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New Series No. 146. OUT ON WEDNESDAY. February 16th, 1929.

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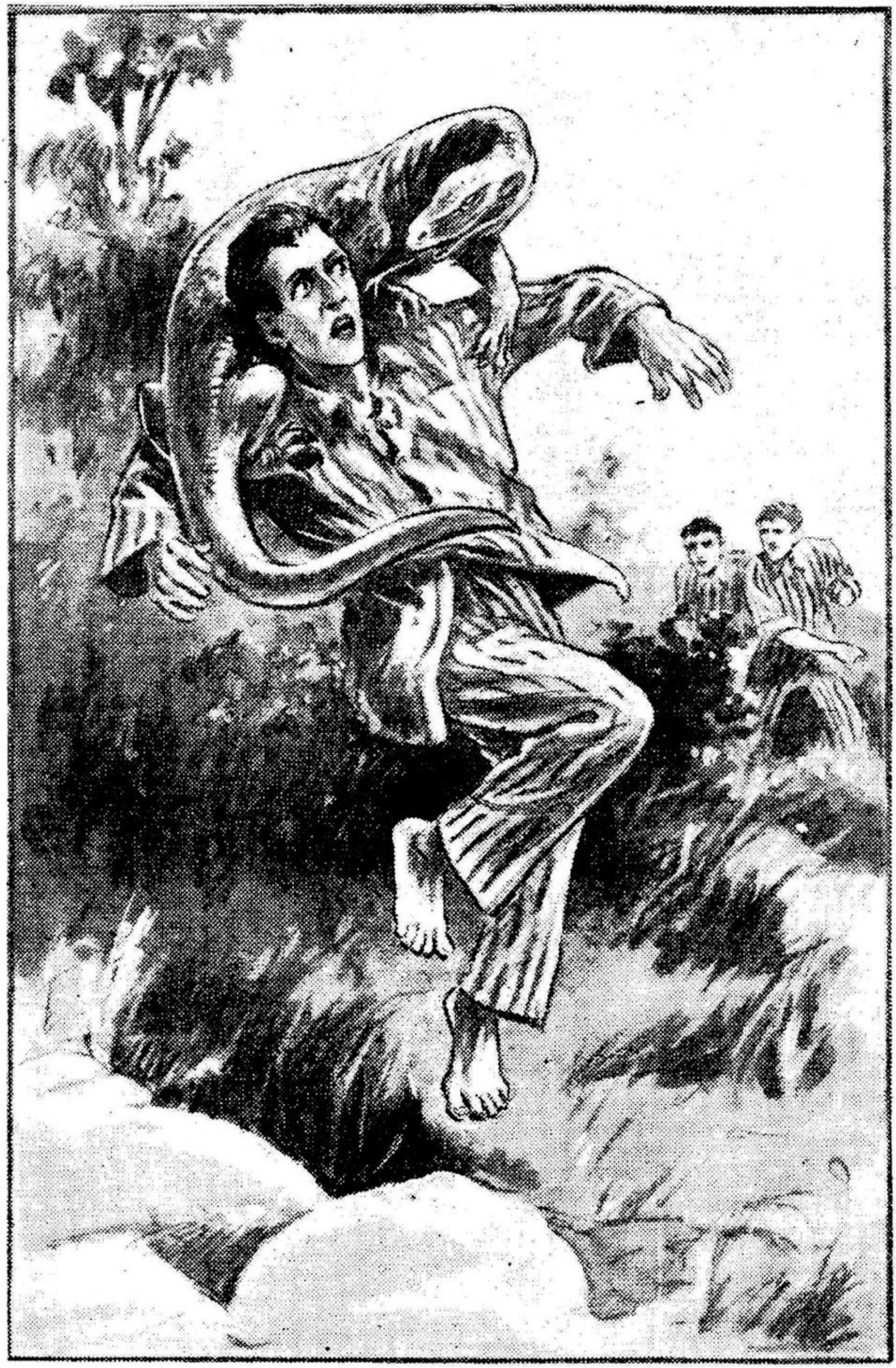

The great lizard-like thing streaked up Archie Glenthorne's body and curled itself round his neck. Its fork-like tongue darted out within an inch of his face. "Good gad!" gurgled Archie faintly.

Follow the Amazing Adventures of Nipper & Co.—

IN UNKNOWN AUSTRALIA!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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

" . . . Remember, boys, we are like a lot of Crusoes cast on a desert island without food, and without clothing!" says Nelson Lee. And such is the predicament of the St. Frank's touring school! Read all about Nipper & Co.'s amazing adventures in this gripping yarn of the Australian wilds.—EDITOR.

CHAPTER 1.

Awakening to Realities!

ARCHIBALD WINSTON DEREK GLENTHORNE, of the Remove at St. Frank's, stirred uneasily, half-awake and half-asleep. He opened his eyes, and then closed them quickly. The sunshine was dazzling, and he was now aware of the fact that he was feeling uncomfortably hot. Moreover, there were aches and pains in various parts of his anatomy.

"Good gad!" he muttered, sitting up.

He opened his eyes again and beheld a dazzling, bewildering confusion of red and orange and blue. He started violently. Then he realised, with a slight feeling of relief, that these brilliant colours were only those of his silken pyjamas. But in the full sunlight of the tropic day they not only seemed startling, but positively aggressive.

Archie did not trouble himself to think things out. He lazily fell back again and pondered over the general situation. Of course, it was perfectly priceless to be in Australia, and all that sort of thing, but it had to be admitted that Queensland—or some parts of it, at least—in the month of February was dashed hot.

In a vague sort of way Archie remembered how the School Ship had crossed the oceans; how all the fellows had watched the Test Match at Adelaide; how they had all started off into the heart of Australia for the benefit of their education.

Half St. Frank's had come on this trip—the occupants of the Ancient House and the Modern House. All the other fellows were still at St. Frank's, keeping the flag flying. On this world tour, the boys were carrying on with their school work, just as at home. It was inevitable, of course, that there had been one or two interruptions, but on the whole everything was satisfactory. Quite a lot of work had been done, and the school was showing itself readily adaptable and anxious to do well. Mr. Nelson Lee, who was in full charge of the party, had very little to grumble at.

And Archie Glenthorne languidly kept his eyes closed as he mused over the situation.

Of course, it was all very well to come out here into a part of Australia that was practically unknown, but there were certain disadvantages about the trip which Archie disapproved of.

He had nothing to complain about when it came to a question of travelling comfort, or of feeding, or of sleeping. Sir Arthur Brampton, the famous Australian millionaire transport magnate, had provided the school with a perfectly marvellous fleet of motor-coaches. Super-motor-coaches of enormous size, and especially designed for travelling over the trackless wastes of lesser-known Australia.

All this, Archie assured himself, was perfectly topping. But it was undeniable that the life was most frightfully strenuous. Always on the move, always dashing hither and dashing thither. The school had had a splendid time at the Dodd station. Jerry Dodd's father, who owned a chunk of Australia about as big as the county of Sussex, had been remarkably hospitable. And after a general jollification the train of coaches had moved on—further into the wilds.

Now they were hundreds of miles from any township—cut off from civilisation. It wasn't quite certain whether they were still in Queensland, or whether they had got into Northern Territory. Anyhow, it was practically tropical, and tremendously hot.

At this point Archie Glenthorne became puzzled. His wits began to get sharpened. Now that he came to think of it, it seemed frightfully peculiar that he was sleeping out in the open under the hot sun, clad only in his pyjamas.

In fact, the situation was grotesque. Probably he was dreaming. Yes, that was it.

"I mean to say, absolutely not!" he muttered. "That sort of thing isn't done!"

He was vaguely aware of voices close at hand, and he opened his eyes again. Rummily enough, he was wide awake. There wasn't any doubt about it. If he wasn't awake, how could he have opened his eyes like this? A dazzling array of red and orange and blue told him that he was undoubtedly wearing his pyjamas.

He sat up, fully alert now—indeed, somewhat shocked. The first thing that struck him was the extraordinary fact that he was sitting on the ground—on the hard, bare ground. And he had been using a heap of dried grass for a pillow!

"Odds mysteries and horrors!" he ejaculated blankly.

He could now understand why he was aching so much. Being unaccustomed to such a hard couch, his bones were feeling the effects. And now, as he looked further afield, he beheld a strange mass of metal—a twisted, grotesque, nightmare-like pile of debris—which, nevertheless, bore a curious resemblance to a vehicle.

And then, in a flood, full recollection returned to Archie Glenthorne.

"Good gad!" he gasped hoarsely.

He staggered to his feet and groped for his monocle. This was a purely mechanical action, for his monocle wasn't there. He stared at the nightmare-like motor-coach. It wasn't the only one. There were others—many of them; and they were all twisted, warped, skeleton-like caricatures. Not a soul was near them, whilst overhead a kind of heat-haze hovered.

There was a lot of trees near by, where men were working—building crude kinds of shelters with sticks and grasses.

And now Archie could see the sprawling forms of dozens of other St. Frank's fellows—seniors and juniors. They seemed to be everywhere; the majority of them were sleeping, and, without exception, they were wearing nothing but pyjamas!

"Absolutely!" said Archie, taking a deep breath. "Stranded, what? I remember now, dash it!"

He felt his heart beating more rapidly, for he had recalled the tragic happening of the previous night. All those marvellous motor-coaches were now nothing but wreckage—with their contents! Everything had been lost in the all-devouring flames!

Archie felt sobered as he remembered the details. Pierre Verano, the chief mechanic of the outfit, had gone mad, and in his insanity he had opened all the petrol-taps on the coaches, and had driven away in the great tender which contained all the spare supplies of spirit.

Some distance away the madman had met with an accident. The tender had crashed and had exploded; and the flames, leaping across the intervening space, had involved all the coaches. The petrol-soaked ground had made it impossible for anybody to attempt any salvage work.

The whole party, staggered and dumbfounded, had been compelled to stand by, and to watch the coaches consumed in the flames. Verano had had a grudge against Sir Arthur Brampton, and it was generally assumed that in his madness he had intended to leave the party stranded, making good his own escape. But disaster had overtaken him—and that disaster was partially shared by every member of the party. Verano was dead, having been blown to atoms in the explosion. And the St. Frank's crowd, hundreds of miles from civilisation, was without any means of transport.

Everything had been lost in the fire—clothes, food, cooking utensils, bedding, rugs, water—everything!

It was a grim reality for Archie Glenthorne to awaken to!

CHAPTER 2.

Stranded in the Bush!

"DDS disasters and catastrophes!"

Archie Glenthorne uttered that exclamation as he came to a full realisation of the position. Of course, he had been sleeping—just the same as the other fellows. He remembered now. They had all been disturbed in the early part of the night, and, owing to the fire, there had been great

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disorder and confusion. It was not until after dawn that the fellows, tired and weary, had been advised by Nelson Lee to get some sleep.

Many of the seniors and juniors had protested that they could not sleep, but within ten minutes none of them had been awake. Archie knew by the position of the sun that the morning was still comparatively young, but he had had several hours of sound sleep.

"Good gad!"

He stared fascinatedly at something on the ground—something which was moving near two or three of the other sleepers. It was red and big and ugly—an enormous insect of some kind with horrible, gigantic claws!

Archie picked up a stick from near by and crept nearer. The insect moved more quickly, and it seemed to Archie that the frightful thing was leering at him.

Slash!

He brought his stick down violently, and the great red insect scurried off, disappearing into a tunnel-like hole. At the same moment two or three of the sleepers sat up, awakened by that thud so close to their heads.

"Hallo!" said one of them dully. "What's the time? By George! It's pretty hot here! Eh? Why, what the——"

Edward Oswald Handforth, the celebrated leader of Study D, looked about him in bewilderment. Nipper, the Remove captain, sprang to his feet, fully awake, uttering a yell.

"Look out, you fellows!" he shouted. "It's a scorpion!"

"What?" gasped Handforth.

That great red insect had appeared from the hole again—finding, perhaps, that it was not really a tunnel. It swerved, and went scuttling down into another opening in the earth.

"I tried to kill it, dear old boy," said Archie. "I mean, a somewhat frightful creature, what?"

"A scorpion, Archie—with claws as big as crayfish," said Nipper, breathing hard. "Oh, my hat! And we've been sleeping here! Those things are dangerous. They're poisonous, and they can bite horribly."

"Absolutely," nodded Archie. "That's what I thought, laddie."

Other fellows were getting to their feet now, uneasy and startled, having heard this brief snatch of conversation concerning scorpions. They included Church and McClure—Handforth's chums—and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and Travers and Jimmy Potts.

"What's the time?" asked Handforth.

"It must be nearly mid-morning," said Nipper. "We can't tell exactly, because we haven't any watches."

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Everything was lost in the fire," said Nipper. "The men seem to be pretty busy over there," he added, as he shaded his eyes against the sunlight. "What are they doing? Building shelters, by the look of it."

"Shelters?" repeated Handforth. "What for?"

"Getting ready for to-night, I dare say, dear old fellow," put in Vivian Travers.

"To-night? But why?" said Handforth. "We're not going to stay in this place all day, are we?"

Nelson Lee, seeing some of the juniors moving about, came over to them. The famous schoolmaster-detective was looking hot and grimy, for he had been working as hard as any of the other men. His pyjama trousers were turned up nearly to his knees, and his sleeves were rolled right up, too. This airy attire in such a climate was by no means distasteful. By day, at all events, heavier clothing was not necessary.

"I was hoping that you boys would sleep until mid-day, at least," said Lee. "Feeling hungry, eh?"

"What's the good of feeling hungry, sir?" asked Nipper. "All the food has gone, and——"

"Some of the men have gone off, searching for food," said Lee. "We have already secured some rabbits and other game. A meal of some kind will materialise towards mid-day."

"That's cheerful news, anyhow, sir," said Travers. "Even if we only get a couple of mouthfuls each it'll be something to be going on with. But how about water?"

"Mercifully, there is a plentiful supply of water near at hand," said Lee. "There is a stream, only three or four hundred yards away, tucked behind those patches of scrub yonder. There is a water-hole, too—and that will be very handy this evening, no doubt, for it will attract game. So we might be able to get hold of some supper."

He spoke lightly, although his feelings were heavy. They would need to obtain large supplies of food to provide all these mouths with meals, for the party was a very large one In addition to all the boys there were several masters, and there were the coach drivers, the waiters, the attendants, the mechanics, and others. It was these men who were now working so hard over by the trees.

"But why build these shelters, sir?" asked Handforth blankly. "Why should we stay here until to-morrow? Why not make a move at once?"

"A move in which direction, Handforth?"

"Eh? Well, any direction, sir," said Edward Oswald. "Does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal," replied Lee. "When we do make a move we shall go back on our own tracks. Fortunately they will be easily followed, since the great coaches have left a very clear trail."

"But it's hundreds of miles to the nearest bit of civilisation, sir!" protested Church.

"Yet we know well enough that if we follow the coach-tracks we shall eventually get back to safety," said Lee. "If, on the other hand, we strike off at random into the bush, we shall only get ourselves into further trouble. It would be a very unwise thing to do."

"It would be little better than suicide, sir," nodded Nipper.

"Let me remind you, boys, that the coaches traversed a desert region yesterday," continued Lee. "Throughout most of the day we were crossing a barren, waterless waste, with nothing but scrub and cactus in sight. And since the way back to civilisation lies across that waste, we must prepare ourselves for the trip. To start off to-day, without food and without clothing, would be the sheerest folly."

Handforth scratched his head

"But I can't see the good of waiting, sir," he said. "We shan't get any clothes, no matter how long we stay here. And as for food——"

"Owing to the presence of water in this particular district there is every likelihood that there will be plenty of game," said Nelson Lee. "Our object, therefore, will be to capture as much of this meat as possible, and to dry it. We must fashion vessels, too, for the carrying of water, and we must provide ourselves with footgear and hats. Perhaps these can be fashioned out of grasses. I don't know yet. All our ingenuity must be set to work. Remember, boys, we are like a lot of Crusoes, cast on a desert island without tools, without food and without clothing."

The juniors were silent. They realised to the full how true were Nelson Lee's words. It would be madness indeed to leave this spot if they were unprepared. One fortunate aspect of this grave position was to be found in the fact that there was water near at hand; also that, great as the disaster was, no lives had been lost However, the prospect was very grave, if not entirely hopeless.

CHAPTER 3.

The Schoolboy Crusoes!

HANDFORTH was an optimist, and he refused to take a serious view of the situation.

"There's nothing to worry about," he declared cheerfully. "Of course, it's rotten losing all those wonderful coaches, but I expect they were insured. And in any case Sir Arthur Brampton is a multi-millionaire."

"That's not the point, Handy," said Church. "The material loss needn't count much. But what about us? How about getting out of this predicament?"

"Being stranded, you mean?" said Handforth. "Oh, that's nothing much! We've only got to get back to Mr. Dodd's ranch."

"I suppose you mean Mr. Dodd's station?" asked McClure.

"What's the difference?"

"Nothing much—only that the word 'ranch' isn't used in Australia."

"I'm using it!" said Handforth promptly. "Therefore it *is* used. As I say, we've only got to get back to Mr. Dodd's place, and everything will be all serene."

"But how are we going to get back?" grunted Church. "Didn't you hear what Mr. Lee said? There's a desert between us and that cattle station—a vast waterless plain. It was easy enough to cross it in the coaches, but it'll be a different proposition on foot—particularly when you remember that we haven't any shoes."

"Why go back to the ranch, anyhow?" asked Handforth. "There might be a township nearer. After all, Australia isn't like the wilds of the Sahara."

"Some parts of the Sahara are more thickly populated than the interior of Australia," said McClure. "Besides, if we penetrate further into the bush, we might meet with some blackfellows."

"Natives?"

"Yes."

"All the better," said Handforth. "They'll be able to show us the way to the nearest township."

"You idiot!" snorted Mac. "Even nowadays some of these aborigines are practically as cannibalistic as they ever were!"

"By George!" said Handforth, his eyes sparkling "Cannibals!"

He seemed to relish the prospect of meeting some of these formidable gentlemen. Church and McClure grunted.

"What about the Test Match?" asked Church.

"The last one, at Melbourne?"

"Yes."

"Plenty of time for that," said Handforth. "We're not half-way through February yet. We shall get back in time to see the final Test, you mark my words!"

His chums could not share his optimism. In fact, cricket—to them—seemed about the most unimportant thing in the world. Only a comparatively few days earlier they had been mad about cricket. But how could they enthuse about the great game now—when they knew that there was a doubt about their ever getting back to the settled regions of Australia?

However, there was no sense in sitting down and bemoaning their fate. And they were anxious to make themselves useful.

Practically everybody was awake now. Group of seniors were standing about talking, and crowds of juniors were excitedly discussing the situation, too.

"I can't believe that there's no chance for us," Boots, of the Fourth, was saying. "Surely there'll be search parties sent out when it is known that we are missing?"

"Sent out from where?" asked Nipper.

"Well, from Mr. Dodd's ranch—beg pardon, station—to mention only one place."

