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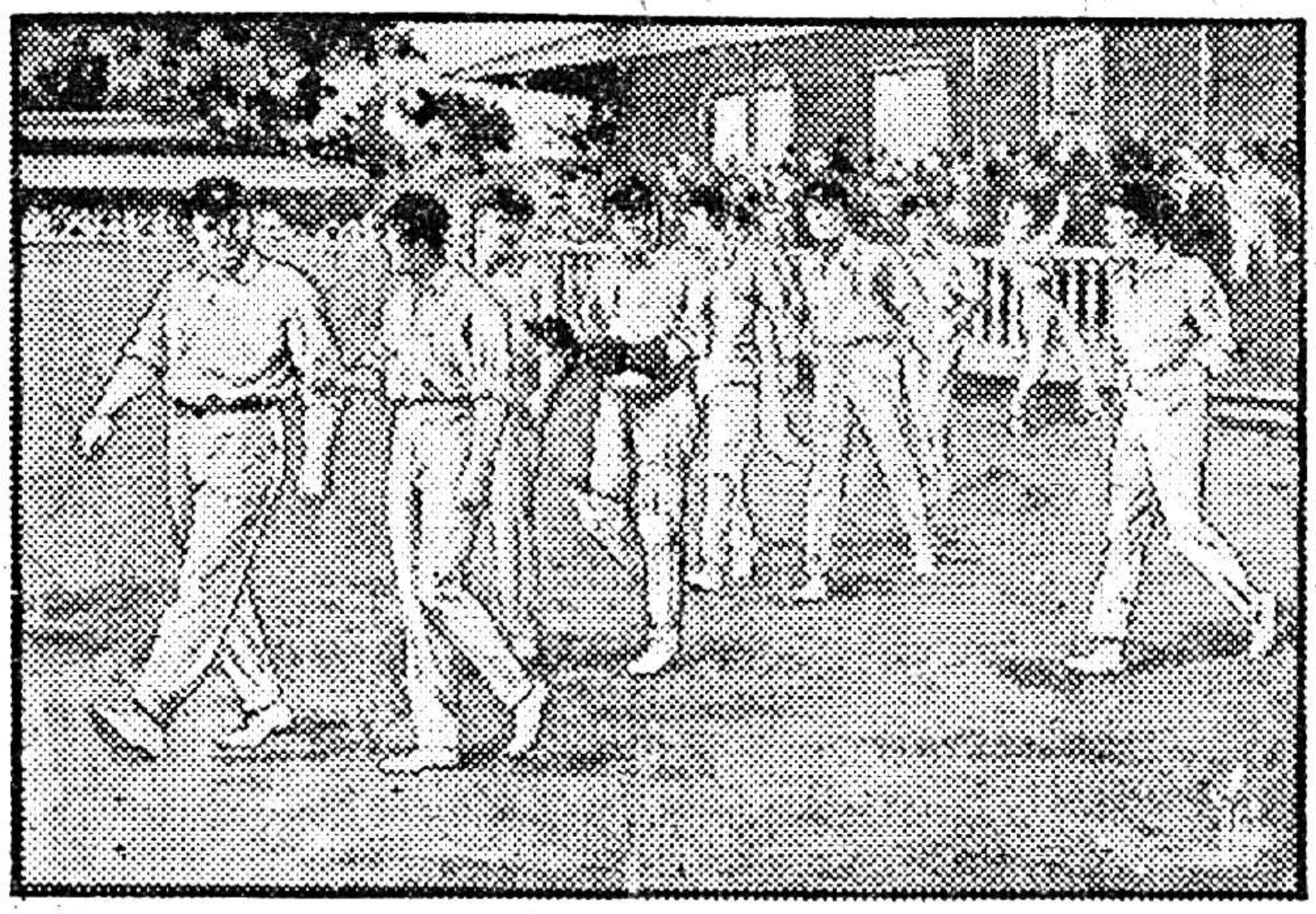

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

IN THE HANDS OF THE TAGOSSA!

LORD DORRIMORE grunted.

"It's not so much the walking I object to, but the lack of cigarettes!" he exclaimed grumpily. "It's simply frightful, Lee, old man. We've been going practically all day, and haven't had a single puff!"

"Hard lines, Dorrie, but it can't be helped," said Nelson Lee. "And we have far greater troubles than lack of cigarettes. I don't think you quite realise the peril of our position."

"Oh, I realise it all right," said Dorrie. "We're in the hands of Mordanian brigands, and if we escape without payin' the bloodthirsty ruffians all we possess, we shall be lucky."

"So you anticipate that we shall be held for ransom?" put in Captain Mason.

"Somethin' of that sort," replied his lordship. "These picturesque gentlemen of the mountains wouldn't hold us as prisoners unless they had somethin' in view. They look upon murder as a gentle pastime, and it wouldn't worry them in the slightest degree to polish the whole crowd of us off. So they're hangin' on to us, with the idea of keepin' us prisoners until they can extract our banking accounts from lovin' relatives in England."

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"Well, there's something in what you say, Dorrie," he admitted. "Personally, I fully expected to be shot out of hand when these brigands first came on the scene. The fact that we have been preserved indicates that our hosts have some object in view."

"Don't talk like that, old man," said Lord Dorrimore. "Bein' preserved! You might think we were mummies, or somethin' of that kind. I hope we sha'n't be preserved for long, by gad! Nothin' gets my temper up more than bein' kept in captivity. And where are we goin' to?"

"Heaven only knows!" said Captain Mason.

"And when shall we get there?"

"My dear fellow, we can't answer these questions!" said Nelson Lee. "We have no say in the matter; we must simply keep going until the order comes for a halt. We are in the hands of the Tagossa, and a greater disaster could not have befallen us. I'm terribly concerned about the boys."

Lord Dorrimore suddenly looked grave.

"Yes, by the Lord Harry!" he said grimly. "The boys! If just we ourselves were prisoners, it wouldn't matter much; we might be able to take a few risks in making a break for liberty. But we can't do anythin' of that kind under the present circumstances. We've got to think of those boys—sixteen of them!"

"No—thirteen!" corrected Nelson Lee. "Three of them are not with us, Dorrie, and I am intensely worried. What has happened to Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson? Why were

they not brought along with the whole party?"

"Perhaps they escaped," suggested Dorrimore. "Nipper's a jolly cute beggar, you know, and he may have wangled things at that old monastery. Anyhow, I'm not deeply concerned about him; he can take care of himself, and his pals as well!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"In one way I agree with you, Dorrie," he said, "and I would trust Nipper to take care of himself almost anywhere. But here everything is extraordinary; the conditions of life in Mordania are totally different to anything existing in any other part of the world. We are right in the mountains, and there is no such thing as law in this land. If we are all murdered within the next half-hour, nobody will be brought to book for the crime."

"That's right—be cheerful!" said Dorrie. "It's frightfully amusin' to hear you talkin' about the crowd of us bein' wiped out!"

"I wasn't particularly referring to ourselves, Dorrie," said Lee. "But it is just as well that we should realise what this country is like, and how we are liable to be treated by these brigands. We are captives in the hands of the Tagossa, which, as you know, is a murderous Mordanian secret society. The Tagossa, of recent months, has extensively developed and has become a powerful political party. Indeed, the leader of the Tagossa, Kol Palak, is practically the ruler of the whole region. His word is law, and at any moment he may decide to rid himself of our presence. As for King Boris and the Crown Prince, I am very doubtful if they will live for another twenty-four hours. They are only being brought with us so that Kol Palak may have the pleasure of gloating over his former enemy."

"And we are on the way to the capital!" said Dorrie, taking a deep breath. "By gad, what a position: On the way to Ludari, where this Palak fellow holds full sway! Well, I must say that we're havin' some new experiences."

They trudged on for some time in silence, over the rough, uneven ground. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were walking together, with Captain Mason not far behind. There were many others in the party, too, including thirteen St. Frank's juniors. Hamilforth and Co. were there, Reginald Pitt, Fatty Little and De Valerie, and Bob Christine and some others; and, of course, King Boris of Mordania, Prince Paul, and two members of the royal court.

And they were all prisoners—all captives in the hands of the Tagossa!

At the present moment they were being marched along a rough, mountainous road into the heart of Mordania—that strange land in the mountains which is practically unknown to the average European. Tucked away in the Balkans, Mordania is a land of mystery—a grim, sinister region where life is cheap, and where murder is an everyday occurrence.

Not so long before, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the other members of the party had sought refuge at an old monastery, after being shipwrecked on the Mordanian coast. Unfortunately, King Boris had sought shelter at the same place, and he had been tracked by his enemies, the revolutionaries. A swift, sudden attack had been made on the monastery, resulting in its downfall and the capture of the king and the Crown Prince. And the members of the Tagossa who had made the attack had not hesitated to capture the St. Frank's party as well.

And now they were all being marched along, through deep mountain passes, towards the Mordanian capital, the headquarters of Kol Palak, the brigand chief.

It was amazing that such conditions could exist in the twentieth century—that while these extraordinary events were coming to pass, the everyday humdrum life in England was taking place.

St. Frank's had reassembled by this time for the new term; the ordinary school routine was probably being adhered to as usual. And yet here were these juniors—thirteen of them—prisoners in the hands of a wild mountain tribe! Except for the modern firearms, one might have supposed that these events were taking place hundreds of years ago.

For, in Mordania, there had been practically no development in the course of centuries; it was the wildest corner of all Europe. The country consisted of a series of fastnesses—a place in which any large army would soon starve, and where a small army would stand no chance against the natives.

Very few English people have visited Mordania, and the reason for this is simple. It is a forbidden country. The Mordanians do not invite strangers within their gates; they know practically nothing of the outside world. They live by their flocks, and by brigandage, and any reckless traveller who crosses the border into Mordania rarely, if ever, emerges.

If he happens to be rich, he is held a captive until his relatives pay an enormous sum to the brigands as the price of his liberty. And even when he comes out he is able to give no information about the country, for, in his captivity, he is not permitted to see anything beyond his rough mountain prison—frequently a cave in some wellnigh inaccessible canyon. It is impossible for him to have understood any of the conversation of his captors, for the Mordanian language is incomprehensible to the outsider.

Indeed, it is quite safe to say that the Mordanian is the last survivor of mediæval days. The Mordanians have no written language, and, consequently, there are no newspapers, and the people themselves can neither write nor read. There are a good many Mordanians who have travelled beyond their own country, and who have learned Russian, Italian, and other languages. These men, naturally, are educated to a certain degree; but at heart they are savages, in spite of their veneer of European education.

The Mordanians, for the most part, are wiry and muscular; they dress in a strange way. With feet encased in raw hide slippers, they move with catlike stealthy tread—not an affected gait, but a perfectly natural inborn characteristic. For the most part the men have their heads half shaven, with hair long at the back in a most peculiar fashion.

The Mordanians have remained almost unchanged throughout the centuries. Vast and wonderful changes have occurred in other parts of the world; but in Mordania everything is the same, and, in some ways, in the depths of barbarism. The country is wild and inaccessible, and the king, after all, is a kind of glorified chieftain.

As Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore looked about them they could not help marvelling that these events could be taking place so comparatively near to real civilisation. And it was all the more wonderful when they remembered that they had been brought to the country by an ultra modern airship.

As they trudged along, Nelson Lee took particular notice of the man who was leading the whole party—for the prisoners were completely surrounded by members of the brigand band.

The leader was walking in a queer, sinuous way. His movements were stealthy, and he kept up the same pace no matter what the condition of the path might be. Rough or smooth, he almost crept along, sure footed, and his feet fell silently. His rifle—the only indication of modern times—was always ready, and his dark, keen eyes were for ever searching on every hand.

Nelson Lee was not quite sure whether an attack was expected, or whether this was the man's natural behaviour. Later on, Lee learned in that particular region there were members of a hostile tribe, who would not hesitate to lie in ambush and take shots at the Tagossa men. For, although the Tagossa had gained full power in Mordania, they still had enemies—men who were faithful to the royalist party.

As for the rest of the men who surrounded the prisoners, they were perhaps the fiercest and most bloodthirsty gang that Nelson Lee had ever seen. They were wild-looking fellows, with swarthy complexions and piercing eyes. They were attired in strange clothing—skin-tight white woollen trousers, with broad bands running down the legs; short white jackets, and sleeveless woolly boleros. Their feet were encased in hide shoes, with uppers consisting of a network of string, and upon their heads they wore small red skull caps.

And each man was almost a walking arsenal. They carried two heavy revolvers in the belt, ammunition, and wicked-looking curved knives. Some of the Mordanians were also carrying rifles, with well-filled bandoliers across their shoulders. And their heads were shaven, leaving a long tuft at the back.

It seemed for all the world that this was some pageant—a reconstruction of a mediæval adventure.

But Nelson Lee knew only too well that it was grimly true—that these strange events were actually taking place, and that his own life, as well as the lives of the other members of the party, was in danger.

For many hours they had been on the march—ever since they had left the monastery of St. Peter. Dawn had broken shortly after their departure, for the great attack had taken place during the night. And throughout the day they had been marched along, until now, when the afternoon was waning into night, they were footsore and tired and utterly weary.

There had been one short halt at midday, when they had been provided with some kind of a meal, chiefly consisting of atrocious black bread and slices of cold meat.

Now the juniors were thoroughly hungry, and quite willing to partake of even more of that rough fare.

"It can't be long before they call a halt now," said Reginald Pitt, as he trudged along with De Valerie and Bob Christine at his side. "Dash it all, we've been going for hours, and my feet are absolutely raw. I'm not a coward, but I can't stand this much longer."

"Same here!" said Christine wearily. "The brutes! They can see we're tired and fagged out—why can't they give us a rest? Why can't they allow us to stop here for the night? This place is just as good as any other."

"I'm blessed if I know what is going to happen to us," said De Valerie. "We're in an awful position, you know, and there's no sense in kidding ourselves that we're not. Goodness only knows when we shall see St. Frank's again!"

"And during all this time we haven't been able to send a word home that we're safe and sound!" exclaimed Pitt. "Would you believe it?"

"Perhaps it doesn't make any difference," said Christine grimly. "We may never get out of this country alive, and it's just as well that our people shouldn't know anything of our sufferings. They think we all went down with the airship, I expect; and perhaps they'd better keep on thinking that."

