

The NELSON LEE

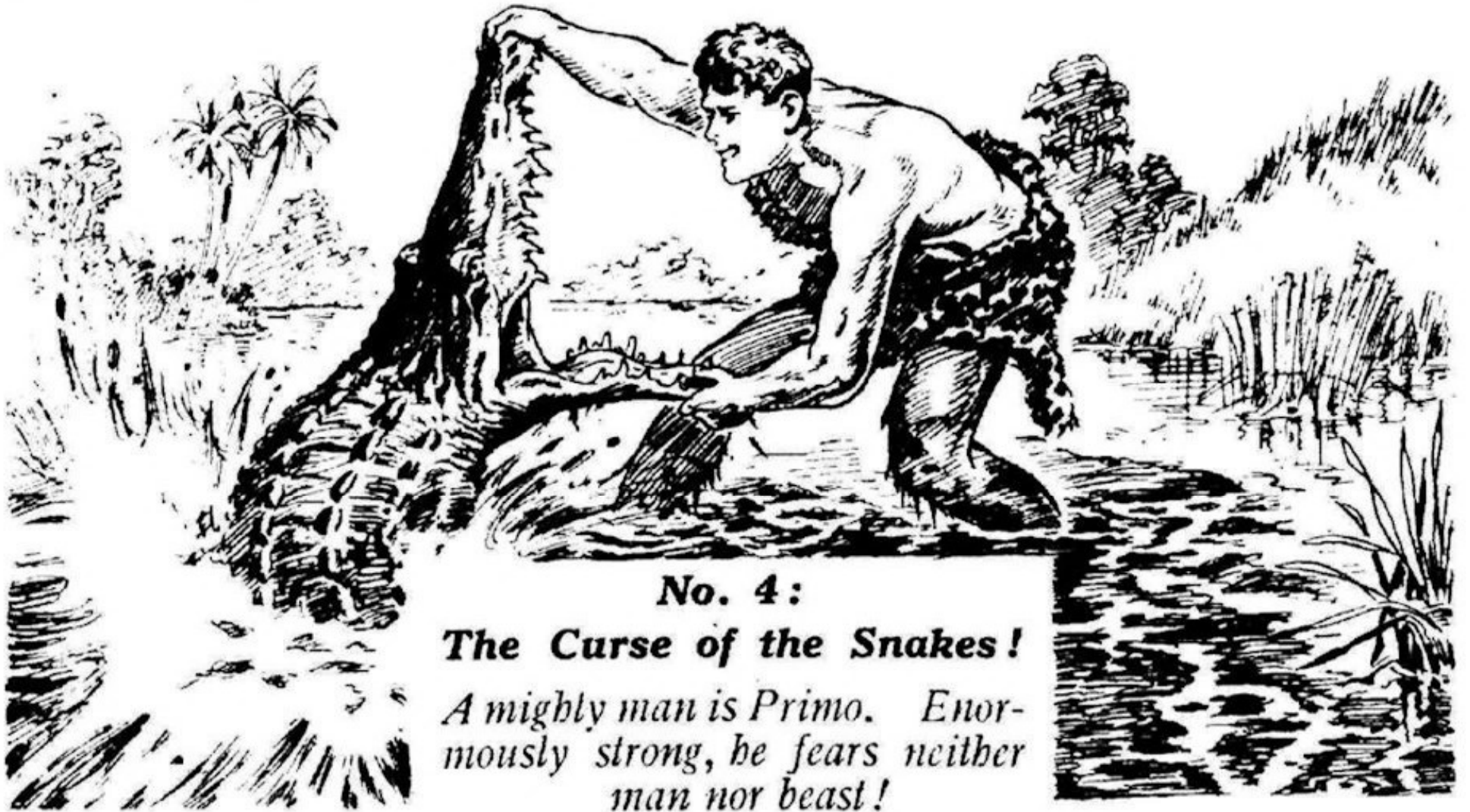
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"The CITY of HIDDEN DREAD!"

An enthralling long complete mystery and adventure yarn featuring Nelson Lee, the famous detective, and his young assistants.
New Series No. 7. OUT ON WEDNESDAY. March 8th, 1930.

PRIMO THE TERRIBLE!



No. 4:

The Curse of the Snakes!

A mighty man is Primo. Enormously strong, he fears neither man nor beast!

The Witch-Doctor's Spirit!

WHICH was the most surprised when Primo the Terrible landed on the back of the crocodile, it would be hard to say.

Primo, King of the Rakatangans, returning from a hunt, had taken the crocodile to be a tree-trunk, half-buried in the ooze which fringed the river's bank. The crocodile had been dozing in the sun, until Primo, leaping from near-by, had landed fair and square upon its back!

Then the tussle had commenced!

There had been a flurry in the mud; Primo had slipped, and the great yawning jaws of the crocodile had opened. In a moment they would have snapped—but a moment was long enough for Primo! Primeval man though he was, his wits worked quickly, and in a flash his great, brawny arms shot out.

The crocodile found himself seized by his mighty jaws. Just as an average man could hold a yelling mongrel's mouth open, so Primo held open the great, teeth-studded jaws of the crocodile. The reptile snorted, but Primo merely grinned. He was conscious of his own strength, and knew that this half-grown crocodile was merely like a kitten in his hands.

Snort! went the crocodile, and his tail lashed furiously. Primo, with another grin, exerted himself. Before the astounded reptile knew what was happening, it found its tail, which it had swung round in an endeavour to smash Primo, caught in a mighty grip. The next moment the bewildered crocodile was being swung round and round from the shoulders of Primo. For a brief while it whirled through the air, and then there came a mighty splash.

The crocodile was in mid-stream—flung there by the mighty arms of Primo, the strongest man the world had ever known!

Primo wasted not a second thought upon the reptile, which, glad to escape with its life, made off rapidly down-stream. With a laugh the young giant bounded forward through the forest to the village in which he knew his "right-of-hand"—Tim Murphy—would be awaiting him.

He found Tim outside the hut which was the "Royal Palace." Tim had an axe in his hand, and on the ground in front of him writhed the remains of a five-foot snake. Tim had, with a blow of the axe, decapitated the snake.

"That's the fifth I've found in the hut to-day, Primo," he announced, kicking the remains of the snake from him. "There's something fishy about all this, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

Primo nodded, but said nothing. There had been an epidemic of snakes! Every time he and Tim had gone to rest in their hut they had encountered snakes of every variety and size. Other huts in the village seemed to be immune, and this was what had first led Tim to suspect that all was not well.

"Wanga!" he cried, and a short while afterwards a slim, lithe native came forward and bowed. "What does all this mean?" he demanded.

Wanga looked apprehensive. Wanga was the only native whom Tim had managed to teach to speak enough English to interpret.

"Master!" he cried. "It is the curse of the snakes!"

"Curse of the snakes?" repeated Tim, while Primo listened. "What do you mean by that?"

"It is Gwamba, master!" gasped Wanga.

"Gwamba!" gasped Tim. "What mean you? Gwamba, the witch-doctor, is dead!"

"His spirit it is, master," said Wanga. "Lo! Many men of the tribe have seen it, all ghastly white and shining, in the night-time. It has pronounced the curse of the snakes upon you and on King Primo! Never till the curse is lifted, will you escape from the snakes, for the Snake-God, who lives in the interior, has so willed it!"

Darkness fell even while Wanga spoke, for there was little twilight in the Java Seas. Tim turned to Primo.

"Then that scoundrel Gwamba was not killed with the others!" he said. "Primo, he must be called to account! He——"

Tim broke off suddenly, as a cry arose from the head men of the tribe. They had turned away from Primo and Tim, and were standing, spell-bound, gazing to a little bluff which overlooked the village. There, standing on a rock, with one arm flung out in dramatic gesture, stood a figure—a figure that was bathed in pale, ghostly radiance!

"Gwamba, the witch-doctor!" cried Tim, and then, as Primo, with a snort of anger, started forward, Tim caught the giant by the arm.

For the witch-doctor had vanished, as suddenly as he had come!

The Pit of the Snake-God!

TIM! He must not escape!" cried Primo. "I will break him into small pieces!"

"Yes, old bean!" answered Tim. "You can do so easily—if you can find him."

He said no more, but Primo nodded his head resignedly. Primo, when aroused to anger, was like a mad bull. He would tear through the jungle like a maddened elephant—but the witch-doctor was crafty, and well skilled in the art of avoiding pursuit.

"I will go!" announced Tim. "Follow later, Primo. If you come with me, it means that he will hear the sounds of pursuit. I will take Wanga with me, and if harm befalls me, Wanga will come back to you!"

He waited no longer, but with a gesture to the loyal Wanga, set off, leaving Primo to follow, more slowly and more cumbersome.

