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GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

£25 in Prizes in Simple
Competition Starting This Week!

EVERY WEDNESDAY.



No. 879.
Vol. XXVI.
December 13th,
1924.

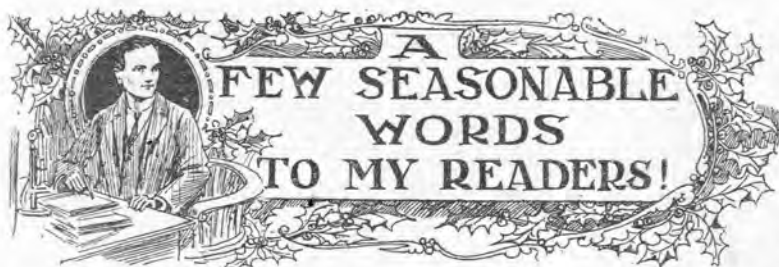
The GEM 2nd

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REAPING A HARVEST AT EASTWOOD HOUSE!

The chums of St. Jim's, guests at Eastwood House, give the carolers a hearty welcome! (An incident from the Grand Lona Complete Christmas Story of Tom Merry & Co. inside.)



MY DEAR CHUMS,—Just about the jolliest duty of the whole twelve months awaits me. Quite simple, of course! It's only to wish all Gemites and everybody a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Only that! It's a lot, and it means more, for we want to see everybody extra busy in the new times ahead pushing clouds away, and adding to the good cheer of the world. Good luck to all my chums! May they have the finest Christmas that ever was!

OUR GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

But now we have something more. This week I can introduce to all my friends the best Christmas Bumper Issue of the GEM that could be imagined. It really is prime, with that triumphant yarn by the inexhaustible, ceaselessly fertile Martin Clifford. He has put sympathy and fun, and all the rest of the needful ingredients into his famous story of Talbot, Jim Dawlish, and the others. You might pass this number along to some pal who is not yet a GEM reader. He will be! He will say the new Competition is a thumping good one. My

heartiest wishes go out to all these cheery newcomers.

"LUMLEY-LUMLEY'S COUP!" By Martin Clifford.

Next week Lumley-Lumley will be found in the gripping story of St. Jim's. Lumley-Lumley's visits are few and far between; but, no matter, he makes up for this by excellence. In next week's superb tale we find the shadow of suspicion settling on Lumley-Lumley. There has been a fire, and in the confusion a priceless jewel goes missing. The conclusions arrived at might have been obvious, but the obvious is often incorrect. Look out for amazing happenings after the conflagration at Colonel Wenham's place! The "Green Man" is again to the fore, likewise that particularly smart detective, Ferfers Locke, not forgetting a nimble gang of crooks.

"THE RADIO CHAIN MYSTERY!" By Lester Bidston.

Those Aero Chums are found going it again in our next. Trust Mr. Lester Bidston for that! From the first start off there was plenty of good reason for feeling sure and certain of Lyle Lindsay and Jerry O'Gorman. They are two

wonderful sleuths of the airways, and, thanks to surpassing cleverness, they get on the track of the unprincipled scamp, Ultima. Ultima is the man who sticks at nothing to enrich himself by importing stuff which the law says must not be brought into the country. Ultima says it shall, by hook or by crook. Just watch the eerie developments in our next!

THE "ERRORS" COMPETITION!

No mistake about this! It may be full of errors—the picture, I mean, but that's nothing. All you have to do is to sit down to a most attractive puzzle and set your thinking apparatus buzzing. You will get there! Sometimes the odd little error which creeps in when nobody is looking is the source of much merriment. The second picture appears next Wednesday. Have a shot at it. The prizes are magnificent.

THE KING'S NAVY!

Our companion paper, the "Magnet," has scored mightily with those brilliant photogravure plates of the fighting ships. The "Magnet" is still scoring, for 'tis its nature to. See the issue of the great Greyfriars' paper out this week. You will be charmed with the plate, also with the yarns.

"CHUMS OF THE IRON WAY!" By Roland Spencer and Francis Warwick.

Really tip-top, interesting letters reach me about our serial. The coming instalment goes one better for 'rip and sensation. This is a marvellous yarn of the shining metal track, and the men behind—the fine fellows on the footplate and in the shops.

Your Editor.

Some of the Stories in the "HOLIDAY ANNUAL!"



A Stirring
Long Story
of the World's Greatest
Motor Road-race.

"JACKSON'S DIP!" By P. G. Wodehouse.

"THE BORDER RAIDERS!" By Gordon Wallace.

"THE WILD MAN OF BORNEO!" By Duncan Storm.

"ST. KATIE'S BIG SPLASH!" By Michael Poole.

"THE RIVAL EDITORS!" By Frank Richards.



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THRILLING PIRATE ROMANCE. By Stuart Martin.

"THE BEGGAR AT THE GATE!" By Howard Pease and Knight Jesse.

"FORBIDDEN TO FIGHT!" By Martin Clifford.

"UNDER THE FALLS!" By M. Wynne.

By FRANK RICHARDS. "THE BISHOP'S MEDAL!" By Martin Clifford.

MANY WONDERFUL COLOURED PLATES

THIS FAMOUS STORY-BOOK IS NOW ON SALE!

6/-

In spite of the merrymaking and jollity at Lord Eastwood's grand house, we hear again of the shadow of the bygone. Old favourites, well-known, play their part—straightforward Reginald Talbot, the stalwart John Rivers, also pretty Marie Rivers, and other friends who form the happy band of—



Off for the Holidays!

"**H**ERE she comes!" said Monty Lowther of the Shell Form at St. Jim's. "Hurrah!"

Lowther was not referring to a member of the fair sex, but to the train which came steaming into Wayland Junction.

The platform was thronged with St. Jim's fellows—a cheery, clamorous crowd.

Breaking-up Day had come at last, and the Christmas vacation was no longer a distant prospect, but a glorious reality.

All the hustle and bustle of packing was over, and the St. Jim's fellows had hired conveyances of various kinds to bring them over to Wayland. From there the majority would proceed to London, where they would catch connections to the north, south, east, or west of England—wherever their homes happened to be.

A few were going even farther afield. Kildare of the Sixth was going to his home in Ireland. And Pat Reilly of the Fourth was also bound for the Emerald Isle.

In the ordinary way, Fatty Wynn would have gone to Wales, and his chum Kerr to Scotland. But they were not going home for Christmas. They had been invited to spend the vacation with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, at Eastwood House, and they had jumped at the invitation.

Guests at Eastwood House—the magnificent country mansion which was the property of Gussy's sire, Lord Eastwood—were always assured of a good time. Lord Eastwood was one of the most genial of men—never more happy than when he was entertaining a party of schoolboys.

It was going to be a very big party on this occasion.

Arthur Augustus had been allowed to invite as many friends as he chose. And he had issued invitations broadcast, as it were.

Tom Merry & Co., the heroes of the Shell, had been invited. So had Gussy's study-mates—Jack Blake, Herries, and Digby.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, the shining lights of the New House, were of the company. And so was Talbot of the Shell, and Talbot's charming girl chum, Marie Rivers, the school nurse.

GUSSY'S CHRISTMAS GUESTS!

A Grand School Yarn dealing with the Exciting Christmas Adventures of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's.

BY

Martin Clifford.

Wally D'Arcy, the lively, gay-spirited minor of Arthur Augustus, was included as a matter of course. And Wally, without first consulting his major in the matter, had decided to bring his three chosen chums of the fag fraternity—Curly Gibson, Jameson, and Joe Frayne.

Wally had been quite prepared to meet with violent objections from his major. But Gussy didn't object. In fact, he fairly beamed when he discovered that the three fags were coming.

"You did quite wight to invite them, Wally," said Arthur Augustus. "The more the mewwiah, bai Jove!"

Gussy, indeed, was so brimming over with the spirit of peace on earth and goodwill towards men that he would probably have invited the whole of St. Jim's—masters and kitchen staff included—had not his chums advised him to go easy.

Already there were sixteen in the party. More would have been a crowd, and would have seriously taxed the resources of Lord Eastwood's domestic staff.

It was just like Gussy to have ordered reserved carriages for the occasion.

"It will cost wathah a lot, deah boys," Arthur Augustus had explained. "but it would be twightfully infwa dig, besides bein' vewy inconvenient, to twavel in the othah part of the twain, with the common herd. If there's anythin' I hate, it's bein' packed in a wailway-cawwage like so many sardines. That sort of thing simply wains a fellow's togs!"

So a number of compartments on the train—which was a corridor-train—had been specially reserved, and notices to that effect had been pasted on the windows.

When the train drew up alongside the platform the guard unlocked the reserved carriages, and the juniors tumbled in—Gussy having first of all ushered Marie Rivers into a carriage with courtly politeness, holding open the door with one hand, and raising his shining silk "topper" with the other.

The train was fairly besieged with schoolboys. Ordinary members of the public were swallowed up in the crowd. Porters rushed hither and thither with laden trollies, voices of seniors were booming, voices of fags were shrilly squeaking. All was bustle and animation.

Marie Rivers had a cosy corner-seat, and Talbot seated himself opposite her. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther jumped into the same carriage, and beckoned Arthur Augustus to follow. But Gussy hesitated on the platform. "I am wathah concerned about my luggage, deah boys," he said.

"The porters will see to that," said Tom Merry. "Yaas. But I am afraid of my hat-boxes gettin' cwushed. You know what these portahs are. The last time I twavelled by twain I saw a portah sittin' on one of my hat-boxes."

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mappin' his perspiwin' bwow. When I opened the box, I found he had squashed my toppahs as flat as pancakes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys, it is no laughin' mattah. I think I ought to go an' make suah that my luggage is hein' tweated with pwopah wespect."

"How much luggage have you got, Gussy?" laughed Manners.

"Oh, not a great deal!" said Monty Lowther, before Gussy could answer the question. "A dozen cabin-trunks, a few sea-chests, a score of portinanteaux, and about a gross of hat-boxes—not to mention the suit-cases and the gladstone bags!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus screwed his celebrated monocle into his eye, and glared at Monty Lowther.

"I am not amused," he said icily. "If it was not holiday-time, Lowthah, I should curb your so-called sense of humah by the administration of a feahful thwashin'!"

"Save me!" gasped Lowther, dodging behind Tom Merry for protection. And his assumed terror was so ludicrous that even Arthur Augustus had to smile.

"I don't think I will bothah about my luggage, aftah all," he said, stepping into the carriage. "If I discovah, when we get to the othah end, that any sciewous damage has been done I shall sue the railway company."

"Good!" said Tom Merry, with a laugh.

Lots of fellows came up to the carriage-window to say good-bye.

Kildare of the Sixth, his genial face glowing, wished the juniors a pleasant holiday, and shook hands all round. Dick Redfern, Lawrence, and Owen, who were going to spend the vacation down in Cornwall, looked in with cheery faces, and expressed the hope that Gussy and his guests would enjoy themselves up to the hilt.

Baggy Trimble, the fat fellow of the Fourth, also came along to say good-bye. But Baggy's manner was less genial. He felt very sore at not having been invited to Eastwood House by Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I say, Gussy!" said Trimble, blinking at the swell of St. Jim's. "I suppose you haven't changed your mind at the last moment—about taking me, I mean?"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"I have not changed my mind, Twimble. Without wishin' to hurt your feelin's in any way, I must say that you are the last fellow in the world that I should dream of invitin' to my patah's place!"

"In fact, without wishing to be the slightest bit rude, we regard you as a greedy glutton and an awful boulder, and we wouldn't have you at any price!" chuckled Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts!" said Trimble, with a snort. "I wouldn't come with you now, not if you begged me on bended knees! I shall spend Christmas at Trimble Towers—my pater's country seat, you know."

"I suppose his town seat is on the Embankment?" suggested Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy Trimble grew purple at this deadly insult. He flourished a fat fist at the smiling occupants of the carriage, then he rolled indignantly away to find a carriage for himself, for the train was about to start.

The next moment, to the accompaniment of rousing cheers and merry voices raised in song, the train moved forward with a series of spasmodic jerks and slowly puffed its way out of the station.

The Figure in the Corridor!

"WEATHER'S Christmassy enough, anyway," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Snow was falling thick and fast. An avalanche of white flakes pattered against the carriage windows. The fields and hedges on either side were covered as with a magic mantle.

The St. Jim's juniors conjured up visions of glorious snow-fights in the grounds of Eastwood House. Doubtless also the ponds and lakes in the district would be frozen over, in which event there would be skating. The members of the party were optimists, for they had all brought their skates with them.

Arthur Augustus glanced at Marie Rivers.

"Quite comfay in the cornah, deah gal?" he asked.

"Quite, thanks!" said Miss Marie, nodding and smiling.

At that moment a shadow darkened the carriage window. A burly figure had appeared in the corridor of the train.

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It was the figure of a tall, square-shouldered man, wearing a dyed trench-coat with a turned-up collar.

Presumably the man had stepped out of a non-smoking compartment in order to enjoy a pipe in the corridor. He lounged with his back to the window of the juniors' carriage, and was in the act of lighting up.

Arthur Augustus frowned.

"That man is obstwuctin' our view," he complained. "I considah his mannahs are shockin'. Shall I wequest him to wemove his objectionable person from our window, deah boys?"

"I shouldn't if I were you," said Tom Merry. "Dash it all, it's a free country! There's no law against a man standing in the corridor if he wants to. I expect he's been strap-hanging in a non-smoker full of old ladies, and he feels fed-up. I don't blame him for coming out into the corridor for a smoke."

"But he needn't obstwuct our view—"

"There's another window, Gussy," Talbot pointed out. "We can see all we want to see through that."

"That's so," said Lowther. "Leave the poor chap alone, Gussy. Let him smoke his pipe of peace—or his piece of pipe, as the case may be."

So the man in the corridor—of whom the juniors had only a back view—was permitted to remain undisturbed.

The train rattled on through the snowy landscape, and Arthur Augustus soon forgot his temporary annoyance. He turned once more to Marie Rivers.

"I have some good news for you, Miss Mawie," he said. "I intended to keep it a secret, but—"

The juniors grinned. They knew how impossible it was for Arthur Augustus to keep a secret—at any rate, for long. Gussy's tongue wagged so readily that in a very short time his "secrets" were public property.

"I have sent an invitation to your fathah, Mr. John Wivahs, to come an' spend Chwistmas with us," said Arthur Augustus.

At the mention of the name of John Rivers, the celebrated Scotland Yard detective, the man in the corridor—who was in a position to hear every word that was said in the carriage—gave a perceptible start. But he did not turn his head.

As for Miss Marie, her cheeks glowed and she clapped her hands impulsively.

"Oh, how good of you, D'Arcy!" she said. "To tell the truth, I was feeling just a wee bit miserable at the thought of spending Christmas away from father. He has been working tremendously hard at Scotland Yard, and the rest and change will do him a world of good."

"Yes, rather!" chimed in Talbot. "I take it Mr. Rivers has accepted the invitation, Gussy?"

"I asked him to send a telegram to Eastwood House," explained Arthur Augustus. "It will have awwived by the time we get there. I have no doubt that Mr. Wivahs will accept."

"That will bring the number up to seventeen," said Tom Merry. "My hat! It will be a regular house-warming!"

"Your domestic staff will be going on strike, Gussy," said Manners.

"Not at all, deah boy. The patah is gettin' extwa help to cope with the Chwistmas wash. He has w'ritten to a London agency, an' they are sendin' us a first-class butlah—a highly respectable person named Bingham. He will assist Billington, our pwesent butlah, with his duties. Bingham is due to awwive this evenin' at Eastwood House."

"Good!"

The man in the corridor was listening with all his ears to the conversation. He had not shifted his position. His burly form still darkened the carriage window, and he appeared to be puffing away unconcernedly at his pipe. But had the juniors been able to see his face they would have noticed that his eyes were glittering with excitement.

"From what I can hear of it, Gussy, we're going to have the time of our lives," said Tom Merry. "Life will be one glorious round of eating, drinking, and being merry!"

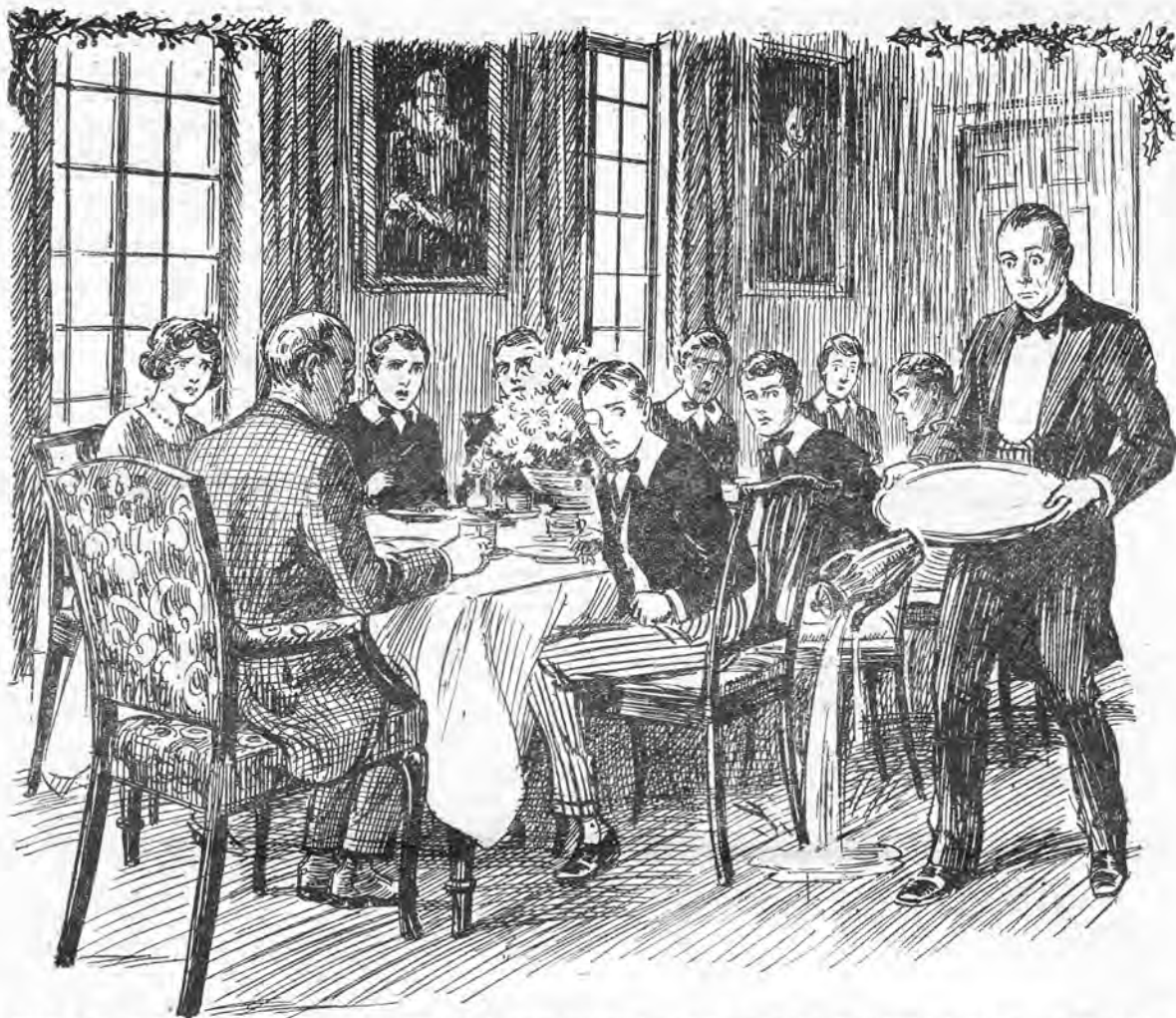
"Well, you'll always be Merry, Tommy!" said Lowther, with a grin. "Unless you change your name by deed of poll, that is."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no weason, deah boys, why we should not have a weally wippin' time," said Arthur Augustus, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. "My patah will do ewevythin' in his powah to give us a mewvy Chwistmas. Do you know one of the things he has done? He asked me to keep it a secret, but—"

A roar of laughter interrupted Arthur Augustus. Another secret was about to be let out of the bag.

