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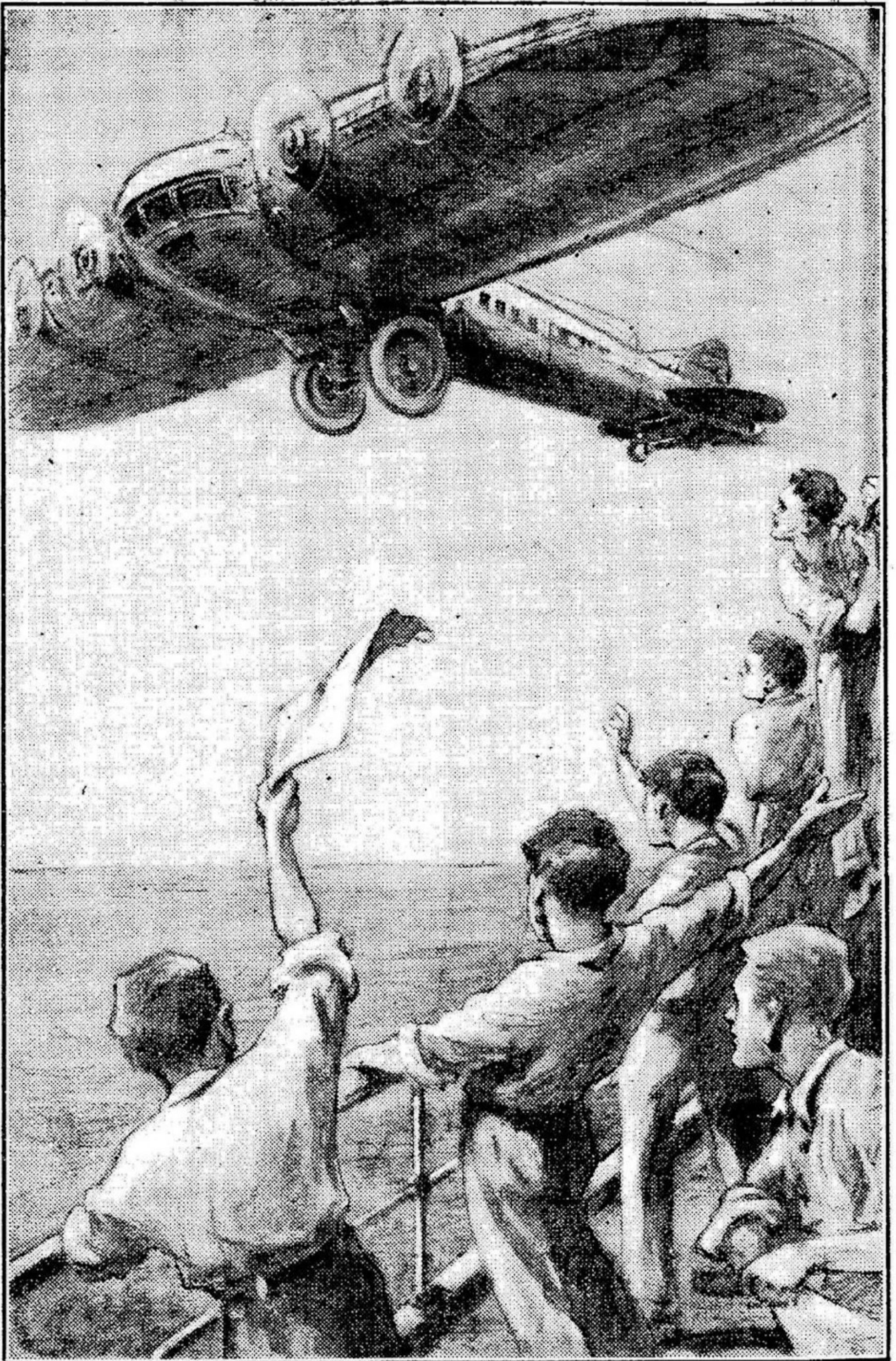
TRAPPED BY BUSHRANGERS!

A magnificent long complete yarn of schoolboy adventure in Australia, featuring the cheery Chums of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 142.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

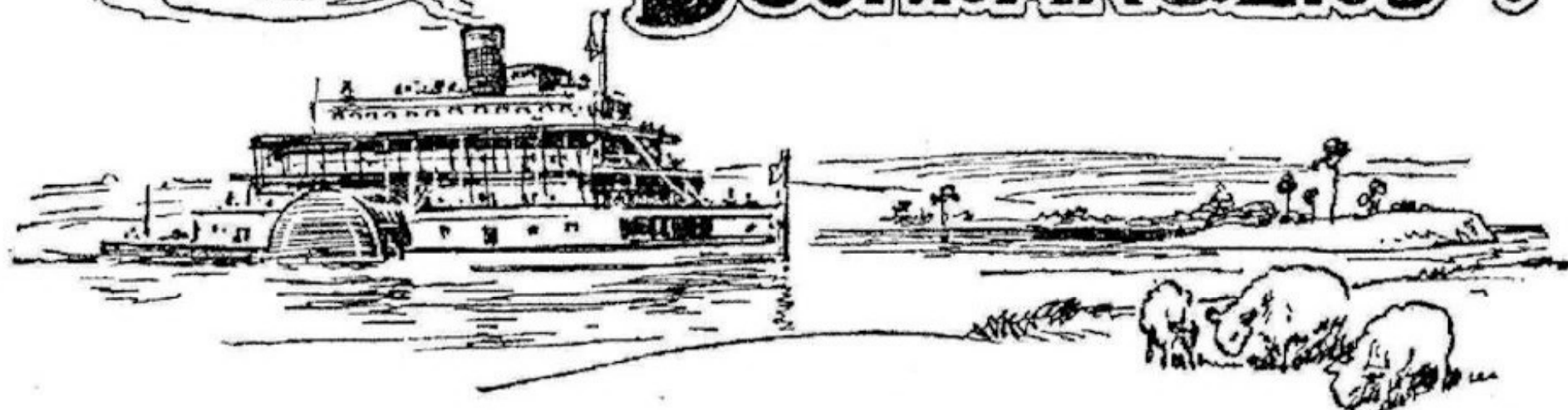
January 19th, 1929.



Slowly, sedately, the great monoplane came humming over the School ship. At the cabin windows could be seen the grinning faces of Nipper, Handforth, and the other lucky juniors. A great cheer went up from the boys on the St. Francis.

Amazing Schoolboy Adventure in the Australian Bush!

TRAPPED By BUSHRANGERS!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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

Held up by bushrangers. An exciting scrap. Archie Glenborne kidnapped! Oh, yes, this fine yarn simply teems with thrills all through! Edwy Searles Brooks has written a real "corker." Start reading it now and prepare yourself for hours of enjoyment!—Ed.

CHAPTER 1.

The Mid-Ocean Watchers!

"LISTEN!" said Harry Gresham, in a low, excited voice. All the juniors within earshot in the Remove Form-room looked up eagerly from their work. They stared at Gresham, and then their gaze wandered towards the windows.

"I can't hear anything!" breathed Duncan.

"But I'm sure of it!" muttered Gresham. "A low, throbbing hum——"

"Ahem!"

It was a loud cough, followed by the sharp rapping of a pointer on the desk. Mr. Norton, the Remove Form-master, was looking severely at the class.

"Silence!" he said sharply. "Really, this is too bad! Three times during this lesson have I been compelled to——"

"But it's the aeroplane, sir!" gasped Hubbard. "Gresham's just heard it! May we all go out, sir?"

"No, you may not!" replied Mr. Norton promptly. "Indeed, not! What next?"

"But we don't want to miss Lord Dorrimore's great 'plane, sir," said Ralph Leslie Fullwood indignantly. "There are lots of the chaps aboard, too——"

"Where they have no right to be!" interrupted the Form-master, with asperity. "I am afraid the young rascals will be dreadfully backward when they join the ship again."

"Never mind about being backward, sir—they've been having a fine lot of excitement," said De Valerie enviously.

"That will do!" said Mr. Norton. "You are quite mistaken, Gresham. There is no aeroplane. Mr. Stockdale informed the school quite plainly that the machine could not overtake us until this afternoon, at the very earliest. It is ten chances to one that the aeroplane will not come near us at all. So let me have no more of this inattention."

The Remove looked at Mr. Norton rebelliously for a few moments, but as they could hear no familiar hum they settled themselves down once more to work. Evidently Harry Gresham had been mistaken—just as other juniors had been mistaken earlier that morning.

The truth was, all ears were on the stretch, so to speak, and all minds were right off the lesson.

Considering all the circumstances, the juniors were not to be much blamed. Looking out of the open Form-room windows, they beheld an expanse of gloriously blue sea, with a hot tropic sun beating down upon it.

For the school was not at St. Frank's. The school was thousands of miles away—in point of fact, in the Indian Ocean, crossing from South Africa to Australia.

It was difficult to believe that the month was January, for the weather was hot, and for some days now the skies had been cloudless.

The St. Francis had voyaged out from England, containing half the school—the entire occupants of the Ancient House and the Modern House. Back at St. Frank's the West House and the East House fellows were carrying on.

It was a new idea of the governors, this School Ship—this splendidly equipped liner, converted so thoroughly that it contained Form-rooms, laboratories, gym., Common-rooms, studies—in fact, everything in replica, as at St. Frank's itself.

Dr. Malcolm Stafford had been left behind, and Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous school-master-detective, was nominally in charge of the floating school. At the moment, however, Mr. Arthur Stockdale, of the Modern House, was in full charge.

Except for the summery weather and the novel surroundings, life was going on in very much the same way as usual for the Removites. They were having lessons exactly according to schedule, and half-holidays came and went in the same old way. They were even allowed to have tea in their own "studies"—that is to say, their cabins—in just the same manner as at St. Frank's.

Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form-master, had not been able to come, and so Mr. Norton was in charge of the Removites for this trip. He was an inoffensive, kindly sort of man, and the boys got on well with him.

There had already been one thrill in the rip. The School Ship had stopped at Durban, South Africa, for three days, and during this brief period a St. Frank's cricket eleven had played a chosen South African school team. It had been a memorable match, the Saints winning by a single run.

Then immediately after that had come another sensation. For Lord Dorrimore—well known to most of the St. Frank's chaps—had been reported missing.

The sporting peer had started on a big non-stop flight from Capetown to Cairo, in the celebrated Manners monoplane, the Wanderer of the Skies. A good many fellows in the Remove knew this huge aeroplane well, since they had flown to India in her during the summer holidays.

And "Dorrie," accompanied only by Mr. Hobart Manners, the designer of the plane, had started off on this ambitious flight—only to vanish very shortly after starting.

Nobody on the School Ship knew many particulars, for Durban had been left behind just when the excitement was at its highest pitch. The next morning excitement and indignation had been mingled when the floating school learned that twelve juniors had sneaked ashore on that fateful night—just so they could accompany Nelson Lee on the hunt for the missing Lord Dorrimore!

Mr. Stockdale was in charge of the School Ship until Adelaide was reached. Nelson Lee had arranged to come on later by an ordinary liner. He had certainly never imagined that he would be saddled with nine Removites and three Third-Formers during that quest for the missing Dorrie!

Yet this was the actual truth. Nipper had grimly made up his mind that he would lend a hand; and so, of course, he had persuaded Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis West to help him in his plan.

Then Handforth & Co., of Study D, had got exactly the same idea, and they had stolen ashore, too. Extraordinarily enough, Vivian Travers thought of a similar wheeze, and he and Jimmy Potts and Archie Glen-thorne were missing. Willy Handforth, scenting that his major was up to something, had persuaded Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon to help him, and the net result of all this was that these twelve boys had been left behind at Durban. When the authorities aboard discovered their absence, the ship was well out into the Indian Ocean.

Various wireless messages had come through from time to time. It was known that Lord Dorrimore had been found. Nelson Lee and the juniors had had some very exciting adventures in Natal and the Orange Free State.

Then, to cap all, it became known that Lord Dorrimore, as irresponsible as ever, had suddenly decided to fly across to Adelaide, instead of continuing his journey to Cairo and England. What was more, he was bringing Nelson Lee and the twelve juniors with him, and there were rumours that the party would reach Adelaide days and days before the School Ship. Which, as everybody was saying, was a bit too thick!

Not only had these boys stayed behind at Durban, not only had they had some priceless adventures in South Africa, but now they were actually to get to Australia in advance of the main party!

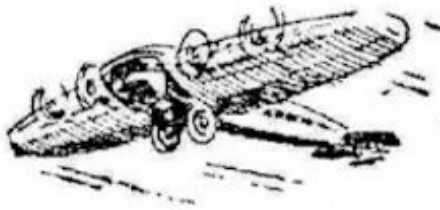
And naturally the main party seethed with jealousy.

Much as the fellows enjoyed this life aboard, they would have given a whole term's pocket-money to be on that wonderful aeroplane.

"It's a sheer nerve—that's what it is!" Fullwood had said. "They're missing lessons and everything! And we've got to stick aboard the ship, working as usual!"

This was scarcely true, for the boys were not working as usual. All this excitement had had a very unsettling effect, and both Mr. Norton and Mr. Pycraft—the latter being in charge of the Fourth—were at their wits' end. They would be heartily glad to see the

big monoplane fly over, and to see her disappear. After that, perhaps, the youngsters would settle down to an orderly routine.



CHAPTER 2.

The Wanderer of the Skies!

"THANK goodness!" said Cecil de Valerie, with relief. The Remove had just been released, and the fellows were all crowding out on to the wide promenade deck. Buster Boots and Christine and a host of other Fourth-Formers were already there. Their faces were flushed, and they were staring out over the sea towards the distant west.

"Any sign, you chaps?" asked Harry Gresham eagerly.

"We've seen nothing," replied Buster Boots, with a grunt. "Great Cæsar! Wait until Handy and Nipper and those other chaps get aboard again! We'll slaughter 'em for playing this trick on us!"

"Go easy, you know!" grinned Fullwood. "No need to be wild with the chaps. We ought to be wild with ourselves, for not having thought of the same wheeze."

"I suppose that's true," admitted Boots grumpily. "Still, the beggars might have given us the tip."

"If they had done that, everybody would have wanted to stay behind in Durban, and then nobody would have stayed behind!" said Alf Brent, with a chuckle. "If you ask me, those chaps were brainy."

Some of the fellows went on to the boat deck, where there was more room, and they stood in groups, gazing everlastingly towards the horizon. But there was nothing to be seen—nothing but the limitless sea in every direction, without a sign of a sail, or a smudge of smoke from another steamer.

The School Ship was steadily and leisurely ploughing her way onwards, and all the fellows had grown so accustomed to the motion by now that they did not notice it at all.

"Well, there's one consolation," said Clapson, of the Fourth. "We shall get to Adelaide in time to see the fourth Test match, and that's something to look forward to."

"The Test match will be good—but I'm as keen as mustard on seeing Australia," said

Oldfield, his eyes sparkling. "By jingo! There aren't many fellows who get a chance of going all the way to Australia on a visit, are there? We're lucky, my sons!"

"Look!" yelled Talmadge suddenly. "What's that over there—in the sky?"

But it was only another false alarm. Everybody went dotty for a moment or two, and then the excitement died down.

Fenton, the captain of the school, came strolling along, chatting with William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth. Both seniors were airily attired in flannels, with open necks, and they looked bronzed and healthy.

"Any news, Fenton?" went up a chorus.

"Yes," said Fenton, smiling. "I understand that a wireless message has just been received from the aeroplane. Dorrie expects to fly over us some time during the afternoon."

"My only hat!" ejaculated Fullwood. "And it's not a half-holiday!"

"We shall be at lessons!" said Gresham blankly.

"Alas, brothers, we must bear these trials with fortitude," said Browne solemnly. "Eager as you are to catch a glimpse of the aeroplane, there is always the voice of Authority to be obeyed. And lessons, brothers, in the eyes of most Form-masters, are of far more importance than aeroplanes."

"But it's an exceptional occasion!" protested Buster Boots. "Look here, Fenton! Why can't Mr. Stockdale grant us all a special half-holiday to-day?"

"By jingo, yes!"

"That's a good idea, Buster!"

"An excellent idea—in your opinion, young 'uns!" chuckled Edgar Fenton. "But, somehow, I don't think Mr. Stockdale will regard it as a brain-wave. So you'd better simmer down. Coming, Browne?"

"I beg of you to excuse me for a few moments, Brother Fenton," said Browne gracefully. "Much as I delight in your company, I have a mind to linger for a brief spell with these stalwarts. It is a quaint but incontrovertible fact that I have a partiality for the society of Youth."

Fenton grinned, and walked on—leaving William Napoleon Browne in the midst of the crowd of juniors.

"I thought it as well, brothers, to let our genial friend wander on," said Browne, in a confidential tone. "Gather round! Lend me your ears!"

"We'll give you a couple, if you like—thick ones!" said Boots obligingly.

**WATCH
THIS SPACE
NEXT WEEK!**

Browne sighed.

"Alas, that I should be threatened when I am loitering merely for the purpose of whispering a word of advice," he said sadly. "Brothers, brothers! Where are your wits? You bemoan the fact that sundry lessons are on the agenda for this afternoon. Yet surely the remedy is in your own hands?"

"Don't be so long-winded, you lanky ass!" said Fullwood. "What are you getting at?"

"I am pained to hear such expressions of disrespect——"

"Kill him, somebody!" said Boots aggressively.

The juniors advanced in a threatening manner, and Browne hastily raised one of his hands.

"Stay!" he urged. "I fear, brothers, that you are as impatient as you are witless. Why worry about lessons? Go into your classrooms confidently, calmly. You have ears, have you not? Yes, assuredly!" he added, as he glanced round. "Seldom have I seen such a collection of humanised cauliflowers!"

"Look here, Browne——"

"When you hear the welcome hum of the 'plane, the thing will be easy," said Browne. "Brother Norton and Brother Pycraft will, no doubt, command you to keep your places. But there are times when it is advisable to ignore such commands. There are moments in this life when it is as well to assert one's self. So, brothers, let me suggest that you should be utterly deaf to the orders of Brother Norton and Pycraft. Later, perhaps, there will be a reckoning—but it will, I am convinced, be a very easy reckoning."

"You're right, Browne, old man!" said Fullwood, nodding. "Blow lessons! If the aeroplane comes over during the afternoon, we'll all bolt out on deck!"

"Hear, hear!"

Browne beamed.

"When in trouble, apply to me," he said kindly. "I am never at a loss with ideas. They exude from me unbidden. Genius, after all, will not be denied."

And Browne, with one of his benevolent nods, passed along the deck, and joined Stevens and Hitchin and Hulbert, of the Fifth.

During lunch everybody was on the jump. Even the seniors were listening—waiting for some sign. But nothing happened; and afternoon lessons commenced with the School Ship still in a condition of uncertainty.

It was becoming rumoured that the aeroplane had passed two or three hundred miles away to the north, and would thus not be seen at all.

"It's only to be expected," said Gresham, in the Form-room. "It's pretty nearly six thousand miles from South Africa to Adelaide—and Dorrie is trying to do it in a non-stop flight. It's an extraordinary effort. He can't afford to go out of his course—just for the sake of waving a handkerchief to us!"

"Silence!" said Mr. Norton severely. "Really, all this chattering is——"

"Listen!" gasped Hubbard suddenly.

"Hubbard!" shouted the Form-master. "Sit down at once!"

"It's the aeroplane!" yelled Gulliver.

Everybody listened intently. Sure enough, a new sound could be heard on the air—a rhythmic throbbing, accompanied by a faint, far-away hum.

"They're coming—they're coming!" went up a roar. "Dorrie's 'plane is coming over!"

With one accord, the Removites leapt to their feet and dashed for the door.

"Boys!" gasped Mr. Norton, scandalised. "Back to your places! Upon my word! How dare you——"

But nobody took any notice of him. The boys were so excited, in fact, that they actually pushed the unfortunate Form-master out of the way in their pell-mell rush on deck!



CHAPTER 3.

The Lucky Dozen!

HERE she comes!"

"By jingo, yes!"

"Hurrah!"

"Look! He's dropping lower! Dorrie's going to swoop down over us!"

"My only sainted aunt!"

The air was filled with shouts as the juniors crowded up to the boat deck. One or two prefects had come sallying out to round up these delinquents, but when it came to the point they failed in their duty. For they were just as fascinated as the juniors. Indeed, within a couple of minutes the entire school was up on deck, gazing into the blue sky.

After all, it was a big event.

The passengers on an ordinary liner will get very excited in mid-Atlantic if there happens to be a brave spirit who is attempting the aerial crossing. This flight from South Africa to Australia was much more ambitious. Quite apart from that, the aeroplane contained twelve St. Frank's fellows, and all the others were eager to catch a glimpse of them if possible.

It was no false alarm this time.

Clearly, distinctly, the great monoplane was in view—flying six or seven thousand feet up in the air, and still several miles distant. But the throbbing of her powerful engines was beating rhythmically on the air, and the sun was glinting on her gleaming metal body.

The Wanderer of the Skies was the largest monoplane in the world—an enormous monster constructed entirely of metal. This metal was a discovery of Mr. Manners—it was an alloy resembling burnished bronze, and it was non-corrosive, and no weather conditions could mar its beauty.

The machine had four enormous engines, jutting out from the front of the one great wing. The main body, like a Pullman coach, was graceful and sturdy.

