

NO. 238.—A MAGNIFICENT CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY STORY!

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HANDFORTH GIVES A(N) ICE DISPLAY!

A YULETIDE OF MYSTERY

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Victory for the Rebels," "Exit the Tyrant," "Dorrie's Christmas Party," etc. December 27, 1919.

A SPLENDID XMAS STORY

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

SPECIAL XMAS STORY

CHAPTER I.

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY AT CLIFF CASTLE.

"GOOD old Handy—sure to turn up like a bad penny," grinned Reginald Pitt. "Here he is again, as clumsy and as ugly as ever!"

Edward Oswald Handforth glared.

"I'm ugly, am I?" he roared.

"Don't ask unnecessary questions," said Pitt. "Just go to the nearest mirror, and you'll know the horrid truth in an instant."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling asses——"

"Remember where you are, Handy," I broke in, with a chuckle. "You can't call the chaps awful names here, at Cliff Castle. At St. Frank's it's different; you can slang for all you're worth."

Handforth, of the Remove, had not been among the original guests at Lord Dorrimore's Christmas party at Cliff Castle. He and his two chums, Church and McClure, had gone to the Earl of Grandmore's place during Christmas week. But their experience there had not been particularly cheerful.

For the earl had turned out to be an eccentric old fellow who lived practically alone. And Handforth and Co. had been only too glad to get away.

Lord Dorrimore had invited him to

join us at Cliff Castle, and the heroes of Study D were only too willing to accept. We were having a glorious time with Lord Dorrimore's party. Our Christmastide was being spent with great enjoyment by us all.

Quite a number of St. Frank's juniors were there, including, naturally, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, my own chums of Study C. And now Handforth and Co. had come to swell the number.

They had arrived on the previous day, and now we were off to the big lake for an afternoon's skating. There had been no snow for two or three days, but plenty had fallen previously, and the whole countryside was enveloped in a white mantle. King Frost held full sway.

The thermometer had registered many degrees of frost for days past, and ice was thick on every sheet of exposed water.

The fellows had been impatient to get on the lake for two days, but Lord Dorrimore had not declared it safe until luncheon time on this particular day. And then, of course, there had been a tremendous rush to fetch out skates.

The previous day we had indulged in winter sports of a different character. Tobogganing was possible on the snow-clad downs, and we had indulged in the pastime to our heart's content. Nelson Lee was like a boy himself, and he

joined in the game with the greatest enthusiasm.

But just now skating was the item on the programme, and we were all eager to get on the ice.

"Good thing we brought our skates along," said Handforth. "Of course, we might have borrowed some, but—"

"Skates?" said Hart. "What's the good of skates to you, Handy?"

"To skate with, of course!"

"But, my dear chap, who on earth told you that you could skate?" inquired Hart. "The last time I saw you on the ice, you did most of your skating on your back. But perhaps that's your particular style?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth clenched his fists.

He looked round at the wide front of Cliff Castle, and saw that many other visitors were within sight. So he clenched his fists, and glared at Hart with a glare which was meant to bore holes.

"You wait until we get back to St. Frank's!" he explained darkly. "I can't punch your nose just here—"

"You can't punch it anywhere," grinned Hart.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I can't punch your nose here," repeated Handforth, "but when we get back to St. Frank's, after the holidays, I'll take a long list with me—and I shall punch noses until my fist is sore!"

And, with that threat, which seemed to have singularly little effect, Handforth marched off with Church and McClure, who were grinning hugely. I chuckled as they went off, and turned to the others.

"He can't help it," I grinned. "Handy's built that way, you know. I'm glad he came, because he makes things brighter. When Handforth isn't about the place things seem rather dull."

Jimmy Little, the enormous fat boy of St. Frank's, emerged from the great doorway at that moment. Fatty had been enjoying himself tremendously—for, as he explained, there was as much grub as he could eat, with no ban on the quantity. And food was Jimmy Little's only aim in life.

At the present moment, however, he seemed to have something else in view, for a pair of skates hung over his shoulder.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Pitt, as Little came up to the group.

"Eh?" said Fatty. "What's impossible?"

"You can't seriously tell us that you mean to go on the ice?" asked Pitt.

"Of course, I mean to go on the ice," replied Jimmy. "Why shouldn't I? I can skate as well as you chaps—and it'll give me an appetite for tea!"

I chuckled.

"I thought there'd be some mention of grub in it," I said. "But, look here, Fatty, Lord Dorrie didn't say that the ice was safe enough for you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll only go through as soon as you step off the bank," said Pitt. "And think what an awful trouble it would be for twenty of us to yank you out. We should have to go and get a traction-engine in the end."

Fatty Little grinned.

"It's all very well being funny," he said. "I sha'n't break the ice—it's strong enough to bear fifty chaps like me. You seem to forget that ice is strong enough when there's a hard frost—it's solid!"

"And so are you," grinned Christine. "The point is, which is the more solid—you or the ice? I think I'd put my money on you. You'd beat the ice any day. Unless you want to get drowned, I should skate on rollers in the dancing-hall!"

But Fatty knew that it was only chaff, and very shortly afterwards we set off for the lake, accompanied by the girls. Watson, of course, did not escort his own sister, although she was decidedly the pick of the bunch. That genial task was left to Sir Montie Tregallis-West and myself. Miss Violet declared that she couldn't skate much, and Montie, gallant as usual, promised to assist her on the ice.

When we arrived at the lake we found that several fellows were already careering about on their skates. It was a magnificent stretch of ice, fully two miles in length by a half-mile broad. There was room enough on it to accommodate a thousand skaters, or more, with comfort.

We were only a comparative few, so the conditions for skating were perfect.

Handforth was just fixing his skates when we arrived, and Church and McClure were waiting for him to start off. Their skates were already fixed, but if they embarked on the ice before him, trouble would certainly follow.

"Buck up, Handy," said McClure, in a low voice. "The girls have come now, and they'll see you floundering about."

"Eh?" snapped Handforth. "They'll see me doing what?"

"Er—skating!" said McClure.

"They will!" declared Handforth. "It's not a habit of mine to boast, but as soon as I go on the ice you'll see everybody stop and look at me. You mark my words. You'll see everybody watch my fancy skating, and admire!"

"Go it!" said Church.

Handforth rose to his feet rather gingerly. He had plenty of confidence in himself; confidence was a quality he never lacked. What he did lack, however, was ability, although he never realised an unimportant detail of that sort.

"Now then!" said Handforth. "Watch me!"

Church and McClure watched. Handforth started off in magnificent style, with the idea, apparantly, of creating an impression. He certainly did that. For several yards he glided along on an even keel, so to speak. Then he attempted a graceful turn, unwisely lifting one foot from the ice as he did so.

For some unaccountable reason, he found it impossible to get his foot back again. And Church and McClure watched joyfully. Handforth continued his glide on one foot, but it couldn't last for ever, and the end was inevitable.

His second foot went into the air, to join its companion, and Handforth concluded his display on his back.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The yell of laughter which went up was ample evidence that everybody had watched him.

Church and McClure skated out to their fallen leader, and circled round him.

"Ripping!" said Church. "You were quite right, Handy. Everybody saw you do it—"

"You grinning ass!" snapped Handforth, jumping up. "I'll— Hi! Look out! What the—"

Crash!

Handforth had jumped up rather too swiftly, and he only succeeded in landing on his back again. Lord Dorrimore came gliding by, looking grave and concerned.

"Hallo, what's the matter here?"

he asked. "Trouble?"

"No, it's all right, sir!" gasped Handforth. "I—I was only showing these fellows how to skate!"

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "It's just as well you told me, because I shouldn't have known otherwise. I thought you were showing them how to fall. Two or three times like that, and you'll make a dent in the ice!"

"Yes, sir," said Handforth weakly.

The next time he regained his feet with greater caution, and he skated off in a gingerly fashion. He wasn't a bad figure on the ice, strictly speaking, once he really got settled to it.

Attention was diverted from Handforth to Fatty Little, who had appeared full of enthusiasm. He was an unknown quantity, and it was generally expected that he would be a hopeless duffer.

But Jimmy Little was by no means a duffer.

He took the ice like a champion, and his lightness was quite astonishing, considering his enormous bulk.

"That's queer," remarked Pitt. "I was expecting to see the ice bend as he went over it. If it'll stand Fatty, it'll stand elephants."

"There's nothing wrong with this ice," I said. "If only the frost lasts, we shall have some terrific sport here. But it's pretty certain that the frost will all go in a day. We can never depend on it."

The sport was exhilarating, and we enjoyed ourselves on the ice more than we had enjoyed the tobogganing.

"Looks like some more snow coming," said Pitt, when we had paused for a little rest. "Those clouds seem to be pretty thick, anyway."

"Oh, rats!" remarked Watson. "We don't want any more snow yet. This ice is in perfect condition, and if there's another snowstorm it'll be completely spoilt. I think it'll blow over."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West gazed at the clouds through his pince-nez.

"Dear fellow, I'm frightfully afraid that you are wrong," he said. "Judging by the atmospheric conditions, snow is comin' soon, begad! I hope I'm wrong, but—"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Pitt. "I felt a flake then."

Pitt was right. Snow had commenced to fall even as Sir Montie was talking—only a few fleecy, white flakes, but it was snow, and before another ten minutes had elapsed, there was every indication that the fall would be considerable.

The young ladies of the skating party lost no time in hurrying to the castle, escorted by Nelson Lee, Dorrie himself, and others. The juniors, on the whole, preferred to stay until there was not sufficient light.

"Where's Montie?" I asked, after I had been to the end of the lake and back. "I left him here with you, Tommy."

Watson grinned.

"I think he's rather gone on my sister," he said. "Vi wanted to go indoors, so Montie escorted her. I'm blessed if I can see any reason why a chap should go dotty over a girl like Violet. There's nothing particularly nice about her," he added, with a sniff.

"Miss Violet's charms are lost on you, Tommy," I said. "She's one of the nicest girls a chap could see—and all you can do is to run her down. I'm surprised at you! Montie isn't 'gone' on her at all—he's simply gallant. He's gone back to the castle, but I'll bet a quid he'd rather be here on the ice."

"I don't run my sister down," said Watson. "That's rot. But I suppose I can talk plainly? Look at Fatty Little! He's doing figure eights like a giddy professional!"

The evening was growing dull now, and after another half-hour had elapsed it was almost impossible to see, what with the snow and the deepening dusk. Watson and I were two of the last fellows to leave the lake.

"We'll be down here first thing after breakfast in the morning," I remarked, as we strode briskly along to the castle, glowing with healthy warmth. Dorrie is going to have the ice swept, if the snow stops. We may not have many chances of skating, and we want to make the best of the ice now."

"Well, of course," agreed Watson. "It's rotten luck, this snow coming just now. There'll be a thaw next—and then rain."

"What a wonderful optimist you are!" I grinned. "Do I hear sounds of stride ahead?" I added, peering into the gloom.

"You can hear Handy's voice," replied Tommy. "I expect he's having a row with somebody—as usual. It's a queer thing how that chap must have a dust-up with somebody every day!"

A few yards further on we found a little group in the path, just at the top of a rise. The path was wide, and it led straight down from this point to the terrace. And most of the guests had avoided it, owing to its slippery nature. Some of the fellows were responsible for this slipperiness, having indulged in sliding during the morning.

"What's the row?" I asked, as Tommy and I drew up.

"If you think I'm going to stand it, you're jolly well mistaken!" roared Handforth. "And I don't want any interference from you, Nipper!"

"My dear chap, I wouldn't think of interfering," I said smoothly. "I don't want to be put to the trouble of punching your nose. If I interfere you'll punch mine, and retaliation is only natural."

"You ass!" snapped Handforth. "This—this perambulating elephant reckons that he can skate better than I can, and if he says it again, I'll——"

"Great doughnuts!" exclaimed Jimmy Little. "I didn't say anything, Handforth; I never mentioned skating. Pitt reckoned that I could skate better than you, so I don't see why you should get your knife into me!"

"You could have denied it, I suppose?" demanded Handforth. "You could have told the truth, couldn't you? Everybody knows how I skate—everybody!"

"Oh, we know how you skate all right, Handy," I said.

"There you are!" roared Handforth. "Did you ever see any skating like it?"

"I can't say that I did," I replied thoughtfully. "Your skating, Handy, is unique. It's a cross between a skidding motor-bus and a tipsy acrobat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny fathead!" snorted Handforth. "I'm not a fellow to boast, but I'm not going to have a fat porpoise like this claiming that he can beat me on the ice! If he says two words, I'll bump him over!"

"Look here, Handy," began Fatty Little, "I didn't——"

"I warned you!" bellowed Handforth. "Take that!"

He lunged out at the fat boy, but Jimmy Little was more agile than one would have supposed. He dodged neatly, and Handforth's fist shot out into the empty air. He slithered wildly on the slippery surface of the path, clutched at Little for support, and just managed to grab the fat boy's coat.

The result was disastrous.

Handforth fell upon his back with a thud, and the next second Little, his feet slipping from under him, descended upon the prostrate Handy, and literally enveloped him.

The next second the two went careering down the sloping path. Handforth was underneath, having converted himself into a kind of toboggan. Little certainly had the best of it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Handy!"

"It's all very well to laugh!" exclaimed McClure. "With a huge chap like Fatty on the top of him, he'll be squashed to bits!"

We rushed down the path, in pursuit of the unfortunate pair. McClure raced so well, in fact, that he finished the journey in a horizontal position. We found Fatty Little and Handforth sitting up on the path, near the terrace. They were both gasping, and both were covered with snow.

"Oh!" groaned Handforth. "Oh, my hat! I'm killed!"

"Any bones broken, Handy?" asked Church.

"I'm all in bits!" gasped Handforth. "I'm smashed up! All my ribs are broken, and I think I shall die! That—that rhinoceros will be responsible for my death——"

"Hardly, old son," I interrupted. "Don't forget you pulled him over, and he couldn't help falling on the top of you. This is what comes of trying to punch noses!"

Handforth got to his feet, groaning still. But a brief examination satisfied me that he was only slightly winded. Jimmy Little was not hurt in the least, for he had ridden down the path in comfort.