Gwamba, the witch-doctor, was a thorn in the flesh of Primo and Tim. Primo had deposed him—and had thought that Gwamba had met his end. That the wily witch-doctor had escaped the retribution which had overtaken most of his followers was now only too evident. He had appeared on the scene again, and, by means of phosphorus, gained from sea-fish, had made himself up to represent his own spirit.

Tim, with Wanga close behind him, delved into the darkness of the jungle. Tim had been long enough on the island to be skilled in the art of tracking, and before long he had gained the bluff upon which Gwamba had stood. Then, like a bloodhound upon the scent, he had started off after the witch-doctor.

It was fortunate that he had brought Wanga with him. Wanga knew the jungle as a town-dweller knows his usual streets, and before long Tim found himself well on the track of the scoundrelly witch-doctor.

For miles they proceeded through the jungle. Filled with a determination to put an end for ever to the witch-doctor's superstitious domination over the natives, Tim pressed on. Eventually his persistence was rewarded. He came out into a clearing amidst the trees, and the first thing he saw was a hut, from which a pale, flickering light came forth.

Forgetting all about Wanga, Tim broke into a run. Straight for the hut he went, and sent the door bursting open. As he dashed inside he halted for a moment. For the scene which met his gaze was entirely unexpected.

The hut was empty, save for one person, and that person was Gwamba, the witch-doctor!

But the interior of the hut was furnished in the style of a native temple, and Gwamba was prostrating himself before a curious sort of altar, upon which stood a massive metal replica of a mighty python! Gwamba turned as he heard the door burst open, and he snarled as he saw that the newcomer was Tim.

Tim leapt forward. He landed a few feet from the witch-doctor, who instantly sprang into action.

His hand groped by the side of the Snake-God's altar. There came the grinding of stone, and, ere Tim could scramble to his feet, the great slab of stone upon which he had landed tilted suddenly.

The stone slab swung over, and Tim found himself falling—falling! There came a thud as he dropped upon a heap of soft brushwood. And from above came the mocking laugh of Gwamba, the witch-doctor, as the stone slab swung round and closed back in its place!

* * *

Night passed, and the first pale flushes of dawn made their appearance. As the light strengthened, Tim surveyed his prison.

He was in a deep pit, part of which was under the crude temple into which he had burst. The rest of the pit was open to the skies, and across one corner of the pit he saw a roughly-made wooden grating. Even as his eyes fell upon this, he saw that by an arrangement of ropes this grating could be pulled up from above.

There was a strange, musty smell in the pit, and Tim's hair suddenly stood on end as he saw whence this emanated. Behind the grating, coiled in sleep, lay a mighty python, the like of which he had never before seen.

He had but time to take this in when he saw that the grating was moving—was being pulled up by someone who stood on the brink of the pit! His eyes travelled upward, and he saw there Gwamba, opening the grating that would allow the mighty snake to crawl out into the pit and attack Tim!

The snake stirred. Then, its glittering eyes fixed upon Tim, its prey, it glided forward.

Slowly but surely it advanced. Tim cowered back. There was no escape. The walls of the pit were too deep and too precipitous to allow him any chance of scaling them. He was helpless—utterly helpless!

And then the mighty monster coiled itself for a spring, and Tim, with a gasp of helplessness, drew back. This, surely, must be the end!

Primo versus Python!

WHAT happened then was like a nightmare to Tim!

He saw the mighty monster—fully twenty feet in length—launch itself through the air. Momentarily he closed his eyes, for he knew that once those mighty coils closed around him he would be crushed to pulp.

A sudden cry made Tim open his eyes. The cry had come from above—from the brink of the pit of the Snake-God! And, looking up, Tim saw Primo—Primo the Terrible!

The giant's eyes were flashing fire. His face was distorted with rage, and it seemed that he was not a man, but some fearful primeval monster that smelt battle!

The great python was in the very middle of its spring—but that spring never ended. Like a bolt from a catapult Primo leaped.

Crash!

The next moment the python dropped to the floor of the pit. Its tail lashed out in fury, catching Tim and sending him spinning against the side of the pit. He stood there, clutching at the earth walls, his senses reeling.

But he could see those steel-like muscles of Primo ripple out beneath the skin as the hands of the strong man gripped tightly around the neck of the python. The veins stood out on his broad forehead as he exerted every ounce of strength of which he was capable. Back and forward they staggered, the python which had never yet known its prey fight so desperately, and the man who never yet had been beaten by man or beast!

Again and again the mighty snake sought to coil itself around Primo. Again and again he tore at it with mighty hands that seemed like steel hooks, and the coils were dragged apart. The snake hissed like a thousand steam jets. Primo growled as though he was no longer a man, but an animal fighting desperately for its life!

The python's tail was flashing around like a flail. One blow from it, and any man must have fallen senseless, crushed beneath its weight. Snorting and snarling, Primo battled on. Suddenly he stiffened. His hands were gripped around the python's neck, and the struggles of the mighty serpent were growing feebler and feebler. With a superhuman effort he lifted the python into the air, and flung it across the pit.

There was a crash, and the serpent dropped, writhing, upon the ground.

"Quick, Tim!" he cried, and before the boy realised what was happening, Primo had seized him.

The next moment it seemed to Tim that he had been hurled through the air with the speed of a projectile from a gun. He came to earth with a thud—well clear of the pit



The cause of the natives' terror was obvious. For standing on the rock was a ghostly figure.

from which Primo had hurled him so unceremoniously!

Although badly shaken, Tim began to crawl towards the pit. He wanted to witness the end of this strange yet terrible battle between man and beast. But some more excitement was destined to take place before the boy could reach the brink of that pit—excitement in which he himself was to play the principal part.

For, as he crawled along on hands and knees, he heard a snarling cry behind him. Turning, Tim saw Gwamba—and such a Gwamba that an involuntary gasp of dismay left the boy's lips. In the eyes of the witch-doctor there shone the light of madness; and in his hand gleamed a long, thin dagger.

Muttering to himself, cackling on a high-pitched note, the man slowly advanced.

"You shall not escape me this time!" he snarled, leering horribly at Tim. "You haven't got Primo to save you now. Bah, revenge is mine at last! Primo is battling for his life down there"—he indicated the snake-pit triumphantly—"and even Primo, with all his strength, cannot conquer a python. And now you shall die by my own hands!"

Obviously, the scoundrelly witch-doctor did not know that Primo actually was conquering that mighty serpent, and Tim did not intend to enlighten him on the subject. The boy had been slowly recovering and collecting his dazed wits while his antagonist was speaking, and now he rose to his feet and prepared to meet the other's onslaught.

Madness lent the witch-doctor strength, and, in spite of all Tim's efforts, the boy felt one of Gwamba's hands fasten itself round his throat in a vice-like grip. He struggled desperately, rolled over, but again his assailant clutched at his throat, and this time the witch-doctor was on top. His other hand, holding the dagger, was upraised; was descending.

With a mighty effort born of desperation, Tim managed to shoot up his knees. Gwamba gave a gasp as they thudded into his stomach. He went shooting backwards—right on to the brink of the snake-pit! He tottered there for a few seconds, and then, losing his balance, fell headlong into it!

Tim had just time to see what happened then.



Uttering a bloodcurdling cry, the witch-doctor hurled himself forward, dagger upraised. Tim neatly sidestepped, allowed the man to blunder past him, and then, swinging round swiftly, launched himself at Gwamba. The two crashed on to the ground. And then the struggle began. While Primo was battling for his life in the pit, Tim was likewise fighting for his own life above!

The python had coiled itself for another spring, weakened though it was by its terrific battle with Primo. Gwamba interrupted that spring! In a moment the coils of the serpent had closed around the witch-doctor, and a frenzied scream rang out as the python crushed the life out of the man. Retribution had overtaken Gwamba the witch-doctor!

Quick as a flash, before the serpent could disentangle its coils from the witch-doctor, Primo leaped forward. His hands were round the reptile's throat; he was exerting every ounce of his strength.

The monster writhed and tightened its coils—but those coils were about Gwamba, and not Primo. The more the serpent fought in its death throes, the more it weakened itself. With a sudden convulsive movement it lashed out—and then dropped motionless!

Primo had killed the mighty python!

