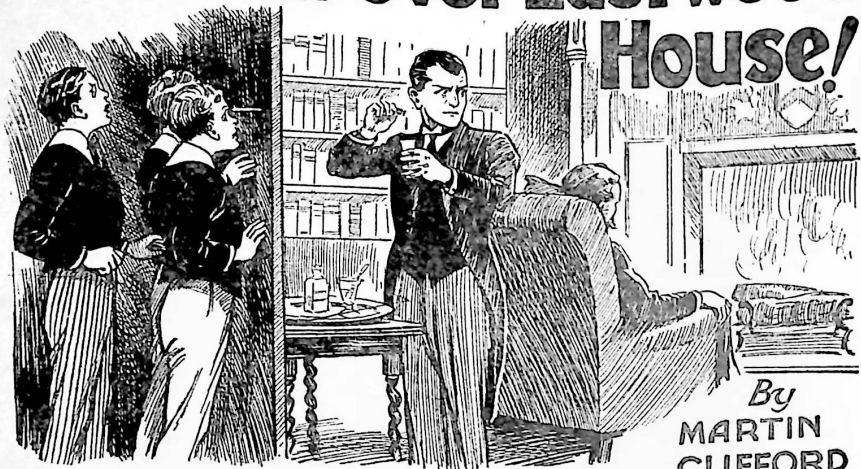


The Shadow Over Eastwood House!



By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD**

THE FIRST CHAPTER

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, Kanga-woo, and Talbot—that's all wight. Woylance and

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's Christmas house-party would have been a very cheery one but for the anxiety caused by his father's illness.

As it turns out, D'Arcy's schoolboy friends are able to defeat a dastardly plot, thereby lifting the shadow that hangs over Eastwood House.

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's 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. "Put me down for a penny!"

"Weally, Manners——"

"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 three-halfpence. 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 uttah ass——"

"Here's mine!" said Manners, and a pennylanded 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 shelling 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 going to ask Mannahs minor, and pewwaps Fwank would like to——"

"I'm sure he would!"

"And what about your sistah Dowis, Levison? As she is a fwiend 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 two-pence for yours truly! He, he, he!"

Arthur Augustus did not deign to reply to that remark. He went downstairs and walked out into the quad. Blake and Herries and Digby were loafing 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 punting 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 contwibutahs 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 partay of fwiends to Eastwood House for Chwistmas!" explained Arthur Augustus. "I am mak-



Figgins passed the ball to Wynn, who passed it to Arthur Augustus—landing it on his chest!

in' up the list of fellows for the partay!"

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!"

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

"Vewy pwob, deah boy! But I wathah think that your undesiwable 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 with——"

"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!

THE SECOND CHAPTER

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 fags 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, Roy-

lance, Wildrake, Levison, Cardew, and Clive.

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 us 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 mannaahs!"

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

"Look here——" began Reggie.

"Weally, Wally, you are quite awaah that I was not alludin' to Mannah's 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 frumptious 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 bwing 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 fist. But it was one of the pater's envelopes."

"Then it is fwom the patah," 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 our 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 door-

way. There was a frown on his noble brow.

"Wally, you young wattah, 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 diswepctful and uttably 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.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

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 lettah 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 celebration of Chwistmas 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 is Bloore?" asked Jack Blake.

"The patah's secwetawy," explained Arthur Augustus. "His pwevious secwetawy had a nervous bweakdown, 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 unpleasant," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "I wathah



"You see, I am makin' up a list of fellows for my Chwistmas party!" explained Arthur Augustus. Baggy Trimble jumped. "Oh!" he gasped. "I—I didn't know—I never thought— Put down my name, old chap!"

thought he was wantin' in pwopah civility in some wespects; 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 cheekay 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 through 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 expvessions——"

"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 twust all my fwiends will come with me, as awwanged," he said. "I wegard it as bein' up to them to wally wound me and show this cheekay 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, Figgay."

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

"Yes, wathah!"

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 was left behind.

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!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

HIS LORDSHIP'S SECRETARY!

"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 weak 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 crocked, 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 boy," 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 awaah 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.



Wally sat on Wildrake's knee, which gave way under him the next moment! There was a roar of laughter in the study. "Call that a joke?" yelled Wally.

He was a rather tall, slim man of about thirty-five years, 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 time 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 you young gentlemen will excuse me," he said softly; "but it's 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 suah 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 tactless chap, but vewy good at heart, I think," said Arthur Augustus. "He seems vewy gwateful 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, deah boy. That would be wathah howwid."

