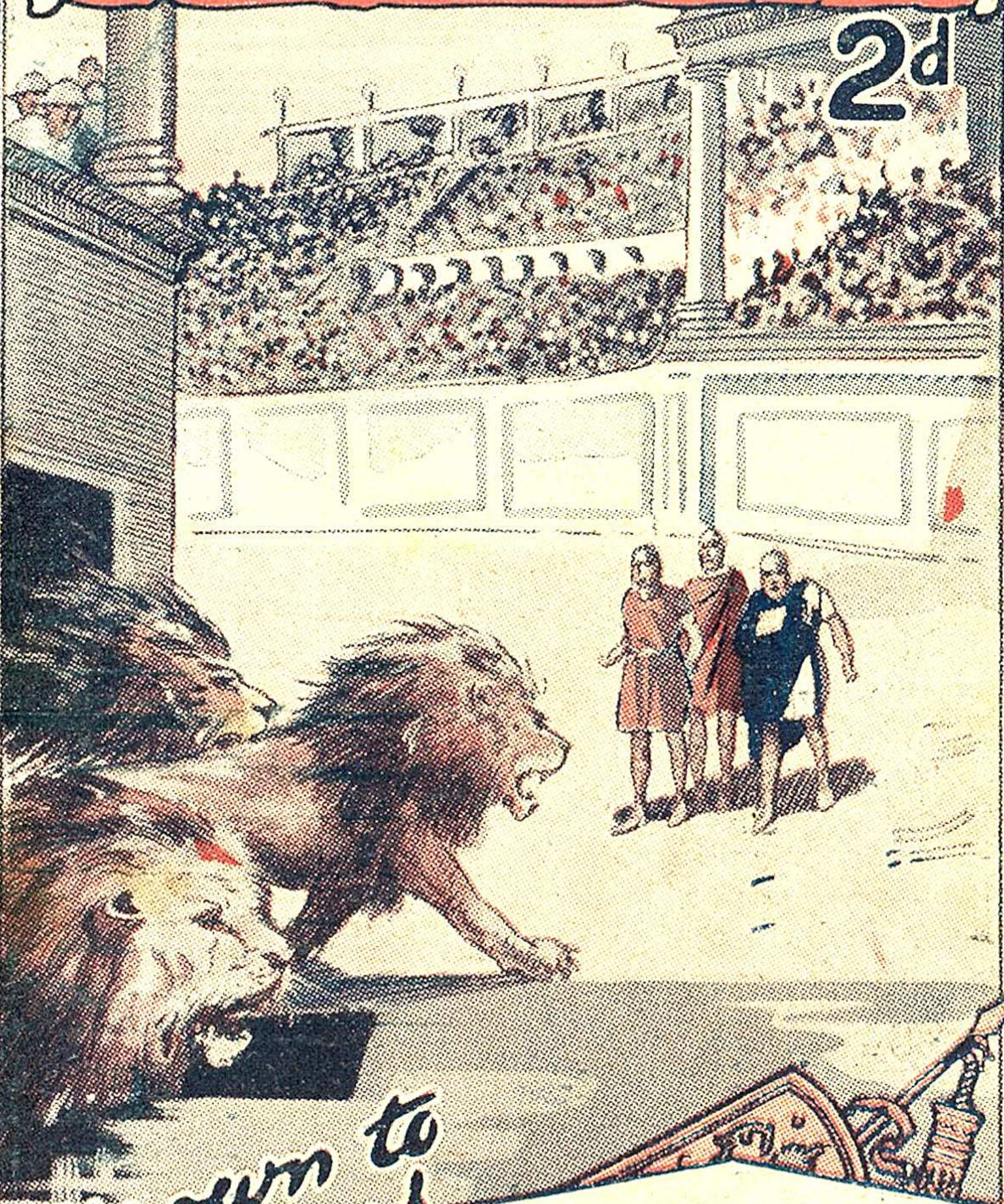


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"He's alive!" roared Lee, with sheer joy. "Oh, Earle! We're in time! Thank Heaven for that!"

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THE EDITOR.

Related Throughout by Nipper and Set Down by E. Searles Brooks

CHAPTER I.

THE SCHEMERS OF THE THIRD.

CHUBBY HEATH opened his eyes with a start.

"What's that?" he gasped frantically.

"Dry up! Don't make a fuss over nothing!" whispered Willy Handforth. "It's only me!"

"Oh, corks! I thought it was one of those giddy Roman chaps!" said Chubby, with relief. "I was just dozing off, and beginning to dream, and then you pushed that rotten wet fist of yours in my face!"

"Fist?" snapped Willy. "You fathead, it's the sponge! My fist's a bit harder than that, I can tell you! I'm just going to wake Juicy up now, and then we'll hold a confab. If the young chump makes a noise, help me to strangle him!"

Chubby Heath looked on dubiously while Willy calmly pushed the wet sponge into Lemon's face. The unfortunate fag gave one gulp, a leap upwards, and a frantic gasp. Considering that half a pint of water

had swilled down his chest, he was hardly to be blamed.

"Good!" said Handforth minor. "Now, then—dress!"

"Dress?" gasped Juicy, bewildered.

"Dress!" repeated Willy firmly. "You know—socks and trousers and things. There's work to do. But first of all I'm going to talk. The fact is, I've had a dream—and it's given me a ripping idea. I don't want to boast, but it seems to me that we can save the whole crowd of us from disaster!"

Chubby Heath edged his way along the bed cautiously.

"You're mad!" he said huskily. "Hi! Clear off! If you come near me I'll yell—I believe you're still asleep, or something. You must be off your rocker to get up in the middle of the night and talk about saving everybody from disaster!"

But Willy Handforth merely smiled. There was a curious glint in his eyes which rather relieved Chubby. He was well acquainted with his volcanic young leader's moods, and he could now see that Willy was in one of his active spells. And

nothing on earth could stop him when he was like that.

The cabin was comfortable and quite private. The electric lights glowed softly on the exquisite furniture and fittings, and everything was as quiet and still as a graveyard. It was hardly possible to realise that a few short hours before the air had been filled with the clash and hubbub of battle.

It wasn't so very late—well before midnight, in fact. But all the St. Frank's juniors had been in bed for some time—after a strenuous day. They were guests on board Mr. Travers Earle's wonderful land yacht, the Conqueror. And they had been having a really extraordinary time.

The Conqueror was in the very heart of the great Sahara Desert, many hundreds of miles from the nearest civilisation—at least, the nearest known civilisation. For countless leagues, in every direction, stretched the great expanse of the unexplored Sahara.

And yet this monster caterpillar-driven land yacht was standing in the centre of a beautiful paved square, with noble buildings of marble on all sides—stately buildings with great colonnades and much other wonderful architecture.

Streets branched out in every direction—well-lighted, well-paved, and thickly populated. But at the moment these streets were comparatively deserted, except for bands of soldiers, wearing gay tunics, sandals, and glittering helmets.

In a word, the Conqueror was in the unknown land of Isirium—a relic of the Ancient Romans—a hidden oasis of the desert, surrounded by mountain peaks that had never before been penetrated. Here, for long centuries, these descendants of the Romans had lived their lives, isolated from the rest of the world, shut off by the desert.

"I'm going to talk to you chaps," said Willy Handforth calmly. "I'm going to tell you exactly what's happened in this place—"

"You chump! We know it all!" growled Juicy Lemon.

"I can't help that. I want to talk, just to get my mind settled," replied Willy. "If you fellows don't like it, you've got to lump it! And the first one who yawns will get this sponge in the gap!"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon regarded their leader sullenly.

"Oh, all right; go ahead!" said Chubby, in a resigned voice.

"First of all, this giddy country's got an emperor," said Willy. "He's supposed to be a man, but he's really a pretty horrible sort of reptile. A tyrant and a beast—in other words, a toad. And just at the moment, old Titus has got us pretty well boxed up."

"But his rotten soldiers couldn't take the Conqueror, could they?"

"You're right, Juicy, they couldn't,"

agreed Willy. "After that awful business in the arena, when they tried to burn old Horatius Placidus at the stake, we've declared war against the emperor, and he knows it. But luck played into his hands, and we've got to start something."

"But what the dickens can we do, you ass?" asked Chubby gruffly.

"I'm coming to that," replied Willy. "Remember the battle an hour or two ago? Well, poor old Dorrie and Umlosi were collared, and they're prisoners. That beast of a Titus has threatened to put 'em to death if the Conqueror doesn't surrender by dawn. We've been sent to bed, like good little boys, so that we shan't get into mischief. But do you think I'm standing that kind of rot?"

"You've got to," said Lemon. "All the Remove chaps are in bed, too—even Nipper. You can't expect us to defeat the emperor, I suppose?"

Willy nodded.

"That's just what I do expect," he said calmly. "You needn't look at me bleary-eyed! I mean it! It's up to us, my lads, to step into the breach and turn the tables!"

"That's a bit mixed, isn't it?" asked Chubby.

"Never you mind about that!" said Willy severely. "The position is simply this—Dorrie and Umlosi have been shoved away in prison, and the Conqueror's got to surrender. Therefore, it's up to us to take some sort of action that'll make the emperor change his record!"

"But, you ass, can't you trust Mr. Lee—"

"Mr. Lee's all right," interrupted Willy condescendingly. "And Mr. Earl, and Mr. Manners—all of 'em, in fact—I suppose they'll get up some sort of scheme, but it's bound to be stiff and formal. So the Third has got to do something snappy."

Considering that the Third was solely represented by these three fags, Willy was evidently something of an optimist.

CHAPTER II.

WILLY'S LITTLE PLAN.



HANDFORTH MINOR had stated the case fairly accurately.

The position was, indeed, acute. Lord Dorri-more and Umlosi had fallen into the hands of the emperor's soldiers during the thick of the fight. Titus IV. had ordered his troops to take the Conqueror, and they had failed. But they had succeeded in obtaining two captives.

And the brutal ruler of Isirium had ordered an immediate surrender, or the lives of the prisoners would be forfeited. But Nelson Lee had refused, and so the period

of grace had been extended until dawn. There were several good hours left, but there seemed little hope.

A few things had happened since the juncos had gone to bed, and Willy consequently knew nothing of them. But his scheme was completely mapped out in his own mind.

"I dreamed about it first," he remarked thoughtfully. "Then I woke up, and realised that it could be done. I had half a mind to tell Nipper and my major, and the other chaps—but why should I? I'd rather have you fellows share the glory."

"Thanks awfully!" said Chubby, without enthusiasm.

"It's no good being sarcastic; wait till you hear the programme!" said Willy. "Now, the emperor's got Dorrie and Umlosi as hostages. That's so, isn't it?"

"Of course it is!" growled Lemon.

"But what's going to happen if we butt along and collar the emperor himself as a hostage?" asked Willy serenely. "I rather think that'll shove a different complexion on the affair."

His chums stared.

"Collar the emperor?" gasped Chubby.

"As a hostage?" breathed Juicy.

"That's the idea!" replied Willy. "Of course, it'll be a bit difficult, but we can't expect—"

"Difficult!" yelled Chubby Heath. "You mad fathead! You're not suggesting this seriously, are you?"

"Of course I am!"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon felt rather faint. From long experience, they knew that their leader was in deadly earnest. And the thing took their breath away. They weren't so very surprised that Willy should suggest capturing a hostage, but it was utterly staggering to hear him naming the emperor himself as the victim! Yet it was quite characteristic of Handforth minor to propose a hare-brained scheme of this kind.

"There's nothing like going straight to the top!" explained Willy. "Of course, we could collar that beast, Melos, or even Gallus, the chief of the army. But they're only small fry. My idea is to go straight for the emperor and get him!"

"Get him?" breathed Chubby. "Oh, you're mad!"

"Say that again, my lad, and I'll chuck you under the giddy bed!" said Willy severely. "Just because I propose a bold idea, you think I've gone potty! As a matter of fact, it'll be easy."

"Easy?" repeated Juicy, with a gasp.

"A little while ago I said it would be difficult, but that was all bluff," went on Handforth minor. "All we've got to do is to sneak out, buzz across the square to the emperor's palace, and climb up the face of the building to the first balcony. Then we've got to break in, collar the emperor in his sleep, bind him, gag him, and there you are!"

"My goodness!" panted Chubby. "Is that what you call easy?"

"Perfectly simple and straightforward," said Willy. "We might have a bit of trouble in getting him, but that's nothing. I believe the balcony is about twenty feet from the ground, and it'll be a stiff climb. But there's no need to be funky over a little thing like that."

It was impossible for Chubby Heath or Juicy Lemon to make any comment. They were bereft of speech. The staggering audacity of this plan was too much for them. And Willy talked about it in a calm, matter-of-fact tone, as though it were merely a Third Form jape at St. Frank's!

As a matter of fact, Willy looked upon it as such. With the supreme confidence of youth, he brushed aside all the difficulties, and calmly made up his mind to put the preposterous scheme into execution. And its very insanity gave it a chance of success.

"Well?" he asked gruffly. "Are you chaps dumb?"

"But—but you don't mean it?" stuttered Chubby. "I tell you it's impossible! It's the wildest thing I ever heard of! How the dickens do you know which is the emperor's bed-room?"

Willy smiled contemptuously.

"My dear ass, I found that out days ago!" he replied. "I made a point of finding out because I wanted to borrow some of old Titus' clothes. But something else cropped up, and I forgot it. His bed-room is the second door on the left along the balcony. And once we're inside—"

"But there'll be guards on duty!" objected Lemon.

"At this time of night? Rubbish!" said Willy. "And it's no good meeting troubles half way. If we find some guards, we shall have to dodge 'em."

"Oh, well, it's no good arguing," exclaimed Chubby, with a hopeless air. "But even supposing we get in, and even supposing we gag and bind the emperor, how do you reckon we shall get him to the Conqueror?"

"Oh, that's all planned out!" said Willy carelessly. "I've got it all pat in my mind. But there's no need to waste any more time now. Get dressed quick, and be ready in five minutes. I'll be back by that time," he added, slipping towards the door.

"Where are you going to?"

"We've got to have some rope, I suppose?" said Willy. "I know where there's a coil of good thin cord. And we shall need a gag, too. If you chaps aren't ready when I get back—"

"Oh, but look here!" protested Juicy frantically. "It's sheer madness, Willy! We shall get ourselves captured, and then Mr. Lee will be more worried than ever. Give it up, you ass—"

"Yes, give it up, and come to bed!" urged Chubby eagerly.

Willy closed the door and slowly rolled up his sleeves.

"Of course, it's a bit of a nuisance, but I'm always willing to perform necessary work," he said, in a calm, deliberate voice. "Are you chaps coming with me quietly, or must I slosh you first?"

Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were not sloshed.

CHAPTER III.

THE COUNCIL OF WAR.



NELSON LEE leaned over the bridge rail and smoked in silence.

Near him, Mr. Travers Earle was chatting with Mr. Hobart Manners, the chief engineer. Irene's father was looking haggard and worried, and Mr. Earle was no less so.

"Of all the infernally difficult positions I think this is the worst!" Mr. Manners was saying. "It doesn't matter which way you look at it, there's no way out. We've just got to wait."

"And at dawn they will be murdered!" muttered the inventor. "Good heavens! What a position! It wouldn't have been so bad if we could have hurried off to that tower in the forest. But we are helpless—unable to move a yard."

As Mr. Earle spoke, he glanced up at a towering stone column just beyond the emperor's pale. It was a curious edifice, with a ladder leading from the ground to the summit. And right on the very top was a wide platform, looking queerly top-heavy.

A fire burned there—or, rather, a blazing flare. It cast a ruddy glow on the immediate buildings, and must have been a clearly visible beacon tens of miles away. And that flare of fire was significant.

For it meant a great deal more than it looked.

Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi had been carried off into the distant forest, many miles from the capital. And the prisoners were incarcerated in a prison tower. Nelson Lee knew this, for there was a young Isirium noble on board who had thrown in his lot with the Conqueror's party. He had brought a good deal of valuable information.

The emperor himself had sent word that the prisoners had been taken from the city. And he had issued a warning that if the Conqueror moved a yard from her present spot, the signal fire would be at once extinguished.

And that would be taken as a sign by the watchers on the prison tower, far away. It would be a death sign. For, on the instant, the captives would be slain. That,

at all events, was what the emperor declared.

The Conqueror, therefore, was a fixture. Plans had been made to make a direct dash to the tower, with Horatius Placidus acting as guide, and to snatch Dorrie and Umlosi from the guards in one big coup. But that was now shelved, for if the Conqueror moved the fire would be extinguished, and that might mean disaster.

"As far as I can see, we are at an utter deadlock," declared Mr. Manners gloomily. "What's the good of fooling ourselves? We're absolutely helpless."

"It seems so, Manners, but we mustn't be too pessimistic," remarked Nelson Lee, turning from the rail. "We cannot move, and our only course is to wait until dawn—"

"To learn that Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi have been executed," growled Mr. Manners.

"No—to find out what the emperor's next move is to be," corrected Nelson Lee. "I don't believe for a moment that our friends will die. It's bluff—sheer bluff."

"We can't be sure of that," murmured Mr. Earle.

"Can we be sure of anything in this life?" retorted Lee. "If any chance is to be taken, this is certainly the one. Indeed, we are bound hand and foot, and have no choice. It is my personal opinion that the emperor will make a new offer."

"What kind of offer?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't venture so far as to hazard a guess at that," he replied. "But he will certainly keep his prisoners alive, for they are valuable to him in that condition. Dead, they are of no use whatever. We must be prepared to take advantage of the slightest loophole. And there is really no object in discussing matters now, because we don't know the emperor's plans."

Mr. Manners paced up and down impatiently.

"But can't we do something?" he growled. "It's terrible to think of those poor chaps in the hands of these infernal soldiers. Can't we make a move of some kind—now, straight away?"

"I appreciate your impatience, my dear fellow, but we must do nothing to precipitate a catastrophe," said Nelson Lee. "If we had Dorrie and Umlosi aboard, I should propose an immediate journey out of this valley. Far better to leave these people to their own troubles, and get back to the desert. We have many young people on board, and we must not underestimate our responsibility. But we cannot leave until Dorrie and Umlosi are with us."

And that was the whole matter in a nutshell.

Lee was interested in the problems of the little nation, but his duty came first. He

would have liked to see the brutal emperor dethroned, and a more humane man put in his place.

And such a man existed, according to Horatius Placidus and his father. He was, indeed, the rightful emperor—a fairly young man, who had been imprisoned for several years, and kept away from all his people. Titus was a mere usurper, and his rule had been prolonged by reason of his harsh and tyrannical sway. The slightest act of disloyalty by the public had been rewarded by death in some particularly fiendish form or other.

The great amphitheatre had been the scene of many ghastly crimes—crimes which

But Nelson Lee didn't know that Willy Handforth, of the Third, was calmly and serenely taking matters into his own hands.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KIDS GO KIDNAPPING.



“REMEMBER—not a sound!” whispered Willy grimly.

The heroes of the Third were just about to leave their state-room. They were all wearing grey flannels and rubber-soled shoes. And Willy had

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were looked upon by the emperor and his nobles as supreme amusement. Men had been ruthlessly flung to the lions, or burnt at the stake—in just the same manner as the early Christians were tortured in the time of Nero.

It was quite natural that the holiday party should wish to improve this terrible state of affairs. But with two of their number in the hands of this cruel tyrant, their chief thoughts were for these particular prisoners.

And it seemed that nothing could be done until dawn came—until the emperor decided on his next move.

a considerable length of thin rope tied round his waist. He was entering into this audacious enterprise quite calmly and deliberately. And, what was more, he regarded success as a foregone conclusion.

The possibility of failure did not even enter his mind, and so he never considered it. And he was very much like his famous brother when it came to counting the odds.

Willy's motto was to decide on a thing, and do it. If there were obstacles in the way, they simply had to be overcome. There were no two ways of looking at it. Once started, go right ahead! That was Willy's characteristic.

"I say, old man, look here——" began Chubby Heath feebly.

"Are you going to jib again?" hissed Willy.

"Nunno! I—I——"

"Better not take any risks!" said Handforth minor darkly. "My hat! For two pins I'll leave you chaps behind, and do the job alone! I've never known such a pair of croakers in all my natural!"

"But I tell you——"

"Your mistake—you don't tell me anything!" interrupted Willy curtly. "In fact, if you spoke for half an hour you wouldn't say a single thing! All you can do is to use the English language—it can't be called speaking!"

