

THE BEST CHRISTMAS NUMBER!



24 Pages.

Every Wednesday.

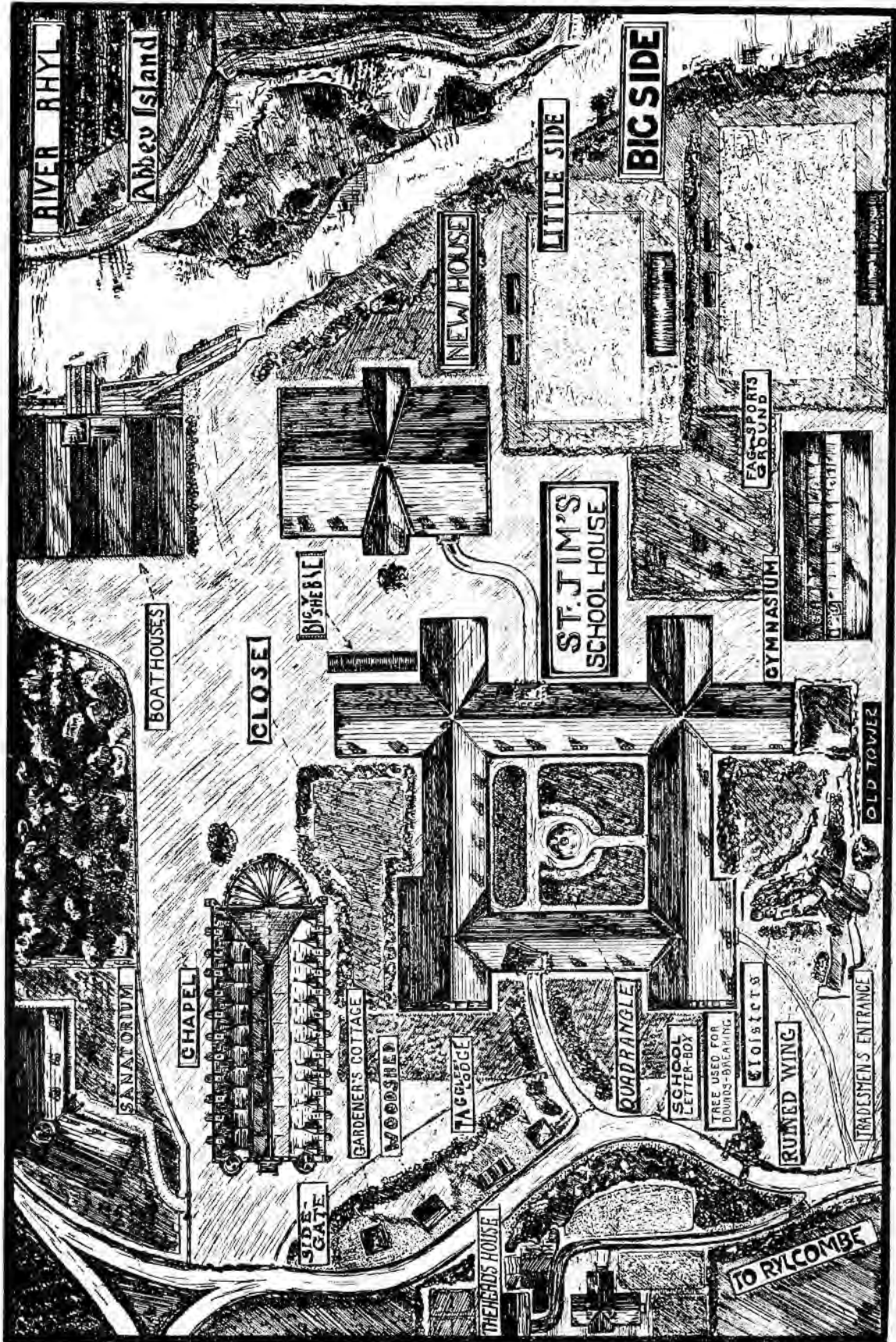
December 24th, 1921.



FUN AT THE CHRISTMAS PARTY!

No. 724.

(Grand Long Complete School Story Inside.)



AN AIR VIEW OF ST. JIM'S.—Readers who desire to get an exact impression of St. Jim's from an altitude of 1,000 feet should stand by the side of a table, lay the plan flat in front of them, and then gaze down upon it through a pair of inverted opera-glasses or binoculars. By moving the glasses slowly in a circular movement the effect is the same as one would get from an aeroplane. (See article in "Tom Merry's Weekly.")

LORD EASTWOOD'S



CHRISTMAS PARTY

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

A Grand Long Christmas Story of Tom Merry & Co., and the Chums of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 1.

Trimble Declines!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY chewed the end of a stump of pencil, and wrinkled his brows thoughtfully. There was a pocket-book in the other hand of Arthur Augustus. It was open, and a list of names appeared on the open page.

Arthur Augustus read them over aloud, as he stood by the window in the Fourth Form passage in the School House.

"Blake—Hewwies—Dig—of course, they must come," he murmured. "And Wildwake, Kangawoo, and Talbot—that's all wight. Woylance and young Wally—that's eight. If I ask those New House boundahs, Figgins & Co., that will make eleven."

Three juniors came along from the Shell passage, and paused as they saw the swell of St. Jim's chewing his pencil over his list.

Tom Merry, and Manners, and Lowther of the Shell, caught Arthur Augustus' mutterings, and they smiled.

"Hallo, old top!" said Tom Merry. "Making up a football team?"

Arthur Augustus glanced up.

"Not exactly, Tom Mewwy—"

"Or is it a Christmas subscription list?" asked Manners.

"You can put me down for a penny!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Me, too!" said Monty Lowther generously. "Christmas is a time for opening the heart and the purse-strings. Count me in! Mine's a ha'penny!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Don't leave me out," said Tom Merry gravely. "I can go threehalfpence. I hope it's a good cause."

"Weally, you know—"

"If it solves the question of the unemployed, or pays off the War Loan, we shall feel that our money has not been wasted," said Lowther. "Here you are!"

Monty Lowther tossed a halfpenny to Arthur Augustus. The swell of St. Jim's did not seem prepared for that contribution, for he caught the coin with his nose, not with his hand.

"Ow! You nitah ass—"

"Here's mine!" said Manners, and a penny landed on Arthur Augustus' ear.

"Yawoooooh!"

"Mine!" said Tom Merry, and he playfully wedged a penny and a halfpenny down Arthur Augustus' neck, as the swell of the Fourth rubbed his ear.

"Gwoogh! You feahful ass!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Put our names down, you know—our generosity ought to be put on record!" said Lowther.

"You feahful ass—Ow—"

The Terrible Three chuckled and passed on.

Whether Arthur Augustus was making up a charity subscription for some deserving cause, or not, they did not know; but it was worth the moderate sum of threepence to pull his noble leg.

"He, he, he!" Baggy Trimble appeared in the offing, as Arthur Augustus was making strenuous efforts to extract two coins from the back of his neck. "He, he, he! Is that a new thing in ju-jitsu, D'Arcy?"

"Weally, Twimble—"

"You jolly well needn't put my name down," grinned Trimble.

Arthur Augustus looked at him. He gave up the attempt to recover Tom Merry's contribution, letting the coins slide down where they would.

"You do not want me to put your name on my list, Twimble?" asked Arthur Augustus, with a rather curious expression on his noble countenance.

"No fear!" answered Baggy promptly. "Catch me shell-ing out money for anybody! Not such an ass!"

Arthur Augustus grinned.

"Vewy well, Twimble, just as you like!"

Arthur Augustus walked away up the Fourth Form passage and looked into Study No. 9. Trimble shrugged his fat shoulders. Levison and Clive and Cardew were in No. 9; and Trimble heard a murmur of voices. Arthur Augustus was scribbling more names on his list as he came out of the study. Trimble saw him look back.

"Levison, deah boy—"

"Yes, Gussy?"

"Shall I put down your minor?"

"Certainly, if you like!"

"I am goin' to ask Mannahs minor, and pewwaps Fwauk would like to—"

"I'm sure he would!"

"And what about your sistah Dowie, Levison? As she is a friend of my cousin Ethel—"

"I think I can answer for Doris, old scout!"

"Good!"

Arthur Augustus scribbled more names on his list, and came down the passage. Trimble gave him a wink.

"Sticking 'em all round, ain't you?" he remarked.

"Yaas!"

"Blessed if I'd go round cadging like that!" sneered Trimble.

Arthur Augustus smiled.

"What are you raising a subscription for, anyhow?" demanded Baggy.

"Wats!"

"I know the game," said Trimble, with a grin. "Helping the poor at Christmas, and helping yourself, too—what? A penny for the poor and twopence for yours truly! He, he, he!"

Arthur Augustus did not deign to reply to that remark. He went downstairs and walked out into the hall. Blake and Herries and Digby were loitering round the door, and Blake called to him.

"Getting on with the list, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How many now?"

"Sixteen, deah boy, without countin' Dowis Levison and my cousin Ethel!"

"Bravo!" chirruped Herries. "Have you put Towser down?"

"Towsah!" Arthur Augustus raised his eyebrows. "Weally, Hewwies, you know vewy well that that feahful bulldog—"

"Leave him out," said Herries. "I have arranged with Taggles for Towser. He might get neglected—"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus walked on. Baggy Trimble came rolling out of the School House. He was quite interested in the progress of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's subscription list. He felt interested to know how many fellows would be fools enough to part with their money—that was how the amiable Baggy looked at it.

D'Arcy trotted across to the New House, where Figgins & Co. were putting about a footer. Perhaps they did not see him coming—or perhaps they did! Anyhow, Figgins passed the ball to Wynn, who passed it to Arthur Augustus—landing it on his chest. There was a yell as Arthur Augustus sat down, his pocket-book flying in one direction, and his pencil in another.

"Yawwooh!"

"Oh, sorry!" ejaculated Figgins.

Arthur Augustus scrambled to his feet. He grabbed at his dangling eyeglass and jammed it into his eye, and glared at the grinning chums of the New House.

"I have a gweat mind not to put your names down now," he said wrathfully. "Howevah, as it is Chwistmas-time, I will ovahlook your wathah wuffianly conduct."

"What's on?" asked Figgins.

Baggy Trimble was rolling towards the spot, but he was too late to hear Arthur Augustus explain what was on. But he was in time to see the swell of St. Jim's write down three more names on his list.

"Three more silly asses!" commented Baggy, as D'Arcy passed him on his way back to the School House.

Arthur Augustus did not deign to heed. Roylance, the New Zealand junior, met him outside the School House.

"Finished the merry list?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "There will be twenty-one, includin' my cousin Ethel and Dowis Levison."

"Quite a party!" said Roylance.

"Yaas."

"Lot of silly owls!" said Baggy Trimble. "Catch me putting up a threepenny-bit! Fools and their money are soon parted!"

Roylance glanced at him, puzzled. Arthur Augustus grinned, and turned to Baggy Trimble.

"Twimble, deah boy—"

"Don't ask me for a sub!" jeered Trimble. "I'm wide awake! I've got my eye-teeth cut! No good spinning me a yarn about the deserving poor! He, he, he!"

"Shall I put your name down, Twimble?"

"No fear!"

"Suppose it is for a vewy good cause?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Rats!"

"You are suah you do not want me to put your name on the list?" asked the swell of St. Jim's.

Trimble sniffed.

"Jolly sure!" he answered.

"Vewy good!"

"What does the fat owl think the list is for?" asked Roylance, in wonder.

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"He thinks it is a list of contributahs to some Chwistmas chawity!" he explained.

"Oh, I see!"

"Well, isn't it?" demanded Trimble, rather taken aback.

"Not at all, deah boy!"

"Then what is it?"

"My patah has given me permish to take a numewous party of fiwends to Eastwood House for Chwistmas!" explained Arthur Augustus. "I am makin' up the list of fellows for the party!"

Baggy Trimble jumped.

"Oh!" he gasped.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Roylance, quite entertained by the expression on Baggy Trimble's fat face at that moment.

"I—I say, Gussy!" gasped Trimble. "I—I didn't know—I—I never thought— Put down my name, old chap!"

"Wats!"

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"I'll be jolly glad to come!" said Twimble eagerly. "I should really enjoy it, you know!"

"Vewy pwob, deah boy! But I wathah think that your undesirahle pwesence would detwact fwom the enjoyment of othahs—"

"Gussy, old man—"

"I gave you a chance to have your name down!" chuckled Arthur Augustus. "You wefused, you know!"

"I—I— Of course I'll come."

"You jolly well won't, Twimble! Go and eat coke!"

And Arthur Augustus snapped his pocket-book shut, put it in his pocket, and walked away grinning. And Baggy Trimble, as he blinked after Lord Eastwood's elegant son, felt inclined to kick himself hard!

CHAPTER 2.

Celebrated in Study No. 6.

"STANDING room only!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, come off!" said Wally of the Third.

It was the last night of the term, and there was a celebration going on in that celebrated apartment, Study No. 6 in the Fourth.

The study was crowded, not to say crammed. For Arthur Augustus had asked to that little gathering all the fellows who were going home with him for Christmas. And it was a numerous party—much too numerous for the space allotted to a junior study.

How the juniors got into Study No. 6 was a mystery. How they were going to get out again was another mystery. And how the three lags who had just arrived were going to squeeze in was a third and still deeper mystery.

The Terrible Three sat in the window-seat. Seven chairs were occupied by Talbot, Kangaroo, Roylance, Wildrake, Levison, Cardew, and G'ive.

Figgins & Co. of the New House shared the coal-locker and a box. Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy were standing; they averred that they preferred to stand.

It was rather warm in the study, though the weather was that of December. The door had been left open for air, and into the open doorway came Wally & Co. of the Third. Baggy Trimble had appeared there a few minutes before, and had been rapidly disposed of. Wildrake, who was nearest the door, "guessed" that Trimble was going to get his boot. And it proved that the Canadian junior had guessed correctly. Trimble got the boot, and departed with a howl. But Wally and Reggie Manners and Frank Levison of the Third Form were honoured guests, and could not be disposed of by means of Wildrake's boot.

"Twot in, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hospitably.

"Puzzle—find the room for trotting!" grinned Levison.

"Oh, we'll manage!" said Wally. "Shove in along with me, kids!"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Manners minor.

"Wedge in!" grinned Frank Levison.

D'Arcy minor led the way; the other two minors followed hard. There was a roar from the occupants of the study as they "wedged" in. They certainly found room somehow. A cup of coffee was spilt over Ralph Reckness Cardew's elegant trousers; an egg squashed on Roylance's jacket. But these trifling casualties did not worry Wally & Co. They shoved in regardless, and reached the table, which was loaded with good things.

"Bai Jove! Don't be a little wuffian, Wally!" exclaimed D'Arcy major.

Wally D'Arcy wagged a rather grubby forefinger at his major.

"Don't you begin, Gus!" he implored.

"Weally, Wally—"

"Pass those ham-patties!" said Wally. "They look nice! Ever such a good stunt of yours to stand as a farewell supper, Gus, old bird! I don't see why you wanted to crowd out the study with the Fourth and the Shell, though!"

"You cheeky young sweep!" growled Kangaroo.

"Same to you, and many of them, old bean!" answered Wally cheerily. "Gussy, old man, leave off talking, and pass the grub!"

"I was wemarkin'—"

"Never mind what you were remarking, old humming-bird! Don't remark—just pass the tommy! We're peckish!"

"You are a feahful young wuffian, Wally!" said Arthur Augustus. "I must weally apologise to these fellahs for your feahful mannahs!"

"Do you hear what he's saying about you, Reggie?"

"Look here—" began Reggie.

"Weally, Wally, you are quite awah that I was not alludin' to Mannahs minah! I was alludin'—"

"Still, you're right! Reggie is rather a sweep!" said Wally cheerily. "He takes after his major!"

"Does he?" snorted Manners major, from the window.

Wally looked round, and nodded affably to the Terrible Three.

"Hallo! Didn't see you little yellow birds there! So Tom's got his fearful Manners with him, too——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not to mention his awful Lowther and his frabjous self!" said Wally. "You ought to be glad to get three decent and well-brought-up youths like us to come and see you, Gus, in a frumpious crowd like this!"

"Bai Jove!"

"If D'Arcy minor is never hanged," remarked Cardew of the Fourth, "it won't be for want of neck!"

"Bow-wow!" answered Wally independently. "I say! What am I going to sit on? Your knee will do, Wildrake!"

"Sit down!" said the Canadian junior.

"Right-ho!"

Wally sat on the knee of the junior from the Boot Leg Ranch. The knee gave way under him the next moment, and he sat next on the carpet. There was a roar in Study No. 6.

"Call that a joke?" yelled Wally. "I'd jolly well punch your head if it wasn't Christmas-time! Fathead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I guess you can try the other knee if you like!" chuckled Wildrake.

"Yaas, wathah! Twy the othah knee, you cheekay young boundah!" grinned Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, rats! Pass the jam-tarts!"

"It's a bit of a squeeze, but what's the odds so long as you're 'appy?" remarked Figgins. "Cake this way!"

"Heah you are, deah boy. I twust you like the cake, Wynn."

Fatty Wynn beamed.

"Topping!" he said. "Pass another this way! You needn't trouble to cut it; just shove it along."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By the way, there's a letter for you, Gus," remarked Wally, with his mouth full of plum cake.

"Bai Jove! You were a young ass not to bring it up to me!" said Arthur Augustus reprovingly.

"But I——"

"Wats! You were a young ass, and a very thoughtless duffah!" said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Oh, all right," said Wally. "Have it your own way, old top!"

"Did you notice whether it was a lettah fwom home, Wally?"

"Easthorpe postmark," said Wally. "I don't know the list. But it was one of the pater's envelopes."

"Then it is fwom the pater," said Gussy. "Pwobably his secwetawy addressed it for him. Wun down and fetch it."

"Bow-wow!"

"Weally, Wally——"

"Likewise rats!"

"I wegard you as a young wascal, Wally. Twy to let me pass, will you, deah boys. It may be somethin' wathah important."

"Better walk across on one heads," suggested Roylance.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was not easy for Arthur Augustus to wind his way through the crammed study to the door. But he succeeded at last, and disappeared downstairs. Wally looked after him with a grin, and pulled a letter from his pocket and laid it among the teacups.

"Is that Gussy's letter?" exclaimed Blake.

"That's it!"

"Then you did bring it up!" ejaculated Herries.

"Exactly. Gussy wouldn't let me tell him!" yawned Wally. "Queer how old Gussy jumps to conclusions, ain't it? I hope it will do him good to go rooting in the rack for a letter that isn't there. Pass the jam, Kerr."

There was a chortle in Study No. 6. It was ten minutes before the aristocratic countenance of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy reappeared in the doorway. There was a frown on his noble brow.

"Wally, you young wottah, there isn't any lettah——"

"Here it is!" chuckled Digby.