"We'll try it again, if you like," he said cheerfully. "It beats tobogganing to fits!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Handforth failed to see the humour of the occasion, and he accompanied us into the castle, holding his aching sides and groaning louder than ever.

CHAPTER II.

LADY MORNINGTON'S JEWELS.

LORD DORRIMORE'S sister, Lady Mornington, was the hostess at the castle, and she was exceedingly popular with every member of the house-party. In many respects, her ladyship resembled Dorrie. She was jolly, full of jokes, and always genial. The juniors, in particular, got on with her famously.

Lord Mornington was rather quieter, and I don't think he counted for much: at all events, he wasn't very prominent in this case. He was content, for the most part, to spend his time in the billiard-room, or at one of the card tables.

After dinner the juniors gathered in the great room which had been set apart especially for their benefit—a kind of big common-room, where they were able to kick up as much noise as they liked.

After a while I slipped out and made my way towards the billard-room. I wanted to have a few words with the gov'nor. However, I found Nelson Lee in the big lounge hall, talking to Lord Dorrimore and his sister.

Our hostess was looking rather troubled.

"But I am anxious, really," she was saying. "Do you think there is any possibility of danger, Mr. Lee?"

"Well, personally, I certainly think you may be quite easy in mind," smiled Nelson Lee. "Burglars are hardly likely to enter Cliff Castle, Lady Mornington. And the party here is so large that I should fancy no burglar would attempt to try his skill just at present."

"That's exactly what I've been sayin'," put in Lord Dorrimore. "The fact is, old girl, you worry too much. The beastly jewels ain't worth goin' grey about. Simply forget all about 'em."

Lady Mornington shook her head.

"I cannot help thinking that something dreadful will occur," she said. "My jewels are worth twenty thousand pounds—and that is a considerable haul for a burglar. I have an uneasy feeling that——"

"But, my dear Pauline," put in Dorrie, "as Mr. Lee says, there's no possibility of burglars comin' to a place like this. An' if you're particularly

anxious about your bits of diamonds, leave 'em in my charge. Thieves would go straight to the library safe, but they wouldn't dream of comin' to my bedroom. Let me have 'em just before you retire. I'll sleep on the bally things!"

His sister smiled.

"I think that is quite a good suggestion, Dorrie," she said. "I know I shall sleep easier if you take care of the casket, at all events. But perhaps Mr. Lee will be offended——"

"Not at all—not at all!" smiled the guv'nor. "Dorrie's suggestion is an excellent one. If a burglar did enter—and I practically scout the possibility—he would probably come to my room after drawing blank in the library. No thief, however, would be likely to suspect Lord Dorrimore of being the custodian of the casket. But I really think you are concerning yourself unduly, my dear Lady Mornington."

"Perhaps I am," admitted her ladyship. "But I cannot help thinking of that little incident which occurred a night or two back."

"And what incident was that, my dear?" asked Dorrie.

"You know as well as I do, you big duffer," said his sister. "One or two of the boys saw a face at the billiard-room window!"

"My dear, frightened old thing!" grinned Dorrie. "That was fancy—sheer fancy. Why, it was proved at the time that nobody could have stood. The snow was undisturbed, an' the window is yards from the ground."

"And one of the servants saw a stranger lurking about near the south wall," went on our hostess. "He was a tall man in a black overcoat, and certainly not a resident of this district. It is quite common for professional burglars to hover near mansions where large house-parties are held. You will call me foolish for being so worried, but I cannot help that."

Lord Dorrimore chuckled.

"As a matter of fact, my dear Pauline, I do call you foolish—deucedly foolish," he said frankly. "Gettin' yourself into a state of nerves over nothin' is positively ridiculous. However, we won't say any more about it. Give the jewels into my care an' everythin' will be all serene."

Dorrie went off with his sister, and I gave the guv'nor a bit of a grin.

"There's no danger, is there, sir?" I asked.

"As far as I can understand, none whatever," said Nelson Lee. "But you know what these ladies are, Nipper. They own valuable jewellery, and it is only natural, perhaps, that they should be anxious about it. But I must remark that I thought Lady Mornington was of a slightly different type."

"They're all the same when it concerns trinkets, sir," I grinned. "But what was that about a figure lurking about the south wall? I haven't heard anything about it before."

"Neither have I, young 'un," said Lee. "It strikes me that the servants are nervous, too, and that, again, is not unnatural. This old castle stands in a very lonely position. It is right on the cliffs, isolated, and with no other houses within sight. The servants are strange to the place, being imported here for this occasion only, and I suppose they are impressed by their surroundings. A harmless stranger happening to pause for a moment or two as he passed is liked to be transferred into the sinister figure of a would-be burglar. I think you may as well dispose of the subject at once. I'm off to the billiard-room. What are you doing?"

"I think I'll come along, too, sir," I said. "It's rather rough luck about the snow, isn't it?"

"Rough luck?" repeated Lee. "I don't quite follow you."

"The skating, guv'nor," I explained. "By the morning all that ripping ice of the lake will be smothered with snow, and the surface will be rotten."

"I shouldn't worry, if I were you," said Nelson Lee. "Dorrie intends to set the men sweeping in the morning if the snowfall has ceased. So we shall probably have another day's skating, after all."

We passed along the corridor and entered the billiard-room. I stood watching the play for some time, quite interested. And then Sir Montie appeared. He touched my sleeve, and coughed.

"Just a minute, dear old boy," he murmured.

"Anything wrong?" I asked, mildly surprised by his mysterious manner.

"Nothin' wrong, but I'd like to have a word with you," he said.

We slipped out of the billiard-room,

and I regarded Montie curiously as we stood in the corridor.

"Now then, my son, choke it up," I said briskly.

"Old boy, I never choke anythin' up," said Tregellis-West. "The fact is, Tommy an' I thought you might be interested in somethin'. A few minutes ago we opened the side door to see how the snow was gettin' on."

"Well?" I asked.

"It's still snowin'," said Montie.

"That's not frightfully exciting."

"Be patient, old boy," went on Montie. "Tommy an' I were standin' there, lookin' out into the night, when we saw a figure not far off—it was lurkin' rather near to the terrace."

"One of the servants, perhaps," I said.

"I can hardly think that, dear fellow," said my noble chum, shaking his head. "The servants wouldn't be out in the snow at this time of the evenin', an' the terrace is forbidden to them, in any case."

"You're quite sure you saw something?"

"Positive, dear old boy."

"Then we'll go and investigate further," I said briskly. "Where's Tommy?"

"Waitin' in the hall."

"Right!" I said. "Come on!"

We hurried to the hall, and found that Tommy Watson had already donned his coat. He was evidently bent upon prompt action, too.

"We don't want to tell the other chaps," he said. "Handforth will want to mix in, and he'll mess up the whole game. Let's get outside before anybody appears. But what about a light?"

"Perhaps we can find a lantern somewhere?" suggested Montie.

"Perhaps we could—but we're not going to try!" I exclaimed. "This is better than all your lanterns, my children."

I produced an electric torch from my overcoat pocket, an article I generally carry about with me. In fact, I was rarely without that small torch, for its uses were many.

"That's the boy," said Watson. "We'd better take a couple of thick sticks, too. The chap may be dangerous."

"This is your investigation, don't forget," I remarked. "I'm coming

with you just for the sake of killing time. But, personally, I don't believe there's any stranger at all. This old castle seems to be getting on your nerves——"

"Rot!" interrupted Watson. "You don't think I fancy things, I suppose?"

"Well, let's go and have a look," I said smoothly.

We went to the side door, passed out, and closed the door behind us. Everything was dark for a time, and the snowflakes fluttered upon our faces like cold, ghostly fingers.

Everything was still and deadened. It is a peculiarity to snow that all ordinary sounds seem to be muffled when there is a big downfall. Somewhere behind the cloud-banks, however, the moon was shining. It was not visible to us, but the night was not intensely dark.

Having grown accustomed to the gloom, we were able to see for some little way across the wide paths and lawns. Everything was white—blank and cheerless. The snowfall was considerable.

"Where did you see the mysterious chap?" I whispered.

"Over in that direction," replied Tommy, pointing.

We moved off silently across the snow. Earlier in the afternoon there had been a good many footprints on the path, but now they were all obliterated. The fresh fall of snow was covering everything again in a coating of white.

Personally, I had an idea that my two chums had been fancying things. But this idea was soon knocked out of my head. For, after walking across the terrace to the first lawn, I suddenly came to a halt.

The snow immediately in front was not dead blank.

"Hallo," I murmured. "what's this?"

"Light your torch, you ass!" muttered Tommy. "They're footprints—can't you see? Footprints, as clear as anything!"

I switched on my torch and cast the circle of light upon the snow. And there lay a new set of clearly defined footprints. The falling snow was only just commencing to enter the sunken depressions.

"Yes, these are footprints all right,"

I said, "and they were made less than ten minutes ago, too. It's a good thing we came out."

"Begad, rather!" said Sir Montie.

"We'd better rush along and see where these footprints lead," said Watson quickly. "I expect the chap was running along here——"

"He wasn't," I interrupted. "He was walking—slowly, too."

Watson stared.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"My dear chap, look at the footprints," I said. "They are all perfectly even—the heel is as deeply imprinted as the sole. If the fellow had been running, there would be hardly any heel marks at all."

"Begad! That's frightfully cute," said Montie.

"It's frightfully simple," I remarked. "But I'm interested in these footprints. Don't you see how peculiar they are?"

"Peculiar?"

"Exactly," I said. "Look at the size of them, for one thing."

"Well, I suppose the fellow has got big feet," said Watson.

"That might be the explanation, of course," I went on. "But, judging by the length of his stride, he must be quite a short chap—a short chap with the feet of a giant. I can't quite understand it."

"Well, let's get on, and find out where the footprints lead to," said Watson practically.

"It might be one of the chaps having a game," I said thoughtfully. "That would account for the short stride. A big pair of boots would——"

"You're wrong," interrupted Watson. "I had that idea myself, and while Montie went and fetched you, I had a look into the recreation-room. All the fellows are there—every one."

"Well, that disposes of that theory," I said. "Good for you, Tommy. Let's get on now, and make further investigations."

We walked briskly, and I found that it was not necessary to place the torch upon the ground all the time. The weak, subdued moonlight, filtering through the clouds, was sufficient to show us our way.

We hurried, for it was pretty certain that the stranger had been hurrying. I found, further on, that the footprints bore positive evidence of this. At last

we broke into a trot, and found that our quarry had left the castle grounds by climbing a low wall into the road.

We set off, running hard, the track being distinct in front of us. And, at last, we caught sight of a dim figure in the distance.

"By jingo," muttered Watson, "there he is!"

"Put all steam on!" I exclaimed. "We've nearly got him!"

We ran forward at our top speed, and rapidly overhauled the dark figure. Rather to my surprise, I saw that he was not particularly short. And we were almost upon him when he uttered a peculiarly wild laugh—a laugh which sounded rather unnatural. Then he set off down the road with the speed of a deer.

"Begad!" exclaimed Montie. "He's runnin' with shockin' quickness, old boys!"

I didn't reply, but pelted forward as hard as I could go. My chums followed close behind.

Less than two hundred yards away, the mysterious stranger had turned off the lane, and was making for the cliffs, which were only a short distance away. Try as I would, I found it impossible to overtake him.

My heart gave a kind of a jump as I saw him disappear over the edge of the cliff. But when we arrived at the spot we found that the cliff was not sheer, but sloped gradually downwards to the beach.

Our quarry was just nearing the base, and we could see his figure against the white snow for a moment; then it was swallowed up amid the black shadows of a group of rocks.

"Come on!" I panted. "We might collar him even now!"

We scrambled down the cliff somehow, slithering and slipping and skidding. It was quite easy to follow the distinctive marks in the snow. But when we arrived on the beach we found a difficulty—a difficulty impossible to overcome.

The tracks led right down to the water, and then, of course, were lost altogether. We stood there, breathless, and I looked up and down with a feeling that I had been swindled.

"Confound it!" I exclaimed gruffly. "He's done us!"

"Begad, the fellow must have gone

right into the sea!" exclaimed Tregellis-West. "This is frightfully shockin', old boy. The chap has committed suicide!"

"Committed fiddlesticks!" I snapped. "He simply walked into the surf—just here, where it's only an inch or two thick—and then ran along the beach. He knew we could follow his tracks in the snow, or in the soft sand, and so he adopted this 'dodge.'"

"Jolly smart, anyway!" panted Watson. "And he must have come back sooner or later. If we search the beach we shall find his tracks again."

I shook my head.

"It's a pretty hopeless task," I said. "We could easily walk about for hours, without any luck. We can't tell which way he went—to left or right. And it would be almost impossible to get on his track again in this snowstorm. It's coming down thicker than ever."

It was.

The wind was rather high, and it was driving the snowflakes into our faces in blinding whirls. The sea roared angrily at our feet, and the surf hissed and splashed. The foam was churned up into a fine state of fury.

"We'd better get back," I said, pulling my coat collar round me. "It'll be a sheer waste of time to stay any longer. We're having a bit of a mystery this Christmas, anyhow."

"I'm blessed if I can understand it," said Watson bluntly. "Who was the chap, and what was he doing there? And did you hear that awful cackle of his? It made my giddy blood run cold!"

"Possibly an escaped lunatic, begad!" said Montie brilliantly.

"That's not likely!" I exclaimed. "You wouldn't find a lunatic in this place; and the way he bunked wasn't very loony, was it? He's a mystery, and I sha'n't be really content until I've probed it. We'll see what the guv'nor says!"

We arrived back at the castle without any other adventures occurring, and after we had divested ourselves of our coats and boots, we sought out Nelson Lee. He was in the drawing-room, listening to one of the young ladies singing.

"I'd like a word, guv'nor, if possible," I said softly.

"There's no hurry, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee.

We waited a while, and then, during a lull, I told Nelson Lee what had hap-

pened. Dorrie was there, too, and he listened to my story with a quaint expression of amusement on his face.

