

Chapman Allen

**Ned Wilding's Disappearance:
or, The Darewell
Chums in the...**



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CHAPTER I THE NEW GUN

The Keene household was suddenly aroused from peacefulness, one quiet afternoon, by a loud thud as if something had fallen. It was followed by a report like an explosion. Then, from Bart's room, sounded a series of yells.

"Wow! Ouch! Jimminities!"

"He's hurt!" exclaimed his sister Alice, as she ran toward her brother's room. As she entered she saw him running about the apartment, which was filled with smoke, holding one hand in the other. Drops of blood were coming from his fingers.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?" asked Alice. "Oh, Bart, are you really hurt?"

"Am I hurt? Do you think I'm doing this for fun? Where's mother?"

"She's gone out. I'm the only one home."

"Get a rag or something, will you please Alice?" and Bart danced around on one leg, holding the other limb out so stiffly that he knocked over several chairs.

"Is your leg hurt too, Bart?"

"No, it's only my three fingers."

"But you stuck one leg out so I thought that was injured also."

"I'd stick 'em both out if it would only ease this pain any! Maybe my fingers will have to come off!"

"Oh, Bart! What did it?"

"My new gun. I went to lay it down on the table and it fell to the floor and went off. Did you hear it?"

"I couldn't very well help it. Did the bullet go through your hand?"

"It doesn't shoot bullets. It shoots shot, and I guess it only grazed a few fingers. Most of the shot went into the wall," and Bart gazed at a dark spot on the wall-paper, and then looked at his injured hand. "I didn't think it would go off so easily," he added.

"Oh, those horrid guns!" exclaimed the girl. "I just knew when papa let you send for it –"

"Say, Alice, if you ever intend to be a trained nurse you'd better get to work on me before I faint!" cried Bart. "Now don't talk any more, that's a good girl. Get a rag before I bleed to death."

"Oh, Bart, I'm so sorry! Of course I'll fix you up. Wait until I get my book," and Alice, whose ambition was to be a nurse and wear a blue and white striped uniform, hurried to her room and came back with a little book. On the cover was a red cross, and the inscription, "First Aid to the Injured."

"What kind of a wound is it, Bart?" Alice asked, rapidly turning the leaves of the volume.

"How should I know? It's a painful wound, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, no! Is it incised or lacerated or a contused one? Because you see I have to give it different kind of treatment if it's an incised wound than I would if it's a lacerated one."

"Oh, give me any kind of treatment!" and Bart began to dance around again. "The shot grazed my fingers, that's all I know!"

"I guess that's a lacerated wound," Alice replied a little doubtfully, as she took a look at her brother's bleeding hand. Then she turned to the page of the book that treated of lacerated hurts and read:

“These wounds have ragged edges and the skin is torn and bruised.”

“That’s me all right,” interrupted Bart.

“They result from force so applied as to tear rather than cut the tissues cleanly,” the girl read on.

“Oh, I’m cut all right,” put in Bart. “Hurry up Alice, stick some court plaster on and let it go at that.”

“Why, Bart Keene! I’m ashamed of you! The idea of me putting such a common remedy as court plaster on a wound! Why, you’d get bloodpoison and other dreadful things! I must treat this just as I expect to treat other wounds when I get to be a trained nurse.”

“You’ll never get to be one at this rate,” Bart cut in.

“They are caused by railway and machinery accidents,” Alice read on, “by falling timbers, stones and brick. Such wounds are frequently followed by shock.”

“Well, this wasn’t a railroad accident, nor one caused by falling bricks or timber,” Bart retorted. “I guess it will come under the head of machinery. A gun’s machinery, I s’pose. But I can testify to the shock. Wow!” and, as a sudden spasm of pain seized him, he snatched his hand from the grasp of his sister and again began dancing around on one leg.

“Hold still! How can I treat the wound if you jerk around that way?” demanded Alice.

“Treat the wound! You aren’t treating any wound!” retorted Bart. “I could treat ten wounds in that time! All you’re doing is talk! If Fenn Masterson or Ned Wilding was here they’d have a rag around this long ago.”

“Yes, and it would probably be full of germs and other things and you’d be dead of lock-jaw,” said Alice calmly. “Now Bart, come here. I know what kind of a wound it is, and I must see how to fix it,” and once more securing her brother’s hand for examination, she began to leaf over the book.

“Treatment,” she read. “Cleanse the wound thoroughly with warm water, lay a wet cloth over it and bandage lightly. If symptoms of shock are present they must receive careful attention. See page twenty-two.”

“Never mind the shock, just get a rag on these fingers before I lose all the blood I’ve got and we’ll talk shock afterward,” interrupted Bart.

Then Alice, laying aside her book, brought some warm water in a basin, and some soft cloths, and soon had Bart’s hand tied up in a sling.

“You’ve got enough rags on here to make my hand look as big as my head,” objected the boy, as he gazed at the bandage his sister had adjusted.

“You don’t want to catch cold in it,” she replied. “It is very chilly to-day. I think we’re going to have more snow.”

“Ought to have some, with Thanksgiving here in about a week,” replied Bart.

“How did you get hurt?” asked his sister again.

“I was examining my new shotgun. It just came – Hark! Who’s that calling?”

“Oh, some of the boys I s’pose,” and Alice went to the window and looked down to the street, whence came a series of shrill whistles.

“Raise the window and I’ll yell to ’em to come up,” said Bart.

“Don’t you come near this window,” commanded Alice. “You forget you’re under treatment. If you should catch cold in that hand it might be terrible! I’ll call the boys. You go back in that corner.”

Then, as Bart meekly obeyed, Alice raised the sash and called:

“Come up, boys! Bart is hurt and can’t come down!”

“They’ll think I’m in bed,” her brother objected.

A few seconds later there sounded the noise of several feet on the stairs. A moment afterward three lads hurried into the room. They had just come from school, but Bart had not attended the afternoon session.

“Hello Frank!” cried Bart. “Howdy, Stumpy? How are you, Ned?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned, noticing the bandage on Bart’s hand.

“Oh, hurt myself with the gun. Went off before I was ready.”

“The gun!” exclaimed Frank.

“Got a new gun?” asked Fenn.

“Let’s see it,” demanded Ned.

“Here she is,” exclaimed Bart, and then, forgetting his sore hand, he took from the corner a fine shotgun. “It’s a beauty,” he went on. “It’s got patent – ”

“Oh! Oh!” screamed Alice. “Your hand!”

CHAPTER II

PREPARING FOR A HUNT

“What’s the matter with my hand?” asked Bart holding the gun in the one that had been injured.