"Bai Jove! How did that lettah get there?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus in astonishment.

"Suddenly flew down the chimney," said Wally, with sarcasm.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! You are a diswepful and uttally wuffianly young wascal, Wally, and I have a gweat mind to give you a feahful thwashin'!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, as he took his letter. "Will you fellows excuse me while I glance at this lettah?"

"Sure we will, old bean," said Wally. "Anything to keep you quiet for a bit."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus gave his cheerful young brother a look that ought to have withered him, but didn't. Then he opened his letter.

CHAPTER 3.

Arthur Augustus on the High Horse.

"CHEEK!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered that ejaculation suddenly as he finished the perusal of the letter from home. Clouds had been gathering on his brow during the perusal, and the juniors in the study wondered what was the matter.

"Feahful neck!" breathed Arthur Augustus. "I shall disdain to make any weply to this."

"Gus, old man, I can't allow you to talk about the governor like that!" said Wally chidingly.

"You young ass, this letter is not fwom the patah. It is fwom his secwetawy—that man Bloore. The cheekay ass——"

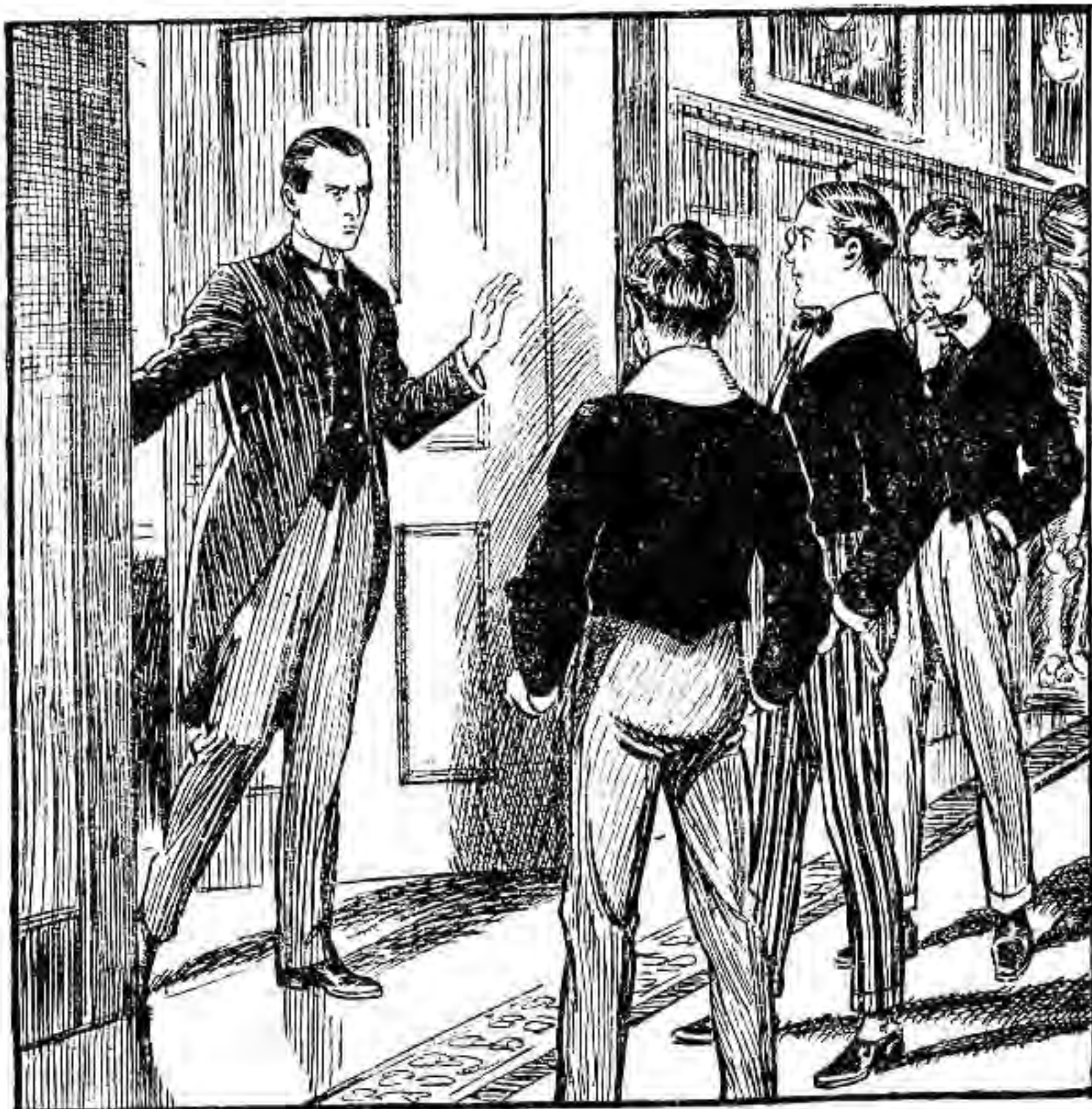
"Nothing wrong at home, I hope?" asked Tom Merry.

"The patah is not vewy well, deah boy. He has not been vewy well for some time," said Arthur Augustus. "But in his lettah to me he said he twusted to be well enough to join in the celebvation of Christmas Day. Now this cheekay boundah—— Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus looked quite excited with wrath. For once his noble manners lost the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

"Who on earth's Bloore?" asked Jack Blake.

"The patah's secwetawy," explained Arthur Augustus.



The three juniors stepped back from the library door as Bloore came quickly out. He held up his hand. "Please do not enter now," he said in a low voice. "His lordship is feeling very low and ought not to be disturbed, and it is my duty to see that he is not excited in any way."

"His pwevious secwetawy had a nervous bwreak-down, and has been sent away to the South of Fwance. This man Bloore is a tempowawy secwetawy. I saw him when I went home a few weeks ago, and did not like him. He has a howwid taste in neckties."

"What a dreadful character!" said Cardew gravely.

"Not exactly dweadful, Cardew, but vewy unpleasent," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "I wathah thought he was wantin' in pweviah civility in some respects; but as you fellows know, I am not the chap to make a fuss. My patah seemed to find him useful, so I let him wip. But now—I will wead out his lettah, and you fellows tell me what you think of it."

"Go ahead!" said Wally.

"You wead it out, Tom Mewwy. I disdain to look at the man's cheeky scaww again!"

"Certainly, old top," said Tom, with a smile. "I haven't seen his necktie, so I can stand him—in a letter. Here goes!"

The captain of the Shell read the offending letter aloud, the whole party listening to it with interest. Arthur Augustus punctuated the reading with a series of scornful sniffs.

"Dear Master Arthur,—I am sorry to say that your respected father's illness appears to have taken a more serious turn. The doctor is firmly of opinion that he should be kept quiet, and disturbed as little as possible. I believe it is your intention to bring a large party of your school-fellows home for Christmas. May I suggest that you should refrain from doing so, as the effect upon his lordship may be quite serious. If I may venture to make a further suggestion, it would be advisable for you and your brother, Walter Adolphus, to accept some invitation from a school-fellow instead of returning home this vacation. At the very least, I trust that you will not bring a party of noisy schoolboys here.—Yours respectfully, GILBERT BLOORE."

"My only hat!" commented Blake.

"Jevvah heah of such a nerve, deah boys?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Sheer neck!" said Wally. "Catch me taking any notice of the Bloore bird! I'll jolly well jaw him for this!"

Tom Merry looked grave.

"If your father is seriously ill, Gussy, old man, don't you think—"

"My fathah is not too ill to w'ite to me himself, if this was his wish, deah boy."

"He might be—" said Tom hesitatingly.

"In that case his medical attendant would w'ite."

Tom Merry nodded.

"That's so," he said. "This man Bloore seems to have taken a lot upon himself, unless he is acting under the instructions of the doctor."

"Dr. Millard would not act thwough him, Tom Mewwy. The doctah knows me vewy well, and he would w'ite to me personally."

"Looks like sheer cheek!" said Kerr.

"I guess it's outside the limit," remarked Wildrake. "Besides, we're not a noisy lot of schoolboys, are we? Nice quiet kids—"

"Especially Wally!" remarked Lowther.

"Oh, come off!" said Wally of the Third. "I'll bet a tanner—"

"Weally, Wally, I wish you would not use such expwesions—"

"I'll bet a tanner that the pater doesn't know Bloore has written to Gussy at all!" said D'Arcy minor. "Like his thumping cheek! We're jolly well going!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You really think we ought to come, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus' eye gleamed.

"I trust all my friends will come with me, as awwanged," he said. "I wegard it as bein' up to them to wally wound me and show this cheeky ass that nobody takes any notice of him."

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Wally.

"Well, if you put it like that, old top—" said Figgins.

"I do put it like that, Piggay."

"Then it's a go!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather!"

And that point was settled.

And the next day, when St. Jim's broke up for the Christmas holidays, a charabanc came over from Wayland to convey Gussy and his numerous guests to Eastwood House, in Hampshire.

A crowd of St. Jim's fellows saw the charabanc off with loud cheers, and Arthur Augustus waved his eyeglass to them as the party started.

Piled with baggage and schoolboys, the charabanc rolled away, and St. Jim's was left behind.

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It was a merry party that rolled away, up hill and down dale, by road and lane, with a cheery buzz of talk going on all the time. Wally had provided himself with a tin trumpet, upon which he blew fearsome blasts. Reggie Manners and Levison minor contributed sweet music with a mouth-organ and a tin whistle. The hilarious party exchanged cheery chipping with the passengers in other charabancs that they passed on the roads. It was a frosty December day, and Tom Merry & Co. enjoyed the journey through the keen air. Only Arthur Augustus was a little subdued, and he even forgot to reprove Wally for the terrific din he was making with the tin trumpet. The thought was in Gussy's mind that perhaps he would find his father worse—that perhaps Lord Eastwood was more seriously ill than he had revealed in his letters—and that painful thought troubled the swell of St. Jim's very much. He was glad when the charabanc rolled up the stately drive of Eastwood House at last.

CHAPTER 4.

His Lordship's Secretary I

"DAD!"

There was a slight tremor in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's voice.

It was but seldom that the swell of St. Jim's allowed himself to betray emotion, but he could not quite help it now. And the old familiar "dad" of childhood came unconsciously to his lips at this moment.

Lord Eastwood turned towards his son with a pale smile.

The old gentleman was reclining upon a cushioned couch in the library of Eastwood House, close to a blazing, leaping log fire. The wide windows gave a view of the great park, with its leafless trees, backed by the setting winter sun. Arthur Augustus felt a pang as he noted how pale and worn his father looked. He had known that Lord Eastwood was unwell; but he had supposed that the earl was run down—a little exhausted, perhaps, by a busy political life. But he could see now that it was real illness. There was a kind of transparent pallor in the earl's face that almost alarmed the junior.

"Dad," faltered Arthur Augustus, "you're not well!"

"I—I say, are you really crooked, father?" asked Wally, who had followed his brother in. Even the irrepressible Wally was reduced to seriousness by his father's ill look.

"I am not very well, my dear boys," said his lordship in a low but steady voice. "I am very glad to see you, though. I hope you have brought your friends with you as arranged?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Bloore—" began Wally.

Arthur Augustus made his minor a sign. If the earl was unaware of his secretary's intervention, Arthur Augustus did not wish to trouble him with any complaint. Wally understood, and was silent.

"Bloore," repeated his lordship—"you have met Bloore, I think. I want you boys to be very kind to Bloore. He has been most attentive to me in my illness. Indeed, Dr. Millard declares that he is better than a nurse."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"I do not think you liked Bloore very much, Arthur, when you were at home last time."

"I—I was not awah that you—you noticed it, sir!" stammered Arthur Augustus.

The earl smiled faintly.

"I am sure, Arthur, that you will carry out my wishes, and show every consideration to him, when I tell you that he has cared for me in my illness with as much kind attention as I could have received from a son."

"I shall thank him myself!" said Arthur Augustus nobly.

"I should be vewy sowwy to misjudge him, even if he should wathah ovahstep the line in his anxiety for you, sir. I am vewy much obliged to him if he has taken care of you!"

And Wally mentally renounced some very plain things that he had been going to say to Gilbert Bloore!

"Isn't old Conway comin' home for Chwistmas?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"No; your elder brother is staying with some friends in Scotland," said Lord Eastwood. "He wished to come home when he heard that I was not very well; but I would not allow him to cancel his arrangements. The matter is not so serious as that."

"But—but you don't look well, dad," faltered Arthur Augustus.

The earl sighed.

"I do not feel well, yet there is little the matter that can be given a name," he said. "I have overtaxed my strength, the doctor thinks. I require a long rest. Dr. Millard says so. Rest and care, and I am receiving the best of care. Bloore sees to that, as well as Lady Eastwood. Your Aunt Adeline is also here, Arthur, and your cousin Ethel arrived to-day. But let your friends come in and see me. I am afraid I shall have to be much alone at present, but you must not allow my indisposition to cloud your festivities. There is really nothing the matter—nothing in the least

serious. Only a feeling of fatigue, which will be cured by rest."

Arthur Augustus made up his mind to interview Dr. Millard at the earliest opportunity; but he did not say so. He brought Tom Merry & Co. into the library to be presented to his lordship. The juniors came in very quietly, and with rather serious faces.

Lord Eastwood greeted them with a smiling face, and an air of courtesy that soon put them at their ease. He was evidently pleased to see the crowd of healthy youthful faces about him. Kit Wildrake, whom he had never seen before, was introduced, and Lord Eastwood asked him some questions about Canada. He seemed interested by Wildrake's talk, and most of the other fellows retired, and left Wildrake still in conversation with his lordship. In his earlier years Lord Eastwood had travelled in the great Dominion, and Wildrake found that he knew British Columbia, had canoed on the Fraser River, and shot elk in the Cascade Mountains. He knew Telegraph Creek, fifty miles from where Boot Leg Ranch was situated.

Arthur Augustus remained, after the rest had retired, with Wildrake, and he encouraged the Canadian junior with a smile. He was glad to see that in the interest of his talk with the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch Lord Eastwood's face became animated, and a little more colour crept into the pale cheeks. Gussy noticed, too, that Wildrake's keen eyes several times dwelt on his lordship's face with a piercing, inquiring glance that puzzled the swell of St. Jim's a little. But his lordship never caught any of those penetrating looks.

There was a soft step at the door, and a young man came into the library, treading softly, almost stealthily. Wildrake glanced at him. He was a rather tall, slim man of about thirty-five, with keen black eyes, and a narrow slit of a mouth. His hands were very white, with long, thin, tapering fingers. He came over towards his lordship's couch.

Lord Eastwood nodded to him, with a smile.

"Ah, you are back, Bloore?"

"Yes, my lord. I did not care to leave you for very long," said Bloore in a soft, rather musical voice.

"You must take care of your own health, Bloore."

The young man smiled deprecatingly.

Kit Wildrake rose to his feet.

"I hope I haven't tired you, sir?" he said. "Perhaps I ought not to have talked so long."

"Not at all, my dear boy!" said Lord Eastwood kindly.

"I have quite enjoyed our little talk. By the way, you do not know Mr. Bloore—my secretary and kind friend—Kit Wildrake."

Bloore held out his hand, and Wildrake touched it and felt a chill from the long, cold fingers. He fixed his eyes on Bloore's face.

"Haven't I met you somewhere before, Mr. Bloore?" he asked.

"I think not," said the secretary, with a smile.

"You haven't been in Canada?"

Bloore started.

"Canada?" he repeated.

"British Columbia," said Wildrake. "That's where I come from."

"Indeed! No, I have never been in Canada," said Bloore.

"I have travelled in the Colonies, but chiefly in Australia and New Zealand. I have never had the good fortune to visit Canada—a great country, I believe. But it is fine that his lordship's medicine was given."

Arthur Augustus and Wildrake quitted the library, and Bloore followed them out. He closed the door, and then spoke again.

"I am sure your young gentlemen will excuse me," he said softly; "but it is very important that his lordship should not be excited by too much talk. He is rather disturbed at present, I fear."

Wildrake coloured.

"Weally, Bloore—" began Arthur Augustus.

"Doctor's orders, sir," murmured Bloore.

Arthur Augustus swallowed something with difficulty. He did not like the man, or his soft suave manner; and he liked still less the secretary's interference. But he remembered what his father had said.

"I am vewy much obliged to you, Bloore," he said, with something of an effort. "You appeah to have been takin' gweat care of my fathah."

"My duty, sir—and my pleasure, too," said Bloore softly. "His lordship has overwhelmed me with kindness, and I should be very ungrateful if I did not strive to make some small return, now that it is in my power to do so. My own health, and indeed my life, weigh little in my mind compared with his lordship's well-being."

"Bai Jove, you are a weally good fellow, Bloore," said Arthur Augustus. "I was feelin' wathah watty about your

lettah to me at St. Jim's; but, upon the whole, I am sash you meant vewy well."

"You did not see fit to act upon my suggestion, Master Arthur," said the secretary.

"That was quite imposs," said Arthur Augustus briefly.

The secretary bowed without replying, and returned into the library, closing the door after him. Arthur Augustus walked away with Wildrake.

"Wathah a tattless chap, but vewy good at heart, I think," said Arthur Augustus. "He seems vewy gwaeful to the patah."

"He talks a good bit about it, at least," said Wildrake drily.

"Bai Jove! I hope you don't think him insincere, dear boy. That would be wathah howwid."

Wildrake made no reply to that, and they joined the rest of the St. Jim's party.

CHAPTER 5.

Wildrake Wants to Know!

LADY EASTWOOD presided at tea, to which the crowd of St. Jim's fellows did full justice. Ethel Cleveland helped her ladyship, and the juniors helped Ethel—especially Figgins. And Fatty Wynn murmured to Kerr that Ethel seemed to be very careful to see that George Figgins had plenty of the best, whereat George Francis Kerr grinned. Arthur Augustus had sometimes complained that Figgy seemed to think that Ethel was his cousin, not Gussy's at all; and certainly Figgins was as attentive to Miss Cleveland as the most affectionate and devoted cousin could have been. Tea was nearly over when Gilbert Bloore came quietly in and took a seat. Arthur Augustus made it a point to greet him pleasantly; but Wildrake—who was very interested in the silent-footed secretary—noted that cousin Ethel avoided speaking to the young man; and he also thought he detected that Lady Eastwood avoided his look, though her ladyship had too much social grace to betray her dislike, if she felt any.

It was quite a merry party at tea. Lord Eastwood's genial manner had quite reassured Tom Merry & Co., and even Arthur Augustus felt that he had been too much alarmed by the first sight of his father. It was Kit Wildrake who was the most thoughtful member of the party, and he spoke little, but in the general buzz his silence was not noted.

A little later, when Wildrake was sauntering on the terrace which ran the length of the great house, he came on Levison, Cardew, and Olive, and caught Cardew's voice.

"The man's a rank outsider."