In this body, and in the wing, there were saloons, cabins—sleeping compartments. As originally built, she had run on petrol, but now Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners were testing her with a new fuel—and with new engines. This fuel was non-explosive, and far less cumbersome than petrol. The use of it gave the plane, with her tanks fully loaded, a very big advantage. Under favourable weather conditions, and only at cruising speed, she was capable of accomplishing a non-stop flight of over ten thousand miles! So this "hop" from South Africa to Australia was more or less trifling.

"Look! Dorrie's shut off his engine!"

"By Jove, yes!"

The vast propellers could be seen just flicking over, and the throbbing had ceased. The Wanderer of the Skies, now only a mile or two away, was coming down in a long, graceful glide. Nearer and nearer came the big machine, and a thunderous cheer went up from everybody on the deck of the School Ship.

"He's going to land!" gasped Hubbard excitedly.

"Rats! He can't!" said Fullwood. "The machine isn't fitted with floats! Besides, if he came down into the water—even if he could rise again—the flight wouldn't be a non-stop one. Dorrie's only having a game!"

By now the aeroplane was only six or seven hundred feet up, and she was circling round the liner, banking superbly. And now, for the first time, the crowds on the School Ship's deck caught sight of faces at the cabin windows above.

"Look! There's old Handy!" yelled De Valerie. "Can't you see him, you chaps? Good old Handy! And Archie Glen-thorne, too! My hat! I can even see his giddy eye-glass!"

"Hurrah!"

"There's Nipper, too!" said Alf Brent.

"And Travers—"

"Look at Willy waving!" roared Dexter, of the Third. "Can't you see him, you chaps?"

Slowly, sedately, the great monoplane was swinging round past the liner. She had now descended to within a couple of hundred feet, and she was so close, indeed, that she seemed to be in danger of colliding with the vessel's masts. But Lord Dorrimore, at the controls of that big machine, knew exactly what he was doing.

At the cabin windows the familiar faces of the "lucky dozen" could be seen clearly. Edward Oswald Handforth—Church and McClure—Vivian Travers and Archie Glen-thorne—all of them, in fact. They were waving, grinning, and appeared to be every bit as excited as the others on the School Ship.

Then, with a roar of the engines, the monoplane shot astern, circled round, and started climbing again, her engines going all out,

filling the air with a soft, powerful throbbing.

This time she came directly over the decks of the liner. The cheers were tremendous as she passed clean overhead. Something was seen to drop—a tiny black object. It fell like a stone towards the boat deck.

"Look out!" went up a shout.

"Get out of the way, there!"

But the juniors need not have been alarmed. For after a second or two a tiny parachute opened out, and for the last twenty or thirty feet the dropped object floated down gracefully.

Fenton, as it happened, was the first to get near it as it struck the deck; and Fenton picked up an ornamental cigarette tin. He cut the cords and released the little parachute—and then, when he opened the tin, he found a half-sheet of notepaper within.

There was a scrawled message upon it:

"Everything O.K. with us. Hope you're the same. See you all in Adelaide in about ten days' time. Good luck!

"DORRIE."

"Just like old Dorrie!" grinned Fullwood, when he heard. "He's said all that over the wireless two or three times—but, of course, he couldn't resist dropping another message in his own handwriting. I say, what a frost! We shan't see them again for ten days!"

"And I expect they'll get to Adelaide some time to-morrow!" said Bob Christine breathlessly. "Lucky beggars!"

By this time the Wanderer of the Skies had started climbing again, and she was circling round and round, getting ever higher into the blue heavens.

The School Ship, of course, had not deviated an inch from her course; she had plugged steadily on, as though nothing unusual had happened. And now the aeroplane took a straight course, and flew into the distance ahead—growing ever smaller and smaller.



CHAPTER 4.

Australia!

"WELL, that's that!" said Nipper cheerfully.

"Poor asses! I'll bet they're grinding their teeth with

envy!" grinned Oswald Handforth. "Not that there's much for them to be envious about," he added in a severe tone. "This trip is a disappointment. It's tame."

"What did you expect, then?" asked Church.

"I expected some excitement, anyhow," retorted the leader of Study D. "But what's happened since we left South Africa? Nothing! We've been flying as steadily as a rock. If it wasn't for the humming of the engines we shouldn't know we were in the air! Tame isn't the word for it!"

But if Handforth was dissatisfied, the other juniors were filled with an ever-increasing wonder at the marvellous efficiency of the Wanderer of the Skies. Fitted with these new engines, she was as safe and as steady as any ocean-going liner.

The twelve passengers were all in the observation-room now—having come up from the saloon in order to catch a final glimpse of the liner, far, far below on the surface of the azure sea.

This observation-room was really a miniature promenade deck. It was on the top of the great wing, and, indeed, formed an integral part of the wing itself. On all sides, and overhead, there was non-splinterable glass. From this "promenade deck" it was possible to obtain a marvellous view of the vista ahead and astern.

Not that there was much to be seen now. For the St. Francis had been "dropped behind, and was now a mere dot on the face of the ocean.

But the fellows were very glad that Lord Dorrimore had spent five or ten minutes circling round the School Ship. It made the absent twelve feel that they were not really separated from the main party.

Forward, in the nose of the great machine, Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Hobart Manners were in the control-room—Dorrie himself being at the wheel.

"Well, we're makin' an easy trip of it," said his lordship. "I reckon we shall get to Adelaide with more than enough fuel left to take us on to Melbourne."

"But you're not going on to Melbourne, are you, Dorrie?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I certainly am!" said his lordship. "And then some! In fact, if I find plenty of fuel left, after Melbourne has been reached, I'll carry right on to Brisbane—or Sydney, if there isn't enough juice left for Brisbane."

"And what about the boys?" asked Mr. Manners in surprise.

"Oh, I'll drop them at Adelaide, of course," said Dorrie cheerfully. "But I shan't take on any more fuel. I want to see how far the old bus will go without replenishing."

"Well, I'm glad you're going to land us at Adelaide, old man," said Nelson Lee dryly. "It wouldn't have surprised me in the least, Dorrie, if you had calmly announced your intention of carrying the lot of us with you to New Zealand!"

"H'm! That's not a bad idea, either!" said his lordship. "By glory! Why shouldn't we try it?"

"Because I want to be landed at Adelaide!" said Lee promptly. "And I want these boys landed, too. You're a good sort, Dorrie, for bringing us over in this way—but I don't want these youngsters to be on the other side of Australia when the School Ship arrives at Adelaide."

"Just as you like, then," said Dorrie, with a chuckle.

There was, after all, something to be said for Handforth's point of view. For there was utterly no excitement on board this wonderful craft. Hour after hour she continued

flying steadily and sedately—making a speed of something like two hundred miles an hour. And for a 'plane of this size to cruise at such a speed was an extraordinary achievement.

"Well, boys, we reckon to be in Adelaide early to-morrow morning," said Nelson Lee, as he sat down at the dinner table that evening. "If everything goes well, we shall arrive in about twelve hours."

"But we're not much more than half-way across!" said Nipper. "We've still got about two thousand five hundred miles to go, gov'nor."

"Yes," nodded Lee. "Roughly, twelve hours' flight."

"Well, well!" said Travers languidly. "We can go to bed to-night peacefully, dear old fellows, and we shall be having breakfast to-morrow morning in Adelaide!"

It seemed well-nigh impossible—and yet, on such a machine as this, it was easy enough to set a fixed time for their arrival.

The twelve juniors slept like tops in their comfortable little cabins, but they were all up extremely early in the morning—at the first sign of dawn, in fact. By now the Wanderer of the Skies was winging her way over the Great Australian Bight.

In the darkness of the night the lights of Albany, Western Australia, has been sighted, and the aeroplane was dead true on its course.

And as the sun rose higher into a cloudless sky, the gleaming machine passed over Kangaroo Island, and then up Investigator Strait, and so into St. Vincent Gulf. Then, at last, Adelaide.

From the air the town presented a wonderful picture, with its splendid surrounding parklands.

"By Jove," said Nipper. "I don't wonder they call it the Queen City of South Australia! Look at the wonderful way in which the streets are laid out!"

It seemed that the entire city was on the watch for the great 'plane, for crowds could be seen down in the streets and in the open spaces.

Lord Dorrimore flew over at a fairly low altitude, and the view of Adelaide was charming indeed.

From the air the division of North Adelaide from South Adelaide could be clearly seen—that section of the city north of Lake Torrens being mainly residential.

Montefiore Park looked splendid—as, also, did Hackney College Park, on the other side of the city.

It was even possible to see right down into King William Street—that noble thoroughfare which runs through the very centre of the city from South Terrace right up to the Lake, past Government House and Parliament House.

And in the distance could be seen the impressive Mount Lofty range.

"Australia at last!" said Handforth, his eyes gleaming with eagerness. "By George, you chaps! It's different from what I expected! I always thought that Australia was nothing but bush!"



Outside could be heard the hum of the expected aeroplane. With one accord the juniors leapt to their feet and dashed for the door. "Boys, back to your places!" gasped the scandalised Form-master. But the juniors took no notice and even pushed the amazed Mr. Norton out of the way in their pell-mell rush on deck.

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Travers. "Bush, with plenty of bushrangers, what?"

"Bushrangers—of course!" said Handforth. "Everybody knows that there are plenty of bushrangers in Australia!"

"Poor old Ted!" said Willy sadly.

"Eh? You young ass——"

"You might as well expect to find highwaymen on the English main roads!" said Willy.

"Well, there aren't any bushrangers in Adelaide, anyway," said Nipper soothingly. "Adelaide is one of the most up-to-date cities in the world—and before very long we shall be sampling it at close quarters."

Even now the fellows could hardly believe that they had actually arrived in Adelaide, where the fourth Test Match was to take place. It seemed only a few hours ago that they had been in South Africa. It was curious to realise, too, that the School Ship was still plodding steadily onwards, nine or ten days' steaming away. In fact, it would be practically a fortnight before the St. Francis docked at Port Adelaide. And here was this "lucky dozen"—arrived at Australia in advance of the main school!

It is hardly necessary to say that Adelaide had decided to give itself up for the day to the excitement of the occasion. For it was the first time that any aeroplane had

made a non-stop flight to Adelaide from South Africa.

And when it came to making a fuss over distinguished visitors, the good people of Adelaide knew all about it!



CHAPTER 5.

Back to Lessons!

DURING the eventful day the St. Frank's juniors hardly knew whether they were on their heads or their heels.

Lord Dorrimore escaped—much to the disappointment of Adelaide. For Dorrie only stopped for about an hour, leaving Nelson Lee and the boys behind. Then he hopped off again, making for Melbourne—and possibly Sydney, or Brisbane.

And Dorrie had quite cheerfully taken a number of prominent Adelaide citizens with him—much to their joy.

Left behind, Nelson Lee soon had the juniors installed in one of Adelaide's finest hotels. And for the whole day the fellows had a pretty hectic time.

Wherever they went they were recognised and greeted cheerily and boisterously. There was quite a civic reception for these distinguished young visitors. They were taken everywhere—escorted all over the town. They had a look at the Adelaide Oval, and Victoria Park Racecourse, and the Botanic Gardens.

They even went along Mile End Road—although it wasn't at all reminiscent of the Mile End Road they were familiar with in London. This one led from Thebarton Station, through parklands, to Hindley Street and Rundle Street. They were shown the Post Office and the Town Hall and the Majestic Theatre and the Tivoli. In fact, by the time evening came they were well-nigh exhausted with sight-seeing.

Any amount of staunch Adelaide citizens had told them that they would "see them some more," and they had made "cobbers" by the dozen. They were declared to be "dinkum," and they had become very familiar with the phrase "good-o."

Indeed, that night, after the tired boys had gone to bed, Nelson Lee was greatly exercised in mind.

The people of Adelaide were apparently of the opinion that these youngsters had come here on holiday, and that they were to be entertained during their visit. Nelson Lee was aware of the fact that a fortnight had to be spent before the School Ship would arrive.

And Mr. Lee rather jibbed at this fortnight.

Therefore, he set his wits to work, and he made all sorts of inquiries—and these inquiries bore fruit.

Thus, the next morning, bright and early, Nelson Lee presented himself to the juniors as soon as they got down, and he took them all aside—out on to a wide, shaded veranda.

"Now, boys, I'm going to talk to you seriously," he said. "You had a full day yesterday, and by the look of things you'll have a good many other full days, unless I take drastic steps to put a stop to it."

"Put a stop to what, sir?" asked Nipper curiously. "We think it's ripping here, in Adelaide. It's a wonderful city! And the people are wonderful, too—"

"Rather too wonderful, young 'un!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "At the rate things are going, you'll be entertained, and taken here and there, day after day."

"You bet we shall, sir!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "Lots of people have promised—"

"Quite so, Handforth—but you boys have apparently forgotten that you are now supposed to be at school!" said Nelson Lee. "I know the circumstances are exceptional; but, at the same time, I see no reason why you should neglect your education during this fortnight, while you are waiting for the School Ship to arrive."

"Oh, I say, sir!" chorused the dismayed juniors.

"I'm quite alarmed," continued Lee. "These Adelaide people mean well, and we cannot but admire their hospitality. But you'll all be spoilt—every man-jack of you—

unless I take drastic steps. You're going back to lessons at once."

"Lessons, sir!" gasped half-a-dozen voices.

"Lessons!" repeated Nelson Lee. "I'm a schoolmaster now, you must remember, and I'm going to see that your education is not neglected."

"Cheese it, gov'nor!" said Nipper, as he caught sight of a twinkle in Nelson Lee's eyes. "You're kidding us, aren't you?"

"Well, perhaps I am, to an extent," admitted Nelson Lee, with a chuckle. "The fact is, I'm going to pack you all off up the Murray River."

"What!"

"Adelaide is somewhat too hospitable," said Lee. "I shan't be able to keep track of you at all if you stay here. So off you go up the Murray River—and you start to-day."

"Aren't you coming with us, sir?" asked Handforth.

"No—you'll be safe enough on the river boat," said Nelson Lee dryly. "I shall stay here, so that I can get into touch with the School Ship, and make all the necessary arrangements for the main party when it arrives. And I can't be bothered with you youngsters. So you're going off."

"But you said something about lessons, sir!" remarked Willy, with a slight shiver.

"Geography lessons," nodded Nelson Lee. "Geography without maps, young 'uns. If you stay in Adelaide, the only thing you will learn is that the Adelaide townspeople are overflowing with hospitality and the milk of human kindness. But by taking this trip up the Murray River you will add greatly to your education."

"The gov'nor's right, you chaps!" said Nipper eagerly. "It'll be heaps better to go for a trip up the Murray! It's a marvellous river, according to all I've read, and I'd love to make its acquaintance."

"The Murray isn't always open at this time of the year," continued Nelson Lee. "The season for the river boats is generally from about July to November. But there have been some very unusual rains recently, and the Murray is navigable even now, during these summer months."

"Summer months, sir?" repeated Handforth. "But it's January! It's winter-time!"

"Winter-time in England, but summer here," smiled Nelson Lee. "I have made all inquiries, and I find that the river steamer, Rubion, is starting from Murray Bridge this evening."

"And we're really going on it, sir?" asked Jimmy Potts eagerly.

"Yes, I want to be rid of you!" said Lee, with a smile. "And you will be well out of harm's way on the Rubion. I shall place you in charge of the skipper. The boat is only going as far as Mildura."

"Where's that, sir?"

"Mildura is in Victoria," said Nelson Lee. "Usually, these river boats go many hundred miles further—right to Swan Hill, which is the farthest up-stream port of these river passenger steamers. But you'll only go to

Mildura. This is quite a long way, however, and it will take you several days."

"It ought to be a fine trip, sir!" said Tommy Watson.

"You will, at least, be able to see something of rural South Australia and New South Wales and Victoria," agreed Nelson Lee. "For soon after passing Renmark you will have New South Wales on one side of the river and Victoria on the other. When you disembark at Mildura you will get on the train, and return to Adelaide by rail. According to the schedule, you will arrive back a day or two before the School Ship gets in."

"And the Test match, sir?" asked Travers.

"Oh, you'll be in good time for the Test match!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "I wouldn't play a low-down trick like that on you, boys. It's this interval of waiting that I'm worrying about—and you'll be well out of mischief by going on this river trip. And you'll learn something, too. At least, I hope you will."

And so it was settled.

The juniors spent the morning in going round Adelaide again, and by lunch-time they were beginning to realize that there was plenty of sound common sense in Nelson Lee's plans. The good folk of Adelaide were so enthusiastic that their attentions were liable to become embarrassing. These St. Frank's fellows would have been welcomed in any ordinary circumstances; but they had arrived in the great aeroplane, and so they were surrounded by an added halo, as it were.

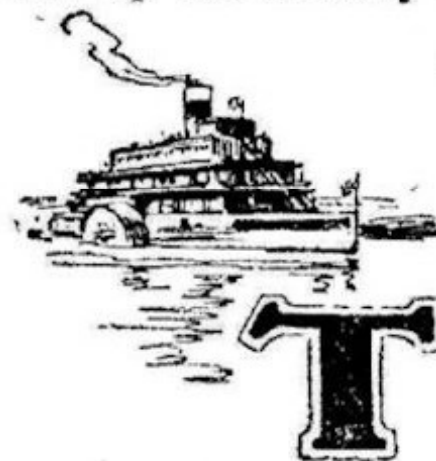
During the afternoon Nelson Lee went with them on the train to Murray Bridge—a comparatively short trip of about sixty miles. This was the terminal port for the river shipping. Incidentally, Murray Bridge is also the centre of a large agricultural and dairy-farming district.

And there, at her moorings, was the Rubion—a true river-steamer of the conventional type, a wood-burning boat, all superstructure, and with a squat chimney jutting out from the topmost deck-house.

"By George!" said Handforth, with gleaming eyes. "This is going to be the real thing, you chaps!"

"Rather!" echoed the others.

"We're going into the heart of rural Australia!" continued Handforth gloatingly. "And if we don't meet with any bushrangers, I'll eat my giddy hat! There aren't any in the towns, I know—but wait until we get well up the Murray River!"



CHAPTER 6.

Up the Mighty Murray!

THE Rubion proved to be a comfortable, friendly boat.

She was not particularly large, but there was something quaintly fascinating

about her. She reminded some of the juniors of the old Mississippi River boats which they had sometimes seen on the films.

She was a paddle-steamer, and she was well equipped. There were hot and cold baths, electric light, large cabins, and quite splendid meals were provided. The chef was a good one, and there were able stewards.

The passenger accommodation was by no means filled. There were not many other people going on this trip—perhaps because it was not usual for these pleasure cruises to be made in this month of the year. Not that the St. Frank's fellows minded. It was more free and easy with the boat uncrowded.

"Well, boys, I hope you'll enjoy yourselves—and I hope you'll learn a lot, too," said Nelson Lee, as he bade them good-bye.

"The captain will look after you, and see that you get into the Adelaide train, as soon as you arrive at Mildura. Your passages are all paid for—including your railway tickets."

"We shall be all right, sir!" chorused the juniors.

"You leave these new chums to us," grinned one of the ship's officers. "They won't come to any harm."

"I'm sure they won't," said Nelson Lee. "They're in safe hands, and the weather looks like being settled."

"Too right, it is," agreed the officer.

"You're just starting, aren't you?"

"Pretty soon, now."

"Then I'll be going," said Lee.

"Good-o!" said the Australian. "See you some more, perhaps?"

Very soon Nelson Lee had gone, and the juniors felt exceedingly pleased with themselves.

They really began to enjoy the beauties of the Murray River next day, as they were chugging along up-stream through the pastoral country. It was exceedingly hot, but none of the fellows cared. The experience was so novel—so new to them—that they did not mind perspiring a little.

The boat slipped along between fringed cliffs at intervals; and then would come grass-covered slopes, with huge gum-trees lining the banks. They were solid fellows, these gums, forming stately avenues.

Here and there, too, small islands would divide the main stream, and at times it seemed that the boat would never get through. At intervals there would be wood piles on the river bank—fuel for the steamers. Small landings, too—jetties.

"They seem to do things in a rummy way," remarked Handforth, while the ship was near one of the banks, discharging some boxes of goods. "There's no town here—and yet they're unloading some stuff!"

"It seems to be uninhabited," agreed Church, as he looked at the landscape. "But there's probably a town tucked away just beyond the hills. By jingo, it's different from Adelaide, though!"

"And we're getting deeper and deeper into the rural districts," said Handforth, with a

note of satisfaction in his voice. "We shall probably be hearing about the bushrangers soon!"

"Yes, we'd better be careful, or we might be held up by Ned Kelly!" said Travers solemnly.

"Ned Kelly, the notorious Australian bushranger!" said Handforth, nodding. "I've heard about him! A desperate character, isn't he?"

"Dreadful!" said Travers.

"Good gad!" remarked Archie, as he adjusted his eyeglass, and took a hard look at Handforth. "I mean to say, laddie! Aren't you a trifle out of date, I mean? Surely this Ned Kelly chappie was hanged a few years ago?"

"Was he?" asked Handforth, with a start.

"I believe so," murmured Travers. "In fact, as far as my recollection goes, Ned Kelly was rounded up in the little township of Glenrowan—in the year 1880."

"The year which?" gasped Handforth.