"My only hat!" said Pitt. "You're pretty cheerful, aren't you? So you think we shall never get out of Mordania?"

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much chance of it," replied Christine. "Have you noticed Mr. Lee? I don't think I've ever seen him look so serious or so worried. He looks twenty years older already! And I know jolly well that he's afraid——"

"Afraid!" interrupted Handforth, from the rear. "What's that? Mr. Lee afraid? What absolute rot! Why, you silly ass, Mr. Lee isn't afraid of anything!"

"I didn't say he's afraid," said Christine. "Mr. Lee is afraid that we're in for a pile of trouble, and he's worrying about us. He wouldn't mind about himself, I know, but——"

"Worrying about us?" said Handforth. "Rats! Why should he worry? We can look after ourselves, I should think. If any of these Mordanian rotters try any tricks with me, I'll jolly soon show them the size of an English fist!"

Church and McClure were near Handforth, and they looked rather startled. The three chums were inseparable. They were constantly having arguments and rows, whether they were in Study D at St. Frank's, or in the far corners of the earth; but, in spite of all their quarrels, they were firm chums. Handforth had an idea that Church and McClure couldn't possibly get on without him; and Church and McClure, strange to say, were quite positive that Handforth would be like a lost sheep if they parted from him.

"I say, Handy, don't you try any of your tricks!" said Church anxiously.

"My tricks?" said Handforth. "What do you mean, you ass?"

"Why, you were just talking about your fists," said Church. "You'd better not punch any of these Mordanian rotters. They are armed to the teeth, and it wouldn't take them a minute to riddle you with bullets."

Edward Oswald Handforth laughed contemptuously.

"You fathead!" he said politely. "Do you think I take any notice of these revolvers and knives? They're only for show; I don't suppose they're even used! And if one of these bounders tries any games with me, I'll jolly soon knock him sideways!"

"And be killed the next minute!" said McClure. "It's not worth it, Handy. We're prisoners, and we've got to do exactly as we're told. It's no good jibbing; we can't do as we like."

Handforth grunted.

"It'll be our turn before long," he said darkly. "Don't you make any mistake, my sons—we're not going to stick this kind of thing for ever. Do you think Mr. Lee and Dorrie will be

content to remain prisoners? Not jolly likely! They're simply waiting their chance to turn the tables on these—these madmen. Did you ever see such freaks in all your life? They look as if they'd walked out of a comic opera! I saw men just like these in a London theatre!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Church. "They were fakes; but these chaps are the real thing. They're brigands, and for two pins they'd fill you with bullets, and leave you by the roadside. So you'd better not do any of your punching; we ain't at St. Frank's now."

"I'll do as much punching as I like!" said Handforth aggressively.

But, inwardly, Handforth knew that his chums were giving him good advice. For all his impulsive nature, he had enough sense to realise that he would be well advised to keep himself in check, and to avoid unpleasantness with the Tagossa men.

Therefore, Handforth still trudged on, although his every inclination told him to come to a halt and let fly at his nearest neighbours—that is, the Mordanians. But, somehow, these men looked dangerous, and Handforth didn't want to put the matter to the test.

It was now growing quite dusk, and at last a halt was called. And it was clear that the brigands had been making for a definite objective, for, after winding round a narrow track which clung in a strange manner to the face of the grey mountain, the party came within sight of several peculiar-looking dwellings.

The leader of the band raised a revolver in the air and fired four times in rapid succession. The shots echoed and re-echoed in a startling way, and almost at once four answering shots were heard just in the distance ahead.

And some more of the queerly attired Mordanians appeared, and among them could be seen some women. The party marched on, and at length came to a halt on a kind of wide shelf on the mountain side, where the houses were built.

The prisoners looked round them with new interest. Two or three of the women were quite young, and, although by no means handsome to Western eyes, they were attired in quite a wonderful way—in a sort of gala costume of gorgeous colouring and design.

It was strange that the women should wear such highly decorative clothing as this, but almost everybody in the Balkans dresses in gay colours. It is a characteristic of the people.

In the dim evening light, Nelson Lee and his fellow prisoners looked round them with much interest, in spite of their unhappy position. So far they had been treated fairly well by the Tagossa men, and had really no cause for complaint, excepting the fact that they were very tired and worn.

On all sides could be seen the bare limestone rocks, without a single blade of grass to relieve the monotony—a grim, desolate region where no foreigners had ever set foot, except when captured and held prisoners, with the ultimate object of obtaining ransom.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were taken into one of the small buildings, and it proved to be a very primitive place. It consisted merely of two rooms, with earthen floors, and the ceilings and walls were blackened by smoke. Many of the Mordanians came in with the prisoners, and the little house was packed. They were all talking together, but Nelson Lee could not understand a word that was being said, for he was unacquainted with the Mordanian language.

No attempt had been made to bind the prisoners, or to have them closely watched. They were allowed to move about just as they wished, but they fully understood that any attempt to escape would be futile.

Here, in this mountain pass, what chance would they have of getting away, even if they succeeded in eluding their captors for the moment? They would never be able to find their way down into the plains, and, without a doubt, all the mountain paths were watched by agents of the Tagossa. Nelson Lee knew well enough that it would be madness to attempt flight.

Before long food was prepared. The meal was not at all bad, consisting of a kind of mutton stew, with a plentiful supply of the unpalatable black bread. There was black coffee, too—steaming hot.

Upon the whole, the prisoners enjoyed their evening meal, for they were inordinately hungry, and anything went down easily. Fatty Little almost broke his own record, for there was no lack of supplies. All the prisoners were given just what they wanted.

Consuming the food was a bit of a problem at first, for there was an unfortunate absence of table cutlery; but, by the aid of pocket knives and fingers, the party managed to get over the difficulties.

Nelson Lee knew something about the code of honour of the Mordanians—a really surprising code, when it is remembered that these men are brigands of the fiercest type. If a stranger partakes of the food of the Mordanian, he is safe for at least twenty-four hours afterwards. While the food remains undigested he may not be injured in any way. This law even applies to a Mordanian's worst enemy; and once a Mordanian has given his word, that word is never broken.

After the supper, all the juniors went to sleep. They were not particular where they laid themselves down, for they were tired out, and slept just as they were. Some of them were fortunate enough to lie upon beds—not that these were particularly attractive, consisting of big sacks filled with dried maize leaves.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were not so tired, and they ventured outside into the open, in order to have a smoke, for they had succeeded in obtaining some cigarettes from one of their captors.

"By gad, what a pleasure!" said Dorrie, as he took a big puff. "Turkish leaf, by the flavour, and quite excellent, too. What a magnificent scene, Lee! I can hardly imagine that we are prisoners in the hands of these rascals."

The scene certainly was entrancing—a glorious panorama of mountains, many of them tipped with snow, bathed in the soft and white brilliance of the moon. The air was quite still and by no means cold. There had been a great change in the weather conditions during the last twelve hours.

Down below stretched the valleys—great chasms of intense and mysterious blackness. It seemed that they were all cut off from the rest of the world, and the silence was so intense that it could almost be felt.

While Lee and Dorrie were smoking, a Mordanian came up stealthily, with the cat-like tread which was characteristic of his race, and, to the surprise of the prisoners, he commenced speaking in Italian.

They could understand, of course, and were soon chatting with the fellow, who seemed quite amiable and good-natured.

He was by no means a fool, but he was startlingly ignorant of all matters beyond his own country and a region slightly over the border. His knowledge of England was practically nil, and he had never even heard of London. This was surprising enough, and both Lee and Dorrie were slightly amused.

They were even more amused when the Mordanian mentioned that London could not be half so beautiful or half so large as Ludari, the Mordanian capital.

Nelson Lee had never been to Ludari, but he knew that the town could not boast of more than twenty thousand inhabitants at the most, and it certainly had no great buildings or modern methods of travel. For this native to imagine that Ludari was greater than London was certainly strange, and it indicated the state of ignorance of the average mountaineer—for this man had been beyond his own country, and had learned the Italian language. What the others were like, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore could not imagine.

"We might as well pump this fellow," said Dorrie, in English. "Perhaps he can give us some information, old man. Ask him a few questions—why we are prisoners, what our fate is likely to be, and so forth."

"We can certainly try, although I'm afraid we sha'n't meet with much success," replied Lee. "I don't suppose the man will be inclined to talk on that subject."

As Lee had surmised, the man was not disposed to answer any questions, and the replies he did give were vague and uncertain. However, Lee and Dorrie gathered that they were all bound for Ludari, which they would probably reach after another two days' march.

Once there, they would be taken before Kol Palak, and it was a certainty that King Boris and the Crown Prince would be put to death without much delay. They would have been killed at once but for the fact that Palak had given strict instructions that the prisoners were to be brought unharmed to the capital. The rebel chief was determined to see the king and the prince with his own eyes, and to see

them executed. He would then know that the sentence had been carried out effectively. This was the only reason that the royal prisoners were being taken to the capital.

The Italian-speaking Mordanian did not say all this in so many words, but Nelson Lee put two and two together, and did not find much difficulty in arriving at his conclusions.

As for the rest of the captives, they were not likely to be harmed; they would certainly not be shot. It had been recognised that they were English, and, with an eye to the main chance, the brigands had captured the whole crowd, feeling fairly certain that they would profit to a fairly high figure. For Nelson Lee's party would never be allowed to leave Mordania until heavy ransoms had been paid.

Quite apart from this consideration, the Mordanians did not allow strangers within their borders, and capture had been inevitable. Had there been no prospect of ransom, the party would probably have been escorted to the border, and expelled; but Kol Palak's agents recognised that here was a fine chance of obtaining funds.

And so Nelson Lee, Captain Mason, Lord Dorrimore, and the St. Frank's party were all prisoners in the hands of the Tagossa. When they would succeed in getting away was a problem which even Nelson Lee could not solve.

And the famous detective was very thoughtful as he sat out there smoking in the moonlight. He was thinking of the three juniors who had been left behind, and wondering what had happened to them.

And the scene all around him was a quaintly curious one. All was still and quiet, except for the crackling of several camp-fires which had been built not far from the houses. And round these fires lay the brigands, sleeping; others, with rifles handy, were patrolling up and down, keeping guard.

It was a picture which impressed itself on Nelson Lee's mind, and which he remembered for many a long day.

CHAPTER II.

THE MONASTERY OF ST. PETER!

"DEAR old boy, I'm frightfully worried—I am, really!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, in a low voice. "We've been hidin' here for hours, and I'm nearly suffocated, begad! And what about the others? Don't you think it's about time we emerged and made some inquiries?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tommy Watson. "I'm fed up with this game, Nipper. There's no sense in us staying here. We might just as well show ourselves ——"

"If you fellows weren't so impatient, everything would be all right," I broke in. "For the present we are safe, and there's no reason why we should reveal our presence to the monks. We shall be compelled to do so before long."

"Oh, well, you know best, I suppose," said Watson. "We're leaving everything in your hands, and we trust you to see us out of this hole. Anyway, we've had a ripping sleep, and I'm as hungry as a hunter."

To tell the truth, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and myself were in a very curious position. We were crouching beneath a great pile of blankets—quite cosy and comfortable, and concealed from view.

We had not long been awake, and I noticed we had slept for perhaps ten or twelve hours. Weary and tired after long travel and hardship, we had been utterly worn out, and nature would not be denied.

Personally, I had not intended to sleep; I had been fully determined to set off in pursuit of the men who had captured Nelson Lee and the rest of our companions. But, in spite of all my resolutions, I dropped off into deep slumber.

Those blankets were very comfortable and very warm, and we had not been disturbed. And now we were talking and discussing the position.

The position was a remarkable one.

We were in a huge, bare apartment, where there were many rough beds, with piles of blankets thrown into disorderly heaps upon the floor. It was beneath one of these heaps that we had sought shelter. Concealed in this way, we had eluded capture when the Tagossa had attacked the monastery.

The guv'nor and all the others had been carried off, but my chums and I had remained free; not even the monks knew that we had been left behind.

And, after all, our escape had only come about by chance. It had happened that I forgot my revolver during the height of the excitement, and I rushed up into the big bedchamber, in

order to obtain the weapon. Tommy and Montie had accompanied me. And while we were absent, the Tagossa men had broken through the barricades and had taken the others prisoners.

But we, being upstairs, were not included in the number. And as we had escaped so far, I thought it just possible that we might be able to remain undiscovered, and so, on the off chance, we had concealed ourselves beneath the blankets. The trick had worked, and now, after a long sleep, we were feeling refreshed, hungry and ready for almost anything.

"By Jove, we've had some queer adventures!" I said, as I shifted the blankets slightly, in order to admit an added supply of fresh air. "Luck is with us, my sons; but what on earth has happened to the guv'nor and the others is more than I can imagine."

"They—they might have been killed!" said Watson nervously.

"Not likely!" I replied. "If the Tagossa meant to kill everybody they wouldn't have taken the trouble to take them prisoners. You can bet all you've got, my children, that these rotters are out for profit, and as long as they think they can get it they'll stick tight to the guv'nor and the whole crowd, and they won't do them any harm, either. I'm not so certain about the king and Prince Paul. Poor chaps! They're probably dead by this time."

"What an appallin' country to live in!" said Sir Montie. "I certainly shouldn't advise anybody to come to Mordania for a rest cure, begad! But to come back to our personal matters, Nipper, old boy. What are we goin' to do?"

I considered for a moment.

"Well, that's rather a difficult question to answer," I said slowly. "What are we going to do? Now, let's just go over all the facts. It isn't very many days since we left England, and I think we've had about the most amazing adventures that could befall anybody. When you come to look over them, they seem too far-fetched to be true."

"But they are true, you ass!" said Watson. "I'll admit that I've suspected myself of dreaming two or three times; but there's no dream in this. We're in the monastery of St. Peter, and all the other members of our party have been carried off by the brigands."

"If it didn't seem frightfully cowardly. I'd suggest making for the frontier, and gettin' across into friendly territory," suggested Sir Montie. "We should be safe enough then, and we might be able to get help. Perhaps the British Government would take a hand, and send a big force into Mordania to rescue the others."

"Well, that's not a bad idea, but it's got one defect," I said. "It's absolutely impracticable."