“Why you’ve taken it from the sling. The blood will rush to it and – and – ”

“Oh, I guess it’s all right,” spoke Bart carelessly, as he held up the gun. “You see fellows, this is the patent ejector, and the barrels – ”

“Well of all things!” exclaimed Alice. “I spend a lot of time fixing up your injury and you go and undo all my work in a minute. I never saw such a boy!”

“How did you hurt yourself?” asked Ned.

“I had just loaded both barrels and put the gun on the table. It fell off and something hit one of the triggers or the hammers and it banged out like a cannon. My hand was in the way, that’s all.”

“Hurt much?” inquired Fenn.

“Not much,” was Bart’s careless answer.

But an exclamation of pain escaped him as he hit his bruised fingers against the gun stock.

“There!” exclaimed Alice. “I knew you’d do something wrong. Now I suppose it will start bleeding again,” and she turned back as if to undo the bandage.

“Never mind!” spoke Bart quickly. “I’ll stick some court plaster on if it does. Say Alice get us some cake and lemonade, please.”

Alice agreed and while she prepared the beverage and got some cakes from the pantry, in which interval the four boys talked nothing but gun, there is an opportunity of making you better acquainted with them. It’s hard to be introduced to a person when he has sustained a smashed thumb, so it is, perhaps, just as well that the formal presentation was postponed until now.

Bart Keene, Ned Wilding, Frank Roscoe and Fenn Masterson, (who was called Stumpy, for short, because of his rather limited height and breadth of beam), were four boys who lived in the town of Darewell. This was located not far from Lake Erie, on the Still River, a stream in which the boys fished, swam and upon which they spent many hours in their big rowboat.

With the exception of Frank Roscoe, the boys lived in the heart of the town. Their parents were fairly well off, and the boys had been chums since they attended primary school together. In fact, when their companionship continued on through the grammar school and into the high school, they became such a town fixture, in a way, that they were known as “The Darewell Chums.”

Those of you who have read the first volume of this series, entitled “The Heroes of the School,” know what sort of lads the four were. Those of you who are meeting them for the first time may be glad of a little sketch of their characters.

Frank lived with his uncle, Abner Dent, about a mile out of town. Mr. Dent was a rich farmer, and Frank had resided with him as long as he could remember. He could not recall his father or mother, and his uncle seldom mentioned them. Frank was rather a strange sort of boy. His chums were very fond of him, but they could not quite make out the curious air of mystery about him. Frank seemed to have some secret, but his chums never asked him what it was, though of late years his odd ways, at times, had attracted their attention.

Ned Wilding was an impulsive, lively chap, full of fun, and given to playing tricks, which sometimes got him into mischief. He was rather thoughtless, but never mean, and when his actions did result in trouble for others Ned was always ready and anxious to make reparation. Ned’s mother was dead and he lived with his father who was cashier of the Darewell bank.

As for Bart, he was so fond of sports, from baseball and swimming to snowballing and skating, that he was seldom still long enough to study his lessons.

Fenn, or Stumpy Masterson, had only one failing as far as his chums were concerned. He was “sweet” on the girls, as they called it. Fenn would go to considerable trouble to walk home with a girl. His chums made all sorts of fun of him, but he did not seem to mind much. His especial favorite was Jennie Smith, who was quite fond of poetry and who liked to recite and act.

As told in the first volume, the boys, during the summer preceding the winter in which this story opens, had taken part in some strange adventures. They discovered that some men in the neighborhood of the town were acting very queerly, and they resolved to find what it meant. One day they went up in a captive balloon at a fair, and the restraining cable broke. The four chums were carried off in the airship high above the clouds.

The boys were detained as prisoners aboard a barge on the river, because it was learned they knew something of the mystery the strangely acting men were trying to keep hidden. By dint of much pluck and hard work the boys managed to solve the affair, and, in order to avoid a law-suit, the men involved offered the boys one thousand dollars each, in valuable oil stock. This they accepted and their parents and relatives did not prosecute the men, as they originally intended, for detaining the boys on the barge.

“Here’s the lemonade!” cried Ned, as Alice came in with a big pitcherful while the chums were examining Bart’s gun. He took it from the girl, as it was quite heavy.

“Now I’ll get the cakes and glasses,” Alice said.

“Let me help you,” begged Fenn.

“Here, you quit that!” called Ned.

“Quit what?”

“Walking downstairs with Alice. I’ll tell Jennie on you, Stumpy!”

“Oh, you dry up!” cried Fenn, and, despite the boys’ laughter Fenn accompanied Bart’s sister to the next floor, where he got the cake and glasses.

“Stumpy’s as bad as ever,” commented Frank. “He reminds me of – ” Frank did not finish his sentence.

“Reminds you of what?” asked Ned. “There you go again, beginning a thing and not finishing it.”

“I guess I’ll not say it. Doesn’t make any difference,” and Frank turned aside and gazed out of the window.

Bart and Ned looked at each other. It was a peculiarity of Frank’s to begin to say something, and then seem to recollect a matter that made him change his mind. But his chums were now used to his strangeness.

“Where’d you get that gun, Bart?” asked Fenn as he came in with the cake.

“Saw it advertised in a catalog, and sent to New York for it.”

“How much?”

“Eighteen dollars. It was the first money I used of the thousand I got from the ‘King of Paprika’” – for such was the assumed name of the principal man in the mystery the boys had cleared up.

“From New York, eh?” spoke Ned. “That reminds me I have an invitation to visit my uncle and aunt there.”

“That’s so. You asked us to come and see you,” added Bart. “Wish we could go around Christmas time.”

“If the holiday vacation was longer maybe we could,” remarked Ned.

“Speaking of holidays, what’s the matter with going hunting the end of next week?” asked Bart. “I’ve got my gun, and you fellows have your small rifles.”

“I can borrow a shotgun,” put in Fenn.

“This is Thursday,” went on Bart. “School closes to-morrow for the Thanksgiving celebration. Let’s see, Thanksgiving is a week from to-day. That would give us three days counting Monday, when

we can start off. Why not go on a shooting trip and stay a couple of nights in the woods? It's not very cold, and we could take plenty of blankets.”

“The very thing!” cried Ned.

CHAPTER III

OFF IN THE WOODS

The town of Darewell, though situated near the center of a well-populated district, presented many advantages to the boys. There was the river to fish in, and it was a deep enough stream to accommodate steamers and barges up to a certain point. In addition there was, about five miles from the place, the beginning of a stretch of unbroken forest, seldom visited, and which in season contained much game. It was a favorite hunting spot, but had not been over-run with gunners.

