Mr. Ratcliff, poking the fire, would have his back to the corner where the screen stood. He ventured to look round the edge of the screen and had a back view of a lean figure, poker in hand, stooping.

He almost shuddered, as Ratty lunged the poker into the fire. Now it was coming—it had to come!

But it did not come! Mr. Ratcliff poked the fire,

and flames leaped up, and fuel crackled. Still there was no explosion. The cardboard box must have been consumed to ashes by that time. Yet the cracker had not caught. There was nothing in the nature of an explosion. There was not the ghost of a bang! Having poked the fire, Mr. Ratcliff laid down the poker in the fender, and sat down again to Form papers—Arthur Augustus's head popping back behind the screen, like that of a tortoise into its shell.

How that jumping cracker failed to explode, Arthur Augustus could not begin to guess. It was in the very centre of a glowing fire, yet not a bang came from it—not a whisper. Something, apparently, was amiss with that cracker!

In the circumstances, Arthur Augustus was glad of it. Making Ratty jump when he was at a safe distance was one thing—making him jump when he was only two or three yards away was quite another. That beastly cracker, in some mysterious way, had failed to explode—and if it kept on failing to explode, there was a chance for Gussy yet.

And it did keep on. So far from exploding, that cracker gave no hint whatever of its existence—Gussy might almost have supposed that it hadn't been in the cardboard box at all! That explanation did not occur to his mind—he was simply mystified. But he was glad that the cracker failed to play up according to plan. By this time it was clear that there was not going to be any explosion—and all Arthur Augustus had to do was to remain parked, till Mr. Ratcliff left the study and gave him a chance to get clear.

Unfortunately, Mr. Ratcliff showed no sign whatever of intending to leave the study.

Paper after paper rustled under his bony hands —

and Arthur Augustus wondered despairingly whether he ever would be finished.

He ventured, at last, to peer out again. He had a view of a mortar-board on the top of a bent head. If Mr. Ratcliff had looked up he must have seen that worried and anxious face peering from behind his screen. Luckily, he did not look up. Obviously he had not the remotest idea that anyone but himself was in the study.

He was about half-through that pile of papers. Nearly a dozen remained to be examined. He made a movement, and Arthur Augustus popped back again behind the screen. Papers rustled, and Mr. Ratcliff grunted again.

'Oh, deah!' Arthur Augustus moaned silently. 'Is that howwid old smudge goin' to sit there for evah and evah and evah? Oh, cwikey!'

Minute followed minute, rustling paper followed rustling paper, as Mr. Ratcliff worked his way industriously through the pile. Never had minutes seemed so long to Arthur Augustus. Every one of them, no doubt, contained only the usual allowance of sixty seconds, but every second might have been a minute, every minute an hour, to the hapless School-House junior parked in the corner of the study.

Arthur Augustus realised that he was hungry. He had had no tea—and tea in Tom Merry's study must be long over by this time. He was getting pins and needles. His retreat was well chosen for concealment, but it was close and cramped, and he dared hardly stir, lest Ratty should hear him. Pins and needles started in his foot and crept up to his knee. It was sheer agony to remain still. But he had to remain still —if he was not to be discovered hidden in the New

House master's study. The perspiration trickled down Arthur Augustus's noble brow.

Still the papers rustled, still Mr. Ratcliff jabbed with a pencil, at intervals grunting. Evidently he was going through the whole pile, slowly and carefully, like the conscientious and meticulous master he was. Arthur Augustus began to wonder dizzily whether he would get away before lock-ups—before he was shut out of his own House. And still the leaden minutes crawled by, and Arthur Augustus, in the throes of pins and needles, was barely able to repress a wild desire to shriek. And then, to his infinite relief, came a tap at the study door.

CHAPTER XXXVII

WHERE IS GUSSY?

'Where's that ass?'

'Where's that ass?'

'Where's that fathead?'

'Where's that burbling jabberwock?'

'O where and O where can he be?' sang Monty Lowther.

'He can't be in the New House all this time,' said Manners.

'Then where is he?' asked Tom Merry.

'Oh, the ass!' said Blake.

'Oh, the blithering cuckoo!' said Herries.

'Oh, the benighted chump!' said Digby.

They were anxious for Gussy. Six fellows were looking out of the School-House into the falling dusk.

It was not far from lock-ups, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had not come in.

He had been expected to tea in No. 10 Study in the Shell, but he had not come to tea. After tea, Blake had looked up and down and round about him, but he found him not: Gussy had not been seen or heard of since he had started for the New House, and as the dusk fell, and still the wandering sheep did not return to the fold, his friends became anxious.

Fellows who were asked whether they had seen him had little information to give. Talbot had seen him crossing the quad—Wildrake had seen him walk into the New House. But that was no news. Nobody had seen anything of him since—and it was clear that something had happened. But what?

'I thought he'd be back in ten minutes,' said Blake. 'It wouldn't take him long to park an empty cardboard box in Ratty's grate. Of course, if there was any trouble lying about Gussy would butt into it.'

'Trust him!' agreed Dig.

'Ratty came in long ago,' said Tom. 'But he can't have spotted Gussy in his study. There would have been a row.'

'A thumping row,' said Blake. 'Ratty would go off at the deep end, if he found a School-House man rooting in his study. Can't be that.'

'Might have pitched into him, as he did into me the other day,' remarked Lowther, 'or marched him back here for Railton to whop. But in either case Gusy would have turned up.'

'And he hasn't,' said Dig.

'Must be still in the New House,' said Tom. 'But where—and how—and why——?'

'He will be cutting calling-over at his rate,' said Blake. 'If Ratty came in while he was in the study, he might have hunted cover—ducked under the table, or something.'

'Oh, scissors!'

'Blessed if I see what else could have happened,' said Blake. 'Ratty can't have eaten him—and he wouldn't be sticking in the New House if he could help it. Can he be in Ratty's study all this time—squatting under the table, or behind an armchair, or something?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Tom Merry and Co. were anxious for Gussy—very anxious. But they could not help chuckling at the idea.

'Well, it's funny,' said Blake. 'But it won't be funny for Gussy if he's spotted. And he will be, if he's still in the New House after lock-ups. If he's there, we've got to hook him out somehow. But if a fellow goes over to look for him, that's as good as giving him away.'

'Couldn't go to Ratty's study,' said Manners.

'No, but we can't leave him to it.' Blake breathed hard. 'Oh, won't I jolly well boot him when he does turn up.'

'That's a future pleasure, not a present help,' said Tom Merry, laughing. 'We've got to get him out first—if he's there. Look here, I'll cut across and give Ratty a call——.'

'And ask him whether Gussy is parked under his table?' enquired Blake, sarcastically.

'Fathead! I've got an excuse for speaking to Ratty, as junior football captain. I'll ask him for leave for Figgins on Wednesday—we're playing Rylcombe Grammar School on Wednesday——'

'He will only snap you head off if you do,' said Herries.

