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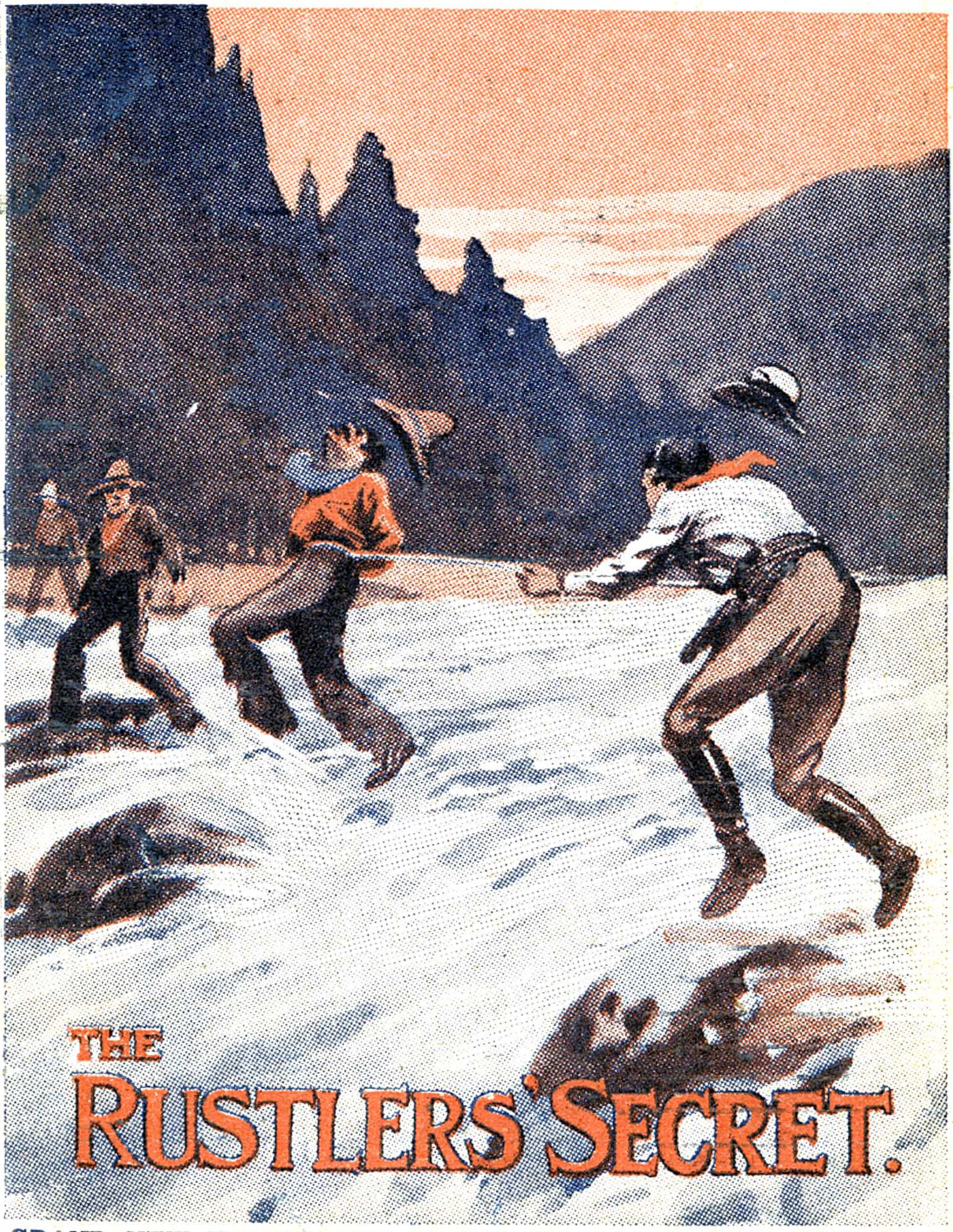

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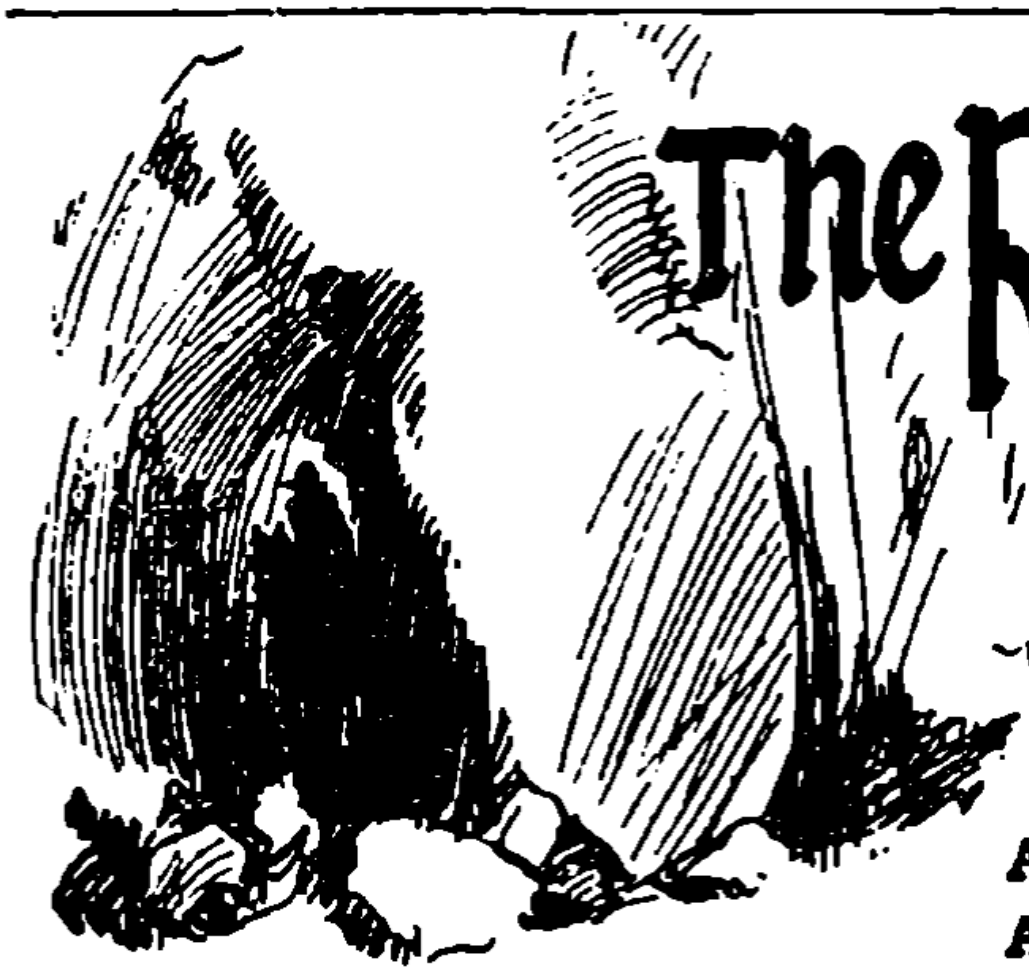

The RUSTLERS' SECRET.

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, LORD DORRIMORE, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Test Match Triumph," "The Montana Mystery," "The Terror of Roaring Z," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE—BRONCHO BUSTER.

NELSON LEE pulled thoughtfully at his pipe.

"Yes, Dorrie, it's a difficult problem," he said slowly. "Mr. Farman was anxious that I should inquire into the mystery of the stolen cattle while we were staying on the ranch. But neither he nor I anticipated that the whole district would be terrorised by this infernal half-breed outlaw."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"We're up against it, old man—up against it squarely!" he declared. "I don't mind frankly admittin' that I'm a bit out of my element on this ranch. At the same time. I'm enjoyin' the experience hugely. If we could only be doin' somethin' it would be better—for example, twistin' the tail of this bally Texas Jose!"

"We have not been on the Roaring Z Ranch long," went on Nelson Lee. "But during the brief period of our stay two attempts have been made on my life, and I have actually come into close contact with these cattle-rustlers. They have been creating great havoc with Mr. Farman's herds, stealing over three thousand head of cattle. How these animals have been spirited away from the ranch remains a complete mystery."

"An' the closer we get to it, the more extraordinary it seems," said his lordship. "That's the strange part of the whole affair, old man. An' before you can get properly goin' on this cattle mystery, Texas Jose butts in, an' proceeds to raise a tidy pile of dust. Do you think you'll be able to solve this cattle mystery? You're a great chap on problems, an' I shall be frightfully disappointed if you don't clear this one up."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, Dorrie, you can be sure that I shall use every effort," he said. "Whether I shall succeed remains to be seen. The exploits of Texas Jose created a diversion, but I think I shall be able to give all my attention to the other matter now."

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were strolling leisurely along the river bank in the cool of the evening. The scenery on every side was quite wonderful. The wooded hills rising back in picturesque stateliness, with the easily flowing river near at hand. Out beyond was the prairie, rolling away, mile after mile, into the dim, misty distance.

And there, overshadowing all, the peaks and snow-covered summits of the Rocky Mountains — imposing, grand, and almost awe-inspiring. Quite near by, the dazzling white ranch-house itself was to be seen, with its closely clustered barns and stables and outbuildings.

The Roaring Z Ranch was, indeed, one of the finest enterprises in the whole of Montana, and Mr. James Farman was

proud of it, although this was not his real home. Being a millionaire, he could afford to invest his wealth where he liked, and, as a matter of fact, this ranch was an extremely profitable proposition.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie and twelve St. Frank's juniors were staying on the ranch as Mr. Farman's guests. I was among this number, of course, and I had been enjoying myself greatly. Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Handforth and Co., and others, made up the party.

There had been quite a lot of excitement since our arrival.

Our host had expressed a keen wish that Nelson Lee should look into a strange cattle mystery which had been troubling all the ranch employees for many weeks. Although it seemed absolutely impossible and incredible, large numbers of cattle had been constantly disappearing. There seemed to be no outlet by which these animals could be taken away. Watches were set on all parts of the ranch property, a hundred and one precautions were taken.

But it made no difference.

The cattle continued to disappear, and indeed, were probably still doing so. But how the thing was managed remained a deep puzzle. The rustlers, or cattle thieves, had proved at the very beginning of our visit that they did not welcome the arrival of Nelson Lee.

The guv'nor's reputation was world-wide, and even in Montana the law-breakers were in fear of him. The unknown rogues had attempted to capture Nelson Lee and me, and they had actually done so, although failing to hold us.

And then, on the top of all this, Texas Jose, the half-breed outlaw, had created a great lot of excitement on the ranch and in the district. His last exploit had been to hold up a buggy driven by our host, and make off with a considerable amount of money which Mr. Farman had been carrying.

Since then the outlaw had vanished, and we had begun to think that we should have no further trouble with him. It was quite possible that he had crossed the border into Canada, deeming that Montana was rather too hot for him.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie found themselves in sight of the big corrals. Within the nearest of these, Square-Deal Reeve was giving an excellent exhibition of rough-riding, being mounted upon a bucking horse which was doing its utmost to unseat the cowboy. The thing was quite interesting and amusing.

Gathered against the railings were practically all the youthful members of the holiday party. They had an intense admiration for Square-Deal Reeve and his companions, and were watching the operations keenly.

"Of course, all this sort of thing looks pretty difficult, but there's nothing in it really," remarked Edward Oswald Handforth. "Riding these horses, for example. It's nothing to these chaps."

"Well, they're used to it; they were born on the prairie, I expect," said Church. "It may be nothing to them, but it would be a shocking ordeal for one of us. In the same way, we should not think anything of reeling off piles of arithmetic and algebra, but these cowboys would be absolutely stumped. Every man to his business, you know."

"They're jolly clever, whatever you say!" declared Reginald Pitt. "And they're a lot of lads, too! It's an awful pity that Loco Jack is laid up; but I don't suppose it'll be long before he gets about again."

The "lads" Pitt referred to were Square-Deal Reeve and his five particular friends. These six cowboys were closest pals, and they called themselves the Happy Bunch. By what we had seen of them, the name was appropriate. Two-Gun Milligan, Ace-High Peter, Twirly Sam, Slick Ed, and Loco Jack were the names of the other five members of the Bunch.

They were a light-hearted, happy set of fellows, real Western cowboys, with any amount of quaint humour and good nature. Their characteristics varied greatly, but in spite of this, they all pulled together with the most astonishing ease. They had played more than one joke upon us—particularly when they had scared Handforth and Co. with their pet grizzly bear—and, so far, we had not had any chance of retaliating. They had been too busy scouring the ranch for Texas Jose. But the man-hunt had died down now, and everybody was beginning to believe that the half-breed had gone for good.

"Well, boys, enjoying yourselves?" asked Nelson Lee, as he came up with Dorrie.

"Rather, sir!"

"These chaps are a regular lot of nuts, sir!"

"They've been doing all sorts of tricks for our entertainment," I explained. "How would you like to be on that bucking broncho, Dorrie?" I added, with a grin.

"Give me the steering-wheel of a motor-car; it suits me better," replied his lordship. "Motor-cars don't always behave themselves, but they're certainly more comfortable. By gad, how that fellow keeps on, staggers me!"

"Oh, it's not so difficult as you might think, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "A good horseman can generally manage a trick of this sort."

Twirly Sam was standing near by, and he turned, grinning.

"Mebbe you'd care to hev a try?" he suggested. "You sure seem to know a hull heap about it. Say, we'd be kinder tickled to death if you got busy with one o' these all-fired bronchos!"

The cowboys laughed loudly, and two or three of the others joined in. It was quite obvious that they discredited Nelson Lee's statement. They were good-humoured, and rather inclined to make a joke about it.

But I gave the guv'nor a keen look, and nudged him. Nelson Lee was one of the finest sportsmen one could see, and I knew well enough that these bucking horses would never be able to unseat him. He did not look the part in his immaculate light flannel suit, soft collar, and panama hat. These cowboys probably set him down as a raw tenderfoot.

"Go on, guv'nor," I muttered, nudging him again.

"My dear Nipper——"

"You can beat them at their own giddy game, sir," I whispered. "It would be rather rich, too. You'd open all their eyes, and I'd love them to know that you're not a duffer at this sort of thing."

"Good man!" chuckled Dorrie. "Go it, Lee!"

Under the circumstances, Nelson Lee had practically no alternative. He climbed over the railings into the corral, and joined the grinning cowboys. Square-Deal Reeve came walking up, knowing what was in the wind.

"Say, I guess this is bully!" he declared. "I 'lows you ain't lackin' in sand, sir! Which hoss do you figger on ridin'?"

"I'm not particular," said Lee.

"Jumpin' rattlesnakes! Do you get that, boys?" shouted Square-Deal. "He 'ain't pertick'ler! Say, I guess we'd best tote out Spitfire!"

All the others roared with laughter.

"I fail to see the point of the joke," said Nelson Lee politely.

"Waal, mebbe you'll get the hang of our laffin' when I get busy explainin'," said Square-Deal. "Say, Mr. Britisher, we ain't figgerin' on you gettin' all mussed up into bran mash, an' I sure 'lows ther' wouldn't be much left o' your carkis if you tried to ride Spitfire."