"I quite fail to see what I have said to excite your wisi-bility, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "I'll tell you what my patah has done. He has taken the valuable gold plate of the D'Arcy family out of safe deposit in London, where it has been kept, an' he is going to use it for Chwistmas, as a compliment to his guests."



"I say, deah boys, there's a haunted house a few miles away twom heah," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I vote we go an' exploah it!" Bingham, the butler, was so startled at the mention of the haunted house that he dropped the tray he was carrying. (See page 10.)

"Oh, my hat!"

"Gold plate!" gasped Tom Merry. "You often hear of silver plate, but I thought that gold plate was a special luxury for millionaires."

"Well, my patah isn't fah short of bein' a millionaire," said Arthur Augustus. "He is a man of vast wesources. But this gold plate has been in our family for generations. It used to be kept at Eastwood House; but there were so many attempts to burgle it that my patah became anxious for its safety. So he was advised to keep it in one of the big safe-deposit in 'town. They are absolutely burglah-pwoof, you know."

"But isn't it rather risky keeping such valuable gold plate in the house over Christmas?" said Marie Rivers.

Arthur Augustus shrugged his shoulders.

"There's not much wisk, deah gal. I don't suppose any membahs of the burglin' p'fession know that the gold plate has been taken out of safe-deposit an' wemoved to Eastwood House. An' even if it did leak out, there will be quite enough of us in the house to deal with any would-be burglahs."

"Yes, rather."

"A skirmish with burglars on Christmas Eve would be jolly exciting," said Monty Lowther. "I rather fancy the burglars would come off second best."

"It would have to be a very determined attempt to succeed, anyway," said Tom Merry. "How much is the gold plate valued at, Gussy?"

"I don't know its exact value, deah boy, but it wwns into several thousands of pounds."

"My hat!"

Talbot sat silent in his corner seat, and his eyes met those of Marie Rivers, seated opposite. The thoughts of both of them went instinctively back to the old days—to the days when John Rivers had been the leader of a powerful gang of looters and law-breakers. Talbot himself had belonged to that gang in his pre-school days. He had been a skilled cracksmen, in spite of his early age. John Rivers had said of him, not without admiration, that he had the touch of a magician for a safe.

Those dark old days were happily over. They had been relegated to the limbo of the past—not the forgotten past, for it had its memories, and its ghosts. Often they would rise before Talbot and Marie, blotting out their happiness for a brief time, and reminding them that their lives had not always flowed along so smoothly and placidly as they flowed now.

What changes had happened since those unhappy, far-off days!

No longer was John Rivers a master-criminal and the friend of criminals. Redeeming his past by a magnificent War record, he had risen to a position of trust and honour at Scotland Yard. He, who had once been the sworn foe of detectives, was now himself a detective, allied to the forces of law and order.

The old gang of cracksmen were extinct. But from the ashes of that gang, as it were, another gang had arisen, under the leadership of a man named Jim Dawlish. This cunning scoundrel had made repeated efforts to persuade Talbot and Miss Marie to join his band of lawbreakers. Often he had gone to desperate lengths to bring about this

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end. But he had never succeeded, nor was he ever likely to succeed.

Jim Dawlish had been lost sight of for quite a long time. His present whereabouts were unknown. Possibly he had spent the last few Christmas Days in one of his Majesty's prisons, serving a term of penal servitude. At all events, neither Talbot nor Miss Marie, nor any of the St. Jim's juniors wanted to set eyes on Jim Dawlish again.

Talbot and his girl chum were soon brought out of their gloomy reverie. That temporary vision of the past had faded, and they chatted lightly of the good time that was in store for them at Eastwood House.

At length the man in the corridor removed his burly person from the carriage window and disappeared. And Arthur Augustus was relieved to see him go, for there was now an uninterrupted view of the snowy landscape.

The train rushed on, and faster and faster fell the snow.

It was a snowstorm of the old-fashioned sort, to which our forefathers of the coaching days had been accustomed. But certain cheery mortals were not afraid to brave the elements, for as the train thundered on its way sounds of carol-singing floated to the ears of the St. Jim's juniors.

"God rest you, merry gentlemen!
Let nothing you dismay!"

And certainly no young gentlemen could have looked less dismayed at that moment than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his guests from St. Jim's!

The Guests Arrive!

"**H**EAH we are, deah boys!" There was a jamming-on of brakes, and a jarring of wheels, and the train drew up with a sudden jolt at the little station of Eastwood Priors.

Arthur Augustus jumped out, and assisted Marie Rivers to alight. Then a deep, pleasant voice hailed him, and Gussy turned, to find Lord Eastwood standing on the platform.

The hands of father and son met in a crushing grip.

"Welcome home, my dear boy!" said Lord Eastwood, who was warmly attached to his elegant son. "I trust all our guests have arrived safely?"

"Yaas, wathah, patah!"

There was quite a gathering of the clans on the little platform.

Jack Blake and Herries and Digby jumped out of one carriage, and Figgins and Kerr and Wynn out of another. Wally D'Arcy and his fellow-fags tumbled out of a third.

Wally D'Arcy at once rushed up to his father and grasped his hand, and put up his impudent face for a paternal kiss. And then Lord Eastwood spent a very busy five minutes shaking hands all round.

"Quite a large family," he observed, with a smile. "It is fortunate that I have obtained the services of an extra butler, and also an assistant cook. Otherwise, I should never be able to feed you all! And that would be a tragedy, wouldn't it, Wynn?"

"It would indeed, sir!" said Fatty Wynn, laughing.

"Have you heard from Mr. John Wivahs, patah?" inquired Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, my boy."

"He is comin'?"

"He will arrive to-morrow evening."

"Huwah!"

Everyone was pleased to know that Miss Marie's father was to join the party.

John Rivers was very popular with the St. Jim's juniors. Moreover, they considered it would be very useful to have a detective among the guests, in view of the fact that the valuable family plate was in the house.

"This way, my dear boys!" said Lord Eastwood cordially. "The cars are waiting outside."

Arthur Augustus, who had all the tickets, gave them up to the aged and venerable stationmaster, who also acted as porter, ticket-collector, and general factotum. The old man touched his hat respectfully to the swell of St. Jim's, and wished him the compliments of the season. Then the party passed out through the little booking-office.

The winter dusk was beginning to fall, and the snow lay deep all around—"deep and crisp and even."

Snow was still falling, too, and the white flakes came wheeling and whirling through the air.

"It's never going to stop snowing!" declared Figgins.

"Who cares?" said Monty Lowther gaily. "Christmas is

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coming! And, personally, I feel so jolly bucked with life that I don't care if it snows."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Three large, comfortable cars stood in readiness outside the station. And Lord Eastwood's guests—a happy throng indeed—were soon being driven rapidly away through the snow.

Everything had a cheery, Christmassy aspect. Lights twinkled in the village as the cars sped through. The cottages, crested with snow, might have been part of a fairy-land scene. Away in the distance, as far as the eye could see in the deepening dusk, stretched fields and hedgerows, their summer green exchanged for winter's white.

It all seemed a dream to the St. Jim's party.

The old school seemed very far away now. The musty Form-rooms, the familiar corridors and studies, were now deserted.

How dull and dead St. Jim's would be during the next few weeks! The juniors could picture the old school, standing grey and grim beneath the snow's soft pattering. They could picture, too, Taggles, the porter, seated by the fire in his little parlour, puffing his pipe in peace, and congratulating himself on the fact that he would not be "worried out of his wits" by any "young warmints" until the new term began.

Latin and Greek, maths and history, grammar and geography—these drudgeries of the Form-room had no place in the glorious festival of Christmas. The St. Jim's juniors were free to enjoy themselves at their own sweet will—for no restrictions of any kind were imposed upon them while they were the guests of Lord Eastwood. It was not necessary to impose restrictions, for no one was likely to take any unsportsmanlike advantage of the numerous privileges.

Arthur Augustus had chosen his guests well. There wasn't a single fellow there who did not deserve to be included in the company. And it looked like being a record Christmas, so far as fun and revelry and good sport were concerned.

The three cars turned in at the gates of Eastwood House and passed up the long drive, with its avenue of trees standing like snowy sentinels on either side.

The cars then disgorged their passengers, and Arthur Augustus lost no time in making his guests feel at home.

Billington, the butler, stood at the top of the front steps when the party arrived.

"Has the new butler arrived yet, Billington?" inquired Lord Eastwood.

"No, your lordship."

Lord Eastwood frowned a little.

"It is five o'clock," he said, as a mellow chime came from the grandfather clock in the hall. "I gave instructions that Bingham was to be here at this hour. He should, in fact, have arrived by the same train as my guests. But I saw nothing of him on the platform. However, I admit I was too busy to keep a special look-out for him."

Billington nodded.

"I have no doubt that Bingham will arrive very shortly, your lordship," he said. "The agency from which he was engaged has never failed your lordship yet."

"That is quite true," murmured Lord Eastwood. "Perhaps I am worrying unduly. But it would be a tragedy if Bingham failed to turn up. It is imperative that you should have help, Billington, over the Christmas holidays."

"If, through some mischance, the new man does not arrive, your lordship, I will do my best to manage single-handed," said the butler.

"I know you will, Billington. But I don't want you to bear the whole brunt of the Christmas work. Kindly serve tea now. My guests have brought healthy appetites with them."

"Very good, your lordship."

It was an excellent tea that was served to the guests in the oak-panelled dining-room.

Fatty Wynn, ravenous after the long journey, declared that it was one of the finest spreads he had ever sat down to. But there was the Christmas dinner to come, and when that great function arrived, Fatty would have to admit that the present spread was merely a humble snack by comparison.

Tea was a merry meal, and when it was over the guests amused themselves in various ways.

Tom Merry & Co., with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as their pilot and guide, made a tour of the fine old mansion. It was not new to them, but the historic house—the seat of the D'Arcy family for generations—never failed to fascinate them. Their favourite room was that in which the relics of the past were stored, including the coats of mail which Gussy's knightly ancestors had worn when they rode to the tourney.

Wally D'Arcy and his chums amused themselves by

constructing a snow-man on the lawn. It was a grotesque figure, and looked quite ghostly in the gloom.

Having spent over an hour in erecting the snow-man, the fags destroyed their patient handiwork in a couple of minutes. Then they proceeded to improve the shining hour, or rather, the dusky hour, by pelting each other with snowballs.

Lord Eastwood, as he stood in the drawing-room and listened to their merry voices, smiled. And then he sighed a trifle wistfully, and reflected that he would cheerfully sacrifice home and fortune and estate if only he could become a happy, care-free boy again, like the frolicsome fags who were at that moment engaged in mimic warfare on the lawn.

The House On The Heath!

MR. REUBEN BINGHAM alighted from the train on to the little platform of Eastwood Priors.

Mr. Bingham was a plump, prosperous-looking personage. He might have been taken for a millionaire, or a peace-profiteer, instead of merely a butler in the service of a London agency. His heavy overcoat was fur-lined, his shoes were of patent leather, and his hat was one of which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would not have been ashamed.

But, with all his air of prosperity, Mr. Reuben Bingham wore a worried look. He had missed his train in London, and had been obliged to take the next one. This meant that he would arrive at Eastwood House an hour after the appointed time.

Mr. Bingham liked to be punctual, and he felt very apprehensive that Lord Eastwood would take him to task for arriving so late.

Armed with his suitcase the butler moved towards the exit. He was the only passenger to alight from the train.

"How far is it to Eastwood House?" he inquired of the aged stationmaster.

"Two miles as the crow flies, sir."

Mr. Bingham snorted.

"I'm not a crow!" he growled. "How far is it by road?"

"About two miles and a half, sir."

"I'm! Are there any conveyances in this benighted place?"

The stationmaster shook his head.

"Then I shall have to walk," said Mr. Bingham. "And it's not what you would call an ideal evening for walking. I shall look like a snowman by the time I get to the house. Besides I shall be dreadfully late. I'm an hour behind time as it is."

The stationmaster looked sympathetic, but there was nothing he could do. He directed Mr. Bingham on his way and bade him good-night.

The snowstorm was at its height when the butler stepped out of the little station. It was blowing great guns, too, and he was obliged to hold on to his hat with his free hand. The other hand gripped the handle of the suitcase almost viciously.

Mr. Bingham was much too plump to enjoy a country walk in a blinding snowstorm. Moreover, the suitcase was heavy. Before the butler had proceeded a few yards, however, a smart-looking car entered the station approach.

The driver of the car, a big, broad-shouldered man, wearing a dyed trench-coat, slowed up and peered through the gloom.

"Mr. Bingham?" he interrogated.

"Yes," said the butler.

"Good! Jump in, and I'll take you along to the house."

Mr. Bingham naturally thought that the driver of the car was one of Lord Eastwood's chauffeurs. He was delighted

to think that his lordship had sent a car to bring him from the station, and he jumped in with as much alacrity as his rotundity permitted. The driver jumped down from his seat and bundled Mr. Bingham's suitcase into the car after him.

"Seasonable weather," said the driver cheerfully.

"Ugh! Beastly, horrible weather, I call it!" granted Mr. Bingham. "I hate bizzards. Drive carefully, won't you, or we shall find ourselves in a snowdrift."

The driver chuckled. It was rather a grim chuckle. Then he took his place at the wheel and the car glided forward through the snow.

Mr. Bingham lay back against the resilient upholstery and closed his eyes.

It was warm and comfortable inside the car, and the butler took no notice of the direction in which the vehicle was travelling.

Presently, however, it occurred to Mr. Bingham that the car was a long time doing the two and a half miles to Eastwood House. It would have been a tedious walk for a man with a suitcase, but a car ought to make short work of it.

Mr. Bingham sat up with a start. There was an expression of alarm on his flabby face. He peered through the window, and instead of seeing the friendly lights of the village he beheld a snowy track of waste land.

The road had narrowed considerably, in fact, it was merely a lane. Where did it lead?

Mr. Bingham peered through the other window, and a similar scene met his startled gaze. A barren expanse of country, stretching as far as the eye could see—a sort of No-man's Land, miles away from civilisation.

The car was travelling at great speed now, despite the narrowness of the road. It rocked and swayed, and gave Mr. Bingham a severe shaking-up.

"Good gracious!" gasped the butler. "What is happening? Where is that fool of a driver taking me? Is he drunk, or demented, or what?"

And Mr. Bingham rapped sharply on the partition in front of him to attract the driver's attention.

The burly man at the wheel heard, but he did not heed. He sat as motionless as a sphinx, while the car sped on at a faster pace than ever.

Mr. Bingham opened the window and thrust out his head, and bellowed to the driver.

"Stop! Stop, you frantic idiot! You have taken me miles out of my way!"

No reply.

"Are you deaf?" roared Mr. Bingham. "I want to

be taken to Eastwood House. Do you hear?" Still no reply. But Mr. Bingham fancied he heard the driver give a low chuckle.

The butler was in a state of great agitation. He could only conclude that he was at the mercy of a madman. At any moment he expected the car to shoot off the road or to turn turtle.

It was indeed fortunate that there was no other traffic along that lonely lane, or a collision would have been inevitable.

Mr. Bingham thought of opening the door and jumping out. But that would have been suicidal. Better to sit tight, he reflected, and pray that the driver's sober senses returned to him.

It was a nightmare journey. Mr. Bingham, plump and perspiring, sat trembling in his seat, hoping for the best, yet fearing the worst.

The car must have travelled a good six miles before it slowed up, and great was Mr. Bingham's relief when it eventually came to a standstill.

The butler took stock of his surroundings. The car had

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 879.



halted a short distance from a bleak, desolate-looking house, situated on a lonely heath.

It was indeed a wild and forsaken spot, the sort of place where highwaymen might have held up coaches a century before.

That one house, standing alone in grim solitude, was the only sign of civilisation.

Panic seized Mr. Bingham. He knew that this could not be Eastwood House. Lord Eastwood's mansion was miles away.

What, then, was this forbidding-looking place? Surely nobody lived there, in such a desolate spot, far from the busy haunts of men?

The driver jumped out, and so did his terrified passenger. "I—I want to know what your game is," said Mr. Bingham, trying to keep his voice steady. "Who are you? Why have you brought me here?"

The driver spoke at last.

"Your first question, Mr. Bingham, must remain unanswered," he said coolly. "I cannot disclose my identity. As to why I brought you here, I propose that you shall spend your Christmas holidays in this house."

"W-w-what?" gasped the astonished Mr. Bingham. "Are you mad? I have no Christmas holidays. I have to be on duty at Eastwood House. Take me there at once, and have done with this tomfoolery!"

The big, broad-shouldered man who had driven the car merely laughed.

"It can't be done," he said. "You are my prisoner. I must ask you to step inside."

And he indicated the lonely house with a wave of the hand. "But—but this is outrageous!" spluttered Mr. Bingham. "I am quite sure, now, that you are out of your senses. Why should you wish to decoy me to this outlandish place and make me a prisoner?"

"Never mind the why and wherefore," was the cheerful reply. "You needn't be dismayed, Mr. Bingham, at the prospect of spendin' Christmas in this peaceful retreat. Your guards will treat you well, so long as you behave yourself. But if there is any attempt at escape—"

The speaker's tone became suddenly grim, and he produced something from his pocket.

Mr. Bingham was startled to see the gleaming barrel of a revolver.

"You will know what to expect if you give any trouble," said the kidnapper. "I will now hand you over to your warder-in-chief, who will conduct you to your quarters."

So saying he took the butler by the arm and marched him up the short path to the front door of the house.

Mr. Bingham struggled and protested, but he was held in a grip of iron.

On reaching the door the kidnapper gave a low whistle, and instantly a man appeared. He was a muscular-looking young man, and he was evidently expecting his visitors, for he grinned.

"Pat," said Mr. Bingham's captor, "here is your Christmas guest. Have you prepared the top attic for his reception?"

The man nodded, and his grin became more expansive.

"Then p'raps you will show him upstairs, Pat? I must hurry off now to Eastwood House."

Mr. Bingham gave a start.

"You—you're going to Eastwood House?" he gasped.

"Yes; I intend to take your place there, my worthy friend, durin' the Christmas holidays. I've had no previous experience as a butler, but I've no doubt I shall manage the job all right. Take your man upstairs, Pat, an' see that the door's locked an' bolted. Then I want you to run me over to Eastwood House in the car."

Mr. Bingham was too dazed to ask any more questions. He suffered himself to be escorted upstairs by the man called Pat, and he was taken to a bare, gloomy apartment at the very top of the house. The room was innocent of furniture, but a heap of blankets had been thrown in a corner.

The prospect of spending Christmas in that cheerless attic was gall and wormwood to Mr. Bingham. But he realised that it would be worse than useless to try to escape.

Meanwhile, the man who proposed to take Mr. Bingham's place as butler at Eastwood House had carried the suitcase indoors, and opened it. The case contained all that he would need in the way of butler's clothing, and in a few moments he effected a startling change in his appearance. When he emerged from the house, in company with the man called Pat, he looked a typical family butler.