'I know that. But while he's snapping my head off, I shall be able to spot whether Gussy's there.'

'Oh, good,' said Blake. 'Do it, Tommy.'

Tom Merry lost no time. He hurried out of the House and cut across the quad to a trot. Figgins and Co. were going into their House as he arrived there, and they gathered round him at once, with grinning faces.

'What's that School-House tick doing on the respectable side of the quad?' asked Figgins. 'Roll him over.'

'Hold on!' exclaimed Tom, hastily. 'No larks, Figgy. Look here, have you seen anything of Gussy over here?'

'Gussy!' repeated Figgins. 'Yes, we saw him come into the House—that was a jolly long time ago—about tea-time. I thought he'd got a message or something — anything happened to Gussy?'

'Only he hasn't come back,' said Tom. 'I'm going to Ratty's study, to see whether he's there. He came over to jape Ratty——'

'Cheeky ass!' said Figgins, indignantly. 'Let me catch him japing our beak!'

'Ratty's in his study now,' said Kerr. 'You can't look for him there.'

'I'm going to ask him for leave for Figgins on Wednesday——?'

'That's all right,' said Figgins. 'My gating's off—Ratty told me so to-day.'

'Oh,' said Tom. 'Well, I don't know that officially —I can ask Ratty all the same. I've got to look for Gussy.'

'Pass, friend, and all's well!' said Figgins, amiably, and Tom went into the House, and a few moments later was tapping at the door of Mr. Ratcliff's study.

'Come in!'

Tom opened the door and entered. Mr. Ratcliff looked up from a pile of Form papers and eyed him. No doubt he was surprised to see a School-House junior, and his expression did not indicate a pleased surprise.

'Well?' came in a snap. 'I am busy, Merry. What is it?'

Tom Merry's glance shot round the study. Gussy, certainly, was not under the table—neither would the armchair have concealed him from view. If Gussy was out of sight in that study, there was only one possible spot — the corner behind the screen. But if he was there, he was invisible.

'Im sorry to waste your time, sir,' said Tom, meekly. 'I —I thought you wouldn't mind my coming over to ask you—'

'Be brief!'

'Oh! Certainly, sir! It's, it's about the football, sir,' stammered Tom.

'The football!' repeated Mr. Ratcliff. Clearly, he was not interested in football. 'What do you mean, Merry?'

'We—we're playing the Grammar School on Wednesday, sir, and—and if you would allow Figgins——'

'You need say no more, Merry. Figgins's gating is rescinded and he is free to play football at the Grammar School on Wednesday.'

'Oh! Thank you, sir!' stammered Tom.

Mr. Ratcliff made a gesture of dismissal and bent his head over the Form papers again. Tom Merry

backed to the door, stumbled clumsily into a chair, and sent it spinning. It fell with a crash close to the edge of the screen.

'Upon my word!' Mr. Ratcliff looked up again, with a thunderous brow. 'Merry! You utterly clumsy boy!'

'Sorry, sir—!' gasped Tom.

'Bah! Replace that chair at once and leave my study,' snapped Mr. Ratcliff.

Tom Merry hastened to pick up the chair. In picking it up, he shot a swift glance round the edge of the screen. An elegant figure, cramped in a narrow space, met his view, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gazed at him dumbly. A moment more the chair was replaced, and Tom Merry left the study.

Mr. Ratcliff settled down to Form papers again, with an expressive grunt. Behind the screen, Arthur Augustus—with pins and needles in both legs now—waited. He had hoped, when that tap came at the door, that Ratty might be called away. But there was Ratty—a fixture, and Arthur Augustus wondered, dismally, how long he would be able to stand the pins and needles without betraying his presence in the study by a loud yell!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

RESCUE!

Tap!

Mr. Ratcliff looked up, in surprise and irritation. That tap came, not at his study door, but at his study window. It was a sharp tap on the glass.

The window was five or six feet from the ground. A fellow could hardly have tapped on it in passing —even if any fellow had ventured to tap at a housemaster's study window as he passed. Besides, there was no one to be seen, as Mr. Ratcliff stared angrily at the window.

'Upon my word!' murmured Mr. Ratcliff.

He could only conclude that some thoughtless youth was throwing pebbles about in the quad, and that one had struck the window by chance. Mr. Ratcliff would have liked to be near that thoughtless youth, with a cane in his hand. However, he grunted, and resumed Form papers, dismissing the trifling incident from his mind.

Tap!

Mr. Ratcliff gave quite a start, as the second tap came. He rose from his table, with an expression on his face reminiscent of that of the fabled basilisk. He stepped to the window and looked out. The dusk was beginning to fall, but there was plenty of light—it was not yet lock-ups, and a good many fellows could be seen in the quadrangle. But there was nobody near the window—nobody engaged in throwing pebbles about—nobody within sound of his voice if he had opened the window and called. It was quite puzzling. Most assuredly a pebble had tapped on the glass—yet there was nobody within throwing distance.

Tap!

Even while he stood perplexed, looking from the window, the third tap came, and it made Mr. Ratcliff jump.

Right under his nose—only a few inches from his nose, in fact—a pebble tapped on the glass. Yet there was no one anywhere near the window—and of twenty

or more fellows that he could see in the distance, not one was even looking in his direction. It was so inexplicable, that Mr. Ratcliff wondered whether his ears could have deceived him.

Tap!

His ears had not deceived him. The fourth tap came so sharply that it almost cracked the pane.

Then Mr. Ratcliff began to understand.

It was not some thoughtless fag throwing pebbles about. It was not an accidental tapping at his window. It was a 'rag!'

It was a deliberate rag on Horace Ratcliff, housemaster. There could be no doubt of it.

Only in one way could those whizzing pebbles reach his study window from an unseen hand. Some young rascal—some disrespectful young rascal—some iniquitous young rascal—was pelting his window from a safe distance, by means of a catapult or some such implement! The New House master almost trembled with anger as he scanned the quad in search of the daring delinquent.

But he could not pick him out. Whoever he was, and wherever he was, he was in good cover at a distance. Behind one of the old elms, perhaps — or perhaps even in the branches!

Mr. Ratcliff stood staring, and then, like the raven's unhappy master in the poem, soon again he heard a tapping somewhat louder than before! Tap! Crack!

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

He blinked at a cracked pane. The unseen marksman seemed to be warming to his work!

Mr. Ratcliff, with his jaw set like a vice, and a fierce and fiery glint in his eyes, whirled round to his table, and clutched up a cane. Whoever that

mysterious marksman was, and wherever he was, Mr. Ratcliff was going to root him out without delay, and deal with him faithfully.

He whisked to the door and tore it open. He almost bounded into the passage. He rushed for the doorway of the House.

In the doorway he passed Figgins and Co. like a thundercloud. They stared as he swept down the steps.

'What's up with Ratty?' said Figgins, in wonder.

