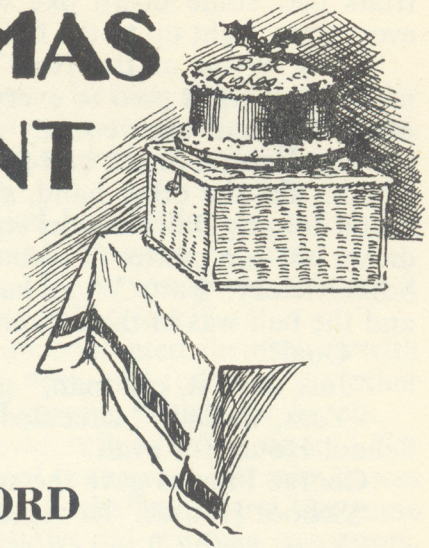
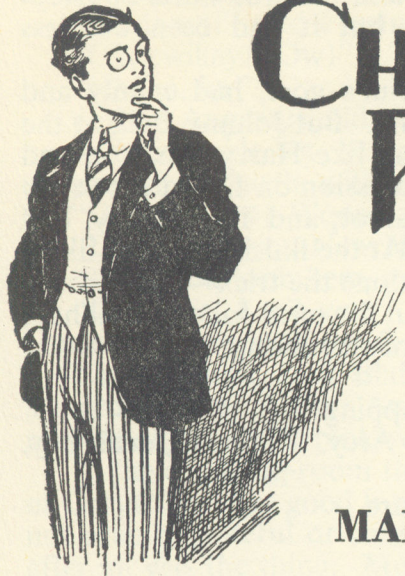


TOM MERRY'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT



by

MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER I

THE WINNING GOAL

“GOAL!”
“Good old Tom!”
“St. Jim’s wins!”
“Yaas, wathah!”
“Goal! Goal!”

It was quite a tremendous roar on Little Side at St. Jim’s. It echoed far and wide. It was Tom Merry, a School House man, who had kicked the winning goal; but New House men joined as vigorously as School House men in the roar that greeted it. Figgins of the New House, rushed up to Tom Merry and smacked him on the back with a smack that made him stagger. Arthur Augustus D’Arcy waved his eyeglass wildly in the air. Johnny Bull, in the Greyfriars goal, stared at the ball, with a grim stare. He could hardly believe that he had let it pass him. But he had. In the very last minute of a slogging match, with no score to either side, the St. Jim’s junior captain had dispatched the leather home—and that was that!

It was a great occasion—the last football match before the Christmas holidays. And it had been fought hard and fast from the first note of the

whistle. And so far it had been practically a goal-keeper's game. Attack had been energetic on both sides: but on both sides the defence had been too sound for it. Again and again the red shirts of St. Jim's and the blue shirts of Greyfriars had come down like wolves on the fold: but it had been bootless every time, right up to the finish.

Fatty Wynn of the New House, in the St. Jim's goal, had calmly and methodically put paid to every shot from the enemy. But Johnny Bull, at the other end, had been equally efficient. Goal-getters like Harry Wharton and Herbert Vernon-Smith had failed to make any impression on David Llewellyn Wynn. On the other hand, shots like Figgins, Talbot, and Tom Merry, had found Johnny Bull's citadel equally impregnable. At the finish it looked like a draw: but in a matter of seconds Tom Merry had done the trick—and it was a home victory. Fatty Wynn had not failed once: but for once Johnny Bull had, and the ball was in the net, and all the St. Jim's crowd roaring:

“Goal!”

“Just done it, old man,” gasped Figgins. “Topping!”

“Yaas, wathah!” chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. “Toppin', deah boy. School House for evah!”

George Figgins gave the swell of St. Jim's a glare.

“School House?” he repeated.

“Yaas, watha.”

“You silly ass—”

“Weally, Figgins—”

“Where should we have been without a New House man in goal?” demanded Figgins, hotly. “Think you could have stopped them? You were sitting down most of the time.”

“Bai Jove! I was doin' nothin' of the sort, Figgins. I considah—”

“Gussy wasn't sitting down most of the time, Figgy,” said Kerr. “He was rolling over on his back as often as he was sitting down.”

“Weally, Kerr, you New House wottah—”

“It was a School House goal, Figgins,” said Jack Blake, “and you jolly well can't walk round that!”

“Yaas, wathah!”

“Look here—”

“Chuck it, you fatheads!” exclaimed Tom Merry. “This isn't a time for House ragging. It was a St. Jim's goal: and it wouldn't have pulled off the match but for old Fatty between the sticks.”

“Hear, hear!” said Figgins, mollified.

“Weally, Tom Mewwy—”

“Dry up, Gussy,” said Kerr. “You talk too much.”

“Weally, Kerr—”

“Put a sock in it,” said Figgins.

“Bai Jove! I—”

"Bow-wow!"

"I do not wegard that as an intelligent we remark, Figgins, and I wepeat, School House for evah!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I wepeat—yaroooooh!"

"Sit down!" said Figgins.

"Oh, cwikey! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus did not mean to sit down. But as Figgins suddenly hooked his noble leg, he had no choice about it. He sat down on the cold, unsympathetic earth, with a sudden bump, and spluttered.

"Oh! ah! ow! Woooooh!"

"Look here, you New House tick—" exclaimed Jack Blake.

"Well, you look here, you School House freak!" retorted Figgins.

"Chuck it, I tell you," hooted Tom Merry. "Are you going to start a House rag here with the Greyfriars men looking on? Order!"

Thus adjured, Jack Blake and George Figgins contented themselves with a mutual glare. Arthur Augustus tottered to his feet, and followed the other players off the field, pink with indignation, and gasping a little for breath.

In the changing-room there was a cheery crowd. Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars were good losers. That St. Jim's goal in the very last minute was not exactly grateful or comforting: but it was all in the game, and the game after all was the thing. Most of the St. Jim's fellows did not care two hoots, or one, whether it was a School House or a New House foot that had landed the leather in the net: on the occasion of a School match, the two Houses were as one. But the rivals of St. Jim's were always ready to begin an argument: and there was room for argument, if fellows looked for it. For while undoubtedly it was a School House man who had kicked the winning goal at the finish of a hard and gruelling game, it was equally undoubted that it was a New House man's stout defence in goal that had saved St. Jim's a dozen times over.

"Good old Fatty!" said Figgins, after glancing round to make sure that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was near enough to hear. "You pulled the game through, old man."

Arthur Augustus lifted a pink face, from which he was sponging a splash of mud, over a steaming basin.

"That's wubbish, Figgins," he exclaimed. "A soccah match is won by goals."

"And how many would the Greyfriars men have bagged but for Fatty?" demanded Figgins.

"That is quite iwwelevant, Figgins. They did not bag any, and a School House man did—and I wepeat—"

"Your face wants washing, Gussy," said Figgins. "Wash it!" And once more Figgins acted swiftly before Arthur Augustus knew what was coming—this time grabbing a noble neck, and splashing Arthur Augustus's indignant face down into the basin, with a mighty splash.

“Urrrrrrrrggh!” came a suffocated gurgle from the swell of St. Jim’s.
 “Wirrrgh! Gurrrrrrrrggh!”

Arthur Augustus dragged a drenched and dripping head from the basin, dashed the water from his eyes, and glared round for Figgins with a glare that was positively ferocious. But by the time he had cleared his vision, Figgins and Co. had walked out of the changing-room, and were strolling away to the New House, laughing as they went. And Arthur Augustus towelled his noble nut in silence, his feelings being apparently too deep for words.

CHAPTER II

BIG IDEA!

“THAT wuffian—”
 “What?”

“That wagamuffin—”

“Eh? Who?” asked Jack Blake, staring at his noble chum. Herries and Digby stared also. Three members of study No. 6 in the School House, seemed quite in the dark as to the identity of the ruffian and ragamuffin to whom Arthur Augustus D’Arcy alluded.

Blake and Herries and Digby had come up for prep. They found Arthur Augustus already in the study. There was a thoughtful frown on his brow, which seemed to indicate that his noble intellect had been at work. It indicated also that his placid temper was not quite so placid as usual.

“I am speaking of that New House boundah, Blake,” he explained.

“Which?” asked Blake. “They’re all bounders, in that mouldy old House. Which particular bounder has come between the wind and your nobility, Gussy?”

Herries and Dig grinned at that question. Arthur Augustus did not grin. Clearly he was not in a grinning mood.

“I am alludin’ to Figgins, Blake!” he said, stiffly.

“Oh, old Figgins,” said Blake. “That was a jolly neat pass he gave Tom Merry, wasn’t it? It gave Tom the goal.”

“That Greyfriars man Vernon-Smith nearly had it away from him,” remarked Herries. “But Figgy was too quick for him.”

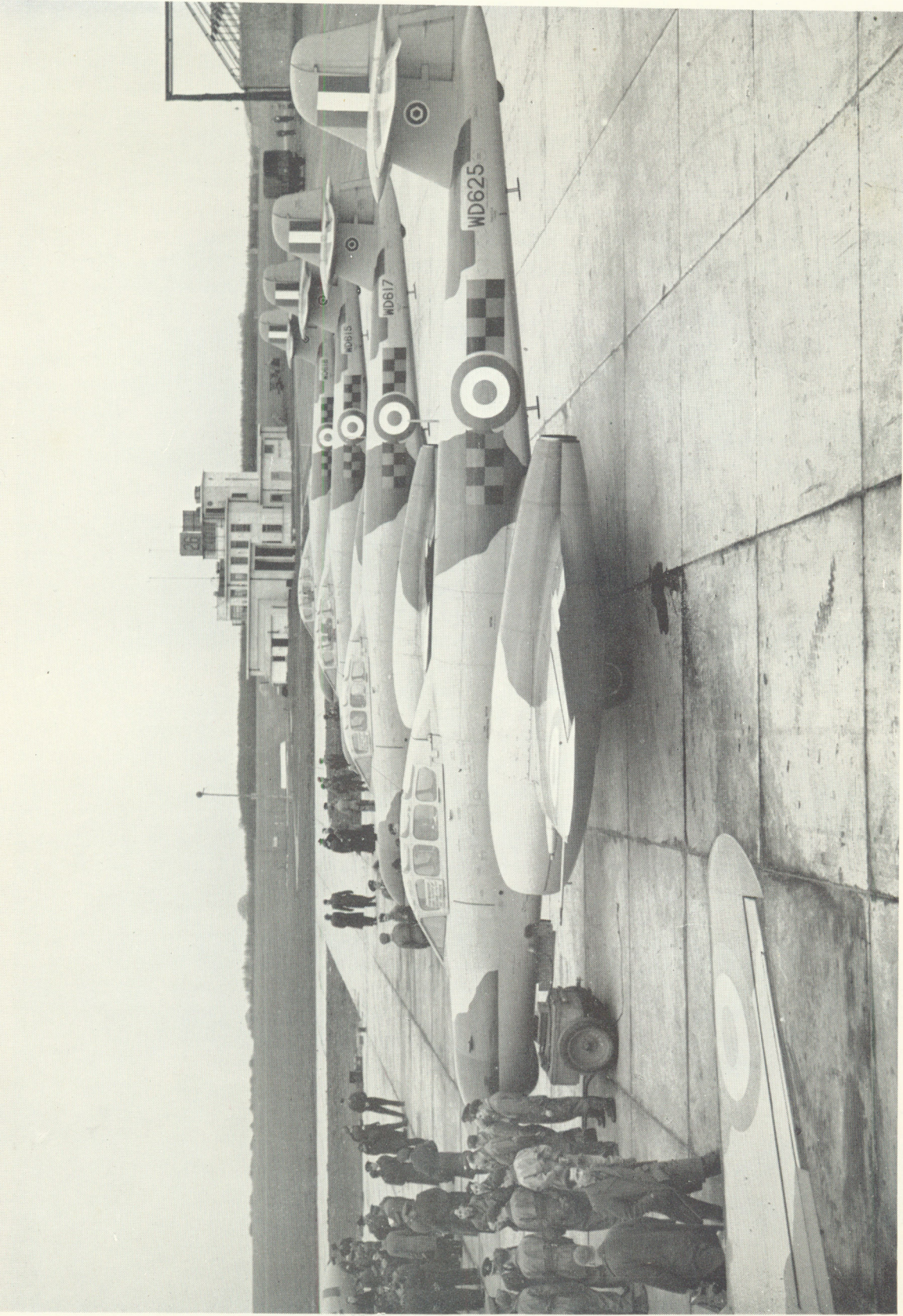
“Good man,” agreed Digby.

Sniff, from Arthur Augustus.

“If you fellows have finished singin’ the pwaises of that New House tick, I will continue my wemarks,” he said, coldly.

