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THE CHRISTMAS PLOT.

A Story of the Christmas Holidays and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Something Like an Idea," "The Schoolboy Cinema Owners," "The Haunted House," and many other Stirring Tales.

December 25, 1920.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

SIR MONTIE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY.

"SNOW—snow—and nothing but snow!" exclaimed Handforth. "My hat! We were hoping that we should get a bit of snow this Christmas time, but this fairly takes the biscuit."

Fatty Little groaned.

"Don't talk about biscuits, you ass!" he exclaimed mournfully. "You don't feel hungry, and all you talk about is something to eat. There's snow by the ton—snow everywhere—but nothing in the way of fodder. I'm blest if I can understand why Tregellis-West wants to live in such an out of the way corner of the world as this!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez.

"Really, Little, dear old fellow, I do not feel myself called upon to apologise," he explained. "Tregellis Castle is situated upon the estate which my ancestors——"

"Pinched from somebody else!" put in Handforth calmly.

"Begad!"

"Oh, I'm not blaming you," grinned Handy. "But I daresay your ancestors were just the same as anybody else's ancestors. In those days it was quite a common thing to pinch land, and castles, and all that kind of rot. Your genial forefathers were the lucky ones—and they retained possession of the property."

"I do not think the Tregellis estate was obtained in the way you indicate, Handforth, old boy!" exclaimed Sir Montie, severely. "My ancestors were not men of that type, begad!"

"Well, there's no need to go into any argument about it," put in Fatty Little. "What I want to know is—when are we going to get to the end of this journey? Where's the station? Where shall we be able to find some grub?"

"That's the most important question!" grinned Tommy Watson.

"Ha, ha ha!"

"Of course it's the most important," said Fatty. "We've been travelling for hours and hours—and we were supposed to get into Tregellis at about four o'clock. "It's nearly six now, and as dark as pitch, and we're still in the giddy train."

I chuckled.

"Well, you can't be surprised at that, Fatty, my son," I said. "It's a terrible day—the snow is coming down in one continuous sheet, and a blizzard is raging. We shall be lucky if we get to the station at all."

The fat boy of the Remove looked horrified.

"Do—do you mean to say that we might not finish the journey?" he asked, aghast.

"We might be kept here for hours and hours—perhaps all night," I said,

winking at the others. "It's quite likely that we shall be snowed up in one of these deep cuttings."

"Great pancakes!" gasped Fatty. "Then—then we shall have to stay in the train until the morning?"

"Of course!"

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Fatty. "And I'm nearly starving now. I can't last much longer—I shall faint! I'm built that way, you know—unless I have my grub at the right time an awful feeling comes over me—I feel groggy, and weak. It doesn't take long to get me exhausted if I don't have some grub."

Fatty certainly did not look exhausted at that moment. His cheeks were chubby, and his figure was as rotund as ever. He looked as though he could do without food for a week, and feel no ill effects.

There were a good few Remove fellows on that train—which was steaming valiantly towards the West of England. I was there with my two chums, Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. Handforth and Co. were in evidence, and Fatty Little, and Reginald Pitt. We were on our way to Tregellis Castle, to spend Christmas there—at Sir Montie's invitation.

Several other juniors would join the party—Dick Goodwin, Solomon Levi, Jack Grey, and one or two more. Some of them were already at the Castle, others would come down the following day.

There was every indication that we should spend a very cheerful holiday at Tregellis Castle. For there would be a good number of us there, including Lord Dorrimore, and—naturally—quite a number of young ladies. The party promised to be a huge success.

Our little party had met in London—having previously arranged to come down by this particular train. Nelson Lee was not with us, for he had gone on earlier in the day. And Lord Dorrimore had accompanied the guv'nor. We juniors were quite by ourselves, and the journey was not a particularly cheerful one. For the day was really a terror. A blizzard was raging. Snow was coming down in tremendous quantities. The wind was terrific, and it had been almost impossible to see a dozen yards out of the train. Cuttings were snowed up, and great drifts lay everywhere.

It was really a wonder that we had progressed so far—and the train had not yet been seriously delayed. It was, however, nearly two hours late already, and we did not reckon to get into the station for Tregellis Castle until a quarter past six. The train was due there soon after four.

And Fatty Little, as usual, was complaining about food. His chief grumble was that no restaurant car was attached to the train. Fatty decided to write to the company about it, and to kick up a terrific row. Not that this would do much good.

However, at last we drew into the little station, and came to a standstill. The train had brought us to the end of our journey—and that was something to be thankful for. We now only had three or four miles to go in order to reach Tregellis Castle. And full arrangements had been made for our accommodation.

We were jolly glad to get out of the train, and to stamp our feet about and stretch our limbs. Everything was pitchy black, and the snow was coming down in cascades, whirling about us wildly.

We got out of the station, and found the snow to be over a foot thick. Three motor cars were waiting, two of them being from Tregellis Castle—they had been sent for our benefit.

"Now we sha'n't be long!" said Handforth, stamping his feet about. "In another half-hour we shall be at the Castle, and then there will be a good feed, warm fires, and all the rest of it. By George! I'm longing to get my teeth into something solid—I'm famished."

"What about me?" groaned Fatty Little. "I've been famished for hours—I'm as weak as a rat now——"

"What about all that grub you brought in the train?" asked Tommy Watson.

"That snack, do you mean?"

"Snack!" grinned Watson. "Why, there was enough for a dozen there—sausage rolls, tarts, mince-pies, custards, jam roll—and goodness only knows what else! You demolished practically all of it, Fatty—and, by all rights, you ought to be filled by now—you ought to hate the sight of food."

"My dear chap, just wait until Fatty gets busy at Tregellis Castle," I exclaimed. "He'll beat all records—and

if he doesn't have to be carried away to hospital at the finish, I shall be surprised."

But Fatty could not wait until Tregellis Castle was reached. Just opposite the station, gloaming through the snow, were the lights of a little shop. There was a village here—only a tiny affair—but there were one or two shops in the place. Fatty scented food—anything would do. While the other juniors were climbing into the motor cars, Fatty Little dodged across the road, ploughing his way through the snow, until he reached the window of the shop.

His eyes glistened as he beheld biscuit tins, and bottles of sweets, and so forth. He didn't hesitate a moment, but plunged in.

Meanwhile, we were all getting into the motor cars, and settling ourselves down for the ride to Tregellis Castle. According to the drivers, the journey would be a rather difficult one, for the snow was tremendously thick on the open country roads. In places great snow banks had drifted across, making progress very difficult.

We were all comfortably seated at last, I walked round, my muffler tied tightly round my neck. The snow was coming down, carried along by the high wind, like icy pellets. The flakes drove into my face cuttingly, and I could hardly see. It was a bitter, cruel evening.

"Everybody ready?" I shouted, above the gale.

"Yes—right away!" roared Handforth. "We're all aboard."

"Good!" I said. "We'd better get a move on, then."

The second car was an open one, and my place was in the tonneau of this vehicle. I climbed in, and at that moment the car started into motion.

Nobody had noticed that Fatty Little was missing—those in the front car thought he was at the rear—and those in the rear car thought he was in front. It was quite a natural misunderstanding. For nobody had dreamed that Fatty would bunk off in search of food.

Fatty came out of the little shop, triumphant. He had left several shillings behind him, but he had good value for the money in the shape of several bags which were filled with biscuits. He bent his head to the gale, and marched out to where the motor cars had been standing. But, to Fatty Little's dismay, he found that they had gone.

"Great bloaters!" gasped the fat junior.

He gazed down the road wildly, and just caught a glimpse of a red, twinkling rear lamp. Breaking into a run, he pelted through the snow for all he was worth.

"Hi!" he bellowed. "Wait for me, you silly asses!"

He ran on desperately, and it was fortunate for him that the cars were only moving very slowly. The road was narrow just here, and the snow was piled up very thickly. Thus, speed was impossible. Fatty found himself overhauling the car, and he yelled harder than ever.

"Wait for me!" he howled. "Stop, you fatheads—you've left me behind!"

I was just settling myself into my seat, when I started.

"Hullo!" I said. "What's that? Didn't you hear something?"

"Sounded as though somebody shouted out," said Tommy Watson, who was next to me. I jumped up and gazed behind.

I saw a bulky figure coming along in our rear. It was rather a wild figure, with a muffler waving in the gale, and with both hands full of bags. Fatty Little, although he was in a desperate hurry, did not loosen his hold on the food. He would sooner have walked all the way to Tregellis Castle!"

"Wait for me!" he yelled, at the top of his voice.

I grinned.

"Great Scott!" I chuckled. "We've left Fatty behind."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buck up, Fatty!" shouted Handforth, standing up and looking behind. "You'll do the trick—you're overtaking us."

"Put on a sprint, my son."

When I had entered the car I noticed that a long coil of rope lay in the seat. What it was for, I did not know—and it didn't matter, in any case. I seized the rope now, uncoiled it, and held myself ready.

"Catch hold, Fatty!" I shouted. "You'll soon be all right."

The rope whirled through the air, and Fatty Little grasped hold of one end. Even then he didn't let go of the bag of biscuits. He grabbed the lot, still running hard, but now the car was

gaining speed—the driver knowing nothing of what was taking place. He merely thought we were having a bit of fun among ourselves.

The rope drew tight, and Fatty clung to it as though his life depended upon it.

Twang!

The rope drew taut all of a sudden, and the jerk was rather too much for Fatty Little. His feet slipped from under him, and he went down beautifully. The next second, still clinging to the rope, he was being hauled along like a toboggan—ploughing up the snow in great cascades on either side of him. The spectacle was extremely funny, and we roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stick to it, Fatty!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Fatty couldn't hang on for ever. And, at last, the rope left his grasp. He swung round, rolled over and over like a gigantic football, and finally disappeared head first into a great drift of snow. He vanished, and all we could see was two wildly waving legs.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pull up, driver—we've left a ton of cargo behind," grinned Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The car stopped, and several of us jumped out and ran back through the snow to the spot where Fatty Little had vanished. We found him just emerging, he was still clinging tight to those bags of biscuits. Several of them had been lost, but he had retained the bulk.

"You silly asses," he remarked, shaking the snow from his coat. "Why couldn't you wait for me?"

"We thought you were in the front car, my son!" I chuckled. "What made you stray away from the fold?"

"I went to buy some grub——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You don't suppose I should go all the way to Tregellis Castle without having some food, do you?" asked Fatty, indignantly. "I've got some biscuits here--but a few of them have been wasted—you'd better come back and help me to look for them—they're scattered in the snow somewhere."

"And they will remain scattered in the snow, my son," I said. "We'll leave them for the birds to-morrow, if any of them happen to be about. Anyhow, we haven't got any further time to waste on you and your giddy biscuits."

"Hear, hear!"

"Buck up, Fatty—jump in!"

At last Fatty was safely on board. And then, while we went through the snow storm, he sat there, contentedly munching his biscuits. He offered some of the other juniors some, but they decided not to partake of them. It would be much better to wait until they arrived at the Castle, when they would be provided with a good hearty meal. It would only spoil their appetites if they partook of biscuits now.

Of course, Fatty couldn't understand this. He was always ready to eat. Nothing ruined his appetite. Quite frequently at St. Frank's he would have dinner, and would then pay a visit to the tuck shop, and proceed to gorge indigestible pastries. How on earth he could do it was a mystery to everybody.

We continued our journey through the evening—a cold, cheerless ride. The snow came down pitilessly, and the wind was biting. And it was impossible to go fast, owing to the treacherous state of the roads, caused by the snow drifts. This was winter indeed—a real Christmas!

And at last we turned up a stately drive, and then the lights of Tregellis Castle gleamed out at us through the snow in the darkness. We pulled up before a massive flight of stone steps; the great door was flung open as we piled out of the two cars, and there stood Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, both in evening-dress.

"So there you are, boys!" said Nelson Lee, as we came stamping in. "We were beginning to think that you were snowed-up."

"Well, we weren't far off it, sir," I said. "By Jingo, it's good to be here! Hallo, Dorrie! How are you?"

"Oh, as fit as a fiddle!" said Lord Dorrimore genially. "Pile in, my children; don't take any notice of me!"

Handforth, with his usual clumsiness, had brushed past the immaculate Dorrie, leaving a good deal of snow upon his lordship's dinner-jacket; but Dorrie merely grinned, and brushed it off

"I see you're looking as large as life, and fatter than ever," remarked Lord Dorrimore, as Fatty Little appeared. "By gad, now I can understand why the train was late! I suppose they were compelled to have two engines on it, eh?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why should they want two engines on it?" asked Watson, who was rather dense.

"Well, look at the load they had to bring!" said Dorrie, nodding towards Fatty Little.

Watson saw the joke then, and he grinned. But Fatty didn't mind; he was quite accustomed to being chipped about his size, and he was so glad at being at Tregellis Castle that he would not mind any insults. His chief desire was to get sat down at a table, with heaps of food in front of him. He considered it a positively ridiculous idea for Lady Helen Tregellis-West to suggest that we should go and wash ourselves and get tidy. As Fatty pointed out, we could wash, and all that kind of thing, after the feed.

However, the advice which Montie's aunt had given was excellent, and we felt all the better after we had had a wash and brush-up. Then we descended and entered the big dining-room, where electric lights were gleaming, and where the table looked a picture. We had arrived just in time for dinner.

The party was a large one, and there were quite a number of young ladies present, including Tommy Watson's sister, Violet. She was looking as charming as ever—if anything, even prettier than when we had seen her on the last occasion. Ethel Church was there also, and quite a few others.

Solomon Levi and his father had not yet turned up, and we learned that they would be at the castle on the morrow.