'Goodness knows!' said Kerr. 'He looks shirty!'

'Jolly shirty!' said Fatty Wynn. 'He's after somebody —he's got his cane! I say, he looked fierce!'

'Tom Merry said something about D'Arcy being in his study,' said Figgins. 'But that wouldn't send Ratty rushing out like a runaway lorry. He's on somebody's track! Sorry for somebody, if Ratty gets going with that cane—and with that look in his jolly old eye!'

'Chance for that School-House duffer to cut, if he's there,' said Kerr. 'Oh! My hat—look! Here he comes.'

Figgins and Co. stared round at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus had lost no time. He had not seen, but he had heard, Mr. Ratcliff rush from the study. He peered out from behind the screen — Ratcliff was gone. Arthur Augustus was not, perhaps, always quick on the uptake. But his aristocratic brain worked quickly now. Ratty was gone—and it behoved Arthur Augustus to be gone, too, while the going was good! With a celerity which showed that he had totally forgotten, for the moment, the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere, Arthur Augustus whipped out from behind the screen.

Pins and needles gave him a frightful pang as he whipped. But he hardy heeded pins and needles. He jumped to the study door, which Mr. Ratcliff had left wide open in his haste, and looked out.

The coast was clear. Ratcliff had vanished. This was his chance—and he took it. He jumped out of the study and ran down the passage—and burst upon Figgins and Co. in the House doorway, in full and breathless career.

Another moment and he would have been running down the steps. But three pairs of hands arrested him in flight.

'Hold on!' said Figgins.

Arthur Augustus spluttered breathlessly.

'Pway don't stop me, deah boys! I'm in a fwightful huwwy! Watty vewy neahly caught me in his study, I've been there houahs and houahs and houahs—we-lease me, will you?'

'And what were you doing in our beak's study?' demanded Figgins.

'I was goin' to jape him——'

'You've got the nerve to come in here to jape our beak?' said Figgins. 'We don't allow School-House smudges to jape our beak.'

'Bai Jove! You were japin' him yourself the othah day, Figgins—twyin' to head him up in a sack, only you got me by mistake, like a silly ass. Let me go, you duffahs! I tell you I want to get cleah—I don't want to meet Watty——'

'We'll help you back to your House,' said Figgins.

'Wats! I don't want any help.'

'You're going to have some, all the same. Dribble him back to his House, you men!'

'Hear, hear!' chuckled Kerr and Wynn.

'Bai Jove! I wefuse to be dwibbled back to my House! I—oh, cwumbs! Oh, cwikey!' gasped Arthur Augustus, as the playful New House trio twirled him down the steps, and he went tottering.

'Dribble him!' shouted Figgins.

'What-ho!'

Three boots landed together on the most elegant trousers at St. Jim's.

'Ow! You uttah wuffians!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'Oh, cwikey!' Arthur Augustus ran for his House, and after him ran Figgins and Co., chuckling, and letting out their feet in turn. 'Wescue, School-House. Blake—Hewwies—Dig—wescue! Tom Mewwy—wescue!' yelled Arthur Augustus, as he sighted his friends in the quad.

Tom Merry, Manners, Blake, Herries and Dig came up with a rush, and Figgins and Co. cut back to their House just in time. Arthur Augustus spluttered for breath, surrounded by his rescuers.

'Oh, cwikey!' gurgled Arthur Augustus. 'I've had a feahful time, deah boys. I've been in Watty's study —Oooh! I am quite out of bweath!'

'You'd be there still, if we hadn't hooked you out,' said Tom, laughing. 'Did you park that box in Ratty's fireplace?'

'Yaas, wathah! And then Watty blew in, and I had to hunt covah behind the scween in the cornah, where you saw me—I've been there evah since. I had pins and needles in my legs——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Weally, you fellows, there is nothin' to laugh at in pins and needles in the legs. It was howwid. Watty stuck in the study like a gwaven image. Luckily, somebody tapped at the window, and he wan out, and

I bolted—it was jolly lucky that somebody tapped at the window——'

'Yes, and lucky that Monty's a good shot with a catapult,' said Tom.

'Bai Jove! Was that it?' ejaculated Arthur Augustus. 'Did you fix it up to wescue me aftah you spotted me in the study? I nevah thought of that!'

'You wouldn't!' agreed Tom. 'Lucky you thought of bolting as soon as the coast was clear. I wasn't sure you'd have sense enough.'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy——!'

'Come on, you frumptious chump!' growled Jack Blake. 'It's lock-ups in five minutes. I'm going to keep you on a chain after this.'

'Weally, Blake——.'

Monty Lowther joined the little crowd as they went into the School-House. There was a cheery grin on his face.

'Okay?' asked Tom.

'Easy as pie!' grinned Monty. 'I dodged when I saw Ratty charge out of his House. He never had an earthly. He's rooting about among the elms now—looking for somebody, I believe.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I am weally vewy much obliged to you fellows,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I should have got into a feahful wow if Watty had found me in his study. It was vewy lucky, as it turned out, that the cwackah nevah went off.'

'Oh! Didn't it go off?' asked Blake.

'No! It was vewy wemarkable, and I cannot undahstand it yet. I put it in the vewy middle of the fiah, and it must have been burned to a cindah, and yet it nevah went off!' said Arthur Augustus. 'It was all

wight, as it turned out—for if it had gone off, I should certainly have been discovahed on the spot. But wasn't it wemarkable that it nevah went off?'

'Couldn't be remarkabler!' said Tom Merry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'It was weally vewy extwaordinawy——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I weally cannot undahstand it—'

'You wouldn't,' said Blake. 'But if you think it over for the rest of the term, with a wet towel round your head, it may dawn on you, in the long run, that the cracker wasn't in the box you parked in Ratty's fire. Jolly lucky for you it was in a pal's pocket instead.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

And Tom Merry and Co. went into the hall, chuckling. Arthur Augustus following them with quite a dumbfounded look on his aristocratic visage.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE HIGH HORSE!

Tom Merry stared. So did Manners and Lowther. They were surprised.

It was morning break, and the Shell and the Fourth were out. Coming on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in the quad, walking in solitary state, Tom Merry gave that noble youth a cheery grin—partly because he liked Gussy, partly because he remembered what an utter idiot Gussy had looked, crammed behind the screen in

the corner of Ratcliff's study. But there was no answering smile on the noble visage of the swell of St. Jim's. He jammed his eyeglass a little more firmly in his eye and surveyed the captain of the Shell with a frigid stare. A refrigerator had nothing on Arthur Augustus for iciness. The Shell fellows, naturally, stared.

'Anything up, old scout?' asked Tom.

'I wegard you as an ass, Tom Mewwy,' said Arthur Augustus, with cold disdain.

'That's all right,' agreed Tom. 'Of course you can regard me in any character you choose to assume for the purpose.'

