

XMAS STORIES AND ARTICLES ^{OF THE} VERY BEST.

THE Vol: IV. No 83.

Dec: 27TH 1913.

DREADNOUGHT

SPECIAL XMAS NUMBER.



THE MIDNIGHT SNOW FIGHT.

A ROLICKING SEASONABLE TALE OF THE BOYS OF CLIVEDEN SCHOOL.

BY CHARLES HAMILTON.

"The Christmas Mutiny"—"Pride of the Prairie"—"A London Lad in Mill-Land"—"Max the Magnificent"—"Last in the League"—"The Men who Changed Places," together with two fine full-page articles, "A New Magic Lantern" and "Catches and Games for Christmas," also appear in this grand Christmas Number—an amazing pennyworth.



THE MIDNIGHT SNOW FIGHT

A Rollicking Complete Tale of Cliveden College, Introducing the "Combine" and the "Old Firm."

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

CHAPTER I.

Caught in the Snow—A Surprise for the Old Firm—Pankhurst Takes the Lead.

"By Jove, it's coming down!"
"Sure, and ye're right, Dicky darling. And it's a fine half-holiday we're having intirely."
"I guess we'd better be getting on to Cliveden, kids."

Neville, Flynn and Poindexter, of the Fourth Form at Cliveden College—known in the school as the Combine—were standing under a tree some three miles from the old school, looking with glum faces at the thick, whirling flakes of snow as they fell.

It was Wednesday afternoon, a half-holiday at Cliveden, and the three chums had left the school in high spirits, and spent a couple of hours in strolling round the ancient market town of Carbury. Just as they set out for the homeward walk the snow began to fall. The Cliveden Combine cared little for a fall of snow, and they turned up their trousers and their coat-collars, and tramped on determinedly. But the snow was coming down now, as Poindexter expressed it, in sackfuls. Thicker and thicker it fell on the unsheltered high road, whirling in heavy flakes on the bitter wintry wind. And at last the three chums had drawn into the shelter of a tree, and there, shaking the snow from their coats and caps, they debated what was best to be done.

While in the market town, Poindexter, who had a keen American eye to business, had improved the shining hour by making various purchases of comestibles, which could be obtained at a much cheaper rate in Carbury than in the village of Clivedale, near the school. The result was that each of the juniors had a good-sized parcel to carry, as well as having his pockets stuffed. They set their packages down as they halted under the tree, glad to

be relieved of them for a time. Micky Flynn was slapping his chest vigorously to keep himself warm, swinging his arms like the sails of a windmill. Dick Neville stamped savagely on the ground.

"We'd better be getting on," said Poindexter. "It's a bit thick, I know, but I guess we can't do any good by staying here, and—ow! You utter ass!"

The back of Micky Flynn's right hand caught the American full on his rather prominent nose, as Micky gave his arms another wide swing. Poindexter staggered back, and clasped his damaged nose.

"Sure, and I wish ye wouldn't get in the way, Puntpusher!" exclaimed Micky Flynn indignantly. "Ye've hurt me hand intirely, and—"

"I'll hurt your fat head, I guess!" exclaimed Poindexter.

But Dick Neville stepped between.

"You said that we'd better be getting on," he said. "It's no good waiting here for the snow to stop. It would be like the chap who sat down on the bank and waited for the river to flow past, I guess!"

"Sure, and ye're right, Dicky. But we can't walk three miles through this beastly snow, you know."

"We can't stay here."

"Faith, but there's another way. We can go home by train if we can find our way to Fernedge Station."

Poindexter looked thoughtful. To go home by train would certainly be an improvement upon tramping three miles through a blinding snowstorm. Fernedge Station lay on a lane that led off from the high road, but exactly where the American chum did not know.

"It's a good idea," said Neville instantly. "Fernedge Lane turns off to the right here somewhere. Let's look for it."

"Not the sort of weather to go

wandering round looking for it," Poindexter remarked.

"Better than tramping three miles through this snow?"

"Well, we'll see."

The chums of Cliveden picked up their packages once more and shouldered them, and tramped on through the falling flakes.

"Hallo, I guess this is the place!"

Through the blinding flakes the chums made out a turning to the right. But the discovery benefited them little, for a second glance disclosed two turnings branching off in different directions at the same spot from the high road. As there was no sign of a guidepost, it was a puzzle which turning to take. One of them was doubtless Fernedge Lane, and would lead to the station they desired to reach, while the other was pretty certain to take them three miles out of their way.

"I guess," said Poindexter, after a good look round, "that we're in a fix. I wish we had old Panky with us now; he knows Fernedge Lane well."

Dick Neville grunted. It was useless to wish for Pankhurst just then. Pankhurst and Price, the Combine's rivals in the Fourth Form at Cliveden, had spent the half-holiday in Carbury, and the Combine had encountered them in the streets there, and exchanged volleys of more or less polite chaff. After that they had lost sight of the Old Firm, but at the present moment they would have given a great deal for Pankhurst's knowledge of the country. "Hark!" exclaimed Poindexter, holding up his hand. "I think I heard somebody."