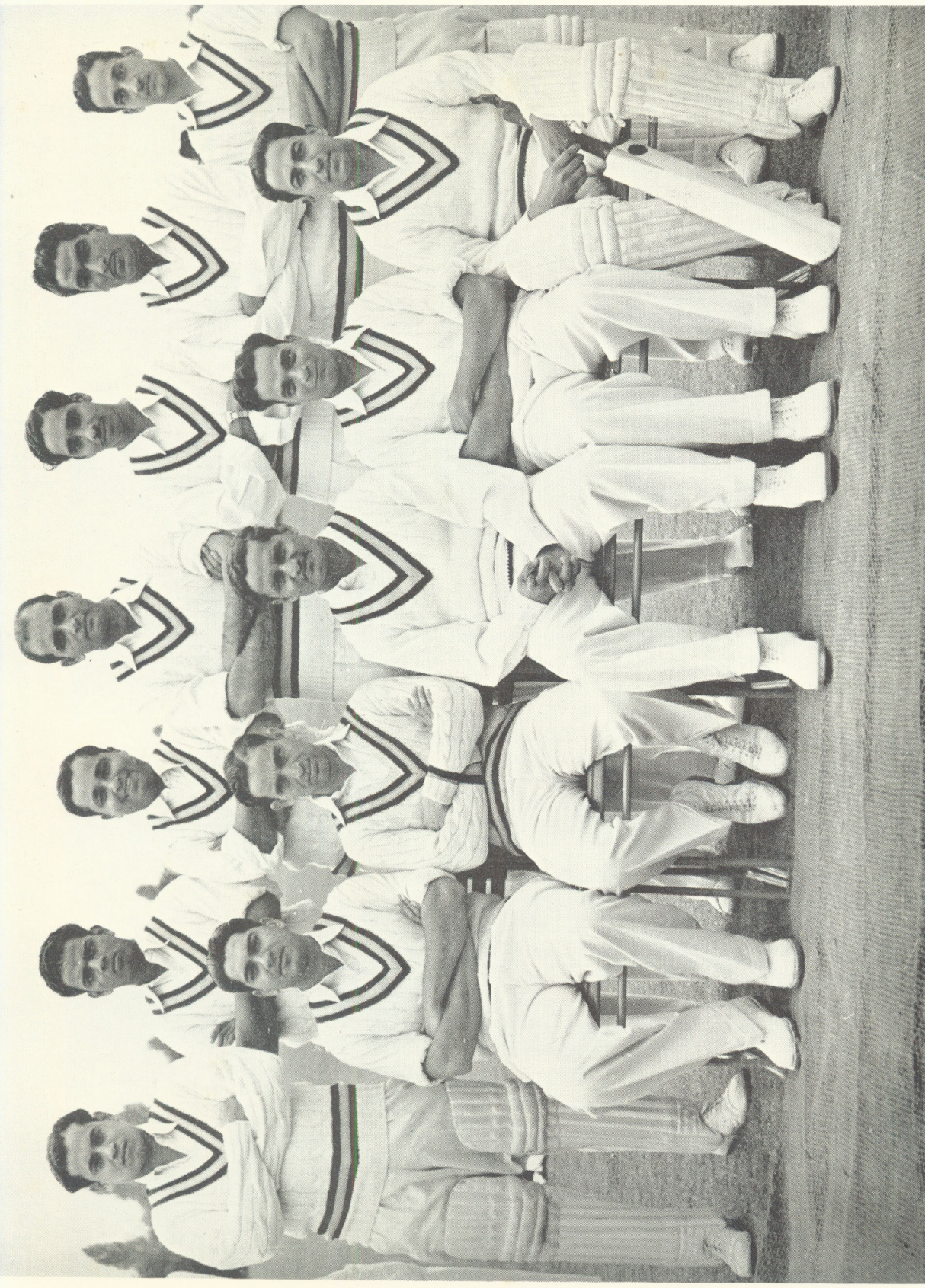
“Better conclude them!” suggested Blake, “prep, you know.”

“Weally, Blake—”



JET NIGHT FIGHTERS

Meteor N.F. 11 night fighters, which take a crew of two, have a very high all round performance, and are able to intercept raiders far from Britain's coasts.



INDIAN TEST CRICKETERS

Back row : l. to r.—Punkaj Roy, V. L. Manjrekar, P. Sen, Ghulam Ahmed, C. D. Gopinath, G. S. Ramchand, D. K. Gaekwad. Front row : l. to r.—D. G. Phadkar, H. R. Adhikari, V. S. Hazare, (Captain), S. G. Shinde, C. T. Sarwate.

"Prep!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Anybody seen the dick?" asked Digby. "Where's that Latin dick? Where the dickens—"

"Nevah mind the dictionawy now, Dig. That wuffian Figgins—"

"What are you calling him fancy names for?" asked Blake.

"Pewwaps you have forgotten that he hooked my leg on the football gwound, Blake, and caused me to sit down vewy suddenly and unexpectedly—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows wegard that as funnaw—" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, not at all," said Blake, soothingly. "We'd have scragged him, only Tom seemed to think it might have surprised the Greyfriars men to see St. Jim's men scragging one another on the soccer ground."

"And that was not all," went on Arthur Augustus, with deep indignation. "You all saw him duck my head in watah in the changing-room—I was feahfully dwenched, and dwippin'—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

"Well, you looked rather a picture, old man," said Blake. "Still, it was awful cheek of a New House tick to duck a School House napper."

"I should watah think so!" said Arthur Augustus.

"We'll duck Figgy's head in the fountain to-morrow," said Herries, consolingly. "And Kerr's and Wynn's too, if they chip in."

"That won't do, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head.

"Well, what do you want us to do?" asked Blake. "Go over to the New House and boil him in oil, or strew the hungry churchyard with his bones?"

"Pway be sewious, Blake. This is a sewious mattah. We do not want a wow with the othah House ovah a football match. It would not be sportin'. Otherwise I should certainly give Figgins a feahful thwashin' for actin' like a wuffian and a wagamuffin. But I shall not thwash Figgins."

At which Jack Blake bestowed a wink on Herries and Dig, and Herries and Dig grinned. Possibly they doubted whether, in single combat, the elegant swell of St. Jim's could have overcome the hefty Figgins.

"Thwashin' him would not meet the case, anyway," went on Arthur Augustus. "It is not a mattah for House wows. Was it a School House goal or not that beat Gweyfwiahs?"

"It jolly well was," agreed Blake.

"It was a School House win really," assented Dig.

"Hear, hear!" concurred Herries.

On that point at least all study No. 6 were of one mind. There had been New House men in the team certainly. Equally certainly, they had played up well and truly. Nevertheless only one goal had been taken, and that had been

taken by a School House man. If that wasn't a win for the House, Blake and Co. would have liked to know what was!

"That fat chap Wynn did jolly well in goal, though," added Herries, by way of afterthought.

"You do not win soccah matches merely by doin' well in goal, Hewwies."

"Oh, no! But if the Greyfriars men had got through—"

"They did not get through, so the question does not awise. A School House man won the match wight on the whistle."

"Well, everybody helped," said Digby. "Especially Wynn—"

"Oh, bothah Wynn!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have heard quite enough about him, and a little ovah. I am not detwactin' from his good work in goal; but we owe the victowy to a School House man."

"Hear, hear," said Blake. "Now what about prep?"

"Nevah mind pwep for the moment, Blake. That cheeky ass Figgins actually said that Wynn had pulled the game through—"

"Well, in a way—" began Blake.

"Pway do not argue, Blake. I twust you are not goin' to back up those New House wottahs against your own House!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly.

"Perish the thought!" said Blake. "Now what about prep?"

"Will you kindly stop chattewin' about pwep while I am talkin'?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"Well, prep's prep, and if you're going on talking till the bell for dorm—"

"Wats! My ideah is that we are goin' to make it perfectly cleah to those New House ticks that it was a School House win and that is what I am coming to."

"Oh! You're coming to something?" asked Blake, as if he had not, so far, guessed that one!"

"Weally, you ass—"

"Come to it quick, then," urged Blake. "There's to be a row with Lathom in the morning, if we leave prep over while you do a chin solo."

"Tom Mewwy, a School House man, put up that goal, and won the match," said Arthur Augustus. "It is the last soccah match befoah Chwistmas, and a School House man won it for St. Jim's. The New House ticks can talk all the wubbish they like but that is how the mattah stands. We are goin' to wub it in—because—"

"Because Figgins hooked your leg?" asked Dig.

"Nothin' of the sort—"

"Because he ducked your napper in the changing-room?" asked Herries.

"No!" roared Arthur Augustus. "We are goin' to wub it in because it is twue, and will put those cheekay New House wottahs in their place."

At which Blake and Co. grinned. Arthur Augustus was very much in earnest. But they could not help surmising that the hooking of his aristocratic

leg, and the ducking of his noble head, had a sub-conscious influence. Anyhow it was clear that Gussy was determined to regard the Greyfriars game as wholly, or almost wholly, a School House victory, and quite, quite determined to rub that fact into the New House.

"But how are we going to rub it in?" asked Blake. "Do you want us to go and shout it under the windows of the New House?"

"Pway do not be wiculous, Blake. "

"Or whisper it in their ears in the form-room, when Lathom isn't looking?" asked Dig.

"If you are goin' to talk like a silly ass, Dig—"

"Well, what's the big idea, then?" asked Herries.

"We are goin' to make a public wecognition of the fact that a School House man beat Gweyfwiahs, by makin' a pwesentation to Tom Mewwy, as the winnah of the game," explained Arthur Augustus. "That will make the fact quite cleah, as well as makin' the New House ticks vewy wild. As it is Chwistmas time, the pwesentation will take the form of a Chwistmas pwesent."

"Oh!" said Blake.

"A vewy suitable Chwistmas pwesent, in my opinion, would be one of those big Chwistmas cakes you can get at the Wayland stores," continued Arthur Augustus. "It will be inscwibed to the man who won the Gweyfwiahs match, with best wishes for a Mewwy Chwistmas, and all that."

"But—" said Blake and Herries and Digby, together.

"Weally, you fellows, if you are goin' to begin buttin' like a lot of billy-goats—" said Arthur Augustus crossly.

"Those Christmas cakes are jolly expensive," remarked Herries.

"That is all wight, Hewwies. We will have a subscwption to buy the cake, and it won't come to a lot among a lot of fellows—a bob or two all wound. The fellows will play up, just to make it cleah, you know, that the New House smudges are merely also wans in football mattahs. We make a Chwistmas pwesent to the School House man who won the game, passin' by the New House ticks like the idle wind which we wegard not, see?"

That was the big idea, which had been exercising the noble intellect of the swell of St. Jim's. Having propounded it, Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass from face to face, inquiringly, to ascertain what his comrades thought of it.

Perhaps he expected them to enthuse. But there was no sign of any exuberant enthusiasm in study No. 6. Big as the idea was, it did not seem to have made a big impression.

"It would make the New House men wild," remarked Digby. "But—"

"There's that!" agreed Herries. "But—"

"Those Christmas cakes are scrumptious," remarked Jack Blake, thoughtfully. "If Tommy had one given him, he would whack it out in a feed, and we should all come in on it. But—"

"Bai Jove! I was certainly not wegardin' it from that point of view, Blake," exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"You wouldn't," agreed Blake. "They don't hand out much in the way of sense to the tenth possessor of a foolish face—"

"You cheeky ass—"

"You want to know what we think of the idea?" asked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Well, I think it's rather rot! What do you think, Dig?"

"Piffle!" said Dig. "What do you think, Herries?"

"Tosh!" said Herries.

"And now that's settled, let's get on to prep," said Blake, briskly. "Nobody wants to be shoved into Extra to-morrow."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood with his eyeglass gleaming in his eye, surveying his friends with a withering stare. He did not seem interested in getting on to prep. Prep was a trifle light as air at the moment. Blake seemed to think the matter settled, over and done with. But it was far from settled, over, or done with, so far as Arthur Augustus was concerned. Kind and mild and placid as Gussy was, there was a streak of obstinacy in him, which was rather reinforced than otherwise by opposition.

"So that is what you fellows think?" he asked, with calm dignity.

"Yes! Anybody seen my Virgil?" asked Blake.

"If you fellows are not goin' to back me up—"

"Oh, we'll back you up, all right, old chap," assured Blake. "If that cake comes along, we'll all pile in and scoff our whack. Can't say fairer than that."

"If you are going to talk like a silly ass, Blake—"

"Leave that to you, partner," said Blake affably.

"I shall certainly cawwy on with the ideah," said Arthur Augustus. "I think it is the wight and pwopah thing to do, and that is that!"

"But, my dear old ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass, Blake."

"Well, dear old donkey, then, if you like that better—"

"Wats!"

"But look here—"

"I wepeat, wats! Pway dwop the subject," said Arthur Augustus, loftily. "And we had bettah get on with pwep, if you fellahs don't want a wow with Lathom in the mornin'."

And the subject was dropped, and study No. 6 got on with prep—not before it was time so to do. But if Blake and Co. supposed that Arthur Augustus was likely to forget his big idea, it only showed that even after a quite long acquaintance, they did not quite know their Gussy. That big idea was as fixed and immutable in Gussy's noble mind as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

CHAPTER III

SHELL OUT!

"TOM MEWWY heah?"

"Yes!" said Tom.

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

He seemed a little taken aback.

It was the following day, after class. The "Terrible Three" were in their study, No. 10 in the Shell, when an elegant figure and a gleaming eyeglass appeared in the doorway.

All three were busy. Manners was polishing his camera, on which, possibly, there was a speck of dust. No speck of dust was permitted to obtain permanent lodgment on Manners' camera. Monty Lowther was giving the finishing touches to a limerick, and grinning over it as if he considered it extremely funny, as doubtless he did. Tom was scribbling the last line of fifty for Mr Linton, his form master, which had to be taken in before tea. However, he delayed the completion of that last line to answer the question asked from the doorway.

"Oh!" repeated Arthur Augustus. "You—you are heah, deah boy?"