Wildrake wondered if he was speaking of Bloore.

"What's the matter with him?" yawned Sidney Olive.

"You take such jolly sudden dislikes to people, Cardew."

"You do, and no mistake," said Levison. "Though in this case I can't say I like the man."

"My dear old tops, I don't trouble to dislike the Bloore bird," said Cardew with disdainful indifference. "I spotted him as an outsider, that's all. Cad through and through. Dashed if I know how the old johnny came to be landed with such a rotter."

Wildrake walked on, thinking. Cardew was a rather cynical and malicious youth in some ways, but Wildrake knew what a keen judgment he had. He had seen at a glance through Bloore's soft, pleasant ways. He was not interested in the secretary in the least; he had seen through him, ranked him as an outsider, and then dismissed him from his mind. That was Cardew's way.

But Wildrake was interested in the man. From somewhere in the back of his mind came a haunting remembrance of those keen, black eyes and that narrow gash of a mouth. Where had he seen the man before? Was it in Canada? But Bloore denied that he had ever been there.

There was a sound of music from within, and Wildrake strolled into the music-room through the French windows. Monty Lowther was extracting sweet strains of rag-time from the grand piano, and Tom Merry and Manners, cousin Ethel, and Kerr and Wynn were there. Manners broke out as Wildrake quietly joined the group.

"Chuck it, Monty! That syncopated muck is an insult to the piano!"

Monty Lowther chuckled, and rose from the music-stool. "Give us something classic, Manners. I can stand it, if cousin Ethel will sing."

Cousin Ethel would sing, and Manners sat down to accompany her. At the first notes of "Should He Upbraid," George Figgins scudded into the music-room. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy followed him in.

"Weally, Figgins, I was just sayin'—"

But Figgins was deaf and blind now.

Arthur Augustus sat down, with a rather severe look on his noble face. He had been enlightening Figgins on the subject of "off-side," when cousin Ethel's sweet voice

spirited his hearer away. Kit Wildrake sat down beside the swell of St. Jim's. They were at a distance from the piano, and could talk in low tones without interrupting the music.

"You've seen your father again, D'Arcy?"

D'Arcy's face became very grave.

"Yaas. He seems to me wathah worse since he has taken his medicine."

"Oughtn't he to have a nurse?"

"Bloorie is takin' care of him, you know. He gives him his medicine and looks aftah him in ovey way."

"You seem rather to like Bloorie, now."

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"I am gwateful to him for his attention to the patah, you know. Personally, I do not like him, somehow, but I am sowwy for it. I must twy to like him bettah."

"I had an idea I had seen him before, somewhere," said Wildrake musingly. "But he says he's never been in Canada. How long has he been with your father, D'Arcy?"

"About two or thwee months."

"Do you know how he came to get the job?"

"The patah's secwetawwy was ill, you know, and he wanted a tempowawy man. Bloorie had vewy good wecomendations from Sir Thomas Mappleton, a vewy old friend of my fathah's."

"Oh, that looks all clear!" said Wildrake, with a puzzled look. "If an old friend of your father's answers for him—"

"Oh, yaas," said Arthur Augustus. "Sir Thomas' lettah of wecomendation was all that could be desiahed. I wemembah secin' it at the time."

"A letter of recommendation—"

"Yaas. Bloorie was Sir Thomas' secwetawwy before he fell ill and went to live at San Remo."

Wildrake drew in a deep breath.

"Then your father hasn't seen Sir Thomas since he engaged Bloorie?"

"Oh, no!"

"He had no communication except by letter?"

"Yaas. But he wote specially to Sir Thomas on the subject, and old Mappleton answahed wecomendin' the man vewy warmly." Arthur Augustus was not a very observant youth, but he turned a very curious look on the Canadian junior now. He could not help being struck by Wildrake's peculiar interest in the secretary. "What are you thinkin' about, the man, Wildrake, deah boy? Do you suspect him of anythin'?"

"My deah chap, what could I suspect him of?" said Wildrake lightly. "Let's get nearer the merry music."

"Wight-ho!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Where are Kangy and Roylance?" asked Wildrake.

"Knockin' the billiard balls about."

"Right."

Kit Wildrake strolled away from the merry party in the music-room and descended the stairs to the billiard-room. There he found Talbot and Fatty Wynn engaged in a game, and Kerr marking for them. Roylance and Harry Noble were looking on, having finished a game. Wildrake joined the two Colonial juniors.

"You chaps seen Bloorie?" he asked.

"The giddy secretary?" said Roylance. "Yes. Seems a rather pleasant fellow."

"Bit too much like a cat for my taste," said Kangaroo.

Wildrake smiled.

"He's like a man I saw in Canada once," he said. "But he's never been to Canada. He mentioned to me that he's travelled in Australia and New Zealand. I don't like the man's looks. I want you fellows to speak to him."

"Eh! Why?"

"You needn't talk of this, of course," said Wildrake quietly. "But I've got a bad opinion of that man. If he's not worth Lord Eastwood's confidence, it ought to be looked into."

"No business of ours, is it?" asked Kangaroo, with a stare.

Wildrake coloured slightly.

"Nope! But I'd like to know whether the man is a liar, as I suspect. You come from Australia, Kangy; and you from New Zealand, Roylance. Will you jaw to him a bit, and see whether he knows anything of either country? I want to know whether he's a liar, I guess."

"Any old thing," yawned Kangaroo, and Roylance nodded.

Wildrake strolled back to the music-party, and he seemed to dismiss Lord Eastwood's secretary from his mind for the rest of the evening. It was not till the next day that he referred to the matter, with the other two Colonials. That afternoon, Ernest Levison, Frank, and Arthur Augustus were going to the station with cousin Ethel, to meet Doris Levison. The juniors gathered round on the terrace to see them off in the car. When the car had started, and the

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crowd broke up, Wildrake joined the Australian and the New Zealander.

Both of them grinned at him.

"Talked to our bird?" asked Wildrake.

"I got him at brekker," said Roylance. "He shut up like an oyster when he heard I was from New Zealand. Never heard of Maoris or hot springs in his life, I fancy. What he doesn't know about New Zealand would fill whole books of travel."

"And you, Kangy?"

The Cornstalk laughed.

"I tried him on the giddy Island Continent at lunch," he answered. "I've been speaking to Gussy, and I got from him that Bloorie's old governor, Sir Thomas Mappleton, was a Minister to an Australian state, and afterwards to New Zealand, and that Gilbert Bloorie was his secretary there. Well, I got him on to Australia, and he talked like a man who had never travelled farther than Bromley-by-Bow. Said he'd seen the hot springs at Sydney—ha, ha, ha!—when I drew the long bow to test him. And when I mentioned that Melbourne was in the Northern Territory, he agreed that it was! And when I let out that I was from down under, he shut up like a pocket-knife. He's never been to Australia in his natural."

Wildrake nodded.

"I guessed he was a bad egg," he said.

"But it's mighty queer," said Kangaroo. "It seems clear that Sir Thomas Mappleton's secretary was with him in Australia, and afterwards in New Zealand. And this is the same man, Gussy says. But he knows nothing about Australia, and Roylance says he's blank on New Zealand. Doesn't that strike you as jolly queer, Wildrake?"

"I guess it does."

"Is he some sort of a spoofer?"

"I guess so."

"Well, I suppose it's not our business," said Kangaroo. "I say, coming out to skate? Wally says the ice will bear."

"I'll join you later."

Soon the merry party were having a fine old time on the ice.

All was going merrily, and the St. Jim's juniors were enjoying their skating to the full. Suddenly there came a catastrophe. Fatty Wynn's plump form met the sturdy frame of 'Tom Merry'.

Boomp!

Unable to keep his balance, the Falstaff of the Fourth went to the unsympathetic ice with a crash.

"Ooooh!" he gasped.

Kit Wildrake remained alone on the terrace, his youthful brow corrugated deep with thought. Kangaroo evidently distrusted Bloorie; but he had said that Lord Eastwood's secretary was none of his business. That was right enough! His lordship's arrangements certainly were no affair of his son's guests from school.

All the same, Kit Wildrake "guessed" that it was his business. Whether it was or not, he was going to make it his business, during that Christmas holiday at Eastwood House.

CHAPTER 6. Dark Suspicions.

"W EADLY—lai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus frowned.

It was a clear frosty morning, as the swell of St. Jim's trotted cheerily out on the long terrace of Eastwood House.

He looked round for cousin Ethel.

And what he saw was, cousin Ethel and George Figgins walking away down one of the garden-paths, so deep in conversation that they seemed quite lost to their surroundings.

"Bai Jove!" repeated Gussy, frowning. It was borne in once more upon Gussy's noble mind that Figgy's air of proprietorship when he was with cousin Ethel was a little disconcerting. And cousin Ethel seemed very interested in her talk with Figgins, which was surprising enough to Gussy. Gussy had certainly never noticed that George Figgins was particularly brilliant or entertaining in the conversational line.

"Hallo, Gus, old top!" Wally came scudding up. "Where's Doris?"

"Weally, Wally—"

"Doris is coming on the ice this morning," said Wally.

"I say, Doris isn't half bad for a girl, Gus. Got a lot of sense."

"Weally, you young sweep—"

"Oh, here she is!" exclaimed Wally, as Doris Levison came in sight with Ernest and Frank and Clive. "Waiting for you, Doris. You coming on the ice, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Keep at a safe distance from him, Doris," advised Wally. "You don't know what Gussy's like when he gets going on skates."

"Bai Jove! Pway don't take any notice of that young loundah's remarks, Miss Dowis," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall be vewy honahed if you will allow me to take you woutid the lake."

"I shall be delighted!" said Doris, with a sweet smile.

"Shall I telephone for the doctor?" asked Wally. "Doris may need him after you've taken her round."

"You young ass!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Still, we know how to render first aid," said Wally thoughtfully. "Keep close, Frank—and you, too, Reggie! We shall have to go to the rescue when Gussy drops Doris through the ice."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I twust you will not dwive me to givin' you a feahful thwashin' this vacation, Wally."

"I trust not!" chuckled Wally. "Think of the state your features would be in afterwards, old bean!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! Pway come along, Miss Dowis!"

Arthur Augustus led Doris Levison away towards the lake, with the party of skaters; and cousin Ethel and Figgins passed out of his noble mind.

As a matter of fact, Arthur Augustus would have been surprised if he had known the topic which cousin Ethel was discussing so earnestly with Figgins. Bloore, the secretary, who interested Kit Wildrake so much, seemed to interest cousin Ethel also. He was the topic. Doubtless, Ethel had her own reason for choosing Figgy as her confidant. Certainly Figgy was not the brightest member, intellectually, of the St. Jim's party; but there was something about rugged, honest old Figgy that made one turn to him instinctively in time of trouble. And Ethel Cleveland was troubled now.

"I have seen the man several times," she was saying, as she walked down the garden path with Figgins. "I never liked him. And—and I know that my aunt, Lady Eastwood, does not trust him."

"Seems a bit soapy, to my mind," said Figgins. "Can't say I've noticed him much."

"I—I wish you would."

"Why, Ethel?"

"I—I don't trust him," said Ethel. "Lady Eastwood does not trust him; she does not like him to be so much about with my uncle, especially in his illness. But Lord Eastwood has a very high opinion of him, and my aunt can say nothing. But—but I know she is troubled."

"Gussy says Bloore looks after Lord Eastwood splendidly," said Figgins.

"I know."

Figgins wrinkled his brows in thought. He had not taken much notice of Gilbert Bloore; indeed, only under the stress

of politeness had Figgins taken much notice of anyone but cousin Ethel. But what he had seen of the man he did not like. "Soapy" was Figgy's way of describing it.

"But I don't quite catch on," said Figgins, after a long pause. "The man isn't doing any harm, is he?"

Ethel's eyes were on the ground. She seemed to hesitate.

"I—I don't know," she said, at last. "But—but my aunt is troubled. The man has an influence over my uncle. He seems to have been a very useful and industrious secretary, and had made himself almost indispensable. But—but it was only since his coming, that Lord Eastwood's health began to fail."

Figgins jumped.

"There can't be any connection between the two things," he said.

"I suppose not," confessed Ethel.

"Does Lady Eastwood think—"

"I hardly know what she thinks; I think she hardly knows herself," said Ethel. "Last night she was very distressed; she talked to me in my room for a long time—much more freely than she generally speaks. She has a sort of instinctive distrust of the man. And Lord Eastwood's illness is a very strange one. The doctor cannot give it any specific name, and yet he seems to be getting steadily worse. And, of course, this is the strictest confidence—"

"Of course," said Figgins.

"I think my aunt might not like me to speak of it, but I—I must consult somebody," said Ethel. "I know I can trust you."

Figgins' honest face glowed with loyalty and devotion.

"I hope so, Ethel," he said softly.

"A few days ago Lord Eastwood sent for his solicitor, and added a codicil to his will," said Ethel in a low voice. "It was no secret, of course, from Lady Eastwood. He has left the sum of five thousand pounds to his secretary, Gilbert Bloore."

"Oh!" said Figgy.

"In return for services rendered, or something of the kind, to provide for the man," said Ethel. "Lord Eastwood places a very high value upon his services. Of course, it is not a large sum to a man so wealthy as Lord Eastwood. It is a large sum, however, for a poor man to receive; and—and Lady Eastwood has not spoken a word to his lordship about it, but she cannot help suspecting that Bloore has cunningly brought it about somehow, and—and—" She broke off.

"But surely," said Figgins—"surely there is no possibility of—of—of your uncle dying?"

Ethel's lips quivered.

"Heaven knows! What does this strange illness mean? Why does he seem to be sinking, when the doctor can find nothing specific the matter with him? My aunt hardly knows what she fears—I hardly know! But—but I—I am



All was going merrily, and the St. Jim's juniors were enjoying their skating to the full. Suddenly there came a catastrophe. Fatty Wynn's plump form met the sturdy frame of Tom Merry. Boomph! Unable to keep his balance, the Falstaff of the Fourth went to the unsympathetic ice with a crash. "Ooooh!" he gasped.

frightened. I—I was uneasy, and when I heard about the codicil, it seemed to me that—that there was something—Oh, I cannot put my thoughts into words—they are too vague, too dreadful; but I am afraid!" Her voice trembled. Figgins' face was the picture of distress.

"I know!" he said at last.

Ethel gave him a hopeful look.

"Let's speak to Kerr," said Figgins.

"Kerr!" repeated Ethel.

"Kerr's the chap to think a thing out," said Figgins. "He's Scotch, you know—no end of a brain. You wouldn't mind my telling Kerr—he's mum as an oyster? I'd rather consult old Kerr than the sharpest lawyer going."

Ethel smiled faintly. Figgins' belief in his Scottish chum's sagacity touched her.

"If you think it best—" she said.

"I do, really."

"Then we will speak to Kerr."

While Tom Merry & Co. were disporting themselves on the frozen lake, Figgins and cousin Ethel drew Kerr into a pagoda in the grounds, and there was a long and earnest consultation.

The Scottish junior listened quietly to what Ethel had to tell him—the vague fear and disquiet that oppressed her.

His keen, intellectual face grew darker as he listened.

"You're sure about the codicil?" he asked, at length.

"Lady Eastwood has seen it."

"Of course, it may mean nothing at all," said Kerr. "A man in Lord Eastwood's position would naturally make a decent provision for a secretary who had served him well. It's probable enough that the man is pulling his lordship's leg for a legacy. But—added to a mysterious illness and the fact that Lord Eastwood has got steadily worse since he signed the codicil, and that Bloore is in complete charge of him and of his medicines—" The Scottish junior paused, and the three looked at one another with startled faces.

Like some hideous shadow in the background, a vague, indefinite suspicion of crime seemed to be hanging over them.

"It will bear looking into," said Kerr quietly. "You can trust me, Ethel, to see if there's anything—anything not on the square. Not a word to a soul—leave it to me to look into it. If Gilbert Bloore is playing some rascally game here—"

"He wanted to keep everybody away from the house this Christmas," said Figgins. "He tried—"

Kerr nodded.

"It will bear looking into," he said. "The doctor comes this afternoon, and Gussy is going to have a talk with him. I'll ask Gussy to let me be present. That's for a beginning. Don't worry, Ethel. If there's any villainy going on here, you can trust me to root it out."

"Thank you!" said Ethel simply.

And the girl's face was much brighter as she walked away to the lake with Figgins to join Doris and Tom Merry & Co. Kerr remained alone in the pagoda, his brows wrinkling in thought.

CHAPTER 7.

Two on the Track.

"Gussy, old man—"

"Yaas, Wildrake?"

"The medical galoot's with your popper now, I guess?"

"Yaas."

"You're going to have a chin with him after he's seen popper—what?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Would you mind if I were present?"

"Bai Jove! That is vewy odd," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning his eyeglass upon the Canadian junior in surprise. "Kerr has made the same wequest."

Wildrake raised his eyebrows.

"Kerr?" he repeated. "Kerr of the New House! Well, two of us won't be in the way, Gussy—what?"

"You will be vewy welcome, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "As a mattah of fact, I am feelin' vewy uneasy. The patah seems to me worse to-day; but I saw him for only a few minutes. Bloore was weadin' aloud to him, and he seemed wathah impatient when I dropped in. I do not want to be ungwateful to a chap who is lookin' afiah my patah so well," added Arthur Augustus thoughtfully, "but weally Bloore is wantin' in tact. I shall certainly not allow him to keep me away from my fathah."

Kerr of the Fourth came along, and joined the two juniors as they were going into the morning-room, where D'Arcy was to see the doctor before he left. Kerr regarded Wildrake rather curiously.

"Seeing the medical johnny?" he asked.

"Yep."

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"Heah is Dr. Millard," said D'Arcy.

The ruddy, genial-looking country doctor came in. Arthur Augustus introduced his two friends, and then asked about his father. The doctor's face was grave.

"His lordship seems a little better to-day," he said. "Nothing whatever to be alarmed about, Master D'Arcy. It is simply a matter of his lordship having overtaxed a somewhat tired constitution. There is assuredly nothing organically wrong."

"But my fathah looks vewy weak and pale," said Arthur Augustus, with a falter in his voice. "I weally had the impression that he was sinkin' when I saw him this mornin'."

"Nothing of the kind. But he is certainly very weak and languid," said Dr. Millard. "It is rather a perplexing case—his lordship's constitution is naturally wrong. There is absolutely nothing wrong with him that can be given a name. It is general weakness and languor; but he will pull round—he will pull round."

"No disease, sir?" asked Wildrake.

"None."

"May I ask if his lordship has ever been in a similar state before?"

"I have attended him for fifteen years, and have never known him so low as at present," said the medical gentleman. "That is rather perplexing—this heavy languor seems to have attacked him during the past few months, and it has grown."

"You are satisfied that Bloore takes the best care of him?"

Dr. Millard gave the Canadian junior a quick glance.