"But why should Jerry's father send out search-parties?" asked Travers. "He doesn't expect to hear any news from us for weeks, and he naturally assumes that we are well on our way."

"Well, what about the next township we're due at?" argued Boots. "There are petrol supplies there, and when we don't turn up there'll be inquiries, and——"

"You mustn't be too sure of that," said Nipper. "Sir Arthur Brampton made no definite plans. The people in these townships will merely assume that we have taken a different route. Of course, search-parties will be sent out ultimately, but not until two or three weeks have passed. And what's the good of that to us? Unless we can find adequate supplies of food, and unless we can provide ourselves with some sort of shelter, we shall never last three weeks. And it might even be a month, or more, before any party can get through to this barren spot."

"H'm! I suppose that's right," admitted Boots thoughtfully. "In fact, now I come to think of it, how will they know where to look?"

"That's just it," said Nipper. "The interior of Australia is large, you know. And when you're looking for somebody at random, there's more than a chance that you'll go astray. I tell you, it's no good relying upon any search-parties coming to rescue us. If we don't get out of this hole by our own efforts, we shall never get out of it at all."

Handforth came bustling up.

"Well, what are you fellows going to do?" he asked briskly. "What's the good of standing about here, jabbering? We'd better get busy."

"Doing what?" asked Bob Christine.

"There's plenty for us to do," replied Handforth. "Mr. Lee reckons that we can make sandals for our feet out of dried grasses—and hats, too. Why not go out into the surrounding bush, and gather all the dried grasses we can find?"

"I think we'd better wait until the guv'nor organises something, Handy," said Nipper. "It's no good doing the thing at random. It's jolly easy to get lost in the bush, you know. We'd better go out in properly formed parties."

"With prefects in charge of us," said Handforth tartly. "Yes, I know the sort of thing! Not likely! I'm not going to have any prefect bossing over me now! We're all in the same boat—we're all on the same level. School rules will have to be chucked until we can get back to the normal."

This was probably true. It would be quite impossible to keep up any sort of discipline in these present circumstances. As for lessons, the very idea of doing any work was farcical. They would all have to join forces in the effort to escape with their lives from this wasteland.

"Come on, Mac—you, too, Churchy!" said Handforth briskly, as he joined his chums. "We're not going to wait for the others. We're going into the bush to look for dried grasses. And perhaps we shall be able to collar some grub, too."

"Grub?" said Church and McClure, in one voice.

"Rabbits or kangaroos," said Handforth. "We mustn't be particular about what we eat now, you know. It's a case of all hands to the pumps, too."

"But we can't go into the bush like this!" said Church, looking down at his airy attire. "We're barefooted, too. Some of the chaps—lucky beggars!—have got slippers, but we're barefooted."

"All the more reason why we should make ourselves some sandals," said Handforth promptly. "Leave it to me, my sons. I'll show you how to make shoes out of dried grass."

"Well, they say that necessity is the mother of invention, and goodness knows there's plenty of necessity now," said McClure. "We shall have to see what we can do in the inventive line."

CHAPTER 4.

Handforth, the Hunter!

IT was characteristic of Handforth to steal away before any of the prefects or masters could stop him. And, naturally, he took Church and McClure along, too. Not that they really needed any taking. Much as they disliked the idea of leaving the camp like this, they felt that it was necessary for them to do so, in order to take care of their leader.

"Well, that's good!" said Handforth, after they had got behind a clump of trees. "It's better here, too. Not so hot. This shade is welcome."

As Handforth brushed against the bushes he let out a wild yell and leapt about a yard into the air "Help!" he bellowed. "I'm stung!"

"Yes, but what's the idea of sneaking off like this," asked Church. "I noticed old Pycraft eyeing us as we came away——"

"Bother Pycraft!" interrupted Handforth, with a frown. "He's one of the moaners. There aren't many, thank goodness, but he's the leader of the choir! Gore-Pearce and Gulliver, and that crowd, are the culprits—and Pycraft is in sympathy with them. What the dickens is the good of crying over spilt milk? The only thing to do in a situation like this is to make the best of it!"

This was undoubtedly a sound way of looking at the position. And it was perfectly true that Mr. Horace Pycraft, the master of the Fourth Form, was wandering about complaining bitterly, prophesying all sorts of disastrous happenings, and generally setting a bad example to the boys. Not that anything else had been expected of him.

Handforth & Co. were compelled to pick their way carefully, for they were barefooted, and the going was not altogether easy. Handforth soon found this out, although he made no comment. It had been his idea to come away like this, and he was not going to admit that it was faulty.

Just on the other side of a patch of mulga scrub the three juniors came within sight of the little stream that Nelson Lee had referred to. It trickled its way down a rocky course, and, at other times of the year, it was probably a rushing river of considerable size.

"We'd better get to the other side of that brook," said Handforth, pointing. "The ground looks pretty open over there—only a few bushes here and there. I dare say we shall be able to find plenty of dead grass."

"Scorpions, too, perhaps," said Church. "And with our bare feet——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "We're not afraid of scorpions, are we?"

"They can bite."

"They won't bite us," said Edward Oswald. "They only attack people when they're cornered."

"Or when you happen to tread on one by accident," said McClure grimly.

They were very interested in their surroundings. There were plenty of trees, the majority of them being of the eucalyptus family. There were ironbarks, bloodwood, and coolibans. There seemed to be a lot of animal and bird life, too.

The three juniors were rather startled by the rasping noonday call of the butcher-birds, with their black and white plumage. These birds have a very different note in the early morning—a carolling of flute-like quality, in direct contrast to the rasping noise of noon. They have gained their name because it is their habit to prey upon smaller birds, and to butcher more than they really require.

Handforth & Co. noticed one or two small birds pronged on the thorns of trees, and they little realised that these tiny carcases had been spiked there by the butcher-birds.

There came a great screeching, too, as a crowd of soldier-birds collected together in

a tree to show their disapproval of these intruders.

There were parrots to be seen, also, and little red-capped robins.

"Well, if the worst comes to the worst, I dare say we can manage to exist on these giddy sparrows, or whatever they are," said Handforth, as he glanced at a clump of trees. "Great Scott! Did you hear that?"

"That deep call?" asked Church.

"Yes," said Handforth, pointing. "Look! That tiny bird made that noise!"

He pointed to a small, insignificant diamond bird—really a sparrow—which was certainly not more than three inches long.

"You're wrong," said McClure, staring. "That little thing couldn't have made all that noise."

But Handforth was perfectly correct. The little diamond sparrow had uttered its usual deep-throated call—a most surprising sound, coming from such a small throat. Curiously enough, it seemed to the juniors that the bird's call came from quite another spot, although they saw the beak open. It is a fact that these little creatures have ventriloquial powers, and they can throw their voices so that it is sometimes confusing to know from where their calls actually come.

"Look here, Handy, I don't think we'd better venture far," said Church uneasily. "Although we're not far from the camp, we might easily lose our sense of direction ——"

"Why, the camp is only just behind those trees," broke in Handforth. "Where's the harm of venturing a little way? I want to gather a lot of grass, and I'm jiggered if I can see any just here. Come on! Let's strike through these rummy-looking bushes."

He walked off before his chums could stop him; but he only went a few paces. Then, as he brushed past those "rummy-looking bushes" he let out a wild yell, and leapt about a yard into the air.

"Help!" he bellowed. "I'm stung!"

Then he gave another yell, even louder than the first, and Church and McClure came up, their minds running on scorpions, and such-like poisonous creatures.

Church happened to touch one of those plants as he dashed up, and he gasped, checked, and his face screwed up in agony.

"Oh!" he gurgled. "I'm stung, too! It's —it's these rotten plants. Handy!"

"It's cactus!" said McClure, backing away.

As far as the eye could reach the vista was covered—literally choked—with the plant.

The juniors did not know it, but this pestilential stuff was prickly pear—one of the curses of Queensland. There are many thousands of acres so thickly covered with prickly pear in that State that nothing can be done with it.

It is a plant to be carefully avoided—a plant that has little pointed barbs, which take a delight in piercing one's arms and legs, even through thick clothing. And Handforth & Co. were wearing nothing but pyjamas!

Furthermore, these pointed barbs cause intense agony. The sting is not only irritating, but alarming.

"Let's—let's get back to the camp!" said Church huskily. "These stings may be dangerous, Handy! We'd better see Mr. Lee, and perhaps he'll be able to give us something to stop the pain. My hat, though!" he added. "All the medicines were burnt up in the fire!"

Handforth was in such agony that he did not raise any objections. He decided that this lone venture had gone far enough. He had not bargained for being stung so severely by a mere plant—and a plant, too, which looked so harmless.

One glance at all that mass of prickly pear convinced Handforth that a walk through it, clad in pyjamas, was not calculated to be healthy!

CHAPTER 5.

Archie in Trouble!

WHEN the chums of Study D reached the camp, the pain seemed to have lessened, but they were still in considerable agony.

"There's nothing to worry about, boys," said Nelson Lee, after they had told him. "You must have brushed against some prickly pear plants."

"Some which, sir?" asked Handforth.

"Prickly pear."

"It wasn't that, sir," said Handforth, shaking his head. "It was a kind of cactus. There weren't any pears on these plants. Besides, I should know a pear-tree when I saw one."

Lee smiled.

"In Australia this plant pest is known as prickly pear," he explained. "It is, without exaggeration, a menace to the country—particularly to Queensland."

"It was a menace to us all right, sir!" said Church, with feeling.

"You must avoid it," replied Lee. "At home, in England, you don't deliberately wallow amongst stinging nettles, do you? Well, this prickly pear is infinitely worse than any stinging nettle. In many parts of the country it so thick that any progress on foot is out of the question."

Nelson Lee did not add that he was full of qualms concerning their proposed return to the Dodd Station, for he knew that the great coaches had, on the previous day, plunged through mile after mile of the deadly pear. Whole tracts of country had been smothered with the stuff. Those great coaches, especially built for such purpose, had driven over the pear-bushes as though they did not exist. But how different it would be if the party attempted to go back on foot—and without any adequate footgear!

For, as Nelson Lee knew, their only chance of reaching the cattle station was to keep to the tracks that the motor-coaches had made—and those tracks led right through these prickly pear areas! It was small wonder that Lee, in his own private mind, half believed that such a journey on foot would be doomed to failure.

"You mustn't go out of camp like that again, young men," said Nelson Lee, after he had done all he could for Handforth & Co. "We are making all the necessary preparations, and if you boys are needed for anything, you will be called upon."

At that moment their attention was attracted by a tremendous shout which sounded from behind a dense clump of bush, and they recognised it as Archie Glenthorne's voice.

"Someone else in trouble!" exclaimed Lee, pursing his lips.

"Hi, help!" came Archie's frantic tones. "S.O.S.! Kindly rally round, Remove!"

Nipper and Travers and one or two others were nearest to those trees, and they went rushing round, fearful lest Archie should have met with some wild creature which had attacked him.

As a matter of fact, Archie was startled nearly out of his wits—although, so far, he was safe enough.

He had wandered towards the river bank, and he had come unexpectedly face to face with a creature of extraordinary aspect. To Archie's startled mind, it looked like a monstrosity out of a nightmare—a miniature edition of a prehistoric horror.

It was a great, lizard-like thing, fully six feet in length. Actually it was a monitor. There were lots of them along the river bank, and some of them indeed in the river itself. For these creatures are just as much at home in the water as out.

Archie, hardly knowing whether to stand his ground or to bolt, compromised by letting out a yell for assistance. And Nipper and the crowd of other juniors, dashing round the trees, caused a most alarming thing to happen. The lizard, being unprepared for this rush, evidently came to the conclusion that it was an attack directed against himself.

And it so happened that Archie had half turned at the same moment.

The monitor ran straight at Archie, streaked up his body like lightning, and stood on his shoulders!

"Good gad!" gurgled Archie faintly.

He took a look sideways, and he felt that his last moment had come. For there was the horrible monstrosity, coiled awkwardly round his neck, and there was its black, forked tongue, darting in and out, coming within an inch of his face!

"My only hat!" panted Tommy Watson.

Archie gave a sudden lurch, he spun round, and the monitor dropped to the ground with a thud, scudded off, and vanished into the stream.

"Are you bitten, Archie?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"Odds frights and scares!" breathed Archie. "I don't know, old thing! I mean to say, what a perfectly foul piece of frightfulness! I'm like a dashed jelly!"

"Nothing to be afraid of, young 'un," said one of the men, as he joined them. "It was only a goanna."

"A which?" asked Nipper.

"A goanna," said the Australian. "I've known them to run up a man's neck before now—when they've been chased by dogs."

"Thanks," said Nipper. "Meaning us?"

"Not exactly," smiled the man. "But the goanna evidently thought that you were chasing it. They're queer creatures, with lizard bodies, and with forked tongues like a snake's. But you needn't be afraid of them. I believe the natives rather enjoy them as food."

"I'd rather starve!" said Tommy Watson, with a shudder.

"They're horrible looking things," said Nipper.

"Too right, they are," agreed the Australian. "But you mustn't despise them as food. One never knows—we may come down to eating goannas before we're through!"

It was a disquieting thought.

However, there was something else to think about just then, for the word went round that a sort of meal had been cooked, and there was a ration for everybody. Not that Archie Glenthorne wanted anything. His recent adventure, harmless though it had been, had robbed him completely of his appetite.

CHAPTER 6.

Discoveries!

NOBODY knew exactly what they were eating. For all manner of creatures had gone into the pot. Rabbits, birds of various sorts, and other flesh that the Australians in the party declared to be edible.

It was a crude meal, and, for most of the St. Frank's fellows, it brought them right

down to realities. It gave them an inkling of what they must expect. There were no plates, no knives or forks.

The boiled meat was handed out on pointed prongs of wood, and in this manner it had to be eaten—held on bits of wood, or taken in the fingers. Although many of those petrol-cans had been filled with meat, the ration, for each individual, was only small. The meal, as a meal, was meagre. Still, it was something—and food of any kind, at a period like this, was to be thankful for.

"Well, that's that!" said Nipper, when he had finished his portion. "Now I suppose we shall have to go until supper-time before we get anything else?"

"But we've had hardly anything!" protested Tommy Watson. "And what about bread--or vegetables? Have we got to eat nothing but meat until we get back to civilisation? Oh, my hat! What a prospect!"

"And such meat, dear old boy!" said Tregellis-West, with a shudder. "Begad! How absolutely frightful!"

"It's not a very pleasant subject to think about," said Nipper quietly. "Still, considering everything, it's rather a wonder that we've had a meal at all so quickly as this. Later on, perhaps, when things have got more organised, we shall fare better."

"But it seems all wrong to me!" said Boots, shaking his head. "What's the idea of sticking here? No rescue can come to us, and we might as well be pushing on—trying to get back——"

"The guv'nor has already explained that it would be fatal for us to leave this spot until we are ready," interrupted Nipper. "We must be able to carry water with us—and food, too. For when it comes to the actual march it will be a terrible ordeal. Most of you fellows seem to forget that we're stranded in the wilderness. It would have been bad enough if we had just run out of petrol—if we had retained all our stores and supplies. Even then we should have been in a nasty hole. But as it is the position will hardly bear thinking about."

"Let's think about something else, then," said Sir Montie. "Let's have a look at the burnt-out coaches, for example. They're pretty well cooled off by now."

This was true. Hitherto it had been wellnigh impossible to approach the debris of the coaches, for, after the dreadful fire, the heat had been tremendous.

So Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson wandered towards one of the masses of charred wreckage that was all that now remained of those once splendid motor-coaches.

Other fellows were interested in the movements of several emus, which were paying a visit to the camp. These great, inoffensive birds were extraordinarily inquisitive. In fact, they were so curious that any nervousness they may have felt appeared to be overcome. For they approached quite close, examining all objects that were strange to them.

"I don't know whether those giddy things are any good as food, but if they are we shall be all right for supper," remarked Watson. "Look at 'em! Ostriches, aren't they?"

"Emus," said Nipper. "They're a bit different from ostriches. I've always heard that they are inquisitive beggars, and——"

He broke off, all thoughts of the emus driven out of his mind. He and the other juniors had approached close to one of the twisted and blackened masses that represented the motor-coaches.

"What's the matter?" asked Watson, as Nipper paused.

"Nothing's the matter," replied the Remove captain. "But look here!"

He kicked against something amidst the debris. Then, bending down, he picked up a number of twisted, tarnished objects.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, staring. "Table forks!"

"Forks and spoons and knives!" said Nipper eagerly. "They're a bit out of shape, and the handles of these knives have practically gone. But look at 'em, you chaps! They're knives! And they're forks and spoons! Hundreds of 'em!"

"And we used our fingers to eat that funny meat!" said Watson.

"This is a discovery, you chaps!" said Nipper. "We've been thinking that everything was lost in the fire. I say, there might be other useful objects amongst the wreckage, too!"

"Let's have a look!" said Watson quickly.

They found that they could climb into the body of that coach. Nothing was left of it but the bent and twisted steel frame, and all the other metal parts. In the centre there was a great mass of conglomerated debris. This coach had evidently been one of the dining-cars.

Careless of soiling their hands or their airy garments, Nipper & Co. commenced turning over the blackened objects. Many of them were still warm, but they took no notice. And presently Nipper let out another shout of triumph.

"Here's a frying-pan!" he ejaculated. "By Jove, and some iron saucepans! There's no telling what there might be amongst all this wreckage!"

"What about the other coaches?" asked Tommy Watson excitedly. "Perhaps we shall be able to find something in them, too?"

"What's the excitement?" asked Travers, coming up.

"We've found some knives and forks and things!" yelled Watson.

The news soon spread, and the excitement was not only rife amongst the boys, but amongst the men, too.

Presently every coach was being explored. Those charred remnants were searched diligently, in the hope that something would be brought to light—something useful. And

(*Continued on page* 14).

You Can Win a "James" Bike for Easter

Who are the Twelve Most Popular Test Cricketers!

YOUR SIMPLE TASK

Here is the Second Coupon for our topping voting contest. As you know, we are giving away during the next few weeks portraits of the sixteen members of the Test Team in Australia, and we thought it would be rather interesting to find out readers' opinions of the popularity of the various members of the side.

So, in the coupon here, are given the names of the sixteen cricketers in alphabetical order. There are only two things for you to do. Firstly, write **IN INK** in the space at the top of the coupon (against the "X") the name of your own personal favourite. Thus, if **SUTCLIFFE** is your choice, write his name against the "X."

Next, number off **IN INK** in the other section of the coupon, *twelve* of the sixteen men in what you think will be their order of popularity among our readers generally. For instance, if you think that **HENDREN** is the most generally popular, put a figure "1" against his name; if **WHITE** is to come second, put "2" against his name, and so on. When you have filled in the twelve figures, put dashes in the remaining spaces.

Then sign and address the coupon, and cut it out. If you like, you can send it in now to:

"Nelson Lee" CRICKETERS,
5 Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. (Comp.)

But we advise you to keep it, as a further coupon will appear in each of our next three issues—so you see, you can have **FIVE** shots at winning the grand "bike"—and when the final coupon is given you can send all your coupons in together.