"I'm jiggered if these kids haven't got scared now!" he observed, at length. "Chasin' imaginary people about—"

"Dash it all, Dorrie, it wasn't imaginary!" I interrupted. "You won't believe these things at all—you won't believe anything! Perhaps you'll be sorry before long—sorry you haven't taken more precautions."

"You'll make me feel nervous soon," said his lordship. "Well, Lee, old man, what's your opinion?"

"I hardly know," said Nelson Lee slowly. "Nipper isn't given to imagining things, certainly, and there must be something in this story of his. However, there's nothing that we can do, so we had better let things rest as they are."

"If you're thinkin' about the jewels, they'll be safe enough in my bedroom," said Dorrie languidly. "All these stories of mysterious figures lurkin' about are makin' me quite nervous, by gad! I shall end up by sleepin' with two revolvers under my pillow, and hermetically sealin' myself into my bally bedroom. It ain't playin' the game to get me into this state!"

He certainly did not look very nervous, and I only hoped that his optimism would be justified.

CHAPTER III.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DORRIE.

"GOOD!" exclaimed Reginald Pitt. "Jolly good, in fact. The snow's stopped, and the morning is first-class. Skating will be in full swing again after brekker. This is the kind of Christmas I like!"

"Rather!" agreed Bob Christine. "We're having a fine time here."

"Couldn't be better," said Fatty Little. "But I don't care much for the idea of going for a walk before breakfast."

"Ass! It'll give us an appetite," said Jack Grey.

"But I don't want any appetite—I've got one already!" said Little. "This

air has given me a terrific twist. I feel like eating six breakfasts rolled into one!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed De Valerie. "You've got an appetite?"

"Yes, rather!"

"But you were just eating sweets and fruit and goodness knows what else!" said De Valerie. "I saw you scoffing enough dates to last a chap a week!"

"That was only a snack," explained Fatty. "A chap must have something to keep his strength up."

The juniors grinned, and I came down the great stairs a moment later with Sir Montie and Tommy.

It was rather early, and breakfast would not be served for another hour. Overnight, we had arranged to go for a walk to the beach with Lord Dorrimore. And we were all pleased to find that the morning had turned out bright and sunny. The snow clouds had rolled away hours since, leaving the sky blue and clear. And the sun glittered down upon the unbroken snow gloriously.

We all got into our overcoats and mufflers, and I looked at the stairs once or twice expectantly.

"A nice state of affairs," I remarked. "Dorrie told us not to be late, and he's late himself! We'll give him a little sarcasm when he comes down—some good advice on early rising!"

"Well, I wish he'd buck up!" said Fatty anxiously. "If we don't start soon we shan't be able to get back in time for breakfast. Great pancakes, it'll be rotten if we're five minutes late!"

"You'd better stay behind, then," grinned Somerton. "You've got a frightful appetite, old chap, and the walk would make the complaint worse. I'm awfully afraid it's a disease with you, Fatty."

Jimmy Little sniffed.

"A disease!" he exclaimed. "You ass, it's an asset!"

"When you grow up you'll have to earn about five thousand a year—just to keep yourself in grub!" grinned McClure. "It's a wonder to me your pater isn't broke to the wide—he's got an appetite just as big as yours!"

The juniors continued chatting, and the minutes went by. Still Lord Dorrimore did not appear. Umlosi, however, turned up a minute or two later.

The great Kutana chief came stalking down the staircase, an enormous figure.

He was big enough ordinarily, but owing to the cold climate of England he insisted upon wearing so much clothing that he was enlarged to a tremendous degree. Africa was his native element, and he looked upon snow as something bewitched.

"Keeping warm, Umlosi?" I asked cheerfully.

"Wau! Thou art pleased to be humorous, O Manzie!" said Umlosi, in his rumbling voice. "I long for the blue skies and warm suns of my own land. Thy country is great and wondrous, but methinks I would be happier were I far away across the vast waters."

"You'll get used to it in time," chuckled De Valerie. "It's pretty cold now, but this spell won't last for ever."

"Mayhap the great whiteness will disappear ere long," said Umlosi. "I am praying to the great gods that the warmth will soon come. Wau! I go to the fire—I go to the comfort!"

He stalked away to the library, leaving us chuckling.

"He's not enjoying his Christmas much," said Watson. "I say, Nipper, where's Lord Dorrimore?"

"In bed, I expect," I said—"snoring!"

"Then go and wake him up, for goodness sake!"

"That's exactly what I mean to do," I declared grimly. "If he's in bed still we'll rag him till he can't stand later on."

I mounted the stairs three at a time, and made straight for Lord Dorrimore's bedroom. I arrived at the door, and beat a lively tattoo upon the panels. The noise I made was sufficient to awaken a man in a trance.

But there was no reply.

"That's queer!" I muttered. "Dorrie's a light sleeper."

I knew well enough that his lordship always slumbered with one eye open, so to speak. Having spent many years of his life in jungles, exploring, this little habit was necessary.

I hammered on the door again, and while I was doing so Nelson Lee appeared out of his own bedroom, buttoning his coat.

"Oh, so you are responsible for all this noise, you young rascal!" he said severely. "What's the idea, Nipper?"

"I'm trying to wake Dorrie," I explained. "He promised to go out with us this morning, you know, and he hasn't appeared yet. How much whisky did he drink last night?"

"Dorrie is not in the habit of drinking spirits in excess," said Nelson Lee grimly. "How dare you make such an insinuation, my lad? He's either in a deep sleep, or has forestalled you by getting up very early. We'll go into the bedroom and make sure."

While he was speaking, Nelson Lee grasped the handle and opened the bedroom door. We both entered, and suddenly the guv'nor checked and stood still abruptly. His figure filled the doorway, and I could see nothing.

"Dear me!" murmured Lee. "This is—remarkable!"

"What is it, sir?" I asked quickly. "What's wrong?"

I pushed past, and stared into Lord Dorrimore's bedroom curiously. And then I received something of a shock. The apartment was in a state of extreme disorder. Chairs were overturned, the bedclothes were piled on the floor, and the white sheets were smothered with muddy footprints. An electric reading-lamp was smashed to atoms, and the whole room, in general, was a wreck.

"Great Scott!" I breathed. "What—what's happened?"

"I really do not know, Nipper, but the appearance of this room is sinister," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Do not forget that Dorrie was taking charge of our hostess's jewels."

"My hat—yes!" I exclaimed.

Nelson Lee walked forward into the room, and I was about to follow when he checked me.

"No, Nipper, you had better not come," he said quickly. "Stay where you are."

He gingerly picked his way over the carpet to the bed. He turned the pillow aside, and a casket lay revealed.

"Oh, good!" I exclaimed. "They're safe all right!"

"I think not, Nipper—I am afraid not," said Nelson Lee.

For he had opened the casket as he spoke, and it was empty.

"All Lady Mornington's jewels gone!" I exclaimed. "This is terrible, sir! But what of Dorrie? What has become of him? I don't like the look of it at all. The window's wide open,

and—— Good heavens, what's that on the sheet, sir—and there, on the floor?"

I pointed, horrified.

"Now, Nipper, you must not get excited," said Lee grimly. "You are quite right. The marks on the floor and on the sheet are bloodstains. Before we can even guess at what has happened, we must thoroughly examine this room. But it is safe to say that something of a very startling character has occurred."

"What shall we do, sir?" I asked huskily. "What about Lady Mornington? Shall I tell her——"

"For the moment, Nipper, you will do nothing," interrupted the guv'nor. "Stay just where you are, and I will make a brief examination."

Nelson Lee stood quite still, but his keen eyes glanced about him in all directions. He took in every detail of that disordered room. Then, at last, he moved cautiously over to the window and looked out.

Finally, he turned back.

"I must spend a good deal of time here before I can form a definite theory," he said. "I think my first duty is to inform our hostess that something grave has happened. It will be for her to decide what course to pursue."

"But what of Dorrie, sir?" I asked anxiously.

"It would be foolish for me to make any statement, but I fear that Lord Dorrimore has met with foul play," said Lee quietly. "In short, he has been kidnapped—for he would certainly never go off of his own accord. It will be a delicate task, informing Lady Mornington, but I must not hesitate."

We passed out of the bedroom, and Nelson Lee closed the door, locking it securely behind him. Then we walked down the corridor, and just as we reached the head of the stairs, Lady Mornington appeared, smiling and cheerful.

"Good-morning, Mr. Lee!" she said. "I am glad to see the snowfall has ceased—— But what is the matter? You're looking quite troubled."

"I am afraid I have some serious news for you," said Lee quietly. "Please remain calm, Lady Mornington——"

"What—what do you mean, Mr. Lee?" asked our hostess, catching her

breath in. "My jewels—has anything — Oh, but that is impossible! Dorrie is taking care of the casket!"

"The jewels are missing," said Nelson Lee bluntly. "It is better, perhaps, for me to inform you of the fact at once."

"Missing!" exclaimed her ladyship, in horror. "But—but you must be mistaken, Mr. Lee! It is out of the question! I cannot believe it!"

"Further, I am afraid that some mishap has occurred to Dorrie himself," continued Lee. "I do not wish to worry you, but your brother has disappeared, and there is every indication that his bedroom was entered by two men during the night, and that a violent struggle took place."

Her ladyship seized the balustrades, and for a moment she seemed to be on the point of fainting.

"I care nothing for my jewels now!" she exclaimed, controlling herself with an effort. "I am thinking of Dorrie, Oh, Mr. Lee, do—do you mean that he is hurt—injured?"

"I can say nothing definite," said Nelson Lee. "I believe it is far better for you to know the full truth at once. There are bloodstains in the bedroom —"

"Bloodstains?"

"Yes; but it is quite possible that they were caused by a minor injury," said the gov'nor. "It is also possible that one of Dorrie's assailants was the sufferer. We cannot tell at the moment."

"Oh, but it is awful—terrible!" exclaimed Lady Mornington. "Mr. Lee, we must do something—we must find out what has become of my brother. I shall never rest until you find out the truth."

"I advise you to communicate with the police without delay," said Nelson Lee. "I shall be only too pleased to act for you in that respect—"

"No, Mr. Lee, no!" interrupted our hostess. "I do not want that!"

"You do not want the police to be informed?"

"What would be the good?" asked Lady Mornington. "We should have a rural constable up here, and a pompous country inspector who knows nothing. They would waste their time on useless

questions, and nothing would be done."

"But it would be advisable."

"I don't want the police, Mr. Lee—I want you to take complete charge of the case," said her ladyship quickly. "You are a crime investigator by profession, and no man in the world is better fitted to get at the truth than you are. Please, please do this for me."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I shall be only too delighted to assist in every respect possible," he said, "for your sake, Lady Mornington, and for the sake of my friend Dorrie. I will make a thorough investigation at once. If, at the end of two hours, I can arrive at no satisfactory conclusion, I shall insist upon you sending for the police without delay. But I will certainly make the preliminary examination."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Lee—so very much!" said our hostess. "Shall I come to my brother's bedroom now, or would you prefer to be left undisturbed at your work? Please do not consider my feelings if you would rather I did not interfere."

"I will take you at your word," said Lee. "I would much prefer to conduct my inquiries alone."

"Very well, Mr. Lee, I will wait with all the patience I can muster."

Lady Mornington went downstairs, and found several young ladies waiting, in a state of considerable agitation, to hear what had occurred. Within a minute or two the story of the discovery was being whispered throughout the castle.

Nelson Lee himself stood on the landing, deep in thought. I was beside him, and at length I ventured to speak.

"Did you mean what you said just now, sir?" I asked.

"Eh? What did you say, Nipper?"

"Did you mean that about conducting the inquiry alone?" I asked anxiously.

"I hope you won't bar me, gov'nor."

Nelson Lee smiled slightly.

"No, I shall not bar you," he said. "In fact, I shall be pleased with your valuable assistance. Come with me now, and we will examine Dorrie's room thoroughly and in detail."

"Oh, good!" I said eagerly.

Tregellis-West and Watson were downstairs, and I was rather glad of

this, for they would have worried me about coming, too. But it was impossible for a whole troop of us to enter that bedroom.

We had just passed the head of the stairs when a lumbering noise made me turn, and Umlosi came rushing up the staircase. He seized Nelson Lee, and whirled him round like a feather.

"Tell me, Umtagati, my master," he exclaimed, "is it the truth that my ears hear regarding the great N'Kose? Is it that my father has been spirited away from us during the blackness of the night?"

"You must be calm, old fellow," said Leo quietly. "N'Kose has certainly vanished for the time being. But have no fear. We shall soon find him, Umlosi. It will not be long before you see him again."

Umlosi shook his head.

"Wau! It is bad, my father!" he exclaimed. "I am sorely troubled!"

"It is only natural to suppose that you would be," said Lee. "But there is no need to be alarmed."

"It is even as thou sayest, Umtagati," rumbled Umlosi. "But if thou findest my father's trail, I beg of thee to inform me. We will hunt down the warriors who performed this vile act, and I will deal with them as they deserve."

"All right, old man—keep calm," said Nelson Lee. "Leave the matter to me for the time being, and I will do my best."

"I am easy of mind, my master," said Umlosi. "Knowing that thou art working in this matter, I am satisfied. For is it not the truth that thou art a great witch doctor—a wondrous worker of magic?"

He moved away, shaking his head, and Nelson Lee and I walked towards Lord Dorrimore's bedroom.

"We'd better not let Umlosi get on the track, sir," I said. "If Dorrie's come to any harm, and Umlosi finds the rotters who did it, there'll be murder. We don't want the old chap to end up on the gallows!"

"Well, hardly, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I will take care that such a fate does not overtake him. And now we will commence our little investigation."

We entered Lord Dorrimore's bedroom.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK.

NELSON LEE stood just within the doorway, with me beside him. The door was closed, and for a full three minutes Lee stood quite still. Then he took out a cigarette and thoughtfully lit it.

"It's a bit of a puzzle, sir?" I ventured.

"Yes, Nipper—yes," said the gov'nor. "I should certainly say that the men were interrupted by Dorrie—eh? Don't bother me now, my lad," he added, coming to himself. "This case promises to be something of a problem. Use your eyes, and say nothing."