This insult was allowed to pass unnoticed, for Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon realised the futility of keeping up the argument. They gave one another a last look of hopeless misery, and braced themselves for the ordeal.

There was a good deal to be said for these fags. When all their protests went in vain, they invariably resigned themselves to the inevitable, and became keen, enthusiastic assistants. They allowed themselves to enter into the spirit of whatever madcap scheme Willy had on hand. And, miraculously enough, these schemes generally came off.

Cool cheek was the main reason. For it is astounding what can be done—what seemingly impossible feats can be accomplished—when a fellow goes at it with a blind, serene confidence in certain victory.

The three fags had no difficulty in leaving the Conqueror. They didn't make their exit by means of a door. Nothing so commonplace as that. One by one, Willy leading, they silently slipped through the window, and found themselves on deck.

Not a sound was uttered. Even Willy himself maintained a stony silence. And, like a shadow, he slipped across the short stretch of deck, and wormed his way behind a pile of deck-chairs. Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon followed him. A rope was lowered, and the trio slid quietly to the ground.

Those on the bridge saw nothing and heard nothing. And even the watchmen on this particular part of the deck were in complete ignorance of what had happened. When it came to stealthy movement, Willy and Co. were like a trio of Red Indians.

"Good! Now we're safe!" breathed Handforth minor.

They had got to the edge of the square, and were crouching behind the cover of a stone pillar. A little distance away the palace gardens were divided off from the square by means of a high wall.

"I didn't expect we'd get as far as this," murmured Chubby. "I say, it's rather exciting now we're on the job!"

"Of course it's exciting," said Willy.

"Didn't I tell you that you'd enjoy yourselves? But not so much jawing—let's get over that wall and break into the palace."

The wall was soon conquered. The three fags were like monkeys, and there was still no sign of alarm when they dropped into the gardens and stole towards the great stone balcony which lay alongside this wall of the palace. The balcony was supported by ornamental marble columns. And Willy eyed them with complete satisfaction.

"Easy!" he whispered. "Plenty of nobs and crevices. I'll go first, and you chaps wait until I'm at the top."

Chubby and Juicy watched with their hearts in their mouths as Willy commenced the climb. He went at it like a steeple-jack, and swarmed up the column as though this sort of thing was an everyday exercise.

The fags, of course, were well accustomed to climbing—this being one of their favourite hobbies when at school. Chubby and Juicy would not have been so expert, but for the fact that Willy always kept them up to the mark.

The leader of the Third reached the balcony without mishap. But if he had made a slip near the top, his fate would have been serious. Without question, he would have sustained a broken limb or two, at least.

He quickly glanced about him, and saw that the balcony was deserted. The gloom was thick, and the dense shadows concealed everything. Willy rapidly uncoiled the rope from about him and lowered it.

Chubby came up first, assisted by his leaders. Chubby's danger was practically nil, since he had the rope about him, and Willy was hauling on it with all his young strength.

And Juicy Lemon was almost lifted up bodily, for he had the two of them to help. And at last they all stood on the balcony—Willy now holding the rope coiled in his hand.

"Well, my lads, what about it?" he whispered. "I thought it wasn't going to be done?"

"We're not inside yet," said Chubby doubtfully.

"That's going to be the easiest part of the whole job," said Handforth minor. "In this hot climate they sleep with the windows wide open—and even the emperor keeps no guards out here."

Willy had obviously made full investigations before deciding upon this plan. And Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon found that their leader was correct. An entry was easily made into the great building.

There was no window to open. A kind of arched doorway led on to the balcony, and the only protection to this was a heavy curtain. Pushing this aside, Willy tip-toed in, and then came to a halt.

"Easy as falling off a form!" he murmured.

There was full reason for his jubilation. Titus IV. himself was reclining on a luxurious lounge, fully dressed, on the other side of the splendid marble apartment. Apparently he had decided to take a short rest. The emergencies of the night debarred him from going to bed in the usual way.

And Willy and Co. wasted no time whatever—but pounced.

CHAPTER V.

THE GET-AWAY.



HOLD him—and keep grabbing as tight as you can!"

Willy hissed out this advice urgently. He and his two chums had leapt upon the emperor as the latter lay sleeping. There were no other persons in the apartment. But Willy knew well enough that guards were certain to be within call.

The fags acted like lightning—as though this kind of work was familiar to them. A cushion had been flung over the emperor's face, and at the same moment he was yanked completely over, face downwards.

He gurgled once or twice, but the sound was almost inaudible. Considering that his face was buried in the cushion, this was not surprising—particularly when it is remembered that Juicy Lemon was sitting squarely and firmly on the back of the emperor's head.

At the same time, Willy and Chubby were dealing with their prisoner's hands and feet. The rope was twirled round his wrists, and he was rendered helpless. And then more rope was tied to his ankles—but not tightly. His legs were left so that he could walk—but only with discomfort.

"Good!" murmured Willy breathlessly. "I told you it would be easy! Of course, we've got to get him out of here yet, but anything's possible to a chap with determination like mine!"

"I—I believe he's fainted, or something!" muttered Lemon nervously.

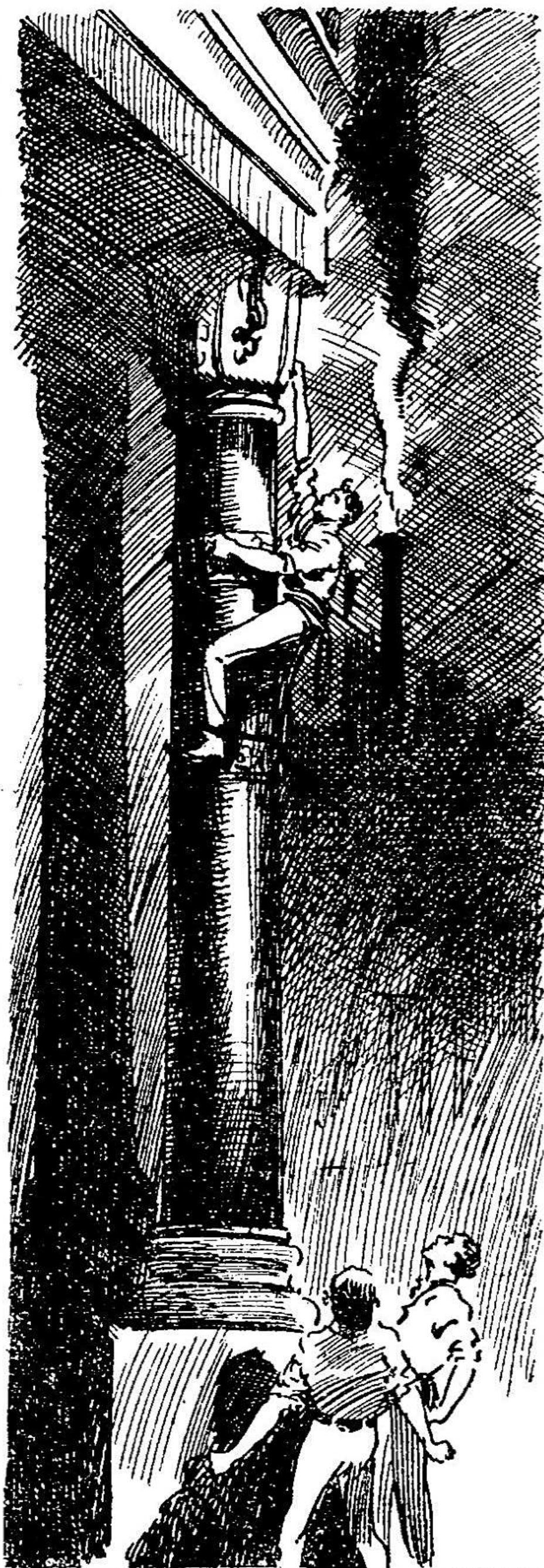
"Rats! He's all right!"

"Perhaps he's drunk!" suggested Chubby.

"That's quite likely," agreed Willy. "In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if Titus IV. is as tight as four! Whew! That's a bit steep, you know!"

Chubby Heath and Lemon failed to appreciate the pun. They inwardly wondered how their leader could find time to indulge in jokes at such a tense moment as this.

"Now hold him tight, and I'll shove his gag on!" murmured Willy. "I don't like treating an emperor with such disrespect, but it's got to be done. Some of these tyrant rulers get assassinated, but we're not quite so rash—we believe in humane methods. Now then, old tight 'un, be good enough to roll over!"



Willy swarmed up the column as though this sort of thing was an everyday exercise.

The unfortunate emperor could do nothing else, for he was abruptly pushed round. He gave one enraged gasp as his face left the cushion, but before he could make any outcry a heavy scarf had been whipped round his face and drawn tight.

"Now, on your feet, please!" said Willy curtly. "That's the way. And have a look at this!"

Willy produced a pocket-knife, and displayed before his enraged victim's eyes a corkscrew, which had a very businesslike point. Willy suggestively prodded this into the emperor's back, and Titus gave a jump.

"That's just a taster!" said Willy calmly. "The first sound you make, or the first—"

"He can't understand English, you ass!" muttered Chubby.

"My hat! I'd forgotten that!" said Willy. "Oh, well, I shall have to speak to him in Latin! If he can't understand, it won't be my fault!"

Willy did his utmost to speak Latin, and if his efforts were comic they were certainly effective. For he clearly made the emperor understand that he would be severely prodded if he didn't do everything he was ordered.

"And now we'll go!" added Willy, in English. "In fact, the sooner we can get out of this the better. The most difficult part will be sneaking past the guards. The fatheads might try to stop us!"

"We'll never get out of this alive!" muttered Juicy. "I knew it was a mad thing to come. We shall probably be thrown to the lions, or burnt at the stake, or something!"

"That's right—be cheerful!" said Willy coldly. "I'm not frightened of the stake! And it wouldn't worry me if they decided to chop our heads off! We can always escape."

Willy's chums were not quite so optimistic, and their hearts were in their mouths as they propelled the helpless emperor towards the heavy curtains on the other side of the room. Just before they reached them, Willy jerked off the captive's gag.

"No need for this now," he said. "We've got to expose ourselves, so it doesn't matter. Now then! Stop that!"

The emperor, finding himself at liberty to use his lungs, was taking advantage of the fact in no uncertain way. But he broke off abruptly as he felt a firm and agonising dig in the small of his back.

The three juniors propelled the emperor through the curtains, and they found themselves in a great domed chamber, with wide stairs leading downwards. And there were soldiers hurrying up. It looked serious for the young adventurers.

The guards came rushing up, and Willy set his teeth. He had to be drastic, or the whole adventure would end in disaster. With considerable force he jammed the corkscrew into the emperor's back.

"Stand back, fools!" screamed Titus. "This young madman will kill me if any

attempt is made to release me. Back, I say!"

The guards halted, staring in dumbfounded amazement. And as they halted, Willy instantly relaxed the pressure—clearly proving to the emperor that no harm would come to him if he obeyed orders. And his imperial majesty was hustled downstairs at such speed that he nearly fell from top to bottom.

But they reached the great foyer all right, and here other men were anxious to come and release their unfortunate monarch. But again Willy brought the corkscrew into play.

And this time the emperor fairly screamed out his orders.

He was proving himself to be an arrant coward, and Willy had, indeed, relied upon this from the first. A stronger man would have suffered serious injury rather than submit to this humiliating, degrading treatment.

He was only dealing with three boys, but they frightened him.

He had an intense fear that Willy would stick the corkscrew two or three inches into his back if the guards attempted to lay fingers on his tormentors. And rather than suffer such agony and injury, the emperor madly ordered the men to stand back.

And so the apparently impossible happened.

The juniors emerged on to the palace steps with their imperial prisoner, and even Willy himself was startled. Inwardly, he had had a haunting fear that something would go wrong, and that the adventure would end in capture for himself and his chums.

The mission, in fact, had been so audacious and startling that any sane person would have declared its fulfilment impossible. But the very cheek of it went a long way towards success.

The emperor himself was frightened for his own skin, and his guards were flustered and bewildered, and hardly knew whether to take this situation seriously. For it seemed so incredible that Titus should be a captive in the hands of these three youngsters.

"Conqueror ahoy!" shouted Handforth minor. "Searchlight—quick! And get your guns ready! Ahoy there!"

"We'll never do it!" muttered Heath frantically.

And even Willy was beginning to become doubtful. Everything depended upon the next few moments. They were outside, and the Conqueror was in sight. It was touch and go!

CHAPTER VI.

A PRESENT FROM WILLY!



MR. TRAVERS EARLE started forward with an exclamation.

"What on earth—" he began.

"It's one of the boys!" broke in Nelson Lee sharply.

"Who is it?" he added, in a shout. "Who's that over there?"

"Me, sir!" yelled Willy. "Coming now!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "It's all right, sir—we've got the emperor with us—just a little present," sang out Willy. "We thought he'd be useful as a hostage. Shove on the searchlight, and get a few machine-guns working!"

"The boy must be fooling us——" began Mr. Earle.

But Nelson Lee didn't wait. He rapped out an order for the forward searchlight to be switched on. The Conqueror's guards had heard Willy's shout, and so they were fully on the alert with rifles and machine-guns.

The beam of light blazed out, and quickly focused itself on the little group which came hurrying towards the land yacht. In the rear a great commotion was gathering force, and men were rushing out of the palace in dozens.

"My hat! We've done it!" panted Willy triumphantly. "Now then, emp, this is where you cease to exist! You're just a prisoner now—but if you're not jolly careful, you'll have your head lopped off!"

"My goodness! They're coming!" panted Lemon.

It was true. When it was practically too late the emperor's guards had decided to make a fierce rush.

Crack! Crack! Zurrth!

A number of rifles sang out, and one of the machine-guns let forth a rattling roar of bullets. They were all aimed at the air, above the heads of the oncoming guards. Nelson Lee had no wish to kill, or even injure, unless absolutely driven to it.

And this warning was sufficient.

A hail of bullets sang over the heads of the guards—whining and droning shrilly through the night air. And a few splinterings could be heard as several bullets struck the palace walls. The guards halted, broke, and fled in all directions.

"Yah! Funks!" said Willy contemptuously.

By this time they had reached the Conqueror's side, and Willy looked up with all his old assurance. The emperor was nearly insane with rage. But he was helpless—his bonds prevented him from taking any action.

"Here we are, sir—he's yours now!" said Willy pleasantly. "As a matter of fact, we shall be glad to get rid of him—I'm fed up with him!"

Nelson Lee leaned over the rail, startled. "Boys! What does this mean?" he ejaculated. "How is it that you appear in this fashion with the emperor?"

Willy gave Lee a rather pitying look.

"It's clear enough, sir," he replied. "We've collared him, that's all!"

"Collared him?"

"Yes, sir—can't you see?" asked Willy impatiently. "You're not quite so sharp as usual to-night, sir! I always thought you were so jolly keen. But I suppose you're a bit sleepy," he added, by way of excuse.

Nelson Lee was too surprised to be annoyed.

"Open the entrance door at once!" he ordered, turning to a member of the crew. "Now, Handforth minor, do you mean to tell me that you deliberately entered the palace and captured the emperor?"

"That's it, sir," replied Willy.

"By glory!" said Mr. Earle. "I always knew these boys were a tough handful—but this beats everything, Mr. Lee! And what a lever in our hands, too! We shall be able to demand the release of Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi!"

"That's why we've kidnapped him, sir!" said Willy, from below.

By this time the door had been opened, and the three fags relinquished their prisoner to stronger hands. Two of Mr. Earle's men took the emperor firmly by the shoulders, and led him up to the deck. Titus was growing calmer.

His fright, in fact, was abating. These people were not disposed to murder him out of hand, it seemed. And with the conviction that he was safe, a certain degree of his former arrogance returned.

"Well, boys, upon my word!" said Nelson Lee. "This is certainly an astounding state of affairs. And I cannot commend you too highly for your pluck and daring——"

"Thank you, sir," said Willy.

"Neither can I condemn you too strongly for taking such unwarrantable risks without permission!" went on Lee sternly. "But the success of your mission has justified the irregularity, and so I can do nothing but give you praise. The emperor will be an amazingly strong asset to us."

"That's all right, sir," said Willy. "As long as we've done a bit of good, we're satisfied. You see, I made up my mind to kidnap somebody, so I thought it might as well be the emperor. Nothing like going to the top and doing a job thoroughly."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EMPEROR'S FATAL COMMAND.

TITUS glared at his captors with baleful hatred.

"Thinkest thou that such trickery as this will serve thee?" he asked gratingly. "Fools! Thy madness has sealed the fate of thy two companions! They shall die——"

"I am glad to learn they still live!" interrupted Lee.

"Ay, they live—but their span of life will be brief!" raved the emperor.

"As brief as thine, O Titus!" said Lee grimly. "For if they



die, then thou wilt die also! If you wish to live, thy soldiers must go hence forthwith and bring our friends back with all speed. And when they are restored to us, then thou wilt go free. But if they die——”

“A fig for thy threats!” roared the emperor, mad with rage. “Thou wilt see my power!”

He suddenly rushed to the side of the ship before his captors could stop him. He waved an arm, and then pointed to the blazing beacon on the top of the column.

“Extinguish the fire sign!” he thundered. “Put out the fire, so that the signal will be seen in the distant forest! Out with it, I say, or every dog of you shall be slain!”

The emperor was hauled back, and Lee was looking more grim than ever.

“Thou art mad, Titus!” he said curtly. “Such insanity will not help thee. Your only hope is to restore our friends to us with all speed possible. And then, perchance, an understanding will be reached.”

Lee had not revealed much in his manner, but he regarded this new situation with complete satisfaction. He was still amazed that Willy and Co., of all people, should have reversed the position so dramatically. The fags—the boys who were considered quite useless—had turned up trumps in a manner that was little short of staggering.

For there was no way out for the emperor. An arrant coward, he was even now gazing apprehensively at the fire column. He had shouted his order in a moment of uncontrollable rage—when even his own peril escaped him. And he was relieved to find that the fire still burned.

“Thou hast the advantage!” he growled, at length. “I will give the order to bring the prisoners back——”

“By heaven!” shouted Mr. Manners suddenly. “The fire’s out! They’ve given the signal! They’ve——”

Nelson Lee caught his breath and stared. There was no mistake. The blaze at the top of the fire column had suddenly died down, and now there was not a spark remaining. Lee gazed at Mr. Earle and the chief engineer. The same thought was surging through all their minds.

The signal would be seen afar—and Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi would be put to death straight away! It was an appalling situation—and brought about by the impulsive rage of the emperor.

Lee grasped the prisoner so roughly that he nearly knocked him over, and he pointed a quivering finger to the knots of soldiers who were hovering about in the square.

“Give the order for that fire to be re-lit!” shouted Lee thickly. “And remember, thou cur, that if our friends die, thy own life shall be forfeit!”

Titus fairly shivered as he gave the order. And within a few minutes the fire was again blazing at the summit of the column. But every ounce of Nelson Lee’s peace had gone.

“This is terrible!” he said, facing Mr. Earle. “The signal has been given—and, although the re-lighting of the fire may stay the execution, we have no guarantee of that. Poor Dorrie and Umlosi may be put to death, in spite of our efforts.”

“But—but what can we do?” panted Mr. Earle hoarsely.

“Since there is no further need for us to remain inactive, we will hasten to the tower at full speed!” replied Lee grimly. “Placidus must be brought up to the bridge, to act as guide. We start at once.”

But both Lee and Travers Earle were pale. They felt convinced that the fire was now useless. That beacon had been extinguished—and that, after all, was the signal.

Instead of the situation being improved, it was far worse!

But Willy and Co. were not to blame for this. They had performed magnificent service, and it was only sheer ill-luck that had brought about the disaster.

And by sending the Conqueror full speed towards the forest there was no certainty that the prisoners would be saved. Indeed, it seemed a hopeless quest. An hour or two would be occupied in that journey. And the men who guarded Dorrie and Umlosi could perform their foul work within five minutes.

But there was only one thing to do—speed through the night, in the hope of being in time. The fateful sign had been given. And the emperor, who was responsible, was hustled below, and locked up, in charge of two men. He was in a pitiable state of terror—for he now realised to the full the extent of his folly. If those two prisoners of his should be dead—then he would pay the penalty with his own life!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FATEFUL SIGN.



“ALL goes well.” This remark was made by a burly Isirium soldier who leaned over the parapet of the great stone tower. He had a companion, a man who

had just come up to relieve him.