"Quite—quite!" he answered. "He is as careful as a trained nurse. I place every reliance upon him, and so does his lordship."

"He gives him his medicine?" asked Wildrake.

"Certainly."

"He weally seems a vewy dutiful chap," said Arthur Augustus.

"Very!" said Kerr rather dryly.

"Undoubtedly," said Dr. Millard. "The medicine has to be taken regularly, and Mr. Bloore is as punctual as a clock. Well, I must be going."

The medical gentleman took his leave, Arthur Augustus going with him as far as the door. Kerr and Wildrake were left alone in the morning-room.

The Scottish junior closed the door and came back towards Wildrake.

"You are on to something?" he asked.

"Are you?" asked Wildrake.

"Yes."

"Same here, I guess," said the Canadian junior. "We'd better compare notes. Nobody seems to suspect anything."

Kerr hesitated. Ethel had spoken to him, of course, in confidence, in the consultation in the pagoda. But he knew that Ethel would allow him discretion in the matter, and he determined to be quite frank with Wildrake. He had a good deal of faith in the keenness of the Canadian junior.

"We're on in this affair together, Wildrake," he said.

"If you suspect anything, you'd better tell me—and the same on my side. We may be able to help one another."

"Sure!"

"There are others who suspect—at least, who are very uneasy," said Kerr in a low voice. "I had a talk with Ethel Cleveland this morning—"

"I guess I noted that she didn't seem to cotton to the Bloore bird," said Wildrake.

"Lady Eastwood does not trust him, and Ethel shares her distrust," said Kerr.

Wildrake whistled softly.

"Women are pesky keen sometimes," he said. "They often jump to the right conclusion from a sort of instinct, while men are fooling around looking for reasons. Kerr, there's foul play going on in this house."

"You think so?"

"Sure!"

"And your reasons?" asked Kerr.

"I guess I've sized up the Bloore man, and he's some spoofer," said Kit Wildrake. "He's supposed to have been secretary to a man who held posts in Australia and New Zealand. Well, I've put Kangy and Roylance on him to pump him, and Kangy's convinced that he's never been to Australia, and Roylance will go bail that he's never seen New Zealand. What do you figure on that, Kerr?"

Kerr drew a deep breath.

"That's news to me," he said. "I thought we could help one another in this, Wildrake. You've got on to some details, and I've got on to others, through Ethel. Anything more?"

"This?" said Wildrake quietly. "The day we came here I met Bloore, and I was struck that I'd seen him before—I reckon in Canada. He said he'd never been in Canada, and had been in Australia and New Zealand. On that he lied, as I've found out!"

"If he lied—as I believe, too—he cannot be Sir Thomas Mappleton's former secretary, Gilbert Bloore," said Kerr.

"Nops!"

"Then he is an impostor, and is here in another man's name," said the Scottish junior.

"Correct!"

"Lord Eastwood has no suspicion of that; and a talk with a couple of schoolboys isn't much in the way of proof," said Kerr. "We shall have to walk warily."

"I guess so," assented Wildrake.

"You think you've seen him before—in Canada. Can't you figure it out where and when?"

Wildrake knitted his brows.

"I can't exactly," he confessed. "I reckon I know those sharp black eyes and that gash of a mouth. I reckon the galoot has been in British Columbia in his time, though he's not a Canadian. If I could get to know something about him, I reckon I could place him. But, anyhow, I know his face."

"If you could prove that you saw him in Canada under another name, that would be something to go upon."

"I know. I've been trying to figure it out, but he's got me beat so far," said Wildrake. "But what else did you get from Ethel?"

Kerr gave the details of the talk in the pagoda.

"Jumping Jerusalem!" breathed Wildrake. "It's O.K. about that codicil?"

"Ethel says her aunt has seen it."

The Canadian junior breathed hard.

"Five thousand pounds to come to the man if his lordship pegs out," he said. "Little enough to Lord Eastwood; but a lot to an adventurer who has wedged into a house under a false name. A mysterious illness, and—and the fellow's in entire charge of the sick man and his medicine! It looks like—like—"

"Poison!" whispered Kerr.

Wildrake nodded.

"You've given me the clue," he said.

"The clue?"

"Yep! I reckon I can place him now, sure!" said Wildrake very quietly. "It was a case of poisoning out at Fraser. Dandy Jim was what the man was called. He was a gambler and a real bad egg. He had a partner, who died. The dead man had friends, who kicked up a shindy; but at the inquest it was a verdict of heart failure. But a good many galoots suspected that it was poison; they opined that Dandy Jim had used a poison he got from the Kootenay medicine-men—a beastly stuff unknown to white doctors."

"I was only a kid then; but I remember the fuss, and remember a mob getting hold of Dandy Jim. He just got away with his life. That was the only time I ever saw him. I was on the street at Fraser with my popper when he came tearing by on a horse—white as chalk, riding for his life. You see, he stood to land a handsome sum by his partner's death, and the galoots put two and two together."

"I know him now. It's four years since I saw him—and I saw him only once. But I never forget faces. Gilbert Bloore was in British Columbia four years ago, and he was called Dandy Jim, and suspected of using a poison that the doctors couldn't trace."

Wildrake spoke with quiet conviction.

"You—you're sure?" breathed Kerr.

"I guess I'd put all my dollars on it."

"There's no time to lose, Wildrake. But what are we going to do?"

The Canadian junior set his lips.

"I guess we've got to show him up, and stop his rum game here," he said. "But we've got to be careful. No good my going to Lord Eastwood and telling him that his secretary was Dandy Jim, the gambler, four years ago. Gilbert Bloore was in New Zealand then, and Lord Eastwood thinks the man is Gilbert Bloore. He would think I am dreaming!"

Kerr nodded.

"Leave Lord Eastwood out," he said. "No good saying a word to him without positive proof. But if the man isn't the genuine Bloore, that man can be found. Sir Thomas Mappleton would know, but he's at San Remo."

"I guess we could get a photograph of this man, and send it out to Mappleton, and ask if it was a picture of his former secretary."

"That's true. But, in the meantime—"

"In the meantime, Dandy Jim is poisoning Lord Eastwood to get hold of the legacy of five thousand pounds," said Wildrake. "That's what we've got to stop, Kerr; and it would take a week to get an answer from San Remo, even if Sir Thomas Mappleton can answer letters. He's ill, you know. It's here on the spot that we've got to act."

"Us two, against that scoundrel!" said Kerr.

"Yep!"

The door was thrown open, and Fatty Wynn came in.

"Oh, here you are, Kerr!" he exclaimed. "Don't you jolly well know it's tea-time? I say, Doris has made a cake!"

"Has she really?" said Kerr.

"You bet!" Fatty Wynn was beaming. "I say, it's a splendid cake! I've seen it. Come along, you slackers! I say, I've tasted the cake! It's a real dream! I'm going to help Ethel and Doris with the Christmas-pudding; only Doris says I should bag the stuff. As if I would, you know! Perhaps a snack here and there! But come on; we don't want all that cake to be gone! I'm hungry, you know!"

And the juniors went to tea.

CHAPTER 8.

The Secret Passage.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY was turning the handle of the library door, when it was opened from within, and Gilbert Bloore came quickly out.

Wildrake and Kerr were with the swell of St. Jim's, and all three juniors stepped back. Bloore held up his hand.

"Please do not enter now," he said in a low voice. "His lordship is feeling very low; he ought not to be disturbed."

"Weally, Bloore—"

"Has his lordship said that he does not wish to see his son?" asked Kerr very quietly.

Bloore looked at him.

"It is my duty to see that his lordship is not excited in any way," he said.

"You have not answered my question," said the Scottish junior in the same quiet tone.

Bloore's eyes gleamed for a moment.

"Dr. Millard leaves his patient entirely in my hands," he said.

"Pewwaps we had better go, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, with a hesitating look at his companions.

"There's your mater," murmured Kerr.

Lady Eastwood came down the corridor towards the library. Bloore did not venture to oppose her ladyship's entrance.

She gave the juniors a faint smile, and passed into the library. Bloore followed her in and closed the door.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I weally think that Bloore is takin' wathah a gweat deal upon himself. Of course, he means well!"

"No doubt!" assented Kerr dryly.

"I suppose you fellows do not specially want to go into the libwawy?" said Arthur Augustus apologetically. "It is the patah's favouwife woom, you know, lookin' out on the park. It is wathah bein' turned into a sick-woom now. But there are lots of books up in my den if you want to wead."

"My dear chap, we didn't come along here to read," said Wildrake, laughing. "We're going to help you spend a merry Christmas."

D'Arcy's face clouded.



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"I feah that it will not be vewy mewwy, in the circs," he said. "I am vewy sowwy that there is sickness in the house, and ewewyth'n is wathah dismal. Howevah, we must keep our peckahs up."

The juniors strolled away, Arthur Augustus wandering towards the music-room, where could be heard the clear, young voices of Ethel and Doris, in a duet. Kerr and Wildrake stopped by a window on the terrace.

"It's coming to a crisis, I think," said Wildrake, in a low voice. "We've got to chip in, Kerr."

Kerr nodded.

"Lord Eastwood is practically confined to the library now, excepting when he's in his own room," went on Kit Wildrake, "and Bloore has the old gentleman practically in his hands. If the medicine is doctored, it's after it's out of Dr. Millard's hands. It's not an easy business—and all we know sounds more like wild suspicion than cold fact. What are you thinking of?" he added.

"Follow me!" answered Kerr.

Wildrake, in some surprise, followed him up the second staircase.

Kerr led the way along a deserted corridor, and opened the door of an empty, dusky room.

Wildrake followed him in.

He glanced round the room in some wonder. It was a spacious apartment, and the domed ceiling was decorated with paintings. It was empty of furniture, save for a huge, old-fashioned bedstead. The panelled walls glimmered in the rays of the setting sun.

"This is the Painted Room!" said Kerr.

"I've heard of it," said Wildrake, with a nod. "Tom Merry told me a yarn about it. It's supposed to be haunted, isn't it?"

"Yes, and it's never used. A trick was played on Gussy once, when he slept in this room," said Kerr. "I was staying here at the time—a crowd of us were. That was before you came to St. Jim's. But you've heard the story, I dare say."

"Sure! There's a secret panel in the wall, I remember hearing Tom Merry say—"

"That's so. Here it is."

Kerr carefully closed the door of the Painted Room, and crossed to the panelled wall on the opposite side.

Kit Wildrake watched him curiously, as he felt over a panel. There was a click, and the panel slid back.

"By gum!" ejaculated Wildrake.

He looked into the opening, and made out the top steps of a dim and dusky stone staircase.

"Where does that lead?" he asked.

"Down to the vaults. But there's a branch passage on the level of the ground floor, that leads to the library."

"Oh!" said Wildrake.

"I've explored it all," said Kerr. "Gussy knows about it, of course. It's very unlikely that Bloore has ever heard of it. He hasn't been at Eastwood House very long, and this room is never used. Have you got your electric torch?"

"Yep!"

"Come with me, then!"

Kerr stepped through the opening, and the Canadian junior followed him. The panel clicked shut behind them.

"You can open that again, I reckon?" asked Wildrake.

"It's easy when you know where to find the spring. We could get out by the secret door into the library, if we liked—but, of course, Lord Eastwood is there, and we can't show up. Keep quiet!"

"You bet!"

Kit Wildrake flashed on his electric torch, and the two juniors cautiously descended the ancient stone steps.

The strange, hidden recess was interesting enough to Wildrake. It was six or seven hundred years since that stone staircase had been built, in the thickness of the ponderous wall. It was easy enough to imagine some grisly phantom gliding at midnight, through those dusty and musty recesses. It was all strange and novel to the boy from the Boot Leg Ranch.

"Turn off here," said Kerr.

The flight of winding steps ended in a narrow passage. Farther on, another and broader flight led farther downward. But Kerr turned off along the passage, and Wildrake followed him.

"Put off the light now," whispered Kerr.

Then they stood in blackness the next moment.

"Keep hold of my shoulder, and feel your way along the wall. Not a sound now!"

"Sure!"

They moved on, cautiously and silently.

A thin, sudden gleam of light struck their eyes in advance. Wildrake pressed Kerr's shoulder.

"Where does that come from?" he whispered.

"The library."

"Oh!"

A few minutes more, and they stood in an arched gap in

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the stone wall of the library itself. The gap was covered by thick oak panelling. Wildrake remembered that the interior walls of the room were panelled in oak, where the book-cases did not cover them. He understood that the panel before him formed a door.

There was a narrow opening in the panel, at the height of a man's head. On the other side, it was concealed in the carving of the panel. But had the juniors carried a light there, a gleam of it through the slit might have betrayed them.

Suddenly there was a sound of voices.

Wildrake started, and thrilled a little. There was only the wooden panel between the juniors and the library; and Lord Eastwood's voice came quite distinctly to their ears:

"Do not be alarmed. I do assure you, my dear, that I do not need the services of a professional nurse. My valet and Bloore take every care of me."

Wildrake drew back.

He knew that Lord Eastwood was speaking to his wife, and he felt a natural repugnance to listening.

Lady Eastwood's voice could be heard in answer, but in tones so low that the words were inaudible.

A few minutes later, the juniors distinctly heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

Lady Eastwood was gone from the library.

Kit Wildrake raised himself on tiptoe, and peered through the slit in the panel. Small as it was, it was cunningly contrived to give a view of a very large part of the room. He saw Lord Eastwood sitting wearily in a deep armchair a short distance from the blazing log fire.

Near at hand was a small table, on which stood several bottles and a wineglass, and a silver dish of tempting fruits. The library had very much the look of a sick-room in that quarter.

As Wildrake looked at his lordship's white, worn face, the figure of Bloore crossed his line of vision.

Bloore was coming back after closing the door after Lady Eastwood. He was behind his lordship's chair, and Lord Eastwood could not see him. But Wildrake had a clear view of the cold, calm, hard face, with its gash of a mouth. And he read much in that face—off its wary guard as Bloore believed that there were no eyes to see him.

In that face, at that moment, the Canadian junior read a cynical triumph, a cold, cruel, mocking derision. But the next moment, as Bloore came nearer to Lord Eastwood, his face resumed its habitual expression of quiet, kind, almost affectionate respect. The look came on his face like a mask.

Wildrake set his teeth. He suspected—he knew—that the man was a scheming villain. He was sure—as sure as he could be without proof—that the man known as Gilbert Bloore was the man who had narrowly escaped lynching for a crime of poisoning in British Columbia. If he had doubted, that change in Bloore's face would have convinced him.

"Her ladyship seems very anxious," the juniors heard Bloore murmur, in his soft voice.

Lord Eastwood nodded.

"The fact is, Bloore, I am feeling weaker to-day," he said. "I really cannot account for this lassitude. The doctor is, I believe, puzzled."

"Perhaps your lordship will be able to drive out in the morning."

"I do not feel equal to it, Bloore—or, indeed, to any exertion. But I am determined not to take to my bed if it can be avoided."

"Her ladyship seems to think—"

Lord Eastwood made an impatient gesture.

"I will not take to my bed, and have the whole paraphernalia of nurses and doctors, if it can possibly be avoided!" he exclaimed a little irritably. "I am having the best of care now. What more can be done?"

"Nothing, indeed, my lord."

"Dr. Millard has sent me some fresh medicine to-day, I believe?"

"Yes, my lord."

"It seems to do me little good—if any! When is it to be taken?" asked Lord Eastwood wearily.

The secretary picked up a bottle that stood on the table.

"One teaspoonful in water at eight o'clock," he said. "The dose to be repeated at midnight if you do not sleep."

"You shall not stay up late again, Bloore. If I need a dose in the night my valet shall see to it. He sleeps in the next room."

"My lord, I hope you will allow me to make so slight a return for all your kindnesses to me."

"You are a good fellow, Bloore. It shall be as you like."

"Thank you, my lord!"

Wildrake moved away from the spyhole as Lord Eastwood sank back wearily in his chair and closed his eyes.

"Let's get!" he muttered.

The two juniors returned to the Painted Room.

CHAPTER 9.

Coming to a Crisis.

"TOM MEWWY—"

"Yes, old top?"

"I am goin' to twust you to look affah Ethel and Dows this evenin'," said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry looked inquiringly at the swell of St. Jim's.

It had been arranged that Arthur Augustus and his numerous guests should drive over to Wickstead Hall that evening to a Christmas Eve dance. The St. Jim's party were looking forward very cheerfully to the prospect. There was a great sorting-out of white shirts and dress-clothes, and a trying-on of ties.

But for once Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had given little attention or thought to his darling "clobber." Even Wally of the Third had given that matter more thought than his major.

"The natch and Aunt Adeline will be comin'," said Arthur Augustus, "and I was goin' to take charge, of course—"

"Of course," smiled Tom Merry.

"But I have attahed my mind, deah boy, and if the fellows will excuse me, I would wathah remain at home this evenin'."

"You will break the hearts of all the young ladies at Wickstead, Gussy," said Monty Lowther, with a shake of the head.

"Relent, old chap!" urged Manners.

But Tom Merry looked very grave.

"Does that mean that your father is worse, Gussy?" he asked.

"Not exactly worse, deah boy, but I am wathah anxious about him," said D'Arcy. "I do not quite feel up to festivities this evenin'."

"We'll stay in, too," said Manners at once. "I'll play you at chess, old bean."

"I'll give you some of my comic recitations," said Monty Lowther. "Cheer you up no end."

Arthur Augustus smiled faintly.

"Thank you vewy much, but I would wathah you went," he said. "Look affah cousin Ethel, you know, and see that that sillay ass Figgins doesn't bag her for all the dances. He treads on people's toes twightfully, you know, and cousin Ethel is so awfully polite, you know, she stands him with weally too much patience."

The Terrible Three grinned.

"I shall not be left quite on my own, eithah," continued Arthur Augustus. "Kerr and Wildrake are not goin'."

"What on earth are they missing it for?" asked Tom Merry.

"The young asses have caught colds and—"

"What rotten luck!"

"Yaas, wathah! They are goin' to bed early, and I shall dwop in and talk to them," said Arthur Augustus. "I weally do not feel like dancin' this evenin'."

"Wildrake looked as fit as a fiddle this afternoon," said Tom Merry, rather puzzled.

"So did Kerr," remarked Manners.

"Yaas. It was wathah sudden."

"Hard luck!" said Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was "high tea" for the young people before the cars came round to carry them to Wickstead in the December evening. Wally & Co. were in great spirits, but some of their elders looked rather thoughtful. They were thinking of the sick man in the library. But they knew that Lord Eastwood particularly wished that no entertainment should be cancelled on his account; and, of course, they could have done no good by staying in. Lady Eastwood's face was slightly clouded as she entered the car with Aunt Adeline and Dows and cousin Ethel. Ethel gave Figgins a look as he handed her a wrap.

"Kerr's staying in," whispered Figgins. "Leave it to Kerr and Wildrake. It's all right."