I was using my eyes all the time, but I could not make any connected story out of what I saw.

I was thinking, as a matter of fact, how remarkable it was that we should be called upon to investigate a mystery during our Christmas holidays—during a time when we were supposed to be enjoying ourselves with pure pleasure.

But that is just one of the peculiarities of detective investigation; a criminologist is frequently compelled to abandon every pleasure when the call for duty comes. In this case, Dorrie himself was the victim, and we were trebly anxious to do our best towards elucidating the problem.

"Our first move, Nipper, will be to reconstruct the events, if such a thing is possible," remarked Nelson Lee, becoming brisk. "You will observe that the room is in a state of disorder."

"Yes, I've observed that, sir," I said drily.

"It is obvious that Dorrie was disturbed from sleep. Two men entered by the window. They came across the room, straight to the bed. By the time they arrived there Dorrie was, no doubt, awake."

"And he showed fight?"

"Unquestionably, Nipper," said Lee. "Dorrie is just the kind of man to show fight—he is not easily defeated. He either scrambled out of bed, or was pulled out. And then commenced a grim fight."

"But why didn't Dorrie yell for help?" I asked.

"Probably because he was over optimistic—he thought he could deal with his assailants single-handed," said

Lee. "I expect he received a blow on his head—a blow which drew blood, and which stunned him."

"That seems the most likely theory, sir," I said. "But how do you know there were two men?"

"How do I know?" said Nelson Lee. "Dear me! Where are your eyes, Nipper? Surely you can read the story of these footprints?"

The guv'nor pointed to the floor, and I followed his finger. The marks were blurry and indistinct. I moved closer, and bent down. I could see that the marks were the footprints of a man, and they were all over the carpet.

Some were larger than others, but I could not quite see how Nelson Lee was so sure two intruders had entered.

"You can follow the evidence now, surely?" asked Lee, as I looked up.

"Not quite, sir."

"Well, Nipper, it is clear that two men were here, because there are one set of prints made by plain boots, and another set which show evident signs of an iron-shod heel," said Nelson Lee. "You will see the marks distinctly in the carpet, if you look closely enough."

"Yes, sir," I said, although I couldn't quite see it.

"There can be no doubt that the men entered for the sole purpose of annexing the jewels," said Lee. "The question is, how did these outsiders know that Lord Dorrimore was entrusted with the casket?"

"That's just what I've been wondering, sir," I said. "Nobody knew it except a few of us, and it's impossible to suppose that any of the guests are responsible. There's not a soul who could be suspected."

"Exactly, Nipper. It therefore leaves only one conclusion."

"A servant?"

"Undoubtedly," said the guv'nor. "One of the servants—a paid spy, I gather—overheard that little conversation regarding the casket. A servant communicated the information to the confederates—also supplying the facts regarding Dorrie's window. The thieves must have known its exact position, and other details. Without inside help, the affair could not have been undertaken."

"But who's the traitor, sir?" I asked. "Have you any idea?"

"Not the faintest," replied Lee.

"There are a good many servants here, remember, and I do not think one is above suspicion. However, we will deal with that aspect of the case later. For the present we will confine ourselves to an examination of this room."

Lee bent down, and regarded the spots of blood with great attention. There were not many, but they were sufficiently ominous for my liking.

"Of course, a punch on the nose would have done this, sir," I said. "Dorrie might have landed one which made one chap's nose bleed—but that's only an idea. We want facts, don't we?"

Lee nodded.

"I am afraid we shall not progress far unless we do gather some facts. You have remembered the snow, of course?" he asked. "The fall ceased in the early hours of the morning, in fact, and there is more than a chance that there will be a distinct trail to follow outside."

"Let's hope it leads to success, sir," I remarked.

The guv'nor moved over to the window, and I followed him. One thing which puzzled me was why the thieves had taken the trouble to carry Lord Dorrimore away with them. Only one explanation suggested itself to me.

Dorrie, probably, had seen his assailants distinctly, recognising them. They were anxious to get clear away, and it struck me that they had made a prisoner of his lordship with the intention of keeping him out of harm's way until they had sufficient time to make their "get away."

"Just look down here, young 'un," said Lee smoothly. "What do you make of these? Rather indistinct—eh?"

The guv'nor was leaning out of the window, and I went to his side. The sill was completely bare, except for a few patches of frozen snow. The burglars, no doubt, had cleared it before entering the room.

Gazing down, I saw that the snow immediately underneath was trampled and disturbed in the most positive manner. And a clear path had been cut in the snow-clad ground—a path caused by the passage of many feet.

The two intruders had come that way, and had then returned, forcing their prisoner between them. That, at all events, was my own theory. And the

tracks led away in the direction of the lane—the lane which ran alongside the south wall of the grounds.

"I wonder how the beggars got up here, sir?" I asked.

"That, after all, is an unimportant detail," said Lee. "I presume they used an ordinary ladder—there are two or three at the rear—or a special rope affair. It is quite sufficient for us to know that they got up to the window, and then down again, accompanied by their victim.

"And what's the next move?" I asked. "I don't seem to see much of importance here. We've followed everything that the burglars did, and I reckon it would be a good idea to get on the trail now."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"It will be as well to find out where the footprints lead us, Nipper," he agreed. "I do not for a moment suppose that we shall come to any positive result. The kidnappers are hardly likely to have left such an easy trail."

"Perhaps it'll lead down to the seashore," I suggested. "But there's no knowing, sir; the beggars may have made a slip somewhere."

"I have been on the look-out for such a possibility," said Lee. "It strikes me that our two unknown friends are somewhat ingenious. They certainly left no clues except the most obvious ones—clues which they could not possibly prevent. Anything of value, however, is conspicuous by its absence."

"Including the jewels," I remarked grimly.

"Precisely, Nipper—including the jewels."

Nelson Lee went round the room again, but he could find nothing which added to our already meagre stock of information. All we actually knew was that two men had entered Dorrie's room by the window, had wrestled with his lordship, and had then carried their unfortunate prisoner away.

"Yes, Nipper, the best thing we can do now is to examine the snow-trail," said Lee, at length. "It might lead us nowhere, but there is never any telling."

We left the bedroom again, and passed downstairs in order to reach the exterior of the castle. Breakfast was being served, as we could hear by the subdued rattle of plates from the dining-hall.

Personally, I was not very keen on feeding; my attention was claimed by the problem which confronted Nelson Lee, and I preferred to stop where I was. We were just crossing the hall to the door when two figures appeared.

"Hold on, Nipper!" said one of them.

"Hallo! What are you chaps doing here?" I asked, turning.

"We were excused from the table," said Watson. "I say, we want to be in this, you know. We want to help to get on the track of Dorrie. It's not playing the game to leave us out."

"Begad! Rather not!"

"This isn't an ordinary case," went on Watson. "We're spending holidays, and I reckon we ought to be allowed —"

"It's all right, Watson," said Nelson Lee, turning. "You and Montie may come, if you wish. But I want you to keep well behind, so that the trail may not be confused. Do you understand?"

"Oh, we'll keep behind," said Tommy eagerly. "Have you discovered anything which will throw light on Lord Dorrimore's disappearance?"

"We've found next to nothing," I said. "We're just trying to find out where the rotters went to after leaving the castle."

My chums were quite eager, but they kept well in the rear, as Nelson Lee had instructed. And a few minutes later we arrived outside Dorrie's window. The snow was trampled about considerably.

"Blood again, sir," I said grimly. "You can see a spot or two in the snow all round here."

"Yes, Nipper, and I don't particularly like it," said Nelson Lee. "This snow is helping us a good deal, but I am afraid we cannot rely upon it too firmly. The burglars are astute men, and they would not be foolish enough to leave a trail which we could follow."

"But we can follow it, sir, easily," put in Watson.

"For a certain distance—yes," agreed Nelson Lee. "But I do not expect for a moment that we shall get on the true trail."

We walked across the terrace, and then over one of the snow-covered lawns. Everything was still and bright in the morning sunshine. The snow

looked perfect in its crystal purity, and was only marred by the set of tracks which led away across the grounds.

We reached the wall in due course, and here Lee paused for a minute or two, making a careful study of the wall top.

"We cannot be certain, but I gather that Dorrie was dragged over this wall," he remarked, after a while. "Either he was unconscious or helpless. He certainly could not have been carried far by his kidnappers. We are in the road now, and we shall soon come across other evidence, if I am not mistaken."

Nelson Lee was quite correct.

We had not progressed far along the lane when we came to a halt. The snow was quite undisturbed, save for those same marks. Nobody but the mysterious intruders had used the lane since the snowstorm.

"This looks like being something of a problem, Nipper," said Lee slowly. "It is clear that a wheeled vehicle drove up to this point, waited here for a while, turned about, and then drove away again."

"A trap, sir, by the look of it," I said. "The horse's footprints are clear, and by the narrowness of the wheel marks, I should say the vehicle was a small, delicately built one."

The gov'nor nodded.

"That piece of reasoning is quite sound," he said. "But you will notice something else. While there is a conglomeration of footprints just here, a single set lead off through the gap in the hedge, yonder. The rest vanish completely, proving that the second man entered the trap. Thus we arrive at the certain fact that one man drove off with Lord Dorrimore in the vehicle, while the other went across the fields on foot. I must confess that I am at a loss. I cannot understand why one of the men should have gone off in that way."

"Which trail do you mean to follow, sir?" I asked.

"Both," replied Lee.

"Yes, but——"

"You and Montie can continue along this lane, and I will go across the fields," said Nelson Lee. "We shall then be able to consult together after our separate investigations."

"What about me, sir?" asked Watson. "Where do I come in?"

"You may accompany me, if you wish."

"Thank you, sir—I will," said Tommy promptly.

We did not wait long at the spot. After looking round carefully for a few minutes, we set off on our separate errands. I was rather glad there were two trails, for I was entrusted with one part of the task myself.

And Sir Montie and I set off briskly down the lane, full of anxiety and concern for the missing Dorrie.

Should we find him?

CHAPTER V.

FEARING THE WORST.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST paced beside me briskly, as we went down the snow-covered lane. Near the hedges great drifts had formed, and in some places the snow was over six feet deep—vast masses of it lying in every exposed position.

"It's rather a good thing the snow ceased in the night," I exclaimed, after a while.

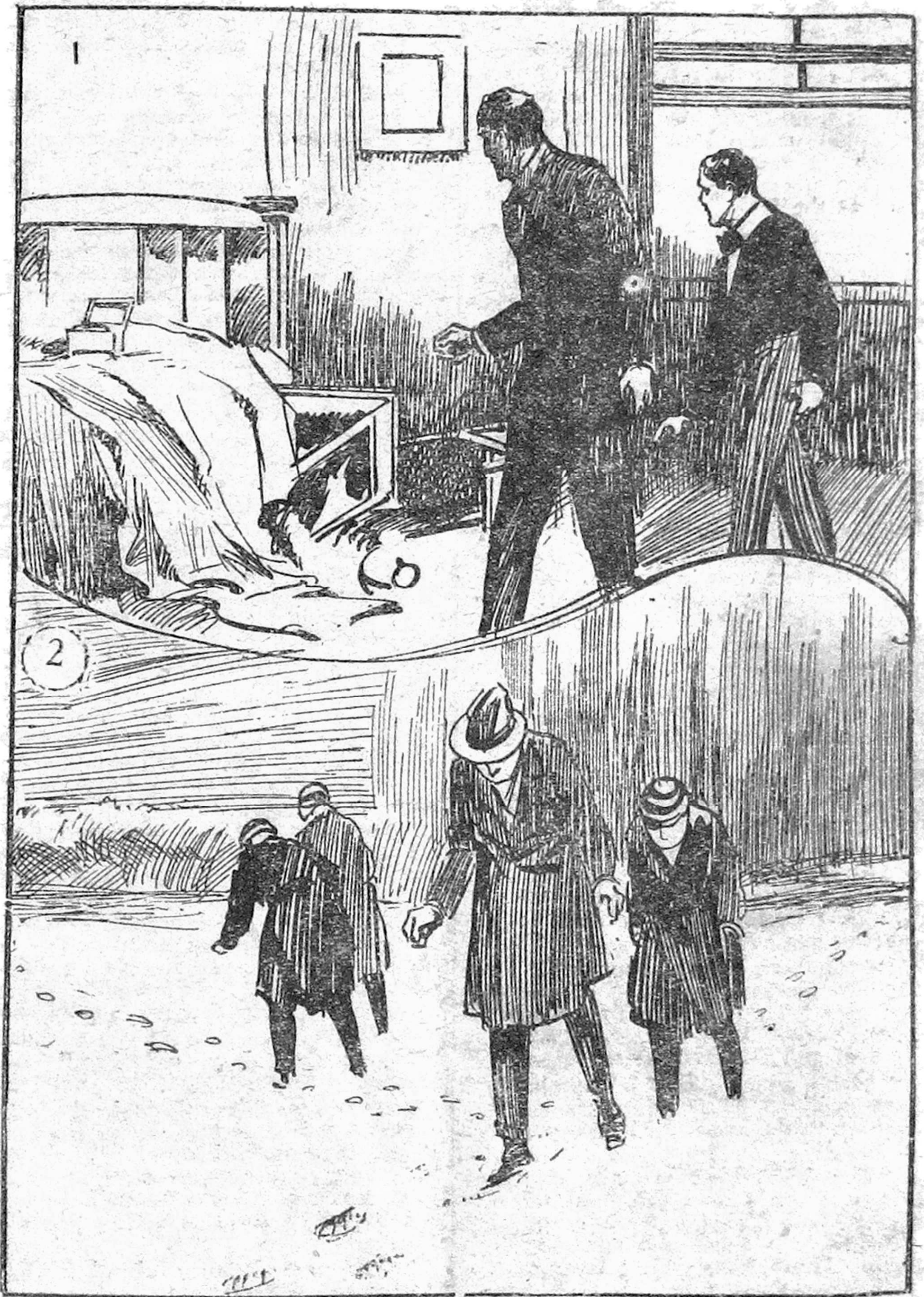
"Why, dear boy?"