"I was afraid somethin' like that would crop up," said Sir Montie.

"In the first place, we should never reach the border," I said. "In the second place, it would take us months to make the British Government pay any attention, and when the Government did get busy, they would waste a year or two before sending any expedition. No, Montie; we've only got ourselves to rely upon. If anybody is to help Mr. Lee and the rest—well, we've go to do it."

"Yes, but how?" asked Tommy Watson.

"That's a question that circumstances will have to answer," I said. "We can't even form a guess at what course we can take. I suppose luck will have a great deal to do with it."

"And to think that only a month or two ago we were in Suffolk, at Dorrimore Hall!" said Tommy Watson, with a sigh.

"Eh? A month or two?" I repeated. "Why, you ass, we were at Dorrimore Hall only a few days since!"

"Great Scott! It seems like months!" said Watson.

"There's no need for me to go into all the details—you know them!" I went on. "First, the airship and the smash; then we were carried right across Europe, thousands of feet in the air, helpless and at the mercy of the wind. After all sorts of adventures we were deposited safely into the Adriatic, where we were fortunate enough to get on board a deserted schooner."

"Yes, and we found Prince Paul of Mordania on board—quite dotty!" put in Tommy Watson. "But that wasn't startling enough—we had to run into a terrific gale, and be wrecked on the coast of Mordania. After that, we arrived at this monastery, where we found King Boris himself."

"Begad, it sounds like a fairy tale!" said Tregellis-West.

"And yet everything happened so

naturally," I said. "Luck was with us to start with, but it played us a scurvy trick when it wrecked the schooner on the Mordanian coast, because we've been flung into a furnace of trouble."

"But wasn't it queer to find the king in this place?" asked Watson. "And wasn't it queer that Prince Paul should recover his senses?"

"I don't see anything strange in that," I said. "He had been driven dotty by some great shock, and the meeting with his father restored his brain to its normal condition. Cases of that sort are happening every day. The prince wasn't really out of his mind—it was only a temporary business."

"Well, there's no need for us to jaw about this for hours on end," said Watson. "What's the best thing we can do now? What course can we take?"

I flung the blankets aside.

"Well, to begin with, we're going to show ourselves to the good Father Dmitri, and we'll get some grub. After that we'll make a few inquiries, and then set out for Ludari."

"Ludari?"

"The capital," I explained. "At the present moment it is in the hands of Kol Palak, the revolutionary leader—the chief of the Tagossa. It's practically certain that all the other members of our party are being taken to Ludari, and we're going to do our best to rescue them."

"But we shall never find our way through the mountains, old boy," protested Montie.

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said; "but we can try!"

Our first object, however, was to reveal our presence to the monks. I thought it rather strange that our hosts had not come up to the bedchamber, in order to set matters straight.

But then I remembered that the Tagossa had blown down the main door and the rear door of the monastery. High explosive had been used, and considerable wreckage had been caused. No doubt the monks were working overtime to repair the damage before nightfall came.

And this proved to be the case.

We descended the cold stone staircase to the great hall below, and we found nobody. In the distance, however, we could hear the sounds of hammering, and I knew that my surmise was correct. The monastery itself was in a very peculiar position, being perched on a mountain top, in a most inaccessible position. On all sides were the cold grey rocks, bare and grim, with no grass or any other sign of vegetation. It was one of the most desolate places one could imagine.

We walked forward through the hall until we came to the wide entrance, and there we saw two dozen of the monks working hard with primitive tools, constructing a new door, and repairing the damage to the thick walls.

We were seen at once, and there was a good deal of excitement. The monks came crowding round us, talking together in Italian, and expressing many signs of surprise.

I knew a bit about Italian, although I could not speak the language easily. I could just make myself understood. Nelson Lee and I had travelled in Italy on two or three occasions, and the knowledge of the language was now standing me in good stead.

Father Dmitri himself soon came on the scene.

"But this is astounding!" he exclaimed—in Italian, of course. "How is it that you boys have escaped? I thought you had all been captured by the accursed Tagossa!"

With considerable difficulty I explained the position to the good father, and, after much perseverance, he comprehended my meaning. And the more I spoke, the better became my understanding of Italian, for I was remembering many words which I had forgotten, and I was able to express myself in a more understandable way.

We were supplied with food at once—as much as we desired. And then I asked Father Dmitri what had happened to the others.

"Ah, my son, that is a difficult question for me to answer," he said. "We only know that your friends have been taken away. Heaven is to be praised for the fact that there was no bloodshed within these holy walls, and that we have been left in peace. But I am sorely troubled over the whole matter."

"I thought at first that those brigands meant to murder everybody in the place," I said. "They are awful scoundrels, Father Dmitri, and I can't quite understand why they spared you all."

The old monk shook his head.

"Ah, my young friend, you do not

understand these mountain people," he said. "They have their enemies, and they have their peculiar ways; but, although they are lawless, and although they know no fear, they do not shed blood unnecessarily. And, unless they are mad with drink, they always respect a holy house such as this. They came here to fetch his majesty the king, and, having found him, they departed at once."

"And took Mr. Lee and everybody else as well," I said. "Why did they do that, Father Dmitri? They have no grudge against the English people."

Father Dmitri smiled.

"No grudge, I will agree," he said. "But these mountain folk are always ready to place money into their pockets, for they value gold in the same way as foreign people, and, no doubt, they believe that your friends will pay well to be given their liberty. That is why they were carried off."

"You don't think the Tagossa will kill them?"

"No, I do not fear that," said the old monk. "I think your friends are perfectly safe, but, of course, they will suffer many hardships ere they find themselves across the border."

It will be understood, of course, that this conversation was not carried out exactly as I have set it down. We were speaking in Italian, and I made rather a hash of it, I believe; but Father Dmitri and I managed to make ourselves understood, and we were able to discuss the whole situation. But it would be practically impossible for me to set down the conversation as it took place.

"I didn't see any reason why we should be taken as well," I went on; "that's why I hid with my two friends here. I thought we might be able to be of some use—that we might even rescue our friends from the hands of the Tagossa."

Father Dmitri's wrinkled old face became very grave.

"My boy—my boy, what are you saying?" he exclaimed. "You think it possible that you can rescue your friends from the Tagossa? Impossible—quite impossible! It would be madness itself to make any such attempt."

"But we can't stay here—idle!" I protested. "We must do something, Father Dmitri! You know which way they went, don't you?"

"Yes; into the mountains—towards Ludari, the capital."

"Then we can follow," I said briskly. "We can follow, and lend a hand if there is any trouble."

The old man laid his hand upon my shoulders.

"Get all such ideas out of your head," he said. "I do not like to discourage you, but you must understand that such a proposition as you are outlining is positively out of the question. You would lose yourselves in the mountain fastnesses, and you would wander about until you starved. There is no trail—no track—nothing whatever to guide you on your way. These mountain men know every inch of these hills, and they need no guide. But for you to attempt such a journey would be equal to committing suicide. I would not even permit you to take your departure. No, my young friend, you must remain here."

"Yes, but for how long?" I asked impatiently.

"I can give you no answer to that question," replied Father Dmitri. "You many be compelled to remain in the monastery for many months; but you may be sure that you will be well cared for during your stay. At the present moment Mordania is in a terribly unsettled condition, and there is no knowing what might happen from one day to another. In any case, you must remain."

I was greatly disappointed, and I said so. I had been hoping that we might be able to go on the trail of the brigands; but Father Dmitri showed me quite plainly how impossible such a project was. With a guide, we might have risked the venture, but, just by ourselves, it would be futile.

"What on earth have you been jabbering about all this time?" asked Tommy Watson, when I turned away from Father Dmitri. "You might let us know all about it."

"I have an idea that we are not going to hear anythin' particularly cheerful," said Sir Montie. "I have been watchin' your face, Nipper, old boy, and just now you looked shockin'ly upset—you did, really!"

"And I feel upset, too!" I declared. "You see, Montie, I've been asking the old gentleman a few questions. He reckons that all the other chaps, and

Nelson Lee and the rest, are being carted off to Ludari, the capital."

"That's what you figured out," put in Tommy Watson.

"Exactly," I said. "Father Dmitri doesn't think that they're likely to come to any harm, although he's afraid that King Boris and the Crown Prince are doomed. I suggested going after them, but the old chap wouldn't hear of it."

"Why not?"

"Because there wouldn't be any chance of us succeeding," I replied. "Father Dmitri reckons that we should get lost in the mountains, and die of exposure or starvation. And he also reckons that we should be wiped up in no time by the Tagossa. The only thing we can do is to stay here until we hear some news."

"Begad! But we may have to stay for weeks!" protested Sir Montie.

I nodded gloomily.

"That's just it. But what can we do?" I said. "We can't go wandering about these mountains. And Father Dmitri's quite right—we should get lost in next to no time. I realise that the whole idea is hopeless, unless we can find a guide."

"Well, why not?" asked Watson eagerly.

"Oh, a ripping idea. But where's the guide coming from?" I said. "The only people in this monastery are monks, and I can't quite picture one of them taking us into the mountains. No, my sons, we've got to stay here and twiddle our thumbs until something turns up."

It was not an alluring prospect, but it was the only thing to decide upon. As it happened, however, our stay at the monastery was not to be so long as we had feared, for something occurred which put a different complexion on matters.

It was now getting towards evening, and the monks were still engaged upon repairing the damage to the huge main door. They wanted everything to be secure for the night. And, feeling rather depressed, and certainly very worried, we stood watching, taking a mild interest in the proceedings. We had offered to help, but the monks said that our aid was not necessary.

I was not thinking of my surroundings as I stood there. I was wondering what was happening to Nelson Lee and Dorrie—to Handforth and Co., and Pitt, and Fatty Little. Where were they? What were they doing? How were they faring in the hands of the Tagossa?

The more I thought about the matter, the more irritable I became. I wanted to be off in pursuit; I wanted to be in the swim of things. And here we were, stuck in this monastery, unable to lift a finger. It was galling to a degree.

"I wish to goodness we hadn't hidden during the night," I said grimly. "It would have been much better to be with the rest of them, and to share their perils. But I thought we might be able to lend a hand if we stayed behind and avoided capture."

"Dear old chap, we acted for the best," said Sir Montie. "It's no good regrettin' anythin', and it's quite absurd to get wild. We must make the best of things, and trust that matters will right themselves."

"Hallo!" said Watson suddenly. "There's somebody coming up the hill—not one of these monks, either!"

We looked down the steep, rocky slope, and watched the approach of the stranger with interest. He was leading three heavily laden mules, and when he came to close quarters we saw that he was a rough-looking customer.

He was a big, powerful man, attired in the same tightly fitting woollen trousers, the curious furry bolero, and the same skull cap as the other Mordanians we had seen. At a glance I could see that he was a mountaineer, and, in his curious hide shoes, he walked with that stealthy, silent tread characteristic of his tribe.

His face was deeply sunburned and weather-beaten, and he affected a large black moustache which half covered his face. Great bushy eyebrows adorned his forehead, and, taking it altogether, he looked an extremely desperate character.

But appearances are deceptive in Mordania. The man proved to be merely a peaceful, harmless trader, who had brought up the regular weekly supplies to the monastery. He seemed considerably astonished to see the monks working at the great new door, and he was open-eyed with amazement when he noted that the walls in the immediate vicinity of the doorway were chipped and cracked and scarred.

When he spoke, he used Italian, and this was not at all surprising. Dealing constantly with the monks, he had

clearly picked up the language, and found it most useful to him when visiting the monastery. With many gesticulations, he made inquiries concerning the damage, and the monks did not hesitate to tell him exactly what had occurred.

"Ah, the accursed Tagossa!" said the mountaineer fiercely. "So it has come to this! Were it possible, I would strike every one of them dead, including Kol Palak himself, for he is the man who will bring about the ruin and degradation of all Mordania! May a thousand curses be rained upon his head!"

"This chap's a pal!" I said to my chums.

"Why, he looks worse than all the rest of them put together!" exclaimed Watson. "Just look at his eyes blazing!"

"Dear old boy, he's a frightful scoundrel!" said Sir Montie.

"You asses!" I put in. "He's raining curses down upon Kol Palak and the Tagossa. He's not one of that bunch at all."

"That may be his policy," said Watson suspiciously.

But I was listening to the mountaineer again. He had evidently been told that the king and the prince had sought refuge at the monastery, and that they had been taken by the Tagossa. For there was now no reason why the truth should not be revealed; it was a secret no longer.

"Ah, but this is terrible news indeed!" said the newcomer. "His majesty the king and our beloved Crown Prince—and they have been captured by the Tagossa! What dog's luck is this, that they should be tracked down? They will be killed; they will be done to death. Ah, good Father Dmitri, I am sad!"

There was not the slightest doubt that the fellow was really affected. The news upset him more than he could express. I soon discovered that his name was Nepoli, and that he was a peaceful man of the lower hills, who had brought supplies regularly to the monastery during the past ten years—indeed, he practically earned his living by this work.

He proceeded to unload all manner of merchandise—flour, butter, eggs, and many other articles of like nature. It was quite surprising what an enormous amount those three mules had carried.

Nepoli had displayed much interest in us, and, after regarding us intently for a time, he put some questions to the monks. He was evidently told what had occurred, for presently he came forward, bowed low, and addressed us.

"I am indeed sorry, my young masters, that you are in such sore trouble," he said gravely. "I understand that your companions have been taken by the bloodthirsty Tagossa. A thousand maledictions be upon them! Were I in a position to help, I would gladly give you my services, for I hate the Tagossa as a man hates poison!"

"What's he jawing about?" asked Watson curiously.

"I'll tell you soon, old man; don't interrupt," I said, turning to Nepoli. "Thank you for your sympathy," I went on, in my best Italian. "I had hoped that we might be able to go on the track of my friends, but Father Dmitri says it's impossible."

The mountaineer stared.

"But you have a wonderful courage, my young master!" he said admiringly. "You would go on the track of the Tagossa? A thousand blessings! What a fine spirit you have! But you would get lost in the passes; you would never succeed in your object."

"That's what Father Dmitri says," I exclaimed; "but if we could find a guide, I'd be off in no time. If they're in danger, there's no reason why we shouldn't be in danger; and it's just possible that we might be able to turn the tables. There's the king, too. Unless we do something pretty quick, he'll be put to death."

