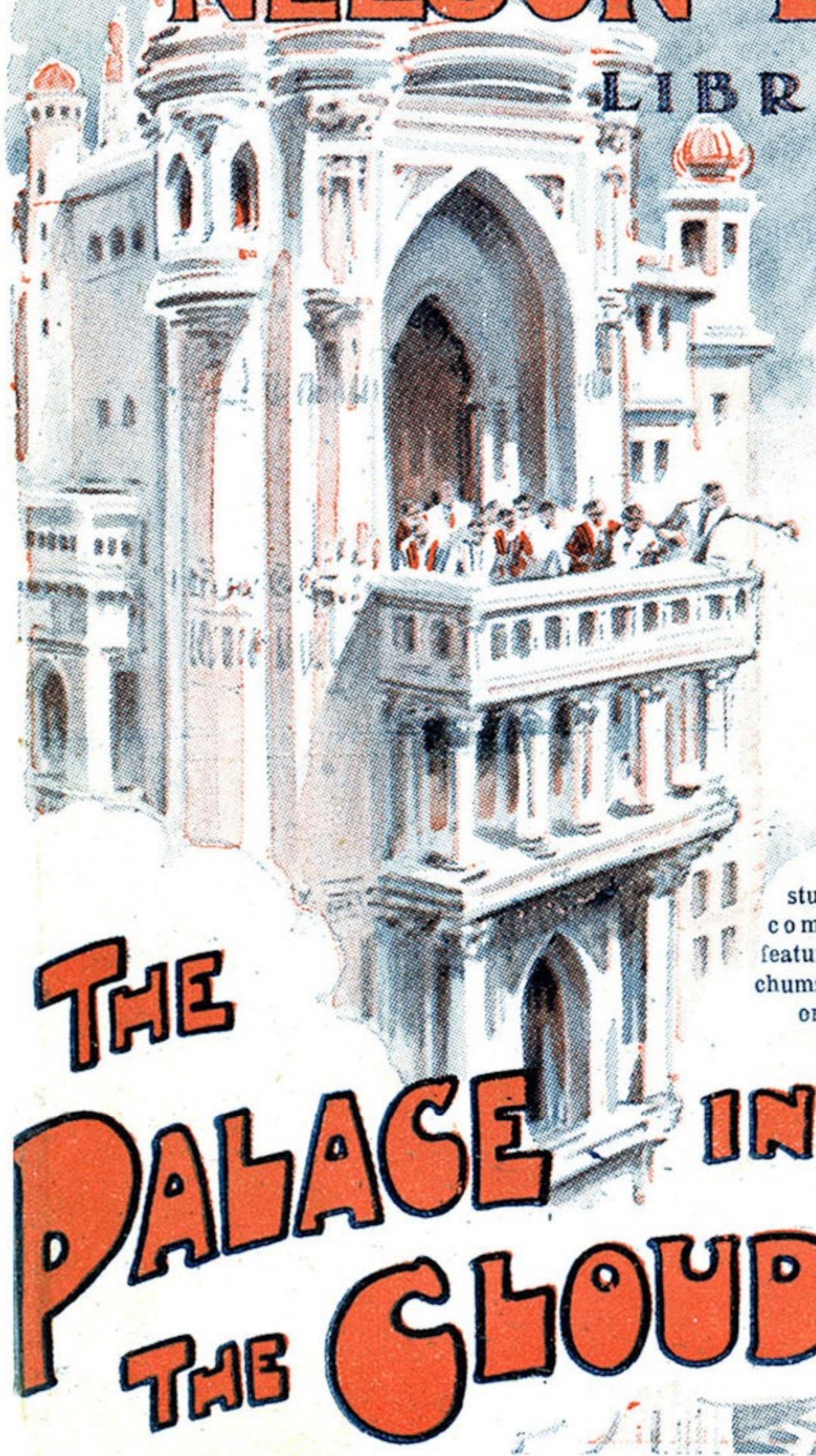


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#### CHAPTER 1.

##### In the Rishnir Jungle!

"WAKE up, Handy!"

Edward Oswald Handforth, of the St. Frank's Remove, opened his eyes and blinked. He found Church and McClure, his faithful study chums, bending over him. They were both dressed in flannels, and they were looking curiously flushed and excited.

"Clear off!" growled Handforth. "I don't want to be bothered— Hallo!" he added, staring round. "Who's been messing about with the dormitory?"

"This isn't the dormitory, you ass!" said McClure. "You're still half asleep! Wake up! Breakfast is ready!"

"Breakfast!" repeated Handforth, with more alacrity. "Oh, rather! Now you come to mention it, I'm feeling a bit peckish."

He yawned, and looked round again.

"We're not at St. Frank's at all!" he said, in a startled voice.

"Go hon!"

"And this isn't the dormitory, either!"

"Of course it isn't the dormitory!" said Church impatiently. "Don't you remember, Handy? We're on the Wanderer!"

"By George!" said Handforth, closing his eyes and giving himself a shake. "The Wanderer, eh? Old Dorrie's yacht!"

"No, not Dorrie's yacht!" said Church, taking a deep breath. "This is the Wanderer of the Skies. It's Mr. Manners' aeroplane, and we've crashed in the Indian jungle. Now do you remember?"

Handforth fairly leapt out of the little berth.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated tensely. "Of course I remember! That storm during the night, eh? We all thought we were going to be killed, didn't we? The machine

tossed and dipped, and then crashed down into the jungle. And nobody was hurt!"

"It was a piece of wonderful airmanship on the part of Mr. Manners," agreed McClure. "He and Lord Dorrimore brought us down safely. And here we are, in the middle of the giddy jungle! It's morning now, and the sun's shining like the very dickens. I believe it's going to be a hot day."

Seldom had Handforth dressed himself so quickly. Within a couple of minutes he was ready, and he accompanied his chums out of the tiny cabin and into the corridor. One would certainly have never guessed that the great aeroplane was crippled, for she was resting on an even keel, and her neat little state-rooms and her lounges were perfectly level.

"Let's go up on the promenade deck for a minute," suggested Handforth, as they came to the companion-way. "Bother breakfast!"

"But everybody is sitting down——"

"Never mind that!" said Handforth. "I want to have a look round by daylight. We've only seen the place at night so far."

He would not be denied, and he hurried up the small companion. Within a few moments he was on the promenade deck—a railed enclosure on the top of the giant wing. Overhead there was a dome of unsplinterable glass, entirely enclosing this novel deck. The sun was blazing down, converting the place into a very inferno of heat.

"We can't stay up here. Handy," said Church. "Mr. Lee says that it'll be like a furnace after another hour."

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth, staring out through the glass.

He saw a tangle of luxuriant vegetation. Trees were all round—bamboo, deodar, satin-wood, red cedar—trees of every imaginable kind. It was the Indian jungle, and there could be no doubt that this particular spot was far down in one of the valleys, where the heat was stifling, and where the vegetation grew in an atmosphere that was almost permanently humid.

The primeval Indian forest!

This was no cultivated area, where the teeming brown men of India were plying their trade, or building factories and railways. It was a backwater, unchanged throughout the centuries. This place was in the heart of Rishnir, the province that was ruled over by the enormously rich Amcer Ali Rajen.

It seemed to Handforth, as he stood staring through the glass, that he had been passing through a dream. It seemed only yesterday that he had been in England, at Vivian Travers' country place in Essex, where he and a number of other prominent Removites and Moor View School girls had been invited after the two schools had "broken up" for the summer vacation.

Then had come news of the flight; the startling disclosure that Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, the Indian boy, had been spirited away and conveyed by aeroplane to India.

And the St. Frank's party, instead of going on a peaceful tour round Europe during the summer vacation, as had been previously arranged, had instead started off in pursuit. Everything had gone well until India had been actually reached. Hussi Kahn had not been recovered, since his captors had conveyed him in a non-stop flight to India, thus rendering the pursuit ineffective.

It had been a very wonderful voyage on Mr. Hobart Manners' great monoplane. It was the last word in flyers; a gigantic machine, with cabins, saloons, and everything almost as complete as an ocean yacht.

All had gone well until the machine had been flying over Rishnir at dead of night. Then a violent storm had been encountered. For over an hour the Wanderer of the Skies had battled with the elements, and all might have gone well but for the fact that the lightning had struck the tail of the machine, crippling her.

But, in spite of this minor disaster, Mr. Manners had brought the 'plane safely to earth. The jungle had been beneath him, but even this had not spelt complete disaster.

By skilful manœuvring, Mr. Manners had "pancaked" the enormous machine in the forest. When only a few feet above the tree-tops, he had caused the 'plane to drop sheer; and so she had crashed down through the trees, landing on an even keel with only a comparatively slight jar. Nobody had been hurt—not even bruised.

But nothing could alter the fact that the great machine was crippled—helpless in the grip of these jungle trees—hemmed in by the forest.

The excitement had been great at the time; but Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore had advised all the passengers to go quietly back to bed, and to sleep until morning. And they had obeyed these instructions.

Nothing could be done at the moment. Plans to cope with this unexpected emergency had to be made; numerous problems had to be solved.

But the greatest problem of all was unknown to those young passengers. They thought that they had descended into the Indian jungle—and they thought right.

But they did not know that they were in the heart of Rishnir, the province that was ruled by a despot who was rabidly antagonistic towards Britain and all Britishers!



## CHAPTER 2.

### Making the Best of It!

THE party was quite a large one.

The men consisted of Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Mr.

Hobart Manners, and Butler, the steward.

Of the St. Frank's fellows there were Nipper & Co., of Study C; Handforth & Co., of Study D; Archie Glenthorne, Reggie Pitt, Grey, Fullwood, Russell, and several others, including Vivian Travers.

Then, too, there were six Moor View school-girls aboard—Irene Manners and her girl chums, Doris Berkeley, Marjorie Temple, Mary Summers, Winnie Pitt, and Tessa Love. Fortunately, there was also a stewardess aboard. She was a motherly old soul named Mrs. Tibbs, and she was looking after her young charges with as much care as though they had been her own daughters.

And here they all were—crashed in the heart of the Rishnir jungle.

When Handforth & Co. arrived in the saloon they found most of the others finishing their breakfast. Everything was going on normally, as though no disaster had happened. The heat in the saloon was becoming unbearable, for the sun was gaining height and gaining power. Before long, indeed, it would be well nigh impossible to remain bottled up in the interior of the great 'plane.

And yet to venture forth would be risky.

"Well, we're all safe, anyhow!" said Handforth, as he sat down at one of the little tables. "What's the next move, sir?" he added, looking at Lord Dorrimore.

"Well, the fact is, young 'un, I don't quite know," confessed Dorrie frankly. "We've got to consider the matter. Without wishing to be too blunt, I should say that we're in a pretty nasty mess."

"Is there any danger, sir?"

"I hope so!" said his lordship dreamily. "It's about time we had some excitement—Eh? Danger?" he repeated, with some haste. "Good glory! What nonsense! How could there be danger here?"

Handforth nodded.

"Of course there's no danger, you chaps," he said, turning to the others. "India is a civilised country. I've read all about it in the books. They've got railways and factories, and motor-cars, and colleges and universities—just like home."

Harry Gresham glanced out through one of the windows.

"It doesn't look much like it," he remarked.

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course it doesn't!" he agreed. "But if an aeroplane descended into the middle of Epping Forest, the occupants wouldn't believe that they were within a few miles of the world's greatest city, would they? You can't judge anything by what we can see here. There's probably a town a short distance off."

"Hadn't we better go to it, then?" suggested Fullwood. "Perhaps we shall be able to get help. And we might get accommodation at an hotel, too—"

"It's no good talking like that, boys," interrupted Nelson Lee gravely. "There's no sense in deluding yourselves. And I don't think it would be quite fair for us to allow you to retain these false impressions.

According to all our calculations, we are quite a long way from civilisation."

"Oh!"

"That is to say, civilisation as we know it," continued Mr. Lee. "Rishnir is not under British control. It is an independent state, ruled over by a despot who is not very particular in his methods. As he is an avowed enemy of England, it stands to reason that our position here is not one to be envied."

"Then—then we're in enemy country?" asked Mary Summers breathlessly.

"I am afraid we are," agreed Nelson Lee. "Not that the Ameer of Rishnir will harm us," he added. "I do not suppose for a moment that he would be rash enough to cause us any injury. The Ameer is an educated man, a man of the world, and he knows perfectly well that he will have the British Government to reckon with if he harms us in any way."

"Good old British Government!" said Nipper cheerily.

"Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that we are practically cut off from the world here," continued Lee. "Rishnir has no railways of its own—no modern transport. I believe there are a few telegraphs in the country, but they are all controlled by the Ameer. Rishnir, indeed, is in very much the same condition as Afghanistan was a few years ago, before King Amanullah ascended the throne."

"What about Kurpana, sir?" asked Harry Gresham. "Aren't we near Kurpana?"

"As distances go, quite near," replied Lee. "And our one object must be to reach the Kurpana border; for once in that state we shall be in the hands of friends. Kurpana is Hussi Kahn's country, and an ally of Great Britain."

Nelson Lee did not think it necessary to mention that Hussi Kahn's father, the Maharajah of Kurpana, had been seized by the Ameer, and was being held prisoner. Gcolah Kahn, Hussi's brother, was also in the hands of the enemy. Things were in a very critical condition in this far corner of India; a clash was imminent. Warfare between Kurpana and Rishnir was practically on the point of breaking out. It was for this reason that the India Office had urged Nelson Lee to rescue Hussi Kahn before it was too late.

So far the quest had failed. Prince Sinji, the man who had kidnapped Hussi, had gained such a start that never once had he been caught sight of. By this time, in all probability, he was in Idar, the capital of Rishnir. And it seemed that Hussi Kahn had joined his father and brother in their exile.

But all this was only guesswork, at the best. Nelson Lee was anxious to get on the move—to reach the Kurpana border, and to get hold of the latest news. He knew perfectly well that it was risky in the extreme for the Wanderer's passengers to be stranded in the Rishnir jungle.

And it was just as well that the boys and girls should know a portion of the truth; it was necessary, indeed, that they should be told the main facts. Otherwise they would not be prepared for danger. A hard march lay ahead of them all—a march that would be fraught with uncertainty and peril. It was better for them to be prepared.

"Whew!" whistled Pitt, as he fanned himself. "It's getting stiflingly hot in here, sir. Can't we go out into the open? Is it necessary for us to be bottled up here?"

"You can go out if you wish," replied Nelson Lee promptly. "But do not go out of sight of the aeroplane. It would be better, indeed, if you remained quite close at hand. And stick together, too. Do not wander off singly, or in pairs."

A minute later the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls were clambering out through the door in the side of the 'plane's body. They hardly realised the significance of Nelson Lee's warning, but they were ready enough to respect his wishes.

The saloon was soon empty, except for Nelson Lee himself, Lord Dorrimore, and Mr. Manners. They looked at one another rather grimly.

"Well, thank goodness they've gone!" said Dorrie, taking a deep breath. "Now we can talk—we can discuss this thing openly."

"And it needs discussing openly, too!" said Nelson Lee. "Manners, we're in the very deuce of a hole."

"I know it!" said Mr. Manners soberly. "The 'plane is crippled, and it is impossible to get her into the air again. And we are in enemy country, practically lost. I can't say that I am cheered by the prospect!"



### CHAPTER 3.

#### Handy the Optimist!

"**T**HANK goodness!" said Reggie Pitt.

He and the others were standing on the ground, some little distance from the Wanderer of the Skies. They had picked their way through the tangle of broken branches, and now they could see the great machine quite clearly, as she lay wedged in amongst the litter of broken trees.

All the boys and girls were thankful for this liberty. It was cooler out here—although, in all conscience, the atmosphere was hot enough. But it had not the stifling quality of the air within the saloon.

"Considering the cropper we came, the machine has escaped pretty marvellously," remarked Nipper, as he eyed the great 'plane with a critical inspection. "The landing gear is badly twisted, and the wing tips are buckled and torn. The tail is smashed, too.

But otherwise she seems to have escaped scot free."

"Yes," nodded Travers. "The body and the main wing are untouched. By Samson! It was wonderful the way Dorrie and Mr. Manners brought her down! We owe them our lives, dear old fellows."

"Well, father always said that this machine was perfectly safe," remarked Irene, not without a touch of pride. "And when he had to make a forced landing in a jungle, a crash was absolutely unavoidable."

"Oh, rather!" said Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, absolutely, dear old girl! Your pater is a priceless chappie, and all that. He'll probably get us into the air again, before he's done."

"I hardly think that, Archie," said Nipper, shaking his head. "Even if the machine could be repaired, there's no suitable ground for taking off."

They all stood looking up at the gigantic aeroplane, with its gleaming wings and body. There was something rather pathetic about it as it stood there, hemmed in by the trees, tangled with creepers and undergrowth.

"Well, it's no good crying over spilt milk," said Handforth philosophically. "Let's go up this rising ground and see if we can spot anything. We're hemmed in so much here that we can't get any view. I want to have a look at the country."

"To see if there are any towns knocking about—eh?" grinned Church.

"There's bound to be a town somewhere near!" declared Handforth obstinately. "You can't fool me about India! I've had letters from chaps in India, and they say that the place is as civilised as England!" Reggie Pitt chuckled.

"But you seem to forget, Handy, that India is a word that is very often misused," he said. "India is half as big as Europe, and it contains dozens of different peoples. Hindus and Mohammedans and Buddhists and—"

"Never mind about the giddy population!" broke in Handforth. "Let's have a look at this stretch of country. I want to see where we are!"

"Hold on, Handy!" said Nipper. "Don't forget what the gov'nor said. We mustn't go out of sight of the 'plane."

"Well, we needn't go out of sight," replied Handforth. "If we climb up this steep hillside, we shall soon get on higher ground, and we can have an eye on the Wanderer all the time."

This was perfectly true. The machine had descended into the jungle at the foot of a steep slope. The trees thinned out considerably on this slope, and the undergrowth was not so tangled. In the other direction, no view could be obtained, owing to the dense trees.

Handforth & Co. and a good many of the others started climbing the hillside, and the girls were not to be outdone. They went, too.

But it was hot work—much hotter than the juniors had believed. Long before they had reached the summit they were out of breath, and they were compelled to pause for a rest. Looking back, they could gaze down upon the crippled aeroplane. She seemed even more pathetic than ever, snuggling down there amidst the broken and shattered trees.

"I wonder what the dickens we're going to do?" asked Harry Gresham. "We're safe of course, but Mr. Lee didn't seem very hopeful, did he? We're in Rishnir, and it's an enemy country."

"Oh, but the people wouldn't dare to harm us," said Doris Berkeley confidently. "We're British, and, although they may not like us, they'll give us a safe escort."

"They'd better not try any tricks—that's all!" said Handforth warmly. "By George! If they do I shall have something to say about it!"

"Well, it's best to be prepared," said Nipper quietly.

"Rot!" scoffed Handforth. "As soon as we get on the march we shall strike a railway, and then we shall only need to get into the train, and before long we shall be in Calcutta, or Bombay."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He seems to think that Calcutta and Bombay are only about twenty miles apart!" grinned Harry Gresham. "Handy, you're hopeless! We're probably thousands of miles from Calcutta. We're right up in the north-west somewhere, beyond the ordinary boundaries of British India."

"Oh, well, why worry about it?" said Handforth. "Let's be getting on. It's not far to the top of this hill, and then we shall be able to see something of the country."

He continued to climb, and Church and McClure kept with him. They weren't so very keen on it, but they felt that it was up to them to keep their eyes on their impulsive leader. He was quite capable of forgetting all about Nelson Lee's injunction, and losing himself in the jungle.

"Better wait for the others, Handy," said Church.

"Why should we wait?" demanded Handforth. "They can come if they like. Well, here we are—almost there!"

They climbed the last few feet rather laboriously, for the ascent had become very steep. But when they had gained their objective, they found that they were standing on the top of a rocky mound, where the trees had thinned away to a very great extent. The rocks were burning to the touch, for the sun was blazing down fully upon them.

But the chums of Study D had conquered, and they stood there, gazing out over a great vista of rolling countryside—down into a wide, sunlit valley. And simultaneous exclamations of astonishment broke from them,

## CHAPTER 4.

## The Palace on the Crag!



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

"There's a town over there!" said

Church, panting with excitement. "Look! You can see the buildings gleaming in the sunlight!"

"My hat!" muttered McClure. "So there is!"

Handforth gave his chums a triumphant glance.

"Well, what did I tell you?" he asked. "Didn't I say that we should spot a town?"