"Not likely, darling."

"Shut up, while I listen."

"Faith, I tell ye it's not likely that—"

Poindexter seized Micky by the throat, and ran him against a tree. Taken by surprise, Micky had no choice but to shut up. The sound of

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voices came floating through the dimness of the thick, falling snow."

"I know we're on the track, Pricey."

Poindexter gave a jump.

"By Abraham Lincoln's whiskers, it's old Pankhurst!"

The Combine stood quite still under the big tree at the corner of the lane. They were almost concealed by it, and the two youths coming on down the lane did not observe them.

Two juniors from Cliveden, buttoned up in greatcoats, with mufflers, and with caps pulled down tightly on their heads. From under the caps escaped a lock or two of flaming red hair, showing anyone who knew Cliveden at all that the two juniors were Pankhurst and Price, self-styled the Old Firm.

The Combine remained silent, even Micky Flynn keeping his mouth closed, as the Old Firm came nearer. Pankhurst was still speaking.

"I wonder if they turned this corner, Pricey?"

"They'd be leaving the road to Cliveden, Panky."

"Yes, but they might have made up their minds to go by train. It's a bit difficult to follow tracks when the snow's coming down so thick. But we've been right so far, you see; here are the tracks, at the corner."

"Quite so."

"We are close behind now, or the tracks would be nearly covered, with the snow coming down so thick," said Pankhurst sagely. "Mind, when we get in sight of them, Pricey, not to alarm the rotters. They're three, and we're only two, and so we shall have to take them by surprise if we're going to have a chance of raiding the grub."

"Quite so."

The hidden juniors exchanged a grin. Moved by the same thought, they stooped down to gather handfuls of snow, and commenced to knead snowballs. Pankhurst was stooping in the lane, examining the tracks, and Price watching him.

"Yes, they left the high road here," said Pankhurst. "The question is, did they know the right way to Fernedge, or have they gone the other? But I'll soon see. They can't be far away now; in fact, I think we're pretty close to them."

"I guess you're about right there," remarked Poindexter, as his right hand went up and the snowball flew with deadly aim.

"Ow!" yelled Pankhurst, as the missile caught him behind the ear, and he went over in the sudden surprise, and fell at full length in the snow.

Price stared round in amazement, and as he stared two snowballs came whirling from under the tree, and smote him simultaneously. Price gave a gasp, and rolled over on the ground.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With a roar of laughter, the Combine rushed into view. Pankhurst and Price were sitting up in the snow, looking dazed. They jumped to their feet at the sight of the Combine.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Poindexter.

"I guess this is a case of the biter bit! Are you going to raid that grub, Panky?"

"Sure, and here it is, ready to be raided!" grinned Micky Flynn.

"Oh, pax, you boulder!" exclaimed Panky, as Dick Neville took aim with another snowball. "We're going to have a snow fight at Cliveden when we get in, and enough's as good as a feast. Sheer off."

Dick Neville grinned, and dropped the snowball to the ground.

"Right you are, Panky. As a matter of fact, we were just wishing for you, to show us the way to the railway-station."

"Good. I can do that."

The Old Firm dusted some of the snow off their coats, and Pankhurst led the way. The lane was narrow, and the snow piled deep in it, but the juniors faced it briskly.

"My word!" said Pankhurst. "It's a long time since we had snow like this near Cliveden. I don't remember a fall so heavy since I've been there."

"It's a bit thick, I guess," panted Poindexter. "How far is it to the station now, Panky?"

"Only a few minutes more, I think."

Pankhurst was right. A few minutes later the station came in sight, its roof gleaming one sheet of white in the gloom of the wintry afternoon.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Dick Neville. "Put it on!"

The juniors "put it on," and came up to the station with a rush. They dashed under the sheltering porch, and plumped down their parcels with great relief. Then they shook off the thick layers of snow, and knocked their caps on the wall to clear them. Then Poindexter went to the booking-office.

It was open, showing that some train or other was nearly due. Poindexter rapped, and a sleepy-looking man came and stared at him.

"Next train to Clivedale?" said Poindexter.

"Nearly due, sir, if the snow doesn't stop it."

Poindexter stared.

"My hat! I never thought of that! Is there likely to be a block on the line, then?"

"There have been some already," yawned the sleepy man. "I don't know whether there will be another. Single?"

"Yes, five," said Poindexter.

"That's a jolly prospect!" growled Pankhurst. "Fancy being snowbound at a dead-and-alive hole like this! Ask the image if he has any foot-warmers to give way, young Tinned Beef."

"None at this station," said the man in the booking-office. "You can get them at Carbury, and at Clivedale—"

"Oh, rats!"

Poindexter put the tickets in his pocket, and they went on to the platform.

Luck favoured them. The train had come in, and the carriage windows glimmered with yellow light through the mist. Poindexter opened a carriage door, and they bundled in.

"Right away!"

The door slammed, and the train jerked into motion. In the midst of the whirling snow the train ran out of the station.

Poindexter glanced from the window as the train, leaving the station behind, hummed on through the gleaming countryside.

