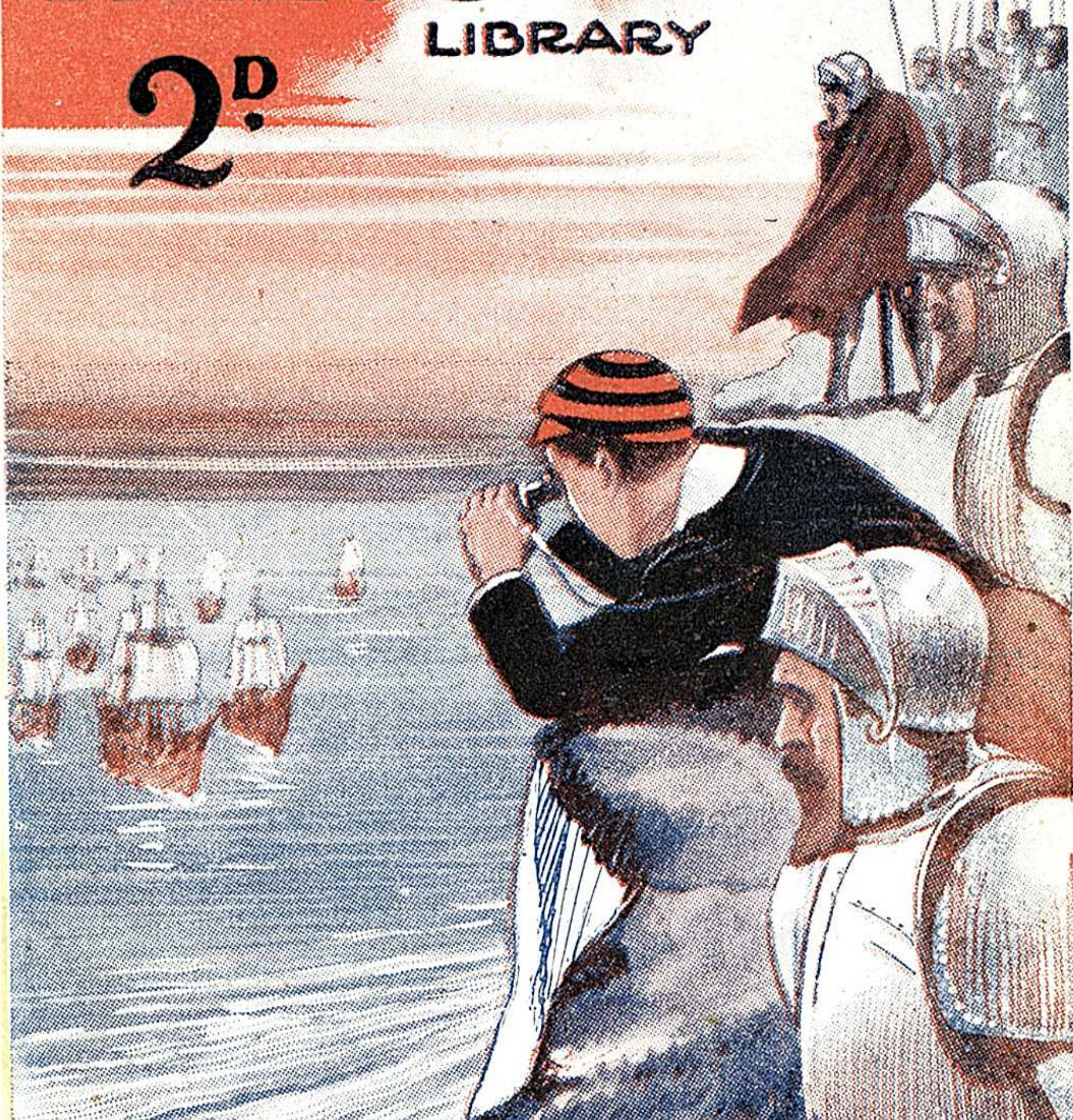


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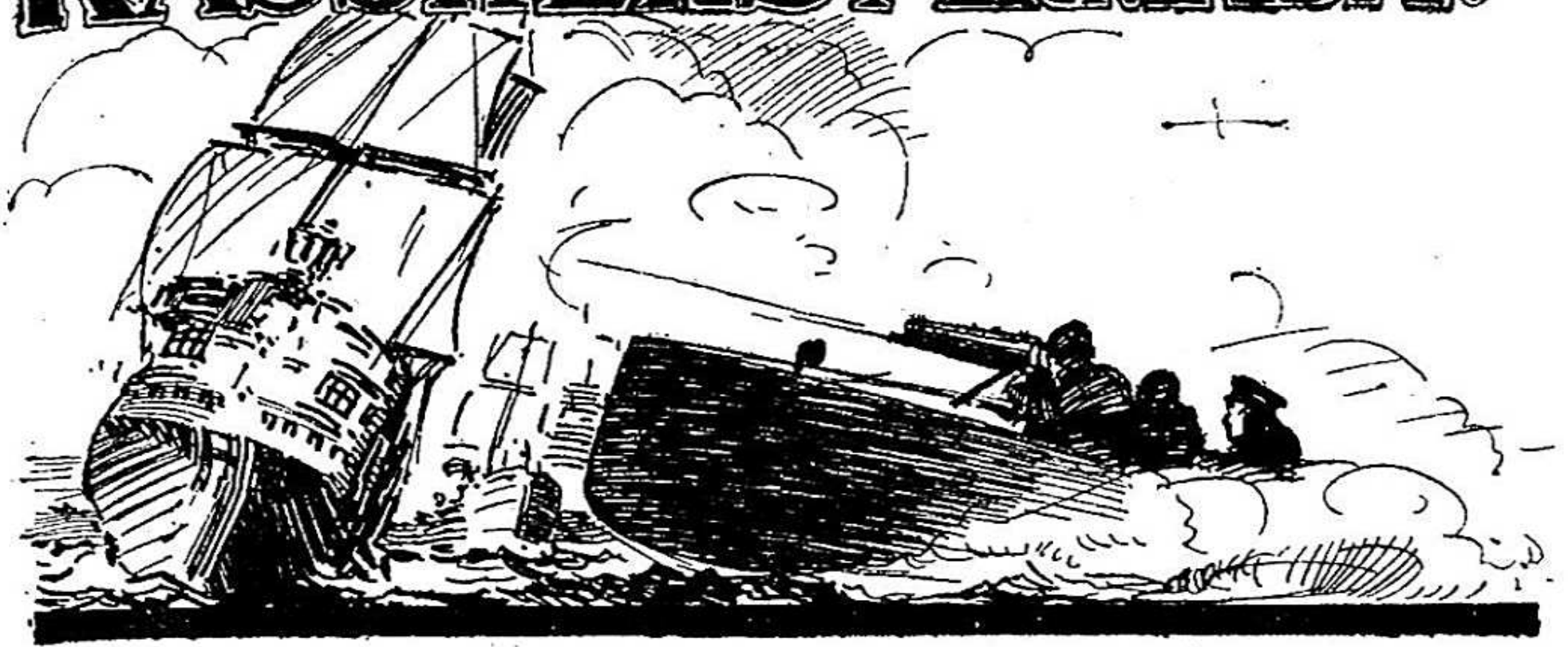
OUT ON WEDNESDAY,

January 11, 1927.



“Clear out of here, you rotters!” bellowed Handforth. “For two pins I’ll order my troops to chuck you out!” “Steady on, Handy,” grinned Nipper. “The gov’nor is in charge now. You’ve got to take your orders from him!”

KASSKER'S ARMADA!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The Boys of St. Frank's defend Northestria from Kassker's invading hordes in this week's rousing long complete story.

CHAPTER 1.

THE HEROES OF THE HOUR!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE looked round despairingly.

"I hate to grumble, laddies, but there's something lacking!" he said, in a sad voice. "I mean to say, how can a chappie look his best when there's absolutely no dashed mirror in the place? I've a haunting feeling that the jolly old necktie is twisted, dash it!"

"That's nothing to worry about, Archie," grinned Reggie Pitt. "A necktie always looks better if it's just a bit careless."

The genial ass of the St. Frank's Remove gave a start.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated. "Then the old fear is absolutely justified? I mean to say, the Pride of the Glenthornes is little better than a tramp, as it were?"

"What's the trouble now, Archie?" asked Nipper briskly, as he bustled by. "Only five minutes left, you know—we're due at the levee in another ten. Can't keep the Court waiting, you know."

"We're all ready," said Tommy Watson.

"Absolutely not!" protested Archie Glenthorne, in alarm. "Odds tragedies and disasters! Five minutes, Nipper, old cheese?"

Imposs! I hate to say it, laddie, but the thing is absolutely out of the question!"

"That's a pity," said Pitt solemnly. "I suppose you know what happens to people who don't turn up on time?"

"Well, laddie, you see——"

"The chopper!" said Pitt.

"Eh?"

"The axe!"

"Oh, but dash it!" protested Archie. "I mean——"

"These Northestrians are slow enough in most things, but when it comes to lopping off a fellow's head, they're wonderfully snappy," continued Reggie Pitt, with a sombre shake of his head. "And a Royal command, after all, is a Royal command. You can't afford to ignore the Princess Mercia's regal summons, Archie."

The elegant Removite looked more distressed than ever.

"Absolutely not," he agreed. "An invitation from a lady is something to be respected. But what can a chappie do, I mean, when there aren't any mirrors about? And there's Phipps, too. Or, to be more exact, there isn't Phipps. Why didn't the blighter come on this trip, dash him?"

Archie's fears, of course, were quite groundless. He had an idea that he was unrepresent-

able—whereas, he was the most scrupulously attired of all the St. Frank's fellows. The lack of a mirror was a great handicap, but, on the whole, he had wrestled very successfully with the difficulty. From the top of his gleaming hair to the toes of his glittering shoes, he was immaculate.

For the occasion was an important one.

There was a great levee in the Royal Court, and honours were to be bestowed upon the brave strangers within the gates. The St. Frank's party, in short, was about to receive recognition for their deeds of derring do.

These were times of strenuous excitement and adventure, indeed. It was difficult to believe that the period was actually the twentieth century.

The juniors, for example, were dressing in a great stone hall, assisted by quaintly-attired lackeys. The view from the windows revealed a broad moat, a picturesque drawbridge, and buildings of mediæval design. People were thronging the castle courtyard, and the cobbled streets of Dunstane. For the Royal Castle was situated in the heart of the capital. It was a day of rejoicing, and all the inhabitants were in festive mood. Prince Oswy had been rescued from the enemy, and all Northestria was *en fête*.

There was a great bustle from without, a clanking of spurs, and a jingling of chain-mail. The next moment a glittering figure appeared in the quaint old apartment, and he came to a dead halt, glaring.

"Hallo!" said Pitt, glancing round. "It's here!"

"What's here?" asked Jack Grey.

"Trouble!" sighed Pitt. "Look at it!"

The new arrival gave a snort.

"If you're referring to me, you West House rotter, it'll only take me two shakes to biff you on the nose!" he roared. "I'm the captain of the Royal Bodyguard, and you'd better not forget—"

"Cheese it, Handy!" said Nipper, with a grin. "All that's over now."

"Eh?" said Handforth. "What's over?"

"Why, all that rot about your being captain of the bodyguard," replied the Remove skipper. "It may amuse you to kid yourself, but nobody else is deceived. In other words, old chap, your reign of power is over."

Edward Oswald Handforth drew himself up to his full height.

"I don't suppose you know it, Dick Hamilton, but you're a blithering fathead!" he said witheringly. "I've got just as much power as ever I had! One word from me, and I can have you chaps thrown into the dungeons!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And you'd better obey orders, too!" yelled Handforth. "The Court is sitting, and you're all wanted."

"Anybody might think we were prisoners at the Bar!" grinned Fullwood. "Sorry, Handy, but we can't come. We're not ready. Look at Archie, for example. Did you ever see such a wreck?"

Handforth gave Archie a cold look.

"The poor chap can't help it—he was born that way!" he said curtly. "His clothes are all right, but nothing can alter his face. That sloppy look is one of his misfortunes."

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Archie, jamming his monocle into his eye. "I mean, dash it, I say!" He inspected Handforth with cold disfavour. "Good gad! The jolly old kettle calling the frying-pan sooty, what? I mean, when it comes to a question of faces, dash you, what about yours?"

"What about it?" said Handforth aggressively.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "If it wasn't for your dashed eyes, and your frightful mouth, we wouldn't know it was a face at all. I mean to say, I've seen a few ghastly accidents in my time, but for a sheer catastrophe, let me gaze upon this rugged scene of horror!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you calling my face a scene of horror?" hooted Handforth.

"A catastrophe, laddie," said Archie coldly. "A sordid disaster!"

"Why, you insulting fathead—"

"Peace, infants, peace!" interrupted Nipper soothingly. "Enough of this squabbling. It's quite bad enough for us to see your faces in the ordinary way, without being especially reminded of them."

The other juniors yelled, and Handforth's heated retort was drowned. Church and McClure managed to grasp him, and pull him aside. His faithful chums of Study D were also dressed in chain-mail, for they, too, belonged to the Princess Mercia's Bodyguard.

"Chuck it, Handy," murmured Church. "They're only pulling your leg."

"As captain of the bodyguard—"

"Leave it alone for a bit, old man," urged McClure. "You can fool these Northestrians with that bluff, but our own chaps are different—"

"Bluff?" repeated Handforth, in a terrible voice.

"Well, I mean—"

"Are you telling me, Arnold McClure, that my position as captain of the bodyguard is a joke?" demanded Handforth. "Are you trying to hint—"

"I—I didn't mean bluff exactly," said McClure hastily. "But these chaps won't give you your due. They just look upon you as a Remove chap. A prophet never gets any recognition in his own country."

"But I'm not a prophet, you fathead!" snapped Handforth.

"No, I know—"

"We're not in our own country, either!"

"You ass, it's only a phrase—"

"I can't help whether it's a phrase or not!" argued Handforth coldly. "What's the idea of talking rot about a chap making profit in his own country?"

"I didn't say that!" sighed McClure. "Oh, what's the use? If I try to explain, you finish up by starting a scrap—"

"The chaps have gone now, anyhow," grinned Church, looking round.

Handforth started, and whirled about.

"By George!" he roared. "We came up here to hustle the fatheads down to the levee, and they've all gone! Come on! We shall be late!"

And the chums of Study D hustled out of the apartment, and went down the great stone staircase to the main hall of the castle. Arriving, they beheld a scene of splendour which was amazingly reminiscent of the Middle Ages.



CHAPTER 2.

LEE THE LIONHEART!

THE Princess Mercia was radiant and happy. She looked over the great assembly with eyes that sparkled with quiet joy.

Although she was nominally the ruler of this strange, long-lost nation, she was a mere slip of a girl—pretty, delicate, and not a year older than seventeen. In England, she would have been at school still. But here she was monarch of all she surveyed. Her faithful Chief Adviser, Ethelbert the Red, was really her only guide in the ruling of her people.

By her side sat Prince Oswy, her young brother of thirteen. He looked even younger, being a frail boy, with pale, thin cheeks and hollow eyes. No doubt his long imprisonment among the Gothlanders had lowered his vitality.

But that nightmare was over now.

The coming of the great airship, and its crew of amazing strangers, had completely changed the life of the sleepy, indolent Northestrians. In short, they had been awakened with a vengeance from their lethargic complacency.

Chance had played a big part in the astounding affair.

Lord Dorrimore, the famous millionaire explorer, had equipped his great airship for the purpose of searching for a fellow explorer—a man who had rather recklessly penetrated the Arctic Circle by aeroplane. Dorrie's efforts to find the unfortunate adventurer had led to disaster—and to these surprising developments, too.

Nelson Lee was with the party, to say nothing of the warlike Umlosi, and a whole crowd of St. Frank's fellows. Even Willy Handforth of the Third was here with his two chums—and the loquacious Browne of the Fifth. Six girls from the Moor View School had eagerly undertaken the trip.

For, at first, it had been regarded as a mere jaunt.

The airship had left England to take up its base on the verge of the Arctic wastes, where Lord Dorrimore's famous yacht, the Wanderer, was stationed. It had been Dorrie's idea to use his yacht as a base, and to make

daily cruises over the northern snows in search of the lost explorer.

But Fate had decided otherwise. Caught in a raging blizzard, the great airship had been whirled deeper and deeper into the frozen wastes of the Arctic. Everybody on board had felt that their last hour had come. And then this extraordinary oasis had been discovered—this hidden basin in the heart of the Arctic.

It was a land of wonders, indeed.

Surrounded by enormous peaks and glaciers, the oasis was heated by means of volcanic fires. And lighted, too. There were probably several gigantic volcanoes surrounding the basin, and the lurid glare from their white-hot craters was thrown upwards upon the everlasting mists above. And this light, deflected into the oasis, provided a false daylight.

The phenomenon was a perfectly natural one. This volcanic heat, coming into violent contact with the unbelievable cold of the Polar region, had the effect of causing ceaseless blizzards and everlasting mists. Year in and year out these blizzards raged round the oasis in a continuous tumult. And thus, for centuries, the strange valley had remained hidden from the outer world. Only by the merest chance had Lord Dorrimore's airship been pitched into the safety zone. And even then she had fallen to earth, crippled—to wreck herself beyond all hope of repair.

The party's amazement, however, at the nature of their escape, had been turned to consternation when they had found themselves seized and flung into dungeons. This oasis was peopled by a long-lost race of Anglo-Saxon origin. And the centuries of isolation

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had caused the Northestrians to remain practically at a standstill. Generations had come and gone, and these lost people were still living in the picturesque style of the Middle Ages.

There was another tribe, too—the Gothlanders. These brutes had obviously been imprisoned in the oasis centuries before the Anglo-Saxons, and there was plenty of evidence to show that they were pure-blooded descendants of the ancient Goths. They had been subjected by the Northestrians—held as slaves, and finally banished to the wild country beyond the central lake.

All this was Northestrian history. While the two peoples had never lost their inborn enmity, they had nevertheless developed a friendly spirit over the course of the last hundred years. The Gothlanders had remained entirely separate, for no inter-marriage was allowed. And, speaking the same language, and using the same customs, they had copied their former masters. Gothland had become a thriving nation, and much trading had been developed. Indeed, the commerce across the lake had grown to such proportions that the trading ships were voyaging daily, and were even preyed upon by pirates.

But during the past year, all this had changed.

Kassker the Grim, the Overlord of the Gothlanders, was a man of ambition. Immediately upon his accession to power, he had placed a ban upon all trading with Northestria, and Gothland had become an armed camp—preparing for the great invasion. For it was Kassker's ambition to be the supreme ruler of the entire oasis.

And meanwhile the Northestrians had lazily pottered on, dimly aware of the coming peril, but ignoring it. For centuries the Gothlanders had been regarded as menials and slaves. They were beneath contempt. And the present generation of Northestrians feared nothing. What was there to fear, indeed, from these crude savages across the lake? It was only by condescension that they had agreed to trade with the uncouth brutes!

But the inborn lethargy of the Northestrians had led to a perilous position. While they continued to take life with an indolence that amazed the British newcomers, Kassker the Grim was preparing for the devastating blow. The Northestrians refused to believe that there could be any danger—and yet the danger was paramount.

This was the position at the moment.

Ethelbert the Red, the kindly, easy-going ruler—for, after all, the Princess Mercia was only a ruler in name—had been suspicious of the airship's party. But since they had raided Gothland, and had rescued Prince Oswy, his views had changed. From one end of Northestria to the other, the visitors were now hailed as heroes.

And this levee was in honour of the prince's joyous release. It was a triumph for Nelson Lee, for the schoolmaster-detective himself had engineered the daring rescue.

It meant a lot to the adventurers.

Instead of being held prisoners, they were granted the freedom of the entire country. Indeed, Nelson Lee was invited to accept the position of commander-in-chief of the Northestrian army, and he was already known as Lee the Lionhearted. The Moor View girls, instead of being serving-maids to the princess, were now ladies-in-waiting at the Court.

No honours were too great for these daring strangers.

And Ethelbert the Red, who had previously been so obstinate, was handsome in his acknowledgements of his mistake.

"'Twas her Majesty's desire that ye should all be welcomed as guests within our borders," said the Chief Adviser, as he addressed them all, amid a deep hush. "Make no mistake, good friends. Our fair Mercia knew ye at your true worth. 'Twas I who harboured unjustified suspicions."

"We bear you no grudge on that account, old man," smiled Lord Dorrimore.

"Thou art ever generous, Dorrimore the Brave," replied Ethelbert quietly. "And the same may be said of Lee the Lionheart. In my folly, I suspected ye all of treachery to Northestria. By my soul, I have been enlightened! 'Tis now my desire to make what amends I can. All of ye are acclaimed by our people, and no honours are too great. I'faith, methinks 'twill be for the good of Northestria if ye do organise the defences of our beloved land."

A great shout went up from the assembly.

"Ay! Let Lee the Lionheart take command!"

"Hurrah!" yelled the St. Frank's fellows loyally.

"'Tis to be feared that we are in danger from Kassker and his savage hordes," continued Ethelbert gravely. "And 'tis only just and meet that I should confess myself bewildered and distraught. I am a man of peace. All we Northestrians are peace-loving folk. But we now perceive that danger is nigh, and we are powerless to grapple with it. 'Tis for thee, Lee the Lionheart, to organise the defences of our threatened land, for thou hast proven thy prowess and courage."

Nelson Lee bowed.

"You are unduly flattering, my lord," he said, smiling. "If it is her Majesty's wish, I will do what I can—"

"'Tis my one desire," put in the princess simply.

