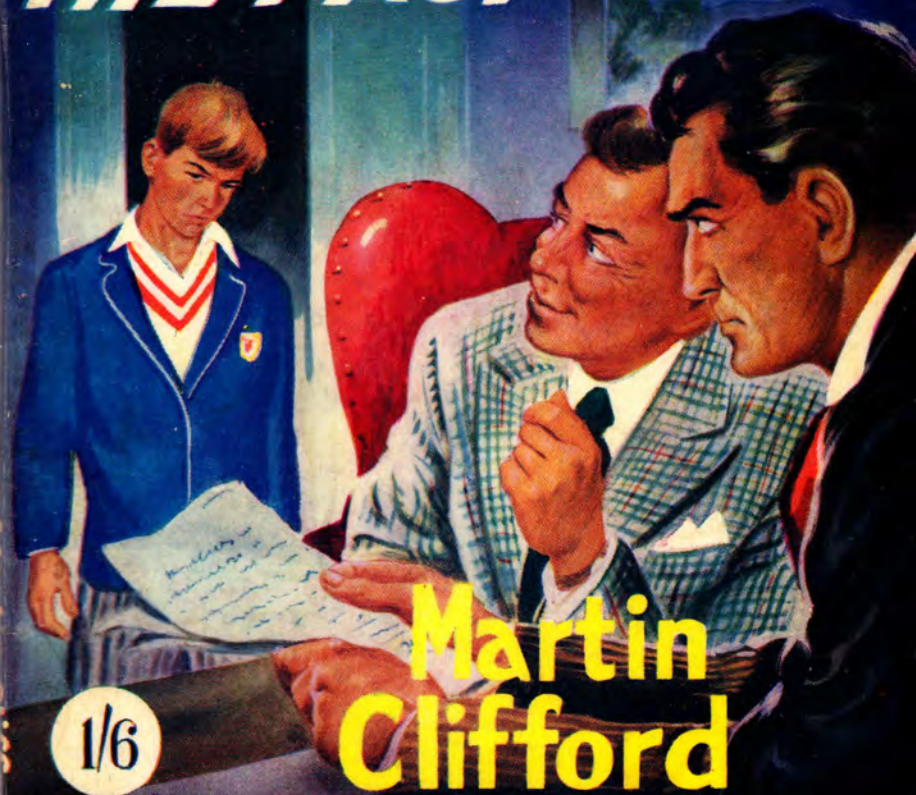




a brand-new adventure of
Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's

THE MAN FROM THE PAST



1/6

Martin Clifford

trouble threatens at St. Jim's
when a stranger walks in from the past

No. 3

THE MAN FROM THE PAST

Martin Clifford



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Our Cover Picture

"Come in, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, rather abruptly.

"Our young friend with the vivid imagination!" drawled Captain Vavasour.

The cloud on Talbot's face, his helplessness to deal with the crook who was blackening his name, amused the Man from the Past.

Talbot stood facing his House-master, and waited for the blow to fall....

The Man from the Past

by Martin Clifford

It was no secret at St. Jim's that Talbot of the Shell was a Boy with a Past ! Everyone knew that the popular junior had once belonged to Hookey Walker's gang of crooks in Angel Alley, though he was now a trusted and honourable St. Jim's man.

So when Captain Vavasour came to St. Jim's as a guest of the House-master, Mr. Railton, only Talbot recognised him as the notorious pick-pocket and confidence-man wanted by the police. Talbot alone could save the school from its dangerous guest !

Tom Merry & Co. refused to doubt their friend when a watch, and then a wallet, were missed from boys' pockets, but many suspicious glances were thrown at Talbot—and he would have been defeated by this echo from the past if a quick and courageous action had not brought a criminal to justice and saved the honour of the school.

By special arrangement with Frank Richards (Martin Clifford), also creator of Billy Bunter and the Chums of Greyfriars. Other titles in this series are :

TOM MERRY'S SECRET
TOM MERRY'S RIVAL
WHO RAGGED RAILTON ?

All characters in this story are imaginary and no reference is intended to any living person. (Copyright March, 1952).

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1

The Watch that Went!

“Bai Jove!”

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, uttered that sudden exclamation, in surprised and disconcerted tones.

He had been reclining gracefully in a deep armchair, by the big bay window of the junior day-room in the School House. Now, suddenly, he sat upright, surprise and concern in his aristocratic face.

Four Shell fellows, in a row in the window-seat, glanced round at him.

Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Talbot had been talking cricket, chiefly interested in the Carcroft match, which was shortly due. But they gave that all-absorbing topic a rest for the moment.

There was only one other fellow in the day-room just then. That was Baggy Trimble, the plumpest member of the Fourth Form.

Baggy had rolled in with news. Baggy, who heard everything, or nearly everything, had heard that Railton, the House-master, was expecting a visitor: a Captain Vavasour, who was to stay in the House for some time. When Baggy had news, he loved to impart it, whether fellows wanted to hear it or not.

On the present occasion they did not.

Not a fellow there cared a bean whether Railton was expecting a visitor or not: and they went on talking cricket, turning a deaf ear—or to be more exact ten deaf ears—to Baggy and his news.

But when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that startled exclamation, and sat up, the juniors in the window-seat gave him attention. Something, evidently, had startled the swell of St. Jim's.

“Bai Jove!” repeated Arthur Augustus.

“What's the row, Gussy?” asked Tom Merry.

“Found a spot of ink on your cuffs?” asked Monty Lowther, sympathetically.

"Or a spot of grease on your trousers?" grinned Manners.

"Anything the matter?" inquired Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah!" answered Arthur Augustus, "Where's my watch?"

"Your watch?" repeated Tom.

"Lost your watch, D'Arcy?" asked Baggy Trimble.

Arthur Augustus held up an elegant arm. From a spotless cuff an equally spotless wrist emerged. On that wrist, as a rule, gleamed the most expensive and dainty wrist-watch at St. Jim's. Now it was bare.

"It's gone!" said Arthur Augustus. "I was just lookin' to see the time, and it stwuck me all of a heap. It's gone."

"Watches were made to go," remarked Monty Lowther. The funny man of the Shell was not likely to lose an opportunity to wedge in a little jest.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"You forgot to put it on," suggested Tom Merry.

"I did not forget to put it on, Tom Mewwy. I wemembah puttin' it on vewy carefully, as the buckle is wathah loose, and it wequiahed care to fasten it."

"Then it's dropped off!" said Manners.

"But I should have heard it dwop, if it had dwopped off on the floor!" said Arthur Augustus, much puzzled. "A watch, even a small watch, cannot dwop on the floor without makin' wathah a wow."

"Might be in your pocket!" suggested Talbot.

"A w'ist-watch is worn on the w'ist, Talbot, not in a fellow's pocket," said Arthur Augustus.

Talbot laughed.

"Quite!" he agreed, "But if the buckle was loose, mightn't it have slipped off when you put your hand in your pocket?"

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "What a chap you are to think of things, Talbot. I will go thwough my pockets at once."

Arthur Augustus rose from the armchair. He proceeded to go through all his pockets, one after a'other.

Tom Merry and Co. watched him, not doubting that Talbot's suggestion was well-founded, and that the watch would emerge from a pocket. Baggy Trimble, taking advantage of the pause in the "cricket jaw," got on with his news.

"I heard Railton speaking to Kildare," he said, "Man named Vavasour, coming back from abroad. He's going to stay in the House as Railton's guest. I wonder what he's like. Railton had a telegram from him to-day—"

"What the dickens does it matter what he's like?" asked Tom Merry, "Nothing to do with any of us, is it?"

"That's why it interests Trimble," remarked Manners, "Nothing to do with him, so of course he knows all about it."

"Well, Railton mentioned that he was a cricketer," said Baggy, "He said he might play in a Sixth-form game, if Kildare liked the idea, see?"

"Oh!" said Tom, faintly interested at last. A man keen on cricket had a passport to Tom's esteem, "I expect he's a good sort."

At which Tom's friends smiled.

"Must be, if he plays games!" said Manners, solemnly, "That's the one thing needful, isn't it, Tom?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Well, it's always a point in a chap's favour," he said, "Look at fellows who slack at games—Trimble, for instance—"

"Look here—" began Baggy, indignantly.

He was interrupted by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Bai Jove! It's not heah!" exclaimed D'Arcy, "Where on earth has that beastly watch got to? I know I had it on!"

Arthur Augustus had turned out every pocket. But he had not turned a watch out of any of them.

"Think you may have dropped it down the back of your neck?" suggested Monty Lowther, with great gravity.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"If you like, we'll up-end you, and shake it out, if it's there!"

"You uttah ass—!"

"Must have dropped it about somewhere, Gussy," said Talbot, laughing, "We'll all help you look for it."

"But it is vewy wemarkable that I did not heah it drop, Talbot," said Arthur Augustus, in perplexity, "It is weally vewy mystewious."

"Perhaps it's been pinched!" suggested Baggy Trimble, brightly.

"Bai Jove! You uttah wottah, Twimble, how dare you suggest such a thing?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, wrathfully.

Five separate and distinct glares were fixed on Baggy, as he made that happy suggestion. The disappearance of Arthur Augustus's wrist-watch did seem a little mysterious: but certainly it was not likely to occur to anyone but Trimble that it might have been "pinched."

"You fat frump!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Kick him!" said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah! Turn wound, Twimble!"

"Look here, you know," protested Baggy, "I'm only trying to help! You said the buckle was loose, so it might have been pinched off your wrist, see? You wouldn't notice anything—"

"I wegard you as an uttah wottah, Twimble, for suggestin' such a howwid thing. I am goin' to kick you."

Baggy backed away in alarm. Tom Merry rose to his feet, looking grim.

"Well, where is it, if it hasn't been pinched? Tain't in your pockets, and you say you never heard it drop—and you ain't deaf, I suppose. Some fellow may have—wow! Keep off, will you, Tom Merry? I ain't said anything about Talbot, have I?" howled Trimble.

"What?" roared Tom.

"Here, you keep off," yelled Baggy, "I never said it was Talbot—I—I—never thought—I—I—was only saying—yarooooooh!"

Four fellows kicked Baggy Trimble, all at once. But Talbot of the Shell, in the window-seat, did not stir.

His handsome face had gone suddenly white.

Four other faces were red with wrath. Even Arthur Augustus, generally calm and placid, was furious.

Tom Merry and Manners, Lowther and D'Arcy, all kicked, and as Trimble yelled and dodged, they pursued him across the day-room, still kicking, jostling one another to land a boot on Baggy's plump trousers. Frantic yells came from the fat Baggy as he dodged, striving wildly, but in vain, to elude the lunging feet.

Talbot rose suddenly, and walked out of the day-room. He did not speak or look round.

"Talbot!" called out Tom Merry, anxiously.

The Shell fellow did not seem to hear. He hurried out, closing the door after him. Baggy roared on his top note.

"Wow! Leave off kicking me! You—ow! I never said—wow! I—I—yaroooh!"

"Kick him!"

"Boot him!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Take that, you fat foozler."

"And that, you podgy piffler—"

"Wow! ow! wow!" yelled Trimble, as he took them, "I tell you I never said it was Talbot—I only said—Whoooooooop!"

Baggy dodged wildly round the armchair in which Arthur Augustus had been seated when he missed the lost watch. Tom Merry and Co. were not done with him yet: but as they circled

the big armchair after Baggy, there was a sudden exclamation from Monty Lowther.

"Look!"

"What—?"

"There's the dashed watch!"

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Gussy, you ass—!"

"There's your silly watch, fathead!"

There it was—glimmering in the armchair against the dark leather. Evidently, owing to the loose buckle, it had slipped from Gussy's wrist while he was sitting in the chair. Arthur Augustus, on getting up from the armchair, had naturally stood with his back to it while he searched through his pockets. It had not occurred to his noble brain to look into the chair. But there was the watch!

"Oh, you ass!" said Manners, "Not lost at all!"

"Weally, Mannahs—" Arthur Augustus picked up the watch, "Yaas, this is my watch all wight—I nevah thought—"

"Do you ever?" snorted Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—!"

"Kick him too!" said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—!"

"Hard!" said Tom.

"Bai Jove! Oh, cwumbs! You uttah asses, you will wuin my trousers! Keep off, you weckless wuffians! Wow!"

Baggy Trimble was rather glad to see attention turned in another direction. He had had enough—or a little more than enough. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's turn to dodge lunging boots. The watch was not missing, after all, but Arthur Augustus's belief that it was, had caused Trimble to make the remark which had sent Talbot of the Shell out of the day-room with a white, drawn face. So the "Terrible Three" booted Arthur Augustus, much to his wrath and indignation. After which Tom Merry, with a frowning brow, hurried out of the day-room to look for Talbot.

The Boy with a Past

TALBOT came rather quickly into his study, in the Shell passage, his face still white. He wanted to be alone. He wanted, at that moment, to keep out of sight of all eyes at St. Jim's, since the obtuse Baggy's words in the day-room had re-awakened black and bitter old memories—memories that he always strove to keep from his mind, but which a careless word was always liable to recall.

But it was not always easy to be alone in a crowded House. He had hoped to find his study vacant: but he did not find it so. His study-mates, Gore and Skimpole, were both there: and Talbot compressed his lips as he saw them. Neither of them heeded him as he came in.

Gore had a cricket bat in his hands. With it, he was prodding Skimpole, who was uttering a series of squeaks, blinking at Gore like an owl through his glasses. In Skimpole's hand was a heavy volume, which apparently he had been perusing when Gore interrupted him. It was not a school book. Skimpole was a youth of scientific tastes, and he had books in his study that made other fellows' heads ache to look at them. Skimpole could have talked biology by the hour, had any fellows wanted to listen. Few did.

"My dear Gore!" spluttered Skimpole, "Please keep that bat away—you are hurting my ribs—wow!—and interrupting my reading—wow—ow—"

"That's the idea," grinned Gore, "Chuck that rot, and come down to the cricket."

"It is not rot, Gore—it is biology—"

"Same thing," said Gore, "Chuck it."

"But surely, my dear Gore, you are interested to know that the human race originated in a slimy creature that crawled out of the mud—"

"I daresay your family did!" said Gore, "You look it!"

"Stop that, Gore, please," said Talbot, quietly. His own trouble was heavy on his mind, but he was always thoughtful

for others. George Gore did not intend to be a bully: but he was overbearing and truculent: and Talbot often had to keep the peace between him and the egregious Skimmy. An ass like Skimmy was, in Gore's opinion, born to be ragged.

Gore looked round.

"Rot!" he said, "I'm only touching him up! I'm going to make him come down to the nets. We don't want frowsy slackers in this study."

"Not a bad idea, Skimmy," said Talbot, "A spot of fresh air would do you lots of good, old chap."

"I have no time for cricket, Talbot," answered Skimpole, blinking at him, "And I am not really slacking—I am endeavouring to penetrate the sublime mysteries of science, exerting my intellect to its full capacity—"

"Swallowed a dictionary?" asked Gore. "Look here, you're coming down to the nets, you frowsy frowster. I'm going to prod you out."

"Wow!" roared Skimpole, as Gore prodded with the bat.

Prod! prod! Skimpole was fairly driven out of the study under Gore's vigorous prodding, and he disappeared into the passage, yelling, followed by Gore, laughing.

For once, Talbot did not intervene. A spot of fresh air, was, as he had said, what Skimpole needed, and was likely to do him more good than the ponderous volume he had dropped as he was prodded out. And Talbot wanted to be alone—free from the boisterous Gore and the loquacious Skimmy. For those two good reasons, he left Gore to get on with the prodding, and shut the study door after the pair of them.

Alone, he moved about the study with restless steps, his brow dark, a harassed, haunted expression on his pale, handsome face.

Few fellows at St. Jim's, in either House, ever heeded Baggy Trimble, or gave attention to his babbling. But in this instance, Talbot of the Shell could not help heeding.

The past, which he had resolutely thrown behind him when he became a St. Jim's fellow, was always in the background.

The boy who had once been known as the "Toff," a nickname among crooks in the underworld, remembered many things of which no other St. Jim's fellow ever even thought.

Among his friends, and he had many, Talbot was always quietly cheerful, he was happy at St. Jim's: all the more from the contrast with what he had known before he had come to the school.

Sometimes it seemed to him that the past, Angel Alley, and Hookey Walker's gang of crooks that had been used to meet in

the den there, were nothing but an evil dream. It was not so very long ago, but it had vanished from his life as if it had never been.

But it had been! He was now a St. Jim's fellow, a keen cricketer, a valued member of Tom Merry's team: good in class, and in the good graces of his Form-master, Mr. Linton—liked by all or almost all in both Houses: trusted by his House-master, Railton: liked and trusted by the Head. Compared with his present life, the past had been fantastic, unreal.

But it had been real! There had been a time when he had been the dupe and companion of lawless men, when he had been known as the "Toff," and had feared the hand of a police-officer on his shoulder.

Baggy's luckless words had brought it all back, as if it had all been yesterday. Many fellows at St. Jim's knew nothing of that dark old story: others knew little: probably Baggy had only a vague recollection of it. Yet when D'Arcy's watch was missing it had come into Baggy's fat foolish mind that there was a fellow present who was not like other fellows.

Talbot was not angry. He had a fair mind, and he knew that he could not expect everyone to forget what he strove so hard to forget himself. But he was bitterly hurt and harassed—the only fellow at St. Jim's who could have been thus affected by anything that the obtuse Baggy might have said or done.

The past was the past: yet it seemed somehow the present also. Always at the back of his mind was the knowledge of what he once had been.

To and fro, to and fro he tramped in the study: glad to be alone, yet more and more oppressed by solitude.

There was a tap at the door: and he started, and stared round. If it was Gore or Skimpole coming back—

But it was neither. It was Tom Merry who came into the study.

Talbot's face was flushed.

"Oh! You, Tom!" he said, awkwardly.

Tom came across to him.

"Talbot, old man, I know why you cut. No need to beat about the bush! We've jolly well booted that toad Trimble—"

Talbot smiled faintly.

"Booting that fat ass won't wash out the past, Tom! Better leave me alone, old chap! You've been a good pal to me—I'd never have pulled through, but for that. But—"

"But what?"

Talbot's colour deepened.

"I'm not fit to be a pal of yours, Tom," he said, in a low voice, "I—I forget it sometimes, and—and then it comes back! You know what I was—"

"When you were a kid, in bad hands," said Tom, "Don't talk of it—don't think of it! You're the most decent fellow in the House, and everybody thinks so. That fat ass Trimble is only a fool!"

"I know! But—but—I'm not the fellow to pal with a chap like you, Tom, or your friends, or Blake, or D'Arcy, or even Cardew—I come from a different world, and—and—you'd better leave me alone."

Tom Merry's face set.

"Wash it right out!" he said, "I know what you feel like, Talbot—I understand. But it's all bunk. You're one of us—and one of the best of us. There isn't a man in the House who wouldn't trust you—even that fat idiot Trimble. You've let his silly babble get under your skin. Wash it right out—and don't stick here brooding, see? Come down to the nets with me."

"I—I think I'll stay here—"

"I think you won't!" said Tom. "Brooding never did a chap any good. Fresh air is the thing. Come on."

"But—I—I—I—" stammered Talbot.

"Do you want me to prod you with this bat till you come?"

Talbot laughed. In spite of the black mood that had settled on him like a heavy cloud he brightened in the company of his best friend. Tom Merry was already chasing the cloud away.

"Gore's just been prodding Skimmy down to the cricket," he said, "Are you going to do the same with me?"

"Yes—if you don't come."

"I'll come," said Talbot, smiling.

And he came! And a few minutes later, handsome in his flannels, at the nets with Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, Blake and Herries and Digby, and D'Arcy, Levison and Clive, and other School House men, he seemed his old cheery self—a care-free schoolboy, contrasting strangely with the gloomy, brooding fellow Tom Merry had found in the study.

3

Monty Lowther's Little Joke!

BUMP!

"Oh! Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy staggered.

It was a sudden collision.

Arthur Augustus had changed after the cricket, and was coming up to his study, No. 6 in the Fourth. He was crossing the study landing with his usual leisurely saunter—it was seldom that Arthur Augustus hurried.

But somebody else seemed to be in a hurry that afternoon. Monty Lowther, of the Shell, came dashing across the landing towards the stairs.

Apparently he did not see D'Arcy in his way. At all events, he crashed right into him, and the swell of St. Jim's went staggering backwards, spluttering for breath.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "Oooogh! Bai Jove! Wooooh!"

Lowther jumped at him, and caught him as he staggered. He threw his arms round the Fourth-Former, hugging him, and staggered round the landing with him.

Arthur Augustus struggled.

"Ooooh!" he gasped, "You uttah ass, welease me! Wooooh!"

"My dear chap, you were going over—"

"Welease me, you silly ass!" howled Arthur Augustus.

"Is that how you thank a chap for saving you from coming a cropper?" asked Lowther, reproachfully.

"Wats!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "I shall punch your silly head if you drag me awound like that, Lowthah, you pwactical-jokin' ass."

Monty Lowther released him, and Arthur Augustus leaned on the banisters, gasping for breath. Monty eyed him with a glimmer in his eyes. Arthur Augustus was the most unsuspecting of

mortals. Not for a moment did it occur to him that that collision was anything but an accident: or that Lowther had had any ulterior motive in grabbing him and waltzing him round on the landing. Still less did he dream that Lowther, with quick deft fingers, had detached the loosely-fastened wrist-watch from his noble wrist while Gussy was in his clutches. Arthur Augustus was happily unconscious that that beautiful expensive little watch was no longer attached to him, and that Monty had it in his hand behind him.

Leaning on the banisters, he gasped for wind.

"I wegard you as a clumsy ass, Lowthah!" he panted, "Wushin' into a fellow like a wunaway lowwy! Gwoogh."

And having recovered his breath a little, he re-started to cross the landing to the Fourth-Form studies, to join Blake and Herries and Digby at tea in No. 6.

Monty Lowther stepped after him.

"Hold on a minute, Gussy—"

"Wats!"

"There's a spot of dust on your jacket."

"Oh! Bai Jove! Bwush it off, will you, deah boy "

"Pleasure, old thing."

Lowther took out his handkerchief, and flicked the back of the most elegant and best-fitting jacket at St. Jim's. While thus engaged, he clipped the little strap of the wrist-watch, with a safety-pin, to the back of the jacket. It was the work of hardly more than a moment.