The boys had, in past summers, camped along the river and in the woods, but they had not penetrated far into the forest, as there were few roads or trails through it.

"Have we got everything?" asked Fenn, as they stood in the front yard of Bart's house, early the next Monday morning.

"I guess so," Ned replied. "I looked after the blankets and such stuff, Bart saw to the tent and Frank to the portable stove and fixings. I suppose you've got the food all packed, Stumpy?"

"Everything."

"Didn't forget the salt, did you, the way you did when we went camping before and had to borrow of a tramp?"

"There's lots of salt."

"How about condensed milk?" asked Bart. "Remember how you dropped it in the river that day?"

"Do I? And how Ned howled because he had to drink black coffee."

"Maybe we'd better take the sled along," suggested Ned, as he noticed it was beginning to snow. "If it gets deep enough we can haul the things on it, instead of on the wagon."

The camp supplies, including a shelter tent, had been placed on a wagon, on which they were to be taken to where the boys decided to make their first camp. On the large vehicle was a smaller one, which the chums could load with all their stuff and haul through the woods, in case they found it advantageous to move to a section where there was better hunting.

"Wait a minute, I've got an idea!" exclaimed Bart.

"Make a note of it before you forget it!" called Fenn. "Good ideas are scarce."

"We can take runners along for the small wagon," Bart went on, not noticing his chum's sarcasm. "There are some adjustable ones I made a couple of years ago. Then we'll be prepared for anything."

The wagon was one the boys had built for themselves several seasons past. They used to cart their camp outfit on it when they did not transport the things by boat up or down the river. As Bart had said, there were adjustable runners, which could be fitted over the wheels, without taking them off, and thus on short notice the wagon could be transformed into a sled.

It was a crisp November day, with a suggestion of more cold to come, and the first few flakes had been followed by others while the boys waited until Bart, whose hand was almost well again, got the runners from the cellar.

"Looks as if we'd have quite a storm," remarked Jim Dodd, the driver of the express wagon, whom the boys had hired to take their stuff to a point about two miles inside the woods. The road, which was made by lumbermen, came to an end there. "Yes sir," Jim went on, "it's goin' t' be a good storm. You boys better stay home."

"Not much!" cried Ned. "A storm is what we want."

"I'd rather eat my Thanksgiving turkey in a warm kitchen than in an old tent," Jim added with a laugh.

"Oh, we'll be home for Thanksgiving," Fenn said, "and we'll have plenty of game to eat too."

"Wish ye luck," was Jim's rejoinder.

The adjustable runners were packed on the wagon, a last look given to see that everything was in place, and then, about nine o'clock the start was made.

“Keep your thumb wrapped up!” Alice called after her brother. “Don’t take cold. Drink some hot ginger tea every night before you boys go to bed. Keep your coats well buttoned up around your throats, don’t get your feet wet and – ”

“Say, give us the books, sis,” called Bart good-naturedly, “we can’t remember all that. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” called Alice, waving her hands to the chums.

“Good-bye!” the four boys echoed.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST TURKEY

"I must say you boys has got grit," remarked Jim, as the wagon lurched along, pitching like a ship in a storm because of the rough road.

"Why?" asked Bart.

"Leavin' your comfortable homes an' comin' out to a wilderness in winter. Land! I'd no more think of doin' it than I would of flyin'."

"Didn't you do such things when you were young?" asked Fenn.

"Never had no time," the expressman said. "When I got a few days off I had t' go t' th' woods an' chop cord-wood or tap trees for maple syrup."

They jogged along for another mile or so, the road getting more and more rough as they progressed.

"Don't believe I can take you any farther," said Jim, as he brought his wagon to a stop before a big bog-hole. For the last mile the road was "corduroy," that is, made by laying small logs across it, close together, like the ribs in corduroy cloth; whence its name.

The boys helped the expressman to unload, and, with his aid they soon had cleared a place among the trees for the tent. It was put up, and then the camp stuff and provisions were taken inside.

Stumpy quickly had ready a meal, which, if it was not elaborate, was appetizing, and Jim who was invited to it had to acknowledge that the coffee was good enough for anyone.

"Now for a turkey hunt!" exclaimed Ned, when Jim had left and his wagon was out of sight on the wood road. "We've got all the afternoon. Let's get the guns and start out."

The snow was coming down faster now, and the wind had increased. It was not very cold, however, and they were warmly dressed so they did not mind it. They had a compass with them, to avoid getting lost, and, confident they would return laden with turkeys or rabbits, they tramped on through the woods.

"Say, fellows! Here's something!" cried Frank suddenly, pointing to some tracks in the snow. His companions ran to where he stood.

"Turkey tracks!" called Bart. "They're leading off into the woods, too! Come on! We'll get some birds now!"

The new-fallen snow deadened their footsteps or they would have frightened all the game within a mile, the way they rushed through the forest. They had never hunted wild turkeys, and did not know what shy birds they are.

So it was more by good luck than good management that they suddenly came upon a small flock, gathered about a big gobbler. The birds were in a little clearing, standing rather disconsolately about in the snow.

Bart, who was leading, came to an abrupt halt as he saw the flock through the bushes. He motioned for the others to remain quiet. Then he carefully brought his gun to bear on the big gobbler.

"Aren't you going to give us a shot?" asked Ned in a whisper. He and the others were standing behind Bart, and could not get a fair aim at the turkeys, as the trail was a narrow one and Bart occupied the most of it.

The whisper, as it was, gave the alarm to the easily frightened birds. The gobbler raised its head and sounded one note of warning. But Bart shot at the instant. The flock scattered in all directions and the other boys fired wildly in the hope of getting a bird.

When the smoke had blown away the chums peered eagerly forward, expecting to see at least four turkeys lying on the snow-covered ground. Bart ran up, hoping the big gobbler had fallen to him.

"Didn't we kill any?" asked Frank, as they saw nothing but turkey tracks.

“Looks as if we all missed,” remarked Fenn.

“No, here’s one, and it’s a fine one too!” exclaimed Frank, as he ran to one side and picked up a plump hen from under a bush.

“Who aimed at that one?” asked Bart, much disappointed at missing his gobbler.

“Hard to say,” said Ned. “I guess we can all claim a share in it. We each shot one-fourth of a turkey. Not so bad for a starter.”

“I’m out of it,” Bart rejoined. “I aimed straight at the gobbler, and he got away. It’s a third of a bird apiece for you fellows.”

“Anyhow it is the first turkey of the hunt,” observed Ned.