"Forty-eight years ago!" chuckled Travers. "Ned Kelly was wounded, and captured. Then he was tried and convicted and hanged later on in the same year. It's history, dear old fellow—history."

"Ancient history!" said Church pointedly.

"And Handy thinks that Ned Kelly's gang is still going about Australia, telling people to 'Bail up'!" said Nipper dryly. "This is what comes of reading sensational literature, Handy. Lots of our chaps at home get wrong ideas about Australia because they read cheap adventure stories in low-class periodicals."

"I don't read low-class periodicals!" roared Handforth.

"Then where did you get this bushranger stuff from?"

"There are bushrangers here!" said Handforth obstinately. "I've read stories—I—I mean, I've heard about 'em. Why, in some parts of Australia it isn't safe to go along the country roads. At any moment you might be held up by these rotten bushrangers!"

"All the same, I expect they're getting wiped out," remarked Tommy Watson.

"And we shan't be lucky enough to see any," said Chubby Heath, with a note of regret.

Nipper yelled with laughter.

"I'm dashed if there aren't five or six of you who believe that bushrangers are still to be found in Australia!" he said, in astonishment.

"Not all over Australia," said Handforth, with an air of importance. "Only up in the back blocks."

"In the which?"

"Back blocks," said Handforth carelessly. "That's an Australian term, you know. It means—it means— Well, these bushrangers are to be found in the back blocks!" he added defiantly.

"The back blocks, Handy, dear old fellow, are rather curious," said Vivian Travers. "The term explains itself. Far in the in-

terior the country is divided up into blocks, and the ones at the rear are called the back blocks. You see? All the country is in the shape of blocks—just like gigantic lumps of sugar. All the hills, for example, are square. Wherever you go, you see these whacking great blocks sticking up, sometimes with trees stuck on the top of them."

"By George!" said Handforth. "I never knew that before!"

"You howling ass—he's only pulling your leg!" grinned Church.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth, turning red. "Why, you—you fatheaded—"

"Always remember, Handy, that we're St. Frank's fellows," said Travers, holding up a hand. "We mustn't do any scrapping on this boat—or people will think that English chaps are rough and ill-mannered. Who says an iced drink?"

"What-ho!" murmured Archie. "A priceless scheme, laddie!"

Handforth was rather glad that the subject of "back blocks" was dropped. And so the journey went on, with the juniors finding plenty to interest them during every minute of the trip.

They came at length to the township of Renmark, not far from the South Australia border. Renmark proved to be very interesting, and practically all the passengers went ashore—for the river boat was due to stop here until the next morning.

"This is one of the principal irrigation settlements in South Australia," said Nipper, as he and the others went into the town. "I don't believe there's any railway here; but there's the Paringa terminus, on the other side of the river."

Renmark was full of genuine interest for the visitors. It fringed the river bank, and the vineyards and plantations could be seen—and this district was famous for its vineyards and plantations.

It was purely a rural town, but it had plenty of attractive buildings and well-equipped shops, and motor-cars speeded up and down the dusty streets.

Singularly enough; however, there were positively no bushrangers!



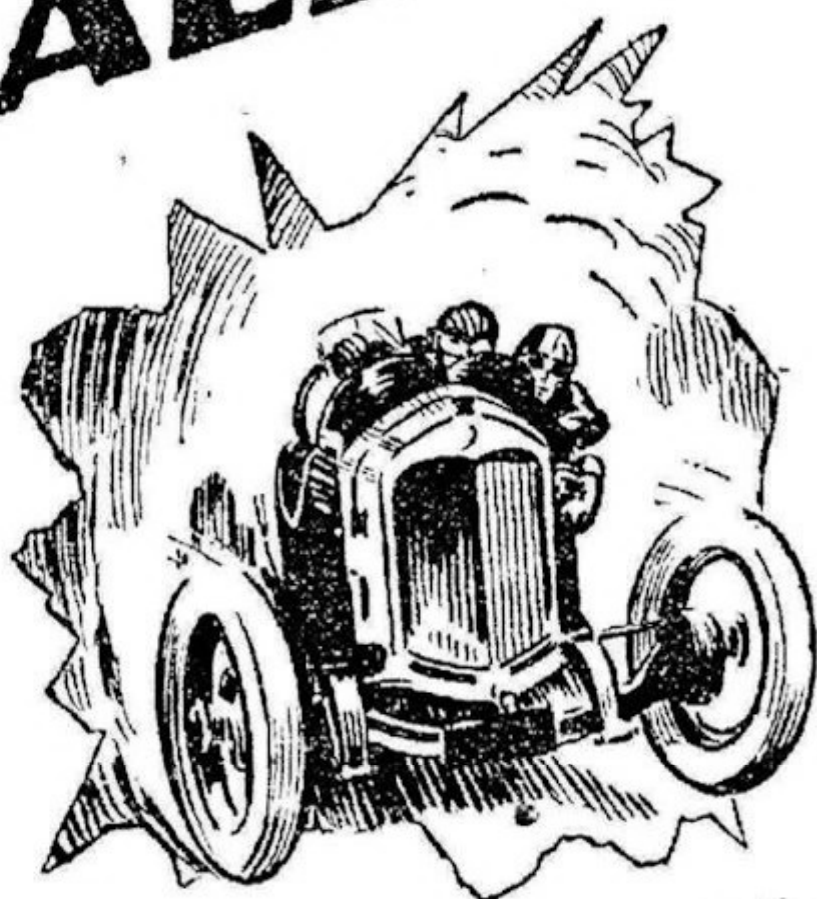
CHAPTER 7.

Handy Hears Some News!

RENMARK made a big fuss of the St. Frank's boys. Naturally the township had heard all about the exciting flight from South Africa, and these youngsters were regarded as persons of some importance. Any party of English schoolboys would have been heartily welcomed, but a party such as this, having flown thousands of miles across the ocean

(Continued on page 14.)

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(Continued from page 1)

in the world's greatest aeroplane— Well, Renmark felt that something special had to be done.

And Renmark surpassed itself.

An escort of enterprising young townspeople was formed, and Nipper and Handforth and the others found themselves taken all over the town. Motor-cars were provided in plenty, and rides out into the surrounding country were indulged in. They were introduced to the orange groves and the fruit orchards. For many of them the trip was an eye-opener.

Here they were, right up the Murray, in the heart of a rural Australian district—and yet everything was modern and up-to-date and peaceful.

Handforth, at least, was frankly disappointed. It didn't fit in with his preconceived ideas of Australia at all. In a dim sort of way he had imagined Australia to be a wild and woolly land, with "bush" stretching in every direction, as far as the eye could see.

"Anyhow, where is the bush?" he asked, when they got back to Renmark.

"Plenty of it out yonder," said one of the townspeople, with a vague motion of his hand. "But you take my advice, young 'un, and stick to the river."

They were in the big hotel in Renmark—a comfortable, substantial structure—and the St. Frank's fellows were surrounded by a grinning, amused group.

"The river's all right, but I want to see some of the bush," said Handforth stubbornly.

"He thinks, if he gets into the bush, he'll find some bushrangers," explained Travers blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared with laughter—all except one elderly man, who looked grave.

"Go ahead!" he said in a wheezy voice. "Think yourselves clever, don't you? But mebbe this youngster ain't far wrong, after all!"

"He's all right—he's bonzer!" declared one of the others. "We're only giving him some chiack."

"Some what?" asked Handforth.

"We're pulling your leg, kid!"

"Oh, are you?" said Handforth, with a sniff. "Then let me tell you that it can't be done—and that's dinkum oil! What do you take me for—a jackaroo?"

"Bet you don't know what a jackaroo is!" said one of the townspeople promptly.

"Oh, yes I do!" replied Handforth. "I've made a study of your Australian

slang. A jackaroo is a sort of—of animal."

"What?" gasped the crowd.

"A sort of cross between a kangaroo and a wombat," said Handforth confidently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Handy, old man!" urged Church, giving his leader a nudge. "You're only airing your ignorance! You silly ass! A jackaroo is a cattle-station hand!"

"Eh?" said Handy, with a start. "I—I thought— By George! I must have got mixed up!"

"Mixed up!" grinned one of the crowd. "Too right, you are!"

"You young fellers can laugh as much as you please," said the elderly man, with a knowing wag of his finger. "But these new chums ain't such coots as you believe! And, talking about bushrangers, I can remember the day when I was bailed up and robbed, not ten miles from this township!"

"Don't take any notice of old Sam!" said one of the younger men, in a low voice. "He's a bit shickered."

"He's what?" asked Travers politely.

"Stonkered," said the native.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "I mean to say, absolutely. Stonkered, what?"

"He's onkus."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie, nodding.

"Onkus, what? Absolutely! I see what you mean! At the same time, old orange, I must confess that I don't quite grasp the trend."

"He's hooched!" chuckled the Australian. "In other words, beered, or oiled. To put it bluntly, he's plain blotto."

"Every time, laddie—every time!" said Archie stoutly.

"I suppose you mean he's under the influence of drink?" chuckled Nipper.

"Haven't I been telling you so for the last five minutes?" asked the Australian, with a chuckle. "Old Sam is all right, but he's never earned a deener in his life by yakker. Don't take any notice of his guyver."

Handforth stared, bewildered.

"Deener!" he repeated. "Yakker! Guyver! My only sainted aunt! It's a foreign language! And I thought you spoke English in Australia!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Later on, when the juniors were allowed to leave—when they went back to their berths aboard the Rubion—they were all chuckling heartily.

"It didn't take those townspeople long to find out that Handy's legs was made to be pulled!" said Nipper, grinning. "And, by Jove, they pulled it!"

"Oh, did they?" said Handforth.

"You bet they did, Ted," said Willy.

"Why, you don't suppose they use all those slang words in ordinary conversation, do you? They use them now and again, I expect—but not all at once!"

"Do you mean to say that chap was spoofing me?" asked Handforth, breathing hard.

"He was spoofing you up to the eyes!" grinned Willy. "A deener is a shilling, if you only know it. And yakker is hard work—"

which, of course, you don't know, and never will know."

"You cheeky young fathead——"

"And guyver is just a term that means nonsense."

"Then we've heard a lot of guyver this evening!" said Handforth promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Never mind, Handy; we shall be going up the river again to-morrow," said McClure consolingly. "And, if we're lucky, we might see some of the bush."

"Yes, and you needn't believe all you hear about bushrangers being obsolete," said Handforth, livening up. "I had a talk with that wizened fellow—old Sam, as they call him."

"Can't take any notice of him—he's onkus!" said Willy.

"Eh? You young chump——"

"Beered!" nodded Willy.

"If you can't talk English, don't talk at all!" roared Edward Oswald aggressively. "The old chap wasn't beered at all! He was perfectly sober—and he told me that bushrangers are just as active as ever. In fact, he took me into his confidence. He said there were some bushrangers round this district not more than five years ago."

"Five years is a long time, Handy," said Nipper.

"There might be some more," argued Handforth. "Naturally, these Australians don't like to admit it to us—they like us to believe that their country is fully civilised."

"And so it is, you ass!" said Church.

"If they can spoof us that there aren't any bushrangers, they'll jolly well spoof us," continued Handforth. "But I know better! I don't suppose we shall meet any—because we're on the river. But along the lonely roads, at the back of the beyond——"

"In the back blocks," murmured Travers.

"Out on the lonely roads the bushrangers are probably as active as ever!" said Handforth severely. "No, my sons! You can't kid me!"

And there were several other members of the party who privately held the view that bushrangers still roamed wild along the lonely trails of Australia.



CHAPTER 8.

A Startling Interruption!

NEXT morning the sturdy river steamer chugged her way up stream again.

Apparently there wasn't much hope for Handforth; there wasn't a chance in a thousand that he would become acquainted with the genuine Australian bush.

For between the occasional locks and weirs the country proved to be agricultural. Wheat and fruit were grown here in great quantities, and sheep-farming was an im-

portant industry, too. There were plenty of barges on the river, carrying their loads down to be transferred to ocean-going ships.

"Couldn't imagine a more peaceful scene," remarked Church, as he and Handforth and McClure leaned over the rail in the shade, as the steamer rounded a bend. "Look at that homestead, peeping through the trees over there. Looks lovely, doesn't it?"

"Rather!" admitted Handforth. "And look at these orchards!"

The progress was very leisurely, and Handforth, who was by nature an impatient sort of fellow, felt that the trip was tame. Handforth, of course, had no eye for scenery, and unless something exciting was happening he wasn't satisfied.

But the others were enjoying this trip to the full, eagerly inspecting every new scene, every fresh vista that opened out to their delighted eyes.

Of course, after the luxuries of the School Ship, the accommodation on the river steamer was somewhat limited; and the speed, too, was negligible. It was a remarkable contrast from the great aeroplane flight from South Africa to Australia. And, by reason of this contrast, perhaps, it was really all the more enjoyable.

In the lazy sunshine, in the sweltering heat, the boys had no desire for anything energetic.

Archie Glenthorne would have been quite content to doze in a deck-chair all day, but the other fellows would not allow him to slack in this fashion. They reminded him that this was an educational trip, and how much education could Archie expect to gain if he slept all the time?

"The gov'nor knew what he was about," said Nipper. "We get so many false impressions about Australia that it is doing us all the good in the world to come on this trip—to see some of the country with our own eyes. And here we are at close quarters, and we behold a land of peace and quiet industry."

"It's too peaceful and too quiet!" grunted Handforth. "In fact, it's a swindle!"

"Which only proves how wise Mr. Lee was," chuckled Travers. "Seeing is believing, dear old fellow. I hope this trip will knock all those wild and woolly ideas out of your head."

Handforth sniffed.

"Australia is a big country," he retorted. "We haven't seen a millionth part of it. What about Queensland? And what about the Northern Territory? I've heard there are immense deserts up there, with blacks all over the place."

"You don't get blacks in the desert, Handy," said Church. "There aren't any factory chimneys——"

"You howling idiot!" interrupted Handforth glaring. "I mean, blacks—niggers!"

"Oh!"

"Aboriginals!" went on Handforth, nodding. "Or aborigines, or whatever they're called. We've hardly seen a single black fellow since we arrived in Australia."

"There's one on the boat," put in Willy.

"That chap?" said Handforth. "He's civilised! He goes about wearing shorts and a shirt."

"What did you expect him to wear—an overcoat and a bowler hat?"

"The real Australian blackies don't wear anything—or hardly anything," said Handforth. "They're—they're cannibals! They hold corroborees!"

"They hold which?" asked Church, staring.

"I know my subject," said Handforth airily. "Corroborees, my son! And if you don't know what a corroboree is, I'll tell you! A corroboree is a huge gathering of native tribes, and when they're all together they rush down on some harmless township, kill everybody, and burn the place to the ground. That's a corroboree."

Nipper chuckled.

"I think you've got a bit mixed, Handy, old man," he said gently. "You're thinking about the Red Indians of the old days. A corroboree is a dance."

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting. "What rot!"

"It's a sort of spectacular dance indulged in by the aborigines," chuckled Nipper. "Very often it goes on for three nights—generally moonlight nights. And the blacks wear animal head-dresses, and they have rummy patterns painted over their bodies."

"Oh, well, I knew it was something like that," said Handforth carelessly. "But where are they? Where are these painted aborigines, holding their corroborees?"

"You want too much for your money, old son," said Travers, shaking his head. "This is a peaceful river trip—a pleasure cruise."

"And there's the bush!" said Willy, pointing.

"The bush!" ejaculated Handforth, staring. "Where?"

Willy pointed across to the river bank. There were no orchards here—no pasture lands. The steamer had swung round into a stretch of the river where the bush came down practically to the water's edge.

"That's not the bush!" said Handforth. "They're trees!"

"Did you expect to see nothing but bushes, then?"

"If there aren't bushes, they shouldn't call it 'the bush,'" said Handforth sternly. "The more I see of Australia, the more I find out that it's a swindle! Mind you, it's a fine country—a go-ahead place. But it's not what I expected it to be!"

"The bush can be forest-land, or fairly open country, or anything like that," explained Nipper. "It's just a term, denoting land that hasn't been cultivated, or can't be cultivated, or used for any other purpose. It's just the bush."

"And here's a sample of it," nodded Travers.

This was certainly true. But Handforth, as he looked at the river banks, was not very impressed. He certainly saw no "blackfellows," and there wasn't a kangaroo in sight.

The steamer was edging towards the river bank, in order to get through a narrow channel just ahead. There was an island in mid-stream here, and it seemed almost impossible that this steamer could get through that narrow passage.

The boys were on the topmost deck, high above the water-line, standing just in front of the wheelhouse, with its open front. A man was leisurely controlling the spokes of the enormous wheel, and the captain was standing by—a leathery-faced individual in his shirt-sleeves.

The Rubion crept nearer and nearer to the bank, edging her way into that confined channel. She chugged along confidently, and from that upper deck the juniors could lean over the rail and watch the churned water from the paddles; they could see how much skill was necessary in order to get the craft through in safety.

And just then, rather dramatically, a group of eight or nine horsemen broke through the bush a hundred yards ahead.

"Hallo, what the——" began Nipper, staring.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth. "Busrangers!"

"You silly ass!" snorted Church, turning red. "You'll have everybody laughing at you——"

"But look at 'em!" gasped Handforth. "They're masked! And they've got revolvers!"

Church nearly fell over backwards. For Handforth's words were only too true! Those men on the river bank, just ahead, were sitting astride their horses, and looking very grim. Each man wore a mask, and each held a big revolver!

And then came the dreaded command:

"Bail up!"

Handforth breathed hard as he looked at this well-nigh incredible scene. The other fellows wondered if they were dreaming.

Busrangers!

The river steamer was actually being held up by busrangers!



CHAPTER 9.

The Fight!

BAIL up!"

The command came again—stern and loud. The captain, uttering a sharp ejaculation of amazement, stared as though he could not believe his eyes. The man at the wheel nearly let go of the spokes.



The two horsemen charged forward, scattering all the boys except Archie Glenthorne, who, trapped between the animals, found himself hoisted up on to the saddle by one of the men. "By George!" gasped Handforth. "They're collaring old Archie!"

"It's a joke!" said Nipper incredulously. "It must be a joke! Somebody's trying to fool us!"

"Rot!" shouted Handforth. "What did I tell you I knew that there were still bushrangers in Australia! My only hat! This is going to be exciting!"

"But—but—"

"Bail up!" shouted the leader of the masked men, spurring his horse and advancing. "Look lively, there! Bring this tub aground, and look slippy!"

The captain found his voice again.

"Say, what's the idea?" he shouted, leaning over the rail, and glaring. "You'd better not start any monkey business with this boat!"

"That's enough!" retorted the leader of the gang. "Are you going to obey orders, or shall I tell my men to fire?"

"I'll see you burned before I obey your infernal orders!" retorted the captain furiously.

"They're bushrangers!" said the man at the wheel, in a shaky voice.

"Too right, they are!" agreed the skipper, as he picked up a heavy iron pin. "But I'm not scared of them! They'd better not try to jump this joint!"

He went to the rail again, and flung the iron pin at the leader of the bushrangers. It fell short, and splashed heavily into the water.

Crack!

"Gosh!" ejaculated the skipper, clapping a hand to his shoulder and staggering.

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth, aghast.

For when the captain took his hand away there was an ugly red patch on his shirt. His arm was hanging limply.

"They've got me, boys!" muttered the captain dully. "Stand clear, there. Keep back, you youngsters!"

He reeled again, and gave the signal for the boat to be stopped. The paddles ceased their chugging, and down below, from the other decks, came a confused shouting. Excitement was apparently running from end to end of the boat.

The steamer swung half round in that narrow channel, and dug her nose into the bank. She grounded, and at the same moment two of the masked men fired their revolvers into the air.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

"They're only bluffing!" panted Handforth. "They're just trying to scare us!"

"Keep back, you idiot!" gasped Church. "They'll shoot you down like a dog if you defy them! Look what happened to the captain!"

By this time the unfortunate captain had collapsed. He was sprawling just inside the deck-house, near the wheel, that ugly patch on his shoulder increasing in size. But he was defiant still; he was gasping out orders,

although, in the confusion, nobody took any notice.

Two men were standing in the bows of the steamer—having been busily engaged on a pile of deck cargo. They now stood with their hands upraised.

The scene was a tense one.

"And we thought that bushrangers were obsolete!" muttered Nipper dazedly. "I've never been more surprised in all my life! I can hardly believe it!"

"It only shows you, dear old fellow, that you mustn't take anything for granted," muttered Vivian Travers. "For the love of Samson! These fellows mean business, too!"

"But we're not going to knuckle under, are we?" asked Handforth defiantly. "By George! Come on, St. Frank's! Let's grab anything we can lay our hands on, and—"

"Wait!" urged Tommy Watson. "They'll shoot you, Handy!"

"I tell you they're bluffing!" retorted Edward Oswald fiercely. "They're only firing in the air!"

"Were they bluffing when they shot the skipper?" demanded Church, with a gulp. "Look! I believe he's dead!"

Just then the two men below, on the fore-deck, made a frantic run for the interior of the steamer. Probably the bushrangers mistook their intentions. At all events, the air was filled with the sudden shattering crack of revolver-shots.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

One man screamed and stumbled, and the other gave a mere grunt, and rolled over. They both lay still on the deck, sprawling in grotesque attitudes.

"Oh, the brutes!" said Nipper, turning away, his face pale.

