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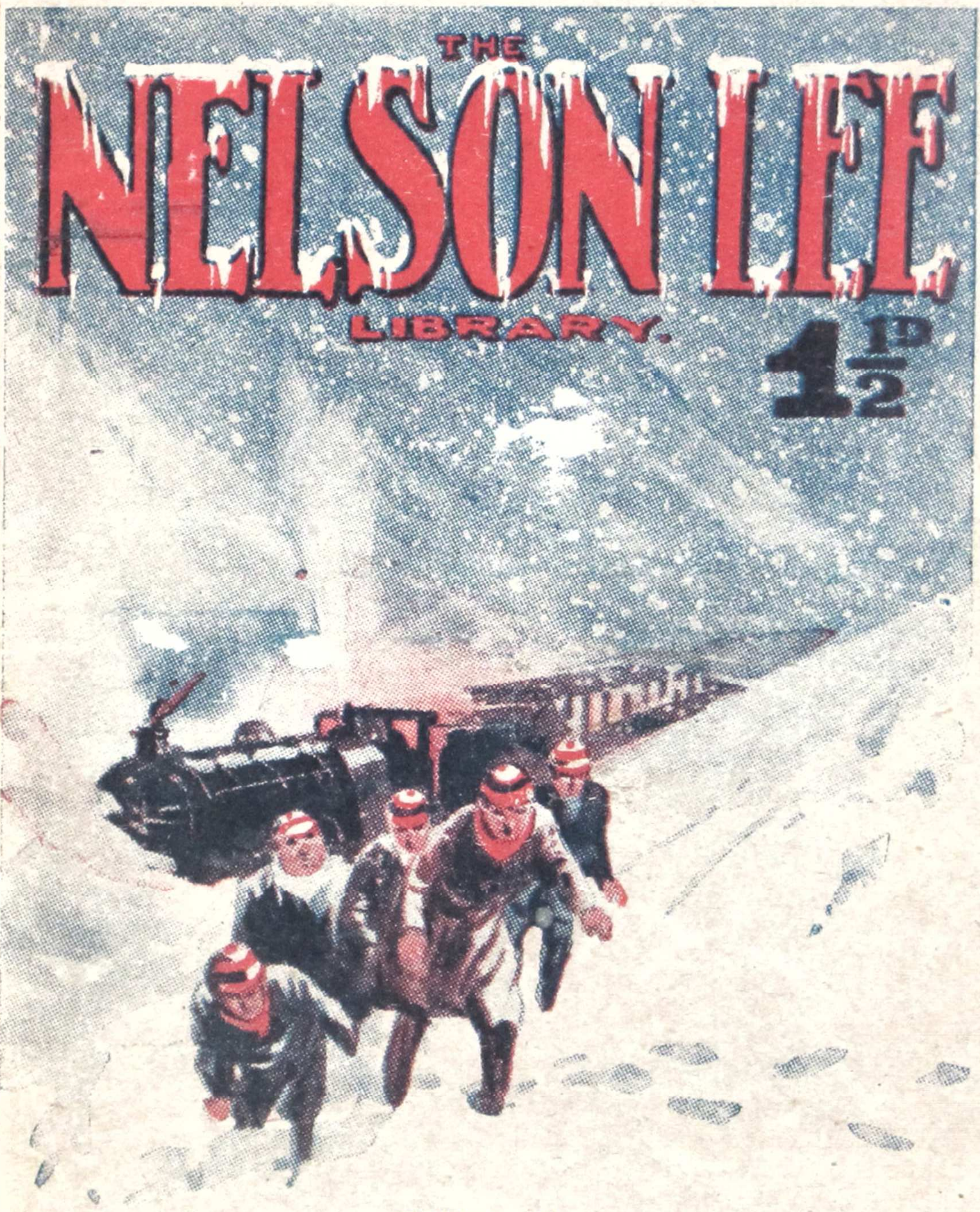

SNOWED UP!

Dorrie's Christmas Party

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER** and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Siege of the West Wing," "Victory for the Rebels," "Exit the Tyrant," etc.

December 20, 1919.

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:: IN TWO PARTS, Entitled ::

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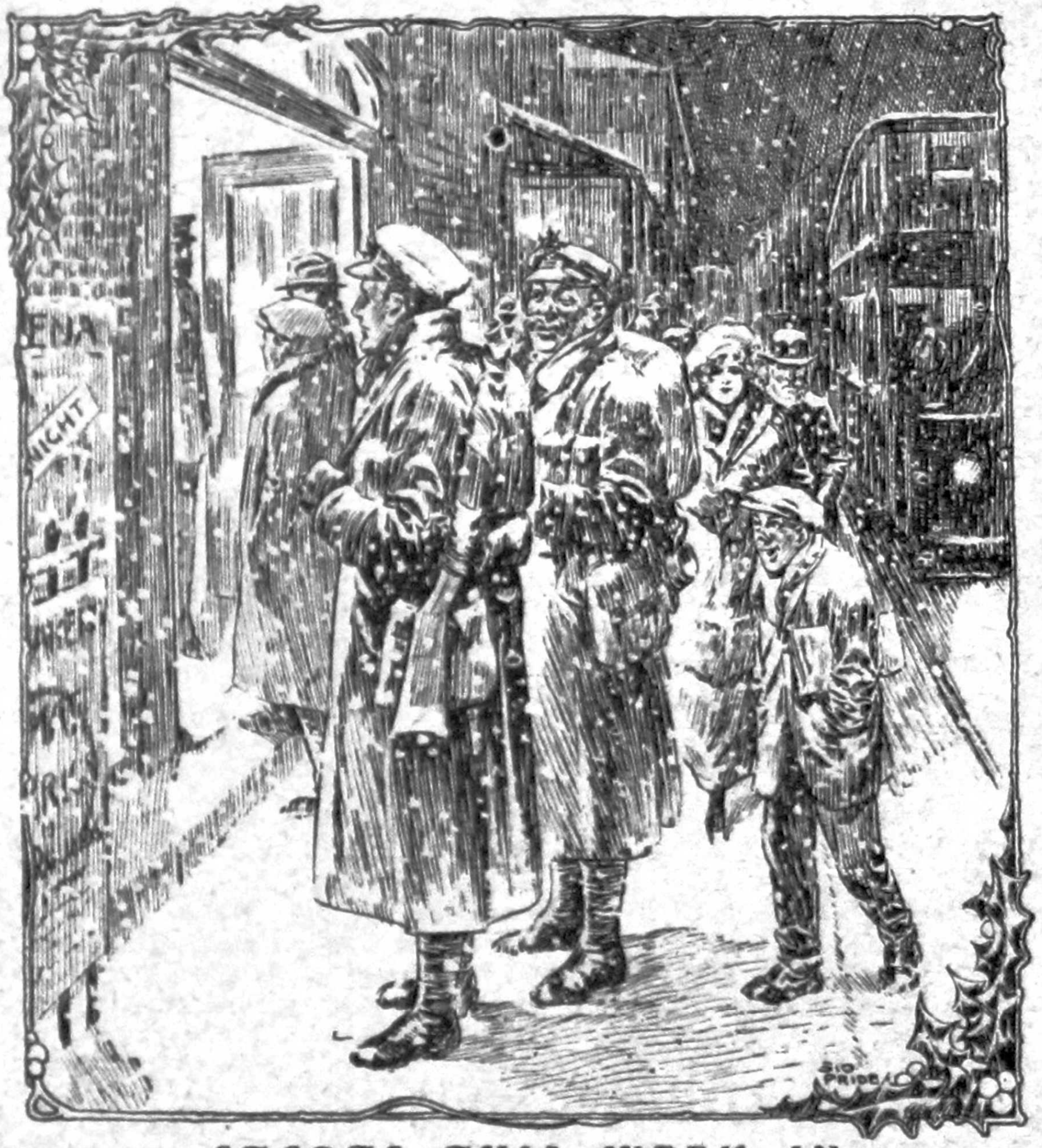

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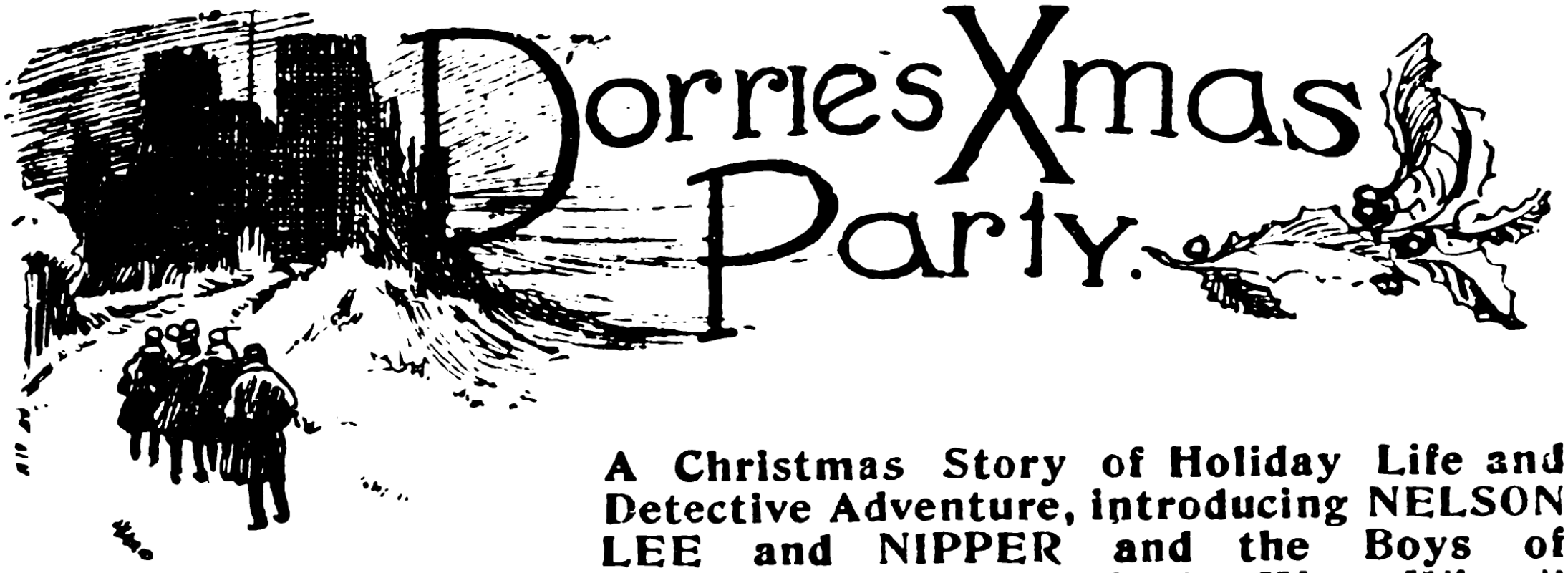

Dorrie's Xmas Party.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

TWO OLD FRIENDS!

"SNOW!" said Tommy Watson.

"Eh?"

"Snow," repeated Watson. "Look at it, my sons! Look at it, and rejoice!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I hastened to the window of Study C, and gazed out into the old Triangle. It was morning, and the sky had been heavy and overcast for twenty-four hours.

"Begad! Tommy's right, old boy," said Sir Montie. "It's snow right enough. I call this rippin'—I do, really. Snow is seasonable at this time of the year. Christmas ain't Christmas without snow."

"Well, it's not Christmas yet," I said. "I expect Christmas Day will be mild and muddy—it's generally the case, you know. But I must admit that things look promising at present."

The snow was descending thickly from the heavy clouds. The flakes were small, for the thermometer registered several degrees of frost. It was impossible to see across the Triangle, owing to the myriad crystal flakes.

"Snow!" yelled Pitt, putting his head in the door.

"All right—don't go dotty about it," I grinned. "Seen snow before, I suppose?"

"Not this season," said Pitt. "When I go away for the Christmas vac. I like to see the country covered with its winter coat of white; I like to see the hedges bowing down under the weight of the silver flakes——"

"Getting poetical, ain't you?" said Watson, chuckling.

"Snow!" roared Handforth, as he rushed past the study door.

"There goes another!" I grinned.

The juniors were all excited. Snow seemed to cause quite a sensation. A crowd of Removites went out into the Triangle, just to be able to boast that they were out in the first snowfall.

St. Frank's was due to "break-up" for the Christmas holidays within a day or two, and everybody in the school was excited and off work. Lessons during the last week of term were generally a farce.

I had made no precise arrangements for the vacation. Nelson Lee and I were to spend a day or two with Sexton Blake and Tinker, it is true, and Sir Montie wanted us to go to Tregellis Castle for the New Year. Tommy Watson insisted that we should spend a week at his place, and Jack Grey was equally insistent that we should go to Grey Towers. However, it was impossible to fulfil all these engagements, so we hardly knew what to do.

Handforth and Co. were booked for a few days at Grandmore Priory, the ancestral home of the Earl of Grandmore. And Handforth and Church and McClure did not fail to let everybody know the fact.

"I think it's a silly idea, having lessons this week," said Watson, as he

gazed out into the snow. Nobody does any work, and we might just as well have the time to ourselves. What's the good of keeping us in the rotten class-rooms, when we're all anxious to be out——"

"Hallo!" I interrupted. "Who's this coming?"

"Begad!" said Montie. "Some frightfully big pots, I should imagine, dear old boys. That is simply a spankin' car—it is, really!"

A magnificent limousine had just turned into the ancient gateway of St. Frank's, and Tommy and Montie and I stood at the window, looking out into the Triangle. We wondered who the visitors could be.

But we were not to wonder for long.

A figure emerged from the car. It was muffled up in a huge fur-coat, and for a moment I did not recognise it. Then, as the man turned his face towards the Ancient House, I gave a little gasp.

"Great Scott!" I panted. "That's—that's——"

"Who?"

"Dorrie!" I yelled.

"Begad!"

"Dorrie?" repeated Watson blankly.

"Yes—Lord Dorrimore—the one and only!" I roared. "I wonder what the dickens has brought him here? Come on, my sons—we're going out! Good old Dorrie! Fancy him turning up!"

It was the shortest way into the Triangle by means of the window, so we did not waste time in going out through the lobby, like rational human beings. We simply threw up the window sash, and dived out.

"Hallo, Dorrie!" I roared.

Lord Dorrimore turned. He was one of Nelson Lee's oldest friends—and, as a matter of course, one of mine, too. But practically every junior at St. Frank's knew him, for he had been to the school several times before, and he had also been with us on a memorable trip to Africa during the summer holidays.

"Hallo!" he shouted, in response to my call. "The cheerful Nipper. My son, how goes it? Where's the professor? How do you like snow for a change?"

Lord Dorrimore seized my hand, and I grasped his.

"It's jolly good to see you again, Dorrie," I exclaimed enthusiastically. "I thought you were thousands of miles away—in Borneo, or Timbuctoo, or somewhere."

Dorrie grinned.