'Bai Jove! I do not mean that, Tom Mewwy! I mean that you are an ass—a cheekay ass. If you had not wescued me fwom Watty's study yestahday, I should give you a feahful thwashin'——'

'Help!' gasped Tom.

'Howevah, I won't,' said Arthur Augustus, magnanimously. 'But I wepeat that I wegard you as a cheekay ass, and I pwefer you to keep your distance.'

'But what has Tommy done?' asked Monty Lowther. 'How has he come between the wind and your nobility?'

'I wegard that as a widiculous question, Lowthah. You know vewy well what that cheekay ass did!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly. 'He suwweptitiously extwacted my cwackah fwom the box, and I went ovah to the New House and packed an empty box into Watty's fiah——'

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

'Pewwaps you wegard that as funnay!' hooted Arthur Augustus.

'No perhaps about it,' chuckled Manners. 'We do!'

'But my dear chap,' urged Tom. 'You said yourself that if that cracker had gone off, Ratty would have nailed you—wasn't it jolly lucky——?'

'Yaas, that is vewy twue—but it does not altah the principle of the thing,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am wesolved, as you know, to wag Watty. I am absolutely determined to wag Watty. He smacked my head—and he mucked up the Gweyfwiahs match, too——'

'A mere trifle in comparison!' said Monty Lowther, solemnly.

'Yaas, wathah,' assented Arthur Augustus, innocently. 'Still, I have been twyin' to wag Watty—and Blake, Hewwies and Dig keep on buttin' in and stoppin' me—and now you have butted in, Tom Mewwy—like a cheekay ass. At this wate Watty will nevah be wagged at all.'

'Why not let him off?' asked Tom, gravely. 'After all, a chap in the Fourth Form oughtn't to deal too severely with a house-master.'

Manners and Lowther gurgled.

'I wefuse to let him off!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am goin' to wag him wight and left. I am goin' to make him feahfully sowwy for himself. I am goin' to make him cwinge. But as my fwiends wefuse to back me up and keep on buttin' in and stoppin' me, I shall keep my plans dark aftah this. But you will see what you will see!' added Arthur Augustus, with quite a grim look. 'Watty is for it, I can tell you that.'

Apparently another great idea was working in Arthur Augustus's powerful brain. His eye gleamed behind his eyeglass.

'Just let him wait till Fwiday!' he added, darkly.

'Expecting another fog on Friday?' asked Tom.

'I am not expectin' anothah fog on Fwiday, Tom

Mewwy, and this time it is goin' to be somethin' more dwastic than tippin' Watty into a puddle. Pewwaps he will be sowwy that he smacked a fellow's head when he gets a duckin'.'

'A ducking!' ejaculated the three Shell fellows together.

'Yaas, wathah!'

'And how the jolly old dickens are you going to duck Ratty?'

'That is my secwet, Tom Mewwy. Aftah what has happened, I cannot wegard you as a fwiend in whom I can confide. In fact, I wefuse to tell you whethah I intend to duck Watty or not. I pwefer to say nothin' whatevah about it.'

And Arthur Augustus turned away, with his noble nose in the air.

'But look here, Gussy——!' exclaimed Tom.

'Wats!'

Arthur Augustus walked—or rather stalked—away, still with his nose in the air. Evidently Arthur Augustus was on what his friends in Study No. 6 called the 'high horse.'

The Shell fellows looked at one another.

'What is that burbling ass up to now?' asked Tom.

'Goodness knows!' said Monty. 'Whatever it is, he won't get by with it—that's a comfort.'

'Sure thing!' chuckled Manners.

Arthur Augustus departed—icy and disdainful. Blake and Herries and Dig were in the quad—but Gussy did not go near them. It seemed that he was adopting the refrigerator method even towards his bosom pals. When Blake gave him a yell, Arthur Augustus simply walked in another direction. There was a rift in the lute.

Not till the bell rang for third school did Arthur Augustus contact his friends. Then they gathered round him as the Fourth headed for their form–room. Jack Blake gave him a playful dig in the ribs.

'Back still up?' he inquired.

'Ow! I wish you would not puncture my wibs, Blake! And I weally pwefer you not speak to me, aftah your wepwehensible conduct yestahday.'

'This is how Gussy thanks his pals for standing by him and preventing him from getting bunked,' said Blake. 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is, to have a thankless Gussy!'

'We'll look after him, all the same,' grinned Dig.

'Oh, yes, rather! If Gussy gets on Ratty's track again, he can rely on his friends to up–end him and sit on his head,' said Blake, heartily. 'He won't thank us–but true pals don't need thanks.'

'We really ought to keep him on a chain,' remarked Herries, thoughtfully. 'We'll keep an eye on him, anyhow.'

'I have alweady wemarked that I pwefer you fellows to keep your distance,' said Arthur Augustus, coldly. 'I am goin' to wag Watty, and you are not goin' to stop me!'

'Sez you!' chuckled Blake. 'Let's catch you at it, that's all. My dear old ass, we're going to watch you like the jolly old apple of our eye.'

'I wathah think that you won't be able to watch me out of gates, Blake. I think that will put paid to your buttin' in.'

'Out of gates!' repeated Blake. 'Is that the latest?'

'I wefuse to weply to that question, Blake. I do not feel that I can confide in you fellows as fwiends!' said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

'How do you think you're going to catch Ratty out of gates?' asked Blake, puzzled. 'And what's the game, anyhow?'

'I am not goin' to tell you anythin' about it, Blake. You will not know a thing until Watty comes in dwippin'.'

'Until Ratty comes in dripping!' repeated Blake, dazedly. 'Why on earth should Ratty come in dripping?'

'He is bound to be dwippin' aftah a duckin', Blake. That stands to weason.'

'You—you—you're not thinking of ducking Ratty?' gasped Blake. 'And how do you fancy you're going to duck him?'

'It is not a fancy, bai Jove—it is a fact!' said Arthur Augustus. 'But pway do not ask me any questions—I shall wefuse to answah them. I cannot wisk you fellows buttin' in again. I shall leave you in complete ignorance of what I intend to do—you are goin' to know nothin' whatevah about my plans till I have cawwied them out.'

'Look here—!' roared Blake.

'It is quite useless to woar at me, Blake, and I have told you more than once that I dislike bein' woared at.'

'You burbling image——'

'Wats!'

'If we catch you trying to duck Ratty——'

'You won't catch me!' smiled Arthur Augustus. 'I shall take jollay good care of that! It will be all wight this time—wight as wain!'

Blake and Co. followed Arthur Augustus into the form-room, with something like consternation in their faces. That Gussy would get away with such a scheme

as ducking Ratty, seemed wildly impossible, but even an attempt in that direction meant awful consequences. Study No. 6 was quite alarmed for its most aristocratic member.

After class that day, three fellows had an eye on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—a very keen eye. Whether Mr. Ratcliff went out of gates or not, they did not know—but if Arthur Augustus had essayed to do so, his three anxious friends were prepared to take drastic measures. But Arthur Augustus did not go anywhere near the gates, and they were relieved.