The First Prize of a James' Cycle (as illustrated) will be awarded to the reader who correctly or most nearly correctly forecasts the popular vote, which vote will be determined from the "personal preference" votes of competitors generally. The other prizes will follow in order of merit.

The Editor reserves the right to divide the value of the prizes, if necessary, in the event of ties, and his decision on all matters concerning this contest is final and binding. No alterations must be made on coupons, which must be filled up in ink. Employees of the proprietors of "Nelson Lee" may not compete.

"Nelson Lee" CRICKETERS

MY PERSONAL FAVOURITE IS: X .....

AMES	
CHAPMAN	
DUCKWORTH	
FREEMAN	
GEARY	
HAMMOND	
HENDREN	
HOBBS	
JARDINE	
LARWOOD	
LEYLAND	
MEAD	
SUTCLIFFE	
TATE	
TYLDESLEY	
WHITE	

SIGNED .....

ADDRESS .....

N.L. **2**

ANOTHER COUPON WILL APPEAR NEXT WEEK!

(*Continued from page 12*).

the result was truly astonishing—and most gratifying.

It was found that, whilst several of the coaches were absolutely burnt out, others had escaped this fate. The outer sections had suffered, giving a general appearance of complete destruction, but inside there was a difference.

One of the great tenders, for example, which looked utterly ruined, proved to contain a veritable gold-mine of salvage. It was one of the tenders which had been utilised as a supply store. Out of this one vehicle alone they dragged blackened cases of canned goods, and, amid great cheering, it was found that the cans were whole. Once the scorched wood was torn away they found dozens of cans of beans—milk—fruits—and similar luxuries.

A case of tea turned up, too—and sugar and flour. Most glorious find of all this was—flour!

Food!

It seemed that the situation was not so terribly bad, after all!

CHAPTER 7.

Salvage!

"RUB, you chaps—and heaps of it!" said Handforth happily. "Oh, my hat! And we thought that we had to exist on nothing else but sparrows and emus and rabbits!"

"They've found lots of flour!" said Fullwood breathlessly. "We shall be able to have some bread for supper!"

"Hurrah!"

"And tea, too!" said Travers. "Real tea—with milk!"

"Good gad!" said Archie Glenthorne, a dreamy look coming into his eyes. "The cup that cheers, what? Laddies, I feel all dithery! I mean to say, this glad shock has caused me to go wonky at the knees!"

Another supply tender yielded plenty of stores, too. Much of the stuff was damaged by the fire, but who cared? As long as some of it was eatable, what else mattered?

Sir Arthur Brampton was overjoyed. He had been very subdued that day, moving about like a man in a dream. He felt his responsibility greatly, for he held that he was to blame for the entire disaster. Nelson Lee had warned him against that chief mechanic, Verano, whose vindictive madness had resulted in such destruction, and if Sir Arthur had taken Lee's advice, the catastrophe would not have happened.

And now, after the situation had seemed so desperate, this glad discovery had been made. It must be remembered that the outfit had carried an enormous amount of supplies. There were scores of mouths to feed, and Sir Arthur, who believed in doing things thoroughly, had had a large number of supply coaches attached to the expedition, and these had contained tons of food.

Well over half this food had been burnt up. But after everybody had believed that *all* of it had been destroyed, it was a glorious thing to find that such a large amount of it was unharmed.

The fire had not been able to reach the centre of the stores. Indeed, after two or three hours of hard work, when nearly all the stuff had been carried out and spread over the ground, it was found that those cases and sacks that had been in the very centre were not even scorched. Four whole sides of bacon were brought to light. Two of them were half gone, but the other two were perfectly good. And as though to clinch the matter two cases of eggs were found to be in excellent condition.

"Eggs, you chaps!" gloated Nipper. "Hundreds and thousands of them! We're going to have eggs and bacon for tea—with bread!"

"Hurrah!"

"Let's start cooking something now!"

"Yes, rather—we're starving!"

"The bread's liable to be a bit heavy, but we don't care about that!" said Fullwood, grinning.

"Heavy!" roared Handforth. "Who said so? They've found tins of baking-powder—and all sorts of useful stuff!"

It was the food discoveries that pleased the schoolboys most. Some odds and ends of clothing came to light, too; but the majority of this stuff was unfit to be used, for it was scorched and burnt so badly that even the portions that looked sound were rotten. The fellows reckoned—and quite rightly, too—that they could get along without heavy clothing in a climate like this. Food, on the other hand, was essential.

Nelson Lee was inclined to gloat over a particularly heavy case that turned up—two or three heavy cases, in fact. They were found in the very centre of one of the big lorries, or tenders, buried in the midst of charred wreckage.

These cases contained—rifles! Ammunition, too! Never for a moment had Nelson Lee believed that the ammunition would be any good. But, owing to the protective layers of other things that had surrounded the cases, the heat had not penetrated to these sealed cases of cartridges. And now the party was plentifully supplied with weapons—and with ammunition for those weapons.

"This will make an enormous difference," said Lee, as he discussed the find with Mr. Stockdale and Sir Arthur and one or two others. "The food problem is no longer grave. There are many mouths to feed, and, although we shall have to ration with care, there will always be plenty of meat."

"You mean, we can hunt for our meat supplies?" asked Sir Arthur Brampton.

"Of course," said Lee. "Frankly, gentlemen, I was pessimistic this morning. We obtained a meal at mid-day—but do you honestly think that we could have kept it up?"

"I was a bit doubtful of it," said Sir Arthur.

"Doubtful!" echoed Lee. "It took half our men several hours this morning to obtain the meagre supplies that we boiled in those twisted petrol-cans. I have been worrying very greatly over the evening meal. How could we kill sufficient game to supply us all? And not only to-day, but to-morrow and the next day! How could we equip ourselves for the coming march back to civilisation?"

"It was indeed a terrible problem," said Mr. Stockdale.

"Now, however, we need not worry on that score," said Nelson Lee. "With so many rifles—and in excellent condition, too—we are safe."

"But even now our position is desperate," said Sir Arthur, shaking his head. "Nobody knows of our predicament, and we cannot expect rescue from outside. And how are we to cross that dreadful desert, Mr. Lee? How are we to get back? Attired as we are, merely in these pyjamas—without proper footwear—what chance is there for us?"

"We will leave these points until later," replied Nelson Lee, with a lightness in his tone that made all the others feel cheerful. "The first thing now is to prepare a really good meal—to put all these boys into a good humour. Upon the whole, they have behaved splendidly—with very fine courage and calmness. We don't want them to get pessimistic. And an excellent meal, with the certain knowledge of further excellent meals to follow, will help matters greatly."

So, as the day was drawing to a close, a tremendous spread was prepared. Bread was made by the cooks, more camp-fires were lit, and the air was soon filled with the luxurious odours of frying bacon and other similar good things.

And the St. Frank's party felt that life was indeed worth living, in spite of the uncertainties of the present situation!

CHAPTER 8.

The Council of War!

PASS another muffin, Handy, old man."

"Rather! Here you are!"

The feast was in progress, and it was one of the merriest, happiest occasions that the St. Frank's fellows could remember. They gave no thought to the morrow, and to their general predicament. Until they had started eating, they hadn't realised their hunger; and now they were fairly revelling in the rough-and-ready feed that had been prepared.

They laughed at the difficulties, and nobody objected to a slight pungency in the flavour of the tea, which had been made in bent and twisted petrol-cans—and which was consumed out of blackened axle-cups and other odds and ends, capable of holding liquid, which had been taken from the debris.

As for plates, there wasn't one amongst the whole crowd. But there were plenty of fresh leaves, and these, spread on the ground, served excellently. And, after all, there were knives and forks—and these were a great boon.

The fellows were making the most of this feast; for they had received a hint that there would be a strict rationing system in vogue on the morrow. Only a certain amount of the salved stores would be used, and the meals would be supplemented largely by freshly killed game.

"Personally, I can't see the reason for it," remarked Bob Christine, of the Modern House, as he was discussing the situation with a group of other juniors. "There's tons of grub here. Enough to last us nearly a couple of weeks, I should say—without any strict rationing, either. And we ought to get back to the Dodd Station by then."

"Before then," said Boots. "But Mr. Lee is cautious, and he doesn't believe in taking any chances. He's in full charge, you know, and we've got to obey orders."

"He knows what he's doing," said Fullwood. "I don't want to be a croker, but it strikes me we shan't get back to the Dodd Station within a fortnight—or within a month, either."

There was a laugh of derision.

"It's all very well to laugh," said Fullwood. "Ask Jerry."

"What's his authority for knowing?"

"He's an Australian."

"He doesn't know much about this part of the country," said Boots. "In fact, I doubt if he has been out in the wilds before."

"Oh, yes, I have—but not so far out as this," said Jerry Dodd, as he came up, after overhearing the remarks. "And I should advise you fellows not to be too optimistic. I'm as keen on getting back to my father's station as any of you—but there are lots of difficulties in the way."

"Prickly pear, for instance?" grinned Christine.

"You seem to think this prickly pear is funny."

"Not funny, but there's no need to make so much fuss over it," said Christine. "It'll be a pity if we can't conquer a lot of silly bushes."

Jerry looked grave.

"What would you say if we found ourselves facing about fifty miles of barbed wire?" he asked grimly. "Fifty miles deep, I mean—tangled wires, strewn over the ground in hopeless confusion. How would you like to force your way through that lot?"

"It would be impossible, of course," said Boots.

"Well, this prickly pear is a lot worse than any barbed wire that was ever turned out of a factory," said Jerry; "and this part of the country is absolutely infested with the stuff. Don't you remember how the coaches crushed it down as we came along? Mile after mile of it—as thick as the sand on the seashore. It's easy enough to talk, but wait until we're face to face with the problem."

"Oh, don't croak!" said Gulliver.

"Croak!" echoed Jerry, with heat. "I'm not croaking, you ass! But I happen to know more about this country than you do, and I'm just giving you a word of warning!"

However, the spirit of optimism was so great that nobody took any notice of Jerry, or of Nipper or of the other fellows who pointed out that the journey back to civilisation promised to be fraught with uncertainties and danger. That solid meal, coming so unexpectedly and so joyously, had put everybody into a good humour.

It was in this mood that the St. Frank's fellows turned in for the night. This was a very simple process. They merely laid themselves down behind the shelters that had been built, resting on the piles of dried grasses that had been gathered. It was the general impression that an early start was to be made on the morrow, and everybody, therefore, was contented enough to get to sleep. The day had been tiring, too, and the majority of the fellows were ready enough for slumber.

As soon as they were all soundly asleep, Nelson Lee called a council of war round one of the camp-fires. The party consisted of Sir Arthur Brampton, Lee himself, Mr. Stockdale, and one or two of the Australians of the party—drivers of the coaches, and men who understood the country.

"Now, gentlemen, we've got to thrash this matter out," said Nelson Lee concisely. "A decision must be reached. We're stranded, and although the finding of a considerable supply of food is gratifying, it really does little to help the general situation."

"You're dead right there, Mr. Lee," said one of the Australians. "We got here easily enough in those coaches, but that was because they had caterpillar tractors, and could climb over anything and go anywhere."

"You can take Simmons' word, Mr. Lee," put in Sir Arthur. "He's the man who drove the leading coach, the man who picked the way."

"That's right," nodded Simmons. "Picking the way was easy enough—simply because we drove over the pear bushes and over practically everything else. But it'll be a different proposition getting back."

"That's why we are holding this council now," said Nelson Lee. "Although we may make temporary footgear for the boys, and for ourselves, if it comes to that, I doubt if such measures will be effective. In fact, I think it would be absolute folly for the whole party to venture across that wasteland. For scores of miles it is waterless, and in parts treeless. Some of the boys might never get through."

"A terrible thought, Mr. Lee," said Sir Arthur, troubled. "Yet what else can we do?"

"We must face the facts boldly and fearlessly," said Lee. "It's no good deluding ourselves, Sir Arthur—there's no sense in assuming that we can do this or do that. The boys, at least, must be assured of safety. I am responsible to their parents, and——"

"No, Mr. Lee—the responsibility is mine now," said the millionaire. "It was I who brought them on this trip."

"Well, we won't argue over that point," said Lee quietly. "Let us say, then, that we are jointly responsible. I state, most emphatically, that we must not take any of these boys into deliberate danger. And there will be danger—of a most concrete kind—if we are rash enough to march in a body back on our tracks. I believe it is a full hundred miles to the Dodd station."

"Too right it is," said Simmons, nodding. "Just over a hundred, if anything. I'm a man who understands these parts—I'm a native of Queensland—and I'm telling you straight out that it would be madness to take all these youngsters, barefooted as they are, and in this sub-tropical heat, on such a trip. Not twenty per cent. of the party would get through alive!"

Mr. Stockdale looked haggard.

"Then what are we to do?" he asked huskily. "What is the alternative? You say that we cannot undertake this trip—and it is certain that we cannot hold out here in this crude camp for more than a week or two. Even if we secure enough game to feed all these mouths to start with, the animals and

Handforth sat up with a gasp of surprise. Gliding near him was a shadowy black body. He saw a repulsive face turned quickly towards him; he saw two gleaming eyes and the glittering point of a spear!

the birds will soon be frightened away—leaving us without food of any kind."

There was every reason for Mr. Stockdale's alarmed tone—for, indeed, it seemed that there was no solution to this grim problem!

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CHAPTER 9.

The Decision!

NELSON LEE looked round at those worried faces, and he had an expression of quiet confidence in his eyes.

"I need volunteers," he said briefly.

"Volunteers?" repeated Sir Arthur, staring.

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"I need volunteers for the journey back to the Dodd station," replied Lee. "No more than six men must undertake this risk. I would go myself, only it is my plain duty to remain with the boys——"

"Yes, yes, of course," said the millionaire. "In no circumstances, Mr. Lee, must you think of leaving. That would be a mistake of the worst kind. I will go back——"

"Not while we're here to prevent you, sir," interrupted Simmons gruffly. "You're not used to bush marching—especially in your bare feet. Better leave it to the rest of us."

The other men murmured their agreement.

"We'll undertake this job," said Simmons. "I don't think there'll be any trouble about volunteers either. Just say when you want us to start, Mr. Lee, and we're your men!"

"You bet!"

"Splendid!" said Sir Arthur. "You propose, then, Mr. Lee, to remain here with the main party whilst six men attempt to get through?"

"I think it will be the only wise course," replied Nelson Lee. "These six men can easily carry sufficient food in their packs to last them through—and it won't be such a difficult job to fix them up with improvised footgear. But, as you will see, it would be a much more formidable proposition if we were all going."

"So formidable as to be practically hopeless," said Sir Arthur.

"And once the men reach the cattle station, the rest will be comparatively easy," said the schoolmaster-detective. "A car can be dispatched almost within an hour—loaded with supplies. There are some tractors, too, on the Dodd station, and many of these can be requisitioned. I reckon that we can all be back within a week at the latest."

"Providing these men get through," said Mr. Stockdale quietly.

Even Simmons said nothing. He was ready enough to make the attempt, and there would probably be a great deal of rivalry between the other men when it came to the choice of Simmons' companions. For all of them were eager enough to volunteer. Yet they must have known that the risks would be great.

The climate here was sub-tropical, and the country was extremely difficult for any kind of march. There was not only the pestilential prickly pear, but countless other difficulties to contend with, too. Those great coaches had crossed a desert, and this must necessarily be re-crossed on foot—and, so far as the adventurers knew, there was no water of any kind. Through that wild bushland, in the

fearful heat of the Queensland summer, it would be a nightmare journey.

And although these six men were natives and familiar with bush travelling, they would be severely handicapped by their lack of any sort of equipment. There was not even a compass by which they could guide themselves in case they lost track of the tell-tale marks of the motor-coaches; and there were many rocky stretches where the ground was hard and barren, where the trail might easily be lost.

Undoubtedly Nelson Lee's policy was a wise one.

It would be madness for them all to attempt this journey. But six might get through—especially six hardened, toughened, valiant men such as Simmons and his companions.

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"Well, we can consider the council at an end," he said, smiling. "At dawn, Simmons, you will be off. Get as much sleep as you can now."

Simmons was perfectly nonchalant.

"That's all right, boss—leave it to me," he said coolly. "If we don't get through, and have a rescue party back for you within four days, you can call me a coot."

But when he got apart with the other men he pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Buckley's!" he said significantly.

The others understood what the word meant.

"A forlorn hope, eh?" said one of them. "Too right, it is!"

"Well, we'll do our best," said Simmons. "And if it's humanly possible to get through we'll do it."

"Good-o!" chorused the others.

Nelson Lee personally superintended the packing of the six men's kits. Food was prepared, water was provided for each—and this alone was a formidable task. For there were no ordinary carrying flasks. All manner of ingenious devices were adopted so that a sufficient supply of water could be carried.

It taxed all Nelson Lee's resource to solve this problem. How, then, would it have been possible to carry water for the entire party? It was difficult enough to send these six men into the bush with adequate supplies—supplies that would mean the difference between life and death.

At last the packs were complete, and it was now past midnight. The camp-fires were burning low, and Lee himself went round and piled fresh wood upon them. The smoke was aromatic and soothing, and helped considerably in keeping off the mosquitoes and other night insects.

At last Lee allowed himself to obtain some rest, and he was asleep within two minutes of stretching himself on the ground. And the whole camp slept.

Half an hour elapsed. No sounds disturbed the stillness except the regular breathing of the sleepers—some of them snoring—and the dull crackling of the fires, and occasionally the cry of some night creature from the wooded belts beyond the creek.

Then towards one o'clock something black seemed to move over on the edge of the camp beyond those piles of twisted wreckage. One black object—two—three! They were moving stealthily, silently, mysteriously.

Whether Nelson Lee awoke by instinct or whether he heard some sound is a matter of no consequence—but suddenly he opened his eyes. Yet he did not move. He was fully awake—sensing somehow that all was not right.

He lay there, watching, listening. Faintly, beyond the smoke pall from one of the camp-fires, he caught a brief glimpse of a lithe black figure—a nearly naked figure. Lee's heart began to beat more rapidly.

Strangely enough, he was not alarmed. He was only filled with wonder—and hope. He was only curious and amazed. An aborigine! Without the slightest doubt that form he had seen belonged to a black fellow!

What could it mean?

Nelson Lee and all the other members of the party had believed that this section of the country was utterly and absolutely uninhabited. They had thought that there were no aborigines within hundreds of miles of them—believing that the blacks were much further to the north and north-west.

Lee refrained from moving because he had an idea that if he stirred he would drive this lurking black into the shadows again, and then he would be lost. And Lee badly wanted to get hold of the man, to question him—to find out whence he had come. For if there were aborigines in this district it was more than likely that they would be able to guide the party to a white settlement. Perhaps there was a station or a township much nearer than Mr. Dodd's place. If so, the party's problem would not be so difficult.

Lee moved cautiously, wriggling like an eel, until he slid behind the crude shelters that had been erected. Here he was behind cover, and he could move safely.

