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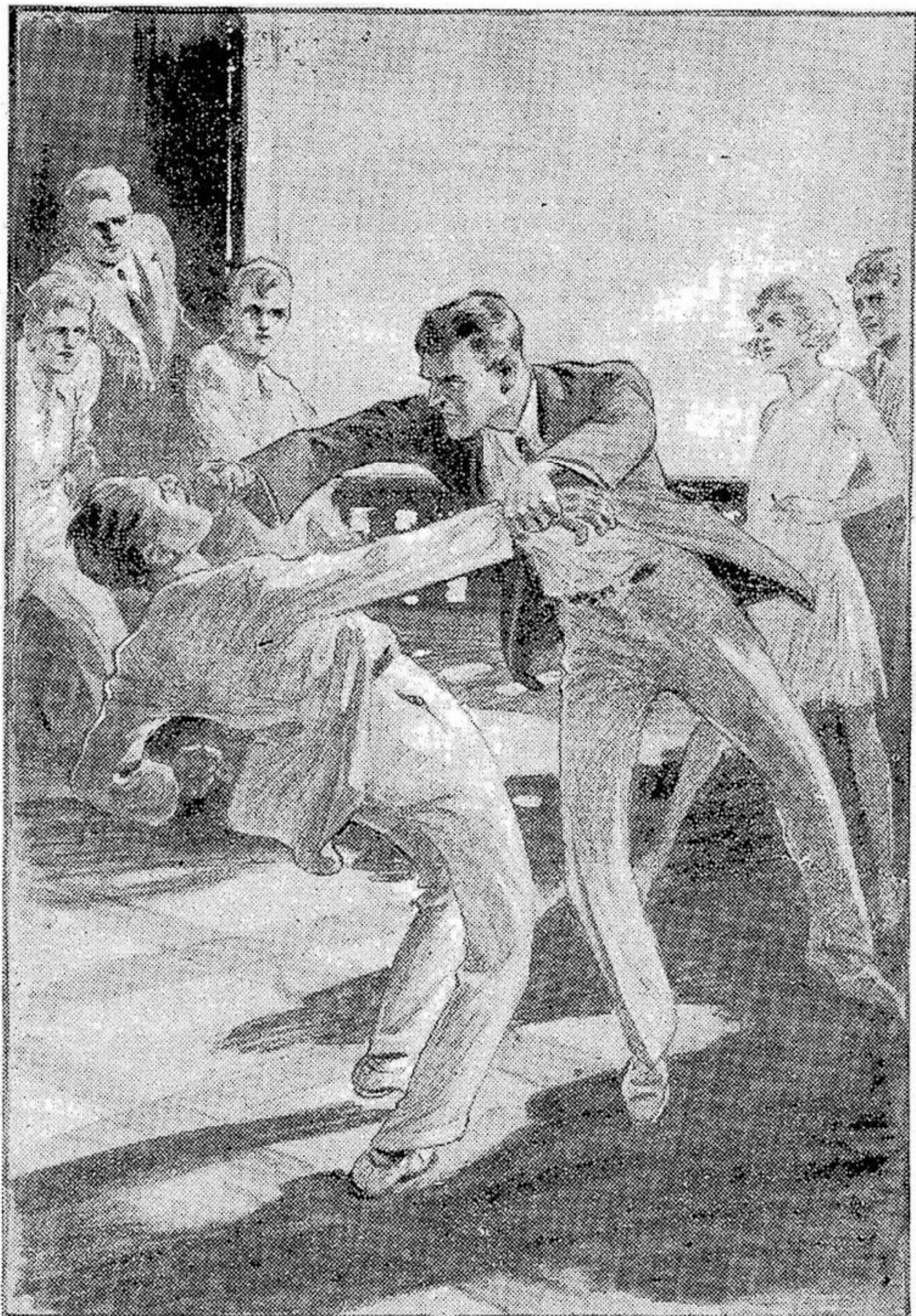
THE AMEER'S PRISONERS!

A thrilling incident from this week's grand story of the Chums of St. Frank's, dealing with their Adventures in India.

New Series No. 120.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

August 18th, 1928.



For once Nelson Lee's coolness deserted him. He seized the Ameer and pulled him violently round. Crash! The detective's fist hit the Ameer of Rishnir right on the point of the chin, and His Imperial Highness went over like a log!

Defying the Ameer!

Amazing Schoolboy Adventure!

THE AMEER'S PRISONERS!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

(Author of the St. Frank's stories now appearing in "The Popular" every Tuesday.)

Incarcerated in the Ameer's palace on the top of the thousand-feet high Idar Crag, surrounded by soldiers, the St. Frank's party would seem to be in a hopeless position. But are they? With leaders such as Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, amazing things can happen—and, what's more, amazing things do happen!—Ed.

CHAPTER 1.

In Dire Straits.

"POOR old Handy!" said Church in a husky voice.

"Don't!" muttered McClure brokenly. "What's the good of talking now?"

The two chums of Study D at St. Frank's sat in a corner of the big lounge, and, judging by their expressions, they were a very unhappy pair. Edward Oswald Handforth, their celebrated leader, was conspicuous by his absence.

Seated elsewhere in that sumptuously furnished apartment were Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson, of Study C; Archie Glenthorne, Reggie Pitt, Fullwood, Vivian Travers, and several other stalwarts of the St. Frank's Remove.

Dotted here and there amongst the juniors were half a dozen girls. Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple, the leaders of the Moor View School, were talking earnestly with Travers and Jimmy Potts. Winnie Pitt and Mary Summers were seated together, pale-faced and silent. Tessa Love was holding a low, whispered conversation with Johnny Onions and Harry Gresham.

On another lounge, seated together, were Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Mr. Hobart Manners. They were smoking and talking quietly.

And on all those faces there was not a trace of a smile—not a hint of contentment. On the contrary, there was scarcely a face that did not reflect sadness and horror.

Over by the big doors—two footmen stood on duty, and outside, visible in the big foyer, were a number of armed soldiers—these latter being men of brown colour.

And everywhere there were softly shaded electric lights; everywhere there was evidence of wealth and comfort. Seldom had the St. Frank's fellows been in a room of such regal magnificence.

The two pairs of great French windows stood wide open, and outside the stars twinkled in the purple Indian night. The faintest of faint breezes came through into the lounge, stirring the air in a cooling, refreshing way.

Yet, amidst all this luxury, there was not one smile!

A figure appeared in the foyer, and the two footmen stiffened. The figure, attired in immaculate evening-dress, moved forward elegantly, and he entered the lounge. He paused just inside, and he removed the cigarette from between his lips.

This man was tall and impressive—perfect master of himself, and obviously cultured. He was upright and clean-shaven. His skin, although dark, was soft and refined; his slender hands were perfectly manicured; his sleek hair was brushed straight back from his forehead, and it shone in the gleam of the electric lights.

His illustrious Highness, the Ameer of Rishnir, smiled amusedly. He regarded his guests with twinkling eyes, and he moved softly forward over the rich carpet.

"Come, come!" he said gently. "Why these hushed voices? Why these long faces? Ladies! Gentlemen! Let me urge you to enjoy yourself to the full during your sojourn under my humble roof."

"Let us feast and be merry—for to-morrow we die!" murmured Vivian Travers under his breath.

In the meantime, everybody else in the lounge was looking at the Ameer with cold, hostile glances. And he, for his part, was not unmindful of these looks.

"I appear to be unpopular," he said, still smiling. "Dear me! Is it possible that you are still worrying over the loss of your young companion?"

"We would prefer, your Highness, not to discuss the fate of that unfortunate boy," said Nelson Lee coldly.

"Unfortunate?" repeated the Ameer. "Ah, my dear Mr. Lee, that is an interesting point. Do you not think it possible that he is the most fortunate of you all?"

There was a hidden significance in his words, and he chuckled over his own grim jest. The St. Frank's fellows glared at him with unrestrained animosity. The girls, for the most part, had expressions of wonder in their eyes. Looking at this suave, gentlemanly Indian potentate, they could not believe that he was more of a demon than a human being.

They felt, with a sense of relief, that men of his type were few and far between. They knew that the majority of the great Indian princes were loyal and faithful to Britain; they were honourable gentlemen of the highest possible integrity.

To regard the Ameer of Rishnir as a representative Indian prince was impossible. On the contrary he was a kind of "throw-back." At heart he was a tyrant, a veritable lord of life and death. In spite of his many modern innovations, his electric lights, his Rolls-Royces, his concrete highways, he was a brutal savage. Under his veneer of culture he was as cruel and ruthless as any Eastern monarch of the Middle Ages.

And, too, the Ameer of Rishnir was ambitious.

His egotism was startling in the extreme;

he dreamed of ruling the neighbouring State of Kurpana, and of gaining supreme power over every mile of land in Northern India. His hatred of the British was well known, and, as the India Office had informed Nelson Lee, trouble was expected with this arrogant Ameer Ali Rajen.

Rishnir was an independent State, and, therefore, the Ameer was supreme ruler.

Kurpana was more or less independent, too, but the Maharajah of Kurpana was a gentle, kindly man, with progressive ideas, and with a desire for peace and goodwill with his neighbours. His friendliness towards Great Britain was on a par with the friendliness of most other Indian princes. He was loyal—he was true. In a word, he was a noble type of Indian aristocracy.

In every possible way the Ameer of Rishnir was the reverse.

For years he had prepared—he had got ready for the day when he would be able to pounce upon his peaceful neighbours. And now that day had almost dawned. The evil Ameer's dream was on the point of coming true.

Already he had seized the Maharajah of Kurpana and Goolah Kahn, the heir to the throne. The unfortunate pair were incarcerated in one of the Ameer's prisons.

Kurpana itself was in a turmoil, with all the populace making frantic efforts to prepare for the coming invasion. Yet what chance would Kurpana have against the trained battalions of the greedy Ameer?

As for his prisoners—the St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls—they only afforded him amusement. He knew that they were helpless, that they would never be able to return to the world they had left behind. It pleased him to treat them as guests and to offer them the hospitality of his roof.

He could afford to smile!

For here, in his great palace, his prisoners were over a thousand feet in the air—isolated from the world on the top of the celebrated Idar Crag—cut off from all hope of rescue!



CHAPTER 2.

The Prison in the Clouds!



THE grim pretence had been kept up ever since the party had arrived at the palace.

Dinner was over now, and the evening was growing late. It would be soon time for retiring.

At first the boys and girls had rather enjoyed themselves; they had believed that the Ameer was a harmless, whimsical sort of man, and that the stories of his anti-British feelings were exaggerated.

But now they knew differently!

It had caused them much surprise to find all the servants in the palace—and there were many scores—were British. The majority of them were English. But there was also a

sprinkling of Irish, Scotch, and Welsh. And the Ameer's one and only object in having these Britishers in his household was because he held the British in contempt.

So his servants were not drawn from his own people, but from his hated enemies. Every one of those servants held menial positions—footmen, valets, cooks, and kindred workers. The Ameer preferred his servants to be British, for, when one of them displeased him, the unfortunate was ruthlessly put to death.

All this had seemed incredible at first, but not one of the prisoners doubted the truth now. For the slightest act of insubordination, for the most trivial word of defiance, any servant was executed. And if any of these slaves—for slaves they were—openly revolted, torture was the consequence.

Thus it was hardly surprising that all those servants in the Idar Palace were cowed and backboneless. One and all, they had been lured to Rishnir by false pretences. And once on that crag, a thousand feet above the ground, they were lost to the world. Never in the history of the palace had a servant escaped. Many had committed suicide, but none had ever reached the outer world alive.

It was a tradition of the crag. Once in the palace, never out! Once in the Ameer's domestic service, never liberated!

And what of these prisoners—these schoolboys and schoolgirls—and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Hobart Manners?

The explanation was very simple.

The whole party had flown out from England in Mr. Manners' great aeroplane, the Wanderer of the Skies. The object had been to rescue Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, of the Remove at St. Frank's, who was the younger son of the Maharajah of Kurpana.

But the aeroplane that had carried him off had made a non-stop flight to India, and the Wanderer, by a grim mischance, had run into a violent thunderstorm over Rishnir, and had made a forced landing.

The next day, while the party was attempting to reach the border on foot, they had been seized by the Ameer's soldiers and brought to the crag.

And, on arrival, they had learned, with mingled feelings, that Hussi Kahn had been seized, not by the cruel Ameer, but by his own people! He had been taken to Sakri, the capital of Kurpana, in an attempt to re-establish the calm of the people and to improve the morale of the rapidly growing citizen army.

In short, the flight from England of the Wanderer of the Skies had been unnecessary. That was the galling truth. Hussi Kahn was safe with his own people, and now, in their attempts to help him, his friends had got themselves into the clutches of the Ameer.

And worse! It was the Ameer's intention to use them as hostages—to force Hussi Kahn to surrender his country, under the threat that all the schoolboys and schoolgirls would be put to death if he refused.

The Ameer had been perfectly frank with his prisoners; he had told them his intentions; and he had been highly amused by the sensation that he had caused. They knew that he was ruthless, and that Hussi Kahn would never be able to consent to the treacherous proposal. Never would the young Indian prince consent to the surrender of his country. And thus he would be put into a terrible position—for his refusal would sign the death-warrant of the St. Frank's party.

The Ameer continued to be calm and smiling as he strolled across that lounge with all eyes regarding him coldly and balefully.

"It has always been said that you British are a dull lot," he observed, shrugging his shoulders. "Unless there is a greater show of cheerfulness I may be constrained to alter your quarters."

"In other words, you'll probably throw us into your prisons, eh?" said Lord Dorrimore. "Well, go ahead! I, for one, would prefer it. As I *am* a prisoner, let me be behind bars."

"Frankly, this farce is well-nigh unbearable!" said Mr. Manners, his voice quivering with anger and indignation. "Do you really expect us to behave as though we were your honoured guests?"

"Well, perhaps you are prejudiced against me at the moment," replied the Ameer with perfect composure. "But within a day or two you will forget your animosity."

"We shall never forget it!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "We shall never forget the incident of this afternoon."

"The boy?" mused the Ameer. "How you value the life of a mere youngster! We are different in Rishnir."

"Good glory! So we've noticed!" said Lord Dorrimore, glaring.

It was most unusual for the genial Dorrio to be anything but light-hearted and smiling. But now he was haggard, drawn and dangerous. It was only with the greatest difficulty that he prevented himself from clutching at the Ameer's throat, so that he could choke the evil life out of him.

While they were talking in this way, Church and McClure and Irene Manners strolled towards one of the open windows. They went out on to the narrow balcony and leaned over the balustrade. Nipper and one or two other juniors followed their example, and they, too, stood looking over into the vast void.

For some few moments nothing was said.

For the scene, indeed, was fascinating, mysterious, dreamy, wondrous.

In spite of the spell that seemed to hold him, Church glanced back and saw that the Ameer was still over on the other side of the lounge talking with Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners.

Incidentally, the Ameer little realised how he was playing with fire!

He believed, in his arrogance, in his egotism, that he was supreme, and that his prisoners were as helpless as little children. The men had been disarmed, and the boys and girls— Pshaw! What matter about the boys and girls?

And here, in this palace, there were scores of armed soldiers ready to fire at the first command from an officer. If one of these British "guests" dared to raise a finger against the Ameer, the act of folly would be answered for by death.

So the Ameer of Rishnir laughed and was amused. It tickled his sense of humour to play with these victims of his, as a cat will play with a mouse.

But then the Ameer was making a very big blunder.

For years he had been surrounded by his menials—men, for the most part, who had had the manhood stifled in them. For years they had been compelled to obey orders under threat of death, and now, resigned to their lot, they were more or less helpless.

And the Ameer was foolish enough to believe that these Britishers were of the same type. Given a leader, his servants would probably have taken action long before this. But amongst them all there was not a single man who could show initiative, courage, decision.

But such a man had now arrived!

In Nelson Lee there was a leader of the finest type—courageous, cautious, far-seeing, and clever. And in Lord Dorrimore there was a fighter—a man who lived for adventure and for danger. Mr. Manners, perhaps, was more prosaic, but he could be depended upon to give a good account of himself in a tight corner.

And the Ameer thought that these men, because they were British—despised and loathed—were no more dangerous than any of his servants.

It was an incredible piece of folly on the Ameer's part!



CHAPTER 3.

Poor Old Handy!

I CAN'T believe it, Mac," said Church huskily. "I can't believe it!"

"But we saw it with our own eyes, old man," said McClure, with a lump in his throat. "We must believe it."

"I know—I know!" said Church, nearly choking. "Poor old Handy has gone! We'll never see him again. He must have been killed on the spot."

"That's the only consolation in the whole horrible business," said Nipper, who was standing close to the chums of Study D.

"Handy couldn't have felt much. He was probably dead before he hit the ground."

Church and McClure were silent. And Irene Manners, who was also there, sobbed softly. The boys felt very uncomfortable, but they knew that Irene had been Handforth's best girl chum, and it was only natural that she should give way.

They stood out there on that balcony overlooking the city of Idar. Far, far below, and stretching right into the distance, were the twinkling lights of the great town. Beyond, the hills arose to meet the purple sky. Over everything there was an air of peace, of slumbering tranquillity.

The sky was spangled with scintillating stars, and the dark vault of the heavens was velvety.

And here were these prisoners, perched on the very top of the great crag, fully a thousand feet above the ordinary ground level.

There was something stupefying about the height of the Idar Crag.

It was a natural formation, and had probably been standing there for thousands of years. The great spur of rock rose sheer from the ground, and it continued to rise, as straight as a pencil, into the heavens.

It was, indeed, very much like a gigantic pencil standing on end. The rock sides were smooth, and there, perched on the summit, was this magnificent marble palace, replete with every modern convenience—electric light, sumptuous furnishings, running water—everything that ingenuity could devise.

And here lived the Ameer, overlooking his domains. The view from the top of this crag was startling, for one could see for scores of miles in every direction.

Bending over the balustrade of the balcony and looking straight down, the juniors stared into a void—an abyss. It went down sheer to the ground without any protection, without any inequalities of the rock. A drop of a thousand feet to the hard, paved courtyard below!

"I can't believe it—even now," said McClure at last. "Oh, why don't we wake up?"

"I can see him now," whispered Irene tremblingly. "Poor old Ted! I can see him stumbling over the balcony after the Ameer had hit him. Oh, it was dreadful—dreadful! That man is a demon—a devil!"

"Yes, he punched Handy, and Handy lost his balance and fell over the balustrade," said Church unsteadily.

"It doesn't do any good, old man, to go over it again," said Nipper gently.

They were silent again, thinking of that dread tragedy.

The Ameer of Rishnir had done this—and there he was in the lounge chatting amiably with his so-called guests. Every one of them wanted to lay their hands upon him, but they knew perfectly well that if they lifted a finger against him they, too, would share

Handforth's fate. The Ameer, at least, had shown them that he was a man of relentless brutality. Of what use was it to invite further tragedies?

"And it was all so trivial, too," said Irene, after a pause. "That's what makes it so terrible."

"Trivial to us, perhaps, but not to the Ameer," replied Nipper quietly. "Handforth struck him—and so Handforth paid the penalty. It was a mad thing for old Handy to do—an absolutely crazy thing. And yet it was characteristic of him."

"That—that brute twisted Handy's ear until it nearly came off in his hand," said Church fiercely. "Oh, the cad—the monster! And Handy just biffed him, as he always does. We expected something to happen, but we never believed that that——"

"I don't think we'd better talk about it any longer," interrupted Nipper gruffly. "It's only making it worse. Handy's gone—and we shall never see him again. If any of us make a move against the Ameer we shall share the same fate. And what's the good of that? We want to escape from this horrible place."

"Yes, and it's all the more horrible because we're supposed to be guests," said Irene, voicing the opinion of the others. "Old Dorrie was right. It would be a lot better if we were treated as real prisoners. But this pretence is—is nerve-racking."

"The Ameer knows it, and that's why he's keeping it on!" growled Nipper. "It would be a lot better if we cheered up and pretended to be enjoying ourselves, and then the Ameer would not get so much satisfaction."

But it was useless to talk of enjoying themselves.

Every minute the figure of Handforth appeared in their minds, and they could see him struggling in the Ameer's grip; they could see him staggering over the balustrade, into the abyss. Then, too, they remembered their own predicament.

How long would this respite last?

How soon would Hussi Khan send his reply, refusing to surrender? For when that refusal came, it would be the death-warrant for the Ameer's prisoners! They had not the slightest doubt that their "host" was in deadly earnest!

Perhaps, indeed, he would put some of them to death in advance, just for his own amusement. For his hatred of the British was so intense that he was capable of any act of murder.

And all the time he maintained his attitude of smooth and polished culture. He moved amongst his guests with a gracious word here and there, inquiring as to their comfort and so forth.

His very presence was hateful to them. As he approached they shrunk away, as though some venomous snake were getting ready to strike. And the Ameer chuckled, and promised himself some rare amusement when the right time came!



CHAPTER 4.

An Unbelievable Discovery!

“W

ELL, thank goodness we're alone!”

“Yes, rather!”

“Good gad! A priceless sort of relief.”

The St. Frank's fellows were in their own quarters—in the suite of rooms that had been set aside for their benefit. It was bed-time, and they were glad enough to retire. It had been sheer torture in that lounge, pretending to be at ease in the company of the immaculate Ameer.