The night was black all round, and although it was just possible to see across the clearing, the dense forest lay thickly on every side. But from the parapet of the tower the distant lights of the capital were in clear view.

And one light was clear beyond all others—a bright, yellowish flare, which had been burning steadily for hours. Both these guards on the tower knew what that fire meant. While it burned, the prisoners were to be kept alive.

But if the fire vanished, then an execution must forthwith take place.

"Ay, all goes well," agreed the second guard. "But what think you of the general position, Clitus? It seemeth that these accursed strangers will cause endless strife."

"Fear not—the emperor will deal with them fitly," replied the other. "Horatius Placidus be alive, but methinks he will soon suffer the fate that our emperor hath planned for him. And little will it surprise me if these strangers never emerge from our valley in their strange chariot—"

"By Mercury!" ejaculated the other. "Look you yonder! The light—the fire hath been extinguished!"

Both the men stared out across the forest.

"'Tis so, Clitus!" muttered one of them. "By the saints, it meaneth but one thing! The emperor desireth the lives of these two rats! I must inform our officer forthwith."

"Ay, and lose no time!"

The man clattered down the stone steps of the tower, arriving, breathless and excited, in one of the lower chambers. The tower was quite large at the base, with many rooms and halls.

"What meaneth this unseemly brawl!" snapped a man who had been lounging idly in a corner seat. "What news, thou fool? 'Tis yet many hours from dawn, and—"

"The light, my captain—the fire hath gone!" panted the soldier.

The officer sprang to his feet, his eyes gleaming. He was a fitting lieutenant for such a master as Titus. He was brutal-looking, and his eyes were almost piggish. A captain, he was attired in elaborate robes, with a great deal of golden mail.

He thrust his glittering helmet on, and made for the door.

"I will see this with mine own eyes!" he declared. "And if thou art right—by Mars, then we will have some sport!"

Two minutes later the pair emerged pantingly upon the tower summit, and the captain stared eagerly towards the capital. That one glance was enough. The fire column was not to be seen.

"'Tis well!" exclaimed the officer gloatingly. "They are to die! A better night than I hoped for, my friends! Come, we have work to do. And thou wilt join me in this amusement!"

They all turned and descended the stairs—although, if they had remained a minute longer they would have seen the signal fire flaring out again. And that might have made a very great difference to subsequent events.

Indeed, if the captain had been delayed in getting to the tower summit he would have seen the signal upon emerging. And he would undoubtedly have believed that his troopers had made a mistake.

But such trifles as these generally decide great issues.

Even as the eager trio were descending

the tower the fire signal flared out as before. And from the ground level the distant city was not even visible—for the surrounding trees confined the view.

So there was no means by which the officer could know that the fateful sign had been altered. His one duty now was to see about the immediate execution of the two prisoners. And the fellow went about his work with a real pleasure. His name was Lucilius, and he was well known in the Isirium army as a brute.

There were two or three other soldiers below, and they all entered into this task with gusto. They had never hoped that it would fall to their lot to execute these prisoners. And so they hailed the news with enthusiasm, and welcomed it as a relief to the monotony.

Lucilius led his men round the tower, and a moment later a heavy door was flung open.

"Ho, within!" shouted Lucilius roughly. "'Tis time for thee to emerge, good friends! Thou art free! The emperor hath been gracious enough to grant thee thy liberty!"

The soldiers laughed heartily at this jest. And a moment later Lord Dorrimore appeared, rubbing his eyes. After the blackness of the prison, the forest clearing seemed fairly light.

"Hang it all, you might have some consideration for a fellow!" grumbled Dorrie. "Right in the middle of my beauty sleep—an' at dead of night—you come here, interruptin' like this!"

"I know not thy words, stranger!" exclaimed Lucilius roughly.

"'Tis well thou shouldst remind me!" growled Dorrie, in Latin. "I forget these trifles, my captain. And what now? Another journey?"

"Ay—a long one!" replied Lucilius pleasantly.

"A foul plan, indeed!" said his lordship. "My friend is by no means recovered. His wounded shoulder paineth, and thou hast not allowed him water or ointments. A curse on thee for thy inhumanity!"

The captain scowled.

"Thy friend will have no need for ointments, nor soothing balms," he replied. "For the journey thou art now taking will be one from which there is no return. As I have told thee, the emperor hath sent a message by means of a fire signal."

Lord Dorrimore started slightly, and his jaw set.

"Speak plainly, my friend," he said quietly. "Is it—death?"

"Ay, and without delay!" replied Lucilius. "Enough! Seize these prisoners!" he added, turning to his men. "Bind them tightly, and then, by Mars, for our sport!"

The captain seemed to regard the execution with wonderful relish. And he wasn't merely going to put his victims to death in a simple, straightforward manner. Nothing so brief and uninteresting as that.

Umlosi was brought out without much difficulty—for, spearless, and hampered by his injured shoulder, his fighting powers were robbed from him. He accepted the position stoically.

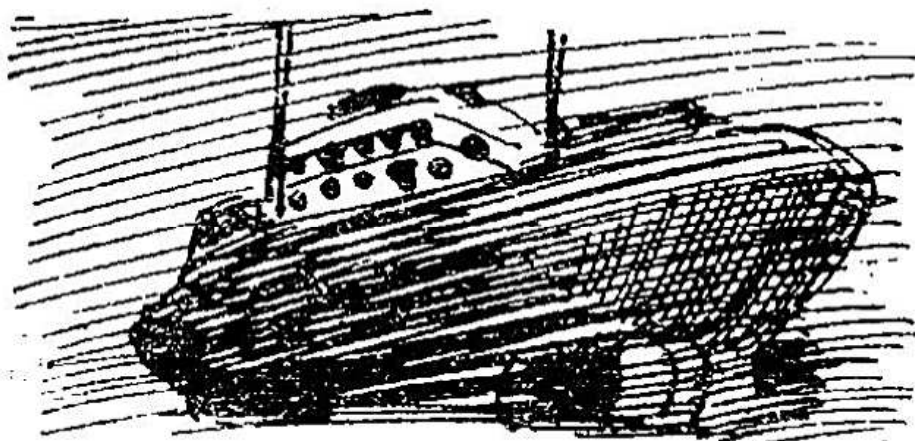
The two prisoners were carried bodily across the clearing, and dumped down at a spot in the open—midway between the Tower and the edge of the forest. Here there were two heavy wooden posts driven in the ground. And Dorrie and Umlosi were tightly and cruelly bound to these uprights.

"I'm afraid it's all up, old son," said Dorrie quietly. "The infernal hogs are goin' to burn us at the stake, by all appearances."

But Dorrie was quite wrong. Captain Lucilius had quite another scheme in his mind.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RUSH THROUGH THE NIGHT.



THE CONQUEROR was like a thing of life.

With her engines throbbing at full pressure, she rolled majestically along the main highway like some gigantic monster of another world. The inhabitants of farms and villages in her path fled in terror as she approached.

The great land yacht generally moved over the ground at an average speed of about ten miles an hour. But just now she was doing well over fifteen miles an hour. For the ground was good and the mission was urgent.

Her decks were alive with activity.

Willy and Co., of course, had not gone to bed again, and so they were on deck when the journey commenced. But the sudden and unexpected moving of the yacht had brought the Remove out of their beds in no time. Handforth and Church and McClure were greatly in evidence. Even Archie Glenthorne was on deck. I was talking with Tregellis-West and Watson, and Bob Christine and a crowd of other fellows were trying to get the hang of this dramatic turn of events.

The night was gloomy, but the Conqueror's path was as clear as daylight, for her forward searchlight gleamed out upon the paved highway, revealing every twist and turn for hundreds of yards ahead.

On the bridge Mr. Earle was at the wheel, and near him stood Horatius Placidus, the

good-natured noble who had lately been the Master of the Emperor's Household. He had been condemned to death for a trifling offence, and had been saved by the Remove juniors. And now he was a refugee on the Conqueror, with his father, and a young friend named Claudius Regulus. All three would have been executed had they joined their own countrymen. Their only safety was in throwing in their lot with the Conqueror.

This dash towards the forest had a double motive. First and foremost, Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were to be saved—if humanly possible. But there was another mission to accomplish.

That great stone tower formed a prison for Marcus Phillipus, the rightful Emperor of Isirium—if Placidus could be believed, and there was certainly no reason to doubt him.

Marcus had been held a prisoner for years, and the tyrant Titus had ruled the land with an iron hand, mainly for his own desires and pleasures. A large proportion of the male population had been turned into soldiers so that Titus's aims should be fulfilled.

It had seemed remarkable to Nelson Lee that Titus should allow this rival of his to live, for Titus was a man who thought little or nothing of human life, and took it for the mere gratification of a whim.

But it seemed that Titus was afraid—being highly superstitious, like all these people of Isirium. And any man who took the life of a man of royal blood was doomed to disaster and death, according to the centuries old tradition of this race.

And so the unfortunate Marcus had remained a captive.

But, according to old Flavius Placidus, the time was now ripe for a great upheaval. The emperor had committed so many atrocities that the people were aroused—although they dared not make any outcry, for fear of death. But old Flavius was convinced that a bold stroke at this juncture would have startling results.

Nelson Lee could easily see that this little band of royalists were eager to take advantage of the Conqueror's presence—to get the Conqueror and her company on their side; and Nelson Lee and the rest of us were equally as keen to help. For there were no two ways of looking at this situation. Under no circumstances could Marcus be worse than Titus.

And if his loyal supporters were any pattern to judge by, then the imprisoned Marcus was a good man, and well worth helping. But it must be admitted that we scarcely thought of the unfortunate exile during this mad rush through the night. Our sole concern was for Dorrie and Umlosi.

"There's no need to worry—we shall be in time all right," said Handforth firmly. "I've got a feeling that everything's going to turn out swimmingly. And we've got the emperor on board to use as a giddy lever in case there's trouble."

"That's one consolation," said Church, nodding.

"It was jolly smart of your minor to kidnap the emperor," put in McClure. "My only hat! Just think of it! Those cheeky fags having the nerve to go into the palace and abduct old Titus!"

Handforth nodded.

"Yes, by George, it was amazing!" he agreed frankly. "It isn't often I agree with Willy's silly rot, but this time I don't mind owning him as a brother. He's covered himself with glory—and I'm blessed if the little beggar hasn't got more brain than I thought!"

"He's a young Napoleon!" put in Reggie Pitt firmly.

"Rather!" said Edward Oswald. "Of course, it was my idea, really——"

"Oh, naturally," said Pitt carelessly. "Don't mention it, old man! Of course it was your idea! We understand! But you thought it was rather a decent scheme to let Willy carry it out, eh? Just so!"

Handforth glared.

"It wasn't my idea at all!" he snorted. "As a matter of fact, I wouldn't own such an idea! Only a chap like my minor, with the nerve of a colossus, could ever conceive of it! By George! Stealing into the palace and kidnapping the giddy emperor! I shall certainly have to give him a pat on the back!"

"At the same time, it didn't pan out so well, did it?" put in De Valerie. "I mean, poor old Dorrie and Umlosi may die through the interference of those fags. It's not their fault, of course——"

"Piffle!" interrupted Handforth. "They kidnapped the emperor in the common cause. As a matter of fact they didn't even know that that signal was burning. And you needn't get the wind up—Dorrie and Umlosi are all right."

We all wished we had Handforth's optimism.

CHAPTER X.

REGGIE PITT'S BRIGHT IDEA.



"HALLO! We're slowing down!" said Alf Brent suddenly.

"Absolutely!"

agreed Archie. "It seems to me, laddie, that we've reached the end of the good old tether, as it were. I mean to say, if we proceed much further we shall get into a sort of argument with sundry tree trunks, and all that sort of stuff!"

"Yes, there's the forest right ahead!" said Brent keenly.

The Conqueror was just coming to a standstill. For some little time she had been travelling at reduced speed, for she had left the paved highway behind, and had been traversing long stretches of pasture-land,

and taking everything in her stride, even including streams and spinneys. The great land yacht had ploughed her way onwards as though obstacles did not exist.

But now the vessel's further progress was impossible—or, if not impossible, inexpedient. For we were faced by the thick, dense forest, with tall, stately trees rising upwards to the sky in all their regal majesty.

Pressed into the task, the Conqueror, by means of her great battering-ram, might have thrust her way through the dense mass of woodland. But it would necessarily be a slow progress, and there was nothing to be gained.

For there was another and a better way.

"Horatius informs me that the path is quite wide," said Nelson Lee, as he talked with Mr. Manners. "By no means wide enough for the Conqueror herself, but of ample size to admit the passage of our small tractors. So we shall go straight ahead in the cars, Manners. I shall want you to remain in charge here, on board."

"Certainly," said Mr. Manners, without hesitation.

The rest of us soon learned what the plan was. And we instinctively knew that we should not be permitted to accompany the rescue party. Nelson Lee would lead it, and they would all go on by means of the small, light tractors which were grouped round the Conqueror, hanging from davits, like the life-boats of a steamer.

The preparations were well advanced, and two of the tractors had been lowered when Reggie Pitt came hurrying up to Nelson Lee. There was a gleam in the junior's eye.

"Can I have a word, sir?" he asked quickly.

"I'm afraid this is hardly the time——" began Lee.

"It's about Dorrie, sir, and Umlosi!" put in Reggie. "You don't know how worried I am—and I've just had an idea. How far is it from here to this tower?"

"I cannot say exactly, but Placidus fears that we shall be at least half an hour in getting through, mainly owing to the extremely difficult nature of hillocks and gulleys in this wood."

Reggie's eyes sparkled more than ever.

"Then wouldn't it be a good idea to do something at once, sir?" he asked eagerly. "Supposing Dorrie and Umlosi are still safe—and it's quite likely they are. But perhaps they'll be murdered during this next half-hour, and then you'll be too late."

"But, my dear boy, we can do nothing until we reach the spot——"

"Yes, you can, sir!" exclaimed Pitt. "What about rockets?"

"Rockets?" repeated Lee, with a start.

"Maroons, even," went on Reggie.

"They make an awful noise, and there are heaps of them on board. These Isiriuru

chaps will be scared out of their wits if some rockets fall all round."

"By James!" muttered Lee tensely.

"Placidus knows, roughly, the direction of the tower, and you can shoot off the rockets at an angle, so that they fall in full flare!" went on Pitt. "Don't you see the idea, sir?"

Lee slapped the junior on the back.

"I see it—and I shall certainly adopt it!" he replied briskly. "It only shows, Reggie, that we can't think of everything. Those rockets and maroons shall go up without a moment's delay."

Reggie Pitt flushed.

"I'm glad you think it's O.K., sir. But you never know—it may just save them—"

He broke off, for Nelson Lee had walked rapidly away, his whole being now concentrated upon this fresh stratagem. And within five minutes a full two dozen rockets and maroons were in readiness. The rockets went up first—hissing and roaring and magnificent in the night sky.

They were not dispatched in the usual manner, but at an acute angle, over the tree-tops. In this way they would travel over a large space of ground, and fall somewhere near that central clearing.

The juniors were greatly excited by this new move. And things really began to look exciting when the maroons followed. They went over with a terrific swoosh, and the devastating reports of the sharp explosions came echoing back over the forest.

"That's a thundering good idea of yours, Reggie," I said keenly. "Even if the fireworks don't reach the tower, the noise alone will scare the guards."

Pitt nodded.

"That's just what I thought," he agreed. "And there's no need for secrecy now, so the more noise we can make the better. And there's another side of the question, too."

"You mean that if Dorrie and Umlosi are still alive, they'll either see or hear the maroons and rockets, and they'll know that we're on the track?" I asked. "Yes, that's important, too. I wish to goodness we could know something certain—Hullo, they're off!"

We watched while the tractors left the Conqueror's side, and plunged into the heart of the forest. Three of the small tractors were used, for there was no knowing the size of the enemy force, and it was just as well to be prepared.

The Conqueror, in charge of Mr. Manners,

still had sufficient members of the crew left to guard against any chance attack.

The next half-hour promised to be tense and dramatic.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE MERCY OF THE TORTURER.



LORD DORRIMORE raised his eyebrows.

"Hullo, what's this?" he said softly.

"These chaps are takin' their time, Umlosi! An' even now they haven't

brought the faggots along, an' all the rest of the combustible material!"

Umlosi's only reply was a grunt.

The black giant was probably as brave and indifferent of death as Dorrie himself. But he did not possess his lordship's extraordinary power of self-control.

Umlosi was furious—madly enraged against these enemies who had them in their power. His one desire was to grasp his trusty spear and fight. Given such an opportunity, he would have died happily. For Umlosi was a born warrior, and his ambition was to die in battle.

And this ignominious execution—this murder—caused Umlosi to become sullen and morose. And his feelings were in no way improved by the certain knowledge that escape was impossible.

The pair had been tied to those wooden posts for a considerable time, while Captain Lucilius and his men talked at some distance. But now, at last, a move was being made.

But it wasn't what Dorrie had expected.

To his lordship's surprise, the Isirum soldiers approached, carrying a number of javelins, which they dumped down in a pile. Lucilius took one of the weapons, and poised it calculatingly.

"'Tis a fair distance," he announced. "Here we will stay, my brave soldiers. And 'tis for me, thy captain, to take the first throw. By Mercury! A fine test for our prowess! Watch, and thou wilt see me transfix the black fool's arm!"

"Thou wilt need a good aim for such a mark," said one of the others.

"To a man of my skill, 'tis nothing!" boasted Captain Lucilius. "And remember, thou blockheads, that no throws must yet cause death. Later, yes—but for the moment we will enjoy our sport."

Lord Dorrimore had understood the full purport of these words, and his lips became thin and set. He could just turn his head, and he glanced round at Umlosi.

"Look out for squalls, old man," he said quietly. "These devils are goin' to take pot-shots at us with those infernal spears! An' I think you're the first mark!"

Umlosi breathed hard.

"I am ready, my master!" he rumbled.

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"Let them do as they will, but never a sound shall they wring from me! Wau! I am sore within, for this is not the death I would willingly die!"

Dorrie gave a short laugh.

"As a matter of fact, I don't think I particularly care for it, when it comes to a matter of choice," he admitted. "But, you see, old man, we can't lift a finger. These fellows have got us on a piece of string. An' I'm not altogether sure that bein' burnt at the stake wouldn't be preferable. It's not such a ghastly business, after all—just one burst of fire, an' then you lose interest in the affair."

"Thou art wondrous jocular, N'Kose!" growled Umlosi. "It amazes me that thou canst jest—"

"I'm not jestin' at all," interrupted his lordship. "But I have rooted objections to bein' sliced up by inches by these co-founded javelins! Still, it's no good wastin' words."

"If only we were fighting, my father!" said Umlosi thickly. "Think of it! A fight—the din and glory of battle! Wau! In that way, I would die as a man should die! But this—"

"Yes, it's decidedly low down!" interrupted Dorrie. "Look out! Here comes the first one!"

Lord Dorrimore braced himself, and, in spite of his composure, he felt a shudder of horror pass down him. There was something indescribably ghastly about this torture—which Lucilius described as "sport."

The light was weak—just the starlight, penetrating through the thin clouds. But it was quite sufficient for these torturers, who could see their victims clearly tied to the posts.

And Lucilius took careful aim with his throwing-spear, and then let fly—with a peculiar twisting movement of his wrist. Dorrimore snapped his teeth together—not being certain, even now, as to whether he was the first victim or Umlosi.

Hiss!

The javelin came hurtling through the air with a slight swishing noise. It missed Umlosi's left arm by a mere fraction—indeed, it actually grazed the skin, although causing no injury.

"By all the skill of the gods!" roared Captain Lucilius. "A miss, by Mars! 'Tis time, indeed, that I had practice! Methinks the next throw will be more aptly judged!"

He prepared to hurl a second javelin, and as he was poising it deliberately an extraordinary sound interrupted the stillness of that forest clearing. It came from above—a crackling, sizzling noise, and growing in intensity every second.

Lucilius lowered his arm in sudden alarm, and gazed up, his companions instinctively following his example. And they all shouted aloud in terrified amazement as a



The beam of light blazed out, and quickly focused itself on the little group. In the rear a great commotion was gathering force, and men were rushing out of the palace in dozens.

roaring, flaming streak of fire hurtled over the tree-tops and soared over the clearing.

Midway across it burst into a myriad stars—red, green, blue, and every imaginable colour. The stars shot out in a glorious spray, but the effect was deprived of its beauty by the low altitude.