The next day there was football at the Grammar School, and the matter rather faded from their minds. But they did not quite forget it, and they remained prepared to collar their noble chum at a moment's notice and sit on his head for so long as might be necessary. More than that the most devoted pals could not do.

CHAPTER XL

D'ARCY DOES IT!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy glanced from the window of Study No. 6, in the School-House, after class on Friday, and smiled.

He had a view of Little Side from that window. Tom Merry and Co. had gone down to games practice, leaving Arthur Augustus busily occupied writing lines in the study. Arthur Augustus had lines for Lathom. Gussy, as a rule, was not in a hurry to deal with an imposition. Sometimes it would be left late—

sometimes so very late that his form-master would double it. On this occasion, however, Gussy started industriously on his lines, and Blake, Herries and Digby left him scribbling away at a great rate, when they went down to the changing-room.

But after his friends were gone, Arthur Augustus ceased to be so busy. That keenness on getting his lines done for Lathom was, in point of fact, camouflage. Arthur Augustus was only planning to escape Blake's eagle eye — while he carried on with his campaign. Standing at the window of Study 6, he smiled as he watched the crowd of fellows in shorts and jerseys in the distance. It was a fine, clear afternoon, and a crowd had turned up for games practice—Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther, Blake, Herries and Digby, Talbot, Gore and Kangaroo, Levison, Clive and Cardew, and many others—and Arthur Augustus watched them for a few minutes, before he walked out of the study.

They were safe now—and so was Gussy. Obviously, he could not carry on with ragging Ratty, with his anxious chums watching him, or collaring him and sitting on his head. With deep artfulness he had thrown them off the track. His unfinished lines were left on the table to meet their eyes when they came back to Study 6. By that time, Arthur Augustus would be far away, and the obnoxious Ratty—if all went according to plan—well and truly ragged. Outside the school, Arthur Augustus would be safe from intervention, and it was at a little distance from St. Tim's that he was going to deal with Ratty.

He sauntered cheerfully out of the School-House, and lounged elegantly in the quad, with one eye on the New House.

After a time, he was rewarded by the sight of a long, lean figure in coat and hat, emerging from that House.

He waited for no more. One glimpse of Mr. Ratcliff was enough. Ratty was going, as was his invariable custom after class on Friday, to walk over to Colonel Bompas's. Arthur Augustus only wanted to be quite sure that Ratty was starting. Now he saw him starting—and it was enough. He walked quickly out of gates and, once outside, broke into an active trot down Rylcombe Lane.

At the stile in the lane he clambered over, and followed the footpath through the wood. That was the way Mr. Ratcliff always went—it was the short cut to Rylcombe, and Ratty did not like long walks. Arthur Augustus was well ahead of the New House master on the path he was certain to follow.

At a short distance from the stile, the footpath crossed Rylcombe Water, a woodland stream, by means of a plank bridge. It was a single, heavy plank, resting on stones on either side of the stream.

This was where Mr. Ratcliff was to get the ducking—a light punishment, really, for boxing the aristocratic ears of the Honourable Arthur Augustus.

Having reached the stream, Arthur Augustus looked cautiously back. There was no one in sight on the woodland path. In the summer there were a good many people about Rylcombe Wood, but in the winter it was leafless, damp and not attractive. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere—Arthur Augustus seemed to have the whole wood to himself—which was all to the good, for he certainly did not want to be seen while making preparations for ducking a house-master.

Mr. Ratcliff was not yet in sight, nor likely to be for some time. D'Arcy had trotted all the way—and Mr. Ratcliff was most unlikely to trot.

'All wight!' grinned Arthur Augustus. 'Wight as wain! I wondah what Blake, Hewwies and Dig would say, if they knew! Ha, ha!' Arthur Augustus chuckled.

His devoted pals, determined to save him from himself, had been successfully eluded. If they thought of Gussy while they urged the flying ball, they supposed him to be scribbling lines for Lathom in Study No. 6—which time Arthur Augustus, a quarter of a mile from the school, was making preparations to duck Ratty!

After that cautious glance back, Arthur Augustus trod lightly across the plank to the further side.

That plank was safe as houses. But it was not going to be quite so safe when Arthur Augustus had finished with it. Mr. Ratcliff was going to tip off that plank into Rylcombe Water.

There was no danger, of course. The water under the plank was hardly three feet deep. Ratcliff would get a splash and a ducking, but when he scrambled up, the water would hardly reach to his waistcoat. There was not the remotest spot of danger, or Arthur Augustus would never have dreamed of that masterly scheme. Nothing but a ducking—merely that, and nothing more!

Stooping at the further end of the long plank, Arthur Augustus grasped it, to drag it loose.

That was the big idea! The end of that massive plank rested solidly on an old mossy stone, as it had rested for years. But when Arthur Augustus had finished, only the extreme tip was to rest.

It would look exactly the same as before, from the

other side. But it wouldn't be the same. It was certain to tip when walked on, and the walker would tip off. Arthur Augustus was going to be behind a tree at a little distance, watching the entertainment unseen. He was going to see Ratty splash, to hear Ratty yell, to watch Ratty scramble out, dripping, and trail away shedding water and mud, in the worst temper ever. And he was going to tell them about it later in Study No. 6 amid roars of laughter.

That was the programme—easy as falling off a form. Arthur Augustus did not come up against difficulties till he started shifting the end of a heavy plank ten or twelve feet long. Then he found trouble.

He grasped the end of the damp and rather muddy plank, with a heroic disregard of soiled fingers. He dragged at it. It did not stir.

He dragged and dragged. He pushed. He shoved. He jerked and pulled. But that heavy old plank was as immovable as the solid globe under it.

'Bai Jove!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

He paused for breath. There was a spot of perspiration on his brow. It was a cold day, but he was feeling quite warm.

Arthur Augustus had not foreseen this difficulty. A fellow couldn't foresee everything! And perhaps foresight was not his long suit.

'Bothah the beastly thing!' breathed Arthur Augustus. 'Bai Jove! I've got to get the wotten thing shifted! Watty will be coming along soon.'

He shot an anxious glance across the stream, and along the further footpath. Ratty was not in sight. But there was no doubt that he would soon be coming. Arthur Augustus grasped the plank again and exerted all his strength.

It shifted at last. It was only about an inch, but it shifted. Arthur Augustus sagely calculated that, once it was disembedded from its ancient resting-place, it would move more easly. All that was needed now was one tremendous shove. Exerting all his strength, putting every ounce of his beef into it, Arthur Augustus shoved, convinced that this would do it. And it did!

It did it quite suddenly—so suddenly, that Arthur Augustus was taken by surprise. With a sudden slip, the plank slid off the stone, and Arthur Augustus's tremendous shove, meeting with no resistance, carried him on after the plank.

