



BY A. B. COOPER.

**I**VE double reason—good and bad—for remembering the Christmas of 189—, because, while it was the most humiliating day of my life, it ended my career as a swell cracksmán, and was the commencement of my better days.

I'd long had my eye on Wharton Manor as a crib worth the cracking, and, as I never was the mere midnight marauder who is popularly supposed to lurk under the bed until the family is asleep, I thought the dinner-hour on Christmas Eve a favourable opportunity for taking my pick of the jewel-cases of Lord Wharton's guests, and for annexing the unconsidered trifles that doubtless strewed their dressing-tables. I did not forget that some of the most valuable articles would at that moment be enhancing the charms of their fair owners, but, as I always worked single-handed and could not hope to carry away a van-load, I reckoned upon picking up sufficient to pay me handsomely for my trouble.

Audacity is half the battle in artistic burglary. I always trusted to my wits, and—I will say this for myself—I never carried a weapon of any kind. I took the fortunes of war and considered that, if I were dolt enough to walk into a trap or let another man's wits outwit mine, or another man's legs outrun mine, I ought to yield him the palm like a gentleman. And it was the fact

that things panned out so differently from anything I could have foreseen—but that's the end of the story, and we are still at the beginning.

Christmas, 189—, was the snowiest in my memory. It was a real Christmas-card Christmas, and as I stood in the deep shadow of a yew within forty yards of the manor the scene pleased my artistic eye not a little.

The great hall door was wide open in spite of the severity of the weather, for it was a still night, and a flood of rosy light from the crimson-covered lamps and fairy lights streamed out upon the drive. Low lights, too, burned in most of the upper windows, but as the whole house-party was at dinner they revealed no sign of life within. The drive swept round to my right as I faced the house. Having studied the geography of the neighbourhood, I knew where it was, certainly, or I should have had difficulty in locating it. A line of yew trees, similar to the one behind which I stood, was planted at intervals along the near edge of the drive, and the opposite side was bounded by a broad stone balustrade, something like the parapet of Waterloo Bridge, though not nearly so high.

This stone fence was a beautiful ornament to the manor and was admired by everybody, but, strangely enough, it was for use even more than ornament. The manor stood high, and the ground to the right fell away very suddenly into a deep

dingle. This dingle was full of bracken and brambles which filled the spaces between the young trees, but the rock cropped out here and there and made it a dangerous place on a dark night. That was the reason of the stone balustrade. Farther down the drive the ravine shallowed off, and winding paths went in and out, which made it a very jolly place in the summer.

When first I took my position of observation behind the yew I got a fright. Casting my eyes towards the balustrade, I saw what I thought was a man looking directly at me. It was the hat that made the figure appear so real, yet I could have laughed aloud at my fears the next minute. It was a man indeed, but it was a man of snow, built on the coping of the balustrade in imitation of a statue. The house was full of young fellows and girls, with a fair sprinkling of small boys—Lord Wharton had no fewer than six of his own; and they had spent the morning—all the lot of them—setting up this effigy, just for the fun of the thing.

This figure could not be seen from the front door because the sweep of the drive brought the yews into the line of sight. From

where I stood, however, I could have knocked his old silk hat off with a snowball, and, such are the mad impulses of our poor human nature, I could have found it in my heart almost to have had a shy.

Of course I did no such thing, for I could see by the dishes the flunkeys were carrying in that dinner was getting on, and that I was much later at my post than I had intended to be. I must bestir myself if I meant business.

Business! Yes—it was my business then, I'm sorry to say, and no easy business either. Yet I knew exactly what I was going to attempt and how I meant to attempt it. There was nothing original in the plan. Ivy and an open window summed it up. The back of the house would doubtless have been safer, but then my booty was in front, and at such an hour it would have been ten times more risky to traverse the house from back to front than to go boldly in at an upper front window.