"Then I will use every means in my power to organise your people without delay," replied Lee. "I take it that I shall have a free hand—that I shall be in a position of supreme control, so far as the army is concerned?"

"'Tis agreed," said Ethelbert promptly.

"With our resources, it is possible that we shall be able to give these Gothlanders more than one surprise," said Nelson Lee. "But we must act swiftly, and the whole nation

must be aroused. Kassker the Grim means to strike, and at present we are unprepared. Not a moment must be lost."

"I agree with that," said Dorrie, nodding. "There's big trouble brewin', or I'm a Dutchman! After the way we pinched Prince Oswy, an' snipped off Kassker's beard, he'll be on the warpath like a Red Indian chief!"

"After the great feast, thou shalt prepare thy plans——" began Ethelbert.

"Let there be no feast," interrupted Lee quickly. "There will be occasion for rejoicing after the victory has been won. But not one moment must be lost now. I desire a council of army chiefs within the hour, if such a thing is possible."

The princess looked at him with wide eyes.

"Thou art indeed a man of swift action, brave stranger!" she said softly.

"Swift action is necessary, your Majesty," replied Lee, with conviction.



CHAPTER 3.

NELSON LEE TAKES CHARGE!

HERE was something in Nelson Lee's manner which made a deep impression upon the whole assembly.

His words were few, and

he spoke quietly—but there could be no mistaking the gravity of his tone.

"By St. Attalus!" said Ethelbert the Red. "I like not the implication, good Lee. Thinkest thou that danger is so nigh, then?"

Nelson Lee looked at him very straightly.

"It is my last wish to alarm you unnecessarily, my lord, but, under the circumstances, I feel compelled to speak plainly—bluntly. Northestria is absolutely unprepared for war——"

"We have soldiers," put in the princess proudly. "We have great overlords, each with their own guards and archers. There are many men eager and willing to lay down their lives for their country."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Many men, yes—but in this crisis we shall need every man," he replied. "Not just the soldiers of your great feudal lords, but every able-bodied citizen, too. Kassker the Grim may be a savage, and his followers may be beneath the contempt of all decent people. But as fighters, I'll warrant they are grim and deadly enemies. Once they gain a footing in Northestria they will sweep through the land like a plague. If these invading hosts succeed in their design, and capture a section of Northestrian soil, there will be no holding them."

"'Tis impossible!" muttered Ethelbert, staring.

"You don't believe it?" said Nelson Lee grimly. "But it's true, my lord, whether you believe it or not. And these brutal Gothlanders are preparing even now—they have been preparing for years. What they have accomplished leisurely, we must perform with the utmost speed. There is no other chance of

saving your land from being despoiled. An invasion is inevitable—unless we can organise such effective defences that the enemy will be kept out. There is no time for feasting—there is no time for rejoicing. We must all get to work in grim earnest. Furthermore, it is my wish to utilise certain materials from our great ship of the air. Indeed, this step may be the only saving grace."

"A murrain on Kassker!" swore Ethelbert the Red. "Thou speakest convincingly, Lee the Lionheart, and thou art arousing my fears. Are these accursed Gothlanders such valiants, then? I'faith, 'twas my impression that such dogs were to be but treated with contemptuous indifference——"

"Exactly!" snapped Lee. "That is where you have made the cardinal blunder, my lord. These Gothlanders have been held in contemptuous indifference for so long that you have failed to see the thing which is staring you in the face. You have pushed reason aside, and have gone blindly on, careless and self-sufficient."

"By the soul of Calwold!" broke out Ethelbert angrily. "Thy words are none too well chosen——"

"Nay, let him speak!" said the princess.

"I mean no slight upon you, or any particular individual, my lord," continued Nelson Lee, smiling. "I am referring to the entire Northestrian race. When I say 'you,' I mean all Northestria in general."

"'Tis better!" muttered the chief adviser, slightly appeased.

"And I will repeat my condemnation, too," continued Lee. "For centuries you have regarded the Gothlanders as a savage race. They are savage. But, because of this savagery, are they harmless? Quite the contrary, by everything that I have seen. Kassker the Grim means to make a bold attempt to conquer Northestria, and even while we are talking here, his legions may be setting forth upon the attempted invasion. We have been to Gothland—we have seen. I am not speaking wildly, but in deadly earnest."

Indeed, Nelson Lee was choosing his words very carefully. He wanted to impress his listeners with the gravity of the situation—but, at the same time, he had no desire to precipitate a panic. Yet, if he had spoken as bluntly as his fears dictated, a panic would certainly have followed. For Nelson Lee knew well enough that the threatened invasion was a stark reality to be grimly reckoned with. The Northestrians were only just beginning to admit the possibility of such a thing.

And Kassker the Grim, taking advantage of his rivals' apathy, was preparing for a brutal invasion of conquest. By what Lee had seen of the Gothlander overlord, he was a man of ruthless methods. His soldiers would sweep into this peaceful land, and they would burn, pillage, and massacre. If such a terrible war broke out, the Northestrians would go under during the very first onslaught. They were childlike in their belief of safety, and Lee was almost staggered by their obstinate reluctance to look the facts in the face.

But, at last, they were beginning dimly to appreciate the position.

It was rather curious that the young princess should reveal a keener understanding than her chief adviser and his satellites. There were many present in this assemblage—all the chief feudal lords of the country, who had come to the capital, post-haste, in order to take part in this joyous celebration of Prince Oswy's return.

Scarcely one of them had had a thought of danger. Lee and Dorrie and the St. Frank's fellows were amazed at the total lack of understanding. These Northestrian feudal lords persisted in their belief that Gothland was peopled by mere savages—brutal clods who had not the sense to organise a war.

Not that the visitors needed any enlightenment regarding the Northestrian psychology. The very fact that they had made no attempt to rescue Prince Oswy proved their lack of initiative.

"Lee the Lionheart speaketh wisely," said the young princess quietly. "At my desire, he is in command of all our soldiers, good Ethelbert. Let him be obeyed in all things. Let his wisdom guide thee. 'Tis my wish."

Her words were final, and after a very few more words, the levee broke up. Honours had been bestowed upon all the chief participants. Dorrimore the Brave and Waring the Dauntless were two of the new titles that had been conferred.

The whole affair had ended very differently to what the Northestrian nobles had supposed. They had come here to take part in a great feast—a banquet of rejoicing. But there was no feast. The one concrete result of the assembly was that Nelson Lee had been made supreme commander of the army.

One entire wing of the Royal castle was placed at the disposal of the strangers. And Nelson Lee was looking grim and thoughtful when he found himself alone with Lord Dorrimore and Captain Waring in one of the inner chambers. The St. Frank's fellows were excitedly discussing the situation elsewhere.

"Well, that's that!" said Lord Dorrimore cheerfully. "Gad, it's a relief to know that we're free agents, anyhow. I'm tired of being bottled up, Lee. What's the immediate programme?"

"I don't quite know, Dorrie," replied Lee, as he filled his pipe. "The whole position is difficult. It is unexpected, too. We bargained for no such development as this."

"Bein' placed in command of the army, you mean?"

"That's one thing, yes," replied Nelson Lee. "Our main object in rescuing Prince Oswy was to prove our friendliness, and thus earn our release. I don't think any of us foresaw that we should have these responsibilities thrust upon us."

"By glory, no," agreed Dorrie. "Still, it's no good grumblin'—an', as far as I'm concerned, I regard the future with cheery anticipation. There seems to be trouble in the air, an' if we can get a good smack at those blessed Gothlanders, I shan't kick."

Captain Waring smiled.

"Yes, but what about our own troubles?" he asked pointedly.

"Exactly!" agreed Lee. "You've hit it, Waring."

"I don't understand," remarked his lordship, staring.

"You wouldn't!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "We all know that you're an irresponsible adventurer, Dorrie. As long as there's some excitement, and a new thrill, you forget everything else. But we're in charge of a number of schoolboys and schoolgirls, and it's just possible that their parents are beginning to worry a bit. We're lost in the wastes of the Arctic, and there seems precious little chance of getting away. Do you wonder that I'm just a bit anxious?"

Dorrie waved an airy hand.

"My dear man, what's the good of fightin' against Fate?" he asked, with his usual nonchalance. "We ought to think ourselves infernally lucky to be alive at all! An' since we're in the midst of all this mediæval warfare, why not take advantage of the situation, an' thoroughly enjoy ourselves?"

"Dorrie, you're absolutely hopeless," growled Nelson Lee, frowning.

"I know it!" sighed his lordship. "I've known it for years."

"You're incorrigible—"

"Guilty again!" agreed Dorrie, grinning.

"Will you stop this nonsense, and be serious?" demanded Lee gruffly. "Without the slightest desire to be placed on a pedestal, I find myself commander-in-chief of these Northestrian soldiers! And there'll be precious little time, by what I can see, for any of us to think of our own troubles."



CHAPTER 4.

HANDY DEPOSED!

ORD DORRIMORE nodded.

"That's just the way I've been thinkin', too," he agreed. "Old Kassker

is a restive beggar, an' he'll probably start that little invasion within a day or two. The prospect looks lively."

"In a way, of course, I feel honoured," admitted Nelson Lee slowly. "And there will be no getting out of the responsibilities. I must do everything I can faithfully to fulfil my trust."

"Why did you accept the position, if you didn't want it?"

"Man alive, what else could I do?" retorted Lee, as he lit his pipe with forceful puffs. "I couldn't refuse, could I? These people might have taken such a refusal in the wrong spirit, and then we should have found ourselves in the dungeons again. As it is, we are at least free—and I suppose we are really the masters of the situation."

"Then, dear old soul, what more do you want?" asked Lord Dorrimore.



"You have challenged me to a combat, and in Northestria that means a fight to the death," declared Browne. "Choose your weapon, Brother Handforth—lance or club!" The watching juniors chuckled; Handy's leg was being pulled again.

"I am thinking of the boys and girls—of our responsibility to their people at home," continued Lee. "In order to save our own lives, we must buckle into this task of defending Northestria. We can't get away, and so we shall have to join in the general strife. But, at the same time, we must do everything in our power to communicate with the outside world. We mustn't lose sight of the fact that we are merely visitors in this place. This warfare between the Northestrians and the Gothlanders is not our concern—although, willy-nilly, we are compelled to take part in it."

"Then what on earth's the good of kick-in'?"

"I'm not kicking, Dorrie—I'm just thinking of the position in general," replied Nelson Lee. "Captain Waring, I want you to find Sparks and hurry him off to the airship. Let one or two of the engineers go with him. If it is at all possible, they must rig up an aerial, and get the wireless into shape."

The airship captain nodded. He was a young man after Nelson Lee's own heart, and he had been chafing under the recent idleness. His eyes now sparkled with anticipation.

"I'll get off at once—I'll go myself," he said briskly. "And if we don't get into communication with the outer world, it won't be my fault."

"All this is very interestin', but what's the

good of gettin' in touch with the outer world, anyhow?" asked Dorrie. "They can't send help to us—"

"But, at least, we can let them know that we are all safe and well," interrupted Lee. "Thank heaven the wireless apparatus was not hopelessly damaged when the airship crashed. If you can only rig up an aerial, Waring, I think you'll get results. But I'm rather doubtful about the transmission. This whole oasis is volcanic, and we are surrounded by extraordinary weather conditions. It may prove impossible to penetrate this natural barrier."

"Well, we'll try," said the captain. "There's something else, too, Mr. Lee. Have you thought of the possibilities of the airship? Two of the gondolas are practically unharmed—"

"I am glad to see that you have grasped the same idea that has occurred to me," put in Nelson Lee. "But this is hardly the time to discuss the matter, Waring. I have my own idea about those gondolas. For the present, I should like you to concentrate your attention upon the wireless. Dorrie, we'll go and have a word with the boys."

"Anythin' you like," agreed his lordship. "But don't forget the pow-wow with the army chiefs."

"That will follow immediately afterwards," said Lee.

"By the way, who are these army chiefs,

anyhow?" went on his lordship drily. "As far as I can see, young Handforth is the only military officer in the place. He's captain of the bodyguard, an' I'm bothered if I can think of any other military force."

"We shall soon know the truth, anyhow," replied Lee, as he moved towards the doorway. "No doubt these feudal lords are regarded as army chiefs in this country. If so, I am afraid they'll be a poor lot—as military men."

They hurried out, and Captain Waring lost no time in finding the young wireless operator, and some of the airship's engineers. In the meantime, most of the St. Frank's fellows were busily inspecting the quarters of the bodyguard.

Handforth didn't like it much. In fact, he regarded the whole affair as distinctly impertinent. As captain of the Royal troops, he thought it decidedly thick that the fellows should come barging in as though they owned the place.

"You dry up, Handy," said Nipper briskly. "We've been in captivity for days, while you've been lording it about with these soldiers. Your reign's over, my lad—and ours is just beginning."

"Hear, hear!"

"Dry up, Handy—you're out of it!"

Handforth glared round him ferociously.

"I've kept my temper pretty well up till now!" he said ominously. "But there's a limit! I don't object to visitors looking round the quarters of the bodyguard, but if there's any rot, I'll shove my foot down!"

"Smother him, somebody!"

"Absolutely!"

"Cheese it, Handy!"

"Out you go!" hooted Handforth. "Do you hear me, you rotters? Clear off before I get wild! For two pins, I'll order my troops to chuck you out on your necks! I'm boss here—"

"Poor old Handy!" sighed Reggie Pitt. "Until to-day you were the Big Noise, and you don't like to admit that your thunder is now as feeble as a little whisper. But it's a sad, sad fact, all the same."

Handforth started.

"I'm still captain, aren't I?" he demanded aggressively.

"I suppose you can fool yourself if you like," grinned Nipper. "But the gov'nor is commander-in-chief now, Handy, and you're only just a little captain. You've got to take your orders from him!"

"Oh, crumbs!" muttered Handforth, with a start.

He lost his bluster, and retired into a nook with Church and McClure.

"The bounder's right, too!" he muttered disgustedly. "Why the dickens did they want to interfere? I'm the chap to be commander-in-chief—and now I've got to take orders from Mr. Lee! It's too jolly thick!"

Church grinned.

"You've had your run, anyhow, Handy," he said. "And you needn't growl, either. By the look of things, there's going to be a fearful lot of fighting soon—and Mr. Lee is the one man to take charge."

"Rather!" agreed McClure. "We can rely on Mr. Lee!"

Handforth brightened up slightly.

"All the same, I'm captain of the bodyguard, and I'm not going to have these fat-heads overrunning our quarters like a lot of rabbits in a warren!" he said with a frown. "They'll take orders from me, or—"

"Rats!" said Church. "You're not their officer."

"H'm! I suppose not," admitted Handforth. "But there's no reason— By George," he added with a start, "that's an idea, Church, my lad! Why shouldn't all these chaps be shoved into the bodyguard? Then I should be able to order them about as I liked!"

Somehow Church and McClure didn't seem to think much of the suggestion. They praised it highly—a sure proof of their real feelings. But when the other fellows heard it, they didn't praise it at all. In fact, they used such blunt expressions of frank criticism that something akin to a riot was in progress when Nelson Lee and Dorrie arrived.

"It's high time we came, I can see," said Nelson Lee grimly, as he looked round at the excited juniors. "Boys, there's work for everybody to do, and the sooner we get at it the better. I'm going to make many changes in the general order of things, and I shall begin with the bodyguard."

There was something so crisp in Nelson Lee's tone that all the rotting ceased on the spot. Handforth looked alarmed.

"You're going to begin on the bodyguard, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes, Handforth, I am," replied Lee. "All these boys—in fact, every man-Jack of you St. Frank's fellows might as well join the bodyguard at once—"

"Why, that's my idea!" roared Handforth excitedly. "Mac, didn't I suggest it not more than five minutes ago?"

"Well, yes," admitted McClure. "But I'm not sure that you meant it in the same way—"

"There has got to be a settled policy at once," continued Nelson Lee. "This bodyguard is far too big as it stands at present, so I shall draft out all the original members, and make them into the First Defence Battalion—at least, the nucleus of it. You boys will be quite sufficient for the bodyguard."

"Hear, hear, sir!"

"We're all game, sir!"

"It is fitting that the eldest should be in command," continued Nelson Lee calmly. "Therefore I appoint you, Browne, as captain."



CHAPTER 5.

HANDFORTH DOESN'T LIKE IT.

WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE, the genial skipper of the Fifth, bowed.

"At your service, Brother Lee," he said amiably. "Henceforth I serve the princess with—"

"But—but—but—"

Handforth seemed to explode. For a moment or two he had been getting redder and redder, and now he jumped forward, his eyes blazing with indignation, and his blood at fever heat.

"But what about me?" he roared aggressively.

Nelson Lee looked at him with a cold eye.

"Is that the correct way to address your commander-in-chief?" he asked sternly.

Handforth's jaw dropped.

"I—I— Sorry, sir!" he gasped. "I—I didn't mean— But look here, I'm captain!" he added tensely. "I'm captain of the bodyguard, sir."

"But we are now face to face with serious trouble, Handforth, and the time for comic opera is over," interrupted Nelson Lee. "It is my decision that Browne shall be captain. He needs two lieutenants. I appoint Nipper and yourself."

Browne sighed.

"I could have suggested a better name for my second lieutenant, sir, but no matter," he said resignedly. "It is not my place to question the instructions of my commanding officer. Greatly as I fear the outcome, I will attempt to train Brother Handforth in the way he should go."

The rest of the juniors were grinning, but Handforth was bewildered and startled. Nelson Lee's decision, of course, was thoroughly sensible, and Nipper, at least, had no difficulty in appreciating the real meaning of it. Lee was anxious to have the boys employed, and by making them all members of the bodyguard, he was achieving his object. At the same time, the bodyguard was evidently destined to be a non-fighting force. Lee's mention of a First Defence Battalion had hinted as much. And it was only right, too, that a senior should be placed in command. And who better than the cool-headed, resourceful Browne? Lee knew well enough that Stevens—the only other senior in the party—would prefer to be in the rank and file.

"I shall give you further instructions within the hour," said Nelson Lee, turning to go. "I have special work for the bodyguard—urgent work—so you will see to it, Browne, that all your men get into uniform."

Lee marched out, and Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"A bit of a bombshell in camp, eh?" he chuckled.

"We've got to get things moving, Dorrie," replied Lee. "Handforth is a good fellow, but it needs a level head in command. I thought of making Nipper captain, but Browne is the elder, and a senior, too. I don't think Nipper will misunderstand. Handforth will probably create some noise to start with, but that'll be nothing new."

And Lee dismissed the matter at that.

Edward Oswald Handforth didn't dismiss it at all. He was bubbling over with white-hot indignation, and the glare he bestowed upon Browne was like a blast from a furnace.

"What have I done to deserve this, Brother Handforth?" asked Browne regretfully. "Why the necessity for this X-ray-like inspection? This look of yours is passing right through me, and leaving me filleted."

"You rotter!" burst out Handforth. "You Fifth-Form bouncer! I expect you faked it all up with Mr. Lee in advance!"

Browne winced.

"A foul accusation!" he said stoutly. "A base and unjust suspicion! I can assure you, Brother Handforth, that until Mr. Lee gave forth the edict, I was absolutely ignorant of it. I step into your shoes with reluctance, and only from a sense of duty. I trust—although I am beset with many misgivings—that they will not be too large!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I might have expected it!" said Handforth bitterly. "Not that I'm going to let you take my place, blow you! Not likely! I'm captain, and you can jolly well eat coke!"

He stormed out amid a yell of laughter, and Church and McClure hurried after him.

"Chuck it, Handy!" protested Church. "It's no good kicking."

"Am I going to be pushed out like this?" snapped Edward Oswald.

"But Mr. Lee is commander-in-chief—"

"Yes, but the princess is on the throne!" retorted Handforth, with a glitter in his eyes. "The princess appointed me captain of the bodyguard, and I don't see why Mr. Lee should come messing about and altering things. In fact, I won't stand it! I'm going straight to the princess!"

"You—you silly ass—"

"Straight to the princess!" repeated Handforth grimly. "I'll make her overrule this order, and Browne can be one of my lieutenants. By George! I'm not going to be snuffed out like this."

"Yes, but—"

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "I'm going." He strode off, and his chums stood there, helpless.

"What the dickens shall we do?" asked McClure anxiously.

"Nothing," said Church. "Let him go."

"But he'll probably worm his way round the princess—"

"Not likely!" said Church dryly. "If I know anything of Mr. Lee, he'll only remain commander-in-chief on the strict understanding that he's in supreme control. He

won't be dictated to by the princess, or by Ethelbert the Red, or by anybody else. Handy will only make himself look silly."

"Yes, you're right," said Mac slowly. "By Jupiter, I'm glad! Old Browne may be a long-winded ass, but he'll make a better captain than Handy. Life's been a bit too strenuous of late, with Handy roaring his orders into our ears every minute of the day."

In the meantime, Handforth was hastening into the Princess Mercia's quarters. He wasn't feeling quite so confident now, although his determination was as grim as ever. He remembered Irene & Co., and had an instinctive feeling that he would run into them. As a rule, he was only too eager to seek Irene's company, but just now he was heartily anxious to avoid her.

Naturally, he ran into her at once.

"Oh, Ted, we were hoping to see you!" cried the girl. "Isn't everything lovely? Everybody is free; Mr. Lee is in full command of things; and we're all ladies-in-waiting, instead of just hand-maidens."

"How do you like our court robes?" asked Doris Berkeley.