"Ah, I fear that you are right," said Nepoli sadly. "I know the mountains well; I am acquainted with every inch of the track from here to Ludari itself. But it would be madness to go into the region of danger; we could not hope to elude the Tagossa. They watch; they have men lying in ambush, waiting."

I looked at Nepoli eagerly.

"You say you know the road—you could act as guide?" I asked. "Then you could help us!"

"Ah, I could; but of what use would it be?" asked the man, shaking his head. "For myself I do not care; a shot, perhaps, and I die. What matters? One day it must come; sooner or later I shall leave this world. But for you, my

young masters, it is different. You are not of this troublesome country, and it is not right that you should suffer dangers——"

"You needn't think about that," I interrupted. "We've been in danger before now, Nepoli. And if there's the slightest chance of helping the king—why, we'll go. I'd rather do anything than stick here, ignorant of all that is happening, filled with doubt and anxiety. It is a chance—why not take it? Help us, and you will not regret it. Act as our guide, and we will do everything in our power to turn the tables on these infernal Tagossa men. What do you say, Nepoli?"

The man's eyes were glittering.

"A fine example, my young friend!" he exclaimed, thrusting out his hand. "Yes, I will help you! Together we will go into the mountains; together we will see if we cannot bring some aid to those who are at present captives."

"Good man!" I said heartily. "It's a go!"

But although I spoke the last few words in English, Nepoli understood exactly what I meant.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRIGAND CHIEF!

THE men of the Tagossa were active at daybreak, and the whole party started out after a rough but satisfying meal.

As before, Nelson Lee and the other members of the party were marched along with their captors in front, at the rear—and, indeed, entirely surrounding the party. Any attempt to escape would have been quite hopeless.

Handforth was more aggressive than ever, and he was constantly threatening to "go for" somebody. But Church and McClure held him back, and did their utmost to avoid trouble. They knew only too well what to expect if Handforth tried any of his tricks with these fierce Mordanians.

"Well, if you're content standing it, I'm not!" said Handforth grimly. "Do you think I'm going to be kept a prisoner by these—these beastly freaks? I won't stand another twelve hours of it!"

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" said Church. "We've got to stand it. We're helpless, and there's no sense in pretending that we can fib."

Handforth snorted.

"Do you think I'm afraid?" he sneered. "Afraid of these comic-opera fatheads? Not likely! And to-night, when everything's quiet, I mean to break away. I shall creep out of the camp, and escape."

"That'll be a fat lot of good, won't it?" said McClure. "And what do you suppose you're going to do after you've broken away?"

"I shall go and fetch help, of course."

"That's awfully interesting," said Church. "Help? Where from?"

Handforth glared.

"Oh, from anywhere," he replied vaguely. "What a chap you are for asking silly questions! What does it matter where help comes from as long as I get it?"

Church sighed.

"But, my dear, good chap, what's the good of deceiving yourself like that?" he asked. "You know as well as I do that we can't get help at all. If you broke away from the camp, you'd simply wander in the mountains until you starved, or until you were recaptured, or shot at sight! The only thing we can do is to rely upon Mr. Lee."

"The others can rely on Mr. Lee," said Handforth. "We're separate; we'll look after ourselves. Or, to be more exact, you chaps can trust me to see that everything is all serene. Put your faith in me, and I won't let you down."

"Oh, yes!" said Church. "We shall come to a pretty pass if we do that! You'd better get all those dotty ideas out of your head——"

"Dotty ideas!" snapped Handforth. "Why, you ass, I'll punch your nose if you say that again! The fact is, you're jealous; you don't like to admit that I'm capable of getting us out of this hole!"

Church was rather fed up, and he did not hesitate to show it.

"I'll say it as often as you like!" he exclaimed. "Your ideas are dotty, and if we were to rely upon you, Handy, we should remain in Mordania for the rest of our lives. You may be all right in the Remove, but here, among these people, you're about as much use as a frog!"

Handforth stopped dead in his tracks.

"Did you call me a frog?" he roared.

"Yes; and anything else you like!" retorted Church tartly.

Handforth nearly choked.

"All right; you asked for it!" he said. "Take it!"

Biff!

Before Church could dodge, Handforth's big fist went crashing upon his nose. Church went flying backwards, incidentally bowling two other juniors over in his progress. There was hopeless confusion for the moment.

"Steady on, you fatheads!" said Pitt sharply. "What's the row?"

"He called me a frog!" roared Handforth. "I'm not going to stand that, and—— Hie! Leggo! Oh, great pip!"

Handforth found himself in the grasp of a fierce-looking mountaineer. The man gave Edward Oswald a shove which sent him flying, and accompanied the action by a series of incomprehensible ejaculations which sounded rather awful.

"Steady on, you chaps; you'll cause a lot of trouble if you go on like this," said De Valerie sharply. "It's a pity you can't keep from quarrelling out here—thousands of miles from Study D!"

They started off again, but Handforth was rather subdued. He had received an indication that it would not be wise to act too aggressively. And now Pitt and De Valerie came forward, and marched on either side of Edward Oswald. Church and McClure fell into the rear. It was better that they should be separated.

"Goodness knows what will happen to us in the end, and I expect we shall find quite enough trouble without looking for more," said Pitt. "Just think of it, you chaps! Here we are, in the hands of brigands, being marched into the awful lair. It's hardly possible to realise that it's actually happening!"

"I can realise it all right," said Fatty Little plaintively. "It's the worst time I've ever spent in all my life! I'm getting as thin as a rake, and before long I shall pine away to a shadow!"

"Well, it'll be a pretty substantial shadow, I'll bet," said De Valerie. "After all, Fatty, you haven't had much to grumble at——"

"Not much to grumble at!" repeated Fatty indignantly. "Great doughnuts! They're starving me!"

"Well, you only have about twice as much to eat as anybody else," said Pitt. "I'm surprised that these men give it to you, Fatty. But I suppose they instinctively know that you need more than we do. I'll admit the grub isn't particularly good; we should call it poison in England. But when a chap's hungry he'll eat anything."

This was true enough. Under ordinary circumstances, the juniors would not have looked at the food which had been supplied them. They would have rejected it with scorn. But, being healthy juniors, and as there was nothing else to eat, they were compelled to partake of the sour, mouldy black bread and the roughly prepared stews which seemed to provide the chief item of food.

And now they were marching on further into the mountains—into the very heart of Mordania. When their journey would end they did not know; they only vaguely guessed that Ludari was some way in the distance ahead.

And when they arrived there?

What would happen then? How would they be able to escape? Their position would be even more hopeless than it had ever been before, for they would be completely cut off from the outside world.

The prospect was by no means inviting.

As long as Ludari was held by the revolutionaries, events in Mordania would be wild and dangerous. And, once in the rebel capital—once within Kol Palak's stronghold—it might be months before Nelson Lee's party found itself at liberty, and during all this time they would be unable to communicate with relatives in England.

The more the juniors thought of the whole question, the more depressed they became, and they walked on almost sullenly, with set faces, and without cheer. It was a gloomy, silent gathering indeed.

Lord Dorrimore, however, appeared to be in his usual spirits. He laughed, he cracked jokes, and he was just his usual good-natured self. It took a tremendous lot to subdue Lord Dorrimore; he always made the best of everything.

"I look at the bright side," he declared. "We've come through all sorts of hair-raisin' adventures, and things might be a lot worse than they are. We're safe, we're all healthy, and it seems that these Tagossa fellows don't

mean to harm us. Personally, I'm findin' the experience rather enjoyable."

"I wish I could share your feelings, old man," said Nelson Lee.

"But it's a new adventure—somethin' quite fresh," said Dorrie. "I've been among cannibals and savages of all types. I've travelled in hot countries and cold countries. But, by gad, this fairly takes the biscuit! It's the queerest adventure I've ever encountered, an' I'm fairly revelling in it."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're rather untruthful, Dorrie," he smiled. "But it always was your way to make the best of things, and I admire your spirit. Were you and I just alone, I could enjoy the experience, perhaps. But I'm thinking of the boys, and I do not mind confessing that I'm worried more than I would like to say."

"Yes, there's that," admitted Dorrie. "I'm worried, too; but just now I was speaking personally. Can't we do somethin', old man? Can we spring a surprise on those infernal chaps? Hang it all, we've been in tighter corners than this, and——"

"It's no good, Dorrie," interrupted Lee. "We can't do anything unless an opportunity arrives. We must keep our eyes open, and our wits about us. Then, if luck favours us, we might be able to seize upon a chance to get free. But it's a very remote possibility, and I don't for a moment suppose that we shall have any such luck. And if these people demand heavy ransoms, we must be tame—we must knuckle under, and pay."

"It goes against the grain, but I suppose you're right," said Dorrie.

"I know I am right," went on Nelson Lee. "I know these people perhaps better than you do, Dorrie. They have only one way of answering refusals—and that is to shoot their captives. If they cannot get what they demand, they do not allow their prisoners to go free. So we must be very careful in all our actions."

They marched on, and then, as the sun was climbing higher in the sky, Nelson Lee noticed that something unusual was afoot. The leaders of the party had come to a halt, and were staring intently down into a wide, rocky valley. And before long it was apparent that a small body of men had attracted their attention.

These men—ten or twelve in number—were apparently in a hurry. Four revolver shots rang out in the distance, and these were answered at once. They were evidently a signal.

And then, before long, the two parties met. The men from the opposite direction were obviously members of the Tagossa, and they looked very much like the other Mordanians—if anything, even more fierce and bloodthirsty.

It was clear that they had been travelling hard, and that they were excited over something, for, without any delay, they commenced talking rapidly, making all sorts of gesticulations to emphasise their remarks.

The listeners uttered ejaculations, too—startled cries—and they looked at one another with every appearance of consternation. Prince Paul, who had been listening intently, turned eagerly to Nelson Lee and Dorrie.

"You can understand?" he asked, in good English.

"Not a bally word!" replied Dorrie. "Can you?"

"Yes—yes!" said the Crown Prince. "It is not surprising that I should know my own language, eh? Unfortunately, these scoundrels are too far distant for me to hear all. But I have gathered much, and I am filled with joy."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "Some good news at last, then?"

"Apparently, yes," replied Prince Paul. "By what I can understand, there have been great and wonderful events in Ludari. My father's supporters and friends have made a great rally, and have seized the capital!"

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee keenly.

"Capital?" added Dorrie, unable to resist the opportunity. "By gad! What can it mean? Are we goin' to be rescued, or what——"

"It is too early to think of such things at the moment," said the prince, with gleaming eyes. "Yes, the capital has fallen into the hands of our own friends, the supporters of my father. Kol Palak has been compelled to flee, and he is now in the mountains once again—in his stronghold, high in the hills."

"Well, this is unexpected, at all events," remarked Lee. "Whether it will lead to anything good remains to

be seen. It is certainly a point in our favour. The brigand chief's plans have apparently not been working on oiled wheels. Like other revolutionary leaders, he encounters a snag now and again."

"Yes, and one of these snags will trip him up before long!" said Prince Paul grimly. "Already it is clear that the royalists have gained the upper hand in Ludari. It may only be a brief success; but one never knows. And who can tell? Before many more days have elapsed, my father may be back on his throne."

Nelson Lee remained silent. He did not wish to dampen the enthusiasm of the prince, but, privately, Lee was not very hopeful that any such happy event would come to pass. It would be too good to be true.

King Boris had been listening to the conversation of the Tagossa men, too, and he knew all the facts. And the king further gathered that Kol Palak was preparing a great attack upon the capital.

The chief of the Tagossa did not mean this reverse to bear any real fruit. Before the royalists could even celebrate their victory, they would be swooped upon, and once more Ludari would be rescued from their grip. And the next time there would be no question—the capital would remain in the hands of the Tagossa.

It appeared that the disaster had taken place because of the carelessness on the part of Kol Palak's men. They had taken it for granted that the royalists were beaten and could never make any organised rally.

Then, in the night, the king's men had swooped down from the surrounding hills. And, after a brief and murderous fight, the Tagossa had been thrown out, and Kol Palak himself had only just managed to escape capture and death.

That the whole affair was a disaster was proved by the looks of consternation which passed freely between the Mordanians; but at length, after a long continuation of the talking, the journey was resumed.

It was now obvious, however, that the direction was altered. The party was no longer proceeding towards the capital, since that would be running right into the enemy's hands. They were off for Kol Palak's stronghold.

They were bound for the brigand's lair in the mountains.

The juniors, when the march was resumed, had much to talk about. Word had been passed down to them from Lord Dorrimore and Captain Mason, and two of the officers of the ill-fated airship. All the prisoners, in fact, were animatedly discussing this latest piece of news.

"The capital retaken, eh?" said Pitt. "That looks a bit lively, my sons, and it certainly makes me feel a bit more cheerful. What do you fellows say?"

"Rather!" exclaimed De Valerie. "Why, it may mean the saving of us all. We don't know all the facts, and it's quite possible that the royalists are a much stronger force than these Tagossa men care to say. And it's even on the cards that King Boris's men will make a swoop on the mountain stronghold of Kol Palak. In that case, we shall all be rescued, and everything in the garden will be lovely!"

Pitt shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's rather too rosy, old man," he said. "We can't hope for anything so good as that; but, taking everything all together, I think our position is improved. For one thing, this brigand chief won't have much time to deal with us."

"What does that matter?" demanded Handforth. "How long does it take to sentence a chap to death? Just one word or two, and it's all over."

"Well, of course, that's one way of looking at it," said Pitt; "but I don't think that Kol Palak will pass sentence so quickly as all that, Handy. He'll be so full of worry and work, making plans for the recapture of the capital, that he won't have time to deal with us at all: and during the interval we might find an opportunity to escape."

Handforth nodded.

"If there's any chance of escaping, you can leave it to me," he said. "I shall keep my eyes well open, and I'll be on the alert the whole time. If there's only a ghost of a chance, I shall take advantage of it, and I'll lead the way out into safety."

All the other juniors grinned.

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Pitt. "You're the man for us!"

"I don't think!" muttered Church.

"Eh?" said Handforth, turning his head sharply.