"Is the prisoner safely shut up, Pat?" he asked.

"Yes. But he doesn't seem very pleased at the idea of spendin' Christmas here. He threatens to shout from the window until he attracts somebody's attention."

"He can shout himself hoarse, but he won't be heard. Nobody ever strays to this lonely spot. As you know, Pat, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 879.

this house has the reputation of being haunted. People give it a wide berth—which is exactly what we want."

"Yes, rather!"

"I will now proceed to Eastwood House in the role of Bingham the butler," said the mystery man who had decoyed the unfortunate Mr. Bingham to the lonely house. "Never havin' seen the real Bingham, Lord Eastwood won't have the slightest suspicion. Drive quickly, Pat, an' put me down about five hundred yards from the house."

The two men got into the car, and it set off through the snow.

Mr. Bingham, in his lonely prison, heard it depart. And he gritted his teeth as he paced up and down his narrow attic and wondered whether he had fallen among thieves—or among madmen.

A Man of Few Words!

"REGRET belated arrival, m'lord. Train snowed up. Walked from station."

In these terse sentences the bogus butler introduced himself to Lord Eastwood. His accomplice had put him down, as arranged, about five hundred yards from the house, and he had walked the rest of the distance through the snow.

Lord Eastwood eyed the man curiously.

"You are Bingham?" he said.

"Yes, m'lord."

"And you say your train was snowed up?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Very well. I accept your explanation. I am very relieved, Bingham, that you have arrived at last. I was beginning to get very worried. You had better report to Billington, my butler, whom you will find in the pantry. Dinner will shortly be served and your assistance will be needed."

"Very good, m'lord!"

And the new butler passed out of Lord Eastwood's presence in the stilted and sedate manner affected by butlers.

Billington greeted his new assistant far from cordially.

"So you've turned up at last?" he said. "You were supposed to be here at five o'clock. His lordship has been in quite a stew about it."

"Have explained to his lordship," was the brief reply.

"Train snowed up. Delay on line. Moreover, had to walk from station."

Billington gave a grunt.

"Well, now you're here you'd better get busy," he said.

"There's seventeen people in to dinner."

"Kindly explain duties," said the bogus butler.

And Billington launched into a long dissertation as to what was required of the new butler. To hear Billington talk one would have supposed that he was the "big noise" at Eastwood House, and that Lord Eastwood was merely an underling.

Presently the dinner-gong boomed through the great house. It was a welcome sound to the St. Jim's juniors, for several hours had elapsed since tea, and they were hungry again. They trooped into the dining-room in high spirits.

"Has the new butlah awwived, patah?" inquired Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, my boy," said Lord Eastwood. "Bingham reported to me a few moments ago."

"Wonder what made him so late?" murmured Jack Blake.

"I expect he was hung up on the line," said Herries.

"Shouldn't think so," said Monty Lowther. "It isn't washing-day!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lord Eastwood smiled.

"The train by which Bingham travelled was snowed up," he explained. "He had to walk from the station, too, and that delayed him considerably. Had I known what time he would arrive I should have sent a car to meet him."

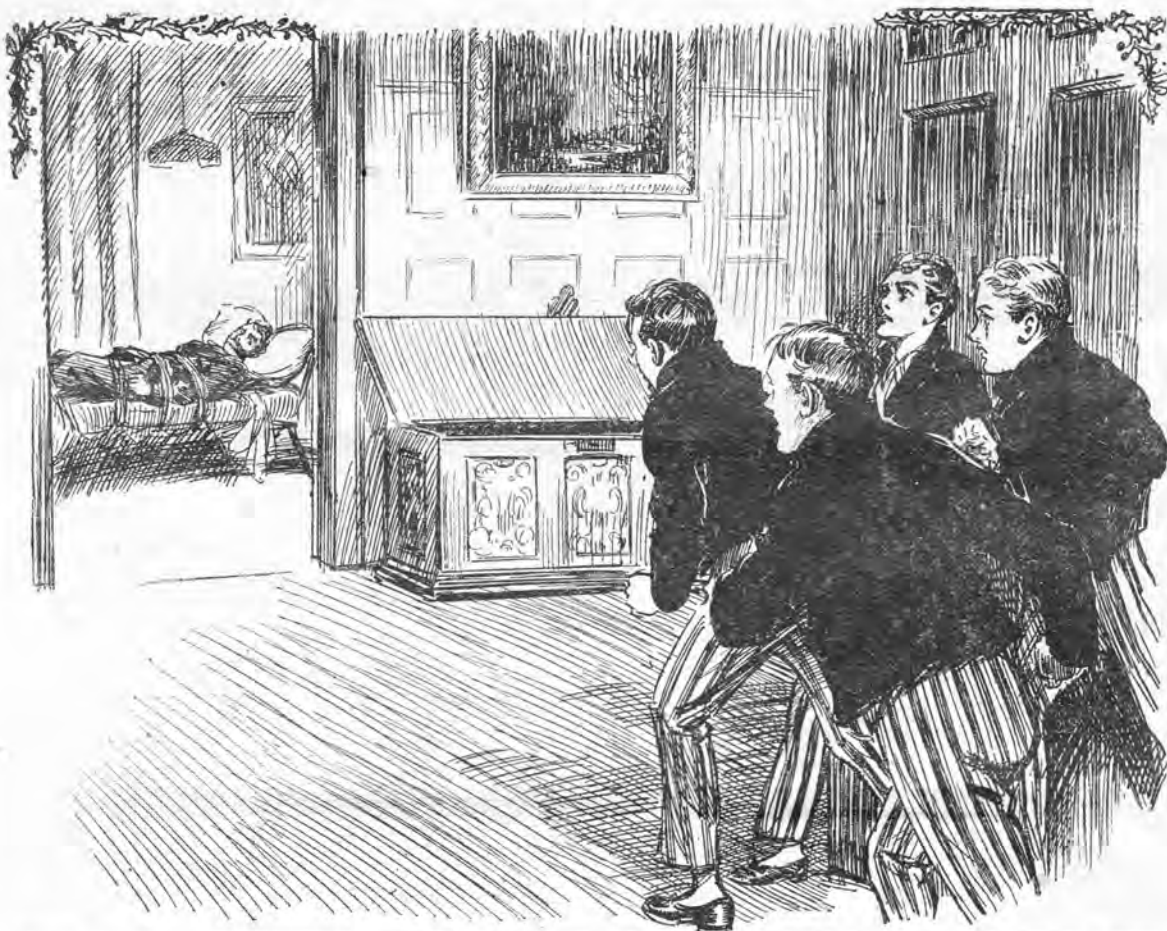
"Talk of angels," murmured Figgins, "and you're bound to hear the flapping of their giddy wings. Enter Bingham the butler!"

All eyes were upon the new butler as he came in with the soup. It was a big ordeal for him, but he did not lack nerve. He might have been a butler all his life, judging by his sphinx-like expression and his air of haughty aloofness.

Bingham made quite a business of serving the soup. It was like a solemn ritual. The butler moved slowly from junior to junior, and he was so painfully deliberate in his movements that the fellows at the lower end of the table wondered if they would ever get served.

"That fellow wants a charge of dynamite behind him," whispered Manners. "He's as slow as a whole procession of funerals!"

Billington, who was watching the new butler to see how



As Tom Merry & Co. switched on the light, an amazing scene met their gaze. The carved oak chest had been ransacked and stood empty, with upraised lid. The light, penetrating into the ante-room beyond, revealed John Rivers trussed helplessly to his bed. (See page 17.)

he shaped, frowned a little. He wished that Bingham would get a move on. But the imperturbable Bingham took his time about everything. He never quickened his pace in his journeys to and from the serving-table.

By the time the fellows at the lower end of the table were served, those at the upper end had finished their soup.

"I wathah like the new butlah," Arthur Augustus confided to his father, in a whisper. "He has all the dignity an' wepose which a butlah should possess. But he wants speedin' up a little. I've been countin' the numbah of steps he takes when he walks from the dinin'-table to the servin'-table. The numbah is fourteen, an' it nevah vavies."

Lord Eastwood nodded, and he beckoned to the new butler. "Pray be more expeditious in your movements, Bingham," he said, in a low tone.

"M'lord?" said Bingham, raising his eyebrows almost reproachfully.

"In othah words, deah man, don't be so long-winded," said Arthur Augustus. "We don't want you to wush awound in an undignified mannah, but a little more bwiskness would be an asset."

"Very good, sir. Note your remarks. Will obey," And Bingham's demeanour and pace became a trifle more brisk as the meal progressed.

The St. Jim's juniors found the new butler an amusing study. His habit of compressing all his utterances into as few words as possible tickled them immensely. When it was time for the sweets to be served Monty Lowther nearly exploded at Bingham's terse query:

"Apple-pie, fruit'n cream, fritters. Which, sir?"

"Pie," said Lowther, not to be outdone in terseness.

And when Fatty Wynn came to be asked which he would like, he replied:

"I'll sample a little of each in turn, I think."

"Go easy, Fatty!" murmured Figgins. "You'll be eating Lord Eastwood out of house and home at this rate!"

"Rats! Lord Eastwood told me to eat just as much as I wanted," was Fatty's retort. "He knows I'm not greedy, but like a lot."

And Figgy chuckled. Dinner was quite as merry a meal as tea had been. And cheery conversation mingled with the clatter of the forks and spoons.

When the guests had retired Bingham, the butler, alone in the dining-room, became suddenly alert. He gave a swift glance round, to make sure he was not being observed. Then he crossed the room swiftly, and stood gazing down at a carved oak chest of great antiquity. He attempted to raise the lid, but it was securely locked, as he had anticipated.

"So this is where the priceless gold plate of the D'Arcy family is stored?" he muttered. "It will be produced on Christmas Day, an' exhibited to the gaze of the admirin' guests, I don't think. The lock on this chest is of a very ancient pattern, but I think I shall find ways an' means of forcin' it. I'd better not make the attempt to-night. That would be rushin' things too much. But to-morrow night—"

And Bingham, the butler, smiled grimly. Then he went downstairs to assist Billington, who lectured him on his slowness.

"What I want is an active assistant, not a crawling tortoise!" said Billington huffily. "Wake your ideas up, man!"

"What you want," murmured the new butler under his breath, "is a thunderin' good hidin'! An' you'll get one if you give me much more of your lip, my beauty! Slow, am I? Well, you won't think me very slow after to-morrow night!"

"Eh? What did you say?" demanded Billington.

"I was talkin' about the snow," said Bingham. "It's comin' down faster than ever."

"Never mind the snow!" growled Billington. "Give me a hand with these dishes."

"Where am I to sleep?" asked Bingham.

"I'll show you directly. You'll be lucky if you get to bed before midnight. There's mountains of work to be done."

And Billington and his new assistant proceeded with their duties in silence.

A Distinguished Visitor!

GUSSY'S guests turned in early that evening. They were dog tired after all the excitement of packing and travelling.

It was mutually agreed that there were to be no "larks" in the bed-rooms—not that night, at any rate.

"If anybody wants to dwees up as a ghost an' scare the household, he'd better postpone it till another night," said Arthur Augustus. "Personally, I feel whacked. An' if any boundah disturbs my beauty sleep I shall jump out of bed an' administrah a fearful thwashin'! Do you heah me, young Wally?"

"How can I help hearing you when you've got a voice like a ship's siren?" grinned Wally.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Wally— My instructions are that you proceed to bed immediately, an' not budge until the maid comes up with your hot watah."

"Do you mean my early morning cup of tea?" asked Wally.

And there was a laugh.

Arthur Augustus glared through his monocle at his irrepressible minor.

"Bed!" he said sternly. "You know your woom."

"To hear is to obey," murmured Wally meekly. "This way, you kids!"

And Wally conducted Curly Gibson and Jameson and Joe Frayne up the wide staircase.

Arthur Augustus need not have feared that the fags would cause a disturbance in the night. They were too exhausted after their fierce battle in the snow. They yawned on their way upstairs, and the juniors followed. Marie Rivers had already retired to her room.

The night passed uneventfully.

When the guests awoke they looked from their windows upon an enchanted scene. It had snowed incessantly through the night. The lawn was carpeted with white, and the garden hedges were covered as with a garment. There was snow everywhere, save where one of the manservants had made a clearing in the drive.

The ancient postman staggered into view, and there was snow on his peaked hat and on his bag. He brought lots of letters to Eastwood House, most of them addressed to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The letters were from St. Jim's fellows all over the country, telling of the grand time they were having. Arthur Augustus sat on his bed, and read his correspondence aloud to the Terrible Three, who shared his room.

There were letters from Cardew and Clive of the Fourth, and from Bernard Glyn and Clifton Dane of the Shell. And there was an ill-spelt communication from George Alfred Grundy, who informed Arthur Augustus that he was having the time of his life at the house of his "maiden ant."

Baggy Trimble had also written. He did not seem to be quite happy at Trimble Towers—if such a place existed—for he wrote:

"I'm not getting nearly enuff to eat, Gussy. My mater and pater haven't very big appetites themselves, and they are silly enuff to think that I have inherited their feeble appetites, for they don't give me sufficient grub to satisfy a sparrow. I reckon you won't know me next term. I shall be so slim and skraggy. I wish you'd take compashun on me, Gussy, and send me a tellygram, asking me to come and join you at Eastwood House."

But Baggy Trimble was unlucky. Arthur Augustus strongly objected to the fat junior—not merely because of his gluttony, but because he would be an undesirable guest in other ways. Trimble's little tricks of sneaking and spying would not be welcome at Eastwood House.

Having gone through his correspondence, Arthur Augustus passed it on to the guests in the other rooms.

The breakfast gong sounded shortly afterwards, and the juniors, with smiling, morning faces, trooped downstairs. They were waited upon by Bingham, the butler, who had

evidently taken Gussy's advice to heart, for he was more brisk and businesslike in his movements.

"Top of the morning, Bingham!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Good-morning, then, if you like that better!"

"Morning, sir!" said Bingham briefly. "Trust slept well?"

"Like top!" answered Lowther. And the guests chuckled.

"Bingham believes in an economy of words," said Talbot, with a smile. "He'd make rather a good parson. His sermons would be cut down to about three minutes."

"Have you ever thought of entering the Church, Bingham?" inquired Tom Merry.

"Never entered church in life!" replied Bingham, without turning a hair. "Eggs boiled or poached, sir?"

"Poached, please."

"Very good, sir."

And Bingham proceeded with his ministrations.

It was a happy party that sat round the long table. Lord Eastwood occupied the host's seat, with Marie Rivers on one side of him and Arthur Augustus on the other.

"What do you propose to do with yourselves to-day, my boys?" asked Lord Eastwood.

"Tobogganing's the proper caper," said Wally D'Arcy. "We're going up on to the downs, aren't we, kids?"

"Rather!" cried Wally's chums, in chorus.

"Mind you don't bweak your necks, that's all," said Arthur Augustus admonishingly. "I know what you fags are—uttahly weekless, an' indiffewent to dangah!"

"Bow-wow!" said Wally.

Arthur Augustus flushed.

"You cheeky young boundah—"

"Dry up, Gussy! Don't try and come the elder brother over me. If we break our necks tobogganing, it will be our funeral—not yours."

Arthur Augustus subsided with a snort. He had quite despaired of bringing up his irresponsible minor in the way he should go.

"Well, the infants are going tobogganing, and what are the grown-ups going to do?" asked Lord Eastwood, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh, we'll hobble down to the village on our crutches and challenge the old gaffers to a snow-fight!" said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus had a suggestion to make.

"I say, deah boys, there's a haunted house a few miles froom heah. It stands all alone on Chillingdon Heath—as wild an' lonely a spot as you could possibly imagine. I vote we go an' exploah it."

"Good idea, Gussy!" said Jack Blako.

At the mention of the haunted house, Bingham, the butler, was startled out of his usual calm. So much so that he dropped the tray he was carrying with a crash, and a rivulet of hot coffee trickled over the floor.

"How very clumsy of you, Bingham!" said Lord Eastwood, with a touch of annoyance.

"Sorry, m'lord. Momentary feeling of faintness. Felt giddy. Dropped tray."

"In that case, I am sorry," said Lord Eastwood, more kindly. "Are you all right now, Bingham?"

"Quite, m'lord."

But had anyone watched Bingham, the butler, closely they would have seen that he was very agitated during the remainder of the meal.

Breakfast over, Bingham intercepted Tom Merry & Co. and Arthur Augustus, as they were in the act of leaving the dining-room.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "During breakfast you mentioned haunted house on heath."

"That's so, deah man," said Arthur Augustus. "But what the mewwy dickens—"

"Advise you not to go," said the butler earnestly.

Arthur Augustus opened his eyes wide.

"Eh? Why shouldn't we go an' exploah the haunted house, Bingham?"

The butler looked grave.

"Madman there," he said tersely. "Passing pedestrian was fired upon the other day from upper window."

"My hat!"

"Better keep clear, gentlemen," said Bingham.

Tom Merry stared at the butler.

"What do you know about the haunted house?" he demanded. "Dash it all, you've only been in the place a few hours!"

Bingham had an explanation ready.

"On my way here last evening, villager stopped me and informed me of the episode," he said.

"Oh!"

(Continued on page 12.)

GRAND "ERRORS" COMPETITION

BIG MONEY PRIZES

1st. Prize £10 2nd. £5. 5 Prizes of £1 each
and
6 FOOTBALLS.

WHAT a splendid offer, chums! £10 First Prize; £5 Second Prize; 5 Prizes of £1 each, and consolation prizes of Six Footballs!

This easy competition is only open to readers of the GEM, and the opportunity afforded should not be missed.

If you do not win the First Prize you may be the successful winner of one of the smaller awards.

It is a competition in which keenness counts. And who could be keener than readers of the GEM?

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO

is to study carefully the picture below—an illustration in which the artist has purposely made mistakes—and see how many "Errors" you can find in the incident.

For instance, one mistake is pretty obvious; the advertisement on the left of the illustration states the GEM to be published every Friday. Who does not know Wednesday, GEM Day, and the greatest day in the week?

There are several "Errors" like this that the keen observer will soon discover.

Don't be satisfied with the most obvious mistakes, but look into the drawing until you are satisfied that no "Error" has escaped your attention.

Remember there are other readers competing against you, and it is up to YOU to beat them if possible.

As you find the mistakes, jot them down neatly upon a piece of paper, then, when you have satisfied yourself that you have discovered all the "Errors," count them, put the Grand Total—that is the exact number of all the "Errors"

found—in the space provided in the top right-hand corner of the Entrance Form.

Having followed these simple instructions, sign your name and address in the space provided on the Entrance Form. Then pin the Entrance Form to your neatly written list of "Errors," and put both in a safe place until next Wednesday when the next picture containing "Errors" will appear.

In all there will be six of these pictures, and readers are asked to study each in turn, making a FRESH LIST of "ERRORS" for each picture.

After the last picture in this "ERRORS" COMPETITION has appeared you will be informed when and where to send in your complete six lists of errors.

Remember, all the above prizes **MUST BE WON**—the First Prize of £10 being awarded to the sender who

has found the largest number of "Errors" throughout the whole competition. In the event of ties, the right of dividing the value of the prizes is reserved. The decision of the Editor of the GEM will be absolutely final.

There is always this fact to remember, too, that if you only find a fair amount of "Errors" in one picture you may be able to bring yourself on level terms with others in another picture.

Keenness is the key to success, so, therefore, **GET BUSY NOW** with this FIRST picture.