Church and McClure was silent. Never for a moment had they believed that Handforth's prediction would come true. And there was something more. The spectacle that they beheld in the far distance was astonishing, indeed.

"I'm blessed if I can understand it, though!" said Handforth, looking puzzled. "I didn't know they had skyscrapers in India!"

"Skyscrapers?" repeated Church.

"Yes! Can't you see it?" said Handforth, pointing. "If that's not a skyscraper, I'll eat my hat!"

"It looks like one, Handy, but it isn't!" said Church, as he gazed intently. "But, by Jingo, what an extraordinary formation. It's a building, right on the top of a great rock!"

"Well, I'm blowed! I believe you're right!" said Handforth breathlessly.

The sight they saw was positively startling.

At their feet stretched a long hillside, with a wide valley extending almost as far as the eye could see. And there, in the distance, perhaps seven or eight miles away, was the city. Even at this distance, the juniors could distinguish tall, slender minarets, and other Oriental structures. They could see buildings huddled together in a compact mass. Without question, they were looking upon a big city.

But towering above all, majestic in its impressive magnificence, was a wonderful palace of white, gleaming and scintillating in the sunshine.

Some freak of Nature had left an enormous crag of rock jutting out from the plain. It rose sheer—very much, indeed, like a skyscraper. This great crag was curiously even, with precipitous sides. It seemed to jut upwards from the very centre of the city. And there, on its extreme summit, was the white palace, with towers and turrets.

"Hi, you fellows!" shouted Handforth, suddenly turning and beckoning to the others. "Quick, girls! Come and have a look at this, Irene! We can see a great city from here!"

"Cheese it, Handy!" came a scornful yell.

"Tell us another, old man!"

"Draw it mild!"

They were all sceptical as they came up to the summit of the hillside. And then, one after another, the exclamations of astonishment broke out. Nipper was the only one who seemed actually startled; and he gave a low, long whistle.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful?" cried Irene delightedly.

"What a gorgeous place!" said Mary.

"I believe you're right!" nodded Nipper, with a certain grim note in his voice. "It may be glorious, but I'm glad we're a few miles away!"

"Why, whatever do you mean?" asked Mary, staring.

"Don't you recognise it?" said Nipper, nodding towards the great crag.

"How can we recognise it, you ass, when this is the first time we've seen it?" asked Handforth.

"It may be the first time we've seen it—but photographs of this place have sometimes appeared," said Nipper. "And it has been described lots of times, too. We're looking at the famous Idar Palace."

"The which?"

"The marvellous white marble palace of the Ameer of Rishnir," said Nipper. "That city is Idar, the capital. It can't be anything else—because this crag proves it. Haven't you heard that the Ameer of Rishnir lives in a marvellous palace, perched nearly a thousand feet above his capital?"

"Well, well!" said Travers mildly. "Now you come to mention it, Nipper, dear old fellow, I remember reading something of the sort. For the love of Samson! How does the beggar get on when he wants to go for a motor drive?"

"That's hardly the point, Travers," said Nipper. "The thing which most of you have apparently missed is that we're within sight of Idar. In other words, we're too jolly close to the place! If the Ameer knows that we have come down here, he'll be after us."

"Let him be after us!" said Handforth indignantly. "Blow the Ameer! He wouldn't have the nerve to interfere with British subjects!"

"Well, I'm not so sure about that!" said Nipper. "Don't forget that we're right in the middle of the Rishnir territory, and hundreds of miles from the nearest British outpost. Who would ever know?"

"Good gad!" murmured Archie Glen-thorne. "That's rather a frightful thought, what? I mean to say, everybody at home would think that the jolly old aeroplane had crashed without leaving a trace, and all that sort of thing! How utterly poisonous!"

"Oh, but the Ameer can't be such a rogue as all that!" said Winnie Pitt protestingly.

"By all that I've heard of him, he's relentless and determined," said Nipper. "He's preparing for a big war against Kurpana—and he has given the British Government no end of trouble in the past. The only point in our favour is that we crashed in the middle

of a thunderstorm. There's not one chance in a thousand that anybody saw our machine while it was over this country!"

"That's true!" said Fullwood thoughtfully. "But it seems rather a pity that we can't go any nearer to Idar. I'd love to have a closer look at that palace!"

"You may get a closer look yet!" said Nipper gruffly. "We're not out of the wood yet, Fully!"

"Or the jungle either!" agreed Fullwood.

"We'd better hurry back to the machine, and tell the gov'nor and Dorrie and Mr. Manners about this," said Nipper briskly. "I don't suppose they know they're so jolly near to Idar. The sooner we can get a move on, the safer we shall be!"

Without wasting any further time, the whole crowd took a final look at the Palace on the Crag, and then hurried off towards the crippled aeroplane.

None of them was feeling actually alarmed; but it could not be denied that they were thrilled and excited. They had a sensation of impending peril!



## CHAPTER 5.

### The Figure Behind the Bamboos!

NELSON LEE looked squarely at Dorrie and Mr. Manners.

"It's no good fooling ourselves, you fellows," he said quietly. "We're in a very nasty pickle."

"In plain language, we're in the soup up to our neck, eh?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"Not yet, Dorrie—but we may be unless we get over the border into Kurpana," replied Nelson Lee. "Every minute that we stay in this territory will be a minute of danger. The Ameer of Rishnir is no ordinary Eastern potentate. He is a man of extraordinary power—educated, wealthy, and relentless. His hatred of Britain and British is proverbial. If he gets us all into his clutches, there will be very little hope for us."

"But, man alive, he wouldn't dare to harm us, would he?" asked Mr. Manners blankly.

"Dare?" repeated Lee. "The Ameer of Rishnir has many times expressed contempt for Britain and all her might."

"Then the Ameer of Rishnir is a fool!" said Mr. Manners curtly.

"Ultimately, of course, he will be suppressed—he will be made to realise that he cannot do just as he pleases in India," said Nelson Lee. "But, for the moment, he is a very difficult problem. His country is hemmed in by mountain ranges, and all the advantages are on his side. He possesses wealth untold; it is said that he has trained armies, running into hundreds of thousands. His ambition is to conquer Kurpana; but Kurpana has been promised protection by Britain."





"Look!" gasped Handforth, pointing to a little clearing ahead. "We're being watched!" His two chums looked. And sure enough they saw a lurking brown figure disappear quickly among the undergrowth.

"Therefore, by striking at Kurpana, the Ameer will strike at Britain?" asked Dorrie.

"Yes," replied Lee. "That is why this ambitious man has hesitated. But I have every reason to believe that Rishnir is on the threshold of a mighty conflict."

"We seem to have dropped in at the right moment," murmured Dorrie.

"We could not have dropped in at a worse moment," replied Lee gruffly. "We must, of course, abandon the aeroplane. It will be rather a wrench for you, Manners, but there is no other course."

"I can see that," said Mr. Manners, with a sigh. "The poor old machine is quite helpless. We should need hundreds of men to extricate her from this fix. Even then she would have to be completely dismantled, and transported to level ground, from which we could take off. No; I'm afraid we must resign ourselves to abandoning the 'plane."

"Jolly hard lines on you, old man," said Dorrie sympathetically.

"On both of us, I think," replied Mr. Manners. "The loss is yours as well as mine, Dorrimore."

"Oh, rot!" growled his lordship. "The mere fact that I paid for the machine is of no importance. I've got more money than I can do with, anyhow."

"That's one way of looking at it," smiled Nelson Lee. "And we must all be thankful, I suppose, that we are alive."

Dorrie glanced out of one of the saloon windows.

"The crowd's coming back!" he remarked. "And, by the look of things, there's a bit of excitement on. They're all shouting and running like the very deuce."

"Perhaps we'd better go out," said Nelson Lee sharply. "I hope there has been no mishap."

"Oh, don't worry about them," said Dorrie. "You know what these boys and girls are; I expect they're excited over nothing."

"Well, it's just as well that they have returned," said Lee. "We must be thinking about making an early start—and this trip through the jungle will not be particularly enjoyable."

"How far do you think it is to the Kurpana border?" asked Mr. Manners.

"Well, according to our calculations, we must be thirty or forty miles from the Kurpana boundary line," said Nelson Lee. "And, in a country like this, it means hard going. My only hope is that we shall be able to avoid villages. For if we are seen the news will spread rapidly, and this is not such a wild and uncivilised country as one would imagine. The Ameer has a very perfect organisation of spies and—"

"Guv'nor!" shouted Nipper, suddenly appearing in the saloon doorway.

"Well, young 'un?" asked Lee, turning.

"What is it?"

"Do you know how far we are from Idar?"

"Idar?" repeated Lee. "The capital of Rishnir?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we must be at least seventy or eighty miles away from Idar," replied Lee.

"I rather wish we were seven or eight hundred miles away."

"Then you'd better prepare yourself for a shock, sir," said Nipper breathlessly. "We're not much more than eight or nine! Idar is only a short distance away, over in the neighbouring valley!"

"Good glory!" murmured Lord Dorrimore.

"What do you mean, Nipper?" demanded Lee. "How can you be so sure of this?"

"Because we've all been having a look at the place, sir!" replied Nipper. "We climbed to the top of the rising ground, and there, before us, was the wide valley. And Idar is in the distance, with its gleaming white buildings, its minarets, and——"

"You must be mistaken!" interrupted Lee. "You have been looking at some other city—which, in all conscience, is bad enough. I had been hoping that we were a very long way from the populated zones."

"But the place is the capital, sir!" declared Nipper. "We've seen the famous Idar Palace—nearly a thousand feet high, on the great crag!"

"Upon my soul!" muttered Lee, startled.

He knew, then, that there had been no blunder. There could be only one Idar Palace—only one building perched on the top of a great crag. If these boys and girls had seen this building, then it was obvious that the capital itself was within sight.

"Then my calculations must be wrong," said Lee slowly. "And if Idar is so near here, I am rather puzzled by this jungle. I should have thought that the country hereabouts would be cultivated——"

"Hallo!" broke in Dorrie keenly. "What on earth—Gad!"

He caught his breath in sharply as he stared through the window. He was looking beyond the group of boys and girls who were outside; he was looking into a bamboo thicket, some distance away. And there, for a moment, Lord Dorrimore had seen a lithe, brown figure.

Only for a moment had it appeared. It had stood rigid, watching; and then, stealthily, it had vanished!



## CHAPTER 6.

### Through the Jungle!

"WHAT is it, Dorrie?" asked Nelson Lee sharply.

"Nothin'!" replied his lordship. "I thought I saw—— Well, it doesn't matter!"

Nelson Lee was not deceived by Lord Dorrimore's tone; but he turned abruptly to Nipper, and his expression was now grave.

"Go and tell all the boys and girls to get together, Nipper," he said briskly. "We must make an early start, and there might be a certain amount of danger. So it is very important that there should be no stragglers. Be particularly insistent with Handforth."

"You bet I will, gov'nor," said Nipper. "We all know what an obstinate blighter Handy is. If necessary, we'll rope him up and gag him."

He disappeared, and Lee turned back to Dorrie and Mr. Manners.

"What did you see, old man?" asked Lee.

"Eh? Why, I thought—— Oh, well, it's no good tryin' to throw dust into your eyes, is it?" growled his lordship. "I didn't see much, though. Only a figure skulking behind the bamboos."

"A figure? What kind of a figure?"

"I didn't see it very clearly—it was gone in a flash," said Dorrie. "But it was a native, anyhow. One of these hill tribesmen, by the look of them. Brown, and half-naked."

Nelson Lee compressed his lips.

"I was afraid of it!" he muttered. "It was sheer folly to hope that we could get away from here unobserved. There's going to be some big trouble soon, Dorrie. And with all these boys and girls——"

"You needn't worry about them," interrupted Mr. Manners. "They'll probably enjoy themselves, in spite of the perils. My own daughter is amongst them, but I am not concerned about her. She's not afraid of a little hardship."

"That's one way of looking at it, anyhow," smiled Dorrie. "And if we *do* have a scrap with the Ameer's crowd, we shan't come to much harm. Hang it, Lee, they wouldn't dare to injure any of us."

"Whether they would harm us or not, the prospect of being captured by the Ameer is not pleasant," said Lee. "It might mean an endless sojourn in one of the Idar prisons, accompanied by interminable negotiations with the British authorities. It is possible that we should be held for months and months. And the Ameer would have rather a strong case for holding us, since we are intruders in this country."

"Yes, and he'll probably guess that we came in search of Hussi Kahn," said Mr. Manners thoughtfully. "That will be another reason for extreme measures on his part."

"I am afraid our search for Hussi Kahn has been a failure," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We have now our own troubles. Still, if only we can reach the Kurpana border, all might yet be well. I am not giving up hope of rescuing Hussi Kahn."

During the next half-hour there was a good deal of bustle and preparation. The Wanderer's food supplies were not large, but what there was of it might prove useful: and, fortunately, a good deal of the stuff consisted of concentrated foods—such as meat extract tablets, chocolates, malted milk, and so forth.

All the stuff was divided and distributed, and it was so compact that it was capable of being stowed away in the fellows' pockets.

The girls had brought spare clothing with them, and quite a number of the juniors, too, had been allowed to carry a second suit, and, of course, changes of linen, etc. All these articles were made into neat bundles, and they were carried as knapsacks.

Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee and Mr. Manners removed a good many of the aero-

plane's valuable instruments, and these, too, were carried. They might come in useful later. Every available bottle was filled with water; metal cans, too, were taken from the machine, and filled. For water was the most precious of all things. There was no guarantee that the adventurers would strike a stream during their journey, and without water they would indeed be lost.

At the end of an hour everything was ready.

"Now, all you youngsters, just a word before we start," said Nelson Lee, as they all stood in the shade of the great crippled plane. "This is not going to be a picnic. We've got a hard march ahead of us, and one of the most important things is that we should stick together. There mustn't be any straggling."

"We'll obey orders, sir!" said Travers promptly.

"This won't be like an ordinary trek," continued Lee. "Remember, we have no carriers—no servants of any kind. We shall only snatch what meals we can. Fortunately, both Dorrie and myself have rifles and revolvers. It was an excellent idea to bring some firearms along. If possible, we'll shoot our meals; but if nothing comes our way, we shall be forced to fall back upon the concentrated stuff that we are carrying. And when night comes our camp will necessarily be rough-and-ready."

"We're not grumbling, sir," said Fullwood. "And we're not scared, either!"

"Good gad, no!"

"We're all game, sir!"

And the girls' voices were as loud as any of the fellows'.

"That's the spirit!" smiled Nelson Lee, with a nod. "Well, we're all ready, I think. I'll lead the way, Dorrie, if you don't mind."

"Any old thing," said his lordship. "Go ahead!"

"I suggest that you, Manners, should march in the centre of the column—and you, Dorrie, will bring up the rear."

"Aren't you going to have a look at the Idar crag sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"It would be an unnecessary waste of time, young 'un," replied Lee. "We know just where we are, and as we are carrying a compass and other instruments, I do not think there is much danger that we shall get out of our course. We shall pass through jungle country for a good few miles, and then rise into the hills. After that, the going will be harder, since we have to conquer the mountains which divide Rishnir from Kurpana. But once beyond those mountains, we shall be in a friendly country."

Nelson Lee thought it unnecessary to go into any details regarding distances. He did not believe, for a moment, that they would ever reach the mountains; but why tell this to the crowd?

Five minutes later they had started—marching through the jungle in a long column.



## CHAPTER 7.

## Elephants!

"GOOD gad!"

Archie Glenthorne muttered the exclamation under his breath. He came to a momentary halt, and he adjusted his eyeglass. Marjorie Temple, who was beside him, gave him an inquiring glance.

"What is it, Archie?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, rather!" said Archie, with a start. "Absolutely! Possibly a trick of the good old eyesight, but I could have sworn that I saw a foul-looking blighter dodging about in the offing."

"Do you mean a native?" asked Marjorie quickly.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "One of those dashed Dacoits, or whatever the chappies are. A sort of turbaned cove, without any clobber above his waist, as it were. A brown-looking blighter."

Some of the other fellows had heard Archie's words, and they all looked about them keenly. At the moment, they were passing through a patch of rank grass. It was very tall, and there were bamboo thickets in the distance. Overhead, the sun blazed down with insistent force.

"You must have been mistaken, Archie," said Jimmy Potts. "This jungle is uninhabited, except by animals."

All the same, the juniors and the girls, from that minute onwards, kept their eyes very much open. They could not help feeling that they were being watched; that there were enemies all about them.

Right ahead, Nelson Lee was leading the column, his rifle ready. Lord Dorrimore brought up the rear, and he, too, was just as much on the alert.

The Wanderer of the Skies had long since been left behind. Mr. Manners had said very little, but it had been a great wrench for him. Yet he knew very well that no other course had been open to them. At all costs, they must get out of Rishnir—they must penetrate into friendly country. Every minute in this territory was a minute of peril.

At times it was impossible for the armed men to keep their eyes on the whole column. When they plunged into the dense trees and the undergrowth, there were periods when Dorrie could only see one or two figures just ahead of him. The rest of the column had vanished right into the trees, twisting and winding—and always following Nelson Lee, who was blazing the trail.

At first, the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls had thought it rather good fun. They had been hoping for some excitement, and they were getting it. But as the morning advanced, they discovered that this "fun" was not quite so enjoyable.

They were beginning to ache; they were thirsty and hungry; and they were per-

spiring from head to foot. The heat was stifling, and almost every inch of the ground had to be conquered. It was not like walking over the calm English countryside.

Creepers barred their progress, tangled undergrowth had to be overcome; and, always, they could hear the noises of the wild things of the jungle.

Once, Nelson Lee paused in some alarm. He had seen unmistakable indications of elephants. The spoor was quite fresh, and Lee was convinced that Lord Dorrimore would spot it, too. But he said nothing.

These elephants were wild—and, by the look of things, a herd was roaming about somewhere in the district. Lee fervently prayed that they would not encounter it. For a herd of wild elephants in the Indian jungle is not a pleasant thing to come across.

And then, too, there was the certain knowledge that their march was being observed by human eyes. More than once Nelson Lee had seen a stealthy parting of the undergrowth; he had caught a glimpse of watching eyes. But there was nothing to be done except to march onwards.

"Phew! When do we take a rest?" murmured Church, as he mopped his brow.

"Rest?" repeated Handforth. "You silly ass! You're not getting tired, are you?"

"I'm hot!" said Church.

"We're all hot, if it comes to that!" growled Handforth. "What else do you expect in a climate like this? We've got to keep on marching until we're in Kurpana."

"At that rate, we shall have a pretty long march, Handy," said McClure. "It'll take us two or three days to get to the border."

The chums of Study D were marching in a little group near the centre of the column. At the moment they were separated from the others, for the going was hard.

"In my opinion, the whole thing is a bit of a swindle," continued Handforth. "I rather thought that we were going to meet leopards and jaguars."

"There aren't any jaguars in India," growled Church. "Or, if there are, I hope we don't meet any! Perhaps you're thinking about panthers?"

"Well, aren't panthers the same as jaguars?"

"Well, they all belong to the cat family, I think," said Church. "But panthers are only found in the New World. Or is it jaguars that are only found in the New World?"

"Who cares?" said Handforth. "Snakes, too. Why haven't we seen any snakes yet? I've always understood that tens of thousands of people are killed every year through being bitten by snakes in India. And yet we've been marching for hours, and we haven't seen one!"

"A jolly good thing, too!" said McClure.

"Rot! There's no excitement or interest unless we have a scrap or two with the wild things," said Handforth. "Now, if we suddenly came upon a good hefty snake, there might be—"

He broke off, catching his breath in sharply. He had been looking across a little open space, towards a tangle of undergrowth and bamboo. And, without question, he saw several pairs of eyes. He saw one or two lithe brown figures.

"Look!" he ejaculated, pointing. "There's somebody there! Old Archie must have been right! We're being watched!"

"Where?" gasped Church, staring.

Handforth pointed. His chums saw, for a flash, the brown figures. Then the undergrowth closed up, and those watching eyes vanished.

"My only sainted aunt!" muttered McClure. "There's something fishy about this, you chaps! These enemies must be all round us. They're following us all the time—they're keeping pace with us. Why don't they charge, and make an attack?"

"That's just what I've been thinking," said Church. "It's awful—feeling that they're round us! It would be a lot better if they put us out of suspense by making a sudden— Hi! Where are you going, Handy? Come back, you idiot!"

Handforth had left the column, and he was plunging through the tall, rank grass.

"Shan't be a minute!" he sang out. "I want to have a closer look at those merchants!"

"Come back!" shouted Church. "You know what Mr. Lee told us!"

"But I shan't be a tick!" said Edward Oswald.