“Yes, and my gun is christened,” added Bart.

CHAPTER V

THE BLIZZARD

“Now for some more game!” cried Ned, as Frank tied the legs of the turkey and slung the bird across his back in true hunter fashion.

“Guess we’ll have to tramp a long distance before we get any more,” remarked Fenn. “All the turkeys for a mile around heard the guns and they’ll keep to deep cover.”

However the boys, ever hopeful, resumed their tramp. They found plenty of turkey tracks but no birds, and, after covering several miles, decided to make their way back to camp, as it was getting dark early on account of the storm.

They got the right direction, by means of the compass, and were within about a mile of where they had set up the tent when Bart, who was ahead, suddenly halted.

“What is it?” asked Fenn, as he saw his chum aiming his gun up through the low branches of a tree near which he had stopped.

For answer Bart fired. There was a flutter of big wings, a protesting gobble or two, and a big turkey cock fell to the ground.

“There, I knew I’d get him!” Bart cried as he ran forward and secured his prize. “I saw him roosting up in the branches, and I fired before he could get away. I knew I’d get him!”

“You don’t think this is the same one you fired at a while ago, do you?” asked Ned.

“Well, it’s one just as big and just as good,” retorted Bart. “I’m satisfied if he is.”

He slung the gobbler, which was a large fat one, over his shoulder and went on, much pleased with himself and his new gun.

“Guess we’ll have roast turkey to-night all right,” Frank remarked as they trudged along.

“I guess not, if I have to cook it!” exclaimed Fenn. “It’s too late to dress any birds to-night. Canned stuff and coffee for yours.”

“Well, to-morrow then,” Frank insisted. “We’ve got to have a turkey dinner while we’re in the woods.”

It was almost dark when they reached camp. They lighted some lanterns, and built a big fire, while Fenn, who had been elected cook, got supper ready. The other boys cleared out the tent for sleeping purposes.

When the boys awoke in the morning it was to find the ground covered about a foot deep with snow. The flakes had ceased falling, but it was much colder, and there was a stiff wind. Gray clouds covered the sky, and altogether it was rather a cheerless prospect.

But the boys’ spirits were proof against almost anything. With some hot coffee to warm them up, and some hot canned meat, which Fenn prepared, they were ready for another day of tramping through the woods after game.

“What do you say to moving camp?” suggested Bart. “I’m afraid we’ve scared from around here whatever there was in the way of turkeys and rabbits. We can put our stuff on the sled and pull it through the snow.”

This was agreed to, and soon the runners were adjusted over the wheels, and the four boys were pulling the sleigh with the camp outfit.

They went slowly, picking their way as best they could among the trees. On a down grade, where two were enough at the rope, Bart and Frank went ahead to see if they could observe any signs of game. Frank killed a fat rabbit, but Bart fired at one and missed.

They went about four miles farther into the forest and, as they saw turkey tracks, they decided to camp there.

“We’ll have an early dinner, put the turkey hen on to roast, and go off hunting the rest of the day,” decided Fenn.

The turkey was prepared in a somewhat rough fashion and put to roast in the oven of the portable stove. When it was nearly done the fire was allowed to cool down.

“All we have to do when we get back is to start a small blaze and we’ll have hot turkey,” explained Fenn. Some dry wood was placed within the tent to keep it safe in case it began to snow again, and, fastening the flaps, the boys set off.

They had better luck this time, and managed to get a turkey apiece, though they were only hens, and not very large.

“We ought to each get a big gobbler before we go back home,” Bart said. “You fellows want to look alive. I’ve got mine.”

“You had all the luck,” retorted Ned.

But the gobblers seemed too wise to come within the reach of the boys’ guns, and when it came time to make back-tracks for camp there was none numbered among the slain. Several more rabbits had been secured, however, and the boys were well satisfied.

“My mouth waters for that roast turkey,” exclaimed Ned, as he tramped through the snow. “I want a piece of the breast and some of the brown skin. Just a bit of dressing, please, and a spoonful of gravy!”

“Let up!” cried Bart. “I’m half starved!”

Ned’s anticipations of the turkey were fully realized. It may not have been done just to the turn a French chef would call proper, but the boys thought they had never eaten anything half so good. There was little left when they had finished.

“We’d better circle around so’s to fetch up near where Jim’s to meet us to-night,” remarked Bart as they crawled out of the blankets Wednesday morning. The cold had increased and the wind was blowing half a gale.

The tent was struck, after a hasty breakfast, and, with the other things, not forgetting the game, was packed upon the sled. The boys started off, intending to make a large circle and bring up that evening where Jim had left them, in time to meet him. They would not erect the tent again.

They managed to kill several hen turkeys, another gobbler, which fell to Ned’s gun, and a couple of rabbits, but most of the game seemed to have disappeared, and there was no more in the vicinity of where the boys tramped, dragging the sled after them.

They halted for dinner in a dense part of the forest, and, after the meal, started for the place where the corduroy road ended. They judged it to be about six miles from where they were, and knew it would take them about until night-fall to reach it.

It was hard work, pulling the sled, but the exercise kept them warm, and they trudged on, plunging into drifts which the wind quickly raised. It started to snow again and the flakes began to blow across their path whipped into stinging particles by the force of the gale. They were enveloped in a white cloud through which they could see only dimly.

“Say, it’s getting worse and worse!” exclaimed Ned, as he paused for breath after a particularly stiff bit of pulling.

“Boys, it’s a regular blizzard, that’s what it is,” cried Bart. “We’re certainly in for it now. I don’t believe Jim will come for us in a storm like this.”

“If it isn’t a blizzard it’s the best imitation of one I ever saw,” remarked Frank. “What are we going to do?”

“Only thing is to keep on,” replied Bart.

“Are we going in the right direction?” asked Ned. “Fenn, suppose you take a look at the compass.”

Fenn, who carried the little instrument, reached in his overcoat pocket for it. He did not find it. Then he looked in several other pockets.

“What’s the matter? Haven’t lost it, have you?” asked Bart.

“I’m afraid so. Didn’t I give it to you, Ned, this morning?”

“Never saw it,” replied Ned.

Fenn made a more thorough search. The compass was not to be found. The boys stood there helplessly, in the midst of the howling storm, which was now at its height.

The snow was a blinding, scurrying, mass of flakes which stung their faces like needles. Overhead the trees were bending to the blast and the gale was roaring through the branches. There was no path. Ten feet ahead it looked like a blank white wall.

“Boys, we’re lost in the woods, and the blizzard is getting worse!” cried Bart, almost having to shout to make himself heard above the storm.