"Guess ther' ain't a buster in t' country as would get astride that blamed mare for less than fifty dollars," put in Twirly Sam. "An' say, he'd be kinder yellin' for trouble, anyways."

"Is she such a tartar, then?" asked Nelson Lee.

Square-Deal scratched his head.

"I ain't sayin' nothin', seein' as I don't rightly get you," he replied. "But we'd sure be real crool if we got urgin' you to take a ride on Spitfire. Say, we ain't got no sort o' grudge against you, mister. Get me? Thet bein' so, I ain't handin' out no taunts, an' I wouldn't advise you to ride Spitfire not fer no money——"

"One moment, Square-Deal," interrupted Nelson Lee. "For a man who is not saying anything, you are remarkably communicative. I've got an idea that you boys think I'm pretty useless at breaking-in a horse. Well, I'd like to show you that I'm not quite such a duffer as I look."

"Guess we wasn't discussin' looks!" said the cowboy.

"If you'll bring this mare out, I'll have a look at her, and decide whether I shall chance it," went on Lee. "I haven't had an opportunity of getting a bit of fun before, so perhaps I'd better seize upon this."

"Geo! If you're figgerin' on hevin' some fun wi' Spitfire—waal, I reckon you'll be kinder disappointed some," put in Twirly Sam. "See here, Mr. Lee, that hoss standin' right in front o' you is a fair terror, an' he'll sure provide you with all the amusement you're hankerin' after. You don't need to get worryin' about the mare."

"I'll allow we admire your pluck, mister, but this ain't a question o' sand," said Square-Deal. "I reckon you're a

guest of the Old Man's, an' I'm guessin' he wouldn't be exackly bustin' wi' joy if you wus saved the necessity o' returnin' home."

"Is this mare such a formidable beast, then?" asked Lee.

"Say, she's a terrer—a dog-gone man-killin' terrer!" said Square-Deal. "I ain't sayin' as she ain't an elegant piece o' hossflesh. She's sure dandy in that respeck. But we'd be kinder murderous if we wus to set you in a saddle an' set that same saddle on Spitfire's back."

"You're capable of it, old man," put in Lord Dorrimore. "Look here, I'll wager you ten to one that you won't keep in the saddle for more than five minutes. Is it a go?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I don't take any wager, Dorrie, but I'll certainly see what I can do with this mare," he replied. "Since I am called upon to show my capabilities, I might as well take on a difficult task. It will be more interesting."

The Happy Bunch looked serious.

"We're advisin' you different, mister," said Two-Gun Milligan. "By cripes! Mebbe you won't be so all-fired keen when you've set eyes on Spitfire. She's sure the liveliest bunch o' spitefulness that wuz ever collected in one goshdurned hide!"

Square-Deal Reeve and one or two of the others followed Two-Gun's example, and almost begged of Nelson Lee not to insist. They pointed out that it would be terribly reckless, and that they had no wish whatever to see him "mussed up good an' proper." But Nelson Lee insisted.

"Waal. I sure admire your determination," said Square Deal Reeve, at last. "I 'lows you're plumb grit, siree, an' I'm fair crackin' up wi' anxiety fer the safety o' your hide. Howsum, you can't say as you ain't been warned, an' I ain't takin' no respons'bility fer accidents."

All the juniors knew what was about to happen, and they watched the preparations with tremendous interest. Perhaps Nelson Lee himself realised that he was just a little foolhardy in insisting upon this dangerous exploit. But, having started, he could not very well draw back—at least, he could not do so without making himself look ridiculous. And this, of course, was the very last thing he desired. So he was compelled to carry on with the plan.

I did not forget that I had urged him on, and I began to feel just a little responsibility of my own. What was this mare like? Even the Happy Bunch seemed to be rather scared of her, so she was obviously something very out of the ordinary.

Square-Deal Reeve and Ace-High Peter lost no time in fetching the animal. We did not see her at first, for she was in the midst of a bunch of about thirty-five colts, in the next corral.

The two cowboys set about the task of cutting her out from that bunch of colts, and this was not quite so easy as it looked. Spitfire herself was a clean-limbed but clumsy-looking animal, rough-coated, and surprisingly lean. She was a great beast, but I could see at a glance that in build she was a magnificent specimen of horseflesh. Now and again I could catch a glimpse of the whites of her eyes, and this did not make me feel any the easier.

Square-Deal Reeve went straight after her without any hesitation. Spitfire knew exactly what was in the wind, and she raced wildly round the corral, trying to find a method of escape. But Square-Deal was determined, and his movements were rapid, as he prepared for the capture.

"Stand clear, boys!" he shouted suddenly.

He made an abrupt rush in to head the mare off. She turned at once, but found her way barred by Ace-High Peter. The animal turned again, halted, and then lowered her head, sat her ears well back, and rushed at Square-Deal with open mouth and glittering eyes.

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth. "She's like a wild cat!"

"Old man, I'm rather sorry I egged you on, now!" murmured Lord Dorrimore. "I had no idea the mare was such a vicious brute as this."

Nelson Lee said nothing. He was watching closely. In any case, too late to back out of it now. He would be absolutely compelled to carry out the programme, even at the risk of being injured. His pride would allow no other course.

Square-Deal was as cool as ice. He waited deliberately, and our hearts leapt within us. At the crucial moment Square-Deal darted aside, and Spitfire went rushing past. Her heels lashed out viciously.

The next second Square-Deal had gained his object.

His lariat swept out just over the ground like a quivering piece of wire. It was an astonishing quick piece of work. The mare fell sprawling on the ground, her two forefeet roped together.

Square-Deal and Ace-High Peter and Twirly Sam rushed upon Spitfire at once, and held her captive. And we all breathed with relief.

Within a very short time the mare was on her legs, bridled, and Peter and Twirly held her fast with a lariat drawn tautly over her wind-pipe. It seemed rather a cruel business, but it was obviously necessary. The animal stood perfectly still. Her eyes were gleaming, and there was no doubt that she was filled with a terrible fury.

Without delay she was led out of the corral, and into the big open space beyond, where there was plenty of room for operations. A saddle was brought—a big saddle which was just suitable for Nelson Lee's size, and the stirrups were carefully adjusted.

The saddling was a ticklish business, and it was necessary to half-choke her for a short time with the lariat—although, of course, she was not really hurt, and the method was quite humane. But she was a savage brute, and would never have been saddled at all without these precautions. The cinchas was drawn tight.

"Waal, Mr. Lee, she's right hyar, ready," said Square-Deal grimly. "But I'm advisin' you right now to quit this game. I ain't sayin' that I possess more savvee than you, but I've kinder lived among hosses since I wus loadin' up milk from a bottle, an' I'm advisin' you, man to man, to cut this right out!"

"Thanks for your warning, Square-Deal," said Nelson Lee. "But, having gone so far, I cannot give it up now. Moreover, I am quite keen upon having a little argument with this high-spirited young lady. I am really looking forward to the tussle."

The cowboys stared at Nelson Lee curiously.

"Gee! I guess you're sure made o' the right stuff!" said Twirly Sam admiringly.

"Anyway, I'm allowin' he's dreadful iggerent, by cripes!" said Two-Gun Milligan anxiously. "He don't realise what dog-gone trouble he's up against."

He was wrong, however, for Nelson Lee certainly did realise it. He knew that Spitfire was the worst "outlaw" on the whole ranch, and there was not the slightest doubt that she would do her level best to seriously injure anybody who was rash enough to try conclusions with her.

The Happy Bunch were by no means happy at this particular moment. They were, on the contrary, exceedingly ill at ease and filled with grave doubts. At the last moment Square-Deal Reeve attempted to call it off.

"Say, pard, I'm admittin' to you that I'm plumb scared," he said. "Mebbe you're guessin' that if you back out o' this we'll kinder think you mean? Say, you'd best fergit them notions. We ain't consarnin' ourselves any with regard to your grit. We sure know that you've got heaps of it. Quit this game, an' we won't think nothin'. This milk-eyed coyote of a mare'll sure throw you off an' crack you to bits wi' her durned hoofs. An', say, she's got a mouth—an' I ain't mentionin' teeth. If you quit, you'll be quittin' hon'rable. Do you get that?"

"Certainly I do," replied Nelson Lee, with a smile. "I appreciate your warning, boys, but I'm not quitting. And I don't think you need be apprehensive regarding my safety. You look upon me as a raw tenderfoot, eh? It will possibly interest you to know that I've been in Montana before to-day—and I have, moreover, broken in more than one animal of this sort."

Square-Deal shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess it ain't no good arguin'," he said. "But I'd jest like to point to the fact——."

"Aw, cut it out!" broke in Slick Ed briefly. "Breath is kinder val'able, an' don't need t' be wasted."

The rest of the cowboys said nothing further—at least they made no more attempts to pursuade Nelson Lee to give it up. But they all promised that they would stand by on the alert, and keep Spitfire off as soon as Nelson Lee was thrown. They knew that she was like a bull, and would charge at her victim as soon as he lay on the ground.

Nelson Lee was as calm as possible, and his very attitude of nonchalance filled the Happy Bunch with admiration. As for the rest of us, we all watched closely, with our hearts beating at an extra rapid speed.

"Be careful gov'nor!" I said concernedly.

Nelson Lee walked round the great animal, and spoke soothingly to her, patting her with a soft hand here and there. Not that she seemed to appreciate these attentions. She watched him with an eye that had an evil glint in it.

"Right away, boys!" said Nelson Lee coolly.

He took a raw-hide quirt from Square-Deal, and twisted it securely on his wrist. Then, swiftly, he mounted Spitfire. She was held, meanwhile, by the cowpunchers—held so securely that she stood motionless. Her sides heaved as she drew in her breath with apparent difficulty.

Nelson Lee collected the reins, and gave a final word. With a swift movement, Ace-High Peter cast the lariat clear of Spitfire's head, and, the next second, the fight commenced.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEFEAT OF SPITFIRE.

WE had all been expecting something fairly exciting and spectacular, but we were certainly not prepared for the grim battle which took place before our eyes. And even the guv'nor was rather disconcerted, I believe.

Spitfire did not waste a moment.

Her head went down even as she was released, and then, with an extraordinary spring, she simply threw herself into the air, with her back humped right up in an arch. Nelson Lee lurched forward, and then back, and he clung on for dear life.

He had ridden bucking horses before, and he had had some exciting experiences, too. There was, however, nothing of the ordinary bucking about Spitfire. She kept her legs absolutely stiff, and her four feet bunched together, and her head swung right down between her front legs. It was a position which would have seemed physically impossible to any horse.

Nelson Lee, however, was no novice, and he was not immediately flung to the ground, as Spitfire would have liked. Clinging there, Lee felt fairly secure for the moment, and he was rather enjoying the adventure. He knew the danger, and there was something exhilarating in this tussle between man and beast.

Once again, Spitfire shot up, and we looked at her movements with a kind of fascinated fear. We gasped as the mare deliberately hurled herself round in mid air, as she was at the top of her jump. She came down facing the opposite direction.

It was an astounding spring for such a clumsy looking beast—a spring which one was more likely to associate with a tiger or a leopard. And this swift, bewildering movement was enough to unseat a rider of years' experience.

Nelson Lee nearly fell into the trap, but he saved himself just in time, and clung to the saddle grimly and desperately, applying his quirt with energy. But this only maddened the mare all the more.

Then came the next buck, and Lee was flung forward, and it seemed that he was about to shoot clean over Spitfire's head. But, with a great effort, Lee threw himself back, and still remained secure in the saddle.

In spite of himself, he was feeling somewhat dizzy, but he had a feeling within him that he was the master in this fight. He determined, then and there, that he would use every ounce of his energy, if necessary, to tire this savage out and emerge the conqueror.

"Great pip!" muttered Handforth. "I—I'm feeling properly scared, you chaps! Mr. Lee's going to come an awful cropper soon."

"It looks like it!" said Church fearfully. "Oh, my goodness! What did he try it for? He might have known that——"

"Oh!" gasped Pitt huskily. "Look—look!"

It seemed that disaster was about to befall Nelson Lee. Spitfire was on her hind legs, lashing out with her front feet at the thin air. It was her intention to crash over backwards—we could all see it. And if that happened her rider would probably receive a fatal injury.

But Nelson Lee was ready.

Before the mare could tumble over he leapt forward in the saddle, right over her neck, and forced her to the ground again. And now Spitfire tried another tactic. She attempted again and again to twist her head round and snap with her bare teeth at Nelson Lee's legs.

But he was prepared for this move, and she failed. Then, without any warning, she suddenly flung her head up, and

it was only by a miracle that Nelson Lee did not receive the blows in his mouth. He threw himself back just in time.

"Gee!" muttered Square-Deal. "Say, boys, what do you know about this, anyways?"

"I sure guess he's a real buster!" said Twirly, admiration eloquent in his voice. "Jumpin' coyotes! This Britisher is a durned surpise packet!"

All the cowboys, as a matter of fact, had expected Nelson Lee to be flung to the ground within a few seconds of the commencement of the fight. But Nelson Lee had not been thrown yet, and the Happy Bunch began to realise that he was, so far, the master of the situation.

However, it could not last for ever.

Spitfire was maddened beyond measure now. She, herself, was realising the fact which was obvious to the onlookers—that she was being beaten. And the knowledge positively sent her into writhing contortions of rage. Square-Deal Reeve had been quite correct when he described her as a savage outlaw.

Spitfire performed a movement which no ordinary man could have foreseen, and which would have unseated anything living. In fact, it appeared at first that she had met with a mishap.

Her legs literally went from under her as she landed after one terrible buck. She flung herself to the ground, and then, in a flash, it was obvious what her game was. But Nelson Lee had foreseen the mare's idea in advance—before we could detect it.

Lee was flung down, and as he touched the ground he rolled away—rolled as though some invisible hand had given him a giant's push. He knew the danger, and he had put every effort into that movement. Spitfire did not succeed in crushing her rider beneath her great body.

She knew, however, that Nelson Lee had escaped, and she attempted to finish the battle then and there. Even as Nelson Lee was getting to his feet, she leapt up like a bunch of wires. Then, with her mouth open, she charged at him.

"By gad!" shouted Dorrie.

"Oh, my hat!"

"He'll be killed!"

"Oh, guv'nor!" I said, clenching my fists.

A rope whistled through the air, settled over Spitfire's head, and was drawn tight in a flash. Before the mare could get within a foot of Nelson Lee her wicked head was swung round with a terrific jar.

Without a word, Nelson Lee swept into the saddle again. He was breathing hard, and he felt grim. Having started this contest, he was not going to give in until he was either powerless to continue, or the mare was beaten.

And Spitfire was evidently of the same mood. She was foaming at the mouth, and sweating desperately. And I noticed that the whites of her eyes were bloodshot. She was finding her task a difficult one.

Having failed in all her tricks, she now tried something else—something which came just as unexpectedly as the other stunts. The mare performed an extraordinary running buck. As she did so her body twisted with strange writhing movements, but Nelson Lee was not unseated.