Behold me then, ten minutes later, stealthily peering into a dimly-lighted room most luxuriously furnished. I had experienced more difficulty than usual—for I was as nimble as a cat—in negotiating the ivy,

because I wore a long, lightish coloured overcoat, made necessary by my tendency to rheumatism. Only a couple of candles in candlesticks of beaten silver served to light the room, but I could see the gleam of jewels and rich ornaments on the dressing-table, half hidden by a heavy curtain which hung from a sort of carved oaken bracket branching from the wall.

I stepped inside upon the thick pile of the carpet and stole noiselessly towards the glittering table. The next moment you might have knocked me down with a feather. Behind the curtain, quickly pocketing the smallest and most valuable objects he could see, was a man in evening dress—a big man, half



"THEY HAD SPENT THE MORNING SETTING UP THIS EFFIGY."

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as big again as myself, but with "gentleman's valet" written all over him. We were not four feet apart, and the gasp of astonishment I gave was enough to make him nearly jump out of his skin.

His dismay was only momentary. He knew the next instant what I was there for, and was evidently as quick-witted as I, for, before I could say "peas," he had darted between the wall and the curtain, banged the window into its place, and yelled "Thieves! thieves! thieves!"—a truer plural than anyone imagined—at the very top of his voice.

For the wink of an eyelid I meant to tackle him, but what was the use? Moments were mighty precious just then, and even while he was shouting—the sly wretch—I turned and bolted for the door, intending to make a dash through the camp of the enemy, and trust to my heels to get clear away.

As bad luck would have it, as I turned the bend of the stairs that brought me in full view of the brilliantly-lighted hall I ran full tilt against a big flunkey with a tray of wine-glasses. Talk about a shindy! A gas explosion would scarcely have made more noise. Broken glass, clattering tray, and the bumpety-bump of two heavy bodies falling down stairs, was something to remember. I fell uppermost, and giving myself a bounce up, with a prod below the belt which knocked the remaining wind out of the footman, I made for the door again as if a legion had been behind me.

Nor was it mere fancy, for in truth a legion was behind me. The valet's big voice must have penetrated to the dining-room, and the tremendous clatter of the footman and my luckless self caused by the downfall brought the party out like a swarm of bees.

"Thieves!" came like a thunderclap from the top of the stairs. The valet was playing the game to perfection. I had thirty yards start, but I knew that among the guests would be many a young athlete from the 'Varsities—men who could do their hundred in even time—socket and rigger men who were accustomed to rough and tumble—so my chances of getting clear away were none too rosy. Besides, the whole party were lighter shod and

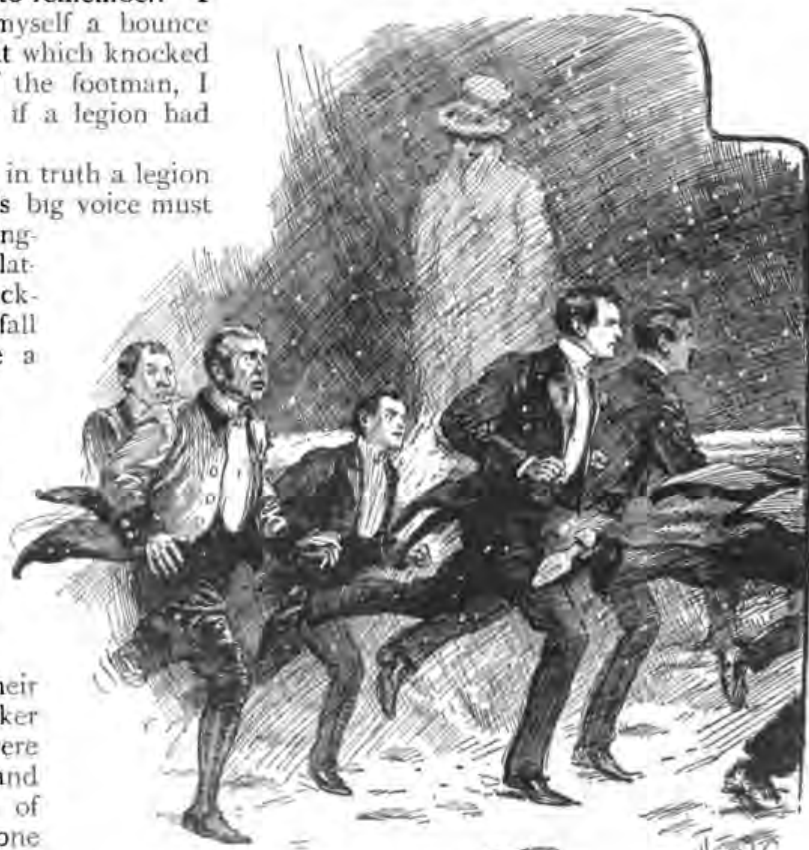
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clad than I, and I knew that these young fellows, though in no rig for snow, would not care a straw about ruining their dress shoes.