"It's horrible—horrible!" whispered Chubby Heath shakily.

Even Edward Oswald Handforth had nothing to say; he no longer urged that they should show fight. What was the use? Nobody aboard the steamer was armed. These bushrangers were evidently prepared to shoot their victims down at the slightest provocation.

The juniors had seen this dreadful scene—they had watched it at close quarters, from that upper deck—and they were horrified. These two unfortunate men had been shot down ruthlessly.

"We'd better knuckle under, dear old fellows," muttered Travers, his voice steady and cool. "It's no good showing fight against such curs."

Handforth gulped.

"I was hoping to see some bushrangers—but I didn't want anything like this!" he said huskily. "I—I thought bushrangers were different! In all the stories I've read bushrangers are sporting kind of chaps, who'll give a man a chance. But these chaps never had an earthly!"

"They'll treat you the same, Handy, if you show fight," muttered Travers.

The bushrangers had dismounted by this time, and they quickly tethered their horses

to the trees. Then they advanced upon the helpless steamer, leaping on to her decks, and keeping their guns ready.

"Any man who disobeys orders will be shot down!" said the leader of the gang, his voice harsh and grim. "Understand? Bail up!"

"We'd better stay up here, you chaps!" said Nipper, looking round. "We can't do anything, even if we go down. We'll stay here."

"But—but we ought to do something!" said Handforth, breathing hard. "Hang it, we're not going to knuckle under—"

"You saw what happened to those men—and the captain," said Travers harshly. "Handforth, if you start any foolery, we'll hold you down, and tie you up! Great Samson! Don't you realise that it'll mean death to—"

"All right—I suppose you're right!" said Handforth, choking. "But—but why should these rotten bushrangers hold up our boat?"

"Why?" shouted the man at the wheel, with a bitter laugh. "We've got bullion aboard—that's why!"

"Bullion!"

"Good gad!"

"Not so loud!" warned Nipper. "Perhaps these men don't know!"

"Oh, they know, sonny!" said the man at the wheel. "They wouldn't have bailed us up otherwise. They're after that bullion—in the strong-room, confound them! The skipper's in a bad way!"

Crack! Crack!

"Listen!" said Juicy Lemon, in terror.

From down below, in the interior of the steamer, came the sound of revolver-shots. Screams followed—and then the roaring voices of the bushrangers.

"They're shooting everybody!" said Church hoarsely.

"Somebody showed fight, I expect," muttered Travers. "These bushrangers are ruthless—and if anybody jibs they just shoot them down!"



CHAPTER 10.

The Bullion Robbery!

RACK-crack!

Again came the ominous sound of revolver-shots. Again came screams.

The captain rolled over, groaning.

"Tell them—tell them to surrender!" he muttered. "Half of us will be killed if we don't obey the orders of these dogs. Tell everybody to surrender!"

"You needn't worry about us!" said Travers. "We won't show fight—we won't give you any anxiety."

"Bail up!"

The command came sharply, and two of the bushrangers appeared on that upper deck, their revolvers ready.

"Steady, Handy!" said Nipper quickly. "It'll be madness to show fight against these armed desperadoes! Up with your hands!"

Nipper's own hands were high—as were Travers's, Willy's, Watson's, and the others. It would, indeed, have been sheer idiocy to defy these ruthless bushrangers.

"Stand still, the whole parcel of you!" growled one of the men. "Go through their pockets, Jim!" he added, to his companion.

"Good-o!" nodded the other.

In a very businesslike way he went from junior to junior, taking no notice of their baleful glares. He took their watches, their loose money, and their pocket-books. His eyes opened wide with satisfaction when he saw how Archie Glenthorne's pocket-book bulged.

"There's real money here!" he said gloatingly.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "You frightful fright! I mean, dash it, you don't think I'd go about with false money, do you?"

"That's enough lip!" snapped the man.

His revolver clicked, and Archie turned a shade paler. However, there was no real danger. These bushrangers did not fire unless their victims defied them.

"Ready?" said the man who had been standing by

"Yes."

"We'll quit, then," said the man. "You kids had better hold still. Stay just where you are—because it'll be unhealthy if you try to move anywhere else."

"See you some more!" said the other man mockingly.

They backed off the top deck, and not until they had disappeared did any of the fellows lower their arms. Handforth was breathing hard.

"By George!" he said thickly. "I wanted to punch those rotters in the eye!"

"And get killed for your pains?" asked Church, with a catch in his voice. "Thank goodness, you held yourself in check Handy!"

Shouts sounded from the lower levels, and when the boys looked over the rail they saw the bushrangers preparing to leave the boat. Three or four of them had already reached the bank, and they were standing ready, their guns pointing.

Four others were struggling along, carrying a small wooden case, which was heavily bound with iron. It was as much as the four men could do to carry it.

"The bullion!" muttered Travers. "So that's why they held us up!"

"And they thought they might as well rifle our pockets while they were at it, eh?" muttered Jimmy Potts.

These desperadoes had come prepared, for one of the horses was supplied with a special kind of cradle in front of the saddle. The box of bullion was hoisted up and placed in this. The other men mounted their steeds, and, at a signal, they raised their revolvers into the air.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Dozens of shots rang out. Then the leader swung his horse round, and raised a hand.

"Much obliged!" he shouted amusedly. "If you want me again, you can use my telegraphic address—Kelly, Australia."

"Kelly!" gasped Handforth, his eyes burning.

"That's my name!" went on the leader of the bushrangers.

"Ned Kelly!"

"Then he's still alive!" panted Juicy Lemon. "We—we thought that Ned Kelly was dead!"

"He must have escaped!" said Handforth.

"You idiot! Ned Kelly was hanged fifty years ago nearly!" said McClure impatiently.

All the bushrangers were laughing uproariously—apparently tickled by their leader's sense of humour.

"Yes, Ned Kelly—that's me!" shouted the leader.

"And that's the dinkie die. Maybe you've heard my name before? Too right, you have! The other Ned Kelly was my grandfather, and I'm carrying on the family tradition!"

His manner suddenly changed as somebody on one of the other decks shouted an angry threat at him.

"No back chat!" he snapped. "When I shoot—I kill! The new Ned Kelly gang is going to be the biggest success that this continent has ever seen!"

With that the bushrangers swung their horses round, fired another volley into the air as a farewell, and vanished into the bush. For some moments the thudding of their horses' hoofs could be heard—and then came silence.

Handforth and the other juniors turned and looked at one another. Up there, on that top deck, they were sweltering in the full glare of the sun, but until this minute they had not noticed it.

"They've gone!" muttered Church.

"And they've robbed us!" said Tregellis-West. "Begad! They've taken everything we had on us, dear old boys!"

"I think we're lucky to be all alive!" said Willy Handforth.

EARLY ADVENTURES!

Would you like to read the Early Adventures of the boys of St. Frank's? Of course you would! Then you'll find a Topping Long Complete Tale of Nipper and Co., of the Remove, in this Tuesday's issue of

THE
POPULAR 2^D.

"The rotters—the crooks—the scoundrels!" said Handforth breathlessly. "What's going to be done now? We're not going to let them coolly run off with all our valuables, are we? And what about that bullion? Oh, my only hat! What a pity Mr. Lee didn't come with us!"

"How was the gov'nor to know that there would be anything like this?" asked Nipper. "It's—it's staggering! Bushrangers haven't been heard of for years——"

"Look here, young man, you've got it wrong!" said one of the officers. "Bushrangers aren't so scarce as you seem to think. This is the third time we've been bailed up within a month."

"What?" shouted the schoolboys.

"But they'll be jugged before long!" went on the other grimly. "They can't keep this game up indefinitely!"

"And you chaps laughed at me because I said that we might meet with some bushrangers!" said Handforth, looking at all the others. "Great Scott! This river trip isn't so tame, after all!"



CHAPTER 11.

On the Track of the Bushrangers!

CAPTAIN WALLIS, of the Rubion, was not so badly injured as everybody had at first believed. Five minutes after the bushrangers had decamped, the captain was on his feet, his arm in a sling. He had recovered some of his strength, too.

"I'm glad you boys are safe!" he said, as he looked at the juniors. "You'd best stay up here for a bit—until we've cleared away the evidence."

He turned and vanished below, accompanied by two other men.

"The evidence?" said Handforth slowly. "What did he mean?"

"We don't know how many people were killed, Handy," said Travers in a low voice.

"Oh, my hat! He meant——" Handforth paused and gulped.

It turned out that none of the passengers had been hurt. The two men who had fallen were now in one of the cabins.

"We're taking the—bodies up to the next township," said one of the officers, when the boys inquired. "Those other shots you heard? They were nothing. Just to frighten some of the passengers who were a bit slow."

"It's pretty awful, all the same!" said Nipper, shaking his head. "Two men shot down like that—killed without mercy! Those bushrangers are ruthless!"

"But isn't something going to be done—at once?" asked Handforth, as the captain came in sight. "You're not going on up stream, are you, without taking any action?"

"What action can we take?" asked Captain Wallis gruffly. "No, young 'un, there's nothing that we can do. This part of the country, apparently, is becoming infested by bushrangers."

"And we've got to lose all our property, I suppose?" asked Travers indignantly.

"It's not my fault, is it?"

"No, of course not, but——"

"That's enough!" snapped the captain. "What you boys have lost is next to nothing. Think of the bullion those bushrangers got away with! Fifty thousand pounds' worth of gold!"

"Good gad!"

"My only sainted aunt!"

"It's for the police to get after those blamed sundowners," continued the captain. "My job is to look after this craft. And it'll take the best part of an hour to get her afloat again. She's grounded."

"Can we go ashore for a bit while you're doing it?" asked Travers quickly. "Might as well stretch our legs——"

"Go ashore, if you like—but be ready to come aboard as soon as we've got the old boat free," said the captain. "I don't want any more delay than I can help."

"But—but can't you do something?" asked Nipper in astonishment. "Can't you send a man on ahead, or something like that?"

"No good!" said the captain. "This is a very lonely tract of bush country. No telegraph for miles—and the quickest way to the nearest township is by river. Those bushrangers knew the best place to attack us."

On the lower decks there was a lot of confusion. The St. Frank's crowd, in fact, was glad to leap ashore and to get just into the bush, under the shade of the trees. They could watch all the movements of the river steamer from here—and, at the same time, they felt free.

"Well, it's over!" said Nipper, breathing hard. "I wouldn't have believed it!"

"But seeing is believing," said Handforth.

"Yes—you've got us this time, old man," admitted Nipper gravely. "And the worst of it is, there doesn't seem to be a ghost of a chance of bringing those scoundrels to justice."

"If Mr. Lee was with us, he would track the gang!" said Tommy Watson.

Handforth looked eagerly on the ground, and pushed his way forward a bit.

"What's the good?" he asked. "There's nothing to be seen here—no trail at all! The ground's too hard."

"Your eyes can't see much, Handy—because your eyes are not trained," said Travers. "Now, if we had one of those black trackers——"

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting. "I've heard about them! Black trackers! The police used to use them, didn't they, when the bushrangers were at the height of their glory?"

"By Samson!" said Vivian Travers, his eyes opening wider. "I wonder!"

"You wonder what?"

"There's a black fellow aboard!" said Travers. "I remember somebody saying that he's a keen tracker, too. Why don't they get that fellow on the job?"

"What could he do, alone?" asked Church.

"Nothing—alone," replied Travers. "But we're here, aren't we? Look here, dear old fellows! Those bushrangers think they're safe—and the chances are that they'll be leisurely in their movements. They're not likely to gallop madly across the country, because that would be a sure way of attracting attention."

"What are you getting at, Travers?" asked Nipper wonderingly.

"If that black fellow is any good at tracking, I suggest that we should employ him!" replied Travers promptly. "Why shouldn't we go after these bushrangers ourselves?"

"That's not a bad idea——" began Handforth thoughtfully.

"No, no!" said Nipper. "There's no sense in asking for trouble——"

"We needn't ask for any," interrupted Travers. "As long as we track them, it'll be enough. I'm not suggesting that we should make any attack, but simply that we should follow them—and then, when we get in touch with the police, we can give them valuable information. In that way, perhaps, the gang will be rounded up!"

"By George!" shouted Handforth excitedly. "We'll do it!"

"It's only a suggestion, mind," said Travers. "It needs thinking over. Perhaps it won't be advisable——"

"We'll get on the track of these bushrangers!" said Handforth fiercely. "Come on, St. Frank's! Are all you fellows game?"

"They're a ruthless lot, Handy——" began Church.

"You're not afraid, are you?" demanded Edward Oswald.

"No, you ass, but——"

"Here's a chance for St. Frank's to become famous!" exclaimed Handforth enthusiastically. "Of course, St. Frank's is famous already, but think of the glory we shall get if we round up these rotten bushrangers! There's that bullion, too! We might be given a whacking great reward!"

"Yes, the bullion!" said Nipper thoughtfully. "That's important, Handy."

"Of course it is——"

"Important in another way, I mean," said Nipper. "The gang can't travel fast with that heavily-laden horse. They'll have to take it almost at a walk, although further on, when they've got a good distance away, they'll probably call a halt and share the loot, so that the weight will be more divided."

"That'll mean a long delay!" said Handforth excitedly. "By George! We'd better get on the track at once! There's no telling, you chaps! We might capture the whole gang!"

"You're mad!" gasped Church.

"Well, are you going to back me up in this idea of mine?" asked Handforth, looking round.

"Idea of yours, dear old fellow?" asked Travers politely.

"Yes."

"Well, well!" murmured Travers. "Somehow I thought the wheeze was mine. But we won't argue. You're welcome to it, dear old fellow."

Travers himself hurried off back to the river steamer, and the others stood in an excited group, talking. Nipper went aboard, too, and before long he and Travers came ashore again, accompanied now by a black fellow, airily attired in a tattered shirt and abbreviated shorts.

"Well?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"According to what I can understand, he's a famous old black tracker," said Nipper, with satisfaction. "He says he can easily follow the trail."

The black man, a rather grubby specimen, was looking intently at the ground.

"Plenty easy!" he muttered.

Without any other comment, he started off into the bush, crouching low, his gaze fixed intently on the ground just ahead.

"Hey!" came a loud hail.

The juniors turned, and found Captain Wallis beckoning to them from the deck of the river steamer.

"What's the idea?" asked the captain. "What are you boys doing?"

"We're going on the track of those bushrangers!" replied Handforth promptly. "You needn't try to stop us——"

"Better think again, boys!" said the captain anxiously. "You can't do any good. Besides, I've promised to look after you, and I can't keep the boat hanging about here for hours——"

"Come on!" panted Handforth.

And, ignoring Captain Wallis' shouts, he led the way into the bush, and the other juniors, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

CHAPTER 12.

Through the Bush!



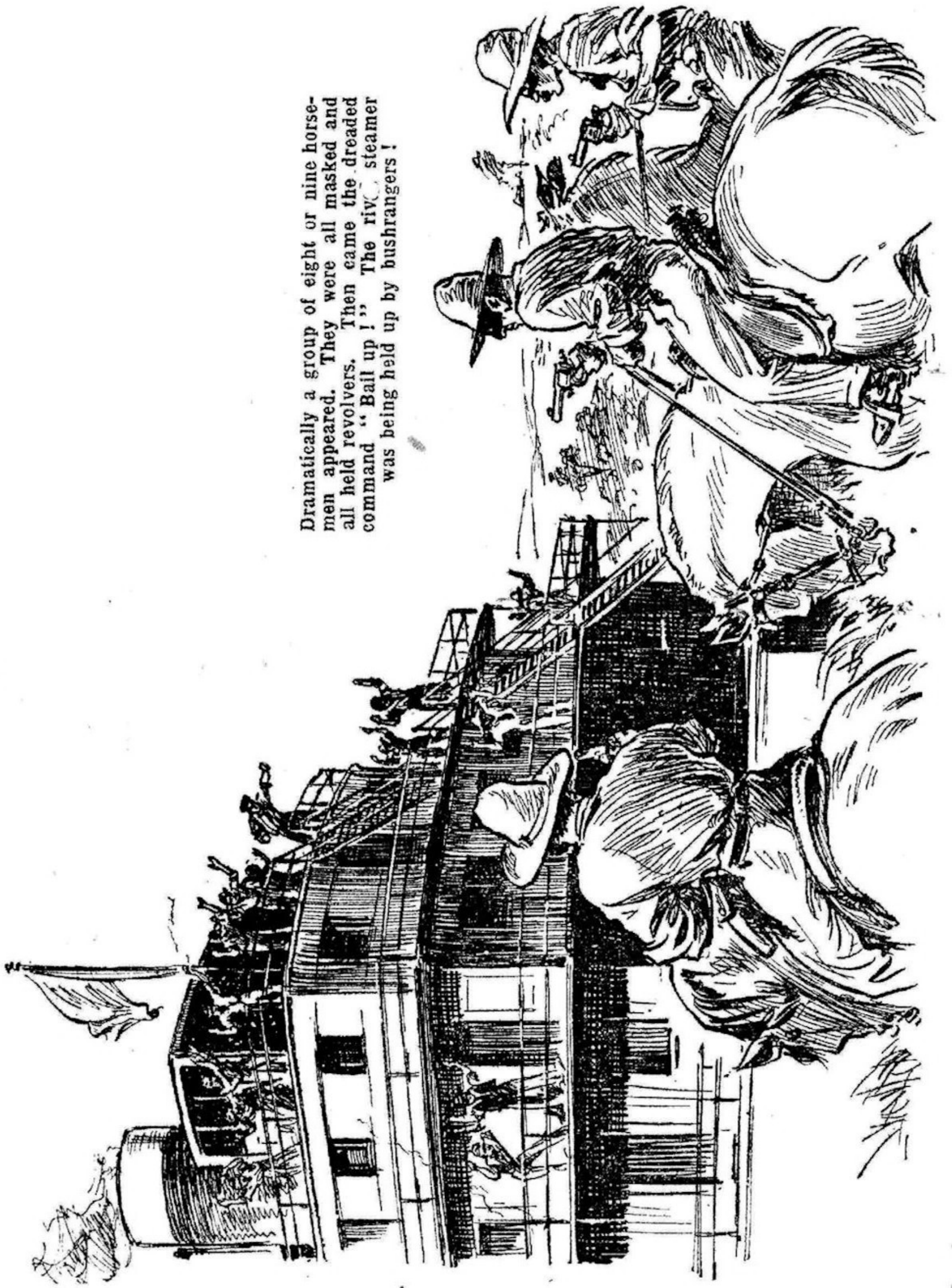
NIPPER was looking somewhat uncertain. "I don't know whether we ought to have done that, Travers!" he said, in a low voice. "Captain Wallis knows best——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth, who had overheard the words. "We're not going to be dished out of this adventure! If Captain Wallis had his way he would take us all on board and lock us in a cabin or something! We've got a chance of going after a desperate gang of bushrangers, and we're not going to be done out of it."

"Hang it all, Handy's right!" said Vivian Travers. "We don't often get an opportunity like this!"

Nipper, who was naturally cautious—and who was, in consequence, generally successful in all he undertook—said no more.

Dramatically a group of eight or nine horsemen appeared. They were all masked and all held revolvers. Then came the dreaded command "Bail up!" The river steamer was being held up by bushrangers!



He could see that the other fellows were eager to go on this rather desperate mission. Handforth, in particular, was bubbling over with excitement.

Less than an hour ago the boys had been telling themselves that this trip up the Murray River, although fascinatingly interesting, was not exactly chock full of thrills.

Now this dramatic change had come.

"Of course, it's a ripe scheme, going on the track of these dashed bushrangers," said Archie Glenthorne. "But, at the same time, laddies, isn't it a trifle on the murky side?"

"We've got to go, Archie," said Church, who was near him. "Handy insists upon going, and Travers is keen on it, too, and so are some of the other fellows. We'd better all stick together."

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie. "The more we are together, what? Absolutely! At the same time, with the good old temperature scoring a century, as it were, there's not exactly a large amount of coolness in the atmosphere."

"Yes, it is hot!" said Church, fanning himself.

They were grateful for the shade of the trees. For out in the open the sun was beating down with sweltering fury. Ordinarily it would not have worried them much. But now they were hurrying—keeping pace with that black tracker, who was plunging deeper and deeper into the bush with uncanny certainty.

None of the juniors could see a trail at all, but this black fellow was never once at fault. He did not hesitate or pause; he kept straight on, and he was apparently tireless. It was as much as the boys could do to keep pace with him, and very soon they were perspiring freely.

The country was rather wild here. In places the bush would open out, and the party would find itself crossing a clearing, where the full power of the sun beat down upon them. Then they would plunge into the shade of the trees again, and descend, perhaps, into a steep gully.

Once they came upon a creek, which was hurrying along its course, gleaming and glinting in the sunshine. The water looked fresh, and a brief halt was called while everybody took a long drink.

The black tracker went straight on, fording the creek without difficulty.

Having reached the top of a steep rise, they found themselves on level ground again, where the bush seemed somewhat thicker. It was rather surprising how the mounted men had ridden along this trail, yet the black tracker was obviously not at fault. That he knew his business was

evident from the manner in which he kept walking onwards, his gaze fixed intently on the ground.

Suddenly he paused, and held up a hand. All the other members of the party came to a halt.

"Horses!" muttered the black tracker.

The thudding of hoofs sounded, and a moment later, before any of the fellows could say anything, two horsemen galloped out of the bush near by.