And then we commenced slipping and sliding, shooting downwards with ever-increasing speed. Down we went right into the mountain, and with no knowledge of what was to be our fate.

"Oh, nothing—nothing at all!" ejaculated Church hurriedly.

"Well, don't mumble to yourself!" snapped Handforth. "Just you wait until we get to the brigands' lair, and then you'll see things. Mark my words, it won't take me long to get busy!"

The journey was tedious and trying before it came to an end. The day wore on, and the prisoners were footsore and weary; but no halt was called, no food was given to them, and not a drop of anything to drink. They were thirsty, hungry, and bodily worn out.

And at last, when the evening was with them, they made their way round a rough, picturesque mountain path. The rocks were rough and rugged, rising in great boulders on both sides of the path. Mountain peaks stretched up away to the right, whilst on the left lay deep gulleys and clefts. Any army penetrating into these mountains would stand no chance whatever, for only a comparatively small body of men, fully armed and with plenty of ammunition, could keep a gigantic horde at bay.

There was not much likelihood of the royalists penetrating into the mountains. They knew this country as well as the Tagossa men themselves, and they would never dare to venture into the hills.

And at last, when all the prisoners were beginning to feel that life was hardly worth living, the journey came to an end. They came within sight of a small party of men who were standing in front of a great cliff of rock.

There was no sign whatever of any human habitation; everything was bare and grim. It seemed impossible, indeed, that any human being could live up here in this wild and desolate region.

Shots were exchanged, as before—obviously a signal. And the whole party moved up, and came to a halt just near the cliff face, on a kind of ledge of rock. Nelson Lee and his party were halted, and made to stand together in one big group, with several guards standing about, with their rifles ready for action, if necessary. Meanwhile, the leaders of the brigand band walked forward, and conferred with the other men. It was not a very long conversation, for presently two men turned, and disappeared into the face of the rock.

At least, so it appeared.

Actually, they went into a kind of cleft, almost hidden by the nature of the rocks themselves. Nelson Lee was watching them closely, and he came to the conclusion that this was the entrance to Kol Palak's stronghold. Hidden behind these rocks there was probably a vast habitation, where hundreds and hundreds of men could be accommodated—where there were arms and ammunition in plenty, and immense stores of food.

The captives were not obliged to wait for long. Within about ten minutes the two men returned, and with them came another man—one who had not been seen before. It was obvious at the first glance that this man was different from the others.

He was dressed in a most gorgeous way. His clothing was highly coloured, and appeared to be brand new, covered with gold lace and other ornamentations. He was literally smothered with revolvers and ammunition. He was fully six foot six in height, and proportionately broad—a magnificent specimen of humanity, so far as figure went. But his face was cruel and harsh; his eyes were small and black, and terribly piercing. A huge moustache adorned his upper lip, and his chin was clean-shaven. His lips were thick, and when he opened his mouth he revealed two rows of perfect teeth. This man, Nelson Lee had no doubt, was Kol Palak himself.

And such proved to be the case.

He commenced speaking rapidly in a tongue which was quite unknown to the juniors; it was, in fact, the Mordanian language. He addressed King Boris and the Crown Prince. And Nelson Lee could tell by his tone that his words were by no means amiable. He concluded with a sneering smile on his lips.

The two royal visitors did not reply verbally; they merely bowed. And it was not difficult for Nelson Lee to guess that Kol Palak had passed sentence upon them. It was not their place to argue.

The rebel chief turned to Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the others.

"I must request, gentlemen, that you exercise patience," he said, now speaking in Italian. "You will consider yourselves my prisoners, but you will be well cared for during your stay in my care. Later, I will tell you why you have been brought here, and what I intend doing."

"I think I am correct in assuming that you are Kol Palak?" asked Nelson Lee curtly.

"Yes, that is my name."

"How you treat your own countrymen is no concern of mine," said Lee. "But I am British, and my companions are British. And you know quite well, Palak, that you have no authority to detain us. As a British subject I demand that we shall be granted a safe escort to the frontier——"

"Insolent dog!" interrupted Kol Palak sharply. "You are here, in my mountains, and I shall treat you as I wish. If you choose to be aggressive, it will be the worse for you and for your young companions. You do not seem to realise that the Tagossa is all-powerful, and that my word must be obeyed. You will now be escorted to your quarters, and I will deal with you at some future time."

And without another word the rebel chief turned on his heel and disappeared from view behind the cleft in the rocks. All the juniors looked at Nelson Lee inquiringly, but the famous schoolmaster-detective shook his head.

"I am afraid I have nothing very cheerful to tell you, boys," he said. "The man you just saw was Kol Palak himself, and it is his intention to keep us captives until he chooses to give us our freedom. Of course it is obvious that Palak's intention is to extort money either from us or from your relatives in England. It is quite useless to argue or to grumble. We must be thankful that we are safe and well, and that we are to be well cared for—Palak has promised that, at all events.

"But how about communicating with our people, sir?" asked Pitt. "How are we going to let our parents know that we are safe?"

"We want to write home, sir!"

"Rather!"

"We want to tell everybody that we're still alive!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am afraid we cannot expect this man to grant us such facilities," he said. "It was not difficult for me to understand that Palak is very hurried at the moment; he has much to concern him regarding the recent activities of the enemy—that is, the royalist party. He is devoting all his energies to his present campaign, and he regards us as of secondary importance. Therefore he has brushed us aside, as it were, and we must languish in captivity until it pleases Palak to give us full attention."

"The awful rotter!" said Handforth indignantly. "If he comes out here again, I'll punch his nose!"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"I can quite believe, Handforth, that you are capable of carrying out that threat," he said. "You are a very impulsive young man, and it is not one of your habits to consider matters before acting."

"But he deserves a jolly good punch, sir," said Handforth stubbornly.

"Quite possibly," agreed Lee, with a slight smile. "But it would be very bad policy on your part, Handforth, to give Palak what he deserves. I can assure you that the results would be disastrous—not only for you, but for all of us. You would certainly be shot, and——"

"Shot?" repeated Handforth. "Shot, for punching a chap on the nose?"

"Without a doubt," said Lee grimly. "It would be a deadly insult to Palak, and he would not hesitate to take drastic revenge. So you must be very careful, my boy, and keep your fists under full control. These mountaineers are not like schoolboys at St. Frank's, and you must get that fact firmly fixed in your mind."

Handforth scratched his head.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he ejaculated. "Shot, for punching a fellow on the nose! I say, you chaps, I wonder if Mr. Lee was spoofing me?" he added, turning to the other juniors.

"Of course he wasn't, you ass!" said Pitt. "We've warned you about the same thing. The fact is, Handy, you've got no brains; you can't seem to fit yourself in with these new surroundings. When you live in Rome, you've got to do as the Romans do."

Handforth glared.

"But we ain't in Rome, you fathead!" he snorted. "We're in Mordania, and Rome's in Spain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm afraid your geography needs touching up, old son," grinned De Valerie. "You may be right, of course, but I always thought that Rome was in Italy."

"Oh, rats!" snapped Handforth. "What's Rome got to do with it, anyhow? It's just like that ass of a Pitt to talk rot of that sort! And if any of

these brigands play any tricks with me, I'll show them the shape of my fists!"

But the other juniors had already decided what to do with Edward Oswald Handforth. They would guard him closely, and at the first sign of aggression on his part they would effectively smother him. It would have given them great pleasure to see Kol Palak receive one of Handforth's famous punches, but it was altogether too risky a proceeding. It couldn't be allowed.

The prisoners were formed up into single file, and then escorted into the mysterious stronghold. They went in one by one, through what appeared to be a tiny opening in the cliff, but which presently resolved itself into a wide passage, with a high, domed roof. Curious torches were burning at intervals, lighting the place in a flickering, weird kind of way.

There was no telling how many members of the Tagossa there were in this place. After a very short distance a great open space was reached—a kind of wide cavern, with many tunnels leading out of it. The whole mountain, in fact, seemed to be honeycombed with passages and caverns.

Finally, the party was escorted into a low-roofed cave, which was pitchy dark within. They were all hustled in, one after the other, like so many sheep, and then two Mordanians remained on guard outside.

Escape was quite impossible, since the exit was extremely small and constantly guarded. Those two men could hold a hundred bottled up.

Nelson Lee soon got into conversation with King Boris, and he was gravely concerned to learn that both the king and the prince were to be brought out at dawn to be shot.

Kol Palak had given this order, and it would certainly be obeyed.

"Of what use is it to protest?" said the king bitterly. "This rebel scoundrel has the upper hand, and it would be idle to argue. Paul and myself are resigned, and we will accept our fate like men."

Nelson Lee had very little to say. Expressions of sympathy seemed rather out of place; but both Lee and Dorrie were furious, and they wondered how they could thwart these evil designs of the rebel chief.

They were powerless.

Their only course was to watch and wait, and hope for the best. But there was one thing they didn't know. If they had been aware of this knowledge, their thoughts might have been more cheerful.

I was not so far off as Nelson Lee imagined.

CHAPTER IV.

TO THE RESCUE!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST shook his head.

"Dear old boys, it seems hopeless—it does, really!" he said wearily. "I'm not the chap to grumble, or to be pessimistic, but these mountains are gettin' on my nerves, begad!"

"Yes, Montie, they're certainly a bit trying," I said; "but if we trust to Nepoli, we shall be all right. He doesn't say much; but he's a good chap, and he doesn't know the meaning of the word fatigue."

"I do!" said Tommy Watson huskily.

As a matter of fact, we were all worn out. We had been going constantly, with hardly a pause for rest or for meals—down valleys, through mountain passes, over the rough, cruel ground.

What rest we had had we had snatched an hour at a time, and during the whole while Nepoli had guided us into the very heart of the mountains. He was untiring; hour after hour he plodded on, hardly saying a word, but never dreaming of giving up. His chief concern seemed to be for our welfare; he was always asking if we were tired, if we wanted food or drink, or if we required a rest.

We didn't like to give in, even when we were nearly fit to drop, and so we had kept pressing on, until our feet were nearly raw and our legs were stiff. It was now nearly night time, and we were longing for food and sleep. We had got to the stage when we didn't particularly care what happened.

But we were kept going by the knowledge that Nelson Lee and Dorrie, Handforth, Pitt, and all the rest were somewhere ahead of us, in the hands of the Tagossa. If it was at all possible, we meant to go to the rescue. We were willing to take all sorts of chances if we could only be of some use.

Of course, we fully realised that there was only one likely end to our adventures. We should be captured, just as

the others had been captured. But even this prospect did not appal us; at all events, we should be with our friends. So, whatever happened, it would be to the good.

But, while we were preparing for the worst, we were hoping for the best; and I had been in so many tight corners that I knew chance could play a hand. If only we could experience a little luck, we might be able to accomplish our object.

We didn't know it just then, but luck, in large chunks, was destined to come to our aid before so very long.

We were now in the heart of the mountains, high up, where the air is chill, and where everything was rugged and desolate. According to our guide, we were still a long march from Ludari, and this did not help to cheer us.

"How long do you think it will take to get there, Nepoli?" I asked, using the best Italian I could muster.

Nepoli shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows?" he said. "It greatly depends upon ourselves, my young master. If we continue as we have started, we may reach the capital after two more days. But I fear that you are worn and need much rest; then it will take longer."

"We can't have much rest—just an hour or two, and then we must be off again," I replied. "And where do you reckon we are now?"

"It is difficult to give a definite answer," replied the mountaineer. "We are far from human habitation—quite by ourselves. True, Kol Palak's men may have a secret fortress up in these mountains; I do not know. But for hours I have been cautious—I have kept a sharp look-out. It is necessary that we should maintain our vigilance; otherwise death will come upon us."

"You think the Tagossa men would shoot us?"

"Without doubt," replied Nepoli. "Secreted behind some boulder on the mountain side, they would pick us off as we walked. Just a few shots, and we should be no more. But I am ready; I am as clever as they. And if any such attempt is made, we have plenty of cover."

The prospect was not a very bright one, and when we camped shortly afterwards we had a cheerless meal—and, of course, quite cold, for it was impossible to light a fire. We should have provided a land mark which would have been seen for miles, and it was quite certain that the enemy were about somewhere.

Tregellis-West and Watson were asleep almost at once. Hardly waiting to finish their meal, they rolled themselves in their blankets and dropped off. I did the same, leaving Nepoli sitting like a statue, alert and untiring. He would not sleep; he would watch and keep guard over us.

How on earth the man did it I could not imagine; but he was as hard as nails, and nothing seemed to affect him. Sooner or later, of course, nature's demands would have to be obeyed, but for the present Nepoli was determined to keep going.

I had told him to wake me up after a rest of two hours; but somehow I felt that he would not do this. He knew how tired we all were, and he would probably let us sleep for double the length of time.

However, such was my own determination that I awoke almost to the minute—exactly two hours after I had dropped off to sleep. And now I saw that Nepoli was standing up and staring straight before him into the distance.

I unrolled my blanket, and stood up. My limbs were stiff, and my eyes terribly heavy. Every inclination told me to get back to my blanket, and take further sleep; but I wanted to continue the journey, to get nearer to Nelson Lee and the rest. So I walked over to Nepoli, and touched his arm.

"Ah, so you have awakened, young master?" he said. "A strong will; I admire it. You are still intending to journey on?"

"Yes," I replied. "I don't like waking my chums up, but it's got to be done. We can't go on without them."

Nepoli lifted an arm and pointed.

"Do you see?" he said. "A curious sight, is it not?"

I looked in the direction he was pointing, and then stared harder. The moon was not shining, being hidden behind banks of clouds which obscured the sky; but the mountain tops were clearly outlined, although the valleys were pits of impenetrable blackness.

And there, on a mountain side, not a great distance from us, was a very curious phenomenon. A glow seemed to be shooting upwards out of the very rocks themselves—a kind of hazy, yellowish light; not bare, but hidden from

us. We could only see the reflection. But what could this light be? What was causing it to come out of the mountain side in this peculiar fashion?

It was not the glow from a camp-fire; we could tell that at a glance. It seemed to be something hidden in the rocks, and we were quite certain it was nothing of a natural character—that is to say, it was caused by human agency.

