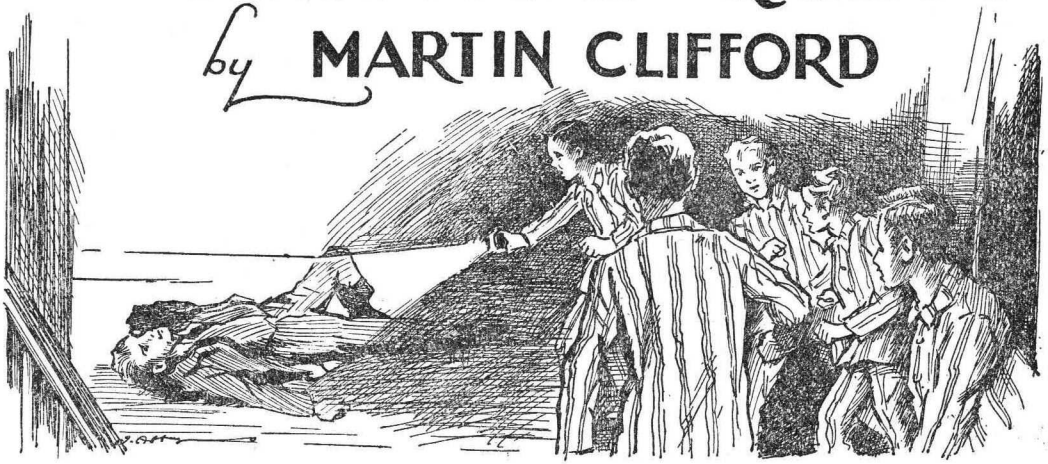
TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS QUEST

by MARTIN CLIFFORD



CHAPTER ONE

STORMY WEATHER

"BAI Jove! It's comin' down!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that remark.

Blake and Herries and Digby did not take the trouble to reply. They were only too well aware that "it" was coming down: "it" being a mixture of snow and sleet that came down in torrents.

Four juniors of St. Jim's, with their coat collars turned up, their caps jammed tightly down, their heads bent to the wind, were tramping through Wayland Wood—cold and tired and wet.

They were heading for the school: which was still a mile away. The winter dusk was darkening. Snowy branches, groaning in the wind, looked up spectre-like. The wind blew snow in their faces, and it was almost a gale. Study No. 6 were tough—they rather prided themselves on being as hard as nails. But they were not enjoying that walk.

They were already late for calling-over, and had given up hope of getting into hall at St. Jim's before the bell rang. But they were not worrying about "lines" from Mr. Lathom, or a "jaw" from their house-master. They were only thinking of pushing on somehow through the sudden flurry of snow and sleet and fierce wind that had overtaken them in the middle of the wintry wood. It was a short cut home from Wayland to St. Jim's through the wood—but like so many short cuts, it was proving the longest way round. Blake and Co. were not weather prophets, and had not foreseen that sudden outbreak of December weather at its worst.

Blake and Herries and Dig. were looking grim and glum. Only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, in the party of four, retained his aristocratic equanimity. And even Arthur Augustus was not looking his bonniest.

"This is wathah wotten, deah boys," resumed Arthur Augustus, as his disgruntled comrades did not speak, "My cap is simply a wet wag. Are you fellows gettin' wet?"

Herries grunted. Digby snorted. Blake gave tongue.

"Oh! No!" he answered, with withering sarcasm, "High and dry! Nothing like buckets-full of sleet to make you nice and dry and comfy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Give your chin a rest, fathead, and save

your breath for walking," said Blake, "Goodness knows when we shall get in, at this rate—if we ever get in at all."

"I twust, Blake, that you are not allowing this wathah wotten weathah to affect your tempah!"

"Ass!"

"Wude wemarks will not impwove mattahs, Blake. And it was your ideah, you know, to walk ovah to Wayland to see the Wamblahs' match."

"The weather was all right till after the Ramblers' match, fathead. And we should have been in for calling-over, before the storm started, if you hadn't called on your tailor, ass! We're landed in this because you go ga-ga over trouserings and waistcoatings and shirtings, blow you."

"We ought to have taken him by the ears and walked him home," said Herries.

"I should certainly wefuse to be taken by the yahs and walked home, Hewwies. It would have been all wight if we had taken a taxi aftah leavin' the tailah's, as I proposed."

"And who's got half a quid to chuck away on a taxi?" demanded Digby.

"I have, deah boy."

"Oh, rats!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Oh, don't jaw!" exclaimed Blake, "Shut up and hoof it."

Blake and Herries and Dig. seemed in no mood for conversation. They tramped on. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, to their surprise and exasperation, came to a halt. They glared round at him, dim in the thickening dusk.

"Gone lame?" hooted Blake.

"Nothin' of the kind, Blake."

"Only silly?" demanded Blake.

"I wegard that as a wude wemark, Blake."

"Well, if you're not lame or silly, why don't you come on?" roared Blake, "Are you going to stand there till the snow-storm blows over? It will be an hour at least."

"As we alweady have to cut calling-ovah, Blake, it does not weally mattah at pwecisely what time we get in. We shall get lines anyway. And if you will have the kindness to listen to a fellow, instead of yappin' at him—"

"What about booting him?" asked Herries.

"Weally, Herries—"

"Come on, will you?" roared Blake.

"Pway listen to me, Blake."

Blake and Herries and Dig. eyed their noble chum almost wolfishly. Snow and sleet and wind, and a "jaw" awaiting them, seemed to them enough to go on with—without lingering in the middle of a snowy windy wood to listen to the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy apparently had something to say which they were not in the least interested to hear. Really it was neither time nor place for a conversation piece!

Arthur Augustus, however, had come to a halt: and he stayed at a halt. He rubbed his eyeglass clear, jammed it in his noble eye, and regarded his three exasperated chums calmly.

"You howling ass—!" said Blake.

"You dithering dummy," said Herries.

"You footling fathead!" said Digby.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy passed those rude remarks by, like the idle wind which he regarded not!

"Pway lend me your yahs, deah boys," he said, "I have an ideah—wathah a bwight ideah, I think."

"Take it home and boil it," said Blake.

"This wathah feahful storm has caught us in the middle of this beastly wood, owin' to you fellows wefusin' to take a taxi home as I suggested—"

"Are you coming on?"

"We are gettin' feahfully wet, and our clobbah will be pwactically wuined. We want to get undah sheltah—"

"Is that the bright idea?" hissed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah. I have thought of a way of gettin' back to the school without goin' on thwough this beastly storm."

"Wha-a-at?"

Blake and Co. stared. They even wondered whether Arthur Augustus might be wandering in his noble mind.

"Mad?" asked Herries.

"I wefuse to answah that widiculous question, Hewwies."

"Then what do you mean?" howled Blake. "If there's any shelter anywhere, we could stick in it till this blows over. But there isn't."

"Don't you wemembah the old monk's cell in the wood, deah boy? We are pwobably

not a hundwed yards fwom it at this vewy moment."

"That rotten old ruin, without even a roof! Is that what you call a shelter, you chump?"

"Not at all, deah boy. I am not thinkin' of stickin' in that woofless wuin. But accordin' to the legend that evewy St. Jim's chap has heard, there is a secwet passage wunnin' from the monk's cell, to the monastewy that used to stand where the school stands now. Suppose we found it—"

"Found it!" gasped Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! Then we could walk home to St. Jim's undahgwound, as the old monks must have done and get out of this feahful weathah," said Arthur Augustus, triumphantly.

Blake and Herries and Dig. gazed at him.

They knew all about the ruin of the old monk's cell in the wood, and the legend that it had once been connected by a secret subterranean passage with the ancient monastery that had stood, in days long past, on the site of St. Jim's. Every fellow at St. Jim's had heard about it. Plenty of fellows had explored the old woodland cell on half-holidays, looking for that secret passage. Nobody had ever found it. If it existed at all, it was well-hidden. And Arthur Augustus's bright idea was that they should look for it now—in falling dark, in the middle of a snowstorm, when they were wet and weary and late for calling-over! They gazed at him—expressively—three Gorgons could hardly have been more expressive.

"So that's the idea, is it?" gasped Blake, at last.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You born idiot—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"It's no good talking to him," said Herries, "Bump him!"

"Bai Jove! Don't you think it's a jollay good ideah?"

Arthur Augustus's comrades did not answer in words. They seemed to feel that it was a time not for words but for action.

Like one man, they fell upon their noble chum, and collared him. Arthur Augustus uttered a startled howl, as he was swept off his feet in three pairs of hands.

"Yawoooh! Welease me, you wuffians—"

Bump!

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

Arthur Augustus sat in slushy snow, and sat hard. He sat and spluttered.

"There!" gasped Blake, "That's what we think of your idea, you footling fathead. Now get up and come on, and if you speak another word before we get to St. Jim's, we'll bump you again, and roll you over in the snow."

"Gwoooogh!"

"Come on!" roared Blake.

And Blake and Herries and Dig. their heads bent to the wind again, tramped on: leaving Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to follow. Bright as Gussy's idea had seemed to the swell of St. Jim's, it was only too plain that his comrades had no use for it.

CHAPTER TWO

WANTED ?

"Putrid!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Seasonable!" said Tom Merry.

Grunt from Lowther! The wild weather might be seasonable, at the approach of Christmas: but that was no great comfort.

Looking from the window of No. 10 Study, in the School House at St. Jim's, the Shell fellows beheld a heavy downpour of sleet mixed with snow, whirling on the wind. Certainly, in the warm and cosy study, they were better off than Blake and Co. tramping through Wayland Wood. But the outlook was not very inspiring, all the same.

Hardly anybody was to be seen in the old quad. They glimpsed Figgins of the Fourth, cutting off towards the New House, muffled up in a mackintosh. They had another glimpse of their form-master, Mr. Linton, coming in with his umbrella blown inside out. Nobody wanted to be out in such weather. Even Tom Merry, who always preferred outdoors to indoors, was glad to be under a roof.

"Putrid!" repeated Monty.

"Lucky it kept off till after the pick-up!" said Tom. He always looked on the cheerful side of things. "Might have come on while we were playing football."

"Football being, of course, the beginning

and end of all things, and then some, and something over!" remarked Lowther, with sarcasm.

"Like to hear the news?" came a voice behind the two juniors at the study window, and they looked round at Manners.

Manners of the Shell was tinkering with his radio. In Harry Manners' list of the joys of life, photography came first: he was as keen on amateur photography as Tom Merry was on football, and Monty Lowther on endless japing. But radio came a good second. Even Manners did not think of taking his camera for a walk in such weather as this: so he was finding a little harmless and necessary entertainment in eliciting a series of squeaks and squeals from his wireless set.

"Go ahead, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"Let's know whether another war has started yet," yawned Monty Lowther. He moved away from the window, towards the electric point where the radio was plugged in, with a glimmer in his eyes.

Had Manners observed that glimmer, he might have guessed that the funny man of the Shell had a jest in mind. But Harry Manners was concentrated on his radio, dabbling at dials.

"This rotten weather is no good for radio," he remarked, a little irritably. "Too many atmospherics."

Squeak! squeal! shriek! Howl! screech! came from the radio. Whether it was the rotten weather or not, the B.B.C. did not seem at its bonniest.

"Good!" said Monty Lowther, closing one eye at Tom Merry, "Is that the Third Programme, Manners?"

"What?" ejaculated Manners.

"Stravinsky, I suppose?" asked Monty, affably, "Or is it Rimsky-Korsakoff?"

Tom Merry chuckled, Manners glared. Really and truly, these squeaks and squeals and howls could not possibly have been mistaken even for Russian music.

"Silly ass!" said Manners, "Shut up, if you want to hear the news. I've got it now."

"This is the B.B.C. Home Service," came an announcing voice, "Here is the news. The seven-hundred and ninety-seventh conference of the Foreign Ministers met—"

Sudden silence.

"Bother!" said Manners.

He frowned over the radio, and twiddled dials. Something, it seemed, had gone suddenly wrong with the set. It seemed as dead as a doornail. Manners wrinkled his brows over it, and twiddled and twiddled. Not a sound came from the set—not the ghost of an announcer's voice.

"Blow!" breathed Manners.

"Something gone wrong?" asked Tom Merry, sympathetically.

"I don't see how anything can have. Blessed if I can make it out," yapped Manners, "They can't have shut down suddenly at the B.B.C., I suppose! But—it's gone absolutely dead."

Manners, evidently, was puzzled.

"It's not the set," he said, "It's the current! I suppose nobody has been silly idiot enough to turn the current off at the meter."

"Oh, crumbs!" said Monty Lowther, "What a jape that would be! I wonder—"

"You and your japes!" hooted Manners, "Shut up, for goodness sake. Look here, the current's failed."

"That's jolly queer," said Tom Merry. He switched on the study light for a moment, "The light's all right, Manners."

"Dashed queer," growled Manners, "I wonder if the plug's got loose, or something." He left the radio, and dived across to the electric point where the flex from the wireless was plugged in.

The next moment No. 10 Study echoed and re-echoed with a roar of wrath.

"Lowther! You silly lunatic—"

"What's up?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"That born idiot Lowther—!" roared Manners, "That funny ass Lowther—that blithering cuckoo Lowther—I'll jolly well punch him—"

"Here, chuck it," ejaculated Lowther, dodging round the study table, "Only a joke, old chap—"

"I'll joke you!" yelled Manners, rushing in pursuit.

"Monty, you ass—!" exclaimed Tom Merry, laughing. He discerned now what had happened. Lowther, with an unseen movement of his foot, had jerked out the flex from the electric point, thus suddenly cutting off the current. It was no wonder that sudden silence had descended upon Broadcasting House—so far as No. 10 Study at St. Jim's was concerned.

Monty Lowther's little jokes were not always played at propitious moments. And sometimes they led to a spot of excitement. Manners was red with wrath as he charged round the study table after his too-humorous chum.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, hastily interposing. He grabbed the excited Manners and held him back.

"Leggo!" roared Manners, "I tell you I'm going to punch his silly head—"

"You couldn't punch any sense into it, old chap," said Tom, soothingly. "Plug in and begin again."

"Do you think the B.B.C. will begin again at the beginning, because a silly owl thinks it funny to cut off the current?" shrieked Manners. "I tell you I'm going to mop up the study with him."

"But silence is golden, old fellow," argued Lowther, across the table, "And it's never so jolly golden as when the radio leaves off."

"Will you lemme gerrat him?" roared Manners.

"But we're losing the news," argued Tom Merry, holding on, "Let's have the rest of it, old chap. We're frightfully keen on the seven-hundred-and-ninety-seventh conference of the Foreign Ministers. Get going again."

Manners breathed hard, and he breathed deep. But he listened to reason. He gave Monty Lowther a withering glare across the table, and sat down to the radio again to extract what might yet remain of the news. Once more the announcer's voice came through.

But the B.B.C., like time and tide, wait for no man. Not only the seven-hundred-and-ninety-seventh conference of the Foreign Ministers, but many other items of such thrilling interest, were past and gone, when Manners' set came to life again. He was just in time to hear:

"That is the end of the news. But here is a police message."

Manners snorted. In point of fact, he was not keenly interested in the news, only he liked to exercise his radio. He was still less interested in police messages at the tail of the news. However, he let the announcer run on. And, as it happened, the message that came through proved to be one of interest for the Shell fellows in No. 10 Study—as it would have been for any fellow at St. Jim's. Certainly they had never expected to hear the ancient scholastic foundation to which they belonged mentioned by a B.B.C. announcer. But they did!

"Will Derek Denzil, formerly of the Western Counties Bank, and an Old Boy of St. James's School in Sussex, communicate with Scotland Yard without delay."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry whistled.

Manners stared at the radio.

"Well!" he said.

He shut off, and rose from his chair. He looked at Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

"Now, what the thump does that mean?" he asked.

"Chap disappeared, I suppose," said Tom.

"Of his own accord!" said Monty Lowther, drily, "I think I can sort of guess what that sort of a message means. Will you walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly! What?"

Tom whistled again.

"Not an old St. Jim's man," he said, "He couldn't be wanted, as they call it."

"Sounds as if they want him," said Monty, "I wonder what he's been up to! Anybody ever heard of him before?"

Tom and Manners shook their heads. The name of Derek Denzil was new to them.

"Some fellow who was here before our time," said Tom, "Can't have been much at games, or his name would be on record."

"Well, if he wasn't good at games, of course, he would naturally go to the giddy bow-wows!" remarked Lowther, with gentle sarcasm.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, games help to keep a chap straight," he said, "Might have been some seedy smoky waster like Racke or Crooke, if he's gone to the bad."

"Might have been some silly japing ass who never had sense enough to know where to stop!" remarked Manners.

"Fathead!" said Lowther, "Let's go down to the day-room and see whether anybody's ever heard of Derek Denzil. Quite nice of him to turn up on a rainy day when a fellow's got nothing to do. Come on."

And the chums of the Shell left No. 10

Study: quite interested and excited, for once, by an announcement from the B.B.C.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE DARK!

"Gussy!"

"Fathead!"

"Chump!"

Three voices called, through the wind and the snow. But answer there came none.

Jack Blake breathed hard. It was not really pleasant, standing on the snowy footpath, with snow collecting on his cap, sleet lashing his ears, and a wintry wind almost pushing him over, while he stared back along the path for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"The howling ass!" said Herries.

"The blithering cuckoo!" breathed Dig.

They had taken it for granted that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was following on. Now they realised that they had taken too much for granted. Arthur Augustus was not following on. There was no sign of him to be seen in the dimness of the wintry wood.

"He's not coming," said Dig.

"Oh! Won't I punch his silly head!" hissed Blake, "I've a jolly good mind to get on, and leave him to it."

"Serve him jolly well right," said Herries, "But—"

"Bother the silly ass!" said Dig. "I suppose he's gone rooting after that old ruin in the wood. Bother him!"

"Oh, come on—let's get back," growled Blake, "We'll walk him on by his silly ears when we get hold of him."

Blake had said that he had a "jolly good mind" to get on, and leave Gussy to it. But it seemed that he had a jollier good mind, as it were, not to do so: for he turned to tramp back along the snowy footpath. Herries and Dig. followed him, with deep feelings. They wanted to get in, out of that fearful weather: and they did not want to lose a minute about it. But it was clear now that they were going to lose a good many minutes, unless they marched on and left their noble chum to his own devices. Which, though no doubt it would have served him right, they did not think of doing.

The wind was behind them, as they tramped back, which was a relief. It was blowing hard, and rather helped them on! But they had to face it again when they headed once more for St. Jim's. And that prospect made three fellows feel that it would be a real pleasure to boot Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, bosom pal as he was.

Tramping rather savagely through sleet and snow, they reached the spot were the swell of St. Jim's had been bumped down. The only sign of Arthur Augustus was a depression in the snow where he had sat.

"Oh, the ass!" hissed Blake.

"Oh, the fathead!"

"Oh, the silly owl!"

It was clear enough that Arthur Augustus, in spite of the bumping administered really for his own good, had not abandoned that bright idea that he had propounded to his friends. Evidently they had not bumped that idea out of his aristocratic head. Instead of following on, he had turned off the footpath, to seek that lonely old ruin in the depths of the wood: and if his chums had doubted it, the track he had left in the snow would have put them wise. Already the tracks were filling: but they were plain enough to be seen: and they led away among the frozen underwoods.

"Come on!" breathed Blake.

With feelings deeper than ever, the three juniors left the footpath, and pushed through wet and frozen underwoods, thickets, and brambles.

That they were not far behind Arthur Augustus D'Arcy they were soon apprised, by the sound of a familiar voice floating on the wind.

"Bai Jove! Where is that wotten old wuin? I wondah if I have missed the beastly way! Bai Jove!"

"There he is," said Herries.

They sighted Arthur Augustus. He was standing staring about him uncertainly. Apparently he was not quite sure, after all, of the direction of the old monk's cell in Wayland Wood. Woodland ways were easy to find in summer—but in a December snow storm it was a different matter.

The swell of St. Jim's gave a little jump, as three dim figures loomed up in the dimness.

"Bai Jove! Is that you chaps?" he ejaculated, "Have you come back?"

"Have we?" hooted Blake, "Oh! No! We're miles away."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Now come on, you blithering owl—"

"I am goin' to the monk's cell, Blake, as I told you. If you fellows pwefer snow and sleet, you are vewy welcome to them. Wats!"

"Look here, you chump—"

"I wefuse to be called a chump, Blake. I wecommend you to take my tip, and come and look for that secwet passage, and get out of this feahful weathah."

And Arthur Augustus, either having ascertained the right direction, or to get out of the reach of clutching hands, plunged into the wood again, and the dripping thickets swallowed him up.

"Oh, leave him to it!" exclaimed Herries, impatiently. "Look here, Blake, I'm fed up with this."

"Same here," said Dig.

"We can't leave that howling ass wandering about in a snowstorm on his own," growled Blake, "Ten to one he will get lost. Look here, we're close on that old ruin, anyway: and we may be able to get some shelter there, and wait for the worst of this to blow over. Get after Gussy."

"Bother him!"

"Blow him!"

But the three got after Gussy. They were, as Blake said, close now to the old stone cell in the wood: and ruinous as it was, it was possible that it might afford some spot of shelter to wet and weary wayfarers. Over their heads, branches were cracking and crashing in the fierce wind, and the falling sleet lashed like a whip. Shelter, if shelter was to be had, was a grateful and comforting thought. They pushed wearily on, and in a few minutes came into a little glade, where remnants of ancient masonry, thick with snow, indicated where the monk's cell stood —or rather, had once stood.

Only the old stone walls remained, and a fragment of roof in one corner. Within and without the ground was cluttered with debris, now covered with snow. In the aperture that had once been a doorway, they glimpsed a figure in an elegant but very wet and muddy overcoat. Arthur Augustus, evidently, had found his way, and arrived first.

Blake and Herries and Digby tramped in after him.

Snow and sleet fell unchecked into the almost roofless ruin. But the remains of the thick old stone walls did keep off the fierce wind. It was not much of a shelter, but it was undoubtedly better than nothing.

"Bai Jove! This is wathah a welief," remarked Arthur Augustus, "that beastly wind was neahly blowin' a fellow ovah. I am glad you fellows had sense enough aftah all to follow my lead. I weally think you might twust to the judgment of the bwainy man of the study, you know."

"You footling chump, we came back to save you from being lost like a babe in the wood!" hooted Blake.

"Wubbish, deah boy! Pway don't lose your tempah because the weathah is wuff. It is wathah parky heah, but much bettah than bein' out in the storm. Suppose you help me look for that secwet passage, instead of wastin' bweath callin' a fellow appwobwious names."

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"Ditherer!"

Those three replies, in unison, indicated that Blake and Co. were not interested in the quest of a secret passage—if any! They packed themselves under the fragment of roof in the corner of the old stone cell, where the most shelter was to be had, glad to be out of the wind at least. It was quite likely that that sudden flurry of wild weather might abate before long, and it was worth while to wait and see: and being so late already, it could not matter much if they were a little later. But certainly they had no intention of joining Arthur Augustus in rooting about the old cell for the secret passage that led to St. Jim's. They had little doubt that it existed, if it came to that: but very strong doubts whether it was likely to be discovered.

Arthur Augustus, however, proceeded to carry on on his own. His chums watched him with sarcastic looks as he rooted about. Exploring that old ruin on a bright summer's afternoon was rather an amusing game: but in half-darkness and falling sleet it was far from amusing.

But Arthur Augustus was a sticker. He groped and plunged about in the sleet and gloom, every now and then slipping over fragments of debris hidden in snow, and

stumbling. The floor of the cell was of solid old flag-stones, now carpeted with snow, and seemingly as solid as the globe beneath. But Arthur Augustus had his own ideas about that.

"Pwobably one of these old flags is ovah the entwance to the secwet passage," he said, rather breathlessly, after ten minutes of it, "I weally do not see where else it can be."

"Then it's all plain sailing," said Blake, sarcastically, "Just lift up the flags one after another, and look under them!"

There was a chuckle from Herries and Dig.

"That is wathah an asinine suggestion, Blake. I could not shift these old flags without a cwowbar. But if one of them is movable, of course we should be able to move it."

"O.K." said Blake, "Find the movable one, and we'll all lend you a hand in the moving job. Until then we'll stay here out of the wind."

And there was another chuckle from Herries and Dig.

Arthur Augustus continued his search. He stamped on flag after flag, in the optimistic hope of discovering one that loosened under his stamp. But if one of those ancient stone flags was movable, it gave no sign of it—not the remotest sign. They all seemed to be quite immovable. In the meantime, the winter dusk was thickening to deep dark, and the industrious Gussy became merely a moving shadow to the eyes of his chums.

"Any of you fellows got a flash-lamp?" came Gussy's voice from the gloom.

"Sorry!" said Blake, with withering irony, "We generally take a flash-lamp to see a football match on a fine afternoon: but this time we forgot."

Chuckle, from Herries and Dig.

"Pway don't be a sarcastic ass, Blake. Pewwaps you have got a box of matches about you."

"Oh! Yes! I generally carry matches to light my pipe. But I forgot my pipe too this afternoon."

"You silly ass!" hooted Arthur Augustus, while Herries and Dig. chortled, "I weally do not see how I can cawwy on without a light of some sort. Howevah, I will twy."

"I fancy the wind's falling," said Blake, "The worst of it will be over soon, and we can get going. We'll give you ten minutes more, Gussy."

"Wats!" came back from the dark.

But Arthur Augustus did not carry on for another ten minutes. The darkness was thickening to blackness, and the juniors in the old cell could no longer see one another. Only a faint glimmer of snow came through the dense gloom. There was a sound of a sudden bump, and a yell.

"Yawoooh!"

"Oh, my hat! Found it and fallen through?" called out Blake.

"Ow! wow! I have not found it—wow!—I have not fallen thwough—ow-ow-wow!—I have slipped ovah somethin' and banged my head on the wall—ow! ow! wooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you wegard a chap bangin' his head as funnay—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!"

Arthur Augustus, rubbing his noble head, joined his friends in the sheltered corner of the cell. Apparently that bang on his aristocratic nut had decided him to give up a somewhat hopeless quest.

Four juniors, damp and uncomfortable, packed close in the sheltered corner, and listened to the wind. It was dropping: there was no doubt about that—branches were no longer cracking and crashing in the wood, and the flurry of sleet and snow was slackening.

The worst of the storm was over: and Blake and Co. on the whole, were rather glad that D'Arcy's bright idea—idiotic as it was in their opinion—had led them to take shelter till the worst was over. But it was damp and cold and dismal, and they waited anxiously for the time to get a move on.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, suddenly, "What's that?" He gave quite a jump: and three other fellows started.

There was a sound in the old stone cell that was not the wind. In the black darkness they could see nothing—not so much as a hand before a face. It was a rustle of thick old ivy, followed by a footstep.

Four juniors stared blankly into the darkness.

Someone else was in the old stone cell—

someone unseen in the gloom. If he had entered by the doorway, they had not heard him—but they heard him now. Plainly to their ears came footsteps, hardly a couple of yards away; then an angry mutter with the sound of a stumble—and then, suddenly, the light of a flash-lamp gleamed out, a sudden stab of light in the blackness. And the four St. Jim's juniors stared with startled eyes at the light, and at the man who held it in his hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

Jack Blake and Co. did not move.

They were too startled to stir.

They stared.

Hardly six or seven feet away from them, picking his way among the snow and debris that covered the old stone flags of the floor, was the man who had so suddenly and strangely appeared from nowhere.

They could make him out only dimly: but they saw a figure in a thick overcoat, with a soft hat pulled low over his face. The flash-lamp was held to shine downwards, evidently to assist him in picking his way across the cell, and the man was dim behind the light.

They might have supposed that it was some wayfarer, like themselves, who had sought shelter in that lonely old ruin in Wayland Wood. But they could see that that was not the case. Their own clothes were wet with sleet and sprinkled with snow: but there was no sign of either on the man's overcoat or hat. He could not have been out in the storm. And he was not coming into the cell—he was going out. Picking his way among the scattered debris, he was moving towards the doorway, obviously with the intention of leaving the cell.

They gazed, speechless with astonishment.

They had been in the monk's cell a good half-hour: and it seemed impossible that the stranger could have been there all the time, without any of them becoming aware of his presence. Yet there he was! His sudden and amazing appearance in the cell was as startling as that of a grisly spectre.

Plainly he did not know that they were there. He could not have heard D'Arcy's startled ejaculation. He did not glance towards the sheltered corner where they clustered out of the wind and sleet. He moved across the cumbered floor towards the doorway, unaware of them.

Arthur Augustus found his voice.

"Bai Jove!" he repeated.

This time his ejaculation evidently reached the stranger's ears, for he stopped dead, with a startled breath and swung round, facing the corner where the St. Jim's juniors clustered.

The flash-lamp was suddenly turned on them, almost blinding them with its dazzling brightness in their faces.

Behind the light, he was still dim: but they caught the flash of startled eyes. A hard sharp voice rapped out:

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man came a little closer, flashing the light on them. They blinked at him in the light, rather like owls.

"Pway turn that light anothah way," said Arthur Augustus, "You are weally blindin' a fellow with it, whoevah you are! It thwows me into quite a fluttah."

"Who are you?" snapped the angry voice. Why the man should be angry at finding them there, was a mystery to the schoolboys: but there was no doubt that he was both startled and angry—very angry indeed.

"Who are you, if it comes to that?" retorted Jack Blake, "and where the thump did you spring from, all of a sudden?"

"Yaas, wathah."

The man stared at them in the light, scanning them with angry eyes.

"Schoolboys!" he exclaimed.

"Right on the wicket!" answered Blake, "St. Jim's, if you want to know."

"St. Jim's!" The man with the light repeated the word, as if it were familiar, "You belong to St. Jim's?" He came closer, peering at them, "How did you get here?"

"Walked," answered Blake, cheerfully.

There was a menacing, almost bullying tone, in the man's voice: which had the effect of putting Blake's back up. The sturdy junior from Yorkshire had no idea whatever of being bully-ragged by a stranger, and he did not care a bean for the man's angry temper.

"You young rascal, tell me the truth."

The voice was almost a hiss, "Tell me at once how you came here, or—"

"Or what?" asked Blake, coolly, "You'd better keep your fancy names to yourself, my man, if you don't want to be tipped over in the snow."

"Yes, rather," said Herries, in a deep growl.

"What the dickens does it matter to you, anyway, whoever you are?" demanded Digby, "I suppose we can come here if we like."

"Will you answer my question?"

"I've answered it," said Blake, "No business of yours: but we walked here! Do you suppose we flew, or what?"

"Bai Jove! I wegard this person as a vewy inquisitive and impertinent fellow," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "I should vewy much like to know by what wight you are askin' these questions, my man?"

The stranger did not immediately answer. He was scanning them keenly, almost wolfishly, with a pair of very sharp and penetrating eyes, under dark brows. Dim as he was behind the light, they could make out his face—a hard face with sharp features, and thin set lips. It was not a prepossessing face: especially with its present expression of anger and suspicion.

Perhaps the man realised that his anger was not likely to get him anywhere, and he made an effort to check it. The chums of the St. Jim's Fourth made it quite clear that

The flash-lamp was suddenly turned on them, almost blinding them with its dazzling brightness.

they were not afraid of him in the least. He looked a muscular fellow, but the four of them could have handled him without difficulty: and they were quite ready to do so if necessary. His voice was quieter when he spoke again.

"You startled me! I did not know that anyone was here, and I was very much startled—"

"Same here," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I came here for shelter from the weather. Did you do the same?" His tone was becoming quite civil.

"That wasn't hard to guess, was it?" said Blake, "We never knew anyone was here when we came in, and never heard a sound of you till a minute ago, but I suppose you came in before we did, as you don't look wet. Where on earth have you been parking yourself for the last half-hour?"

"Yaas, wathah, that is vewy cuwious," said Arthur Augustus, "I have been wootin' all ovah the place, and I never came acwoss you."

Again the man paused before he replied.

"I took shelter before the storm broke, and I have been under the lee of that old wall," he answered, at last, "You did not see me until I turned on the light, I suppose?"

"We're not cats," answered Blake, politely, "If we were, we might be able to see in the dark. Not being cats, we didn't."

"It is vewy wemarkable that I saw nothin' of you, as I have been wootin' all ovah the place—"

"And why were you rooting all over the place, you young fool?" came a snap from the man with the flash-lamp: his angry temper apparently getting the upper hand again.

Arthur Augustus did not answer. He adjusted his eyeglass in his eye, and gave the scowling stranger a glance of ineffable scorn. That was all the reply the swell of St. Jim's deigned to make to an impertinent person who addressed him as a "young fool."

"Will you answer me?" came another snap.

"Certainly not!" said Arthur Augustus, "I wegard you as a cheeky wottah, and I wefuse to speak a single word to you. I will not uttah a single syllable. Go and eat coke, bai Jove!"

The threatening look that came over the hard sharp face was a little startling, and the four schoolboys instinctively drew together, facing him. For a long moment he stared at them, his face dark with anger and suspicion. Then, suddenly, the light was shut off: and he disappeared into blackness. They heard him tramping and stumbling to the doorway, and in a moment or two he was gone.

"Well," said Blake, with a deep breath, "That's a rather queer customer."

"A vewy queeah customah indeed!" said Arthur Augustus, "His mannahs are weally shockin'. I am afwaid that he was not tellin' the twuth, deah boys—he cannot have been heah all the time, or I should have come acwoss him while I was wootin' all ovah the place."

"Must have," said Blake, "He wasn't wet—and he would have been jolly wet, if he's come through that storm as we did."

"Yaas, that is vewy odd: but all the same, I am quite suah that I should have come acwoss him in wootin' about if he had been heah—I was wootin' ovah evewy foot of the place."

"Bow-wow!" said Blake, "Look here, it's clearing off—we can get going: and I'm fed up with this show, if you fellows are."

"Come on," said Dig.

"Bettah gwope your way, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, "It's fwightfully dark. We don't want to wun into the beastly wall." Arthur Augustus shoved out his aristocratic hands to grope in the dark, "Oh! Bai Jove! I have banged my knuckles against something—"

"You blithering idiot—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"It was my nose, you born blitherer," hissed Blake.

"Bai Jove! Was it weally, deah boy? Pway keep your nose out of the way, while I gwope to the doorway. Come on! Oh, cwikey, now I have banged my other hand on somethin'—"

"Will you keep your fist out of my eye?" yelled Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Here, let's get out before that dangerous lunatic gives us all the K.O." exclaimed Blake. "Come on."

The four juniors scrambled out of the old

cell in the darkness. The wind had fallen, and only a few flakes of snow were still coming down. Damp and dismal, but glad at least to get going, they tramped away through the wood, and emerged at last into Rylcombe Lane, and headed for St. Jim's.

CHAPTER FIVE

JUST LIKE GUSSY!

"Blake!"

"*Adsum*!"

There was a rustle in the ranks of the Fourth, as fellows moved and looked round. Nobody in that Form had expected to hear "*adsum*" when Blake's name was called at roll. Certainly it was not Blake that replied.

Every fellow in the Fourth knew that Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy, had not come in. Some fellows knew that they had gone over to Wayland that afternoon to see the Ramblers' match there: and, in view of the wild outbreak of the wintry elements later, concluded that they had taken shelter somewhere to wait till the storm was over. Anyhow, wherever they were, and whatever they were doing, they were still out of gates and missing House roll.

So it was quite a surprise to the Fourth, if not to the Fourth-form master, when "*adsum*" was answered to Blake's name.

Little Mr. Lathom, master of the Fourth, was taking roll that evening. Lathom was short-sighted and unsupicious: his eyes, and his glasses, were on the list in his hand: and it had happened, more than once, that some friendly fellow had answered for an absent one, when Lathom was taking roll. At St. Jim's they remained in their places till the roll was finished, so there was quite a good chance of getting away with it, when an unwary beak like Lathom was calling the names.

That Mr. Lathom did not "smell a rat" was clear, for he continued to call the names, satisfied with that "*adsum*" from some unknown person.

There was a grin on the face of Cardew of the Fourth. His pals, Levison and Clive, looked at him rather expressively.

They were quite in favour of doing an absent fellow a good turn, and saving him from lines. But Cardew of the Fourth was not specially friendly with Study No. 6—neither was he unduly given to doing fellows good turns. It was, in fact, his propensity for pulling a beak's leg, more than anything else, that caused him to answer for the absent Blake, and Levison and Clive were quite aware of it.

"D'Arcy major."

"*Adsum*!" came again from the Fourth.

"You ass, Cardew!" whispered Levison.

Cardew winked at him.

"Lathom won't fall for it twice," whispered Clive.

But the unsuspicious Lathom did fall for it twice. He went on with the roll, obviously unaware that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not present in hall.

Some of the fellows were grinning, and there was a fat chuckle from Baggy Trimble.

"They must have got in after all," Tom Merry remarked to Manners and Lowther, "I thought they were cutting roll."

Lowther chuckled.

"They haven't got in," he whispered, "Some other man has answered for them. Lathom's taking it like milk."

"Lucky for him it's not Linton taking roll," said Manners.

"Digby!" came Mr. Lathom's rather squeaky voice.

"A*dsum*!"

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Lowther, "That man's got a nerve, whoever he is! Will Lathom swallow it three times running?"

"Cardew, you goat—!" muttered Levison.

Cardew winked again.

He was quite enjoying it. It was not unknown for a fellow to answer to another fellow's name, in propitious circumstances. But for a fellow to answer three times in succession was quite unknown and unheard of. That was why Ralph Reckness Cardew was doing it. The other fellows were wondering at his nerve: and Cardew liked to make them wonder.

By this time, all the Fourth, and most of the other juniors, were "on" to the game. There was quite a spot of excitement. Almost breathlessly, the juniors waited to see whether even the short-sighted and unsuspicious Lathom would "fall" for it a third time.

They were soon reassured. Lathom went

on sedately with the roll, nothing doubting. There were suppressed chuckles in the Fourth, the Shell, and the Third. There was yet another name, belonging to the absent Study No. 6, to come, and the juniors wondered whether Cardew would have the tremendous nerve to carry on the same trick for a fourth time.

"Herries!"

Promptly from the Fourth came the answer:

"*Adsum*!"

There was a moment of breathless excitement. It seemed almost impossible that even Lathom could have his leg pulled to this extent. Four fellows were absent: and "*adsum*" had now been answered to every one of the four names. Was it possible that even Lathom—?

It was!