The animal stood quite still, and this stoppage was as quick as her first movement. She began to kick savagely with her head stretched low. And Nelson Lee, in spite of himself, was sliding, with the saddle, over her neck.

And then Nelson Lee took her squarely in hand.

He applied the quirt with all his strength, beating her unmercifully—as she undoubtedly deserved. But even so, the animal was so tough that these slashes hardly took any effect. But the stinging of the quirt seemed to bring her to her senses.

She suddenly flung herself back, and remained quite still.

It was almost as though she was nearly exhausted. Quivering in every limb, she stood there, breathing hard. Then, once again, she re-commenced the battle. But now there was no terror in her tricks.

Twice Nelson Lee was thrown, but he regained the saddle each time before Spitfire could attack him. The famous detective was by no means fresh. Streaming with perspiration, panting hard, he stuck to his task with an iron will.

The Happy Bunch, looking on, revealed their intense admiration. They had expected something so very different to this! Nelson Lee had beaten this untamed vixen—there was no doubt about that now.

Her tricks were weak and tame, and

were growing weaker still. Nelson Lee saw that he had won, and he applied the quirt gently, just to tell Spitfire that he was her master.

Then he used his spurs, and this, combined with the other punishment, proved to be the final straw. Spitfire rose on her hind legs, gave one tremendous forward bound, and then she raced away down the valley like a Derby winner.

"Gee whiz!" yelled Square-Deal. "She's beat, boys! Guess she'll take chaff out of a baby's hand after this!"

"Sure!" said Twirly, grinning with pleasure.

"By cripes! It was sure some fight!" said Two-Gun Milligan ecstatically. "Right this minnit I'm takin' off my hat to that Britisher!"

The Happy Bunch fairly yelled with enthusiasm, and they were still in this condition when Nelson Lee returned, twenty minutes later. He trotted up leisurely, with Spitfire tame, subdued, and as quiet as an old cab horse.

She was positively docile, and hardly had enough energy to keep up the trot, which Nelson Lee had insisted upon.

"Guess she's tuckered out some!" grinned Square-Deal. "Say, Mr. Lee, I'm sure guessin' that you're a real man!"

"Every time, pard!" shouted the other members of the Bunch.

Nelson Lee himself smiled, and dismounted. He was looking quite cool again, although decidedly dishevelled, and he suffered from several grazes and one or two bruises. He was at once surrounded by the juniors, who cheered him to the echo.

Hitherto, the Happy Bunch had regarded Nelson Lee as an outsider—a tenderfoot. But from this moment onwards he occupied a different position in their outlook. He was a man—a man's man.

And, during the remainder of the evening, the guv'nor's tussle with Spitfire was a subject for general conversation at the ranch house. The juniors were particularly elated, for they were proud of Nelson Lee—he being their housemaster when at St. Frank's. The famous detective had done wonders.

Of course, Lee himself treated the whole thing lightly, and, after the evening meal he retired with Dorrie and Mr. Farman to the luxurious billiard room. I went with them and marked, while several of the other juniors stood looking on. Others were in the drawing room with Mrs. Farman and Connie. We were enjoying ourselves greatly here, out on the prairie—where there was every modern luxury. Mr. Farman's ranch house was a perfect model, containing everything that one might expect to find in a big city residence, including electric light.

It was while we were in the billiard room that a diversion came. The big French windows were open, for the evening was very warm. It was not yet quite dark, and, looking up, I noticed that Buck Mason was coming towards the house. He made for the French windows, and paused as he entered the doorway.

"Hallo, Buck!" I said. "Feeling all right?"

"Sure, young 'un," replied the ranch manager. "Guess them scratches ain't hurt me none. I'm figurin' to have a word with Big Jim."

Buck had received several nasty little wounds a day or two earlier during an encounter with Texas Jose, the outlaw. But he was a hardy, toughened individual, and he took very little notice of his hurts.

Mr. Farman had heard the words, and he turned.

"Well, Buck, anything important?" he asked, as he paused, cue in hand, before making a shot. "Guess I'm ready to hear what you've got to say."

"Waal, Chief, there's a guy out hyar who guesses that he'd be kinder glad of a few minutes with you," replied Buck Mason. "I dare say you've heard of him—a fellow named Dawson—Poker Dawson, they call him, seein' as he hes an almighty hankerin' after draw poker. He hit the trail from the foothills at noon, and showed up half an hour ago. He's got a hunch that he knows somethin' big."

"This fellow seems to be an interesting visitor," said Mr. Farman, laying his cue down. "Have you got him around?"

"Right here, Chief—outside!"

"Good—tote him in," said the millionaire.

A minute later a rough customer entered the billiard room, blinking in the electric light, and fingering his shabby hat. He was attired in rough trousers with leggings, a flannel shirt and a grubby neckerchief.

"Say, Mr. Farman, I 'lows I'm real

sorry to intrude," exclaimed the newcomer diffidently. "But I'm sort of figgerin' that my information is best handed out right now. I've heared tell that that blamed guy of a Texas Jose hes lit into the hills. Waal, my shack is up in that same locality. I ain't sayin' as I'm letting loose any real talk. But things look kinder suspicious."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Mr. Farman.

"Waal, I'm gettin' busy explainin' right now," said Poker Dawson. "It's this way, boss. This mornin' I seen somethin' which got me guessin' good'n hard. I wus out searchin' around for a couple of prairie chicken. But that ain't the p'int. What I seen was this. Way back in the hills a column o' smoke was risin' behind the trees. Say, it ain't usual fer that thing to happen up where I live. It set me thinkin' some. Gee! My brain got that busy I forgot my eats! Waal, boss, I calc'lated I'd best get around Rattlesnake Bend right soon, but I stopped in here fust. Mebbe you get me?"

"Well, not exactly," said Mr. Farman. "What are you suggesting about this mysterious column of smoke?"

"Say, I ain't suggestin' nothin'," replied Poker Dawson. "But it kinder hit me that no lawful pusson would be makin' camp-fires away there in the hills. Y'see, the guy who made that fire didn't figger on me bein' around. I'm a lonely kinder cuss, and my shack ain't situated in what you'd call a highly populated district. No, sir! Say. I need to walk ten miles to my nearest neighbour. Waal, I've been figgerin' that this guy with the camp-fire didn't know I was ther'. An' it kinder hit me that this same guy is Texas Jose."

"Mebbe he's right, Chief," put in Buck Mason. "We've all been reckonin' that Jose slipped up into the hills, and this sort of agrees."

"Quite so," said Mr. Farman thoughtfully. "Say, Buck, we'd be wise if we followed this up. See here! We'll get out early in the morning—just after dawn—an' I reckon we can be up in these hills real early. Say, we'll look into this. What do you think, Mr. Lee?"

"I certainly agree," said Nelson Lee. "It is quite likely, of course, that this man is wrong in his supposition, but it would be very foolish to ignore the matter. If possible, we want to get hold of the outlaw, and there is just a chance that we shall succeed. The fellow may not have any suspicion that his hiding place has been discovered. He imagines, possibly, that the smoke from his fire could not be observed by any living soul."

Buck Mason nodded with approval.

"Guess your notion fits in with mine, sir," he said. "I'm figgerin' that's settled. I'll have a bunch of hosses ready soon after dawn. How many of us will be gettin' on the trail, chief?"

"I'd like to come, sir," I said eagerly.

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't do so," smiled Mr. Farman. "You can come with Mr. Lee, of course. I don't think any of the other boys had better come—this affair may be risky."

"Nipper will be all right," said Nelson Lee. "He and I have faced many dangers together, and we are well accustomed to this country."

The juniors were disappointed—particularly Justin B. Farman. He wanted to go with his father, but Big Jim would not hear of it. It was different with me, for I was Nelson Lee's assistant. Out here I was not regarded as a schoolboy.

There would be several others in the party—Buck Mason, Poker Dawson and the Happy Bunch, with the single exception of Loco Jack, who was unable to move. Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi and the juniors made arrangements of their own. Dorrie would dearly have liked to come with us, but he decided to remain behind for the benefit of the juniors. He intended taking them out.

And so, with the plans for the morrow cut and dried, we went to bed. Little did we imagine what strange and extraordinary events the morrow was to bring.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE OUTLAW'S TRAIL.

BUCK MASON looked round critically.

"Yep, I guess we're all ready, chief," he said briskly. "We ain't needin' to hang around any longer. It's a longish trip, and we'd sure be wise to get goin'."

Mr. Farman nodded.

"Sure, Buck," he agreed. "We're ready if you are."

It was bright, early morning, and the sun was shining in the Roaring Z valley

with rare brilliance and heat. We were not actually starting at dawn, but the hour was still quite early.

There was quite a crowd of us, including Nelson Lee and myself and Square-Deal Reeve and his companions. One of the finest horses on the ranch had been placed at Nelson Lee's disposal, and the guv'nor was looking rather serious. He realised that this trip might lead to big results.

He certainly did not guess what amazing results these would be.

And so, almost at once, we started off, proceeding at a steady trot up the wooded hills out of the valley. It was really astonishing how quickly all signs of the ranch house and the river disappeared.

For, out on the open prairie, we lost sight of everything. In every direction, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the undulating wastes of course grassland, with the imposing ridge of the Rocky Mountains ever present in the distance ahead. It was a splendid sight.

Our course lay direct over the prairie, and into the far away foothills, which rose higher and higher until the Rockies themselves were reached. These foothills, for the most part, were seldom visited by mankind.

Within their depths—down in the valleys and in the woods—there were beauties untold to be seen. It was the glorious virgin beauty of Nature, where nothing was disturbed or sullied by civilisation.

It was quite likely, as Poker Dawson had pointed out, that Texas Jose was hiding in the hills. Even if this proved to be the case, there was no certainty that we should capture the outlaw.

For we knew that he had a fast horse, and at the first sign of our approach he would probably flee. However, there was every chance that we should get on his trail. And so we were optimistic.

Mile after mile we covered, riding on steadily, with the cowboys in their picturesque garb leading the way. The Happy Bunch were more set upon this trip than we were, for they would dearly have loved to lay their hands upon this murderous ruffian who had been terrorising the whole district.

Texas Jose was no ordinary desperado.

He had worked on Roaring Z Ranch years back, and had been "fired" for several cases of glaring theft. And, just recently, he had returned, apparently with the idea of exacting revenge.

But he was not only vindictive towards the ranch and its employees, but he had swept down upon Rattlesnake Bend, the nearby township. Here he had killed two or three people, and had robbed a store. After this exploit, Texas Jose had killed an elderly man in Bluff Creek Valley, afterwards disappearing. He had made one brief show after that, but had not been seen since. There was a reward offered of two thousand dollars for the outlaw's body, dead or alive. And it was fairly evident that Poker Dawson was out after this reward.

He knew that if Mr. Farman and his cowboys captured the outlaw, the reward would go to him—since he had been the first to bring the information. Alone, he could do nothing.

Leaving the prairie behind, we at last found ourselves entering the foothills. Here the scenery was wonderful in the extreme. There was a strange enchanting beauty about everything we saw.

We passed through wonderful valleys where soft breezes blew, and where the glinting sunlight seemed to possess a wondrous magic. The wind sighed in the rustling treetops of the peaceful woodland. The whole picture was fascinating, and we could not help being impressed.

We were looking upon Nature in all its wonders of complete simplicity. The twinkling of the sunlight through the trees compelled us to gaze long, and we forgot almost everything except the beauty which lay all around us. The wonderful green of the little valleys was something which we had rarely seen. The trickling brooks, the noisy, bustling rapids where the water hurried down between piles of worn rocks. Everything went towards making a never-to-be-forgotten picture.

In the main, these hills and valleys were practically untrodden by human foot, and their was a sense of mystery in their very look. And, whenever we happened to glance upwards, there reared up the awe-inspiring peaks of the great mountains, where the snowy sheen dazzled the eye.

I suppose only the eye of an artist could really appreciate this wonderful panorama of verdant beauty. Personally, I almost overlooked the fact that we were out on a grim mission, and that we were looking for a murderous outlaw.

"By jingo, guv'nor, this is the place to come to for real beauty," I exclaimed, as Nelson Lee and I rode side by side. "Isn't it lovely? It makes a chap feel that he'd like to stay out here all his life."

"Quite so, Nipper, but you must remember that this is the best season of the year," said Nelson Lee. "In the winter time this view would not be quite so enticing, I am afraid."

As we progressed the scenery grew wilder in its virgin glory. We came unexpectedly upon a stream of considerable size, noisily making its way from the mountains down to the plains. The current was very swift, and the waters deep, and I was rather surprised when I found that we had to cross the river.

We all dismounted at a spot where there were many rocks. In fact, opposite some bustling rapids. Away in front of us, on the other side of the river, rose a steep hillside, where trees grew in thick profusion. And suddenly, after we had dismounted, Poker Dawson pointed an eager finger.

"Say, take a peep up ther'!" he exclaimed. "Guess our man's still around!"

It was a moment or two before I detected anything out of the ordinary. Then, faint and indistinct against the background of hills, I detected a filmy column of smoke rising in the still air.

"Geo! Mebbe the gosh durned coyote is makin' his breakfast!" suggested Two-Gun Milligan. "By cripes! I'm eggerin' he won't have need for no more breakfast if we get a hold on his durned carkiss!"

"Hold on, Two-Gun—we have no evidence that this stranger in the hills is actually Texas Jose," said Nelson Lee. "I certainly agree that the supposition is likely to be correct—but we must not take it for granted."

Milligan laughed.

"Gee! You sure are an elegant talker, pard!" he said. "Say, I'd give a piece to be able to hand out the swell words that aways."

The sight of that column of smoke had made us all eager. And then we set about the talk of crossing the river. It was, of course, quite impossible to take the horses with us, and the rest of the journey was to be accomplished on foot.

Much to their disgust, Twirly Sam and Slick Ed were left behind, in charge of the animals. And the rest of us crossed the river and penetrated into the thick woodland. It was reckoned that it would take us a good half hour to get near the spot where the smoke was rising.

The actual crossing of the river was a ticklish business, and at first Nelson Lee had forbidden me to take the risk. But I insisted, and the guv'nor gave in. But I readily admit that it was a task fraught with danger.

The rapids were swift and treacherous, and the only method of crossing them was to use the numerous rocks which formed a rough set of stepping stones from bank to bank. In places these stones were wide apart, with the leaping, cascading water rushing between. A false step would have led to serious consequences. But as we made no false steps, there is no need for me to enlarge upon its possibility.

We reached the other side in perfect safety, and then our steps led us through belts of woodland which had never before seen human beings. We were making our way into glades and little unexpected valleys which constantly opened up new delights for the eye.

But the thought was constantly in our minds that at any moment we might be called upon to face a desperate, murderous ruffian. And so we did not fully appreciate the scenes which surrounded us. And we progressed onwards rapidly, led by Poker Dawson, who had an excellent sense of direction.