There was a splash as the end of the plank dropped into the water below. There was another splash, like an echo, as Arthur Augustus nose-dived after it, plunging headlong into Rylcombe Water before he knew what was happening.

'Urrrggh!'

The soles of a pair of elegant shoes showed, for a moment, above the water and then followed the rest of Arthur Augustus on the downward path.

There was a wild whirling and splashing. Rylcombe Water was disturbed as if by a subaqueous volcano. Only for a few moments—then a head came up, spluttering.

'Oooooooogh!' gurgled Arthur Augustus.

He came up in the middle of the woodland stream, dazed and dizzy, with his eyes and nose and mouth and ears full of water. He clutched round wildly for support. The plank slanted across the stream, one end on the bank, the other sunk in water. But it was out of Gussy's reach—winter rains had fed the woodland stream, and the current was strong. Arthur Augustus came up several yards from the plank.

'Ooogh! Oh, cwikey!' gasped Arthur Augustus, struggling wildly, dragged down by wet clothes and water-logged shoes.

A gentleman of Mr. Ratcliff's length could have waded Rylcombe Water with ease. But it was not easy for a Fourth-form junior. Arthur Augustus found his feet, but was washed off them again. He whirled on the current, and grasped at a low branch of a willow that overhung the stream. His weight dragged it down into the water, but it gave him support, and he hung on, dizzy and bewildered, keeping his dizzy head above the surface—and yelled for help.

'Oh, cwikey! Help! Oh, cwumbs! Help! Bai Jove! Help! Wrrrggh! Help!' yelled Arthur Augustus. 'Oh, Chwistophah Columbus! Help!'

CHAPTER XLI

RATTY TO THE RESCUE!

'Goodness gracious!' ejaculated Mr. Ratcliff.

He stared.

Mr. Ratcliff's first reaction, as he arrived by the footpath at the edge of Rylcombe Water, was one of annoyance. The plank across the woodland stream seemed to have slipped from its place—it slanted down, its further end buried in mud two or three feet below the high bank. In such a position, crossing it was difficult and meant a clamber up on the further side, scarcely to be effected without wet feet and muddy trousers. It looked as if Mr. Ratcliff

would, after all, have to go the long way round to Colonel Bompas's.

But the next moment, Mr. Ratcliff glanced downstream as a suffocated howl reached his ears and uttered a startled ejaculation. He stared blankly.

A dozen yards downstream, in the midle of the rushing water, a St. Jim's junior clung to a frail, dripping, swaying willow-branch, barely keeping his head up, spluttering for breath, ducking under from moment to moment, tossing about almost like a cork.

'Urrrggh! Gwooogh! Help! Ooooch! Wooooogh!'

'That foolish boy D'Arcy!' muttered Mr. Ratcliff. 'Bless my soul! He must have fallen from the plank when it slipped—goodness gracious! I—I must help him—somehow! Hold on, D'Arcy!'

'Ooogh!'

'Do you hear me?'

'Gwoooogh!'

Mr. Ratcliff looked along the banks. They were high and steep, a couple of feet higher than the stream, and wooded thickly to the very edge. There was only one way of getting to Arthur Augustus—by water! If Mr. Ratcliff was going to help the unfortunate swell of St. Jim's he had to wade down the woodland stream to reach him.

He gave an expressive grunt.

Mr. Ratcliff disliked getting even his feet wet. To reach Arthur Augustus he had to plunge along with the water up to his waist. He was intensely annoyed. But he realised that there was only one thing to do. He could not leave D'Arcy to it. The boy could not hang on to that dipping branch for ever, and when he lost his hold, he would be swept down the stream

to the open river—the wide waters of the Rhyl. The New House master made up his mind to do it.

Very gingerly, he lowered himself into the water. He gasped for breath as it rose round him. It was cold, and it was most unpleasant. It was wet, clammy and horrid. But it had to be! He gasped and gasped as it washed round him. His feet plunged into mud at the bottom of the stream, his shoes filled with water—he trod in a hole that brought the stream, for a moment, up to his arm-pits. He spluttered and surged on.

'Oooooogh! Help! Gwoooogh!' came from Arthur Augustus. 'Ooooooch!'

'I am coming!' gasped Mr. Ratcliff.

'Gwoogh! Oh, cwikey! Urrrggh!'

Arthur Augustus was aware that somebody was coming. But he was too dizzy and blinded by splashing water to recognise Mr. Ratcliff. He had forgotten all about Ratty. But as two bony hands grasped him, and his dizzy eyes glimpsed a bony, frowning face, he became aware of Mr. Ratcliff, and his eyes popped at the New House master.

'Watty!' he gasped.

'What? What did you say, D'Arcy?' exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh, cwikey!'

'Pah!' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'Hold on to me! Do not struggle, you stupid boy—do you want to drag me over?'

'Urrrggh!'

'Have you no sense?' snapped Mr. Ratcliff. 'Hold on to me without pulling me over, and keep as still as you can. Try not to be so stupid, D'Arcy.'

'Oh, cwumbs!'

Mr. Ratcliff's manner could not be called gracious. But he was not feeling gracious. He was feeling intensely irritated and annoyed, and in a very bad temper. The lower half of him was drenched, the upper half splashed, he was wet and clammy, he was spoiling his clothes, and he was risking catching a bad cold. Perhaps grace of manner could hardly be expected of Mr. Ratcliff in such circumstances.

'Put your arm over my shoulder—so—you utterly obtuse boy, do not choke me—' grunted Mr. Ratcliff. 'That is better—now hold on——'

'Thank you—gwoogh—very much—oogh——'

'That will do!'

'But weally, Mr. Watcliff——'

'Do not chatter! Hold on.'

'Oh, cwikey!'

With Arthur Augustus holding on to his bony shoulders, Mr. Ratcliff waded up the stream again. It was not easy wading against the current, with a Fourth-Form junior clinging on to him, and the New House master was no athlete. More than once the current threatened to up-end him, as he plunged and struggled back to the plank, but he reached it at last.

He stood in the water, holding on to the plank, for Arthur Augustus to scramble ashore from his shoulders to the footpath. The swell of St. Jim's scrambled and landed sprawling in the grass.

He sat up, dizzily, dashed water from his eyes, and blinked at the New House master, as he scrambled ashore in turn.

Arthur Augustus had planned to watch Ratty ducked, to see him scrambling out wet and muddy. Now he saw it! But he saw it with very changed

Two bony hands grasped him

feelings. Ratty had ducked himself—to save Arthur Augustus! Who would have thought it—of Ratty? But he had done it, and Arthur Augustus was feeling the pangs of remorse!

Mr. Ratcliff splashed and squelched out. He was almost exhausted, and he leaned on a tree, with the water running down him in rivulets, gasping and panting for breath.

Arthur Augustus sat in the grass and panted, while Mr. Ratcliff leaned on the tree and panted—for several minutes, it was a panting duet. Then Mr. Ratcliff found his voice: 'You utterly stupid boy!'