The squeaky voice went on with the roll. Lathom, in blissful ignorance that four members of his form were not present, had not marked a single one of them absent from roll. It seemed almost too good to be true. It was the most tremendous leg-pull that had ever happened in hall. Cardew was the cynosure of all eyes in the Fourth.

"Well, that man's got a nerve," remarked Tom Merry. "Who is he?"

"Cardew," whispered Monty Lowther, "Nobody else in the Fourth would be ass enough to risk it."

"Lathom may spot it yet," said Manners.

"Let's hope not," said Tom, "It would mean six of the very best for Cardew if Lathom got wise to it."

Cardew, in the Fourth, was looking quite calm and unconcerned. Possibly he was not feeling so easy inwardly as he looked. For if Mr. Lathom did "smell a rat," it was certain that there would be rigid inquiry for the junior who had answered for four absent names: with dire results for that junior. But if Cardew was feeling any uneasiness within, he showed no sign of it; though very probably it was a relief to him when roll was ended and the House dismissed.

"You ass!" said Levison, as they went into the day-room after roll.

"You fathead!" added Sidney Clive.

Cardew yawned.

"Why not do fellows a good turn" he? asked, "Lathom's ass enough to swallow anything, isn't he? Quite a pleasure to pull his leg."

"That's why you did it," grunted Clive. "Fat lot you care whether Study No. 6 get lines or not."

"Admitted!" yawned Cardew, "I could bear it with tremendous fortitude if they had to write out the Æneid from beginning to end. It's amusin' to pull Lathom's leg. Still, it was a good turn for Study 6, though that was only a bye-product."

There was quite a buzz in the junior day-room on the subject, and a good deal of laughter. Cardew, and his nerve, were a topic for quite a long time. And whatever his motives had been, it was certain that it was a good turn for Study No. 6—for they were very late. Many fellows were eager to see Blake and Co. come in, to tell them how "that man Cardew" had scraped them through at roll.

It was almost time for prep. when Blake and Co. at length did appear. Three members of Study No. 6 came into the junior day-room, looking neither merry nor bright. Blake and Herries and Dig. had dried themselves and changed their clothes, and were feeling none the worse for their stormy walk; but they were expecting to be called to their house-master's study, having of course no doubt that they had been marked absent at roll. Mr. Railton might, or might not, admit the excuse of the weather: but it certainly looked like "lines" at least.

"Oh, here you fellows are!" called out Tom Merry.

"Here we are," answered Blake, "Couldn't be helped—but I suppose it means a row. Gussy had to waste all the time he possibly could."

"Hasn't Gussy come in?" asked Tom.

"Oh! Yes! But he's still changing his clobber," said Blake, sarcastically, "That takes time, with Gussy!"

"Well, you're all right," said Tom, laughing, "Cardew answered for you in hall, and there won't be any row."

Blake stared.

"Cardew didn't answer for the lot of us, I suppose?" he exclaimed.

"The whole happy family," said Tom.

"Oh, my hat! And got by with it?" exclaimed Digby.

"Looks like it."

"Well, that beats it," said Herries, "Mean to say that he had the nerve to answer for four fellows one after another?"

"Just that!"

"Wouldn't have worked with any beak but Lathom," said Manners, "Lucky it wasn't Linton, or Railton, or old Selby."

"Jolly lucky," said Blake. His face had brightened considerably, and he looked round for Cardew. He had, as a matter of fact, no very high opinion of that rather slack and somewhat supercilious youth, but at the moment he was feeling quite friendly, "I say, Cardew, you're a brick."

"Thanks," said Cardew, nonchalantly.

"You've got a nerve!" said Dig.

"My long suit!" admitted Cardew.

"Well, I'm jolly glad you got by with it," said Herries, "I don't want to have to go up to the House beak, for one."

"Good news for Gussy, when he blows in," said Kit Wildrake. "Hallo, here he comes."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, changed and clean as a new pin, sauntered gracefully into the day-room. The expression on his aristocratic face was a little serious.

"Goin' to Wailton, you fellows," he asked.

Blake chuckled.

"No jolly fear," he answered, "We're all right, Gussy."

"Bai Jove! How do you make that out, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus, in surprise, "It means lines all wound, Blake."

"It would have—but for Cardew," explained Blake, "Cardew answered *adsum* for us in hall, and we've not been missed."

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"What!" he ejaculated.

"O.K., D'Arcy," drawled Cardew. "The spirit moved me to do you fellows a good turn, and I answered for the lot of you. Lathom lapped it up like milk. So you're all right."

"Oh, cwikey!"

Arthur Augustus had been expected to look as relieved as his friends at the good news. But he did not look relieved. He looked dismayed. His eyeglass dropped from his eye, as he blinked at Cardew.

"Bai Jove!" he said, "That's aw'fly wotten."

"You howling ass," said Herries, "Did you want lines from the House beak?"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"You specially want to call on Railton?" asked Digby, sarcastically.

"Weally, Dig.—"

"What's the matter with you, you image?" demanded Blake, "Can't you get it into that lump of cheese you call a brain that Cardew's pulled Lathom's leg, and pulled us through?"

"It's all right, Gussy," said Tom Merry.

"It is vewy fah fwom all wight, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head, "You see, I have alweady been to Wailton."

"What?" gasped Tom.

"What?" yelled Blake.

"What?" roared Herries and Dig.

"Pway do not woar at a chap," said Arthur Augustus, "I have wemarked vewy many times that I dislike bein' woared at. You see, I went to Wailton at once when I came down aftah changin', to get it ovah. I explained to him that we were hung up by the feahful weathah—"

"Oh, holy smoke!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

Cardew's face was a study.

Every fellow in the junior day-room was staring at Arthur Augustus. Cardew's look was the most expressive!

"You—you—you've been to Railton!" stuttered Blake. "You went to Railton without waiting to be sent for?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And why?" yelled Herries.

"I thought it best to get it ovah, deah boy."

"You—you ass!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"I also thought," added Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "that it was best for me to explain the mattah, as a fellow of tact and judgment. Wailton was vewy decent about it, too. He said that our absence had not been weported to him yet—"

"Oh, you chump!"

"And he gave me only twenty lines, and I expect you fellows will get the same," said Arthur Augustus, "You are to go to his study now."

"You—you—you—Oh, there ain't a word for you!" gasped Blake, "So we've got to go to Railton after all? After Cardew saw us through! Oh, you ass! Some of you massacre him while we're gone, will you?"

"Weally, Blake—"

Blake and Herries and Dig., with deep feelings, left the day-room, to repair to their house-master's study. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned to Cardew, who was looking at him as if he could have eaten him.

"Cardew, deah boy—"

"You idiot!" hissed Cardew.

"Weally, Cardew—"

"You born idiot!"

"Bai Jove! Is anythin' the mattah, Cardew?"

Ernest Levison laughed.

"Nothing at present," he said, "But there will be—when they begin inquiring after the fellow who answered to your name in hall."

"I was not awah that Cardew had answered to my name in hall, Levison. Had I been awah of it, I should not have gone to Wailton. Not," added Arthur Augustus, "that I appwove of pullin' a beak's leg, even to do a fellow a good turn. I cannot help wegardin' it as diswespectful, and bad form. Howevah, I am sowwy, Cardew, if you get into a wow—"

"No if about it," said Manners, "He will!"

"Good old Gussy!" chuckled Lowther, "He can't open his mouth without putting his foot in it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"You born idiot!" said Cardew. "If I get six from Railton for this, I'll punch your silly head!"

"I wepeat, Cardew, that I am sowwy if you get into a wow—"

"Oh, go and eat coke."

Cardew walked, or rather stamped, out of the day-room. That leg-pull in hall, which had made him the cynosure of all eyes, seemed likely to come home to roost now. With all his nerve, and his desire to make fellows wonder at it, Cardew did not seem to like the prospect.

CHAPTER SIX

LOWTHER WANTS TO KNOW

"Taggles would know!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Taggles!" repeated Tom Merry, blankly.

Manners grinned.

It was after class the following day.

The wild weather had cleared off. The "Terrible Three" of the Shell came out of the House into wintry sunshine. Snow ridged the roofs, and glistened on the branches of the old elms. Tom Merry was thinking of the football ground, only too likely to be soaked and soggy. Whether it would be altogether too muddy and splashy for a pick-up game, was the question before the meeting so far as the captain of the Shell was concerned, and he was debating that important point as they came out.

Monty Lowther was not listening. His thoughts were running on a quite different subject. Manners was lending a friendly ear, though not so deeply interested as Tom.

Tom had just observed that the best thing to do was to go down and have a look at the ground. So he was naturally surprised when Lowther stated that Taggles would know—Taggles being the school porter, who, whatever extensive knowledge of various subjects he might have accumulated in sixty-nine years, certainly did not know or care much about junior football, pick-ups, and the state of the football ground.

"Did you say Taggles, Monty?" asked Tom, staring at his chum.

"Yes: Taggles is bound to know," said Lowther.

"What the jolly old dickens could Taggles know about it?" asked Tom.

"Well, he's been here for donkeys' years," said Lowther, "If anybody knows, it's old Taggles."

"I don't suppose he knows, or cares, a hoot about it," said Tom, "What the thump do you mean, if you mean anything?"

"Only what I say," answered Lowther, testily, "Taggles is bound to know—he's been here longer than the Head. The Head knows, of course, but we can't very well walk up to Dr. Holmes and ask him."

"I should fancy not," said Tom, "The Head would stare, I think, if Lower boys asked his opinion about the state of a football ground. Gone off your rocker?"

Manners chuckled.

"Eh! Who's talking about a football ground?" asked Lowther.

"I am!" hooted Tom.

"Are you? Can't you forget football for a single minute? I don't suppose the ground's fit to play on, anyhow."

"Tom's been talking about it for five minutes," grinned Manners.

"Has he?" said Lowther, "Well, he would be!"

"You howling ass," said Tom, "What do you mean by saying that Taggles would know! What would he know?"

"About that man Denzil."

Evidently, thoughts had been running on different lines. Monty Lowther's were concentrated on the strange and startling announcement the Shell fellows had heard on the radio in No. 10 Study, the day before.

"Eh! Who's Denzil?" asked Tom. "Oh! I remember! The man they mentioned on the wireless. Well, never mind him now—let's walk down and see whether there's a chance of a pick-up—"

"Blow your pick-ups! Look here, I've asked half the House, and nobody seems to know anything about Derek Denzil," said Lowther.

"What does it matter?" asked Tom.

"Fathead! Aren't you interested in an old St. Jim's man being wanted by Scotland-Yard?" demanded Lowther.

"Not a lot! Besides, we don't know that he's wanted. The announcer only said that they wanted him to communicate with them."

"That might mean anything," said Manners.

"It might," agreed Lowther, "It might mean that the Chief Commissioner at Scotland-Yard wants to ask him for the address of his tailor, or to remind him that he lent him half-a-crown when they were boys at school. Think that's likely?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No," he said, "But—"

"That message means that they want him," said Lowther, "It means that just because it can't mean anything else. It's a bit thick, but that's what it means. Well, Denzil was here before our time—but he must have been in Taggles' time, as Taggles is about a hundred years old. Taggles is sure to know—so let's go and ask him."

"Oh, all right," said Tom. His interest in that Old Boy of St. Jim's, who had apparently gone to the bad, was very faint: Lowther's, on the other hand, was very lively. Manners was mildly interested.

"Well, come on," said Monty, "Plenty of time for a mud-bath afterwards, if you're keen on it. I can tell you," went on Lowther, as they headed for the porter's lodge, "that I've got an idea about that man Denzil."

"He can't have played for the School," said Tom, "If he had—"

"Will you give Soccer a rest for a single minute?" hooted Lowther. "Look here, why do you think they mentioned in the announcement that he was a St. Jim's man?"

"Because he was one, I suppose."

"They had a reason for dragging it in, ass. Most Old Boys are more or less in touch," said Lowther, "If Denzil's keeping doggo, as it's pretty clear that he is, some other old St. Jim's man may know something that would be useful to Scotland-Yard, see? Might know where he is. The Head may know. I shouldn't be surprised to see a detective coming here to ask questions."

"That would be pretty rotten," said Tom.

"Putrid!" said Manners.

"Well, it's not nice, but it's jolly likely to happen," said Lowther. "They may even think that he's in this neighbourhood, now he's on the run. Man might very likely head for country that he knew as a boy, looking for a hide-out."

"I suppose he might," agreed Tom Merry, "I suppose every eye in the school would be open for him, if he did. Let's hope he won't."

They arrived at the porter's lodge. Old Taggles was standing in his doorway, blinking out into the winter sunshine. The expression on his ancient face was, as usual, somewhat crusty: and it did not brighten as the Shell fellows came up. His manner did not not indicate that he was yearning for cheerful boyish company.

"Nice day after the storm, Taggles," began Monty, amicably.

"Ho!" said Taggles.

"We've just come along to ask you something," went on Lowther.

"Don't I know it?" said Taggles.

"Eh! How's that," asked Lowther, in surprise.

Taggles gave a sniff, or rather a snort.

"You ain't the first," he grunted, "Since I heard that there announcement on the wireless yesterday, there's been about a 'undred coming 'ere to ask me if I remember young Denzil."

Tom Merry and Manners grinned. Low-

ther's bright idea of seeking information from the ancient porter of St. Jim's evidently came rather late in the day. Others had been before him on the same tack.

"Oh!" said Lowther, a little dashed. "Well, you do remember him, don't you, Taggles?"

"P'raps I do, and p'raps I don't," answered Taggles.

"What sort of a chap was he?" asked Lowther.

"A young limb, like most of 'em," answered Taggles.

"Was he a bad hat when he was here?"

"P'raps he was, and p'raps he wasn't."

"Was he sacked?"

"P'raps he might have been, and p'raps he mightn't."

"Look here, can't you tell us something about the man?" demanded Lowther.

"P'raps I could, and p'raps I couldn't, answered Taggles, "But I can tell you somebody what knows more'n I do."

"Oh, good! Who's that?"

"The 'Ead!" said Taggles.

Tom and Manners grinned again, and Monty Lowther gave the old school porter an expressive look.

"Better ask the 'Ead," added Taggles, "He knows more about Derek Denzil than I does. He may tell you all about it—p'raps."

"Has the Head told you not to talk about him to the fellows?" snapped Lowther.

"P'raps he 'ave, and p'raps he aint," said Taggles.

Monty Lowther breathed rather hard. Whether on the Head's instruction or not it was clear that Taggles did not intend to impart information on the subject of that interesting Old Boy, Derek Denzil.

"Come on, Monty," said Tom, laughing, "Nothing doing here! Let's go and have a look at the ground—"

"Blow the ground! Look here, Taggles, you bothering old image—"

"You call a man names, and I'll report yer," said Taggles, stolidly.

"Oh, come on, you fellows," snapped Lowther, and he turned away. "Hallo, what's that?" He stooped, and picked up something from the earth, so quickly that his friends did not see what it was, "Either of you chaps dropped a shilling?"

"I haven't," said Tom Merry.

"Nor I," said Manners.

"Then this doesn't belong to either of you. I don't think I dropped it myself—in fact, I know I didn't. Not yours, Taggles, is it?"

Taggles made a step outside his doorway.

"'Ow do you know it ain't, Master Lowther?" he exclaimed, "You found it jest outside my doorway."

"But you said that a lot of fellows have been here—"

"Mebbe they 'ave, but that ain't neither 'ere nor there," snorted Taggles, "You 'and me that shilling, Master Lowther. Now I come to think of it, I've been a shilling short, and I must 'ave dropped it."

Taggles horny hand stretched out for the shilling. Monty's closed tighter. His chums looked at him in surprise.

"Hand it over, Monty," said Tom, "Taggles says it's his—"

"Course it's mine," grunted Taggles. "You 'and it over, Master Lowther. You 'ear me?"

"Well, if it's yours, you can have it, of course," said Lowther, "But if a lot of fellows have been round here—"

"Oh, rot," said Manners, "Give Taggles his shilling, you ass."

"You're sure it's yours, Taggles?" asked Lowther.

"Course I'm sure!" hooted Taggles, excitedly, "Oo's else could it be, jest in front of my door? Ain't I told you I'm a shilling short."

"That settles it," said Tom, "Hand it over, Monty, and don't play the goat."

"If Taggles is quite certain that this belongs to him—!" said Lowther, slowly.

"Course I'm certain."

"You want me to give it to you?"

"Course I does, bein' my shillin'. Look 'ere, you 'and it over, or I'll go to Mr. Railton about it!" snorted Taggles.

"O.K.," said Lowther, "Here you are, Taggles."

He opened his hand, and dropped a small object into Taggles' horny palm. Taggles's gnarled face, for a moment, registered satisfaction. But that was only for a moment. The next, he stared blankly at the small object in his palm. It was not a shilling. It was a pebble.

"Wot's this ere?" ejaculated Taggles.

"That's what I just picked up," explained Monty Lowther, blandly. "It doesn't look much like a shilling to me, but if its yours, you can have it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Manners and Tom Merry. Taggles's face was a picture.

"You young limb!" he gasped, "You said it was a shilling—"

"Oh, draw it mild," protested Lowther, "I never said it was anything. I asked these chaps if they'd dropped a shilling. Didn't I, you chaps?"

"You did!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Merely that, and nothing more!" chortled Manners.

"You—you—you—!" gasped Taggles. He hurled the pebble to the ground, "Pulling a man's leg, you young limb."

"Sorry it wasn't the shilling you lost," grinned Lowther, "You're still that shilling short, Taggles, old man."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Tom and Manners.

Taggles gazed at the playful Monty. If it had been practicable for a school porter to box a St. Jim's fellow's ears, it was plain that Lowther's head would have been ringing the next moment. Fortunately for Monty, it wasn't.

"You-you-you—!" gasped Taggles, "'Ere, you clear off, you young limb! You'll come to a bad end, you will, and I shouldn't wonder if you was expelled some day jest like young Denzil was! 'Ook it, you 'ear?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Taggles retired into his lodge, and closed the door with a bang. Tom Merry and Co. departed, laughing: and in possession of at least one item of information, inadvertently released by Taggles. They knew now that Derek Denzil, once of St. Jim's, had been "sacked."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS ASKS FOR IT

"Cardew, deah boy—"

"Oh, can it!"

"Weally, Cardew—"

"Idiot!"

With that brief but expressive remark, Ralph Reckness Cardew brushed past Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and walked on—or rather, stalked.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

Blake and Herries and Dig. grinned.

They did not expect Cardew of the Fourth to be in a good temper just then. Arthur Augustus, apparently, did.

Certainly, it had been rather unfortunate, about that little affair in hall the previous day. Gussy could see that. Cardew, whatever his motives, had done Study No. 6 a good turn—if only Arthur Augustus had not inadvertently given the whole game away. But Arthur Augustus having done exactly that, there had naturally been inquiry into the matter. The outcome had been painful for Cardew.

Four fellows, according to the roll, had been present at calling-over: while Mr. Railton, the house-master, had given those four fellows lines for absence from calling-over! So very curious a circumstance had to be looked into—and it was looked into.

Mr. Lathom, apprised of the fact that his leg had been pulled in hall to an extraordinary and unheard of extent, had quite lost his usual mild geniality, and developed an unaccustomed grimness. He was after that leg-puller like a dog after a bone. He was going to make an example of him. And he did. Which young scamp had answered to four absent names might have been difficult to discover—but the master of the Fourth washed out that difficulty with a drastic hand. With a frowning brow worthy of the Lord High Executioner, he announced in the form-room that every School House boy in the Fourth was under detention until the culprit was revealed.

That, of course, did it! In such circumstances a fellow had to own up. It was expected of him, and if he had not done so, his life would scarcely have been worth living at St. Jim's while the detentions lasted. Cardew had had his little joke on his beak, and he had to pay the piper. Not that Cardew hesitated. He was not the fellow to elude a punishment by letting it land on others. What the form expected of him, he did promptly: and he was immediately and drastically dealt with. The "six" administered by Mr. Lathom sounded, to all ears, like six successive rifle-shots.

Cardew prided himself upon being able to "take it" without giving a sign. But so uncommonly hard did Mr. Lathom lay on

that six, that in spite of all his efforts, Cardew yelped, and almost yelled. That was the unkindest cut of all—that he had uttered sounds of woe, like a fellow of Trimble's sort, under a whopping. Cardew was not likely to get over that in a hurry.

So when Arthur Augustus addressed him on the study landing, nobody but Arthur Augustus expected Cardew to be civil.

True, the whopping had had time to wear off. By that time, there were only a few reminiscent twinges. But it was a ridiculous end to Cardew's jape on Lathom, and worst of all, he could not forget that he had uttered a howl, like Trimble or Mellish under the swiping. So far from having any civility to waste on the cheery Gussy, Cardew came very near to planting his knuckles in the middle of Gussy's aristocratic features.

He stalked across the landing, stalked up the passage, and slammed the door of No. 9 Study after him. A dozen fellows on the landing grinned, while Arthur Augustus, for the second time, ejaculated:

"Bai Jove!"

He gazed after Cardew, till that disgruntled youth disappeared, and then turned his eyeglass on his grinning friends.

"Cardew seems wathah watty," he remarked.

"Just a few!" agreed Blake, "I've noticed that fellows' tempers are seldom improved by six on the bags."

"Pewwaps that was wathah wuff, Blake, but it is no excuse for bad mannahs," said Arthur Augustus, "Did you heah what he called me?"

"Yes: right on the wicket, too," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Did you expect to please him by getting him six from Lathom?" asked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Lathom laid them on, too," remarked Dig., "Never knew the old bean packed such a muscle."

"And didn't Cardew yell?" chuckled Baggy Trimble.

"Not like you would have," said Blake, "You'd have raised the roof at the first swipe. It was tough on Cardew, Gussy, and it was all your fault— but he'll come round, and if he doesn't, it won't matter a whole lot. Let's get out."

"I am vewy sowwy to see a fellow's mannahs detewiowate because of a lickin'," said Arthur Augustus, "But it was certainly wuff on Cardew, as he appawently meant to do us a good turn by pullin' Lathom's leg. I cannot appwove of pullin' a form-master's leg—"

"We've heard that one! Come on."

"I am sowwy that Cardew is cuttin' up wuff about it. He is a distant welation of mine, you know—a sort of second cousin twice wemoved, or somethin'—and it is fwightful bad form for welations to wow. Pewwaps I had bettah go and speak to him—"

"Leave him alone, fathead," said Herries.

"I wefuse to be called a fathead, Hewwies, and I shall go and speak to Cardew," said Arthur Augustus. "I don't want to be wowin' with him, and the soonah the mattah is set wight the bettah. Especially as Chwistmas is comin', you know. We shall be bweakin' up next week—"

"You'll be breaking up this afternoon, if you don't keep clear of Cardew," said Blake. "Like us to pick up the pieces?"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus.

And he walked up the Fourth-form passage to No. 9 Study and tapped at Cardew's door. His friends followed him. In Cardew's present temper, a visit from Arthur Augustus was something like Daniel dropping into the lion's den. They thought it more probable that Arthur Augustus would leave Cardew's study on his neck than on his feet.

Arthur Augustus opened the door, and looked in.

Cardew was alone in the study. His friends, Levison and Clive, probably did not find his company exhilarating in his present mood.

He was standing by the study window, staring out into the quad. Possibly the lingering twinges of the "six" made him prefer to stand.

He glanced round as the door opened, and a quite deadly look came over his face at the sight of the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus stepped cheerily into the doorway.

"Cardew, deah boy, I twust that you are wecoverin' fwom that whoppin'," he began, "I feel bound to expwess my wegwet. It

was wathah tough on a chap like you, as you are wathah a slackah, and cannot take it as I could."

If Arthur Augustus expected that remark to pour oil on the troubled waters, it showed that Arthur Augustus was an optimist.

Cardew did not answer. He glanced about him, as if in search of something—perhaps a missile.

"I am extwemely sowwy," went on Arthur Augustus, "I am suah you meant to do us a good turn, deah boy, though, as I have wemarked befoah, I cannot appwove of playin' such a twick on a beak. It is vewy bad form, Cardew. Howevah, I am awah that you have vewy little wegard for good form."

Cardew's hand dropped on a cushion on the armchair. He took a grip on that cushion, his eyes glinting.

"I can assuah you, Cardew, that I felt vewy sowwy indeed, in fact vewy much distwessed, when I heard you yowl while Lathom was swipin' you," continued Arthur Augustus, "It was weally vewy painful to listen to, old chap."

Cardew breathed hard.

He did not speak. His hand went up, with the cushion in it, taking aim at the swell of St. Jim's in the doorway.

Whiz!

Crash!

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

The cushion landed, suddenly and hard, in the middle of his features. Arthur Augustus was swept away like a straw before a gale.

He went over backwards, yelling. There was a terrific bump, as he landed on his back in the passage.

"Oh! Ow! Bai Jove! You wuffian! Wow! Oh! Ooooh!" spluttered Arthur Augustus, as he sprawled, "Wow! You wottah—wow—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake and Co.

They seemed to see something of a comic nature in their noble chum's sudden exit from No. 9 Study.

"Ohh! Oh, cwikey! Woooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew came across the study, and slammed the door on the sprawling Arthur Augustus.

The swell of St. Jim's sat up, dizzily. His aristocratic face was as red as a freshly-boiled beetroot. He spluttered for breath.

Blake and Co. yelled. Six or seven fellows, staring along the passage from the study landing, yelled too.

"Do that again, Gussy!" called out Racke of the Shell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" came from Baggy Trimble.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy scrambled to his feet. He, at all events, was not amused! His noble eye gleamed with wrath. "The wuffian! The wottah! The cheeky smudge! I'm goin' back into that study to give Cardew a feahful thwashin'—"

"Hold him!" exclaimed Blake.

"Pway get out of the way, Blake! Leave my arm, Hewwies. Welease my collah, Dig., you ass! I am goin' to thwash Cardew—"

"Bad form for relations to row, Gussy," chuckled Blake, "Better steer clear of your jolly old relatives, old bean."

"Pway don't talk wot, Blake. I am goin' to thwash Cardew—"

"Keep hold of him!"

"We've got him!"

"Will you get out of the way, or will you not get out of the way, Blake and Hewwies and Dig.?" roared Arthur Augustus: for once deaf and blind to considerations of form, good or bad.

"Not!" answered Jack Blake, cheerily. "Forget it, Gussy! If you ask for it, you know, you can't be surprised at getting it."

"Come on," said Herries.

"I wefuse to take a single step fwom this spot until I have thwashed that cheeky wottah Cardew," shrieked Arthur Augustus.

"O.K., We'll carry you," said Blake, "Heave him up."

"You uttah ass—!"

"You take his legs, Herries! Dig. and I will take an ear each—"

"Will you welease me?" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Not unless you walk quietly, like a good little boy. You're not going to scrap with your relations—bad form, old tulip."

"Cardew is a vewy distant welation—pwactically no welation at all—vewy distant indeed—!"

"Let's add to the distance, then! Distance lends enchantment to the jolly old view!

Now, then, walk or be carried?" asked Blake.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed hard, and he breathed deep. His grinning comrades held him fast.

With deep feelings, Arthur Augustus decided to walk!

CHAPTER EIGHT

BARMECIDE FEAST!

"Twimble!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Baggy Trimble.

He was startled.

It was an unexpected meeting. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was coming into his study, No. 6 in the Fourth, just as Baggy Trimble was coming out. They met in the doorway.

Trimble backed hurriedly.

Arthur Augustus frowned.

He did not like Trimble of the Fourth. Arthur Augustus had a very wide tolerance, but he drew the line at Trimble. A fellow who would listen to conversation not intended for his ears, who would read other fellows' letters, and even lift other fellows' tuck when opportunity offered, was a fellow whom Arthur Augustus preferred to keep at arm's length.

And Trimble had no business in his study. Yet there he was!

Arthur Augustus had come up to the study for a box of chocolates, which had arrived from home that day. He was going to take it down to the junior day-room to whack out with his friends there. The box lay on the study table, full in view of anyone looking into No. 6.

Arthur Augustus was not a suspicious fellow. He was the very reverse of that. But even Arthur Augustus's unsuspicious mind deduced a connection between Baggy's unwarranted presence in the study and the fact that there was a large box of chocolates in the room.

He fixed his eye, and his eyeglass, sternly on the fat startled face of Trimble of the Fourth.

"What are you doin' in my study, Twimble?" he demanded.

"Oh!" gasped Baggy, "Nothing."

His eyes were longingly on the doorway, But Arthur Augustus was standing in the doorway: and in backing away from him, Baggy had had to back further into the study. He was cornered.

"If you came heah aftah that box of chocolates, Twimble—"

"Oh! No! I—I hadn't noticed it," stammered Trimble, "I—I came here to—to speak to you, D'Arcy, I—I was coming away, as—as you weren't here."

Arthur Augustus's frowning brow relaxed. Trimble, certainly, had been coming out of the study, as D'Arcy entered—and there was the chocolate box, on the table, just where Arthur Augustus had left it. Certainly, had not the swell of St. Jim's arrived, Trimble would have been gone—leaving the chocolate box where it was!

"Oh, vewy well, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus, "I am sowwy if I misjudged you—but you are such a sneakin', nosey wottah, you know—"

"Look here—"

"Howevah, if you wanted to speak to me, heah I am," said Arthur Augustus, "What is it?"

"I—I—I came here to—to say—"

"Yaas?"

"I—I mean—I came to—to—to—!"

Trimble had stated that he had come there to speak to D'Arcy. But he did not seem quite to know what he had to say. A more suspicious fellow than Arthur Augustus might have guessed that he was cudgelling his fat brains for some fib that would serve his turn.

"Pway get it out, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus, "My fwiends are waitin' for me downstairs."

"Oh! Yes! I—I—I came—Oh! About Christmas," stammered Trimble.

"Chwistmas!" repeated Arthur Augustus, in surprise, "What about Chwistmas, Twimble?"

"We—we're breaking up for the hols. soon, you know—"

"I am quite awah of that, Twimble. What about it?"

"The—the fact is, I—I came to ask you for the hols.!" Having thought of one that would serve his turn, Trimble recovered his fat confidence, "I—I'd like you to come home with me for Christmas, D'Arcy, if you would."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's brow relaxed still further. Certainly, he had not the remotest, faintest intention of accepting that kind invitation. Still, it was decent of Trimble to ask him, and Gussy was the man to be very courteous about it. He gave the fat Baggy quite a benignant look.

"That is vewy kind of you, Twimble," he said, graciously.

"Oh! Not at all," said Baggy, "I'd like you to come, D'Arcy! Jolly glad to have you for the Christmas holidays, old chap."

"Thank you vewy much, Twimble. I wegret that havin' made othah awwangements, it would be imposs. for me to accept your invitation. But thank you vewy much all the same, deah boy."

And with that, Arthur crossed to the study table to pick up the box.

Trimble lost no time.

The moment the doorway was clear, Baggy Trimble shot out of it like a fat rabbit. If Arthur Augustus looked inside the chocolate-box before taking it away, Baggy had no time to lose!

He was gone in the twinkling of an eye.

But he need not have been uneasy. It did not occur to Arthur Augustus to look inside the chocolate box before taking it away.

He picked it up, and walked out of the study.

A fat figure was disappearing down the stairs. It disappeared in such haste that two or three chocolates dropped from its pocket as it went!

If Baggy heard them drop, he did not stop to field them. Baggy was in haste to seek the open spaces.

At a much more moderate pace, Arthur Augustus descended the stairs, with that large, handsome chocolate-box under his noble arm.

Quite a number of fellows gave him welcoming looks, as he came into the junior day-room.

Blake and Herries and Dig., Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, Levison and Clive and Talbot of the Shell, were all prepared to lend their friendly aid in disposing of the chocolates. Other fellows with whom he was not so pally were also prepared to lend aid—indeed, fellows whom he hardly knew. Arthur Augustus had many friends in his House: but with a magnificent box of chocolates to whack out, they had increased in number!

"Oh, here he is," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah," Arthur Augustus placed the chocolate-box on the table, and waved a hospitable hand, "Pway help yourselves, deah boy."

Blake lifted the lid off the box.

Then he stared.

Other fellows, gathering round, stared also. Quite an extraordinary expression came over many faces.

"What the thump—!" ejaculated Blake.

"Pulling our leg?" asked Tom Merry.

"Is this Gussy's idea of a joke?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"Silly ass!" commented Manners.

"Fathead!" said Levison.

"Weally, you fellows." Arthur Augustus gazed round at face after face, in surprise. It did not occur to him, for the moment, to glance into the chocolate box, "Is anythin' the mattah?"

"You silly chump!" roared Blake, "What do you mean?"

"Weally, Blake—!"

"A feast of the Barmecides!" remarked Monty Lowther, "Help yourselves to nothing, you fellows."

"Weally, Lowthah—!"

"Gone batty?" asked Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Must be off his rocker, I think," said Digby, "I don't call this a joke."

"Weally, Dig.—"

"I suppose it's a joke, of sorts," said Tom Merry, "But really, Gussy—"

"Weally, Tom Merry—"

"What do you mean?" roared Blake, "You ask a dozen fellows to whack out a box of chocolates, and then trot out an empty box—"

"What!"

Arthur Augustus jumped. He turned his eye, and his eyeglass, on the box. Then he gave another jump, and his eyeglass fluttered to the end of its cord.

"Gweat Scott!" he ejaculated.

He gazed into the box as if he could not believe his eyes—as, indeed, he hardly could. Except for packing paper, it was empty! Not a single, solitary chocolate met the astonished gaze of the swell of St. Jim's.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry, "Didn't you know it was empty, Gussy?"

"Bai Jove! I cannot undahstand this! gasped Arthur Augustus, "The box was cwammed with chocolates when I unpacked it. Somebody must have wemoved them. If you have done this for a joke, Blake—"

"Ass!"

"Or you, Hewwies—"

"Fathead!"

"Or you, Dig.—!"

"Dummy!"

"I wepeat that the box was cwammed with chocolates," hooted Arthur Augustus, "I bwought it heah supposin' that it was still full—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The chocolates have been wemoved—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus remembered Baggy, "That wottah Twimble—that was why he was in the study—"

"Trimble!" ejaculated Blake.

"Yaas, wathah," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, excitedly, "I wondahed why he was there, and he told me he had come to ask me home for Chwistmas—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He must have taken the chocs. out of the box—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I nevah thought of lookin' inside it—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Has anybody seen Twimble! Where is that fat wottah? I am goin' to give him a feahful thwashin'! Scoffin' a fellow's chocs., and then pullin' his leg askin' him for Chwistmas—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled all the day-room.

Arthur Augustus, pink with wrath, rushed out of the room, in search of Baggy Trimble—whom he was not likely to find in a hurry. It had been, as Monty Lowther described it, a feast of the Barmecides: but the School-House fellows seemed to find it entertaining. A roar of laughter followed Arthur Augustus as he went.

CHAPTER NINE

TRIMBLE LISTENS IN!

"Derek Denzil!"

Baggy Trimble pricked up his fat ears.

That name, falling on Baggy's ears, interested him extremely.

Trimble of the Fourth was, at the moment, leaning on the old stone wall, under the window of his head-master's study. The massive old stone projecting sill screened Baggy's fat form, if Dr. Holmes had chanced to glance out.

Lower boys were not supposed to loaf about under the windows of the head-master's study. But Trimble of the Fourth had good reasons for loafing there.

Trimble's pockets were packed with rich creamy chocolates, extracted from the box on the table in Study No. 6. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, he had no doubt, was looking for him—for it could not have taken him long to discover that the chocolate-box was empty. D'Arcy was not likely—Trimble hoped at least—to look for him under the Head's windows: but even if D'Arcy did, and if he spotted him there, he could not carry out reprisals in such a spot. Baggy richly deserved booting: but the most reckless fellow at St. Jim's would not have ventured to boot him under the head-master's eye.

So Baggy was feeling fairly secure. In that quiet spot, he helped himself to chocolates from his pockets, devouring his prey at his leisure. The window over his bullet head was open, to let in the fresh air and sunshine of that unusually fine afternoon. And from the study within, a voice floated out from the open window—that of Dr. Holmes, and it uttered the name that was, by that time, on almost every tongue at St. Jim's.

So near was the voice, that Baggy concluded that the Head was sitting by the open window. For a moment he felt a tremor. Had the Head been aware that a fat and sticky Lower boy was loafing under his window-sill, certainly he would have ordered that fat and sticky youth off. And Baggy was extremely unwilling to meet the severe eye of his head-master, and still more unwilling to depart from that safe spot and run the risk of falling into the avenging hands of the proprietor of his

supply of chocolates.

But he was quickly reassured. The Head, sitting within by the window, certainly had a view of the old quad: but naturally could not see directly below the window. He couldn't see Baggy without putting his head out and leaning over the sill. It seemed to Baggy that all was well: and he remained where he was, only taking care to chew chocolates noiselessly, instead of with his usual gobbling effects.

"Denzil!" said another voice: that of Mr. Railton, house-master of the School House.

Baggy made no sound.

Evidently, head-master and house-master were talking, or going to talk, about the old St. Jim's man whose name had been mentioned on the radio, as that of a person with whom Scotland-Yard were anxious to "communicate."

Baggy was interested. He was curious and inquisitive. And he had no objection whatever to listening surreptitiously to talk not intended for him to hear. Indeed he had often been booted in the House for that very reason.

A good many fellows at St. Jim's, as well as Baggy, were curious about Derek Denzil. That strange and startling announcement over the radio had been heard by dozens of fellows, as well as Tom Merry and Co. Every fellow in the school had heard about it, by this time, and knew that there was an Old Boy of St. Jim's with whom the police authorities desired to get into touch.

Little was known of him: for it was a good many years since he had left. But it had leaked out that he had been "sacked": and for that reason was presumably a "bad hat." The police wanted to see him: but he did not seem to want to see the police—from which most fellows concluded that he was "on the run."

Many fellows would have liked to know more about him. Baggy most of all! It looked now as if the inquisitive Baggy was going to learn more!

"I should like you to advise me in this matter, Railton," the Head's voice went on, "That is why I asked you to step into my study."

"Certainly, sir."

"From what I have heard, the name of Denzil is already the talk of the school," said Dr. Holmes.

"I fear so, sir," answered Mr. Railton, "Quite a number of the boys seem to have heard the radio announcement, and the rest have heard it from them. I believe that Taggles has been asked questions on the subject."