He watched, and then his keen eyes detected another slinking black form—and another! There were two or three of them—perhaps dozens! For a moment Lee caught his breath in. Supposing there were hundreds? What if the camp were surrounded by a wild mob of blacks?

CHAPTER 10.

The Capture!

YET Nelson Lee dismissed this suspicion almost on the instant. It was too fantastic—too absurd! The aborigines were not in the habit of moving about in great tribes. Moreover, if there had been such a tribe in this district some signs of the blacks would certainly have been seen earlier.

As for attacking the camp, this thought was too fantastic to be seriously considered.

The white party was a large one, and the blacks were undoubtedly aware of this. It was not likely that any attack was contemplated.

It was far more probable that these aborigines were merely five or six in number, and were skulking about on the off-chance of pilfering some trifling odds and ends. If Lee or anybody else in the camp made a sudden move, they would be scared off. And Lee wanted to capture one, at least, in the hope that he might know a little pidgin-English.

Unfortunately Handforth had been restless—probably owing to the mosquitoes—and when he unexpectedly sat up, and saw a shadowy black body gliding comparatively near him, he gave a gasp of startled surprise. He saw a repulsive black face turned quickly towards him; he saw two gleaming eyes, and the glinting point of a spear.

"Blacks!" he yelled, springing to his feet. "Cannibals!"

Nipper, aroused, sat up.

"What's that?" he ejaculated. "Handy, you idiot! Have you gone dotty?"

"We're surrounded by cannibals!" roared Handforth excitedly. "I saw them just now—dozens of 'em!"

"There goes one!" ejaculated Harry Gresham, pointing.

A number of other fellows saw that black figure also, and within a moment the whole camp was in an uproar.

"Blacks!" panted Edward Oswald, looking round for a weapon. "Buck up, you chaps! They're going to attack in a couple of minutes! Swarms of 'em! By George, it'll be a fight for our lives!"

"Good gad!" groaned Archie. "The blighters might have waited until we'd finished our spasm of the good old dreamless! I mean, somewhat inconsiderate, and all that sort of thing!"

Nelson Lee was inclined to be very annoyed during the first few moments after the alarm. Then he changed his mind. For one of the black fellows, in making a dash for the shadows, came slithering diagonally towards the spot where Lee was crouching.

The man thought that his way was clear, but he got a shock a moment afterwards. For Lee sprang out, confronted him, and held out his empty hands, as an indication that he was unarmed.

"Hold on!" said Lee, in a friendly tone. "What do you want here?"

"Yack-a!" howled the aborigine, in fright and surprise.

There was a rattle as he dropped his spear, and he made an attempt to bolt. But Lee was just a shade quicker, and he leapt in and grasped the black by the arm.

"Don't run away!" he said. "Nothing to be frightened about. I won't harm you."

The aborigine, a tall, well-built man of about middle-age, turned a pair of frightened eyes towards his captor.

"No savvee," he said violently.

"Yes, you do," said Lee. "Come sit longa camp. Talk-talk. Savvee?"

The man shook his head.

"No savvee," he repeated vehemently.

But Lee could tell, by the way the man glanced into the camp, that he had understood the words perfectly, and as the detective applied a little pressure on his arm, he moved forward. They reached one of the camp-fires, and Lee invited the aborigine to sit down. After a moment's hesitation the man squatted on the ground, and looked round uneasily.

Nipper and Handforth and a few seniors were near by, and some of the men, too. Simmons was looking very astonished.

"Well, this beats me!" he was saying. "I didn't know there were any black boys in this district. It's not so barren, after all."

"Who is this man?" asked Sir Arthur Brampton.

"That's what we want to find out," said Lee, as he turned to the captive. "You needn't be frightened. Smoke pipe. We are friendly—savvee?"

The man took the tobacco that Lee proffered, but he continued to look uneasy.

"Your friends?" went on Lee. "Call them in. Let them come longa fire for talk-talk."

The aborigine seemed more reassured.

"Me savvee," he said, nodding. "Me think you going to kill black fellow."

"Why should we kill you?" asked Lee, smiling. "Or your friends? Call them in for smoke and talk-talk."

"No come for steal," said the aborigine. "You think we come for steal, eh? But we only look. Master send us."

"Your master?"

"Him white man," nodded the other placidly.

"A white man!" ejaculated Sir Arthur. "But this is extraordinary, Mr. Lee! We did not know——"

"Him all white," said the captive. "Him skin—him hair—everything. Master send us longa bush to find out big noise and big blaze."

"He must mean the explosion," said Handforth breathlessly.

"But how was it heard—or where?" asked Nipper. "And how could the fire have been seen? This white man that the fellow refers to can't be very far off."

Lee waved a hand towards the bush again.

"Call your friends," he said. "No harm. We give you food and tobacco."

The man nodded, rose to his feet, and uttered a wild kind of cry, repeating it two or three times. In the silence that followed answering cries came from the darkness. Then, whilst everybody in the camp watched, three other aborigines advanced out of the shadows into the circle of flickering light cast by the camp-fires.

"Come longa camp!" called Nelson Lee. "You come sit down for talk-talk!"

The blacks advanced. One of them was distinctly younger than the others, and he, unlike his companions, was wearing a pair of shorts, red in colour, with a blue belt round his middle. Scanty though this attire was, it reminded vaguely of a uniform. He was a well-set-up black, this man, and he

was clean-shaven, his hair being well-trimmed.

"You not harm us, white men?" he asked, in much better English than the other black fellow.

"We not harm you," said Lee. "Why should you think such a thing?"

"Master warn us against all white men," said the newcomer. "Where white men—danger. So master tell us. We thought you kill Yarro."

"So your master has warned you against all white men?" asked Lee thoughtfully. "Who is this master of yours? Why should he tell you such strange things? The white men are your friends, and mean you no harm."

"There are white men and other white men," said the aborigine. "Master tell Olem. Me Colonel Olem," he added, with pride.

And all those who listened, including Nelson Lee, wondered what the explanation of this mystery could be. Where had these blacks come from, and who was their white master?

CHAPTER 11.

A Change of Plan!

COLONEL OLEM, as he had called himself, was now apparently quite at home, and all his misgivings were dissipated. Yarro and the other blacks were equally at their ease. Finding that these people did them no harm, they were thoroughly restored.

"We no came for steal," said Yarro. "We came for look."

"Our white master sent us," nodded Olem. "Him say, 'go find big noise and big blaze. And if you see white men, they kill you.'"

"Your master is a strange man to tell you such things," put in Sir Arthur Brampton.

"Our master good man—clever man; him give us food, and we live proper," said Olem.

"And who is your master?" asked Lee. "Where does he live, and what is his name?"

"Him master—no other name."

"Is this true?"

"True," said Olem firmly.

Nelson Lee began to scent something interesting—something unusual. Furthermore, he was beginning to hope. If there was a white man in the neighbourhood, it might be advisable to change the plan that had already been made.

"Where do you live, Olem?" asked Lee. "Where is your master now?"

The young black pointed.

"Seven hours—eight hours," he replied. "Difficult for travel. Much prickly pear, then swamp."

"Is there a cattle station in that direction?"

"Plenty men and women—big town," said Olem. "Me colonel of master's bodyguard."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Sir Arthur. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"This town—if such a place actually exists—cannot be a great distance off," said Lee keenly. "Considering that the way is so difficult, and that it can be reached on foot in seven or eight hours, the mileage cannot be very much. It is evident, too, that this white man heard the boom of the explosion when the petrol-car blew up, and the glare from the fire must have been seen, too."

"But I can't credit it," said Sir Arthur. "How can there be a town out in these wilds? And a white man, with a personal bodyguard of blackfellows! Without wishing to be too blunt, I half-suspect that this man is drawing upon his imagination."

"Yet he speaks amazingly good English," put in Simmons. "Never heard one of these boys speak so well before. There's something special about him."

"I have the same impression," said Sir Arthur, looking at Olem curiously.

"You have food and sleep?" said Lee, turning to the blacks. "You wait until morning?"

"We eat, and when sunrise, we go," said Olem.

He looked round, and then raised a hand. Lee had noticed that all these aborigines had been regarding the pyjama-clad figures of the schoolboys and the men with open surprise—and they had looked at those blackened piles of wreckage, too.

"You have trouble?" asked Olem.

"Much trouble," replied Lee. "Big fire—nearly everything burnt. No shoes—no clothes—no tents."

"Bad!" said Olem, and one or two of the others.

They seemed very interested, but Lee made no further explanations, and when the blacks had been provided with something to eat, Lee strolled off with Sir Arthur Brampton and Mr. Stockdale. A crowd of St. Frank's fellows, in the meantime, gathered round the blacks, watching them with interest.

"This is a queer business, Mr. Lee," said Sir Arthur bluntly.

"Very queer."

"What do you make of it?"

"Nothing—yet," replied Lee. "I've never come across anything like it. As far as my experience goes, these aborigines are more or less primitive. But these men are different. They're typical bushmen, but they are undoubtedly more educated and more sophisticated than the majority of their fellows. And this 'white master' appears to be responsible."

"Yet he warns his servants against other white men," exclaimed Mr. Stockdale. "What can be the meaning of that?"

"I don't know—but I *do* know that we must alter our programme," said Lee. "It would be foolish to proceed with the original plan now. Far better spend a day in going to this so-called town. The white man will be in a position to help us. The

very fact that there is a white settler in this country proves that he is in communication with civilisation. The fact that we have never heard of this settlement is no proof that it does not exist."

"Are you sure that these blacks are really friendly?" asked Sir Arthur. "They brought spears with them, did they not?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't that look significant?"

"Not necessarily," said Lee. "These blacks habitually carry spears, I believe. They may need them for use in self-defence—or for getting their meals. We've got to remember that Olem and his companions made no attempt whatever to attack us; and yet, had they chosen, they could have flung their spears with deadly effect from the darkness. I believe Olem's story—that he and his companions were merely circling round the camp to find out its nature."

"Well, it is extraordinarily good news," said Sir Arthur, with relief. "A settlement only seven or eight hours' journey away! Why, our troubles are practically over, Mr. Lee! Once we reach this place we shall be out of all danger."

"I am thinking of the boys," said Lee, as he looked towards some of the excited juniors. "It will be a very good thing if they can be placed out of reach of any peril. Yes, we must certainly make an immediate investigation into this strange business."

"Do you intend to go back with these blacks yourself?"

"I have not yet decided the point."

"Then let me decide it for you, Mr. Lee," said Sir Arthur. "I urge you to remain here—in full charge of the camp. Let me go with Simmons and two or three of the men. I will find out the exact truth, and if there is a settlement, I will soon send word—and as many supplies as I can get hold of."

"There might be danger," said Lee, shaking his head. "Although these blacks seem trustworthy, there is always the chance——"

"And supposing there is danger," interrupted Sir Arthur gruffly. "Am I to shirk it? I insist upon going, Mr. Lee, and you can say anything you please. This is a very exceptional opportunity, and we must take full advantage of it."

"All right," smiled Lee. "If you insist, Sir Arthur, I suppose we had better refrain from argument."

And so it was settled. Instead of Simmons and his five companions making an attempt to get back to the Dodd Station, Sir Arthur and several other men were to accompany these blacks back to the "town" that they spoke of. Yet how a town could exist in this sub-tropical wilderness region was a puzzle that intrigued the adventurers very considerably.

CHAPTER 12.

Handforth's Brainwave!

HANDFORTH was frankly indignant.

"The whole thing's a swindle!" he declared, with some heat. "Somebody told me that these aborigines were cannibals—and these fellows are as harmless as kittens!"

"Did you want them to chuck spears at you?" asked Church tartly.

"Not exactly, but I expected 'em to be a bit dangerous," said Handforth.

"These are modern days, Handy, old man," said Nipper, with a smile. "We're not living in the old 'bad days.' At that time, when Australia was first being settled, I dare say the blacks were a pretty dangerous crowd. But now there aren't many aborigines left who haven't come in contact with white men, and who haven't acquired civilised ways and habits."

"Some of 'em are cannibals to-day," said Handforth obstinately. "I was speaking to a couple of the men yesterday, and they told me that cannibalism is practised in some tribes whenever the blacks get a chance."

"Your leg was being pulled, old man," chuckled Church.

"I'm not so sure of that, either," said Nipper. "I've read that cannibalism is still practised by some of the blacks. But why enter into a discussion on the subject now? These men aren't that sort. They're fairly well civilised."

"And we've been swindled," said Handforth, nodding. "Instead of being surrounded by cannibals, and fighting for our lives, we're standing here, watching those black fellows eating some of our grub! I'm going to sleep again."

"Best thing you can do," said McClure promptly.

But when Handforth laid down again he did not sleep, although the other fellows,

A crowd of aborigines appeared in sight. And at their head marched—Edward Oswald Handforth ! He presented an extraordinary figure, with his red shorts, peaked cap, weird top-boots, and spear.

having come to the conclusion that the excitement had fizzled out, were soon slumbering once more.

Edward Oswald Handforth was a fellow of remarkable impulse. An idea had suddenly come to him—one of Handforth's "specials." This is merely another way of saying that the idea was rash. While every other fellow in the party could be trusted to act reasonably and rationally, Handforth could be relied upon to do the opposite. He was, in fact, the exception to the rule.

As he lay close beside the sleeping forms of Church and McClure, his eyes were open, and he was looking eagerly towards that camp-fire where the aborigines were still squatting.

"Why not?" murmured Handforth. "By George! It's the wheeze of the century!"

He thought it out thoroughly, carefully, and considered all the pros and cons. He took about twenty seconds to do this. Handforth's ideas regarding thoroughness, when it came to cogitating upon one of his schemes, was weird and wonderful.

He knew of the new plan. There was no secret about it. Sir Arthur Brampton and Simmons and three other men—all five of them Australians—were to accompany these blacks to the town that was supposed to exist seven or eight hours' march away. And they were to start at dawn.

Handforth felt that he could not keep his wonderful idea to himself, so he shook Church and McClure into wakefulness, taking care that none of the other fellows were aroused.

"What's up now?" asked Church, rubbing his eyes. "Anything else happened?"

"Not yet—but it's going to!" said Handforth.

"Oh, go to sleep!" mumbled Church.

"Look here, my sons, there's something I know that you don't!" said Handforth mysteriously. "It's a secret."

His chums aroused themselves more fully.

"A secret?" said McClure. "What is it that you know, Handy?"

"I said it's a secret."

"Well, you can tell us, can't you?"

"I'll tell you if you'll give me your word of honour that you won't let it go any further," said Handforth.

"All right," murmured his chums.

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!"

"All right, then," said Handforth coolly. "I'll tell you the thing that I know, but you don't. It's a secret. At dawn, when Sir Arthur and those other men go off with the blacks, we're going to follow them!"

"Eh?" said Church, blinking.

"It's no good asking Mr. Lee for permission to go with the party, so our only chance is to follow on behind," said Handforth. "I don't see why we should be left out in the cold."

Church and McClure, now thoroughly and absolutely awake, grasped their leader so tightly that he winced.

"Chuck it, you asses!" he said gruffly.

A crowd of aborigines appeared in sight. And at their he figure, with his red shorts,

"You're mad, Handy—dotty!" said McClure, in alarm. "The best thing we can do is to obey orders. We'll stay here, in camp, until something definite is discovered."

"I tell you, we're going with Sir Arthur's party."

"But we can't!" said Church. "We haven't any shoes, and all that prickly pear stuff——"

"Bother it!" interrupted Handforth. "We made some shoes yesterday out of dried grasses. They're a bit clumsy, but they'll do."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Church. "Why the dickens can't you act like a sensible human being, Handy, and not like an inmate of Bedlam? Why can't you be patient?"

"I want some action," replied Handforth stubbornly. "Sir Arthur and those other men are going to make the trip, wearing nothing but pyjamas and grass sandals—and if they can do it, so can we!"

"They're Australians."

"What does it matter?" said Handforth. "What's the difference? If it comes to that, it's only right that England should be represented—and so we're going!"

"We're not," said Church excitedly. "I'll tell Fenton, or one of the other prefects, and he'll soon put a stop to your little game."

"What about your promise?"

ward Oswald Handforth! He presented an extraordinary rd top-boots, and spear.

"Eh?" said Church, with a start. "But—but——"

"Both of you gave me your word, honest Injun, that you'd keep the secret," said Handforth coolly. "So you can't back out of it now, my lads!"

Church and McClure were startled at their leader's duplicity. He had trapped them very neatly. It was impossible for them to give him away.

There were only two hopes. Firstly, it was more than likely that Handforth would be sound asleep at dawn, and that he would awaken too late to put his plan into execution; secondly, there was always the chance that they would be spotted getting away.

"Oh, all right, then!" said Church, giving Mac a nudge. "If your mind's made up, Handy, we can't do anything."

"Of course you can't!" agreed Handforth.

"So we'll go to sleep again now—and wake up at dawn," said Church. "There are two or three hours yet——"

"I know it—and we're not going to sleep, either!" said Handforth, shattering the first of his chums' hopes. "We're not taking any chances, my sons! We're going to wait for the dawn, and we're going to watch Mr. Lee like a cat watching a giddy mouse. Then, just before dawn, when Mr. Lee's back is turned, we're going to slip away and wait in cover until the expedition starts. See? Nobody can spot us slipping away like that, because we shall have slipped away in advance."

And so the other hope had "gone west," too! Church and McClure were thoroughly alarmed. Handforth, for once, was displaying some real ingenuity.

"Well, we're not going with you!" said Church fiercely. "If you want to go on this dotty mission, Handy, you can jolly well go by yourself!"

"Hear, hear!" said McClure.

"But you promised——"

"Rats! We didn't promise to go with you," said Church. "We only promised to keep your secret."

"Why, you—you——"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Mac. "Let's go to sleep again, Churchy."

They pretended to — hoping against hope that Handforth would succumb to the warmth of the night, and drop off. They knew perfectly well that they could not allow him to go on this stunt alone.

Unfortunately for their hopes, Handforth remained very much awake—this idea had gripped him—and when the first faint streaks of dawn began to show in the sky he commenced activities. It was perfectly true that he and his chums had made some footwear for themselves—crude sandals of thick, dried grass roughly woven and entwined. But they were comfortable enough, and afforded excellent protection for the feet, although there was no guarantee to their wearing qualities.

"Come on, you chaps!" whispered Handforth. "It's time we slipped off. Nobody will notice anything if we go easy. Mr. Lee, of course, will think that we're sleeping, like the rest of the fellows."

"Look here, Handy——"

"There's no time for arguments," interrupted Handforth coldly. "Either you'll consent to come with me, and come quietly, or I'll go off on my own, and you can jolly well stay behind with the crowd."

Church and McClure made their choice—and when Handforth sneaked into the cover of the neighbouring bush, some minutes later, they sneaked with him.

CHAPTER 13.

Into the Bush!

NELSON LEE took Sir Arthur Brampton's hand.

