

always freezes before shallow," replied the dauntless Robin. "Do let's go. It will be such a lark to tell the other chaps to-morrow we've been skating. Won't they be wild they didn't know?"

"I vote we go," said Dobbin Major, usually called Dobbie for short.

"I don't believe my mother will let me go," observed a small, delicate-looking little lad.

"I shan't tell mine, Spider," said Robin. "If she don't know where I am she won't worry. I shall just tell her I'm going out if she asks."

"That's a bright idea of yours, Cock Robin," said big Fergus patting him on the back. "I put it to the Right Honourable gentlemen present, that this assembly unanimously resolves it won't tell its mothers where it's going."

"Agreed! Agreed!"

"What time shall we meet?"

"Eight o'clock sharp. That'll give us time to do our prep. first."

"Then hurrah for our next merry meeting!"

The boys scurried away in different directions to their respective homes. Robin turned out of the main road into a dingy little street, and running up the steps applied his latchkey, slammed the door and burst into the shabby little parlour like a whirlwind.

The cloth was laid for tea, and his mother was on her knees before the fire making toast. "You are late, darling," she said gently.

"So I am," replied the boy, glancing at the clock as he threw his arm round his mother's neck and gave her a careless kiss. "Old Langley kept me in again, and coming home there was such a jolly slide, and a lot of our fellows on it, so I stayed and had a good turn."

"Well, run and wash your hands quickly. I told Emma to make the tea the moment she heard you come in."

Robin dashed upstairs, three steps at a time, shouting at the top of his lusty young voice, "The man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo," and was down again by the time the patient little maid-of-all-work had brought in the tea-pot.

The buttered toast his mother had been making went down at an amazing rate, and the loaf looked foolish by the time Master Robin had satisfied his appetite.

"Have you many lessons to do, dear?" asked his mother, as, tea being over, he got out his books with what seemed to her an unprecedented air of industry. Usually she had to drive him to begin his preparation.

"No, not very many. I'm going out presently."

"Going out again this cold night? What-ever are you going to do?"

"I'm going to meet some of the fellows," explained Robin, burying his head in his lexicon to avoid further questions.

His mother looked a trifle anxious and wondered what choice piece of mischief was brewing. Poor mother! she suffered no little anxiety on behalf of her boy, who was unspcakably dear to her; for he was all she had to love, "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow."

Robin's lessons were prepared that night with a carelessness that augured trouble for the morrow; but then he was always getting into trouble, and took canings and impositions most philosophically, regarding them as necessary evils, not exactly agreeable of course, but all in the day's work. At ten minutes to eight he shut up his books with a bang, bundled them into his satchel and prepared to leave the room.

His mother looked at him wistfully.

"You won't be very long, will you, Robin?"

"I don't know, mother. I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't worry if I'm late."

He was out of the room and up the stairs without heeding her remonstrance. His skates were hanging on a nail. He had oiled and cleaned them in readiness at the first signs of frost. He caught them up, rushed downstairs, and had his hand on the handle of the front-door, when his mother's voice arrested him.

"Robin, you won't get into any scrape, will you, dear?"

"All right, mother," and he was gone.

She heard his footsteps echoing down the frosty road, then, with an anxious sigh, she returned to the fireside. He was so terribly reckless that she was always in fear for him; but fortunately she had no idea that there was any question of ice yet. Had she known where he was going, she would have run after him and dragged him back by main force.

Robin ran on, his skates clinking cheerily at his side, and presently overtook Fergus Hume.

"Hullo, Ferg!" he cried, "ain't it a ripping night? The moon will be up in half-an-hour."

"We're going on a wild goose-chase, you know," responded the sober Fergus. "I don't believe Jimmy Low's tale for an instant. Did you ask him if he'd walked all over the pond?"

"No; but if it bore in one place it would in another."

"H'm, I don't know about that, and anyhow, Jimmy's such a crammer you can't believe a word he says."

"Well, we can try it ourselves. We needn't run any risks. Hullo, there's Wilson and little White. Does your mother know you're out, Spider?"

"No," replied the little fellow. "I took your advice, King, and didn't tell her."

By this time they had left the town behind, and soon reached the field wherein the old mill-pond lay. The moon was rising now, and they could dimly see the big sheet of ice lying black and tempting. Standing on the edge were two other boys, Dobbin Major and Minor.