"By the Lord Harry!" roared Dorrie. "A rocket!"

"Umtagati!" muttered Umlosi. "He has come, N'Kose! The great wizard himself is near at hand—the father of all the magicians! Even now we may be saved from this ignominious fate!"

"Here they come—a whole bally flight of them!" panted Dorrie.

Rocket after rocket came into view—some descending into the forest only half-exhausted—and there spluttering and exploding amid the undergrowth. And before the prisoners could regain their breath the maroons arrived—to fall with shattering explosions over a wide radius. Some, indeed, exploded in mid-air.

And Captain Lucilius was as pale as a sheet with terror.

CHAPTER XII.

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN.



THE surprise was complete and dramatic.

Captain Lucilius and his men had never seen rockets in their lives before and it seemed to them as though some monstrous visitation had come to the earth—some appalling phenomena from another world.

Two of the soldiers were the first to recover their powers of action. And they fled—madly panic-stricken, their only thought being for their own safety.

Lucilius was affected in precisely the same way. For he, too, took to his heels, his remaining companions accompanying him. And less than two minutes after the first rocket had appeared the clearing was empty—except for the two prisoners, bound to the posts.

Lord Dorrimore gave a soft chuckle.

"Now, that's what I call a brain-wave," he said calmly. "I don't know who thought of it, but he deserves nothin' less than the Victoria Cross! Our cheerful pals have gone, Umlosi. An' now we've just got to wait until the reinforcements arrive."

Although his lordship spoke calmly, he was feeling quite sick and faint. And he was surprised at himself. He regarded this as a sign of weakness, and fought against it.

But it was nothing but the reaction. Dorrie had faced death without a quiver. But now that the terrible peril was over, he found himself suddenly weak. Umlosi was probably the same, but the Kutana Chief said nothing that hinted at this.

"'Tis well now, my master!" he exclaimed, in his deep voice. "Ere long Um-tagati will be with us, and then, mayhap, I will find an opportunity of taking revenge on these accursed dogs!"

"Never mind revenge," said Dorrie. "Let's get free first!"

There was a significant note in his voice—and not without reason.

For he had observed that a lurid glare was beginning to appear on the edge of the forest, not only in one spot, but in two or three. To be exact, the half-exhausted rockets, spurting out their remaining fire into the underbush, had set the wood on fire!

There were dead leaves and twigs by the million—the most inflammable material imaginable. Everything was as dry as tinder, and the forest had caught fire at once, the flames greatly assisted by the gentle, hot wind which had been blowing over the valley for some hours.

Dorrie made some quick calculations.

Those rockets had come from a fair distance, and the chances were that the actual rescue-party would not arrive on the scene for twenty minutes or half-an-hour.

Dorrie remembered the difficult nature of the forest path—the deep gullies, the treacherous dips, and the many rocky hillocks. On foot it was bad enough, but if any of the Conqueror's small tractors were essaying the task, their progress would be slow.

And there was one fire which particularly alarmed his lordship. A rocket had fallen in the clearing itself, setting fire to a mass of dried bushes and long grass. The flames were gathering in intensity, casting a weird, lurid light over the whole glade.

And the fire was spreading with amazing

speed—licking up the dried grass greedily and to the accompaniment of an ever-deepening roar. The great stone tower was illuminated in an uncanny fashion by this livid glare.

"This is distinctly a case of out of the fryin'-pan into the fire!" exclaimed Dorrie tensely. "We're grateful to the brainy fellows who sent the rockets over, but, unless they hurry up, we shall experience the thrills of bein' burnt at the stake, after all!"

And this was the literal truth.

It was a horrifying prospect. And the nature of the difficulty was galling in the extreme. Undoubtedly, the rockets had saved the pair from horrible mutilation and death by torture. But they were bound cruelly to those posts—utterly helpless—unable to move foot or hand.

And the flames were spreading with such startling rapidity that it could only be a short while before they swept round the unhappy pair. They had been saved from one death, only to be immediately faced by another!

And this second peril, although due to natural causes, was every bit as appalling as the first. The brutal Isirium soldiers had gone—but Nature had stepped into their shoes, and was providing a peril which could hardly be beaten for sheer horror.

The prisoners could do nothing but watch. They looked upon the advancing flames with a fascinated gaze—each calculating how long it would be before the devouring flames enveloped them and put an end to this terrible ordeal. Foot by foot and yard by yard the fire was spreading.

"I'll bet this is somethin' that never entered into Lee's reckonin'," exclaimed Lord Dorrimore grimly. "He probably loosed off those rockets to scare anybody who happened to be near—an' a confoundedly good idea, too! But Lee didn't think of this possibility. Neither should I have done, if I had been in his position."

"Our friends will come, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "Having escaped thus far, the fates will not allow us to perish in this miserable fashion. Be thou of stout heart, for all will be well."

"There's nothin' like bein' an optimist," agreed Dorrie. "Good man! We'll wait calmly an' peacefully, an' see what Santa Claus brings!"

The greater the peril, the greater was Lord Dorrimore's sang-froid. He had a terrible doubt. The spreading of the fire was so rapid that help must come quickly now, or it would be too late.

There was something gripping in this acute situation. The flames creeping nearer and nearer—crackling and roaring, and sending myriads of sparks across the open clearing. The fires actually within the forest were not gaining much hold.

But the conflagration in the clearing was a terrible affair, the dried grass burning with incredible violence, and sending the

flames leaping upwards to an astonishing height.

A gust of wind swept over the two bound men, carrying with it a cloud of choking smoke and burning sparks. And the air was like the scorching blast from a furnace.

It really seemed that the end had come.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE NICK OF TIME!



“GOOD heavens!”

Mr. Travers Earle uttered the ejaculation in startled surprise. He was driving the leading tractor, and Nelson Lee was sitting just behind him. Horatius Placidus was there, too—for he had been acting as guide.

The tractor's brilliant headlights gleamed out through the forest, and, according to Placidus, the clearing was now only a few yards further on. The journey had been a difficult one, but it was accomplished.

Just in the rear were the other two caterpillar cars, but they had halted upon seeing the leader at a standstill.

“The forest is on fire!” ejaculated Mr. Earle hoarsely. “See! There are nothing but dense flames ahead of us!”

As he spoke, he switched off the headlights, and the truth of his statement was now plainly obvious.

Through the trees a ruddy, livid glare could be seen. And now that the tractor's engine was quiet, all her occupants could hear the crackling roar of the flames. Further progress seemed to be completely barred. And the rescuers were startled.

“The rockets!” exclaimed Lee grimly. “They are the cause of this fire! I didn't think of this at the time, and now it is too late to talk. We must make a dash through this fire belt.”

“But, man alive, we'll be burnt to death!” protested Mr. Earle.

“I think not; the clearing is only a short distance ahead,” replied Lee crisply. “Indeed, no more than twenty or thirty yards, according to what Placidus told us. Once out of the forest, there will be no danger of being enveloped. We've got to do it!”

The inventor made no objection. He was game enough for any amount of risk. And so the tractor charged blindly forward through the surging mass of flames; and the others came along on its heels.

These vehicles were especially suited to such a dash. For they were fully protected and armoured, the occupants all being screened on every side.

The three tractors, moving onwards like monsters of destruction, hurtled through the belt of flaming forest. It was brief and terrible while it lasted, and seemed like a nightmare.

Flames, sparks, and choking smoke. A sensation that they were all being suffocated and burned, and then the clearing was reached. The air was more breathable, and the immediate danger over.

“We're through!” gasped Mr. Earle. “By Heaven, I thought that was the end of us, Lee!”

“The tower!” shouted Nelson Lee, leaping up from his crouching position. “But I see no sign of— I'm wrong—I'm wrong! Look over there!” he added, in an agony of suspense. “Oh, we're too late!”

The scene that suddenly presented itself before the eyes of the rescue party was indeed a startling one. Over a third of the great clearing was burnt bare, and was now nothing but a blackened, charred space, with red-hot embers strewn over every yard of ground.

A little further on the flames were beating forward, a great wall of fire that was awful to behold. And just to one side, mercifully clear of the flames as yet, two upright posts could be seen. And bound to them were two figures.

The tractors needed no headlamps, for the whole clearing was ablaze with ruddy, flickering light. And one figure could be recognised as Lord Dorrimore, and the other as Umlosi.

“Yes, we're too late,” said Mr. Earle hoarsely. They could be excused for jumping to this conclusion, for neither figure showed any sign of life. And the first thought that struck Lee was that his friends had been speared to death, and left bound to the posts. The sudden fire had caused the soldiers to flee.

“Make haste, old man!” came a well-known voice. “We can't stand much of this heat for long, you know—”

“He's alive!” roared Lee with sheer joy. “Oh, Earle—we're in time! Thank Heaven for that!”

The tractor leapt forward under Mr. Earle's hand, and a few seconds later jerked to a standstill against the two upright posts. They could be seen through a kind of fog, for the smoke was now swirling round in thick clouds.

“It's all right, old man—no need to worry now!” panted Lee, as he slashed at Lord Dorrimore's bonds.

Two other members of the rescue party were helping, and others were assisting Umlosi. The peril was acute, for the fire was so near that the heat was devastating; and the flames were racing up with incredible speed.

"Another two minutes, an' it would have been all up," panted Lord Dorrimore hoarsely. "Thanks, old man! Here, steady—lend a hand! I'm no more use than a cripple!"

The sudden release from those cruel bonds left the two prisoners helpless, and quite unable to stand on their own limbs. They were numbed and temporarily paralysed. And in addition, the fumes had dazed them and rendered them dizzy.

But, somehow or other, they were bundled into the leading tractor, and the little armoured car twisted round in its own length, and made a break for the clear ground. The other tractors were already on their way. And all three were safe—with the prisoners safe and sound and their liberty restored.

"I think that's about the narrowest shave you've ever had, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Man alive, another minute and——"

But Nelson Lee was interrupted by Horatius Placidus. The latter was on his feet in the car, pointing a shaky finger at the great stone tower which rose, ghost-like, out of the belt of smoke and flame. And Horatius was flushed with excitement and alarm.

"The tower is in the full path of the flames!" he shouted. "And Marcus Phillipus is within! Our emperor is doomed!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SAVING OF MARCUS.



FOR the moment the peril was over.

Even the tower was not in the danger that Horatius Placidus had believed. For the flames in the clearing were not penetrating. The grass burned so swiftly and violently that the ground was cleared in a very few minutes, leaving nothing but charred embers behind.

Ten seconds of this terrible fire, however, would have been sufficient to deprive Dorrie and Umlosi of their lives. Only in the very nick of time had they been dragged away from that terrible fate.

The tower was different.

"The fire will not endanger such a solid structure of stone," declared Nelson Lee. "It will sweep round and pass on. For the moment, we can do nothing better than wait."

Mr. Earle nodded.

"I quite agree," he said breathlessly. "There is no need to endanger our machines and our lives by unnecessary ardour. It will be better to wait, Mr. Lee, as you say. Phew! This heat is killing! And I'm almost choked!"

Dorrie and Umlosi were rapidly recover-

ing. They had suffered agonies at first, while the circulation of their blood renewed its normal channels. And those cruel ropes had left ugly bruises and weals on their flesh. Their voices had almost gone, owing to the suffocating fumes, and they were painfully scorched.

But these were mere trifles now that they were safely in the hands of the rescue party. They were hurt, but only superficially. And a few hours would see them well on the road to complete recovery.

"Thanks, old man; I needed that!" whispered Dorrie, as he took a gulp of brandy from Lee's flask. "Give Umlosi—— Oh, he's got some? Good! I say, you shouldn't pamper me up like this!"

"You've got to say as little as possible, Dorrie; your voice is nearly gone!" warned Lee. "For the moment, you are my patient, and I won't have any insubordination. Even now I can't understand why it is that you are still alive."

"Neither can I," whispered his lordship frankly. "First of all, there was the cheerful programme that friend Lucilius mapped out, and then the fire thought it would liven things up. Gad, Lee, we have some narrow escapes, don't we? I think we must be like old Felix—with nine lives to help us along, as it were."

In spite of Lee's warning, Dorrie insisted upon explaining the position. And not only Nelson Lee, but all the other members of the rescue party, were hotly enraged at the tale of ghastly torture.

In the meantime, Placidus was at his wits' end.

The big, good-natured fellow was bubbling with anxiety to get to the tower, so that his royal master, the Emperor Marcus, could be released. This, indeed, was his chief interest in the whole enterprise. He had come to the forest to help in the rescue of the two prisoners, but far more to set the exile at liberty.

And this was only natural, since Marcus Phillipus was the true and rightful ruler of Isirium. Placidus did not recognise Titus IV. as his true emperor. The man was a brute and a tyrant, and, above all, an impostor.

So Placidus' worry could be appreciated.

The thought of Marcus being burnt alive was awful. But if there had been any danger of this, Lee would certainly have made a desperate dash. But he knew how important it was for them all to have a breathing spell. And the tower was sturdy enough to withstand such an onslaught as this.

Nelson Lee's judgment was correct, and his policy justified.

For after ten minutes had elapsed the fire had swept round the tower, and beyond, and was now eating its way into the heart of the forest. The roar was deafening, and the flames were leaping up in a devastating column that was fascinating to watch.

Happily, the full force of the fire was now sweeping in the opposite direction to the forest path, so that the way of escape was clear. And the next item on the programme was to enter the tower and make a swift exploration. Even now there was no certainty that Marcus remained here. Perhaps he had been removed to another prison. Titus was cunning, and nothing could be certain until the tower was searched.

The heat continued to be enormous. The air was like the fumes from a furnace—blistering hot, choking with fumes, and well-nigh unbreathable.

The three tractors came to a halt at the front of the tower, standing there upon ground that was well-nigh red-hot. The tower walls were scorched and blackened, and the heavy door was splintered by the heat. Otherwise, it remained intact.

And before it could be conquered, one of the tractors was obliged to charge full-tilt, using the sharp, powerful battering-ram. Under the treatment, the door was shattered to fragments.

Horatius Placidus, with Lee and Mr. Earle at his heels, entered the tower, the latter pair carrying electric torches and having their revolvers ready to hand.

The building was larger than it looked from the outside, and there were endless rooms and staircases. Although there were no windows, the place was honeycombed with small, cell-like apartments, each one provided with strong doors with massive bolts.

There was not a sign of the soldiery. If any had been left in the Tower, they had apparently fled at the sight of the rockets and maroons, or when the fire threatened to envelop the building.

Door after door was thrust open, and two prisoners were found who proved to be of no importance. And then, just as Horatius Placidus was beginning to lose hope, another captive stood revealed.

He was a tall, well-built man, attired in a plain cloth robe, and with nothing on his feet. His cell was bare and small, and the man himself showed many signs of privation.

But Placidus gave a cry of rapturous joy as he ran forward, and fell upon his knees at the released prisoner's feet.

"At last—at last!" he panted. "The Emperor Marcus is saved!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY.



"It seems to me," remarked Lord Dorrimore, "that everything is turnin' out bright an' rosy, after all! An hour ago I was wonderin' what the next world would

be like. But it seems I'm still booked for another spell in this!"

The three tractors were laboriously plugging their way through the forest. The ground was rough, but the hearts of all the adventurers were light. Their mission had been successful, and everything was looking promising.

The fire had been left behind—for it was burning itself out far on the other side of the clearing. And the Emperor Marcus was now in the second tractor with Horatius Placidus. The latter was so overjoyed that he could hardly contain himself.

And just as the dawn was breaking the caterpillar cars emerged from the forest, and there stood the Conqueror—massive, imposing, and eloquent of safety and strength.

"And now for a bath!" said Dorrie gladly. "I've never wanted one so badly before! I hope the ladies are safely out of the way—I don't want to be seen like this."

But Dorrie's hope was in vain.

The ladies were not only in evidence, but the gentlemen as well.

That is to say, Irene and Co. were on deck, at the rail, and all the St. Frank's fellows were up and active, too. And a great shout went up when the tractors were seen to crawl out of the wood like three black, squat insects of exaggerated size.

"Hurrah!"

"They've got back—they're safe!"

"Don't shout too soon!" warned Reggie Pitt. "We don't know if Lord Dorrimore is safe yet—"

"Don't we?" I roared, a pair of binoculars to my eyes. "I can see him now. He's there—he's saved! Hurrah! Good old Dorrie!"

"Hurrah!"

"Umlosi's there, too!" bawled Handforth excitedly. "Give 'em another cheer, you chaps! I never thought we'd see 'em alive again! I was sure they were dead!"

They all crowded the rail as the tractors approached.

"I thought they were dead, too!" panted Church breathlessly. "I say, isn't this ripping? We were wrong, Handy—"

"We?" interrupted Handforth. "What do you mean—we? I've said all along that Dorrie and Umlosi would be saved!"

"What!" gasped Church. "Why, you just said—"

"Blow what I just said!" interrupted Handforth. "They're all safe, and we don't want to argue! Let's be ready to give Dorrie a terrific cheer as he comes on board."

Irene and Co. were just as excited as the juniors, and the unfortunate Lord Dorrimore was compelled to fairly run the gauntlet. He looked a wreck, and he felt a wreck. He was torn, tattered, travel-stained, and practically blackened from head to foot. And he was thankful when he escaped from the crowd and plunged below.

Umlosi came in for a similar ovation. And then, of course, everybody wanted to

know what had happened, and how the captives had been saved, and who the tall man was who looked so imposing but was dressed like a beggar.

And it wasn't long before the whole yacht's company was talking, and eagerly discussing the fresh situation. For this stranger was none other than Marcus himself—the true Emperor of Isirium.

"Well, we don't want to get things mixed," remarked Pitt. "We've got two emperors on board already! But, of course, old Titus is only a fake, and I expect the mass of the population will turn against him now that he's bottom dog."

"There's going to be some big events to-day—you mark my words," said Handforth, looking wise. "It's getting daylight now, and before the sun is fairly up, there's going to be some excitement."

"What a marvellous deduction!" said Church sarcastically. "Of course there's going to be excitement—everybody knows it! So you needn't start any of your Trackett Grim stuff, old man."

"For two pins, I'll biff you for that!" snorted Handforth.

"Sorry—I haven't got two pins!" grinned Church. "But I can oblige you with a couple of nails!"

Handforth sniffed.

"I won't trouble to smash you!" he said loftily. "This isn't the time or place for violence——"

"Of course not," put in McClure. "Miss Irene might see—she's only on the other side of the deck!"

Handforth turned red, and allowed the subject to drop. In the meantime, the Conqueror was returning towards the Capital at a steady twelve miles an hour.

Some time before the land yacht entered the outskirts, Lord Dorrimore appeared—nearly himself again. Clean, immaculate in white flannels, and refreshed after a bath, he felt amazingly fit, considering the experience he had passed through. Umlosi was on deck, too—equally happy. His one thought, now, was to seek revenge for what had happened.

The sun was shining brilliantly, and the time seemed particularly appropriate for the entry into the capital. For it was the dawn of a new day—and the dawn of a new era for Isirium.

The Emperor Titus was a prisoner, and his fate uncertain. Much would depend upon the way that Marcus was greeted by the population. And I had an idea that his victory would be a big one.

A halt had been made before entering the city, and Placidus had paid a visit to the mansion of a friend—bringing with him a number of nobles who were staunch to Marcus, to say nothing of rich robes. The emperor was now arrayed in these, and he presented a fine figure.

He was on deck when the Conqueror rolled majestically into the city. Grouped round

him were Flavius Placidus, Horatius Placidus, Claudius Regulus and the other nobles.

And long before we reached the heart of the city crowds were gathering to watch the Conqueror pass—for the people were still awed and wondering at the great land yacht.

And a shout went up from somebody in the crowds.

"Marcus! See! 'Tis Marcus himself!"

And after that the uproar increased, and the name was shouted from mouth to mouth, until hundreds of throats were voicing the magic word.

"Marcus! Our emperor hath returned to us!"

The excitement grew, and the crowds increased as though by magic.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON THE FORUM.



OLD FLAVIUS PLACIDUS was more than delighted.

"Did I not declare that this would be the master stroke?" he asked, turning to Nelson Lee eagerly. "Behold! Our Emperor is being hailed with joy and great acclamation!"

"It seemeth so," agreed Nelson Lee cautiously.