"Well, good-bye—and good luck," he said heartily. "I sincerely hope, Sir Arthur, that this trip will be successful. We shall await your return with confidence

"I feel my responsibility very greatly, Mr. Lee," said the Australian millionaire. "It was I who brought you and all these boys into this unknown region, and it is my duty to get you back safely. I shall do my best to send you word of some kind or another before the day is out."

"I shall hardly expect anything before to-morrow," replied Lee. "In the meantime, we in camp will go ahead with our plans, and prepare for anything that might crop up."

Sir Arthur and his companions were a quaint-looking group. The trousers of their pyjamas were rolled up to their knees, and they were wearing remarkable footgear—cunningly woven "boots" which came well over their ankles, and which were tied on with creepers. Round their waists were primitive belts, and on their shoulders they carried packs of food and water—and each man was in possession of a rifle. On their heads were roughly-made, but effective, hats of dried grass.

"This is the Robinson Crusoe stuff, sure enough," cackled Simmons.

"And there are several editions of Man Friday," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, the dawn is here, and so you had better get straight off. Once again—good luck!"

The blackfellows were carrying no packs whatever, and Sir Arthur had pointed out that if these aborigines could do the journey so unprepared, why was it necessary for the white men to carry food and water and rifles? Nelson Lee, however, thought it better to be on the safe side. At the same time, he was ready to admit that it was a very good sign—these blacks travelling so light. It indicated that their journey to the camp had been trivial, and therefore the journey back to the town they spoke of would be equally trivial.

The departure was made without any fuss—without any cheering. The school was still asleep, for there was no earthly reason why the fellows should be aroused. Most of the other men were sleeping, too. Nelson Lee had only aroused Sir Arthur and the men who were to accompany him.

After all, there was nothing particularly exciting about this little journey. It was not a forlorn dash for help, or anything like that. Sir Arthur was merely using the blacks to guide him to the settlement—which would probably turn out to be some paltry, isolated prospector's camp. However, this man, being very familiar with the country, would probably be able to indicate a safe route to some decent-sized settlement or township.

Olem and Yarro led the way. All these blacks were now perfectly at their ease; the white men had secured their confidence, and they seemed strangely eager to get back to their "town."

They plunged straight into the bush near the creek, and none of them noticed the three crouching figures behind a patch of mulga scrub. As soon as the party had got well past the three figures emerged.

"O.K.!" murmured one of them. "We're as safe as houses."

Church and McClure were thoroughly disappointed. Not even Nelson Lee had noticed them stealing away from their sleeping places. Even now they had not been missed, or there would have been an outcry. So there was nothing for it but to follow Sir Arthur and his party.

This proved to be a much easier task than Handforth's chums had believed. The trees were fairly thick alongside the creek, and there was plenty of cover. It was not difficult to keep the expedition in sight, for neither the blacks nor the white men looked back, and as they took no precautions to maintain silence—since there was no need—the task of the shadowers was simple.

The chums of Study D were inadequately equipped compared with Sir Arthur and his companions. They carried no packs and no rifles. In fact, they were quite empty-handed.

The home-made shoes proved quite satisfactory—in fact, surprisingly effective. But it was doubtful if they would be any good for hard wear.

"How long is this going on, Handy?" asked Church in a low voice. "When are we going to disclose ourselves to Sir Arthur?"

"Not for miles yet."

"Better not," put in McClure. "He might send us back."

"That's just it," said Handforth, nodding. "We don't want to take any risks like that. But after we are well on our way, Sir Arthur won't feel inclined to waste a lot of time by going back with us. Don't you see the wheeze? He wouldn't dream of sending us back on our own—and so he'll have to take us with him."

Now that the adventure had fairly started, Church and McClure were beginning to change their opinion. Somehow it did not seem so hare-brained, after all—and they were healthy, vigorous schoolboys. The spirit of the adventure gripped them, and very soon they were just as enthusiastic about it as Handforth himself. They came to the conclusion that their leader, when all was said and done, was a pretty brainy sort of chap. Most of his ideas were duds, but when he did strike a good one, it *was* good. And this idea was one of those.

The aborigines avoided the prickly pear for several miles, but then, apparently, it was necessary to leave the creek, and they emerged from the bush, striking out into the open sunlight and across the plain, where there was no cover save for an occasional wilga-tree or some mulga scrub, and, of course, the unwelcome prickly pear.

"That's done it!" said Handforth blankly, as he and his chums reached a point where they could no longer keep in cover. "We've got to show ourselves now. Let's hope nobody turns round and spots us."

Strangely enough, nearly two miles were covered before the presence of the three juniors was discovered. During this time the aborigines had picked their way cunningly and carefully through the prickly pear. There was no actual path, but the blacks seemed to avoid the worst clumps of the hateful plant by instinct, and progress, instead of being laborious, continued to be fairly brisk.

But now and again the party, in order to avoid an extra-heavy patch of stuff, would nearly double back on its own tracks; and it was on one of these occasions that Handforth & Co. were spotted. The fact was, the chums of Study D were in trouble. Being so far in the rearguard, they had lost track of the "path" through the prickly pear, and there was every indication that they would get left far, far behind. In their eagerness all three juniors had sampled the wretched spikes, and now, when they were discovered, they were by no means displeased.

"Boys!" thundered Sir Arthur across the intervening space. "What are you doing here? How did you come?"

"We've been following you all the time, sir," shouted Handforth. "And now we've got in a mess with this rotten cactus stuff. I'm stung in about a thousand different places, sir!"

The party retraced its steps, the blacks looking surprised and curious, and the whites angry. In the glaring sunshine of the nearly tropical morning, Sir Arthur faced the three juniors.

"You young rascals!" he said angrily. "So you've been following us, have you?"

"Yes, sir."

"What for?"

"We want to come with you, of course, sir," said Handforth. "We stole out of camp, and nobody saw us go—and we want to be with you. We're relying on your sportsmanship, sir, not to send us back," he added boldly.

Simmons and the other men were grinning, and Sir Arthur's eyes twinkled.

"The spirit of adventure, eh?" he chuckled. "Now, I wonder what I had better do with you?"

But his tone proved that he had already decided.

CHAPTER 14.

The Hidden Valley!

HANDFORTH looked eagerly at Sir Arthur Brampton.

"You'll let us come, won't you, sir?" he asked. "We won't cause any trouble—and our patent boots are wearing well. We haven't any grub or water, but we don't mind going on short rations."

"Very clever!" said Sir Arthur, nodding. "You reckoned that I wouldn't go to the trouble of taking you back to the camp, eh? You suspected that I would not waste so much time. But if you come with us, what about Mr. Lee?"

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" replied Handforth. "He may worry a bit, but he'll know that we're with you, and he'll be pretty sure that we're safe."

"That's just the point," said Sir Arthur. "Mr. Lee might not jump to the truth. He's a clever man, but he is not possessed of second-sight, and I do not think he is capable of thought-reading. It is quite possible that he will assume that you boys have drifted off into the bush, and then there will be a rare commotion."

Handforth shook his head.

"He won't think anything like that, sir," he replied. "I left a note."

"Bonzer!" murmured Simmons approvingly.

"Oh, you left a note, did you?" said Sir Arthur.

"Of course," replied Handforth. "I wouldn't leave Mr. Lee in the dark like that. I scrawled a few words on a broken piece of box-lid with a burnt stick. Said we were following you, and that we would join you three or four miles from camp. So Mr. Lee will know that everything's all serene."

"Well, you deserve to accompany us, if only for your infernal nerve," said Sir Arthur, with a chuckle. "But for the life of me I can't understand why you should be so keen on this journey. In this sweltering heat and through this confounded prickly pear, it's by no means a pleasant trip."

"But it's an adventure, sir," said Handforth eagerly.

And so the three juniors were allowed to go, and before very long it turned out that the aborigines' estimate of time was at fault. For there were indications that they were nearing their journey's end after only a matter of four hours had elapsed.

The prickly pear in this direction was not nearly so thick or extensive as appearances had led the party to believe. Without Lee knowing it or suspecting it, the camp had been made almost on the edge of the prickly pear region. It extended for miles and miles in the other direction, and the natural assumption was that it extended in just the same way in every direction.

But investigation proved the opposite. Olem and his companions led the way towards a low range of rocky hills which could be observed now and again through a break in the trees. For by now a strip of forestland had been reached, and the appearance of the countryside was well-nigh tropical, with its innumerable wild flowers, creepers, gaily-coloured birds, and abundant animal life.

Then came a swampy region.

The heat here was very oppressive, and before long all the members of the party were perspiring freely. Only occasional glimpses of the sun could be seen, and the atmosphere was moist and humid.

Under foot the ground had become treacherous and boggy, and occasionally one of the travellers would find his foot sinking deeply down into the deceptive-looking surface. It was deceptive because it had the appearance of solidity, and yet actually the whole belt was little better than a quagmire.

"Well, Handy, I hope you're satisfied!" panted Church, as he laboured along. "Phew! I'm stifled! And these flies and other insects are an awful nuisance! We shall lose our shoes before long if there's much more of this hard going."

"Don't growl!" said Handforth, as he wiped his brow. "By George, though, it is a bit rotten, isn't it?"

Handforth, in his enthusiasm, had not anticipated any such ordeal as this. But since the idea of coming on the journey had been his, he could not very well accuse his chums of being responsible.

"How much of this?" asked Sir Arthur, glancing at Olem.

"Mile—two miles," said the aborigine. "Not long. Soon we come to rocky path, and then into hills."

"Was there no other way?"

"This way the only way," said Olem. "Come longa black fellow, and all safe. Follow carefully. No good walking this way or that way. Keep to black fellows' trail. Savvee?"

"Is it really necessary to be so cautious?" asked Sir Arthur. "The ground is swampy, but I do not think there is danger."

"Much danger," interrupted Olem quickly. "Many men die in swamp. Many white men.

Come longa this way, not know path. Fall into devil mud. Soon gone."

"You mean they are sucked down?" asked Simmons bluntly.

"Devil mud grip them—pull them—take them," nodded Olem. "But keep to black fellows' trail, and all safe."

Sir Arthur glanced back.

"You boys had better get closer," he said, with concern "Keep strictly to our tracks—do not take any step to right or to left. There is danger here."

"All right, sir," said Handforth. "We'll be all right."

The aborigines zig-zagged this way and that, sometimes almost returning on their own tracks, but ever progressing. Their movements were bewildering, and apparently quite random. Yet they must have known exactly where they were going, for never once did any member of the party become bogged, except when Simmons carelessly strayed off the trail for a yard or so.

In a moment his ankles were under, and he felt himself being dragged relentlessly down into the deadly swamp.

"Quick, you chaps!" shouted Handforth, who happened to be the nearest, and he dashed forward to the rescue, followed by his two chums.

Simmons was now sinking rapidly into the swamp, and things would have gone badly with him but for Handforth & Co.'s promptitude.

"Grab my hands!" yelled Handy to the unfortunate driver, and leaning over as far as he dared, he held out both his hands. At the same time Church clasped hold of his leader round the waist, while McClure grabbed Church likewise.

Simmons clutched at Handy's outstretched hands, and then the three juniors heaved with all their strength, assisted by others of the party who had come upon the scene. At last he was hauled out, and he sprawled on the ground, panting.

"Thanks, young 'uns!" he said, when he had recovered his composure. "I'd been a goner but for you. The place is an absolute quagmire—worse than a quicksand," he added. "Gosh, I hope these blacks know the way out of it again! It's so deceptive that if we're left on our own we shall never see solid ground again."

Just for a moment Sir Arthur had a doubt. The alarming idea occurred to him that these blacks had deliberately lured them into the swamp, so that they could be left to that death-trap. But the millionaire soon dismissed this unwarrantable suspicion. There was no earthly reason why these black "boys" should commit such an outrage. Moreover, Sir Arthur was satisfied that they were simple and harmless.

Proof of this was forthcoming very soon afterwards, for the ground gradually began to rise, and it became more solid.

"All safe now," said Olem. "No more devil mud."

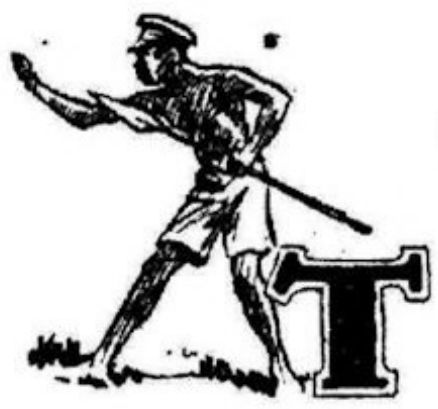
They pushed on, and after another half-hour they found that the trees began to thin, and soon they came out upon a rocky, sun-drenched plateau, where the heat beat up from the ground in waves of suffocating radiation.

"Soon come valley," said Olem, pointing. "Up this hill, and through rocks. Then valley."

"What valley?" asked Sir Arthur.

"Valley of white master."

Olem said no more, and the party pressed on, eager to take a look into this valley, which appeared to be owned entirely by the mysterious white master.



CHAPTER 15.

The Valley of the White Master!

THE party found itself penetrating a narrow ravine, where the rocks rose steeply on either hand. It was a sort of miniature pass, and suddenly, unexpectedly, as they skirted round a promontory of rock, they came within sight of the valley below.

And they all halted, filled with wonder and amazement. In fact, they were so stupefied with surprise that for the first few moments nobody spoke.

They could see far down into the valley—a vision of green, with a sparkling river, and a creek here and there. But the surprising feature of this view—the glorious feature—was the sight of neat, cultivated fields—and fields, moreover, that closely resembled the fields of England! There were meadows, with cattle grazing; and, half-hidden amidst tall, stately trees, were the roofs of some houses.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly.

He was the first to break the silence, and the others all broke out into excited exclamations.

"I've never seen anything like it!" declared Simmons.

"Extraordinary!" said Sir Arthur. "Cultivated fields—in the midst of this wilderness! Pasture-land—meadows! Can all our calculations be at fault? Can we be on the edge of a settled, thriving district?"

"No, sir!" said Simmons, shaking his head. "This is unknown Australia—a bit of the interior that isn't touched by the railways, or the telegraphs, or the roads. There's something queer about this valley, and the sooner we go down into it and find out the truth, the sooner we shall satisfy our curiosity."

Sir Arthur nodded, and turned to the aborigines.

"What is this valley?" he asked.

"It is the land of the white master," replied Olem. "Plenty flour—plenty yam—plenty tobacco—plenty everything."

"How far does it extend? How big is this valley?"

"Big valley," put in Yarro eagerly. "Many fields. Much land. White master clever man."

"Let's hurry on, sir!" said Handforth breathlessly. "By George, we were expecting something interesting, but this takes the biscuit!"

Before they could move, however, a number of excited aborigines appeared as though from nowhere. Like Olem, they were wearing brief shorts, of some thin red material. One of them, as though to complete his uniform, sported a peaked cap.

This man was evidently a kind of officer, for when he spoke to Olem, the latter saluted. True, it was a careless, hurried salute, but it was undoubtedly a military action. They talked rapidly in their own tongue, and the others, crowding round, joined in. Discipline, at all events, seemed somewhat lax.

"Never in my life have I known anything like this," said Sir Arthur Brampton, in amazement, to his companions. "Black boys—in uniform—trained like soldiers! It is well-nigh unbelievable!"

Olem turned, the other blacks spread themselves across the rocky path, and their spears were held ready.

"General Gimbi say 'go back,'" said Olem. "Not enter valley. White master much angry if you come longa us."

"Oh!" said Sir Arthur. "So your friend is a general, eh? And you are a colonel?"

Olem nodded vigorously.

"Well, my cheerful friends, this comic opera business is all very well as a joke, but you had better not go too far with it," said Sir Arthur grimly. "Take us to your white master."

"Not come!" shouted the man in the peaked cap. "Olem big fool for bringing you here. Not come further. White master's orders."

Sir Arthur glanced at his companions.

"What shall we do?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Go straight on, sir!" replied Simmons.

"Nothing else for it," said one of the other Australians. "Mustn't show weakness before these blacks."

"Rather not!" said Handforth. "I'd like to see these black chaps try to stop us!"

They advanced, and the aborigines immediately sent up a wild shouting. It was fairly obvious that "General Gimbi" had remonstrated with Olem for guiding the white party through the swamp and into this ravine. He was a superior officer, and he seemed to regard the advent of the white party with dismay and consternation. Olem himself had exhibited very much the same symptoms—until Nelson Lee had gained his confidence.

"White men not come!" shouted Gimbi. "White men go back!"

"Come on!" muttered Sir Arthur.

He strode forward, and the others, resolute and determined, moved with him in a body. Handforth & Co. were just as bold as the men. This was a moment when a strong front must be shown. It was unthinkable that the expedition would turn back now, after catching a glimpse of that remarkable valley.

The blacks set up a wilder howling than ever, and one or two of them, in their excitement, hurled their spears. The weapons clattered harmlessly upon the rocks, but more than one man had been compelled to leap aside in order to save himself from injury.

"Let them have a volley!" snapped Sir Arthur, bringing his rifle to his shoulder. "But fire over their heads. If we scare them it will be sufficient."

Crack! Crack! Crack!

A number of shots instantly rang out, and the effect, as the millionaire had anticipated, was immediate. The aborigines flung their remaining spears down and bolted, screaming and shouting. Olem and Yarro and Gimbi were the last to go, and the latter was leaping and gesticulating like a madman.

"That's settled them!" said Sir Arthur gruffly. "The infernal nerve! We'll have something to say to this white master for allowing his 'boys' to threaten a party of white men!"

They marched forward, and when, later, they plunged into a thick belt of trees, and continued along a kind of rough track, they were prepared for action. They half-expected an ambush—or, at least, they expected spears to come hissing out from the undergrowth.

Sir Arthur was now anxious concerning the three junior schoolboys. He was sorry that he had brought them. But how could he have anticipated any such dramatic development as this? Fortunately, there were no manifestations of hostility, and the little party plunged deeper and deeper into the valley.

At last they had left the hills behind, and they were soon marching along an open lane, with the fields and meadows on either side. A closer view only confirmed the former impression. These fields were irregular, and oddly shaped—almost exactly like the fields of an English countryside. What was more, they were surrounded by hedges.

"This country was never like this naturally," said Simmons, with conviction. "These fields have been made—these hedges deliberately planted."

"It's opposed to all Australian principle," said Sir Arthur, nodding. "I don't pretend to understand—but, by the look of things, we shall soon be in a position to understand better. There are houses already in sight."

It was true. Less than half a mile further on there were wooden buildings to be seen—the outskirts of that township that Olem had spoken of.

The man felt himself being dragged relentlessly down into the deadly swamp. "Quick, you chaps!" yelled Handforth to his two chums, and he leapt forward to the rescue.

And the party progressed at a brisk march, in spite of its tiredness, and in spite of the broiling heat of the afternoon.

CHAPTER 16.

More Surprises!

HANDFORTH & CO. were agog with excitement. They had no fear. The way in which those aborigines had bolted assured them that the blacks were not really a menace. Now numbers of other aborigines were to be seen—working peacefully in the fields, tilling the soil, tending cattle, and so forth. There was, indeed, something very startling about this whole adventure.