'Eh?'

'Are you going to sit there drenched with water till you catch cold? Go back to the school at once, and run all the way.'

'Yaas, wathah!' gasped Arthur Augustus. He struggled to his feet. 'I—I'm afwaid you are vewy wet, Mr. Watcliff.'

M. Ratcliff stared at him.

'Of course I am very wet,' he snapped. 'Do not waste time making nonsensical remarks, D'Arcy, when you are in danger of catching a cold.'

'I—I'm very sowwy you're so wet, sir!' stammered Arthur Augustus. 'I'm feahfully sowwy you have got dwenched like that, sir. It is all my fault——'

'I am quite aware of that, D'Arcy! You are wasting time.'

'It was vewy bwave of you to come in for me, sir——'

'Eh! what? Do not talk nonsense, D'Arcy. Has this boy no sense at all?' exclaimed Mr. Ratcliff. 'Will you persist in standing there and chattering while you are dripping with water?'

'Oh! Yaas! I—I mean no,' stammered Arthur Augustus. 'I mean to say——'

'Will you go back to the school at once?' hooted Mr. Ratcliff.

'Oh! Yaas, sir. But——'

Mr. Ratcliff detached himself from the tree and made a step towards Arthur Augustus. 'If you do not go immediately, D'Arcy, I shall box your ears!' he snapped. 'Now——'

'Oh, cwikey!' Arthur Augustus went.

CHAPTER XLII

NOT AS PER PROGRAMME

'That ass!' hissed Jack Blake.

'What——?' asked Tom Merry.

'Look!' roared Blake.

He pointed to an unfinished impot, on the table in Study No. 6. About twenty lines from the Æneid were written there, in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's elegant hand. Arthur Augustus had started on that impot, when his friends went down to games practice. But that impot, like Schubert's celebrated symphony, was unfinished—and nothing was to be seen of Arthur Augustus. Blake jumped to it at once—he knew what had happened.

'He's gone!' said Herries.

'Gone out of gates!' roared Blake. 'Pulling our leg—he never meant to stay put. He hasn't done his lines for Lathom! He's gone—after Ratty.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Tom. 'That's what he meant by Friday! Ratty's gone on his usual trot—at least, I suppose he has——'

'They're both out of gates, then,' said Digby, with a whistle. 'Gussy had some cracked idea of ducking Ratty—'

'But how the thump was he going to duck Ratty, in gates or out of gates?' asked Manners.

'Goodness knows! That's what he was burbling about—'

'And we've been keeping tabs on him ever since he burbled about it,' hissed Blake, 'And now he's pulled our leg and got away. What has that dangerous lunatic been up to while we've been at the footer?'

Tom Merry and Co. looked at one another, in dismay. Only too clearly had Arthur Augustus, with unexpected artfulness, dodged his devoted pals that afternoon, to carry on as a bold, bad ragger. But what——?'

'By gum!' ejaculated Monty Lowther. 'You know the way Ratty goes on that trot—the footpath, and the plank bridge—is that what the howling ass meant——?'

'Oh scissors!' groaned Blake. 'That's it! That's what he meant by a ducking. The other day he was going to tip Ratty into a puddle. Now he's going to tip him into Rylcombe Water. That's it.'

'That tears it!' said Herries. 'We can't stop him now.'

'Up before the Head for the sack in the morning!' groaned Blake. 'Oh, won't I jolly well boot him!'

'He won't pull it off,' said Monty. 'Whatever Gussy tries on, won't come off—you can bank on that!'

'Yes—but if he tries it on——'

'Oh, the ass!'

'Oh, the fathead!'

'Time he was back, whatever he's up to,' said Tom Merry. 'Let's go and look for him.'

The juniors had come up to Study No. 6 to tea. But they forgot about tea now, in their anxiety for Arthur Augustus. They hurried down the stairs, and out of the School House. They cut across to the gates.

Three fellows—Figgins and Co. of the New House—were in the old gateway, staring down the road and grinning. It seemed that Figgins and Co. had spotted something down the road that amused them.

'What a picture!' chuckled Figgins.

'Looks as if he's been in a ditch!' remarked Fatty Wynn.

'He would tip into a ditch, if there was one handy!' agreed Kerr. He glanced round as the School-House crowd came up. 'Here's your prize ass, Blake—he looks as if he wants a wash and a brush-up!'

'Gussy!' exclaimed Blake.

Tom Merry and Co. stared from the gateway. Coming up the road, at a trot, was a rather startling figure.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had walked out of the school the most elegant fellow at St. Jim's, spick and span and spotless, the glass of fashion and the mould of form. He was returning in a sadly different state. His clothes hung about him limply, drenched with water and splashed with mud. His shoes squelched at every step. His hat was gone, and his hair was wet, wild and tousled. Even his noble face was grubby. Never since he had distinguished St. Jim's by his presence had the Honourable Arthur Augustus been seen in so dismal, draggled and dilapidated a state. They gazed at him blankly.

He came up to them at a run. He was gasping for breath. His trot had warmed him up, and his face, where it was not muddy, was crimson. He dashed aside a muddy trickle of perspiration with a muddy hand.

'Been in a ditch?' grinned Figgins.

'I've been in Wylcombe Watah,' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'You see, I tumbled in somehow when I shifted that beastly plank——'

'And Ratty?' hissed Blake. 'Never mind about you—what about Ratty? Did Ratty go in?'

'Yaas, wathah.'

'Oh! That's torn it, then,' said Blake. 'That's put the lid on. Of course, you let Ratty spot you! You would!'

'Weally, Blake——'

'You shifted the plank for Ratty!' exclaimed Figgins. 'Why, you cheeky School-House smudge, if you've ducked our beak——'

'Did Ratty spot you?' exclaimed Tom Merry.

'Yaas, wathah! You see——!'

'Train home in the morning, then,' said Blake. 'Oh, you ass!'

'Oh, you chump!' said Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies——'

'Oh, you footling fathead!' said Digby.

'Weally, Dig——'

'He had to let Ratty spot him!' sighed Monty Lowther.

'Weally, Lowthah, it was wathah lucky for me that Watty spotted me. Othahwise, he couldn't have fished me out.'

'What?'

'Ratty fished you out——!'

'You ducked Ratty, and he fished you out!' stuttered Tom Merry.

'I did not exactly duck Watty! I was goin' to duck Watty! But the beastly plank slipped, and I fell in, befoah Watty awwived——'

'Oh good!' exclaimed Blake. 'Fine!'

'I fell wight in——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Weally, you fellows, there is nothin' to cackle at, in a fellow fallin' into beastly, mudday watah and wuinin' his clobbah!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, hotly.

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the juniors. It was a tremendous relief to hear that Gussy had ducked himself instead of Ratty. And though Arthur Augustus could see nothing to cackle at in that change in the programme, Tom Merry and Co. could, and they yelled.

