

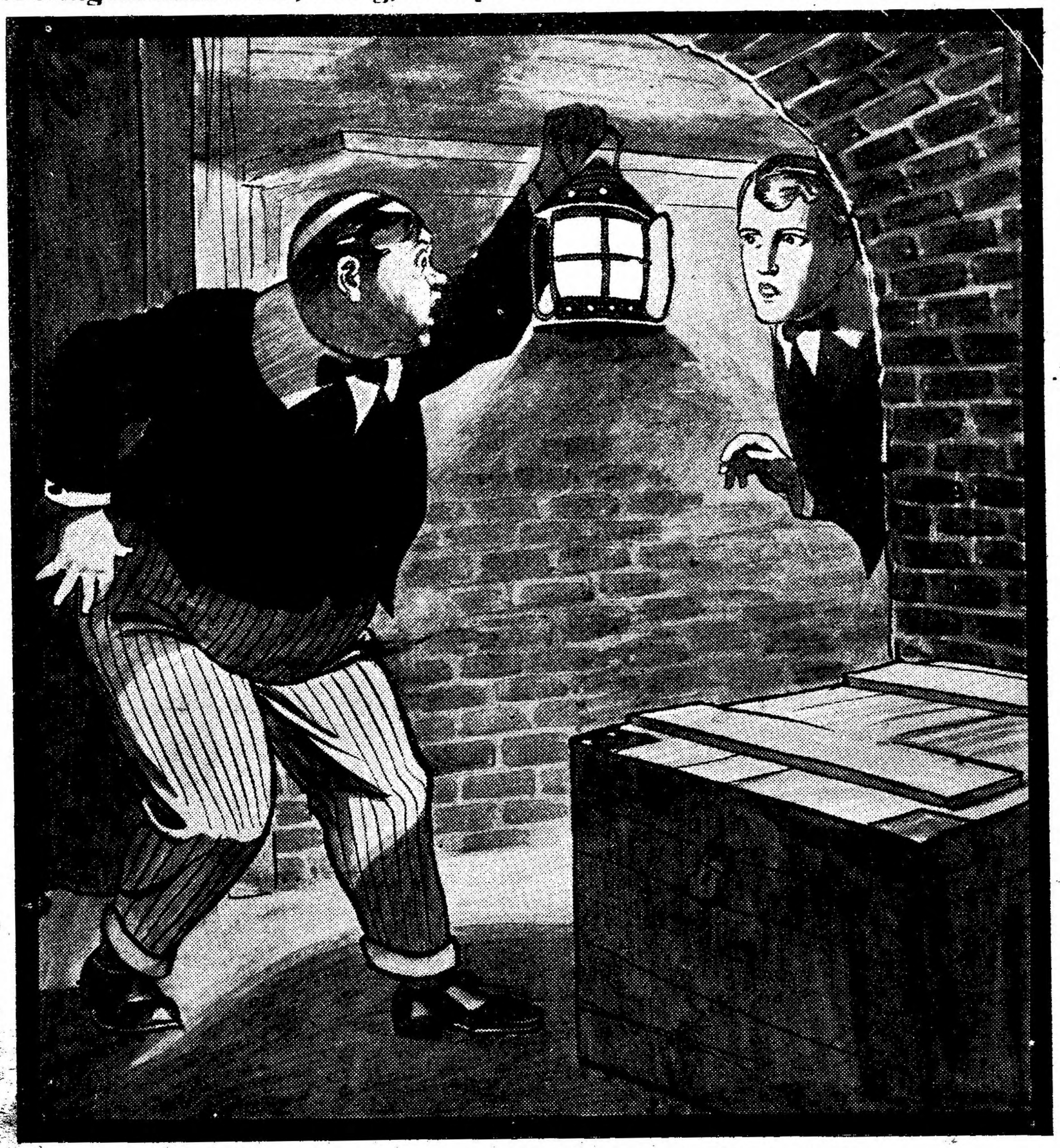
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BROUGHT TO LIGHT!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.



TALBOT IS FOUND!

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BROUGHT TO LIGHT!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry and Co. at St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
Up to Gussy.

"TOM MEWWY!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form, looked into Study No. 10 in the Shell passage with a very grave face.

The Terrible Three were there, looking very down.

Tom Merry was mooching aimlessly about the study with his hands in his pockets; Monty Lowther was in the armchair, watching him; and Manners was cutting films.

To judge by appearances, Study No. 10 was very much down on its luck.

Tom glanced round as the elegant figure of Arthur Augustus stopped in the doorway, and he had a touch of impatience in his face.

"Well?" he said, a little gruffly.

Arthur Augustus did not heed the gruffness.

He knew the worry that was weighing on the mind of the captain of the Shell, and he was sympathetic.

"Can I come in, deah boy?" he asked politely.

"If you like."

Arthur Augustus stepped in.

"Pway don't wegard this as an intwusion, my deah fellows," he said, turning his eyeglass upon the Terrible Three, one after another. "I have come heah, I twust, to wendah you fellows a service."

"Any news of Talbot?" asked Tom quickly.

"Not that I am awaah of."

Tom's face, which had brightened for a moment, fell again. He resumed his restless moving to and fro.

"But I have come heah to speak about Talbot," said Arthur Augustus. "I have been talkin' it ovah with Blake and Hewwies and Dig. I told them that I wegarded it as bein' up to me."

"Eh?"

"Up to me!" said D'Arcy firmly. "I am goin' to look into the mattah, Tom Mewwy."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that announcement impressively, as if expecting the clouds in No. 10 to roll by as soon as he had made it.

But they didn't.

Tom Merry grunted. Monty Lowther sniffed. Manners glanced up for a moment from his films, snorted, and then resumed his occupation. The reception of Gussy's announcement could not be called flattering.

But the swell of St. Jim's went on calmly:

"As a fellow of tact and judgment, deah boys, I think I am the fellow to take the mattah in hand. What do you think, Tom Mewwy?"

"Br-r-r-r!"

"Rats!" said Lowther.

"Bosh!" said Manners.

Not in the least discouraged, Arthur Augustus took a seat on the corner of the study table, swinging one elegant and beautifully-trousered leg. Arthur Augustus had set himself a task, and he was not to be rebuffed.

"The mattah," he said, with perfect calmness, "stands like this. On Wednesday Talbot of the Shell left the school aftah dark, and did not weturn."

"Just heard that?" grunted Lowther.

"To-day," continued Arthur Augustus, unheeding, "is Monday. Talbot has therefore been gone five days, includin' to-day."

"You worked that out in your head?" asked Lowther, who seemed to be in a sardonic mood.

"Pway don't intewwupt, Lowthah!" said Arthur Augustus chidingly. "You fellows may be awaah that there are some vewy unpleasant surmises bein' made about Talbot, an' his goin' off in that mystewious mannah."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"If you've come here to——" he began.

"Pway don't be an ass, deah boy! I am statin' the case," explained Arthur Augustus. "Talbot's cousin, Cwooke of the Shell, is takin' advantage of these vewy cuwious circs to hint things about Talbot——"

"Let him hint them to me, the cad!" muttered Tom Merry savagely.

"Wacke and Sewope and Mellish and Twimble seem to have the same opinion; and I feah that some much more decent fellows are beginnin' to agwee with them," continued D'Arcy. "For that reason it is necessawy for the mattah to be cleahed up, to save old Talbot's good name."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"You see, deah boys, undah the circs, there has been a wevival of talk about Talbot's past, befoah he came to St. Jim's. It was pwactically forgotten, but it is bein' mentioned now; about his havin' been——"

"Oh, dry up!" grunted Tom.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You talk too much, old scout," said Lowther.

"I am not speakin' in a dewogatowy way. It is pwetty well known that Talbot was bwought up undah howwid circs, among a gang of wottahs, and that he——"

"Cheese it!"

"Vewy well, I will not wefer to those unpleasant circs," assented Arthur Augustus. "But there is a wumour goin' wound that Talbot has left the school to go back to his old associates—the old gang, as Cwooke calls it. An' weally, deah boys, it looks vewy much like it!"

"You silly idiot!"

"Bai Jove!"

"You crass dummy!"

"If you wegard those expwessions as civil, Tom Mewwy, I can only wemark that you are labahin' undah a delusion," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity.

"Well, don't talk rot!"

"I can make allowances for your wowwied fwame of mind, Tom Mewwy, but I weally beg you to be more westwained, an' not to woar at me. It thwows me into a fluttah when I am woared at."

Grunt!

"I wepeat that it looks like it! Talbot bwoke bounds aftah dark last Wednesday; it comes out that Figgins of the New House bunked him ovah the wall. There has been no news of any accident, though inquiwies have been made fah and wide. Moreovah, it is known that a man Talbot used to know in the old days is in the neighbourhood—a howwid wottah called Tickey Tapp. I have seen Tickey Tapp myself, hangin' wound the Gween Man in Wylcombe."

"Hang Tickey Tapp!"

"Yaas, wathah! But as I was sayin', it looks as if Talbot has thwown up his life heah, and gone off of his own accord to his formah fwiends. Many of the fellows think so."

"Only a silly fool would think so!"

"I do not agwee with you, Tom Mewwy. It is a vewy weasonable point of view for fellows who do not know old Talbot as well as we do. That opinion is certainly gainin' ground. Now, as a fellow of tact and judgment, I do not think there is anythin' in it."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"I have vewy gweat faith in Talbot, and I am suah that he is a stwaight as a stwing. I have thought it out, deah boys, and I feel suah that he is bein' kept away fwom St. Jim's somehow."

"We all think so," said Tom Merry, more amicably. "If you wouldn't be so jolly long-winded, Gussy, a chap could see sooner what you were driving at."

"I excuse your oppwobwious expwession, deah boy—don't mench!" said Arthur Augustus graciously. "Now, if Talbot does not turn up, it will be believed by evewybody that he has gone back to his old life—I feah that Mr. Wailton and the Head wegard it as pwob alweady. Inspectah Skeat has been heah about it, an' I am suah, fwom his expwession, that he thinks so. The point is, deah boys, that Talbot has got to be found and bwought back heah befoah evewybody in the school comes to believe that he has gone back to that howwid gang to wesume his formah life as a——"

"What can be done, fathead? How are we to find him?"

"That is the cwux of the mattah," agreed Arthur Augustus. "The Head and our Housemastah don't seem able to do anythin'; an' you fellows haven't been able to do anythin'—an' in short, nothin' has been done. Now, I am not a fellow to push myself forward in any way, but I weally think it is time for me to take the mattah in hand."

"Ass!"

"I will pass ovah that wemark, Tom Mewwy! I am goin' to take the mattah in hand, and find Talbot," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "It is merely a question of findin' out where he is, you know, an'—an' goin' there."

"Go hon!" said Lowther, with deep sarcasm.

"Yaas, that is all, Lowthah."

"And how are you going to do it?" inquired Manners.

"I haven't thought that out yet," confessed Arthur Augustus. "But, of course, there are ways and means. The gweat

point is that I have wesolved to take the mattah in hand, and I have vewy little doubt that in a short time I shall be able to put my fingah on poor old Talbot!"

"Bow-wow!"

"Rats!"

"Piffle!"

The Terrible Three made those replies in a sort of chorus. Evidently they had very little faith in the tact and judgment of the Honourable Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's slipped off the table.

"So that is your opinion?" he asked with dignity.

"Yes, ass!"

"Vewy well; I can only wecommend you to wait and see! If I were a bettin' chap, Tom Mewwy, I would lay you ten to one on it! As it is, I can only wemark that I wegard you as distwustful asses!"

And Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity, turned upon his heel and walked out of the study. His departure was intended to be dignified and impressive; but the effect was spoiled by Arthur Augustus walking into a fat junior as he strode through the doorway. He came out so suddenly that Baggy Trimble of the Fourth had no time to get out of the way, and Arthur Augustus collided with him and sent him spinning.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy.

"Yoop!" roared Trimble, as he sat down in the passage. "Oh! Ow!"

"You uttah wottah!" shouted Arthur Augustus. "You were listenin' at the door!"

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"You have wumpled my waistcoat, you howwid little wascal, biffin' on your beastly nose!"

"Yow-ow-ow!" groaned Trimble, clasping his nose, which was really more hurt than D'Arcy's waistcoat. "Groogh!"

"I wegard you as a sneakin', pwyin' Hun, Twimble, and I am goin' to kick you as a warnin'!"

"Yaroogh!" roared Baggy, as D'Arcy's elegant boot smote his fat person. "I wasn't listening, you ass! Yoop! Leave off, you beast! I was simply looking for a pin on the floor! Yah! Oh!"

Baggy Trimble scrambled up and fled. He dodged into Racke's study to escape, and Arthur Augustus, with a scornful sniff, walked down the passage. In Tom Merry's study the three Shell fellows were left looking as troubled and moody as before, not in the least bucked by the knowledge that the great Arthur Augustus was taking the matter in hand.

CHAPTER 2.
Nothing for Baggy.

"ARE we goin'?" yawned Scrope of the Shell.

"I am!" grunted Aubrey Racke.

"May as well!" assented Crooke. "It's rainin', though!"

"Blow the rain!"

The three black sheep of the Shell were in Racke's study. There was a scent of cigarettes in the atmosphere, and Racke was putting away a pack of cards. Outside, the rain was dripping against the window-panes.

It was tea-time, but Racke & Co. were not thinking of tea in the study, or of rations in Hall. Racke, the son of the war-profiteer millionaire, had better resources than those. Money will work wonders, and Racke had not suffered, so far, from the general scarcity, being a food-hog of the most pronounced and unscrupulous variety. At Laurel Villa, at Rylcombe, Racke's man had his quarters, and at Mr. Scaife's quarters there was always a spread for Racke & Co. The only drawback to that arrangement was



The Joke in Study No. 6.
(See Chapter 4.)

that it was risky, and had to be kept a dead secret; also, that such secrets could not be wholly kept for long. A good many fellows in the School House knew or suspected that Aubrey Racke visited the villa for forbidden spreads, and trouble impended over Aubrey's head in consequence.

The profiteer's son, however, went on his way, regardless of scornful looks and contemptuous remarks. So long as he was not given away to the authorities he cared little. There were some fellows who were willing to keep friendly with him for the sake of sharing in the good things, though they were few. His only fear was that Tom Merry & Co., if they had proof of his proceedings, would put a stop to them; but that had not happened as yet, and for some days past, at least, Tom Merry & Co. had had more important matters to think of than Racke and his food-hogging.

The three Shell fellows were about to leave the study when the door opened suddenly, and Trimble of the Fourth rushed in, slamming the door after him.

He turned the key in the lock, and stood gasping for breath. Racke & Co. stared at him.

"What the thump's that game?" demanded Racke.

"Ow!" gasped Baggy.

"What the dickens do you want?" asked Crooke.

"Ow! D'Arcy's after me!"

Baggy listened nervously at the door. He was relieved to hear the footsteps of Arthur Augustus pass on.

"All right; he's gone, the beast!" said Trimble. "The awful rotter pitched into me for nothing, you know. I happened to stop outside Tom Merry's study to look for a stud I'd dropped, and he thought I was listening! As if I would, you know!"

"Well, we jolly well know you would!" growled Racke. "Serve you right!"

"I say, that ain't chummy, Racke!" said Baggy reproachfully.

"You fat duffer! Get out!"