Every attempt must be complete in itself, that is, your six lists of "Errors" and the six coupons all properly arranged and filled in as directed.

A regular weekly delivery of the GEM from your newsagent will insure you against missing any one picture in this NEW and Novel Contest.

"ERRORS" COMPETITION—ENTRANCE FORM.

FIRST PICTURE.

I accept the Editor's decision as final.

Number of Errors.

Name

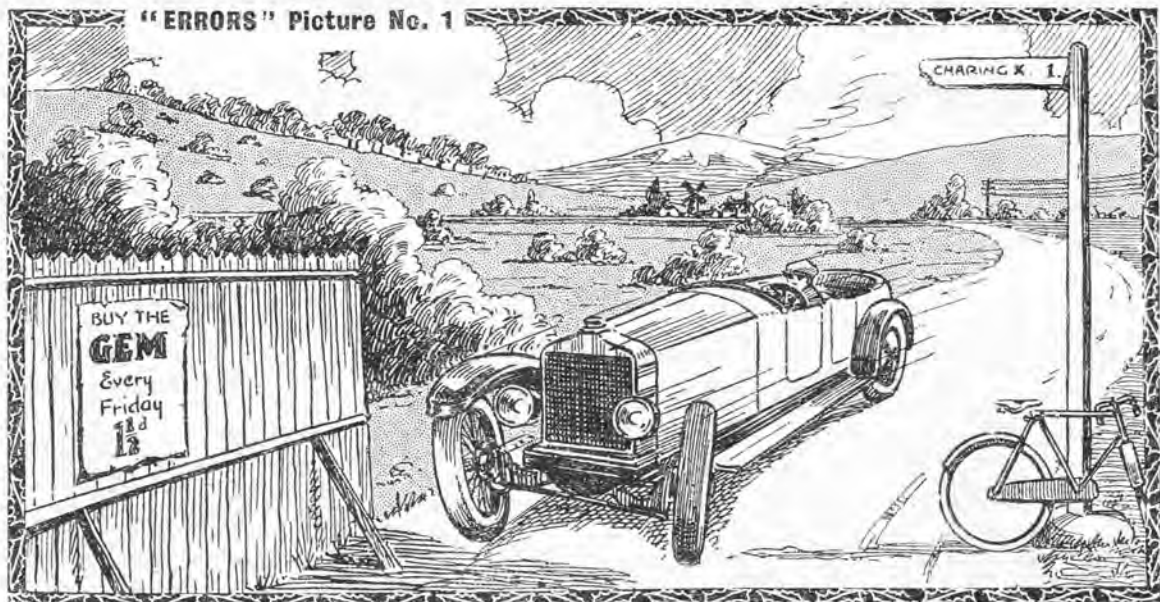
Address

GEM.

And don't forget the second picture in this Great Competition will appear in next week's GEM—SO DON'T SEND

ANY ENTRIES YET. Employees of the proprietors of this journal may not compete.

"ERRORS" Picture No. 1



"Shouldn't think there was any truth in it, myself," said Manners. "Sounds rather a wild yarn. But if there really is a madman in the haunted house it would be rather interesting to see him."

"But he appeals to be armed," said Arthur Augustus. "An' Miss Mawie is spendin' the day with us. We can't expose her to any dangah. It wouldn't be wight an' pwopah. I agwee with Mannahs that there may be no twuth in the yarn. But we're not justified in takin' any wisks, in the cires. Bettah postpone our visit to the haunted house, deah boys, an' spend the day in the village instead. We can help the villagahs put up their Chwistmas decowations, an' have a confab with some of the old folks. The people woud heah always expect me to pay them a visit at Chwistmas-time."

"All serene, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "We'll spend the day in the village, and postpone our trip to the haunted house. Thank you for warning us, Bingham."

The butler bowed. And he looked very relieved as he walked away. He had excellent reasons for not wishing the St. Jim's juniors to go near the haunted house. There was no madman in the building; but there was a prisoner, and if he raised the alarm the consequences might be very awkward.

The juniors spent a thoroughly enjoyable day in the village, helping the old folks decorate their cottages and chatting with the children.

The generous-hearted Gussy put his hand in his pocket a good many times for the benefit of the poorer people, and he contributed materially to their Christmas comfort.

After dinner that evening, Lord Eastwood motored to the station, taking Talbot and Marie Rivers with him.

The train was in when they arrived, and the passengers were coming towards the exit.

Marie Rivers uttered a joyful cry on catching sight of a tall, athletic figure who came striding towards the stationary car.

"Father!"

"Marie!"

They embraced affectionately, and then John Rivers shook hands cordially with Lord Eastwood and Talbot.

"I am delighted to see you, Mr. Rivers!" said Lord Eastwood, with a welcoming smile. "It will be good to have you with us over the Christmas holiday."

"It is indeed good of you to invite me," said John Rivers warmly.

"You are looking none too fit, father," said Marie, rather anxiously. "It is high time you had a holiday. You have been working too hard at Scotland Yard."

"Well, my dear, so long as the criminals are actively employed, the detectives will be in the same boat," said John Rivers with a smile. "The crooks don't give us much respite. As a matter of fact, I have only just finished an important case. I had no sleep last night, which accounts for my somewhat haggard appearance."

"Then you must make up your arrears of sleep to-night," said Lord Eastwood. "I will give instructions that you are not to be called until a late hour to-morrow."

The stationmaster hobbled into view, carrying the detective's suitcase. It was deposited in the car, which made short work of the journey back to Eastwood House.

A hearty cheer arose as the car glided up the drive.

The St. Jim's fellows had formed a sort of guard of honour. They stood in two rows on the front steps, and John Rivers had to pass under an archway of flags. He lifted his hat in acknowledgment of the cheers, which were a wonderful testimony to his popularity.

The detective had dinner in solitary state. Bingham, the butler, waited upon him in the dining-room. And the butler's twitching fingers betrayed the nervousness he felt. He was aware that the new guest was a detective, and he was uneasy lest his disguise should be penetrated.

But the butler's fears were groundless. John Rivers ignored him, except to make a casual remark about the weather.

When dinner was over, and the butler had withdrawn, the detective drew a chair up to the blazing fire and smoked a cigar before joining the other guests in the drawing-room.

John Rivers' gaze wandered round the oak-panelled room, and finally rested upon the carved oak chest. He was still scrutinising it when Lord Eastwood came in.

"Admiring the family chest, Mr. Rivers?" said Lord Eastwood with a smile.

"Yes. It is a magnificent piece of work. I am curious to know what it contains."

"Something of great value," was the reply. "The gold plate of the D'Arcy family, to be precise. I had it taken out of safe-deposit in London and brought here for use on Christmas Day."

John Rivers nodded.

"And what precautions have you taken to guard against the possible burglary of this valuable plate?" he asked.

"Well," said Lord Eastwood, "I must confess that no

special precautions have been taken. But the chest is far too weighty a proposition for a burglar to remove. And besides, it is effectively locked. I have the key on my own person."

John Rivers rose from his chair and faced his host.

"Believe me, Lord Eastwood," he said, "a clever cracksmen would make short work of that lock. He would require no key. You really ought to take measures to ensure that the plate is not stolen."

"But, my dear Mr. Rivers, I doubt if any burglar knows that it is here, in the house!"

"Cracksmen find things out very quickly," said John Rivers. "Having been a cracksmen myself, in the days which I now strive to forget, I know what I am talking about. I wonder you can sleep soundly in your bed, with the knowledge that this chest is exposed to the attentions of any midnight marauder."

Lord Eastwood laughed.

"You detectives are always scenting danger where no danger is," he said. "I do not anticipate a burglary for a single moment."

"It is when burglaries are not anticipated that they invariably happen," was the reply. "Personally, I shall feel more comfortable about the safety of your valuable plate if you will permit me to sleep in the ante-room which adjoins this. I shall then be on the spot should any burglarious attempt be made."

"But it is quite unnecessary—"

"I respectfully beg to differ. Will you allow me, Lord Eastwood, to occupy a camp-bed in the ante-room?"

"Certainly, if you wish. But you would find your own room upstairs much more comfortable."

John Rivers, however, said that he would much prefer to sleep downstairs, in close proximity to the dining-room. And the arrangement was accordingly made.

A Night Alarm!

JOHN RIVERS fully intended to sleep with one eye open, so to speak, that night.

But although the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak.

The detective, worn out by lack of rest, soon sank into a sound slumber.

A camp-bed had been installed in the little ante-room. It was a cosy little apartment, with a fire glowing in the small grate. Certainly John Rivers found it very comfortable.

The connecting door was left ajar, giving a view of the dining-room beyond.

All the guests at Eastwood House had retired for the night, and were in the arms of Morpheus. No light gleamed from the windows of the old mansion. All was dark and still.

As the night wore on, the slumbers of John Rivers became lighter. He turned restlessly in his bed. His subconscious mind was trying to tell him that he would need to be awake and alert.

And at last he actually awoke, and sat up in bed.

Somewhere in the house a clock struck two. And no sooner had the chime died away than another sound became audible. It was the sound of a window being stealthily opened.

Instantly John Rivers was on the qui vive. He well knew what that sound portended. Somebody was breaking into Eastwood House via the dining-room window.

Straining his eyes through the gloom, the detective could dimly perceive the marauder in the act of clambering through the aperture.

Acting swiftly, but noiselessly, John Rivers slipped out of bed and put on his dressing-gown, which lay in readiness over the back of a chair. Then he thrust his feet into a pair of slippers, and made his way from the ante-room into the dining-room beyond. He groped for the electric-light switch, and found it, and clicked it down.

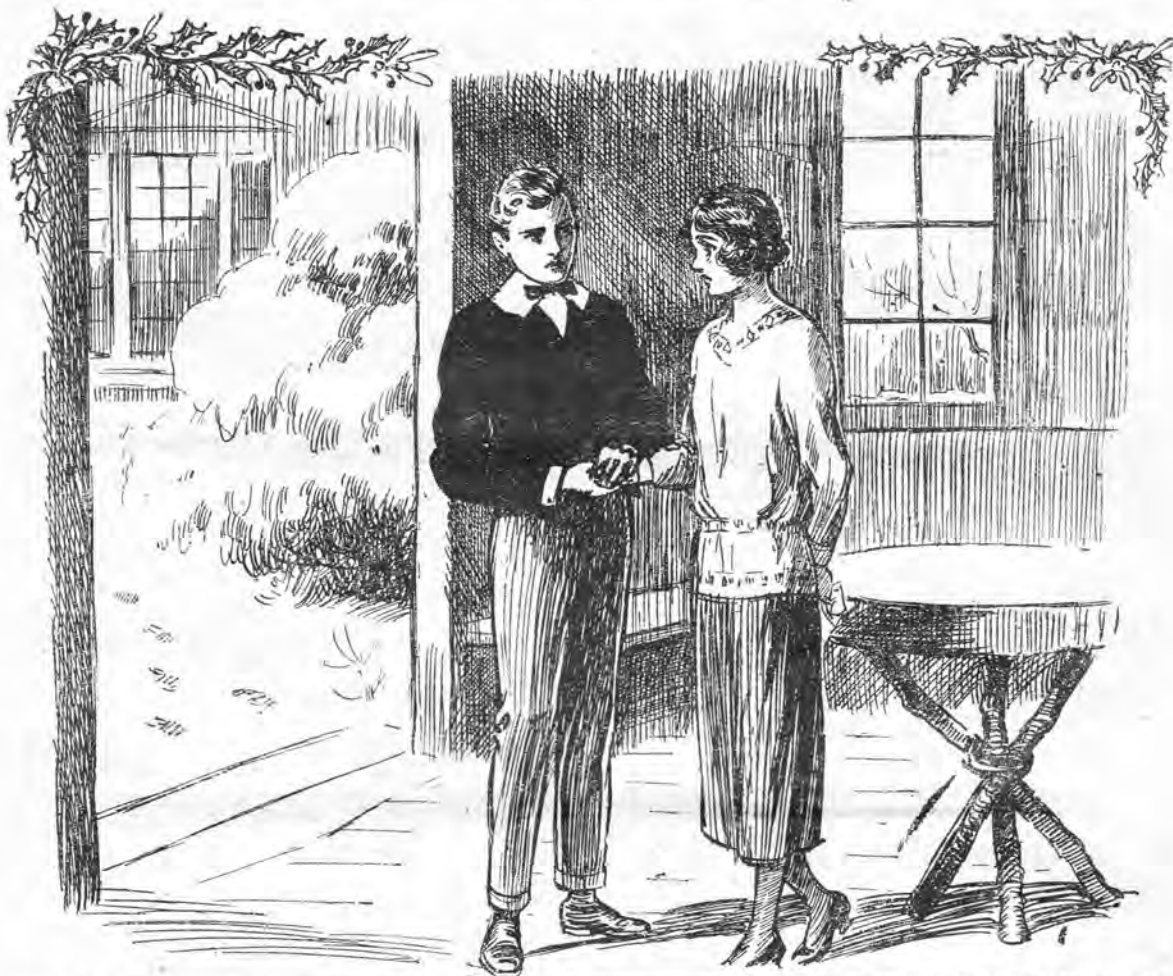
Instantly the room was flooded with light, and there was a startled exclamation from the mysterious intruder, who by this time was actually in the room.

John Rivers took stock of the man. He was tall and powerfully built, and a crepe mask partially concealed his features.

Obviously the man was a cracksmen, and quite possibly he was armed. The detective did not wait to find out if this was the case. He was upon his man with the spring of a panther.

The intruder was ready for him. The two men closed with each other, without a word being uttered, and a desperate struggle ensued.

John Rivers possessed great strength, and in a man-to-man



"Toff!" said Marie Rivers, her voice trembling with anxiety. "You—you are not thinking of going away?"
 "Yes," answered Talbot quietly. "How can I go on eating at Lord Eastwood's table when he thinks me a thief? Marie dear—he faced the girl squarely—"this is good-bye!" (See page 20.)

encounter he was an antagonist to be feared. But on this occasion he had met his match—if not his superior.

The powerfully-built man in the crepe mask had the strength of a giant. His arms closed around the detective's body like hoops of steel. John Rivers felt that his ribs were cracking. He struggled desperately to free himself from that vice-like embrace, but his energy was being expended in vain.

The detective realised that he would soon be overpowered unless help was forthcoming. And he gave a shout that echoed through the slumbering building:

"Help! Help!"

"Hang you!" snarled the man who was at grips with John Rivers. His nefarious designs were nipped in the bud now, for that shout would bring all the guests on the scene.

The marauder wisely decided to make a quick get-away. He hurled the detective away from him with tremendous force, and John Rivers reeled against the wall, and then collapsed, half-dazed, to the floor. By the time he had pulled himself together his assailant had vanished.

Presently there was a pattering of feet without, and half a dozen juniors in dressing-gowns, headed by Tom Merry, burst into the dining-room.

"Mr. Rivers," panted Tom Merry, "what's wrong?"

The detective was on his feet now, but he was still very much shaken.

"I have just been at grips with a burglar," he said breathlessly. "He was too strong for me, and I was obliged to shout for assistance. He has only just gone. He escaped through the window. If you make a search of the grounds you may catch him."

"This way, you fellows!" said Tom Merry promptly.

And the Terrible Three, with Jack Blake, Herries, and

Digby in attendance, rushed towards the window, and hastily clambered through.

One by one they vaulted out on to the snow-covered lawn, and peered about them in the gloom. But there was no sign of the fugitive.

Tom Merry rapped out a few sharp instructions, and the juniors scattered, and spread themselves over the grounds, in the hope of cutting off the burglar's escape.

The garden, the lawn, the tennis-courts—all were thoroughly scoured, but without result.

At the end of ten minutes the searchers met together again outside the window of the dining-room.

"No luck!" said Monty Lowther. "The bird has flown!"

"He was after the gold plate, you bet!" said Manners.

"Well, he hasn't got it, so there's no harm done," grunted Jack Blake. "Let's get in. I'm jolly well frozen!"

The juniors clambered in through the window.

John Rivers was still in the dining-room, and other guests had joined him. Lord Eastwood was there, too, in his dressing-gown. He looked very concerned. Overnight he had pooh-poohed the notion of a burglary; but he had to admit now that the apprehensions of John Rivers were well founded.

"Any sign of the marauder, my boys?" he asked quickly. Tom Merry shook his head.

"We've not seen so much as his shadow," he said. "We've ransacked the grounds, but the bounder had evidently got clear away before we started the search."

"Wotten luck!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Mr. Vivahs appeals to have had a wough handlin', deah boys."

"The fellow was as strong as a horse," said the detective.

(Continued on page 16.)

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CHRISTMAS!
There is magic in the word. It at once conjures up visions of plump turkeys and plum-puddings and mince-pies and crackers and mistletoe and holly and blazing log-fires. And if the Clerk of the Weather is in a good humour we may get snow. How jolly that will be! It would be rippling to have one of the old-time Christmases, with snow-covered fields and frozen ponds. But alas! the aforementioned Clerk of the Weather is such a treacherous old gent that he will possibly serve up a heat-wave. You never can tell!

Christmas is not here yet, but the spirit of Christmas is in the air. St. Jim's is about to break up for the vacation, and everybody is in a happy humour.

Even Mr. Ratcliff, the sour, ill-humoured master of the New House, actually smiled to-day! I saw him myself, and I wish I had had a camera handy. It's the only time Ratty has been known to smile this term! A snapshot of Ratty's smiling visage would indeed be a rare curiosity.

And Knox of the Sixth was smiling, too! As a rule, Knox goes about with a fierce, forbidding frown. Jove of old is celebrated for his frowns, but he would have to play second fiddle to Knox. However, the bully of the Sixth was simply wreathed in smiles this morning, and he went so far as to wish me a happy Christmas! Good old Knox! I had always thought he was drained dry of the milk of human kindness, and I am delighted to find this is not so.

Furthermore and moreover—as the lawyers say—I saw Taggles, the porter, smiling! In the ordinary course of events, you will find Taggles grunting and growling and sulking and growling. But Taggles, like everybody else, has been infected with the spirit of Christmas. Doubtless he has visions of receiving numerous "tips" on breaking-up day! I hope Taggles will take my tip, and take my tip with a smile!

It's a wonderful thing, this Christmas spirit. It changes pessimists into optimists, and growlers into sunbeams, and selfish people into Good Samaritans. I really don't know what we should do without Christmas, with its chimes and carols, its romps and revels, and its heritage of happy laughter.

If only peace on earth and goodwill towards men prevailed not only at Christmas-time, but all the year round, what a jolly world it would be! People wouldn't need to look forward to the millennium. It would be already here!

To my loyal reader-chums all the world over let me echo the same old wish in the same old way:

"A Right Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year!"

Tom Merry

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CHRISTMAS-TIME! Christmas-time!

Let its praise be told in rhyme,
Boughs of mistletoe and holly,
Everybody gay and jolly.
Fairy lanterns glow and gleam,
Waltzers glide as in a dream.
All is merry as can be,
Christmas-time's the time for me!

Christmas dinner! Christmas dinner!
How can Fatty Wynn get thinner?
Eating turkeys plump and round,
He'll burst buttons, I'll be bound!
Trimble, too, will put on weight,
His circumference will be great.
When returning to St. Jim's
He'll waddle on his lower limbs!

Christmas bells! Christmas bells!
How their merry music swells!
They ring out their message still,
"Peace on earth, to men good-will!"
Grandeur far than poet's rhymes
Are their merry, mellow chimes;
Pealing out with joy and gladness,
Drowning cares, dispelling sadness.