Embankment and track, field and wood and roof, were white with a spotless carpeting, while it made a dazzling glare under the wintry sun.

Stopped on the Line—Snowed Up!

Thicker and thicker the snow came down, and the juniors knew that there were some masses of snow on the line, through which the engine was forcing its way.

"I guess we shall be late for tea at Cliveden," remarked Poindexter. "It's jolly lucky we got in this grub while we were at Carbury!"

The keen weather had made the juniors hungry enough. The packages were opened, and the good things intended for a study feed at Cliveden were passed round. There was nothing mean about the Combine. They were just as willing to share it with foes as with friends, and the Old Firm did full justice to the meal.

"Good!" said Pankhurst. "I like these tarts. I'll finish them for you, if you like, just to show there's no ill-feeling."

"Do," said Neville.

"They're jolly good! I like your taste in jam-tarts, really!"

"Quite so!" said Price.

"We'll stand you a feed, though, at Cliveden," said Pankhurst. "One good turn deserves another."

Pankhurst leant forward to take another tart. Micky could not resist the temptation, and gave the leaning boy a shove. His hand plunged into the sticky jam and pastry, whilst his head shot forcibly forward into Poindexter's waistcoat.

"Oh-h! Wouff-f!" groaned Poindexter; and then, recovering his breath, collared Pankhurst round the neck, and strove to rub his nose in the tarts.

"Rescue, Price!" cried Pankhurst, in a smothered voice.

Quick to answer his leader's appeal, Price dashed at Poindexter.

"Arrah! Is ut a fight ye're wanting?" cried Micky; and he, too, joined in.

At that moment the train gave a sudden, shivering jerk.

The four combatants reeled over, and went down in a heap in the bottom of the carriage, and Dick Neville was shot forward on to the opposite seat, from which he rolled upon the other juniors.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Pankhurst, in a muffled voice. "What's the matter?"

"Faith, and it's an accident!"

"Qu-qu-ite so!" gasped Price.

The juniors sorted themselves out, and scrambled to their feet.

The train was certainly at a standstill.

Poindexter, with his hair unkempt, and his collar hanging by one end, opened the window and put his head out. Many other windows had opened, and excited passengers were looking out upon the line. The guard was coming along the train.

"Hallo!" called out Poindexter.

"What's the matter?"

"The train's stopped."

"Snowed up?"

"Yes."

"Phew! Snowed up!"

The juniors did not look alarmed. On the contrary, it was clear enough that the untoward happening was by no means unwelcome to them. To be snowed up in a train was an adventure which would make them the envy of all Cliveden, and as yet they thought nothing of the privation and danger it might entail.

"I guess I'm glad we took this train," said Poindexter, rubbing his hands.

"It will make us late for the snow-fight at Cliveden—"

"Oh, so long as we get in before dark, that will be all right, I reckon."

"We may not get in before dark," said Neville, "or before morning, either, for that matter, my son."

"Oh, don't croak, kid!" said Pankhurst. "We're not hurt, anyway. I suppose they will try to back the train; but if the snow's too thick in front, it will be too thick behind, I should think."

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"I guess so."

"Keep your seats!" called out the guard.

"That's it; they're going to back the train."

With a jerk the train was set in motion again. It was going backwards now, but ere long it came to a stop with a sudden jerk. The juniors were prepared for it this time, and kept their footing.

"Stopped again!" said Pankhurst.

Again the train moved forward.

"Full steam on!" grinned Pankhurst. "But they won't get through the snow, I fancy!"

Pankhurst was right.

The speed slackened, and became

be about the coolest there. Poindexter would have been cool and level-headed under any imaginable circumstances, and the others followed his cue.

"We shall have to get help," said Poindexter resolutely. "I say, guard, what are you going to do?"

The guard shook his head helplessly. "They'll soon know at Clivedale that we're blocked in," he said, "and they'll set a gang to work to clear away the snow."

"And when do you think we shall get away?"

"We may get away by morning."

Poindexter whistled.

"That's not good enough," he said coolly. "We've got a snow fight

"All of us," said Pankhurst.

"Quite so!"

"Faith, and it's meself that's with you intirely, Panky! As for the grub we've got left, sure and it must be handed over to the ladies, in case the poor dears get hungry while they're waiting to be rescued."

"Good for you, Micky!"

The remains of the provisions were fetched out of the carriages; and the quantity was still considerable. Poindexter took the bundles to the guard, and explained to him. The man gave him a puzzled look.

"That's very kind of you, young gent; but you can't go through the snow."



In a moment Poindexter was collared by the defenders and dragged into the snow fort, where two or three juniors sat on his head, and held him a helpless prisoner.

slack and slacker. Finally, the train came again to a halt, and it was evident that further progress was impossible.

Poindexter opened the door, and the Cliveden juniors scrambled out. Other passengers were leaving the carriages. The guard was in consultation with the engine-driver. It was evident that they were helpless to deal with the matter.

The passengers surrounded them in an excited crowd.