"There you are, Gussy—"

"Suah the-dust is off, deah boy " asked Arthur Augustus, anxiously. Arthur Augustus was very particular indeed about his clobber.

"Quite!" said Lowther. "Not a speck left."

"Thank you vewy much."

"Not at all, old boy," grinned Lowther, "By the way, what's the time, Gussy? If it's not too near lock-ups I'm going over to the New House to see Figgins."

Arthur Augustus glanced down at the wrist where, a minute or two before, the wrist-watch had been.

Then he uttered a startled exclamation.

"Bai Jove!"

"I asked you the time, Gussy—"

"Yaas, wathah! But I cannot tell you the time, Lowthah—my watch is gone again," exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Gone again!" repeated Lowther, "What have you done with it this time?"

"I had it on my w'ist! I am suah I had it on my w'ist! I must have dwopped it when you wushed into me, Lowthah! Pway help me look for it, befoah some fellow comes up and tweads on it."

"Right-ho!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his celebrated monocle into his eye, and scanned the old oak planks of the landing. Monty Lowther glanced about him—not very searchingly. Really, it was not of much practical use for Monty to search for the watch, as he knew that it was pinned to the back of D'Arcy's jacket. But Arthur Augustus searched and searched. He was not likely to have much success, as he was not blessed with eyes in the back of his head.

"Bai Jove! It's not heah!" he exclaimed, "I must have dwopped it on the stairs! I must get a new stwap for that watch—this is the second time it has dwopped off my w'ist! I had bettah go and look for it at once."

"Better," agreed Lowther.

Arthur Augustus went back to the stairs, and began to descend, scanning each stair in turn. Monty Lowther went into the Shell passage, and looked in at the doorway of No. 10. Tom Merry and Manners were there.

"Like to see something funny?" asked Lowther.

"Always glad to see you, old chap," answered Tom.

Manners chuckled.

"Oh don't be a goat," said Lowther, "Come along and look at Gussy! He's going downstairs looking for his watch."

Tom Merry frowned.

"Has that ass lost his watch again?" he asked.

"It's not far off," answered Lowther, "Come and look!"

Somewhat mystified, Tom Merry and Manners followed him down the passage, and across the study landing. They looked over the balustrade. By that time, Arthur Augustus had descended about a dozen steps, scanning each in vain for the missing watch. He had seen nothing of it, so far! But the three Shell fellows, looking down from the landing, saw something of it! There it was, glistening on Arthur Augustus's back, in the sunshine from the landing window.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, "What—"

"What the dickens—!" exclaimed Manners.

"Tip to Gussy to keep that watch safe!" explained Monty Lowther, airily, "By the time he finds it, it will be impressed on his mind—what he calls a mind—see?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus looked up, at the sound of laughter from the landing. The sight of the elegant Fourth-Former, scanning every step with the aid of his eyeglass, for the watch that was pinned on his back, seemed comical to the Shell fellows above, and they roared. But Arthur Augustus's aristocratic countenance was very serious. He gave the "Terrible Three" a reproachful look.

"Weally, you fellows, there is nothin' to cackle at, in a fellow losin' his watch," he exclaimed, "It was a birthday pwesent from the governah, and I weally must wecovah it."

"Sure you haven't missed it?" grinned Manners, "You may be leaving it behind you, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wubbish! I am lookin' ovah ewevy inch of gwound. It is certainly not behind me," answered Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh wats!" said Arthur Augustus, quite crossly, and he went on his way scanning stair after stair on the downward path.

More fellows joined Tom Merry and Co. on the landing. Kangaroo of the Shell, Ridd and Julian and Hammond and Roylance of the Fourth, looked over the banisters. There was more and more laughter from above. Racke and Crooke came along, and Gore and Skimpole, and Mellish and Wildrake and Lumley-Lumley. The landing balustrade was crowded, the whole crowd staring over and down, at the watch glistening on Arthur Augustus's bent back, as he plodded on his way, amid laughter. Baggy Trimble rolled up to see what was going on, and added his fat chortle.

Arthur Augustus cast a very exasperated glance upward, at a long row of laughing faces.

"Weally, you fellows—!" he expostulated.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to laugh at!" howled Arthur Augustus.

"Isn't there?" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!"

Arthur Augustus plugged onward, leaving the fellows above to yell. On the lower staircase he passed Levison, Clive, and Cardew, of the Fourth, coming up. They stared at him, and he hurriedly explained:

"I have lost my watch somewhah, you fellows! Have you seen anythin' of it?"

"No," answered Levison.

"I twust that you have not twodden on it."

"That's all right—we should have heard it crack if we had!" said Sidney Clive.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Cardew, suddenly. He had caught sight, as he passed Arthur Augustus, of the watch pinned on his back.

"Bai Jove! What are you cacklin' at, Cardew?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "Do you think it is funny for my watch to be gone?"

"Just a few!" chuckled Cardew.

"What—?" began Levison and Clive together. Then they too saw the watch, and burst into a laugh.

"Weally, you fellows—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Instead of cackling, I think you might help me look wound for it," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, indignantly.

"You'll find it if you look round!" chuckled Cardew, "It depends on how you look round, and where."

And the three went on up the stairs, laughing. Arthur Augustus uttered a sound resembling a snort, and continued on his way down. Loud howls of laughter from above followed him on his way.

He discovered nothing on the stairs. But that watch had to be found before it was trodden on, and he proceeded to search the floor adjacent to the staircase. At a little distance, Mr. Railton, the House-master of the School House, was standing, talking to Kildare of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's. Both of them glanced at Arthur Augustus, in great surprise. The sight of a junior bent almost double, moving about scanning the floor, with a little gold watch on his back glistening in the sunlight from the windows, was quite surprising.

"D'Arcy!" called out Mr. Railton.

Arthur Augustus straightened up, and turned round.

"Yaas, sir!"

"What are you playing this extraordinary prank for?" asked Mr. Railton, severely.

Arthur Augustus blinked at him.

"I'm not playin' a pwank, sir! I am lookin' for my watch."

"Your watch?" repeated Mr. Railton.

"Yaas, wathah, sir! I have dwopped my w'ist-watch some-whah, and I am vewy anxious to find it befoah somebody tweads on it and cwacks it."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, blankly.

Kildare grinned.

"You young ass—!" he said.

"Weally, Kildare—"

"You absurd boy!" exclaimed Mr. Railton, "Are you unaware that there is a wrist-watch, in a strap, pinned on the back of your jacket?"

"Wha-a-a-at?"

Arthur Augustus jumped almost clear of the floor.

"A—a—a—a wrist-watch, pinned on my back!" he stuttered, "Bai Jove! I was quite unawah of it, sir! I quite fail to see how my watch could be pinned on the back of my jacket, as I must have dropped it—"

Mr. Railton tried not to laugh.

"Someone must have picked it up," he said, "Come here."

"Oh, cwumbs!"

Arthur Augustus approached his House-master, and Mr. Railton detached the safety-pin and the watch. Arthur Augustus, as he took them, gazed at them like a fellow in a dream. Never had the swell of St. Jim's been so astonished. Indeed, it seemed almost like magic to him—for how could a dropped watch have become pinned to his back? It was quite a mystery.

"Bai Jove!" he said, faintly, "That is my watch! I entiahly fail to undahstand this, sir! How—"

"You young ass!" said Kildare. "Somebody must have picked it up, and pinned it on you for a lark."

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

His aristocratic brain grasped it at last. There was deep wrath in his countenance, as he went back to the stairs, watch in hand, and mounted them. A yell from the landing greeted him as he came up.

"Found your watch, Gussy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' to cackle at in a silly jape like this," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "Wailton saw the watch pinned on my back—"

"Ha, ha, ha,!"

"Some awful wottah must have picked it up, and pinned it on my back, somehow. I had no ideah—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or somebody may have got it off your wrist on purpose!" suggested Monty Lowther, blandly.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Imposs, deah boy," he answered, "I should certainly have noticed it."

THE MAN FROM THE PAST

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I should certainly have noticed it if somebody had hooked it off my w'ist. I twust I am not such an ass as all that."

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the juniors.

"He trusts he isn't such an ass as that!" almost sobbed Monty Lowther, "What a trusting nature!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows are goin' to cackle at everythin' a fellow says, I will leave you to cackle," snapped Arthur Augustus. And he walked away to Study No. 6 with his noble nose in the air—leaving the crowd of juniors still cackling!

4

Unexpected !

“**L**OST, stolen, or strayed !” remarked Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry and Manners smiled. Talbot, who seemed to be deep in thought, did not smile, or even seem to hear Lowther's playful remark.

It was the following afternoon, and the ‘Terrible Three’ were strolling down to Rylcombe, by a footpath through fields and woods. They had come on Talbot of the Shell in the quad, as they came out, and rounded him up for a walk with them. Tom's quick eye had spotted the faint cloud on Talbot's brow, and he guessed that the scene in the day-room, of the day before, was lingering in his mind. For which reason he linked his arm in Talbot's and walked him off, willy-nilly : sagely deciding that a tramp in sunny weather by fields and woods was the best cure for gloomy or harassing thoughts.

Talbot's handsome face was cheerful, but it was very thoughtful, as he walked with the chums of the Shell. What he longed to forget had been brought back to his mind by the fat and obtuse Baggy, and it was not easy to dismiss it again. He did not heed Lowther's remark, or the man a little distance ahead to whom Monty playfully alluded.

There were many winding paths in Rylcombe Wood, and visibility did not extend very far amid trees and bushes and thick summer foliage. A stranger in the locality might very easily lose his way, or at least be doubtful of it, and at a point where another path crossed the one the juniors were following, not far ahead of them, a man had halted, and was looking round him, evidently in doubt which path to take. Hence Monty's remark.

“Stranger in the land !” remarked Manners, “We'll set him right when we reach him.”

The man, catching sight of the schoolboys as they came, stood looking at them, instead of at the branching paths. Apparently he was waiting for them to come up, with the intention of asking his way when they arrived.

He looked a man about thirty, well dressed, with a rather ruddy face under a Homburg hat, and a little plump in build. The 'Terrible Three' had never seen him before, and concluded that he was some visitor to the neighbourhood who had not yet learned his way about.

Talbot, with his hands in his pockets, and his eyes on the ground, did not seem to have observed him at all. He gave quite a little start, as the man spoke, the juniors having come within hearing, and looked up.

"You lads know which of these paths leads to the school?" asked the stranger, in a rather pleasant voice, "I started to walk from the station, but seem to have got a little mixed."

"These paths are a bit of a puzzle to a stranger, sir," said Tom Merry, "But which school are you heading for—St. Jim's, or the Grammar School?"

"St. James—!"

"We call it St. Jim's," said Tom, with a smile. "It's our school, you see. Keep straight on by this path, and you will get out into Rylcombe Lane in sight of the school gates."

"Thanks a lot." The man eyed them, "You belong to St. Jim's?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then I daresay you know Mr. Railton?"

"Just a few," said Monty Lowther, "He's our House-master, in the School House." He remembered Baggy Trimble's news in the day-room of the previous day, and guessed who the stranger was. "I shouldn't wonder if you are Captain Vavasour?"

The young man nodded and smiled.

"I see you've heard of me," he said.

"We heard a chap say, yesterday, that Captain Vavasour was coming to visit our House beak," explained Lowther, "Jolly glad we happened to come this way and put you right for the school, sir."

The three juniors regarded the man with some interest. They concluded that he was a friend of Railton's, as he was visiting the school to stay with the House-master: and they were glad to be of even a slight service to a friend of Railton's.

Talbot had not spoken.

He had glanced at the young man, casually. But, as the juniors exchanged words with him, Talbot's look became intent and fixed, a startled gleam in his eyes.

He gazed at Captain Vavasour: or rather, stared at him, with so fixed and penetrating a look, that his friends could not help noticing it, and the young man himself seemed a little surprised by it. He gave Talbot quite a curious look: and for a moment, his face seemed to become watchful.

"You are Captain Vavasour?" Talbot spoke at last, and there was a strange accent in his voice.

"That is my name," assented the young man, with a nod, "You seem to look as if you know me, my young friend. Have we ever met?"

"The visitor Mr. Railton is expecting at St. Jim's?" went on Talbot, without heeding the question.

"Exactly."

"Has Mr. Railton ever met you before?"

The young man stared at him, and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther exchanged uncomfortable glances. What was the matter with Talbot they could not begin to guess. Generally his manners were excellent, not even excelled by those of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. They could hardly believe their ears when he addressed, to a stranger, a question that could only be regarded as impertinent. All three reddened with discomfort.

"Really, my boy," said Captain Vavasour, stiffly, "Don't you think that such a question is a little impertinent?" He glanced at the other three, "Thank you very much for setting me right on my way."

With that, and without looking at Talbot again, he walked on, following the path by which the juniors had come.

Talbot stood staring after him as he went.

There was a very uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Seldom had Tom Merry and Co. felt so disconcerted.

"Coming?" he asked, rather abruptly. Manners and Lowther The three moved on.

Talbot did not stir. He stood as if rooted, staring after Captain Vavasour, watching him till the trees round the winding footpath hid him from sight.

Tom touched him on the arm.

"Coming" he asked, rather abruptly. Manners and Lowther

were going on, but Tom turned back for Talbot.

Talbot gave him a strange look. The colour seemed to have faded from his face, and his eyes had a haunted expression. He hesitated.

"I—I don't think I'll come any further, Tom, if you don't mind," he stammered, "I—I'd rather get back."

"What on earth's the matter with you, Talbot?" exclaimed Tom, bluntly, "You were positively rude to that chap—"

"Oh! W—was I?"

"Blessed if I make you out," said Tom, "Asking a stranger questions like that—even Baggy Trimble would have drawn the line at it. Are you wandering in your mind, or what?"

Talbot's pale face flushed.

"I—I—" he stammered, "I—"

"Oh, never mind," said Tom, "I know you're a bit upset owing to that fat fool Trimble yesterday. Come on—a walk will do you good."

"I—I'd rather go back—"

"What rot!"

"I would really, Tom—"

"Just as you like, of course," said Tom Merry, a trifle gruffly. "I'll cut on, then."

He cut on, overtaking Manners and Lowther. Talbot watched the three of them, till the wood swallowed them from sight. His flushed face became pale again, and he clenched his hands till the nails almost dug into the palms. The stress of his feelings showed plainly in his tormented face.

"It's impossible!" he muttered, "Impossible! And yet—I know his face like the back of my hand! Yet—if Railton knows him—how can it be?"

He stood for some minutes, in troubled thought. Then he started back along the path by which the juniors had come, breaking into a rapid run.

By the time he sighted Captain Vavasour again, the young man had passed out of the wood, and was crossing a wide sunny meadow. He was walking with vigorous strides, but Talbot, running fast, was overtaking him. In the middle of the meadow, he came breathlessly up with Railton's visitor.

"Stop!" he panted.

Captain Vavasour glanced round. Perhaps he had not heard the running feet on the thick grass: if he had heard, he had

not heeded. But at Talbot's panting call he stopped, and turned.

He raised his eyebrows as he looked at the Shell fellow of St. Jim's.

"You again!" he said, in a slightly ironical tone, "Have you followed me?"

"Yes," panted Talbot.

"And why?"

"To ask you a question."

"I do not choose to be questioned by schoolboys I have never seen before," snapped Captain Vavasour, "You may save your breath."

"You will answer this question," said Talbot, between his teeth, "I want to know what you are doing here, Light-Fingered Jack?"

5

Talbot's Warning!

CAPTAIN VAVASOUR gave a start. A sudden gleam shot into his eyes, as he stared at the school boy who asked that unexpected question.

Talbot, his eyes fixed on the ruddy face with an eagle's keenness, did not fail to observe it.

"That name is familiar to you—*Captain Vavasour!*" he said, with an accent of bitter irony on the name.

If the captain was startled, he recovered himself in a moment. He stared at Talbot, with surprise and a faint amusement in his look.

"What name did you call me by?" he asked.

"Light-Fingered Jack!"

"And what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. You do not know me," said Talbot, "But I know you, only too well."

"I fail to see how you can know a man who had served abroad for many years, and only lately returned to England—you, a schoolboy at St. Jim's."

Talbot's lip curled bitterly.

"I was not always a schoolboy at St. Jim's," he said, "I was once something very different, and that was when I saw Light-Fingered Jack. I have a good memory for faces, my man."

The captain frowned.

"Take care how you address me, boy! I do not wish to begin my visit to the school by thrashing a St. Jim's boy."

"Oh, give that a miss!" snapped Talbot, impatiently, "I tell you, I know you. Your face is as familiar to me now, as it was in the old days, when I was called the 'Toff,' in Hookey Walker's gang in Angel Alley. I saw you only once, and you, I suppose, never saw me, or you would know me as I know you. But you must have heard of the Toff, if you never saw him."

Captain Vavasour gave him a very curious look.

"The Toff?" he repeated.

"You know that name?"

"Not in the least! A nickname, I suppose," said Captain Vavasour, shrugging his plump shoulders, "But are you jesting or are you serious when you tell me that you were once a member of a gang of crooks?"

"I am quite serious, as you know."

"How should I know?" said the captain, lightly. "I have never seen you before, and know nothing of you. But if you intend me to believe you, you must surely see that it will be my duty to repeat what you have said, to Mr. Railton at the school—I cannot be a party to any deception you are practising there."

Talbot laughed, almost savagely.

"You need not worry about that," he said, "Mr. Railton and the Head, and almost everyone else at St. Jim's, knows my story."

"Yet you are there?"

"Yet I am there!" said Talbot, "I found friends to help and trust me, to give me a better way of life, and the King's Pardon stands between me and the past. There is no deception in my case—but in yours—"

"I see," said the captain, musingly, "You have been in bad company in earlier days, you contacted breakers of the law, and you remember some of them more or less vaguely—and some odd likeness has caused you to suppose that I am one of them! He laughed, "is that it?"

"No!" said Talbot, "That is not it, Light-Fingered Jack! I know your face as well as my own in the glass."

"Dear me!" said the captain, banteringly, "But who was this Light-Fingered Jack you speak of? It is a curious nickname—indeed as curious as the Toff."

"I will tell you. Light-Fingered Jack was so called, because he was the cunningest and most skilful pickpocket known to the police, I heard of him often, but never came across him—till the day he was tried—"

"Oh! He was tried, was he?"

"And sent to prison," said Talbot.

"Is he still there?"

"You know better than anyone else that he is not. I saw him standing in the dock—he did not see me in a crowded court—but I saw him very plainly, and remember every feature of his face."

"And you fancy that I am he?"

"I do not fancy—I know."

Captain Vavasour smiled.

"Now my boy, I will be patient with you, for I can see that you are in earnest, and I believe what you say," he said, "Whether

I may or may not resemble this man you speak of, I cannot say, as I have never seen him, or heard of him until this moment. I can only tell you that you are mistaken."

"I am not mistaken."

"Does that mean that you intend to repeat this absurd story at the school, and cause a scandal?"

"I shall repeat it to Mr. Railton, if you go to the school. You are deceiving him, and I shall put him on his guard."

The captain laughed contemptuously.

"I imagine that your House-master will deal with you with some severity, if you slander his guest in such a manner," he said.

"I shall risk that."

"I counsel you, my boy, to get this absurd fancy out of your head and cease to make a fool of yourself."

"I am not in need of your council," answered Talbot, "But I will give you mine. Keep clear of my school—take the next train back to London—and let me see no more of you. That is your best guess, Light-Fingered Jack."

"I shall be staying some days at the school."

"You will not enter the school, if you are wise—"

The captain laughed.

"I am going there now," he said

Talbot set his lips.

"Do so—and take what is coming to you," he said. "If I find you at the school when I come in, I shall go directly to Mr. Railton, and tell him that he is harbouring a crook wanted by the police."

"I hardly think your House-master will heed so childish a story," said the captain, laughing. "But do as your fancy dictates. I am looking forward to a chat with Railton, and probably you will find me in his study when you come in."

With that, and still laughing, the young man turned away, and walked on towards the school.

Talbot watched him go.

In spite of his certainty that he knew the man's face, a momentary doubt struck him. Was he mistaken? Was it possible that he was mistaken?

But he shook his head.

The man who called himself Captain Vavasour was the Light-Fingered Jack of other days: he was certain of it—absolutely certain—there was no possibility of doubt. And why was he going to St. Jim's under a false name? Obviously, to carry on his trade there—there were rich pickings for thievish fingers in

such a place. If that man, thief, rascal, pickpocket, set one foot within the gates of St. Jim's, Talbot's duty was clear—he had to denounce him for what he was. And that he was fully determined to do.

But would the rascal dare, after the warning he had had? Talbot could hardly believe so. More likely, most likely, he would realise that his cue was immediate departure—to get out while the going was good. It seemed almost certain to Talbot that the man would heed his warning, and it was a relief to his mind to think so, as he walked slowly away.

It was about an hour later that Talbot fell in with Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, in Rylcombe Lane, sauntering back from the village. The Terrible Three gave him rather curious looks as he rejoined them: but Talbot had himself under command now, and his face revealed nothing. They walked in at the gates together.

"I expect that chap Vavasour has blown in long ago," remarked Lowther, as they went in.

"Had plenty of time, anyway," said Manners.

"Looked a decent sort," said Tom Merry. "Here's Trimble—he knows all the latest news. Captain Vavasour blown in yet, Trimble?"

Talbot's eyes turned anxiously on Baggy's fat face. He hoped and expected, to hear a reply in the negative. But it was an affirmative answer that came.

"Long ago," answered Trimble. "I saw him walking with Railton."

Talbot caught his breath.

"He's here?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. Railton's showing him round," answered Baggy, "I saw them on the cricket ground."

Talbot walked on to the School House with his friends in silence. The man had come—heedless of his warning, he had come—and he was now in the school.

Talbot's face set grimly. Light-Fingered Jack was asking for it, and he was going to get it!

6

A Spot of Bowling!

“WELL hit, young 'un!”

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy glanced round, to see who had spoken.