"Because, if the snow had continued, the trail would have been completely covered by this morning," I replied. "There would have been nothing to show us how Dorrie had vanished, or what had happened to him."

"That's true enough, old boy," agreed Montie.

"It's my opinion that the burglars started this game during the storm," I went on reflectively. "You see, the snow was coming down like fury when they broke into the castle, and they assumed that it would continue to fall throughout the night. It was still falling when they left, taking Dorrie as a prisoner, but it ceased soon afterwards. The result is, the trail is quite clear—as you can see."

"Dear fellow, it's remarkable how you can think these things out," said Sir Montie. "I shouldn't be surprised if we come across somethin' frightfully important before long. But just fancy takin' part in a real detective investi-



1. "Good heavens, what's that on the sheet, sir—and there, on the floor?"
2. Montie and I took one trail and Nelson Lee with Watson the other.

gation durin' the Christmas holidays! Begad! It's shockin'!"

"Fancy Lord Dorrimore being the object of our investigation," I said grimly. "I hope to goodness nothing has happened to the poor old chap. He's one of the best, Montie, and if some awful rogues have harmed him—Oh, but it's no good surmising. Let's keep to the facts."

We continued our walk briskly, for there was no reason for us to stop. The wheel tracks were distinct and clear out. No other vehicle had passed along that way since the snowfall. A more straightforward trail to follow could not have been found.

The lane was only a narrow one, and neither Montie nor I had any idea as to where it led. Probably to some isolated village on the coast. We were not destined to follow it for long, as we soon found out.

After winding round and about for close upon a mile we found the lane dipping down into a hollow. The sea was away on our left, cold and somewhat choppy. The cliffs were not very high in this particular region, but the coast was quite rough.

"This looks like a halt," I remarked, staring ahead. "It seems to me that the trail leads off the lane in a minute or two. Don't you notice those disturbances in the snow just ahead?"

"Old boy, I was just lookin' at them," said Montie.

Twenty yards further on we came to a full stop. For here a kind of foot-path led off in the direction of the sea. The lane continued straight on, following the line of the cliffs.

But the trap had not kept to the lane, for the tracks were clear in front of us; they led away down the steep foot-path, which, I judged, was really a kind of gully, leading to the beach.

"This seems a bit queer," I remarked. "What on earth did the trap go to the beach for? It's puzzling, Montie."

"The best thing we can do, dear fellow, is to follow the track all the way," said Tregellis-West practically. "Begad, the snow is frightfully deep here. Those wheels must have sunk a foot—they must, really!"

My noble chum was quite right. Down in the gully the snow had collected in great banks, and there was

plenty of evidence to show that the horse had had a somewhat difficult task in drawing its load. The snow was greatly disturbed.

"Looks like a bit of trouble at this point," I remarked, coming to a halt. "It seems to me that the trap nearly overturned, Montie. Look at those places in the snow near the edge. The offside wheel must have found a hole."

We continued our way, and a few minutes later came right upon the beach itself. The tide was some little way out, and the sands near us were smothered with snow, proving that the water did not reach that portion of the foreshore, even at high tide.

Further down, of course, the sands were yellow and bare, and seemed to be remarkably drab in comparison to the surrounding whiteness.

"Along the beach, now," I remarked, nodding. "The guv'nor was right, you know. These beggars were tricky, and I'll bet we're on a wild goose chase. Don't forget what happened when we chased that mysterious chap last night. He went into the sea, and ran along in the surf. His tracks were lost, and I expect these tracks will be lost in just the same way."

"I'm frightfully afraid that you're right, dear fellow," said Sir Montie. "However, we'll hurry along an' see."

I was pretty sure that the trail would lead almost to the waves, for my theory was that the trap had been driven off the snow on to the wet sands and had then made its way along the shore for perhaps a mile.

"Even if they did try that dodge," I remarked, "we might find the trail later on, if we persevere. They couldn't have driven into the sea, so it's obvious that the horse and trap must have gone somewhere."

"Quite so, dear old boy," said Montie.

We were walking through the snow on the beach, and I was somewhat surprised to find that the marks in the snow kept parallel with the waves; the track was clear and distinct, and there had evidently been no attempt to conceal it.

In the near distance, ahead, I could see a dilapidated old boathouse. It looked like a place where a lifeboat had been kept. This was probably the truth, for I knew that a new lifeboat

and house lay a mile further along the coast. The one now in sight was apparently the old place.

"We seem to be making for that ruin," I remarked. "It can't be possible that Dorrie is a prisoner there. It's too simple——"

"You never know, Nipper, old boy—you don't, really," said Sir Montie. "It will be frightfully excitin' if we find Lord Dorrimore in that old boathouse. The honours will be ours, begad!"

We hurried as we neared the boathouse, for, sure enough, the tracks led straight towards it. The snow just outside was much disturbed, but I did not pause to examine it thoroughly. My first concern was to have a look inside the place, to see what it contained.

The doors were old and ramshackle, with no proper fastenings. They had been propped up with a piece of heavy timber, probably washed up from the sea. Montie and I heaved this aside, and one of the doors half collapsed.

Something moved inside the shed, and we peered in curiously.

"Begad!" said Montie.

We saw a fine-looking horse, with its hindquarters towards us. It was rather cramped for space, for a neat trap stood beside it. One glance told us that the boathouse contained nothing else. Just the horse and trap, and that was all. The missing Dorrie was certainly not there.

"Well, we've found something," I said, as Montie and I entered. "Not much, I'll agree, but we haven't drawn a blank. This simply shows that Dorrie's captors are jolly smart."

"Does it, really?" asked Montie. "I must confess, dear fellow, that my brains are incapable of followin' your line of reasonin'. How does this prove that the awful scoundrels are smart?"

"Well, what's the inference to be gained from what we can see?" I asked.

"I'm bothered if I know," said Sir Montie mildly.

"The inference is this," I declared. "These men were determined that their trail should be covered. They knew that the snow would give them away unless they were very careful. What did they do?"

"Begad, that's what we're trying to find out!"

"They adopted a scheme to throw the

police off the track," I went on. "As it happens, the police aren't on the job—and we are. The men came here in a boat, and the trap was waiting for them, I expect. Therefore, the only tracks left are these between this old boathouse and the castle."

"But Mr. Lee is followin' some tracks——"

"Yes, I overlooked them for the moment," I admitted. "Still, the proposition is a very tough one. The inference, as I told you, is that Dorrie's attackers came here in a boat."

"Exactly—you just said so."

"That was what we are supposed to believe," I said grimly. "But the facts, in my opinion, are different."

"Begad, you surprise me!"

"I don't think for a moment that a boat was used——"

"But, dear old boy——"

"Listen to me," I interrupted. "The sea was rough last night—quite high, in fact. The night was dark, and snow was falling. Do you think it's probable that a small boat could have landed here, on this rocky beach? I don't think it could have been done—the boat would have been smashed to bits in the surf. A landing would be difficult in daylight, but at night, and in a snowstorm, a landing would be almost impossible!"

"Dear fellow, I certainly agree with you," said Montie. "It hadn't struck me like that before. There are some shockin' rocks just here, an' no ordinary boat could come ashore at night, with the sea high. You are assumin', I suppose, that the scoundrels walked along the beach?"

"Something of that sort," I replied. "Anyhow, I'm not done yet—I haven't given up the game. I mean to look round for other evidence. And, to begin with, we'll examine this old boathouse."

It didn't take us very long to do that.

We looked over the place carefully, and we looked over the trap. We found nothing of importance. On the floor of the trap, however, were one or two dark spots which were unmistakable in their character.

"Blood!" I remarked grimly. "It looks bad, Montie—it looks horribly bad. It seems to me that Dorrie was injured, and he was brought away by those rotters for some particular reason. I can't bear to think that Dorrie is

dead, and that his murderers have thrown his body into the sea——"

"Dear old boy, you shock me!" interrupted Montie, horrified. "Such a thing cannot be true—it is too awful to even consider."

"I know it is, but we've got to go by the evidence," I said quietly. "And you must admit, Montie, that things look bad."

"They do," confessed Montie; "they look frightfully bad."

We left the boathouse shortly afterwards, and I walked thoughtfully down the beach towards the sea. Tracks led down to the surf, and then vanished completely. It seemed clear to me that the same dodge had been worked; Dorrie's captors had walked on the damp sands, relying upon the tide to obliterate their tracks before the morning.

And the tide, it seemed, had not disappointed them.

But then I received a ray of hope. Glancing casually down the beach, I thought I saw a footprint, just at the point where the sand showed the high-water mark. Perhaps the beggars had been too confident of the sea; they had reckoned that the tide would come in further than it actually had done.

"Let's have a look at this, Montie," I said briskly.

"Eh? Have a look at what?" asked my noble chum.

I didn't reply, but walked sharply down along the sands. And I soon found out that my surmise was correct. Here and there, just at the high-water mark, traces of footprints could be seen. And where there were footprints there were other curious marks.

It almost seemed that the sand had been swept by something, and it did not take me long to arrive at an explanation.

"Can't you see, Montie?" I asked gravely. "There are footprints here and there, and these other marks, which look like the trail of a dragged sack, were caused by Dorrie's body being drawn along."

"Dear fellow, don't put it that way, it sounds too awful," protested Montie. "You might think we were talkin' of a corpse, begad!"

"Well, whether Dorrie was alive or dead, he had a body," I said. "And there is no doubt that he was dragged

along here in an unconscious condition, or, at least, in a helpless condition. It stands to reason that he couldn't have been dragged far, so we ought to make other discoveries soon."

"Let's hope we do, dear fellow."

We continued our way for two or three hundred yards; and, at intervals, we came across the unmistakable marks in the sand, sometimes in the snow. And then, at last, the trail became positive again.

It led up the beach abruptly at right angles from the sea. And, glancing at the cliff, I saw that a low, dark opening was visible.

A cave!

So this was the truth! Lord Dorrie more had been pulled along the beach for a distance, and had then been placed within a cave. But were the burglars there also?

That was the point we had to decide. Neither Montie nor I had any weapons on us, but I was not inclined to hesitate because of this. We hurried towards the cave, and found that the footprints led right into the dark opening.

"This is beginnin' to get excitin'," remarked Tregellis-West, in a low voice. "Shall we explore?"

"Yes, rather," I said. "I've got my electric torch with me, and we'll go straight in—or, at least, I will."

"Rats! I'm comin' with you."

"But there might be danger," I began.

"That's all the more reason I should come," said Montie simply. "Shall I lead the way, dear boy?"

"No, you won't," I said. "That's my department!"

I pulled out my torch, bent down, and cautiously entered the cave. Tregellis-West came just behind me, eager and alert, but perfectly calm, and ready for any emergency.

At first we could see little, although the torch cast quite a respectable light. After the brilliant sunlight, however, the torch seemed absurdly weak and dim. The effect soon wore off, however, and our eyes grew accustomed to the near conditions. We began to see distinctly.

And we found that we were in a long, low-roofed cave. It was rather narrow, and there was no opening of any description at the rear. The sand was dry, and therefore showed no distinctive

footprints. But the loose sand was greatly disturbed, showing clearly that human beings had been there quite recently. But the place was empty now.

"Well, Dorrie's not here, that's one good point," I remarked. "We certainly feel a bit more cheerful now. I do, at all events. But where on earth the fellows took Dorrie to is astounding."

"We might learn something if we look about us carefully," said Tregellis-West. "It's too awful to think that poor old Dorrie has really been killed. I can't think it, Nipper—I refuse to accept such an idea."

We went over the cave carefully, exploring every corner and crevice. Here and there we came upon signs of blood. These grim discoveries did not tend to make us particularly cheerful.

At last we had completed our search, and the result was nil. We had advanced no further in our investigation. We had drawn a complete blank, and knew absolutely nothing as to Lord Dorrimore's whereabouts.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can get the hang of it," I said, at length. "It seems so pointless, Montie. There's nothing in this cave. Why did the men come here. Why did they bring Dorrie here?"

"It's no good asking me," said Montie. "If you're puzzled, you can understand what my state of mind is. I'm in a shockin' muddle—I am, really. It seems so absurd to bring poor Dorrie here for nothing."

"That's exactly what I reckon," I said. "If we could only get at some explanation I should be more content. But this puzzle gets deeper and deeper. The more we probe, the more we are involved."

I flashed my torchlight round the cave once more, doing so in an absent-minded way, for I was thinking deeply. Then, abruptly, I held the torch steady, for a little patch of sand had become very significant to me.

"Look at that, Montie," I said, in a low voice.

"Eh? Look at which?"

"That little pile of sand over by the wall," I exclaimed. "It seems to me that it's been recently turned over. I can't help thinking that something might have been buried there."

"Buried!" gasped Montie. "Oh, be-gad!"

"You needn't be startled, and you needn't get alarming ideas into your head," I said grimly. "It's only a surmise on my part, and it's very likely that I'm positively wrong."

"I hope you are, dear old boy—I do, really!"

We walked over to the other side of the cave, and I gave the little pile of sand a preliminary kick. I did so quite carelessly, but gave a little gasp of astonishment immediately afterwards.

For my foot had struck against an article of clothing!

"Great Scott!" I breathed.

"What—what is it, dear boy?"

I picked the article out of the sand and shook it.

"A waistcoat," I said quietly.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Dorrie's waistcoat," I went on. "There's no doubt about it, Montie, I remember this vest quite well."

"But—but what can it mean?"

"I don't know," I interrupted, my voice shaking a little. "But it seems terrible. We shall have to scrape the sand away and search deeper down."

Sir Montie regarded me with troubled eyes.

"I'm frightfully nervous, old boy: I'm in a shockin' condition," he said shakily. "I'm positively afraid to look in the sand—I am, really."

"I don't much care for the job myself, Montie, but it's got to be done," I said. "We are fearing all sorts of awful things, but it's just as well to keep our heads clear."

We'd entered that cave with the purpose of investigating, and it was not our habit to flee from an unpleasant task. Lord Dorrimore had vanished; he had undoubtedly been carried to this cave; and we had just unearthed an article of his clothing. What could be more significant?