There were several of the other girls present, too, and ordinarily Handforth would have been full of enthusiasm for their rich dresses. Previously they had been compelled to wear the severe garb of menials. But everything was changed now.

"I—I think you look ripping!" stammered Handforth in confusion. "But—but the fact is— Look here, you girls!" he burst out. "Mr. Lee has barged in, and he's appointed Browne of the Fifth as captain of the body-guard, and I'm reduced to a lieutenant!"

The girls didn't seem particularly horror-stricken.

"Yes?" said Irene, as if she expected some more.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "Isn't that bad enough?"

"I don't see why you should be upset," put in Ena bluntly. "Everybody knows that you were only a joke, Ted. Mr. Lee is naturally putting things on a proper footing, and you ought to think yourself lucky to be a lieutenant even."

The other girls were thinking very much the same thing, but they hardly cared to put it into such blunt words. But Ena had a sister's privilege.

"I didn't ask for your rot, sis!" growled Handforth, frowning. "I'm going straight to the princess, and I'm going to make her countermand the order! I'll show Mr. Lee whether he can biff me out of the captaincy like this!"

Irene looked at him with stricken eyes.

"Oh, Ted!" she murmured brokenly. "You can't mean it!"

Her voice was so laden with grief that Handforth jumped, wondering what he had said.



CHAPTER 6.

BROWNE IS WILLING!

H, Ted!"

Doris and the other girls repeated the reproachful cry.

"Eh?" breathed Handforth. "I—I mean— But—but what's the matter?"

"You say you're going to the princess?" asked Irene. "You're going to dispute Mr. Lee's authority, just after he has been put in full control? Oh, Ted! You stand there and tell us that you're going to snivel?"

Handforth turned pale.

"Snivel?" he panted helplessly.

"No, Renie, you're wrong," said Doris quietly. "Ted isn't the kind of fellow to snivel—he's too strong for that. I don't blame you for jumping to such a conclusion, because it looks like it."

"But—but—"

"It's all right, Ted, we know exactly what it means," said Doris accusingly. "You needed an excuse to see the fair Mercia again—in private! That's the truth, isn't it? Irene doesn't like to think it, but in face of all this evidence—"

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth frantically.

He was as red as a peony, and he looked at Irene in dumb despair. He only saw cold indifference in Irene's face, and the other girls were all frowning at him with stern accusation.

"What is it to me?" asked Irene icily. "If Ted wants to run to the princess on some feeble excuse, let him. I can see it all now. He's ready to leap at the slightest chance. We know that the princess is soft about him, and I expect he's fallen under her spell. Well, what do I care?"

Handforth reeled. It staggered him to find that the girls put this construction upon his mission. It never entered into his head that they were pulling his leg. Everybody knew that the young princess had displayed a marked tendency to favour him.

For some extraordinary reason the lovely Mercia had bestowed sweet smiles upon him, and had shown him with unmistakable clarity that she had singled him out for her very sweetest attentions.

Handforth didn't mind being flattered like this—in fact, he rather enjoyed it. But, after all, Irene Manners was his special girl chum, and it alarmed him exceedingly to find that she was under such a false impression.

"I—I'm not going to the princess because I want to see her!" he panted.

"Then you're going to her to—to complain?" retorted Irene. "I won't say snivel this time, because that word isn't quite nice. But it's either one thing or the other, Ted—you're either going to her because you want to be in her company, or because you're discontented. And it isn't like you to run to people with your troubles, so I can only come to one conclusion."

The leader of Study D suddenly saw his mission in its true light.

"By George, you girls are right!" he said huskily. "It would be like snivelling, wouldn't it? Thank goodness you pulled me up in time! Blow the princess! I'll keep the captaincy by another method—I'll challenge Browne to a scrap, and whack him!"

He raced off, and the girls broke into soft chuckles.

"It's too bad, the way you tease him!" said Irene reproachfully.

"My hat!" said Mary Summers. "I like that! You were the worst teaser of all!"

"Well, you started it, and I had to keep it up," smiled Irene. "Anyhow, it stopped him going to the princess, didn't it? He would only have made himself look silly——"

"And now he's booked for a fight with Browne!" chuckled Ena. "Poor old Ted! I've heard that Browne is a terror with the gloves."

Handforth was full of his new plan. The girls had diplomatically shown him that he would be acting weakly in making any complaint, and he was startled at the narrowness of his escape. He came upon Church and McClure out in the courtyard, and they met him anxiously.

"What did she say?" asked Mac.

"What did who say?"

"The princess."

"I haven't seen the princess," snapped Handforth. "Not likely! Do you think I'm going to run to her with my troubles? I've thought of a better plan. Browne's been appointed the captain, but he'll never be able to keep the job if I knock him out in front of the whole bodyguard, will he?"

"Knock him out?" gasped Church.

"Yes," said Handforth with relish. "I'm going to challenge him to a fight, smash him to pulp, and then continue as captain! By right of conquest, my sons! It's the rule in this country, and even Mr. Lee can't dispute it!"

His chums looked at him aghast.

"But Browne will pulverise you!" said Church breathlessly.

"He'll eat you up!" yelled McClure. "He'll reduce you to jelly! Browne's the best boxer in the Fifth, champion of the Ancient House——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth, with a wave of his hand. "We're not at St. Frank's now; we're in Northestria. We're in the Middle Ages! And if I beat my opponent in fair combat, I get the job! That's the understood rule."

He strode into the quarters of the bodyguard, leaving his chums feeling strangely weak. Handforth's confidence in himself was supreme. But he wasn't quite prepared for William Napoleon Browne's attitude.

"Oh, there you are!" said Handforth curtly, as he spotted the new captain. "I want a word with you, Browne."

The lanky Fifth-Former looked round mildly.

"Say on, Brother Handforth," he urged. "I am all attention."

"Mr. Lee has appointed you captain, but I don't agree to it," said Edward Oswald. "In this country, such questions are settled by combat. So I challenge you here and now! The winner to be captain of the bodyguard!"

"Splendid!" said Browne promptly.

"Agreed, brother!"

Handforth started.

"You—you'll fight?" he asked, staring.

"Assuredly!" replied Browne. "What alternative is there? I have been challenged, and I must accept. Let the combat be joined, Brother Handforth! I am at your service entirely."

The other fellows crowded round, half amused and half excited.

"Don't be an ass, Browne," said Nipper. "You're not taking any notice of Handforth's rot, are you? Mr. Lee has given his orders——"

"Nay, Brother Nipper, let us humour him," interrupted Browne gently. "It has been truly said that when one is in Rome one must do as Rome does. I take it that the same rule applies in Northestria. While we are in Northestria, we must do as the Northestrians do. I have been challenged to a combat. I accept that challenge. Let us begin!"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "You're a sport, Browne!"

Now a fight seemed inevitable, he wasn't at all sure that he had done the right thing. Browne's readiness to enter battle was rather alarming.

"Stay!" said William Napoleon, in astonishment. "What is this, Brother Handforth?"

"Aren't we going to fight?"

"Fight, yes—but with bare hands, no!"

"It'll have to be bare hands," said Handforth. "There aren't any gloves here——"

"Gloves?" repeated Browne, staring.

"Gloves? Did I hear aright? Are you suggesting, brother, that this is to be a fight with fists? A mere brawl? A common or garden rough-and-tumble?"

Handforth simply looked at him.

"What else?" he asked, at length.

"What else?" said Browne, in a firm voice. "Well, well! You amaze me, Brother Handforth! It takes a great deal to disconcert a Browne, but in this instance I am fairly rocking on my pivot. Have I not said that we are in Northestria, and that we must do as the Northestrians do? You have challenged me to a combat, and honour compels me to accept. And in this country a combat means a fight to the death!"

"Death!" gasped Handforth.

Browne waved his hand, and the other fellows began to grin.

"Death!" said the Fifth-Former. "I will leave the choice to you, brother. Shall we mount our steeds, and fight this combat with lances? Or shall we select spiked clubs, and

see which one of us can get in the first death-blow? The winner, naturally, becomes captain. Choose, Brother Handforth—lance or club! I am entirely indifferent.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

The juniors were by no means deceived by the gravity of Browne's tone. And Handforth turned crimson as he realised that his leg was being pulled again.

“You—you silly Fifth-Form fathead!” he roared.

“I assure you, Brother Handforth——”

“You don't mean to fight at all!” hooted Handforth. “You're just trying to be funny!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

And the chorus of laughter was so uproarious that Edward Oswald was only too glad to escape. Quite privately, he wasn't exactly sorry that the fight was off. And his only course was to accept the inevitable.



CHAPTER 7.

MARCHING ORDERS!

NELSON LEE was looking rather grim as he emerged from the council of army chiefs. He had termed it such, but it was really

nothing of the kind—as he had soon discovered.

For the Northestrian army was a myth.

With the exception of the princess' bodyguard there were no national soldiers whatever. The various feudal lords maintained their own bodies of troopers and archers, but these could scarcely be called an army. The majority of them were merely kept for the sake of appearance—to make an impressive show when their masters travelled. Scattered in various parts of the country were a few fortresses, each with their own garrisons, but they were mostly run on comic opera lines.

Nelson Lee had discovered everything after a very short consultation with the various overlords. His first impression had been correct. These people were the victims of prosperity and apathy. For centuries they had lived in peace, without any menace to necessitate formation of a national army. In a word, Northestria was utterly and absolutely unprepared for war. Indeed, never had a country been so helpless—never so sleepy and listless.

There was no excuse for this lethargy. The people had had warnings enough. For years they had known of the activities in Gothland. For years the Gothlanders had boasted of their intention to conquer their former masters. And since Kassker the Grim had assumed control, the Northestrians had known full well that Gothland was becoming an armed camp, preparing for The Day. And still they had gone on in the same old, slow-moving manner—blind and deaf to the threatened danger.

Nelson Lee was seriously perturbed. True, he had made these feudal lords thoroughly understand the position. He had left that council in a ferment, and the hitherto complacent overlords were now in a state of agitated concern. Their eyes were fully open to the peril. Nelson Lee's personality had startled them, and they were all shocked into action.

“By glory! You've started with a bang, old man,” commented Lord Dorrimore dryly. “You've made these lackadaisical beggars sit up with a vengeance!”

Lee nodded.

“I meant to make them sit up,” he replied grimly. “Before long they'll be jumping, too. If I'm to be in command of this national defence campaign, I'll do it thoroughly or not at all. Dorrie, there's danger—frightful danger. I didn't exaggerate a thing. Those Gothlanders mean to sweep into this country and commit the most horrible massacres—just as their ancestors did in Europe over a thousand years ago. And they are to be kept out, Northestria will have to shake itself up and put on its fighting kit.”

Lord Dorrimore beamed with delight.

“What a man you are for action, Lee!” he said admiringly. “Gad, when you get going, there's no rest for anybody.”

But Nelson Lee was not listening. His mind was full of plans for organising the people. He had accepted his position seriously, and he meant to carry out his plans for the defence of the country. Indeed, he foresaw that the very safety of his own party depended upon this. For the great detective was under no misapprehension. If Kassker's hordes swept across the lake, and invaded Northestria, the St. Frank's party would be the first to fall under the gory swords of the conquerors. That recent raid into Gothland had made Kassker a bitter enemy, and the brute would exact a terrible revenge if he only got the chance.

So Nelson Lee's motives were not entirely actuated by his concern for Princess Mercia's subjects. He had the lives of his own party to think of—and every move that he made now was as much on their behalf as on the behalf of Northestria.

Lee's personality was never so forceful as during a crisis like this. Normally, he was quiet and strong—always a man of power and resource—a man to compel attention. But when an occasion of this sort arose, his personality was electric; every one of those Northestrian feudal lords had felt it. Every man of influence in the country was staggered and aghast at Lee's exhibition of command. That he was the right man in the right place was obvious.

He paused in the courtyard, and saw that the bodyguard had turned out in full array; some had donned armour—but, in the main, the bodyguard uniforms had proved too large, and the boys were mostly in their ordinary clothes.

“This is fortunate,” said Lee, as he strode

up. "I have work for you youngsters, and I might as well give you your orders now. You will divide yourselves into three parties, each under an officer."

Browne saluted.

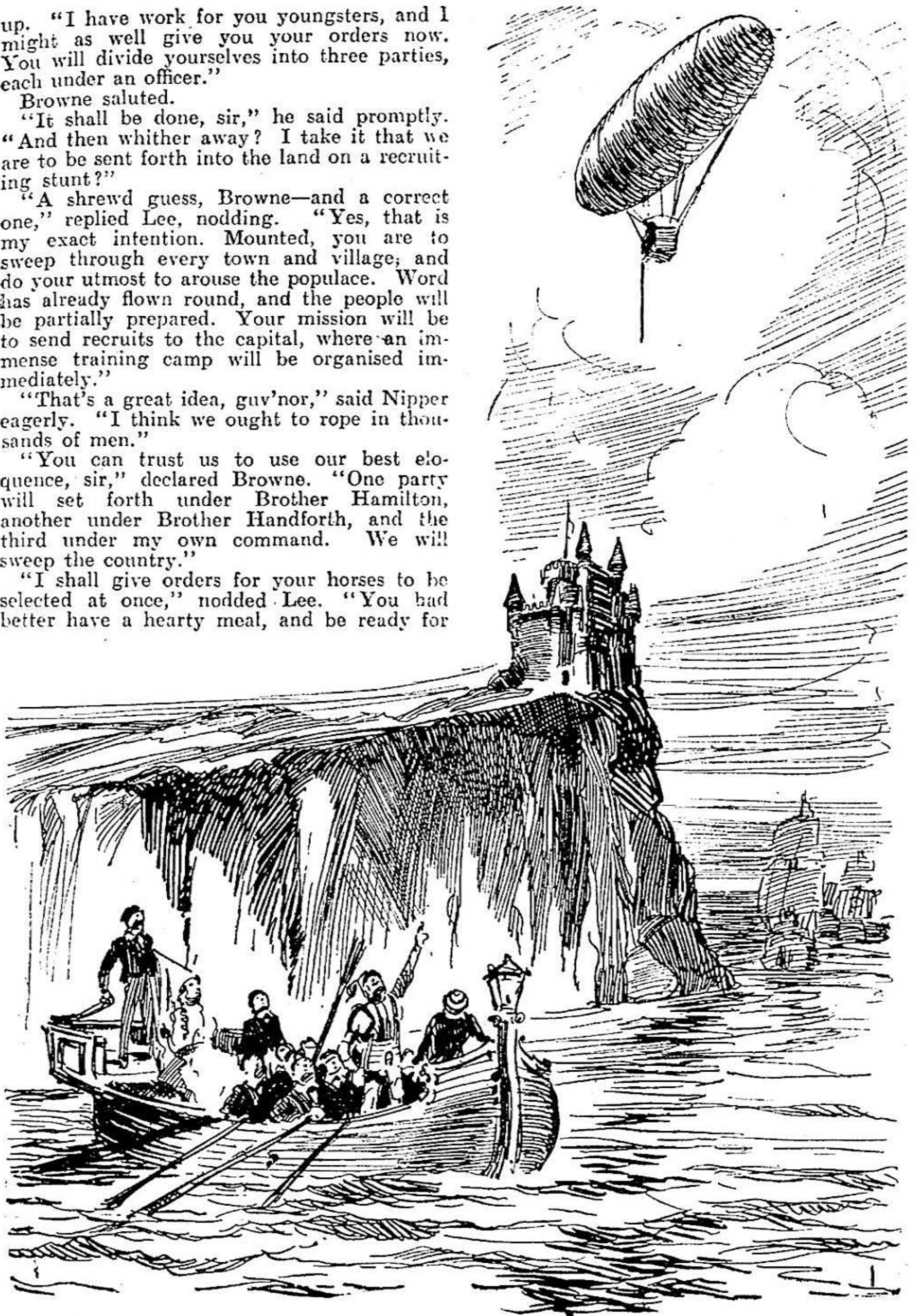
"It shall be done, sir," he said promptly. "And then whither away? I take it that we are to be sent forth into the land on a recruiting stunt?"

"A shrewd guess, Browne—and a correct one," replied Lee, nodding. "Yes, that is my exact intention. Mounted, you are to sweep through every town and village; and do your utmost to arouse the populace. Word has already flown round, and the people will be partially prepared. Your mission will be to send recruits to the capital, where an immense training camp will be organised immediately."

"That's a great idea, gov'nor," said Nipper eagerly. "I think we ought to rope in thousands of men."

"You can trust us to use our best eloquence, sir," declared Browne. "One party will set forth under Brother Hamilton, another under Brother Handforth, and the third under my own command. We will sweep the country."

"I shall give orders for your horses to be selected at once," nodded Lee. "You had better have a hearty meal, and be ready for



"Look!" exclaimed Handforth, pointing at the drifting balloon. "Willy, by Jove! And he's being carried out into the lake!" The crew of the Royal Galley ceased work at the sweeps as all eyes watched the balloon and its helpless passenger.

the road within an hour. Captain Browne, you will attend my quarters with your two lieutenants as soon as possible, and three routes will be prepared for you, with full instructions. Native riders will precede you in each case, and prepare accommodation for you. The actual recruiting methods I will leave to you. You thoroughly understand—you must make the people appreciate the danger! The country has got to be aroused, and there is not a minute to be lost."

Nelson Lee's methods were brisk and cut-and-dried. It was an excellent plan to send out the St. Frank's fellows on such a mission, for all Northestria was aroused by the tale of the raid into Gothland. These visitors within the gates were sure of a welcome everywhere. The country was just arousing itself, as though from a long, long sleep. The St. Frank's fellows could be trusted to complete this work of waking up the people. But Lee fully intended to send out other recruiting parties, too—he would have every one of these feudal lords acting as his agent, arousing their own subjects. But it would be all the better for the boys to sweep through the country in advance.

Handforth and the others could be trusted to startle the populace, and to set them an example of energetic activity. Thousands of men were needed, and the sooner they received some sort of training, the better. Indeed, Lee was filled with doubts, even as it was, for he suspected that Kasker would not delay for long. And it would never do to rely upon the Northestrians alone.

Nelson Lee had other ideas in mind.

But his one great object was to prepare as many defences as possible. Kasker the Grim was making all his own plans on the assumption that his armies would descend upon a helpless nation. If only Nelson Lee had time, he would give the Gothlanders the surprise of their lives.

Before twenty-four hours were over, Northestria would be aflame with enthusiasm, and already there was only one cry spreading throughout the land.

To arms!



CHAPTER 8.

READY FOR WAR!

THE first fruits of the recruiting campaign were evident that very day. William Napoleon Browne, with all his usual forcefulness, had entered heart and soul into the enterprise, and he had commenced operations on the capital itself. In Dunstane, the people were already seething with subdued excitement. They were in close touch with the happenings at the Court, and when the St. Frank's fellows galloped through the streets, shouting their war-cry, there were many hundreds of men who instantly responded.

Out in the country towns and villages, the

people were still sleepy and indifferent. Only the faintest ripples of the coming excitement had reached them, and they still lived on in their usual slow-going fashion. But here, in the capital, the population was thoroughly awakened.

And men fairly stormed the Royal Castle, eager to be accepted as soldiers. At first, old Ethelbert the Red was bewildered and confused. As Chief Adviser to the princess, he was practically the ruler of this land, and this abrupt upheaval almost bowled him over. But Nelson Lee's calm presence had its effect, and in a short time Ethelbert was catching the enthusiasm.

A great camp was organised outside the town—not far distant from the quiet valley where the wrecked airship lay sprawled over the meadows. Men were accepted as fast as they presented themselves, and the camp grew and grew.

Not only Nelson Lee, but Lord Dorrimore and Captain Waring were kept constantly busy. They introduced modern methods, and this recruiting camp was of such character that the natives were startled and amazed. Ethelbert the Red was turning out to be a thoroughly decent sort—now that he was fully convinced that the airship party could be trusted. He realised the danger to his country, and entered into the spirit of the great campaign with all his heart and soul. More than anybody else, perhaps, he appreciated the valuable work that these strangers were doing.

As for the three parties of St. Frank's fellows, their own success was gratifying. By the end of the second day, all roads to the capital were thronged with excited men—farmers, labourers, simple tradesmen, and serfs. Men were pouring in continuously, in converging streams. Never had Northestria known such exciting times as these.

Days could only be reckoned by actual time, for here, in this strange Arctic oasis, there was no darkness. During such a crisis as this, everlasting light was a wonderful advantage. Never for a single minute was the activity held up. Nelson Lee and his chief helpers were never sleeping at one and the same time—there was always somebody in charge, to keep everything moving.

The St. Frank's fellows moved from village to village, and from town to town, covering every road in the land. And wherever they went, they were received with shouts of enthusiasm, and by great crowds. Word had gone on ahead, and in a surprisingly short time Northestria was aflame from border to border.

The boys' task was not so difficult, after all. Everywhere, the people were ready to respond to the call to arms. They only lacked initiative, but this was readily instilled into them by the energetic schoolboys. It was a strange situation, in all truth—that these youngsters should be able to arouse grown men into a national uprising in defence

of their young princess and her threatened country.

Yet, after all, it was not so very astonishing. For centuries these people had known no warfare. The present generation hardly grasped what it could mean. But Browne and Nipper and Handforth and their companions left them in no doubt. An invasion was threatened, and the fair Mercia was in peril. This fact, alone, was enough to inflame the imagination of the populace. The princess was beloved throughout the land, and all men were willing to rush to her defence.

And while this call to arms was sounding its clarion note, the activity round the capital was assuming immense proportions. Nelson Lee was quite certain that Kassker would try to keep in touch with Northestrian news, and that he had spies on this side, ready to carry word across the lake.