Christmas snow! Christmas snow!
(If the Fates ordain it so).
Then we'll take to building snowmen,
And to fighting hostile foemen.
Down on hands and knees we'll go,
Plunging in a sea of snow;
And each resolute defender
Fighting hard, will scorn surrender.

Christmas-time! Christmas-time!
'Tis delightful, 'tis sublime!
Cheeks aglow with happy laughter,
Joyous shouts that shake each rafters
Christmas comes but once a year,
Greet its coming with a cheer.
Happy folk, the whole world wide,
Will hail the joys of Christmastide!

WHAT A SPLENDID PRIZE LIST, EH?

1st Prize £10; 2nd Prize £5;
Five Prizes of £1 each; and
SIX FOOTBALLS!

Turn to our Easy

"ERRORS" CONTEST

On Page 11.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY—famously called Gussy, because life's short—has invited a whole crowd of us to Eastwood House for the Christmas holidays. Tom Merry & Co. are included in the invitation, and Figgins & Co., and Gussy's study-mates, and Talbot, and Marie Rivers. And Wally D'Arcy—without consulting his major in the matter—has invited three of his tag friends. We are looking forward to having the time of our lives at Lord Eastwood's stately mansion. And if a spice of adventure should enter into the holiday, so much the better!

BAGGY TRIMBLE is feeling very bitter at having been left out in the cold. Baggy claims to be Gussy's nearest and dearest pal, and he declares it is perfectly monstrous that he should be overlooked when the invitations were sent out. But I would remind Baggy that Lord Eastwood caters for ordinary healthy appetites—not for unhealthy ones! Fatty Wynn will be one of the guests, it is true—and Fatty's appetite knows no limit. But then the plump Welsh junior is good company wherever he goes, whereas Trimble is always making mischief. So the uninvited Baggy has received the cold shoulder; and he will probably receive another cold shoulder for his Christmas dinner—a cold shoulder of mutton instead of the fatted turkey!

IT is interesting to note how the various people at St. Jim's propose to spend Christmas. Dr. Holmes is crossing to the Continent, I believe. Let us hope he will be favoured with blue skies and brilliant sunshine. Mr. Ratcliff is going to inflict himself upon an aged aunt of his. I feel awfully sorry for the poor old soul! Ratty is a man of fads and fancies. He suffers from indigestion, and the mere mention of turkey and plum-pudding is a nightmare to him! His Christmas dinner will probably consist of dry toast and barley-water! Anyway, I can't imagine Ratty being very cheery company over the Christmas holidays. Glad he isn't staying at Eastwood House, anyway!

MR. RAILTON will have an athletic sort of Christmas, for he is going golfing. Railton is a rattling good sort. He has worked like a galley-slave during the term, and he has thoroughly earned his holiday recreation. All the fellows will join me in wishing him a jolly good time. Mr. Linton is going down to Devonshire, and Mr. Latham to the East Coast. As for the unpopular Mr. Selby—well, he can go to Jericho, for all I care!

MAY all the readers of the "St. Jim's News" have the time of their lives this Christmastide, and enjoy themselves up to the hilt! Our thoughts will often turn to them in the midst of our merry-making at Eastwood House. We hope they will spend the jolliest Christmas ever, and "eat, drink, and be merry" to their hearts' content!



MARTIN CLIFFORD'S CHRISTMAS!

A Cheery Interview with the Famous GEM Author. By Dick Redfern.

REDDY," said the editor of the "St. Jim's News," waylaying me in the quad, "I want you to run up to town and interview Mr. Martin Clifford, the gent who chronicles our merry adventures, you know. I've spoken to Railton about it, and he has persuaded your own House-master, old Ratty, to give you the afternoon off."

"Oh, good!" I said, my cheeks glowing with pleasure in anticipation of meeting Martin Clifford. "But what am I to interview Mr. Clifford about?"

"Ask him how he proposes to spend Christmas, and then write up a chatty article on the subject. There's a train to town at two-fifteen, and I shall want your 'copy' first thing in the morning."

I trotted off in great glee to the station, and thoroughly enjoyed my trip to town.

London always seems a maze to me, and I should never have found Martin

Clifford's abode, or even the district in which he lived, but for the aid of a friendly taxi-driver, who drove me for miles through the busy streets, thronged with shoppers, and finally set me down outside a cosy-looking suburban villa.

I rang the bell, and a trim maid appeared. I told her my business, and the next moment I was ushered into the genial presence of Mr. Clifford.

"Well, Redfern," he said, nodding me towards a comfortable armchair, "what brings you here? I had pictured you packing your traps at St. Jim's, in readiness for the Christmas holidays."

"I am here in the capacity of special interviewer for the 'St. Jim's News,'" I replied.

"Ah, a bright little paper," said Martin Clifford. "I often chuckle over its comical features."

"But all our schoolboy stuff must seem awful trash to a real, live author," I ventured.

"Not at all! Some of the contributions show distinct talent."

I glanced towards the great man's typewriter, and saw that he was half-way through a page of typescript.

"Oh, I say, I do hope I haven't barged in when you're very busy, Mr. Clifford," Martin Clifford smiled.

"I am just writing the final chapter of my Christmas GEM story," he said. "So long as I finish it by post time it will be quite all right. After that, I intend doing no more work until after Christmas. Like the lilies of the field, I shall toil not, neither shall I spin. I shall lay down the pen for the golf-club, so to speak. I shall seek out some secluded spot where the editors cease from troubling, and the authors are at rest. Meanwhile, I expect you could do with some tea?"

Without waiting for my answer, Martin Clifford rang the bell and ordered tea. And a very jolly tea it was!

"Fatty Wynn would like to be here, Mr. Clifford!" I said gaily.

"Yes. And I don't suppose Trimble would violently object to being here, either."

We chatted away pleasantly over tea, on the subject of the Christmas holidays. I gathered from my host that he was spending Christmas on the Devonshire moors, in company with his colleague, Frank Richards, of "Magnet" fame. There would be golf and long country tramps, and dances and whist-drives; but there would be no manner of work. Martin Clifford's motto is, "Work while you work, and play while you play"—a very excellent maxim, too!

I had the pleasure of watching Martin Clifford finish his GEM story for the Christmas number. He permitted me to look over his shoulder while he worked.

Was it a good story? That you will all be able to judge for yourselves, for it is now in your hands. And I have no doubt that your verdict will be a unanimous:

"Yes, rather!"



MY IDEAL CHRISTMAS DINNER!

Some Curious and Comical Confessions of St. Jim's Celebrities.

FATTY WYNN:

Personally I am quite satisfied with the usual Christmas dinner, consisting of turkey and plum-pudding, with mince-pies and nuts and fruit to follow. The Christmas dinner is one of our grandest institutions. It has glorious traditions. I believe it would break my heart if turkey and plum-pudding went out of fashion, and we had to make our Christmas dinner off mutton and leeks. Being of Welsh extraction, I ought to be loyal to the leek, but I don't want it on Christmas Day, thanks! I sincerely hope that our reformers, and people who are always trying to turn things upside down, will not succeed in changing the Christmas menu.

BAGGY TRIMBLE:

Ruffly speaking, my ideall Christmas dinner may be divided into a duzen courses. It starts with soup, and then proceeds as follows:

- Horse Doovers.
- Fish (any variety).
- Pidgin Pie.
- Roast Duck (with green peas).
- Roast Goose (with ossidge).
- Roast Turkey (with stuffing).
- Plum Pooding (minnimum weight half a ton).
- Minse Pies.
- Jam Ounmylets.
- Apple Dumplings.
- Gorgonzola Cheese.

Such a menu is one to gladden the hart of man—and of prize porpusses! I hope I get a Christmas dinner like the above when I go home to Trimble Towers. Then I shall have no cause to grumble!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY:

My ideal Chwistmas dinnah, deah boys, consists of chicken. I have found that a chicken, as a wule, is more tendah than a turkay. The turkay we had last Chwistmas was as tough as

leathah, bai Jove! My patah spwained both his wists when he carved it. I considah that bird had been takin' fah too much exercise. It had worked off all its superfluous flesh long since! I shall theretofah beg my patah, this couin' Chwistmas, to slay one of his plump, tendah chickens for the Chwistmas dinnah. Then ewerythin' in the garden will be lovely!

PAT REILLY:

Shure, an' the good old turkey an' plum-pudding fills the bill entirely! At the same time, I always like to start my Christmas dinner with a plate of Irish stew. It's jolly good stuff, be jabers, especially when there are nice fat dumplings floatin' about in it. If I had my own way, I'd preface every meal with a plate of Irish stew. As the well-known song says:

"I love it in the morning,

I love it at night;

I love it in the evening,

When the stars are shining bright."

But I'm afraid, begorrah, the St. Jim's cook would jolly soon go on strike if she had to prepare Irish stew at every meal!

EPHRAIM TAGGLES:

Which I prefers to take my Christmas dinner in liquid form—not solid. What could be better than a foam-in' flagon of ginger-wine, with a dash of summat in it jest to give it a bite? I shall 'ave great pleasure in drinkin' the 'ealths of all the young gents of St. Jim's on Christmas Day—all wot 'ave given me tips, that is!

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"I confess I should have been overpowered in another moment. However, the gold plate is intact, and that's the main thing."

The door opened, and Bingham, the butler, appeared, clad in deshabille. He carried a lighted lantern, and looked very sleepy-eyed.

"Trust nothing amiss, gentlemen?" he said drowsily.

"A burglar broke into the house, Bingham," explained Lord Eastwood. "Unfortunately he escaped the moment Mr. Rivers raised the alarm."

"Search grounds, m'lord?" volunteered Bingham.

"They have already been searched, but without success. You had better make coffee for these young gentlemen, Bingham. They have been exposed to the night air, and I should not like any of them to take chill."

"Very good, m'lord"

Bingham disappeared to the lower regions, returning in a few moments with a steaming coffee-pot on a tray; also an array of cups, and some biscuits on a dish.

Tom Merry & Co. sipped their coffee, and chatted excitedly to their schoolfellows on the subject of the attempted burglary.

"I wish I had old Towser here," said Herries. "He'd run the burglar to earth in next to no time!"

"Rats!"

Towser was the devoted bulldog of George Herries. He had been left behind at St. Jim's, in the care of Taggles, the porter. Herries had badly wanted to bring him to Eastwood House, but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had objected flatly and firmly. Towser, Gussy had explained, was a "howwid beast," who had "no respect whatevah for a fellow's twousahs!" So Herries' faithful hound had been left behind.

"Wonder who the giddy burglar was?" said Blake thoughtfully. "A clumsy amateur, or a skilled professional?"

"He was no novice at the game," interposed John Rivers. "In spite of the fact that the man wore a mask, there seemed something familiar about him. I believe we have met before. Possibly we shall meet again, in which event I hope to be better prepared. Good-night, all!"

And the detective walked a trifle unsteadily to his little bed-room. A chorus of "Good-nights!" followed him.

Having finished their coffee, the guests went back to their rooms. But it was some time before they settled down to sleep.

The only fellow who had not been roused was Talbot. He slept in the same room as Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn, and on retiring he had complained of a bad headache. Talbot had not heard the cry for help given by John Rivers. Figg & Co. had, and they had turned out, but had decided not to disturb Talbot. He was still sleeping when they returned to their room.

The night was far advanced before the guests at Eastwood House settled down to sleep again—a sleep that was in many cases disturbed by dreams of burglar scares and man-hunts.

But nothing untoward happened during the remainder of the night.

The Second Attempt!

LORD EASTWOOD telephoned to the local police in the morning, and gave instructions that a sharp look-out was to be kept for any suspicious-looking characters in the neighbourhood.

But the local police force consisted of one man—a fat, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 879.

comfortable-looking constable, who would probably have turned tail at the sight of a burglar. Besides, the worthy constable went to bed early each evening, like a self-respecting citizen; and he was not at all likely to be up and doing at the "witching hour," when burglars were abroad. However, it afforded Lord Eastwood a certain amount of comfort to know that the police had been informed.

It was the day before Christmas Eve, and it passed pleasantly enough at Eastwood House.

The guests amused themselves in various ways, and they got up an informal concert in the evening.

Talbot's headache had gone, and he entered into the fun with zest. He was thrilled to learn of the attempted burglary in the night, and he reproached Figgins & Co. for not having roused him.

It was the general opinion among the guests that the unknown marauder would let a few nights elapse before breaking into the Eastwood stronghold again. That he would try again seemed more than probable, for his stern encounter with John Rivers proved him to be a strong and determined man.

The detective had a nap in the afternoon, in order to be fit and fresh when night came. It seemed improbable that the burglar would visit Eastwood House on two successive nights; but John Rivers was leaving nothing to chance. He turned in at ten o'clock that night, but with no intention of going to sleep. He lay wide-awake in the darkness, busy with his thoughts. Under his pillow, for use in case of emergency, was a loaded revolver.

In any event, the detective would have been unable to sleep, for a party of Christmas waits had tramped through the snow to Eastwood House, and they stood carolling on the lawn in a frozen group.

Windows were opened upstairs—Tom Merry & Co. had not yet turned in—and for a few moments it rained coppers. The carol-singers, armed with lanterns, groped for the coins in the snow.

"Please wun away now!" came the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We're too sleepy to enjoy any more carol-singin'. Thank you for comin' woun. Good-night!"

"Good-night, Master Arthur!" responded the waits, who were villagers, and knew Arthur Augustus well. "Good-night, young gentlemen!"

"Good-night!" chanted the St. Jim's juniors, in chorus.

And the Christmas waits departed.

The bed-room windows were closed, and the guests settled down for the night.

But in the little ante-room which adjoined the dining-room John Rivers remained wide-awake, resolved not to be caught napping.

He heard the midnight chimes, and then the half-hour, and then the solemn boom of one. From time to time he sat up in bed, listening intently. But all was still and silent now, save for the soft patter of the snow upon the window-panes.

When two o'clock came the detective concluded that he would be justified in going to sleep. Evidently the cracksmen had decided not to pay a call that night.

John Rivers gathered the bedclothes about him and turned on his side, and dropped into a doze.

How long the doze lasted he did not know. But he awoke with a sudden start, and a peculiar conviction that he was not alone in the room.

Instinctively his hand went towards the pillow, and he groped for his revolver.

It was gone!

Then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, the detective discerned a figure moving about the room—the figure of a boy in Etons. It was too dark for him to distinguish the features, but the boy was obviously a St. Jim's junior. Either he had heard burglars, and had come down to rouse John Rivers; or he was sleepwalking.

"Who are you?" rapped out the detective sharply.

There was no answer. And John Rivers was utterly unprepared for what followed. It happened with incredible swiftness.

A gag was thrust into the detective's mouth, causing him to choke and splutter. Then his arms and legs were pinioned by a stout coil of rope.

Evidently these preparations had been in progress while John Rivers was dozing, and it was the work of a moment to complete them, and to truss the detective to his bed.

The victim of the amazing outrage struggled frantically to free his limbs, but his bonds were strong and secure. He was quite helpless.

John Rivers wondered if he was dreaming. It seemed ridiculous to suppose that one of the schoolboy guests would play a practical joke upon him by trussing him to his bed in the small hours of the morning.

But it was no dream. It was grim reality.

Mr. Rivers heard the sound of stealthy footsteps retreating

from the ante-room into the dining-room beyond. Then he heard other sounds—familiar sounds—the meaning of which was unmistakable.

Cracksmen were at work, picking the lock of the carved oak chest containing the gold plate.

Again he tried desperately to free himself, and to remove the gag which prevented him from raising the alarm. But all his struggles proved futile.

It was a maddening experience to lay there, gagged and bound, in the darkness, listening to the cracksmen at work.

The detective was a prey to tormenting thoughts.

"Fool that I was to have gone to sleep!" he reflected bitterly.

The noise made by the cracksmen—there were two or three of them, for John Rivers could hear them conversing in low tones—was not sufficient to arouse anybody sleeping upstairs. But the detective fervently hoped that someone would awaken and give the alarm before the plunderers got away with the spoils.

But the cracksmen went on with their work without interruption. For nearly half an hour they pursued their operations, which apparently proved successful, for the detective heard one of them, at length, give a low chuckle of triumph.

Then he heard them take their departure and he made a final desperate effort to get rid of the gag which rendered him so helpless. Finally he succeeded in ejecting it from his mouth; and then he gave a stentorian shout, which would have awakened the Seven Sleepers.

Whilst waiting for a response to his shout, the detective heard the distant hum of a departing automobile. And he gritted his teeth with annoyance.

"They have got away!" he muttered.

After a brief interval, bumpings were heard overhead.

Tom Merry & Co. had been roused from their slumbers by the detective's shout, and they promptly leapt out of bed, and came hurrying downstairs with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

When they switched on the light in the dining-room, an amazing scene met their gaze.

The carved oak chest, towards which they glanced instinctively, had been ransacked, and it stood empty, with upraised lid, as if mocking them.

The light, penetrating into the ante-room beyond, revealed John Rivers trussed helplessly to his bed.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "The cracksmen have been at work!"

"And they've made a complete job of it, this time!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Rivers?" asked Manners anxiously.

"No. Sever these cords quickly, one of you! The soundrels have got away by car. I must give chase!"

Tom Merry promptly rushed to the detective's assistance; and John Rivers lost no time in getting into his clothes.

"May we come with you, Mr. Wiyahs?" asked Arthur Augustus excitedly.

"Yes. Hurry up and dress, my boys, and join me in the drive."

The detective hurriedly quitted the building, and rushed round to the garage, only to find it locked up. But Arthur Augustus came hurrying on the scene with the keys.

Only a couple of moments were spent in getting out one of the cars. But they were valuable moments. The juniors scrambled in, and John Rivers jumped into the driver's seat, and pressed the self-starter. The car leapt forward and sped down the snowy drive.

"It's a forlorn hope, I'm afraid," muttered the detective to himself. "They have had too good a start."

But he knew which direction the cracksmen's car had taken; and there was always the chance that they might have had a spill on the road, which was deep in snow.

John Rivers drove at the greatest possible speed, compatible with the safety of his passengers. And Tom Merry & Co. kept an eager look-out for the fugitive car.

The quest, however, proved hopeless. And at the end of a dozen miles John Rivers gave it up.

There were no car-tracks in the snow to serve as a clue, and the detective concluded he must have mistaken the direction taken by the cracksmen. He slowed up, and reversed the car, and drove back at a more moderate pace to Eastwood House. He was bitterly disappointed, and so were the juniors.

It was a dismal report that was presented to Lord Eastwood, who was awaiting the party in the drawing-room.

His lordship had discovered the theft of the gold plate, and he had hoped that John Rivers had brought the burglars to book. But the expression on the detective's face as he stepped into the drawing-room with the juniors clearly told a tale of failure.

"They have got clear away," he said. "I would not have had this happen for worlds. I remained awake until two o'clock, and then I concluded that we had nothing to fear from the cracksmen to-night. No sooner had I dozed off than I was trussed to my bed and gagged."

"Did you catch a glimpse of your assailant?" asked Lord Eastwood.

"Yes. And that is the part of the business that puzzles me most," said John Rivers, with a clouded brow. "Incredible as it may seem, my assailant was a schoolboy."

"Good gracious! You are quite sure of that, Mr. Rivers?"

"Quite! I was unable to identify the boy in the darkness, but he certainly wore Etons. And he was undoubtedly an accomplice of the cracksmen."

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Lord Eastwood looked greatly perturbed.