The train was a local one, and carried no more than a dozen passengers all told, most of them country people returning from the market town of Carbury. There were several women among them, some of them inclined to be extremely frightened. The Cliveden juniors, as a matter of fact, seemed to

coming off at Cliveden this afternoon, and we've simply got to get in."

The guard shrugged his shoulders.

"But somebody must go for help."

"It can't be done, I tell you!"

"Well, if you can't do it, I can—"

"You can—eh?" said Pankhurst.

"What do you can? I know you can all sorts of things in Chicago—rats and horses and other nice things—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

"My dear Puntbuster, you started talking about canning—"

"Look here," said Poindexter, "we're not going to stick here all night, that's certain. Besides, we must have help. There's some women here, and we must get word to Clivedale at once for help for them. Who's game to try?"

"I'm going to try."

"But you can't, and I can't allow it."

"My dear chap, I don't want you to allow it. I can manage it all right without that. The only difficulty is the snow. I can—"

"You can't!"

"I can—"

"You're quite wrong, guard," said Pankhurst, "he can. He's in the canning trade, you see, and his father canned before him."

"Oh, shut up, Panky! Let's get along!"

"You mustn't go!" exclaimed the guard. "I am responsible—"

"I hereby, thusly, and therefore relieve you of all responsibility," said Poindexter. "You see, you can't stop

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us. We're five to one. And I suppose you don't want to have your head snowballed off, do you?"

And, leaving the guard still puzzled and doubtful as to what he should do, the juniors marched off to make their forlorn attempt to get through the snow to Cliveden.

Through the Snow—Welcome Home.

"Give me a bunk up!"

"I guess you'd better give me one."

"Rats! Of course, a member of the Old Firm is to lead the way!"

"My dear kid, the Combine is always at the front. First in the field, first in the study, first in the—"

"In the canning trade—"

"Oh, dry up—"

"Faith, and it's a set of silly spalpeens ye are!" exclaimed Micky Flynn. "Sure, I'll lead the way. Ireland always leads the way, doesn't she? Here goes!"

And Micky scrambled up the bank.

The Cliveden juniors had been searching along the bank for some favourable spot to climb, and, after a long search, they had found one. In this spot the embankment was less steep, and, under the snow, straggling bushes grew, which afforded some hold for hands and feet, and also held the snow more securely. The climb was certain to be a matter of difficulty, and might lead to an avalanche coming down.

"Here, come back, Micky!" exclaimed Poindexter.

"Faith, I'm not coming back! I'll show you how to do the trick."

And Flynn went plunging up the steep bank. Perhaps he was in too great a hurry to be careful. At all events, he came rolling down the next moment in the midst of masses of snow. He sat up, looking quite bewildered, amid the fallen snow, and stared around him. The juniors burst into a roar.

"Ha ha, ha!" yelled Pankhurst. "If that's the way you're going to show us, Micky Flynn, you needn't trouble."

"Sure, and I—"

"Rats! Get out of the way!"

"No fear!"

"I'll jolly soon shift you if you don't!"

"I guess I'm ready to see you try."

Pankhurst laid hold of the American at once, and they staggered away, and fell over Micky, who was getting up, jamming him down into the snow again.

"Arrah, ye howlin' spalpeens! Sure, and it's crushed I am intaiely!" roared Micky. "Get off my chest, Punt-pusher, or sure I'll bite ye!"

Neville grinned, and, leaving the others to scramble up as they could, he tackled the ascent of the bank, Price turning to his chum to help him rise. Neville clambered up the steep side, sending down showers of snow upon the juniors.

Poindexter looked up after him. Neville was half way to the top, and still going strong.

"I guess he takes the cake!" exclaimed the American chum. "But I'm next."

And Poindexter essayed to climb. Pankhurst reached out and grasped his ankle, and they went down together in a heap of snow. Flynn, giggling, followed Dick, and then Price followed him.

"Make it pax, ass!" said Pankhurst, as he scrambled up. "We shall be left behind at this rate. And I don't enjoy your company enough to stay here for it."

"Head or tail?" said Poindexter,

clasping a penny in his hand. "First guess does it."

"Right-ho! Head!"

"Head it is!" grunted Poindexter.

"Get on!"

"Right! Don't growl! It's only proper that I should go first, as head of the Fourth Form at Cliveden—"

"Rats! Get on!"

"Here goes!"

Poindexter sprang up the bank. The chief of the Old Firm followed. By this time Dick Neville had nearly reached the top, but the higher he rose the more difficult he found the ascent. And, suddenly, as he was almost at the level, his foot slipped, a tendrill he was grasping broke in his hand, and he fell. Away he slid down the way he had come, gathering snow and speed as he rolled down the slope.

"Arrah, ye gosssoon!" roared Micky Flynn, as Dick rolled into him, and sent him flying, too.

Price was the next to suffer. He had no time to get out of the way, and he went down with the other two, rolling and gasping.

Poindexter and Pankhurst were a dozen feet from the start when the three flying juniors rolled into them, carrying them away as if they had been smitten by an avalanche.