"There would, I suppose, naturally be some curiosity on the subject," said Dr. Holmes. "It is an episode which I certainly do not wish to be recalled—but it cannot be helped in the circumstances. Denzil was here before your time, Mr. Railton, and you may never have heard of him till now. He was expelled from the school for very good reasons."

"There are black sheep in every flock, sir. But we are not bound to conclude from the radio message that Denzil has broken the law."

"I am afraid that there is little doubt of it, Railton," said the Head, with a sigh, "It would be in keeping with his character while here."

"Indeed, sir."

"He was in the Sixth Form when he was expelled," continued Dr. Holmes, "It was discovered that he was a breaker of bounds, an associate of low characters, a haunter of low resorts. It came out that he frequently left the school, at night, but though he was for a long time under suspicion, he was so wary that for long nothing definite was known. Indeed, I remember that I wondered afterwards whether he could have found some secret way of leaving and re-entering the House at forbidden hours. But the truth came out at last, and he was expelled—not only for bad conduct, but for—" The Head paused.

"For something still more serious, sir?"

"Yes! A sum of money was missing, and it transpired that Denzil had paid losses to some racing man in banknotes—which were traced."

Baggy Trimble, under the window, repressed a squeak of excitement. He was undoubtedly learning something! Other fellows knew that Derek Denzil had been "sacked." Baggy could tell them more than that, now!

"I had hoped," went on the Head, after a long pause, "that the boy, bad as he was,

might have reformed, and made good. But—it does not look like it."

"It does not, sir."

"It is a painful recollection to me," continued Dr. Holmes, little dreaming that a pair of eager fat ears were drinking in every word. "I should not have mentioned the matter, had there been nothing but the radio police message. But—I have now heard from Denzil himself."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

"A letter reached me to-day," said Dr. Holmes, "It was post-marked Liverpool, and the man, from what he says, is there, hoping to get abroad. He tells me that he has secured a passport in another name, but is in need of money. He does not give an address, but asks me, if I am willing to help him, as his old head-master, to put a brief message, the word 'Willing,' in the personal column of the *Daily Record.* He will then communicate ways and means."

"Upon my word, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, "The man's impudence can have no limit. Obviously, from this, he is on the run from the police, and you could not give him such aid without yourself breaking the law."

"I need hardly say, Mr. Railton, that I have no intention whatever of helping a law-breaker to escape justice," said Dr. Holmes, "That is not what troubles me. I shall not make the reply he asks, or any reply: I shall of course have nothing whatever to do with the rogue. But this letter gives a clue to his whereabouts which the police would be very glad to learn."

"Undoubtedly, sir."

"I am unwilling to intervene in the matter in any way," said Dr. Holmes, slowly, "But it is the duty of every citizen to give aid to the authorities in dealing with crime. What do you think I should do with this letter, Railton?"

"I think there can be no doubt upon that point, sir," said the house-master, quietly, "That letter should be handed to the police."

"That is how it appears to me," said the Head, "I am unwilling—very unwilling—to intervene, against a man who was once a schoolboy here, though he was a disgrace to his House and his School. But in venturing to write to me as he has done, does he leave me any choice in the matter?"

"None, in my opinion, sir," said Mr. Railton, "As you have asked my advice, I most certainly advise you, sir, to pass that letter on to the police authorities without delay."

There was a long pause.

"You are right, Railton," said the Head, at last, "It is a distasteful business, but there is nothing else I can do."

"I certainly think so, sir."

"And I agree. Thank you, Railton."

Baggy Trimble, in his intense interest in the conversation going on over his bullet head, had ceased even to chew chocolates, He listened eagerly with both his fat ears for more.

But all he heard was the sound of a closing door, from which he could guess that Mr. Railton had left the Head's study.

There was silence: and then Baggy heard a sigh from the Head. Evidently Derek Denzil's old head-master was deeply disturbed. What he had to do was a painful duty. But it was a duty, and he had to do it: and a few moments later, Baggy heard him move, and there was a scrape of a chair as he sat down at his writing-table.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Baggy.

And there being no more eavesdropping to entertain the fat Baggy, he resumed chewing chocolates, and pursued that interesting and sticky occupation till the very last one had followed the rest on the downward path.

CHAPTER TEN

GUSSY WON'T HAVE IT!

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came to a sudden halt, as he uttered that startled ejaculation.

His aristocratic face darkened in a deep frown.

It was Saturday afternoon. Study No. 6 had been sliding on the Rhyl, which was frozen hard. Coming back to the school for tea, they were taking a short cut across a wide meadow that lay between the river and Rylcombe Lane.

That meadow was bordered on one side by a high fence, enclosing the weedy, unkempt grounds of the Green Man Inn. And as he strolled, with his elegant saunter,

along the foot-path across the meadow Arthur Augustus's eye, and eyeglass, suddenly fell upon a rather startling sight—that of a figure clambering up the high fence from the field, evidently to gain access to the inn-garden within.

On that figure, Arthur Augustus fixed his eye, and his eyeglass, his noble brow corrugating in a frown.

"That weckless ass, Cardew!" he exclaimed.

Blake and Herries and Digby looked round. Blake gave a shrug, Digby a sniff, and Herries a scornful grunt.

Having thus expressed their feelings, they did not seem further interested. The Green Man was a spot with a somewhat "juicy" reputation, strictly and severely out of bounds for St. Jim's fellows. But they knew a good deal about the manners and customs of the scapegrace of the Fourth, and were not very much surprised to see Cardew in the very act of clambering over the fence into the forbidden precincts.

"Shady sweep!" said Blake, "The pre's will spot him at that game sooner or later, and it will be the long jump for him."

"The sooner the better," grunted Herries.

"Come on," said Dig., "What are you stopping for, Gussy?"

"Pway hold on, deah boys. That weckless ass is askin' for it—"

"No business of ours," said Blake, "Think it would make any difference to that shady sweep if you told him what a rotter he is?"

"That's where he gets his smokes, I expect," said Herries, "and sees Joey Banks about backing his fancy! Br-r-r-r!"

"Oh, let him rip," said Dig., "Come on, Gussy—I'm ready for tea, if you're not."

But Arthur Augustus did not come on.

"Cardew is a welation of mine, though a vewy distant one," he said, "He has wecently tweated me with wuffianly wudeness: but he is a welative all the same."

"Cush on the conk!" said Blake, "Well, you asked for that, Gussy, giving the man away to Lathom as you did. You're not going to row with Cardew about that, old pippin'."

"I am not goin' to wow with him, Blake, But I am goin' to stop him fwom goin' into that wotten den," said Arthur Augustus, firmly, "Cardew is goin' the wight way to get sacked, like that man Denzil. I am goin' to stop him."

"Look here, ass—"

"Let's get in," said Dig., "I want my tea."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not heed. Leaving his comrades, he cut across at a run towards the high fence at the side of the field.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Blake, "Come on, you men. If Gussy starts giving that young blackguard sermons, there's a spot of trouble coming."

And the three juniors followed Arthur Augustus.

Cardew, on the fence, was not yet aware of their presence. It was a high fence, and not easy to climb, and as he climbed he had, of course, his back to them. But just as his hands reached the top, and grasped, he heard the patter of Arthur Augustus's running feet, and gave a startled glance round. The spot he had chosen for climbing was out of sight from Rylcombe Lane, safe from observation unless someone happened to pass along the footpath across the field—and for one startled moment, Cardew dreaded that some St. Jim's master or prefect might have done so. In which case, he would have been booked for a walk back to the school in official custody, and an extremely painful interview with his headmaster.

So it was a relief to him to see nothing more perilous than the aristocratic visage and gleaming eyeglass of his distant relation, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he glanced hastily round.

He gave Arthur Augustus a black look.

He was far from having forgotten the painful results of his jest on Mr. Lathom in hall a few days ago: and now Arthur Augustus had startled him, and given him a momentary pang of dread. His eyes glinted at the swell of St. Jim's.

"You dummy!" he ejaculated, "What are you ambling about here for?"

Without waiting for a reply to that question, Cardew proceeded to draw himself up, to get a leg over the fence.

But he did not proceed very far. For Arthur Augustus, reaching up, grasped the tail of his overcoat. That sudden jerk, coming unexpectedly, almost jerked Cardew

from his hold. But he held on, and glared down at D'Arcy.

"Let go, you fool!" he snapped.

"Weally, Cardew—"

"What are you grabbing my coat for, you born idiot?" exclaimed Cardew, as much astonished as angered, "Gone off your rocker?"

"I certainly have not gone off my wockah, Cardew! I wegard the question as widiculous."

"Let go my coat!" shouted Cardew.

"Pway come down," said Arthur Augustus, mildly, "You are well awah, Cardew, that that wascilly place is out of bounds, and that you would be sacked if you were caught there. Even if you have no wespect for the school you belong to Cardew, think of the wisk!"

"You burbling idiot—"

"Will you come down, Cardew?'

"No!" yelled Cardew.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's grasp on the coat-tail tightened. Cardew, still hanging to the top of the fence by his hands, glared down at the swell of St. Jim's as if he could have bitten him. The scapegrace of the School-House prided himself upon being a law unto himself, reckless of beaks, regardless of prefects: and to be interfered with in his dingy pursuits by another fellow in the Fourth Form was about the last thing he would have tolerated. His eyes fairly burned at Arthur Augustus.

The moment Arthur Augustus's grip was loosened, Cardew dragged himself up the fence.

"Will you let go?" he hissed.

"Certainly not," said Arthur Augustus, calmly, "I shall not allow you to entah that wotten show, Cardew. Come down at once."

"You—you—you—!" gasped Cardew, almost stuttering with rage. He stared round at Blake and Herries and Digby, who had now come up, and were looking on with grinning faces, "Will you take your prize lunatic away, you fellows?"

"Not at all," answered Blake, cheerfully, "Gussy's talking sense for once, you shady sweep, and if you've got any sense yourself, you'll do as he tells you."

"D'Arcy, you meddling idiot, let go!"

"Wats!"

"For the last time!" breathed Cardew. "Will you let go?"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! I wefuse to allow a welation of mine to disgwace himself and his school. And I wepeat —yawoooh!" yelled Arthur Augustus, in sudden anguish, as Cardew kicked out backwards.

A hard heel jammed on Arthur Augustus's noble nose. It jammed hard. There was a sudden spurt of crimson.

Arthur Augustus did not intend to let go Cardew's coat-tail. But he did let go, staggering back with both hands clasped to his anguished nose.

"Oooooh! Ow! Oh, cwikey! You howwid wuffian! My nose! Wow! spluttered Arthur Augustus, "Oh, cwumbs!"

The moment Arthur Augustus's grip was loosened, Cardew dragged himself up the fence. Arthur Augustus did not intervene—he was in no state to do so, with his noble nose feeling as if it had been driven through the back of his head, like a nail under a hammer.

But Blake and Herries and Dig., as if moved by the same spring, all jumped at Cardew together. Three pairs of hands grasped at Cardew, getting grips on his coat and his legs.

"You rotter!" exclaimed Blake.

"You tick!" yelled Dig.

"You worm!" shouted Herries.

Up to that point, Blake and Co. had not been disposed to intervene. Now they did, with vigour.

Cardew made a desperate effort to break loose, and clamber on. But the three juniors dragged at him together, and he had no chance.

His grasp on the fence was torn away, and he came slithering down, landing in a sprawling heap in wet grass. He lay there, panting, Blake and Co. eyeing him grimly, while Arthur Augustus, still clasping his suffering nose, uttered a series of anguished ejaculations:

"Oh! ow! wow! Oooh! Woooh! Bai Jove! Wow!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CARDEW HAS TO COME!

Ralph Reckness Cardew staggered to his feet.

His face was pale with fury.

He clenched his hands, and looked, for a moment, as if he would hurl himself at Blake and Co. hitting out right and left.

Jack Blake grinned. He was quite a match for Cardew, on his own, and quite prepared to handle the scapegrace of St. Jim's if he asked for it.

"Come on, if you like," said Blake, cheerfully, "I'd rather like to mop up the field with you, you outsider."

"Oh, do!" said Herries.

"Do!" grinned Dig.

But Cardew, furious as he was, restrained his fury. It was not of much use to rush at three fellows, any one of whom was able to deal with him singly. He was bumped and breathless, wet and muddy: but had he tackled Study No. 6, there was no doubt that his last state would have been worse than his first.

"You—you—you meddlin' fools—!" he panted, "What business is this of yours?"

"None at all," answered Blake, "You can back Nobbled Nancy for the Swindlem Stakes, and smoke yourself sick in the back parlour of the Green Man, till the pre's spot you and you get like Derek Denzil, and we couldn't care less. But back-heeling Gussy's boko is another matter, you rotten worm."

"The fool should have let go."

"Ow! wow!" Arthur Augustus dabbed his 'boko' with a handkerchief, which was soon spotted red, "You uttah wottah

Cardew—"

"Oh, shut up, you meddlesome idiot!"

"I wegard you as a wascally wat, Cardew! I have a gweat mind to give you a feahful thwashin'," gasped Arthur Augustus, "And I uttahly wefuse to allow you to entah that diswe putable den—"

"Will you mind your own business?" hissed Cardew.

"I wegard this as my business, Cardew, as you are a welation of mine, though a vewy distant one, I am thankful to say." Arthur Augustus gave his nose a final dab, and restored the spotted handkerchief to his pocket, "You will now walk back to the school with us, Cardew."

"We don't want his company," growled Herries.

"Neither do I, Hewwies, but I am goin' to see him back to the school, all the same. Pway take his oathah arm, Blake."

"If you lay a hand on me—!" breathed Cardew.

"Well, what will you do?" grinned Blake, "Knock out the four of us? You're welcome to try it on, if you like."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Go ahead!" chuckled Dig.

"You are walkin' back to the school, Cardew, and we are goin' to see that you do," said Arthur Augustus, "Now—oh, cwikey! stop him!"

Cardew made a sudden dart along the fence to escape. Arthur Augustus grabbed at him, missing by a yard. But Jack Blake grabbed in time, and Cardew was swung round with a grip like iron on his coat-collar.

"No, you don't!" said Blake, "Collar him, you men."

Cardew, in unrestrained fury, struck out. But three pairs of hands grasped him, and held him powerless. He struggled savagely, but in vain.

"Oh, you rotters!" he panted.

"There's a rotter here," agreed Blake, "But I don't think it's one of us. Are you going to walk back with us?"

"No!" yelled Cardew.

"You won't come?"

"No, I tell you."

"O.K." said Blake, "Tap his head on that fence till he changes his mind. You're going to do exactly as Gussy tells you, Cardew: and you're going to have your napper tapped till you make up your mind about it, see?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Coming?" asked Blake.

"No!" shrieked Cardew.

Tap!

Cardew's resistance did not avail. Blake and Co. jerked him to the fence, and tapped his head thereon. It was a rather hard tap.

"Coming now?" inquired Blake.

"No!" panted Cardew.

Tap!

It was a harder tap than before. It made the scapegrace's head sing.

"Coming?" smiled Blake.

Cardew did not answer this time. He gave Jack Blake a black and bitter look: but he came. He was in the hands of the Philistines, and there was no help for it. With a face as expressive as that of a demon in a pantomime, he walked across the meadow, Blake gripping one arm, Herries the other, and Dig. walking behind. Arthur Augustus followed, still giving his nose an occasional dab.

They reached the end of the meadow, where a plank across a ditch gave access to Rylcombe Lane through a gap in the hedge. At that point Blake and Co. came to a halt.

"We can't walk you along the road like this," said Blake, "Will you come quietly if we let go?"

"You know I won't!" snarled Cardew.

"You'll cut back to the Green Man, what?"

"You know I will."

"Pway don't let go that wapscallion, deah boys. If he wefuses to come quietly, we must walk him back to the school holdin' on to him."

"Can't put up an exhibition like that for the entertainment of the public," said Blake, shaking his head. "And if we run into a pre., he will barge in—and I suppose you don't want to tell Kildare, or Darrell, that we're keeping this shady sweep out of a pub."

"Bai Jove! No! He would get into a feahful wow."

"So he's got to come quietly, or we've got to leave him here," said Blake, "Now, for the last time, Cardew, will you walk back to

the school with us like a good little boy, and give your pubby pals a miss this afternoon?"

"Let go, and see!" sneered Cardew.

"We're not letting go just yet. Yes or no?"

"No, you fool!"

"Sit him in the ditch," said Blake.

"Good egg!" grinned Herries, "He won't feel much like pub-haunting after sitting in that ditch."

Squash!

Cardew gave a yell of fury, as he was suddenly sat down in the ditch. There was not a lot of water in the ditch, but there was a considerable quantity of half-frozen mud. The scapegrace of St. Jim's sent up a shower of muddy splashes as he sat!

"Oh, cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "I—I say, that is wathah wuff, Blake—makin' a fellow's clobbah all muddy. I weally cannot appwove of this, Blake."

"Not really?" asked Blake.

"No, weally," said Arthur Augustus, firmly.

Blake glanced at Herries and Dig.

"Think we could manage to stagger along somehow without Gussy's approval, you fellows?" he asked.

"Sort of!" chuckled Dig.

"We'll try," grinned Herries, "Come on!"

Cardew struggled to his feet in the ditch. Up to the waist, he was clothed in mud as in a garment. He squelched wildly in mud. Cardew was keen to get back to the Green Man, if only to show Study No. 6 that he could, and would, do exactly as he chose to do. But it was pretty certain that he would not do so in that state. On that point there was no doubt—no possible probable shadow of doubt—no possible doubt whatever!

Blake and Co. cut across the plank, and emerged into Rylcombe Lane. Cardew, white with fury, was left scraping mud from his coat and trousers and shoes—scraping off as much as he could, before he started for the school, and a very necessary change. His sporting friends at the Green Man were not going to see him that afternoon, at any rate.

Blake and Co. cheerily pursued their way to St. Jim's: three of them grinning, only Arthur Augustus looking somewhat serious. Gussy, as he had said, could not wholly approve of muddying a fellow's clobber. His comrades, however, seemed quite able to stagger along without Gussy's approval!

Levison and Clive met them when they came in at the gates.

"Seen anything of Cardew?" asked Levison.

"We've been looking for him," said Clive, "I think he must have gone out."

"Just left him," answered Blake, cheerily, "He did us a good turn the other day, you know, though Gussy rather mucked it by talking too much—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Now we've done him one," continued Blake, "One good turn deserves another, you know. We shouldn't have bothered, but Gussy insisted on it. You'll find him strewn along the lane somewhere."

Blake and Co., smiling, walked on to the House, leaving Levison and Clive rather mystified. However, they went out to look along the lane for Cardew. When they found him, he did not look like a fellow who considered that Study No. 6 had done him a good turn!

CHAPTER TWELVE

RAILTON WANTS TO KNOW!

Mr. Railton paused—and frowned.

He had called in at the New House to speak to Mr. Ratcliffe, the house-master: and as he came away, he passed a group of three New House juniors—Figgins, Kerr and Wynn.

Figgins and Co. were talking, and did not observe the School House-master coming from the direction of their House. And so it happened that their talk fell upon Mr. Railton's ears. Hence his frown.

Victor Railton was not the man to take heed of the careless talk of juniors not intended for official ears. But what he heard from Figgins and Co. was somewhat startling and very disconcerting.

"That man Denzil was on the radio again yesterday," said Figgins, "They haven't got him yet, looking for him in Liverpool, I suppose.

"They'll get him all right, now that they know where to look for him," said Kerr.

"Unless he's got on a steamer with that dud passport," remarked Fatty Wynn. "I

say, what a tick the man must be. Must have been a School-House man when he was here, I think."

"Must have been," agreed Figgins. "New House men don't go to the bad like that. Ten to one he was a School-House man."

"Sacked for pinching!" said Fatty, "What a nerve to get in touch with the Head, after a thing like that."

"Must be a rotter with planty of nerve!" said Kerr.

Mr. Railton stood almost dumbfounded.

Those three New House juniors were discussing, in the quad, details concerning Derek Denzil, once of St. Jim's, which were, or had been, known only to the head-master and himself. They might have learned, from Taggles or some other ancient inhabitant, the reason why Denzil had been "sacked." But the fact that he had written to Dr. Holmes from Liverpool, and that he was in possession of a passport in a false name, had been known only to the Head, and to the School-House master. How Figgins and Co. had become acquainted with such details was a mystery—and a very annoying one—and one which the house-master had to inquire into.

"Figgins!" said Mr. Railton, sharply.

Three New House juniors spun round, as one man, startled.

"Oh! Yes, sir," stammered Figgins.

"I heard what you were saying, Figgins," said Mr. Railton, sternly, "You are discussing matters which are, or should be, outside the knowledge of any boy in this school. I must inquire where you learned such details."

"About Denzil, do you mean, sir?" asked Figgins.

"Yes! You appear to be aware that the man has communicated with your head-master, and from what place. Explain yourself at once."

"It's the talk of the school, sir," said Figgins, in wonder, "Everyone knows."

"I fail to see how everyone, or anyone, can know anything about a matter that was discussed in private between your head-master and myself, Figgins. Tell me at once from whom you received this information."

"There's no secret about it, that I know of, sir," answered Figgins, "I've heard it from several fellows."

"I require to know the name of the person who first told you."

Figgins reflected for a moment.

"I think it was Lowther, of the Shell, who mentioned it first," he answered, "He had heard it from somebody else, I suppose."

"Very well," said Mr. Railton.

He walked on towards the School-House, leaving Figgins and Co. exchanging rather uneasy glances.

"Oh, crumbs," said Figgins, in dismay, "I hope I haven't got Lowther into a row. I thought everybody knew—it's all over the shop."

"That's all right," said Kerr, "Lowther will be able to give the name of the fellow he heard it from."

"But what's the row?" said Fatty Wynn, "It's true, isn't it? Nobody could have made up a yarn like that."

"It's true enough," said Kerr, "Not much doubt about that. But from what Railton said, somebody must have been listening at a keyhole when he was talking about it with the Head, so that's how it got out."

"Well, that wouldn't be Lowther," said Figgins, "He's all right! I wonder what sneaking smudge it was!"

Mr. Railton was wondering the very same thing, as he walked to the School-House. He was certainly going to know!

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther were in the quad, near the School House steps, and Mr. Railton altered his course to bear down on them.

"Lowther!" he rapped, sharply.

"Yes, sir," said Monty.

"Certain details respecting the man Denzil seem to have become known in the school," said Mr. Railton, "I understand that you are aware of them."

"Yes, sir," said Monty, again.

"Kindly give me the name of your informant."

"I heard about it from Levison, sir."

"Thank you, Lowther."

Mr. Railton went into the School House: leaving the "Terrible Three," like Figgins and Co. exchanging uneasy looks.

"Is there going to be a row?" murmured Manners, "Railton looked ratty."

"Well, how did it come out?" asked Tom Merry, "It's all over the school—but who

started it?"

"Somebody must have got on to it somehow," said Lowther, "Blessed if I know who or how. I know it's the talk of the Fourth."

"We had it from Levison," said Manners, "But I've heard half-a-dozen Fourth Form men talking about it—Blake and his gang, and Hammond, and Roylance, and Mellish, and a lot more, too."

"The beaks don't like all this talk about Denzil," remarked Monty Lowther, "Taggles has been told to keep his head shut. I fancy somebody must have heard some of the beaks talking—that's how it all got out."

"That somebody will be sorry for himself, if Railton gets on his track," remarked Tom Merry.

The expression on Victor Railton's face, as he went into the House, indicated that Tom was right on that point. The School-House master looked into the junior day-room for Levison. He was not there, and Mr. Railton called to Hammond.

"Do you know where Levison is, Hammond."

"I think he's in his study, sir."

"Thank you, Hammond."

Mr. Railton went up the staircase, and crossed the study landing. Several fellows glanced at him curiously, as he passed, wondering what had brought that dark frown to his usually kindly face. Unheeding them, the house-master walked up the Fourth-form passage to No. 9 Study.

The door of that study was open, and an angry voice proceeded therefrom as the house-master came up.

"Oh, shut up, you two! I tell you I'll make that meddling fool D'Arcy sorry he barged into my affairs—" It was Cardew's voice.

Mr. Railton gave a cough. He did not want to listen-in to unintentional information about rows and feuds in the Fourth Form.

There was sudden silence in the study. Levison, Clive and Cardew were there, and they all rose to their feet as the house-master appeared in the doorway.

Cardew breathed rather hard. He had been speaking of the episode in the meadow adjoining the Green Man, and for a moment he wondered, with a sinking of the heart, whether his house-master had heard too much. Sitting in a muddy ditch was a mere nothing, compared with what would have happened to him, had Mr. Railton learned why D'Arcy had "barged into his affairs."

But Mr. Railton did not even glance at Cardew. His eyes fixed on Levison of the Fourth.

"Levison!" he rapped.

"Yes, sir."

"I understand that you are in possession of certain knowledge concerning the Old Boy, Derek Denzil and have discussed it with other juniors."

"That is so, sir."

"From whom did you acquire the information, Levison?"

"It's the talk of the form, sir."

"Possibly!" said Mr. Railton, grimly, "But it can only have become the talk of the form, as you express it, by some one having listened to a private conversation between the head-master and myself. If this was you, Levison—"

Levison crimsoned.

"It was not I, sir," he answered, quietly, "I was told about it in Study No. 6, and the fellows there had heard it from somebody else."

"Very good," said Mr. Railton.

He walked down the passage again: and once more three juniors were left exchanging startled glances.

"The beaks are hearing it now," murmured Clive.

"Bound to, sooner or later," said Levison.

Cardew laughed.

"I wonder if Railton will track it home to Trimble! If he does, Baggy will be sorry he was the man who spread the glad tidings."

Mr. Railton rapped on the door of Study No. 6, and opened it. Four juniors sitting round the table at tea jumped to their feet.

"Pway come in, sir," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with polished politeness, "It is a pleasuah to see you heah, sir."

Utterly disregarding that hospitable welcome, Mr. Railton stood in the doorway, scanning Blake and Co. with stern eyes.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" asked Blake. He wondered whether Railton might have heard that a Fourth-form man of his House had been sat into a muddy ditch that afternoon.

"Yes, Blake: something is very seriously the matter. Certain information regarding

the man Denzil, who was formerly at this school, appears to be bandied about the House. Other boys have heard it in this study. I require to know how details, supposed to be known only to the head-master and myself, came to be discussed in this study."

"Oh!" said Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"Explain this at once, Blake."

"If you mean about Denzil writing to the Head from Liverpool, sir—"

"I mean exactly that," rapped Mr. Railton.

Blake paused. Very many fellows, in both Houses, who had heard the story, did not know its source. But most of the School-House fellows in the Fourth Form knew that it came from Baggy Trimble in the first place. Study No. 6 were well aware of that fact. But they naturally did not want to mention it. Their opinion of Baggy, and of his methods of acquiring information about matters that did not concern him, was uncomplimentary in the extreme. But that did not make them willing to give him away to a "beak."

Blake's dismayed hesitation did not escape Mr. Railton's eye. His brow grew sterner.

"I require an answer, Blake," he said, sharply, "Someone appears to have listened surreptitiously to a private conversation in the head-master's study. If it was someone here—"

"Weally, Mr. Wailton," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, almost breathless with indignation.

"You need not speak, D'Arcy."

"I am bound to speak, sir. I wefuse to be silent when shuch a howwid imputation is hurled at my study, sir! No fellow heah, sir, is capable of listenin' siwweptitiously to a pwivate conversation—"

"Be silent, D'Arcy."

"In the circumstances, sir, it is impossible for me to be silent. With all wespect to you, sir, you have no wight to suppose—"

"Shut up, you ass," breathed Herries.

"I wefuse to shut up, Hewwies! Wow! What are you stampin' on my foot for, Dig., you clumsy ass? Wow!"

"I am waiting for your answer, Blake," said Mr. Railton, taking no heed of the indignant swell of St. Jim's.

Jack Blake breathed rather hard.

"I can't tell you anything, sir, except that it's the talk of the form," he answered, "Every fellow in the Fourth knows all about it."

"Where did you hear it in the first place, Blake?"

"In the day-room, sir."

"You mean that you heard talk on the subject among other boys of your own form?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a pause.

Mr. Railton could have little doubt that Blake, had he chosen, could have given him the name of the unknown listener-in. But it was quite plain that Blake did not intend to do so. And the house-master, determined as he was to get to the root of the matter, was not the man to insist upon information which, in the code of schoolboy ethics, came under the head of "sneaking."

It was quite a long pause, and Study No. 6 waited uneasily for their house-master to speak again.

"Very well," said Mr. Railton, at last, "I shall now question other members of the Fourth Form. That is all for the present."

He turned on his heel and left the study.

"By gum!" Blake drew a deep breath, when the house-master was gone, "I couldn't give Trimble's name, could I?"

"Of course you couldn't," said Dig., "Bet you Railton will root him out, all the same."

"Serve him right!" grunted Herries, "Sticking under a beak's window and listening—pah!"

"Yaas, wathah," said Arthur Augustus, "Twimble is a weal towtah, but you couldn't give him away, Blake. I should certainly have wefused to answah. But Wailton is wathah a sport not to pwess the point."

Study No. 6 agreed that Railton was a sport, and they sat down to finish their tea, wondering what the outcome of the affair was going to be, and whether Railton, in the pursuit of his investigations, would arrive ultimately at Baggy Trimble.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TROUBLE FOR TRIMBLE!

"Oh, crikey!" groaned Baggy Trimble.

"You're for it!" said Tomkins, "You come next."

"Oh, lor'!"

"Go in and win, Baggy," grinned Cardew.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were a crowd of Fourth-form fellows in the junior day-room. A little excitement reigned among them. Nobody, however, seemed alarmed, with the solitary exception of Baggy Trimble.

But Baggy was very much alarmed.

His fat face generally looked as broad as it was long. Now it was looking unusually long. There was trouble for Trimble.

Nobody seemed to be wasting much sympathy upon him. Baggy's methods of acquiring information were quite unpopular in his form. Everybody, it was true, had been interested in the news Baggy had spread about that peculiar Old Boy, Derek Denzil. But a good many fellows had told him what they thought of a fellow listening under an open window.

Baggy did not mind that very much. But when the house-master came into the affair, Baggy minded very much indeed. He had enjoyed being the fellow who knew all about it—the fellow who had something to say to which everybody was willing to lend an ear. Now, after the feast, came the reckoning.

Blake and Co. in Study No. 6, had wondered what steps Railton was going to take. After calling-over, they knew. The order had gone forth for every fellow in the School-House section of the Fourth Form to present himself in the house-master's study, one after another, for questioning. Junior after junior went, and returned—and now it was Baggy's turn. And Baggy was about as willing to head for Railton's study, as if it had been a lion's den.

"Better own up as soon as you get in," said Jack Blake, "Not much good trying to pull Railton's leg."

"Yaas, wathah."

"I don't want to be whopped!" hooted Baggy. "I—I wasn't listening, either—I just happened to be there. It was D'Arcy's fault, too."

"Bai Jove! How do you make that out, you fat wottah?"

"If you hadn't been after me, I shouldn't have gone anywhere near the Head's window," howled Baggy, "I was only sticking there to keep out of your way, because you fancied I'd had your chocs."

"Weally, Twimble—"

"If Railton asked me if it was me, it would be all right," groaned Baggy, "I could say it wasn't—"

"That would be an untwuth, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, severely.

"Oh, don't be a goat!" yapped Trimble.

Apparently the circumstance that such a statement would be an untruth, did not worry Baggy unduly.

"Only Railton isn't asking that," grinned Lumley-Lumley, "Railton's asking fellows where they were a quarter of an hour after class yesterday—that's when he was talking to the Head in his study. Where were you, Baggy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everyone knew where Baggy had been, a quarter of an hour after class on Friday afternoon. That did not matter—so long as Railton did not know! But it looked as if Railton was going to know!

"You can cackle," groaned Baggy, "You were all jolly glad to hear the news about that man Denzil, and chance it. Look here, D'Arcy, suppose I tell Railton that I was in your study at the time—"

"You were not in my study at the time, Twimble."

"I was there just after class," urged Trimble, "Don't you remember—I asked you for Christmas—"

"You spoofin' fat wottah, you were pullin' my leg, because you had cleared out my chocolate-box and had the chocs. stuffed in your pockets—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I was there," argued Baggy, "Suppose I tell Railton so! If he asks you, you needn't mention that I went out. See? Just say we had a chat in the study about the Christmas hols.—"

Arthur Augustus jumped. He stared blankly at the cheery Baggy, as if he could not quite believe his noble ears.

"Bai Jove! Are you suggestin' that I

should tell Wailton an untwuth, Twimble?" he ejaculated.

"Well, we all stretch a point at times," urged Baggy, "I'll do the same for you another time."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors, quite entertained by the expression on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's aristocratic countenance.

"Oh, cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "If you say anothah word, Twimble, I will give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Better cut off, Trimble," chuckled Levison, "If you keep Railton waiting too long, he will guess why."

"Oh, lor!" groaned Baggy.

He rolled out of the day-room, and headed dismally for his house-master's study. He had already kept Mr. Railton waiting some minutes, which, in the circumstances, certainly was not judicious.

The School House master gave him an impatient glance as he arrived in the study. That impatient glance became a very keen and penetrating one, as he read the woebegone expression on Trimble's fat face.

"Trimble!"

"Oh, yes, sir! It wasn't me, sir," mumbled Baggy.

"You will kindly answer this question at once, Trimble: where were you at precisely fifteen minutes after class yesterday."

"I—I don't remember, sir."

"I advise you to make an effort to remember, Trimble," said Mr. Railton, grimly, "It is a very serious matter, and I require an answer."

"Oh! Yes!" stammered Trimble, "I—I wasn't anywhere near the Head's window, sir."

"The Head's window!" repeated Mr. Railton.

He stared at Trimble. That some surreptitious ear had overheard his talk with Dr. Holmes, he knew must be the case. But he had supposed that that ear must have been at a keyhole. He had not thought of the window. The hapless Baggy had enlightened him.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, "I remember now that the window was open. You were under the window, Trimble?"

"Oh! No, sir!" gasped Baggy. "Nowhere near the place, sir. I was in the tuck-shop at the time—"

"In the tuck-shop?" repeated Mr. Railton, "In that case, Mrs. Taggles will be able to bear out your statement, Trimble."

"Oh! I—I mean that I—I wasn't in the tuck-shop, sir—I—I mean—I—I—I was in the gym—"

"In the gym!" repeated Mr. Railton.

"I—I was, really, sir," gasped Baggy, desperately, "I—I was going over the vaulting horse, sir, at the very time I heard you talking to the Head—"

"What?" ...

"I mean, when I didn't hear you, sir—I never heard a word," stuttered Baggy, "I—I couldn't of course, being in the gym."

"You will hardly expect me to believe that statement, Trimble," said the house-master, sternly.

"Oh, yes, sir! Lots of fellows saw me there," gasped Trimble.

"Give me their names immediately."

"Oh, crikey!"

"I am waiting, Trimble."

"I—I—I mean, I—I don't mean that I was in the gym, sir. I—I mean, that I—I was going to the gym, but—but I changed my mind—"

"Upon my word!"

"I was in my study, sir," gasped Baggy, "I—I was mugging up some Latin in my study, sir, for—for quite a long time after class yesterday—"

"That will do, Trimble."

"Oh! Yes, sir! May I go now?"

"You may bend over that chair, Trimble," said Mr. Railton, rising to his feet, and picking up his cane, "I shall cane you most severely for having listened surreptitiously to a conversation between your head-master and myself—"

"Oh, lor'!"

"Bend over that chair, Trimble."

"But I—I didn't—I—I—and it was all D'Arcy's fault—I shouldn't have gone anywhere near the Head's window if he hadn't been after me—and I—I never did, either—I was in the tuck-shop—I mean the gym—I—I—I mean my study—"

"Bend over!" almost roared Mr. Railton.

"Oh, crikey!"

There was a sound, in the house-master's study, as of beating carpet. Seldom, or never, had Mr. Railton laid on such a "six." Generally he was wont to spare the rod.

But on this occasion he seemed to regard it as his painful duty to put plenty of beef into it—and he did. Baggy Trimble would have been satisfied with a much less dutiful house-master.

It was a doleful and dismal Trimble that wriggled away after justice had been done. That evening, the fat Baggy, who was never known to stand if a seat was available, seemed to prefer standing—and even when the Fourth went to their dormitory, Baggy's snore was not heard as usual a minute after his fat head touched the pillow. Baggy was still suffering for his sins: and he derived no comfort whatever from the assurances he received from the other fellows that it served him right!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AFTER LIGHTS OUT!

"Who's that?"

It was a startled squeak in the Fourth-form dormitory.

Ralph Reckness Cardew set his lips.

He had crept out of bed without a sound, at a late hour. He had dressed himself quietly in the darkness. Not another fellow in the long dark dormitory was, so far as he was aware, awake. That sudden squeak from Baggy Trimble's bed apprised him that one, at least, was not asleep.

Cardew, reckless as he was, in his disregard of authority, did not want attention drawn to the fact that he was "breaking out" that night. He did not want to hear angry remonstrances from his friends, Levison and Clive: and he did not want a buzz of voices at that late and silent hour. There was always risk in "breaking out"—plenty of risk: and silence and caution were the cue of a fellow who was taking the risk of the "sack."

Baggy Trimble was about the last fellow whom he would have expected to wake. It was extremely unusual on Baggy's part to wake till the rising-bell clanged—even then he did not always wake! But things were not as usual with the fat Baggy on this particular night. Twinges of that severe "six" in Railton's study lingered, and like Macbeth, they murdered sleep! Baggy had awakened half-a-dozen times: and now, awake, he was startled by a dark shadow that moved in the glimmering of winter stars from the high windows.

It did not occur to Baggy, for the moment, that it was some Fourth Form fellow out of bed. He was too startled to think of that, or anything else. No fellow had any business to be out of bed, when all the House was silent and still. Even for a breaker of bounds, Cardew had left it very late. Baggy, as that mysterious dark shadow moved between his blinking eyes and the glimmer of the window, squeaked involuntarily and loudly: "Who's that?"

Cardew did not answer: he stood quite still, his face set with anger. He would have been glad to take a pillow or a bolster to the startled Baggy! But that, assuredly, would not have kept Baggy quiet!

Not that Baggy was going to be quiet, anyway! Somebody was in the dormitory, in the middle of the night! Baggy was scared. When Baggy was scared, keeping quiet was the very last thing that was likely to occur to him.

"Oooooooh!" came from Baggy Trimble, "Burglars! Ooooh! I say—burglars! Help!"