"It looks very queer," I said. "If this was a volcanic region, I should say that there was a small crater in that mountain; but it can't be anything of that kind. What's your idea, Nepoli?"

"I am puzzled a thousand times," replied Nepoli. "It is strange, and I would like to know what this means. For many years I have travelled in the mountains—for all my life—but I have never seen anything of this nature before. I would give much to discover the truth."

"When did you first see that glow?" I asked.

"Not more than one hour since," replied Nepoli. "It appeared while my back was turned. I have a mind to go forth and see with my own eyes—to examine this strange light with my own eyes."

"Good idea!" I said. "We'll go at once—we'll all go. By the way, is this in the direction we ought to be travelling?"

"Nay; Ludari is over yonder," said our guide, pointing in a different direction. "But we must see—we must examine this strange thing."

It was a difficult task, awakening Tregellis-West and Watson. They were both dead asleep, and we were almost forced to lift them out of their blankets and shake them into life.

And even when they were fully awake at last they declared that they were too tired and stiff to walk. And they exhibited no interest when I explained that we were off to have a close look at the glow on the mountain side.

"It's hard lines, I know," I said; "but you'll be all right after you've been going a bit. And think of the others, my sons. We're going to rescue them, if we can."

"It's no good; we can't do anything!" muttered Watson. "Oh, why not give it up, Nipper? I don't care if I get captured; I shouldn't care if I was shot!"

I shook him sharply.

"That's not the way to talk, you ass!" I said. "I know it's a fearful ordeal, but you've got to rise to the occasion. Pull yourself together, and buck up!"

"Oh, all right!" growled Watson. "I'll do my best; but if you think I can walk far, you're mistaken. I'm just about done!"

"Dear old boy, if I thought we could do anythin' I'd be as lively as a cricket," said Sir Montie; "but it seems so hopeless to me. We're out of the world: we're up in these appallin' mountains, cut off from everybody. I've never had such a frightful experience in all my life. I'd rather be lost in the African jungle, begad!"

I could well understand Sir Montie's feelings. The desolation, the utter silence of the mountains, the absence of any animal life—all this contributed to a sense of gloom and depression which could not be ignored.

But, as I had said, after Sir Montie and Tommy had been going for a short while they felt better. Their stiffness relaxed, and they became more fully awake. They had had two hours' sound sleep, and it had done them a world of good. And now, with Nepoli leading the way, we picked our course over the rough ground, like so many shadows. For even now, in the darkness of the night, our guide insisted upon complete silence.

Whether he feared that we should walk into an ambush, I did not know; but Nepoli was very cautious, and he picked his way with that peculiar stealthy walk which was characteristic of his race.

Now and then he would pause, holding up his hand. He would stand like a statue, listening intently, and then, with a gesture, he would walk on again. During every second he was on the alert, apparently expecting trouble. And, if any trouble did happen to arise, Nepoli would be ready for it.

We found that our task was not half so easy as it had appeared to be. At the spot where we had encamped, it seemed but a short distance to the opposite mountain side where the glow appeared from. But it was necessary to cross a valley, and the distance was not a yard less than three miles.

In the valley, to make matters worse, we found a swiftly running stream. We refreshed ourselves here, and we felt

much better, but it was rather a job getting across. The water was deep in most places, and we were compelled to walk along until we found a spot where many rough boulders filled the river bed, and where the water rushed through with the force of a cataract.

Jumping from one boulder to another was by no means an easy task. There was an element of danger attached to the job, too. A false landing, and we should have plunged into that swiftly flowing stream, to be carried down the rapids. But at last, after many narrow escapes, we landed on the other side of the stream.

And then commenced a long, arduous climb. The ground was terribly rough and difficult. In places we were obliged to assist one another up the great boulders.

For this mountain side was steep, and now we had lost all sight of the glow; but Nepoli knew his direction, and he led us without a fault.

It seemed ages before we had climbed to the place where we expected to find the object of our labours, and at length, after climbing on hands and knees over a great mass of broken rocks, we came within sight of the glow. It was there, some distance up the mountain side, but now comparatively close.

"What on earth is it?" murmured Watson.

"The light seems to be coming out of a hole in the ground," I said softly. "There must be a cavern, or something—that's about the only explanation. A great cavern, perhaps, with a big space in the roof; this, of course, leads up to the open air. That's where the light's coming from. But we shall soon know for certain."

"You must not talk; it is unwise!" whispered Nepoli.

"Don't forget—strict silence," I murmured to my chums. "Nepoli's orders."

We walked on, forgetting our fatigue now, for we were within a hundred yards or so of the big opening in the ground, and we hurried on eagerly. And then, without the slightest warning, a very startling thing happened.

It was quite dark where we were walking, and the ground looked solid enough; but, as I felt my way just behind Nepoli, he uttered a peculiar little cry, and staggered. The next second, with a slithering sound, he shot downwards, apparently into the very ground itself.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

I rushed forward, attempting to grab Nepoli at the last second. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie did the same, and, instead of walking upon solid ground, we felt our feet sinking away beneath us.

And then we commenced slipping and sliding, shooting downwards with ever-increasing speed.

Down we went, right into the mountain, and with no knowledge of what was to be our fate.

CHAPTER V.

WITHIN THE BRIGANDS' LAIR.

CRASH!

I hit something solid, rolled over, and lay for some seconds, too dazed to think. I was bruised and battered, but otherwise I seemed to be fairly whole. Sundry gasps and grunts were proceeding from a spot just near by. Something brushed against me, and this something turned out to be a booted foot.

"Begad!" muttered a voice. "What's happened, dear old boys?"

It was more than I could say. I only knew that I was in total darkness, and that I had come to a stop after slithering down for a considerable distance. My wits were returning, and I began to realise what had actually taken place.

There was evidently a deep cleft in the mountain side—a kind of natural chimney—down which we had all dropped.

It was not actually sheer, but at a sharp angle. So, instead of dropping to what would have been certain death, we slid helplessly down, to come to rest at the bottom in a confused heap. As I afterwards discovered, this cleft was not more than ten feet wide, and the sides were rough and rocky. It was a wonder we were not torn to pieces as we fell down.

In our eagerness to get to the strange glow, we had not walked with our usual caution. Even Nepoli had been somewhat careless. But perhaps fate had guided us down that cleft, because, as events turned out, it was all for the best.

It was impossible to see where we were, or what the nature of this place was like, for we lay in total darkness,

with our eyes and lungs filled with dust. But, after a while, we managed to pick ourselves up, and to feel our bones. We discovered that we were quite intact, except for missing bits of skin here and there. And a few grazes and gashes did not particularly worry us at a time like that.

"Well, we've done it now!" I said ruefully. "We've dropped into this place, and it's very doubtful if we can climb out again."

"I'm afraid you're right, old boy!" said Sir Montie. "It's easier to get down than to get up, begad! But we must try; we can't stay here, or we shall die of starvation."

"But where are we?" asked Watson. "I've got a terrific bruise on my shin, and I can hardly walk. I believe I've lost two of my left fingers; at all events, they're so numbed that I can hardly feel them. I seem to be blind, too!"

"According to that, you're about done for!" I said. "But you're not so bad as you make out, Tommy. The only thing we can do is to climb back; but we'd better not make an attempt until we've had a little rest."

Nepoli touched my arm.

"You must not talk!" he whispered. "It is unsafe."

"Why?" I asked. "Surely there's no possibility of any of the enemies being here? Why, we're about seventy feet down into the mountain—right at the bottom of this gulley. I thought about striking a match."

"You may do so, but it must be put out quickly," said Nepoli. "I have suspicions, my young master. I do not think that this place is exactly what you imagine. But we shall soon see."

I couldn't quite understand what he meant, but I soon brought out a box of matches, and struck a light. We all stared about us curiously, rather dazzled for the moment by the bright flame.

And then I caught my breath in with amazement, for, instead of finding myself in a bare, rocky pit, as I had imagined, I found that the place was enormously large, extending right beyond the radius of the match flame. And there, not six feet away from us, were stacked large numbers of cases and barrels.

"What the dickens——" began Watson.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Why, we seem to be in a kind of cavern!" I whispered. "And what are those boxes and barrels? This is a bit too much for me! I didn't expect——"

Nepoli interrupted me by jerking my arm. The match went out, and we were in total darkness again.

"Do you not understand?" whispered our guide. "We are within Kol Palak's stronghold!"

"Eh?"

"I have long suspected that such a place existed," went on Nepoli tensely; "but now I am certain, my young friend. It is no longer a suspicion. You remember the light in the mountain? Below that light there is a cavern, just like this one. And I am convinced that it is possible to pass from this cavern into the other."

"My goodness!" I muttered. "Then we're within the brigands' lair! We're right on the very spot! Do you think we could be of any use, Nepoli? Would it be possible for us to find something out?"

"One never knows," replied our guide. "But we will see——"

He broke off abruptly.

For at that moment a faint, flickering glow appeared in the cavern. It seemed to come from nowhere at first. We all stood perfectly still, wondering; then we heard voices, faint and far away, but echoing in a peculiar fashion among the rocks.

"The barrels!" muttered Nepoli quickly. "We must hide!"

I swiftly explained to my chums what we had to do, and it was not a difficult task for us to get into a place of concealment. The glow filled the cavern now, and we knew that it was coming from a flaming torch which was being carried by somebody in a tunnel—several men were approaching and making for this very cavern with lights. If we did not conceal ourselves at once we should be seen and captured.

We didn't hide behind the barrels, after all, for near by we found a number of huge bales, which afforded better cover. And, crouching behind these, we waited. Unless those bales were touched we should not be seen, and we certainly had no intention of allowing ourselves to be heard.

I was longing to take a peep out, and Nepoli evidently guessed that something of this sort was in my mind, for he kept a firm hand on my arm, preventing me from acting rashly.

The light flickered on the rough rock roof of the cavern, and I judged that two or three torches were being used. And I could tell by the voices that there were at least four or five men.

They talked continuously, laughing sometimes, and apparently in a good humour. What they were doing I could not see, but one of the cases were wrenched open, as I could tell by the sound of breaking wood.

And then, shortly afterwards, the men took their departure, leaving the cavern again in total darkness. Our presence had not been suspected. And now I discovered that Nepoli was greatly excited. He put his mouth close to my ear, and he gripped my wrist. His own fingers were trembling.

"Wonderful news, my young master!" he whispered. "I have heard much—much that is amazingly good. Your friends are here, within this very mountain!"

"Here?" I gaspod. "Mr. Lee, Dorrie, all the chaps? But—but they were going on to Ludari——"

"That was the original plan," interrupted Nepoli, "but Ludari is in the hands of the king's men. A thousand blessings! Kol Palak has met with disaster. And all your friends are here; but, alas! King Boris and the Crown Prince are to be shot at dawn. I have heard all!"

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated in a startled voice.

"What's the matter?" asked Tommy Watson eagerly.

"Has anythin' happened, dear old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"Wait a minute. I want to put a few questions to Nepoli, and then I'll tell you," I replied. "Good news, by what I can hear; but we shall soon know for certain."

I turned to our guide, and clutched his arm.

"How do you know this, Nepoli?" I asked, wishing that I had a better mastery of Italian. "You say that all our friends are here, and that King Boris and the Crown Prince are to be shot at dawn. How could you get to know all that information?"

"I used my ears, my young master," replied the mountaineer. "These men who were with us not long since were rascals of the Tagossa. I imagine they are preparing for a journey, and a somewhat grim journey, since they have been supplying themselves with new weapons. And while they worked they talked. You could not understand, but I knew all. It is well that they talked. It seems that their captives have only recently arrived, and they are all imprisoned in one cave."

"Mr. Lee and our other friends?"

"Yes, all of them," replied Nepoli.

It did not take me long to tell Tregellis-West and Watson of this good news. We were tremendously excited, and this was not to be wondered at. Once again fate had played into our hands.

By sheer chance we had stumbled into this quaint mountain stronghold. We had literally fallen into it without any intention of doing so. It had been a pure accident; but it was destined to lead to big results.

But I did not know this at the moment, and after my first excitement was over I became somewhat despondent.

"It's all very well to know that Mr. Lee and Dorrie and the chaps are here," I said; "but what can we do? How is our position any better—or their position either?"

"Well, we know that they're not far off, at all events," said Watson. "If we could only get to them we could probably help. And if we could release them, and if we could all escape——"

"I'm afraid there are too many 'if's' about that, my son," I interrupted. "If we could work miracles, everything would be O.K. But we can't. We've got to look at hard facts. Just realise the position. We're in this cavern, and there's no telling where the others are to be found. They might be near by, or they might be a long way off. And if we start investigating we shall run our heads into trouble. It's a dead cert. that we shall run into some of these Tagossa men, and then it would be all up. So far as I can see, there is only one way of getting to work."

"And what's that, dear fellow?" asked Sir Montie.

"We must go up this shaft again," I replied grimly. "It'll be a pretty stiff task, but it's got to be done. Then we'll work our way round the mountain to the proper entrance. Perhaps we can adopt some ruse to attract the guards:

but we can decide on that after we get out."

"You're right, Nipper," said Tommy Watson. "We mustn't stay here—it's too risky. Some more of these men might come, and the next time we shouldn't be so lucky. We should be spotted and hauled out."

I told Nepoli what we had decided, and he agreed that our plan was the best that we could adopt. But he was very doubtful when I mentioned our ideas about a ruse.

"However, we can but try," he said. "It would be idle to remain here."

We were not feeling very tired now. The knowledge that all the rest of our party were near at hand gave us added strength and encouragement. We forgot our aches and pains, and when we started to climb we found that the task was not so difficult as we had feared.

The shaft was by no means sheer—it sloped at a fair angle, and as the surface was fairly rough, we found plenty of footholds, and grips for our fingers. And in this way we progressed upwards, Nepoli bringing up the rear.

I was leading, and I had an idea that our guide was coming last, so that he could help us in case we slipped. Up above we could see an irregular patch of sky, where the shaft came to an end.

But before we reached the top, we made a discovery which completely altered all our plans.

The summit of shaft was about twenty feet above me when I noticed a black, gaping hole just on my right side. At first I thought this was merely a shallow opening in the rock; but it was not quite so pitchy dark here, owing to the dim light that was coming in from the top of the shaft. The moon was shining now, and I could see that the black hole was deep, and not unlike a tunnel.