Down they went, five juniors with flying legs and arms, amid a cloud of snow. It was fortunate for the Cliveden juniors that there was a deep carpeting of snow in the cutting, or there might have been broken bones as the result of that wild slide. As it was, they plunged into the snow, nearly burying themselves, and lay there helplessly gasping for several minutes.

Poindexter was the first to scramble up.

"My Panama hat!" he exclaimed.

"What the dickens did you do that for, Neville?"

Dick Neville spluttered the snow out of his mouth.

"This is what comes of allowing one of you boudners to lead the way!" he exclaimed. "I'm going first this time!"

And Panky sprang up the bank.

"After him!" exclaimed Poindexter. "I guess he's not going to get ahead of us!"

And the juniors scrambled after Pankhurst.

The chief of the Old Firm was making good speed up the slope. As a matter of fact, the juniors, in rolling down, had almost cleared it of snow in that particular spot, and the bushes underneath were exposed to the falling flakes, and easy to hold.

Pankhurst was not long in reaching the spot where Dick Neville had lost his footing, and he here exercised great caution, feeling his way inch by inch.

Higher he rose, and higher, till at last he stood breast-deep in the snow on the high level, and waved his hand. He would have waved his cap, but it was buried somewhere in the deep snow of the cutting.

"Hurrah, it's done!"

"And we've done it!" shouted Price.

"Hurrah for Study No. 10!"

"Hurrah for the Old Firm!" shouted Pankhurst.

"Oh, dry up!" grunted Poindexter. "There'll be another avalanche if you make that row, kids. Still, I'm glad we've got out."

One by one the juniors dragged their weary limbs upon the summit of the embankment. The snow was deep around them and before them, but, after a brief pause to recover their

breath, they plunged on through it, and reached the road.

"A mile to Clivedale," said Poindexter. "Here's for a long tramp. Come on!"

The snow was thick on the road, and was still falling in heavy flakes. The five juniors tramped on doggedly. Exactly how long that tramp took them they did not know; but the wintry sun was sinking behind snowy clouds when they reached the village.

"The railway-station first," said Poindexter. "I dare say they don't know yet that there's anything wrong on the line. And, anyway, we can tell them exactly where the train is snowed up."

And the wet and snowy juniors hurried to the station to report the mishap to the train there. In the station-master's room they were given something hot to drink, and they felt all the better for it as they faced the snow again to tramp to Cliveden College.

Fortunately, the walk to the college was not a long one. Cliveden College gates, surmounted with snow, rose into view at last, and the five weary juniors passed in.

It was very dark in the quadrangle, save for the glimmer of snow with which the ground was carpeted. But several figures in scarves and caps were moving about in the gloom, and the five belated youngsters received a hint that their return had been noticed, in the shape of a shower of snowballs.

"Here, stop it!" exclaimed Poindexter. "We're not up to that sort of thing now. Is that you, Philpot, you rotter? Stop it, I say!"

Philpot, the cad of the Fourth, was taking aim with another snowball. Greene came up through the gloom, and gave him a push that made him sit down in the snow.

"Thank you, Greeney!" said Poindexter. "We're fagged out. Been snowed up in a beastly train, and had to climb out through heaps of beastly snow!"

"What about the snow fight?" said Greene. "We were waiting for you to turn up, you know, and we've got the fortifications all ready. There's a splendid fort built up over by the Fives Court, and the sides that has to attack will have all its work cut out to capture it."

"It's too late to-day," Pankhurst remarked.

Poindexter smote his thigh as a new idea came into his head.

"Not a bit of it! There will be a moon to-night. And why shouldn't we have a snow fight by moonlight?"

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Pankhurst.

"Quite so!"

"Faith, and sure ye—"

"We'll do it!" exclaimed Greene. "It's a ripping idea! Hallo, Trevelyan! Nice-looking crew of scarecrows I've got here, haven't I?"

Trevelyan, the captain of Cliveden, stared at the woebegone juniors in amazement as they entered the house.

"Great Scott! Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"Snowed up!"

"Come into my study!" exclaimed Trevelyan, hurrying the juniors into his room. "Get those clothes off—quick! I'll get some towels and blankets! Hurry!"

"I guess—"

"Don't talk! Move!"

"Right-ho!"

Trevelyan did not allow them to waste a moment. They were stripped and rubbed down with rough towels,

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and then they sat before a roaring fire, wrapped in blankets, while a change of clothing was brought to them. They had dressed, and, by the time they had finished, tea was ready in the captain's study.

Hot tea and muffins were grateful and comforting after their experiences in the snow. The juniors fell to with a hearty goodwill.

"You young rascals are always getting into some trouble!" Trevelyan remarked. "Now you are dry, you can tell me exactly how it happened."

"Sure, and I'll tell ye—"

"It was like this—"

"I guess I can explain—"

"You see, Trevelyan—"

"Shut up, all of you!" said Trevelyan. "Price can explain. He's about the only one that doesn't seem anxious to gloat on the sound of his own voice."

So Price told the story.