"Sort of," agreed Tom. "Want anything?"

"Not pwecisely."

"Something to say to me?"

"Oh no! Not at all."

Tom stared at him.

"You've come here to see me, and you don't want anything, and you've got nothing to say?" he inquired.

"I—I did not exactly come heah to see you, deah boy. I was goin' to speak to Mannahs and Lowthah, as a mattah of fact. I was not awah that you were in the study—Blake said he was seein' you in the gym—"

"After I've handed these lines to Linton," said Tom. "I'm nearly through." He stared harder at the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus's question had been asked, apparently, not because he wanted to see Tom, but because he didn't! He was obviously a little disconcerted by finding him in the study with his friends. "You young ass—!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Do you mean you want to speak to my pals without me here?" asked Tom. "If that's it, I'm going down in a minute. But what the thump do you mean?"

"Oh! Nothin', deah boy."

"What's the jolly old secret?" asked Tom, glancing in turn at Harry Manners and Montague Lowther.

"Ask me another!" said Manners, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Gussy's wandering in his mind, I expect."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Off-side!" said Monty Lowther, shaking his head. "He hasn't one to wander in."

"Weally, Lothah—"

"Well, here goes," said Tom. He finished his last line, blotted it, and rose from the table. "I'm going down! You can whisper your jolly old mysterious secrets in another minute, Gussy."

"Bai Jove, you know, weally——"

"Don't go for a minute," said Monty Lowther. "Listen to this limerick Lucky Gussy's barged in—it will interest him too. Listen, my beloved 'earers.'" And the funny man of the Shell read it out.

There was a young fellow named Gussy,
Whose manners were fearfully fussy,
One day a chap sat
On his best Sunday hat.
Ere he fainted, he moaned "Lor-a-mussy!"

Manners smiled, and Tom Merry laughed. They were Monty's pals, and that was the least they could do, when Monty was facetious. But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy neither smiled nor laughed. He jammed his eyeglass a little tighter into his noble eye, and gave Monty Lowther a withering look.

"You uttah ass, Lowthah!" he exclaimed. "Do you wegard that as funnay? You are vewy well awah that I should not uttah so widiculous a wemark as 'Lor-a-mussy!' I wegard you as a silly ass, Lowthah."

Tom Merry, laughing, left the study, to take his lines down to Mr. Linton. Arthur Augustus seemed disposed to follow him out of No. 10, regardless of the matter, whatever it was, upon which he had come there to speak to Manners and Lowther.

"Like to hear another?" asked Lowther, affably.

"Certainly not, Lowthah."

"I've one about a guy with a pane in his eye—!"

"Pway do not wead out any more of your wubbish, Lowthah. Now that Tom Mewwy has gone down, I can bwoach the subject I came to speak to you fellows about. I could hardly bwoach it in his pwesence, you know."

"Why not?" asked Manners.

"You see, Tom is to be the wecipient of the Cwistmas present," explained Arthur Augustus. "That is why, Mannahs."

"The Christmas present?" repeated Manners. "Anybody making Tom a Christmas present ahead of Christmas?"

"We shall not be heah on Cwistmas Day, so it could hardly be left ovah till that date, Mannahs. Besides it is intended as a public wecognition of the fact that a School House man won the Gweyfwinars match, and that the New House were simply nowhere. The ideah is that we all wally wound and pwesent

Tom Mewwy with a whackin' Chwistmas cake—as the man who kicked the winnin' goal, and beat Gweyfwiahs at Soccah, see?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Lowther.

"It will demonstwate to the New House smudges that we wegard them with uttah indifference and disdain," said Arthur Augustus. "It will wub in the fact that School House is cock-house of St. Jim's, and the New House simply somethin' that the cat might have bwrought in. Tom Mewwy will weceive the Chwistmas pwesent in wecognition of his gweat feat!"

"Think he'd like that?" asked Monty Lowther.

"I twust so, Lowthah!"

"Fellows don't generally like allusions to their great feet," said Lowther, shaking his head. "Besides, I've never noticed that Tom's feet are bigger than any other fellow's. Have you, Manners?"

Manners chuckled.

"You uttah ass, Lowthah—!" yapped Arthur Augustus.

"Thanks! Same to you, and many of them!"

"I was not alludin' to his feet, as you know vewy well, Lowthah! I was alludin' to his feat in beatin' Gweyfwiahs at Soccah. It was a vewy gweat feat, in my opinion, and by makin' this pwesentation we put the New House wottahs wight in their place. It will make them vewy watty."

"Not much doubt about that," remarked Manners. "Since the argument started, they've been making out that Fatty Wynn did more than all the School House men in the team combined.

"That is uttah wot, Mannahs, and feahful cheek! It was a School House victowy, and we are goin' to celebwate it by givin' honah where honah is due. Tom Mewwy is the man."

Manners shook his head.

"Tom wouldn't stand for it," he said. "Fact is, he was saying to-day that Wynn of the New House had as much to do with beating Greyfriars as any man in the team, and more than most."

"Tom all over!" remarked Lowther.

"That is vewy wight and pwopah of Tom Mewwy, and his modesty does him cwedit," said Arthur Augustus. "But facts are facts all the same, and we are goin' to make that cleah to the New House. Those boundahs have got to learn where they get off."

"A consummation devoutly to be wished—Shakespeare!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! It will make Figgins and Co. vewy wild, and Figgins will have to wealize that he cannot althah facts by hookin' a fellow's leg, or splashin' his head in a basin of watah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to cackle at, in Figgins's wuffianly antics," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway be sewious on a sewious subject. We talked it

ovah in my study, but Blake and Hewwies and Dig did not seem to think vevy much of the ideah—”

“Same here,” remarked Manners.

“And then some,” agreed Lowther.

“I have called heah to see you, as Tom Mewwy’s pals,” said Arthur Augustus. “I twust you will back up. Blake and Hewwies and Dig have agreed to contwibute to buyin’ the cake: but unfortunately money is short, and their whole contwibution comes only to fourpence-halfpenny, which won’t go vevy fah. But I am startin’ the subscwription with a ten-shillin’ note. How much are you subscwibin’, Mannahs?”

“Wash it out, old man—”

“I wefuse to wash it out, Mannahs.”

“Then wash me out,” said Manners.

“Wats! I twust, Lowthah, that you are goin’ to play up,” said Arthur Augustus. “I do not want to dwaw this study blank.”

“My dear chap, in a cause like this I’d hand over my last farthing,” said Monty Lowther, heartily.

Arthur Augustus smiled cheerily.

“That’s the wight spiwit, old chap,” he said, approvingly. “Shell out deah boy.”

Monty Lowther went through his pockets carefully. He seemed to be in search of some particular coin.

“Here you are, Gussy,” he said at last.

Arthur Augustus held out an open palm for the contribution. Monty Lowther placed an extremely small coin in it.

“Spend the whole lot, and blow the expense,” he said.

“Bai Jove!”

Arthur Augustus gazed at the coin in his noble palm. Having gazed at it he gazed at Lowther.

“What is this, Lowthah?”

“My last farthing!” said Lowther, affably. “I’ve had it quite a long time and now it’s come in useful at last. I said I’d contribute my last farthing, and there it is! I don’t want any change.”

“You uttah ass!” roared Arthur Augustus.

“What?”

“You funnay fathead—!”

“Is that how you’re going to thank fellows for their contributions to the fund?” inquired Lowther. “You won’t get a lot of subscriptions at that rate.”

“I wegard you as a howlin’ ass, Lowthah! Wats!”

There was a clink, as Arthur Augustus hurled Monty Lowther’s last farthing into the fender. Then there was a bang, as he stalked out of No. 10 study and shut the door after him with a slam. The swell of St. Jim’s departed in wrath, leaving two fellows laughing in No. 10 in the Shell.

CHAPTER IV

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS MEANS BUSINESS

"THAT ass?" said Figgins.

"That goat!" remarked Keer.

"That chump!" said Fatty Wynn.

The chums of the New House seemed quite unanimous in their opinion it was a case of three souls with but a single thought: three hearts that beat as one!

They were glancing at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the School House, as they made those approbrious remarks to one another.

It was morning break at St. Jim's and Figgins and Co. were strolling in the quad in the cold and frosty morning. They sighted the swell of the School House sitting on one of the old benches under a leafless tree with an open notebook on his knee, a pencil in his hand, and a frown of concentrated thought on his noble brow.

Arthur Augustus did not observe Figgins and Co. He was too deep in his engrossing calculations, whatever they were. He looked like a fellow "bottled" by some particularly thorny mathematical problem. Even his eyeglass had dropped from his eye, and hung unheeded at the end of its cord.

"That fathead!" went on Figgins. "Making out that the School House beat Greyfriars the other day—"

"Cheek!" agreed Kerr.

"If any man won that match, it was a New House man," said Figgins. "Time and again they nearly got through. 'Member how that chap Wharton jolly nearly potted the pill, and Fatty saved it fairly with his finger-tips."

"That was a narrow shave," remarked Fatty Wynn.

"And that dark chap, Inky they call him, fairly bunged it in," said Kerr. "Nobody could have saved that goal but Fatty here. How he managed to head it out I don't know now."

"It came rather a crack," said Fatty.

"Over and over again," said Figgins, rather excitedly. "Why, it was anybody's game, except for the goalie. The Greyfriars men had a good man between the sticks, but we had a better."

"We had!" agreed Kerr.

"I ain't saying that it wasn't a good goal from Tom Merry," continued Figgins. "It was! And it just won! But, but for Fatty, Greyfriars would have had three or four, and where should we have been then?"

"Echo answers where!" said Kerr.

"It's just School House swank!" said Figgins, "and I've a jolly good mind to walk over and bang Gussy's silly head on that tree. I'd give him School House wins and Christmas cakes, the silly ass!"

The fact was, that argument had run high on the subject of the Greyfriars match. As both Houses played for the School, argument after a game was not exactly uncommon. School House, as the more numerous House, always had a majority of men in the team: but many School House men took the view that there were too many of the New House in it all the same. While if things went amiss, New House men inevitably and infallibly attributed it to lack of New House recruits: and expressed a fixed belief that things would have gone better with more New House players in the field. Tom Merry, as junior captain, was as impartial as a fellow could be: he held the balance with an even hand, which was admitted on both sides: nevertheless arguments survived. And on this special occasion there seemed to be more argument than ever. It had started on the soccer ground almost the minute the game was over: it had continued in the changing-room: and it had gone on ever since. St. Jim's had beaten Greyfriars, and that was satisfactory all round: but whether the victory was due more to the School House than to the New House, or more to the New House than to the School House, was a moot point—and the rivals of St. Jim's argued the point, and indeed worried it like a dog worrying a bone. Tom Merry had declared that it did not matter two hoots one way or the other: but it was said of old that wisdom cries out and no man regards it! Whether it mattered or not, the argument went on: and was kept all the more alive by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's big idea of Tom Merry's Christmas present, which was to emphasize the School House view in the most unmistakable manner.

Naturally, Figgins and Co. were wrathful: and at the moment, Arthur Augustus's noble head was in peril of being banged against the old elm under which he sat with his note-book, pencil, and calculations.

"Let's!" said Kerr, in reply to Figgy's suggestion. "Might do him good to bang his silly nut."

"Couldn't bang any sense into it," said Fatty Wynn.

"Try!" said Figgins.

"Oh, all right."

And the New House trio started towards Arthur Augustus. But they stopped as three Shell fellows of the School House came along the path, and halted under the elm to speak to D'Arcy. Banging a School House head with three other School House men on the spot was not practical politics: so Figgins and Co. waited for Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther to pass on their way. However, they did not pass on immediately.

"Looking for you, Gussy," said Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus glanced up from his notebook.

"Heah I am, deah boy," he said cheerily. "I am wathah in a jam with these figures."

"Maths?" asked Manners, with interest. Manners was quite a whale on maths, and always ready to lend a less gifted fellow a helping hand.

"Oh! No! It's the subscription list," explained Arthur Augustus. "Waisin'

the wind for the pwsentation, you know: Tom Mewwy's Chwistmas pwsent."

"That's what I want to speak to you about, Gussy," said Tom. "Chuck it, see? It's all rot, old chap."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Tripe," said Tom. "I've heard all about it, and it's rot. Any man might have kicked that goal the other day—Talbot or Blake or Figgins— And Wynn in goal saved the game all through."

"That is not my opinion, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, calmly. "I wegard it as a School House victowy, and I am certainly goin' to dwaw attention to the fact that the New House simply did not come into the picture. Figgins could not have kicked that winnin' goal to save his life. He is bettah at hookin' a fellow's leg or duckin' his head, than at kickin' goals!" added Arthur Augustus, with sarcasm. "Pway say no more about it. You are goin' to be pwsented with a special Chwistmas pwsent for winnin' the match—"

"Cut it out, I tell you."

"Wats!"

"I won't have it, I tell you."

"Wats again!"

Tom Merry looked very expressively at the swell of St. Jim's. Indeed, just then Gussy's noble head was in peril of again being banged against the tree, though not by New House hands. Manners and Lowther grinned. Apparently Tom Merry was to be presented with a Christmas present whether he liked it or not! He was, in fact, only a pawn in the game: Gussy's big idea was to put the New House in its place, and that idea was now so firmly fixed in Gussy's noble head that nothing short of a surgical operation would have removed it.

