

Old-Fashioned Folks

A Short Short Story complete on this page

By John B. Kennedy

Illustrated by Walter C. Klett

THE last time they met had been at a party like this one of the poet's. Charles, who had grown to like the girl to a degree where he was intensely curious about her, didn't like something she had said. She had called him old-fashioned, because he didn't drink.

Here they were again, in a crowded studio, jazz blaring from a radio, a miniature bar exceedingly busy in a corner of the room, everybody drinking, nearly everybody drunk—and Charles, seriously sober, pinning her in a love-seat.

"You're funny," she said, sipping a cocktail. "You come to a lively party and act like a mourner. At least, you look like one."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll get drunk if you insist."

He left her for the bar. The poet monopolized it, reciting his poems which dealt with death, disaster and the melancholy triumph of the tomb. He had an audience because the gin had run out and they were awaiting replenishments from a neighboring novelty store. So Charles returned to the girl, drinkless.

The replenishments arrived in charge of a colored maid bearing bottles in one hand and a pail of ice cubes in the other. She picked her way through the hilarity, teeth white and grinning, eyes scornful.

The poet bawled a toast. "It's Christmas Eve," he cried. "All good little boys and girls should hang—" he missed the "g"—"their stockings."

Everybody laughed. A willowy girl, with a loose mouth and hair burnished in bright waves, put her glass down in the wrong place. It spilled on an actor's vest; but he didn't mind—he didn't know. The willowy lady was the poet's friend, acting as his hostess. Thus matters were socially simplified.

"Let's all hang up our stockings," she shrilled. "Let's."

The idea caught on. Men and girls backed into divans, sat on cushions. Bare limbs gleamed as shimmering stockings were hung on the mantel, the bar and elsewhere—held down by books, book-ends and gutta-percha Buddhas.

ISLANDED from the rest of the party on their love-seat, Charles and the girl seemed miles removed from making love. They watched the revelers stumble to and from the bar, dance to the radio and mock intrusions of sales blarney on jerking jazz. Suddenly, a hymn, *Adeste Fidelis*, cut like cool water through the medley of sound.

"It's a hymn," shouted a tipsy girl. "Shut it off."

Jazz returned and, with it, dancing. The hostess came along the floor uncertainly with her poet.

"Helen!" she cried. "Join in the fun. Take off your stockings. Nobody wears stockings. It's Christmas."

Charles arose: "Helen," he said, "that is, Miss Norstrom, prefers to wear her stockings."

"Don't be so serious," the hostess chided.