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

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

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 Clive, 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 Clive. "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 slit 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 jazz 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?"

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

"You seem rather to like Bloore, 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 three months."

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

"The patah's secwetawy was ill, you know, and he wanted a tempow-away man. Bloore had vewy good wecommendations from Sir Thomas Mapleton, a vewy old fwiend 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 wecommendation was all that could be desiahed. I wemembah seein' it at the time."

"A letter of recommendation——"

"Yaas. Bloore was Sir Thomas' secwetawy 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 Bloore?"

"Oh, no!"

"He had no communication except by letter?"

"Yaas. But he w'ote specially to Sir Thomas on the subject, and old Mapleton answahed wecommendin' 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 dear 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 Roy-lance?" 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 billiards-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 Bloore?" he asked.

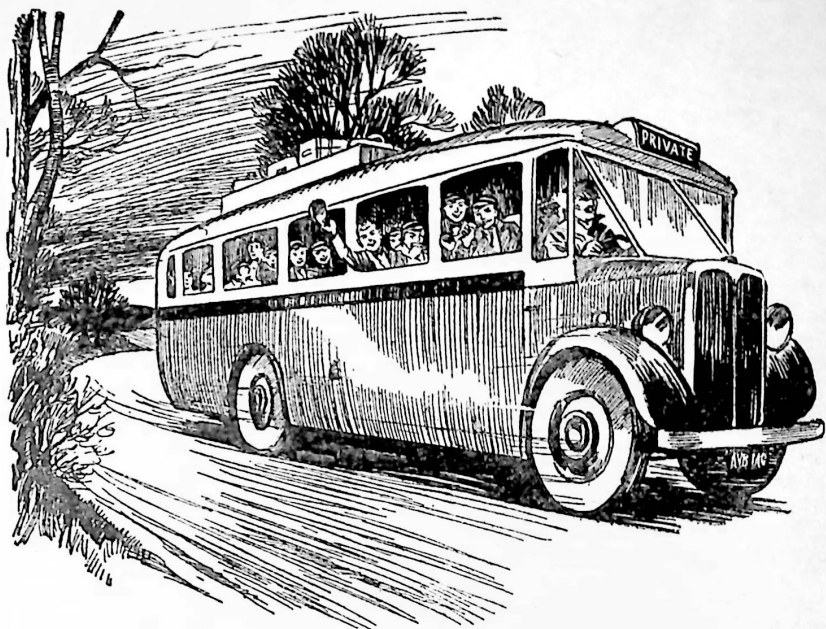
"The giddy secretary?" said Roylance. "Yes. Seems a rather pleasant fellow."

"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?"



Piled with baggage and schoolboys, the charabanc rolled away, up hill and down dale, en route for Eastwood House.

"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 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 Australian 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 Bloore's old governor, Sir Thomas Mapleton, was a Minister to an Australian state, and afterwards to New Zealand, and that Gilbert Bloore 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 Mapleton'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."

Kit Wildrake remained alone on the terrace, his youthful brow corrugated deep with thought. Kangaroo evidently distrusted Bloore; 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.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

DARK SUSPICIONS

"WEALLY—bai 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 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 boundah's we-marks, Miss Dowis," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall be vewy honahed if you will allow me to take you wound 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 trust 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 brow 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 has 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, to 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 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. Figgy's 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.



Bloore held out his hand, and Wildrake felt a chill from his long, cold fingers. "Haven't I met you somewhere before, Mr. Bloore?" he asked.

"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. 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.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

TWO ON THE TRACK!

"Gussy, old man——"

"Yaas, Wildwake?"

"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 dwopped in. I do not want to be ungwateful to a chap who is lookin' aftah 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 fwom 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."

"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 impvession 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 strong. 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 in on 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 and——"

"I guess I noted that she didn't seem to cotton on 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 Mapleton's former secretary, Gilbert Bloore," said Kerr.

"Nope!"

"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 slit 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 Mapleton would know, but he's at San Remo."

"I guess we could get a photograph of this man, and send it out to Mapleton, 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



Bloore held up his hand. "Please do not enter now," he said in a low voice. "His lordship is feeling very low, and he ought not to be disturbed."

a week to get an answer from San Remo, even if Sir Thomas Mapleton 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.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

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 bettah 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 weed. ”

“ 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.

“ 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 ewevythin' 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 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 bookcases 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 slit 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, a bit 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 be possibly 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."