There were three rooms in this particular suite, and they were inter-connected. It was possible for the juniors to move from one room into the other, without going forth into the wide corridor. They felt private there—they felt that it would be possible for them to talk without any chance of their words being overheard.

But Nipper thought it advisable to issue a word of warning.

“It's no good beating about the bush, you fellows,” he said steadily. “We all know what happened to poor old Handy, and we don't want to suffer the same fate. So, if we value our lives, we'll talk in the lowest possible voices.”

“But who's to hear us here?” asked Reggie Pitt, staring.

“We don't know,” replied Nipper. “The servants have left us, and the doors are closed. But there may be other means of overhearing. But if we talk in whispers there won't be much danger.”

“Oh, rot!” said Castleton. “Hang it, Nipper, there's no need to go to extremes! And I don't see why we should be afraid of the Ameer, either.”

“We're not afraid of him in one sense—and yet in another we *must* be afraid of him,” said Nipper. “How do we know what he'll do next? If he gets to know that one of us has been talking against him, he may order his execution. The man's capable of any brutality.”

“Absolutely true, laddie!” nodded Archie Glenthorne. “I mean to say, this Ameer cove is a priceless sort of blot. A smudge on the dashed landscape, as it were. A poisonous chunk of fungus!”

“That's enough to get you sentenced to the torture, Archie,” said Harry Gresham.

“Oh, what's the use?” put in Reggie Pitt impatiently. “We're not going to be gagged, are we? And we can't go on like this, you chaps. Something's got to be done.”

“And something will be done—if you'll only have some patience!” said Nipper, in a low tone. “Trust the gov'nor—and Dorrie, too!”

“By Jove, do you think they'll be able to really do anything?” asked Tomray Watson.

“We don't know—we can't tell yet,” replied Nipper. “But the gov'nor has been in some

tight holes before—and he's got out. And old Dorrie isn't the kind of man to take this position lying down. The Ameer thinks that he's got us in the palm of his hand, but he's a little bit too cocksure!"

"Not that it would be much good, even if we did crack the beggar on the head," said Travers musingly. "Don't you see, dear old fellows, that we're in a nasty, messy predicament? Supposing we escape from the palace? What then? Have you forgotten that we are in the heart of the city? Do you think for a moment that we shall have any chance of escaping?"

"It looks rotten," agreed Nipper. "Everything seems against us. But to-morrow, perhaps, after we've had a good sleep, we shall be able to look at things in a better light. Anyhow, nothing can be done to-night."

Truth to tell, they were all very subdued and upset about the tragedy of Handforth. And, although they had seen the thing with their own eyes, they sometimes found themselves wondering—doubting whether it had really happened. It seemed so much like a fantastic nightmare.

It was noticed that Handforth was hardly mentioned while the juniors were undressing and getting into their various beds. Of what use to talk about the poor chap? Any discussion on the subject would only make them feel worse. It was far better to talk of other matters, even though their minds still centred on Handy.

All the juniors felt that they were quite alone in this suite of rooms, and indeed they were alone. The Ameer was certainly a savage beneath his polished character, but he was not a kind of villain out of a film drama. He had no secret listening holes, or any hidden spies. His contempt for his prisoners was so great that he took it for granted that there was no danger.

How could there be danger? For was he not the Ameer, the lord of all he surveyed? Was he not supreme? At a word from him any man would be executed, for his word was law. Moreover, there were scores of armed soldiers in the palace, and every stairway and every corridor was constantly patrolled.

So Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners, and the Moor View girls and the St. Frank's fellows, were quite private in their respective quarters. Yet, after what had happened, Nipper's word of warning had not been out of place.

"We shan't sleep, of course!" said Church dully, as he got into one of the beds. "If Handy had been here——"

"What I can't understand is this," said Fullwood. "Why is the Ameer treating us like royal guests? If we were all princes we couldn't be treated better!"

"It's part of the Ameer's game," said Russell. "He's pretending to be our host, and it must give him some peculiar kind of satisfaction. It's quite likely that he'll kill one of us every day, for his own amusement. He's devilish enough for anything."

"Listen!" broke in Church huskily. "What was that?"

"I heard something just then," he went on, in a choking voice. "It—it sounded like old Handy! He called my name, and ——"

"Steady, old man—steady!" said Nipper, coming in from the adjoining room. "You mustn't go on like that."

There was an uncomfortable silence, whilst everybody stared sympathetically at Church.

"Hey, you fellows! Just a minute! Is the coast clear?"

More than one of those juniors turned deathly pale. They looked about them with wide-open, bewildered eyes. Handforth's voice had come to them! The voice of the fellow who had gone hurtling down to his death that afternoon!

"There!" breathed Church. "Did—did you hear it?"

"It's Handy!" said McClure wildly. "Handy—Handy! He's not dead! Unless——"

"He must be dead!" said Nipper harshly. "Didn't we see him pitch over the abyss?"

"Rats!" came Handforth's voice. "Do you think I'm a ghost, you fathead?"

"Look!" gurgled Reggie Pitt.

They all turned and stared fixedly at a large, ornamental cupboard which opened out from one of the corners of the big room. The door was partly open, and framed in that space was the figure of Edward Oswald Handforth!



CHAPTER 5

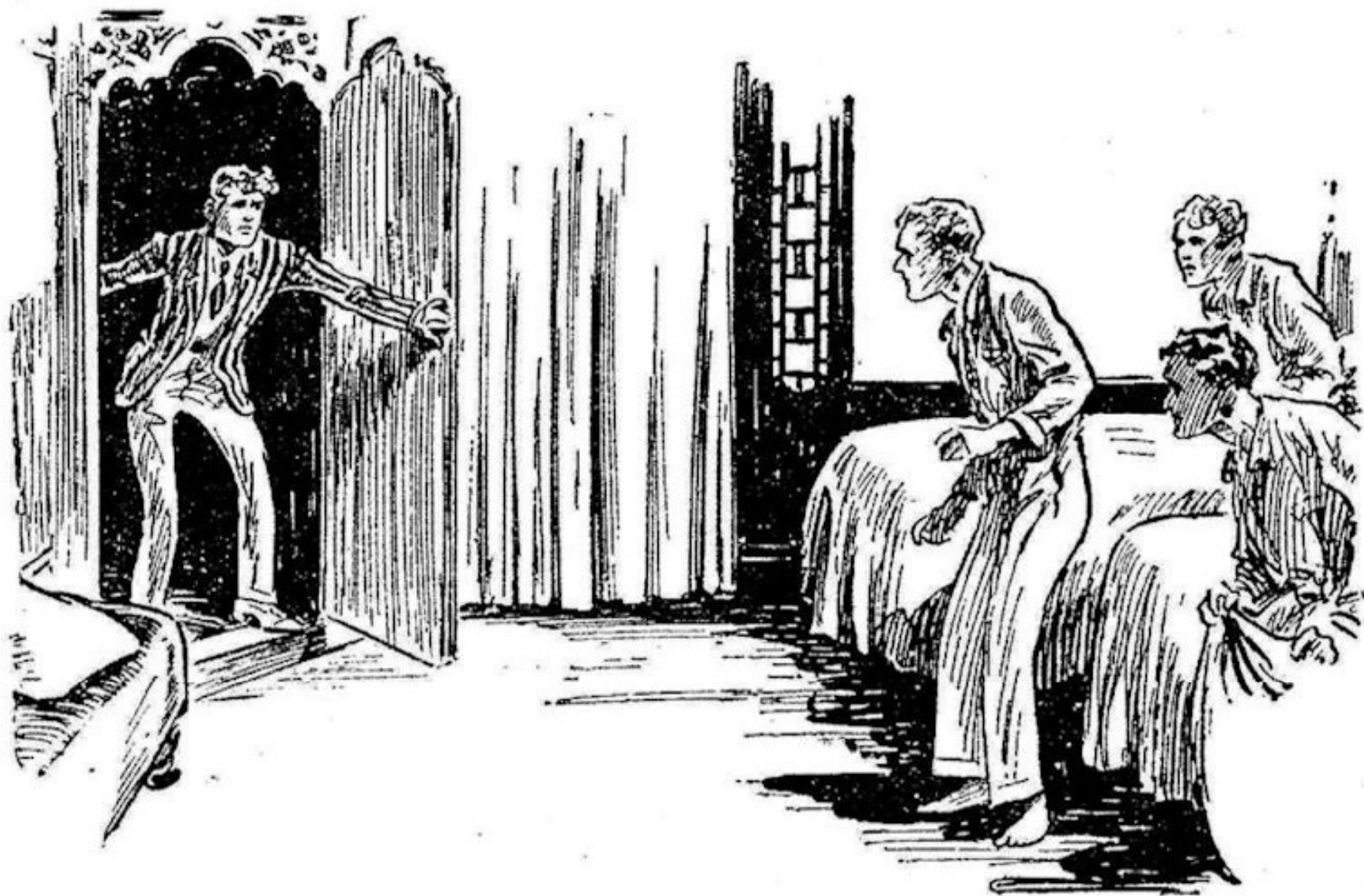
New Hope!

ORD DORRIMORE paced up and down like a caged animal.

"Another twenty-four hours of this, and I shall be a raving lunatic!" he said fiercely. "It's no good, Lee! Don't tell me that I'm acting the fool! I know it! But I'm a man of action—and to stick here, pretending to be cool and collected, is more than my flesh and blood can stand."

Across the corridor from the boys' quarters, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Hobart Manners were preparing to undress in their own bed-room. It was a large apartment, with three separate beds in it, and with a bath-room adjoining. Evidently all these rooms had been prepared in advance for the prisoners.

Smith, the wizened, little valet who had been instructed to look after them, was hovering about near the bath-room, a curious burning light in his eyes. Smith was a native of London, and he had been on the crag for ten years; he was one of the first victims. He, like all the other servants here, had been brought to Idar by false pretences, and, once on the crag, he had bidden farewell to the outer world.



"Look!" gurgled Reggie Pitt. The juniors turned and stared fixedly at a large ornamental cupboard which opened from one of the corners of the big room. The door was partly open, and framed in that space was the figure of Edward Oswald Handforth—Handforth, whom they all thought to be dead!

Nelson Lee looked at Lord Dorrimore steadily.

"I can quite understand your feelings, old man, because I am in very much the same condition myself," he replied. "I don't think I am homicidal by nature, but I could cheerfully choke the life out of the inhuman demon who murdered poor Handforth! And yet we are compelled to remain impassive and to pretend——"

"Why must we pretend?" broke in Dorrie harshly. "By the Lord Harry! Why should we keep it up, Lee? He means to kill us all—that's as clear as daylight. Well, why not get it over in one glorious fling? If I'm to die, I want to die fighting!"

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" muttered Smith, the valet. "Don't talk like this. His Highness will never allow you to die quickly. If you revolt it will mean torture——"

"Pah!" snapped Lord Dorrimore, turning on him. "Do you think I'm afraid of this accursed Ameer's torture? You've been here for ten years, Smith, and I forgive you. At one time, perhaps, you were a man of courage. But now you've had all the stamina taken out of you. You've got no more backbone than a pound of filleted tripe!"

Smith winced.

"Mebbe you're right, sir!" he said humbly.

"It ain't for me to answer back."

Dorrie flushed and walked over to the man.

"Sorry, old scout!" he growled. "I didn't mean to insult you like that. I was just talk-

ing generally. You and your fellow-sufferers have been here so long, and you know the dangers so well that——"

"I know, sir—I know!" interrupted Smith. "What's the good of denying it? At one time of day I was a fiery little beggar, ready to scrap with anybody. Many's the time I've had a set-to in the Old Kent Road. But nowadays I'm different. I know what'll happen if I don't obey orders to the letter. The cage—the cage!"

"The cage?" repeated Dorrie curiously.

"Ay, sir!" nodded Smith. "It's the Ameer's favourite kind of torture. A big iron cage slung out from the crag. I've seen men put into it—yes, and women—too, curse him!—and left out there in that cage without water in the glaring sun. Left out there until they went mad—stark, raving mad! Left out there until they tore themselves to bits, dashing against the iron bars trying to escape. Quick death is nothing compared to the cage."

Dorrie and the others were silent.

"Why, gents, if you was to start any trouble, do you think the soldiers would shoot you down?" went on Smith tensely. "Not they! His Highness don't like his victims to be shot down and put quick out of their misery. Not he! They'd just shoot you in the legs and put you out of action. Then you'd be tortured in the cage."

"Well, nothing can come of this conversation," said Nelson Lee quietly. "If we

had not seen the dreadful death of young Handforth we should hesitate to believe your stories, Smith. But, knowing that the boy was sent hurtling down to his death, we——”

“Just a minute, sir!” muttered Smith, clutching at Nelson Lee’s arm. “There’s something I’d like to tell you. Mebbe I oughtn’t to, but I can’t keep it to myself. And you’re all so cut up about it—about that boy’s death—that I ain’t the heart to keep it any longer. Besides, the young gents probably know by this time, anyhow.”

“Know what?” asked Lee.

“About that schoolboy who’s supposed to have been killed,” replied Smith in a whisper. “Master Handforth is his name, ain’t it? Well, gents, he’s not dead!”

“Not dead!” echoed the three in one voice.

“Quietly, gents—quietly!” urged Smith in fear. “If the Ameer gets to know he’ll not only finish the boy off, but he’ll put me into the cage, too. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“You must be mad, Smith!” said Lee sharply. “How can the boy still be alive? He fell a thousand feet to the ground. We saw him being carried away by the soldiers——”

“No, you didn’t, gents!” interrupted Smith. “The boy never fell!”

“Never fell!” breathed Dorrie. “Good glory, are you dreaming, or what?”

“He’s alive!” insisted Smith. “He went over that balustrade, yes, but he came into the window just below. I helped him——”

“By Jove!” ejaculated Nelson Lee, seizing Smith by the shoulders. “Is this true, man? Are you telling us that Handforth is really alive?”

“Ain’t I been saying it for the last two or three minutes, sir?” whispered Smith. “He’s not only alive, but he’s in there across the corridor,” he added, jerking his thumb. “But nobody mustn’t know that he’s alive—or the truth will come out. And then it’ll mean the cage for me—for helping the young gent to escape.”

Nelson Lee moved towards the door. Dorrie and Mr. Manners wanted to question Smith further, but Lee was set upon seeing Handforth with his own eyes before he believed this well-nigh incredible story.

“Where are you going, sir?” panted the valet.

“To the boys’ quarters.”

“Be careful, sir!” urged Smith. “There’s soldiers out there in the corridor, and——”

“They won’t interfere, will they?” asked Lee. “Surely I can go to the boys’ rooms without arousing any suspicions?”

“I dare say, sir, but you’d best be careful,” said Smith. “You don’t know what it’s like in this palace!”

Nelson Lee was convinced that Smith was full of unnecessary fears. It was all the result of his long years of “slavery.” There was danger, of course, but there was certainly no necessity for such exaggerated precautions as Smith hinted.

Out in the corridor Nelson Lee found two sentries on duty, one at either end. They regarded him unemotionally, and made no move when he stepped across the corridor and tapped on one of the doors.

These soldiers had orders, probably, to prevent any of the prisoners from leaving that quarter of the palace. But there was nothing to prevent them from visiting one another in their own rooms if they wanted to do so.

Nelson Lee entered the bed-room where most of the juniors were congregated, and he took a sharp glance round.

Something was evidently “in the wind.” For all the boys were flushed, and they were rather wild-eyed.



CHAPTER 6.

Handforth’s Story !

NELSON LEE entered the room and closed the door behind him.

He was glad that Dorrie and Mr. Manners had not come, too. In all probability they had realised that some suspicions might be aroused if they all went across to the boys’ quarters.

“I’m jolly glad you’ve come, gov’nor!” said Nipper eagerly. “We wanted you here badly.”

“Why?” asked Nelson Lee. “Smith, the valet, has been telling me some very extraordinary things——”

“About Handy, sir?”

“Yes, about Handforth.”

“Then he was probably right, sir,” said Nipper. “Handy, old man, come out!”

Nobody had spoken to Edward Oswald Handforth yet. They had all seen him in the doorway of that cupboard, but before any of them could ask any questions or make certain that he was not a ghost, the tap had come on the door. And Handforth had bolted back like a rabbit.

Finding that the visitor was only Nelson Lee, the juniors had regained their confidence, and now they were agog with excitement. Church and McClure seized the door of the cupboard and flung it open. The next moment they were grasping their old leader and trying to knock all the wind out of him.

“Handy, old man!” gurgled Church. “It’s—it’s really you! And we thought you were dead!”

“Oh, Handy!” panted McClure.

“Steady, you fatheads!” said Handforth, with a gasp. “What’s the idea of pummeling me about? It’s me all-right. I’m not a spirit!”

They all felt like cheering at the top of their voices, but they remembered where they were. So they crowded round Handforth and

gave vent to their delight in other ways. Nelson Lee pushed his way through the excited juniors, and silently took Handforth's fist.

"I am glad, young 'un," he said quietly. "Things are not so bad as we had feared. But how in the name of all that's miraculous did you manage to escape?"

"It was Smith who saved me, sir," replied Handforth.

"Yes, but how?"

"Well, you remember when the Ameer hit me and I fell over the balustrade, sir?" asked Handforth, his eyes smouldering with indignation and anger. "You remember how I clutched at the marble and then slipped?"

"We thought you had gone down to your death, Handy!" said Church breathlessly.

"Well, I didn't. I lost my hold, but when I dropped I clutched at the marble lower down just below the level of the balcony," said Handforth. "How the dickens I did it I don't know. Anyhow, the grip was so insecure that I couldn't have stuck it for more than twenty or thirty seconds."

"It's a wonder you didn't faint," said Fullwood.

"There wasn't any time for fainting," growled Handforth. "I felt for a foothold, but there was nothing there. And when I looked down I went all dizzy. Try to picture it, you fellows. A sheer drop of a thousand feet beneath me—with nothing but solid ground. I can tell you, I thought it was all up with me."

"And how did Smith save your life?" inquired Lee.

"Well, just beneath the balcony there was a window," said Handforth. "I didn't know it at the time, because I was too jolly busy trying to keep my finger-hold. But Smith was in that room—this room, as a matter of fact. He saw what had happened, and he nearly had a fit when he looked out of the window and saw me hanging there."

"But he couldn't drag you in," said Nipper. "The window was too far down."

"At the time I didn't know what happened, but Smith explained it to me afterwards," replied Handforth. "There was a whacking great wooden screen in the room, and Smith rushed it to the window and set it out at an angle, pointing upwards. He put all his weight on to the lower part of it, and then sang out to me to let go."

"I see—I see!" murmured Lee, nodding.

"Well, I let go at that second, anyhow," went on Handforth. "I slithered on to that wooden screen, and tumbled into the room—although, even then, it was touch-and-go. I biffed into Smith, and the screen overbalanced and went down into the abyss."

"Blow the screen!" said Church. "You were saved—and that was all that mattered."

"But that screen was heavy, and when it hit the ground it broke into a thousand bits!" continued Handforth significantly. "One of the soldiers was hit, I believe, and he went down."

"By Jove!" murmured Nelson Lee. "Don't you remember, boys, how we looked over from the balcony? There was a cloud clinging to the crag at the moment, but when it cleared away we could see the soldiers carrying a body away. We naturally assumed that it was Handforth's body."

"That's what Smith said, sir!" nodded Handforth. "We heard you up there—we heard the Ameer, too. And there's not much chance of him finding out that I'm really alive, because he won't make any inquiries. People have fallen down the crag before, and their bodies are generally taken away without any questions being asked. My only hat! What a place to live in!"

"But why have you been hiding all this time?" asked Church wonderingly.

"Why?" repeated Handforth. "Because if the Ameer finds out that I'm alive, he'll *really* chuck me over the balcony, and there won't be any second miracle, either!"

"And Smith, too, is in danger of being put to death for his part in the affair," said Lee, nodding. "I rather think it is up to me to apologise to Smith. Long years in this palace have robbed him of his courage, but there can be no doubt that he is a man of resource and quick action. Your life was saved, Handforth, only because of the valet's swiftness."

"And now I've got to stay hidden, sir," said Handforth. "The Ameer thinks that I'm dead, and I'd better remain 'dead.' Besides, there may be some good come out of it. While all the rest of you are having meals, or listening to the Ameer's talk, I shall be down here, alone. Nobody will suspect that I'm here, and I may be able to make some investigations on my own!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Always full of optimism!"

"Rats!" said Handforth coolly. "As soon as the opportunity arises—to-morrow, I expect—I shall do some detective work. As I'm officially dead, I shan't be watched. Don't you see how ripping it is?"

Nelson Lee gripped Handforth by the shoulder.

"You must put all these ideas out of your head, young 'un," he said earnestly.

"Eh? Oh, I say, sir—"

"You'll make no investigations, Handforth," continued Lee. "The situation is too dangerous—too delicate. Your only hope of safety is to remain hidden."

"But—but I want to dish the Ameer, sir!"

"We all want to dish the Ameer," said Lee. "But if you are caught, Handforth—as you certainly will be caught if you conduct these secret investigations—you will not escape a second time. As it is, we are all alive, and while there is life, there is hope. I do not really think Smith is in any danger, since, if you are caught, you will naturally not explain how you escaped."

"Rather not, sir," replied Handforth.

"But I'm not going to be caught."