"Pway say no more, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "It is all cut and dwied. I am goin' ovah to Wayland aftah class for the cake: and while I quite approve of your modesty in the mattah, I must weally wequest you not to argue about it. Now wun away or I shall nevah get this wight befoah the bell goes for class. Pewwaps you would like to add it up for me, Mannahs—you are wathah bettah at awithmetic than I am."

"Slightly, I think," agreed Manners, with a grin: and he took the notebook and the Terrible Three glanced at the subscription list. Then Tom Merry's brow cleared, and he smiled.

That list did not indicate that much of a harvest had been gathered in, in the way of hard cash, or that the Christmas cake was very likely to materialize.

	£	s.	d.
A. A. D'Arcy		10	0
W. A. D'Arcy, minor			1
H. Skimple			1
B. Glyn			6
H. Noble			3

R. R. Cardew	1
S. Clive	1
E. Levison	1
R. Talbot	6
G. Gore	2
J. Blake	2
G. Herries	1
R. A. Digby	1½
G. Wilkins	3
H. Hammond	4
	<hr/>
Total	<hr/>

Arthur Augustus had not yet entered the total. Having cast up the column of pence several times, he seemed a little doubtful about the result. Perhaps his aristocratic brain did not deal easily with figures.

"Of course, it's quite easy, Mannahs," he remarked.

"Quite," grinned Manners.

"Well, does that column come to two and sevenpence halfpenny or to two and tenpence halfpenny, old chap?"

Manners chuckled.

"Neither!" he answered.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Two and ninepence ha'penny," said Manners. "Total, twelve and ninepence ha'penny."

Arthur Augustus looked very thoughtful.

"Those Chwistmas cakes won to twenty-five shillin's," he said. "Twelve and ninepence halfpenny from twenty-five shillin's leaves—let's see—leaves eleven and elevenpence halfpenny—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows—"

"That wouldn't do for Lathom," grinned Monty Lowther.

"I—I mean, it leaves eleven and ninepence halfpenny," said Arthur Augustus, hastily. "So I still have that amount to waise."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any weason for cacklin'—"

"Your jolly old arithmetic would make a stone image cackle, old man. It leaves twelve and twopence ha'penny," said Manners.

"That is not a lot of diffewence, Mannahs. All I wequiah is twelve and twopence halfpenny, then. I wondah where it is comin' fwom!" added Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully. "I'm gettin' the cake to-day, you know."

Tom Merry and Co. chuckling, walked on, and left him to wonder. As

the subscription list had been open for some days, and had produced only two shillings and ninepence halfpenny so far, it seemed improbable that Arthur Augustus would ever arrive at the required sum, and unlikely that that Christmas cake would ever materialize at St. Jim's: which would put "paid" to Gussy's big idea. Certainly it seemed rather a problem, as Arthur Augustus's own resources were limited to the 10s. note that already figured in the list.

Arthur Augustus sat with a wrinkled brow over that problem: unconscious of Figgins and Co. eyeing him, under the elms. Having given the "Terrible Three" time to get to a safe distance, the New House trio bore down on Arthur Augustus. The time had arrived for action.

"Bag him!" said Figgins.

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"Bai Jove! You New House wuffians—let go my collah, Figgins—wow! Let go my arm, Kerr—bai Jove! I will give you a feahful thwashin' all wound—wow—yawooh!"

Tap!

The most aristocratic head at St. Jim's tapped on the trunk of the elm. A most unaristocratic yell pealed from Arthur Augustus.

"Yawoooooh!"

"Give him another!"

Tap!

"Oh, cwumbs! Oh, cwikey! Wow!" roared Arthur Augustus, struggling frantically in three pairs of hands. "Ow! Wow! You uttah wottahs—wow!"

"Now, which House won the Greyfriars match?" demanded Figgins.

"School House," gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Give him another!"

"Whoooooh!" spluttered Arthur Augustus, as the New House trio, grinning gave him another. "Oh, scissahs! Wow!"

"Now which House won the Greyfriars match?" grinned Figgins.

"Wooh! School House!" gurgled Arthur Augustus. Gussy would have made that reply, if it had been with his last breath. "School House, you wottah!"

"Give him another!"

"Yawoooooh! Oh, cwumbs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and Co. having administered that final tap, trotted away, laughing. The bell for third school was beginning to ring. Arthur Augustus, for the moment, did not heed the bell. He sprawled on the old bench, gasping for breath, and rubbing the back of his head. He had not finished either process when the bell ceased to ring, and Arthur Augustus realized that it behoved him to head for the form-room. He was still gasping when he arrived there: and he gave George Figgins, already in his place, a withering, indeed

devastating glare: to which, to Gussy's speechless indignation, Figgins responded only with a wink.

But if the heroes of the New House fancied that tapping Gussy's noble head would knock a fixed idea out of it, they had another guess coming. After class that day, Arthur Augustus walked out of gates and headed for Wayland—his financial problem, apparently quite disregarded. Figgins and Co. watched him go, and exchanged expressive glances. After which, three heads were put together in consultation: and a little later, Figgins and Co. also walked out of gates.

CHAPTER V

UNEXPECTED!

WHOOOOOSH!
"Gwoooogh!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hardly knew what was happening.

Up to that moment all had gone well. And how and why something unseen and unknown dropped over his noble head, blotting out the frosty trees, the frosty bushes, and the wintry landscape generally, he simply did not know. He was taken quite by surprise.

He had walked over to Wayland. He had dealt successfully with the matter of the Christmas cake in Mr. Tucker's shop in the High Street. He had selected a very handsome cake, at the handsome price of twenty-five shillings: and the plump and genial Mr. Tucker, genially obliging a good customer, had genially and willingly agreed to take twelve-and-six on account and leave the other twelve-and-six to be settled later. Thus simply had Arthur Augustus solved his financial problem.

The handsome cake was handsomely packed, in a nice strong cardboard box, neatly tied with string. It was quite a large parcel, and its weight was considerable: but Arthur Augustus walked out of the confectioner's shop quite cheerily with it under his arm. On the white iced top of that cake, in red letters, was the ancient and familiar inscription: **MERRY CHRISTMAS**. Really it was quite a magnificent cake, and perhaps worth the twenty-five shillings that Mr. Tucker had charged for it. Certainly it was the largest cake that had ever graced a junior study in either House at St. Jim's. Any fellow who was not pleased with such a Christmas present must really have been very hard to please.

All that Arthur Augustus now had to do was to walk back to St. Jim's with that handsome Christmas present, and bestow it safely in study No. 6: later to be presented to the junior captain of the House. Tom himself, it was true, had not seemed to welcome the idea—rather the reverse. Arthur Augustus

disregarded that, as a trifle light as air. That Christmas present was going to be presented to Tom, in the junior day-room, amid a cheering crowd of School House fellows: and the more exasperated the New House men were about it, the better. In fact the exasperation of the New House was the primary object. It would rub in, well and truly, the undoubted fact—undoubted in Gussy's opinion at least, which was shared by most School House fellows, that the School House had beaten Greyfriars, and that the New House were nowhere, and not worth mentioning in connection with soccer.

Cheerily, Arthur Augustus walked out of Wayland and took the footpath through the wood for Rylcombe Lane and St. Jim's. It was a little misty in the wood, and a cold December wind blew through the leafless trees and bushes, and a few light snowflakes floated on the wind. But the weather did not worry Arthur Augustus. With his coat-collar turned up, and the rather heavy parcel under his arm, he tramped cheerily along the footpath, under over-arched branches glimmering with frost.



And then it happened.

What happened he hardly knew. At one moment, he was walking along briskly, with the misty wintry wood round him: the next, the wintry wood vanished suddenly from sight, and he was in darkness, with something musty and clinging over his head.

Naturally it had not occurred to Arthur Augustus, as he tramped, to look up at the branches that arched over the narrow footpath. Certainly it could never have occurred to him that any persons were ensconced in those branches, waiting and watching for him to walk back from Wayland. Still less could he have surmised that those persons had provided themselves with a roomy old sack, which had once contained potatoes, but was now scheduled to contain the noble napper of the swell of St. Jim's. No such surmises were in Arthur Augustus's mind: and it was a complete surprise to him, when that sack dropped neatly on his head, enclosing it, and flapped down round his elegant person.

He staggered and gurgled.

He did not even hear the sound as three fellows dropped actively from the tree. His parcel slipped from under his arm to the ground, and rolled in damp grass. He did not heed it—he was grappling wildly with the enveloping sack, and spluttering for breath in its interior.

“Bai Jove! What—who—how—oh, cwumbs! What is it? Oh, cwikey! It—it—it's a sack—oh, scissahs—gwoooogh—”

Probably it would not have taken Arthur Augustus long to struggle out of the sack, had he been permitted so to do. But he was not permitted. Unseen hands grasped him on all sides, and he was pinned.

He struggled wildly. His noble brain was in a whirl with the suddenness of the happening. He could see nothing, and hear nothing—who had collared him was a blank mystery to him. Whoever they were, they had him—on that point, at least, there was not a shadow of doubt. The swell of St. Jim's enveloped in the sack, was a helpless prisoner in unknown hands. He had simply no chance: but he struggled all the same. Arthur Augustus was not the fellow to give in, if he could help it.

“Urrggh! Welease me, you wottahs, whoevah you are!” he spluttered from the interior of the potato-sack. “You fwightful wuffians, welease me at once.”

There was no reply.

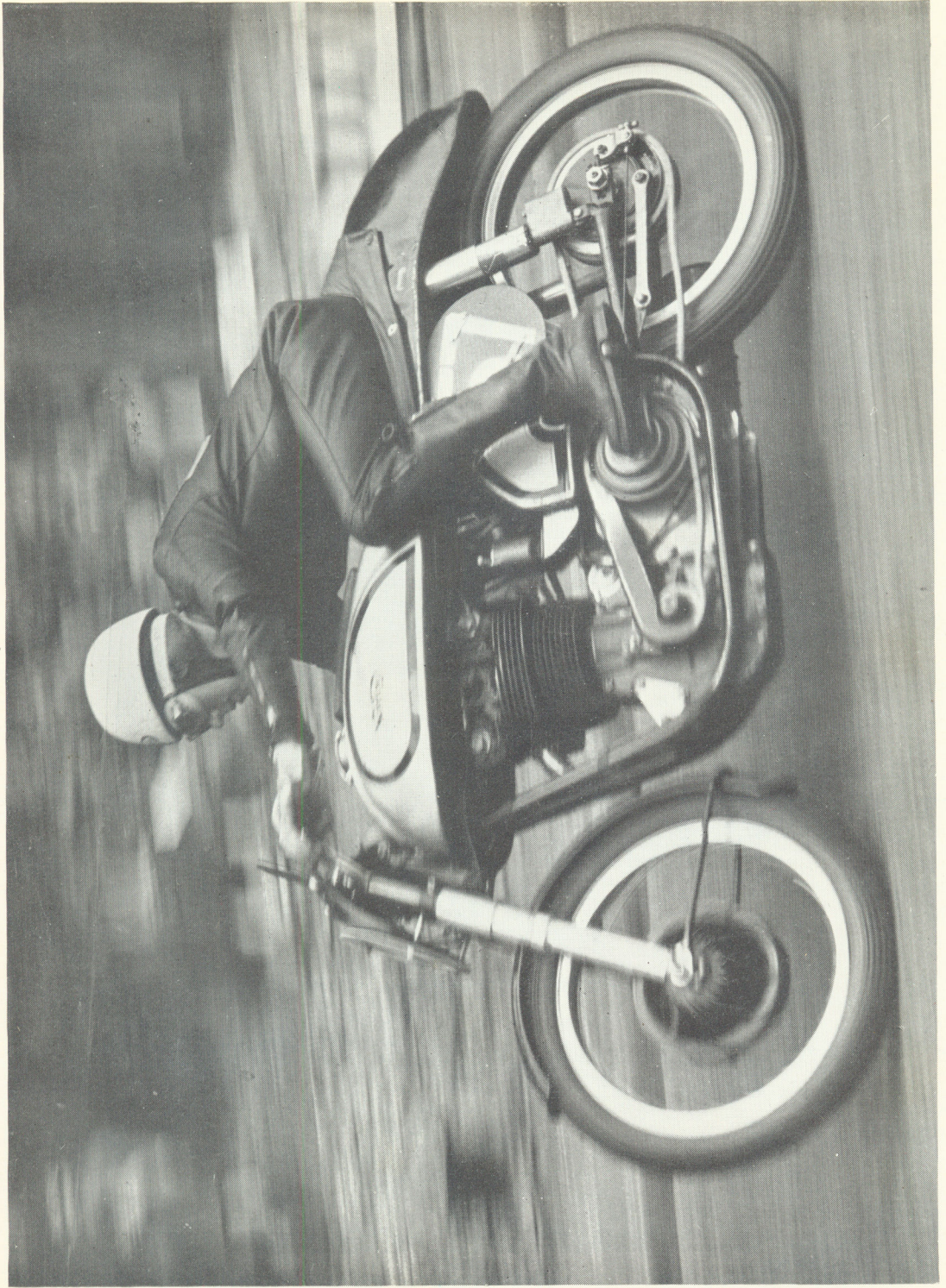
Action, not words, seemed to be the cue of his assailants. Heedless of Gussy's manful resistance, they pinned him, up-ended him, and sat him down in the grassy footpath. He sat down rather hard, with a bump and a gasp.

Then he was suddenly released.