"You do not suggest, Mr. Rivers, that the boy who

trussed you to your bed was one of my guests?"

John Rivers was silent. He looked no less perturbed than his host. Ever since the outrage had occurred he had been haunted by a very unpleasant thought.

Although he had only been able to gain a slight glimpse of his attacker's face, that slight glimpse had led him to conclude that the boy was Talbot.

Try as he would to assure himself that he had been deceived by that fleeting glimpse and that his eyes had played him a trick in the darkness, John Rivers could not rid himself of the impression that the boy in Etons who had trussed him to his bed was indeed Talbot.

But if Talbot, why had he done such an outrageous thing?

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THE FALSTAFF OF ST. JIM'S!



DAVID LLEWELLYN WYNN.

A member of the New House of St. Jim's, and a staunch chum of George Figgins and George Francis Kerr, the other two occupants of Study No. 4. Although only five feet two inches in height, this Welsh junior turns the scale at something like eleven stone. He has an enormous appetite, and is never happier than when he is sampling pork-pies in Mrs. Mimbble's little tuckshop. Wynn is a popular favourite with all the sportsmen of St. Jim's, and is a member of the junior football eleven. As a goal-keeper Wynn has no equal. He is a real nice fellow in every way—just the opposite to his rival, Baggy Trimble, of the School House.



It was absurd on the face of it to suppose that Talbot was in league with the cracksmen. John Rivers knew the boy better than that. Talbot was as straight as a die. Not for any consideration would he have thrown in his lot with looters and plunderers. Talbot's reformation was not a pose; it was thorough and complete. He placed honour before all, and would never have been a party to any shady undertaking.

Yet, for all that, John Rivers felt strangely uneasy. He would not feel comfortable in his mind until he heard from Talbot's own lips that the boy was innocent of the outrage.

"Surely, Mr. Rivers, you do not suppose that your assailant was a guest in this house?" repeated Lord Eastwood. "I hardly know what to think," muttered the detective. "The whole business is very perplexing."

"We had better ascertain if every boy is in the house," said Lord Eastwood.

Figgins and Kerr and Wynn, who had come downstairs and joined the little group in the drawing-room, looked very uncomfortable. They exchanged glances of dismay and shuffled their feet, and were obviously ill at ease. Lord Eastwood noticed the fact.

"Can you throw any light on this matter, my boys?" he asked, turning to the trio.

"Ahem!" muttered Figgins.

And he and his chums looked more uncomfortable than ever.

"Come, come!" said Lord Eastwood a trifle sharply. "If you can give any information which will assist us in clearing up this mystery it is very wrong of you to withhold it."

Figgins was about to speak when there was a sound of the front door being opened. Then it was closed again—somewhat cautiously, it seemed—and footsteps sounded in the hall.

Lord Eastwood crossed to the doorway of the drawing-room and looked out.

A junior came into view, wearing his overcoat and school cap. There was snow on his garments and on his boots.

The junior was Talbot. Apparently he was not prepared to find anybody up at that hour. He had not seen the drawing-room lights, owing to the fact that the window was screened with heavy curtains.

Talbot uttered a startled exclamation. He stood rooted to the hall floor, and his face paled a little.

Lord Eastwood eyed the junior sternly.

"Talbot," he exclaimed, "where have you been?"

The junior was silent.

"Pray follow me into the drawing-room," said Lord Eastwood in tones of authority, "and offer an explanation of your strange conduct."

All eyes were on the snow-bespattered junior as he followed Lord Eastwood into the drawing-room.

"Now, Talbot!" said Lord Eastwood sharply.

"I—I have nothing to say, sir," muttered Talbot.

"You have been absent from the house?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"I really can't say, sir. I didn't notice the time when I went out."

"But why did you go out? And where have you been? Unless you can answer those questions to my satisfaction, Talbot, I shall be forced to conclude that you have been doing something wrong."

Talbot looked his questioner straight in the face.

"I give you my word of honour, sir, that I have done nothing to be ashamed of."

"Then, why in the world don't you give an explanation of your movements?" demanded Lord Eastwood impatiently.

Talbot said nothing.

"Are you aware, Talbot, that this house has been broken into by cracksmen, and my valuable gold plate has been stolen?"

"Great Scott!" gasped Talbot, genuinely astonished.

"Moreover," went on Lord Eastwood, "a schoolboy—presumably one of my guests—entered the bed-room of Mr. Rivers and bound and gagged him."

Talbot gave a further gasp of astonishment.

"Can you not see, Talbot, that unless you give a satisfactory account of yourself, it is more than possible that suspicion may fall upon you?"

"On me?" panted Talbot.

"That's so, dear boy," chimed in Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, greatly distressed. "Of course, we know you would never do such a mad thing as to attack Mr. Wivahs, who is your friend. An' yet if you don't speak up an' explain where you've been it will look wathah funny."

Talbot's face was the colour of chalk now.

He could tell from the frigid manner of Lord Eastwood that dark suspicions were already forming in that gentleman's mind. Yet he could not speak. He was pledged to silence concerning his movements of that night.

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There was a long and embarrassing pause.

The look of distress on the face of Arthur Augustus was duplicated on the faces of the others.

"Surely, Talbot, you can give a satisfactory account of your movements?" said John Rivers at length.

Talbot shook his head.

"Very well!" said Lord Eastwood, compressing his lips. "There is nothing to be gained by prolonging this conversation. I will speak to you again in the morning, Talbot. By that time you may have conquered your absurd reticence."

The gathering dispersed. Talbot went miserably up to his room, where Figgins & Co. joined him.

"Won't you tell us where you've been, old man?" asked Figgins. "Of course, we know perfectly well that you're not mixed up with this burgling business in any way. But unless you explain—"

"You will begin to suspect me!" said Talbot bitterly.

"No. But Lord Eastwood will—if he doesn't suspect already."

Talbot sighed as he started to undress.

"I wish I could explain to you fellows," he said. "But I can't. I've pledged my word. So there's nothing more to be said."

And he finished undressing in silence.

Under a Cloud!

LORD EASTWOOD was one of the first to rise in the morning—the morning of Christmas Eve.

He had slept badly—in fact, he had scarcely slept at all. There was a weight on his mind.

The theft of the valuable family plate was a serious matter. It was not its intrinsic value—though that was colossal enough—but its sentimental value that made its loss so hard to bear.

The gold plate had been in the family for generations. And now it was gone—spirited away in the night—and there seemed little hope of its recovery.

Then there was the strange affair of Reginald Talbot.

Lord Eastwood could not rid himself of the suspicion that Talbot had had something to do with the theft.

He knew of Talbot's chequered past—that the boy had once been a skilled cracksmen. And he feared that, after a long spell of honesty and straight living, the junior had succumbed to an overwhelming temptation and thrown in his lot once more with a gang of crooks.

Not knowing Talbot so well as Tom Merry & Co. and the others knew him, Lord Eastwood could hardly be blamed for entertaining such suspicions.

If Talbot was innocent and ignorant of the whole matter, why was he so secretive concerning his movements in the night?

Then, again, there was the attack on John Rivers. A boy in Etons had carried out that attack at an hour when Talbot had been absent from his room.

There was no actual proof that Talbot had taken part in the burglary, but there was evidence that could not be ignored.

The whole business was very unpleasant; but Lord Eastwood was determined to probe it to the bottom. And with this object in view he made his way to the room in which Talbot slept.

There were two double-beds in the room. Talbot and Figgins occupied one, and Kerr and Fatty Wynn the other.

The three New House juniors were sound asleep. But Talbot was lying with his head propped on his arm, and his eyes wide open, staring into vacancy. He had scarcely slept a wink. His face was haggard in the morning light.

Lord Eastwood stepped quietly into the room and drew a chair to the bedside.

"Have you any communication to make to me, Talbot?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, sir."

Lord Eastwood sighed.

"I am sorry you are persisting in this obstinacy," he said. "I wish to clear this matter up. And I feel that I am entitled to an explanation of your movements in the night, since you are under my care whilst you are here."

"I can only say this, sir," said Talbot. "I had nothing whatever to do with the burglary, nor with the attack on Mr. Rivers. Good heavens, sir! You surely don't suppose that I should repay all your hospitality by letting crooks into the house, and helping them to plunder it?"

"I am making no accusation against you, Talbot," said Lord Eastwood. "But you can surely see how strange your conduct must appear to others? You have only yourself to blame if suspicion should fall upon you. I urge you to make a clean breast of the matter, to tell me exactly where you went, and what you did."



Reginald Talbot stepped into the barn. Lying on a blanket-bed was an acquaintance of former years—a man named Hookey Walker. "Toff," said Hookey Walker, looking greatly relieved, "you're one of the very best! If it wasn't for your help in bringing me blankets and grub I reckon I should have died!" (See page 21.)

"I cannot, sir," Talbot's tone was respectful, but firm and final. Lord Eastwood rose up from his seat with a frown. Suddenly he gave a start as his eye fell upon something which protruded from beneath Talbot's pillow.

"What is this?" he asked quickly. "Why, good gracious, it is a revolver!"

Talbot looked thunderstruck. He could scarcely believe his eyes as Lord Eastwood pulled out a gleaming revolver from under the pillow.

"Is it a habit of yours, Talbot, to sleep with firearms under your pillow?" demanded Lord Eastwood.

"Certainly not, sir! I—I can't think how the revolver came to be there. It isn't mine."

"Is it loaded?"

"How should I know, sir?"

Lord Eastwood looked grim.

"I will take charge of this," he said. And he slipped the revolver into his pocket. "There is something extraordinary about this, something which I do not pretend to understand. I must discuss the matter with Mr. Rivers."

And Lord Eastwood quitted the room and went downstairs. John Rivers was dressing when his host appeared. And his expression, reflected in the mirror, was far from cheerful.

"Good-morning, Mr. Rivers!" said Lord Eastwood. "I have just made a somewhat startling discovery. I found this under Talbot's pillow."

And he produced the revolver.

John Rivers started violently.

"Why, that is mine!" he exclaimed. "It was taken from under my pillow during the night."

Lord Eastwood looked very grave.

"Taken from under your pillow, Mr. Rivers, and found under Talbot's," he said. "The inference is obvious. There is no doubt in my mind that it was Talbot who attacked you in the night."

"No, no. I cannot believe it was Talbot," said the detective, shaking his head. "From the fleeting glimpse I had of him, my assailant certainly bore a remarkable resemblance to Talbot. But it was not actually he. How could it have been? Talbot would be the last person in the world to do me an injury."

But Lord Eastwood was not convinced.

"I am very sorry to say it, Mr. Rivers, but I am afraid the boy has relapsed into his former ways. The evidence against him, whilst not conclusive, is very strong."

"Talbot gave you his word of honour that he was in no way connected with the burglary," said John Rivers. "Pardon me for saying so, but I know the boy better than you, and he would never lie in such a barefaced way. I am positive he is quite innocent, and I am hoping to find ways and means whereby his innocence may be established."

Lord Eastwood said no more. He handed the revolver back to its owner, and departed.

Breakfast at Eastwood House that morning was a melancholy affair. An atmosphere of gloom hung over the place.

It was Christmas Eve, the time of radiant faces and happy laughter. But there was no radiant face among Lord Eastwood's guests.

Lord Eastwood sat morosely at the head of the table, and merely toyed with his breakfast. Marie Rivers, who had

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heard all the news from her father, looked pale and troubled. John Rivers himself sat frowning at his plate, deep in thought. The events of the night had mystified him considerably, and he could not make head or tail of the strange business.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Tom Merry, and the rest of the St. Jim's party, sat through the meal in silence. They were unhappy. They believed in Talbot implicitly, and they knew him to be the soul of honour. Yet they were dismayed at his silence. Why had he not given Lord Eastwood the explanation that had been demanded of him?

As for Talbot himself, he felt utterly wretched.

Lord Eastwood had not actually accused him of having anything to do with the burglary. But his cold attitude and frigid manner towards Talbot showed clearly that he suspected. And that hurt the junior much more than a direct accusation would have done.

Talbot glanced round at the group of troubled faces. Then, for a brief instant, his eyes met those of Lord Eastwood. In his host's look he read suspicion and distrust.

Another thing that added to Talbot's wretchedness was the cold and contemptuous manner of Bingham, the butler.

Bingham said no word, but his actions spoke louder than words. He waited upon Talbot with an air of lofty disdain. Once the junior nearly lost his temper. He felt like jumping up from his seat and hurling himself at the sleek-looking butler. But he controlled himself with a great effort.

Everybody was relieved when the meal was over.

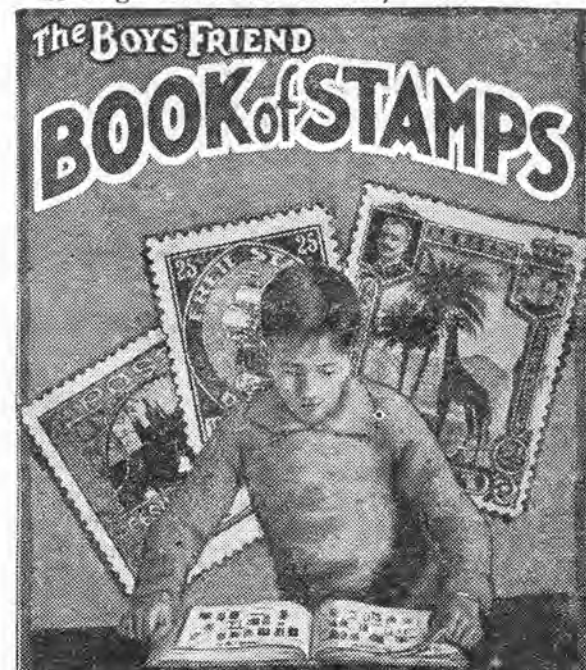
Talbot strolled out into the grounds with his hands thrust moodily into his pockets. He sat down in the summer-house to think things out.

It was there that Marie Rivers found him a few moments later.

Talbot was leaning forward, resting his chin in his hands. His face wore an expression of utter dejection.

The girl laid her hand gently on the junior's shoulder.

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“Toff!” she murmured.

Talbot started at the sound of the familiar name by which he had been known in the old days.

“I am more sorry than I can say that this has happened,” said Marie. “Of course, I know perfectly well that you had nothing to do with the theft of the gold plate. But why didn't you explain to Lord Eastwood where you had been in the night?”

“I—I couldn't, Marie.”

“Won't you explain to me?”

“Impossible! I have pledged my word, Marie, to say nothing of my movements. Otherwise, I would gladly tell you. You know that, Marie?”

The girl nodded.

“This is a ghastly business,” she said. “And, coming just at Christmas-time, it has thrown a damper on everything. Lord Eastwood is terribly upset. So is my father. He is reproaching himself for not having frustrated the burglary. But, after all, a detective is only human. He is bound to be caught napping sometimes. And father was tired out after his trying time in London. He could not be expected to stay awake all night, watching out for burglars.”

“Of course not!” said Talbot.

He rose wearily.

“You believe in me, Marie?”

For answer the girl slipped a slim white hand into Talbot's. She said nothing, but her look was eloquent of her trust in him.

“Thank you, Marie!” said Talbot quietly. “I should feel more happy about it all if everybody thought as you do. But Lord Eastwood believes that I had a hand in the burglary and that I attacked your father. He hasn't said as much. But every look he gives me is like a sword-thrust. I can't possibly stay here any longer.”

“Toff,” said Marie, her voice trembling with anxiety, “you—you are not thinking of going away?”

“My mind is already made up,” said Talbot. “How can I possibly stay here in the circumstances? How can I go on eating at Lord Eastwood's table when he thinks me a thief? Marie dear—he faced the girl squarely—“this is good-bye!”

Marie Rivers did her utmost to turn Talbot from his purpose. But he was adamant.

“I shall leave at once,” he said. “I ought to say good-bye to the others—to your father and Tom Merry, and the rest. But I don't feel I can face them just now. I shall slip away quietly.”

“Where shall you go, Toff?”

“London, I think,” said Talbot vaguely. “I haven't decided. Good-bye, Marie! I'm hoping that this wretched mystery will be cleared up soon. Then I shall come back. But I can't possibly stay here under a cloud of suspicion. Once again, good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” murmured Marie, with a catch in her voice.

Talbot pressed her hand and was gone. His girl chum sank on to the seat he had recently occupied, and buried her face in her hands.

Talbot's Christmas Eve!

TALBOT found it a fairly easy matter to take his departure unobserved.

He first of all returned to the house and went up to his room, where he packed a few belongings, and donned his overcoat and school cap. Then he left the house by the back exit.

Nobody saw him go—at least, he believed not. But had he looked behind him as he went down the garden path he would have seen Bingham, the butler, peering at him from the pantry window. And there was an expression of malevolent satisfaction on the butler's face.

Talbot walked swiftly. He had not bound Marie Rivers to secrecy, and he was afraid that she would tell Tom Merry & Co. of his movements, and that they would hurry after him and endeavour to bring him back. Talbot wanted to avoid that at all costs.

He let himself out by the garden gate and hurried down the narrow lane until he reached a stile. He clambered over it, and struck out across the snowy fields.

Eastwood House was soon left far behind. And Talbot, glancing over his shoulder, saw that he was not being followed. He slackened his pace, and walked in a more leisurely manner, until he came at length to an old barn standing in the corner of a field.

Talbot tapped on the door of the barn, and there was a startled exclamation from within.

“It's all right!” called the junior reassuringly. “It's I—Talbot.”

"Oh, good! Come in, Toff. Scrape your shoes well, in case you drop any snow on the valuable Turkey carpet!" added the voice ironically.

Talbot stepped into the barn.

Lying on a blanket-bed was an acquaintance of former years—a man named Hookey Walker.

The man's face was haggard, and there was a hunted look in his eyes. He was obviously ill.

"I asked you not to come an' see me in the day-time, Toff," he said rather reproachfully.

"I know, Hookey. But it's quite all right. Nobody saw me come."

"And you've not told a soul that I'm here?" said Hookey Walker anxiously.

"Not a soul. I've kept my word!"

Hookey Walker looked greatly relieved.

"Toff," he said, "you're one of the very best! If it wasn't for your help—bringin' me these blankets an' the grub last night—I reckon I should have died. I was in a sorry plight, an' no error, when you first found me here. Hunted by the police, cold an' hungry, an' without a penny in the world."

"Are you certain the police are after you?" asked Talbot.

"Certain sure! An' I'm an innocent man, Toff. I had nothin' to do with that burglary at Brighton a month ago. But the two men who were caught happened to be enemies of mine, because I refused to have any truck with them when they tried to get me to join their gang. So when they were collared, an' taken to the police-station they told the police that I was in the swim. They even went so far as to say it was me who had planned the burglary."

Talbot stood looking down at the sick man.

"Look here, Hookey," he said, "there's nothing more that I can do for you. I brought these blankets for you yesterday, and the grub; but I see your supplies are nearly gone already. I can do nothing more, because I'm going away. But you can't possibly stay here in this condition. The hospital is the place for you."

"No, no, Toff! I daren't go to any place where I might be recognised."

"Well," said Talbot, "there is only one thing to be done. You must give me permission to tell John Rivers about your present plight. I will assure him that you are innocent—not that he will need any assurance, for he knows that you gave up the old game long ago. He is a detective, and he will help to clear you. You simply must let me tell him, Hookey."

It was a long time before Hookey Walker gave his consent to this arrangement. But when Talbot assured him that John Rivers would prove a real friend to him in his trouble, he at length agreed that the detective should be told.

"If John Rivers will help me out of this fix I'll be grateful to him to my dyin' day," said Hookey Walker. "But why are you goin' away, Toff? Why are you leavin' Eastwood House?"