And Ethel gave him a smile and a nod.

Arthur Augustus saw the party off from the steps, smiling bravely and genially.

As the cars drove away Arthur Augustus turned back into the lighted hall. The great door was closed, and Arthur Augustus stood thinking, with a glum brow. He had missed the dance—it was true that he did not feel "up" to merry-making just then. But he felt rather "down" when all his friends were gone. He would have been glad to see his father, but he knew that Lord Eastwood would be displeased at his staying in, and he did not go near the library. But he signed to Bloore as he caught sight of that gentleman in the hall.

"How is Lord Eastwood now, Bloore?" he asked.

"A trifle better, I think, Master Arthur."

"Bai Jove! I'm glad to hear that."

"You have not gone with the rest, sir."

"I did not feel equal to dancin', Bloore."

"I quite understand your feelings, sir," said the secretary, with a sympathetic look. "I think, however, that it will be wise not to disturb his lordship—"

Arthur Augustus compressed his lips.

"I was not thinkin' of doin' so, Bloore. I am goin' to spend the evenin' in my snuggery with Wildrake and Kerr, as they have colds and have to stay in."

"Very good, sir!"

Bloore passed on, and Arthur Augustus saw him disappear into the library, and the door closed on him. Slowly and despondently the swell of St. Jim's mounted the staircase.

He came into his own "snuggery"—a rather large room that adjoined his bed-room. There was a blazing fire on the hearth, and in two armchairs close to it sat the two invalids, Kerr and Wildrake. They did not look much like invalids, certainly. Arthur Augustus, as he glanced at them, was smitten by a doubt.

"You fellows look fit enough," he remarked.

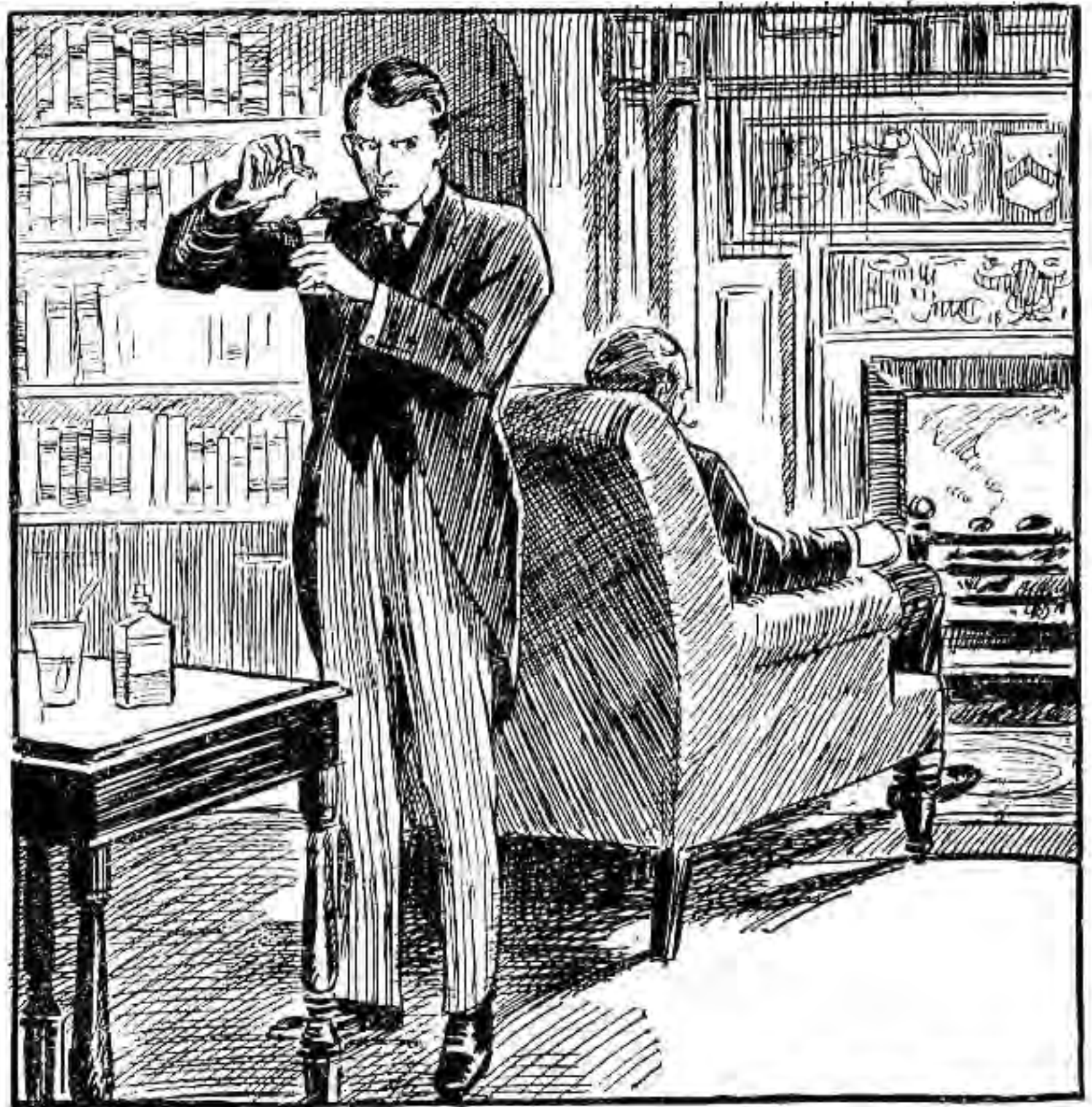
"And feel the same, I guess," said Wildrake, with a laugh.

"Bai Jove! I twust you were not spoofin' about a cold—"

"I'm afraid we were," said Kerr. "You see, we had a reason for staying in, and didn't want comment on the subject. It seems that you are staying in too, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat down. He turned his eyeglass alternately upon his two companions, evidently perplexed.



Bloore measured out half a wineglass of water from a carafe. He added to it a single dose of medicine from the bottle. Then with a quick movement, he drew a small phial from his waistcoat pocket. Holding it over the wine-glass he dropped five or six drops of the colourless fluid into the medicine.

Wildrake looked at his watch. It was nearly seven. "Plenty of time yet," he remarked. "I suppose Bloore is with your father, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas. Weadin' to him, I expect. But why did you fellows want to miss the dance at Wickstead?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"I guess we didn't want to miss the dance," said Wildrake, "but we had something to do here; and we're going to tell you about it, now, Gussy. You've got to act with us in the matter."

"Bai Jove! You are waihah mystewious, deah boy."

Wildrake looked at Kerr.

"He's got to be told," said the Scottish junior. "Tell him, Wildrake."

"It's about your father, Gussy," said the Canadian junior gently. "You'll take it quietly, I hope."

"I don't quite undahstand, deah boy—"

"Your father is ill, and his illness puzzles the doctor. There's no name for it, but he's sinking under it," said Wildrake.

"Yaas," faltered Arthur Augustus.

"And there's foul play!"

Arthur Augustus started to his feet.

"Wildrake!"

"Foul play!" repeated the Canadian junior. "I know, and Kerr knows! Unless we're making a frightful mistake, your father's medicine is being doctored after it leaves Dr. Millard's hands—by—"

"Bloore?"

"Yes!"

"Good heavens!" whispered Arthur Augustus, his face white as a sheet. "You—you can't be sowious! Do you mean poison?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"Will you listen to me quietly while I tell you all we know?"

Arthur Augustus drew a deep breath.

"Go on, deah boy!" he said faintly.

With an occasional word from Kerr, the Canadian junior quietly told of what he knew and suspected. Arthur Augustus did not interrupt him once; he listened, and watched him, with eyes growing wider with horror.

"Good heavens!" he muttered when Wildrake had finished.

"You had to know, Gussy—"

"I am glad you have told me, deah boy. But—but it must be some fearful mistake! I cannot believe—" Gussy's voice broke.

"If you'd gone with the party we should have acted on our own," said Kit Wildrake. "But I'm glad you stayed in, I guess. It's better for Lord Eastwood's son to be acting with us."

"But—but what are you goin' to do?"

"Bloore gives your father his medicine at eight o'clock. We're going to see him do it."

"But—but if we are present the wascal would not dream of attemptin' foul play—"

"The secret panel!" said Kerr.

"Bai Jove! I never thought of that."

"That's the idea," said Wildrake. "If he is using poison—the secret Indian poison Dandy Jim used that time in Canada—he will not dare to put it in the medicine-bottle. It could be traced there in case of suspicion. He will put it in the wineglass in which he gives your father his medicine. After it is swallowed it cannot be traced in the body by a post-mortem. But in the medicine it can be traced. If he doctors the stuff in the wineglass we shall see him, and we shall take care that your father does not drink it—and we shall take care, too, that it's kept as evidence against the villain. Catch on?"

Arthur Augustus shuddered.

"Bai Jove! If the fellow is weally such a howwid snake in the gwas—"

"Ho sure is, I guess!"

The swell of St. Jim's clenched his hands.

"I am with you, of course, deah boys," he said. "Bai Jove! What is the time now?"

"Half-past seven!"

"Let us get a move on, then!"

Arthur Augustus rose to his feet. He was quite calm now, and his face was set hard.

"Come on to the Painted Room!" said Wildrake.

The three juniors put on rubber shoes and left D'Arcy's "den," closing the door behind them. They walked away quietly to the Painted Room. The upper corridors of the great house were silent and deserted, there was no one to observe them.

In the Painted Room, Kerr opened the secret panel, and the three juniors passed through. The panel clicked shut behind them.

Wildrake turned on his electric torch, and the juniors descended the stone staircase, as Kerr and Wildrake had

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done before that afternoon. The Canadian junior turned off the light as the beam from the secret panel door in the library wall struck his eyes.

The three juniors drew close to the panel. Both D'Arcy and Kerr knew where to touch the secret spring to open it in case of need. The narrow, horizontal slit in the ornamental panel was above their heads, but by standing on tiptoe they could look through it. Three heads were placed very close together, and the three juniors were able to peer into the well-lit library.

The sound of a soft, monotonous voice came to their ears. It was the voice of Gilbert Bloore, and he was evidently reading aloud to Lord Eastwood. His lordship was leaning back in his chair, shading his eyes with his hand. The secretary's voice went on—reading some political report from the "Times."

It ceased at last.

Lord Eastwood looked up.

"What is the time, Bloore?"

"Ten minutes to eight, my lord."

"Read on a few minutes more."

"Yes, my lord."

Arthur Augustus breathed hard. If Gilbert Bloore was not the respectfully affectionate attendant he appeared to be, he played his part remarkably well. Arthur Augustus could scarcely bring himself to believe in such treachery and wickedness as Wildrake and Kerr suspected. But the matter was soon to be put to the proof.

Bloore laid down the paper at last.

"It is time for your lordship to take the medicine."

"Very well, Bloore."

The secretary rose, and stepped to the little table upon which the medicine-bottles stood. Lord Eastwood's eyes were fixed moodily and heavily upon the fire. He did not think of looking at his secretary's actions. He would have seen nothing if he had looked, for the secretary was standing between the armchair and the table, and his back was turned to Lord Eastwood.

Three pairs of eyes at the slit in the secret panel watched him feverishly.

Bloore measured out half a wineglass of water from a carafe. He added to it a single dose of medicine from the bottle.

Then, with a quick movement, he drew a small phial from his waistcoat pocket, removed the stopper, and held it for a moment over the wineglass.

Five or six drops of an almost colourless fluid dropped into the medicine.

The stopper was replaced, and the phial restored to the man's pocket, all in a few seconds.

He picked up the wineglass, shook it a little, and then turned to Lord Eastwood.

"Your medicine is ready, my lord."

"Thank you, Bloore," said his lordship.

CHAPTER 10. Brought to Book.

C RASII!

The secret door flew open.

Lord Eastwood started up in his chair with a cry. Gilbert Bloore spun round, the wineglass clutched in his hand.

Three rather dusty juniors burst into the room—Arthur Augustus first. As Bloore turned towards Lord Eastwood with the poisoned draught, Arthur Augustus, without stopping to think, had pressed the secret spring and hurled the panel open.

He leaped into the room.

"You scoundwel!" he shouted.

"Arthur!"

Lord Eastwood grasped the arms of his chair and raised himself. His face was dark with anger.

Bloore's face was white, hard, fixed. He stood like a man in a dream, hardly knowing what to think. The surprise to him had been utter and complete. But, dazed as he was, it was borne in upon his mind that his villainy was known—that he had come to the end of his tether.

"Arthur! How dare you burst into my room like this—how dare you!" thundered Lord Eastwood. "And these boys—"

"I guess—" began Wildrake.

"Excuse us, sir!" said Kerr. "We—"

"You are guests in this house," said Lord Eastwood. "To you I will say nothing of this foolish trick. But you Arthur—"

"It was not a twick, dad—"

"A foolish, practical joke like this—"

"Futhah! That man is poisonin' you!"

"What!"

(Continued on page 20.)



Editorial.

In the first place, I think it is the best plan to wish you all the compliments of the season and a right-down merry Christmas. Here is my latest stunt, "Tom Merry's Weekly," and I am hoping with all my heart that it will be as successful as its companion, the "St. Jim's News."

This week I am again giving a few more questions for readers to answer. These will help those who want to write to me, but can't think of anything to say. No. 1.—Which do you like the better—the "News" or the "Weekly"? No. 2.—Which has been the best "Gem" yarn published this year, in your opinion? No. 3.—Would you like to read a complete yarn of Gordon Gay and his tribe from Rylcombe, say, in the "Boys' Herald" every week, and what do you think of the "Boys' Herald" Christmas Number? No. 4.—Which, in your opinion, has been the best article published in the "St. Jim's News" from No. 1 to this present issue? No. 5.—And why? No. 6.—Would you like cousin Ethel to continue her series of articles on early St. Jim's, or not? No. 7.—Which is the best "Gem" story you ever read? No. 8.—Are you interested in the secret passages at St. Jim's, and would you like them brought into the stories? No. 9.—Would you like these two little mags to continue, or would you prefer a serial?

There, I think that ought to fill the bench for those who have been waiting to write to me. In conclusion, I will add, may you always be able to buy the good old "Gem," and may you ever sing its praises, so that it will continue to prosper, and bring the things which delight you every week.

When you sit down to your Christmas dinner, don't forget to give a cheer and your best wishes to the "News" and my "Weekly," and also to your old chum,

TOM MERRY.

Grundy on Toast.

By WILLIAM CUTHBERT GUNN.

Note.—This story of Gunn's describes the large air-view of St. Jim's given on page 2.—Tom Merry.

THE STRANGER.

"COULD you tell me the name of this building, please?"

George Alfred Grundy, of the Shell Farm at St. Jim's, wheeled round as he heard the voice behind him. The leader of Study No. 3 was standing a few yards from the entrance gates to St. Jim's, contemplating the road ahead with a thoughtful frown. He was trying to decide upon a way of spending the afternoon, and I was waiting to follow.

The speaker was an elderly gentleman, very expensively dressed, and well over fifty in years. The handsome face seemed rather familiar to me in some ways, and yet I was quite certain I'd never set eyes upon him before.

"Eh—what?" said Grundy, in his abrupt, impolite manner.

"Could you tell me the name of this place?" repeated the stranger.

"Rather!" said Grundy promptly. "This place is St. James' College." And, raising his nose a trifle more skywards than it already pointed, added: "The academy for sons of gentlemen!"

The elderly gentleman looked quite interested.

"And I'm Grundy—George Alfred Grundy, you know!" said the Shell fellow impressively.

"Indeed!" said the stranger, arching his eyebrows in mild surprise. "I wonder whether you would be so good, then, as to show me around this college?" he asked, with a smile.

Grundy did not answer, but looked inquiringly at me. It was a half-holiday, and we hadn't very much to do. The ten fellows who, with George Alfred, comprised that famous eleven known as "Grundy's Growlers," had fallen out with their peaceable skipper. So, for the time being, as it were, "leather-lamming" was "off."

"Quite a good idea," I responded agreeably. And Grundy, after a few seconds' reflection, adopted it.

"Right-ho, old sporty!" he said to the elderly gentleman. "Fall in and follow me!"

And then, with the superb dignity of a sergeant-major at a Royal Review, George Alfred Grundy strutted through the gateway, and led the way. The elderly gentleman, with an expression of great amusement on his face, walked along in the Shell fellow's wake. I walked along in their rear.

Grundy turned round sharply to the left as he entered the gates, passed under the high elms which bordered the drive, and halted outside the small cottage near by. This was Taggles' lodge. The elderly gent had followed Grundy at a leisurely pace, and Grundy had to wait several seconds before he appeared.

"That's where the porter hangs out," said George Alfred, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Next to it is the stables, but I don't suppose they'll interest you much."

"I have two large garages to keep my motors in," smiled the stranger complacently.

Grundy sniffed, and walked on. The elderly gentleman followed until the woodshed was reached. Here my leader took stock of the surroundings, no doubt, to disguise the fact that he was trying to think of something funny to say.

"That structure yonder is a shed of wood," expounded Grundy learnedly. "It would hold wood if we let it. But we use it to hold meetings and councils of war in, so the wood often gets pitched out!"

As he finished speaking, he looked at the stranger's face, apparently under the impression that he ought to have raised a hearty laugh. As it was, the elderly gentleman had already left Grundy, and was walking on towards the gardener's cottage. Grundy gave another sniff, and turned to me.

"Come on, idiot!" he growled. "Don't walk along like a half-stuffed magpie!"

We caught the stranger up, and then Grundy led him round behind the gardener's cottage, past the side gate, around the sanatorium grounds, and then down towards the chapel.

GRUNDY AIRS HIS HISTORY.

The stranger eyed the chapel with considerable interest. Grundy eyed it in disgust. What was there interesting in a chapel? I could see George Alfred was impatient to get along to the gymnasium, where he would show his visitor how to knock sparks off the punching-ball.

However, the elderly gentleman was deaf, blind, and dumb to all Grundy's impatience to "get a move on." The towering chapel, black with age, claimed the attention of the stranger. I think the place was built by James I.

"Have you any idea who founded this magnificent chapel?" asked the stranger of Grundy.

"Thomas a Becket, the boxing archbishop," said Grundy promptly.

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman. "You don't mean to say so!"

"Do you mean to say you hadn't heard that?" demanded George Alfred, staring.

"I certainly had not!" said the stranger emphatically.

"Well, you'd better go back to school, and learn your history, then," said Grundy in disgust.

It was a great puzzle to me that the stranger didn't knock my leader about a dozen yards for his frightful nerve. Perhaps he didn't quite know what to make of such an extraordinary youth. Anyway, he held his hand.

"This way, old fellow," said Grundy, linking arms with the stranger, and leading him across to the New House.

"That's the bike-shed over there, sir," I remarked, pointing to the long tin-roofed place, in which several hundred bikes were stored.

THE CYCLE-SHED.