The hands that had grasped him in a vice-like grip relinquished their hold. Vaguely, through the sack, he heard the sound of running feet. He realized



Champions. I. RANDOLPH TURPIN



Champions. 2. GEOFFREY DUKE

that his assailants, whoever they were, had gone—leaving him sitting in the musty old sack!

He grappled with the sack. He succeeded, at length, in peeling it off, over his head. He stared about him dizzily.

He was alone on the footpath. The wintry wood reappeared to his vision: but it was quite uninhabited. His mysterious assailants had vanished—in what direction he could not begin to guess. But they were gone—there was not a sign of them—Arthur Augustus sat gasping in the grass, as solitary as Robinson Crusoe on his island.

“Oh, cwumbs!” gurgled Arthur Augustus, and he staggered to his feet, gasping for breath, and still considerably bewildered. “Oh, cwikey! I wondah who they were—some of those wuffs fwom Wayland, I suppose—oh, cwikey! Bai Jove—where is that box?”

He had not had much time to think of the box, containing the Christmas cake, which had fallen from under his arm when the sack descended. But he thought of it now. He stared round for that box—but he stared in vain. He jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and continued to stare—but even with the aid of his celebrated monocle he could not discern an object that was not there! The cake-box had disappeared.

“Oh!” gasped Arthur Augustus.

The swell of St. Jim’s was not, perhaps, remarkably quick on the uptake. But he could guess that the parcel, and the unknown assailants, had disappeared together! He comprehended the meaning of that unexpected onslaught at last. They had been after his parcel!

“Oh!” repeated Arthur Augustus, blankly.

They were gone. The box was gone. They—whoever “they” were—had bolted with it and vanished.

Who they were, and where they had gone, Arthur Augustus could not begin to guess. He knew that there were some rough characters in the region of the Black Bull at Wayland, and surmised that some of them might have spotted him on a lonely footpath with a parcel, and followed on to snatch it. If that was not the explanation, Arthur Augustus could not think of one.

Anyhow, the cake was gone—and there was not a clue, not the ghost of a clue, to the identity of the lawless persons who had lifted it.

“Oh!” breathed Arthur Augustus, for the third time.

Slowly and sadly he walked on to St. Jim’s: cake-less.

He was not looking his usual sunny self as he came in at the gates, just before Taggles came out to close them. Three New House fellows, lounging near the gateway, glanced at him as he came in, and smiled.

But Arthur Augustus did not heed Figgins and Co. or their smiles. With a corrugated brow, he walked on to the School House: leaving the New House trio grinning almost from ear to ear.

CHAPTER VI

BY WHOSE HAND?

“OH! HERE you are!” said Blake.

“Heah I am, deah boy.”

“Anything up?” asked Tom Merry.

“Yaas, wathah.”

Half a dozen fellows were seated round the table in study No. 6. Tea was going on—a little later than usual. Blake and Co. had waited a while for their noble chum: but as Arthur Augustus did not arrive, they sat down to tea with three guests from the Shell. It was now past lockups, and they rather wondered what had become of Arthur Augustus, and whether he would bag lines from Railton for getting in late. However, here he was at last: but not, apparently in his usual cheery mood. His face was frowning, and it was clear that something had happened to perturb his aristocratic calm.

“Lines from Railton?” asked Herries.

“No! I was not in late, Hewwies.”

“Then why didn’t you come up to tea before this?” asked Digby.

“I had to get a wash and a bwushup, Dig! I was in a vewy wumpled and dusty state when I came in.”

“Who’s been rumpling and dusting the one and only?” asked Monty Lowther.

“Weally, Lowthah—”

“New House rag?” asked Manners.

“No! I think it was some wuffs fwom Wayland, but I weally do not know. I did not see them. I think there were three of them.”

Six fellows gazed at Arthur Augustus.

“Three of them?” repeated Blake.

“Yaas! They gwabbed me wight and left, and I wathah think there were three pairs of hands. But I couldn’t be quite suah, as I did not see them.”

“Three fellows collared you and rumped you, and you didn’t see them!” exclaimed Blake.

“Yaas.”

“Walking about with your eyes shut?”

“Weally, Blake—”

“Then how the jolly old thump didn’t you see them, if there were three of them and they collared you?” demanded Blake.

“I could not see them with my head inside a sack, Blake. It was quite imposs.”

“Inside a sack!” gasped Blake.

“Yaas—a vewy dusty wotten old sack. It made my clobbah fwightfully

dusty, and wumped my hair, and actually made my face dirty," said Arthur Augustus, in a tone of deep feeling.

"You didn't walk home from Wayland with your head in a sack, did you?" asked Herries, staring blankly at Arthur Augustus.

"I wegard that as a widiculous question, Hewwies. Certainly I did nothin' of the kind. The sack was dwopped ovah my head fwom a twee ovah the foot-path, and they collahed me befoah I could stwuggle out of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Does it stwike you fellows as funnay?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, indignantly. "I fail to see anythin' funnay in a bunch of wuffians dwoppin' a sack ovah a fellow's head, and wumplin' him wight and left. You fellows seem to have a vewy peculiah sense of humah, if you think it funnay."

"Too bad, old man," said Tom Merry, laughing. "So you don't know who perpetrated the fell deed?"

"Haven't a clue, deah boy. They were gone when I got the sack off—they left me sittin' in the gwass with my head in it—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am vewy glad that you are amused," said Arthur Augustus, sarcastically. "It did not seem amusin' to me. My clobbah was in a fwightfully wumped and gwubby state, and my collah howwibly soiled—"

"But why the dickens should they have picked on you?" said Dig.

"I suppose they were aftah the cake, Dig."

"The cake?" repeated the whole tea-party in study No. 6.

"You see, they snooped it," explained Arthur Augustus. "The box was gone when I got out of the sack. They must have taken it with them when they bolted. I looked evewywhah, but the box was gone."

"Well, you ass!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"You fathead!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"You let them walk off with a twenty-five bob cake?" exclaimed Digby. "Well, you're the limit."

"They did not walk off with it, Dig."

"You've just said they did!"

"I have said nothin' of the sort, Dig. I said they wan off with it. If they had walked, I should have caught them, and I should certainly have given them a feahful thwashin' all wound, and wecaptured the cake."

"I can sort of see you thrashing three roughs in a bunch!" grinned Blake. "Lucky for you they were gone."

"So you did gef the cake after all?" said Monty Lowther. "Have the subs. rolled in since break this morning?"

"As a mattah of fact, Lowthah, the subs did not woll in, but I awwanged the mattah by owin' Mr. Tuckah twelve-and-six on the cake."

"Oh, my hat!" said Manners. "You paid twelve-and-six, and you owe Tucker twelve-and-six, and somebody else has walked off with the cake."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have already said, Mannahs, that they did not walk off with it. They wan off with it."

"Comes to the same thing, so far as the cake is concerned," said Monty Lowther. "Tommy, you won't be presented with that Christmas present after all."

"Good!" said Tom.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Wash it all out, and forget all about it, Gussy," said Tom. "We'll have a whip round to raise that twelve-and-six for Tucker, and there's an end."

"I wefuse to wash it out, and I wefuse to forget all about it," answered Arthur Augustus, calmly. "I wegwet, Tom Mewwy, that you take up so vewy ungwacious an attitude towards a Chwistmas pwsent pwsented to you by admiwin' fwiends, but I shall certainly cawwy on, and make it cleah to all St. Jim's what we think in this House of the New House ticks and their widiculous claim to have won the Gweyfwiahs match."

"Look here, you ass—"

"Wats!"

"No good arguing with Gussy, Tom," sighed Blake. "Gussy's as obstinate as a mule, and then some."

"You pwobably mean as firm as a wock, Blake," said Arthur Augustus. "I am certainly as firm as a wock in this mattah. I shall begin again to-mowwow, and I twust the fellows will wally wound. And now," added Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "I will have my tea, if you fellows have finished cacklin'."

Arthur Augustus sat down to tea. The rest of the party had finished, and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther left him to it. They were smiling in the passage. They could not help seeing a comic side to Arthur Augustus's adventure with the Christmas cake: which perhaps it was natural that Gussy himself could not see. But Tom Merry had rather a thoughtful look as they went down to the dayroom.

"Gussy thinks there were three fellows who collared him," he remarked. "He didn't see who they were—"

"They shoved the sack over his head so that he couldn't, of course," said Manners. "Just like Gussy to walk into it."

"If he had seen them—!" said Tom.

"If he had he could send a bobby to inquire after the cake!" grinned Monty Lowther. "I wonder who they were."

"I fancy I could make a guess," said Tom.

"Eh? How?"

"There were three of them," said Tom. "Gussy thinks they followed him

from Wayland. I rather think they may have followed him from St. Jim's—laid in wait for him coming back—”

“What?” exclaimed Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

“Well, it looks to me more like a jape than anything else,” he said, “and I don't think that jolly old cake is very far away.”

“Oh, my hat!” ejaculated Monty Lowther. “Figgins and Co.—”

“Looks like it, to me.”

“Figgins and Co.” repeated Manners. “Why, of course! They knew Gussy's game, and had an eye on him—they bagged him and lifted the cake! Might have guessed that one!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared Lowther. “If that's it, they walked in with the cake before Gussy got in, and it's in the New House now.”

“Or in Fatty Wynn!” said Tom, with a chuckle. “Fatty may have scoffed it by this time!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

The Terrible Three chuckled, as they went down the stairs. They had little doubt that Tom had put his finger on the explanation of Gussy's wild adventure in Wayland Wood—and that the Christmas cake, which Arthur Augustus supposed had disappeared into parts unknown, was all the while no further off than the New House at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER VII

THE JOKE OF THE TERM?

RALPH RECKNESS CARDEW looked into No. 10 study at the hour of prep, and three Shell fellows who were sorting out their books glanced round at him in the doorway.

“Prep!” said Manners, rather pointedly.

“Quite!” agreed Cardew. “Sorry to interrupt—”

“No need to,” remarked Monty Lowther.

“None at all,” Cardew agreed again. “I rather like prep bein' interrupted in my study, mais chacun à son goût—which bein' interpreted, my beloved 'earers, means everyone to his taste.”

“Thanks,” said Manners, drily. “Have you looked in to teach your elders and betters elementary French?”

“Not at all! I've looked in as Mercury.”

“Mercury!” repeated Tom Merry, staring at the Fourth-former. “What do you mean, you ass?”

“Messenger from Olympus,” explained Cardew. “Olympus in this case bein' the New House. To cut it short—”

"The shorter the better," said Manners, who had no use for Cardew's airy persiflage. "We've got to do our prep, if you haven't."

"Message from the New House?" said Tom Merry. "Who the dickens is sending us a message from the New House?"

"Young fellow of the name of Figgins. I believe you've met him."

"Oh, don't be an ass. If you've got a message from Figgins, cough it up, and travel."

"Here it is."

Cardew slipped his hand into his pocket, and drew therefrom an envelope. He tossed it on the study table.

But he did not "travel". He remained standing in the doorway while Tom Merry, considerably puzzled, picked up the envelope and opened it.

"Figgins nobbled me just before lock-ups, and asked me to hand it to you," drawled Cardew. "He said there was somethin' in it that would interest all the House. From the expression on his speakin' countenance, I deduced that there was somethin' on in the nature of a jape."

Tom, without replying, unfolded the sheet of notepaper he drew from the envelope. He could not guess why Figgins, who could see him at any time up to lock-ups, had taken the trouble to write him a note, and dispatch it to him by Cardew. He was quite puzzled.

"Oh!" he ejaculated, as he looked at the missive from the New House.

Manners and Lowther and Cardew all looked at him.

"What—?" began Manners and Lowther together.

"Look!" said Tom.

He held up the letter. Manners and Lowther and Cardew all looked at it. They stared at it, in fact. It was quite an unexpected communication from the great chief of the New House juniors. It ran:

To-morrow
at 5 p.m.

A Christmas Cake will be presented
as a Christmas Present.

to

DAVID LLEWELLYN WYNN

(The New House man who won the Greyfriars match for
St. Jim's)

The cake, kindly provided by the School House, will be presented to D. L. Wynn in the New House at a distinguished gathering of New House men, in recognition of his Great Exploit in winning the Greyfriar's match.

Signed,

G. FIGGINS.

PS. School House men will be permitted to the ceremony if they make it pax and promise to behave themselves.

PPS. School House men will be expected to wash before coming to the New House.

There was a long moment of silence in No. 10 study while three fellows stared at that missive. It was broken by a yell of laughter from Cardew.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew, at least, was amused.

"A Christmas cake!" said Manners.

"Kindly provided by the School House," breathed Monty Lowther. "That means Gussy's cake!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom Merry.

Evidently, Tom's surmise had been well-founded. There could be no doubt now about the identity of the three mysterious raiders who had relieved Arthur Augustus of the Christmas cake in Wayland Wood. The cake "kindly provided by the School House" was obviously that cake!

"Cheek!" said Manners, warmly. "Making out that a New House man won the Greyfriars match—"

"Well, that ass Gussy made out that a School House man did!" said Tom.

"So a School House man did—you did—"

"No more than Fatty did!"

"Who kicked the winning goal?" demanded Lowther.

"Who kept Greyfriars from kicking two or three!" answered Tom.

"Oh, you're an ass!" said Lowther. "Look here, this is a score over School House, and we're not letting those ticks get by with it."