He leaped out of that pit of terror, and, as calmly as though nothing

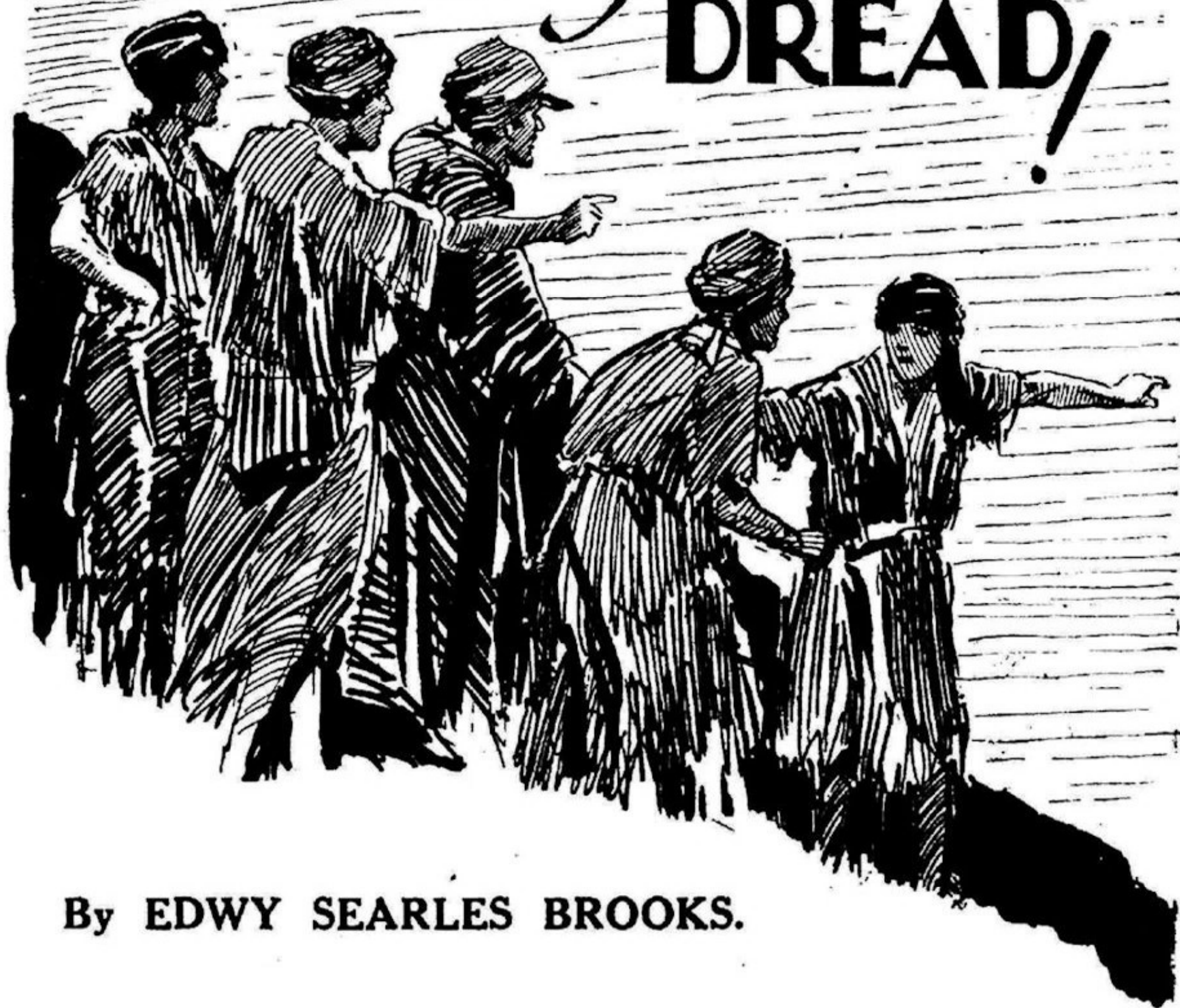
had happened, turned to Tim.

"I do not think we need worry any further about Gwamba the witch-doctor," he said. "He's not likely to smuggle any more snakes into our hut!"

(There will be another enthralling complete yarn featuring Primo the Terrible and Tim Murphy in next week's NELSON LEE. Look out for it, chums!)

You'll Enjoy Every Chapter Of This Enthralling Long Yarn, Chums!

The CITY OF HIDDEN DREAD!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Surrounded by mountain fastnesses, this city lies, ruled by the despotic Ameer. White men have entered it, to be seen no more. And into it enter Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Nipper, Handforth and Waldo, prisoners

CHAPTER 1.

The Valley of Echoes!

THE figure on guard stood motionless and silent.

He was almost like a statue, amid this strange wilderness. The valley, with towering masses of rock on either hand, was a weird, grotesque place.

In many ways it was terrifying. The moonlight only added to the general effect of utter loneliness. A stony, horrible, treeless waste, with masses of volcanic rocks piled in gargantuan mounds here and there. It was a place where almost every rock, in the moonlight, took on the shape of some hideous image. Precipices towered up, comparatively close at hand, and overhead there was the night sky, spangled with gleaming stars, with the moon, a crescent, suspended over the end of the valley.

It was a pit of echoes. The guard, if he had shouted, would have heard his voice roared back at him. Even a light whisper would come shouting back out of the profound stillness. The falling of a stone, two or three hundred yards away, would sound like the crashing of twenty boulders.

Behind that motionless guard, almost concealed by an overhanging mass of rock, was something that one would not expect to find in this desolate valley of the Balghanistan hills. An aeroplane—a great all-metal monster, with gleaming bluish-green wings and body. The great 'plane appeared to be undamaged; yet, actually, four of her engines were out of commission, owing to smashed propellers.

And in the body of the 'plane, sleeping in the comfortable little cabins, was a number of adventurers. Boys, for the most part—the boys of Nelson Lee's Detective Academy.

Nelson Lee himself was on guard at the present moment. He would be relieved, at three a.m., by Lord Dorrimore. The only other men of this party were two young fellows named Jim Barnes and Fred Thompson. They were both mechanics. There was also a thin, lanky youth, known as "Tadpole"—nobody had ever inquired his real name—and he was the cook, steward, and general factotum of the big air yacht, which was the property of Lord Dorrimore.

Nelson Lee had plenty to think about as he stood on guard. He was wondering when he would come to grips again with Dacca the Dwarf, alias Sir Akbar Laldh, the man who had lately been the Balghanistan Ambassador in London.

But Sir Akbar had fled, following an attempt on his part to murder Lee and England's Prime Minister and Home Secretary. Lee, using Lord Dorrimore's 'plane, had arrived in Balghanistan in advance of the fugitive. But disaster had befallen the flying yacht. She had encountered an enemy machine, and the latter, swooping down, had fired on her. Not with machine-guns, but with something more deadly. Two engines had been put out of commission at once, and the other two had soon given up the ghost. The machine had six engines, but the remaining two were not sufficient to keep her aloft; so Lord Dorrimore, in the rapidly gathering darkness, had brought the machine to earth in this desolate, wilderness valley.

It was in Balghanistan—right in the heart of the enemy country. And there was no means of communicating with the outer world. Even the wireless was useless with the great 'plane on the ground.

FOR many weeks there had been dramatic happenings in this part of the world—over that section of wild country which formed the last lap of the Indian Air Mail route. Somewhere between Bushire and Karachi, mail 'planes had vanished one after the other. Royal Air Force machines had disappeared in the same mysterious way. Dozens had gone, leaving no trace.



And it was Nelson Lee's theory that these machines had been lured to destruction—or captivity—by means of a device which had been invented by Mr. Robert Harding, the famous British engineer.

Mr. Robert Harding himself had been held a prisoner by Sir Akbar Laldhi, and had afterwards been murdered. Something was taking place within the heart of Balghanistan—something grim and ugly. The British Government believed, in fact, that the Ameer was preparing for war.

But everything was secretive and hidden. Belghan, the capital of this vast state, was a hidden city—a city of secrets. No white men were permitted to enter. The country was surrounded by lofty mountains, and there were only a few passes by which Balghanistan could be entered; all these passes were guarded by the Ameer's troops. It was even impossible to approach by aeroplane. For any machine which ventured over Balghanistan territory was never seen again.

The Prime Minister himself had urged Nelson Lee to fly out East, and to investigate the mystery of the missing mail planes at close quarters. This was not the time for any warlike activity. Far better that Nelson Lee, with his small party, should penetrate into Balghanistan in secret. And if sufficient evidence could be obtained that the Ameer was preparing for hostilities against India—then the British Government could act. But until something definite was known, it was better to go carefully. It would be madness to precipitate a war which might involve half the nations of Europe, and start a war in the East which would embroil the whole civilised world.

It was some satisfaction for Nelson Lee to know that he and his companions had landed in secret. The enemy—for Lee regarded the Balghars as enemies—believed that the crippled plane had escaped. But in the semi-darkness it had turned back, and Dorrie had landed here.

It might give Lee an advantage. For this place could now be used as a base, and he fully intended to press on in the morning—to penetrate farther and deeper into the heart of this mysterious country.

LEE suddenly stiffened.

A sound had impressed itself upon his ears. He had not been listening in any concentrated manner—for his thoughts had been busy—but now, subconsciously, he knew that there was a difference.

He peered into the darkness of the valley, searching the dim, vague spaces which were flooded with the ghostly moonbeams. The rugged hummocks of rock stuck out in nightmare shapes, casting monstrous shadows, but there was no sign of anything moving. Yet Lee could hear an occasional rustle, prolonged and exaggerated, as the echo caught it.