We made our way to the cycle-shed, and the stranger showed a remarkable amount of interest in the machines.

"I'll tell you what, old chap!" exclaimed Grundy suddenly. "If I fish out a couple of machines, will you have a race with me round the school?"

"I am afraid my racing days are past!" sighed the stranger. A far-away look came into his eyes for the moment, but departed as quickly as it had appeared. "I think we had better be getting along."

Grundy then made as though to avoid going near the New House. He stepped out boldly towards the frozen Rhyf. The elderly gentleman pulled up, however, and prepared to inspect the House of Ratcliff carefully.

"Oh, come on!" growled Grundy impatiently. "There's nothing worth seeing there, unless any of the monkeys are about!"

"I think it is a very fine building," said the stranger candidly.

"Well, it's not. It's a mouldy old barn!" stated Grundy flatly.

"I should very much like to see the interior," insisted the visitor.

"Well, you can't!" said Grundy firmly. "That's the old casual ward, the rotten old back number, the also ran, the new branch of Colney Hatch— Oh, my hat! Here comes Figgins and his crowd! I think we'll get a move on!"

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A large party of New House worms were gathering in the oiling, and when Grundy's flattering description of their show reached their ears they looked as if they were going to charge. However, we got across to the boathouse, and they didn't appear. I, at any rate, breathed more freely.

The ice on the Rhyl was just about thick enough to bear. We had been forbidden to skate, however, as the oaks had not seemed it safe enough for the boys. A trifle like that did not worry Grundy. There was the ice, and there was his wonderful ability for sliding. What more was wanted?

"Watch me!" roared Grundy. He tore on ahead of us, bounded on to the landing-stage, and then made a prodigious leap on to the ice.

We watched, we saw, and we howled! George Alfred Grundy howled as well.

He slid two yards good on his feet; he slid three yards better on his heels; but he slid the remainder of distance best on his back!

I never saw an old coughdrop laugh more than did Grundy's visitor, when he witnessed that scene. It was killing!

Grundy smote the reeds and frozen grass against Abbey Island with a crash which we plainly heard from the landing-stage by the boathouse.

Needless to add, he didn't slide back. George Alfred crept over the glassy surface on all fours.

"Splendid, my boy—splendid!" gasped the stranger, when Grundy staggered to his feet. "Douglas Fairbanks couldn't have done it better!"

"Rats!" growled Grundy gruffly. "Let's go along to the playing-fields."

To the playing-fields we wended our way. Here my leader proceeded to show the stranger the Fags' Sports Ground, Little Side, and Big Side.

The manner in which he spoke of the Soccer ground must have given the elderly gentleman the impression that Grundy scored goals for his school by the dozen there every week.

"You've heard the old saying about this place, haven't you?" asked Grundy, jerking his thumb over his shoulder to indicate Little Side.

The stranger shook his head.

"Don't they say the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of St. Jim's?" demanded Grundy, in deep scorn.

"I have heard that same remark applied to Eton College, but was not aware of the fact that it was in circulation here," replied the elderly gentleman.

"What you don't seem to know would fill baskets!" sniffed Grundy. "Now what about the gymnasium?"

He strode off the playing-fields before the stranger could reply, and made for the gym, which was situated hard by. I walked along more calmly with Grundy's visitor, and we talked together for half a minute. But in the short time we both came to a mutual understanding over two or three little matters, chief among them being the decision that George Alfred Grundy couldn't help it.

When we reached the gym we found Grundy in his shirt-sleeves, and with the boxing-gloves already on. He seemed ready for instant action.

"Now, then, Gunny!" he roared. "Come and put your dukes up for three minutes!"

I declined without thanks, but suggested that Grundy should wear off his superfluous energy on the punching-ball. This was my leader's only alternative, so he agreed. His first business-like lunge at the ball reminded me of a golfer making a long drive. Grundy turned his head immediately he punched, and grinned proudly at the stranger and myself, who were standing a short distance away.

"How's that for you?"—Smack! Wallop! Thud!—Whooooof!"

The ball had naturally returned, and it sent Grundy eight yards. He sprawled on his back, and counted the solar systems, while a proper description of our merriment would fill pages. When Grundy at length rose to his feet again, there was a look in his eyes which boded ill for the St. Jim's punching-ball. George Alfred took a short run, and then—

Smack! Bang! It had exploded!

Grundy gave a grunt of satisfaction, threw off his gloves, scrambled into his jacket and overcoat, and then prepared to leave the gym. The ill-fated ball had given Grundy a

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lap under his chin which would be a reminder for several weeks.

"I think we'd better have a look at the Cloisters now," he mumbled, and led us away in that direction. We passed by the Old Tower, and at length turned into the dim, ivy-covered arcways. The musty, damp smell of the ruins came strong to our noses. Neither the visitor nor myself were desirous of staying, but apparently George Alfred Grundy wanted to explain.

"This place was built by—by Julius Caesar for his Roman pals," said Grundy. "I expect they must have used it for a roller-skating rink. The stone floor seems nice and smooth—"

"My hat!" I gasped. "Go on!" Grundy went on.

"That old tower yonder is the place where the two princes were murdered by their wicked uncle, King Dicky the Second or Third—I don't know which. I also think it's the place where Queen Anne died. Cardew once told me she did—"

"Cardew did did he?" said the stranger, opening his eyes in interest. "Ha ha, ha!"

"Yes!" snapped Grundy. "And that little oak-tree which is growing from the top was planted there by Sir Francis Grundy when he was a boy at St. Jim's."

"I think it's time we paid our final respects to the quadrangle," I murmured.

We took our leave from the gloomy precincts of the Cloisters, and made for the quadrangle. On the way Grundy pointed out the old tree which hung out over the wall, and was used for breaking bounds by certain young gentlemen after dark.

When Grundy had shown his visitor around the quadrangle, he prepared to see him off to the gates again.

"What do you think of me for a guide?" asked Grundy modestly, as he walked slowly towards the archway.

"Very good," said the stranger promptly. "You have kept me highly amused all the afternoon. You were correct on many points."

"How the deuce do you know that?" demanded Grundy.

"Because I spent eight years of my youth at this same college," replied the stranger simply.

"Great pip!" cried Grundy, when the meaning of the elderly gentleman's words had sunk in. "Then you're an old boy?"

"Exactly!"

"But—don't you remember Sir Francis Grundy, who was captain of St. Jim's for three years?" asked Grundy hopefully.

"I remember a John Grundy, who stayed three years in the Fifth Form because he hadn't the brains to get promoted to the Sixth," said the old boy.

George Alfred fidgeted with the buttons on his overcoat, and didn't dare to look in my direction. The old boy, whoever he was, had knocked all the wind out of Grundy's sails completely.

"But—but my uncle was an awfully brainy chap!" stammered Grundy.

"Yes, I know!" chuckled the stranger. "He used to spell cat, 'k-a-t,' and caught, 'k-o-r-t.'"

"Well, ain't that the right way to spell 'em?" yelled Grundy sarcastically.

The stranger and I nearly wept, and Grundy danced with rage.

"Who are you, anyway?" he demanded. "You look like a lord or somebody?"

"I am a lord," said the stranger, with a quiet smile.

"By Jove!" gasped Grundy. "And I've been calling you 'old sporty' and 'old fellow'!"

"I am Lord Reckness," continued the elderly gentleman. "I have called to see my grandson, Ralph Cardew—"

"Oh!" gasped Grundy. "Oh, my stars! Oh, seissors! Are you really the granddad of that idiot, sir?"

"I am grandfather to Ralph Cardew; I am not related to idiots!" said Lord Reckness, with severity. "I thank you again, young man, for entertaining me so splendidly, but I must really be going along to see Dr. Hohmes. Can you direct me to his house?"

"Turn to the left when you leave the gates, and take the first on your right, sir," I replied, Grundy being too flabbergasted to give utterance to one syllable.

When his lordship had disappeared Grundy looked at me in a dazed fashion.

"My hat!" he mumbled. "My only Sunday tile!"

That was all he could say, THE END.

Lord Eastwood's Christmas Party.

(NOTE.—As the story concerning Gilbert Bloore did not require a detailed account of the boys' Christmas Day at Eastwood House, I did not give one. I am, however, leaving the matter in the hands of the St. Jim's boys themselves; and when you have read the following descriptions of what happened I expect you will be able to form your own opinion of what sort of time they had.—MARTIN CLIFFORD.)

Christmas Day.

By TOM MERRY.

"Good-morning to you, Tom! A merry Christmas, my boy!"

"Same to you, sir!" I smiled. "And many more like 'em!"

I was the first to see Lord Eastwood after he turned in on Christmas Eve. The routine for the day was breakfast, dinner, and a late tea. Gussy had insisted upon this, as it was the customary practice at St. Jim's. Very few of us indeed were used to the mid-day luncheon, with dinner at seven-thirty, and practically nobody wanted it. Christmas Day only seems real with the turkey and pudding served up at the usual dinner-time.

Lord Eastwood had had his breakfast served up in bed, and I passed him on the grand staircase as he was making his way to the library.

There was a marked change in his lordship, and it was unnecessary for me to ask him how he was. He was not an actor, and the jovial expression on his handsome features was undoubtedly genuine.

"You cannot believe how glad I am not to have to be a wet blanket to my guests this Yuletide," went on Gussy's pater. "In fact, I am amazed at having resumed my own self again in such a short period of time. Millard is undoubtedly a very capable man. His strong antidote has cured me of the foul poison, and I shall not forget!"

Even as he finished speaking Lord Eastwood walked on towards the library. It did me good to see him so jubilant.

Certainly Lord Eastwood's statement about not being a wet blanket at the party was true. He was anything but that. He gave a speech and a toast at dinner in a manner which reminded one more of his third son and heir, than a staid and dignified earl. And it had the one desired effect, in sending a wave of great happiness and relief over the whole of his large Christmas party.

A Christmas Walk.

By COUSIN ETHEL.

Half an hour after breakfast ten of us started off for a long walk. George Figgins held one of my arms, and Arthur held the other. Doris walked between her brother and Ralph Cardew. The six of us moved along quickly, spread across the road in one line. Behind came Fatty Wynn, Wildrake, Wally, and Frank. Taken on a whole, I don't think they walked so enthusiastically as the front line.

The downy white flakes were drifting down fast, and the whole countryside was enshrouded in a mantle of pure whiteness. It looked like lasting the whole day. Underfoot the snow was crisp and hard, and it crunched musically as we walked. Our course lay through Wickstead, round to Easthorpe, and then back over the fields to Eastwood House.

The white snowflakes came down faster from the purplish-grey clouds overhead, and when Wickstead was reached we looked strangely like Eskimos. The boys behind snatched their gloved hands together noisily, and Wally thought it a great joke to stride along kicking his heels, until Arthur stopped him. Ralph Cardew kept up a running commentary on every subject nameable, and Arthur argued with all he said.

Doris and myself had our hands tucked into our warm, furry muffs. Wickstead was passed through, and left behind. It was while we were walking briskly along a frost-bound country road to Easthorpe that some trouble started. A large crowd of young children suddenly emerged from the frozen hedges, armed with snowballs. I will leave it to Fatty Wynn to describe what happened next week.

The ST JIM'S NEWS

Edited By TOM MERRY.

Fun Round the Christmas Table.

By Harry Manners.

"Christmas comes but once a year;
And when it comes it brings good cheer."

WELL, now, would you believe it? Your old friend, "a photographic fanatic," as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy so kindly addressed me the other day, had nearly forgotten that there really was such a time as Christmas. Well, you can guess my surprise when Tommy, our worthy Editor-in-Chief, with face flushed and perspiring, burst into the study the other day.

"Slacker!" he cried, in an angry tone, pointing a warning forefinger at me. "Do you know, man, that this week we are to pass our bumper number of the 'News,' and that I haven't yet had a contribution from you?"

"Ye-e-es, old man," I stammered, my brain expanding at the bare thought; "but I thought that perhaps you were thinking out some—"

"If it's ideas you are going to say," Tom barked out, "you are mistaken! I'm busy with the junior sports stunts. Bah! You make me mad!"

I paled as I read danger in those eyes of Tommy's; but finally plucked up courage.

"Can I make a suggestion?" I ventured at last. "Suppose we send a Christmas-card to each of our readers?"

"What!" thundered Tom, almost striking me down in his fury. "Send off two hundred and fifty thousand cards? Preposterous! Do you think I want you to be addressing envelopes for the next six months?"

I pushed back my hair, thinking some other inspiration might strike me.

"Ah!" I cried jubilantly, lifting my head up suddenly, and catching Tommy a sharp crack on the point of the jaw. "I've got it!"

"Got what?" thundered the junior captain, caressing his injured jaw. "An idea? Out with it, then, before I decorate your impopular with ink!"

"Brightest of youths," I implored, "may I suggest writing an article showing how, with a small piece of string, a boy may be able to keep his Yuletide visitors interested for hours?"

Tom's brow cleared almost immediately, and a smile flickered o'er his lips. I could see in a moment that I had pleased him.

"Ah, I am 'lighted with your spark of brilliance!" he said, gripping my hand in that of his own. "Carry on with it right now!"

The study door closed with a bang, and Tommy had gone.

I sat down and thought, my fingers raking through my head the while. I had made the suggestion, and I had no alternative but to get on with it at once.

A "Knotty" Problem.

After you have obtained a length of string about 2ft. 6in. in length, with which to operate, ask your friends if they can tie a knot in the string without letting go the ends. Although seemingly impossible, it is one of the easiest tricks imaginable. Place the piece of string on the table, horseshoe shape. Now remember, after once picking up the string you must not leave go. The

trick is worked in this way: First of all fold your arms, then pick up one end of the string in your right thumb and forefinger, and the other end with your left forefinger and thumb. Having done this, still retain your hold on the string, but unfold your arms—this movement should be done rapidly—you will then find the required knot in the string. Another good trick is to make a member of the party

A Helpless Prisoner

by tying him up with two inches of string. Ridiculous as it may seem, it is quite possible. Get the required person to lie face downwards on the carpet, next raise his left hand, and with two inches of string tie his little finger to that of his right hand. After doing this, raise the two feet, and push them under the tied fingers. The victim of the trick will then be unable to extricate himself, and be a helpless prisoner. Now for the next, which is

The Separation Trick.

Pick two members of your company—a boy and a girl for preference—then obtain two pieces of string of equal lengths. With one piece tie both ends to the wrists of the boy, allowing play of about a foot in length. Care must be taken not to tie the string too tight—a slip-knot will answer the purpose. Now, with the other piece of string tie the left wrist of the girl in the same manner. Before affixing the other end to her right wrist, bring it between the arms of the boy, now tied, and you will have the two more or less locked. Now, the object is for them

to try to separate from each other. This will cause endless amusement, and will allow you time to sit down and enjoy to the full the strange muddle the two find themselves in in their unsuccessful operations. After the two have tired themselves and beg for release, all that is necessary is to slacken one of the strings, make a loop, and pass same from the inside through the slip-knot on the wrist of the other, then over the fist. If the string is then pulled taut, you will find the parties separated. This trick may seem a little complicated, but it is more easy when tried.

Now for those who may be seeking something fresh. Ask if anybody can affix a stamp to the ceiling without standing on anything to do it. This seems difficult, but it is quite easy. Place a stamp—the gummy side of which has first been damped—face downwards on a penny, which should be resting in the palm of your hand. Then throw the penny upwards to the ceiling, and the stamp will stick as required. Oh, no; not the penny as well. I'm not quite a magician yet.

When they have got over their surprise ask your audience if they think it possible to strike a match twice. "No," they will answer you. Well, just to prove that you can, get a cup of water, and place it on the table before you. Now strike the match, and, as quick as you can, dash the lighted match in the cup of water. You can again strike it, if only you dry the sulphur end with your handkerchief first.

Now, don't forget that you have the cup of water to empty. Whilst out of the room get your matchbox, and rub the phosphorus part on the sole of your boot. When you return to the company you can surprise them all by being able to strike a match on your boot. Ask them to do the same—of course, it must be understood that a safety match must be used—and they will find they cannot do it.

After the trick has been explained, empty your matchbox, and show it to your company, to prove that it is quite empty. Now get someone to tie it up securely with string. When this has been done to everybody's satisfaction, ask for the loan of a sixpenny-piece. When you have obtained one, lay it on the table before you, and inform all present that you can pass the sixpence into the matchbox without the coin touching your hand. In view of the box being tied up, your listeners will think you are pulling their legs. But just get one of them to spin the sixpence for you. Care should be taken beforehand to see that there are no break-ables on the table upon which you are going to perform this trick. While the coin is spinning, the box which you hold in your hand should be brought down sharply upon it. What has happened to the sixpence they will ask afterwards. Then untie your box, open it, and there, sure enough, will be the sixpence for all to see.

Your friends will no doubt be satisfied with your evening's entertainment, but there is still another string trick you can give them to try when they get home. They must get a piece of string about two feet in length. After both ends have been tied together, forming a circle, a ring should be slipped on to the string. After having done this, a thumb is inserted in both ends of the circle. Now, the object is for someone to release the ring without removing the string from the thumbs. Perhaps some of my reader chums will try this one for themselves, and let me know the results.

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THE SIXTH FORM.

No 1 HORACE JONES	No 11 STANLEY BAKER
No 2 NEBERT OSWALD LANGTON	No 12 PHILIP RUSHDEN
No 3 GERALD KNOX	GEORGE BRUCE (3)
No 4 ARTHUR LYONS	DARREL (PREFECT)
No 5 JOHN NORTH	NEW HOUSE
No 6 PATRICK MULVANEY	No 1 ARTHUR WELLS
No 7 ERIC KILDARE	No 3 ALBERT GRAY
No 8 NIGEL MACGREGGON	No 4 HAROLD HALL
No 9 EDWIN DUDLEY	No 5 JAMES GARTON MONTGOMERY
No 10 GEORGE THURZMAN	No 6 GEORGE WEBB
	No 7 DOUGLAS HARRINGTON
	No 8 JAMES HURLINGHAM

A Plan of the Studies and Occupants.

Tea and Bonbons.

By Gussy.

When my patah and matah returned from Clystlands, Duncan Sloane's place, they brought with them the millionaire's daughter and niece. I felt highly pleased with my patah for doing this, because at present there were only two girls to twenty boys—and a couple more young ladies to help matters were very welcome.

At the tea-party I sat between Miss Winnie—the seventeen-year-old daughter of the millionaire—and my cousin Ethel. Miss Sylvia Foxcroft, our neighbour's niece, by some pwe-awwanged coincidence, was seated next to that artful boundah Kerr. Miss Dows Levison, by another piece of planning, was next to Cardew. Being what one would call "in a glass-house" myself, I don't like hurling stones, but I weally think Kerr and Cardew should have known bettah at their age!