At all events, it was certain that we should spend a very happy Christmas at Sir Montie's ancestral home.

We did not know, however, that there was to be some excitement, and that this excitement would be mainly connected with the Jewish boy of the Remove.

Our Christmas at Tregellis Castle was not to be without its thrilling adventures!

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOTTERS.

ONLY two passengers alighted from the short train when it pulled up against the ridiculously small platform of Tregellis Station. It was the afternoon train from London, and it was not much more than half an hour late, which was distinctly good, considering the snow-bound condition of the railway track.

It was Christmas Eve, and snow had not fallen since the early morning; but the sky was leaden and heavy, and a sharp, biting wind was blowing fiercely. There was every promise of another big fall of snow, too, before so very long. King Frost had seized the whole countryside in his grip, and in this lonely region the outlook was chilly, desolate and bleak.

The two passengers who alighted were both men. They were apparently well off, for they were attired in thick, well-cut great coats, heavy woollen mufflers, and soft hats. They each carried handbags, and they were smoking cigars.

"Gee! I'm glad to get out of that doggone train!" exclaimed one of the men, stamping his feet on the snowy platform. "Say, Webb, you've brought me to a cold region this trip!"

Mr. Stanley Webb nodded.

"Yes, it's rather lonely out here," he agreed. "But we've arrived, old man, and now the first thing we must do is to find accommodation. I don't know whether there are any hotels about here, or anything of that sort; but we must do our best. Personally, I want a good round meal, and then we can see about making our plans. Tregellis Castle is about five miles away, I believe."

"Well, we don't need to get near that!" said Mr. Hooker J. Ryan, shifting the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "I guess we'll need to be cautious, Webb."

The two men passed out of the station, going through the tiny booking-office, and delivering up their tickets to the sleepy-looking clerk. And outside in the tiny station-yard they were rather surprised to see a big, beautifully appointed limousine. The chauffeur was looking expectantly at the door of

the booking-office, as though on the watch for somebody.

"I guess this guy might know something," remarked Mr. Ryan. "Maybe he can tell us where we can find hotel accommodation."

Webb nodded, and walked across to the motor-car.

"Good-afternoon, my man!" he said, by way of an opening.

"Good-afternoon, sir!" replied the chauffeur, touching his cap.

"Do you happen to know where we can find a good-class hotel about here?" asked Webb.

The chauffeur looked rather surprised, and then grinned.

"I don't know about a hotel, sir!" he replied. "Tregellis is only a small village, and it don't boast of no grand hotels. The best place you can find, I reckon, is the Blue Lion Inn, about half a mile up the road, at the other end of the village. The Blue Lion is the best place here, I think, and it's probably the only house where you'll find accommodation, if you want to stay over the night."

Webb nodded.

"That will suit us admirably, I think," he said. "Thank you, my man. Straight through the village, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Take this road, and go straight along, and you can't miss the Blue Lion—it's on the right-hand side," replied the chauffeur. "By the way, sir, do you happen to know if any other passengers came off that train?"

"No—nobody at all."

The chauffeur made a grimace.

"Just like 'em!" he grumbled. "I've been sent from Tregellis Castle to pick up a couple of passengers, for the Christmas party, and now they haven't come. It'll mean that I've got to wait here until the next train arrives, which ain't for two hours. That's the worst of these Jews, they don't care for nobody!"

"Jews?" said Webb.

"That's what I take 'em to be, anyway, sir," said the chauffeur. "Name of Levi—father and son. They was to be down on this train!"

Webb and Ryan exchanged glances.

"Oh, quite so!" said Webb, at length. "Well, I don't suppose it was Mr. Levi's fault. There has been considerable disorganisation on the railway, owing to this heavy snowstorm. It is quite likely that Mr. Levi and his son missed their connection somewhere. They will certainly be down by the next train. Well, we are much obliged to you, my man, for your information!"

"Hold on, sir!" said the chauffeur. "Seeing that I've got to waste my time until the next train comes, I might as well take you along in the car to the Blue Lion. You're quite welcome, sir!"

Webb nodded at once.

"That's very good of you, my man," he said, smiling. "What is your name?"

"Rodgers, sir," said the chauffeur. "If you'll get inside, it'll only take me a minute or two to drive you there."

Ryan and Webb entered the limousine, and very soon afterwards they were speeding their way through the little village of Tregellis, towards the Blue Lion Inn.

"This is excellent!" muttered Webb. "We might be able to get some information out of this man—he comes from Tregellis Castle, don't forget. And we must seize every opportunity we can, Ryan."

"You are sure right!" said Mr. Hooker J. Ryan, nodding. "I'll allow this is a stroke of luck."

The car soon came to a standstill, and the two passengers alighted to find themselves facing an old-fashioned, comfortable-looking inn. It was a very ancient place, and very picturesque, with the snow all around, and with wreaths of smoke curling from its ornamental chimneys.

Webb and Ryan entered, and when they got into the stone-paved hall, they found the place decorated with holly berries and leaves and little sprays of mistletoe. There was a real Christmas effect.

The landlord soon appeared—a rather jolly old fellow, decidedly stout, with a red, clean-shaven face. He assured his guests that he had ample accommodation for them, and they were welcome to stay under his roof until it pleased them to depart.

They were given the use of a cosy little sitting-room, and Rodgers was invited into this, when he drank with his hosts. They questioned him casually about Tregellis Castle, and the party which was staying there. The chauffeur was quite unconscious of the fact that he was being pumped, and he answered all these questions freely and without

suspicion. He took these two men to be gentlemen, and he had no idea that they had a sinister motive in coming to Tregellis.

They tipped the man liberally, and he departed at length, highly satisfied and pleased. And Mr. Webb and Mr. Ryan considered that the money had been well spent.

They washed, made themselves tidy, and then sat down to an excellent meal. They were quite in private, for this little sitting-room of theirs was situated at the end of the passage, away from the tap-room and the other public apartments.

"I guess we've fallen on our feet," remarked Mr. Ryan, as he helped himself to steaming hot ham and eggs. "But say! We nearly made a muddle of things with that train!"

"You're right!" said Webb, nodding. "If Levi and his father had been on the same train as us, it would have been unfortunate, for the kid would certainly have recognised us, and that would have ruined everything. Solomon would have guessed things if he had seen us around this district!"

Mr. Stanley Webb was the proprietor of the little picture-theatre in Bannington—the town two or three miles from St. Frank's. And Mr. Webb was not a particularly scrupulous person.

There had been a good deal of trouble with him at St. Frank's of late, for his picture-theatre had been banned by the Head. All the St. Frank's boys were forbidden to enter the place, because Mr. Webb exhibited very questionable films.

Solomon Levi, the new boy at St. Frank's, had conceived a great idea, and his father, Mr. Isaac Levi, had promised to support the scheme.

In short, it was to build a new cinema in the heart of the town.

And this cinema was to be a magnificent place. A site had already been chosen—an old house in the very centre of the High Street. Solomon Levi had obtained an option on the property, and this option was still in his possession. Webb and Ryan had suddenly realised the value of that site, and they had done their utmost to obtain possession of it; but, while the option was in existence, nothing could be done. The two scoundrels had attempted, on more than one occasion, to obtain the option by force, but they had failed.

And now, having learned that the two Levis were to be guests at Tregellis Castle during Christmas, the plotters had transferred their activities to this part of the country. They were determined to make one last desperate effort to force Mr. Isaac Levi out of the game.

The option would expire on the last day of the year, and, before then, it was positively certain that Mr. Levi would complete the deal—he would buy the property outright for cash.

Therefore, if Webb and Ryan did not succeed in their object now, during these Christmas holidays, they would have lost the game. It was a desperate chance, and they were determined to take it.

Their plans were already made, as far as possible, and they were both of the opinion that it would be a comparatively easy task to compel Mr. Levi to drop the whole transaction. This could only be done in one way—by taking drastic action. Kid-glove methods would not do; fair means had failed, and so Webb and Ryan were determined to try the other kind.

The proprietor of the Blue Lion Inn—Mr. Dennis—was under the impression, however, that his guests were gentlemen—that they were merely in Tregellis for the Christmas holidays.

It was not his business to inquire why they chose to come down to such a tiny place—such a lonely spot. They looked promising, and they would probably pay well—and that was all that really mattered to Mr. Dennis.

After the meal was over, he was called into the sitting-room, and Mr. Webb proceeded to question him.

"This seems a very quiet place down here, landlord!" said Webb, lighting a cigarette. "Not a very big population, eh?"

"Nay, we haven't got many people round here, sir," said the landlord. "It's only a small place, except for the castle. Then, of course, there is the manor, two miles in the other direction. But, for the most part, we are very quiet hereabouts, sir."

"So I judged," said Webb. "By the way, landlord, are there any interesting ruins in the district?"

"Ruins, sir?"

"Yes; old churches, or——"

"Oh, I see!" interrupted the landlord. "Why, yes, sir. There are one or two spots of interest like that—for example, there's the old abbey, midway between here and Tregellis Castle."

"The old abbey?" repeated Webb, with polite interest.

"Yes, sir," said the landlord. "It's not exactly midway between, either, now I come to think of it. If you keep along the road that goes right past my door, you'll come to Tregellis Castle after you've been going for three or four miles. But you don't need to go so far as that. Keep along the road about two miles, and then you'll see a little lane turning away to the left. If you go up that lane, it won't be long before you come to the abbey ruins. It's rare interesting, sir, but at this time of the year folks don't go near them. It's only during summer that visitors look over them ruins. What with all this frost and snow, it wouldn't be worth the trouble."

"You're quite right, landlord!" said Webb, nodding. "I don't think we shall venture near the abbey ruins. It's a creepy old place, I suppose, with dungeons, and cellars, and all that kind of thing?"

"Well, I haven't been down there myself, and so I can't say exactly;" said the landlord; "but they do tell me as there are many big dungeons in them old ruins—right away beneath the ground, with passages, and stone cells, and all them kind of things. By what it seems to me, sir, there was rare goings on in the old days!"

Webb smiled and nodded.

"You are quite right, landlord," he agreed. "Those were the days when a man could be captured and placed in captivity for weeks and months, without the authorities knowing anything—or caring, for that matter. Happily, we live in more enlightened times now!"

"Eh, it's a good thing we do, sir!" said the landlord. "What time will you be wanting tea, gentlemen?"

"Oh, we'll tell you that later," said Webb. "My friend and I are going out for a walk now, and we shall be in at about five. But you had better not prepare tea until we come back."

The landlord departed, and Webb gave his companion a significant glance.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed softly. "The very place!"

"I guess you don't mean to get handing talk around?" said Mr. Ryan, in a whisper. "Say, Webb, we can't be too careful. Some of these walls ain't very thick, and there's no telling who might be listening."

Webb nodded.

"Let's get outside," he said shortly. "And we've no time to waste, either, because it'll be dark before long."

It was dark already, and when the men had donned their overcoats and hats, they passed outside. They walked away from the inn leisurely, as though they had no particular object in view, but, as soon as they had turned the bend, they quickened their pace.

"About two miles along this road," said Webb, "and then we shall find a little lane to the left. Those directions are quite clear, Ryan. I think it will pay us to explore these old ruins now, without any delay."

"Sure!" said Mr. Ryan.

They had not proceeded far before snow commenced to fall again, and, although the flakes were few and far between to begin with, within five minutes a regular blizzard was raging. The snow was coming down in blinding fury, making it impossible to see more that a few yards ahead. Webb and Ryan were soon smothered from head to foot.

"Gee! I don't fancy this any!" remarked Mr. Ryan, as he struggled along. "I guess we'll be sure snowed up before we get back, Webb."

"This is all to our advantage!" shouted Webb, above the wind. "I had been rather worrying because we shall leave footprints along that side road, and footprints in a quiet district like this may cause comment; but this snowstorm will cover up our tracks almost at once, and the wind will blow the snow everywhere. We are lucky, Ryan!"

The American grunted, and continued his walk. But, after all, Webb was quite right. It was far better to have snow descending in this way while they were upon their mission. They would leave no traces, and it was very necessary that they should be cautious and careful.

At length they arrived at the side turning, and then they found themselves ploughing through thick, undisturbed snow. It was only a very narrow lane—almost a footpath. Indeed, it was quite impossible for any big vehicle to travel that way, for the banks were only four or five feet apart.

The lane twisted in and out, it went down hill and up hill, and both the men were beginning to fear that they would be lost. For this district was quite new to them, and it was not a very hard matter to lose themselves amidst all this snow and smother.

But at last a grey old building loomed up through the driving snowflakes. It stood there, on the brow of the hill, its gaunt, broken walls outstretched towards the sky, smothered with snow. Anything more desolate could not have been imagined.

The ruins stood some little distance from the lane, and they were reached by crossing a gate. Webb and Ryan climbed over, and fought their way against the gale until finally they arrived at a broken down doorway. Passing through, they found themselves in comparative quietness. The wind was not blowing in here, and there was a roof overhead. Snow had drifted in through the doorway and through the broken windows, but it was a haven of refuge after the fierceness of the storm outside. Webb and Ryan shook the snow from them, stamped their feet, and worked their arms about.

"My word, I'm glad to be out of it!" said Webb. "Well, this seems to be just the place, Ryan. Not a house for miles, and a long lane which is never frequented. I consider that we are in luck's way."

Mr. Ryan nodded.

"It certainly seems like it," he replied. "But we've got to explore those dungeons yet, and everything depends upon them."

"Well, we've no need to waste any time," went on Webb. "It is getting darker every minute, and we shall not be able to get back unless we are quick. Come along!"

And together the two precious rascals proceeded to explore the dungeons which lay beneath the old ruin.

What was the sinister scheme they had in mind?