Church and McClure looked at one another with alarm and exasperation. It was just like Handforth to rush off in that manner—at a second's notice, before he could be stopped. And, of course, there was only one thing to be done.

"Hi, there!" roared Church, shouting towards the other members of the column. "Stop, everybody! Handy has dodged off!"

Without waiting for anything else, Church and McClure raced after their leader. Their expressions were grim. They intended to drag him back by force—to knock him silly if he resisted. There was no time for gentle measures!



## CHAPTER 8.

### In Deadly Peril!

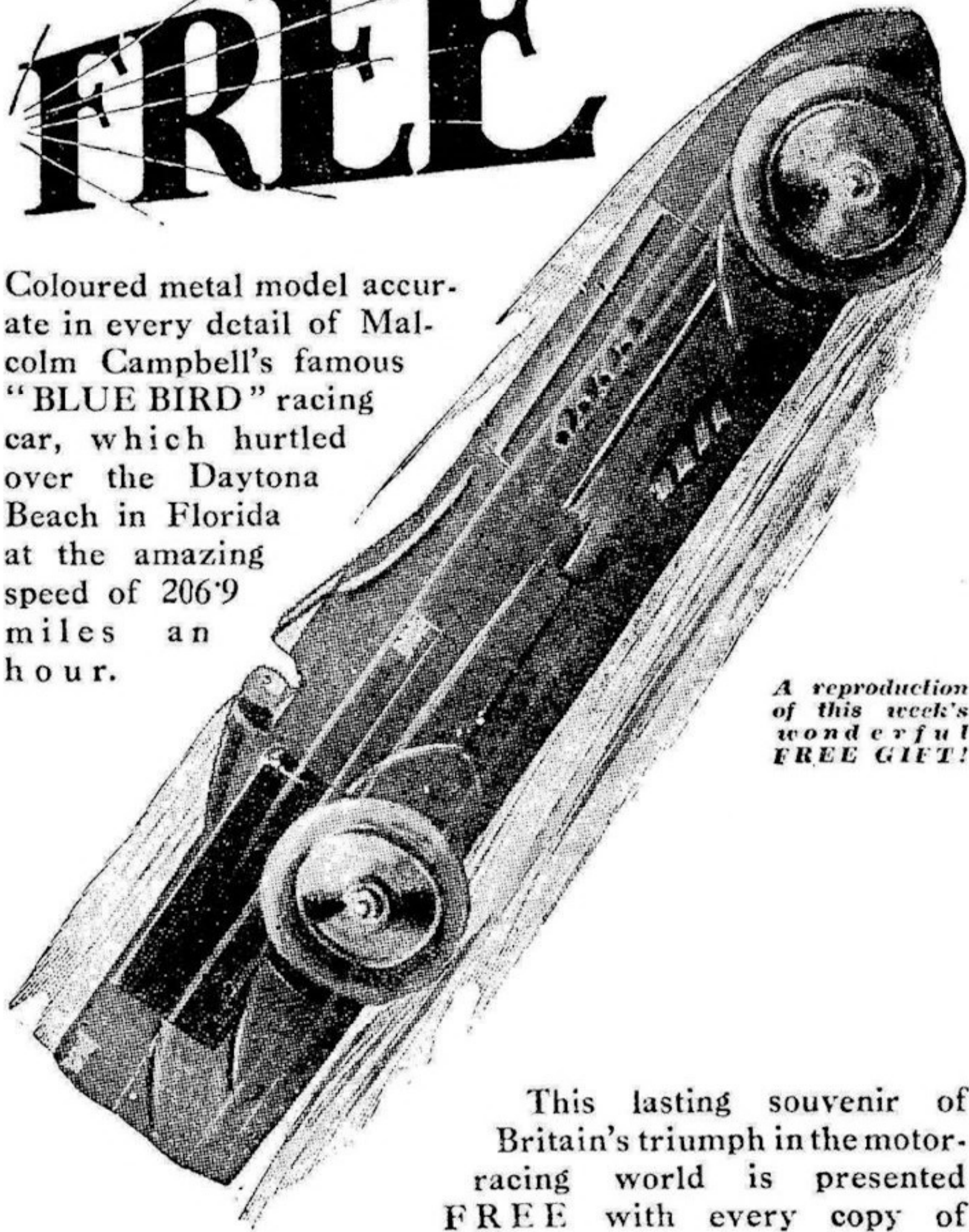
EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was celebrated for his impulsive actions.

At the present moment he had not thought about the rest of the column. He wanted to have a closer look at those brown figures—and, indeed, he had an idea of fighting them. He wanted to know what they meant by lurking about in that sinister fashion. And, single-handed, he charged to the attack.

(Continued on page 14.)

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(Continued from page 12.)

It wasn't that he ignored Nelson Lee's instructions. He forgot all about them. He was excited, and the prospect of a scrap generally made him forget everything else.

But he was due for a disappointment.

For, when he arrived at the spot where the figures had been, there was no sign of them. He plunged on, fighting his way through the tangle. But he was quite alone; there were no brown figures now. There were no watching eyes, no indications whatever that human beings had been there.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, coming to a halt and mopping his brow.

Then he started. Close at hand he could hear the crackling of twigs, the moving of some big body. Then, to his startled amazement, he beheld an elephant. The great animal lumbered towards him, then started back, giving vent to a shrill trumpeting sound.

"Oh, my hat!" said Handforth.

The elephant turned, and went thundering off, the trees and the bushes crashing noisily. While Handforth was still staring, Church and McClure came upon him from behind. He swung round as he heard them approach.

"By George!" he shouted. "So you've been stalking me, have you? I'll— Eh? You—you silly asses! I thought you were Indians!"

"It doesn't make much difference, Handy—we're just as dangerous!" said Church furiously. "You hulking great fathead!"

"Look here—"

"You brainless lunatic!" roared Church. "You've no more sense than a snail!"

"If you talk to me like that again, Walter Church, I'll punch—"

"You'll punch nothing!" snapped Church. "You've disobeyed orders! Mr. Lee distinctly told all of us to keep to the column, and—"

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth, with a start. "I'd forgotten all about that!"

"Well, you know it now!" put in McClure. "Are you coming back quietly with us—or shall we brain you first? Understand, Handy we're not putting up with any of your nonsense!"

Handforth glared.

"What's this—mutiny?" he demanded.

"You can call it what you like—but you're coming back with us!" replied Church curtly. "And in future we'll keep you chained!"

Perhaps Handforth realised that he was at fault: and there was no fellow at St.

Frank's who was more ready to admit himself in the wrong than Handy. At all events, he uttered no protest, but started moving back through the dense jungle.

"It was those Indians we spotted!" he explained gruffly. "I came along to see what they were after."

"It's a wonder you weren't killed!" said Church. "They're enemies, don't forget!"

"Rats! They wouldn't dare to harm us!" said Handforth. "In any case, they weren't in war paint. They weren't wearing any feathers, or blankets, or anything!"

Church and McClure halted in their blank surprise.

"Feathers!" ejaculated Church, staring.

"Blankets!" gurgled McClure.

"Of course!" said Handforth. "Don't Indians wear feathers and blankets?"

"Not these Indians, you howling idiot!" roared Church. "They're not Red Indians!"

"Eh? Oh, by George!" said Handforth, looking sheepish. "I'd forgotten for the minute!"

"Oh, you're hopeless!" snapped Church.

"Listen!" said Handforth, with a queer note in his voice. "What's—what's all that din? Can't you hear something, you chaps?"

They all stood still, listening intently. Startled expressions sprang into their eyes. A kind of thunder was rolling in the distance, and the very ground was shaking and quivering.

"Thunder!" said Church breathlessly.

"Not likely!" exclaimed Handforth. "It's an earthquake! Can't you feel the ground shaking?"

And then McClure pointed.

"Look!" he yelled. "Elephants! Hundreds of 'em! And they're coming this way!"

They stared, fascinated.

Possibly Handforth had disturbed the herd. At all events, there could be no doubt as to the herd that was now approaching. There were scores of the great animals—wild, untamed elephants of the jungle. They were sweeping along in a kind of panic. Perhaps they had scented the human beings, and were alarmed.

What the actual explanation was mattered little. It was enough for Handforth & Co. to know that this great herd of wild elephants was sweeping onwards towards them—trumpeting and bellowing. And the three juniors stood right in the path of the oncoming mass!

"Run!" gasped Church suddenly. "We shall be killed, Handy! In another two minutes there'll be no hope for us! They'll trample us to death!"

"Oh, corks!" gurgled Handforth.

He turned to run, but some sort of instinct warned him that this would be useless. Never could they out-distance those charging monsters. Within a minute they would be overtaken—trampled to death.

"Quick! Up this tree!" roared Handforth, with inspiration. "You go first, Mac! Now, then, Churchy! Up you go! Look alive!"

Fortunately, there was a big tree close at hand, and, with the agility of monkeys, Handforth & Co. swarmed up the trunk, reached the branches, and then scrambled higher and higher,



## CHAPTER 9.

## A Narrow Shave!

**I**N a veritable stampede the elephants charged on. Handforth & Co., perched high in the tree, with their hearts nearly in their mouths, stared down fascinatedly.

Would they escape?

Would the herd go past, leaving them unharmed? It was a fateful moment.

The leading animals went tearing by, their great feet thundering and thudding on the ground. The whole atmosphere around Handforth & Co. became heavy with the odour of the great beasts.

Thud!

One of the biggest elephants struck against the tree as he passed, and Church was nearly thrown from his hold. Handforth and McClure managed to cling on, and Church just recovered his grip in the nick of time.

"It's all right—we're safe!" panted Handforth. "By George! I was hoping to see a few elephants, but I'm jiggered if I thought we should get 'em by the gross!"

"Oh, my hat!" shouted Mac suddenly. "Look down there! That brute has spotted us!"

Over two-thirds of the herd had lumbered past, but now one huge elephant—an old bull, by the look of him—had come to a halt near the tree, and he was creating a tremendous noise. The three juniors could see him looking up; they could detect the evil glint in his little eyes.

"Look out!" shouted Handforth. "He means mischief!"

There wasn't the slightest doubt of it.

The great elephant—one of the largest the juniors had ever seen—charged at the tree, and he seized it with his trunk. In a moment, the tree was being swayed to and fro as though a cyclone had struck it.

In that perilous moment, Handforth caught a glimpse of figures some little distance away. From this elevated position, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore could be seen. But it was impossible for them to approach, owing to the proximity of the herd. Fortunately, the animals were all thundering away in the opposite direction to the now disorganised column.

And after that Handforth was too busy to see exactly what was happening. He was clinging for dear life to the tree, and Church and McClure were equally hard at work.

The elephant was conquering; his enormous strength was winning the battle. The tree

was bending like a sapling, and there was the crashing and crackling of wood filling the air.

Cra-a-a-ash!

Suddenly, the tree snapped like a carrot. Over it went, and Handforth & Co., high up in the branches, felt that their last moment had come. They had a vision of being seized by the elephant, one after the other, and they could already feel themselves being tossed into the air, and sent crashing to their deaths.

All this in a flash.

Then came other sounds.

Crack! Crack!

They were the sounds of rifle-shots. Not that rifles such as Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were carrying were of much use against an elephant. But the two men were doing their best.

Splash! Splash! Splash!

If Handforth and Church and McClure had been alarmed a second earlier, they were now filled with amazement. For as the great tree struck the ground they were jerked from their hold, and they went crashing through the foliage, stunned and dazed. If they thought anything at all just then, they thought that they were going to be battered to death on the ground.

Instead, they found themselves plunging in water, and when they came to the surface they were practically unhurt, except for a few scratches and bruises. Handforth was swimming wildly, and as he gurgled and gasped he saw his chums near by.

"Oh, my goodness!" he panted. "What happened?"

"We're safe, anyway!" gasped Church.

And then they knew how they had been saved. The tree had fallen towards this hidden stream—a deep, slow-flowing river which was almost concealed in the jungle.

As the tree had struck the ground, the three juniors had been flung out, and they had all fallen into the water. It was an extraordinarily lucky escape.

One after the other, they scrambled to the bank and pulled themselves out, and they were grateful for the fact that there was no sign of the great elephant. He, in all probability, had been scared off, startled by the rifle-shots—or, possibly, startled by the falling of the tree.

"We ought to be dead!" said Church shakily. "I can't understand it, even now!"

"We should have been dead if we hadn't climbed into that tree!" said Handforth.

"And don't forget that it was my idea——"

"And we're not forgetting, either, that we shouldn't have been in any danger if you hadn't left the column!" put in McClure tartly. "Oh, crumbs! It's the narrowest shave we've ever had!"

Handforth picked up a long reed-like stick which was standing close at hand, amid the bushes.

"Well, I'm not going to be taken unawares again!" he said. "This stick ought to make a fairly good weapon. It won't take me five minutes to convert it into a business-like spear!"

Church and McClure watched him in astonishment. Soaked as he was, and barely recovered from the recent shock, he pulled out his pocket-knife, and sharpened the point of the stick until it was like a needle.

"There you are!" said Handforth. "That's better! If anything else attacks us, I shall be ready!"

"Handy—Handy!"

A hail came from the distance, and the chums of Study D started round.

"Church! McClure!" came the shouts.

"Here we are!" roared Handforth. "It's all right, you fellows! We're safe! And we've found some water, too!"

A minute later, Nelson Lee and Dorrie and most of the others came swarming round. There were many exclamations of relief when it was seen that Handforth & Co. were safe.

"You reckless young rascals!" said Lee, his anger getting the better of his relief.

"It wasn't our fault, sir!" protested Church. "We only chased after Handforth! He'd have lost himself if we hadn't—"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I knew what I was doing!"

"Oh, let's forgive 'em, Lee!" chuckled Lord Dorrimore. "They're safe, anyway—and that's the main thing."

Within five minutes the column was on the march again, and Handforth, for the moment, was satisfied.

He had been longing for some excitement—and he had had some.

But it was noticed that not only Church and McClure kept near him, but Mr. Manners, too. Handforth was not to be given another opportunity of dodging off!

And so the march through the jungle continued. And, at intervals, one member of the party or another would catch a momentary glimpse of a brown figure in the distance.

Yet, strangely enough, the natives never once came near. They were watching these strangers—keeping in close touch with them.

There was something grim and deadly about this situation!



## CHAPTER 10.

### Great Snakes!

As they progressed, the sense of being surrounded grew stronger and stronger.

They felt that they were being continuously watched; that at any moment an attack might develop. Yet, when they came to regard the thing in the cold light of reason, they rather wondered at their fears.

Why should they be attacked?

And by whom? The Ameer of Rishnir was known to be anti-British, but he would be a rash man, indeed, if he allowed any of his tribesmen of these wilder districts to beset and attack such an innocent party. At the

very worst, the Ameer could do no more than seize them and hold them until the British authorities arranged for their rescue.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners, knowing this, were not particularly worried. There was always the chance that capture might come, but even this would not mean any real danger. At the very worst, it could only lead to inconvenience and delay.

Some of the juniors, of course, took a different view.

Handforth, for example, was quite ready to believe that the inhabitants of these regions were wild savages, little better than the headhunters of Papua. He expected poisoned arrows to be directed at them; he was half hoping that a yelling mob of savages would appear out of the jungle, and show fight. For Handforth was rather anxious for a fight; he considered that any sojourn in the wild was a swindle unless there were a good few battles with the natives.

A halt was called after another hour's marching, and a meal was indulged in. Some of the concentrated foods were eaten, and a clear running stream provided the party with plenty of fresh, cool drinking water.

Then they continued onwards again, going deeper and deeper into the jungle.

As they progressed the heat grew more oppressive. It was rather swampy here, and progress was slow, owing to the interminable creepers and undergrowth. In places, the whole jungle was steaming with moist heat. And the experienced eyes of Nelson Lee and Dorrie spotted more than one trace of wild animals.

From time to time, too, a sign would come, proving that the party was still being watched—still being followed. Yet none of these lurking natives ever came out into the open. They remained skulking behind the trees, only giving an occasional glimpse of themselves.

"I thought these jungles were full of tigers and things," remarked Handforth, after a while. "Yet we haven't seen a tiger, or even a leopard."

"Aren't you satisfied with the herd of elephants?" demanded Church, with some sarcasm.

"In all the stories I've read about India, chaps are in danger of their lives from man-eating tigers," said Handforth. "And what about snakes? We've been marching all this time, and we haven't seen a trace of a snake!"

"A jolly good thing, too!" remarked Irene. "I'm not keen on seeing snakes, Ted."

"Oh, well, I thought it would be interesting, you know," said Handforth. "It doesn't seem to be the real thing unless—"

"Go easy here, all of you!" came a hail from Nelson Lee, some distance ahead. "The ground's very swampy here—and we shall have to go carefully."

They were fighting their way through a dense thicket, where the sun could not pene-





An anguished cry came from Church. He was staring fascinatedly at his forearm. "Something bit me!" he panted huskily. "The snake!" cried Irene, in horror. "Oh, look—look!" And there, quite close to Church, was the wriggling form of a snake!

trate. It was swelteringly hot, and there were millions of insects, too.

Suddenly a little gasp came from Mary Summers, who was immediately behind Handforth & Co. Nipper, who was beside her, turned sharply.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Look!" whispered Mary breathlessly.

She pointed, and Nipper stiffened. There, not three yards away, and rearing its head menacingly, was a fairly large snake. The others might easily have passed it by without noticing, for it was of very much the same colour as the vegetation.

"Look out, there!" shouted Nipper. "Mind how you go! This snake looks dangerous!"

"Snake!" ejaculated Handforth, whirling his pointed stick. "Where? Let me get at it!"

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" gasped Church. "Come back, you idiot!"

But Handforth was dashing forward, intent on giving the snake its death-blow. The creature itself was probably disturbed by all the noise, for it glided off into the undergrowth.

"Come back, Handy!" urged Church, as the leader of Study D plunged on.

"Not until I've killed this giddy snake!" replied Handforth.

Church, McClure, Nipper, and Travers ran after Handforth and seized him.

"Hi, what the——" he began.

"That's about enough, old man!" said Nipper gruffly. "You're fond of looking for trouble, I know, but this time we're not going to let you find any!"

Handforth tried to swing round, bubbling with indignation. But, before he could utter a word, a sharp, anguished cry came from Church. He was staring fascinatedly at his forearm.

"Something bit me!" he panted huskily.

"The snake!" cried Irene, in horror. "Oh, look—look!"

And there, quite close to Church, was the snake itself. At the same instant a shot rang out, and the reptile vanished amid the grasses, wriggling convulsively.

Nelson Lee strode in amongst the boys and girls.

"Church!" he said sharply. "Let me see!"

"By George! That was a wonderful shot of yours, sir!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "You killed it first pop!"

"Never mind that!" said Lee. "It was very foolish of you, Handforth, to penetrate into this thicket. Church, show me your arm!"

Trembling, Church held out his forearm, and Nelson Lee compressed his lips. There was a distinct puncture on the junior's skin, and a spot of blood was oozing forth.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth blankly. "I didn't realise—Churchy! Are you bitter? Oh, Churchy, old man! I—I didn't know—"

"It's all right!" muttered Church. "I expect Mr. Lee will be able to do something for me!"

But his voice was unsteady, and all the other St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls stood round, pale and agitated. Church had been bitten!



## CHAPTER 11.

### A Quick Recovery!

**C**HURCH, in spite of his perspiration, was looking pale and drawn.

Lord Dorrimore had come up, and he held the unfortunate junior whilst Nelson Lee rapidly took out a small medicine case—a kind of large pocket-book, containing numerous tiny phials.

"What sort of snake was it, sir?" asked Nipper tensely.

Nelson Lee did not reply. He had paused in his work, and now he was closely examining the puncture on Church's arm. He sniffed at it, even, and then a puzzled frown came over his face.

"Strange!" he muttered. "Look, Dorrie."

"Very rummy!" declared Lord Dorrimore, nodding.

"But why don't you do something, sir?" burst out Handforth. "Isn't it usual to apply a tourniquet, to stop the blood? Let me suck the poison out, sir! I don't mind—"

"Steady, young 'un—steady!" said Lee quietly. "There is no need to get excited. You are not in very much pain, are you, Church?"

"Not much, sir," muttered Church.

"Is this puncture throbbing at all?"

"I—I don't think so, sir."

"Did you actually see the snake bite you?"

"No, sir," said Church. "It attacked me from behind. I was breaking through the grass and the undergrowth when I felt the sting of it. I whipped round, but the snake had moved aside, quite a good way—"

"And where was Handforth?"

"Just behind me."