The evidence was appallingly grave.

Before allowing my thoughts to run further I went down upon my knees and scrambled away at the sand with my hands. At first I discovered nothing further, but then my fingers struck against something soft. I dragged the article out and shook it. It was a tweed coat!

"Dorrie's jacket!" muttered Sir Montie. "Dear boy, this is gettin' unspeakably awful!"

"It certainly seems bad, Montie."

I continued my search, and after a moment or two, I found further articles of apparel—a pair of trousers and a cloth cap. There was no underclothing or shirt, and the pockets of the suit contained nothing except a tobacco pipe, some matches, and a few odds and ends of Dorrie's.

"I suppose you know what all this evidence points to?" I asked abruptly.

"I think I do, old fellow," replied Montie. "It points to the fact that Lord Dorrimore was stripped——"

"But why was he stripped," I asked tensely. "Why should these men bring Dorrie here merely for the pleasure of stripping him?"

"I really don't know, old boy."

"Then I'll tell you," I said. "Dorrie was brought here because his captors had evil designs upon him—there is nothing else to think. In short, Montie, I can't help thinking that Dorrie has been murdered, and that his body has been thrown into the sea."

Tregellis-West looked pale.

"But it can't be, dear fellow—it's too horrible!" he exclaimed huskily. "My goodness, I can't believe it, Nipper! That such a thing should happen to a rippin' chap like Dorrie——"

"It's no good getting into a stew," I interrupted. "We've got to think this thing over carefully, Montie. We've got to come to some decision regarding our movements. I think it will be just as well if we found the guv'nor at once, and you had better rush off in search for him while I stop here. Or you can stop, if you like, and I'll go——"

"I have no objection to going," said Tregellis-West quickly. "In fact, I would rather go, dear boy. I'm not at all comfortable in this frightful place. But Dorrie is alive—I know he is. Begad, I won't believe that he has been thrown into the sea—I won't really!"

"I don't like to believe it myself," I said. "And even now the whole case is perplexing. Why should the thieves do these unnecessary acts? If they wanted to kill Dorrie, they could have chucked him into the sea with all his clothes on!"

"Exactly! That is just what I was thinkin'!"

"But they stripped Dorrie," I went on. "Why? Surely not for any sensible reason. Why should they strip him in this cold weather if they meant to carry

him away a prisoner? Why should it be done?"

Montie couldn't answer that question.

"It seems to be a mix up," he exclaimed. "I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels, Nipper boy. It's all worryin', an' there is no tellin' what has happened to dear old Dorrie. But you want me to get off in search of Mr. Lee, don't you?"

"I do," I replied. "You'd better hurry off at once."

Sir Montie nodded.

"I'm only too willin' to do this, but where can I find Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"You know that the guv'nor went off on that other track," I said. "So the best thing you can do is to go back to the lane, and then follow Mr. Lee's trail until you overtake him. But it's quite possible that you'll see him before then. I'll be making a closer examination of this cave while you're gone."

"Right, dear boy—I'll go now," said Sir Montie briskly.

He moved towards the cave exit.

But, as it happened, he was not destined to leave just yet. For, even while he was moving towards the patch of daylight, something of a rather startling nature occurred.

We heard a sound just outside the cave, a kind of a low chuckle. And the next moment a rumbling noise followed.

"Begad, what's that?" whispered Montie, halting.

It was not necessary for me to reply, for we saw, less than a second later, what the trouble was.

The cave entrance became darkened, and something hard ground against the rocks and splintered in one or two places.

A boulder, in short, had been rolled against the cave entrance, and there it stood, jammed.

"Quick!" I gasped. "We must push that aside, Montie——"

"But I don't understand, dear fellow," panted Sir Montie. "Has there been an accident——"

"An accident!" I echoed. "Where are your brains, Montie? We've been spotted, and we are now prisoners in this barren cave. Unless we can move that boulder aside we shall probably remain prisoners for some time. The enemy is on the watch, and he has turned the tables on us."

"Oh, begad!"

And, together, we moved across the cave to the blocked exit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OTHER TRAIL.

MEANWHILE, Nelson Lee and Tommy Watson were active in quite another direction.

They were following the second trail—the trail left by the man who had parted from his companions in the lane. The trap had continued its way to the beach, and the third man had made off alone.

Nelson Lee and Watson were determined to find out where the fellow had gone.

They had no difficulty in keeping to the track, for the footprints were deep in the snow, and they were even and regular.

"This is rather a curious business, Watson," remarked Nelson Lee, as they walked along. "I can understand the trap and everything else—I can picture exactly what took place during the night. But why did this man go through the snow alone? His action strikes me as being significant. Anything which seems unaccountable is generally of the utmost importance."

Tommy Watson nodded.

"But I can't see why this one man should have walked through the snow like this," he remarked. "It's jolly queer, sir. You might almost think that the rotter had done it on purpose, just to lead us away—just to send us off on a wild-goose chase."

"That is probably the exact truth, my lad," agreed Lee. "But we must not take anything for granted. Our business is to investigate thoroughly."

"Of course," said Watson. "But supposing this trail goes on for miles, sir?"

"Then we must follow it without a pause," said Nelson Lee. "I only hope that the man has not made for the town. If so, his footprints will be easily lost in the churned-up mud of the town. But we must not surmise, Watson; we are here to deal with concrete facts."

"Yes, sir," said Watson. "But everybody is anxious about Lord Dorrimore, and we want to find out something of the truth as soon as possible."

"That is quite right, Watson," said Nelson Lee. "I am hoping that this morning's work will not be in vain."

"Perhaps Nipper and Montie will do something, sir."

"Quite possibly," agreed Lee. "There is just a chance that we have come on the wrong trail, and that they have followed the correct one. For I have an idea that one trail has been faked, for the especial purpose of putting us off the scent. However, time will show."

"Yes, sir," said Watson. "But I hope we sha'n't be long. It's awful to think of Lord Dorrimore being carried away by a gang of murderous criminals. That blood, too! Perhaps he's badly injured. Perhaps——"

"Now, Watson, you mustn't imagine things," smiled Lee. "We are doing our utmost to discover the truth, and you will not improve matters by giving way to a mild form of panic."

"I'm not in a panic, sir; I'm simply anxious."

They continued their walk in the snow. The footprints on the ground were the only set to be seen, and they led away along the footpath towards the cliffs. The man who had walked that way was obviously one of the criminals who had entered Cliff Castle. Nelson Lee was quite certain that he was making no mistake.

The detective pondered over the affair as he walked. It was remarkable that such a case should come to his notice during the Christmas festivities; and it was still more remarkable that Lord Dorrimore should be the victim of a robbery plot. Dorrie was an active man, and Lee could hardly think that he had come to any real harm.

Very soon the trail led right to the cliff-edge. The man had walked along, dangerously near to the brink of the cliff, which was sheer in places. For half a mile Nelson Lee and Watson walked.

Then Lee came to halt.

"Hallo—hallo!" he murmured. "This looks significant."

The trail ended abruptly at the cliff edge.

Within a circle of about twelve feet the snow was trampled down, proving that the man had walked up and down, and round and round, before disappearing over the edge—for he had certainly gone over the edge.

There was no other way to account for the disappearance of the trail. The snow was thick everywhere, un-

disturbed, and pure white. Nelson Lee stood near the cliff, lost in thought.

"What does it mean sir?" asked Watson curiously.

"I hardly know my boy—I hardly know," said Lee. "It is quite obvious that the fellow walked up to this point. Then he stopped, stood about for a few minutes, and then paced up and down. I should say that he stamped about in order to keep himself warm."

"But what did he want to stop here for, sir?"

"Perhaps he had arranged to meet somebody, and the other party failed to keep the appointment," said Lee. "There is just a chance that the man grew careless in the darkness, and stepped over the brink."

"You—you mean he fell over, sir?" gasped Watson.

"What else is there to think, my boy?" asked Lee. "The man certainly did not fly into the air, and the undisturbed condition of the snow proves that he left this spot by vanishing over the edge."

"Then—then he must be down there now—dead?" exclaimed Watson.

Nelson Lee did not reply. He walked to the very brink, and gazed down upon the rocks below. The distance was considerable, and the cliff was almost sheer. It was certainly impossible for any human being to climb down.

Immediately below there were rocks, snow covered like everything else. Lee took out a pair of small binoculars and focussed them. He gazed down keenly for some moments, and then he nodded slightly to himself.

"Seen anything, sir?" asked Tommy.

"Yes, Watson, I have."

"The dead body, sir?"

"No," said Nelson Lee grimly; "something far more interesting."

"More interesting, sir?"

"Yes."

"But—but I don't follow——"

"I have seen footprints in the snow on the beach—clear footprints," said Nelson Lee. "No, my lad, don't come too near the edge; this snow is treacherous. But there are footprints down there. That seems to indicate that our friend succeeded in getting down the cliff."

"But he couldn't have done it, sir."

"He could—in one way," said Nelson Lee.

"Do you mean a rope, sir?" asked Watson. "Oh, no, that's impossible, though. If the chap had used a rope, the rope would be here now!"

"Not necessarily," said Nelson Lee. "I have also observed one or two other little details which are of great interest. For example, you will see that the cliff-edge just near my feet is considerably chafed. There is, in fact, a deep groove cut in the high ground."

"By a rope, you mean?"

"Yes, my boy."

"But where could a rope have been fixed, sir?"

"If you will take the trouble to look behind you, Watson, you will see a tree-stump not far distant. It is within the circle of footprints, and our friend evidently tied a rope to the stump and threw the loose end over the cliff. He then swarmed down, thinking that he had defeated any possible pursuers."

"He didn't know he'd have you on his trail, sir," remarked Watson.

Nelson Lee smiled as he walked over to the tree to examine it. Sure enough, there were plenty of marks on the aged bark to prove that Nelson Lee's theory was correct. The man had used a rope.

"You quite see the game, don't you?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir, except for one thing," said Tommy. "How did the rotter untie the rope when he was down at the bottom of the cliff?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I assume that you are putting me a poser?" he smiled.

"Well, it's a poser to me, sir."

"Then I will soon explain matters to you," said the schoolmaster detective. "It is really absurdly simple. The man secured the rope by means of a noose. The rope was double, you understand? Thus, when he reached the bottom he simply pulled one rope, and the whole thing came free."

"Oh, yes, sir," said Watson. "That's easy enough."

"I can now understand why the man trampled the snow down so completely," went on Lee. "It was in order to obliterate any marks caused by the rope. Our next move, my boy, will be to get to the beach."

"But we can't get down, sir!"

"Not directly, I will agree," admitted the detective. "But if you glance along the cliff, Watson, you will

see that there is a gap about half a mile further on. I fancy it will be an easy matter for us to scramble down at that point. At all events, we will try."

"Good!" said Watson. "Let's be going, sir."

They walked along more briskly, and when they arrived at the gap they found that Lee's prediction was correct. They had no difficulty in scrambling down the cliff at that particular point.

They reached the beach and then retraced their steps, but this time they were at the bottom of the cliff instead of the top. And at last they came opposite to the point where they had been standing, high above.

And, sure enough, there were marks in the snow.

"Now we had better go cautiously," said Nelson Lee. "I have no doubt that the man has attempted further trickery here, for it was obvious to him that the snow would betray his every movement, unless he took great precautions."

The footprints were difficult to follow, for the snow only lay in patches between the rocks. Lee and Watson had been scouting round for several minutes when the junior suddenly caught hold of Lee's arm.

"Look, sir!" he muttered. "There's somebody coming!"

Nelson Lee looked up quickly. Just round a high portion of rock Lee could see the figure of a man. He was curiously attired in a long coat and a hat which almost came over his eyes.

And the fellow was standing fairly close to a small cave, the entrance of which could just be seen, a dark hole in the cliff.

The man had no idea that other human beings were near by. He did not once glance in the direction of Nelson Lee and Watson. They had been concealed behind the rocks, and Watson had only noticed the stranger by accident.

"I wonder who he is, sir?" whispered Tommy.

"Hush, my lad—hush!" murmured Lee. "Keep quiet and watch."

They continued to watch, and the man's movements were certainly interesting. He was hanging about the cave entrance in a manner which was rather puzzling. It almost seemed as though he were waiting for somebody to emerge.

Then he seemed to come to a decision. For he seized hold of a giant boulder, which stood just against the cave. The chunk of rock seemed to be balanced, and it was a comparatively easy matter to heave it sideways.

As Nelson Lee watched, the man pulled the boulder over until it fell into place in front of the cave, blocking it completely.

"I have an idea that there is more in it than we can see," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Come, Watson, we will hasten up, and make inquiries."

They ran beyond the rocks and made for the stranger. The man turned abruptly as he heard the faint sounds made by the pair. For a second or two he stood quite still, staring.

Then he turned on his heel and ran off along the beach as fast as his legs would carry him.

CHAPTER VII.

DETECTIVES GALORE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH snorted.

"You can say what you like, but I think it's offside!" he declared warmly.

"Talking about football?" inquired Pitt, strolling up.

"Ass!" snapped Handforth. "I'm talking about this mystery concerning Lord Dorrimore. Why should those chaps of Study C have all the giddy credit? Why should they go off investigating and leave us behind?"

"Because Nipper is more suited to detective work, I suppose," put in De Valerie. "And Tregellis-West and Watson naturally went along, too. Take my advice, Handy, and leave the affair in Mr. Lee's hands."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I'm going to investigate on my own. I rather pride myself on my detective abilities, you know——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Laugh—I don't care," snorted Handforth. "You won't laugh when I turn up at dinner-time with the whole mystery explained. This is just the chance I've been looking for, and with my two assistants I mean to get to work."

"And who are your assistants?" grinned Pitt.

"Church and McClure, of course."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Eh?" said Church. "Oh, come off it, Handy! You know jolly well that McClure and I are going down to the lake for some skating."

"Of course we are," said McClure. "It was settled last night."

"Well, it's unsettled now!" roared Handforth. "You unfeeling rotters! You callous bounders!"

"What?"