The scenes in this valley were different from any the juniors had witnessed in Australia. They were not characteristic of the country at all. And this fertile hollow was hidden away behind the rugged hills, in a region that was generally supposed to be an uninhabited wilderness.

"Extraordinary!" repeated Sir Arthur, in a tone of wonder.

At close quarters he could see that the houses were thatched—and in such a way as to be reminiscent of the old English style. The houses themselves were of wood, and they were found to be very crudely constructed. There was no glass in the windows, and the general architecture was primitive. Yet they were in no sense aboriginal dwellings. In spite of their crudity, they followed, in a general way, the bungalow type of home in England—with a little admixture of the homely country cottage. There were little gardens to them, too, the majority being neatly set out and tended.

Peeping from the doorways and windows, and round angles of the buildings, were women and children—black, of course. They were all neatly attired in frocks of some cotton material.

"What do you make of it, sir?" asked Handforth, appealing to Sir Arthur.

"I make nothing of it, my boy," replied the millionaire. "I am completely bewildered!"

As they advanced they found themselves entering a regular township, and they even encountered one or two primitive-looking little shops. The rough track had become a road, and now it turned into quite a wide street—dusty and uneven, and innocent of all wheeled traffic, but it was a street, nevertheless.

Crowds were gathering—men, women, and children—and they were tacking themselves on behind, and walking with the white party. They jabbered and cried out and waved their arms.

Towards the centre of the strange township a body of blacks appeared—all of them wearing the curious red shorts. They marched in some sort of order, and the crowds, at the sight of them, fell back. These "soldiers" ranged themselves all round Sir Arthur and his companions, and formed an escort.

"This doesn't look any too cheerful to me," murmured Church. "They've taken us prisoners, Handy!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "They'd better not try any monkey tricks, or they'll find themselves in trouble!"

Sir Arthur, who was looking keenly about him, noticed that one house was much bigger—much more pretentious—than any

of the others. It stood apart, surrounded by its well-tended grounds. It was an elaborate sort of bungalow, with a low-set roof, and with a wide veranda facing the broad street.

As the party approached, a tall, upright figure could be seen standing on the veranda at the top of some wooden steps. He was an impressive figure, attired all in white. The general effect was increased by the fact that this man was a white man, with a long, white beard and an abundance of white hair. His expression was grave and angry. His lined, bronzed face was expressive of resentment.

Slowly he flung up one of his hands, and uttered some quick words in the language of the aborigines. Instantly the men in the red shorts halted and stood at attention. Sir Arthur and his party continued to move forward—until they were at the foot of those veranda steps.

"Am I right, sir, in assuming that you are in a position of control here?" asked Sir Arthur bluntly.

The man in white looked at him out of smouldering eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you want here?"

"We come for aid," said the millionaire, delighted to find that this man spoke English. "We are but a few members of a big party that has met with disaster in the bush. Your blacks were found near our camp, and they guided us to this wonderful valley."

"They shall be punished for their folly," said the other sternly. "You are white men, and you are not welcome here, in my community."

"You are, at least, candid."

"I intend to be candid," said the man with the smouldering eyes. "I am angry that my peace of nine years should be so disturbed. Who are you and your companions? How comes it that you are stranded in the bush? And why come to me? I cannot help you—I will not help you. Your entry into this valley is an intrusion and an offence."

"Do you happen to be the king here?" asked Simmons, with some heat.

"I am the ruler of this valley—the supreme law."

"With the sanction of the Australian Federal Government?" asked Sir Arthur.

"I care naught for governments!" retorted the other. "Out here, I am in the wilds. For nine years I have been undisturbed—I have been left to build my community, and to rule the destinies of these harmless black people."

"What is your name, sir?" asked the millionaire.

"My name does not matter," replied this extraordinary man. "I am the white master."

"You are an Englishman?"

"I am the white master," repeated the other. "Nine years ago I abandoned my nationality. I am a man of the wilds—a man lost in the heart of this great continent."

"Since you are the supreme ruler, I think we have a right to demand an explanation from you, sir," said Sir Arthur sternly. "Your men attacked us. They threw spears and it was only by firing a volley of rifle-shots over their heads that we were saved from further molestation. Is this the way you greet your fellow-white men? Is this the way you instruct your aboriginal subjects?"

The white master looked troubled.

"If my men attacked you, they shall answer for their incredible daring," he said. "Yet I suspect that they acted from a misplaced sense of loyalty to me. They accounted you intruders, and acted accordingly."

"And do you regard us as intruders?"

"I do," said the white master coldly. "I desire no association with my fellow-white men."

"And you will send us back into the bush—knowing that it will probably mean death?"

"No, I will not do that," said the man on the veranda. "Much as I resent your presence, I will extend you all the hospitality that is at my disposal. I only urge you to depart and go your ways without an unnecessary prolongation of this stay."

"There are other members of the party out in the bush—including a great number of schoolboys—English schoolboys," said Sir

Arthur. "They are without clothes, without shoes, and their food supplies are limited. They are unfamiliar with the Australian bush, and they have no means of transport. I desire to send a messenger to the camp of my friends, and to instruct them to come——"

"No," broke in the white master harshly. "To that I will not consent. I will rally all my resources, and I will send two hundred laden men back with you. But I will not permit your friends to enter this valley."

"Since we have entered it, and since we are under no pledge of secrecy, what difference would it make if our friends enter, too?" asked the millionaire. "And why, sir, is there any need for such strange behaviour? Are you ashamed of this valley, and of the splendid work among the blacks that you have evidently been doing?"

The white master did not answer for some little time. He stood thoughtful, his lined face frowning, his eyes smouldering.

"Your point is a sound one," he said at last. "Since you have entered this valley, and since you are under no pledge of secrecy, your companions might as well enter, too. Gentlemen, my soldiers will escort you to a suitable lodging. I will dispatch express messengers to your camp, and your friends will be granted safe escort into the New Colne Valley."

"We have your word for that?" asked Sir Arthur.

"My word," said the white master, bowing.

He then turned on his heel and walked into the bungalow. He had given his visitors a strange welcome, indeed—if it could really be called a welcome. But it was felt that he was a man of his word—a man of honour. As to who he was, or why he was living in this strange valley, one white man amidst hosts of aborigines, was a puzzle that fairly bristled with intriguing possibilities.

CHAPTER 17.

The White Man's Escort!

"DAWN, guv'nor," said Nipper, as he glanced up at the eastern sky.

"Yes, yes," said Nelson Lee. "And still no word from Sir Arthur."

The pair squatted near one of the campfires, and all round them the other members of the party were sound asleep. Nipper, awakening shortly before, and seeing Nelson Lee tending one of the fires, had joined him.

"We didn't expect anything to happen until to-day, did we, sir?" asked Nipper. "I only hope that Sir Arthur and the others are all right."

"Particularly those young rascals, Handford and Church and McClure," said Lee, frowning. "I am rather disappointed with Sir Arthur for allowing them to——"

"Look out, guv'nor!" broke in Nipper. "There's somebody moving over there, amongst those gum-trees!"

They were both on their feet immediately, Lee's hand on his rifle. But there was no need for alarm. Two figures came into the circle of the firelight—figures instantly recognisable. They were Olem and Yarro.

"You have returned?" asked Lee sharply. "What of the others?"

"White men send letter," said Olem, with a cheerful grin. "You read; I wait. Then I show you."

Nelson Lee took a folded piece of paper which Olem had produced—a rough, coarse piece of paper, but stout and strong. Upon it was written a message, and Lee quickly noted the signature—"Arthur Brampton."

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"'Dear Lee,'" read out the schoolmaster-detective,—"'You may trust Colonel Olem. We have reached the township, and are all safe, including the three boys. Olem will guide you and the rest of the party without delay. There is much to tell you, but details here are unnecessary, since we shall be joining forces a few hours after this reaches you."

"Is that all, sir?" asked Nipper.

"That is all."

"But Sir Arthur hasn't said where he is, or what this township is like——"

"Sir Arthur finds it unnecessary, as he says, to go into such details," broke in Nelson Lee. "Is it not sufficient to know that there

is a township, and that we are thus able to get back to civilisation without delay?"

Lee's tone was full of relief—full of untold satisfaction. He sensed that there was something very unusual about this township, and he quite appreciated Sir Arthur's disinclination to write long explanations in the letter.

"It is well!" he said, turning to the waiting blacks. "Sit down and rest. Food will be given you. We will be ready to start within the hour."

Olem grinned.

"Plenty men for help," he said blandly. "White master know best."

He turned, flung up a dusky brown hand, and let out a great shout. That shout aroused nearly everybody in the camp, and the next moment St. Frank's seniors and juniors were sitting up, rubbing their eyes, or jumping to their feet. The men were quickly alert, too. They were thoroughly awake just in time to witness a rather strange spectacle. A file of heavily-laden men came marching out of the bush. There were between fifty and sixty of them, all loaded—but unarmed.

"What is this?" asked Lee, turning to Olem.

"White master send many things," replied Olem, with a wave of his hand. "Plenty shoes for feet. Much else too."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Nipper breathlessly.

The aborigines, at a word of command from Olem, set their burdens down; then they retreated to the edge of the camp, where they squatted down, and jabbered animatedly amongst themselves.

"It's a queer business, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Norton, the Remove master. "What do you make of it?"

But Lee hardly knew how to answer. The bundles, upon examination, proved interesting. Scores of pairs of roughly-made shoes were disclosed—they were serviceable things, of raw hide—hand-sewn and of all sizes. Then, too, there were strangely made straw hats, and drinking cups of baked clay, unglazed and primitive. There were various assortments of fruits, and clumsy earthenware bottles, evidently for the purpose of carrying water on the march.

"What kind of a township is this, anyhow?" asked Fenton of the Sixth, in an amazed voice. "All these things are primitive and crude."

"It beats me," said Nipper, scratching his head. "But Sir Arthur tells us to go there—and he went along in advance to give the place a look over, didn't he? It must be all right, or he wouldn't tell us all to follow."

"Let's be thankful that there's a town of any kind near at hand," remarked Stevens, of the Fifth.

"True, brother—true," murmured William Napoleon Browne. "It is no exaggeration to say that we are all gratified and relieved. There were indications yesterday that we should be compelled to turn ourselves into backwoodsmen and squatters, and to eke out a precarious existence in these wilds. Now, however, there is an alluring prospect ahead of us. It cannot truthfully be said that this is a hopeless dawn."

"But it can be said that you're a hopeless ass!" said Stevens.

"An ass, perhaps, brother, but not hopeless," replied Browne benevolently. "I can say, without fear of contradiction, that my optimism——"

But nobody heard what Browne's optimism was like, and nobody cared. A wave of excitement was sweeping through the camp. There was an element of mystery in this strange affair. Everybody felt that there was something unusual—something remarkable—about the township they were setting out for.

And, without doubt, there was every justification for this feeling!

CHAPTER 13.

Into the New Colne Valley!

THE journey was not a difficult one. Olem and his blacks went in advance, heavily laden then came Nelson Lee, with a group of the men, then the St. Frank's seniors, followed by the juniors, and, finally, another party of men in the rear.

There were many sore feet long before the journey was half over, for those rawhide shoes were not as comfortable as they might have been. Yet they were infinitely better than the grass sandals that had been made in camp.

The day was swelteringly hot, the sky cloudless, and the sun blistering. The heat seemed even more oppressive after the prickly pear belt had been left behind, and when the great party was marching beneath the tropical undergrowth of the swampy region. The steamy atmosphere, so humid and oppressive, was even worse to-day than yesterday.

Never once did the blacks falter or make an error. Unerringly they led the way through that treacherous expanse of slime and insect-infested moisture. Then came the higher ground, where the atmosphere was less humid, and although it was blazingly hot, it seemed a great relief after the recent ordeal.

Many of the juniors, who had thought that the march would be simple and easy, were showing the effects. They were weary and exhausted, and their eager excitement, which had been noticeable at dawn, was now completely lacking.

However, they bucked up considerably after they had got well into the ravine, for the sun, slanting across the hills, left this valley in deep shadow. A halt was called here for drinks, and upon Olem assuring Nelson Lee that the end of the journey was practically within sight, long drinks of water were handed out After this the fellows felt refreshed and invigorated, and when they marched again, they walked with a lighter step—a brisker stride. And those who had sore feet—and there were many—forgot their pains soon afterwards. For a rather surprising thing happened. Just before the valley came into full sight, a crowd of aborigines appeared, all dressed in red shorts. And at their head marched—Edward Oswald Handforth!

He was an extraordinary figure. He, too, was wearing a pair of those red shorts, and upon his head he sported a peaked cap. There was a band of blue material stretched slantwise across his chest, and upon his feet were some weird and wonderful top-boots. He carried a spear, and he marched with a firm step.

At the very rear of the column Church and McClure could be seen, attired very similarly to their leader. The only real difference was that they were not wearing the blue band across their chests.

"Great Scott! It's old Handy!"

"Well, I'm blowed!"

"Hurrah!"

"This proves that everything's all right, anyhow!"

"Rather!"

Everybody was shouting and laughing, and another cheer went up. For the sight of Handforth was a sufficient indication that the march was nearly at an end.

"Welcome to the New Colne Valley!" sang out Handforth. "Now, then, men! Halt! Form fours! Attention!"

The blacks, after a lot of shuffling and dodging about, formed into a ragged kind of line. And they held their spears high in the air by way of salute.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"That's the way to do it!" grinned Handforth. "It doesn't take me long to train these men. Wait until I've been at it for a week."

"But what are you supposed to be?" asked Nipper.

"I'm the officer of the visitors' bodyguard," replied Handforth promptly.

"You're the which?"

"You heard me the first time, you ass!"

"But who made you the officer?" asked Nipper.

"I did!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And who organised the visitors' bodyguard?"

"I did!" said Handforth coolly. "These black fellows were wandering about doing nothing, so I thought I'd give them something to do. And as they obeyed my orders, everything is all serene."

"It's a wonder they didn't go for you with their spears," remarked Buster Boots, of the Fourth. "But I suppose, after giving you a good look over, they decided that you were too tough."

"Fathead!" retorted Handforth. "They're not cannibals!"

"I thought you said all these aborigines were cannibals?"

"Perhaps they were, in the old days—but these black chaps are more or less civilised," said Handforth. "Anyhow, they know better than to start any of their monkey tricks while I'm in command!"

He gave some more orders, and there followed another series of shufflings and scurrying about. This lack of precision was not entirely the aborigines' fault, for Handforth had a habit of giving an order, and then countermanding it with the next breath.

However, the guard was eventually formed up into a double column, and then, with Handforth at the head, they marched into the valley. In a way it was a very impressive entry for the St. Frank's party—a sort of triumphal march.

And then surprise followed upon surprise.

All these seniors and juniors had felt that they were past the point where they could be astonished; but when they saw that wonderful valley, with its irregular fields and meadows, its creeks, its thatched houses, they were nearly speechless with wonder. Nobody quite knew what they had expected; but never in their wildest dreams had they anticipated anything like this.

Down in the valley near the township, Sir Arthur Brampton himself came forward. The millionaire was no longer dressed in his pyjamas, but in a kind of airy uniform—brief shorts and a gay-coloured shirt. A wide straw hat on his head afforded him efficient protection from the sun's rays.

"Splendid!" he said, by way of greeting. "You have done well, Mr. Lee! I hardly expected you until daylight was failing."

"For goodness' sake, Sir Arthur, tell me what all this means!" said Lee bluntly. "Where are we? What is this remarkable place?"

"We are in the land of the white master," replied Sir Arthur. "I believe he calls it the New Colne Valley—but there, Lee, you have practically the sum total of my own knowledge. The gentleman has not vouchsafed me any detailed explanation, and I can only tell you that we are all very unwelcome in this community."

"Unwelcome?"

"Unwanted," said Sir Arthur. "The white master—as he calls himself—was quite candid on the point. He is tolerating us because we are white, and because we are in distress. Otherwise, he prefers our room to our company."

"My only hat!" said Nipper.

"Has this man a grudge against his fellows?" asked Lee. "And if he is so hostile, why has he allowed us to enter at all? Without his aboriginal guides, we could never have crossed that deadly swampland."

"Well, you see, my little party got in more or less by accident," explained Sir Arthur. "Olem and his men blundered. It seems that they ought not to have revealed the secret of the valley to us. But as we were in, the white master thought that it would do no harm if the whole party came in, too."

"I see the point," nodded Nelson Lee. "But I'm hanged if I can see why this man should be so anxious for us to avoid his wonderful valley."

CHAPTER 19.

The Exile of the Bush!

SIR ARTHUR BRAMPTON shrugged his shoulders.

"Does it really matter?" he asked. "This man—this white master—is eccentric. He resents our presence, but he recognises that we are white, and that it is his plain duty to aid us in our extremity and show us every hospitality."

"Is this man alone here?"

"Quite alone—except for the blacks."

"And how many blacks are there?"

"Quite a number," said Sir Arthur. "Well over a thousand, I believe—counting women and children. An astounding community."

"Has this white man no white companions?"

"None. He seems to be a recluse—an exile from his own kind."

"And for this reason he disapproves of our invasion?" mused Nelson Lee. "I shall be very interested to hear what explanation he has to offer. He must have been here many years——"

"About nine, I think," said Sir Arthur.

"Then he has accomplished marvels in such a short space of time," said Lee.

"The valley is full of surprises," agreed Mr. Stockdale. "We have passed corn and vegetables and fruit orchards, and everything appears to be flourishing amazingly well."

They continued their march, and presently they came into the heart of that quaint township, with its thatched roofs and its dusty streets. Nelson Lee and his party became more amazed than ever as they saw it. The whole place seemed such a contradiction. Homes like this for the aborigines! It was unheard of. On the other hand, there were no windows in these houses, and the very implements that the landworkers had been using were crudely made tools of wood.

"All arrangements have been made," said Sir Arthur, as he walked alongside Lee. "There are several of these houses specially prepared for our benefit. I have been supervising the work all day, and I think we shall find them quite comfortable. It may be necessary to remain here a few days—I don't quite know yet—but I dare say we could do with a short period of rest."

"And this white master?" asked Nelson Lee. "Who is he—actually?"

"You can see him for yourself," replied the millionaire.

He nodded towards the big bungalow, and there, on the veranda, stood the white figure with the white hair and beard. If he had been wearing long, flowing robes he would have looked patriarchal.

"An invasion—an invasion!" he was saying in distress. "My solitude is indeed rudely shattered. And my secret is no longer safe."

Nelson Lee advanced.

"Sir Arthur informs me that you have been kind enough to put certain houses at our disposal, sir," he said. "As the leader of this party, I would like to thank you——"

"Spare yourself the trouble, my friend," interrupted the white master. "I require no thanks—I desire no thanks. Your presence here is distasteful to me. But of two evils I am choosing the lesser. It is better for you to be here in this valley than to return to your accursed civilisation, there to spread stories of my strange valley community—stories that would probably in due course become grossly exaggerated and lead to inquisitive official investigation."

There was an implication in these words which caused Nelson Lee to pause.