"Well, you had better return to your hiding-place, and get as much sleep as possible," said Nelson Lee. "And to-morrow, Handforth, you must continue to lie low."

"How can I, sir? What about my investigations?"

"You must forget these investigations!" replied Lee. "What, indeed, can you do? Be sensible, Handforth!"

But Handforth was of the opinion that he had never been anything else but sensible; and, furthermore, that Nelson Lee was quite off his rocker in suggesting this policy of inaction.



CHAPTER 7.

Time for Action!

MINUTE later Nelson Lee prepared to go.

"Remember, Handforth, that I earnestly suggest that you should do nothing whatever," he said. "The situation is altogether too dangerous. As for the rest of you boys, you must play your parts, too."

"How do you mean, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"In the morning you must continue to look sad and unhappy," replied Lee. "On no account must we allow our genial host to guess that we are all in a more cheerful frame of mind. We must continue to mourn Handforth's loss."

The juniors grinned.

"Right you are, sir!" said Church cheerfully. "We won't forget it. We'll act our parts all right."

"And be careful not to overact them," warned Lee.

"Do the girls know that I'm alive, sir?" asked Handforth quickly.

"Not yet."

"Then how can we tell them?"

"We cannot tell them before the morning," said Lee. "And even then I doubt if it would be advisable."

"Oh, I say, sir—but what about Irene?" asked Handforth blankly. "I expect she's a bit worried about me—"

"H'm! Judging by appearance, your girl chum is more than worried, Handforth," replied Nelson Lee dryly. "Yes, we shall have to tell her somehow. But never mind now—all of you get to bed, and remember what I have told you."

A minute later, Nelson Lee had gone, and Handforth was preparing to go back into his place of concealment. He grumbled at it, because there was not much comfort for him. But, after all, it was certainly better to sleep in a cupboard, in security, than to sleep in a bed with the almost certain probability of being executed as soon as he was found.

Nelson Lee returned to his own room, and he found Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners in a much more cheerful frame of mind. Smith, the valet, had been telling them all about it.

"You were very smart, Smith," said Lee quietly, as he looked approvingly at the man. "It was a wonderful act of presence of mind. And you need have no fear for your own safety."

"If the Ameer ever finds out, sir—" began Smith.

"He cannot find out," interrupted Lee. "Even if the boy is found, he will naturally keep it dark as to how he escaped. Your own part in the affair will never be known, Smith. So set your mind at rest."

The valet looked relieved.

"That's one way of looking at it, sir, of course," he agreed. "Mebbe I was a bit too scared. But then I ain't the man I used to be."

Presently he bade them good-night, and went off. Nelson Lee sat down on the edge of a bed, and lit a cigarette. Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners sat there, too.

"Well, you fellows, we've got to face this thing!" said Lee grimly.

"What thing?"

"The situation, of course, is impossible," continued the Housemaster-Detective. "Quite impossible."

Dorrie sighed.

"You mustn't expect our brains to be as acute as yours, old man," he said. "Do you mind explaining what the dickens you mean?"

"Well, to begin with, we know what kind of a boy Handforth is," said Lee slowly. "Do you think for a moment that he will be content to remain in hiding indefinitely? Sooner or later—much sooner, probably—he will commit some act of indiscretion, and disclose his presence; and that, of course, will precipitate a crisis."

"You think His Nibs will do something drastic?"

"I don't think at all, Dorrie—I know!" replied Lee. "Even though the Ameer's rage may have become dissipated, he will nevertheless think it necessary to execute the boy. With him, it will be a matter of prestige."

"The devil!" said Mr. Manners hotly.

"Then, too, there are the other boys," continued Lee. "They have promised me that they will do their best to keep up the pretence. But they won't be able to do it. It's more than we can expect."

"Yes, and the girls, too," said Dorrie, pursing his lips. "They'll have to know about Handy—and, much as I admire them, I don't think they'll be different from the majority of other girls. They're bound to let the cat out of the bag."

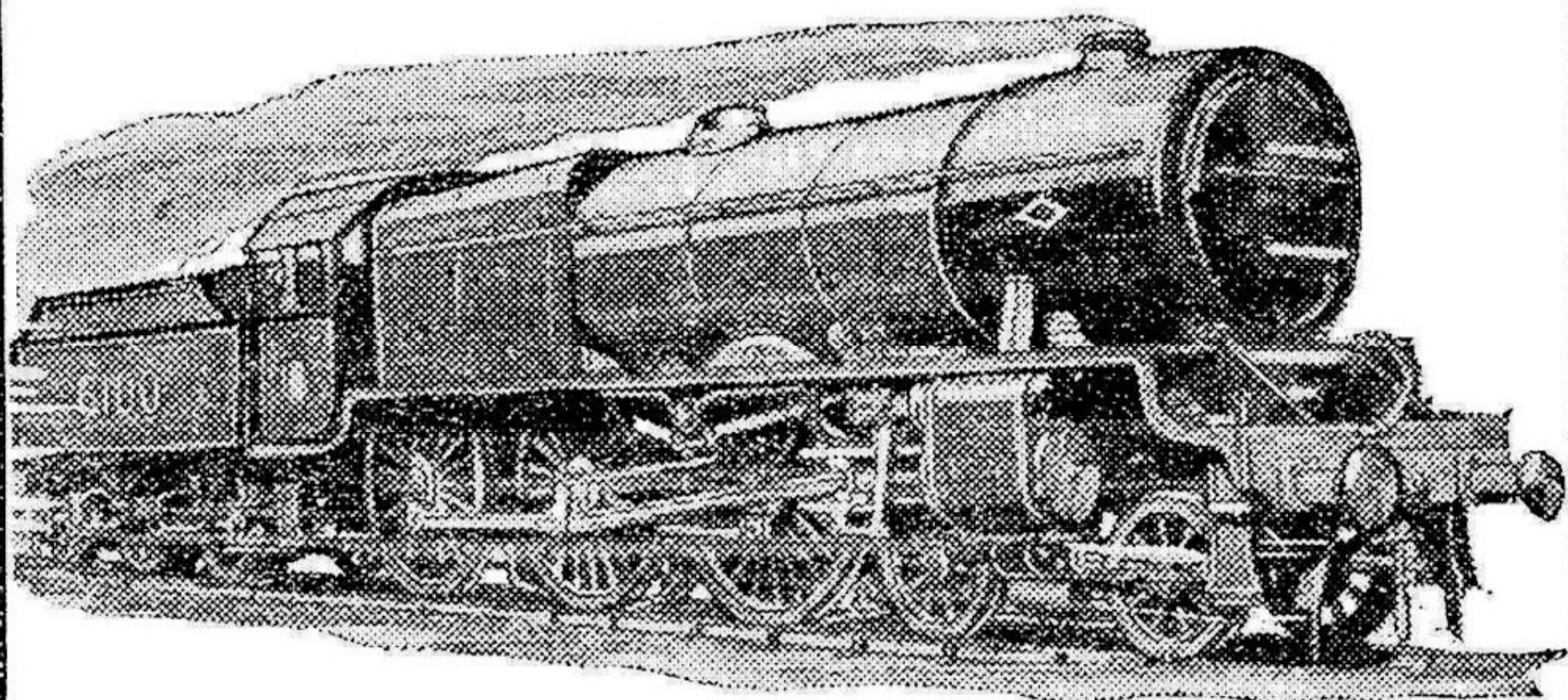
"That is why we must prepare for immediate action," replied Lee. "There must be no beating about the bush, Dorrie. We are in an awful fix, and it's no good mincing

(Continued on page 14.)

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THE AMEER'S PRISONERS!



(Continued from page 12.)

matters. In my opinion, there is only one possible ray of hope for us."

"And that is?" asked Dorrie interestedly.

"To take the bull by the horns."

"The bull, I assume, being His Nibs?"

"We must act decisively and positively—to-morrow!" said Lee tensely. "As a general rule, I prefer to play a waiting game—preparing everything well in advance. But there are exceptions to all rules, Dorrie, and this, I believe, is an occasion when we must act first, and prepare afterwards."

"My opinion, too!" nodded Mr. Manners.

"Therefore, it is quite impossible for us to make any plans," said Lee. "We must leave things in the lap of the gods. But to-morrow we must act. Whether we all die in consequence is a matter that need not be discussed. To die fighting is certainly better than to die tamely."

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie, his eyes burning. "Good man! Lee, old scout, 'them's my sentiments,' too! But why the deuce have you changed so suddenly?"

"Because Handforth is alive!" said Lee. "That makes a very big difference. Our party is still intact, and, if we are to leave this crag alive, we must not hesitate any longer. There are any number of British servants here—footmen and similar fellows."

"But can we count upon them to help?" asked Mr. Manners doubtfully.

"At first, I'm afraid not," said Lee. "They will be too afraid—too scared. But if once we can gain a little ground, they will rally to our support. My scheme is to seize the palace, and if can only do that, we shall hold the trump card."

"What about seizing the Ameer, too?"

"Unless we seize the Ameer, the whole scheme will fail," said Nelson Lee steadily. "But why discuss the matter? We cannot make any plans—because we do not know how events might turn out. So let us sleep, and let us make up our minds that we'll either win, or go down fighting!"

CHAPTER 8.

The Dawn of an Eventful Day!



HANDFORTH gave a discontented grunt.

"It's all very well to tell me to lie low," he said. "But I don't see why I should do it. I might be

able to make all sorts of investigations—"

"Cheese it, old man!" interrupted Church. "Mac and I are overjoyed because you're alive. We can't believe it, even now."

"You'd better punch the pair of them on their noses, Handy, dear old fellow," suggested Travers. "Then, perhaps, they'll be convinced of the truth."

There were a few chuckles, and Handforth grunted again.

"It takes a lot to kill me!" he said coldly. "And as for this giddy Ameer, I'm going to have my own back before long! By George! I'm going to have the satisfaction of punching his head until—"

"Won't you ever realise, Handy, that we're not in a position to punch anybody's head—the Ameer's, least of all. It was your rashness that nearly led to your death, as it was."

It was morning now, and the St. Frank's fellows were dressing. They had, in fact, nearly finished, and were ready to venture forth. A new day had dawned, and none of the juniors guessed that it was to be one of the most adventurous days of their lives.

Handforth, rather recklessly, had come out of his special cupboard, and he had been complaining. He didn't see the fun of remaining hidden indefinitely. Yet even he, with all his rashness, felt that it would be pure folly to allow himself to be seen by any of the Ameer's soldiers or officers. He was supposed to be dead, and it was better for him to remain "dead."

"You've got to be sensible, Handy!" urged Church earnestly. "In spite of your narrow escape, you don't seem to appreciate the dangerous nature of the position. If anybody spots you, you'll be hauled in front of the Ameer, and then you can imagine what will happen!"

Handforth nodded.

"Yes, perhaps I'd better go easy," he admitted. "But what about grub? I'm not supposed to starve, am I?"

"We'll smuggle something down to you, old son," said Fullwood.

"That's all very well," complained Handforth. "But supposing you can't do it? It's not so jolly easy to smuggle grub off a table with footmen and soldiers looking on!"

"Cave!" came a warning whisper.

Handforth dodged into his hiding-place, and a moment later Smith, the valet, came gliding into the room.

"Oh, it's only you!" said Church with relief. "We were just talking about grub for Handforth. Can you suggest anything, Smith?"

"Leave it to me, young gents!" replied the valet. "I dare say I can manage to bring something down for the prisoner. It may be a bit risky, but it ain't likely that I shall be watched."

Handforth cautiously appeared.

"Morning, Smith!" he said cheerily. "I heard what you just said about grub—"

"For the love of mercy, young gent, go back!" panted Smith, horrified.

"Eh?"

"You don't understand, sir!" continued the valet hoarsely. "I don't blame you—because you can't know how things are in this place until you've lived here a few years! But if you're seen, after what's happened, your life won't be worth a red cent!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm not going to be scared—"

"It ain't a question of being scared, sir," said Smith. "But what's the good of being brave and defiant when there's always the chance of the cage?"

"The which?"

"I'd best not explain, young gent!" replied Smith. "But you can take it from me that it's a risky thing for you to show yourself. I'll do the best I can for you—I'll bring some food down, one way or another. But, for your own sake—and mine—you'd best keep hid."

There was such a wealth of anxiety in Smith's tone that Handforth vanished, and the other juniors were considerably relieved.

"We'd better go, you fellows," said Nipper in a low voice. "After we've gone, Handy will probably settle down, and there won't be any more trouble. Goodness only knows how this is going to finish!"

They went crowding out into the corridor, and, just at that very moment, Irene & Co. appeared from their own rooms, and they came hurrying forward towards the juniors.

At the very first glance, Nipper knew that the girls had been told. When they had gone to bed they had believed that Handforth was dead, and they had been dull with misery and horror.

But what a difference now!

Their eyes were sparkling, their faces were flushed. Irene, in particular, was looking radiant. It was quite clear that either Nelson Lee or Lord Dorrimore had told them the news.

"It's true, isn't it?" whispered Irene eagerly.

They were so excited that they did not even pause to exchange greetings.

"Yes, it's true!" said Nipper, nodding. "But it's just as well not to talk about it, you girls. Let's be satisfied that everything's O.K. so far."

"We couldn't believe it at first!" said Winnie Pitt breathlessly. "Mr. Lee only said one or two words, and we're still absolutely mystified about it all. How did he escape?"

"Never mind that now, old girl," said Reggie, patting his sister's arm. "It's quite enough to know that he's safe and sound. The Ameer's infernal soldiers are dodging about this corridor, and it's quite likely they'll understand English. So we don't want to talk too much. Let's wait for a bit."

The girls appreciated the wisdom of this suggestion, and they went to the end of the corridor and found themselves in a wide marble foyer. Lord Dorrimore had just appeared, and he nodded genially.

"You'd better come upstairs, to the famous roof-garden, young 'uns," he said. "Mr.

Manners and Mr. Lee have already gone there, chatting with His Nibs."

"Then we don't want to go, sir," said Fullwood.

"We don't want to, I know—but we must keep up appearances," said his lordship. "Come along. I've heard that these roof-gardens are well worth seeing. After all, there's no reason why we shouldn't make ourselves thoroughly at home."

None of the "guests" had gone over a tenth of the palace, and they were always encountering new wonders. Now, after they had ascended a noble marble staircase, they found themselves out in the open—on the top-most limit of the palace.

There were many exclamations of astonishment as they looked about them. Everything in the palace itself was wonderful.

But here they were in a veritable fairy-land of surprises!



CHAPTER 9.

The Message of Doom!

THE main roof of the Idar Palace was quite flat, and it was incredibly large. Yet, farther away, there were other terraces, on a slightly lower level, and these were flat, too.

The main section was entirely surrounded by a high marble parapet, and it was several hundred yards in length. The entire roof was set out as a garden.

Graceful palms grew everywhere, and there were rich flower-beds and lawns. Towards the farther end there was a full-sized tennis court, and quaint little summer-houses, and a big fountain was playing in the very centre.

"Why, it's marvellous!" said Doris Berkeley incredulously.

"My only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Tommy Watson. "It must have cost thousands and thousands!"

"Money is nothing to the Ameer," said Nipper. "He's a millionaire several times over. In fact, nobody knows exactly how rich he really is. By Jove! But it is pretty wonderful, eh?"

"Odds miracles and marvels!" said Archie. "I mean to say, laddies, we hardly expected this, what? A dashed garden a thousand dashed feet in the air!"

They found it necessary to blink, in order to convince themselves that they were really awake. Here and there, gardeners were at work—and these men were British, like the other servants. They were placidly going on with their labours, as though gardening a thousand feet in the air was one of the most commonplace tasks in all the world.

Now and again they glanced up and took stock of the Ameer's visitors. But they did not dare to stare too hard. For His illustrious Highness was present.

The Ameer, in fact, was standing near the fountain, talking to several of his gor-

geously uniformed officers. There seemed to be an important conference in progress.

Some of the boys and girls moved to the nearest parapet and stood leaning against it, looking over.

The view was astounding.

They could see for scores of miles—right into the distance, beyond the city, and the cultivated area surrounding it—beyond the jungles.

It was indeed a fairyland.

It was difficult to believe that they were on solid ground—on age-old rock. This great crag, this pencil of solidity, seemed a very precarious affair. Yet all the fellows knew that it had been standing for thousands of years. It had stood the test of time.

"I can quite understand why these poor beggars of servants never get away once they arrive on the top of this crag!" said Fullwood thoughtfully. "How can they escape. We all know that there's a lift, but it's constantly guarded by soldiers—top and bottom. And it's the only possible way of reaching the earth."

"That's quite right!" agreed Russell, as he looked over. "You couldn't possibly get down by ropes—because it's too far. And even if it wasn't too far you would only land into the courtyard, and it's full of soldiers all the time. Phew! It does seem a bit of a problem, doesn't it?"

They continued to look about them, astonished at the variety of flowers and at the endless bushes of palms. It was a great vista of green and brilliant colour, and a triumph of ingenuity.

Space was limited on the top of this grim crag. The palace occupied every atom of this space, so there was no spare ground for gardens. The Ameer, therefore, had built his garden on the very top of the palace. But, as the juniors had said, it must have cost a fortune to produce this wonder.

Presently the Ameer saluted his officers and they saluted in return. Then he strolled over one of the green lawns to the spot where Nelson Lee was talking with Lord Dorrimore.

"Alas! gentlemen, I fear that I shall not be able to spend a great deal of time with you to-day," said the Ameer, by way of greeting. "I am to be robbed of your agreeable association."

They were silent.

"Perhaps you are relieved?" he went on dryly. "But let me reassure you. During my absence, you will be well cared for. My officers have their orders, and it is my desire that you should still regard the palace as your own."

"You are very generous," said Nelson Lee shortly.

"I am really afraid that you do not appreciate my generosity to the full," said the Ameer. "You are all my prisoners, and yet I am treating you as guests. Yet I do not think that the period of waiting will be tedious. I am expecting news at any minute."

"From Kurpana?" asked Dorrie.

"Exactly," nodded the Ameer. "From

Kurpana. My courier has already left Sakri, and he should be arriving very shortly."

"But is it not several days' journey to the capital of Kurpana?" asked Mr. Manners, as he walked up.

"By road, yes," replied the Ameer. "But my couriers do not travel by that old-fashioned method, Mr. Manners. I think you will have noticed that I am quite modern. We, in Rishnir, are not so heathen and musty as the outer world believes. We are, perhaps, a mixture of the ancient and modern. But all this is changing. It is my ambition to make this part of India more progressive than any European country."

"Then you are unwise to be at enmity with the British Government," said Mr. Manners.

"You think so?" murmured the Ameer. "Time will tell, of course. My armies are preparing for the field, and to-day several battalions will be on the move. I must personally superintend the operations, and so, gentlemen, I shall shortly be taking my departure."

Lord Dorrimore found Nelson Lee glancing at him keenly. They both remembered their chat of the previous night. If the Ameer was going, it might be several days before he returned.

Perhaps, on the whole, it would be better for him to be away. Conditions at the palace might possibly be lax in consequence of his absence.

"See!" said the Ameer, raising his hand and pointing into the blue of the sky. "Unless I am mistaken, my courier is now approaching. And for you, gentlemen, and for your young companions, he brings a message of doom."

For a moment or two they could not see what the Ameer had been pointing at. But then Nelson Lee slowly nodded. He could see now. An aeroplane was winging its way towards Idar, a mere speck in the sky.

Events were moving more rapidly than Nelson Lee had anticipated!

CHAPTER 10.

The Refusal!



ALL eyes were on that aeroplane as it changed from a speck and became a thing of vibrant life.

The humming of the powerful engine could now be heard, and it was seen that the machine was heading straight for the crag.

Zurrrrrrrh!

As it grew nearer the throbbing of its engine caused the air to quiver.

"One of the fastest 'planes in the world," said the Ameer, as he stood there watching. "It is merely one of a fleet that I have recently acquired."



"Look out!" roared Dorrie. He and Mr. Manners and Nelson Lee leapt wildly aside. There came a low, dull explosion from down the corridor, and then a blinding, blazing flare of light. The barricades splintered to matchwood, and pieces of wood fell dangerously in all directions.

"British, no doubt?" asked Dorrie mockingly.

The Ameer smiled.

"You are wrong, your lordship," he replied. "My machines are German, Dutch, Italian. My agents are everywhere, buying, buying. But not in Great Britain."

He nodded towards the approaching aeroplane.

"You here see one of the swiftest fighting 'planes in the world," he continued. "That machine is now travelling at the rate of two hundred and fifty miles an hour. So, as you can readily reckon, it does not take my courier long to travel from Sakri. I can only trust that he brings a message of hope for you."

"And yet, in your heart, you desire him to bring a message of death," remarked Lee coldly.

The Ameer shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps so," he said. "In any case, since you are all to die, it is better to have the issue definitely settled. Yet, while you live, I am anxious that you should make the most of my hospitality."

His frankness was astonishing. From the very first he had given his prisoners to understand that death was to be their ultimate fate, and, through it all, he had remained suave and smiling. There was something very devilish in this refined, cultured Indian potentate.

"Hallo," said Reggie Pitt, "she's stopped her engine."

The aeroplane was now almost directly overhead, and no more than five hundred feet above. Yet, of course, she was fifteen hundred feet from the ground.

It could now be seen that the machine was a vicious-looking fighter—a biplane, with very squat wings, and with a little stub tail. It was a brilliant red, and it shone dazingly in the morning sunshine.