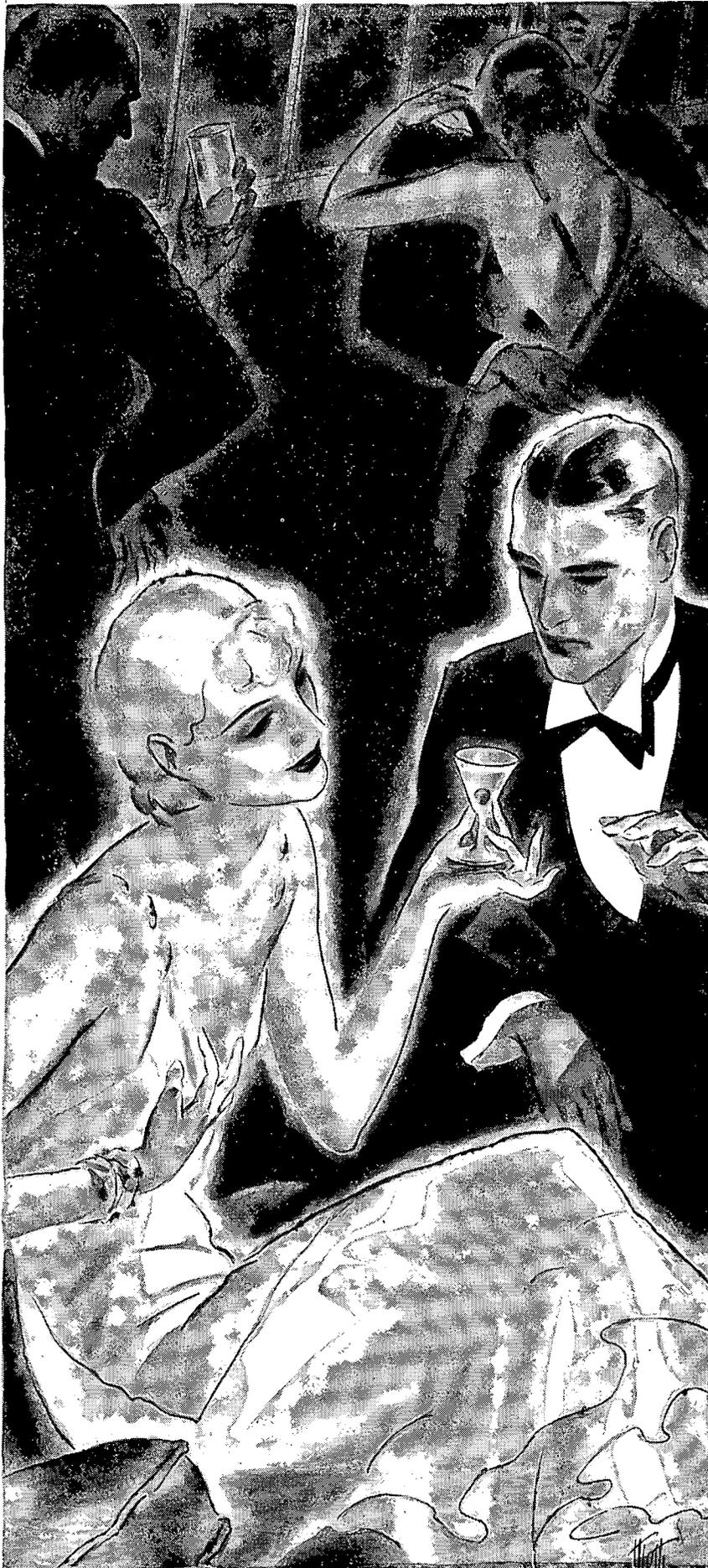
"Naughty Charley," said the poet, wagging a finger. "Tha's Charley," he informed his companion. "He's an architect. Designs warehouses and freight-sheds, doncher, Charley?"

He roared at this devastating sally and reeled away with the hostess.

Left to themselves again, Charles observed Miss Norstrom frowning. "Another drink?" he suggested.

Her gray eyes pondered. "Who told you," she asked, "that I wouldn't take off my stockings?"

"I know you won't," he said. "This



"You're funny," she said. "You come to a lively party and act like a mourner. At least, you look like one"

is a stupid party. I'm a fool for not spending Christmas at home—up in Peterboro."

"That's just one way of being a fool," said the girl, eying him steadily. "Why don't you go to Peterboro?"

"Why don't you go to Taunton?" asked Charles. "That's where your home is, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the girl. "But my job's here."

"And where will you spend Christmas?"

"Part of the day at the office," she said. "And a silly dinner at the club."

"Which club?"

"The Women's Advertising Club, if you must know."

"Why not have Christmas dinner with me?" he asked.

"It might be too exciting," she said.

HE CAUGHT the mockery in her tone, turned away, barged through wrestling dancers and reappeared before her, bearing drinks. "Your health," he said, handing her one. She refused it, and he stood for a while, contemplating his untouched glass. He placed it on the floor where it was promptly kicked over by an overjoyed cartoonist who shouted, "Whoopee!" as he did it.

"Why didn't I go home?" said Charles, in disgust.

"Why didn't you?" the girl echoed.

"It's a stupid old house," he said. "It was built by somebody who didn't know the difference between a mansard and a pent, so he slapped on both. But it must look pretty tonight—if it's snowing in Peterboro."

He mused, and she mused with him.

"Peterboro's only thirty miles from Taunton," she said.

"Just about," said Charles. "I'd be willing to walk there the way I feel."

The girl smiled—a smile of alert sympathy.