"Going skating, with your host bleeding and possibly dying!" said Handforth scornfully. "You know that Lord Dorrimore has been kidnapped, and yet you talk about skating!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"I don't want to hear a word!" bawled Handforth. "I'm disgusted with you!"

"You dotty ass!" howled Church. "Lady Mornington told us to go skating. She asked us particularly to carry on just the same as usual—and it's our duty to oblige a lady, I suppose."

Handforth glared.

"Lady Mornington only said that because she wanted the fellows to feel easy," he declared. "But I don't believe in it. It's our duty—our duty, mind you—to help in the search for Lord Dorrimore. It's up to us to do all we can to discover the truth."

"You mean that?" asked Pitt.

"Yes, I do."

"And you really want to help all you can?"

"Of course, you ass!"

"Then the best thing you can do is to go skating," said Pitt blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny lunatic!" snorted Handforth.

"You'll do a lot more to help by keeping out of the way," explained Pitt. "You know as well as I do, Handy, that when you start investigating you generally manage to plant yourself into trouble——"

"Go and eat coke!" said Handforth tartly.

He marched off, leaving the juniors grinning. They were standing outside the gates of Cliff Castle. And Handforth stalked away down the lane in the direction of the beach.

But he halted after a few moments. He had suddenly realised that he was alone.

"Come on, you chaps!" he roared.

"No, thanks; we're staying behind!" yelled Fatty Little.

"I didn't want you, in any case!" shouted Handforth. "Detectives don't take elephants round with them! I was talking to Church and McClure. Come on, you bounders, unless you want your noses punched!"

"Rats!" said McClure. "We're going skating—— Oh, my hat!"

Handforth was stalking back.

"It's no good!" muttered Church. "We shall have to go. There's no getting out of it. When Handy gets into this condition the only thing is to humour him. All lunatics need humouring."

"I say, you chaps," whispered McClure, turning to the others, "be sports, and back us up. Come along with us. We shall have an awful time with Handy, alone. Let's all go together."

"I'm game," chuckled Pitt.

"Same here," said De Valerie.

Handforth came up, rolling back his sleeves.

"Now then," he said grimly. "Are you coming or not?"

"Oh, we'll come all right," said Church. "We're all coming, in fact—making a party of it."

"Good!" said Handforth. "I thought you'd learn some sense, sooner or later. You'll see me doing wonders before long, although it's not my habit to boast. My idea is to investigate this case in a thorough manner."

"Good!" said Pitt. "That's the style."

"Lead on, MacDuffer!" grinned De Valerie.

"Eh?"

"MacDuff, I should say," said De Valerie. "Same thing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors started off on their investigation. As a matter of fact, they were really keen to rag Handforth, for they were fairly certain that his investigation would turn out to be a fiasco.

They marched down the road until they came to a point where the wheel marks of the trap commenced. Handforth paused here, and gazed at the snow in a contemplative fashion. Then he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "That's the idea. It's as clear as daylight."

"What is?" grunted Church.

"The story of these footprints," said Handforth. "Can't you see them? They were caused by the whole gang—three or four of them. They had a cart too, by the look of it. Two of them were walking, and the others went in the cart."

"You'll be in the cart before long," said Christine blandly.

"I don't want any of your rotten joking!" said Handforth. "My plan is to follow these footprints—the footprints caused by the gang——"

"You dotty ass!" said Church. "These tracks were made by——"

"The gang, just as Handy says!" interrupted Pitt, with a rapid wink, which Handforth did not catch. "Hasn't the great oracle spoken? Haven't we got the word of the marvellous crime investigator to comfort us?"

"Well, yes," said Church. "But I can't see——"

"Of course you can't see," said Pitt. "It's not your business to see. Handy is doing all the detecting."

"Of course!" said Handforth. "I'm glad you take that view, Pitt. You've got more sense than I gave you credit for!"

Pitt found it somewhat difficult to keep his face straight, but he managed to do so by a great effort. And Handforth walked on in advance, in splendid isolation. He did not notice the grins which broke out.

"The lunatic!" chuckled Church. "Those tracks were made by Mr. Lee and Nipper. I didn't think Handy was so dull——"

"Dull!" echoed De Valerio. "Shame! How dare you make such a suggestion? Handforth is the most marvellous detective that ever happened. We've only got to follow him, and we shall overtake the criminals. In other words, we shall join in the fun. Handy's face will be a study when he gets to the end of the trail."

The fellows grinned still more, and walked briskly down the road in Handforth's wake. In due course, they arrived at the boathouse on the beach; they couldn't very well do anything else, since the trail led direct there.

"The horse and trap!" exclaimed Handforth triumphantly. "There you are. We are getting nearer and nearer to the solution! You see? Look at the footprints leading away along the beach!"

"Marvellous!" said Pitt admiringly.

"Eh?"

"How can you do it?" asked Pitt. "Your cleverness is staggering, Handy. How could you possibly know that those marks in the snow are footprints?"

"Why, you can tell by their shape—at least, I can, with my trained eye," said Handforth. "Of course—— You silly asses! I suppose you're trying to be funny?" he added, as he observed the broad grins of his companions.

"Oh, no!" said Christine. "You're the comedian, Handy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth marched away, with a sniff. It was easier for him to follow the trail along the beach, and the crowd of juniors followed behind, wondering what the next move in the game would be.

They went on for quite a distance, but nothing very exciting happened. Then the party moved round a clump of rocks and turned almost at right angles. They saw the low entrance to a cave.

Handforth came to a halt, his face flushing with excitement.

"Back, you asses—back!" he hissed. "There's one of the gang inside!"

"Mr. Lee, I suppose!" breathed Pitt.

The other fellows chuckled, but they craned their necks round the rocks. And they saw the figure of a man standing a few yards from the cave. He crept up to it gradually, in a furtive manner.

"Well, I'm blessed!" whispered De Valerio. "There might be something in this, after all! That chap looks a queer merchant!"

"Something in it—of course, there's something in it!" said Handforth tartly. "You don't suppose I'd lead you on a wild-goose chase, do you?"

The other fellows did not reply. As a matter of fact, they were rather astonished, for it certainly seemed that something of an unusual nature was occurring near the cave.

They were even more convinced of this when the mysterious stranger heaved a boulder in front of the cave entrance. Nelson Lee and Watson, just on the other side of a bunch of rocks, witnessed the incident, too. But neither party knew of the other party's presence.

And then, as Handforth and Co. watched, the stranger suddenly took

to his heels. He came running, with all his speed, right in the direction of the group of boys. They hardly knew what to do for the moment.

Then two more figures came into sight—the figures of Nelson Lee and Tommy Watson. They were chasing the man, and Handforth let out a wild whoop of victory. He turned round to the others, his eyes glittering.

"Come on!" he roared. "We'll collar the rotter!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed Pitt.

He was so astonished that he did not rush out for a moment. It was staggering that Handforth had actually led his companions to something which was really connected with the case. The fact that Nelson Lee was there proved that this was true.

Handforth and Co. rushed out, and surrounded the stranger, just as he neared the rocks. He was overwhelmed in a second, bowled over in the snow, and held down tightly.

— — —

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL SERENE!

CRASH!

Nelson Lee and Tommy Watson turned abruptly as that sound came to their ears from the rear.

And what they saw caused them some little surprise. The big boulder had been pushed aside from the cave entrance, and it had thudded down upon the other rocks. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I emerged into the open, flushed and angry.

"My hat!" I shouted. "The guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee took one look at the crowd of juniors, and saw that they held their prisoner securely. Then he waited for Sir Montie and me to run up.

"Well, Nipper?" he asked. "This is rather surprising. I hardly thought that your trail would lead to the same destination as mine. What were you doing in that cave?"

"That's where the trail led, sir," I panted. "We were just coming out when somebody pushed a chunk of rock over the entrance, but we easily pushed it aside."

"That is curious," said the guv'nor. "Watson and I arrived just in time to see the fellow blocking you up. It

seems that the two trails both lead to this cave, and that is decidedly astonishing. Watson and I have done nothing except make our way here. Have you anything to report?"

"Begad, what are all those fellows doin', sir?" put in Montie.

"They have captured the stranger—the man who attempted to bottle you up," explained Lee. "There is no immediate hurry, the boys will bring their prisoner up within a minute or two. Well, Nipper?"

"I'm afraid things are bad, sir—awfully bad," I exclaimed gravely. "You'd better come into this cave and have a look for yourself before long. It seems that poor Dorrie has been killed——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "I don't believe that, Nipper!"

"His complete suit of clothing was buried in the sand at the back of the cave," I said grimly. "Why should those rotters rip Dorrie's clothes off if he was alive and well?"

"I don't pretend to know, Nipper, but I cannot possibly think that such a tragedy as you suggest has actually occurred," said Nelson Lee. "Possibly we shall know more after we have questioned this mysterious fellow."

Lee turned, and we saw that Handforth and his companions were bringing up their prisoner. He walked in the midst of the crowd in a slouching attitude. He was tall, shabbily attired, and his dark beard was unkempt and ragged. His coarse black hair escaped from under his hat and lay in tufts over his forehead.

"We've got him, sir!" exclaimed Handforth triumphantly. "He seems to be a foreigner, by the sound of him."

"What a marvellous deduction!" murmured Pitt.

The man was jabbering away at full speed in Italian. He excitedly waved his hands, and talked in a shrill voice without a pause. He was apparently very excited, and his eyes gleamed strangely.

"Talk in English, you jabbering ass!" roared Handforth.

The man continued in Italian.

"Begad, I believe you are puttin' it on, you frightful rotter!" exclaimed Sir Montie warmly. "You have murdered Lord Dorrimore, an' you are now pretendin' to know nothin'!"

"Murdered Lord Dorrimore?" gasped Pitt, looking pale.

"Well, we've found Dorrie's clothes in that cave," I said grimly.

"He must have been chucked into the sea!" exclaimed Handforth, horrified. "We'll chuck this rotter in——"

"Steady boys—steady!" said Nelson Lee, pushing forward. "Look here, old man, I should advise you to stop this Italian stunt of yours. You've played your game pretty well, but it's finished now. We've got you!"

The man jabbered away with more excitement than before, and we regarded him with hostile looks. I considered that the gov'nor had spoken to him too easily, and I couldn't quite understand it.

"Grab him!" shouted Handforth. "We'll duck him in the sea, and then carry him along to the police-station. Lend a hand!"

The boys crowded round, eager to help. And the stranger ceased talking in Italian very abruptly.

"By gad!" he exclaimed.

Nelson Lee chuckled. His face burst into smile, and then he laughed heartily, reaching out as he did so for the unkempt beard. He gave it one big pull, and it came away in his hand.

"Great Scott!"

"It's a false beard!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great doughnuts!"

Nelson Lee grabbed at the hat, and it came away in his hand, and a wig with it. And everybody stared at the stranger in amazement. His sun-burnt face was wreathed in smiles, and I recognised it on the instant.

"Dorrie!" I gasped.

"Lord Dorrimore!" shouted the crowd.

"Great pip!"

Lord Dorrimore roared with laughter.

"You—you awful spoofer!" I shouted. "Oh, my goodness! I'm terrifically glad to see you safe, Dorrie——"

"My lad, you're makin' a mistake," grinned Dorrie. "I'm dead—I'm chucked into the sea, by gad! Ha, ha, ha!"

Nelson Lee seized his lordship's shoulder.

"I think you owe us a little explanation, old man," he said grimly.

"I suppose you realise that you've hoodwinked us completely this morning? I gather that you are aware of the fact that we have wasted the morning in following your precious trail?"

"Exactly," grinned Dorrie. "That's just what I wanted!"

"You—you swindler!" I shouted.

"You spoofed us, as Nipper would call it, until a minute or two ago," said Nelson Lee. "But as soon as I saw you run, Dorrie, I knew the truth. You've played your game well, and I congratulate you. But I must confess that I cannot quite understand what the game actually was."

"And we've been worryin' in the most shockin' manner. It's too bad of you, sir—it is, really!"

Lord Dorrimore wiped his tears away.

"Well, perhaps it is, but I couldn't resist the temptation," he said, grinning. "I know you'll forgive me—you're all warm-hearted. I didn't see why you couldn't have a little problem to be goin' on with, Lee."

"Oh," said Nelson Lee, "you were anxious to find me some work?"

"Exactly," said Dorrimore. "You see, it was such a bally pity to have you at the castle doin' nothin'. I figured it all out to myself, and provided you with a brand new, ready-made mystery, an' left you to chew at it."

"I see," smiled Lee. "Well, you certainly succeeded remarkably well. I must confess that I had no suspicion of the truth until a few minutes ago. I overlooked that you are an incorrigible practical joker."

"Of course, my sister was in the game, too," said Dorrie. "I faked it up with her yesterday. She's as bad as I am when it comes to a good joke, an' I couldn't see any reason why you shouldn't have a mystery to deal with. I meant to carry it further, but these young bounders collared me."

"That was my fault, sir," said Handforth. "I was on the trail——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You asses!" snapped Handforth. "What are you cackling at?"

"You!" grinned Pitt. "I'm going to cackle again, too! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you——"

"The trail you were following was made by Nipper and Tregellis-West," chuckled De Valerie. "As it happens, it turned out all right, but we didn't think we'd enlighten you to begin with—we didn't like to disappoint a born detective!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" gasped Handforth. "I—I thought——"

But he was interrupted by another howl of laughter, and in order to hide his confusion he retreated to the back of the crowd.

"But what about that mysterious chap we chased along the beach last night?" I asked. "Who was he?"

"You are now gazing at him," grinned Lord Dorrimore. "I thought it just as well to prepare things in advance; I wanted to create an air of mystery before the actual robbery took place."

"Well, you took a terrific lot of trouble over it," I said.

Dorrie sighed.

"Trouble!" he said. "I haven't worked so hard for years. 'I've been workin' like fury ever since yesterday evenin'. I haven't had any sleep or rest. It's been positively frightful."

"Nobody asked you to do it," chuckled Lee.

"Quite right; but the game was well worth the candle," said Dorrie. "It'll be to my credit in future that I succeeded in spoofin' the wonderful Nelson Lee. It's a great achievement."