He knew these hills better than any of us, perhaps, since he lived among them, although further to the westward. And, at last, after climbing steadily for possibly two miles, our movements became more cautious. The woods were not quite so thick here, little clearings appearing at unexpected moments.

And it was in one of these clearings, probably, that the author of the column of smoke had his camp. We did not wish to give him any chance of becoming aware of our approach. And now we were walking silently, without any conversation whatever. Speaking was strictly forbidden.

We did our utmost to make no sounds as we walked, and we were duly rewarded for our precautions. For, almost before we knew it, we found ourselves looking into a much smaller clearing than the average one.

It was just a little break in the wood-

land, where the sun shed a soft mellow radiance down upon the fresh, enchanting green of the grass. It was a delightful spot, where wild flowers grew in abundance, and where a tiny trickling stream went speeding along its fantastic, irregular course.

And, just against the bank of this little stream, a tiny camp was set. A fire burned lazily, and one or two cooking utensils could be seen lying on the ground near by. A man sat there on a sleeping blanket, in total ignorance of our presence. We had given him not the slightest warning of our approach.

And he, no doubt, believed himself to be secure, for we were a great many miles from the nearest human habitation. And, under ordinary circumstances, no searching parties would penetrate into these hills. For they were innumerable, and stretched for miles and miles to the east and west and right up into the fir-clad mountain sides.

Just near the camp there was a tiny bower of branches and leaves, where this outcast made his bed. He was evidently no ordinary man, for such an individual would not make a camp in this lonely spot.

The fellow got to his feet and stretched himself. He looked up at the sun, turning in our direction. But it was impossible for him to see us, for we were hidden in the dense shadows of the wood.

But we recognised that face at once.

Poker Dawson was right—the man was Texas Jose.

He turned again, and Nelson Lee silently drew his revolver. Square-Deal Reeve did the same thing, and several of the others followed suit. Then, with catlike tread, they emerged into the open and advanced. I stood watching, with my heart beating rapidly. I was filled with anxiety.

What if the murderous rascal turned now? In a flash his gun would be out, and he would not hesitate to fire. With so many lives on his hands already, he cared little about adding more.

The fateful moment came abruptly.

Something must have caught the man's ear. He turned his head sharply, and then uttered a hoarse cry. One hand went to his belt in a flash—and then he let out a string of oaths. He was not wearing his belt.

He dived towards the ground, but was brought up short.

"Hands-up!" roared Square-Deal. "Say, you all-fired skunk, if you make one move, I'll let daylight into your vitals!"

Texas Jose twirled round, his hands leaping upwards. For there had been something in the cowboy's tone which meant—death. Refusal to obey that order would have led to instant extinction.

The outlaw, with his hands above his head, stood still as his enemies approached. His face was black with fury. But he could do nothing—he had been caught unawares, and had had no chance to put up a fight.

Nelson Lee quickly took charge of the bandit's belt and revolver. And, in the meantime, Buck Mason jerked Jose's hands down behind him, and passed a rope over and over his wrists.

These men were in a grim mood.

"Guess you've played your last hand, Texas Jose!" said Buck Mason curtly. "You was figgerin' that you held a trump, mebbe—but I'm guessin' that you were wrong. This is the end of everything fer you!"

"By thunder, you got me!" snarled Texas Jose. "I wusn't kinder calc'lating on this blamed play. Gee! If I'd a' had jest one minute more —"

"You didn't!" interrupted Buck. "We followed your trail, you skunk, and from this minute you'll consider yourself arrested. You'll be a hull heap interested to know that we're takin' you right along to the sheriff's office in Rattlesnake Bend."

No notice was taken of his lurid threats. The man was finished.

It was clear enough that he was a half-breed, but he spoke the same rough talk as Square-Deal Reeve and the other cowboys. For Texas Jose, of course, had lived nearly all his time on these Montana cattle ranches.

We did not remain long in the little clearing, but commenced to walk back to the rapids, where we had left two of the cowboys and the horses. Our mission had been successful, and we were all feeling in the best of spirits.

"I hardly dared to hope for this, Mr. Lee!" said Big Jim Farman. "Say, it makes things easier all around, I reckon. We sha'n't need to keep the youngsters in, and you'll be able to get straight ahead with those other inquiries of yours.

Are you still reckoning that Texas Jose may know something?"

"I think it is most likely that this rascal knows more than he would have us believe," said Nelson Lee. "Whether he is actually connected with the cattle thieves is a point which we cannot decide until we have closely questioned him. Even then our efforts may be fruitless."

"Well, the main thing is that we've got the rotter," I said. "After all the trouble he caused, and after all the excitement, it's jolly queer that his capture should be such a tame business."

"Yes, it sometimes happens in that way," said Nelson Lee. "Armed, this man was a desperate character, but, taken off his guard, he did not possess an ounce of fight. Such a crumple-up is not uncommon."

"Wnal, I'm figgerin' that ther's a tidy little sum of two thousand dollars comin' around in my direction," said Poker Dawson gaily. "Gee whizz! I'm sure a lucky guy, and right here I'm telling you that——"

"Don't you think you'd better guess again?" interrupted Buck Mason. "Say, Poker, air you calc'lating to collect that bank roll an' keep it fer yourself? Say, that wad ain't no more your property than it's mine."

"Shucks! Aw, talk sensible!" ejaculated Poker Dawson indignantly. "Wasn't it I who fust got busy handin' out this information? Say, I claim that there reward, but I'm willin' to distribute ha'f of it among the ranch boys, seein' as they helped some——"

"Don't you worry, Dawson," interrupted Mr. Farman. "You gave that information about the column of smoke, and you'll get the reward all right—Mr. Lee and I will see to that. What's more, you'll keep it for yourself, and I'll distribute another two thousand among the boys."

"Jumpin' snakes!" said Poker Dawson. "I guess you're durned good, sir!"

The return to the river was rather faster than the journey up, for now we were descending all the time, and it was a smooth, easy descent. And, at length, we came out into the open, within sight of Twirly Sam and Slick Ed, on the other side of the rapids. They jumped up at once as we appeared.

"Holy Mackinaw!" roared Twirly Sam. "Hev you got him, boys?"

"Sure!" replied Square-Deal.

"Bully!"

Twirly Sam and Slick Ed danced with pleasure, and then we, on the other side, prepared to make the crossing. Nelson Lee seized the rope which bound Jose's hands behind his back. There was a fairly long length, and the guv'nor looped it round his waist. He looked at the prisoner grimly.

"You will go first," he said curtly.

Never for a moment did we suspect that any thoughts of treachery were in Texas Jose's mind. He certainly would not make any attempt to break loose—he could not very well do so. And Nelson Lee had merely taken the precaution of tieing himself to the prisoner as an act of humanity.

If Jose should happen to slip and fall into the swift current he would be doomed. For, with his hands bound, there would be little chance of his surviving. And so, Nelson Lee had taken this step. The cowboys would not have been quite so particular. They looked upon Texas Jose's life as just about as valuable as a rattlesnake's.

Mr. Farman and Buck Mason led the way over the crossing. Texas Jose followed. And then, just as they were half way across, the captured outlaw suddenly gave vent to a harsh laugh. And, as he did so, he leapt sideways, with all his force, into the rushing stream.

The movement was so unexpected that we were not prepared for it.

Nelson Lee himself gave just one startled gasp as the rope grew taut, and he was pulled headlong into the rushing water. The next moment our horrified eyes were gazing upon the two men swiftly floating down right into the heart of the rapids.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted hoarsely.

"The dog-gone coyote!" roared Square-Deal Reeve fiercely. "Say, boys, do you get that? Gee! I'm figgerin' that Mr. Lee ain't got much of a chance in this blamed rapid!"

The others said nothing. They were staring down at the river in a fascinated kind of way. I hardly knew what I was doing, or what I was thinking of. I only knew that Nelson Lee had gone—that he had been dragged into the water by this murderous outlaw. The reason for Texas Jose's move was quite obvious. He know well enough that he was booked for the hangman's rope. It was even

probable that he would be lynched by the mob as soon as he was taken into Rattlesnake Bend. And so, rather than face this ordeal, the outlaw had jumped into the rapids—preferring death by this means. And he had the additional pleasure of taking Nelson Lee with him to his doom.

But the rascally half-breed's scheme did not materialise in the exact way he intended. For an eddy of the swiftly rushing currents seized Nelson Lee in its grip, and bore him away towards the left-hand bank. This was very high, and Nelson Lee had practically no chance of grasping the bank itself. But, just at one place, a willow tree grew near by, and the branches overhung the water, some of the leaves even touching the surface.

And at first he reached up desperately, and grabbed at one of the branches. The next moment his headlong descent of the rapids was checked. He held there, and the branch did not break. We were just able to see this from the crossing, where we were still standing, gazing down the river with our hearts beating at a terribly rapid pace.

"Good heavens!" I shouted huskily. "Do you see, boys? He's caught hold of that tree! Quick! We've got to rush down as fast as we can——"

"Say, young 'un, you don't need to hand out that talk!" shouted Twirly Sam. "I guess we're getting busy right now! Come on, boys!"

They tore off as hard as they possibly could, and I rushed after them. But, as I had been standing in the middle of the crossing at the moment, I was some little distance in the rear, for I had to get over the river.

And while we were doing this, the little drama was continuing its course.

Nelson Lee, clinging tightly to that overhanging branch, tried with all his strength to haul in the rope. He did not want Texas Jose to meet his death by means of this rapid. Nelson Lee was anxious to take the man in, and to hand him over to the sheriff. But fate would not allow this.

Suddenly the rope snapped, and Texas Jose was swept down on the bosom of the speeding current. Nelson Lee, of course, remained clinging to the tree branch—and it is hardly necessary for me to say that he was quickly pulled ashore by the eager cowboys, none the worse for his exciting experience.

In the meantime, Texas Jose was far luckier than he had anticipated. As a matter of fact, the outlaw had been quite prepared to die—he had expected to go to his death in this river. With his hands bound, and being only a poor swimmer, he had no hope whatever of getting to the shore alive.

But the snapping of that rope made all the difference.

The cord had been tied round the outlaw's wrists. As a consequence, the strands loosened, and Texas José was amazed and excited to find himself free! His arms were free, and he was able to strike out for the bank with all his strength. Not that this was of much avail. The current was exceedingly strong, and all Texas Jose's efforts were quite futile.

However, now that there was some hope, the man did not give up the battle. He struggled on, just managing to keep his head above water.

And down he was flung, covering the distance at a great speed. Now and again he narrowly missed death, where jagged rocks jutted out, and where the water was converted into creamy foam.

And the water was icy, too, and the half-breed's blood was becoming numbed. He was losing all interest in his surroundings—he was beginning to resign himself to the inevitable. And then, just as he was losing consciousness, he felt himself in smoother water.

He struggled desperately with his wits, and then saw, to his amazement, that he was quite near the bank, and in comparatively calm water. Exerting all his remaining powers, he struck out, and managed to grasp hold of some rough grass which grew on the river bank.

One minute later Texas Jose hauled himself ashore—alive, and very little hurt.

"Sufferin' coyotes!" he panted. "Guess I'm sure in luck! I figgered that I was goin' to hit the one-way trail all right this trip! Geo! I'll need to quit mighty slick, too—them all-fired guys will be right down the river directly, and I guess it's up to me to vamoose good'n sharp!"

Exactly how Texas Jose was going to vamoose, he did not know. He was only aware of the fact that his peril was great, and that it would be necessary to clear out of the district as soon as he possibly could. The prospect of recap-

ture gave him added strength, and, after a few minutes had elapsed, he was feeling a great deal better. The numbness was going out of his limbs under the influence of the warm sunlight.

He made his way round a group of willows in order to inspect the exact locality. He wondered if there would be any cover for him, so that he could make his escape without being observed. And then, as he gazed over the grassland, he gave a start.

"By thunder!" he muttered, his eyes glittering. "Guess I've seen a few pretty sights in my time—but, say, this kinder makes me feel good!"

For, only two or three hundred yards from him, a group of horses was quietly grazing—one or two of them gazing at him idly, and with mild interest. The presence of these horses was not very surprising—but what was surprising was the fact that all the horses were saddled.

And then Texas José knew the real truth. For, beyond, and looking mere specks across the big expanse of meadow country, were a group of figures. As a matter of fact, these figures belonged to Lord Dorrimore, Umlosi, Handforth and Co., and all the rest of the St. Frank's party. They had come out on a little expedition of their own—to explore this peaceful valley, and the rapids. And they had left their horses quietly grazing whilst they went towards the river.

Texas Jose was not slow to realise that Fortune had favoured him in an extraordinary manner. At least, so it seemed at the moment. In literal truth, all this was leading to one inexorable conclusion—a conclusion which Texas Jose never dreamed of. Had he known the actual truth—had he guessed what this adventure was to result in—he would have fled in the opposite direction. But it was not possible for the outlaw to know any of the facts which were destined to occur in the near future. Therefore, he took the obvious course, and crept towards that little bunch of saddled horses.

His idea was plain. Here were the horses, with nobody to guard them. It would be quite an easy matter for Texas Jose to leap into the saddle of one of the animals, and to speed off. He could see himself escaping altogther—he felt morally certain that he would be able to elude capture.

And then the excitement began.

Texas Jose did exactly as he had planned. He landed on one of the horses; glanced round, and then rode away at a swift gallop. His movements were not unobserved. Lord Dorrimore and the other members of the party saw the stranger seize one of the horses, and make away with it. In fact, through a pair of binoculars, Dorrie recognised the desperado.

There was a wild rush across the meadow, a swift mounting of horses, and then they all started off in pursuit, the juniors excited. Not being expert horsemen, they were soon left behind by Umlosi and Lord Dorrimore, who urged their horses on to greater effect.

Texas Jose was going like the wind, and making for the northern boundary of the ranch. Why he should do this was rather puzzling, since in this direction there was that tremendous great cliff, which barred all further progress into the outer country. But Texas Jose probably knew what he was doing. He rode recklessly, with very little care for his horse's safety. He felt that everything depended upon this one great effort. Would he be able to reach the northern boundary before his pursuers overtook him?"

As events turned out, it was a very narrow squeak for the outlaw. He had not proceeded more than a mile before he saw another party of horsemen.

These, of course, were Nelson Lee, Mr. Farman, Buck Mason, and the Happy Bunch. They were on their way round the open country so that they would be able to strike the river lower down. And they saw Texas Jose and recognised him. They gave chase at once. Then there was a short consultation. Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi came up, and the juniors. The pursuers were separated into three different parties. One went straight forward into the valley which ended in that great cliff. Another party went round to the West, and a third party to the East. According to Buck Mason, there were no other trails, and Texas Jose would be trapped. There was no possible way for him to escape. He had gone into this valley, and it stood to reason that he would have to turn, either to the left or the right. It did not matter which way—his progress would be barred. And then came the surprise.

For, when the three parties joined forces, about fifteen minutes later, they

all reported the same thing. Texas Jose had not been seen.

In some manner which could not be fathomed, he had given his pursuers the slip.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET PASS.

EXTRAORDINARY as the situation seemed at the moment, it was all the more extraordinary after we had examined the matter thoroughly.