"By Mercury! 'Tis but a tithe of the triumph that will be ours ere many minutes have passed!" declared Flavius. "For long years the people of Isirium have been held in bondage by the tyrant Titus. And this dramatic appearance of our own beloved Marcus will be the beginning of new peace and happiness for the people of this valley."

There was certainly every justification for the old man's enthusiasm. The crowds were increasing every moment, and Mr. Earle was obliged to use extreme caution in steering the great vessel.

And at last the Conqueror was back in the big square.

Here confusion reigned. The soldiers of Titus, dismayed by the seizure of their royal master, had been at sixes and sevens for hours. And now they were at a loss to account for the sudden wild excitement which was sweeping over the capital like a wave.

The people were not merely excited, but completely carried away by their rapturous joy. They shouted at the tops of their voices—men, women and children. And the one word, heard above all others, was the name of Marcus.

Nelson Lee's last lingering doubt vanished.

This wild excitement was no mere expression of approval—but something far more. It was an almost fanatical outburst of intense, patriotic fervour—the pent-up enthusiasm for a man who was loved and respected by nine-tenths of the population.

And his appearance, a free man, on the deck of the Conqueror, meant only one thing—as the entire population instantly grasped. Of course, the news had already circulated the entire city that Titus was a captive in the hands of the “strangers from beyond the desert.” This news, alone, had caused tremendous joy, but it had necessarily been subdued, for the soldiers of Titus were still on duty.

But now the position was completely altered.

And the most significant fact of all was that the soldiers themselves were the most noisy of the demonstrators. Almost as one man, they acclaimed the Emperor Marcus, shouting his name with a fervent zeal that was an eye-opener to us.

It proved, above all else, that the soldiers had served Titus because any refusal to do so would have meant death. But Titus was a prisoner—and Marcus Phillipus was here—a free man in the capital!

“My hat! This is getting a bit exciting!” said Handforth, as the crowds surged round the stationary Conqueror in a flood. “In two minutes they’ll be on board!”

“Let ‘em come!” grinned Reggie Pitt. “They’re our friends—they regard us as the best pals they’ve got! My dear chap, they wouldn’t harm a hair of our heads for anything in the world! We’re solid with them now!”

And Pitt was right.

For had not the Conqueror captured the base tyrant, and delivered Isirium’s exiled hero from his imprisonment? If any man dared to breathe a word against any member of the Conqueror’s party, he stood the risk of being struck down on the spot and slain.

Such was the feeling of the people at the moment. And, in spite of every effort, swarms of excited soldiers and gladiators reached the land yacht’s deck, and carried Marcus Phillipus away. Old Placidus and his supporters were startled and alarmed.

“There is nothing to fear, my friend,” said Nelson Lee, smiling. “Have you no appreciation of the public’s feeling? They desire naught else but to give their hero a welcome.”

“’Tis so—but I fear for His Majesty!” said old Flavius.

His fears, however, were needless. The new Emperor was carried shoulder high to



Can you find the correct wording for this sketch from the story? See Page iii of the cover for particulars of a new and interesting competition.

the Great Forum, on the other side of the square. And here, at last, he was set down, and the soldiers instantly formed a guard round the wide marble steps. They did this without any instructions.

The square itself was one solid mass of excited people, and more were coming in through every artery. The whole city was seething.

And Marcus, more than a little bewildered, pulled himself together and made a rousing speech. He delivered it with dignity and eloquence. There was something fine and manly about his appearance as he stood there—proud to be back among his people, and to receive their cheers.

That speech was just the one last thing necessary to seal his popularity.

He told the great mass of people, in a voice that shook with emotion, that he had no words to express his gratitude towards the brave and wonderful friends who had made this change possible.

He referred to the Conqueror’s party as the saviours of Isirium, and urged his people to treat them with as much respect as they would treat him. And he impressed upon them the necessity of keeping calm in this great moment.

Not only the soldiers, but everybody in the square swore allegiance to Marcus in one great roaring voice. And we, on the yacht, watched with fascinated interest. There was something very impressive and grand about this solid exhibition of loyalty.

“Henceforth thy lives shall be different,” declared Marcus, in a rousing voice. “There shall be no more tyrannies—no more base exhibitions of vile cruelty in the arena! Titus, the traitor, is even now a prisoner on this wonderful chariot in our midst. And all may be assured that Titus will be made to pay the full penalty for his murders, his unspeakable crimes—”

"Titus!" roared dozens of voices. "To the stake with Titus!"

"To the lions—to the lions!"

The cry was taken up by a thousand throats.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SEIZING OF TITUS.



NELSON LEE compressed his lips.

"This is looking ugly, Dorrie," he said sharply. "I hadn't reckoned on this situation!"

By what I can see, the people are almost out of hand, and the position will be extremely delicate unless we are quick."

Lord Dorrie laughed.

"My dear man, let them have their fling!" he said calmly. "Personally, I don't care if they grab Titus, and yank him to pieces. I look at this affair from a different point of view, old man. Don't forget what Umlosi an' I went through at the hands of this fiend!"

Lee frowned.

"I know it—but that doesn't make it right for us to allow an infernal exhibition of sheer devilment," he replied. "Bad as the man is, he at least deserves a fair trial and a humane execution. And yet if we oppose these crowds, they'll misunderstand us. There is no driving sense into a riotous mob. The position is grave."

There was every reason for Nelson Lee's remark. The soldiers themselves were pushing through the crowds, endeavouring to get to the Conqueror. On the last occasion when they had made a charge of this sort they had been forced on by the orders of Spurious Gallus, their chief commander. But now they had no animosity against the Conqueror herself.

They merely wanted Titus the traitor. And, what was more, they meant to have him. A more determined body of men could hardly be imagined. They advanced grimly and purposefully.

"Titus! Deliver Titus!" came the ever-increasing roar.

"Wait!" shouted Nelson Lee, holding his hand aloft. "This is no time for madness, my friends! Let thy tempers subside, and then Titus shall be handed over into thy keeping."

"Nay! We will have Titus now!"

"To the lions with him! To the lions with the tyrant!"

"Deliver Titus!"

The shouts were increasing alarmingly—and, what was more, scores of soldiers were now climbing on to the Conqueror like a host of ants. It would have been utterly futile for the crew to make any attempt to drive these men back.

And Lee and all the rest could do nothing but watch.

Of course, a few rounds with the machine-

guns would have stopped the rush on the instant. But such a course was unthinkable. The invaders were not enemies now—they had no quarrel with the Conqueror. All they wanted was the arch enemy of the people, who was a prisoner on board.

And, what was more, they got him.

The Isirium soldiers took complete possession of the Conqueror, charging below, and exploring every nook and cranny. And in this they were unhindered. Lee had given express orders to this effect, for the situation was too delicate for any chances.

Resistance might mean a change of feeling on the part of the soldiers. They would possibly believe that Nelson Lee and Co. were friendly with Titus, and then the affair would end in nothing but massacre.

And so Titus was allowed to be taken. He was dragged from his prison cabin below, and forced triumphantly on deck—a figure of unutterable fear. His face was like chalk, and beads of cold perspiration stood out on his forehead. He was in the final stages of abject terror.

And he had reason to be. How many crimes he had committed he alone knew. But for years he had sent innocent men to torture and death with less compunction than an ordinary mortal would use in killing a fly. And now it was the tyrant's turn himself.

"Kill him—tear him to pieces!" shouted scores of voices.

"Nay—nay! To the lions!"

This was decidedly the most popular verdict. The people wanted nothing better than to see this brute taste his own medicine—and suffer the horrible tortures of the arena.

And, after all, it was surely a fitting end—and one that we had to agree with, although the thought filled us with horror. We had only glimpsed into this country, and we knew very little of the long succession of atrocities that Titus was responsible for.

And so we felt it in our hearts to be just a little sorry for this fallen man. Somehow, it didn't quite fit into our own code to see him beaten when he was down. But that he deserved all that was coming to him was certain.

And in the midst of the excitement another great burst of shouting came from the other side of the square, and we saw that two other prisoners were being forced down the palace steps by a great body of soldiery.

And these two other prisoners were Lara Melos, the ex-emperor's chief adviser, and Spurious Gallus, the ex-chief of the army. In many ways they were just as guilty as Titus himself—and were apparently doomed to share the same fate.

They were the arch three—the infamous trio who had held Isirium in their clutches for so long. And the people, exhilarated by their sudden freedom, and completely intoxicated by the desire for revenge, meant

this task of destroying the tyrants to be sure.

And it was always the same shout—voiced by a thousand throats.

“To the lions!”

It was only by luck that Titus was not torn into shreds on his way across the square. He had to thank his own soldiers for this respite—not that they provided it from any motives of regard.

The soldiers had no wish to see their brutal ex-emperor die in such an unspectacular way. There was one suitable death for him—and one to which he was doomed.

He was to be flung to the lions!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DREADED ARENA.



HANDFORTH'S eyes sparkled.

“What about it?” he asked eagerly.

“Shall we?”

“What about what?” said Church.

“What do you mean—shall we?” demanded McClure.

It was one of Edward Oswald's favourite habits to assume that his chums could read his thoughts, and he frequently questioned them on matters which they knew nothing at all about.

“Don't be so dense!” he said impatiently. “Shall we follow the crowd, and go to the arena? There's nobody to stop us—everybody's friendly now, and Mr. Lee hasn't given any special orders.”

Church and McClure looked dubious.

“Better stay where we are, I think,” said Church, at length. “We don't want to cause any trouble, you know. And it'll be a rotten business at the Amphitheatre—a regular butchery. We don't want to see anything like that, old man.”

“I'm a bit surprised at you for suggesting it,” added McClure severely.

Handforth glared.

“What do you take me for—a rotter who likes beastly spectacles?” he demanded.

“Why, even if this was a giddy Rodeo, I wouldn't go! I love to see sport, but there's nothing sporting in torturing helpless animals.”

“Oh, rats!” said Church. “What about hunting foxes? And what about rearing pheasants just for the purpose of shooting them down? What about rabbit and hare coursing? Isn't that just as bad as a Rodeo?”

“Worse!” agreed Handforth promptly.

“If I had my way, I'd bar the lot! They don't allow cock fighting in England, because it's cruel—but they allow a fox to be hunted and torn to pieces by dogs! And then they make a fuss about roping steers! It makes me sick! One's just as bad as the other, and anybody who goes fox-hunting

or rabbit-coursing ought to be classed as a brute!”

“Why, your pater goes hunting,” said Church. “And so does mine!”

“And nothing's said!” exclaimed Handforth bitterly. “Just because they're rich, with big country houses, they can practise these things! But I think they ought to be barred!”

“Socialist!” said McClure scornfully.

“My dear ass, there's no such thing as a Socialist nowadays,” said Handforth loftily. “Even the Socialists themselves turn into Conservatives as soon as they've got some cash! My goodness! Are we going to talk politics? I've never known such idiots for arguing!”

“You started it—so you can't blame us,” growled Church. “And if it's wicked to hunt the fox, what about shooting lions and tigers?”

“I'm not going to demean myself by answering,” said Handforth coldly. “Big game hunting is altogether different! These wild beasts have got more chance than the hunter. But what chance has a fox or a stag against a pack of hounds?”

“Jolly good!” said Reggie Pitt approvingly, as he strolled up. “Why not buzz across to the Forum and make a proper speech?”

Handforth was thoroughly exasperated.

“I'm not making a speech of any kind!” he roared. “But these fatheads keep arguing! I'm suggesting that we should go along to the arena, and have a look at the excitement. Of course, we'll clear off if anything horrible happens—that's understood. But we can be in the swim.”

“Why not?” agreed Reggie. “Let's do it!”

And there were quite a number of others who were just as eager. They had no desire to witness the horrors of the arena, but they were certainly anxious to keep pace with the events of the day.

And a large number of fellows, including myself, left the Corqueror quite unconcerned. Nobody thought of stopping us. Nelson Lee was not present—having gone into the palace to speak with Marcus.

For the new emperor had promptly taken possession of the magnificent building. He and his immediate advisers—including Flavius Placidus and his son—were intent upon restoring order as soon as possible.

For the city was now in turmoil.

Over half the population had followed the soldiers to the Amphitheatre, and the other half was on the way. All the main streets in the region of the palace were empty and deserted, except for a few women and a large number of children.

And in the neighbourhood of the Amphitheatre itself pandemonium reigned. Crowds were squeezing in at every entrance. The worst of it was over by the time the St. Frank's party arrived but it was still bad.

“Great pip!” gasped Handforth. “It's worse than a Cup Final!”

"There's a greater attraction," said De Valerie. "You seem to forget that these people have suffered tyranny from Titus for years, and they want to see him taste some of his own medicine."

"Yes, it's a bit apt, when you come to think of it," observed Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, this absolute boulder being absolutely chewed up by his own lions! Somewhat fruity, if you grasp exactly what I mean! I can't say I'm sorry for the poisonous cove!"

"Well, let's get inside," I said briskly.

Somehow or other, we managed to squeeze into one of the entrances, and secured a perch near by, high up in the Amphitheatre, and quite close to the steps, so that we could leave at a moment's notice.

The spectacle was an impressive one.

The enormous circular amphitheatre was nearly full, thousands and thousands, of people filling the enclosures. The excitement was intense, and the sunlit air was filled with shouts of the throng.

On the opposite side from where we stood lay the emperor's own private enclosure. And this was occupied by army officers and other soldiers. More warriors were in the arena itself—but they soon left. And we could see that there were now three people only in that big sand-covered space.

Needless to say, the trio were Titus, Melos, and Gallus. The terrible moment was about to arrive. And, to our surprise, the three men were by no means craven.

On the contrary, they held themselves proudly, and walked about the arena with a fine unconcern which was impressive to watch. In spite of the appalling death which awaited them, they were ready to face it with calm, stoical courage.

"By George!" said Handforth. "They've got more pluck than I thought!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DECREE OF MARCUS.



"THIS appalling atrocity must be stopped!" declared Nelson Lee grimly.

"Wilt thou allow such a base act to mark the first day of thy reign, my Marcus? Show thy strength, and forbid this vile thing!"

The emperor frowned with worry.

"'Tis my wish that it should not be," he replied. "But what can I do, friend? I have no soldiers to enforce my orders. They are loyal to me, I believe, but in this great excitement they have lost their heads."

"'Tis an excuse that will not suffice," said Lee impatiently. "I am not one to interfere in matters which are not my concern. But 'twas I who captured this brute—through the skill of a mere boy—and I

am responsible. It pleases me not to know that this man is to be put to the most violent torture imaginable."

They were talking in the great throne-room of the palace, and Horatius Placidus and several others were in attendance. Nelson Lee was supported by Lord Dorriemore and Sir Edward Handforth.

"I grant that thy request is both reasonable and just," exclaimed Marcus gravely. "And readily will I do my utmost to stay this act. But perchance thou art unaware of the many provocations the people have received. They are more than justified in their swift actions——"

"Do not mistake me," interrupted Lee. "I know full well that your people have complete cause to hate this brute and his two henchmen. But that, my Marcus, is not the point. What manner of beginning is this—that the first day of your reign should be marred by an atrocity in the great arena which ranks with the worst of Titus' own cruelties?"

"By Mars! It would indeed be unfortunate!" declared the new emperor.

"These three men are guilty—their hands are stained with the blood of countless victims," said Lee. "And therefore they should be brought to the trial they deserve, and dealt with in accordance with the verdict. Whatever their sins, they are entitled to a fair trial—if this city be, indeed, conducted as it should. Am I right?"

"Truly thou art right," agreed Marcus. "And my own desire is even as thine. I thank thee for thy advice and readiness of wit. I confess I am still flustered, and know scarcely what I do. 'Tis well to have a steady brain by my side. These three men shall have a fair trial, as thou hast suggested, and I will force this decree at once."

"'Tis well!" said Lee briefly.

He turned aside while the emperor spoke with his companions.

"I am sorry, old man, but I can't quite see the point of all this," exclaimed Dorrie. "Titus and those other two toads deserve everythin' horrible that human ingenuity can devise! An' if a trial is held, they're bound to be condemned——"

"I agree," put in Nelson Lee. "And, once condemned, they will be put to death—but the execution must be humane. It would be no great advancement if the culprits were to be tortured. We have assisted Marcus to the throne so that he shall make the lives of these people more peaceful and happy. And it is absolutely necessary that he should set a good example—by sparing his very worst enemies from torture."

"But, man alive, the people demand it——"

"Yes—in their present mood," said the famous detective. "But is not this very atrocity—throwing men to the lions—one of the greatest of all the grievances the population has had? When this excitement has

cooled down, and the city is quiet, the people will see the wisdom of this decree. Frankly, Dorrie, I don't like to think of those men being torn limb from limb by lions. I'm not squeamish, but the thing is too horrible."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"You're right," he admitted. "Now that you put it in that way, I can see the idea. An' it makes it all the worse because there must be hundreds of women in that amphitheatre, too."

Marcus quickly wrote out a command, ordering his officers to take immediate steps to avert the massacre. He suggested, as the simplest plan, the secret removal of the lions. If this was not done, the people themselves might take the affair into their own hands.

"Reminds me of a Western sheriff protecting a murderer from a lynching crowd," remarked Dorrie. "An', after all, it's just about the same thing. But I'm a bit dubious about those lions. I've got an idea that we shall find the business all over by the time we arrive. Those people were in no mood to waste time."

Marcus himself promised to follow within a few minutes—his intention being to make a speech, so that the crowd should be pacified.

And, without any further delay, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the others stepped into a waiting chariot, and were whirled through the city towards the arena.

Long before they arrived they could hear the swelling roar of the crowd. And even Lee was doubtful as to whether they would be in time. At least, he had done his best, and he would now feel that the responsibility rested no longer with him.

But, as he had pointed out to Mr. Earle, Titus had been held on board the Conqueror and the Conqueror was, therefore, answerable for the prisoner's safety.

"Here we are!" said Lee, as the chariot came to an abrupt stop. "I shall take this command to the officer in charge—"

"If you can locate him," said Dorrie doubtfully. "It's my belief, old man, that there's nobody in command. The whole affair's more or less of a riot."

There were crowds round the great marble doorway, but they stood aside instantly when the newcomers were seen. Everybody belonging to the Conqueror was now treated with respect and homage.

Nelson Lee was the first to pass through the marble hall, and then out into the deep enclosure. He took one glance at the arena, and his heart beat a trifle more rapidly.

The decree had come too late!

The three prisoners were standing down there, and at this exact moment the big folding doors of the entrance swung back—and a number of powerful lions leapt into the arena, roaring defiance and fury.



He was a tall, well-built man, attired in plain cloth robe, and with nothing on his feet.

CHAPTER XX.

TITUS SPRINGS A SURPRISE.



"I SAY, old man, let's be going!" said Church uneasily.

"Wait a minute—nothing's happened so far," said Handforth. "And I must say these chaps are

behaving with plenty of pluck. I never gave them credit for such ripping courage."

We had been watching for some time, and the great crowds were now getting impatient. The ex-Emperor Titus was standing down there in the sandy arena, with Lars Melos on one side, and Spurius Gallus on the other. And all three were erect and proud, calmly awaiting their fate.

I looked at them, puzzled.

"According to everything I've seen of Mr. Titus, he isn't acting up to his character," I said. "He ought to be grovelling for mercy, and yelping with fright. This courage is a bit queer to my mind."

"I suppose he realises the game's up, and means to go down with a bold front," said Reggie Pitt. "But even that doesn't seem quite feasible—particularly as his two precious pals are just as bold."

We continued to watch in much concern. And we were ready to leave the very instant the actual torture commenced. We didn't

want to witness that. The densely packed enclosures were interesting, too—for the people were shouting and waving and generally behaving as though they had taken leave of their senses.

Perhaps they had done so. The sudden reaction, after living under the lash of Titus for so many years was so great that the people were lifted out of their usual personalities. They became a pack of wolves, cruel and vicious. They wanted to see blood flowing—the blood of Titus.

"I reckon there must be some explanation," I remarked, after awhile. "And I think I've got it, too."

"Say on, O Oracle," urged Pitt.

"Well, these three rotters have got to the end of their tether, and they know it," I replied. "And they've got some poison about them that they'll take as soon as ever the lions appear. In that way they'll dish the spectators, and die painlessly."

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you're right," agreed Pitt. "That's a good way of accounting for their extraordinary courage, anyhow. They'd never be as calm as this if they knew they were to be torn to shreds by savage lions—"

"Look out! Here they come!" said Handforth huskily.

"Let's go!" muttered Church.