"I thought I'd spend this Christmas at home," he observed. "I must say you're lookin' fatter than ever, my son. An' so are these two cheerful pals of yours. Surprisin' how you fellows grow! I've come down here because I want to have a little chat with you—on a matter of great importance."

"Importance?" I repeated.

"Holidays!" said Dorrie shortly.

"Oh, I see."

"By the way," went on Dorrie, before I could express my delight, "you haven't seen the parcel I've brought. It's still in the car—because the car's heated, by gad! This parcel can't stand the cold at any old price."

"Begad! It must be a really remarkable parcel," observed Sir Montie.

"Go an' examine it—you're quite welcome to," said his lordship, with a chuckle. "You'll find it wrapped up in a corner—wearin' about four dozen fur-coats."

I rushed to the limousine, for a suspicion of the truth had dawned upon me. I wrenched open the door, and peered in.

Right back in the big cushions rested what appeared to be a gigantic bundle of furs. Right at the top two eyes were staring out—two bright eyes which contained recognition as I looked in.

"Well I'm hanged!" I roared. "Umlosi!"

"What?" shouted Tommy.

"Umlosi, begad!" said Sir Montie. "Dear boys, this is frightfully interestin'. We haven't seen Umlosi for months."

The bundle of furs in the corner commenced to unroll itself. A face appeared—a shining black face, with large features. And the face spoke.

"Wau, Manzie, I greet thee," it said in a deep, rumbling voice. "Thou art even as the warm sun unto mine eyes. O son of the great Umtagati, I greet thee."

"Jolly glad to see you, Umlosi!" I exclaimed heartily. "But what's the matter with the outside air? It's not poison, you know."

"Even as thou sayest, O white youth," rumbled Umlosi. "But thou must know that the air is even as the sting of a scorpion, and the mystic white

flakes are like fire unto my skin. Wau! This land is indeed a land of great and terrible marvels!"

I chuckled.

"You'll get used to it, old son," I said. "All you've got to do is to come out and exercise yourself. You'll never get warm if you stick in there, like a giddy egg in an incubator."

"Thou art using strange words, O my son," exclaimed Umlosi. "However, I will take thine advice. Mayhap it will strike me unto my grave; but I will take the risk in thine honour."

"Good man!" chuckled Dorrie. "You know, he wouldn't do that for me, Nipper. I've had a fearful job with him ever since he's been in England. He hates the cold air worse than a schoolboy hates soap!"

"Thank you!" I said sweetly.

Umlosi emerged from the car. His huge figure was swelled out to an enormous size by the big fur-coats, and he looked like some freak out of a sideshow as he stood there.

Naturally, a big crowd had collected, and all the juniors were grinning hugely. Most of them were quite polite and reserved, but one or two thought they saw an opportunity of being funny.

"Nice kind of visitors to bring to a school for young gentlemen!" sneered Fullwood, of the Remove. "Look at him—just like a bally train conductor on an American express."

"You dry up, you cad!" snapped Handforth. "You know jolly well that Umlosi is a prince of royal blood—and if you insult him I'll take your face and rub it in the snow!"

"Oh, rot!" said Fullwood sourly. "You know jolly well that I'm speakin' the truth. A fine kind of guest——"

"Are you going to dry up?" demanded Handforth fiercely.

"I don't see why I should!"

"Then I'll soon show you!"

Handforth took a step in Fullwood's direction—and that was quite sufficient. The cad of the Remove edged off, growling. But a moment later he thought he saw an opportunity of showing his disapproval and contempt. Sufficient snow had fallen to make it possible for snowballs to be made, where the flakes had drifted. Ralph Leslie Fullwood made two, and he sent one with unerring aim at Umlosi, just as the black giant was about to speak.

Splosh!

The snowball burst fairly in Umlosi's mouth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Fullwood and a few others.

"Wau!" gasped Umlosi. "That is surely a remarkable occurrence, my master. A flake of the whiteness, even as large as a cocoanut, struck me in the mouth! Is it not even as the miracle?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Fullwood. "You bet!"

"However, I am not the dullhead," proceeded Umlosi. "Thou art foolish, O white boys, if thou thinkest that mine eyes are as those of the bat. Perchance it is possible for I, too, to indulge in these games!"

Umlosi became active in a rather startling manner.

He gave a tremendous leap, and was across the Triangle in three or four strides. He gathered up several big handfuls of snow, and, before Fullwood knew what had happened, the snowballs struck him left and right.

"Yarooooh!" howled Fullwood. "You—you black nigger——"

Fullwood fled, for Umlosi was coming for him in no uncertain manner. But the cad of the Remove might just as well have attempted to outstrip an express train. Umlosi overtook him in six strides, and lifted him clean into the air, and held him kicking above his head.

"Let me down!" screamed Fullwood frantically.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Serves you right, you cad!"

"Give him socks, Umlosi!" roared Handforth.

"That is a strange request that thou makest," said Umlosi. "However, I will give this youth of the great cheek something which appears to be plentiful. Wau! Thou shalt see!"

He took Fullwood, rolled him in the snow as though he were a bundle of rags, and continued the process for a full minute. By the time he had finished, Fullwood had vanished, and nothing was visible except a white mass of flaky snow.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's the way to treat cads, Umlosi," I yelled. "Good man!"

Umlosi came to my side, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Wau, Manzie, my master, thou art surely wise in thine young years," he exclaimed. "It is even as thou sayest. In the heated kraal which runs on wheels I shivered, but now, in the air which bites, I am glowing with the warmth that is grateful. Thou art a wise magician, O fair youth."

"It's exercise," I explained, "that's all. If the weather's cold, Umlosi, you only need to exercise yourself, and you'll be as warm as a bloater just off the grill!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Thy expressions are strange and wondrous," exclaimed Umlosi, shaking his head.

Just at that moment Nelson Lee appeared, and then Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were carted indoors by the guv'nor.

But, as I had half expected, it wasn't long before Tubbs, the pageboy, arrived with the message that I was required in the Housemaster's study with Sir Montie and Tommy. I jumped up at once.

"I thought so," I exclaimed. "Come on, my sons!"

We hurried down the passages, and a few minutes later burst into Nelson Lee's study. The guv'nor and Lord Dorrimore were sitting elegantly on the edges of the table, and Umlosi was doing his utmost to roast himself in front of a truly terrific fire.

"Ah, here you are, young 'uns," said his lordship. "Good! I've got a little proposition to put to you. If you don't much care for it, say so. Don't tell me anythin' except the blunt truth."

"Right ho!" I said. "We promise."

"Well, it's this," continued Dorrimore. "Not knowing what your arrangements were for Christmas, I didn't like to send any letters—that's why I've come down personally. It happens that I've rented a big old house—a castle, strictly speaking—on the coast of Cornwall. It's a rippin' place, with the real Christmas touch about it—ghostly, an' all that sort of thing."

"Go on!" I exclaimed eagerly.

"Well, I was thinkin' that it would be rather decent if we could hold a kind of house warmin'," said his lordship. "Mr. Sexton Blake and Tinker have already promised to be there, an' you'll meet some other people you know, too—assumin' you'll come, of course. I don't want to press you. I'm simply invitin' you boys to a good time for three or four days at Christmas. You have my permission to bring as many pals as you like—ten—twenty—thirty. They're all welcome, an' there's room for fifty. What do you say to the idea?"

"Great!" I exclaimed heartily.

"Ripping!" shouted Watson.

"Toppin', begad!" said Sir Montie.

Dorrie smiled.

"You'll come, then?"

"Come!" I echoed. "Rather!"

"Good!"

"It is indeed as thou sayest, N'Kose, my father," rumbled Umlosi, from his chair. "It will be well to see the nimble Manzie and his warriors in thine great kraal by the wondrous waters."

"I told you what it would be, Dorrie. The boys are only too glad to come—and I shall be quite delighted to be your guest."

His lordship beamed.

"Nothin' could suit me better," he said. "It's rippin' of you all. With a big crowd of us there we shall enjoy ourselves stupendously. There's only one thing I want to say—you can bring any fellows you like—exceptin' that frightful young bounder who insulted his Majesty the Sweep——"

"Fullwood?" I repeated. "My dear Dorrie, I wouldn't invite Fullwood if he was the last fellow in the world. He's a cad and a rotter."

Dorrie nodded.

"Well, you can invite anybody else you like—I leave it to you," he said. "You'd better buck up an' make your arrangements, because there isn't much time, an' some of your pals may be makin' other plans. I'll talk to the Head nicely, pay him a few compliments, an' ask him to let you off a couple of days earlier."

"Oh, good!" I exclaimed. "That'll be ripping, Dorrie!"

"The journey won't be a big one," went on his lordship. "I don't suppose it's more than thirty miles from here to this place of mine——"

"Thirty miles, sir!" exclaimed Watson, in surprise.

"Well, it might be thirty-one," said Dorrie mildly.

I grinned.

"You must have got a queer idea of distances," I remarked. "Cornwall is a tremendous lot further than thirty miles, Dorrie. Why, it's right down the other side of England—through Hampshire and Dorset and Devon——"

"My dear kid, who's talkin' about Cornwall?" interrupted Dorrimore.

"I am," I said.

"But why should you, when this castle of mine is in Kent, an' practically on the Sussex border?" asked Dorrie.

"You said, not five minutes ago, that it was in Cornwall——"

"Did I?" grinned his lordship. "That's nothin'—a mere slip, my son. Perhaps I was thinkin' of a pal of mine who's gone to Cornwall for Christmas. This place I've rented is on the Kent coast, an' not more than thirty miles away, to the best of my belief."

"Well, that's all the better," I said. "I didn't want to be rude, but I thought Cornwall was rather out of the way. It's miles better—literally—to go just along to Kent."

"Well, hurry off an' make your plans," said Dorrie. "Invite whom you like, an' I can promise them a gay time of it."

"I don't think I shall ask more than eleven fellows to come—a dozen, including myself," I said. "It wouldn't be quite square to you, Dorrie. A dozen of us will be quite a big handful, in any case. And we don't want the whole of St. Frank's there, do we?"

"Just as you like," said Lord Dorrimore. "I think it's a good idea. Twelve of you young bounders will keep things busy, I daresay."

Two or three minutes later Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and I took our departure from the study. We were agog with excitement, and we were feeling particularly cheerful.

Dorrie's Christmas party promised to be something special!

CHAPTER II.

COMING TO A DECISION.

"OF course, we can't invite everybody—that's obvious," I said briskly. "Dorrie was only joking when he said something about twenty or thirty. If twelve of us go, it'll be more than sufficient."

"We want to take twelve decent chaps," said Watson. "It's no good inviting anybody. Some of the fellows may have made other arrangements, and they won't want to come with us."

"Dear old boy, they'll all want to come," said Sir Montie. "It won't take long to alter things, you know. Nearly all the chaps would do anythin' to join Dorrie's party."

"Well, we shall have to decide somehow," I said. "I don't quite know how it's going to be done, but there'll be a lot of rivalry and jealousy. Twelve of us are going, and all the rest aren't going."

We had not much time to discuss the matter at length just then, for morning lessons intervened. This, needless to say, was a nuisance. But morning lessons had to be attended—they came before holiday arrangements. Perfectly absurd, of course; but there it was.

After lessons, however, we had a chance to talk. The news of Dorrie's party soon got about, and when the juniors knew that it was in my power to invite nine of them, in addition to Montie and Tommy, they became somewhat excited.

A crowd gathered in the Remove passage, outside the door of Study C, and I found it necessary to interview half a dozen Removites at once, a somewhat difficult proposition.

"It's no good all jawing at once," I exclaimed. "If you want to ask questions, ask them singly, and I'll do my best to answer."

"We want to know what this party is," said Handforth, pushing forward. "What's it going to be? Who's going to be there? What sort of a show will it be like? Is it worth coming to?"

"You needn't ask everything at once," I said. "Lord Dorrimore is the host, and that ought to be enough for you. This place of his is something out of the ordinary, I believe—an old castle on the coast, with a real Christmas touch about it. There'll be heaps of people there, and plenty of fun and merriment."

"Any grub?" asked Fatty Little eagerly.

"Oh, tons of it—grub of all kinds," I said. "That goes without saying. There'll be fruit and confectionery and every giddy thing you can think of. Don't forget that Lord Dorrimore is a

millionaire, and it's a cert he'll do everything on a grand scale."

"Good!" exclaimed Little. "That'll suit me first rate."

"You haven't been invited yet," said Handforth, with a sniff.

I grinned.

"Fatty is perfectly welcome to come, if he wants to," I said. "Is it a go, Jimmy? Will you join the little party?"

"Rather!" said the fat boy. "Thanks awfully, Nipper! As a matter of fact, my pater is abroad just now, and it's doubtful if there'll be anybody at home for my Christmas. So it'll suit me topping to go to this party. Great doughnuts! I shall have a fine time!"

"Who else is coming?" demanded Handforth. "I don't want to push forward, but I think it's only right——"

"Dry up, Handy," I broke in. "Let me explain at once that this Christmas house-party will be something very special. As I said before, Lord Dorrimore is a millionaire, and he's got a habit of spending money like water over a party. So you can reckon that this thing will be on a grand scale. Well, judge for yourselves. He's rented a huge castle on the coast——"

"With scores of servants, I expect," put in Watson.

"Bound to be," I said. "There'll be dancing and music and gaiety of every kind. We shall meet all sorts of people. Sir Crawford Grey will be there, for sure; and Captain Burton, and a good many girls."

"That'll suit Handy," grinned De Valerie.

Handforth glared.

"Would it?" he roared. "Do you think I care a snap about girls?"

"You'll probably meet Watson's sister," grinned Grey.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anything funny in that?" snorted Handforth.

"Yes—when we remember that sea trip in the summer holidays," said Grey. "Do you remember how you fell in love with Miss Violet? Do you remember how we japed you—— Hi! Look out, you ass! Hold him!"

Several grinning juniors grasped Handforth, who had assumed a warlike attitude.

"Lemme go!" roared Handy. "I want to punch that fathead's nose."

"Not just now, old son," I chuckled. "And Grey was probably right. If Watson goes, it's a cert his sister will join him; and Miss Violet is a ripping girl. There'll be other girls there, too. And Dorrie's sister, Lady Mornington, will be the hostess. I can tell you, my children, that this party will be A 1—a regular, ripping beano!"

"Yes; but who's going to be invited?" demanded McClure. "That's what we want to know? Who's going to be invited?"

"Speak up, Nipper!" shouted the crowd.

Half the Remove had collected in Study C and in the passage, and the general interest was enormous.

"I say, my people are full up this year," shouted Teddy Long. "I wouldn't dream of asking for an invite, but it would come jolly handy——"

"Dry up, you little worm!"

"You don't stand an earthly!"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Long. "I've got as much right as anybody!"

"Take my advice, Teddy, and clear off," I said grimly. "Only decent fellows are going to be invited to this party."

"Hear hear!"