"Well, you've had a rough time, and I hope the other passengers are safe out of the snow by this time," said Trevelyan, when Price had finished, which he soon did, for Price was a fellow of few words. "You had all better stay before your fire to-night, and go to bed early."

Whereat the Combine and the Old Firm exchanged a series of expressive winks.

The snow fight in the Close had to come off yet, but about that they did not think it advisable to speak to Trevelyan just now.

They left the captain's study feeling perfectly fit after the rest and refreshment, and ready for anything.

"What a brick he is!" exclaimed Pankhurst. "I say, the moon's up over the clock tower, and it's left off snowing! Are you coming out?"

"Rather!"

"I guess so!"

"Come on, then!"

"Faith, and sure—"

"Come on!" said Pankhurst. And he led the way into the white-carpeted Close.

Something Like a Fight.

High over the tower of Cliveden soared the moon, and the light streamed down in a sheet of silver upon the snowy Close, and the gleaming, white roofs of Cliveden.

The snow had ceased to fall; but it was a foot deep in the Close. It was bitterly cold out of doors, but little cared the hardy juniors for that.

Poindexter drew in a deep breath of the keen air.

"I guess it's cold!" he exclaimed. "All the better! We shall soon be warm enough. Let's go and look at the fort, and see if the kids have done it according to instructions."

"It's all right," said Greene, joining the Combine with several other Fourth-Formers.

"Let's go and look, anyway. Get the rest of the Form together."

The Combine and the Old Firm walked over to the fives-court, and examined the snow fort.

Poindexter had laid out the plan of it, and it had been constructed by the juniors during the afternoon, there being plenty of material at hand, as only snow was used.

Poindexter looked at it with much satisfaction.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "That's all right! By Jove, this will be ripping fun! Now we had better separate the sheep from the goats."

The Fourth Form were nearly all in

the affair, and they had already agreed as to sides. The following of the Combine were about equal to that of the Old Firm. The rivals had never been quite able to decide which was head of the Form, and the question probably never would be settled. There were about fifteen lads on either side ready for the fray. Poindexter examined the fort with a critical eye. It was really very well built. The walls, built of solid blocks of hardened snow, were high and thick, and there was only one entrance, which could be blocked up when the defenders were inside.

"Now, which side is to hold the fort?" asked Poindexter. "As the attack will be the more difficult part of the business, I think you had better have the fort, Panky, our side being a cut above your lot—"

"Rats! Canned rats!" said Pankhurst. "We'll take the attack, as it will need a better lot than your set to carry the fort—"

"Toss up for it, and stop jawing," suggested Greene. "Chap who wins to hold the fort."

"Faith, an' sure that's a good idea intirely," exclaimed Micky Flynn. "Curious that neither of you two spalpeens could think of it."

"Here you are!" exclaimed Poindexter. "Best two out of three, or sudden death, Panky?"

"Sudden death," said Pankhurst.

Poindexter threw up the coin, and allowed it to fall in the snow.

"Head!" said Pankhurst.

"Sure, and head it is, intirely," exclaimed Micky Flynn. "You're to hold the fort, Panky. Faith, but ye won't hold it for long!"

"We'll hold it till doomsday for anything you fellows can do to get us out," said Pankhurst disdainfully.

"I guess—"

"Oh, leave off guessing," said Neville. "Time we got to business. I saw Monsieur Friquet nosing round a while ago, and I shouldn't wonder if he comes bothering us. Time we started."

The Combine and their forces drew off, and Pankhurst and his merry men poured into the snow fort, and blocked up the opening with snow. Huge piles of snowballs had been arranged in convenient places for the defenders. It would certainly be no easy task to take the fort with the defence Pankhurst meant to make.

But the Combine were serenely confident of their own powers. They drew off for a distance to get room for a charge, and began making snowballs. A little, fat figure loomed up in the moonlight.

"Mes garçons!" It was the voice of M. Friquet, the French master of Cliveden. "Are you not cold in ze open air in ze evening?"

"I guess not, sir," said Poindexter cheerfully. "And we're just going to have some exercise, sir, to keep us warm."

"Charge!" shouted Neville at the moment.

"Arrah!" roared Micky Flynn.

"Come on, ye rascals!"

And away went the Combine and their followers, at top speed, through the snow in the Close.

The little Frenchman gazed after them in stupefaction.

"Mon ciel!" he murmured. "I have often zought viz myself zat zere is madness in all ze English boys, and really I zink zat eet is true. Ciel!" he exclaimed aloud in his alarm, as a terrific uproar burst upon the wintry air. Then he ran in the direction the juniors had taken, convinced that something ter-

rible was happening. The Combine had reached the snow fort.

Right up to the walls of snow they dashed, their followers close behind. They covered their advance with volleys of snowballs, which fell thick among the defenders. But from within the fort came volleys in return.

And here Pankhurst and his men had the advantage, for they were secure behind walls, and had piles of snowballs ready to their hands.

The air seemed full of the frozen missiles as they flew. Thick and fast they fell among the oncoming juniors, bowling some of them right over the slippery ground.

"Forward!" yelled Poindexter.