He took some night-glasses from his pocket and put them to his eyes. Slowly, deliberately, he searched the farther end of the valley. Was it imagination, or did he see, for a fleeting second, a moving shadow? It was far distant—several hundred yards away. Yet those sounds had apparently been close up. No doubt the strange echoing qualities of this valley were responsible. A new sound came to him, and he turned sharply. A figure was creeping up to him, having just got down from the doorway in the aeroplane's side.

"Who is it?" breathed Nelson Lee sharply.

"Only me, sir," came a low voice.

The newcomer was Stanley Waldo.

"Hush, young 'un!" whispered Lee. "You should not have come out. Why are you here?"

"I thought I heard something, sir," replied Waldo, in the slightest of breaths. "I believe they're creeping on us. I've been crouching in the doorway for some minutes, and I'll swear that there are some men up the valley. I caught sight of something moving once or twice."

"Upon my word! Your eyesight is amazing, Waldo—and your hearing, too," said Lee. "You are certainly a son of your father!"

Waldo's senses were all acutely developed. He inherited these remarkable qualities from his famous father—Rupert Waldo, the Peril Expert. Apparently, this youngster had heard the mysterious sounds even before Nelson Lee—and yet Lee had been on guard, whilst Waldo was supposed to be sleeping. His sense of hearing was uncanny.

"It may mean an attack, or it may not," murmured Lee. "But it will be just as well to get prepared."

"Just what I was thinking, sir," nodded Waldo. "Don't you think I'd better arouse the chaps? And Lord Dorrimore? We don't want to be taken unawares, do we?"

There was little risk of their voices being heard out in the valley. The echoes did not take effect unless one walked out beyond the overhanging mass of rock, which formed a roof over the heads of the pair. They had the advantage in this situation; for they could whisper in comparative safety, whilst any possible attacker would have to be exceedingly careful.

Nelson Lee did not disguise from himself the possibility that this was the beginning of a carefully organised onslaught—one in which, perhaps, they would be compelled to fight desperately for their lives.

They were strangers in a strange land—white men within the borders of Balghanistan. These people were fierce and untamed, for the most part. Wild hill men, well versed in the art of warfare—relentless, bloodthirsty and possessing a bitter hatred of all white people. The Ameer, for many years, had instilled this doctrine of hatred into his subjects.

"We must be ready," murmured Lee, pressing Waldo's arm. "Better go back, young 'un, and arouse the others. Get hold of Lord Dorrimore first, and he will do the rest. Tell him that an attack is possible, and he will know what to do for the best."

Young Waldo moved off like a shadow, and climbed back into the body of the vast aeroplane. He found himself in a sumptuously appointed passage, with silken hangings, tiny electric-light bulbs, a soft carpet underfoot, and many other luxuries. A strange and incongruous contrast to the wildness of the rocky scene outside. Passing through the saloon, Waldo went for'ard, and here there was another passage, with some little cabins on either side. He entered one, and shook the shoulder of the man who was sleeping in the comfortable berth.

"Hallo! What's wrong?" asked an alert voice.

Lord Dorrimore was a hunter—an explorer—a man who had knocked about in the wilds in every quarter of the earth. He awoke at a touch, and he was always fully awake in the first second.

"All right, sir," whispered Waldo. "Mr. Lee wants you."

"By glory! Have I overslept myself?" asked the sporting peer. "I've got to relieve him——"

"No, it isn't that," said Waldo. "We've spotted some figures up the valley. I believe they're creeping nearer."

"Gad! A scrap, eh?" ejaculated his lordship, leaping out of the berth. "Good! I'm ready!"

"We'd better all turn out, sir," said Waldo. "There's no telling what this might lead to."

"Go round and rouse them—and warn them not to make any noise," said Lord Dorrimore. "They know where the guns are, don't they? Let 'em take a good supply of ammunition, too."

Before this trip had started, both Nelson Lee and Dorrie had known of the perils that might beset them. So a good supply of rifles had been brought aboard—revolvers, too. There were even two small machine-guns—in addition to the big machine-guns which were mounted on the aeroplane itself.

Overnight, Lee had drilled the "cub" detectives, so now that the alarm had come they knew exactly what to do. Within five minutes they were all out, their rifles ready, their ammunition at hand. Their hearts were beating rapidly, and they were thrilled by the thought of what might soon develop.

Nipper was there—and Fenton and Browne and Pitt and Archie Glenthorne and all the other stalwarts of the Detective Academy. Handforth had suggested that his younger brother, Willy, should remain in the aeroplane for safety's sake. Willy's reply to this suggestion was merely a contemptuous snort. He and Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon were well to the fore now.

"Looks like trouble, boys," murmured Lee, as they gathered round.

"Any further sign, sir?" asked Waldo.

"Yes," said Lee. "The figures are creeping nearer."

"Hang it, why wait until they pounce on us?" demanded Lord Dorrimore. "The best form of defence is attack. Why shouldn't we go out and surprise the blighters before they can surprise us?"

"Yes, gov'nor, let's do it," said Nipper eagerly.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

"Yes, it will be the better way," he said grimly. "The fight must come, so let it come quickly."

He knew that the morale of his boys was good; and the one thing to destroy that morale was a period of suspense—of waiting. Far better for them to dash out and impress the enemy with a big show of boldness. Lee pointed.

"There are several figures creeping on us," he murmured. "They seem to be gathering behind those big boulders, about two hundred yards away. You see the pile? There are deep shadows close by. When I give the word—follow me!"

"Go ahead, sir!" went up an eager chorus.

And Nelson Lee gave the word.

CHAPTER 2.

The Men Who Were Dumb!

"**H**URRAH!"

"On the ball, you chaps!"

"St. Frank's for ever!"

In an emergency like this, the boys of the Detective Academy could not forget that they had once belonged to the famous St. Frank's College; and they gave vent to loud whoops of enthusiasm as they dashed forward up the moonlit valley. The four men were in the lead—Nelson Lee himself, Lord Dorrimore, Barnes and Thompson, the two mechanics.

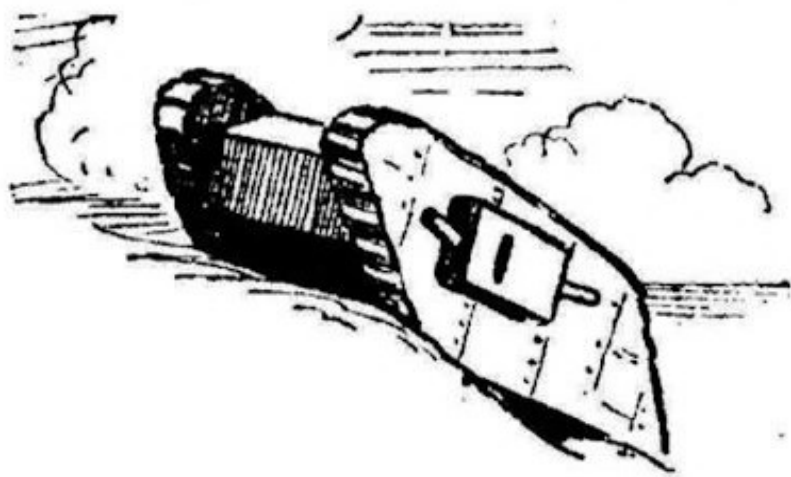
"Don't fire unless we ourselves are attacked!" shouted Nelson Lee warningly.

Nipper and Handforth and the others were spreading out as they advanced. At any second they expected to hear the crack of rifles, and to see a horde of hostile figures springing from behind the many piles of rock. But nothing like this happened.

Instead, they suddenly became aware of the fact that four or five figures were bolting as hard as they could go, uttering strange, terrified cries. Yet so quick was the rush of the boys that the five strange figures had no chance of escaping. One of them stumbled, another tripped over him and fell, and during this momentary confusion they were surrounded. In fact, it was all over within a minute. These five marauders literally rolled on the ground, wailing and gurgling. They were prostrate with terror.

"Steady, young 'uns!" said Lee sharply. "There's no danger here, by the look of things."

He gazed round swiftly. Out there, in the open valley, he could see for a considerable distance in the moonlight. He was quite sure that there were no other enemies anywhere near. His



original surmise was wrong; there was no horde of hill men creeping along to attack them. Merely this group of five; and the five did not look particularly dangerous. They fairly grovelled, panting hard.

"Better be on the watch, old man," advised Lord Dorrimore. "It may be a trick—a trap. These beggars are full of such dodges."

"I fancy there's no trap here, Dorrie," replied Lee, as he bent down, and rapidly searched one of the wretches. "Not even a weapon—revolver or knife. Look at them! I know the difference between simulated terror and the real thing."

"By the Lord Harry, you're right!" admitted his lordship, staring.

There wasn't the slightest doubt about the condition of these five men. Their terror was certainly not put on.