'I went wight in, head first——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'And when I came up I hung on to a bwanch ovah the watah, and I weally do not know what might have happened had not Watty awwived. He came in for me——'

'Ratty did?' shrieked all the juniors.

'Yaas, wathah—wight in! Wight in, neahly up to his neck! I wegard that as vewy wippin' of Watty! He was wathah cwoss about it, but, of course, he is wathah a cwusty old codgah, and he got vewy wet, and his twousahs must be uttahly wuined. He did not give me a chance to thank him—he said he would box my yahs if I did not wun back to the school at once——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ratty all over,' grinned Blake. 'But it was jolly

decent of him to go in for Gussy—especially as that frabjous, frumptious, footling stuffed dummy was there to duck him—'

'Watty did not know that, Blake, and I did not mention it,' said Arthur Augustus. 'He told me to wun back, and I wan back: I have been wunnin' all the way, and—'

'And where's our beak?' demanded Figgins.

'I expect he is walkin', Figgins. He is wathah too old a codgah to wun. He is wathah a decent old bean, Figgins, and I twust you will nevah think of headin' him up again in a sack—it is wotten bad form to head a house-mastah up in a sack, and I considah—'

'Are you going to stand there wagging your chin till you catch cold?' asked Blake.

'Weally, Blake—'

'Come on, fathead! Come on, chump! Take his other arm, Tom. Come on, blitherer. The sooner you change your clobber the better! Get a move on! Budge!'

'I can wun without you dwaggin' at my arm, Blake—leggo, Tom Mewwy—I will not be wushed about like this— do you heah?—welease me, you uttah asses—I wepeat—Oh, cwumbs!'

Arthur Augustus was rushed into the House at a speed that made his noble head swim.

CHAPTER XLIII

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS SPEAKS SERIOUSLY

Tom Merry glanced at Jack Blake, as he laid a fives bat on the table in Study No. 6.

'What's that for?' asked Tom.

'Gussy!' answered Blake.

Six juniors were in the study, waiting for Arthur Augustus. There was to be tea in the study when Gussy came down after changing. But changing was always rather a lengthy process with the swell of St. Jim's. His friends had been waiting some time—and they were still waiting.

'Gussy's got to have it,' explained Blake. 'It's no good talking to him—you might as well talk to a mule. Gussy's going to have that bat on his bags till he promises, honour bright, to quit ragging Ratty. He's had too many jolly old narrow escapes already—he's not going to have any more. He will get himself bunked next time, if we don't stop him. As soon as he comes in, you Shell-fish shut the door and back up against it, so that he can't cut.'

Tom Merry laughed.

'Rely on us,' he said.

'Happy to oblige!' grinned Lowther.

'Jolly good idea!' agreed Manners, heartily.

'You fellows collar him,' went on Blake, to Herries and Dig. 'Spread him over the table. I'll handle the bat. I'll wear it out on him if necessary. He's going to have it till he gives us his word to let up on Ratty.'

'Hear, hear!' said Herries.

They waited.

'Here he comes!' murmured Tom Merry, as there was a footstep, at last, outside Study No. 6.

The door opened.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, newly swept and garnished, spotless from head to heel, walked gracefully in.

Slam went the door, as soon as he was inside the study. Tom Merry, Manners and Lowther, with smiling faces, lined up with their backs to it. Arthur Augustus was fairly in the lion's den.

'Oh!' said Blake, grimly. 'Here you are!'

'Yaas, deah boy, heah I am,' said Arthur Augustus.

Blake made a sign to Herries and Dig, who moved towards their noble chum, one on either side. Blake dropped his hand carelessly on the fives bat on the table. Arthur Augustus, happily unconscious that anything unusual was 'on' glanced round the study.

'I wathah thought you fellows would have tea weady,' he remarked.

'Never mind tea for a minute or two,' said Blake. 'We want a little chat with you before tea—about Ratty.'

'Bai Jove! I was just goin' to speak to you about Watty,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am glad that you are not in a huwwy for tea, as I want to speak to you fellows vewy sewiously about Watty. I should like to wemark, in the first place, that it is not wespectful to allude to Watty as Watty.'

'Eh!'

'It would be much more wespectful to speak of him as Watcliff,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'Watty is wathah dewogatowy.'

'What?'

'There is such a thing,' said Arthur Augustus,

firmly, 'as pwopah wespect to a mastah. I twust I shall nevah again heah you fellows speakin' of Watty by such a diswespectful and dewogatowy nickname as Watty.'

The juniors gazed at Arthur Augustus. He was rather taking their breath away.

'Watty has his faults,' resumed Arthur Augustus. 'He is cwusty! He is wathah a wowwy. His mannah is against him. He has a wathah wotten tempah. But he is vewy fah fwom bein' a bad old bean weally. You fellows have misjudged him.'

'We have?' gasped Blake.

'I am sowwy to say it, but you fellows have all failed to tweat Watty with the wespect due to a schoolmastah. Lowthah knocked his hat off with a footah—and sent him wushin' off to Wookwood on a wild-goose chase——'

'I didn't duck him in Rylcombe Water,' said Monty Lowther, sarcastically.

'Look here——!' hooted Blake.

'Pway let a fellow speak, Blake. I am speakin' for your own good,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Even you, Tom Mewwy, though you hold the wesponsible position of juniah captain, acted vewy thoughtlessly, to say the vewy least, in diswegardin' Watty's authowity on Gweyfwiahs day——'

'Got it!' said Tom.

'I don't want to wub it in, deah boys. But aftah what happened to-day, I weally feel that I must speak to you sewiously. I twust—I sincerely twust—that nothin' more will be heard in this study about waggin' Watty.'

'Wha-a-t?' stuttered Blake, Herries and Dig, together.

'It is fwightfully bad form to wag a beak,' said Arthur Augustus. 'If you fellows don't wealise it, you can take the word of a fellow of tact and judgment. I twust I shall heah nothin' of the sort mentioned again.'

'Who ragged him?' shrieked Blake.

'Did we?' bawled Dig.

'You——!' roared Herries.

'Pway don't woar at a chap. It thwows me into quite a fluttah when fellows woar at me. There is nothin' to get shirty about,' said Arthur Augustus. 'Watty is cwusty, cwoss, and wathah cantankewous, but he is really a vewy good old bean, and I would go ovah to the New House and thank him for fishin' me out, only I'm afwaid he might smack my head if I did——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Is that the lot, Gussy?' asked Tom Merry, laughing.

'Yaas, that's all, deah boy, but I twust you fellows will wemembah what I have said. Now let's have tea,' said Arthur Augustus, cheerfully. 'Bai Jove! What are you goin' to do with that fives bat, Blake?'

Blake picked up the fives bat and tossed it into a corner. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I was going to do something with it——'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'But it won't be wanted now. Let's have tea.'

And all was calm and bright.