Blake and Co. of the Fourth, and some other juniors, were at the nets, and Arthur Augustus was wielding the willow. Cardew of the Fourth was giving him some bowling, and the swell of St. Jim's was dealing with it in quite a masterly manner. Cardew was almost as good a bowler as Fatty Wynn of the New House, and he was sending down good stuff: and a glint in his eyes showed that he was not over-pleased by D'Arcy's handling of it. Cardew hated being beaten in anything. Even in practice at the nets he liked to score, and he had fully expected to make hay of the sticks, and put “paid” to the cheery satisfaction in Arthur Augustus's beaming face.

Instead of which, it was Arthur Augustus who was putting paid to Cardew's bowling, and a good many fellows had gathered round to watch him doing it. Cardew put all he knew into every ball, but the result was the same all the time—and many fellows winked or grinned at one another, as they saw the chagrin in his face.

Nobody noticed, for the moment, that Mr. Railton had strolled on Little Side, with a companion, and had stopped to look on at the junior cricket practice. Railton's companion was a plumpish young man with a ruddy face, whom Tom Merry and Co. had they been there, would have recognized as the young man they had directed on his way to Rylcombe Wood and whom Talbot of the Shell would have known, or at least felt certain that he knew, as “Light-Fingered Jack” who had once stood in the dock at the Old Bailey.

If Captain Vavasour was the man Talbot believed him to be,

at least he was well-provided with nerve. For here he was, at the school, and his manner was easy and unperturbed as he walked with Mr. Railton, who was showing him round. And it seemed that he was, as Baggy had reported in the day-room the previous day, a cricketer: for he certainly seemed interested in the game. Few, looking at the smiling plump, ruddy face, would have surmised that Captain Vavasour had any dark secrets to keep. Indeed, such a surmise could never have occurred to Talbot himself, but for his knowledge of the man and recollection of him.

Arthur Augustus had just dealt with a ball that whizzed down like a bullet from a rifle. Cardew, this time, had no doubt that the wicket was gone. But the wicket was not gone: it was intact, and the ball, hot from the bat, whizzed away, Cardew setting his lips as it whizzed. It was then that Vavasour called out "Well hit young 'un," and the swell of St. Jim's glanced round at him.

"Oh, here's old Railton," murmured Blake, "Who's that with him?"

"I heard he was having a visitor to-day," said Digby.

"Man named Vavasour," said Herries.

"Army man," remarked Levison.

"Looks decent," said Clive.

The juniors "capped" their House-master and his companion. Mr. Railton gave them a pleasant nod.

"That kid knows how to handle the bat, Railton," remarked Captain Vavasour, "By gad, this makes me feel rather a boy again."

The School House-master smiled.

"I know you're keen on the game, Vavasour," he answered, "And in fact I've spoken to Kildare about it—he's captain of the school—and if you'd like a spot of cricket with the seniors sometime—"

"Love it!" said Captain Vavasour, "These junior lads seem keen. That's a good man at the wicket."

"D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form," said Mr. Railton, "A very good junior cricketer, Vavasour. Shall we walk on?"

"Mind if we watch the young 'uns for a few minutes?"

"By all means."

And they stood looking on. Most of these remarks reached the ears of the juniors, and Blake and Co. could not help feeling, and looking, pleased. It gave them a high opinion of Railton's friend: not only was he a cricketer, but he was inter-

ested in junior practice. Blake rather wished that the House match had been going on, so that Vavasour might have seen them mopping up the earth with Figgins and Co. of the New House.

"That lad can bowl, too," remarked Vavasour, as Cardew sent the ball down again.

He was right. It was a dangerous ball, that looked like a wide, but was anything but! But it did not catch Arthur Augustus napping. There was a smack as willow met leather, and the ball went on its travels again.

Cardew breathed hard.

Gladly he would have displayed his bowling skill under the eyes of his House-master and the visitor to St. Jim's. He would have given a very great deal for the ball to have scattered the bails. But it was Gussy's day: and Cardew realised that, good as he was, he could not take that wicket. Levison fielded the ball, but Cardew shook his head, and drove his hands deep into the pockets of his flannels. He had had enough failures. He moved away, hardly able to keep a scowl from his face.

"Here, laddie," called out Captain Vavasour, as Levison stood with the ball in his hand, "Throw it this way."

"Like to send down one or two, Vavasour?" asked Mr. Railton, with an amused smile.

"Just that—if I may."

"Do, by all means! The boys will be honoured by a spot of bowling from a man who has played for the Army."

Levison tossed over the ball. Captain Vavasour had his hands in his pockets. But a hand flashed out and caught the ball, with ease. Evidently the captain would have been a good man in the field. Smiling, he walked to the spot vacated by Cardew, all eyes on him. Mr. Railton seemed a little amused by his companion's boyish fancy for bowling at junior nets: but all the juniors on the spot were deeply interested. Even Cardew, who was about to walk off, paused to look on.

"Look out, Gussy," called out Blake, with a grin.

"Yaas, wathah!" smiled Arthur Augustus.

And he looked out, very warily.

It did not serve him much, however. He hardly saw the ball that came down. Cardew's bowling had been good, very good. But it was nowhere like the captain's. There was a clack as the sticks went, and Arthur Augustus gave quite a jump, and ejaculated "**Bai Jove!**"

"Man down!" grinned Clive, and Cardew laughed.

Arthur Augustus stared at his wrecked wicket. He seemed surprised. Dig, grinning, set up the stumps again.

"How's that?" called out Captain Vavasour, smiling.

"Bai Jove! Would you mind twyin' again, sir?" inquired Arthur Augustus, "If you wouldn't mind sendin' down anothah ball—"

"Certainly, if you like."

Dig tossed the ball to the captain, who caught it with his left hand. He transferred it to his right, and bowled again.

This time Arthur Augustus was very much on his guard. He was on the lookout for a ball that came with what seemed like supersonic speed. But it booted not. A gleaming bat smote empty air, and the middle stump was whipped out of the ground, as if by magic.

"Gweat Scott!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Well bowled, sir!" exclaimed Blake.

"By gum, that man can bowl!" Levison remarked to Clive, "There isn't a man in the First Eleven to touch him." And Clive nodded assent.

"Pewwaps you wouldn't mind twyin' just once more, sir?" called out Arthur Augustus. He was quite anxious to stop, at least, one ball from that remarkably fast bowler.

"Just one more, then," said the captain, smiling.

Possibly the captain, with a good humoured consideration for the youthful batsman, did not exert his skill with the next ball: tempering the wind to the shorn lamb, as it were. Arthur Augustus succeeded in stopping it dead: much to his satisfaction.

Then the captain strolled away with Mr. Railton, a cheery smile on his face, leaving the junior cricketers in a buzz. If Captain Vavasour's object had been to make himself popular among St. Jim's fellows, he could not have chosen a better method. A man who could bowl like that, and who could take a keen interest in junior cricket, was a man that St. Jim's could—and did—admire!

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus, "That chap can bowl! I wondah who he is!"

"Friend of Railton's," said Blake, "I heard Railton say he had played for the Army."

"Awfully kind of him to take note of our unimportant exist-

ence," said Cardew, with a sneer.

"Jolly decent of him," retorted Blake, "Nose out of joint, what?"

"Oh, go and eat coke."

Cardew walked away, by no means so pleasantly impressed by the captain as the other fellows. His own failure to do what Captain Vavasour had done so easily, irritated him. But every other junior at the nets was quite enthusiastic about Captain Vavasour: and when they went in to tea, Mr. Railton's visitor was a topic in most of the junior studies.

7

Tea in Study No. 6

“T’WOT along, deah boys.”

Arthur Augustus D’Arcy was on the study landing, when four Shell fellows came up the stairs. Apparently he was looking for them. Tom Merry and Co. were booked for tea in Study No. 6, after their walk abroad. At the foot of the staircase, Talbot had hesitated, as if he had other thoughts in his mind—as, indeed, he had. After a moment’s hesitation, however, he came up with his friends.

He had to see Mr. Railton, and “put him wise” about his visitor. That was fixed in his mind. “Light-Fingered Jack” was at St. Jim’s under the name of Captain Vavasour: and obviously Railton could not have the slightest suspicion, or the man would not have been there. How the crook had deceived him, Talbot could not begin to guess: but he, at least, knew the truth, and had to tell it. But he resolved to think it over before going to his House-master with so startling a tale. It was possible, indeed it was very probable, that Mr. Railton would not be able to believe what he had to tell: and it looked as if the crook intended to brazen it out: otherwise he would not have come on to the school after Talbot’s warning. It was a matter that required some thinking out: and in the meantime, Talbot intended to say nothing. Such a story, if it became public property, would cause altogether too much of a sensation in the school, and that he was very anxious to avoid. Surely the man could be got rid of quietly, and nothing said.

If not, Talbot knew what he was going to do—what he had to do. If Mr. Railton would not listen to him, he had to go to Inspector Skeat at Wayland. The inspector, surely, would listen.

Talbot’s face was clouded—he could not help it. Only the day before, Baggy Trimble’s obtuse babble had recalled the dark old

days he was so anxious to forget. And now there came a face from the miserable past—and he wondered, with a heavy heart, whether he would ever be permitted to banish those dark old haunting memories from his mind.

It seemed as if fate had always a jolt in store. Trimble's babble was a trifle, perhaps. But the man from the past was not a trifle—the man was there to carry on his crooked game, and the one-time "Toff" had to put a stop to it. It was no wonder that there was a cloud on his brow, and that he was very silent—though he tried to force a smile as Arthur Augustus greeted the Shell fellows on the study landing.

"Tea's weady," went on Gussy cheerfully, "At least it is vewy neahly weady—Blake and Hewwies and Dig are gettin' it in the study. Blake had a parcel fwom Yorkshire to-day, and we are wathah wollin' in it."

"Good egg!" said Tom Merry, "Come on, Talbot."

"I—I think I'll go to my study—"

"Forgotten that we're teeing with the one and only " asked Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Lost your watch again, yet, Gussy?"

"I have not lost my watch again yet, Lowthah."

"Found out who pinned it on your back yesterday?"

"Not yet! I am goin' to punch his nose, vewy hard, when I spot him. Have you any ideah who it was?"

Monty Lowther winked at his friends.

"Well, I think I could guess!" he admitted. "But if you're goin' to punch his nose, Gussy, I'd rather not mention his name."

At which Tom Merry and Manners chuckled.

"I wegard him, whoevah he was, as an uttah ass to play such a twick," said Arthur Augustus, "And I shall certainly punch his nose vewy hard when I find him out. Howevah, nevah mind that now—pway twot along."

Talbot seemed to hesitate. He was in no mood for the cheery company of a Fourth-Form study. But Tom Merry slipped an arm through his, and led him on to the Fourth-Form passage. The four of them followed Arthur Augustus to Study No. 6.

That celebrated study presented quite a festive appearance. Blake's parcel from his home in Yorkshire had apparently been packed on ample lines. Blake and Herries and Dig were busy sorting out good things.

"Oh, here you are, you Shell-fish," said Blake, "You missed something, wandering about while we were at games-practice."

"Yaas, wathah."

"What have we missed?" asked Tom, with a smile.

"Gussy been bewitching the world with noble batsmanship?" asked Lowther.

"As a mattah of fact, Lowthah, I was in wathah good form," said Arthur Augustus, "Cardew couldn't take my wicket, could he, deah boys?"

"Not in his lifetime," said Herries, "But somebody else could."

"And did," said Dig.

"Oh, who was that?" asked Tom, interested at once. As junior captain, he was keen to hear of it. "Cardew's a good man with the ball. If he couldn't take Gussy's wicket, and somebody else could, there must be an unknown prize-packet in the Fourth. Who was it?"

Blake chuckled.

"Not a Fourth-Form man," he answered, "Railton's got a visitor—man named Vavasour—Army man."

Talbot gave a little start.

"Vavasour?" he repeated.

"That's it! Railton was showing him round, and they gave us a look in at the nets," explained Blake, "He sent down a few to Gussy—and where was the one and only?"

"Out!" grinned Herries.

"Some bowler, believe me," said Blake, "I'll bet if he gets a game with the Sixth, Kildare won't stand up to his bowling."

"We met him, on his way here," said Manners, "Looks a decent chap."

"Well, a friend of Railton's would be," said Blake.

"Is he a friend of Railton's?" asked Talbot, in a low voice.

"Must be, I suppose, as Railton seems to have asked him here," answered Blake, "Railton must know him, I suppose, as he's his jolly old guest."

Talbot made no rejoinder, and he did not take part in the cheery chat as the tea-party sat down round the table. He was puzzled. That "Captain Vavasour" was a cricketer was no surprise to him: for he knew that "Light-Fingered Jack" played a good game of cricket, and made use of the game in following his nefarious calling. He had seen the man only once in the old days: but he had heard a good deal about him at the time. His skill in the summer game had served him well, among acquaintances who never dreamed what he was: and he had profited, in his own way, by being in demand for "cricket weeks" at country-houses. The fact that Captain Vavasour shone at cricket only

confirmed Talbot's belief that he was Light-Fingered Jack—if it had needed confirming.

But Mr. Railton's contact with him was a puzzle. If Railton knew Captain Vavasour, the real Vavasour, how was the crook able to carry out this imposture at St. Jim's? There must be a real Captain Vavasour somewhere, in whose name the man had come to the school.

It was a perplexing problem to Talbot.

He sat almost silent at the cheery tea-table in Study No. 6. However, his silence was not much noticed, with seven fellows talking, two or three of them generally at once.

Tea was almost over when there were footsteps and voices in the passage outside. Talbot gave a violent start, as he recognized the easy, rather pleasant tones of the visitor to St. Jim's. Railton, it seemed, was still showing his visitor round, and now he was conducting him over the School House. The other fellows caught the voice also, and exchanged glances.

"Bai Jove! That's Vavasour!" remarked Arthur Augustus.

"These are the Fourth-Form studies," said Mr. Railton's deep voice. The door of No. 6 was half-open and the two were just outside. "Our young friends you saw on the cricket-field are here."

He tapped on the door and pushed it further open.

Tom Merry and Co. rose respectfully to their feet, as their House-master appeared in the doorway, with Captain Vavasour at his side.

The captain gave them a pleasant nod and smile.

Talbot looked at him fixedly: but Captain Vavasour did not seem to notice him specially among the others. He gave him no attention whatever.

"Oh, here you are!" said Captain Vavasour, "Don't let me disturb you—just looking round! By Jove, this reminds me of my own schooldays, Railton: Tea in the study, what?"

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

"What a jolly study," said the captain, "How it brings back old times! *Eheu fugaces*, what? You see, I haven't forgotten all my Latin," he laughed, "But I remember the cricket more than the Latin."

"Which is not uncommon, I think," said Mr. Railton, with a smile.

They were moving away when Talbot spoke suddenly.

"Mr. Railton!"

The House-master glanced back at him.

"Yes, Talbot! What is it?"

"May I come to your study and speak to you, sir, when you are disengaged?"

"Certainly, Talbot! Any time after the next quarter of an hour."

"Thank you, sir!" Talbot's eyes were on Captain Vavasour, "I have something to tell you, sir."

The captain certainly heard, but he gave no sign.

"Very well, Talbot," said Mr. Railton.

And he went on up the passage with his guest: certainly never dreaming what it was that Talbot had to tell him: though equally certainly it could have been no mystery to Captain Vavasour.

Talbot was breathing rather hard, as he sat down again with the tea-party in Study No. 6.

His words to Mr. Railton had been a plain warning to "Light-Fingered Jack". The man knew what to expect, if he did not go. Would he dare to remain? If he did, it was not only with Talbot of the Shell that he had to deal, but with Inspector Skeat of Wayland. The "Toff's" mind was irrevocably made up on that.

8

Defeated!

“COME in!”

Mr. Railton's tone was short and sharp.

Talbot, at his House-master's door, stood and looked at him.

There was a frown on Victor Railton's brow. Seldom, or never did the House-master of the School House frown, at the sight of Talbot of the Shell. He knew, as the Head knew, as many at St. Jim's knew, the dark story of the Toff's chequered past. But all the more for that reason he was invariably kind to the schoolboy who had once been the “Toff” in Hookey Walker's gang. He liked him and trusted him, and in many kind and thoughtful ways, made it easier for him to live down the past.

But he was frowning now. Obviously he was disturbed, if not angry. For once his tone was sharp, and his manner almost grim.

Talbot stepped in.

He did not need telling what this meant. Captain Vavasour had spoken—he had got in with his story first. He intended to remain at St. Jim's as Railton's guest, defying what Talbot could do: and by speaking out to Railton he had discounted the Toff's accusation in advance.

“Shut the door!” rapped Mr. Railton, “I know what you are about to tell me, Talbot, and I do not desire other ears to hear!”

Talbot quietly shut the door.

He stood before his House-master, who was seated at his table, looking across it with that unaccustomed frown.

“Now, Talbot,” said Mr. Railton, quietly, “Perhaps you can guess that Captain Vavasour has told me of your meeting him on his way here—”

“I can guess that, sir,” said Talbot, bitterly.

"He has told me of the amazing, the extraordinary suspicion in your mind. I can scarcely understand this, Talbot. You are usually a very sensible boy, not at all given to foolish fancies—"

"This is not a foolish fancy, sir! The man who calls himself Captain Vavasour is not what you think him."

"Nonsense! He tells me that you accuse him of being some rascally character whom you knew, or saw, in the past. Some person called by the extraordinary nickname of 'Light-Fingered Jack'." Mr. Railton uttered that nickname with obvious distaste. It was as if it seemed to him that the mere name brought a savour of the under-world to the school. "Some chance resemblance—"

"I know him, sir."

"According to what you told him, you had seen the man you spoke of only once, and that was long ago."

"That is correct, sir."

"Now, listen to me, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, quietly, "There was an occasion, not long ago, when a bad character came to this school, under an assumed name, deceiving everyone, and it was due to your recognition of him that he was exposed in his true colours. You rendered us a great service on that occasion, and I have not forgotten it. Now you have allowed your imagination to run away with you, fancying that the same thing has happened again. Some chance resemblance to a half-forgotten face has deluded you, and that is all there is about it."

"That is not all, sir!" said Talbot, steadily, "That man is the crook and pickpocket, Light-Fingered Jack, whom I saw standing in the dock."

"Impossible."

"It is true, sir."

"It is not true, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, raising his voice a little, "I have no doubt, Talbot, that you desire on this occasion to be of service, as you certainly were on a previous occasion. But you are making an absurd mistake, and you must put it entirely out of your mind."

Talbot breathed very hard.

"May I ask, sir, what you know of Captain Vavasour?" he asked, "I am certain that you cannot have met him before to-day, or you could not be deceived."

"It is a fact that I have met Captain Vavasour to-day for the first time," answered Mr. Railton, "and in order to disabuse your mind of this fantastic suspicion, Talbot, I will explain. Captain Vavasour is a relative of one of my oldest friends, now with the British Army of Occupation in Germany. He is now

on leave in this country, and my old friend wrote to me recommending him to me for some friendly attentions during his home leave. I immediately wrote to Captain Vavasour at his quarters in Germany inviting him to stay here with me for as much of his leave as he desired. It was in response to that letter that he came."

"Then you had never seen him before?"

"That is immaterial."

"If you had seen Captain Vavasour, sir, this man could not have deceived you."

Mr. Railton breathed hard.

"I repeat, Talbot, that my guest is Captain Vavasour. Although I have never met him before, there is no doubt on that subject. Yesterday he sent me a telegram, which has been followed by his arrival."

"A telegram?" repeated Talbot. "He did not care to write, then—the hand might have betrayed him—" Talbot broke off, feeling that he was catching at straws. Light-Fingered Jack could imitate hands if need were.

"The telegram, since you are so set upon your suspicions, is very easily explained," said Mr. Railton, "Yesterday there was a crash on the Brighton line, on which he was travelling. Probably you may have heard of it."

"I saw something in the paper—"

"One traveller on the train was injured, and taken to hospital with concussion. It was natural for Captain Vavasour to despatch a telegram to apprise me that he was safe, and was coming as expected."

Talbot was silent.

He was aware, from some head-line that had caught his eye in the newspaper, that there had been a railway accident in Sussex. If Captain Vavasour had been on the train, it was natural, as Mr. Railton said, that he should despatch a telegram to the school, where he was expected as a guest.

"You see, my boy," said Mr. Railton, more gently, "that you have been led away by some fancied resemblance."

"No, sir."

"Talbot!"

"You have said, sir, that you wrote to Captain Vavasour at his quarters in Germany. Will you ask him to produce the letter you wrote?"

"He has done so."

Talbot almost staggered. He stared at his house-master, stupefied.

"He—he has done so?" he stammered.

"Certainly he has."

"Oh!" gasped Talbot.

"Cannot you see, my boy, that after you had made such an accusation, and announced your intention of repeating it to me, Captain Vavasour felt that it was necessary for him to prove his identity, as we had never met before?" exclaimed Mr. Railton, "I assured him that it was unnecessary: but he insisted. I have seen his Army papers—"

"Oh!" repeated Talbot, helplessly.

"And he has shown me the very letter I wrote to him asking him to stay for part of his leave as my guest at the school."

"You—you are sure that it was the same letter, sir?"

"I presume that I know my own handwriting, Talbot. He has shown me, also, several letters from his relative, the old friend I have mentioned, whose hand I know as well as my own."

Talbot stared at him in bewilderment.

That the man was not Captain Vavasour, that he was Light-Fingered Jack, he knew. Yet he had proved his identity as the captain, by producing letters that could only have been in the captain's possession. It seemed to the boy that his head was turning round.

Mr. Railton smiled faintly.

"You see now that you are mistaken, Talbot," he said, "I can forgive you for coming to me with this extraordinary story—indeed, I know that it was your intention to expose a man you believed to be an impostor. The fact that such a thing occurred once, has put into your head the idea that it might happen a second time, and some chance resemblance has done the rest. Say no more about it, Talbot, and dismiss it wholly from your mind."

Talbot could not speak.

"You have said nothing of this in the school?" asked Mr. Railton, "I think you are too discreet for that, Talbot. But answer me."

"I have said nothing."

Mr. Railton was evidently relieved.

"I am very glad of that," he said, "I could scarcely forgive you, Talbot, if you had been the means of spreading a story about my guest." He knitted his brows, "You understand, of course, that you are to say nothing. No one must know that you have ever entertained such a suspicion."

"I have no intention of telling anyone, sir! But—"

"But what?" rapped Mr. Railton, sharply.