"Sort of gipsy people, by the look of them," said Dorrie, after a moment or two. "These aren't the ordinary hill tribesmen. Better drag them to their feet, and ask them what their game is."

"But what about the scrap, sir?" asked Handforth, his tone full of indignation. "Aren't we going to fight anybody?"

"We can't fight these people, can we?" retorted his lordship. "We can't fight people who creep on the ground and wobble with terror."

"What a swindle!" said Handforth, in disgust.

Most of the other fellows, however, were honest enough with themselves to feel relieved. They were plucky enough, but really they had no desire to engage in a desperate fight for their very lives.

"We'd better take these men to our camp," said Lee. "I doubt if we can question them—because we don't know their lingo. I'll try them with Hindustani, but I doubt if it will be any good."

The boys pulled at the prisoners, and forced them to their feet. Two men were fairly tall, but the others were short and squat. They had a curious appearance of being stunted. All their faces were brown, and they had masses of shaggy hair. They were dressed in queer, sandal-like footgear, and an odd assortment of rags and tatters.

Nelson Lee tried several dialects—he had a good smattering of such languages—but there was no apparent effect. These brown men showed no sign of responding. However, as they found that their captors were making no attempts to kill them, they lost some of their terror. They began to look at Lee and Dorrie and the boys with awed, half-shy expressions. They were like children—scared, distrustful, and suspicious. But they were certainly harmless.

"Well, what are we going to do with them?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "And why did they come creeping towards our camp like that?"

"Attracted by curiosity, probably," replied Lee. "Perhaps they even saw us land, and waited until night before creeping up to have a closer look at us. Obviously they were not intending any attack. They're not the type of people to attack anybody—for unless I am mistaken these five men are as harmless as kittens."

The captives were marched back to the camp—under the overhanging rocks where the aeroplane was more or less concealed. By the time they reached there the strange creatures were less terrified.

"It is just as well we made our rush," said Nelson Lee, "otherwise, these people might have sheered off. It is to our advantage that we should have captured them. When they get over their scare they might be disposed to speak."

But the detective was wrong. The prisoners, after they had been conveyed to the camp, and were surrounded by their captors, remained stubbornly silent. All Nelson Lee's efforts to engage them in conversation failed. One of the men, however, made a queer, guttural sound with his throat.

"Ug-ug!" he grunted, pointing to his mouth.

"My only hat!" said Nipper, with a start.

"Surely, brother, I have heard that sound before?" asked William Napoleon Browne, elevating his eyebrows. "I have recollections of my wonderful wireless set, back in Gray's Inn Road. I would remind you that I manufactured that set with my own hands——"

"Never mind that, Browne," said Nipper, "There's something queer about this."

Most of the boys recognised that uncouth "Ug-ug" utterance. It was familiar to them because they had heard it over the wireless. In London, they had intercepted some strange radio signals, sent out from secret broadcasting stations—and these stations were controlled by Sir Akbar Laldhi. That "Ug-ug" had always been prominent in those broadcast code messages.

"It may be a coincidence, but I doubt it," said Nelson Lee, as he faced the man who had made the remarkable sounds. "Surely these fellows must have some sort of language? Why don't you have a shot at them, Dorrie?"

"If you can't succeed, it's a cert that I can't," replied Lord Dorrimore.

By this time, "Tadpole" had arrived—instructed by Nelson Lee. He brought food and drink for the prisoners, and put it in front of them. It was a sort of peace offering. It was intended to show the prisoners that they were in no danger.

"Ug-ug," said one of them, apparently the leader of the five, when Nelson Lee again attempted to speak to him.

As before, he pointed to his mouth, and this time he opened it, revealing a number of yellowish fangs.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lee, in a startled voice.

The strangers scampered away as Nelson Lee made a charge, tripped over one another, and then lay grovelling on the ground in terror.



He had seen something else—something which brought a flash of realisation to him. Quickly he pulled a small electric torch out of his pocket, and flashed it into the man's still-open mouth.

"Ug!" gasped the fellow, closing his mouth like a trap, and backing away.

He was startled by that strange light, appearing so abruptly in the torch.

"All right—all right—keep your hair on, my friend," said Lee, patting the man on the shoulder. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"What is it, sir?" asked Nipper curiously. "Why did you seem so surprised just now?"

"This man has no tongue, Nipper," replied Lee.

"No tongue!" went up a chorus.

"There is merely a stump—proving that the tongue was cut out," said Lee quietly.

Some of the boys shivered.

"No wonder the poor beggar couldn't answer any of your questions, then," said Lord Dorri-more. "What about the others? They can't be the same, can they?"

"I have no doubt that they are all the same," replied Lee.

He soon made certain. Two of the men opened their mouths of their own accord, and the others were forced to comply. In every case the examination led to the same discovery. All these men had had their tongues removed.

"It's an ugly business," said Dorrie, shaking his head.

"Yes, sir—with the accent on the 'ug,' eh?" murmured Travers.

"Hanged if I can understand it," said his lordship, scratching his head. "One of the Ameer's cheery notions, perhaps. Doesn't want these people near the border to get chatty with the neighbours, what?"

"You express it semi-humorously, Dorrie, but I believe you have hit the nail on the head," said Lee.

"Well, as they can't speak, and as they're harmless, hadn't we better turn them loose?" asked Fenton—the late captain of St. Frank's College. "What's the use of keeping them, sir?"

"Although they have no tongues, they may have some system of communicating with the real Balghars," replied Nelson Lee. "No, I don't think we'll let them go just yet."

Lord Dorrimore looked at him straight in the eye.

"There's something rummy in your tone, old son," he said. "You've got a wheeze."

"I really believe I have."

"Out with it!" said Dorrie eagerly. "What's the idea, Leo?"

"It has only just occurred to me—and it needs thinking of," said Nelson Lee slowly. "As soon as I found that these men had no tongues, I thought of a possible plan. And look at them, too. Two of them are about the same size as you, Dorrie, and myself. The others are small. No bigger than some of these boys."

"Good glory! You don't mean——" His lordship paused, breathing hard. "Impersonate them, eh?" he went on. "Is that it?"

Lee nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"Why not?" he retorted. "It ought not to be difficult to make ourselves up to resemble these queer men. We can dress ourselves in their rags, and we shall be comparatively safe from any other of the hill tribes we happen to encounter. These tribes will not expect us to speak—believing that our tongues are missing. We cannot be trapped in that way. And no doubt these wandering gipsies are allowed to go wherever they please."

"It's a great idea, gov'nor," said Nipper breathlessly. "If we push on into the interior as we are, we are bound to be spotted—and that will mean an attack."

"Exactly," agreed Lee. "And our object is to penetrate towards the City of Balghan in secret."

"But there are only five of them!" ejaculated Handforth. "That means that only five can go! What about the rest of us?"

"You will remain here, safely in camp," replied Lee. "Even in the event of an attack—by quite a large force—you can easily hold this natural fortress. There are rocks overhead, and rocks all round. You have rifles and ammunition. You have machine guns. There is little fear of disaster overtaking you as long as you keep on the alert. And while you remain here, five of us will penetrate inland."

It was a quick decision—and a decision which put all the boys into a state of fresh excitement. An adventure was promised here—a journey of mystery and peril!

CHAPTER 3

Into the Unknown!

"WE shall have to draw lots," said Nipper decisively.

"It's the only fair way," agreed Fenton.

Nelson Lee had intimated that three of the boys would be permitted to go, and he had left it to the boys themselves to select the trio. Very quickly, lots were drawn, and the lucky three, by a curious chance, included Nipper himself. The others were Waldo and Handforth. The three juniors presented themselves in the big saloon, where Nelson Lee was waiting. The great detective's eyes twinkled as he saw them.

"I'm glad to see you here, Nipper," he said.

"Rather, sir," agreed Nipper. "I never expected it. Are you ready to get busy on us?"

"At once—and you had better be first."

Two hours later an extraordinary change had come over the three boys and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. With rare skill, Nelson Lee had changed them from cultured, well-dressed whites into rough, uncouth brown men. The impersonation was a masterpiece.

Even in a strong light, it was difficult to see that there was anything wrong with these five figures. They looked like those captives to a "T." There had been no attempt at actual impersonation. Nelson Lee had contented himself with duplicating the type rather than the individual. They were all dressed in the rags and tatters which had been taken from the captives. These men were now safely held in one of the aeroplane's saloons, and they would be kept under close guard.

As there was little danger of the camp being attacked both Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were going. There were the two mechanics left behind—and Edgar Fenton would be nominally in charge. He was a very capable young fellow, and could be trusted.

Jim Barnes, the head mechanic, made an excellent suggestion.

"While you're gone, sir," he said to Dorrie, "Fred and I will do our best with the propellers. Two of them, I think, can be patched up, and fortunately we've brought out some spare propellers on board—two."