CHAPTER VI

A LONELY CABIN

“What’s to be done?” asked Fenn.

“Keep on! We may find the place where we were to meet Jim,” advised Frank.

“No,” Bart said. “That would be foolish. Jim would never come for us on such a night. Besides, we don’t know which way to go. We’d better camp here until the storm blows over. We’ve got everything we need, but it’s not going to be much fun under a tent in this weather.”

“Let’s get down more in a hollow,” suggested Fenn. “We’re on a hill here and get the full force of the wind. If we go on a bit we may find a better place.”

“Good idea!” exclaimed Bart. “Come on, fellows!”

He seized hold of the sled rope and began to pull, the others joining him. There was no choice of direction, so they turned to get the wind on their backs.

With grim perseverance they kept on. The wind seemed fairly to carry them forward, though it was hard to struggle through the drifts they encountered every once in a while. As they had no particular path to take, they avoided the big hummocks of snow as much as they could.

“I’ll have to stop!” declared Fenn, after a bit of hard pulling. “My wind’s giving out!”

“I wish the wind up above would,” murmured Bart as he tried to peer through the clouds of flakes to see where they were.

“Let’s stay here,” suggested Fenn. “If we’ve got to camp in the storm this place is as good as any.”

“That’s what I say,” remarked Frank. “This seems to be well sheltered.”

There came a momentary let-up to the gale. The snow did not seem to fall so thickly and the boys eagerly looked around them.

“There’s something over that way!” cried Ned, pointing to the left. “It looked like a barn or house. Let’s try for it!”

Then the wind swept down on them again, blotting out, in the swirl of flakes, whatever Ned had seen. But he had an idea of the direction it was in, and started off toward it.

“Here, come back and help pull the sled!” cried Bart, and the four boys, led by Ned, dragged the heavy load toward the spot where the building had been noticed.

They did not see it again until they were within ten feet of it, and then made out a lonely cabin in the midst of a clearing in the woods. The snow was half way up to the first floor window sills.

“There’s some one inside!” shouted Bart, as he saw smoke curling from the chimney. “Knock on the door! I’m half frozen!”

But there was no need to knock. The door was opened and a little girl peered out.

“Can we come in and get warm?” asked Ned. “We’re lost in the storm.”

“Who is it?” asked a woman’s voice, as she came to the door.

“We were camping out,” explained Bart, “and the storm caught us as we were about to go home. We live in Darewell.”

“Come in!” the woman exclaimed. “Our cabin is poor enough but it is better than the woods in such a storm. I’m sorry we can’t offer you anything to eat, but we have only a little for ourselves and there’s no telling when we’ll get more.”

“And to-morrow’s Thanksgiving,” murmured Ned in a low voice.

The boys stamped the snow from their feet and entered the cabin. There were two rooms downstairs and two up. In the apartment they entered was a stove in which a wood fire burned. In one corner stood a table with a few dishes on it, and there was a cupboard. Some chairs completed

the furnishings. Close to the fire, clad in a ragged dress, sat a little girl. The boys needed but one glance to see that the family was in dire straits.

"My name is Perry," the woman said. "I live here with my two daughters. The town of Kirkville supports us. The poormaster brought some food last week but he hasn't been here this week, and we are afraid he can not come because of the storm. Otherwise I could offer you something to eat," and she turned aside her head to hide her tears.

"Don't cry, mother," exclaimed the child who had been sitting near the fire. "We're not very hungry, and maybe the snow will stop. We had a nice Thanksgiving last year – and – and –"

"I'm afraid we'll have a poor one to-morrow," Mrs. Perry replied. "But boys, come closer to the fire. You must be cold. At least we have plenty of wood. That is free, and my daughters gathered a lot the other day in the woods."

"Mrs. Perry – ahem, ma'am – that is – er – I mean – Oh, hang it! Ain't any of you going to help a fellow out!" exclaimed Ned, clearing his throat with unnecessary violence. "What I mean is we've got a lot of things to eat, on our sled. We'd be glad to have you – Oh, here! Boys come on out and bring in some of the things!" and before the astonished woman knew what was happening Ned and his chums were out in the snow fairly tearing the things off the sled. In they trooped again, bearing turkeys, rabbits, and a lot of the camp food they had not eaten.

"Oh, it's just like Santa Claus!" cried the little girl. "I knew we'd have Thanksgiving, mommey!"

But Mrs. Perry was crying, with her head down on the table.

Indeed the room did look as if it was ready for some sort of holiday feast. It was fairly crowded with the things the boys had brought in.

"I don't – don't know what to say," Mrs. Perry exclaimed, as she dried her eyes. "Are you sure you can spare so much?"

"Spare it? Say we've eaten so much lately we'll be sick!" broke in Bart, with a laugh. "Now we'll make a better fire, and if you'll get some of these turkeys and rabbits ready you can have a dinner. There's some other things, – canned stuff, you know."

By this time the older girl, whose name, the boys learned, was Jane, was placing some of the things aside. Her mother helped her, while Mary, the younger daughter, seemed, from mere astonishment, unable to stir. She sat gazing at the pile of good things as if they might suddenly vanish.

The boys brought in more wood and began to help with the meal. In a little while they had a good one ready, using some of the camp food, while the turkeys and rabbits were put away for the next day.

The boys told something of themselves, and, in turn, Mrs. Perry related how her husband had died a few years before, leaving her with a small farm, and three children, a boy and the two girls. The farm, she said, had been taken because they could not pay the interest on the mortgage, and there had been nothing left for them.

The town gave them the use of the little cabin, and they managed to make something of a living, for Mrs. Perry did sewing for women in the village, which was about three miles away. They had a little garden patch, and raised some fruit.

"You said you – you had a son?" asked Ned gently. "Is he –"

"No, he isn't dead," replied Mrs. Perry sadly. "Poor boy, I wish I knew where he was. He tried to help us, as much as he could," she went on. "But there was no work for him around here, and so he decided to try and get work. He went to the city and wrote me that he was going to sea. He said he had a good position, and would send me some money."

"Did he?" asked Bart.

"I have never heard from him since," the widow replied. "I'm afraid he is dead," and she began to cry again.

“Perhaps not,” suggested Ned, as cheerfully as he could. “Maybe he is on a long voyage and can’t write. Or perhaps he has written and the letters have gone astray. I would not worry. He may come back.”

“I think Willie is alive,” remarked Jane. “He was a very proud boy, and perhaps when he found he could not earn money enough to send home, he decided to stay away until he could. Maybe he is ashamed to come home.”