"I—I don't know—I can't explain—how the man has the papers you have mentioned, but—but—he is not Captain Vavasour."

"Talbot!"

"I must stick to that, sir," said Talbot, desperately, "That man is Light-Fingered Jack, the crook and pick-pocket and confidence-man—"

Thunder gathered in the House-master's brow. For the first time, he was really angry with the boy who, hitherto, had received only kindness at his hands.

"I can scarcely believe my ears, Talbot!" he exclaimed, "In order to disabuse your mind of this absurd fancy, I have gone into the matter in detail: yet you repeat to me that your suspicion of my guest is unchanged."

"I must, sir."

Mr. Railton set his lips.

"Very well!" he said, "I will not argue with you, Talbot. I have shown you too much consideration already. In spite of my patience, you persist in what I can only call a slander on an honourable officer who has served his country, and in defiance of your House-master—"

"Oh! No! No, sir! But—"

"Say no more." Mr. Railton raised his hand. "Now heed me, Talbot. I forbid you to say one word on this subject in the school."

"I shall not say a word, sir, in the school. But—"

"That will do."

"But, sir, I—I can't leave it at this!" panted Talbot, "If you will not listen to me, sir—!"

"I have listened, only too patiently."

"If you will not believe me, sir—"

"Do not be absurd, Talbot."

"If you will not believe me, I can't let that crook carry on here. I must go to Inspector Skeat, sir."

The School House master fairly jumped.

"What!" he thundered.

"That man, sir, would not dare face a police-inspector—!"

"Silence!"

"But, sir—"

"Silence!" repeated Mr. Railton. "If you utter a single word more, Talbot, I shall punish you with great severity. Now hear me! You are not to go to Inspector Skeat! You are not to utter one word on this subject, either in the school or outside it! If you should do so, if you should utter even a whisper,

inside or outside the school, if you should cause gossip and scandal on the subject of my guest, I shall go to Dr. Holmes, and request him to expel you from the school."

"Mr. Railton!"

"Keep that in mind, Talbot! My authority shall not be set at naught by any boy in the House! Either you obey your House-master, or you leave the school. Now leave my study."

Talbot gave him an almost haggard look.

But he knew that he was defeated: that Light-Fingered Jack had been too much for him. There was nothing more to be said. Slowly, with halting feet, he left the study, and shut the door behind him.

9

Blow for Blow !

“TOFF!”

Talbot gave a start at the name.

It was the following day. After class, Talbot of the Shell had gone out, chiefly to avoid his friends. He was walking slowly along the tow-path by the Ryll, his hands in his pockets, and a deep line in his brow.

Tom Merry and Co. had looked for him, to round him up for the nets, but they did not find him. He wanted to be alone.

All that day he had been silent, clouded. It was not like Talbot to betray his feelings, whatever they might be. But with such a weight upon his mind, he could hardly help it now. He was tormented by doubt and indecision, almost helplessly wondering what he could do, and whether he could do anything.

Captain Vavasour was still at St. Jim's.

With the cool nerve which, as Talbot knew, was a part of his character, he was staying on at the school, where there was at least one who knew him in his true colours: disregarding Talbot, and any danger from Talbot.

Was there, after all, danger for him from the perplexed and harassed junior?

Talbot had said nothing. He could say nothing. It would have been useless, even if he had been disposed to disobey his House-master, to tell other fellows what he knew.

It would have caused something like a sensation, no doubt. But no one could have believed that he had it right. The fact that Victor Railton had the man there as a friend, was a sufficient guarantee for Captain Vavasour. Everyone would have supposed that Talbot was making a wild mistake, and would have blamed him for telling such a tale of the man who had made an

agreeable impression upon everyone who had contacted him. It was useless, and worse than useless, to tell what he knew in the school.

And Railton's severe command barred him from going to Inspector Skeat at Wayland. Could he deliberately disobey that command?

He could not, even for the best of reasons. He had to obey his House-master, who was in authority over him. And would even the inspector listen, when a St. Jim's House-master answered for the man?

The crook had wholly deluded Railton. Suppose he brazened it out with the police-inspector, and succeeded in deluding him also? It was possible. In some mysterious and inexplicable manner, he was in possession of papers that proved his identity to Railton. Inspector Skeat might be equally satisfied with the proof—indeed, when Talbot thought over it, he realised that that was very likely.

And if the inspector failed him, after he had disobeyed Railton, he was lost. Railton was kind-hearted and tolerant: but he would not tolerate direct disobedience on the part of any boy in his House. He had meant every word he said—Talbot would be dismissed from St. Jim's if he dare to act as his House-master had commanded him not to act. Only the truth coming out about the crook could save him—and the truth might not come out.

No wonder his heart was heavy, and his face clouded, that day. Even in the Shell form-room, Mr. Linton had been sharp with him. For once Talbot had been inattentive in class: though the master of the Shell little guessed the reason.

Now, as he paced on the grassy tow-path by the Ryll, he was thinking it over again, for the hundredth time: wondering what the outcome would be.

"Light-Fingered Jack" was staying. Probably he would not stay long. He could only be there for plunder, and at present he was studying the lie of the land, observing his surroundings, calculating and planning. In a day or two, perhaps two or three days, perhaps a week, he would know all that he wanted to know—and then it would happen. Probably he would cover up his tracks too cunningly to be suspected, and leave at the end of his visit unsuspected: going as "Captain Vavasour" as he had come. Indeed he might intend to carry on the same imposture in other quarters—and the fact that he had stayed as a guest at St. Jim's would strengthen his hand, and make suspicion of his true character still more unlikely.

What could Talbot do?

Nothing!

That was the conclusion to which he was driven. He could only wait, knowing what the crook intended—wait for the blow to fall.

But in the dark outlook, there was one glimmer of light. When there was theft in the House—and there must be, unless Light-Fingered Jack was there to waste his time—then, surely, Mr. Railton would recall what Talbot had told him, and doubt. Surely he would be struck by so strange a coincidence, as that of a thief in the School House after what Talbot had said! Surely that would open his eyes!

Indeed, this seemed so likely, that Talbot could not doubt that the captain also had thought of it, and might hold his hand in consequence. If that was so, nothing might happen. The man would go, and no harm done.

Yet was Light-Fingered Jack the man to waste his time: to go with empty hands? That did not seem likely.

Deep in troubled and painful thought, the Shell fellow of St. Jim's did not hear, or heed, a footstep on the grassy tow-path behind him. He did not know that he was not still alone there, till a voice fell upon his ears, pronouncing the old name by which he had been known in Hookey Walker's gang in the old days. He started, as if a serpent had stung him, as he heard the name of the "Toff" in the half-drawling voice of Captain Vavasour.

He spun round, with a flash in his eyes.

The captain stood before him. He seemed amused by the look of angry repulsion on the schoolboy's face.

"Toff!" he repeated, smiling.

"Why do you call me that?" muttered Talbot.

"Did you not tell me that it was your name, or nick-name, when you were—what were you?" smiled the captain, "A young crook in the underworld, from what you said. Quite an unexpected character to meet at a school like St. Jim's."

"I am no longer what I was," said Talbot, in a low voice.

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"There is a saying, 'Once a crook, always a crook'!" he remarked, "Railton and Dr. Holmes would do well to bear it in mind."

Talbot flushed crimson.

"Both of them know me and trust me," he said.

"More fools they!" said Captain Vavasour, coolly, "If you are what you have described yourself as being, you will break out again—in fact, I can have no doubt that you are only biding your time."

Talbot breathed hard.

"You have followed me from the school," he said, "Is that what you have come to say to me? If so, I have heard enough. Leave me alone."

"Hold on! I am not finished yet. I have followed you out of the school to have a word with you," said Captain Vavasour, "We have to get this matter clear, Toff or Talbot, or whatever you choose to call yourself. You did not have much luck with Railton yesterday, I think."

"None, as I've no doubt you know."

"But you still believe what you told him?"

"You know it is true."

"Not at all! Have a little sense, my boy," said the captain, with an air of great frankness, "I am Captain Vavasour—"

"You are nothing of the kind."

"I say have a little sense! Mr. Railton was expecting Captain Vavasour at the school—and I came. If I am not he, where is he? Do you think that the real Captain Vavasour, the relative of Railton's old friend, would sit it out while a crook came to the school in his place?"

"I cannot understand it."

"Or do you think I have kidnapped him, or knocked him on the head, in order to borrow his name?" asked the captain, laughing.

Talbot shook his head, slowly.

He knew that it was not that. Light-Fingered Jack was a crook and a rascal: as thievish as a daw: a cunning confidence-man and cheat and pickpocket. But there was never a trace of the "rough stuff" about him. No kind of violence was in his line. False, ingratiating, dishonest, undoubtedly, he was. But he had never even been suspected of more brutal crime. Talbot could almost have smiled at the idea of that plump, smooth, silky trickster knocking anybody on the head, or planning a kidnapping. It was certainly not that! Whatever the genuine Captain Vavasour was, for whatever mysterious reason he had failed to come to St. Jim's, this smooth rogue had never raised a violent hand against him. Talbot did not need assuring of that.

Yet that only deepened the strange mystery. For where was the real Captain Vavasour, and why was he not at the school where he was expected? What could imaginably have kept him away, while this rascal used his name?

The captain smiled, as he read the boy's troubled and perplexed thoughts in his face.

"Come, come," he said, in the same frank way as before, "Have a spot of sense, my boy. If I were not Captain Vavasour,

he would be here—since even you, wildly suspicious as you are, cannot fancy that I have put him out of the way. Does not that fact speak for itself?"

Talbot did not answer.

"You have made a mistake," said the captain, with determined good-humour. "And as a sensible lad, I want you to admit it."

"I have made no mistake."

"You still believe—?"

"More firmly than ever."

The captain's face hardened.

"That will not do," he said, quietly, "We cannot leave it at that. I want you to go to Mr. Railton and tell him that you realise that you have made a mistake."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"You understand that you are making my position here very uncomfortable." The captain's face hardened still more. "Suppose—the most unexpected things may happen—suppose a theft occurred in the school. My good friend Railton would remember what you have said—do you not think so?"

"I hope so!" said Talbot.

"It would be awkward for me," said Captain Vavasour.

Talbot looked him full in the face.

"That is as good as an admission!" he said, between his set lips, "If Mr. Railton heard you say that—"

"I am speaking in a quiet spot, because I do not wish other ears to hear," said the captain, coolly. "We will have our cards on the table, Toff. It does not suit me for you to keep up this story: and I repeat that I want you to go to Mr. Railton and withdraw it, wholly and completely. Will you do so?"

"No!"

"You may be sorry for it." The captain's eyes glinted, and he came a step nearer the schoolboy, "You young cub—"

"That is enough from you, Light-Fingered Jack!" said Talbot, contemptuously, "Do you fancy that you can frighten me with threats?"

The captain stood looking at him. There was no good-humour in his face now. His eyes glinted, and his lips were drawn back in a snarl. He looked as if he could scarcely keep his hands off the schoolboy who stood facing him, with cool contempt in his look.

"You young cub!" he repeated, "You dare to set yourself against me—you dare insult me to my face—!"

Talbot laughed scornfully.

"Can Light-Fingered Jack be insulted?" he said, "Pickpocket,

cheat, confidence trickster—Oh!" he gasped.

Smack!

The captain's open hand came full across his face, with so savage a smack that it made him stagger, and almost lose his footing.

"Take that!" hissed the captain. "And—Oh! Would you?" Talbot recovered himself in a moment, and was springing at him like a tiger. Captain Vavasour struck out as he came: but he did not heed. His clenched fist crashed in the plump ruddy face, with all his strength and weight behind it, and Captain Vavasour went spinning backwards, and crashed on the tow-path.

Talbot stood looking down at him with flashing eyes.

"You cur!" he breathed, "Get up—come on, if you like! You are a man—I am a boy—but I think I can handle a pickpocket! Come on, if you choose."

Captain Vavasour sat up, dizzily, in the grass. There was a trickle of red on his face, and he drew out his handkerchief to wipe it away. His eyes fixed on Talbot with a deadly look in them. Slowly, he gained his feet.

But he did not come near the boy again. He gave him a look—a look that spoke, in silence, a volume of deadly threats—turned, and walked away. Talbot watched him go. Very evidently, the man who called himself Captain Vavasour was not a man for the "rough stuff". He walked quietly away, with the mark of the schoolboy's knuckles on his face.

10

Light Fingers !

“**L**OST that watch again fathead?”

“Weally, Tom Mewwy—”

“If he has, let’s kick him !” suggested Manners.

“Weally, Mannahs—”

“Perhaps it’s pinned on his back !” remarked Monty Lowther.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Captain Vavasour, strolling across the quad from the gates, glanced at the group of schoolboys.

A quarter of an hour ago, the captain had picked himself up, after being knocked down by Talbot of the Shell. There was a mark on his ruddy face where the “Toff’s” knuckles had landed. But otherwise, there was no sign about him that anything had occurred to disturb his good-natured serenity. He looked cheerful and good-tempered and quite at his ease. He stopped for a few minutes, when he came in, to exchange a word or two with Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth-Form : and then strolled on towards the School House, passing the group of juniors.

Their words reached his ears : though certainly Tom Merry and Co. would never have dreamed that their playful remarks about Gussy’s watch could have any interest for Mr. Railton’s guest. They did not even observe him coming along the path, and were unaware that he paused, and stood looking up at the facade of the School House, as if interested in the view of the ancient building in the summer sunshine.

“I have not lost my watch again,” said Arthur Augustus. There was no wrist-watch on the elegant Fourth-Former’s wrist : hence the inquiries of the “Terrible Three.” “You see, it dwopped off yestahday owin’ to the buckle bein’ loose, and I am goin’ to have that wotten buckle wepaired, so I am keepin’ it in my pocket till I go ovah to Wayland. I do not want to wisk it dwoppin’ off again. I was vewy much upset when that fat wottah Twimble suggested that it might have been pinched, and made that wotten wemark about old Talbot.”

Captain Vavasour's eyes were not on the juniors: they were fixed on the School House, its ancient bricks and clustering ivy. But a gleam shot into them as he heard.

"If you lose it again, we'll jam it down the back of your neck," said Tom Merry.

"I should wefuse to have it jammed down the back of my neck, Tom Mewwy. I wegard you as a widiculous ass!"

"Sure you've got it safe now?" asked Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus dived his hand into a pocket of his elegant jacket, and drew out the wrist-watch to show that he had it safe.

"Bai Jove! It has stopped!" he said. "Now I don't keep it on my w'ist I have forgotten to wind it. I shall go ovah to Wayland to-mowwow and get that stwap put in ordah."

"Like it pinned on your back again?" asked Lowther.

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus dropped the watch into his pocket again, and walked away. Monty Lowther looked after him, with a glimmer in his eyes. Evidently an idea for a jest was working in the mind of the funny man of the Shell.

"That ass will be dropping that watch about again," he remarked.

"Safe enough in his pocket, I should think," said Tom Merry.

"He's the sort of ass to hang his jacket up somewhere with a valuable watch in the pocket."

"Well, it wouldn't drop out if he did."

"Might!" said Lowther, "if a fellow was on hand to heip it. What about bagging that watch again, and pinning it inside his top hat? His Sunday topper, see? That would give him a few days to look for it, and then he would find it in his topper—ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther laughed: he was always greatly entertained by his own jests. But Tom Merry and Manners did not laugh. They glared at him.

"You howling ass!" said Manners. "Haven't you got a limit when you're on the track of a jape?"

"You burbling chump!" said Tom Merry, "Suppose somebody saw you bagging a watch from a pocket—what would they think?"

"Look here, it's a jolly good jape on Gussy—"

"Oh, jolly good!" said Manners, sarcastically, "Trimble isn't the only fellow who would think it was pinched, if D'Arcy missed it from his pocket."

"He would find it in his Sunday topper."

"You blithering fathead," said Tom, "You touch that watch,

and we'll duck your head in the fountain, and then bung it in the coal-locker. Have a little sense."

Grunt, from Monty Lowther. Evidently, he was unwilling to abandon that bright idea of japing Gussy once more with the watch.

"Pair of spoil-sports, ain't you?" he said, "Fat lot of good a fellow thinking out a jape, with two kill-joys like you to knock it on the head! It would be funny—"

"Very—if you were spotted and taken up to Railton for trying to pinch a fellow's watch!" said Manners.

"Oh, rot!" said Lowther.

Captain Vavasour strolled on towards the House, leaving the chums of the Shell arguing. On the steps of the House he stopped again, and stood looking over the sunny quad, and the crowds of fellows visible there. Mr. Railton came out, and paused to chat for a few minutes with his guest, before crossing over to the New House to call on Mr. Ratcliff. The captain remained on the steps, with a cheery smiling face, his hands in his pockets, looking like a man enjoying the view of the school quadrangle and innumerable cheerful boyish faces. Several fellows passed him, going in or coming out, and every fellow capped him in passing. The captain was popular in the House on two counts: as a friend of Railton's, and as a good cricketer.

For quite a long time the captain remained there. He did not stir till D'Arcy of the Fourth came in.

But as Arthur Augustus went into the House, the captain seemed to have had enough of the view, for he turned and went on rather hastily—so hastily, indeed, that apparently not seeing Arthur Augustus, he collided with him.

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

The captain caught at him to steady himself.

"Oh! Sorry," he said. It was only for a moment that his hold was on the swell of St. Jim's. Then he stepped back, apologetic. "Sorry, my boy, I did not see you for the moment, coming in from the sunshine—"

"Quite all wight, sir!" said Arthur Augustus, cheerily. Had it been a School House junior who had run into him, Arthur Augustus might have said "Clumsy ass!" It was rather dusky inside, after the bright sunshine, but really that collision was clumsy. But Arthur Augustus's manners to a guest of Mr. Railton's were perfectly polished, and he certainly did not dream of calling Captain Vavasour a clumsy ass.

Arthur Augustus went on his way, not a suspicion in his noble mind of the real meaning of that momentary collision. Certainly

he could never have dreamed that the watch was no longer in his jacket pocket.

Captain Vavasour stood looking after him, for a moment, with a glimmer in his eyes. Then he walked away to Mr. Railton's study.

He was seated at the telephone in that study when the House-master came in. He was speaking into the transmitter as Railton opened the door.

"Captain Vavasour speaking! That is the Brighton Hospital? About the poor fellow who was injured in the crash yesterday. I should be very glad to know how he is getting on."

Mr. Railton stood silent, so as not to interrupt the talk on the telephone. He heard a few words of the murmur that came back from the other end: "still unconscious!"

"Thank you!" said Captain Vavasour, and he hung up, and turned to the House-master, with a smile. "I've borrowed your phone to ask after that poor chap who was hurt in the crash—can't help feeling a little concerned about him—I helped to carry him after the accident."

"I hope he is not in a serious state."

"Oh, no, only a spot of concussion, I gather: he will be all right, but I thought I'd like to know. Man twice my age—he wouldn't stand it so well as a younger man. Not expected to recover consciousness yet, it seems."

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Railton, compassionately.

"You're not busy for the moment?" asked the captain.

"Not at all."

"Well, I don't want to butt in on what doesn't really concern me, Railton, but I have been thinking about that boy Talbot," said the captain.

Mr. Railton frowned slightly. Plainly this was a painful subject to him.

"I am more sorry than I can say, Vavasour," he exclaimed, "I would not have it for worlds that any such thing should have happened during your stay here. I can only apologize for that foolish and obstinate boy. At all events he will obey my command not to repeat his ridiculous accusation for others to hear."

"You think that he believes what he said?"

"I am sure of that, Vavasour. You must have a very bad impression of him, I know: but, in truth, he is a very sensible and very straightforward lad. He led a very strange life before he came to this school, but it has left no trace on him."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite!" said Mr. Railton, with some emphasis. "He is as upright and honourable a boy as any here. And there is

some excuse for his folly in this instance, Vavasour—for it actually happened once that his recollection of his former life led to the exposure of a bad character who came here in an assumed name. This I have no doubt, lingers in his mind: and some resemblance, real or fancied, has led him to believe that it has happened again. But I have every hope that he will realise his mistake, and express his regret to you."

"If it was a mistake!" said the captain.

"What else could it be?"

"I will be frank, Railton. It is often said, once a crook, always a crook—"

"That certainly does not apply to Talbot. He was in bad hands, in very early boyhood: but at the first opportunity, he shook himself free from evil influences. I trust him absolutely: angry as I am at his obstinate persistence in this very unpleasant mistake he has made."

"I have said that I will be frank. You believe that he was sincere in making so absurd an accusation—but I cannot. It seems to me much more likely that he hoped to be believed, and that would make a sort of alibi—"

"Alibi!" reported Mr. Railton, blankly.

"Suppose it is in his mind to act, not as a St. Jim's school-boy, but as the 'Toff' he once was—"

"I cannot suppose so for one moment."

"If that were the case," continued the captain, undeterred. "If he has his eye upon loot of some kind, and intends to lay hands on it, it would be very useful to him to spread such a story in advance—to cause suspicion to take a wrong direction."

Mr. Railton gave quite a jump.

"Captain Vavasour! You surely could not suspect the boy of such duplicity—such planned rascality—"

"I do not know the boy, and you do," said the captain, "But I am bound to say that that is how it looks, to me."

"Impossible!"

"If you think it impossible—"

"I know it to be so! I would trust Talbot anywhere. He is obstinate and extremely annoying, in this instance: but he is absolutely incapable of a bad action," said Mr. Railton, warmly. "As you do not know the boy, I can understand that you might take such a view: but do please let me assure you that there is nothing at all in it."

"I accept your assurance, of course—you should know!" said the captain, "I was only thinking that if something was missing—"

"Nothing will be missing."

"—then his motive would be clear—"

"I repeat that he can have had no such motive, for he is honest as the day. He is making a mistake, and remaining obstinate in his mistake, that is all. You may be quite assured of that, Vavasour."

"Very well: then I will say no more on the subject," said Captain Vavasour. "I felt bound to mention what was in my mind, that is all. Let it drop."

And the subject dropped. But when Light-Fingered Jack left the House-master's study, and his light fingers, in his pocket, felt Arthur Augustus's watch there, he knew that his words would recur later to Railton's mind. To Talbot of the Shell, it seemed like a glimmer of light in the dark, that a thief in the School House would substantiate his charge against the man from the past. But Light-Fingered Jack had put paid to that in advance.