"Indeed!" said Lee slowly. "Handforth was just behind you—eh? Did you see the snake bite Church, Handforth?"

"No, sir," said Handforth, looking puzzled.

"Well, the snake's dead, and I really think, Church, that you will come to no harm," said Lee dryly. "However, we will just put a little iodine on the wound, as a safeguard. After all, it is only a very small puncture."

Handforth and Nipper and the others looked amazed.

"Iodine, sir!" shouted Handforth. "But that's no good as a cure for a snake bite!"

Nelson Lee gave the wound another examination. It was a very tiny spot, and no further blood had oozed out. But there was a trace of yellowish gummy fluid round the puncture.

"There you are—that's the poison!" said Handforth excitedly. "Oh, why can't you do something, sir? You know jolly well that snake poisons are awful! Within half an hour Churchy will be writhing in agony—"

"Don't you believe it, young man!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "And you had better throw that stick away."

"Stick?" repeated Handforth, looking dazed.

"Yes, my lad!" replied Lee. "You are evidently very dangerous when you are walking behind people."

Church gave a violent start.

"My only sainted aunt!" he ejaculated. "Do—do you mean that I wasn't bitten by a snake at all, sir? Do you mean that I only received a jab from Handy's stick?"

"Look at this!" replied Nelson Lee, seizing the pointed end of Handforth's stick, and showing it to the victim. "Now do you understand, my boy?"

The end of that stick was coated with a yellowish, gummy ooze—sap which the wood was exuding.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church, with a deep breath of relief.

"It so happens that this particular gum is very antiseptic," smiled Nelson Lee. "It has excellent healing properties, but a touch of iodine will do no harm. You needn't worry, Church; you are not injured. This prick will be forgotten within half an hour."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The expression on Handforth's face was so funny that all the other juniors and girls were compelled to roar with laughter. They were relieved, too; and laughter was an excellent outlet for their feelings.

"Good old Handy!" chuckled Travers. "We can always rely upon him to create a diversion."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He jabbed poor old Church with his giddy stick, and we all thought that Churchy had been bitten by a snake!" grinned Fullwood. "Oh, Handy! You're a scream!"

Handforth turned red as he threw the stick away.

"How the dickens was I to know?" he demanded. "If Church had had any sense, he would have known the truth. I don't suppose I gave him more than a pin-prick."

"Well, that was quite enough, old son—with snakes about," said Nipper. "When Church looked round, and saw that snake wriggling off, he naturally jumped to conclusions."

After the column had been reorganised, the march was continued. And there were many chuckles over the snake incident.

But from that minute onwards they all kept their eyes well open—on the look-out for further dangers.

After another hour's march, they left the thick jungle country behind and came out into more open ground. There was a vista of long slopes ahead of them leading upwards into the hills, with clumps of trees here and there, and with long grasses underfoot.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie, at least, were very glad of this open ground, for it enabled them to see for quite a long distance. They no longer had that sensation of being hemmed in.

Of the dark-skinned watchers there was no further trace. It seemed, indeed, as though everything was going well. They were getting farther and farther away from Idar, and nearer and nearer to the Kurpana border—and to safety.



## CHAPTER 12.

### The Surprise!

"WELL, well!" said Vivian Travers mildly.

And he pointed as two or three of his companions looked at him inquiringly.

"Telegraph wires, unless I'm very much mistaken, dear old fellows," he murmured.

"Great Scott!" said Jimmy Potts, staring. "I can't believe— And yet— They are telegraph wires!"

Most of the fellows and girls were very greatly surprised. They had believed themselves to be in a wild, uninhabited region.

For a further two hours they had marched, leaving the jungle country well behind. They had been rising all the time, and the ground was now much more open. Skirting round hills, and passing through rocky valleys, they had progressed, and never once had they seen any sign of a human being. Not once had they beheld a human habitation.

But now, on rounding one of the numerous hills, they beheld a long line of telegraph posts in the far distance, winding their way round a neighbouring slope.

"I can't see anything rummy about it," remarked Handforth. "Why shouldn't there be telegraph wires?"

"No reason at all, old man," replied Nipper. "But we were hardly expecting any such evidence of civilisation. I don't think the gov'nor quite likes it."

"Why not?" asked Mary Summers. "Isn't it a good sign? Surely it means that we are approaching a region that isn't so wild?"

"Exactly!" said Nipper. "Unfortunately, it happens to be in Rishnir. We want to avoid all civilised regions in Rishnir, old girl. The sooner we're over these mountains, the better. And it's going to be a long, long trail. We're still a great distance from Kurpana."

Lord Dorrimore had joined Nelson Lee at the head of the column—for there was no longer any necessity to provide a rear-guard. Both he and Lee were looking worried.

"There's probably a road alongside those telegraph wires, Dorrie," Nelson Lee was saying. "And, if there's a road, it proves that our course is taking us between two important Rishnir towns."

"Idar is probably one of them," remarked Dorrie.

"Yes," said Lee. "I don't think we can do better than cut straight across this telegraph route and get into the hills beyond. As you see, the ground continues to rise all the while, and once we are well into the hills we may be comparatively safe."

"You don't speak very confidently."

"I cannot do so—because I am not confident," replied Lee. "I don't suppose for a minute, Dorrie, that we shall get out of Rishnir in safety. It is almost inevitable that we shall be held up by the Ameer's subjects."

"But we've only been seen, so far, by the half-savage inhabitants of the jungle country," remarked Lord Dorrimore. "It's quite on the cards that they won't make any report; and, judging by the fact that they did not attack us, they were probably only following us out of curiosity. Personally, I'm by no means pessimistic."

Nelson Lee made no comment, and the march proceeded. In due course, they climbed a steep hillside, with the telegraph wires immediately in front of them. The endless succession of posts wound their way round the hillside, and it was not until the party had got quite close to the wires that they made another discovery.

For here there was a wide, well-made road.

Even Nelson Lee was surprised. He had expected a road of some kind—a dusty sort of trail, full of boulders and holes. Instead, he beheld a wide, splendidly-built concrete highway, equal to any of the main roads of England.

"Well, by glory!" said Lord Dorrimore. "The Ameer believes in doing things thoroughly, Lee! This is a splendid road!"

"The Ameer is a man of modern progressive ideas," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "It is said that Idar is full of European improvements. During the past ten years a complete transformation has taken place, and Idar, instead of being a sleepy, Eastern city, has become a teeming hive of Western activity."

"Perhaps we shall see the city for ourselves," said Dorrie.

"Perhaps so—but I hope not," replied Lee. "I am far more interested in Sakri, the capital of Kurpana."

By this time the whole party had climbed on to the highway, and they stood there, taking a little breather, for the ascent had been difficult.

In one direction they could look down the great road for nearly two miles, but, in the other direction, it curved sharply round the hill, and there was little to be seen.

"I'm sorry, young 'uns, but we can't stay here," called Nelson Lee. "We must continue onwards—up this hillside."

"Aren't we going to follow this road, sir?" asked Handforth.

"I'm afraid not."

"But it'll be much easier going, sir."

"No doubt," smiled Lee. "But our direction lies straight ahead, over these hills—"

"Great glory!" ejaculated Dorrie abruptly. "Listen! What's that?"

Everybody stood stock still. It seemed to them that they heard the quiet purring of a motor-car engine. The very next second all doubts were set at rest.

For round the curve of the highway came four glittering automobiles, one after the other; and they were filled with brown-skinned men in gaily-coloured uniforms!

"Soldiers!" shouted Castleton excitedly.

Nelson Lee compressed his lips.

"The Ameer's guard!" he muttered.

"Dorrie, old man, it's come rather sooner than I had expected!"



## CHAPTER 13.

### Prisoners of The Ameer!

**L**ORD DORRIMORE gripped his rifle.

"Can't we put up a fight?" he asked tensely.

"A fight!" echoed Nelson Lee. "Man alive, what are you talking about? What chance should we have? Besides, it would be an act of sheer folly to fire on these soldiers. Our policy is to remain peaceful. We must only show fight if we are attacked."

"Yes, you're right!" nodded his lordship. "It would be madness for us to start any trouble."

Before the St. Frank's fellows could get over their initial astonishment, the four big automobiles came to a standstill close by, and the gaily-coloured soldiers leaped out. It was clear that they had been waiting round that bend of the hillside—waiting for hours, perhaps, watching the steady, slow progress of the British party.

None of the boys or girls felt alarmed. Their chief emotion was curiosity. They gazed with intense interest at these men of Rishnir.

They were so different from what the imagination had pictured.

The juniors had known, of course, that all the inhabitants of Rishnir were not semi-naked tribesmen, such as had been seen in the jungle. There were many towns—big towns—in this great territory. But the juniors had pictured the inhabitants of these towns as picturesque men of the East, with sashes and turbans—and, of course, with bare feet.

The reality was so very different.

These Rishnir soldiers, at all events, were equipped as completely as any Western army. They were well shod, they wore breeches with neat puttees; their tunics were well-fitting, with glistening metal belts, and they all wore helmets, with impressive spikes projecting upwards from the centre.

Although they were armed with useful-looking service rifles, they had made no attempt to make use of them. At a word of command, the soldiers formed up in a neat double line on the concrete highway.

While they were doing this three more big cars came into view round the bend of the hillside. These three cars were quite empty, except for the drivers.

"Well I'm blowed!" said Handforth, scratching his head. "They're not savages at all!"

"Dry up, ass!" muttered Church. "They'll hear you!"

"Supposing they do?" said Handforth. "They can't understand English, can they? Didn't you hear the officer jabbering in his own lingo just now?"

"They look a fine body of men!" remarked Irene approvingly.

Handforth grunted.

"Well, not so bad!" he admitted, in a grudging tone.

All the soldiers, in fact, were well built and sturdy; their brown skins were eloquent of good health and fitness, and they were all clean-shaven.

The officer in command was attired in a much more gorgeous uniform than his men. His spiked helmet was encrusted with glittering metal ornaments, and he was tall and upright and refined.

Having seen that his men were lined up to his satisfaction, he approached Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners, who had automatically grouped themselves in front of the main party of boys and girls. Butler, the steward of the Wanderer of the Skies, and Mrs. Tibbs, the stewardess, stood apart, watching wonderingly.

"Gentlemen, I must request you to surrender your weapons," said the officer steadily.

He spoke English that was well nigh perfect; only the faintest trace of an accent could be detected.

"There you are!" whispered Church. "What did I tell you, Handy? That officer must have heard all you said!"

"Well I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Handforth in amazement. "He's talking in English, you know! Here—in this heathen country!"

"Heathen country be dashed!" said Fullwood. "When will you realise, Handy, that India is a kind of continent of its own—with all sorts and conditions of men to make up its population? Hundreds and thousands of Indians are cultured, educated gentlemen."

"So it seems!" nodded Handforth. "I'm learning things!"

In the meantime, Nelson Lee and the others had willingly surrendered their weapons. There was nothing else to be done. Dorrie, perhaps, hesitated for a moment, but a glance from Nelson Lee was sufficient. It would have been foolish in the extreme to resist the officer's request. For, in reality, it amounted to a command.

Moreover, it was essential to prove that no hostilities were desired or intended.

"May we ask the reason for this action?" said Nelson Lee quietly.

"I am acting under orders from my imperial master, his illustrious Highness, Ameer Ali Rajen," replied the officer. "I regret, gentlemen, that it should be necessary to take this action. But my orders are that you shall be escorted safely to Idar without delay."

"That's very kind of you, old man, but we're not particularly anxious to go to Idar," said Lord Dorrimore. "Perhaps you know that we came by aeroplane, and that we made a forced landing——"

"The facts were known in Idar within one hour of your descent, gentlemen," interrupted the officer unemotionally. "Steps were immediately taken to ensure your safe conduct into the capital."

"Haven't you been rather slow about it all?"

"It was deemed unwise to take action until you had reached a spot where transport would be convenient," replied the officer. "Gentlemen, if you are ready, I would request you to enter the waiting cars with your party."

"Does this mean that we are prisoners?" asked Mr. Manners hotly. "Surely you must realise that we are perfectly harmless travellers? We made a forced landing in your country, and we are now anxious to proceed to Kurpana. Can you not give us safe conduct to the border? I would point out that we are British subjects, and that——"

"I regret my inability to help you, gentlemen," said the officer curtly. "I offer you my sincerest apologies, and can only repeat that I am acting under orders."

"And what if we refuse to obey these orders?" asked Dorrie curiously.

"Then, sir, I shall have no alternative but to employ force," said the officer. "Yet such a step would be distasteful to me, and I urge you to ponder deeply before disregarding the courteous invitation from my illustrious master."

It was a thinly-veiled threat, and there could be no doubt as to the true position.

The British party had seen seized; they were all prisoners of the Ameer of Rishnir.

It had been done very nicely, but behind everything there was a hint of grim deadliness!



## CHAPTER 14.

## The Arrival in Idar!

ARCHIE GLEN-THORNE stretched himself luxuriously.

"Well, dash it, we've got to admit

that these Rishnir chappies know how to take people prisoners!" he observed contentedly. "I mean to say, this is doing the thing in style, what?"

"We don't feel much like prisoners, anyhow, Archie," agreed Reggie Pitt.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "Good gad! I mean, here we are, rolling along the good old highway, taking our dashed ease in there super Rolls-Royces."

"Yes; we've nothing to complain of—yet," said Nipper.

"It may be a fad of mine, dear old grapefruit, but I don't quite like that 'yet,'" said Archie dubiously. "I mean to say, it gives a hint of frightful frightfulness to come, what? You don't believe that the good old rajah, or whatever he is, will shove us into durance vile, do you?"

"He might shove us into the palace dungeons, Archie," said Reggie Pitt.

"Odds horrors and tortures!" said Archie, adjusting his monocle and looking at Reggie in consternation. "I mean, good gad! You don't absolutely think that the blighter will bung us behind the good old bars?"

"There's no telling what he'll do, old man," said Nipper. "We can only wait and see. But there's one thing certain—the Ameer is not going to let us get out of this country."

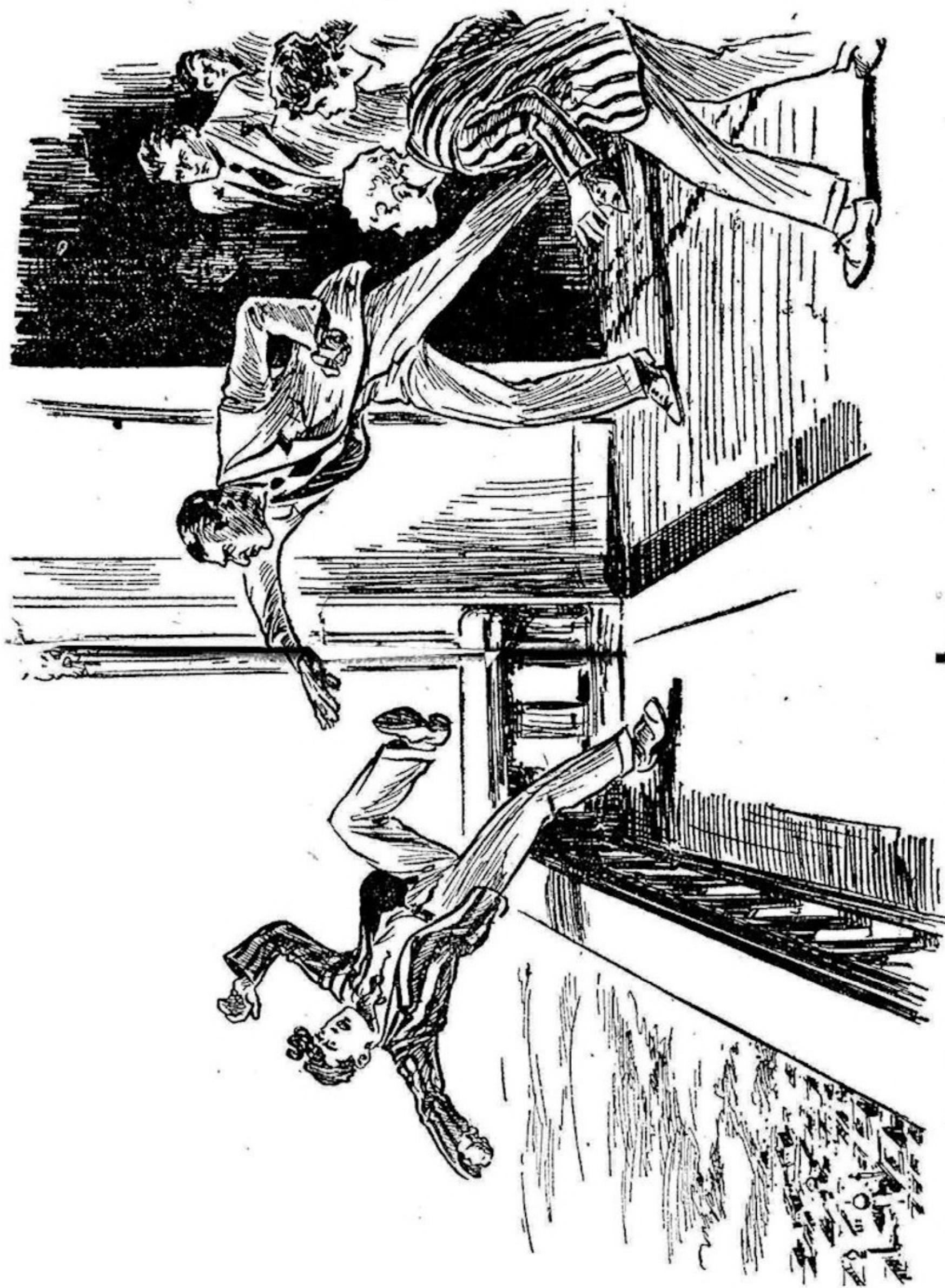
"Yes, laddie, that seems to be fairly certain," agreed Archie. "We sort of dropped in on the old boy, and he's going to press us to remain—even if he has to clap us into irons."

It was undeniable that the Ameer's prisoners were having quite a good time of it so far, and it was not surprising that the boys and girls began to regard the whole adventure as an interesting diversion. It seemed ridiculous to suppose that they could be in any danger.

They were now bowling along the splendid concrete highway. The six cars were making excellent progress, humming along at about forty miles per hour. The officer in charge led the way in his own car, and the others followed behind, with two or three hundred yards separating each.

There was plenty of room in these huge cars—which were, indeed, Rolls-Royces—to accommodate all the members of the British party.

Not once had there been a sign of hostility; there had been no display of fire-



The Ameer raised his hand and struck the last blow. With despairing cry Handforth reeled, stumbled, and fell headlong over the verandah—down, down, down, towards the ground, a thousand feet below!

arms or swords. But Nelson Lee, at least, knew perfectly well that if they had refused the "invitation" they would have been ruthlessly seized, bound and carried into Idar as real prisoners.

"What do you think of it, old man?" asked Lord Dorrimore, as he sat next to Nelson Lee in the second car.

"I hardly know what to think," said the famous schoolmaster-detective. "But I'll tell you this much—I don't like the look of it at all!"

"Rather too good to be true, eh?"

"Well, I won't say that," replied Lee. "It is quite possible that the Ameer will continue to treat us as guests. He will be a very sensible man if he does—for when the British Government hears of our seizure, as it is bound to hear sooner or later, it will be a great point in the Ameer's favour. At the very worst, he can only be punished for holding us against our will. If, on the other hand, he treated us badly, the case would be very black against him."

"All the same, he means to hold us," nodded Dorrie. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," said Lee. "The Ameer is on the verge of a very tricky campaign, and he does not want us to get out of the country. That means, Dorrie, that we may be here for months."

"Oh, well, it's all in a lifetime," said Dorrie complacently.

"It is easy enough for you to contemplate the prospect with equanimity," replied Lee. "But it is very different for these St. Frank's boys and Moor View girls."

"Get away!" grinned Dorrie. "It'll do 'em good—it'll widen their minds. Supposin' they lose a few weeks of lessons at school? They can easily make up for lost time."

"That's one way of looking at it, of course," smiled Nelson Lee dryly. "You always believe in looking on the bright side, don't you, Dorrie? Let us hope that the Ameer will be content to hold us as prisoners. He may have other ideas in view."

"That remark sounds deucedly significant," said his lordship.

"I'm not an alarmist, but Ali Rajen is a man of ruthless determination," said Lee, becoming grave. "He is suspected of many massacres; it has been hinted that he is responsible for the frightful orgy of last year, when ten thousand subjects of the Rajah of Kurpana were tortured, mutilated and killed. The India Office is more or less certain that Ali Rajen gave the orders for that horrible business."