"Stout fellow!" said his lordship. "Go ahead with it, Jim!"

NELSON LEE and his small party started out at dawn.

There wasn't much of a scene. The other boys gave a little cheer, and they wished their companions God-speed. Then, shuffling their feet, and shouldering their rough bundles, the five moved off towards a narrow pass which led out of the valley. Concealed in their clothing, the disguised five carried revolvers and ammunition. Nelson Lee also had a compass and an electric torch.

Their route lay through wild country. As far as the eye could see, the landscape was the same—rocky crags, deep gorges, barren wastes of plain. There was scarcely a tree or a bush or a blade of grass to be seen anywhere. This region, in all truth, was one of the most desolate on the earth's surface.

The adventurers plodded on, hour after hour—pausing occasionally for water and a bite of food. Towards noon they had their first sight of human life. Away in the distance, down in a valley, they beheld a hamlet; and after that they detected others. They were getting well into the inhabited region. They avoided these places as much as possible, and once or twice, when they saw groups of figures in the distance, they sheered off.

Although they must have been seen, none of these hillmen took any notice. None came near to speak with them or inspect them. It was obvious that they were taken at their face value—they were accepted as a little wandering band of gipsy folk.

Nelson Lee made no mistakes. Whenever camp was made, it was made after the style of the natives. They were impersonating those wanderers, and they acted in all respects as the wanderers themselves.

In this way the day passed. It was towards evening that something occurred which caused Nelson Lee to become more grim. Away in the distance they heard a dull, rhythmic throbbing. Searching the sky, they soon detected a tiny speck, far away in the south. It grew bigger and bigger, and finally revealed itself as a great three-engined metal aeroplane, flying at a great height.

"Sir Akbar, or I'm a Solomon Islander!" said Lord Dorrimore, staring up.

"Looks like it," agreed Lee. "So he has arrived at last—and he's evidently flying straight towards Balghan."

Handforth suddenly pointed.

"Look!" he ejaculated. "The plane is going into a glide. Do you see how she's diving?"

"And the pilot has cut off the engine," nodded Lee. "He's making for that range of hills yonder."

"Then Balghan must lie beyond those hills, sir?" asked Nipper.

"It looks like it—although I must confess that I am more or less at sea. This country is unknown to us, and ever since morning we have been plodding on at random. This aeroplane may help us—since it will indicate the right direction."

They were all feeling a little thrilled.

"The fact that the pilot has shut his engine off indicates that the city is not far beyond those hills," said Lord Dorrimore, nodding. "Anyhow, there must be something there—or the pilot wouldn't prepare to land. Doesn't the cut of that machine look familiar?" he added, as he stared up.

"It's a British mail plane," replied Lee.

"Just what I was going to say, sir," said Nipper. "It's the very machine that Sir Akhar Laldhi seized at Croydon Aerodrome."

The machine was soon out of sight, falling beyond that range of hills. In front of the adventurers there was a wide, rocky valley, with clumps of stunted vegetation here and there. They decided to press on—through this valley, and then up into the hills on the other side. All of them had an impression that there was something beyond those hills which would be worth looking at.

THEY did not pause for a meal.

They pressed on, and by dint of hard going they approached the summit of the hills as darkness was descending over that wild and rugged countryside. The evening glow was in the sky when, at last, they passed round a mass of towering rocks, and saw another valley at their feet. They came upon it unexpectedly, for the ground dropped away sheer. There was a dizzy precipice lying at their feet, with a wide panoramic view stretching out before them.

"Ye gods and-little fishes!" muttered Lord Dorrimore.

They gazed down into the vast valley, a marvellous, amazing scene. It was flooded with the evening light, and the sun's rays, as the great orb prepared to dip behind some distant mountains, were reflected in a winding river which wandered through the valley, the ribbon of water stretching away as far as the eye could see.

Here everything was verdant. There were forests, with stately trees. There were great tracts of land under cultivation, and at frequent intervals there were villages and towns.

In the very centre of that great valley there was a city, too. Spires and minarets and towers rose skywards in picturesque profusion. Many roads could be seen, dusty and well-defined, and on these there was a deal of traffic. Horsemen could be seen, lumbering wagons, and occasionally even motor vehicles. In the slanting rays of the setting sun everything was brilliantly clear.

"Balghan!" said Nelson Lee, a queer note in his voice. "Without doubt, we are looking upon the City of Balghan!"

"My only Sunday hat!" breathed Handforth. "The Hidden City!"

Nipper was not taking so much notice of the city. He was staring beyond a great stretch of woodland.

"Isn't that a kind of grassy plain over there?" he asked, pointing. "Look, guv'nor! To the left of the city as we're standing."

"Yes, it appears to be a wide stretch of flat, grassy country," agreed Lee. "There are numbers of buildings there— Why, hallo! They look like hangars!"

"They are hangars, sir," said Nipper. "And look at those other things! Aeroplanes! Do you see 'em, you chaps?" he added, pointing again. "Rows and rows of them!"

"I see them," said Waldo, nodding. "I saw them at first."

"You would!" grunted Handforth. "You've got eyesight like a telescope!"

"Aeroplanes!" muttered Lee. "I thought at first that they were buildings. The sun, glinting on them, is somewhat deceptive. But you're right, Nipper. They are aeroplanes! See them, Dorrie?"

His lordship nodded.

"All our missing air mail liners, what?" he commented.

"Obviously," said Lee. "And all of them undamaged, I should say. Air mail liners—Royal Air Force machines—and private planes. All the dozens of aircraft that have vanished. This is a remarkably encouraging discovery."

"Encouraging, sir?" asked Handforth, in wonder. "Encouraging to find all these machines captured and in the hands of these rotten Balghars?"

"Until now, my boy, there has been no certainty of the fate of these machines," replied Lee. "They might all have been destroyed—with their pilots and mechanics and passengers. But now there is a distinct possibility that these unhappy people have been spared."

"Taken prisoners, by George!" ejaculated Handforth.

"No; taken prisoners by the Ameer, I should say," remarked Lord Dorrimore dryly.

Nipper took a deep, deep breath.

"Guv'nor!" he said, his voice husky with suppressed excitement. "We've got to press on! Oh, if only we can get into the city of Balghan itself, and release all those pilots and mechanics and air-mail officials and passengers! We might be able to make a sudden rush—and perhaps all get away in those seized machines! That would be one in the eye for these brutes, wouldn't it?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"We must not be too ambitious, Nipper," he replied. "But we are certainly going ahead—and, with luck, we may get near to the city. What will happen after that must rest in the lap of the gods."

CHAPTER 4

The Fight in the Gorge!

A SURPRISE was sprung upon them suddenly and unexpectedly about twenty minutes later.

There was a narrow mountain track leading downwards into this verdant valley. The five, with Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore leading the way, continued as before. They walked with a slouching gait; they behaved exactly as one would expect the uncouth gipsy folk to behave. They did not know what eyes might be upon them; and as they were in the heart of the enemy's country, no precautions were too great. Their very lives might depend upon a trifle.

The glow of the sunset was fading in the sky, and the dusk was growing deep as they penetrated farther and farther into a gorge. For the time being they had lost sight of that verdant valley, and appeared to be as much in the wilds again as ever. It was at this point that the surprise came.

Horsemen appeared right in front of them, converging into the gorge out of two narrow canyons. The light was not particularly good now, but Nelson Lee and his companions could see that the mounted figures were all dressed in brightly coloured uniforms.

"Ambushed, by glory!" breathed Lord Dorrimore.

"Hush!" hissed Lee. "Remember, Dorrie! We're dumb!"

They plodded on, as though they had seen nothing. It would have been a mistake to hesitate or to turn back. These horsemen were evidently soldiers of the Ameer; and, in their guise of poor hillmen, there was no reason why they should be afraid of the soldiers.

The horsemen galloped up, spreading out in such a way that they formed a barrier across the gorge. There were not very many of them—hardly two dozen. One of the men rode forward in advance. He was an impressive-looking fellow. He sat bolt upright in his saddle, and his uniform was brighter and more gorgeous than that of his fellows. Evidently an officer. He wore a big black beard, and he had a commanding air with him. He flung up a hand, and shouted something in the Balghanistani language.

Balghanistani was very akin to Hindustani, and Nelson Lee had no difficulty in recognising the order. He and his companions had been told to halt. Lee looked back, and waved to the other four to pull up. They collected together, a pitiful collection of rags.

"Dogs and vermin!" shouted the officer, in Balghanistani. "Back! Back to your filthy hovels! Do you not know that it is forbidden that such as you shall enter the personal domain of the Illustrious One?"

Nelson Lee cringed, and the others, taking their cue, did the same.

"Tongueless animals!" continued the officer contemptuously. "Give thanks to your heathen gods that we don't cut you down and strew your remnants over the mountain side. Back with you!"

