



GRUNDY'S MERRY CHRISTMAS



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This story throws an interesting new sidelight upon the character of George Alfred Grundy, of the Shell Form at St. Jim's.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Message Through the Gloom!

"IT will be simply ripping!" It was George Alfred Grundy who spoke. And he addressed the words to himself, as he strode along in the gathering dusk.

Grundy had been over to Wayland to do some shopping, and he carried a large parcel under each arm. His step was light, and his heart likewise. For it was the eve of breaking-up day.

The burly Shell fellow had been invited to spend the Christmas holidays at the residence of his Uncle Grundy. And Wilkins and Gunn, his two study-mates, were included in the invitation.

"What a stunning, slap-up time we shall have!" muttered Grundy, as he footed it briskly in the darkening lane. "Plenty of grub, plenty of fun, plenty of everything that goes to make life worth living!"

Grundy laughed gaily at the prospect. He

was finding the world a very pleasant place to live in.

Another of his uncles—a gentleman of considerable means—had sent Grundy a ten-pound note. Such a princely remittance would enable George Alfred to buy heaps of good things for himself.

For himself, be it noted. Grundy was not thinking of others. He rarely did.

Decent enough fellow though he was in many ways, there was no denying that George Alfred Grundy was self-centred. He made far too much use of the first personal pronoun. It was "I am this" and "I am that," with Grundy. He was a sort of tin god—in his own estimation.

And now, as he went striding along the dusky lane, plunged in a pleasant reverie, a voice came to Grundy.

It was not a human voice. It was a still, small voice, yet unmistakably clear.

"George Alfred Grundy, you are selfish!" Grundy stopped short in his stride.

"My hat!" he muttered.

"You are selfish, do you hear?" repeated the voice. "You are thinking of the grand time you will have at your uncle's place. You are thinking what a merry Christmas it will be—for yourself."

"Well, that's so," stammered Grundy. He was shivering a little. This was an uncanny experience.

Where was the voice coming from?

Grundy looked this way and that way, half-expecting to see a human being within call. But, save for himself, the lane was deserted.

"George Alfred Grundy!"

It was the mysterious voice again, and it was insistent.

"Yes?" muttered Grundy.

"Has it ever occurred to you that there are others on this planet, besides yourself?"

"Of—of course!" faltered Grundy.

"Do you realise that many of these people are—to use an everyday expression—down and out?"

"Y-e-e-s."

"Are you aware that in this small town of Wayland alone there are upwards of a hundred unemployed?"

"Y-e-e-s."

"And do you realise that Christmas will be merely a sham and a mockery to these men and their dependents?"

"I—I've never thought about it," Grundy confessed.

"No; you have been too much wrapped up in self."

Grundy walked on. He had mastered himself a little by this time. His hands were clenched as if in defiance.

"Who is speaking to me?" he demanded.

"You must not ask that question," came the voice.

"Well, whoever you are, I don't see why you should lecture me like this," said Grundy. "It isn't my fault that there are a hundred unemployed in Wayland. Your quarrel lies with the Government—not with me."

"Enough!" said the voice sternly. "Have you ever done anything to lighten the load of poverty and misery which these people bear?"

"No," answered Grundy. "Why should I?"

"Because it is your duty."

"What rot!"

"It is not 'rot,' as you call it. It is the duty of every individual to make bad better, and to stretch out a helping hand to those who are in need of it."

Grundy walked on, silent and thoughtful.

"Perhaps you're right," he muttered, at length.

"There is no perhaps about it. I am right!"

"Are you asking me to give a helping hand to the unemployed of Wayland?"

"I am not asking you to do anything. Whether you help or not is for you yourself to decide."

"Oh, all right," said Grundy. "I suppose there's a certain amount of truth in what you say. These men who are out of work will have a pretty putrid Christmas, and their wives and kiddies will have to go short. I think I ought to help them—yes, and I'll do it, too! I've got plenty of cash. I'll send a couple of quids to the Unemployment Relief Fund that's being run by the local paper."

"And have your subscription in next week's issue? 'George Alfred Grundy has kindly subscribed two pounds.'"

"That's it!" said Grundy.

"Do you imagine for one moment that that is true charity?"