"Oh, you fat fool!" breathed Cardew.

Five or six fellows awakened at once. Cardew heard several of them sitting up in bed. Three or four voices called:

"What's up?"

"Is that ass Twimble?"

"What's the row?"

"That chucklehead Trimble."

"I say, there's somebody in the dorm.," howled Baggy, "I say, I saw him! I say, get a light, somebody! Ooooh."

"You fat chump!" growled Jack Blake, "Shut up and go to sleep, and let us go to sleep, you blithering ass."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Chuck a boot at him, somebody," yawned Levison.

"Keep quiet, you burbling bloater!"

"I tell you there's somebody here!" howled Baggy, "I tell you I saw him—"

"Fathead!"

"Keep quiet!"

Nobody, evidently, believed that there was a burglar in the Fourth-form dormitory. Some enterprising burglar might, perhaps, have entertained designs on a head-master's safe, or a house-master's desk: but a junior

dormitory was hardly likely to attract such a prowler of the night. Certainly nobody thought of turning out to look for an imaginary Bill Sikes. They only wanted Baggy to shut up and let them go to sleep.

But Baggy had no intention whatever of shutting up, with that dark shadow lurking at hand in the gloom!

"Will you get a light!" Baggy fairly yelled, "I tell you he's here—I saw him move—I tell you—"

"Pway dwy up, you silly ass!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, "Do you think a burglah would come heah aftah our shirts and twousahs?"

"I tell you I saw him—"

"Cheese it!"

"Pack it up!"

"Go to sleep."

Cardew made no sound or movement. He guessed that Trimble must have seen him against the glimmering window for a moment. He hoped that the emphatic objurgations from the other beds would shut Trimble up, and that the dormitory would settle down to slumber again.

But that was a delusive hope. Blake, as the quickest way of quietening the alarmed Baggy, groped for a match-box, struck a match, and lighted a candle-end. There was a glimmer of illumination in the long shadowy room, as Blake held up the candle.

It was followed by a startled exclamation from Blake himself, as he glimpsed a shadowy figure in the gloom.

"Oh! Who—what's that?"

"Bai Jove! It's somebody—"

"What the dickens—"

"Don't yell!" came Cardew's voice, "No need to wake the House because a fellow happens to be out of bed."

"Cardew!" exclaimed Herries.

"That silly ass!" growled Dig.

"What are you up to, you fathead?" exclaimed Wildrake.

Levison and Clive, sitting up, peered at the dim form of their chum in the glimmer of the candle. Their looks were grim. They did not need telling what the scapegrace of the Fourth was "up to": they could guess only too easily.

"So you're up, Cardew," said Levison, quietly.

"Sort of!" drawled Cardew. He was savagely exasperated: but he was quite cool.

"Oh!" gasped Trimble, "Is—is—is it Cardew? I—I thought it was a burglar—"

"You fat idiot!" snapped Cardew.

"Do you know it's nearly midnight, Cardew?" said Sidney Clive.

"Yes! I've left it a bit late to make all safe," answered Cardew, in the same drawling tone, "Can't be too careful, when you're goin' to see a man about a horse."

"Bai Jove! You uttah wottah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "If you mean that you are goin' out of bounds, Cardew—"

"I mean exactly that," drawled Cardew, "You've put it up to me, you know. I had to see a man this afternoon, and you stopped me. I'm goin' now."

"You shady sweep!" growled Blake.

"Thanks!"

"Rotter!" grunted Herries.

"Thanks again!"

"Bai Jove! I wefuse to allow you to do anythin' of the sort, Cardew," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "I stopped you this aftahnoon, and I shall stop you again now, you wottah. I shall not let you leave the dorm."

Arthur Augustus scrambled out of bed.

Cardew laughed.

He did not trouble to answer the indignat Gussy. And he did not wait for him! He had intended to steal quietly out of the dormitory, leaving all the others there asleep. Baggy Trimble had put paid to that. Now, if he went, he had to go under a crowd of staring eyes. But that made no difference to his intentions: he was going all the same. He crossed swiftly to the door and opened it.

"Cardew!" exclaimed Levison.

The scapegrace of St. Jim's heeded him no more than he heeded his indignant relative, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He opened the door and stepped out into the dark passage.

"Stop, you wottah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

The door shut after Cardew.

In a moment, he was gone: and the whole dormitory was left staring, in the flickering candle-light, at the shut door.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

He crossed to the door and opened it. He stood staring out into the darkness of the

passage.

"Chuck it, Gussy!" grunted Blake.

"Get back to bed, fathead," said Dig.

Arthur Augustus did not reply. He stood at the doorway, staring into the dark outside, apparently considering whether it was feasible to follow the scapegrace and haul him back again. But Ralph Reckness Cardew had vanished into darkness, and Arthur Augustus realised that there was nothing doing.

"Bai Jove!" he breathed, "The uttah wottah—!"

He broke off, suddenly.

From the distance, in the darkness, came a sudden, startling sound. It reached every ear in the Fourth-form dormitory. It was the sound of a sharp cry, followed by a heavy fall!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KNOCKED OUT IN THE DARK!

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

Levison was out of bed with a bound. Clive was hardly a moment after him. Blake and Herries and Dig. turned hurriedly out. Four or five other fellows followed. Every face was startled.

Something had happened to Cardew, in the darkness of the sleeping House. The cry and the fall, could mean nothing else.

Levison ran to the door. He pushed Arthur Augustus aside without ceremony, and darted into the passage, with Sidney Clive at his heels. Both of them were angry with their chum: but he was, after all, their chum: and something had happened to him, out there in the midnight dark.

"Weally, Levison—!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as he tottered from a push.

"What on earth's happened!" exclaimed Blake.

"Fallen downstairs, perhaps, in the dark," said Herries. "Something's happened, anyway."

"Better go and see," said Dig. "I've got a flash-lamp somewhere—"

"Get it, quick."

Digby found the flash-lamp, and turned it on. Blake and Co. followed Levison and Clive, the light gleaming ahead. They overtook Levison and Clive at the end of the passage, on the dormitory landing. They had come to a stop there, baffled by the darkness. The glimmer of wintry starlight from high windows gave little aid.

"Give me that light!" Levison almost snatched it from Dig's hand.

"Look here—!"

Unheeding Digby, Levison moved on across the great landing, flashing the light to and fro. There was a sharp exclamation from Clive.

"Look!"

"Here he is!" breathed Blake.

"Cardew—!"

"What—?"

Cardew, evidently, had not fallen on the stairs in the dark. He had not reached the stairs. He lay stretched in the middle of the landing, motionless, his face upturned, his eyes closed, and the juniors stared at him in amazement and horror. He was quite unconscious: and a dark bruise was already forming round one eye, showing where a blow had been struck. That blow had caught him on the forehead, just above the eye—blackening the eye, and knocking him senseless. It was not an accident in the dark that had caused that cry to reach the juniors in the dormitory. Cardew, as he groped across the dark landing, had been struck down—knocked out by an unknown hand!

"Good heavens!" breathed Blake.

Levison dropped on his knees beside the unconscious form of his chum.

"Cardew!" he breathed, huskily, "Ralph, old man!"

There was no sound, no movement, from the insensible junior. Cardew lay like a log.

The juniors stared round them, with startled, almost scared eyes. Cardew had been knocked out—a blow had been struck in the dark—a fierce and heavy blow. It was utterly amazing. Whose hand could have struck him down?

"A—a—a burglar!" breathed Herries.

The whole form had derided Baggy Trimble's terrors of burglars, Blake and Co. did not feel so derisive now. Someone had been in the landing in the dark when Cardew came—and a blow had been struck.

"Bai Jove! We had bettah go and call Wailton!" muttered Arthur Augustus.

Levison looked up, quickly.

"Stick where you are! We want to know what happened, first. We don't want to land Cardew in a row—"

"If it was a burglah, Levison—"

"It couldn't have been! What would a burglar want up among the dormitories? Don't be an ass."

"But what—?" "exclaimed Blake, "Who—?"

"Cardew may be able to tell us! He's coming to. Quiet!"

Cardew's eyes opened. He stared dizzily in the light. He made a feeble movement to put his hand to his forehead.

"All right, old chap," breathed Levison, pressing his arm, "We're here—you're safe now, old fellow. Don't move for a minute—you've had a knock—"

Cardew's voice came, faintly.

"Who hit me?"

"Don't you know?" asked Clive.

"I—I don't know anything." Cardew pressed his hand to his forehead, "Oh! My head's swimming! Was I—was I knocked out?"

"Yes, old chap—"

"Better call Wailton—"

That name seemed to revive Cardew. He pulled himself together, and, with the help of Levison's arm, sat up.

"Keep that fool quiet," he said, almost in his usual tones.

"Weally, Cardew—"

"What is Railton going to think if he sees me now?" snarled Cardew, "Shut your silly head, will you? Help me back to the dorm., Ernest."

"If it was a burglah—"

"Don't be an idiot! Help me back, and keep that dummy quiet."

Levison and Clive, between them, lifted Cardew to his feet. He had fully recovered consciousness, hard as the knock had been. But he hung heavily upon on his chums, as they helped him back up the passage to the dormitory.

Blake and Co. followed.

"Oh, crikey!" ejaculated Baggy Trimble, as Cardew tottered in, between his anxious chums, his face white as a sheet, disfigured by the dark thickening bruise, "I—I say—w—w—w—was it a burglar—?"

"Hold your silly tongue," snapped Cardew.

He sat on the edge of his bed, breathing hard. Levison dipped a sponge in water to bathe the bruise. Blake closed the door quietly. Every eye in the dormitory was on Cardew's white disfigured face.

But he was very quickly pulling himself together. With all his slack ways, Cardew was hard as nails. His chief anxiety, evidently, was that Mr. Railton should not be brought upon the scene. That, no doubt, was natural enough: the scapegrace did not want to stand before the Head in his study the next morning, on a charge of breaking out at night. The bitter ache in his head, the blackening of his eye, counted for little in comparison with that.

"Look here," said Blake, "We don't want to land you in a row with the beaks, Cardew—but if there's a burglar in the house—"

"Are you as funky as Trimble?" sneered Cardew.

"Don't be a cheeky fool! Somebody knocked you out on the landing. Well, who was it?"

"Yaas, wathah! I weally cannot see who it could have been but a burglah, and I considah that we had bettah call Wailton—"

"Have a little sense," snarled Cardew, "Are you all frightened like that fat idiot Trimble? Of course it was not a burglar. How could it be?"

"Then who was it?" demanded Blake.

"How should I know? I can't see in the dark."

"Tell us what happened, old fellow, so far as you know," said Ernest Levison gently.

"I got to the landing, and was crossing it to the stairs," muttered Cardew, "I couldn't see anything—it was as black as a hat. Then I heard something—I fancied it was like a very soft foot fall, and it made me jump. But it came into my head that some other fellow was out of his dorm.—I didn't want to run into him, whoever he was, and I stopped quite still, and listened. And then—he walked right into me, in the dark—not seeing me, of course—"

"But who—?" said Clive.

"I haven't the foggiest! Whoever it was, knows his way about the House, in the dark too—it was no outsider—so you can wash out that burglar, D'Arcy," said Cardew, with a sneer, "He was walking directly across

the landing towards the dormitories—and he wouldn't be doing that unless he knew every inch of the way."

"That's so," said Blake, slowly, "But—"

"Well, he biffed right into me. Before I could do anything, or even think of doing anything, he hit out—afraid of being caught, I suppose. That's the last thing I know before I found you leaning over me on the landing, Ernest."

"Bai Jove! He must have stwuck a vewy hard blow, Cardew, to knock you unconscious," said Arthur Augustus.

"Think I don't know that—and feel it!" snapped Cardew.

"For that weason, Cardew, it cannot have been a St. Jim's man. And I weally think we had bettah call Wailton—"

"Oh, shut up! It was a St. Jim's man, and tomorrow I'm going to find out which man it was," said Cardew, savagely, "He was frightened, I've no doubt—fancied that a pre. or a beak had got him, when he walked into me—and hit out and ran for it to save his skin.

"Some fellow breaking bounds like yourself!" said Herries. "Well, you asked for it, sneaking out in the dark."

"Oh, quite!" sneered Cardew, "and if I find the man, I'll give him what he's asked for, too! Now I'm going to bed."

"Chucking up the Green Man for tonight?" asked Herries, sarcastically.

"Go and eat coke."

Evidently, Cardew did not feel fit, after that strange and startling adventure in the dark, to carry on with "breaking out" that night. He prepared sullenly and savagely to turn in, every now and then pressing a hand to the black bruise on his face.

"You'll have to explain that black eye tomorrow," said Blake, "I suppose you're right—it was some fellow from another dormitory—Racke or Crooke, very likely, if it was the Shell."

"I cannot think it was a St. Jim's chap, even a wottah like Wacke or Cwooke, who stwuck a chap down in the dark," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally cannot think—"

"We know that!" interrupted Cardew, "Nobody expects you to think! Shut up and go to bed."

"Weally, you cheeky ass—"

"Bed, Gussy," said Blake, "There aren't any giddy burglars about—it was some shady sweep like Cardew himself, frightened of being caught—"

"I do not agwee, Blake, and my firm opinion is that we had bettah weport the whole mattah to Wailton," said Arthur Augustus.

"And get your relation sacked?" asked Blake. "Chuck it, Gussy, and go to bed. I'm turning in."

"I do not want to get Cardew into a wow, but I weally considah—"

"Pack it up, Gussy."

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Bed, ass!" said Digby.

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus, "As nobody agwees with me, I will yield the point. But I am assuahed that it will turn out that somebody was in the House, and that it was not a St. Jim's man who knocked Cardew out."

"Bow-wow!"

Arthur Augustus said no more. He was in a minority of one: and, as he had said, he yielded the point. But he remained obstinately of his own opinion. However, he was soon fast asleep again, the dormitory settling down to slumber once more. But it was long before Cardew slept. Baggy Trimble, forgetful at last of twinges, slumbered like the rest: but Cardew's aching head turned and turned on the pillow, and the glimmer of the December dawn was in the sky before he sank, at last, into fitful sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BLACK, BUT NOT COMELY!

Tom Merry stared.

The rising-bell had just begun to ring in the dim December morning. Tom, as often happened, was first out of bed in the Shell dormitory in the School House.

He was about to hook the blankets off Manners and Lowther, when the door opened, and he glanced round.

Then he stared.

It was unusual for a fellow from another dormitory to come along before the bell had ceased to ring. It was still more unusual for him to present himself with a black eye!

Tom's own eyes almost popped, at Cardew's eye.

It was not only black. It was the blackest black eye that Tom had ever seen. Black eyes were extremely uncommon at St. Jim's —they hardly ever happened. Still, they did happen at rare times. But Cardew's black eye was such a black eye as had never been seen before at the old school. Tom fairly blinked at it.

"What the dickens—!" he ejaculated.

"Hallo!" Manners sat up in bed. He too stared at the Fourth-form fellow in the doorway. "Where did you dig up that eye?"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, "Black, but not comely! Been scrapping in your dorm. over-night, Cardew?"

The other Shell fellows all stared at Cardew. His face was set, and his sound eye glinting, as he came into the Shell dormitory. His black eye was the cynosure of all other eyes. Cardew was a fellow who was very particular about his personal appearance: even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was hardly more particular on that point. He did not feel ache or pain so deeply as he felt the disfigurement: though that eye must have been very painful. That he was in a savage and bitter temper was easy to see.

Nobody in the Shell was likely to care a boiled bean for Cardew's temper. Monty Lowther began to hum:

"All in the Downs our fleet was moored,
When Black-Eyed Susan came on board."

And there was a chuckle from some of the fellows turning out of bed.

"What was it—an accident, Cardew?" asked Tom Merry, good-naturedly. He did not like Cardew's angry, half-menacing look: but he could feel a spot of sympathy for any fellow who had collected an eye like that.

"No!" said Cardew, quietly, "I got this eye last night from some fellow who was out of his dormitory in the dark."

"Then you must have been out of yours," said Talbot of the Shell.

"Never mind that! That's my business, and nobody else's! Somebody ran into me in the dark on the landing, and hit out. I never saw him—but I want to see him, badly."

"You've come here to look for him, do you mean?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Do you think it was a Shell man?"

"I don't know! I want to know!"

Cardew's sound eye scanned the crowd of staring faces. Perhaps he hoped to pick up, in one of them, a sign of the culprit. But there was no such sign to be discerned. All the fellows were staring, some amazed, some amused: but nobody's face gave a clue to the searching eye of the angry Fourth-former.

"Speak up, you men," called out Monty Lowther, "Were you out on the tiles last night, Racke? Or you, Crooke?"

"Find out," snapped Racke.

"Go and eat coke!" growled Crooke.

"Well, you're the only black sheep here," said Lowther, cheerfully, "If you weren't out, nobody was. Look in another dorm., Cardew. Some festive youth in the Third, perhaps—or some merry soul on the Fifth!"

"If the man's here, I want to know who it was," said Cardew, savagely, "I'm going to give him an eye to match, and another over and above."

"Some fellows here might be able to hand you as much as you can hand out," said Manners, sarcastically.

"I should jolly well say so!" exclaimed Gore, belligerently, "If you want another eye like that, you won't have to ask twice, you cheeky tick."

"Is the man here?" asked Cardew. "Do you know whether anybody went out after lights out, Tom Merry?"

"Of course I don't, as I was fast asleep all night. But I'm pretty certain that nobody did," answered Tom, "and it's a pretty cheek of you to tell us you think there's a man here who would hit a fellow in the dark like that."

"Somebody did, and left me knocked out," said Cardew, "I'm going to find out who it was."

"And strew the hungry churchyard with his bones?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Cardew, don't be a goat," exclaimed Tom Merry, impatiently, "It was nobody here, whoever it was. Sure you didn't stumble over and bang your face on something in the dark?"

"Don't talk rot," snarled Cardew.

"Well, that seems more likely to me," said Tom. "I can't imagine any St. Jim's man hitting out in the dark and knocking a fellow out."

"Nor I," said Manners.

"Talk sense," snapped Cardew, "Is the fellow here, and is he too funky to own up to what he did?"

"Oh, can it!" roared Gore, "Nobody here funks you, Cardew."

"Not a lot," grinned Kangaroo.

"Chuck it, you cheeky ass," said Bernard Glyn, "The man isn't here, or he'd give you another eye to match, for your cheek."

"Sure you didn't get as far as the Green Man, and pick up that black eye from one of your pals there?" suggested Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew cast a black and bitter look round at the crowd of Shell fellows. But he turned and left the dormitory without another word.

Probably he was satisfied that the culprit was not there, and decided to go further afield. The door closed after him with a slam.

"Dear man!" said Monty, "If he expects us to understudy Sweet Alice in the song, and tremble with fear at his frown, he's got another guess coming."

"Cheeky tick!" grunted Gore.

"Well," said Tom Merry, "It was a dirty trick to punch a man in the dark, if that's what happened. Cardew will have to take that black eye home with him for Christmas. But—"

"But it was nobody here, if it happened at all," said Manners. "Chap mooching about in the dark might run into anything, and fancy it was a fist."

"He shouldn't have been out of his dorm. after lights out, anyway," said Tom, "He's asked for what he's got."

The "Terrible Three" were first out of the Shell dormitory. On the landing, they came on Cardew again—he was coming away from the Third-form dormitory, apparently having been there to ask questions.

From the doorway of that dormitory, Wally of the Third was staring, or rather glaring, after him. D'Arcy minor seemed irate!

"Cheeky fathead!" Wally called out, "You barge into this dorm. again, and you'll have two black eyes instead of one to take home for the hols."

After which, Wally of the Third banged the door.

"Haven't found your man among the fags, what?" asked Monty Lowther, with a grin.

Cardew gave him a scowl.

"No! I've asked there, but I don't think it could have been a fag that handed out such a punch. If it wasn't a Shell man—"

"It wasn't," snapped Tom Merry.

"Then it was a senior, I suppose," said Cardew, biting his lips, and passing his hand tenderly over his discoloured eye.

"Try the Fifth!" Monty Lowther suggested, blandly, "Ask Cutts of the Fifth if he was out on the tiles last night—we all know he plays the goat at times. I'm sure they'd give you a rousing reception in the Fifth-form dorm."

Tom Merry and Manners laughed, and Cardew scowled. Cardew was very keen indeed to discover who had handed out that punch in the dark: but he was hardly likely to barge into a senior dormitory to catechise the occupants. He was more likely to leave it on his neck, than to get his questions answered. He gave the Shell fellows a black look, and went back sullenly to his own dormitory.

From that dormitory an elegant figure emerged, and joined the Terrible Three on the landing.

"Did you fellows notice Cardew's eye?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Did we?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Sort of!" grinned Manners.

"I fancy Railton will notice it too, and want to know where Cardew picked it up," said Tom.

"Yaas, wathah! It will be vewy awkward for Cardew, as he cannot explain to a House-mastah that he was goin' out of bounds late at night," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Not the sort of thing a fellow would be anxious to explain to his House-master," he agreed.

"Cardew thinks that some St. Jim's man punched his eye in the dark," went on Arthur Augustus, "My belief is that it was a burglah."

"Oh, my hat! Then we shall hear all about it, when we go down," said Tom, "The burglar can't have dropped in merely to black Cardew's eye! Come on, you men—

let's go down and get the news."

The Shell fellows, laughing, went downstairs. Arthur Augustus frowned. Evidently Tom Merry and Co. were taking his burglar no more seriously than he had been taken in the Fourth. But perhaps even Gussy himself began to doubt, when he went down, and discovered that there was no news of anything having happened in the night!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A MYSTERY!

Dr. Holmes, head-master of St. Jim's, sat in his study, after morning chapel.

Light flakes of snow were falling in the old quadrangle, and whirling against the windows in the December wind. The weather was resuming a seasonable aspect for Christmas-tide! But within the study all was bright and cheerful. A glowing fire burned in the fire-place, the firelight glimmering on the dark old walls—ancient oaken panels darkened by the passage of the centuries.

There was a shade of perplexed thought on the Head's kindly old face. He was gazing at an open drawer in his writing-table, half-full of papers. Something about it seemed to be puzzling him.

He glanced up, as a tap came at the door. It was Mr. Railton, house-master of the School House, who entered.

"Come in, my dear Railton," said Dr. Holmes, "I asked you to come here after chapel, as something very strange has occurred, about which I wish to consult you."

"Denzil again, sir?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Denzil!" repeated the Head, as if he had half-forgotten the name, "Oh! No! Nothing of the kind. I have heard nothing of the man since I received his letter from Liverpool, which I passed on to the authorities. It is a matter of quite another kind—something that has occurred in this study."

"In this study!" repeated the house-master.

Dr. Holmes pointed to the open drawer in the writing-table. The house-master, in some wonder, glanced at it.

"What—" he began.

"The papers in that drawer have been disturbed, Railton. It seems incredible, indeed almost incomprehensible, but someone must have opened that drawer, after I left the study last night, and disturbed the contents."

Mr. Railton's face became very grave.

"Is anything missing, sir?"

"Nothing! There was nothing of value in that drawer, or indeed in any of the others, last night."

"I believe that you usually keep cash in the top drawer, sir."

"That is the case: but last night, as it happened, there was nothing of the kind. If that was the person's object, he found nothing; though during the day there was quite a considerable sum. But if the other drawers have been searched, there is no trace of it—only of this particular drawer I am certain. You see what it contains, Mr. Railton."

"School reports, sir."

"Precisely! And when I placed them in the drawer last night, Kildare's was the last, and was naturally placed on top of the others. Now, as you see—"

"Darrell's," said Mr. Railton.

"Exactly."

"You are, of course, sure, sir?"

"Perfectly sure."

Mr. Railton stared into the drawer, the second from the top. Unless the Head had made a mistake, it was, as he had said, incomprehensible.

"The drawers are locked at night, I believe, sir?"

"Without fail," said the Head.

"Then, if opened, that drawer, and perhaps the others, must have been opened with a key?" said Mr. Railton, "You have not lost your key?"

"I have it here, Mr. Railton. A former key was lost, many years ago," said Dr. Holmes, slowly, "The key was abstracted, on that occasion, by the Sixth-Form boy who was expelled. It was not found, but the matter was clear, as he had passed banknotes which had been locked up in the money-drawer. I allude, of course, to Denzil, the man for whom the police are now searching in Liverpool. A new key was made, which has been in my own

possession ever since, and is now safe on my key-ring."

"It is hardly possible that the key, abstracted and used by Denzil so many years ago, can be still in existence," said Mr. Railton.

"Even if it were, Railton, it could not be in possession of any boy now in the school," said Dr. Holmes.

"Impossible!" agreed the house-master.

"My own key has not left my possession —I opened the drawer with it this morning," said the Head. "No one can have used it last night. Yet that drawer must have been opened with a key."

Mr. Railton stood silent.

He was as puzzled as the head-master. But there was, perhaps, a lingering doubt in his mind that possibly the head-master might have made some mistake about the school reports in the drawer. Indeed on any other theory the occurrence was unaccountable.

"The other drawers had not been disturbed, sir?" asked the house-master.

"I am not sure," said the Head, "The money-drawer, as it happens, was empty. The others contain papers of various kinds, but I do not recall in precisely what order they were placed. I am only certain of the school reports— I remember clearly having gone over Kildare's report last, and placed it last in the drawer."

The house-master was silent again.

"Unless I have made a mistake," went on the head-master, voicing a thought that was in Mr. Railton's mind, "that drawer was opened, last night, with a key. The other drawers may or may not have been— but that one certainly was. I should never have detected what had been done, had I not clearly remembered placing Kildare's report last in the drawer. Whoever turned it out did not, I suppose, notice which one was on top of the pile—he would hardly attach any importance to it. Only that one slight act of carelessness has betrayed him."

Mr. Railton nodded, slowly.

"We can hardly suppose, sir, that this unknown person could have taken the trouble, and the risk, of entering your study at night, to look at the school reports. He must have been in search of something else—in fact, money."

"I fear so," said the Head, with a sigh.

"It is most extraordinary, sir. That there may be some person in the school capable of pilfering is, of course, possible. But how could he obtain a key to the drawers in your writing-table? It is not a common lock, and could not be opened by a common key."

"That is true."

"It is scarcely possible to imagine, sir, that any boy here could be in possession of a key which, by chance, fitted a very uncommon lock."

"Scarcely, Mr. Railton. But—the drawer was opened with a key, and the contents turned out, and replaced in somewhat different order."

Mr. Railton was silent again.

Respect for his venerable Chief prevented him from uttering what was in his mind. But what the head-master stated appeared to him a practical impossibility. There was only one key to the writing-table drawers, and that had not left the Head's possession. A chance key would not have opened the locks. There was only one other key that could have done so—the one abstracted long years ago by Derek Denzil. And that that key could have turned up at St. Jim's again, after the lapse of so many years, was fantastic.

Dr. Holmes looked rather fixedly at the house-master, a faint pink creeping into his cheeks.

"You think I have made a mistake, Railton?" he asked. There was a sharp note in his voice.

Mr. Railton drew a rather deep breath.

"I must be frank, sir," he said, "The occurrence seems to me not only incomprehensible, but impossible. Is it not at least possible that in replacing the reports in the drawer, you may have unintentionally and perhaps quite unconsciously disarranged them—?"

"I do not think so, Mr. Railton."

"Then I can only say that I cannot begin to account for what has happened, sir," said the house-master. "I hardly know what can be done, except—"

"Except what, Mr. Railton?"

"It would be advisable, sir, to leave no money in the drawer at night. If, by some incomprehensible chance, someone in the

school had a key which fits the lock, and is capable of putting it to a dishonest use, money would be better locked up in the safe when you leave your study at night."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"That is certainly true, Railton, and I shall not fail to take that precaution until this strange matter is cleared up. Thank you!" added the Head, with just a trace of stiffness.

The house-master left the study.

Dr. Holmes remained, with a deep frown wrinkling his brow, his eyes on the drawer containing the reports. He was certain—quite certain—of what he had told the house-master. Whether or not the other drawers had been meddled with, he could not say: but that particular drawer certainly had, unless he had made a strange mistake. Mr. Railton plainly believed that he was mistaken in thinking that he had left Kildare's report on top of the pile in the drawer, since he had not found it so in the morning. Was it possible that he had been mistaken?

He shook his head.

He was certain! And yet—how could the drawer have been opened with a key, when the only key other than his own had been lost long years ago, when Derek Denzil was expelled from St. Jim's?

It was a puzzle that the Head could not solve—a mystery that he could not begin to fathom. And Dr. Holmes realised that he had no choice but to leave it at that!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BITTER BLOOD!

Ralph Reckness Cardew stood in his study, No. 9 in the Fourth, in break on Monday morning, before a glass, scanning his reflection therein.

His brow was almost as black as his eye.

Outside, in the quad, snow-flakes floated on the wind, and merry voices reached Cardew in the study—unheeded by him. Snow, to most of the juniors, meant snowballs. Tom Merry and Co. had sallied out, with Study No. 6, and a crowd more School House fellows, to encounter Figgins and Co. of the New House: and a battle-royal was raging—voices shouting, feet trampling, snowballs whizzing. Cardew's chums, Levison and Clive, were in the crowd: as doubtless Cardew would have been, in other circumstances. But Cardew was not anxious to parade his black eye in public.

He bit his lip, hard, as he stared at the reflection in the glass. That eye was as black as ever: and he knew that it was due to go through a good many shades of colour before it disappeared.

Break-up for Christmas was at hand. Cardew was booked to spend Christmas at the palatial home of his grandfather, Lord Reckness. The bare idea of turning up at that palatial residence with a black eye made him writhe.

But there was not the remotest hope that it would be gone by Christmas. No doubt it would have changed from black to purple and green. There was no consolation in that!

Cardew had not even had the satisfaction of discovering who had given him that eye, and handing over one of the same! He could only feel fairly sure that it was not a junior, after making all the investigation he could.

Indeed, the force of the sudden punch he had received in the dark made it seem more like the act of some hefty senior. But if it was a senior man who had delivered that punch, there was little that Cardew could do. He could not question Fifth-form men—and even had he discovered the offender in that form, he could hardly hope to handle a big senior man.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, it was true, still held to his belief that it was some unknown and mysterious outsider who had been in the House. But Arthur Augustus had that belief to himself: though other fellows might, perhaps, have thought that there was something in it, had they known of the curious incident in the Head's study that was puzzling Dr. Holmes.

But Cardew, though he would have been glad to hand over a black eye to the unknown person who had punched him in the dark, did not feel so savagely bitter against that unknown person, as against the well-meaning swell of St. Jim's. It was all due to D'Arcy.

Arthur Augustus's benevolent concern for his relative's welfare was not in the

slightest degree appreciated by that relative! Cardew's view was that Gussy was a meddling fool who had butted into what did not concern him: and he gritted his teeth every time he thought of the episode at the fence of the Green Man.

But for D'Arcy's interference, he would have seen his sporting friend, Mr. Banks, at that salubrious resort, on Saturday afternoon. His urgent business about a horse would have been done, and done with. It was because he had been prevented, by D'Arcy's meddling, from seeing Mr. Banks in the afternoon, that he had set out to break bounds after lights out, and visit the Green Man at a late hour. And that had led to the encounter on the dark landing and the black eye! He was disfigured for the Christmas holidays, because that ineffable ass, D'Arcy, couldn't mind his own business! He breathed rage when he thought of it.

And it was not only the holidays to come, when he had to display that startling eye to the surprised gaze of the family circle at Reckness Towers, that troubled and exasperated him. He had to carry that blackened eye about the school—and every other eye at St. Jim's constantly turned on it. It was painful, but he cared little for that. But he did care very much for stares, and grins, and derisive glances. Cardew rather liked to be the cynosure of all eyes, in some ways—as a fellow who had the nerve to pull a beak's leg, or to cheek a prefect. But he hated to be conspicuous on account of such a thing as a black eye. Every time a fellow looked at that eye, or a fag laughed as he passed, he felt a spasm of fury.

He had been questioned by his form-master about that eye, and had told a punch-ball story. That was good enough for unsuspicious Mr. Lathom. He had no fear that his nocturnal adventure would be discovered by the beaks. But in point of fact, Cardew would have preferred a Head's flogging to that black eye, had he had any choice in the matter.

He gazed into the glass, rubbing the discoloured eye tenderly. It was not like Cardew to seek solitude: but since he had had that black eye, he had kept out of the public sight as much as he could. While other fellows hurled snowballs in the quad., he remained in his study—moody and savage and bitter. But when the bell rang for third school, he had to face the crowd again: the only fellow at St. Jim's with a black eye.

The study door was thrown open, and Ernest Levison looked in.

"Oh, here you are!" he said.

Cardew scowled round at him. He was in a mood to scowl impartially at friend and foe.

"Can't you leave a fellow alone?" he snapped.

"Didn't you hear the bell?" said Levison, "I came up to tell you you'd be late for class."

"Hang class."

"Well, you can't hang Lathom," said Levison, "Look here, Cardew, it's no good doing a song and a dance about that eye of yours. Fellows have had black eyes before—not often, but it's happened."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Well, don't be an ass," said Levison, "The more you let fellows see that you're sensitive about it, the more attention it will get."

"If that's all you've got to say—"

"That's the lot: except that it won't do your dashed eye any good to get into a row with Lathom for being late in class."

Cardew gave him a dark look.

"Lathom can go and eat coke! By gad, I've a good mind to give D'Arcy one of the same to take into the form-room."

"What on earth do you mean? Whoever punched you in the eye on Saturday night, it wasn't D'Arcy, or any other Fourth-form man."

"It was D'Arcy's fault! It wouldn't have happened if he hadn't meddled in my affairs on Saturday afternoon."

"Lucky for you it was only D'Arcy that meddled, and not a prefect," said Levison, drily. "You were asking for the sack."

"No business of D'Arcy's—or of yours either."

"Are you coming down?" asked Levison, impatiently.

"I'll please myself."

Ernest Levison shrugged his shoulders, and cut away down the passage. He did not want to be late for class, if the reckless

and disgruntled scapegrace did.

Cardew, left alone once more, gave another glance into the glass, and scowled blackly at the reflection there. Then, slowly, he left the study. He hated showing up in the form-room with that eye: but there was no help for it, and, as Levison had said, matters would not be improved by a row with Lathom.

As he went sullenly down the stairs, he passed Toby, the House page. Toby's face for a second melted into a grin: the next moment it was sedate again: but Cardew had noted that momentary flicker of amusement. His feelings were deep as he went on his way.

He was already late, but he did not hurry. Class in the Fourth form-room had been going on for five minutes, when he came in at last.

If he had wanted to attract attention, which he certainly did not, he could not have managed it better. A fellow walking in to class five minutes late was sure to have all eyes turned on him.

Mr. Lathom gave him a severe glance.

"You are late, Cardew! You will take fifty lines."

Cardew did not answer. He could not have answered, in his present state of passionate exasperation, without uttering some impertinence that would have made matters worse. In silence, but breathing hard, and with a glint in his sound eye, he went to his place. To reach it he had to pass close by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, into whose aristocratic face came a faint contempt, which revealed what he thought of Cardew's dark and angry scowl.

It was the last straw, in Cardew's present mood. The black and bitter temper he had restrained until that moment broke suddenly out, beyond control, and as he passed D'Arcy, he gave him a sudden savage hack on the shin, under his desk.

Arthur Augustus gave a gasp of utter anguish.

Then, without stopping to think, he went into action. He forgot that he was in class, that he was in the presence of his form-master—he forgot everything but the fact that he had been kicked. He was on his feet with a bound, his fist lashing out.

That fist crashed full in Cardew's sullen face: and Ralph Reckness Cardew, with a breathless yell, went sprawling among the desks.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AN AMAZING ENCOUNTER!

"D'Arcy!"

Mr. Lathom almost shrieked.

"Gussy!" gasped Blake.

Every head in the Fourth spun round at Arthur Augustus. Mr. Lathom gazed at him with his eyes almost popping through his spectacles.

The whole form gasped.

Cardew, sprawling among many feet, splutted for breath. Levison jumped out of his place to help him.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood with flashing eyes, his fists clenched. He had knocked Cardew down, and he was ready to knock him down again as soon as he got on his feet. The usually calm and placable Gussy was seeing red just then.

"D'Arcy!" Mr. Lathom roared. "D'Arcy! How dare you? Stand out before the class! How dare you, I say?"

Arthur Augustus came to himself, as it were. He realised what he had done. His fists unclenched, and his face flushed. Still, he was not sorry that he had knocked Cardew down. His shin was aching and burning with that savage hack. But he realised that, whatever the provocation, no fellow could knock another down in the Form-room, under the eyes of the form-master, without dire consequences.

Breathing hard, the swell of St. Jim's walked out in front of the form.

Cardew staggered up, with the help of Levison. His face was almost white, and a red mark showed where D'Arcy's knuckles had landed.

"Steady, old man," muttered Levison, "Has D'Arcy gone mad, or what?"

Cardew made no reply to that.

Not a fellow in the Form had seen the hack on the shin, under the desks, that had provoked Arthur Augustus's prompt retaliation. Mr. Lathom had not the remotest suspicion of it.

To Form and Form-master, it seemed that D'Arcy was the aggressor, and that he

had knocked a fellow down in the form-room, for no apparent reason, except that he chose so to do.

It was no wonder that Mr. Lathom's face, usually mild and benignant, was dark with anger, and that his eyes glinted over his spectacles. Blake and Herries and Digby sat utterly dismayed. They knew well enough that there was bitter blood between D'Arcy and his relative, at least on that relative's side. But that sudden outbreak on D'Arcy's part utterly astonished and dismayed them. They almost wondered whether the swell of St. Jim's had suddenly gone out of his senses.

Cardew leaned on Levison's shoulder, silent. He was dizzy from the blow and the fall among the desks. But the look in his eyes, and the feeling in his heart, were sheer evil. The fellow who had landed him in a caning from Lathom, who had meddled in his affairs and dragged him away from the Green Man, who was the cause of the disfigurement that made him writhe when he saw it in the glass, was booked for trouble now—serious trouble: and Cardew was glad of it. It was quite likely that it would mean a Head's flogging—and Cardew hoped that it would. At the moment, at least, there was no limit to his bitter rancour.

Arthur Augustus, with flushed face, stood before his form-master. All eyes were on him.

