



a brand-new adventure of the
Chums of St. Jim's

TOM MERRY'S SECRET



Martin Clifford

1/6

the world's most famous schoolboys
in an exciting NEW SERIES

No. 1

Tom Merry's Secret

Martin Clifford brings to vivid life the laughter and excitement of St. Jim's, in this, the first in his new series of Tom Merry adventures.

It all started when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy decided to punch the nose of Prefect Gerald Knox of the Sixth ! For Knox had assaulted the noble ear of Arthur Augustus, and not even a "pre" can get away with *that*.

And Baggy Trimble played his part, too. What Baggy overhears to-day, the whole school knows to-morrow—and Trimble's acute hearing threatened the "sack" for the Terrible Three if there was a disclosure of *Tom Merry's Secret*.

Our Cover Picture

Arthur Augustus almost tottered from the study. His motions were eel-like as he went down the passage. Baggy Trimble was amused by Arthur Augustus's imitation of an eel.

But the hapless swell of St. Jim's was feeling too far gone even to kick the fat Baggy. He wriggled on his eel-like way, leaving Trimble grinning.

TOM MERRY'S SECRET

Martin Clifford



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(Martin Clifford), also creator of Billy Bunter
and the Chums of Greyfriars.

*All characters in this story are imaginary and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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Wrathy!

TOM MERRY whistled.

Manners and Lowther stared.

They were all surprised.

"What on earth's up in Study No. 6?" asked Tom.

Something, it was clear, was "up" in Study No. 6, in the School House at St. Jim's.

Excited voices could be heard from that study. There were four of them, and they all seemed to be speaking at once. Loudest of all was the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the elegant ornament of the St. Jim's Fourth. Which was not only surprising, but quite astonishing: for Arthur Augustus, as a rule, cultivated the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere, and even perhaps over-did it a little.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, of the Shell, were coming along after tea, to talk to the fellows in No. 6 on the perpetually interesting subject of cricket. But they forgot all about the summer game as they heard the voices raised in hot dispute.

"I wepeat—!" came the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, almost on its top note, "I wepeat—"

"Keep cool, old man," came Jack Blake's voice.

"I wepeat, Blake—"

"Take it easy!" came Herries' voice.

"I wefuse to take it easy, Hewwies, and I wepeat—"

"Forget it!" came Digby's voice.

"Wats!"

"Now, look here, Gussy—"

"I wefuse to look there, Blake! I uttably wefuse to allow you fellows to butt in. I am goin' to punch Knox of the Sixth, wight in the eye, and you fellows are certainly not goin' to pwevent me."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

The three Shell fellows in the passage jumped. Arthur Augustus's wrathful declaration was enough to make any junior at St. Jim's jump. For Knox, of the Sixth Form, was a prefect: and a Sixth-Form prefect could no more be punched in the eye by a junior, than a form-master could, or indeed a head-master! Punching a prefect, especially a heavy-handed fellow like Knox, was the sort of thing a junior might dream about, in a happy dream. But certainly he could not translate it into reality—not unless he wanted to say a long farewell to St. Jim's, and catch the next train home.

"Will you listen to a chap?" shrieked Jack Blake, in the study. "You can't punch a prefect—"

"I certainly can, Blake! I shall walk up to Knox and punch him wight in the eye."

"And go up to the Head to be bunked?" yelled Herries.

"You know what he did, Hewwies—"

"We know what the Head would do, if you punched a pre," hooted Digby. "Have a little sense, Gussy."

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, Dig. You know what that wuffian did—he pulled my yah!" said Arthur Augustus, in tones of thrilling indignation and wrath. "Are we at this school to have our yahs pulled by wuffians like Knox?"

"We'll make him sorry for it somehow" said Blake, "There are lots of ways—but you can't punch him—"

"I am goin' to punch him wight in the eye. I should have punched him on the spot, but I was so taken by surpris by such an outwage, that he was gone before I weally wealised what had happened. I am goin' aftah him now to punch him in the eye—"

"You're not!" roared Blake.

"It is quite useless to wear at me, Blake. I am goin' aftah Knox—"

"You howling ass—!"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a howlin' ass, Blake. I am goin' aftah that cheeky wuffian Knox—"

"You're going to stop in this study till you cool down, old man. You're not going to get yourself sacked from the school."

"I wefuse to stop in this study! Wats!"

Apparently, at that point, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy took the bit between his teeth, as it were: for the Shell fellows in the passage heard a rush of feet doorward in the study, and Blake's voice shouting:

"Stop him!"

But it seemed that Arthur Augustus's chums were too late to stop him. He came out of the study with a rush, his face pink with excitement and indignation, his eyeglass flying at the end of its cord.

"Hold him!" breathed Tom Merry.

Perhaps it was fortunate for Arthur Augustus that the Shell fellows were in the way: and that they were just as anxious as Blake and Herries and Dig to save Arthur Augustus from himself, as it were! For, really and truly, a Fourth-Form junior could not punch a prefect of the Sixth—not at all events without the most awful consequences.

Three sturdy youths lined up in D'Arcy's path. Instead of rushing after the obnoxious Knox, wherever he was, he rushed into the arms of Tom Merry and Co. And they all held on to him together.

"Gussy, old man—I!" said Tom.

"Welease me, Tom Mewwy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, struggling in the grasp of his well-wishers, "Welease me at once."

"Take it easy," said Monty Lowther, soothingly.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Come back into your study," urged Manners

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, Mannahs! Welease me at once!" roared Arthur Augustus.

But if Tom Merry and Co. had released him, it would not have availed: for Blake and Herries and Digby emerged in haste from the study, and seized him. Friendly hands on all sides escorted Arthur Augustus, struggling and gasping, back into Study No. 6. Tom Merry kicked the door shut behind them.

"Thank goodness you fellows were there!" gasped Blake, "That howling ass was going to beg to be bunked from St. Jim's—"

"Oooooogh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, breathlessly. Released at last—with a wary half-dozen juniors taking care now that he did not bolt out of the study again—the swell of St. Jim's spluttered for breath, at the same time eyeing his well-meaning friends with deep wrath, "Ooogh! You cheekay asses—if you think you are goin' to stop me—"

"Sort of!" said Blake, "You try to get out of this study again, and we'll bang your silly head on the table."

"I wepeat!"

"But what's the row?" asked Tom Merry, "We heard Gussy say that Knox had pulled his ear—"

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Knox is a bit of a bully" said Tom, "But he doesn't pull fellows' ears just for fun! What did you do to Knox?"

"Nothin' whatevah!"

"Gussy chucked a cricket ball at him," explained Blake.

"I did nothing of the kind," hooted Arthur Augustus, "It was a sheeah accident, as you are well awah, Blake. You see, Tom Mewwy, I was handlin' the cwicket ball, showin' these fellows a twick in bowlin', and it slipped fwom my hand—"

"It would!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"But where does Knox come in?" asked Manners.

"He did not come in, Mannahs. He happened to be passin' the study and the door was open. Of course I did not intend the cwicket ball to leave my hand, indoors, you know, but it slipped somehow—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' to cackle at that I can see. It was a sheeah accident that the ball shot out of the doorway just as Knox was passin', and caught him in the wibs—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the three Shell fellows.

"Gussy all over, wasn't it?" sighed Blake. "Gussy is the man to do these things."

"Accidents will happen, Blake! I could not help the ball slip-pin' vewy unexpectedly fwom my hand. I was sowwy when it caught Knox in the wibs, and he tottached—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I stepped to the door to make a gwaceful apology for the accident," went on Arthur Augustus, in deep and intense indignation, "To my surpwise, Knox gwabbed me by the yah, and pulled it—indeed, he twisted it in the most wuffianly mannah. Then he walked on: just as if it was quite an ordinary thing to pull a fellow's yah! Bai Jove! I am goin' to show him that it is not an ordinawy thing at all! I am goin' to punch him wight in the eye!"

"Call it quits, old chap!" suggested Tom Merry, "Knox got the cricket ball, you know, if you got the ear-pull."

"I uttably wefuse to call it quits, Tom Mewwy. A cwicket-ball in the wibs is merely an accident: but pullin' a fellow's yah is dewogatow to a fellow's personal dignity. I am goin' to punch Knox—"

"Stop him! yelled Blake, as the swell of St. Jim's made a sudden movement towards the door.

This time Arthur Augustus was stopped. No fewer than six pairs of hands grabbed him on all sides.

He was whirled back from the door, and sat down on the floor of the study with a bump.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus, breathlessly, "Oh, cwumbs!"

"Now will you chuck it?" roared Blake.

"Nevah!"

"Bump him!" said Herries.

"Bai Jove! I wefuse to be bumped—I—I—yaroooooh!" roared Arthur Augustus, as his faithful chums swept him up from the floor, and bumped him down again thereon, with quite a terrific concussion, "Oh! wow!"

"Now will you stick in the study?" demanded Blake.

"Nothin' of the sort—"

"Give him another."

Bump!

"Wow! Oh, cwickey! Ow!"

"Now will you stick in the study?"

"Ow! No! I—I—I mean, I—I will wemain in the study," gasped Arthur Augustus, "You are wuinin' my twousahs, on this dusty old carpet. I am goin' to punch Knox, but I—I will wemain in the study for the pwesent."

Arthur Augustus was a fellow of his word. His wrath was unabated, his purpose as fixed and immutable as the law of the Medes and Persians. But he remained in the study. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, Blake and Herries and Digby, talked cricket, discussing the coming House match with Figgins and Co. of the New House. But, Gussy, keen cricketer as he was, did not join in the discussion. Cricket seemed to him, at the moment, a trifle light as air. His frowning brow did not relax. Cricket "jaw" passed him by like the idle wind which he regarded not; he seemed, indeed, wholly concentrated on reproducing the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner.

2

Kildare Takes a Hand!

KILDARE of the Sixth, captain of St. Jim's, raised his eyebrows. And he stared at an elegant figure under one of the old elms, with a surprised stare.

The sun was setting over the Sussex downs. It was getting near lock-ups. But it was not yet quite lock-ups: and there was no reason why D'Arcy of the Fourth Form should not be out in the quadrangle. There was no reason why he should not stand under one of the ancient elm trees if the spirit moved him so to do. Neither was there any reason why he should not have selected an ancient elm that grew near Masters' gate—the wicket gate to which only masters and prefects had keys—if that particular leafy elm took his fancy. Nevertheless, there was something about the aspect of D'Arcy of the Fourth that caused the captain of the school to raise his eyebrows, and stare.

Kildare was strolling past the end of the little shady path that led to Masters' gate when he sighted the elegant junior. He paused to look at him. He wondered what was the matter with that usually good-tempered and placid youth, to cause him to frown darkly: and he wondered, too, what he was up to in that quiet and secluded spot. For Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, at the moment, was pushing back his spotless cuffs, as if preparing for war—which was very singular, as there was no one else on the spot.

Kildare of the Sixth had no idea of what had recently happened in the Fourth-Form passage in the School House. He was not in the least aware that, only a couple of hours ago, an aristocratic ear had been pulled by Gerald Knox of the Sixth Form.

Certainly, had he known, he would have disapproved very strongly. Ears were not pulled at St. Jim's. It was not the sort of thing that was "done." But Kildare would not have regarded it, as Gussy apparently did, as an earth-shaking occurrence.

Arthur Augustus, generally quite placable, could not be placated on that subject. For quite a long time he had not been able to escape the watchful eyes of his anxious and alarmed friends. But he had escaped them at last, and looked for Knox of the Sixth: only to learn that Knox had gone out. As the school gates were now closed it seemed probable, if not certain, that Knox, when he came in, would come in, by Masters' gate, as prefects were permitted to do. That was why Arthur Augustus was there—that was why he was pushing back his cuffs as he heard the sound of a Yale key outside in a lock.

He did not see Kildare. His eyes were fixed upon the wicket-gate about to open, gleaming. His noble mind was made up. Knox had pulled his ear. He was going to punch Knox—with an utterly reckless disregard of the consequences. It did not occur to him to look round. He remained in blissful ignorance of the fact that a big Sixth-Form man was staring at him from a little distance.

"What the dickens—!" murmured Kildare.

He realised that Gussy was watching the gate for someone to come in. It looked as if he meant war, as soon as that someone did come in. But only beaks and pre's used that gate, and it was unimaginable that a junior in the Fourth Form planned war on master or prefect. So Kildare was quite puzzled. However, he moved a little nearer to the spot.

The gate opened.

Knox of the Sixth, a big, rather ungainly fellow, whose best friend would not have called him handsome, appeared in the gateway. He stopped to snap the gate shut, and came on along the path, not for the moment noticing D'Arcy of the Fourth under the elm. Probably he had forgotten the existence of D'Arcy of the Fourth. The ear-pulling was not likely to linger in his memory as it did in the indignant Gussy's.

"Oh!" ejaculated Kildare, with quite a jump.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave his cuffs a final push, and clenched both fists. Unimaginable as it was to a Sixth-Form man, it was clear, only too clear, to Kildare's astonished eyes, that that junior was going to rush out at Knox as he came by, and punch. For one second more, Kildare stared—but only for a brief second. Then he strode with rapid strides to the spot: and, even as Arthur Augustus was emerging from his cover, grasped him by the back of the collar.

"Oh! ejaculated Arthur Augustus, in surprise, as his collar was grasped. It was his first intimation that anyone else was on the spot.

He spun round, staring at Kildare.

"You young sweep! exclaimed the St. Jim's captain, angrily, "What do you think you are doing?"

"Ow! Pway welease my collah, Kildare. I—I—"

Kildare did not release his collar. He tightened his grip on it. Had Arthur Augustus carried out his fell intention, it would have been Kildare's duty to march him off to his head-master, in all probability to be "sacked," at the very least for a flogging. The captain of St. Jim's was far too good-natured to want to do that if he could help it. But he was angry, all the same. Good-natured as he was, he was keen on discipline: and little as he liked Knox personally, he had a Sixth-Form man's keen sense of the lofty dignity of the prefect's rank. However, his grip on Gussy's collar had been in time: Arthur Augustus had no more chance of gettingt out of it than getting out of a steel vice. Knox's eye was safe, for the present at least.

Knox, coming along the shady path, stopped to stare.

"Anything up, Kildare?" he asked. He gave Arthur Augustus an unpleasant look. If the ear-pulling had slipped his memory, no doubt he remembered the impact of a cricket-ball on his ribs.

"Only this kid playing the fool, Knox," answered Kildare, "You can leave him to me."

Knox nodded and walked on, happily unaware that he had narrowly escaped a punch in the eye. When he had gone into the quad, Kildare released the junior's collar.

"Now tell me what this means, D'Arcy," he said, sternly, "I saw what you were up to. What were you going to do?"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

"I pwefer not to weply to that question, Kildare," he answered, "You would only be watty if I told you I was goin' to punch Knox."

"Oh!" gasped Kildare, "So you were going to punch Knox?"

"I do not think you have a wight to expect me to weply, Kildare. A fellow is not bound to give himself away to a prefect."

"Oh, my hat!" said Kildare. A smile flickered over his face. But the next moment it was stern again. "You young rascal."

"Weally, Kidare—"

"I suppose you know that a junior would be sacked for striking a prefect!" rapped Kildare.

"I was not going to stwike him exactly," said Arthur Augustus, cautiously, "I was only goin' to punch him in the eye for pullin' my yah!"

"He pulled your ear?"

"Yaas, wathtah."

"I shall speak to Knox about it," said Kildare, "In the meantime, you will follow me to my study."

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus, resignedly.

Kildare strode away towards the House. After him trailed Arthur Augustus, not in the best of spirits. In the quad they came on a party of juniors—Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell, Blake and Herries and Dig of the Fourth. The six were looking for Arthur Augustus—wondering uneasily what he might be up to. Blank dismay settled on six faces as they saw him trailing behind the captain of the school.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Jack Blake, "Has he done it?"

"Looks like it!" muttered Dig, dismally.

"Oh, the ass!" breathed Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus glanced at them as he passed. Blake caught him by the arm, and stopped him for a moment.

"Have you—" he breathed.

"Not yet, deah boy," answered Arthur Augustus, calmly, "I was goin' to when Kildare collahed me—"

"Thank goodness!" breathed Blake.

"The wottah has got it comin', all the same—!"

Kildare looked round.

"I told you to follow me, D'Arcy," he rapped.

"Comin', Kildare."

Arthur Augustus followed the St. Jim's captain to the House. Tom Merry and Co. were left a little relieved. Arthur Augustus apparently, was still going to do it. But he hadn't done it yet! It was possible that, after an interview with Kildare in his study he might give up the idea!

In that study, Kildare selected a cane: a proceeding which Arthur Augustus watched without pleasure.

"Now you young ass," said Kildare, "You'd be sacked if you did what you had in mind. I'm glad it isn't coming to that. I'm going to give you a warning not to get such ideas into your silly head. Bend over that chair."

In silence, the swell of St. Jim's bent over the chair. Up came the cane, and down it came.

Swipe!

Had there been any dust on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's well-fitting trousers, it would have risen in a cloud. No dust arose:

but from Arthur Augustus himself arose an anguished howl.

"Wow!"

Swipe!

"Oh, cwikey!"

Swipe!

"Yawoooooooooh!"

Kildare layed down the cane. Arthur Augustus, with an eel-like wriggle, resumed the perpendicular. Kildare gave him a stern look.

"You're getting off cheaply," he said, "Any more of your nonsense and you go to your house-master. Cut!"

"Wow! ow! wow!"

Arthur Augustus almost tottered from the study. His motions were eel-like as he went down the passage. At the corner of the passage, Baggy Trimble of the Fourth grinned at him: apparently amused by Arthur Augustus's imitations of an eel. But the hapless swell of St. Jim's was feeling too far gone even to kick the fat Baggy. He wriggled on his eel-like way, leaving Trimble grinning.

3

Three to the Rescue!

"COVER," whispered Monty Lowther.

"What—?" began Tom Merry and Manners together.

"Ware pre's!"

"Oh! Quick!"

Three Shell fellows backed into the trees that lined the foot-path in Wayland Wood, with great rapidity.

It was the sight of Eric Kildare, captain of St. Jim's, in the distance up the leafy path, that caused that sudden retreat.

Not that there was anything alarming, as a rule, in the sight of the tall handsome captain of St. Jim's. There were few fellows who were not glad to see him, at any time: and a word or a glance from him was an honour to any fellow in the lower School. A fellow like Baggy Trimble, who "nosed" in other fellow's studies for tuck, or shady fellows like Racke and Crooke of the Shell, might regard him with uneasiness but certainly not Tom Merry and Co.

But circumstances alter cases.

It was lock-ups at St. Jim's. Every fellow in the school—with the exception of prefects of the Sixth Form, who were trusted to come and go as they pleased—had to be within the gates after lock-ups. And the "Terrible Three" of the Shell were out of the gates. The sight of a prefect was, therefore, alarming, even a prefect like the good-natured and popular Kildare. For good-natured as he was, Kildare was a whale on duty and discipline: and there was not the slightest doubt that if he spotted juniors out of gates in lock-ups, he would call them to a just account. And Tom Merry and Co. naturally did not want to be reported to their house-master, which would have meant "lines" and perhaps Extra School.

Not that they were up to any harm. They had not, as Cardew of the Fourth or Racke of the Shell might have done, slipped

out to look in at the back door of the Green Man for surreptitious cigarettes. Nothing of that kind was in their line. It was simply that the lovely summer weather had tempted them out for a stroll in the scented woods: and they were going to clamber in at a certain well-known corner of the school wall in time for calling-over in their House—and no harm done! But harm or no harm rules were rules, and it was a prefect's duty to enforce them. And so, at the sight of Kildare of the Sixth on the leafy footpath, they faded out of the picture with promptness and despatch, and crammed themselves behind trees to keep out of sight, until he had passed. Which, as he had evidently not seen them so far, was a perfectly easy thing to do.

Lowther peered from behind his tree. Kildare, still at a little distance, was coming on at a leisurely saunter.

"O.K.," whispered Monty Lowther, "He never saw us! Keep doggo, and we're all right!"

And the three Shell fellows kept "doggo." Kildare came on slowly. Tom Merry and Co. could have wished that he would put on a little speed, pass them, and leave them free to proceed. It was time for them to be getting in if they were not to be late for roll. It was not of much use to escape Kildare's keen eye, if only to be called over the coals later for failing to answer to their names when they were called in hall.

But Kildare was also, it seemed, out for a stroll in the pleasant summer evening, and was in no hurry. "Roll" did not trouble him—Six-Form prefects, among their other privileges, had that of cutting roll.

The rather anxious trio peered out from their cover—taking care not to put their heads into view, however. It seemed to them that Kildare was moving almost as slowly as the fat Baggy of the Fourth might have done.

"Blow me!"

That sudden low ejaculation, quite close at hand, made the juniors almost jump. They had been so interested in Kildare that they had not thought of anyone else being on the shady leafy footpath. Glancing round hastily, but still keeping carefully in cover behind gnarled trunks, they beheld a figure that had come to a sudden halt on the path—not a pleasant or prepossessing figure. It was that of a somewhat tattered man with a battered bowler hat jammed down on a bullet head, a half-smoked cigarette hanging to a loose lip, and little piggy eyes glinting from a hard face much in need of soap and water. It was easy for the juniors to guess that he was one of the rough characters attracted to the district by Abbotsford Races:

and he certainly looked as if he had not profited by the "sport of kings".

He did not glance across the path towards the schoolboys' cover. Plainly he had no idea that they were there. His eyes were fixed on the Sixth-Former of St. Jim's, coming slowly towards him. Only for a moment—a long moment—he stared towards Kildare and then, as suddenly and swiftly as the juniors had done five minutes earlier, he backed behind the trees by the path, on the opposite side. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stared, as he vanished suddenly from sight.

"What the dickens—!" muttered Manners.

"What on earth's that johnny's game?" asked Lowther.

Tom Merry caught his breath. He had no doubt that he could guess what the racing man's game was.

"He's seen Kildare, and he's waiting for him to come up!" he whispered, "He looks none too good to be a footpad."

Lowther suppressed a whistle.

"By gum!" he breathed, "If that's it—!"

"That's it," said Tom, with conviction.

"Hard luck on the races—and somebody has got to make it good, what?" grinned Lowther, "If that's it, Kildare will handle him all right. He could knock him out."

"Not if he's taken by surprise," muttered Tom, "What's that brute taken cover for, unless—"

"Quiet! Here comes Kildare!"

The St. Jim's captain was close at hand now. Keeping carefully in cover, the juniors watched him rather anxiously. There was no sign to be seen of the man in the battered bowler. It was possible that he had gone on his way, through the wood. But they did not think so: they could not help fearing that he was lying in wait, ready to spring out at the St. Jim's senior as he passed. They waited breathlessly, watching. If that was what was scheduled to happen, there was help at hand for Kildare if he needed it—the juniors would not have hesitated a moment in going to his aid—regardless of lines or Extra School for being out of gates in lock-ups.

Kildare passed them, without a suspicion that they were there. There was still no sign of the racing rough. Then suddenly, it happened. From the leafy brambles, a figure came with a sudden spring and before Kildare even saw it coming, he was grasped, tripped, and went down in the footpath with a crash on the grass.