They were rudely interrupted. A group of the boys pulled Charles away to the bar where the poet, wobbly and voluble, poured him a drink. Charles took it. When he returned to the love-seat, the girl had vanished. She was nowhere in the studio.

Grabbing hat and coat, he departed, plunged into a cab and went slipping and snorting to the station. He just had time for the twelve-forty-five to Peterboro.

"No berths," said the ticket clerk.

"Nothing left?"

"Nothing. Unless the conductor has something."

"Damn the conductor."

"Merry Christmas," said the clerk, slapping down his window.

Enraged at the idea of sitting up all night in a day coach, Charles elbowed through commuters making end runs to the lower level. He cursed all the way to the train gate. Then he stopped cursing. The girl was there.

"OH," he beamed. "You're going too?"

She waved a ticket, triumphantly.

"Cost me all I had, for a compartment," she crowed. "But I'll be home for Christmas."

"So will I," said Charles. He took the ticket.

"I'll buy this from you and share it," he said.

"We can't do that," said the girl.

"Why not?" he asked, as a conductor at the checking desk glared disapprovingly.

"Of course we can't," she said. "We're not married."

"Then we'll get married," said Charles.

So they sat up all night in the day coach, and did.

The Story Thus Far:

EN ROUTE to Narrow Harbor, where they are to spend the summer, Edwin Bleecker Jewett III, "Beechy" Gwynn (with whom Eddie is in love), and Dr. Beekman Winship, Eddie's tutor, have a thrilling adventure with some bandits in a gambling house to which Winship has been innocently led, one of whom the doctor—a large, but usually timid, college professor—knocks out.

Convinced by Eddie (who has a remarkable sense of humor) that his victim was a cop, not a bandit, and that he may have fatally injured him, Winship is terror-stricken. He has a weird pink beard. The police, glimpsing it, will recognize him. He removes it (at Eddie's suggestion) with hair-killer.

Eddie (seized with an inspiration) calls on Dan McGurk—who trains pugilists—has a secret interview with him, and introduces him to Winship who, devoid of whiskers, might, because of his ferocious appearance, easily be mistaken for a prize fighter.

Strange events follow at Narrow Harbor. McGurk arrives, hovers mysteriously around the home of Eddie's Aunt Julie, where Eddie and Winship are guests. Trooper Wilbur Dill, of the New York State Police, also appears on the scene.

McGurk approaches Winship, offers to make a great fighter out of him. Winship, a cultured soul, is shocked. He declines the offer. "Okay, big boy," says McGurk, who knows of his secret terror, "it's you for jail!" Whereupon Winship surrenders—agrees to train, under McGurk's tutelage, for the world's heavyweight championship.

Nevada Sullivan, a night-club queen, becomes deeply interested in the future champion. Nellie, a maid at Aunt Julie's, whom Trooper Dill is courting, is likewise impressed by "The Big Pink" and his financial possibilities. In the midst of a secret rendezvous in the kitchen, she kisses him and declares herself in on his "racket."

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WERE letting Mr. Edwin sleep a little late this morning." The crisp frostiness with which on principle Julie Bedloe addressed all servants was absent from her voice. She spoke to Ellen almost as to a fellow creature.

"Late, ma'am?" Ellen stared. "Why, Mr. Eddie and Dr. Winship had their breakfast at seven."

It was Mrs. Bedloe's turn to stare. Even her husband, startled, detached his gaze from his plate.

"Seven? Then where are they now?"

"They went out right afterwards, ma'am, in Mr. Eddie's car."

"What! They've gone?"

"Yes'm, but they'll be back for lunch."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, yes'm. Mr. Eddie said he'd like to have steak."

"Steak? For lunch?"

"Yes'm. You'll find it on cook's list."

Ellen departed kitchenwards. Ronald Bedloe, keeping his gaze upon his plate, spoke with an impatience almost husbandly.

"Now don't fuss, Julie. It only shows that the boy feels at home here, and that's what you want, isn't it?"

"But beefsteak! For lunch! Why, Dr. Frisbee says—"

"I know, but if you want to keep Eddie you've got to break a few of Dr. Frisbee's rules at first. If you try to make that boy eat creamed spinach and pineapple salad for lunch he'll just pack up and go before you have a chance to do anything for him."