"D'Arcy," Mr. Lathom's voice trembled with anger, "I could scarcely believe my eyes—such an act—never in all my experience as a schoolmaster have I known such a thing—I shall send you to your head-master, D'Arcy, to be dealt with—"

"I am sowwy, sir, but—"

"You have dared to strike another boy in the Form-room—to knock him down before my eyes!" exclaimed Mr. Lathom, "You need not tell me that Cardew provoked you in some way, D'Arcy—no provocation can excuse such an act. I shall send you to Dr. Holmes.

"Vewy well, sir," said Arthur Augustus, quietly.

"You will take a note from me to your head-master. I shall explain what you have done, and I have not the slightest doubt that Dr. Holmes will administer a severe flogging.

Arthur Augustus drew a deep breath.

But he made no reply. There was, in fact, nothing to be said. What he had done, he had done, and he had to face the consequences.

He waited quietly, while Mr. Lathom wrote a note at his desk. Blake and Herries and Dig. gazed at him dismally as he stood. Every fellow in the form was staring at him.

"Chap must be off his rocker," Figgins whispered to Kerr. "Fancy old Gussy breaking out like that."

"Can't make him out," murmured fatty Wynn. "Cardew never did anything, so far as I could see—"

"I'll bet he did," said Kerr, "He must have done something to get Gussy's rag out like that. Not that it would help Gussy to tell Lathom. You can't knock a man down in the Form-room and get by with it."

Mr. Lathom finished writing the note, and, with a brow of thunder, handed it to the luckless swell of St. Jim's.

"You will take that note to your head-master's study, D'Arcy!" he rapped.

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

"If Dr. Holmes is not there, you will wait for him."

"Yaas, sir."

"Now go!" snapped the master of the Fourth.

"Vewy well, sir."

Arthur Augustus, with the note in his hand, walked to the door, his head very erect. All eyes followed him—Cardew's with an evil gleam. The door closed behind the elegant figure of the swell of St. Jim's: and lessons were resumed in the Fourth-form room in a somewhat troubled atmosphere.

Outside the door, Arthur Augustus paused.

The pain in his shin, where Cardew had hacked, was sharp and bitter. He would have been glad to go up to Study No. 6 and rub it with Elliman's before proceeding to the Head's study. But he shook his head. Mr. Lathom's orders were peremptory: and Arthur Augustus was not a fellow like Cardew, who delighted in eluding or disobeying orders from a 'beak.' He had been told by his Form-master to go

to his head-master's study, and he went.

He limped a little as he walked. At the corner of the corridor on which the Head's study opened, he passed Toby. The House page glanced at him, noting the limp, and looked concerned. Toby had grinned at Cardew's black eye: but he was concerned about Gussy's limp—he liked Arthur Augustus, as almost everyone in the House did.

"'Urt your leg, sir?" asked Toby, with respectful sympathy.

"It is wathah painful, Toby," answered Arthur Augustus, with his accustomed courtesy, "A fellow hacked my shin. But it's all wight weally."

"I'll get you some embrocation, sir—"

"I am afwaid I cannot bothah about that, Toby, as I have to go to the Head," answered Arthur Augustus: and with a cheery nod to the page, he passed on up the corridor.

Toby stood looking after him, till he tapped on the door of the Head's study and disappeared within. Then Toby, still with a concerned look on his chubby face, went his way.

Arthur Augustus stepped into the Head's study, and glanced towards the writing-table by the window. No one was there. Dr. Holmes was in the Sixth-Form room: and deep in Thucydides with that form.

"Wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

A fellow taking a note from his form-master to his head-master, with the fairly certain prospect of a flogging, would have been glad to get it over. But the Head was not there, and he had to wait. It was far from pleasant to wait with such a prospect in store, but there was no help for it.

Arthur Augustus closed the door, and walked across to the window. He stood looking out into snow-flakes whirling on the wind.

Then he turned, and paced across the study and back again. It was weary waiting, and he hoped that the Head would not be long. But he could guess that if the Head was taking the Sixth in that lesson, it would be some time before he came. Minutes passed in waiting for a flogging moved on leaden wings.

"Wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus again.

He went back to the window, and stood looking out. In the distance, he had a glimpse of Taggles, with his coat-collar turned up, crossing the quad. in the sprinkle of lightly-falling snow. Taggles' gnarled old face wore a frown, no doubt caused by the state of the weather. He glanced at the Head's window in passing, and stared at the junior standing there, probably surprised to see a Fourth-form boy at the head-master's study window, lesson time. Then he passed on and disappeared.

Arthur Augustus continued to gaze out at the whirling flakes, and the leafless old elms groaning in the December wind. There was nothing else to do, while he waited for his head-master.

But suddenly he turned, at the sound of a footfall in the room. He had not heard the door open, but a footfall could only mean that Dr. Holmes had arrived.

The next moment, Arthur Augustus jumped almost clear of the floor in utter amazement.

He stared with popping eyes at a man in the study. It was not the Head. Dr. Holmes had not come. The face at which he stared was nothing like the Head's—but it was a face that D'Arcy knew, and remembered, though he had seen it only once before, in the dimness of the old monk's cell in Wayland Wood. He knew those hard sharp features again, those sharp penetrating eyes, the dark brows and the thin hard lips. Blankly, bemusedly, Arthur Augustus gazed at the man that Study No. 6 had encountered in Wayland Wood—the "man from nowhere."

"Gad!"

It was a startled exclamation from the strange man. His eyes popped at D'Arcy, as D'Arcy's popped at him. Evidently he was as startled as the swell of St. Jim's. For a long moment, they stood staring at one another: D'Arcy's face expressing only astonishment, but astonishment giving place to black and bitter rage in the face of the strange intruder.

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus found his voice, "Who are you—and how did you come heah? I did not heah the door open—"

He got no further. The man, for some moments, had seemed thrown off his balance, by finding someone on the Head's

study, which it was plain he had expected to find vacant. But the desperate look that came over his face, showed that he had rapidly decided on his course of action. Arthur Augustus had no time to finish speaking. With the spring of a tiger, the hard-faced man was upon him, gripping him in a grip of iron: and as his lips opened for a cry, a savage hand was pressed over his mouth, choking him into silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHERE IS ARTHUR AUGUSTUS!

"What's the row?" asked Tom Merry.

"Something up? inquired Manners.

"Wherefore this thusness?" asked Monty Lowther.

The three Shell fellows came into the junior day-room after third school, and found Blake and Herries and Digby there—looking as if they had collected all the worries and troubles in the universe, and a few over. Seldom or never had Study No. 6 been seen looking so thoroughly down in the mouth.

"It's Gussy!" muttered Blake.

"Eh! Where's Gussy?" asked Tom.

"I don't know! Keeping out of sight, I suppose," mumbled Blake, "I went up to the study, but he's not there."

"Nothing wrong with Gussy, is there?" asked Tom, concerned at once.

"Only a flogging," said Blake, savagely.

The Terrible Three jumped.

"Gussy—a flogging!" exclaimed Manners. Even Monty Lowther became serious at that.

"Must have been," groaned Blake,

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus found his voice. "Who are you — and how did you come heah? I did not heah the door open—"

"Lathom sent him with a note to the Head —we know what that means."

"But what on earth has Gussy done?" exclaimed Tom, in amazement.

"Knocks a man down in the Form-room —right under Lathom's nose."

"Gussy did!" ejaculated Tom, blankly. "Who?"

"That cad Cardew," snapped Blake. "Cardew must have got his rag out somehow, all of a sudden—I don't know how, but he must have done something. But all we saw was, Gussy jumping up and knocking him down. You can guess that Lathom went off at the deep end."

"Well, he would, I suppose," said Tom, with a whistle, "It's a bit over the limit, whatever Cardew may have done. So Gussy went to the Head?"

"Yes, with a note from Lathom! That means a Head's whopping. Gussy would feel it—I don't mean only the whopping, but going up to the Head for it—that's why he's not showing up, I suppose. Poor old Gussy!"

"Look here, let's go and look for that man Cardew," growled Herries, "He must have done something. Well, we can jolly well boot him."

"But how did it happen?" asked Tom.

"Cardew was late for class, and Lathom gave him lines—he was shoving past Gussy's desk, when Gussy jumped up and punched—can't make it out," said Blake, "He may have said something we didn't hear—"

"He said or did something," growled Herries, "That's a cert, and I jolly well think he jolly well ought to be booted."

"Gussy didn't come back to the Form-room?" asked Manners.

"No! He may have had to wait for the Head—or he may have gone off on his ear after it was over," said Blake. "Can't find a chap who's seen him since he walked out of the form-room with Lathom's note."

Six faces were serious and troubled now instead of three. Those six troubled faces looked round, as a fat giggle came from Baggy Trimble. The episode, almost tragic to Gussy's friends, seemed to have its comic side in the fat Baggy's estimation.

"I say, I've been looking for him," said Trimble, cheerfully, "I was going to ask him if it hurt! He, he!"

"Were you?" roared George Herries, "Well, now ask somebody if that hurts, you fat smudge!" Herries' foot accompanied the words, and there was a yell from Baggy Trimble. He faded out of the day-room, still yelling.

"Now let's go and boot Cardew," urged Herries.

"Well, you don't know what Cardew did, if he did anything," said Tom Merry, "Better go and look for Gussy. He can tell us."

"Goodness knows where he is," said Blake, "We've looked all over the shop since Lathom turned us out. Nobody seems to have seen him."

"He must be somewhere," said Tom, "Not likely to have gone out of the House in this weather. We'll find him all right."

"O.K." said Blake, and the juniors left the day-room to look for Arthur Augustus, and afford him what friendly comfort and consolation they could in the painful circumstances.

But Arthur Augustus was not easy to find.

They looked for him, up and down and round about, and asked every fellow they met. But he was nowhere to be seen, and nobody had any information to give.

"Can't be still with the Head!" said Tom, at last.

"Well, hardly," said Blake, "It was more than an hour ago that Lathom sent him up to the beak."

"The Head may have been with the Sixth," remarked Manners, "If he was, Gussy would have had to wait till after third school."

"Well, that's twenty minutes ago."

"Can't make it out."

The juniors stood in a puzzled group.

"Here's Lathom!" murmured Dig. "Looks shirty, doesn't he?"

Mr. Lathom, coming away from the head-master's study, glanced at the group of juniors. He undoubtedly looked "shirty." Seldom had his benevolent face been seen clouded by so portentious a frown.

"Blake!" he rapped.

"Yes, sir," murmured Blake.

"Do you know where D'Arcy is?"

"D'Arcy, sir! No—we're looking for him

now."

"He must be found at once," said Mr. Lathom, his voice quivering with anger, "Such wilful disobedience—such reckless defiance of authority—I have never heard of such a thing. I cannot understand it in a boy like D'Arcy—always so very well-conducted.

"Is he with the Head now, sir?" ventured Blake.

Mr. Lathom stared at him, over his glasses.

"What? what? No, he is not with the Head—he has not been to the head-master's study at all, though ordered to do so. Dr. Holmes has seen nothing of him, and was quite unaware of what happened in the Fourth-form room until I saw him a few minutes ago. D'Arcy has deliberately evaded my order—he was sent to his head-master's study and did not go."

"Oh!" gasped Blake, in utter dismay.

"Look for him at once, Blake, and send him to me immediately you find him," rapped Mr. Lathom: and he rustled on, very angry and perturbed.

Tom Merry and Co. looked at one another blankly.

"Oh, the ass!" breathed Blake.

"He never went to the beak's study!" breathed Herries, "Oh, the fathead! Asking for it."

"But—but he must have gone!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "D'Arcy isn't the man to cheek his form-master like that."

"You heard what Lathom said!" growled Blake, "I suppose Gussy's got his ears up—you know what a mule he is when he's got his ears up! Oh, the ass! Why, a fellow might be bunked for this! Walking off on his own when he's sent up to the Head—no wonder Lathom's shirty!"

"Better find him as soon as we can," said Tom, "The Head will be as shirty as Lathom, now he knows. For goodness sake let's find him before matters get worse."

Doubly anxious now, the chums of the School-House resumed their search for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

But they searched in vain.

Wherever Arthur Augustus was, he was not to be found.

The quest was still going on, when the bell rang for dinner. That the missing junior could remain out of sight after that seemed impossible.

But he did. There was a vacant place at the Fourth-form table in hall: every eye was open now for D'Arcy, but no eye beheld him. Blake and Co. hoped that he would, at least, arrive late—but he did not arrive late: he did not arrive at all. There was a thrill of excitement in the Fourth. It was known to all now that D'Arcy had not gone to the Head, as directed by his form-master: and now it was evident that he was "cutting tiffin." Where he was, and what had became of him, was a mystery: and there were wild surmises whether he had run away from school to escape a head master's flogging.

Wild as that surmise was, it began to look possible, when the bell rang for class in the afternoon. For Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not join his form going to the form-room. His place remained vacant in the Fourth-Form room: and Mr. Lathom's brow was more thunderous than ever.

There was deep though suppressed excitement in the Fourth. Blake and Herries and Dig. looked, as they felt, utterly dismal: Figgins and Co. were deeply concerned: everyone else was excited: and there was one fellow—a fellow with a black eye—whose face was very darkly clouded. Ralph Reckness Cardew, certainly, had never dreamed of such an outcome of his hasty and vicious action: and now that it was too late, he was sorry for what he had done: as often happened with the scapegrace of the Fourth.

Study No. 6 hoped, against hope as it were, that Arthur Augustus would turn up before class was over. But he did not turn up: and when Mr. Lathom dismissed his form, they hurried out to look for him once more. But they did not find him—all they discovered was the absolute certainty that he was nowhere in the School House.

One question now was on almost every tongue at St. Jims's—where was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy ? And to that question no one knew the answer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DISAPPEARED?

"Oh, get out!" exclaimed Tom Merry, gruffly.

"And stay out!" grunted Manners.

"Shut the door after you!" snapped Monty Lowther.

Cardew of the Fourth coloured. That greeting, in No. 10 Study in the Shell, was far from flattering.

The Terrible Three had gone to their study to tea—a rather dismal meal. They were worried about Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—as indeed were a crowd of other fellows in the House.

D'Arcy had, to all appearance, walked out of the school instead of going to the headmaster's study as ordered. The consequences of such an action could only be dire. All his friends—which meant almost everybody in the Lower School at St. Jim's—were concerned and anxious. The sight of Cardew had rather an effect on Tom Merry and Co. like that of a red rag on a bull.

Cardew hesitated for a moment in the doorway. Then he came quietly into the study, heedless of the unwelcoming glares of the Shell fellows.

"I've told you you're not wanted here, Cardew," said Tom, bluntly.

"I heard you."

"Well, travel."

"I've come here to say something."

"Keep it packed up," snapped Tom, "You're the cause of all this—if D'Arcy's sacked, it's your doing. You must have done something to make him break out as he did in the form-room—something pretty rotten, too. D'Arcy isn't the man to fly off the handle like that without cause. And if he's done some mad thing since, it's all your fault."

"But has he?" said Cardew, quietly.

Tom stared at him.

"You know he has! He cleared off instead of going to the Head as Lathom told him. It was a mad thing to do—but he did it. You know that."

"I don't!"

"Well, everyone else does. What do you mean, if you mean anything?"

Cardew's lip curled in a sneer.

"I don't know what's happened, and you don't," he said, "I can't make it out. You needn't rub it in that it's my fault—I know that. It was his fault I got this eye—and if he'd had a Head's floggin', I couldn't have cared less. But—it's more serious than that."

"Yes, it may be the sack, now," snapped Tom.

"More serious than that, perhaps," said Cardew. "It looks to me as if something's happened to D'Arcy, though I can't imagine what."

"We know what's happened," growled Manners, "He cleared off—instead of going to the Head's study—"

"He did not," said Cardew.

"Oh, don't talk rot," said Monty Lowther, "We all know he did—because he must have. The Head, as it turns out, was with the Sixth, and never went to his study till after third school. He didn't find D'Arcy there—and never knew that anything was amiss till Lathom went to see him. Do you think the Head never noticed whether D'Arcy was in his study or not?"

"He couldn't have been there when the Head went in after leaving the Sixth," said Cardew, "But he had been there."

"And how do you know?" snapped Lowther.

"Because I've found out. I was late for class in third school, and passed Toby as I was going down to the form-room. It was only a few minutes afterwards that D'Arcy was sent to the Head, so it occurred to me that Toby might have seen something of him after he left the form-room, as he was about the passages."

"Oh!" said Tom, "Have you asked him?"

"I have! And the page says that D'Arcy passed him at the corner of the Head's corridor, and he saw him go into Dr. Holme's study."

"Toby saw him go in!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yes. And that isn't all," continued Cardew, "I've been down to Taggles' lodge to ask him—"

"What on earth would Taggles know about it? He wouldn't open the gates for D'Arcy to walk out during class. D'Arcy must have got out some other way."

"Oh, quite," drawled Cardew, "But Taggles would be quite likely to see a fellow who was out when everyone else was in class. Well, Taggles never saw D'Arcy out of the House—but he did see him in the House."

"Where and when?"

"He saw him looking out of the Head's study window, soon after eleven o'clock," answered Cardew, "D'Arcy was in the Head's study then."

"Oh!" said Tom.

The Shell fellows looked at Cardew, and at one another. This was a little new light on the puzzling subject. As D'Arcy was not to be found in the House, and the Head had not seen him in his study, it had been concluded as a matter of course that the swell of St. Jim's had left the House instead of going to the Head. Certainly that was a wild and reckless act not at all in keeping with Arthur Augustus's character. But it seemed clear enough that it had happened. What Cardew had learned from the House page and the porter showed, however, that it had not happened. There were two witnesses that Arthur Augustus had gone to Dr. Holmes's study—Toby had seen him go in, and Taggles had seen him at the window.

"Blessed if I make this out," said Tom Merry, quite perplexed, "If D'Arcy did go to the Head's study, why on earth wasn't he there when the Head went in?"

"He did go in, and he must have been waiting for the Head to come, when Taggles saw him at the study window," answered Cardew.

"Looks like it!" said Manners, slowly, "Did he get fed up with waiting for the Head, and clear off afterwards, or what?"

"Must have," said Monty Lowther, "But it's jolly queer! If he went to the study, he must have meant to go through it, or he wouldn't have gone. Queer to change his mind just because he had to wait for the beak."

"It beats me," said Tom, "But—he's gone! I can't understand his going to the Head's study as Lathom told him, and then changing his mind about it. But—he's not in the House. We all know that."

"Yes, we know that," said Cardew, very quietly, "But that's all we know. What we want to know is, what's happened to the chap."

Tom gave him a sharp look.

"What do you mean, Cardew? Nothing can have happened to him, I suppose. How could anything happen to him?"

"No good askin' me that," said Cardew, shrugging his shoulders, "But there's one thing I know—there's more to this than we can see. I could understand D'Arcy getting his ears up, and marching off, instead of going to the Head's study at all. It wouldn't be like him—but it might happen. But I can't understand him going to the Head's study, waiting there some time, and then changing his mind about going through it, and bolting from the school. It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't," said Tom, slowly, "If he bolted, it was to dodge a Head's whopping—yet if the Head had been in his study, he'd have had it, as it seems certain now that he did go there."

"That's quite certain. What we want to know is, why did he leave the study, and disappear," said Cardew, "It wasn't to dodge the whopping—because he must have made up his mind about that when he went there."

"What other reason could he have had," said Manners.

Cardew gave another shrug.

"Have a little sense," he said, "If D'Arcy had been going to bolt, he would have done that without going to the Head's study at all. But he did go—he went there to deliver Lathom's note, and take what was coming to him. We know that now. Something happened after that—goodness knows what—"

"Good heavens, Cardew!" exclaimed Tom Merry, blankly, "Do you mean to say you don't believe that D'Arcy cleared off at all?"

"Exactly."

"Then where is he?" demanded Lowther. "Know that, as you know so much?"

"All I know is that he's disappeared."

"Disappeared!" exclaimed the three Shell fellows, with one voice.

"Just that!"

"Oh, you're dreaming," exclaimed Tom Merry, "How could a fellow disappear, in broad daylight, in the middle of the day,

in a crowded House? Talk sense."

Once more Cardew shrugged his shoulders.

"O.K.," he said, "Leave it at that, then. I came here thinking that we might be able to put our heads together, and do something—but leave it at that!" He turned to the door.

"Fat lot you care," said Tom, angrily, "You've been girding at D'Arcy ever since he gave you away, without meaning to do it, over that jape on Lathom at roll in hall, last week. You're the cause of what's happened to-day—but for you he wouldn't have been sent up to the Head at all. I don't know what you did at him in the form-room to make him break out as he did—but I'll bank on it that it was something mean and rotten—"

"It was," said Cardew, in a low voice, "I hacked him under his desk, if you want to know the particulars. Nobody saw what I did, and Lathom came down on him like a ton of bricks for punching out—"

"And you never owned up to Lathom?" excluded Tom.

"No!"

"Well, you worm! Lathom mightn't have sent him up to the Head if you had."

"I knew that."

"Why, you—you—you—is there a word for you?" exclaimed Tom Merry, his voice ringing with scorn, "You make me sick! For goodness sake get out of this study! You play a dirty trick on a fellow whose shoes you're not fit to clean, and let him go up to the Head for a flogging when you might have stopped it by owning up as any fellow with a rag of decency would—and now you come here and make out that you're concerned about him—Oh, get out! I tell you you make me sick."

Cardew made no reply to that. He gave another shrug of his slim shoulders, and lounged out of No. 10 Study—leaving the chums of the Shell more than half regretting that they had not pitched him out on his neck.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NO CLUE!

Inspector Skeat, of Wayland, sat plumply on a chair in Dr. Holmes's study, with an expression on his stolid face that indicated complete puzzlement.

Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton had their eyes on his face, not very hopefully.

Headmaster and house-master were utterly and hopelessly perplexed. And they could not help thinking that the police-inspector was in the same state of mind.

Two days had passed since D'Arcy of the Fourth, sent to his headmaster's study from the form-room, had gone to that study, and then vanished from all knowledge.

Cardew's suggestion, in Tom Merry's study, that D'Arcy had "disappeared," had been met with incredulity. But all St. Jim's now knew that he had disappeared. How and why and where remained totally unknown: but the fact was now common knowledge in the school.

It was on Monday, after Dr. Holmes had telephoned to Eastwood House, and learned that nothing had been seen or heard of D'Arcy at his home, that he had called in official aid. Inspector Skeat's first impression, like that of everyone else, was that the missing junior had "bolted." But the investigations of the following days forced him to modify that view.

There was silence in the Head's study. Mr. Skeat was slow to speak. His glance wandered round the room, on the glimmering old oak-panelled walls, the pictures, the bust of Socrates on the bookcase. But at length he looked at the Head, and spoke.

"A very perplexing case, sir," he said, heavily.

"I had hoped, Mr. Skeat, that you would be able to give us some light on the matter," said Dr. Holmes.

The inspector coughed.

"I hoped so myself, sir, and I still hope so. You may be sure that investigation has been quite exhaustive, though negative in its results. The boy almost seems to have dissolved into thin air."

He paused.

"Let us go over the facts, sir, so far as we

know them." He tapped his left forefinger with his right, as if ticking off the facts on those plump fingers, "D'Arcy was sent to your study—this study—in third school on Monday—about ten minutes past eleven in the morning."

"That is so."

"You were occupied with a senior form, and did not come back to your study till after twelve o'clock."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"The study was, therefore, vacant when D'Arcy came here. That he did actually come here is proved by the evidence we have heard from the page-boy and the school porter. The former saw him enter the study: the latter, a little later, saw him looking out of the window. It is established beyond doubt that he was in this study at, approximately, a quarter past eleven o'clock."

"That is assured," said Mr. Railton, and the Head nodded again.

Mr. Skeat gave another cough.

"He was not here when you came back from the Sixth-Form room, Dr. Holmes, and you did not know that he had been sent to you, until his form-master, Mr. Lathom, came in to speak to you about the matter."

"That is correct, Mr. Skeat."

"On the face of it, it looked as if the boy had walked out of the House of his own accord, taking French leave."

"That was our first impression, Mr. Skeat, extraordinary as such an act would have been. But now—"

"Now," said Mr. Skeat, "there appears to be no evidence that he did anything of the kind, but considerable evidence that he did not. We know that he never went home, or communicated with his parents. A boy running away from school might hesitate to go home—but he would know that his parents would be very anxious, when they heard that he was missing: and a boy of D'Arcy's character would scarcely be so unthinking, or so unfeeling, as to leave them in such anxiety if he could help it."

"I am convinced that he would not," said Mr. Railton, quietly, "D'Arcy might act in a thoughtless or headstrong manner, in a moment of excitement. But his character is well-known to me—he would be the very last person to act inconsiderately towards others."

"Neither," went on Mr. Skeat, "did he take a train, either for his home, or for anywhere else. My inquiries establish that beyond doubt. He is well known by sight at Rylcombe and at Wayland stations, and he certainly was not seen at either on Monday. I have ascertained that no car was hired by a schoolboy at any garage within a very wide radius."

"You mean that he must have gone on foot, wherever he went," said the Head.

"Certainly—if he went anywhere," said Mr. Skeat, "But it appears incredible that he did so. You will remember that it was snowing on Monday—there was a steady fall of snow and drizzle all day. But no hat, cap, or coat belonging to D'Arcy is missing from the House."

"That is true."

"We know," continued the inspector, "that he did not rush hastily from the House when he was out of his form-room. We know that he came to this study, and waited here at least for some minutes. He had, therefore, ample time and opportunity to secure hat and coat from the lobby, if he was going out. Is it conceivable that he deliberately omitted to do so, and went out hatless and coatless of his own accord into snow and drizzle and a bitter December wind?"

Dr. Holmes drew a deep breath.

"It is scarcely conceivable," he said, "Yet all this, Mr. Skeat, would lead to the assumption that he did not leave the House at all—while actually he has been missing for over two days."

"It would lead to the assumption, sir, that he did not leave the House of his own accord," said Mr. Skeat.

"How else could he have left it, Mr. Skeat?" exclaimed Dr. Holmes, while Mr. Railton, with his eyes keenly on the inspector's stolid face gave a slight nod.

Mr. Skeat shook his head.

"There," he said, "we are in the dark. From every appearance, it looks as if the boy has been spirited away—in a word, kidnapped."

"Mr. Skeat!"

"That, sir, I repeat, is how the matter

looks," said Mr. Skeat, "But against that is the apparent impossibility of such a thing taking place in this building."

"In this building!" repeated the Head, blankly, "In my study, Mr. Skeat! Kidnapping implies a kidnapper—and while it may be imaginable that some extraneous person might have succeeded in penetrating into the House, while all the forms were in class, unseen and undiscovered—imaginable, though very improbable—is it imaginable that such a person could have taken a kidnapped schoolboy away with him—unseen, unsuspected, without leaving a trace—really, Mr. Skeat!—"

"Perfectly so, sir," said Mr. Skeat, stolidly, "It appears, and perhaps is, impossible. Neither can one imagine any reason or motive for such a kidnapping. But this brings us to a hopeless impasse, sir—on the one hand, D'Arcy seems not to have left the House of his own accord—on the other, it seems impossible that he can have been taken away by force. One or the other theory must be the truth—but there is no evidence of either. One or the other must have happened, yet both seem equally improbable, if not impossible."

Dr. Holmes was silent.

His brow was deeply wrinkled. The dilemma, as stated by the Wayland inspector, was beyond him.

"All we know for certain," resumed Mr. Skeat, after a pause, "is that D'Arcy was in this study at a quarter past eleven on Monday. What followed is completely hidden from us. Not only is there no clue—but all the evidence we can find points to the conclusion that he never left the House at all. Yet he is not here."

There was a long silence in the head-master's study.

Dr. Holmes looked at Mr. Railton. The house-master looked at him. Neither had anything to suggest. Both were utterly mystified.

Mr. Skeat waited a minute or more. But as neither head-master nor house-master spoke, he rose at last ponderously to his feet.

"My investigations will proceed, sir," he said, "Obviously the missing boy is somewhere: and he can be and shall be found. That is all I am able to say at the present moment."

And the Wayland inspector took his leave, evidently an utterly puzzled and mystified man.

"What do you think, Railton?" asked the Head, when Mr. Skeat was gone.

But the house-master could only shake his head.

"I confess that I am quite perplexed, sir," he answered, "I can imagine nothing to account for D'Arcy's disappearance."

Dr. Holmes sighed.

He was utterly at a loss. The house-master was at a loss. Inspector Skeat, only too clearly, was at a loss. The problem seemed an insoluble one—a riddle to which there was no answer. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had vanished from the eyes of all who knew him: as if the floor of the Head's study had opened and swallowed him up. And what had become of him, no one at St. Jim's could guess, or even surmise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A CHRISTMAS QUEST!

Tom Merry ran his fingers through his curly hair, a way he had when he was perplexed or worried. Now he was both.

No. 10 Study was in a somewhat dismantled state. It was the day before breaking-up for Christmas. Books lay about, all sorts of belongings cumbered the table and the chairs, packed or half-packed.

Tom Merry stood in the study, pausing in his packing. Monty Lowther and Manners were busy—Manners putting his precious camera very carefully into its case, Lowther hunting for a copy of verses he had intended to send to the *Carcroft Chronicle*—the schoolboy paper at Carcroft—and which had disappeared in the general disarray of the study. None of the "Terrible Three" looked as merry and bright as they were accustomed to look on the eve of a holiday. They had been looking forward to break-up for Christmas but now it had come, it found them with clouded faces.

The mystery of D'Arcy's disappearance

was still a mystery. No word, no sign, no clue, had transpired: the swell of St. Jim's had vanished without leaving a trace. His father, Lord Eastwood, had come down to the school: but had departed again, as utterly perplexed as the Head, or the staff, or the fellows in all forms and both Houses. Inspector Skeat still hovered occasionally about the school: but everyone knew that he was hopelessly puzzled. And the thought of going away for Christmas, and leaving the strange matter where it was, lay heavy on the minds of Arthur Augustus's friends.

"Look here, you fellows," Tom Merry broke a long silence in No. 10, "Look here, we're booked to clear out to-morrow—" He paused.

"What about it?" asked Manners.

"You chaps were coming home with me," said Tom, "I mean, are, if we go."

"If!" repeated Monty Lowther.

"I've been thinking it over," said Tom, "My guardian will let me do as I like about it—I know that. Look here, I don't feel like going away and leaving poor old Gussy to it."

Manners stared.

"We can't help him, can we?" he asked.

"No! I suppose not! But—we can try! I just can't stick the idea of going off as if nothing had happened, while he's missing. Are you fellows game to stick it here over the hols. and chuck festivities and things? The Head will give us leave if we ask."

Monty Lowther gave a whistle.

"If we could do any good—!" he said, dubiously.

"We might," said Tom, "Nobody knows what's become of old Gussy—it's simply a riddle. But—he disappeared here, at St. Jim's. We know that much. How and why beats me hollow. But there it is—it was here that he vanished, and it's here that he must be looked for."

"The police have been doing plenty of looking for him," said Manners.

"I know! And everything they've found out goes to show that D'Arcy never left the school at all," said Tom.

"Only he's not here."

"I know, I know! It's got me beat." Tom ran his fingers through his hair again, which was already looking like a mop. "He's not here—but he never left—it doesn't make sense, but there it is. As he never left, it's no good looking for him anywhere else—and as he's not here, it's no good looking for him here—it's enough to make a fellow's head turn round. The long and the short of it is, that there's something in it we don't and can't understand."

"That's right on the wicket," agreed Lowther.

"Well, we haven't the foggiest idea what's happened to him," pursued Tom, "But a search naturally begins at the spot where a missing man was last seen."

"Here at St. Jim's, then," said Manners.

"That's it."

Lowther grinned faintly.

"That narrows it down to the Head's study," he said, "That's where Gussy was last seen."

"Well, he's not in the Head's study," said Tom, "Goodness knows where he is, but he was in this House when he disappeared, and so a search for him must begin here, or round about here. We shall have lots of time with lessons out of the way—"

"And games," murmured Lowther.

"I know it won't be very Christmassy," said Tom, "and you were booked to come home with me. But—what do you feel about it?"

"I don't see that we can do any good," said Manners, "But I'm on."

"Same here," said Lowther.

Tom Merry looked relieved. It had long been arranged that the "Terrible Three" were to spend the Christmas holidays together, at Tom's home, which made it a little awkward for Tom to change his plans without the cordial co-operation of his chums. But that cordial co-operation was at once forthcoming.

"The fact is," said Monty, "I had the idea in my own mind—I just hate going off while we don't know what's become of poor old Gussy."

"I feel that way, too," said Manners, "It's a go—we get leave to stay at the school over the hols., and put in the time hunting for Gussy. If nothing comes of it, we shall have done our best for a pal."

"That's the idea," said Tom, "I'm

jolly glad you fellows are playing up. We may find out something—though as yet I can't begin to guess what there is to find out. Poor old Gussy seems to have dropped into a hole and pulled it in after him. But—he's somewhere!"

"Bank on that, at least," said Lowther, "The only question is, where? But as that Indian chap at Greyfriars would say, the wherefulness is terrific."

"One thing's certain, at least," said Tom, "Gussy wouldn't and couldn't leave his people in such anxiety if he were a free agent. He's kept away by force. That speaks for itself. Well, that means he's a prisoner somewhere—and that means that he was kidnapped."

"By whom?" said Manners.

"Goodness knows."

"And why?"

"Can't begin to guess. But he's a prisoner, because he must be—otherwise, he would have been heard from. Who they are, and how they got him, we don't know—but we do know that he's kept quiet somewhere, somehow—"

"It's a bit vague," said Lowther.

"I know! But there's one other point," said Tom, "How they—whoever they are—got him, is a giddy mystery—but could they have got him far without being seen? In the middle of the day, in broad daylight! Well, it looks as if they couldn't have got him much distance without being spotted—and that's another reason for beginning the quest round about here."

"True, O King!" said Monty Lowther, "But you can bet that old Skeat's been through all that, and it's got him nowhere."

"If it gets us nowhere, we shan't be any the worse off, and we shall have done all we could," said Tom, "But we'll hope that it will get us somewhere, see?"

"O.K." said Lowther, "We—, "He broke off, as Jack Blake appeared in the study doorway, " Any news?"

Blake shook a dismal head.

"No! I've given up expecting any news of poor old Gussy," he said, "But we've talked it over in Study 6, and we're jolly well not going away while Gussy's missing."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Terrible Three, in unison. Evidently Tom Merry's idea of a Christmas quest had occurred to other fellows.

"We just can't," said Blake, "We're getting leave from our people to stay at the school over the Christmas hols.—till Gussy is found, at any rate. We're going to put in the hols. hunting for him. We've talked it over and settled it. So we shan't be able to drop in on you on Boxing Day as we'd fixed, Tom."

Tom Merry smiled.

"You will!" he said.

"I tell you we're staying at St. Jim's over the hols.," said Blake, a little testily, "and we're not caring much about hols. either, so long as old Gussy is out of sight goodness knows where. So we shan't be seeing you on Boxing Day, as I said."

"You will!" repeated Tom, "You see, we've just fixed it up to stay at the school over the hols., too, and put in the time hunting for Gussy."

"Oh!" said Blake. His face brightened, "Good man! That'll make six of us—quite a party. And by gum, what a jolly Christmas it will be, if we find old Gussy, what?"

"Jolliest Christmas ever, if we do," said Tom, "and we may, Gussy's a prisoner somewhere, and I believe that he can't be far away. We're all Scouts—and we're going to do the scouting of our lives."

There was no more packing in No. 10 in the Shell that day. Neither was there any in Study No. 6 in the Fourth. Six fellows, it was settled, were to remain behind at the old school, when the rest of St. Jim's scattered north and south, east and west, for Christmas. And hopeless as their task looked, they nevertheless had hope of success in their Christmas quest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A CHANCE?

"O Solitude, where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?"

Monty Lowther gave voice to that quotation, as the Terrible Three turned out into the old quad. on Christmas Eve.

They tramped through a carpet of snow.

The old elms glistened with frost. There was frost on the window-panes: snow on the cills, and the slanting old red roofs. St. Jim's, that winter morning, had the look rather of a Christmas card.

But the old school was strangely silent.

No tramping feet woke the echoes of the passages. No voices called from the studies. No snowballs whizzed in the quad. It was strange enough, and almost a little eerie, to fellows accustomed to the ceaseless hum of busy life in a crowded school. No gathering at the form-room door for the " beak " to let them in for class: no new notices on the board: no rows and rags between School House and New House—life seemed to have departed from the place. Schoolboys are gregarious animals: and the six fellows who were staying on at St. Jim's during the holidays were very far from seeing charms in the face of Solitude! But they did not regret that they had stayed on.

They had the school almost to themselves. The Head and his family were gone on a Christmas visit: Mr. Railton was gone: all the masters were gone. Most of the household staff were gone. Mrs. Mimms, the house-dame, remained, with two or three maids: and the kindly old dame was quite pleased to see a few youthful faces about. Taggles, the ancient porter, remained—but did not seem to share Mrs. Mimms' pleasure in the sight of youthful faces! Taggles gave the half-dozen juniors rather crusty looks when he came across them. In vacation time, Taggles considered, he had a right to be wholly and entirely clear of boys: he felt that he needed a rest from boys, to brace him for the next term when they would be back in droves. A cheery word to Taggles at his lodge generally elicited only a grunt in reply.

"Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
Than reign in this horrible place!"

Lowther went on with it.

Tom Merry gave his cheery laugh.

"That may apply to Robinson Crusoe's island, but not quite to St. Jim's," he said, "We're all right here, old bean."

"Right as rain!" said Manners. "I've taken a jolly good picture of the House—snow all over—I'm thinking of having it made up as a Christmas card."

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"Well, of course it isn't solitude for Manners, as he's got his camera," he remarked, "That's all he wants—it's his Man Friday! But Oh, gum! Isn't it awfully quiet! Like to drop into Talbot's study for a Soccer jaw, Tom?"

"Well, yes! But—"

"Or get Figgins in the neck with a snowball—?"

"Um! Yes! But—"

"Blessed if I wouldn't like even to hear Baggy Trimble squeaking," said Monty, "And that's the limit!"

"Never mind," said Tom, "If we find old Gussy—"

"If!" sighed Lowther.

"We're not going to give up hope, anyhow," said Tom, sturdily, "It's a dashed mystery how and where he went—but there must be some answer to it."

"Only we don't know the answer."

"We're going to find out."

"Hear, hear!" said Lowther, as enthusiastically as he could.