For it will be understood by this time that we had all entered the valley just against the northern boundary of the Roaring Z Ranch. The character of the country here was very peculiar. It was impossible to pass beyond the boundary at this point, for a tremendously high cliff rose in front of us—a cliff which swept right up into the heavens to a distance of something like two or three thousand feet.

It was all solid rock, and no living thing—except those which fly—could possibly get to the top.

There were only three ways out of this valley. One was to the west, one to the east, and one to the south. You could go either up or down the valley, or away from it to the south. To the north there was no way out. And we had barred all the other exits. We had cut off Texas Jose's method of escape. And yet he was nowhere to be seen! This was very startling.

As Buck Mason explained, it was impossible to leave the trail, especially on horse-back. For the going was terribly rough, and there were thick trees growing in every direction. In other places there were bogs, where no living thing could exist. And, at the end of our talk, only one possible conclusion remained. Texas Jose had come into this valley, and he had not appeared since. Impossible as it seemed, the outlaw must have made his exit by means of the cliff! And this, on the face of it, was perfectly ridiculous.

For one glance at the cliff told us that no exit existed.

"Say, I guess I'm sure stumped!" said Buck Mason, at length. "I'll allow I've hit a few mysterious things in my time, but my brains are kinder mussed up, an' I can't think none. Whar' in the name of miracles has that guy vamoosed to?"

"It is certainly mysterious, Buck, but there must be some explanation," said Nelson Lee, looking round keenly. "We know that Texas Jose went down the river, that he managed to get ashore, and that he stole a horse from Lord Dorrimore's party. We are all here, and we have all been chasing this half-breed. He has vanished—somewhere in this valley. Are you quite certain that he could not have got away to the west, or the east——"

"I'm telling you right now, Mr. Lee, that there's no possibility of Texas Jose hevin' got past us," put in Buck Mason grimly. "That's straight from the shoulder, believe me. I figger I know what langwidge I'm handin' out, and it's no sort o' use to think that Texas Jose climbed this little step we see right in front of us!"

He indicated the big cliff.

And we all looked at it with a kind of fascination. It was an enormous cliff, stretching for miles and miles in both directions, and mounting its summit up to a dizzy height.

For a man to climb this great precipice was out of the question, and for him to disappear with his horse seemed positively uncanny.

And while we were talking, Umlosi was working. Without being observed, the Kutana chief was gazely closely at the ground, and moving forward yard by yard. We were all talking in a little cluster, and I was the first to notice that Umlosi had left us. He was making slowly towards the cliff, and, seeing he was very intent upon the ground, I ran after him, wondering what he was doing. He glanced up as I came beside him.

"What's the idea, Umlosi?" I asked.

"Wau! Thou must not disturb me, O Manzie!" he said, in his deep voice. "Mayhap I shall be able to help in this great chase after the man who has been committing so many killings. Thinkest thou I am idling my time, O my son?"

"No, you're not the kind of chap to idle your time away, Umlosi," I said. "The case is this—have you got hold of anything?"

"Thou art a strange youth for expressing thyself," said Umlosi. "Aye, Manzie, I have discovered much. Dost thou not see the trail which lies clearly upon the ground? Are thine eyes of such little use, that thou canst not see that which is plainly marked?"

An amazing thing happened. That enormous piece of rock, stretching high into the air, was moving—slowly it was shifting sideways, as though upon a great axle.

I stared at the ground.

"Plainly marked?" I repeated. "No, Umlosi, I'm afraid I can't see anything particularly exciting. There's no trail here——"

"Thou art mistaken," interrupted Umlosi. "Dost thou not see the marks upon the ground? Here—there—look there, Manzie! This man that thou callest Texas Jose has passed this way with his horse. I have spoken!"

And Umlosi went on his way carefully, taking no further notice of me. He arrived, at length, at the face of the gigantic cliff, and here he remained for some little time, looking about him closely and with great attention.

He looked up with a gleam in his eyes.

"It is good!" he exclaimed. "My master approaches!"

Nelson Lee was coming, with Lord Dorrimore, and all the others. The Happy Bunch, at the rear, were talking together animatedly. They were more mystified than anybody else, for they knew this country perfectly, and they knew how impossible it was for anybody on horseback to escape from this valley without being seen—particularly as all the exits had been closed.

"I think Umlosi has discovered something, guv'nor," I said, as Nelson Lee came up. "At any rate, he's pretty keen, and he's been seeing some marks on the ground which I couldn't notice. The old beggar has got eyes like gimlets!"

"I have been taught to use mine eyes, O Manzie," said Umlosi. "A man in my country needs to know what every blade of grass has to tell—what every piece of stone may mean. See! A man has passed this way barely ten minutes since. I know—I can read the signs upon the ground!"

Nelson Lee became very keen. He looked upon the ground, too, and Buck Mason, Mr. Farman, and all the members of the Happy Bunch searched round as though they were looking for a lost coin, or something of that kind. The juniors were collected in the background, watching all the proceedings somewhat excitedly.

Buck Mason and the cowboys were inclined to be impatient. They considered that we were wasting time by remaining here. As Twirly Sam complained, we were doing no good, and Texas Jose was getting further and further away all the time. But when Twirly Sam was asked how Texas Jose had got out of the valley, he could give no answer. For he knew well enough that there was no way out—at least, any known way.

And while they were talking together, Nelson Lee was using his eyes, and all his wits. His vision was not so acute as Umlosi's, and he could not see anything particularly instructive upon the ground. But now, as he gazed at the rock face of the cliff, he started. Then he leaned forward, until his face was right close to the rock. And now, standing quite still, he gazed before him. Presently he brought out a powerful magnifying lens, and with this he gave the cliff face a close examination.

"I'm allowin' that Mr. Lee is some hoss-man!" said Two-Gun Milligan. "He's sure a dandy, say, I don't cal-k'late that I'm in agreement with this durned waste o' time. Gee! We're sure standin' around like a lot o' fools, by cripes! I've got a kinder notion that ——"

"Upon my soul!" said Nelson Lee softly. "This is really remarkable!"

"Why, have you found something, Mr. Lee?" asked Jim Farman, darting forward.

"Yes—and I must admit that I am exceedingly puzzled," said Nelson Lee, frowning. "Look here, Mr. Farman—do you see these finger marks? Without doubt they were made less than fifteen minutes ago!"

Nelson Lee pointed out a portion of the rock—and, just here, the rock was quite smooth. Even I could see, with my naked eye, some blurry finger prints upon the rock face. I was very much puzzled, though I could not understand why Texas Jose had pressed his hand against the rock just there—and it was obvious that he had exerted quite a lot of pressure. Nelson Lee did the same now, merely to satisfy his curiosity, I suppose.

But, suddenly, he withdrew his hand, and now there was a rather startled look in his eyes.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "Surely it must have been imagination? But I distinctly felt a tremor. Yes, by James!"

It was almost beyond belief, but the very rock trembled as Nelson Lee pressed against it. Yet how could such a thing

be possible? This was no small portion of rock, but a terrible great cliff. Certainly, the portion which Nelson Lee pressed against was only comparatively small, reaching up to about fifty or sixty feet, by perhaps fifty feet wide.

It was like one massive rock lodged against the main cliff. It must have weighed hundreds and hundreds of tons—thousands, in all probability. Under these circumstances, how was it possible for the great rock to have trembled?

There was a curious gleam in Nelson Lee's eyes now. He turned to me, and told me to stand back. Then, as I did so, he pushed with all his strength upon the face of the rock.

An amazing thing happened.

For a moment I stared in bewilderment—I could hardly believe the evidence of my own eyes, and a hoarse cry rose in my throat. And there was certainly an excellent reason for my condition.

That enormous piece of rock, stretching high into the air, was moving—slowly it was shifting sideways, as though upon a great axle. We all thought that a tremendous portion of the cliff was on the point of collapsing—and if this happened, we should all be buried.

"Back—stand back!" shouted Dorrie hoarsely. "Good heavens! Can't you see——"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Handforth.

"The rock's falling—stand back! Stand back!"

We all scattered away like so many rabbits. And that huge piece of cliff, weighing thousands of tons, rolled back, as though sliding quite near to the rock. Indeed, until this moment, we had thought it to be a part of the cliff, never realising that it was a separate rock—a massive, towering stone almost as large as a mountain in itself.

It rolled back without a sound, seemed on the point of falling, and then it gradually came to a stop, after moving back about fifteen feet. The banks, it will be understood, came upwards for the axle, as it were, at one corner.

And now, to our further amazement, we could see a tunnel opening behind this rock—in the very face of the cliff. We all rushed towards it. Nelson Lee stood there, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. He had solved the riddle, this problem which had been worrying all those on Roaring Z Ranch for many a month.

"A balancing rock!" he said quietly. "Don't you understand, Mr. Farman? This is not the only rock of its kind in the world, by any means. There are all sorts of these balancing rocks. They are marvels of Nature. Weighing thousands of tons, a mere touch is sufficient to send them rolling back. But they never go beyond a certain point. And a touch at the other end will replace them to their original position!"

"Well, it's easy to understand how Texas Jose slipped away from us now," said Lord Dorrimore. "By gad! The cute bounder! I suppose he's been usin' this secret passage affair for quite a long time!"

"I rather fancy that other people have been using it, too!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Look, Dorrie—don't you see? The whole ground within this tunnel is pounded into a rough mass. Cattle have passed through here—hundreds and thousands of head of cattle——"

"Holy Mackinaw!" shouted Buck Mason excitedly. "Say, Mr. Lee, are you suggestin' that the lost cattle was taken through by this means? Gee! I'm kind of lost on this deal! I'm allowin' that I'm just about all in!"

"And yet, strictly speaking, the secret is a very simple one," said Nelson Lee. "Nobody has ever dreamed of looking for it, because there was not the slightest indication that this vast rock was a balancing one. But now that we have hit upon the solution, quite by accident, I will admit—there is no longer any necessity for us to be puzzled. See! There is daylight just beyond. It is not really a tunnel, but a kind of archway, probably leading into the unknown canyon. These mountains hold many secrets which they will not readily give up to humanity. This is merely one of them."

We were all extremely delighted now. As Nelson Lee had said, this tunnel was not a long one, for daylight was distinctly visible some little way through it. We were about to enter when Mr. Farman held us back.

"Say, just a minute!" he exclaimed. "Don't you think it would be better, Mr. Lee, if we mounted our horses? There is plenty of room for accommodation, by what I can see, and we shall be able to make an exit rather more rapidly—if the occasion arises."

Nelson Lee agreed to this suggestion, and a minute or two later we were all mounted upon our horses, and we were

passing through this strange little tunnel into the daylight which was entering beyond. The secret of the cattle rustlers was out! By this means—by making their way straight through what appeared to be a solid cliff, stretching back for miles, the thieves had been able to work their game. This boundary had never been guarded, for it was believed that a guard had been unnecessary. And now, in the chase after Texas Jose, we had discovered something of far greater importance. But that's generally the way of things. A fellow nearly always finds something he isn't looking for when he's really searching for something he badly wants.

And the very fact that Texas Jose had come through this secret place, proved that he was hand in glove with the cattle rustlers. Things were getting more and more interesting every minute. But we little dreamed how they would end.

We found ourselves in a most extraordinary canyon. It was narrow, being scarcely more than twelve feet wide. And the rock walls rose sheer, for hundreds of feet. The daylight came from up above—down a crevice, so it seemed. It was a subdued kind of light, and the top of this strange canyon seemed an incredible distance away. Large masses of rock overlooked us, and the daylight itself was dim. It seemed quite subdued and unreal. And this slit in the mountain stretched right ahead as far as we could see, and there was no telling where it ended.

But for the excitement of the moment, I should have been quite amused by the expressions of Square-Deal Reeve and the other members of the Happy Bunch. The cowboys were absolutely staggered, and had hardly anything to say. All they could do was to ride on in silence, taking in all the details with wondering eyes. They, of all people, had never suspected that such a canyon as this existed in the mountains just here. But, even now, the mystery of the cattle was not yet over. Where did they go to? Who was the man responsible for their theft?

We were all greatly impressed with the wonders of this hidden canyon. It was so very different to every other canyon that I have ever seen. In most of these gigantic marvels of Nature, the cliffs were perhaps a mile or two apart, rising up sheer from the bed of the canyon. And, in all probability, a rushing river flowed along below. But this was quite different. It was more like a narrow cliff than a canyon—a kind of split in the mountains too insignificant to be noticed from above. But this split was right down, thousands of feet, and resulted in a smooth road at the base—along which we were now riding. And it went on, mile after mile. We continued, hardly speaking, for we were fully occupied in gazing about us, taking in all the details, and marvelling at the whole wonderful adventure.

Texas Jose had passed out of our thoughts—at least, out of mine. Now and again we passed by the entrance to a side canyon, which jutted out at right angles here and there. The place appeared to be a kind of network of these side passages—for, after all, they were little else. And, in every place, the rock walls rose sheer and smooth, mounting thousands of feet. It was as though we were passing through innumerable trenches which seemed to descend to the middle of the earth.

And then, after riding on for what seemed to be a tremendous distance, the canyon began to open. Presently, it developed into a much wider affair, with rugged, rocky sides. Here and there were little rock basins, with a circle of light showing far above.

I suppose we must have looked rather queer, as we rode along on horseback. There was a large party of us. For, of course, we had all come. The juniors, bringing up the rear, were full of excitement and wonder. They had never believed that they would be allowed to accompany the rest of us into the canyon. But nothing had been said to detain them. Nelson Lee himself led the way, with Mr. Farman and Buck Mason with him. I followed closely behind, accompanied by Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi. The Happy Bunch came next, all of them uttering their own peculiar ejaculations every now and again.

And then, turning a corner in this canyon, we came upon an astonishing scene—a scene which caused us to thrill in our seats, and stare in wonderment and with wide open eyes.

We could see for miles—for, just a little distance ahead, the canyon came to an end, breaking up, and going down in a rocky descent. We could see beyond all this—right down into the flat country of the foothills. And there, distinct in the sunlight, and in the wonderfully clear atmosphere, we could see mile after

mile of rich grazing property, with a tiny speck here and there denoting a house. And Square-Deal Reeve gave a great shout after he had been looking for a moment or two.

"Say, boys, what do you know about this?" he exclaimed. "Gee! If it ain't lookin' down upon old man Travers' ranch! Don't you recognise it? I guess this country down in front of us is the property of the Bar S outfit!"

"By cripes!" said Milligan. "You're dead right, Square-Deal!"

"The Bar S Ranch!" repeated Nelson Lee sharply. "I am beginning to understand——"

"Guess a feller don't need much savee to get a holt of this play!" said Buck Mason grimly. "I'll allow old man Travers has been prosperin' good'n plenty during these last few months. Say, the wall-eyed old skunk! I never did care a heap for him, but now I know what breed he is. Say, Mr. Farman, we don't need to search any further for the guy who's responsible for our cattle bein' missin'!"