"Oh!" he gasped, as he crashed. "What-oh-who-why, you rascal—"

"Stow it!" The man in the battered bowler had him down,

and kept him down, with a bony knee planted on his chest, pinning him to the earth, "'And it over, and you won't get 'urt—all you got in your pockets, and sharp!"

Kildare struggled under the pinning knee.

"You rascal! I'll—!" he panted.

"I said stow it!" growled the ruffian. "You give a bloke trouble, and you get it good and 'ard, sure as my name's Bill Guffin! Now, 'anding it over?"

Kildare did not reply. He exerted all his strength to throw the ruffian off. With a savage scowl, Bill Guffin drew back his arm, clenched a fist that was like a leg of mutton.

In another moment, a blow would have been struck. But at that moment, Mr. Guffin, in his turn, was taken by surprise. Three figures leaped from behind the trees, and before the ruffian could deliver the punch, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther grabbed him right and left, dragged him off Kildare, and pitched him sprawling in the grass.

"Blow me!" gasped Mr. Guffin, as he sprawled.

Kildare was on his feet in a moment. He stared at the juniors.

"Where on earth did you spring from?" he exclaimed, blankly.

"Look out, Kildare!" panted Tom.

Bill Guffin scrambled up, his face red with fury. He came at Kildare, unheeding the juniors, with clenched fists and smouldering eyes.

But the St. Jim's captain, on his feet and on his guard, was quite capable of dealing with the racing rough. His hands went up like lightening, and he faced the ruffian's rush coolly and quietly. Bill Guffin, evidently very much to his surprise, did not sweep him over with his rush. He found his fierce punches knocked aside: and then a fist that seemed like a lump of iron landed in his eye, and he went spinning backwards, and crashed.

"Ooooooh!" spluttered the ruffian, as he crumpled under that punch. He sat dizzily in the grass, a hand to his eye. That eye was already darkening—and it looked as if it was going to be the blackest eye ever!

Kildare rubbed his knuckles, and looked down at him.

"Have any more?" he asked.

"Blow me! Blow you! Oh, my eye!" moaned Mr. Guffin, "Oh, strike me pink! Oh, wouldn't I like to meet you one dark night, with a stick in me 'and! Oooooh!"

Kildare laughed.

"You'd better take yourself off," he said, "Sharp's the word—if you're not gone in two ticks, I'll help you with my boot."

Bill Guffin crawled to his feet. He caressed his damaged eye

then jammed his battered bowler down on his bullet head, and caressed the blackening eye again. His other eye glinted and gleamed at the captain of St. Jim's: plainly revealing what he would have liked to do, had he have dared.

"If a bloke gets a chance—!" he breathed.

"Get out!"

Kildare made a step towards him: and Mr. Guffin got out promptly. Evidently he did not want a second edition of that punch. He backed through the trees, and disappeared, at a run, into the wood.

Kildare gave him no further heed. There was little doubt of what Mr. Guffin was likely to do, if, as he said, he met the St. Jim's captain on a dark night with a stick in his hand. But that was a very improbable contingency: and his threats left Kildare quite unmoved. The ruffian disappeared: taking with him the blackest eye in the county of Sussex: and Kildare, dismissing him from mind, turned to the juniors again.

"Thanks," he said.

"We—we couldn't let him get on with it, Kildare," stammered Tom, "We—we didn't mean to show up, but—"

"Quite!" said Kildare, "and now tell me what you are doing out here in the wood after lock-ups."

The juniors looked at him, and looked at one another. They were caught—or rather, they had caught themselves. They had helped Kildare out of a bad spot, it was true—but that did not alter the fact that they were out of gates in lock-ups: and that Kildare was head-prefect of their House.

"Well?" rapped Kildare.

"Just taking a trot, Kildare," said Tom, "We—we were just going back, when we saw you, and—and—"

"I understand! But you're out in lock-ups, and that means Extra School to-morrow."

Tom Merry's face registered blank dismay.

"It's the House match to-morrow, Kildare!"

"I know!"

"I—I—I say—!" stammered Lowther.

That will do! I'd better walk back to the school with you, in case that rough is still hanging about. Get a move on."

It was not a happy walk back to St. Jim's. Kildare's face was thoughtful and frowning: and Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther walked in dismayed silence. On the morrow there was the House match, with Figgins and Co. and all three were down to play for their House. A junior game was not, perhaps, in a Sixth-former's eyes, a matter of such tremendous importance as

it was to the juniors themselves: but to Tom Merry and Co. it rather transcended in importance even the exploits of the First Eleven. The bare thought of Extra School on the morrow when the House match was played, was unnerving. A quite dispirited trio arrived at Masters' gate with Kildare, and he unlocked the gate with his key.

"Come in!" he said, gruffly.

They followed him in. At the end of the little shady path, Kildare came to a halt, under the elms.

"You young sweeps!" he said, "I ought to report you to Railton, as you know very well. But—"

Three faces brightened. Apparently there was a "but."

"I should have had a pretty hard knock, if you hadn't been there," said Kildare, "But that's no excuse for breaking rules. But—" he paused, "Oh, cut off! If I catch you out in lock-ups again, I'll give you six all round, and make up for letting you off this time. Cut!"

Three reassured juniors were only too glad to cut. They cut at a rapid run and were just in time to squeeze into hall before the door was closed. Quite cheerfully they answered to their names when Mr. Railton called the roll.

"O.K." said Tom, when they came out of hall, "Kildare's a brick!"

"He is," agreed Monty Lowther.

"All right for to-morrow," said Manners.

"Right as rain!" said Tom, "And we'll jolly well give the New House the licking of their lives."

"Hear, hear!"

And the cheery chums of the Shell dismissed the matter from mind: completely forgetting the unpleasant existence of Mr. Bill Guffin, and never dreaming how, and in what circumstances, they were destined to be reminded of it later.

Gussy All Over!

"TOM MEWWY!"

"Adsum!" said Tom, with a smile.

"Prep!" said Manners, rather pointedly.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"What are you doing out of your study in prep, fathead?" asked Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, was apparently regardless of prep for once.

The Fourth, like the Shell, "prepared" in their studies, thus distinguished from the small fry of the Third Form, who prepared in their form-room under the eye of their form-master. It was a strict rule that juniors did not leave their studies during preparation: any junior "larking" in the passage at that time being liable to be called to account by the prefect on duty.

But Arthur Augustus seemed to have decided to be a law unto himself on this occasion, for here he was, stepping into No. 10 in the Shell, the study tenanted by Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther.

One of Arthur Augustus's noble ears was glowing an unusual red: no doubt the effect of the twist Knox of the Sixth had given it that afternoon. That twist lingered more painfully in Gussy's indignant memory than even in his aristocratic ear!

"What is it, Gussy" asked Tom, "Better cut off to your study old chap. It's Knox on duty to-night, and if he catches you out of your study in prep—"

"Bothah Knox!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Bother him all you like," said Manners, "But prep's prep, D'Arcy." Manners of the Shell was a studious youth. He was always careful with his prep, and the result won him golden opinions from his form-master, Mr. Linton. In which respect he rather differed from his pal Monty Lowther.

"Oh, let Gussy run on," said Lowther, "Any interruption's welcome in prep. If chin-wag interferes with work, give up work! What?"

"Fathead!" said Manners politely.

"Carry on, Gussy," said Lowther, encouragingly, "Punched any prefects in the eye yet? If you have, we'll all come and see you off at the station to-morrow."

"I have decided not to punch Knox in the eye, Lowthab."

"Good man," said Tom Merry, suppressing a grin. Apparently that interview with Kildare in his study had produced the effect that Gussy's friend had hoped it might!

"I have welfected on the mattah," explained Arthur Augustus, "A man might be sacked for punchin' a pwe. As a mattah of fect, I do not want to wisk bein' sacked! I am goin' to wag him."

"Wag him?" repeated Tom, puzzled for the moment. "Oh! Rag him? I see."

"Yaas, wathah! I am thinkin' of shippin' his study," said Arthur Augustus, "That would serve him wight, wouldn't it?"

"Oh! Yes!" agreed Tom, "But—"

"Blake and Hewwies and Dig do not seem keen on it," went on Arthur Augustus, "They think it too wisky to ship a Sixth-Form man's study."

"Right on the wicket," said Tom, "It is!"

"Just a few!" grinned Lowther.

"Forget it!" suggested Manners.

Arthur Augustus screwed his celebrated monocle into his eye, and surveyed the three Shell fellows at the table. It was good advice that they gave him. "Shipping" a prefect's study was undoubtedly a very risky business: though not quite so awfully serious a matter as punching him in the eye! But Arthur Augustus seemed to have no use for good advice.

"I came heah to ask you fellows if you would like to join up!" he said, stiffly, "I should natuwallly wequiah some assistance."

"Oh!" said Tom. The reason why Arthur Augustus had meandered along to No. 10 in the Shell, in prep, was now revealed.

Three heads were shaken. In study No. 6 in the Fourth, three fellows at least had no desire to hunt for trouble. The same feeling prevailed in No. 10 in the Shell!

"Wash it out, old chap," said Tom, "Knox is rather a brute, but there's a limit. You don't want to be up for a row to-morrow when we're playing cricket with the New House. We're relying on you to knock up the runs against Figgins and Co. you know."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Forget Knox, and think about cricket!" advised Monty Lowther.

"I shall certainly think about the cwicket, Lowthah. But—"

"Not a bad idea to think about prep, too," remarked Manners. "Your beak will scrag you in the form-room to-morrow if you skew in con."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Might get stuck in Extra!" said Tom, "You don't want to have to cut the House match, do you?"

"Bai Jove! No! But—"

"*Tantae molis erat Romanum condere gentem,*" murmured Manners. He was trying to get on with prep.

"Pewwaps you are wight, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, "The cwicket is vewy much more important than Knox. I hardly know what might happen in the match to-mowwow if I were not there to bat for the House. Bai Jove! What are you fellows gwinning at?"

"Oh! Nothing!" grinned Tom, "Of course, it's just barely possible that we might beat the New House, even if you weren't there, Gussy—"

"I wegard that as wathah impwobable, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head, "We shall wequiah our vewy best batsmen, to stand up to Fatty Wynn's bowlin'."

"Oh! Ah! Yes! Well, then, cut back to your study before Knox blows along. If he catches you out—"

"The wottah would if he could!" agreed Arthur Augustus, "I wathah think that Kildare has been jawin' him—he gave me a fwightful scowl when I passed him, comin' up to pwep—"

"You can bet he will have an eye open for you, then," said Tom.

"Yaas, wathah! He is wottah enough for anythin'. Pewwaps I had bettah weturn to my study befoah that wank outsidah blows along. I—Oh, cwumbs!"

Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly, as there was a tread in the passage. It did not sound like the tread of a junior. Moreover, all juniors were—or should have been—in their studies, deep in prep. There was, in fact, no doubt that it was the tread of the prefect on duty, making his round to see that all was in order.

Arthur Augustus was inside No. 10. The prefect in the passage could not have seen him—yet! But the door was wide open. He was in full view when Knox came along.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus, "If that's Knox—"

"Quiet!" whispered Tom, across the table, "Back behind the door!"

There was just time!

Arthur Augustus backed behind the open door, thus concealed from view if Knox looked in. The door completely screened him from view.

The next moment, Knox of the Sixth was looking in.

His face, never pleasant, had now the most unpleasant expression ever. No doubt Kildare had talked to him on the subject of ear-pulling, and Knox had not enjoyed it. His temper, never very good, was now very bad indeed.

He gave a surly, suspicious glance round the study. It dawned on the Shell fellows that he had heard something as he came along—perhaps even recognized the rather distinctive voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Behind the wide-open door, D'Arcy still as a mouse, was crammed against the wall. Luckily it did not occur to Knox to look behind the door. He was suspicious, but he seemed disarmed as he saw only the three Shell fellows round the study table, all three apparently deep in the deathless verse of P. Vergilius Maro.

"I thought I heard D'Arcy here," said Knox.

Tom Merry looked up.

"Did you?" he asked, politely.

Knox grunted, and stepped back into the passage, no doubt concluding that he had been mistaken. But there was no doubt, not a shadow of doubt, that he had a very special eye open for D'Arcy of the Fourth. He had had to listen, with outward respect at least, to what the head-prefect had had to say to him: and undoubtedly he would have been pleased to "take it out" of the junior who had been the cause of it.

However, he went out of the study, and the Shell fellows breathed more freely. Arthur Augustus, hidden by the door, was still and silent. He had only to remain silent so long as Knox lingered in the passage. But a moment or two later, he peered round the edge of the door at the juniors at the table.

"Is that wottah Knox gone?" he whispered.

Tom Merry made him an almost frantic sign to be silent. But it was too late! That whisper had been audible in the passage.

Knox of the Sixth reappeared in the doorway. D'Arcy's head popped back promptly into cover. Knox looked quite astonished, for a moment, as he found only three fellows visible in No. 10 study. But he knew now that there was a fourth. For a moment he was puzzled, then, with a sneering grin, he pulled the door away from the wall. The most elegant figure at St. Jim's was revealed.

"So you're here, D'Arcy," said Knox, grimly. "Out of your study in prep!"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard.

"Yaas," he answered, quietly.

"D'Arcy only came along for a few minutes to speak to me, Knox," ventured Tom Merry.

"You need not speak, Merry!" snapped Knox, "I shall report this to your form-master, D'Arcy. Now go back to your study at once."

Arthur Augustus gave him a look.

For a moment, as Arthur Augustus's speaking countenance revealed, the idea recurred to his mind of punching Knox in the eye! Fortunately, he restrained that natural impulse, and walked out of the study without another word. Knox, still grinning sourly, followed him; leaving the chums of the Shell with rather deep feelings.

"Poor old Gussy!" murmured Manners.

"That rotter was glad of a chance to nail him," growled Monty Lowther, "He's had a jaw from Kildare, and it's just pie to him to take it out of Gussy. But— isn't Gussy the man to ask for it?"

"Isn't he just?" sighed Tom Merry.

"Gussy all over!" said Manners.

And Tom Merry and Co. resumed their interrupted preparation, considerably concerned about Arthur Augustus and what might happen to him.

5

Rough Luck!

TOM MERRY'S good-looking face was bright and cheery when he came out after third school the following morning. It was a sunny day: the afternoon was a half-holiday: and there was going to be cricket. Which was more than enough to make the junior captain of the School House look cheery and bright.

That afternoon—Tom hoped at least—Figgins and Co. were going to be beaten at the summer game, and the fact impressed on their minds that School House was cock-house at St. Jim's, in cricket as in everything else. His selected team were all good men and true: including Talbot of the Shell, Kangaroo the mighty hitter from Australia, Blake and Cardew and Levison, and, certainly not least Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who with all the little manners and customs that often entertained his friends, was a hefty man with the willow, and could always be relied on for runs. And even if Figgins and Co. were not sent home bootless to the New House, even if they pulled off the game, at all events it was going to be a good game, and Tom was going to enjoy every minute of it, win or lose. So his cheery face was as bright as the summer sunshine that streamed down on the old quadrangle of St. Jim's, as he came out with Manners and Lowther.

"He, he, he!"

That unmusical sound of merriment proceeded from Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth, and it caused the Shell fellows to glance at him.

Baggy was watching a group of four fellows by the elms, all of whom looked decidedly glum, if not gloomy. The fact that Blake and Co. seemed down on their luck apparently amused Baggy: hence his musical effects. Tom Merry glanced at him, and then across at the chums of Study No. 6, and then at the fat Baggy again.

"What are you gurgling about, you fat tick?" he asked politely. Baggy chuckled again.

"Poor old Gussy!" he grinned, "Did he look flummoxed when Lathom jumped on him in the form-room this morning? He, he, he."

"Kick him!" said Manners.

"Ow! wow! roared Baggy, his merriment suddenly departing as a foot impacted on his plump trousers, "Look here—wow!"

Baggy ceased to be amused, on the spot. Leaving him wriggling, entirely unamused, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther crossed over to the gloomy group by the elms.

"What's up?" asked Tom.

"Gussy's number," grunted Blake. "No cricket for Gussy this afternoon."

"Oh!" said Tom. "Did Knox report him—?"

"Think he'd lose a chance like that?" growled Blake, "Of course he did, and Lathom ragged Gussy in the form-room, and gave him detention for the afternoon."

"Rough luck," said Tom, sympathetically.

"Rotten!" said Digby, dismally.

"Putrid!" concurred Herries.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not speak. Perhaps his feelings were too deep for words. His noble visage was deeply clouded.

All the runs he had been going to make in the House match that afternoon, were not going to be made now. Another man had to play in his place, while Arthur Augustus sat dismally in Extra School.

Extra School was not the sort of thing that any fellow enjoyed at any time. Least of all was it enjoyable when a fellow was scheduled to play cricket for his House.

And it was not merely cutting cricket that troubled Gussy. He had grave doubts as to whether the House would be able to stand up against the rival House without his aid. As he had remarked the evening before in Tom Merry's study, they required their best batsmen to stand up to Fatty Wynn's bowling!

"Sorry, old man," said Tom, "I shall have to find another man! It's rough luck!"

"Well, a fellow who wanders round the passages in prep knows what to expect," remarked Manners.

"True, O King!" said Monty Lowther, "But no present help in time of need! Pack it up old bean."

"Prep's prep!" said Manners.

"Fat lot Knox cares about that!" growled Blake, "He was keeping a special eye open for Gussy. Anyhow, he's reported him to Lathom, and its Extra for Gussy this afternoon. Stick-

ing in Extra while we're playing cricket! And he's wanted, to bat against the New House, too"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, coming out of his dismal silence, "That is weally what wowwies me."

"Oh, we'll beat the New House all right, Gussy," said Tom Merry, cheerily, "You needn't worry about that."

Arthur Augustus gave him a look.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy," he said, stiffly, "you are vewy well awah that that fat chap Wynn of the New House is wathah a demon at bowlin'. The House wequiahhs its best men this aftahnoon."

Tom Merry smiled.

"Quite!" he agreed "And you're one of the best, old chap and we'll be sorry to lose you. But we'll try to keep our end up all the same."

"I have no doubt that you will twy, deah boy, but I have vewy gwave doubts about the wesult," said Arthur Augustus, with a shake of his noble head, "I twust I am not a conceited chap—"

"What a trustful nature!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"One or two of us may score a few runs, you know," said Tom, laughing.

"Pwobably," assented Arthur Augustus, "I twust you will be able to knock out the New House boundahs. But—he shook his head again, "I shall be vewy anxious about the wesult. If that wottah Knox is the cause of the House losin' the match, I shall certainly make him sowwy for himself somehow. And while I wepeat that I am not a conceited chap about my cwicket I cannot fail to be awah that I am wequiahed to play vewy badly."

"Not much good playing badly against men like the New House," remarked Monty Lowther, very gravely.

"You uttah ass!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, "I do not mean that I am wequiahed to play badly, I mean I am wequiahed to play badly—"

"Lucid, at any rate," said Lowther.

"Weally, you ass—"

Tom Merry and Manners smiled. Monty Lowther never could resist a little joke, in season or out of season: and Tom and Manners, like good chums, were accustomed to smile at Monty's little jokes. Blake and Herries and Digby, on the other hand, glared at the funny man of the Shell. To Study No. 6, a member of that celebrated study stuck in Extra while a House match was

being played, was too serious a matter for joking.

"I'll put in Clive," said Tom Merry, "We'll pull it off, Gussy. While you're sitting in Extra you can think of us piling up the runs."

And the "Terrible Three" of the Shell walked on, Tom Merry looking for Sidney Clive, the South African junior, to tell him that he would be wanted that afternoon.

They left Study No. 6 looking very glum. The feelings of Blake and Co. towards Knox of the Sixth, were very deep. In fact, Blake and Herries and Dig were rather coming round to Gussy's idea of "shipping" Knox's study—if a favourable opportunity offered.

In the meantime, there was nothing to be done, except grin and bear it—at all events to bear it, even if it was difficult to grin.

They were still looking glum, when the dinner bell rang, and they went into the House. They passed Gerald Knox of the Sixth, going in, and gave him inimical glances as they passed—Arthur Augustus, indeed, expressing in his aristocratic countenance all the scorn of which it was capable. Knox did not even notice them! He was chatting with Cutts of the Fifth, and the juniors passed him unregarded. What was a disaster to Study No. 6 was apparently, to Knox, a trifle that he had forgotten! Which added considerably to the wrath of Blake and Co.

Later, when stumps were pitched for the House match, Arthur Augustus, instead of donning his elegant and spotless flannels, and taking out his gleaming bat, was sitting in Extra School, with other hapless delinquents: imbibing more or less knowledge of French irregular verbs from Monsieur Morny, the detention master. Never had the swell of St. Jim's been less interested in French irregular verbs! Undoubtedly, it was very rough luck. It was not a century, but it seemed like one, before Gussy was free at last to amble down to Little Side and see how Tom Merry and Co. were getting on in the House match.

6

The House Match

GEORGE FIGGINS of the New House, grinned.

"Feel like another over, Fatty?" he asked.

"Dozens, if you like," answered Fatty Wynn.

And Kerr chuckled.

Figgins and Co. of the New House, were feeling bucked. In fact they were feeling on top of the world. So were the other New House men on Little Side. School House men were looking rather more serious.

House matches, whether senior or junior, were very keenly contested at St. Jim's. In the Lower School, junior matches outweighed in importance the contests that seemed far more important to the great men of the Sixth and Fifth. A senior match was going on, on Big Side: but few juniors wandered across, even to watch mighty men like Kildare at the wicket. They gathered round Little Side in great numbers, to watch the junior game.

In the House matches, New House did not always have the good fortune they felt they deserved. School House was a much more numerous House—stronger in quantity if not in quality. The School House skipper had more men at his disposal for selection. If a man failed him, or was off colour, or happened like D'Arcy to be in Extra, there were plenty to fill the vacant place. No doubt that accounted for the fact that, on the record, School House were ahead of their rivals. But on this occasion, at least the smaller House had produced what looked like a winning team.

The junior match was single innings. George Figgins having performed that first duty of a cricket captain, winning the toss, had elected to bat, on an excellent wicket. And the New House men had knocked up eighty-five: a total which the School House had little doubt of beating when they came to take their knock. But it did not work out like that. Figgins had a rod in

pickle for them, in the shape of his plump chum, David Llewellyn Wynn.

Fatty Wynn, of the New House, was at the top of his form. He was always a first-class bowler: but now he seemed to excel himself. Figgins, indeed, would have been glad had the rules permitted his plump chum to bowl every over! For when the School House came in, Fatty proceeded to make hay of their wickets, with ease and grace.