"Bail up!"

The command came sharp and stern. The



two men were masked, and they were carrying revolvers at the ready.

"Rats!" roared Handforth furiously. "We've bailed up once, and I'm blowed if we're going to bail up again! In any case, you've pinched everything we had!"

"I expect it's another gang!" muttered Chubby Heath, in a scared voice.

"No, these are two of the same men!" said Travers keenly. "I can recognise them—by their clothes. What on earth—"

He broke off, for at that moment the two horsemen had charged forward. They had been gazing searchingly at the juniors during those tense seconds, and now apparently they had made up their minds.

They caused the boys to scatter, but Archie Glenthorne, who was evidently their quarry, was trapped between the two horses.

"Look out!" yelled Handforth. "They're collaring old Archie!"

"Great Scott!"

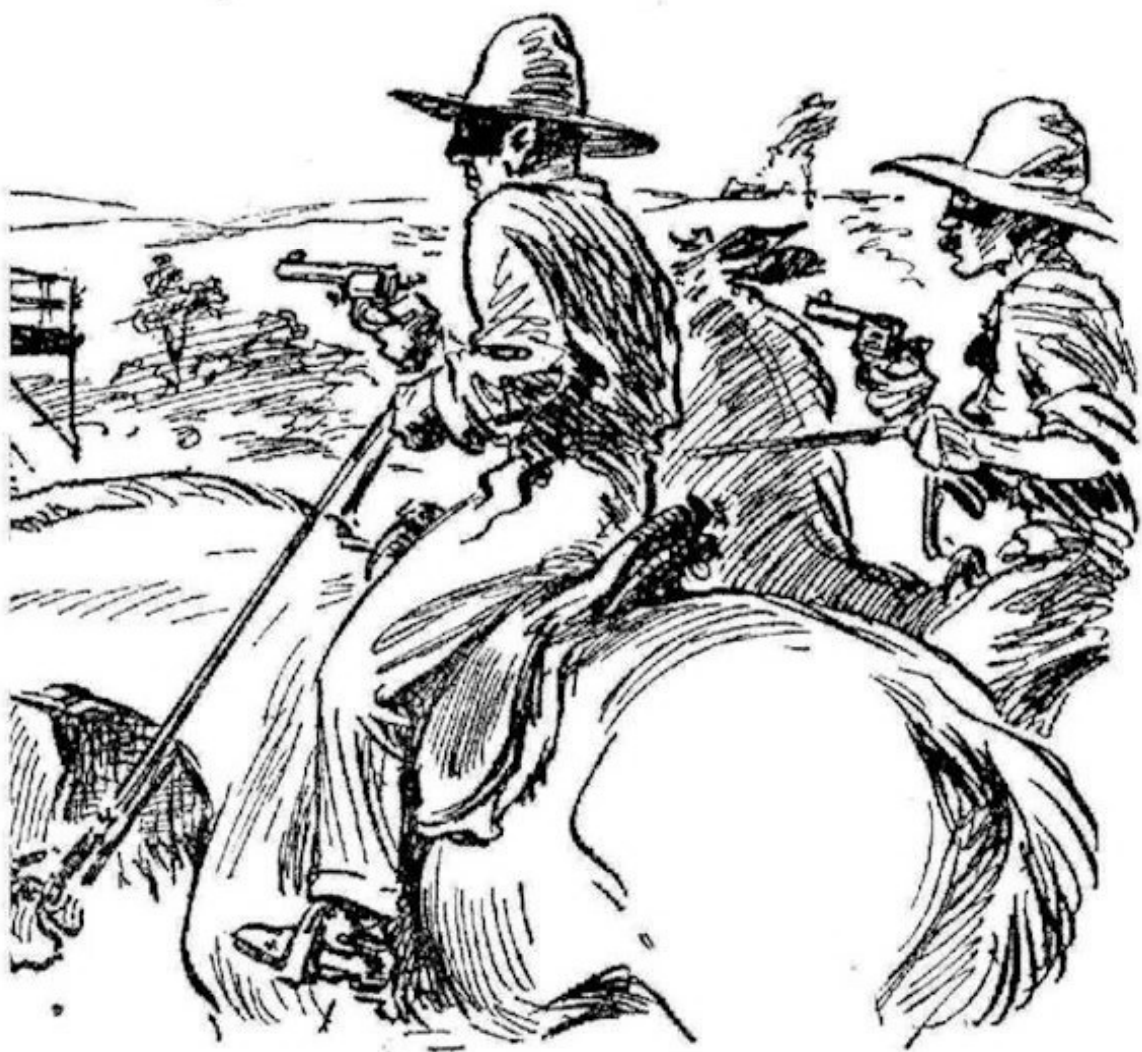
"Hi, you leave Archie alone!" bellowed Handforth. "You rotters! You—you——"

But by this time the unhappy Archie Glenthorne had been swung up into the saddle of one of the horsemen!

"Odds disasters and outrages!" gasped Archie. "Here, I say! Dash it! I say! Kindly desist, dash you! S.O.S., chappies!"

With a mocking laugh the bushranger spurred his horse on, and the animal leapt forward. The other bushranger followed, and a moment later they had vanished into

Dramatically a group of eight or nine horsemen appeared. They were all masked and all held revolvers. Then came the dreaded command "Bail up!" The river steamer was being held up by bushrangers!



the bush, taking Archie Glenthorne with them!

"Well, well!" said Travers breathlessly.

"It's not well!" shouted Handforth. "They've kidnapped Archie! What are we going to do now? It was your rotten idea to come after the bushrangers, Travers——"

"For the love of Samson!" ejaculated Travers, startled. "I thought you claimed the idea as yours, dear old fellow?"

"Eh? Oh, well, what difference does it make?" said Handforth, in anguish. "Archie has been collared! What can we do now?"

"We're pretty helpless," said Nipper. "We can't get help, because we're too far from the river boat. And it would be useless to go after those two men. They're on horseback, and they'll be miles away within half an hour. Might as well try to catch a motor-car."

"But why—why?" asked Jimmy Potts helplessly.

"Why what?"

"Why have they grabbed Archie?" asked Jimmy. "What's the object of it? They took his valuables—his pocket-book and his gold watch. What's the idea of grabbing him?"

"Goodness only knows!" said Handforth, scratching his head. "Perhaps they found out that we were on their trail, and they've done this just to scare us? But we're not scared—are we?"

"No!" chorused the others.

But their voices were not particularly firm. For, truth to tell, the unexpected seizure of Archie Glenthorne had shaken them considerably. One of their party had fallen a victim to the bushrangers! What was going to happen now?

CHAPTER 13.

Ned Kelly's Camp.



"WE were fools to leave the boat!"

Jimmy Potts gave utterance to this remark, and his tone was bitter.

"Easy, Sir James—easy!" said Travers. "We acted for the best——"

"Was it for the best?" broke in Potts. "What about poor old Archie? They've got him! They've carried him off!"

"No need to get into a panic about it," said Travers smoothly.

"I dare say we shall find out something about him before long. Besides, they won't harm him!"

"How do you know they won't?" put in Tommy Watson.

"Isn't that obvious?" asked Travers. "If they had wanted to harm him, they would have shot him down—without troubling to carry him away."

"Yes, there's that about it," admitted Tommy, with relief.

"I can hardly believe it!" said Handforth incredulously. "Right in front of our very eyes, you chaps! What was the matter with us? Why couldn't we have stopped them?"

"Don't be silly, Handy!" snapped McClure. "What could we have done? Those two men were mounted—and armed, too. If we had attempted to attack them, they would have shot us!"

"Jimmy Potts is right—we oughtn't to have left the steamer!" said Church.

And he glared ferociously at Handforth.

"That's right—blame me!" said the leader of Study D gruffly. "How the dickens was I to know this would happen? And what are we going to do now?"

"Follow the main trail, of course," said Travers.

"But why not go after Archie?" urged Handforth. "Archie's more important than our valuables!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Handy's right!"

"Let's go after Archie!"

It certainly seemed the most logical course—until Nipper pointed out its defects.

"We'd better stick to the main trail—as Travers suggests," he said. "If we go after the two men who have got Archie we shall only be making a needless detour."

"How do you make that out?" asked Watson.

"Well, it's ten to one that those two men left the main party on purpose to ambush us," said Nipper. "Probably they had somebody watching, who warned them. Those two horsemen, after making a detour, will join the main party again. That's the most likely thing, anyhow."

"In that case, the main party has come to a halt somewhere," said Handforth quickly. "By George! That gives us more chance! While Ned Kelly and his gang are waiting for those two men, we can creep up!"

"And after we've crept up—what can we do?" asked Church.

"Eh? Well, anyway, we can locate their camp," said Handforth stubbornly. "We might even discover their lair in the hills."

"How do you know that they've got a lair in the hills?"

"Don't be an ass, Walter Church!" said Handforth impatiently. "You know jolly well that all bushrangers have lairs in the hills!"

The black tracker was waiting, evidently uncertain as to which trail to follow. But, at a nod from Travers, he grinned and prepared to carry on again. He understood that it was the main trail that had to be kept to.

"I'm just wondering," said Nipper. "Oughtn't we to go back to the steamboat?"

"Let's carry on for another hour," suggested Travers. "If we haven't discovered anything by then, we'll go back."

"And do you think the steamer will be waiting for us?" asked Potts, in surprise.

"I think so," said Travers. "There are a dozen of us, don't forget—all paid passengers—and the skipper wouldn't dare to go on without us. A few hours' delay doesn't make much difference to these river boats, anyway."

So once more they took to the main trail—although by now their enthusiasm was beginning to wane. Even Handforth was far less excited. The disappearance of Archie worried him exceedingly. Archie had been carried off by the bushrangers, and this was a startlingly unpleasant development.

"It's almost unbelievable," murmured Church, as they walked along, with the black tracker unerringly leading the way. "Only a few weeks ago we were back in England—with its January frost and snow."

"To say nothing of its rain and slush," nodded Travers. "By Samson! I wonder how the Blues are getting on?"

"The Blue Crusaders, eh?" said Church. "They're at St. Frank's, aren't they? And Reggie Pitt and Corcoran and Tich Harborough, and all the rest. They'd be surprised if they could see us now!"

"They'd have a fit!" said Handforth, nodding.

"And it only seems a day or two ago since we were in South Africa," put in McClure.

"Well, it is only a day or two ago, really," said Handforth. "That's the rummy part of it. And here we are, right in Australia—tracking bushrangers! By George! And Mr. Lee is having an easy time in Adelaide, thinking that we're safely out of harm's way!"

"He would never have let us come if he had known that there were any bushrangers about," said Church. "I can't understand, even now—"

"Steady, you fellows—not so loud!" murmured Nipper. "Cherry Blossom is slowing down a bit, and he looks cautious."

"Cherry Blossom?" repeated Handforth.

"The tracker," said Nipper. "One name's as good as another."

The black tracker had come to a halt now, and he was holding a finger to his lips. The trees were fairly thick here, and it seemed that the party had reached the edge of a steep hollow, for the ground dipped down sharply just ahead of them.

"He must have heard something!" murmured Travers. "These black chaps have got hearing like animals, you know."

"Listen!" breathed Nipper.

They all held their breaths, and a moment later, they heard a shout of laughter. It was taken up by others, and they could tell that a party of men was down in that hollow, just ahead.

"The bushrangers!" muttered Handforth. "By George! We've done the trick, after all! We've caught up with them!"

* * * * *

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Cautiously, breathlessly they advanced, picking their way from tree to tree, and dodging round the patches of scrub. Peering through a clump of dense bushes, they beheld a sight that caused their hearts to beat more rapidly.

Almost immediately below them—at the bottom of the steep hollow—was the party of men. There were seven of them, and they were lounging about, talking, smoking, and laughing.

A camp-fire was burning, and some horses were grazing on a patch of grassland some distance away.

One glance was sufficient for the juniors to know the truth.

They were looking down upon Ned Kelly's gang!

This was the camp—and the bushrangers were all unsuspecting of those watching eyes from above!



CHAPTER 14.

Handforth Takes a
Chance!

NED KELLY'S camp! All those St. Frank's fellows were thrilled as they found themselves looking down upon that scene. A meal was being prepared over the camp-fire, and the bushrangers were in high good-humour. Now and again they shouted with laughter, and at times they would gather round the bullion box, which was in full sight in the middle of the clearing.

"My hat!" breathed Handforth. "What are we going to do now?"

"Nothing!" said Nipper softly. "Let's wait here—and see what these brutes get up to. They haven't divided the loot yet."

"Waiting until after the meal, I expect," said Travers. "They don't seem to be in any hurry, do they? They're not expecting to be followed, and they're off their guard."

"But those two men saw us, and they'll give the warning as soon as they get back into the camp," said Willy shrewdly. "If we're going to act—we shall have to act at once. Otherwise, it'll be too late. When those two men get back they'll tell Kelly, or whatever his real name is, and then all the men will be on the alert."

"By Jove, that's true enough," said Nipper. "That's a good thought of yours, Willy. So far the gang is unsuspecting, because those two men haven't come in with Archie."

"Let's act at once, then!" said Handforth tensely. "Let's creep down, and then make a sudden rush—"

"And all be shot dead?" asked Church. "You're crazy, Handy!"

"Am I?" said Handforth. "Look! The rotters have taken off their belts! They're not wearing their revolvers at all now!"

"Well, I'm jiggered! He's right!" said Jimmy Potts, staring.

They all crept to a point where they could lay flat down, and overlook the hollow. The scrub was thick everywhere, and it was only by luck that the boys could see right down into that camp.

"There's something else!" murmured Vivian Travers, his voice quiet but throbbing with inward excitement. "Look down there! Over towards the right—just against those thick bushes!"

"What do you mean?" whispered Nipper.

"Can't you see?" said Travers. "They've discarded their revolver-belts, and they've put them in a heap! They're all together there—near that bush. The revolvers, and the cartridge-belts, too! Not a single man of them is armed!"

"By George!" said Handforth.

"And the revolvers are right near that bush!" went on Travers. "I've a darned good mind to have a shot at this, dear old fellows!"

"Have a shot at what?"

"Well, I could creep down, get hold of those revolvers—"

"I'll tell you what!" broke in Handforth hastily. "I've got an idea! I'll get down to that bush, seize the revolvers, and hold the bushrangers up!"

Travers started.

"Your idea?" he murmured. "Well, of course—"

"It flashed into my mind just as you began speaking, Travers," said Handforth. "And as it's my idea, I insist upon going. It's too risky for you other fellows. It needs a born tracker for this job—a fellow who is absolutely sure of himself."

"Ahem!" coughed Travers. "Then I think I'd better go, Handy."

"You silly ass!" frowned Handforth. "You're not going to dish me out of this!"

"Oh, let him go!" said Nipper. "He'll be more trouble here if he's left behind. He might give the whole show away!"

Church and McClure looked surprised.

"You're mad!" said Church, staring at Nipper. "If you let Handy go, he'll ruin everything! The bushrangers will spot him, and—"

"If they do, we'll cause a commotion up here—and draw them away," said Nipper.

"As soon as you hear anything of that sort, Handy, you'd better make a dash for it, and the chances are you'll get there in time—because the bushrangers will be flurried."

"Well, they're not flurried now," said Potts. "They don't expect any trouble at all—or they wouldn't have discarded their revolvers. I expect they're thundering hot. They never dream that anybody will come upon their camp—"

"I say! Look at 'em!" broke in Willy. "They're having a squabble of some sort!"

It was a fact. Ned Kelly and his gang were now talking excitedly—angrily. Apparently, an argument had arisen. One or two of the men were gesticulating, and others were shouting. In the end they all moved to the iron-bound box, and stood round it.

"When thieves fall out, what?" murmured Travers.

"You think they're quarrelling about the bullion?" whispered Church.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" nodded Travers. "And now's your chance, Handy! While they're quarrelling like this, you'll be as safe as houses! They won't hear anything—they're too excited about that gold. Go on, old man! Good luck!"

"Go easy, Ted!" warned Willy.

"You can leave this to me!" said Handforth exultantly. "By George! We're going to capture these bushrangers—at least, I am! Single-handed, I'm going to round up the whole gang!"

The dangers of the enterprise did not occur to him. Even though the bushrangers were showing no weapons, it was possible that one or two of them had revolvers concealed about them. However, this was a risk that had to be taken. The main weapons were there, near the bush—in a heap, just as they had been cast off.

Now the men were hacking away at the bullion box, shouting more excitedly than ever. Ned Kelly himself was the angriest of them all. He was a tall, resolute-looking man. None of the bushrangers was wearing their masks now—and, upon the whole, they looked a desperate crowd.

It was an anxious time of waiting for the main party of schoolboys. They knew that they could do nothing until Handforth made his dramatic appearance—and even then, perhaps, to act would be to invite death!

However, this chance was too good to be missed. By the sheerest piece of luck the juniors had come upon the camp just when the bushrangers were off their guard; and it was an added stroke of luck that the men should be quarrelling over their booty—since, naturally, they were more or less indifferent to all other sounds. The lure of gold had evidently gripped them tightly.

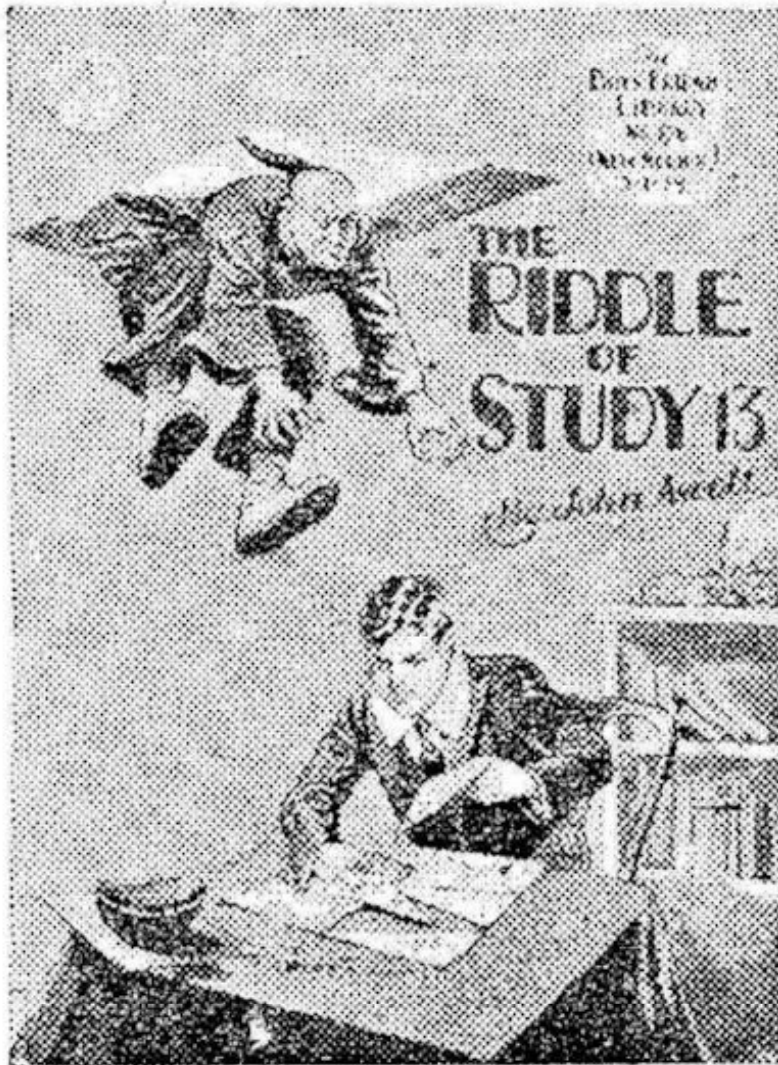
Handforth, worming his way from bush to bush, and keeping well behind the patches of scrub, got lower and lower into the hollow. He made a slight detour, and at times he was compelled to dash across a small open space, but he was not seen. The bushrangers were now gathering round the opened box, and they appeared to be lifting out the bullion.

"Look!" whispered Church abruptly.

He indicated that bush near the stack of belts and revolvers. The others all stared, their hearts in their mouths!

For the bush had moved slightly—and then they caught sight of Edward Oswald Handforth. The leader of Study D had successfully reached the fateful spot, and the moment for action was at hand!

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CHAPTER 15.

Handforth's Great Coup!

HANDFORTH'S heart was thumping so hard that it felt like a miniature steam-hammer battering against his ribs.

He could hardly believe that he had accomplished his task successfully. Yet here he was, within arm's reach of those revolvers. And the bushrangers were still arguing over that box of bullion! It was the gold, without question, which had enabled Handforth to succeed. For had those men been on the watch they could hardly have helped spotting him during his progress down into the hollow.

"It's no good, boys—we shall need dynamite for this!" Ned Kelly was saying, in a disgusted voice. "This wooden case is only a blind. There's a steel lining in here!"

"We can't divide the gold, then?" asked one of the others.

"Doesn't seem like it," retorted Kelly harshly. "Listen to me, boys. I don't want any back chat. And you'd better understand that half this gold is for me."

"Half!" shouted one of the other men. "You're greedy, aren't you?"

"Too right, I am!" said the man who called himself Ned Kelly. "I fixed up this bullion robbery, and I'm entitled to half——"

"What's that moving—over by the bushes?" broke in one of the gang suddenly.