The propeller was only just revolving, and the machine was "side-slipping" down towards the crag.

Lower she came—lower and lower.

At last the boys and girls felt their hearts leap into their mouths. They felt convinced that the machine was going to land on that big tennis-lawn. But at the crucial moment a tiny object dropped from the machine and thudded to the grass. Then, with a zooming roar, the machine rose into the air again and circled away.

"Neatly done!" commented the Ameer approvingly.

"An excellent piece of airmanship," agreed Nelson Lee.

"Pooh, this is nothing!" declared the Ameer, shrugging his shoulders. "My air-men are trained to perfection; they are men of resource, courage and skill. The inhabitants of Sakri will understand that when the invasion has commenced."

A moment later an officer came hurrying up, carrying the little packet that had been dropped from the aeroplane. The latter was

now gliding down, past the crag, with the evident intention of landing somewhere on the outskirts of the city. In all probability it was making for its hangar.

"You see?" said the Ameer, as he took the package and turned to Lee. "There is no delay in my methods. My courier has returned from young Hussi Kahn with the fateful message. It saves much time for him to drop it on to my lawns, and it is quite simple, too."

He broke the seals of the package and handed the unnecessary material to the officer. Then he took the actual letter and opened it coolly.

Nelson Lee was quite convinced that this little affair had been pre-arranged. It had been performed in order to impress the visitors. Lee could now understand why he and all his companions had been invited to take the air on the roof-garden before breakfast.

"Alas!" said the Ameer, with a sigh.

"Bad news?" asked Dorrie bluntly.

"Exceedingly bad—for you!"

"Well, we expected it, so it won't come as much of a shock," remarked his lordship.

What is it going to be—sudden death from the firing squad, or burning at the stake?"

The Ameer laughed.

"I am glad to see that you are, at least, resigned," he said. "As I had half expected, this young fool of a Hussi Kahn refuses, point-blank, to surrender his country to my soldiers."

"Bravo, Hussi Kahn!" said Mr. Manners promptly.

"The boy could do nothing else," said Nelson Lee. "It was an impossible proposition to put before him. Even though he knows our lives are in danger, he cannot surrender his country to its enemies. He cannot betray his people."

"And so my little scheme has failed," said the Ameer regretfully. "Thus it will be of little use for me to keep you here, in my palace, as my guests. In brief, gentlemen, you will only be an encumbrance."

It was obvious that the Ameer was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Well, why don't you get something done, and let's have it over?" burst out Mr. Manners hotly. "Why are you playing with us? If you wish to take our lives, take them! But, by Heaven, you will have a heavy bill to pay, sir! Do not forget that the British Government will know of this massacre, sooner or later, and then—"

"Tut, tut!" broke in the Ameer mildly. "Why this wild outburst, Mr. Manners? I have not given orders for you to be executed—or massacred, as you crudely put it. Certainly not! I have no intention of acting so drastically. For the time being, I desire you to remain in the palace, as my guests. And let us continue to be frank. Since you cannot escape, and since you cannot do any harm, there is no reason why you should not enjoy life for a little longer."

"There is no enjoyment in life when the shadow of death is hovering over us!" growled Irene's father.

The Ameer smiled more broadly than ever.

"I think that breakfast is awaiting us," he said smoothly. "For this morning, we are taking the meal in the special Summer Wing. A little innovation of mine, for use during the hottest weather. I am quite sure that you will like it."

And he led the way towards the big staircase.

Lord Dorrimore breathed hard, and clenched his fists; and Nelson Lee tightened his lips.

The Ameer, in his egotism, did not realise that his prisoners were rapidly nearing the point when drastic action—whatever the consequences—would be necessary!

CHAPTER 11.

The Crisis!



THE trouble was, nobody could tell how much the Ameer really meant, and how much he didn't mean. Perhaps he was only playing with them all the time; perhaps he had no intention of putting them all to death.

It was impossible to tell.

Yet, knowing Ali Rajen's record, Nelson Lee had little doubt in his own mind as to the man's real intentions. The world, outside Rishnir and Kurpana, believed that the British party had perished in the crash of the Wanderer of the Skies, for this was the news that the Ameer had caused to be circulated.

In his message to Hussi Khan, too, he had stated, under threat of instant death for the Britishers, that no news of their still being alive should be allowed to reach the outside world.

It was for this reason that the Ameer was playing with his victims. They were already "dead," so he could take his time in actually polishing them off. His treatment, just now, was a sort of refined torture. No doubt it would become more and more hideous as time went on.

And Nelson Lee was doubly convinced that, if any action was to be taken, it must be taken promptly. Yet it was difficult to come to any decision as to the actual method of action. It must be incredibly foolish to defy the Ameer, and to tell him to do his worst. For, with so many armed soldiers in the palace, there would not be a ghost of a chance for the party.

So Nelson Lee was worried—intensely worried. Yet, judging by the expression on his face, one would have imagined that he did not possess a care in the world.

The entire party went down into the great foyer, which seemed to be the central pivot

of the palace, and then the Ameer led the way down a long, domed corridor. None of the prisoners had been in this part of the palace before. It was on a higher floor than the other reception-rooms.

"Now, this wing is quite novel," observed the Ameer genially. "It is self-contained, and the only method of ingress and egress is this one corridor. There are no other staircases, no other passages leading to the main section of the palace."

"Very interesting, your Highness," said Dorrie gruffly.

"Particularly interesting to you, my dear sir," nodded the Ameer. "For it is my intention that you shall all remain in this Summer Wing during my absence from the palace. There is every convenience, every accommodation, so you will have no cause for complaint. I regret the necessity to change your quarters so unexpectedly, but I do not think it would be essential for me to leave the palace until the end of the week, at the earliest. But, after all, we are all the slaves of our duties."

"And some are slaves without having any duties," remarked Dorrie.

"Neatly put, my lord!" smiled the Ameer. "Yet I think you are unduly harsh with me. Surely I have not turned you into slaves—yet?"

There was a hidden significance in his words. Not many of the party noticed it, but Nelson Lee wondered. Was it possible that the Ameer was planning to keep them all in the palace, and to use them, after this present war fever was over, as servants and lackeys? Was his threat of death a mere bluff? The prospect of remaining for ever in the palace, acting as slaves to this tyrant, was bad enough.

Indeed, judging by the trouble that the Ameer had had to procure his servants, it was more than possible that he would retain this entire party—particularly the boys and girls. Lee, Dorrie and Mr. Manners would probably be executed, but the boys and girls would be kept—to be trained as servants. That was the way Nelson Lee figured it out.

"It will be better from every point of view for you to remain in this Summer Wing during my absence," said the Ameer. "Two soldiers, posted at the end of the corridor, will be sufficient to provide an ample guard. You see, I am prepared for any emergency. You are high-spirited, rebellious. But you would be crazy to lift a finger against any of my officers or soldiers. They have the strictest orders to fire if so much as a finger is raised."

By this time they had not only reached the end of the corridor, but they found themselves in a cool, delightful room that was a species of sun-parlour. There were several great open windows, leading on to a balcony, similar to the one below. All the furniture was of the cane type, and the floor was of mosaic marble, cool and artistic.

Leading off from this great central apartment were many other rooms. These latter were fairly small, but they were furnished in the same style, only they contained beds; and every room was open to the air, having no windows whatever.

The entire wing was a jutting-out portion, built cunningly over the extremity of the crag. When one looked over the balcony, the void beneath was absolute. For the Summer Wing projected, and overhung the great abyss.

In the centre apartment there were a number of tables, all set for a meal. And here, for the first time, it was noticeable that there were no soldiers on duty. One or two menservants were ready to wait upon the guests, but there was no display of arms.

"I trust you will be duly honoured by the compliment I am paying you," said the Ameer, as he approached a group of boys and girls who were looking over the balcony. "This Summer Wing was built for my own especial use, and during my enforced absence I am permitting you to have the entire run of it. Am I not good-natured?"

None of the boys or girls answered.

"Come, come!" smiled the Ameer, placing a hand on Irene's slim shoulder. "Have you no word for me, pretty one?"

"Please, sir!" said Irene, turning pale.

"You need not be afraid of me," said the Ameer, leering evilly into her face. "I admire your fairness, my child. You are so different from the others. Your golden hair, your blue eyes, your fair skin—they attract me strangely. From the very first I have singled you out for my most gracious favours."

There was a dead silence. Irene stood, trembling, and the other girls had gone rather pale, too. This was the first indication that the Ameer had given that he was at all interested in any of the girls.

"But not yet!" said his Imperial Highness softly. "No, not yet! Duty first—and pleasure afterwards, eh? When I return, fair one, we shall see. We shall see."

He placed his arm further round her shoulder, and pressed her fondly. Irene stiffened, and her eyes flashed.

"Please let me go!" she panted. "Oh, how can you?"

The Ameer chuckled.

"So! The little bird attempts to flutter away, eh?" he smiled. "Splendid! I think all the more of you, pretty one, for your resistance."

He laughed aloud, bent down, and drew Irene's face towards him. He kissed her.

"Oh, you beast—you beast!" panted the girl, trying to free herself.

"Excellent!" laughed the Ameer. "Just for that, my little bird, you shall have another kiss—"

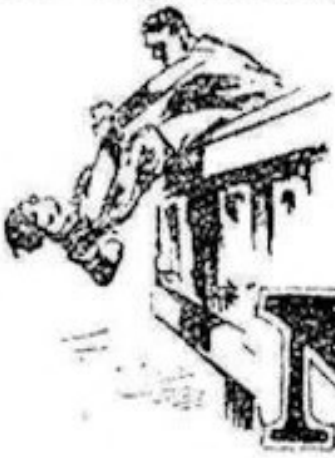
"And you, you hound, will have this!" said a stern, grim voice just behind him.

The next second the Ameer's shoulder was seized, and he was pulled violently away

from the girl. Nelson Lee stood there, his eyes blazing.

Crash!

The famous detective's fist hit the Ameer of Rishnir on the point of the chin, and his Imperial Highness went over like a log!



CHAPTER 12.

Action!

NELSON LEE had no intention of precipitating the crisis.

But when he saw Irene struggling so helplessly in that demon's arms, his reserve fled. Lee found it impossible to hold back, and to watch calmly these proceedings. There was only one thing to be done—and that was to knock the Ameer down as he deserved.

Ever since he had arrived, Nelson Lee had been expecting something of the sort. He had feared that the Ameer would pay some gross attentions to his fair prisoners. Now, in an incautious moment, the Ameer had revealed the fact that he was particularly attracted to Irene.

"Hurrah!"

"Good for you, Mr. Lee!"

"Knock him down again, sir!"

The St. Frank's fellows were wild with excitement. Irene stood back, trembling visibly.

"Please, sir!" she panted. "Oh, I didn't mean to cause this trouble—"

"Get into these rooms—quickly!" snapped Nelson Lee, his eyes blazing. "Don't ask questions, any of you—but get out of the way! There's going to be trouble!"

The Ameer was slowly rising to his feet, and his face was distorted with fury.

"For this, my friend, you shall have the cage!" he snarled. "Yes, and every one of your companions shall watch your tortures!"

He raised his voice and shouted in his own language. It was a crucial moment. Nelson Lee knew well enough that he had practically signed his own death-warrant. The Ameer was not bluffing now. It would mean the torture.

Escape was out of the question, since the only way out of this summer wing was by means of the corridor, and this was already filling with hurrying soldiers.

Yet Nelson Lee was not prepared to tamely surrender himself to the Ameer's men.

He acted swiftly.

Before the Ameer could fully recover from the effects of that blow, Nelson Lee had seized him and had flung him back against the marble balustrade of the balcony. Back he went, farther and farther, and a wild, hideous scream came from the Ameer's throat.

"Good glory!" ejaculated Dorrie blankly.

He believed in that second that Nelson Lee was about to fling the Ameer to his death into the abyss. But at the last second Lee stopped, and held the Ameer there, just on the balance. For the man to struggle was impossible, since by so doing he would precipitate his own destruction.

"Fool—fool!" he panted hoarsely. "If I overbalance your tortures will be so ghastly—"

"If you overbalance, Your Highness, you will be dead!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "You have already assured me that my tortures are to be ghastly, so there can be no risk in taking the action I am now taking. Steady—steady! I advise you not to move, or Rishnir will be in need of a new Ameer!"

Nelson Lee was thoroughly enjoying himself in a fierce, burning, hot-blooded way. For once his coolness had deserted him, although, outwardly, he was collected enough. But, at the same time, he knew that he held the trump card in this dramatic situation.

Soldiers came running in, led by an officer in glittering uniform.

"Shoot—shoot!" screamed the Ameer. "Kill these dogs!"

The officer pulled up short, his face expressive of horror.

He grasped the situation, and he turned swiftly to his men. He rapped out some orders, and many rifles were flung up, and fingers trembled on the triggers.

"Steady on, you fool!" shouted Lord Dorrimore. "If you kill my friend your Ameer will overbalance and go to his death!"

The officer gasped and held a hand to his men.

"Excellency!" he panted. "I am at a loss!"

"You are wise, my friend," said Nelson Lee, his voice cold and chilly. "See! Your Ameer is quite helpless as I am now grasping him. One false move on his part and his own doom will be sealed. If you shoot me, you kill your monarch. If you shoot any of my friends I shall immediately release my hold. So think carefully before taking any action."

The Ameer, who had now got over his momentary rage, changed his tone.

"Yes, yes!" he panted. "Hold your fire! The fools have the advantage for the moment. They will kill me if they are disobeyed."

The officer saluted and waited. He was bewildered and frightened. The soldiers were equally dumbfounded.

It was Lord Dorrimore who took quick advantage of the situation.

"Come along, boys!" he said crisply. "Now's our chance! Nipper, Pitt, Travers! Grab as many rifles as you can—and don't forget the ammunition-belts!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good gad! A spot of jolly old action!"

"Thank goodness!"

With one accord the boys leapt forward. They guessed, perhaps, that the soldiers would fire upon them, but they didn't

hesitate. It was now or never. The officer whirled round, his face blank, but he knew not what to do.

Indeed, his quandary was difficult. The Ameer was in danger of being sent to his death, and there had been something in Nelson Lee's tone which clearly indicated that he was not bluffing.

"Interfere, and over you go!" muttered Lee into the Ameer's ear. "You believed, my friend, that we were all backboneless, did you not?"

"Fool—fool!" panted the Ameer. "Do you imagine that you can carry this thing through? A fleeting victory, perhaps—but it will be brief. And then there shall be the torture for you—such torture as you have never imagined!"

"And yet, my dear Ameer, your threats have a most hollow sound," said Lee mockingly. "Steady! I should advise you not to wriggle. I might lose my grip, and that would be tragic, would it not?"

The Ameer ceased his efforts, and continued to hang there, with three-parts of his body over-reaching the abyss. If Lee only relaxed his grip, no power on earth could save the Ameer from certain death. He was wise, therefore, in remaining passive.

In the meantime, the St. Frank's fellows had leapt to their unexpected work. The soldiers, knowing of the peril of their monarch, dared not resist, and during that first minute a dozen rifles were seized, to say nothing of sundry revolvers and belts of ammunition.

"By glory! That feels better!" said Dorrie, as he gripped one of the revolvers. "I feel a man again now! Good for you, boys! How many of you can use rifles?"

"All of us, sir!" replied Nipper promptly. "We're all cadets, don't forget—and we can handle rifles easily enough."

"And aim pretty true, too!" said Reggie Pitt eagerly.

Dorrie took a quick look round.

"Sorry, girls, but you can't be on in this act," he said tensely. "Get into one of these rummy bed-rooms and stay there. You, boys, spread yourselves out on the other side of the room—and take aim. If there's the slightest attempt to rush us—fire!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Dorrie!"

The boys rushed to their posts, and they were ready enough to obey orders strictly to the letter.

The first step had been taken. The revolt against the Ameer had commenced!



CHAPTER 13.

Getting Exciting!

CURIOSLY enough, nobody thought about Handforth during this crisis.

Yet Handforth, of

all those juniors, would have revelled in this grim situation. For Edward Oswald was a born fighter, and his indignation would probably be tremendous when he heard all the details—if, indeed, he ever would hear them. For, so far, the situation was critical. Nobody could tell exactly how it would end. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and the boys may have gained the upper hand for the moment, but, as the Ameer had said, there seemed little or no chance of this advantage being maintained.

For the palace was swarming with soldiers, and there were tens of thousands of others on hand if necessary. What could this handful of Britishers do against the Ameer's might?

Even as it was, they had only gained the advantage because Nelson Lee had slung the Ameer over the balustrade, thus making it impossible for any of his subjects to fire. And now was the time to take full advantage of the position.

"Listen to me, Your Highness!" said Nelson Lee, bending over the Ameer, and making the latter's position more precarious than ever. "You are hovering between life and death. It lies in my hands, whether you are to live or to die. Do you realise that?"

"I am not a fool!" replied the Ameer hoarsely. "Hold back, you maniac! You'll have me over!"

"As you have sent others over, eh?" said Nelson Lee. "Perhaps, my dear Ameer, you will now appreciate the horror of it. A thousand-foot drop with certain death at the bottom. Does it appeal to you?"

"I shall have your eyes torn out!" snarled the Ameer. "I shall have you tortured—"

"It is idle for a man on the scaffold to threaten his executioner," interrupted Lee curtly. "Spare your breath, Your Highness. Spare it for the orders that you are now to give to your men."

"I shall give them no orders!"

"If you do not do so, then you shall topple over!" said Nelson Lee. "And when I say that I mean it! Remember, Your Highness, that it is a matter of our lives or yours. Do you think that I am going to hesitate? No! Therefore, let me advise you to be sensible."

"What—what are you saying?" panted the Ameer.

"You will give orders to your officer—now!" replied Lee. "You will tell him that every soldier is to be removed from the palace at once. Furthermore, you are to instruct your officer to bring every British subject under this roof into this apartment. Footmen, valets, gardeners, cooks, maids—all of them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand!" muttered the Ameer.

"You are clever, Mr. Lee!"

Everybody there had heard the words, and their hearts were beating wildly. Could it be possible that Nelson Lee was to gain full control of the palace? If the Ameer obeyed these orders, and if his men carried out their instructions—there could be no doubt about it. The palace would be in sole control of the British party.



There was only one avenue of escape, and down that
wildly. And then he spotted a mass of ornamental metal
arriving at the top. With one leap Handforth flung
lift! Had he been seen?
siders were approaching. Handforth looked round him
work appearing out of the lift well—the lift was just
himself through the air and landed on the top of the great
Would he be discovered?

Smith, the valet, who had been in the Summer Wing before any of the guests, was standing by, looking on with glittering eyes. There were two footmen there, too, and these men were equally excited.

Smith suddenly gave a gulp, and shuffled forward.

"Let me have a gun, sir!" he said wildly. "Let me have a gun! I'm with you, gents! I've had ten years of it here—ten years of fear! And now I'm ready to help. If I die, it can't matter much. But, by my Sam, I'll have a bit of a fling before I go!"

"Good man, Smith!" said Dorrie enthusiastically. "Pick one of those rifles from the floor. That's right! You can handle it? Good!"

He turned and looked at the two footmen.

"And you?" he asked. "Aren't you going to join us?"

The footmen hesitated, and one of them half stepped forward.

"It'll mean death if something goes wrong, sir!" he muttered. "Worse than death!"

"You're British, aren't you?" demanded Dorrie. "Well, show your spirit, man! I know very well that your manhood has been stifled since you have been in this accursed place. But there's a chance of liberty for you now. Aren't you going to take it?"

"Yes, by gosh, I am, sir!" shouted the footman suddenly.

His companion leapt forward, too. A moment later they were armed, and they took their places beside the St. Frank's fellows.

All this had only taken a mere moment or two, and now the Ameer craned his head over and looked at his startled officer. His position was appallingly undignified, for he was very precariously balanced over the balustrade, in Nelson Lee's grip. The slightest jerk, and it would be impossible for Lee to hold him any longer. He would go hurtling down to his doom.

"Give orders!" said the Ameer in a harsh, strident tone. "Have every soldier removed from the palace immediately. Get the servants here. And quickly—quickly!"

The officer saluted and dashed off.

"There's nothing like giving him some of his own medicine!" said Mr. Manners breathlessly. "By Heaven! It was an amazing piece of work of yours, Mr. Lee! Ten minutes ago we had absolutely no hope. And now—"

"Now," said Dorrie, "things are beginnin' to get interestin'."

A laugh came from the Ameer.

"Yes, my friends—very, very interesting!" he said. "Far more interesting, perhaps, than you realise!"

Crack!

It was a muffled little sound, rather like the snap of a whip. At the same instant the Ameer gave a convulsive wriggle, a super-human effort.

Nelson Lee had gone suddenly dazed, as though he did not quite know what was happening. And Dorrie, who was looking at Lee's face, felt his heart give a leap as he saw blood trickling down from the detective's hair. The next moment, Lee sagged slowly, grotesquely, to the marble floor.

The instant the detective's grip had relaxed the Ameer made his effort.



There was only one avenue of escape, and down wildly. And then he spotted a mass of ornament arriving at the top. With one leap Handforth lift! Had he been

And after a dreadful moment of hovering, he had jerked himself out of that deadly danger, and now he was standing with his back to the balustrade, a glittering little revolver in his grip!

CHAPTER 14.