"Of course!"

"Pardon me, it is nothing of the sort. It is thoroughly and utterly selfish."

"What!" gasped Grundy.

"You will have the satisfaction of seeing your name in print, and your schoolfellows will say, 'Grundy's an awfully good sort. Look what he's done! He's subscribed a couple of pounds to the Unemployment Fund.' That will be your reward—the plaudits of the crowd. And a true philanthropist neither seeks nor expects a reward. He does good by stealth."

Grundy was silent. And the mysterious voice continued.

"If you are thinking of sending two pounds to the Fund, do it anonymously. Sign yourself 'A Cheerful Giver,' or something of that sort. Then nobody will know the source of the donation."



Wilkins and Gunn were waiting for Grundy in the school gateway. "Brought the crackers?" asked Wilkins. "Yes; but I don't think we shall want them!" said Grundy. "There are others who need them more than we do!" (See Chapter 2.)

"But I should get no credit, that way!" protested Grundy.

"Of course you wouldn't. And it would be wrong of you to seek credit."

"My hat!"

"Now, what do you propose to do in this matter, George Alfred Grundy?"

Grundy debated a moment.

"I'll send the money anonymously," he said.

"You mean that?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will put an alternative plan before you. Instead of proceeding straight to your uncle's house to-morrow, why not spend a few days in Wayland?"

"What on earth for?" exclaimed Grundy, in amazement.

"You could then personally investigate cases of hardship. I am not asking you to give away all your money, or to make absurd sacrifices. Just give a little help to the worst cases you can find, and do it in such a way that they will not know from whom the help comes."

"I see," said Grundy.

"Will you do this?"

The junior hesitated. He was thinking of the morrow—of the projected visit to his uncle's country house.

What a splendid time he would have there! Much better than fooling about in Wayland, doing the Good Samaritan stunt.

Then there were Wilkins and Gunn to be considered. What about them?

Again the voice spoke.

"If you explain the matter to your chums, I feel sure they will gladly join you."

Grundy frowned as he tramped on his way.

"What you're really suggesting, in a nutshell, is that we should give up several days of the Christmas Vac., and devote them to helping cases of hardship?" he murmured.

"That is so."

"But—but a lot of poor people have only themselves to blame for being poor," said Grundy.

"True."

"And lots of people are unemployed simply because they're too lazy to seek employment—in fact, they wouldn't take it if it was offered to them."

"True again."

"Well, then," said Grundy, "how do you expect me to sort out the deserving cases from the undeserving?"

"You need not worry your head about that."

"But I may go and help the wrong sort of people."

"That will make no difference. Listen to this passage from the work of a great writer. 'The true philanthropist is the guide and support of the weak and the poor; not merely of the meritoriously and the innocently poor, but of the guiltily and punishably poor; of the men who ought to have known better—of the poor who ought to be ashamed of themselves.' Is that clear to you?"

"Quite," said Grundy.

"Very well, then. You will know how to proceed. Once again, I am not asking you to do miracles. With the limited means at your disposal, you could never hope to help all the cases of hardship in Wayland. But even a little help will go a very long way. And think of the tremendous joy you will bring into the lives of those who are now without hope! That thought will repay you over and over again. I will leave you now. Think this over and do what you feel to be right."

"One moment!" said Grundy. "Won't you tell me who you are?"

There was no response. Grundy walked alone. No voice addressed him. Everything had become normal again.

For a moment, the junior imagined he must have been dreaming. But he presently decided that it was no dream—that his unusual experience in the dusky lane had been a very real one.

Grundy approached the gates of St. Jim's, deep in thought. And it was not of himself that he was thinking now. It was of those "under-dogs" to whom the term "A Merry Christmas" was empty and meaningless.

"I'll help them!" he exclaimed, aloud. "They want help, goodness knows, and they shall have it. And I'll persuade others to help, too!"

A strange feeling of happiness came into Grundy's heart as he uttered those words.

Happiness! That elusive state which so many were seeking in vain—that will-o'-the-wisp that everyone was chasing, and few could capture. But it came to Grundy now; and it bore out the truth of that saying, so often despised, that true happiness can only be achieved by helping others.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Brighter Christmas Society!

