

Out of School.

By P. G. WODEHOUSE.

Illustrated by Joseph Simpson, R.B.A.



MARK you, I am not defending James Datchett. I hold no brief for James. On the contrary, I am very decidedly of the opinion that he should not have done it. I merely say that there were extenuating circumstances. Just that. Ext. circ. Nothing more.

Let us review the matter calmly and judicially, not condemning James off-hand, but rather probing the whole affair to its core, to see if we can confirm my view that it is possible to find excuses for him.

We will begin at the time when the subject of the Colonies first showed a tendency to creep menacingly into the daily chit-chat of his Uncle Frederick.

James's Uncle Frederick was always talking more or less about the Colonies, having made a substantial fortune out in Western Australia, but it was only when James came down from Oxford that the thing became really menacing. Up to that time the uncle had merely spoken of the Colonies *as Colonies*. Now he began to speak of them with sinister reference to his nephew. He starred James. It became a case of "Frederick Knott presents James Datchett in 'The Colonies,'" and there seemed every prospect that the production would be an early one; for if there was one section of the public which Mr. Knott disliked more than another, it was Young Men Who Ought To Be Out Earning Their Livings Instead Of Idling At Home. He expressed his views on the subject with some eloquence whenever he visited his sister's house. Mrs. Datchett was a widow, and since her husband's death had been in the habit of accepting every utterance of her brother Frederick as a piece of genuine all-wool wisdom; though, as a matter of fact, James's uncle had just about enough brain to make a jay-fly crooked, and no more. He had

made his money keeping sheep. And any fool can keep sheep. However, he had this reputation for wisdom, and what he said went. It was not long, therefore, before it was evident that the ranks of the Y.M.W.O. T.B.O.E.T.L.I.O.I.A.H. were about to lose a member.

James, for his part, was all against the Colonies. As a setting for his career, that is to say. He was no Little Englander. He had no earthly objection to Great Britain *having* Colonies. By all means have Colonies. They could rely on him for moral support. But when it came to legging it out to West Australia to act as a sort of valet to Uncle Frederick's beastly sheep—no. Not for James. For him the literary life. Yes, that was James's dream—to have a stab at the literary life. At Oxford he had contributed to the *Isis*, and since coming down had been endeavouring to do the same to the papers of the Metropolis. He had had no success so far. But some inward voice seemed to tell him— (Read on. Read on. This is no story about the young beginner's struggles in London. We do not get within fifty miles of Fleet Street.)

A temporary compromise was effected between the two parties by the securing for James of a post as assistant-master at Harrow House, the private school of one Blatherwick, M.A., the understanding being that if he could hold the job he could remain in England and write, if it pleased him, in his spare time. But if he fell short in any way as a handler of small boys he was to descend a step in the animal kingdom and be matched against the West Australian sheep. There was to be no second chance in the event of failure. From the way Uncle Frederick talked James almost got the idea that he attached a spiritual importance to a connection with sheep. He seemed to strive with a sort of religious frenzy to convert James to

West Australia. So James went to Harrow House with much the same emotions that the Old Guard must have felt on their way up the hill at Waterloo.

Harrow House was a grim mansion on the outskirts of Dover. It is better, of course, to be on the outskirts of Dover than actually in it, but when you have said that you have

It was about five weeks from the beginning of term that the even river of life at Harrow House became ruffled for the new assistant-master.

I want you to follow me very closely here. As far as the excusing of James's conduct is concerned, it is now or never. If I fail at this point to touch you, I have shot my bolt.

Let us marshal the facts.

In the first place it was a perfectly ripping morning.

Moreover, he had received at breakfast a letter from the editor of a monthly magazine accepting a short story.

This had never happened to him before.