"An interestin' sort of cove to meet," remarked Dorrie.

"Unfortunately, the Ameer is a man of amazing egotism," continued Lee. "He regards himself as the Emperor of the East. It is his dream to become supreme ruler over the greater part of Northern India. He is contemptuous of the British Government, and it may be a very difficult matter to put him into his right place."

Fortunately, the boys and girls did not appreciate the dangerous nature of their position. As the motor-cars progressed, they were interested in the scenery.

The concrete highway made a long detour round the jungle country. The journey that had taken the party many hours on foot, fighting their way through the undergrowth, was now accomplished in almost as many minutes.

Soon they were approaching Idar, which stood on the bank of an impressive river.



The Ameer raised his hand and struck the last blow over the verandah—down.

As they drew nearer they had a magnificent view of the gigantic crag which overlooked the entire city. Perched on the top of it was the famous Idar Palace, a gleaming wonder of whiteness.

At last they reached the very gates of the city, and swept through onwards over a wide bridge. They had arrived at Idar—the city of surprises!

## CHAPTER 15.

## The Palace in the Sky!

"It's wonderful!" said Irene breathlessly. "Rather different from what we expected, eh?" said

Handy, and have us waited on hand and foot!"

"Quite likely!" agreed Handforth, nodding.

The others grinned. They were by no means alarmed, for everything seemed so friendly and novel. Certainly, there was not the slightest indication that they were in the hands of a ruthless enemy.

There was much to see, much to interest them as they drove through the city.

It was truly Eastern, with its bazaars, its picturesque crowds, and its temples. Slender minarets rose towards the sky, and down the narrow side streets the buildings were closely packed, almost jostling over one another and overhanging the roadway.

But right through the centre of the city ran this great concrete highway, with many modern imposing buildings on either hand. Whilst the greater portion of Idar was old and picturesque, this main street was frankly Western in style.

And everywhere soldiers were to be seen.

The place was swarming with men in uniform. It was obvious to the dullest eye that the country was prepared for war. Occasionally a big armoured car would lumber by, and the general populace would look on with mild interest, as though this sort of thing was commonplace.

The "prisoners" were examined with great curiosity as they were driven along. Yet there were not any signs of hostility or hatred. The people merely regarded them with intense interest.

The sun of the late afternoon blazed down relentlessly into the stifling streets. It had been hot in the open country, but it seemed much hotter here, in the city. The sunshine was dazzling; the very roadway seemed to radiate the heat, and send it up in suffocating waves.

Then the procession of motor-cars drove into a grateful shade. Some of the juniors looked up in surprise, for they were passing through the centre of a great open square, round which there were no high buildings. Where, therefore, did this shade come from?

One glance upwards was sufficient to tell them.

They were passing through the shadow of the great crag. It fell thwart the city like a sinister, dark stain. And now that they were at such close quarters the captives were more than ever impressed by the wonder of that crag.



big cry Handforth reeled, stumbled, and fell headlong to the ground, a thousand feet below!

Vivian Travers. "Well, well! On the whole, we're not doing so badly!"

"I don't believe the Ameer is a rotter!" said Handforth firmly. "It's all spoo! He's treated us like honoured guests, and I expect he'll invite us into his very palace."

"And give us suites of rooms to ourselves, and the whole run of the place," grinned Church. "He'll even appoint servants to us,





"In that case, you'd better gag me!" growled his lordship. "I can't stick this kow-towing stuff. I'm a man of action—not a diplomat. So I think I'll leave most of the jawing to you."

Nelson Lee moved in amongst the juniors and girls.

"Well, young 'uns, so far everything has gone all right," he said smoothly. "It cannot be denied that we are in a difficult position—"

"How, sir?" asked Fullwood.

"We are prisoners of the Ameer," replied Lee. "Everything has been done very courteously, but we should be very foolish if we deluded ourselves. And let me impress upon you all that there must be no defiance of orders. Whatever you are told to do, you must do."

"We're not worms, sir!" protested Handforth.

"You are not; and I am glad of it," nodded Lee. "But, at the same time, we cannot afford to take any chances. The Ameer of Rishnir is a very dangerous man, and we must not give him the slightest opportunity to vent his animosity upon us. We made a landing in this country by chance, and our one desire is to get beyond the borders."

"Don't you think the Ameer will let us go, sir?" asked Harry Gresham.

"It is very difficult to know what the Ameer will do," replied Lee. "But one thing is certain; he will seize upon the slightest excuse to hold us. Therefore, we must give him none. While we are in Rome, we must do as Rome does—and if anything happens that arouses our indignation we must hold ourselves in check. Will you all promise me that you will exercise this restraint if necessary?"

"Yes, of course, sir!" chorused the boys and girls.

Lee nodded, and rejoined Dorrie and Mr. Manners. And Edward Oswald Handforth scratched his head.

"Jiggered if I can understand it!" he growled. "Is he asking us to be meek and mild? By George! If any of these Rishnir chaps insult me, or anything British, I'll dot him one on the nose!"

"No, you won't, Handy!" said Nipper grimly. "That's the very thing the gov'nor is trying to guard against."

"But, hang it, we can fight, can't we?" demanded Handforth hotly. "We're British! We're not afraid—"

"It will take more courage to restrain ourselves than to let ourselves go, dear old fellow," put in Travers quietly. "That's a point that you seem to miss. Besides, why worry? Nothing's happened yet."

There was a command from the officer at that moment, and the escorting soldiers formed a kind of cordon round the prisoners. Another order followed, and the soldiers commenced marching.

The object of this fresh move was soon obvious. The "guests" were ushered through some big, double doors which were let into the very heart of the rock crag, and once through the doorway they found themselves in a large apartment, with plush seats all round. In the ceiling, overhead, gleaming electric lights were dotted.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Reggie Pitt. "So the crag is hollow!"

"I don't believe it's a crag at all!" said Handforth, looking round. "I believe it's a skyscraper, as I first said. It's been camouflaged; they've built it so that it looks like a natural rock."

But Handforth was quite wrong—as he should have known. The famous crag of Idar was historical. Here it had stood, rearing its height above the city, for centuries. The palace itself had been built over a hundred years ago; although it was known that the reigning Ameer of to-day had made vast improvements and alterations.

Clang!

The big, double doors were closed, and a second later the great apartment gave a sort of jerk, and everybody was aware of a sense of movement.

There was plenty of room for them all, including a number of soldiers, for the room was of impressive size. And now the boys and the girls looked at one another in astonishment.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "A lift, what? I mean to say, rather unexpected, and all that sort of thing!"

"A lift!" said Nipper, with a whistle. "By Jove! It's a wonder we didn't guess this before. We're going up to the palace, my sons!"

"But who would have expected it?" asked Mary Summers breathlessly. "Everything is so—so up to date! Motor-cars—electric lights—lifts! Who would think that we were in the heart of one of the most remote of Indian provinces?"

"There's no telling what we shall find in this extraordinary city, young 'uns," said Nelson Lee. "Personally, I am not surprised in the least. The Ameer of Rishnir is well known as a man of modern, progressive ideas. A powerful elevator to the summit of this crag is an innovation that one could easily anticipate."

Zurrrrh-zurrrrh!

Accompanied by a slight humming noise, the great lift was now ascending more swiftly, and the trip seemed everlasting. Up it went—and there was nothing to indicate how much progress had been made.

In a skyscraper, the doors of an elevator are generally of glass, and one can see the various floors slipping past.

But here it was different.

The lift was just like a lofty, well-appointed room. The doors were solid, and there was never a stop. The lift went up and up—right through the heart of that great crag, to the towering palace above!



## CHAPTER 17.

## Wonder Upon Wonder!

LICK!

Gently, and almost imperceptibly, the lift came to a stop. The officer spoke a word,

and the soldiers stood sharply at attention. As though by an unseen hand, the doors opened, and a wide foyer, or vestibule, could be seen just beyond; and although the sunlight was screened, the place seemed daz- zlingly bright after the artificial illumination of the lift.

"Remember, young 'uns!" said Nelson Lee quietly.

No other word from him was necessary. They all walked out into the foyer, and stared about them wonderingly. Everything was of white marble, and they could not believe that they were not on the ordinary ground level. Yet, a moment later, the truth was impressed upon them in a very decided manner.

"Great Scott!" shouted Russell. "Come and look here, you fellows!"

Nobody seemed to restrict their move- ments, so Russell had strode forward and had ventured out upon a wide verandah, through some big French windows. Now he was leaning against the marble balustrade, star- ing downwards.

"What is it?" asked Winnie Pitt, running forward.

The others followed, and in another moment there were loud exclamations of amazement.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie. "I mean to say, odds dizziness and dash it! We're up in the good old clouds, what?"

And, impossible though it seemed, Archie Glenthorne spoke the literal truth.

Standing against that parapet, the boys and girls stared downwards in sheer fascination. They were so dumbfounded, indeed, that for some moments they lost their voices. They could only stand and stare.

Immediately below them, the crag was sheer—an unbelievable precipice. From below it had seemed that the palace was an enormous height in the air; but from above the human brain could hardly grasp the marvel of it.

Far, far below, stretched the city of Idar, its houses looking like dolls' cottages, its minarets and domes dwarfed and rendered miniature. Vehicles could be seen in the streets, and they resembled the smallest toys. People moving about seemed smaller than ants.

Quite a few of those youngsters had once been to the top of the great Woolworth build- ing in New York, and they had been greatly impressed.

But this Idar crag was much, much higher than the celebrated New York skyscraper.

The gleaming palace was over a thousand feet in the air, and the crag descended sheer from every wall. It was almost like a plateau, thrust up by some miraculous up- heaval of nature from Mother Earth.

Since the party had entered the lift, a few rain-clouds had drifted up from the South, and the amazing thing was—these clouds were now below the level of the palace!

They were floating near by, drifting in the breeze, looking feathery and misty at such close quarters. One of the clouds came into contact with the crag itself, and the face of the precipice disappeared in the smother of- mist.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, at last.

His voice had a strained note in it, as though he found it difficult to articulate. The St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls had seen some wonders in their time; but they could never have imagined any- thing quite so astounding as this.

They seemed to be detached from the world —perched high in the clouds. And, although they had grown accustomed to aeroplane fly- ing, their present sensations were totally different.

For they were not in an aircraft; they were on solid ground. They were in a great marble building; and it seemed to them that there was danger. At any moment the crag might collapse and send them hurtling down to certain death.

They wondered what would happen if a gale sprang up and struck this slender crag. It seemed impossible that this strange natural formation could withstand such an ordeal.

But they were forgetting that the Idar crag had come unscathed through typhoons and storms of every description. The Idar crag had stood here for centuries—no doubt for thousands of years. It was a permanent monument, a marvel of nature.

"Come, boys!" said Nelson Lee gently. "Yes, and you girls, too."

"But look at this, sir!" burst out Jimmy Potts. "Have you seen—"

"We must not keep his Imperial Highness waiting, young 'uns," said Nelson Lee sig- nificantly.

And they all recalled themselves. They turned away from the balustrades, and went back into the foyer. To their fresh surprise, they found several liveried menservants awaiting them; and the girls, together with Mrs. Tibbs, who had drawn slightly apart, were astounded to see a group of four neatly- attired maidservants.

There was nothing remarkable in the fact that the palace boasted of servants. But what *was* surprising was their colour, and their obvious nationality.

The menservants and the maids were British!

That fact could be detected at first glance. They were white people—and very ordinary- looking domestics at that! Their eyes, per- haps, reflected their inward excitement at

the visit of these guests. But their manner was deferential and formal.

"But—but you're English!" burst out Irene, as she regarded the maids with wide-open eyes.

"If you will all come with us, miss, we will show you to your suite," replied one of the maidservants steadily.

"Oh, we shall wake up soon!" said Doris, shaking her curls.

They went off, escorted by the maids, and the boys watched them go in wonder. Then

"You're English, aren't you?" he added, to one of the footmen.

"Yes, sir."

"What part of England did you come from?"

"London, sir—Lewisham."

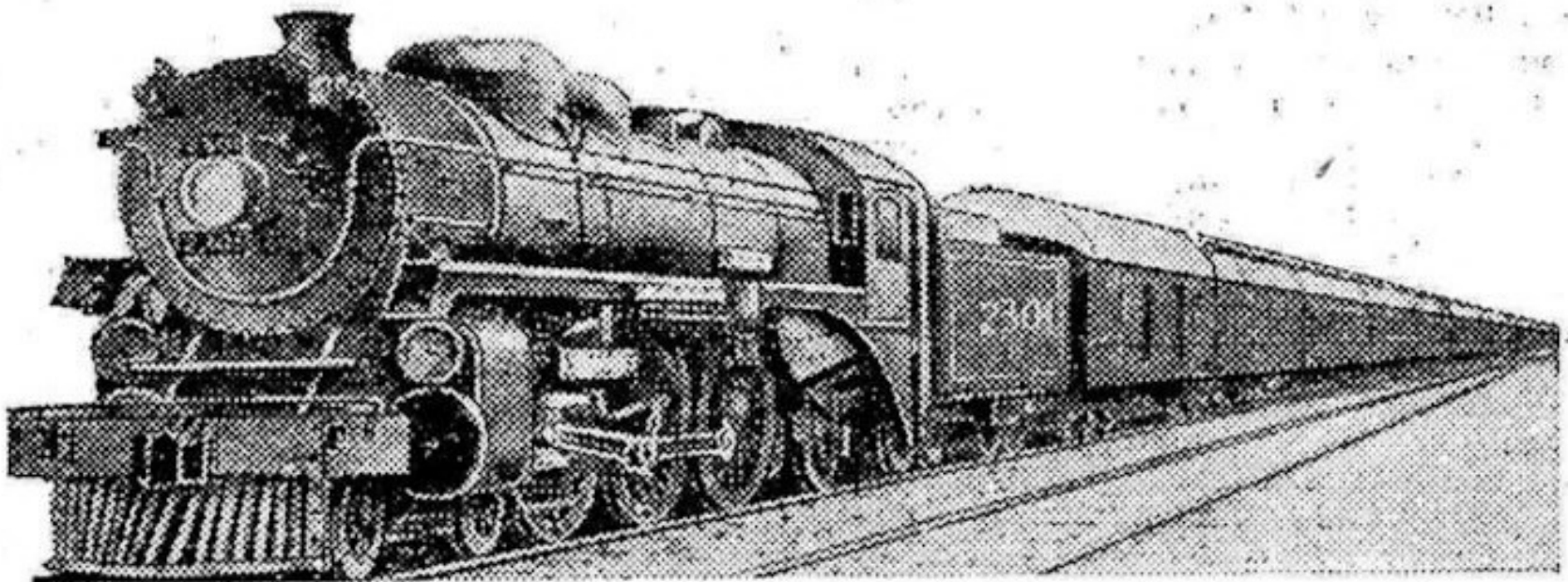
"Oh, my only sainted aunt!" said Fullwood. "He comes from Lewisham, you chaps!"

"How long have you been in India?" asked Johnny Onions curiously, looking at the man.

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they, in turn, found themselves being taken along a wide corridor by the footmen, and presently they entered a splendidly appointed apartment, with great windows, and with soft carpets underfoot.

The place was furnished in just the same manner as a hundred reception-rooms are furnished in Mayfair. Everything was of superb quality, and everything in perfect taste. But there was not a trace of Eastern splendour. It was all very, very European.

"Well, this beats the band!" said Fullwood, scratching his head. "We expected to get some surprises, but I'm nearly speechless!

"Begging your pardon, sir, I'd rather you didn't question me," replied the man uncomfortably. "I'm a servant, sir, and I'm not supposed to talk."

At that moment there came a little commotion from the wide doorway. There was a clicking of spurs as the guards sprang to attention.

And all eyes were fixed on the doorway. A figure appeared, and every one of those "prisoners" knew, at the first glance, that they were now face to face with his illustrious Highness, the Ameer of Rishnir!



## CHAPTER 18.

## Mine Host!

**I**N thinking of the Ameer of Rishnir, some days earlier, the juniors had pictured a swarthy, Eastern potentate, richly garbed in silken robes, with diamonds and other jewels scintillating on his person.

But since entering Idar they had changed their views. So many things were so modern—motor-cars, electric light, and now, in the palace itself, every sign of European culture. Therefore, they no longer pictured the Ameer as an Eastern potentate of the traditional type.

And now that "mine host" had actually appeared, they knew, by instinct, his identity. And although he was very different from what they had imagined, his very air as he entered the apartment was sufficient to tell them the truth. Furthermore, all the soldiers and menservants were standing like statues.

"Gentlemen, I am highly honoured!" said the Ameer courteously.

He bowed, and Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners bowed in return. The juniors looked uncomfortable and awkward. They hardly knew what to do.

They found themselves regarding a tall, slim gentleman, attired in spotless white flannels, as though he had just come in from tennis. He was comparatively light-skinned, and clean-shaven—yet, nevertheless, purely Indian. His hair was brushed straight back. He was the very embodiment of coolness and imperturbability.

Yet somewhere in his eyes lurked an expression of grim purpose. His lips, upon closer examination, were unusually thin for a man of his blood; his jaw was powerful, cruel. And his smile, although amiable, was somehow false.

"You are British, eh?" continued the ruler of all Rishnir. "Excellent! As you may have noticed, I have a strong partiality for the British. All my best servants are British. I have invariably found that British servants are the best, since they are generally humble, servile, and backboneless."

Nelson Lee stiffened, and Dorrie and Mr. Manners flushed. All the juniors found themselves breathing hard, and Church and McClure took a grip on Handforth. They remembered Nelson Lee's admonition.

"You are, no doubt, aware of my identity," continued the host. "If, however, there is any doubt in your minds, let me introduce myself. I am the Ameer of Rishnir. I am the man who rules the destinies of this turbulent country."

"I gather that you have no intention of ruling our destinies, too?" asked Lord Dorrimore gruffly.

"That remains to be seen," replied the Ameer. "For the moment, I urge you to regard yourselves as my guests. Order my servants about as you will, and if you do not receive strict obedience, be good enough to place your complaints before my notice. Various suites of rooms have been prepared for your use, and it is my desire that you should regard the palace as your own."

"You are very kind, but we have no desire to avail ourselves of your hospitality, your Highness," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Please do not misunderstand me. Our landing into your country was a mischance—"

"An unfortunate one for you, but a fortunate one for me," said the Ameer. "Fortunate, since it has enabled me to bring you to my palace as my guests. And have I not already told you that I am very, very fond of the British?"

There was a sneer in his voice—a sinister, relentless note of irony.

"We are anxious to journey on into Kurpana," said Mr. Manners gruffly. "And, your Highness, as British subjects, we earnestly request you to provide us with a safe escort to the border."

"Your request is modest, my dear Mr. Manners," said the Ameer smoothly. "So modest, indeed, that I am inclined to smile. But let us not discuss these matters at this present moment. I am sure that you are anxious to remove the dust of my humble highways. The boys will be escorted to their own suite by these excellent menservants. And you, gentlemen, will please be good enough to command Smith."

He clicked his fingers, and two footmen placed themselves near the juniors. Another man, evidently a servant of a better type, came forward and stood near Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners.

"This," said the Ameer, "is Smith. An excellent valet in every way. He will attend to your wants, and I can assure you that he is an invaluable servant. Gentlemen, I will see you later."

The Ameer nodded, and turned away.

"One moment, your Highness!" said Leo quickly. "Surely you can give us some definite information—"

Then he bit his lip. For the Ameer, taking not the slightest notice, was walking away. And two of the soldiers had automatically come forward, and were barring Nelson Lee's path.

A minute later, the juniors were led out of the apartment. They found themselves taken down a wide corridor, and then into a suite of splendidly-appointed rooms. There were many beds, and the furniture was European. Adjoining, there were two magnificently-appointed bathrooms.

Butler, the steward of the aeroplane, had been taken off elsewhere—probably to the servants' quarters. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners found themselves in another suite—on the other side of the corridor to the juniors.

And with them was Smith, the valet.



The officer, having seen that the soldiers were lined up to his satisfaction, came across to the St. Frank's party. "I must ask you to surrender your weapons!" he said, addressing Nelson Lee.

"Somehow," said Dorrie slowly, "I've got an idea that his nibs is goin' to be nasty. I've met many a fellow I wanted to punch—but never one that I wanted to punch quite so hard!"



## CHAPTER 19.

### Cut Off From the World!

**N**ELSON LEE looked troubled as he regarded his companions.

"I hope you won't do any of that punching, Dorrie," he said quietly. "I do not think the Ameer would hesitate as to your punishment. Without the slightest question, you would be immediately put to death."