Nelson Lee gesticulated, indicating his companions. He gave the impression, too, that they wanted to move on down into the valley. He pretended to be dull-witted and dense.

"Fool, and thrice fool!" replied the officer. "Do you think I can understand your senseless signs? For months His Illustrious Highness, the Ameer, has given his orders, and yet such

vermin as you continue to venture into this valley. Before long the order will go forth that all such as you will be put to the death. Back into your hills—before you die!”

Nelson Lee could only understand a portion of this, but he gathered enough to know that the first obstacle had appeared.

How could he and his companions hope to descend into the valley when there were soldiers guarding the passes?

The officer grew impatient.

“Is this defiance?” he shouted aggressively. “You may be without tongues, but you possess ears. Animals! Obey, or my men will cut you down as you stand!”

He turned to his soldiers, waved his hand, and gave a sharp order. The mounted men galloped up and charged down upon the five ragged figures. The idea, no doubt, was to get them on the run. If this was a sample of the Ameer’s way with his subjects, it was clear that the Ameer was a brutal tyrant. Here, in this almost-inaccessible corner of the world, he was supreme—he was a lord of life and death.

Clouds of dust arose as the horsemen pressed upon their victims. And now, dramatically, something unforeseen developed. The dust was thick and heavy, and Lord Dorrimore and Waldo and Handforth coughed as the choking clouds swirled into their faces. Waldo unthinkingly lifted his head for a moment as he coughed—and he was close to the black bearded ruffian of an officer!

“Hold!” shouted this man suddenly. “Ten thousand devils! What is this?”

He leapt from his horse, and his men drew back, holding rein. Before Waldo could know what was intended, the officer seized him, brutally jerked his head back and pulled at his chin.

“A tongue!” he bellowed. “Then my eyes did not deceive me! These vermin possess tongues!”

Waldo, in that moment, felt like biting his own off from sheer exasperation and mortification. That dust, catching him, had forced him to cough—and he had shown his tongue by sheer accident. Nelson Lee and the others felt that they were on the verge of a volcano. A minute earlier they might have turned tail and passed out of this gorge without further molestation. Now the whole situation was different; it was fraught with peril.

“By the mercy of Allah!” swore the officer, in a startled voice. “What do I see? This dog is no tongueless hill-dweller!”

With one movement—his suspicions now being fully aroused—he swept off Waldo’s head-covering. The boy stood revealed. No amount of make-up could hide the truth from the officer. He could see that neat head of hair—the well-set-up shoulders.

“Your weapons!” muttered Lee, to the others.

The officer, aghast with amazement, took a firmer grip on Waldo.

“A boy!” he thundered. “A white boy! What trickery is this?”

Waldo suddenly stiffened like tempered steel.

“Get back!” he yelled. “Back to those rocks! There’s cover there if you’re quick!”

At the same instant, while he was shouting, he gave that Balghar officer the shock of his life. Waldo possessed remarkable strength—and he was acquainted, too, with the art of ju-jitsu. His famous father had taught him all the grips and all the throws. With one movement, he twisted round, caught the officer in a vice-like clutch, and gave himself a heave at the same second. The officer pitched clean over Waldo’s head, and went hurtling through the air. He crashed to the hard ground, shrieking madly. And Waldo dodged back before the soldiers could get over their amazement and confusion.

“Well done, Waldo!” said Lee huskily.

“It was the only thing, sir,” panted Waldo. “My only hat! This is going to be hot!”

DURING those fateful moments they had managed to get behind a number of heavy boulders. To turn tail and flee up the gorge would have meant death. The soldiers were firing already; the air was filled with the sharp “crack-crack” of the rifles. Bullets were pinging wickedly on the rocks.

“By George!” ejaculated Handforth. “What happened? How did they spot us? And what are we going to do now? Wouldn’t it be better to charge at the rotters—?”

“No, no!” interrupted Lee. “Handforth, keep cool! Don’t dare to show yourself—or you’ll be shot down.”

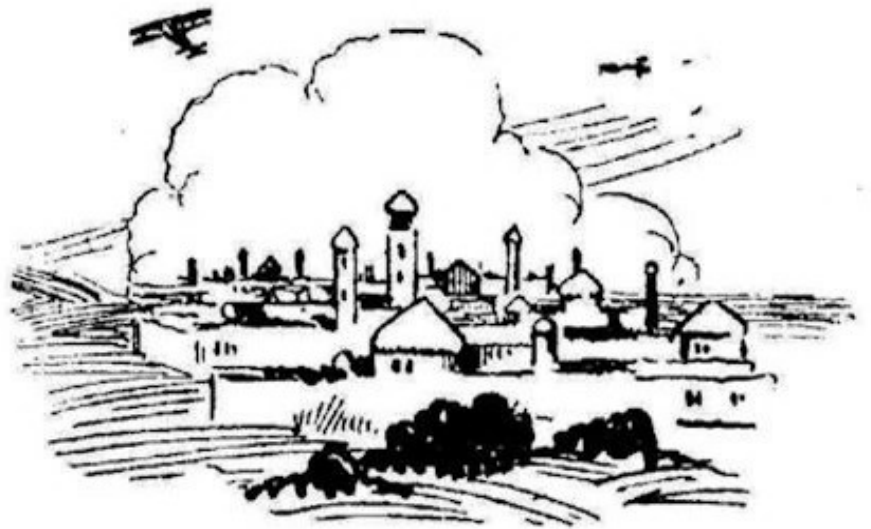
He had thrown off his rags, and his revolver was in his grip. Lord Dorrimore, too, was just as ready for action. The rocks behind which they hid were in deep shadow, and in this respect they had the advantage for the soldiers were out in the open gorge, plainly visible in the evening afterglow.

Crack-crack-crack!

Nelson Lee’s weapon spat viciously—three times in quick succession. Two of the soldiers rolled from their horses, and a third screamed with sudden fright.

Crack-crack-crack!

It was Dorrimore’s weapon this time. Another two of the Ameer’s soldiers were accounted for. Nipper was also firing—and Waldo. They were all exposed in their true colours now, so



it was just as well for them to fight while they could. This show of boldness sent confusion into the ranks of the enemy. The officer, having regained his feet, seemed to understand that he and his men were at a big disadvantage. He shouted some orders, and the remainder of the soldiers pulled their horses round and went galloping off. They were followed by a number of riderless horses. There were many casualties left behind.

"My stars! That's given us a breathing-space, anyway," said Waldo.

"What are we going to do now, sir?" asked Nipper, glancing at Lee. "Is there any way of escape for us?"

"I don't know," replied Lee. "If we attempt to get out of this gorge, we shall certainly be killed out of hand, but while we keep in cover like this there is a slim chance for us. This is an ugly business, Dorrie."

"I've seen uglier," replied his lordship promptly. "We're not dead yet."

Yet they all felt that the end would come before very long. Perhaps there would be a delay—while reinforcements were being brought up—but, after that, what hope was there for them? The soldiers would swoop down, and they would be riddled with bullets. They braced themselves with the thought that when the end came they would die fighting.

Things turned out very differently, however. And there was hardly any delay. Suddenly, from out of the gloom in the rear, there came a rush of feet. The little party of adventurers had been expecting another attack from the front—from the wide part of the gorge. They spun round, ready to face this new peril. Before they could fire a shot, dozens of Balghanistan soldiers were upon them, having appeared, it seemed, from a number of small canyons in the side of the gulch. During the first fateful seconds the five gallant adventurers expected to die; but the Ameer's soldiers did not use their weapons. They simply hurled themselves at Lee and Dorrie and the boys, and bore them to the ground by sheer weight of numbers.

CHAPTER 5.

Into The Hidden City!

THEY were prisoners before they could regain their breath. Most of the wind was knocked out of them in the first onrush. They were thudded down, jumped on, then dragged up and held whilst ropes were bound round them.

"While there's life," gurgled Lord Dorrimore, "there's hope, what?"

They were thrown into a heap—tossed one upon the other with brutal roughness. In the course of the scuffle the greater portion of their make-up had come off. They were all revealed in their true colours. The Balghar officer, standing over them, had got over his surprise by now. His eyes burned with hatred.

"White pigs!" he said harshly. "By Allah, you shall suffer for what you have done!"

Handforth, who could not understand a word of what was being said, glared back.

"Go and eat coke!" he said defiantly.

"Why haven't they killed us, gov'nor?" whispered Nipper, who found himself next to Nelson Lee. "Why rope us up like this?"

"Perhaps the Ameer has given orders that all white men are to be captured alive," replied Lee.

"So that they can be tortured afterwards, eh?" muttered Nipper. "By Jove, this is a pretty kettle of fish, if you like!"

Conversation after that was difficult, for they were dragged to their feet and separated. Their legs were not bound, but their arms were, and they were secured to one another by long lengths of rope. They were formed into a line. The object of this was clear. They were to be marched down into the valley—probably into Balghan itself!