CHAPTER III.

THE SKATING CARNIVAL.

"GLORIOUS, isn't it?"

"Dear old boy, you are quite right—you are, really!" said Sir Montie, nodding to me. "It is simply stunnin'! I am delighted with the way everythin' is goin'. The party is a terrific success, begad!"

"I wasn't talking about the party, Montie," I said. "We all know that's a huge success. I was talking about the night."

"Oh, I see, dear old fellow!" said Sir Montie. "You are quite right in that remark, too. The night is certainly glorious!"

We were standing just outside the big doorway, looking out on to the terrace at Tregellis Castle. It was evening—about seven o'clock—and from our rear came the soft, dreamy sounds of the music in the ball-room. A great many of the guests were dancing, and Sir Montie and I had been dancing until a few minutes before. We had just come out into the open to get a breath of fresh air.

The night was lovely.

A full moon sailed overhead, all the wind had dropped, and the moonlight bathed the scene in wonderful light. The lawns and the terraces were all smothered with snow, and they were glistening white in the brilliance.

Without the slightest doubt, the Christmas party was a huge triumph. Everybody was happy—everybody was enjoying the holiday to the utmost. It was Boxing night, and, of course, Solomon Levi and his father had been with us for a day or two. They were enjoying themselves as whole-heartedly as the others.

"It seems a pity we can't do something outside on a glorious evening like this!" I went on. "It's cold, of course, but it's quite easy to keep warm. Just fancy skating on the lake in this moonlight! It would be simply ripping!"

"Dear old boy, I believe there is somethin' in the wind!" said Sir Montie mysteriously. "At all events, Dorrie has been conspiring with the gardener."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly," said my noble chum, "but there is somethin' doin', Nipper—there is, really. Dorrie has been tremendously busy this after-

noon—he was plottin' with the gardeners, and there has been great activity down in the hollow. I don't know what it all means, but I believe Dorrie is goin' to spring a surprise before long."

And, as it happened, Tregellis-West was quite correct. It was obvious to me that Montie knew something about it, although he did not wish to let the cat out of the bag too soon. In all probability Dorrie had consulted Montie beforehand. At all events, when I got back into the ball-room, I was just in time to hear Lord Dorrimore make an announcement.

A waltz had just come to an end, and all the dancers were standing about—chatting, laughing, and partaking of ice-creams, and so forth. Ice-creams may not seem appropriate at Christmas-time, but they are exceedingly enjoyable after a dance.

"Ain't it ripping?" said Handforth. "Best party I've ever been to, bar none!"

"Rather!" said Fatty Little, with his mouth full of strawberry ice-cream. "Everything is grand. I've never seen so much gorgeous grub in all my life. I haven't felt hungry all day, simply because I've been able to eat enough to keep up my stamina!"

"You mean you've been gorging yourself like a porpoise from morning until night!" said Church, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And the band is gorgeous, too!" said Reginald Pitt. "It's simply a first-class orchestra. I will say that all the arrangements have been made perfectly."

Everybody was looking happy.

Violet Watson was just a dream. She looked far prettier than she had ever looked before. And there was tremendous rivalry on the part of the juniors—they all wanted to dance with Miss Violet. But, of course, there were plenty of other charming girls there, and everybody was satisfied. Lord Dorrimore, in evening-dress, had wandered in amongst the orchestra, who were taking a rest. Dorrie perched himself in the conductor's stand, and picked up the bow of a violin. He held this up in the air and waved it about. Everybody grinned at him, for Dorrie was really only a huge overgrown boy. They thought that his lordship was just having a bit of fun.

"Ladies and gentlemen,—I want to say a few words!" exclaimed Dorrie calmly.

"Hear, hear!"

"Silence for the speaker, you ass!"

"Go it, Dorrie!" I chuckled.

"That's what I'm proceeding to do," said Lord Dorrimore. "I have a little surprise for you—at least, for the younger members of this party. But I think we are all young this evening—we are all boys and girls, eh? Well, just for a change, I think it would be rather a rippin' idea to go skatin'."

"My hat!"

"Oh, jolly good!"

"Skating in the moonlight—it'll be top-hole!"

"That's what I thought," went on Dorrie, "so I've made a little series of preparations."

"Oh!"

"What's the idea?"

"The idea," went on Dorrie, "is to have a skatin' carnival—a fancy-dress affair. Anybody who likes to take part in this carnival is at liberty to do so. All kinds of fancy-dresses are to be found in the morning-room—the place is simply smothered with them. First come first served. You can go along there as soon as you like, and choose your attire. Everybody must be masked, and when you get down the lake, you'll find another little surprise awaiting you. It's Boxing night, and there's no reason why we shouldn't have a little fun."

"Hear, hear!"

"I thought Dorrie was getting up to something of this kind!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "He's been on the go all the afternoon—and now I understand."

"One might think that Lord Dorrimore was only fourteen or fifteen!" smiled Mr. Isaac Levi. "He's a wonderful man, Mr. Lee. He's the life and soul of the whole party, and we should be sadly at sea if he were not present."

"Rather, dad!" put in Levi, of the Remove. "Dorrie is a brick!"

There was a wild scramble for the morning-room by the juniors. Dorrie had added, later, that a selection of fancy-dresses for the ladies could be found in the drawing-room—and the girls did not waste time in getting there.

Before half an hour had passed, practically everyone was attired in weird garments.

Fatty Little looked a scream, for he

was wearing some clothing of the Elizabethan period, which had been made for a full-grown man, and a stout man at that. He had been compelled to wear this costume, simply because he could find no other to fit his rotund person. And the effect was ludicrous in the extreme. However, Fatty didn't mind—he rather fancied himself in his get-up.

Handforth appeared dressed as a Wild West bandit, with red neckerchief and everything complete, including a leather belt full of imitation cartridges, and a property revolver. He strutted about in leather chapps, and he rather fancied himself.

There were a good many juniors attired as pierrots, and all the girls looked very charming in their fancy-dresses, which were nearly all startling in colour. Masks were the order of the day, and everybody revelled in the impromptu carnival. It was something they had not expected, and they were surprised—and they enjoyed it all the more because of that. And it must not be supposed that only the younger members of the party entered into this Christmas revel. Nelson Lee was as keen on it as anybody, while Lord Dorrimore simply bubbled over with enthusiasm and boyish impulsiveness. Even Mr. Levi entered into the spirit of the thing, donned a fancy-dress, and stated his determination to go upon the lake. Both Mr. Levi and his son were good skaters.

As Dorrie explained afterwards, he had said nothing to the guests, in case they should be disappointed. There was no guaranteeing the weather, and it had seemed, on Christmas Day, that a carnival in the open would be impossible. If snow had been descending and a keen wind had been blowing, skating would have been out of the question at night. But the weather had cleared, and the moon was shining, and the air was still, so Dorrie had sprung his surprise, much to everybody's delight.

And when the guests arrived at the lake, a further surprise awaited them, for it was not bare, as everybody had anticipated; it was not simply swept of the snow and ready for skating.

Other preparations had been made.

The entire lake was surrounded by hundreds and thousands of fairy lamps, twinkling all colours of the rainbow. Posts had been erected, and the fairy lights were across the lake itself, in all manner of confusing directions. The result was charming in the extreme.

Skating had hardly commenced before two or three dozen flares were illuminated. They were strung all round the banks of the lake, and, when they were fully going, they cast enough light to illuminate the whole district. The place was brilliant—a blaze of light and colour—and, with the fairy lamps twinkling overhead, everything was glorious. The ice was in perfect condition, and the skating was of the finest.

Much to Fatty Little's delight, the summer-house, which stood near the lake, had been converted into a refreshment-room. Here neat maids were behind tables, serving cakes, pastries, hot tea and coffee, and everything that was nice. Nothing had been overlooked by Dorrie, and the guests, one and all, were having the time of their lives.

"My only hat! said Handforth. "Ain't this simply gorgeous? I never expected to spend such a fine time as this down at Tregellis Castle! It's the best Christmas party I've ever been to!"

"It beats the whole giddy lot!" said Church. "But you'd better be careful, Handy. The ice is jolly slippery, you know, and you ain't particularly good on skates——"

"What's that?" roared Handforth. "Why, you—you silly fathead! Do you mean to say I can't skate?"

"Well, you can skate, but not particularly well——"

"You—you——"

Church and McClure fled.

Handforth was not at all particular about which of his chums he went for. As long as he punched one of them he would be satisfied, and he gave chase at once.

Both Church and McClure were excellent on the ice, and they skimmed off at top speed. Handforth attempted to skim off also, but, unfortunately, he didn't exactly know how to skim.

He went all right for several feet, but then one foot appeared to possess a distinct desire to go skywards.

Handforth valiantly attempted to save himself, but he couldn't quite manage it. The next second he thudded upon the ice on his back, and went

shooting along in that condition, with his legs waving wildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy—he's trying a new style of skating!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth could not check his progress, and the next moment he went slithering wildly into a group of juniors. They went flying in all directions, and the laughter which followed was terrific.

Handforth picked himself up, indignant, flushed, and highly enraged. But Church and McClure were nowhere to be found. They had made their way to the other side of the lake, and they decided that it would be safer to give Handforth a wide berth for some little time. He was a most unreasonable fellow, and this was no time for indulging in a scrap.

The skating continued, and, viewed from the bank, it looked something like a scene from fairyland. The clear, crystal air, the shouts of the skaters, the laughter, all contributed towards making the carnival charming and supremely enjoyable.

Although everybody was masked, it was quite easy to tell who was who. Not many of the juniors had many doubts as to the identity of their companions.

Dorrie had extended his invitation to some of the servants—the butler, the footmen, and several of the maids. It was Christmas time, and everybody was welcome. The servants were only too glad to join in the fun, and after an hour or so the carnival was at its height. And by this time there were quite a number of people on the ice who were strange to the juniors. Some of them in fancy dress, and some not. Two or three of the maidservants had come out just as they were; black dresses, and neat white caps and aprons. And they looked quite charming in this simple attire. There were two—supposed to be by many of the juniors two of the gardeners—who were dressed in long smocks and wide-brimmed hats. They were masked, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves very much. But, somehow, they hovered about the lower end of the lake, and did not venture in amongst the chief guests.

Mr. Isaac Levi was enjoying himself immensely, and he skated about here and there, taking care not to exert himself too much.

On one occasion he ventured down to the lower end of the lake. And it seemed that the two men in smocks were waiting for the Jewish guest. For, as soon as Mr. Levi appeared, the two smocked men went up to him, and seized him, one on either side.

"Got you!" chuckled one of the men. "This way—bring him along."

Mr. Levi laughed, and assumed that these men were having a little joke. All sorts of jokes were being played by the skaters. And Mr. Levi did not think anything of this incident—at least, not at first.

Mr. Levi, like the others, assumed that the two men were members of the staff—probably gardeners. And Mr. Levi was quite pleasant.

"We all seem to be enjoying ourselves," he remarked, as the men still grasped his arm. "There is nothing better I like to see than——"

"I knew it was George," said one of the men, with a laugh. "That mask may disguise his face, but we know his voice, eh? Come along, George, we're going to have a bit of fun with you."

Mr. Levi laughed outright.

Apparently, these men had made a mistake; they assumed that he was called George, whoever he happened to be—possibly one of the other servants—a footman, or something of that sort. And these two gardeners had made the error of taking Mr. Levi for "George." Mr. Levi was quite amused.

"You are quite at liberty to have a bit of fun with me if you choose," he smiled. "One cannot expect anything else at such a time as this—but please be careful. I don't quite like to be rolled in the snow, if that is what you are thinking of doing."

"Now then, George, don't try to be funny," grinned one of the men. "We knew you in a minute, and you can't get out of the affair like that——"

"But I am not George, really," said Mr. Levi, with another chuckle.

"Not that that matters in the slightest degree. But wait one moment. We are going off the lake—there is no need to——"

"Off with them skates," said the man who had been doing all the talking. "You won't want them on any more; we're going over the grounds."

"Really, I think this has gone far enough," said Mr. Levi. "A joke is a joke, but you must not go beyond it, my men. In order to prove that I am not who you think I am I will remove my mask——"

"We don't want to see your face, old man," grinned one of the others. "We know you all the time; you can't get over us like that, George, my boy. Now then, off with them skates."

But at that moment an interruption occurred.

I was rather a startling one. Fatty Little came shooting down the lake at full speed. The fat junior had been doing some fancy work, and he was scooting along the ice with a jam tart in one hand, and a huge custard in the other. Fatty saw no reason why he should not combine the two pleasures—skating and feeding. By the time he had eaten the tuck he now possessed, he would be back at the refreshment-room. That was his little idea.

But Fatty had made a miscalculation. Down at this end of the lake, which was narrow, there were no fairy lights, and no flares. It was only the upper part of the lake which had been illuminated and decorated. The ice down here, in any case, was by no means perfect.

And Fatty, coming out of the brilliant glare of the flares, was a little bit confused. He thought he had a long way to go before he reached the bank—but he hadn't.

The result was disastrous.

Fatty, unable to stop himself, went shooting at full speed into the two men who were attired in smocks. Fatty's tremendous weight sent the pair flying over backwards. They slithered along the ice, rolled over and over, and rolled up against the bank with a tremendous jar.

Fatty himself went over, collided with Mr. Levi, and the latter fell, too. Fatty Little, in fact, had caused a general upset. Fatty howled wildly. He didn't howl because he was hurt, but because he had lost his tart and his custard.

I was skating near by, with Sir Montie, and we came to a halt as we heard the commotion.

"Hullo! What's the trouble over there?" I exclaimed. "Somebody seems to be in the wars."