“Oh, he knows I would forgive him! I would be glad to see him if he never had a penny!” exclaimed Mrs. Perry.

“I’ll bet he’ll turn up all right,” put in Fenn. “He’s only waiting until he can come back rich.”

“It’s been about a year now,” the widow went on. “Willie was fifteen when he left, and he’d be sixteen now. It’s his first birthday away from home.”

The boys did their best to comfort her, and she seemed to feel a little better after telling her troubles. The girls were certainly more cheerful after the meal.

“You boys had better stay all night,” Mrs. Perry suggested. “The storm is getting worse. If you don’t mind being crowded we can accommodate you.”

“If we can sleep on the floor in the kitchen we’ll be glad to,” Ned answered.

“I have Willie’s bed, which no one uses, and there is another,” the widow replied. “I have always kept his room ready for him.”

“Then we’ll stay for the night, thank you,” Fenn said.

The storm did appear to be getting worse, or else the howling of the wind about the lonely cabin made it seem so.

CHAPTER VII

HOME FOR THANKSGIVING

“Hurrah! It’s stopped snowing!” exclaimed Ned as he looked out of the little window on the second floor of the cabin the next morning. “Maybe we can get home for Thanksgiving!”

“I hope so,” Bart answered. “The folks will be worried. Wonder if Jim is waiting for us?”

“Not much! Jim’s too fond of his comfort to come out in such weather,” said Frank.

The boys found the widow had breakfast ready for them. She told them their best plan would be to go to Kirkville, which could be reached by the road leading from the cabin. From that village it was seven miles to Darewell.

“It’s going to be a long pull,” remarked Ned. “But I guess we can make it.”

“Let’s go out and see how the snow is,” suggested Bart.

They found though it was quite deep it was dry and soft so that tramping through it, and pulling the sled, would not be so great an exertion as it otherwise would have been.

“We’ll have to take it easy, and we may get home in time for dinner,” said Frank. “Pity, though, we can’t have some of our own game cooked for the feast, but we’ll not arrive in time.”

“I think we’ll leave most of it with her. What do you say?” asked Bart, and he nodded toward the cabin, outside of which the boys stood.

“Sure thing!” exclaimed Fenn. “I wish we could find her son for her.”

“Maybe we can, some day,” remarked Ned. “But we’d better go in to breakfast and then get started.”

“I hardly feel like taking all this,” Mrs. Perry said as she looked at the rabbits and turkeys the boys left. They had reserved a turkey and some rabbits each but left all the rest. “It hardly seems right,” she added.

“Why it’s no more than we owe you,” said Bart quickly. “We never could have stayed all night out in that blizzard in our tent. I don’t know what we would have done if it hadn’t been that we saw your house.”

“I only wish I had had better accommodations to offer you,” the widow said. “But we have nothing except what charity gives us. In the spring Jane hopes to get a place to work.”

“Perhaps we could help you,” suggested Ned. “My father knows a number of business men and he might get Jane a place in a store.”

“Oh, if he only would!” exclaimed the girl. “I do so want to help mother. I must take Willie’s place – until he comes back,” she added a little sadly.

“My poor boy,” Mrs. Perry exclaimed with a sigh. “I wonder if he will have as nice a Thanksgiving dinner as we will, thanks to the generosity of you boys.”

“We’ll hope so,” said Fenn. “So you haven’t any idea where he is?”

“Not the least. He used to say he wanted to see New York, as I suppose all boys do. But I hardly believe he is there. I wish I knew where he was. He should come home, pride or not, no matter if he hasn’t a cent.”

“New York,” murmured Ned. “I expect to go there soon. I might see Willie.”

“Oh! If you only could!” exclaimed Jane. “Tell him to come home at once. You can easily recognize him. He has a little red scar on his right cheek. He fell and cut himself on a stone when he was a baby.”

“New York is a big place,” said Mrs. Perry. “You are not very likely to see my boy. But if you should – tell him his mother prays for him – every night!” and, unable to keep her feelings in control the widow burst into tears.

It was rather an awkward moment for the boys, but little Mary saved the day.

"I'm going to New York!" she exclaimed. "I'm goin' right now with these nice boys. They can pull me on their sled!" and she ran to get her bonnet and cloak.

This raised a laugh, and Mrs. Perry recovered her composure.

"Not now, dear," she said. "Sometime, maybe," and she smiled through her tears.

"Well, we must be going," remarked Fenn. "We're ever so much obliged to you."

"Indeed, I am in your debt," the widow replied. "If you are ever out this way again come and see us."

"We will!" the boys cried as they put on their things and started off with the sled. It was lighter now that the load of camp food and much of the game was off, though the boys found it heavy enough before they had gone a couple of miles. But they were determined to reach home as soon as possible and kept on.

"Pretty tough, eh?" remarked Ned, after a silence of several minutes, as he nodded back in the direction of the cabin.

"You're right," replied Bart. "Glad we could do something to help 'em."

The boys found, on inquiring from a farmer they met, that, by taking a short cut through the woods, they could get on the road to Darewell without going to Kirkville. This would save them a mile, and, though they might be able to hire a horse and wagon in the village, they thought it better to take the short cut.

They were just turning from the woods into the highway that led to Darewell, which was about five miles away, when they heard the jingle of sleigh bells back of them. Turning they saw coming along a big sled drawn by two horses. A boy was on the seat.

"Here's a chance for a ride!" exclaimed Ned. "We're in luck. We can offer to pay him to take us home."

They waited until the sled was close to them and hailed the driver. He turned and they saw it was their old enemy, Sandy Merton. Sandy had been employed by the men in the secret which the four boys were instrumental in bringing to disclosure, but had lost his position and gone to work for a farmer.

"Oh, it's you, eh?" asked Sandy with a sneer, as he saw the four chums.

There was a moment's hesitation among them. They did not relish the idea of asking him for a ride. But still less did they like the thought of pulling their heavy sled five miles.

"Look here, Sandy!" exclaimed Ned. "This is a strict business proposition. Will you drive us to Darewell for four dollars, and take our sled? That's a dollar apiece, and it's more than livery prices. We're not asking you out of friendship."

"No, and I guess you'd better not!" exclaimed Sandy. "Not the way you acted toward me!"

"We never injured you in any way!" said Bart. "But we're not going to discuss that now. Will you give us a lift for money, or won't you?"