"HERE he is!"

"Good old Grundy!"

"Finished your shopping?"

Grundy nodded abstractedly. Wilkins and Gunn were awaiting him in the school gateway.

"Bought the crackers, old man?" asked Wilkins.

"Yes."

"And the model railway?" inquired Gunn.

"Yes."

"That's good! And what about the rest of the things?"

"They're all here," said Grundy. "But I don't believe we shall be wanting them, after all."

Wilkins and Gunn stared at their chum in blank amazement.

"W-w-what do you mean?" stammered the former.

"Just this," said Grundy quietly. "There happen to be others whose need is greater than ours."

"Good old Sir Philip Sidney!" said Gunn. "Whatever has come over you, old chap, to make you talk like this?"

"I've been thinking——"

"Quite a novel experience for you!" said Wilkins crushingly.

"I've been thinking that I've been thinking——"

"Then you weren't really thinking at all?" chuckled Gunn.

"Don't keep chipping in! I've been thinking that I've been thinking too much of myself, and not enough of others."

"Oh!"

"It didn't occur to me until just now that there are heaps of poor kiddies over at Wayland who won't get any toys this Christmas."

"Well, that's not our fault," said Wilkins.

"I know it isn't. But we can help to remedy matters."

"My hat!"

Wilkins and Gunn were frankly amazed. This was a new Grundy. They had never heard him "spout any of this sentimental stuff," as Gunn expressed it, before.

The trio remained in the school gateway, talking.

"What has come over you, Grundy?" repeated Gunn.

"I'll try and explain," said Grundy. "I was coming along the lane, thinking of the ripping time I should have this Christmas, when a voice suddenly spoke to me."

"Whose voice?" asked Wilkins.

"That's just what I can't make out. It wasn't a human voice, but I heard it just as plainly as if it had been."

Wilkins and Gunn exchanged glances.

"Delusions!" said the former.

"First stage of insanity!" said the latter.

Grundy flushed.

"Nothing of the sort!" he said hotly. "I tell you, I distinctly heard this voice——"

"But you saw nobody?" said Wilkins.

"Not a soul."

"Well, listen to me. When a fellow fancies he hears voices——"

"It wasn't all fancy!" said Grundy indignantly.

"All right; I'll begin again. When a fellow hears voices, and they are not human voices, there are several constructions that can be put upon it. Firstly, it may be sheer delusion——"

"It wasn't delusion in my case."

"Secondly, it may be the voice of conscience——"

"My hat!"

"Thirdly, it may have been your subconscious mind speaking to you——"

"What rot!"

"Fourthly, it may have been

what is known as telepathy—somebody else was putting the thoughts into your mind——"

"Piffle!"

"And, lastly, it may have been a spirit voice."

Grundy gave a violent start.

"Oh, I say! Do you really mean——"

"It's not a subject we can jaw about," said Wilkins gravely. "People who are a jolly sight wiser than we are have quarrelled on this topic. Some say that spirit communication is possible, and actually does take place; others sneer at the bare notion of such



Grundy knocked at the door, and when someone came he thrust forward a sock. "With Father Christmas's compliments!" he said. (See Chapter 3.)

a thing. There we must leave it. But, personally, I think in your case you were the victim of a delusion."

"Same here," said Gunn.

"Delusion or not," said Grundy, "I'm going to act on the messages I received. I'm not going to my uncle's place to-morrow—I'll wire him not to expect me till Christmas Day."

"What!"

"I'm going to stay in Wayland for a few days, and give what little help I can to the poor beggars who are in need of it. I should like you fellows to come over and give me a helping hand—but I don't suppose you'd dream of doing that."

Wilkins and Gunn were silent a very long time. Grundy's earnestness had at last impressed them.

They, too, began to think less of themselves and more of others.

Their thoughts were now turned to the poor and destitute, who were dreading Christmas rather than looking forward to it.

Presently Wilkins turned to Grundy.

"I'm with you," he said.

"Count me in, too," said Gunn.

Grundy's face brightened.