"You're probably right," agreed his lordship. "And, much as I would like to give my knuckles a bit of exercise, I suppose I must restrain myself. By the Lord Harry! What a situation! It seems so—so fantastic!"

He turned to Smith, who was hovering near by.

"And how on earth did you get here?" he asked curiously.

"I was brought here, sir," replied Smith in a low voice. "Pretty much the same as you was brought here, I dare say. And, like me, here you'll remain. Nobody ever goes

away from this palace once they've entered it. Leastways, not until they're dead!"

"You're a nice, cheery sort of fellow, Smith," said Dorrie dryly.

Smith was a wizened little man, and there was an old scar over his left eye. He wore an air of permanent resignation; and in his eyes there was a hopeless look.

"So the only people who leave the palace are dead people, eh?" said Nelson Lee quietly. "And what, exactly, do you mean by that, Smith?"

The valet looked about him rather fearfully.

"Not so loud, sir—not so loud!" he muttered. "I'm afraid to talk much—"

"But we're in private here, aren't we?" put in Mr. Manners.

"Ay, in private mebbe—but there's no tellin' in this palace!" replied Smith tremulously. "There's no tellin', gentlemen! Best come into the bath-room."

They entered the bath-room, and Smith closed the door. Here, at least, they were in private—in no danger of being overheard. For it was an inner room, and the only window looked straight out upon the great abyss.

"Who are you, gents—and why did you come into this country?" asked Smith hoarsely. "You've done yourselves in! That's what you've done! You'll never get away from the Ameer!"

"That remains to be seen," said Nelson Lee. "How do you come to be here, Smith? And how long have you been in this palace?"

"Ten years, sir," replied the valet, as he clenched his fists. "I'm not sayin' as it ain't bad here. Good food—and light work. But every now and again I feels that I want to see the Old Kent Road and the Elephant and Castle! Not as I ever *shall* see 'em again!"

"And why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Smith. "Why not, gents? Because no Englishman—no Britisher—ever leaves this palace once he enters. Ay, and if it comes to that, no British woman, either! Once on this crag, never off!"

"How many British people are there in this palace?"

"Scores, sir—I might say hundreds!" replied Smith, taking a deep breath. "All the servants are British—cooks, footmen, maids; everybody that works is British!"

"For the love of Mike!" ejaculated Dorrie.

"The Ameer hates us all, sir!" muttered Smith. "In his eyes, the British are no better than the things that crawl! He wouldn't have his own people in the palace as servants. No! All the menials are British—the people he hates! That's why we're here—that's why he tricked us into comin'!"

"How did he trick you?"

"Easy enough, sir," replied Smith. "Adverts in the papers down at Calcutta and Bombay and the other big cities. His game is to offer big money, and to make all sorts of promises about leave and that sort of thing. Then, after we've come up country, we meet a sort of escort, and once we're over the border it's all up with us."

"This has been going on for some time, I imagine?"

"Years, sir—ever since I come," replied the valet, in a melancholy voice. "I was one of the first. And once we come on to this crag it's the end. One or two of 'em have revolted and stood up for their rights. Poor beggars!"

"They were—killed?"

"It wouldn't have been so bad if they were only just killed, sir," replied Smith. "They were tortured—ay, and in the sight of all the rest of us, too! Slung out from the crag in an iron cage, without food or water. And there they stayed, poor souls, until they were sent mad by the heat of the sun."

"And the Ameer has done this—just because some of his servants have refused to obey orders?"

"That's all, sir," replied Smith, glancing stealthily over his shoulders. "And the same'll 'appen to me, if it ever gets about that I've spoken to you in this way. But I couldn't 'elp it! You're strangers here—and gents, too! And them young ladies! Crikey! My heart bleeds for 'em!"

"We seem to have arrived in a very pretty spot!" said Dorrie, with a whistle.

"It's all right, sir, as long as you don't give back answers—as long as you obey orders," replied Smith. "But your life ain't worth a farthing if you make one little slip! The Ameer is smooth-tongued and soft! But at 'cart he ain't human!"

"With so many of you in this palace, I rather wonder you haven't organised a general rebellion," said Mr. Manners slowly.

"Organised, sir?" repeated Smith in wonder. "You don't understand! There's no chance of organisin' anything! There's soldiers everywhere—and most of 'em can understand English! We're watched night and day—and the thought of the tortures is enough to keep us from plottin' anything."

It was obvious from the man's manner that he was subdued—long years of service in the palace had robbed him of his manhood.

## NEXT WEDNESDAY!



"But why did you come here, gents?" he went on huskily. "You and them young boys—and them girls? Why did you come?"

"We were on our way to Kurpana," replied Nelson Lee. "Our aeroplane caught in a storm, and we made a forced landing—"

"Kurpana!" muttered Smith. "Ay, there's goin' to be trouble soon! The old maharajah and his son are in this city now—kept captive."

"It was because of that fact that we came out from England," said Nelson Lee. "The maharajah's younger son, Hussi Kahn, was kidnapped by the Ameer's agents—"

"You don't know what you're sayin', sir," interrupted Smith, with a trace of excitement. "Why, you don't believe young Hussi Kahn was brought here, do you?"

"Wasn't he brought here?" asked Mr. Manners sharply.

"Not on your life, sir!" said Smith. "He was taken away by his own people! He was brought from England by his friends, and he's in Sakri now. He's in the capital of Kurpana!"

"By Jove!" said Lee, under his breath.

"And the Ameer is as mad as a wild tiger," added Smith. "When he heard the news he was ragin' up and down for hours! It's a wonder half of us wasn't put to the

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torture—just so's he'd have a bit of satisfaction!"

"So Hussi Kahn was taken from England by his own people!" said Nelson Lee slowly. "If this information is reliable——"

"If you don't believe me, sir, ask his Highness the Ameer," said Smith, in an earnest voice. "He'll tell you! Only, mind you, you'd best go careful. He's not a nice man; to get into a temper!"

"But, hang it, it's not reasonable—it's not sensible!" said Mr. Manners. "If Hussi Kahn's own people had taken him from England, why the necessity of kidnapping him? Why not take him openly?"

"That is a very small point, Manners," said Lee. "If Hussi Kahn's friends had gone to work in the usual way there would have been endless delays, and, quite possibly, he would have been kept in England by the

British Government. They took him, and they made sure of him."

"Well, this is a piece of good news!" said Dorrie approvingly. "Young Hussi Kahn in Kurpana! Splendid! Things don't seem so bad, after all!"

But Nelson Lee was looking very grim.

"On the contrary, Dorrie, things are looking worse than ever!" he said quietly.



## CHAPTER 20.

### Grim Possibilities!

ORD DORRIMORE looked surprised.

"Worse than ever?" he repeated.

"For us—yes," said

Nelson Lee.

"Why particularly for us?" inquired his lordship. "Surely it is good news to learn that Hussi Kahn is in Kurpana? His arrival will have created a sensation. The people will be enthusiastic—they will be ready to withstand the onslaughts of the Ameer's soldiers if an invasion takes place. Hussi Kahn himself can do little, but his very presence in Kurpana will have a tremendous moral effect."

"I quite agree with you," said Lee. "Nevertheless, Dorrie, our own position is infinitely worse."

"But why?" asked Mr. Manners curiously.

"I rather think the Ameer is a shrewd man," said Nelson Lee. "We are his prisoners. Do you think it likely that he would not take advantage of the fact? Think it over, Dorrie! You, too, Manners!"

"Oh, hang it!" said his lordship. "Let's get washed, and then see what the next move in the game will be."

There could be no denying that the situation was fraught with danger.

There was no reason to disbelieve the statement of Smith, the valet. For with their own eyes the new arrivals had seen the many British servants. This autocratic Oriental monarch despised all people of British nationality; therefore, he used them as his servants. It probably gave him pleasure to see them about him in menial capacities. In his estimation they were lower than the lowest of his own blood.

And there had been something dreadfully convincing in Smith's words. Once at the top of the crag—never liberated! It was, indeed, an appalling thought.

Happily, the St. Frank's boys were not troubled by any of these reflections. The girls, too, were equally free from worry.

The very presence of British servants in the Ameer's palace gave them confidence. It seemed to be a clear indication that everything was all right—that the tales they had heard of the Ameer were exaggerated and malicious.

"We're going to enjoy ourselves here for a few days," remarked Handforth, after he



and the others had washed, and were feeling fresh and fit. "Why, I thought we were coming to some heathen place. And here we are, in the midst of luxury and with everything modern."

"And the grub looks good, too!" said Gresham hungrily.

They had been escorted into a wonderful dining-room, where the table was set ready for a meal. The girls had come in, too, fresh and smiling.

"It's all so marvellous!" said Irene breathlessly.

"The Palace in the Clouds!" said Nipper, with a smile. "Well, we ought to get plenty of fresh air up here, eh?"

"It was jolly decent of the Ameer to tell us to make the palace our home," said Jimmy Potts. "What could have been more hospitable?"

"All the same, dear old fellows, I didn't quite like his tone," said Travers. "And there's something about him that seems—well, evil!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "The Ameer is a good scout!"

And this was the view of the majority of the boys and girls. They were judging by appearances—by the cordiality of the Ameer's reception of them. They had not yet seen behind his veneer.

A moment later Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners entered, and they were relieved to find the boys and girls all present. It gave them much satisfaction to know that they were still all together.

But before any words could be exchanged the Ameer himself reappeared.

He strolled easily into the great dining-room, smiling and cool. He waved an inviting hand towards the table.

"Pray seat yourselves, young ladies," he said gracefully. "You, too, gentlemen. I have no doubt that you are hungry, and I would remind you that there is no necessity for you to stand on ceremony with me."

"Thanks awfully, sir!" chorused the juniors.

"This is a pleasure I had not anticipated," continued the Ameer. "It is a delight, indeed, to see so many young, fresh British faces. In my earlier days I spent so many years in England that I may be forgiven if I describe myself almost as a blood brother."

"We'd hardly know you weren't English yourself, sir," said Castleton cheerily. "And everything here is so—so British-looking, too. I mean, all the servants, and the furniture, and the electric light, and—and—"

"And everything, eh?" interrupted the Ameer-gently. "I am more gratified than I can say. And how do you like my palace? What is your opinion of my cloudland home, as we might call it?"

"It's gorgeous, sir!" chorused the boys and girls.

"You do, indeed, like it?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is very satisfactory!" said the illustrious Ali Rajen. "My satisfaction is

intense, since it would be lamentable if you disliked this new home of yours."

"New home of ours, sir?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Precisely," murmured the Ameer. "Why should I beat about the bush, as you British say? Ladies and gentlemen, this is your new home—your permanent home. For I will make it clear to you—now—that you will never know any other. You will never again descend to the world that you have left behind."

There was a dead silence for a moment or two.

"Never, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt huskily. "What—what do you mean?"

"Have I not made myself sufficiently clear?" asked the Ameer amusedly. "Is there any other meaning to the word 'never'? It is a tradition of this place that no alien foot has ever stepped out of it, except in death. You may come—yes—but you will go—never! Not a single soul of alien blood has escaped from this historic crag."

"But—but you can't mean that you're going to keep us here for always?" asked Doris Berkeley breathlessly.

"That, young lady, is my meaning," replied the Ameer. "I trust that I have not disturbed your appetites by this simple statement?"

But he certainly had!

Not one of his "guests" felt like eating now. Their throats seemed to be choked, and their hearts were beating very rapidly. Was it possible that this potentate was in earnest? Were they never to set foot in the great world again?

## CHAPTER 21.

### Straight From the Shoulder!



**N**ELSON LEE looked at the Ameer steadily.

"Has not the time arrived, your Highness, for a frank understanding?" he asked, his voice sharp and tense. "Is there any necessity for veiled words?"

"I was not aware that I was using veiled words, my dear Mr. Lee," replied the Ameer smoothly. "It was my intention, indeed, to make myself thoroughly clear. Have I not already explained to you that you will never leave this crag?"

"But you cannot possibly mean that!" replied Nelson Lee grimly. "This must be some joke, your Highness!"

"An excellent joke—yes!" agreed the Ameer. "From my own point of view, it is highly amusing. Doubtless you are not in a position to appreciate the humour of it."

"But the British Government—" began Mr. Manners.

"A thousand curses on the British Government!" interrupted the Ameer violently.

The change in him was staggering. In a moment he had ceased to be a smooth-tongued, imperturbable gentleman, and he was now more like a human tiger. His eyes blazed, his figure was rigid.

"The British Government!" he repeated furiously. "I care not a fig for the power and might of Britain! If you expect any help from your precious Government, you will be disappointed! Already I have caused reports to be sent over the telegraphs, giving out the news that your aeroplane crashed in the mountains, beyond the borders of my country. The world believes that you were all killed, and that your bodies were burnt to unrecognisable cinders in the destruction of the machine."

"Great Scott!"

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!"

"He—he can't mean it!"

"Absolutely not, dear old lads!" said Archie, as the others all broke into exclamations. "I mean to say, our people, what? How frightfully frightful!"

"The world is now mourning your loss!" said the Ameer, returning to his suave manner. "Forgive me for my little display of temper. I am inclined, on occasion, to indulge in such outbursts. We all have our weaknesses."

"And what is your object in this deception?" asked Nelson Lee curtly. "Why have you given out the news that we have all been killed?"

"Because I do not desire any rescue parties to come flying over my territory!" replied the Ameer. "If it is believed that you are dead, there will be no searching. And, of course, you are as good as dead!" he added. "As far as the world is concerned, you are lost to it. Here, on this crag, a thousand feet in the air, you are my guests."

"Your prisoners!" growled Dorrie.

"If you prefer the word, yes!" nodded the Ameer. "And yet I have offered you the hospitality of my palace. I do not wish to 'rub it in,' as you would say. It amuses me to entertain you. And, so long as you obey my orders, and behave yourselves, you may enjoy the privileges of my palace."

"And you're going to keep us here for years?" asked Handforth hoarsely.

"I think not, young man," replied the Ameer. "It may be only a brief sojourn. A week—possibly two weeks. At most, I do not think it will be longer than a month."

"And then?" said Lee.

The Ameer shrugged his shoulders.

"Then—who knows?" he said amusedly. "No doubt you already know that young Hussi Kahn, the second son of the Maharajah of Kurpana, has arrived in Sakri. It was your object, no doubt, to follow him up?"

They were all silent.

"It is unfortunate that young Kahn should have arrived in his own country,"

continued the Ameer. "For it necessitates immediate action on my part. I was not prepared for this move. Happily your arrival has provided a solution to my difficult problem."

The boys and girls listened in amazement, although they kept silent. They, too, had believed that Hussi Kahn had been seized by the Ameer; now they were learning that their former views were all wrong.

"You have asked for a plain understanding," continued Ali Rajen. "Why should I deny you this little satisfaction? Let us have plain words, by all means. Therefore, gentlemen, I will inform you, straight from the shoulder, that you are hostages."

"In what way?" demanded Mr. Manners.

"To-morrow I am sending a special courier to Sakri, the capital of Kurpana," replied the Ameer smoothly. "He will take a message to Hussi Kahn, explaining that you are here, in my palace, as prisoners."

Nelson Lee's eyes brightened, and the Ameer chuckled.

"No, no!" he said amusedly. "Do not think for a moment that Hussi Kahn will telegraph the news to the world that the reports of your death were false. I shall guard against that. My message will include a passage, making it quite clear that if any such information is given out you will all immediately die!"

"You—you—you," began Handforth.

But Church and McClure held him in check, fearful lest he should bring danger upon himself.

"Furthermore," said the Ameer, "I shall demand immediate action from Hussi Kahn. He and his advisers are to surrender the entire state of Kurpana into the hands of my soldiers. I am not a man of bloodshed; I desire no war. If I can annex Kurpana peacefully, so much the better. Accordingly, I shall instruct Hussi Kahn to make a complete surrender."

"And if he refuses?" asked Lee.

"If he refuses, it will be very unfortunate for you," replied the Ameer. "For I shall make it quite clear to young Kahn that his refusal will entail your deaths by torture!"

"Do you mean my death—or the deaths of us all?"

"Unhappily, the deaths of you all!" replied the Ameer sadly.

There was a silence in that big, luxurious dining-room for a few moments. All the boys had become flushed with excitement and surprise; the girls were no less flushed. Lord Dorrimore was having some difficulty in controlling himself, and Mr. Manners was frankly dumbfounded. Nelson Lee, perhaps, was the only one who remained perfectly immobile.

But his eyes were glittering with a light of danger, and, although he was inwardly burning with apprehension for the safety of his young charges, he revealed no outward sign.

## CHAPTER 22.

## Handforth's Madness!



**Y**OU cannot possibly mean what you say, your Highness!" said Nelson Lee steadily.

"No?" replied the Ameer. "But I do mean it."

"The situation is impossible!" continued Lee, his voice very grim. "You cannot place Hussi Kahn in this appalling predicament. To suggest such a thing is purely farcical—as you, a man of common-sense, must know."

"In what way is it farcical?" murmured the Ameer.

"Hussi Kahn will be unable to agree to your outrageous proposal," replied Lee curtly. "His country *must* come first. Even if he, in his youthful inexperience, consented to the outrageous demand, his advisers would refuse. And that, of course, will mean that Hussi Kahn must sign the death-warrants of his former schoolfellows!"

The Ameer nodded genially.

"Splendid, my dear Mr. Lee!" he said. "I can see that you have grasped the position. Quaint, is it not? Alas! I fear that young Hussi Kahn will send his refusal, and then there will be only one course for me to take."

He chuckled again, and waved towards the laden table.

"But will you not dine?" he added courteously. "It is long since you have eaten—"

"We're not going to eat at your rotten table!" shouted Handforth furiously.

"Good God, no!"

"Not likely!"

"We should choke!"

All sorts of shouts came from the boys and girls, and Nelson Lee turned to them quickly.

"Keep calm, please!" he said earnestly. "Leave this matter to me."

"But—but he's practically saying that he's going to kill us all, sir!" protested Handforth impulsively. "And he's going to make Hussi Kahn surrender his country, so that our lives can be spared."

"But Hussi Kahn will *not* surrender!" declared the Ameer dryly.

"Then you're going to murder us all?" roared Handforth, dragging himself away from Church and McClure, and striding boldly up to the Ameer. "By George! We're British! We don't stand being trodden on—"

"Hush, Handforth!" broke in Nelson Lee.

He admired the junior for his pluck; but he was fearful, nevertheless. It was the height of folly to goad the Ameer in this rash fashion. This was essentially an occasion for diplomacy. It was madness to blind their eyes to the fact that they were utterly helpless.

But Handforth did not consider these points. As usual, he blundered on. He was thoroughly aroused, and he cared nothing for the odds. His recklessness, indeed, was horrifying.

"Dear me!" said the Ameer, looking at him curiously. "What is this little storm? Boy, stand back!"

Handforth glared at him in defiance.

"We don't want any more of this rot," he said fiercely. "You keep on saying that we're your guests—and, all the time, you're treating us as prisoners. Well, we'd rather not have your hospitality! Chuck us into your dungeons, if you want to—"

"Silence!" said the Ameer, his eyes glittering.

"I'm not afraid of you, if that's what you think!" panted Handforth. "You can't frighten me with your—"

He broke off, gasping, for the Ameer had suddenly reached out a hand, and was twisting his ear.

"Enough!" said Ali Rajen. "In dealing with you thus lightly, I am gracious and lenient. You are but a boy, and—"

"Leggo!" shouted Handforth thickly. "By George! I'll—I'll—"

His ear was twisted with vicious force—twisted so much, in fact, that the agony was supreme. And Edward Oswald Handforth had always been a fellow of impulsive action. At this present moment he "saw red." His fist came round, his knuckles clenched.

Crash!

Before he could stop himself, he had driven his fist into the Ameer's face, and a shout of horror went up from the other juniors, and from Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners.

"Handforth!" shouted Lee. "Your Highness, I urge you to remember that this boy is impulsive, and—"

But the Ameer took no notice.

His face had become hideous in its sudden transformation. This boy—this despised British boy—had punched him! He, the Ameer of Rishnir—the enormously rich potentate, and ruler of all this wondrous territory—punched by a mere boy!

With a sound that was nothing more nor less than an evil snarl, the Ameer threw aside his polish and his culture.

Like a tiger he sprang, crashing his fist into the junior's face. Handforth reeled, swayed dizzily, and nearly dropped, but the Ameer was at him again, smashing with a savage ferocity.

A blow caught Handforth on the temples, and made him stagger afresh.

"Oh!" gasped Irene, as the boy swayed drunkenly towards the open French windows. "He'll be killed. Ted, oh, Ted!"