"Dear old boy, I hope the ice hasn't given way," said Sir Montie, anxiously. "I believe it was Fatty Little who——"

"We'll go and see," I said, briskly. "Fatty is a terrific weight, and it's a wonder the ice has stood him so far."

We scooted down towards the spot, and we arrived just in time to find Fatty Little getting to his feet. A little way further beyond the two men in smocks were getting to their feet also. One of them turned his face to me in the moonlight for an instant, and I saw that his mask had slipped down, revealing his features.

I gave a big start.

For in that second, I had recognised the countenance of Mr. Stanley Webb.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAROL PLAYERS.

BEFORE I could move forward, the two men climbed up the bank of the lake, and then they disappeared through a clump of bushes. I was about to follow when Mr. Levi called me.

"It's all right, Nipper," said the Jewish guest. "Those men were only having a bit of fun—although I will admit they were somewhat rough. Let them go."

"Who are they, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Oh, only two of the servants," smiled Mr. Levi, dusting himself down. "A pair of under gardeners, I believe. They mistook me for somebody, and were about to carry me off with the intention of playing a joke upon me. It was rather fortunate that Little came along just when he did."

"Fortunate," howled Fatty. "Why, I—I lost a ripping tart and a fine custard? They went flying, and I don't know where they are——"

"Oh, bother you and your grub!" I interrupted. "It's a marvel to me how you left the vicinity of the refreshment-room."

The incident was over, and Mr. Levi made his way back to the other portion of the lake. I was very thoughtful, for the glimpse of that man's face had startled me.

Had I been mistaken?

I had only seen the man's features for a bare second in the moonlight, but I could have sworn that he was Webb, the

Bannington Cinema proprietor. It was possible, of course, that I had made an error and that those two men were really servants at the Castle.

But I found it difficult to believe that Webb could be here, so many miles away from Bannington. But then, again, it was extremely significant that the two men should have got hold of Mr. Isaac Levi. I knew well enough that Webb was anxious to defeat Mr. Levi's scheme with regard to the new cinema. Could it be possible that the rascal had come all the way to Tregellis Castle, hoping to defeat his rival?

I decided to say nothing to anybody—except Nelson Lee. And I would tell the guv'nor of my suspicions later on in the evening. There was no reason why I should say anything now. Another point which struck me was the attire the two men had been wearing. They were not in fancy dress, strictly speaking—but had been merely wearing long smocks and slouch hats. They could easily have obtained these from a farm or an outbuilding near by. It was, after all, an emergency kind of fancy dress.

But there was something else to occupy my thoughts then, so I dismissed the matter for the time being.

The carnival was brought to an end in a swift fashion. Everybody had been enjoying themselves, and only a few—mainly those who were standing about—had noticed that a wind was springing up. And this wind increased in violence very rapidly. Then somebody noticed that snow flakes were falling. And, glancing upwards, it was seen that the moon was obscured, and that a great threatening bank of black clouds had almost completely covered the sky. Without the slightest doubt another snow storm was coming along—and it would soon be on us.

Therefore, everybody was advised to get indoors as quickly as possible. The guests lost no time, and the merry crowd went dancing and laughing towards the Castle. Handforth and Co. were among the last to come, and Handforth was rather thoughtful. This was rather unusual for him, and Church and McClure were uneasy. They were quite certain that the mighty Handforth had thought of something, and as certain as the storm was brewing, he would want them to join in. And, naturally, it would be a wild, hare-brained scheme. All Handforth's schemes were of that description.

"Look here, my sons, I've thought of something," said Handforth, at last.

"Yes, I know," said Church. "It's a ripping idea, Handy."

"Eh?"

"I—I mean——"

"How can you call it a ripping idea when you don't know what it is?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, you see, I know it'll be ripping," said Church, hastily.

"All your ideas are awful——"

"What!" roared Handforth.

"Awfully good!" concluded Church, even more hastily than before.

"Oh, I see," said Handforth. "That's different. My idea is good—it's first class. Why shouldn't we get up a bit of a joke? My scheme is to pinch a cornet, a trombone, and a drum. We can easily borrow them from the orchestra while the musicians ain't looking."

"But what the dickens for?" asked McClure.

"We're going to play carols outside the windows, said Handforth triumphantly.

"Eh?"

"What!"

"Carols!" said Handforth. "See the idea? Of course, we sha'n't be able to play much, but that doesn't matter at all. We'll make a terrific row on those instruments, and cause a lot of fun. Besides, I can play the cornet all right—I shall be able to get the tune. We shall collect a lot of money, too."

"You—you silly ass!" said Church. "Do you think we're going to sing outside, and play, like a lot of silly kids—and accept pennies?"

"Not likely!" said McClure flatly.

"You tame lunatics!" said Handforth, pityingly. "They won't chuck pennies——"

"No, they'll chuck bricks," said Church.

We shall have shillings and half-crowns and all that sort of thing thrown to us," said Handforth. "We might be able to collect five or six quid—and then it can all be collected up and sent to some charity. That's my idea. And we're going to push it through, too."

Church and McClure groaned. They knew that Handforth would carry out this scheme, whatever happened. And they, of course, would be compelled to join in. There was no getting out of it.

The idea—as an idea—wasn't so bad. But, of course, it was quite certain that Handforth would mess it up.

They arrived on the terrace, and, very shortly afterwards, they were creeping into the ball-room. This was quite deserted now, for everybody was busily changing into their ordinary evening dress, and getting rid of the carnival attire.

The lights were switched low in the ball-room, but there was still sufficient on to enable Handforth and Co. to see what they were doing. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he beheld the instruments of the musicians lying about just where they had been left—in readiness for music when it was required.

"Good!" muttered Handforth. "It'll be as easy as falling off a giddy form!"

"Look here——"

"I don't want any objections," said Handforth, who evidently knew what was coming. "If you chaps don't agree to help me in this jape, I'll punch you until you can't speak. You don't seem to realise how funny it'll be."

Church and McClure could say no more. They selected their instruments—Church a trombone, and McClure a drum. Handforth seized the cornet, then, together, they stole quietly out of the building until they were again on the terrace. Snow was now falling heavily, and the wind whistled round the walls of the old castle in shrieking gusts.

"Oh, my hat!" said Church, shivering. "We—we can't do it, Handy—this storm's just coming on——"

"Rats to the storm," said Handforth. "Now, the best thing we can do is to get outside the windows of the drawing-room. Nearly everybody is there now—or they will be in a minute or two."

The three juniors went along the terrace, through the snow, until they arrived opposite the drawing-room windows. These were brilliantly illuminated, and Handforth and Co. took up their stand. Edward Oswald was full of his idea, but Church and McClure were miserable and cold. They wanted to get indoors—and, in any case, they couldn't play a note of music on the instruments they possessed.

"Now, to start, we'll play 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing,'" said Handforth. "I'll keep to the melody on the cornet, and you chaps can join in. Make as much row as you like—the more the better. Only keep to the tune."

"Oh, of course," said Church sarcastically. "We'll do that all right."

"But look here, Handy," put in McClure. "The time for carol playing and singing is over. It's after Christmas now——"

"I don't want any of your silly fatheaded objections," broke in Handforth grimly. "Are you going to play, or are you not? You'd better say which quickly."

"Oh, we'll play," growled McClure.

Handforth started.

He started before his companions, and they nearly fell over backwards. The noise he managed to get out of that cornet was simply staggering. It was quite likely that Handforth believed that he was playing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." But if Handforth believed this, nobody else did. He was simply producing an unearthly din. And Church and McClure realising that they might as well make the best of it, joined in. The drum was banged unmercifully, and the trombone let out some blasts which simply shattered the atmosphere.

Meanwhile, I was just strolling into the drawing-room with Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and Solomon Levi. We were just in time to hear the beginning of a song, rendered by Miss Violet. She had a very pretty voice, and her singing was excellent in every way. She commenced, and everybody listened attentively.

But then, before she had got halfway through the first verse an interruption occurred. Something outside was making a terrible noise. Miss Violet continued her song valiantly, and everybody else gazed wonderingly at the windows. The noise of the carol singers, combined with Miss Violet's singing, was not precisely melodious.

"Dear me!" murmured Lady Helen Tregellis-West. "I did not think the gale was quite so violent!"

"Gale!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Really, auntie, dear old gal, I think you're mistaken. There is somethin' else makin' that noise. It is really a most frightful din!"

Miss Violet had, at that moment, paused, feeling that it was impossible for her to go on. And she heard Montie's last words.

"Oh, Montie, I didn't mean to——" she began.

"Begad!" gasped Montie. "I wasn't referrin' to your singin', dear gal, when I said somethin' about a frightful din. Can't you hear it? It is comin' from outside. I think about ten or twenty cats must be havin' a fight, you know!"

Everybody listened, and the noise came surging into the drawing-room in great waves of horrible sound.

Lord Dorrimore rose to his feet, and went over to the French windows. He had a shrewd idea of what was taking place.

"We'll soon probe this mystery," he remarked. "I've heard a few gales in my time, but no hurricane that ever blew could make a commotion like this!"

He pushed the curtains aside and stared out upon the terrace.

At first he could see nothing but the whirling snowflakes, but then his eyes grew accustomed to the different light, and he made out three figures standing there, smothered with snow, and holding musical instruments—a trombone, a cornet, and a drum. And the three figures were working at top speed.

"By glory!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Somebody seems to be havin' a merry time out here."

I had joined Dorrie by this time, to say nothing of several other juniors. And we looked out, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Why, it's Handforth!" shouted Pitt "Handforth and Church and McClure! What on earth do they think they're having a game at?"

"Goodness knows?" said Dorrie.

"Well, we sha'n't need any more food to-night if this goes on," remarked Pitt. "I'm feeling a bit queer already. If that's what Handforth calls a joke, I haven't got much opinion of his sense of humour."

Lord Dorrimore pushed open one of the windows, and a smother of snowflakes came into the room.

"Hi! What's the idea out there?" roared Dorrie. "Haven't you any mercy on us?"

Handforth and Co. stopped their musical efforts.

"You heard us, then?" said Handy.

"Heard you? My dear chap, the inmates of a deaf and dumb asylum could have heard you," said Dorrie. "What's the idea of this? What do you think you're doing?"

"We're the waits," explained Handforth.

"The which?"

"The waits!"

"By gad!" exclaimed Dorrie. "Then, if you don't mind, we'd rather wait a little longer before you get on with the imitation cyclone."

"Cyclone!" roared Handforth. "We were playing a Christmas carol."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By glory!" said Lord Dorrimore blankly. "A Christmas carol? I thought you were trying to drown the storm."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth sniffed.

"Only good musicians can appreciate good music," he said. "Now then, you chaps—strike up! We'll change the tune this time—we'll have something better than 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing.' We'll try 'Good King Wenceslas.'"

"Shut the window—quick!" exclaimed Pitt, urgently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And as Dorrie closed the window, the horrible noise burst out again. Even with the windows completely closed conversation was almost impossible in the drawing-room. Everybody was smiling, although it was decidedly annoying for Handforth and Co. to interrupt the playing and singing in this way. But it was a Christmas party, and good humour reigned supreme.

"Well, something will have to be done," said Lord Dorrimore. "We can't stand this racket, an' I don't see why we should turn out of the drawin' room just because the waits are playin' carols outside."

"I've got an idea," I chuckled. "I say, you chaps—come outside!"

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie, and Solomon Levi and Dick Goodwin and Reginald Pitt all followed me out into the wide lounge hall. They were grinning, for they anticipated that I had something good up my sleeve.

"What's the wheeze?" asked Pitt, briskly.

"I think Handforth and Co. need cooling," I said. "Their heads are probably hot, and they could do with a lesson."

"A lesson in music wouldn't be a bad idea," suggested Watson.

1. Still clinging to the rope, Fatty was being hauled along like a toboggan.

2. Handforth believed that he was playing "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." He started before his chums, who nearly fell over with the sudden blast of the cornet.

"They can have that at any time," I said. "The main thing, now, is to smother them."

"Smother them!"

"Exactly," I said. "The roof over the drawing-room is not particularly high, and it is bound to be covered with thick snow. There's a turret window overlooking that part of the roof, and all we have to do is to take out some brooms, or things of that sort, and we can send that snow slithering down the roof——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no need for me to explain any further. The juniors could guess the rest. And without any delay we went searching for brooms, and articles of a like description.

Having cornered a footman, we soon got the grinning worthy to obtain the supplies we needed. Then we marched upstairs in a body, and made our way to the window which overlooked the drawing-room roof. A beautiful layer of thick snow greeted our gaze.

"The very thing!" I chuckled. "Nothing could be better, my sons."

The roof was a steep one, and we knew that once we got the snow moving it would slither down like an avalanche. And it was not at all a difficult matter to shift the snow.

With the brooms, we started it, pushing down in all directions. For some few moments it seemed that we should not be successful. Then, without warning, the snow commenced moving—all in a body.

It slithered down the roof at a tremendous speed, and then disappeared over the gutter in one huge cascade.

The awful sounds of the so-called music had been floating up to us all the time. We waited, expectantly.

The music ceased abruptly.

"That's done it," I grinned. "I thought this idea would do the trick."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Down below, Handforth and Co. had been going strong. They were just getting into their stride. It was cold in the snow, and they needed to exert themselves a great deal in order to keep themselves from getting chilly. And they were just in the middle of the third verse, and going "all out," as it were, when the disaster occurred.

Without the slightest warning a tremendous amount of snow came hurtling down from above. It fell upon Handforth and Church and McClure in one smothering volume.

Swish!

The snow simply smothered the juniors, and knocked them flat upon the ground. And all that was to be seen a second later was a great pile of whiteness, with a head sticking out here, an arm or two there, and a head in another place. And the pile of snow worked convulsively, while weird sounds came from the midst of it.