“HE EXPRESSED HIS VIEWS ON THE SUBJECT WITH SOME ELOQUENCE WHENEVER HE VISITED HIS SISTER’S HOUSE.”

said everything. James's impressions of that portion of his life were made up almost entirely of chalk. Chalk in the schoolroom, chalk all over the country-side, chalk in the milk. In this universe of chalk he taught bored boys the rudiments of Latin, geography, and arithmetic, and in the evenings, after a stately cup of coffee with Mr. Blatherwick in his study, went to his room and wrote stories. The life had the advantage of offering few distractions. Except for Mr. Blatherwick and a weird freak who came up from Dover on Tuesdays and Fridays to teach French, he saw nobody.

He was twenty-two.

And, just as he rounded the angle of the house, he came upon Violet, taking the air like himself.

Violet was one of the housemaids, a trim, energetic little person with round blue eyes and a friendly smile. She smiled at James now. James halted.

“Good morning, sir,” said Violet.

From my list of contributory causes I find that I have omitted one item—viz., that there did not appear to be anybody else about.

James looked meditatively at Violet. Violet looked smilingly at James. The

morning was just as ripping as it had been a moment before. James was still twenty-two. And the editor's letter had not ceased to crackle in his breast-pocket.

Consequently James stooped, and—in a purely brotherly way—kissed Violet.

This, of course, was wrong. It was no part of James's duties as assistant-master at Harrow House to wander about bestowing brotherly kisses on housemaids. On the other hand, there was no great harm done. In the circles in which Violet moved the kiss was equivalent to the hand-shake of loftier society. Everybody who came to the back door kissed Violet. The carrier did; so did the grocer, the baker, the butcher, the gardener, the postman, the policeman, and the fishmonger. They were men of widely differing views on most points. On religion, politics, and the prospects of the entrants for the three o'clock race their opinions clashed. But in one respect they were unanimous. Whenever they came to the back door of Harrow House they all kissed Violet.

"I've had a story accepted by the *Universal Magazine*," said James, casually.

"Have you, sir?" said Violet.

"It's a pretty good magazine. I shall probably do a great deal for it from time to time. The editor seems a decent chap."

"Does he, sir?"

"I sha'n't tie myself up in any way, of course, unless I get very good terms. But I shall certainly let him see a good lot of my stuff. Jolly morning, isn't it?"

He strolled on; and Violet, having sniffed the air for a few more minutes with her tip-tilted nose, went indoors to attend to her work.

Five minutes later—
nes, back in the

atmosphere of chalk, was writing on the blackboard certain sentences for his class to turn into Latin prose. A somewhat topical note ran through them. As thus:—

"The uncle of Balbus wished him to tend sheep in the Colonies (*Provincia*)."

"Balbus said that England was good enough for him (*placeo*)."

"Balbus sent a story (*versus*) to Mæcenas, who replied that he hoped to use it in due course."

His mind had floated away from the classroom, when a shrill voice brought him back.

"Sir, please, sir, what does 'in due course' mean?"

James reflected. "Alter it to 'immediately,'" he said.

"Balbus is a great man," he wrote on the blackboard.

Two minutes later he was in the office of an important magazine, and there was a look of relief on the editor's face, for James had practically promised to do a series of twelve short stories for him.

It has been well observed that when a writer has a story rejected he should send that story to another editor, but that when he has one accepted he should send another story to that editor. Acting on this excellent plan, James, being off duty for an hour after tea, smoked a pipe in his bedroom and settled down to work on a second effort for the *Universal*.

He was getting on rather well when his flow of ideas was broken by a knock on the door.

"Come in," yelled James. (Your author is notoriously irritable.)

The new-comer was Adolf. Adolf was one of that numerous band of Swiss and German youths who come to this country



"A WEIRD FREAK WHO CAME TO TEACH FRENCH."

prepared to give their services ridiculously cheap in exchange for the opportunity of learning the English language. Mr. Blatherwick held the view that for a private school a male front-door opener was superior to a female, arguing that the parents of prospective pupils would be impressed by the sight of a man in livery. He would have liked something a bit more imposing than Adolf, but the latter was the showiest thing that could be got for the money, so he made the best of it, and engaged him. After all, an astigmatic parent, seeing Adolf in a dim light, might be impressed by him. You never could tell.