Tom Merry opened the innings for School House, with Talbot of the Shell at the other end. Tom was the best junior bat in his House, not even excepting Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. But he had cruel luck. He had made four in the first over when Fatty Wynn put paid to him. Tom was very unaccustomed to going out for four: but he kept a cheerful face as he went back to the pavilion with an almost unused bat. Cardew of the Fourth took his place: giving his skipper a slightly ironical grin as he passed him. But if Cardew fancied that he was going to put up a striking contrast to Tom's hapless innings, he was soon undeceived: for the next ball from Fatty Wynn deprived him of his middle stump: and as he saw himself dismissed for a duck, Cardew's expression became very unpleasant indeed: he was not so good a loser as his skipper. He went back to the pavilion with glinting eyes: and Kangaroo of the Shell came out. For the first time on record, the Australian junior was dismissed, like Cardew, for a duck. And a crowd of New House men round the field roared their appreciation of the hat trick.

It was not a bright beginning: but, cricket is an uncertain game, and School House still hoped for the best. Kerr of the New House bowled the second over, and things looked up a little. Kerr was a good bowler, but nowhere near Fatty Wynn's form: and Talbot of the Shell handled the bowling very efficiently. Sidney Clive was at the other end, and he backed up well. That over gave the School House twelve. But in the next Fatty Wynn had the ball again, and Clive had to go home, and his chum Levison, who followed him in, was sent home for two.

Eighteen for five was not exactly what the School House had been looking for, and assuredly did not look like topping the New House score.

But even Fatty Wynn was not sudden death all the time: and the score slowly moved up, as batsman after batsman came and went. Tom was glad to see Monty Lowther put on eight, and Manners four. Jack Blake added ten, and Digby four.

Talbot, the only man who seemed impervious to Fatty Wynn's deadly bowling, was adding runs all the time, and when last man was called the score was at sixty. Last man was George Herries,

and he went out to face Fatty Wynn's bowling in a new over.

It was then that George Figgins, grinning, asked Fatty whether he felt like another over, receiving the reassuring reply that Fatty felt like dozens if required.

Dozens, it seemed clear, would not be needed. With sixty against eighty-five, and only one wicket to fall, the School House men could hardly doubt that their number was up. Talbot had lived through the whole innings, and was still going strong, and had he been facing the bowling, there was still a chance. But Herries had the bowling: and George Herries, though a good and reliable bat, was hardly expected to live long under Fatty Wynn's attack. Tom Merry gave him a word as he left the pavilion.

"Keep 'em up somehow, old man, and give Talbot a chance."

And Herries nodded, and loyally resolved that he would. And his first proceeding was to capture a single, which brought Talbot of the Shell to the batting end: to the delight and relief of the School House men at the pavilion.

"How's it goin', deah boys?"

Tom looked round. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, released from Extra at last, had arrived.

"Not too bad," answered Tom, cheerfully, "We want twenty-five to win."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass on the board. Nine down for sixty-one was, perhaps, not too bad, but for the circumstance that New House had been all down for eighty-five!

"Good old Talbot!" ejaculated Blake. The ball was whizzing hot from Talbot's bat, and the batsmen were running.

"Three!" said Dig: and Dig was right: it was three. But as the three brought Herries to the batting end again, Tom Merry could not help feeling that he would have been better satisfied with two!

Arthur Augustus shook his head sadly.

"That wottah Knox!" he murmured.

"Eh? What?" Tom Merry, with his eyes on the game, spoke over his shoulder, "What about Knox?"

"But for Knox, Tom Mewwy, I should be playin'."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Old Hewwies is a good man, but that fat New House boundah will be wathah too much for him," said Arthur Augustus, sadly.

"Good old Herries!" roared Blake.

Again George Herries stole a single, and Talbot had the batting

once more. Fatty Wynn put all he knew into the next ball, but even Fatty was no miracle-worker: it turned out a boundary.

Tom Merry's face glowed. Was it going to be, after all, a win? His own hapless score of four was forgotten, as he watched Talbot pile up runs. It was sixty-nine, still for nine wickets. Cricket after all, was a gloriously uncertain game: a match was never lost till it was won.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, "If only I were at the othah end, backin' up old Talbot! That wottah Knox—!"

"Two!" said Blake, as the batsmen crossed and re-crossed the pitch, "No, three! Seventy-two, my beloved 'earers! Creeping up."

Herries faced the bowling again. George Figgins, in the field, gave his fat chum an expressive look. Fatty did not fail him. The ball went down like a bullet hot from the rifle, and Herries hardly saw it. But he heard it—as it lifted his off-stump. And the brief hope of the School House that it might be a win after all faded out.

"That wottah Knox!" breathed Arthur Augustus, as the field rane off. His noble eye glinted behind his eyeglass, "That wottah, that bwute—bai Jove!"

And in fact it was very exasperating, for there was little doubt that had Arthur Augustus been in the place of George Herries, the game might after all have been pulled out of the fire. The House wanted only fourteen to win, and it was more than likely that Talbot and D'Arcy, between them, could have knocked up that fourteen. True, he wouldn't have been in Herries' place. But Clive, who had replaced him in the team, had had the bad luck to go out for a big round nought: and certainly Arthur Augustus could never have envisaged a duck's egg falling to his lot. It might have happened, of course: but to Arthur Augustus, at least, it seemed one of those impossibilities that couldn't happen. Knox of the Sixth had not only kept Arthur Augustus out of the game, but he had cost the House a victory: on that point, in Gussy's mind, there was not a shadow of doubt: not a possible, probable shadow of doubt: no possible doubt whatever. And all his self-restraint was needed to keep him from walking round in search of Gerald Knox, of the Sixth Form, and giving him, after all, that punch in the eye!

Opportunity Knocks !

“WOW!”

Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth Form, made that remark. He made it in pained, indeed anguished, tones.

The fat Baggy was on the study landing. He was leaning and wriggling as he leaned on the balustrade. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, coming upstairs to cross the study landing, glanced at him. Obviously, Baggy had had “six”. Baggy had been amused, a couple of days ago, by the sight of Arthur Augustus making his eel-like way from Kildare’s study, —now he seemed to be understudying an eel himself, without finding it in the least amusing.

Tom Merry paused, and Manners and Lowther stopped too. None of the three liked Trimble of the Fourth—few fellows did. Trimble had stealthy and unpleasant ways that did not make him popular. Still, without liking the fat Baggy, they could feel sympathy for any fellow who had been through it—and it looked as if Baggy had been through it rather hard.

“Whopped?” asked Tom.

Baggy ceased to mumble for a moment, and looked round at him with a lack-lustre eye, still wriggling.

“That beast Knox!” he groaned.

Tom Merry frowned.

“That bully!” he exclaimed. Tom was not feeling pleasant feelings towards Knox of the Sixth. Quite unjustifiably and against all laws written and unwritten, Knox had pulled the noble ear of Arthur Augustus, which unjustifiable action had been indirectly the cause of D’Arcy standing out of the House match the previous day. Whether that match would have been a victory instead of a defeat, had D’Arcy played, might be a moot point: but what was certain was, that D’Arcy had not played, owing to

Knox, and that match had been a goner. Tom indeed would willingly have punched Knox himself, had such things been practicable—which they were not. Now, it seemed, Knox had been giving Baggy the benefit of his bad temper.

"Hold on, though," remarked Manners, rather dryly. "If Knox has been whopping Trimble, what did he do it for?"

"Nothing," said Baggy promptly.

"Nothing?" asked Tom.

"Just nothing at all! Ow!"

"Well, look here," said Tom, "It's about time that bully Knox learned where he gets off. If he's whopped you for nothing, you come with me to Railton, and we'll put it up to our house-master."

"Oh!" said Baggy. He did not seem enthusiastic about going to Mr. Railton, the house-master of the School House, "You—you—see—"

"You've a right to appeal to your House beak, if a prefect whops you for nothing!" said Lowther.

"But did he?" said Manners, as dryly as before.

"I—I wasn't doing anything, you know," mumbled Baggy Trimble, "I couldn't help hearing what Knox was saying to Cutts—"

"What?" roared Tom Merry.

"Well, how could I help it, when I was just round the corner, and they were talking in the passage—"

"You fat sweep!" said Tom, in disgust, "So Knox whopped you for eavesdropping, did he? Serve you jolly well right!" All Tom's sympathy had evaporated, quite suddenly.

"Well, he made out I was listening," mumbled Baggy.

"And you weren't?" asked Manners, sarcastically.

"I tell you I couldn't help hearing what they said," yapped Baggy. "A fellow can lean on the wall if he likes, can't he, and he's not bound to move off if senior men start jawing just round the corner. Knox was only ratty when he spotted me, because he was talking about going out late. I say, I wonder what Knox is going out for to-night, you fellows," added Baggy, "Of course, pre's can go out when they like—they've got keys to Masters' gate. But at half-past ten at night, you know—"

"So that's what you were listening to!" snapped Tom.

"No wonder Knox was ratty," said Monty Lowther, "Lots of fellows know that he goes out sometimes to see a man about a horse. He wouldn't be a prefect long, if the Head knew what a lot of fellows could tell him."

"Think it's that?" asked Baggy, "Anyhow, he was awfully

ratty, the beast. I heard him ask Cutts if he was coming, and Cutts said no, and Knox said he would do it alone, then—"

"Oh, chuck it," said Tom, "Think we want to know what you spied out listening behind a corner?"

"I tell you I just happened to hear him," yapped Baggy, "But he was in an awful bait when he spotted me, and made me go to his study and take six! And I can tell you he laid them on!" added Baggy, with a wriggle, "Wow!"

"Good!" said Tom.

And he walked on across the study landing, having had quite enough of Baggy Trimble's woes, now that he knew the cause thereof. Knox of the Sixth was rather a black sheep, no doubt, but a fellow who surreptitiously listened to talk not intended for his ears was, in Tom's opinion, all the better for "six" on his trousers.

Manners and Lowther followed their chum, leaving the hapless Baggy still hanging on the banisters, and wriggling and mumbling. Knox had a heavy hand with an ashplant, and there was no doubt that Baggy had suffered for his sins. Quite unsympathetic now, the chums of the Shell left Baggy to his mumbling, and went into the Fourth-Form passage, where they were due for tea with Blake and Co. That day Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had received a hamper from home and hampers from Eastwood House were always well and truly packed: and there was in consequence a reign of plenty in Study No. 6, which their friends in the Shell were scheduled to share.

"Twot in, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass on them as they appeared in the doorway. And Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther "trotted" in—eyeing Arthur Augustus rather curiously as they did so. There was a cheery smile on Gussy's face: he was, in fact, looking quite merry and bright, which was rather a contrast to his looks of late—he had not been quite his usual cheery self since the House match. Blake and Herries and Dig also seemed rather pleased with themselves and things generally. Study No. 6 in fact, seemed in rather high feather all round.

"Come into a fortune?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Not pwecisely, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "But things seem to be goin' our way wathah. That wottah Knox has got it comin'."

"Oh!" said Tom, "Knox again? Not punching him in the eye, I hope!"

"Wathah not! We are goin' to wag him."

Manners shut the door of the study. If discussion of ragging

a prefect was going on, the fewer ears that heard it the better, in Manners' sage opinion.

"My dear chap—!" murmured Tom.

Arthur Augustus's eye gleamed behind his eyeglass.

"You know what that wottah did!" he said, "Not only pullin' my yah, which was a wascally affwont to a fellow's personal dig. He lost us the House match yestahday—gettin' me stuck in Extwa instead of battin' for the House."

"New House might have pulled it off anyway," remarked Manners.

"Wubbish, deah boy."

Tom Merry laughed. Evidently it was fixed in Gussy's noble mind that matters would have gone differently, had he not been stuck in Extra while the House match was played. Quite possibly it was so: though only Arthur Augustus regarded it as a matter of absolute certainty.

"It's all right," said Blake, "We're not letting Gussy rush in where angels fear to tread. We've got it all cut and dried—and it's as safe as houses. Knox's study is going to be shipped to-night."

"What-ho!" said Digby, and Herries nodded and grinned.

"To-night!" repeated Tom, "Do you mean that you are going down from the dormitory after lights out?"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"Jolly risky," said Manners.

"Not a spot of risk, in the jolly old circumstances," said Blake.

"But, my dear chap," said Tom, "Think Knox is going to stay in bed fast asleep while you ship his study?"

Tom was quite puzzled. In the Sixth Form, studies were also bedrooms, at night. And "shipping" a study while the proprietor thereof was in bed in the same room did not seem to him practical politics.

"Knox won't be in bed when we get there," said Blake, "He won't be in his room after all. You see, we've had news."

"We happen to know that Knox is going out to-night, see?" said Digby, "He will be far enough away from his study—nearer to the Green Man than to the school, I fancy."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, "You've heard that from Trimble, I suppose?"

"You heard it too?" asked Herries.

"I fancy half the House will have heard it before long," answered Tom Merry, "That fat smudge will babble it out to every fellow who will listen. If it gets to the prefects, Knox will be in a bad spot."

"Well, Knox is a pre himself," said Blake, "I don't suppose the other pre's would be fearfully keen on nailing a brother pre."

"Kildare would, at least," said Tom, "If Kildare knew that Knox was going out at half-past ten to-night, he would nail him as soon as he'd nail Racke, of my form, or Cardew, of yours: or any other shady sweep that was disgracing his school. If Baggy rattles that yarn all over the House, and Kildare gets wind of it, I don't envy Knox."

"Serve him right if he gets nailed," said Herries.

"Oh, quite! But what's the programme?" asked Tom.

"All cut and dried," said Blake, "We know that Knox is going out at half-past ten. He'd hardly be away less than an hour—anyhow, half-an-hour would give us plenty of time. We slip down from our dorm without waking anybody—slip into Knox's study—and there you are! When he comes in, he will get rather a surprise."

"Sort of!" chuckled Dig, "We'll jolly well rag his study right and left. He will find that we know how to ship a man's study all right."

"What-ho!" grinned Herries.

"Knox will make a fearful row about it, if he finds his study shipped," said Tom, dubiously.

"Will he?" chuckled Blake, "Think he'd like to draw Railton's attention to his being out late at night? The House beak's first question would be, where was Knox when it happened? It couldn't happen if he was at home."

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom. He laughed.

"Besides, let him kick up a row, if he likes," said Blake, "He won't know who ragged his room, will he? There's fifty fellows at least in the House who'd be jolly glad to rag a bully like Knox: and he can pick and choose among the lot if he wants to know who did it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Looks safe enough," admitted Tom, "Knox may think of this study, as he's had a spot of trouble here: but he certainly won't want Railton or the Head to know that he was out of the school late at night. His best guess would be to take it quietly and keep it dark."

"Just that!" grinned Blake, "May make him think twice, another time, before he goes down to the Green Man to see a man about a horse."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's the chance of a lifetime to put paid to that bully," said Dig, "We don't often get an opportunity like this."

"Opportunity knocks!" grinned Monty Lowther. There was an opening for one of his innumerable puns here, and the funny man of the Shell jumped at it, "Opportunity knocks, and there will be knocks for Knox, while he's wandering out in the shades of Nox, which is Latin for Night, my beloved 'earers. Knocks and Knox and Nox—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther could always rely on Tom and Manners for a smile when he makes his little jokes. This time all Study No. 6 laughed, as well, being in high good humour. And it was quite a merry party that sat round the table to do justice to the contents of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's munificent hamper.

8

Back Up!

MONTY LOWTHER burst into a sudden chuckle, as he sat at prep in No. 10 Study in the Shell that evening.

Tom Merry and Manners suspended prep to stare at him across the table.

They were preparing Latin: and the passage in the *Aeneid* with which they were dealing was not quite so easy to Tom as to Manners. But neither of them could see anything of a risible nature in "*Aelus haec contra: Tuus, O regina, quid optes, explorare labor.*" There was, so far as they could see, absolutely nothing in the conversation between the God of the Winds and Juno to evoke merriment. So that sudden chuckle from Monty Lowther was rather surprising. They stared, while Monty, having chuckled once, chuckled yet again.

"Anything funny in this?" asked Tom Merry, in perplexity, "Blessed if I've ever found Virgil funny."

"Eh? Blow Virgil!" said Lowther. "Never mind Virgil! Knox—"

"Blow Knox!" said Manners, testily.

"It's a wheeze!" said Monty Lowther, impressively.

"Blow your wheezes! Prep—"

Monty, evidently, was not thinking of prep. Some bright idea, it seemed, had flashed into his active—perhaps too active—mind, quite excluding considerations of prep. When a "wheeze" occurred to the funny man of the Shell, other considerations were not merely 'also rans'—they were nowhere!

"It's the jest of the term," said Monty.

"Tell us after prep," said Tom.

"I'll tell you now. You'll yell when I tell you," chuckled Monty, "It's pie—just pie—pie handed to us on a plate. Knox has been making himself jolly unpleasant, hasn't he? He pulled old Gussy's ear—"

"I believe the solar system is running on much the same," remarked Manners, sarcastically, "It wasn't such a shock to the universe as Gussy seems to think it was."

"All the same, he did it," said Lowther, "and didn't he keep Gussy out of the House match, and didn't we lose the game—"

"D'Arcy might have scored a duck, like Clive," said Manners.

"Look here, if you're going to stand up for Knox, Manners—"

"I'm not going to stand up at all. I'm going to sit here, and get my prep done, if you'll shut up about Knox."

"Oh, let Monty run on," said Tom, "If he's thought of a jape he will burst something if he doesn't get it out. Cut it short, old man."

"Well Knox has asked for it, hasn't he? demanded Lowther, "And he's a rotter all round—cutting out at night to see a hookie—and we jolly well know that that is his game."

"Not our business," said Manners, "The Head hasn't asked us to look after the Sixth, has he?"

"Look here, Manners—"

"Oh, cut on, Monty," said Tom, "Get it off your chest. Admitted that Knox is a worm! What about it?"

"He's getting out to-night," said Lowther, with a glare at Manners, who only too evidently wanted to stick to work, regardless of japes on Knox. "He has a key to Masters' gate and that's the way he will go. He won't be clambering over a wall like Racke does when he gets out of bounds."

"What about it?"

"It will be black as a hat under the trees by Masters' gate."

"I expect so, at half-past ten. And what about that?"

"Knox isn't a cat, is he?" asked Lowther.

"A cat?" repeated Tom, blankly.

"If he isn't, he won't be able to see in the dark, and if three fellows collar him there, he won't know who they are, or even which House they belong to."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Beginning to see?" hooted Lowther, "Blake's gang are going down from their dorm to rag his study while he's out. Well, they ain't the only men who are going to look after Knox. While they're ragging his study in the House, we're going to attend to Knox at Masters' gate."

"But—!" said Manners.

"You can pack up the buts, Manners. I tell you it's the jape of the term. We can get down from our dorm, just as easily as those Fourth-Form men can get down from theirs. We drop out of a back window—"

"Do we?" said Manners, dryly. He seemed to doubt it!

"We do!" hissed Lowther, "and we're all ready in the dark when that giddy roysterer comes along to Masters' gate at half-past ten. He's a rather big brute: and I don't think Gussy would

have got very far with punching him in the eye: but the three of us could handle him like a baby."

"And what are we going to do with him?" asked Manners, sarcastic again, "Are we going to scalp him, or boil him in oil, or strew the hungry churchyard with his bones?"

"If you're going to keep on talking rot, Harry Manners—"

"I'll leave that to you, Montague Lowther! It's in your line, not mine."

"Look here—!"

"Peace, my infants, peace!" urged Tom Merry, soothingly, "Let's hear the rest, Monty—there's still prep, you know."

"If you're going to jaw about prep, Tom Merry—"

"I'm waiting for you to jaw, old chap."

Monty Lowther breathed rather hard. Apparently he had expected his proposed 'jape' on Gerald Knox to evoke enthusiasm in No. 10 Study. Evidently, it hadn't—so far at least. Having breathed hard, he went on:

"We're on the spot, when that smear Knox comes along to go out. We collar him—that's easy! You grab one arm, Tom, and Manners grabs the other, and you hold on—he wouldn't be able to do a thing. And I—"

"Might be able to yell, and might, perhaps, think of it!" suggested Manners, who seemed to be in quite a sarcastic vein that evening, "And one yell would be enough—"

"Will you let me finish?" hissed Monty.

"Oh! You're going to finish?"

Monty Lowther disdained to answer that question. He gave Manners another glare—a very unchummy one, considering what chums they were!—and continued:

"You two grab his arms and hold on, as I've said. I shall have a bag—that old canvas bag that's been knocking about the box-room for ages—it's a bit dusty and musty, but I suppose we're not going to be over-particular with Knox! It's got a strap on it. Well, I bung the bag over his head—"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom.

"Right over his napper," said Lowther, "and if he yells, he can yell inside the bag, and nobody will hear him—it will muffle his yells all right! I hitch the strap, and the bag will be a fixture. I shall put a spot of soot in the bag which will amuse him—perhaps!"

"Oh, crumbs!" said Manners.

"After that, I hardly think that even Knox will want to carry on, and call on his sporting friends at the Green Man. What?"

"Hardly!" gasped Tom Merry.

"In fact, this will be our good deed for the day—we're Scouts,

aren't we?" said Lowther, "Knox would be jolly well bunked if he was caught out in his rotten game. Saving him from himself, and all that!"

"And that's all you're thinking about?" asked the sarcastic Manners.

"Well, no: that's a by-product," admitted Lowther, "I'm chiefly thinking of making him sit up because he's asked for it—begged and prayed for it. He's entitled to what he's asked for."

"But—!" said Tom Merry, very doubtfully.

"Easy as falling downstairs," said Lowther. "Knox will be busy for quite a while, getting that bag off, and sneezing off the snout. That will give those Fourth-Form men time to get through in his study."

"But—!" said Tom.

"Well, what?" snapped Monty.

"It's a bit too thick, handling a pre like that," said Tom, shaking his head, "Not quite so thick as Gussy's idea of punching him in the eye: but too thick, old chap. After all, a pre's a pre."

"When the Head appoints a man a prefect, he should play up!" said Lowther, "If he doesn't, he can take what's coming to him. The Head would give him something tougher than a bag over the napper, if he knew what he was up to to-night."

"Oh! Yes! But—"

"Any billy-goats in your family?" asked Lowther, "A fellow would think so, the way you keep on butting."

"Suppose he doesn't go after all?" asked the practical Manners.

"We know he's going. That fat smudge Trimble heard him telling Cutts."

"And Trimble's told half the House by this time. Knox may have sense enough to chuck it, after it's been tattled about."

"He can't have much sense, or he wouldn't be breaking bounds at night to see a bookie," retorted Lowther, "But if he doesn't go, we don't get him, that's all, and no harm done. We're on the spot in time: and if nobody comes along to Masters' gate, we chuck it and come back. A little walk out on a summer's night won't hurt us, will it?"

"Railton's cane would, if we were spotted out of House bounds after lights out," answered Manners.

"If you're funky of Railton's cane—"

"Oh, don't be an ass! It's a fatheaded idea," said Manners, "I don't like Knox any more than you do, and I'd like to make him sit up for what he did to old Gussy—but there's a limit—"

Snort, from Monty Lowther.

"That your idea, too, Tom," he asked.

"Well, yes," said Tom, "It's a jolly good jape, old man—one of the best—but—but—"

"But—but—!" mimicked Lowther, "All right—let it drop! I'll ask old Kangy after prep, and Cardew of the Fourth—they'll back me up, if you fellows don't like the idea. Now get on with your prep, and be blowed!"