"I'm sure that Inspector Skeat believes that he's still somewhere in the vicinity," said Tom. "We've spotted him several times, rooting about."

"He's as flummoxed as we are," said Lowther.

"Well, I think even Sherlock Holmes of Ferrers Locke might be flummoxed by what's happened," said Tom, wrinkling his brow, "We keep on thinking it over, and talking it over, and it doesn't get us any forrarder."

"Something came into my head this morning," said Manners, quietly, "when I was thinking it over at brekker."

"Cough it up," said Tom.

"You remember, a long time ago, there was a ghost story in the House," said Manners, slowly, "Mysterious tapping on the walls, and all that. It came out that it was a young ass, Binks, playing silly tricks."

"I remember," said Tom, "What about that?"

"Well, you know how the young ass played those tricks," said Manners, "He had found out a secret passage in the House, and was able to tap on walls and

so on without being spotted."

"It was bricked up afterwards," said Tom, "I remember! What are you driving at, Manners?"

"This!" said Manners, quietly, "The New House here is hardly a couple of hundred years old: but the School House dates back to Plantagenet times. In those old days they used to build secret passages in thick walls as a matter of course. We know that that ass Binks found one of them—"

"Yes, but it was bricked up afterwards—I remember—"

"Mightn't there be others?" said Manners.

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Lots of the walls here are old oak, that's stood for centuries on end," said Manners, "Binks found a moving panel in one of them, and played ghost, the young idiot! Well, suppose there was another like it?"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, "I wonder—"

Tom Merry looked very thoughtful.

"I suppose it's possible," he said, slowly, "and if there is such a thing in the House, a fellow certainly could disappear that way without leaving a trace. But Gussy couldn't have known anything about it, Manners. He wouldn't have kept it dark if he knew."

"I know that, ass! Think I mean that D'Arcy walked into a secret passage and stayed there, like the baron's daughter in the old oak chest in the Mistletoe Bough!" grunted Manners, "We know—or at least we feel sure—that D'Arcy was collared by somebody—he must have been because that's the only imaginable way of accounting for his disappearance."

"That's so," agreed Tom.

"Well, if that somebody was wise to a secret passage, there you are!" said Manners, "and thinking about that silly trick played by Binks in a secret passage, it seems possible to me."

"Um!" said Tom.

"What does "um" mean in English?" inquired Manners, testily.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, we've got to believe that somebody collared Gussy," he said, "Who and how and why is a mystery: but we've just got to believe that much. But how could that Somebody know anything about a secret passage in the School House, old chap, even if there is one?"

"I suppose Christmas is a time for conundrums," said Manners, "But it's no use asking me that one."

"It's pretty steep, old chap."

"Isn't it pretty steep for a St. Jim's man to vanish out of the House as if he had melted into the air?" asked Manners, "That's what's happened. A secret passage, and somebody knowing about it, is no steeper than that."

"Well, yes, that's so!" agreed Tom.

"Oh, my only hat and umbrella!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, suddenly. He gave a jump, evidently startled by a new idea that had flashed into his mind, evoked by Harry Manners' suggestion, "Think a minute, you chaps—just think—" Lowther's eyes were gleaming with excitement, "Remember what happened a week or two ago—Cardew getting that black eye in the dark—"

"Bother Cardew and his silly black eye!"

"But who gave it to him?" exclaimed Lowther.

"Oh, we know all that—some fellow who was out of bounds, and run into him in the dark—"

"That fellow has never been found out," said Lowther, "and don't you remember that Gussy persisted that it wasn't a St. St. Jim's man who had done it, but some outsider, burglar or something—.

Tom stared at him.

"But there wasn't any burglar," he said. "Nothing happened that night, except Cardew's black eye. They'd have found out fast enough if anybody had got into the House from outside."

"What about Manners' secret passage?" said Lowther.

"Oh!" exclaimed Manners, "By gum! Was Gussy right after all—was there an outsider in the House that night—Why, look at it!" Manners' eyes blazed with excitement, "Cardew ran into him in the dark, and he knocked him out and ran. Cardew never saw him in the dark. But Gussy—if he ran into him in broad daylight—don't you see? By gum! It wouldn't

suit him to knock Gussy out as he did Cardew—after Gussy had seen him, and could give his description! Tom—Monty—I believe we've got something, between us!"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

"By gum!" he said, "It fits together. But who—?"

"Never mind who," said Manners, "We know there's Somebody. That somebody was in the House at night, ran into Cardew, knocked him out and cut. He was in the House again in the daylight, ran into Gussy—and got him away so that he couldn't tell! What price that?"

"Good heavens!" breathed Tom, "It looks like it! If there's such a thing as a secret passage in the House—"

"We know there's one, the one Binks used, that was bricked up afterwards. Why not another?"

"Why not!" said Monty Lowther.

"But—don't let's go ahead too fast," said Tom, "Gussy was in the Head's study—we know that. But where else he may have gone—"

"The Head's study!" repeated Manners. "And why not the Head's study? It's a bit of the oldest part of the House—it's got oak-panelled walls that have stood since King John's time—why not the Head's study?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom.

The chums of the Shell looked at one another. All three faces were excited. It was perhaps a wild idea—yet they had a feeling that they had got something. If it was unlikely, if it was even fantastic, it at least accounted for what had undoubtedly happened—the sudden disappearance of a St. Jim's junior in broad daylight in a crowded House.

"Come on," said Manners. He turned back towards the School House, "It may be all fluff—or there may be something in it. We're going to find out."

"I'm afraid the Head wouldn't like us rooting about his study while he's away," said Tom, dubiously.

"Very likely not! But we're going to chance that! He would be jolly glad if we got on D'Arcy's track."

"No doubt about that," said Monty Lowther. "Come on."

They almost ran into the House—and into Blake and Herries and Digby coming out. The Fourth-formers stared at the excited faces of Tom Merry and Co.

"Anything up?" asked Blake.

"We've got an idea," said Tom, "Sort of ghost of an idea how Gussy may have been got away."

"What's the big idea?" asked Blake, rather disparagingly.

"Manners thinks there might be a secret passage—"

"Bosh!" said Blake.

"In the Head's study—"

"Tosh!" said Herries.

"We're jolly well going to look—"

"Rot!" said Digby.

"Oh, come on, and never mind those Fourth-form kids!" exclaimed Manners, impatiently. "If there's anything in it, we want to know."

"If!" snorted Blake.

"If!" grunted Herries.

"If!" sniffed Dig.

Blake and Co. evidently, did not think it very probable! Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, cut away to the Head's study; and Blake, Herries and Dig., with rather derisive faces, went out into the quad.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SCOUTS ON THE TRAIL!

"That's queer!" remarked Jack Blake.

He came to a halt, on the footpath in Wayland Wood.

Blake and Co. had no special object in following the half-frozen footpath through the wood. They had simply gone out on a "scout."

The fate of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was hidden in impenetrable mystery. But they had to believe that he had, somehow, inexplicably, fallen into hostile hands, for there was no other imaginable cause for his disappearance. Who, how, and why, they could not begin to guess: but they felt that they knew that much, at least. And from that assumption, they argued that, if he was held a prisoner, it was most likely in some hidden spot not very far from the school: for how could a

prisoner have been taken any distance in broad daylight unseen? That he had been got out of the school somehow was certain, because he was no longer there: and it was difficult to understand how: but if the mysterious kidnapper had got over that difficulty, he had plenty of others to encounter outside St. Jim's, and it seemed a probable theory that he had hunted the earliest possible cover.

Whether that was so, or not, it was all that the missing schoolboy's friends had to go upon. If there was nothing in it they were wasting their time—but they were more than willing to waste their time in the faintest hope of helping their lost pal. It was for that, that they were staying at the school over the holidays: and every day they spent in scouting up and down and round about the vicinity, hoping against hope that something might come of it. Nothing had, so far: and hope was growing fainter: but anyhow it was better to be doing something than doing nothing. A tramp through the frosty wood, on a cold and frosty day, was as good an occupation as any other, when there was no clue to lead them in any special direction.

Following the footpath, they were reminded of the day they had walked back to St. Jim's after the Ramblers' match at Wayland, when they had taken shelter at the old monk's cell. They had been rather exasperated with Gussy that day—now, they wouldn't have minded how exasperating he was, if only he could have been with them once more.

It was the sight of a robin redbreast, just off the path, that caused Blake to come to a sudden halt. The bird, evidently hungry on a winter's day, was pecking at something that lay in the snow among the bushes, and that something was a small loaf. At any other time, Blake would hardly have heeded such a circumstance, but he was scouting now, with eyes keenly open for anything out of the common. And it struck him that this was a good deal out of the common, as he stared at the hungry bird pecking at the bread.

Herries and Dig. looked round, and came to a halt also.

"What—?" began Dig.

"Look at that robin," said Blake.

"What about it?" asked Herries, staring, "Lots of robins in the wood. We haven't come out to look at robins."

"Look at what it's pecking, old man."

"A bit of bread," said Herries, "Come on, for goodness sake. We shan't find old Gussy by staring at a robin feeding."

"And you call yourself a scout?" said Blake, "Scouts are supposed to keep their eyes open, Herries, and if they see a thing that isn't easy to account for, think it out till they account for it. See?"

"Oh, crumbs," said Herries, "Anything unusual in a robin rooting after grub in the winter?"

"I say, though," said Digby, "It's a bit unusual for a chunk of bread to be lying about in the wood, a mile from everywhere."

"Herries will see that, too, if he puts a wet towel round his head, and thinks it over a few hours," said Blake, sarcastically.

"Oh, draw it mild," said Herries, with a grunt, "Come to think of it, it's rather queer. People throw crumbs to the birds in the winter, but they don't walk a mile by a lonely footpath to do it."

"They don't!" said Blake, "and that isn't just crumbs, either—it's a whole loaf! Nobody threw a loaf to the robins, you can bank on that, especially after walking a mile to do it! Somebody dropped that loaf."

"Looks like it," admitted Herries, "But what about it?"

"Some kid in the Third ought to take you in hand, old man, and teach you the rudiments of scouting," said Blake, "Who dropped that loaf, and why? There isn't a building about here between Rylcombe and Wayland. Think Wayland people walk to Rylcombe to buy a loaf, or Rylcombe people walk to Wayland? That loaf has no business here."

"By gum!" said Dig.

The three juniors stood staring at the pecking robin. It was, in fact, a most singular occurrence. A chunk of bread and a hungry robin were ordinary enough, in themselves. But it was an intriguing mystery how that chunk of bread came to

be lying a few yards off the footpath in Wayland Wood. Somebody had passed that way and dropped it: but who could have been carrying a loaf along that long and lonely footpath, and why? As Blake had said, Rylcombe people did not buy loaves in Wayland, or Wayland people in Rylcombe. So why that loaf, in the middle of the wood?

"It's queer," agreed Herries, after some thought.

"It's jolly queer," said Blake.

"Not much good wasting time over it, though," said Herries, "We're out to look for old Gussy, aren't we, not for some shopper who dropped a loaf?"

Blake gave him a pitying look.

"Let's work it out," he said, "Whoever bought that loaf at a baker's, bought it either in Wayland or Rylcombe. No reason whatever for carrying it from one place to the other. Unless," added Blake, with emphasis, "it was somebody camping out."

Herries laughed.

"Camping out in this weather!" he said. But Dig. was a little quicker on the uptake, and he caught his breath.

"Blake, old man! Do you think—?"

"We don't know what to think yet," said Blake, "But we're looking for somebody who's got old Gussy hidden somewhere. We find that somebody has been taking food into a lonely wood. That's as far as we've got."

"Oh!" exclaimed Herries. He whistled, "But I say, suppose somebody gave a loaf to a tramp, and he happened to pass this way?"

"The tramp, wouldn't drop it without missing it, and wouldn't leave it lying—"

"Might have chucked it away. Tramps do, sometimes, when they're given plain food, when it's money they want."

"Oh, quite! But would he carry it a mile before he chucked it away! If he was going to chuck it away, it would go into the first ditch."

"That's so," said Dig., with a nod.

"All very well," said Herries, "You say that a tramp wouldn't drop it without missing it and picking it up. But somebody has, for there it is."

"Exactly!" said Blake, "And nobody carrying a single loaf could possibly drop it without missing it. Whoever was carrying that loaf, was carrying other things as well—most likely more than he could comfortably manage—that's the only way to account for him leaving it where it fell.'

"Phew!" breathed Dig.

Herries whistled again.

Blake looked rather pleased with himself. He prided himself on his scoutcraft: and it really looked as if he had some reason to do so. From seeing a hungry robin pecking at a lost loaf, he had worked it out that some person had gone into the wood carrying a considerable quantity of provender—and it was quite unimaginable that anyone was camping out in snow and frost on Christmas Eve without some very powerful reason.

Whether that was a clue to the lost schoolboy it was impossible to say. But it was a clue to something well worth looking into, in the circumstances.

"We're on this," said Blake.

"We jolly well are!" agreed Dig.

"I don't quite see how we're to get any forrarder," said Herries, "We don't know which way the man went, and this footpath is too trampled to pick up footprints."

"You don't know, old chap, so I'll tell you," said Blake, nonchalantly.

"Oh, do," said Herries, sarcastically.

Blake pointed to the loaf.

"Think the man stepped a couple of yards off the footpath, specially to drop that loaf?" he asked, "He dropped it there, because he was going that way—he left the footpath at this point, to go into the wood. And I've no doubt that it was pushing through the thickets that made drop something from a packed bag—stumbled, or something."

"By gum, you're working it out, old man," said Dig.

"Hum!" said Herries, "Well, if he went that way, we can jolly well pick up his tracks, and see. Nobody's been trampling there, and he must have left foot-prints in the snow—if—"

"No 'if' about it," said Blake, tersely, "Come on and see."

He led the way off the footpath. The robin flew away, and perched on a frosty

branch, watching them, evidently intending to return to the feast when they were gone.

In the thickets, it was not easy to make out "sign." But in a clearer space, a little further on, Blake pointed triumphantly to foot-prints in the snow, as clearly marked as any scout could have desired.

"How's that?" asked Blake.

"By gum!" said Herries.

"That track leads away from the foot-path, going right into the wood," said Blake, "The man, whoever he was, in ahead of us—in the wood."

"Blessed if I make it out," said Herries, "Nobody could camp in the open air in this weather. And there's no shelter in the wood—nothing but that old monk's cell where we stopped the other day—"

"And this track leads directly towards it," said Blake.

"Well, nobody could camp there," said Herries, "Might as well camp under a tree."

"Got any idea why the johnny walked into the wood with a cargo of grub?" demanded Blake.

"Goodness knows."

"Well, we're going to know, as well as goodness," said Blake, "We may be after a mare's nest, or we may be after the man that's got Gussy! We're going to follow this trail, and find out what it means. So come on and save your breath."

And Blake marched on, and Dig. followed, and Herries brought up the rear. And the hungry robin, when they had disappeared into the wood, flew down from the frosty branch, and resumed pecking at the lost loaf in the snow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE MAN IN THE WOOD!

"Know that chap?" exclaimed Blake, suddenly and breathlessly.

"Him!" said Dig.

"Him!" repeated Herries.

And they all stared.

They came on him quite suddenly, emerging from a tangle of frosty, snowy brambles, into an open glade. On the further side, a man stood, lighting a cigarette. At his feet lay a bag and a basket, both well packed. Evidently, he had been carrying both, and no doubt found them heavy after more than a mile. He had stopped for a rest, and a smoke, and cigarette-stumps and burnt matches on the snowy ground showed that he had stopped there for some time. Now he was lighting a fresh cigarette, shading the match with his hand from the winter wind, and so intent upon that occupation, that he did not see the three schoolboys emerging into the glade.

They had a clear view of the face that was bent over the cigarette and the flickering match. Its hard sharp outlines showed in the wintry sunlight. They all knew that face—the sharp nose, the thin lips, the hard keen eyes under heavy brows. They had seen it only once before, by the light of a flash-lamp: but it was not a face easily forgotten, and they knew it. It was the man they had so strangely and unexpectedly met in the old monk's cell nearly three weeks ago.

They had forgotten him—wholly. It was startling to be thus suddenly reminded of him. It was startling to find him there, so near the spot where they had first met him. And there was deep suspicion in their looks as they stared at him. What was he doing there?

On the previous occasion, he had said that he had sheltered in the old ruin, as they had done themselves. Now there was no need of shelter—there was plenty of snow on the ground, but none was falling. Who was he, and why was he hanging about Wayland Wood after the lapse of weeks?

Blake's keen eye fixed on the bag and the basket at his feet. The bag was closed, but it bulged, and he could guess that it was provender of some kind that made it bulge. The basket was covered by a cloth, whether to protect the contents or to conceal them. But the basket tilted a little on uneven earth, and the cloth had slipped aside, revealing something of what was within—and Blake detected a loaf. There was bread in the basket, and a good quantity of it—packed full, indeed over full, and that plainly was how the lost

loaf had dropped out in the thicket near the footpath.

"By jiminy!" breathed Blake, his eyes gleaming.

"He's seen us," murmured Dig.

The man blew a puff of smoke from the cigarette, dropping the match. At the same moment his eyes fell on the three schoolboys, staring at him across the glade.

He gave a start.

The hard sharp eyes under the thick brows snapped at them like a hawk's, They knew in that moment that he recognised them, as they recognised him. For that moment, the glint in his eyes was unpleasant.

But the next moment, he removed the cigarette from his mouth, between two fingers, and waved his hand at them, leaving a trail of blue smoke in the air.

Leaving his bag and basket where they lay, he walked across the glade towards the three juniors.

Blake and Co. half-consciously drew closer together. Their suspicions of the man were vague: but strong. And it came suddenly into their minds that, if he was a suspicious character, it was a very lonely spot, in the heart of a wood that was extremely solitary in the winter time.

But there was no sign of hostility in his manner. At the meeting in the old monk's cell, weeks ago, he had been angry, almost threatening. But there was no sign of that now.

"Hullo," he said, as he came up.

"Hullo!" replied Blake.

"Haven't I seen you before somewhere?"

"Right on the wicket," answered Blake, "You saw us, and we saw you, by your flash-lamp, in that old ruin, the day of the storm."

The hard-featured man nodded.

"I remember! There were four of you then—you had a friend with you—kid with an eyeglass, I think."

"That's so," said Blake.

"You told me you belonged to St. Jim's, I remember." The man looked at them curiously, "Your school breaks up before Christmas Eve, surely?"

"Oh, yes! We're staying on at the school for the hols."

"Rough luck!"

Evidently the man concluded that they were staying at the school during the holidays from no choice of their own. Blake did not choose to enlighten him: and Herries and Dig. were leaving the talking to their leader.

"Well, I'm rather glad you've taken a walk in this direction," the man went on, "I'm beginning to think that I've lost my way."

"Easy enough, in this wood, if you don't know it well," agreed Blake. "Fellows have got lost in it before now."

"I thought I'd take a short cut to Rylcombe Lane, instead of going on by the footpath," the man explained, "I've been in this wood only once before, but I fancied it would be all right. Look here, if I keep on, shall I hit Rylcombe Lane or not?"

"You'll have to bear a good bit to the right," said Herries, putting in a remark for the first time, "The way you're going will take you to that old ruin where we saw you the other day."

The man laughed.

"Well, I don't want to see that dismal hole a second time," he said, "Thanks for the tip. I was getting a bit doubtful, and thought I'd ask you. Glad you came this way. Thanks."

"Not at all," said Blake, politely.

The man nodded, and walked back to where he had left his burden. He picked up the bag and the basket in either hand, and, turning to the right from the direction he had hitherto been following, marked by his track in the snow, he disappeared among the frosty brambles and leafless trees.

Blake and Co. were left staring after him.

"He's gone!" said Dig.

Has he?" said Blake.

"Well, can't you see he has?" asked Herries, staring.

"Perhaps I can see more than you can, old man. Was he really heading for Rylcombe Lane, or has he changed his direction because we're here?"

"Oh!" said Herries.

"Right up to this point, he was heading for the old monk's cell, not like a man

who'd lost his way, but like a man who knew every inch of it," said Blake, "and if that's his destination, I fancy he may get there by a roundabout walk after getting out of our sight."

"Oh!" said Herries, again.

"Let's head for the cell, then," said Dig., with a grin, "If he comes butting in from a different direction, it will rather make him jump to see us there."

"Let's!" agreed Blake.

The three schoolboys tramped on.

Ten minutes later they arrived at the old monk's cell in the wood. Blake's eyes were keenly open for sign in the snow.

But no such sign was to be seen. A glance was sufficient to show that there was no indication of any kind of a "camp" in the old ruin. If the hard-faced man had any sort of a camp in the wintry wood, it certainly was not in the old monk's cell.

"He hasn't been here," remarked Herries.

Blake gave a grunt.

"How do you make that out?" he asked.

"No tracks in the snow," said Herries, "Look for yourself."

"I've looked. But it was snowing up to an hour ago. If he was here before that, his tracks would be covered."

"Um! Yes!" Herries admitted that, "All the same, what would he want here? You can see for yourself that there isn't a sign of camping—unless he sits in the snow in the open air, waiting for the next snowfall!" added Herries, with sarcasm.

Blake replied to that only with another grunt. He tramped in and round the old ruin, with watchful eyes: but there was no "sign" of any kind to pick up. If anyone had been there that day, it was before the snow had ceased to fall: and any sign he had left was under a white carpet.

"Nothing doing," said Dig., at last.

"It's pretty parky, standing about here," "Herries remarked casually.

"If you're getting chilly, old man, you'd better cut off for the school, and warm your feet at matron's fire," said Blake.

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Herries, "And don't get shirty."

"Who's getting shirty?"

"You are, because that johnny turned out to be some ass who'd lost his way, and nothing to do with Gussy," retorted Herries.

Blake breathed rather hard. As a matter of fact, he was feeling irritated and annoyed. He was suspicious of the man with the hard face and thin lips, but his suspicions were very nebulous. He had hoped that the trail might lead to something tangible: and it had led to nothing.

"There's one thing," he snapped, "It wants a lot of explaining why that johnny is carrying a stack of grub about."

"He hasn't carried it here, at any rate," said Herries.

"He may be heading here, all the same," said Blake, obstinately, "It doesn't look as if he's camped here, and I don't say that I can make out his game. But it's a queer business, and I tell you he was heading straight for this spot when he saw us—"

"Might have been heading straight for any spot, if he'd lost his way."

"Br-r-r-r-!"

"Well, what about it?" asked Dig., "Are we sticking here, or what? Not much good, so far as I can see."

"That's about as far as Herries can—say a quarter of an inch," retorted Blake: a remark that indicated that the leader of Study No. 6 was undoubtedly getting a little "shirty". Cut along with Herries, and tell Mrs. Mimms you want to warm your poor little feet at her fire, because it's cold on a nasty cold day. I'm going to stick here for a bit and see whether that johnny shows up or not."

Dig. winked at Herries, who grinned.

"We'll wait, old chap," said Dig.

"As long as you like," said Herries, "Mrs. Mimms won't like it if we're late for dinner—and we shan't, either. But stick it out as long as you like."

Grunt, from Blake.

He "stuck it out" for a quarter of an hour. During that period, there was no sign or sound of the hard-faced man or anyone else: and by the time it had elapsed, Blake was as tired of the frozen dismal spot as either of his comrades. And he realised that he did not want to be late for dinner: and it was a good walk back to the school

"Oh, let's cut," said Blake, at last.

And they cut—Herries and Dig. thinking

chiefly of dinner, and Blake wondering whether, after all, there was any ground for his vague suspicions of the man in the wood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

NOTHING DOING!

"Nothing doing!" said Tom Merry.

"Nothing!" said Monty Lowther.

Manners, silent, stared at the old oaken walls of the Head's study.

He was loth to give up the idea.

It had seemed like a chance, at least. The chums of the Shell had been excited by the bare possibility. But a long hour of patient searching had discovered exactly nothing.

Dr. Holmes, probably, would have been pleased, had he beheld the activities of the three eager juniors, at work in his study that winter morning—though no doubt he would have approved of their motive.

In term time, no fellow entered that august apartment unless sent for: and few were pleased to receive such a summons. When they came, they came with circumspection, often in fear and trembling. But Monty Lowther remarked that while the cat was away, the mice could play—and they did!

They explored that study as freely as if it had been a junior study in the Fourth or the Shell. They tapped the oaken walls, listening for a hollow sound that might indicate that some spot was not so solid as it looked. It was a large and lofty apartment, and there was a great deal of space to cover. Patiently, they covered it all. Hardly an inch of the dark old glistening oak was left unexamined.

But no hollow sound rewarded them. No groping or pressing or pushing could make one of the ancient oak panels yield a fraction of an inch. It was tiring work, but they kept on for a good hour: and then, at last, they ceased the futile search, and looked at one another despondently.

If there was a secret, they could not find it. But was there? Those old oaken walls seemed as solid and immovable as the grey old stones of which the School House was built. Was it, after all, a fantastic idea, with nothing in it—nothing but their delusive hope of somehow discovering a clue to the missing schoolboy?

Perhaps their hopes had not really been very high. But it was a disappointment all the same. Manner's ingenious theory would have accounted for all that had happened—had there been anything in it. But it seemed that there was nothing.

"May as well chuck it," said Monty Lowther, "if there's anything of the kind here, we can't spot it. But—is there?" He shook his head.

"It was worth trying on," said Tom, "Anything's worth trying on, when we're utterly in the dark. But—" He too shook his head.

Manners frowned. He was more disappointed than his chums, for he had banked on his theory more than they had.

"We'll try again, some time," he said, "If there's an opening panel here, it's well hidden, or it would have been found out before this. Well, if it's well hidden, we can't expect to produce it like a rabbit out of a hat. Rome wasn't built in a day!"

"If finding that panel is going to take as long as the building of Rome—!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Oh, rats!" said Manners, crossly.

"Might be something of the kind somewhere, if not here," said Tom Merry, "But—let's get out for a bit. Blake's gang have gone scouting—"

"Fat lot of use that will be," said Manners, "Much more likely to spot something inside the House than outside, after what's happened."

Tom Merry and Lowther exchanged a smile. They were tired of a vain search that led nowhere, but they would willingly have carried on, had it seemed to be of any use. Manners was evidently very unwilling to abandon what had seemed to him a hopeful idea. He stood frowning at the old oak walls. But his comrades had had enough of the Head's study for one morning, at least.

"We'll have another shot another time, Manners," said Tom.

"Um!" said Manners.

"Fine frosty morning for a trot in the open air," said Lowther.

"We could have had all the trots in the

open air we wanted, if we'd gone home for the hols.," said Manners, "We're not here to amuse ourselves. We've stayed on here to look for D'Arcy."

"Oh, yes! But—"

"The more I think of it," said Manners, positively, "the more I believe D'Arcy was right in thinking that it was some outsider who blacked Cardew's eye that night. And if it was, he had some way of getting into the House."

"Um! Yes! But why, after all, should he, even if he knew how?" said Lowther, "If an outsider got in that night, why did he?"

"There's only one answer to that, plain enough for even you to see," retorted Manners, "People who mooch into buildings in the middle of the night are looking for something to pinch."

"But nothing was pinched, old chap," said Tom Merry, mildly, "Nothing whatever happened that night except Cardew of the Fourth picking up a black eye."

"Well, the man bolted, when he found that somebody was up," answered Manners, "He knocked Cardew out and bolted —but if Cardew hadn't been up, and hadn't run into him, he would have carried on, see?"

"But Cardew ran into him on the dormitory landing," said Lowther, "Think a burglar would come up to the dormitories?"

Manners did not reply immediately. But he rallied, as it were. His own idea was becoming a fixed belief in his mind, perhaps because his chums were beginning to regard it as moonshine.

"Not an ordinary burglar," he admitted, "A cracksman would go for the Head's safe, in his room. More likely a sneak-thief. That kind of rat would find plenty of loose cash in fellow's pockets if he was free to root through a dormitory, at night while the fellows were asleep."

Lowther winked at Tom Merry.

"I remember I had a threepenny-bit that day," he remarked, gravely, "I never dreamed that it had had such a narrow escape!"

"Funny ass, aren't you?" said Manners, gruffly, "A sneak-thief would find lots in a senior dormitory if he went through the pockets there. If you can't help being funny, Monty Lowther—"

"Well, what about a run in the open air?" asked Tom Merry, rather hastily, "The snow stopped long ago, and it's quite sunny—"

Grunt, from Manners.

"If you're fed up, you can cut," he said, "I'm going on here. Cut off and leave me to it, and be blowed to you both."

"It doesn't seem much use—!"

"Not to you," said Manners, "It does to me. Hook it, for goodness sake—I shall get on better without you fellows bluebottling about."

Lowther bestowed another wink, unseen by Manners, on Tom Merry.

"What I was thinking—!" he began.

"Don't say you were thinking!" implored Manners, "I'd take your word, as a pal, about anything else. But don't pile it on."

"I was thinking—"

"Gammon!"

"I was thinking," persisted Lowther, imperturbably, "that as the sun's come out just like a spring day, we might get some snaps to make up into Christmas cards—"

"Eh!"

Manners sat up and took notice, as it were. The mention of " snaps " interested him at once. His expression became quite cordial.

"Good egg!" exclaimed Tom Merry, taking his cue from Lowther, "If you wouldn't mind bringing your camera, Manners, old man—"

"Oh," said Manners, genially.

"We'll have another go here another time," remarked Lowther, "But while this bright sunshine lasts—"

"Well, we've had a jolly good search," said Manners, thoughtfully. "We've been all over the place, if you come to that. There isn't an inch that we haven't given the once-over. May as well get out for a bit, and have another go another time when the weather keeps us in, what?"

Manners led the way out of the Head's study.

Tom Merry and Lowther followed him, with grinning faces. They did not want to keep on a task that was plainly hopeless: neither did they want to go out and leave

their obstinate chum still rooting wearily after a secret that could not be found, and probably did not exist at all. The magic word "camera" had done the trick.

They went for coats and caps, and Tom and Monty waited at the door, while Manners ran up to No. 10 Study for his camera. Outside, in the quad., the sun was shining brightly on a carpet of snow. In the distance, Taggles could be seen at the door of his lodge, his crusty face a little less crusty than was its wont. That bright frosty morning certainly seemed more attractive out of doors than indoors.

Manners joined his chums, his camera slung in its case over his arm, his face very cheerful. The three walked out of the House together. They gave Taggles a cheery hail as they passed the porter's lodge.

"Top of the morning, Taggles!"

"Mornin'!" grunted Taggles.

"Christmas to-morrow, Taggles," said Lowther.

"I was aweer of that, Master Lowther," answered Taggles, "It's marked in my calendar, arter Christmas Eve," Taggles was sarcastic!

"Lost another shilling, Taggles?" asked Lowther.

Taggles did not answer that question. He bestowed a concentrated glare on Monty Lowther: and Tom Merry and Co. laughing, went out at the gate, leaving the ancient porter still glaring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A FIGHT FOR A FILM!

"Good spot!" remarked Manners.

"Eh!"

"What?"

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther answered rather absently. Sad to relate, they had actually forgotten Manners' camera!

The three juniors were tramping along Rylcombe Lane where it bordered Wayland Wood. Little paths ran up from the lane into the wood, but they were mostly choked with snow after the late fall, and did not tempt the juniors into the trees. Besides, Blake and Co. were rambling in Wayland Wood that morning, and if scouting in the wood was of any use, they were doing it.

Tom was thinking of the quest which had kept them at the school over the Christmas holidays. The sacrifice of the holidays was nothing, if only it led to something—if it rooted out the faintest clue to the missing schoolboy who had so suddenly, strangely, and mysteriously vanished from the knowledge of his friends. But it was borne in upon Tom's mind that that hope was faint—and indeed, how could schoolboys hope to succeed, when it was plain that Inspector Skeat, an experienced police-officer, was hopelessly at a loss? Tom's face was a little clouded, in the bright sunshine, as he thought it over—and Lowther, whose thoughts were much the same, looked rather more serious than usual. So it was not surprising that they had forgotten that Manners had his camera with him, and had in fact been tempted out of doors only by the prospect of handling it.

"Just the place!" said Manners. He unslung his camera-case, and disinterred the camera from within.

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Oh!" said Monty.

Manners, evidently, was not thinking of the Christmas quest. He was as keen as any other fellow on the search for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy: but at the moment he was thinking of suitable spots for snaps, to be made up into Christmas cards for despatch to friends and relatives. Certainly the snow-covered countryside presented many suitable spots for Christmas pictures. Harry Manners had his eyes wide open as they walked along the lane by the edge of the wood, and now he came to a stop.

His comrades, thus reminded of the camera, stopped also, Lowther winking at Tom Merry and Tom smiling. Manners was much too serious about photography, to notice either the wink or the smile.

"Just the place," he remarked, "The edge of the wood there—that mass of trees like a wall of frosty branches—that little path running into the wood, with snow drifted against the trees—and nobody about to butt in and spoil the picture. What do you fellows think?"

"Fine!" said Tom.

"Topping!" said Lowther.

They spoke as enthusiastically as they could. It was up to any fellow to be tolerant of a pal's hobby. Manners focussed his camera on the spot he had selected, which certainly had a very Christmassy aspect, and was likely to come out well on a Christmas card. A man appeared in sight on the little path in the wood, just as he snapped.

"Bother!" said Manners.

Lowther and Tom Merry glanced at the man. He had a hard, sharp face, and sharp eyes under heavy brows. He was a stranger to them: though, if they had known it, not quite a stranger to Study No. 6. He was carrying a basket and a bag in either hand, and looked a little tired and cross. Manners, too, looked cross. He had remarked that there was nobody about to butt in and spoil the picture: and then, at the very moment of snapping, that stranger had suddenly appeared from the wood, and had undoubtedly come into the picture.

"Film wasted!" grunted Manners.

"Did you get that chap?" asked Tom.

"How could I help getting him, fathead, when he barged in just as I snapped," yapped Manners, "His ugly mug will come out right in the middle of the picture. Fat lot of use for a Christmas card with that phiz in it."

"He's looking at us," remarked Lowther.

"Let him," growled Manners, "I've got a whole roll of films in the camera, and I'll take another shot when he's gone. Perhaps he'll walk on when he's tired of staring at us like a cow at a train," added Manners, with impatient sarcasm.

But the man in the wood did not walk on. Probably he had intended to cross the lane, into the woodland on the other side. If so, he changed his intention, coming to a halt, and staring down at the St. Jim's juniors from the edge of the wood, where there was a rather high bank from the road, sloping down.

His first glance at them was merely casual. But it fixed, in quite a concentrated way, on Manners and his camera. No doubt he discovered that the schoolboy photographer had just taken a shot, at the very spot where he was standing: but the juniors would hardly have supposed that he could or would concern himself about that circumstance. Something, however, was evidently disturbing him, for his brows darkened, and a glint came into his eyes: and after a moment or two, he dropped his burden at the foot of a tree, and came scrambling down the bank towards them.

Manners gave him no heed. He was winding up No. 1 film on his camera, to bring the next unused film into place for another shot, when the man was gone. But Tom Merry and Monty Lowther watched the man rather curiously. That he was angry, they could see at a glance, and there was something very like hostility in his look and his manner: though why, they could not begin to guess. No reasonable man could take offence at having come accidentally into a snapshot.

"Here, who are you?" The man snapped gruffly as he came up, "What are you doing with that camera?"

Manners stared at him.

"What does a fellow usually do with a camera?" he retorted, "Taking photographs, if you don't know what a camera's for."

"Have you taken mine?" The man's sharp eyes glinted at him, "I saw you were snapping, as I caught sight of you. Do I come into that picture?"

"Don't you expect to, if you walk in front of a camera just when it clicks?" answered Manners, "You've spoiled a film for me, and I haven't too many."

"You've photographed me?"

"Why not?" snapped Manners. He liked neither the man's look nor his tone, and was not disposed to waste too much civility on him.

"You've no right to do anything of the sort," snapped the hard-faced man, "and I don't choose to be photographed by a silly schoolboy."

"It can't be helped now," said Tom Merry, pacifically, "You see, you walked into the focus just as the camera clicked—"

"The photograph can be thrown away."

"Thrown away!" repeated Manners.

"Yes, and at once."

"Look here—!" began Monty Lowther, testily.

"You needn't speak! I'm talking to this lad with the camera. Open that camera and take the film out, do you hear?"

Manners wondered whether he had heard aright. He stared at the man in blank astonishment.

"Don't you know the first thing about photography?" he asked, "If I open the camera, it will spoil the whole roll of film. I've got seven unused in this camera, and they're not too jolly easy to get."

"That's your look-out! Open it at once."

"I can see myself doing it!" said Manners, disdainfully.

"Be reasonable," urged Tom Merry, "You walked into the picture, and it couldn't be helped if you were snapped. What can it possibly matter anyway?"

The man took no notice of him whatever. His eyes were on Manners, and his scowl growing darker and more threatening.

"Will you hand me that film at once?" he asked, between his teeth.

"No!" answered Manners, promptly, "I won't."

"You will—or I shall take away your camera and stamp on it!" said the man, deliberately, "You can take your choice."

"You—you—you'll stamp on my camera!" ejaculated Manners, almost dizzily, "Why, you pie-faced smudge, I'd like to see you stamp on my camera! You lay a finger on my camera—!"

He was interrupted. The man came at him with a spring, grasping at the camera. Manners instinctively put it behind him. But it would have been snatched, and undoubtedly stamped upon, had not Tom Merry and Monty Lowther rushed, or rather leaped, to the rescue. As the hard-featured man grasped Manners, they grasped him, and swung him away from their chum by main force.

So powerful was that swing, that, as they let go, the man went staggering back, and fell on the roadside bank, among frozen reeds. He sprawled there on his back, gasping for breath, his face in a blaze of rage.

Manners promptly jammed his camera into its case, and shut it, slinging it over his shoulder. Then he pushed back his cuffs, clenching his fists. Manners was prepared to do battle in defence of his camera, had he been alone in dealing with a man who was obviously twice a match for him. Luckily he was not alone, or it might have gone hard with him.

It was only for a moment or two that the man sprawled in the frozen reeds on the banks. Then he was on his feet again, and coming at the St. Jim's juniors with lashing fists.

What was the matter with him, what was the cause of his anger and excitement, why he was so fiercely determined that his photograph should not be taken, was an utter mystery to the St. Jim's juniors. But they had no time to think about that. He was going to get hold of Manners' camera, if he could, and destroy the film in it: and he was not stopping short of savage violence. Probably he supposed that three schoolboys would scatter before his fierce attack and that it would not be difficult to effect his purpose. But if that was his belief, he was soon undeceived.