Handforth was near, dangerously near, to those open windows. The Ameer's eyes were glittering vengefully. No one had yet insulted the Ameer and lived, and this youth, a mere boy, should learn his lesson.

The Ameer raised his hand and struck the last blow.

With a despairing cry, Handforth reeled, stumbled, and pitched headlong out of the window and over the verandah.

His hands clutched at the marble balustrade in a wild endeavour to save himself. But he failed, his hands slithered off the smooth stone, and he fell—down, down towards the ground, a thousand feet below.

Everybody within the room was silent. The whole incident had happened so quickly that nobody had had time to intervene. Also the horror and hideousness of it had paralysed them. For a fleeting second they had a glimpse of Handforth as he dropped, and then he had gone, the last echo of his agonised cry ringing in their ears!



## CHAPTER 23.

Thanks to Smith!

“**H**ANDY!” Church was the first to recover his voice. He gave vent to a wild cry of anguish, and he started forward, his face as pale as a sheet. At the sound of his cry the others were brought out of their stupefaction.

“He’s gone—gone!” sobbed Irene hysterically. “Oh, Ted—Ted! He’s gone down—”

“Back, all of you!” said the Ameer, his voice grim and steady. “Tush! Why all this fuss? The boy is dead by now. And he has died as many others have died! If I am displeased by any of my servants, I throw them into the void. It is simple—and it is certain!”

“You—you devil!” shouted McClure fearlessly. “Throw me over, too, if you want to—but I’m going to speak my mind! You’ve killed him—you’ve killed my chum!”

The Ameer laughed sneeringly.

“Yes, he is dead!” he agreed. “Without the slightest doubt, he has been killed. Well, he asked for death.”

Lord Dorrimore was clenching and unclenching his fists; but for the restraining hand of Nelson Lee on his arm, he would have strode forward and knocked the Ameer senseless. But what would have been the use? Further bloodshed would have happened. Perhaps, indeed, a massacre would have followed.

“No, Dorrie!” said Nelson Lee quietly. “We can do nothing. Boys, control yourselves! His Highness the Ameer has shown us the reward of defiance.”

The boys and girls had nothing to say: they were feeling physically sick. Handforth had gone—he was the first victim. He had paid the penalty for his incredible rashness.

But, for the moment, the Removites had overlooked Edward Oswald Handforth’s proverbial luck!

Wherever Handforth went, his luck accompanied him. Where other fellows would meet with disaster, Handforth generally escaped.

At St. Frank’s, this luck of his was a by-word.

And in this dire extremity it had not forsaken him.

At this very moment, while everybody was taking it for granted that he was dead, he was very much alive! For there he clung, on the wall of the Palace, just below the level of the balustrade.

Not that Handforth’s position was in any way safe.

As he had dropped from view, his fingers had managed to clutch at a decorative pillar, and he had held on. Now he was in a truly dreadful predicament. One glance down had been sufficient; there was a void beneath him, a drop of a thousand feet! If he released his grip he would fall, and there would be nothing to save him.

Yet nothing could alter the fact that Handforth was still alive.

He did not cry out, for he was stunned by the horror of his position. He only knew that he was still alive, and that the grip he had obtained was insecure. He could feel his fingers slipping; he knew, with an absolute conviction, that he could not hold on for more than a few seconds. And there was no foothold for him, since there was a big window opening opposite his feet. He kicked once or twice, but he found nothing.

So far, no more than fifteen seconds had elapsed since Handforth had disappeared over the top of the balustrade. Below, in the apartment under the dining-room, Smith, the valet, was quietly at work with his duties, and that room, as it happened, was one of the apartments that had been set aside for the use of the St. Frank’s juniors.

Hearing something unusual, Smith hurried to the window and looked out. He glanced upwards, and his face changed to the colour of putty.

“Another of ’em!” he whispered. “Poor kid! He can’t last—”

And then he broke off. An idea had come to him. He instinctively knew that Handforth was doomed unless something was done immediately. He guessed that the Ameer had flung the boy over the upper balustrade; but, in this crisis, Smith did not pause to think for too long. Had he done so, he might have considered his own position. Long years in the Ameer’s service had taught him never to interfere, no matter how great the need.

But as it was, he dashed quickly across the room and seized a heavy wooden screen—a strong affair, fully six feet in height. He dragged it across the room, and pushed it upwards and outwards from the window. Then he pressed his entire weight on the bottom end of it.

“Drop, boy—drop!” he exclaimed hoarsely.

Whether Handforth heard, or whether his fingers had become numb, was not certain. At all events, he released his grip at that second.

‘Thud—crash!

It was over in a flash. Handforth’s falling body struck the projecting screen, and for a

horrible second his weight caused the screen to lose its balance, in spite of Smith's hold. And then Handforth came tumbling into the room—scooped in, as it were, by the acute angle of the screen.

He crashed into Smith, and they both rolled to the floor. The screen overbalanced, struck against the side of the window, and vanished into the void.

"By George!" gurgled Handforth.

Smith was on his feet in a moment, leaning out of the window, staring downwards. He caught his breath in sharply as he saw the screen strike the ground, all those hundreds of feet below. It shivered to fragments, and a group of soldiers who had been standing near jumped for their lives. One of them fell, hit by a portion of the splintering woodwork. He lay prone, and the others gathered about him.

Then a filmy cloud struck the crag, and obliterated the scene from Smith's view. Even as it was, he could not be certain as to what had actually happened, since those figures on the ground had all the appearance of ants.

And now that the incident was over, Smith was struck by the enormity of his action. He was utterly dumbfounded; he was shivering from head to foot with fright.

"Boy—boy!" he panted. "What have I done? What have I done?"

"You've saved my life—that's what you've done!" breathed Handforth unsteadily.

"But what of the consequences?" asked Smith, his eyes wide with fear. "The Ameer will find out! He will discover what has happened—and then I shall be put to death!"

His words had the effect of bringing Handforth rapidly to his senses.

"Put to death!" he echoed. "But—but why?"

"I have thwarted his illustrious Highness!" said Smith in anguish. "It was he who threw you out, wasn't it?"

"Yes, the demon!" said Handforth furiously. "Oh, I can't believe it! I—I shall wake up soon! He chucked me over the balustrade—he tried to murder me!"

"And I saved you!" said Smith, in a parrot-like way. "The Ameer will find it out! Boy—boy! You'll have to say that it was an accident! You'll have to tell him that I only put the screen out by chance, and that I didn't mean to——"

He broke off, unable to form coherent sentences. And Handforth, who had just escaped a terrible death, was not in a fit condition to appreciate it all.

"Never mind!" he muttered, as he rose staggering to his feet. "I'm safe—and I owe you my life! That screen did the trick! I—I thought I was going to my death, and then I found myself in here! I—I don't know how to thank you!"

"Thank me!" babbled the valet. "Don't I keep telling you, young gent, that I must have been mad? When his Highness finds out that you're alive, and that I saved you, it'll mean the torture! No man has ever

thwarted the Ameer and escaped the torture! I've saved your life, but I've sentenced myself to certain death!"



## CHAPTER 24.

### A Strange Situation!

**H**IS ILLUSTRIOUS HIGHNESS, THE AMEER OF RISHNIR, laughed softly.

"Come, come!" he said in an amused voice. "Why all this confusion? One boy is dead—and that is a trifle. And, no doubt, you have learned by this little experience that I am not a man to be defied."

Nobody took any notice of him. He had strolled out upon that narrow balcony, and he was looking over into the great abyss.

"Come, if you wish," he said amusedly. "There is nothing to be seen, but you will doubtless be more satisfied if you take a glance."

The boys and girls went out on to the balcony and looked down; Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners followed. Not one of them could analyse his inner feelings at the moment; they only knew that they were anxious to seize the Ameer, and to pitch him over, too. Dorrie, indeed, would have done so, for he was almost as impulsive as Handforth himself.

But Nelson Lee took the view that "while there was life there was hope." He did not despair—since when hope is dead, all is lost. He had grimly made up his mind that if it was humanly possible, he would save these boys and girls from the fate that the Ameer had sentenced them to.

"There's nothing—nothing!" panted Church, as he stared down.

"Oh, Ted!" breathed Irene. "Poor old Ted!"

The others were silent. Two or three hundred feet beneath them a feathery cloud was swirling lazily round the great crag. The big courtyard below was hidden from view, although the major portion of the City of Idar was visible.

"Occasionally, these clouds are a nuisance," said the Ameer. "That is one disadvantage of living so high in the sky. And yet, at other times, our clouds are kindly. It is just as well that you cannot see what now lies on the ground. I cannot imagine that the sight would be a pleasant one!"

"Look!" said Doris, pointing. "The cloud's passing away! We can see the ground now!"

"Yes, yes!"

"There he is—down there!" shouted somebody else. "Look—they've found him!"

The cloud had drifted on, clinging to the crag in a most strange fashion, and after the last filmy wisps had blown away the boys and girls found it possible to stare straight downwards at the ground.

They could see figures in the courtyard; those ant-like figures, which were men. Even now, it seemed incredible to them that they could really be so high in the sky. The tallest skyscraper in the world was a dwarf compared to this stupendous crag.

"Look!" said Nipper, pointing.

The others need no telling. A group of figures was moving away from the great rock, and the figures were carrying something. Nobody needed telling that the "something" was a human figure.

And was it not obvious that all should jump to the one conclusion? How could they doubt the evidence of their own eyes? Something was being carried away by the soldiers. Could it be anything else but Handforth's body?

At such a height, it was impossible to distinguish anything clearly; even the Ameer was left in no doubt. How could he guess that the "something" was merely one of his own soldiers, injured and knocked senseless by the shattering of the falling screen?

"Oh, Ted! Poor old Ted!" said Irene, bursting into tears. "What a shame—what a terrible shame!"

"Can't we do something?" asked Church desperately. "Aren't we going to see him again?"

The Ameer heard the words, and he came nearer.

"It will be better for you not to see him again!" he said gently. "And now, since this little affair is over, let me urge you to commence your meal—"

"What are they doing to him?" asked McClure tensely. "He's dead, of course, but they'll bury him decently, won't they?"

"He will be flung where all such refuse is flung!" replied the Ameer in a contemptuous voice. "On various occasions, servants have been flung from one of these balconies. Sometimes they have been thoughtless enough to commit suicide." He shrugged his shoulders. "My soldiers carry them away, and dispose of them."

"But aren't you going to give any orders, or—or—"

"Why the necessity?" said the Ameer. "The incident is forgotten. Your young friend is dead, so why the necessity of an inquiry? Let this be a warning to you all. Remember, in future, that a similar fate may overtake any of you if you defy me."

The Ameer walked away, leaving his prisoners stunned and dazed by his callous point of view. Handforth was dead—he was to be flung on the refuse-heap! And that was the end of him!

Meanwhile, down below, in that other room, Smith, the valet, was trembling like a leaf.

"Boy—boy!" he whispered, clutching at Handforth's arm. "It's all right! I'm safe—safe!"

"But I don't understand!" said Handforth, staring. "I can't see that you were in any danger—"

"But I was!" panted the valet. "If the Ameer had known that you were alive, he

would kill me for this. He would have me executed for saving you!"

"But he *will* know, won't he?" asked Handforth blankly. "I'm not dead, and—"

"But his Highness will make no inquiries, and he will take it for granted that the soldiers have dealt with your body!" said Smith cunningly. "Don't you understand? The chances are, he'll never find out that you're alive."

(Concluded on page 43.)

# ATHLETES TRAIN ON IT



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milk in every

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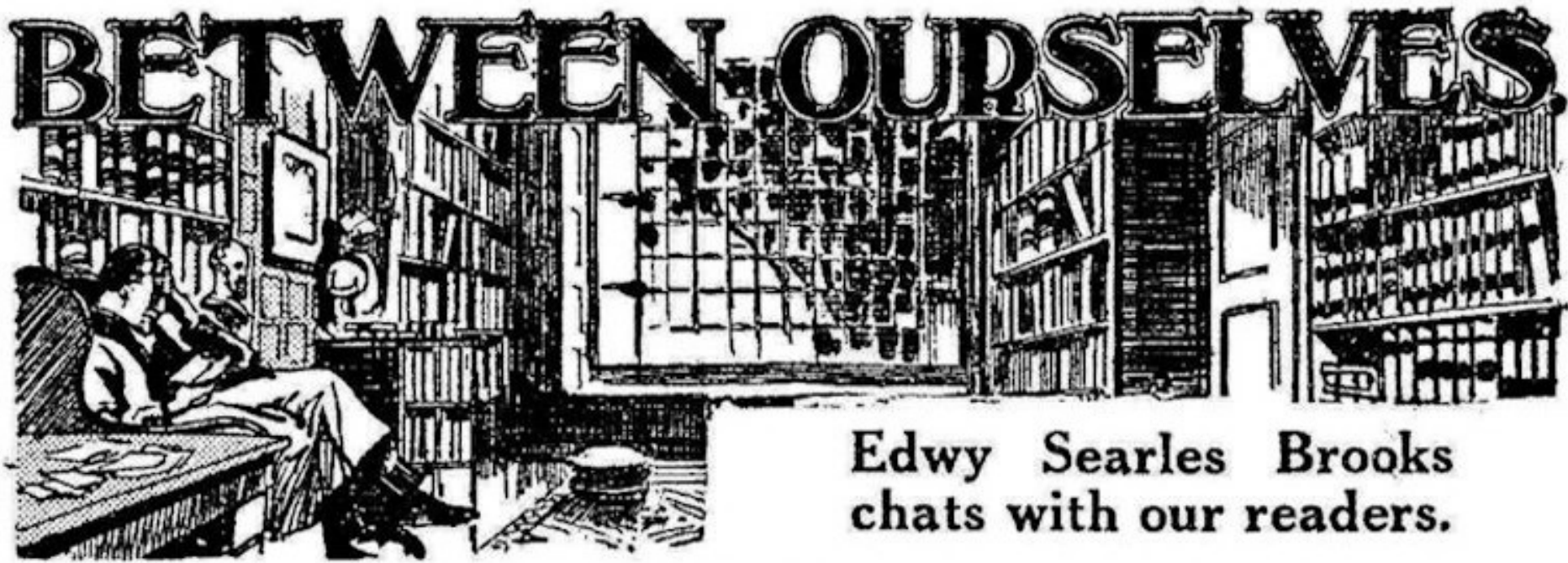
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Edwy Searles Brooks  
chats with our readers.

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., LONDON, E.C.4.

SO you want some more "real school stories," as you call them—Sid Waite (Highbury, N.5). Well, what about the yarns featuring Cuthbert Chambers and Travers? They're school stories, aren't they? Still, after the Summer Holiday stories, I'll let you have some real "jape" yarns, dealing with the River House School rivalry. As a matter of fact, I'm preparing these tales at the moment. You know, it's so jolly difficult to please everybody.

\* \* \*

I'm afraid I can't go into a long description of Soccer in these columns—Ronald Mason (Melbourne)—but if you want to know more about this type of football, you can buy plenty of sports papers dealing with Soccer yarns. And every now and again I describe a football match in my own stories. Yes, Bert Hinkler, the Australian airman, is a one hundred per cent he-man. All honour to him for his wonderful flight. I have seen him flying over here on several occasions.

\* \* \*

Yes—Emslie R. T. Bryan (Chingford)—I do have time to go to amusements occasionally. But one of my chief amusements is reading your letters, old man. This one I am now commenting upon is the 23rd weekly letter you have sent me. The trouble is, although your letters are interesting, there is very little that I can reply to or comment upon. So you mustn't be disheartened if you only get an occasional word. Please remember that I receive all your letters, and that I read them with much enjoyment.

\* \* \*

If your mother—Roy Stevens (East Prahan, Melbourne)—considers that "Between Ourselves" and my stories are all "trash and rubbish," it is my misfortune. Still, when you show her this she will be compelled to alter her mind a little, won't she? She will know, at least, that I do actually conduct this page personally. And perhaps, if I'm lucky, she will now do me the justice of reading at least one of my yarns.

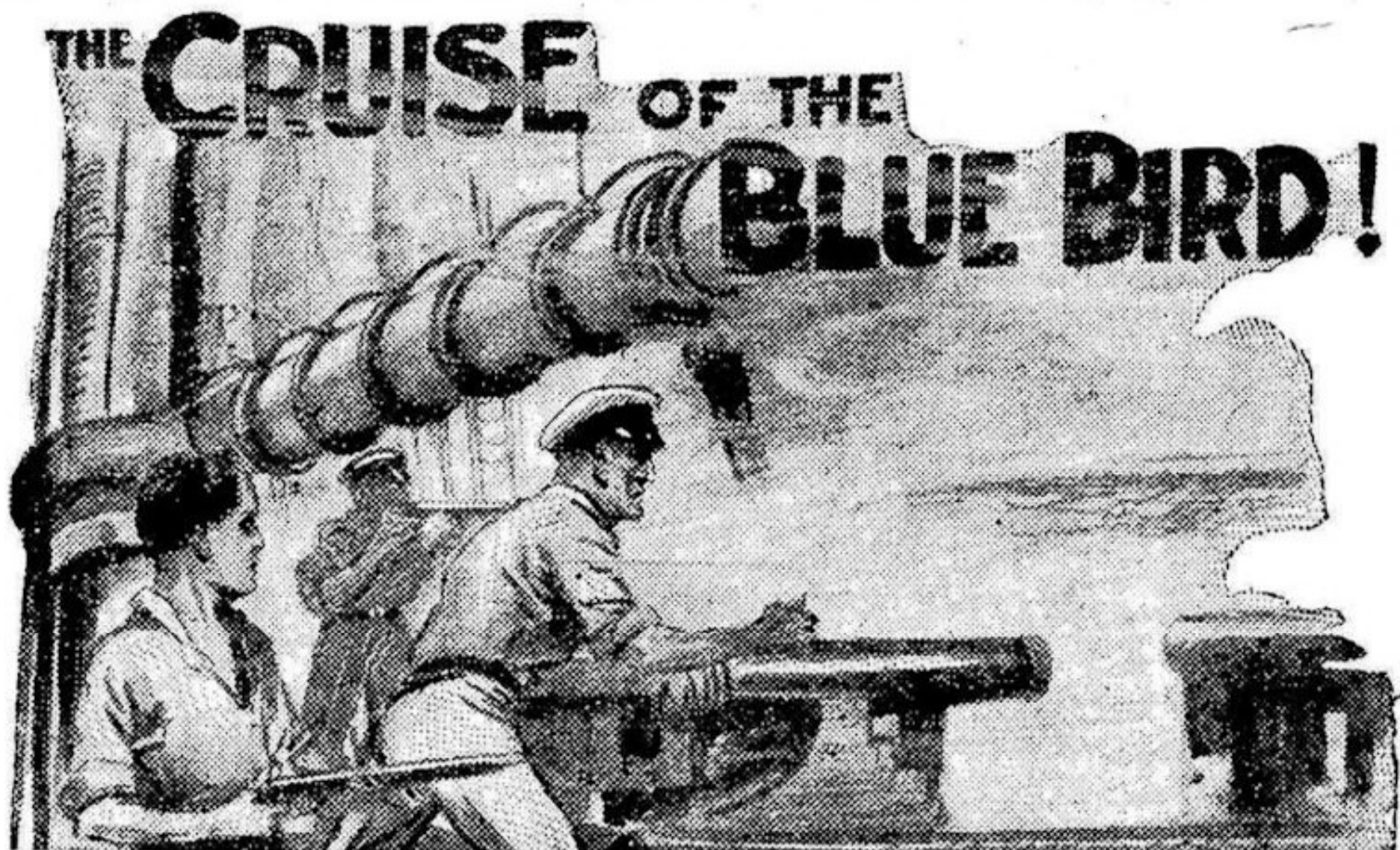
There's a bit of your letter—Jack Shannon (Adelaide)—that I really must repeat, and I hope that your dad won't mind: "I was sitting down the other night to read the Old Paper, when my father asked me to go up to the tobacconist to get him a tin of tobacco. Well, I put the book on the table, and went on the errand. When I came back, I was surprised to see dad reading the NELSON LEE! After reading a couple of chapters, he started to praise it up, and not a fortnight before he was getting on to me for idling my time away reading the Old Paper! Now he actually gives me the twopence for it." Which only goes to show, as I have said before, that fathers are difficult propositions. If you ask them to read one of the yarns, there's nothing doing. But if they pick one up themselves, they're soon converted. It's a difficult world, old man.