"Look here!" roared Long. "I—— Yarooh!"

Somebody had thought it advisable to push the sneak of the Remove into the background, and he never succeeded in getting to the forefront again. I regarded the crowd with a certain amount of doubt.

"Well, look here; this seems to be a difficult matter," I exclaimed. "I know jolly well that a score of you want to be invited——"

"Right on the nail!"

"Hear, hear!"

"But it can't be done," I said. "It wouldn't be playing the game to take half the Remove. We've got to confine ourselves to a reasonable number. I've been invited, and so has Watson; ditto Tregellis-West. It's in my power to invite nine others. I could pick out twenty——"

"Hold on," interrupted Handforth. "I've got an idea."

"Bury it, for goodness sake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a thundering good idea!" roared

Handforth. "Roughly speaking, there are about two dozen chaps who'd like to go to this party—Remove chaps, I mean. Well, I think there ought to be a kind of competition——"

"A which?"

"A contest—to decide the point," explained Handforth. "Suppose we picked two teams of twelve? Study C can lead one team, and Study D will lead the other. We'll have a snow fight in the Triangle, one team against the other, and the winners are to go to Lord Dorrimore's party."

"Rotten!"

"No good at all!"

"It's not bad," I shouted. "In fact, I'm willing to adopt that, if everybody else is. It'll be a bit of sport, and the winners are to go to the party."

Watson looked rather alarmed.

"You silly ass!" he exclaimed. "We're invited anyhow!"

"I know that," I said.

"But if we adopt Handy's idea we stand a chance of being out of it," said Watson. "If we lose the snow fight, we sha'n't be able to go."

I nodded.

"Exactly," I agreed. "But I hope I'm a sportsman."

"Yes; but look here——"

"Besides, we shall win," I said calmly. "If Handforth's going to lead this icy battle on his side, we're bound to win."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That remains to be seen!" exclaimed Handforth quickly. "Let's decide the teams. I'm rather keen on this, you know. A snow fight is always interesting, but if the winners are to gain something, it's all the better."

"You gambler!" grinned Reginald Pitt.

"Gambler be blowed!" said Handforth. "It's sport!"

Most of the other fellows were willing to adopt the idea, and there was a good deal of enthusiasm. The opposing sides were quickly selected, and the teams were due to line up as follows: Handforth, Church, McClure, Owen major, Canham, Hubbard, Griffith, Farman, Doyle, Armstrong, and Conroy minor.

The others were: Watson, Tregellis-West, Pitt, Grey, De Valerie, Little, Somerton, Hart, Burton, Christine, and Yorke, of the College House. This made eleven a side. It had been agreed that I should stand out of the contest, as, of course, it was only natural that I should go to the party with Nelson Lee, in any case. So I was to be a spectator.

I had picked the fellows for Watson's team, and I had no doubt as to the result, and he and the others were willing to take the chance. In any case, it completely obviated all arguments.

Handforth was certain of victory. The very fact that he was leading his side in the battle was sufficient to make him confident. Two judges were appointed, Morrow of the Sixth and Chambers of the Fifth. The snow battle was to last for half an hour, when the judges would give their verdict.

There was no time to decide matters then, for dinner was practically ready; but after dinner the Remove poured out into the Triangle. The news of the contest had got round, and quite a number of spectators gathered about to watch the fight.

Snow had been falling all the morning—not very heavily, it was true, but in quite sufficient quantities to make the snow fight a real thing. The contesting sides were given ten minutes for the manufacture of ammunition before the start. It was allowable to take prisoners, if this was possible.

"Go it, Handy! You'll win!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"On the ball!"

There was quite a lot of enthusiasm, but the fight itself was a serious affair, for so much depended upon the result. The competitors were making snowballs as fast as their hands could work, once the word had been given. The two judges stood well aside, and their verdict was to be final.

At last Morrow gave the signal for the start.

And then the fun began.

Two tremendous showers of snowballs whizzed across the Triangle as an opening fusillade. Then the two armies entered into the spirit of the thing. Pitt, who had taken the leadership of his side, ran forward, urging his men to follow. At the same time, Handforth rushed out with his own crowd.

At close quarters, the snow fighters stopped, and shots were exchanged with tremendous vigour and rapidity.

Handforth was pelted until he could

hardly see, and there were yells of laughter from the onlookers.

But he managed to shake the snow from himself. And then he rushed forward, seized one of the enemy, and rolled him in the snow. Doyle and Armstrong came to his assistance, and the enemy was taken prisoner.

The unfortunate junior was Yorke, and he was carried back in triumph. The first phase of the fight was over, and five minutes had elapsed. Handforth and Co. were certainly the winners so far, for they had taken a prisoner.

I watched with some anxiety.

"Buck up, you chaps!" I roared. "You've got to win, remember."

"Keep your hair on!" shouted Pitt. "We haven't started yet."

Yorke was not an easy prisoner to hold. It required three juniors to keep him down, which simply meant that Handforth's side was three short, whereas Pitt's eleven was only one short. So the prisoner was something of a drawback. Handforth found this out when the battle resumed.

After several more showers of snowballs, the two armies rushed to close quarters again. And this time Pitt's men had been given precise instructions. They made no attempt to throw snow, but hurled themselves forward with bent heads; and before Handforth knew what was happening he was collared. McClure was made a prisoner also, and Owen major only just escaped.

Pitt and his men dashed back across the line, followed by a perfect storm of snowballs. But they had captured the leader of the opposing force, and they had a big advantage.

For Fatty Little, alone, dealt with the prisoners.

Handforth and McClure were rolled in the snow, and Fatty simply sat upon them. His weight was quite sufficient to keep them down.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared, and Handforth's supporters were filled with dismay. Their concern was even greater when Pitt and Co. charged forward with a determination which could not be ignored. For five minutes the battle was waged with tremendous fury, and then the end was a foregone conclusion.

Handforth and Co. were defeated, and there was no necessity for the judges to give any verdict. For Pitt and his men simply captured the other force entirely. All the defeated juniors were held down, and when the half-hour had expired, Handforth and Co. were wiped out.

"Hurrah!"

"Poor old Handy!"

"Good man!" I exclaimed, patting Tommy Watson on the back. "You've done well, and now there'll be no jealousy. I was sure you'd win, and all the fellows on your side are just the crowd we should have invited, in any case."

"So everything's all serene," panted Watson. "It's rough luck on Handy, but we can't grumble; it was his own giddy idea!"

Handforth was looking rather crestfallen.

"We've lost, of course," he admitted, "but it wasn't my fault. How the dickens could I hope to win with such a crowd of blessed weaklings? They didn't fight at all!"

"Well, you were the first chap of your side to become a prisoner," grinned Pitt. "So you can't boast much about your fighting!"

"Besides," put in Grey, "what about your invitation to Grandmore Priory?"

Handforth nodded.

"Of course, we've still got that—Church and McClure and I, anyhow," he said. "But we were willing to drop that in favour of Lord Dorrimore's party. But perhaps we shall have a better time than you, after all."

"Let's hope so!" I said consolingly.

At all events, the question was settled, and the juniors who were invited to Dorrie's party consisted of Tregellis-West, Watson and myself; Pitt, Grey and De Valerie; Jimmy Little, the Duke of Somerton, Hart and Burton; and Christine and Yorke.

They were the very fellows I wanted to be there, so, as Tommy Watson had said, everything was all serene.

CHAPTER III.

OFF TO CLIFF CASTLE.

"AT last!"

Tommy Watson made that remark as he stood on the steps of the Ancient House, two days later. The school was not due to

"break up" until the following day, but the twelve of us who were invited to Lord Dorrimore's party had gained permission to go a day earlier.

Our luggage had gone on in advance, and the twelve of us were due to leave by the mid-day train, just we boys alone. Nelson Lee would come on the following day. Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi, of course, had only stayed at St. Frank's for a few hours, in order to make their arrangements.

"We're going to have a ripping time, by the look of things!" I remarked. "Real Christmas weather, too! It'll be fine if we can indulge in winter sports at Cliff Castle!"

Fatty Little looked dreamily into the sky.

"I'm thinking about the grub," he said, in a far-away voice. "The last party I went to was gorgeous! I ate everything there was to be eaten, and my pater said I should be ill for a month! What rot! I could have packed away double the amount, you know."

"You see, you've got a big tummy, and it needs continual fuel!" grinned Watson. "Didn't I see you packing up about a thousand sandwiches to eat in the train?"

"Only a little parcel," said the fat boy. "Two of Mrs. Hake's loaves, cut up with a pound of ham. I expect you chaps will take some grub, too."

"Why, I thought those sandwiches were for all of us!" said Watson.

"Great pancakes!" exclaimed Fatty. "They're only just a snack for me—something to be munching when there isn't a refreshment-room handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't want to be greedy," went on Little; "anybody's welcome to one of my sandwiches. But when a chap's going on a journey, it's just as well to be prepared. There's no fun in being left stranded."

"Let's talk about something else," I said—"the snow, for example. It seems to me that we shall have a lot of it to-day—not a little downfall like we had on Tuesday, but a regular storm."

"We're having it already," remarked Pitt.

He was quite right.

The snow was whirling down in great flakes, and settling everywhere. The day itself was gloomy, owing to the dense masses of cloud, and a high wind drove the snow before it in millions of flakes.

It came down in great masses, and had been doing so for about an hour. By the appearance of the sky, it seemed likely that we should have a record fall. The roads were already two inches deep with snow.

And as the morning advanced, the conditions grew worse—or, as the juniors termed it, better, for the boys were quite anxious to have plenty of snow. They declared that it was seasonable.

We set out for the station together, twelve of us.

And by this time the whole countryside was simply a white mass—roads, fields, and hedges had vanished; nothing was to be seen except the vast tracts of snow. In the lane the snow had drifted into deep banks, and in some places we ploughed through ten or twelve inches of snow.

"This is something like a storm!" exclaimed Pitt, as he bent his head to the gale. "I wonder if conditions are like this at Cliff Castle?"

"Bound to be," I said. "It's not far off."

"Let's hope the trains are running all right," put in Hart. "It'll be rather a lark if everything's snowed up. If the trains aren't running, we sha'n't be so jolly keen on the snow!"

"Oh; they'll be running all right!" said Watson.

When we arrived at the station, we found that Tommy was correct. The train service had not been altered. Owing to the violent snowstorm, however, the trains were all late.

The one which was due to take us to Cliff Castle was not even signalled, although we arrived a second or two late. The stationmaster informed us that he could not say when the train would appear, but it would certainly be fifteen or twenty minutes late.

"Well, we can't wonder at it!" observed De Valerie. "With snow like this, everything must be late. It's coming down thicker than ever, and it doesn't mean to stop! Just look at that!"

A tremendous whirlwind of flakes whistled down with the wind. One was smothered in a moment out in the open, and not only the ground was covered,

but the walls of every building which stood exposed to the wind.

The snow was everywhere; it choked everything.

"I say, there's no need for us to hang about in the cold waiting for that giddy train," said Jimmy Little, stamping about in the cheerless waiting-room. "I vote we occupy our time in a reasonable manner. There's a nice little tuck-shop in the High Street——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "What about your parcel of sandwiches?"

"They're to eat in the train, you ass!" said Fatty. "I was thinking about having a snack now——"

"Well, forget it!" said Pitt. "There isn't time to go along to the tuck-shop, anyhow. There's not time——"

"Yes, there is," said Little. "I bet the train won't come in for another half an hour, and I'm feeling awfully hungry!"

"Hungry!" gasped Hart. "After that terrific feed you had in the school-shop?"

Fatty Little sniffed.

"Feed?" he repeated. "Why, it was only a biting-on!"

"My hat!" said Hart. "If that was a biting-on, I don't know what you'd call a square meal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You had half a dozen beef patties, a terrific lot of mince pies, sausage rolls galore, and a dozen sandwiches!" went on Hart. "That was only about an hour ago, and now you want something else!"

"Well, a chap must keep warm on a day like this," said Fatty. "I've found that the best thing to keep a chap warm is grub. There's nothing like it. Eat plenty of grub, and you'll never feel cold. I'm going along to the tuck-shop, anyhow, to have a bite or two."

And Jimmy Little moved towards the door.

"Hold the ass!" shouted Pitt. "Don't let him go!"

Several juniors grabbed at Fatty and held him. But he simply pushed himself forward, and the fellows went sprawling. With such weight behind him, Little could charge an army.

He reached the platform and marched out into the road, through the booking-office. I glanced at the clock.

"The silly ass!" I exclaimed. "If he's not careful he'll miss the train. Once he goes in that tuck-shop, he won't care a dash for anyone. He'll keep on eating until he can't walk straight."

"Well, it's his own look-out," said Pitt. "He simply can't help himself, you know. He's got an appetite that won't be satisfied. You can't wonder at it with a figure like his!"

The minutes passed, and there was no sign of Little returning. The tuck-shop was not far away, certainly, and he could easily reach the train when it came in. But there was no guarantee that Fatty would trouble about the train when he was fairly on the go.

At last, twenty minutes after the train was due to come in, the signal dropped. This meant that the train had left Caistowe.

"She'll be here within five minutes now," I said briskly. "Good! What about Fatty? Isn't he coming yet?"

Hart looked out into the whirling snow.

"Not a sign of him," he said.

"Who'll come with me to fetch him?" I said. "I shall want at least five chaps. It'll take six of us to bring the ass along."

Watson and Sir Montie and three others agreed to come, and we set out through the snow at a run. It was over our ankles as we ploughed along, and the great snowflakes were blowing into our faces in appalling numbers. It was undoubtedly the worst storm Sussex had experienced for years. That it should happen on the very day of our departure for Cliff Castle was rather unfortunate, for I realised that we should have a good many delays.

But the first, apparently, was to be caused by the appetite of Fatty Little!

We managed to get to the tuck-shop in about three minutes. Ordinarily, we could have done it in two, but it was impossible to travel fast in that blinding snowstorm.

In the tuck-shop. Little was sitting on a stool against the counter, blissfully careless of the train's approach. He looked up as we came in, his mouth full of pork pie.

"You gorging ass!" said Pitt sternly.

"The train's coming!" exclaimed Watson. "Buck up!"

Little nodded.

"I thought you'd come along," he

said comfortably. "It's ripping in this place, you know—cosy and warm! Try some of these pies; they're ripping! By chutney! I could stay here for hours!"

"You're not going to stay here for another minute!" I said grimly. "The train's signalled, and it'll be in within three minutes. You can take your choice, Fatty. Are you coming willingly, or shall we use force?"

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Fatty. "I've got to eat this pile of stuff!"

"Look here——"

"I've paid for it!" exclaimed Little. "You don't think I'm going to leave it here, I suppose? You can help yourselves——"

"Oh, you—you hippopotamus!" I broke in. "I believe you could sit there and eat all day, without a giddy stop. Are you coming?"

"But I must finish——"

"Train's coming!" yelled Hart, from the door.