11

Something Missing !

“B Al Jove!”

Fellows in the Fourth-Form room glanced round at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Mr. Lathom, their Form-master, gave him a very severe glance.

It was quite unusual, indeed unknown, for a Fourth-Form man in class to interrupt the lesson with a sudden, startled exclamation.

But that was what D'Arcy of the Fourth did.

It was morning : and “con” was going on in the Fourth. Kerr of the New House was delivering a translation that brought quite a pleasant smile to Mr. Lathom's face. So good, in fact, was Kerr's that the Fourth-Form master had rather let him run on. It was not a gratifying change from Kerr to such pupils as Baggy Trimble or Chowle or even Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, into whose unreceptive heads it was Lathom's duty to instil some knowledge of the tongue of Horace and Cicero.

Quite a number of fellows were listening to Kerr's con, from the fourth book of the Aeneid, with pleasure—less because they relished it like Mr. Lathom than because they hoped that Lathom's appreciation would cause him to let Kerr run on and on : thus saving less-gifted fellows from being called on in their turn to translate

And in fact Kerr might have run on for whole minutes longer but for Arthur Augustus's involuntary ejaculation.

Arthur Augustus had slipped his hand into a pocket of his jacket. Into that pocket, in Study No. 6 the previous evening he had slipped a paper, with some notes of the section of the Aeneid prepared. Listening to the Scottish junior's masterly rendering, Gussy had realised that his notes on the subject were considerably far and wide of Virgil. Very commendably, therefore,

had Arthur Augustus decided to amend them here and there, while he gave ear to Kerr.

But as his hand slipped into that pocket, he forgot all about notes, all about Virgil, indeed all about the lesson and the form-room. For that was the pocket in which, the day before, he had placed his wrist-watch, all ready to take over to the watchmaker's at Wayland for a new strap. And he discovered that, except for a folded paper, that pocket was empty. The watch was not there.

Hence his startled exclamation.

Once or twice that wrist-watch had slipped from his wrist, owing to the buckle's state of disrepair. But how it could have slipped out of a jacket pocket was a mystery. But it must have—for it was gone! Since leaving it in his pocket, after showing it to Tom Merry and Co. in the quad, Arthur Augustus had not given it a thought. He had not missed it when he slipped those notes in. But he missed it now as he felt for the notes.

"D'Arcy!" rapped Mr. Lathom.

"Oh! Yaas, sir!" stammered Arthur Augustus.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! Nothin', sir."

"You have interrupted the lesson, D'Arcy."

"I—I—I'm sowwy, sir! I—I just missed somethin' fwom my pocket, sir," stammered Arthur Augustus, "I—I was wathah surprised, sir—I—I—I've lost somethin'—"

"That is no reason for interrupting the lesson, D'Arcy!"

"Oh! Yaas—I—I mean, no, sir."

"You will go on, D'Arcy," said Mr. Lathom, severely. "You may sit down, Kerr."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Having drawn his Form-master's attention to himself, Arthur Augustus was landed. He had to go on "con".

Puzzled and perplexed and dismayed by the amazing disappearance of the watch from his pocket, it was not easy for D'Arcy to fix his attention on Virgilian verse. Neither was he anything like such a scholar as Kerr. In the circumstances, he was not likely to hand out a translation which would cause the pleased smile to return to Mr. Lathom's face.

Kerr had arrived at *avertere oras* when D'Arcy's interruption occurred. From that point the swell of St. Jim's had to go on, and he stared at the Latin page, trying to collect his thoughts.

It did not help him to observe that Blake and Herries and Dig were glaring at him. They could guess what was the "something" he had missed—that watch which had, in their

opinion, been missed often enough already. Had they not been in form they would have told him what they thought of him. As it was, they looked it.

"*Sic contra est ingressa Venus*," stammered Arthur Augustus. But the translation of that simple phrase would not come. "And so Venus came in against him—" was Gussy's hapless venture.

Mr. Lathom's face was a study as he heard that.

Figgins winked at Kerr, who grinned. All the form smiled. Even Baggy Trimble giggled. Even Baggy could have done better than that.

"What?" Lathom almost shouted.

"Oh, cwumbs!" murmured Athur Augustus in dismay.

"D'Arcy! What did you say?"

"And so Venus came in against him—!" groaned Arthur Augustus. He knew by that time that he was wide of the mark, but he could think of nothing more acceptable to Lathom.

"You utterly absurd boy."

"Weally, sir—"

"You have not prepared this lesson, D'Arcy."

"Oh, yaas, sir! I was sloggin' at it in the study last evenin', sir—I have some notes of it in my pocket—"

"Trimble!"

"Oh!" Baggy ceased to giggle. "Yes, sir."

"Explain that sentence to D'Arcy."

Arthur Augustus crimsoned. To have a simple phrase explained to him by Baggy, the dunce of the form, was altogether too humiliating. Gussy was no whale at Latin: but as a rule he could have played Trimble's head off in class.

"Weally, sir—!" he protested.

"Silence, D'Arcy! Since you are absolutely ignorant of the meaning of that verse, Trimble will explain it to you."

Trimble grinned.

Sic contra est ingressa Venus—thus Venus began to reply!" trilled Baggy, quite bucked to display his little bit of knowledge.

"Very good, Trimble! Do you understand now, D'Arcy?"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard and deep.

"Yaas, sir!"

"You will write out that sentence, and its translation, a hundred times after class, and bring it to me by tea-time," said Mr. Lathom. "You may go on, Levison."

Arthur Augustus sat down, with deep feelings, his noble cheeks still red. Really, it was not his fault that the sudden discovery that his watch was missing had driven Latin from his head and caused him to perpetrate a "howler" even more howl-

ing than usual. And really it was too bad to have to listen to instructions from a dunce like Trimble.

However, his noble mind reverted to the missing watch. While Levison was on con, followed by Clive, and then Fatty Wynn, he groped in his pocket, to make assurance doubly sure that the watch was not there. Then, with a vague idea that he might have transferred it to another pocket and forgotten having done so, he groped through one pocket after another: without anything in the nature of a watch meeting his groping fingers.

"D'Arcy!" suddenly rapped Mr. Lathom.

"Oh! Yaas, sir."

"Sit still!"

"Oh! Certainly, sir."

Arthur Augustus ceased to grope in pockets. Lathom, evidently, was irritated with him: and was as likely as not to come down with "Extra School" next. Anyhow, he knew that he no longer had that watch about him, and groping was useless. What had become of it was a puzzling mystery. It simply could not have fallen out of that pocket. That really was impossible. But if it had not fallen out, how had it got out at all—as evidently it had? For it was gone.

It was quite a worry on D'Arcy's mind: and he was very much relieved when the Fourth were dismissed in break. As the juniors came out of the form-room, Blake and Herries and Digby all addressed their noble chum together:

"You ass!"

"You fathead!"

"You blitherer!"

"Weally, you fellows—!" protested Arthur Augustus.

"Lost your dashed watch again?" demanded Blake.

"I have not pwecisely lost it Blake—"

"You told Lathom you'd missed something from your silly pocket. Wasn't it your silly watch?"

"Yaas, wathah! But I have not lost it—I left it in that pocket! I have not the foggiest ideah how it got out."

"Lost itself perhaps?" jeered Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"You were dropping it all over the House the day before yesterday," snapped Blake.

"I did not dwop it all ovah the House, Blake! Pway do not exaggewate! And I have not dwopped it now. It could not have dwopped out of that pocket. That is imposs."

"Jumped out, perhaps!" suggested Dig, sarcastically.

"Weally, Dig—"

"Still there, I shouldn't wonder," grunted Blake, "You know what a howling ass you are, Gussy. Feel in your pocket again."

"It is not there, Blake! I quite fail to undahstand how it has gone—but it has gone. Unless," added Arthur Augustus, sternly, "One of you fellows has been larkin' with it. If that is it—?"

"Fathead!" said Blake.

"Somebody was larking with it the other day though," said Dig, "Somebody found it and pinned it on Gussy's back."

"That funny ass Lowther, I believe," grunted Blake. "May have been larking again. Felt in all your other pockets, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Better go up to the study and see if it's there," said Herries.

"It could hardly be in the study, Hewwies, when it was left in my pocket, and I did not take it out—"

"You know what an ass you are!" argued Herries.

"Might have taken it out to see the time and laid it down," said Dig.

"But it had stopped, and I had not wound it up, Dig! I should not take out a stopped watch to see the time."

"Oh, a chump like you might do anything."

"Weally, Dig—"

"Better go up to the study and see," said Blake, "Come on."

"He, he, he! Lost that watch again, D'Arcy?" giggled Baggy Trimble. Five or six fellows had stopped, as Blake and Co. argued in the corridor, the fat Baggy among them. They seemed amused.

Unheeding the giggling Baggy, Blake and Co. went up to the Fourth-Form studies. To three of them, at least, it seemed probable that Arthur Augustus might have left it somewhere about No. 6.

Morning break lasted only fifteen minutes. Seldom did Blake and Co. spend it indoors in fine weather. This time they did—hunting up and down and round about Study No. 6 in the Fourth for the missing watch. But they did not find it. All they found was the absolute certainty that Gussy's watch was not anywhere inside Study No. 6.

"Oh, you ass! There's the bell!" said Blake, "Look here, Gussy, if that watch doesn't turn up pretty soon, we'll jolly well kick you round the study."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Fellows will think it has been pinched," growled Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, I am suah that no such ideah would evah entah any decent fellow's mind."

"Well, what's become of it?" hooted Blake, "It can't have fallen out of that pocket, if you really left it there. Somebody must have taken it out."

"Wubbish!"

"Then how did it get out?" yelled Blake.

"I weally do not know, deah boy: and it is quite useless to yell at me," said Arthur Augustus, "I can heah your wemarks without yellin'."

"You—you—you image! Oh, come on, before the bell stops!"

The four juniors went down the stairs again. On the middle landing they passed Trimble, who eyed them inquisitively.

"Found that watch?" he asked, "I say—yaroooooooooh!"

Blake kicked him in passing, which was all the reply Baggy received. He was left squeaking with pained indignation.

"Here, Tom Merry!" Blake caught sight of Tom, coming in from the quad, "Here, stop a minute—"

"Hurry up then," said Tom, stopping, "Manners and Lowther have gone in—I don't want to be late for Linton—"

"Gussy's lost his watch again—"

"Oh, the ass!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Somebody must have been larking, like that japing ass who pinned it on his back the other day," said Blake, "Know anything about it?"

Tom gave a start! He remembered Monty Lowther's suggested jape on Arthur Augustus and his watch. He, and Manners, had supposed that Monty had dropped that idea, after its freezing reception from his pals. But this did not look like it.

"Oh!" said Tom. "Sure it's gone?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Look in your Sunday hat, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus jumped.

"Did you say my Sunday hat, Tom Mewwy?" he ejaculated.

"Just that!"

Tom, laughing, cut off towards the Shell form-room. He left the four Fourth-Formers staring after him.

"Bai Jove! Is Tom Mewwy wandewin' in his mind?" exclaimed the astonished Arthur Augustus, "How could my watch possibly get into my Sunday hat?"

"It couldn't, ass," said Blake, "But it could be put there, fat-head! It's a jape, duffer, and that's where it is, foozler."

"I will go and look at once—"

"You'll be late for Lathom—come on."

Third School claimed the heroes of the Fourth. But immediately Mr. Lathom dismissed his class again, Blake and Co. lost no time in getting to Study No. 6. There a handsome hat-box was opened, and a silk hat that was a thing of beauty and a joy for ever was lifted out—and four juniors stared into it. But it was empty! There was no watch in that hat: and concluding that Tom Merry had been pulling their leg, the four went to look for him, to make it clear unto him what they thought of him and his leg-pulling.

12

Mysterious !

“LOWTHER, you ass—!”
“Lowther, you born idiot!”

Monty Lowther looked up, in surprise, across the table in No. 10 Study in the Shell.

After Third School, Monty had gone up to his study to write fifty lines for Mr. Linton: the penalty for projecting an ink-ball at a New House man in the Shell. He had not expected to see his chums again till he came down with his lines, to take them to his Form-master's study. However, he saw them now—coming into No. 10 with frowning faces, and both of them addressing him at once, in far from complimentary terms.

He stared at them, across the table.

“What's up?” he asked.

“You japing ass!” said Tom Merry. “Can't you ever chuck japing?”

“You funny idiot!” was Manner's reply. “Can't you ever stop being a funny idiot?”

“Well, I got that New House man, French, just behind the ear!” said Lowther, “It was just rotten luck that Linton spotted me—”

“It's not that, ass,” said Tom, “It's D'Arcy's watch—”

“What about his watch?”

“Oh, don't be a goat!” said Tom, quite crossly, “What have you done with it?”

Monty Lowther blinked at him.

“Potty?” he asked.

“I think you must be,” said Tom. “Didn't we try to knock the silly idea out of your silly head when you proposed it yesterday? Japing is all very well: but messing about with valuable articles—”

"That watch is worth twenty pounds, if a bob," said Manners, "Haven't you sense enough to leave such things alone, you fathead?"

"Where is it?" demanded Tom.

Monty Lowther could only stare blankly.

"Is it gone again?" he asked.

"For goodness sake don't be such an ass," exclaimed Tom, impatiently, "D'Arcy missed it this morning, and Blake spoke to me—I suppose he guesses that it was you pinned it on Gussy the other day. I told him to look in Gussy's Sunday hat—I remembered your potty idea."

"But I—!" began Lowther.

"I supposed they would find it there, after what you said, and forgot about it," went on Tom, "But they haven't found it. Blake's just been slanging me for pulling his leg. Of course I thought you'd put it in Gussy's Sunday topper, after what you said yesterday—"

"But I never—"

"I know you didn't, now they've looked," snapped Tom, "But where have you put it, you footling fathead? They've got to be told at once."

"Can't you see fellows will think it has been pinched!" exclaimed Manners. "Have you forgotten what that fat frump Trimble said the other day in the day-room? Do you want to hear some more like that—about old Talbot?"

"You ought to have more sense, Monty," said Tom, "Japing with articles of value is a fool's trick."

"I tell you—!" shouted Lowther.

"You can tell me where it is! Can't you see that it's got to be got back to D'Arcy at once?" exclaimed Tom. "Do you want a story of stealing in the House to spread about? That's what it will come to, if that watch doesn't turn up at once."

"It can't run on, Monty," said Manners. "It's got to be shelled out at once. What have you done with it?"

"Will you let a fellow speak?" shrieked Monty Lowther. "I haven't touched D'Arcy's silly watch—"

"What?"

"I don't know anything about it! If the silly ass has lost it, I expect he'll find it in his pocket. Now shut up and let me get these lines done—Linton said before dinner—"

"Never mind the lines," said Tom. "This is a good deal more serious than lines. Mean to say that you haven't been japing with D'Arcy's watch?"

"I've told you I haven't! It would have been a jolly good

jape—but I chucked it when you chaps threw cold water on the idea! I haven't thought a syllable about it since."

Tom Merry and Harry Manners gazed at him. They had taken it for granted, when they learned that the watch was missing, that it was Monty Lowther who was responsible, with his japing. The fact that it had not been found in Arthur Augustus's Sunday hat, only made them suppose that Monty had decided on some other hiding-place for it. His denial that he had handled it at all took them quite by surprise.

"You haven't touched the watch?" said Tom, at last.

"No!" hooted Lowther.

"Honest Injun?" asked Manners.

Lowther glared at him.

"Can't you take a fellow's word?" he bawled.

"Oh! Yes! But—after what you said—"

"I've told you I chucked up the idea! If you can't take my word—"

"Oh, don't be an ass! What has become of the watch, then?" said Manners. "It's gone—and Blake says they've hunted all over the study—"

"How should I know what's become of it? Perhaps somebody's pinned it on that burbling ass's back again."

"Oh, rot," said Manners.

"Well, I know nothing about it," snapped Lowther. "Now shut up and let me get these lines done."

"It's gone," said Tom.

"Follow its example!" snapped Lowther. "The sooner you're gone too, the better, and I can get my impot done."

Monty Lowther, with a frowning face, resumed scribbling. Tom Merry and Manners exchanged troubled glances.

They could not doubt Lowther's word. He was capable of anything in the way of a jape, but he certainly was not capable of telling untruths about it. But if Monty, after all, had not been japing with Gussy's watch, where was it? For it was undoubtedly gone.

There was a step in the passage, and Talbot of the Shell looked in at No. 10. He glanced at the 'Terrible Three'.

"You fellows up here?" he said. "I've been looking for you, Tom. You were coming down to the nets—"

Talbot broke off, as he read the expression on the faces of Tom Merry and Manners, and the frown on Monty Lowther's brow.

"Anything up?" he asked.

"Oh! No." Tom stammered a little. To mention the lost

watch was, he knew, to recall to Talbot's mind that scene in the day-room.

But Monty Lowther looked up from his impot, to reply.

"Only that ass D'Arcy lost his watch again," he snapped, "and these silly asses fancied I had been japing with it."

Talbot gave a start.

"D'Arcy's wrist-watch! Lost again?" he exclaimed. The colour wavered for a moment in his cheeks. Evidently he remembered what Baggy Trimble had said in the day-room.

Tom compressed his lips.

"The silly ass ought to be jolly well kicked for losing his watch time and again," he said crossly.

"He certainly ought not to wear it, till the strap is repaired," said Talbot. "It might have fallen about anywhere."

"He wasn't wearing it," said Lowther. "Even Gussy had sense enough for that. He was keeping it in his pocket till he could go over to the watch-maker's at Wayland for a new buckle, or strap, or something."

"In his pocket!" repeated Talbot. "But he couldn't lose it out of a pocket. D'Arcy isn't the fellow to have a hole in his pocket-lining."

"Hardly," said Manners.

"Some fellow must have shifted it for an idiotic joke," said Tom, knitting his brows. "We thought it was Monty, as he had some such silly idea in his head—but he says it wasn't."

"Oh, give us a rest!" growled Lowther.

"It must be found," said Talbot, abruptly. "It must be found at once—if it has been lost."

"No 'if' about it," said Tom. "It's lost."

Talbot did not reply to that. He turned, and walked quickly down the passage. Tom Merry breathed hard.

"That ass Gussy!" he muttered. "He's always losing something. He ought to be jolly well kicked."

"He couldn't help it, if some japing ass took it out of his pocket for a silly joke," said Manners. "He hung his jacket up somewhere, I suppose—or some blithering idiot nobbled it in the dormitory, perhaps. I hope it will turn up before somebody fancies it's been pinched."

"It's got to turn up," said Tom. "Let's go and see if we can do anything. By gum, if it turns out to be a jape, I'll jolly well punch the japer, hard."

They left No. 10, leaving Monty Lowther in peace to get through his lines. Baggy Trimble met them on the landing. Baggy's fat face was full of eager interest and curiosity.

"I say, it's jolly queer about D'Arcy's watch, ain't it?" exclaimed Baggy. "He couldn't have dropped it out of his pocket, could he? I say, think somebody nipped it out of his pocket in the dorm last night? Looks to me as if it's been pinched—"

"You fat snail!" hooted Tom Merry. "If you say anything about pinching, I'll bang your silly head."

"Look here, you know" protested Baggy. "It jolly well looks like it! That watch is worth more than twenty quid. How could it get out of D'Arcy's pocket if it wasn't taken out? It must have been taken out, and who would take a fellow's watch out of his pocket except to pinch it—Wow! wow!"

Bang!

Baggy roared, as his fat head contacted the banisters. Tom Merry and Manners went on their way and left him to roar.

13

D'Arcy Drops a Brick !

“**P**INCHED!” said Blake.
“Wubbish!”

“You ass—!”

“Wot!”

“Can’t you see—?”

“Wats!”

Arthur Augustus D’Arcy was alone in his opinion in Study No. 6.

Blake and Co. were there at tea: but their faces were not cheery as usual. The mysterious disappearance of D’Arcy’s watch was a deep worry on their minds. Blake and Herries and Dig looked troubled and glum: and Arthur Augustus’s noble countenance was very serious.

That morning, Tom Merry had banged Trimble’s head for uttering the word “pinched”. But it had been uttered a good many times since, by many fellows as well as Trimble.

That the watch—a very valuable article—was missing, was know all over the House now. And it couldn’t be found.

Even if it had been lost, as on the previous occasion, by slipping from D’Arcy’s wrist owing to a defective fastening, it would surely have turned up by this time. But it was known that D’Arcy had had it in his pocket to take over to the watch-maker’s. Dozens of fellows had looked at that pocket, with the assured conclusion that nothing could have dropped out of it by accident, unless Arthur Augustus had stood on his head—which certainly he had not done. The Latin notes he had parked in that pocket were safe enough there: the watch was missing. It had been taken out. That was certain.

That it had been done for an unthinking jest was possible—it

was known that Monty Lowther had had just that idea, though he had abandoned it. But even Lowther, inveterate jester as he was, would not have kept up the joke after so much discussion and the mention of the word "pinching": he would have realised that the sooner the watch was produced, the better. It was not the work of a practical joker at all. Whoever had removed that watch from D'Arcy's pocket was in danger of being accused of stealing it, and such a peril would have brought the maddest japer to his senses. If that watch had been taken for a jest, it would have come back to its owner before this. And it had not come back.

Blake and Herries and Dig, and almost everyone else, were driven to the conclusion that it had been taken for "keeps". It was a theft that had occurred.

Only Arthur Augustus doubted it.

That any fellow, within the walls of St. Jim's, was capable of such an act, was an idea that Gussy's noble brain simply could not assimilate.

That there were such persons out in the wide world, he had to believe: though he could not comprehend them. But a thief in the school was an inadmissible idea, at least to the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He just could not believe that he, personally, had ever contacted anything so unclean.

"But who?" went on Blake, helplessly. "That ass hung his jacket on a peg while he was at cricket. Anybody could have—"

"Nobody did, Blake, deah boy."

"Or in the dorm," went on Blake, unheeding. "Anybody who knew it was there—"

"Wubbish!"

"You howling ass!" roared Blake. "Can't you see what's as plain as the nose on your face? Do you think the watch jumped out of your pocket and hid itself somewhere?"

"Certainly not! I wegard that as widiculous."