If I were Fatty Wynn, I should undoubtedly give a long, elaborate description of what was on the table for tea. But as I am not, I shall wevahn! The best thing I enjoyed at that Christmas tea was the lovely sandwich—myself! between the charming beauty chorists! After tea came the excitement of the cwackahs. This was intensified as a hundred degrees by the girls having pweviously organised a competition in connection with the bonbons. Each boy had to take a partner, and the couple who could pull a cwackah in the most elegant mannah would win some unknown prize! My patah was very enthusiastic over the stunt, although, of course, he was naturally excluded from the competition. Cardew and Figgins formed a couple, and I gwew a triffe suspicions. Fatty Wynn joined hands with me, Wildrake with Levison, Kerr with Noble, and Monty Lowther with Blake. We had had three cwackahs each, and most of the fellows had pulled theirs. However, there were several with just one left, and they formed the pairs mentioned above. Kerr and Noble went first. Their pull was anything but elegant. Kerr pulled the handle off his end, and Noble sat down on the floor as the result of the unexpected break. There was a weally big laugh over it, but the girls did not declare them the winners. Wildrake and Levison tried next—but as the bangah didn't go off, they could not be called an elegant pair. The next couple were Blake and Lowther. The fatheads pulled at his cwackah as though it were the tug-o-war at the Olympic Games. When it suddenly broke, both asses sat down on the floor, and turned a somersault backwards. Then came Cardew and Figgins. Both these chumps stepped forward, bowed, Cardew waived the cwackah, and they snapped it neatly. Together they turned and bowed to the girls again, and stepped back. Then yoaah humble and old Fatty stepped forward. I was quite certain we could whack the west hollow. All that was wequarabed was the tact and judgment of a D'Arcy. Fatty produced a cwackah, and we pulled hard.

Bang! The howwid thing went off with an ear-splitting explosion. Fatty and I staggered back. Such a bang I had nevah heard from a bonbon before. Then—without the slightest warning—the remaining fwagment in my hand jerked away.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The amazing cwackah flew all round the room. The shweeks of laughter soon told me what it was.

"Who put a wotten cwackah in my cwackah?" I woared.

"Is that a riddle?" yelled my minah. "If so, the answer's a 'cwackah!'"

"Ralph Cardew and George Figgins pulled their bonbons best," announced Miss Dows. "They will receive their prizes later."

Later I asked all the guests if they knew who placed that beastly jumpah in my cwackah. Everybody denied any knowledge of the affair, with the exception of Walph Weckness Cardew, who merely winked at the ceiling in reply to my question, and walked away.

"The whole thing was awwanged!" I told my minah, when he met me crossing the hall. "It was nothing but personal favouritism!"

"Nevah mind, old sheen's phiz!" said Wally soothly. "Winnie Bubbles is vacant; she's the GEM LIBRARY.—No. 724.

quite old enough to look after you for the rest of the evening, if you want her to."

"I've got a scheme for wevenge!" I wepided darkly. "Wevenge is sweet, and shall be mine!" (Yes, but as you've taken up quite enough room already, I think George Figgins had better describe your little scheme of vengeance—Tom Merry.)

Postman's Knock.

By GEORGE FIGGINS.

Everything was positively glorious. Outside it was pitch black, the whirling snowflakes came down at a fearful rate, and it was freezing like the dickens.

But within the baronial hall at Eastwood House high jinks and revelry were taking place. A roaring Yule log fire blazed merrily in the great open hearth, and before it sat the fags roasting chestnuts.

The hall I am speaking about is not, by the way, the entrance-hall. It is a place in the centre of the building large enough to drive a carriage and pair round. Lord and Lady Eastwood and all their grown-up guests were away in the drawing-room, but we had no desire to be there. In a drawing-room, drawing-room manners are required—and the twenty boys and four girls drew a line at that on Christmas Day Eve!

A superb electrolator cast down a splendid light over the whole hall. On either side was a large grand piano, one being played by Levison's sister, and the other by Monty Lowther. Doris gave us rag-time, and Monty thumped out some fast, exciting, cinematic stuff. In one part of the hall Cardew was giving a splendid illustration of "El Chucho," the new tango, and the latest fox-trot, with a dozen other capable dancers. Cousin Ethel and the two girls from Clystlands were among those being whirled off their feet. I don't mind admitting I felt a bit green standing there and looking on. But, as my feet and legs always seemed to get in the way whenever I tried to learn to dance, I gave it up.

In the centre of the hall an extraordinary variation of "Blind Man's Buff" was all the rage. At the other end Gussy was trying to persuade all near him to vote for a good game of "Postman's Knock."

Evidently Gussy wanted revenge for that little affair over the bonbons. It was a cute notion of old Cardew's, and I must say the reward we had from Doris and Ethel was—well, guess the rest. And if Gussy did get his way, it seemed there was some more in store.

The dancing ceased soon after this, and when the crowd gathered round the blazing log-fire, D'Arcy minor astonished everybody by suddenly adopting the manner of a waiter. He folded a rather grubby handkerchief over one arm, and came round to each of us with a plate of cluders in his hand. We were somewhat enlightened when he informed us that they were roasted chestnuts. Everybody took one chestnut, and what was left over the fags quickly demolished. Eventually we managed to relieve ourselves of the charred trep-fruit by slipping them down each other's necks—the girls excepted, of course.

Then Gussy proposed "Postman's Knock" again. He was seconded by a mighty roar from the fags, who, as a matter of fact, had not even the slightest chance of sharing such a grown-up pastime. When Tom Merry asked him why he suggested it, Gussy replied:

"Because it is X-X-Xmas-time deah, boy!"

The next half-hour was about the best I've ever spent in my life. I met cousin Ethel three times in the little ante-room which branches off the hall. The third time I said to her:

"I think it's been a lovely Christmas, Ethel!"

"We've certainly had a perfect day!" she agreed, smiling.

"Well," I said, "do you know I haven't seen anything to-day that isn't perfect!"—and with that looked her straight in the face.

Then Ethel blushed.

It was the best Christmas I ever spent.

GEORGE FIGGINS.

(Articles by Fatty Wynn on the "Christmas D'Arcy," and Kit Wildake on "Skating" will appear in next week's wonderful number of the GEM.)

Jones on the Job.

Into the Lion's Den.

By EDGAR ALFRED JONES.

(I have allotted the task of interviewing the occupants of the Sixth Form studies to Edgar Alfred Jones, an inconspicuous Fourth-Former from Study No. 8.—TOM MERRY.)

Aha! This job wants a lot of careful thinking over. In the first place, I shall choose tea-time as the most opportune moment for striking lucky. In the second place, I shall load my bags with some stout exercise-books, because Sixth-Formers often cut up rusty instead of welcoming you with open arms. You see, I've got a brother in the Sixth Form, and I've had some!

I often go to tea with the brother, and find Knox or Kildare or some Sixth Form fogey present, and I'm quite familiar with the old beans. Knox and Monteith usually scowl, but Kildare condescends to give me a superior nod. I have before now made jokes with some of them.

Five o'clock the following day saw me shuffling down the corridor sacred to all but the awe-inspiring magpies who call themselves the Sixth.

Study No. 1.—Occupant, Horace Jones, major to this infant.

Horace is at home, leaning against the mantelpiece in deep thought. Old Jonesey looks round to see who it is.

"Oh!" says he. "It's you, is it, kid? Well, you're just the one I wanted to see!"

"Good, man!" I exclaimed. "What are you wanting?"

"You've just come in time to lay the tea for me," replied brother Horace, "and the quicker you can manage it, the better!"

Visions of a glorious repast floated before my eyes. My pater is a farmer in Devonshire, and he fairly lathers old Horace with pocket-money; while, on the other hand, I am always kept fearfully short of that very desirable article, I slung the tea-things out to the table in less than two minutes. Then I sat down in the best armchair and waited. My brother removed himself from the mantelshelf, and stared at me.

"When you've finished resting I'd be obliged to see you go!" he said.

"What about tea?" I demanded, with a kind of hopeless feeling. "I thought you had invited me to a grand spread."

"Well, there's something wrong with the works of your thinker, then!" he snapped. "Now, hook it, and sharp!"

In a dazed frame of mind, I made my way to the next study.

Study No. 2.—Occupant, Herbert Oswald Langton.

I marched in. Langton, the mighty man of cricket, was seated at the table, and in a chair opposite was Mr. Kailton, my Housemaster. Neither saw me, so I quietly returned the way I had entered. Seeing my Housemaster reminded me that I owed him two hundred lines, and, as I hadn't yet started on them, I was not desirous of interviewing Herbert Oswald Langton. He would have to wait until the Housemaster was off the scene before I came near his apartment again.

Study No. 3.—Occupant, Gerald Knox, prefect, bully, and a horrid beast!

I entered this study on tiptoe. Knox was at home. He had his back to me. Good! I saw a way of getting a few knocks at Knox. Just inside the door on the dresser was a large bottle of ink. I gathered this up, and removed the cork. Then silently I crept forward, and, with a quick, deft movement, jammed the bottle between Knox's neck and collar. Then, as he straightened himself up, I raised my boot, and gave him a real good lunge against the tail of his long coat.

The next second I dived across the study, slammed the door, and turned the key. A thud like that of an elephant's foot against the panels inside. By the time Knox succeeded in getting the ink-bottle out, the entire contents were safely down the back of his neck. He started to hellow like a roaring bull immediately he found his door was locked, and I decided the best plan would be to vanish. I shall, in all probability, continue my tour of the Sixth Form studies next week. Look out for it!

E. A. JONES.

(You look like finishing up with a thick car!—T. M.)



(Continued from last week.)

BRUTELL was quite near now, and he could hear the familiar voice quite distinctly. He knew that he was on the right track. What was the danger which threatened the girl, and would he be in time to save her? Dr. Brutell hastened along as these thoughts passed through his brain.

It was clear to the doctor that the sounds came from somewhere below him, and he looked about him with the object of finding the easiest means of descending the high ledge of rock upon which he was standing. As he had supposed, the secret lair of the Black Circle gang was in a hidden cave.

Brutell commenced his descent, and he called to Madeleine to shout out again so that her voice would guide him, and this she promptly did.

The fact that her father's friend, Dr. Brutell, was coming to her aid gave the girl renewed strength. She at once recognised his voice, and although Madeleine was exhausted and near collapse she determined to hold up for a few minutes longer.

Fortunately, the entrance to the cave was not a great way down the mountain-side, and the descent was certainly not difficult to an accomplished climber like Dr. Brutell.

One of his hobbies was mountain-climbing, and he had spent many enjoyable holidays scaling the snow-crested heights of Switzerland.

There were just a few more feet to go, and then he would be right at the entrance of the cave, and ready to render whatever assistance was in his power. But at that moment a terrible thing happened!

Reason for a moment left the distracted girl who had for so long used all her strength in a desperate effort to hold the roof support.

She made one frantic effort to tear her weary limbs away from the cruel post to which her captors had tied her, and the result was that the top of the cave, with its tons of earth and rock, started to topple down and surround the helpless girl.

When, a few minutes later, the head of Dr. Brutell appeared at the entrance of the cave, he was amazed to see Madeleine almost engulfed by the roof of the cave.

All but her head and a small portion of her body were covered and hidden from view. Good fortune, however, was on her side, and Dr. Brutell, who could see that the girl was still alive, hastily set to work to remove the debris around her.

The roof had fallen in such a way that one large piece of rock had formed a sort of archway over her body, and this supported a tremendous weight.

By almost superhuman effort, the faithful Dr. Brutell succeeded in getting Madeleine clear, and it was seen that she was really very little the worse for her nerve-racking experience. The two were just about to leave the cave, when several more lumps of rock fell from above.

Dr. Brutell was quick to size up the situation, and he managed to push his companion clear; but, alas! it was too late for him to gain safety, and a large piece of rock struck him with considerable force upon the head. Dr. Brutell fell like a log to the ground, and when Madeleine rushed to his side he was quite unconscious.

Fearing that her friend and rescuer had been killed, she shrieked out loudly for

The Queer Case of Dr. Brutell

Written by Professor Hector Gordon, Science Master of St. Jim's.

help. But no answer came to her cry of distress.

Rescued!

DR. BRUTELL had been away for a considerable time, and the ranch foreman and his party were somewhat anxious concerning his safety.

When it was decided to set out in search of Mr. Stanton's daughter, Brutell, like the rest of them, had agreed to meet at a certain time. He was now long overdue, and Jack Regan came to the conclusion that he had either succeeded in finding the missing Madeleine, or else some mishap had happened to him.

In any case, it was decided to send out a search-party. No one wanted anything to happen to their gallant friend. The whole countryside was searched, and the party were reluctantly considering whether to give up the hunt or not, when their attention was aroused by faint shouts in the distance.

The cowboys rode in that direction, and then Jack Regan was lowered to the entrance of the cave by means of a lasso. He quickly summed up the position, and ordered two or three of the others to follow him.

Everyone at once set to work to remove the doctor from the debris of earth and rocks which now covered him. Brutell was still unconscious, but his rescuers were delighted to see that he had received no other injury, and that there was every sign that he would soon regain his senses.

Madeleine did all she could to assist in reviving him, and presently he was well enough to be taken to the top of the cliff.

When all had regained the surface, the party set off towards the Stanton ranch-house.

It was indeed a welcome sight to them, for everyone was thoroughly tired out after the exciting, but fruitless, chase of the Black Circle gang. They had not been home very long before the sound of horses' hoofs were heard outside.

Instantly everyone paused and listened, and the men felt for their revolvers, for they had no idea who the visitors were, and they did not intend to be caught napping again. They had not yet forgotten how the Black Circle gang had taken them by surprise, and completely overpowered them.

Jack Regan went to the door, and cautiously peered out. He soon learnt that there was no need for alarm, for he recognised the friendly voice that greeted him. It was the sheriff and his men.

They had continued their search, hoping that they might be able to find a few stray members of the Black Circle, and now they had some most important news to relate.

The sheriff quickly explained how they had trapped and surrounded the bandits in the mountain, although, unfortunately, they had not succeeded in capturing them, owing to the fact that it was not possible to penetrate their hiding-places.

Jack Regan and his men were amazed when they heard this news, for they fully imagined that Pinchers and the rest of the outlaws had been killed when the motor-car toppled over Wild Cat Canyon. They soon realised how they had been fooled by the cunning outlaws.

Dr. Brutell did not hear this news. He had retired to rest, as he felt the effects of his injury. The shock, indeed, had made him suffer very severely, and, although he tried hard to fight against it, he felt that another attack of the strange malady of which he was a victim was creeping upon him.

Presently he fell off to sleep, and then a most remarkable thing happened. The shock of his narrow escape in the cave made him succumb once more to the overwhelming spell of evil. But this time it took on a new turn altogether. The bad side of Dr. Brutell, in the form of a spirit, disembodied itself, and took on the form of the notorious mountain outlaw "Scarface" Bender.

But, strangely enough, Dr. Brutell's unconscious body remained upon the bed in his room at Madeleine's house. The evil spirit of the doctor was in full possession of all the powers of the scientist while he was in his normal moods.

The first thing which Dr. Brutell's evil form did was to secure a fast horse, and ride away into the mountains. Then, by means of his double X-ray, he sent out a call to the members of the Black Circle, who were hidden away in the mountain fastness.

The outlaws obeyed the call of their chieftain as speedily as possible, and they all met together on Bald Mountain, where they held an important discussion.

The Next Morning.

DOWN in the valley the sheriff and his men paused for breakfast. They had lost no time in again setting out on the trail of the bandits, and every man of the party was as keen as mustard on the job.

The Black Circle gang had eluded them so far, but they were determined to get them in the end. They were resolved upon that. Not one of the merry and gallant little band, however, was aware that a powerful ally had joined the gang in the person of the notorious outlaw, Scarface Bender.

The outlaw was even now stealthily making his way from the mountain to the village which sheltered the sheriff's party.

While they were busy at their meal, laughing and chatting light-heartedly, he succeeded in capturing and making away with their entire outfit of horses. The bandit was certainly a remarkable horseman. Even his worst enemies would give him credit for that.

As he rode away, shouting his defiance at the sheriff, he gave an exhibition of riding which astonished even those well-seasoned cowboys. Behind him trailed the string of stolen animals.

But the evil Brutell had not only succeeded in getting away with their mounts, he had also overheard all their plans, and this was highly important to him.

While the high-spirited boys were laughing over their meal, and, later on, arranging the details of their scheme, he had crept quite close, and heard all that they had to say. Armed with this information, the evil doctor, in the form of Scarface Bender, would be able to warn the other members of the gang, and thus outwit the sheriff.

He had also another scheme in view, and that was, if possible, to turn the tables on the sheriff and his men, and entrap them. Needless to say, the sheriff did not leave it long before starting in pursuit of Scarface Bender.

They obtained a fresh supply of horses, and went flying through the village streets after the vanishing desperado. The men fired a perfect volley after him, but without obtaining the desired result, for he was now too far away. Soon the bandit disappeared from view altogether, and the sheriff lost his trail.

Some little way ahead of them there was a horseman jogging along, and the sheriff rode over in his direction. Then, when he was near enough, he shouted across to him.

"Say, stranger, did you see a cowboy, wearing a white hat, and with a scar on his face, pass this way, leading a bunch of horses?"

The stranger's answer came quickly.

"Yep—passed him ridin' like mad up the trail to the mountains!"

This was quite sufficient for the sheriff; he gave an instruction to his men, and they set off at once in the direction indicated. But although they rode hard for over half an hour, they did not catch a glimpse of the bandit.

(To be continued.)

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"Lord Eastwood's Christmas Party."

(Continued from page 11.)

Wildrake's grasp closed on the dazed rascal's wrist. He placed the other hand over the top of the wineglass to prevent the contents from being spilled, and wrenched it away.

Bloore gave a husky cry. He seemed to make an effort to pull himself together.

"What—what does this mean?" he stammered. "You—you dare accuse me—"

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"I accuse you, Dandy Jim!" said Wildrake, savagely and sternly.

Bloore staggered back.

"What—what did you call me?"

"Dandy Jim—the poisoner at Fraser—"

"It is false! I—I—"

Lord Eastwood staggered to his feet.

"In Heaven's name, what does this mean?" he exclaimed. Wildrake held up the wineglass. Bloore made a movement towards it, but Kerr intervened.

"No, you don't!" said the Scottish junior grimly. "Hands off, you scoundrel!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"This medicine is doctored, sir," said Kit Wildrake. "We suspected that scoundrel—I'll tell you the reasons later—and we watched him through the spy-hole in the panel. We saw him take a phial from his pocket, and add something to the medicine—"

"Good heavens!"

"When a specialist analyses this wineglass of stuff, he will have the evidence to send that villain to gaol," said Wildrake—"and the phial is still in his pocket. Stop him!"

Bloore's hand had flown to his waistcoat-pocket. Kerr grasped him at once, and dragged his hand away. Arthur Augustus rushed to his aid. There was a crash as they brought the man to the floor. Wildrake hastily placed the wineglass on the mantelpiece, and ran to the aid of his comrades. Bloore was struggling savagely now.