"Look here, old fellow—!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Be reasonable, old man—!" said Manners.

"You were very keen to get on with prep a few minutes ago," said Monty, "Are you going to jaw instead. You might let me get on with it, at any rate—I want to get through."

Tom Merry looked at Manners, rather comically. Manners looked at Tom Merry, with a shrug of the shoulders. Monty, disappointed by his comrades' reception of the big idea, had his back up. He was not going to chuck up that big idea: he was going to carry on with it, with help from fellows outside the study, as his chums refused to back him up. That was quite inadmissible. The "Terrible Three" of the Shell were too united for that. It was their invariable rule to sink or swim together.

"Look here, Monty—!" said Tom, at last.

"Give a chap a rest."

"It's a fatheaded scheme—"

"Br—r—r—r—r—r—r!"

"But if you're bent on it, we'll back you up!" said Tom.

"After all, Knox is poisonous," said Manners, "Likely as not he won't go out at all, in case some pre's heard something of Trimble's tattle—but if he does, we'll get him all right."

Monty Lowther's clouded brow cleared.

"That's more like a chap's pals!" he said, "Done, then!"

"Done!" said Tom and Manners together.

And that was that! During the remainder of prep, Monty Lowther was grinning over Virgil, as if he found something very amusing in that great poet. Tom Merry and Manners had lingering doubts, but Monty had none—he never had when he was on the trail of a jape. And when Kildare of the Sixth saw lights out for the Shell that night, there were three fellows in the Shell dormitory who did not follow the example of the rest, and sink into slumber. Three remained wakeful: and when ten o'clock sounded from the old clock-tower, they turned out quietly and dressed with hardly a sound in the dark.

Not as Per Programme !

"PWAY keep quiet, deah boys."

"Shut up, you ass !"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Quiet !" hissed Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Do you want all the fellows in this dorm to wake up?" breathed Digby.

"Weally, Dig—"

Blake and Herries and Digby, in the dark in the Fourth-Form dormitory, glared at their noble chum as if they could have bitten him.

Silence was their cue. Nobody else in the dormitory was awake. And they did not want anyone to awake. Fellows who were going down after lights out, to "ship" a prefect's study, could not be too careful. Nobody, certainly, would willingly have given them away. But talk on the subject among the juniors might have done that inadvertently. The least said was the soonest mended, in such a very serious enterprise. For there was no doubt that fellows who ragged a Sixth-Form prefect's study would be in a bad spot if they were discovered. They would have to go up to their house-master, if not to the Head himself. On such an occasion silence was golden.

"I was simply warnin' you fellows to keep quiet !" said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "If you make a wow—"

"Who's making a row now, with his chin?" hissed Blake.

"If you are descwibin' my wemarks as a wow, Blake, I can only say—"

"You say another word," said Blake, in a ferocious whisper, "and I'll jam your silly head in the door."

Arthur Augustus opened his lips for an indignant rejoinder. However, he closed them again. And in silence, the four juniors crept out of the dormitory, leaving the rest still sleeping.

All was dark in the passage. They groped away towards the landing.

"You fellows had bettah follow my lead," whispered Arthur

Augustus, "It is vewy dark, and you may wun into the wall or somethin'—Oh! ow! wow!"

"You blithering ass—"

"Wow! ow! I have wun my nose on that beastly wall! Ow!"

"Keep it up," said Blake, resignedly, "Keep it up, old man, till we have Railton and Lathom and Linton and Selby on the spot, and a few prefects after them! Hadn't you better shout?"

"Wats! I have hurt my nose—"

"I'll hurt it some more if you don't shut up!" breathed Herries.

"Pway don't lose your tempah Hewwies! It is vewy bad form for a fellow to lose his tempah! Come on and mind you keep quiet! The less you talk the bettah!"

Blake and Herries and Digby, with great self-restraint, refrained from slaying their noble chum on the spot. They crept along to the landing, Arthur Augustus rubbing his damaged nose as he followed. They crossed the landing to the stairs.

"It's fwightfully dark," murmured Arthur Augustus, "Mind you don't twip ovah the stairs, deah boys."

"Mind you don't, ass!" whispered Blake.

"Weally, Blake, I am not likely to be so vewy clumsy. Twead vewy carefully here, and mind you don't miss the step—Whooop!"

Bump! bump! bump!

There was a sound in the darkness of somebody rolling downstairs. That bumping sound was accompanied by gasping ejaculations. Somebody, evidently, has missed his footing in the dark, and rolled.

"Oh! cwikey! Oh, cwumbs! Bai Jove! Woooooh!" came floating up from the shadowy staircase.

"That tears it!" muttered Blake.

"Better chuck it, and cut back to the dorm!" sighed Dig.

"Hold on, though! Listen!"

A scrambling, scuffling sound told that Arthur Augustus had ceased to roll, and was gathering himself up on the dark staircase. Blake and Herries and Dig listened with painful intentness, in fear of hearing a door open. If Gussy's tumble had given the alarm, there was nothing for it but to bolt back to their dormitory, and bolt into bed.

But, excepting for Gussy's gasping, there came no sound. There had been no alarm. A voice floated up:

"Come on you fellows! What are you waiting for?"

"You born idiot—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Quiet!"

"If you are going to call a fellow names, Blake—"

"I'm going to slaughter you if you don't shut up."

"Wats!"

Blake and Herries and Dig crept down the dark stairs and rejoined their chum, whose arm Blake immediately grasped. Arthur Augustus was going to be guided the rest of the way, willy-nilly. Luckily, perhaps, Arthur Augustus misunderstood.

"That's wight, deah boy," he whispered, "Hold on to me, and I'll see you thwough! Wely on me, old chap."

Jack Blake made no reply to that. They proceeded on their way: and the Sixth-Form quarters were reached without further mishap. All was as black as a hat there. Then a sudden doubt smote Arthur Augustus.

"Bai Jove! Have you a match, Blake?"

"No, ass!"

"How are we goin' to pick out Knox's study in the dark? Perhaps you fellows had bettah wait heah, while I cut back and get a box of matches."

"Perhaps you'd better keep your head shut, if you don't want Kildare or Darrell or Langton to step out!" hissed Blake, "Knox's door is fifth from the end—"

"Yaas, but we cannot see the doors—"

"We can count them from the end, fathead."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

"You wouldn't! Shut up."

Blake groped in the dark with a light hand. Door after door was groped over, till he had counted five. Then there was a halt.

"Here we are! whispered Blake.

"Suah you have got the wight door, deah boy?"

"Yes, ass."

"We don't want to walk in on Kildare or Dawwell, you know—"

"No need to—they'll come out if you keep on wagging your chin."

"Oh, wats!"

Blake groped over the door for the handle, turned it, and the door opened. It was Knox's study: there was no doubt about that: and as it was after half-past ten, Knox, according to programme, was well on his way to the Green Man by that time. All was safe so long as the prefects sleeping in the adjoining studies were not awakened. The whispering in the passage had not disturbed sleeping ears, for there was no sound.

On tiptoe, the four raiders stepped into Knox's study. Blake closed the door after them silently.

"O.K. now," he whispered.

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was not a glimmer of light in the room: the blinds were drawn, shutting out the summer starlight. The juniors could not have seen their hands before their faces. But that was all right: for now that they were inside, with the door closed, it was safe to turn on the light.

"All serene," whispered Dig, "We can have a light now. Look here, let's begin with Knox's bed. Rag it right and left, and pour the inkpot into it, what?"

"Yaas, wather!" chuckled Arthur Augustus, "and then we'll turn the table upside down—"

"And pull up the carpet, and drape it over the table-legs, what?" chuckled Herries.

"And pile the chairs on it, bai Jove!" chortled Arthur Augustus, "And what about wakin' soot down fwom the chimney, and spweadin' it all wound "

"Good egg!"

"Quite!" said Blake, "We don't want to wake the other pre's. We can rag the study bald-headed, without making a row! By gum, Knox will get a surprise when he comes sneaking in presently."

There was a gleeful chuckle in the dark. Blake groped for the electric switch, and turned it on. Light filled the study, revealing their surroundings, and the bed in the alcove, which they had no doubt was vacant, as Knox was—or at least should have been according to programme—far away.

But the next moment, there was a gasp of horrified amazement from the Fourth-Form raiders. They stared at the bed in the alcove, with staring eyes.

The light revealed not only the bed. It revealed a Sixth-Form man, sitting up in that bed, staring blankly at the intruders.

Knox of the Sixth stared at the juniors. The juniors, almost petrified, stared at Knox of the Sixth! Not for a moment had it occurred to Blake and Co. that Knox, after all, hadn't gone out! Now it was only too clear that he hadn't. For there he was—sitting up in bed, blinking in the sudden light, and staring blankly at the intruders in his study.

Bagged!

TOM MERRY yawned.

So did **Manners**.

Monty Lowther, quite as much inclined to yawn as his comrades, manfully suppressed the yawn.

"Sleepy?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Well, just a few," admitted Tom.

"Chap gets sleepy at night, you know," remarked **Manners**.

"Squat down under the trees and go to sleep!" suggested Lowther, "I'll wake you when **Knox** comes along."

"Fathead!" said Tom Merry and **Manners** together.

The fact was that all three were rather sleepy, as was only natural at that time of night. Even Monty Lowther, keen as he was on his japing, did not find it quite so attractive under the shadowy trees by **Masters'** gate, as it had seemed in No. 10 Study.

But Monty was a stickler. He was going to see that jape through, if he had to prop his eyelids open to see it.

"Can't be long to wait now," he whispered, "I've got the bag all ready. He can't be long now."

The Terrible Three had been on the spot at a quarter past ten. That was amply early enough to catch a fellow who was going out at half-past. They were prepared to wait: but the minutes seemed very long: and Tom Merry and **Manners** could not help thinking of the comfortable beds they had left—and even Monty's thoughts, perhaps, ran in the same direction. However, they did not expect to see or hear anything of **Knox** till the half-hour boomed out from the clock-tower: and they had to wait.

Not that they were likely to see anything of **Knox** in any case, for it was densely dark under the thick foliage of the trees by **Masters'** gate. Nothing more than a dim shadow in the dark was likely to meet their eyes. But that, of course, was all to the good, for it was very essential that **Knox** should not see

them! The bare idea of being "nailed" was appalling. Exactly what would accrue to juniors who bagged a prefect's head in a sooty bag, they were not sure: but there was no doubt that it would be something extremely unpleasant. A Head's flogging was probable. It might even be the sack. It was very important indeed that Gerald Knox should not see who bagged him! Dark as it was under the trees, they could have wished it darker.

They would no more than glimpse Knox when he came—a shadowy glimpse. But they would hear him. They would not need to see him to know that it was Knox: for nobody else, of course, would be coming along that dark path to go out at such an hour. It was all right, if Knox came—but Manners, at least, doubted whether he would come.

"A few minutes now," murmured Lowther. This time a yawn almost escaped him: but he suppressed it again.

"If he comes!" grunted Manners.

"Oh, don't be an ass," Lowther snapped: a doubt perhaps coming into his own mind. "We know he's coming."

"We don't," said Manners, coolly, "I tell you that if he had the sense of a bunny rabbit, he would chuck it, after that tattling chatterbox Trimble got hold of it."

"Shouldn't wonder!" yawned Tom Merry.

Snort, from Monty Lowther.

"Well, we shall see in a few minutes," he grunted, "If he doesn't come, no harm done! But I jolly well believe he will come. Hark!"

There was a sound in the dim distance. It sounded like a quiet foot-fall. Lowther caught his breath.

"Hear that?" he whispered.

"By gum!" muttered Tom, "It sounds—"

"Quiet! He's coming."

The three Shell fellows, blotted in darkness under the trees, hardly breathed. Faintly, but unmistakably, in the silent night, sounded the footfalls and they were approaching!

Monty Lowther grinned in the dark. He had been right after all! Knox was coming! He grasped the canvas bag, liberally supplied with soot from a study chimney, all ready for Gerald Knox. Tom Merry and Manners were on the alert. In a few moments the night walker would be walking along that shadowy path under the dark branches, and then would be the time for action. Their hearts beat a little faster: but they were ready.

Dim, half-seen, a shadow loomed up in the gloom. All the juniors could see of it was that it was Knox's height. One

glimpse was enough. The next moment they leaped at that shadowy figure.

It worked like a charm.

Tom Merry grabbed one arm, Manners the other. Almost in the same second, Monty Lowther slammed the open bag down over a startled head.

A muffled splutter came from within the bag. Manners had suggested that the victim might yell: but he had no chance to yell. With his head in the sooty bag, he was spluttering wildly and frantically with his mouth full of soot,

At the same time he struggled, exerting more strength than the juniors had expected of Knox, who was rather a slacker and by no means fit. But unexpectedly vigorous as his struggles were, they did not avail. With sturdy hands gripping either arm, he was powerless, or almost so: and they held him as in a vice while Lowther, with rapid fingers, buckled the strap, securing the neck of the bag round the neck of the victim.

"Urrrrrrrgh!" came chokingly from within the bag.

The next moment the shadowy figure was released, and the japers were in full retreat. That shadowy figure staggered and tottered wildly, horrible gurgles coming from within the bag. But the Terrible Three did not stay to listen! Prompt retreat was their cue. They vanished into the night, leaving the inhabitant of the sooty bag tottering and gurgling: the ghastly sounds dying away behind them as they raced.

Hardly a minute later, three breathless juniors were clambering in at a back window on the ground floor of the School House. Tom Merry closed and fastened that window, and crept away by dark passages and staircases: and tiptoed into the Shell dormitory. All were sleeping there, and no one awakened as the three plunged into bed.

Only a low chuckle from Monty Lowther broke the silence, as he laid his head upon the pillow.

"Did it work, you fellows?" he whispered.

"It did!" agreed Tom.

"Did we get him?"

"We did!" said Manners.

"Did we jolly well bag him?" chuckled Lowther, "Did we leave him sneezing soot? Did we? Ha, ha!"

And Monty Lowther chuckled himself happily to sleep.

11

Who?

“WOTTEN!”

“Just rotten!”

“Putrid!”

“We’re for it!”

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, hearing those remarks in the quad in the sunny morning, stared. They were in a very cheery mood when they came on Study No. 6 after breakfast. But rather to their surprise, Study No. 6 looked, and sounded, far from cheery.

Indeed, Blake and Co., rather looked as if most of the troubles of a troublous universe had gathered and collected on their young shoulders. Never, or hardly ever, had four St. Jim’s juniors seemed so pessimistic. Their looks were quite a contrast to the cheerful faces of the Terrible Three.

Cheerful as the Shell fellows looked, and felt, they had little doubt that there was going to be a terrific “row” about the episode at Masters’ gate the night before. Mr. Railton, if it was reported to him, was quite certain to take an extremely serious view of such an incident as the bagging of a Sixth-Form prefect in a sooty bag. The whole body of prefects, would be wrathful at such a “rag” on one of their august number. Even Kildare, who was all good nature, and who did not like Knox or his ways, was sure to be very keen on the trail of raggers who had ragged and bagged a prefect of the Sixth.

But there was no clue. Knox, assuredly could not have seen them in the dark under the trees, much less recognised them. He had the whole House—indeed, both Houses—to choose from in looking for the raggers. So the cheery chums of the Shell were not alarmed. Only they intended to keep that nocturnal exploit a deep, dead secret, breathing not a word even to their best friends: not even to Study No. 6. A careless word might let

the cat out of the bag—with dire consequences.

Manners indeed suggested that quite possibly Knox would say nothing about it. Enraged as he must have been, he would not want to draw attention to the fact that he had been out of the House, near the gate, at a late hour in the night. No doubt he could invent some excuse—but would he run the slightest risk of letting Railton surmise that he had been going out of bounds? If Knox decided to keep the episode dark, for his own sake, there would not be any row after all.

But, row or no row, the three juniors felt secure, and they still grinned whenever they thought of the prefect wriggling and spluttering in the sooty bag. So long as they said nothing they were all right—and they were going to say nothing—not a syllable.

They were looking for Blake and Co., rather curious to know how they had got on with the "shipping" of Knox's study in the night. They expected to see smiling faces. They saw quite the reverse. Study No. 6, only too clearly, were in the doldrums.

"What's the jolly old trouble?" asked Tom, surveying four faces that reflected not a single glimmer of the summer sunshine, "Didn't you get through last night after all?"

"Wathah not!" moaned Arthur Augustus.

"Spotted out of your dorm before you got down to Knox's study?" asked Manners,

"Worse than that!" mumbled Digby.

"Knox didn't get back before you were through?" asked Monty Lowther. The Terrible Three had had no doubt that Knox, with his head in a sooty bag, would be kept busy quite long enough for the raiders to get through, in his study. But it was clear that something had happened!

"He wouldn't have nailed us if that had been it," muttered Blake. "We'd have dodged in the dark all right if we'd heard him coming. But that's not how it was, worse luck."

"Did you ship the study?"

"No fear."

"But why—?"

"How could we ship the study, with Knox looking on?" grunted Blake. "By gum! You see, he hadn't gone out—hadn't gone after all—"

"Wha-a-a-t?"

Three Shell fellows stuttered out that word. All three seemed afflicted with stuttering at the same moment.

"I daresay he was scared to go, after that fat ass Trimble heard, and jawed about it," mumbled Blake. "I—I didn't think of that at the time. We thought he was gone, of course."

"Yaas, wathah."

"And he wasn't!" groaned Herries.

"Only to bed!" sighed Dig.

"You could have knocked me down with a coke-hammer, when I saw him there, sitting up in bed, staring at us, when I turned the light on!" said Blake, dismally. "Never had the faintest idea that he'd gone to bed as usual—never dreamed that he was in the study at all. But—there he was!"

"But—but—!" gasped Tom, in bewilderment.

"He did go out!" articulated Lowther, "What the dickens do you mean? Knox went out last night—"

"He jolly well did," said Manners, blankly.

"That's all you know about it," grunted Blake, "He never went out after all, I tell you. When I turned on the light in his room, there he was sitting up in bed—"

"Staring at us like a goggon!" said Dig.

"I wathah think he was as surpvised as we were!" sighed Arthur Augustus, "It was wathah a surpwise on both sides."

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther gazed at the Fourth-Formers. Up to this moment, they had had no doubt—not a shadow of doubt. It had seemed impossible, quite impossible that a mistake could have been made. True, they were not cats to see in the dark; but who other than Knox could possibly have been coming down to Masters' gate at that hour of the night?

But if, as now stated, Blake and Co. had found Knox of the Sixth in bed in his study, if he had not, after all, gone out—!

Somebody had! That was certain! Somebody had been left struggling and spluttering in that sooty bag!

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Tom Merry, "You—you—you're sure—?"

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Blake, peevishly. "We were coped. It was a fair cop, and no mistake. We thought that if Knox found his study shipped when he came in about midnight, he wouldn't howl out about it—he wouldn't want the House to hear that he'd been out on the tiles. But, you see, he wasn't out—there he was, in bed—and of course he knew why we'd come—what else could we have come there for? He knew it was a rag: and he turned out of bed, shoved on his clothes, and walked us along to Railton's study."

"Knox did?" breathed Lowther. Obviously, if Knox had walked the Fourth-Formers along to Railton's study, he could not have been the fellow who had been bagged under the trees at Masters' gate. No fellow could have been in two places at once.

"Yes, Knox did," grunted Blake. "Railton hadn't gone to bed—he was in his study doing Greek papers for the Sixth and was he surprised when Knox walked us in!"

"And was he waxy!" mumbled Herries.

"He told us he would deal with us in the morning!" said Blake, drearily. "We've got it coming! Knox was grinning like a Cheshire cheese—I mean a Cheshire cat—last we saw of him. I daresay he was amused. Luckily, we hadn't started shipping the study—but he knew, of course, and so did Railton—it means six of the best all round, at least."

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther looked at one another. They were sorry for the unexpected misfortunes of Study No. 6, if it came to that. But a much more pressing matter worried them. They had bagged somebody in a sooty bag. Obviously, now it could not have been, as they had been assured, Knox of the Sixth. Who was it?

"Bai Jove! Heah comes that wottah!" murmured Arthur Augustus: and the juniors looked round, as Gerald Knox came out of the House: and crossed over to the disconsolate group, a sour grin on his face.

The Shell fellows scanned him. This was the fellow they had firmly believe that they had bagged the previous night. Certainly there was no sign about Gerald Knox to indicate that he had been through any such wild nocturnal adventure.

He did not glance at the Shell fellows. He fixed the four Fourth-Formers with an unpleasant eye.

"Cut in," he said. "You're wanted in Railton's study—the four of you!" Then he laughed, "You young duffers. Did you fancy that you were going to rag in my study without waking me up, or what? Cut in."

Knox walked on, and Blake and Co. looked more pessimistic than ever, trailed sadly into the House, to an interview with their House-master. Tom Merry and Co. were sympathetic. But they could not help thinking more of their own peculiar plight, than of what was coming to Study No. 6.

"It—it—it wasn't Knox!" breathed Lowther.

Tom shook his head.

"But—but—but who was it?"

"Goodness knows."

"Can't have been a beak!" said Manners, in almost a hollow voice. "I—I suppose a beak might have been going out—but—but—"

"Oh! Don't!" gasped Tom. The bare thought that the sooty

bag might have been clamped down over a master's head was appalling. "Don't!"

"It wasn't," said Monty, shaking his head, "We should have seen if it was a beak, dark as it was. It was a senior—same height as Knox—"

"Cutts of the Fifth is about Knox's height," said Tom, hopefully, "If it was Cutts, we needn't worry."

"Serve him jolly well right, if it was," said Manners, "But a Fifth-Form man wouldn't be going down to Masters' gate—only the pre's have keys to it."

"Sixth-form man," said Tom, with a nod, "and a pre, if he had a key—and I suppose he must have, as he was going down to the gate. Or—or was he going down to the gate, after all?" he added, struck by a sudden doubt, "We took it for granted, of course, but—but—"

"Why else was he there at all?" said Lowther, "Must have been a Sixth-Form man going out—what else?"

"But who—?" said Manners.

"I suppose we shall know later," said Tom Merry, "Knox might have kept it dark, if he was going out of bounds—but whoever got that bag won't keep it dark. There's going to be a row."

"Well, we've only got to keep mum."

"Mum's the word!" said Manners. "Next time you propose getting out after lights out, Monty, to jape somebody, we'll shove your head into the coal-locker, and keep it there."

"Oh, we're all right," said Lowther. "Whoever it was, he never saw us—we're all right. But—I wonder who it was."

"We shall know before long, I expect," said Tom.

Tom Merry was right! Baggy Trimble, of the Fourth, came grinning up to them.

"You fellows heard?" he chuckled.

"Heard what?" asked Lowther, carelessly: and Tom Merry and Manners looked as disinterested as they could. But all three guessed that Baggy had the news!

"About Kildare—!" grinned Baggy.

"Kildare!" repeated Tom.

"I heard Railton speaking to Linton about it," said Baggy, "There's going to be a row, I can tell you—Kildare, you know."