"That's fine!" he said. "Between the three of us, we shall do quite a lot of good in Wayland. And I'll ask the other fellows to help, too—Tom Merry and the rest. They needn't worry about Wayland. We'll see to that. But wherever they happen to be going for Christmas, they can give a helping hand to those who are down and out."

"Here comes Merry!" said Wilkins. "Mention it to him now."

Tom Merry was approaching the school gateway with Manners and Lowther. Grundy beckoned the captain of the Shell.

"I've got a suggestion to make, Merry," he said. "I don't take any credit for it, because it really isn't my own. It was put into my head by somebody else."

"Let's hear it," said Tom Merry good-naturedly.

"I propose that we form a Brighter Christmas Society."

"With what object?"

"With the object of making it a happy Christmas for those who are counting on getting a miserable one. You know what I mean. It's the kiddies that matter most at Christmas. They like to dream of Santa Claus, and all the rest of it. And when he doesn't turn up—when there are no toys or sweets or crackers—why, it's an awfully big disappointment—"

Grundy broke off, with a catch in his voice.

He half expected that Tom Merry and Co. would laugh at him. But the Terrible Three were not laughing. On the contrary, they were fighting hard to prevent themselves doing the other thing.

Tom Merry's voice was strangely husky as he replied to Grundy.

"That's the happiest wheeze I've heard for a long time," he said. "And we were selfish beasts not to have thought of it before. Yes, we'll form a Brighter Christmas Society, with the greatest of pleasure. What do you say to calling a Form-meeting in the common-room, and putting the proposition to them?"

"Ripping!" said Grundy.



"We ain't got no home!" said the little girl, half defiantly. "We're orfings!" "Then you come along with us!" said Grundy. (See Chapter 3)

The meeting was summoned forthwith.

Tom Merry took the chair, and he made an eloquent plea on behalf of those who seemed doomed to an unhappy Christmas.

"Gentlemen!" exclaimed Tom. "We can all do something, however small, to relieve the general distress. A parcel of food here, a half-crown there, will work wonders. As things stand, Christmas Day is merely a joy-day for the rich and for the middle-classes. The poor—the real poor, I mean—are shut off from all enjoyment. And these are the people we are going to brighten Christmas for."

"Hear, hear!"

"We shall all be working in one great cause," Tom Merry went on. "And it won't be wasted effort. So let's pile in, and make this Christmas as happy as possible for those who are worse off than ourselves."

"Bravo!"

There were a few dissenters. Aubrey Racke remarked that the poor were always with us, and that they never appreciated help when it was given to them. And Crooke declared that he could find better use for his time and money than by helping gutter-snipes.

For these uncharitable remarks, both Racke and Crooke were soundly bumped. They refused to join the Brighter Christmas Society; but there was no doubt that the society would get along very well without them.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

A Merry Christmas!

IT was Christmas Eve. Not the traditional Christmas Eve, when the snow lay thick on the ground.

Out of doors it was the coldest and most cheerless evening imaginable. Sleet was falling, and the pavements of Wayland were slippery and slushy.

Grundy was walking those pavements. He had walked them for days together, in company with Wilkins and Gunn. And the trio had done "good turns" by the dozen. Not with a flourish of trumpets, but quietly and by stealth. Coins had been slipped into grubby hands. Bags of sweets had been stuffed into the pockets of unsuspecting urchins. Parcels of Christmas fare had been distributed anonymously.

Grundy, Wilkins and Gunn had pooled their resources, and they now had only three pounds left, besides the money necessary to pay their fares down to Uncle Grundy's.

But three pounds could buy quite a lot, even in these days of inflated prices. And Grundy had decided to spend it all on this, the last evening of their operations in Wayland.

The juniors were staying at a small private hotel, and Grundy was now on his way to join his chums.

He strode along briskly.

Like the youth in "Excelsior,"

"In happy homes he saw the light

Of household fires gleam warm and bright."

But he saw other homes, too, where happiness had not crossed the threshold, and where "household fires" were rendered impossible owing to the price of coal.

"We'll have a final tour of Wayland to-night," muttered Grundy. "I'll tog up as Father Christmas; then nobody will know who I am. We'll buy up a stock of toys and Christmas stockings, and go round doing the Santa Claus stunt. It will be top-hole!"