"They were talking about your cousin, Crooke," said Trimble. "D'Arcy says he's going to find him."

Gerald Crooke gave a sneering laugh.

"Is he? He'll have to look for him in some thieves' kitchen in London, then!"

"He, he, he! He thinks that Talbot is being kept away from the school—kidnapped, I suppose! He, he, he!"

"The silly ass!" said Crooke contemptuously. "Talbot's gone back to the old game, to become a cracksman again, and I know it. He was fed up with pretending to be respectable here."

"I don't quite agree with you," said Racke. "Talbot may have been spoofing about his reform, and all that; but he had his head screwed on the right way. You've told us yourself that he was a favourite with your Uncle Lyndon—Colonel Lyndon—an' that the old sport had him down in his will."

"Yes; the rotter cut me out there!" growled Crooke.

"And the colonel made him a good allowance. He would be a thumpin' idiot to chuck it all up to go back to his old life."

"Well, he's done it," sneered Crooke, "an' I know it! An' when Colonel Lyndon hears of it he will cut him off fast enough. Talbot's done for in that direction."

Racke shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, he has been playing your game by bolting," he said. "I don't like the chap, an' I'm ready to help you run him down in public; but, between ourselves, I don't believe he was such an ass as that!"

"I tell you I know it!"

"I don't see how you can know it, unless you had a hand in his goin' away," said Racke, with a very sharp look at his dear pal.

Crooke coloured, and did not reply. He turned to the door and unlocked it.

"If we're goin', we may as well go!" he said.

"I'm ready!"

"I'll come with you chaps," said Baggy Trimble cheerfully. "I know where you're going! He, he, he!"

"You won't!" growled Racke.

"Look here, Racke——"

"Oh, shut up!"

The trio left the study, and Baggy Trimble rolled after them down the passage. Baggy had had his tea, but one tea did not amount to much with Baggy Trimble. He was ready for another—for two or three others, in fact.

"Better let me come, Racke, old fellow!" murmured Trimble. "Otherwise, I might let drop a word to a prefect——"

"We're going for a walk!" said Racke, with a savage look at the fat Fourth-Former.

Trimble winked.

"Just for a walk—in the rain!" he said.

"That's all!"

"He, he, he! I'll come for a walk with you, then!" chortled Trimble. "I dare say we shall meet Scaife at the end of it! He, he!"

Racke clenched his hand.

"Hallo! What's that about Scaife?" Kangaroo of the Shell came up the passage, and he stopped. "Going food-hogging—what?"

"Nothing of the sort!" said Racke, between his teeth.

"Well, I've heard of your man Scaife, and what you pay him for!" said the Australian junior, looking grimly at Racke. "And if I was certain of it, Racke, I'd mop up the staircase with you!"

Baggy Trimble grinned, and winked at Racke again. Aubrey signed to him to come on, and the fat Baggy went on towards the stairs with the Shell fellows. Kangaroo cast a grim look after them, half inclined to mop up the staircase with Racke on suspicion.

Racke & Co. hurried out, with overcoats and umbrellas, into the dropping rain. Trimble trotted on contentedly with them. To his surprise, they did not turn in the direction of Rylcombe.

"I say, where are you going?" exclaimed Trimble.

"Didn't I tell you we were going for a walk?" grunted Racke. "We're going over to Wayland."

"I—I say that's miles! What are you going to Wayland for?"

"We're going to the cinema!" grinned Crooke.

"I don't believe you, you beasts!" growled Baggy. "I'm coming, anyway! You can stand me a ticket at the pictures, Racke."

"Catch me!" answered Racke.

The trio struck off across the fields, Trimble following them with a series of discontented grunts. After about half a mile in the rain Baggy had had enough of it, and he halted.

"Look here, you know——" he snorted.

Racke & Co. walked on, unheeding. Trimble watched them enter the footpath through the wood, and then, with an angry snort, turned back towards the school.

From the wood Racke saw him go, and grinned.

"Now for Scaife's!" he said.

And the three, chuckling, struck off through the wood for Rylcombe, and in a quarter of an hour they were at Laurel Villa, sitting down to one of the expensive and forbidden spreads provided by the dutiful Scaife.

CHAPTER 3.
The Prisoner.

A LANTERN gleamed into the darkness, and Talbot of the Shell rose to his feet, blinking in the sudden light.

It was cold—bitterly cold—in the deep cellar under Laurel Villa, and the junior of St. Jim's looked pale and worn.

For several days and nights Talbot of the Shell had been a prisoner; visited once in the twenty-four hours by his captors, for the rest of the time left in darkness and solitude.

But his spirit was still unbroken.

His pale face was quiet and firm as he looked at the two rascals who entered the cellar from the outer store-room.

Scaife, the one-eyed man, carried a lantern, and Tickey Tapp, the sharper, followed him in.

Talbot faced them quietly.

His eyes gleamed, but he made no hostile movement. His right arm was tied to his side, and he was helpless.

Tickey Tapp eyed him curiously.

"Here we are again, Toff!" he said genially. "'Ow do you find yourself?"

Talbot did not answer.

The sharper sat on a box, and bit the end off a cigar. In spite of his genial manner, his eyes were glittering, and it was easy to see that he was in a mood of savage irritation.

He lighted his cigar, and blew out a stream of smoke.

"Ain't you ready to talk reason yet, Toff?" he asked. "You've been 'ere five days now, and you know that we mean business. Nobody has the least idea where you are, and you know you can't be found. Can you get out of this?"

"No!" answered Talbot.

"We've got you fixed," said Tickey Tapp, with a nod. "You can't get out of this, Toff. You're beginnin' to show signs of wear and tear, my boy. This ain't doing you any good!"

"I know that!"

"Twenty-four hours a day in the dark—and one meal a day, consistin' of bread and water!" said Tickey Tapp. "Hard tack, Toff!"

Talbot did not answer.

In the solitude of his imprisonment it was a relief to him even to see the evil faces of Tickey Tapp and Scaife, and to hear their voices. But he was silent while Mr. Tapp went on:

"You're obstinate, Toff, that's what you are! Why don't you do the sensible thing? You, the prince of cracksmen that was, wastin' your time at a school, when there's thousands ready for you to touch! Go in with your old friends, Toff, and you'll be rich for life! Ain't it a good offer?"

"I've answered you already!"

"You turned your back on your old friends," said Tickey Tapp. "But 'ere I am, willing to let bygones be bygones. I tell you, Toff, if you choose to follow your old trade, you may die a millionaire. How easy for you to crack the crib at St. Jim's f'rinstance, where you know the lay of the ground!"

"Easy as easy!" said Scaife, his single eye glittering at Talbot. "You're a fool to your own interests, my lad!"

"You know by this time that we mean business, Toff!" resumed Tickey Tapp argumentatively. "And we're desperate men! Scaife can't keep on his present job much longer, though it's a good thing while it lasts. They're getfin' too keen after food-hogs in these days, and it can't last. He will have to clear sooner or later. Same with me—I'm almost on my uppers! With you to 'elp, Toff, we'd soon be setting up regler mansions. Hang you!" broke out Tickey Tapp savagely. "You're standing in your own light, and ours, too!"

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"What's in the way of it?" said Tickey Tapp, dropping into a tone of persuasion. "It ain't as if you was like the other fellers at your school—that young Merry, f'rinstance. You was born among thieves—your father, old Captain Crow, was a cracksman, till he went under in a scrap with the police. You have a hand that's like a magician's on a safe. I don't even dare to leave you 'ere without your 'and tied, you're so cute with a lock. There ain't a safe in the three kingdoms that's safe agin you!"

"That's true enough."

"And you won't take the fortune that's fair smilin' on you?" urged Tickey Tapp. "What's in the way, I ask you?"

"You wouldn't understand," said Talbot.

"On the honest lay—what?" sneered Tickey Tapp. "Oh, I know the game! You reckon you're provided for with your uncle, that stiff old colonel. But, I tell you, Toff, that game's played out! You've been missing five days now, and you're known to 'ave left school of your own accord. I get news from your school through young Crooke and Scaife 'ere! And I tell you, Toff, that nigh on everybody at St. Jim's believes that you hooked it to go back to your old life!"

Talbot winced.

"When you don't turn up, they'll be certain of it—and when it gets to Colonel Lyndon, what'll he think?" said Tickey Tapp. "I tell you, Toff, you're done for in that direction. Your good name, for what that was worth, is gone, or going. You'll be set down as having gone back to the gang. Why not have the game as well as the name?"

"Sensible thing!" said Scaife.

"I've answered you," said Talbot wearily. "I'll die first. That's all I've got to say!"

Tickey Tapp gritted his teeth.

"Mind, that ain't clean out of the reckoning," he said. "You'll knuckle under, Toff, or you'll die 'ere! I can't afford to let you out, if I wanted to; you know too much! I don't know 'ow long you'll stand this life; but it's tellin' on you already!"

"I know it."

"And here you'll stay, till you come to terms," said Tickey Tapp. "I'm only asking you to make your own fortune, ain't I?"

No reply.

Tickey Tapp was silent, too, for some minutes, his deep-set eyes burning with malice as he looked at the undaunted junior.

Scaife clenched his hand, his single eye gleaming. Both the rascals were bitterly incensed against Talbot. They had counted upon reducing him to submission in a very short time; indeed, neither of them believed in the reform of the Toff, and Tickey Tapp had surmised that the one-time prince of cracksmen would be more than half-willing to resume his old ways.

The quiet resistance of the junior puzzled and enraged him.

Between the Toff of other days and Talbot of St. Jim's there was a great gulf fixed; but Tickey Tapp was never likely to understand it.

Scaife had brought in a tray, with a jug of water and half a loaf of war-bread. He now picked it up, and took it back into the outer cellar. Talbot watched him in silence.

"You see that, Toff?" asked Tickey Tapp.

Talbot nodded.

"You ain't going to eat nothing more till you come to reason!" said Tickey Tapp, with a venomous look. "P'rap's that'll bring you to your senses, Toff!"

"You may starve me; it's in your power," said Talbot quietly. "Nothing will make me alter my mind."

"Hang you!" muttered Tickey Tapp. "We'll see about you! 'Ere you are for another twenty-four hours, without a bite or sup!"

"As you choose," said Talbot, unmoved.

Tickey Tapp glanced at the padlocked boxes and cases in the cellar. They contained the hoarded supplies from which Scaife drew for Racke & Co.'s spreads in the dining-room above.

"Safe enough," said Scaife. "He can't open them, Tickey!"

The sharper nodded, and rose from the box, throwing away his half-smoked cigar.

"You'll stick it out, Toff?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You'll repent it!"

The sharper stamped angrily out of the cellar, Scaife following with the lantern.

The door closed, and the key turned.

Talbot of the Shell was left in the darkness again.

He sank wearily on the bench.

That grim imprisonment was telling even upon the Toff's iron frame. But in solitude, in darkness, almost in despair, his will was unbroken. His body might weaken, but his spirit would remain as strong as ever; and even if death itself came, his resolution would never falter—Talbot of St. Jim's would never become again the "Toff" of other days!

CHAPTER 4.

Gussy Goes Ahead.

THERE was silence in Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's.

Three faces wore broad grins. One was deeply clouded with thought.

Blake and Herries and Digby were watching their noble chum, Arthur Augustus, the ornament of the Fourth.

The four juniors were supposed to be doing their prep; but Arthur Augustus had knocked off work, and, leaning his chin on his hand, he sat in deep reflection, with a corrugated brow.

His chums had knocked off work, too, to watch him.

For five minutes, at least, the Honourable Arthur Augustus had been deep in reflection, unconscious of the growing, though suppressed, merriment of his study-mates.

His unconsciousness struck Blake & Co. as comic. He was quite unaware of the three fixed stares turned upon him.

Arthur Augustus broke the silence at last.

And what he said was:

"Yaas, wathah!"

Apparently he was answering some question asked in the recesses of his mighty brain.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake, unable to restrain himself any longer. And Herries and Digby chimed in, "Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus started.

He extracted his celebrated monocle from his waistcoat, jammed it into his eye, and surveyed his hilarious chums reprovingly.

"What's the joke, deah boys?" he asked.

"You are, my son!" answered Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"And you did it jolly well, Gussy!" said Digby admiringly.

"Eh? What did I do?"

"Weren't you understudying a gargoyle?" asked Dig innocently.

"I wegard you as an ass, Dig!"

"I've been timing you by the clock," said Jack Blake. "For five minutes and a half you've been scowling like a demon in a pantomime, or a Hun behind barbed wire. What have you been doing it for?"

"I was thinkin', Blake."

"Oh, draw it mild, old chap!"

"I wepeat, Blake, that I was thinkin'!" said Arthur Augustus, with asperity. "I may wemark that when there is any thinkin' to be done in this study, it genewally falls to me."

"And you've got nothin' to do it with, either," remarked Herries sympathetically. "That makes it so much rougher on you."

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Well, after that terrific think, what have you got to?" demanded Blake. "Have you thought out how we're to get any supper?"

"I wasn't thinkin' of suppah."

"Or how I can get a meat-ticket for Towser?" asked Herries.

"Bothah Towsah!"

"Better think of prep," suggested Digby. "There'll be a scrap with Lathom in the morning."

"Never mind Lathom now!" said Arthur Augustus. "I have been weflectin' on a fah more important mattah than pwep. About Talbot——"

"Talbot's bunked!"

"I do not believe that Talbot has bunked, Hewwies, as you wathah inelegantly expwess it. I have a vewy high opinion of Talbot."

"Well, if he hasn't bunked, why doesn't he come back?"

"Havin' decided that he has certainly not bunked, Hewwies, I can only conclude that he does not come back because he is pwevented. Some feahful wottah has got hold of him!"

"What for?"

Arthur Augustus coughed.

"I am not at pwesent acquainted with the motive of the wottah in question," he said. "But I have no doubt that Talbot has been kidnapped."

"Rather a tall story!" remarked Dig.

"I wegard it as the only explanation of the wemarkable circs. An' I think it is up to this study to find the poor chap; an' I am goin' to lead you."

"Bow-wow!"

"I do not wegard that as an intelligible wemark, Blake. I am goin' to lead you in a search for Talbot," said Arthur Augustus firmly.

"Where?"

"That is what I am comin' to," said Arthur Augustus, with a smile of superior wisdom. "I have been thinkin' that out. I suppose you fellows will admit that Talbot is somewhere?"

"Well, I should say that much was probable, at least," admitted Blake.

"Pway don't be funnay! Not knowin' where he is, the next thing is to find a person who does know, an' make him tell us."

"Topping!" exclaimed Blake heartily. "All you've got to do now is to find the person. Easy as winking, I suppose?"

"You are pleased to be funnay, Blake; but, as a mattah of fact, I think I can put my fingah on the person."

"My hat!"

"If you mean that horrid bounder, Tickey Tapp, you're off-side," said Herries. "Tom Merry told Mr. Railton all about him, and Railton went to the police about it. They can't find anything against Tickey Tapp, except that he's a boozy bounder!"

"I was not thinkin' of Tickey Tapp, Hewwies. The person I am thinkin' of is much nearah home."

"Somebody here?" howled Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

D'Arcy's chums simply blinked at him. He had succeeded in surprising Study No. 6.

"Somebody at St. Jim's?" said Dig faintly.

"Yaas."

"Oh, Christopher Columbus!"

"And who?" asked Blake, in measured tones. "Who, you ass? Which? What?"

