

Where the Snowmen went in winter

On an impeccably cold winter's night, late in January when the snow was lying hard on the ground and a wind cut like a knife across the fields and down the streets, the Snowmen decided that they had had enough. It was bad enough, standing out in the snow with no chance of getting down to the shops or out to the fish and chip shop, bad enough having naughty children throw snowballs at you, worse still to have the children's mother come storming out to retrieve the father's best scarf and coat which the children had kindly put on the snowman, leaving only a hat and a rope for a belt; but to have to wait out there for days and nights on end, with their carrot-noses dropping lower and almost falling off, and the odd piece of coal popping out of their faces, and the sun slowly but surely melting away all the shape of their arms and heads - that was really a misery.

So when the coldest night of all came along, and great black clouds made the night blacker still and snow fell and swirled and the wind howled, the Snowmen shouted across the gardens to each other.

'I say, James! Do you want to get away from here and into the warm?'

'Well, I certainly do, Jeremy. Where will we go?'

The two neighbours turned to another snowman, three doors down.

'Where can we get to, Jason?' they asked him.

'Dashed if I know,' replied Jason, 'Why don't we ask Jonathan?'

Jonathan had been standing with his hands in his pockets, glad of the scarf which the children had found on the rubbish tip and wrapped around his neck. He thought for a while.

'Well, chaps, there's the railway station down the road. Why don't we get down there and see where the trains are going?'

Well, the four Snowmen thought this was a unspeakably good idea, so off they went. Jasper and John joined them on the way, when they explained where they were off to; but not Jemima or Janet or Juliet, because this was a trip only Snowmen could go on, not the Snowgirls.

When they got to the station, the blizzard howling around their knees, the place was dark and deserted. They went in cautiously, ready to run if anyone saw them. A dim light shone above the two platforms, and on a bench someone was asleep.

'Somewhere on here there should be a timetable,' whispered Jonathan. 'Let's see if there's a train coming soon.'

They tiptoed down the platform; attached to the boards on the walls were pictures of sunny skies and blue seas: Come to Aberdour! Take a sunny break in Helensburgh! Jasper nudged Jason and the two of them stopped to gaze in rapture at the pictures.

Meanwhile, Jonathan and John and James and Jeremy were studying the timetable, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands to keep the cold out. It

soon became obvious that there was only one train that night, coming from the south and going to the north.

'But it will be even colder there,' complained James. 'Why can't we catch one going south, where the sun shines?'

'Well, it's the only one we'll get tonight. And you know they don't let us on the trains during the day - makes the other passengers cold, they say.'

'Pah! Stuff and nonsense!' grumbled James. But he could not think of any better suggestions.

'Anyway,' said Jeremy cheerily, 'At least it will be out of the wind for a while. And we can catch the next train home afterwards...'

So, until one o'clock in the morning, when the train was due in, the six Snowmen sat in the cheerless waiting room, playing I-Spy, humming with their hands in their pockets, having competitions to see who could make the ugliest faces (John won) and who could make the most steam on the windows (a close heat between Jason and James), and feeling grumpy.

Finally, one o'clock struck on the town clock. They all rushed out on to the platform to wait for the train. The person who had been sleeping on the bench had disappeared. A minute passed. There was not a sound except the whining of the wind and the rustling of the snow. Five minutes passed. Still nothing. Twenty minutes.

'Are you sure you read that timetable properly?' asked Jasper, suspiciously.

'Of course I did,' said Jonathan,

'Go and look for yourself if you don't believe me.'

Everyone except Jonathan went back to look at the timetable. It was true: only one train that night, due in at one o'clock. Miserably they trooped back into the waiting-room. The train must be running late.

Just as the town-clock struck half-past two, Jason jumped up.

'Here it is!' he shouted, 'Quick! Out on to the platform!'

The others got unsteadily to their feet. (It must be said that Jonathan and John had found a can of beer and were slightly the worse for wear.) But sure enough, out in the blizzard, they could just make out the lights of the train as it rolled into the station. No one got off, and the Snowmen just had enough time to throw open a door and pile into the carriage before the train started off again.

What luck! They had found a carriage with no one in it. This was hardly surprising, since the lights were out and the heating was not working. They were in the last carriage of the train. In the next carriage towards the engine, the lights were also out, but the heating was on full blast; any snowman going in there would have been melted in a matter of moments.

With sighs of pleasure, the six Snowmen threw themselves into the seats, and peered out of the windows to watch the dark countryside flowing past. They went past empty towns, dark woods, silent fields; the train rattled on, stopping briefly in deserted stations, moving off again.

'Well, I must say, Jonathan. I think this is unaccustomedly splendid,' said Jason as he gazed out of the window, his carrot nose pressed up against the freezing glass. His friends agreed, and voted Jonathan the Best Snowman of the Winter. Jonathan had a headache coming on, but accepted their praise graciously.

And just at that moment, the lights went on briefly, then off again and the train shuddered to a grinding halt. It was the middle of nowhere; the blizzard still raged outside, and the cold was outrageous. There was not a sound except the wind in dark and hidden trees. It was so cold and draughty that carrot-noses which had been drooping suddenly froze solid.

At length, the ticket inspector came through from the carriage in front.

'Sorry, gents,' he explained, 'But the train has run out of fuel. We'll have to wait here awhile for another engine to come and pull us into the next town.'

What a splendid trip this had turned out to be for our Snowmen! First the cold waiting-room at the station, then the draughty carriage, and now the prospect of a long and chilly night in a darkened train in the middle of a freezing plain.

'Absolutely top-hole!', exclaimed Jeremy, rubbing his hands with glee. He pulled his muffler straight (actually, it was an old rope with fraying ends). 'Top-hole, my man,' he repeated, clapping the ticket inspector on the back. The poor man wandered off, not quite sure what to make of these people who so enjoyed the cold.

Well, the night went on, and the blizzard finally stopped, and the noise of the wind disappeared, leaving the quiet stars in the deep and cold sky. The snowmen gathered at the windows staring out into the frozen countryside. Next to the railway-track was a small wood, and a deep valley. At the bottom of the valley was a pond, frozen over now and shiny with thick ice. The trees of the wood looked out over the pond and were hung heavy with the snow.

'What a jolly fine spot,' murmured Jason, as he gazed out. 'Would it not be absolutely spiffing to just get out here and lark about?'

He turned to his friends. They were all slowly nodding in agreement. Here was a cold, cold and quiet place for a real holiday: no howling gales, no drifting snow, no children throwing snowballs or stones, no one stealing back your clothes. Just the snow, the trees and the sky.

One by one, they got up from their seats, went to the carriage-door and clambered out. One by one, they scrambled up from the railway line and into the wood. One by one they lay on their tummies and sledged - whoosh! - straight down the slopes of the valley and skidded - wheesh! - on to the ice of the pond. Some of them went so fast they slid right over the far bank and bounced off again.

Their laughter and shrieks cracked the air, and drowned out the noise of the train on the line above as - eventually - it set off again on its long journey.

And that is where the snowmen went to in winter, disappearing in the middle of a snowy night, leaving behind only strange and unlikely tales told by

drunks and ticket inspectors. But if you ever did want to see how they are getting on (and they are still having the time of their lives in that cold and forgotten wood) then pick up one of those snow-shakers and have a look. There is a snowman in there who will tell you some news...