It was at this moment that the great doors opened, admitting the lions. And a tremendous wave of excited cheering arose from the throng. I turned to the steps, and hurried down—all the other St. Frank's fellows following.

Although the affair had a certain ghastly fascination, none of us had the slightest desire to witness the horror. We came to a halt at the foot of the stairs, and looked at one another while the cheering continued. We were all rather pale.

"Thank goodness we got out of it!" muttered Jack Grey. "It's horrible—horrible! Why couldn't they have stopped this rotten massacre? Those three beasts ought to pay for their crimes, but—"

"Listen!" panted Handforth. "What's that?"

We all stared up the stone steps. We could only catch a brief glimpse of an occasional waving arm, and the arena itself was completely out of sight.

But there was no mistaking the great roar of rage which went up from a thousand throats. It was a totally different sound to the other—the earlier roar. Obviously something had happened in the arena which the crowd strongly disapproved of.

With a few mighty bounds, Handforth leapt up the steps and came within sight of the arena. If he had been a few moments earlier, he would have seen something rather startling.

At the very instant the lions came into view, Titus and his companions changed their tactics. Their cool indifference vanished, and with one accord they turned

and raced for the arena wall—which was quite blank and bare in front of them.

The great amphitheatre was circular, the lowest seats in the enclosures being fully twelve feet above the sandy ground. Thus, the great ring was in a kind of well. Titus and his friends could not hope to escape by climbing the wall. In the first place, it was too high, and in the second place, the crowd would instantly hurl them back—if, by some miracle, they reached the summit.

Their object, therefore, in making this rush was a puzzle to all. The three had been standing only twenty yards from this particular side—the lions entering exactly opposite.

But the crowd was not puzzled for long.

Titus was the first to reach the stone wall, and by this time the lions were roaring with greater savagery than ever, and two of them were bounding across the ring in chase of the fugitives.

But an extraordinary thing happened. Titus only paused a brief second, and then a portion of the wall swung back like a door. It was at this moment that the crowd sent forth its yell of rage.

And Handforth, leaping up into the enclosure, was just in time to see the last of the trio vanish into the opening. The next second the secret door thudded to, leaving the wall blank and bare. And the lions raced up and down, madly furious at being cheated of their prey.

But if the lions were furious, the enormous crowd was no less so. Even now, after the few tense moments had passed, the people could scarce believe their eyes.

With supreme ease the intended victims had eluded the punishment. And the enclosures were sending up a confused din of voices, for everybody was talking at once.

But one fact was clear—and nothing could alter it. Titus and his henchmen had slipped through the noose just when it had apparently settled firmly round their unclean necks!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HUNT THAT FAILED



"WELL, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

"What's up? Where are they?" gasped Church. "My hat! Have—have— Oh, how awful!"

"What's awful?" snapped Handforth, glaring.

"They've been eaten already!" panted Church, in horror. "Those lions must have been starved for weeks—"

"Eaten!" roared Handforth. "They've escaped!"

"Escaped!"

"Yes—bunked!"

"But—but—"

"Oh, it's no good talking," growled Hand-

forth. "The rotters got through a door in that wall, and they've dished everybody! Even the lions have been cheated out of a good breakfast!"

None of us could quite understand what had happened. But Handforth explained in further detail, and then we knew the truth. We had arrived just too late to see the door closing.

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed Reggie Pitt slowly. "So that accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nut! No wonder those three beauties were so jolly calm! No wonder they faced death so bravely!"

"They didn't face death at all!" said Watson.

"That's what I mean—they knew they had that way of escape, and so they spoofed everybody!" said Pitt. "Hang it all, I can't help admiring old Titus a bit. Of all the cunning rotters, he takes the bun! He fairly walks off with the first prize!"

I nodded.

"Of course, it's as clear as daylight now," I remarked. "The prisoners knew all about that exit, and so they just waited. But where does it lead to? And have they got any chance of getting away?"

"That remains to be seen," said Grey.

Apparently the soldiers knew nothing of the hidden exit, for the lions had been forced back into their prison, and the arena was now in the charge of the soldiers. They were frantically searching for the secret stone door. And they met with no success.

Later on we learned that not a single soul knew how to get the door open, and nobody claimed any knowledge of it. It could not be said where the exit led to, or whether it was a tunnel, or just a mere chamber.

Hard work, however, solved the riddle.

By sheer force the wall was shattered, and then it was discovered that a long tunnel led away from the arena, underground, and thence into the cellar of a mansion half a mile distant.

And this mansion was actually the private residence of Lars Melos. Needless to say, no trace of the escaped prisoners was found. During the confusion they had had plenty of time to get completely away—and by now they had probably got well clear of the city.

The cunning of Titus was apparent.

With the assistance of Melos—and perhaps a number of bribed men—the exit had been secretly made. For Titus must have

known that one day sooner or later, his career would suffer a violent end. And the most probable chance was that he would be flung to the lions. For this had been one of his favourite amusements.

His judgment, as we had all seen, proved to be sound. For when death seemed inevitable, he had slipped away, taking with him his chief criminals. And they could not even be brought to trial.

Nelson Lee was both pleased and annoyed.

It relieved him to know that the butchery had been averted, but it was galling to realise that the infamous trio had escaped.

It was not until the close of the day that the city began to quieten down. And in the meantime soldiers were out in parties throughout the entire valley—engaged on a grim man-hunt.

And so far they had failed to find any trace of the fugitives.

On board the Conqueror, Nelson Lee was talking with Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Earle.

"I don't know that this development affects us much," he remarked. "For we shall, of course, be taking our departure almost at once. There is nothing left for us to do in this valley, and the sooner we leave the better. I am by no means comfortable."

"You're thinking of the responsibility?" asked Mr. Earle. "The boys and girls, eh?"

"You're right, Mr. Lee—we don't want to take any unnecessary chances," added Mr. Hobart Manners. "I agree that we should leave this place at once. For I have an uncomfortable feeling that we are standing on an unexploded mine. These Isirium people are a trifle too war-like for my taste. Give me the desert."

By nightfall the news came that the man-hunt had utterly failed. And this meant that Titus and his two companions were still at large—still capable of wreaking mischief. The three men had apparently vanished into thin air. But they were somewhere—and they were hardly the kind of men to remain quiet and inactive.

Was their escape a portent of evil to come?

If we had only known precisely what was to follow, we should not have been so happy and jolly at dinner that night! We were telling ourselves that our adventures in Isirium were nearly at an end.

But, as a matter of fact, they certainly were not!

THE END.

Another Splendid Story of the Boys of St. Frank's, Nelson Lee, and Lord Dorrimore and their wonderful adventures in the Sahara will be told next week in

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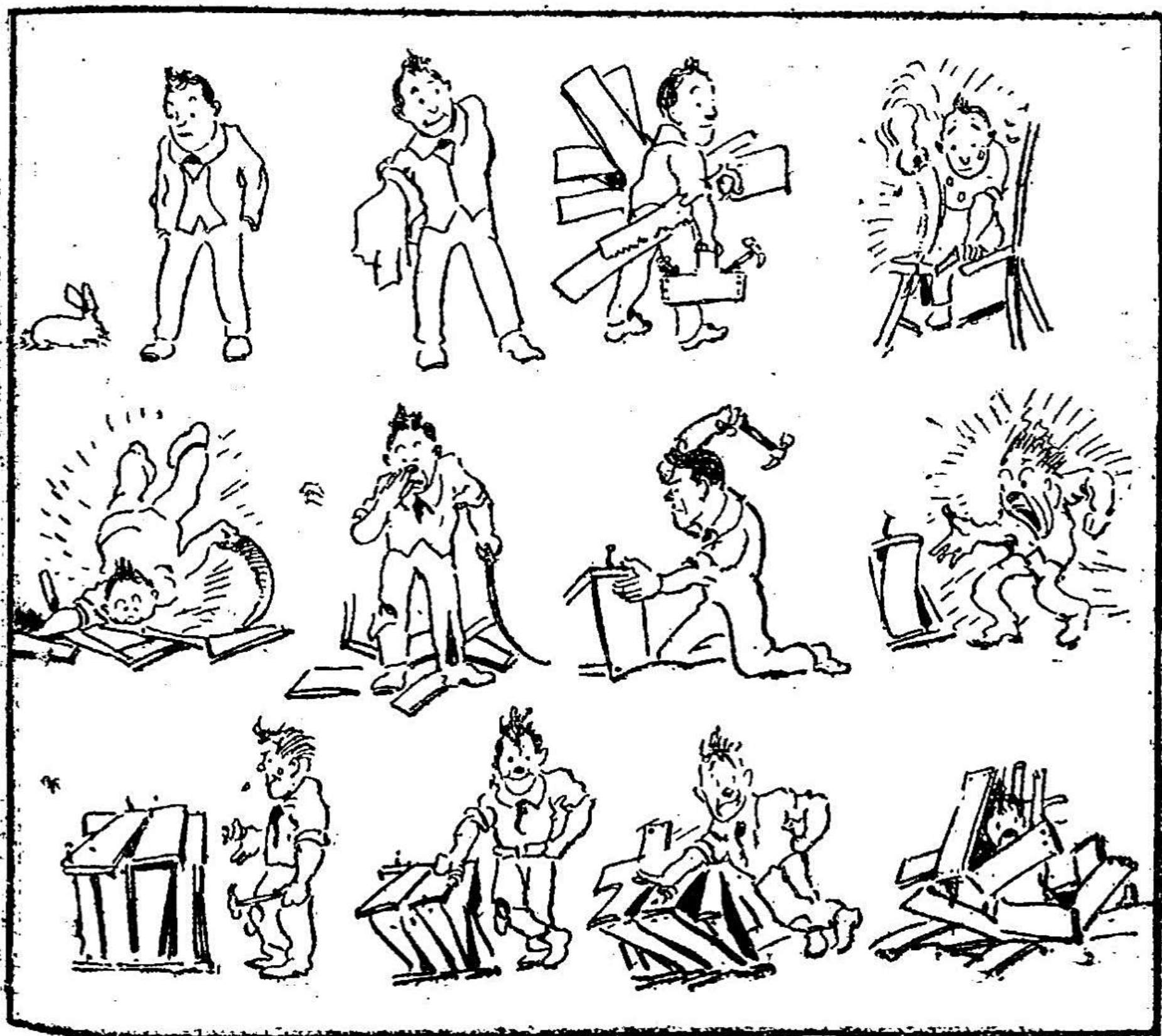
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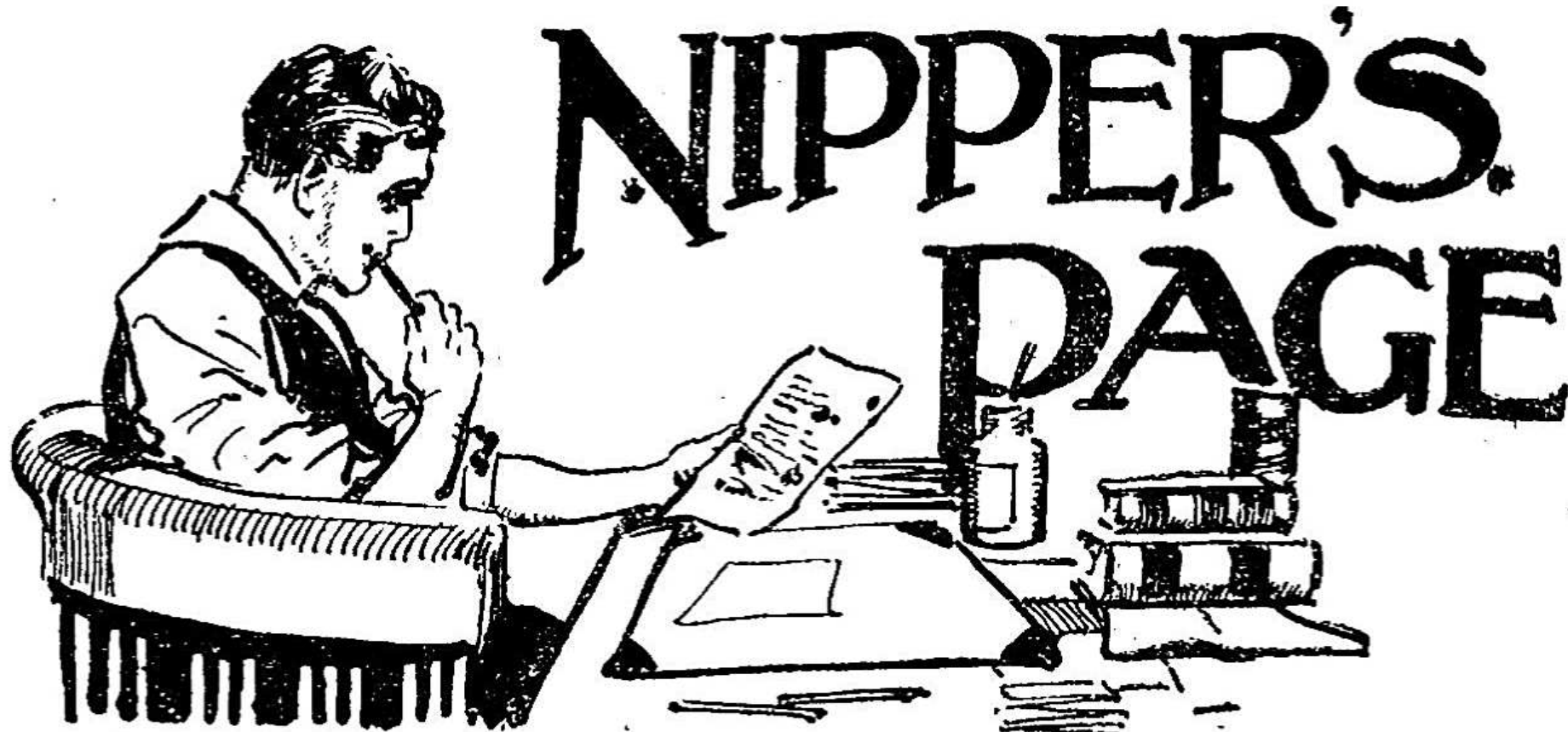


St. Frank's Magazine



ADVENTURES OF E. O. HANDFORTH BUILDING A RABBIT HUTCH. *A Story Without Words.*





Editorial Office,
Study C.
St. Frank's.

My dear Chums,

Six weeks of the holidays I have now spent in the solitude of St. Frank's, and in another two weeks this great building will be humming with life. I shan't be sorry, either! One can have too much peace and quiet. Then it gets on your nerves, and you begin to jump at your own shadow. There are some fellows who would never tire of being left to themselves. They are of the sort who emigrate to the backwoods of Australia, miles away from civilisation, and don't see a soul for months at a time. Such a life would drive me potty, for I am not made that way. I am what you would call a gregarious kind of animal—that is, one who likes to live where there are plenty of other people.

ANYTHING FOR A BIT OF EXCITEMENT.

I won't say, however, that a quiet holiday away from one's friends and family is not sometimes desirable and beneficial. At all events, it makes you appreciate the society of your friends. There were times when I longed to get away from them, so that I could do just what I liked without consulting anyone. Well, I have had my fill of the quiet, contemplative sort of holiday, thank you! I am absolutely fed up with it. And now I am longing for the noise, the babble of tongues, the free fights, the ragging, and even the punishments by the masters—anything, in fact, for a bit of excitement.

THE AFRICAN PARTY.

Our fellow Removites in Africa seem to be having an unusually active time of it. They have just taken part in a war against the tyrannical emperor, Titus, and rescued Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi from the jaws of death. Although defeated, Titus has

escaped from the fate that he deserved, and before long, I expect, he will be causing a heap of trouble again. Isirium must be a jolly place to live in. A little too jolly for the safety of the Holiday Party. Now that they have rescued Pitt and Grey and driven Titus from the throne, I think it is about time they made tracks for home and safety. If they stay out there much longer, they won't come back at all, for you cannot play with fire indefinitely without burning your fingers. Anyhow, I hope we shall see them all back again fit and strong when the new term begins.

COMING CHANGES AT ST. FRANK'S.

I had a letter this week from Dr. Stokes, who has had a long communication from Dr. Stafford. The former has made a number of suggestions relating to certain changes he advocates to Dr. Stafford concerning the Old School. I am not in a position yet to make public what Dr. Stokes has suggested. But it will be no breach of confidence to state that Dr. Stafford fully agrees with these changes being made, and will put them into operation on his return.

THE RETURN OF DR. STAFFORD.

We shall all welcome the reappearance of Dr. Stafford to the position he has held so long as Headmaster of St. Frank's. We hope to see him bronzed and well after his sojourn in Africa, and ready to preside over the destinies of St. Frank's for many years to come.

You will be glad to hear that Dr. Beverley Stokes will not be leaving St. Frank's in consequence of Dr. Stafford's return. He has kindly consented to take charge of one of the Houses, and as Housemaster, we may be sure, his popularity will be no less than when he was Headmaster.

Your sincere Chum,
BUSTER (Acting Editor).

The Adventures of TRACKETT GRIM



THE MISSING BEACHCOMBER

Trackett Grim and his Young Assistant, Splinter, solve another Baffling Problem.

By

E. O. HANDFORTH

CHAPTER I.

THE MISSING HEIR.

"SPLINTER," announced Trackett Grim, "it is Wednesday afternoon!"

Splinter, the world-famous incriminator's brainy assistant, looked with admiration at the wonderful sleuth. Then he dashed to where a calendar hung on the wall. Breathlessly he turned over the dates till he came to the one he wanted.

"Guv'nor," he cried, "you're quite right!"

"I am always right, lad," the great incriminator said modestly. "And that reminds me. During the next month or two we shall have to undertake another case."

"How can you tell that, guv'nor?" asked the lad. "And if so— Why," he broke off, "there is another case coming!"

As he spoke a number of quiet footsteps were heard coming up the stairs leading to Grim's sanctum. There seemed to be one pair continually repeating itself. It arrived at the door, and Mrs. Bones, Grim's housekeeper, put her head round the door.

"There is a client to see you," she announced.

"Show him up!" Grim said, springing to attention.

A few moments later Mrs. Bones ushered in the new client. He was a small man in gold-rimmed glasses. He was clean-shaven, and wore a white wig under his hat.

"Good-morning!" announced Grim suavely. "Sit down! Take a chair! How are ye? Good-afternoon! I hope you are well."

The visitor looked flabbergasted at Grim's astuteness. And well he might.

Many visitors were. Grim possessed an uncanny knack of knowing everything. He seemed to be able to peer right down into a man's soul.

"My name is Charge," he announced. "I

am a solicitor of the firm of Messrs. Rookem and Charge. And I wished to see you on a matter of business."

"You need not explain," Grim said softly. "I see that you are a solicitor, and that you wish to consult me on a case of the most utmost importance."

"That is so," replied the other, when he had recovered his breath. "I have a client."

"Exactly!" Grim snapped. "And this client is someone who is employing you to undertake a matter of business for him."

"Great pip!" gasped the solicitor. "Are you a wizard?"

"I am merely the world's greatest incriminator," returned Grim with a smile that was half a laugh. "By years of long practice I am able to tell these things."

"As I supposed," the other went on. "Then, my dear sir, you will be able to tell me where Michael Strand has disappeared to?"

At these words the solicitor stood up and took off his wig. Grim was not a whit abashed. He suddenly made a movement with his eyebrows which entirely changed his appearance. Then he barked like a dog.

"It is unbelievable!" cried Mr. Charge, hastily putting on his wig again. "Is it possible that you already know where poor Michael is?"

"It is quite impossible!" Grim returned sagely. "And first I must get you to answer my questions. This Michael, I deduce that he is a man between the ages of ten and ninety-five?"

"You are correct!" gasped Mr. Charge. "He is my client's son, and he disappeared fifteen long years ago to the South Sea Islands. We learnt that he took up a job as a beachcomber. Since then he has not been heard of again."

"I should say he has vanished," Grim said shortly. "He is, in fact, out of England, and no one can find him?"

"That is so," went on the other, producing a book and reading aloud. "Mr. Michael Strand has gone to Hywyee, and we cannot find him."

"It is as I thought," Grim commented. "He is lost. And why do you wish to find him? I presume that the income tax people are after him?"

"Not quite that," said Mr. Charge. "But my client is his father, and——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Grim. "If that is so Mr. Michael Strand is your client's son."