"But it's positively revolting! Red meat! For lunch!"

"What do you expect of a boy who's never had a chance to learn better habits? Eddie's all right. Just see how much he's improved already! Out of bed and out of doors before eight o'clock!"

Julie brightened. "That's Dr. Winship's influence."

"Yes, and if he's done that much in two days, think what he could do in a

whole summer! Why, at this rate it won't be long before he'll have Eddie actually studying!"

Ellen, reëntering, made bold to offer respectful interruption.

"Beg pardon, sir, but they've started already. Mr. Eddie said something about having a lesson this morning."

"There!" Bedloe spoke triumphantly. "What's a little thing like steak for lunch, compared to—"

Julie nodded. "Perhaps you're right," she said. "I'll—" bravely, "I'll order the steak."

She turned to Ellen. "But tell cook to have it very well done."

"Mr. Eddie particularly said to have it rare, ma'am."

THERE was a brief pause before Mrs. Bedloe made the magnificent sacrifice.

"Very well, Ellen. We'll have it rare."

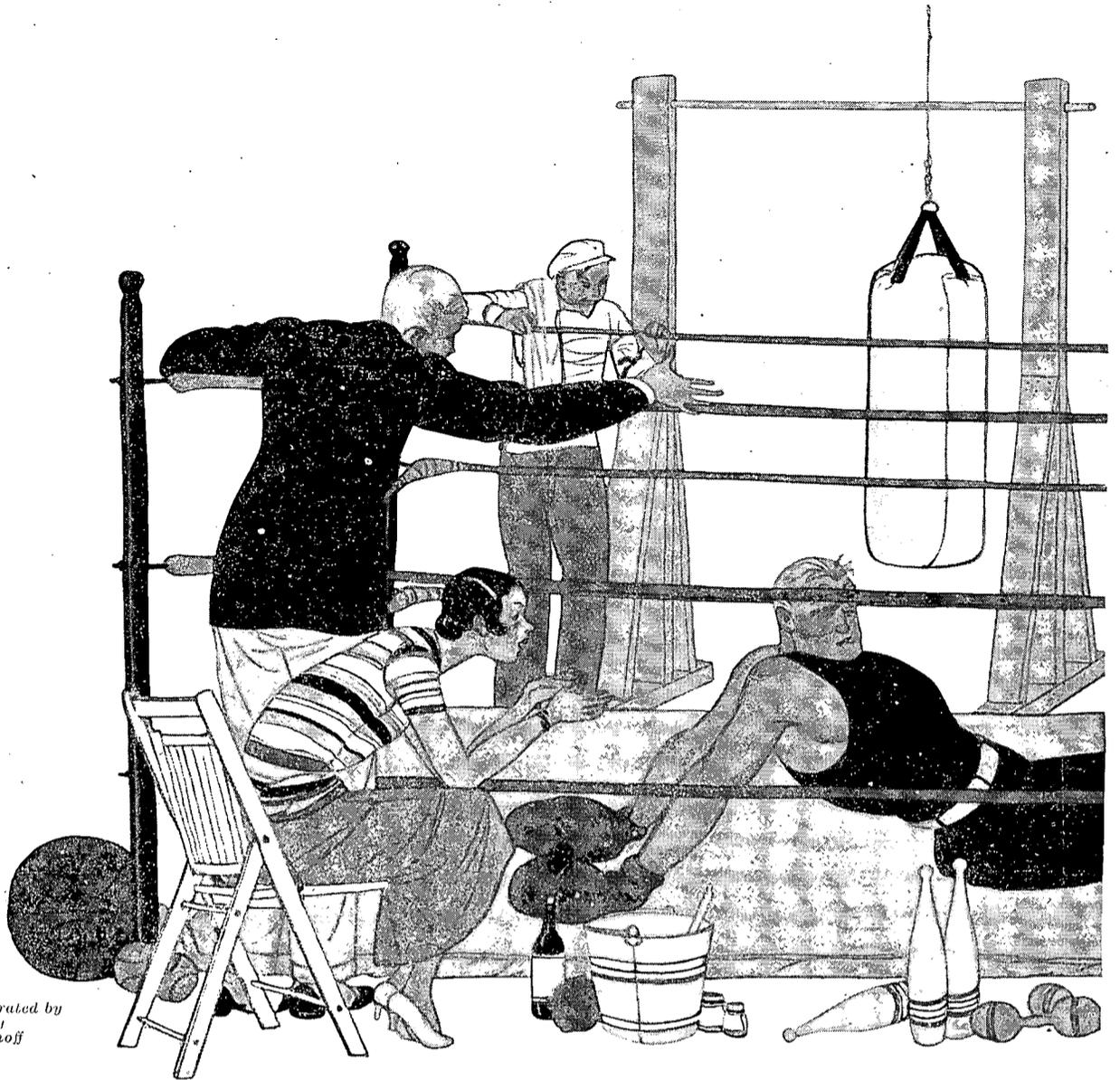
"Yes'm."