"I suspect Cwooke of the Shell!"

"Crooke!" gasped Blake. "Talbot's cousin! Are you fairly off your dot? Talbot could knock Crooke out with one hand."

"I do not think Cwooke kidnapped Talbot personally, Blake; he couldn't do the twick. But I suspect him of bein' at the bottom of it."

Herries tapped his forehead in a significant way.

"That is what I was thinkin' out," said D'Arcy calmly. "Think of the circs, deah boys! Cwooke always hated Talbot since Colonel Lyndon took him up. He thinks Talbot is aftah the colonel's money, the suspicious wottah! He has often twied to discwedit Talbot with his uncle."

"I think everybody knows that much," yawned Blake. "What about it?"

"Now that Talbot has gone, the fellows are beginnin' to surmise that he has got tired of bein' heah, an' gone back to those howwid wastahs he was bwought up among."

"I'm afraid so—some of them," assented Blake.

"Colonel Lyndon is at the Fwont now; but he must heah of it soonah or latah," resumed Arthur Augustus. "What will he think?"

"He will think as everybody's beginning to think, I suppose."

"Exactly; and he will cut poor old Talbot off!" said Arthur Augustus triumphantly. "That's where Cwooke comes in. He will have gained his object if the colonel believes that Talbot has gone to the bad again, and he is suah to believe it if Talbot does not weturn. And that, deah boys, is why Cwooke has done it!"

"Oh, my only summer bonnet!" gasped Blake.

Arthur Augustus was evidently very much taken with his theory. But its effect upon his chums was to make them chortle.

George Gerald Crooke, they knew, was rotter enough for any treacherous trick upon his cousin; but that he would have the nerve to elaborate such a plot as Gussy suspected seemed wildly beyond the bounds of probability.

It seemed, in fact, impossible, though Arthur Augustus did not appear to realise it.

He regarded his grinning chums loftily.

"In weasonin' the mattah out like this, I have followed the methods of Sherlock Holmes," he condescended to explain. "When a cwime is committed, you know, look for the motive. Isn't the motive cleah? Only Cwooke has an intewest in makin' Talbot disappeah under mystewious circs. Therefore, Cwooke did it!"

"Dear old chap!" said Blake affectionately. "You can't help doing these things, I know. It's your misfortune, not your fault. And I'll tell you what we'll do. When funds are a bit easier, after the war, we'll club together and buy you a strait-jacket."

"Does that mean that you do not cwedit my theowy, Blake?"

"Well, not quite!" grinned Blake. "Crooke would tell whoppers about Talbot, but he wouldn't plan to have him kidnapped. He would be jolly well afraid to!"

"Cwooke has been sayin' quite openly that he believes Talbot has gone back to that howwid gang."

"He would!" grunted Blake.

"So have others," said Dig.

"Nevah mind the othahs. I am speakin' of Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus,

who was evidently following the Sherlock Holmes system faithfully, to the length of diregarding all facts that did not agree with his theory.

There was a chortle in the study.

"Somehow, Cwooke got Talbot to go out that night, and somebody was lyin' in wait for him," said D'Arcy. "It's quite cleah to me."

"How could he get him to go out, ass? They weren't even on speaking terms."

"As a mattah of fact, Cwooke went to Talbot's studay that day, to talk to him, a short time befoah he went out. You see, I have been askin' questions—I mean, pursuin' my investigations," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "Gore wemembahs the circumstance, and so does Twimble, and Skimpole, too. Now, I want to know what Cwooke said to Talbot on that occasion."

"Borrowed five bob, perhaps."

"Oh, wats!"

Arthur Augustus rose.

"You haven't finished your prep," remarked Dig.

"Nevah mind pwep. Pway come with me, deah boys. Havin' detected the cwiminal, it only wemains to denounce him."

"Denounce him!" stuttered Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Crooke?"

"Certainly!"

"You—you want us to come with you and denounce Crooke?" said Blake dazedly. "Are you quite off your silly rocker?"

"I twust not," said Arthur Augustus calmly. "Are you comin'?"

"No!" roared Blake.

"Are you comin', Hewwies?"

"No. I'm going to do my prep," grinned Herries.

"What about you, Dig?"

"I'll come along later, old chap, and carry you home after Crooke's finished with you."

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy quitted the study, with his noble nose high in the air. Blake & Co. looked at one another for a moment or two speechlessly. Then they roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

As that merry yell rang out Arthur Augustus put his head back into the study wrathfully, and said in crushing tones:

"I wepeat, wats!"

Then he departed. And his chums, after another yell, settled down to work again. Prep had to be done, and the swell of St. Jim's was welcome to denounce Crooke, if he wanted to, quite on his own.

CHAPTER 5.
Denounced.

"WILL you fellows come with me?"

Arthur Augustus' eyeglass glimmered in the doorway of No. 10 in the Shell, and the Terrible Three, who were working round the table, shook their heads as if moved by the same spring.

"Prep!" explained Manners concisely.

"You may be pleased to heah, deah boys, that I have found out who had poor old Talbot kidnapped."

Tom Merry bounded to his feet.

"What?" he shouted.

"Found out who—what?" stuttered Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! Wathah a surpwise to you—what?" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "But it's all wight. I've hit it, you know. I've been thinkin' no end, and it flashed into my bwain, you know."

"Have you found anything out?" exclaimed Tom.

"Yaas, I tell you. I am goin' to put my fingah on the kidnappah now!"

But—but who——"

"Cwooke!"

"Crooke! yelled Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry stared at the smiling, satisfied face of Arthur Augustus for a moment. The startling announcement had roused a brief hope in his breast, and the disappointment was too bitter. He did not speak again; but he strode towards Arthur Augustus, grasped him by the shoulders, and spun him out of the study.

The surprised junior went spinning round as Tom Merry let him go, and sat down in the passage with a bump, in a state of great astonishment.

Slam!

The door closed on him.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus dizzily. "Is the chap insane? Is he off his wockah? What evah did he do that for?"

"Hallo! What are you sprawling about for, you silly fag?" asked Grundy of the Shell, coming along to his study.

"Yawooh! Help a chap up, instead of gwinnin' at him like a Cheshire cheese—I mean, cat!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Certainly," said Grundy; and he took hold of D'Arcy's collar, and brought him to his feet with a jerk, accompanied by a yell from Gussy.

"Yoogh! Yoop! You're chook-chook-chokin' me, you uttah—gwoogh!—ass! Welease my collah! Gwoogh!"

"Well, you asked me to help you," said Grundy; and he went into his study, grinning, while the swell of the Fourth gasped for breath.

"Bai Jove, I have a gweat mind to thwash Gwunday an' Tom Mewwy an' Lowthah and Mannahs!"

It occurred to Arthur Augustus, as he recited the list, that that series of thrashings would take up a good deal of time, and he restrained his righteous wrath, and went along to Crooke's study.

The door of that apartment was locked, but voices could be heard within. D'Arcy tapped at the door.

"Who's there?" growled Racke's voice.

"It is I, deah boy."

"Well, you can stay there!"

"I want to see Cwooke."

"The want's all on your side," came Crooke's voice. "Go and eat coke!"

"I ordah you to let me in at once, Cwooke!"

"Order away!" chuckled Crooke.

"Unless, Cwooke, you would pwefer me to call in the police!" said Arthur Augustus through the keyhole in menacing tones.

"The what?" yelled Crooke.

"The police!"

"Potty!" said Racke, in wonder. "We're not going to let a lunatic into the study, D'Arcy! Go to Colney Hatch!"

"I leave it to Cwooke," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "He has got to answah for his wascality, in any case, wegardin' Talbot."

"What's that?" exclaimed Crooke.

"Your guilt is discovahed, Cwooke!" said D'Arcy, still through the keyhole. "I have come to denounce you, you wottah!"

"Mad as a hatter!" said Racke. "Don't unlock the door."

"Better hear what the fool's got to say," muttered Crooke, whose face had paled. He threw open the door. "Come in, you idiot! Now, what have you got to say?"

Arthur Augustus marched in triumphantly. Racke stared at him, and Crooke watched his face with ill-concealed uneasiness. George Gerald Crooke was hardly likely to be a kidnapper, but probably his conscience was not quite clear on the subject of his vanished cousin.

D'Arcy's eyeglass gleamed accusingly at him.

"You are discovahed, Cwooke!" he said, raising his forefinger at the surprised Shell fellow in dramatic denunciation. "I have discovahed you!"

"What are you burbling about, idiot?" was Crooke's answer.

"Where is Talbot?" demanded D'Arcy.

"Talbot! How should I know?"

"Weally, Cwooke, you ought to know, as you kidnapped him!"

"What's that?" yelled Racke, astounded.

"I?" shrieked Crooke. "I whatted?"

"You kidnapped him, Cwooke—at least, you had him kidnapped," said Arthur Augustus. "It is useless to pwevawicate. I have thought the mattah out, an' I am quite satisfied that I am wight. I pwesume," added Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "that that settles it."

"You howling idiot!" said Crooke, between his teeth. "How could I kidnap anybody? Are you quite mad, you hopeless chump?"

"I wefuse to be called a chump, Cwooke, especially by a wascally kidnapper!" said D'Arcy sternly.

"Kidnapper!" murmured Racke. "Oh, my hat! I always thought that chap was a bit off his onion. Now I know it!"

Arthur Augustus' accusing forefinger still pointed at Crooke.

"I ordah you to pwoduce Talbot!" he said.

"Produce him!" said Crooke dazedly. "Do you think I've got the fellow in my pocket, or under the study table?"

"I weally don't know where you have got him, Cwooke, but you have got him somewhah," said D'Arcy, with conviction, "and I wequiah you to pwoduce him, or you will repent it!"

"You crass idiot!" hooted Crooke furiously. "Talbot's bunked, to go back to the thieves he used to live with, and you know it!"

"I am quite awaah, Cwooke, that you desiah fellows to think so. You have twied before to blacken Talbot's chawactah an' wuin him with his uncle. I am quite convinced that you have had Talbot kidnapped."

"Oh, you imbecile!" gasped Crooke.

"Of all the idiots——" said Racke.

"If you back up Cwooke in this mattah, Wacke, I shall conclude that you are an accomplice!" said Arthur Augustus sternly.

"Go it!" said Racke, with a grin. "Conclude what you like, old bird!"

"I wepeat, Cwooke——"

"Oh, dry up!" howled Crooke.

"You wefuse to pwoduce Talbot?"

"Idiot!"

"I'd go to the Housemaster and complain about this if I were you, Crooke," said Aubrey Racke.

"I am quite pwepared to go to Mr. Wailton with Cwooke!"

Crooke shook his head.

"What rot!" he said. "No need to do that. Let's give this silly idiot a lesson about gassing his rot in our study. Collar him!"

"Bai Jove! Hands off, you wottahs!"

Crooke was not a fighting-man, as a rule, but he was angry now, and he rushed at Arthur Augustus fiercely, Racke backing him up. Somehow, Arthur Augustus had not seemed to expect that when he denounced Crooke. Certainly George Gerald did not look much like a discovered kidnapper just then.

He grasped Arthur Augustus round the neck, unheeding a punch on the nose, and Racke grasped D'Arcy's arms, and

between them the Shell fellows whirled their surprising visitor into the passage.

Bump!

The swell of the Fourth smote the floor with a heavy concussion, and roared. But the angry Crooke was not done with him yet. He grasped one of Arthur Augustus' ankles, and Racke grasped the other, and the swell of St. Jim's was pulled along the passage at a great rate. The Shell fellows were taking him home, and the method of progression was an extremely uncomfortable one—for Arthur Augustus.

The door of Study No. 6 flew open suddenly, and Blake & Co. jumped up. Racke and Crooke came rushing in, with D'Arcy's ankles in their grasp, and Arthur Augustus followed them in, on his back, with his hands clutching wildly.

"There's your silly idiot!" panted Crooke furiously. "There he is! Better look after him. If he comes to my study again I'll take the poker to him!"

Racke and Crooke departed, leaving Arthur Augustus strewn on the carpet, a sadly dishevelled figure. Blake and Herries and Digby did not lend him a helping hand, and they did not sympathise. They roared.

"Gwoogh!" Arthur Augustus sat up. "You cacklin' asses——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is nothin' whatevah to cackle at! I have been tweated with gwoss diswespect——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Those feahful wottahs attacked me when I denounced Cwooke for havin' kidnapped Talbot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blake. "What did you expect? Did you think he would take it as a compliment and give you a bun?"

"Gwoogh!"

Arthur Augustus picked himself up at last, breathless and furious.

"That finishes it!" he stuttered. "I gave Cwooke a chance to pwoduce Talbot, an' he wefused. Now I am goin' to the Head."

"To tell him Crooke's a kidnapper?" shrieked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! As Cwooke wefuses to pwoduce Talbot, I have no other wesource."

Arthur Augustus turned to the door, and at the same moment three pairs of hands grasped him, yanked him back, and plumped him into the study armchair. George Herries sat on him to keep him there.

"You're not going to the Head, old bird!" said Jack Blake. "You're not going to get a flogging while you've got pals to look after you."

"Yawooh! Welease me! Hewwies, you wuff ass, get off my head immediately! Gwoogh!"

"I'm not getting off your head till you've got some sense in it, my infant!" answered Herries.

"Then you're a fixture there for life!" chuckled Dig.

"Yawooh! I am suffocatin' undah this heavy beast! Dwaggimoff!"

"Not till you've promised to be sane!" said Blake.

"Yow-ow-ooop!"

"You're not going to the Head, and you're not going to talk any more rot about Crooke, and you're to give us your word," said Blake grimly; "and if you don't do it sharp I'll pour the ink down the back of your neck."

"You howwid wottah——"

"Do you promise, honest Injun?"

"Nevah!"

"Here goes the ink, then! The gum will follow it, then the treacle!"

"Keep off, you howwid beast!" wailed Arthur Augustus. "Dwag this heavy wuffian off, an'—an' I will pwomise!"

Arthur Augustus did not go to the Head. His word was his bond. But for the rest of that evening he gave Blake and Herries and Digby looks that ought to have withered them utterly. So far from being withered, however, Blake & Co. only chortled, and the more Arthur Augustus frowned the more they chortled.

CHAPTER 6.
A Shock for Crooke.

"HEARD anything of Talbot, Crooke?"

Figgins & Co. of the New House were chatting near the gates the following day after lessons when Crooke of the Shell came out.

Figgins asked the question good-naturedly.

As the missing junior was Crooke's cousin, the simple Figgy supposed that George Gerald must be feeling rather concerned about him, though they had certainly never been friends.

Kerr smiled, and Fatty Wynn winked into space. They were not quite so innocent as the good-hearted Figgy, and they did not need Crooke's scowl to tell them that the Shell fellow wasn't feeling in the least concerned about Talbot.

"No!" snapped Crooke.

"Queer, isn't it?" said Figgy. "He hasn't written?"

"He wouldn't write to me, I suppose?" sneered Crooke. "I should jolly well send his letter back unanswered if he did!"

"Would you?" asked Figgins, in surprise.

"Yes, I would!" growled Crooke. "I've got nothing to do with a fellow who's gone back to the thieves he was brought up among!"

"There's no proof of that!" said Kerr.

"None at all!" added Fatty Wynn, with a glance of strong disfavour at Crooke's sallow, spiteful face.