"Marvellous!" choked Mr. Charge. "That is the case. And my client is now on the point of being seriously ill. Naturally, that being so, he desires to find his son. Twenty years ago he cut Michael out of his will. And now that the end is near he wishes to cut him in again."

"I see," Grim said, with a nod. "And I presume that you wish me to get on his trail?"

"Mr. Grim," said the other, in a voice of utter amazement, "are you human? It seems as though you could almost read my thoughts."

"I can," Grim replied. "But we are wasting time. We will now go and see your patient—client, I should say."

Little though either Grim or Splinter knew it, they were now on the verge of a wonderful series of adventures! For though Michael Strand had vanished, there were many more things to be done before he could be brought back to the waiting arms that were held out for him.

Grim carefully packed his trunk, and then lent Splinter his despatch-case, for there was no knowing how long the two would be away. Then they followed Mr. Charge,

and at tea-time they arrived at Strand Lodge, the country seat of the Strands.

The Strands, in fact, had been firmly seated there ever since the conquest, and Piccadilly Circus was called after them.

Once in the old baronial hall Grim reverently lifted his hat and took off his heavy boots, lest he should disturb the ancestral peace which had reigned there through the ages. Splinter put on a pair of rubber shoes and followed his beloved master. It was thus they came into the bed-room of Sir Michael Strand, the last but one of his line.

The baronet, who was also a peer of the realm, was seated in an armchair, and Grim's keen eyes saw at once that he was on the verge of being very ill. But he did not mean to allow his thoughts to betray him. He therefore patted Sir Michael heartily upon the back. Then he kicked him joyfully on the shins.

"Yoooooooooop!" gasped the baronet peer loudly.

"Not at all," Grim reassured him, catching him over the top of his head with a paper-knife which lay handy. "You will soon completely recover. I am going to find your missing boy!"

At the kind words the colour rushed back into the aristocrat's face, and he straightened up. His quavering voice hardened and his eyes shone.

"You amaze me, sir," he husked, "whoever you are. It is almost more than I can bear. Poor Michael only left me fifteen years ago. How can I tell how old he may be now on that terrible island?"

"No one can tell," Grim replied solemnly. "But I will find him for you. Now tell me, Mr. Regent Street, why do you wish to see the young fellow again. At least, tell me

if you can bear to answer so personal a question."

"The reason is simple," Sir Michael explained. "When my erring son went away to Hywyee he never said good-bye. So thereupon I made a new will——"

"That is to say," interrupted Grim astutely, his eyes lighting up, "that you chose another heir. And therefore Michael would inherit nothing."

"True!" shouted Sir Michael, now looking the picture of health. "I left my fortune to my nephew, Jabez Bluke. He had always been friendly with me,



A few moments later Mrs. Bones ushered in the new client. He was a small man in gold-rimmed glasses. He was clean-shaven and wore a white wig under his hat.

except for twice attempting to throw me under an electric tram and once running me over with the garden roller."

"Mr. Bluke must be rather clumsy," Grim said. "But I suppose that you are now anxious to cut him out of the will?"

"I am," the old man replied. "I am sorry that Michael should have to remain in the South Seas, and I would like to see him back before—well, to be candid, Mr. Grim, my doctor tells me I have barely another fifty years to live."

Grim saw it was no time for words. He patted Sir Michael on the head. Then he offered him a biscuit, which the other eagerly ate out of his hand.

"If I cannot produce Michael by the twenty-first," he went on, after chewing the biscuit, "all the vast fortune will go to Jabez. Therefore please hurry. For it is the eighteenth to-day."

"I know," returned Grim; "and to-morrow will be the nineteenth. But tell me, Sir Michael," he added, "does Mr. Bluke know that you wish to cut him out of your will?"

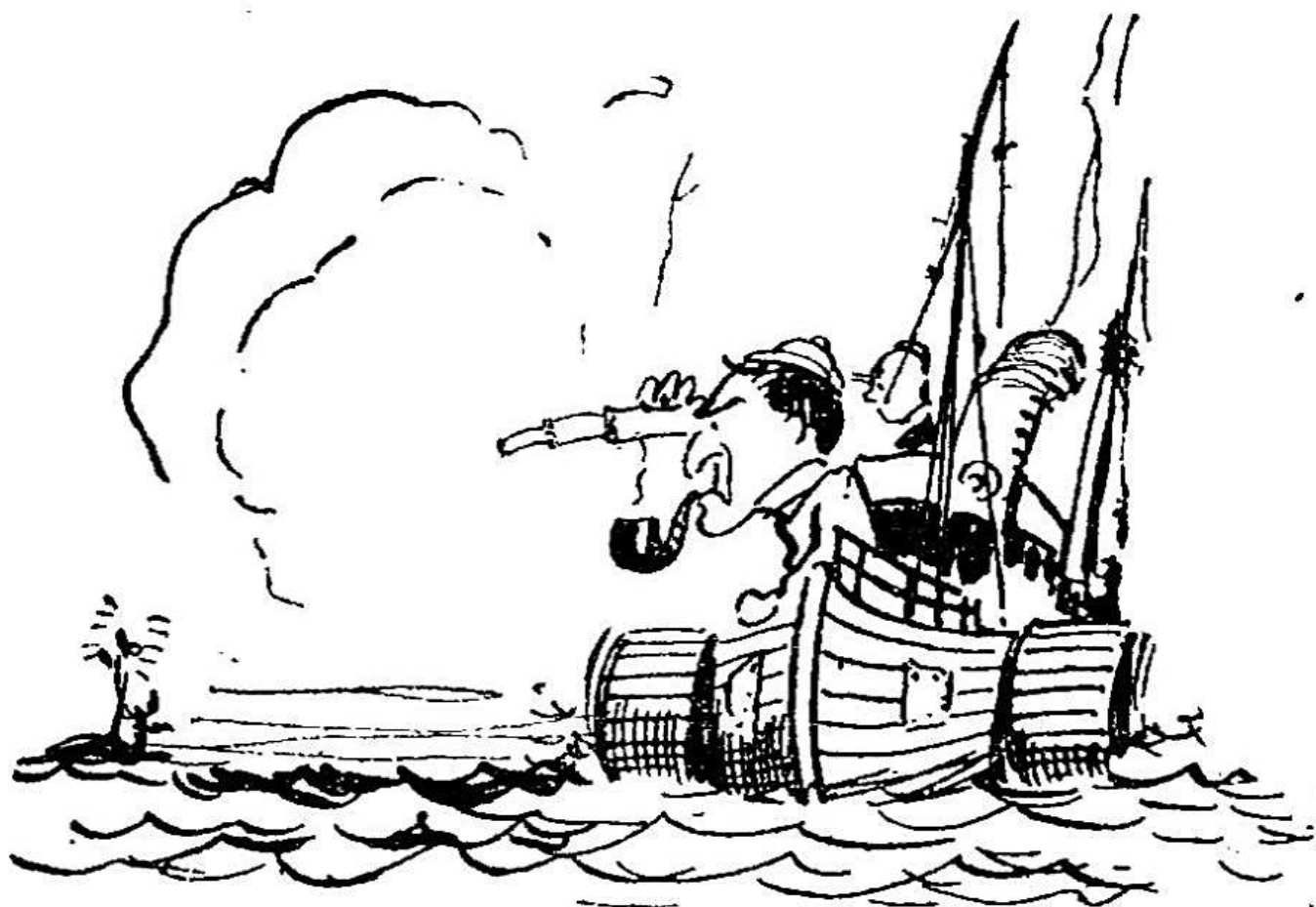
"Not a word!" responded the other. "He does not guess for an instant. And——"

"You lie!" shouted a sudden voice, and a man stepped in through the verandah window, which had been left open. He was a dark, sallow-faced man, with a close-cropped head of dark, sallow hair. And he had a pair of dark, sallow eyes. Even his hands were dark and sallow. The only thing that was not sallow was his voice, and that was thick and husky.

"You lie!" he repeated, working himself into a terrible rage. "You will never cut me out of my uncle's will. It is all a mistake. It is all wrong! You are a set of rotters! Dash you all! I hate you!"

At the string of terrible language that issued from his lips Grim paled. But he did not show it. He felt he could ignore this sallow young man.

"You are an impostor," he cried, "and I will send you packing! To-morrow I go to the South Seas to find Michael. And——" Grim never finished his sentence, for in the most unsporting way, Jabez Bluke threw a chair at the incriminator's head. Luckily, he was such a poor shot that it hit Sir Michael. That was enough for Grim. He saw at once that the man was a dangerous



On Wednesday afternoon the South Sea Islands were sighted.

chap. He was convinced Jabez had wished to harm him. Therefore he rang the bell.

"Waiter," he said, when the old butler appeared, "turn this man out!"

Jabez went, and Grim smiled.

"We shall never see him again," he said, "unless he should turn up again in some inexplicable manner."

And, as always, the famous incriminator was right.

CHAPTER II.

AMIDST THE ISLANDS OF THE SOUTH SEAS!

AT ten o'clock the next morning Grim and Splinter left the shores of Old England behind them. They were on a fast yacht bound for the South Sea islands.

Grim had borrowed the boat whilst the owner wasn't looking, and they set off across the sea at a fine pace.

Of Jabez they heard nothing. Yet all the time he was close at hand, for he meant that Michael should never be found. Jabez, in fact, unknown to the others, had come aboard disguised as a bo'sun. And he was watching the famous incriminator at every step. He was dogging him like a cat!

Once he stopped dogging Grim and tried to take his life. He suddenly opened a port-hole as Grim passed. Grim was pitched into the sea, but was able to swim after the ship and climb on board again. After that Jabez was more careful, and resolved to wait till the islands were actually reached. After all, if Michael was never found, he reflected that Grim's investigations would be in vain.

On Wednesday afternoon the South Sea Islands were sighted, and Grim cheered, while Splinter waved his cap.

There were hundreds of them! Some were

great, big islands as large as Waterloo Station; others were quite small, no bigger than dinner-plates. And as the yacht sailed peacefully by, Grim scanned their contents through his opera-glasses.

He was looking for a white man, but never one did he see! All the folk were black, though a few were striped.

For a week they cruised among the magnificent islands. The tropic sky blazed overhead, and the palm trees waved at them from the islands. The scene was wonderful.

But still there was no sign of Michael. Then they came to the very last island of the lot; and as Grim scanned it eagerly his face suddenly lighted up.

For on a large board was the word, in capital letters, "HYWYEE."

"At last we have got there!" cried Grim. "Unpack the hamper, Splinter. We will now explore. And you, bo'sun, weigh the anchor, and stand by for orders."

The gang-plank was lowered, and Grim stepped ashore with his suit-case. Splinter followed, carrying his bucket and spade, for it looked as though he might get a little digging on the sandy beach.

A wooden hut was built under a palm tree, and thither Grim went. He knocked on the door, and it was opened by a black man in bathing things. Grim spoke to him in four languages all at once, but the fellow could only nod. So Grim, losing patience, trussed him up like a chicken and left Splinter on guard.

Then, disguised as a cokernut hunter, the incriminator set out on his search.

He walked all that day. By that time he had been fifteen times round the island and four times across it. Yet it was only as the darkness fell with tropic suddenness that he saw a single human being.

At first he thought it was only another native.

Then he discovered his mistake. It was a white man, with a big, black beard such as would result from not shaving.

The man was dressed in flannels, and was busy combing the beach with a long rake. When he had combed it, he brought out a large broom and began vigorously brushing it. After that he poured brillianine on to it out of a big bottle.

Without waiting to be introduced, Grim dashed up to the man and wrung his hand.

"I take it you are a beachcomber," he said.

"Great pip," exclaimed the other, "how can you tell that?"

"I am a sleuth," replied Grim; "and I am looking for a man named Michael Strand, who disappeared. Perhaps you have seen him."

The stranger put his hand to his forehead, dropping his broom. He swayed dizzily, then he gulped.

"Why—why," he stuttered, "that is my name!"

"What a coincidence!" Grim returned. "Then there must be two Michael Strands on this island."

"There is only one," the other said sadly. "And I am he. There is no other white man here."

Grim frowned. Was he to be foiled at the last moment? No!

He suddenly made a great deduction.

"I've got it!" he shouted. "You are yourself Michael Strand, and the son of Sir Michael. I am sure I am right."

"You are," the other said eagerly. "It has all come back to me. My father was considerably older than me, and I am his son!"

"Then I have found you," Grim said softly, and clasped the beachcomber's hand. "But come, we must be back in England by the day after to-morrow."

Hand in hand, the two ran back to the hut where Splinter had been left.

He had vanished!

At once Grim set off for the boat. It had vanished, too!

Grim's face hardened. He surmised there had been some foul play. He was right. As he stood gazing round the island, he saw his yacht coming towards land, and at her wheel stood the bo'sun!

At sight of the sallow-faced rogue, Sir Michael gave a shout of anger.

"Jabez Bluke!" he yelled. "How it all comes back! That man is my enemy. I will finish him!"

And, before Grim could stop him, he suddenly picked up a cokernut from the beach and hurled it with all his might at the sallow face that was peering over the prow of the boat!

With a dreadful plonk, the missile met its mark. The face vanished and the boat was without a helmsman. Quick as thought, Grim plunged into the surf and swam to her.

He clambered up, and then, taking the wheel in his strong hands, got the boat alongside the shore. His quest was over.

Splinter was found in the cabin where Bluke had taken him, none the worse for his adventure. The black man was also there, and they sent him back to his hut. As for Bluke, he recovered from the cokernut, and was taken back to England, where he was handed over to the police.

Sir Michael welcomed his long-lost son with open arms. And as for Grim and his young assistant, they returned to the Baker's Inn Road very well satisfied with the way they had succeeded in their dangerous mission.

THE END.

ANCIENT AQUEDUCTS

By DICK HAMILTON

AN aqueduct is a duct, or pipe, used to convey water, usually drinking water, from one place to another. It may be of stone, wood, iron, or lead. Ancient ones were usually constructed of stone, the masonry work being of a high order, and some of the stucco used as linings was so hard that it would resist mechanical tools—and does now.

The Romans were famous aqueduct builders, and the Greeks ran them very close. Both displayed great engineering skill, and they seem to have known as much about the action of water, and about filtering and settling tanks, syphons, etc., as the moderns do.

Aqueducts may be underground, on the surface, or raised on solid walls or arches. In common speech an aqueduct means the latter. Ancient Rome had many aqueducts—twelve or fourteen. The first, built 312 B.C., was eleven miles long, all underground except about 300 feet. A second, 269, B.C., was forty-three miles long, and only 1,100 feet of it was above ground. A third, 140, B.C., was sixty-one miles long; nearly all underground, and the rest on arches. This was reconstructed in 1870, so that it is still in use. The size of the

channel in these aqueducts varied, but the largest was from three to four feet wide, and about nine feet high.

One of the finest of the Roman aqueducts was built at Nimes in France, in the reign of Augustus. It is still in existence, and is known as the Pont du Gard. An imposing structure, rising to a height of 160 feet, it is a beautiful work of art. It consists of three tiers of arches, stretching across the valley of the River Gardon. The lower tier has six arches, one having a span of seventy-five feet, and the others of sixty feet; the second tier has eleven arches, the span of each extending to seventy-five feet; the third tier has thirty-five smaller arches. It is also, as its name implies, a bridge, and, massive and bold as it is, it gives an impression of lightness and grace. Clearly, both Greeks and Romans knew how to combine usefulness with beauty to an extent that even we have not surpassed.

Scarcely less imposing is the Roman aqueduct bridge at Segovia, Spain, which is 2,400 feet long, and has 109 arches of fine stonework in two tiers, and is 102 feet in height.

At Caerwent, in Monmouthshire, remains of a small wooden aqueduct have been found, the wooden pipes being only two inches in diameter in the channel. Evidently, these were used to carry drinking water from the hills near at hand.

OASES

By ARNOLD McCLURE

AN oasis in the desert! To the weary and thirsty traveller this represents the delights of heaven on earth. Herodotus was the first to give this name to these fertile and fruitful spots in the wildernesses of sand. Usually, an oasis is small, and, consequently, land is precious, so precious that every inch is cultivated, and the pathways which divide one plot from another are very narrow, while in the towns the streets are often arched over, and houses are built on the arches, making a second or third storey.

Egypt, especially the Libyan Desert, abounds in oases. The largest of these is Kharga, often called the Great Oasis. It is 425 miles from Cairo, and is now reached by a narrow gauge railway. The population numbers about 9,000. It is formed by a depression in the desert about a hundred miles long, and from twelve to fifty miles broad. There is no rain and no flowing stream. Water is obtained from wells. In some oases the wells are shallow, and the water may rise to the surface in springs, on the principle of an artesian well. But

in the Great Oasis the wells are very deep, some as deep as 400 feet, the water being obtained from porous sandstone, which underlies most of the Libyan Desert.

There are 60,000 date palms in Kharga, and rice and barley and wheat are largely grown. This oasis was known to the Greeks as the Island of the Blessed, but the Romans used it as a place of banishment, and one of the most famous men who was sent into exile there was Nestorius, after he had been condemned by the Council of Ephesus.

Other oases in the Libyan Desert are Dakhla, with over 18,000 inhabitants, Farafra, with 1,000 population, notable as the first oasis taken from the Christians by the Mohammedans, and Baharia, with 6,000 people.

Another famous oasis is Siwa, containing the ruins of the Temple of Ammon, where the oracle was consulted by Alexander the Great. It is about six miles long, and from four to five wide. The population is about 4,000. It is very fertile, and has many thousands of date palms. The town of Siwa is built on two rocks, like a fortress. Arches span the narrow and irregular streets, and on the arches dwellings are built. Siwa, like Kharga, was used by the Romans as a place of banishment for criminals.



IN REPLY to YOURS

Correspondence Answered
by UNCLE EDWARD

(NOTE.—Readers of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY can write to me, and I will reply on this page. But don't expect a reply for four or five weeks. Address your letters or postcards to UNCLE EDWARD, c/o The Editor, The NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.—UNCLE EDWARD.)

A. H. (Leeds): You call me a priceless idiot, and then ask me to give you a description of myself, so that you can have a good laugh! By George! I'm coming to that school of yours one day, and I'll wipe up the floor with you! On seconds thoughts, though, I'll forgive you. You say you like the Trackett Grim stories, so you can't be such a fathead, after all. And when you say that Willy could knock me flat, I simply refuse to make any comment. You know as well as I do that Willy couldn't do anything of the sort!

WILLY LEVER (Poplar): I'm glad to find my stories so soothing at bedtime. This proves how good they are for your health! I don't know Mr. Lee's age, but he isn't married. Fullwood has been in the Remove for ages. Starke isn't at St. Frank's now. Sorry I can't make this reply longer, old son, but I'm simply swamped in letters.

TOMBOY (Leeds): You're a girl, and yet you always wanted to be a boy! What rot! Oh, sorry—I was forgetting! You don't know when you're well off. Girls have a lot better time of it than boys. No black eyes—no thick ears—no swishings—and always plenty of chocolates and new dresses! And you really mustn't talk about your schoolmistress like that, you know. I'm beginning to suspect you deserve all the hot water you talk about. Thanks for admiring my cricket and boxing. As for my favourite lesson, there isn't one! I think all lessons are a nuisance, and ought to be prohibited. As for your letter boring me, it did just the opposite. Write again!

A. GLESCA KEELY (Glasgow): Thanks for your letter—but I hope we've got more than one reader in Glasgow! You're all wrong when you say that I boast, and when you talk about letting me have the weight of your fist, you forget that my fist weighs a bit, too! Still, you seem to be a good sort, and if we knew one another, I'd bet we'd be pals. I've told Nipper that idea of yours, and perhaps he'll do something about it. Cheerio!

BERT PINK (Southampton): Nelson Lee doesn't contribute to the Mag., because it's a purely junior publication. Yes, we invite Irene and Co. to tea sometimes—but, of course, we have to get special permission from the Housemaster. The plan of St. Frank's will probably appear in the autumn. Jolly nice of you to crack up the Trackett Grim yarns so much. You've got sense!

C. DEIGHTON (Portsmouth): Yes, I think my Trackett Grim stories would make good films, too—but not comedies, you chump. They'd be thrilling detective dramas. Willy isn't really witty—it's just plain nerve.

JOSEPH CASHEN (Liverpool): You were right in asking me to excuse your writing. I'm not even sure I've got your name right. Archie is blonde, and it's very difficult for the artist to always show this. The Portrait Gallery is coming along. Hard luck about the competition. Do better next time!