Lightly Ellen departed. Mrs. Bedloe drew in a long, rapt breath.

"Lessons! And so soon! I can hardly believe it's really true!"

Precisely this difficulty of belief afflicted Beekman Winship. From the beginning of his morning's nightmare he had waited hopefully for the waking moment that would dissipate a fantastically ghastly dream.

In the presence of coarse, uncongenial strangers, including even a gentleman of color, he had been ruthlessly obliged to disrobe. He had been weighed and measured like a beef-bullock. Clad in the singlet, tights and footgear of Signor Primavera, he had been driven by harsh chidings through calisthenics even less dignified than the



Illustrated by
Harry
Beckhoff

The Big Pink

push-ups and squattings of his secret habit. Even when, given a skipping-rope, he had acquitted himself almost brilliantly, he received no praise.

"I thought so!" McGurk spoke darkly. "He played with girls!"

Winship denied this charge with an irrational heat of anger. McGurk's pessimism lessened slightly.

"Well, let's see you shadow-box, then."

It was necessary, for Winship's enlightenment, to provide him with an object-lesson in this art. A gentleman of strangely skewed features and oddly swollen ears, who answered for obvious reasons to the name of Split-tooth Ganley, was chosen as instructor. Sliding between the ropes that inclosed a square, canvas-carpeted space in the center of the barn, this person, assuming an aspect and posture of sinister ferocity, proceeded to commit atrocious assault and battery upon an imaginary antagonist. With this antagonist Winship somehow associated himself. He seemed to stand as target for the wicked, swishing blows. At first, impressed by Mr. Ganley's swiftness and manifest bloodthirstiness, he cowered, mentally, before the fusillade of fists. Slowly, as he watched, a deep, abiding dislike for Mr. Ganley took form in him.

"See?" McGurk's hand fell ungently on his shoulder and Ganley, breathing fast from his exertions, paused. "Get in there and let's see you do it."

Winship crawled gingerly between

the ropes and made forlorn endeavor to imitate the pantomime. Mr. Ganley coarsely expressed his opinion by making a lingual noise which Winship had heard described as the raspberry.

"Whadduyuh think you're doing? Playing post office?"

Winship's dislike deepened slightly, but he made no answer. Into his next pretense of a blow, however, he found it possible to put more energy.

"What's the idea of leadin' with your right?" McGurk demanded.

"I'm right-handed," Winship explained.

"Whatcha tryin' to do—kid me?"

McGurk spoke with heat. Winship smiled appeasingly.

"By no means. I merely explained that since my right arm is more powerful and under better control than my left, it is natural that I should—uh—strike with my right."

McGurk sighed.

IFORGOT that there ain't but one way to learn the big ones. Get in there, Split-tooth, and do it."

With malevolent alacrity Mr. Ganley slid between the ropes. His disarranged features achieved a leer of singular ill will. Leaning down to one of the padded posts, he pretended to speak into a telephone.

"Hello. Gimme the glue fact'ry. Say, if you got any use f'r a dead el'phant, shoot your truck over."

Loud mirth greeted this crude witti-