"Where has he gone, then?" sneered Crooke. "Why doesn't he come back? It's plain enough to me. The fellow ought never to have been admitted here. I said so all along."

"Oh, rats!" grunted Figgins.

"And I can tell you Inspector Skeat thinks so," said Crooke. "The Head had him here about it, and the inspector was asking me questions afterwards. I could see plain enough that he had made up his mind about it."

"Perhaps you helped him!" growled Kerr.

"Perhaps I did! I certainly didn't conceal my opinion."

And with that Crooke lounged out of the gates, leaving the New House trio looking rather grim. They liked Talbot, and trusted him, and they neither liked nor trusted Crooke. But they had to admit that matters looked as if the cad of the Shell might be right. It was plain enough that Crooke believed what he said.

Crooke grinned evilly as he walked up the lane to Rylcombe. It was always a pleasure to him to malign his absent cousin—putting another nail in Talbot's coffin, as he called it to himself.

But the grin soon died off his face, an angry and anxious look replacing it. The black sheep of the Shell was not worrying about his cousin, but he had worries of his own.

Half-way to the village he struck into a footpath across the fields, and entered the wood.

There among the trees a squat figure was seated on a log. It was Tickey Tapp, with a big cigar in his mouth. He rose, and grinned and nodded as Crooke came up.

The Shell fellow cast an uneasy glance round him before joining the sharper. He did not want to be seen in talk with Tickey Tapp.

"Arternoon, sir!" said Mr. Tapp genially.

Crooke wasted no time in greetings.

"I wanted to speak to you, Tapp," he said abruptly. "I've never seen you at Scaife's place since—since nearly a week ago."

"Master Racke objects to my comin' there to see my old pal Scaife, sir," said Tickey Tapp.

"You came there often enough before, though Racke objected all the time," grunted Crooke.

"Well, p'r'aps I've my own reasons for keeping away from the villa, Master Crooke. Wot does it matter?"

"I've wanted to speak to you ever since—ever since Talbot went——"

"Well, 'ere I am, sir. When I got word through Scaife that you wanted to see me, didn't I make an appointment at once?" said Mr. Tapp. "Always at your service, sir."

"It would have been safer to meet at the villa," grunted Crooke.

"Not in the daytime; and you couldn't very well come at night, sir," said Tickey Tapp. "I don't want to be seen around the villa these days."

"I don't see why."

"No need fur you to see, Master Crooke," answered Tickey Tapp coolly. "What's the business now, sir? Something on a horse—what?"

Crooke made an irritable gesture.

"Nothing of that sort! I've no mind for that kind of thing now! Look here, Tapp, what are you doing here?"

"Meetin' you at the present moment, sir."

"Don't play with words!" said Crooke savagely. "You know what I mean. Why haven't you left Rylcombe?"

"Jest staying on at the Green Man, that's all. I do a bit at billiards there, and one thing and another."

"It's not prudent!" muttered Crooke. "It's not safe! I—I understood that you were going away at once with Talbot."

Tickey Tapp smiled.

"Did you really, sir? I never said so."

"I understood that. Look here, Tapp. It's not safe for you to be here—not safe for me. I—I helped you to get into touch with Talbot, an' I don't see that I was to blame; but—but if it came out——"

"It won't come out, sir," said Tickey Tapp, eyeing him through the smoke of his cigar. "Don't you worry, Master Crooke! You did me a good turn, and I ain't likely to mention your name."

"How—how did it go?" asked Crooke, with uneasy curiosity. "I got Talbot to come to the villa easily enough. But—but his intention in coming there was to order you away from the place. He knew enough about you to send you to prison, an' he was going to threaten you, if you didn't clear out of this neighbourhood. But—but you talked him round, somehow, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Tickey Tapp, with a very peculiar look; "I got him to alter his mind about that, sir."

"It's queer," said Crooke. "Talbot seemed set on getting rid of you—that was his only reason for going to the villa to see you that night. Yet you managed to persuade him to join you instead?"

"Didn't I tell you I could do it?"

"Yes, you did; but I only half believed it," said Crooke. "I never believed in Talbot's reform; but—well, he must have been pretty keen to get back to his old life if he did it simply at a word from you!"

"I put him up to a good thing, sir," said Tickey Tapp, smiling. "I made it worth his while to come in with me."



BILLY BUNTER BUYS BUNS

"I suppose you did, as he hasn't come back," said Crooke. "But you can see it wouldn't do for my part to be known. I don't see that I was to blame; but people would call it deliberately putting the fellow in the way of temptation. That—that's what it looks like. I should get into trouble if it came out."

Tickey Tapp chuckled involuntarily, as he wondered what Crooke, already nervous, would have said if he had known the facts—if he had known that he had simply been used as a tool for getting Talbot of the Shell to Scaife's house, and that Talbot had been kidnapped there.

Crooke stared at him, surprised and irritated by the chuckle.

"I don't call it a laughing matter!" he said savagely. "I tell you, it would mean heavy trouble for me if it came out that I sent Talbot to see you; the motive would be jolly clear, I think. It would be known that you'd told me you could persuade him back into his old life, and that I wanted you to."

"Don't you fear, Master Crooke," said Tickey Tapp reassuringly. "Nothin' will be known unless you tell it yourself."

"I thought you intended to leave with Talbot at once," said Crooke. "Did he go away alone, then?"

Tickey Tapp suppressed a chuckle again, as he thought of the imprisoned junior in the dark cellar under Scaife's house.

"Yes, exactly," he agreed.

"It's odd," said Crooke musingly. "And he's really taken up his old life, Tapp?"

"He jumped at the chance, Master Crooke."

"Has he—has he," Crooke faltered—"has he done anything yet?"

"Has he cracked a crib yet, in the old style, you mean?"

"Ye-ee," muttered Crooke.

"You can depend on it, Master Crooke, that he has," said Tickey Tapp. "But I won't tell you any perticklers, for that would make you an accessory after the fact, as the lawyers call it, and you'd be liable."

Crooke shuddered. He realised more clearly than before what deep waters he was in to be dealing with a man like Tickey Tapp at all. His bitter animosity against his cousin, his desire to blacken him in Colonel Lyndon's eyes, had spurred him on. But he was sailing very near to the wind, and he knew it.

"Look here, Tap," he said, after an uneasy pause, "you ought to get out of this quarter. There's talk about you at the school in connection with Talbot. Mr. Railton came to see you about him, I know; and—and Talbot's friend, Mise Rivers, would guess something if she knew you were here—may have guessed already, for all I know. And—and I believe Tom Merry suspects that Talbot has been kidnapped, or some such rot!"

"Does he?" said Tickey Tapp, winking at the trees.

"And another silly fool, D'Arcy of the Fourth, think so, and was idiot enough to suspect me of having a hand in it."

"What an idea, sir!"

"Of course, it's silly rot! But talk has a way of growing," said Crooke. "It's not safe for you to stay in this quarter, Tapp. Why don't you clear?"

"Fact is, sir, a little matter of business is keepin' me 'ere."

Crooke started.

"Not—not—— You'd never be fool enough——" he gasped.

"Ha, ha! Nothing in the Toff's line!" grinned Tickey Tapp. "I'm no 'and at a safe, sir, and I couldn't pick a lock to save my life. The Toff's the boy for that game. Not me!"

Crooke breathed more freely. But his desire to see the last of the ruffian, to know that he was gone, was almost feverish.

"It would be safer to go, Tapp," he said, biting his lips. "Look here. If you want tin, I'll stand you a fiver to go to-day!"

"Can't be done, sir!" said Tickey Tapp decidedly.

"Why not?" broke out Crooke savagely. "What's keeping you here? Billiard-sharping at the Green Man?

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You could play that game anywhere. It's not Scaife, as you don't visit his place now. What is it then?"

"That's my business!" said Mr. Tapp coolly.

"It would be safer for you to keep an eye on Talbot, too, wherever he is," urged Crooke. "Suppose he changes his mind again? Suppose he turns pious, as he did before, an'—an' came back! I believe the Head would let the fellow stuff him up with some yarn. He thinks no end of Talbot. You may be spoiling your own game by letting him go out of sight."

The look on Tickey Tapp's face at that moment was so peculiar that it struck Crooke, and he broke off abruptly. His vague fear and distrust of the man deepened.

Why was Tickey Tapp staying on?

After persuading Talbot to join him and the gang once more, what object had he in staying there, id'ing at the Green Man, and letting the Toff out of his sight?

It was not wholly safe for him, for there were some, at St. Jim's, at least, who surmised that Talbot had been forcibly kidnapped, and that Tickey Tapp might have had a hand in it.

The sharper's safest policy was to disappear without leaving a trace behind; and if, as he had averred, Talbot was now his comrade in crime, he was neglecting to gather the rich harvest he had promised himself.

A terrible fear was rising in Crooke's breast. His face grew paler, and his eyes had a scared look, as they rested upon the sharper's stubbly face.

"Nothin' more to say, sir?" asked Tickey Tapp calmly. "I may as well be gettin' 'ome. A man's comin' in to see me at six."

"Hold on a minute!" muttered Crooke huskily. "Tell me. When are you going away?"

"Can't say."

"Tell me why you're stopping here, then!"

Tickey Tapp shrugged his shoulders, and made a movement to go. Crooke caught him by the arm, with a grip that was unconsciously hard.

"Tickey Tapp," he muttered, "tell me the truth, hang you! You—you told me that if I got Talbot to come to the villa you could persuade him to take up his old life, and go away with you. I—I believed you."

"Well?" said Tickey Tapp, with a deep breath.

"Some—some fellows think he has been kidnapped," whispered Crooke. "Tickey Tapp, if—if I thought you were tricking me——" He broke off.

"Better not think too much about it, sir," said Tickey Tapp. "Chuck it out of your mind!"

"Tell me the truth, hang you! Were you spoofing me? Did you—did you want Talbot there so that you—you could kidnap him?" gasped Crooke. And, even as he said it, it was borne in upon his mind that it was the truth.

He released the sharper's arm and staggered back a pace. Tickey Tapp looked at him with a sneering grin. He had wondered whether Crooke would tumble, and Crooke had tumbled at last.

The Shell fellow's face was white as chalk.

Unconsciously, though with malicious intention, he had taken part in a crime; he was amenable to the law; and as he realised that his knees knocked together.

"Oh, you hound!" he almost sobbed. "You treacherous villain! I can see it now! You took me in! You knew Talbot wouldn't join you! You got him there, and you and Scaife—— Thats why you haven't gone! That's why——"

"Take it easy, sir!" said Tickey Tapp.

"Where is he now?" breathed Crooke.

"Ask me no questions and Ill tell you no lies, sir."

"I needn't ask—I know!" hissed Crooke. "That's why you're keeping away from Scaife's place! You don't want to draw attention to it because—because Talbot's there!"

Tickey Tapp blew out a cloud of smoke.

"I ain't saying yes, and I ain't saying

BOB CHERRY BUYS BONDS!

no," he answered calmly. "I ain't saying nothing, 'cept take it easy. You score, Master Crooke. Your cousin's gone, and left a bad name behind him. He's done for with the colonel, and he won't ever see St. Jim's again. Take my word for that. He's going back to his old life, that I swear, sooner or later—most likely sooner. I told you the truth—that I could persuade him. I'm persuading him now." Tickey Tapp grinned hideously. "Leave it to me, sir. You're safe if you hold your tongue."

"Safe!" panted Crooke.

"Safe enough. Even if it comes out there's no proof you sent the feller there—only his word again yours, and a little hard lying wouldn't come new to you, I dessay. Keep a still tongue and a steady nerve, sir, and you're all right. I reckoned you'd tumble, sooner or later; but you ain't got nothing to fear. Put it out of your 'ead."

With that Tickey Tapp walked away through the wood, leaving Crooke rooted to the ground.

Crooke stared after him till he was out of sight, and then, with faltering steps, walked home to the school, a prey to terror and remorse. The terror outweighed the remorse, however, and the remorse would have vanished entirely if the terror could have been quite banished. But, after all, he asked himself, what was there to fear? His word was as good as Talbot's, even if all came out, and the kidnapped junior mentioned his part in the affair.

And another thought came to him—he knew Talbot's generous nature; he knew the Toff's reluctance to lower him, enemy as he was, in the opinion of their uncle. Talbot would never accuse him.

That thought brought him relief.

He started as he came into the School House and found the stern eyes of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fixed upon him. He passed D'Arcy hurriedly, and went to his study.

D'Arcy's accusation, which he had laughed at the day before, had become true. For he was now, at least, an accomplice in the kidnapping of Talbot; he was an accessory after the fact.

He wished from the bottom of his heart that he had not seen Tickey Tapp that day, that he had never guessed the truth!

But it was too late for that now, and from that hour he had to remain under the shadow of a guilty secret.

CHAPTER 7.
The Shadow of Guilt.

"I'VE been waitin' for you!"

Aubrey Racke snapped out that remark as Crooke came into the study.

Crooke scowled in response.

He was in no mood for Racke's society or for Racke's remarks.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"Nothin'! I suppose we're goin' out to tea, that's all," said Racke, with a stare. "Anythin' the matter?"

"No."

"Well, are you comin'?"

"You—you—you're goin' to Scaife's?" muttered Crooke, a new fear seizing upon him.

"Of course! What's the matter with you?" demanded Racke in surprise. "You needn't come if you don't choose. I'll ask Clampe; he'll be glad enough."

"Hold on, Racke!" Crooke stood before the door to stop his study-mate. "Hold on! You—you'd better not go there food-hoggin' any more."

"Gettin' scared?" sneered Racke.

"It's not safe," said Crooke, with trembling lips. "Lots of the fellows suspect what you go there for. They know Scaife's in your pay. You know what they did before, when they found you had a man supplyin' you with grub. They raided the place!"

"Cheeky cads!" said Racke. "They won't raid this place. They'll get no change out of Scaife."

"They—they might."

"Well, let 'em! Scaife will get another show if he has to leave the villa. It's happened before, and it may happen again. Nothing new about it, is there?"

"It's frightfully risky, Racke! Suppose—suppose there's talk about food-hoggin' going on there—there's plenty of talk already for that matter—and it it gets to the ears of the food office people, they'll have the place searched."

"Do you think I haven't thought of that, you ass? Suppose they search it and find Scaife's stores? Nothin' to connect us with them, unless we're found on the scene—and we should take care of that. Even if we were found there, we simply dropped in for a cup of tea with a cottager, knowin' nothin' of any food-hoggin'. Scaife will hold his tongue; he's paid to. I've thought all that out."

Crooke panted.

It was not the danger of discovery as a food-hog that worried him. It was the knowledge of what would be found at the villa if it was searched for food-hoards—the knowledge that somewhere in the building a kidnapped junior was concealed. He could not explain that to Racke, who was astonished at his sudden nervousness.

"You're losin' your dashed nerve!" said Racke contemptuously. "The danger's no greater to-day than it was yesterday, or the day before, I suppose?"

"It is—it is!"

"How is it, then?"

"I—I think it is, anyway," stammered Crooke.

"Oh, you're a funk!" said Racke. "If you're afraid, stay here. Let me pass, Crooke! Scrope's waitin' for me, and I've got to call at the New House for Clampe."

"Racke, I wish you'd give it up!" muttered Crooke. "After all, it's caddish and—and unpatriotic hoggin' food in war-time. It's no class. The—the fellows are right in what they say about it. Chuck it!"