"That is my affair, Hookey," said Talbot, with a faint smile. "I'll say good-bye now, and wish you good luck. You may expect a visit from John Rivers very shortly."

Talbot shook hands with the wan-looking man on the blanket-bed. Then he stepped out into the snow, and carefully closed the door of the barn behind him.

An hour's tramp brought Talbot to the little market-town of Westbury. He went into the post-office, and there he wrote a letter to John Rivers, telling him of Hookey Walker's troubles, and requesting the detective to help the unfortunate man with all speed. He posted the letter and went on his way with a somewhat lighter heart.

It was typical of Talbot to put other people's troubles before his own.

Here was he, an exile from Eastwood House, tramping the country on Christmas Eve, with very little money in his pocket and no notion of where he would sleep that night. And yet, instead of being absorbed in his own sorry plight he was concerned for the welfare of another.

But as the winter day wore on Talbot could not remain indifferent to his own troubles.

Darkness came all too soon, and with the darkness came a blinding snowstorm.

It was one thing to watch a snowstorm from the cosy drawing-room of Eastwood House; but it was quite another thing to be out in one, exposed to the bitter elements.

Talbot tramped on over hill and dale, heading for London, but doubtful whether he would reach the metropolis that night.

In the towns and villages through which he passed he heard sounds of merry-making. For it was Christmas Eve—the time of family reunions, of revelry and dancing, and good will towards all.

Like the youth in "Excelsior,"

"In happy homes he saw the light
Of household fires gleam warm and bright."

But these comforts were not for him. By his own action in leaving Eastwood House he had cut himself off from all comforts.

At length, famished and fatigued and chilled through and through by the icy wind, he staggered into a little coffee-house, to expend what little money he had on food and drink. He had been flush with money when the vacation began; but his kindness to Hookey Walker had made a big hole in his resources.

The steaming beverage stimulated him; the bread-and-butter, coarse fare though it was, fortified him. He found his vitality returning. He would rest awhile in the coffee-house, and then take to the road again, resolved to reach London that night.

And what then?

Talbot dared not let his thoughts dwell too much on the future.

Was not to-day enough? Why should he peer too closely into the darkness of the days to come? Hunger and privation awaited him in London—unless by some amazing turn of Fortune's wheel he happened to fall on his feet.

Talbot quitted the little coffee-house—which had proved a veritable oasis in a desert—and plodded on patiently towards London. And again and again, as he proceeded on his weary pilgrimage, he was mocked by the sounds of Christmas merry-making, which echoed through happy homes and out into the snow-swept streets beyond.

Amazing Revelations!

TOM MERRY & CO. were in the conservatory, chatting moodily with Figgins & Co., when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy joined them. He was looking very agitated.

"I say, deah boys!" he exclaimed. "Talbot's gone away!"

"Gone?" echoed the juniors in a startled chorus.

"Yaas. I had it from Miss Mawie. Talbot has packed his things an' left the house. He could not bear the thought that my patah suspected him of havin' had a hand in the burglary."

"But—but where has he gone?" gasped Figgins.

"Ask me anothah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am extremely sorry that things have come to this pass. There is now no prospect of a happy Christmas for any of us. It's wotten!"

The juniors looked greatly distressed. They were alarmed, too, at the thought of Talbot tramping the country, possibly without money and shelter.

"Poor old Talbot!" said Tom Merry, a trifle huskily. "He must be found and brought back. How long has he been gone, Gussy?"

"About an hour, I think."

"Then it's pretty hopeless to try to find him," said Manners. "He'll be miles away by now."

But Tom Merry insisted upon setting out on the track of the wanderer. He could not bear the thought of inaction. Talbot must be found, if possible, and brought back. Whatever Lord Eastwood might think, Tom Merry & Co. had not lost their faith and trust in Talbot. They would have staked a good deal on his innocence.

"We don't know which direction he's taken," said Tom Merry. "But we can go for a long tramp and see if we can pick up any news of him. That's the least we can do."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors went into the house, and donned their overcoats and caps and mufflers, for it was intensely cold.

Bingham, the butler, was hovering in the hall when they came out. They told him they would not be back for lunch—possibly not until dinner-time that evening.

Bingham, moved by curiosity, asked them where they were going. He was curtly told to mind his own business. The juniors were not in a very happy humour just then. The new butler, whom they had rather liked at first, was now beginning to get on their nerves.

Tom Merry & Co. were not aware that Talbot had left the house by the back door, and that they would be able to follow the trail of his footprints in the snow. They went down the drive and out at the front gates.

They first of all tramped down to the village and made inquiries there. But, nothing had been seen of the wanderer.

"We shall have to go farthah afield, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry nodded.

"We'll go a few miles in this direction," he said, pointing to the north. "Then, if we have no luck, we'll try another direction, and keep on until we can pick up a clue. Lead

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 879.

the way, Gussy. You know this part of the country better than we do."

Was it Fate that led the footsteps of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy towards Chillingdon Heath, where the haunted house was situated?

But whether it was the operation of Fate, or a mere blind chance, it was towards Chillingdon Heath that the search-party made its way. Little did they dream that their quest for Talbot, which seemed almost hopeless, would have a dramatic and surprising sequel.

A tramp of several miles in the snow brought them eventually to the lonely expanse of heath, a lonely enough spot in summer-time, but acutely lonely now.

"What is this outlandish place, Gussy?" inquired Fatty Wynn.

"Chillin'don Heath, deah boy, where the haunted house is."

"Groo!"

"It weminds me of that line fwom Bywon," said Arthur Augustus. "It is a place 'where mortal foot hath no'er or warelly twod.'"

Figgins gave a grunt.

"You don't suppose Talbot would come to a benighted place like this?" he growled.

"Why not, deah boy? He would natuwallly wish to avoid bein' seen. He would expect us to form a search-party with a view to bwingin' him back. An' he wouldn't dream that we should come to such a lonely place as this."

"Well, now we're here, we can have a look at the haunted house, anyway," said Manners. "By Jove! It looks a jolly ghostly spot, even in the day-time."

The bleak, solitary house loomed large before the juniors' gaze. It was an oasis in a desert of snow, and not a very inviting-looking oasis, either.

At first sight the house appeared to be untenanted. But as the juniors drew near a face appeared at a tiny barred window at the top of the house. It was the face of a man, and he seemed to be gesticulating wildly.

"Hallo!" ejaculated Monty Lowther suddenly. "Is that the giddy ghost, I wonder?"

"No. That fellow's human enough," said Tom Merry. "What's the matter with him? He's waving his arms about like windmills."

"The window's barred," said Kerr. "Looks to me as if the man's a prisoner."

"Bai Jove!"

Tom Merry was about to hail the man at the upper window to inquire what was wrong when the man put his finger to his lips, enjoining silence. He also signalled to the juniors to wait. Then he disappeared from the window.

The juniors waited down below in a state of wonderment. "I wondsh, deah boys, if that's the madman that Bingham the butlah told us about?" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"I say, we'd better make ourselves scarce," said Manners. "Dashed if I want to be fired upon by a lunatic."

"You fellows can please yourselves," said Tom Merry. "But I'm staying here."

The juniors stood their ground, and presently the man reappeared at the window. He thrust his hand between two of the outer bars and dropped a note. It came whirling through the air and fluttered at the feet of Tom Merry.

Tom picked it up, and his companions gathered round him eagerly and peered over his shoulder.

The message which had been tossed down to the juniors was a most remarkable one. It fairly staggered them. They wondered, as they perused it, if they were dreaming.

"Help me! I am a prisoner here. My name is Reuben Bingham. I am a butler, engaged for Christmas by Lord Eastwood. When I arrived at Eastwood Priors Station I was met by a man with a car, and he decoyed me to this place. He has gone to Eastwood House under my name. From the conversation of my guards I have learned that the scoundrel's real name is Jim Dawlish, and he has planned to steal the valuable family plate from Eastwood House. I believe it has already been stolen and brought here. There are three men and a boy in this house—members of Dawlish's gang. You will have to overpower them in order to effect my release. They have been drinking all the morning, doubtless to celebrate their coup. They are in no state for fighting, and you should have no difficulty in capturing them. I urge you to act swiftly."

For a full moment the juniors stared speechlessly at that message hurriedly written by the prisoner in the upper attic. As in a flash everything was made clear to them. The mystery of the outrage at Eastwood House was a mystery no longer.

Bingham, the butler at Eastwood House, was an impostor. He had carried out an amazing masquerade. The real

Bingham was here, a prisoner in the haunted house. The bogus Bingham was none other than Jim Dawlish, the notorious leader of a gang of cracksmen.

Tom Merry was the first to find his voice.

"My hat! What a discovery!" was all he could gasp.

"You—you could knock me down with a feather!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Jim Dawlish's gang have taken this house as their headquarters. An' Dawlish himself is at Eastwood House, posin' as a butlah!"

The juniors were almost bowled over by the magnitude of the discovery. They could understand now why Bingham had urged them not to visit the haunted house. He was afraid that they might stumble upon the truth. And they had done so.

Tom Merry glanced at his comrades.

"Are you fellows in fighting form?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

And the others braced themselves up and said that they were ready for anything.

"This way," said Tom Merry. And he strode towards the front door of the house.

The door was bolted on the inside.

"We must try a window," said Tom Merry. "We've got to get in somehow."

"Those wottahs are pprobably armed," said Arthur Augustus.

"We must chance that."

Entry was effected at length through a window at the back. The juniors clambered through, one by one, and found themselves in an empty kitchen.

The ground floor of the house appeared to be deserted.

"Better take off our shoes," whispered Tom Merry. "We've not been heard so far. And if we can take the rascals by surprise, so much the better."

The juniors removed their shoes, and Tom Merry led the way upstairs.

On the first-floor landing he halted.

Cuttural sounds came from a room close at hand. Tom Merry stooped down and peered through the keyhole, and an amazing scene met his gaze.

There were two men and a boy in the room. The boy—who was dressed in Etons, and who bore a remarkable resemblance to Talbot—was stretched out on the couch in a state of stupor. The two men had fallen back in their chairs and were fast asleep. One was snoring loudly. On the table were a number of empty glasses, also some empty bottles, which had contained champagne and spirits.

Tom Merry turned to his chums.

"They're dead drunk!" he whispered delightedly. "We couldn't have come at a better time. But there are only two men in there. Bingham said there were three in his note. I expect the other man is upstairs, guarding the prisoner's room. Come on!"

The juniors hurried up the stairs. On reaching the top of the house they discovered a burly man lying fast asleep on a rug outside the door of one of the attics.

"What luck!" murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "They all seem to have drunk themselves into a stupor. But I'm wathah sowwy there's not goin' to be a sewap, atiah all."

"Same here," muttered Figgins.

Tom Merry dropped on to one knee, and went through the pockets of the prostrate man, whose name, judging by various letters found in his possession, was Patrick Donovan. He was the right-hand man of Jim Dawlish.

In one pocket Tom Merry discovered a bunch of keys. This was precisely what he had been hunting for. He rose to his feet, and tried several of the keys in turn, until he found the one which unlocked the door of the attic.

The key turned in the lock, and the door was opened, and Reuben Bingham—the real Bingham—staggered out of his captivity into glorious freedom.

For several days and nights the unfortunate man had been held prisoner in that poky little room. He appeared to have been well fed by his warders, but the lack of fresh air and exercise had told upon him, and he reeled dizzily as he emerged on to the landing. But he soon recovered himself, and he was profuse in his gratitude to the St. Jim's juniors for having rescued him.

"You have nothing to fear now, Mr. Bingham," said Tom Merry. "Your warder has gone to sleep at his post, and the others are in the same state downstairs. The best thing we can do is to lock them in and send for the police."

Mr. Bingham nodded.

"The precious scoundrels deserve to go to penal servitude for this," he said. "Especially that man Dawlish. He is an arch-villain!"

"Is the gold plate heah, I wondah?" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"We'll jolly soon see," said Tom Merry. "First of all, give me a hand with this burly loud. We'll carry him down

and bundle him into the room where his pals are. If he wakes up during the process, it will be necessary to give him a crack on the head."

But Donovan did not wake, although he was carried none too gently down the flight of stairs.

Having first peeped through the keyhole to make certain that the others were still sleeping, Tom Merry opened the door and Donovan was bundled into the room without ceremony. Then the door was promptly closed again and Tom Merry locked it.

"They're fairly trapped now," said Figgins. "Jolly considerate of them to drink themselves into this state. They've simplified our task."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Having imprisoned the members of the gang like rats in a trap, the juniors proceeded to explore the haunted house. It seemed at first that the plunder was not there; but it was discovered at last, hidden in the gloomy basement. Arthur Augustus was overjoyed when he surveyed the family plate, which had been regarded as lost and gone for ever.

It now only remained for the police to be called in to take the members of Dawlish's gang into custody, and then proceed to Eastwood House and arrest Jim Dawlish himself.

And then there was Talbot. In the excitement of their discovery, the juniors had almost forgotten their chum who had been driven from Eastwood House by the chilling atmosphere of suspicion.

It was not difficult to see now who had made the attack on John Rivers in the night. It was the youthful member of Dawlish's gang, who bore such a remarkable resemblance to Talbot.

Mr. Bingham volunteered to go for the police, and the others remained in the house, lest the prisoners should awaken and attempt to batter down the door.

But they did not wake. They were in too deep a stupor for that. And it was the officers of the law who eventually roused them from that stupor. It was indeed a rude awakening for the members of Dawlish's gang, who were promptly handcuffed and taken for a Christmas Eve joy-ride in the prison van.

Bitterly they regretted having imbibed so freely, and thus played into the hands of the St. Jim's juniors. They had not dreamed that anybody would come near the haunted house. But the unexpected had happened, and the cracksmen were doomed to spend Christmas Day—and a good many days to come—in durance vile.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

WHEN Tom Merry & Co. returned to Eastwood House and exploded their bombshell, Lord Eastwood and his guests were fairly staggered.

John Rivers, in particular, was flabbergasted. To think that his old enemy, Jim Dawlish, had been under the same roof all this time, practising an amazing imposture!

But the tidings which Tom Merry & Co. brought were received with joy, as well as astonishment.

The plunder had been found; the members of the gang of cracksmen—with the exception of Dawlish himself—had been brought to book; and Talbot's innocence had been established.

But when search was made for Dawlish, he was nowhere to be found. Billington, the butler, declared that his assistant had left the house hurriedly, only a short time since. Evidently he had got wind of the fact that the game was up.

Simultaneously with the disappearance of Dawlish, one of Lord Eastwood's cars disappeared. Dawlish had calmly appropriated it in order to facilitate his flight.

John Rivers—with Tom Merry & Co. on board—promptly gave chase in another car.

The tracks made by Dawlish's car were plainly visible in the snow, and the detective went full-pelt in pursuit.

After a breathless and thrilling chase over a distance of nearly thirty miles, the chief of the cracksmen was captured.

He pleaded for mercy, but he got no mercy from John Rivers, who was thinking of Talbot and of Talbot's possible fate.

Where was the boy now? Ill, perhaps, through exposure and privation. Anything might have happened to him. Talbot's chums shuddered as they thought of some of the possibilities. It was not the sort of weather for a boy to be tramping the country without means of subsistence.

Jim Dawlish was conveyed by car to the police-station, the other car being taken in tow. And John Rivers gave a sigh of relief when the precious soundrel was safe under lock and key.

"It will be a long time before Dawlish is a free man again," he remarked. "He has too many previous convictions to warrant a light sentence. And such men as he are

far better out of the way. They are pests to the community."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Now, the next thing is to find poor old Talbot."

John Rivers nodded gravely.

"Christmas festivities are out of the question until Talbot is found," he said. "I will communicate at once with Scotland Yard."

And he drew up at the first place which boasted a telephone, and put through a trunk call to London.

Fortune, which had smiled upon Lord Eastwood's guests that day, did not desert them now.

Scotland Yard entered with zest into the hunt for Talbot; and they had not far to seek.

The boy had never reached London. He had been found in a fainting condition by the roadside, a few miles from the metropolis, and a kindly constable had taken him to the station, where he was given food and warmth and shelter and promised a night's rest.

Having discovered these facts, Scotland Yard lost no time in communicating with John Rivers. And the detective, taking with him Tom Merry & Co., Arthur Augustus, and Miss Marie, went post-haste by car to fetch Talbot and bring him back to Eastwood House.

Talbot's face glowed with happiness as he accompanied his friends to the car.

Well wrapped up in rugs, he sat next to John Rivers on the journey.

"I've written you a letter, Mr. Rivers," he said. "You haven't got it yet, I suppose?"

"No, dear boy."

"It was about Hookey Walker," explained Talbot. "You remember him? He's in a very bad way at present. He's staying in an old barn not far from Eastwood House, and he's ill. Not only ill, but wanted by the police in connection with a burglary at Brighton. He had no hand in it, really—he's quite innocent. But he refused to join forces with the actual burglars, so when they were arrested they dragged him into it. I told him I would write to you, and that you would help him."

"Of course I'll help him!" said John Rivers. "Lying ill in a barn, eh? And on Christmas Eve! I'll go and see him the moment we get back, and set him on his feet."

John Rivers looked thoughtful as the car sped on through the darkness.

"I can understand now why you broke out in the night and refused to give Lord Eastwood an explanation," he said. "You went to help Hookey Walker. And he pledged you to secrecy. Is that so?"

Talbot nodded.

"You're a good chap, Toff!" said John Rivers, with emotion. "You're only a boy in years, yet you're one of those rare products for which Diogenes searched in vain—a man. You're the least selfish fellow I ever knew."

"Cut it short, Mr. Rivers," said Talbot. "If you talk like that I shall begin to think I'm a paragon of all the virtues."

The car rushed on through the snow and the darkness. And the hour was late when it drew up at its destination.

A cheerful blaze of lights gleamed from the windows of Eastwood House. And Lord Eastwood, with a crowd of St. Jim's fellows at his heels, came down the front steps to welcome the return of the wanderer.

And what a reception Talbot had! The cheers of his school-fellows rang out over the snowy fields. And Lord Eastwood frankly confessed to Talbot that he was ashamed of having harboured suspicion in his breast.

It all seemed a dream to the popular junior—a dream following a ghastly nightmare.

What a crowd of events had been crammed into that one day! It was a day that would live for ever in the memory of Lord Eastwood's guests.

Talbot was very happy now. Life, which had seemed so hard and cruel but a short time since, was now well worth living again. And when Reginald Talbot awoke on Christmas morning, and listened to the joyous peal of the bells, the words of the old Psalmist flashed into his mind:

"Heaviness may endure for a night: but joy cometh in the morning."

It was a wonderful Christmas at Eastwood House. Everybody agreed that it put all previous Christmases in the shade.