"Well I won't, and that's my answer!" cried Sandy, in sudden and unreasonable rage. "You fellows think you're mighty smart. But this time is where I've got the upper hand. I wouldn't take you to Darewell for ten dollars apiece. You can go off hunting and enjoy yourself while other folks work. Then because you get lost in the woods you think every one you meet has got to give you a ride. Not much! You can walk to Darewell!" And whipping up his horses Sandy drove on, laughing loudly at the predicament of the chums.

"Might have known better than to ask him," murmured Ned. "Well, fellows, I guess we'll have to walk."

It was easier traveling in the road than through the woods and across the fields, but still it was hard work. However, they managed to get a lift from a farmer when they were within a mile of town. They hitched their sled to the back of his sleigh and the man obligingly took them to Bart's house.

"Oh! There are the boys!" exclaimed Alice as she looked from the window. "Look, Jennie, they have some game. I can see the turkey feathers!" she added to her friend, who had called.

“Here we are!” cried Bart, as his sister and her chum came running down the front walk. “Just in time for dinner!”

Bart wanted his chums to come into his house, but they were in a hurry to tell their folks of their safe arrival, so, shouldering their guns, and dividing the game, the boys separated.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING SQUARE WITH SANDY

"Come Alice, help me carry this game into the house," said Bart when the excitement over their arrival had quieted down a bit. His rabbits and the turkey were on the sled with the camp stuff.

"Is that all the luck you had?" asked Mr. Keene, as he came out on the porch to greet his son. "Why I thought you'd come loaded down. We didn't buy anything for dinner, thinking you'd have enough."

Bart knew by his father's tone that he was only joking.

"We did have fine luck," the boy replied, and then he told about the widow and how they had left her with plenty of food.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mr. Keene. "If you'd brought home any more game than you did, and hadn't left her some I'd make you go back to Mrs. Perry without your dinner. You did right, Bart. I'm glad to hear it."

Bart ate his Thanksgiving dinner with an appetite that astonished even himself. Jennie Smith remained, as the guest of Alice, and she kept those about the table in lively mood, reciting bits of verse.

During the course of the meal Bart told of their trip, and more about the widow.

"We didn't hardly know what to do when that blizzard came up," he said. "Wonder if Jim went to meet us."

"No, he came here and said he was expected to be at the end of the corduroy road for you," Mr. Keene explained. "I said I guessed you boys would know what to do. Besides, it is doubtful if he could have gotten his wagon through the drifts."

In the afternoon Bart's chums came over. Ned said he had spoken to his father about the Perry family, and Mr. Wilding was going to get Jane a place to work. Mr. Keene expressed a wish to help the widow, and arrangements were made to see that she did not suffer any more for lack of food or clothing for herself and daughters. When the roads were better Mrs. Keene went to visit Mrs. Perry, and Jane secured a place in a store in Kirkville, so she could come home every night.

"Now if we could only find the widow's son for her we'd have that family in pretty good shape," remarked Bart to his chums one morning early in December as they were on their way to school after the Thanksgiving holidays. "Accidentally we were able to do quite a lot for them, but I'd like to do more."

"I'm glad Jane has a place," observed Fenn.

"Good thing it isn't in Darewell," said Frank.

"Why?" asked Fenn.

"Because you'd be hanging around the store where she was whenever you had the chance, Stumpy, to see her home."

Frank did not dodge quickly enough to escape the snowball Fenn threw at him, and caught it on the head. But he laughed good-naturedly. It was the price for his joke and he was willing to pay it.

"Let's go skating this afternoon," suggested Bart. "The river edge is fine almost up to the Riffles."

"Good!" exclaimed Ned. "We'll have a race."

School was dismissed for the day at three o'clock and as soon as they were out the boys hurried home for their skates. The weather was crisp and cold, just right for a fine spin up the frozen stream.

The four chums were soon gliding over the smooth surface on which were a number of other boys and girls enjoying the sport.

“We haven’t room to expand here,” said Bart, after they had skated around on the broad expanse of the river near the town. “Let’s go up a mile or two.”

His chums agreed, and they were soon racing up the stream toward the “Riffles” a shallower place where, in summer, there was good fishing.

“Let’s see who’ll be first to the dead pine!” cried Bart, pointing to a lightning-blasted tree on the river’s edge about a mile up. All four dashed off at top speed.

There was little difference in the ability of the boys when it came to skating. They were as much at home on the steel runners as they were on the baseball diamond, and were speedy skaters. Forward they went, stooping over to avoid the wind resistance as much as possible, the metal of their skates singing merrily in the crisp winter air.

“Now for the last rush!” cried Bart, as he put on an extra burst of speed. His companions responded to the call, but Bart had a little the best of them, and was first at the goal.

“I’ll beat you going back!” cried Ned.

“Let’s rest a while,” suggested Frank. “What’s that?”

The boys turned suddenly at the sound of loud shouting on the road which, at this point, ran close to the river. It was someone trying to stop a team of horses, attached to a sleigh and, to judge by the noise, the animals were running away.

“Whoa! Whoa there!” cried the driver.

An instant later the team dashed from the road and came straight for the river, the driver trying in vain to stop them.

“It’s Sandy Merton!” exclaimed Bart.

Before the boys could say any more the horses had run out on the ice of the river, near the chums. Fortunately it was thick enough to bear the weight of the animals or it might have proved a disastrous runaway. As it was, Sandy, in trying to stop the horses, lost one rein. He pulled sharply on the other and the steeds, obeying it, turned quickly to the left. In an instant the sleigh, with its load of feed, in bags, was overturned on the ice and Sandy was spilled out.

“Quick! Grab the horses!” cried Bart, and the chums were soon at the bridles. But the animals appeared satisfied with the damage they had done, and stood still. Sandy picked himself up, for he was not hurt, and came to the heads of the horses. He looked at the overturned sleigh, with the bags of feed scattered on the ice, and murmured:

“I’ll catch it for this.”

“I rather guess he will,” said Bart in a low tone, as the temper of Silas Weatherby, for whom Sandy worked, was well known in that locality.

For a few moments Sandy stood surveying the scene. It looked as if it would take several men to set matters right, even if the sleigh was not broken. Then Sandy, with a sigh, set to work unhitching the horses. He led them from the ice and tied them to a tree on shore. Then he began moving the bags of feed so as to get a clear place around the vehicle. The chums watched him for a few minutes. They were thinking, as no doubt Sandy was, of that day when he had refused them a lift.

“It’s a good chance to get square,” murmured Bart to his companions. “We could sit down and watch him sweat over this, and laugh – but we won’t!” he added quickly. “That isn’t our way. We’ll get square with Sandy by helping him out in his trouble. That’ll make him feel just as badly as if we sat and laughed at him.”