I paused, and examined it with greater interest. And then I saw that there were signs of men's handiwork. This was no natural opening; it had been carved out of the solid rock, and, apparently, was the entrance to some kind of tunnel.

With a little difficulty I climbed into it, and looked about me. Then I turned round to the others.

"Hold on!" I murmured. "This looks rather queer to me. I believe this is the entrance to a tunnel, and it might lead right into one of the other caverns. I think we might as well have a look along this while we're about it. If we go cautiously, we can't run into any danger, and there's just a possibility that we might find out something of interest."

"Just as you like, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "I'm willin'. Go ahead!"

"We shall have to be jolly careful, though," put in Tommy Watson. "We don't want to run into any of these Tagossa brutes!"

I briefly explained to Nepoli what we intended doing, and he agreed.

"It is a wise decision, my young master," he said. "This mountain is honeycombed with passages and tunnels. Who knows but what we might be able to come upon something of great importance? It is even possible that we shall locate your friends. And we can't accomplish if we do not try."

I was eager now, and full of inward excitement. There was something thrilling about this investigation of ours. There was an element of danger in the whole affair which rather appealed to me. We knew that we had enemies all around us, and at any moment we might find ourselves in a tight corner; but this did not make me pause.

I pressed on into the tunnel, feeling my way cautiously, and in the rear came Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and Nepoli.

It was a rather tiresome business, going along that tunnel. It twisted and turned, and on several occasions I received some nasty bumps; but I did not mind these.

Everything was pitchy black; it was as though we were in the catacombs. Inky darkness surrounded us, and deadly, solemn silence. I tested every inch of ground before going forward. This was necessary, for it was quite possible that there were deep holes in the flooring, and I did not wish to be precipitated down into a pit, where I should be mangled into a pulp.

It was impossible to provide ourselves with a light. We had matches, but we dared not strike any of these, for to do so would have been to betray ourselves. We did not know what lay ahead; we did not know whether the Tagossa men were near us or not. And so we went on blindly, feeling our way.

I was glad to find that there were no side tunnels. There were no other pas-

sages leading out of this one; therefore it would be an easy matter for us to find our way back. There would be no possibility of going on the wrong path; and, after a while, the tunnel led downwards at a sharp angle, right into the heart of the mountain.

This continued for some little way before the passage became level once more. It was quite dry, and the surface under foot was hard and rocky.

I was just wondering when the tunnel would come to an end when my fingers encountered something solid in front of me. It was smooth, and did not feel like rock. I felt carefully, and came across one or two rounded studs. And then, with a feeling of surprise within me, I came to the conclusion that it was an iron door, which was heavily studded with bolts.

This was very astonishing, and for a moment or two I paused, wondering what it could mean. Then my fingers encountered a big bolt; it was shot home into position. Reaching down, I felt another bolt near the floor.

There was only one explanation.

At this point the passage was cut off by a heavy iron door, and this door was bolted securely on this side.

I quickly communicated the news to the others, and they were as excited as myself.

"Push back the bolts!" said Tommy Watson. "Do it quietly, of course, because there might be men on the other side."

"Right you are; hold tight!" I said tensely. "And if there's any danger, be prepared for it. I'm going to work back these bolts gradually, and then open the door. I want to see what lies beyond."

With great care I shot back the bolts, and then, pulling at one of them, I found that the door opened fairly easily. Fortunately, it did not click, and I flung it further open, inch by inch. No light came to my eyes; beyond the door all was blackness. But suddenly I sniffed, and held myself tense.

For I could smell tobacco smoke!

And then I thought I must be dreaming, for I heard voices—clear, whispering voices. But they were not talking in Mordanian; it was the English language that I heard—and, what was more to the point, the voices were those of Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore!

CHAPTER VI.

THE ESCAPE!

NELSON LEE and Lord Dorrimore! Could this be true, or was my imagination playing tricks with me? I stood there, listening intently. Yes, there was no mistake about it. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were whispering together. And if I had any doubts at first, these doubts were soon dispelled.

For, a little further away, other voices were talking together, and the speakers were not so particular about whispering. I could hear Handforth—Edward Oswald Handforth himself—and he was having an argument with Church and McClure. Even in captivity, in this dark and gloomy cave, Handforth was just the same as ever. He could not get on without arguing.

I turned round, fairly shaking with excitement.

"They're here!" I said, in a low whisper. "Don't roar, or anything of that sort; but they're here—Nelson Lee. Dorrie, Handforth, all the rest of them! They're all in some cave or cavern beyond this door!"

"Begad!"

"My only hat!"

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West were astounded.

There was only one explanation, as far as I could see. All the prisoners had been brought into this cave, and there was probably a guard at the door, so that they could not escape. Perhaps Nelson Lee and the others did not know this iron door existed. They certainly could not see it, for the blackness was pitchy.

But it was there all right. We knew that, because we were standing near it.

The Tagossa men had not even considered this iron door at all. They knew that it was bolted on the other side, and that the prisoners could not possibly open it, unless they used dynamite. And even the use of dynamite was impossible, since it would bring down the rock, and smother everything.

But the Mordanians had not known that we were on the track—that we were coming to the rescue. And thus this state of affairs existed at the moment; we had come in by the back entrance, so to speak, and now there was a clear way for all the prisoners to escape, without the guards knowing anything

about it. The possibilities were enormous, and my brain almost reeled when I thought of them. If I could only get in, and pass the word to Nelson Lee and the rest, they could be brought out of this prison, one by one, into the tunnel. Then, with the door securely bolted again, we should have a chance to run along to the exit, and thus get out on the mountain side. And once free, under the moonlit sky, there was no telling what we could do.

And there was no time for talking or for thinking. Action was required now—swift, decisive action; and it did not take me many seconds to make up my mind.

"You fellows remain out here, and I'll slip through and have a word with the guv'nor," I whispered. "We've got to do everything quietly, and without the enemy knowing anything. But, if there's an alarm, you make straight for the exit."

"Right you are!" murmured Watson. "Hurry up!"

I slipped noiselessly through the doorway, and then felt my way forward, foot by foot. I could now just make out that I was in a large cave, with a low roof. On the far side there was an uneven sized hole, with a dim light showing beyond. This, no doubt, was the exit, and I saw a man's figure pass to and fro. This fellow was evidently on guard, but he suspected nothing.

And it was quite obvious that he would not take particular notice if he heard sounds of talking within the cave. All the prisoners were there, and now I could tell that they were all either sleeping or speaking in low tones. This was a welcome discovery, for I knew that I should be able to converse freely, without fear.

I felt my way forward, and then touched a shoulder. Somebody was squatting on the ground just in front of me. He looked round sharply as I touched him.

"What's the game?" he asked. "Who's that?"

"Dorrie!" I murmured. "How goes it?"

Lord Dorrimore drew his breath in sharply.

"By gad!" he muttered. "You can't be Nipper, but your voice sounds remarkably like his!"

"That's just where you're mistaken," I said. "I am Nipper, and Tregellis-West and Watson are just outside. We've come to the rescue."

"I thought I should be fancyin' things before long," said Dorrie. "Of course, it can't be true. I know you didn't come in, because I've had my eye on the doorway the whole time——"

"Not the doorway at the rear," I interrupted. "Dorrie, old man, there's just a chance that we might be able to escape. Pass the word round that we're here, and tell everybody to keep quiet ——"

"Who's that talking with you Dorrie?" asked Nelson Lee, approaching us. "I could have sworn that it was Nipper's voice; but such a thing is impossible."

I seized Nelson Lee's arm and pressed it tightly.

"Guv'nor!" I whispered.

Nelson Lee gave a start.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed. "Nipper! But, my dear boy, how did you get here? I have been wondering what had happened to you, and I have been worrying, too. What does this mean? How did you find your way into this place?"

Very briefly I explained what had occurred—how we had come across Nepoli, how we had travelled through the mountains, and how we had slipped down that shaft. Nelson Lee listened without a sound until the end; then he pressed my shoulders warmly.

"Splendid, my lad—splendid!" he murmured approvingly. "I want to question you more closely, and I want to congratulate you in a fitting manner. But that must wait. If there is a chance of escape, we will seize it at once. Hesitation might be fatal."

"But can we get out of here?" whispered Captain Mason, who had been listening to us. "By Jove! This is rather more than I hoped for! Nipper, my lad, you're a wonder! Did I understand you to say that there's a door at the rear of this cave?"

"Yes; it was bolted on the other side," I replied.

"But we couldn't see it—and we struck several matches, too——"

"There can be no doubt that it is disguised on this side," put in Nelson Lee. "When closed, it is probably impossible to detect that a door exists; but, from the tunnel side, no disguise is necessary. And the tunnel, Nipper, leads into the open?"

"Yes, sir; a direct route," I replied. "Once we get into the open, we shall be a long way from the front entrance, and it might be hours before our escape is detected. During that time we can go miles!"

"We must not anticipate, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "The first thing is to get out of this prison. I will go round to all the others, and acquaint them of the truth, and tell them to be ready to steal silently out. It would be a real disaster if our guards discovered the truth at this juncture. Kol Palak himself is near by, and the results would be terrible if he knew."

It did not take Nelson Lee long to pass the word round. He went from group to group, waking some of the follows up, and warning them all to remain calm, and on no account to talk in excited tones.

But the juniors were excited.

They hardly knew how to contain themselves. They had just begun to fear that there would be no escape, and that they would be imprisoned within this mountain fortress for weeks, and perhaps months.

And now, all in a moment, there was an opportunity of getting away. It was hardly surprising that the juniors were thrilled through and through.

As it happened, our escape from the cave was a simple affair, and it was carried out without a hitch. One by one the party came through the doorway, and they all passed along the tunnel until only Nelson Lee and I remained. Then we closed the door softly, and shot the bolts into position.

"So far, so good!" murmured Lee. "Our guards will probably think that we have all fallen asleep, and they will suspect nothing. But we must not waste any time."

It was not a hard task to reach the open, for we knew that the path had no false turnings, and that there were no pitfalls to be wary of. And at length we arrived at the open shaft, and climbed the twenty or so feet to the exit.

And there we collected together in a big, excited group. All the juniors were talking in low voices, and it was glorious to feel ourselves at liberty once more. The Tagossa had no power over them now.

"You deserve half a dozen medals for this, Nipper, old son!" said Pitt, tapping me on the shoulder. "How on earth you did it beats me. It was just like the wizard in the Christmas pantomime, suddenly appearing from nowhere!"

"Jolly good, Nipper!" said Handforth. "Of course, I had an idea you were coming! I meant to tell the other chaps, but I forgot to!"

"Quite so!" I grinned. "But we haven't got any time to talk now. We've got to move—move quickly, too."

"But where—in which direction?" asked De Valerie.

"I'm hanged if I know!" I replied. "I don't suppose it matters much which way we go, so long as we get away from here!"

"But we shall have to be jolly careful," said Pitt, "and we must keep our eyes open. These Tagossa fellows are everywhere; there must be thousands of them up in these mountains. They've got queer ways of signalling, and if we're spotted doing a bunk, we shall have hordes of them on our track."

"Well, we shall have to leave things to chance, to some extent," I said. "With so many of us, we can't hope to be concealed all the time. And this moonlight, although it's welcome in one way, it's against us in another. It'll serve us to light our way down the mountain, but it'll also serve to show us up, if any members of the Tagossa happen to be on the watch."

"Gad, it is great to be able to stretch oneself again," said Lord Dorrimore. "Even if we're only free for a few hours, it's worth it. Nipper, my son, you ought to be knighted for this! I always knew you were a bit of a marvel, but this time you've fairly taken my breath away."

"You're on the wrong track, Dorrie," I said. "There's no credit due to me. I haven't had time to introduce you to Nepoli; but he's the chap you've got to thank. We should have been as helpless as babes but for him. He guided us into the mountains, and chance did the rest. I don't deserve any credit at all."

"Well, of course, I was expecting you to say that," grinned Dorrie. "You always were a modest young bounder."

Before I could reply, King Boris approached, and with him was the Crown Prince. They took my hand, and wrung it warmly. I felt quite embarrassed, because I felt that I did not deserve such treatment. After all, what had I done?

Nepoli had brought us here, and then we had fallen down that chute. Without Nepoli, and without good luck, I could have done nothing.

"I cannot find words to express my gratitude, Nipper," said King Boris quietly. "Your own friends have much to thank you for; but my son and myself were to have been shot at dawn. Thus you will see that your action has been the means of saving our lives. I cannot help feeling that all will come well, and that one day, before long, I shall be restored to my throne. I may be optimistic—foolishly so—but there is a feeling within me that our fortunes have taken a turn for the better."

"By Jingo, I hope so, sir!" I said warmly. "Thank goodness we've been able to stop those murderers from carrying out their threat. But we haven't escaped yet. We've got out of that prison, but we're still in Mordania—still in the region which is held by the Tagossa."

King Boris nodded.

"True!" he agreed. "But see—look down yonder!"

He stretched out his hand and pointed right down the valley. We could see distinctly in the moonlight, and there, right down in the hollow, I saw the moonlight glinting upon water.

"The river is the only barrier between us and safety," said the king. "Beyond the water there is safety—there are friends. After all, my boy, our task may not be such a difficult one."

"And we must lose no time in getting off," put in Nelson Lee. "Every moment is of value, and our escape may have been discovered already."

And so, without any further delay, we commenced our descent into the valley. Freedom was within sight, and the Tagossa was beaten.

But would our luck hold?