But Lee had no intention of Kassker learning of the great change that had come about. For such a thing would be fatal. Once the Gothlanders knew of this warlike activity, they would start their invasion without delay, even if they were not fully prepared.

So stringent measures were taken to keep the secret.

Vessels were sent out in a string, all down the lake, and not a boat of any description was allowed to pass out beyond this watchful fleet. They formed a complete barrier, and many harmless-looking craft were stopped and sent back—the majority of them carrying spies. Nothing was allowed to penetrate these outposts, and thus Kassker the Grim got no word of the great changes that were being wrought at Northestria.

The very absence of news was significant, however. Until now, the Gothlander spies had come and gone as they had pleased, for things had been very lax. Suddenly there was silence. Kassker received no reports, and when fresh spies were sent out to cross the lake, they returned with news that they had been turned back. Northestrian vessels had refused to allow them to proceed.

So, although Kassker knew nothing of the actual truth, he suspected much, and he guessed—correctly enough—that the strangers of the airship were responsible for all these mysterious goings-on.

He hastened his plans for the invasion—but not to such an extent as he would have hastened them if he had known the actual truth. And every hour, every minute, was of value. Northestria was undergoing a vast transformation.

Not only in the capital, but all down the lake, camps were being formed, and men were being turned into soldiers.

And there were other activities, too.

Captain Waring was hard at work on the airship with his engineers—and close by there was feverish activity with hosts of carpenters and wheelwrights. Nelson Lee's hand was at the bottom of all this, for he had seen many possibilities in the crippled dirigible

The ill-fated Titan was a wreck—such a wreck, indeed, that there was no hope of ever getting her into the air again. But when she had crashed, the two main gondolas had escaped almost intact.

Captain Waring had brought his craft down with masterly skill. The stern had been shattered to fragments, it is true, but the vital parts of the airship—the wonderful engines—had not been harmed.

And those two gondolas were being put to a novel use.

Attached to the airship, they were now utterly useless. But what if they could be cut free, and converted? Each gondola was a huge engine-room—a structure of metal, containing enormously powerful motors. The great air propellers were unharmed, and Nelson Lee had evolved a shrewd scheme.

At Lee's instigation, Captain Waring had designed a weird and wonderful chassis for each gondola. These chassis were constructed from the metal girders of the great body. Many of the girders were twisted and crumpled, but others were intact.

And while the engineers worked hard on these designs, Northestrian wheelwrights were busy in another direction. Great wooden wheels were made—broad wheels, light in construction, and twenty feet in diameter. They were made this size so that they could travel over rough country with impunity.

As an engineering feat, the job was a remarkable one.

Each of those two gondolas was mounted upon the improvised chassis, and the wheels were fitted. And those gondolas, instead of being useless, were now turned into deadly engines of war.

Tanks!

In a word, that was their new guise. Enormous tanks—not tanks of the conventional type, but extraordinary engines of warfare, calculated to do tremendous destruction among these primitive fighting forces.

At the very first test they were successful.

Amid cries of wonder—and almost fear—the juggernauts lumbered across the valley, their engines making such a roar that the Northestrians were scared out of their wits.

"The more noise they make, the better," said Nelson Lee, with satisfaction. "By Jove, Dorrie, I hoped they would be effective, but Waring has done his work famously. These monsters are marvellous."

"They'd scare any modern troops, let alone these mediæval fellows," declared Lord Dorrimore, nodding. "A nice little surprise-packet for old Kassker, by gad! I can see his invadin' hosts doin' a pretty quick bunk!"

The tanks were indeed terrifying. They no longer looked like airship gondolas. Mounted on their fantastic chassis, and with such great wheels, they were between twenty and thirty feet high. They were propelled by means of the air propellers, at the rear, and these were protected by special guards. A wicked-looking machine-gun was projecting from the nose of each craft.

These monstrosities, charging into an army of foot soldiers, were calculated to strike terror. And they were not the only results of Lee's ingenuity.

Another army of men were at work on the lake shore. Two of the fastest Northestrian ships—comparatively small vessels—were being fitted with engines. These engines had been taken from the smashed whippet aeroplanes.

The airship had carried four such aeroplanes, and two of them were perfectly intact, and were to be used, later on, for scouting purposes. But as it was impossible to repair the wrecked machines, Lee was using their engines.

It didn't matter very much about speed. The boats would be faster than any of the Gothland craft, in any case, and those aeroplanes would create a terrific din. With the motor-boat, they would comprise the Northestrian Navy.

A mixture of the Middle Ages and the latest modern inventions!

It seemed that the immediate future would be full of excitement and thrills!



CHAPTER 9.

WILLY, THE SCOUT!

PRINCESS MERCIA took an active interest in all these preparations.

She knew well enough that the transformation of her people was due to the enterprise and energy of her visitors. They were responsible for the awakening of her country. The menace of the Gothlanders was now known to be a very real danger. At last the Northestrians were alive to the truth.

The princess' active participation in the preparations was like a spur to everybody. The recruits were still pouring in, and by this time several regiments of volunteers had been formed. To give them any kind of real training was out of the question. But they were at least taught a certain amount of discipline, and their love for their country would turn them into grim fighters when the moment came.

Kassker the Grim meant to rule over the entire oasis—but it seemed that he would not gain his end without a terrific struggle. His invasion of Northestria was not to be the walk-over that he fondly believed.

When the St. Frank's fellows returned from their recruiting campaign, tired but victorious, they were amazed to see the great changes round the capital. Their work, for the time, was over, and they had plenty of opportunities to go round inspecting the various activities. They were full of enthusiasm for the tanks, and Dick Hamilton was responsible for still another idea.

He and a group of juniors were walking round the remains of the airship—now a pitiful picture of wreckage, indeed. There was scarcely nothing left of her but the main

saloons, the remnants of the girders, and masses of fabric.

"Something ought to be done about this," said Nipper thoughtfully.

"About which?" asked Pitt.

"Well, look at those forward balloonettes," said Nipper, nodding. "All the after section is a mass of tatters, but up forrard the old hulk appears to be pretty well whole. Those gasbags are full of gas still."

"Absolutely," said Archie. "At the same time, laddie, I don't quite gather the good old trend."

"These dirigibles, as you know, aren't just filled with gas—but they're built in sections, as it were," replied Nipper. "The gas is contained in lots of different compartments, or balloonettes. It seems to me that that forrard one is not only intact, but as full of gas as ever it was."

"Well, supposing it is?" asked Pitt curiously.

"Well, it's only got to be disentangled from the outer fabric, and there you are," said Nipper. "A ready-made observation balloon. A small basket can easily be faked up."

"Odds brain spasms!" ejaculated Archie. "A somewhat priceless wheeze, old genius. I mean to say, one of those dashed sausage thingummys, what? One of those things which soar up into the middle distance, as it were, with a stout lad dangling underneath with sundry binoculars and telescopes?"

"That's the sort of thing," nodded Dick. "But this won't be a sausage balloon, even if they get it up. There's plenty of cable—Anyhow, I'll have a word with the gov'nor, and see what he says."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Put it to the good old C.O.!"

Handforth paused as he was passing.

"What's that?" he asked. "What do you want to put to me?"

"Do you happen to be the C.O.?" grinned Nipper.

"Yes!" retorted Handforth promptly. "The C.O. of the bodyguard, anyway! Who dug out the greatest number of recruits? I did! Who went through the country like a tornado, rousing the people to a patriotic frenzy?"

"Browne!" said Reggie Pitt blandly.

"Eh? You silly fathead!" roared Handforth. "You know as well as I do that I gathered more recruits than anybody! And I'm the C.O.—whatever Browne likes to call himself!"

Nipper gently pushed him aside.

"I want to have a word with Mr. Lee, if it's all the same to you," he said. "We're thinking about rigging up an observation balloon. Better than sending out scouting boats. The air's jolly clear here, and from a height of a thousand feet an observer ought to be able to see right across into Gothland."

"By George!" said Handforth. "You mean— Why, I was going to suggest something like that, only I didn't think there was any observation balloon here. So I dismissed it. It was like your nerve, to keep an important fact of that sort away from me!"

Nobody thought it worth while to explain, and Nipper hurried off to put his little scheme before Nelson Lee.

"Yes, it's a good idea, young 'un," said Lee promptly. "It only shows that we can't all think of everything. I'll send Wilcox over at once, with two or three of the men. If there's anything in the suggestion, we'll soon have the balloon aloft."

Nelson Lee was quite pleased, in fact—for, as matters stood at present, it was impossible to gain any exact knowledge of what was taking place on the other side of the lake. There were no high hills from which observations could be taken, and a captive balloon would provide the very medium.

While Wilcox and two or three of the other men busied themselves with the balloon, a number of Northeistriens were set to work on the manufacture of a light basket.

Things were accomplished rapidly under Lee's orders.

Within four hours, the captive balloon was ready. It was quite a businesslike proposition, but Captain Waring was rather doubtful about its lifting capacity. And there was no further supply of gas, either. The idea was an excellent one; for if a look-out could only be carried up, he would be able to keep constant watch on the distant shore.

A trial proved disappointing.

It was Wilcox who went up on the first trip aloft, but there was hardly sufficient gas to support the load. The balloon almost failed to rise, and Nelson Lee gave orders for it to be drawn in.

"I'm afraid it's not much good," he said, shaking his head. "You're right, Waring—the lifting capacity is insufficient."

"Why shouldn't I go up, sir?" asked Nipper.

"Or me, sir?" said Handforth eagerly. "It's my job! I've got a keen eye, and I shall be able to—"

"No, boys, it's no use," said Lee. "You are only about a stone lighter than Wilcox, and I doubt if you could ascend more than two or three hundred feet. Yet we can't reduce the rigging, and the basket is as light as it can possibly be."

Willy Handforth grinned.

"That's all right, sir—I'm the man for the job," he said cheerily. "I'm three or four stone lighter than Mr. Wilcox, and—"

"By Jove, the kid's right," said Captain Waring. "This balloon will easily support a youngster of his size."

Nelson Lee considered.

"She's quite safe?" he murmured, looking at Wilcox.

"Bless your life, sir, it's safer in that basket than in an armchair," replied the young officer, grinning. "This cable is strong enough for two balloons, and as long as the youngster is strapped in, he can't come to any harm."

"So that's that, sir," said Willy. "You can't refuse now. I promise not to climb on to the top of the gasbag, or to do any stunts. I'll even promise to leave the strap fastened all the time."

"Better put a padlock on it," said Dorrie firmly. "If you don't, he'll probably slide down the rope, instead of waiting to be hauled in."

"All right, Willy—take these binoculars, and have a shot," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "I rely upon you not to start any of your tricks. This is a serious job, and you must report everything you see."

"What about fixing up a telephone, sir?" asked Willy.

"A good idea—but that'll do later," replied Lee. "First of all, get into that basket, and we'll see if the balloon will lift you."

Handforth bestowed a fierce glare upon his minor.

"All right—you wait!" he hissed.

"Wait for what?" asked Willy.

"You young rotter!" breathed Edward Oswald. "I'll pay you out for this!"

"What are you going to do—sneak up with a carving knife, and cut the rope?" grinned the fag. "Poor old Ted! What a tragedy it is to have a jealous disposition!"

"You—you—"

"But I'll tell you what," went on Willy. "If you're really keen on the job, Ted, I'll hand it over to you—on one condition."

Handforth leapt.

"By George! You mean it?" he gasped. "If you want me to lend you five bob—"

"What the dickens is the good of five bob to me here?" interrupted Willy tartly. "No, this condition isn't a question of money. It's a matter of weight. If you can carve three stone off yourself, the job's yours!"

"What?" gurgled Handforth.

"Yours!" repeated Willy blandly. "I couldn't be fairer!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth gave a gulp as he heard that laugh from the others. He only just realised that Willy had been pulling his leg—for, of course, it was humanly impossible for him to reduce his weight by three stone.

He stormed off, and Willy kissed his hand after him.



CHAPTER 10.

THE ENEMY ARMADA!

FIVE minutes later, Willy was aloft.

The experiment was a complete success, for his comparatively small figure

was an easy load for the improvised observation balloon. At a height of a thousand feet, the gasbag was anchored, and Willy sat up there in his basket, highly pleased with himself.

Below, Nelson Lee was no less pleased.

"We'll leave him up there for half an hour, and then haul him down," he said. "And you'd better be preparing a telephone, Wilcox. It will be a great improvement for Willy to have a 'phone, so that he can make his reports direct."

Dorrie was staring upwards

"He's up a good height," remarked his lordship. "Don't you think this gasbag will be seen from the enemy's camp?"

"It's quite possible, but we needn't worry about that," replied Lee. "The Gothlanders have no telescopes, and they'll only see a tiny object in the sky, at the best. They won't know what to make of it, whatever they think."

This was true enough. The Northestrians had an immense advantage over their enemies—the advantage of modern instruments which the airship had brought. And they needed a few of these advantages, too! Without them, indeed, Lee would not have attempted to organise a defence, for such a thing would have been futile. It was only because of the aero-engines, the machine-guns, and other devices, that Nelson Lee entertained any hope of holding the enemy off.

Far above, Willy was already getting busy.

The view from this height was a wonderful one. He could see far over the capital, right into the rural districts of Northestria—far away into the rugged foothills, and to the mountains and glaciers beyond. In the other direction, the lake stretched out in a placid sheet of blue—a veritable inland sea.

Notwithstanding the dense mists which entirely encircled the oasis, and the everlasting fogs which hung like a pall overhead, reflecting the volcanic fires, the lower air was crystal clear. Willy could see far across the lake, and the Gothland shore stood there like a smudgy strip.

Midway across the lake there was quite a respectable little island, with a number of isolated rocks grouped about. But Willy gave very little attention to these. He put the powerful binoculars to his eyes, and focussed them on the Gothlander shore.

"By jingo!" he muttered, in astonishment.

If he had needed any proof of the clear atmosphere, he had it now. Through those glasses, the enemy coastline sprang into sharp relief. He could see the forests, the coloured blotches which denoted towns or villages. He could pick out bays and inlets where rivers flowed.

In fact, the observation balloon was a great success.

For Willy could keep a constant watch on Kassker's country, and make an instant report in case of any activity. But he was rather disappointed to find that there was nothing suspicious in view. There was not even a ship over on that far section of the lake. Everything seemed to be at peace.

The work was by no means easy—partly on account of the fact that the captive balloon was only an improvised affair, and was constantly swinging round. And Willy soon found that it was an arm-aching job, holding the binoculars to his eyes, and keeping the coastline under close observation.

His report was encouraging when he was hauled down. And when he went aloft again, an hour later, a telephone was provided, and this time he took up a telescope. A sling was provided for this, so that he was relieved of its weight.

Willy was on duty for six hours, and during the whole course of that time he had nothing to report. Chubby Heath relieved him—for these Third Formers were the only members of the party who were light enough to be carried up. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were eager for the task, without any promptings from Willy; they agreed to divide the watch into three eight-hour shifts daily, so that observations could be kept continuously—with only a brief spell on land, every two hours, so that they could stretch their legs. Besides, food was an all-important point, as Willy took care to point out.

And so it went on.

Three days passed in this way—three days and nights, according to ordinary reckoning, although here the "daylight" was continuous. And during this period no sign of enemy activity had manifested itself.

But Nelson Lee was not fooled by this. He was convinced that Kassker the Grim was pushing his preparations forward with all rapidity, and when the invasion came it would probably be swift and sudden. Kassker's armies were being prepared inland, and would not show themselves until the crucial moment.

Lee was grateful for the respite.

For those three days had given him a chance to make many improvements to the defences. All down the shores of the lake, trenches were prepared, and men were stationed at their posts constantly. Other troops were being prepared continuously—and the Northestrian army grew and grew. Hundreds of officers were commissioned, the majority of them being the overlords, or their sons. And it was now unnecessary for Nelson Lee to give any instructions; the natives had grasped the nature of his methods, and were fired with enthusiasm of their own.

A totally different feeling had arisen in Northestria.

The old lethargy had gone, and everybody was imbued with determination and enterprise. There were some, perhaps, who shrugged their shoulders, and said that all this preparatory work was unnecessary—some who predicted that there was no fear of any invasion of Gothlanders.

But they were not heeded. The vast majority had listened to Nelson Lee's warnings, and the one cry in the land was to prepare, so that Kassker could be crushed and beaten when he struck his blow.

Handforth was chafing, and even the other St. Frank's fellows were beginning to feel just a little impatient. There was no special work for them now, and they were anxious for something to happen. And they were rather disappointed, too, because no results had been obtained from the wireless. An aerial had been rigged up, and everything seemed to be in perfect order—but although constant messages were sent out into the ether, there was no indication that they were being picked up. For no replies came. Was it possible that they would all be bottled up in this Arctic basin for the rest of their days?

It was a worrying point, and one that gave Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore much more

concern than the boys. Fortunately, there were so many other things to attend to that there was hardly any time left for worrying.

Then, four days after Willy had commenced his observations, came the shock.

And it really was a shock, for nothing had happened for so long that many people were beginning to believe that Kassker's threatened invasion would not develop for some weeks. Northestria had heard of this invasion for years, and had regarded it, until now, as a myth. They were at length convinced that it was coming, but scarcely anybody believed that it would arrive as soon as Nelson Lee had been predicting.

Willy had been up for several hours, and he was making his usual systematic examination of the Gothland coast-line. After these days of close watching, he knew every inlet and promontory by heart.

Occasionally his gaze would wander, and he would find himself looking down upon the busy scenes of activity round and about the capital. And, farther along, all down the Northestrian coast. This activity was beginning to slacken up a bit now.

"Hallo!" said Willy with a start.

He held his telescope still. Something was moving on that distant shore.

"Only a flock of sheep or cattle," he muttered with a grunt. "For half a tick I thought— By jingo, though! I'm not so sure—"

He broke off, catching his breath in. No, that dark mass he could see was no flock of sheep. There were men gathering—not merely a flock, but masses of them. And now that he had seen one evidence of activity, he could see many others. It was as though Gothland had sprung to life during the past hour.

Ships were putting out from the main river, a broad stream which led into the heart of Gothland and to the capital. Not three or four ships, but a fleet of them. They were coming round the headland and into the open lake in a kind of formation, three abreast.

"Crumbs!" murmured Willy. "It's here—the Day!"



CHAPTER 11.

KASSKER ON THE WAR-PATH!

ORD DORRIMORE lighted a cigarette languidly.

"Well, we're ready for the visitors, whenever they like to barge in," he said

with a smile. "If Kassker ever sets foot in this part of the country, he'll be a livin' marvel!"

"I wouldn't be so sure, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee with a frown.

"Man alive, you're not doubtful, are you?"

"I am not only doubtful, but I view any possible conflict with apprehension," replied

Lee gruffly. "It may seem to you that we have done some very remarkable things during this past week—"

"There's no seeming about it—we have," interrupted his lordship. "Or, at least, you have. I've just been lookin' on!"

"Well, I'll grant that Northestria has awakened itself," said Nelson Lee. "But we mustn't be fooled into any sense of complacency, Dorrie. Do you realise that Kassker's armies are not only numerically superior to ours, but they have other advantages, too?"

"We're ready with those tanks, and the machine-guns—"

"Useful toys," broke in Lee impatiently. "When Kassker strikes, he'll strike with an overwhelming force. And those Gothlanders are not only powerfully built savages, but they're trained. They've been training for years! If only we can keep them out in the lake—turn them back before they can land—all will be well. But if the main invading forces effect a real landing, there'll be no hope for Northestria. Neither you nor I, Dorrie, can do anything then to save them."

"Well, they haven't shown up yet," said Dorrie mildly. "I'm beginnin' to think they're a lot of frauds—"

Wilcox came running up breathlessly.

"Enemy coming out, sir!" he reported, his eyes glittering.

"Great glory!" ejaculated Dorrie. "What's that?"

"Look-out has just telephoned down, sir—enemy fleet in sight!" went on Wilcox, with a kind of joyous intentness. "Can you come, sir?"

Lee needed no second asking. He hurried to the telephone at the foot of the cable which held the observation balloon.

"Well, Willy?" he asked sharply.

"Enemy coming out in strong force, sir," came Willy's voice down the wire. "About a hundred ships are sweeping out into the lake, and spreading out into a kind of armada. Massed troops are visible ashore, too—probably reserves, to be shoved on other ships later."

"Can you see the entire fleet?"