Grundy was surprised to find how much happiness sprang from doing good. On first coming to Wayland, he had been inclined to regard it as a bit of a bore. But the days had sped merrily by, and the trio were now loth to leave the scene of their activities. In bringing joy to others, they had automatically brought joy to themselves. And Grundy felt indeed grateful to the "mysterious voice" which had prompted his actions.

He found Wilkins and Gunn awaiting him at the hotel.

"Our last night here, isn't it?" said Wilkins.

"Yes," replied Grundy. "And I was thinking it would be a good stunt for me to tog up as Father Christmas. I've got a costume in my trunk. Wore it last Christmas at a fancy-dress ball, you know. We've got a matter of three pounds left, and we can spend that on the kiddies."

"Ripping!" said Wilkins and Gunn, together.

"We'll have some grub first," said Grundy. "Then we'll set out on our merry tour."

A meal was prepared in the small, cosy dining-room of the hotel. Grundy and Co. did full justice to it, for they had been out in the open air all day.

"Wonder how Tom Merry and the others are getting on?" said Wilkins.

"They can't possibly have had such a happy time as we've had," said Grundy. "Everything's worked like a charm."

"And we're leaving Wayland in a better state than we found it," said Gunn.

"Yes, rather!"

As soon as the meal was over, Grundy retired to his room, and dressed himself in the garb of Father Christmas.

Wilkins and Gunn assisted their chum.

The quaint costume, bordered all round with white fur, completely transformed George Alfred Grundy. And the flowing beard reached down almost to his knees.

"You'll have all the kids bawling 'Beaver!' after you!" said Wilkins.

"I shan't mind a scrap," said Grundy, with a grin.

"Anything to give 'em a bit of fun on Christmas Eve. Pity you fellows haven't anything special to wear."

"We'll get some comic masks," said Gunn. "Then nobody will know who we are. We don't want ourselves advertised as Good Samaritans."

"No, rather not!"

"We must borrow a sack from somewhere, too," said Wilkins. "Santa Claus won't be complete without his sack."

The sack was obtained without much difficulty. And then the three chums went along to one of the biggest toyshops in the town. Here they purchased all sorts of

Christmas novelties, which were crammed into Grundy's sack.

Grundy's quaint appearance caused quite a sensation in the shop, and also in the streets. On emerging from the shop with his chums, he was followed by an excited crowd of youngsters.

"Where do we go first?" inquired Gunn.

"I've got a list of addresses here," said Grundy. "Every house on my list contains some kiddies—the children of parents who are wretchedly poor. They won't be expecting anything for Christmas, and these toys and things will come as a joyful surprise."

Each separate article had cost one-and-sixpence, so with the three pounds the juniors had been able to buy forty items. It would take a long time to distribute these at the various addresses, and it was not at all a pleasant sort of evening for being out of doors.

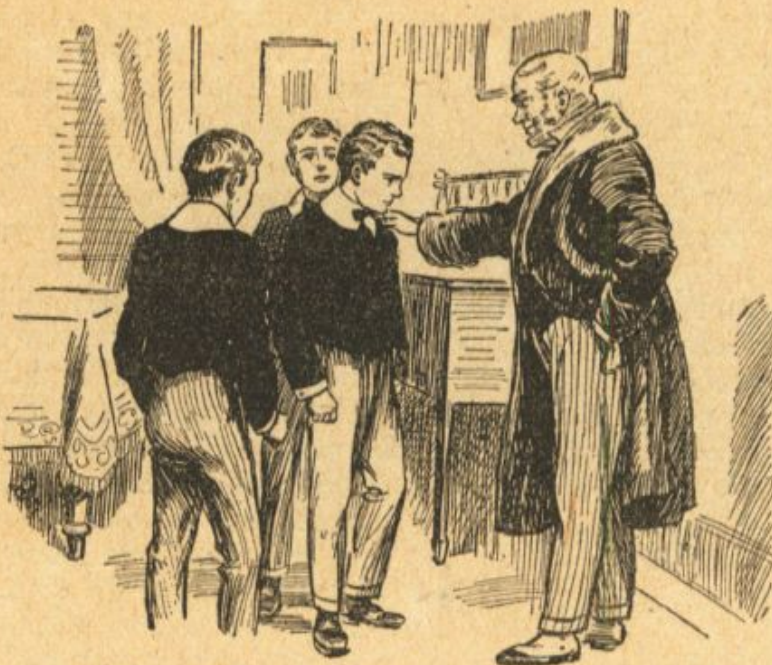
But Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn cared nothing for the elements. If a raging blizzard had been in progress,

they would have carried on just the same.