"Eh?" gasped Fatty. "Wait a tick!"

"No ticks!" I snapped. "You're coming now!"

"Just these mince pies——"

"Not a crumb!" I said. "Come on!"

Fatty stuffed a mince pie into his mouth, and seemed capable of stopping in the tuck-shop until he had eaten all the others. But there was no time for playing about.

I took drastic action.

"Lend a hand, you chaps!" I said crisply. "Yank him out!"

We grabbed Little on all sides, and literally hurled him off the stool. The shopkeeper was smiling, and he did not object. Little gasped and spluttered, but it was useless.

Hart opened the door, and Fatty was hurled into the snow.

"Yarooh!"

He slithered along on one foot, and then collapsed on to his broad back. Before he could get up, I seized one of his feet. Pitt, grasping the idea, grabbed the other foot.

"Now—pull!" I shouted, above the gale.

Little was helpless. Other juniors helped us, and Fatty was pulled along over the slippery snow like a sledge, his broad back acting as a first-class runner. He swept along, roaring.

"Stop, you asses!" he howled.

"No time!" I panted. "The train's coming! Great Scott! It's in the station!"

"And I left five bob's worth of grub on the counter!" gasped Little. "Oh, mustard! What a waste of good food! Great bloaters! You'll smother me—— Gug—gug!"

The snow, thick on the road, curled over in cascades, and Little's further utterances were reduced to a gurgle. He was pulled over the snow-covered station-yard and into the booking-office.

"Buck up!" yelled Christine. "Train's just off!"

"Now then—altogether!" I shouted breathlessly.

Jimmy Little was hoisted to his feet, and before he could utter a word, he was hurled through the booking-office, across the platform, and into a compartment which stood opposite.

Christine, Yorke, Somerton and Hart were already there, and Fatty was pushed through the doorway like a sack of potatoes.

He sprawled upon the floor, and I slammed the carriage door.

"Done it!" I gasped. "Jump in, you chaps!"

We bustled into a compartment near by, and the guard waved his flag. The train moved slowly out of the station.

"The silly, fat ass!" exclaimed Pitt. "Another minute, and we should have lost the train!"

"The last one to-day, too," I said.

"The last?" repeated Tregellis-West. "Dear fellow, surely you are mistaken? There are trains later—there are, really."

"I'll warrant there won't be any more trains through Bellton to-day," I said, grimly. "The next isn't due for three hours, anyway—and by that time the Bellton cutting will be impassable. This snow is filling everything. The drifts must be ten to twelve feet deep in some places."

"Begad! You're right, old boy," said Montie. "I hadn't thought of that. I hope we shall get to Yalemoor all right."

"We'll trust to luck," I said. "When we get there I'll punch Little's nose for him. He nearly messed the day up for us!"

"This train goes right through, doesn't it," asked Pitt. "We don't change at Bannington?"

"No," I said. "It's not a main line

train—it goes along the coast, you know. Yalemoor is only a little place, like Bellton. It's not very far off, but on a slow train of this sort it'll take us two or three hours—longer to-day, with all this snow about."

Meanwhile, in the other compartment, Jimmy Little was trying to get himself straight. He was smothered with snow, and not unnaturally in the heated compartment, the snow began to melt.

"Don't come near me, you wet ass," said Christine. "Keep over in that corner. You're in a shocking state."

Little gathered his breath in.

"How can I help it?" he demanded. "Those asses yanked me along by my feet! Dragged me like a sack, you know! I couldn't do a thing to help myself! You were one of the rotters, Hart!"

Augustus Hart grinned.

"We had to do something, Fatty," he said. "If you'd been left behind you would have made yourself ill. I don't know what's going to happen at Lord Dorrie's place. You'll burst, or something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty looked mournful.

"And I left five bobs' worth of grub in that shop," he said sadly. "It's a shocking waste of good food. I'm hungry, too——"

"Hungry!" gasped Hart. "After that waggon-full you got rid of?"

"A snack—a mere snack!" said Little. "A fellow must have something to keep body and soul together. I'll try some of these sandwiches, I think. They're better than nothing!"

He produced a huge parcel—which Somerton had thoughtfully put into the carriage for him. Unwrapping it, Fatty exposed an enormous amount of healthy-looking sandwiches. Not thin wafers, but solid articles.

"Anybody want one?" he asked, looking round.

"Yes, rather!" said the other four juniors.

The parcel was passed round, and handed back to Little. Fatty took it, and then glanced at a man who was sitting over in the opposite corner. He was a man of about thirty, and was dressed like a gentleman, although his clothing was somewhat shabby. His face was rather pinched, and Fatty noticed that he looked at the sandwiches somewhat longingly.

"Have one, sir?" asked the fat boy, holding out the parcel.

The stranger flushed slightly, and his eyes sparkled.

"Thank you," he said. "I—I—— Well, I don't want to rob you, my lad. I don't think I'll take one, thanks."

"Go on," said Fatty. "They're ripping."

"Yes, they look splendid," exclaimed the stranger. "If you insist—— Thanks very much. It's very generous of you."

"Rats!" said Little. "Take two!"

"No, really——"

But the stranger did take two—and he evidently needed them. For he ate hungrily, although he did his utmost to hide his eagerness. And for some minutes the occupants of the compartment munched away at the sandwiches; the stranger eating his with greater gusto than the boys.

"I say, have another," said Fatty, when the man had finished his second. "Go on. There are plenty yet."

The stranger hesitated, and then shook his head.

"Thanks all the same," he said. "I've had ample. You eat them, lads."

"Oh, all right," said Fatty. "You're quite welcome, though."

The man smiled, and looked out of the window at the whirling snow. And, somehow, the boys knew that he was still hungry; they knew that he would have enjoyed another sandwich.

And Fatty Little's appetite, for once in a way, seemed to go. He wrapped the parcel up thoughtfully, and put it on the rack. He didn't quite like eating when he knew that a fellow-being, who was positively in need of food, was going without.

CHAPTER IV.

A VERY GENIAL GENTLEMAN.

THE snow was descending in thicker clouds than ever.

Bannington had been passed, and the train was proceeding laboriously on its way. It was literally fighting the snowstorm—which was driving fully into the face of the engine.

"A terrible day, lads," remarked the stranger in the corner. "I don't think

I can remember such a severe storm."

"It's certainly thick, sir," said Christine. "The snow must be two or three feet deep in these cuttings. Have you noticed the way we keep ploughing through drifts? It's a wonder the train doesn't jib."

The stranger nodded.

"I hope we shall get to Boxvale, at all events," he said—"although that sounds selfish. I'm due at Boxvale, but you youngsters may be going further."

"We're getting out at Yalemoor," said Hart. "That's a good bit further on."

"Yes," said the man. "I think we shall have a slow journey. The train is not making more than fifteen or sixteen miles an hour. However, we must consider ourselves lucky to be going at all in this storm. It is terrible weather—shocking weather."

"Oh, I don't know," remarked Yorke. "Snow is seasonable at Chrismas time, sir. I rather like it. It's great fun."

"Fun—oh, yes," said the man, rather bitterly. "I was thinking of the poor folks who are unable to afford coals or proper food. This kind of weather hits them badly—fatally, sometimes."

"Yes, sir—of course," said Yorke, slowly. "I—I hadn't looked at it in that way. We're all selfish, I suppose. We're apt to regard these things from our own point of view."

The stranger nodded.

"There is no need for us to be unhappy, at all events," he smiled. "What do you boys say to a little amusement—just to pass the time away? It is rather dull, sitting in here, watching the snow on the windows."

"We're game, sir," said Christine. "What's the idea?"

The man produced a pack of playing-cards, and the expressions of the juniors changed. They did not play cards, as a rule, and they had heard a good deal about card-sharpers. Gentry of that type were always on hand somewhere, ready to catch unwary "mugs."

"We don't play cards, sir," growled Hart.

"I was just going to suggest——"

"Sorry, sir," interrupted Christine. "But we'd rather not."

"Thanks all the same," said Yorke.

The stranger chuckled.

"You are quite wrong, boys," he said. "I am not going to suggest that we should play with these cards—for money. I am not going to suggest that we shoul play at all."

"Then what have you brought them out for?" asked Somerton.

"I thought you would be amused by a few card tricks—that is all," said the man. "My name is Goodall, and I am a professional conjuror—that is to say. I am a conjuror when I have engagements."

The juniors felt more easy.

"Oh, I see," said Hart. "That's all serene, then. A few tricks would be rather interesting. Thanks, sir."

"You needn't thank me, boys," smiled Mr. Goodall. "I am only too pleased to do something to while away the time. Now, just look at this. First, of all, please examine the pack. Are they all correct?"

The pack was passed round and examined.

"Yes, they're all right, sir," said Christine.

"All the cards are there?"

"Yes, the full pack," said Hart. "Fifty-two—I counted them."

Mr. Goodall took the cards and rapidly shuffled them.

"They are all here?" he said. "That is rather remarkable, my lad. I can only count fifty-one. Ah, I have it! The last card is reposing in the vest pocket of this young gentleman, unless I am mistaken?"

He pulled Hart round, and unbuttoned his jacket. Then he dived his hand into Hart's waistcoat pocket—and produced a playing card.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fraud, Hart," said Christine. "Fancy pocketing——"

"You ass!" snapped Hart. "I didn't pocket it! I can't understand it! I haven't even unbuttoned my coat!"

The trick rather mystified the boys, although, of course, it was a simple one. Mr. Goodall had simply "palmed" a card, and had had it in his hand all the time. It had only appeared to come out of Hart's pocket. But it was done so cleverly that the boys were quite deceived.

"That was good," said Christine. "Do some more, sir."

"Certainly," exclaimed the stranger cheerfully. "Now, you will see that I have the ace of spades in my hand. I

place the card in the centre of the pack —so. It is there, is it not?"

"Of course it is," said Hart.

"H'm! Remarkable," exclaimed Mr. Goodall. "The ace of spades is here—at the top of the pack! How on earth did it get shifted? You were watching me closely, and I didn't take the card out, did I?"

Hart grinned.

"There must be two aces of spades," he chuckled. "It's a trick pack."

"Go through the cards yourself," invited Mr. Goodall.

Hart did so, but there was no second ace of spades.

"You must be jolly quick, sir," said Christine. "Let's have a few more, will you?"

Mr. Goodall obliged and for twenty minutes the boys were greatly amused. The stranger was extremely clever with the cards, so clever, in fact, that Fatty Little felt hungry again, and munched sandwiches while he watched.

"Have one, sir?" asked Fatty.

Mr. Goodall took the sandwich absent-mindedly.

"Yes, thanks. Oh, a sandwich?" he said. "No, thank you, my boy. I would rather not just now. Too greasy for my hands while I'm on this job."

He handed it back, and performed another trick. Little, meanwhile, continued eating. He finished one sandwich, and commenced another. His teeth bit through it with some difficulty.

"Now, to perform this trick, all the cards must be in the pack," said Mr. Goodall. "We will see if the cards are correct. One, two, three——"

He counted until he reached the end.

"Hallo, there's one card missing," he exclaimed. "Perhaps I dropped it."

The juniors searched the floor.

"Great doughnuts," remarked Fatty. "There's a queer kind of meat in this sandwich. It's as tough as—— Oh, kippers! What's this? Paper—a card—a playing card, by chutney!"

Fatty opened the sandwich, and revealed a playing card lying on top of the meat. The edge was torn and greasy, and a portion of it was missing. Fatty's teeth marks showed where that portion had gone.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors roared.

"Really, that is too bad," said Mr. Goodall severely. "Surely you are not hungry enough to eat my stock-in-trade, my lad?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But—but I didn't put it there!" gasped Fatty. "I wondered why it was so beastly tough——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mr. Goodall put it there, you ass. That must be the sandwich you handed him," grinned Hart. "I'm blessed if I saw him shove it in, though."

Mr. Goodall chuckled.

"The quickness of the hand deceives the eye," he smiled. "Never mind, young 'un. I hope your stomach will stand it. You only ate a small corner of the card. Perhaps we have had enough."

The genial stranger put his cards away, and produced a handful of coppers.

"Perhaps you would like to see a few coin tricks?" he asked.

"Yes, rather, sir."

So Mr. Goodall obliged with several excellent coin tricks. They were clever, and the juniors were greatly amused.

Meanwhile the snow was whirling down as thickly as ever. It was impossible to see out of the windows, for they were smothered with a coating of snow. When Little opened the window for a second, to have a look out, the compartment was filled with driving flakes.

"Phew! The storm's worse than ever," said Christine. "Close that window, you fat ass!"

"I'm trying to!" gasped Little.

He managed to get it up, and the juniors brushed the flakes off their clothing. Mr. Goodall put his coins away, and picked up a newspaper he had been reading when the boys entered the compartment.

"Finished, sir?" asked Yorke.

The stranger put his paper aside.

"Yes, I think so, my boy," he said nodding.

"Don't you know any more tricks?" inquired Hart.

"Oh, yes—plenty," said Mr. Goódall. "But most of them require apparatus, and others are rather too intricate to perform in a jolting railway carriage. There is only one more I would like to show you, but I am afraid it is impossible."

"Why?" asked Christine.

"Well, it is a trick with ordinary pound currency notes," said Mr. Goodall. "It is a trick of my own invention—and

one which has mystified more people than all the card tricks put together."

"With currency notes?" exclaimed Fatty. "That's all right, sir. I can lend you half a dozen to do the trick with, if you like."

"That is very kind of you," smiled Mr. Goodall. "But you see, this is a kind of glorified card trick, but, instead of cards, I employ forty currency notes."

"Forty!" ejaculated Yorke. "My hat! We can't manage that!"

"I didn't think you would be able to," said the stranger. "I have twenty of my own, but I fear you boys will be unable to place an equal number of notes at my disposal for a few minutes——"

"Twenty—that's better," said Christine. "We can manage that."

"Really?" said Mr. Goodall. "So much money between you?"

Christine grinned.

"It's Christmas time, sir," he said. "We've had some extra tips sent us."

"Ah, I understand."

The juniors easily produced the twenty pounds. Somerton lent five notes, Little six, Christine two, Yorke two, and Hart the other five. Mr. Goodall took the money.

"Please tell me if you wish me to perform this trick," he said. "I shall not harm the notes, but you may not care to trust me——"

"Oh, rats, sir!"

"That's all right!"

"Go ahead with the trick, sir."

"Very well," said Mr. Goodall. "Since I have your full permission, I will show you this trick. When I have finished, I may explain the procedure—for, I can assure you, the effect is most mystifying. It is easy to perform, and you will be able to puzzle your friends."

"Oh, good," said Christine. "Let's see the trick, sir."

"Well, to begin with, I place twenty notes in one hand, and twenty in the other," exclaimed Mr. Goodall. "I want one of you to count this twenty while I count the other twenty. Please watch me while I am doing so."

"But we know we gave you twenty, sir."

"That doesn't matter—make doubly sure."