"You are suggesting, Mr.—Mr.——"

"My name does not matter," said the other. "I am the white master."

"Your words imply that we shall not leave this valley," said Nelson Lee, "and that, surely, is a fantastic suggestion. We are anxious to return to a recognised settlement or township——"

"There is one fifty miles to the westward," interrupted the white master. "That is the only settlement in this whole region. But during my nine years' sojourn in this valley I have never once communicated with that settlement, and the people who live there are not aware of my existence."

He waved a hand, as though dismissing the subject.

"But these young people are doubtless tired and hungry," he went on. "They will be escorted into their homes. For the present, sir, we need say no more."

He turned, and Lee did not press for the interview to be continued. He knew that many of the boys were utterly exhausted, and they needed food and drink and rest.

So they were taken into some of those queerly-built houses, and they found the interiors as quaint as the exteriors. There was furniture of a kind—roughly-made tables and chairs—table utensils made of baked clay—knives and forks of a hard wood. Extraordinary ingenuity must have been employed to provide all these.

Having seen that the school was quite settled, Nelson Lee left one or two of the Form-masters in charge. The prefects,

too, were now resuming their authority. For the first time since the disaster of the burnt coaches the school was now required to observe discipline.

Nelson Lee took Sir Arthur Brampton aside.

"We will visit the white master," said Lee, with a curiously grim note in his voice. "I am particularly anxious to have a talk with that gentleman. His hospitality, although grudging, is lavish. Yet I doubt its sincerity."

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Lee?" asked Sir Arthur. "I have been priding myself that we are in luck's way. I made these arrangements——"

"It remains to be seen, Sir Arthur, whether we have improved our lot by coming to this valley," said Nelson Lee. "On the face of it, it seems that our troubles are over. A fifty-mile trip to the settlement is not formidable. But before we discuss this further let us have a chat with that white-haired man."

They went to the big bungalow, and they found the white master seated in a deck-chair on the veranda, contemplating the peaceful scene of the wide main street. Aborigines were passing to and fro, and they all seemed to be bent on some business or other. Some were carrying loads of fruit, others, with tools on their shoulders, were returning from the fields. It was noticeable that all these blacks were sturdy and solidly-built—a sure enough indication of good living, with an abundance of food. So many of the Australian aborigines are skinny and ill-nourished that these people looked exceptionally robust in comparison.

And this man—this white master—was undoubtedly responsible for the community's prosperity. But while he was a kind of fairy godfather to the blacks, would he be equally generous to these white visitors who had come into his hidden valley?

CHAPTER 20.

The Shock!

THE white master rose to his feet as Nelson Lee and Sir Arthur mounted the veranda steps.

"Please do not disturb yourself, sir," said Lee. "If you will not consider it an impertinence, we shall be most interested to hear the story of this remarkably cultivated valley——"

"I do regard it as an impertinence," said the white master coldly.

"I am sorry——"

"Furthermore, I have no desire for your company, gentlemen," said the white-haired man. "For nine years my solitude has been undisturbed, and now this present situation

is none of my own making. I beg of you to respect my wishes. You may remain here if you please, and perhaps. in time, I shall grow accustomed to——"

"But we do not intend to remain," said Nelson Lee. "Since you value your solitude so much, Mr. Winton, we will not presume to disturb it for a minute longer than we can help."

The white master started back, his eyes burning.

"Winton!" he muttered. "You know my name!"

"Your name is Mr. Stanley Winton," said Lee quietly.

"Are you a magician?" panted the white master hoarsely. "How did you know? I have never met you before——"

"This gentleman is Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective," interrupted Sir Arthur. "Perhaps that may help to solve the riddle for you?"

"I claim no magical powers," smiled Lee. "I have never met you before, Mr. Winton, but I have a record of your case in my files. And a record of injustice and blundering and tragedy it is, too."

The man seemed pleased, and he sat down abruptly, staring straight before him.

"You know?" he muttered. "I had thought that the world had forgotten me."

"No doubt the world has," said Nelson Lee. "It is fourteen years since you were convicted."

The white master started.

"Yes, convicted!" he said, bending forward. "Wrongfully arrested, convicted upon false testimony, and flung into prison for five years' penal servitude!"

"But I don't understand!" said Sir Arthur.

"It is an old case," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, a famous case. Mr. Winton, a peaceful country gentleman, living in the quiet Colne Valley of Essex, in England, was arrested on a charge of manslaughter. At first the charge had been one of murder, but it was altered. Mr. Winton's estate steward was found dead, and it was known that this man was under notice. There had been a quarrel between them."

"Over some trifling matter of a public right of way," said the white master feverishly. "I was thrust into the dock, and without a shred of real evidence the verdict was given against me. Men perjured themselves, and it was in vain that I protested my innocence. I was sent to penal servitude, and when I came out, after spending five years of torture, I found——"

He broke off, nearly choking.

"My wife and my little son were dead!" he went on hoarsely. "My wife was killed by the shock, and my little boy, a delicate child, was neglected, and he died. And then, on the very day of my release, the truth came out. It was known that I had been innocent.

"On that day—the day I returned to my barren home—I made a vow!" continued the white-haired man, rising to his feet and clenching his fists. "I swore that I would go to the uttermost ends of the earth—that I would bury myself amongst a primitive people, untouched by the curses of civilisation. I penetrated far into Queensland, into the west. Then I deliberately wandered on and lost myself—walking mile after mile, getting even further and further into the wilds.

"I found this valley by accident—by succouring an injured aborigine," went on the man. "I was led through the swamp—and I came to this valley. At that time it was just a haven of tropical beauty. I settled here, and gathered the black men about me."

He paused, calming down somewhat, and he became reminiscent.

"We worked—month in and month out," he continued. "I taught these harmless, industrious people my language. I taught them crafts. I had the landscape altered—fields were made. Seeds were sown—oh, yes, I had brought some supplies with me. And this is the result!" he added, waving his hand eloquently. "A community of my own, with many hundreds of loyal subjects. They came to me, these blacks, in ever-increasing numbers. And, once in this valley, they never get out. It will be the same with you and your party. I let you come in—but you will never get out!" He spoke gloatingly. "You have your liberty—you can go where you please. But if you attempt to get back to your infernal civilisation you will perish in the attempt!"

Nelson Lee and Sir Arthur Brampton looked at one another with troubled eyes.

Was there any truth in the white master's statement? Were they doomed to remain in this sunny, picturesque valley for the remainder of their days—cut off from the world?

THE END.

("The Valley of Surprises!" is the title of next week's long yarn, and Edwy Searles Brooks has once again produced the real "goods." Also look out for your Free Badges of Hammond, Jardine and Tyldesley.)

E. S. BROOKS

BETWEEN OURSELVES!

OUR AUTHOR CHATS WITH OUR READERS

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE SCHOOL STORY LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

LESLIE WILSON

BEFORE I forget it, I would like to thank all readers, at home and abroad, who have sent me such nice Christmas and New Year cards. I am writing this, of course, just about Christmas-time, so, although the festive season will be over and forgotten by the time these words appear, I am right in the middle of receiving the nice cards referred to. I mean, I couldn't very well thank you for them before I got them, could I? That's why this little note may strike you as being late. These expressions of good will are coming in by every post, from all parts of the world, and it makes me realise more than ever how many more friends I have got than those who are in daily contact with me. It warms the cockles of my heart (whatever they may be), and makes me feel that I really know you all.

* * *

Glad you agree with the majority—Leslie Wilson (West Hartlepool)—that there is not too much of Handforth in my yarns. Considering that he and his minor are the two most popular characters, I should be lacking in my duty to our readers if I did not keep them both well in the limelight. But, as I have often said, it is impossible to please everybody; so I must console myself with the thought that I am pleasing most of you. As you have given me permission to publish your photograph, it appears opposite mine this week. The only trouble is, I shall look awfully forbidding in comparison with your own smiling chivvy.

* * *

Yes—Nora C. Milne (Hayes)—I really do write all the stories that are published under my name—as well as some that are not published under my name. You surely don't think I'd risk another man writing his stories and using my name, do you? They might be so much better that you would all expect me to keep up to the same standard! As for your wondering if I'll ever see your letter, it's in my hand even now, and I think your idea of green ink on green paper is very tasty. Any such combination of shades is always attractive. I'd like to mention here that I read *all* letters from *all* readers, although, as I have repeatedly mentioned on this page, I can only find space to reply to a few. But I also reply by post to quite anumber of readers every week.

* * *

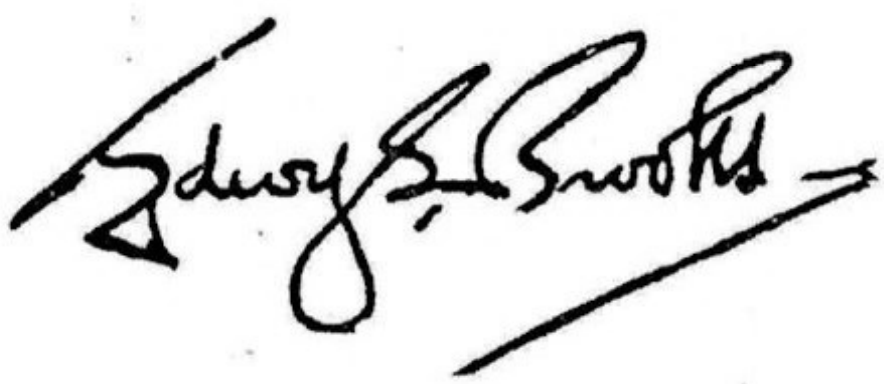
I did not think it necessary—Maysie Mortimer (Cheadle Hulme)—to mention in the stories that Vivian Travers had obtained a new motor-bike to replace the one that was wrecked shortly after he arrived at the school. Regarding an English series, I have already mooted such an idea in these columns—that is, a School Train, with St. Frank's moving from town to town all over the country—but so far there has been no time for readers to give me their opinions, although one or two have already expressed their liking for the wheeze. And, at the time I am writing this, remember, the paragraph I have alluded to has not long been in print.

* * *

I'm afraid you're asking too much—Wilfred Snowden (Doncaster). Firstly, you want me to send you my photograph, and secondly, you want an advert. inserted in the Correspondents Wanted column—and you have not even sent me your own photo, and you admit that you have not joined the League. You can't have something for nothing, you know. Send me your photo, and you'll have mine; join the League, and your advert. will be printed in due course, free of charge.

* * *

Yes, Handforth was at St. Frank's in the very first story—Frank Drinkwater (Altrincham)—and he has been there ever since. A few readers think that I make too much of him, but the general opinion is that he and Willy are the two most popular fellows. So it's only natural, isn't it, that they should appear regularly, whilst minor characters—such as Lord Pippington—are only mentioned at long intervals.



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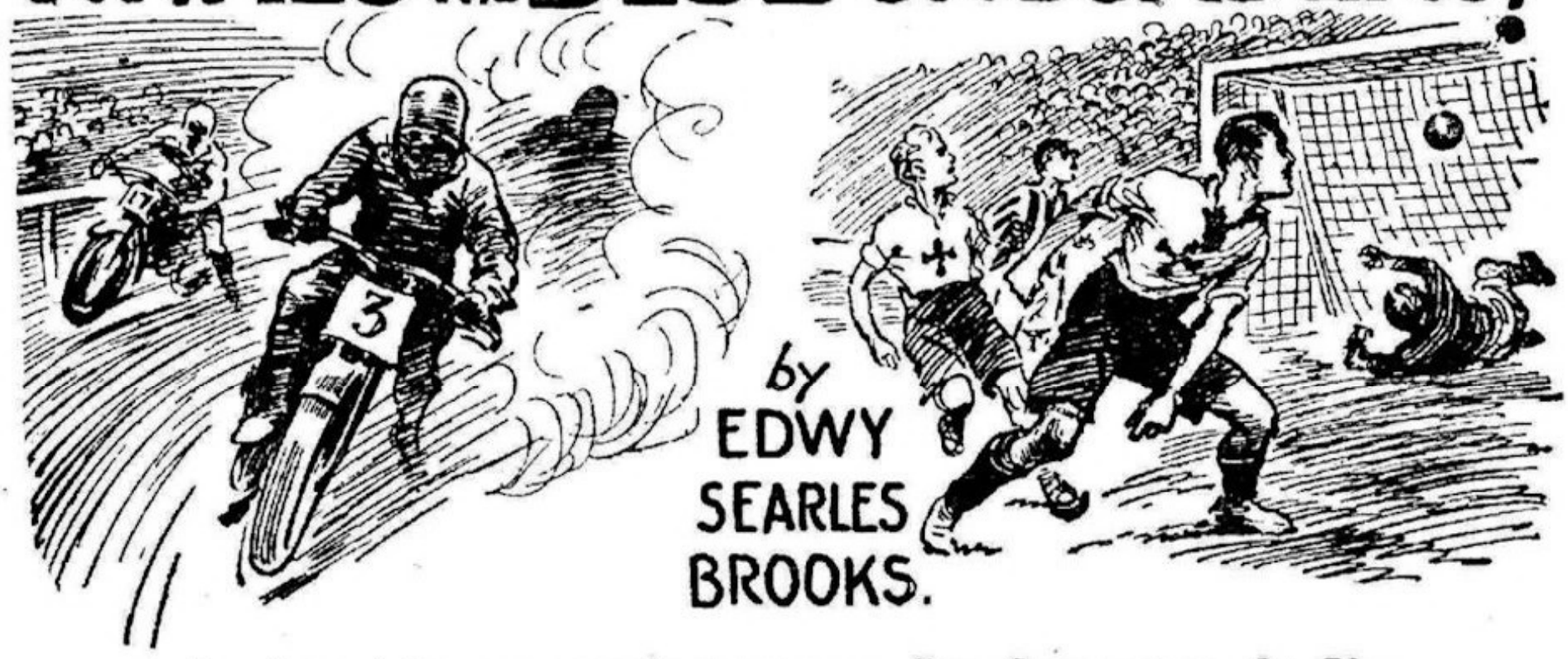

by EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

In spue of his manager's warnings, Rex Carrington, the Blue Crusaders' brilliant centre-forward, is determined to have a go on the dirt racing track. He does—and the results are dramatic in the extreme!

The Lure of Speed!

ZURRRRRH!

There was something exhilarating, awe-inspiring, in the spectacle of those leather-clad, demon-like figures hurtling round the track, clouds of dust arising as they slithered and skidded on their way.

This was Bannington's first taste of dirt track racing, and when the opening event was over a great cheer went up from the spectators. The younger people in particular, were aroused to a great enthusiasm.

It is an age of speed, and the blood of the youngsters was sent throbbing through their veins as they beheld the racers tearing over the track, broadsiding perilously, and indulging in other daring tricks. It was something totally different from ordinary motor-cycle racing, something infinitely more thrilling to watch.

"A bit better than the old greyhound-racing arena, eh?" said Reggie Pitt, with a breathless note in his voice. "My only hat! This is what I call real excitement."

"Rather!" agreed Armstrong, of the East House. "And we're allowed to come here, too. The Speedway isn't out of bounds. Dirt track racing is a clean, healthy sport and no betting is allowed. We can come here as often as we like."

The St. Frank's fellows were much elated when they thought of this. Attending grey hound racing was strictly prohibited by the school authorities, mainly, of course, because of the betting that is so general at such meetings. But it was a totally different matter in the Speedway. People came to watch the motor-cycle racing for the mere thrill of it, for the exhilaration of the sport itself.

For dirt track racing is a spectacle—a breathless, exhilarating exhibition of skill and daring and pluck.

"H'm! I don't wonder that old Piecan is a bit worried," remarked Lionel Corcoran thoughtfully. "Once this new sport gets popular in Bannington, it will become a very serious rival to the Blues."

"You don't look particularly cut up about it," remarked Tich.

"Why should I be cut up?" retorted Corky. "I'm a philosophical sort of chap. These people have as much right in Bannington as we have, and it's no good grumbling at competition. It's up to the Blues to keep their supporters, that's all."

"I suppose you're right," said Tich, nodding. "And when you come to think of it, there's nothing really to beat football. This Speedway may be a success, but I don't think it will seriously interfere with our gates."

"Not unless we strike a bad patch, or something like that," said Corky. "By Jove, you know, they've got some real stars appearing this evening! In the big handicap race there are Smiling Billy Ross, Reg Stanton, Gold Helmet Kemp, and Broadside Dick Somers. One of 'em is an Australian, but the others are English. And they're all men of fame."

"I suppose they make a good bit at this game?" asked Rex Carrington.

"You bet they do!" agreed Corcoran. "Why, some of them have earned as much as two thousand pounds in three or four months."

"Good-bye, football!" said Rex promptly.

"Don't be an ass!" grinned Corky. "It's only the experts who get that money."

"But who are the experts?" asked Rex. "Why, a year ago there weren't any Englishmen who could do this particular kind of riding. It's a new sport here—and yet these men have made such big money! It looks pretty good to me!"

"Best not let old Piecan hear you talk like that," chuckled Tich. "Cheese it, Rex! You're the Blues' star centre-forward, so you mustn't think of this dirt track racing."

"I'd like to have a go at it, all the same," said Rex.

He strolled away, and, by coolly climbing over a fence which divided the pits from the public enclosure, he got amongst the racing men and the mechanics.

The air was filled with the roar of engines being tested, filled with petrol fumes, and Rex, although he was a calm customer, felt rather bewildered.

"Hallo! What are you doing here?" asked a voice.

Rex swung round, and found himself facing a squat, square-shouldered man of about forty-five. He was clean-shaven, florid, and not particularly handsome.

"Just having a look round," said Rex carelessly.

"Well, you're not allowed here, my friend," said the other. "My name is Burke, and I'm the track manager."

"Good!" said Rex, holding out his hand. "My name's Carrington, and I'm the centre-forward of the Blue Crusaders. Shake! Pleased to meet you!"

The track manager looked dubious.

"I didn't intend that as an introduction," he grunted. "So you're Carrington, are you? I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to leave ——"

"Hold on, Mr. Burke!" said one of the helmeted riders as he came across. "Put it there, Carrington!" he added, as he seized Rex's hand. "I'm Bil'y Ross. I saw you playing this afternoon, and I thought you were terrific."

"Thanks awfully," smiled Rex. "After I have seen you winning one of these races perhaps I shall be able to return the compliment?"

"I may not win," said Billy Ross, who was a jovial-faced, lean individual of about twenty-five. "All right, Mr. Burke. No need to send him out. He's a friend of mine."

Mr. Peter Burke grunted again.

"You soon make friends!" he said shortly.

After he had gone Smiling Billy Ross chuckled.

"There's never any pleasing old Burke," he said confidentially. "He used to be manager of one of the big London tracks, where I did a lot of racing. Interested in this sort of thing?"

"Tremendously," said Rex.

"Ever done any of it?"

"No, but I'd like to have a try," said the Blues' centre-forward. "Of course, I've done quite a lot of motor-cycling, and I've got the reputation of being reckless. I suppose there isn't an old jigger here that I could run round the course on—just to get a thrill?"

Billy Ross grinned.