It was an application of the Biblical injunction of heaping coals of fire, but it is doubtful if the boys thought of it in that light.

“Come on!” cried Bart. He began to take off his skates, and his chums followed his example. Then, to the great surprise of Sandy, they began to help him move the bags away so they could get at the sled.

“Say – say – fellows – ” began Sandy, as the thought of his own mean conduct, that day on the road, came to him. “Say – I don’t deserve this. I’m – ”

“You dry up!” commanded Bart.

CHAPTER IX

SANTA CLAUS IN SCHOOL

The four chums pitched in with a will and helped Sandy. They did not talk much, for, take it all in all, it was rather an embarrassing situation. Sandy did not know what to say, and the boys did not feel like entering into friendly conversation.

They did not care to be sociable with Sandy after what he had done, not only in regard to refusing them a ride, but in the matter of the oil barge. But they could not see anyone in such a plight as Sandy was, through no fault of his own, and not render assistance.

"The horses took fright and ran away," Sandy explained, when most of the bags had been piled on shore. "I couldn't stop 'em. The load was too heavy, and it was down hill."

The chums did not answer. Sandy did not expect they would. The situation was too novel. But he was grateful for their help, and, doubtless resolved not to act meanly toward them in the future. The trouble with Sandy was he had no strength of character. He was mean in spite of himself, and couldn't help it.

When the bags were out of the way the five boys, by dint of hard work, managed to right the sleigh, which was a big double bob. It was not damaged to any extent and soon was ready to receive the bags of feed. They were piled in and the horses hitched up again.

"I'm – I'm much obliged to you fellows," said Sandy in a mumbling tone. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a ride that day."

Sandy meant that. He was much softened by what the chums had done.

"We'd made up our minds to get square with you," said Bart, as he fastened on his skates. "And I think we did, Sandy," and with that the four chums started off down the river, while Sandy drove the horses up into the road.

"Queer way to get square," murmured Ned. "I'd like to punch his face."

"This was the best way," Bart replied, and, somehow, though perhaps they didn't know just why, the chums agreed with him.

Christmas was approaching, and mingled with the joys of the holiday season, were thoughts in the minds of the four chums and all the other pupils, that school would close for two weeks.

"Next Wednesday is Christmas," observed Bart one afternoon as the chums were on their way home. "School closes Tuesday for the two weeks, and we ought to mark the occasion in some way. Have you fellows heard of any celebration?"

"Nary a one," replied Fenn.

"Well, there's going to be something doing, all right."

"Who's going to do it?" asked Ned.

"Well, not the fellow who invited the cow to school," replied Bart, referring to an incident for which Ned was responsible.

"You, maybe, eh?"

"Maybe," and Bart winked his left eye.

There was little studying done on Monday of Christmas week, and less was in prospect for the following Tuesday. Some of the classes had arranged for informal exercises in their rooms and later there was to be a general gathering of all the pupils of the school in the large auditorium, at which Mr. McCloud the principal would make an address.

Monday night Bart was very busy in his room. There were odd noises proceeding from it, and when he came down a little later, and asked Alice to sew some strips of red cloth for him, she asked:

"What in the world are you up to, Bart?"

"I'm a knight, getting my armor ready for the conflict of battle," he replied gravely. "Be ready for me when I return, for I may be covered with wounds and you can get lots of first-aid-to-the-injured practice."

"Now, don't do anything silly," Alice advised.

"Far be it from me to do any such thing. You girls can attend to that part."

"As if we girls were anywhere near as silly as boys are when they get started," commented Alice, sewing away at the cloth. "Ouch! There, I've pricked my finger!" and she wiped away a few drops of blood.

"Here! Don't get my uniform all spotted!" exclaimed Bart, as he saw Alice wipe her finger with the red cloth.

"Silly! How is blood going to show on this old red flannel?" asked Alice. "You'll have to wait, Bart, until I wash my finger in an antiseptic solution," and, laying aside the cloth, Alice hurried for her little box of remedies.

"I can sew it myself," declared Bart, and he tried to, but he made awkward work of it, for he used a five cent piece in place of a thimble, at which Alice laughed when she returned. Under her skillful fingers, even though one was done up in a cloth, the work was soon completed.

It was about two o'clock when the pupils were assembled in the auditorium of the High School Tuesday afternoon. Professor McCloud delivered an address on the meaning of Christmas, telling of how ancient people celebrated it, and relating stories of the various nations that had beliefs in myths corresponding to Santa Claus, or St. Nicholas.

"Speaking of Santa Claus," Mr. McCloud went on, as the closing remarks to his lecture, "I am reminded of –"

At that instant there was a jingle of bells out in the corridor, and before pupils or teachers, the latter all sitting on the raised platform in front, knew what it portended, a strange sight was presented.

Into the big room came a personage dressed in the usual Santa Claus costume, red flannel striped with white, a big white beard, his clothing sprinkled with something to represent snow, and, over his back a big bag.

But, oddest of all, was a little sleigh which St. Nicholas pulled in after him by a string. Hitched in front of it were eight tiny reindeer, made of plaster-of-paris, properly colored. Each animal was on a stand on wheels, and as St. Nicholas pulled them in with the sleigh, he shook the leading string, on which were bells, so that they jingled musically.

"Merry Christmas to all!" exclaimed St. Nicholas in a deep bass voice. "May I speak to them, sir?" and the figure turned to Professor McCloud, who, entering into the spirit of the occasion, nodded an assent. Neither he nor any of the teachers were prepared for the advent of Santa Claus. Some of the boys had suspected, but they were not sure.

"My sled and reindeer shrunk as soon as I struck this climate," Santa Claus went on in his deep tones, which Ned was puzzling his brain over. He was wondering where he had heard them before. "Still I managed to come," the red-coated figure went on. "I have a few gifts for some of the more faithful of my subjects."

He slung the bag from his shoulder and began groping in it.

"Is Lem Gordon here?" he asked.

"Step up, Lemuel," said Professor McCloud, for, though he did not know what was coming, he was willing to let the pupils have fun on such an occasion as this.

Rather sheepishly Lem, the pitcher on the High School nine, left his seat.

"I have heard of your good work last season," Santa Claus went on, "and, as a reward for it I have brought you this. May it help you to win many games."

With that he handed Lem a red, white and blue striped rubber ball, the kind given to babies so they can not hurt themselves.

The other pupils burst into laughter, and Lem blushed. He acted as though he was going to throw it at the head of St. Nicholas, but thought better of it and went to his seat.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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