Ned Kelly twirled round.

"Where?" he roared.

Handforth gripped himself, leaped out from cover, and in a flash he had seized two of the revolvers! At the same second, the St. Frank's fellows at the top of the rise saw what had happened, and they jumped to their feet, exposing themselves to view.

"Bail up!" thundered Handforth triumphantly.

He looked a grim figure as he stood there, before those startled bushrangers, a revolver in either hand.

"Hurrah!" came a yell from the top of the steep slope. "Hold 'em up, Handy! We're coming!"

"Come on, St. Frank's!"

The bushrangers spun round, and saw the juniors pelting down into the hollow. Ned Kelly and his men were dismayed and staggered. The surprise had come like a bomb-shell.

"It's only them blamed young English kids from the boat!" panted Ned Kelly. "Quick, men! We'll rush this young fool——"

"Bail up!" thundered Handforth again.

"Up with your hands, you crooks! The first man who moves will be shot in his tracks!"

Up went the hands of the bushrangers, and

Handforth's heart leapt again. It filled him with ecstatic joy to see these desperate criminals surrendering to him in this way.

And then the rest of the crowd arrived on the scene.

There were seven men in the gang—and eleven schoolboys, counting Handforth. Archie, unfortunately, was missing—but there was every reason to hope that now he would soon be rescued.

"Tie them up!" shouted Handforth. "Anything will do! Take your shirts off, if necessary! But rope 'em up! Tie their ankles, and their wrists!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Hurrah!"

Ned Kelly, his face working with fury, let out a roar of defiance.

"Come on, boys!" he panted. "This young fool won't dare to fire——"

"Won't he?" yelled Handforth.

Crack! Crack!

Handforth pointed his two revolvers into the air, and pulled the triggers.

"Duck!" gasped Church. "Handy's started firing!"

"He'll kill the lot of us!" said McClure, in alarm.

But the effect of those shots was gratifying. Even Ned Kelly himself had no fight left. He was the first to receive attention; his wrists were quickly bound, and he was bowled over, and held down while his ankles were secured.

One after another the bushrangers were rendered helpless. Then somebody found some lengths of stout rope, and the job was done thoroughly.

"We'll string them together in a line," said Handforth exultantly. "No need to bind their ankles then. They've got to walk, anyhow. But if their arms are bound to their sides, and they're all roped together in single file, they'll be pretty easy to deal with!"

The men were looking dazed—so dazed, indeed, that they had hardly anything to say. The leader was stunned. Perhaps he felt that this was a dreadful blow to his pride.

Captured by a party of schoolboys! It was indeed an humiliation.

"Listen!" called Travers suddenly.

Toot-toot-toot!

"There it is again!" said Travers. "That's the steamer's whistle, you chaps!"

"It can't be!" said Church, looking round. "We're miles from the river!"

"No we're not, by Jove!" sang out Nipper, as he ran up a little rise on the other side of the hollow. "The river's here—and the good old steamboat is in sight!"

"What!"

"It's easy enough," said Travers coolly. "We're miles away from the spot where the steamer grounded, but I expect the river winds a lot just here. So, although we've come a good way across country, we've hit the river again."

This, of course, was the explanation, and a perfectly logical one. While the boys had been tracking the bushrangers, the Rubion,

having floated herself once more, had proceeded up stream, and, winding round the long bend, had reached practically the same spot.

"This is a piece of luck, you chaps!" said Nipper gleefully. "We shan't have to take these prisoners back through the sweltering heat. The steamboat's here, and they've seen me, too!"

Toot-toot!

Nipper was waving frantically, and yet again the steamer answered. Now he saw her turn in from mid-stream and glide towards the bank.

"It's all right!" he shouted. "They're stopping! The river's only a hundred yards away."

"Good egg!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Now then, you rotters! Line up! We're going to lead you to the steamer, and you're going to be put in irons and handed over to the police at the next township."

Handforth's triumph was complete. He could say, with almost perfect truth, that he had captured these bushrangers single-handed! It was a tremendous coup, particularly as the bullion box was also recovered. But nobody thought of this at the moment. The main thing was to get the prisoners on board, and to hand them officially over into Captain Wallis' care.



CHAPTER 16.

Marching in the Prisoners!

"READY?" asked Handforth briskly.

"Yes, they're all tied up securely," said Travers.

He could not help grinning at Handforth. The latter had secured one of the bushrangers' belts round him, and he looked a rather incongruous figure in his soiled white flannels, with two enormous revolvers sticking out of that belt, at his middle. He had also secured one of the bushrangers' wide-brimmed hats, and with t' s s'uck rakishly on his head he presented a truly remarkable appearance.

"Now, then—quick march!" he commanded authoritatively.

The coup was complete. The bushrangers had not only been rounded up, but they were prisoners—helpless. Handforth, at the head of the column, was leading the way back to the steamboat. In fact, now Handforth came to think of it, he had been in the lead from the very first. It was true that Vivian Travers had suggested one or two things, but, after all, what were suggestions? It was Handforth who had done all the work!

He could picture the headlines appearing in the big London newspapers, after the story had been flashed across the ocean cables: "St. Frank's Schoolboy Captures

Gang of Bushrangers!" "Handforth, of St. Frank's, Rounds Up Dangerous Gang!" "Amazing Exploit by Fearless Schoolboy!"

It was possible that some of the other fellows would be mentioned in the messages, but, when all was said and done, Handforth was the fellow who had accomplished this big feat. It was only right that he should march to the steamboat at the head of that column of prisoners.

"There's only one thing I don't like," said Jimmy Potts, as he and the others brought up the rear. "Poor old Archie hasn't turned up yet!"

"Oh, he'll be safe enough!" said Travers confidently. "Those other two bushrangers will soon be back, and then they'll abandon Archie."

"But will they?" put in Potts. "They'll see what has happened from some distance off, and they'll probably get the wind up and bolt."

"Exactly, leaving Archie behind," said Travers. "They won't want to be encumbered by him. The funny thing is, why haven't they arrived before now? What are they doing with Archie all this time?"

"Yes, they ought to have joined the main party before now," said Nipper. "Oh, well, we haven't done so badly, on the whole."

"We've done marvels!" said Potts enthusiastically. "And Handy has done most."

The juniors were tremendously relieved to know that the river was so near at hand. They had been anticipating a long walk back in the blazing heat of the afternoon. Captain Wallis had evidently not waited for them, but had taken his steamer up stream, according to his schedule.

As the river was approached, the trees thinned away, and so the boys had a full view of the steamboat, with its towering superstructure and squat funnel. Those on board the Rubion had, in the same way, an excellent view of the prisoners being marched up. Handforth, at their head, was a remarkable figure. In the rear came Nipper and Travers and the other schoolboys.

The horses had not been interfered with—nothing in the bushrangers' camp, in fact, had been touched. The first thing was to get these prisoners on board and put into irons.

Toot-toot-toot!

The steamer's whistle gave a triumphant succession of toots, and loud cheering broke out. Handforth glowed with satisfaction.

"Step lively, now!" he ordered, glancing round. "If there's any justice in Australia, you'll all be hanged!"

"You young fool!" said Kelly, the leader. "I may be beaten for the minute, but—"

"Silence!" commanded Handforth. "You are the man who shot down those poor chaps on the boat! You—you villain! It's lucky for you that we're only schoolboys! If we had been men, we should have taken you to the nearest tree and strung you up!"

"Ned Kelly" was silent. Perhaps he realised that Handforth had spoken very



Peering cautiously round the clump of bushes, the juniors found themselves looking down into a kind of hollow. And in the hollow, sitting round a fire, were the bushrangers!

truthfully. At all events, he had no reply, and he only scowled.

On came the column, right to the river's bank. The nose of the steamboat was pushing gently into the bank, so no gangway-plank was necessary. It was easy enough to leap straight on board.

Captain Wallis was standing near at hand, and some of the other passengers were crowding on the upper decks, looking on eagerly. Men were standing about, too—some of them having come up from the engine-room apparently.

Extraordinarily enough, Captain Wallis' arm was no longer in a sling. He seemed to have made a miraculous recovery from that injured shoulder.

"Line up!" said Handforth sternly. "Captain Wallis, I've brought you these prisoners——"

He broke off, scandalised by a ripple of laughter which had sounded among the passengers on the upper decks. But Handforth's famous glare had no effect. The ripple increased, grew louder, and before another ten seconds had passed the passengers were fairly shouting with merriment.

"Stop!" panted Handforth, amazed. "What's the joke? My hat! You're not laughing at me, are you? Just because I've got this belt on, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laugh had spread rapidly. The members of the crew were yelling, and even

Captain Wallis was doubled up with uncontrollable mirth.

"Have you all gone mad?" asked Handforth, in amazement. "I've brought these prisoners——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We've captured the bushrangers——"

"Ho, ho, ho!" gasped Captain Wallis, holding his sides. "Good boy! Good lad! We haven't had a joke like this on the river for years!"

"Joke!" babbled Handforth. "But—but we've collared these bushrangers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This time Handforth twirled round, and his eyes nearly bulged out of his head when he saw that the bushrangers themselves were shouting with laughter. Their faces were creased into wide grins, and they were fairly shaking with merriment. "Ned Kelly" himself was laughing so much that the tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"What—what does it mean?" asked Church blankly.

"Goodness knows!" said McClure, with a catch in his voice. "But—but—— Oh, my only Aunt Matilda! Look!"

"Eh?" said Tommy Watson excitedly. "Look where?"

"There!"

They looked on the deck of the steamer, and there, in full sight, were the two unfortunate men who had been shot down by the bushrangers earlier in the day! Captain Wallis had made a remarkable recovery

from his own injury, but these men apparently had come back from the dead!



CHAPTER 17.

A Shock for Handy!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was bewildered, flabbergasted, dumb-founded.

"But—but I don't understand!" he panted. "These men are bushrangers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

At the very mention of the word "bushrangers" everybody seemed to go into fresh hysterics.

"Look, Handy!" said Church, grabbing at his leader's arm. "Those two men on deck! They're the two who were shot down!"

"Wha-a-at?" gurgled Handforth, with a jump.

"They weren't shot at all; they must have been spoofing!" said Church. "And look at the captain! His arm's all right now! Those bushrangers must have used blank cartridges, or something!"

"Oh, my only hat!" breathed Handforth dazedly.

There was no doubt about it. Those two men were very much alive, and, judging from their laughter, they were enjoying the joke as much as anybody. Obviously they couldn't have suffered any severe injuries.

Handforth's heart nearly stopped beating. The other juniors were startled and dazed, but Handforth felt as though his brain had suddenly become paralysed. He couldn't think—he couldn't form any connected thoughts. For a few dreadful moments he was stunned completely.

Spoofed!

He couldn't realise it—he couldn't believe it. There weren't any bushrangers at all—or, at least, not any real ones. They hadn't killed anybody—the hold-up had been a fake!

Suddenly Handforth recovered the use of his wits and his limbs. He spun round upon Ned Kelly, and seized him roughly.

"What does this mean?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"I don't want any back chat, you English coot!" snarled the leader of the gang with terrific ferocity.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Sorry, but I'm not Ned Kelly at all!" went on the leader, his manner changing, and his face breaking into a friendly grin. "We've been fooling you, young 'un. And that's the dinkum oil."

"What?"

"It's the real truth," chuckled the other. "My name happens to be just plain Smith, and as far as I know I'm a respectable townsman of Renmark."

"Oh, my hat!"

"If you want to know more particulars, ask this young friend of yours," chuckled "Ned Kelly," indicating Travers. "He's the one who put us up to it."

"You did?" gasped Handforth, looking at the cool Travers.

"Too right, I did!" replied Travers serenely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter burst out again, and the majority of the St. Frank's fellows were feeling extraordinary relieved. Nipper was grinning widely, and even Willy Handforth had

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



no look of bewilderment on his face. The others, however, were plainly startled.

"The fact is, dear old fellow, you wanted bushrangers, so I thought I'd provide some," said Travers blandly. "I'm an obliging sort of chap——"

"Here, wait a minute!" interrupted Handforth, swallowing hard. "What's that you said?"

"You seemed so cut-up because there weren't any bushrangers knocking about in Australia that I set my wits to work," explained Travers. "Just a minute, though. Who's got a pocket-knife? There's no reason why these excellent gentlemen should be roped up while I'm giving the explanations."

"Thanks, kid," said Mr. Smith. "I must say you put these ropes on in a businesslike way."

"Hi!" roared Handforth. "Don't cut those ropes! These bushrangers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Handforth dried up. That great shout of laughter silenced him completely. All seven "bushrangers" were cut free, and they gathered round, working their arms up and down to restore circulation. They certainly made no attempts to escape—which, had they been real bushrangers, they would certainly have done.

"So you're responsible for this, Travers, are you?" said Jimmy Potts darkly. "You—you deep bounder! You spoofing rotter! You fooled us completely!"

"LOST IN THE BUSH!"

Poor old Archie Glenthorne! He's in a proper mess!

He's completely lost in the Australian Bush, with absolutely no prospect of finding his way out—which is very perturbing, for Archie wants to see the coming Test match at Adelaide! Then he's lost his eyeglass, another catastrophe for the genial ass of the Remove.

But how's he got into this predicament? And what's happened to the rest of the St. Frank's juniors?

Ah, you'll have to wait until next Wednesday, when Edwy Searles Brooks will tell you all about it in his usual entertaining style.

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Matters are now reaching an exciting stage in this popular serial featuring Nelson Lee and Nipper as detectives. Don't miss reading next week's full-of-thrills instalment.

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"Not all of you!" said Travers. "It didn't take Nipper long to jump to the truth—and I had the deuce of a job to make him keep quiet. But as soon as he got the hang of the thing he helped."

"What about me?" asked Willy coolly. "You didn't spoof me for long, either. As soon as I heard you egging my major on, Travers, I knew that there was something in the wind. And Ted, of course, swallowed the bait, as usual. He not only swallowed the bait, but the hook and the line and the sinker as well!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth tried to speak, but no words would come. He looked from the juniors to the "bushrangers," and from the "bushrangers" to the people on the steamer. Everywhere he saw faces that were distorted with wide grins. Handforth realised, with a shock, that they were laughing at him.

"Ever since this trip started, Handy, you've been grumbling because there weren't any bushrangers," said Vivian Travers calmly. "By the time we got to Renmark I was pretty well fed up; and it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to collect a few bushrangers together, just to give you some sport."

"You—you——"

"Yes, you can say all that afterwards," said Travers gently. "Well, I soon fixed things up at Renmark. The people were awfully obliging, and they entered into the spirit of the thing like real sportsmen. You see, all these desperadoes are highly respectable townspeople of Renmark, and they all agreed to help in the wheeze."

"But what about everybody else?" asked Handforth bleakly.

"Oh, they were in the plot, too!" said Travers. "I had a word with the skipper, and he thought it was the wheeze of the century. He tipped the wink to the crew and to the passengers. Everybody agreed to be struck dumb with horror when the bushrangers appeared and gave the dread cry: 'Bail up!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They did their parts well, too," said Travers. "Bravo! It was all so realistic that I nearly had a fit when I saw blood on your shirt, Captain Wallis."

"It wasn't blood," said the skipper, with a smile. "It was arranged that I should fall—shot in the shoulder—so I prepared a little bladder of red dye, and tucked it under my shirt. So when I clapped my hand to my shoulder I burst it."

"It was top hole!" said Travers. "The way those two men dropped to the deck was wonderful, too. And the screams from below, and all the rest of it. I'm not surprised that Handy and the other chaps were spoofed."

The unfortunate Handforth looked doleful.

"So—so there aren't any real bushrangers at all?" he asked sadly.

"There's not a ghost of one," said Travers, shaking his head. "I thought that was rather a good wheeze of yours, Mr. Smith, to call yourself Ned Kelly."

"It was the first name that came into my head, to tell you the truth," said Mr. Smith.

"And there you are, Handy," said Travers. "That's that! And now, I suppose, we can continue our peaceful trip up the river—without any more delays?"



CHAPTER 18.

Explanations!

R. SMITH smiled broadly.

"Yes, we'll be getting back to Renmark," he said.

"There'll be some laughter in the township to-day—when we tell everybody all about this affair."

"But—but wait a minute!" urged Handforth dazedly. "I haven't got the hang of it yet. You're a lot of spoofing bounders, of course, and you all ought to be boiled! But what about that bullion?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's no bullion, Handy," said Travers gently.

"No bullion!"

"Not a penn'orth," said Travers. "That iron-bound box was a specially prepared one, and there's nothing in it but a few scraps of old iron, to make it realistically heavy. I thought it would make the hold-up so much more interesting if the bushrangers grabbed a consignment of gold bullion."

"You—you tricky bounder!" said Handforth aggressively.

"What about the black tracker?" put in Church.

"Oh, he was a fake, too."

"What!"

"Rather!" said Travers. "He may be pretty good at the game for all I know, but he wasn't called upon to do any tracking to-day. He's only a harmless blackie, and—"

"But wait a minute!" put in McClure. "He did track the bushrangers—I mean the gang—that is to say—"

"He appeared to track them," agreed Travers. "But it wasn't really necessary. He knew that the river takes a big bend just about here, and I arranged it with him in advance. All he had to do was to lead the way through the bush to that hollow, and, being a native of these parts he was familiar with the hollow. So he simply went straight there, knowing that the 'bushrangers' would be all ready."

"We were on the watch, young 'un," explained Mr. Smith gently. "and as soon as you came into sight we staged that quarrel."

"It was arranged that all the revolvers should be put in a heap, and that I should suggest making a raid on them," said Travers. "Of course, I knew that you would insist upon going, Handy. I am much obliged to you, dear old fellow, for falling in so beautifully with my plans."

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Handforth.

He realised that the spoof had been directed, mainly, against himself. Of course, there were a number of other fellows in the party who had been deceived; but it was Handforth who had fallen so utterly and absolutely into the trap.

"I—I suppose you think it's funny?" he said at length.

"Travers didn't merely do it to pull your leg, Handy," said Nipper. "He wanted to convince you that all your talk about bushrangers was nonsense. The fact is, bushrangers are obsolete in Australia."

"They must be!" said Travers gravely. "I had the very dickens of a job to find a mere nine of them."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They're not bushrangers at all!" said Handforth, glaring at the Renmark men as though they were deserving of severe punishment for being respectable citizens.

"That's true," admitted Travers. "But when you can't get the real thing, Handy, you've got to be satisfied with substitutes."

"Well, it was a jolly dangerous game!" said Handforth accusingly. "Firing those revolvers like that. Some of us might easily have been killed!"

"I don't think so, old man," murmured Travers. "All the 'guns' were filled with blank cartridges."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You see, we knew that you would get hold of the weapons, if the plan went right," said Travers, "and, naturally, we didn't want to have any tragedies. You're dangerous enough without loaded revolvers. Somehow, we didn't much care for the idea of leaving you in an Australian prison, awaiting your trial for manslaughter."

"You—you funny idiot—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you think this is a good joke, then I'm sorry for your sense of humour!" said Handforth sourly. "It's the craziest piece of nonsense I've ever heard!"

"Chuck it, Handy!" said Nipper. "You don't mean that! The joke was mainly against you, but you're a sportsman."

Handforth looked round, his frown vanished, and a slow grin overspread his rugged features.

"I suppose it was a bit funny," he admitted sheepishly. "By George, you bounders!"

"I hope you won't expect to see any more bushrangers, young man," said Captain Wallis, wagging a finger at Edward Oswald. "It's time some of you English boys realised the truth about Australia. It's not such a lawless country as you believe."

"Well, let's get aboard, you chaps," said Travers, turning to the others. "We've delayed the boat long enough—but I rather think it was worth it, eh?"

"You bet it was!" said Willy, nodding. "Ted's had a lesson that he won't forget in a hurry."

"Oh, have I?" said Handforth, turning on his minor. "There may not be any bushrangers in this part of the country—but what about New South Wales and Queensland? How do I know that there aren't any bushrangers there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's hopeless!" said Church, glaring. "Even when he's had the truth demonstrated to him, he doesn't believe it!"

A general move was made towards the steamboat, but Travers paused.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "We shall have to wait until Archie turns up."

"By jingo, yes!" said Nipper. "He ought to have been here by now."

"Archie?" repeated Mr. Smith. "Who's he? One of you boys?"

"Yes—the fellow with the eyeglass."

"Oh, I remember," said "Ned Kelly," with a chuckle.

"It was rather a good stunt of yours to add that extra bit," continued Travers.

"What extra bit?"

"Why, having Archie sensationally kidnapped while we were tracking you to the hollow," said Travers. "I suppose you thought of it, Mr. Smith?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mr. Smith, staring.

"You don't know——" Travers paused, and his expression became startled. "But what about the other two men?" he asked. "There were nine of you to start with."

"Wait a minute," said Smith. "Let's get this straight. You just said that somebody was sensationally kidnapped."

"Yes!" chorused the juniors.

The "bushrangers" gathered round curiously, and their smiles were vanishing.

"We don't know anything about the affair," said one of the men.

"Don't know!" echoed Nipper quickly. "But two of you came up on horseback—with masks on—and we were ordered to bail up. Then these men dashed into the midst of us, and grabbed Archie Glenthorne."

"That's very queer!" said one of the men.

"Too right, it is!" agreed Smith, frowning. "So that's why those two fellows rode off?"