A Change in the Situation!



THE Ameer was like a panther as he crouched there, his tiny revolver still smoking in his grasp.



approaching. Handforth looked round him hearing out of the lift well—the lift was just through the air and landed on the top of the great staircase. How was he to be discovered?

“Hold!” he thundered. “Up with your hands—all of you! Your leader is dead, and at the slightest movement from any of you, you will follow him into oblivion!”

Everybody was so startled that they could

scarcely move. This change in the situation had come so abruptly—so dramatically—so unexpectedly.

A moment earlier, everything had been in their favour. Now, as though by a miracle, the Ameer held the trump card again.

It was disastrous—it was appalling.

If anybody had been capable of connected thought, they would have realised that the Ameer had played for time; that he had cunningly worked a hand into his pocket, and had then edged his revolver into position, so that he could fire at Nelson Lee's head.

Yet the Ameer must have known, all the time, that such a proceeding would be fraught with deadly danger. It was only by his tiger-like movement at the critical moment that he had saved himself from overbalancing. And Nelson Lee now lay on the floor at his feet, blood trickling from his head.

Lord Dorrimore knew only one thing in that fateful second. He knew—or, at least, he believed—that Nelson Lee was dead. The Ameer had shot him in cold blood, with less compunction than he would have shot a guinea-pig.

“You murderous hound!” shouted Dorrie harshly.

He leapt towards the Ameer, and his eyes were full of deadly purpose.

Crack!

Dorrie staggered, and Nipper and several of the juniors shouted aloud. They had seen that the Ameer's revolver had been pointing straight at Lord Dorrimore's heart, and now there was a curl of smoke coming from the barrel of that tiny revolver.

At the same moment, his revolver pointing at the juniors, so that they could not use their rifles, the Ameer raced across the room, reached the corridor, and vanished. It was quite evident that he was hurrying away to countermand his orders; his intention being to have these prisoners subdued.

“Dorrie!” panted Nipper, running up.

His lordship was tottering on his heels, and he had gone deathly pale. Both his hands were clapped to his heart, and his revolver had slipped to the floor.

“Are you hit, man?” asked Mr. Manners frantically.

“Afraid so!” muttered his lordship in a dull voice. “Gad! The brute was quick!”

Nipper, in spite of his concern over Dorrie, scarcely gave his lordship a second glance. He ran over to the spot where Nelson Lee was sprawling, and he bent down. Nipper had thoughts only for his beloved master.

“Gav'nor!” he said tensely.

A gulp of joy came from his throat as he saw that Nelson Lee's eyes were flickering. In a flash, Nipper had the detective's head on his bent knee, and he carefully sought the wound.

“It's only a graze, you chaps!” said Nipper joyously. “Quick! Get some water, somebody! Oh, and I thought he was dead! It wasn't a direct hit—only a graze!”

Everybody was eager to help, not excluding the girls. Of these latter, Irene was perhaps the only one who remained pale and troubled.

"It's all my fault!" she kept saying. "If I hadn't resisted him, we should still have been safe——"

"You did quite right to resist him, Renie!" said her father hotly. "By heaven, the infernal scoundrel!"

"Yes, Irene, you did splendidly!" said Nelson Lee. "And, on the whole, it is far better that the situation should be as it is. We know exactly where we stand now."

"And we can beat this rotten Ameer, sir, too!" said Fullwood eagerly. "We've got rifles and ammunition. We can hold out until——"

He paused, hardly knowing how to finish his sentence. Until what? Indeed, there was no finish to that sentence. Even supposing the little garrison withstood the coming siege, what prospect of rescue was there?

Nobody knew of their presence in Idar, and it was impossible for help to arrive. They were on the summit of this gigantic crag, surrounded by enemies, and even if, by a miracle, they escaped from the crag itself, they would still be in a hopeless predicament.

Fortunately, nobody thought of this just then; there was too much to be done.

But the Ameer thought of it. And, now that the immediate crisis was over, he cooled down. He decided, in that evil mind of his, that he would keep his head, and that he would risk none of his soldiers' lives in the coming struggle. There was plenty of time. The prisoners were making a bit of a stand, but there was no real chance for them. Sooner or later they would be compelled to surrender.

And then——

The barricades rose steadily. Everybody took a hand in this work, and three of the most enthusiastic helpers were Smith and the two footmen. They were filled with a fierce joy. It was the first bit of excitement they had had for years, and they were momentarily intoxicated by the joy of it. Even if they died in the battle they would not care very much—in their present mood. Their manhood had been revived.

Tables were dragged to the end of the corridor, and all sorts of other articles of furniture. In less than ten minutes quite a respectable barricade had been built. It was not really strong enough to withstand a heavy charge, but then the defenders had their rifles. They were all very hopeful.

"What a pity it is that Handy isn't here!" said Church, for the twelfth time. "I wonder where the old chap is now? Still hiding in that cupboard, I expect."

"He probably doesn't know anything about this!" said McClare. "We can't tell him, either. And now he's isolated."

"Absolutely cut off, dear old chappies," nodded Archie Glenthorne. "Rather a frightful piece of luck for the dear old pippin.

I mean, he would have spread himself somewhat in this picnic."

Nipper was hurrying past at the moment, and he paused.

"Perhaps it's just as well that Handy isn't here," he remarked. "You know what a fat-head he is—how impulsive. He might have got himself killed during the first two minutes."

"Yes, there's that, of course," agreed Church, nodding. "But I'm thinking of what might happen when he gets to know the truth. The chances are he'll dash out on his own accord and then get shot down."

"Well, there's no sense in worrying over things that haven't happened," said Nipper. "There's quite enough going on just now to keep us busy. Anticipating trouble is worse than useless."

A hail came from Nelson Lee, and all the boys turned.

"Just a word, you youngsters," said Lee steadily. "I want you to understand that I am in complete command here——"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll obey all orders, sir!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Well, I want my orders to be obeyed on the instant!" said Lee. "I am very sorry that it should be necessary for you to defend your lives in this way——"

"Oh, cheese it, sir!"

"We'll all in this game together!"

"Absolutely!"

"I know I can rely upon you to do your best," continued Nelson Lee. "Those of you who have rifles will take your places at the barricades when the attack commences. I am rather surprised that it has not already developed. But we can be sure that it will not be long delayed."

"The sooner the better, sir!" shouted Fullwood.

"You must only fire when I give the order to fire!" said Nelson Lee impressively. "There must be no random shooting. To begin with, Dorrie and Mr. Manners and myself will hold the barricades. All you boys must remain in the background——"

"Oh!"

"You will only be called upon if matters become vital," said Lee, taking no notice of the disappointed shouts. "We will see how the affair develops. Everything will depend upon that."

"But look here, gov'nor!" protested Nipper. "We want to take our part in the defence!"

"Hear, hear!"

"A moment ago, boys, you promised to obey my orders!" said Lee quietly. "Are you questioning my authority already?"

"Sorry, gov'nor!" muttered Nipper.

The other flushed slightly, and there were no further grumbles. In obedience to orders, they kept back, and Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners placed themselves at the barricades. Smith and the other two men

were there, too, and it was their job to hold the less dangerous positions.

"Well, we're in it now!" said Dorrie happily. "Gad! But I'm feelin' as pleased as a dog with two tails!"

"You have nothing to feel pleased about, Dorrie!" said Lee, in a low voice. "Man alive! Do you believe for a moment that we shall win through?"

"We've been in worse corners than this!" retorted Dorrie.

"I doubt it!" said Lee. "Don't you appreciate the fact that our supply of ammunition is absurdly limited?"

"We haven't got much, I'm afraid," put in Mr. Manners.

"Much!" echoed Lee. "Our revolvers have no spare ammunition at all, and there are only a few belts for the rifles. Five minutes' brisk fighting, and we shall be left without another shot; and what do you think will happen after that?"

"There's not much supposin' about it, old man," said Dorrie, shaking his head.

"Therefore, we must use our ammunition with the greatest possible care," said Lee. "And it would be all the better if we enter this fight knowing that we cannot possibly

hold out. At the very best, we can show the Ameer that we are game to the last!"



CHAPTER 16.

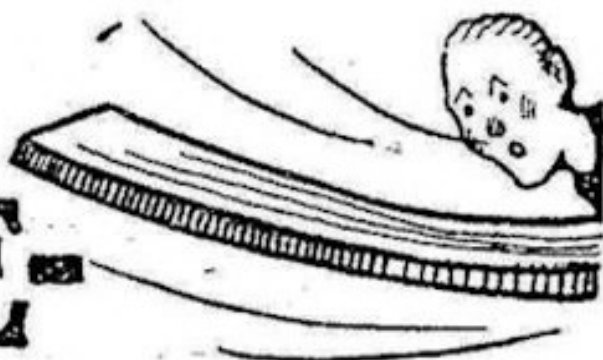
Handforth Gets Fed Up!

AND, in the meantime, Edward Oswald Handforth was in serene ignorance of all this excitement.

For a full half-hour he had remained in his hiding-place, in accordance with his promise. He was waiting for Smith, the valet, to turn up with some breakfast. But after half an hour Handforth had become tired of the game.

Cautiously opening the door of the cupboard, he had peeped out, and he had been reassured by the fact that the bed-room was quite empty. After all, he told himself, there wasn't much danger in coming out here. Nobody would enter these bed-rooms except some of the British servants—and they

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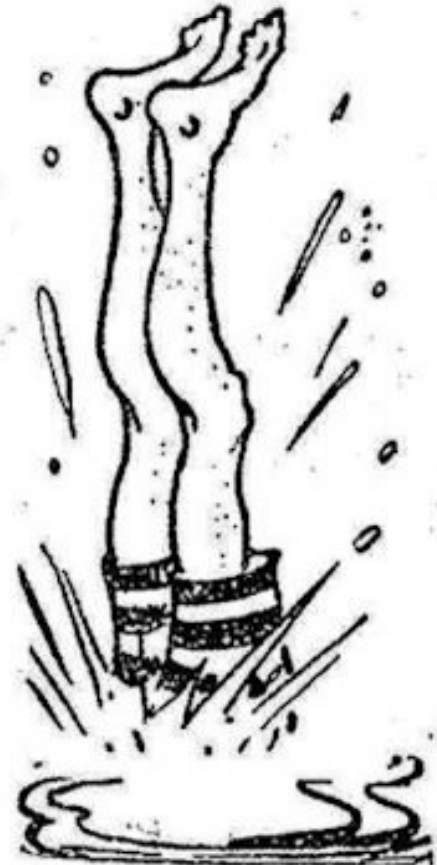
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wouldn't give him away, even if they found him.

So Handforth became bolder, and ventured right out.

He was trying to think of some way in which he could help the others. He did not know, of course, that some very exciting things had just commenced to happen. The Summer Wing was quite a distance from this particular quarter.

"Oh, it's all rot!" said Handforth gruffly. "Why the dickens can't I go and join 'em? There's no fear that the Ameer would have me put to death!"

Yet, when he considered the point, he decided that there *was* a fear. At any rate, it wasn't worth taking the risk. Handforth was very fond of life, and he had no desire to end it abruptly. The Ameer had already shown him how relentless and ruthless he could be.

Accordingly, the reckless Handy was for once cautious. But nothing could alter the fact that he was impatient. He went to one of the doors leading out on to the corridor, and placed his ear to the panel. He fancied he heard the sound of somebody pacing up and down—a soldier, probably, on patrol duty. It would never do to show himself.

This went on for another half-hour, and still there was no sign of Smith with the breakfast. Not that Handforth really cared about the food. He wanted to question Smith, to ask how everything was going, and he wanted to know if there had been any developments. So when a third half-hour slipped by, and there was still no sign, he became fed up to the neck.

"They must have forgotten me!" he decided disgustedly. "By George! I'll tell 'em something when they come down here again! The rotters! They know how jolly helpless I am, and yet they leave me here, and forget all about me!"

This was rather unjust, for Smith, at all events, had thought of Handforth several times, and Church and McClure had hardly allowed him to leave their minds. But naturally it had been quite impossible for them to go anywhere near him.

Suddenly Handforth stiffened, and he caught his breath in. He could distinctly hear the thudding of feet, as though men were running.

In a flash he had dodged back into his hiding-place, and he closed the door.

But nothing happened, and after two or three minutes he came out again. Everything was silent. He stood there, scratching his head.

"Rummy!" he muttered. "What the dickens is happening?"

He crept nearer to the door that led on to the corridor, and he stood listening. Complete and absolute silence. And then Handforth's natural recklessness displayed itself.

He was so fed up with waiting that he took a great risk. He cautiously opened the door and looked out. He might easily have looked straight into the eyes of a passing soldier, and that would have meant disaster for him.

But his proverbial luck was with him—as usual.

He saw at a glance that the long corridor was completely empty. This was rather strange, too, for hitherto there had always been men on duty at either end. Now there wasn't a sign of any living soul.

"Rummy!" repeated Handforth, puckering his brow.

He waited there for some little time, and he was struck by the dead, deserted appearance of everything. There was not even any servants about. It seemed as though everybody belonging to the palace had deserted the place.

"Oh, well!" said Handforth.

He felt that he was justified in making a little "investigation," as he was pleased to call it. It was risky, of course, but as there was nobody in sight he might just as well creep along the corridor for a bit and see what was happening. After all, there wasn't much danger.

Even if he met any of the soldiers he would be able to bluff it out. They were Indians, those soldiers, and if they saw him they would take him for one of the other fellows. It wasn't likely that they would know him by sight.

This, indeed, was quite a brainy thought of Handforth's. The chances were that if he met any of the soldiers, they would let him go by unmolested. His only real risk was the chance of meeting the Ameer himself, and, considering everything, this wasn't likely.

But Handforth met nobody.

He arrived at the end of the long corridor, and he found himself looking into the great foyer, which was the central pivot of the palace. To his surprise, there was nobody there, either. Yet when the party had arrived, there had been quite a good few soldiers on duty. Now they were all missing.

"Rummier and rummier!" muttered Handforth, puzzled.

He crossed the great foyer, by no means impressed by the noble marble and the superb carving. Such things as that had no interest for Handforth.

He beheld two great metal gates, and they were standing open. He crept towards them, and found himself looking into a void. Then he remembered. This was how they had come up; this was the well of the lift—that great lift which was the only communicating avenue between the palace and the solid ground, a thousand feet below.

A faint whirring noise came to Handforth's ears, and then, with a start, he realised that the lift itself was coming up! He crept away from the opening, wondering vaguely why the great gates had been left open. He did not know, of course, that everything was at sixes and sevens at the moment.

And then, to make matters worse, he heard many footsteps. He ran to one of the main openings and peeped round. Soldiers were coming! A group of them, led by an officer!

"My hat!" muttered Handforth.

He dodged across, meaning to go down to the other corridor, so that he could reach

his place of concealment again. Then in the nick of time he halted. More men were coming through that corridor—his one avenue of escape!

He backed away, startled. He had done it for himself now!

He looked round wildly, and, to his dismay, he saw that there was no cover in that great foyer. There was nowhere he could hide!

At that second he beheld a mass of ornamental metalwork slowly appearing out of the lift well. In a split second Handforth guessed the truth. The lift was just arriving at the top.

There was no time for hesitation, no time for thinking.

With one leap Handforth flung himself through the air over that barrier of ornamental metal, and landed on the top of the great lift. If he had hesitated for a fragmentary moment he would have been too late.

But as it was, he rolled over, concealed by the top of the lift, and at the same instant a number of soldiers came into the foyer:

And not one of them knew of this boy who had been there in full view a moment earlier!



CHAPTER 17.

The Unseen Witness!

SEVERAL officers came out of the lift, as soon as it had halted. At their head was his illustrious Highness, the Ameer of Rishnir himself, and the Ameer was looking grim and dangerous.

"Crumbs!" breathed Handforth.

He hadn't the faintest idea what had happened, but it was evident to him that there was something special in the wind. For all the officers were carrying firearms, and the Ameer himself held a big revolver in his hand. The other soldiers not only had rifles, but their bayonets were fixed. Also, there was a general air of excitement.

After the Ameer and the officers came a full score of men. And, to Handforth's amazement, they dragged two machine-guns out into the open, and immediately commenced getting them ready for action.

The Ameer was talking with his officers, but Handforth could not understand a word, since they were not using the English language. But Handforth saw quite enough.

His mind, under the most normal of conditions, generally jumped to melodramatic conclusions. Now it seemed to him that some very big trouble was in the air. There was to be a battle. And against whom but the St. Frank's party? And here was he—Handy—out of it all! He quivered with indignation. It was too thick altogether!

There could be no doubt that Handforth's position was extraordinarily lucky, for he could see everything that was going on, and yet he, himself, was unseen.

The lift was standing in place at the top of the great shaft, but there was a lot of

ornamental grille work overhead, and Handforth, of course, was behind this. There was also the ornamental grille work on the lift itself, so he was provided with a double barrier.

The roof of the lift was big, and there was plenty of room for him to move about if he wanted to do so. It was thick with dust, for it was very seldom that anybody thought it necessary to get on to the roof.

And while Handforth crouched there, without making any sound, there was no reason why he should be discovered.

It was impossible for him to get down even if he wanted to, for the metalwork was as strong as the bars of a prison. So he watched with fascinated interest, galled by the knowledge that he, himself, was helpless.

He saw the Ameer go to the entrance of one of the big openings that led out of the foyer, and he stood there for a moment, watching intently. Then the Ameer turned, and made a sign to two of his officers.

"Let there be no blundering!" he shouted, in a loud voice. "This attack must be successful. If it fails, you shall pay for your incompetence with your lives!"

"Well I'm blowed!" muttered Handforth.

For the Ameer was using English! It seemed a surprising thing that he should adopt that hated language to his own soldiers. But there was method in the Ameer's apparent madness.

He knew well enough that his voice would carry to the end of the corridor—to those Britishers who were behind the barricades. They would be able to hear all he said, and it was the Ameer's intention that they *should* hear.

"Take your machine-guns as near as possible and then open fire!" he continued loudly. "Kill every one! My patience is exhausted, and I have no intention of showing these dogs the slightest mercy. Kill them all!"

"Great Scott!" breathed Handforth.

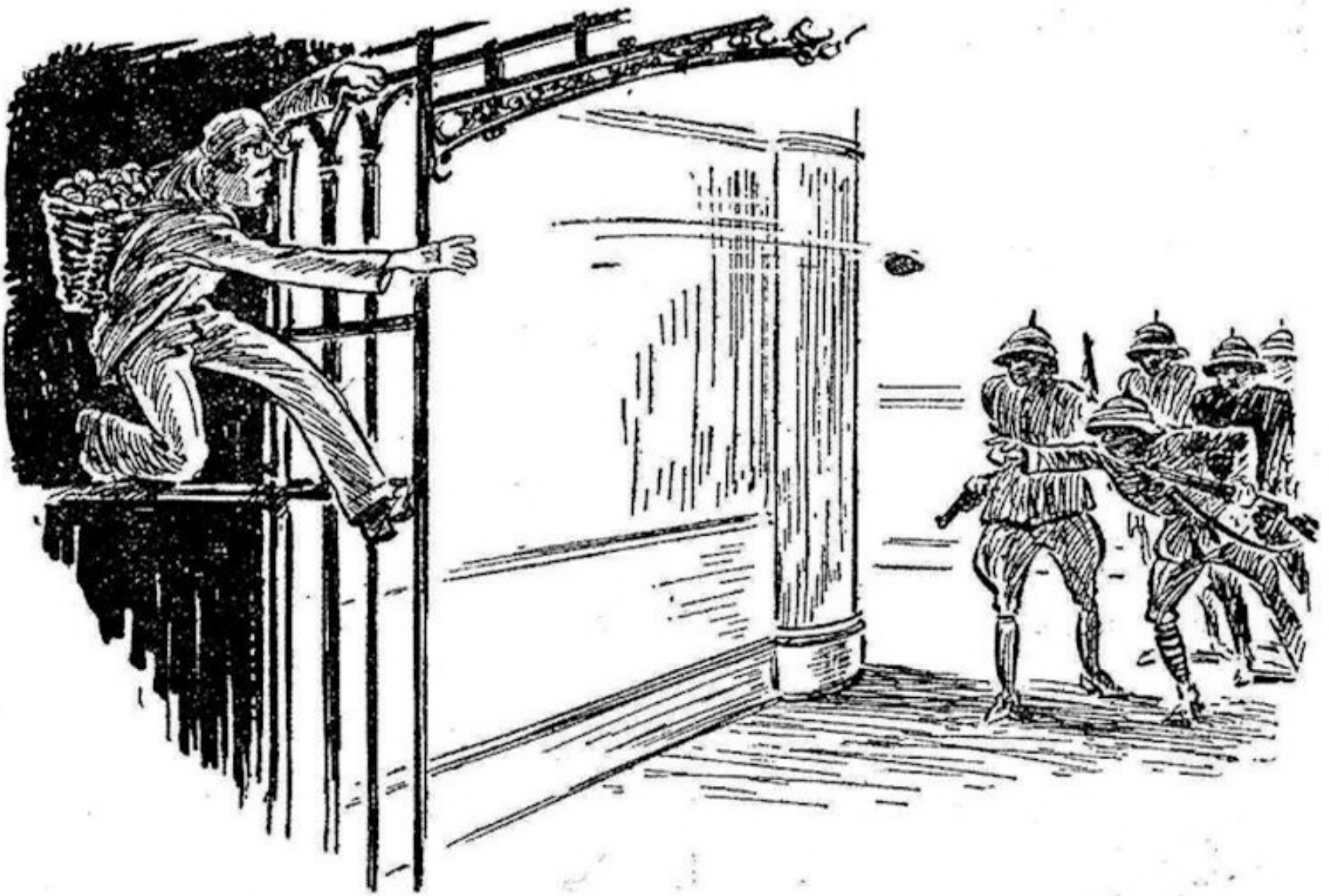
He clutched at the ornamental metalwork, staring madly. The Ameer was giving orders for all the St. Frank's fellows to be killed! And Nelson Lee and Dorrie and—Yes, and the girls!