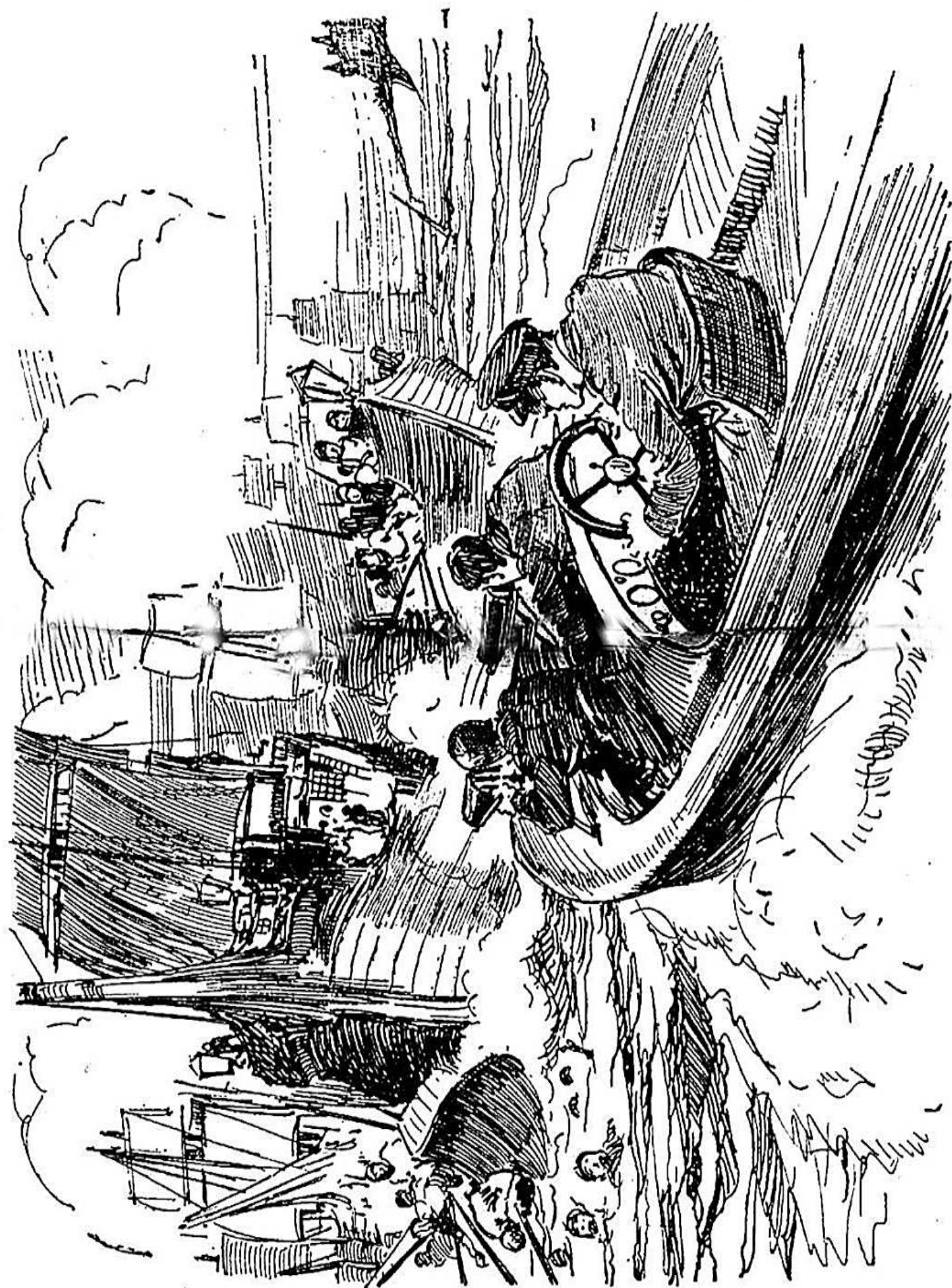
"No, sir; they're still coming out."

"Is it possible to judge their speed, young 'un?"

"They're only making three or four knots, sir," replied Willy confidently. "By what I can see, they look like galleys—and they're heavily laden. They're right down in the water. Bunged full of troops, I expect. Looks pretty lively, sir. I suppose Dorrie will buzz off in the 'plane, and drop a few Christmas boxes?"

"Report every five minutes, Willy," said Lee briskly.

He turned to Dorrie and Captain Waring, who were near by.



Zurrrrh ! Zurrrrh ! Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee got into action with the two machine-guns. The invaders were mown down by the chattering hail of bullets and the foremost ships of Kassar's armada began to turn about in peace-stricken frenzy.

"They're coming! Heaven knows how many of them!" he said grimly.

"Gosh!" muttered Waring. "Then you were right, sir."

"Willy declares that an armada is setting out, and I'm sure he hasn't exaggerated," went on Lee. "Not a score of boats, Dorrie, but hundreds of them. Kassker is making one huge attempt to transport his army."

"The beggar doesn't know what's waiting for him," smiled Dorrie.

"Yes, he believes that he can land his men at any point he chooses," said Lee. "Nevertheless, we can't take any risks. We must get our wonderful navy to sea, and you'd better get the 'plane ready."

"I'm your man!" said his lordship with satisfaction. "Action at last, by gad! Thank goodness there's somethin' doin'! I'd better take a load of bombs, eh?" he added. "I don't quite like the idea of blowin' the poor beggars to smithereens, though. It seems so one-sided."

"You had better drop your bombs in the open water," said Lee. "If we can scare these brutes back, so much the better. I'm just as much against bloodshed as you are, Dorrie; but if things get really serious you'll have to drop your bombs where they'll take grim effect. We can't be squeamish at a time like this. By hook or by crook those savages must be kept out. Otherwise there'll be bloodshed neither you nor I can possibly visualise."

"Shall I start right off?" asked Dorrie.

"You'd better—as quickly as possible," replied Lee. "At a rough estimate, this fleet will take nearly eight hours to get here, and that gives us some time, thank Heaven! If you can sweep over the fleet in the 'plane, it will delay things, and give us still more time. You can be across the lake in less than forty minutes, Dorrie."

His lordship hurried off. His aeroplane was all ready—in fact, it had been standing at the appointed spot for days, the engine tuned up, the petrol tanks filled. It was a fast scouting machine, provided with a machine-gun, to say nothing of a well-filled rack of bombs.

Nelson Lee, in the meantime, got into immediate touch with his Northestrian staff, and sent word down the long lines of defences that the hour was at hand. And it seemed that a quiver ran right through Northestria. The news travelled with the speed of lightning, although, so far, nobody on land had seen any sign of the invading fleet.

Having given his orders, Lee immediately sought an audience with the Princess Mercia and Ethelbert the Red. In the Royal castle, he briefly explained the situation.

"Your Majesty, there is danger," he went on. "According to the latest reports, the enemy is making for this section of the coast, the obvious inference being that Kassker is aiming to seize the capital. Several



Zurrrrh! Zurrrrh! Lord Dorrimore and vaders were mown down by the chattering ha turn

days ago I advised you to leave, but you thought fit to resist me."

"It is my duty to remain with my people," replied the young princess quietly.

"It is a greater duty for you to preserve your life," replied Lee. "If there is to be bloodshed, your Majesty, I urge you to—"

"Marry, but thy words are wise!" interrupted Ethelbert. "The hour is at hand, fair Majesty, and I beseech thee to depart for a zone of safety. I add my voice to that of Lee the Lionheart."

"'Tis not my wish to play the coward," replied Mercia, with a sudden toss of her head.

Lee looked at her grimly.

"You have placed me in supreme command of your country's defences, and it is my wish that you should respect my desires," he exclaimed. "I do not like to insist, but if you force me—"

"Nay, thou art right," interrupted the princess quickly. "'Tis foolish of me to set



action with the two machine-guns. The in-foremost ships of Kassker's armada began to en frenzy.

my will against thine, brave Lee. Thou art doing wondrous things for my people, and 'twould be a poor return if I should attempt to resist thee. I will do as thou sayest."

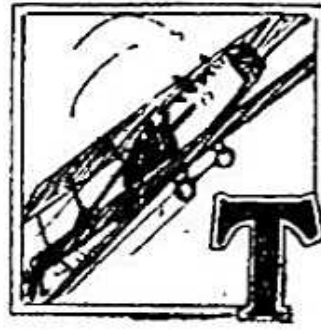
"Good!" exclaimed Lee, with relief. "My lord, you once suggested a place known as Westwold Castle—"

"Ay, but 'tis too late for such a journey," said Ethelbert, shaking his head. "The old moated castle is indeed wondrous safe, but there are mountains to be crossed—"

"'Tis possible to get there by water," interrupted the princess. "Fifteen miles down the lake, and then into the gorge—"

"The Royal galley shall be ready within the hour!" broke in Lee crisply. "By skirting the shore, there can be no danger, for it will be several hours before the first Gothlander vessels can reach these waters."

"'Tis agreed," said Ethelbert. "The gorge is safe—it can be guarded with ease, owing to its natural defences. And Westwold Castle is impregnable. Our sweet Majesty will be safe there."



CHAPTER 12.

REFUGEES!

THE princess was looking excited.

"'Tis against my inclinations that I should flee in this way, but I will obey," she said rather wistfully. "'Twas my desire to stand on the battlements above, and watch the progress of the fighting. My brave soldiers will hold off these invaders."

"A plague take them!" growled Ethelbert. "Never fear, they will be held off!"

"I hope so—although we can take nothing for granted," said Nelson Lee quickly. "That is why I am anxious for you to leave at once, your Majesty. If Kassker's men gain a footing here their first task will be to attack the castle."

"Thinkest thou that such a thing might happen?" asked Mercia in wonder.

"It is possible, and therefore you must go," replied Lee. "Everything possible will be done to fling the Gothlanders back, but we cannot be certain that we shall succeed. I desire you to take your ladies-in-waiting and such members of your suite as may be necessary. The Royal bodyguard will also accompany the barge."

Ethelbert the Red gave a quick little smile.

"A wise decision, thou crafty one!" he said. "All the young people of thy party, I perceive. 'Tis thy wish that they should be in safety, too, and I do not blame thee for such precautions."

The St. Frank's fellows, when they received their instructions, were not in the least impressed, however. In fact, they were disgusted. Handforth's complaints were bitter and caustic.

"It's too thick!" he burst out. "We're to be sent up to this rural retreat in charge of the Royal barge, and it's only a ruse to get rid of us."

"That's all," said Nipper sadly. "There won't be an atom of danger up there, and we shan't even see the fighting. The Gothlanders can't get here for another six or seven hours, and by that time we shall be in the gorge, nicely tucked away in safety."

"Are we going to stand it?" roared Handforth. "Are we going to be pushed off with the girls and the princess, like a lot of china dolls? I think we ought to go to Mr. Lee, and put it to him straight!"

William Napoleon Browne shook his head.

"While my own emotions are distressingly akin to yours, Brother Handforth, we must remain level-headed," he said smoothly. "We have received our orders, and we must obey. Would you advocate mutiny at the hour of crisis?"

"Mutiny be blowed!" roared Handforth. "Are we going to miss all the fun?"

"Alas, I fear there is no alternative," said Browne. "But duty is duty, and the bodyguard, after all, is the bodyguard. Our very

mission is to protect the princess from harm, and our place is by her side. Let us go forth with brave hearts and resigned spirits."

Nipper grunted.

"It's no good, you fellows—Browne's right," he said. "After all, it's the body-guard's job to escort the princess."

"But it's only a stunt!" snorted Handforth. "We all know that this trip is as safe as going down the Stowe in a punt. It's only a dodge to get us out of harm's way."

"Yes, we know that," agreed Nipper, with a wry face. "But the gov'nor wants to be on the safe side. We know what these Gothlanders are—we've seen 'em. If we're on the spot when those beggars land, they'll kill us the first of anybody. So Mr. Lee wants us to be well out of it."

"But they won't land, you blithering ass!" bellowed Handforth. "What about the aeroplane? What about those tanks? Kassker's armies will never get a footing on these shores, and it's all rot to talk about sending us—"

But Handforth was silenced. Orders were orders, and it was no good kicking against them. And although the fellows were keenly disappointed at being sent off in this way, they instinctively felt that Nelson Lee was acting for the best.

The hastily prepared defences looked stout enough, and those tanks would strike terror into the hearts of the invading hosts if they ever came ashore. But, when all was said and done, there were only two of the things, and they could not be everywhere at once. While they were holding off the enemy at one spot, a vast army could land at another. It was no good blinking at the fact that the Northestrian defences were actually feeble. Everything would depend upon the airship party. If this invasion was held off, it would be their doing. True, there were thousands of Northestrians ready to fight, but if it came to a land battle, the Gothlanders had an overwhelming advantage. They were brutes by nature, and they were trained men. On the other hand, the new Northestrian armies were composed of raw recruits.

Nelson Lee's scheme for getting all the boys and girls into a place of safety was a clever one, and he saw to it that there was no delay. The Royal galley was already at hand, Lee had arranged that days earlier. The boys themselves had put in some training at the oars, and were now to take full charge. During the past two or three days they had taken the galley out more than once, little dreaming that Lee had had an ulterior motive in getting them thus accustomed to the sweeps.

The only St. Frank's fellow who didn't take his place on the craft was Willy, and it was assumed he could not be spared from his important post. As a matter of fact, Lee was so full up with other important matters that he had overlooked Willy. Otherwise the Third Form skipper would have been packed off with the rest.

The Royal galley was a rather wonderful craft.

She was not particularly big, but in comparison to the other Northestrian vessels she was imposing and stately. There were private cabins for the princess and her suite, and there were many great sweeps, each propelled by three men. As there were not sufficient juniors to man all the sweeps, several of them were left idle. For there was no particular hurry. The gorge was only fifteen miles down the coast, and this could be reached, even at a leisurely pace, long before the enemy armada came into sight.

"We're simply turned into galley-slaves—that's what it means!" grunted Handforth, as he sat at one of the sweeps. "I'll get my own back on Mr. Lee for this! After I'd decided to lead a regiment into battle, too!"

"We all have our trials, Brother Handforth," said Browne, with a shake of his head. "We make plans, and then Fate deals us a jab in the back. Let us be consoled with the thought that we are acting as knight-errants."

"A fat lot of consolation in that!" said Reggie Pitt. "If we had to fight our way through a crowd of enemy ships, it would be a different thing. But we're buzzing off before the beggars even come into sight! Oh, well, we can't expect Mr. Lee to see the thing from our point of view."

But the St. Frank's fellows were a very sorry-looking crowd as they commenced their work at the sweeps.

The Royal galley moved slowly and sedately off, taking the course down the lake, with instructions to hug the shore. The princess herself would act as guide, and once the friendly gorge was reached, the up-river trip would be simple. Several miles beyond the outer gorge, the river wended its way through a deep canyon, with Westwold Castle beyond. There could be no fighting up there, since the place was more or less of a death-trap for any enemy ships. They would avoid that gorge like the plague.

Even Irene & Co. were disappointed, for they, too, had hoped to see some of the excitement. The girls were by no means anxious to see any bloodshed, but they never for a moment believed that there would be any. They were convinced that the invaders' fleet would be turned back in confusion and disorder, and they had hoped to witness this welcome spectacle.

"There's Willy, too!" growled Handforth, glaring. "By George! Think of it! There he is, up there in that basket, with a bird's-

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eye view of the whole giddy scene! Isn't it enough to make you boil?"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Church. "Don't make it worse!"

"There goes old Dorrie!" shouted Nipper, pointing.

Dimly in the distance an aggressive roar had made itself apparent. And now with a leap the little whippet aeroplane had taken the air, soaring up steeply, and banking round under Lord Dorrimore's expert hand.

Dorrie was off into the battle—and the St. Frank's crowd felt more out of it than ever. The tiny aeroplane came sweeping overhead, no higher than two or three hundred feet. The Princess Mercia was watching with wide-open eyes. In fact, she was feeling just a little frightened. For it seemed to her that this noisy little wasp was something unbelievable. The modern aeroplane was an awe-inspiring sight to the Northestrians, even though they were now familiar with it, for Dorrie had made more than one test flight.

The machine banked round as it passed over the Royal galley, and Dorrie cheerily waved his hand.

"Hurrah!" roared the juniors.

"Smash 'em, Dorrie!" yelled Nipper. "Good luck!"

The aeroplane swung off, straight out to the lake, rising higher and higher as Dorrie opened out the powerful engine. And while the stately galley continued her peaceful journey down the coast, Dorrie went out into the thick of things.



CHAPTER 13.

THE FIRST SKIRMISH.

BY the Lord Harry!" said Dorrie blankly.

He was at a height of two thousand feet, flying steadily with half-closed

throttle—cruising at the little aeroplane's easiest speed. And from this altitude, in mid-lake, his lordship had a perfect view of the oncoming Armada.

He had expected to see a large number of enemy vessels, for Willy's report had been quite definite.

But even Dorrie was startled by the actual sight.

The Gothlander fleet was enormous—almost unbelievable.

There were hundreds and hundreds of ships, and as they advanced across the lake they were spreading out fanwise. They were in perfect formation, too, coming onwards in definite groups. And they stretched as far as the eye could see. Ships were still coming out of the wide river mouth on the Gothland coast.

"Glory, there's somethin' uncanny about old Lee's predictions," muttered Dorrie. "He warned us about this, but we wouldn't believe him. The whole tribe must be in these ships!

Old Kassker means to do the thing properly or not at all!"

He throttled down his engine, and the machine glided downwards fairly slowly, under perfect control. Dorrie was watching closely, taking note of everything he saw, and receiving fresh surprises every moment.

This invading host was complete in every detail.

It was like a Viking fleet. Every ship was packed with men. There were archers, soldiers in chain-mail and armour, hundreds of barges filled with horses, and every possible requirement for war. At the very first glance Dorrie could tell that this Armada had taken many years to prepare. And Kassker had kept it secret! That was the most astonishing fact of all. Even the most well-informed Northestrian had had no conception of Kassker's actual resources. Indeed, no Northestrian would have believed that so many ships were in existence. They must have been built in secret, and hidden away up the Gothland rivers during the past years—waiting for the arrival of The Day.

And now the Armada was coming across the lake!

Lord Dorrimore's former complacency deserted him. Indeed, he was beset with a vague uneasiness when he thought of the hasty defences on the Northestrian shore. Nelson Lee had done his best, but what could any man do with only a few days at his disposal? How could those untried recruits—simple, country workers—hope to repel these grim, trained soldiers of Kassker's army?

Dorrie thought of the aeroplane he was piloting—of those great tanks which had been contrived. Excellent weapons of war, no doubt, but how could they, alone, hope to smash up this invading horde?

"Oh, well, we've got to do our best!" he muttered. "But, by gad, it's goin' to be touch an' go by the look of things. I'll just give them a taste of these fireworks, an' see how they like 'em!"

Dorrie himself was not in the slightest danger. In that ultra-modern aeroplane, with its smoothly-running engine, he was perfectly safe. He could swoop down upon these mediæval ships with impunity. It rather went against the grain, in fact. Dorrie was a fighter, and he liked to be battling against odds. This bomb-dropping business wasn't in his line at all. No matter how necessary it was to send back these enemies, he couldn't bring himself to the point of dropping bombs on them. That sort of thing would be sheer murder. In a fight on land, with a rifle in his hand, Dorrie would cheerfully shoot to kill—knowing that it was his life or the other man's. But this was different, out here. All the advantage was with him, and he simply couldn't make use of it.

But he could certainly do his best to scare the beggars.

He dropped lower, and by this time the foremost of the Gothlander ships were immediately beneath him. He could see the up-

turned faces, most of them wearing expressions of fear and awe. This was the very first time the Gothlanders had seen an aeroplane, and they were stricken with apprehension.

But they were helpless. Each boat was packed with soldiers, so heavily laden that the craft moved sluggishly. Other men were at the sweeps, and their commanding officers allowed them no respite. Probably the officers were as scared as the men, but they managed to keep up a pretence of bravado.

Dorrie could see much clearer now. Many of the barges contained horses, and these latter were causing trouble. When Dorrie opened up his engine for a moment, and the exhaust barked out its shattering roar, many of the horses reared up. On one barge, a number of the steeds got beyond control, and several men were pitched overboard by the plunging animals.

Dorrie made mental notes. The majority of the soldiers were in chain-mail, and they carried battle-axes and swords. The archers were less numerous. But it was really impossible to make any attempt to estimate the numbers. The fleet stretched right out across the lake, and every boat was packed. There were thousands upon thousands of men.

"Well, it's got to be done," muttered Dorrie.

He opened the throttle wide, and soared off in advance of the fleet. A quarter of a mile beyond the foremost ship he sent the first bomb plunging into the lake, and there

was a dull, reverberating explosion. A great column of water shot up.

Boom! Boom!

Two more bombs followed, and Dorrie shut off his engine, and swung round to note the effect.

He smiled grimly.

There was no mistaking the effect! The entire Gothlander fleet was in disorder. Sweeps were stilled, the formation had been lost, and the various groups of ships were plunging into one another, and there was general confusion. The enemy had had its first taste of high explosive! This taste had been at a distance, but it had nevertheless been effective.

Perhaps Lord Dorrimore was rather careless. At all events, he continued to glide downwards over the disorganised fleet, and he was no higher than fifty or sixty feet as he bent over the cockpit, and took a look at the enemy at close range.

Phut! Phut! Phut!

Something hissed through the air against Dorrie's ear, and his startled eyes beheld a dozen arrows sticking into the wing, immediately in front of him. One of the ships beneath had loosed off a flight of arrows. The archers had seized their opportunity.

"Well, that's a bit steep!" growled Dorrie, opening the throttle.

He shot upwards at a steep angle, fully aware of his danger now, and another burst of arrows hissed harmlessly into the air be-

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hind. Lord Dorrimore took care to fly higher now. He had forgotten all about the archers—or, at least, he had not believed that they would loose off their shafts at him.

He cast rather an anxious eye over his machine as he mounted higher, in a series of circles. Fortunately, the arrows had done no harm—they were just sticking into the underplane. No vital part of the machine had been touched. But Dorrie looked rather straight when he realised that the propeller might easily have received one of those arrows. And a smashed propeller would have meant sheer disaster for him. He could imagine his fate if he fell into this lot, even if he survived the crash!

"Hanged if the brutes aren't gettin' shipshape again," he muttered, as he took a survey from a higher altitude. "H'm! It'll take more than an explosion or two to scare them back, it seems."

The leading vessels were sorting themselves out, and Dorrie could easily see that the officers were bullying their men into order. The great fleet was taking its former shape, and was once more moving onwards—slowly, but with a grim, sinister, inexorable purpose.