"Turnin' pious, or chicken-hearted?" sneered Racke. "Don't talk silly rot to me, Crooke. Let me pass!"

"There's bound to be somethin' come out some day, Racke!"

"I'm goin' to get good feeds till it does, then. Let me pass, you duffer!"

And as Crooke did not move Racke pushed him out of the way and left the study.

Crooke sank into a chair with a groan.

Sooner or later, it was certain, the food-hogging at Laurel Villa would be put a stop to, and if the stop came in the form of a search by the officers of the Food Control every corner and recess of the villa would be ransacked. And then, beside the hoards of foods, the searchers would find Talbot of the Shell!

For it was certain that he was there. That was why Tickey Tapp was hanging on in Rylcombe. He could not convey his prisoner away secretly, and there was only one place where Talbot could be kept concealed till he yielded to the sharper's terms, and that was Scaife's house.

Racke & Co., feasting in the dining-room of the villa, would be within a dozen yards of the kidnapped junior. The thought was a terrifying one to Crooke.

It was impossible to explain to Aubrey Racke, for the latter would certainly never have become a party to the kidnapping. Even his silence could not have been depended on. He had nothing to gain to make him take such a risk. Indeed, Crooke was aware how furious Racke would be if he found out for what purpose Scaife was using the house.



Helping Gussy!
(See Chapter 4.)

In his fear and trouble Crooke was almost tempted to go to Mr. Railton and confess all. But he thought of Talbot's triumphant return, restored to honour and the good opinion of all, and he ground his teeth.

At any cost and risk Talbot should never come back to his old place at St. Jim's.

But if he came, and chose to speak, and tell how Crooke had tricked him into the kidnapper's hands! The wretched cad of the Shell trembled at the thought. Expulsion, disgrace, ruin loomed before him!

He stood at the study window and watched Racke and Clampe and Scrope going down to the gates. They were going to Laurel Villa, little dreaming of the dark secret it held. Baggy Trimble was at the gates, and he joined the Shell fellows as they went out.

Crooke left the window and threw himself into a chair. He regretted now that he had not gone with Racke; at least he could have kept an eye on the feasters, and could have been sure that they made no discovery. He took his cap and coat as that thought came to him, and left the School House to follow his chums.

Blake & Co. were in the doorway downstairs, and the eye of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was turned at once on Crooke.

"Bai Jove! That wottah is lookin' feahfully off colour!" Arthur Augustus remarked.

"Too many smokes, perhaps!" yawned Blake.

"I think it is pwobably a guilty conscience, Blake."

"Bow-wow!"

"Considewin' that he is a wascally kidnappah——"

"Bump him!" said Herries.

Arthur Augustus fled. He was still firmly fixed in his belief, but his chums did not share it; and there was an agreement in Study No. 6 to bump the great Gussy whenever he referred to his amazing theory.

Crooke hurried down to the gates, and in the road he met Baggy Trimble, trying to extract his cap from the back of his neck. Baggy was wrathful. His attempt to join the food-hogs had failed again, and Racke & Co. had not stood on ceremony with him.

"You going, too, Crooke?" he asked, jerking out the cap as Crooke came by. "I'll come with you, old chap!"

"Get out of the way!" snarled Crooke.

"Look here, Crooke, I'm coming!" said Baggy determinedly. "I know very well what's on—I know all about Scaife! And I can tell you—— Yooop!"

Crooke gave him a savage shove, and Baggy sat down in the road with a bump.

The Shell fellow hurried on, leaving him there, and Baggy Trimble scrambled up, and shook a fat fist after him. There was no food-hogging for Baggy that afternoon, and he was feeling very injured.

CHAPTER 8.
No Backing for Baggy.

"GUSSY, old fellow!"

"Wats!"

"I say, old chap——"

"Wun away!"

"But look here, old bird——"

"Once for all, Twimble, I wefuse to allow you to addwess me in that familiah mannah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "You compel me to wemark, Twimble, that I wegard you as a pushin' boundah!"

And the swell of St. Jim's walked on. But Baggy Trimble, apparently not in the least perturbed by being regarded as a pushing bounder, trotted after him.

Mere words were not sufficient to rebuff Baggy.

"You're not playing footer this afternoon?" he asked.

"I am playin' in the School House Eleven, Twimble!" answered Arthur Augustus coldly.

It was Wednesday afternoon, and a House match was on. Arthur Augustus was killing time till kick-off by walking in the quad and thinking out the mystery of Talbot's departure. His suspicions were fixed upon George Gerald Crooke as firmly as ever; but he had ceased to speak of them to his study-mates. Blake & Co.'s methods of bringing him to reason, as they regarded it, were too drastic.

"But, I say, Gussy——"

"Pway wun away, Twimble!"

"I was only going to say that I quite agree with you about Talbot," said Baggy, with an injured look.

Arthur Augustus came to a halt.

"What do you know about that mattah, Twimble?" he asked sternly. "I am suah Cwooke has not told you!"

"I heard——"

"I feah, Twimble, that you could only have heard the mattah weferred to by listenin' suwweptitiously!"

"I don't know what you mean by syruptitiously, D'Arcy; but I meantersay, I quite agree with you. What beats me is, that the other fellows can't see it! They don't rely on your judgment as I do, I suppose."

Arthur Augustus thawed considerably.

"It's as plain as anything," said Trimble blandly, "that Crooke's had Talbot kidnapped."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He's a food-hog, too," said Trimble.

"So are you, Twimble!"

"Ahem! The—the fact is, D'Arcy, I've given up that kind of thing. I'm patriotic, you know. I—I'm down on those cads! I refuse to go out with them!"

"I feah that the boot is on the othah leg, Twimble, and that they wefuse to allow you to share in their food-hoggin'."

"Ahem! I've quite given them the go-by," said Trimble. "And what I think is, they ought to be stopped."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I've spoken to Tom Merry about it," continued Trimble, "but he only snapped at me; he seems in a frightful bad temper lately——"

"He is wowwied about old Talbot."

"Is he?" grunted Trimble. "I don't see why! Anyway, that's no reason why he should snap at a fellow! I've spoken to Figgins, but he's so full of the House match that he won't listen to anything. And Levison told me to mind my own business, and Cardew said I could go and eat coke, and Roylance said——"

"I wepeat all their wemarks, Twimble!"

"Ahem! So I've come to you, Gussy—I mean D'Arcy! You've got sense," said Trimble. "You've got some tact and judgment."

"I twust so, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus, thawing again.

"Well, then, they ought to be stopped—you agree to that. I know quite well that Racke & Co. go to Scaife's house grubbing. Scaife's his man, you know, and he pays him—or his father pays him. Ten to one there's a food-hoard in the place. Don't you think so?" asked Trimble eagerly.

"I wegard it as vewy pwob."

"Well, then, wouldn't it serve them right to have it raided?"

"You have no pwoof, Twimble: an' it is wathah low-class to be a wotten informah, in any case!"

"I wasn't thinking of that. You know the chaps raided them once, when Racke had another man here, before Scaife came. Why shouldn't we do that? You back me up," said Trimble valiantly, "and I'll put a stop to it!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I'm willing to give up my half-holiday to-day, for patriotic reasons," said Trimble. "You come with me and raid 'em! Racke won't be there to-day; Crooke's asked him and Scrope to go home with him for the half. Crooke doesn't seem so keen on food-hogging as he was. Scaife will be alone in the place, and two chaps could deal with him, D'Arcy."

"Vewy likely! But——"

"Another fellow or two would come, if you asked them!" said Trimble eagerly. "They won't do it for me—for some reason. They would for you. We could handle Scaife, and search the house for grub. I know it's there; I tell you I went once with Racke, and the place was fairly reeking with grub."

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"I think the pwesumptive evidence is stwong enough to justify a waid," he answered. "But I do not wegard it as my bizney, Twimble; besides, I am playin' footah this aftahnoon."

"Don't walk away, D'Arcy! Trimble trotted after the swell of St. Jim's again. "Do listen to a chap! I've tried a dozen other fellows, and they won't listen to me. Just think of the feed we could get if we raided the food-hoard——"

"What?"

"I—I mean," gasped Trimble, realising that he was on the wrong track—"I—I mean, think what a punishment it would be to those rotters to have their hoard confiscated! Handed over to the Food Control, of course! I—I wouldn't think of touching it myself!"

"Oh, wats!"

"And that isn't all!" gasped Trimble. "Think of Talbot——"

"What are you dwivin' at now?"

"You think that—that Crooke's had a hand in kidnapping Talbot," said Trimble cunningly. "Well, Racke's hand-in-glove with Crooke, and Scaife is Racke's man. Scaife may have had a hand in it, too!"

"Yaas, I shouldn't wondah!" said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "I believe the man is wascal enough! Hallo! Heah's Tom Mewwy!"

"I say, Gussy——"

"Twimble, pway wun away; you are a feahful boah, deah boy! Wats!"

And Arthur Augustus joined the Terrible Three, to escape from the persistent Baggy.

Tom Merry was not looking very cheerful that sunny autumn affternoon. His thoughts were with his missing chum, and he was not feeling inclined for football. Kangaroo of the Shell was to captain the School House Junior Eleven in the House match, and Tom was standing out of the game. Manners and Lowther both had places in the eleven, however.

"You are lookin' wathah down, Tom Mewwy," remarked Arthur Augustus.

Tom nodded without speaking.

"I have alweady told you, deah boy, that I am on Talbot's twack," said the swell of St. Jim's mildly. "It is simply a question of makin' Cwooke pwoduce him——"

Tom made an impatient gesture.

"Don't be an ass, old top!" said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"Time to change, Gussy!" shouted Jack Blake. "If you're late for kick-off, we'll scalp you!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Get a move on!"

Arthur Augustus was dragged away by his chum, and Manners and Lowther went with him, to change for the match. Tom Merry walked on under the elms, amid the fallen leaves, with his hands in his pockets and his brows knitted.

Baggy Trimble approached him rather gingerly. The fat Fourth-Former was bent on raiding the hoard at Laurel Villa that afternoon, while Racke & Co. were away; and he wanted help. Tom Merry's look was not very promising, but Baggy resolved to risk it.

"I say, Tom Merry——" he began.

"Don't worry!" snapped Tom.

"If you call that civil, Merry——"

"Oh, cut off!" said Tom irritably.

The trouble on his mind affected Tom's sunny temper a little, and he had no patience to waste upon the fat Baggy.

"Look here, you know, as you're not playing footer you might as well come with me to Scaife's!" pleaded Baggy. "I'm sure that——"

"Leave me alone!"

"Racke's really breaking the law there, you know, and——"

"Hang Racke, and hang you!" broke out Tom Merry savagely. "Let me alone, you fat porker!"

He strode away towards the football-ground with a frowning brow, and Baggy Trimble did not venture to follow him farther. He snorted with angry disappointment.

Racke and Crooke and Scrope came from the direction of the School House, and Trimble watched them out of gates sulkily. Crooke was taking his chums home for the afternoon, chiefly to keep them away from Scaife's place. Trimble's offer to join the party had been declined without thanks.

Baggy looked round, and joined Julian and Kerruish, who were heading for Little Side to watch the footer match.

"Julian, old top," he said persuasively, "how'd you like to come with me this afternoon?"

"Not a bit!"

"Suppose I tell you where we can bag a big spread——"

"Against the rations?" asked Julian.

"Yes; simply ripping—any amount of grub! Yarooh!" roared Trimble, as Dick Julian took him by the collar and spun him round. "Wharrer you up to? Yoop!"

Trimble sat down with a bump. Julian and Kerruish walked on, evidently not in the least tempted by the prospect of a big and unlawful spread. Baggy shook a fat fist after them, and scrambled up as George Alfred Grundy came along. Grundy of the Shell was his last hope.

"I say, Grundy, old man——" he began.

"Not so much of your old man!" snapped Grundy. "I don't allow familiarity from fags. I've told you so before, Trimble!"

"Ahem! But I say——"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" Grundy turned to Wilkins, who was in footer rig, with a coat on. "Wilkins, old chap, there's still time for you to stand out, and give me your place in the team!"

"You don't say so!" remarked Wilkins.

"For the sake of the side, you ought to do it!" urged Grundy. "I suppose you want the School House to win?"

"Yes; that's why I can't do it, old top!" said Wilkins blandly.

"Why, you—you—you——"

"I say, Grundy——" persisted Trimble.

"Oh, shut up, you!" howled Grundy. "Don't bother!"

"Yes; but I say——"

Grundy made a rush at Trimble, evidently with hostile intentions; and Baggy fled.

His last hope had failed him. Grundy was heading for the footer-ground, to watch the House match, and made sarcastic comments thereon. And Baggy Trimble rolled out of the school gates by himself, having come to the desperate resolution of attempting the raid on Scaife's food-hoard on his own.

CHAPTER 9.
Baggy Trimble Makes a Startling Discovery.

BAGGY TRIMBLE stopped at Laurel Villa, and blinked over the gate. Somewhat slowly, he rolled up the garden path to the door.

That quiet-looking villa was the Promised Land to the greedy Baggy; verily a land flowing with milk and honey. Like a podgy Peri at the gate of Paradise, he thought of the delights within that he was not permitted to share. But Baggy was hungry, and Baggy was determined; what he lacked in courage he made up in cunning. After all, he reflected, Scaife could not eat him; and he had often risked a licking to bag less provender than was to be found within the villa—if he could get at it.

More than once Baggy had prowled round the villa, but he had always found the doors locked and the windows fastened. He was certain—or almost certain—of the existence of the food-hoard, and he had been tempted to give information; but proof was lacking, and, moreover, it would not have benefited Baggy to see the hoard confiscated by the authorities. That would have removed it further than ever from his reach, and Baggy was thinking wholly of his greedy inside.

He knocked at the door of the villa, conscious that Scaife's single eye was gleaming at him from behind a curtained window. Scaife never opened the door without that precaution. His footsteps were soon heard within; he knew Baggy Trimble by sight, having several times seen him with Racke & Co.

The door opened, and Scaife looked out inquiringly.

"Well?" he said laconically. Mr. Scaife did not waste much civility on Baggy Trimble; he had observed how Aubrey Racke treated his hanger-on, and he treated him accordingly.

"Racke's sent me to warn you, Scaife," said Trimble glibly.

"I don't understand you, Master Trimble!"

"Crump's watching the house!" said Trimble in a low voice.

Scaife started. Mr. Crump was the village policeman—a gentleman whom Scaife certainly did not want to see near the villa.

"You can see him from here," whispered Trimble. "There's the end of his helmet just showing behind the rhododendrons—if you look from here——"

Scaife, with a hard glitter in his eye, stepped out of the porch, and looked towards the mass of rhododendrons down the garden by the fence. As he did so Baggy Trimble whipped into the house.

Slam!

Scaife spun round in amazement.

The door was closed, and the key turned inside. And inside, too, was heard a fat and breathless chuckle.

Baggy Trimble had won the first round!

Scaife stood rooted to the ground for some moments, dumbfounded. He would never have suspected the podgy Baggy of so much craft. Neither did he know why the fat junior had tricked him in this way. But his single eye glittered with rage as he strode back to the door and knocked at it.

"Let me in, you fat fool!" he called out. He understood now that Police-constable Crump was not there; that was merely the cheerful Baggy's dodge to trick him out of the house.