I got round the sweep of the drive and was in the straight. It was three hundred yards to the great gate, and cover, except the yews, was scarce. A gleam of lanterns ahead decided me. My way was blocked. Meanwhile my wits had been working at express speed. It was snowing again in heavy flakes. I purposely fell headlong into the snow piled on the edge of the drive, rolled over and over, and clutched an armful of it to my body and shoulders. I then scrambled up, leapt upon the stone balustrade, snatched the old silk hat—all snow-covered—from the head of the snow man, gave that unfortunate effigy a shove which toppled it neck and crop into the depths of the dingle, and myself dropped upon my knees on the top of the snowy foundation it had left behind it.

It was the work of five seconds at the most, and there was I, with the snow-crowned hat over my eyes, my overcoat thickly caked with snow and my legs wholly invisible, posing in the room and stead of the man of snow.

The hue and cry went past me like a whirl-



"THE HUE AND CRY WENT PAST ME  
LIKE A WHIRLWIND."

PACIFIC  
1880

wind, half-a-dozen flunkeys in their knee-breeches and yellow stockings bringing up the rear. They ran full speed, thirty yards past my post of observation, into a band of waits, with lanterns and instruments, from the village. These yokels were ready to turn and fly themselves when they saw the strange exodus from the Manor, thinking, no doubt, that all the ghosts of which the old house was well known to be the trysting-place had suddenly appeared—not in singles but in battalions—and scared the guests away from their dinner and out of their five senses.

But the sudden halt didn't help me in the least. The dilemma was distinctly mutual, and I did not bless the waits one little bit. Had the thief gone down the drive they would surely have seen him. It was a perfect mystery how he could possibly have dodged them. He had been seen in full flight round the bend. He must either have gone over into the dingle—a most unlikely course if he knew what he was doing—or he was hiding behind the yews.

Then commenced a game of hide and seek. I nearly burst with laughter as I saw this mixed company dodge in and out among the sombre trees and catch at each other convulsively, each thinking the other a burglar. But there was no opportune opening for me. All I could do was to kneel stock still. One of the waits pointed me out. His attitude showed terror though I could not see his face. The laugh that greeted his "find" sent him behind a yew tree on a fresh trail and very greatly reassured me. I evidently looked my part.

Just then there was another arrival—the local policeman and a big man in plain clothes whom I guessed was a 'tec. Lord Wharton and some of the guests were in a group near me when they came along, and I heard the whole colloquy. Their arrival at that moment was quite unconnected with my affair, but it seemed to fit into the circumstances as detailed by his lordship in a few sentences.

I heard the 'tec say: "He's a very old hand, known commonly as 'Toff' Smith, but his real name is Charles Markland. He's wanted for a dozen big jobs, and I've had almost certain advice that he's somewhere in this neighbourhood."

"It'll be he," said his lordship, "but he has been baulked this time. Lieutenant Fontenoy's valet was too quick for him. He has got away in the most amazing fashion, but it's a comfort to know that he has gone empty-handed."

I'd heard of "Toff" Smith. He was one of the big-wigs of the profession—a perfect Napoleon of burglary—but it goes without saying I was not he. So I was now not only personating a snow man but involuntarily standing in the shoes of "Toff" Smith as well.