"Looks as if they've got by with it," said Tom. "They've got that cake safe in Figgins's study in the New House. Gussy got the cake—and Figgy's going to give it to Fatty Wynn to-morrow—and that's that."

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Cardew. "I fancied there was a jape on, from Figgy's look—ha, ha, ha! So they were the sportsmen who nobbled Gussy in the wood! And he never guessed! Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's not so jolly funny as all that," grunted Lowther. "It's one up for the New House if they get away with it."

Cardew chuckled.

"No 'if' about it," he said. "As Thomas has already remarked, they've got away with it. I must go and tell the fellows this—it's the joke of the term. Gussy must hear this—it will amuse him no end! Ha, ha, ha!"

Cardew, laughing, went down the passage. Tom Merry threw the message from the New House on the table. He was smiling.

"That's that," he remarked. "Gussy's idea has worked out—in reverse! I don't think he'll be frightfully amused when Cardew tells him."

"Look here, it's a score over the House, and we're not standing for it," declared Monty Lowther. "What about turning up in force to-morrow, at 5 p.m., and scragging that gang and collaring the cake?"

Tom Merry shood his head.

"Forget it, old chap! If we kick up a shindy in the New House it will bring beaks and pre's into it! That's not in the game."

"Well, no," admitted Lowther. "But—"

"Prep!" said Tom.

"Oh, blow prep," said Lowther, crossly. "I tell you, they're not getting by with this! Look here, that cake's parked in Figgins's study over the way. It's a School House cake, and it's coming back to the School House. I suppose we can't march across and kick up a shindy—"

"Hardly," said Manners.

"But there are other ways," Monty Lowther wrinkled his brows. "Suppose a fellow got out after dorm—"

"What?"

"The New House ticks will all be asleep in their little bunks, never dreaming of anything of the kind," said Monty.

"You ass!" exclaimed Tom. "It might mean a Head's whopping for getting out of the House after lights out—at least six from Railton."

"Well, I shouldn't wake Railton up and tell him I was going," said Monty, sarcastically. "I should hate to spoil his beauty sleep."

"Fathead! How would you get in, over the way?"

"That would want thinking out," admitted Monty.

"It would!" remarked Manners. "Better chuck it, and get on with prep."

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Lowther.

However, he "chucked" it, and the chums of the Shell got on with prep.

But Monty Lowther's prep was done in a very desultory manner that evening. Every now and then he went off into deep thought—not on the subject of the deathless verse of Virgil. And after prep was over, and Tom Merry and Manners had joined the crowd in the junior dayroom, Monty Lowther disappeared for a time. When he was seen again there was a cheery grin on his face, which seemed to indicate that things were going well from his point of view.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER LIGHTS OUT!

"**W**HO's that?" Jack Blake asked the question sleepily, in the Fourth-form dormitory in the School House, as the last stroke of eleven died away in the silence of the December night.

It was not the distant boom from the clock-tower that had awakened him.

It was the sound of a thud nearer at hand. It was not a very heavy thud, nor a very loud thud; but it was very distinct in the silence, and it was close beside his bed. He opened his eyes, peered in the gloom, and murmured a drowsy inquiry.

"Pway be quiet, Blake! Don't make a wow, old chap."

That answering voice made Blake sit up and take notice!

"Gussy, you ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"What are you waking us up for, at this time of night?"

"I did not wake you up intentionally, Blake! The shoe dwopped fwom my hand—"

"Are you putting on your shoes?" ejaculated Blake. "You're going to sleep with your shoes on?"

"I wegard that as wathah widiculous, Blake! I am not goin' to sleep at pwesent. I have othah fish to fwy."

"What are you up to?" hissed Blake. "Not going out on the tiles after lights out like Cardew, I suppose?"

"Pway don't be an ass, Blake! I am goin' to get that Chwistmas cake, if you weally want to know. You wemembah what Cardew told us in the study—"

"Oh, my only hat and umbrella!" gasped Blake. "You howling ass—!"

"I wefuse to be called a howlin' ass, Blake. It turns out that the threee wuffians who bagged that cake were fwom the New House, and they have it there now—"

"Do you think you can burgle the New House in the middle of the night?" breathed Blake.

"I twust so, Blake! I am certainly goin' to twy. I uttahly wefuse to allow Figgins to pwesent my cake to Fatty Wynn to-mowwow. That cake is goin' to be pwesented to Tom Mewwy for winnin' the Gweyfwiahs match—"

"Go back to bed, you ass."

"Wats!"

"You'll get into a fearful row if you're caught out of dorm—"

"I shall not be caught out of dorm, Blake. I am goin' to be vewy cautious. That is why I am goin' alone. I am afwaid I could not wely on you and Hewwies and Dig to get thwough without givin' an alarm—you know what asses you are, if you don't mind my sayin' so."

"Oh, you image!" breathed Blake. "You'd wake up everybody in the New House if you got that far. But you won't—you'll wake up everybody in this House first."

"Wats!"

"Who's that jawing?" came a sleepy voice from Herries' bed.

"That ass Gussy—that idiot Gussy—that dangerous maniac Gussy—Look here, Gussy, you go back to bed, or I'll turn out and take my bolster to you." exclaimed Blake.

"There was no reply.

"Do you hear, you goat?" hissed Blake.

Still no reply. But in the silence, there came the faint sound of a door softly shutting. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was gone.

Blake put one leg out of bed. But he withdrew it again. It was too late to make any attempt to stop Arthur Augustus. Blake could only hope that he would not return with a master or prefect's hand on his shoulder. Arthur Augustus, in the opinion of his friends, was about the last fellow in the world to carry out such a perilous enterprise successfully.

That was not Arthur Augustus's own opinion, as he trod away in the gloom. He was cautious—very cautious! But he was very determined, and quite confident. He placed full reliance upon his own tact and judgment.

The discovery that his mysterious assailants in Wayland Wood had been Figgins and Co. of the New House, and that the Christmas cake—Tom Merry's Christmas present—was parked in Figgins's study over the way—had stirred Arthur Augustus's deepest ire. He had been strongly tempted to march across to the New House after prep, and make a valiant attempt to recapture that cake by the strong hand. Arthur Augustus feared no foe, and was not wont to count odds: but even Arthur Augustus realized that an attack in force on the New House was not practical politics. Stratagem was needed: and Gussy had no doubt that he was the man for stratagem. He had set his noble wits to work: and he had been thinking it over ever since Kildare of the Sixth had turned out the lights in the Fourth-form dormitory. And he had made up his noble mind what he was going to do—and now he was doing it. He was going to get out of the House quietly, while everybody was asleep: get into the New House equally quietly, lift that cake from Figgins's study, and return with it in triumph. That was the programme: quiet and caution all along the line, and he had started by dropping a shoe and waking Jack Blake, to begin with!

However, he made no sound as he crept across the landing to the stairs. The House was sleeping. All was still. If a master was still up, in his study, Masters Studies' were far enough away for safety. Softly and silently, the swell of St. Jim's trod down the stairs.

Fortunately, he knew every inch of his way, for the night was almost as black as a hat. He groped in the dark to the junior lobby, groped into it, and groped across to the door on the quad.

That door was locked and bolted at night. It was easy enough to turn back the key, draw the bolts, and leave it unlocked and unbolted for his return. All that was plane sailing: his difficulties were likely to begin over the way. But as he groped over that door for the bolts, he met with a sudden surprise.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

The bolts on the door were already withdrawn. It looked as if the house-porter had neglected to bolt that door at the usual hour. And, to his further

surprise, Arthur Augustus, when he groped for the key, found that the door was already unlocked!

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus. "The house-portah must have been vevy careless—anybody could get into the House! Or pewwaps some wat like Cardew, or Wacke of the Shell, has gone out of bounds, and left the door unfastened—I shouldn't be surprised."

That, really, was a more probable explanation than carelessness on the part of the house-porter. Anyhow, the door was unbolted and unlocked: and Arthur Augustus opened it, and the chill December air blew on him. Heedless of a cold wind, and a few feathery flakes of snow that floated on it, he stepped out, and shut the door softly behind him.

Dark and gloomy looked the old quad, as he peered round him in the night. But dark and gloom had no more effect on Arthur Augustus than winter wind and feathery flakes. He stepped briskly into the night, trailing through the darkness for the New House.

Like a black shadow against a dark sky, Mr. Ratcliffe's House loomed up before him. He followed the path that led him round to the rear of the building. The blackness was bewildering, and he was now on less familiar ground. He groped along with his hands extended before him: and suddenly he gave a jump almost clear of the earth, and his heart leaped fairly into his mouth, as his outstretched hands came in contact with another form—unseen—in the blackness.

Not for an instant had it crossed D'Arcy's mind that someone else might be there in the dark.

But someone was!

It was unexpected—it was startling—it was really unnerving—but his hands in the darkness were touching some unseen person, and he heard a startled panting gasp as they touched.

It was only for a moment. The next, the unseen figure was leaping away, and bolting into the night. Hitherto, there had been no sound—the unseen one had been creeping softly and silently as Gussy himself—till that sudden contact. But now there was a sound of footfalls, fleeing.

"Oh, cwumbs!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

He stood with his heart thumping. Such an unexpected contact in the dark was enough to make any fellow's heart thump. Gussy's thumped like a hammer, as he stood peering in the direction in which the unseen one had fled.

He could see nothing. And in a moment or two the fleeing footfalls had died away.

"Oh, cwumbs!" repeated Arthur Augustus. "Who the dooce—what the dooce—oh, cwumbs!"

For a long minute he stood there, peering and listening. But there was nothing to be seen, and nothing to be heard. The unseen person, whoever he was, had vanished into the dark night. Who he was, why he was out of his

House creeping about at night, Arthur Augustus could not begin to imagine. But at all events, it was obvious that it could not have been a master or a prefect: and he was gone, anyway. Arthur Augustus was, undoubtedly, a little shaken by that strange encounter. But he was as determined as ever to carry on. And at length he resumed his way, and arrived at the back of the House, stopping at a little window that gave on a dark passage within.

His plan was cut and dried. Kneeling on the sill, he was going to push back the catch by inserting a blade of his penknife between the sashes. Then the little window would open to his hand: he would climb in, and all would be, so to speak, calm and bright. It was as simple as that.

Quietly, he drew himself up on the little stone sill. Kneeling there, with for once a complete disregard for the knees of his trousers, he groped in his pocket for his penknife.

His hand came out empty.

He groped in other pockets. But the result was equally empty-handed. The penknife was not there: He had used that penknife in study No. 6 after prep. No doubt he had left it there!

It was an utterly unexpected and dismaying setback.

"Oh, cwikey!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, forgetting for the moment the need of silence and caution. "Oh, cwumbs! That dashed penknife—I must have left it on the table in the study! Oh, scissahs!"

Following that exclamation, there came to his ears, from the darkness "D'Arcy! So it was you, you blithering idiot! What are you doing here, you gibbering chucklehead?"

Arthur Augustus nearly fell off the window-sill in his astonishment, as he heard the voice of Monty Lowther of the Shell.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE ENEMY'S QUARTERS

"LOWTHAH!"

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Quiet, ass!"

Arthur Augustus stepped down from the window-sill. He peered in amazement at a shadowy form in the gloom. He could barely make it out, but the voice revealed that it was Monty Lowther. That voice went on:

"You champion chucklehead, was it you barging into me a few minutes ago, coming round the House?"

"Bai Jove! Was that you, Lowthah?"

"Yes, ass! Was it you?"

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"But what?"

"But I wefuse to be called an ass, Lowthah."

"Blitherer!"

"You startled me fearfully when I wan into you, Lowthah—"

"Do you think you didn't startle me, you image?"

"Weally, Lowthah, I fail to see what you are doin' heah. Howevah, now you are heah, pewwaps you can lend me a pocket-knife."

"I've a jolly good mind to lend you a thick ear," growled Lowther. "What the thump are you playing the giddy ox for, in the middle of the night—walking into a fellow's back and giving him a turn? I thought it was a New House pre. for a minute—or old Ratty himself!"

Arthur Augustus chuckled. He realized that it was only Monty Lowther into whom he had barged in the dark, startling the Shell fellow more than he had been startled himself.

"Think it's funny?" hissed Monty. "If it wasn't for waking up the New House, I'd bang your silly head on the wall, see?"

"I should wefuse to have my silly head banged on the wall—I mean I should wefuse to have my head banged on the wall, Lowthah! And I should like to know what you are doin' heah at all."

"I'm going in at that window," grunted Lowther. "I cut off after you barged me, thinking it might be a beak or a pre.—are you sniggering, you silly ass?—but I wasn't going to chuck it. And then I heard you fumbling here, you fathead, and if you hadn't spoken I shouldn't have known that it was you—why aren't you in bed and asleep, ass?"

"You are awah, Lowthah, that Figgins and Co. bagged the Chwistmas cake I am goin' to prewent to Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, my hat! You're after the cake too?"

"Are you aftah it, Lowthah?"

"Think I'm taking a walk for pleasure in the middle of a December night, with a cold wind blowing, and the risk of a Head's whopping?" snorted Lowther. "I'm after that cake. It's in Figgins's study in that mouldy old House, and I'm going to give him a surprise about it."

"You had bettah leave it to me, Lowthah! This mattah wequiahs gweat caution, and it will be safah in my hands."

"Fathead! As you're here, you can keep cave while I nip in and get it. see? Safer with a fellow keeping cave."