"Well?" said James, glaring.

"Any sing vrom dze fillage, sare?"

The bulk of Adolf's perquisites consisted of the tips he received for going to the general store down the road for tobacco, stamps, and so on. "No. Get out," growled James, turning to his work.

He was surprised to find that Adolf, so far from getting out, came in and shut the door.

"Zst!" said Adolf, with a finger on his lips.

James stared.

"In dze garten zis morning," proceeded his visitor, grinning like a gargoyle, "I did zee you giss Violed. Zo!"

James's heart missed a beat. Considered purely as a situation, his present position was not ideal. He had to work hard, and there was not much money attached to the job. But it was what the situation stood for that counted. It was his little rock of safety in the midst of a surging ocean of West Australian sheep. Once let him lose his grip on it, and there was no chance for him. He would be swept away beyond hope of return.

"What do you mean?" he said, hoarsely.

"In dze garten. I you vrom a vindow did zee. You und Violed. Zo!" And Adolf, in the worst taste, gave a realistic imitation of the scene, himself sustaining the rôle of James.

James said nothing. The whole world seemed to be filled with a vast baa-ing, as of countless flocks.

"Lizzun!" said Adolf. "Berhaps I Herr Blazzervig dell. Berhaps not I do. Zo!"

James roused himself. At all costs he



"JAMES KISSED VIOLET."

must placate this worm. Mr. Blatherwick was an austere man. He would not overlook such a crime.

He appealed to the other's chivalry.

"What about Violet?" he said. "Surely you don't want to lose the poor girl her job? They'd be bound to sack her, too."

Adolf's eyes gleamed.

"Zo? Lizzun! When I do gom virst here, I myself do to giss Violed vunce vish. But she do push dze zide of my face, and my lof is durned to hate."

James listened attentively to this tabloid tragedy, but made no comment.

"Anysing vrom dze fillage, sare?"

Adolf's voice was meaning. James produced a half-crown.

"Here you are, then. Get me half-a-dozen stamps and keep the change."

"Zdamps? Yes, sare. At vunce."

James's last impression of the departing one was of a vast and greasy grin, stretching most of the way across his face.

Adolf, as blackmailer, in which *rôle* he now showed himself, differed in some respects from the conventional blackmailer of fiction. It may be that he was doubtful as to how much James would stand, or it may be that his soul as a general rule was above money. At any rate, in actual specie he took very little from his victim. He seemed to wish to be sent to the village oftener than before, but that was all. Half a crown a week would have covered James's financial loss.

But he asserted himself in another way. In his most light-hearted moments Adolf never forgot the reason which had brought him to England. He had come to the country to learn the language, and he meant to do it. The difficulty which had always handicapped him hitherto—namely, the poverty of the vocabularies of those in the servants' quarters—was now removed. He appointed James tutor-in-chief of the English language to himself, and saw that he entered upon his duties at once.

The first time that he accosted James in the passage outside the class-room, and desired him to explain certain difficult words in a leading article of yesterday's paper, James was pleased. Adolf, he thought, regarded the painful episode as closed. He had accepted the half-crown as the full price of silence, and was now endeavouring to be friendly in order to make amends.

This right-minded conduct gratified James. He felt genially disposed toward Adolf. He read the leading article, and proceeded to

give a full and kindly explanation of the hard words. He took trouble over it. He went into the derivations of the words. He touched on certain rather tricky sub-meanings of the same. Adolf went away with any doubts he might have had of James's capabilities as a teacher of English definitely scattered. He felt that he had got hold of the right man.

There was a shade less geniality in James's manner when the same thing happened on the following morning. But he did not refuse to help the untutored foreigner. The lecture was less exhaustive than that of the previous morning, but we must suppose that it satisfied Adolf, for he came again next day, his faith in his teacher undiminished.

James was trying to write a story. He turned on the student.

"Get out!" he howled. "And take that beastly paper away. Can't you see I'm busy? Do you think I can spend all my time teaching you to read? Get out!"