They were going to be shot down by these machine-guns! It was appalling—it was horrible! And here was Handforth, behind this grille, unable to help in the slightest degree. His position was horrifying. He felt like a caged animal.

Yet really he was lucky. This hiding-place of his was unique, and if he had not found it he would have been dead before this.

"Wait!" continued the Ameer. "It is not likely that the young English girls will be in your line of fire. After you have killed the others and have broken down the defences, you will probably find the girls huddled in one of the rooms. Do not harm them, but bring them to me alive."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth hoarsely.



Handforth pulled the safety pin of his grenade and then, taking aim, he flung the thing with all his strength. But as he did so a yell sounded, and he found several of the soldiers pointing towards the grille. He had been seen!

"I do not intend the men or the boys to live!" shouted the Ameer. "But it is different with those gentle young English ladies. I shall show them every consideration."

Handforth was utterly horrified. There was something evil—something ghastly in the Ameer's tone.

"By George!" breathed Handforth fiercely. "The rotter! He's going to kill the others, but he means to save the girls! And he'll keep 'em prisoners for years, I expect! He'll wait until they grow up, and then he'll add them to his giddy domestic staff. That's about the size of it!"

He could hardly contain himself. Here was action—brisk, deadly action—and yet he was out of it all! He, the fighter, the reckless Handforth—out in the cold!

The chances were that Handforth would have done something rash during that next minute if he had been left to his own devices. He was, indeed, on the point of standing up and shouting defiance at the Ameer. He was in such a state of mind that he forgot all about danger, and he only wanted to tell this brown scoundrel that he was an out and out rotter.

But just then, much to Handforth's dismay, the lift gave a significant jerk. He half-fell, and lay flat. Then a queer sensation came over him, and it seemed to him that the walls of the shaft were moving upwards.

But then he knew the truth.

The lift was descending, and he was being taken with it!



CHAPTER 18.

The First Attack!

"DID you hear that, old man?" asked Dorrie, glancing at Nelson Lee.

"Yes," nodded Lee.

"I fancy the Ameer is shouting especially for our benefit. Machine-guns, Dorrie! It looks bad!"

"A pity you didn't chuck him over that balustrade while you had the chance!" said Dorrie.

"I couldn't, old man—and you know it."

"I suppose I do," admitted his lordship. "Well, we're in for a nice little packet in consequence of your reluctance to shed some particularly unsavoury blood."

"We should have been in for the 'packet,' as you call it, in any case," answered Nelson Lee. "Indeed, there would have been practically no hope for us if the Ameer had been killed. For his soldiers would have torn us limb from limb."

"And now they're going to riddle us with machine-gun bullets," said Mr. Manners steadily. "There's not very much difference, after all."

"Hallo!" muttered Dorrie. "Here they are! What about it, Lee? Shall we take a pot-shot at them?"

"Wait until they get a little nearer, when we shall be more sure," replied Lee.

And in the rear the St. Frank's fellows were waiting, their rifles ready.

"Why can't we join in?" asked Fullwood. "It's a bit thick keeping us back here out of all the danger."

"Don't be impatient, old man," said Nipper. "There'll be plenty of fighting for us to do before long, judging by the way things are going. If the Ameer is bringing machine-guns up, they'll get through that barricade in no time, and then it'll be a hand-to-hand struggle."

"And we shall all go under!" muttered Church.

"If we do, we do," said Nipper quietly. "But we'll go under gamely, anyhow. But, hang it, why look on the black side so much? All sorts of things might happen—particularly with the gov'nor and Dorrie in command. I haven't give up hope yet."

"Good gad, no!" said Archie. "Hope? Absolutely not, laddies! There's a large supply of the good old stuff welling up inside my manly breast at this moment. I've got chunks of it!"

"Good old Archie!" said Reggie Pitt approvingly. "That's the spirit! If we give up hope before we even start the fight, there'll be very little chance for us. We've got to take it for granted that we're going to win. We've got to win!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Down with the rotten Ameer!"

"Hurrah!"

From the doorway of one of the other rooms the girls were looking out.

"When you fellows grumble next time, think about us," said Mary Summers unhappily. "You're talking about having nothing to do, but we're barred from the fight altogether. Just because we're girls!" she added indignantly.

"It's too jolly bad!" declared Doris. "Girls can be as useful as boys—and don't you chaps forget it!"

"If I were in command," said Nipper graciously, "I'd give you all something to do."

"Mr. Lee doesn't give us credit for having any pluck," said Marjorie complainingly. "He thinks we're all soft. He thinks we're made of glass, or something!"

But Irene shook her head.

"If there were enough rifles to go all round, I expect we should be given a look in," she said. "But there aren't enough fire-arms even for the boys, and we mustn't forget that most of them are cadets. They can use guns better than we can. Perhaps we shall be able to help later on."

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The juniors jumped as three reports rang out. At a nod from Nelson Lee, he and Dorrie and Mr. Manners had fired, and they had the satisfaction of seeing three of the

soldiers at the far end of the corridor roll over. One of the machine-guns toppled and crashed.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

They fired again, and there was a moment of confusion. The soldiers scattered, but others immediately took their places. The Ameer, safely out of sight round the corner, was giving his orders. He did not care how many of his men fell. Human life was cheap in his eyes. He had determined to get these Britishers out of their retreat, and to kill them. The cost did not matter to him.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"Look out!" muttered Nelson Lee. "It's coming now, you fellows! We'd better get out of the immediate zone of fire. There's no sense in committing suicide!"

Zurrrrrr—zurrrrrh!

Two machine-guns had started and the din was nerve-shattering. Streams of bullets came pouring into the barricades, and it really seemed certain that the attack would succeed.

There was something very satisfactory in the thought that this corridor was the only means of getting into the Summer Wing. There could be no attack from the rear, and as long as the defenders could hold this one passage the situation might be saved.

"Here they come!" shouted Mr. Manners at the top of his voice.

The machine-guns had ceased firing, and a strong body of soldiers came tearing down

the corridor at the barricades. Their object was to rush them and to scatter the defences in the first onslaught.

"Now, boys—quickly!" shouted Nelson Lee. "To your places, and—fire!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the Ameer!"

Nipper and Reggie Pitt and the others with the rifles rushed to the defences, and never gave a thought to the possibility of death. In the excitement of the moment they were carried away.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

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Seven or eight rifles spoke at once, and a number of the onrushing soldiers fell, tripping some of those who came in their rear. Another round of bullets followed, and there was further confusion. But the numbers were too many, and the next moment the soldiers were tearing and scrambling at the barricades.

"Stand back, boys, and let them have it coolly!" ordered Nelson Lee. "Whatever you do, keep your heads!"

Again and again they fired, and the soldiers found that their task was greater than they had imagined. The barricades were erected sturdily, and they refused to budge, in spite of repeated charges.

And every now and again one of the attackers would fall until, indeed, many of the men were lying helpless. In nearly every case they had only been winged.

The defenders had not fired to kill; they had aimed low, deeming it satisfactory if the enemy soldiers were put out of action.

"Lummy!" gasped Smith, the valet. "They're retreatin', sir! They've had enough of it!"

"Hurrah!" panted Reggie Pitt. "He's right! They're retreating!"

Crack! Crack!

A final volley did the trick.

With one accord the attackers gave up their task and bolted back along the corridor. A full thirty men had hurled themselves to the attack, but less than ten fled. The others were lying on the floor, or crawling away, groaning.

The first attack had been repulsed, and the honours of the fight went to the defenders.



CHAPTER 19.

Handy Makes Himself Useful!

IT seemed to Handforth, as he went down that long shaft on the top of the lift, that the journey would never end. But at last the bottom was reached, and the great lift came to a standstill.

And now Handforth found that it was more necessary than ever for him to be extra cautious. For here there was no ornamental metal-work to act as a barrier when the lift came to a stop. He had nothing but the decorations of the lift top itself; and these were hardly adequate. Only by crouching down at full length was it possible for Handforth to escape observation.

His feelings were very mixed.

He had not wanted to come down here. His one desire was to be up above—in the palace—where the excitement was taking place. Yet he had had no choice in the matter.

He was exasperated intensely, and he was filled with anxiety for the safety of his companions. What was happening up there now? Had they been all killed? Had those machine-guns succeeded in their object?

"Oh, corks!" panted Handforth. "I've never been in such a rotten fix in my life! What the dickens can I do? Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

But for the "row" that was going on overhead, Handforth might have felt very excited over this trip to the ground. He would have had all sorts of fantastic ideas of escaping. He might even have ventured out into the City of Idar, hoping, in his optimism, that he would be able to escape, and eventually get into Kurpana.

As it was, Handforth's only desire was to go up again, for he was filled with dread, lest his companions should all be killed.

There was a good deal of talking just outside the lift, to commence with, but it did

not interest Handforth, since he could not understand a word. But after a bit the voices faded away, and there were no sounds of footsteps, either.

At last Handforth ventured to look up, and to peer over the top of the narrow shield which protected him from view.

He found himself looking into a rather dim, lobby-like place, cut out of the solid rock at the base of the crag. There was none of the magnificence here that was so much in evidence at the top of the lift shaft.

There was nobody in sight, and Handforth grunted. It was quite on the cards that the lift would remain down here for hours. And there was no way of—

Then his thoughts gave a kind of jerk. He could climb down from the lift now—and he could even get inside! Supposing he dodged in and closed the gates? He might be able to work the thing and get to the top again!

But before he could decide whether he should attempt this or not, a soldier appeared, carrying a curiously shaped basket over his shoulder by means of a big strap. Handforth crouched down, still watching.

The man very cautiously unhitched the basket and let it carefully on the ground, just in front of the lift. Then he hurried away again. Handforth stared at the basket and its contents, frowning in a puzzled way.

"Anybody might think they were bombs, by the way the chap was handling that basket!" he muttered. "He seemed to be afraid— By George! I wonder if— They are!"

In a flash, Handforth recognised the rounded objects which filled the basket. And, of course, there was a perfectly legitimate reason why they should be brought here. They were hand grenades!

He recognised them now. They were of a new design to him, but, without doubt, they were hand grenades. Each one had its own pin, and they were more or less nobbly.

Handforth's heart jumped when he realised that these deadly things were to be used against his chums, and against Nelson Lee and the girls. What chance would there be for the party, once these deadly grenades were flung at them?

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth faintly.

He was overwhelmed by an idea which had suddenly struck him. And, with Handforth, to think was to act. It was a general rule for him to act impulsively. He never paused to consider things.

In less than three seconds he had clambered over the top of the lift, and was climbing down like a monkey. By an extraordinary stroke of luck he reached the basket of hand-grenades without being seen. He took a glance out of the cave-like entrance, and he could see, across the great courtyard, a number of soldiers approaching.

His idea had been to fill his pockets with the grenades, but he could now see that there was no time for that. So he heaved the basket on to his shoulders and put the strap round his neck. Then, with the agility of a

monkey he climbed up the side of the lift again, thanking his stars that there were plenty of metal projections to afford him foothold.

A single slip might have brought disaster, for if Handforth had fallen with all those grenades he would probably have been blown into a thousand pieces.

But he reached the top of the lift again, and then unhitched the basket and pushed it to the very back. Then he crouched down, waiting breathlessly, his heart beating a song of triumph within him.

"Good egg!" he muttered. "Even if that soldier wonders what the dickens happened to his basket, they'll never guess the truth! They'll never think of looking up here! They'll think that somebody else came along and shifted it!"

Without doubt this move on Handforth's part had not only been brainy, but courageous. He had taken his life into his hands by showing himself. But his extraordinary luck had held good.

And now, as he had half-suspected, an officer appeared with a number of men. They were bringing with them a kind of trench mortar—a smallish-looking gun, with a wide, wicked mouth. Other men were carrying shells of a curious type, and all of them went into the lift.

A moment later the lift commenced moving upwards, and nobody seemed to notice that the hand-grenades were missing.

But those hand-grenades were being taken up to the palace, after all—although they were now in dangerous hands!



CHAPTER 20.

Too Hot to Last!

LORD DORRIMORE selected a sandwich from the table, and bit into it contentedly.

"This reminds me that we haven't had any brekker," he remarked. "Why starve ourselves? Come along, you fellows—there's plenty of stuff here."

"We're not hungry, Dorrie!" said Nipper. "How the dickens can you eat with all this rumpus going on?"

"What rumpus? It's over, you young ass!"

"You can't fool me like that, Dorrie—or anybody else!" said Nipper. "It may be over for the moment, but something pretty big will happen before long."

"Then, until it happens, let's be cheerful!" said his lordship coolly. "And as for the Ameer, may he trip over his own shadow and fall down his own lift-shaft!"

Dorrie's light-heartedness was infectious, and the majority of the juniors were feeling cheery. Now and again they thought of Handforth, and they wondered what was happening to the redoubtable leader of

Study D. But, after all, there was no need to worry about him. He was probably the safest fellow of them all. Little did they realise what extraordinary activities Handforth was indulging in!

There had been a brief respite, and Nelson Lee was quite convinced that this was only the calm before the storm. The injured soldiers had been taken away, and the wide corridor was clear once more. Now and again there were signs of movement at the farther end, near the great foyer, but it seemed that no further attack was yet contemplated.

And the defenders had taken the opportunity of strengthening the barricades. They had done their work well, and it would need a veritable battering-ram to break through those defences now.

"What do you think of things, Mr. Lee?" asked Irene's father, as they stood together at the barricade.

"It seems all so pointless," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "Of course, I will admit that we are doing the only thing possible. We cannot surrender. That is impossible. Yet, when you come to consider the position, what hope is there for us?"

"There seems to be none!"

"And, indeed, there is none—unless something unforeseen happens," went on Lee. "And I really cannot see how anything of that nature can transpire. There is only a handful of us here, and our ammunition is nearly exhausted. A second onslaught will find us beaten. And after that? Surely, Manners, your imagination can picture what will follow?"

"I am afraid it cannot!" replied Mr. Manners. "With a man like the Ameer, the human imagination is inadequate."

"Hallo! What's this?" put in Lord Dorriemore, as he peered through a hole in the defences. "The white flag, by glory!"

An officer was walking down the corridor, and he was carrying a flag of truce. There was a complete silence as he approached.

"Mr. Lee!" he called, when he grew comparatively near.

"What is it?" asked Nelson Lee.

"You are, I believe, the leader of this party?"

"Yes."

"I have brought a message from His illustrious Highness," said the officer unemotionally. "You are requested to surrender forthwith."

"Yah! Go and eat coke!"

"Rats!"

"We'll never surrender!"

"Down with the Ameer!"

All the juniors who had heard the words shouted defiance.

"We shall not surrender!" said Nelson Lee, after the hubbub had subsided.

"I am instructed to inform you that unless you surrender forthwith the barricades will be blown down by shell fire."

"Great gad!" muttered Dorrie.

"It is for you, Mr. Lee, to give me your answer," said the Rishnir officer. "His illustrious Highness desires you to have every

chance. He is willing to overlook this gross breach of his hospitality. If you will walk quietly out of this wing you shall be allowed the same measure of freedom as you have already enjoyed. But if you refuse, His illustrious Highness is prepared to go to extreme lengths in order to subdue you."

Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

"Go back to your illustrious master, and tell him that we are all of one mind," he said steadily. "We have no intention of surrendering, and he can do his worst!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, sir!"

Nelson Lee had spoken for them all, and they were in hearty agreement with his answer. For they all knew instinctively that the Ameer's promise was meaningless. To surrender would be to give themselves up to untold tortures. It would be far better to go under fighting.

The officer saluted.

"I will take your answer," he said briefly.

He walked back, and Dorrie glanced at Nelson Lee.

"Think he means it?" he murmured.

"Without question he means it!" replied Lee, with tight lips. "Good heavens, Dorrie! We must do something quickly! See! There is the trench-mortar in readiness! They are going to shell the barricades!"

"But, man alive, it will half-wreck the whole wing!"

"The Ameer is determined to beat us, and he does not care what damage is caused," replied Lee. "And I think you are wrong, Dorrie. I do not believe that the shell-fire will cause much damage, except to the barricade. But it will, naturally, scatter that to fragments."

"The mortar is only a small one," said Mr. Manners, "and probably the missiles will be robbed of half their explosive."

"Half will be sufficient!" said Lee grimly. "I'm afraid, you fellows, that this is going to be the end."

Nelson Lee had every reason for speaking so pessimistically. Even Dorrie, the optimist, was compelled to grant that there was little or no hope now. For once the barricade was shattered by the explosion of the shell, the Ameer's soldiers would rush in and quickly finish the work of destruction.

Nelson Lee turned to the boys.

"Get as much to the sides as you can!" he he sharply. "Get into these adjoining rooms, and keep well back!"

"But, sir—"

"Do as I say!" interrupted Lee. "There is not a moment—"

"Look out!" roared Dorrie.

He and Mr. Manners and Nelson Lee leapt wildly aside. Smith and the other two men were already well clear. There came a low, dull explosion from down the corridor, and then it seemed that the whole world was shattering to pieces.

The barricades splintered to matchwood, and there was a blinding, blazing flare of

light. Pieces of wood fell in all directions, and Lee was hit and gashed in the cheek. Dorrie got a nasty jab in the arm. Then the dust cleared, and it was seen that the barricade was more than half-demolished. Yet scarcely any other damage was done.

"Quickly now!" shouted Lee, rushing back to the defences, his rifle ready.

But he was without hope. He knew that the soldiers would now come rushing up to follow their advantage. And it would be sheerly impossible to hold them at bay.



CHAPTER 21.

The Mystery!

HERE they come!" said Dorrie breathlessly.

He and the others were at the defences, and they could see a solid mass of men at the other end of the corridor preparing to make their charge. And one glance was sufficient. With the barricade broken, and with most of the defenders' ammunition gone, the issue was practically settled.

"Charge!" came a loud order in English.

And the soldiers came rushing down the corridor, bayonets fixed.

Crack! Crack Crack!

The defenders fired, and one or two of the enemy fell. But the great majority came pressing on. And then suddenly an extraordinary thing happened.

Bang!

There was a loud, sharp, devastating explosion towards the rear of the oncoming soldiers. A cloud of acrid smoke arose, and the soldiers paused, confused, disorganised. The foremost of them continued to charge, but it was obvious that they were unsettled by the inexplicable explosion that had taken place in their rear.

Bang!

Another one came, and several men fell, shrieking aloud. Yet curiously enough, none of them seemed to be badly injured. They screamed in agony, clutching at their eyes and their throats. The end of the passage was filled with a yellowish, murky vapour.

"Poison gas!" gasped Dorrie. "But they must be mad—to let the stuff off down there amongst their own men!"

"It cannot be poison gas!" said Lee keenly. "The men are not falling. It must be some kind of vapour that temporarily affects the eyes and throat."

Bang!

Another explosion sounded, and the great majority of the enemy scattered, fleeing back into the big foyer. Only a remnant of the force was left, and this remnant had hesitated.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The defenders took advantage of their opportunity, and rifles and revolvers spat viciously. After about twenty seconds the broken force turned tail, and retreated.

"Hurrah!" yelled the juniors.

"I cannot understand it!" muttered Nelson Lee. "What can have happened?"

And this was a question that the Ameer's officers were asking, too!

Yet the answer was very simple, if they had only known it. Edward Oswald Handforth, perched on the top of the great lift, was taking an important hand in the battle. Earlier he had believed that he was entirely out of all the excitement. But now he was in the middle of it. He was, indeed, the most important factor of all.

From his position behind that grille he had heard the officer's words—the threat to blow the barricades down by shell-fire. He had heard, to his keen satisfaction, Nelson Lee's refusal to surrender; he had also heard the cheers of his schoolfellows.

And Handforth had been greatly heartened. For he knew then that everybody was still safe.

And there on the top of the lift he had those hand-grenades, and not a soul knew of his presence. It was a unique position, and the redoubtable Handforth took full advantage of his opportunity.

The sudden firing of the mortar had taken him by surprise, but after the soldiers had commenced their charge, he had suddenly awakened to the critical nature of the moment.

Without a thought for the consequences, he had pulled the pin of one of the grenades, and had flung it unerringly through the grille, right across the foyer and into the thick of the soldiers at the end of the corridor.

Three of those grenades had he flung, and then he had had the satisfaction of seeing the men come streaming back into the foyer, staggering drunkenly, blinded and choking. There was complete confusion. Everybody was shouting at once, and the officers were distracted. The attack had failed, and nobody knew why. Nobody could explain how those explosions had been caused.

"My only hat!" breathed Handforth, with a gulp. "They don't know! They didn't see me chuck the giddy things! It's a mystery to 'em! By George! I'd better keep it up!"