"But how did you fake up all the tracks?" I asked curiously. "You must have walked miles, Dorrie!"

"Miles!" said his lordship. "I've walked leagues! I've been trampin' about, along the cliffs, and along the beach, until I am weak. I've been drivin' a horse an' trap, an' I've been frightfully worried all the time in case I should give the game away too early."

"Well, you deserve a raggin' for this," I said grimly. "I suppose you know that Montie and I nearly cried when we were in that cave?"

"Really?" said Dorrie. "That's awfully interestin'. I suppose you were on the point of sobbin' because I bottled you in——"

"Rats!" I interrupted. "We got out easily enough. No, we nearly cried because we thought you'd pegged out; we thought your remains had been cast into the sea——"

But I was unable to proceed further, for Lord Dorrimore was roaring so heartily that I could do nothing but join in. We were compelled to see the joke, and could appreciate the richness of it.

But his lordship did not escape the ragging.

He was seized by the crowd of juniors and frog-marched along the beach, although, of course, it was a very gentle frog-march. The juniors got tired of it before Dorrie did.

"Good!" he exclaimed when he was set down. "That was ripping! You can carry me all the way if you like!" But the fellows declined and Lord Dorrimore went the remainder of the distance on his own feet. There was considerable excitement at the castle when the truth became known, and that evening everybody was merry and bright.

Dorrie had had a nap during the afternoon, and he was as bright as ever.

Lady Mornington came in for a good deal of chaff, but everybody admitted that the joke was an excellent one. Umlosi did not regard it with much favour, however, and he gave Dorrie a lecture which did not seem to impress his lordship in the slightest degree.

Our Christmas, after all, was a very happy one, and everything was merry and cheerful. There was no tragedy, as we had feared.

And the following day preparations were set afoot for a big fancy dress carnival. It was to be a somewhat gorgeous affair, by what I could understand, and all the juniors were looking forward to it with much anticipation.

I shall not have the pleasure of recording the incidents concerning the New Year carnival, but I believe they will be set down elsewhere. We certainly enjoyed ourselves immensely.

We were due to remain Lord Dorrimore's guests until New Year's Day, and then we would disperse to our various homes, before returning to St. Frank's, for most of the fellows were anxious to spend a week, at least, in their own family circle.

There was destined to be considerable fun over the New Year, and many new heroes were to spring forward. What this fun exactly was I cannot set down here, but I shall certainly have the pleasure of doing so very shortly.

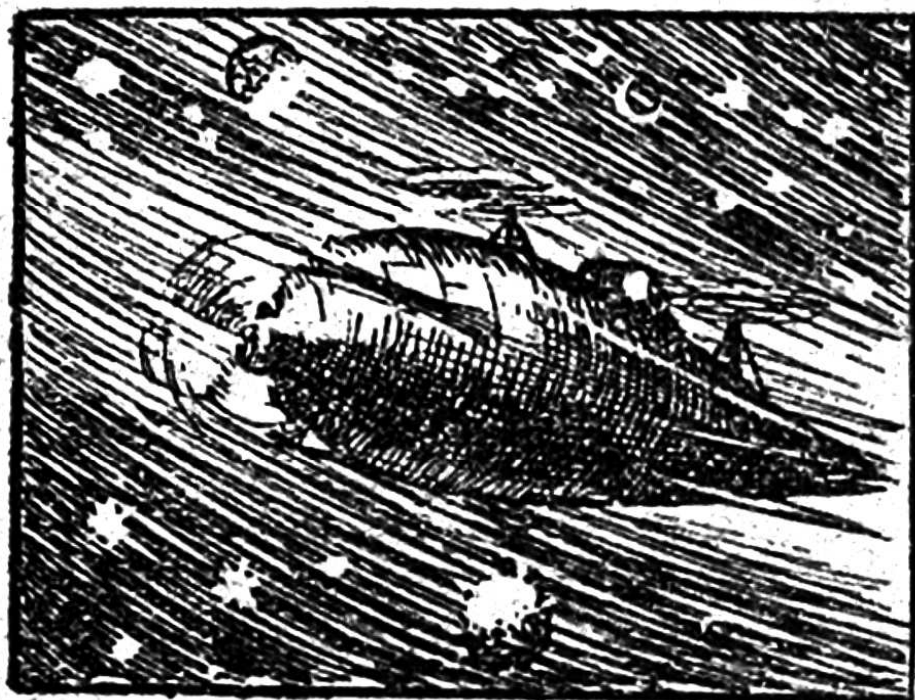
And so I will wish everybody a bright and happy Christmas, and leave it at that!

THE END

NEXT WEEK!

"THE NEW YEAR HEROES."

MAGNIFICENT STORY OF ADVENTURE AMONG THE PLANETS



IN TRACKLESS SPACE.

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

By ROBT. W. COMRADE.

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

INTRODUCTION.

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

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

(Now read on.)

The Planet of Caverns.

THE travellers looked about them with wonder-laden eyes as the aeronef sailed serenely out of the tunnel-mouth. Right before them stretched a wonderful panorama. As

far as the eye could see the place was brilliant. In the near foreground a huge city lay, while at its side were fields and meadows. The river took its course through the heart of the city, and they could see it glittering and sparkling right away at the other side. All this may sound very much like a fairy-tale; yet I am only putting down the facts related to me by Robert Gresham himself, corroborated in every detail by his companions of that wonderful voyage.

To resume. As the adventurers looked they could see the roof of this cavern, smooth and chocolate-coloured, some hundreds of feet over their heads. But where did the light come from? Try as they would, not one of them could discover from what source it emanated. In comparison to Venus, Mars was proving a planet of wonders, of incredible improbabilities, and the human beings felt almost bewildered as they gazed about them.

"I canna find words tae express masel'!" Mac ejaculated. "If it wasna for the fact that I'd got pins and needles in ma right leg I'd say I was dreamin'."

"You would have every cause to think such a thing," said Gresham; "for of all the most marvellous things we have seen on this journey, this is surely the most marvellous. I am almost repeating the professor's words of a short while back, for I cannot find others to express myself better. Look, we are nearing the city; you can see the inhabitants moving about. Professor, I should imagine your heart is gladdened. At last we are on a planet which is civilised."

"When I describe Mars in the book

"I shall write," Palgrave said, "I shall startle England. But although this globe is undoubtedly inhabited, I shall be infinitely surprised—not to say amazed—if its inhabitants prove to be any way similar to ourselves. They will seem to us—as we shall seem to them—impossible beings—freaks; efforts only of a fertile imagination."

"I don't think there is very much imagination about it," put in Frank. "Everything we've seen is real enough. That funny machine thing in the tunnel was, anyway! What do you say, Mac?"

"Rather!"

The Solar Monarch was now moving slowly over the edge of the city. They had left behind them a large field of the coarse seaweed-like grass. The ship was a bare hundred feet from the ground, and the first thing its occupants noticed on entering the town was the colour and brilliance of its roads and buildings.

"What are they made of?" inquired Mac curiously. "By gum, it looks like gold more than anything else!"

"Gold!" Gresham exclaimed. "So it does, Mac. But see, have you ever beheld such buildings? Are they not marvels of architecture?"

They were. The glittering palaces were small but magnificent. They had gables, ornamental work, and other architectural marvels, too numerous to mention. There were several peculiarities about them, however. For instance, no windows were visible in the sides; these appeared to occupy the whole top of the house, which was flat, with decorative parapets. No entrance of any description could be seen. Every building was precisely similar to its fellow, and they were not arranged in roads or streets; they were dotted about here and there in seeming hopeless confusion. And now a word about the Martians themselves. Here I am forced to repeat the remarks which I made in respect to the inhabitant of the tunnel. Nevertheless, I will describe to you as accurately as Gresham described to me.

Somewhat similar to the water-dweller, the Martians might almost be called machines. They were certainly far from being flesh and blood. On the average, the height of them worked out

at about five feet. In figure and build they were wildly grotesque. Their bodies—which is hardly a proper term to use, but I do so in want of a better one—were oblong, with many projections. At the bottom of the boiler-like objects protruded a couple of straight rods, barely half an inch in diameter, but which, nevertheless, were the Martians' legs. And from almost every quarter of their "bodies" long flexible tentacles jutted out, the end of each culminating in several tiny feelers. From the top of the oblong "body" two arm-like objects shot straight upwards, and the ends of these, being evidently flexible, were constantly moving backwards and forwards and from side to side. They were, it seemed, the Martian's eyes, for at the extremity, large, watery globules could be seen. And, to conclude this bizarre and grotesque description, in the place where one would expect a head to be, there was nothing but a large cavity, and out of this cavity there issued everlastingly a thin spiral of smoky vapour, purple in hue. The whole of the creatures, moreover, glittered like brand-new silver and were indistinguishable from that metal.

After the first gasp of surprise had passed over, Mac rushed for his camera and succeeded in taking several excellent photographs. The explorers could talk of nothing else; they were totally engrossed in the marvellous scene below them.

"There is one thing I am rather surprised about," Gresham said. "And that is that I have seen no animals of any variety. I should hardly think the planet is devoid of savage beasts. Another amazing thing is the utter absence of bird-life. Have you noticed how quiet everything is? These Martians are noiseless—listen."

They all remained quiet; but the only thing which broke the stillness was the shrill whirr of the aeronef's screws. And yet the Martians seemed to take not the slightest notice of them; they might, for all the effect they saw, be hovering over a deserted ocean.

"I wonder if I could draw their attention," said Gresham. "I mean, get them to show signs of recognition. It is incredible that they have not seen us. Personally, I think they have; at

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

all events, I'll give them a hail and see what effect it has."

The inventor raised his voice and shouted loudly. They were all leaning over the rail of the stationary airship, but none of them saw any sign that the hail had been heard. After waiting for a matter of five minutes, during which time they noted the seemingly aimless—to them—manner in which the inhabitants moved about, Frank suddenly drew their attention to a remarkable object which had apparently come from nowhere in particular. At all events, it had not been observed from whence the object had arisen.

Floating up into the air, unattached to any string, was a huge oblong cylinder. What it contained, or what its object was, it was quite impossible to guess. Its colour was black, and it slowly mounted higher and higher until the travellers could see that it was making for the Solar Monarch. Its length, approximately, was about twelve feet.

"What can it be?" asked Frank curiously. "And how, in the name of all that's Martian, is it being propelled or guided?"

"If you take my advice," said the professor, "you'll all retire into the conning-tower, shut the door, and raise the vessel. It is impossible to tell what this cylinder contains, and it would at least be a safeguard. It is foolish, I consider, to take unnecessary risks."

"I agree with you there," Gresham put in. "But can there be any danger in that innocent-looking floating cylinder. It is my belief it is some kind of message."

"I, myself, am going in, anyhow," Palgrave answered, crossing the deck. After a moment's hesitation, the others followed, and the door was closed. The cylinder was now rapidly growing nearer. Gresham laid his hand on the telegraph in readiness to signal to Abbie, but he was too late. As they watched the strange object seemed to dwindle; rapidly it grew smaller, until finally it disappeared in a cloud of thick bluish vapour, which, swirled round the aeronef in a remarkable manner. Gresham darted to the other side of the room and seized a small instrument. A couple of minutes later he turned an ashen face to his companions.

"Professor," he said huskily, "but

for your timely suggestion we should now be all stretched lifeless on the deck!"

"What do you mean?" cried Frank, starting forward.

"Exactly what I say, my dear lad. One breath of this vapour you see hovering around us would mean instant death. Had it not been for you, professor, I should have been foolish enough to have stayed outside."

"It is undoubtedly a good thing we came indoors," laughed Palgrave, although his face was white. "But I wonder if the Martians intended it to kill us."

"I should say so," Frank exclaimed. "But why they want to destroy such important visitors as ourselves is a question. We seem to be barred everywhere. First at the moon, then on Venus, now these walking petrol-motors seem to have a grudge against us! About that vapour. If the Martians thought it would kill us, it is only logical to conclude that it is harmful to themselves, and is, therefore, used as a weapon of attack."

"Just what I think," Palgrave remarked. "So, after all, these wonderful creatures are similar to us in that respect, if no other. Don't you consider it would be advisable to raise the vessel out of this unpleasant atmosphere, Gresham?"

"It would be more healthy, at all events," Gresham touched the telegraph, and in a few moments the Solar Monarch was speeding along at a much higher altitude. The Martians below did not even see the aeronef, if one were to judge by the recognition they displayed. At the other side of the city, in a bare space, Gresham lowered the vessel to the ground. Telling the others to remain where they were he leapt down. In thirty seconds he was back again and the airship was soaring aloft.

"To satisfy my curiosity," the inventor explained, "I have tested the material with which these buildings and roadways are made, and have found them to be composed almost entirely of pure virgin gold."

"My hat!" said Mac excitedly. "Can't we take some away with us? Not for ourselves, but in the interests of science, I mean?"

(Continued overleaf.)

"A few nuggets will be sufficient," the professor said. "They would realise fabulous sums at home."

They were flying over trees now—chocolate-coloured trees on which hung dozens of red nuts. These were of unusual size, the average measuring twelve inches in diameter. The explorers procured one, and it required a heavy hammer to make any impression. Finally, after a struggle, it was smashed, and to their surprise it was found that the inside was no different. The nut was red throughout, as hard as coal, and just as chippy.

"This is, I presume," remarked Gresham, holding a piece in his palm, "the principle substance on which the inhabitants of Mars exist. You can see

that there are literally thousands of these trees scattered about."

"But it can hardly be called food," protested Frank. "It looks more like fuel to me. By Jove, these jokers must possess magnificent teeth if they have to dine on this stuff regularly.

"Probably they have no teeth at all. It is impossible to guess what they possess in the way of digestive organs. From what we have seen, the Martians appear to be a weird species of the steam-engine." And Gresham laughed.

"Hallo, we're coming to the end of the world again," Frank interrupted. "Look, the roof gets lower over there and the side walls close in. Half a minute—let me get my glasses. Ah, I thought so, there's another tunnel."

(To be continued.)

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