Dorrie had another three bombs left in his rack, and he hesitated. But then he shook his head. He couldn't bring himself to drop them upon these helpless men. If they were peppering him with anti-aircraft guns he would have dropped his bombs cheerfully. But it was too one-sided to appeal to his sporting nature. He dropped the bombs two or three hundred yards away from the nearest ship, and they exploded harmlessly in the water.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

And it was rather significant that the armada never flinched. This time there was no disorder. The sweeps were still plied, and the ships continued their course. The Gothlanders had learned, from the first experience, that this little whippet had a bark that was worse than its bite.

Perhaps they thought that Dorrie could do them no harm. At all events, it is practically certain that the Gothlanders had no idea that Dorrie could have sent hundreds of them to eternity, had he chosen.

His lordship grunted, opened up his engine, and sped towards Northestria.



CHAPTER 14.

WILLY—ADRIET!

WILLY HANDFORTH scratched his head.

"Rummy!" he muttered. "Thundering rummy!"

He was perched up in his observation basket, and his eye was glued to his telescope. He had just seen Lord Dorrimore drop his second dose of bombs, and he had seen them all explode harmlessly, well clear of the enemy.

"What's the giddy idea, anyhow?" went on Willy, picking up the telephone. "Hey! Anybody down there?"

"What now, young 'un?" came the voice of Nelson Lee. "Can you see what is happening?"

"Dorrie just dropped another three bombs, sir," said Willy. "He went pretty low down just before that, and I believe they loosed off some arrows at him. It was a pretty near thing, sir."

Lee, on the ground, pursed his lips.

"Confound the reckless idiot!" he muttered. "He'll get himself killed if he goes on like that. Willy, what effect did the bombs have?"

"None, sir."

"None?"

"No, sir—he dropped them harmlessly into the sea."

Nelson Lee nodded. He could quite understand Dorrie's motive, and Willy was beginning to appreciate it now, too. From the ground, of course, Lee could see nothing whatever, for the Gothlander fleet was still well beyond the range of vision from the earth level.

It exasperated Lee to feel that he must rely upon this Third Form fag. There was nobody else to go up in the basket—nobody, that is, who was sufficiently slight. Lee had thought about using the other aeroplane, but he was too urgently needed on the ground to allow of his going off.

"All right, Willy," he said. "Report anything fresh if you note it."

"Right you are, sir," came down Willy's voice. "The fleet is still twenty miles off, and without the telescope it looks like a flock of sparrows on the water. They're coming slowly, sir, but they evidently mean business."

"What of the Royal galley?"

"Going down the coast well, sir—over two or three miles away now."

Willy glanced round, and spoke again.

"Dorrie's just coming back, sir," he reported.

This latter piece of information was rather needless, for a few seconds later the aeroplane came into full sight, and swooped down with the obvious intention of landing. Dorrie wanted to make his own report, and he was anxious to tell Lee precisely how matters stood.

And then an unforeseen incident happened.

The aeroplane, gliding steeply, opened up again for a moment near the ground, and the sudden burst from the engine had an instantaneous effect upon a number of horses which happened to be almost immediately beneath.

A company of lancers were riding past. Several of the horses took fright. The shattering din from the aeroplane sent them into a panic. The riders were thrown violently, and the frenzied animals ran madly, galloping at random. Several men only just leapt aside in the nick of time.

Willy Handforth was just applying his eye

to the telescope again when he was nearly torn out of the basket. The captive balloon gave a wild, dizzy plunge. The young observer uttered a gasp of dismay. He had no idea what was happening, but the balloon was still acting erratically.

As a matter of fact, one of the frightened horses had fouled the cable, and, somehow, the animal's heavy harness got entangled with the rope. The frenzied steed pranced and reared alarmingly.

And then, before anybody could attempt to calm the horse, the rope cable snapped! It was a most unlooked for incident. That rope had been strong enough to hold the balloon under all normal circumstances, but nobody had anticipated such an affair as this.

"Whoa! What the——" gasped Willy.

He suddenly felt himself moving—rising higher and higher, and moving outwards over the lake. The balloon above him was swaying and rolling, and he was dizzy with the sudden motion. He clung to the basket instinctively, although, as a matter of fact, he was securely strapped.

There was no wind in this curious volcanic pocket of the Arctic, but there were plenty of air currents, and the released balloon was soon caught in the drift of one. Willy was being carried out over the lake, and although he was rising scarcely at all, his position was perilous.

"Well, my hat!" he muttered, as he realised the position. "I was longing for a bit of excitement, and now I've got it! By the look of things, I shall either drop in the middle of that fleet, or land somewhere in Gothland! Or I may take a dive into the lake. It doesn't much matter which—the end will probably be just the same."

Willy had strong nerves for a youngster of his age, but he couldn't disguise from himself the fact that he was in a nasty fix. He was moving much more rapidly than he liked, and he was already well out over the lake. And now he could see that he was dropping. Perhaps the violent plunging of the balloon had torn a section of the fabric, and the gas was escaping? He was dropping into the lake, and it did not need much calculation on Willy's part to see that he would reach the water several miles further down the shore, and a good distance out. And, by the look of things, it would be impossible for any boat to get to the spot in time to save him.

Lord Dorrimore, landing, found Nelson Lee and Captain Waring running up as he jumped out of the cockpit.

"Yes, I know!" shouted his lordship anxiously. "Confound my infernal clumsiness! I scared those horses, didn't I? Any chance of chasin' the poor young beggar in a boat?"

"There's the motor-boat!" replied Lee, as he looked anxiously out at the drifting balloon. "But I am torn, Dorrie. If we waste time in chasing after Willy, I shall be unable to put my plans into execution. It

may be an hour before that balloon drops, and I was thinking of taking the motor-boat out to the enemy. What's the news, anyhow?"

"Yes, but about young Willy——"

"He's safe for the time being. The news, Dorrie!"

His lordship gave it—and his information proved to be much more graphic than any Willy had supplied. Nelson Lee was looking anxious and grim by the time Dorrie had finished.

"An endless fleet!" he muttered. "We've got to engage it, Dorrie, even if we only have the motor-boat and a couple of machine-guns! We've got to do everything we can to harass the brutes. If such a thing is remotely possible, I want to turn them back in disorder."

"What about Willy?"

"I am sorry for the youngster," replied Lee steadily, "but unless we do something at once, we shall all perish. If that horde lands on this coast, Dorrie, we shall never be able to hold 'em. We can leave Willy for an hour, anyhow, and search for him later. The main thing at the moment is to attack the enemy."

Lee was undoubtedly right.

It seemed rough on the unfortunate Willy, but his was only one life compared to thousands—and among those thousands were a big proportion of women and children. The Gothlanders were coming with the grim intention of committing a wholesale massacre, as Nelson Lee well knew, and there would be no quarter for the women and children.

So Willy was almost forgotten in the dire urgency of the general peril.

There were many activities afoot. The two "cruisers"—the Northestrian ships fitted with the auxiliary aero-engines—were already well out over the lake, in command of two parties of the airship engineers. They were going out to engage the enemy. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were getting into the motor-boat, to dash out to the attack, too.

Dorrie refused to wage warfare from the aeroplane.

"It's no good, Lee, I can't do it," he declared. "I'll fight as hard as you like in any straightforward way, but I can't drop bombs. Get me behind one of these machine-guns, and I'll do plenty of damage, though."

"Perhaps you're right, Dorrie," agreed Lee.

In the meantime, Willy Handforth was getting further and further away, and the air current was now causing the captive balloon to drift down the coast, but he was still gradually getting further out over the lake. He had dropped to less than six hundred feet by this time, and it seemed that he was not only getting well clear of the zone of battle, but there was every indication that he would drop into the lake, miles from the shore, and miles from the nearest help. The battle was developing further up, and Willy Handforth was drifting further off into the open lake.

His was just one life—and it was forgotten.



Willing hands reached out and grasped Willy, dragging him into the boat. His rescuers were only just in time, for as they lifted him out of the water two ugly tentacles lashed out, missing the fag by a few inches.



CHAPTER 15.

MITE AGAINST NIGHT!

"WELL I'm jiggered!"

Edward Oswald Handforth was standing up and staring into the sky.

"Look out, Handy!"

growled Church. "These sweeps aren't like the oars of a rowing boat, you know! You can't mess about—"

"But look!" roared Handforth, pointing. "Willy! And he's adrift!"

"My only hat!"

"Good gad!"

"Willy, by Jove!"

Practically all the members of the Royal bodyguard ceased work at the sweeps, and the graceful galley slid onwards through the water under her own impetus. Her crew were all staring up at the drifting balloon.

"There must have been an accident!" cried Doris Berkeley. "Poor Willy is dropping into the lake, I believe! Aren't they doing anything to go to his rescue?"

"Perhaps they're too busy," said Irene. "Can't you see the boats making out into the lake, far away? They're all going in the opposite direction."

There was no mistaking the signs.

The captive balloon was plainly visible to everybody on board the Royal galley. The

balloon was taking such a course that it must inevitably fall into the water, far from any possibility of help.

"Perhaps we're wrong," said Nipper, after a moment. "Perhaps it's only the balloon—without anybody in it—"

"No, I can see Willy clearly!" put in Pitt, staring through his binoculars.

"By George!" muttered Handforth. "What the dickens are we going to do? The poor kid will drop into the water, and drown!"

They all looked at one another in alarm. There was no immediate danger, but anybody could see, with only half an eye, that the escaped balloon was sinking, and sinking rapidly.

It was the Princess Mercia who settled the point.

"The boy is your young friend," she said simply. "We must go to save him, since it seemeth unlike that other help will reach him."

Browne looked dubious.

"While appreciating your kindly motives, your Majesty, I must point out that we are under orders to escort you to Westwold without delay," he said. "And if we venture out into the lake, we shall not only delay, but there is more than a chance that we shall touch the fringe of the battle."

"Good egg!" said Handforth eagerly.

"Even if we undergo risk, we must alter our course," declared the young princess. "'Tis thy brother, Handforth the Bold, who is in peril. Enough! Our course must be altered."

And while the galley veered round and commenced a race with the descending balloon, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were in the midst of some excitement. Lee had considered it advisable to leave the land defences to themselves for the time being. He wanted to get to close grips with the enemy. The motor-boat contained only Dorrie and himself, and an officer to look after the engine.

There was something farcical in this venture.

These two were going out in an attempt to turn the Gothland fleet back! Two Britons against a veritable horde of savage fighters! They had the advantage of the swiftly moving motor-boat and the machine-guns, but, even so, their task was well nigh impossible.

But Lee had a vague hope that these heathens would be terrified—so terrified that panic would set in. That, indeed, was the real crux of the matter. If only a panic could be set up, the rest might be easy. For a panic would mean disorder—and after that anything might happen.

"It's a piece of infernal nerve, when you come to think of it, but there's nothin' like tryin'," remarked Lord Dorrimore. "Those other two boats are comin' up behind, an' they'll be able to lend a hand soon. But this is goin' to be our show for the present."

The Northestrian Navy was about to come into action!

The two "cruisers" were behaving remarkably well. The aero-engines were roaring with their utmost power, and the vessels were attaining quite a respectable speed, with the assistance of the sweeps. Compared to any ordinary motor-driven craft, they were slow—but they made up for this in noise. And, in any case, they were quite nippy compared to the sluggish, heavily-laden enemy vessels.

In advance, the motor-boat was opening the fight.

The little craft swept down upon the Gothland fleet, and at first it seemed as though the speeding boat was going to charge the enemy. But at the last moment Lee whirled the wheel, and the boat slewed round, leaving a creamy mass of foam in her wake. And as she passed the nearest ships, a burst of arrows came hissing through the air.

"That's done it!" roared Dorrie. "It's all I was waiting for! They've opened fire, so now we'll give 'em a taste of lead!"

He was at one of the machine-guns, and a moment later the weapon delivered a shattering volley of bullets. With a wicked roar, the gun got into action. Arrows were still hissing round.

But they were futile compared to the machine-gun fire.

Zurrrrh!

Numbers of men fell in the enemy boats

and the manner of their deaths and injuries so frightened the others that panic broke out. Scores of men fell into the water, and no attempt was made to pull them out. Many of the vessels collided, and two were sunk owing to the force of the impacts. This particular part of the lake became alive with struggling, drowning men.

They had no chance of being saved. Some vessels of the fleet started to turn about.

Nelson Lee's eyes were gleaming as he brought the motor-boat round, and sent it sweeping along the line again.

Zurrrrh! Zurrrrh!

Again the machine-gun sang its ugly song, and this time it became a duet, for Lee relinquished the steering-wheel to operate the second gun. The original confusion became worse, and all the foremost ships were turning about, their officers and crew panic-stricken to a point of frenzy.

"We're doing the trick, Dorrie!" roared Lee.

"Absolutely!" grinned Dorrie. "We'll beat the blighters yet!"

And it seemed, during those tense moments, that there was some justification for his hope. The enemy was in flight, all the leading vessels turning about. Several had sunk, others were crippled, and large numbers of men were killed and injured.

But, compared to the actual numbers, the casualties were a mere handful. It was the moral effect that was the most devastating. With thousands of men frightened out of their wits, and with scores of boats fleeing, the entire fleet was upset.

Again and again the motor-boat skirted the enemy, sending forth its double hail of bullets. The panic grew worse, and the confusion more confounded.

Arrows were coming in showers over the motor-boat continuously, but both the daring occupants crouched low, and took care not to expose themselves when they were at close quarters. The noisy little craft was like a wasp harassing a mighty elephant!

But Lee's hope proved futile. Although the morale of the leading boat's crews was utterly destroyed, there were hundreds of other craft to be reckoned with, and it was impossible for Lee and Dorrie to be in more than one place at one time.

They soon saw that the enemy's fleet was breaking up. Those in the rear were steering out in new formations, and it seemed that Kasker the Grim was not without strategy.

He was abandoning those leading ships of his, and adopting new tactics. Instead of sending his fleet across the lake, intact, he now broke it up into a dozen different units, each one making in a new direction. As soon as Lee became aware of this, he steered the boat well clear of the engagement, and he and Dorrie gazed at one another.

"The cunnin' blighters!" said his lordship.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"THE SCHOOLBOY SLAVES!"

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Made to work as galley slaves!
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"I was afraid of it, Dorrie," muttered Lee. "If only we could have caused that panic to spread throughout the entire fleet, all would have been well. But we're done now."

"Done?" repeated Dorrie. "That from you, old man?"

"I mean, we're done as far as this one boat is concerned," said Nelson Lee grimly. "We cannot fight a dozen different flotillas at once. A dozen! There'll be two or three score by the time they had finished their evolutions! Upon my word, Dorrie, Kasker is a clever man!"

"Well, what's the programme?" asked his lordship, scratching his head.

"For the moment, we can only retreat, and join up with our other forces," replied Lee. "It's a mere waste of time to stay here, using our ammunition on two or three of these groups. While we're doing that, the others will be getting ahead. No, we've got to get back, and organise our full defences."

"Then it looks like an invasion, after all?"

"It not only looks like it—but an invasion is inevitable," replied Lee grimly.



CHAPTER 16.

TOUCH AND GO!

WILLY HANDFORTH had been almost completely forgotten by Nelson Lee and the others.

The approach of the enemy was so grim and relentless—the advance of that great fleet was so menacing—that Nelson Lee had no time to think of the unfortunate fag. There were thousands of lives at stake, and even the resourceful Nelson Lee could not see how the disaster could be averted.

So the unhappy Willy was left to his fate. At least, he would have been left to his fate, but for the fortunate proximity of the Royal galley, with its crew of St. Frank's fellows. Against Nelson Lee's strict orders, the galley was deviating from its course.

But the Princess Mercia herself had given the order, and Willy's life was in the balance. Scarcely any of those young people on the

Royal craft gave a thought to the possible danger. It never occurred to them that they might run into the enemy—and suffer not only capture, but death.

The galley was unarmed. If, by chance, a number of the Gothlander light boats swept up and surrounded her, there could be no escape. But neither the princess nor her escorts considered the point.

It was a race for life.

Willy Handforth was aware of it. Over three points of the compass there was nothing but the open lake, with the vast enemy fleet just coming into sight over the horizon, and with a number of Northebian vessels preparing to challenge the invaders. They were all far distant—for Willy had drifted miles. He knew that he could not hope for any help from these quarters.

In the one other direction the open lake contained only one boat—and that was the Royal galley. Willy was well aware of the fact that his chums of St. Frank's were making a gallant attempt to reach him in time.

But Willy was quietly dubious.

By now the observation balloon was only fifty feet above the surface of the water, the descent having become precipitate. At first, Willy had drifted out over the lake, descending slowly. But the gas was leaking rapidly from the strained balloon, and by now there was so little buoyancy that he was dropping fast. With a plunge, the basket struck the lake.

Willy leapt clear. He had unfastened his strap well in advance, and he made a determined effort to swim away from the enveloping folds of the silken envelope. He dived, swimming hard, and he rose well clear of the debris.

"That's something, anyhow," he muttered, spluttering. "Phew! I think I ought to be able to do it!"

He was gazing over the water towards the barge. From aloft, it had seemed comparatively close. But now that he was in the lake, swimming, he knew the truth. The barge was well over a mile distant, and the St. Frank's fellows were pulling desperately at the clumsy sweeps.

They were pale with anxiety now.

"It's all up!" muttered Chubby Heath miserably. "He's gone, poor chap!"

"I saw him jump for it, but he didn't come up again," wailed Juicy Lemon. "I believe he was smothered—"

"No, he's there—swimming!" roared Handforth excitedly. "Pull away, you chaps! He's swimming!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, St. Frank's!"

All thought of the grim invasion had fled from their minds. They were out to save a single life—a life that was very dear to at least two people on that ship—Edward Oswald Handforth and his sister. And the other affair, which involved the fate of a nation, seemed trivial.

"It's all right—no need to worry!" said Reggie Pitt breathlessly. "It's only about a mile, and Willy's a first-class swimmer—"

"I'm not worrying about that," interrupted Handforth, so he strained at his sweep. "Pull, you fellows! Put more strength into it, for goodness' sake! This lake's full of monsters! Poor old Willy may be dragged under at any minute."

"Oh, rot!" muttered Church. "We can't believe those yarns—"

"They're true!" panted Edward Oswald. "Oh, why can't we go faster?"

The others said very little—they saved their breath for the strenuous work. They believed that Handforth was right. The waters of this lake were no ordinary waters. It was an inland sea, but this oasis was sub-tropical, and no one knew exactly what lurking dangers the water held. The fellows had heard many stories of death-dealing fish—strange and ugly creatures which rendered bathing dangerous, even near the shores. And the Northebians would not tell such stories unless there was some foundation for them.

At any moment the luckless Willy might be dragged under, never to be seen again. But he was still swimming—he was still getting nearer.

But for the fortunate presence of the galley, Willy's fate would have been indeed sealed, for there was no other boat within several miles. Handforth and the other fellows had been indignant earlier, when they had been sent off on this safe journey. But now they were fervently thankful, for their presence might mean the saving of Willy's life.

Willy himself was quite serene now. After all, a mile swim was nothing much to worry about—and the galley was sweeping up pretty quickly, too. He was just telling himself that things couldn't be better, for he would find himself among his own companions, and the St. Frank's party would be intact to a man. Nothing could have happened more fortunately—

And then suddenly Willy forgot everything.

As he was swimming, he felt something sweep past one of his legs. He caught a glimpse of a curious object near him in the water. He stared into the limpid depths, and his jaw set. He saw a shape—a great shape which brought the thought of sharks into his head.

"Things are going to be lively!" he muttered.

The thing was no shark. A long, glistening tentacle shot out of the water, and lashed down with devastating force near his head. He was almost stunned by the power of it. Then he caught a glimpse of a scaly mass immediately in front of him. At first he believed that he was surrounded by the monsters, but then he realised that there was only one—an enormous creature which he could not define. But it was after him—it was intent upon destroying him.

The thing was neither octopus nor shark.

For a second he thought he saw its shape—a great, long body, with thick, tapering tentacles. It was obviously a creature peculiar to this lake. Willy thought rapidly. The galley was now only a mere hundred yards distant, but it seemed to be miles away.

Willy was not scared—but he was desperate. Quick as thought, he twisted round in the water and struck out in the opposite direction. His major and the other juniors were surprised at this manœuvre, for they had seen no sign of the monster of the lake. But Willy's swift manœuvre probably saved his life. For even as he twisted like an eel in the water, two of the ugly tentacles rose up, and lashed at the spot he had just vacated.

"Look!" yelled Handforth, aghast.

"There's something after him!" muttered Nipper. "By Jove, we're too late!"

They strained every nerve, and the galley swept on. As though acting by the same thought, all the fellows yelled at the top of their voices—subconsciously thinking, perhaps, that the noise might scare the brute.

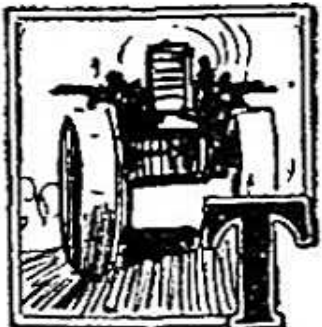
Willy was still swimming—he was still alive. He knew that salvation was within a few yards, but even now it was touch and go. That thing was close upon him, and with every second he expected to feel a grip on one of his submerged limbs. The sensation was awful—the suspense of waiting was a sheer agony.

And then the galley surged up. All those on board felt a peculiar jarring thud, and the speed of the craft was checked, as though it had struck upon a sand-bank. Several of the Moor View girls were thrown off their balance, and the fellows at the sweeps ceased their efforts.