He crouched down, watching intently.

The Ameer himself appeared now, coming from one of the other corridors—from some other section of the great palace. His brow was black, and his eyes were glittering.

He rapped out his questions in a terrible voice, and Handforth could see the officers trembling under his gaze. One man, indeed, who dared to protest too strongly was shot down by the Ameer as though he were a mere dummy. He fell, groaning, and His illustrious Highness raved in vain.

"Go it!" murmured Handforth. "You may find me in the end, but I've given you something to puzzle over, haven't I?"

He couldn't understand what was being said, but he could easily guess. Soldiers were now searching everywhere—in the corridors, all round the foyer, in the very

lift itself. Yet, strangely enough, nobody thought of looking on the top of the lift.

But perhaps this was not so strange, after all. How could they guess that anybody was hidden up there? How could they imagine that the bombs were coming through the grille, flung by one of the St. Frank's school-boys?

For the Ameer believed that the entire party was bottled up in the Summer Wing. Handforth's presence in the palace was entirely unknown and unsuspected. The Ameer and his officers believed that the explosions had been due to somebody's carelessness—to some accident. They were not searching for an enemy, for they did not believe that any enemy was amongst them.

But they could discover no explanation of the mystery, and, after a while, the force was formed up again, and fresh orders were given.

Handforth stealthily raised himself. He selected another of the grenades, and he quickly pulled the pin. At that moment not a single eye was turned in his direction; nobody was looking towards the lift. Silently, the grenade sped through the air, over the heads of all those soldiers. Then, with a thud, it fell beyond the first group, and a wild shout went up.

Bang!

The thing exploded violently, and once again there was complete confusion. The Ameer himself was standing quite close, and he staggered away, shouting madly.

"This is pretty good!" said Handforth triumphantly.

He had no compunction in throwing those grenades. He had seen that they did not cause grave injuries—and it is doubtful if he would have hesitated, even if the things had caused death. For the situation was critical. The whole matter was a life-and-death struggle. He was doing this to save his companions, and he was in grim earnest.

Again the Ameer's officers were mystified. They could only think that some of the soldiers had been carrying the grenades, and that somebody, at least, was either a traitor or crazy.

And then came an unexpected turn, and it was necessary for Handforth to make a swift, momentous decision.

CHAPTER 22.

Handforth Does the Trick!

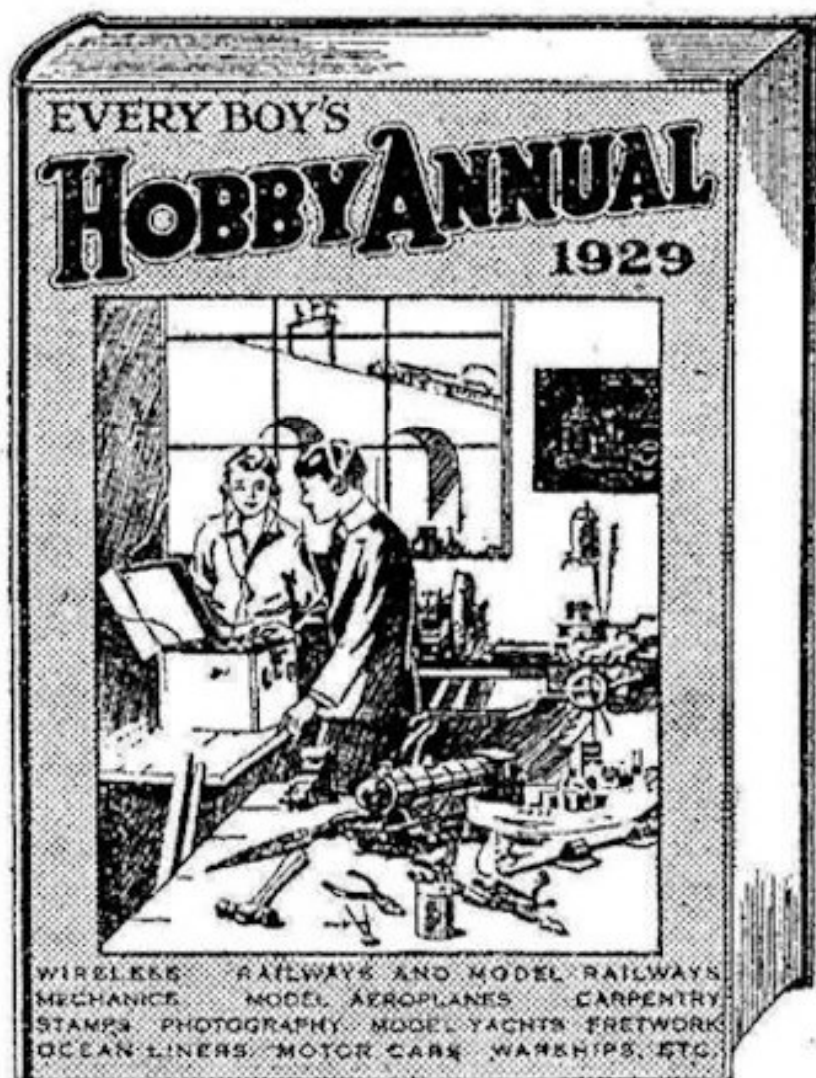


THE AMEER OF RISHNIR strode towards the great lift, his brow as black as thunder, and with

him were two of his officers. He was talking rapidly. They entered the lift, and Hand-

(Continued overleaf.)

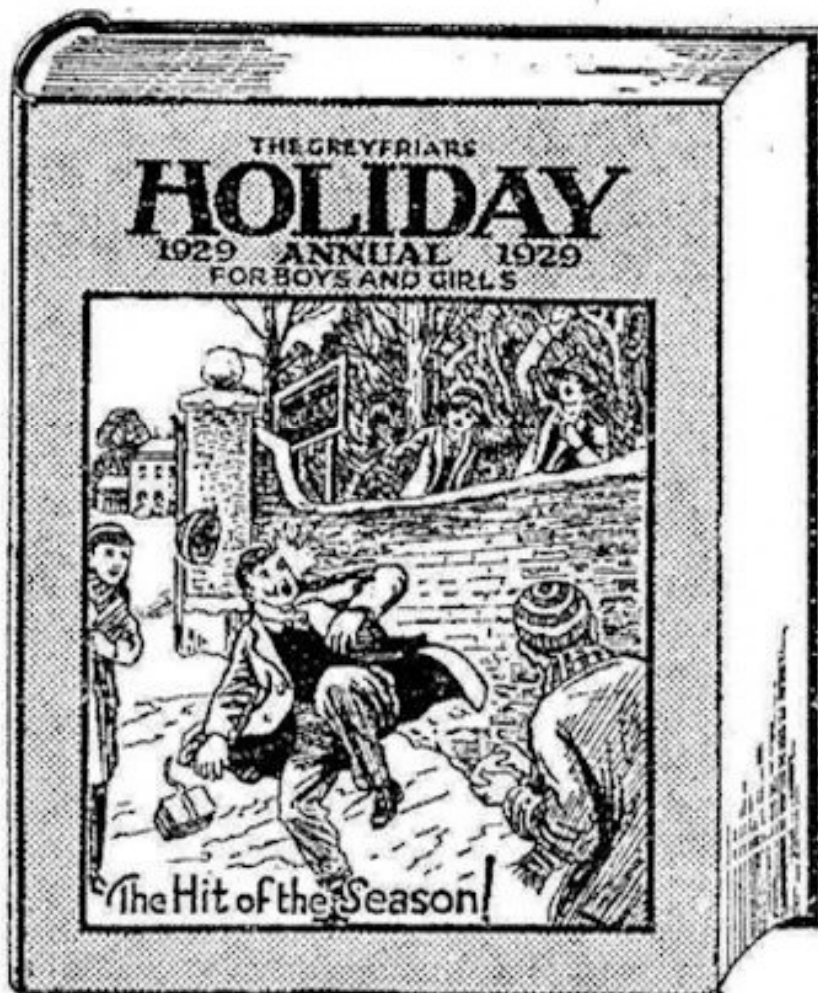
BETTER THAN EVER!



WIRELESS RAILWAYS AND MODEL RAILWAYS
MECHANICS MODEL AEROPLANES CARPENTRY
STAMPS PHOTOGRAPHY MODEL YACHTS FRETWORK
OCEAN LINERS MOTOR CARS WARSHIPS, ETC.

A new edition of this Popular Annual for Boys will be on sale in a few weeks' time.

HERE WE ARE AGAIN!



The Hit of the Season!

Look out for another new edition of the famous "Holiday Annual"—appearing shortly on the Bookstalls.

forth, who had seen them from above, felt his heart give a leap.

"Crumbs!" he gasped. "They're going down!"

He was determined not to go down that everlasting shaft again. He wanted to be here—within sight of the hostilities. And there was only one thing for him to do.

With an effort, he lifted the basket of hand grenades, and swung it over his shoulder. Then he clung like a monkey to the heavy metal work of the lift shaft, above the lift itself.

As he did so the lift commenced descending—leaving him there, in mid-air.

But, at least, he was not going down again, and he was momentarily satisfied. Gradually he edged his way along until he reached one of the corners, where he was safely out of sight, and here, to his intense satisfaction, he found a fairly large metal ledge, where he could gain some degree of ease.

"Good egg!" he muttered exultantly.

He was in a safer position than ever. Never would the Ameer's officers think of looking for an enemy here—perched up in this shaft, beyond the ornamental grille. And the lift itself had now gone down.

Handforth took a look downwards, but he did not feel giddy. He wasn't the sort to do so. He was the type of fellow who could climb the side of the house, from the ground to the roof, without turning a hair. And now, although he knew that certain death awaited him if he slipped, he never gave the matter a thought.

He saw that the gates of the lift were still open, leaving the shaft unprotected. Edging his way sideways again, he took a peep through the metal work. He could see two of the officers forming the men up again, and it was evident that another attack was to be made.

"All right!" muttered Handforth fiercely. "I'll spoil your giddy little game!"

And just then an idea came to him—a brain-wave.

There were scores of those grenades in that basket, and, sooner or later, he was bound to be discovered. He could only throw one here and there. If, on the other hand, he could get through to the main party, those grenades would be a hundredfold more useful.

But how to get through?

The majority of fellows in Handforth's position would have taken it for granted that the venture would be doomed to failure. But Edward Oswald Handforth was quite different. He saw no reason why he could not make a dash, and get through the barricade before any of the enemy soldiers could get at him. It would all depend upon speed. Handforth had plenty of faith in his running abilities.

"I'll do it!" he decided promptly.

But, as a preliminary, he reached a hand round, and selected one of the missiles. With a quick jerk, he pulled himself up—just as he was about to release the safety pin.

"I'd better wait a bit!" he decided.

He could see that the attack was not ripening just yet. It would be better for him to throw his grenade at the critical moment—and then there would be more chance of him breaking through in the confusion.

So he clung there, waiting and watching. The minutes passed, and he did not heed his aches and the heavy strain on his shoulders, caused by the basket that was slung there. Yet the weight of those grenades was very considerable, and at any other time Handforth would have complained bitterly.

It seemed to him that the officers were waiting for something, and it proved that he was right in this assumption. A bell suddenly sounded somewhere below the spot where Handforth was clinging, and instantly the officers became active.

That bell probably meant that the lift was coming up again—with more reinforcements—and, possibly, with further weapons or ammunition. The Ameer was quite lavish, and he apparently did not care how much destruction he caused—so long as he killed these Britishers who had dared to defy him.

As it happened, it was an extraordinarily lucky chance that Handforth had waited. For, by waiting, he was to be accidentally responsible for the greatest stroke of fortune that had yet befallen the besieged garrison.

He pulled the safety pin of his grenade, and then, taking aim, he flung the thing with all his strength. But as he did so a yell sounded, and he found several of the soldiers pointing towards the grille.

He had been seen at last!

Bang!

The grenade exploded beyond the officers, and men were sent reeling in all directions. And Handforth, breathing hard, took a great chance.

He swung himself down that precarious metal-work, and then, hanging by his fingers, he swung and let go. He landed on his feet, well clear of the shaft, and, after staggering a moment, he regained his balance. And not one of the grenades had been jerked from the basket.

Quick as thought, he reached round, seized another of the missiles, pulled the pin and flung it. Two or three rifles cracked out, but in the excitement the aim was bad, and Handforth escaped.

Bang!

The grenade went off, and Handforth's way was clear. He closed his mouth, shut his eyes, and charged blindly forward. Nobody tried to stop him; for the fresh confusion was worse than ever.

Once in the corridor, Handforth turned, and he flung another grenade with all his strength. It went hurtling clean across the foyer, and disappeared right down the lift shaft.

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "Now then, you rotters! Catch me if you can!"

He sped like mad along the corridor, and a combined yell of welcome, and triumph

came from the watchers behind the barriers.

"Great Scott! It's Handy!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Handy!"

Boom—boom!

The very crag seemed to shake and shiver, and even Handforth paused, although he was still in danger. What had happened now?

It was obvious, from the very force of that tremendous sound, that a considerable explosion had taken place somewhere. As Handforth looked back, he saw a dazzling, ruddy burst of light from the foyer, and every soldier within sight went hurtling over, as though by some unseen blast.

Then a tremendous rush of hot air came surging round Handforth, and he was knocked off his balance, too. But by then the tremendous force of the explosion had expended itself. Handforth ran on, breathless—amazed.

He found himself being pulled through the broken barricade, and then he was in the midst of the other St. Frank's fellows!



CHAPTER 23.

The Victors!

"HERE, steady!" gasped Handforth, in alarm. "Good old Handy!" "Oh, Handy, we thought we should never see you again!" panted Church. "What the dickens have you been doing?" "Unless you all want to get killed, leave me alone!" ejaculated Handforth. "This basket is full of hand-grenades!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Here, let me take it, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee sharply.

He and Dorrie relieved Handforth of the basket, and they carried it safely away and deposited it near the wall. Then Lee came back, and he seized Handforth's fist.

"Well done, my boy!" he said heartily.

"Oh, cheese it, sir!" growled Handforth. "I thought I might as well take a hand in the game, you know. I found that basket of hand-grenades, pinched it, and then I dropped one or two amongst the enemy."

"What an amazing fellow you are, Handy!" said Lord Dorrimore, in frank astonishment. "How on earth you manage to come through these adventures scathless is positively miraculous."

"He was born lucky, sir!" said McClure.

"But—but what's happened?" ejaculated Handforth. "Didn't you hear that explosion, sir?" he added, looking at Lee. "It must have been something tremendous!"

"I imagine that an accident must have happened," replied Lee. "It seemed to come from the lift shaft—"

"By George!" shouted Handforth, his eyes burning. "I've got it! As I turned into the corridor, I threw another of those

grenades, and it went right down the lift shaft! The lift was coming up!"

"Good gad!"

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!"

"A part of the roof of the lift—that bit in the centre—is glass!" panted Handforth. "The grenade must have fallen clean through with terrific force, and it probably exploded inside and set off some of the ammunition that was being brought up!"

"Undoubtedly you are correct!" said Nelson Lee tensely. "And that means, of course, that the lift is out of commission—completely and utterly wrecked! Great heavens, Dorrie, this may mean our salvation!"

"Didn't I tell you to keep cheerful?" asked his lordship triumphantly.

"And I told you that unless something unforeseen happened we were assuredly doomed," replied Lee. "Well the unforeseen *has* taken place! Not one of us—not even Handforth—could have dreamed that the lift would be destroyed."

"And perhaps the Ameer was in it, sir," said Handforth breathlessly.

"That is probable, but it is not a matter that need concern us at the moment," replied Lee. "The main thing is that the lift is destroyed. That, of course, means more to use than I can explain in a mere sentence."

"Then do it in two or three sentences," said Dorrie pointedly. "I may be dull—in fact, I am dull—because I'm hanged if I can see how the position is much brighter. In fact, I thought the opposite. I had a fleeting idea that we might desire to reach the main section of terra firma one day. And without the lift—"

"There is no necessity for us to look into the future, Dorrie," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "There are many ways in which we could get down from this crag, irrespective of the lift. But can you suggest any ways in which people could get up?"

"That's too much of a poser for me, old man."

"Can't you understand?" said Lee. "None of the Ameer's soldiers can come up to the attack now. With the lift out of action, we are isolated up here. Certainly we cannot get to the ground, but the Ameer cannot use his armed legions upon us."

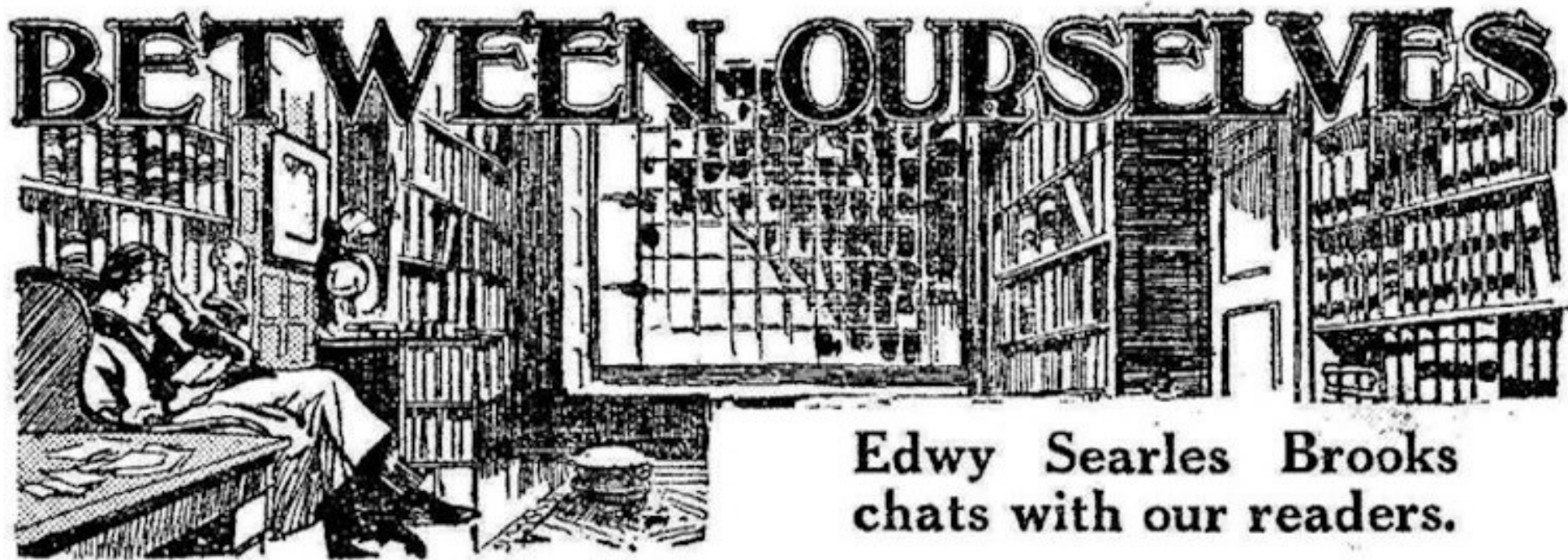
"My goodness!" said Nipper, his eyes opening wide.

"And that means, with any ordinary luck, we shall be able to seize the whole of the palace!" went on Lee. "So far, we have had the odds against us—we have been hemmed in this one wing. But with the whole palace under our command the situation will be very different."

"And there's all the men, sir!" put in Smith, the valet. "There's a lot of 'em who would be glad to help—"

"They'll all help, I hope," said Lee. "This palace contains a large number of Britishers—mostly men. They will make quite a respectable defence force when thoroughly

(Concluded on page 43.)



Edwy Searles Brooks chats with our 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: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., LONDON, E.C.4.

THE largest city in the world—Frank S. Mackay (Holmesburg, U.S.A.)—is London. I cannot give you the exact population, but even as far back as 1921 the population of Greater London was 7,400,000 odd. So, after 7 years, I don't think I am far wrong in computing the present size at 8,000,000. But really a great City is not great because of its actual size. It is great because of its traditions, its history, its records. Even if the population of London was far less than the population of New York, there can be no doubt that London would still be the greater city.

Yes—Marjorie Milliken (Wallasey)—I am quite fond of boating, but I like canoeing better. I used to do quite a lot of the latter when I was out in California. I'm very fond of tennis, too, and play a bit. Cricket is also one of my favourite sports, but I only watch this. I'm afraid I haven't the time to get myself tied up to a club. I'm glad you are now a regular reader of "The Popular," and that you like the paper very much. Let's hope that lots more of our readers have now decided to take in "The Popular."

If you find it too much of a task to keep up your regular weekly letter—Eric Bournes (Sydney)—don't carry on with it. Just write to me as often as you *want to*. I shan't think any the less of you. It must be pretty awful to make a resolution like that, and then stick to it although you have nothing particular to write about. But if you *do* keep it up, you will prove that your determination is as strong as your resolution. Yes, I am well aware that this page has been conspicuous by its absence lately. But in future it will be conspicuous by its presence.

I want every reader to be like you—"Rough 'un Sheila" (Taumarunui, New Zealand). You say that it is easy to write to me because it seems that you know me, through reading my yarns. That's splendid!

I want all my readers to write to me as though I were a real old pal. There's nothing like it. By the way, judging from what you say, it seems that your granddad is now a regular reader, too. Don't forget to give him my kind regards, will you? If you care to send me your full name and address, I'll certainly write and give you my honest opinion of you, "Rough 'un Sheila."