The notes were counted, and found correct. Hart and Little watched Mr. Goodall as he counted the other Treasury notes.

"All right?" he asked after a pause.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Goodall. "You will see twenty notes in my right hand, and twenty notes in my left. They are folded. The object of this trick is to get twenty-five notes in one hand, and fifteen in the other—without bringing the hands together."

"That's impossible, sir," said Hart.

"You think so?" smiled Mr. Goodall. "I will show you——"

He broke off as he shot from his seat and charged into Little's lap. The other juniors also fell into heaps, and for a moment there was dire confusion.

"Great pip!" gasped Christine. What's happened?"

"It's—it's an accident!" said Yorke huskily.

The train had come to a standstill with an abruptness which was rather startling. Just one huge jolt, and then stillness.

"Something has certainly happened," said Mr. Goodall, still grasping the currency notes in his two hands. "I can hear shouting. An accident of some kind certainly. Here, boys, you had better have your money back. I cannot perform this trick now."

"It'll do later, sir," shouted Hart. "We're going out on the line."

"Yes, afterwards," said Christine, turning the door handle.

Mr. Goodall pushed forward.

"Certainly not," he said. "Take your money now."

"Oh, all right, sir."

Christine took his two pounds, Little took his six, Yorke took his two, Somerton his five, and Hart his five. The juniors stuffed the notes into their pockets, and crowded out of the train.

The storm was just as fierce, but snow was not falling in such heavy quantities. Christine looked up at the train, and saw that ten or twelve passengers had dropped into the snow.

"Come on," said Bob Christine.

He dropped down, and the other juniors followed his example. Their feet sank into eighteen inches of snow. The train was in a deep cutting, with steep banks rising high on either side. And the banks were literally choked with snow.

"Great goodness!" panted Yorke. "I've never seen so much snow before!"

It was almost impossible to walk. In order to get along, the juniors were compelled to plough their way through the snow. They drew opposite a compartment which had just been vacated by Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Pitt and myself.

We were standing in the snow, looking up and down the train, getting smothered by the myriad flakes which whirled down.

"What's happened?" asked Hart.

"Begad! We were goin' to ask you that," said Tregellis-West.

"It felt like a collision," I exclaimed. "It was a nasty jar, anyhow. I'll bet the front carriage suffered a bit. Let's go forward and investigate. My hat! Here comes the snow again."

The wind whistled round us, lifting the fluffy snow off the ground in showers of blinding whiteness. We positively fought our way along the track, until at last, we neared the engine.

A few yards further, and we saw what had happened.

The train was intact, but further progress was impossible. The whole cutting, for a distance of fifty yards, was blocked with dense masses of snow. The train, in short, was snowed up!

The forward guard was there, talking to the engine-driver. He looked round as we loomed up in the smother of snow.

"Might as well get back into your carriages, young gents," he said. "It's warmer there, and you'll have a long wait, I'm thinkin'."

"What happened, guard?" asked Pitt.

"We ran into a drift—that's all," said the guard grimly. "It's ten or twelve feet deep just ahead. It'll have to be cleared away before we can move out of this cutting."

"A fall of snow, you mean?" I asked.

"That's about the size of it," said the guard. "It must have slithered down the left bank—tons and tons of it. The driver didn't know he was on it till the old engine started jibbing."

We regarded one another with curious expressions.

"Snowed up!" I exclaimed. "Snowed up—and no way out. This looks like being lively. "How far are we from a station, guard?"

"Not far," said the man. "This is the Boxvale cutting—Boxvale Station is only a mile ahead. But if you young gentlemen think of walking, let me advise you not to. You'd never get there."

"But what shall we do?" asked Watson.

"Wait here—until the train goes on again," said the guard. "With luck that'll be in about two hours' time. But the snow's getting thicker every minute. Worst day I remember for twenty years!"

The prospect was not cheering. We were snowed up, and there was nothing to do until the train was able to resume its journey. The juniors were not quite so ready to approve of the snow now!

It is possible to have too much of a good thing!

CHAPTER V.

A BIT OF A PROBLEM.

SNOWED up!

The experience, if not exactly pleasant, was certainly novel.

The Removites had often read of trains being snowed up during severe winter storms, but they had never been snowed up themselves. And it is quite a different matter then!

We did not know if the guard was able to communicate with the next station along the line, or whether the train would have to wait until help was sent along—because of the train's non-arrival at Boxvale.

"Well, it's lively," I exclaimed. "It simply means waiting here until we're dug out. It's quite on the cards that we shall be stuck in this cutting for three or four hours!"

"Why should we put up with it?" asked Christine. "Why not walk along the line to the next station?"

"Because it'll be a bigger job than you seem to think—and because we shouldn't be any better off, even if we did," I replied. "There'll be no trains from Boxvale, and we might just as well stay here as there. We're snowed up, my sons, and we've got to make the best of it."

"And I only brought a handful of sandwiches!" said Fatty Little, in dismay. "Great pancakes! We shall be starved—absolutely starved before we get out of this! Why didn't we bring more grub?"

1. Handforth was pelted until he could hardly see.
2. "Lend a hand, you chaps!" I said, crisply. "Yank him out!"

"You'll be all right, even if we stay here for twenty-four hours," I said. "You've eaten enough grub to-day, Fatty, to last you a week."

Little apparently did not think so, for he was quite ready to start on some food, even then, if any had been available.

"We'd better get back to our compartment," said Christine. "This snow is awful—I'm cold to the bone already. Perhaps Mr. Goodall will show us a few more of his ripping tricks?"

'Mr. who?" I asked.

"Mr. Goodall."

"Who's he, anyhow?" I inquired.

"He's a conjuror chap," explained Christine. "He's in our compartment, you know, and during the journey he showed us a lot of card tricks. A regular sport, he is. You'll have to come and meet him."

"I'd like to," I said. "Lead the way, my son."

"He was doing a trick when we bumped into that snowdrift," went on Bob Christine. "A jolly ripping one, too. He had twenty quid of ours——"

"What?" I shouted.

"Only lent, you ass," grinned Christine. "You see, he had to have forty pound notes to do the trick, and he had only twenty of his own. So we lent him twenty of ours. He was just starting when the stop came."

I was rather thoughtful.

"That must have been a queer kind of trick," I said. "Currency notes aren't generally used by conjurors. It strikes me that there's something fishy about the chap, Christy——"

"Rats!" interrupted Yorke. "He's as straight as a die. You don't suppose he played any tricks with the notes, do you? I lent him two of mine—here they are. Nothing wrong with them!"

Yorke showed me the two currency notes. I was not going to take them at first, but I did so, and handed them back after a moment's examination. Yorke took them, and grinned.

"Pretty suspicious, aren't you?" he asked. "The man's as honest as you are. Perhaps you'd like to see him?"

"Come on, then."

We ploughed our way through the snow, and at last arrived at the compartment which Christine and Yorke and the others had vacated shortly before. We all climbed up, and Somerton, who was first, looked over his shoulder as he went through the doorway.

"Hallo! Mr. Goodall isn't here," he said.

"I didn't expect he would be," I replied grimly. "In fact, I should have been very surprised if Mr. Goodall had been in the carriage."

The juniors looked at me rather wonderingly. The five fellows who had watched Mr. Goodall's tricks were all there. And Tregellis-West, Watson and I, in addition. But the stranger was conspicuous by his absence.

"I expect he's on the line, talking to some of the others," said Yorke.

"Well, I don't," I remarked. "Look here, my cheerful pals, I don't want to give you a shock but I've got an idea that you've been swindled."

"Swindled!"

"That's what I said."

"But you must be dotty!" said Christine. "How could there be a swindle about it? He gave us back our notes, I tell you."

"Did he give you your notes, Yorke?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"That's interesting," I went on. "And do you usually carry forged currency about with you?"

"Forged currency!" gasped Yorke.

"Yes!"

"But—but——"

"Those two notes you showed me outside are not genuine currency," I said grimly. "They're fakes, my son—and not particularly good fakes at that. It's a wonder you didn't notice——"

"But you must be mad!" said Yorke, in alarm.

He pulled out the notes from his pocket, and examined them with keen anxiety. There was no necessity for him to do so with minute care; for a brief inspection was sufficient to show him that the slips of paper were not real Treasury notes. They looked like it, certainly; but they were only fakes.

"Well I'm jiggered!" panted Yorke.

The other juniors had pulled out their notes, and they were examining them with hasty alarm.

"Great cocoanuts!" said Jimmy Little aghast. "I've got six of 'em—all duds! They're forgeries!"

"And so are mine!" ejaculated Hart blankly.

"Mine too!" said Somerton. "This

is awfully interesting, you know. Fancy that chap turning out to be a swindler. I should never have dreamed it. It seems to me that we've been robbed!"

"There's not a doubt of it," I agreed.

I took all the notes—twenty. And they were precisely similar. Every one of the twenty was a fake.

"You see, it was worked pretty easily," I said. "A kind of confidence trick. He got into your good books by performing a number of clever tricks, and then borrowed the twenty quid—making everything look straightforward by producing twenty quid of his own. But, instead of giving you back your own notes, he palmed off these duds!"

Hart nodded.

"We deserve it, for being such duffers," he said. "We ought to have examined the money——"

"How could we, when we were anxious about the train?" interrupted Christine. "We simply stuffed the notes into our pocket, and jumped out on to the line. What can we do?"

"Nothing, old chap," said Somerton.

"Rot! We ought to have the chap arrested——"

"The main point is to get the money back," I explained. "Mr. Goodall, as you call him, can't have got far in this snow—it's a ten-to-one chance that he's made off somewhere—and must have left a pretty clear trail in the snow. What do you say to the idea of going on his track?"

"Ripping!" said Hart. "I'd like to capture the rotter!"

"The way he made us think he was a good sort was really remarkable, you know," said Somerton. "I can't help admiring him, although he is a beastly swindler. Is it worth while going in chase?"

"Yes, it is," said Fatty. "He's got all my tin—I'm not a millionaire like you are, Somerton."

"Well, we'd better decide quickly," I said. "I don't suppose the train will shift for two or three hours, so we've got plenty of time to waste. Nothing can be done until help is sent out from Boxvale."

"Boxvale!" echoed Hart.

"That's the station a mile further on."

"That chap had a ticket for Boxvale, he told us so," said Hart. "Perhaps that's why he's cleared off—because he's near home! I expect he knows this cutting, and he thinks he can get clear away. Very likely he believes that we sha'n't notice the fraud until it's too late."

I nodded.

"Well, as it happens, it isn't too late," I said. "We've got nothing to do for two or three hours, so we might as well occupy our time by going on the track of this conjuror merchant. If we can recover the money, it will be all the better. We needn't trouble about giving the chap in charge. It's the money we want."

"That's right," said Christine. "But we'll roll the cad in the snow, and give him a thundering bumping."

"Well, look here; who's coming?" I said crisply.

"All of us."

"No; that won't do," I went on. "We can't have a crowd, and there's no necessity for it. Three of you will be enough—Montie, Tommy, and Hart. We don't want to spoil things by overdoing it."

"But I want to come!" said Yorke.

The others wanted to, too; but I was firm. Four of us were ample for the job in hand, and so the rest had to be content. I was quite eager for the work, for it provided us with something to do during the interval of waiting.

"We'd better examine the snow," I said. "Mr. Goodall is bound to have left tracks, and it's pretty certain that he left the train by the other door, the one you fellows didn't use."

We all tumbled out on to the other railway track. And there, sure enough, were the footprints of Mr. Goodall, leading away up the steep embankment. There was no difficulty whatever in following the trail, for each footprint was six inches deep. Those holes would not be obliterated until snow had been falling for many hours. The trail was easy to follow.

"Come on!" I said briskly. "If we hurry, we might overtake the man within half an hour. He couldn't have got far."

The other juniors watched us as we fought our way up the embankment. And it certainly was a bit of a fight, for it was very difficult to walk in the soft, yielding snow, particularly up the embankment.

Having reached the top, we found ourselves in a field, although what kind of

a field it was impossible to say. The snow lay thick everywhere, smothering every inch of land.

Mr. Goodall's tracks were easy to follow. Having crossed the field, we found ourselves in a lane.

And this lane led off down into a valley, where everything was a mass of white. The snow was coming down with even greater fury than before, and the wind whistled fiercely through the leafless trees.

"It's certain that Goodall knows the district," I remarked. "He made a bee-line across that field, and as soon as he arrived in this lane he walked down in this direction without hesitating."

"Well, he lives somewhere near, I expect," said Hart. "Not that I care anything about that. All we need is our money. But I'd like to see the swindling beast shoved in prison. Those sort of chaps deserve to be given ten years!"

We continued on our way down the lane, and in the little valley we found a collection of cottages and a solitary inn. The place was a mere hamlet, and Mr. Goodall had walked through without pausing.

Still further on we came to a few houses, dotted here and there. We were evidently on the outskirts of the little town of Boxvale.

The trail was still quite strong, for, although snow was falling, the impressions were so deep that they stood out distinctly.

And then, to our surprise, we saw that the tracks ceased abruptly. All before us was a clear sheet of white, undisturbed snow. We came to a halt, and stared up the road.

"Hallo!" said Watson. "What's the meaning of this?"

"There's only one meaning," I said. "Mr. Goodall must have gone into this house, and he's there now."

"Which house?" asked Hart.

"Well, there's only one that would apply," I said. "It's this one on the left—this modern-looking place—although we can't see it very well in this blinding smother."

The house, in fact, was well-nigh invisible, owing to the rapidly falling snowflakes. But there was no doubt that Mr. Goodall had entered the front garden from the road. His tracks were quite distinct.

"Now, I hardly know what to do," I said slowly. "It'll be just as well, perhaps, for two of us to go to the door first. The others can wait in readiness, in case of emergency."

"Right-ho!" said Watson. "I'll come."

"Rats!" exclaimed Hart. "I'm going!"

"Bogad! That's frightfully interesting," remarked Sir Montie. "I had an idea that I should be the one, you know."

"Well, you needn't all quarrel about it," I said. "In my opinion, Hart is the best chap to come with me."

"Good!" said Hart.

"I don't see why——"

"My dear Tommy, Hart knows Goodall, and we don't," I explained. "We don't want to make a bloomer, but that's impossible if Hart comes with me. Our object is to get Goodall face to face, and make him give up those genuine notes. It's my opinion he'll crumple up when we confront him. Those sort of chaps are generally as weak as water when it comes to a pinch."

Hart and I left the others at the gate, and followed the footprints down the garden path towards the house. The snow was now coming down in confusing clouds. It was almost impossible to see a yard ahead, for the flakes were so thick that it was difficult to walk with open eyes. We had to bend our heads to the wind as we neared the building.

"This way," I said.

The man's footprints led round the path to the rear of the house, and they came to a halt at the back door. The very fact that the man had entered in this way indicated that it was his home, for he would scarcely have gone to the rear door otherwise.

"What's the programme now?" whispered Hart.