GERTIE ALBONE (Wood Green): Hear, hear! I agree with you that Willy is a positive little terror. In fact, if it wasn't for me being here to keep him in check, goodness knows what mischief he'd be up to! I'm sorry to hear about your father. You ought to take him firmly in hand, and make him read the yarns, and then he'd change his opinion. Sorry I can't answer your questions about Irene—they're too personal. How do I know if she uses powder? Regarding Somerton and Sir Montie, you'll probably see a good deal about them in due course. I suppose the best-looking chap in the Remove, barring myself—these are your own words, you know, not mine—is Reggie Pitt. In my opinion, he even beats Nipper. He's a jolly handsome chap. Yes, my Trackett Grim stories ought to be filmed, as you say—

but these film companies are so backward, you know. Although you're a girl you've got a pretty big nerve to say I make a lot of mistakes in my yarns! And I'm always so particular, too.

PRINGLE COOKE (Transvaal, South Africa): When you ask who is the best detective—Sherlock Holmes, Nelson Lee, Sexton Blake, or Trackett Grim—well, as I told Allan Pollock, Trackett Grim does more marvellous things than any of the others. So what's the good of asking? Miss Irene is a ripping girl, but I'll agree with you that Tessa Love is just as ripping in her own way. I'm afraid I can't send you the addresses of other readers. Sorry, old man. By the way, how do you like living in the heart of the dense, tropical jungle? Don't you ever get fed up with the snakes and alligators?

H. GOLDENHAR (Montreal, Canada): When I opened your letter I had a pleasant feeling, and thought it decent of you to write from such a wild, outlandish spot. It must be very lonely out there in the backwoods. But when I started reading, I decided not to give you any reply at all. It's a bit thick when a chap writes and tells me to bury my face and fry myself in oil! You call me a bully, too, and you tell me that my geography is rotten, and end up by saying that I'm a duffer! And yet you expect me to reply! You can jolly well go and eat coke, my lad! The names of all the boys and masters will be given when the Portrait Gallery comes out.

C. W. D. (Walthamstow): Sorry I can't let you have any of those tents you want. You see, I only used them in a story, and I don't think they'd be suitable for you, anyhow. If Willy helped me with the Trackett Grim stories they wouldn't be worth printing. The Trotwood twins are still here, and you'll hear more about them in due course. You want to know who gives the most black eyes in a week? I do, of course. I hold the record. It's not necessary for me to remind Nipper about that Portrait gallery.

ADA FRANKLIN (Carshalton): I thought it was very nice of you to write me such a long letter, considering you're ill in bed. As for the pencil, I don't mind in the least. I don't really think that Willy is a rotter. He's one of the best, as a matter of fact, but he's got rather too much nerve for a fag. I'm glad you like Reggie Pitt so much. I like him, too—he's a brick. You say you've been a reader for nearly seven years? That's fine! I hope you won't miss another week, like the one you mentioned. And you mustn't be ill any more, either. Your record is a jolly good one, and I don't think there are

many boy readers who can beat it. By your description of yourself, I think you must be jolly attractive, and your three brothers are lucky to have such a sister. When I grow up, I'm going to be a great detective. All the details you ask for will be published when the Portrait Gallery comes out. I am looking forward to hearing from you again, when you can get up, and write properly in ink. I hope I shan't have to wait long.

RITA S. (Harlesden): Willy's age is just over thirteen. I've asked Nipper to publish my minor's photograph, and I expect it'll appear in the forthcoming Gallery.

A. RIVAL (Croydon): I've never heard of those books you mention, and I can't see how they'd be of any use to me, anyhow.

MABS (Filey): If your brother is anything like Willy, I'm sorry for you. I'm glad to learn that you make a habit of biffing him. Glad you like the Old Paper, and that you think the Trackett Grim stories are O.K. But how many more times must I explain that my yarns are not funny? Hope you'll keep your promise and write again soon.

CALIFORNIA JOE (Hindley, Lanes): Thanks muchly for your warm appreciation. But I'm very much afraid a serial about Deadwood Dick would be unsuitable for our pages. Thanks for your historical notes, all the same.

DEADWOOD DICK Jr. (Platt Bridge, Lanes): You can't fool me, you know! I know you under your other alias—California Joe. You seem to forget I'm a handwriting expert, being a detective. Why, you didn't even trouble to disguise your fist in that second letter! Still, you're just the kind of reader I like. Thanks awfully for all the ripping things you say about the Old Paper. And thanks, too, for your interesting account of how you first got in touch with the stories. After thinking things over, I've come to the conclusion that that idea of yours about a Deadwood Dick serial is pretty good. I think I could write this yarn myself, and pack it full of thrilling, exciting adventures. I'll talk to Nipper about it, and we'll see what can be done. Many thanks for the suggestion.

SYDNEY ATHERSTONE (Leicester): Considering that you call me a "big, sloppy, fat-headed chump," it's a wonder I'm answering you at all. You ask me to find Handforth and batter him, bump him, kick him, and punch him until he's unrecognisable. Do you think I'm going to do all this to myself, you silly ass? I've shown your letter to Nipper and all the Remove chaps, and also to Irene Manners and Co. You asked me to, and you asked me to tell you what they say. I don't want to pain you, so I won't.

You redeem yourself at the end by saying that my Trackett Grim stories are very good. On the whole, Sydney, you're not such a bad sort.

BETTY (Bath): Thanks for your photograph. I must say you look very Blythe in it. Somehow, I've got an idea that you're trying to pull my leg. But it can't be done, Miss Betty. I've shown your photograph to the chaps you mention, and they all say they've seen you on the pictures. Well, dear Betty, I haven't got any space for more now.

PAUL DE JARDIN (Bourg-la-Reine, France): I'm jolly pleased to hear from a French chap. I expect you're surprised to hear that I know you're French. You don't say so, but don't forget I write the Trackett Grim stories. I've asked Nipper about that map, and I think it's coming along. As for the Green Triangle and Jim the Penman—just look out! I have presented your compliments to everybody in general, and they're all very pleased. Yes, Lord Dorrimore is an old St. Frank's boy. The Careers in Caricature are drawn by the same gentleman who illustrates the stories.

GERALD G. L. BLOOM, (London, N.17): Yes, like your notepaper, I'm in the pink. But you've got a bit of nerve to say that my face reminds you of your puppy. Anyhow, your puppy must be jolly good-looking! No, I don't bully Church and McClure—never have done. I hate bullying.

A CHUM (Ramsey, Isle of Man): Reggie seems to be very popular. You're not the only one who likes him best. Willy isn't a bit frightened of me—why should he be? The young ass isn't frightened of anything? Thanks for the description of yourself. I think you must be a girl, and it's a certainty that you're pretty—you've got fair hair and blue eyes.

A FRIEND (Ramsey, Isle of Man): Look here, what's the idea? You call yourself a friend, and calmly proceed to refer to me as a terrible bully and a stupid. That's not very friendly, is it? I don't think you're such a nice girl as your chum. I'm certain you're not as pretty, because you've got brown hair and brown eyes. Of course, plenty of other chaps may like dark girls better, so it's quite likely you're pretty, after all.

TELEGRAPH TIM (Holborn): If Nipper agrees with you that Willy can write better stories than I can, I'll punch his head. In fact, I showed him your letter, but he only grinned. He knew better than to say anything.

TED K. (Sheffield): I've given that message to my minor, and he had the cheek to say that he'll soon write some more stories for the Mag.

GEORGE (Clayton-le-Moors): Sorry to hear about your warts. The best way to remove them is to soak the hands in water for twenty-four hours, then scrub the warts thoroughly and leave them in a solution of vinegar and salt for a week. If the warts haven't vanished by that time, they never will. With regard to settling an argument, there's only one way. Don't argue at all! I agree that my minor is cheeky, but what the dickens do you mean by saying that he gambles with Fullwood and Co.? Willy is as straight as a ramrod, and he doesn't even know what gambling is. That riddle of yours is easy. When is a door not a door? Why, when it's a French window, of course. And that picture puzzle of yours is still easier than the riddle—Accrington. It only took me half an hour, after seeing the post-mark on your letter.

PANSY (Shropshire): The game I like best is football. Alf Brent is just over fifteen, and I've given him your love, as you asked. I agree with you that E. Sopp ought to dry up, but lots of readers rather like his Fables. You tell me not to look at your writing. How the dickens can I answer your letter without looking at it?

A READER OF THE N.L.L. (Ingatstone): The photos of the Remove chaps and their ages, etc., will appear in the Portrait Gallery—which is definitely arranged for in the near future.

MURIEL RAY LEVEY (Brondesbury): Thanks for your very nice letter, Muriel. It's too bad of your parents to forbid you to read the Old Paper. How on earth can they imagine for a moment that it is bloodthirsty? Please urge them to read two or three copies, and then give a fair decision. I'm afraid there are lots of people who judge things before they know the facts. It isn't fair to us, is it? Still, I am sure that you are a staunch reader, and just the sort we want.

MARGARET ((Hants): Archie Glenthorpe is a jolly good chap, and he's not half so lazy as he looks. You'll get his full description when the Portrait Gallery is published. Miss Irene is fair, and she has got wonderful blue eyes. Don't forget to write to me again—and then I'll give you a longer reply.

BARTLE JOUBERT (Wellington, C.P., South Africa): You're wrong. I wasn't born on April 1st at all. And for calling me a fathead, I won't tell you my real birthday. But you say a few nice things about my yarns, so I think you must be a sound, level-headed chap. Who gave you the idea that Church and McClure suffer from sore ears and noses? And why should my fist hurt me? As a general rule, it hurts somebody else!

MAIDMENT (Bermondsey): I don't know whether I've visited Bermondsey or not. How can I remember everywhere I go? But I've got an idea that Bermondsey is somewhere near the river, so it must be something like Hampton Court. You're lucky to live in such a lovely suburb. It's no good your coming to St. Frank's now—we're all away. Church and McClure live in the Ancient House. Thanks for your nice remarks about the Old Paper.

STELLA SHEPSTONE (Kennington): Thanks for your long letter. Sorry, but I can only give you a short reply this week. I'll try and squeeze in another later. Well, you've got your travel stories—hope you'll like 'em. The ages you want will be given in our coming Portrait Gallery.

NELSONLEEITE (Paisley, N.B.): That's a good idea of yours to bind the books together in dozens. Very clever—I can tell you're Scotch. That summer trip has come off, as you'll know by this time. You're quite right about the girls—I heartily agree with what you say.

R. M. (Deptford): Good man! I'm glad to find that you agree with me that I ought to be Captain of the Remove. And when you call Trackett Grim the greatest genius in fiction, I haven't got a word to say. Being the creator of Trackett Grim, I'm naturally modest. But I entirely agree with you, old man.

MATT McCANN (Cavan, Ireland): You fat-head! Just because you're Irish, you think you could "make me a fit case for hospital." Come along and try it, my lad! I may not be Irish, but I can fight. How do I think of my Trackett Grim plots? I don't. They come unbidden to a brain like mine.

FRED MAYERL (Shepherd's Bush): You prove your common sense by turning straight to the Trackett Grim story every Wednesday. But I don't want any rot about Miss Irene, you ass! It's all piffle to say I'm in love with her. Yes, Willy's stories are sheer rubbish, as you say, and I've often told him so. But I might just as well talk to a brick wall. My minor's a young terror.

NEY NEUMAN (Edmonton): If your friends won't speak to you because of a slight argument, they can't be friends at all. What about Church and McClure? They're always arguing—but we all remain pals. I don't know what your P.S. means at all. No detective on earth could decipher it.

A. COOPER (Lavendon, Beds.): I showed those sketches of yours to Nipper, and it was ten minutes before he recovered. They knocked me over a bit, too. If I looked like your pictures of me, I'd go for a dive in the Stowe, and forget to come up. I don't believe a word you say about Willy and Archie.

UNCLE EDWARD.

TRAVEL TALES.



By An Old Boy

(Lord Dorrimore's Weekly Trifle)

No. 13.—THE SNAKE-PROOF ZULU.

SNAKES I abominate. To me they are horrid creatures. Yet I have a great curiosity with regard to them, and whenever I get a chance of seeing them in large numbers, or under extraordinary conditions, I take it. Hence, I visited the laboratory and snake farm in Brazil to which I referred the other day, when I related the incident of the non-poisonous snake devouring poisonous ones.

In South Africa, at Port Elizabeth, there is an island, surrounded by a moat and high walls, which is devoted to snakes. You may see them in hundreds, little and big—cobras, pythons, and the smaller species, all poisonous and deadly. Some of them are writhing and swaying, lifting their heads and projecting their fangs, while others are lying doggo watching for prey, and still others are comatose and to all appearance dead.

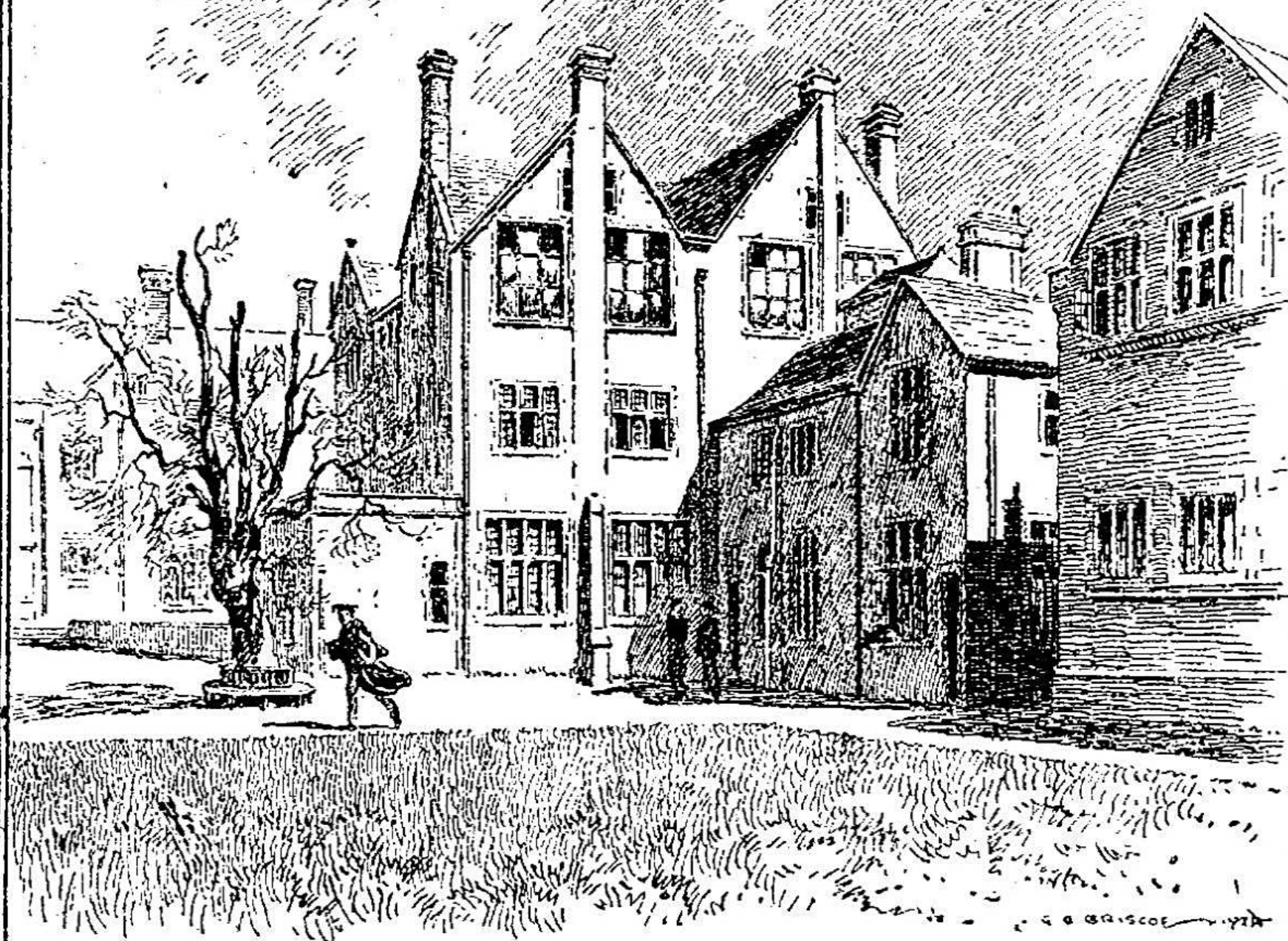
The snakes at Port Elizabeth are under the charge of a big, stolid Zulu, who walks about among them quite unconcerned. If he sees you are interested in him and the repulsive reptiles he will stoop down, grope with his hands among the grass and bushes, and fill his arms with wriggling, deadly snakes, and he will allow their fangs to almost touch his face and eyes.

If he gets bitten, he doesn't care. He just crosses the island and the moat to the museum, where antidotes and serum are kept. It is hardly necessary to cauterise bites or dress wounds now, however. He has been inoculated so thoroughly that the poison is in his blood, and he is not afraid of any snake in the world. He is as vain as a peacock, and nothing pleases him more than to be photographed by visitors. I took two or three snapshots of him playing with, or provoking, the venomous reptiles among which he lives.

OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

SPECIAL SERIES OF ART SKETCHES BY MR. E. E. BRISCOE.

No. 42.—BERKHAMSTED SCHOOL.



Founded by Dean Incent, of St. Paul's, London, during the reign of Henry VIII., Berkhamsted School was intended to educate 144 boys. Henry VIII. granted the school the property of St. John's Hospital in Berkhamsted. A Parliamentary title was granted to its lands by Edward VI., and this has caused the school to be incorrectly called the Edward VI.'s School. For many years the school suffered from mis-

management. It was re-established in 1841, and the present buildings were erected in 1838. Many other additions have since been made, including a new junior school and assembly hall in 1910, and in 1913 new playing fields have been acquired. The number of boys in the school is 520. In 1909 the school won the Public Schools Gymnasium competition at Aldershot, and the school eight won the Public Schools Rapid Firing Competition at Bisley.

"NELSON LEE" MYSTERY PICTURE COMPETITION.

----- *

Boys! Here's the splendid little competition which you can all enter. It need only cost you the stamp for a postcard or letter, and you will find that it is quite a novel idea we have hit upon.

On Page 21 of this issue you will find a picture drawn to illustrate a certain part of this week's great story, "Thrown to the Lions," as you will see when you read the yarn.

Now you know that under our pictures we always have a line or two describing the incident shown. Well, this time we want you to find the best wording to be put underneath this picture.

A Prize of £1 1s. will be awarded to the reader who sends what, in the Editor's opinion, is the best inscription for the picture, and Twelve Consolation Prizes will go to the readers whose efforts are next best.

All inscriptions must be taken from the actual text of the story, and they must not exceed 25 words in length. Each inscription must be written on one of these coupons, which must be posted to:

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C/o "Nelson Lee Library,"

Gough House, Gough Square, E.C.4.

The Closing Date will be Tuesday, September 2nd. The Editor's decision is final.

"MYSTERY PICTURE" COMPETITION

No. 6.—I agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and binding.

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"Nelson Lee Library."—Closing date, Tuesday, September 2nd.

Inscription to Mystery Picture (see Page 21).

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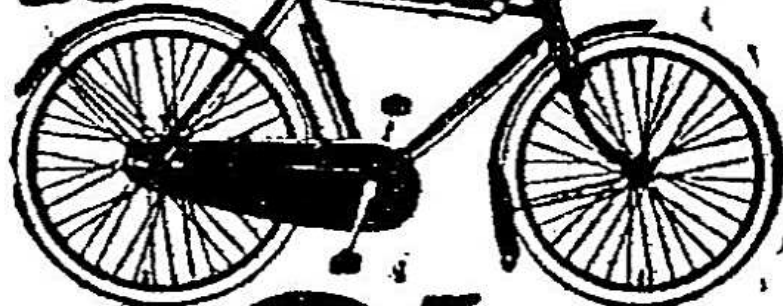
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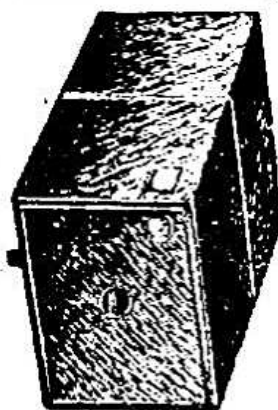
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