The drawing-room door opened, and Lord Dorrimore, Nelson Lee, and a group of others looked out.

"Hallo!" said Dorrie mildly. "Somethin' seems to have happened."

A head appeared out of the snow, and it wagged about wildly.

"Gug-gug-groooh!" it said.

"Quite so!" said Dorrie, nodding. "It's nothin' more than you deserve, anyway."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth appeared out of the heap of snow.

"Great pip!" he gasped. "What—what happened?"

"Punishment descended upon you," said Dorrie. "That's what happened, my son. I don't fancy carol singin' or playin' is quite in your line. Take my advice, Handforth, old man, an' give it up. If you don't, some further disasters will befall you."

Church and McClure scrambled out of the snow. They were quite unhurt—there had not been sufficient to do any harm. They looked about them rather wildly, and then glared at Handforth.

"I knew what would happen!" snapped Church. "You with your silly carol playing. I'm finished with it."

"Rats!" roared Handforth, who could never be conquered. "We're going to start again now——"

"You can start if you like—but we're not going to!" exclaimed Church grimly. "I don't fancy being smothered a second time."

Church and McClure, to avoid all further argument, marched off. Handforth did not much care to continue his musical efforts single-handed. So, at length, he was compelled to follow his chums indoors. And after that there was no more carol playing.

CHAPTER V.

THE FINAL ATTEMPT.

"I'M afraid there's no help for it, Solly," said Mr. Isaac Levi firmly.

"Oh, but, dad!" protested Solomon. "Surely you can stay another day or two? It'll be rotten if you go away now——"

"It's no good talking, my boy," interrupted Mr. Levi. "I must go—it is a matter of business."

"Oh!"

"I would very much like to stay," went on Mr. Levi. "But it could not be managed, Solly. This business is very important, and if I do not go to London to-day, it may be the cause of one or two weeks' delay in my plans."

It was the following morning, and Mr. Levi had opened a telegram a minute or so earlier. Solomon gathered that it was from an architect, and it evidently related to a matter of some importance.

"I may as well tell you, Solly, that this business is connected with the cinema in Bannington," continued Mr. Levi. "So, you see, I do not want to waste any time. I intend to push the matter through as quickly as possible."

"Oh, good!" said Solomon, with sparkling eyes. "Under the circumstances, dad, you'd better get to London as soon as possible. You're going straight ahead with that cinema idea, then?"

"Yes, straight ahead," said Mr. Levi, nodding. "It is the next thing to be done. And as you know, my lad, when I start operations I do not allow grass to grow under my feet. This seems to be a big thing, and I am giving it all my attention."

Sir Montie's aunt was very sorry to hear that Mr. Levi was leaving so abruptly. But she quite understood that a matter of urgent business had called her guest away, and so it would be useless to attempt to persuade him to stay.

There was a train for London at about eleven-thirty. So, soon after breakfast, Mr. Levi made his preparations for departure. The limousine had been ordered to take him to the station, and it was round in front of the castle in good time, with Rodgers in the driving seat.

"It looks as though you're going to have a pretty snowy journey, sir," remarked Reginald Pitt, as we waited to see Mr. Levi off. "The storm is raging as fiercely as ever."

Mr. Levi nodded.

"Yes, so it appears," he said. "But we cannot afford to wait for weather in these hurrying days. Business is business—and it must be attended to."

The weather was certainly very severe. In the early morning snow had not been falling, although the wind was very high. But now the flakes were descending in myriads, being whirled along in blinding clouds by the high gale. If anything, the weather conditions were worse than they had been before.

Mr. Levi said good-bye to everybody, and went down to the car, and climbed inside. A moment later it glided off through the snow, and soon vanished in the smother.

The chauffeur was compelled to drive very cautiously on the way to the station. Speed was impossible owing to the great snow drifts which lay everywhere along the roads. In places the snow was so thick that it was only with great difficulty that the car ploughed its way along.

All went well until nearly half the distance to the station had been covered. And then, as Rodgers was driving along a particularly tricky piece of road—it was very steep, and the snow lay heavily banked up—two men appeared in the near distance. They were right in the centre of the road, and Rodgers sounded his electric hooter as a warning.

But the men did not move, and the chauffeur was compelled to slow down. He was rather angry, for that electric hooter was a loud one, and the pedestrians must certainly have heard it.

Hoot—hoot!

Again Rodgers sounded the horn, but still the men remained there. And now the chauffeur received something of a surprise. For he could see that both these strangers were wrapped up to the eyes in mufflers, and, moreover, they were wearing thick black masks over the upper portion of their faces. And, what was considerably more to the point, they were both holding revolvers.

"My goodness!" said the chauffeur, blankly.

He pulled up, hardly knowing what to think. Possibly this was some joke; but who could the jokers be? On the other hand, was it a real hold-up? Such a thing seemed ridiculous. and Rodgers

felt his heart beating rather rapidly.

The car came to a stop, and both the men moved forward with brisk strides.

"What's the idea of this?" asked the chauffeur, half angrily.

"If you value your life, you will stand out here," said one of the men, in a deep, solemn-sounding voice. "And you had better hurry. We are in no mood to take any nonsense!"

"If this is a practical joke——"

"Get down from your seat!"

The order was rapped out curtly, and the chauffeur, not liking the looks of those revolvers, stepped out into the road. The instant he did so, one of the men thrust forward a foot and tripped him up. The chauffeur fell headlong in the snow. The next second a rope was passed round his feet, and drawn tight. This convinced the man that a serious raid was being made. This was no practical joke.

"Help!" shouted Rodgers. "Mr. Levi! Help——"

"Silence, you fool!" snarled one of the attackers.

Mr. Levi opened the door of the car, and looked out.

"Stand still!" commanded a voice. "Do not move an inch!"

Mr. Levi stood motionless in the doorway of the car.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked evenly.

"You will know very shortly, Mr. Levi!" said the man who had spoken. "Do not move at all, or it will be the worse——"

He paused, for Rodgers, the chauffeur, was making a commotion. Although his ankles were secured by the rope, the man was making a desperate effort to free himself. And the second masked man, who was Mr. Hooker J. Ryan, was having a little trouble.

In fact, the chauffeur was getting the better of the tussle, and he would almost certainly have won had not Mr. Ryan taken a mean advantage. The American, realising that matters were not going very smoothly, brought the butt of his revolver down with considerable force upon Rodgers' forehead.

Thud!

The chauffeur uttered a slight groan, and collapsed in the snow. He was stunned, and quite incapable of further action. Mr. Levi's eyes blazed as he witnessed this incident.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he shouted furiously. "If you think——"

"Get him—quick!" panted Ryan.

Mr. Webb sprang forward, and the next moment he had grasped Mr. Levi's arm. The next instant he was pulled forward, and, although he fought desperately and with considerable skill, it was not reasonable to suppose that he could defeat his two assailants.

The struggle in the snow lasted for perhaps two minutes, then Webb and Ryan were successful. They managed to get their victim down in the snow, on his back, and, while he was still struggling, a rope was passed round his wrists, tying them securely. Then he was yanked to his feet, and a revolver was thrust against his chest.

"Now you will walk!" said Webb harshly. "If you attempt to break away, I shall shoot—make no mistake about that!"

Mr. Levi was in an unenviable position. He could not very well resist, although he did not believe for a moment that these men would discharge their revolvers. In all probability they were not loaded. At the same time, it would have been unwise to take a chance, for it was quite out of the question for Mr. Levi to escape. With his wrists tied behind his back, his movements were hampered, and he could do practically nothing.

Mr. Levi was forced along, one captor on either side of him, and the men passed through a wide gap in the hedge, and then took a course right across a wide meadow. The snow was greatly disturbed as they went, but fresh flakes were falling in such profusion that it would only be a matter of minutes before the trail was covered. And the wind, in any case, was blowing the snow about wildly, for it was crisp and powdery.

Within half an hour there would be absolutely no trace left—no track to follow. The snow would lay as it had lain before, white and undisturbed.

Once across the meadow, Mr. Levi found himself on a footpath. He was taken along this at a rapid speed by his two masked captors. Mr. Levi was puzzled—he could not imagine what all this meant. If these men had intended to rob him, why did they not do so on the spot? Why were they bringing him all this way from the road? What was their idea?

Mr. Levi could not understand it, and he knew it would be useless asking any questions. He was not scared, and he was not at all nervous. His main sensation was one of curiosity—and annoyance. This would mean that he would lose his train, and there was no other train until the afternoon.

The men led Mr. Levi along the footpath for some way, and then a small lane was entered upon—a narrow lane, where the snow lay tremendously thick, and where the wind howled along with tremendous fury, driving the snow up in blinding clouds.

But, without uttering a word, the two men forced their captive along, and at length some old, jagged ruins were sighted.

Mr. Levi was rather surprised when he found that this was his destination. The ruins were approached and entered, and then the prisoner was forced down some stone steps—down, down, right into the bowels of the earth.

And, right at the very bottom, a stone door was encountered. This was closed, but, by giving it a hard push, it opened, and Mr. Levi felt a breath of warm air as he entered the passage beyond the doorway. And he was rather surprised to see a candle burning upon a little ledge; evidently this place had been prepared in advance.

"I shall be interested to know——" began Mr. Levi.

"Silence!" snapped one of the men. "We will do the talking, when it is necessary. You must understand, Mr. Levi, that you are our prisoner, and that you cannot escape. Robbery is not our intention, as you doubtless imagine. We have something of far greater importance to discuss."

"I shall be very interested to hear what that something is," said Mr. Levi calmly.

They went along the passage, turned to the right, went down another passage, and then several doorways were visible, for a candle was stuck against the wall along this passage, too. The door was made of rusty iron, and was evidently of a tremendous age. It was unlocked by a huge key, and then Mr. Levi was thrust forward into a dungeon.

But it was not a very dismal place, after all.

For a lamp was burning in there, in addition to a small oil stove. A supply of food was to be seen up in one corner on a ledge, and, although the place was devoid of any furniture, some heavy stone slabs had been placed in such a position that they formed a kind of chair. In another corner Mr. Levi could see some blankets.

The door of the dungeon was closed, and Mr. Levi found himself facing his two mysterious assailants.

"Now, we want you to understand that we do not mean to harm you," said the spokesman of the pair, who, of course, was Mr. Webb. "We do not require money from you, and, if you will only agree at once to what we require, you will be released without further delay."

"What are your terms?" asked Mr. Levi curtly.

"It is not our intention to beat about the bush," said Webb. "At the present moment you are negotiating with a certain Mrs. Cubitt, of Bannington, for the purchase of some property in the Bannington High Street, I think?"

"It is correct," agreed Mr. Levi.

"Very well, then. For reasons which I will not take the trouble to explain, we are determined that the sale of that property shall not be transacted," went on Webb grimly. "At the present moment you hold an option from Mrs. Cubitt, which does not expire until the thirty-first of this month—less than a week from to-day. It is your intention to close the deal at once, I believe——"

"That is my intention, certainly," said Mr. Levi. "The deal will be closed and settled to-morrow, my friend. The purchase money will be paid over, and Bannington Grange, in the High Street, will become my sole property."

"I think not," said Webb. "We intend that this sale shall not be effected, and we require from you, Mr. Levi, a letter, in your own handwriting, and with your own signature, to Mrs. Cubitt. This letter will be dictated by me, and it will say that you have decided to drop all thoughts of purchasing Bannington Grange."

Mr. Levi laughed.

"Indeed!" he said, with a harsh note in his voice. "You are telling me that I shall abandon my scheme altogether?"

"Exactly."

"I am afraid I cannot oblige you," said Mr. Levi. "I have no intention of writing any letter, or of signing any-

thing. I refuse to agree to any of these terms."

"You had better think well before you decide——"

"I have thought well already," interrupted Mr. Levi. "It only took me precisely three seconds to come to a definite decision, my friend. I positively refuse to do as you say. Bannington Grange will become my property to-morrow. That is final!"

Webb was rather taken aback by Mr. Levi's coolness.

"You are very optimistic!" he snapped. "You have refused to sign this paper; very well, then other measures will be adopted."

"And these methods are?"

"You will be kept here, a prisoner, in this dungeon," said Webb grimly. "You will be imprisoned here, Mr. Levi, until the New Year—until January the first, to be exact. Your option will then have expired, and, when you make inquiries about Bannington Grange, you will find that it has passed into other hands."

Mr. Levi nodded.

"A very interesting state of affairs," he said calmly. "But, surely you do not imagine for a moment that you will be able to keep me a prisoner here for five whole days?"

"You will be kept a prisoner," went on Webb. "It will not be difficult, I can assure you. It will be out of the question for anybody to trace you to this spot. The snowstorm is raging with full violence, and no traces or tracks will be left. We have taken every precaution; we chose our time admirably, Mr. Levi, and not a soul in the whole countryside would think of looking for you here. With regard to the police, we are indifferent to them, and it may interest you to know that our task in the immediate future is to plan a false trail. This trail will be followed by the police, and it will lead them nowhere. Meanwhile, you will remain a prisoner here, and, if you had any sense at all, you would agree to our proposition at once, to save yourself any further trouble."

Mr. Levi shrugged his shoulders.

"I have stated my intention, and I stick to it throughout," he said shortly. "You have the advantage over me, and I can do nothing, but I shall certainly sign no paper."

Mr. Levi was quite calm, although, inwardly, he was enraged. He did not mean these scoundrels to see it, however. It would be better, he decided, if he appeared to be indifferent. It was a matter of business, and, in all business matters, Mr. Isaac Levi was grim and cold.