All the answer he received was the quick shooting of a bolt on the door. Scaife clenched his hands with rage.

Baggy Trimble, inside, was panting with breathlessness mixed with apprehension. He was not often a fellow of resource; only the prospect of a big feed could have made him so resourceful as this. He knew that the doors and windoors were generally kept fastened, but he ran through the house quickly to the back door, to make sure, before Scaife could get round. The door was locked, and Baggy bolted it, too. Knock, knock, knock sounded on the front door while he was thus engaged.

"The rotter!" gasped Baggy. "He'll pitch into me if he gets in—the ruffian! He's jolly well not going to get in!"

"Open this door!" came Scaife's furious voice from without. "If you don't let me in, you young rascal, I'll break the glass of a window and get in!"

Scaife was alarmed, for reasons Trimble did not understand yet. Trimble did not know the secret hidden in the villa; but the bare idea of the fat junior spying about the building unchecked filled Scaife with angry alarm.

Trimble did not answer. He was too busy. All the rooms on the ground floor of the villa opened upon a little hall which extended through the house. Trimble changed the keys of all the doors to the outside, and locked them one after another. If Scaife entered a room by breaking a window, now, he would still have a locked door between him and Trimble.

"That settles the brute, I fancy!" grinned Trimble. "He can't eat me, the beast, even if he does get in! Suppose the beast licks me, it won't be worse than Grundy gave me when I borrowed his sardines! He's not such a beast as Grundy, anyway. Now for that hoard! I'll show 'em!"

Crash!

It was the sound of breaking glass. Scaife had been as good as his word. He dared not leave the intruder alone in the house.

Trimble did not heed. He was opening the door that led down to the cellars. He did not expect to find the food-hoard in any of the upper rooms, of course; if it was there, it was pretty certain to be well out of sight. Trimble was going down the cellar steps when he heard Scaife raging at the locked door of the dining-room.

But a locked door was a locked door, and Trimble did not mind if he raged. He closed the door of the cellar stairs behind him, and jammed his pocket-knife under it, so that it could not be opened again. With the wedged door behind him, Trimble felt quite safe, even if Scaife got into the hall.

All was dark below, and Trimble struck a match and picked his way down the narrow stair gingerly.

If the food-hoard was there, Baggy was on it now; and he had no objection to taking his next meal in a cellar—none at all. And if he found the hoard he would have certain information, and he could make terms with Scaife. The threat of giving information at the police-station would bring the one-eyed man to order fast enough.

Trimble was feeling quite easy in his fat mind. And the thought of being on the very verge of a terrific food-hoard made his greedy mouth water.

He stepped into the cellar below, and struck another match. There was firewood stacked in the cellar, and other articles, but no sign of food. But there was a lantern on a bench, and Trimble lighted it. Taking up the lighted lantern, he cast the light around him.

Faintly from the distance came another crash of glass.

Scaife had climbed to a bed-room window at the back and smashed it in. His heavy footsteps rang on the stairs. Trimble paused, his heart beating a

little as he heard the man moving above. As if by instinct, Scaife came at once to the door at the top of the cellar steps, and Trimble heard it creak. But the door opened inwards, and the pocket-knife wedged under it made it impossible for anyone to push it open from without. Trimble had taken care of that.

Thump, thump, thump!

Scaife beat frantically on the door. The discovery that Trimble was in the cellar alarmed him to the point of frenzy.

"Thump away, old top!" murmured Trimble, with a smirk. "You wait till I've found your hoard, you beast! You'll be civil enough then!"

Trimble cast the light of the lantern round the cellar. It gleamed upon a low door in the brick wall that was bolted and barred. Trimble emitted a chuckle as he saw it. Evidently the contents of that cellar were well safeguarded. Yet, obtuse as Trimble was, it struck him as curious that the cellar should be barred and bolted as well as locked. However, he dragged away the bars, and pulled back the bolts, and felt for the key. But the key was not there.

"That's the place!" muttered Trimble, his eyes gleaming. "Why should a little inner cellar be locked up and the key taken away?"

Thump, thump, thump! Bang! Scaife was beating furiously on the door at the top of the cellar steps with some heavy instrument.

"My hat! The silly idiot's trying to break in the door!" murmured Trimble. "He's jolly waxy! Blow him!"

He set down the lantern, and picked up one of the iron bars he had taken down. With one crash he shivered the lock on the low door. He had no time to waste, with Scaife in such hot haste above. As the door jerked open Trimble passed into the inner cellar, holding up the lantern.

The next moment he uttered a startled yell.

From the darkness of the deep cellar a white face and staring eyes looked at him, like the face of a spectre.

"Yarooh!" yelled Trimble. "Keep off! It's a g-g-ghost! Ow! Yow, yow! Yah! Help!"

There was a panting cry in the gloom.

"Trimble! It's you, Trimble! Good heavens!"

And Baggy, recognising the voice, stuttered, as he turned the light full on the ghastly face:

"Talbot! My only hat! Talbot!"

CHAPTER 10.
A Fight for Freedom.

TALBOT of the Shell stood staring dazedly at the fat junior.

He could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes when he saw Trimble before him. If Tom Merry had somehow discovered him there he would not have been surprised, but the sight of Baggy Trimble astounded him.

Trimble, equally astonished, blinked at the kidnapped junior, the lantern shaking in his fat hand.

"Talbot!" he repeated. "You! Talbot!"

Crash, crash, crash! rang above, with a splintering of wood. Trimble understood at last why Scaife was in such reckless and furious haste to overtake him. The one-eyed man was not thinking of the food-hoard, as Trimble had supposed—he was thinking of the hidden prisoner of the cellar.

Talbot panted for breath.

How Trimble had come there was a mystery to him. But there was no time for words. His brain was quick to act. The crash above told him that Scaife was close at hand.

"Trimble, untie my arm—no, cut the cord! You've a knife? For mercy's sake, be quick—quick!"

"I say, you're tied up! Oh, my hat!" said the astounded Baggy. "I say, Talbot, what are you doing here?"

"Cut me loose!" panted Talbot, almost in agony, as he heard the door splintering at the top of the cellar steps.

If Scaife arrived before he was free, Baggy Trimble would not be able to help him. Baggy was more likely to share his fate—to keep his mouth shut as to what he had discovered

"I say, I stuck my pocket-knife under the door up there," said Trimble. "That's what's keeping Scaife back, you know."

Talbot groaned.

"Get me loose somehow—get me loose! Untie the cord. And give me that bar—quick!"

In his left hand, which was free, Talbot grasped the iron bar. That, at least, was a weapon, and a formidable one, though he had but one hand to wield it. Baggy Trimble stood the lantern on a shelf, and began to pick at the cords with fat, clumsy fingers.

He was still in a state of blank amazement, and his obtuse brain was far from realising the seriousness of the situation, or his own danger. His danger was as great as Talbot's, if he had only known it, for Scaife would never, if he could help it, allow him to depart to chatter of what he had found.

The cord was knotted round Talbot's wrist, and secured round his waist, leaving his arm loose enough to keep up the circulation, but that was all. The knots were hard and fast. Talbot had worked at them with his left hand many times, but without making any impression on them. Trimble had two hands for the task, but the hands were clumsy, and the knots were too secure. The precious moments flew by, and Talbot's arm was still confined.

Crash!

Fragments of the door above rattled on the cellar steps as it was burst through at last by Scaife's furious blows.

Heavy, hurried footsteps followed.

"He's coming!" gasped Baggy.

Talbot gritted his teeth.

"It's all right, old man!" said Trimble, with a wink, and pointing to the padlocked boxes and cases in the cellar. "That's the giddy food-hoard, you know. If Scaife cuts up rusty I'll tell him I'm going to the police about it. I had that in my mind all along."

"Stand by me!" muttered Talbot, unheeding, as Scaife's heavy footstep rang in the outer cellar. "Trimble, we've got to beat Scaife, or you'll be kept here with me. Don't you understand?"

"Wha-aat?"

Baggy's jaw dropped.

He did understand then, and his fat knees knocked together. It was pretty clear that Trimble would be no use in the coming struggle.

Scaife's furious face appeared in the low doorway.

Talbot, with teeth set, the iron bar in his left hand, faced him, weak and pale from confinement and want of food, but dauntless and determined. Trimble dodged behind the Shell fellow with a howl.

"Put down that bar, boy!" shouted Scaife, advancing.

Talbot did not answer; his eyes were fastened upon Scafe. He spoke, but it was to Trimble.

"Trimble!"

"Oh, dear! I—I say, Scaife——" mumbled Baggy.

"Trimble, cut for it! Get away, and get help! Run for it!" panted Talbot.

Scaife sprang at the Shell fellow; but he sprang back as the iron bar swept up. His single eye glittered like a cat's. Keeping it fixed on Talbot, he backed through the low doorway into the outer cellar, evidently to seek a weapon. Talbot understood, and he knew that, with only one hand, he had no chance if Scaife once laid hands on a bludgeon. It was neck or nothing; and Talbot, summoning all his strength, rushed after the one-eyed man, pursuing him closely.

Scaife sprang back, and Talbot followed hotly through the low doorway. Scaife had his hand on a pile of billets of wood when Talbot reached him and the iron bar struck.

There was a shriek from Scaife as the bar came crashing upon him. He threw up his arm instinctively, and the blow came on his elbow. He reeled back on the pile of wood, almost fainting with pain, and Baggy Trimble dodged by at the same moment, and fled up the cellar stairs.

Talbot could have cried aloud with joy as the fat junior vanished. Baggy was thinking of his own skin; but once he was clear of the house all was safe for Talbot—once his imprisonment there was known outside.

Scaife, white as chalk with pain, squirmed away from the second blow Talbot aimed at him, and stumbled to the cellar stair in pursuit of Baggy.

He was too quick for the junior, enfeebled by hunger. He was out of Talbot's reach, but he was not safe yet. As he sprang up the stair, Talbot hurled the iron bar with all the strength of his arm, and it struck Scaife in the small of the back.

With a fearful yell the rascal rolled backwards, and fell on the floor of the cellar, writhing with pain.

Talbot passed him as he rolled and writhed, and staggered up the cellar-stair. Even then Scaife made an effort to catch at him as he went; but Talbot eluded his feeble clutch, and ran up the steps. He heard Scaife crawling up the steps behind him as he ran, groaning and panting as he crawled.

But he had no chance of overtaking the junior now. Talbot thrust through the broken door at the top of the steps, and ran down the passage to the front door, which Baggy had left wide open in his flight.

His heart bounded as he saw the blue sky again and felt the wind on his cheeks.

He staggered out of the doorway.

In the fierce struggle, excitement and hope had buoyed him up, and he had not known how weak he was.

But he realised now how much his imprisonment had told upon him, and a mist floated before his eyes as he staggered down the garden path, and his legs seemed to bend under him. The white road beyond the garden seemed endless distances away, and behind him, closer now, came the sound of Scaife, groaning out curses as he moved.

CHAPTER 11.
At Last!

"TOM MERRY!"

Tom looked round.

The captain of the Shell had watched the House match on Little Side for some time; but his heart was not in the game. He had left the football-ground at last, and walked away in a gloomy mood.

His thoughts were all of his absent chum as he turned out of the gates of St. Jim's and walked aimlessly down the lane, caring little whither his footsteps led him. With his hands driven deep into his pockets, and his brows blackly knitted, he walked on unseeing till the sound of his name, shouted close at hand, caused him to look up.

Ahead of him in the lane was Baggy Trimble, hatless, spluttering with terror

and excitement. He waved both fat hands at Tom Merry as he yelled.

"Tom Merry! Help! Tom Merry!" The sight of the captain of the Shell was sheer joy to Baggy at that moment, for his terrors pictured Scaife close in pursuit at his very heels. He had started to run for the school, pounding along at the greatest speed his weight would allow, when he sighted Tom and yelled to him.

Tom Merry quickened his pace.

"What's the row?" he called out.

"Help! Help! He's after me! Help!"

"What? There's nobody after you, fathead!" said Tom impatiently.

Trimble blinked round, and saw that the road was clear behind him as far as the gate of Laurel Villa.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Baggy. "I've had a frightfully narrow escape—the awful villain—the awful kidnapper! Ow! I—I was only looking for the food-hoard—but when I found Talbot——"

"What?"

"Talbot said I should be kidnapped, too, so that I couldn't tell, you know—— Ow-ow-ow!"

Tom Merry, his face in a blaze, grasped the fat junior by the shoulder, and shook him.

"Talbot! What do you mean? Have you seen Talbot? Quick!"

"Yow-ow! Don't shake me——"

"Have you seen Talbot?" roared Tom Merry.

"I—ow!—I was just going to tell you—oh, dear! He's at the villa—yow-ow! Scaife's place, you know—kidnapped——"

Tom Merry did not wait to hear more.

Leaving Baggy Trimble gasping, the captain of the Shell went up the lane like an arrow, his feet seeming scarcely to touch the ground as he ran. His face was white, his eyes burning. Almost in a flash, as it seemed, he reached the gate, and as he looked beyond it he saw Talbot of the Shell—Talbot, pale as chalk, tottering on the path, with Scaife behind him and close upon him.

The gate flew open, and Tom Merry, with an unconscious cry of rage, dashed up the path.

"Tom!" panted Talbot.

Tom did not pause. He rushed straight at Scaife, who put up his hands in defence, feebly, for he was badly hurt. But in the prime of strength he could not have stood against Tom Merry at that moment. With blazing eyes, Tom Merry drove his fists into Scaife's face, and the rascal rolled over on the path, almost stunned.

Then Tom Merry turned to his chum.

"Talbot!"

He caught the tottering junior by the arm and supported him.

"Tom, old man!" said Talbot faintly. "Help me out of this! Oh, Tom, it's good to see you again!"

"Talbot, old chap!" whispered Tom.

With his strong arm he helped his chum to the road. Scaife raised himself on his elbow dazedly, and blinked after them. The game was up for Racke's man, and he was thinking only of his own safety now. With grinding teeth, the rascal limped into the house.

In the road Tom Merry stopped, Talbot leaning on his arm. But Talbot was already recovering a little.

"I've been through it, Tom," he muttered. "Did you guess that I'd been kidnapped? You never thought——"

"I never thought harm of you," said Tom. "You know that, old chap. You've been a prisoner—in that house?"

"It seems like ages, Tom. I—I've been half starved!" Tom Merry had opened his pocket-knife, and was cutting the cords on Talbot's arm. "Oh, Tom! I—I thought it would never end—I'd given up hope! Tickey Tapp wanted me—you can guess what he wanted; but I'd have died before I'd have given in! They were hand-in-glove—Tickey Tapp and Scaife—and they couldn't believe that the Toff of old time was dead and done with, Tom!"

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

"I understand! The villains—the villains!" he muttered. "Let's get to the police-station. They've got to be taken——"

"Let's get to the school, Tom."

"But those rascals——"

"They've failed, Tom! The police will be after them soon enough. The Head will telephone——"

"Talbot, that's letting them escape!"

"Let's get to the school, Tom."

"Talbot, they sha'n't escape—they sha'n't! Are you mad?"

Talbot pressed his arm.

"Let me have my way, Tom! My—my cousin was mixed up with them. No, no, no!" he exclaimed hurriedly, as Tom's brow blackened. "No! Crooke didn't help in the kidnapping; I am certain he knew nothing of that. But he tricked me into going there, thinking that Tickey Tapp could persuade me to join with him, and become—you know what. That was all Crooke did."