"We hit it!" muttered Pitt. "By jingo, we've rammed the brute!"

"Willy!" cried Ena. "Quick! Oh, quick!"

The fag was alongside now, and willing hands reached out to grasp him. The next moment he was lifted out of the water—as two of those ugly tentacles lashed out, and missed him by inches.



CHAPTER 17.

THE TANKS.

"HANKS, you chaps!" panted Willy breathlessly.

"You — you awful young bounder!" gasped

his major. "You might have been killed! We thought you were going to be dragged under!"

"A miss is as good as a mile, old son," said Willy, looking over the side of the galley, with a slight shudder. "Crikey! There it goes—sinking deeper and deeper! I think you must have crocked it just now. Anyhow, it didn't get me."

"Good man, Willy," said Dick fervently.

"That twist of yours a minute ago was a marvel! It was the only thing that saved your life."

"Let us all be thankful that his life has been spared," said Princess Mercia quietly. "We came not in vain, and he is spared. Our great lake is not so beautiful as it seemeth. Many have died in these placid-looking waters."

They were about to question the young princess, but Nipper brought their minds back to other affairs.

"Man the sweeps, you fellows," he said urgently. "We're too far out—unless we're careful, we shall be in the thick of the fighting. And that's just what the gov'nor wanted to avoid."

They looked up, and saw ships in the distance. They were coming shorewards, getting nearer and nearer. And they needed no telling that these vessels were manned by the bloodthirsty savages of Gothland. The galley was swung round, and the sweeps were plied with frantic energy.

And the St. Frank's fellows were in deadly earnest now, too. They had no wish to be caught by these hostile ships. They knew they wouldn't stand an earthly chance against such numbers. So they got back on to their original course, and made for the gorge—which was now only a mile or two down the coast, and clearly visible. For the galley was a long way out, and the whole coastline was visible for miles up and down.

With the Princess Mercia in their care, they could not take any chances, and the run for safety continued. They were well in time, and when the entrance to the gorge was reached, there was no danger of being captured by the enemy. They had saved Willy, and had come to no harm. So far as the St. Frank's party was concerned, all was well.

But what of the others?

What of the invading hosts? Even at that moment the first real action was taking place—and it was destined to be an action which would decide the issue.

The Northestrian Navy was entering battle.

It consisted of the motor-boat, with Lee and Dorrie in command. Then came the two "cruisers," with their aero engines. In addition, there were dozens of other vessels, manned by picked men. They were carrying archers, and these determined fellows were only awaiting the moment when they could get to close grips.

The action opened with machine-gun fire.

Nelson Lee had selected the biggest of the oncoming groups—for the whole Armada had divided itself into definite formations, each making for a different section of the Northestrian coast.

Zurrrrh!

The machine-guns barked harshly, and a hail of bullets swept over the enemy vessels. Arrows came shooting over the water in answer, but the majority of them fell short. The air was made hideous by the roaring of

the aero engines on the two cruisers—for these motors had open exhaust-ports, and they were roaring under full throttle.

To the Gothlanders, such craft must have been truly terrifying. With their engines spurting flames, and their air-propellers whirling, they were enough to startle even the Northestrians. And then another factor came into the affair.

Overhead, the aeroplane swooped—the machine that Dorrie had left behind, on land. She was performing a number of evolutions high above, and both Lee and Dorrie glanced at one another inquiringly.

“Waring, of course,” said Lee.

“Yes, but what’s his game?” asked Dorrie.

“I think we shall soon know——” Lee broke off. “Yes, there you are! Jove, he’s rather too close to be comfortable.”

Boom! Crash!

A bomb dropped—a direct hit on the foremost of the Gothlander craft. The result was devastating. The vessel simply ceased to be. Men and fragments of wood went hurtling high into the air. Sounds of anguish arose, and all the other ships were flung into confusion.

“It’s justified now, old man,” muttered Dorrie. “I couldn’t bring myself to drop bombs on these brutes, but Waring’s right. It’s touch and go. If a few of the ugly curs aren’t bombed, they’ll overrun Northestria.”

“I’m afraid they’ll do it in any case,” said Lee curtly.

Boom!

Another bomb dropped—and this one fell between two of the enemy craft, heeling them over so acutely that they capsized. In the meantime, the other factions were waging battle continuously.

The motor-boat, speedy and nippy, was dashing to and fro, harassing the enemy continuously. And at last the affair grew too hot. The disorganised fleet broke up and turned.

The Gothlanders fled in panic.

Many of the officers attempted to control their men, but they were helpless. The frightened rank and file mutinied, and set off back to Gothland.

But in the meantime something else had happened.

One of those groups of enemy vessels had reached land! All along the beach the ships were disgorging their troops, and the Gothlanders were sweeping in. The invasion had actually started.

“What shall we do, Dorrie?” asked Lee quickly. “Leave the Northestrians to deal with the invaders, and confine our attention to these other fleets, or shall we get ashore?”

“Get ashore!” growled Dorrie. “The tanks!”

Nelson Lee nodded.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “Those tanks in action will be seen from far out to sea—or, rather, on the lake. The sight of such juggernauts might have a telling effect.

in any case, it’s all a gamble. Swing her round!”

His lordship, who was at the wheel, turned the motor-boat’s nose towards Dunstane. The invaders had landed three or four miles farther up the coast, and several of the other fleets were now converging on the same spot. If they all succeeded in landing their human cargoes, the invasion would be beyond control.

Within five minutes the motor-boat was driving her prow into the beach, and Lee and Dorrie leapt ashore. One of the first to greet them was Umlosi, the African chief—Dorrie’s friend in many a grim fight.

“Wau!” he roared. “Thou hast come, N’Kose! The dogs are sweeping inland, yonder. And many warriors are rushing to the attack.”

“Then get on with it, Umlosi—join in the fray!” said Dorrie.

“I waited for thee, my master,” said Umlosi.

“That’s all right—I’m comin’ in one of the tanks,” replied his lordship. “I think you’d better join us——”

“Nay, N’Kose, I fight with my spear,” interrupted Umlosi. “’Tis no fight at all otherwise. For many days have I awaited this hour. Much blood will flow, and these curs shall taste my blade!”

Of late, Umlosi had almost been forgotten, for unless there was fighting to be done, he was wont to remain in the background. An opportunity such as this was what he lived for.

And while Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrie more ran madly towards the tanks, Umlosi charged into battle with a rush which brought terror into the hearts of the enemy.



CHAPTER 18.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

URRRRRRRRRH!

The din was absolutely shattering.

Lumbering across the low-lying land near the shore were two monstrous-looking objects. One of them was controlled by Lee, and the other by Dorrie. And several of the airship’s engineers were controlling the motors.

The tanks were about to enter into action.

And now that the actual moment of the test had come, these weirdly contrived tanks were more terrifying than even Lee had suspected. In any ordinary modern battle they would have been useless, for a single shell would have shattered them to fragments. Even machine-gun fire would have put them out of action.

For they were merely the airship gondolas mounted on giant wheels.

But against foot soldiers and archers they were impregnable. They rolled on relent-

lessly. It was only just possible to steer them roughly, but they were making for the heart of the enemy forces. The invaders were massing in ever-increasing numbers, as vessel after vessel disgorged its crew.

Umlosi was fighting with all his usual ferocity. Many of the Northestrians had given battle to the Gothlanders. Five hundred men strong, sweeping up to the point of attack, were engaging Kassker's men. And so fierce was the fighting that the archers were helpless. It was a hand-to-hand struggle, with battle-axes swinging and swords flashing.

Umlosi's spear, however, was the most deadly weapon of all.

Nelson Lee had seen the giant negro fighting on many an occasion, but seldom had he fought with such abandon as now. He was like a man possessed. The havoc he wrought with that one spear was staggering. The enemy fell back before him, aghast, and the ground was littered with dead.

And then came the tanks.

The Northestrians, previously warned, knew what to expect. They broke away at the last moment, and those great monstrosities lumbered on, ploughing a way into the closely-packed ranks of the foe.

Kassker's soldiers, already half demoralised, were stricken with terror.

For years they had been told that the conquest of Northestria would be child's play. They had always understood that there would be no resistance, and that they would be able to seize the coveted land without a sword being drawn. And this was the actual reception they got!

Not only were the Northestrians rolling up in hundreds to repel them, but there were these other horrors—this demoniacal black man, with the terrible spear, and these terrifying monsters which swept up, spitting death. There were the disasters out in the lake, and the thing of the air which dropped death from above. Everything combined had a shattering effect.

And the vanguard of the enemy became demoralised.

It was the tanks that turned the tide. The Gothlanders who had escaped were having no more of this warfare. They fled—they ran screaming back to their boats. The panic was terrible. Hundreds of men were trampled down, many of the ships were capsized by the very madness of the demented creatures who tried to crowd into them. The rest escaped.

And the other groups of enemy vessels, coming up, could see that something was wrong. The tanks were in full evidence—roaring and lumbering. And the panic spread. The freshly-arriving ships, instead of disgorging their human freights, turned.

"They're bunkin', Lee—they're turnin' tail!" yelled Dorrie. "By glory, it's a victory!"

"I believe you're right, old man, but we can't be sure—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted his lordship. "Look at 'em! Can't you see the other boats turnin' round an' makin' off? This frenzy is spreadin' like wildfire, an' before five minutes have gone, the whole of Kassker's brood will be on the run!"

The original invaders were beaten. Hundreds of men had fallen in that swift, deadly engagement. Hundreds of others were drowned in the lake—within a few yards of the shore. And then came Waring in the aeroplane, to finish off the defeat.

All down the coast the enemy ships were turning about. There was no semblance of formation now. Each boat was for itself. And the men were thinking only of getting back to Gothland.

What Kassker the Grim was thinking, Nelson Lee could only imagine. His chief officers had kept their heads, and had done everything in their power to urge their hordes on, knowing full well that once they landed the victory would be assured. But the panic had got beyond their control. The men were ignoring all orders, and as ship after ship turned about and fled, so the others followed their example.

All the way down the lake the Northestrians were mad with excitement. The news spread from town to town and from village to village.

All the Northestrians knew, however, that they had to thank Nelson Lee and his lieutenants for the victory. They were the real conquerors. And if these strangers within the gates had been idolised before, they were now hailed as the saviours of Northestria.

Ethelbert the Red was deeply moved.

"Words are of little use in such times as these, brave Lee," he said sombrely. "Thou has averted a mighty disaster, and what can I say?"

"Say little, my lord," replied Lee. "This is only the first brush with the enemy. Kassker's armies are still intact. Make no mistake, he will reorganise them, and the next battle will be the real test. For then the enemy will know what to expect, and they will come prepared. We have beaten them now, but we must not be too sure. Never for one moment must we relax our efforts. From one end of this country to the other the population must prepare itself to keep out the invader."

"By St. Attalus, thou art right!" vowed Ethelbert.

And so the episode closed. Kassker the Grim was defeated in his first attempt to invade Northestria. But would he be content to let matters stand?

There were signs of grim excitement ahead!

THE END.

In next week's story, "THE SCHOOLBOY SLAVES!" the boys of St. Frank's fall into the hands of pirates. You will enjoy this yarn. Make sure of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering in advance!



BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with his readers.



NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to **EDWY SEARLES BROOKS**, c/o The Editor, **THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY**, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of special merit will be distinguished by a star against the sender's name.—E. S. B.

YOU'VE heard about author's licence, haven't you? I've got one, of course, but I try not to use it too much. You can't buy these licences at the post-office, or at the town hall. They're invisible sort of things, and we only trot them out when we've tied ourselves into knots, and can't undo them. That's when an author's licence comes in jolly handy.

* * *

Well, there's such a thing as an artist's licence, too. Now and again I get letters pointing out that a cover or an inside picture doesn't quite correspond to the writer's idea of the incident in my story. You immediately jump on the poor artist like a ton of bricks, and say that he's made a bloomer. In nine cases out of ten this long-suffering gentleman has made the "mistake" deliberately, and entirely for your sakes.

* * *

You see, an incident in the yarn will sometimes be jolly good for picturing, but perhaps I describe it as happening on a dark night. Well, if the artist faithfully portrays that incident, all you'll get is a black square on the page. So, you see, he can't be as exact as all that, and out comes his licence. He consults it, and finds that he can shove a moon in somewhere in order to throw some light on the subject. And then some of you will probably write to me and say that the artist has made a mistake!

* * *

I have noticed that some of you are jolly keen to bowl us out in these little points. I'm glad you are keen, but I want to be tripped up on something big, if you can manage it. I like you to tell me where I go wrong, especially when the mistake is not an oversight, but due to bad writing. The more you can pull me up about boring you, instead of amusing you, the better I shall like it.

Now to acknowledge a few more of those old letters—the ones I could not reply to by post, as there were no addresses given: "Soccer Player" (Adelaide), "A Loyal Supporter" (Folkestone), E. J. E. (Preston), "Scot" (Huntly, N.B.), "Handforth Admirer" (Newport, I. of W.), Stella M. Glover (E. Cowes, I. of W.), Jack Harper (Walworth), T. D. (Glasgow), Ernest Eley (Holloway), "Enthusiastic Reader" (New Southgate), "The Friendly Critics" (Coggeshall, Essex), T. D. (Glasgow), B. (Rochdale), M. E. (London, E.1), "Nipper of Remove" (Brighton).

* * *

I've come to the conclusion that it's no good commenting on any of these letters, as you have probably forgotten what you wrote about, or you may have changed your views altogether. So I'm reserving my comments until fresh letters come rolling in—in response to my invitation in the January 15th issue. If anybody mentioned in the last paragraph writes to me again, I'll not only acknowledge the letter as quickly as possible on this page, but I'll reply to it, too—if it deserves one.

* * *

With regard to the stars, I shall make a point of indicating all the extra good letters with this mark—but, as I said before, I shan't be able to restart this until the fresh letters come in. We shall soon be quite up to date, and running smoothly once more—this time, for good.

Edwy Searles Brooks

*The Attack on G.H.Q.!**Read This Week's Stirring Chapters!***SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!**

By

ROGER FOWEY**THE ENEMY IN LONDON!**

Jack Bennett and his two school-chums, Tom Lee and Buster Kirk, fall into the thick of the fighting on the south coast when Germany invades England in a War of Revenge. The enemy forces are aided by a spy named Stutz, who poses as a master at the chums' school. The enemy land on both the south and the east coasts, the latter army sweeping towards North London. The chums are involved in a strategic retirement of the British forces down the Edgware Road, and join the army holding up the enemy on the northern side of Hyde Park. Learning that a couple of thousand Germans are attempting to capture the British headquarters, now shifted to Berkeley Square, they join men hurrying to the defence. The Germans, aided by two

fighting tanks and a troop-carrying tank, break into Berkeley Square while enemy infantry cover the line on which the tanks will retire. The chums, accompanied by a big Canadian, get into headquarters and warn the Commander-in-Chief, General Marlow, that enemy tanks are outside. In the same moment they hear shots; the chums rush across the room and whip open the door, to see fifty members of the famous Prussian Guard dashing out of the troop-carrying tank and into the building. They throw a bomb at the three, but Buster catches it before it explodes and flings it back at the Germans. The chums fling themselves full length to the floor of the hall, and the bomb bursts in the middle of the leaders of the Prussian Guard!

(Now get down to this week's smashing chapters.)

The Battle of Berkeley Square!

THE fierce crash of the exploding bomb filled the hall with sound. Grey smoke gouted in an ugly cloud, and through it the chums saw the leaping figures of giant Germans as they leaped over those disabled by the bomb and plunged on.

Jack, sprawling full-length on the chill tiles of the hall, snatched his revolver from its holster and blazed madly at the men—the pick of the German army!

He had a glimpse of Buster's chubby, set face, a big, black revolver kicking and jerking in his hand. Tom was shouting just behind him; he was on one knee, his rifle to his shoulder, firing as fast as he could work the bolt.

Through the smoke came the running figures in field-grey. One lifted a hand to fling a bomb; even as he tensed to throw, Jack's revolver roared and the fellow dropped.

A man jumped to one side of the chums—it was the big Canadian. He had grabbed half a dozen bombs from one of the men who had accompanied them from Hyde Park; three he

slammed at the Prussians, and they exploded in a welter of sound and smoke! The chums saw Germans reeling and falling, then the rest made a burst for the door at one side of the hall.

In this room were headquarters' orderlies and a few soldiers from Hyde Park. They had flung furniture in a rough barricade opposite the door and on the far side of the room. Some were trying to pick off the Germans as they came out of the tank; the rest let the Prussian guardsmen have it the moment that the door opened!

Caught by a shattering fire on two sides, the Germans hesitated—then began to run back. But now Britishers at the buildings on the opposite side of the square had got into action; rifle and machine-gun fire poured an almost solid stream of lead.

"Soak it to 'em!" Jack heard the Canadian shouting, as he pitched the rest of his bombs at the defeated men.

Of those who had left the tank, barely half a dozen scrambled back and crashed shut the armoured panel. The two fighting tanks which had accompanied the troop carrier, crunched off the pavement and, as they went, Jack—peering

from one side of the hall—saw that they were bringing their guns to bear on the building. If they couldn't capture the headquarters' staff, then they would kill them!

"Back!" Jack yelled. "Get back—they're going to shell us!"

With the others he dived into the room where the staff officers had been grouped about General Marlow. They were standing there with their revolvers ready; one or two had drawn their swords.

"The tanks are going to shell us, sir!" Jack shouted to General Marlow. "Better get—"

His voice was lost in the tremendous boom of a terrific explosion. A shell had crashed through a window at the front and had caught the wall of the room high up in one corner. Bricks and mortar-dust, plaster and smashed laths came out in a great cloud; fragments of steel from the burst shell-casing screeched across the room and brought more plaster from the opposite walls.

Next instant, everybody in the room was tumbling out through the French windows and over the balcony to the lawn below, while other shells smashed and crashed into the lower floor of the building.

"By glory—look at that!" exclaimed the big Canadian, as he dropped to the grass at Jack's side. He snatched at his revolver as he spoke, and the big weapon spat lead towards the end of the garden.

Jack saw a grey-clad figure reel, totter, and then drop from the wall, while a falling bayonet gleamed in the sun—it was another German!

There were yet more of them—attacking headquarters in the rear! A score came leaping into the garden from over the wall. These were men from the two regiments which had crossed Oxford Street, but, by a stroke of luck, their attack had been about half a minute late. Had they raided the building at the same time as the men from the street, nothing could have saved the British staff.

The Germans vanished amidst the bushes at the end of the garden the moment that they got over the wall, and an instant afterwards Jack heard the thick Who-ooz! of a revolver bullet searing past his head. Back of him, a man shouted out in pain, as the bullet caught him high in one shoulder.

"Behind here, Jack—quick!" came Buster's voice, and Jack saw that the fat junior was crouching with Tom on the far side of a stone balustrade, which guarded steps leading upwards into the house. In two jumps, Jack was beside him, and, as he dropped down, he unslung the rifle that he had slipped across his shoulders when he had first entered the building.

Prisoners!

IT was an old-English garden which stretched before them, with moss showing green on the broken-stone pathways, on the balustrades and on the little corner-seats dotted here and there beside the lawns. Most of the smooth, grassy patches were surrounded by bushes and flowering shrubs, and amongst them the Germans took shelter.

Jack pushed his rifle forward, sighted for the roots of a thick rhododendron bush and blazed at it; he saw white, splintered wood fly and thick leaves spun out, while a grey figure rolled into the open, and then squirmed back to shelter again.

From the wall at the end of the garden there came anew the gleam of bayonets, and an instant afterwards a sudden burst of firing from the defenders was poured into more Germans who came clambering into the fight.

There must have been forty of them there—

and there were less than a score of Britishers, even including the headquarters' staff.

A shell screeched through holes that had been hammered in the house walls, and it pitched sheer to the centre of one of the trim lawns. It exploded with a smashing sound, and sent torn grass and soft earth showering in all directions.

Jack heard a window crash as something struck it, then he glimpsed Germans massing behind a screen of rose-bushes.

"They're going to charge!" he gasped. "Get—"

He broke off. There was a sudden, throaty British cheer from one side of the garden, and over the wall there came leaping the men who had been at the windows of the next house. Someone had warned them of this attack on the rear of headquarters, and they had formed up to start a counter movement.

Over the wall they came, bayonets gleaming, some firing even as they dropped to the ground.

"Up—and at 'em!" roared the big Canadian, and he went chasing forward with the reinforcements.

"Come on!" yelled Jack as, crouching in his shelter, he snapped fresh cartridges into the breech of his revolver, and then went racing after the rest.

It was only a handful of men who had come over the wall. Some dropped as the Germans blazed at them, the rest raced on, cheering as they went.

Jack saw a big German leap to his feet, levelled automatic in his hand. Buster sighted him in the same moment; he let fly and the man staggered, while the chums tore past him. Ahead, they saw the massed Germans waiting for the Britishers who were coming at them.

The charging Britishers formed up into some semblance of a line, and now they presented a row of grim bayonets as they went forward—chill steel! It was only a thin khaki line, but sight of their bayonets was too much for the Huns. Ere a Britisher could reach them they wavered, then came another cheer as they broke and ran.

"Chase 'em out of it, boys!" a corporal roared. "After 'em!"

Before they knew where they were, the chums were scrambling over the end wall with the rest. There was a mews beyond, and right in the centre of it stood another troop-carrying tank, with two more battle machines guarding it.

"Back!" yelled Buster.