"Well, if we knock, it may spoil things," I said. "The best plan is to open the door, if it isn't locked. If we can only catch Goodall by surprise, all the better. It'll give him a shock to find himself face to face with us."

The back of the house was sheltered, for the wind was roaring in the opposite direction. I gripped the handle of the back door, turned it, and, to my surprise, the door opened.

There was not much draught, owing to the sheltered nature of the rear portion of the house.

Hart and I found ourselves looking into a small kitchen, where a fire was

burning in the grate. There were signs that some cooking operations had been in progress, and a teddy bear near the fender indicated that one member of the household, at least, was not of very mature years.

I was rather surprised to find this, for, knowing Mr. Goodall's character, I'd expected something different to this domestic scene. Hart was looking astonished, too, and he was just about to speak to me when we heard voices.

I held up my finger for silence.

We crept further into the kitchen, towards a door which led into the front portion of the house. I had no compunction in doing this, for we had come here to recover money which had been deliberately stolen.

"It's all right, darling," said a man's gentle voice. "There's no need to worry, or to cry. Everything is bright now."

I looked at Hart inquiringly, and he nodded.

"Yes, that's him!" he said with his mouth.

Hart looked surprised, and again we listened.

"Come, sweetheart, you mustn't cry like that," came Goodall's voice. "Heaven has been merciful to us, and your fears of the past few days have now proved to be groundless."

"Oh, but Ernest, where did you get the money? Tell me where you got it!" exclaimed the sobbing voice of a woman. "You must tell me how you got it!"

"All in good time, dear," said Goodall. "It was—— Well, a very kind man—— But, there! I sha'n't tell you any more just now. Yesterday you were talking about us starving over the Christmas, and now we can laugh."

"Is it true, daddy?" came a child's small voice. "Shall we really have nice things for Christmas?"

"Yes, sonny; we shall," said Goodall.

"Christmas pudding?"

"Yes; Christmas pudding."

"And sweets and bon-bons?"

"Everything you can think of, my little man," said Goodall, with a curious tremble in his voice. "Come here, Erny, and sit on daddy's knee."

"We sha'n't starve, shall we, daddy?" asked the child.

"Don't you talk such nonsense to me," said Goodall sternly. "If you do, I shall be compelled to smack you. Daddy's got plenty of money now, and you'll have just as nice a Christmas as other good little boys."

"But it's funny, daddy," said the child. "You say that we shall have a nice Christmas, and yet mummy is crying. What's mummy crying for, if we're going to have a nice Christmas?"

I looked at Hart, and Hart looked at me.

And as we heard the woman sobbing, we both moved silently out of the kitchen as though we were ashamed of ourselves. We realised that we were intruding, and I breathed a sigh of relief when we got out into the snow again.

Somehow, I felt a bit overcome; and I knew that we had a problem before us. It was not going to be an easy matter to settle the question.

CHAPTER VI.

GOODWILL TOWARDS ALL MEN.

AUGUSTUS HART looked at me queerly.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know," I said. "We'd better creep away, and hold a consultation with the other fellows. That chap in there is Goodall, isn't he?"

"Yes, of course," said Hart. "I recognised his voice at once."

We stole down the path, still feeling guilty, and we seemed to forget that the man in the house was a thief, with twenty pounds of stolen money on him.

We found the other fellows waiting still, sheltering from the driving snow behind a hedge.

"Well, is the rotter there?" asked Watson.

"The rotter is there," I replied. "But things are very different to what we expected, Tommy. This chap has got a wife and child, and, by the look of things, they are pretty nearly starving."

"Gammon!" said Watson.

"It's not gammon," exclaimed Hart. "Wait until you hear."

We explained everything, and Tommy and Montie listened with interest. They opened their eyes somewhat as we related the conversation we had overheard, and Sir Montie shook his head.

"It's frightfully awkward—it is,

really," he said. "Dear fellows, it's difficult to know what to do. It seems genuine enough, I must say. Begad! How frightfully rotten to be starvin' in this kind of weather."

"I expect the poor chap has been out of an engagement for weeks," said Hart. "I've heard that these music-hall people do starve sometimes, when they can't get a job. And a conjuror isn't always required. The public seem to want rot nowadays, instead of decent entertainment, and the rotters get engagements, while the good men are left to starve. I liked Goodall from the start, and I'm blessed if I know what to do now."

"I'll suggest somethin'," said Montie.

"Out with it."

"I think we'd better get back to the train, dear boys," said Tregellis-West quietly. "I have heaps of tin; an' I'll pay back the chaps who were robbed ——"

"That's all very well, Montie, but that won't do," I interrupted. "Goodall may be starving, and he may be a decent sort, but he deliberately swindled those chaps out of twenty pounds, and it's not right that he should be allowed to stick to it."

Hart stared.

"You're not suggesting that we should take the money, and leave the family to starve over Christmas?" he asked warmly. "I'm not a soft chap, and I'm not hard-hearted. I think we ought to ——"

"Goodall needs a lesson," I persisted. "Just leave this to me, and you won't be sorry. The man has done wrong, and, if I know anything of human nature, it'll be on his conscience for the rest of his life. We shall be doing him a favour by clearing his conscience straight off."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Watson. "What's the idea?"

"We'll all go to the back door, and I'll knock," I said. "Goodall is bound to come himself, and we'll pounce on him. Simply take him down to the bottom of the garden, and leave the rest to me."

"Right," said Hart. "Come on!"

We entered the garden, and made our way to the back door. There had been no alteration in the snowstorm; it was as fierce as ever.

Tap-tap!

I rapped upon the door with my knuckles, and we all waited in readiness. We stood there like so many highwaymen, ready to capture an unwary passer-by. And, as we stood, we heard quick footsteps through the kitchen.

The door was flung open, and Goodall stood there.

"Now!" I muttered.

At the same second, we flung ourselves forward. The man was utterly unprepared for the attack, and before he knew what had happened he was pulled forward on to his face in the snow. Then we dragged him down the garden to the rear, where I had spotted a small shed.

Goodall did not protest as we hustled him along; he really had no time to do so. It was impossible for him to do anything to help himself, and when we arrived at the shed he was invisible in the coating of snow.

But he must have known the identity of his captors. For, when he shook the snow from his head and shoulders, his face was pale, and he was trembling visibly. We stood round him with stern faces.

"Mr. Goodall, we didn't quite like to use you so roughly just now, but we wanted to get you alone," I said. "We don't want your wife and child to know anything about this little affair."

The man gave a kind of gulp.

"I—I don't understand!" he panted.

"I think you do," said Hart. "You swindled us out of twenty pounds, Mr. Goodall, and that wasn't quite the action of a gentleman. Half an hour ago I thought you were a common thief, but now I've changed my view. You evidently took our money because you were in a hole——"

"I don't suppose you will believe me, but I did what I did for the sake of others—not for myself," exclaimed Goodall brokenly. "The opportunity came, and I seized it. I was mad—I was a fool—but, somehow, I couldn't help myself. Temptation came upon me, and I weakly gave in."

"Let's get to the facts, Mr. Goodall," I said grimly. "You took twenty pounds belonging to five fellows. You borrowed the money in order to perform a trick, and then kept the genuine notes, and gave the faked ones——"

"I know—I know!" interrupted Goodall brokenly. "I expect you will take me to the police, eh? Well, it's what I deserve—although I will swear that I have never indulged in theft before."

"But why did you do it?" I asked.

"Because something impelled me—

some devil within me," said Goodall fiercely. "When I started that trick I had no intention of doing anything wrong. But I had an idea the boys thought I was penniless, so I brought out that stage money just for the sake of show. I didn't think you would be able to produce twenty pounds against mine."

"Well, we did," said Hart.

"Yes, I know," went on the man. "And I was compelled to go on with the trick. It wasn't my intention to rob you then; but then the train ran into the snowdrift, and you were all excited to leave the train. Somehow or other, I gave you the forgeries; an infernal imp inside me whispered that you would never know the difference, and that it would mean salvation for—— But I needn't go into that. I have your money here. For Heaven's sake, take it now. It has burnt my hand every time I have touched it!"

He pulled out the little wad of folded notes, and handed it to Hart.

"And now, I suppose, you'll hand me over to the police?" he asked bitterly. "And this—this after I have left my wife sobbing with joy—— Oh, but I needn't tell you of that. It is your duty to give me in charge——"

"I'm not so sure of that," I said. "It's not a question of duty, Mr. Goodall. You've owned up that you were wrong, and you haven't begged for mercy. That's the best of the whole business. You haven't asked us to do a thing. Well, the matter ends now."

"You won't go to the police?"

"Begad, no!" said Montie. "An' what's more, we'll give——"

"Leave it to me, Montie," I interrupted. "Mr. Goodall, you can go back into the house. We will not trouble you any more. You have handed over the money you took, and, under the circumstances, we don't bear any malice. It is Christmas time—a time of goodwill."

"You are too good to me," muttered Goodall.

He staggered to the door, passed out, and went through the blinding snow towards the house. He walked drunkenly, as though dazed and bewildered. And my chums grabbed hold of me, glaring:

"You heartless rotter——"

"Eh?"

"You mean bounder——"

"What?"

"Begad! I'm surprised at you, Nipper!"

"But look here——"

"You let the chap go back without a farthing," said Hart. "I was going to suggest that we should contribute something. He may be a thief in actual fact, but not in spirit. His wife and child were starving, and so he took the money in a moment of madness. Any man, no matter how honest, is liable to do mad things in a time of extremity."

"Look at him," I said quietly.

I pointed, through the snow, at the the house. The man had halted, and was fingering something he had just taken from his pocket. He examined it with care, looked back towards us, and then came forward. I smiled.

"Why is he coming back?" asked Watson.

"I don't profess to be a conjuror," I said, "but I rather fancy I put that wad of notes into Goodall's pocket rather neatly!"

"Eh?"

"You—you frightful bounder——"

"It's all right," I grinned. "I put the twenty quid back, but I didn't think he'd find it out until he got indoors. I'll pay the chaps the money they lost——"

"You won't pay me!" said Hart promptly.

"And he won't pay the others, either!" put in Sir Montie. "Begad! I don't mind layin' out every farthin'——"

Goodall came up at that moment.

"I found these notes in my pocket," he said huskily. "I—I don't remember. I thought I gave them back to you——"

"You gave us that twenty pounds, if that's what you mean," I said. "We've had that, Mr. Goodall. Everything's finished."

"But these notes—they're yours," said the man, staring.

I looked at the other fellows.

"Ours?" I said. "Are those notes ours, you chaps?"

"No!" said the others promptly.

"We don't know anything about them, do we?"

"How should we know anything about the money Mr. Goodall carried in his pocket?" asked Hart. "Be sensible, Nipper!"

The man easily saw what our object was, and his eyes were rather moist as he regarded us.

"God bless you, boys—God bless you!" he muttered huskily.

"That's all right, sir. There's no need to say any more about it," said Watson. "It was Nipper's idea to put that money——"

"Dry up, you ass!" I interrupted. "You don't know what you're talking about, Tommy. We'll wish you good-day, Mr. Goodall—and I hope you'll have a merry Christmas."

The man's eyes sparkled.

"I shall—thanks to you!" he said, with a kind of lump in his throat. "I did not think that boys could be so wonderful. I have wronged you, and yet you return good for evil. Heaven bless you!"

We all moved out of the shed, and left the garden. But before going away from the house we saw that Goodall was still watching us. I made a note of the name of the place—for I had an idea that Nelson Lee would take a hand. If we sent a Christmas turkey, it was necessary to have the full address.

"And now we'll get back to the train," I said briskly. "We've accomplished our object, and there's nothing more to be said. I don't quite know how the other chaps will take it——"

"Oh, they'll be all right," said Hart. "I'll make it all right, anyhow. If we had taken that money, I shouldn't have slept a wink for weeks. My hat, isn't the snow awfully hard to walk on?"

We dismissed the subject by mutual consent, and trudged back towards the Boxvale cutting, mostly in silence. Talking was difficult in any case, owing to the howl of the wind and the lash of the driving snow.

We all felt happier for what we had done, and although we were considerably out of pocket, we felt that the money had been well used.

For we had, at least, provided a happy Christmas for one innocent family—for we were convinced that Mr. Ernest Goodall was a gentleman by instinct. He had fallen from the path of virtue for one brief spell because of his dire extremity.

And so we were happy as we returned to the train.

We took it leisurely, for we judged that we had heaps of time at our disposal. But when we got to the top of the cutting we received a shock. Down on the line, through the whirling snowflakes, we could see the train. And it was moving! The engine was puffing vigorously.

"Great Scott!" shouted Watson. "She's off!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"We went down the embankment helter-skelter. Tommy Watson, in fact, was in such a hurry that he slipped over on his back and slithered the remainder of the way down, being quite unable to stop his progress.

He alighted in a snowdrift at the bottom, and was practically buried: but he managed to extricate himself before we got there. And we found the train just on the point of moving off—in earnest.

When we had first viewed it the engine had been pushing its way through the last remains of the snow. The obstruction had been cleared, and now the train was off once more on its journey.

"Buck up!" roared Pitt, from the window. "This way!"

Somehow or other we scrambled on board—but not in Pitt's compartment. We got into one occupied by Christine, Yorke, Somerton and Little—which, of course, was just the compartment we wanted.

"Well, what luck?" asked Christine, as we piled in.

"Give us a chance to get on board!" I gasped. "By jingo! That was a near shave, you know! Another minute, and we should have lost the giddy train!"

"What about that rotter Goodall?" roared Yorke.

"Did you track him?" asked Little.

"Yes, we did," I replied.

"You found him?"

"Yes."

"And what about the money?"

"We found that, too, begad!" said Sir Montie calmly.

"You've got it?" roared Christine.

"It was handed back to us," I said. "But we haven't got it. You see, we decided to make Goodall a present of it."

"You—you did what?"

"We made Goodall a present——"

"But that was our money," said Somerton mildly. "I don't wish to say anything rude, but you certainly seem to be an awful ass, Nipper. What's the idea? Explain yourself, old chap."

And so we explained the whole posi-

tion. Hart did most of the talking, because he was one of the victims, and when he had finished, Christine and the others had lost their warlike expressions, and were looking thoughtful. Fatty Little was the first to speak.

"I've lost six quid, but I can get another six from the pater, so it doesn't matter," he said. "And I'm very pleased that this has happened. It must be awful for people to be without grub. I've only been starving once, and that was bad enough for me!"

"You were starving?" said Yorke, staring.

"Yes, rather!" replied Little. "About three months ago it was. I was out with the pater, and we were on an express—which didn't stop anywhere. And we were forced to go from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon without anything to eat! Don't you call that starving?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you never starve any worse than that, Fatty, you'll be lucky," I said. "Goodall, I should say, was about on his last legs, and that little bit we overheard in his kitchen was enough to make a stone heart tender."