"What about Kildare?" asked Tom Merry, with a sinking heart. Was it possible—could it be possible—?

"Awful nerve, you know, whoever they were!" chuckled Baggy, "The captain of the school, you know—what a nerve!

I wonder if it was some New House men? What do you fellows think Nobody in our House has anything up against old Kildare, that I know of. I—"

"You blithering, blethering, burbling bunny-rabbit," said Monty Lowther, in concentrated tones. "Has anything happened to Kildare?"

"Then you haven't heard?" grinned Baggy, "Has anything happened to him? I should say so! He, he! Some fellows got him in the quad last night, in the dark, and shoved his head into a bag of soot!"

"Kildare!" said Tom Merry, faintly.

"I say, though, who could have done it?" asked Baggy, "You fellows got any idea who they were?"

Tom Merry and Co. were not likely to answer that question. They walked away, leaving Baggy to carry his thrilling news to others.

12

A Mystery!

ST. JIM'S thrilled with the news, when it came out.

In morning break that day, everybody knew.

It was almost incredible. But it had happened. Eric Kildare of the Sixth Form, captain of St. Jim's, the most popular prefect in the School House—indeed the most popular fellow in both Houses—had been collared in the dark, by some person or persons unknown: and a sooty bag had been crammed over his head, leaving him spluttering while his assailants escaped!

That, incredible and almost unthinkable as it was, was what had happened! It thrilled St Jim's from end to end.

Indignation was intense. Almost every fellow in every form was indignant. Head-master, House-master, and prefects, naturally condemned the perpetrators of such a deed: but for once, everyone was in accord with the views of Head-master, House-master, and prefects. In the Sixth, in the Fifth, in the Shell, in the Fourth, even among the fags of the Third, feeling was the same—and in the New House almost as strong as in the School House. Figgins and Co. were as eloquent on the subject as Blake and Co. George Figgins told Tom Merry that he jolly well wished he knew who the raggers were, and wouldn't he jolly well punch their heads—a remark to which Tom did not reply. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy declared that it was "uttahly wotten," and all his hearers agreed that it was.

Had Knox been the victim, doubtless there would have been a "row": but not such a row. Knox was a prefect, but otherwise nobody in particular: and juniors, at least, would have been quite pleased to hear that he had been bagged in a sooty bag. But Kildare was a tremendously great man, in the eyes of all St. Jim's: Captain of the School, Head of the Games: and more than all else, liked and respected by everyone—including the hapless juniors who had bagged him! There could hardly have

been more excitement and indignation if the revered Dr. Holmes himself had been bagged!

But who were the perpetrators?

Masters and prefects were keen on the track. But there seemed to be no clue. They had to be found. The general consensus of opinion was that the sooner they were found out, and sacked, the better. Only three fellows, in fact, did not concur in that opinion: but they did not say so: mum was very strictly the word with Tom Merry, Manners, and Monty Lowther. They could have kicked themselves, or one another, for having bagged old Kildare. But they did not want to see the Head about it!

Who had done it? Who, among all the crowd of fellows at St. Jim's, could have had such a "down" on old Kildare, as to plan such a rag? That Kildare had been "bagged" in mistake for somebody else, naturally did not occur to anyone. Nobody disliked Kildare, really. Even juniors to whom, in the way of duty, he had to administer teco, did not dislike him. He was a hero to his House, and even to the other House. Who could have done it?

Two or three fellows—Kildare thought that there were three of them—must have been out of their House after lights out. But it was not even known which House. They might have been New House, quite as likely as School House—indeed more likely, for what School House man could ever have dreamed of ragging old Kildare?

St. Jim's fellows had done it, that was all that was known for certain. But the pre's hunting for the culprits had all the school to choose from. In fact only four fellows in the Lower School were above suspicion—Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy. They, it was known, had been larking in Knox's study about the time that Kildare was getting bagged out of doors. So they had a good alibi. And if anyone had thought of suspecting Knox, almost the only fellow in the House who did not like Kildare, his alibi was as good as Blake and Co.'s. That sooty bag must have been over Kildare's head at the very time he was reporting Blake and Co. to Mr. Railton.

It was a deep mystery.

In morning break there was only that one topic. Indeed it lasted as a topic through third school—never had there been so much whispering in the form-rooms. Linton in the Shell, Lathom in the Fourth, even Ratcliff in the Fifth, did not find it easy to keep attention on the work in progress. Never had St. Jim's had such a spot of excitement,

And after school, fellows talked in groups, in the passages, and the quad, with endless surmises as to who could have done it. Kildare, when he was seen in public, was the object of unending curious gazes. There was, of course, no longer any sign of the soot about him. But fellows pictured him, in their minds eye, as he must have looked when he got his head out of that bag!

His handsome face was very grave that day. All the prefects, and all the masters, were looking very grave. It was a grave matter—gravest of all for the delinquents if they were found out.

Many fellows—including those delinquents—were puzzled to know why Kildare had been on the spot at all, to get “bagged.” Obviously he could not have been going out, at that hour of the night. A prefect could for good reasons, leave the House after lock-ups even after lights-out: but what could have been Kildare’s reason? What could possibly have taken him out of the House at a late hour, to that solitary shady path by Masters’ gate? And how could the raggers have known that he would be there?

They must have known, as Blake pointed out in the junior day-room. They had been right on the spot, with their sooty bag all ready, when Kildare came along. They must have got out of their House—which ever House it was—in good time to lay that ambush for him. But why had Kildare gone there, and how did they know? It was really very mysterious.

It mystified Mr. Railton, as well as the younger inhabitants of the School House. He discussed it with Kildare in his study, after dinner—no discovery having been made up to that time. Kildare came in to report the result of investigation so far—precisely nil!

“You have learned nothing?” asked Mr. Railton.

“Nothing at all, sir,” answered Kildare.

“You have no suspicion yourself?”

“None whatever, sir,” Kildare’s handsome face clouded, “If it hadn’t happened, sir, I couldn’t have dreamed that such a thing could happen. I never knew that anyone in the House had a grudge against me. Why should they?”

“You think there were three of them?” said the house-master, thoughtfully.

“I think so, sir! My arms were suddenly seized by two of them—and there must have been a third who slammed the bag over my head.”

“It is scarcely possible to think that senior boys could be guilty

of such action," said Mr. Railton, "But what was your impression?"

"I think they were juniors, sir! I am sure at least that they were not anything like my own size. But for the bag coming over my head, I think I could have handled them."

"You have had no special trouble with any of the juniors lately?"

"None at all." Kildare smiled faintly, "I had to cane D'Arcy of the Fourth the other day. But he and his friends could not have done anything like this—and as it happens, they are known to have been in the House at the time."

"Quite so." Mr. Railton drummed on the table with his finger-tips, a very puzzled man. "Now, Kildare, you have told me why you went out last night. Some chatter among the juniors had reached you, to the effect that some senior was planning to go out of bounds."

"That is so, sir! There was, I gathered, a good deal of tattle on the subject of a prefect intending to break bounds at night. I did not attach much importance to it: but it was certainly curious that the exact time should be mentioned—half-past ten. That looked as if there might perhaps be some foundation for the story, and I decided to go down to Masters' gate at that time, to satisfy myself."

"Quite right," said Mr. Railton, with a nod.

"I went a little before the time mentioned, sir, intending to wait at the gate, to ascertain whether anyone came there to go out. A prefect of course would go out that way, if he went at all, having a key to the gate."

"I will not ask you the prefect's name, Kildare: but are you satisfied that he did not leave the House?"

"Quite, sir."

"There is no possibility that, finding you there, it was he—"

"Oh, no, sir. I know as an absolute fact that he did not leave the House."

Mr. Railton drummed on the table again.

"Did you mention your intention of going out to anyone, Kildare?"

"Only to my friends Darrell and Langton, sir. I asked their opinion whether they thought I ought to look into it, and they agreed that I had better."

"Someone must have known of your intention, Kildare. Possibly Darrell and Langton may have spoken of it, and may have been overheard. Three members of this House knew, as

they were on the spot waiting for you. Undoubtedly School House boys—no one in the New House could have known anything of your movements.”

“I—I suppose so sir.”

“And you can form no surmise as to their identity?”

Kildare shook his head.

“I can’t even begin to guess, sir.”

“Obviously, the matter cannot rest where it is,” said the house-master. “The culprits must be found—and expelled. The investigations must continue until they are found.”

“Very well, sir.”

Kildare left the study, puzzled and perplexed—leaving his house-master as puzzled and perplexed as himself. And equally puzzled and perplexed was everyone else at St. Jim’s—with three exceptions: the hapless trio who knew!

13

Asking For It!

“YOU ass!”

“You chump!”

“That’s right!” said Monty Lowther, sardonically, “Round on a fellow!”

Tom Merry and Manners were not exactly “rounding” on Monty. They were only telling him what they thought of him!

After class that day, the excitement of the morning’s news had hardly abated. Fellows still gathered in groups, discussing the amazing affair. Prefects were still on the prowl: hoping to pick up a trail. Wild guesses were still being made at the identity of the utterly unknown culprits—all of them wide of the mark.

Nobody was likely to guess that No. 10 Study had had anything to do with it. Had the victim been Knox, some fellows might have guessed or surmised. But no one could even dream that Tom Merry, junior captain of the House, or his friends, could have lifted a finger against Kildare—the man they liked and admired most in all St. Jim’s. They were, in fact, much safer from discovery than had Knox’s head gone into the bag.

That of course was a relief, in its way: but even security was no great consolation, in their remorse for what they had done.

It had been a mistake—a wretched mistake in the dark. But they had done it. They had collared and bagged Kildare of the Sixth, and it was really an awful memory in their minds. They would have given anything or everything to have undone that inadvertent act. But what was done could not be undone. More than once had Monty Lowther’s japing proclivities landed him, and sometimes others, in the soup. But never had the outcome of his wildest and maddest jape been so disastrous as this.

The three took little part—no more than they could help—in the endless excited discussions of that mysterious bagging.

They felt like humbugs when fellows spoke to them about it, knowing what they did. Nor could they join in the general view that the fellows who had "done it" were a bunch of cads, rotters, smears, smudges, ticks, and outsiders. Really, they weren't!

Only in their own study did they refer to that disastrous happening—and then only with the door shut. Remorseful as they were, they did not want to be spotted. It would have been so very unpleasant to be sacked from the school—and that was the penalty. A Head's flogging might have met the case if it had been Knox. But fellows who had ragged and bagged the captain of the school were booked for the "long jump" as a matter of course.

Monty, generally satisfied with his japes, was considerably dashed. Tom Merry and Manners could have kicked themselves for ever having had a hand in it. Hence their uncomplimentary remarks in No. 10 after class. They had followed Monty's lead—reluctantly, it was true—but they had followed it, and it was to this that it had led!

"Ass! Chump! Goat! Fathead! Blithering burler!" Manners seemed to be reciting all the opprobrious names he could think of. "Idiot! Cuckoo! Pudding-head!"

"Was it my fault?" demanded Lowther.

"Was it?" said Manners, "Who proposed that idiotic jape, and refused to take no for an answer? Instead of saying yes, we ought to have banged your silly head on this table."

"Hard!" agreed Tom Merry.

"How was I to guess that Knox wouldn't go out after all?"

"Didn't I tip you that he mightn't?"

"Well, how then was I to guess that Kildare would come along? Did either of you think anything of the kind?" demanded Lowther.

"Of course we didn't, ass," said Tom, "If I'd even dreamed it, I'd have sat on your head in the dorm last night, and kept you in."

"Well, then," said Lowther, "Nobody's to blame, unless it's Kildare, for coming along where he wasn't wanted. What the thump was he doing there anyway? Couldn't have been going out on the razzle like Knox or Cutts, I suppose."

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"A pre who walks about the quad in the dark, when everyone else is in bed, jolly well asks for it," said Lowther.

"He must have had some reason," said Tom, "Goodness

knows what it was—nothing to do with us, anyway.”

“Who could have dreamed that anyone would be there, excepting Knox? I knew Knox mightn’t come, after all—but nobody could have guessed that somebody else would—especially old Kildare! No good rounding on me.”

“We’re not rounding on you, fathead,” said Tom, “You were a silly owl to propose such a jape, but we were just as fatheaded to fall for it. Knox is rather a rotter, but he’s a pre, and there’s such a thing as law and order in a school. We oughtn’t to have thought of bagging Knox—and if we hadn’t, we shouldn’t have bagged old Kildare.”

“Right on the wicket!” agreed Manners.

Grunt, from Monty Lowther.

“Knox asked for it,” he snapped.

“If every fellow is to get what he asks for, where do we come in?” demanded Manners, “We’ve asked for the sack. Want it?”

“Oh, rats!” said Lowther.

“Can’t do anything now but keep it dark!” sighed Tom Merry.

“But it’s rotten all round. I couldn’t look old Kildare in the face to-day, thinking of what we did! Oh, it’s rotten.”

“It’s Knox’s fault, really,” contended Lowther. “If Knox hadn’t asked for it, Kildare wouldn’t have got it! I know it’s jolly rotten, as it’s turned out, but there’s one thing we can do.”

“What’s that?”

“Take it out of Knox!” said Monty, eagerly, “Look here, he put it off last night, but that was only because he was funky, after Trimble got hold of it—you know that. He will be at it again—that’s his sort. To-night, or to-morrow night, you can bank on it that he will be going out on the ran-dan, as he intended last night.”

“What about it?”

“Well, what about laying for him, and giving him what we intended to give him last night.”

“What!” yelled Tom Merry and Manners together.

“Serve him right for landing us in the soup like this, what?” said Monty, “And we’ll jolly well get some tar for him, out of Taggles’ shed, instead of a spot of soot. That will make him sit up and squeak! What?”

Tom Merry and Manners gazed at him.

They were landed in the most awful row of their young lives, through following Monty’s lead in a reckless jape. That, it seemed, did not satisfy the funny man of the Shell. He was

prepared to repeat the performance! As they did not speak, Monty rattled on eagerly:

"You back me up, and we'll let Knox have it. See? We get out of the dorm, same as before, and wait for him—see? If you're on—"

"If we're on!" repeated Tom Merry, almost dazedly, "We've bagged and sooted the fellow we like best in the whole school, and we're going to be sacked if the beaks find us out—and you propose doing the same thing over again—!"

"Like to bag Railton next time?" asked Manners, with almost ferocious sarcasm, "Railton might take a walk, and you could bag a house-master instead of the captain of the school? Or what about the Head? Like to get Dr. Holmes's napper in a sooty bag?"

"If that's what you think of the idea—!" snorted Monty.

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"We'll tip you what we think of the idea, Monty," he said, "Collar him, Manners! Bang his silly head!"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Manners, jumping up.

"Here, look out—leggo!" shouted Lowther, as his incensed chums collared him on either side, "I say—stoppit—oh, crumbs—ow!"

Bang!

They were great pals, in No. 10 in the Shell. But nobody, looking into the study at that moment would have guessed it!

Monty Lowther struggled frantically. But it booted not. His head contacted the table top with a vigorous concussion. He roared.

"Ow! Leggo—I—I—I'll—yaroooooh!"

Bang!

"Oh! Oh, crikey! I tell you—"

Bang!

"Whooooo-hoooo-hoop!"

"There!" gasped Tom Merry, "That's a tip! Now you cough up any more japes, and you'll get the same again."

"And harder," said Manners, "We're landed in trouble enough, without hunting for more, old man! Keep your japes bottled up!"

"Ow! Oh! ow! wow!" gasped Monty Lowther, rubbing his hapless head with both hands, "Wow! Why, you rotters—ow!—call yourselves pals? Wow! I've a jolly good mind to take

a cricket stump to you—wow! And I tell you it's a jolly good idea to bag that smudge Knox—"

"Still at that?" howled Manners, "Give him another bang, Tom! If we can't knock any sense into his head, we can knock his japes out of it."

"Let's!" agreed Tom.

"Look here, I tell you it would be O.K.—we shouldn't make another mistake—Kildare wouldn't come along again—"

Tap!

"Shush!" breathed Tom Merry hastily, as a tap came at the study door. And the chums of the Shell were suddenly silent, as the door opened, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth walked into the study.

Inky!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY nodded cheerfully to three Shell fellows. Then, adjusting his his celebrated monocle in his noble eye, he glanced from one face to another, inquiringly and curiously. No doubt he had heard sounds of discord as he stopped at the door: the Shell fellows could only hope that he had not caught what Monty Lowther had been saying.

"You fellows haven't been wowin', I hope," remarked Arthur Augustus.

"Oh! No! Yes!" stammered Tom Merry.

"Only a little argument," said Manners.

Monty Lowther gave his head another rub. The "argument" had been a little painful for him.

"Wight-ho," said Arthur Augustus, cheerily, "It sounded wathah like a wow as I came along. I thought I heard somebody mention Kildare—"

"Oh! Did—did—did you?" stammered Tom.

"I suppose you were arguin' about what happened to old Kildare last night," said Arthur Augustus, innocently. "Lots of fellows are arguin' about it. We've been wathah arguin' in No. 6

"Oh! Have you?" murmured Tom, "Guessed who it was?"

"Not so fah!" admitted Arthur Augustus, "Hewwies thinks it must have been New House men."

Tom Merry and Manners smiled. No doubt Lowther would have smiled too, but for a lingering pain where his head had contacted the study table. The Terrible Three were quite content to let Herries, or anyone else, think that the culprits had been New House men.

Study No. 6, of course could have been trusted with the secret, so far as loyalty went. But a careless word might have been enough to give it away unintentionally. That secret had to be kept buried very deep.

"Dig wathah thinks so, too," went on Arthur Augustus. "You

see, the ideah is that School House men just couldn't do such a wotten thing."

"Such a—such a—what?"

"Uttahly wotten thing," said Arthur Augustus, "I suppose you fellows agwee that it was uttably wotten thing to wag old Kildare, and that the fellows who did it were uttah wottahs."

"Oh!"

"I wegard them, whoevah they were, as uttably wotten," said Arthur Augustus. "I wegard them with feahful contempt. I would not touch any of them with a barge-pole, exceptin' to punch their noses."

"Look here—!" began Manners, restively.

"I twust, Mannahs, that you agwee with me in wegardin' them with feahful contempt!" said Arthur Augustus, warmly. "Kildare is one of the best fellows bweathin', and it was uttably wotten to wag him as if he had been some wottah like Knox. Don't you agwee with me?"

"Oh, quite! But—"

"But what?"

"Oh! Nothing! Carry on, if your chin's not tired."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Is that the lot?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Fah fwom it, Lowther! I don't agwee with Hewwies and Dig that it must have been New House men. Those wotten waggahs must have been keepin' an eye on Kildare to catch him as they did—"

"Oh! Think so?" asked Tom.

"Yass, wathah! New House men couldn't have known a thing. It is vewy painful to admit it, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, sadly, "But I am dwiven to the conclusion that the wottahs who wagged old Kildare must have been School House men."

"Dear me! said Lowther.

"I have weflected on the mattah vewy sewiously, you see," explained Arthur Augustus, "and that is the conclusion to which I am dwiven. It is howwid to think that there are such wottahs in this House—I am suah you fellows feel that as keenly as I do—"

"Oh! Ah! Quite!"

"But there it is—I am suah that they are School House men—and I twust that I shall be able to twack them out—"

"What?"

"I wegard it as bein' up to ewewy fellow in the House to do his best to twack them out," said Arthur Augustus, firmly, "and

I twust that you fellows will be willin' to help."—

"Oh, my hat!"

"Has the Head asked you to take the matter in hand, D'Arcy?" inquired Monty Lowther, blandly: and Tom Merry and Manners grinned.

"Certainly not, Lowthah! The Head would not be likely to make such a wequest to a Fourth-Form juniah!" answered Arthur Augustus, who never could see when his noble leg was being pulled, "Nothin' of the kind."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I do not see anythin' to laugh at in that wemark," said Arthur Augustus, in surprise, "Neithah is this a laughin' mattah. Now, I think you fellows might be able to help in twackin' out those wottahs."

"I think we might!" remarked Monty Lowther, thoughtfully, with a wink at Tom Merry and Manners unseen by Gussy. "What do you fellows think about it. If we tried very, very, very hard, think we might be able to guess who it was that bagged Kildare?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Tom laughing.

"Might be possible!" assented Manners.

"That is weally vewy encouwagin'," said Arthur Augustus, innocently. "Work togethah, what, till we twack the wottahs out? Of course we could not give them away to the beaks: but we could jolly well wag them and make them feahfully sowwy for havin' wagged old Kildare. The fellow who thought of such a thing ought to be jolly well scwagged, don't you agwee?"

"Ought to have his head banged on a study table, at least!" agreed Manners.

"Quite! grinned Tom Merry.

"Now the question is, who did it?" said Arthur Augustus, "I have been thinkin' of Cardew, of my form. He is such a weckless ass that he might be capable of almost anythin'. But Levison and Clive wouldn't back him up in such a wotten thing, and it appeahs that there were thwee of them. What do you fellows think?"

"Rubbish!" said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"You can wash Cardew out," said Tom, "It certainly wasn't Cardew. He never had anything to do with it."

"I should be vewy sowwy to think that he did, as he is a welation of mine," confessed Arthur Augustus, "But I cannot think of anyone else in the Fourth weckless ass enough. You agwee that the fellows who wagged Kildare must have been uttably weckless asses?"

"Oh! Quite!"

"Twimble is wathah a wottah," went on Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, "But he wouldn't have had the nerve—"

"Hardly!"

"Mellish is a bit of a wat, but he wouldn't have had the nerve, eithah—"

"No more than Trimble," agreed Tom.

"Then we shall have to look in the Shell," said Arthur Augustus, "There are some wathah wotten smudges in your form, Tom Merry. What about Wacke and Cwooke?"

"Nothing about Racke and Crooke," answered Tom Merry, promptly, "They had nothing to do with it."

"But somebody did it, deah boy. Somebody certainly did it."

"Gussy's worked that out, in his head!" said Monty Lowther, admiringly. "What a brain!"

"Weally, Lowther—"

"Better chuck it, Gussy," suggested Manners, "You're not cut out for a detective, old bean."

"As a mattah of fact, Mannahs, I wather think that I should make a pwetty good detective. What is wequiahed for it is a fellow of tact and judgment. I shall certainly not chuck it. I shall certainly twy to twack down those awful wottahs, and when they have been spotted, they will be wagged by the whole House, and serve them wight! I am suah you fellows will be vewy glad to take a hand in waggin' them."

"Oh, we should enjoy that no end!" said Manners, "Sort of thing we should just love, in fact!"

"Yaas, wathah! What are you gwinnin' at, Tom Mewwy?"

"Oh! Nothing! Keep your chin moving, old chap."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly, "What are you doin' with that squirt, Lowthah?"

"Filling it with ink."

"Wats! This is not a time for playin' twicks with squirts," said Arthur Augustus, severely, "This is a vewy sewious mattah. We have got to find out those wottahs and wag them—it is a mattah of the honah of the House. Such a bunch of uttably wotten wascals—"

"Oh, draw it mild," said Manners.