Webb and Ryan, realising that further talk would be useless just them, withdrew from the dungeon. It was locked securely on the outside, and it was quite impossible for Mr. Levi to escape, no matter what he did. This door was as strong as the door of any modern cell. And the two rascals made their way up the passage, until they arrived at the opening, against the flight of stone steps. They looked at one another in an uncertain manner.

"Well, we have taken the step now," said Webb grimly; "we have cast the die, Ryan. If Levi proves obstinate, we must force him to——"

"Say, don't you get rattled!" said Mr. Ryan. "This fellow will cave in before twenty-four hours have elapsed, don't you worry. We've done well, Webb, and we shall do better before long. This snowstorm has helped us a heap."

Mr. Webb nodded.

"It has, indeed," he said. "No tracks will be left, and when the chauffeur returns to the castle, and tells his story, there will be a hue and cry; but the pursuers will probably keep to the main road, and all sorts of ruses will be adopted. But they will never think of looking in this direction—that is absolutely certain. Yes, Ryan, we are safe."

"Well, I guess it's the last chance we've got," said the American. "Unless we do the thing now, we shall never do it at all. There are only five days more, and that option will expire. We have only to keep Levi here, and then we shall be able to step in and buy the property."

"I didn't expect this Jew would be so calm about it all!" said Webb. "I thought he'd spring up in the air, have hysterics, and all that sort of thing."

"He's a business man," said Mr. Ryan. "I guess that accounts for it. He knows we sha'n't do him any harm—he can guess that. But he's obstinate, and he hopes that he'll be rescued before the thirty-first arrives. But there'll be nothing doing; we've got him tight, and we'll hold him!"

Outside, the blizzard was raging furiously. Snow was coming down in even greater force than before, and the wind was howling with terrific violence. That storm was one which devastated half England. Telegraph posts were down by the hundred, trees blown over, roofs were lifted from houses, and railways were blocked. It was one of the worst storms England had ever experienced. It said much for the railway companies that, on most lines, an excellent service was being maintained.

The road from the little station at Tregellis to the castle was hardly frequented by any traffic, and during the holiday week no vehicles of any sort passed that way. Not a soul knew of the affair which had occurred. Rodgers, the chauffeur, still lay unconscious, and the big limousine was in the centre of the road, now smothered with snow until it was almost unrecognisable. The storm shrieked round it.

Rodgers had been placed in the interior of the car before Webb and Ryan had led their captive away. They were not such scoundrels as to leave the unconscious man lying in the snow, for that, without a doubt, would have caused his death.

When Rodgers came to himself he did not remember anything for some little time. His head was aching abominably, and he felt dizzy and rather faint. Then, after he had got to his feet, and after some little time had elapsed, he began to remember what occurred, and new life was instilled into him. He stepped out of the car, and was nearly sent flying by the terrible roar of wind which accosted him. The snowflakes beat upon his face with terrific force, and he gasped for breath.

He knew everything that had occurred. The whole adventure had come back to him forcibly. And what had happened to Mr. Levi? Rodgers, of course, could know nothing of that, for he had been unconscious when his passenger had been led away. To look round in the hope of finding some sign was positively hopeless, for the snow had smothered everything—and what the snow had not smothered, the wind had disturbed. No matter how deep the footprints, they were completely obliterated. It was simply a waste of time to search about. The chauffeur found himself looking upon a sea of white in every direction. The snow was banked up against the wheels of the car to a height of two or three feet.

And the man decided that his best course would be to go straight back to the castle, and report the incident. There was really nothing else to be done, for there were no policemen in Tregellis, and the nearest town was ten or twelve miles away. At the castle there was a telephone, and it would be possible to ring up—unless, of course, the wires were down, which was distinctly possible.

Rodgers had a look at the water in the radiators, and found, to his satisfaction, that it was not frozen. It had been rather hot, and, although now cold, freezing point had not been reached.

So the chauffeur started up the engine, and proceeded to return to the castle. This was a difficult matter, for it was very hard to turn the car. The road was narrow, and great snowbanks were lining the road on either hand.

However, at last Rodgers succeeded in his object, and then he went back towards the castle with as much speed as he could manage. It was a trying journey, for the snow lay thick everywhere, and the chauffeur was not feeling extremely bright, either. His head was still aching, and he was dizzy. That blow he had received had been a severe one, and the man was plucky to act as he was doing.

He arrived at the castle at last, and drove straight up to the main front door. Then, staggering from his seat, chilled with cold, he ran up the snow-covered steps and hammered furiously upon the door. It was opened almost at once by the butler, a stout, staid-looking individual with an air of pomposity about him.

"Oh, so you have come back!" said the butler. "We had been expecting you, Rodgers. No doubt you were delayed by the snow?"

"I must see Mr. Lee—Lord Dorrimore—anybody!" panted the chauffeur. "Something terrible has happened—Mr. Levi has gone!"

"Steady, man—steady!" said the butler. "What is there to be excited about? Of course Mr. Levi has gone! didn't he intend to catch the train——"

"You don't understand!" shouted the chauffeur. "I must see Mr. Lee ——"

"Well, my man, what is it?" inquired Nelson Lee, coming forward at that

moment. "Come inside; don't stand there! Upon my soul! What is the matter with your forehead, Rodgers?"

"I was knocked out, sir—stunned," replied the man huskily, "and Mr. Levi has been took away——"

"Do you mean that some misfortune has occurred?" asked Nelson Lee quickly.

"It's worse than a misfortune, sir!" exclaimed the chauffeur. "A regular hold-up! That's what it was, sir, what with those men, with masks and revolvers——"

"Steady, steady!" said Nelson Lee quickly, as Rodgers swayed slightly. "Sit down here, my man—sit here, and tell me calmly and quietly exactly what took place. Ah, Nipper, I'm glad you have come; fetch some brandy at once!"

I had entered the lounge hall with several other juniors, and Lord Dorrimore had appeared, too. We were startled to see Rodgers' condition, and we guessed at once that something of a startling nature had taken place. The juniors were very excited, and one or two of the young ladies were rather alarmed. We gathered round Rodgers in an interested, excited group. Solomon Levi was there, and his face had gone pale, and there was a light of great anxiety in his eyes.

"Has—has anything happened to my father?" he asked huskily.

"He's been kidnapped, young gent!" said the chauffeur, who had just gulped some brandy.

"Kidnapped!" echoed Levi, startled.

"Great Scott!"

"My only topper!"

"Great doughnuts!"

"Let Rodgers tell us what has happened, boys," said Nelson Lee crisply. "Do not keep interrupting."

Rodgers touched the bruise on his forehead gingerly.

"That's what they gave me, sir!" he muttered. "Two men there was—two of 'em, and masked and carrying revolvers! They held up the car about two mile away, right in the thick of the snow. They made me pull up, and then they put a rope round my ankles, and forced Mr. Levi to get out of the car. I did the best I could, sir, but they were too much for me, and one of the rotters brought down his revolver on my head; and after that I didn't know any more, until I woke up a little while ago. Mr. Levi wasn't there, so I drove straight back."

"Mr. Levi wasn't there?" repeated Nelson Lee. "Was there any sign——"

"No sign at all, sir!" said Rogers. "What with all this snow it ain't to be wondered at, either. All footmarks was obliterated in less than no time, and I couldn't see a thing. All I know is that Mr. Levi wasn't there when I woke up, and it stands to reason that them two men took Mr. Levi off with them. It's a case of kidnapping, sir—robbery with violence, as like as not!"

Solomon Levi was looking scared now.

"Then—then perhaps they knocked father on the head!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Perhaps they stunned him, went through his pockets, and left him lying in a ditch, covered with snow. He'll be dead now, Mr. Lee, after all this time!"

"Keep calm, Levi, my boy!" interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "There is no reason why you should get such pessimistic ideas into your head. It is hardly likely that these two masked men treated your father as you suggest. In any case, we will lose no time in getting to the spot and making an instant investigation."

And before very many minutes had passed a party was ready to set off to look into this mystery.

The party consisted of Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, the chauffeur, and a whole crowd of juniors, including myself. We were determined to find Mr. Isaac Levi, even if we had to search for him the whole day long!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS.

EXCITEMENT ran high.

And it was, after all, a very thrilling business—this investigation in the snowstorm; for when we got outside and were well on our way to the fatal spot, we found that the snow was whirling down in myriads of flakes. The wind was cutting, and snow lay everywhere feet deep. It had been swept up by the wind into drifts that piled themselves against the hedges. Other portions of the frozen road had been swept almost clear.

Nelson Lee had decided that it would be better for us to go on foot. Rodgers had only just managed to get the car back, owing to this fresh fall of snow, and we did not want to leave the vehicle stranded perhaps a mile or more from the castle. By relying on our legs, we should be certain of ourselves.

Solomon Levi was more concerned than anybody. He walked almost mechanically, and seemed as though he wanted to break into a run all the time. His eyes were wild with anxiety, and he was breathing hard. The uncertainty of the whole affair was unnerving him.

"Cheer up, Solly!" said Handforth, giving Levi a slap on the back. "There's no need to look so glum. I don't suppose your dad has been hurt."

"We don't know; it's impossible for us to even guess what has happened!" said Levi anxiously. "If these men would knock the chauffeur on the head, what would they do to my father? Rodgers hadn't got any money on him, but my father had. Perhaps he's lying there now——"

"It won't do any good to anticipate things, Levi," I put in. "The best thing to do is to leave it to the guv'nor; he'll find out the truth."

"Oh, I hope he does!" said Levi.

We trudged on, bending our heads to the gale. It was, as a matter of fact, almost impossible for us to face that whirling hail of snowflakes. They were hard and stinging, and they drove into our faces like fine sand, and every now and again a great cloud of snow would be blown upon the road, smothering us completely for the time being.

However, we struggled on, until at last we had travelled two miles. Then Rodgers came to a halt. His head was aching badly, and it was very plucky of him to undertake to direct us to the spot. But without him we should have been rather helpless, so his inclusion in the party was necessary. The chauffeur came to a stop and looked round him.

"I think this was the place, sir," he said rather uncertainly. "Yes, just about here, sir."

Nelson Lee regarded the man sharply.

"You think, Rogers?" he repeated. "Are you not sure?"

"Well, not absolutely, sir," said the man. "You see, this road looks all the same just hereabouts—the hedges are level, and there ain't many trees. And in this terrific smother of snow it's hard for a man to distinguish where he is. There ain't no tracks on the road, either; I didn't expect there would be."

"I don't think there will be traces anywhere," said Nelson Lee quietly. "These men undoubtedly made the footprints at the time, but they were probably smothered over by the wind and snow within half an hour. It would be a sheer waste of time to search round looking for footprints."

"Then—then what can we do, sir?" asked Levi desperately.

"I don't know yet, my boy. But we must not be hurried," replied Nelson Lee. "Come, Rodgers, make an effort. Is this the spot where the outrage took place?"

Rodgers looked round again, and then shook his head.

"No, I don't believe it is, sir," he replied, at length. "I don't reckon we've come quite far enough; maybe it's a hundred yards further on."

And so we trudged further, and then Rodgers once more came to a halt. But even now there was no absolute certainty in his tone when he spoke.

"This is the place, sir," he said. "Just about here."

The spot looked about the same as the other place in the road—there was no material difference. Snow lay everywhere, the tops of the hedges only just peeping out of the drifts, and there were no high trees or gateways to mark any particular spot.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, old man," said Lord Dorrimore. "I'm not surprised at the chauffeur being muddled. With all this snow about, an' in this storm, it wasn't possible for him to remember the place clearly. Moreover, he was a bit dazed at the time."

"I was, sir," admitted the chauffeur. "I didn't rightly know where I was, or what I was doing, and I can't exactly say which is the right place, sir, and that's the real truth."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I thought as much," he said. "Then we might just as well give up this search, Rodgers. It is quite useless for us to waste our time by trying to find a spot which even you do

not know. We must adopt other tactics. What were these two men like, Rodgers?"

"They were masked, sir, so I could not see their faces very plain."

"Were the upper portions of their faces hidden, or the lower?"

"The upper portion sir."

"Did either of the men possess a moustache?"

"I don't rightly remember, sir."

"How tall were they, or how short?"

"They were just about alike, sir," said Rodgers. "Although, maybe, one was a bit on the stoutish side. They was both dressed in long overcoats and mufflers, and slouch hats. There wasn't nothing particular about either of them, nothing that a man could remember by."

"They were total strangers?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"Did the men address Mr. Levi by name?"

"Yes, sir; but not until after I had called Mr. Levi," replied the chauffeur. "So that don't count anything."

"I think it does," said Nelson Lee. "I am quite sure, in fact, that these men knew that the motor-car contained Mr. Isaac Levi, and they ambushed the car deliberately. It was not a mere casual hold-up."

"I don't quite follow you, sir," said the chauffeur.

"I mean that these men knew the car was coming along at that certain time, and they were there waiting in readiness for it," said Nelson Lee grimly. "It is not likely that two footpads would wait on a lonely road like this in the middle of the snowstorm for a car that might possibly come along. The chances are that no car would appear during the whole day. Therefore, we may safely take it for granted that these two men knew—positively knew—that the car would come, and that leads us to another conclusion."

"Does it?" murmured Dorrie. "I'm frightfully dense; I can't follow it."

"Really, Dorrie, it is quite simple," said Nelson Lee. "The conclusion I draw is this—these two men were not strangers in the district. They had been here for some time, and they knew that Mr. Levi was arranging to catch the train for London. It was a deliberate plot to stop Mr. Levi's car—not any chance car. It therefore stands to reason that the culprits know a great deal about our affairs at Tregellis Castle. They are men who have been in this district for some little time. That stands to reason."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "I think you're right, old man."