And so as we proceeded on our way to Dorrie's Christmas party we all felt that something good had been done. We were going to enjoy our Christmas—and that little family in Boxvale would enjoy theirs.

CHAPTER VII.

DORRIE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY.

"YALEMOOR!" I said briskly.

The train had come to a standstill at a little country station, and we tumbled out of our carriage thankfully. The journey, although short, had been long—if that doesn't sound Irish.

But, on the whole, we considered ourselves fairly lucky to get there at all. The short winter's day was drawing to a close, and darkness was already falling over the snow-clad countryside.

The clouds were lighter now, however, and snow had ceased to fall. This was just as well, for if the downfall had continued for another spell of the same length, everything would have been snowed up solid.

"And now for Cliff Castle," said Pitt briskly. "How far is it?"

"About a couple of miles," I said.

"That'll be a nice walk——"

"I don't think!" I interrupted. "Lord Dorrimore isn't the sort of man to treat his guests like that. There'll be something here to meet us, I'll warrant."

"By George, yes!" exclaimed Watson. "There's a huge motor-car out there—two cars, in fact. This is ripping!"

We got outside the station, and found that both cars had been sent down for our use—for it was hardly possible to crowd twelve into one motor. We started on the last stage of our journey in the best of spirits.

And, after a comparatively short run through the thick snow, we came within sight of Cliff Castle.

It was not such a gloomy place as Dorrie had made out, but a handsome old building perched on the cliff. It was a blaze of light as we came along; every window was brilliant.

"Ah, that looks cheerful," I remarked. "We're going to have a fine time here, my sons—a ripping Christmas."

"Yes, rather!"

The two cars rolled into the big courtyard of the castle, and pulled up before the massive old doors. They opened to admit us, and very soon we were being warmly welcomed by Lady Mornington, Lord Dorrimore's sister.

She proved to be a jolly, joking woman, and it was easy to understand why she was so popular as a hostess. Her husband, Lord Mornington, was a very genial peer, and we were comfortable right at the start.

Dorrie himself met us as we were peeling off our overcoats in the great lounge-hall. Electric lights blazed everywhere, and the most gorgeous decorations had been hung.

"Oh, so here you are, young men!" said Dorrie severely. "A fine time to turn up, by gad! I thought you were coming by the early train!"

"So we did," I explained.

"Is this what you call early?"

"Well, the train was snowed up," I grinned. "You're lucky to have us here even now."

"Lucky!" said his lordship. "Thanks for tellin' me! I wasn't aware that it

was lucky to have a parcel of mischievous schoolboys in the place. Still, we shall all be happy, and that's the main thing."

"How's Umlosi?" I asked.

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"At the present moment, Umlosi is doin' his best to roast himself in front of the library fire," he said. "He simply longs to get back to Africa—he's dyin' for it. But I've told him he can't go back until Christmas is over, so he's roastin' himself instead. If you happen to notice a smell of scorchin' Kutana, don't be surprised."

We couldn't help grinning, and later on we saw Umlosi himself. He was, as Dorrie had said, trying to roast himself in front of a huge fire. It was wonderful how he could stand the heat.

"Wau, Manzie!" he exclaimed in his deep, rumbling voice. "It is a strange place that my father, N'Kose, has brought me to. This is the land of great whiteness—the land of the air that cuts even as the knife. Methinks I would prefer to be back under the sunny skies of Africa."

"You don't appreciate snow, Umlosi," I said. "All you need to do is to go outside and stand about in the cold for a time. You'll soon get used to it, and then you'll be as hard as nails!"

"Mayhap thou art right, O youth of great wisdom," said Umlosi, shaking his head. "But I live for the day when I will return over the great waters to the land of the forests and the blue skies. Were I to take the advice which thou offerest, methinks I would not live for even an hour."

Umlosi certainly did not appreciate the English climate; but a lot of his grumbling was assumed. He was not half so bad as he made out, and, if necessary, he would venture out in the snow without a murmur.

The other guests at Cliff Castle had not all arrived. There was some talk of Sexton Blake and Tinker coming down, but this was by no means certain. I hoped that they would be able to.

Jack Grey's father, Sir Crawford Grey, was there, and so was Captain Burton, the father of the burly "bo'sun." And we again met Lady Helen Tregellis-West, Sir Montie's highly respected aunt.

Miss Agnes Christine and Miss Ethel Church had not turned up, although they were due to arrive on the morrow. But Tommy's sister was there, and her presence made up for a lot.

She was certainly one of the sweetest girls one could wish to see, and Tommy was right in being justly proud of her. Needless to say, however, he could not appreciate her charms, he being a mere brother.

Dinner was a great success. But, strictly speaking, the holidays had not commenced. The House party was not complete as yet; Nelson Lee himself would not be down until the morrow.

After dinner, Dorrie took Sir Montie and Tommy and I to the billiard-room. The other fellows amused themselves in various ways. We were not experts at billiards, but we were able to amuse ourselves quite well.

Dorrie played Montie and I a hundred up, and beat us hollow. Then he left us to our own devices, for, as host, he had many duties to attend to.

"Ripping place!" remarked Watson, who was marking for Montie and I. "I reckon we shall have a gorgeous time here——"

He broke off suddenly.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "That wasn't a bad shot, Montie!"

"Did—did you see it?" gasped Watson huskily.

I looked up.

"That shot?" I said. "Of course I saw it, you ass! There's no need to speak in that tone."

"I—I mean that face at the window!" gasped Watson.

"You must be dreaming!"

"I wasn't dreaming!" exclaimed Watson tensely. "While you were playing just now, a face came at the window—an awful-looking face, with whiskers round it. It gave me quite a start, I can tell you."

"Begad! That wine we had after dinner——"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Montie!" snapped Watson. "I tell you I saw—— There it is again! Look—look!"

We both looked intently, and there was no mistake about it. For a brief second we all three saw a face out in the darkness of the night. The owner of it was looking into the billiard-room, and two eyes were flashing queerly. Then, as we watched, the face went.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed. "What an awful-looking chap! The

eyes were gleaming, but the face seemed to be dead! If I believed in ghosts, I should say that that thing was an apparition."

"It gave me quite a turn," said Watson huskily. "What shall we do? Don't you think we'd better go and tell Lord Dorrimore——"

"There's no need to," I interrupted. "He's coming."

I could hear Dorrie's whistle in the corridor, and he came bustling in a moment later.

"Who's winnin'?" he inquired genially "I wouldn't mind bettin' that Montie is lickin'—— Hallo! What's the matter here? Been quarrellin' or somethin'? You all look pretty black!"

"We just saw something at the window, Dorrie," I said.

"Somethin' at the window?"

"Yes, a face—a horrible-looking face!" I explained. "Watson saw it first, and he drew our attention to it. Perhaps you'd better send somebody out to have a look round——"

"Nonsense!" said Dorrie. "There's nothin' there. Just because you're in an old castle, there's no reason for you to get fancyin' things. Personally, I don't believe in ghosts."

"It wasn't a ghost, Dorrie," I said. "Somebody came to the window and looked in. We all saw the fellow as plainly as we can see you."

His lordship chuckled.

"That's remarkable!" he said. "Somebody came to the window and looked in?"

"Yes."

"I don't know how to account for it," said Dorrie. "This window, my sons, is twelve feet from the ground, and the wall is sheer. We don't happen to have any twelve-foot giants knockin' about, that I know of. Really, boys, you must have made a bloomer."

"Look here, Dorrie, we're not the kind of chaps to fancy things!" I said. "We saw a face outside the window ——"

"Then the only thing to think is that somebody put a ladder up there," interrupted Dorrie. "But who'd do that, and why? There'd be no sense in such a thing, an' there's no object to be gained."

"Well, the fact remains that we saw the face," I said. "Hallo! There's an electric-torch on the mantelpiece. We'll have a look out of the window."

"Good!" said Dorrie. "There's nothin' like doin' it now."

I took the torch and went to the window. I threw open the casement and leaned out. The window, as Dorrie had said, was fully twelve feet from the ground, and was almost sheer, without a single projection. I flashed the powerful electric-light down upon the snow. And as I did so, a queer feeling came over me, for I saw something which rather startled me.

The snow on the ground beneath the window was one white, unbroken sheet! No human being had disturbed it. There was not a footprint, and not a trace of any mark.

"Now what about it?" asked Dorrie, with a chuckle. "Who came to the window and looked in? Nothin' human, at any rate."

I flashed my torch upwards, and the light revealed the bare, blank walls of the castle, stretching high above. Certainly no human being could possibly have come to the window.

And we had seen the face distinctly!

"Look here, Dorrie, this is jolly rummy!" I said slowly. "I don't want you to grin or laugh at me, but it's a fact that we all three saw a face, and we couldn't all be fanciful, could we?"

Dorrie suddenly became serious.

"Well, it's remarkable," he said. "Do you know, somebody who lived in this place years ago said that they could see a face sometimes behind the window of the billiard-room. I thought it was all bunkum at first. But then one of the servants saw something, and now you say the same."

"I can't understand it," I said slowly. "It's—it's mysterious!"

It certainly was mysterious, and, somehow, I did not like staying in the billiard-room after that. I was not satisfied, either, and shortly afterwards Watson and I put on our coats and hats and went out into the grounds.

We walked round to the wall of the castle where the billiard-room window was situated. And we were soon convinced that no human being could possibly have got to the window. The snow lay thick everywhere.

"Do—do you think it was a ghost?" asked Tommy.

"Dash it all, I can't think that!" I said. "But I know it's jolly queer, and I don't mean to rest until I get to a solution of some kind. You saw the face, didn't you?"

"Yes, distinctly."

"What was it like?"

"An awful kind of thing—like the face of a dead man nearly!" said Watson. "But the eyes seemed to glitter."

"That was my impression," I said. "It seems that we shall have a mystery to unravel while we're here, old son. I mean to tell the guv'nor all about this as soon as he arrives. I don't like anything that can't be explained."

We did not tell the other fellows, and when we went to bed that night I could not help thinking that there was something rather strange about the old castle.

On the morrow Nelson Lee arrived, and some other guests, too. The house party was practically complete, and there was plenty of fun and laughter. As soon as I could get Nelson Lee alone, I took him to the billiard-room and explained what had occurred.

He listened, and then looked at me strangely.

"Really, Nipper, I can't quite credit this," he said. "You see, the story is rather tall——"

"But it's a fact, sir!" I interrupted. "The face was there, and yet I can't see how it could have got there. It must have been something human, because I don't believe in spirits or ghosts."

"If you saw a face, human agency was certainly responsible," said Nelson Lee. "In any case, Nipper, we will not pursue the matter now. But if there is any other mysterious occurrence, I shall certainly make it my business to investigate. We are here for pleasure, but if there is work to attend to, we must put pleasure aside."

"Of course, sir!" I agreed. "I hope nothing else happens, because it makes a chap feel rather uncomfortable."

After that, I almost forgot the incident for the party was such a merry one that there was very little of a serious nature to think about. It was a real Christmas party, and there was every prospect of great enjoyment for us all.

But, had we only known it, there was to be further mystery before so very long—mystery and excitement and adventure.

It was to be a Yuletide of strange happenings!

THE END.

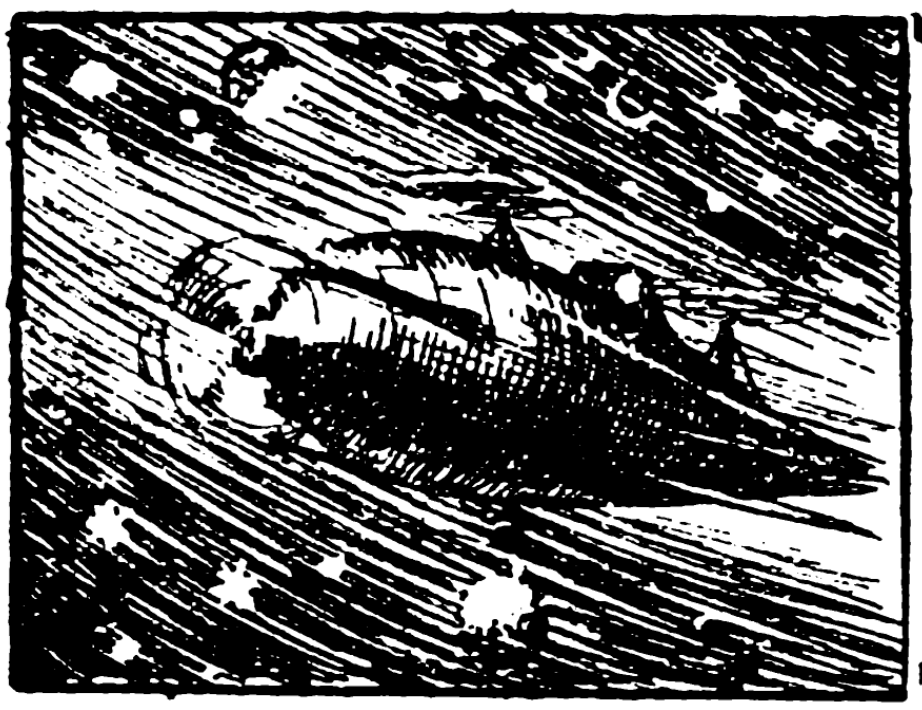
Hearty Greetings to all my Readers.

I hope that all my chums will make up their minds to have a rattling good time this Christmas, and that if they have no troubles to forget they will help others to forget theirs. This will be the first real Christmas in many homes for six years. Christmas fare will be more abundant, and everything conspires to your enjoying the happy Christmas I wish you one and all.

Though this is virtually the Christmas Number, another number of our paper will be on sale before the 25th. But I have decided to make this the Christmas Number because: Firstly, it opens a splendid Christmas series that will continue next week in an enthralling fireside story called "A YULETIDE MYSTERY!" Secondly, some of my chums will be so busy sending off Christmas cards, buying presents and what not on the day preceding Christmas, that they may even forget their "Nelson Lee" until the shop reopens. For the benefit of these chums I have thought it better to be a little early than too late. Nevertheless, I advise you to make sure to add next week's number to your Christmas fare.

THE EDITOR.

MAGNIFICENT STORY OF ADVENTURE AMONG THE PLANETS



IN TRACKLESS SPACE.

A Thrilling Account of a Wonderful Voyage to the Moon, Venus, and Mars, and of a Flying Machine known as the "Solar Monarch," the Most Marvellous Invention of the Age.

By ROBT. W. COMRADE

Author of "The Stowaway's Quest," "Scorned by the School," etc.

INTRODUCTION.