"He's got clear away!" one cried. "Why trouble further? James tells me he did not have time to pick up a pin. Let us have a lark while we're out." I guessed it was Lieutenant Fontenoy who spoke, and all the youngsters, who had enjoyed the whole thing immensely, set up a shout, for he had evidently suggested something.

"Cock-shies! Pay yer penny and take yer chance! Now, then, fair and square! No, don't cross the drive. Who'll knock his hat off first? Take yer chice—coker-nut or cigar! I'm frozen to death! It'll warm us up!"

These were the cries I heard, but I didn't at the first blush tumble to their meaning. The ladies, clad in thick wraps, were at the windows all this time, where they could look along the drive and get news of the search. Now I heard them laugh merrily as a small boy ran across and made some communication to them.

I quickly learned what it was. They were to witness a bombardment. The whole band, guests and waits—the police had hurried off—were gathered together about twenty yards from where I knelt, and at the word of command they let fly.

I have enjoyed snowballing in my time, but that was when I had a chance of potting my opponent in the nape of the neck when he was stooping for ammunition. But to be the sole target for thirty well-directed missiles per second is another story. Move I dared not. I must grin and bear it, or, failing that, bear it without grinning. I had jammed the beastly old hat too tightly over my cranium for it to be easily dislodged, and the fun in consequence waxed fast and furious.

By degrees discipline broke down, and the set distance was no longer regarded. Snowballs innumerable came at me from a range of a few yards with terrific force. Recognition was quickly put out of the question, for had I been a veritable snow man I could not have looked more like one. Every snowball that hit—and few, indeed, missed—left its contribution to my make-up, and I was shortly in peril of suffocation from the accumulation of snow about my mouth and nostrils, and almost equally in danger of temporary blindness, but that the hat-rim protected me enough, at least, to keep half an eye intact.

Had not the top of the wall been broad and I on my knees, I must inevitably have gone over willy-nilly; but hitherto I had kept my place, and I meant to continue to do so, for the fall backwards had greater terrors for me even than remaining where I was.

But now the clapping of fair hands, the exhilarating exercise, the excitement of the last twenty minutes, and the spirit of mad revel which enters into the hearts of all men occasionally, wrought my doom.

The waits, as aforementioned, had been pressed into the fray. It was Christmas time, and class distinctions went by the board. Even the man who played the big bass viol had propped his instrument against a tree and

which might put an end to my career more surely than the dingle: I never waited for the shock. I went down without a touch, and, rolling over and over down the steep bank, I only remember thinking I should never stop, and—then—nothing!

How I got to Everledge—a small town five miles away—I never rightly knew. I came to myself in the dingle, while it was still dark, with pains in every limb. The nurse at the Cottage Hospital—bless her—tells me that I was picked up in an apparently dying state, and everybody sympathized with my being lost in the snow. I never told her the truth—how could I when she was so kind and good!—but if she had guessed why I was so



"THEY LEVELLED THE BASS FIDDLE LIKE A BATTERING-RAM."

joined in the sport. But now—like me—they were to be sorry they had come.

Half-a-dozen young sparks, to vary the amusement, seized the big bass fiddle, and the youngsters fought for clarinet, hautboy, ophicleide, euphonium, and trombone! Then, to the sound of a wild, unearthly pibroch, they levelled the bass fiddle like a battering-ram and charged for the supposed snow man with shouts of laughter, thinking to demolish it finally and end the sport.

I saw it coming, and I knew that the bottom end of a bass fiddle has an ugly spike,

interested in the district weekly paper she might have suspected something.

Here is the conclusion of the paragraph which took my eye: "This is one of the most cunning robberies on record. The detectives think the whole affair was a put-up job on the part of 'Toff' Smith—Lieutenant Fontenoy's valet—who left a most impudent note behind him, for while the party were all disporting themselves with the snow man, or applauding from the windows, he got clear away with three thousand pounds' worth of jewellery."