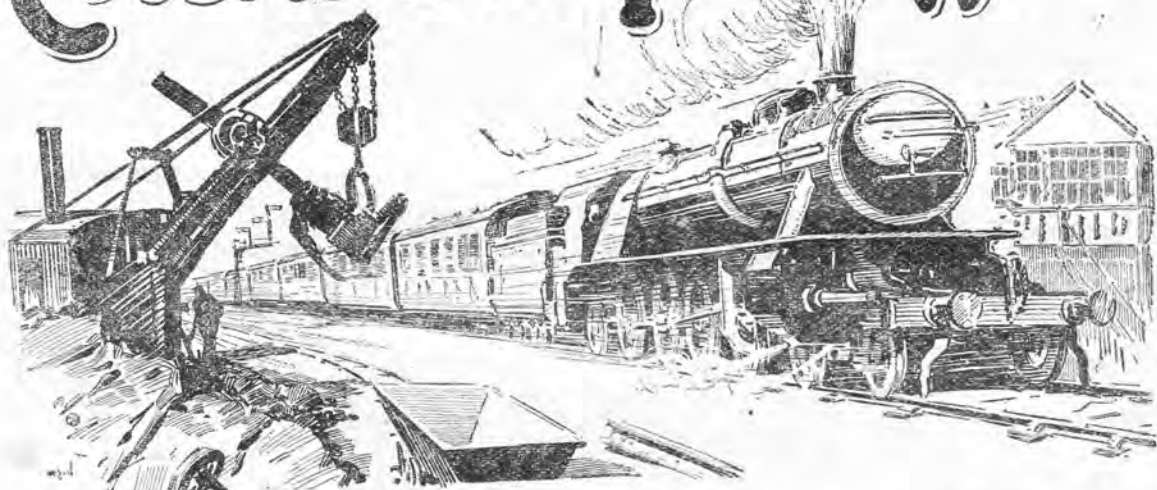
Happiness and high good-humour prevailed on every side. And it was indeed a red-letter day for Gussy's Christmas Guests!

The holidays came to an end at last, and in high spirits Tom Merry & Co. caught their train back to Rylcombe and St. Jim's.

(There will be another grand long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: **LUMLEY-LUMLEY'S COUP!** By Martin Clifford. Make sure you read it, chums.)

Granite Langrish's great challenge gives Jimmy Speed an idea!

CHUMS OF THE IRON WAY!



A Thrilling Yarn of Exciting Adventure on the Railroad. By ROLAND SPENCER and FRANCIS WARWICK.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

JIMMY SPEED, a plucky and cheery young newsboy of Blackhampton.
SIR RICHARD GRANT, chief director of the Great Scottish and Central Railway, who has in his employ nearly all the male population of Blackhampton.
JOHN LANGRISH—whose heavy and determined features, square-set jaw, and steely eyes earn for him the title of "Granite" Langrish—chief director of the Great Electric Northern, and a rival of Sir Richard Grant.
HAROLD SOPER, a foreman shunter on the G.S.C., and an unscrupulous rascal, working in the pay of John Langrish, and
SAM BLUNDELL, a fireman on the G.S.C., and as true as steel.

It was a lucky day for the cheery young newsboy, Jimmy Speed, when, at great risk to himself, he rescued Sir Richard Grant from being crushed beneath the wheels of a monster goods-train engine, for it meant the realisation of his long-envisioned ambition—to get a job in the great workshops of the G.S.C. To hear the clanging and the shouting, and to see the great steel locomotives towering around him, sent a thrill through Jimmy Speed.

But he is soon up against it when he meets Soper, who, in the pay of Granite Langrish, is endeavouring to poison his fellow-workers against the G.S.C.

He finds a friend, however, in Sam Blundell, a fireman. Then, anxious to learn more, he shadows Soper, who, together with

Cridland, another confederate of Langrish's, have met in the lonely ruins of Black Hill to discuss further villainous plans. A thrilling fight follows, Speed miraculously escaping from the hands of the villainous Cridland. Suspecting further villainy next night, Sir Richard Grant, together with some detectives, and Jimmy Speed, crouch in a ditch, waiting. An attempt is made to wreck a train. Speed and Blundell are captured in the scrap, and taken by Langrish's men to Black Hill ruins, where they discover a plot to collapse the tunnel. The two chums effect an escape, but before help arrives Cridland carries out his vile scheme. The great disaster casts a still deeper shadow over the great railway town, and the newspaper talk makes bitter reading for Blackhampton.

The following Saturday Carnborough meet Blackhampton on the football-ground. A fierce tussle takes place, but the bitter blood of the Carnboroughites soon comes to the surface. A fight follows, and inch by inch the staunch Blackhamptonians are forced back. Speed and Blundell are singled out, but cleverly evade capture by jumping on a passing electric express. With the exception of the first carriage, the train is in darkness.

Sam Blundell's curiosity is aroused. Disguised as a waiter, he enters the lighted compartment, where he finds Langrish and his followers discussing another plan to bring about the downfall of the G.S.C. In his eagerness to hear more, his disguise is pierced. A hue and cry is set up, and Sam and Jim are forced to make a bold bid for freedom. With their pursuers hot on their track, the chums sprint full speed across the bewildering maze of marsh-land.

(Now read on.)

A Dash for Freedom!

THROUGH mud and water, sometimes waist-high in treacherous reeds, sometimes sprinting full speed along hard stretches, Sam and Jim kept on, winding in and out as best they could in the bewildering maze of marsh-land. And at last, when they glanced back, nothing was to be seen of the men who had been pursuing them.

"They've given it up as a bad job, I s'pose," panted Jimmy. "Thank goodness for a breather!"

"Ay, I'm about done myself!" chuckled Sam, as he and his chum came to a standstill by the edge of a sodden stretch of turf. "We led 'em a dance, Jimmy, you an' I! I bet they're mighty puzzled to know who we are, and what our game was!"

Jimmy nodded.

"I guess that'll puzzle 'em all their days!" laughed Jim. "Talk about the films—what a grand comic it would have made, all those toffs chasing us, an' stepping into pools and

bogs every other minute. But though they don't know who we are, we know what they're up to, anyway, with that rum empty express of theirs."

"Yes. Trial run, London to Edinburgh, with this newest type of loco of theirs," muttered Sam grimly. "Seventy miles an hour average speed, too—some going!"

"Some going it is!" echoed Jimmy moodily. "And they mean to issue a challenge to the Great Scottish and Central on the strength of it, do they? Sir Richard Grant will accept the challenge, I suppose?"

"He'll have to," answered Sam shortly. "Langrish will let the Press know of this for sure, and then, if the G.S.C. wouldn't come up to scratch it would look as though we knew we'd be worsted in the race." He whistled softly. "Seventy miles per hour average!"

"Can we hope to whack that?" asked Jimmy, his eyes on Sam's face doubtfully.

Sam shook his head thoughtfully.

"Afraid I doubt it. In fact, I'm pretty sure there's not a loco on the G.S.C. that could take a train of that weight from London to Edinburgh at that average speed. Though I am a steam man, and still pin my faith to the power o' steam,

I've got to admit Langrish and the G.E.N. have got out a wonderful thing in that great yellow 4-10-4 of theirs."

The young fireman pulled a pipe from his pocket and filled it from his pouch, looking round him at the dark waste of moorland as he did so.

"Where are we?" he said abruptly. "That's the first thing for us to decide. Looks as though there's no village or house for miles around. Might be the middle of the Sahara for all the signs of life there are."

Jimmy stopped and scraped some of the thick chunks of mud from his trousers. The feet of both were squelching unpleasantly in their boots.

"What about cutting across to that lump of a hill over there?" Jimmy suggested. "From the top we ought to see if anyone does live near this benighted spot."

The two chums turned towards it. But it was farther away than they had imagined, and it was over half an hour later that they reached the summit, where a few fir-trees rose straight and strong to the cloudy moonlit sky. But they had not climbed in vain, for away to their right they could see a light gleaming from a huddled black mass that might prove to be a farm.

"That light's a comfort, anyway," said Jimmy cheerily, as they set off down the opposite side of the hill towards it.

Sam Blundell had discarded the white drill coat of the G. E. N. waiter, so that there was nothing to connect them with the railway. In their mudstained clothes, as Jimmy remarked, the two chums looked more like a couple of tramps than anything else. It was with very doubtful feelings that they knocked on the farmhouse door, keeping a wary look-out for dogs; one was already barking lustily from somewhere among the outbuildings.

But despite their clothes, there was something in the faces of both chums that apparently inspired confidence. For they received a hearty north-country welcome from the farmer and his family, instead of having a dog turned loose at them.

Over a fine supper of ham and eggs, the chums learnt that they were near the village of Grindlesedge, in Yorkshire.

"Jolly decent of this old boy and his missus putting us up like this," said Jimmy, as he and Sam turned in that night in a little upstairs room. "Decent of 'em not asking us a lot of awkward questions, too. We couldn't very well have told 'em how we got here! Well, it's mighty lucky this business has happened on a Saturday. We could never have got home to Blackhampton in time for our jobs otherwise."

"As it is, we've got to get across to Hatherford somehow to-morrow morning, to pick up the G. S. C. line. Can't go back free on the G. E. N., even though it would be a bit quicker under the arcs, being closer at hand," said Sam. "Hatherford is twenty miles away, according to the farmer."

He blew out the candle, and the two settled down between the sheets. Both were dog-tired after the strange events of that evening, but for all that it was some time before Sam could sleep.

"You know, Jimmy," said the young fireman suddenly in the darkness, "it'll break my heart if the G. S. C. get licked in this great railway race that Langrish is going to challenge us to. But I'm sure even our crack Pacifics couldn't whack that wonderful 4-10-4 we travelled behind to-day. But for all that, I've got hopes of winning—"

He broke off, staring into the darkness.

"Jimmy, I've been thinking that if only I could get out the plans for my Wolf loco in time, my loco would beat theirs. Don't want to blow my own trumpet—"

A loud snore vibrated through the darkness. Jimmy had not heard. He was already asleep.

Sam grinned in the darkness, and, turning over, pulled up the blankets round his ears to copy Jimmy's example.

The Deepening Shadow!

IT was late afternoon before the chums reached home on the following day. The farmer had refused all payment for his hospitality, rather to their disappointment.

"Nay, lads, tak' it back," he had said, when Sam pulled out his purse. "An' if ye are after makin' Hatherford,

ye'll find a motor van in the village if ye hurry, that's off for there. Gi' the lad my name, an' you'll be champion."

At Hatherford the chums boarded a slow local for the nearest junction, where they caught the fast train to Blackhampton.

In the comfortable G. S. C. compartment, Sam leaned back thoughtfully, staring out of the window at the scenery flashing by. Like Jimmy, his thoughts were all on the challenge which they believed was to be issued to their railway by that of their unscrupulous enemy, Granite Langrish—mysterious as well as unscrupulous, for the chums were still bewildered and mystified by the words Jimmy had once overheard from the man Cridland—the boast from Cridland that he knew Langrish's secret, and could break Langrish with that knowledge if need arose.

"What on earth can it be that Cridland knows about Langrish?" muttered Jimmy suddenly, half aloud. "If only we could find out!"

"Ay!" agreed Sam. "But even if we don't, it's clear that there's no love lost between Cridland and Langrish, for all that they are working together now. If Langrish should try any gains with Cridland, there'll be trouble for Langrish, I'm thinking, though what form it'll take I can't guess any more than you. For it's clear that Langrish doesn't know Cridland knows his rum secret, whatever it can be. But for the moment we can't hope to solve that riddle. It's this race we've got to think about."

Jimmy nodded gloomily.

"You say there's nothing on the G. S. C. to touch their new 4-10-4, Sam?"

"There isn't at the moment," said Sam slowly. "But even if they issue the challenge to-day, the race probably won't take place for some time. Time enough to build a new loco—"

Jimmy suddenly brightened.

"By gum, Sam! Are you meaning your Wolf loco?"

Sam nodded with a laugh.

"Ay, Jimmy, I was! For I still pin my faith to steam. And if only I could get over my difficulties, the old Wolf, as I picture her, would be a match for any of the G. E. N.'s 4-10-4 locos."

Then Sam's face fell suddenly.

"But there, I'm a bit of a dreamer, perhaps. I've got the main ideas in my old crumple, and I think they're good. But that doesn't mean they are. Robert Steel, Esq., of the drawing-offices, didn't seem particularly keen on 'em, if you remember. Besides, I've still got snags to overcome, which may take years, and goodness knows there's little time enough for getting out something to put the G. E. N. in their place."

He shrugged his shoulders, and a little later the train glided smoothly into the big Blackhampton West Central station of the G. S. C.

As soon as they reached their rooms, Sam opened the cupboard where he kept his work, and pulled out the medley of papers that contained his plans—some mere rough ideas jotted down on paper, others neatly worked drawings. Jimmy strolled out towards the crowded main square of the town. And there one of the first things to meet his eyes was the fluttering placard of a Sunday evening special edition—"G. E. N. Challenge to G. S. C."

Jimmy had no money on him. But he got a newspaper "on tick," from an old acquaintance among the newsboy fraternity, and eagerly scanned the first page. Then he hurried back home.

Sam looked up as Jimmy burst in, waving the newspaper. "It's out already—their challenge!" cried the youngster excitedly. "Listen, Sam!"

Sam started eagerly to his feet, almost knocking over the bottle of Indian ink at his elbow. He hurried to Jimmy's side, looking over his chum's shoulder at the great headline. But Jimmy was already reading aloud.

"So that's that!" said Jimmy, throwing the paper on to the table when he had finished reading. "Course, London to Edinburgh. Weight of trains, five hundred tons. Date, April 15th. No cup or jam spoon or anything to race for," he added, with a chuckle. "No prize or anything—just a friendly race, Langrish calls it."

"Fat lot of friendliness behind this challenge," grunted Sam. "This will decide for good an' all which of the two is the premier railway to the North—and Langrish would never have challenged us if he had had a shadow of doubt as to the result. But he hasn't. He believes his new 4-10-4 capable of wiping up the floor with anything we can run against it—and he's justified."

"Nothing said yet as to whether the challenge is accepted," said Jimmy.

ANSWERS

EVERY MONDAY.....PRICE 2:

Sam picked up the paper again.

"Let's have a quizz at the Stop-Press news," he suggested. "Perhaps there'll be something—Ay, here you are! Just a bit saying it's understood Sir Richard Grant, on behalf of the G. S. C., will accept the challenge! Well, of course, he couldn't do anything else, so they're safe in putting that, I s'pose."

"April the thirteenth," muttered Jimmy. "Three months ahead, roughly. Twelve weeks only. Not long to wait. After that the struggle between Blackhampton and Carnborough will be pretty well all over, I suppose. The railway that's beaten will take second place definitely after that. I can tell you, Sam, there's some excitement in Blackhampton over this! In the streets everybody's talking about it."

"Ay, they will that!" Sam glanced at the papers that littered the table. "Langrish has planned this to be his final crushing blow, Jimmy. Already he's turned the public against us, and the newspapers, for the most part, are down on us because of these accidents those hounds have brought about on the Scottish and Central. And if, as he hopes and expects to do, he licks us hollow in this London-Edinburgh race, the G. S. C. will have to admit second place to the G. E. N. And once a railway takes the first step downhill—"

Sam's face was strangely drawn as he crossed slowly to his chair and sat down, staring at the drawings scattered before him.

"What if Langrish keeps his word in spite of all opposition, Jimmy? He said he would smash us up in the wheels of his giant yellow electric locos. What if the G. S. C. starts going down the hill—the mere success of a once noble railway brought to its knees in the end, forced to sell, lock, stock, and barrel to its triumphant enemies?"

For a moment Jimmy did not speak. Something in Sam's voice had awed him oddly.

"But—but the Wolf—your loco?" he stammered at last. "You said that if you could finish that, it would beat anything on the Electric Northern—"

Sam Blundell laughed harshly.

"Ay—if I could finish! But I ought to have known long ago that I've not got the brains to finish. Look at the time I've spent—and the great race comes off in April! I can never do it in the time. I can never do it at all, if you want the truth!"

A sudden gust of hopeless anger seemed to sweep across him. Jimmy had never seen Sam's laughing blue eyes take on the look he saw in them now. Reaching out a great hand, Sam seized the sheet of drawing-paper that bore his uncompleted plans. Across and across he tore it, then flung the scraps into a corner.

"That's that!" he cried. "So much for that wasted labour! I've been a fool, Jim—but that nonsense is all over now!"

For some minutes there was silence in the room. Then Jimmy picked up his cap. Something told him that Sam wanted to be left alone.

With a last glance at the dark figure of his chum, standing in the scatter of white, torn paper, Jimmy slipped noiselessly from the room.



Sam Blundell seized the sheet of drawing-paper that bore his uncompleted plans, and tore it up into little pieces.

"Poor old chap!" muttered Jimmy. "He's whacked. He's worked too hard and worried too much—that's what he's done. Those rotten plans have upset him altogether."

The youngster's eyes went to the corner where the torn scatter of paper had been. But there was no sign of the torn plans.

"What's he done with 'em?" muttered Jimmy anxiously. "If he's burnt 'em—"

Jim Speed crossed the floor hastily, and Sam Blundell stirred again. In consternation, Jimmy's quick eyes darted here and there, searching for the torn plans.

Then, with an exclamation of relief, the youngster found what he sought.

Jimmy sat up over an hour that night, sorting out the torn sections of Sam's plans from the other torn papers that filled the wastepaper-basket. When he came to piece them together, he found all the pieces were there. Then, stuffing the little wad of torn fragments into his breast pocket, Jimmy turned in beside Sam with a more peaceful mind.

When Jimmy awoke, Sam had already gone.

Jim himself was on the back turn that week—that is, the shift, hated by all, which begins at two o'clock in the afternoon and knocks off at eleven at night.

But it meant that Jimmy had time that morning to fit Sam's torn plans together again, this time carefully pasting them on to a sheet of thick paper. It was a long job, getting the pieces to fit exactly; but Jimmy, whose faith in the plans had not diminished in the slightest, was scrupulous in seeing that each line met to a nicety, that no ragged zigzag lines showed too clearly where the tears had been. When that labour of love was done, he had a hasty meal, after which he hurried off to the railway workshops.

Here a surprise was awaiting Jimmy.

(And there was also a big surprise awaiting Sam Blundell. Be sure you read next week's exciting instalment of this powerful serial, chums.)

In the Erecting Shop!

JIMMY wandered moodily through the streets till a late hour. When at last he returned home Sam Blundell was in bed, sleeping rather restlessly. As Jimmy softly closed the door, Sam stirred and muttered, and for a moment Jimmy thought his chum was awake. But Sam slept on.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 879.

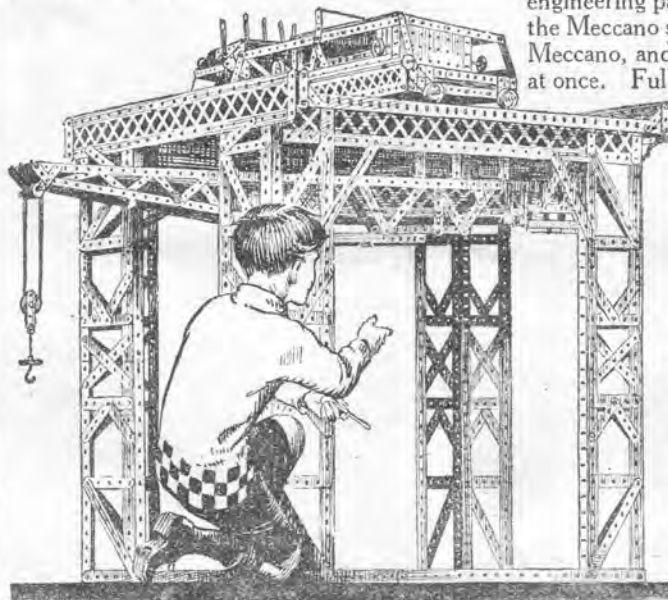
Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press (1922), Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription rates: Inland and Abroad, 11s. per annum; 5s. 6d. for six months. Sole agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Ltd. Sole agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for Canada, The Imperial News Co., Ltd. (Canada).—Saturday, December 15th, 1924.

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