"Dere some hard vord vos," said Adolf, patiently, "of which I gannot dze meaning."

James briefly cursed the hard words.

"But," proceeded Adolf, "of one vord, of dze vord 'giss,' I dze meaning know. Zo!"

James looked at him. There was a pause.

Two minutes later the English lesson was in full swing.

All that James had ever heard or read about the wonderful devotion to study of the modern German young man came home to him during the next two weeks. Our English youth fritters away its time in idleness and pleasure-seeking. The German concentrates. Adolf concentrated like a porous plaster. Every day after breakfast, just when the success of James's literary career depended on absolute seclusion, he would come trotting up for his lesson. James's writing practically ceased.

This sort of thing cannot last. There is a limit, and Adolf reached it when he attempted to add night-classes to the existing curriculum.

James, as had been said, was in the habit of taking coffee with Mr. Blatherwick in his study after seeing the boys into bed. It was while he was on his way to keep this appointment, a fortnight after his first interview with Adolf, that the young student waylaid him with the evening paper.

Something should have warned Adolf that the moment was not well-chosen. To begin with, James had a headache, the result of a hard day with the boys. Then that morning's English lesson had caused him to forget

entirely an idea which had promised to be the nucleus of an excellent plot. And, lastly, passing through the hall but an instant before, he had met Violet carrying the coffee and the evening post to the study, and she had given him two long envelopes addressed in his own handwriting. He was brooding over these, preparatory to opening them, at the very moment when Adolf addressed him.

"Eggscuse," said Adolf, opening the paper. James's eyes gleamed ominously.

James cared for nothing. He kicked Adolf again.

"Zo!" said the student, having bounded away. He added a few words in his native tongue, and proceeded. "Vait! Lizzun! I zay to you, vait! Brezently, ven I haf dze zilver bolished und my odder dudies zo numerous berformed, I do Herr Blazzervig vill vith von liddle szdory vich you do know go. Zo!"

He shot off to his lair.



"ADOLF LEAPED LIKE A STRICKEN CHAMOIS."

"Zere are here," continued Adolf, unseeing, "zome beyond-gombarison hard vords vich I do nod onderstand. For eggssample——"

It was at this point that James kicked him. Adolf leaped like a stricken chamois.

"Vot iss?" he cried.

With those long envelopes in his hand

James turned away and went on down the passage to restore his nervous tissues with coffee.

Meanwhile, in the study, leaning against the mantelpiece in moody reflection, Mr. Blatherwick was musing sadly on the hardships of the schoolmaster's life. The

proprietor of Harrow House was a long, grave man, one of the last to hold out against the anti-whisker crusade. He had expressionless hazel eyes and a general air of being present in body but absent in the spirit. Mothers who visited the school to introduce their sons put his vagueness down to activity of mind. "That busy brain," they thought, "is never at rest. Even while he is talking to us some abstruse point in the classics is occupying his mind."

What was occupying his mind at the present moment was the thoroughly unsatisfactory conduct of his wife's brother, Bertie Baxter. The more tensely he brooded over the salient points in the life-history of his wife's brother, Bertie Baxter, the deeper did the iron become embedded in his soul. Bertie was one of Nature's touchers. This is the age of the specialist. Bertie's speciality was borrowing money. He was a man of almost eerie versatility in this direction. Time could not wither nor custom stale his infinite variety. He could borrow money with a breezy bluffness which made the thing practically a hold-up. And anon, when his victim had steeled himself against this method, he could extract another five-pound-note from his little hoard with the delicacy of one playing spilikins. Mr. Blatherwick had been a gold-mine to him for years. As a rule, the proprietor of Harrow House unbelted without complaint, for Bertie, as every good borrower should, had that knack of making his victim feel, during the actual moment of paying over, as if he had just made a rather good investment. But, released from the spell of his brother-in-law's personal magnetism, Mr. Blatherwick was apt to brood. He was brooding now. Why, he was asking himself morosely, should he be harassed by this Bertie? It was not as if Bertie was penniless. He had a little income of his own. No, it was pure lack of consideration. Who was Bertie that he—

At this point in his meditations Violet entered with the after-dinner coffee and the evening post.