"All!" said Tom, between his teeth. "The cowardly villain!"

"If those rascals are taken they'll turn on Crooke. They'll make it blacker for him than it really is, very likely. And—and my uncle, Tom—he's at the Front now—what would he think?" breathed Talbot. "Let's get to the school."

"You're mad to have mercy on that rascal, after all he's done!" exclaimed Tom passionately. "I tell you——"

"Tom, let me have my way!"

"Come, then," said Tom at last. And, leaning heavily on his chum's arm, Talbot of the Shell returned to St. Jim's.

. . . . . .

There was news for Gerald Crooke when he returned to the school that evening. All St. Jim's was buzzing with it. Talbot of the Shell had returned, and all St. Jim's knew that he had been kidnapped, and held a prisoner by Scaife and Tickey Tapp; and Baggy Trimble was spreading himself to any extent as the heroic rescuer. Crooke almost fainted when he heard the news, and he waited in sickening apprehension to learn whether the kidnappers had been arrested. The Head had telephoned to the police immediately after Talbot's return, and they had visited Scaife's house at once. Aubrey Racke shared Crooke's terror, for he was well aware that if his "man" was taken the story of the food-hogging would come out into the light of day.

Their fears were relieved at last; neither of the rascals had been taken. Scaife had evidently telephoned a warning from the villa to his confederate at the Green Man; and the two rascals had vanished long before the police arrived to look for them. At the villa, however, a huge food-hoard was discovered, and taken possession of.

Racke had lost his man at last; and the food-hogging was a thing of the past. The discovery that his man was a desperate criminal had sickened even Racke of that kind of pursuit, for the time at least. It was days before the two black sheep felt able to breathe freely; but they were relieved at last. Talbot had said no word of Crooke's share in the affair.

To his cousin Talbot was the same as before; not even to Crooke did he utter one word of reproach or scorn. But the wretched schemer felt the unspoken scorn, and he shrank from Talbot's presence, avoiding the sight of him as much as he could.

During those days Baggy Trimble was a great man. He related his thrilling adventures over and over again to all who would listen; and at every repetition they became more thrilling. It soon appeared that Trimble had suspected that Talbot was a prisoner in Scaife's house; had gone there with the heroic intention of rescuing him, and had done so after a terrific combat. The other fellows "winked the other eye," so to speak, as they listened; but Trimble ran on with great satisfaction to himself.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was also in a state of great satisfaction. In Study No. 6 he surprised his study-mates by the remark:

"Pewwaps you fellows will admit now that I was wight?"

"Which?" ejaculated Blake.

"I believe, Blake, that I told you all along that Talbot had been kidnapped by——"

"Well, we all thought that," said Herries.

"And by Cwooke——"

"What?"

"I pwesume you can see it now!" said Arthur Augustus loftily.

"Fathead!" said Blake. "Talbot was kidnapped by Tickey Tapp and Scaife, and there hasn't been a word said to connect Crooke with the matter at all."

Arthur Augustus smiled superior.

"I am quite awaah of that, Blake! Talbot is keepin' it dark for the sake of lettin' the wottah off. But it is quite cleah to me that I was wight all along."

"Bow-wow!"

"And if," said Arthur Augustus emphatically—"if Twimble hadn't happened to dwop on Talbot by accident, when he was goin' food-hoggin', I have not the slightest doubt that I should soon have discovahed where Talbot was——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Yaas, wathah! And then I should have wescued him."

"So practically it comes to this, that you did the whole bizney, and found it all out and rescued Talbot?" said Blake blandly.

"Pwactically, yaas!"

"Then it's jolly ungrateful of Talbot not to have come to this study with a vote of thanks!" said Blake. "I must say I am rather surprised at Talbot."

Whereat Herries and Dig chortled, and Arthur Augustus said, with great emphasis:

"Wats!"

THE END.

(Don't miss next Wednesday's Great Story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's—"THE MISDEEDS OF MULVANEY MINOR!"—by Martin Clifford.)

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Wednesday:

"THE MISDEEDS OF MULVANEY MINOR."

By Martin Clifford.

This story will delight those who prefer above everything a yarn of the japing type.

We do not often hear anything in particular of Micky Mulvaney; but many readers will remember his coming to St. Jim's, and what a trouble he was to his brother in the Sixth—and to others.

I am not going to say that Mulvaney minor is a typical Irish boy. There are as many kinds of Irish boys as of English, and I am by no means certain that a bigger proportion of them are eternally in scrapes and always making blunders than is the case nearer home.

But this story of how Micky's uncle came to St. Jim's on a visit, and of the things that happened, is really screamingly funny.

YOUR EDITOR.

THE ST. JIM'S GALLERY.

No. 25.—Eric Kildare.

KILDARE is really an important person—to the school and to the stories. Taggles would be missed, but we really could not get along without Kildare.

The captain of a big public school is always a personage. He holds a position which many aspire to and few can reach. He wields an influence almost incalculable. Everything he says and does matters because of that position, and because of the tendency of boys to imitate anyone in it. It is well for the school which has a skipper like Eric Kildare.

I don't mean that he is perfection. Something short of that will serve our turn in this world. Kildare is as near it as we need—open as the day, generous, kind-hearted, brave as a lion, gentle as a girl when need is for gentleness—nice every way. It is rather a young-ladyish word, "nice," but it is among the words that help to express Kildare.

He can set a standard not only in conduct—the most material thing of all—but in other respects. He is an accomplished all-round athlete. He is quite a passable scholar, though to St. Jim's that is a matter of small concern than his athletic prowess. And he has very nice manners. Wingate, the captain of Greyfriars, is every bit as good a fellow as Kildare; but he is more rough-hewn, less sunny and gracious.

But Kildare is Irish; and perhaps in all the world there can be found no more thoroughly charming person than the best type of Irishman. There is in him a disposition to be friendly and good-natured which is no very typical part of the Anglo-Saxon nature—or, at least, which is by no means so obvious in the Anglo-Saxon. When an Irishman of that sort does a nice thing he is apt to do it in a nicer way than an Englishman would, though the Englishman may mean every bit as well.

From the time that stories of St. Jim's have been published Kildare has been in them. He was in them before Tom Merry was, though it is difficult to imagine the school without Tom. In those early stories one read of the opposition of Monteith, the head prefect of the New House, not at all a nice person in those days, to Kildare. I remember one in particular in which Monteith was left out of the footer eleven for slack and foul play, and tried to induce the New House contingent to refuse to turn out if he were not given back his place. Webb and Gray held by him; but Baker was loyal to Kildare, although threatened with Coventry for standing by the captain. Blake & Co. tried to get up a testimonial to Baker, but it was not a success. Baker's firm stand was, though. For the time being, Monteith came round. That was not the end of trouble between him and Kildare, however. There was much more of it; but perhaps it can be better dealt with when one comes to Monteith in the series.

One story—the latest in which the two were brought into close personal contact at a critical time—should be mentioned here, though, for it shows up Kildare at his best. It was called "Kildare of the Great Heart," and it told of how the St. Jim's skipper saved Monteith's life first and his honour afterwards. Since then the two have naturally been better friends, though their enmity was dead before that. But Monteith is not, and is never likely to be, Kildare's best chum. Darrel is that.

Kildare appears in many yarns, but it is often only casually, and in a way that calls for no detailed notice. How many times, I wonder, have we read that Kildare came into the Shell or the Fourth dormitory to put out the lights, and noticed—or sometimes failed to notice—that a bed was empty? Repetition? Yes, but not unnecessary or mistaken repetition, for it helps to make up the picture of life at St. Jim's that is more or less vivid in the minds of all readers. There are other things which serve the same purpose—Frank Levison bringing his Latin or Greek prep up to No. 9 for aid in it from his major; Arthur Augustus deliberating on the choice of a tie; Grundy explaining how he came to leave Rodclyffe, and what a truly great man he is; Skimpole studying Professor Balmycrumpet; Manners busy with his photographic hobby. Have you ever considered how the hearing of these things often makes the whole circle of life at the school more real to you?

But perhaps this is getting away a bit from Kildare; and there is no need to do that, for there is enough on record about the skipper of St. Jim's to fill far more than the space available.



One very special story was "Kildare for St. Jim's." That began with what Kildare took to be a ragging of his study by Tom Merry & Co. It was really nothing of the sort. They had come along, believing him out, to fag for him—to prepare a feed for the coming of his cousin, Lieutenant Micky Kildare. The skipper caned them. His temper hardly seemed so sunny as usual. In fact, he was a good deal worried.

They heaped coals of fire on his head. It is a striking testimony—no joke intended—to the real popularity of Kildare that his caning them did not choke them off their project. Perhaps it is a still more eloquent testimony that they were ready to fag for him without being asked, though Shell and Fourth alike resent the very notion of being considered fags.

Wally turned up. Wally D'Arcy is Kildare's fag, and he was indignant at their butting in. They had to chuck Wally out in order to get on with their work.

Kildare found his cousin at the Rylcombe Arms, playing billiards. No reason why even the most junior of Army officers should not play that game at a decent hotel; but Micky Kildare ought to have remembered the fact that public school seniors are not expected to visit even high-class licensed houses. Micky, however, was not the sort of fellow who does remember little things like that. He was a careless, reckless, slap-dash youth, just the kind to get into trouble without meaning any harm, and to drag others in with him.

He was in trouble just then, and he wanted his Cousin Eric to help him out of it. Money was needed, of course—far more money than Kildare could raise. Tom Merry heard all about it—could not help hearing. The fags—Wally & Co.—had rushed Tom in the skipper's study, bound and gagged him, and thrust him into a cupboard.

The sweet beauty who had his thumb on Micky Kildare was a certain Mr. Spooner, a bookmaker. Mr. Spooner had been making his book on the match between St. Jim's and Lanchester, and he was willing to go easy with Micky if Kildare would throw away the match. It was easily done, and Mr. Spooner could see no dishonesty in it. "You jest lose your wicket; you don't take any runs; you put on a poor bowler instead of a good one. You lose the match. Well, you've always lost the Lanchester match afore. It won't 'urt you once more."

That was how Mr. Spooner looked at it. But Kildare looked at it in a very different light. He lost his honour if he did it. But Micky was dear to him, and the situation was a very difficult one. "Think of it as he would, Kildare could see no way out. He could not sacrifice his own honour to save Micky's; and it was the only way!"

He stood firm, of course. And Tom Merry came to his rescue. How it was that Tom chanced to have enough money for that does not matter here. He had it, and he saved Micky Kildare from trouble with his colonel, and Eric Kildare from the worry of being unable to help his cousin in his urgent need. Kildare never knew who had done that generous deed; Tom's own dearest chums did not know.

The skipper of the school and the skipper of the Shell have always been good friends, in the manner and to the extent possible to two fellows separated by a gulf of age and place. Two or three years mean very little in middle life, but they mean a lot among schoolboys. Kildare has often stood by Tom, and has never been ready to condemn him without evidence that was apparently impossible to get round. Somehow, one never likes to have Tom found guilty of any mean trick even on such evidence. We know he wouldn't do it, and we are inclined to feel impatient with those who believe he could. But Kildare has at least never been in a hurry to believe, in the case of any fellow whose character speaks for him. He has the juniors pretty well sized up. It took him some time to credit Levison's reformation, but he knows now that it is real. He knows just how much the word of Racke, Crooke, Mellish, Trimble, or any of the rest of the black sheep is worth. He is liable to make mistakes, of course. At times a fellow whom one had always held particularly decent does a thing that seems impossible for him; at times a liar takes one in by telling the truth, or a funk rises above his cowardice and achieves the unexpected. And so Kildare, like the Head and Mr. Railton, both of whom look at things very much in the same way as he does, is deceived. There can never have been anyone in authority who was not at some time or other made to appear unjust, in spite of doing all he knew to be just.

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There is the best of good feeling between the Head and Kildare, between the Housemaster and Kildare. They are all pretty good judges of human nature, they all incline rather to mercy than to undue severity, and they are all optimists—cheerful people, not gloomy misanthropes like Messrs. Ratcliff and Selby. Friction between them is very rare. Kildare knows his place, as the phrase goes. It is a high place, but it is below that of Mr. Railton and that of Dr. Holmes. He consistently refuses to deal with matters that seem to him too serious for him to handle adequately, even as Mr. Railton, though he always tries to save Dr. Holmes trouble when he can, will take certain matters to him as a thing of course.

One of the things that one notices in Kildare is his real good temper. He can flare up; what Irishman was ever incapable of that? But the gust is soon over; he is himself again, and sorry that he has let out at anyone. How many times has he been the victim of practical jokes meant by the juniors for someone else? I cannot count them, and I am not going to try. But I never recall an occasion when he was really nasty about it.

There was one such occasion when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had prepared a simply terrible mixture for the benefit of Cutts of the Fifth, always an enemy of the Fourth and Shell fellows. Kildare got that mixture—red ink and black ink, pyro and liquid glue, were in it—and he chased the juniors round the table, with his cane swishing furiously. He did remember that a bit longer than most such things; he was down on the jokers as long afterwards as next day. But many fellows would not have forgotten it by the next term or the next year.

In that same story we had the juniors believing evil of Kildare—thinking that he had taken to pub-haunting and that sort of thing—and quite sorrowing over him. He had not, of course; it was Cutts, using the mixture-spoiled overcoat, which Kildare had discarded. In the same story, too, we saw Kildare standing up for Talbot, whom Cutts had been taunting with his past. The skipper was prepared to thrash Cutts first and report him to the Head later if he did not stop. Cutts stopped for a while his persecution of Talbot; but he tried to get home on Kildare.

As a general rule, the captain of a big public school does not fight. It is easy to see why. Nothing could be much more subversive of discipline than his fighting. But it is a rule that has exceptions; and how a fellow judges of those exceptions does something to show his character. Cutts would not have taken a thrashing without fighting, of course; but Kildare would have fought him—he held it necessary. And he has fought Knox. There was nothing else for it then. In no other way could he have dealt with the cad of the Sixth. Knox had done all he knew how to keep Kildare out of a match. He had forged a telegram to call him home—a telegram saying that his mother, who was seriously ill, was worse, and that he was to come at once. Kildare did not go; rightly or wrongly, he felt that he must stand by the school, and he stayed to play, intending to catch a train directly the match was over. Before he could go to the station, however, the trick was discovered; and there was real keenness in the manner in which Kildare deduced Knox's guilt. Kerr had tumbled to the same thing; but Kerr is more in the way of detective work than Kildare.

So Kildare fought and thrashed Knox, and he was right in doing so. On the whole, Kildare is pretty generally right, for he is sound and straight and decent all through; and if a fellow who is made that way commits mistakes he does not often commit very glaring ones.

St. Jim's could not ask for a better skipper than Eric Kildare!

Extracts from "THE GREYFRIARS HERALD" and "TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY."

HOW I WOULD EDIT "THE GREYFRIARS HERALD."

(Having overheard remarks in the Common-room and elsewhere to the effect that the "Greyfriars Herald" was on the decline, we decided to obtain advice on editing the paper. A few of the suggestions received were somewhat helpful; but most of them were bad—rank bad—and we have no intention whatever of making use of them. You will see why when you read them. A selection appears below.—H. W.)

DR. LOCKE
Approves of the Paper as It Is.