ROBERT GRESHAM, inventor of the Solar Monarch, an airship designed to travel through space, decides to put his theories to the test by making a journey to the moon and other planets. He is accompanied by

FRANK HILLSWORTH and MACDONALD GUTHRIE, both wealthy young adventurers; PROFESSOR PALGRAVE, a renowned scientist; and ABBIE, a burly negro, who acts as cook and engineer. The airship is secretly constructed in England. At last everything is in readiness to start. The adventurers are aboard, and as Gresham pulls a lever the Solar Monarch shoots up into space. The moon is reached in a week, the projectile attaining a speed of 2,000 miles an hour. The surface of the moon appears destitute of life, but the explorers learn, after many exciting adventures, that the dark fissures and caves are inhabited by strange monsters. They return to the Solar Monarch, and set off for Venus. In this world of whiteness the adventurers encounter many extraordinary beings and fresh scenes, such as have never before been seen by the inhabitants of our Mother Earth. After Venus, their next port of call is Mars, some experiences on which will be described in the following chapter.

(Now read on.)

Down into the Caverns.

YES, sure enough, the Solar Monarch was about to pass another of those peculiar cavities. Having come to a standstill, the airship hovered over the pit for a moment or two, during which time the explorers eagerly scanned the sides of the opening. They were apparently of rock, and smooth-faced, being almost black in colour. But of bottom there seemed to be none.

"Strange—very strange," murmured Gresham perplexedly. "Still, there cannot be any danger." He touched the telegraph. "I cannot convince myself that these are natural holes; they are too even, too round. Besides, there are so many of them. It seems to me they are the work of other hands than Nature!"

"Let us hope," observed Mac, leaning perilously over the stout rail. "It'll be an awfu' frost if we find naething at the bottom of this thing. I tell ye I'm mair than disgusted with Mars, as it is."

Slowly and steadily the airship dropped into the pit. She was already below the level, and those on her deck-plates watched curiously.

Down she went, down, down, until they were in comparative darkness, the hole in the surface appearing smaller and smaller. The searchlight had been affixed, and Gresham lit it up and directed its powerful rays as far downwards as he could.

Were they never going to stop? Suddenly a cry of amazement broke from them all. They had reached the bottom of the shaft; but that was not all.

The Solar Monarch still hovered in the air. She had dropped into a vast cavern, the extent of which they could not even guess at.

They were still descending, and the blaze from the searchlight revealed the ground beneath.

"This is not what we expected, anyhow," remarked Frank. "I wonder

what the place is—— Great Scott, look down there! I'm hanged if there ain't trees and plants growing just as if it was exposed to the sun!"

He pointed excitedly overside, and the others echoed his amazement. It was marvellous. There, in total darkness, could be seen trees—tall, lofty trees—scrubs and grass growing in profusion; and—wonder of wonders—they could see the swiftly running waters of a fairly large river.

"Weel, this knocks Venus into a cocked hat," Mac declared. "I never dreamt such a thing possible."

Gently the vessel came to rest on a patch of tall and thick grass. In a moment Frank and Mac had leapt to the ground.

It was as light as day there in the brilliant illumination. The young explorers eagerly examined the grass.

"Black as your hat!" cried Frank to the professor and Gresham, who were taking the more leisurely way of descending, "and as tough as leather."

He brushed his way through the tall blades and made for the trees. These were huge, silent, leafless. Not that they were devoid of foliage. The trunk, of immense thickness, was as hard as ebony, and out of this, several minor trunks—giant branches—forked out, while from these, hundreds of thick, flat blades protruded, for all the world like seaweed.

"Truly remarkable trees," declared the professor, when he had examined them. "And the small plants are somewhat similar—black, tough, and might almost be mistaken for a specie of seaweed. Truly remarkable."

Gresham, who had been delayed over something, now came up, carrying a glass jug of water in his hand. He smiled as he saw the looks of quick comprehension which passed between the companions.

"Yes, my friends, you see before you a specimen of Martian water. I have tested it, and have found it to be absolutely pure—perfect. It is in almost every respect precisely similar to Earth water. The dissimilarity is that it is slightly pink in colour, and has a somewhat sweet taste. Abbie is now about to descend with buckets to refill our water-tanks, which, you may remember, are already running low.

Having tasted the water and pronounced it excellent, the others would not be satisfied until they had been to the river-side. It was close to the Solar Monarch, but opposite to where they were standing. As they passed the aeronef Abbie appeared, his shiny, black visage showing every expression of bewilderment.

"All dis heah 'citement and oder tings 'll probe too much fo' dis niggah," he exclaimed. "I guess I shall get a kink in de system 'fore long!"

"In the solar system, Abbie," grinned Frank. "That's where you'll feel it most."

"Is dat so, sah? Well, I reckon my system's allus been good'n sober, anyhow, so I don' see no reason fo' worry. We'm got down to de centre ob dis heah earf, fo' suah!"

"Not quite as far as that, Abbie," Gresham smiled. "But we all think you're a wonder to get the ship so safely down the shaft."

"Dat weren't notin', sah. I jes' let her drop, an', by golly, I tought we'd soon be a-gettin' out'n de oder side."

He walked to the river bank and drew two pailsful of water. The bank was sheer, but as the river flowed within four inches of the top it was a simple matter to fill the buckets. Abbie started walking, then paused.

"Sakes," he exclaimed. "I guess dis water don' weigh much; feels most as if I were carryin' empty pails."

"That's the difference in the force of gravity," the professor told him.

Two minutes later they were all lending a hand at filling the tanks, and the task was soon completed. After that they stood on deck discussing what to do next.

The silence of the place was almost the silence of the grave. The trees were as motionless as statues, but every now and again came a gentle whisper from the flowing water.

Of animal life there was not the least sign—not a bird, not an insect, to show that Mars had life on her surface. It was strange, uncanny, this visit of civilised human beings to a probably dead world.

"I suggest going forward," said Frank decidedly. "We can't come to any harm, anyhow. We can always get up this pit-shaft, or whatever it calls itself. And the very fact of there being numbers of these holes on the surface

seems to show that Mars is literally honeycombed with these caverns.

"For all we know, this one itself may be miles in extent. And, for goodness sake, after taking the trouble to come all these millions of miles, don't say we're not going to explore everything we can."

"Don't worry yourself, Frank," said Gresham. "We shall certainly see everything there is to be seen before we emerge into the outer air again. Abbie, you're not destined to have much rest; the engines will require your attention again, I think."

"Dat's good hearin', sah. I calculate I ain't half sech a cheerful pusson on deck as I am below! De engine-room is where I lib, sah, and I kinder feel lost without de smell ob oil an' petrol, an' de buzzin' ob de engines."

The good-natured negro disappeared below, and soon the soft, yellow light from the engine-room windows showed itself on the black vegetation.

Altogether, the Solar Monarch seemed a cheerful and comfortable home, apart from its being the most efficient flier in existence.

The hum of the screws seemed extra loud down there, but as they were only going at about quarter-speed, the noise was comparatively slight.

The vessel rose for a distance of fifty feet—the roof of the cavern was lost in the darkness—and then progressed forward at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

With the great beam of light cutting the darkness ahead, the watchers leaned on the rail, taking in everything eagerly. The atmosphere down here was of the same low temperature, but the adventurers were well protected in their massive furs.

To their great surprise they travelled onwards for a couple of miles, and still no sign could be seen of the cavern terminating.

It stretched out endlessly on either hand, and Gresham began to wonder whether they could find their way back to the outlet.

But when they passed beneath another of the great air-shafts—they could be nothing else—he grew confident.

Beneath them the forest of trees stretched out, occasionally broken by a patch of hard, shiny rock, or a meadow of coarse grass. The river had twice been visible to them, but now had faded out of sight.

Suddenly Gresham rang the telegraph with a clang, and the aeronef dropped swiftly for a matter of fifteen feet, and slowed down until she was travelling a bare eight miles an hour.

"What on earth's all the hurry about?" inquired Frank curiously. "There's nothing——"

"Look above your heads," said Gresham calmly.

His companions did so, and with astonishment perceived that the cavern roof was quite close to them.

Even as it was, the bottom of the vessel came within four feet of the tree-tops. Then the trees were broken, and the river appeared to view again.

Instantly Gresham lowered the vessel to within a few feet of its level. Thus they proceeded until, without any warning, the mighty cavern curved inwards, and formed itself into a tunnel, through which the river flowed silently and placidly.

The roof was still lofty, and Gresham decided to proceed onwards, for there was room to spare for the Solar Monarch's passage.

"Good," murmured Frank into Mac's ear. "I feared for a moment Gresham wouldn't enter the tunnel. But he's evidently as eager as anybody—excited as anybody—only he doesn't show it."

The tunnel kept as straight as a die, and of an equal depth and width. The sides, now close to them, were of smooth, chocolate-coloured rock. There was no danger of the suspensory screws touching the roof, for it was a good fifteen feet above them.

So long as the passage grew no narrower or shallower the aeronef could proceed. At the crawling rate of eight miles an hour she continued her amazing voyage, the searchlight showing up every niche and crevice for a considerable distance ahead.

Then a commotion in the water drew the attention of the travellers. What could it be?

The next moment they all received a shock. And it is scarcely to be wondered at either; they had every reason to be stupefied and amazed.

The commotion was taking place slightly in advance of the airship. The explorers looked at it interestedly and with curiosity.

Then the water was broken and lashed to a white foam, and an object revealed itself, an object which caused them to gasp.

It was of huge dimensions, and again I must plead my inability to give my readers more than a vague description; to describe it in detail would be more than my pen could accomplish.

The thing was perfectly black, and the most remarkable fact was that it had the appearance of a machine rather than that of flesh and blood. Its body—if it possessed such a thing—was a narrow, tube-like object, out of which protruded numerous minor tubes. And out of the end of each minor tube a long, thick wire lashed about.

Head or eyes it apparently had none, but at the uppermost end of the "body" a white object, which resembled a tea-cup, kept up a continuous sliding movement impossible to describe.

And out of this tea-cup arrangement a thick, opaque vapour arose, like steam from an engine.

It is possible that more than one reader will laugh derisively, and say the whole thing is too absurd to credit: this opinion, however, did not occur to the occupants of the Solar Monarch, who stared at the Martian river monster

In a moment the vessel had reached the spot where it broke the surface, and Gresham was hoping they had left it behind, for he paled at the thought of a fight in that confined space, when a sound like a rifle shot came from aft.

With a jerk the aeronef was brought to, and the propeller rent the air unavailingly.

What had occurred—was the question they all asked one another.

Abbie, from the windows of the engine-room below, had an uninterrupted view, and as he clung to the steering-wheel his heart beat faster with apprehension.

He knew that the vessel was stationary, and looked for some sign of activity above.

It was not long in making itself apparent. With a jerk the inventor swung the searchlight round; and he caught his breath in sharp as he saw what had happened.

The Martian monster had flung up one of its steel wire-like tentacles, and had grasped the Solar Monarch tightly. The end of the "wire" was only just touching the plates, but it stuck there like a magnet.

In a moment Palgrave jerked out his revolver and took steady aim.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times in quick succession the weapon spoke viciously, and three times there echoed back a sharp "pink" as of metal to metal when the bullets struck.

"It hasn't even felt 'em," gasped Frank, who had his own six-shooter in readiness. "By Jove, stop that if you can. The brute's treating us to another of his cables!"

It was true. Slowly another tentacle was rising from the water; for a moment it hovered, then, quick as lightning, darted forward and fixed itself to the after-tank.

Frank waited a moment, then fired. The bullet hit the glittering "wire" with a sharp crack. Nothing happened, however. Then, with a feeling of horror Gresham realised that the aeronef was being gradually dragged down to the water, stern foremost!

"This is terrible!" he cried. "We are so hampered. If I give orders for Abbie to increase the speed of the suspensories, it will be dangerous in the extreme, for should this creature release its hold we should inevitably shoot upwards and wreck the screws upon the roof. I am at a loss to know what to do for the best."

"Den I guess I'll tell yo, sah," shouted Abbie from the doorway. "Dis niggah's seen de latest addition to de Zoo, and an idea kinder struck me."

"And that was, Abbie——"

"To frow a pot ob boilin' water ober his highness, sah. I reckon dat'll make him feel warmly towards if anything will."

"No harm in trying it, Abbie," Gresham returned quickly. "If that fails I see nothing for it but to start the suspensories and risk the consequences."

Abbie staggered on deck, carrying with him a huge cauldron of boiling water. With Frank's aid he lowered it on to the deck-rail, then, accurate and true, poured the whole contents upon the upper end of the "tube" in which the white "cup" slid up and down. The aeronef's stern plates were already touching the water, but now, with a sudden jerk, she rose a few feet, and those on deck, watching with fast-beating hearts,

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

gave a sigh of relief, for, with a metallic twang, the Martian river dweller had released its grip. For a matter of ten seconds it appeared to turn somersaults over itself, writhing this way and that, its wire-like tentacles, gleaming in the bright light, lashing about with awful force. Then, becoming still, it disappeared from view, and the surface of the stream became calm and unruffled. Professor Palgrave wiped a wet brow with his handkerchief.

"That," he opined, "is the narrowest of all the narrow shaves we have experienced on this wonderful tour of exploration. What say you, Graham?"

"My opinion differs very little from your own," said the inventor of the Solar Monarch. "In another four minutes we should have been under water. Abbie, it's no use whatever us trying to thank you; we couldn't do it sufficiently. All I can say is—and I know I'm speaking for us all—that we owe our lives to your happy thought——"

"Dat's notin', Massa Graham, sah," interrupted Abbie hurriedly. "I guess you'd a tought o' something else ef I hadn't a brought de water. But I'll hab to get, sah, or we'll—we'll be inter de wall, fo' suah!"

"By Jove, yes!" cried Frank. "In the excitement we'd forgotten the vessel's started again now that the back-tension is released. Well," he added, straightening his collar, "if there are many more merchants of his breed"—he indicated the river—"on this little wonder-box, I can foresee we're in for a real high old time before we've done."

"I shall undoubtedly be on the look-out for further callers," Gresham exclaimed with a smile. "And Mac, I'll leave it in your hands to see that we're kept supplied with sufficient ammunition—in the shape of boiling water."

"I've been tryin' tae get at how the watter did what it did," said Mac, the Scot of few words. "Four revolver bullets left nae impression, and yet a few gallons of watter half pulverized the awfu' brute."

"That is easily explained," said the scientist. "The bullets failed to find a vital spot, and were, in any case, cold. The water was boiling, and this creature, who is accustomed to living in a fluid colder than ice—you will note with surprise that it is not frozen—could not possibly stand the terrible heat which in all probability reached a vital part. That is my explanation of the phenomenon."

"And it is the only logical one," Gresham said. "I only hope that we shall not encounter any more—— Hallo, do my eyes deceive me, or is that a light ahead?"

He bent forward, a look of wonderment on his bearded face. The others looked, too. Frank snapped the shutter of the searchlight down for a moment. Yes, some little distance ahead could be seen a yellow radiance.

Five minutes later the gallant little Solar Monarch having successfully flown through the long and danger-laden tunnel, once more emerged into the open—into another mighty cavern. But this cavern—wonder of wonders—was in some unaccountable fashion illuminated with a brilliance which was as light as day!

(To be continued.)

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