"Do you think it could have dropped out?" hooted Herries.

"Imposs."

"Think any practical joker would be keeping it all this time, with the risk of going up to the Head for pinching it?" demanded Dig.

"That seems vewy impwobable, Dig."

"Then what do you think's happened?" howled Blake.

Arthur Augustus shook his noble head.

"I weally haven't a clue, Blake! It is absolutely mystewious. I simply cannot account for it! But I am quite assuahed that the watch has not been stolen—that is an uttably wotten ideah."

"Fathead!" growled Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"But who?" said Blake, again. "Somebody's got it, and it's jolly plain now that he means to keep it. But who?"

"Echo answers who!" said Dig. "Can't think of a fellow in the House who'd do anything of the kind. Even New House men wouldn't."

"Nobody at St. Jim's is capable of such a wotten act, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, firmly. "Pway put that ideah wight out of your heads."

"Then where's the watch?" bawled Blake.

"I weally do not know, Blake."

"What's happened to it?"

"Weally, I haven't the foggiest."

"It's been snoopd, you silly ass—"

"Wats! Pway do not say anythin' of the kind, Blake—we don't want the beaks to fancy somebody has been stealin' and get into a flap about it," said Arthur Augustus, anxiously. "What has occurred is a complete mystewy, but the bare ideah of a thief in the House is altogethah too wevoltin'."

"The beaks will jolly soon get on to it," said Blake. "In fact, you're bound to report the loss to Railton."

"Everybody's talking about it now," said Dig, "I expect some of the pre's have heard by this time."

"They will soon, anyway," said Herries.

"Bai Jove! It is dweadfully distwessin'," said Arthur Augustus. "I could not explain to Wailton what has become of the beastly watch, and he might think as you do that it has been pilfahed—"

"He will know it has, fathead."

"Wubbish and wot!"

Tap!

"Oh, come in, fathead, whoever you are!" growled Blake, as there was a tap at the door of Study No. 6. "Somebody found that dashed watch, perhaps."

"Bai Jove! That would be a vewy gweat welief."

It was Talbot of the Shell who opened the door and came into the study. There was a slight pallor on Talbot's face, and it was very grave. It had been an anxious day for him, since he learned that the watch was missing.

"Twot in, Talbot, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Have you got it?"

"Eh! Have I got what?"

"My watch."

Talbot gave him an almost wild look, the colour draining from

his face. He looked, for a moment, as if he would stagger. He put his hand on the study table, to steady himself. The Fourth-Formers stared at him.

"D'Arcy." Talbot's voice came hoarse and husky. "In heaven's name, you can't think—you couldn't suspect—you couldn't—! His voice failed and trailed away.

Arthur Augustus gazed at him in astonishment.

"Whatevah is the mattah, Talbot?" he exclaimed. "You look as white as a sheet, deah boy. Has anythin' happened?"

"You ass!" breathed Blake. He at least could see how the one-time "Toff" had taken D'Arcy's unexpected question.

"Weally, Blake—"

"D'Arcy didn't mean—!" began Herries, crimsoning.

"He didn't mean—!" stammered Dig.

Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and glanced round the study, in surprise and bewilderment.

"What are all you fellows talkin' about?" he asked. "I fail to compwehend you. I asked Talbot if he had my watch—"

"Shut up, you burbling ass!" hissed Blake.

"You—you asked me—!" Talbot's voice was low and shaking, "D'Arcy, you couldn't—you couldn't think so. You couldn't!"

"Why not, deah boy?"

"Why not?" repeated Talbot, dazedly.

"Yass, wathah! I weally fail to see what all you fellows are gettin' into a flap about. What is the mattah?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, you dummy!" breathed Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Dry up," hissed Dig.

"I wefuse to dwy up, Dig," said Arthur Augustus, warmly, "I have not dwopped a bwick, so fah as I know. Blake said it might be somebody comin' heah who had found my watch, so I asked Talbot if he had it. Why shouldn't I?"

"Oh!" gasped Talbot. He began to understand.

Blake breathed very hard. Three fellows in the study could see how Talbot had taken that question, not knowing what had gone before: though it had not dawned on Arthur Augustus's aristocratic brain.

"You see," said Blake, as casually as he could. "When you tapped, I said it might be somebody who'd found the watch—that was why that ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh!" breathed Talbot, "I—I see." The crimson surged into his face till it burned.

Arthur Augustus gave him a look of concern.

"I twust you are not ill, Talbot," he said. "You have a vewy high colour, deah boy. Not catchin' a cold, I hope."

"Eh? Oh! No."

"Well, your face is vewy wed," said Arthur Augustus. "Isn't his face vewy wed, Blake?"

"Idiot!"

"Bai Jove! What are you callin' a fellow names for, Blake! Weally, you fellows are beyond compwehenson," said Arthur Augustus. "However, to weturn to the subject, have you found my watch, Talbot?"

Talbot looked at him. The colour had faded out of his face, and left him pale again. He realised now that D'Arcy's question had been an absolutely innocent one: startling as it had been to the unhappy boy with so strange a past. He smiled faintly.

"No, I have not found it, D'Arcy," he answered, quietly.

"You see, Blake suggested—"

"Yes, yes, I understand," Talbot bit his lip hard. Blake and Herries and Dig were pictures of discomfort: though even yet nothing had dawned on Arthur Augustus. "I came here to speak to you about it, D'Arcy—to ask you whether it had turned up or not."

"Nothin' of the kind, deah boy. It is an absolute mystewy what has become of it. I just don't know anythin' about it, exceptin' that it had not been pinched, as I am sowwy to say some fellows fancy."

"You think it has not been pinched?"

"I am suah it has not, Talbot! I uttably wefuse to believe that there is any person in this school capable of such a wotten thing."

"But what has become of it, then?" asked Talbot.

Arthur Augustus shook his noble head.

"Ask me anothah!" he answered. "I couldn't begin to guess. How it got out of this pocket is just one of those mystewies."

Talbot nodded, and left the study.

Blake and Herries and Dig fixed three separate, distinct, and expressive glares on their noble chum, as the door closed after him.

"Oh, you cuckoo!" said Blake.

"Oh, you image!" said Herries.

"Oh, you burbling bandersnatch!" said Dig.

"Weally, you fellows, you quite mystify me," said Arthur Augustus. "But I am wathah wowwied about old Talbot. I think he must be seedy. Didn't you fellows notice how his face went wed and then pale?"

"No wonder, when you dropped such a brick, you lunatic."

"I am quite unawah of havin' dwopped a brick, Blake. I wegard myself as a fellow of some tact and judgment, and I should certainly not dwop a bwick. "Pewwaps," went on Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "you will have the gweat kindness to explain, Blake."

"Ass!" said Blake.

"That is not an answah, Blake."

"Idiot, if you like that better."

"Wats! I wefuse to pursue this discush, if you are goin' to keep on callin' a fellow oppwobwious names! Wats!"

And Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity, walked out of Study No. 6—still happily unaware that he had dropped a brick of the largest size.

14

An Unexpected Blow !

“TALBOT !”

“May I speak to you, sir?”

“Certainly. Come in, my boy.”

Mr. Railton's eyes were keenly on the face of the junior at his doorway. His manner was kind. He could read the signs of mental stress in the schoolboy's face: the cloud on his brow, and the almost haunted look in his eyes. He had not forgotten, or quite forgiven, Talbot's strange and startling accusation against his guest. But he was kind.

Talbot came in and closed the door. He stood before his House-master's writing-table, the colour wavering in his cheeks. Evidently, he had come there to say something: but he found difficulty in saying it.

Mr. Railton smiled faintly. He fancied that he could guess what was in the junior's mind.

“Speak out, my boy,” he said. “I think I can guess what you have to say.”

Talbot started.

“You can guess, sir?” he stammered.

“I think so! Speak out,” said Mr. Railton. “You are too sensible a boy, Talbot, to hesitate to admit a mistake, and to make amends for it. I shall be very glad to be able to tell Captain Vavasour that you realise that you were in error, and have very properly come to me to say so frankly.”

Talbot looked at him blankly for a moment. The House-master was very far indeed from guessing what had brought him there!

“Oh! It—it is not that, sir!” he muttered.

“Not that, Talbot?”

“No sir.”

The kindly expression faded a little from Mr. Railton's face.

"Indeed!" he said, dryly. "Then what is it, Talbot? What have you come here to say to me?"

"There has been a theft in the House, sir."

"What?"

Mr. Railton half-rose, in his startled surprise.

"You had not heard of it, yet, sir?" faltered Talbot.

"Certainly I have heard nothing of the kind," rapped the House-master, sharply. "What do you mean, Talbot? What has happened?"

"You would be certain to hear of it before long, sir. Some of the prefects must have heard already—it is the talk of the House. A Fourth-Form boy's watch has been taken—"

Mr. Railton sat back in his chair, his eyes on Talbot, with an almost grim intentness. This news was a surprise to him, and a distasteful one: he had heard nothing so far. But back into his mind came the words of Captain Vavasour. Had the Captain been right?

"The boy's name?" he rapped.

"D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, sir."

"D'Arcy!" repeated Mr. Railton. "Yes, I have observed that he had a wrist-watch much too valuable for a schoolboy's use—I understood that it was a present on a Christmas or a birthday. Do you mean to say that the watch is missing?"

"It has been missing all day, sir."

Mr. Railton knitted his brows.

"D'Arcy is a very careless boy! What possible reason can you have, Talbot, for making such a statement as that the watch has been stolen?"

"All the fellows think so, sir, excepting D'Arcy. It was taken from his pocket some time since yesterday afternoon—he does not know when. He had it in his pocket because the fastening was defective, and he had once dropped it. It was taken from his pocket."

"Has search been made for it?"

"Everywhere, sir, by a crowd of fellows. Many of us have examined the pocket, and nothing could have fallen from it. Other things in the pocket were safe. It was deliberately taken out, sir."

"At some time when D'Arcy was not wearing his jacket?"

"That is not known, sir" said Talbot, quietly. "Certainly no fellows here could have taken it from him, while he was wearing the jacket, without D'Arcy being aware of it. A pickpocket could."

"A pickpocket!" repeated Mr. Railton. Thunder gathered in

his brow. "Talbot! Do you dare—after what I have said to you—!"

"I must speak, sir! That is why I have come to you!" said Talbot, desperately. "I must! I warned you that that man—who calls himself Captain Vavasour—is the man known among thieves as Light-Fingered Jack—"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Railton.

"Oh, sir, do think a moment," exclaimed Talbot. "A valuable article has been stolen, only a couple of days after that man came. Has such a thing happened before he came? Oh, sir—do you not see—?"

Talbot broke off, startled, and almost alarmed, by the expression that came over Mr. Railton's face.

That face had hardened, and the eyes glinted. There was a grim sternness in it that Talbot had never seen before.

"I will speak plainly to you, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, in a hard voice very unlike his usual kind tones. "I did not doubt your sincerity in making so wild an accusation against my guest. I believed that you were in earnest, though mistaken. I am now driven to doubt."

"Mr. Railton!"

"Listen to me! Captain Vavasour, who does not know you, and naturally could not trust you as I have done, did not believe in your sincerity: but, knowing what you had told him of your past, believed that you made the accusation, to cover up your own tracks in advance, so that if a theft occurred here, suspicion would take the wrong direction—"

Talbot almost tottered.

"He—he said that?" he panted.

"He did—and it was a natural explanation to occur to his mind, said Mr. Railton sternly. "Knowing you as I do—or believed I did—I could not of course accept such a view. I assured him that you were acting under an honest mistake, that no such thought could possibly be in your mind—that you were thinking not of an alibi for yourself, but only of rendering a service, though in error—and that certainly no theft would occur in this House. What am I to think now that a theft has occurred?"

Talbot stood dumb.

His eyes were fixed on his House-master in horror.

He had not dreamed of this.

But he realised now how cunningly, how pitilessly, the rogue had guarded himself in advance.

The theft in the School House, so far from substantiating the accusation against Captain Vavasour, had brought Talbot himself under suspicion.

What did it look like? Or rather, what had the captain's cunning insinuation made it look like?

He could not speak. He could only stand there, with a colourless face, dumb.

"A theft has occurred," went on Mr. Railton, in the same hard tone. "It has occurred after your fantastic attempt to make me believe that a pickpocket had introduced himself into the House."

Talbot's lips moved, but he could not speak.

"Even if that wild accusation had a vestige of truth in it," continued Mr. Railton, "it is obvious that my guest here does not come into contact with the junior boys of the House—he could scarcely have observed that one boy in the Fourth Form wore a very valuable wrist-watch—certainly he could not have known that he had it in his pocket because the fastening was defective—he could have known nothing of it."

Talbot found his voice.

"You don't know him, sir" he panted. "Light-Fingered Jack—"

"I will not allow you to utter that name here."

"That—that man, then, sir—he sees everything—he spies—he listens—he would find out all he wanted to know before he had been here a day—I tell you, sir, he has stayed at country-houses in cricket weeks, to carry on the same game—he is used to it—"

"Silence!"

"I must tell you, sir! That man already knows, or is on the way to knowing, where you keep money in your study, where the other masters keep money, even what Dr. Holmes may have in his own house—he will make a clean sweep before he goes, laughing in his sleeve at the people who trusted and never suspected him—"

"Silence, I say," thundered the School House-master. "How dare you persist in this, Talbot? You are straining my faith in you very hard. I do not believe—I cannot believe—that you have fallen back to what you were before you came to this school—it is too terrible to believe. Yet if you persist in slandering an honourable man, what am I to believe?"

Talbot was white to the lips.

"Heaven help me!" he breathed. "You are losing faith in me, then—you think—you think—that? You to whom I owe so much. I should never have come here—I should have known that the Toff could never leave his past behind. What you think now, others—my friends—Tom Merry himself, heaven help me—may be thinking soon! I must go—I must go."

He turned blindly to the door.

"Stop!" rapped Mr. Railton.

Talbot looked back desperately.

"I must go!" he said. "I must! You think me a thief—you think that Talbot of the Shell has been a comedy all along—that it was the Toff, all the time, that was waiting for a chance! If I am a thief you do not want me here. I must go—I must go, before I am shamed to the very soul by others thinking as you think. That man has been too cunning for me—he has beaten

"I must go," he said. "I must! You think me a thief—you

"You will not go," said Mr. Railton, icily. "You have driven me to doubt, Talbot, but so far it is only doubt."

"I will not endure doubt," exclaimed Talbot, passionately. "I have a right—"

"That doubt," said Mr. Railton, grimly, "will become certainty, if you leave the school, Talbot. What could I believe then, but that you had gone with stolen property in your pockets?"

"Oh!" panted Talbot, as if the House-master had struck him a blow.

"You will not be allowed to leave," said Mr. Railton, "the the truth of this miserable matter must be investigated and established. Your flight would be tantamount to a confession."

Talbot pressed a hand to his burning forehead. He felt that he was caught, as in a trap. To stay, to be judged a thief—theft added to slander! To go, and be condemned as a thief fleeing with his plunder! It was as if an iron circle enclosed him, and there was no escape.

Railton's eyes were on him—in compassion, yet in doubt. He had trusted the boy, in spite of his past—he would have been glad to trust him now. Yet how could he trust him? The Toff once a member of the gang in Angel Alley, had broken out again—was it as simple as that? What was the House-master to think, when not for one moment could he dream of crediting what the "Toff" had told him of Light-Fingered Jack?

"I shall take this matter up at once," said Mr. Railton, at last. "I hope and trust that it may prove that the watch has merely been lost, and may be found. In any case the facts will be established. In the meantime, you will be silent—and I may scarcely add, that no word must be uttered of your senseless suspicions of my guest. You understand me?"

"Yes," almost whispered Talbot.

And he left the study, with something like despair in his heart.

15

Tom Merry's Tenner !

"BAI JOVE!"

"What a spot of luck!"

"Halves!" grinned Blake.

Tom Merry laughed.

It was morning break on Saturday, and some of the School House juniors were looking for letters in the rack. There was one for Tom Merry, addressed in the fragile hand of his old guardian, Miss Priscilla Fawcett. And as he opened it, two folds of engraved paper were revealed.

"Two fivers!" said Monty Lowther. "Lucky bargee! How often does a fellow get even one fiver!" And here's a tenner! Phew!"

"Gwattahs, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Doughnuts all round," said Herries.

"And then some!" said Dig.

"What the jolly old dickens is your guardian sending you all that money for?" asked Manners. "Not even registered the letter!"

"Oh, the dear old soul wouldn't think of that," said Tom, smiling. "It's got here all right, anyhow."

"Better not let the beaks spot it," said Kangaroo. "Lower School chaps aren't allowed to roll in fivers."

"Wathah not!"

"The sooner you blow it on a spread for every man in the House, the better," remarked Gore.

"Nothing doing!" said Tom, cheerfully. "This cash is to spend on a cricket outfit—specially sent for it, and Railton knows. That's all right. I'm going over to Wayland this afternoon to the sports shop. I don't get fivers to blow on riotous living like Gussy."

"Weally, Tom Merry—"

"What rot!" said Blake. "Make the old things do, and let's

have a spread for the whole House, and ask the New House chaps too."

"Bow-wow!" said Tom, and he laughed, and walked away with Manners and Lowther.

Ten pounds was a large sum for a junior at St. Jim's to possess, a much larger sum than any junior would have been allowed to keep in his possession, with the knowledge of the "beaks". But so far as pocket-money went, Tom was none the richer for it, as it had been sent to him for a special purpose, on which he was to expend it. But he was looking forward cheerfully to his visit to the sports shop at Wayland that afternoon, and his intended purchases there.

The "Terrible Three" went out into the sunny quad. Captain Vavasour, strolling there with his hands in his pockets, glanced at Tom Merry's bright and cheerful face.

"Better get over to Wayland on our bikes after dinner," Tom was saying. "I don't want to be carrying ten pounds about me longer than I can help."

"Where are you keeping it?" asked Manners.

"In my wallet, of course."

"Wallet safe in your pocket?"

"Of course." Tom Merry tapped his pocket. What do you mean, Manners? Think there's a hole in the lining, or what?"

"I was thinking of Gussy's watch," answered Manners, quietly, "You don't want those fivers to follow it."

Tom Merry started, and his face clouded.

"Oh!" he said. "That rotten watch hasn't been found. Well, I shan't hang up my jacket on a peg anywhere with banknotes in the pocket, as Gussy would. But it's pretty rotten," he added. "It makes a fellow's flesh creep to think that there might be a thief in the House. I—I can't get it down."

"Well, we've got to get that down," said Lowther. "Gussy's watch is gone, and there's no news of it. The house-beak and the prefects are on to it now."

"I know! But—" Tom Merry broke off, as he observed Captain Vavasour, and noted that he was within hearing. Whether Mr. Railton's guest had heard that there had been a theft in the House, he did not know: but certainly he did not want to be the one to apprise him of such an unsavoury happening in the House where he was a visitor.

But the captain did not seem to have heard, or heeded, what the juniors were saying to one another. It was not likely to occur to Tom Merry and Co. that Captain Vavasour made it a point to loiter about, watching and listening, to pick up information that might be useful to "Light-Fingered Jack."

The captain gave them a pleasant nod and smile. The juniors capped him in passing, the captain still smiling as he looked after them. They did not speak again till they were out of hearing.

"I wonder if he's heard," said Manners.

"Railton would hate it," said Tom. "I suppose he must hear of it sooner or later, with so many fellows talking about it, and the beaks going into it. Rotten thing to happen with a guest in the house."

"Rotten thing to happen at all," grunted Lowther. "I can't make it out! We've got some black sheep here, but not a man I can think of capable of a thing like that. Can you?"

Tom shook his head.

"Not a man," he answered. "The thing seems so deliberate—the watch must have been taken from Gussy's pocket, either in the dorm or when he was at cricket, I suppose. There's no hope now that it could turn out to be nothing more than a practical joke! Even you wouldn't have been such an ass as to leave it parked in Gussy's topper till Sunday, with all this bother going on."

"Well, I never thought—"

"Your long suit!" said Manners, "You never do."

"Oh, rot!" said Lowther, crossly. "Catch me ever larking with anything valuable—after this!"

The mysterious disappearance of Gussy's watch had certainly been an instructive lesson to the funny man of the Shell. Lowther was very thankful that he had never touched it: and he assuredly was not likely to think again of such a jape. It was now settled in all minds—excepting perhaps D'Arcy's—that a theft had taken place: and there was a rumour of an intended search of studies and dormitories.

"Hallo, there's old Talbot," said Manners, catching sight of a lonely figure pacing under the elms. "Looks down on his luck! What's the matter with old Talbot lately?" Then he caught his breath, "He can't suppose—"

Tom Merry flushed.

"He can't!" he said, "But that ass Trimble—you remember what he gabbled in the day-room—"

"Oh, scissors!" said Lowther, "If Talbot's got anything of that kind in his mind—let's go and speak to him, now."

Talbot looked up, a faint flush coming into his cheeks, as the chums of the Shell bore down on him. He made a move as if he would avoid them: but they were not to be eluded. There was an almost worn expression on his handsome face, and they could hardly doubt what was in his mind—what he suspected,

or dreaded, might be in the minds of others. A theft in the House—and no one there upon whom suspicion could imaginably fall: unless upon the junior who had once been the “Toff” of Angel Alley.

“Look here, Talbot,” said Tom, in his direct way, “I fancy I can guess what’s in your silly head—chuck it right out, see?”

Talbot crimsoned, but did not speak.

“Somebody’s bagged a gold watch,” said Tom, “At least it looks like it—”

“It is so!” said Talbot, in a low voice, “It isn’t a case of looking like it—the watch has been stolen.”

“Well, you never know—something or other may turn up that we haven’t thought of,” said Tom, “It’s a bit hard to swallow.”

“It is so!” repeated Talbot.

“Well even if it’s so, that’s nothing for you to worry about,” said Tom, “Are you mad ass enough to fancy that any man here would think of you in such a connection—that’s what you’ve got on your mind, isn’t it?”

Talbot did not reply.

“You must be off your rocker,” said Tom, almost roughly, “Are you thinking of what that fat fool Trimble said the other day? Even Trimble wouldn’t think such a thing—it was only his babble. Nobody would! There isn’t a man in the House who wouldn’t trust you. You know that, or ought to know it.”