"Your father is sinking under his illness, and there's foul play!" said Wildrake. Arthur Augustus started to his feet, exclaiming "Good heavens!"

"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 go!" he muttered.

The two juniors returned to the Painted Room.

THE NINTH CHAPTER

COMING TO A CRISIS!

"TOM MEWWY——"

"Yes, old top?"

"I am going to twust you to look aftah Ethel and Dowis 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 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 matah 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 altahed my mind, deah boy, and if the fellows will excuse me, I would wather wemain 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 aftah Cousin Ethel, you know, and see that that sillay ass Figgins doesn't bag her for all the dances. He tweads on people's toes fwightfully, you know, and Cousin Ethel is so awf'ly 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 Wildwake 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 Doris 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 heah 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 snuggewy with Wildwake 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 arm-chairs 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 fellahs 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.

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 wathah mysterious, 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 understand, 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 sewious! 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 feahful 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 pwesent the wascal would not dweam of attemptin' foul play——"

"The secret panel!" said Kerr.

"Bai Jove! I nevah 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!"

Arthur Augustus shuddered.

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

"He sure is, I guess!" said Wildrake.

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 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,



Crash! The secret door flew open and three juniors burst into the room. Gilbert Bloore spun round, the wineglass clutched in his hand.

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 test.

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 bottle 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, then turned to Lord Eastwood.

"Your medicine is ready, my lord."

"Thank you, Bloore," said his lordship.

THE TENTH CHAPTER

BROUGHT TO BOOK I

CRASH!

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 scoundrel!" 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——"

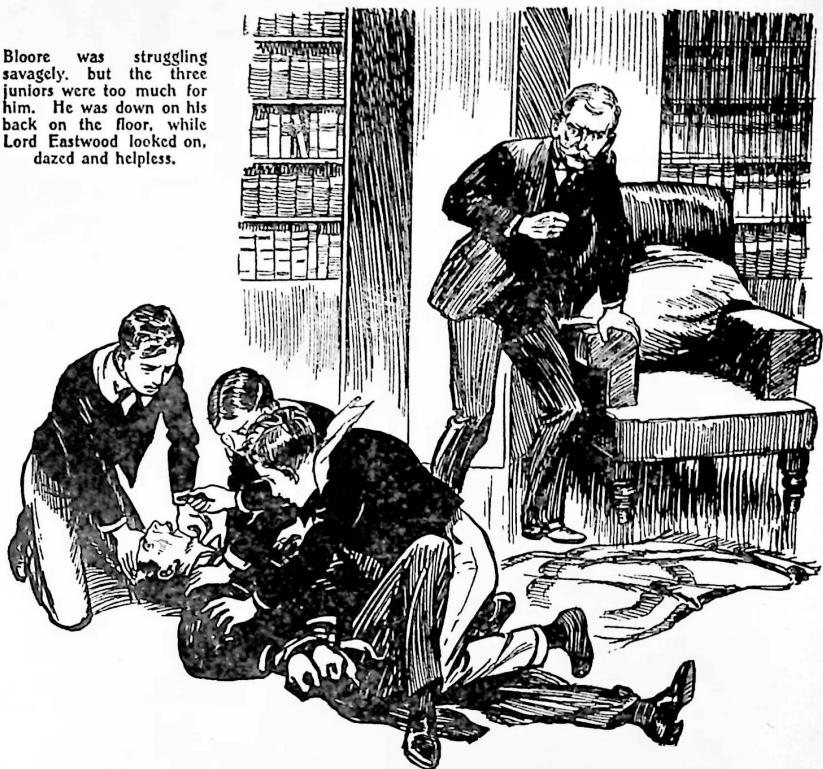
"Fathah! That man is poisonin' you!"

"What!"

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.

Bloore was struggling savagely, but the three juniors were too much for him. He was down on his back on the floor, while Lord Eastwood looked on, dazed and helpless.



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

"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 knee 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!"

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! Mercy!" 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!"

"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!"

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER

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.

"Bettah, deah boy!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "That feahful villain was sappin' away his stwength with small, continual doses of that awful stuff—the fwightful wottah! Missin' one dose has done the patah a lot of good. You should have seen Dr. Millard's face when he was told! The patah's picked up wonderfully—and the matah is no end bucked. As for Ethel, I weally think it was only a stwict wegard for pwopwietty 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 Mapleton's secretary was returning after leaving his master at San Remo, and starting for America to take up a new post there. And the real Bloore 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 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, and on Christmas evening he was able to sit among the merry party. 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!

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