And he made a spring at the snow wall.

He dropped with his chest right upon it, but in a moment he was collared from within and dragged into the fort, where two or three juniors sat on him and held him a helpless prisoner.

"Rescue!" Poindexter bawled. And his chums came gallantly on.

"They've got Poin!" shouted Dick Neville. "Come on! Rescue!"

"Rescue!"

But on the snow wall the assailants broke like a wave, and back they went surging, battered right and left with the snowballs from within.

Pankhurst gave a yell of glee.

"Beaten! Hallo, Pointplunger! How do you like 'em done?"

Poindexter grunted under the weight of Greene, Gatty and Simpson.

"Will you give your parole?" grinned Pankhurst. "Otherwise we shall have to tie you up, and you'll find that rather chilly, lying there in the snow."

"I'll give in," growled Poindexter. "Till I'm rescued, of course."

"Of course; that's understood. But if those wasters are able to rescue you, Puntbuster, I'll eat a snowball."

"I'll remind you of that."

"Ha, ha! It won't be necessary. Let him go, kids!"

Poindexter was allowed to rise to his feet. He shook off the snow, and gasped for breath.

The defenders of the fort turned their attention to the enemy, and did not bestow a glance now on Poindexter. They knew he would keep his word.

The assailing party had gone back with a rush, and collided with the French master, who was coming on at top speed.

Monsieur Friquet staggered back as Neville ran into him, and clutched at Micky Flynn for support. He caught hold of Micky's hair, as it happened, and Micky gave a yell.

"Arrah! Sure, and ye're scalping me intirely!"

"Stop! You will hurt yourselves viz zis rough play. I will not allow—"

But no one took any notice of Monsieur Friquet.

He remonstrated to the desert air, while the juniors, having recovered their breath, dashed forward to the attack again.

"Stop—stop! Zis is too—"

But no one heeded.

In a body the Combine swept up to the snow fort, the bewildered little Frenchman in the forefront.

"Stop! Ciel! It is horreeble! I am lifeless! I am keel—"

The little Frenchman had completely lost his head now. He rushed to and fro, waving his arms and shouting and gasping, while the Combine pressed the attack.

(Continued at the bottom of page 24.)

"Gravy!" breathed Frank Best grimly, as Paddy vanished up the ladder. "I'll give him gravy!"

Paddy was back in a few minutes, and in his absence Frank had helped himself to a supply of mineral grease from a tin near a motor-hoist.

With hands working like lightning, he rapidly mixed all the unsavoury ingredients together. Tar, oil, tallow and grease, he stirred them into the can until they made up a beautiful-looking, thick, succulent fluid.

Then he glanced fearfully along the deck. A sigh of relief and joy broke from him. Stoker Simmonds's can was still standing on the galley table.

In an instant, crouching low, Frank had reached the galley. The cook's mate was bending over one of the coppers, and he failed to see the long arm stealing up over the edge of the partition.

When he turned round again, the can was still there, where Simmonds had left it.

But it was not the same can! Not by any means!

"What's that infernal cackling and laughing going on in the boys' messes?" growled the harassed cook's mate a few minutes later, to a passing ship's corporal. "I'd like to knock some of their ugly little heads together!"

"Oh, Christmas morning, Christmas morning, you know, Slushy. Mustn't be hard on 'em," answered the good-natured "crusher," and passed on his way with a smile.

The Christmas Dinner—The Stokers Do Not Enjoy It.

"Shove the sprouts along, Pincher!"

"Give the bread a fair wind, somebody!"

"Who says spuds? My word, aren't these geese prime?"

A cheery buzz of conversation and a clatter of knives and forks rose from No. 10's table, and was repeated all along the mess-deck of H.M.S. Imperial.

The day's work was over, divisions and prayers were done with, and "pipe down" was the order until evening quarters at four o'clock. The whole of the interval was to be given over to merry-making, and already the fun was fast and furious.

Never was there such a Christmas dinner as lay spread before the hungry lads of No. 10 mess! Frank had been forced to tell the boys of Simmonds's trick, of course, and it had been as much as he could do to restrain some of the more ardent spirits from carry-

ing out a raid on the galley there and then.

He had not, however, enlightened them as to the vengeance he had planned. The fewer in the secret the better, he had decided, for tongues will wag.

But the boys were in good spirits; and, after all, it was Christmas Day. The stokers' geese were voted a huge success, and some even went so far as to aver that they were even better than turkey.

But the triumph of the meal was a surprise contribution from Frank, in the shape of a can full of the most delicious gravy lips ever tasted! It was hailed with acclamation, and the laughing youngsters drank Frank's health in it with three times three, little suspecting whence it came.

Yet, amid all the chattering and laughter round the merry table, Frank Best and Paddy Flynn, usually the ringleaders in any fun that was going, sat strangely silent.

"By gum, I feel as if I were sitting on a tin of guncotton!" whispered Frank to his chum. "When will it happen? I can't stand this much longer!"