“For goodness sake, don’t get such fancies into your silly head, Talbot,” said Manners.

“Have a spot of sense,” said Lowther.

Talbot stood looking at them. What had happened had certainly not shaken their faith in him. So far as he had seen any sign, it had not shaken the faith of any other fellows: many of whom knew something of his miserable story. Only Railton’s faith had been shaken—and that was due to the fathomless cunning of the crook who had deceived him.

Yet it must come! He felt, with a shudder, that it must come. The thief would not be found—how could he be found, when Talbot, at least, knew that it was Light-Fingered Jack, and nobody could dream of suspecting Captain Vavasour. The watch would not be found—Light-Fingered Jack would take care of that. Must not suspicion, at length, turn upon the only person in the House open to suspicion, because of his past? It must come! Indeed, he could only wonder that it had not come already—he could only surmise miserably that it might already be in the minds of some of his schoolfellows, as it was in his House-master’s.

“Talbot, old man—!” urged Tom.

“You’re a good chap, Tom,” said Talbot, huskily, “But—

but—it must come, old fellow. They will think of me—they will suppose—”

“Not a man, I tell you.”

Talbot smiled faintly, and made no rejoinder.

“You’ve got to get that right out of your head,” said Tom, “Now come and trot with us till the bell goes. You’re not going to brood here on your own.”

“But, my dear chap—”

“Come on, I tell you.”

“Oh, all right.”

“After dinner, we’re biking over to Wayland,” said Tom, as they walked on the path under the elms, “You can hike along with us to the sports shop. I’ve got ten quid to blow on cricket things, and you can help me shopping, see?”

Talbot gave him a quick, startled look.

“Ten quid!” he repeated, “How—”

“My old guardian’s sent it to me for cricket things,” explained Tom. “It’s all going this afternoon—two fivers.”

Talbot caught his breath.

“Tom! For goodness sake, keep it safe! You know what’s happened to D’Arcy’s watch—”

“I’ve had that from Manners,” said Tom, laughing, “It’s safe in the wallet in my pocket—I shan’t hang my jacket up on a peg with the fivers in it. I’m not quite such an ass as Gussy.”

Talbot opened his lips—and closed them again. No pocket he knew, was safe from Light-Fingered Jack. He had not the slightest doubt that Arthur Augustus’s pocket had been picked while he had been wearing the jacket. And if “Captain Vavasour” knew of those fivers—and did he not? Was he not haunting the school with listening ears and the eyes of a hawk?

The boy’s heart was like lead.

It would go on—he knew that it would go on—that was why Light-Fingered Jack was there! And Talbot’s presence in the school made it all the more secure for him: for if suspicion turned upon anyone, upon whom could it turn but the one-time Toff? It would go on—and he was helpless—helpless! He could have groaned aloud.

“Coming with us to Wayland after dinner, Talbot?” asked Manners

“Eh! Oh! Yes, if you like,” stammered Talbot.

“Do you good to get a run on a jigger, instead of moping about being an idiot!” said Lowther.

“Oh! Yes.”

Talbot remained with the three, till the bell rang for Third

School, and then went into the form-room with them.

But he did not find it easy to give attention to Mr Linton in class. What was he to do, was the haunting thought in his mind. What had already happened had caused Railton to doubt him. But more was to happen—he knew that it was coming. Whether it was Tom Merry's banknotes, or money from the cash-drawer in Railton's own desk, from the till in Dame Taggles' tuck-shop, from the Head's house—all was grist that came to Light-Fingered Jack's mill. He was there to line his pockets—and he would line them: leaving suspicion to thicken round the Toff, laughing in his sleeve. D'Arcy's watch, he believed, had been taken less as loot, though it was valuable, than to blacken Talbot in Railton's eyes—and in that the crook had been easily successful. But there would be more—and more—it was coming. And he could do nothing—unless, indeed, he deliberately and directly disobeyed his House-master, and went to Inspector Skeat at Wayland. And even if he did take that extreme step, how could he know that even the keen police-inspector would give heed—a wild sounding accusation, without proof of any kind?

The man was there as Captain Vavasour, in possession of Captain Vavasour's papers. How could he have obtained them? Talbot could not explain that. Where was the genuine Captain Vavasour all this time? He could not even guess. Would Mr. Skeat heed a story that would sound to him utterly groundless?

Even so, he could not go to Inspector Skeat. He could not deliberately disobey his House-master. It might be little use if he did—but he could not take that step.

But what was he to do?

Several times, during Third School, Mr. Linton called him to order. Other fellows glanced at him curiously. It was a relief, at last, to be free of the form-room: and he hurried up to his study, to think—and think—if there was any way out of this fearful tangle. And he did not know that, while he was striving, with throbbing brain, in his study, to think of some way out, Captain Vavasour brushed against Tom Merry in a passage downstairs, and that after that momentary contact, there was no longer a wallet in Tom's pocket: he did not know, and Tom did not know—yet!

The Hand of the Crook

“WUBBISH!”

Arthur Augustus D’Arcy spoke emphatically.

There were four Fourth-Formers, in the bike shed, and four Shell fellows, when Arthur Augustus thus pronounced his opinion with emphasis.

Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther, and Talbot, had come in for their machines, for the ride over to Wayland. Blake and Herries, Digby and D’Arcy, were there for their jiggers, for a ride over to Carcroft. And Blake, when the Shell fellows came in, looked round, and called to Tom “That tenner still in your pocket, old scout?” Hence Gussy’s emphatic remark.

“Wubbish, wot, and wats!” continued Arthur Augustus, “Piffle! I am weally surprised at you, Blake.”

“Fathead!” said Blake.

“I wegard you as a fathead, Blake,” said Arthur Augustus, warmly. “For whatevah weason do you suppose that tennah might not still be in Tom Mewwy’s pocket?”

“Where did your watch go?” counter-questioned Blake.

“I have no ideah, Blake, exceptin’ that it certainly was not pilfahed, which I uttahly wefuse to believe.”

“Ass!” said Herries.

“Weally, Hewwies—”

Tom Merry laughed.

“The tenner’s all right, anyhow,” he said, “I parked those two fivers in my wallet, and the wallet’s in my pocket, safe as houses. You fellows ready?”

Talbot gave him a quick look. Tom Merry had no doubt that the wallet, which had been in his pocket, was still safe there. Talbot could not feel so sure of it.

“Somebody pinched Gussy’s watch,” said Digby, “That’s a cert—and a fellow doesn’t feel his things safe since.”

“Weally, Dig—”

“Right as rain!” said Tom, “Here it is!” He slipped his hand

into his pocket for his wallet.

Then he gave quite a jump.

"Why—what—where—?" he ejaculated.

Talbot caught his breath.

"Tom! Your wallet's safe, surely," he exclaimed, "My dear chap—"

"Of course it is," said Tom, "It must be. I've had this jacket on all the time. I thought I put it in that pocket—"

"You did!" said Lowther, "I saw you."

"Isn't it there?" exclaimed Manners, his face startled.

Tom Merry looked perplexed, as he groped in the pocket. He drew out a pencil and an old bus ticket. But there was nothing else.

Then, with a very grave face, he groped through his other pockets. But the result was the same—there was no wallet.

"Good heavens!" he breathed.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Blake. "You don't mean to say it's gone?"

"It's not here," said Tom.

"You couldn't have dropped it out," said Manners.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Nothing's ever dropped from that pocket. And there were other things in it—they're still here—look!"

The juniors looked at one another. Talbot stood as if frozen, his face white.

It had happened!

Tom Merry's ten pounds had vanished, like D'Arcy's wrist-watch. It was the hand of "Light-Fingered Jack." Arthur Augustus had left his jacket off once or twice before his watch was missed. But Tom Merry had had that jacket on all the time since he had put the two five-pound notes in the wallet, and the wallet back into his pocket. The wallet had been abstracted while he was wearing the jacket, that was certain. It was the work of a skilled and light-fingered pickpocket. Talbot knew who that was.

There was a long silence in the bike-shed.

"Gone!" said Blake, at last.

"Gone!" said Tom.

"Pinched!" said Herries.

"I—I—I suppose so!"

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus's voice was almost faint, "You—you—you are quite suah that it is gone, Tom Mewwy?"

"Quite! It's not in any of my pockets. Besides, I know that I put it into that pocket—and the other things are there. It has been taken out."

"But—but—but—!" Monty Lowther stammered, "That's not like pinching something from a jacket hanging on a peg. That's pocket-picking, Tom."

"I know."

"But—who—who—good heavens, who in this school is able to pick a pocket like that!" said Lowther, his face quite pale, "Only a practised pickpocket could do it."

The perspiration came out on Talbot's brow. His face was like chalk. Only a practiced pick-pocket—Lowther had spoken the truth. Not a fellow in the School House could have done it, even if so inclined—it was an act that required the cunning skill of a professional thief. Not a man in the House—unless one, who had been called the "Toff" in other days, the associate of a gang of crooks.

Talbot knew what others must think of this. Knowing nothing of "Light-Fingered Jack", what were they to think? Even his own friends—

It seemed to the unhappy boy that there was ice at his heart. He stood like one condemned, waiting for accusing looks to be turned on him.

Tom Merry drew a deep, deep breath.

Perhaps, for a dreadful moment, doubt assailed him. Talbot had been with him: and no fellow in the House excepting the one-time Toff could have done this.

But if doubt came for a moment, it was only for a moment. He could not, and he would not, believe such a thing. Talbot was true as steel, honest as the day: it was impossible—impossible! There was no explanation—he could not begin to guess what the explanation was—but it was not Talbot—it was not and could not be Talbot.

Blake and Co. looked at one another, and then quietly wheeled their machines out of the bike-shed. Even Arthur Augustus had nothing to say in face of this plain and undeniable proof that there was a thief in the school. What they were thinking—whether they were thinking of Talbot—the unhappy "Toff" could not know. They lost no time in going.

Tom Merry put his machine back on the stand.

"No good going over to Wayland now," he said, quietly.

"No!" said Manners, slowly.

"But—but—!" muttered Lowther.

Talbot did not speak. He could not speak. He awaited an accusation, as one might have awaited a sentence of death.

"You'll have to report this to Railton, Tom" muttered Manners. Tom shook his head.

"But—you must!" said Lowther, miserably, "It can't be kept dark, Tom—you can't lose ten pounds."

"It's lost already," said Tom.

"Well, yes: but—"

"We're going to keep this under our hats," said Tom, steadily, "It would cause too much talk—too many rotten suspicions—"

"Railton will be shirty, if it comes out, and you haven't reported it," said Manners, uneasily.

"I can't help that," said Tom, shortly.

"It would mean a row with the House beak," said Lowther.

"Let it!"

Talbot found his voice at last. The three were not looking at him, but they knew that his face was ghastly. His voice came husky:

"Tom!"

Then Tom Merry looked at him. He looked him fair! in the eyes, and his face showed what he was feeling—loyal faith and trust.

"Yes, old chap," he said.

"You can't keep this dark." Talbot strove to steady his voice. "Such a thing must be reported to the House-master at once. It couldn't be kept dark, anyway—four other fellows know—there would be talk—"

"I'll ask them to say nothing."

"It would come out! And it must come out," said Talbot, "You must go to Railton and tell him, Tom."

Tom shook his head again.

"Do you think I don't know why you would keep it quiet?" muttered Talbot, "You know what fellows will say—what they must think, and must say—that it was the Toff—"

"If any fellow says it to me, he will get a fist on his lying mouth the next minute!" said Tom, savagely.

"So you believe in me still, Tom?"

"You know I do."

"And you—you know how it looks—"

"I know how it looks! I can't help that! And I don't care! If you told me yourself you had done it, I should not believe you."

Talbot smiled faintly.

Manners and Lowther stood silent. They believed, or at least they tried their hardest to believe, as Tom did. Yet what were they to think—what was anyone to think? What was every fellow in the school to think, when it came out that there was a cunning skilled pickpocket at St. Jim's—with only one person there who

could possibly answer to such a description? If anyone belonging to St. Jim's had done this, it was the Toff!

"You're a good pal, Tom!" said Talbot, his voice very low, "If ever I was tempted to go on the old way, your trust in me would pull me up. I don't need to tell you that I never touched your wallet."

"You don't!" said Tom.

"God bless you, old chap! But it will look as clear as daylight to every other man in the school. It was the Toff or nobody."

"It will never look like that to me," said Tom.

"Or to me!" said Manners.

"Or me!" said Lowther.

"You must go to Railton, Tom," said Talbot. "It couldn't be kept dark—and it ought not to be. I know your motive, old chap, but it's no good. And there will be more of it."

"More?" said Tom, with a start.

"Do you think the villain will stop at this?" said Talbot, bitterly. "He has his alibi ready-made—the Toff is here, isn't he?"

"Oh!" gasped Tom. "But—but—Talbot—Railton may think—if I tell him about this, he may think—"

"I know what Railton will think. But you must report this all the same. Railton must know. He will know, anyhow, when his own wallet goes," said Talbot. "He will think that the Toff is making a clean sweep! That is what he is meant to think, and that is what he will think. It cannot be helped, Tom—if you don't report this, Railton will know sooner or later, and he will know why—that you were trying to screen me—that you doubt me as he does."

"Never that!" said Tom. "But I'll go to Railton if you think it best, Talbot."

"You must!"

"Very well, then, said Tom. "But—!" He looked directly at Talbot. "Look here, old chap, you're keener than the rest of us put together—have you any idea what all this means? Can you think of anything?"

Talbot did not reply for a moment or two.

"Yes, he said, at last. "I can see light where it is dark to you, Tom—but—but I cannot explain. I hope and trust—I believe—that I may be able to clear this up—how, I do not know yet. If you trust me, Tom—"

"No 'if' about that."

"You know something," said Monty Lowther, with a very

keen look at the Toff's pale face.

"If you know anything, Talbot, for goodness sake cough it up," said Manners. "This kind of thing can't go on."

The three looked at Talbot, curiously and anxiously. What did he know—what could he know—unless it was the knowledge of guilt? He stood silent.

"Talbot!" said Tom, at last. "If you know anything—if you suspect anything— We're quite in the dark—do you suspect anything or anyone?"

"Yes," said Talbot, at last. "I can tell you that much, Tom, but I can say no more. But I—I hope that I shall pull through this—that I shall be able to fix it where it belongs. Now—go off to Mr. Railton, old chap—the sooner he knows what has happened, the better—never mind what he may think."

"I'll do as you say," answered Tom: and he left the bike-shed, with Manners and Lowther.

Talbot remained alone: pale, harassed, feeling driven to desperation. What was he to do? What could he do? How was he to circumvent the un pitying rogue who was piling suspicion and shame upon him, securing himself by his own unscrupulous acts, and gratifying his grudge for that blow struck on the bank of the Ryll? How? There seemed to be no way—and yet, surely, there must be a way.

A crowd of cheery juniors came into the bike-shed—Levison, Clive, Wildrake, Tompkins, and Ridd, the new boy in the Fourth. Talbot hurried out: his own deep gloom deepened by contrast to their care-free high spirits. As he went towards the House, he passed Captain Vavasour, at a little distance—and the captain glanced at him, and their eyes met. In Talbot's look was all the bitter scorn and indignation that he was feeling—in the captain's, ironical mockery, and the man laughed as he walked on to the gates and went out. That low derisive laugh was in Talbot's ears as he went slowly into the House.

17

The Solution ?

“OH! Stoppit, Gore—ow!”

“You clumsy ass—”

“Oh! Will you stop it?”

“Look at my Virgil!”

“Wow!”

Talbot frowned as he came to his study. The voices from that study told a not unaccustomed tale: Gore of the Shell was ragging Skimpole again.

Skimpole, undoubtedly, was rather an irritating study-mate in some ways. Talbot was always very patient with him: the Toff had learned patience in a hard school. Gore was much less so. Talbot kept the peace by peaceable means when he could: but more than once he had had to intervene with a strong hand, and it sounded as if his intervention might be required again. He stepped rather hastily into the study.

The burly Gore was gripping the weedy Skimpole by the back of the neck, and coolly tapping his bony head on the table. Skimpole wriggled and squirmed and squeaked, but he could do little more. Talbot frowned.

“Look here, stop that, Gore,” he snapped.

Gore glared.

“Look what he’s done!” he bawled. “Bagging a fellow’s books, and mucking them up! Look at that Virgil!”

“Oh!” said Talbot, as he looked.

Skimpole had a way of losing his own books, and borrowing others in the study—and he was careless with them. Having lines to do for Mr. Linton, he had looked for his Virgil without finding it, and taken Gore’s. That would not have mattered, but he had upset the ink—another of his irritating ways—and evidently drenched his fingers in it—and his finger-marks, on Gore’s Virgil, were only too prominent. The book was open, and across one page was the pattern of an inky hand that had

been laid on it—obliterating half the print on the page. It was really no wonder that George Gore was a little excited.

"Look at it!" bawled Gore, "Next time I have to mug that up, how am I going to do it? What?"

"Oh!" repeated Talbot, rather blankly.

"I have said that I am sorry, my dear Gore," bleated Skimpole,

"I did not notice that my fingers were so inky—"

"You clumsy, grubby, blithering owl—"

"Wow!" howled Skimpole, as Gore tapped his head again.

"Chuck it, Gore," said Talbot. "Skimmy can't help being an ass. You can use my Virgil when you want it."

"I'm not going to have his paw marks over my books!" bawled Gore. "Linton will jaw me if he sees that! Take that, you grubby, inky chump."

"Whooop!" howled Skimpole, as he took it.

Talbot frowned, and grasped Gore by the shoulder. George Gore was a burly, muscular fellow: but he spun in Talbot's strong grasp almost as easily as Skimpole might have done. He had to release his victim as he spun—and Skimpole, jumping at the chance, darted out of the study, and fled down the passage.

Gore, red with rage, turned on Talbot.

"Look here—!" he roared. "Do you fancy you can pitch a fellow about like a sack of coke, what?"

"Skimmy had had enough," said Talbot, pacifically.

"Had he?" said Gore. "Well, he's going to have some more, see? I'll go after him and give him what he's asked for, and you can go and eat coke."

And George Gore stamped angrily out of the study, and slammed the door after him with a slam that rang through all the Shell studies.

Talbot smiled faintly, when he was left alone in the study. He had no doubt that Herbert Skimpole was doing his best to put the greatest possible distance, in the shortest space of time, between himself and the enraged Gore. Really, Skimmy was an irritating fellow. No fellow could have been pleased to see the pattern of a bony hand, outlined in ink, in the middle of his Virgil.

But in a moment the smile vanished from Talbot's face, and the gloom returned. He stood there, with knitted brow, thinking. By that time, Tom Merry would have reported his loss to the House-master.

What was Railton going to think?

Talbot thought that he could guess, only too easily. It was even possible that he might send for Talbot and question him—if not accuse him!

What was he to do?

Captain Vavasour had gone out—sauntering cheerfully out in the sunny afternoon, without a care on his mind—after the harm he had done. He was safe—secure. Even if Talbot, who knew him, should speak, he still felt himself safe. And Talbot could not speak. He was safe unless the real Captain Vavasour came: and that, evidently, he did not fear. For some unknown cause, the real captain was kept away from St. Jim's, and Light-Fingered Jack knew it, and banked on it accordingly. He was in no danger, and he could stroll out carelessly and unconcernedly, leaving the boy with the torment of an insoluble problem on his mind.

What, what could he do?

This could not go on. He could not defy his House-master, and tell what he knew: and even if he did, who could believe him? There was no solution that way. But what else

What else?

Suddenly, Talbot gave a start—and a flash came into his eyes. His glance, lingering on the print of Skimpole's hand, in the page of the open Latin book, became fixed.

Finger-prints!

"Oh!" breathed Talbot.

His pale, shadowed face lit up. Skimpole's inky clumsiness had put an idea into his mind. His eyes blazed. Was this the solution?

Light-Fingered Jack had been in the hands of the police: once, but once was enough. His finger-prints must have been taken—that was certain—and filed away in the archives of Scotland Yard. His picture would be in the Rogue's Gallery there.

To tell Mr. Railton was futile: he would no more listen to that than to the rest. But there were other ways. Light-Fingered Jack's finger-prints were on record at police-headquarters, as indelibly as Skimpole's finger-prints in Gore's Virgil. And in his room in the School House, there must be many articles on which similar prints had been left—covers of books, papers of all sorts—there could be no lack of them, if only there had been a Scotland Yard detective on the spot to investigate.

That was impossible. But there was Inspector Skeat at Wayland: who was in touch with headquarters in London.

He could not go to Mr. Skeat. He could not mention Captain Vavasour to him. But, without disobeying his House-master, he could send Mr. Skeat a set of finger-prints asking him if they could be identified at Scotland Yard. Mr. Skeat, who knew of his old connection with Hookey Walker's gang, would get those finger-prints identified, and then—

Then, knowing that Light-Fingered Jack was in the vicinity, he would act of his own accord—there would be no need for Talbot to speak.

Talbot's eyes gleamed as he thought it out.

Was it the solution?

He felt that it was. He thought it over and over: and finally, he left the study. He knew Captain Vavasour's room in the School House: it was next to Mr. Railton's on the upper landing. The captain had gone out—Railton was in his study the Saturday afternoon was a half-holiday, and almost every fellow was out of doors in the sunny weather. The opportunity was all that the Toff could have desired. Was luck turning his way at last?

He passed no one but Baggy Trimble, loafing on the study landing. On the upper landing there was no one at all.

Talbot, his heart beating, paused there for a moment.

He was going to the captain's room for finger-prints. He knew that he would find what he wanted.

But if he were seen—what would it look like after what had happened already?

He had to take that risk. His pause was brief: a few moments more, and he was in Captain Vavasour's room.

He was in that room only three or four minutes. When he emerged, the coast was still clear.

Baggy Trimble blinked at him, when he came down, and crossed the study landing again, and went back to his study. But his face was impassive: there was nothing to give even the inquisitive Baggy a hint.

In his study in the Shell, he shut the door, and sat down at the table to write.

Dear Mr. Skeat,

Enclosed a newspaper, on which you will, I think, find finger-prints sufficiently clear for identification.

Will you refer to Scotland Yard, and ascertain whether they are the finger-prints of Light-Fingered Jack, the pickpocket?

If so, the man may be picked up, carrying on his game under a false name.