Grundy's method of delivering his gifts was as follows. He would knock at the door of each poor, ramshackle house, and when some one came he would thrust the Christmas stocking, or whatever it was, into their hands, with the remark, "For Jimmy, with Father Christmas's compliments," or, "For Doris, with love from Santa Claus."

Before the amazed householder could recover from his delighted astonishment the three Good Samaritans would be half-way down the street.

And so the good work went on, until



"I think it was perfectly splendid of you!" said the old gentleman cordially. (See Chapter 3.)

the sack which was slung over Father Christmas's shoulder was empty.

The hour was late, and Grundy & Co. were tired and footsore, for they had covered a wide area.

But they were happily tired, and it was with a feeling of contentment that they retraced their steps to the hotel.

"We'll take a short cut down this side street," said Grundy. "Hallo! What's this?"

Huddled together in a doorway, seeking protection from the falling sleet, were a boy and a girl. They were wretchedly clad, and shivering with cold. The boy was about seven, and the girl—apparently his sister—a little younger. Not only were they cold and ill-clad, but their faces were pinched and drawn with hunger.

Grundy stopped short, and glanced down at the waifs.

"Do you live here?" he inquired, pointing at the house.

"No, Farver Kiss'mus," was the boy's reply.

"Where do you live, then?"

"We ain't got no 'ome," said the little girl, half-defiantly. "We're orfings."

"You mean to say you wander about from pillar to post, without food or shelter?" said Wilkins, aghast.

The boy nodded. A couple of tears coursed down his grimy cheek. He was not so stoical as his sister.

"This is a shocking state of affairs," said Grundy.

"Can't help them," muttered Gunn. "We've blued all our cash."

"There's the money for our fares tomorrow," said Grundy.

"We can't break into that."

"Can't we? Well, we're jolly well going to, even if it means hoofing it down to my uncle's place!"

Wilkins and Gunn looked a bit startled at first. But they soon sided with Grundy.

"You come along with us," said the latter, addressing the two outcasts. "Don't be afraid. Father Christmas won't hurt you. And these fellows in the masks aren't nearly so terrible as they look. Come along!"

Late though the hour was, there was a restaurant open in the High Street. The "orfings" were taken inside, and plied with as much food as they could consume at one sitting. After which, Grundy & Co. found lodgings for them, and paid for their keep for a week.

"In the meanwhile," Grundy informed the landlady, "I'll ask my uncle to get in touch with an orphanage, so that these kids can be taken in."

Having performed the last and best good deed of the day, Grundy & Co. returned to the hotel. They were now "broke," and it was fortunate that their hotel bill had been settled right up to date.

"We've got a fifty-mile tramp in front of us to-morrow," said Wilkins, as the three chums turned in.

Grundy yawned sleepily.

"The morrow can take care of itself," he replied. "I've an idea that something's going to happen."

And something did. Something totally unexpected.

Uncle Grundy drove up to the hotel in his car. He had found out—from what source nobody ever knew—that his nephew, and Wilkins and Gunn, had been devoting their time to helping the poor of Wayland.

"I think it is perfectly splendid of you, my boys!" said the old gentleman cordially.

"Cut it out, uncle," said Grundy. "We only did what was right."

"I shall insist that you behaved splendidly!" said Uncle Grundy. "And now you are coming home with me in my car, to reap the reward of your labours in a really merry Christmas."

Shortly afterwards, the car was speeding through country lanes. And the strains of carol-singers were borne on the breeze.

"God rest ye, merry gentlemen!

Let nothing you dismay."

And merry indeed were the Christmas revels at Uncle Grundy's house. Happiness and high good-humour reigned supreme.

And happiest of all, as he plunged into the whirl of pleasure, was George Alfred Grundy.

THE END