"Why not?" he said coolly. "Here's an old test machine. There's no race for another fifteen minutes. You can go round if you like. I'll lend you a helmet."

"Good man!" said Rex eagerly.

He had only suggested it in a casual sort of way, never expecting that his desire would be granted. But Smiling Billy Ross, as it happened, was an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky

The Opening Chapters in Brief.

ULYSSES PIECOMBE—more commonly known as Piecan—manager of that famous Second Division Football Club, The Blue Crusaders, is worried, very worried. Not because the Blues are doing badly—indeed, at the moment they are playing splendid football—but because they've got rivals—dirt track racing rivals. A dirt track is about to be opened near the Stronghold, the Blues' enclosure, and Piecan fears that the club's "gates" will suffer in consequence. The players, however, seem unperturbed. Especially

REX CARRINGTON, the Blues' brilliant centre-forward. Rex is of a reckless nature, and he declares that if he gets the chance he's going to have a "go" at this new sport.

LIONEL CORCORAN, sole owner of the Crusaders—Lionel, of course, belongs to the Fourth Form at St. Frank's—is also enthusiastic. In Rex's case, however, Piecan puts his foot down. "I absolutely forbid you to go riding round a dirt track on one of those dangerous machines!" he says. "I can't run the risk of you being crocked. Corcoran is not a player, and I have no jurisdiction over him, but I do forbid any members of the team to indulge in this sport!" And that's that. What Piecan says goes. However, Rex is still as enthusiastic as ever. After the Blues' victory over Alexandra United—a victory in which Rex played a leading part—the players, and also a number of St. Frank's juniors, go along to see the dirt track racing. It is the opening night, and there are many "stars" performing. The first race is run. Everybody is immensely thrilled. "I'm going to have a run round on this track before long!" says Lionel Corcoran excitedly.

(Now read on.)

youngster, and he cared nothing for rules or regulations. Besides, he liked the look of Rex Carrington.

Thus, five minutes later, Rex sat astride a roaring monstrosity, his head helmeted, his eyes goggled.

"Better go easy to start with," roared Billy Ross in his ear. "Take the bends gently. If you don't you might come a cropper."

Mr. Burke came hurrying up, evidently with the intention of making some pointed inquiries. So Rex lost no further time, but started off with a mighty jerk. The next moment he was gathering speed, and roaring away down the straight.

He reached the bend, Billy Ross watching him curiously, for Rex was going at a great speed.

"The hopeless ass!" muttered Billy Ross. "He'll come a frightful cropper!"

But Rex Carrington did no such thing. Broadsiding giddily, bucking and skidding, he fairly slithered round the bend, and the manner in which he held his iron steed was marvellous. Mr. Burke stood quite still, amazed and fascinated, for there was something masterly in Rex's handling of that old "jigger." It was only a trial machine, and Billy Ross knew well enough that it was a brute to handle It was for this reason, perhaps, that he had given it into Rex's care. For Billy, in his own way, was a bit of a practical joker.

And then suddenly there came a totally unexpected thrill—a dramatic interruption.

Several of the Blues and two or three of the St. Frank's fellows had recognised Rex in spite of his helmet and goggles, and they were shouting and pointing. Mr. Ulysses Piecombe had also spotted him, for now he leapt over the rails and ran angrily cross the track.

"Stop!" he shouted, in his booming voice. "Carrington! How dare you defy my orders! Stop at once!"

Unfortunately, Mr. Piecombe misjudged the speed at which the motor-cycle was travelling, or perhaps did not realise the difficulties of pulling up on the loose surface.

Rex Carrington, in order to avoid running down his manager, swerved wildly, and only by a hair's-breadth did he avoid an ugly collision.

But something else happened—something infinitely more startling.

Solely owing to Mr Piecombe's rashness, Rex was now in deadly danger. The motor cycle, skidding broadside, crashed into the fence, and at this particular spot the fence served to divide the track from the railway line.

Cra-a-sh!

The motor-cycle, carrying Rex Carrington with it, hurtled straight through the fence, reared up, and came staggering over on its side, flinging Rex headlong!

The Blue Crusaders' centre-forward fell sprawling, his head coming into violent contact with one of the cold, polished rails. He lay still—ominously, horribly still

And at the same moment there sounded the thunder and roar of an approaching train! Scarcely more than a hundred yards away, just round the curve, an express came hurtling down upon the limp, unconscious form of Rex Carrington as it lay sprawled across the rails!

Rex the Reckless!

REX CARRINGTON'S luck, although apparently right out, was really in.

For, by the most fortunate chance, a couple of platelayers were walking towards Bannington goods yard on a narrow footpath which ran alongside the permanent way. And they were only about five yards from the spot where Rex had crashed over on to the rails

As the express thundered down upon the helpless footballer the two platelayers leapt up, seized him, and whisked him clear. Solely owing to their prompt action—and, indeed, their courage—Rex was saved.

With a roar and a rattle the train thundered past, and all the spectators in the Speedway, including Mr. Ulysses Piecombe himself, believed that the worst had happened.

There was an immediate rush. Lionel Corcoran and Tich and a number of St. Frank's fellows went dashing through that gap in the fence which Rex had smashed. A great shout of relief went up when it was seen that Rex was not only safe, but standing on his feet.

"Lucky for you we were near by," said one of the platelayers. "It was only a matter of seconds even as it was."

"Thanks!" muttered Rex, pressing a hand to his head. "I—I don't seem to remember —— Great Scott! I fell on the railway track, didn't I?"

"The London express nearly caught you," nodded the platelayer. "A good thing you was wearing that helmet."

The crash-helmet had undoubtedly saved Rex from serious injury when his head had hit the rail. As it was, he had only received a bump, and his recovery was rapid. Strangely enough, he felt no bruises in any of his limbs. Except for that knock on the head, he had come off scot-free. And the old "jigger," thrown clear of the rails, had come to no harm whatever.

"Thank heaven!" said Mr. Piecombe, after they had all got back into the Speedway. "I feared, Carrington, that you had badly injured yourself."

"Well, I like that, sir!" protested Rex. "It was all your fault."

"Indeed!" snapped the manager. "How dare you make such an accusation?"

"Well, it's true," retorted Rex. "I had to swerve to avoid smashing into you."

"Perfectly true!" said Mr Peter Burke, the track manager, with a glare at Mr. Piecombe. "It was a crazy thing for you to

run across the track as you did. You would certainly have been killed if Carrington had not displayed the most extraordinary presence of mind."

"Really, I had no idea——" began Mr. Piecombe, startled. "Upon my word! If I am to blame, Carrington, I sincerely regret my—er—impetuosity. But I gave you very distinct orders not to indulge in any of this ridiculous racing."

"I wasn't racing," retorted Rex. "I was just having a trial run round the track. Hang it all, sir, I'm not a slave! Surely I can do as I like in my own time?"

"Not if you endanger your limbs," said Mr. Piecombe promptly. "It is imperative that you should take no unnecessary risks, Carrington. The club will be in a bad fix if you become—er—incapacitated."

Mr. Piecombe, feeling, perhaps, that he had not played a particularly creditable part in the recent incident, turned on his heel and walked away. Now that it was all over, he could see that he had been the cause of the mishap.

"You must have been born lucky, Rex, old man," said Corcoran. "If you were a speedway champion I dare say the crowds would dub you 'Lucky Rex Carrington.' Lots of these racers have had handles tacked on to their own names."

"Why wait until he's a champion?" asked Smiling Billy Ross. "We'll call him 'Lucky' right away. By all the laws of chance, he ought to be dead by now."

Rex went away to the pits, taking the old machine with him. He found himself face to face with Mr. Burke.

"Feeling shaken up, eh?" asked the track manager, looking at him closely.

"I'm all right now," said Rex.

"Isn't your nerve affected?"

"Why should it be?" laughed the Blues' centre-forward. "Hang it, there's no need to be scared over a little spill like that. Besides, it wasn't my fault—I didn't crash through that fencing because of any mistake in judgment."

"That's quite true," nodded Mr. Burke. "You shaped thundering well during that first circuit, Carrington. I'm always on the look-out for new blood in this game, and if you care to——"

Crash! The motor-cycle hurtled straight through the fence, and Rex Carrington was flung head-first between the railway lines—right in the path of the oncoming express!

"Awfully sorry, Mr. Burke, but I'm a professional footballer," interrupted Rex, smiling. "I'm under contract to the Blue Crusaders."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't do a bit of track-racing," said Mr. Burke. "Our meetings don't clash with your football fixtures. And there's plenty of money in the game, too."

"It's very decent of you," said Rex. "But old Piecan—he's our manager, you know—is a bit particular."

"Well, think it over," said Mr. Burke. "After the next race you can take one of the newer machines round the track if you like."

And the manager walked away. He had an unerring eye for the particular kind of talent

and nerve that dirt track racing required, and in Rex Carrington he saw a very promising "hope." He was probably right, for Rex had always been of a reckless nature, and anything of this sort appealed to him. Of late he had settled down splendidly to some really great football, and Mr. Piecombe's concern for the star centre-forward was reasonable enough. Knowing Rex's nature as he did, Mr. Piecombe was worried lest this new sport should take a grip on him.

"I say," said Rex, pulling at Billy Ross' sleeve as the latter was brushing past. "Your manager is a queer sort isn't he?"

"Queer?" said Ross. "How do you mean?"

"Well, he knows that I'm a mere novice at this game, and yet he wants me to go in for it," said Rex. "He knows, too, that I'm a Blue. With all you champions here I don't see why he should care two straws about me."

Smiling Billy chuckled.

"There's more in it than meets the eye, old man," he replied. "Several of these champions—Gold Helmet Kemp and Broadside Dick Somers, for examples—are only engaged for this opening meeting. I'm a fixture, I think, but I'm not such a famous man as these others. Mr. Burke wants to get hold of new talent."

"Oh, I see," nodded Rex.

"You're innocent, aren't you?" grinned Ross. "You seem to have forgotten that you're a bit of a celebrity in Bannington. The crowds go to the Stronghold to see you playing football, don't they?"

"Not to see me—but the Crusaders."

"Don't you believe it," said Ross. "You're one of the star turns, old man. And if Burke can get hold of you to appear at the Speedway he'll be on a cert."

Rex Carrington's eyes opened wider.

"Oh, so that's it is it?" he said slowly. "Thanks for the tip, old son! By Jove! I wondered why Mr. Burke was so interested in me! Now I know!"

And, knowing, he was more determined than ever to have another "go" round that alluring track!

The Wonder Rider.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Peter Burke had no idea of it, Rex's interest in dirt track racing was entirely superficial. He thought that perhaps he might be able to get a thrill during his off-duty hours; but Rex was, first and foremost, a footballer. He was heart and soul with the Blue Crusaders, and the lure of the speedway was only a kind of sideline, so to speak.

However, it would have been better for his subsequent peace of mind if he had gone home then and there. For a mere taste of anything that one likes is liable to be disturbing and unsettling—especially if there is a prospect of obtaining plenty more of it without trouble. And Rex Carrington's nature, his whole make-up, was of the type that goes to make the perfect track-racer. On the football field he was renowned for his quick thinking, his lightning-like decisions. These were qualifications which would stand him in good stead on the Speedway.

Moreover, he was dashing—with just that touch of recklessness which appeals to the crowd. He was impulsive and self-willed, too. Mr. Piecombe had forbidden him to race on this track, and Rex's inclinations were all in favour of racing. He loved to act in defiance of orders.

After the next race he took another trial run round the course—this time using a much better motor-cycle. And he took to the new sport naturally, just as a duck takes to water. His broadsiding was wonderful to see, his control of his mount was remarkable.

Mr. Burke, who had witnessed the trials of many novices, was impressed.

"That young chap has the makings of a real champion in him!" he said, as he watched. "Gosh! Look at that! I thought he was over then, but he recovered as cleverly as any experienced racer! He's spectacular, too—just the fellow to interest the public."

"You really think so, Burke?" asked another man who was standing by the manager's side.

"I know it!" replied Burke, with conviction.

He glanced at his companion—a big, burly powerfully-built man. This latter was Mr. Julian Harding, the sole owner of the Speedway. This dirt track did not belong to a syndicate, but was Mr. Harding's own property.

"Well done!" said Mr. Burke, as Rex completed the trial.

"It's easy," grinned Rex.

"Care to compete in the next race?"

"May I?" asked Rex eagerly.

"If you like."

"But—but I thought that I had to join a club, or——"

"We'll waive one or two formalities," said Mr. Burke, smiling. "This is the first evening, and we needn't be too particular. Two of the star riders are competing in the next race, and there's a prize of fifty pounds for the winner."

"Any second or third prize?" asked Rex cheerfully. "There's not much chance of my grabbing the first, with men like Gold Helmet Kemp and Broadside Dick Somers on the track."

A little later Fatty Fowkes and Dave Moran and the other Blues were astounded to recognise Rex Carrington amongst the number of competitors for the next race. Lionel Corcoran and Tich Harborough and a group of St. Frank's fellows were equally astounded.

"Better go and stop him, hadn't we?" said Fatty, with a frown. "The silly ass! He's doing this in absolute defiance of Piecan's orders."

(How will Rex fare in the race? And what's going to happen when old Piecan finds him defying his orders again? All readers will enjoy next week's grand instalment—and look out for your three Free Gifts in the same issue!)

THE MEN WHO WON THE "ASHES"!

Our Special Contributor tells N.L. readers some interesting facts about the three famous players who form the subjects of this week's wonderful Free Gifts.

1. ELIAS HENDREN

Hendren, that wonderful little fellow of Middlesex and England, is so often referred to as "Patsy" that there must be many people who don't even know that his real name is Elias. Such is the case. However, there is enough Irish blood, and certainly enough Irish humour in Hendren's make-up to justify the "Patsy." The Irish parents of Hendren came to London before the lad was born, that auspicious event being on February 5th, 1889.

At a very early age Hendren began to breathe the atmosphere of cricket, for as soon as he left school he went to Lord's as a ground boy, and between the times when he was helping the groundsman he sold match-cards when games were in progress. More than once, however, he nearly got the "sack" as a match-card seller because he would stop and watch players like "Ranji," Tom Hayward and C. B. Fry making runs, instead of selling the cards.

His love of cricket took him to the nets, and there were many who attended at Lord's who liked the bright-faced boy so well that they gave him every possible help. In due course he played for Middlesex. He has twice scored over three thousand runs in an English season, and he scored his first century against Australia at Lord's in 1926. He is a delightfully free-scoring batsman, but there was a suggestion at one time that he could not fight an uphill battle. During the present series of matches he has given the lie to that idea. His 169 in the first innings of the first Test at Brisbane, made at a time when England were not doing well, definitely set the Old Country on the road to victory.

In the slips, in the long field, or at silly short leg he is a great fielder, but most of all he is popular in the long field. Those short legs and that stumpy figure dashing along to save a boundary just "gets" the watchers. And he is always cheerful.

2. MAURICE TATE

The title which best fits Maurice Tate is "great-heart." Whether, since the war, he has been the greatest bowler in the world may be a matter of opinion, but it is an absolute fact that no county and no country has produced a bowler with a bigger heart for the job than this son of Sussex.

No captain ever called upon him in vain for a big effort. When the last England team went to Australia the spectators used to give this advice to the captain: "Let Maurice bowl at both ends." And almost all day long, under the most trying conditions, and with a worrying big toe, Maurice would bowl. He bowled so effectively that he took more wickets than any other cricketer has ever taken in one series of games.

Maurice comes of cricket stock, for his father played for England when the lad was in the toddling stage. It was the stories told by his father which led Maurice to take up cricket. He bowls what is called a fast-medium ball, and that is a very accurate description. Through the air the ball only comes at medium pace, but Maurice has the knack of making it pick up when it strikes the pitch, and off the pitch he is really fast.

There is no leg theory or off theory about Tate's bowling. He bowls to get the batsman out—bowls at the wicket. And that is the reason why he is so frequently referred to as the world's unluckiest bowler. He often misses the stumps by a hair's-breadth. His big, broad shoulders and his swinging gait suggest the farmer, and when he is batting he gives the same impression. He just loves to hit sixes, because, though now thirty four, he is still a big, smiling boy.

3. GEORGE DUCKWORTH

One of the mysteries of cricket is why the best wicket-keepers should be nearly all little fellows. For years England had "Bert" Strudwick, a fellow of small stature. As Strudwick's successor England has a man out of the same mould. When George Duckworth has a pair

(Continued overleaf.)

OUR WEEKLY POW-WOW!

By The Editor.

Nine More Free Gifts to Come!

THIS week, chums, I've just managed to "get in" by the skin of my teeth, so to speak. As it is, space is very limited, so I'm going to say what I want to say about next week's issue of the Old Paper as briefly and as snappily as possible.

First and foremost, of course, are our Free Gifts. Already seven of these metal portrait badges of England's victorious Test Team have been given away—don't they look topping, arrayed in your Album!—but there are still nine more to come! Three of these are due next week—Hammond, Jardine and Ernest Tyldesley. Don't miss the badges of these famous cricketers, otherwise you'll spoil your set—and that would be a great pity. And why not wear the badge of *your* favourite player in your buttonhole?

Do You Want a Bicycle?

Have all of you entered our simple "Popular Cricketers" competition? What's that? Do I hear some of you saying "No"? Great Scott! Don't you realise that you're missing the opportunity of winning a splendid, fully-equipped "James" bicycle, or one of the twelve Hobbs' cricket bats which are to be given away as prizes? Come, this won't do. Why, the competition is very simple. You know who your favourite cricketer is, don't you? And you know who

(*Continued in next column.*)

THE MEN WHO WON THE "ASHES"!

(*Continued from previous page.*)

of ordinary pads on—well, you can scarcely see Duckworth.

But he is a great little wicket-keeper—there's no doubt about that. His grandfather was a wicket-keeper at Warrington, and so was his father, so the most natural thing in the world was for little George to keep wicket. He nearly didn't play for Lancashire at all, but for Warwickshire instead.

He has told the writer how he dreamed of being a professional cricketer, but he could not get a chance in the Lancashire eleven so he replied to an advertisement of the Warwickshire county club, and went there.

While he was qualifying, however, he noticed another advertisement—that Lancashire wanted a wicket-keeper. And love of his native county being strong, he applied, got the job, and to-day is as good a wicket-keeper as can be found anywhere.

He has surprised Australia during the present matches, not by his wicket-keeping, but by his batting also. In fact, he was given a fancy name as the "second Woodfull"—the man who couldn't be got out, because in the first three Tests he never lost his wicket.

He can take all sorts of bowling, but is particularly strong on the leg side—and that is the true test of a wicket-keeper because the leg balls come to him more or less "blind."

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you think are the twelve most popular cricketers now touring with the England team in Australia? Of course you do. Then enter this competition; fill up the coupon on page 13 of this issue now. A coupon also appeared in last week's copy of the NELSON LEE; cut this one out, fill it up, too, and then keep them by you until next week, when another coupon will appear.

ORDER NEXT WEEK'S "NELSON LEE" NOW!

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