"Such a cwev of wuffianly wapscallions!" said Arthur Augustus, hotly. "Such a gang of wewehensible hooligans—Pway don't point that squirt in my diwection, Monty Lowthah. What are you pointin' that inky squirt at me for?"

"I was wondering whether I could get your eyeglass from this distance."

"What?" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Stand steady—!"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort! If you squirt that ink at me Monty Lowthah, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'. I shall certainly—oooooooooh! Gwoooo! Oh cwikey! Gwooooooogh!"

Whiz! Splash!

A stream of ink from the squirt landed fair and square on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's monocle. It splashed on it, and scattered over his aristocratic visage, in streaks: giving him a sudden and startling resemblance to a zebra.

"Ha, ha, ha,!" yelled Tom Merry and Manners.

"Gwoooogh! Ooooooooooh! Wwooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cwikey! I am all inkay! Lowthah, you wottah—wow! Oooogh!" spluttered Arthur Augustus, "Bai Jove! I will thwash you—"

"Come on, old boy," invited Lowther, dipping the squirt into the inkpot again, "Lots more!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Perhaps the Terrible Three were a little tired of hearing Arthur Augustus's opinion of the culprits who had ragged and bagged the captain of St. Jim's. Which, as they were the culprits, was not really surprising. But they were not going to hear any more. The swell of St. Jim's was too busy with ink to pursue the subject.

He dabbed wildly at streaming ink on his face, and made a step towards Monty Lowther. Up went the squirt: and he stopped suddenly. He did not want any more ink!

Instead of rushing on Monty, to administer the thrashing he so richly deserved, Arthur Augustus skipped out of the study, with the rapidity of a kangaroo. He just escaped a squirt-full as he skipped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Terrible Three had been feeling rather 'down' before Gussy's visit. But that visit seemed to have cheered them up. A roar of laughter followed Arthur Augustus down the passage, as he hurried away to wash off the ink.

15

Trimble Comes to Tea!

BAGGY TRIMBLE jumped.

On Saturday afternoon Trimble of the Fourth, as not infrequently happened, was where he had no business to be.

In point of fact, he was standing before the open cupboard in No. 10 Study in the Shell. In that cupboard Baggy expected to see something of the nature of a parcel. Baggy, who very often heard things that did not concern him had heard that Tom Merry, that day, had received a parcel from his old guardian Miss Priscilla Fawcett. Baggy knew what parcels from Laurel Villa were like, and he was deeply interested.

But to Baggy's deep disappointment, there was no parcel to be seen in the study cupboard. Apparently Tom had not yet brought it up from the lobby. Which was very annoying to Baggy, who had a strong desire to sample the contents.

But even that was not the worst. For as he stood staring into the cupboard in search of the parcel that was not there, footsteps and voices became audible in the passage, approaching the study.

So it was no wonder that Trimble jumped!

On Saturday afternoon, a half-holiday and a fine summer's day, most of the St. Jim's fellows were naturally out of doors. Baggy had had no doubt that the coast was clear. Otherwise, certainly he would not have made the venture. On occasions when Baggy was caught in another fellow's study, he was liable to be booted down the passage: and often as it had happened, Baggy had never grown to like it. So the footsteps in the passage, and the voices of Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, were alarming.

They were coming in. Only five minutes ago he had seen them out in the quad, talking with a group of other Shell fellows: Talbot, Gore, Glyn, Wilkins, Gunn, and Skimpole. The group had been discussing the still mysterious affair of the bagging of

Kildare on Thursday night : and Baggy, naturally, could not guess that that topic palled very soon on the Terrible Three, and that they were glad to get away from it. Anyhow they were coming in : and Baggy was fairly caught.

He jumped—and stared round at the door like a scared fat rabbit. There was no escape for Baggy—he was fairly cornered. He jumped again—but his time behind the armchair. Behind that rather massive article of furniture he ducked out of sight.

It was rather early for tea : and Baggy nourished a hope that the Shell fellows had not come to stay. That was his only hope.

A moment or two later, there was a tramp of feet in the doorway, and the chums of the Shell came in. Baggy heard something slam on the table—evidently the parcel of which he had been in quest. If they had come up only to put the parcel in the study and were going down again—

Alas for Baggy's hopes ! He heard the door kicked shut the next moment. They were not going down ! Then he heard the sound of unwrapping at the table. Baggy suppressed a groan as he realised they had come up to tea. Still, if they did not look behind the armchair—!

"By gum !" It was Lowther's voice. "That looks all right, Tom. Jam—cake—marmalade—chocs—ham sandwiches—Good !"

Baggy's mouth watered as he heard. If only that parcel had been in the cupboard, and the Shell fellows hadn't come in—!

"How about asking some fellows to tea?" said Manners. "We've got lots."

"Um !" said Tom Merry.

"Well why not?" asked Lowther, "We tea'd with Blake's gang in No. 6 the other day. Might ask them back."

"Well, yes, but—"

"But what? Not getting inhospitable in your old age, I suppose?"

"No, ass ! But there's only one topic in the school now, and we've heard enough of it. Any fellows we ask will be sure to jaw about Kildare getting bagged the other night. I'm getting rather tired of being asked if I can guess who the rotters were !"

"Oh !" said Manners, "Yes, there's that ! Never was so much fed up with anything in my life."

"Same here," agreed Lowther. "I hadn't thought of that ! We don't want any more jaw about it in this study."

"It makes a chap feel such a measly humbug," said Tom, restlessly, "I've thought more than once of owning up, and getting it over—"

"Don't be an ass," said Manners, "That means going up to

the Head, and getting the push! You can't do that."

"I know! But—it's rotten to hear all the fellows on the subject knowing what we do. It makes a chap feel a humbug, knowing all about it, and not letting on! I—I wonder if it would make any difference, if the Head knew that it was a mistake in the dark, and that we never meant to get Kildare—"

"Only that we mean to get another prefect!" said Manners, sarcastically, "Not much in that, Tom,"

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire!" said Lowther.

"I—I suppose so! We've got to keep it dark! Well, let's have tea, anyway, and we'll get a spot at the nets afterwards."

Behind the arm-chair, Baggy Trimble almost wondered whether he was dreaming this! He could hardly believe his podgy ears.

The mystery of that mysterious affair at Masters' gate was still a mystery. All the efforts of masters and prefects to discover the culprits had been futile. The result had been precisely nil. Baggy, like others, had wondered who they were: but certainly he had never dreamed that they might be the chums of No. 10 Study. Now he knew: and his eyes widened, as he realised that, quite inadvertently, he had learned the secret that puzzled the whole House, and indeed the whole school. He could hardly repress a gasp of amazement.

"I'll make the coffee," said Lowther, "Tea's run out. Here's the spirit-stove—where's the kettle?"

"Behind the arm-chair, I think," said Manners.

"Oh, all right."

Baggy Trimble had hardly time to realise what was coming. Lowther pushed the arm-chair aside. The kettle, certainly, was in the corner. But it was not upon the kettle that Lowther's eyes fixed. They fairly popped at a podgy figure huddled behind the armchair, with two round startled eyes popping back at him.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Baggy.

"Trimble!" stuttered Lowther.

"What—?" began Tom Merry and Manners together.

"Trimble!" roared Lowther, "That fat tick—here—behind the armchair! Trimble, you prying worm—"

"I—I—I wasn't—I never—I mean—I—I say—whooop!" howled Baggy, as Monty Lowther, stooping, grasped him by the collar, and whirled him out into the middle of the room, "Wow! Here, you keep off! I—I wasn't—I didn't—I never wasn't didn't—wow!"

"Trimble!" gasped Tom Merry and Manners.

Baggy, spluttering for breath, and in a state of dire apprehension, sprawled on the carpet. Tom Merry and Manners and

Lowther gazed at him as he sprawled. Into all three minds came the same thought at the same moment. Baggy, behind the armchair, must have heard every word that had been spoken in the study—Baggy knew!

For a long moment they gazed at him. Then Monty Lowther setting his lips, picked up a cricket stump.

Yell, from Baggy.

"Here, you keep off!"

Swipe!

"Yaroooooop!"

Baggy bounded to his feet. Another swipe caught him, as he bounded, and another frantic yell woke the echoes of No. 10 Study. Then he dodged behind the armchair.

"Keep off!" he roared. "I never heard what you said—not a word! And if you don't keep that stump away I'll go and tell Railton! Ow! wow!"

The stump was up for another swipe. But Monty Lowther paused. For a moment the cricket stump remained, like Mahomet's coffin, suspended in mid-air—Baggy watching it with popping eyes. Then, slowly, Lowther lowered it, and Baggy breathed again.

Manners gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"This tears it," he said.

"The game's up!" said Tom Merry, quietly, "We've got to face it. After all, we asked for it!"

"I—I say," Baggy eyed the Shell fellows, "Look here, I ain't a sneak—I—I ain't going to give you away! Think I'd give a man away to the beaks? Not my sort, I can jolly well tell you."

A fat grin dawned on Baggy's face. He emerged from the armchair.

"Fancy it being you fellows all the time," he said, "I say, what did you do it for? What had Kildare done to you?"

"It was a mistake, you fat chump," said Tom.

Baggy chuckled.

"Not much good spinning that yarn" he said, shaking a fat head, "That wouldn't wash, you know."

Tom Merry made a motion with his foot. Baggy backed promptly behind the armchair again.

"Look here, you know—!" he squeaked.

"Oh, get out," said Tom. "What were you doing here anyway, you prying tick."

"I—I dropped in, as—a friend, you know," said Baggy. His eyes were on the good things on the table, "Look here, I ain't going to say anything. Think I'm a sneak?"

The three hapless juniors exchanged glances. Baggy knew—that could not be helped. But Baggy, after all, was a St. Jim's man, though little credit to St. Jim's, and St. Jim's men did not "sneak" to the beaks. Even Baggy was hardly capable of going to master or prefect with the tale of what he had discovered in No. 10 Study. The danger really was that Baggy, whose fat chin seldom rested, might find his discovery too thrilling to keep to himself, and would probably tattle it all over the House, as he had tattled his story of Gerald Knox's night-excursion. But if Baggy, somehow, could be prevailed upon to keep his too-active tongue still——!

"That's all right," said Baggy, as the Shell fellows did not speak, "You treat me as a pal, and I'll treat you as pals. What? Look here, you're just going to have tea, and you've got lots. I'll tea with you, if you like! Can't say fairer than that!"

Once more Baggy emerged from behind the armchair. This time he did not have to retreat again!"

There was, after all, a guest to tea in No. 10 Study. It was not a guest whom that study delighted to honour, by any means. But Baggy Trimble did not mind a trifling detail like that. It was the foodstuffs in which Baggy was interested: and the foodstuffs, fortunately, were ample. Baggy Trimble enjoyed that study tea, if Tom Merry and Co. did not.

16

Wet!

"BEATS me!" yawned Jack Blake.

"And me!" remarked Dig.

"No business of ours, anyway," said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Well, is it?"

"Yaas, wather!" answered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with emphasis.

Blake and Herries and Digby were leaning, in a row, on the granite rim of the fountain in the quadrangle. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was standing facing them, with a slight frown on his noble brow. None of the four heeded a fat youth, with a smear of jam round a large mouth, who was eyeing them curiously, as he lent a fat ear to their talk, grinning the while. If Baggy liked to listen-in while they discussed the unending topic—who had bagged Kildare of the Sixth—no member of Study No. 6 cared a bean. They noticed Baggy in the offing, but did not heed him.

Blake and Herries and Dig, perhaps, were feeling that they had had enough of that mysterious topic. True, they sympathised with old Kildare, and they were deeply indignant, like all other fellows: and quite prepared to rag the raggars bald-headed if they found them out. Still, there were other things to occupy their minds.

That was not how Arthur Augustus looked at it. Arthur Augustus was as keen as ever. His inky reception in No. 10 Study the day before had not discouraged him in the least—except that he had quite dropped the idea of enlisting Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther in the quest.

"I wegard this affaih as the business of ewevy fellow at St. Jim's, Hewwies," he said, "It is weally a scandal if those wottahs get away with it, aftah waggin' old Kildare like that."

"Hear, hear!" yawned Blake.

"The beaks and pwefects have been on the twack evah since it happened," went on Arthur Augustus, "But what have they found out?"

"Nix!" said Digby.

"Pwecisely! If it is left to the beaks and pwefects, those howwid wottahs, whoevah they were, will get off scot-fwee."

"Looks like it!" assented Herries,

"We simply cannot stand for it, deah boys. Old Kildare is one of the vewy best—"

"Hear, hear!"

"And he has been wagged in a vewy wotten way. And there is such a thing as discipline, and law and ordah!" said Arthur Augustus, loftily, "What is St. Jim's comin' to, when a Sixth-Form pwefect is wagged and bagged by junior men?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I fail to see anythin' funnay in that wemark!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "What are you cacklin' at, pway?"

"Well, I rather like that, from the fellow who was going to punch a prefect in the eye a few days ago!" chuckled Blake.

"Oh!" Arthur Augustus seemed a little taken aback for a moment, "Weally, Blake, that is a vewy diffewent mattah. Knox pulled my yah, as you know vewy well. Besides, I did not punch him in the eye aftah all. On weflection I decided not to do so."

"You went down with us on Thursday night to ship his study, and we jolly well got six each all round from Railton," said Herries,

"I wepeat that that is a vewy diffewent mattah, Hewwies. I weally wish that you fellows would keep to the point," said Arthur Augustus, crossly, "The point is, that I wegard it as up to us to find out who wagged and bagged old Kildare, and give them a jolly good waggin'. I weally think that you fellows ought to back me up in this. Tom Mewwy did not seem keen about it, when I asked him—I weally do not know why—"

"He, he, he!"

That sudden unmusical cachinnation caused the chums of Study No. 6 to glance round at the fat Baggy.

Baggy Trimble did not really mean to contribute that fat chuckle. But Arthur Augustus's remark was rather too much for him! Baggy knew—only too well—the reason why Tom Merry had not been keen on joining in the quest of those mysterious raggers! The idea of Tom Merry hunting for the doer of the deed done by his own hands, was, in Baggy's opinion, enough to make a cat laugh! Anyhow it made Baggy laugh.

Arthur Augustus gave him a stern look.

"Pway do not stand there cacklin' at my wemarks, Twimble," he said, "You are askin' to be kicked."

Baggy chuckled again.

"Think you're likely to find out who ragged Kildare the other night?" he asked, banteringly.

"I am certainly goin' to twy, Twimble. And I trust that I shall be successful."

"You won't get any help from Tom Merry or his pals!" chortled Baggy. "You can bank on that to begin with."

"And why not?" grunted Blake, "They're as down on the rotters as we are."

"He, he, he!"

"Does that fat frump know anything about it?" asked Digby, staring at the podgy Baggy, "He's always nosing about and spying and prying. Have you found anything out, Trimble?"

"Bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus was interested at once, "Twimble is wather a disgustin' wottah to spy and pwy as he does, but if he has found anythin' out about those wottahs who bagged Kildare, it may be a clue. Have you any ideah who they were, Trimble?"

"That's telling!" chuckled Baggy.

"What does that mean exactly?" asked Blake, his eyes fixed on the grinning fat face. All the four, by this time, had the impression that Trimble knew something—or at least fancied that he did.

"Well, a fellow might have heard fellows talk, or he might not," said Baggy, breezily. "He might know who they were, and again he might not. That's telling."

And Baggy chuckled again.

It was not really the fat Baggy's intention to reveal what he had discovered in No. 10 Study that afternoon. At the same time, he was almost bursting with what he knew. He was not going to give the Terrible Three away. But he simply could not help dropping hints that a fellow knew what he knew, as it were. Sooner or later it was fairly certain that Tom Merry's secret would burst out of Baggy, almost of its own accord. Baggy was not accustomed to keeping his fat chin under control.

"Look here, you fat cackling fraud, do you know anything about it or not?" demanded Blake.

"He, he, he!"

George Herries gave a grunt.

"Only his gas," he said, "He doesn't know a thing! Kick him."

"Oh! Don't I?" exclaimed Trimble, warmly, "I could jolly well tell you fellows something that would surprise you, if I jolly well liked."

"If that means that you know who those wottahs were, Twimble—"

"Perhaps I do, and perhaps I don't!" chuckled Baggy, "But I'll bet you'd be surprised if I mentioned their names."

"So you know their names, do you?" grunted Herries.

"That's telling!"

"Oh, kick him," growled Herries, "He's only trying to pull our leg. He doesn't know any more than we do."

"That's all you know," grinned Trimble. He gave a cautious look round, to make sure that Tom Merry and Co. were not in sight. "Look here, if I tell you, will you promise to keep it dark? I'll let you into it if you'll promise."

Study No. 6 gazed at him. It was clear to them now that either Trimble knew, or thought that he knew. It looked as if that munificent tea in No. 10 Study had been a sheer waste. Baggy was bursting to tell what he knew.

"Promise that it won't go any further, and I'll tell you," he said. He could scarcely keep it in, even without waiting for that promise.

"O.K." said Blake. "If you can tell us, we'll keep it dark, so far as that goes we'll jolly well handle the rotters on our own."

"Well, who was it, then?" growled Herries, least impressed of the four by the fat Baggy.

"Yaas, wather."

"There were three of them—!" said Baggy.

"Ancient history," said Dig, "All the school knows that."

"But you'd never guess who were the three!" grinned Baggy, Railton wouldn't! Kildare wouldn't! You wouldn't. Just about the last chaps in the House that anybody would think of."

"Well, who?" snapped Blake.

Trimble came a little nearer, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"What about Tom Merry?" he breathed.

Blake and Herries and Digby jumped, detaching themselves from the rim of the fountain. Arthur Augustus's eyeglass dropped to the end of its cord. They had not known or guessed what name they were about to hear: but the name of Tom Merry was about the last they would have expected. They stared at Baggy dumb-founded.

Trimble grinned from ear to ear, much gratified by the impression he had made. Never had four fellows at St. Jim's been so astonished.

Blake found his voice.

"Tom Merry!" he repeated, "Did you say Tom Merry?"

"He, he, he! I jolly well did!" chuckled Baggy, "And his pals, Manners and Lowther, were the other two."

"Bai Jove!"

"Surprised you, what?" grinned Baggy, "You'd never have guessed, would you?"

"You fat rotter—"

"Eh?"

"Pulling our leg all the time," said Herries, "I knew he was."

"Yaas, wather! Twimble, you uttably wotten wapsallion—"

"You fat fibbing fraud!" said Digby, "Do you think you can pull our leg to that extent?"

"Eh? It's true!" said Trimble, "I tell you I jolly well know—"

"True?" repeated Blake, "You fat worm, I don't believe you could tell the truth if you tried—not that you ever tried."

For a moment, Study No. 6 had been astonished: indeed astounded. But astonishment in their faces gave place to disbelief—utter disbelief. Not for a moment did they dream of believing a word of it. Baggy Trimble was well known to be a reckless fibber—and this seemed, to Study No. 6, the most reckless of all his many fibs. He could hardly have given unlikelier names.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a deep breath, "That fat wottah is makin' out that it was Tom Mewwy and his fwiends! The uttah wat—"

"Look here, D'Arcy, I tell you—"

"Do not address me, Twimble! I wefuse to be addressed by such an uttah wottah. If you speak to me again I will smack your head."

"Look here, Blake, it's true—" gasped Trimble, rather dismayed by this reception of his thrilling secret, "I tell you I know—I heard—"

"Collar him!" said Blake, "You fat fibber, if you try starting a yarn like that about Tom Merry, you'll be kicked by every fellow in the House. And we'll jolly well duck your head in the fountain to begin with."

"Good egg!" said Herries, heartily.

"Bag the fat tick!" breathed Dig.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Baggy, as he realised that his thrilling secret had recoiled, like a boomerang, on his own fat head, would have bolted. But he had no chance to bolt. Study No. 6 were all round him: and four pairs of hands grasped the fat Baggy, and grasped him hard.

"I say—leggo!" yelled Baggy, in great alarm.

"Duck him!"

"What-ho!"

Those four pairs of hands swept Baggy Trimble off his feet.

He spluttered wildly as he was jerked up over the fountain's rim, and saw in the water the reflection of the podgiest and least handsome face at St. Jim's. But it was only for a moment that he saw that unprepossessing reflection. Then his head went in, with a splash.

"Groooooooooooooogh!"

Splash!

"Wurrrrrrrggh!"

Baggy's fat face came up, streaming. He spluttered and sputtered and stuttered frantically, as the water ran down his fat neck.

"Urrrrrrrrrr!"

"Now go and spin your yarns to fellows who are fatheads enough to believe them," growled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Urrrrggh! Wurrrgh! Gurrrrrggh!"

Blake and Co. walked away, leaving the fat Baggy sprawling over the rim of the fountain. He rolled off it, and stood in a pool of water, gasping and spluttering. Gasping and spluttering, and spluttering and gasping, Baggy tottered away, in search of a towel, wet and dripping and dismal—and no doubt wishing, by that time, that he had given his fat chin a rest, and kept his thrilling secret to himself!

A Knock for Knox!

GERALD KNOX, of the Sixth Form, turned off the light in his study. Eleven strokes had sounded from the clock-tower. It was a very late hour: and all, or almost all, of St. Jim's slept. Common-room was closed, though possibly one or two masters might still be up, in their studies.

The Sixth were not bound by "Lights out" like lower Forms. Any Sixth-Form man was at liberty to sit up late in his study, if the spirit moved him so to do: and senior men who had "swotting" to do, did sometimes sit up over their books. Gerald Knox, certainly, was not likely to sit up late swotting over Latin or Greek. But on this particular Saturday night he was still up at eleven o'clock, for reasons of his own: yawning over a novel though he had Thucydides on his study table to meet any eye that might, perhaps, glance in. Nobody was likely to look in, but a fellow like Knox, who was accustomed to kicking over the traces, had to be very careful.

But at eleven o'clock, he threw aside his novel, and turned out his light. He stepped quietly to the door and without a sound turned the key in the lock. If, by a remote chance, anyone came to that door while he was absent, his absence would not come to light. And Knox was going to be absent.

Baggy Trimble's prying and tattling had made it too risky for the black sheep of the Sixth to get out on Thursday night, as he had planned. Always wary, he had allowed another night to elapse. Now he was going. His sporting friends at the Green Man were going to see him to-night.

Many of St. Jim's fellows were puzzled to guess how and why Kildare had been on the spot, near Masters' gate, when he had been "bagged" by hands unknown. But Knox fancied that he could guess—Kildare had heard something of Trimble's tattle, and had gone there to ascertain whether there was any-

thing in it. He was glad that he had been too wary to make the venture. As it had turned out, Kildare had had ample proof that he was not out of the House: which made it all the safer for a later venture. To-night all was safe.

He shifted the blind at his window, and looked out, from the dark study, into the summer night. Six-Form studies were on the ground floor: an easy drop. Knox was going to drop quietly from that window, as he had done many a time before. But he watched for several long minutes before he stirred. He had left it very late, to make sure that the coast would be clear: and he had no doubt that it was clear. But he was very cautious, all the same. The penalty for what he was doing was the "sack" short and sharp, if he was discovered: and he could not afford to take risks.