Reginald Talbot.

Talbot placed that letter, with a folded newspaper he drew from an inner pocket, in a large envelope, and sealed it carefully.

He slipped it into his pocket, and left the study.

Once more Baggy Trimble gave him a blink, as he crossed the

study landing to the stairs. He went down, and out into the quadrangle, to look for Tom Merry. He found that Tom had just come out. Manners and Lowther had gone to the tuck-shop for a ginger-pop, while Tom went in to speak to Mr. Railton: and Talbot was glad to find him alone.

"You've seen Railton?" he asked.

Tom Merry nodded.

"You've told him?"

"Yes." Tom's face clouded, "It was a jolt for him, Talbot. But—But I can't believe that he thinks—!" He broke off.

"If he does, I hope that he will not think so long, now," said Talbot, quietly, "I hope—I believe—that things will come right soon, Tom. Will you do something for me?"

"Anything, old chap."

"Bike over to Wayland and call at the police-station—"

"Wha-a-t?"

"And deliver a letter to Inspector Skeat—only into his own hands. I can't go—never mind why—I can't! Will you?"

Tom looked at him long and steadily.

"I will do anything you like," he said. "But all this can only mean that you are on somebody's track, Talbot."

"It does,"

"But—if it's some School House man, Railton ought to know—"

"It is not a School House man."

"Oh! But who—who else? How—"

"I can't say anything, Tom! Only trust me, old chap, and do as I ask you. You will do that?"

"I will—and ask you nothing," said Tom.

Five minutes later Tom Merry, with the envelope in an inside pocket, was whizzing away by the lanes to Wayland. And Talbot of the Shell, as he watched him disappear in the distance, drew a deep, deep breath.

Was this the solution? He felt that it was, and it was as if a heavy load had rolled from his mind and his heart

18

The Last Card !

“TALBOT!”
“Yes, sir!”

Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, glanced at Talbot, as the juniors were taking their places in the form-room on Monday morning. And as he called Talbot's name, a good many fellows glanced at him, and then at Talbot. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther exchanged a quick look. The master of the Shell had a very grave expression on his face. They sensed at once that something was in the air.

You need not take your place, Talbot! Mr. Railton desires to see you in his study during this lesson.”

Talbot drew a sudden breath.

“Very well, sir!” he answered, quietly.

He passed Tom Merry, and Tom touched his arm as he passed.

“Chin up, old chap!” whispered Tom, “It will be all right.”

Talbot gave him a nod and a faint smile, and passed on without speaking. All the Shell fellows noted that Mr. Linton's glance followed him to the door, with a grave and strange intentness. That something had happened, all knew: and many, no doubt, wondered whether it was some recurrence of what had happened in the previous week.

Talbot had no doubt of it, as he made his way to the House-master's study. He knew as well as if he had been told, that the hand of the crook had been active again, and his heart was heavy, though his face was calm.

The door of Mr. Railton's study stood half-open, and within the room, as he came up, Talbot glimpsed a plumpish figure and

a ruddy face. Captain Vavasour was with the House-master.

He paused in the passage. His sense of repulsion towards the crook was so deep, that he hesitated to enter.

As he stood there, he heard Mr. Railton's voice.

"It looks like a splendid day for cricket, Vavasour."

"It does!" came the captain's drawl, "It's good of you, Railton, to fix this up for me. But you know how I enjoy the game."

"Kildare is only too glad of such a recruit, Vavasour. The game is hardly up to your standard, perhaps,"

"I shall get a good game," said Captain Vavasour, "and I've seen some first-class cricket here, too, in the past few days. Let me see, I think you told me that stumps will be pitched at three."

"That is right!"

"I shall be on hand, and am looking forward to it. I—the captain broke off, as Talbot tapped at the half-open door. He would gladly have avoided a meeting with the man, but he could not stand there indefinitely when he had been sent for.

Captain Vavasour glanced round, and smiled at the sight of Talbot in the doorway.

"Come in, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, rather abruptly.

"Our young friend with the vivid imagination!" drawled Captain Vavasour, "I see you are engaged, Railton."

He nodded to the House-master, and left the study, still smiling. The cloud on Talbot's face, his helplessness to deal with the crook who was blackening his name, amused Light-Fingered Jack. He hummed a tune as he strolled out into the sunny quadrangle.

"Shut the door, Talbot," said Mr. Railton, in the same abrupt tone,

Talbot quietly closed the door, then he stood facing his House-master, and waited for the blow to fall. It was not long delayed.

"Do you know what has happened in this study, Talbot?"

Talbot's lip curled bitterly.

"I can guess—as you have sent for me," he answered, "But the man you should have questioned has just gone out."

Mr. Railton frowned, and raised his hand.

"No more of that!" he rapped, "You place yourself in a very bad light, Talbot, by this persistence in a foolish unfounded story. Not a word more of it."

"Very well, sir."

"I am glad, at least, that you have kept your word to me," said Mr. Railton, "You have not spread this story over the school."

"I have told no one."

"That is something, at least. But—I hardly know what to say to you, Talbot. The matter of D'Arcy's watch is still unsettled. On Saturday a Shell boy's pocket was picked, and two banknotes in a wallet taken. This, Talbot, was, and can only have been, the work of a professional thief.

"I know!"

"No boy belonging to this school could have done such a thing as abstracting a wallet from another boy's pocket without his knowledge."

"Except the Toff!" said Talbot, bitterly. "The Toff would have found it child's play."

Mr. Railton bit his lip.

"You are not accused," he said. "But now—something more has occurred, Talbot. A locked drawer in my desk has been opened, apparently with a skeleton key, and the sum of a hundred pounds in notes taken."

"I guessed that something of the kind had happened. That is why I am sent for!" said Talbot. "Very well, sir. There is your telephone—it is easy to call up Inspector Skeat. Send for him, and charge me."

Mr. Railton stood silent, looking at him.

He doubted. He could not help doubting. For unless Captain Vavasour was a crook, as Talbot averred, there was only one person in all St. Jim's at whom suspicion could be directed, and that person was the one-time "Toff". And the House-master did not believe for one moment that there was an atom of truth in the accusation against Captain Vavasour. He was driven to doubt Talbot—yet it was sorely against his will.

He broke the silence at last.

"Have you anything to tell me, Talbot?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" repeated Mr. Railton.

"Nothing but what I have told you already."

"You need not repeat that!" snapped Mr. Railton. "Talbot, I have taken no action so far. But you can see, as well as I can, that this cannot go on. I can have no choice but to call in the police to investigate this robbery."

Talbot did not speak.

"I hesitate to do so," went on Mr. Railton. "I still hesitate. I am at a loss. Talbot, deal with me frankly. I make every

allowance for the bad training you had in your early boyhood—I believe, I firmly believe, that since you have been at this school, you have made every effort to throw off the influence of the past. But—if that influence has been too strong for you—if you have failed to make good, and fallen back, every consideration will be shown you, in view of the honest efforts I know that you have made. I have been a friend to you, Talbot—”

“I know it, sir, and I am grateful.”

“I desire to be a friend still,” said Mr. Railton. “If it is as I have said, be frank with me—and I will consult with Dr. Holmes what can be done. But be frank, Talbot—for your own sake, I urge you.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“Think, my boy—”

“I have nothing to say,” repeated Talbot, with white lips.

Mr. Railton sighed.

“If you have nothing to say, Talbot, I will not pursue the subject,” he said. “I will say only this—think over it during the day. I will take no action until this evening. That will give you time to reflect. That is all, Talbot. You may go back to your form-room.”

Talbot left the study without speaking again.

In the Shell, every eye was fixed on him, as he came in. Mr. Linton’s glance was very keen: but he made no remark, as Talbot went to his place. The Toff’s face was a little pale, but it was quite calm, and he gave his Form-master careful attention during the lesson.

It was not till the Shell were dismissed, that Tom Merry was able to get a word with him. In the corridor, he caught Talbot by the arm.

“What—?” he began.

“It’s happened,” answered Talbot, in a low voice.

“Oh!” breathed Tom.

“Railton’s study this time—a desk opened with a skeleton key.”

Tom’s face whitened.

“But—but he doesn’t think—?” he stammered.

“What is he to think?” muttered Talbot. “I cannot blame him, can I? He has been a good kind friend to me: but—he thinks that the Toff has broken out again. What else?”

"It's rot—rubbish—" breathed Tom.

"It's not ended yet, Tom," said Talbot, quietly. "I needn't tell you, old chap, that I am as innocent as you are—you believe that without my telling you and God bless you for it. Don't let us talk of it any more—I believe that it will come right—and perhaps before this day is out. That is what I am banking on now."

They went out into the quad together—Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther sorely troubled, Talbot quiet and calm. He had played his last, his only card, in sending Light-Fingered Jack's finger-prints to Inspector Skeat. If that card proved a trump, all would be well. If it failed him—but he tried not to think of that.

19

At Last !

“WATHAH worth watchin’, what?” said Arthur Augustus D’Arcy.

“What-ho !” agreed Blake.

There was no doubt that Captain Vavasour, on the cricket-field, was worth watching. Whatever he was, the man could play cricket.

On Big Side at St. Jim’s there was a crowd as numerous as any that ever gathered to watch a game between the First Eleven and Greyfriars, or Rookwood, or Carcroft. It was only a match between the First Eleven, on one side, and a scratch eleven on the other : but the latter was playing Captain Vavasour, and that made all the difference.

Kildare and his men took first knock. Lefevre of the Fifth captained the other side : and he grinned when Captain Vavasour went on to bowl. Plump and ruddy, looking very fit in his flannels, the captain handled the bowling with ease and grace, and the first over sent Kildare himself back to the pavilion, with a rather rueful face. And with the last ball of the over, Darrell joined him there. It was very unusual for the great men of the First Eleven to see their wickets go down like that : and it was, as Arthur Augustus sapiently remarked, worth watching.

Blake and Co. were there, in the crowd, with Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther—and Talbot. Even Talbot, in spite of the leaden weight on his mind, could take interest in the game. But every now and then his eyes wandered away from the cricket field to the distant gates.

He had had no word from Inspector Skeat.

Had the inspector acted? Was he coming to the school? Was that cunning and wary impostor on the verge of being unmasked?

He did not know. He could only wait—and hope!

The captain himself obviously had no uneasiness. Talbot, watching him as he bowled, could see that he was full of ease and confidence. For some reason, utterly unknown and inexplicable to the Toff, the man had no fear of the real Captain Vavasour turning up to expose him. Somehow, he knew that the genuine owner of that name could not come or send word—how, Talbot could not imagine. But plainly he had no fear: and Talbot had no doubt that he would disappear before the genuine captain could come on the scene. For the present, at all events, he felt himself safe.

He was playing good cricket now, as “Light-Fingered Jack” had played it in “cricket weeks”, many a time. He was good at the game, and he had found it a valuable asset in his nefarious trade. It had given him entrance to many a country-house where his light fingers had found their profit. What he was doing now he had done many times—though at St. Jim’s, the presence of the “Toff” had made it easier and safer for him—a ready-made alibi if suspicion could possibly have turned his way.

Many fellows had given Talbot curious glances. He knew what was, what must be, in their minds. How was it going to end?

Mr. Railton was looking on, from the pavilion. His eyes happened to fall on Talbot in the crowd, and the boy saw a faint cloud cross his brow for a moment. It was like a blow to him. He doubted the Toff: but his manner to Captain Vavasour showed that he had not the slightest doubt in that direction. How—how was it going to end? If only the inspector would come!

But the inspector did not come.

The game went on. Kildare’s men piled up runs against other bowlers, but they had little luck when Captain Vavasour handled the ball. That innings was much briefer than First-eleven men could have expected. In less than an hour, Kildare’s side were all down for fifty.

“Worth watchin’, what?” chirruped Arthur Augustus.

“By gum, that man can bowl,” remarked Tom Merry.

“He can—and then some,” agreed Blake.

Tom Merry glanced round as Talbot moved.

“Not going, old chap?” he asked. “It won’t be long before

they bat. Don't you want to see Captain Vavasour at the wicket?"

"Worth seein', old bean," said Arthur Augustus.

"I'll be back, by the time they bat," said Talbot. And he walked away rather quickly, to avoid further questioning.

He strolled rather aimlessly across the quad, and then went down to the gates. Was the inspector coming?

Was he coming?

He had surely had time. If he acted at all, he would act swiftly: Mr. Skeat was not the man to lose time if he acted. But had he acted at all? Surely, surely he would not lose a chance of "nailing" Light-Fingered Jack. He knew the Toff's story—he knew that Talbot would not speak idly—surely he would act. Surely he would act, before the last blow fell, and the boy was sent away from the school in disgrace?

Like Sister Anne, Talbot watched at the gate, hope and doubt alternating in his mind. A taxi-cab came in sight, and his eyes fixed on it. And there was a throb in his heart, as he discerned a portly form and a keen lean face—it was Inspector Skeat of Wayland in the taxi.

He ran into the road.

The taxi stopped.

Inspector Skeat stepped out. He gave Talbot a keen look and a brief nod and then told the driver to wait. The taxi remained by the roadside, while the portly inspector walked with Talbot to the old gateway.

In the old arched gateway they stopped. Talbot had not spoken: but now he could contain himself no longer.

"Mr. Skeat! You had my letter—from Tom Merry—on Saturday—"

"Yes."

"Have you acted on it?"

"Yes."

"And——?" breathed Talbot.

"Now you must tell me more," said Mr. Skeat. "That is why I am here. The finger-prints on the newspaper have been identified—"

"As those of Light-Fingered Jack?" breathed Talbot.

"Yes."

Talbot's eyes gleamed.

"Then—you know—you have no doubt——?"

"Finger-prints cannot lie!" said Mr. Skeat. "That newspaper has been in the hands of Light-Fingered Jack, wanted for a dozen robberies or more. That is not all. Beside the identification of the finger-prints, they have sent me a photograph of the man. That, with their report, reached me to-day."

"Let me see it!"

The inspector opened his pocket-book, and drew out a photograph. Talbot's eyes glinted at the plump face it revealed: the face of the man who was playing cricket on Big Side at St. Jim's. There was no doubt now! Captain Vavasour—Light-Fingered Jack—was almost in the bag!

"You have seen him?" asked the inspector.

"Yes," breathed Talbot.

"You remembered him—?"

"From other days—yes."

Inspector Skeat gave him a curious look. Once the Toff of Angel Alley—now a schoolboy at St. Jim's—it was a strange history.

"Where have you seen him?" he asked. "Lately?"

"Here," answered Talbot.

The inspector started.

"Here—not at the school?"

"Yes. A guest here—under a false name," said Talbot, between his teeth. "He has been here nearly a week—plying his trade, the villain!"

Mr. Skeat frowned for a moment.

"You told me nothing till Saturday. Did you not warn your House-master—or your Head-master—!"

Talbot's lip curled bitterly.

"I warned Mr. Railton! He believed nothing of it. But how could he—for he was expecting a guest, whom he had never met, and this man came in his name—he is called Captain Vavasour here."

"Captain Vavasour!" repeated the inspector slowly.

"So far from believing me, Mr. Railton forbade me to speak a word on the subject, or I would have come to you," said Talbot, quietly. "I could not disobey my House-master. Then—on Saturday—I thought of the finger-print clue—something put it into my head—I could not speak to you of Captain Vavasour, but I could speak of Light-Fingered Jack! If I had been mistaken, nothing would have come of it. But—I knew that I was not mistaken."

"There have been thefts here?"

"Three—already!" Talbot choked for a moment. "No one dreams of suspecting him—it is supposed that the Toff has broken out again."

"Oh!" muttered the inspector. "You!"

"I am under suspicion! But now—"

"Where is the man?" asked the inspector, abruptly.

"Playing cricket, on Big Side."

"His old game!" said Mr. Skeats, grimly. "Well, it will be Light-Fingered Jack's last game for some time to come. I am here to take him. Come!"

Talbot's eyes were dancing as he followed the police-inspector. Light-Fingered Jack had beaten him to it—almost beaten him to it. But his last card had proved, after all, a trump. The man from the past was in the bag!

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In the Bag !

"I ARREST you—!"

A thunderbolt on the St. Jim's cricket ground could not have caused a greater sensation.

Surprise—astonishment—stupefaction—showed in every startled face. And the most stupefied of all was that of 'Captain Vavasour'.

The innings was about to begin. Kildare and his men were in the field. Round the ground, the swarming crowd looked on, in happy expectation of "fireworks" when Captain Vavasour opened the innings for his side. He was coming out of the pavilion with Lefevre of the Fifth, with his bat: his plump ruddy face cheerful and care-free. Mr. Railton gave him a friendly smile as he went. All eyes were upon him, and for the moment the portly figure of the Wayland inspector was hardly noticed, as Mr. Skeat came up. And fellows who noticed him only wondered what on earth a police-inspector was doing there—never dreaming of guessing. Only Talbot, who had followed the inspector, knew. Talbot's face was bright—a strange contrast to his looks for so many days. Other fellows only stared. And they could hardly believe their eyes when Inspector Skeat stepped up to the man who had come out of the pavilion, dropped a hand on his shoulder, and pronounced the startling words "I arrest you!"

Captain Vavasour, taken utterly by surprise, stood rooted to the ground—dumb! There was, for a moment, a breathless silence. Then a buzz of amazed voices rose.

Mr. Railton ran forward.

"Inspector Skeat! Are you mad? What do you mean?"

This man is Captain Vavasour, my guest here—”

“This man is Light-Fingered Jack, the pickpocket, confidence man, and cheat and thief,” answered Inspector Skeat, stolidly. “I have a warrant for his arrest, and I am taking him into custody.”

“Impossible! I tell you—” Mr. Railton’s glance shot to Talbot, in deep anger. “Talbot! You have disobeyed me—you have told your fantastic tale to Mr. Skeat—”

“I have not disobeyed, you, sir!” answered Talbot, quietly. “You did not forbid me to mention Light-Fingered Jack—and that was all I did. Mr. Skeat knew no more than that I had seen the man called Light-Fingered Jack, until he came here to arrest him.”

“Mr. Skeat! It is a mistake—this man—”

“This man is my prisoner, Mr. Railton. I have his fingerprints and his photograph, and there is no mistake.”

The amazed House-master turned to his guest.

“Captain Vavasour! Speak! You can prove—”

The “captain” pulled himself together. For the moment, he had been almost stunned. But he knew now that the game was up: and with a sudden twist, he broke from the inspector’s grasp, and ran.

“Captain Vavasour!” gasped Mr. Railton. Even he could not doubt, when he saw the man running. “Oh! Good heavens! Then it is true!”

“Stop him!” roared the inspector.

Talbot leaped in the way of the running man. It was what he had been watching for. And in an instant he grasped him and dragged him down.

“Not this time, Light-Fingered Jack!” he said, between his teeth.

The man struggled frantically. But the next moment Inspector Skeat’s grasp was on him again, and there was a clink of metal as the handcuffs closed on his wrists. And amid a wild buzz of voices he was led cringing away.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D’ARCY polished his eyeglass, in Study No. 6 in the School House and glanced round at a circle of cheery faces in that celebrated study. There was a thoughtful expression on the aristocratic visage of the swell of St. Jim’s.

“You fellows see that I was wight all along!” he remarked.

It was several days since the dramatic arrest, on Big Side at

St. Jim's, of the man who called himself "Captain Vavasour": and who was now behind bars to take his trial as "Light-Fingered Jack".

In those days much had come to light. The loot had been discovered hidden in the captain's room: and a handsome wrist-watch once more adorned the most elegant wrist in the School House: Tom Merry had expended Miss Priscilla's "tenner" at the sports shop in Wayland, and the missing notes had been replaced in Mr. Railton's desk. And the strange mystery of the real Captain Vavasour's non-arrival at St. Jim's had been elucidated, and the explanation was very simple. It was Captain Vavasour who had been knocked out in the railway accident, and was lying in hospital suffering from concussion, unable to speak, unable to give his name: and it was Light-Fingered Jack who, in the confusion of the accident, had rifled the pockets of the unconscious man, and stolen his suit-case. With cool, cunning unscrupulousness, he had come on to the school in his name, to reap a harvest there so long as the going was good—keeping in daily touch with the Brighton hospital on the telephone, to be apprised in time when the unknown nameless man there showed signs of recovery. It had been an easy game for a crook like Light-Fingered Jack, and finding the "Toff" at the school had seemed to make it even safer—for a time! But the "Toff at long last, had put paid to it.

Days had passed—but it was still a topic at St. Jim's. If any of the School House fellows had doubted Talbot, they forgot their doubts now. Railton had doubted him—and no one was more glad and relieved than Victor Railton when the truth came to light. But there were some who had never doubted—Tom Merry and Co. had stood by the "Toff" through it all. And the boy whose strange past had seemed to rise up against him, stood high as ever in popularity in his House. No face at St. Jim's was brighter than Talbot's, as he sat at the tea-table in Study No. 6—the past, and its bitter memories, dismissed from mind—once more a happy schoolboy. He smiled as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy announced that he had been "wight" all along.

"How's that, Gussy?" he asked.

"Weally, Talbot, old boy. I think it is vewy cleah," said Arthur Augustus, "Didn't I say that no man at St. Jim's was capable of such a wotten action as pilfahin'? I told you so, Blake."

"You did!" agreed Blake.

"I told you so, Hewwies.

"Did you?" yawned Herries.

"I certainly did! And you too, Dig," said Arthur Augustus.

"I simply wefused to believe any such wotten thing. And—"

"Pass the jam," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Merry, I was goin' to say—"

"Pass the cake," said Monty Lowther.

"Bothah the cake! I was goin' to say—"

"Jolly good cake," said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs, I am goin' to say—"

"That's Gussy!" sighed Blake. "He's always saying something. Give your chin a rest, old chap—"

"Wats! I was goin' to say, that as it has turned out, the wottah was not a St. Jim's chap at all, but a wascally outsidah who had barged in, and so I was wight all along the line. And anothah time," added Arthur Augustus, severely. "Pewwaps you fellows will listen to a fellow of tact and judgment!"

"Hear, hear," said Monty Lowther. "And now—"

"Now what, Lowthah?"

"Now pass the cake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!" said Arthur Augustus. However, he passed the cake.

THE END

REMEMBER TOM MERRY ?

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