"Twill not be yet," answered Paddy. "He'll be only just off watch. He's got to bath and clean first. We'll be nearly finished before it happens. Get on wid your dinner. Faix, and here's Martin wid the pudding! Hur-roo!"

An enormous cheer went up from the mess as, staggering under the weight of an enormous Christmas pudding, Pincher Martin appeared, his face beaming with smiles.

In a moment it was carved into twenty equal portions, and the lads fell to. But by this time Frank was almost ill with suspense. He was actually on the point of getting to his feet and creeping forward to the stokers' mess, to make sure that his plot had not failed, when suddenly Paddy clutched him by the arm.

"Whisht, alannah!" whispered the Irish boy. "He's coming! Och, great smoke, and he's got it! Look now! He's got it in his fist!"

Frank's face shone with joy. Slasher Simmonds was striding hurriedly along the deck, hugging in his hands the fatal can!

Frank could resist the temptation no longer.

"Come on!" he whispered. "I must see it!"

"Here, where the dickens are you two off to?"

But neither Paddy nor Frank stayed to enlighten the astonished Martin. Like shadows they glided along the mess-deck. In a moment they had

reached a point of vantage right opposite Simmonds's mess, and, peeping round the corner of the engine-room uptake, they watched the scene before them with bated breath.

Already Simmonds's messmates, his particular cronies and chums all of them, were seated round the table, and, even as Frank and Paddy watched, one of them came along with the stolen turkey, brown and succulent in its big tin dish, the baked potatoes sizzling and hissing merrily in the gravy.

It was placed before the redoubtable Slasher, and then Simmonds rose.

"Messmates," he said, "while you was on watch this morning, I suddenly thought of a bit of an idea. This 'ere turkey of ours'll want basting with gravy to make it proper, thinks I, and that there cook won't bother himself to do it. So, says I, I'll mix up some gravy. And, messmates, here it is!"

He drew out the can from beneath the table with a flourish, and a murmur of applause and appreciation of his thoughtfulness went round.

"It's a recipe my old mother gave me," went on Simmonds, "and all you've got to do is to pour it over the bird like this."

Suiting the action to the word, he inverted the can, and in a moment the luscious-looking stream spread slowly over the turkey's brown bosom.

Carefully Simmonds guided the stream, until not a fraction of the bird remained uncovered.

Breathlessly the chums watched, and then suddenly a little shiver seemed to run round the table, and they saw Simmonds's back stiffen rigidly.

"Smells funny, don't it, Slasher?" hinted somebody, with a doubtful sniff.

"Eh?" grunted Simmonds, and Frank could see his ears slowly reddening. "Oh, that's only the seasonin'. Onion, and 'erbs, an' a touch o' garlic. You'll find it's all right."

"Bust me if it don't niff like tar!" growled another.

Simmonds was carving away feverishly, and already the plates were being passed round and loaded up with vegetables. But at this suggestion he swung round upon the speaker with a savage snarl.

"Tar! You thunderin', fat-headed idiot! You're always grumbling, you are, Joe Smith! Wot 'ave you done to 'elp—eh? You shut your jaw, or I'll jolly well shut it for you!"

The mess subsided into silence. Frank could see the looks of doubt flashed from one to another, and Simmonds, even, sniffed covertly at his portion. But the mess feared Simmonds, and his sudden outburst effectually quelled the critics.

(Continued on next page.)

THE MIDNIGHT SNOW-FIGHT.

(Continued from page 7.)

Assailants and defenders were hand to hand now, Neville and Flynn being over the wall, and their followers pouring on to back them up.

"Stand fast!" yelled Pankhurst. "Sock it into them!"

"Come on!"

"Hurry up, ye scoundrils!"

"Hurrah! Throw them out!" shouted Pankhurst.

The next moment he was rolling in the snow, with Micky's grip on him.

Price rushed to the rescue, and Monsieur Friquet came blindly between, and rolled over in the grip of Price.

"Ciel! I am assault—I am knock down!" gasped the unfortunate Frenchman. "Mercy! I shall never see my muzzer any more! Mercy!"

Neville rolled Price over and colared him, unfortunately with Mossou underneath them.

The fall of the leaders discouraged the defenders, and as the Combine's followers dashed on, Pankhurst's defeated party poured out of the other side of the fort.

"Hurrah!" roared Neville.

"They're beaten!"

"Fight it out!" yelled Pankhurst.

"Rats, old chap! They're gone! You can get up. We've captured the fort. Give your parole, and you can get up."

The Old Firm reluctantly gave it, and were helped to their feet. It was

a victory to the Combine this time, with a vengeance!

Pankhurst grinned as he rubbed the snow out of his hair.

"Well, you've done us," he exclaimed. "You'd better come and feed in my study, as we left your grub in the railway-train. We've got a good fire going there, and it won't take long to get the grub ready."

The suggestion was too good not to be adopted. Half an hour later the Combine and the Old Firm were enjoying a ripping tea in the study, as if such a thing as rivalry had never been heard of in the Fourth Form at Cliveden.

THE END.

(A dramatic new Sexton Blake serial commences next Thursday. Don't miss it.)

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