\* \* \*

Glad to hear the Old Paper is booming so well in Melbourne—Jack Fairhall (Melbourne). You tell me that the NELSON LEE LIBRARY is offered for sale every Tuesday morning out there, but if you try to get one on Tuesday evening, anywhere in Melbourne or suburbs, you will practically always be told that "they have sold out." Which is, as you very pointedly remark, an excellent reason for ordering your copy in advance. There's nothing like it, old chap. In my opinion, every reader should order his, or her, copy in advance. It's the sensible thing to do. Then, if you fail to get your copy, you can have a good old row with the newsagent. But if you don't order it in advance, then you can only have a row with yourself. And what's the good of that?

Edwy Searles Brooks

THE PEARL HUNTERS ! Looking for pearls is a perilous job—but Ned and Jack soon forget the discomforts when they find a rare and valuable specimen !



By COUTTS BRISBANE

WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENED :

CAPTAIN MANBY is skipper of the schooner Blue Bird, which is bound for the Malea atolls, in the Southern Pacific. He is accompanied by his son

JACK MANBY, and his nephew

NED SUTTON, two adventure-loving boys.

From a native Captain Manby has learned that in these atolls is an uncharted island—supposed to be practically inaccessible—the lagoon of which is full of pearl shell. The captain is successful in finding this unknown island; and to his surprise discovers that it is inhabited by a number of French castaways. They appear to be

very friendly, but later the captain is not too sure about them. One of their number obtains from him some dynamite for mining purposes. Later Jack and Ned go ashore. They see two of the Frenchmen, named Benoist and Pascal, disappear into a kind of cave. A few moments later there is a terrific explosion. Benoist appears, shouting that Pascal has been killed. Jack and Ned dash up to the cave and, assisted by Benoist, clear away the debris in the hope that they may be able yet to save the unfortunate Pascal. (Now read on.)

Explanations !

THE interior of the cave, which was little more than a dozen feet in depth, was disclosed, heaped up with more debris.

Under it, one hand outflung as though in a last effort to drag himself to safety, lay the unfortunate Pascal. One glance was enough to make certain that he was dead.

The boys drew back, pale-faced. They turned towards the Frenchman, who, with goggling eyes and half-open mouth, stared at his comrade.

"Well? What exactly happened?" demanded Ned crisply. "That was slow fuse that Captain Manby gave you. I heard him telling you how to fix the detonator. It should have been safe enough. How much fuse did you use?"

"As the captain said. About so much." Benoist indicated about two feet with outspread hands. "Pascal, he knew also, for I

had told him. Also, he had been a gunner in the navy. He was a Moco, like the other sailor, Voisin. He lit the fuse. He says it was quite right. He knew well about such things. He had been a gunner."

"But how on earth did he come to make such a mistake? Haven't you a notion?" asked Jack.

"I do not know. He was smoking some of the tobacco your generous father gave us. Perhaps he may have dropped a spark on the fuse close to the dynamite. I do not know. I came out when he said he would light it."

"Well, the poor chap's done for," said Ned. "Better come down to our boat, and we'll row you back."

Benoist nodded sadly, and followed them down the hill to the beach. They rowed him up the lagoon and put him ashore beside the French boat, which had just landed a small



quantity of shell. At once he told the bad news to the other Frenchmen with a great flood of words and much gesticulating, in the midst of which the boys pushed off and made for the schooner.

"They don't seem very sorry about it," commented Jack. "And I saw one fellow actually grinning. Benoist gave him a jacketing for it, though."

"They were sore with Pascal because of the advice he gave them about opening the shells and that pearl getting spoiled. But they are a queer lot. I shan't be sorry to see the last of them," said Ned.

At that moment they came alongside the schooner. Captain Manby looked grave when, the boys having climbed on board, he heard their tale.

"It's very odd," he said. "That was the fellow I saved from being half killed, eh? I suppose it's a coincidence, but I don't know how the accident came to happen. If the man really had been a gunner he must have known something about fuses and explosives. With slow fuse the dynamite was safe enough. And Benoist was cut up, eh?"

"He went on as though he were half mad. By the way, sir," added Ned, "what is a Moco? He said Pascal was one, and the other sailor, too—a man called Voisin."

"A Moco is a man from the South of France. They're called that in the French navy. Ah, they're going along the beach. I suppose they are going to bury the poor fellow."

From the schooner's deck they could see the Frenchman walking along the beach. Presently they turned into the bush, and were lost to sight. Later, when work was done for the day, Benoist came off to the Blue Bird. He looked very mournful, and wiped his eyes ere he came on deck.

He repeated what he had said to the boys, with the additional information that Pascal was blind in one eye.

"Perhaps it was this that caused the fatality," he said. "Who knows? He may not have seen the fatal spark that perhaps fell from his pipe. He called to me that he was about to light the fuse. I ran out, expecting that he would follow. There was a little delay. I called to him to know if all was well, and then came the terrible explosion. I am desolated. We buried him where he had fallen. Tears flowed from all eyes."

"Yet last night you all wanted to kick him to death," put in the captain dryly.

"That was what you call a leetle bit of temper," explained Benoist, with a shrug. "With us it means nothing. We are—what you call it?—more easily excite than you English. That adds the more to our sorrow. I go, my captain, to spend a night of un-availing remorse. Bon soir, my captain, gentlemen!"

And again wiping his eyes, Benoist dropped into his outrigger and paddled ashore.

"What d'you make of it?" asked Manby of Sinclair.

"Oh, I s'pose a spark lit the fuse close to

the cartridge while the chap was lighting the end, as Benoist says. But I don't know. Anyhow, I don't like the fellow. He's like a parrot. He talks too much, and he strikes me as being a bit of a hypocrite."

"That's the way he strikes me, too," whispered Ned to Jack. "Though I didn't like to say so before. Let's turn in. I'm fagged out."

### The Pearl!

"TODAY it will be your pleasing task to search that first batch of shell for the delightful but elusive pearl," said Captain Manby jovially, as he sat down to breakfast on the following morning. "I am going underneath, where I will escape the charming—er—effluvia. Mr. Sinclair will show you how to work for the common good. Phew! I can wind 'em even here."

The schooner had been moved from her anchorage on account of the smell of the rotting oysters, yet it seemed to float over the whole lagoon. It became almost overpowering as the vessel was taken back to the old anchorage close to the beach on the reef.

"Good hunting!" cried Manby, as he and Tom Tiddler donned the diving suits and went, accompanied by Big Timo and ten other men. "Remember that nothing worth having is got without pains."

"Well, we're having 'em," muttered Jack, trying not to breathe the over-ripe atmosphere. "What do we do, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Get those buckets and that canvas trough ashore, Baro," ordered Sinclair. "What we have to do is simple enough. Baro will pour water to wash away the rotted flesh out of the shells, and you two will search the stuff as it flows into the trough. That's all. I'll show you. C'mon!"

Pearl seeking didn't seem quite so desirable to the pair as they landed on the beach, for the smell was terrible, and the first batch of oysters the most abominable thing they had ever seen.

They hung back from the trough while Baro put in shells and poured water on them. Sinclair, however, wasn't so squeamish. He plunged his hands into the slimy mass, and called upon Baro for more water.

"You'll get used to it. You won't notice it soon," he prophesied. "Hallo! What have we here? Trickle it in, Baro."

Water poured into his palms. Something white and gleaming appeared. It was a white pearl of fair size, but irregularly shaped.

"They call these baroque pearls. They aren't worth much, but every little helps," cried Sinclair cheerily, and dropped the thing into a cigar-box lined with cotton-wool. "Come on! Lucky dips!"

With compressed lips and averted eyes, the two lads took their places beside the trough and plunged their hands into the mess. Baro poured water, fetched more shells, dropping those examined in a heap which another man

removed to dry and pile ready for stowing aboard.

Presently Jack felt something hard under his fingers, fished it out, and held up a grey object about the size of a pea.

"It's a pearl right enough, but it isn't worth much. No one wants grey pearls. Pity it isn't black. Go ahead. Better luck next time," said Sinclair.

Meanwhile, Ned worked on, getting nothing at all. Presently, however, he, too, found some hard substances in his hands. He held them up for inspection.

"Seed pearls." We'll find a lot of 'em at the bottom of the trough when we're done with the day's batch, but they're worth very little. They'll be sold like milk—so much a pint!" laughed Sinclair. "You can't expect to draw a prize every time. Get on with it!"

Ten minutes passed, then Jack drew another prize—a small pearl, but beautifully round and lustrous.

"That's a first chop one. If it had been bigger it would have been worth more, but it's good. Go ahead. You never know what's round the corner!" cried Sinclair.

He grinned silently as he noted that the boys no longer seemed to notice the appalling odour. The lust of the hunt was upon them. They examined shell after shell, while Baro poured water, sweating under the hot sun.

And then, after no one had found anything but seed for nearly half an hour, it happened. Jack took a rather small shell from the second man who was now carrying a fresh

supply to the trough, and thrust his fingers somewhat negligently into the slimy mass. Next moment a smothered gasp escaped him.

"Gee-houlikins!" he exclaimed. "I suppose it's another baroque, but—"

But it wasn't. There in his palm lay a pearl nearly as large as a walnut, round, lustrous, and a brilliant scarlet.

"Well—I'm—cooked—in an oven!" bawled Sinclair.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" came the voice of Captain Manby. He had been resting with his helmet off on the gunwale of the cutter. "Has something bitten you?"

"Come ashore! Come here, sir! Quick!" The cutter surged in under eager oars. Captain Manby, still wearing his lead-soled

diving boots, waddled up the beach as fast as he could, and gasped as he saw what Jack held.

"A red pearl! A really red one!" he whispered. "I say, Sinclair, d'you know that so far as I've heard, there are only about a dozen known to be in existence, and half of those are a bad shape or colour. This ought to be worth a good deal, eh?"

"If it were white, I'd say about seven or eight thousand dollars, but—oh, hang it, sir, you can't put a value on a thing like this! It depends on what someone is willing to pay to possess a unique jewel. Say five, or six, or seven, or eight thousand pounds. I don't know. Anyhow, I should say it's worth the



Captain Manby gasped as he saw the huge, round, lustrous pearl in Jack's hand. For he knew that that pearl was worth a small fortune!

shell and all the rest of the pearls we're likely to get for weeks. It's a whacking fine bit o' luck."

"Carry on, lads!" boomed Captain Manby. "If you can find a score more we'll all go in for a round-the-world cruise in a pukka motor-yacht with gold fittings. Carry on!"

He waddled back to the boat, and with feverish energy Mr. Sinclair and the boys proceeded with the hunt for hour after hour, till a frenzied banging on the ship's gong told that Ah Moy had grown tired of waiting for them to return to dinner.

No other find had rewarded them. No matter. They would find more before the evening or next day. They carried the treasure back in a special wad of cotton-

wool and Mr. Sinclair's handkerchief, and, setting it on the table in a box all to itself, feasted their eyes on it during dinner. Even the usually self-contained and apathetic Ah Moy was moved out of himself.

"Velly fine pearl! Velly fine colour. Chineese man pay heap big price for them pearl, cap'n. Lucky colour. Not showing them fella 'long beach?"

He nodded in the general direction of the Frenchmen's camp.

"Oh, we won't go showing it round promiscuously, but it might be well to show it to Benoist. He knows nothing about pearls, and might think a red one valueless. But you don't appear to like these Frenchmen, Ah Moy?" remarked Captain Manby.

"Not knowing," murmured Ah Moy, and, looking inscrutable, glided out after another long, appraising glance at the pearl.

"Better lock the thing up, sir," suggested Sinclair.

Manby nodded. He put the pearl in a drawer of his desk and locked it.

"That'll do for the present," he said. "I'll put it and the others in the safe later. Now, boys, back to the hunt!"

But it seemed as though the finding of the red pearl had put a stop to the luck. The hunters found a few more, but they were all small, or misshapen, or of poor colour.

"It doesn't matter, though," said Mr. Sinclair cheerfully, when they knocked off, a little before sundown, and, after a dip in the lagoon to refresh themselves, went aboard. "We've no cause to grumble even if we get nothing but seeds for a week. I've known men work for a month and get nothing worth more than twenty dollars. It's all a toss up."

#### Missing!

THEY had supper and sat down on the deck by the open door of the deck cabin. Scarcely were they seated than the look-out hailed, and Benoist, with two other men, came alongside. Captain Manby invited them to share the coffee which Ah Moy had just served, and they seated themselves in the circle.

"I come to ask you again about how we go to take the pearls out. They are now begin to smell—ah, so much!—the first ones," began Benoist. "You say to wash them? And is it right that black ones and the pale red—what you call it? Oh, yes, pink! Are they truly worth more than the white?"

"Yes. I'll show you something in a minute," replied Manby, and detailed the method of washing the oysters. "Now, I'll show you one which we found to-day," he concluded. He went into the cabin and returned with the box containing the red pearl. "How's that?" he chuckled, with boyish pleasure. "A beauty, eh? If you find one or two like that you won't need to stay in the Solomons to grow vines. You'll all be able to go back to France."

"Wonderful!" breathed Benoist reverently, taking the red pearl in his palm and gloating

over it. "Amazing! This must be worth a small fortune."

"It is," replied Sinclair.

Benoist passed it back to Manby, who put it in its box, and, without replacing the lid, stepped into the cabin and laid it on the top of his desk, where it gleamed like a red coal in the rays of the hanging lamp. "More coffee, Ah Moy," he said, as he sat down.

"Come one lil mlinit, Cap'n," murmured Ah Moy. "Glet tlay."

He stepped into the cabin, took the tray from the table, paused before the desk as though admiring the pearl, then turned down the lamp.

"Him smokee," he said softly, and pattered away on his rope-soled shoes.

"We have not work so much to-day," Benoist said. "We are mournful because of our poor Pascal."

The other two Frenchmen, who had said nothing so far, murmured in acquiescence as he repeated his words in French.

"So we have agree that if we find pearls, his share shall go to his wife, if he have one in France," continued Benoist. "That is but just." He sipped the coffee which Ah Moy handed to him, and pointed up at the peak dimly seen against the star-spangled sky. "You know that volcano is what you call active, captain? Not fierce, but still steady boil of lava. One day he erupt and then mebbe no more island."

"Well, I hope he doesn't start till we have cleared the lagoon and taken you all to civilisation again," replied Manby, with a laugh.

"It may not be for many years. It may never be at all. With a volcano all things are possible," murmured Benoist. "And now we must go. Early to-morrow we put our sorrow behind us and work most hard. Gentlemen, I bid you good-night."

Everybody rose and strolled along the deck with him to the gangway, the two other Frenchmen following more slowly. The group halted as the outrigger was hauled in, admiring the stretch of the lagoon twinkling under the light of stars more brilliant than Europe ever sees. Then the three embarked, and with a chorus of "Bon soir, messieurs," paddled away at a great rate.

"They're in a hurry to get to their downies," said Ned in an undertone. "For their own sakes, I hope they work harder to-morrow than they've been doing before. Hadn't you better lock up that pearl, uncle? You left it lying on your desk."

"I'm a fine sort of treasurer to go and forget it!" exclaimed Manby, with a laugh. "I'll put it in the safe right away. Let's have one last look at it."

Together they passed into the cabin—to halt and gaze on the threshold. There was the desk, there was the box with its bed of cotton-wool standing on it, but—the pearl was gone!

*(The valuable pearl missing—and three of the Frenchmen have just left! Are they responsible for the theft? Look out for a big surprise in next week's ripping instalment, boys!)*

## THE PALACE IN THE CLOUDS I

*(Continued from page 37.)*

"But—but—"

Young gent, there's only one thing to be done!" continued Smith. "You've got to be hidden!"

"Hidden!"

"Here, in this suite!" said the valet. "If you're discovered, it'll mean death for both of us! Don't you understand that? Death for both of us! So your only chance is to remain hidden here. Things ain't so bad, for all! These are the rooms that you young gents are to have for your own use, and the others, mebbe, will be able to feed you. But you'll have to stay hidden!"

And Edward Oswald Handforth grasped the significance of the situation.

He was alive—he was saved. But, in the future, he would have to "lie low." And, then and there, Smith prepared a hiding-place for him.

In the dining-room above, Handforth's death was mourned by his chums and by the other members of the party.

They thought him dead—whereas he was being concealed by the friendly Smith. It was a situation that was full of possibilities.

Fate had played into the hands of the Meer's prisoners. As yet, it was impossible to see what the result of this situation could be, but every member of the party knew that their host was a devil in human form.

They were captives on the crag, without the slightest hope of ever escaping. Their host had come out in his true colours, and the future was black and forbidding.

But with Edward Oswald Handforth present, dead, and really alive—well, anything was capable of developing!

THE END.

*The St. Frank's holiday adventurers seem to be up to their necks in trouble, but, as Nelson Lee says, "While there's life there's hope!" Next week's yarn, entitled, "The Meer's Prisoners!" is a real treat.*

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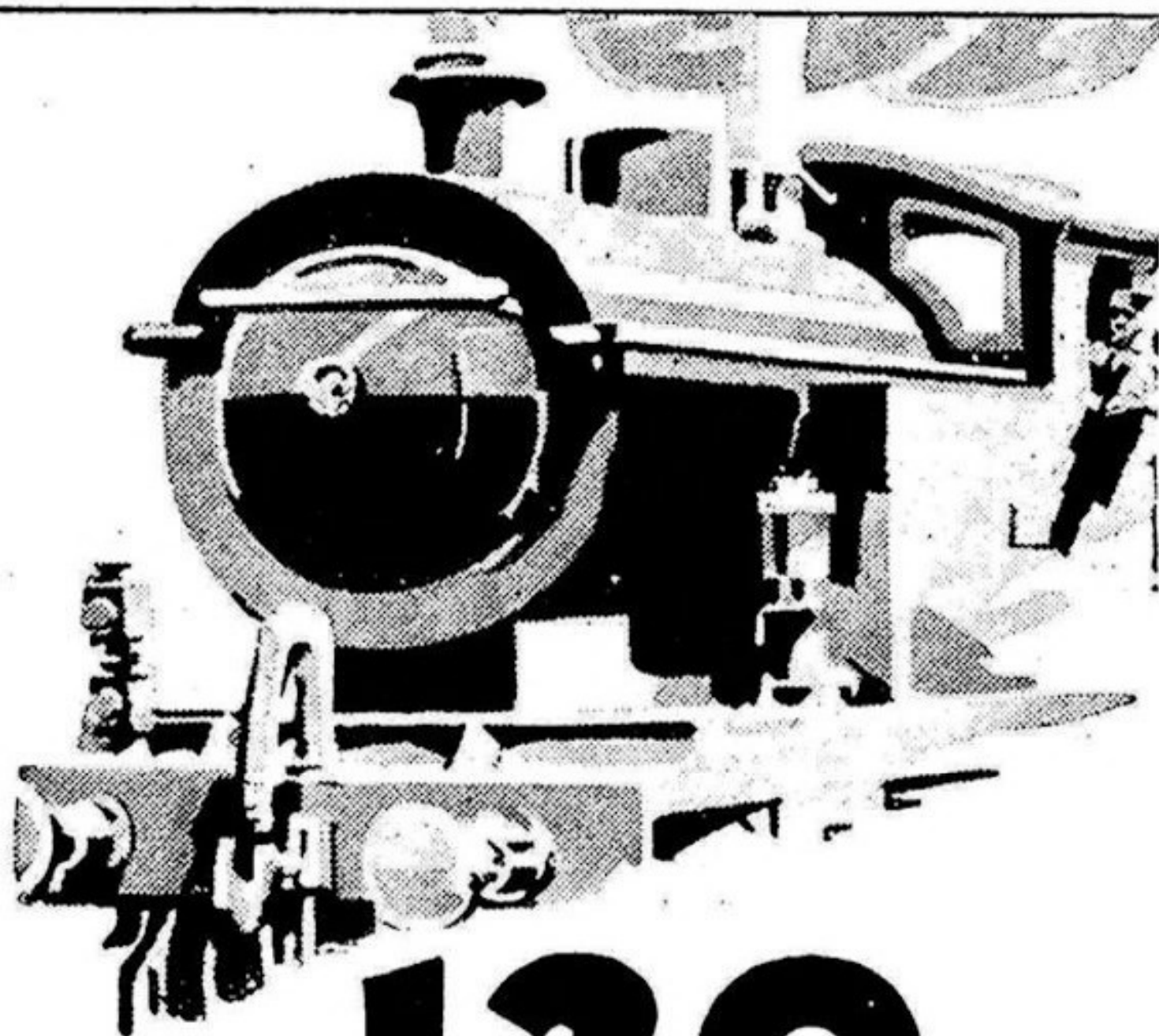
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