Mr. Blatherwick took the letters. There were two of them, and one he saw, with a rush of indignation, was in the handwriting of his brother-in-law. Mr. Blatherwick's blood simmered. So the fellow thought he could borrow by post, did he? Not even trouble to pay a visit, eh? He tore the letter open, and the first thing he saw was a cheque for five pounds.

Mr. Blatherwick was astounded. That a

letter from his brother-in-law should not contain a request for money was surprising; that it should contain a cheque, even for five pounds, was miraculous.

He opened the second letter. It was short, but full of the finest, noblest sentiments; to wit, that the writer, Charles J. Pickersgill, having heard the school so highly spoken of by his friend, Mr. Herbert Baxter, would be glad if Mr. Blatherwick could take in his three sons, aged seven, nine, and eleven respectively, at the earliest convenient date.

Mr. Blatherwick's first feeling was one of remorse that even in thought he should have been harsh to the golden-hearted Bertie. His next was one of elation.

Violet, meanwhile, stood patiently before him with the coffee. Mr. Blatherwick helped himself. His eye fell on Violet.

Violet was a friendly, warm-hearted little thing. She saw that Mr. Blatherwick had had good news; and, as the bearer of the letters which had contained it, she felt almost responsible. She smiled kindly up at Mr. Blatherwick.

Mr. Blatherwick's dreamy hazel eye rested pensively upon her. The major portion of his mind was far away in the future, dealing with visions of a school grown to colossal proportions and patronized by millionaires. The section of it which still worked in the present was just large enough to enable him to understand that he felt kindly, and even almost grateful, to Violet. Unfortunately it was too small to make him see how wrong it was to kiss her in a vague, fatherly way across the coffee tray just as James Datchett walked into the room.

James paused. Mr. Blatherwick coughed. Violet, absolutely unmoved, supplied James with coffee, and bustled out of the room.

She left behind her a somewhat massive silence.

Mr. Blatherwick coughed again.

"It looks like rain," said James, carelessly.

"Ah?" said Mr. Blatherwick.

"Very like rain," said James.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Blatherwick.

A pause.

"Pity if it rains," said James.

"True," said Mr. Blatherwick.

Another pause.

"Er—Datchett," said Mr. Blatherwick.

"Yes?" said James.

"I—er—feel that perhaps——"

James waited attentively.

"Have you sugar?"

"Plenty, thanks," said James.



"HOW WRONG IT WAS TO KISS HER IN A VAGUE, FATHERLY WAY."

"I shall be sorry if it rains," said Mr. Blatherwick.

Conversation languished.

James laid his cup down.

"I have some writing to do," he said.

"I think I'll be going upstairs now."

"Er—just so," said Mr. Blatherwick with relief. "Just so. An excellent idea."

"Er — Datchett," said Mr. Blatherwick

next day, after breakfast.

"Yes?" said James.

A feeling of content was over him this morning. The sun had broken through the clouds. One of the long envelopes which he had received on the previous night had turned out, on examination, to contain a letter from the editor accepting the story if he would reconstruct certain passages indicated in the margin.

"I have—ah—unfortunately been compelled to dismiss Adolf," said Mr. Blatherwick.

"Yes?" said James. He had missed Adolf's shining morning face.

"Yes. After you had left me last night he came to my study with a malicious—er—fabrication respecting yourself which I need not—ah—particularize."

James looked pained. Awful thing it is, this nourishing vipers in one's bosom.

"Why, I've been giving Adolf English lessons nearly every day lately. No sense of gratitude, these foreigners," he said, sadly.

"So I was compelled," proceeded Mr. Blatherwick, "to—in fact, just so."

James nodded sympathetically.

"Do you know anything about West Australia?" he asked, changing the subject.

"It's a fine country, I believe. I had thought of going there at one time."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Blatherwick.

"But I've given up the idea now," said James.