As events turned out, some very exciting incidents were destined to take place before we reached freedom, and before Kol Palak was defeated!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

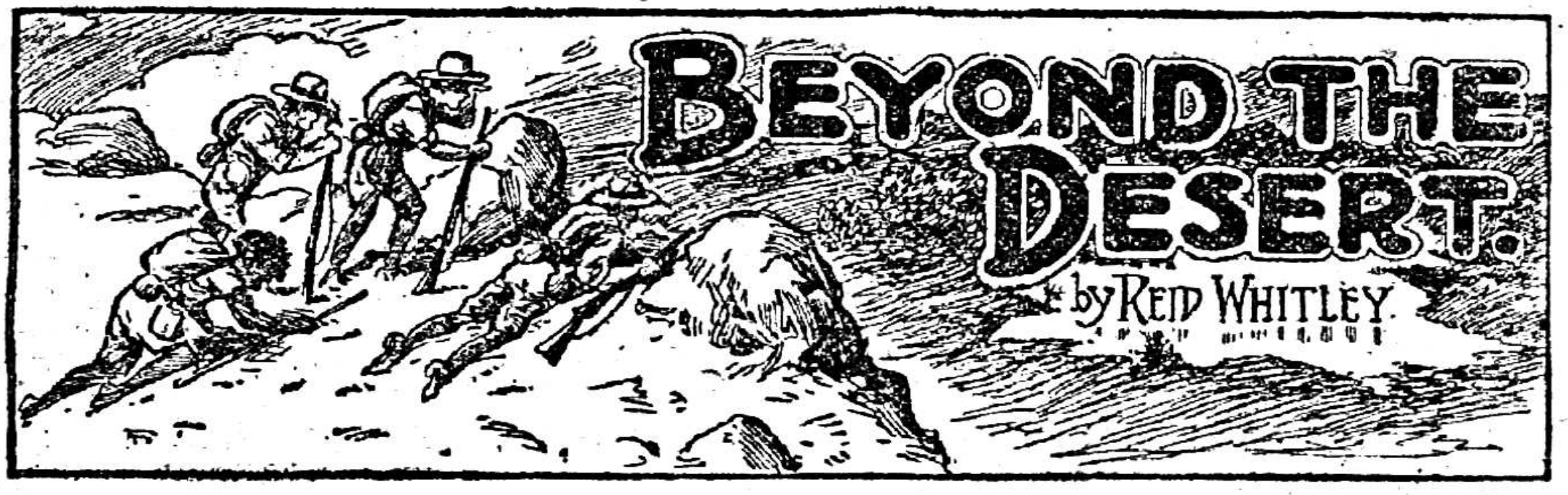
"Where is Mordania?" is a question I am now constantly being asked. If some of my chums have been trying to look for it in an atlas, I am afraid they will be disappointed; for Mordania, though representing in character a wild and lawless state in the Balkans, is purely an imaginary name invented for the benefit of the equally imaginary story of King Boris and the Crown Prince.

As to how the party flee from the dreaded Tagossa, of the raising of an army in support of the king, the journey to Ludari, the Mordanian capital, the occupation of the citadel, and the subsequent onslaught made against it by the Tagossa are a few of the main incidents in next week's story, "THE SAVING OF THE CAPITAL!"

Every lover of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY should read the new collected stories of their favourite characters now being published in "The Nugget Library," two numbers every month at 3d. each. See titles on page ii.

THE EDITOR.

Start To-day This Grand New Australian Serial!



AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE BY AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

FOR NEW READERS.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding have come to settle in Australia from the Old Country. They go to Cairns, where Jack has an uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been absent in the interior for some months, the young Englishmen decide to try and find him. They are joined by Tom Anson, an Australian, with whom they have struck up a friendship. Accompanied by Snaplus, a black tracker, they start off across the desert until they come to a dried up water-hole. Here they find a message from Jack's uncle, directing them to the Secret Valley where, after many strange adventures they find the professor, and together they explore this wonderful new world, where they find many weird animals long thought to be extinct. There are two native tribes—the Bheels and the Worgees. The Worgees are cowardly and cruel, a terror to the Bheels, or tail-men.

(Now read on.)

Snaplus's Story.

"CARBON dioxide. Carbonic acid gas," replied Jack. "There must be a regular lake of it at the bottom of that slope. I don't know exactly how it comes to be there. I suppose it must have gathered there in the course of time, and, since it's heavier than air, it would sink to the lowest parts of the caves. You know it's a deadly poison, and that a breath of it will kill an animal or human being like a lightning flash. The Worgees dashed straight into it, and they have all perished."

"Good lord!" ejaculated Harding. "That's wholesale, with a vengeance!"

"The best thing that could have happened to them!" growled Anson. "These Bheels are harmless little chaps, but for centuries the Worgees have treated them abominably. I'm jolly glad they're done for, the whole beastly tribe of them."

This was exactly the view Professor Maxwell took, when he heard the story. He confirmed it, by taking a couple of torches and advancing far enough down the slope to catch a glimpse of the huddled forms lying in the pit of death.

"Their rule has been abominably tyrannical," he said. "So far as I can gather from the Bheels here, they used to sacrifice several of the little folks to the brutes in the pool there whenever they needed recreation. Doubtless we will get more out of the fellow you left bound at the cave mouth."

But this was not to be, for as they reached the outer tunnel they saw the Worgee silhouetted against the last of the sunset light, frantically endeavouring to grab the rope dangling from aloft in his bound hands. In vain the professor shouted to him that he would not be harmed. The man was mad with terror, and redoubled his efforts, slipped, and rolling from the narrow platform, dropped into the water below. Something swirled in the depths, and he did not reappear.

So they had no chance of learning more of the strange tribe that had lorded it over the Bheels for centuries, since the best the little people could tell was too confused to make head or tail of.

Snaplus, still almost helpless from the constriction of his bonds, was hoisted aloft. After prolonged rubbing he was at last able to tell what had occurred.

Shortly after the party had gone a Worgee had brought him a tempting dish of fish. He had pushed this through the opening between the poles securing the door, making friendly noises. Snaplus resisted the temptation for a little, then yielded. He ate some of the fish, which tasted very good, then, moved by compassion for his prisoner, the man Gom, he had offered him some.

Gom had refused, showing the utmost repugnance. This excited Snaplus's suspicions, which were soon confirmed, for he became exceedingly ill. Doubtless the fish was a poisonous variety, and had he eaten the whole of it he would have died. However, an Australian blackfellow can stand a lot, and he merely fell into a stupor, from which he was at last aroused by noises at the door.

He roused himself enough to see that Worgees were busily unfastening the poles that barred the entrance. He could scarcely move, but when they at last entered he gathered enough energy to shoot Gom and a couple of the intruders before he was overpowered.

"Then them fellow make corroboree. Heap dance, heap sing, take me down big fellow hole, tie up to give big fellow bunyip in water-hole. Some other small blackfellow Bheel do along me all same time. You come shoot um, all same make them man go along of big fellow Bunyip. No more fish this fellow," he concluded.

"I reckon not! Once bitten, twice shy. And there's something about a stable door, too," muttered Anson. "However, I am hungry. Let's call it a day, have some chow, and turn in."

This they did, and although there seemed no likelihood that they would be attacked by anything, Jack Maxwell arranged that they should take turns at watching.

But although there was some liveliness that caused a good deal of noise on the further bank of the lake, nothing disturbed the village on the cliff, and they woke to a new day with a sense of relief.

The Worgees gone, they were rid of the need of excessive watchfulness. The Bheels, to whom Maxwell had carefully explained that they would no more have to risk a dreadful death at a Worgee's whim, seemed more cheerful, and their little tails waggled madly when the adventurers came out on the terrace.

"This morning I think we might take a rest," said Professor Maxwell, as he lit an after-breakfast pipe. "I will write up my journal, and see to my belongings, which the Worgees do not appear to have disturbed much. And you boys?"

"We'll fish, I think," replied Jack.

Harding nodded, but Anson rose, and gathered an armful of resinous wood.

"I'm going to take a look at that cavern below," he said. "There were things in the wall that interested me, though I hadn't time to look at them. I'll be back by noon, but give me a howl if I'm late."

He tucked his hatchet into his belt, unfastened his rope, and strolled away towards the place where was the step way down to the caves beneath. At noon, when the fishermen had returned with a load of fish and a yarn about some wretched crab thing that had taken the biggest catch, he was still below.

Harding went to fetch him when the fish was sizzling in the frying-pan, and met him in the entry of the cave.

"Jim, old scout, fetch a sack, if there is such a thing in the outfit. I think the professor has one."

"What do you want it for?" asked Harding; but, receiving only a wink for answer, climbed up and returned with the desired sack.

"Now play fair. Don't look," begged Anson.

So Harding waited till he returned with the sack well loaded. Together they hoisted it aloft, and lugged it to the cave, where Snaplus was just turning the fish out on a bark dish.

"Well, young man? Did you find anything worth leaving the sunshine for?" asked Maxwell.

"That depends on what you call worth while," answered Anson. "How's this for high?"

Whipping off his coat, he emptied the contents of the little sack upon it in a scintillating shower of what seemed to be bits of gleaming moonshine.

"Not so bad for a beginning, eh?" he cried. "Turquoises, my dear sirs, as good as any I've ever seen, if not better. Look at the fire of this one!"

"Magnificent! You have enough to make you rich there," said the professor. "I have never seen finer, though I have seen many."

"There are enough to make us all rich," corrected Anson quietly. "We're all together in this. There are cartloads down there. We have only to break them out, select the finest ones, and——"

"And get them away," interrupted Jack Maxwell. "Always bear that in mind. And though there is no especial hurry, it seems to me that we had better begin to think of how we're going to accomplish it. I vote that while my uncle devotes himself to writing up and tabulating all the marvels of this place, we should skirmish round, and, while we're collecting specimens for him, try and discover some way out."

"That will be only the beginning of the difficulty," replied the elder. "The real trouble will be to transport ourselves and our treasure trove over waterless sands without any baggage animals. Solve that problem, and then come to me, but meanwhile don't bother me. Oh, let me add that if you can bag that Stegosaur, or one of those other beasts, I shall be eternally grateful. Only don't run any risks over the job."

Thereupon he fell to dissecting a strange fish which he had saved from the frying-pan in the interests of science, while the young men took their arms and went off chuckling. The notion that it would be possible to bag the Stegosaur without risk tickled their sense of humour.

That day they directed their steps in the opposite direction, retracing the path they had followed at their first coming to the village. A couple of the Bheels accompanied them. When they reached the place where they had ascended to the ledge, the little men showed them another path, along which they travelled till they came to a narrow creek, at the head of which lay the queer wheel from which the little people had been wont to make their fishing expeditions at the behest of the Worgees.

Since the extermination of these latter had diminished the population by half there was no further use for the thing, the Bheels being able to catch all the fish they needed

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

from the security of a ledge not too near the water.

The three young men, however, were determined to try a voyage in the odd craft, and, having first carefully repaired the damaged side, they got in and wheeled off, leaving the two little men whimpering on the cliffs.

Remembering the dangers that lurked in the deeper water, they confined their voyaging to the upper end of the lake, where it was mostly shallow, steering for the spot where they had slain the "bunyip." Only a few bones remained, and they were splintered, so swiftly had the scavengers attended to their work.

Then, emboldened by immunity from attack, they turned towards the place where they had left the hides of the two tiger-lions pegged in the upper branches of a tree. It was, of course, probable that some creature had destroyed them, but it was worth while going to see, the distance being barely a mile across the lake.

(To be continued.)

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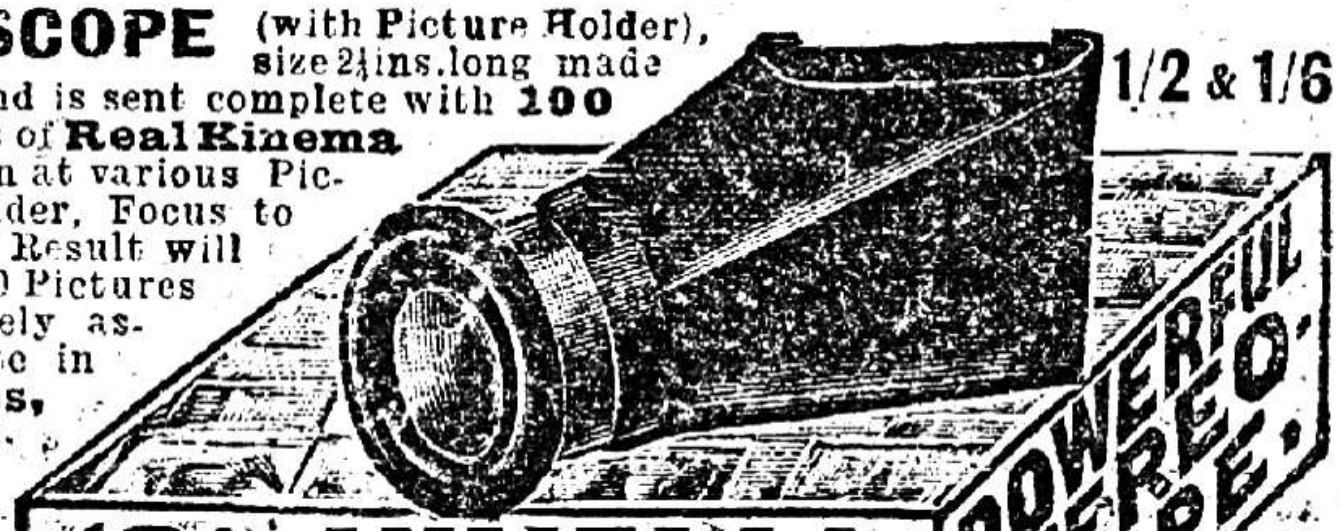

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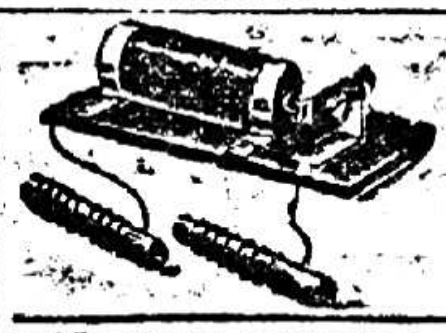

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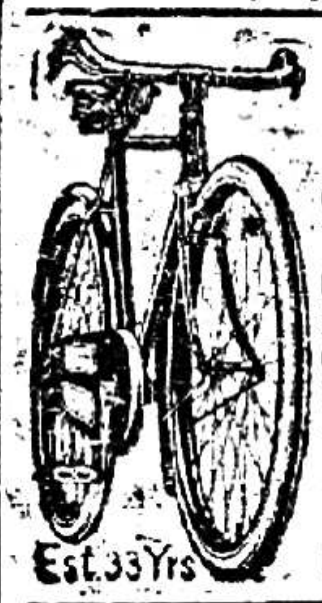

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