"No, come on!" Jack shouted—to have tried to get back over the wall would have meant being picked off by the machine-guns of the tanks, the weapons were already chattering murderously. Men were falling all about them under the hail of lead, while the racing Germans in front leaped into the shelter of their tank, and instantly turned to the loop-holes, shoved their rifles out and began to fire at the little band who had pursued them.

Jack could see now that to go on meant death. To attempt to get back would be equally futile, so he flung himself full length close against the tractors of the nearest tank, well beneath its guns. The others followed his example.

"They can't hit us here!" Jack shouted above the uproar. "We're too close. Lie still, and they'll think we're— Gosh!"

A crackle of rifle-fire from the end of the mews drew the exclamation. German infantry showed there—men who had advanced from the positions they had taken to cover the retirement of the tanks. They came running forward, shooting down such Britishers as now remained on their feet.

Jack saw two of the leaders lift their bayonets to finish off a wounded man in khaki.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed—but already Tom

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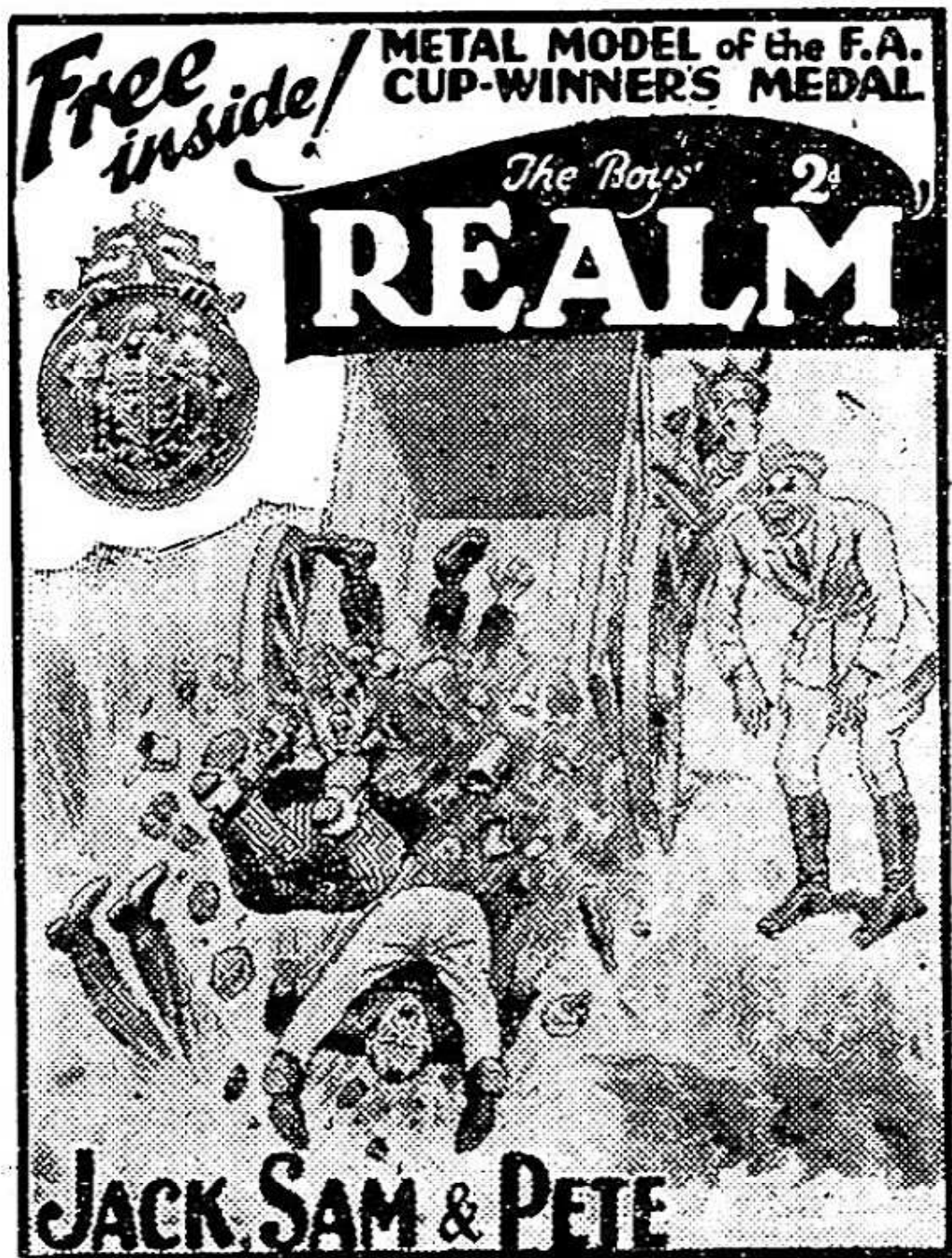
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had fired. He was using his revolver, and the weapon cracked twice in swift succession.

"We've got to fight for it—keep by the tank!" Jack yelled; as he spoke the big machine suddenly roared, and began to move in the midst of the Huns now swarming round it.

The Germans on foot would now move back under cover of the tank. The guns of the craft were silenced; its crew could not see the chums or, if they could, had no weapon which they could depress sufficiently to hit them.

Of all the British who had come over the wall, the trio were now the only ones on their feet. Ere they could realise what was happening the tank was swinging round. Germans swarming now at the tail of the craft were on them before they realised it.

Jack thrust his rifle forward and fired blindly. A man with his weapon clubbed came plunging at him, shouting. Jack heard Buster yell, and his revolver roaring right after his cry. Something burnt across the side of Jack's head, and he staggered; then came a crashing blow which made lights sear across his eyes, and he felt himself falling.

He went down, dimly conscious that there was fighting going on all around him. Buster saw him go down, then the fat junior himself collapsed as the heel of a rifle-butt crashed in a side-long blow against one temple. Tom dropped

a moment after, with a red wound clear across his forehead.

One of the Germans straddled his prostrate figure, bayonet up—and then a man came tearing down the mews, ripping off his khaki tunic as he came and disclosing the field grey of the Germans' beneath. He was at the man ere the glittering bayonet could fall. He caught him by one shoulder and sent the fellow headlong, then he barked at the other men who were bending to examine Jack and Buster.

They stared at the newcomer. He was lean, pallid of face and with dark eyes. He flung away the tunic he had removed, then pitched off the officer's cap that he wore. He stood a moment glowering at the men, then he sighted a German officer who was running up.

He shouted and the Hun stopped dead. He stared, then one hand flashed to his steel helmet in a salute as he gasped:

"Herr Stutz!"

"Ja, Stutz!" grated the spy, then he barked a rapid order and indicated the three boys. Instantly, the men who would have killed them picked them up, three to each inert figure. Stutz ran forward to where the troop-carrying tank was about to emerge from the mews. He signalled to it, and the tank stopped; a little grid slid back and the face of a man appeared.

Stutz spoke to him quickly, then the sliding

panel below the grid slid open, and the three chums were passed through.

The spy followed them.

In the Enemy Tank!

JACK was the first to recover consciousness. His head was spinning, and there was a terrific roaring in his ears. The earth beneath him seemed to vibrate, and it was some time before he discovered that he was lying on throbbing steel and that the roar came from the powerful engines of the tank.

The darkness was relieved by long, glimmering neon-gas lamps in the roof, and he could see a number of figures crouching at loop-holes and firing through them. Jack twisted on his side, and he discovered that he was close against the wall of the tank; just above him was the black splotch of a covered loop-hole, with a periscope to one side of it.

From the turret above came the clattering roar of three machine-guns, with spent cartridge cases dropping to the floor in a continuous stream; some struck and bounced off the smooth metal which encased the engine, and it was one of these—burning hot—which had served to bring Jack round.

He eased himself on one elbow then, with a hand about a leather strap bolted to the vibrating wall of the tank, he hauled himself up to the periscope and peered through it.

The reflected image of what was passing outside showed small and colourful before his eyes. He saw the shifting, apparently jolting, wall of a house. In a window within his range was a rifle which appeared to be spouting flame dead at him, and he ducked instinctively away—but nothing that he could feel followed the shot.

When he looked again, the house had gone, and a shattered shop window showed before him. On the pavement a couple of dead Germans were lying, and a little further along, he saw a British soldier sprawling inert above the wreckage of a machine-gun set in the doorway of the shop.

There came another shop window—a hosier's. it seemed. The front had been struck by a shell and the interior was burning fiercely; Jack could see the burning counter and the flames leaping up the stock behind it—a lurid glow, with smoke billowing all about.

He realised that he was looking down Oxford Street, towards the Circus. Every window in sight was blazing lead; he could see the roadway being torn up by founting bullets from machine-guns, then everything was blotted out for the moment as a shell burst near him and he heard the thudding ring of splinters as they struck the side of the tank.

When he looked again, he could just see men moving behind the entrenched field-gun. The muzzle was dipping straight towards him; a moment later it fired again.

It seemed to Jack that in the very same second, the tank received a staggering shock. Above him there sounded a crash which deafened him; the interior of the tank was filled with a sudden glaring light which left him blinded. Men stumbled across him, and then he could see nothing for smoke—but the tank still went on.

It appeared to clear Oxford Street; travelled a little way and then changed its direction. By the time that it had turned yet again, the smoke had cleared somewhat, and the men at the loop-holes stopped firing.

Then Jack saw that the gunners were no longer in their turret. Smoke was pouring out through a great gash in the top, and two of the machine-guns lays shattered in their mountings; of the third, there was nothing left. Of the men who

had been firing them, Jack could see nothing except an inert heap over which other Germans bent.

He felt a touch on his arm, and found Tom staring at him. There was blood on the junior's face, trickling down one cheek and oozing slowly from the wound across his brow.

"Where—where are—we?" he asked.

"In a German tank," Jack told him.

"Prisoners—I don't know why. Are you hurt?"

"It's nothing!" Tom answered. "Something caught me on the forehead—must have stunned me. Buster's here—I can't make him answer!"

Both bent to where their chum was huddled up close against the steel side of the troop-carrying tank. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing steadily.

They remained trying to bring him round, while the tank went on. Some of the Germans stood looking at them, but nobody came near them or tried to speak.

In a little while, all noise of battle died, and the only thing they heard was the roar of the engine and the clanking of the great tractors which sent the machine along. Presently, Buster's eyelids flickered, but they travelled some distance further before he roused sufficiently to speak.

"My head feels like a hive o' bees," he grumbled. "It's buzzing like anything! I say, we're not— My hat, they're Germans!"

He sat staring about him, at the uniformed figures and the dim-seen shapes in the driving compartment at the front.

"We've been taken prisoners," Jack said grimly.

"They must have picked us up in that mews."

"But I saw this tank go on!" Tom told him.

"They couldn't have come back for us!"

"Anyway, we're here!" Jack answered. "And I'd like to know what they're going to do with us! I wonder how the others got on. I expect the staff got away all right, and— Hallo, we're stopping!"

The tank's engine slowed, and it swung round. The armoured panel in the side slid open as the machine stopped, and the men began to file out; another panel opened at the front and more men left by that, except half a dozen who turned to the chums and signalled for them to march out.

At Lord's Cricket Ground!

TOM and Jack helped Buster up; the fat junior staggered a little when he reached the open air, then he growled:

"All right—leggo! I'm not goin' to let 'em see I'm groggy! I can stand all right!"

They loosed him, as the Germans formed up around them, then—

"Lord's!" gasped Tom. "Gosh, look where we are!"

They were being marched across the world-famous cricket ground—Lord's! Now the historic turf, once the scene of great games and epoch-making Test Matches, was a parking ground for a score or more German tanks.

There was a covey of aeroplanes by the long length of the new stand on the Elm Tree Road side. Germans were squatting about in front of the other double-decked stands, some of them round half a dozen field-kitchens which had been pulled up by the tavern.

The chums saw that the other troop-carrying tank had come up behind their own; but only one of the fighting machines, which had accompanied it to the front of the British headquarters, had come back.

All the tanks looked battle-scarred, and the one from which they had come had most of its turret blown away. They were streaked from

rifle-bullets, and covered with the dust cast on them by exploding shells. Most of the men falling from the tanks were wounded, but the grim Prussian Guardsmen strutted across the turf oblivious of their hurts.

The chums' escort was from the ranks of these famous soldiers, and they marched in silence beside the chums towards the big pavilion with its green benches and "No Smoking" signs.

Straight to the centre of the pavilion the trio were marched. Up the steps they went, to the broad doorway at the top. There were sentries standing here, and they eyed the three prisoners as they passed into the hall.

A command halted their escort, and for some time the trio stood there.

Germans were bustling all about them. Through the windows at the far end they could see the aerial of a field-wireless station, from which orderlies continually ran, bearing little slips of paper.

A door to the left opened, and a German staff officer strode out, the escort stiffening to attention as the man in command of them brought them up. The officer glanced at the chums, paused a moment to stare at them, then he addressed a guttural remark to the escort's commander. The man answered stiffly; the officer smiled a little, and then passed on.

A door further along the hall whipped open, and a voice shouted. Instantly, rifle-muzzles prodded the chums forward. They were marched to the door and pushed in.

They found themselves in a big hall, the walls of which were lined with pictures and photographs of cricketers and cricket matches. At a table in the centre of the room, a man was seated. Back of him stood three others, all in uniform.

The man sitting down had the brown field-boots and the breeches of a British officer, but he wore the tunic and the hat of a German.

He remained staring at the trio, his dark eyes glowering and the faintest shadow of a grin on his lips.

"Gosh!" gasped Jack. "It's Stutz!"

The Firing Party!

THE master-spy beckoned them forward, and they stepped nearer the table. All three could understand, now, why they had been brought here. Stutz must have been on hand during the attack on the British headquarters—it was just the sort of thing he would have attempted; no doubt he had seen them when they were knocked out, and had caused them to be taken prisoners.

"Well, boys—we meet once again!" he said in his ugly voice. "I hope, for your own sakes, that you're going to be sensible!"

There was no trace of the accent he had shown when he was at Cliff House school, posing as M. Gantier, the French master. He spoke clear English, and he went on:

"We have orders to take no prisoners. I have broken that order, for your sakes. An army in an enemy country cannot be handicapped by prisoners, but we are willing to be handicapped by you—if you are sensible.

"You were at British headquarters a little while ago," he said. "I also saw you at General Hamilton's headquarters in the Edgware Road. I saw you in Denge Village, and I know that you were working with the Secret Service man who almost upset things for me. How comes it that you are so mixed up with those in authority with the British Forces? You three, it has been reported to me, were at Chillen Quarry and destroyed the guns there—how did you come to be there?"

"Matter of luck," Jack said, and the spy smiled.

"I think it is rather more than luck," said Stutz. "Listen, now, while I tell you how near is England to defeat. We have driven your forces out of Regent's Park, and the whole of North London is in our hands. We are moving westward with our left flank resting on the River Thames. Down south, our troops are holding your wild attacks, and when the time comes—perhaps to-night—we shall advance from the south.

"By this time to-morrow, we shall have captured London, the whole of Kent, and we already hold most of Essex. Your forces will be left without any leaders, because none of the troops now in London will escape. We have London like—that!"

He lifted his hand and clenched it.

At Jack's side, Buster started to say something:

"What about our—" he began, but Jack's elbow in his ribs shut him up.

He knew what the fat junior was going to blurt out. He was going to ask Stutz what he thought about the big British army over at Wornwood Scrubbs, waiting the signal to advance, and the other gigantic force assembled between Aylesbury and Hertford. To have given Stutz that information would have been fatal.

"What about—what?" asked Stutz, as he saw Jack's movement.

"Nothing!" Jack exclaimed.

The spy sat looking at them for what seemed a full minute. Finally he said:

"I have told you that we take no prisoners. You three are attached to British headquarters. You may have information valuable to us. It can make no difference to our ultimate victory, but it may save many British lives if we know—"

"You won't get anything out of us!" Buster said stoutly.

Stutz took no notice. He went on:

"You have, I believe, knowledge of the exact location of British reserves. Where are they?"

Neither of them answered.

"There is a brick wall outside," Stutz said. "Unless you give me the information I want, you will be marched out there immediately, stood up against the wall, and—shot!"

"Where are those reserves? Will you speak, Bennett?"

"No!" said Jack.

"Will you save your own life, and that of your chums, Lee?"

"I—won't!" said Tom.

Stutz looked at Buster.

"You needn't ask me!" Buster grunted at him.

"Very well." Stutz shrugged his shoulders, then sat down again as he reached out for some papers on his table. He lifted a pencil, then half turned to the officer on his right and said casually:

"Weissmann, take these three fools out and shoot them."

The officer nodded, then shouted for the escort. The door opened and there came the tramp of the Prussian Guardsmen as they marched in.

Along the hall the three were marched, down the steps to the gravelled path back of the pavilion. There was a flower-bed at the foot of the high brick wall on the right, and they were taken along it, then their escort was stopped at the back of the low stand just inside the entrance gates. The soldiers were ordered to stand fast, then the officer said to the chums:

"Right turn—quick march!" They stepped out, with their chins held high. "Left wheel—halt!" The trio stopped. "Left turn!"

(Continued on page 44.)

HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 62.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

(FULL NAME)

(ADDRESS)

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. *The second form* is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for 2d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

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If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

All Sorts of News!

This week I am not going to say much about our future arrangements. It suffices to point out that the coming years are particularly striking, while the Silver Medal Boom will knock spots off all previous records. There is a fair sackful of interesting letters which I should like to deal with circum-spectly and individually if the printer would give me space. But you can no more argue with a printer than you can with Fate or the strong, silent Sphinx. The printer always wins. A man of few words, but a kind heart. One has to take things as they come, and one is extra lucky when the things wanted come along, carriage paid, and no trouble.

"Dear Brother Edwy!"

I was immensely appreciative of the style of a letter from Bonnie Scotland. So was Mr. Brooks. He handed me the communication and asked me to say something in "Chat" expressive of his own gratification. The writer pitied the sorrows of a popular writer. Thanks for that. I will say this, however, that Mr. Brooks is bearing up like a Trojan against the slings and arrows of fortune. The writer of the letter under survey says some clear, straight things. I liked them all. So did Mr. Brooks. He sympathises with "Brother Edwy" over criticism. There is no need for this. Criticism, like mustard, adds piquancy. Then read this: "In the near future the NELSON LEE LIBRARY will immensely increase its popularity among the peoples of the world." This remark is carried unanimously.

About Ourselves.

For the moment I am not thinking of opinions concerning the N.L.L. What was in my mind was the amazing spirit of self-disparagement which is abroad. I find it evidenced in numerous letters. Now, we are living in a world where there is plenty of disparagement and far, far too little encouragement. It is encouragement that keeps the flag flying. It is the same thing which sweeps aside relative failure and carries a fellow on to a thumping success. It is the cheery slap on the back, the "You'll do it, old Scout!" which helps. This being so, why on earth a good chap who writes a topping letter should start off with "Excuse bad writing," or weigh in with an apology concerning his spelling beats me altogether. One hates a prig, but where there is ability it is common sense to be pleasantly conscious

of it—and grateful. For ability is a gift, handed out, all free, to the lucky recipient. Running down self is a poor, thin game. You never found Handforth erring like that. Yet he is no giddy swanker.

A Bit of Luck.

A letter from Exmouth contains the intelligence that the writer will be travelling on through the world for months to come. Consequently he cannot put in much work for the League, as he will have no fixed address. There is something here with which I do not agree. I believe my chum in Devon will be able to do tons of good work for the S.F.L. as he journeys on. He will meet new friends all the time. Some fellows may object if one says "Travel" to them, but it is topping advice to proffer to anybody who has the chance to see foreign countries.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

T. Rhodes, 18, Jackson Street, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancs, wishes to hear from a reader in his district who can let him have Nos. 1 to 546 inclusive of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

P. L. Bridgman, 81, Beach Road, Sparkhill, Birmingham, wishes to correspond with members in the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

G. Reeve, Manor Drive, P.O. Manor Gardens, Durban, Natal, South Africa, wishes to hear from readers anywhere.

H. Simmons, 45, Myrtle Street, South Yarra, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader in South Africa or America.

Edmund Armitage, Jellico Avenue, Tuakau, Auckland, New Zealand, wishes to hear from readers who are willing to sell him old copies of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, ranging back to No. 99.

Eric Ross, Rialto Street, Greenslopes, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Miss May Trist, 124, High Road, Ilford, Essex, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere, also to hear of a League club in her district.

A. S. Gibson, Florence Street, Mentone, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond and exchange stamps with readers anywhere.

H. Gregory Dell, Field View, Parsonage Barn Lane, Ringwood, Hants, would like to hear from readers anywhere willing to join his Imperial H. & Co. Club. Magazine published.

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!

(Continued from page 41.)

The three faced round, with their backs to the flower-bed and the wall behind.

The thunder from the near-by battle front came to the ears of the chums—a background to the crunch of boots on gravel as the big Prussians were formed into line. Grey and grim they showed against the grassy banks, and the white and green of the little stand behind them.

"Stick it, you chaps!" came Buster's voice.

"So long," said Jack. "Good-bye, Tom."

"Cheer-oh!" said Tom.

White of face, the three looked to the firing-party. The officer was standing to one side, a white handkerchief ready in his hand.

He barked a command, and the big Germans lifted their rifles. He spoke again, and the weapons came forward—six smoke-blackened muzzles training on the trio.

This was the finish.

Jack gritted his teeth. He saw the white handkerchief flutter in the officer's hand—

(Is there no chance of escape for the chums? They have given up all hope. Look out for astounding developments in next Wednesday's instalment of this great serial. Make sure of reading it—order your NELSON LEE LIBRARY in advance!)

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