"It is not likely that there are many strangers staying in this district at this time of the year," said Nelson Lee. "We must inquire in the village, and it is just possible that we shall get some information concerning two strange men who have been staying at one of the local inns for a few days past. Or perhaps the men rode in this morning on bicycles, or on a car of their own, from a local town. It is a matter which must be investigated at once. Having failed to get on the trail direct, we must use different methods ——"

"Hold on, sir!" interrupted Rodgers suddenly. "I've just thought of something."

"Well, what is it?" asked Solomon eagerly.

"You were talking about two men—two strangers, sir," said the chauffeur, addressing Nelson Lee. "That put something into my mind, and you're right, sir! I'll lay ten to one them two men are the culprits! Now I come to think of it, they looked a bit like 'em—one being thin and tall, and the other a bit stoutish——"

"Explain yourself, my man!" interrupted Nelson Lee sharply.

"It's this way, sir," said Rodgers. "Two or three days ago, when I came to meet the train for Mr. Levi—when he wasn't on it, I mean—I saw two strangers there. They were gents from London, I think. Anyhow, they got talking to me, and they was real nice to me."

Nelson Lee looked keen.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed. "And what were these two strangers from London like, Rodgers?"

"They was well dressed, sir; they looked real gents!" said the chauffeur.

"Did they ask you any questions?"

"I don't know as they asked anything particular, sir," said the chauffeur. "We talked about the country, and about Tregellis Castle, and about things like that; but the gents didn't ask me anything personal or private, as you might say."

"Did they put up in the village?"

"Yes, sir; at the Blue Lion Inn."

"You are quite sure of this?"

"Certain, sir," said Rodgers. "They took me in and treated me to a drink, sir.'

"Oh, I understand!" said Nelson Lee. "Well, of course, these two gentlemen may be perfectly innocent of the affair. It may be quite a coincidence."

"I ain't so sure about it, sir!" said Rodgers. "I can think more clearly now; my head ain't so bad. I dare say you know I went into the village the first thing this morning, sir—to the station?"

"I was not aware of that, Rodgers," said Nelson Lee.

"Well, I did, sir—to fetch some meat and things which had come down from London by the first train. I went in the two-seater, and I saw them two men on my way back, just outside the village."

"Did they stop you?" asked Nelson Lee quickly.

"Yes, sir."

We were all listening eagerly now to the chauffeur's story.

"Yes, sir, they stopped me," he went on, "and was very pleasant. They asked me about the party—how we was all getting on, and I remember particular now, sir, they asked me when Mr. Levi and Master Levi was leaving."

"By my life!" said Solomon. "They asked that, did they? What did you say?"

"Well, young gent, I knew that your father was going by the later morning train," said the chauffeur. "I mentioned to them two gents that I was bringing Mr. Levi out in the limousine to catch that train."

"By gad!" said Lord Dorrimore.

"Yes, Dorric, this is certainly very significant," said Nelson Lee. "These two men knew well beforehand that Mr. Levi would be coming along in the car at a certain time. We must certainly go along to the Blue Lion Inn, and inquire about these two mysterious strangers who appear to be so interested in Mr. Levi's movements."

I pulled the guv'nor aside.

"Yes, sir, it's as clear as daylight!" I exclaimed in a low voice. "I haven't forgotten what took place last night on the ice. Those two men who tried to play a joke—or what we thought to be a joke—on Mr. Levi. I was quite certain that I recognised one of them as Webb, of Bannington. They tried to kidnap Mr. Levi then, but failed, owing to Fatty butting into them. So they did the trick this morning, guv'nor, and I'll bet you anything you like that those two men are Webb and Ryan!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It looks remarkably like it, Nipper," he said grimly. "Well, we will soon have them by the heels, I fancy."

"Rather, sir!" I agreed. "They're not professional crooks, or they wouldn't have left so many traces behind them. They've done the whole thing in an amateurish way, and they'll be a bit surprised when we get on the track in next to no time. The main thing to do now is to hurry along to the Blue Lion!"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "Come, we must not waste another minute!"

And so we trudged on through the driving snow, our hopes now running high. Solomon Levi was looking excited and eager, but he had a frown of anxiety upon his clean-cut, good-looking face.

"Cheer up, Levi, my son!" said Handforth, as we hastened along. "Everything will be all serene before long. We shall find your pater, and then——"

"I hope we do find him!" exclaimed Solomon fervently.

"Dear old boy, I quite realise your frightful anxiety, an' I am shockin'ly worried," said Sir Montie. "However, you can safely trust the matter to Mr. Lee. He's a marvel—he is, really!"

Solomon Levi nodded.

"Yes, but I want to know what has happened to my dad!" he said. "We're wasting so much time that it might be hours before we get to know anything definite. By my life, if anything serious has happened to my father——"

Solomon didn't finish his sentence; but his fists were clenched, and there was a grim look in his eye.

We continued our journey at a good speed, and at last we came within sight of the little village. Almost at once we saw the picturesque old inn which was known as the Blue Lion. It formed a very charming picture, with its snow-covered roof, and with wreaths of smoke curling from its chimneys. We all stamped into the tiled hall, and were

met immediately by Mr. Denniss, the landlord.

"I am sorry to trouble you, landlord, but I am here to make a few inquiries concerning the two gentlemen who are at present staying with you," said Nelson Lee, after he had introduced himself. "I do not wish to alarm you——"

"Lor' sakes!" ejaculated the landlord. "Be there anything wrong with the two gents?"

"I cannot tell you exactly at this moment, Mr. Denniss," replied Nelson Lee. "I sincerely trust that your guests are above suspicion. However, we must make sure. I shall be obliged if you will direct me to their sitting-room——"

"They're both out at present, sir," said the landlord. "They've been out since directly arter breakfast. I ain't seen 'em all the morning."

I exchanged glances with Dorrie. This piece of news was significant. The two strangers at the Blue Lion had been out all the morning!

"Was it usual for your guests to spend a portion of their time away from the hotel?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Why, yes, sir," said the landlord. "They was mostly out for hours every day."

"Do you know where they went to?"

"That I don't, sir, seeing that it ain't none of my business," said Mr. Denniss. "The gents was greatly interested in the district—they come here for Christmas, just to get rest and quietness. A rare nice pair they are, sir, and I can't understand anything being wrong."

"Were they interested in any particular place?" inquired Lee.

"Well, I believe they was, sir. They've shown a great hankerin' to have a look round the ruins of the old abbey," said the landlord. "Mebbe they've been exploring there, sir! There's no telling what some gents will do."

Nelson Lee looked at Mr. Denniss sharply.

"Did these men inquire about any ruins?" he asked.

"Well, yes, sir," replied the other. "They did ask, now I come to think of it. They seemed particularly interested, although I think they mentioned they wouldn't go near the ruins in this weather."

"I see," said Nelson Lee, rubbing his chin. "How is the old abbey reached, landlord?"

"Why, you pass the turning on your way to the castle, sir," said Mr. Denniss. "About two mile along this road, on the left-hand side. You'll find a narrow little lane, and, if you keep to that lane, you can't miss the ruins."

"I am much obliged to you, Denniss, for your information," said Nelson Lee. "Later on I will be with you again, and I shall be able to thank you in a more material manner. It all depends upon the success of our mission."

A minute or two later we were outside the Blue Lion, and the snow was beating into our faces with bitter coldness.

"Do you think Mr. Levi has been taken to the abbey ruins, sir?" I inquired eagerly.

"I am fairly certain of it, my lad," replied Nelson Lee. "We will explore the place, at all events, and without delay. By all appearances, the rascals are not exactly finished in the art of concealing their trail."

It was not long before we were hastening—as much as it was possible to hasten in the snowstorm—back along the road to the castle. And when we arrived at the little side lane, we found progress was more difficult still.

However, we were determined to find Mr. Levi at the earliest possible moment, and we trudged along through the snow, knee deep, whilst here and there we were practically buried in the drifts. But we struggled on, and at last we came within sight of the ruins.

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth. "Here we are!"

"Not so loud, you ass!" I said. "Those men may be about, and we don't want to give them any alarm——"

"Begad!" interrupted Sir Montie, grasping my arm. "Dear old boy, I thought I saw somethin' movin'! Yes! There are two men just against the ruins. Don't you see, dear fellow?"

Tregellis-West pointed, and we all looked eagerly. Nelson Lee had seen even before Montie, and the guv'nor was already hurrying through the snow at top speed. Dorrie was with him, and together they broke into a run. We followed as hard as we could go.

And just before we arrived, two muffled-up figures broke away from the

ruins, and dashed at full speed across the meadow, through the thick snow. The enemy had spotted us, and had taken flight. They were now fleeing.

It was a chase, but only a short one. The two fugitives, obviously enough, were in a panic. They ran wildly, and did not take any heed as to their direction, and, before they had been running far, they stumbled into a gully, which looked perfectly level upon the surface. Before they knew it, however, they were floundering over waist deep in snow.

Progress was out of the question, and the men were overtaken before they could even regain their equilibrium. They turned at bay, but it was too late. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore had seized them, and, although the men struggled for a minute or two, they were quickly overpowered, for Handforth and Co., Tommy Watson, and Tregellis-West and I, all lent a hand.

And as we had anticipated, the men were Mr. Stanley Webb and Mr. Hooker J. Ryan.

"You—you rotters!" roared Handforth. "You kidnapping bounders! You'll be shoved in prison for this——"

"Really, Handforth, I should prefer to deal with these gentlemen, if you will allow me to!" said Nelson Lee mildly.

Handforth turned red.

"Sorry, sir!" he exclaimed.

But before Nelson Lee could speak, Ryan and Webb burst forth.

"What—what is the meaning of this outrage?" demanded Webb, his voice harsh with alarm and anger. "How dare you treat us in this manner?"

"Say, I reckon we've got as much right here as anybody else!" exclaimed Ryan. "We were just exploring the ruins——"

"Nevertheless, gentlemen, I'm afraid I must detain you," said Nelson Lee calmly. "And I should not advise you to make any attempt to escape."

"They'd better try it—that's all!" muttered Handforth.

Webb glared.

"You are going to detain us?" he demanded. "Why?"

"Because I have every reason to believe that you and your companion are responsible for the kidnapping of Mr. Isaac Levi," replied Nelson Lee. "It would be better, perhaps, if you confessed at once, and led us to the spot where you have concealed your victim!"

But the men blustered and appeared to be highly incensed. They certainly would not admit that they were guilty; and there was nothing very surprising in this. We had not expected for a moment that they would confess to the crime. But while we were taking care of Mr. Ryan and Mr. Webb, Solomon Levi, Dick Goodwin, and Reginald Pitt had separated themselves from the party.

Solomon, seeing that there were quite sufficient of us to deal with the men, had suggested going straight towards the ruins, for the Jewish boy shrewdly suspected that his father had been hidden away there. And Solomon was extremely anxious. He did not know what had happened to his father, and he was greatly perturbed.

Dick Goodwin went with him, and Reginald Pitt decided to lend a hand. They entered the ruins, and it was not long before they found a stone stairway leading straight down into the earth.

"By my life!" exclaimed Levi. "I'll betcher ten to one that my dad is down here!"

"Ay, it's quite likely—it is that!" said Goodwin, nodding. "This is a champion place for keeping a prisoner."

They passed down the stairs as rapidly as possible, but speed could not be attained, owing to the darkness, and the stairs were unfamiliar, and rather treacherous, pieces being broken away here and there. But at last the three juniors reached the bottom; then they found themselves in a passage. And the air here was distinctly warm, and, moreover, there was the faint odour of stale grease hovering about.

"Candles!" said Pitt shrewdly. "A candle has been burning here just recently. Who's got some matches?"

Pitt struck one himself, and the other juniors did likewise. They went forward, and before long they found a stump of candle sticking to a little ledge. This was illuminated, then, carrying the stump, the juniors proceeded on their tour of investigation.

They were all now thoroughly excited, and they realised that they were near the end of the chase. They instinctively knew that they would come across Mr. Isaac Levi within a minute or two.

But everything was silent—deathly silent.

Would Mr. Levi be well and active?

Would he be unconscious, or would he be——

Solomon was white with anxiety and excitement. He was the first to arrive at a corner in the passage.

"Dad!" he shouted.

Then the juniors waited, breathlessly.

"Good boy, Solly!" came a calm, distinct voice from near by. "I didn't expect you quite so soon as this!"

"Hurrah!" roared Levi, rushing forward.

"By gum, this is champion!" shouted Dick Goodwin.

They soon found themselves outside the dungeon; but the door was locked, and the key was not there.

"Are you all right, dad?" asked Levi.

"Perfectly all right, my boy."

"Oh, good!" said Levi. "We'll rush away and fetch the others."

"It's all right—you can stop here!" said Pitt. "I'll go." And he sped off.

"How did you manage it, Solly?" asked Mr. Levi, through the door.

"I didn't manage it, dad!" replied Levi. "It was Mr. Lee who brought us here—Mr. Nelson Lee.

Meanwhile, Reginald Pitt had rushed out, and he was just in time to find Webb and Ryan being led into the old ruin. Pitt burst upon the group like a whirlwind.

"It's all right, sir!" he shouted. "Mr. Levi is down below, in one of the dungeons!"

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee. "It is exactly as I expected."

Pitt and several others had rushed down the stairs, helter-skelter. The key was obtained, and the prisoner was released. He came out smiling and calm.

The affair was over, and Webb and Ryan had been defeated.

. . . . . .

But Mr. Levi decided not to prosecute. Now that the affair was over, he was rather amused.

Moreover, it was Christmas-time—a time of goodwill towards men. And Webb and Ryan were allowed to go.