"I'm amazed," said Mr. Farman, frowning. "Is it really possible, Mason, that this man, Travers, is the culprit? He is a landowner—rich and influential. Surely he would never dare to risk his liberty and his reputation——"

"Travers ain't a man who cares much about risks," said Buck. "Say, chief, he's that mean he'd sooner sell your cattle than his own! Waal, we're wise through his play, now, I reckon. Old man Travers will finish up in the pen!"

"The infernal scoundrel!" said Mr. Farman, with heat. "A neighbour, Mr. Lee—for, after all, he may be called that. Mr. Travers' ranch is the nearest one to my own, and, although I never liked the man, I regarded him as an honest gentleman. He has been adding to his bank-roll at my expense—with my cattle! By glory! I'll make him pay to the last penny!"

"There is little doubt that Mr. Travers is responsible for the cattle theft," said Nelson Lee. "As a matter of fact, I suspected it all along—although I do not wish to sound wise after the event. What do you propose to do, Mr. Farman—now, at the minute, I mean?"

"Wal, I'm a man of action, Mr. Lee, and I'd rather fancy goin' straight down and facing Travers at once," replied the millionaire. "That's my way. What have you to suggest?"

"Well, to be quite truthful, Mr. Farman, I should not advise you to take that course," said Nelson Lee. "For one thing, we have all these boys with us, and it is quite possible that there may be some rough horseplay. These cattle rustlers are dangerous men—and they will be desperate when they discover that their secret is known. At the present moment, they are in ignorance of that fact—and I think it would be better to leave them in that position for the time being. It will be better, I think, to go straight back now, and to continue as if we had discovered nothing."

"I guess it'll be rather hard to do that, Mr. Lee," said our host regretfully.

"Nevertheless, I urge you to follow this course," said the guv'nor. "Would it not be better, Mr. Farman, to catch these rustlers red handed? Cannot you see the advantage of acting in such a way? We know the secret now—we are fully aware of it. Therefore, you can set your men on to watch—you can have this closely guarded night and day. Then, when these scoundrels come through—as they undoubtedly will come through before long—you will be able to catch them redhanded."

"Gee! There's sure somethin' in that, Mr. Lee," agreed Buck Mason. "I've been thinkin' a heap, I figger, an' I dare say you couldn't rightly prove old man Travers is the guilty man. But, by catchin' these rustlers redhanded at their game—waal, they wouldn't have a blamed leg to stand on. Say, chief, I'm calc'latin' that Mr. Lee is dead right. We'd best tote along back right now—and set that watch. I'm guessin' that the boys are real eager to nab these rustlers in their own way."

"Sure, Buck!" said Square-Deal Reeve. "Just you leave it to us—I guess we'll do it good'n proper!"

And so this course was decided upon—and it was, undoubtedly, the best thing that could be done. We should gain no advantage by continuing our journey right down to the Bar S Ranch. By acting hastily we should probably spoil everything. What we wanted was proof—concrete evidence of Mr. Travers' guilt. And this evidence would be forthcoming if we could only capture his men at their rascally game.

The order was given to turn about, and we were soon riding back towards the exit on the northern boundary of

the Roaring Z Ranch. We had passed right through the mountains—through their very heart, and thousands of feet from the open daylight.

And then came the surprise.

We had not proceeded far before word came from the rear that some horsemen were following! This was startling enough, and we hardly knew how to act at the moment. Indeed, we had no time to make up our minds in any way. For, as we turned a bend in the canyon, we saw before us a number of masked men on horseback! There were twenty or thirty of them, gathered together in one of those curious wide basins—through which we should have to pass. And every one of these masked men held a revolver—we had come upon them so suddenly that we had no time to prepare.

One of these men rode forward—a hulking great fellow who was obviously the leader. He had two revolvers, and his voice was like that of a foghorn.

"Say, up with your paws—every darned one of you!" he shouted thickly. "Say, we ain't standin' fer any nonsense. Get me? The fust man to draw his gun will get sech a dose of lead that his carkiss would be kinder useful in a metal factory!"

There was no help for it. We were trapped completely—we were taken off our guard. Having passed along this canyon we had never dreamed that the enemy were so near at hand. A fight was absolutely impossible in this confined space. For, with the enemy in front, and at the rear, we had positively no chance. To fire even one shot would be an act of madness.

Our feelings were bitter, and we were filled with inward fury as we were compelled to dismount, and stand in a row, with our hands held above our heads. And then, almost before we knew it, we were all bound up—tightly, with our hands behind our backs, and with our ankles tethered. The Happy Bunch looked a ferocious lot while this was going on. They knew well enough that it was impossible to fire their revolvers. Such an action would have meant instant death for all of us. For these armed cattle rustlers would not hesitate a moment before riddling our bodies with rifle bullets.

The leader swaggered up and down with an important air. There was something about him which made me hate him intensely. He was a blustering, loud-voiced fellow with a manner which would have seemed ludicrous had not the situation been so grave.

"Now then, line up!" he shouted roughly. "Say, I ain't standin' fer any roughness. Get me? You'd best quit the cussin' stuff right now—before you begin. I'll allow it won't help you none!"

"Gee! We'll get even for this one day, Jake Crasher!" shouted Square-Deal Reeve. "Mebbe you thought I didn't rekernise you in that blamed mask? Say, you're mistaken a whole heap. I know you—I guess I'd know you 'most anywheres. Jake Crasher—that's who you are, durn you—old man Travers' foreman!"

The leader of the party ripped off his mask.

"I warn't figgerin' on hidin' my identity, anyways," he said. "Yup, you interferin' guys, my name is Jake Crasher, an' I'm goin' to show you right now that I ain't the feller to trifle with. I've got you real good—the whole dog-gone bunch. Say, if you're reckonin' to leave this hyar canyon—waal, you've kinder hit the wrong guess. You've hit on this secret now, an' it wouldn't be kinder safe fer me or Travers if you were to get back. Saved? Say, I've got a kinder hunch that you won't see Roarin' Z Ranch no more—not a blamed one o' you!"

"Tchtch! You always wus a boastin' galoot!" said Buck Mason disgustedly. "Say, Jake, this is sure goin' to be a darned serious business for you. You'd best let us go right now and quit. We ain't quarrellin' with you, anyways. Our man is old Travers——"

"Waal, Travers don't happen to be around jest now," interrupted Jake Crasher. "The old man has gone East—get me? I'm left in sole charge of this outfit—and what I do will be on my own responsibility. An' I'm figgerin' that I shall get real busy before long. I figger you came here after Texas Jose? That slab-sided skunk gave the game away, too, I calc'late. Waal, he won't give nothin' more away!" he added harshly.

"Where is Texas Jose now?" asked Mr. Farman angrily. "See here, my friend, you'd better not——"

"Aw, cut out that stuff!" interrupted Jake Crasher shortly. "We've got you proper, an' threats don't scare me none. Mebbe it'll give you a kinder joy if I

tell you right now that Texas Jose hit the one-way trail. He's sure in the next world—or travellin' downwards at an almighty rapid speed!"

"You have killed him?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Sure!" replied the foreman of Bar S Ranch. "Say, that guy warn't fit enough to feed hisself out of a sow-trough! We had him right hyar, among my crowd, for a time. But the treacherous coyote got gay, and—waal, we kinder kicked him out!"

"Do you mean that you murdered him?" asked Nelson Lee grimly.

"Say, we wasn't doin' no shootin' then," said the foreman. "No, sir. But Texas Jose got around not an hour ago. He'd been kinder warned that if he showed his blamed mug in this canyon again it'd be sort of blown into almighty small pieces. Waal—it wus!"

Without another word, Jake Crasher moved off, and then we were all herded together, and placed in one of those rock basins, with the sky far above us, and with the great rock cliffs rising up on all sides. Five or six men were placed on guard, and they were all armed with rifles and revolvers. Our position seemed a hopeless one.

And everything had happened so quickly—so dramatically sudden. Even now we could hardly realise the full extent of this disaster.

CHATER V.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

THAT day was one which remained in the memory of many people for a good many years. It was a day packed with excitement and startling adventure. It seemed, indeed, that all these strange events had been reserving themselves, so that they should be sprung upon us within the space of a few hours.

Firstly, the capture of Texas Jose—then his escape. And, because of this breakaway of his, the discovery of the secret pass. We had anticipated none of these things. Yet they had happened—and in quite a natural order, too.

Most decidedly we had to thank Texas Jose for the discovery of the cattle rustlers' secret. In the outlaw's extremity, he had made for his only method of escape—the secret canyon behind the balancing rock.

It was galling—even alarming—that we should fall into the hands of the enemy after meeting with such success. For it was not merely one or two of us who had been captured by the rustlers—but the whole crowd.

We were all there—the party of St. Frank's juniors, Mr. Farman himself, the guv'nor, Dorrie, Umlosi, Buck Mason, and the Happy bunch. If we had been told that we should all suffer capture in this way—well, we should have laughed at the very thought of it.

But now that it had actually happened we could see how unavoidable it had been. Perhaps we could have put up a fight, and it is just on the cards that we should have won. But at what a cost? Many deaths, no doubt, and the lives of more than one St. Frank's junior, would have paid the penalty. To escape from the rustlers at such a cost was unthinkable.

And so it came to pass that we were all helpless prisoners—disarmed, bound hand and foot, and closely guarded. And there was an uncertainty about the position which did nothing to alleviate our anxiety.

And Jake Crasher? What of him? He had shown himself to be a loud-mouthed bully, and he was undoubtedly a brute. What his plans were he had no exact idea. But somehow I had an idea that Jake Crasher was reserving a surprise for us, and it was morally certain that this surprise would not be of a very palatable order.

If this man's statement was true—to the effect that his boss, Travers, was away in the East—it was practically certain that Crasher himself would deal with us. He would decide our fate.

And he was the type of man who would not hesitate to go to extreme lengths. According to Buck Mason, the foreman of Bar S Ranch had a reputation in this part of Montana which stamped him as a cruel, heartless ruffian. Jake Crasher was known to be an over-bearing bully—a man without scruples, without a kindly thought, and without the slightest trace of humanity in his compposition.

And we were in the power of this individual!

We had plenty of time to think over the position and to ponder the possibilities. The hours passed slowly for

us, packed together like a lot of sheep in that rocky prison.

Jake Crashor himself had gone, and our guards consisted of eight or ten men who lounged about, smoking and chatting, all of them being armed to the teeth. Thirst and hunger assailed us, but neither food nor drink was offered. Poor Fatty Little was nearly on the verge of exhaustion when the day began to close.

Mr. Farman was more anxious about his wife and daughter than on his own account. He wondered what they were doing, and what they would think. There was no possible way of communicating with them, and Mr. Farman was greatly worried.

Fortunately for his piece of mind, he did not know what was actually taking place at the ranch-house. If he could have known, his worry would have been increased tenfold.

There had already been dramatic events on this day, but there were to be many others. And at Roaring Z Ranch a second drama commenced shortly after darkness had set in.

All the afternoon and all the evening, Miss Connie and her mother had been looking out anxiously for any sign of the party's return. They were puzzled and worried. It was particularly mysterious—the complete disappearance of Lord Dorrimore and the juniors who had gone with him.

"There is no need to worry, mother," said Connie smilingly. "Oh, you know what these men are! I expect dad has gone off on the trail of this outlaw, and there's no need to look so troubled. Nothing could have happened——"

"I wish I could believe you, Connie," said Mrs. Farman. "But it is very strange, and I am beginning——"

She paused while she was speaking, and listened intently. She and Connie were on the verandah of the ranch-house, with the soft electric light from the drawing-room behind them.

Outside all was dark and intensely quiet, except for the sounds made by the animals in the nearest corrals, and the incessant, irritating buzzing of mosquitoes. But, as Mrs. Farman was speaking, she fancied she head something else.

"Listen, Connie!" she exclaimed sharply. "I think I can hear the sound of hoof beats."

"Oh, you're surely right, mother!" said the girl, clapping her hands. "There, you old silly! Fancy getting so worried—and here they are back. I do hope they've succeeded in capturing that awful man."

Exactly ten minutes later, Miss Connie was in a very different mood. Bound securely, she was in one of the upper rooms of the house, and her mother was with her in a similar plight. To be quite truthful, they were inclined to be hysterical, for the events which had just taken place had filled them with dread.

It will be easily guessed what had taken place. Jake Crasher and a large party of his men had, in fact, descended upon the ranch-house like an avalanche. Masked and armed to the teeth, the enemy surrounded the ranch buildings and had no difficulty whatever in rounding up Mrs. Farman and her daughter and all the servants. The few cowboys who had been discovered in the bunk-houses had put up a bit of a fight, and two or three casualties resulted. And now all the buildings were in the complete power of Jake Crasher.

He had swooped down, and he had conquered.

The rascally foreman was in his element. Anything of this nature appealed to him, for he loved to bully and bluster.

He had known from the first that he held all the trump cards. With everybody away—prisoners in the secret canyon—it had been obvious to Crasher that only a weak show of resistance could be made. And this resistance had been squashed at the outset. And now the headquarters of Roaring Z Ranch lay in this man's hands.

"Guess things have gone well, Doane," he said pleasantly, as he stood in the big hall of the house, deftly rolling himself a cigarette. "I figgered that we should drop on this little crowd an' make them dance some. The hull blamed outfit is ours to do as we like with."

"I sure 'lows we've made a big hit, Jake," said Doane. "But this hyar game don't appeal to me, I guess. Say, it's risky—dog-gone risky!"

"Ain't you got no savee?" interrupted Jake Crasher sharply. "Gee! You kinder make me tired. Risky? You'd best get guessin' again, Bob Doane. We're in this durn thing up to

our necks, an' I'm tellin' you right hyar that my neck's more val'able to me than the necks o' them guys we've bottled up in the canyon. Say, we've got to go through wi' this play."

The two men were standing near the doorway of Mr. Farman's own sanctum—a comfortable, well-furnished smoking-room. They passed inside, and Jake Crasher helped himself to a neat whisky from the sideboard. Then he flung himself into an easy chair.

"Guess this is dandy," he observed. "Say, I'm kinder sorry that we've got to burn this hyar place down—but it's the only way, I fear. We can't afford to hev no mistake."

Jake's companion, Bob Doane, was a tall, lean individual with a cunning, foxy cast of countenance. He was probably as great a scoundrel as Jake himself, but he lacked the foreman's innate brutality.

"Yep, we've made a clean sweep," went on Jake. "Ther' ain't a soul around this buildin' who ain't been roped up. We've sure got the hull outfit to ourselves. An' I'm tellin' you, Doane, that it's got to be sent up in one all-fired blaze that'll label it as the most elegant heap of ashes in Montana. Gee! I'm figgerin' we won't be troubled after this."

The other man looked doubtful.

"It sure is a big proposition," he said. "But, see hyar, you ain't calc'latin' to leave everybody in the buildin', so's they'll get kinder roasted——"

"Say, you make me tired!" said Crasher impatiently. "Hev you thought of our position, Doane? Farman an' all the blamed guys with him are right on to our game. Get me? If we let them loose—waal, I reckon they've got tongues. Say, we'll be needin' to quit. An' I guess that ain't my way. It's the other feller who's got to quit—not me!"