In my opinion, the "Greyfriars Herald" is a very creditable production. The editors and the contributors deserve every praise for the efforts they put forth to produce a really live school paper. It would be extremely difficult for me to run the paper so successfully, although, when a boy, I used to do my share in producing our school magazine. When one passes middle age one gets out of touch with schoolboy papers, and would find it very hard to publish stories and other features which would appeal to the juvenile taste. In spite of this, I frequently peruse the "Greyfriars Herald," and on more than one occasion have been highly amused and interested by the stories. (We are very grateful to the Head for his complimentary remarks, and are glad to learn that he has been able to derive enjoyment from reading the "Greyfriars Herald.")

HORACE COKER.
Talks Out of His Hat—as Usual.

If I had charge of the "Greyfriars Herald," the first thing I should do would be to sack its present staff. Wharton, Cherry, Linley, and the rest would get marching orders at once. They've pretty nearly wrecked the paper as it is, and if they are allowed to run it much longer I can see the fellows refusing to buy it. Were I the editor, I would not permit a single Remove fag to contribute a line. Those kids haven't any notion of how to write, as you must know if you've read any of their tosh. I would soon alter things if I had the chance. I should run an amazing adventure serial by Horace Coker, a humorous story by Horace Coker, a football story by Horace Coker, a page of jokes by Horace Coker, and then I might let Potter finish the number with a column of footer notes. I reckon the paper would go then. (We quite agree with Coker. The "Greyfriars Herald" would go—under! Coker talks about writing stories. Let him learn to spell first; we had to correct every other word in his reply.—ED.)

WILLIAM GEORGE BUNTER
Thinks Only of Making Money.

The first alteration I should make if I had the "Greyfriars Herald" would be to get my own back on Wharton and the other beasts. They'd be given the order of the boot at once, and if they wanted me to publish their blessed stories they'd have to go down on their hands and knees first, for the way they've treated me in the past. I'd make them sit up! I shouldn't be so hard on the other fellows. All they would have to do would be to pay me for publishing their tales. I should charge a bob for a page story, two bob for a two-page yarn, and so on. Then I should hold a competition. I should make it jolly hard, so that none of the fellows could give the correct answers. I should charge an entrance fee of sixpence, and if nobody gave the correct solutions I should take the money myself. (It is very kind of Bunter to offer to treat us so decently if he were editor of the "Greyfriars Herald," but the Kaiser would have to become civilised before we'd knuckle under to the porpoise!—ED.)

LORD MAULEVERER
Hasn't the Energy or the Inclination.

Edit the "Greyfriars Herald"! Too much fag, begad! I simply couldn't be bothered with such a job. If I could rest on a couch, I wouldn't mind giving instructions to a capable staff. Somebody would have to do the "Editorial Chat" for me. I simply couldn't manage that job. But, after all, I would rather have nothing to do with the paper. Wharton & Co. get on all right, and I'm quite willing for them to carry on. (Thanks, Mauly; we quite believe you'd shy at the job, but we wish you'd pop in occasionally on press day and sweep up the wastepaper. It would buck you up no end.—ED.)

WUN LUNG
Has Little to Suggest—that's Any Good.

Me lun "Gleyfliars Helald" velly well. Me publish stolies 'bout China, intloducing Chinese chalacters. Chinee boy velly plucky—makee good helo. Me wlitee stoly in Chinese. Makee it velly thlilling. Lots of muldels and lobbelies. Makee Englishman villain in stoly. Englishman makee good villain. But Chinee boy too clevel for English villain. Chinee boy—— (Sorry to cut you short, Wun Lung, but we've heard quite enough to decide that a story on the lines you suggest would be N.G. Send it over to China! We'd sooner they suffered than us!—ED.)

CLAUDE HOSKINS.
Makes Quite a Reasonable Proposal.

I don't think I should make any extensive alteration in the "Greyfriars Herald." The stories might be a little better written, but on the whole they are pretty good. What it needs, however, is two or three pages devoted to music. I should make a point of printing one song a week, and should publish some very useful articles on "How to Play the Piano." To my mind, the fellows do not pay enough attention to music. Every fellow should learn to play the piano, and devote at least two hours a day to practice. (We shall have to see what can be done in the matter, Hoskins. We can't think of two or three pages, however. You will have to condense it to a column.—ED.)

GERALD LODER
Shows His Ignorance.

Rats! I wouldn't have anything to do with such a rag! (Just what we might have expected from Loder. Perhaps he is not aware that a polite question calls for a polite answer. He may learn better some day, but we're a bit doubtful.—ED.)

OLIVER KIPPS
Wants Too Much.

Were I editor of the "Greyfriars Herald," I should see that more conjuring articles were published. Four pages could very well be devoted to this feature every week, together with a story dealing with a wonderful boy conjurer. Wharton & Co. don't realise just how popular this sort of thing would be. (We do, Kipps, old son; that's why we keep your stuff down to half a column a week!—ED.)

WILLIAM GOSLING
Gets Dead Off the Mark.

It wouldn't be much good asking me to edit that there "Greyfriars Herald," as I ain't no scholar. If I did take on the job, though, I bet I wouldn't make so many mistakes as some of them there himps who run the paper. I'll tell you what they did the other week. They had a story called "Caught Red-Handed!" It was all about a bloke what hid stolen goods up a chimney. He'd got a pile of stuff there, and was just going to take it away, when the detective entered the room just as he was pulling the silver and things down from the chimney. He was smothered with soot from head to foot, when the 'tec took him off. That was the end of the story. I puzzled my brains for hours, but I couldn't find out how that burglar bloke was caught red-handed. His hands were pitch black with soot—no red on them at all. (Sorry you were puzzled, Gosling. Must try and make things a bit more simple in future. We always try to believe, however, that our readers have got some intelligence—if very little.—ED.)

HOW I WOULD EDIT "TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY."

(Having heard that Harry Wharton has asked the fellows at Greyfriars to let him know how they would edit the "Greyfriars Herald," we thought it would not be a bad idea to get our fellows to give their opinions in regard to "Tom Merry's Weekly," so I have sent an emissary—good word, that!—round to get ideas. In passing, we would like to mention that we did not think much of the Greyfriars suggestions, and we think still less of those which follow.—T. M.)

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY
Makes an Impossible Suggestion.

I wish vewy much I could become editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly." Then I should make it my business to publish some splendid articles on how to dwess pwoperly. I have suggested a sewies of this sort to Tom Mewwy on many occasions, but he has always answahed in a most wude mannah. He doesn't wealise how useful articles on dwess would be to fellahs at St. Jim's. I would like to publish articles of this sort, if it was only for my bwothah Wally's sake. Wally is a most untidy little wascal, and whenevah I wepwimand him he makes oppwobwious wemarks, walks away, and wefuses to listen. If there were articles in the "Weekly," Wally would be suah to wead them, and I am confident they would pwompt him to take more interest in his dwess. (Gussy, old son, you might do us a favour, and stop all this rot about dress articles. We've told you a thousand-and-one times that it can't be did, but we'll tell you two-thousand-and-two times if necessary.—ED.)

GEORGE ALFRED GRUNDY
Wants It All His Own Way.

There is only one chap at St. Jim's who knows how to run a paper—that's me! If I had charge of it, I should make it a real, live paper, a paper with some ginger in it. I should not have a staff—Tom Merry and his pals would have to hop it—I should do every bit of the work myself, and I am sure the paper would be a credit to the Form then. I should write a good deal of the stuff myself, and, what's more, I should make it my business to see that the humorous stories were humorous. Lowther's puns, which a kid in the Second wouldn't laugh at, would be chucked into the wastepaper-basket. Piggy's thrilling adventure stories would follow suit, and that chap who wrote "Impressions of London"—he was supposed to be a member of the "Magnet" staff, but I believe it was Cardew—would go out on his neck if he poked his nose into my editorial sanctum. If only I were editor—— (If only you were, Grundy, old man! You'd better be careful what you say about Monty's puns; he tells me he'll punch your nose for you if you're not careful. —ED.)

GEORGE HERRIES
Makes a Suggestion we Expected Him to Make.

If I had charge of "Tom Merry's Weekly" I am not sure but what I shouldn't change the title, and, to a certain extent, the policy of the paper. Tom Merry and the others don't seem to realise the importance of articles on music. If I had my way, every fellow at St. Jim's would be compelled to learn to play the cornet, and if articles were published in the school paper on this subject they would prove an inducement to him to learn. Then if the title was changed to "The Musical Schoolboy," for instance, I am sure that music would make big strides at St. Jim's. (You'll be made to take big strides, Herries, if you don't take care. Once and for all, we'll have nothing to do with cornets in "Tom Merry's Weekly." Verb. sap.!—ED.)

EPHRAIM TAGGLES
Takes the Giddy Bun Shop.

Me edit "Tom Merry's Weekly"? I ain't a schoolboy; I'm a growed man. What I sez is this 'ere—it's too much to expeck a poor 'ard-worked man like me to take on sich a job. Why, I've got more work now than I knows what to get through as it is. Besides, that sort o' thing ain't in my line. I did see a copy of that there paper the other day, and tried to read it. But the first story I come across was about me—me, mind you! And what was worse, the young himp as wrote the story made me out to be an awful villain. I believe it was Master Manners. I must talk to him about that there story when I sees him again. There's another thing I want to mention, and that is that I wish that there paper didn't come out no more. Every time the printer sends the copies up I 'as to take 'em to Master Merry. And jolly 'eavy they are, too! (Cheer up, Taggy, old sport! They're nothing like the weight now as they'll be when the war's over. We're going to make it double the size then, so you'd better get your strength up!—ED.)

THE HON. WALTER ADOLPHUS D'ARCY
Has Pleasing Visions.

We chaps in the Third would make something of "Tom Merry's Weekly" if we had anything to do with it. Fancy those kids in the Shell and Fourth trying to run a paper! If they took a run round their hats they'd do better! I'd like to be editor of the paper, if it was only for the sake of turning down some of old Gus' rot. Perhaps he wouldn't be so eager to give me lectures on how to dress then. And there's another thing—if we Third Form chaps edited the paper we'd be able to have some roaring fires in the Common-room by shoving on the rejected manuscripts. (Such a treat will not be yours, Wally, old bean. Might we suggest that you take a leaf out of your own book—that is, run round your hat!—ED.)

HERBERT SKIMPOLE
Votes for Professor Balmycrumpet.

It would be a great pleasure to me to edit "Tom Merry's Weekly." My initial announcement would be that of my intention to publish Professor Balmycrumpet's most marvellous book in serial form. As Professor Balmycrumpet's book is over five hundred thousand words in length, I should endeavour to publish ten thousand words a week. This is far too little, but I quite realise that the paper is small, and that more could not be got into a single issue. But no doubt the fellows would be patient, and not worry for the next issue. Also, if I had charge of the paper, I should write some articles myself on "The Descent of Man." This is a most interesting and fascinating problem, and would be bound to meet with general approval. I am not quite sure whether I should need as little as a hundred thousand words to deal with this subject, or whether two hundred thousand will be necessary. I shall have to think it over. (Don't trouble, Skimmy, old son; the opportunity to run "Tom Merry's Weekly" won't come your way just yet. We're hanging on to it for all we're worth.—ED.)

GERALD KNOX
Is Terse, and, incidentally, Very Rude.

Don't ask ridiculous questions. What do I want to edit "Tom Merry's Weekly" for? I've got something better to do in my spare time. If those little humbugs in the Fourth and Shell learned how to be polite to fellows in the Sixth, it would do them more good. Please understand that I shall whack the next junior who speaks to me about "Tom Merry's Weekly." (My hat! You've got your rag out with a vengeance, Knox! Must see if I can't write something about you in the next number, and send you a copy.—ED.)

GEORGE GERALD CROOKE
Would Certainly Ruin the Paper.

I'd soon make a change in "Tom Merry's Weekly" if I had charge of it! First of all, I should alter the title. Tom Merry's name would have to go. I should make a point of publishing some real sporting stories, stories of the racecourse and the casinos. I should also deal with race meetings, and give tips for forthcoming races. It would be a good, sporty paper, a paper that would interest a fellow, not bore him like "Tom Merry's Weekly" does. (Jolly glad to hear we bore Crooke! If we suited him—— 'Nuff said!—ED.)

Cadet Notes.

Boys who belong to Cadet Corps in every part of the country are very much gratified at the increased amount of public attention now being directed to the Cadet Corps and their work. One evidence of this is the very large number of distinguished people who are interesting themselves in the Movement, and who are doing their best to promote the success of Cadet Corps in their own neighbourhoods or in places with which they have some connection. Quite recently Captain Carpenter, V.C., who, it will be remembered, commanded the Vindictive at Zeebrugge on the occasion of the heroic attempt to stop up the harbour, inspected some Cadets at the Surrey County School, Purley. The boys were tremendously interested to see the famous hero of one of the greatest British naval exploits, and it is stated that many of those in the school who were not already members of a Cadet Corps are now coming forward to offer their services to it.

Why do so many boys continue to hold aloof from the Movement in spite of all the inducements which are held out to them to belong to it? No doubt in some cases it is due to the fact that their parents object; but it is to be feared that in most cases it is due to nothing but want of energy and determination on the part of the boys themselves. Of course, we know there are cases where, owing to the absence of Corps, it is impossible for lads, however willing they may be, to join the Cadet Movement. These cases are very few, comparatively; and, speaking of the greater part of the country, Cadet Corps are now in existence within reach of the vast majority of lads who ought to wish to belong to them. Where there is any doubt about the matter, our readers should apply to the C.A.V.R., Judges' Quadrangle, Law Courts, W.C. 2, where they will obtain full particulars as to the nearest Cadet Corps to their homes, and an introduction to the C.O., etc.

A SONG OF FOOTER.

By ERNEST LEVISON.

Sing a song of footer, a bright and breezeless day,
Two-and-twenty players eager for the fray.

Quite a crowd on Little Side, everyone's aware
School House versus New House means a battle fair and square.

Burly Herries holds our fort; Dane and Kangaroo
Play at back, and jolly hard they are to pass, those two.

Roylance, Clive, and Lowther make up our half-back line.
"Pretty useful," did you say?" Rats, sir! Jolly fine!

Tommy's in the centre—who should be there but he?
Talbot, D'Arcy on the left—right wing's Blake and me.

Rosy, rotund Fatty Wynn keeps the New House goal.
Kerr and Figgins are their backs—good 'uns, bet your soul!

Thompson is at centre-half, but Thompy can't stop Merry.
Can Pratt and Clarke stop little us? Is it likely, very?

Reddy's quite a nailer in the centre-forward place.
Right wing's foreign—French and Koumi Rao—but has pace.

Owen. Lawrence on the left; when the game is o'er
They'll both be owin'—owin' goals we wouldn't let 'em score!

Pheep! the ref's shrill whistle goes. Reddy tips the leather
To the feet of Lawrence bold, and down the field together

Go the New House House forwards, passing to and fro,
Till Reddy crashes down, Dane clears, and it's our turn to go

Racing off like greyhounds fleet. Sling her over, Blake!
Blake to me, and I to Tom, and Tom makes no mistake.

First blood to the School House! Shout, you bounders, shout!
Wynn's a loser at first shot, something to yell about.

Sing a song of footer, of all games it's the king!
Sing it long and loud, you chumps, make the welkin ring!