"Yaas, wathah! Only—"

"Only what?" yapped Lowther.

"Only you had bettah stay here and keep cave, while I nip in and get the cake," explained Arthur Augustus.

"Pack it up, fathead! You stay here—"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus, emphatically.

"Now, look here—"

"I wefuse to look there, Lowthah! You can come in with me, if you like, and we will twy it on togethah. But mind you don't make a wow and wake Watty. If you wake Watty there will be twouble, you know."

Monty Lowther breathed hard and deep. It was a relief to discover that it was only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who was abroad in the darkness of the December night: but he was strongly tempted to bang his aristocratic head on the wall of the New House. However, he restrained that natural impulse. Banging Arthur Augustus's head would certainly not have preserved the silence that was so necessary in that nocturnal enterprise.

"Keep vevy quiet!" went on Arthur Augustus. "I need hardly impress on you, Lowthah, that it is essential to keep vevy quiet, and not wisk givin' the alarm. There would be a feahful wow if we were caught heah. Pway don't speak at all—if it is necessawy to give any instwuctions, I will whispah—and you need not weply—mum's the word, you know. Now, have you got a pocket-knife?"

"No!" hissed Lowther.

"Oh, cwumbs! I left mine in the study—"

"You would!"

"Wats! It was feahfully thoughtless of you, Lowthah, not to bwing a pocket-knife to open the catch—"

"You couldn't open that catch with a pocket-knife, fathead. And it doesn't need opening, either. It's unfastened."

"Bai Jove! I uttahly fail to compwehend how you can possibly know that the window-catch is unfastened, Lowthah. How do you know?"

"Because I trickled over here after prep, ass, and hung about in the dark till the coast was clear, fathead, and then nipped in for a minute, idiot, and unfastened the catch, image, all ready to get in when I came across to-night, chuckle-head."

"Bai Jove!"

"Now if you'll get out of the way, I'll open the window."

Monty Lowther put up his hands to the lower sash of the little window, and pushed. The sash slid up under his hands.

"Bai Jove! That's wippin'!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, forgetting caution once more on seeing the way open before him.

"Shout!" said Lowther, sarcastically. "Now the window's open it'll be quite easy to wake the whole House."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Yell!" said Lowther.

"Wats! Pway stand aside and let me get in first, Lowthah! I had bettah lead the way. Do you heah me, Lowthah?" added Arthur Augustus, warmly, as the Shell fellow, unheeding, clambered in.

Monty Lowther, without reply, disappeared into the blackness within.

Arthur Augustus breathed hard as he followed. He dropped inside the window, and bumped into Lowther, unseen in the dark.

"Oh, cwumbs!"

"Bellow!" came a sarcastic hiss from Monty. "Roar!"

"Pway do not talk, Lowthah, now that we are inside. I have already warned you not to speak—"

"Bawl!" hissed Lowther.

"Oh, wats! It is fwightfully dark heah—we shall have to gwope our way—Oh, cwikey, what's that?" added Arthur Augustus, startled, as a sudden beam of light bit into the darkness. "Oh! Is that a flash-lamp? I nevah thought of bwingin' a flash-lamp—"

"You wouldn't!"

"You had bettah hand it to me, Lowthah—"

"If you don't keep quiet," said Monty Lowther, in concentrated tones. "I'll bang your silly head and chance it. Now shut up and follow me without yelling."

The flicker of light danced away in the gloom. Arthur Augustus, suppressing his indignation, followed the gleam of the flashlamp. All was dark, silent, and still: the New House was sleeping. As he glimpsed a staircase, Monty Lowther shut off the light. Arthur Augustus blinked.

"Bai Jove! Where are you, Lowthah? Where—?"

"Quiet!" hissed Lowther. "Here's the stairs! Keep your hand on the banister, and don't stumble—"

"I should not be likely to stumble, Lowthah! I am not a clumsy ass— Oh! Ah! Ooogh! Bai Jove!"

Bump!

Arthur Augustus sat on the stairs. Really, it was not easy work, groping about in pitch darkness.

"Oh, you chump!" breathed Lowther.

"Pway be quiet, Lowthah—"

"What?"

"Pway be quiet! You will wake the House, at this wate."

Perhaps it was just as well that Lowther could not see Arthur Augustus in the dark. Had he been visible, his noble head would have been in extreme peril of a punch, at that moment.

He scrambled up, rubbing a knee that had banged on a stair.

"Ow! wow! ow!"

"What are you yelling about now?" hissed Lowther.

"I am not yellin', Lowthah, and I have banged my knee—"

"Hurt it?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Good!"

"Why, you wottah—"

"Now shut up!"

Monty Lowther pushed on up the staircase. Arthur Augustus gave his noble knee a final rub, and groped after him.

On the landing above, Lowther turned on the flashlamp again for a moment or two. That was sufficient to give him his bearings. A minute more, and they had reached Figgins's study. Another moment, and they were inside the study, with the door shut: immensely to Monty Lowther's relief. All, after all, had gone well: and Figgins and Co. if they were dreaming in their dormitory, certainly did not dream that the School House enemy were within the walls of the New House, the captured cake at their mercy.

CHAPTER X

SOMETHING FOR FIGGINS AND CO.

"**E**UWEKAH!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

Lowther had turned on the flashlamp, as soon as the door was closed, illumining the darkness in Figgins's study. The light revealed a rather bulky cardboard box, carefully tied with string, that lay on the study table. Arthur Augustus pointed to it, repeating the celebrated exclamation of Archimedes, though with his own inimitable accent.

"Eureka!" echoed Monty Lowther.

"That's the cake all wight!" grinned Arthur Augustus. "There's Tuckah's name on the box. They haven't even unpacked it—"

"Bet they did, to make sure the cake was in it, and that Fatty Wynn sampled it, unless Figgins and Kerr held on to his neck."

"Oh, bai Jove! If that fat New House boundah has been scoffin the cake—"

"Let's see, anyhow."

Monty Lowther put down the flashlamp on the table, and untied the string that secured the cardboard box. There was plenty of string, and it was tied with a good many knots, and the task was not rapid

"Bettah cut it, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "We can find a knife or scissahs somewhah."

Lowther shook his head, and went on disentangling knots

"Weally, Lowthah, you are wastin' time," urged Arthur Augustus. "We weally do not want to pass the west of the night in the New House. If somebody should hear somethin' and wake up—"

"Pretty sure to, if you keep on exercising your chin."

"Wats! Pwobably there is a knife in the table dwawah—"

"Leave it there, ass! We shall want this string again."

"I weally do not see why, Lowthah."

"Lots of things you don't see, fathead."

"I am bound to point out to you, Lowthah, that this mattah is in my hands," said Arthur Augustus, firmly. "I stwongly object to wastin' time, when we are in the enemy's quartahs like this. I will look for a knife."

"Keep quiet, ass—"

"I wecommend you to keep quiet, Lowthah! I am keepin' as quiet as a mouse. Here is the dwawah."

Arthur Augustus pulled at the table drawer, in search of a knife. The drawer was a little stiff in opening, and he jerked at it. Perhaps he put a little too much energy into the jerk. Unexpectedly, the drawer came entirely out, and Arthur Augustus, in his surprise, let go.

Crash!

"Oh, cwikey!"

The drawer, and Figgins and Co.'s supply of cutlery which it contained, fell to the floor. In the silence of the night it sounded almost like thunder, to the startled ears of the two juniors in the study.

"Oh, you chump!" breathed Lowther.

"The wotten thing came out quite suddenly—"

"Quiet!" hissed Lowther.

He listened with almost painful intentness. The junior studies were a good distance from the sleeping quarters. It was probable that the crash, loud as it had sounded in Lowther's and D'Arcy's startled ears, had not reached other ears. But there was a long minute of tense anxiety.

"It's all wight," said Arthur Augustus, at last. "Nobody's heard! But pway do be more careful, Lowthah—"

"What?" hissed Lowther. "Who dropped that drawer, you maniac?"

"I wefuse to be called a maniac, Lowthah—"

"Pick up those things, idiot, and keep quiet."

"I wefuse to be called an idiot, Lowther. There are two or three knives heah, and now we can cut the stwing—"

"If you come near this parcel," said Lowther, in concentrated tones. "I'll brain you with it."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Shut up!" Lowther loosened the last knot. "It's done now."

He removed the lid of the cardboard box. Tissue paper packing was revealed. The tissue paper removed, the cake itself came in sight—the extensive and magnificent Christmas cake which Arthur Augustus had carried off that afternoon from Tucker's in Wayland, with the inscription "Merry Christmas" on the icing. But the final "s" was missing from the word "Christmas": a triangular segment having been cut out of the big cake. Evidently Figgins and Kerr had not been quite able to restrain their plump chum from sampling the prize.

"Bai Jove! That fat boundah Wynn has been at it!" breathed Arthur

Augustus. "There is quite a large piece missin'. What are you liftin' it out of the box for, Lowthah. It is much more convenient to cawwy it in the box."

Unheeding, Monty Lowther carefully lifted out the cake, and wrapped it in the tissue wrapping paper. Arthur Augustus surveyed that proceeding with surprise and impatience.

"Weally, Lowthah, I quite fail to undahstand what you are at!" he exclaimed.

"Could you expect to understand anything, with a brain like yours?" asked Lowther.

"You cheekay ass—"

"We're going to leave something else in that box for Figgins and Co.," said Monty Lowther. "They'll find it tied up here the same as before, and are they going to guess that there's been a change inside?"

"Oh! Bai Jove!"

Monty Lowther glanced round the study. He picked up a shovel from the fender, and shovelled ashes from the grate into the cardboard box.

Arthur Augustus stared at him blankly for a moment or two: and then chuckled, as the idea dawned on his powerful brain.

"Bai Jove! If they don't look into that box before they pwesent it to Fatty Wynn to-mowwow—"

"Why should they?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Arthur Augustus.

There was a scuttle of coal in the study. Monty Lowther tipped its contents into the box. If Figgins and Co. on the morrow, missed that supply of coal, they were likely to surmise that some fellow from another study had borrowed it—certainly they were not likely to guess that it was in the cake-box.

A mixture of coal, ashes, and cinders almost filled the box. The lid fitted on nicely. With great care, Monty Lowther replaced the string, re-tying the knots as he had found them.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Will that be wathah a surpwise for the New House boundahs to-mowwow? What?"

"Just a few!" grinned Lowther.

"Weally, it is quite a bwight ideah, deah boy. I wathah wondah that I did not think of it myself."

"Your brain wasn't planned for thinking, you know."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Now pick up those knives and forks and things—and don't make a row."

The table drawer was replaced, and the cutlery replaced in it. Monty Lowther glanced round the room. There was nothing to indicate that it had received a nocturnal visit from the School House. Arthur Augustus picked up the cake from the table.

"Leave that to me," said Lowther.

"Safah in my hands, deah boy. You might dwop it."

"You howling ass—"

"Wats!"

"I'd better carry it, fathead."

"Wubbish!"

Arthur Augustus settled that point by opening the study door, and walking out with the cake under his noble arm.

Monty Lowther suppressed his feelings, and followed. With a glimmer from the flashlamp, they trod cautiously down the stairs, and arrived at last at the little window at the back where they had entered. Arthur Augustus landed the cake on the sill, and clambered out. But the cake was under his arm again by the time Lowther had clambered out after him. Arthur Augustus was not trusting the prize into any hands but his own.

Lowther shut down the sash silently, and they trod away in the gloom.

"Bai Jove! It's fwightfully dark," murmured Arthur Augustus. "Bettah keep close to the wall for a guide—yow-ow-ow!"

"What the thump—?"

"Wow! I've banged my nose on a buttweess or somethin'. Wow! Bettah not keep too neah the wall, Lowthah, and for goodness sake keep quiet! We're not out of the wood yet, you know."

Monty Lowther did not reply: they were still too near the New House for him to tell Arthur Augustus what he thought of him. Like dark shadows in the dark, they groped across the quad towards their own House.

Bump!

Thud!

"Woooooooh!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "What is that? I've wun into somethin'. I have dwopped the cake! Mind you don't twead on the cake, Lowthah. I wan into a twee and dwopped it."

Monty Lowther stopped, groped, and found the parcel in the darkness. He grabbed it up, and put it under his arm.

"Oh, cwumbs! Where are you, Lowthah?" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I dwopped the cake when I wan into that beastly twee—wow! Pway turn on the flashlamp and help me look for that cake."

Monty Lowther chuckled. Really, it would have been injudicious to flash a light about in the quad, at that hour. Nor was it necessary, as the cake was under Monty's arm.

Arthur Augustus groped wildly in blackness for the cake that was not there. There was another bang, and a sharp ejaculation, as his noble nut established contact with a tree-trunk.

"Ow! wow! Oh, cwikey! Wow!"

"Yell!" said Monty Lowther, encouragingly. "Now we're in the middle of the quad, you can wake both Houses at once."

"I wegard you as an uttah ass, Lowthah! Will you turn on that flashlamp or will you not turn on that flashlamp?" hissed Arthur Augustus.

"No fear!"

"Bai Jove! You fwightful wottah—"

"What's the good?" asked Lowther.

"So that we can look for the cake, you uttah ass."

"Why look for the cake, when I've got it under my arm?"

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Have you picked it up, you fwightful ass! Hand it to me at once—you may dwop it—"

Monty Lowther chuckled as he receded towards the School House. Arthur Augustus groped after him. He was breathing hard as he groped into the lobby in the School House.