Jake Crasher's scheme was apparently a hideous one. Utterly heartless, he did not scruple to take this course, which, in simple language, meant the burning down of the ranch-house and all its buildings including the helpless occupants. It was a dastardly plan.

"When people is dead they don't get gassin', or handin' out chunks of information," said Crasher. "As for them prisoners of ours in the canyon—waal, we can deal wi' them later, I figger."

The man lost no time in giving full instructions to his companion, who would shortly be going out to superintend the operations. Outside, all the members of the enemy party were surrounding the ranch-house.

Doane was just about to leave the smoking-room when he was checked by an unusual sound. Both the men stood quite still listening. Then they looked at one another in a startled kind of way.

"By thunder! An automobile!" muttered Jake harshly. "Some durned fool from Rattlesnake Bend, I'm figgerin'. Say, who in blazes would get around Roaring Z at this time o' the evenin'?"

There was no doubt about the matter. A motor-car had entered the drive and was now just coming to a standstill outside the big house. For a brief spell, Jake Crasher considered matters.

"Say, we can't let these folks believe that anythin's wrong," he said swiftly. "Mebbe ther'll only be one man—the durned doctor, like as not. Guess we'll soon settle him, Doane. You've got to answer the door, an' you've got to let fly the information that Mr. Farman ain't prepared to see anybody. Get busy on the job when this galoot rings the bell."

The ring came almost at once, and Doane answered the door. He found himself facing a fairly small man of about forty years of age, and with a look of eager anxiety in his eyes.

He at once inquired for Mr. Farman, and he looked startled when he was informed that the millionaire would see nobody. The stranger certainly did not suspect that things were not as they should be.

"You just can't send me away without telling Mr. Farman that I'm here," he said earnestly. "I guess I've come some miles to see Big Jim Farman. North-West Canada is a fairish piece of land, and from Fort Derwent, on the Drake River, is something of a trip. My business is real urgent, and I guess I'm not waiting. I want to see Mr. Farman right now."

"Sorry, but you can't do it," said Doane curtly.

The visitor made an impatient gesture.

"See here, you don't seem to realise that my business is important," he

said. "By all that I've heard of Mr. Farman he's not the man to act like this. Say, I didn't even wait in the township until the morning—I came right over, an' if Big Jim Farman is around—well, I'd like to introduce myself."

"You don't know him, then?" asked Doane, with a curious note in his voice.

"No."

"Waal, seein' that you're so durned pressing, I'll have a word with the boss." said Doane. "Mebbe he'll see you. Wait right here."

Doane disappeared, but returned within a minute. He invited the newcomer to walk in, and they went straight to the library. Jake Crasher was sitting at the desk smoking a big cigar and trying to look important.

"Mr. Farman?" asked the stranger uncertainly.

"Yep, that's my name," replied Crasher, standing up and extending his hand. "I figger I'm busy, so you'd best get your talk over slick."

The stranger looked at Doane, and Jake nodded.

"You'd best retire, my man," he said briefly.

The other man left the study and closed the door. And the stranger produced a sealed envelope from his pocket.

"I'm from Fort Derwent, on the Drake River, an' my name's Tom Hanshaw, I guess," he said. "This letter is from Angus Macdonald, the trader. You're his employer, I understand, and he instructed me to deliver this letter in the slickest possible time, and to place it in your own hands. I reckon my job's done, Mr. Farman."

"Sure," said Jake Crasher.

As a matter of fact, he was filled with curiosity. There was something impressive—something mysterious—about the arrival of this man from the Athabasca region of North West Canada. His mission was evidently one of great importance.

Jake Crasher had no scruples about hoodwinking the man. Hanshaw had accepted him as Farman without question; and this, after all, was only natural. And he believed that he had fulfilled his mission successfully.

The rascally foreman of Bar S Ranch tore open the flap of the envelope, and removed a single sheet of notepaper, upon which could be seen several paragraphs of small handwriting. The letter read as follows:

"Fort Derwent.

"Dear Mr. Farman,—Can you come right up here at once? I've got hold of something big. This letter is being sent by hand, because I'm afraid to trust it to the mail. Tom Hanshaw will give it straight into your hands. Destroy it at once.

"As you may guess—it's gold! I'm putting it straight to you, chief, that I've located the biggest strike ever—bigger than the Klondike and all the others put together. This strike is absolutely unknown to another soul, and we've got to get there first. If a word leaks out there'll be the biggest stampede in history. I guess you know me—I'm not the sort to blow hot air. This thing is a cinch, but I can't leave the Fort without the folks getting wise to what's doing. You come up with a party and let on you're going North to see the country. No suspicions, and everything O.K. I daren't say more in writing. I guess you're a millionaire, but if you follow this thing up we'll be the richest men in the whole blamed world.

"Bring a decent outfit with you, and only men you can trust. I'll sit tight until you show up. But you sure must come—this is the biggest thing that ever hit the universe. And don't forget to burn this letter at once.

"ANGUS MACDONALD."

It was only with the greatest difficulty that Jake Crasher controlled himself. He managed to do so, however, and looked up calmly at Tom Hanshaw. Jake shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. He was quite certain that Hanshaw knew nothing. In all probability he had been told that this letter was connected with furs.

"Sure, it's important," said Crasher smoothly. "But I don't figger you need have rushed around this evenin'. Jest wait awhile, an' I'll see you again."

Jake seized a bell and rang it. Doane appeared at once, and Hanshaw was shown out, and told to make himself comfortable in an empty room. When Doane got back to the foreman he found the latter with his face deeply flushed and with glittering eyes.

"! Gee! What's hit you?" asked Doane curiously.

"Say, this is calc'lated to alter my plans a bull heap!" said Crasher tensely. "Get your eyes glued to this, Doane—it's the real goods! By thunder! Luck's played right into our hands!"

Doane read the letter, and he and his companion excitedly discussed the possibilities. They forgot all else—their plans regarding the ranch, and every other consideration. In this brief space they had been converted into madmen. It was the madness of gold. The news of a big strike is sufficient to convert decent men into beings resembling wild animals. Jake Crasher and Bob Doane were not decent men. And the effect upon them was startling.

Gold! And it was undoubtedly a genuine piece of information. Jake's one instinct was to rush off north without a moment's delay—to get there first. He had been making a good thing of it on the Bar S Ranch with his rascally employer. But he was prepared to turn Travers down without a moment's thought—to leave him in the lurch. The lust of gold had entered his veins.

This thing had come by pure chance, and might have been missed altogether. But that letter from the fur trader was no piece of bluff. In every line, in every word, it breathed truth.

And then before anything more could be said another interruption came. From outside came the sounds of galloping horses. There was a scuffle, a quick rush, and one of Jake's men appeared, streaming with perspiration, panting heavily, and wildly excited.

"Darn my hide!" snapped Jake. "What in blazes——"

"Quit!" gasped the new-comer. "Them gosh-durned coyotes hev escaped—the hull cussed crowd! They're ridin' like blazes, an' they'll sure be around within ten minutes!"

Jake Crasher uttered a string of oaths.

He was about to demand explanations, but thought better of it. There was no time. And now the importance of keeping Farman and the others in captivity did not appeal to him. His plan to burn down the ranch-house sank into insignificance.

The lust of gold overshadowed all else. Travers could go to blazes—Jake didn't care. He had a chance to clear out and reap a fortune. Mr Farman would never get the letter—he would never know. But Tom Hanshaw might talk——

"Bring that guy in here!" snapped Jake Crasher abruptly.

Doane quickly obeyed—for he, too, was a mass of nerves, all eager to clear away from the ranch while there was yet time. The man who had brought the news had gone out into the open once more.

Hanshaw was pushed into the library roughly, much to his astonishment. He could not understand the attitude of the two men, and he was beginning to have grim suspicions that all was not right.

"See here, Mr. Farman, I don't quite get the hang——" he began.

Crack!

With less compunction than if he had been shooting a dog, Jake Crasher shot Tom Hanshaw down as he stood—within six feet, at point-blank range. The messenger from Athabasca dropped with one sighing groan, his life-blood flowing freely.

"By glory!" muttered Doane huskily. "What in the name of madness——"

"Can that stuff!" snarled Jake. "It had to be done—it was the only way. Get me? We're goin' North—after this gold! We've got the letter, an' Farman won't know a thing. I guess that dead men don't talk none!"

And Jake kicked the limp form at his feet with the brutality of a bestial nature. Doane was not quite so callous, and he looked somewhat scared.

"Say, I'm sure rattled!" he muttered. "I—I——"

"Quit the chin music!" rapped out Crasher harshly. "Ain't you got no savee? Thar's gold waitin' for us to take, an' I figger we're goin' to lay all our hands on it. We'll just hev time to make the night train at the Bend before the alarm gets buzzin' around. Gee! It's the biggest thing that ever came our way, an' we ain't lettin' it slip loose!"

A moment later the two ruffians passed out into the night.

. . . . . .

"Thank Heaven we got back before those infernal ruffians could do any mischief!" said Big Jim Farman fervently. "By glory! We owe everything to that black friend of yours, Lord Dorrimore! Say, I take off my hat to him!"

"Yes, Umlosi's a useful sort of animal at times," said Dorric. "An' as everythin' has turned out all serene we can put on big smiles an' look happy."

"My hat!" said Handforth. "But it was a narrow shave, though!"

"Bogad! Rather, dear old boy!"

"You bet!"

"But we're all right now."

The St. Frank's juniors—and everybody else—were in a state of considerable excitement. There had been some astonishing happenings during the last hour or so, and it was rather a wonder that things had turned out happily.

When we had been kept as prisoners in that secret canyon we had practically given up hope. And then unexpected developments had taken place with dramatic abruptness. Old Umlosi had been the saving of us.

Cruelly roped up, we had considered it impossible to regain our freedom. But we had overlooked the fact that Umlosi was as hard as forged steel and just about as strong as six editions of Sandow rolled into one.

To put it briefly, Umlosi had burst the ropes which bound him. Then, moving with that snake-like stealthiness for which he was famous, he slid to Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Square-Deal Reeve and slashed their bonds.

A ticklish minute had followed after that. Our guards were quite near by, round a blazing camp fire. They were playing poker, and their rifles lay in a stack in full view. Nelson Lee and the others could do one thing only.

They made a quick rush at the rifles, seized them, and held up the rustler gang before a man could draw his revolver. It had been a magnificent piece of work, and the result was overwhelmingly fine.

For the tables had been turned from that moment. Leaving the canyon we found our horses just outside on the prairie. It had been a simple matter to mount and to ride at break-neck speed for the ranch.

We hardly knew what to expect when we arrived. We thought possibly there would be a pitched battle. But to our surprise everything was peaceful. The rustlers had completely vanished.

But we found Mrs. Farman and Miss Connie and all the servants securely bound up in the upper rooms of the house. They were rather frightened, but quite unharmed. Jake Crasher and his scoundrelly men had vanished.

At first we could not understand this, but we received grim enlightment. So far Mr. Farman had not gone into the smoking-room or library. But now, finding that everything was all right, he went there accompanied by Nelson Lee.

"I guess we need to talk some, Mr. Lee," said the ranch owner. "We've got to decide what we shall do—— By Heaven! What—what——"

Big Jim paused, his voice trailing away. He and Nelson Lee had just entered the smoking-room. The electric light was full on. And there, in the centre of the floor, lay the huddled figure of a man—absolutely still and with an ominous pool staining the rich carpet.

"The infernal murderers!" shouted Mr. Farman hoarsely.

Nelson Lee ran forward and bent over the prostrate form. He made a quick examination, and then looked up.

"Some brandy—a bowl of cold water and a sponge!" he said curtly. "Bandages and ointment will do later. For the man is still alive, Mr. Farman, but in a very bad way. We may be able to——"

Tom Hanshaw opened his eyes, his face working with agony. But his expression was one of intelligence. He knew exactly what was going on and what he was doing. He tried to speak, but failed at the first attempt.

"No, you mustn't do it!" said Nelson Lee gently. "Lie quiet——"

"I—I'm going, sir! I guess I'm all in!" muttered Hanshaw thickly. "Say, is—Mr. Farman around? I—I thought I heard——"

"Yes, I'm Mr. Farman," said Big Jim, dropping down on one knee.

"Gee! What a fool I was to fall for that brute's bluff!" said Hanshaw bitterly. "Say, I brought a letter from Angus—Macdonald—Fort Derwent—gold——"

"What!" ejaculated Big Jim sharply. "You come from Macdonald, the fur trader at Fort Derwent? Pull yourself together, man! Tell me everything you know!"

In short, broken sentences, uttered with extreme difficulty, the grievously wounded man explained how he had arrived, how he had delivered the letter to Crasher, believing the latter to be Mr. Farman.

"This letter was taken by Jake, of course," said Nelson Lee quickly. "Do you know what it contained?"

"No. Macdonald let on that it concerned furs; but I guess different," muttered Hanshaw weakly. "They got me—shot me down like I was a wolf! But—but he had a blamed rotten aim. I still lived, I guess, an' I wasn't unconscious. I—I heard them talking——"

"What did they say?" asked Mr. Farman sharply.

"Gold—gold!" whispered Hanshaw. "They reckoned they were going North at once—Fort Derwent—after gold. Night train—biggest strike—— Macdonald knows. Gold—those guys after it. Say—they'll—kill old Mac. Dear old Mac—you'd best get on the trail, and—and——"

The man could say no more—but he had said more than enough to expose the whole secret to Nelson Lee and to Mr. Farman. They did not discuss it then, but confined all their attentions to Tom Hanshaw. He was shot through the chest—a terrible wound. Nelson Lee did everything that was surgically possible, and the poor fellow was placed upstairs in one of the spare beds.

"He may pull through—it'll be touch and go," said Nelson Lee gravely. "A bad wound, but he is strong, and there is more than a chance that he will survive. Jake Crasher did not do his grim work thoroughly."

Mr. Farman set his teeth.

"I'm going to get that skunk!" he exclaimed fiercely. "Do you follow me, Mr. Lee? Say, we're going right North on the track of this thing—and we're going without wasting a minute!"

"Under the circumstances, I think you're decision is a wise one, Mr. Farman," said Nelson Lee. "It is evident that Macdonald is in danger. Crasher has learned of this gold, and he will force the trailer to speak——"

"Not if we get there first," interrupted the millionaire. "And that's what we're going to make a big bid for, Mr. Lee. Macdonald is in charge of my store at Fort Derwent—one of the finest men breathing. We can't telegraph, so we'll have to get on the trail. Macdonald's got to be saved!"

Before many hours had passed, the whole ranch-house was buzzing with the new excitement. We were to start at dawn for the Far North.

Yes, it had been decided that we should all go—for a trip into Athabasca and the region about Fort Derwent, on the Drake River. The events of the last few hours had altered everything.

And now, at a moment's notice almost, we were setting off on the trail of Jake Crasher. Buck Mason would be left behind to settle accounts with Travers, and the cattle rustlers of Bar S Ranch. Our course lay elsewhere.