And Mr. Levi took the next train for London, and he arrived in time to conduct the business which was so urgent.

With regard to the others, including myself, we returned to Tregellis Castle, there to spend the remainder of our holiday, enjoyably and comfortably.

But stirring times were to follow, when once we got back to St. Frank's!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS TO ALL MY CHUMS.

PERHAPS some of my chums think that Webb and Ryan were too lightly dealt with by Mr. Levi in the above story. With this opinion I would heartily agree had it happened at any other time than at Christmas. Nevertheless, because mercy was shown the rascals, it does not condone their offence. With the exception of the chauffeur, no one suffered any harm, and we may take it for granted that Mr. Levi handsomely compensated his chauffeur for his injury, which, however, was not serious.

The feeling of goodwill that makes us forget our enemies, that prompts us to help others less fortunate than ourselves, that brings laughter, contentment, and good cheer, this is real happiness in keeping with the Festive Season—a happiness I wish to every one of you, my chums.

The New Year number will open with "The Mystery of Bannington Grange!" It is a magnificent yarn of strange happenings, excitement, and humorous situations. THE EDITOR.

Thrilling New Serial of Brother and Sister Detectives!

KIT & CORA

Mysterious Detectives

A TALE OF DETECTIVE ADVENTURE IN LONDON.

INTRODUCTION.

LIN FLEET, a lad of fifteen, wrongfully accused of stealing, loses his job at a motor garage. His parents being dead, he lives with an unscrupulous pair known as Uncle and Aunt Pawley, the former being better acquainted with the thefts at the garage than he would care to admit. Lin meets a stranger in a grey suit, who takes an interest in him, and the boy nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger employs Lin on some dangerous missions in order to give the lad an opportunity of displaying his detective abilities. The most perilous and mysterious of these adventures will be told in the ensuing chapter.

(Now read on.)

The Groping Hand,

AND the dull blur of reflected light upon the windows of the car vanished leaving the interior intensely dark. Twyford had smoked his pipe out or put it away, for not even its glow now broke the velvety blackness. It was as dark, too, outside, and Lin thought that the driver must have had the eyes of a cat, for he ran the car on with but little slackening of speed through that pitchy gloom.

They rounded a sharp curve with a jolt that tossed Lin out of his seat; and when he picked himself up again the car had stopped.

"Out here, Lin!" said Twyford, opening the door and springing from the car. "Ah, you have remembered the spot well, Crabb, after that one visit of ours a few nights ago."

"Once I've took me bearings I don't forget 'em, guv'nor," responded the driver; his face a barely perceptible patch of lighter hue, as he leant from the fore part of the car—which was itself practically invisible, being painted a peculiar grey that seemed to melt into the surrounding gloom and become part of it.

"And what's for me now, guv'nor?" asked the driver, as Twyford removed his overcoat and threw it into the vehicle.

"You will stay by the car, Crabb," he answered. "I shall need no help but that of this boy here. If we are not back here within an hour, you will know that we are little likely to return at all—things will have gone wrong with us."

Lin heard the man called Crabb give a gulp at that, as if he had a lump in his throat, and click his teeth, like the snap of a rat-trap.

"And what'll I do if that 'appens, guv'nor?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"Back to London with all speed, and let Inspector Barrows know," answered Twyford. "Though it's little that he can do if we fail here to-night!" he added, in a lower tone, as if to himself.

"And if they come out, see the car and try to rush it before I can get away, what then, guv'nor?" inquired the driver.

"Then," said Twyford, "use your automatic, as you would upon wolves or savages—for these men are little better. It is your business to get away with the car, if possible, and back to town."

"And I will, guv'nor, if I don't get dropped meself!" said Crabb grimly. "Though I'd like a heap more to go with you, sir, and see the thing through!"

"Impossible, my man," responded Twyford. "Your place is here."

He turned to the boy, waiting silent, eager, and expectant close at hand.

"Now, Lin," he said, "keep in touch with me, for sight will not help much in this darkness. Speak only in a whisper, if you have to speak at all. And remember, whatever happens, if you get flurried and lose your head, you double the danger."

"You may trust me, sir," said Lin. And he meant it—though he little knew how his nerve was to be tried in that night's work!

The car, Lin now saw, had been drawn up, not in the lane itself, but in a little dell forming a sort of bay, at the side.

It was rather less dark out in the lane, beyond the ring of tall bushes that hemmed this in. The drizzle had not ceased, but the sky was somewhat clearer, and the wet, sandy track which formed the middle of the lane or avenue shone light, like the surface of a stream.

Twyford avoided this, where a moving figure might have been too conspicuous to a keen watcher, and kept to the grassy track at the side, where the shadow of the tall hedgerow fell.

"Keep close in my footsteps, Lin," he said, in a whisper over his shoulder, when

they had gone a few yards down the lane. "There is a deep black ditch on your left. Take care. A plunge into that would be a bad start for our little stunt to-night!"

And he laughed softly; as though they were merely out for a bit of amateur poaching, or treacling for moths!

But Lin could hear the gurgle of the water in the deep ditch at his side, and having no fancy for a sideslip headlong into it, picked his way cautiously in the track of his guide. But this was not easy, for Twyford, as though he possessed a cat's alleged power of seeing in the dark, or guided himself by a kind of instinct, moved with a rapid, assured stride that was rather difficult to keep up with.

But they had not far to go. The avenue came to an abrupt end at a high brick wall with a pair of very tall, rusty iron gates.

Beyond loomed the black shape of a great, rambling house. It was entirely dark. Not a light shone from any of its windows. Twyford stopped, still keeping in the shadow of the rank hedge, which grew right up to the wall.

"Creep up and peep through the gates, Lin," he said. "Tell me if you can see a small motor-car anywhere within there."

Lin stole to the gates, and stooping, peered between the rusty bars. In a few moments he returned to Twyford, and said:

"Yes, sir, there is a little car standing by the steps in front of the house. It's a closed car, and there is something white, like a handkerchief, I fancy, hanging on the steering-wheel."

"Her car, and the signal we arranged," murmured Twyford to himself, with a passing tremor of emotion. "That means she is here—actually within that house, and alone, playing her daring part! Now for mine!"

He turned to Lin.

"The gates are not locked, I see," he said, "but we will not use them, Lin; iron gates are noisy things to deal with. Over the wall where those bushes top it—that's our way. Stop! I will go first. When you reach the top don't sit up—your figure might show. Lie flat and roll off. I'll see that you break no bones."

He backed a few paces and ran lightly at the wall. There was a slight rustling sound; then his voice, from the other side, softly called, "Now!"

The wall was about twelve feet high—an awkward climb in the darkness.

Lin scrambled up with the aid of the bushes, and, lying for a moment flat upon the top, rolled off and dropped into space, as it seemed. But Twyford's strong arms were there to receive him, and he landed on his feet with scarce a sound.

"Good!" said Twyford, in the low undertone he had used throughout. "Stick to me, Lin. That lawn is probably wired, and we have only a narrow margin. As for the path—we might as well have come with a drum and a couple of lighted torches, as venture on that!"

The path, or drive, led straight up to the dark portico of the house, cutting the ragged, ill-kept lawn in two. A watery moon, in its last quarter, was now showing through the curtain of drifting cloud. Its rays were feeble, but enough to flood lawn and drive with a shimmer of wan, misty light.

Twyford led off into a narrow, weed-grown path, which ran through a veritable jungle of bushes, that had once, no doubt, been a well-kept shrubbery. This brought them to a paved passage, or courtyard, at the side of the house. Here he stopped, and pointing upward to where a dense growth of ivy mantled the wall of the house, said:

"There is a small window up there, Lin; a climb of about twenty feet, but not difficult, because that strong old ivy is almost as good as a ladder to a light-weight like you. You will probably find the window fastened. If so, just slip this between the sashes and push the catch back. Then slide the sash up with as little noise as possible, and drop inside quietly on your toes."

He took from his pocket a roll of baize that seemed to contain a number of curious little tools, and selecting a thin, flat strip of steel, gave it to Lin. The boy took it with a slight show of hesitation. Suddenly a wave of repugnance came over him. There was something about this midnight exploit that went badly against the grain!

"I—I don't much care about it, sir," he whispered. "It is awfully like—like——"

"Burglary? No doubt," said Mr. Mysterious drily; "and the rest of this job will look rather more so, I fancy. But it is not too late; you can go back and wait with the car."

Then it flashed upon Lin that his strange employer might think his nerve had gone shaky—that he was afraid! That settled it for Lin Fleet!

"No, sir, I don't want to go back. I am ready to do what you want," he said.

"Then listen," said Twyford. "When inside, you will find yourself on a small landing at the top of a flight of stairs. It will all be very dark, and you must guide yourself by touch of hand. At the bottom of the stairs you will come to a small stone lobby, and on your left will be a door; that door you can see there, among the ivy."

He pointed to a small door, half-hidden by the tangle of ivy, at the foot of the wall.

"It is sure to be bolted, top and bottom," he continued, "and the bolts will be badly rusted, I suspect; for the ivy shows that the door has been long disused. Take this"—he gave Lin a small oilcan—"and pump plenty of oil into the slides and sockets of the bolts before you try to move them. Also squirt plenty into the lock—although you can do nothing with that, as the key is gone. When you have the bolts clear, rap upon the door twice, gently—I shall hear. Now you quite understand what you have to

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

do? Good! Work quickly, but don't get flurried. That might be fatal! Now make a start."

Lin stowed the oil-can and the strip of steel in his pocket, and began to climb the ancient growth of ivy.

Light and agile as he was, it was not a very difficult climb, for the gnarled stems and branches, stout with the growth of many years, and crossed and criss-crossed in every direction, served very well as a ladder. Lin might even have enjoyed it, if the whole business hadn't savoured so much of Bill Sikes, and the late Charlie Peace!

His repugnance returned in force when he thought of that.

But he had given his promise, and he meant seeing the thing through now. And besides, the spirit of adventure was beginning to lay hold of him. There was mystery in the coming exploit, and that had a powerful charm for the imaginative lad. There was unknown danger, too; but that only spiced it for him. He was not troubled by any sense of fear.

A pleasing glow of excitement thrilled in his veins. But he was cool and clear-headed. This time, he vowed, he would not get flurried and bungle his work.

He reached the sill of the little window without mishap.

Parting the ivy, and peering through the dusty panes, he saw that, as Mr. Mysterious had foreseen, it was fastened. But that piece of thin steel, slipped between the sashes, soon did the business. Then, with a cautious hand, he raised the lower sash. A pitchy-dark void appeared beyond; but without hesitation he climbed in, and lowered himself until his toe-tips felt the floor beneath him.

For a moment or so he hesitated to move. It was very dark in there, and he hardly wished to find that staircase by a headlong plunge from top to bottom.

But, as suddenly as though a blind had been raised, the place grew lighter, as a shaft of moonlight came through the window. It lasted but a few seconds, then the flying scud hid the moon again. But brief as it was, Lin got a glimpse of his surroundings.

He was in a narrow corridor. About ten or twelve feet away, and exactly opposite to the window at his back, he could see the head of a staircase, leading downward. On his right, and only a few feet from him, was a closed door. From under its lower edge shone a thin line of lamplight; and he could distinctly hear beyond the muffled sound of men's voices.

It was a warning not to linger there! At any moment the door might open and someone emerge!

Keeping along the other wall, he crept noiselessly towards the staircase. He had nearly reached it—another step, and he would have began to descend, when he heard the stairs creak under a heavy tread, and knew that someone was actually coming up that very flight! Two people! For the first spoke—it was a man's voice, harsh and guttural, with a foreign accent—as if over his shoulder to someone who followed him at a little distance.

They carried no light. The boy's sole chance lay in that. They might pass him in the intense darkness. Then suddenly the moon flooded corridor and stairs with another burst of fitful light!

It lasted scarcely longer than a flicker of summer lightning; but Lin knew that it must have brought out his figure sharp and black against the shaft of rays from the window. He held his breath, expecting some exclamation from below!

But none came! He marvelled at that; for in that brief flicker of light he had seen down the staircase clearly enough, and there was a man, a tall man with a big grey beard, more than halfway up—near enough to have seen him plainly!

But if he had, the man gave no sign. He continued to mount the stairs slowly, holding the handrail which was fixed to the wall on one side, and breathing heavily, as though the ascent tried his wind. But whether he had been seen or not, Lin knew that he was in a desperate plight. Detection seemed certain—a matter of moments!

Yet he kept cool, and weighed his slender chances with a clear head, and thoughts as swift as the flying moments.

Escape by the window was out of the question. He had no time to reach it and open it again. For by Twyford's orders he had closed it as before, that it might tell no tales.

No; he had just one chance—to lie close, and trust that the man, and whoever followed, might pass him while the spell of friendly darkness lasted.

He crept to the wall, and pressed himself closely against it, crouching low and holding his breath for dear life. The tall, bearded man mounted the last stair, and, as the handrail ended there, Lin hoped that he would move farther from that side.

But to his dismay the man kept near the wall, as if to guide himself along it by touch of hand. This brought him so close to the crouching boy, that his hand actually brushed Lin's cap, and startled him into a slight, sharp movement.

"Ah! What was that?" ejaculated the man. "I swear my hand touched something living and warm!"

He recoiled. Just then the place was again flooded with pale moonlight. Lin saw the glitter of steel in his hand!

It was a woman's voice that answered him, with a little hard laugh:

"A rat—nothing bigger! Ha, ha! You seem to have lost your nerve with your eyesight, Herr Sapt! Ridiculous! Put that great knife away. A valiant warrior, to draw steel upon a rat!"

(To be continued.)

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