But the three juniors were too much for him. He was down on his back, with D'Arcy grasping his wrists, and Kerr's knees on his chest.

Lord Eastwood looked on, dazed, helpless, thunderstruck. "Fasten the brute's hands!" gasped Kerr. "He's got a revolver in his pocket—I can feel it—"

Bloore struggled furiously. But his wrists were dragged together, and Wildrake knotted a handkerchief round them.

"It is impossible!" gasped Lord Eastwood at last. "I—I trusted him—he came to me with excellent recommendations—"

"He came with lies and trickery!" said Wildrake. "He is not Gilbert Bloore at all, but a scoundrel who has always lived by his wits. I can't prove that at once, but inquiry will bring it out, sir. But I can prove that he tried to poison you—as he has been doing for weeks—a small dose at a time, to keep off suspicion."

"It is false!" screamed Bloore. "Lord Eastwood, I have served you faithfully—you cannot believe—"

"I cannot!" exclaimed the earl.

"Put it to the test, then!" said Wildrake grimly. "Hold him, you fellows, and force open his jaws!"

(Continued on page 21.)

EDITORIAL.

My Dear Chums,—

My Chat this week has but one aim—namely, to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Naturally I want to draw attention to the present number of the "Gem," but, as a matter of fact, it can well afford to speak for itself. Mr. Martin Clifford has excelled himself this time, and that is saying plenty, for the famous author has turned out a great many Christmas stories. These were hard to write during the dark years, though it was even then the bounden duty of everybody to keep smiling. It is still more a duty now.

Don't let's have any truck with the gloomy-minded folks who cry down Christmas. Luckily they are a dwindling band of merchants of melancholy. Christmas was given to the world so as to bring joy and thankfulness to the loneliest heart that ever beat. But for the present occasion it will be enough to speak of Christmas as the grand time of peace and good will, the time when it is more than ever a privilege to think of the other fellow, and it will not stop at thinking. This Christmas is bringing us all a lot more than we can see at present—better days, a deeper understanding of fellowship. That is what the world needs.

But now, come to think of it, fellow—THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 724.

ship is just what the "Gem" has always stood for—loyalty between comrades. If you get that cheery understanding on the playground, and in the class-room, you get it for keeps. The story this time is a winner, and the bright little supplement is keeping its end up in fine style.

I was the fortunate recipient of a letter from Melbourne, and the writer asks for a new boy named Roy Graham. Will Mr. Martin Clifford arrange this? This newcomer has got to have dark-brown eyes, dark curly hair, and he is to be a pal of Cardew. I see no objection, but it is to be hoped, if he comes along, the handsome stranger will be able to play cricket and football, and face the slogging hours of prep without a shudder down his spine.

For the moment, however, I cannot get away from the thought of Christmas, and the New Year, and the future of the "Gem." It is not odd the three should be linked together, for the "Gem" stands for fair play and all that sort of thing, and there is a lesson we all try to learn again about this season of the year which has much to do with fair play. It is what everybody is thinking about—Herries, when he ties a coloured ribbon round Tower's neck in honour of the occasion, Gussy, as he hands out generous tips to all who want them, and forgets to spend anything extra on dress, and Cardew, the silent, sarcastic fellow who never has to blush at finding his good actions famous, for he takes good care nobody knows.

In the New Year the "Gem" will, as

per usual, be at the top of the tree. My programme for 1922 is really tremendous, and will ensure the old paper making further strides down the big route of world-wide fame. Make up your mind not to miss a single copy.

And that is all this week, except to echo the sentiments referred to just now—heaps of happiness to everybody this Christmas, and a bumper New Year!

YOUR EDITOR.



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"LORD EASTWOOD'S CHRISTMAS PARTY."

(Continued from page 20.)

Wildrake felt in the rascal's pocket, and took out the phial. He removed the stopper; and Arthur Augustus and Kerr, with a wrench, forced the bound rascal's jaws open.

A fearful scream came from the wretch, as Wildrake made as if to pour the contents of the phial down his throat. His face was convulsed with awful fear.

"Stop! Merrey!" he shrieked. "Stop—stop! It is murder——"

Wildrake drew back his hand, with a grim smile.

"Does that convince you, Lord Eastwood?"

"It does!" said Lord Eastwood. He fixed a terrible look upon the trembling, quivering wretch. "You villain! I have trusted you, and you have sought my life—sought it, I presume, for the provision I made for you in my will, believing you to be true and loyal! Wretch! You are too vile for an honest man's hands to touch!"

"I—I——"

"Silence! Arthur, go to the telephone, and ring up the police-station at Easthorpe immediately. Ask them to send a constable here to take in charge a man accused of attempted murder. This phial, and the wineglass, shall be handed to the police. Bloore—if Bloore is your name—you need say no more. What you have to say may be said to the police when you are in custody!"

Arthur Augustus crossed to the telephone. Bloore sank back against the wall, with a groan of despair. The game was up now—and the prison gates yawned for the ingrate and the poisoner.

CHAPTER 11.

A Merry Christmas!

TOM MERRY & CO. returned late that night, in a merry crowd—and that night they knew nothing of what had happened. But on Christmas morning they knew all.

From D'Arcy and Wildrake and Kerr, they learned that Gilbert Bloore had passed the night in a cell at the police-station, charged with attempted murder—and that the proofs were in the hands of the police.

It was startling news for the St. Jim's party. Cardew showed no sign of surprise. He smiled and nodded to Levison and Clive.

"I think I remember mentionin' that the man was a rank outsider," he remarked. "Cad all through, what! What price little me as a reader of character?"

"How is Lord Eastwood now, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Betrah, deah boy!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "That feahful villain was sappin' away his stwength with small, con-

tinued doses of that awful stuff—the feightful wottah! Missin' one dose has done the patah a lot of good. You should have seen Dr. Millard's face when he was told! Worth a guinea in box, hai Jove! The patah's picked up wonderfully—and the matah is no end bucked. As for Ethel, I weally think it was only a stwick wegard for pwpriety that pwevented her kissin' Wildwake and Kerr——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins rushed away in search of cousin Ethel. The girl was on the terrace, and she met him with a bright face.

"Didn't I tell you it would be all right if it was left to Kerr?" said Figgins, beaming.

"You did!" said Ethel softly. "Oh, I am so glad—so glad! I have seen my uncle this morning. He has had a very severe shock, but he looks better—much better. His life was being sapped away——" She shivered. "Oh, I am so glad that Kerr and Wildrake——"

"Kerr chiefly," said the loyal Figgy. "But Wildrake was jolly smart. And Gussy played up like a little man, it seems. I say, it's going to be a merry Christmas, after all!"

Figgins was right.

Gilbert Bloore spent his Christmas behind stone walls and iron bars. It was afterwards—when the police had had time to work on the case—that the facts came out with regard to the dastardly adventurer. His real name was not known; but proof was forthcoming that he was the man who had been known as Dandy Jim in Western Canada—and by a dozen other names in different cities. It was found, too, that he had robbed the real Gilbert Bloore of his papers in France, when Sir Thomas Mappleton's secretary was returning after leaving his master at San Remo, and starting for America to take up a new post there. The real Bloore was in New York, little dreaming of the use to which his name was being put; but he came forward when the police inquiries were made. The analysis of the phial and the wineglass provided ample evidence of Dandy Jim's murderous attempt, and at his trial he was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude—with another arrest and a trial in Canada, on half a dozen charges, waiting for him when he came out.

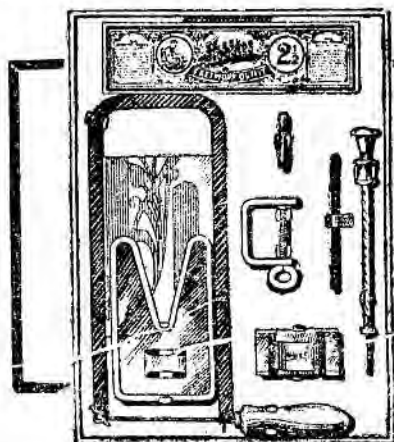
But all that came afterwards. For the present, the St. Jim's party only knew that the rascal was safe in prison, and they gave him no further thought.

Lord Eastwood recovered slowly, but surely, and on Christmas evening he was able to sit among the merry party, evidently on the mend. So it was, after all, as Figgy had predicted, a merry Christmas. The shadow of tragedy had passed, and all was frolic and merriment. Arthur Augustus had no more serious trouble than his observation of the fact that Figgins seemed to think that Ethel was his cousin, not D'Arcy's at all. But that was not a very serious trouble.

In fact, Arthur Augustus' noble countenance was one of the very brightest among the numerous merry faces that thronged Eastwood House during Gussy's Christmas Party.

THE END.

(There will be another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "TOM MERRY'S GLEE PARTY." By Martin Clifford. Be sure you order your copy EARLY.)



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Hobby Tarrant and Tony Matthews, with Billy Kettle, a trusted negro servant, are on an expedition in the Andes. A volcanic eruption, causing a tremendous tidal wave, carries their canoe into the Valley of Surprise. The party explore the valley, and meet many weird and wonderful animals, and experience many adventurous times. Reaching a village, they are confronted by a race of strange, primitive men, who show great hospitality, and make friends. But Maxla, the medicine-man, hates the newcomers, and through a dastardly scheme which he hatches, they very nearly lose their lives. For this dirty action the Ariki loses faith in him. He then succeeds in making friends with the Mangas, and with the assistance of these semi-human brutes, captures Tony and imprisons him in the hollow of a large tree.

It had a rough floor. The aperture through which they had entered lighted it. Overhead the hollow narrowed to a mere chimney, down which filtered the light of day.

In a corner was a heap of fruit and several cooking-pots, together with the horned head-dress and scaly tail in which Tony had first seen the villainous owner of the den. Dead snakes hung from a line stretched across the chamber, and part of a lizard, which Tony knew to be venomous, protruded from a cooking-pot. By this, and various other signs, he guessed that they were in the medicine-man's laboratory—the place where he prepared the poisons which had given him his power.

Maxla remained in the entrance, his head outside, listening with all his ears. One of the Mangas put his hand over Tony's mouth. The other tickled his throat significantly. As plain as gesture could make it, the movement meant that if he tried to cry out he would be strangled.

But the Ariki were moving silently now. Not for a while was Maxla sure that they had passed the place where he had left the track. When he was certain he grinned unpleasantly, and, lifting a flint-headed spear from the floor, made a playful pass that stopped short of splitting the prisoner by a bare half-inch.

When the Mangas would have carried the game a step further by biting Tony's fingers, he interfered, however. Something which he snapped at them quelled the two half-humans. They pushed Tony into a corner, and squatted obediently while he talked with them.

Apparently, what he had to say tried their simple minds. They behaved like a pair of overgrown and exceedingly stupid louts. They stared at Maxla open-mouthed, nudged each other, giggled idiotically, and even yawned. But Maxla persevered. He said the same thing over and over again, and, to make things plainer, went through a sort of dumb-show interpretation for the benefit of his pupils.

First he stood straight up, with his hands behind him, rigid, as though he were tied to a pole. Then he dropped on all fours, and crawled about, snapping his teeth. The Mangas stared, puzzled at first, while he patiently repeated the same sentence. When at last his meaning was made clear to their limited understanding, they were delighted.

They hugged each other, and rocked with silent laughter, dealing each other playful blows that would have felled a buck-navy. One of them dropped on the floor and crawled round as Maxla had done, while the other fed from him.

"He's pretending to be an alligator," thought Tony. "Are they going to try to catch one of the brutes? And, if they are, am I to be the bait?"

It was a daunting thought. He tried to put it away from him, but it would return. He could see that the Mangas, left to themselves, would most likely have killed him at once. But Maxla was higher up in the scale of civilisation. He wished to have the pleasure of tormenting the prisoner, to hear him scream for mercy, to see him die slowly!

It was for this, then, that Tony was spared. Better would it have been for him if these brutal, semi-human Mangas had broken his neck at the outset. He would have been saved from the torments Maxla designed for him.

The day wore on. Maxla and the Mangas ate some of the fruit. They offered none to their prisoner, but they did not stop him when he helped himself. After the meal the Mangas lay down to snooze, but one of them occupied the most of the doorway, and whenever Tony moved opened his eyes. Maxla snored.

"If the brute would only sleep," thought Tony, "I could jump over him, grab one of those bananas, and swing off. Perhaps I could get clear. Anyhow, anything would be better than sitting here, waiting to be killed!"

The light began to decline. Maxla still snored. Surely his snoring was echoed by the brute in the door? Tony moved towards him, inch by inch, braced himself for the leap, and sprang.

"Har-ar-ar!"

It was neither a growl nor a chuckle, but something compounded of each, that burst from the wide mouth of the Munga in the door as Tony moved. His great hands went up, catching the lad about the body as he shot forth, dragging him down and back, to be thrown into a corner, where he landed amongst the cooking-pots with a crash that awoke the medicine-man.

Maxla understood what had occurred in a twinkling. He silenced the chuckling half-man with a sharp command, and favoured Tony with a grin so mocking and malignant that he had hard work to restrain himself from leaping at the renegade's throat.

A crimson flush spread across the tiny patch of sky visible through the door, then darkened. It was night. Tony felt that he had seen his last sunset!

Maxla turned from the door, out of which he had been peering, and spoke sharply. Tony was hoisted to his legs and dragged out. Up they all climbed, till they had come to a narrow path among the branches. This they traversed, treading softly, stooping low to avoid touching boughs that overhung the perilous way.

Before them Tony could see the great wall of the cliff towering up to dizzy heights, the upper part still illuminated by a faint light, though the floor of the valley was now plunged in darkness. The lake was somewhere near at hand, for he felt the fresh coolness of its water on the faint breeze that fanned his cheek, and heard the splash as some water-beast or fish broke the surface.

The Mangas were grunting softly; Maxla was speaking sternly and commandingly under his breath. Evidently he was persuading them to something which they

objected to doing. As before, mind proved superior to mere brute stupidity. Very reluctantly they began to descend. As they touched earth, each clutched his only weapon, one of the sole-shaped flints, and hurried Tony forward towards the cliff.

He would have been content to take the risks of the darkness and the chance of finding refuge aloft before some prowler caught him, if he had but been allowed the chance. He was given none. The Mangas never relaxed their hold as they trotted noiselessly across the open, skirted the edge of a reed-bed, swung sharply along the bank of a creek, and so came to the foot of the cliff.

Even in the dark Tony recognised the spot. It was the place where the Mangas got water, and some way from where the forest touched the cliff. Away aloft was a hum of gruff voices, jabbering together, but nowhere could he hear the intonation of human speech.

He could guess what had happened. Billy, with Hobby and Lolo, and all the fighting-men, had pursued pell-mell. They had run on past the spot where Maxla had left the trail. Perhaps they had reached the cliffs, only to find no trace of the prisoner.

Very likely Maxla had had a false trail laid. Perhaps the Mangas had simply remained in some secret hiding-place, and watched their enemies' futile efforts to find them. When the Ariki had given up in despair, the half-humans had come out of their holes, and were now gathered on the ledges, awaiting the return of their new leader.

Tony was hurried up an almost perpendicular track, dragged along a narrow ledge, and at last thrust into a narrow-mouthed, ill-smelling cave. Maxla made a light, and himself tied the prisoner's hands and feet securely. Then, with a snarling grin that boded very ill, he extinguished the torch, and went out, leaving a burly brute with a heavy club on guard at the door.

Tony lay still, perforce, and slowly the most terrible night of his life passed. The Mangas on the ledge outside kept up a continual, harsh jabbering, and several times one or more entered and felt his bonds to make certain that they were fast.

At last, just as the sky was beginning to lighten, Maxla returned. He brought a long, strong rope. Swiftly this was made fast to Tony's body, about the waist and under the armpits, and he was hauled out into the chill dawn—to die!

(To be continued next week.)

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"MY READERS' OWN CORNER."

Half-a-crown is paid for all contributions printed on this page.

WHY NESTS DISAPPEAR.

When birds desert their nests moths lay their eggs in them, and the grubs, when hatched, feed on the hair, wool, etc., with which the nest was bound together. By the destruction of the strengthening ties of the nest the whole structure becomes the sport of wind and weather, and gradually vanishes.—Peter J. Nicholls, 3, Hill Street, Old Hednesford, Staffs.

TOO SMART.

A soldier on parade had miscalculated buttons. "You have not cleaned your buttons!" said the officer sharply. "No," said the soldier. "No, what?" asked the officer. "No 'Soldiers' Friend'!" answered the other, trying to be funny.—John Batchelor, 15, Norfolk Terrace, Brighton, Sussex.

QUITE LIKELY.

At a public school the other day a pupil turned his head slightly towards the next boy. "Our Form-master is a regular ass!" he whispered. The master, who had just put a question to the class, thought that the junior was framing a reply. "Come, my lad," he said encouragingly, "speak up. Perhaps you are right."—Miss J. Taylor, 29, Third Street, Gateshead.

BREAKING IT GENTLY.

Mike: "'Tis sad news I bring for ye, Mrs. McCann. Your husband's new watch is smashed entirely." Mrs. McCann: "How did it happen, Mike?" "A ten-ton rock fell on him."—Ralph Mills, 24, Pyrenees Terrace, Brixham, Devon.

DISGRACEFUL.

Captain (to man at the wheel): "Another pint a-port, quartermaster." Lady passenger: "Good gracious! That's the second pint of port the captain's called for within a few minutes! How these captains do drink!"—E. A. Leach, 27, Piquet Road, Anerley, S.E.20.

HE MISSED THE POINT.

"So these watches," asked an old gentleman of a watchmaker, "cost half a guinea?" "Yes, sir." "And how much does it cost you to make them?" "Half a guinea," was the reply. "But, then, where does your profit come in?" "Repairing them, sir," replied the watchmaker blandly. The customer bought one!—J. Raffo, 260, City Road, Hulme, Manchester.

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THE BATTLE OF WAYLAND MOOR. St. Jim's v. Rylcombe Grammar School.

ST. JIM'S (reading from left to right.) Front line of fire:—G. A. GRUNDY, TOM MERRY, A. A. D'ARCY, ERNEST LEVISON, HARRY NOBLE. Second line of fire:—DICK JULIAN (by ammunition), JACK BLAKE, MONTY LOWTHER, FIGGINS, R. R. CARDEW (by ammunition). Others in this group:—HARRY MANNERS, GEORGE HERRIES, G. F. KERR, REGINALD TALBOT, and DICK ROYLANCE.

GRAMMARIANS. Leader, GORDON GAY (boy on left, bending down), FRANK MONK (fellow being smitten by snowball on left), WOOTTON MINOR (second boy from right), CARBOY (extreme right figure), JOHNNY GOGGS (fellow in the rear), MONT BLANC.