"But didn't you know all about it?" asked Travers sharply.

"No, we didn't," said Smith, shaking his head. "This is the first we've heard of your young friend being carried off."

"There's such a thing as taking a joke too far," said Handforth gruffly.

And, for the first time, the boys began to feel a vague sense of uneasiness!



CHAPTER 19

The Mystery of Archie!

CAPTAIN WALLIS, looking serious now, leapt ashore and joined the Renmark men and the juniors.

"I hadn't noticed that young Glenthorne wasn't with you," he said, with concern.

"When did this affair happen?"

The full details were described.

"Beats me!" said Smith, scratching his head. "You youngsters thought it was a part of the joke, eh?"

"Of course we did!" said Nipper. "I had a word with Travers about it, and he didn't know anything—so we concluded that it was an added effect."

"All the same, we began to get a little puzzled," said Travers. "We naturally thought that the other two men would ride up with Archie soon after we had 'bailed up' the bushrangers. But they didn't come, and I, for one, couldn't understand it."

"I thought perhaps Archie was already on board the steamer," said Nipper. "You haven't seen anything of him, or the two horsemen, I suppose, captain?"

"They haven't been near us," said Captain Wallis.

"But those two men must have said something when they left you!" exclaimed Handforth, looking at Mr. Smith. "You knew they went, didn't you?"

"Why, yes," admitted Smith slowly. "Some little time before we got to the hollow those two men said that they were tired of the game, and they rode off, saying that they were going back to Renmark."

"And on the way they must have collared Archie," nodded Nipper. "That was a silly thing to do. What was the good of taking him to Renmark? It'll only mean more delay."

Curiously enough, a small outboard motor-boat appeared on the river just then. The juniors had seen this little craft on the previous day. It was owned by one of the young sportsmen of Renmark, who had had it shipped out especially from England a month or two earlier.

The boat veered in towards the bank, and the occupant waved and grinned. He was a young fellow, wearing breeches and a shirt that was open at the neck.

"How did the hold-up go?" he asked cheerily.

"I say, have you just come from Renmark?" asked Nipper, running to the bank.

"Why, yes."

"When did you leave?"

"Not much more than half an hour ago," said the other. "This boat is speedy——"

"Have you seen anything of Archie Glenthorne?"

"Archie who?"

"He's one of our chaps," explained Nipper. "Two of the 'bushrangers' collared him, and carried him off. They said they were going back to Renmark, and they ought to have been there at least an hour before you left."

"I saw nothing of them," said the young fellow. "Nobody else, either. We've all been wondering how the game went—and that's the main reason I came along. Those two horsemen haven't been seen in Renmark again."

"Then Archie wasn't taken there!" said Handforth, startled. "Great Scott! What does it mean? What can have happened to him?"

"It's ridiculous!" frowned Nipper. "A joke's a joke, but——"

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth, with a roar. "I've got it! Those two men were *real* bushrangers!"

"Oh, my hat!" cried Church. "What's the good of trying to convince Handy of anything?"

"They weren't real bushrangers," said Smith gruffly. "How many more times must we tell you, young man, that there aren't any bushrangers?"

"But you know who the men are, don't you?" asked Nipper.

Mr. Smith frowned.

"To tell you the truth, I don't," he admitted.

"Don't know who they are?"

"I found them!" said Travers. "They were outside the hotel, while I was making arrangements. I was looking for likely customers, as it were. I naturally thought they were Renmark men."

There was a discussion then, and in the end of it Mr. Smith was looking grave.

"It seems that those two fellows were comparative strangers in the township," he said. "None of the boys knew them—"

"But what about their horses?" asked Willy.

"Most of the horses were lent by Mr. Cooper. As far as I can understand it, those two men were nothing but sundowners."

"They were what?" asked Handforth.

"Swag men."

"Eh?"

"Sundowners," repeated Mr. Smith impatiently.

"Tramps!" said Nipper, turning to Handforth. "In Australia tramps are generally called sundowners. Those men, it seems, were passing through Renmark humping the blucy."

"Great Scott!"

"That means they were carrying their packs," said Nipper. "The other men thought that Travers had picked them, and in all the general commotion and excitement they got a couple of horses, and joined the 'gang.' But it's beginning to look bad."

"They're real bushrangers, I tell you!" said Handforth stubbornly.

"If you like to put it that way, maybe you're right," said Smith anxiously. "They're rogues, anyway. Looks as if they've bolted with those horses."

"It's bad enough about the horses—but what about Archie?" asked Nipper. "Great Scott! They've grabbed this opportunity to pull off a coup. Poor old Archie has been really kidnapped!"

"Ye gods and little fishes!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Archie—kidnapped!"

"It's impossible!" said Travers. "It must be another joke! Hang it, why couldn't they be satisfied with the thing as we had planned it?"

But the others were becoming more and more convinced that there was no joke about this. The comedy was turning to drama. There were no bushrangers—but it certainly seemed that there were a couple of real crooks in the game; and these gentry, seeing their opportunity, had seized Archie Glenthorne, and had made off with him. Perhaps they had grabbed Archie because he was the least offensive of all the juniors? Moreover, they had seen, during the hold-up, that Archie's wallet had been more full of money than anybody else's.

The facts were certainly significant.

The townspeople of Renmark had entered wholeheartedly into the scheme, and they had decided to help Vivian Travers in the joke. Then, somehow or other, those two "sundowners" had got themselves mixed up in the game.

Nobody knew their names. They were comparative strangers in Renmark. It appeared that they had drifted into the township a couple of days earlier, and they had been only too willing to take part in the fake hold-up.

Now they were missing. What was more to the point, two very valuable horses were missing, too—and Archie Glenthorne had been spirited away!

Not a laugh was to be heard now. All the St. Frank's fellows were looking anxious and worried. The Renmark men were sorely puzzled, and Captain Wallis was frowning deeply.

The situation, instead of being hilarious, had now become grave in the extreme!



CHAPTER 20.

The Decision!

VIVIAN TRAVERS felt positively awful.

He blamed himself entirely for this unhappy situation. It had been his idea, in the first place, to organise that fake raid. Thus he was to blame for what had transpired.

"If those two men were honest they would have been back long ago!" he said, his usual complacency deserting him. "Besides, they lied to you, Mr. Smith. They told you that they were going back to Renmark."

"Yes—they said that very distinctly."

"And they didn't go back to Renmark," added Travers. "They doubled back on their tracks, waited for us, and grabbed Archie Glenthorne. Why did they do that—after telling you that they were returning to the township?"

"It looks bad," said Nipper.

"It looks thundering suspicious," agreed Travers. "If Archie had been taken away as a joke, those men would have said something to the rest. But no! They told a lie, and rode off. And the next thing we know is this. They're missing completely—those horses, and Archie with them. By Samson! It's awful!"

"But why should they get hold of Archie like that?" asked Handforth, in astonishment. "If it's not a joke, what is it?"

"It can't be a joke, Handy," said Nipper. "The unhappy feature about this whole affair is that Travers' little wheeze gave those men their opportunity."

"What do you mean?"

"Nipper's right," said Travers. "In ordinary circumstances, those two sundowners couldn't have kidnapped Archie or anybody else. Don't you see?"

"Well, not exactly."

"It's clear enough," said Travers. "Supposing those two tramps had wanted to get hold of Archie? How could they have done it? His very disappearance would have led to an inquiry. Besides, how could they have got hold of him? But by joining the

'gang' the opportunity was absolutely given to them, free of charge."

"By George!"

"They were provided with horses, and when they left the main party, nobody thought that anything was wrong," continued Travers agitatedly. "There's another cunning aspect of it, too. The blighters knew that we shouldn't be suspicious when Archie was collared. They came up, pinched Archie, and galloped away, and naturally I assumed that it was a part of the wheeze. That thing happened nearly two hours ago. So those rotters have had a clear two hours' start, and on horseback!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Poor old Archie!"

There seemed little doubt that Vivian Travers' theory was correct. Those two men, comparative strangers in Renmark, had taken advantage of the chance opportunity. Kidnapping anybody under ordinary conditions would have been too risky a game. Indeed, it would have been practically impossible, since the crooks would never have been able to get at Archie, or any of the other juniors, without arousing instant suspicions.

The cleverness, the cunning, the trickiness of the thing, was startling.

"But why Archie?" asked Handforth blankly.

"Probably because Archie had more money on him than anybody else," said Travers. "And that reminds me. What about Archie's pocket-book?"

All the juniors' property had been returned to them—watches, wallets, loose money, etc. But it was now found that Archie Glenthorne's wallet had not turned up. One of those two "sundowners" had helped to "bail up" the juniors on the upper deck of the steamer, and it was now clear that this man had stuck to Archie's pocket-book.

"It's becoming clearer!" said Nipper grimly. "Last night, at the hotel, there was plenty of talk. Some of you fellows were explaining about St. Frank's, and all the rest of it, and I remember that Archie Glenthorne was mentioned."

"Yes, we told everybody that Archie's two brothers had flown across the Atlantic," said Jimmy Potts. "And I think it was mentioned that Archie's people are tremendously rich."

"Then these two men took his pocket-book—in the ordinary course of the fake raid," said Nipper. "I expect there was something beside money in that wallet of Archie's. Letters, perhaps—his home address—and all sorts of other information. Those men have probably taken him away with the intention of keeping him a prisoner until his people pay over a large sum of money."

"Holding him for ransom, by George!" said Handforth, startled.

"That's it," said Nipper. "What else is there to think?"

"Boys, we're real sorry about this," said Mr. Smith. "But I don't think you can blame us—"

"Of course we don't blame you," said Travers. "Hang it, that wouldn't be fair! If anybody's to blame, it's me!"

"Real bushrangers!" said Handforth dreamily. "By George, I knew it! And you tried to spoof me that bushrangers were extinct!"

"But they're not bushrangers, Handy," said Church. "They're only a couple of ordinary criminals."

"Well, what's the difference?" interrupted Handforth. "The question is, what are we going to do?"

"We must decide quickly," said Nipper. "I don't very well see how we can get back on board the steamer and continue this pleasure trip up to Mildura. We can't leave Archie to his fate like this."

"Rather not!" echoed the other St. Frank's fellows.

"Better come on board, young men," said Captain Wallis anxiously. "I'm more or less responsible for you. We'll give information to the police, and get the telegraphs to work—"

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We're not going on this trip, leaving Archie in the hands of those bushrangers! I vote that we go back to Renmark, and put up at the hotel."

"Hear, hear!"

"But I've got everything fixed!" protested the captain. "Mr. Lee distinctly told me—"

"Awfully sorry, but we're not coming," said Nipper. "I'll put everything right with Mr. Lee when we see him again. We've just got to stay here, captain. And we can't do better than go back to Renmark, so that we can be on the spot when the first news comes in. The chances are that these two men will be rounded up, and then, of course, they'll be brought back to Renmark."

"That's true," said Mr. Smith. "You can safely leave the boys to me, captain. Renmark will look after them."

The other men chorused their approval.

And Captain Wallis realised that no arguments of his would make the boys change their minds. So very soon afterwards the Rubion continued her up-river trip.

Vivian Travers was filled with anguish. He was the innocent cause of this startling development. His practical joke had seemed perfectly harmless, and nobody could have foreseen that such a turn would come. The other fellows urged Travers not to take it to heart so much.

"I can't help it," he said gruffly. "I feel that I'm to blame. And, by Samson, I'm going to move heaven and earth to get Archie back! I'll never forgive myself if anything serious has happened to him. He's such a helpless chap, too—"

"Not so helpless!" put in Nipper. "In an emergency, Archie is as good as the best. Those men probably think that they've caught an easy victim, but Archie is liable to give them a bit of a shock!"

(Concluded on page 44.)



E. S. BROOKS

BETWEEN OURSELVES!

OUR AUTHOR 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 SCHOOL STORY LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.



A. R. THOMAS

YOUR photograph is appearing in the Place of Honour this week—Arthur R. Thomas (Swansea). You're an enthusiastic reader of the Old Paper, I know, and I hope you'll continue to be so for many years to come. Best of luck, Arthur!

* * *

Somehow I've got an idea—Joan M. Wearing (Manchester)—that quite a number of readers would like to hear of Hal Brewster & Co. more frequently; so you are not the only one. Shall I bring the River House School chaps into the stories more frequently after Nipper & Co. come back from Australia? And now I'm not only putting the question to you, Joan, but to everybody. This is distinctly a matter of general interest, and it might give you something to write to me about if you are otherwise stumped. You say that you like the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne (as a villain) much better than Claude Gore-Pearce, and I am therefore wondering if it would be a popular move if, in some future story, I brought the Hon. Aubrey to St. Frank's, to remain there as a permanency.

* * *

I'm going to quote a few lines from your latest letter—James W. Cook (Poplar)—since I know, from your previous letters, that you have no objection to your views being made public. So here goes: "Quite a crowd of people tell me of their amazement at my reading the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, and I understand the reason for their surprise. Now, if I were to see a chap of my own age playing marbles I would at once think him childish, because only children play marbles. Yet, although I give that opinion, I am not entitled to do so. Because there must be some reason why that chap played marbles; perhaps it interested him, or may have instructed him somehow. Anyhow, he did it for some reason. So we mustn't say 'He's acting foolishly.' That's why I read the NELSON LEE. I benefit from it greatly. It interests me, educates me. The fact that it mainly deals with people younger than myself is nothing. I was their age once. But, by reading of that age, we can consider ourselves of the same. Many an old man or

woman to-day wouldn't feel so old if they were only to read the NELSON LEE. Yet they won't be told, or they refuse to listen. And so it goes on. Ignorance may be bliss. Mr. Brooks, but not this kind of ignorance. . . . Now I am sending you this letter, and it may be months before you reply to it; but that is not my object. As long as *you* read it, that is all I care." And I have read, as you can see, Jimmy; and I quite agree with everything you've said.

* * *

Yes—Margaret Shaw (Clitheroe)—Handforth has two sisters. The elder one, Edith, is married, and Ena is at the Moor View School. I quite agree with you that Teddy Long has not done much work lately. In fact, he never does any work at all, unless he is driven to it.

* * *

I am sorry—Ronald E. Mabbett (Fairford)—but I can't be a party to your suggested wheeze. It is quite true that your pal, William Wall, has sent me his photograph (for which he has had mine in return), but in his accompanying letter he did not give me permission to publish it on this page, and he has not given me permission since. You blithely say "it will be all right; I give you full permission, and will stand the consequences." My dear chap, you are quite wrong here, for it is the Editor of the Old Paper who will be responsible if a photograph is published against the sender's own wishes. If William Wall tells me I can print his dial, it'll be printed—but not otherwise. So I'm afraid your cheery little scheme has sprung a leak. I haven't the slightest doubt that William would take it all in good part, but I want all our readers to understand that no photograph is published on this page unless that reader *himself* or *herself* desires it. A friend's permission is no permission at all.

There Are Startling Revelations in This Week's Thrilling Instalment!

What's Wrong with the Rovers?



Nelson Lee is convinced that Stephen Langton is the cause of all the trouble, and this week the famous detective is out to get his man. But Langton is a tricky customer and he doesn't intend to be caught easily!

At Granite Fort!

NELSON LEE'S startling statement gave Nipper something to think about as the car, leaving the town behind, came out on the bleak road leading to the Granite Fort. The driver, switching off his head-lamps, proceeded carefully over the rough stones.

Earlier in the week the famous diamonds of the Countess of Dimston had been stolen from her town house. They were valued at over a hundred thousand pounds, and a strict watch was being kept at every port and aerodrome in the country, and suspicious-looking parcels were being opened by the postal authorities. Did it mean that the robbery was the work of this daring gang Nelson Lee and Nipper were now after? That the "Bat" intended taking the jewels across the North Sea that night? Was that why such elaborate precautions had been taken, Nipper wondered, to keep his chief and himself out of Northmouth that night?

"Halt!"

A sentry had stepped out into the road, and the moonlight glinted on his fixed bayonet.

"Police!" shouted the driver, and the sentry allowed them to proceed.

At the grim-looking entrance to the Granite Fort there was another sentry, but he did not challenge. The doors were open, the car rumbled over the bridge across the empty moat, and came to a stop in a big gravel quadrangle, where two mechanics were busy on the fast military aeroplane that stood at one end.

Tony Craddock, the daring young airman, came hurrying up to the car.

"They've got the 'plane out now," he said calmly. "You can get a good view of the ground from up there, but it's beginning to cloud up a bit now. Perhaps you'd like to

have a look before you get into your flying kit? Hallo, youngster, you seem to have been in the wars!"

Nipper explained what had happened as they walked to the observation post, where two men had powerful glasses trained upon the Rovers' football ground down in the distance. They saluted Nelson Lee, and passed over their glasses.

Nipper focused his pair, and in the silvery light got a splendid view of the Rovers' ground. The goal posts had been

PICK UP

the threads of this mystery on page 38.

taken up. At the end of the ground furthest from the sea was an aeroplane, and by it stood three men. One of them was in flying kit, and was undoubtedly Stephen Langton, the daring amateur airman known as the "Bat." The man beside him had ginger hair, and Nelson Lee was prepared to swear that he was Barton, the man who was supposed to be with an ailing sister in Manchester. The third man was a stranger to him.

"Langton's using Ridley's engine," said Nelson Lee, and Nipper noticed that, though no sound came from the ground below, the propeller of the aeroplane was swinging round.

"Warming up," said Craddock. "I daren't start up until he has taken off. Not that it matters much. I must give him a start, for if he spotted he was being followed there would be nothing doing."

Nelson Lee and Nipper went into a bare barrack-room where a cheerful fire was burning, and changed into flying kit. Even in that thick clothing Nipper knew that they were in for a perishingly cold time in the air.

Craddock was standing beside his machine as they went out, his eyes fixed on a small red light up at the observation post. A big mechanic stood gripping the propeller.

The red light blinked and changed to a green.

"Let her rip!" said Captain Craddock.

Nipper knew that meant that the "Bat" was in the air. A second later he saw the aeroplane that had risen from the Rovers' ground moving swiftly and noiselessly away in a south-easterly direction.

And then the military 'plane was roaring. At least, it sounded a roar in the square of the old-fashioned fort, though actually it was a remarkably silent engine, if far behind the wonderful invention of the Rovers' brilliant centre-forward.

Craddock got into the pilot's seat, and Nipper followed his chief into the seat behind him. It was narrow for the two of them.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked the airman.

"The green light again," replied Craddock. "They're going to give the signal the moment it's safe for us to go up. Have your glasses ready, Mr Lee."

The detective nodded. Nipper, headache forgotten, discomfort of the small cockpit ignored, saw the green light flash.

The powerful engine throbbed. There came a sharp command, chocks were pulled away, and then they were rising sharply above the walls of the fort—rising in pursuit of the man who had disappeared over the North Sea!

The Chase in The Air!

DOWN below them were the lights of Northmouth. The wail of the syren of a trawler entering the harbour came faintly to Nipper's ears. Then they were rising rapidly, and warmly-clad as he was, the youngster felt chilly in this icy air over the grey, tumbling North Sea, looking so bleak and desolate in the faint moonlight.

Nelson Lee had got glasses to his eyes, and was holding them in hands encased in big fur-backed gloves. Suddenly he leant forward and shouted in the pilot's ear.

What's Gone Before.