And we were after gold!

Little did we realise what amazing new adventures were to befall us on this fresh expedition!

Our adventures, so far, would be absolutely tame in comparison to the stirring events which were in store.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

In next week's story, "Up the Ghost River!" begins the great trail up North in search of the wondrous valley of gold hidden among the little-known recesses of the Rocky Mountains. Jake Crasher, a scoundrel as dauntless as he is cold-blooded, descends upon the unsuspecting Angus Macdonald in order to extract further particulars of the gold strike from the fur trader by force if necessary. But Macdonald is a wily Scot, and is not the kind of man to be easily intimidated. Crasher's bluff and brazen demands, and the fur trader's cool indifference to either, form one of the most thrilling battles of wits that I have come across for a long time.

Then follows the exciting journey by river, through lakes and over roaring rapids, with the rival expedition trying to thwart and encompass the destruction of Nelson Lee's party at every turn. As I promised last week, I am publishing on the whole of page ii. of cover a specially drawn map indicating the route of the expedition, from the fur trader's chart, which Nelson Lee uses to guide the party on their perilous journey to the Secret Valley.

THE EDITOR.

The Ghosts of Marsh Manor

BEGIN TO-DAY THIS THRILLING NARRATIVE OF THE GREAT DETECTIVE OF GRAY'S INN ROAD.

INTRODUCTION.

Mr. Herbert Drake, otherwise NELSON LEE, secures an appointment as games master at Marsh Manor School. His real purpose is to investigate the alleged appearance of a ghost at the school.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER II. (*Continued.*)

The New Games Master.

THE room that had been allotted to the new master was at the east end of the long corridor, running almost the whole length of the building, and when he went there that evening he carried with him recollections of the Chard family that were quite pleasant, and one also that puzzled him.

The Rev. Octavius had two daughters—bright, lively young ladies of, perhaps, fifteen and sixteen, jolly open-air girls, full of fun, who went about without hats, and were not ashamed if their noses were freckled.

Joan, the younger of the pair, he dismissed without a thought; but there was something about Monica he could not understand. The spirit of mischief lurked in her dark eyes, which she had rarely taken off the new master during the meal, and every time he met her gaze he read, or thought he did, a defiant challenge in them.

He never trusted anyone who smiled with their lips and not with their eyes, but Monica Chard's eyes danced with merriment when her mouth was perfectly solemn, and he wondered.

"You're a tomboy, Miss Monica, if ever there was one," he said to himself. "You are capable of anything, and don't know what fear is. We shall see, my young lady, we shall see. It is quite possible that you may know more about the ghost than anybody else."

He had been taken round the lecture-hall, where preparation was carried on, and announced as "Mr. Drake, our new games master," and the quiet, indulgent smile with which he looked along the faces upraised from the desks found an echo in the faces themselves, so that afterwards, when he had retired, leaving Mr. Jackson on duty, quite a buzz of excitement went through the room, and he was voted "a topper," and "a topping sort," "the goods," and "some master, if you like," "jolly slight better than that snide Wilkins, you chaps," until even Mr. Jackson, who was a little deaf, rapped his desk and sternly called for silence.

From a casual word of Mr. Chard's, he had identified the trio and taken mental stock of them, and after he had gone those three young gentlemen, whose desks were close together, criticised him very favourably on the whole, and yet with certain quite natural regrets.

"Looks a jolly good sort!" whispered Gurling, a thick-set lad of fifteen and a half, who played centre-forward in the soccer team.

"That's what I say," nodded Tulk, who was red of hair and likewise stocky. "But I'd rather have seen Nelson Lee turn up, all the same."

"Something tells me he will," said Dick Seymour, a rather tall, nice-looking boy, but with a delicate complexion that suggested he was not constitutionally very strong. "He only got our letter yesterday, you know, and if he's a gentleman he'll write. We may hear from him to-morrow, or the day after. But I like the new man awfully. Bet he doesn't get the wind up, whatever happens."

The man they were criticising was leaning his elbows at that moment on the sill of the open window in his study, a pleasant room, from which his bed-room opened, his pipe in full blast, and his eyes riveted on the reflection of the young September moon mirrored in the marsh beyond the playing-fields.

Everything was very still, the calm of quiet centuries seemed to permeate the old house, and he could readily understand the Head's love for it and the necessity, from his point of view, that the masquerader should be found out.

There could not have been a better place for the busy brain of the great detective to work out an alternative theory to the one he had already formed—viz., that Miss Monica Chard was acting the ghost and the "goat," with all the thoughtless disregard

of consequences to her father one might have expected from a girl of her age.

He had an idea, born of certain little scraps of conversation at the tea-table, that the three masters who had resigned had been unpopular—not only with the school, but with the Chard girls—and he had taken care to make himself very amiable.

But, of course, against that theory altogether was the undoubted fact that a retired admiral, who ought to have had strong nerves, and a peppery old colonel, who had no nerves at all, to say nothing of a long array of luckless tenants, had all cleared out before the Chards came on the scene.

He had obtained the reverend gentleman's permission to take any steps he thought fit to bring the ghost to book—if he could see one—and he had already roughed out a sketch plan of the three floors, which lay beside him on the broad oak window-seat.

The ground-plan showed the house to have been built in the form of a long parallelogram, with a wing at each end and four staircases. The west wing being entirely occupied by Mr. Chard's family, and no ghost having been seen there, he dismissed as mere waste of time.

The dining and lecture-halls and all the class-rooms were on that ground floor. Upon the next were the dormitories and the masters' rooms, each with its own study, and the baize door connecting with the west wing was at the end of a long corridor, running the length of the building, and at the opposite extremity of which Nelson Lee had his own quarters.

Three staircases led up to the attics, one of them used only by the domestics, whose bed-rooms were in the east wing. and the entire house was panelled from floor to ceiling, which made it a little funereal after nightfall, as lamps and candles were the only means of artificial lighting.

The youngsters went to bed at half-past eight, the older boys at nine, and as he heard the former troop up in a body he seated himself at his table and wrote a long epistle to Nipper, which he carefully sealed, remembering the beady-eyed young person at the post-office, and directed it to the address where Nipper received his letters when his master was away from home.

There was nothing to connect "Herbert Drake" with Nelson Lee, or to show that he had asked Nipper to come down at the end of two days, with a certain mutual friend, who would act as the "guardian of the backward boy."

There was a basket on the Tudor table in the entrance-hall, where all letters for post were duly collected by Boyle, and, putting on a pair of rubber-soled tennis shoes, the new master descended, and tossed his missive among the rest.

As he reached the upper floor again, where an oil-lamp threw a dim, yellow light at the head of the staircase, a hand clutched the sleeve of his college blazer, and Seymour, pointing to the western end of the corridor, whispered:

"Look, sir! Do you see it?"

Nelson Lee's hand took possession of the lad's quivering shoulder as he followed the direction of Seymour's pointing hand.

"See what, my boy?" he said. "Are you dreaming?"

"Oh, no, sir; it's there distinctly!"

"Nonsense! Let me feel your pulse. Either your eyes want attending to, or you are out of order. Great Scott! It's beating nineteen to the dozen! Get to bed with you, and you shall come with me to the Head in the morning."

He spoke in his natural tone, laughing incredulously as Seymour reluctantly obeyed. But the moment the dormitory door had closed Nelson Lee's face changed, and, drawing out his powerful electric-torch, he glided on tiptoe down the corridor.

There was a ghost, then, after all, for he had seen it himself!

CHAPTER III.

Nelson Lee Lays Traps.

NELSON LEE stood quite still, listening, when he came to the end of the passage.

The lamp at the head of the main staircase burned all night. The others had been extinguished by Mr. Williams, the science master, who had gone his rounds, and who could be heard undressing in the room on his left hand.

The opposite apartment was a dormitory where the ten younger boys slept, and a little chorus of snores in various keys came to the detective's ear.

In front of him was the baize door leading to the private apartments, and just there, at right angles, a smaller staircase led down to the ground floor.

It was while moving in the direction of that staircase that Nelson Lee had distinctly made out a figure in white, with the pointed cowl of a monk drawn over its head.

Mr. Chard had shown him three of the secret passages known to exist in the building, and one of these was reached by a sliding door in the oak panelling at the head of that staircase.

With his torch in his hand, ready to switch on if necessary, he planted himself in front of the movable panel, hearing the clock in the turret chime the quarter and the half-hour, but nothing happened.

He knew that the dark grey suit he was wearing would make him practically invisible against the almost black woodwork of the wall, and at a quarter to ten he came to the conclusion that the ghost had passed through the green baize door after all.

Nevertheless, he had already prepared himself for just such a contingency, and drew from his waistcoat pocket a strip of stamp paper, the back of which he had painted to exactly resemble the colour of the ancient woodwork.

Tearing off half an inch of the strip, he

licked the gummed side, and, flashing on his light for a moment, pressed the stamp paper across the edge of the moving panel, examining it carefully before he left it.

No one could open the secret door without tearing the paper, and with a smile of satisfaction he returned to his own room.

When the bell summoned the school to prayers and breakfast next morning he waited until the coast was clear, and had just seen that his mark had not been tampered with, when something caught his eye lying beside the wainscot at the end of the corridor.

It was only a little scrap of folded paper, but he picked it up, and on his way to the main staircase read the following message, scribbled in a bold handwriting, full of character:

"Dearest Dick,—We shall have to be very careful with the new master. He's got eyes in the back of his head, but he's awfully nice.—Eternally yours, GHOST."

"By Jove, here's a clue worth following up!" said Nelson Lee, placing the paper carefully in his pocket-book, and reaching the hall just in time. "That accounts for Master Richard Seymour being in the corridor last night when he ought to have been in his own room. I'll watch you, my young gentleman, 'with the eyes at the back of my head.'"

During prayers, which the Rev. Octavius Chard read impressively, Lee was turning several things over in his mind, and he decided that Dick Seymour should have an interview with the Head, and that he would not reveal the fact for the present that he himself had seen the apparition.

Even though it should turn out in the end to be nothing more than a schoolboy prank, there was a certain freshness in running the plot to earth, and the detective already felt that it was good to be again in the healthy atmosphere of boys and playing-fields, to say nothing of that magnificent house, which grew upon him the more he saw of it.

He caught Master Seymour glancing furtively at him once or twice, but avoided his eye until breakfast was finished, and then he beckoned to him, and Dick grew scarlet to the roots of his hair.

"Come along, Seymour," said the new master. "And don't look as if you're going to be hanged, because you're not. But I can clearly see that your nerves are unstrung, and I think a little chat with Mr. Chard will do you all the good in the world."

"But, sir——"

"There are no 'buts' about it, my dear lad. When a boy of your temperament takes to 'seeing things,' it's time for his elders to have a hand in the game."

"I can't understand why you didn't see it, too, sir!" faltered Dick, as they walked side by side to the Head's study.

"Probable reason not far to seek, Richard; you're a bundle of nerves—I haven't got any at all."

But the tone of perfect sincerity with which the boy spoke was not lost on Nelson Lee. Had the note anything to do with the ghost, after all? he wondered. Or was he on the trail of a double mystery?

He tapped on the study door, and a voice said "Come in"; and as he ushered the unhappy Richard into the room he caught Mr. Chard's eye, and made a sign to him over the boy's head.

"Not in trouble, surely, Seymour?" said Mr. Chard.

"Not in the sense of any delinquency, sir," said Nelson Lee; "but Seymour declares he saw the—er—shall we call it the monk, who is supposed to frequent the house—last night; and as I found his pulse abnormally rapid, and the boy in a state of extreme agitation, I thought you had better see him."

"Quite right, Mr. Drake," assented the Headmaster. "Now, Seymour, you know this is getting beyond a joke. It's the meanest form of trick that could possibly be played in a school. I have always found your word to be relied on, and it is your duty not to shield this individual out of any mistaken notion of schoolboy honour, because the matter is most serious. I cannot afford to face the possibility of having to leave this house. Have you any idea at all who the culprit is?"

"If I had, sir, I would tell you at once," said Seymour. "But I'm quite sure, if it's really alive, it's not one of the boys. It's much too tall. Sutcliffe is the only fellow anywhere near its height, and he was in the dormitory all the time."

"Why were you not in the dormitory?" said Mr. Chard.

"Because I suddenly remembered, sir, that I had left all my books on my desk, and didn't want to do lines for them."

"So on your way downstairs you say you saw something? Tell us all about it."

"It was the monk again, sir," said Seymour. "It came out of the little lobby by the side of No. 4, crossed the end of the passage, and disappeared. It's the fourth time we've seen it there. I know you think I'm pulling your leg—I beg your pardon, sir, you know what I mean—and I can't make out why Mr. Drake couldn't see it."

The Head looked at the new master, who smiled indulgently and shrugged his shoulders, and poor Seymour looked so miserably unhappy that Mr. Chard discontinued the cross-questioning. Instead, he wrote something on a paper, and said:

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY....PRICE 2:

"Take this to Mrs. Chard, Seymour. What she will give you is not unpleasant, and it will do you good."

"What do you make of it?" he continued, when the boy had gone.

"I am convinced Seymour believes he saw something," replied Nelson Lee. "Have you any fastening on the inside of the baize door at the end of the passage?"

"A little brass bolt, that is all; but it is seldom used. There is nobody in my particular wing at all likely to be doing this."

"No, no; but as the wing has three exits to the rest of the building, it might be possible that whoever is perpetrating this hoax might take the liberty of using your own staircase. I mean, for example, the rascal could very well invade your quarters from the first floor, gain either the upper or the lower, and so make his way back undetected to his own room while all eyes were turned to the spot where he disappeared."

"There is something in that," said Mr. Chard gravely. "I will have a lock put on this very day. I think you will agree with me, Mr. Drake, that this is a very undesirable state of affairs."

"It must be put a stop to at once, sir," assented Nelson Lee, "and I am in great hopes that I shall discover the culprit."

"You will earn my eternal gratitude if you do," said Mr. Chard, and they parted.

(To be continued.)

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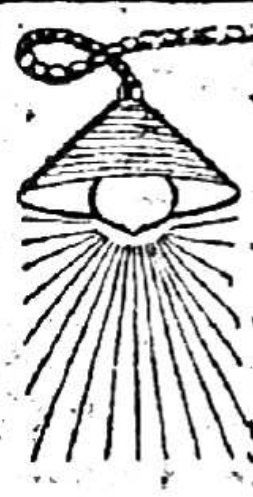

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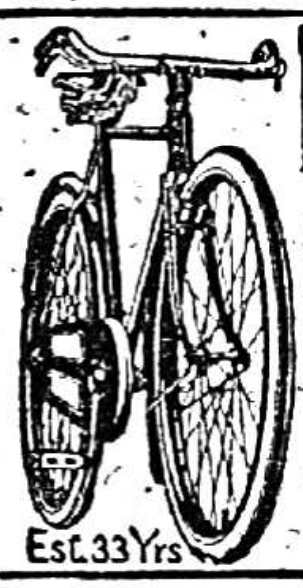

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