But all was silent and still. And at length he pushed up the lower sash, and clambered through. On the broad stone sill, he lingered for a moment to pull down the sash, leaving it an inch up for his return. Then he dropped lightly to the ground.

The summer stars glimmered in the sky. Knox kept in the shadow of walls and trees, as much as he could, as he crept away. He looked back, from a little distance, to see whether any windows were still lighted: and scowled as he caught a gleam from a corner of the blind in Mr. Railton's study. Railton was still up. Knox would have preferred his house-master to be asleep in bed just then. The sportsman of the Sixth crept on: relieved when he stepped into the black shadow of the trees close by Masters' gate. Railton, certainly, was not likely to look from his window at that hour: but the skulking black sheep was glad to get out of the starlight.

It was deeply shadowy under the old elms by the wicket-gate. Knox, as he stepped into the shadow, remembered how Kildare had done the same a couple of nights ago, and grinned at the recollection. The mysterious "baggers" had never been found, and Knox, like the rest of St. Jim's, had wondered a good deal who they could possibly be. He was by no means sorry that they had "bagged" the head-prefect, whom he did not like, and who had given him a "jaw" on the subject of pulling a Fourth-Form man's ear.

But the grin suddenly faded off his face, at a sound close at hand. He gave a violent start, staring round into the deep shadows.

He had not doubted—he could not doubt—that he was alone there. Who else could be up, at that hour? But that sound of a stealthy movement under the shadowy branches told a different story.

His heart thumped.

Could it be possible that Kildare was there again—on the watch? It was a terrifying thought. Who was lurking there in the gloom?

But it could not be that. Kildare had gone down to that gate on Thursday night, because he had had a reason. He had no reason to go there again on Saturday night. Neither was he the fellow to lurk in the shadows, watching—he would not be lurking there—he would be out in the open, nailing the breaker of bounds, if it were Kildare.

It was not Kildare, or anyone in authority. Knox was relieved to feel assured of that. But who was it—and why?

The raggers again—some bunch of reckless juniors out of their House after lights out, as it had been last time. That was more likely.

Knox gritted his teeth.

He stared about him in the gloom, a stealthy creeping sound coming to his ears as he stared. Alarmed and uneasy, he hardly knew whether to go on or retreat. Certainly he did not want to be "bagged" as Kildare had been: but on the other hand, he did not want to give up his sporting excursion.

If it were a bunch of larking juniors, his duty as a prefect was to "run in" those juniors, and take them to their house-master. But Knox had very good reasons for not wishing to make any disturbance at that hour, or to draw attention to his absence from the House: and he was never a "whale" on duty at any time. He simply did not know what to do—and as he stood puzzled and enraged and hesitating, it happened! A shadowy, burly figure rushed suddenly, and Knox jumped back too late. His brain almost swam as he saw, dim as it was, that it was a burly man who rushed at him—with a battered bowler hat jammed down on his head. Certainly it was nobody belonging to St. Jim's, some tramp, perhaps, who had crept in at that late hour for anything that he could lay thievish hands on.

But Knox had no time to surmise who and what it could be. He jumped back, and would have fled, in sheer terror, but he had no time. A knuckly fist crashed in his face, drawing a crimson spurt from his nose, and he went over backwards, crashing on the earth.

Before he could stir again, a knee was planted on his chest, keeping him down. He squirmed under that pinning knee in terror and bewilderment, hardly conscious of the crimson stream from his nose.

"Don't you make a row!" came a low, harsh, hissing voice,

"If you ain't the cove I want, I ain't going to 'urt you! But keep quiet, blow you, or you get it 'ard."

"Let me up—I—I—I!" stuttered Knox.

"Didn't I say keep quiet? You want the K.O.?"

Gerald Knox most certainly did not want the K.O. He was utterly at the mercy of the burly ruffian pinning him down, and he relapsed into quavering silence.

He heard the ruffian fumbling. Then there was a scratch of a match. Dizzily it came into Knox's mind that the man, whoever he was, was there with a purpose: there was someone at the school against whom he had a grudge, and he fancied that Knox might be that someone! He was scratching a match to see his face.

The match glimmered. The flickering light showed up Knox's white, terrified face clearly. And it showed, to his staring, popping eyes, the face that bent over him: a hard ugly face, with the left eye black as the ace of spades—the blackest black eye that Knox had ever seen.

Knox had never seen that face before. And with deep relief he realised, from the expression that came over it, that he was as much a stranger to the ruffian, as the ruffian was to him. He was not the fellow—whatever that fellow was—that the mysterious nocturnal intruder wanted. He heard a muttered oath.

"You ain't 'im!" came a low growl.

Knox was deeply thankful that he was not "im".

The match went out.

"I—I—I say—let me go—I—I—I!" quavered Knox.

"'Old your row, I tell you. You ain't 'im, and I've come 'ere for nothing—fat lot of good carrying on arter this, blow you! I got a good mind to give you the K.O. arter all, shoving in and spoiling a man's game, blow you."

Knox shuddered.

"Oh! Don't! I—I—I—"

"Oh, 'old your row!" growled the savage voice.

The pinning knee was withdrawn.

Knox lay gasping, shaking from head to foot. His hand went to his nose, and the red streamed over his fingers. He did not dare to rise—he lay shaking and listening, till he heard sounds that told that his assailant was scrambling over the wall, and going. From outside came a thud as the man dropped and then there was silence.

Knox sat up dizzily.

Who the man was, against whom the ruffian had a grudge

at St. Jim's, he could not begin to guess—possibly he had fallen foul of some St. Jim's fellow, who had given him that black eye. Whether it was for vengeance, or for thieving, or for both, that he had crept into the school in the dark, Knox did not know: but at any rate he was gone now.

Knox staggered to his feet.

He dabbed his streaming nose with his handkerchief, gasping for breath. He was utterly shaken by that strange and terrifying encounter in the dark. He was not thinking of carrying on with his plans for that night now—he was in no mood for the sporting circle at the Green Man. The mere thought of going out into the dark lanes, where that awful ruffian with the black eye might be lurking, chilled him. He was only anxious to get back into his room, with the window shut and fastened, after what had happened. With unsteady steps, and his handkerchief to his nose, he crept away towards the School House. He cast startled, scared glances round him, as he crept: and fairly gasped with relief when he found himself under his study window again. He scrambled in, shut the window, fastened the catch, and sank into a chair in the dark, limp.

It was some time before, having carefully covered the window with the blind, he turned on the light. Looking into the mirror, he saw a pale, scared, ghastly face, streaked and spotted with red from his streaming nose.

For quite a long time, Gerald Knox bathed that bulbous nose over his wash-stand. The crimson ceased to flow, at last: but it was very red and swollen when Knox, at last went to bed—quite certain to draw attention and evoke comment on the morrow.

It was likely to be long before that nose was normal again. And it was likely to be longer before the sporting circle at the Green Man saw anything of Gerald Knox after lights out at night. For that term, at least, the black sheep of the Sixth had had enough—and a little more than enough—of breaking bounds at night!

A Shock for Arthur Augustus!

"YAROOH!" roared Baggy Trimble.

It was quite a sudden roar. The impact of a foot on his plump trousers took Baggy by surprise—rather painful surprise.

It was after third school on Monday. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, sauntering out of the House, came on a group in the quad: his eyeglass turning with disdain on Baggy Trimble, who was in the group. Five or six of the Fourth Form were listening to Trimble. Dick Julian, Roylance, Lumley-Lumley, and one or two others. Arthur Augustus would have passed the group with little heed, had not Dick Julian's voice reached his ears, answering something that the fat Baggy had said.

"Tom Merry? Rot! Better not say so where he can hear you, you fat ass."

"Mind, it's a secret!" burred Baggy, "I'm just telling you fellows, but it's to go no further, of course. I don't want to give him away. But I can jolly well tell you—!"

"Rubbish! As if Tom Merry would rag old Kildare—"

"I tell you—!"

Baggy got no further than that. It was at that point that Arthur Augustus weighed in, stepping towards the fat Baggy, and landing a foot on his trousers. He landed it with considerable force.

Thus interrupted, Baggy Trimble roared, instead of continuing his remarks. There was a laugh from the other juniors, as Baggy spun round, with a glare of wrath at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Look here, what are you kicking me for?" roared Baggy, "Think you can kick a fellow, you smudge?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, sternly, "You are wepeatin' that wotten yarn you told us on Saturday, Trimble."

You are a wotten fibbin' wat! Turn wound and I will kick you again."

Baggy Trimble did not turn round: apparently having no desire to be kicked again. He backed away instead.

"I was only telling these fellows," he howled, "I ain't giving Tom Merry away, am I? They ain't going to tell Kildare."

"Dwy up, you wottah." Arthur Augustus glanced round at the juniors, "I twust you fellows do not believe a word of Twimble's wotten yarn about Tom Mewwy."

"Hardly, said Julian.

"Not a giddy syllable!" said Lumley-Lumley, "Jolly good idea to boot him. Let's all do the same."

"Good egg!" grinned Roylance, "Let's."

"I tell you—!" howled Baggy, indignantly.

"Bai Jove! Do you venchah to wepeat that yarn, Trimble, aftah I have kicked you for it?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"It's jolly well true," hooted Trimble, "I ain't giving Tom Merry away, but it's jolly well true. And—wow! Leggo!"

Arthur Augustus, in great wrath, made a stride at the fat Baggy, and grasped him by the collar. Trimble gave a howl of apprehension.

"Ow! Leago! Leago my collar, D'Arcy—"

"I shall not leave go your collar, Twimble. I am goin' to take you to Tom Mewwy, to wepeat your wotten yarn in his pwesence," said Arthur Augustus, sternly, "Come along at once—I shall kick you vewy hard if you do not."

Trimble blinked at him.

"Take me to Tom Merry!" he repeated, "I'll go to Tom Merry fast enough, if you like. What do I care?"

"I wather think you will care, when Tom has heard your wotten yarn, and deals with you as you deserve, you fat wottah."

"He, he, he!"

"Bai Jove! What are you cacklin' at, Twimble "

"He, he, he!" chuckled Trimble, "I'll repeat it to Tom Merry, if you like. Why shouldn't I? He, he, he!"

"I shall see that you do, you wat!" snapped Arthur Augustus: and still gripping Baggy's collar, he marched him off, towards where Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther could be seen strolling under the elms.

The group of juniors exchanged rather curious glances, as Trimble was marched off. Not one of them had believed a word of Baggy's startling story, any more than Blake and Co. had believed it on Saturday. But as Baggy was clearly willing to

face Tom Merry with it, they began to wonder.

Baggy was grinning, a fat grin, as he arrived under the elms. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther stared at him, and at Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"What on earth's this game, Gussy?" asked Tom, "What the dickens are you marching Trimble about by his collar for?"

"I have bwrought him to you, Tom Mewwy—"

"Thank you for nothing," said Tom, laughing, "I don't want him. Wouldn't take him as a gift."

"Leago my collar, D'Arcy—"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort. I am not goin' to allow you to dodge, Twimble, now I have bwrought you to Tom Mewwy."

"I ain't going to dodge—"

"Wats! Tom Mewwy, deah boy, I have bwrought this fat wascal to you to wepeat what he has been sayin' to other fellows. As you cannot have been awah of it, I wegarded it as up to me to bwing it to your notice. Now, Twimble, you wat, wepeat what you told us on Saturday, and what you were tellin' othah fellows to-day!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry. He understood now.

Monty Lowther set his lips, and Manners gave a shrug of the shoulders. It was hardly necessary for Baggy to repeat what he had said. The Terrible Three could guess easily enough. Only too clearly, the desire to impart startling information had been too strong for Trimble, and his fat chin had got out of control. The Shell fellows had wondered whether it would happen; or rather, perhaps, when it would happen. Now it had happened.

"Oh, kick him!" muttered Lowther.

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Baggy, indignantly, "I ain't said anything, except to some friends of mine. Think I'd tell Railton?"

"Will you wepeat to Tom Mewwy what you've been sayin' to othah fellows, Trimble, or are you waitin' for me to kick you?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, I don't mind," grinned Trimble, "He knows."

"Wubbish! Tom Mewwy certainly does not know what you have been sayin', or he would have kicked you all ovah St. Jim's. Wepeat it at once."

"Look here—wow! Ow! If you kick me again, D'Arcy, I'll—yaroooooh!" yelled Baggy, "Stoppit, will you? I—I say Tom Merry, I was only telling some fellows about Kildare the other night—it won't go any further, of course. Think I'd give you away to the beaks? Of course I wouldn't."

"You fat burbler," snapped Tom.

"Well, you jolly well did bag Kildare last week," protested Baggy, "I ain't going to say anything. I might mention it to a friend or two. That's all."

"That is what the fat wascal has been sayin', Tom Mewwy. He told us on Saturday and we ducked his head in the fountain."

"Good old Gussy!" said Tom.

"But now he is wepeatin' it," went on Arthur Augustus, "That is why I have bwrought him to you, deah boy. I wecommend you to give him a feahful thwashin', as a warnin' not to slandah decent fellows."

"Oh, you silly idiot!" gasped Trimble, "Tom Merry knows it's true, as he did it. The three of them did it, you silly ass."

"Bai Jove! You heah that, Tom Mewwy?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "I advise you to thwash the wottah till he cannot cwawl."

Tom Merry clenched his hand, and his eyes glinted. He was strongly tempted to act on Gussy's suggestion. Trimble gave a howl as he read the expression on his face.

"Look here, you touch me, and I'll jolly well go to Kildare!" he howled, "You keep off. You'd be jolly well sacked if the beaks knew."

Tom Merry breathed hard.

"Let him go, D'Arcy," he said, quietly, "He's not worth kicking."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—!"

"I—I ain't going to tell—" burred Baggy.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Tom, "Get out, you prying worm!"

Arthur Augustus, in sheer astonishment, released Trimble's collar. The fat Baggy lost no time in dodging away. D'Arcy hardly heeded him—his gaze was fixed in startled astonishment on the Terrible Three. For the first time, it began to dawn on his noble mind that there was something in Trimble's strange tale. But he found it hard to grasp.

"Bai Jove! I don't quite undahstand you, Tom Mewwy! Are you goin' to let Twimble cawwy on with spinnin' that yarn?"

Tom Merry did not answer. Arthur Augustus stared blankly at his clouded face. His own became rather grim in expression.

Tom Mewwy!" he said, quietly.

"Well?" said Tom, restively.

"Twimble's storwy will be all ovah the school soon, at this wate."

"Well?" repeated Tom.

"I fail to undahstand you, Tom Mewwy. Am I to undahstand," said Arthur Augustus, in his most stately manner, "that there is twuth in what Twimble has been sayin'?"

No reply.

"It is pwactically imposs to believe that it was you fellows who played that wotten twick on Kildare!" said Arthur Augustus, But—"

"Oh, give us a rest," said Monty Lowther.

"I shall certainly give you a west, Lowther, if it turns out that you fellows were the uttah wottahs who wagged old Kildare. I should certainly nevah speak to you again," said Arthur Augustus, sternly.

"That would be a treat, anyhow," remarked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Oh, drop it, D'Arcy," said Tom, "No good chinning about it."

"I wefuse to dwop it, Tom Mewwy. Will you give me your word, honest Injun, that it was not you who wagged Kildare?"

There was no answer to that. Arthur Augustus's stern brow grew sterner and sterner. He knew, now.

"Vewy well!" he said, "You wefuse to weply. I undarstand what that means. I will not tell you what I think of you—you know well enough what the whole school thinks. I only wequest you to keep your distance, and nevah to address me again!"

"Look here, you ass—"

"That is quite enough, Tom Mewwy."

With that, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned on his heel, and walked away, his noble nose in the air. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther looked at one another, expressively, and with deep feelings. Then they resumed their stroll under the elms, in not a happy silence.

19

The Only Way!

"**M**ERRY! A hundred lines!" rapped Mr. Linton.

"Oh!" stammered Tom, "Yes, sir."

"And now give attention!"

"Oh! Very well, sir."

Mr. Linton frowned, and left it at that. Several fellows in the Shell form-room glanced round at Tom Merry, wondering what was the matter with him. It was seldom that the master of the Shell had occasion to speak sharply to that member of his form.

But Tom Merry did not find it easy to fix his attention on lessons that afternoon. Neither did Manners nor Lowther. They had a weight on their minds which would not be denied. In spite of efforts, their thoughts would wander to the extremely bad spot in which they were placed. Four days had elapsed since the mysterious ragging and bagging episode, and no discovery had been made by masters or prefects. But the Terrible Three could not help feeling that they were on the edge of discovery.

Baggy Trimble of the Fourth knew. And they realised that that could only mean that sooner or later all St. Jim's would know.

Baggy, according to his lights, was no sneak. Even Baggy was not the man for that. But he was an incurable babbler and tattler, and he simply could not keep what he knew to himself. Already the chums of the Shell had noticed several fellows glancing at them curiously and rather queerly: and could guess that they had heard something from Trimble. That story, once started, was sure to spread, and it could only be a matter of time before it reached official ears. Nobody would deliberately "tell": but careless words and allusions would be heard: it was bound to come out, since Trimble knew.

With such a spot of trouble on their minds the three were not

likely to be very attentive in class—even Manners, the most studious fellow in the form, failed to give Mr. Linton satisfaction for once.

They were glad and relieved when class was over, and they were able to get out. As they walked in the quad, they caught sight of Baggy Trimble in the distance, busily chattering to a group of Fourth and Third fellows. They could guess the topic.

"Better talk this over, you fellows, and decide what's to be done," said Tom Merry, breaking the long silence, "This can't go on."

"It can't!" agreed Manners.

"But-what—?" asked Lowther

"It's a question of grasping the nettle," said Tom, "It's got to come out. The beaks will get on to it sooner or later. We shall be called up to the Head and questioned, and that will be the finish."

"We've got to face it," said Manners, with a nod.

"What about owning up, instead of waiting to be spotted?" said Tom.

"Asking for the sack!" said Lowther.

"It will get it off our minds. And we're in a better position if we own up now. After all, it was a mistake in the dark—we never meant to touch Kildare. That will count, even if it was another pre we were after. Look here, you men, I think the best thing now is to go straight to Kildare and tell him the whole story, and chance it."

"But—!" said Monty Lowther, uneasily.

"It's bound to come to it before long, old chap."

"I—I suppose so! It was all my fault!" muttered Lowther, "I was an ass—"

"You were!" agreed Tom, with a faint smile, "But never mind that now. We're all in this together, and things can't be worse, and may be better, if we go to Kildare and own up. You agree, Manners?"

"Quite!" said Manners.

"Oh, all right!" sighed Monty Lowther, "Let's. When shall we go to Kildare?"

"Now!" said Tom, "Strike the iron while it's hot, what? Not much good hanging it out."

Three faces were very serious, as they went into the School House. That it was the best thing they could do, in the troublesome circumstances, they agreed. But the prospect was grim. However, their minds were made up, and they went to the Sixth-

Form studies and tapped at Kildare's door.

There was no reply to that tap. Tom Merry opened the door. The study was vacant. Kildare was not there.

"Oh, rotten!" muttered Tom, "I'd like to get it over. Let's draw the Prefect's Room—I daresay he's there."

They went along to the Prefects' Room. Five or six Sixth-Formers were in that apartment, but Kildare was not among them. Tom Merry called to Darrell of the Sixth

"We're looking for Kildare, Darrell! Know where he is?"

"Gone to Wayland," answered Darrell, "He went out by this door a few minutes ago—might be still in the quad—"

"Oh! Thanks!"

The three juniors hurried out. They cut out of the House at a run. Now that they had made up their minds, they felt a natural anxiety to get it over, and know the worst. It was tantalizing that Kildare had gone out just when they wanted him to hear them.

"There he is!" said Tom Merry, breathlessly, as they sighted the tall figure of the captain of St. Jim's in the distance, just disappearing through the old stone gate. "Going out—" Kildare disappeared from sight, as he was speaking. "I—I suppose we can't cut after him, and tell him now—"

"Hardly," said Manners.

"We shall have to wait till he comes back from Wayland," said Lowther. "Jolly old sword of Damocles hanging over our heads for an hour or two!"

"He won't be back much before call-over, as he's walking," said Tom, "I—I suppose we've got to wait. We can go to his study after roll—bound to find him then."

"After all, there's no hurry," said Manners, "We've kept it dark for four days, and a couple more hours won't matter much."

"Um! No! Like to get it over, though," said Lowther.

But they had to wait, there was no help for that. Kildare of the Sixth, as he swung along with his vigorous strides on the tow-path, by the bank of the shining Ryll, towards Wayland, little guessed how anxious three juniors of his House were to see him.

At Last !

"BLOW me!"

The man in the battered bowler hat, sprawling in the shade of a tree by the river, sucking at a foul pipe, breathed the words in an under-tone. One of his eyes was half-closed, and black as the ace of spades: but the other glittered and glinted at the figure approaching from the distance.

Mr. Guffin sat up in the grass under the tree.

"Blow me!" he repeated, "That covey! That covey what give me this eye! Blow me! You're ja luck, Bill!"

Mr. Guffin grinned: an unpleasant grin. He cast a quick look round him. The spot was as lonely as the ruffian could have desired. Mr. Guffin's keenest wish, since he had felt the weight of Eric Kildare's fist the week before, had been to meet that schoolboy on a dark night, with a stick in his hand. It was not night, and it was not dark: but it was solitary, which was equally favourable for Bill Guffin, and he had a thick stick lying across his knees. His look was fairly gloating as he watched the captain of St. Jim's coming.

A mile from the school, the tow-path was lonely enough. On one side rolled the shining Ryll, deep below a steep bank, gleaming in the summer sunshine: on the other were the thick shades of Wayland Wood. And no one was in sight in either direction save the tall handsome schoolboy on whom Mr. Guffin's glittering eye was fixed.

Kildare, as he came swinging along, was thinking of anything but the footpad whose eye he had blackened in the wood nearly a week ago. He was thinking chiefly of a coming cricket match between the St. Jim's first-eleven and Wayland Ramblers: and so far from thinking of Bill Guffin, he had quite forgotten his

dingy existence. From the distance he noticed what looked like a tramp sprawling under the shady tree, but without heeding. And Guffin, after a long stare at him, turned his head away, so that Kildare should not see his face as he came. He did not want his intended victim to take the alarm, before it was too late!

Kildare came on: glancing carelessly at the tramp as he was passing him. He gave a little start of surprise, as the man suddenly leaped to his feet, and leaped into his path, the cudgel in his hand.

"What—!" ejaculated Kildare. He started back a pace.

Bill grinned at him.

"Know me agin, guvnor?" he chuckled.

Kildare, as he scanned the hard unshaven face, knew him again. He eyed the man coolly and warily.

"Yes, I know you again," he assented, "What do you want? Another eye to match that one?"

"You won't give me another eye like this 'ere in a 'urry, young covey," said Bill between his tobacco-stained teeth, "I got a stick in me 'and this time."