Even a short letter—Dora Cantor (Krugersdorp, South Africa)—is better than no letter at all. But I'm not going to forgive you—for the simple reason that there is nothing to forgive. You're a very regular correspondent, and I'm always interested in your Guide doings. I shall be very glad to get your promised letter describing the Union Day celebrations.

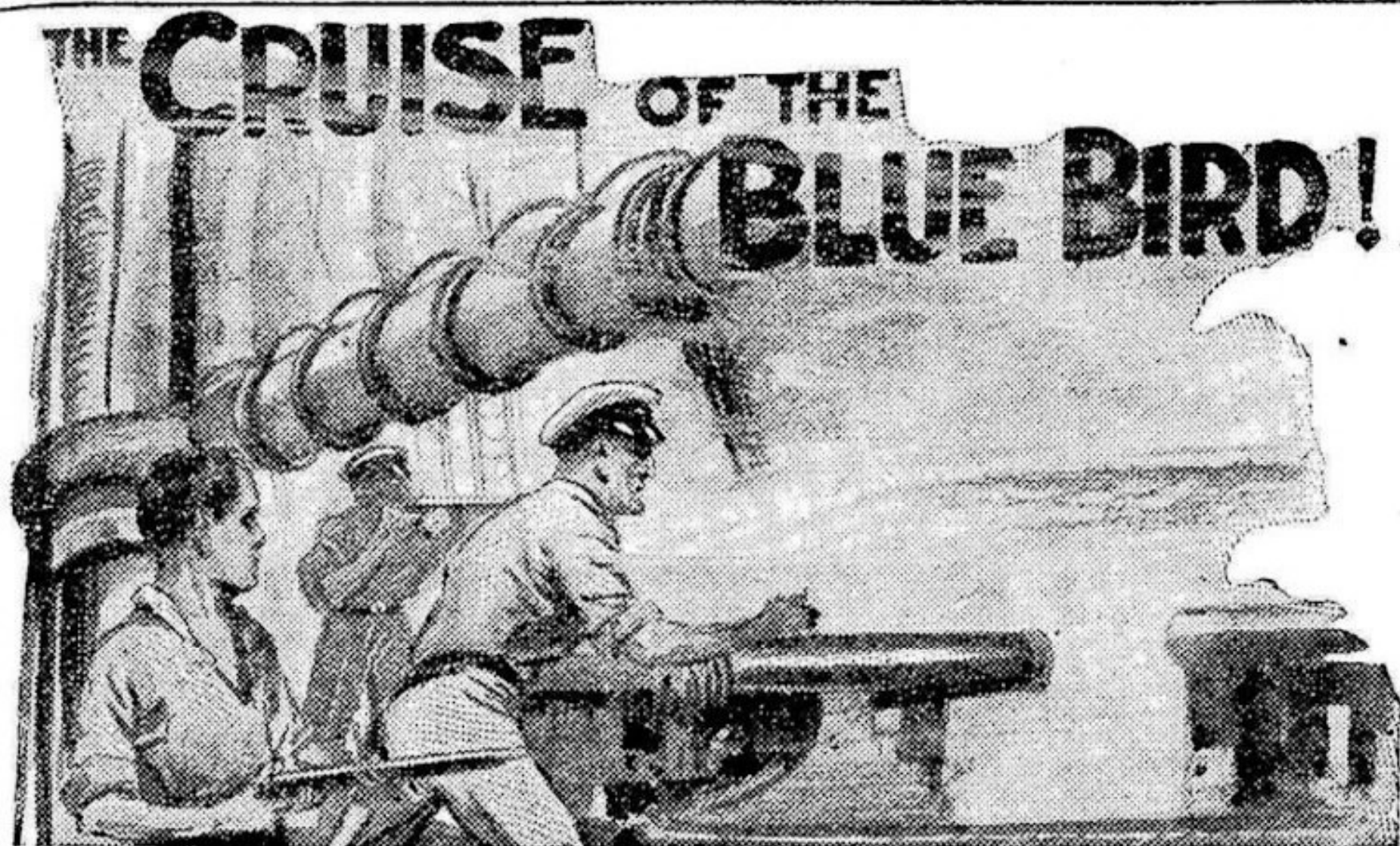
You can send me a "magazine" every week, if you like—Emslie R. T. Bryan (Chingford)—but somehow I have an idea that you'll get tired of it before I do. Still, have a shot at the thing by all means if you feel that you are bursting to get busy on it.

Yes, you can have my photograph if you want it—George Wm. Forrest (Liverpool). That old offer of mine is still open. If you—or any other reader—will send me your photograph, I will immediately let you have an autographed one of myself in return. I think it's rather a good wheeze, really, because I like to see the kind of readers I'm doing my best to please.

You mustn't think that I was "running down" your sex—Ivy Swailes (Heckmondwike)—when I said in one of my stories that girls were unpunctual. It is one of the privileges of the fair sex to be unpunctual. I rather like the way you say: "I'm always on time—well, only five minutes or so late, anyhow." If that isn't like a girl, what is?

EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

IF IT'S THRILLS YOU LIKE, THIS IS JUST THE STORY FOR YOU!



By COUTTS BRISBANE

WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENED:

CAPTAIN MANBY is skipper of the schooner Blue Bird, which is bound for the Malea atolls, in the Southern Pacific. He is accompanied by his son

JACK MANBY, and his nephew

NED SUTTON, two adventure-loving boys. From a native Captain Manby has learned that in these atolls is an uncharted island—supposed to be practically inaccessible—the lagoon of which is full of pearl shell. The captain is successful in finding this island; and to his surprise discovers that it is inhabited by a number

of French castaways. They appear to be very friendly, but later the captain is not too sure about them. Meanwhile, the native's story proves to be correct. The lagoon is full of pearl shell. Jack discovers a unique and valuable pearl. Captain Manby is jubilant, and shows it to three of the Frenchmen who come aboard. When they have gone he and the two boys and Sinclair, the mate, return to the captain's cabin to have a look at the pearl. They enter the cabin—and find that the pearl has gone!

(Now read on.)

Ah Moy's Cunning!

FOR a long moment nobody spoke. Surprise, chagrin and rage held the four silent. Then Sinclair sprang round the deckhouse to the open port, and thrust in his arm. The box was within easy reach. Anyone passing along that side of the deck could have snatched the pearl in passing.

"One of those infernal Frenchies!" roared Sinclair. "After 'em! Catch 'em before they can get ashore. That's why they were in such a hurry."

The boys sprang to the rail, peering through the gloom towards the beach. They were in time to see three dark figures moving across the white sand to the huts.

"Let's take rifles, and go after them, dad!" shouted Jack. "Let's get them before they have time to stow it away. Let's—"

"Let's keep our heads," cut in Manby incisively. "Mr. Sinclair, what do you think?

Those fellows have rifles, and they may want to use them if we go armed. On the other hand— What is it, Ah Moy?"

The Chinaman had glided round the end of the house. The light fell upon his face, and he was smiling blandly.

"Thlem fella takee red pearl?" he asked, and his voice was soft as the cooing of a dove.

"Thlem Flenchy man?"

"Yes, and we're going after them!" cried Sinclair hotly.

"No gooc. Thlem no gottee. Me gottee. Lookee!"

He flung out his hand with a dramatic gesture, opened it—and there lay the red pearl, glowing like a red-hot coal in the lamplight.

"Eh? You, Ah Moy? But I can swear you weren't near the thing after you served the coffee. I saw you all the while standing amidships!" exclaimed Captain Manby in stupefaction. "And I saw the pearl in its

box. Then you were at the gangway when those fellows went off. How—what—?”

He stared at the yellow man. Ah Moy had sailed with him for years, and he trusted him implicitly, for the Chinaman had again and again proved himself worthy of trust. The captain was utterly puzzled by this odd turn of events.

“I was watching the pearl, too. Ah Moy couldn't have taken it,” chimed in Ned. “Yet he has it.”

Ah Moy's smile became a trifle broader and infinitely more innocent. He handed the pearl to Captain Manby.

“Thaf fella Flenchy man with pointee beard takee when you allee get up walkee-walkee glangway,” he said. “Walkee lound this slide, puttee hand in port, takee. Me see. Walkee in bloat healp flast.”

“But”—Manby passed a hand over his bewildered brow—“if he took it, how d'you come to have it?” he gurgled.

“Longee aftlah dinner, me makee red pearl from pieces red sealing wax. Keepee in plocket. See Flenchy man makee big eye along pearl. Walkee in clabin, takee tlay. Takee plover pearl, putte sealing-wax pearl allee same place. Walkee. Flenchy man, he takee sealing-wax pearl. Heap talkee alongee 'bout this timee, eh?”

“Well I'm eternally jiggered!” shouted Manby and, dropping into a chair, roared with laughter. “You're a pearl, too, Ah Moy—a yellow one! This'll mean a bonus on your share. I thought the thing looked different, somehow, after you turned down the lamp.”

“Turnee down, no see velly plopah. Lamp no smokee. Think mebbe Flenchy tly take. Do take. Flenchy no good.”

“Well, you're good, anyhow,” laughed Manby. “You're a smart chap, Ah Moy, and you'll be all the richer for this. I'll put this in the safe now and make certain of it.”

The captain locked the red pearl and the others away in the small but very strong safe bolted into the cabin bulkhead, and returned.

“And now, what are we going to do about this confounded Frenchman?” he growled. “He only got a lump of sealing wax, but, all the same, we can't disregard it. I think I'd better go ashore and tell Benoist. I don't think he could have been privy to the attempt. He must know that anything of the sort would imperil his chances of getting away from the island.”

“Well, anyhow, we'll soon know what he has to say about it,” said Sinclair, turning from the rail where he had been glaring towards the huts that the Frenchmen occupied on the beach. “He and two others are coming off. At least, I suppose it's him. They're pushing off.”

“More chin music!” grunted Manby. “But I suppose the fellow may have confessed, or given himself away.”

He went to a locker and slipped his automatic pistol into his pocket. He was taking no more chances. The outrigger came back to the Blue Bird almost as fast as it had left

it. Benoist came on deck alone, and his face was wet with what appeared to be tears.

“I am desolated!” he cried. “I am horrified. I find that Cauchon, wretched man that he is, in a moment of criminal folly, has stolen your beautiful red pearl. I have brought him back to confess, to beg your forgiveness. It was done under a sudden temptation. He could not resist the lure of so much beauty. He took it. He came ashore. And then the full horror of what he had done burst upon him. With tears and lamentations he told of his crime. He begged to be allowed to come back at once, to throw himself at your feet, to beg pardon for that moment of madness. Here is the pearl. I will fetch the criminal.”

“Humph! Did he have this change of heart before or after he discovered that his prize was only sealing wax?” asked Manby coldly, taking the “pearl” and holding it between thumb and finger in the light.

“Sealing wax? But, no? Yet I have not looked. I took it from him as, with cries of repentance, he thrust it upon me. I have not examined it. Sealing wax! I do not understand, yet that does not diminish his crime. He thought to steal your pearl—”

“And didn't. Well, since he has confessed and is sorry for it, and we have the real pearl safely, we'll say no more about it. I don't want any scene. Tell him he is forgiven, and deal with him yourself. We are going to turn in. Good-night, M. Benoist, and thanks for relieving my mind. I do not wish to think hard thoughts of any Frenchman.”

“You are noble. I will tell him. A thousand thanks for your leniency!” babbled Benoist, and, dropping into his boat, went back, talking furiously.

“I suppose it's all right,” murmured Manby, turning the sealing-wax ball in his fingers. “But, anyhow, someone has tested the quality of this with the point of a knife. I doubt that if it had been a real pearl we should have got it back so soon. But let's not think evil. Turn in boys, and pleasant dreams.”

“Benoist's an honest man,” said Jack, as he slipped into his bunk.

“Or a jolly fine actor,” muttered Ned. “I dunno which. Mebbe we'll find out before we're finished with him.”

More Trouble!

NEXT morning Jack and Ned resumed their job of washing and searching the shell, with Captain Manby to help, while Sinclair took a turn at diving. The work went steadily on. They found quantities of seed pearls, a few good quality pearls of small size, several large baroques and one small black, but nothing in the least startling. Nevertheless Captain Manby was well satisfied.

“If we only hold this average we'll do first-class,” he said. “Even if we don't find any more exceptional ones. Sinclair was right. The luck is running our way at last.”

All day they worked and all through the next, by which time the diving squad had collected such a pile of shell that they had to knock off and help wash the rotted stuff. Then it was Big Timo's turn to distinguish himself by a find. He loosed a yell that rang all along the lagoon, and came dancing to Captain Manby with a perfect white pearl nearly as big as the unique red one, and worth a large sum.

"Heap good fella, boss cap'n!" he cried "Mebbe I get a stick o' baccy?"

"You get ten stick along this fella, Timo," replied Manby. "And a bonus. You fella listen," he went on, addressing the other men. "Fella get big pearl, he get baccy, he get bit more money, savee?"

this lot, sir. We'd better turn to diving again to-morrow."

"Yes," agreed the captain, "and though we will keep on, I think the boys can do with a holiday, or rather a change of occupation. I'm going to put them to fishing for the day. We could do with a change of diet, and it's criminal to neglect the food swimming in the lagoon."

"Yes, it would do 'em good, sir. They're looking a bit fine drawn, what with the heat and the excitement," replied Sinclair.

He understood that the expedition was really designed as a holiday for the two boys, since all the fish needed was easily caught from the ship. However, Jack and Ned knew nothing about this solicitude, but,

The man put on a spurt, drew ahead of his pursuers, then with a strangled cry for mercy reeled forward and fell almost at the feet of the boys.



"Savee!" they chorused, and went to work with renewed energy.

Presently another man found a good pearl, then two more were discovered, while Ned drew a fine pink one from his part of the trough.

"We must have struck an extra special diseased patch," Captain Manby said, and it really seemed as though this was the case, for in the next hour over a score of fine specimens were secured—and then no more.

Not a single pearl, except seeds that were almost valueless, appeared, and so it was for the remainder of the day. And the next. And the next.

"It's the luck of the game. Either you're on the ball or you aren't," said Mr. Sinclair philosophically. "We've about cleared

putting afloat early, dropped down the lagoon and fished for a couple of hours, getting a great haul. The first were hungry and dashed at the bait the moment the lines were lowered. At the end of that time there was a pile of gleaming silver and gold in dinghy, enough to feed all hands.

"No use catching more. It would only be wasted. Let's take it back, then run right down the lagoon and go round to the farther side," suggested Jack. "We might get some bananas."

The two boys returned to the schooner, handed over their spoils to Ah Moy, and set off again. They passed the French party, who seemed to be working vigorously enough, though an altercation was going on upon the beach between three men, one of

whom the second sailor who had survived the wreck of the ill-fated "Jean Bart."

"That's Voisin, that poor chap Pascal's mate," said Ned. "They're blackguarding him. It's an odd thing, but he doesn't seem to be popular with the others. Neither was Pascal. I wonder why?"

"Perhaps because he's a sailor and those other fellows aren't," hazarded Jack. "But they seem a quarrelsome lot, anyhow. I'm afraid it won't be a very pleasant voyage home with that gang aboard. We'll have to pack uncommonly tight to take them, anyhow, and I don't think they'll like discipline."

"Then they'll have to lump it. Uncle won't stand any nonsense from them."

The rowed on, forgetting all about the Frenchmen and their ways as they reached the farther end of the lagoon. After beaching the boat, the two boys made their way along the broad white beach, rounding the steep shoulder of the hill.

Here the guardian reef was close inshore, and the ever-busy coral insects had filled the lagoon up so that the place where it had been was now sanded over. In places were clumps of weed and a stray sapling. In a few centuries, if man or the volcano didn't interfere with the process, soil would gather on this beach and palm and other trees would flourish.

The boys walked on and on till noon had come and gone. Then they halted, and, spying a bunch of bananas growing at the edge of the bush, cut it and dined off the ripe fruit.

"There are some more in there. We'll take back as many as we can carry," said Jack, as he swallowed the last morsel and got to his feet. "Hallo, there's a sort of path here, d'you see? Those Frenchmen must have come over here."

"To gather bananas, I expect," replied Ned. "There are lots more about. Shall we go along the path a bit?"

The boys found plenty of signs that the path had been recently traversed. Bunches of bananas had been cut, and skins lay about underfoot. The Frenchmen had evidently been there only a day or so before at latest.

"Greedy pigs! They might have brought us a bunch or two," said Jack. "But listen! I can hear voices. Surely we can't have got across already?"

"Yes, we have, though. Look, there are the huts down there, and the beach and the lagoon."

Surely enough, they could see the Frenchmen's quarters at the end of the path, barely

a quarter of a mile away, and glimpse white sand and blue water beyond.

"I see what it is," said Ned. "The island is shaped like a pear. We've come round the thick end of it. If we got up aloft on that hill top we'd see the shape of it. What a racket those fellows are making! Another row, I s'pose."

Voices raised high in altercation came echoing from the beach, the pathway through the bush acting as a sort of funnel which conveyed the sound. The boys halted. They hated rows, having already had enough of real fighting to last over the whole voyage. They were about to turn back when a figure appeared, running heavily up the beach pursued by a number of others.

The fugitive swerved towards the huts then, as a man dashed out of one howling, came back into the straight again, making up the path towards the boys who, standing in deep shadow, remained unseen. The pursuers, yelling loudly, raced after him, gaining at every step.

On he came, passed through an open space where the sunlight poured down, and as the light fell upon him the boys recognised him. It was the sailor Voisin, the one who had been quarrelling on the beach when they had passed some two hours before.

He seemed to be running almost blindly, for he cannoned against tree-trunks beside the path several times. As he came closer the boys saw the reason for this. The man was badly wounded. He had a broad cut across the head from which blood streamed, while he held a hand upon another wound in his breast, blood oozing between his fingers.

His breath came in loud, hoarse gasps, and he was plainly almost at the end of his strength. The pursuers were closing in upon him now; he made one last effort, spurted, drew ahead, then with a strangled cry for mercy reeled forward and fell almost at the feet of the boys.

They sprang forward, too late to catch him. Jack stooped over him, while Ned stepped out into the patch, confronting the oncoming gang.

"Get back!" he cried. "What is this? You have killed him!"

"Pig of an Englishman!" yelled the foremost. "Look at his work!"

He displayed a long wound running from his left shoulder across his chest.

"Let me get at him!" screeched the fellow. "I will settle him."

"Keep 'em back!" The man's dying, I think!" said Jack.

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THE AMEER'S PRISONERS!

(Continued from page 37.)

organised. And by the wrecking of the lift we shall have time to do this necessary organisation work."

"But there are still some soldiers out there—in the foyer," said Nipper quickly.

"Let's go after 'em," said Lord Dorri-more. "Come on, you fellows! Let's finish the thing now—while they're still confused!"

"Hurrah!"

Nelson Lee was in firm agreement. He had, indeed, been on the point of suggesting an immediate attack. For never would they get another opportunity like this.

But the boys were not allowed to take part in the affair, much to their disgust. Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Mr. Manners and Smith went out down the corridor, their rifles ready.

Not that it was necessary for them to make any further use of their firearms. When they arrived at the great foyer they found two dozen men lying unconscious, stunned by the force of the explosion that had nearly wrecked the top of the lift shaft. One officer and several men were in a dazed condition, and quite helpless. They surrendered without the slightest resistance.

"All these men must be attended to at once," said Lee. "They had better be conveyed into the nearest bed-rooms. Smith, hurry round the palace and bring all the help you can."

"Yessir!" gasped Smith, who was living in a kind of dream.

"Rally all the men, and assure them that the palace is in our hands, and that as long as we hold together we can defy the Ameer," continued Nelson Lee.

Within half an hour the injured Indian soldiers were in bed, and were being cared for. The others were disarmed and locked up in a room to themselves. They could do nothing against the new owners of the famous Idar Palace.

The situation was now interesting in the extreme.

That great palace, perched on the top of its crag, was in the possession of the British party—and it was impossible for the Ameer's men to get at them by any ordinary means. They were ready to withstand a siege, and they were prepared to carry the struggle on until—

Until what?

It was impossible to tell what might happen in the immediate future. But for the moment Nelson Lee and his party had gained a decisive victory.

THE END.

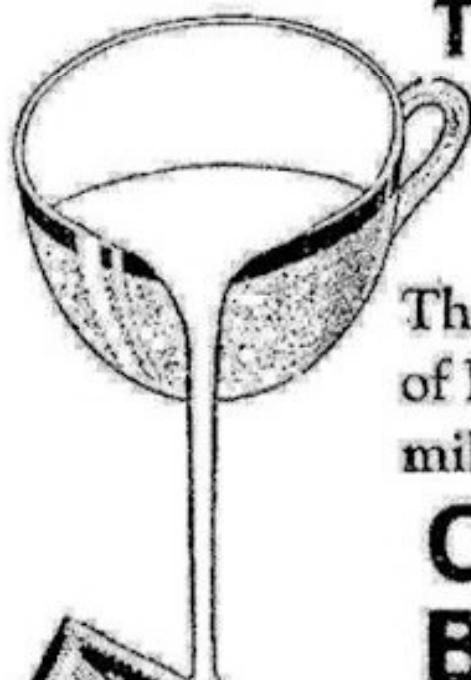
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