"Well, will it bear?" was the breathless inquiry.

"Don't know, haven't tried," replied Dobbie.

"What an ass you must be, or rather what a couple of asses," said Fergus. "Hullo, Robin! Steady there, old fellow!"

But Robin, with characteristic imprudence, was half-way across the pond.

"Strong as a house!" he shouted joyfully. "I say, boys, it's ripping ice."

As he spoke, there came an ominous crack which made Arthur White nervously implore Robin to return.

"Stuff and nonsense! ice that cracks always bears. It's the snow-stuff that doesn't crack but gives way all of a sudden that's dangerous."

By this time Fergus Hume and Wilson were also walking about the pond.

"It seems safe enough," said the elder boy at last; "not over-strong perhaps, but still I think it will do."

Hume's decree was the signal for a general putting-on of skates, and in a couple of minutes all six boys were skating briskly to and fro.

Little White had hung back for a moment. "Are you quite sure it's safe, Robin?" he asked anxiously.

"Safe as a house, little Spider," answered Robin cheerily. "If it bears us big fellows, it won't give way under your feather-weight."

"Little coward!" jeered Dobbin Major, who, not being distinguished for bravery himself, was ever ready to scoff at the fears of

others. "Go home to his mamma if he's afraid."

"I'm not afraid," answered the little boy, and in another minute he was skating with the rest.

"I say," presently called out Fergus Hume, who had been exploring; "don't any of you fellows go to the lower end of the pond, there's a spring there and it won't bear," then with a sudden shout of alarm—"Spider, you young idiot, come back!"

But little White, either not hearing Hume's warning, or anxious to show Dobbie that he was no coward, had skated away towards the dangerous ice. At Hume's cry he turned sharply, hesitated, and then gave a shrill cry of terror. There was an ominous rending sound, a dull splash, and then an awful silence.

The catastrophe was so sudden that for a moment the five boys stood motionless; then Robin skated briskly towards the black hole, calling out as he went: "Make a line, you fellows! No, Fergus, not you next, you're too big—little Dobbie, that's right! throw yourself flat and hold on to my ankles."

He threw himself face downwards as he spoke, and began to crawl nearer to the black hole with the shining edges, and little Dobbie crawled after him, followed by Wilson, Fergus Hume bringing up the line. Dobbin Major, with praiseworthy prudence, made his way unobserved to the bank, reflecting that one in the family was quite enough to be drowned. He had, however, the sense to take off his skates, and shout lustily for help, and in about a minute his shouts were answered.

Mr. Langley, the grammar-school master, had walked out to see a friend who lived just outside the town, and was passing the field on his way home, when he heard a shout. Instantly coming to the conclusion that some idiot had been trying the ice, and had fallen in, he set off running with all his might towards the pond. He arrived just in time to see Robin King lean forward and make a grab at a dark mass which rose to the surface for an instant; then the ice broke again, and with a sickening splash Robin disappeared from sight.

Little Dobbie, who was holding on to his ankles, would have been pulled in after him, but for the weight of the two bigger lads, who hung on his rear; nevertheless, instead of retreating, the brave little fellow crept close to the very edge, and when Robin—after an awful pause—came to the surface with Arthur White on his arm, Dobbie caught at his coat-sleeve, and held on like grim death for what seemed to him an eternity, every moment expecting the ice to give way and plunge him into that terrible black gulf.

But help was nearer than he knew.

"Hold on!" shouted Mr. Langley, as he pulled off his coat and, advancing boldly to the edge, threw one end of it into the water. Robin caught it without relinquishing his hold of Arthur, Mr. Langley and the three boys pulled together with all their might, and somehow or other the two dripping forms were hauled on to the ice and carried safe to land.

Mr. Langley sent Wilson, who was a swift runner, off for the doctor; then he turned his attention to the sufferers.

Robin's teeth were chattering, and he was shivering so that at first he could not stand; but he was all right, and with hardly a glance in his direction, Mr. Langley busied himself over Arthur White's unconscious form. He turned him over on to his face, did his best to empty the water out of his lungs, and then, calling Fergus Hume to his side, the two set to work with a will to produce artificial respiration.

But no sign of life rewarded their efforts; and the awestruck boys began to whisper to one another that little Spider was dead.