Kildare drew a deep breath. He was not scared in the very least: but he knew that he was in a very bad spot. On equal terms he would willingly have given the ruffian the "mixture as before." But the stick in Guffin's hand made all the difference: and only too clearly he was ready to use it.

"I been looking for a chance like this 'ere," said Guffin, "Jest 'anging round for days, looking for it! Why, I got into your school one night, I did, thinking I might nose you out, and 'ad my trouble for my pains. But I fancy I've got you where I want you now, young covey! Nobody ever gives Bill Guffin a black eye without 'earing of it afterwards."

Kildare did not reply, but he watched the ruffian warily.

He backed away another pace, as Guffin came closer. The ruffian, grinning, made a lash with the stick, and the St. Jim's captain backed again, and Bill followed him up, crowding him towards the edge of the tow-path, over the steep bank that dropped to the water six or seven feet below.

"You got it coming!" he jeered, "You give me this black eye—He crowded on again.

"Stand back, you rascal!" rapped Kildare.

"Not 'arf!" grinned Bill, "You got a good punch, young covey, and don't I know it, but it won't 'elp you much agin this 'ere stick. You got it coming! If I don't lather you black and blue, till

your school-master won't know you, my name ain't Bill Guffin! Why if it wasn't for the law, I'd break every bone in your body for giving me this 'ere eye. But you got such a wallop coming, young covey, you won't find it easy to crawl 'ome arterwards."

He pressed on, with a flourish of the stick, the captain of St. Jim's backing away to elude a lash. But on the verge of the steep bank of the Ryll he had to stop. Bill Guffin crowded on, and Kildare, in sheer desperation, leaped at him, taking his chance of the cudgel, and lashing out fiercely with his fist.

"Blow me!" gasped Bill, as Kildare's knuckles crashed on his unshaven chin, and for a moment he staggered.

But the next, the cudgel was crashing at Kildare. The St. Jim's captain just dodged it with his head, but it struck his arm and he gave a sharp cry, as his arm dropped to his side, almost paralysed by the blow.

"Gotcher!" breathed Bill.

He closed in on the St. Jim's captain, and Kildare, with one arm hanging powerless, struck with the other. But a crack on the side of his head made him stagger: and then the ruffian's grasp was on him, and he was flung headlong to the earth.

"Now—!" breathed Bill Guffin.

Kildare, half-stunned, lay helpless: and over him bent the ruffian, stick in hand: and blow after blow descended with cruel force. It was Bill Guffin's turn, this time, and the ruffian fairly let himself go—too maliciously intent on his vengeance to look round him, or to hear the sound of running feet on the grassy tow-path.

D'Arcy Does It !

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY turned up his nose.

His noble eye gleamed with scorn behind his eyeglass.

Three Shell fellows watched that operation, with deep feelings.

Arthur Augustus did not look at them. He did not seem to see them. He ignored their existence—except for the turning up of his aristocratic nose, and the gleam of scorn in his aristocratic eye. The very picture of disdain, he was passing Tom Merry and Co. by, like the idle wind which he regarded not.

"D'Arcy, you ass—"

"Gussy, you fathead—"

"Gustavus, you silly chump—!"

Three fellows spoke at once.

Then Arthur Augustus paused. His eyeglass was brought to bear on Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, with ineffable scorn.

"Did you address me?" he inquired, with lofty distance.

"Yes, ass!"

"Yes, fathead!"

"Yes, image!"

"Then pway do nothin' of the kind, deah boys—I mean, you wottahs!" amended Arthur Augustus, hastily, "I did not mean to say deah boys—I meant to say wottahs and wapscallions. I wegard you with despision—I mean contempt—uttah contempt! I wefuse to wecognize you."

"Anything biting you?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Off your onions?" asked Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Look here, Gussy—!" said Tom Merry.

"I am Gussy to my fwriends," said Arthur Augustus, icily,

"and I do not wegard you wottahs as fwiends. Pway keep your distance."

"You silly ass, listen to me—"

"I wefuse to listen to you, Tom Mewwy! I wefuse to know you! I have nothin' to say to the wottahs who wagged old Kildare! I have a vewy gweat mind to give you all thwee a feahful thwashin' all wound—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"But I shall tweat you with scorn!" said Arthur Augustus, "You wagged old Kildare—bagged his nappah in a bag of soot, bai Jove—and I wegard you as a cweu of weckless wuffians. Ewevy man at St. Jim's will be down on you when it gets wound—even the New House boundahs will be down on you: and if you are sacked for it, so much the bettah! Wats!"

Having thus made his noble opinion clear, Arthur Augustus, his nose still turned up, walked on, with stately dignity.

That stately dignity was a little disconcerted, however, as three pairs of hands grasped him, and sat him down, suddenly, in the quad. He sat on Sussex with a loud bump, and a louder yell.

"Yawoooooooooooooh!"

A dozen fellows looked round, from various directions. Blake and Herries and Digby came up at a run. Knox of the Sixth, lounging under the elms, stared across at the juniors, frowning. Figgins and Co. came along. But Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther did not heed any of them. Their attention was fixed on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Now, you blithering burbling bletherer—!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Ow! wow! You wuffians—"

"You pie-faced tailor's dummy—!" hissed Lowther.

"Ow! wow! You wottahs—"

"You chuckle-headed cuckoo—!" said Manners.

"Gwoogh! I will thwash you all wound!" gasped Arthur Augustus, "You uttah wottahs, I—I—I—"

"Now listen to me!" hooted Tom Merry, as Arthur Augustus, sitting on Sussex, groped for the eyeglass that was fluttering at the end of its cord, "It's true that we bagged Kildare that night—"

"I wegard you as a wottah for doin' so Tom Mewwy, and as soon as I get up I am goin' to punch your cheeky head—"

"But it was a mistake!" shrieked Tom.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Do you think we'd have ragged old Kildare if we could have helped it, you burbling bandersnatch!" howled Monty Lowther,

"It was in the dark, and we took him for somebody else—"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Here, what's this game?" demanded Jack Blake, as he arrived on the spot, "You can't sling the one and only about like a sack of coke."

"I've a jolly good mind to bang his silly head," growled Tom Merry, "and I would, if I thought I could bang any sense into it."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Fathead!"

Arthur Augustus tottered to his feet. He was gasping for breath, and his trousers were dusty: though, for once, the swell of St. Jim's did not heed that circumstance.

"But what's Gussy been doing?" asked Herries.

"Turning up his silly nose at his elders and betters," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"But what—?" asked Digby.

Tom Merry gave an angry snort.

"He's heard from Trimble that we bagged Kildare that night," he said, "and he hasn't sense enough to understand that if we did, it was an accident—we didn't know who it was, in the dark."

"You!" gasped Blake.

"We were after another man—and goodness knows how Kildare got there instead! That's all! We never knew till the next morning that it was Kildare we had bagged! Understand now?" snapped Tom.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Bai Jove! You must have been a set of vewy silly asses to get the w'ong man," said Arthur Augustus.

"Think we're cats to see in the dark?" yelled Lowther, "We never even dreamed that Kildare was out of the House. Why should we?"

"Oh, gum!" exclaimed Blake, "Better not shout it out here, you men—whether it was a mistake or not, you're for it, if it gets to the beaks."

"It will get to the beaks all right," growled Tom, "That fat porker Trimble nosed it out, and he's told half the school already. We're going to Kildare to own up as soon as he comes back from Wayland. And if that perishing image turns up his silly nose at me again, I'll push it through the back of his silly head!"

"I should uttably wefuse to have my nose pushed through the

back of my head, Tom Mewwy. Howevah, now you have explained that it was a mistake, and you did not mean to wag old Kildare, of course it is all wight."

"Is it?" grunted Tom.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, reassuringly, "If you had wagged old Kildare on purpose, I could only wegard you with contempt and scorn, and should certainly keep you at a distance. But any fellow might make a mistake, and if you did not mean it for Kildare, of course it is all wight—I shall not wegard you with scorn, and I shall westore you to my fwiendship!" added Arthur Augustus, graciously.

"I breathe again!" said Monty Lowther.

At the same time, you must have been vewy silly ass, to collah old Kildare, and wag him, even if you meant it for somebody else, and—"

"Shush!" breathed Blake suddenly.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Ware pre's."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

But it was too late—much too late. Knox of the Sixth was there, and he had heard. He fixed his eyes grimly on the Terrible Three, as a sudden silence fell on the crowd of juniors.

"So it was you, Merry!" he said "You three! I shall report this to your house-master, of course."

Tom Merry did not reply. The game was up now, with a vengeance. "Owning up" had been put off too late. Knox walked away to the House, evidently to report that unexpected discovery to Mr. Railton. A silent crowd of juniors watched him go. Arthur Augustus broke the silence at last.

"Sowwy, Tom Mewwy, old chap," he said.

"O.K.," said Tom, as cheerfully as he could. "It had to come!" He drew a deep breath, "But there's still a shot in the locker—come on you two."

"What—?" asked Manners and Lowther together.

"Come on," said Tom.

"Oh, all right."

They followed him, as he hurried away to the gates. The other fellows were left in a buzz of excitement; and it was not long before all St. Jim's knew who had 'bagged' Kildare—Tom Merry's secret was a secret no longer. But there was, Tom hoped at least, still a shot in the locker.

Unexpected !

“TOM—”

“What—?”

“We’re going after Kildare,” said Tom, quietly, “Don’t you see? We were going to own up—we’d made up our minds about that, only Kildare was walking over to Wayland. But now—”

“Oh!” said Monty Lowther. He nodded. “If we get to him first—”

“That’s it!” said Tom, “We’re in for an awful row—there’s no getting round that. But if we get Kildare to hear our story first, it may do us some good. He will believe it was a mistake in the dark, anyway—and that will be something. Kildare isn’t a fellow like Knox—he will take our word about that. And Railton and the Head may go easier with fellows who’ve owned up. We’d settled that already.”

“Um!” said Manners. “Not much of a hope, old man, now that Knox is going to Railton with his dashed report. But—”

“But it’s all that’s left,” said Monty Lowther, “Pity we couldn’t get in a bit earlier with our jolly old confession. But better late than never. If we get Kildare to believe that it was all a mistake, it mayn’t come to the worst.”

“I’m sure that he will believe that all right,” said Tom.

“Let’s hope so, at least. He might even put in a word with the Head for us, if he got that clear,” said Lowther hopefully.

“Um!” said Manners again. He did not seem to share Monty’s hopefulness to any great extent. “He got the sooty bag, you see! Still, it may do some good, if Kildare hears our story first. But—”

“But what?” asked Tom, rather impatiently, “It’s the only shot in the locker, anyway.”

"Oh, yes! But Kildare's half-way to Wayland by this time," said Manners.

"He's walking, and we can sprint! We shall catch him all right before he gets to Wayland."

"Yes, but—"

"Not a lot of time for butting, if we're going to catch Kildare and spin our yarn first, Manners," said Lowther.

"Do let a fellow speak," said Manners, "Kildare is half-way to Wayland by this time as I said, and we don't know which way he went."

"Oh!" said Tom. Outside the school gates, the three came to a halt. This was an overlooked difficulty.

Getting to Kildare, and getting him to hear what they had to say, before the matter came up to the Head, was obviously a good move. It was, as Tom said, the last shot in the locker. But it was fairly certain that Kildare was at least a mile away by that time: and there were several ways he might have taken, and no clue.

"Most likely the footpath through the wood," said Lowther, slowly.

"Might have gone by the road," said Manners.

"Or the tow-path," said Tom.

The hapless juniors looked at one another. There simply was no telling which way Kildare had gone. Likely enough he had walked through the wood—a very pleasant walk in the summer. Equally likely, he might have gone by the tow-path, also a very pleasant walk by the shining Ryll. Yet he might have taken the road, if he wanted to save time.

"Flummoxed!" said Monty Lowther.

"Not quite!" said Tom, "We'd rather see him all together, as we're all in it—but one of us can tell him all right. You cut through the wood, Manners—you take the road, Monty—and I'll sprint up the tow-path. One of us will be bound to catch him."

Manners and Lowther nodded. Evidently, it was the only way in the circumstances, and they settled upon it at once. Without further debate, they separated: Lowther going along the road at a trot, Manners turning into the footpath through Wayland Wood, and Tom Merry cutting across to the tow-path by the Ryll.

Several St. Jim's fellows, in boats or on the tow-path, stared at Tom Merry, as he sprinted. Talbot of the Shell called to him, but he did not delay to answer. There was no time to lose. Kildare, if he had taken that path, was a long way ahead, and moments were precious.

At a distance from the school, no more St. Jim's fellows were

to be seen. Tom Merry covered a mile with a speed he had seldom equalled on the cinder path. Here the tow-path was solitary enough, with the rippling Ryll on one hand, the shady woods on the other. Tom Merry's eyes were eagerly alert for a glimpse of Kildare's tall form ahead of him. But the Ryll was a winding stream, and every now and then masses of trees shut off the view ahead.

Every time he rounded a bend, Tom hoped to catch sight of Kildare in advance. Of one thing he was certain: if that was the path Kildare had taken, he would overtake him long before he reached Wayland. He kept up a rapid trot without a pause. And, coming round a cluster of trees, into a long straight stretch by the river, he suddenly sighted the captain of St. Jim's—and his eyes bulged at what he saw.

He had expected to see him, if he saw him at all, striding along the river bank. But that was not how he saw him. Far ahead of him, in the grass near the water's margin, Kildare of the Sixth lay sprawling on the earth, and over him bent a figure that Tom Merry remembered and knew—that of the footpad with the black eye. And the ruffian was raining blows with a cudgel upon the helpless Sixth-Former in the grass.

"Oh!" panted Tom.

For a second, he could hardly believe his eyes. Then he was racing on with desperate speed.

The object he had in mind was forgotten now. His own spot of trouble vanished from his thoughts. He was thinking only of helping the victim of the footpad's brutal attack. Neither did it occur to him that a junior schoolboy had little chance against a burly ruffian armed with a cudgel. He tore on, his feet hardly seeming to touch the grass as he tore.

He could hear the sound of the cruel blows as they fell. But the grass deadened his own footfalls, and Bill Guffin heard nothing, and did not look round. A dozen savage lashes had fallen, when Tom Merry, breathless, panting, reached him. Without hesitation he hurled himself on the ruffian, snatched at the cudgel that was about to fall again, and tore it from Guffin's hand, over his back.

There was a startled howl from the ruffian, taken utterly by surprise. He whirled round on his unexpected assailant.

"Blow me!" he gasped, "Wot—!"

Tom Merry sprang back, the cudgel in his grasp. Bill Guffin leaped up, his face red with rage, his single available eye blazing. Kildare made an effort to rise, but he sank back again. He was too spent to be able to aid his rescuer, for the moment at least.

"You, you young 'ound!" breathed Bill Guffin, as he recognized Tom. He shot a swift glance along the tow-path, to ascertain whether others were coming. But there was no one to be seen. Tom backed away as the ruffian came at him.

Kildare with a panting effort, raised himself on his elbow. He was as surprised as Bill Guffin by Tom Merry's sudden and unexpected arrival on the scene. He stared on dizzily at what followed, striving to get on his feet.

With a clenched fist that looked like a leg of mutton, Bill Guffin rushed at the St. Jim's junior. Tom Merry, with set teeth, stood grimly up to the rush. By good fortune, the cudgel was in his hand now, and he was ready to use it. With a steady hand, and with all his strength, he struck, and Bill uttered a bellow like a bull as he received the blow on his battered bowler, which was crushed and knocked from his tousled head. But the leg-of-mutton fist swept out, and crashed into Tom Merry's face, sending him staggering.

But he kept his feet. Dazed and dizzy from the blow, he still faced up to the ruffian, and as Bill Guffin came on, struck again with the cudgel, this time landing it fair and square on the tousled head. It was a terrific swipe, and the ruffian went down under it like an ox.

Tom Merry peered at him, with spinning brain. Both his eyes were blackening, though he was hardly aware of it. He was ready for the ruffian, if he came on again, dizzy as he was from that crashing punch.

But Bill Guffin did not come on again. That terrific crash on his tousled head had stunned him, and he lay like a log in the grass, and did not stir. Tom stood unsteadily, with earth and sky spinning round him. But he strove to pull himself together.

"Kildare!" he panted.

The St. Jim's captain dragged himself to his feet.

"Tom Merry! You plucky kid! All right now—the brute's knocked out! You poor kid, you've had a fearful knock—"

"It's all right—I—I'm all right, Kildare—I—I—" Tom's voice trailed away. He could hardly see with his blackening eyes, and his head was reeling. Only Kildare's hand on his shoulder kept him from falling.

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Spot of Luck !

"SEEN Tom Merry?"

"Yaas, wathah !"

"Then he's come in?"

"He's come in all wight."

Manners and Lowther came in rather breathlessly at the school gates. They had had their run for nothing. Neither of them had seen anything of Kildare, either on the road or in the wood, and they had to conclude that he had gone by the tow-path, and could only hope that Tom would have better luck. On their return they met at the gates, and came in together: and asked for news of Tom from the first fellow they met: who happened to be Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form. Arthur Augustus eyed them rather curiously through his celebrated monocle.

"I twust that you fellows haven't been wowin'," he said.

"No, ass !" grunted Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Where's Tom now?" asked Manners.

"In the House ! He came in with Kildare—"

"With Kildare?" repeated Manners, "Kildare was going to Wayland—"

"Was he? Well, he came in with Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, "Poor old Tom looked as if he needed a little help. I am vewy glad to heah that you have not been wowin', but who gave Tom Mewwy those black eyes?"

"Black eyes !" repeated Lowther, blankly, and Manners stared.

"Yaas, wathah ! Two vewy black eyes," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head, "I have nevah seen such a paih of black eyes befoah ! Somebody must have given him a feahful punch. As you

went out togethah, I wathah thought that you must have been wowin'—"

"Fathead!" said Lowther.

"Ass!" said Manners.

"Weally, you fellows—"

Manners and Lowther hurried on. They were anxious to see Tom, and learn the result of his interview with Kildare. The news that he had come in with the St. Jim's captain, and that he had two black eyes, was simply astonishing. Evidently something had happened to their chum, since they had separated.

They cut across to the House, where they ran into Blake and Herries and Digby. Blake called to them.

"What on earth's happened to Tom Merry? Kildare brought him in with two black eyes—"

"Black as ink!" said Herries.

"Blacker!" said Digby, "You fellows been rowing and punching one another, or what?"

Unheeding, Manners and Lowther went up the steps. There they encountered Baggy Trimble of the Fourth. Baggy was grinning all over his fat face.

"I say, which of you did it?" squeaked Trimble, "He, he, he! You'll get into a row—Kildare took Tom Merry to Railton's study, with those black eyes—if you did it you'll jolly well get into a row! Black as the ace of spades—he, he, he!"

Baggy Trimble chuckled a fat chuckle. Evidently, those two black eyes amused Baggy.

Manners and Lowther were in haste. But they felt that they could spare time to kick Baggy—which they did, with vigour. Baggy yelled and faded away.

"Railton's study!" said Manners.

"I suppose it's all out now," said Lowther, "Come on."

They hurried to their house-master's study. Manners tapped at the door and opened it.

They expected to see Tom Merry there. But Kildare was with the house-master, and there was no sign of Tom. Kildare was looking rather pale, though they did not notice it at the moment. Mr. Railton fixed a stern look on the two juniors at the doorway.

"Manners! Lowther—!" he rapped.

"We—we thought Tom Merry was here, sir," stammered Lowther.

"He has gone up to his own study," said Mr. Railton, "Apparently you do not know what has happened—"

"N-n-no, sir! I—I suppose you know—!" stammered Manners,

"that-that we—"

"I received Knox's report, if that is what you mean," said Mr. Railton, "And but for what has happened since, the three of you would have been taken to your head-master for judgment."

Manners and Lowther could only wonder dizzily what had happened since! Kildare looked at them, a faint smile on his pale face.

"It's all right, you young rascals," he said, "Mr. Railton has very kindly consented to look over the whole matter—"

"Oh!" gasped Manners and Lowther, together.

"Only at Kildare's urgent request!" said the house-master, sternly, "But for that—!"

"It was all a mistake, sir," said Kildare, "Tom Merry explained it to me as we were coming back—a mistake in the dark—"

"Such mistakes should not occur," said Mr. Railton, dryly, "and the three juniors were out of their House after lights out, in any case. But for your plea on their behalf, Kildare, they would be dealt with, with the utmost severity."

"After what Tom Merry did for me, sir—if you'd seen him standing up to that ruffian, while I lay helpless—"

"Quite!" said Mr. Railton, "In view of that, and the injury he received in your defence, you leave me no choice but to do as you wish, Kildare! The whole matter will be overlooked. Manners, Lowther, you may go."

"Oh! Thank you, sir!" gasped Manners.

They backed out of the study, astonished and bewildered. It was against all rules in the School House for juniors to race up the stairs at top speed: but Manners and Lowther forgot all about rules. They fairly galloped up the staircase, hurtled across the study landing, and charged into the Shell passage. They burst into No. 10 Study like a hurricane.

"Tom—!"

"Tom, old fellow—!"

Tom Merry was standing at the table. On the table was a basin of water, in his hand a sponge. He was bathing his eyes—which undoubtedly needed it.

He looked round, with a dripping face, and blinked at his chums, with a pair of the blackest eyes they had ever seen.

They gazed at him almost in horror.

"Tom—!"

"What—?"

Tom Merry grinned—a wet but cheery grin. He was feeling good, black eyes and all!

"Glad you've got back," he said, "Jolly good news, you chaps! Do my eyes look very black?"

"Do they?" gasped Manners.

"But how—what—where—which—?" stuttered Monty Lowther.

Tom, still dabbing with the sponge, explained.

"Kildare's a brick," he wound up, "He put in a word with Railton—a good many words, in fact—and these jolly old black eyes helped. Couldn't have happened better, really. We're not going up to the Head—the whole thing's washed out—we're all right."

"You look a picture," said Manners.

Tom chuckled.

"I'd rather look a picture, than go up to the Head!" he said, "And as I'm let off, you fellows had to be let off too. Spot of luck, what?"

"Oh, quite!" said Manners, "But if you hadn't had the pluck to tackle that hulking ruffian—"

"If you hadn't been a giddy hero—!" said Lowther.

"Do you want this basin of water over your nappers?" inquired Tom Merry, "If you don't, just ring off that. Thank goodness it's turned out all right. Only one more thing, Monty—"

"What's that?" asked Lowther.

"You ever cough up a jape like that again, and I'll give you a pair of black eyes blacker than these!" said Tom.

"So will I!" said Manners.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"That would be four!" he said, "Well, Tom looks a picture enough with two, and I don't want four! No more japes after lights out!"

The black eyes faded out in the course of time, and Tom Merry's cheery face resumed its normal good looks. But it had been, as Tom declared, a spot of luck: an unexpected but very happy end to Tom Merry's Secret.

THE END

REMEMBER TOM MERRY ?

Of course ! Long after school-days are over we recall the light-hearted adventures of the Terrible Three, Baggy Trimble, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Cardew the Cad, and so many more famous schoolboys of St. Jim's.

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