He was a muscular fellow, and could have handled one of them with ease, no doubt. But he could not handle the three of them. As he leaped at them, the three lined up, with their hands up, prompt for the fray. Tom Merry caught a heavy blow on his chin, Lowther a jolt on his cheek: but they were hitting out, and hitting hard, and Manners was hitting out, too, with a vim that he seldom displayed. Three pairs of fists, all hitting hard, sent the hard-faced man spinning back again, and once more he crashed into the reeds on the bank.

"By gum!" gasped Lowther. He rubbed his cheek, "Is the man mad?"

"Stamp on my camera, will he?" breathed Manners, with the light of battle in his eyes, "My camera, you know! Let him try it on!"

"We can handle him," said Tom.

"What-ho!" said Lowther. "Want any more?" he added, as the sprawling man came panting to his feet.

The hard-faced man panted and panted. Once, twice, thrice, he made a move to come on: and three pairs of fists were ready, three pairs of eyes gleaming at him. But he seemed to realise that he could not handle three sturdy schoolboys if they had the determination to stand up

to him—as very clearly they had.

With a black and bitter scowl, he turned away at last, rather to the relief of Tom Merry and Lowther who had no desire to push on a scrap with a stranger. Only Manners seemed rather keen for more: the threat to his beloved camera having roused his deepest ire.

"Had enough, you cheeky rotter?" bawled Manners, "Plenty more, if you like to come and ask for it."

Manners really seemed to want the man to come on again, for a little more punishment. But he did not accept the invitation. He scrambled up the bank, picked up his basket and bag, and disappeared into the wood.

"Well!" said Tom Merry, rubbing his chin.

"Well!" said Monty Lowther, rubbing his cheek.

"Man must be mad!" said Manners, "Fancy thinking I'd take a roll of unused films out of my camera in broad daylight! And stamp on it, by Jove! I'd like to see anybody stamp on my camera! Look here, we ought to have given him a few more."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Nuff's as good as a feast," he said.

"Well, he asked for it," growled Manners, "Look here, if that man isn't batchy, he's got some jolly good reason for not wanting his photograph taken—shouldn't wonder if it matched one in the Rogues' Gallery at Scotland-Yard! What?"

"He's a queer fish, that's certain," said Tom, "Thank goodness he's cleared."

"I'd like to have given him a few more."

"Take a snap instead, old man—he won't butt into the picture again," said Tom, laughing.

And Manners unbent his brows, and became a photographer again. The strange man from the wood was dismissed from mind, and the chums of the Shell resumed their tramp—with exactly seven halts, for Manners to use up the roll of film in his camera, eight pictures in all.

That morning's tramp did not seem to have got them any "forrarder" in the matter of the search for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy: but Manners, at least, was satisfied that he had secured a jolly good set of pictures, which he was anxious to develop in the dark-room in the School-House: so one member of the party, at least, did not feel that it had been a wasted morning, when they tramped back to St. Jim's for dinner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

IS IT A CLUE?

"You fellows been scrapping?"

Jack Blake asked that question, staring alternately at Tom Merry's chin and Monty Lowther's cheek. Both of them bore very distinct marks of the brief but hectic combat in Rylcombe Lane.

Tom and Monty were in the doorway of the house-dame's room, where the juniors had their meals during their stay in the deserted school, when the Fourth-formers came in. Manners had gone up to the study to unload his camera.

"What have you two been punching one another's silly heads for?" asked Dig.

"We haven't, ass," said Tom.

"You look like it!" said Herries.

"Nobody else here to scrap with, is there?" asked Blake, "You haven't been scrapping with old Taggles, or Mrs. Mimms, I suppose?"

"Fathead! We got into a shindy with a man out of gates," said Lowther. "We gave him more than he gave us, so that's all right."

"You were going to root about the Beak's study, when we went out," said Blake, "Didn't you have any luck there?"

"Not a lot."

"I rather fancied you wouldn't," said Blake, and Herries and Dig. chuckled, "Remember I told you it was bosh?"

"I remember you talked some rot," assented Tom, "How much luck have you had, rooting about in Wayland Woods?"

"You don't seem to have walked Gussy in with you," Monty Lowther remarked sarcastically.

"Well, I think we've got on to something," declared Blake, "You remember we told you about that queer fish at the old monk's cell in the wood, when we were hung up by the weather. Well, we've seen him again."

"Anything special about him?" yawned Lowther.

"Blake thinks so," said Dig., "But—"

"But—" said Herries.

"No need for you fellows to butt, like a pair of billy-goats," said Blake, "I think the man's suspicious. Look here, Tom—Gussy's parked somewhere, and somebody's keeping him parked—we know that, don't we?"

"I think so," said Tom, "At least, we can't think of anything else."

"Well, he would have to be fed, wouldn't he."

"I imagine so."

"Well, then, that man in the wood was loaded with grub," said Blake, "He had a bag and a basket—"

"A bag and a basket!" repeated Tom, with a start: and Lowther started too. They remembered the bag and the basket carried by the strange man who had so strenuously objected to having his photograph taken.

"Yes, packed so full that he dropped a loaf and left it behind," said Blake, "I believe he was making for the old monk's cell, goodness knows why, but his track went that way: might have been going to hide the stuff there to be fetched later, perhaps—I don't know. Anyhow, when he saw us, he made out that he had lost his way, and struck off towards Rylcombe Lane—but I'm pretty certain that that was only to throw dust in our eyes. My belief is that he was only giving us a wide berth."

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tom, "Sure he had a bag and a basket?"

"Of course, ass."

"Was he in a dark overcoat?" asked Tom, "Sharp features, eyes rather like a rat's, thin lips—?"

"You've seen him!" exclaimed Blake.

"I rather think we have," said Tom, "That's the man, I fancy, that we had the shindy with. He came out of the wood into Rylcombe Lane, and he had a bag and a basket—"

"What on earth did you scrap with him for?" asked Digby. "He was civil enough when he spoke to us,"

"He walked into the picture when Manners was snapping," explained Tom, "He was quite wild at having his photograph taken, and wanted to destroy the film. You can guess how Manners answered that one!"

"A lion and his cubs simply aren't in it, with Manners and his films," grinned Monty Lowther, "The good man lost his temper, and wanted to smash the camera—and there was a little liveliness."

"Why should he care if he came into the picture?" asked Herries, staring, "It wouldn't hurt him, would it?"

"Not that I know of! But he did care, an awful lot, to judge by the way he cut up rusty," said Tom, "He would have collared Manners' camera and stamped on it, if we hadn't been able to handle him."

"Must be off his nut," said Dig.

"By gum," said Blake, "I'll bet it was the same man. He was giving us a wide berth, and ran into you fellows—that's how it was."

"Looks like it," said Dig.

"There can't be two johnnies rambling about Wayland Wood with a bag and a basket on Christmas Eve!" said Tom. "Must be the same man."

"And he didn't want his photo taken, didn't he?" said Blake, "Why shouldn't he, unless he had something to be afraid of?"

"That's what Manners thought—"

"Well, Manners had it right," said Blake, positively, "If it's the same man, it's jolly suspicious. And it must be! We can tell by the photo, if it's come out clear. Where's Manners?"

"Here he comes!"

Manners joined the juniors at the door of the house-dame's room. He had a sealed roll of films in his hand.

"Dinner's not ready yet, I hope?" he said.

"Do you?" said Herries, staring, "I'm jolly well ready for dinner, for one. You get a jolly good appetite in this frosty weather, I can tell you."

"Just on, Manners," said Tom Merry, "Mrs. Mimms will be calling us any minute. Don't you want your dinner?"

"Eh? Oh! Yes. But I want to develop this film first," explained Manners. "This bright sunshine won't last all day, and I want to get the picture printed out before

it goes, so there's no time to waste. I'm going to develop now."

Tom Merry laughed. All the juniors were hungry after a morning in the keen wintry air. Manners, no doubt, was as hungry as the rest. But photography came first. That unusually bright spell of sunshine was a chance for printing-out his pictures, and Manners was not going to let his chances like the sunbeams pass him by.

"Think the one with the man in it will come out all right?" asked Jack Blake.

Manners stared at him.

"No!" he answered.

"Oh, rotten!" exclaimed Blake, "We specially want to see that one, to find out if it's the same man we met in the wood this morning. Look here, why don't you think it will come out all right?"

"Because I know," answered Manners, calmly.

"What?"

"I don't think it will come out all right! I know it will, "Manners further elucidated, "My snaps always come out all right."

Blake gave him an expressive look. Manners had answered "No" to his question, because he did not "think" the picture would come out all right—he knew it would! That was Manners all over.

"You silly ass—!" began Blake.

"Well, if it does, Manners—" said Tom.

"No 'if' about it—it will," interrupted Manners, "If Blake knows the man by sight, he will see him in the picture when I've printed it. If I'm late for dinner, Tom, tell Mrs. Mimms I'm sorry and shan't be very long."

"But—" said Tom.

Manners did not wait for him to continue or to conclude. He walked away, heading for the dark-room. Manners had the run of the dark-room, and was oftener in it than any other fellow at St. Jim's.

Tom laughed again. When Manners had his teeth in his hobby, he was beyond argument. He disappeared, with his roll of films: and a few minutes later Mrs. Mimms called the juniors in to dinner.

Tom Merry explained to the house-dame, as requested, that Manners was sorry and wouldn't be very long. But in point of fact, five fellows had nearly finished dinner when Harry Manners came in.

"You are very late," said Mrs. Mimms mildly.

"So sorry, Auntie," said Manners, "I had to see to something that simply couldn't be put off." He beamed on his friends, "The whole roll developed a treat," he went on, "I've printed it out—the light's just perfect in the quad., but it won't last much longer like that. Can't expect it in December."

"Have you fixed it, or whatever it is you do to the blessed thing?" asked Tom.

"Of course I have, ass," answered Manners, "I've got the pictures here if you'd like to see them. The one of the windmill is the best—simply perfect that one! But they're all good. Here you are."

Manners produced an envelope containing eight photographs, and sat down to dinner. Blake shook the photographs out on the table, eagerly scanning them one by one for the one with the "man" in it, completely regardless of the one with the windmill in it, in spite of Manners' recommendation! He fairly grabbed the one with the hard-faced man in it, and held it up in the light of the window. Tom Merry and Lowther, Herries and Dig., all looked at it together.

One look at the face in the photograph was enough for Blake and Co. It had come out with perfect clearness: every sharp feature, the thin hard lips, the sharp almost rat-like eyes, the heavy brows. It was the face of the man in the wood. They had felt sure it would be, and it was!

"That's the man!" said Blake.

"That's the fellow!" said Dig., "I'd know him anywhere. We saw him only by a flash-lamp the first time, but this morning we had a jolly good view of him—and that's the man."

Herries nodded.

Tom Merry and Co. left the house-dame's room, leaving Manners still at his delayed dinner. They were all feeling a little excited now. Manners glanced round at them as they went.

"What do you think of the one of the windmill?" he asked.

"Blow the one of the windmill!" an-

swered Blake.

"Bother the one of the windmill," said Tom.

"Bless the one of the windmill," said Monty Lowther.

"Eh! What? I tell you it's the best of the lot—!" exclaimed Manners.

"Fathead!"

And five juniors trooped out: leaving Manners to realise—slowly—that they weren't interested in photography as photography, but only in the snap-shot of the man who had carried a basket and a bag in Wayland Wood. Manners snorted, and went on with his dinner, while Tom Merry and Co. foregathered in the day-room.

"We've got something!" declared Blake.

"I believe we have," said Tom. He summed it up. "That man, whoever he is, is hanging about this neighbourhood. He goes shopping for grub early in the morning, and takes it to a lonely wood. He gets violent when his photograph is taken by sheer accident. He's up to something—we don't know what, but something! It mayn't have anything to do with D'Arcy's disappearance—but it may!"

"It jolly well may!" said Blake.

"We stayed here over the Christmas hols. to hunt for Gussy," went on Tom, "We haven't found the ghost of a clue—till this! It may or may not be a clue—but it's all we've got, and we're following it up. We're going to know more about that man and his game—and as he's plainly hanging on in this vicinity, and we're all pretty good scouts, we can do it."

"What-ho!" said Blake, emphatically.

It was a glimpse of hope. The clue, if it indeed was a clue, was vague, and uncertain: but it was something to work upon, at least: and it made all the juniors feel more hopeful of the outcome of their Christmas quest.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AN ALARM IN THE NIGHT?

Tom Merry sat up in bed.

What had awakened him, he hardly knew.

It seemed to him that a sudden and heavy sound had come through the silence of the winter night: a heavy thud, from the direction of the dormitory window.

He rubbed his eyes, and stared at the window, glistening in the glimmer of wintry stars. It was a square of dim light at the end of the long dark dormitory.

Manners and Lowther, in the beds on either side of him, were fast asleep. The sound, if there had been a sound, had not awakened them.

Tom had been dreaming, a confused dream of secret passages, of an unknown kidnapper, in which was mingled the hard, sardonic face of the man in the photograph. That troubled dream had doubtless helped to awaken him: and as he sat up, he wondered whether the heavy thud he had heard was a part of his dream.

But the next moment he knew that it was not. For, across the glimmering window on which his eyes were fixed, a dark shadow moved.

He gave a start, his heart beating.

The shadow disappeared the next moment. But he had seen it—something had moved there—something outside the window.

The dormitory window was high from the ground. No one could have reached it from outside without a long ladder. It seemed impossible that anyone could be there. Yet something had undoubtedly moved and darkened for a moment the glimmering glass.

The window was open an inch at the top. So it was possible, if not easy, for anyone on a ladder to push up the lower sash.

For a long minute, Tom sat staring at the window. Nothing was to be seen but the glimmer of the glass, but it seemed to him that his ears picked up a faint brushing sound in the silence. Snow was not falling now, but the window-sill was thick with it from the last fall. It sounded like something or somebody brushing the snow on the sill.

Tom stepped quietly from his bed.

Amazing as it was, he could have little doubt that some intruder was at the dormitory window.

He did not awaken his chums. He was going to make sure first. He moved

quietly along the dormitory to the window, mounted on a chair, and looked out.

Then he caught his breath.

He had not been mistaken. Showing over the edge of the wide snow-covered window-sill, was the end of a ladder.

He knew now what had been the thud he had heard. Someone below, had reared up that long ladder, and it had thudded heavily against the sill. And the shadow that had darkened the pane for a moment had been made by the top of the ladder, as the unknown intruder below shifted it into position.

Now it was firmly planted against the sill, from which it had dislodged a quantity of snow. That was the brushing sound he had heard.

Blankly, Tom stared at the ladder-top. He knew that it must be Taggles' long ladder, which the porter kept at his wood-shed, a distance from the House. Whoever was below, knew about that ladder, and where to lay hands on it. And he must have observed that the window of the Shell dormitory was left open at the top at night. Whoever he was, knew his way about St. Jim's. Back into Tom's mind came the recollection of the unseen, unknown man of mystery who had knocked out Cardew in the dark. Had that mysterious unknown, after all, come from outside, and was this how he had come?

That whoever had reared the ladder to the window, intended to mount it, and enter the dormitory, was clear. Tom's face set grimly. Whoever he was, he would not enter stealthily and silently as he doubtless intended—he would find a warm reception awaiting him.

Tom crept back to the beds where his chums were still sleeping. He shook Monty Lowther by the shoulder.

"Urrrggh!" came a sleepy mumble from Monty, "What—"He opened his eyes and blinked at Tom.

"Quiet, old chap!"

"What's up?"

"A burglar, I think! Somebody at the window, anyhow—"

Lowther sat up, with a jump.

"Dreaming?" he asked, "How the thump could anybody get up to that window?"

"He's got Taggles' ladder."

"Look here, Tom—"

"I tell you it's so—turn out."

"Oh, all right."

Monty Lowther turned out of bed, and groped for his clothes. Tom awakened Manners in his turn.

"What the dickens—?" began Manners.

"Quiet! There's somebody at the window—"

"What rot!"

"Look!" said Tom.

Manners looked—and jumped. There was a suppressed exclamation from Lowther. While Tom was awakening his chums, the intruder below, evidently, had mounted the ladder. Black against the glimmering panes, a dark figure was visible there—head and shoulders above the level of the sill.

"Oh, holy smoke!" breathed Manners.

"Turn out, and get something on," whispered Tom, "It will take him some time to get the sash up—we'll be ready for him!"

"O.K." breathed Manners.

The three juniors hurried on their clothes in the dark. Tom Merry was quite cool, and Manners perfectly steady: and there was even a faint grin on the face of Monty Lowther.

"What a giddy surprise for him, when he barges in!" murmured Monty, "He doesn't know that three fellows are awake here, ready to give him a reception! Get under the window, what, and grab him when he makes a happy landing."

"That's the idea," whispered Tom.

Half-dressed, and quiet as ghosts, the three Shell fellows crept to the window, ducking below its level. There was a sound at the window above them of the lower sash being pushed up from outside. It was slow and far from easy work, but it went on stealthily and steadily, and the juniors below the window-level felt a gust of the keen December air as the sash rose.

They waited in grim silence.

Three pairs of hands were ready to grasp the intruder as he stepped in: and they were certainly strong enough to hold him. He would not have a ghost of a chance once he was in their grip. Obviously he had no suspicion whatever of what

awaited him within.

Slowly, but steadily, the sash was pushed up. Then, at length, a head came in from without, cocked a little to one side as if listening intently. Three juniors, in the darkness under the window, made no sound. And the intruder, evidently satisfied by the silence, climbed in.

Head and shoulders came first, and the intruder drew himself upon the broad window-ledge inside. From that ledge, he lowered himself by his hands, till his feet touched the floor of the dormitory.

And at that precise moment, Tom Merry, and Lowther, closed in on him together. One startled gasp was heard, as they seized him—Tom getting one arm, Manners the other, and Lowther throwing his arm round the coat-collared neck. Before the intruder could have known what was happening, he was dragged over, and pinned to the floor.

"Oh!" came a gasp.

"Got him!" said Tom, grimly, "Hold him."

"You bet!"

The dark overcoated figure struggled, panting. But he had no chance. His arms were held as if in a pair of vices, and Lowther's arm round his neck half-choked him. Never had a midnight intruder been so thoroughly and completely captured. He ceased to struggle and spluttered for breath.

"Oooooogh! Urrrrgh!"

"Don't quite choke him, Monty," said Tom, "Keep quiet, my man—we've got you. Let him breathe though."

Lowther loosened up a little. Then the captured intruder found his voice.

They waited in grim silence. Three pairs of hands were ready to grasp the intruder as he stepped in and they were certainly strong enough to hold him.

"Mind lettin' me go?" he asked, "Thanks for the reception, but you're over-doin' it!"

Three pairs of hands fell away from the mysterious intruder, as if he had suddenly become red-hot! Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther peered at him—they almost goggled at him. For the voice that spoke was a voice they knew—the voice of Ralph Reckness Cardew, of the Fourth Form!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ONLY CARDEW!

Cardew sat up.

He was panting for breath. But he was, as usual, quite cool and self-possessed. There was a faint smile on his face, and a glimmer of amusement in one eye—the other was still almost as black as when the Shell fellows had seen it last.

Tom Merry, almost dazedly, switched on the dormitory light. Cardew's voice, coming from the midnight intruder grasped in the dark, almost made him wonder whether he was still dreaming. How could it be Cardew?

But it was Cardew! He picked himself up, as the three Shell fellows stared at him in blank astonishment. He gave them a nod.

"Merry Christmas!" he said, lightly.

"Wha-a-t—?"

"It's past twelve," drawled Cardew, "It was midnight when my train got in at Wayland, and there wasn't a lift to be had for love or money—I had to walk it."

"You mad ass!" said Tom Merry. He was angry, as well as astonished. "What do you mean by playing this mad trick?"

"What trick?" drawled Cardew.

"Getting in at a window in the middle of the night—"

"No choice in the matter. Do you know it's past two o'clock?" asked Cardew, "I couldn't make Taggles hear at his lodge, and had to climb in over the wall. I daresay I could have woke up Mrs. Mimms by banging at the door, but who'd want to alarm a dear old soul by knocking her up in the middle of the night?"

"You think of others such a lot, don't you?" said Lowther, sarcastically.

"Sometimes, if not often."

"And why couldn't you come by an earlier train, if you came at all?" snapped Tom Merry.

"I did! But the early train developed into a late one on account of the jolly old weather. Line blocked," yawned Cardew, "Aren't you pleased to see me! Better late than never, you know."

"No," said Tom, curtly.

"Thanks!"

Cardew, probably, had not expected a welcome. Certainly the looks he received were unwelcoming enough. Evidently, however, he cared nothing for that. He seemed amused by the angry irritation of the Shell fellows.

"Did I frighten you?" he drawled.

"No," said Tom, "You didn't! But I've a jolly good mind to punch your cheeky head for playing such a mad trick on us."

"Haven't I said there was no choice in the matter? I simply couldn't startle Auntie Mimms at two in the morning! I remembered Taggles' ladder, and that I'd noticed that this window was left open at the top at night. How was I to know that you'd wake up and get scared—?"

"That's enough," said Tom.

"Tired of my bright and entertainin' conversation already?" asked Cardew, "Do I bore you as much as you bore me? That's sayin' a lot."

Tom Merry compressed his lips. Lowther and Manners gave the scapegrace of the Fourth grim looks—without affecting his cool nonchalance in the least. Cardew, in these strange and unexpected circumstances, was as cool and airy as ever.

"You like playing potty tricks," said Tom, "You can never be satisfied to act like any ordinary fellow."

"Easily explained—I'm not any ordinary fellow," smiled Cardew, "Do you know, Thomas, you almost make me feel that you're not glad to see me."

"What are you here for?" demanded Tom, gruffly, "You can't have fancied that any fellow here wanted to see you."

"No—I'm not so fanciful as all that!" admitted Cardew.

"Well, what do you want?"

"A bed, chiefly."

"Don't be a fool!" said Tom, savagely, "Why have you come here, where you're not wanted?" You were the cause of all that's happened—do you think we're likely to forget that?"

"That's why."

"Will you tell us what you mean?" snapped Lowther.

"You needn't pile too much blame on me," said Cardew, more seriously, "How could I foresee that D'Arcy was going to disappear, when he was sent to the Head's study? Did you expect me too?"

"Don't talk rot! But it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been sent up to the Head, and you did that—and you know it."

"Yes, I know it," said Cardew, quietly, "and that's why I've come back in the hols., to help find him."

"Nobody's asked your help," grunted Manners.

"I'm a benevolent chap—I give it unasked."

"Well, nobody wants it, then."

"D'Arcy may, if you don't," said Cardew, "I've thought it over, and decided to take a hand. I'd have stayed on here with you, if you'd wanted me to. You didn't—"

"No," said Tom, "and we don't."

"You'll have to make the best of it—I'm staying," said Cardew, coolly, "I think I may help to find D'Arcy—"

"Better than we can?" asked Lowther.

"Probably!"

"You cheeky ass—!"

"Same to you, old bean. Anyhow, I've come here to do what I can, and nobody's goin' to stop me. D'Arcy's more or less of a relation of mine, and it was partly my fault he landed in the soup. That's why."

"Not to keep that black eye out of view of the nobby nobs at Reckness Towers?" asked Monty Lowther, sarcastically.

Cardew coloured a little.

"No!" he said, "It's been pretty rotten for me, but that's not the reason. Believe it or not."

"Well, I'll put it plain," said Tom Merry, abruptly, "Nobody wants you here, Cardew, D'Arcy's pals in the Fourth even less than we do. I suppose we can't prevent you from sticking on if you choose: but the less we see of you, the better we shall like it."

"Exactly how I feel about you, old top."

Tom breathed hard. He had never liked the scapegrace of the Fourth Form, or had a high opinion of him. Now he felt that he disliked him intensely.

"I'm going back to bed," he said, "This isn't your dorm.—the sooner you get out of it the better."

"Pleased!" yawned Cardew. "Like to cut down that ladder and get the bag I've left at the foot of it?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"I rather thought not," said Cardew, blandly. "But I can open a door downstairs and get it. There won't be a bed made in my dorm.—I wonder whether Blake or Herries or Digby would jump at sharing one with me?"

"I wouldn't bank on it," said Monty Lowther, drily.

"I won't, smiled Cardew, "I daresay I can camp on the sofa in my study. I'll be gettin' along—it's late hours, even for me! Fancy old Taggles' face in the mornin' when he finds his ladder stickin' up at your window." He laughed, and lounged away to the door, "Good-night, and happy dreams!"

They watched him, with frowning faces, till the door closed on him. Then they looked at one another, expressively.

"I suppose we've got to stand him here," said Tom.

"Looks like it," said Lowther.

"After all, if he really wants to help—!" said Manners, slowly.

"Does he?" snapped Tom, "More likely he wants to keep that black eye quiet!—and to make himself obnoxious. That's in his line. Well, let's get back to bed."

Tom closed the window, and switched off the light. The chums of the Shell went back to bed: very far from pleased by that unexpected addition to the party in the School House.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

"Merry Christmas!"

Nobody answered Cardew.

Christmas morning was bright and clear. The old quad. was carpeted with snow: every roof and ridge and chimney and sill gleamed with it. But there was a glimmer of blue in the sky, and the sun was shining. Six fellows, who had come out into the fresh keen air after breakfast, were not looking so bright as the morning. And they looked no brighter when Ralph Reckness Cardew came out of the House and gave them that cheery greeting.

Christmas was not likely to be "merry" for the friends of the missing Arthur Augustus. They certainly did not feel like making merry. They were going to spend the day in scouting, in the hope of getting on the track of the man of Wayland Wood: following up the only clue they had, if it was a clue. Cardew was late to breakfast, and they did not see him till now, when he came lounging out of the House, his hands in his pockets, and his usual half-mocking smile on his face.

Six fellows gave him grim looks.

Tom Merry and Co. did not want to keep up hard feelings on such a day. But Cardew put their backs up. They were deeply concerned about Arthur Augustus: and Cardew did not look as if he were capable of being deeply concerned about anything. They blamed him for what had happened to D'Arcy, of which he had been at least partly the cause. His presence was unwelcome to them at the deserted school, and he knew it, and they knew that it only amused him. He had said that he wanted to help: but if there was any sincerity of real feeling hidden under his careless nonchalance, it was hidden too well for them to discern it. What they were feeling, and thinking, was quite clear in their faces, but obviously their grim looks did not affect Cardew in the very least.

He gave them all a cheery nod.

"Toppin' weather for the time of year, what?" he remarked, "What's the programme for to-day?"

Blake gave a grunt.

"That needn't worry you," he said.

"It doesn't!" said Cardew, "Only askin'."

"Look here, let's get out," said Herries, with a glare at Cardew, "If we're going to have a chance of getting after that man, no good losing time."

"You're getting after a man?" asked Cardew, with interest.

"Find out!" retorted Herries.

"What I like about you chaps in Study 6," said Cardew, thoughtfully, "is your polished manners. You seem to have benefitted a lot by associatin' with my relation Gussy."

Jack Blake looked at him, his eyes glinting. There had been a glint in Blake's eyes ever since the Shell fellows had told him that Cardew was there.

"I don't want to punch a chap's face on Christmas Day," said Blake, "But you're asking for it, Cardew. You'd better keep your distance."

"Sendin' me to Coventry, what?" drawled Cardew, "After I've torn myself away from the throng of the happy and the gay, to come down to this dead-and-alive hole, with nobody about but a gang of grubby schoolboys! I mentioned to Thomas last night that I've come to help."

"Fat lot you care!" snapped Dig.

Cardew gave him a curious look.

"But I do," he said, "You mightn't expect it of me, but I do."

"You look it!" jeered Herries. "You were a rotter to D'Arcy, as you know jolly well. Look here, you men, let's get out.

"Hold on! I've got somethin' to say."

"Nobody here wants to hear it!" growled Herries.

"I seem to be rather unpopular!" sighed Cardew, "How jolly lucky that I don't care a bean! But let's get down to brass-tacks. You fellows are here to search for D'Arcy. So am I! I fancy I've got a clue, of sorts—"

"You have!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Rot!" grunted Herries.

"It may be rot," assented Cardew, "But such as it is, I've got it. If you fellows have hit on anything, put me wise—I'll do the same. Can't we loathe one another and

help one another at the same time—when it's only D'Arcy that really matters?"

"That is so," said Tom, "I can't see how you can help: but if you could, of course we should be glad. But—" He paused, "Well, we've got a bit of a clue—at least, we hope we have. I don't see how you can have anything of the kind, as you've not been here—"

"Lots of things you don't see, old scout! What about cards on the table?" suggested Cardew, amicably.

Tom Merry hesitated. It was not easy to take Cardew seriously, even on a serious subject. His light and airy manner could only irritate fellows who were concerned about an absent comrade.

Blake and Herries and Dig. looked uncompromisingly hostile: Lowther shrugged his shoulders, and Tom hesitated. It was Manners who answered Cardew.

"We've got on to something," he said, "But—"

"Anythin' to do with a secret way in and out of the school?" drawled Cardew.

Manners jumped.

"How on earth did you guess that?" he exclaimed.

"Not a guess, old bean! But is that the big idea, Tom Merry?"

"That's just Manners' idea," answered Tom, "There may be something in it. But we've got on to something else—a suspicious character hanging about the neighbourhood, and we're going to find out something more about him, if we can."

"Nobody I know of, I suppose?"

"Well, you've heard of him," answered Tom, "It's the man D'Arcy and his friends fell in with at the old monk's cell in Wayland Wood, the day they were caught in the snowstorm. You heard all about that."

"The day I answered to their names at roll in hall," smiled Cardew, "I remember it being talked about. Has that sportsman turned up again?"

"We came across him yesterday."

"And we're going out to scout for him, and the sooner we start, the better," grunted Herries, impatiently.

"What's suspicious about the man?" asked Cardew, disregarding George Herries.

"Blake spotted him in the wood, carrying a lot of grub in a bag and a basket. Blake thought he was heading for the old monk's cell, to park the stuff there, or something—but if he was, he chucked it, when he saw these chaps, and cleared off for Rylcombe Lane. They waited at the monk's cell for some time, but he never came there—not while they were there anyhow. He ran into us in Rylcombe Lane, and we had rather a row."

"I fancied, from your chin, that you'd had a row," murmured Cardew, "I'm interested in that man! Was he a man with sharp features and eyes as sharp as a hawk's, and thin lips?"

The juniors stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Yes!" gasped Tom, "How on earth do you know, when you've never seen him?"

"I don't know—I'm just askin'," smiled Cardew.

"You've described the man all right. But you've never seen him—"

"No," said Cardew, "I've never seen him. But I had that description of a man I'd like to meet, from somebody who knew him, see? By gad, I'd like to see him."

"You can see him if you like," said Manners.

"Eh! How? You haven't got him in your waistcoat pocket, have you?"

"I've got his photograph."

"His photograph!" Cardew stared, "He can't be the man I think, then, or he wouldn't let anybody take his photograph, by a long shot—"

"He didn't let us—he walked into a snap I was taking, without knowing it till it was taken. That's what we had a row about—he wanted to destroy the films." Manners' eyes glinted at the recollection.

"Oh, gad!" said Cardew. He was excited now, "Bet you he wanted to destroy that film, when he found he'd been snapped, if he's the man I think. I wonder he didn't grab your camera and smash it to bits."

"He tried to," said Tom, "But didn't get away with it."

"Let's see that photograph, Manners," exclaimed Cardew, eagerly.

Manners took the cardboard envelope containing the snaps from his pocket. He picked out the one that pictured the man in Wayland Wood, and handed it to Cardew.

Cardew's eyes almost devoured it.

"By gad!" he said.

"You don't know the man," grunted Blake.

"No! He was long before my time, and yours. We'll ask Taggles."

"Taggles!" repeated Blake, "Gone crackers? What could Taggles know about him?"

"Lots, I think."

"Look here, haven't we wasted enough time?" demanded Herries, "Are we going on a scout, or are we going to stick here listening to that ass chin-wagging?"

Cardew did not heed him. With the photograph in his hand, he started off towards the gates. Taggles, in the doorway of his lodge, looking out into the wintry sunshine, stared at him, as he came up. This was his first intimation that Cardew of the Fourth had joined the Christmas party at the deserted school.

Tom Merry and Co. stared after Cardew as he went, and then followed him. What was in his mind, they could not begin to guess. But it was clear that Cardew had, or fancied he had, "got on" to something; though why the photograph was to be shown to the school porter was an utter mystery to them.

"Merry Christmas, Taggles," said Cardew. He was his airy self again now.

Grunt, from Taggles.

"I didn't know you was 'ere, Master Cardew. 'Ow many more, I wonder!" The sight of an addition to the schoolboy party did not seem to gratify Taggles unduly!

"I've got something to show you, Taggles."

"'Ave you?" said Taggles.

"It's a photograph of an old acquaintance of yours."

Another grunt from Taggles.

"Aren't you pleased?" asked Cardew, "You haven't seen him for donkeys' years, Taggles, and I daresay he's changed a bit—but you'll know him all right. Look!"

Cardew held up the snap.

Tom Merry and Co. looked on, in silence, perplexed and impateint. Taggles' gave the photograph a glance. Then he gave a jump. His ancient eyes, under his gnarled brows, fixed on the pictured face, and they fairly popped. Quite plainly Taggles knew that face.

"My eye!" said Taggles, "That's 'im! Twice as old, and more, but that's 'im all right! Look 'ere, Master Cardew, 'ow did you get 'old of his photograph! From what the radio said, the police is after 'im. 'Ow did you get 'old of a photograph of Derek Denzil?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

WHAT CARDEW KNEW!

"Derek Denzil!"

Tom Merry and Co. echoed the name in utter astonishment.

A couple of weeks ago, the name of Derek Denzil had been on every tongue at St. Jim's. The announcement on the radio, and what Trimble had overheard under the Head's window, had been a thrilling topic. But what had happened since had quite obliterated Derek Denzil as a matter of interest. The juniors had forgotten his existence—at any rate they had not given him a thought. They were utterly amazed to be reminded of him in this strange and unexpected way.

Taggles eyed Cardew curiously and suspiciously'

"'Ow did you get it?" he repeated, "That's a noo photograph! It's jest like 'im—he ain't changed much except he's older. He ain't no nearer than Liverpool, last that was 'eard of 'im. I don't see 'ow you got it. If you know anything about that man, Master Cardew, you're bound to tell them at the police-station."

"Thanks for the tip, Taggles," drawled Cardew, and he turned away, Taggles eyeing him as he went.

Cardew stopped, out of hearing of the old porter. Six astonished and excited juniors surrounded him. He handed the photograph back to Manners, who fairly blinked at it in his astonishment. Manners had wondered who the man might be, and suspected that he must have some

strong reason for seeking to destroy the photograph: but certainly he had never dreamed that he had snapped the outcast of St. Jim's—the man who had been expelled long years ago. He could hardly believe it now.

"By gum!" said Manners, "No wonder he wanted to get at that film, if he's dodging the police! But who'd have thought—!"

"I suppose Taggles knows—!" said Lowther, dubiously.

"No doubt about that," said Tom Merry, "It's the photograph of Denzil. Denzil's the man we're after."

"Well, it beats me," said Blake, "You remember what that prying worm Trimble spread all over the school—Denzil was in Liverpool then—"

"Was he?" asked Cardew.

"You know he was," snapped Blake, "You heard Baggy Trimble's blather, like everybody else, and Railton as good as said the same. Denzil wrote to the Head from Liverpool, where he was trying to get out of the country with a fake passport—"

Cardew smiled.

"And the Head passed the letter on to the police, as in duty bound," he said, "It never occurred to his innocent old mind that that was exactly what that jolly Old Boy wanted him to do."

"What!" exclaimed Tom.

"Oh, think a minute," said Cardew, derisively, "It occurred to me at the time, but it was no business of mine—then! Denzil knew that that letter would go to the police, and that's why he wrote it, and got some pal in Liverpool to post it for the post-mark. It suited him to have the police rooting after him in Liverpool while he was hiding in Sussex."

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

"By gum," said Monty Lowther, "You remember what I said, Tom, when we heard it on the radio—the man might look for a hide-out in the quarter he knew well as a boy—and that's what he's done."

Tom Merry nodded, slowly.

"Cardew knows all about it," said Herries, sarcastically, "More than the Head, or Railton, or anybody else. Any more, Cardew?"

"Oh, lots," said Cardew, "Glad you're interested! It was jolly good luck getting that snap, Manners—it's made certain what I only suspected before."

"And what was that?" asked Tom, quietly.

"If you're interested—!" drawled Cardew.

"Oh, get on with it, will you!" growled Blake, impatiently.

"Pleased! You see, my Uncle Lilburn was at St. Jim's at the time Denzil was here," explained Cardew, "I was rather interested in the man who had been sacked, as a bad hat rather in my own line—"

"Cut it short," said Dig.

"I asked nunky about him," continued Cardew, "and he remembered him well. He saw him several times in later years—once as recently as last year. From his jolly old reminiscences, Denzil was no end of a goer—breaking out at night, backing wicked geegees, and finally comin' an awful mucker. But there was one thing nunky said that set me thinkin', and turned it into a personal matter."

"Well?"

"It was a known thing, among Denzil's pals in the St. Jim's Sixth at that time, that he had found out a secret way of gettin' in and out of the school," said Cardew, "That was how he was able to carry on so long without getting nailed, though it happened at last."

"Oh!" said Manners, deeply interested now.

"He never let out what or where it was," went on Cardew, "But my uncle Lilburn, and other fellows who knew him well, knew that it was so. Well, at the finish, Denzil pinched the Head's key and helped himself to some banknotes—and it was more than suspected, then, that he was the chap who had gone through pockets in a senior dormitory one night and raised quite a tidy sum in loose cash. He seems to have been, altogether, a black sheep of the deepest dye—and the Head hoofed him out at the finish. Guess what came into my head while I was listenin' to Lord Lilburn's jolly old reminiscences?"

"Well, what?" asked Tom.

Cardew passed a hand over his blackened eye.

"Who gave me this?" he asked.

"Nobody knows, or cares," said Herries.

"I care—and I think I know—now!" said Cardew, "It wasn't a St. Jim's man, as I believed at the time. D'Arcy thought it wasn't—and you all thought him an ass—so did I! Well, we're the asses! The man who ran into me in the dark on the dormitory landin' that night was headin' for a senior dormitory to go through pockets while fellows were asleep—as he'd done before."