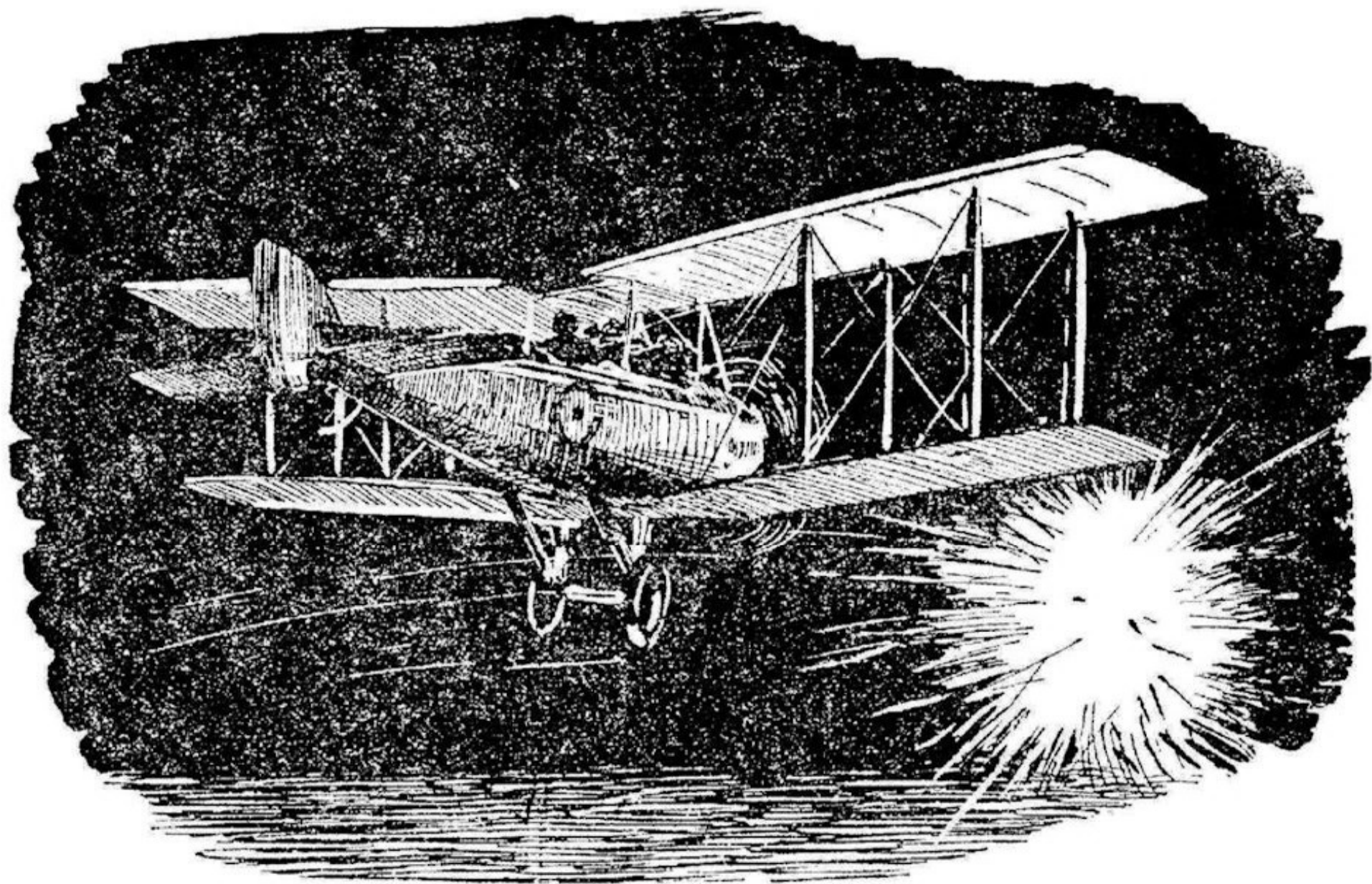
NELSON LEE, the world-famous detective, and his assistant

NIPPER, are investigating the strange disappearance of James Ridley and Mark Mayhew, two directors of Northmouth Rovers, the famous First Division football club. Lee suspects that they have been kidnapped by

STEPHEN LANGTON, the Rovers' chairman, who is a keen airman, and is known as the "Bat." Lee also thinks that Langton is smuggling illicit goods between England and Holland. Others who seem to be implicated in the mystery are Bert Barter, Minter and Coles, the club's centre-half, manager and trainer respectively. At one time, too, the detective suspected

DICK RIDLEY, the kidnapped director's nephew, and the Rovers' amateur International centre-forward, for Ridley is often seen with the chairman. However, Lee finds out that this is only because the centre-forward has invented a wonderful silent aeroplane engine, and has been financed by Langton, little realising that the latter is a daring criminal, and wants the engine for his own use. One night Nelson Lee receives intimation that Langton is about to start on a flight, and he and Nipper set out for Granite Fort—an old disused fortress which overlooks the Rovers' ground—where a fast military aeroplane is awaiting them. The detective intends to follow the "Bat" to wherever he is going! Just before they reach the fort Nelson Lee tells Nipper that he suspects that the "Bat" is taking the famous Dimston diamonds with him across to Holland.

(Now read on.)



Bang! A shell exploded just in front of the 'plane, and Nipper, seated in the cockpit, felt something whiz uncomfortably near his head.

The 'plane turned sharply to the left, and Nipper, peering forward, saw what looked like a sea gull flying some distance ahead of them, and at a lower level. Even allowing for the start they had been obliged to give him, the "Bat" had made wonderful progress, had obtained a lead far greater than would have appeared possible. It was clear by the sound of their own engine that Tony Craddock was hitting up the revs of his own engine in a desperate attempt to reduce that lead and keep the other 'plane in sight.

"Speaks well for Dick Ridley's invention!" Nipper shouted in his chief's ear.

"A lot too well for it!" was the grim reply. "Ridley had no idea of the purpose to which his clever invention would be put, and I can well understand Stephen Langton financing him."

The R.A.F. pilot was reducing the lead now. Nipper could not see the instrument board, but he was certain that they were doing well over two hundred miles an hour. Soon they were dropping to avoid a bank of cloud; the engine roared in his ears; there was the reek of petrol and castrol oil. The object ahead, which only a few moments before had looked like a seagull, was now clearly a 'plane, and, like their own machine, was carrying no lights.

Nipper had quite forgotten that swelling lump on his forehead, and his headache had vanished in the excitement of the chase

And then suddenly an ejaculation of surprise came from Nelson Lee.

"Look!" he shouted, and pointed with his outstretched gloved hand.

Both the pilot and Nipper glanced in the direction indicated. From the grey, tumbled surface of the North Sea came a stabbing light.

Flick, flick, flick, flash, flick!

"Morse!" said Nelson Lee.

"He's dropping!" shouted Tony Craddock. "Surely he can't be going to land on a rough sea like this. I've got floats, but I'm hanged if I should care to——"

"Climb, man, climb!"

The intensity of the great detective's shout startled the young airman. It startled Nipper, too.

Boom!

Bang!

A small shell had exploded just in front of the military 'plane. The flash blinded the occupants; something whistled past Nipper's head. There came a harsh, grating sound, then a spitting and hissing, and the engine had stopped.

"I think it means the sea, Craddock," said Nelson Lee quietly.

The young airman flattened out just as they were getting into a dangerous nose dive.

"What does this mean?" he shouted a little hoarsely.

"A slight error in deduction," was the calm reply. "Stephen Langton has never

flown to Holland, but to some vessel anchored in the North Sea, off the beaten track. How it has stopped there without arousing suspicion is more than I can say, but their gun work is excellent."

"I don't know, gov'nor!" said Nipper. He was pale, but plucky, and there was the ghost of a smile upon his lips. "I think I'd sooner have been shot than drowned. If that shell had hit us square we shouldn't have known much about it."

They were planing down rapidly to the sea. Though the machine was fitted with floats, in addition to landing wheels, it certainly seemed improbable that they could survive a forced landing upon those rolling waves.

Although death stared them in the face they were watching the "Bat," and they saw him circle and land upon what at first seemed the water, but which they saw almost instantly was a large floating deck. At sight of it Tony Craddock gave a hoarse little chuckle.

"Any port in a storm, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to try and land beside our quarry. They may shoot us, but, like your young friend here, I'd sooner be shot than drowned!"

They were planing down rapidly now. Lights gleamed below. Nipper saw men hastily moving Stephen Langton's 'plane, and he admired the pluck of Tony Craddock, who, with nothing much to hope for whatever happened, was concentrating on the task of making a safe landing.

"Clever!" said Nelson Lee. "Salvage ship. Might stop for a year or more without rousing suspicion."

"Hold tight!"

Crash!

Nipper vaguely knew they had landed partly on the flat deck, partly in the water, then he was thrown forward. That bump on his head came in contact with the framework of the cockpit, and for the second time that exciting day he fainted.

Prisoners!

"**D**RINK this, old chap!" The words came faintly to Nipper's ears, as though the voice was addressing him from a long distance, but he knew it was Nelson Lee's voice, and vaguely realised that someone was holding a flask to his lips.

He gulped down a little of the brandy, and the first thing he was conscious of was a dull hammering at his head. Then the white enamelled steel wall, and a curious rolling sensation, told him that he was on board a ship.

Ship! What was he doing on a ship?

And then gradually it all came back to him—the football match, the rush back to Northmouth, the pursuit of Stephen Langton's aeroplane, the bursting shell in the air, and the descent upon the salvage ship in that lonely stretch of the North Sea.

"What's happened, gov'nor?" he asked eagerly.

"I'll tell you in the morning," replied Lee. "For the moment we're safe, and that's enough to go on with. You've got to get some sleep, and I'm going to turn in myself."

With that Nelson Lee rolled into a bunk on the other side of the small cabin, and, pulling the heavy fur coat over him, switched off the electric light.

Nipper was all impatience to hear what had happened, but he knew it would be useless to question his chief. In any case, after what had happened he felt sleepy.

He realised that he was lying on a bunk, fully dressed save for his boots, and the great coat he had worn in the air covered him. He thought he might as well get a little doze if that splitting headache would let him, and as any attempt to think made his headache worse, he rolled gingerly over, keeping that tender bump from the pillow.

His little doze must have lasted several hours, for he awoke to a splashing of water, to see Nelson Lee, stripped to the waist, enjoying a wash in icy water. Nipper promptly sat up. His headache had almost gone, and he was feeling decidedly hungry.

"What's the time?" he asked eagerly.

"Nearly nine o'clock on Sunday morning," was his chief's reply. "I don't suppose they are very early risers on Sunday, but there is an appetising smell of eggs and bacon, and we must hope that the prisoners share the same fare as the crew."

"Oh, we are prisoners, then?" said Nipper, sitting up, and tenderly feeling that bump on his forehead.

"Very much so, though that sarcastic beggar, Langton, described us as an addition to his distinguished guests!" replied Lee dryly. "It will be interesting to hear from Ridley what the life is like."

"Ridley! Have you seen him? Is he here?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"I've not seen him, but I'll bet he's here, and Mayhew, too. It's an ingenious plot, Nipper, and this is the solution we all overlooked. I should say that——"

Nelson Lee broke off as there was a clatter of a tray on the floor outside, and

then a key was inserted in the lock of the door. It partly opened, and a fat face, surmounted by stiff, bristly hair, peered cautiously in and said:

"Vos behave like schentlemen? Yes? Den I vos goom in mit your breakfast."

A big Dutchman, wearing a white coat that appeared to have had a long absence from the wash tub, came in, bearing a tray, which he placed on the floor. He glanced a little apprehensively at Nelson Lee, who, in shirt and trousers, face fresh from the cold water and hair ruffled, evidently struck him as looking formidable. As he put down the tray, he hastily explained in broken English that it would be use- to assault him as a possible means of escape.

"You vos only lose your eatings," he said, as he backed to the door.

He had brought them a large rasher of bacon, an egg, and a chunk of bread each, with some coffee in a battered pot. The bacon was a little on the lukewarm and greasy side, and Nipper had tasted better coffee, but he was ravenously hungry, seeing that he had eaten nothing since the tea after the match at Halston. It was not until he had put away half his ration that he questioned his chief with regard to what had happened after their forced landing.

Nelson Lee explained that Craddock and he had escaped with a slight shaking; he explained, too, how men had pulled them from the 'plane, and then turned it over into the sea, where it had sunk like a stone. Then Stephen Langton had greeted them with a mocking smile, and asked them to accept his hospitality.

"He seems to have rather a soft spot for you, Nipper," remarked Lee. "I suppose he appreciates you as a footballer. Anyway, I heard him give instructions in Dutch that you were to be treated with every courtesy, then we carried you down here. Craddock was taken to another cabin, and I heard Langton leave to fly back to Northmouth just before you recovered consciousness."

Nipper listened intently, then nodded thoughtfully. It was a pretty hopeless outlook, but they refused to be discouraged. There seemed no earthly chance of escape, and it was perhaps the most galling position the great detective had ever been placed in; here on board this alleged salvage ship, surrounded by the men so badly wanted in two countries, with sufficient evidence now to arrest the master mind—the dashing, flying chairman of Northmouth Rovers—yet a prisoner on this ship, miles from land, and unable to make any sort of communication.

About an hour later, a burly, black-bearded man, who appeared to be in command, and who spoke English with only the slightest trace of a foreign accent, opened the door and told them that they could go on deck and take exercise.

"I take it that it is needless for me to tell you that any idea of swimming from the ship in this weather would be absolutely hopeless," he said warningly. "But should you be ultra optimists, perhaps it is only fair to warn you that someone is always on watch, and that you would be shot almost as soon as you touched the water."

"Thanks," said Nelson Lee dryly, "that's very sporting of you. But neither of us happen to be channel swimmers, and the temperature of the sea in January is not inviting!"

The black-bearded man shrugged his shoulders, and Nelson Lee and Nipper followed him up on deck.

That flat deck on which they had landed looked only half the size now, and there was a derrick, and a diver's outfit upon it. At the further end stood two men, who gazed curiously at them as they appeared. The black-bearded man had turned, making for a deck cabin forward. Nelson Lee strode towards the taller of the two men.

"Mr. James Ridley, I believe?" he said casually. "My name is Nelson Lee. Your friend, Mr. Colton, engaged me to find you, so that part of my task is accomplished."

"I've heard of you, Mr. Lee," said the man with the thin, bronzed face. "You certainly succeeded that far, but, unfortunately, in finding me you've lost yourself!"

"So what's the good of that?" demanded the shorter man, whom Nipper knew must be Mark Mayhew, the wealthy timber merchant who had disappeared so soon after Ridley.

The detective was filling his pipe. He looked steadily at the two men.

"This much, gentlemen," he said quietly. "The next time Stephen Langton visits this ship I propose we shall leave him to enjoy the company of his friends, and borrow his 'plane to take us to Northmouth!"

(Will Nelson Lee be able to carry out this daring plan successfully? The thing's easier said than done, and when he's up against a man like Stephen Langton, anything can happen. This stunning serial is now reaching a grand climax, and all readers ought to make sure they don't miss next week's thrilling instalment.)



"TICH" FREEMAN, the famous Kent bowler, who has been doing his bit in Australia recently.

BRAINS TELL IN THE TESTS!

When you're batting or bowling do you use your brains? You ought to, anyway! This article tells you how famous Test cricketers use theirs!

either leg-before-wicket, stumped, caught, or run out. When a batsman is bowled out—has his middle stump removed—you can very often say that it was sheer bowling ability which got rid of the batsman. But in most other cases of a batsman being dismissed it is bowling ability coupled with brains. You don't so much have to bowl a man out in a Test match—that is, the really great batsman—as think him out; or diddle him out, if you like the phrase better, though in using this phrase it must be understood that "diddle him out" is only meant in a legitimate sense.

Diddling Them Out!

There are a hundred-and-one ways of diddling a batsman out, according to the strict rules of cricket, and when it comes to a match between two teams of more or less equal merit there are two important things which tell. Some people would say that the most important thing is luck. Well, it is a fact that you can't very well hope to beat an equally good team on a cricket pitch unless you have luck on your side. But the second important thing is—well, the stuff the painter mixed with his paints—brains.

ONCE upon a time there was a company of important people viewing the works of a famous artist. These people were awe-struck, and few of them dare even speak. They could only marvel at the wonders of the works placed before them. Finally, one of the admirers of the work of the artist did pluck up sufficient courage to go to the painter of the pictures with a question, and this was the question which the admirer asked:

"How in the world do you mix your paints?"

The reply of the artist was brief and to the point: "With brains, sir." And that, if one may put it in this way, is the manner in which cricket has to be mixed—and particularly Test match cricket—with brains. In a Test match you don't merely send a batsman out to get runs or put on a bowler to bowl a batsman out. You have to set your brains working overtime to get out the world's best batsmen on the perfect pitches which they make for batsmen in Australia.

During the first Test match of the present series, played at Brisbane, there was no English batsman clean bowled. They were

The way in which brain against brain is pitted in Test matches is not always obvious, but if we look beneath the surface we can see it sometimes. Before the matches of the present England touring team in Australia had gone very far, it was pretty obvious that Larwood, the England bowler, had cast a sort of spell over Ponsford, the greatest batsman in Australia at the present time. Now, the object of the Australian captain, when it came to the second Test, was to prevent Ponsford being called upon to bat when Larwood was at his best and freshest. And

the object of the England captain was to have Larwood ready to bowl at Ponsford the minute he came in, no matter at what part of the innings Ponsford was called upon.

"Pocketing" Ponsford!

Of course, Larwood, being the star turn of the England side, starts bowling at the beginning of the Australian innings. Twice in the first Test match of the present tour Larwood got rid of Ponsford, who was sent in first, before the crack Australian batsman had settled down. So the Australian captain put on his thinking cap. In the second match, he said to himself, he wouldn't send Ponsford in first. He would keep him back, possibly until Larwood was too tired to bowl at his best.

So, instead of Ponsford going in first, he was kept until third wicket down. But Chapman, the captain of England, was fully alive to the idea. He bowled Larwood a bit at first and then gave him a rest. But the minute Ponsford appeared at the wicket, Larwood, still thoroughly fresh, was put on to bowl. That is one of the finest illustrations perhaps, which could be given to show the thought which has to be put into a Test match by the captain of a side.

What you have to remember is this—if, by a little brain, by a little cunning or a deep scheme, a dangerous batsman of the other side is got out for a little score, then the whole course of the game may be changed. You have to think the batsmen out.

Here is another story to illustrate my meaning. It is told by Frank Foster, the famous bowler, who had a lot to do with England's victory in the Test matches the last time the Old Country won in Australia. Clem Hill, the famous Australian cricketer, had one weakness in his batting; when he played a leg glide, he used to drag his right foot just outside the crease. Now, in the ordinary way a wicketkeeper would not stand close up to Foster; he bowled too fast for that. But Foster and "Tiger" Smith between them worked the downfall of Clem Hill in one innings in this way.

Catching Clem Hill!

The story can be told in the words of Frank Foster himself.

"As I prepared to bowl, the wicketkeeper stood well back, and, of course, Hill noticed this. I fiddled with my sleeve to give 'Tiger' a chance to settle in a new position. I bowled Hill a ball which was the sort at which he could make an attempt at a leg glide. He made the attempt, missed the ball. 'Tiger' takes it perfectly and whips off the bails. There is no need to appeal; Clem was out by at least a yard—stumped Smith, bowled Foster 0."

Now Foster, in finishing the story, admits that never again was he able to catch Clem Hill in the same trap during that tour, but if you catch a great batsman once in a trap of that kind it is worth while. Indeed, these sort of traps have to be set. Clem Hill

thought he was quite safe in dragging his right foot outside the crease to make the stroke, because, so far as he knew, the wicketkeeper was standing well back. But as bowler and wicketkeeper had hatched an idea—that of the wicketkeeper sneaking up to the wicket—the batsman was stumped, much to his surprise.

Sometimes during the present matches in Australia we have been surprised at the number of times batsmen have been out leg-before-wicket. Now, most of these leg-before cases are due to batsmen falling into a trap set by the bowler.

As you know, certain bowlers are in the habit of imparting spin to the ball—delivering what are called break balls. It is the custom, in big cricket in these days, for the batsmen to use the legs as an additional guard for their wicket against break bowling. A bowler of the Grimmett, Tich Freeman, or even Maurice Tate style will bowl five balls in succession, all of which break across the wicket. From these the batsman cannot be out leg-before-wicket, of course.

Baffling the Batsman!

The sixth ball, however, which is bowled to all intents and purposes in exactly the same way, doesn't break at all. The batsman steps in front of his wicket to make sure, if he doesn't play the ball with his bat, that his legs will prevent the ball from hitting the wicket. Instead of breaking, however, as the batsman expects the ball to do, it comes straight through. And if, by chance, the ball misses the bat and hits the legs, then up goes the umpire's finger; the batsman is out, leg-before-wicket.

If a batsman can't be got rid of in any other way, it sometimes pays to give him a few cheap runs in the hope of getting him out. In the first match at Brisbane, a few weeks ago, Herbert Sutcliffe was got rid of in this way by Gregory. A fielder was moved round to long leg. Then Gregory deliberately bowled a bad ball, which Sutcliffe thought ought to be banded to the boundary for four. He banded it towards the boundary, but the new man, placed at long leg, was waiting for it, and Sutcliffe was duly caught out.

We hear of a Test match captain declaring his innings closed at five o'clock in the afternoon, or of the last batsman or two deliberately throwing away their wickets. There is sound common sense in this sort of thing—brain if you like.

Men who have been out in the field all day are not too fresh; may be feeling a bit tired or stale. Then is the time for the wise captain to sacrifice a few runs for his side to get the other fellows in during that last hour or so of the day in the hope of getting rid of two or three batsmen, who are not as fresh as they would be on the morning following.

Yes, brains all round—they win cricket matches!

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Kenneth Bruce, 2, Lambeth Villas, Portsmouth Rd., Surbiton, Surrey, offers for sale a large number of back issues of the N.L., including "The Fresh Air Fiends," "The Deluge at St. Frank's," and "The River House Raiders," etc.

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The Wellington Correspondence Club, Sidney G. Gross, 23, Wellington Rd., Norwich, wants to hear from readers interested.

TRAPPED BY BUSHRANGERS!

(Continued from page 35.)

They all went back to Renmark with the "bushrangers." They were given rides on horseback, and there was a big sensation in the township when the truth got round. Inquiries were immediately instituted, but those men had not been seen again.

The telegraphs were set to work, and inquiries were made in all the neighbouring townships. But nobody could give any information regarding those two mysterious horsemen and their prisoner.

Nipper, after sending a long telegram to Nelson Lee, felt a little more comfortable. He had a conviction that he was doing right by staying in Renmark. To have continued the river trip, leaving Archie to his fate, would have been unthinkable.

And what of Archie Glenthorne himself? He had vanished—he had been carried off into the bush, and there wasn't the slightest doubt that his kidnappers were intending to hold him for ransom.

But, as Nipper had said, Archie was not such a helpless duffer as he looked! In fact, the St. Frank's fellows need not have worried themselves unduly, for the genial Archie, when put to it, was not only brainy, but exceedingly energetic, too!

THE END.

(Next week's long complete yarn is entitled "Lost in the Bush!" Look out for it, chums; it's a "corker"!)

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