"Fasten the door after you, fathead!" came a whispering voice in the gloom. Then Monty Lowther was gone, still in possession of the cake!

Breathing harder, Arthur Augustus closed and fastened the lobby door. Then he made his way to the Fourth-form dormitory. The cake, at all events, was safe in the School House: the nocturnal raid on the rival House had been a success. All were sleeping as Arthur Augustus tiptoed into his dormitory: and about a minute later, Arthur Augustus was sleeping too, and his eyes did not open till the rising bell rang out in the cold and frosty morning.

CHAPTER XI

NOT AS PER PROGRAMME

"PAX!" SAID Figgins, suspiciously.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Certainly," he answered.

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Pax all round," agreed Jack Blake. "We're here for the jolly old ceremony, not for a row."

"As that Indian chap at Greyfriars would say, the paxfulness is terrific," assured Monty Lowther.

"Peace, my infants, peace!" said Manners. And Herries and Digby grinned and nodded.

Figgins eyed them. Kerr and Wynn eyed them. They really could not quite understand this peaceful visit from the School House—in the circumstances. It was five p.m.—the time set for the presentation, in the New House, of the Christmas cake, "kindly provided by the School House", to Fatty Wynn, as the man who had won the Greyfriars match for St. Jim's. Figgins had cheerily invited the School House men to be present at the ceremony, on condition

that they made it "pax". But that really was only intended to "rub it in". Certainly he did not expect the heroes of the rival House either to make it "pax", or to attend the ceremony peacefully. He would rather have expected some attempt to recapture the cake—indeed, an attack in force would not have surprised him. If Tom Merry and Co. had come over on the warpath, it would not have been surprising. But it was very surprising indeed to see them arrive in this peaceful and indeed hilarious mood.

They were peaceful. They were polite. They willingly made it "pax"—evidently they were not on the warpath. And they were all grinning as if they regarded the affair as a tremendous joke. A joke, indeed it was: but the laugh was on the side of the New House—so far as Figgins and Co. could see, at all events.

"Well, if it's pax, you can come in!" said Figgins, at last. "Are you owning up that it was the New House that beat Greyfriars?"

"Wathah not!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, warmly. "The New House were merely also wans, Figgins—"

"You School House fathead—"

"You cheekay New House wottah—!"

"Order!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Dry up, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Order!" said Blake. "No rows or rags! If Figgy thinks that a New House man beat Greyfriars—"

"I don't think—I know!" hooted Figgins.

"Well, then, get on with the jolly old ceremony, and let's see the great man duly honoured," said Blake.

"Yes, rather," said Herries.

Arthur Augustus's frowning brow cleared, and he chuckled.

"Yaas, wathah!" he assented. "Pway let us have no arguin', deah boys—get on with the cewemony! Fatty Wynn weally does deserve what they are goin' to give him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you can cackle," snorted Figgins. "If you enjoy seeing your mouldy old House scored over, you're welcome to enjoy it all you like. Mind, its pax—no rags here, and no snatching when you see the cake."

"No snatching," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Wathah not!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, come in!" grunted Figgins, and the New House Co. stepped out of the doorway of their dayroom, and Tom Merry and Co. came in from the quad.

There was quite a crowd of New House juniors in the junior dayroom in the New House. Besides Figgins and Co. Redfern and Owen and Lawrence and Pratt of the Fourth, and French and Thompson of the Shell, were there: and more fellows of both forms were coming in. All of them seemed to be in

cheery spirits, evidently bucked by the score over the rival House. They seemed surprised to see the School House party: and still more surprised by their grinning hilarity. What School House men had to grin about, on such an occasion, no New House man could guess—yet!

Certainly the School House men had no chance, if they had been thinking of war. Apart from “pax”, which precluded hostilities, there were only seven School House fellows present, and more than two dozen of the New House. Tom Merry and Co. were there simply as witnesses of the triumphant function: and why they had come to swell a New House triumph was a mystery to Figgins and Co. However, there they were, with smiling faces, plainly enjoying the occasion quite as much as any New House man.

On the table stood a large cardboard box, tied with string, bearing on the lid the style and title of Tucker and Co. of Wayland. The time had arrived now for that box to be opened.

That anything had happened to the contents during the previous night, naturally did not occur to Figgins and Co. How could anything have happened to the cake, over-night, in a New House study? Not for a moment did any such suspicion occur to any New House fellow. The box had been brought down from Figgins's study to the dayroom, and there it was—looking just the same as ever—on the outside! It was the inside that was scheduled to cause surprise, when the box was opened.

Fatty Wynn eyed that box almost lovingly. Whether, as his friends declared, Fatty had won the Greyfriars match for St. Jim's, or not, undoubtedly he was looking forward to that cake. The sample he had taken the previous day had whetted his appetite for that magnificent Christmas cake. Fatty would willingly have cut out the ceremony, and started at once on the cake—he could not help feeling that old Figgy was rather wasting time.

Figgins stood at the table, a penknife in his hand, ready to cut the string. All eyes were upon him.

“Gentlemen, chaps, and sportsmen!” began Figgins.

“Hear, hear!”

“As you all know, we recently played a match with Greyfriars, who are pretty good men at Soccer, and only one goal was scored. The match was saved for St. Jim's by the magnificent work of a New House man in goal.”

“Hear, hear!”

“Good old Fatty!”

“New House for ever!”

“Wats!” came from the School House group.

“Shut up, you School House tick!” came a roar.

“Order, Gussy!” said Tom Merry.

“Yaas: but—”

“Dry up!” said Blake.

“Oh, all wight.”

"By the magnificent work of a New House man in goal!" repeated Figgins, with a glare at the School House group, "and we are met together on this auspicious occasion—"

"Hear, hear!"

"—to present the winner of the Greyfriars match with a Christmas cake, kindly provided by the School House—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"And—and—and—" Figgy's eloquence seemed to run short. "And—here it is!" he concluded.

He cut the string with the penknife. He lifted the lid of the box. Fatty Wynn's eyes glistened. The removal of the lid revealed a sheet of tissue paper. Figgins swept it aside. And then—!

He stared into the box.

He was about to lift out the magnificent Christmas cake. But he did not lift out a Christmas cake. Instead, he stared into the box, with his eyes almost popping out of his face.

"Oh!" he gasped. "What-what—oh!"

"Get on with it, Figgy," breathed Fatty Wynn.

"What—?" began Kerr. Then he, too, stared into the box, and jumped. "What-what—where's the cake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in a yell from the School House party. "Get on with it, Figgins!"

"Yaas, wathah!" chortled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Do get on with the presentation, Figgins."

"We want to see Fatty scoff what's in that box!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What—what-what—who—how—!" stuttered Figgins. "The—the cake ain't here! How the dickens—who the thump—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not there!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Kerr. He stared at a collection of ashes, cinders, and chunks of coal, in the cake box. "What—what—somebody's got at it—those School House rotters—"

"Oh!" gasped Figgins. "But how—when—how—oh, crumbs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the School House party.

"Go to it, Figgy."

"Hand it over to Fatty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The New House fellows crowded round, staring into the cake box. Fatty Wynn gazed into it in anguish. There was no Christmas cake for Fatty. There was a stack of ashes, cinders, and coal: which even the Falstaff of the New House did not feel disposed to "scoff".

“Collar those School House ticks!” roared Figgins. “They’ve done this somehow—collar them—”

“What about pax, Figgy?” chuckled Tom Merry.

“Oh!” Figgins had forgotten “pax” for the moment. “Oh! Look here, you rotters—look here, you School House smudges—you jolly well did this somehow—”

“Yaas, wathah!”

“Guilty, my lord!” chuckled Monty Lowther.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Come on, you chaps,” said Tom Merry. “Thanks for letting us in to witness the ceremony, Figgins! We’ve really enjoyed it! Cheerio!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Tom Merry and Co. crowded out into the quad, laughing as they went. Figgins and Co. were not laughing. Figgins and Co. were left gazing at that box of ashes and cinders and chunks of coal, with feelings that they could hardly have expressed in words.

CHAPTER XII

JUST LIKE GUSSY!

“CHRISTMAS IS comin’,” said Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, thoughtfully.

“Go hon!” murmured Jack Blake.

And there was a general smile in Tom Merry’s study.

They had returned from the New House in merry mood. Figgins and Co. had been well and truly diddled, dished, and done. The moot point, which House, if either, had really beaten Greyfriars, was still moot. But at all events the Christmas cake was safe in the School House, and the New House enemy had been left with only the box and its quite inedible contents.

So it was a very cheery party at tea in Tom Merry’s study. Only one member of the party had an extremely thoughtful expression.

Arthur Augustus, for quite a while, had been deep in thought: his noble intellect apparently working at full pressure. He came suddenly out of that state of deep cogitation, with the remark that Christmas was coming!

Which really was not news to the other fellows in the study. As St. Jim’s was about to break up for the Christmas holidays, they were not likely to have forgotten that Christmas was coming!

“Is that what you’ve been thinking out?” asked Monty Lowther.

“Yaas, wathah,” assented Arthur Augustus, with a nod. “Christmas is comin’, deah boys—”

"It often does, towards the end of December," remarked Blake, thoughtfully.

"Weally, Blake—"

"I've noticed that," agreed Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Thanks for telling us, all the same, Gussy," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, what I mean is—"

"Oh! You mean something?" asked Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Go it, Gussy," said Tom Merry, laughing. "What about Christmas? We sort of knew it was coming: but what about it?"

"I've been thinkin'—"

"Did it hurt?" inquired Monty Lowther, sympathetically.

"Weally, you ass—"

"Shut up, Monty," said Tom. "Cough it up, Gussy."

"I will pwoceed to do so, of Lowthah will let a fellow speak," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "Chwistmas is comin', as I have already wemarked, and Chwistmas is a time of peace and goodwill and so on—"

"Hear, hear!"

"It is a time to wash out wows, even House wows!" went on Arthur Augustus. "We have given the New House the kybosh—"

"We have!" agreed Blake. "We have!"

"And I have been thinkin' that, as we have kyboshed them, we might stwetch a point, and wefwain fwom wubbin' it in," explained Arthur Augustus. "Of course, Figgins and Co. have been fwightfully cheekay, makin' out that a New House man won the Gweyfwiahs match—"

"Sheer cheek!" said Herries.

"—when it was weally won by a School House man—"

"Rot!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Bosh!" said Tom. "The match was won by St. Jim's, both Houses combined, and every man played up. That's that!"

"My ideah was to pwesent you with a Chwistmas cake as a Chwistmas pwesent, as the man who won the match, Tom Mewwy—"

"Br-r-r-r-r!"

"Pway do not intewwupt me with widiculous ejaculations. As I was sayin', we have given those ticks ovah the way the kybosh, and it would be wathah sportin' to wefwain fwom wubbin' it in. I am goin' to pwopose—"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Monty Lowther. "Who's the happy lady?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass!" hooted Arthur Augustus. "You know vewy well that when I say I am goin' to pwopose, I do not mean that I am goin' to pwopose—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am goin' to pwopose a change in the pwogwamme, if you fellows will leave off cacklin' for a minute and let a fellow speak. Instead of pwesentin' the Chwistmas cake to Tom Mewwy as the winnah of the Gweyfwiahs match, and makin' the New House gween with wage, which is weally not a pwopah state of affaihs just on Chwistmas, I pwopose to stand a study suppah to celebwtate the victowy, askin' Figgins and Co. to join up—"

"Oh!" exclaimed all the tea party, together.

"The fact is," went on Arthur Augustus, "that all this waggin' and wowin' ovah a Soccah match is not quite the thing."

"Not?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Not!" said Arthur Augustus, firmly.

"Who's been doing most of it?" asked Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway wing off the cackle and let a fellow speak. While it is quite twue that School House is cockhouse at St. Jim's, and the New House pwactically nowhah in compawison, yet we are bound to wemembah that we are all St. Jim's men, and that weally and twuly it does not mattah a wap which House contwibutes most to a Soccah victory—"

"Oh, my hat!" said Blake.

"So I twust," added Arthur Augustus, "that we shall heah no more of it."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"But it was Gussy—" began Herries.

"Don't interrupt Gussy when he's talking sense for once," said Manners.

"He doesn't do it often," agreed Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Carry on, Gussy!" said Tom Merry, encouragingly.

"So I pwopose," said Arthur Augustus, "that we wash out all this arguin' and waggin' and wowin', and that as Chwistmas is comin', we extend the wight hand of fwiendship to the New House boundahs, stand a study suppah in celebwtation of winnin' the Gweyfwiahs match, and weceive Figgins and Co. as honahed guests, and whack out the Chwistmas cake all wound!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Arthur Augustus's proposition was passed unanimously, with cheers and chuckles—especially chuckles.

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It was a very handsome study supper when it came off. There were many good things, most imposing of all the long disputed Christmas cake. Figgins and Co. came over very amicably, Fatty Wynn not only amicably but eagerly: and all was calm and bright. Figgins even made a little speech

congratulating Tom Merry on having kicked the winning goal in that famous match, to which Tom responded with another congratulating Fatty Wynn on his monumental goalkeeping on the same occasion: Arthur Augustus D'Arcy punctuating each speech with "Heah! heah!" and "Bwavo!" And not a crumb or a plum, not the ghost of a crumb or a plum, was left of Tom Merry's Christmas Present.

THE END