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

"The man who knew a secret way into the school," said Cardew, "When D'Arcy disappeared from the Head's study, I wondered—just wondered if there could be anything of that kind—as Manners seems to have wondered since. I came to your study to talk about it, only you turned me down—quite emphatically, I seem to remember—"

"I never knew—"

"Oh, it was only a vague idea then—hardly worth goin' into," drawled Cardew, "You'd have laughed, most likely. But after I heard from nunky about an expelled fellow who knew a secret way in and out of the school, I sort of tumbled, see! Although not the brightest fellow in Lathom's form—nothin' like you men in Study 6!—I can put two and two together."

"But—!" said Blake, slowly.

"Look at it!" said Cardew. "Denzil knows secrets about this old show—and he's hiding from the police, nowhere near Liverpool at any rate. He's in want of money to see him through on the run. He remembers how he raised the wind once in the Head's study and in a dormitory. Some unknown person knocks a fellow out in the dark near the dormitories. A chap disappears mysteriously, last seen in the Head's study. It all boils down to one thing—if we can find out whether Denzil has picked the vicinity of his old school for his hideout. I came back here with that idea in my mind—and lo and behold! the first thing I hear is that Denzil is around, and you chaps have run into him—even snapped him, without knowing who he was! If all that isn't plain enough for you to understand, I'll try to say it over again in words of one syllable, suitable to your feeble intellects."

Blake gave him a grim look.

"I think you've got it right," he said, "But I feel jolly well like punching your head, all the same."

Cardew laughed lightly.

"I suppose you can't help being the kind of chap you are, Cardew," said Tom Merry, quietly, "You seem to like putting fellows' backs up. I'm glad you came here, after what you've told us, though."

"Not on account of my own irresistible charm?" asked Cardew, plaintively.

"Oh, chuck it! You make me tired," snapped Tom, "This is a serious matter, whether you know it or not."

"Serious enough, when I've got an eye like this!" said Cardew, "I assure you I'm quite serious about putting paid to the sportsman who gave me this eye." He passed his hand over his discoloured eye again, "And Gussy, of course," he added, "I'm really worried about Gussy! Think of the state his clobber will be in by this time! Must be breakin' his heart."

Nobody made any reply to that.

"Come on, you fellows," said Tom, abruptly, "We know what we've got to do—take that photograph to Inspector Skeat at Wayland. They'll find Denzil, and it looks as if they'll find D'Arcy with him when he's rooted out. Let's get going."

Six fellows walked out of gates. Cardew strolled after them.

"You're walkin' to Wayland?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tom, curtly.

"Takin' the footpath?"

"Yes, it's the shortest cut."

"Like me to amble along?"

"You can please yourself about that."

"Thanks—I was goin' to," drawled Cardew.

He sauntered after the party, with his hands in his overcoat pocket. Not a word was addressed to him as the juniors walked down the lane, and turned into the footpath through Wayland Wood. He did not seem to mind. But half-way along the footpath to the Wayland road, he halted.

"Do you know," he remarked, "I suspect that you fellows are tired of my company. I more than suspect that I'm

tired of yours. I'm not comin' any further."

"Good," said Herries.

That was the only reply he received. Tom Merry and Co. tramped on, and disappeared up the snowy footpath, leaving Cardew alone in the wood.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE SECRET OF THE MONK'S CELL!

"Eureka!" breathed Cardew.

He stood in the old monk's cell in Wayland Wood, in the midst of the shattered ruins, shapeless under thick snow. His sound eye was gleaming.

Tom Merry and Co. tramping on to Wayland, had no idea that Cardew had any special object in letting them go on without him. So far as they gave him a thought at all, they supposed that he was fed up with the company of fellows who made no secret of the fact that he was unwelcome.

But Cardew had his own reasons. Immediately they were out of sight, he turned from the footpath, and threaded his way through the wintry wood in the direction of the remote old ruin.

Careless as his manner was, his eyes were very alert when he reached it, and he scanned it keenly before emerging from the trees and thickets. Satisfied that it was as lonely as it looked, he moved on at last, and entered the frozen ruin.

It was carpeted with snow: and Cardew, as he moved to and fro, scanned the snowy carpet with a watchful eye. Tom Merry and Co. had they seen him, would have known that he was scouting for "sign"—though with what object, would have puzzled them.

If he was looking for foot-prints, he found them in plenty, a day old. There had been no fall of snow since Blake and Co. had visited the old monk's cell the previous day, and the track of their boots almost leaped to the eye. They had moved about a good deal, it seemed, for their foot-marks were all over the place.

Cardew scanned them carefully.

And it was then that he ejaculated:

"Eureka!"

It was easy to distinguish the tracks of the three juniors. Blake's and Dig's were much of a size: Herries' a little larger. But among them, Cardew's keen and watchful eye picked up another track that was larger still. And he knew that a man had trodden there, after the juniors had left.

He whistled softly.

"Eureka—I have found it!—as jolly old Archimedes remarked," he murmured, "Or—have I?"

He scanned the snow.

"Those three chaps were here yesterday—they've left their hoof-marks all over the shop. But a man came later—that's a bigger tread, and it's over some of the smaller ones, in places. Ralph, old boy, you can scout!"

He moved slowly, scanning the confused tracks.

"Thomas is a better scout than I am," he sighed, "I'd be glad of his company—if he were a little gladder of mine! But let's work it out! Accordin' to the tradition, there's a secret passage somewhere under this old ruin. Nobody's ever found it—hardly anybody believes in it—nobody cares a boiled bean whether it's there or not—and only an ass like D'Arcy would think of wastin' time looking for it. No reason to suppose that anythin' of the kind exists—till now. Is there a reason now?"

He nodded in answer to his own question.

"Yes, there's a reason now—now that we know that that jolly Old Boy of St. Jim's knew a secret way out of the school. He must have emerged somewhere—why not here? Might have found it while explorin' on a half-holiday—much more likely than at the other end. He's been seen here—they found him here the day of the snowstorm, poppin' up suddenly like a jack-in-the-box, from nowhere in particular. How did he do the jack-in-the-box act? Why was he here at all? They said he was shirty at findin' them here—why, except for a jolly good reason? And yesterday Blake trailed him this way, with his cargo of foodstuffs, only he sheered off when he saw them. Does that make this a likely spot?"

He nodded again, in answer to himself.

"They hung on here for a time, but he never came. But somebody with a man-sized hoof came after they left. Not a lot of people wanderin' about in a frozen wood on Christmas Eve! It was that sportsman."

Cardew smiled.

He had worked it out to his own satisfaction.

"Now, supposin' that this is the way in, that accounts for lots of things. As safe a hide-out as any rogue on the run could ask for. The only drawback—he would have to sneak out at times for food—all the more if he has company for Christmas, as I rather think he has."

He laughed.

"That rat is hiding in the secret passage, somewhere round the school, that he knew when he was Denzil of the Sixth. That's a cert. Is this the way in? If it isn't, what's his interest in the place? Not archæological, I fancy!" He chuckled, "He haunts this spot because it's the way in! Couldn't be anythin' else."

He moved about slowly, his eyes watchful as a hawk's.

The "sign" he was picking up would not have been noticed by any casual eye. But Cardew's eye was not casual. He was looking for what he had expected to find and he believed that he had found it.

"Plain as pie!" murmured Cardew, "He was makin' for his home-from-home when they spotted him—he gave them a wide berth, and ran into those Shell chaps—he came back later, and I fancy he's stayed home ever since, with so many schoolboys nosing around—the good man's at home now, I'll bet! But I'm goin' to know!"

Cardew had not a patient nature. But he seemed as patient as a Red Indian on the trail, now, as he scanned the trampled snow in the roofless old ruin for "sign' that would corroborate his theory.

He stopped, at last, where a great mass of ancient ivy clustered over a remnant of the old stone wall of the cell.

If he had read the sign in the snow aright, the unknown man had trodden there. He was sure that he had read it aright.

The heavy mass of old clinging ivy was sprinkled with snow. But he noted that snow was not so thick on the ivy as on other spots. A great deal had rolled off, and scattered. Did that mean that the ivy had been stirred since the snow had piled on it? Cardew believed that it did.

He dragged aside a mass of the old ivy. It came away from the old stone wall almost like a hanging screen. Some of the tendrils, that had once clung to the stones, were broken, as Cardew's keen eye noted at once. And he knew, or at all events he was certain, that he was on the right track.

There was a deep narrow recess in the old wall behind the ivy. Had he been merely exploring the old ruin for amusement, as St. Jim's juniors sometimes did on a half-holiday in term time, he would have glanced into the recess in the wall and let the ivy fall back into place. There was nothing whatever in the grimy old recess to draw attention.

But Cardew knew—unless his reading of "sign" had deceived him—that the man who had trodden there had lifted away the hanging ivy, as he had done. It could only have been to reach that grimy, shadowy old recess in the stone wall. That, unless Cardew was on a false scent, was where the secret lay.

He stepped into the recess, and the great mass of ivy fell into place behind him, plunging him into shadow. He took a flash-lamp from his overcoat pocket, and flashed on the light.

The recess extended about six feet into the massive old wall. It was less than two feet wide. Its floor was a flat stone flag, like the floor of the old cell. He flashed the light about him, as he stepped forward, wondering where and what the secret was, and whether he would find it. Then, as he reached the very end of the narrow recess, he knew: for the stone flag under his feet, which looked as solid as the solid earth, sank under him.

He gave a startled ejaculation.

"Oh, gad!"

He tottered. The end of the flag-stone, on which he stood, was sinking—the outer end was rising. In a flash he understood. There was a pivot through the centre of the stone, on which it rocked like a see-

saw.

It was the secret entrance. The end of the long flag-stone on which he stood tipped under his weight, and shot him off into space below. Had he known what to expect, had he been prepared, he could have jumped clear—as it was, he fell, and sprawled panting on a steep stone stair, with a shock that made him breathless, in the darkness below.

As he sprawled, the flash-lamp still alight in his hand, the stone over his head, relieved of his weight, resumed its place. For a long minute he lay there, dizzy from his fall.

He picked himself up at last.

He was breathless, and had collected a good many aches and pains, from that sudden fall. But for that he could not have cared less. He had found the secret!

He flashed the light above. The stone was in place again—he was shut in. But he discerned an iron ring clamped to the under side—he could have dragged on it, and clambered out.

But he did not think of doing so. He had discovered the secret he had suspected, or rather known, to be there. He was going to discover to what it led. He was standing now on a narrow stone stair that led down into black darkness. Holding the light before him, he descended, and found himself, after nine or ten steps, in a vaulted stone passage. Where it led he could guess—he knew that he had found the legendary secret passage that led from the monk's cell in Wayland Wood to St. Jim's, built in the ancient days when a monastery had stood where the school stood now. He moved along the subterranean passage, in black darkness save where his flash-lamp gleamed.

Suddenly he halted, and switched off the flash-lamp. Ahead of him, in the blackness, was a gleam of light.

His heart beat a little faster.

He knew that he was near the hide-out of the man "on the run," who must have found out this hidden secret in the days when he was a schoolboy at St. Jim's, and remembered it when he was in need of a hiding-place. A man who was, perhaps, desperate. But there was no fear in Cardew's heart. He was quite cool, as he stepped along silently, guided by that gleam of light far in the distance ahead. As he advanced, it was nearer and clearer, and he saw that it came from a doorway in the side of the subterranean passage. Was that the den of the hidden fugitive—was that where he camped—where he held a prisoner, if indeed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had fallen into his hands?

Cardew was not left long in doubt on that point. For, as he drew silently nearer, the murmur of voices came to his ears: and suddenly, clearly, a voice he knew, in tones of indignant wrath:

"You uttah wascal!"

Cardew grinned in the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

UNEXPECTED!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed wrath.

"You uttah wascal!" he repeated.

Arthur Augustus was not looking, or feeling, his accustomed self. In the light of the lamp that hung from an iron hook in the vaulted roof overhead, the swell of St. Jim's looked weary and worn, rumpled and untidy, indeed slovenly and almost dilapidated.

It was a small vault built in the side of the subterranean passage. In ancient days it had evidently been a hidden refuge in times of danger. The rusty chain that suspended the hanging lamp was probably as old as the vault itself.

There were rugged old oaken benches and a trestle-table, relics of old forgotten days. Other things were of more recent date: the paraffin lamp that hung from the rusty old chain, a small oil-heating stove, rugs and blankets, bags and a suit-case, cans of oil, oddments of cutlery and cookery, and other things needed for camping. The man who had made that hidden vault serve his turn as a hiding-place, as it had served the turn of others long since dead and gone, had taken some trouble to make it habitable, if not comfortable.

No doubt there was some concealed

means of ventilation, but the air was heavy, and made heavier by the fumes of the oil that burned in lamp and stove. The door, set deep in a thick stone arch, was wide open, to let in what fresher air there might be from the passage without.

Arthur Augustus was seated on one of the old oaken benches, leaning back against the further wall of the vault.

His eyes were fixed on the man who sat opposite him, on another bench, placed across the open doorway—a man with sharp features, thin lips, and keen watchful eyes reminiscent of a rat's.

Blake and Co. would have known him, at once, as the man they had seen in Wayland Wood. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther would have known him, as the man who had been snapped by Manners' camera in Rylcombe Lane. Taggles would have known him, and Dr. Holmes would have known him, as Derek Denzil, once of the Sixth Form at St. Jim's, though older now by many years than when they had seen him last.

He sat on the bench, his back to the doorway, smoking cigarettes. No doubt he had chosen that position, in case of any sudden and desperate attempt on the part of the prisoner to make a dash to escape. It was only when Denzil was present that the oaken door was open. When he was absent it was shut, and the rusty old iron key turned in the ancient creaking lock.

The remains of a scanty meal lay on the table. In that remote subterranean den, day was the same as night: it was only by his watch that the hapless St. Jim's junior could count days and nights. But he knew now that it was midday, and the rough fare his captor had placed on the table was his Christmas dinner.

Arthur Augustus had been on short commons since he had fallen into the outcast's hands. But that was not his chief worry. He had had to sleep in his clothes, in dirty blankets on the floor. He had not even seen a cake of soap. Short commons he could endure with fortitude. But for a fellow accustomed to being as clean as a new pin, personal slovenliness was the limit—beyond the limit.

"You uttah wascal," said Arthur Augustus, for the third time. His eye, and his eyeglass, gleamed at the man on the bench across the doorway, "I have asked you, a hundwed times at least, who you are, and why you are keepin' me heah."

"Not because I want a fool's company," answered Denzil, with a shrug of the shoulders, "Who I am does not concern you: and I am keeping you here, as I've told you, to keep your silly mouth shut."

"I wegard you as a wotten wat!"

Denzil laughed.

Arthur Augustus's speaking countenance expressed unlimited wrath and scorn. It seemed rather to amuse the outcast.

"Your own fault," he went on, "and my rotten luck! There never was such foul luck. I fixed up this place, which I remembered from old days, when I knew that I should have to run. Couldn't be a better spot for lying low till the hue and cry was over—especially with a letter posted at a safe distance to draw attention in another direction. And I had to have money to keep on the run—and here it was at hand—or I thought it was. But my luck let me down."

He knitted his brows in a dark scowl.

"Yaas, wathah, you wottah," said Arthur Augustus, "I know who was wootin' about the dormitowies that night, and why, and who wan into Cardew and knocked him out. I jolly well knew it was a burglah all the time, though that silly ass Cardew fancied that it was a St. Jim's fellows out of bounds, and the othah fellows thought the same. Now I know vewy well that it was you, you wottan wascal, lookin' for a chance of wobbewy."

"Rotten luck," repeated Denzil, hardly heeding him, "Nothing in the Beak's study—I might as well have chucked that old key away, for all the use it was. And when I tried to repeat the old game in a dormitory, some young idiot had to be out of bed at midnight, and run into me—some bright lad following the way I went, I've no doubt," he added, with a sneer, little dreaming upon whose ears his words fell, "Some young blackguard heading for the sack as I did."

He threw the stump of the cigarette on the stone floor, and lighted another.

"Did I give him a very hard knock?" he asked.

"He was knocked unconscious, and had a feahful black eye aftahwards," said Arthur Augustus, "It was a dirty twick to knock a fellow out in the dark."

The outcast laughed.

"I had to get clear," he said, "and I'm glad that the young fool, whoever he was, has something to remember me by."

"You are an uttah wuffiian!" said Arthur Augustus, with almost inexpressible scorn, "I wegard you with loathin'."

Denzil blew out a cloud of smoke, evidently quite unmoved by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's indignant contempt.

"Rotten luck all round," he said, "Nothing for my pains—so far. I was careful enough—I never knew I left a trace after using the old key—how could I guess that the old sportsman would notice that a pile of school reports in a drawer had been disarranged? Who'd have thought of that? But he did—just my luck! "He gave an angry laugh, "They never dreamed that the mysterious visitor was listening behind the panel, when they discussed it—but after what I heard, there was no chance in the night-time—it had to be a daylight raid or nothing."

He gave Arthur Augustus an evil look.

"And you, you meddling fool, had to butt in! I heard a good deal behind that panel, and I knew that the Head would be in the Sixth-form room that morning—I chose my time well. It looked like plain sailing. How could I guess that a fool of a Lower boy would be in the study?"

"Weally, you cheeky wottah—"

"Rotten luck!" went on Denzil, "Just rotten luck! I need not have been five minutes in the study. And you had to be there, you fool—you fool! For a moment I thought the whole game was up—the secret panel wide open, and a scared schoolboy yelling—"

"I was not scared in the vewy least! I was startled, but I uttahly wepudiate the suggestion that I was scared!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, indignantly, "I should certainly have shouted for help, if you had not had the effwontewy to clamp your cheeky paw over my mouth—"

"And only just in time," snarled Denzil, "I got you away and shut the panel—if I'd had anything in my hand, I'd have cracked your silly head first—you were lucky."

He lighted a fresh cigarette.

"It's Christmas Day," he said, "Not the sort of Christmas you were looking forward to, what? Thank yourself for it, you young fool! You've been trouble enough to me—adding to the risk, and there was enough of that already. They must be searching for you, I suppose. Not that they're likely to guess that you vanished through the wall of your headmaster's study!" He laughed, "I don't think the local police force are likely to tumble to that!"

"I twust that they may," said Arthur Augustus, "But I suppose it is not vewy likely. So fah as I know, nobody has evah heard of a secwet panel in the Head's study. I weally do not see how you know, whoevah you are."

Denzil laughed again.

"An idle half-holiday spent in an old ruin, and a chance discovery," he said, "It came in useful in the old days, and by gum, it's come in more useful now. But it will be no secret after this—it will be known, when I let you go."

"And when will that be?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"Not for a good while yet," answered Denzil, coolly, "I've got to hide here for some time to come, and I've got to raise the wind before I go—and there's only one source—the school. Next term—"

"Bai Jove! Do you mean to say that you think you are goin' to keep me a pwisonah heah till next term!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"No choice about that," snapped Denzil, "I've got to keep your silly mouth shut. Thank yourself for it."

"I uttahly wefuse to wemain for weeks in this wotten hole! I have not changed my clothes since I was dwagged heah—I have not even had a wash!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, breathless with indignation, "I am in a howwid slovenly state. Bai Jove, I wish I were big enough to handle you, you wottah."

"Better for you that you're not," said Denzil. "If you give trouble, you know what to expect—I've warned you before.

I'd knock you senseless as soon as look at you."

Arthur Augustus rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming at the man who sat on the bench across the doorway.

He was tempted, as he had been tempted many times since he had been a prisoner in the hidden vault, to make a desperate attempt to tackle his captor, and escape.

Denzil watched him, with a sardonic smile.

He was, as he had said, prepared to knock the schoolboy senseless, as he had knocked out Cardew in the dark, if he gave trouble.

Arthur Augustus breathed very hard. But he restrained his impulse to rush on the outcast. He was only too well aware that it was futile. On the day in the Head's study, when the startling intruder had seized him, and dragged him away through the secret panel in the wall, he had struggled with all his strength, and had been utterly powerless in the rascal's grasp. He knew that he had no chance in those strong hands. And a savage blow, and an eye to match Cardew's, would not have improved matters.

"Oh, you wattah," Arthur Augustus almost groaned, "If one of my fwiends was heah to lend me a hand—if only Blake or Tom Mewwy was heah—"

Denzil lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Blake and Tom Merry, whoever they may be, are not here," he said, "Make the best of it, you young fool!"

Arthur Augustus stood, his eyes on the hard face. Futile as such an attempt was, he could barely hold himself in hand. It was only when his captor was present in the vault that there was a chance—at other times the little door in the arch was locked on him. Beyond the man who sat on the bench across the doorway was the subterranean passage—and freedom. But it was useless, and slowly he unclenched his hands.

Denzil laughed, and Arthur Augustus's eyes flashed at him.

"If Blake or Hewwies or Dig. was heah —!" he muttered, "Oh! Bai Jove!" His eyeglass dropped to the end of its cord, as he gave a sudden jump.

Behind Denzil, in the little arched doorway, a figure appeared—silently as a ghost. Denzil, with his back to the opening, saw nothing—Arthur Augustus, staring past Denzil, saw a face he knew—a face with a discoloured eye! For the moment, Arthur Augustus wondered whether he was dreaming, as he gazed blankly at Ralph Reckness Cardew. The spectre of the scapegrace of the Fourth could hardly have startled him more. The next moment, Cardew's arm was flung, from behind, round the neck of the man on the bench, and he was dragged over backwards, with a crash on the stone floor.

A startled yell of amazement and fury, burst from Denzil as he crashed, the back of his head thudding hard on the stone. Cardew was on him with the swiftness of a panther, pinning him down, and shouting to Arthur Augustus.

"Back up!"

And Arthur Augustus, spell-bound for a moment, woke to swift activity, and rushed to his aid.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LEFT TILL CALLED FOR!

"Back up!" yelled Cardew.

"Yaas, wathah!" panted Arthur Augustus.

Denzil, taken utterly by surprise, dazed by the crash on the stone floor, was for some moments helpless. Cardew was upon him, his knee jamming on the man, pinning him down, and grasping him with both hands to hold him there. But the outcast was swift to rally, and he grasped at Cardew in his turn, to throw him off, his rat-like eyes gleaming and glinting with rage.

Cardew was strong, and he exerted all his strength: but he was nothing like a match for the outcast, and he would have been flung off, had he been unaided.

But he was not unaided. Arthur Augustus, his eyeglass flying at the end of its cord, his face ablaze with excitement, hurled himself headlong into the fray.

Denzil, struggling savagely with Cardew, was half up, when Arthur Augustus

reached him. And as he reached him, Arthur Augustus hit out with his right, landing his knuckles in the outcasts's eye, following it up with his left, which crashed on Denzil's jaw.

Few who looked at the slim and elegant swell of St. Jim's would have guessed that he could put such force into a punch. Right and left landed on Denzil as if they came from a coke-hammer.

The outcast sprawled back on the floor, and Cardew's knee jammed on him again. Arthur Augustus grasped his coat-collar.

The man was yelling with pain and fury. Down on the stone floor as he was, with two study juniors pinning him down, he struggled madly, and they had all their work cut out to hold him.

Either of them, alone, would have been hurled aside, and the man would have had the upper hand. Even together, exerting themselves to the utmost, they were hard put to it. But the two of them were more than a match for him, desperate as he was: and in spite of his furious resistance, they kept him pinned to the floor. For several minutes the struggle went on, till Denzil, spent by his own frantic efforts, relaxed, and lay panting, almost groaning, for breath, still in their grasp.

"Our win!" panted Cardew.

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "We've got the bwute! Hold on to him, deah boy."

"Keep quiet, you rat," snapped Cardew, as Denzil made another, though feeble, effort to break loose, "Twist his arms behind him, D'Arcy—and give them a good twist if he doesn't keep quiet."

"Weally, Cardew—"

"Don't waste time, ass," snapped Cardew, "Do you want him to get loose?"

"Bai Jove! Wathah not."

Arthur Augustus dragged Denzil's hands behind him. The man still resisted, but he was too spent to give much trouble. His wrists were dragged together behind him and held there, and Cardew, jerking off his own silk muffler, bound them together, pulling the knots tight.

Then he rose to his feet, breathless, almost as spent as the man who lay helpless on the floor, but quite cool.

"Our win!" he repeated, "You can let him go now—we've got him! He won't get out of that in a hurry."

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus mopped his noble brow, clotted with perspiration from that wild fierce struggle, "Bai Jove! It seems wathah like a dweam, Cardew. I weally cannot undahstand how you got heah! But I am vewy glad that you did."

"Glad to see me?" drawled Cardew.

"Yaas, wathah! Nevah so jolly glad to see anybody. Sowwy to see that your eye isn't vewy much bettah yet, deah boy," added Arthur Augustus, politely.

"It feels better, now I've got the sportsman that gave it me," said Cardew. He laughed, "You've given him one of the same."

"Bai Jove!"

Denzil, on the floor, struggled into a sitting position. One of his eyes gleamed and glittered at the schoolboys like a cornered rat's. But the other—the one in which D'Arcy's knuckles had crashed—was closed, and fast blackening. It more than matched Cardew's.

"Well, the wottah asked for it," said Arthur Augustus, "I don't know who he is, but he is a wottah, a wuffiian, and a weptile."

"Hasn't he introduced himself?" grinned Cardew, "No—I suppose he wouldn't, as you were only a temporary guest in this home from-from-home. He wouldn't want you to tell the world that Derek Denzil had been around, when he let you run."

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"Dewek Denzil!" he ejaculated.

"Old Boy of St. Jim's" said Cardew, "Not one of our best specimens—they won't put him in the records as a distinguished Old Boy, who brought credit on his old school!"

"Let me go!" The outcast panted, "Let me go! I'll not raise a hand if you let me go—!"

"Sort of johnny we can trust, aren't you?" asked Cardew, "Get out of this, D'Arcy—we'll leave this animal to be called for."

Cardew drew the swell of St. Jim's through the arched doorway, into the subterranean passage. Denzil, gained his

feet. Even with his hands bound behind him, the desperate man seemed to be bent on some further effort. But if he still had a desperate hope, it was shattered as Cardew crashed the oaken door shut, and turned the rusty key in the lock.

"Come on," said Cardew.

"I am quite in the dark how you got heah, Cardew—"

"I'll tell you as we go along. We won't go the way I came—I sort of guess that this tunnel will lead us to St. Jim's, if we follow it—"

"Yaas, wathah! That awful wottah got me in the Head's study—there is a secwet panel in the wall—"

"Ancient history!" drawled Cardew, "Come on! You look as if you want a wash."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, with deep feeling, "Would you weally believe, Cardew, that I have not had a wash since the day Lathom sent me to the Head's study—"

"Awful!" said Cardew.

"Dweadful!" agreed Arthur Augustus, "I have had a vewy wotten time, but that was the worst of it. Bai Jove! I shall be vewy glad to get a bath and a change. It was wippin' of you to come to the wescue like that, Cardew."

"Oh, don't mench."

"It was all your fault weally, as that wotten thing you did made Lathom send me to the Head—but I entiahly ovahlook it now," said Arthur Augustus, graciously.

"I breathe again!" said Cardew.

"Weally, you ass—"

"Come on! You'll find some of your pals at the school—they stayed over the hols. to look for you. I believe they're still lookin'," drawled Cardew, "They didn't seem to rejoice a lot when I turned up to help—I almost got the impression that they weren't glad to see me. But they'll be glad to see you, at any rate.".

They tramped up the long, dark stone passage, Cardew lighting the way with his flash-lamp, and explaining, in his airy way, what had happened while Arthur Augustus was a prisoner in the hidden vault.

"Here we are!" he said, at last.

The flash-lamp gleamed on a narrow stone stair at the end of the subterranean passage.

"This is where that fwightful wottah dwagged me down that day—!" said Arthur Augustus, his noble brow knitting at the recollection. "Bai Jove! I am wathah glad I gave him that black eye!"

They clambered up the narrow stair. At the top was a little landing, closed in by stony walls. In the wall was a heavy door of ancient oak. The key was in the lock, and it turned easily—having been recently oiled, by whose hand they could guess. Cardew pulled open the door, which had fitted close against a panel of old oak—evidently a panel in the wall of the Head's study. It was no wonder that Tom Merry and Co., tapping on the panels, had heard no hollow sound—the oak door behind backed it up solidly. Cardew flashed the light on the panel, and groped over it.

"Hey presto!" he said.

The spring that moved the panel, undiscoverable from the other side, was easy enough to find where they stood. As Cardew spoke, he found it, and the panel suddenly flew open.

A moment more, and they stood in the Head's study, in the School House at St. Jim's.

"We'll leave it open," said Cardew, "I shouldn't wonder if the Beak will be interested, when he comes back."

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"I wathah think so," he said, "It will be wathah a surpwise for him!" He cut across to the door, "Pewwaps you will be kind enough to appwise Mrs. Mimms that I have weturned, Cardew—I have no time now—I must weally get a bath and a change at once—"

Arthur Augustus did not stay for more. He flew. And Cardew, grinning, followed him from the Head's study.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CARDEW ASKS FOR IT!

"Merry Christmas!"

Tom Merry and Co. made no reply to that greeting. It was the second time that day that Cardew had proffered it: and it had no better reception than the first time. His airy manner and half-mocking smile did not please any member of the Christmas party at the deserted school.

The St. Jim's juniors were not in a mood for Cardew's airy persiflage. True, they were feeling more hopeful now of getting on the track of their missing chum. Inspector Skeat, at Wayland, had been distinctly pleased by the information they had been able to pass on to him. There was every hope that, with such a clue, the search for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would prove successful. But they did not expect it soon: and Christmas was not likely to be "merry" with Gussy still absent and his fate in doubt. Cardew's high spirits jarred on the whole party, as he was doubtless well aware.

He was standing in the open doorway of the School-House when they came back, in coat and hat, with a bag on the step. That looked as if he was prepared for departure—for which no one was likely to be sorry. And the fact that he was in high spirits, well pleased with himself and things generally, was obvious in his looks. He seemed even to have forgotten his discoloured eye.

He gave the whole party a cheery nod as they came up and greeted them affably, getting only grim looks in return.

"Just in time to say good-bye," he went on, "I'm expectin' my taxi any minute now."

"So you're going?" grunted Blake.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!" said Herries.

"I'm goin' to tear myself away," admitted Cardew, "I've an impression—I may be mistaken—that there will be a lot of dry eyes here when I'm gone."

"Nobody will miss you, if that's what you mean," said Dig.

"I'm glad you came, Cardew," said Tom Merry, quietly, "You've been able to help—I know that! I believe that D'Arcy will be found now—"

"Think so?" asked Cardew, with a glimmering eye.

"Yes, I think so, and I know it will be owing to you to a good extent, if we find him—"

"If!" repeated Cardew, "What a little word, but what a lot it implies!"

"Well, don't you think so yourself?" asked Tom, sharply.

Cardew laughed.

"I don't think you'll do the trick," he said.

"If we don't, Inspector Skeat will, said Manners, "after what we've been able to tell him."

"He was on to it, at once," said Monty Lowther, "He will get that man Denzil, and we shall find Gussy—what are you laughing at, you cheeky ass?"

"Only my happy nature," drawled Cardew, "It's an amusin' world, and you fellows are among the most amusin' specimens in it. So you're goin' on huntin' for my dear relative?"

"Of course we are," snapped Tom, "That's what we're here for—and according to what you've said, that's what you came to help in. You seem to have tired of it pretty early, if you're going now," he added, with a curl of the lip.

"I hardly think I should be of much further use," said Cardew, gravely, "and I can't say I'm enjoyin' life here. A fellow wants a good time at Christmas, doesn't he?"

"I daresay you do!" grunted Blake, "Well, clear off and have your good time, and the sooner the better."

"You're going—leaving things as they are now?" asked Lowther.

"Exactly as they are now!" assented Cardew, "What's the matter with things as they are now?"

Nobody answered that question: but six fellows looked at him very expressively.

"I haven't been quite idle, you know, while you've been tramping around, and chatting with police-inspectors, and all that," continued Cardew, "To tell the truth—a thing I sometimes do!—I've had a rather busy mornin'."

Tom Merry looked at him sharply.

There was something in Cardew's manner that puzzled him.

"Well, if you've done anything, what have you done?" he asked.

"I had a walk in the wood after you left me."

"Is that all."

"Oh, no! I came back by a different way, by way of variety. On the whole, I found it rather pleasant. And since I came in, I've had several goes on the telephone."

"On the telephone!" repeated Tom, blankly.

"Yes. One call after another. First of all, an agreeable chat with Inspector Skeat—I got him soon after you had left him—"

"You had nothing to tell him that we had not told him, I suppose," said Tom Merry.

"Well, yes, a few details. After that, I rang up Lord Eastwood at Eastwood House—"

"D'Arcy's father?" exclaimed Blake.

"Exactly! I thought he'd like to have a word from me on Christmas. Then I got the Head's number from Mrs. Mimms, and rang him up—"

"You rang up Dr. Holmes?" exclaimed Tom, staring blankly at Cardew, "To tell him what we've found out, do you mean."

"Yes—and a few details over and above, that I thought he'd be pleased to hear. And then I had to ring up the railway station about a train—frightful bad service to-day, but there's a train, thank goodness—you'll be glad to hear that I'm all right about my train."

"And gladder still when you're in it!" snorted Herries.

"Hear, hear!" said Dig.

"Then I had to phone for a taxi, and then phone home to say that they weren't losin' my fascinating society over Christmas after all. Never done such a jolly lot of phonin' in a mornin' before. Quite fatiguin'. So you see, I've been fairly busy.

Tom Merry breathed rather hard.

"You came here only yesterday, and you're going to-day," he said, "That's the extent of what you're willing to do for D'Arcy, is it?"

"That's about the lot," assented Cardew, with a nod.

"You're satisfied to go, leaving him where he is, wherever that may be?"

"Quite!"

"Well, I won't tell you what I think of you—" said Tom, with a deep breath.

"No! don't!" murmured Cardew, "I can see in your eye that it wouldn't be complimentary!"

"So it boils down to this," said Jack Blake, "that you don't care a boiled bean if D'Arcy stays where he is?"

"Why should I?"

"Why should you?" gasped Blake.

"Yes! I've no doubt that he's all right where he is—enjoyin' life, probably," drawled Cardew.

Blake's lips set hard.

"I won't punch a fellow's face on Christmas Day," he said, "But you're going to get what you're asking for, Cardew. Collar him and bump him!"

"What-ho!" said Herries and Dig.

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther.

Cardew jumped back.

It had amused him to pull the leg of the party who had spent anxious days in search of their lost comrade. But he had carried his impish humour a little too far. Blake and Herries and Dig., Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, all collared him together, and he was swept off his feet.

Bump!

"Oh!" gasped Cardew.

Bump!

"Bai Jove! What are you fellows waggin' Cardew for?" exclaimed an unexpected voice." Whatevah is the mattah?"

Six fellows fairly bounded.

They let go of Cardew, as if he had suddenly become red-hot. He sat on the floor and gasped for breath unheeded. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, Blake and Herries and Digby, stared at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as if they could not believe their eyes—as indeed, they hardly could. The ghost of the swell of St. Jim's could hardly have astonished them more. Cardew picked himself up, and dusted his natty overcoat. They had forgotten his existence. They could only gaze at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—petrified!

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

"D'Arcy!"

"Gussy!"

"What—!"

"How—?"

"Oh, crikey! Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his celebrated monocle in his noble eye, and gazed at them. They gazed at him.

He did not look as he had looked when Cardew had found him in the hidden vault. He was newly swept and garnished, as it were. Spotless and speckless from the crown of his well-brushed head to the tips of his elegant shoes, he looked his old self—a thing of beauty and a joy for ever!

"You fellows seem surpwised—!" he remarked.

"Surprised!" gasped Tom Merry, "Yes, just a few! Is it really you, Gussy?"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"But how—" stuttered Tom.

"Hasn't Cardew told you?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Cardew!" repeated Tom.

"What were you waggin' him for? It is wathah wuff to wag him aftah he came to the wescue and got me away fwom that howwid vault and the howwid wuffian who was keepin' me there—"

"Cardew did!" yelled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Dig.

"It was toppin' of you fellows to put in the Chwistmas hols., heah lookin' for me," said Arthur Augustus, "But as it happens, it was Cardew who found me and got me away fwom that wuffian."

"I suppose we're not dreaming this," said Blake.

"Wathah not!" chuckled Arthur Augustus, "Heah I am, deah boys. But didn't Cardew tell you—?"

"No!" said Tom. He glanced round at Cardew, "You silly ass! I suppose you were pulling our leg—"

"Sort of!" assented Cardew.

"Gussy was here all the time!" said Herries, "All the time that silly chump was gassing! I'm glad we bumped him."

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"So you found Gussy and got him away, Cardew!" said Blake, staring at the scapegrace of the Fourth, rather blankly.

"Incidentally," explained Cardew, airily, "To tell the truth—for the second time in the same day!—I was after that sportsman who gave me this decorative eye. Gussy was a bye-product!"

"Weally, Cardew—"

"And here comes my taxi at last!" Cardew picked up his bag, as a taxi came grinding up the snowy gravel. "The excellent Skeat will be collectin' Mr. Derek Denzil by this time—I've given him full directions where the sportsman was left to be called for. Gussy, your pater will be here as fast as the petrol ration will bring him. Cheery-bye!"

"Pway stop, deah boy," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "Aftah what you have done, you must not wun off like that! My patah would like to thank you—"

"Speech may be taken as read."

"These fellows will be comin' home with me for Chwistmas, Pway come too, deah boy."

"Don't you fellows think I should bore you?" asked Cardew, glancing round at the faces of the Co.

"No, ass," said Tom Merry.

"We'd be glad," said Blake.

"I shouldn't share your gladness," said Cardew, regretfully, "I might not bore you—it's possible—but I'm afraid that you would bore me! Good-bye."

He ran down the steps to the taxi. But he turned his head before he stepped in, with a whimsical grin on his face.

"Merry Christmas!" he called out.

And there was a reply this time to the greeting, and quite a hearty one.

"Merry Christmas!"

The taxi rolled away with Ralph Reckness Cardew. He left Tom Merry and Co. gathered in a joyous crowd round Arthur Augustus. It was going to be a merry Christmas after all—which was a very happy ending to Tom Merry and Co.'s Christmas Quest.

THE END