THE City of Balghan, although looking so close from the heights, was in reality many miles distant.

And after two or three hours' marching—hard marching, for their guards, mounted on horses, set a cruelly quick pace—the prisoners were halted at a native village. They were thrown down against the wall of a primitive building, and left there. Half a dozen soldiers remained on guard. Dark-skinned natives came and looked at them—men, women, and children. This whole village, in fact, was seething with excitement.

"Looks as though we're here for the night," remarked Lord Dorrimore, after a while.

"What about making an attempt to escape?" breathed Handforth. "We might have a chance later on."

"With all these soldiers watching us?" asked Nipper.

"Perhaps there'll only be two or three on guard later," replied Handforth. "And what about Waldo? He's got the strength of Samson. Can't you break these ropes, Waldo?"

"I've been trying to," replied Stanley Waldo, "but they're beyond me, Handy. I'm not a magician, you know."

No food was brought them, not even water. They were left there. After about an hour other soldiers came, and the first lot went off. Apparently the troops were feeding and resting. It was clear that the prisoners would never have any opportunity of getting free of their ropes. They were watched constantly and continuously. A big fire was lit in the village street, and the glare of this provided all the illumination necessary.



Waldo gave a heave, and the Balghan officer hurtled over his head.

Lord Dorrimore, with all his usual sang-froid, turned over and went to sleep. Nelson Lee advised the three boys to do the same, and they made some pretence of sleeping. But it was useless. The tension was too great. Moreover, their bonds were tied with such savagery that they were in pain. And they were all assailed by an ever-growing thirst.

It was in the small hours of the morning that a horseman galloped into this little village, and soon after that there was a big movement. All the soldiers appeared, including the officer. The prisoners were dragged to their feet and formed into line again. Lee guessed—probably correctly—that the officer had been awaiting instructions. He had sent a man on, giving information to his superiors of the capture. Now he had his orders.

Once again the march continued. Long before it was over, the prisoners were suffering tortures. Their thirst was appalling, their limbs ached, and their feet were blistered. But not one of them complained. They just plodded on, grimly determined to show no sign of weakness. They instinctively knew that if they stumbled, or showed any sign of faltering, they would be whipped or tortured into renewed activity.

Dawn was breaking as the great wall of the city of Balghan came into sight. For some time they had been passing through long stretches of woodland, alternated with widely cultivated areas, but now the Hidden City was in front of them. It was of tremendous age. The great wall must have been standing for centuries. They passed through a deep, tunnel-like gateway, and were soon within the city proper.

Here they met with many surprises. Although the hour was early, the place was seething with activity. Large bodies of soldiers were moving to and fro. There was little or no evidence of the ordinary population. Everybody appeared to be wearing uniform; and these soldiers were equipped with every modern accoutrement. Half the buildings of the city appeared to be converted into barracks. During this brief march through the streets the prisoners passed thousands of uniformed soldiers. They saw modern artillery—even tanks. Motor-cars were shooting here and there, conveying officers. Balghan appeared to be one vast military camp.

It was as Nelson Lee had suspected from the first. The Ameer was preparing for war. Indeed, it was clear enough that war was imminent. War with whom? Not China or Russia. All these troops, no doubt, were being got ready for an invasion of India. For many years the Ameer of Balghanistan had had his eyes on the rich provinces of India.

THE five prisoners were marched into a great courtyard.

They now beheld a vast palace in front of them—an Oriental structure of surpassing grandeur. Without doubt, this was the Ameer's palace. There were more soldiers here. They took very little notice, however, of the dusty, tired cavalcade which rode in with the file of ragged captives. All these men had their own duties to attend to.

The thing which struck Nelson Lee more forcibly than anything else was the evidence of brilliant organisation. He was only seeing a glimpse here. He had no doubt that these military preparations were afoot from one end of Balghanistan to another. Troops were probably concentrated at all the strategic passes. Armies were on the move.

The prisoners were marched into a big chamber of Oriental splendour. Presently an officer came and inspected them.

"Mr. Nelson Lee, I think?" he said, halting opposite the detective, and speaking in perfect English.

"Yes, that is my name," said Lee.

"And Lord Dorrimore, I perceive," continued the officer, glancing at the peer. "These three boys I do not know, but I take it that they are members of your Detective Academy, Mr. Lee? I am afraid that you have made a blunder this time."

"How the deuce did you know us?" asked Dorrie.

"Our intelligence department, I can assure you, my lord, is well organised," replied the officer suavely. "You must remember, also, that we knew of your departure from England. We learned that your aeroplane had descended close to the border, although I must confess that we



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature! If you know of a good rib tickler send it along now—and win a prize! A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; all other readers whose efforts are published will receive a pocket wallet or a penknife. Address your jokes to: "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

New Lodgings!

Mrs Jones: "Good gracious, Mary! Why are you trying to feed the dog with pigeon seed? I told you to feed the pigeon."

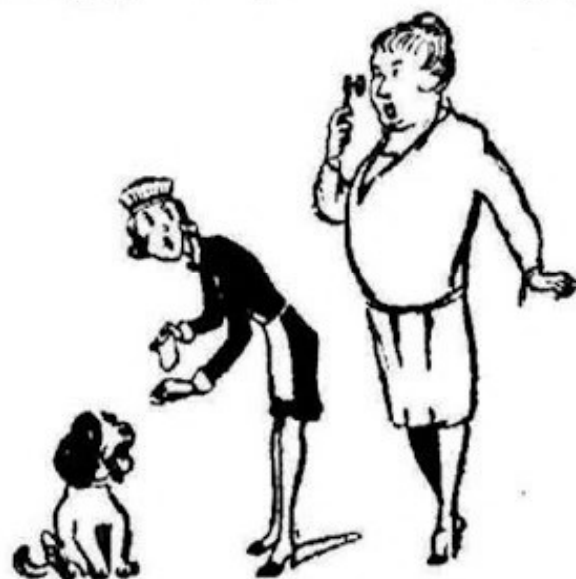
Maid: "Well, that's where the pigeon is, ma'am!"

(*H Newman, 2, Tabernacle Avenue, Barking Road, Plaistow, has been awarded a handsome gilt watch.*)

The Difference:

"Johnny," said the teacher, "if your father promises to pay a man twenty shillings a week, how many weeks will it take the man to get two hundred shillings?"

"Two hundred weeks."



"Johnny, you don't know your lessons."

"No," replied Johnny, "and you don't know my father."

(*G. Clarke, 22, Franklin Street, Bromley-by-Bow, has been awarded a penknife.*)

His Special Crop!

Stranger: "You have a fine farm here."

Farmer: "Aye, zur. I pride myself that it be one of the finest in these parts."

Stranger: "Which is your most paying crop?"

Farmer: "Summer boarders, zur."

(*J. Taylor, 70, Gleadless Road, Heeley, Sheffield, has been awarded a pocket wallet.*)

And Still Unbeaten!

It was a local Derby; Rosham were entertaining Anthouse. The referee, a nervous chap, stood chatting to the captain of the home team prior to the match.

"A lovely ground, eh?" asked the captain.

"Um!" grunted the referee.

"Rowdy spectators, though."

"Splendid view," went on the captain, ignoring the ref's remark. "Duckpond in the north, a hospital in the south, a nursing home in the east, and a graveyard in the west. And what's more," he added very deliberately, "we've never once lost a home game!"

(*H. Dilley, Station Rd., Langford, near Biggleswade, Beds., has been awarded a penknife.*)

believed that you had landed outside the boundary line of Balghanistan. His Illustrious Highness, the Ameer, is desirous of inspecting you without delay. He is, indeed, anxious to meet you."

"Interesting exhibits, eh?" commented Lord Dorrimore.

"This way—gentlemen," said the officer.

His tone was full of mockery, in spite of its politeness. There was, indeed, a hint of menace lurking in his voice all the time. Soldiers were guarding every door, and all of them carried rifles with fixed bayonets. This gorgeous officer—no doubt belonging to the Ameer's private guard—indicated a circular doorway straight ahead. There were flowing velvet curtains in front of it, and the officer pulled them aside.

"Walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly," murmured Handforth. "I'll bet the fireworks will start in half a minute."

Although he knew perfectly well that he and his companions were in a particularly tight corner, Handforth was as self-possessed and as aggressive as ever. They passed through the curtained doorway, and now found themselves in an apartment of wondrous splendour. The carpet was silky and thick; the hangings, of rich silk, were tasteful in the extreme. The furniture consisted mostly of Oriental lounges, and, altogether, the whole place spoke of luxury.

"Gentlemen, you will be good enough to stand at attention," said the officer stiffly. "His Illustrious Highness, the Ameer!"

Curtains on the farther side of the room parted, and another figure appeared. It was a figure clad in flowing robes—the robes characteristic of this Oriental country. It was tall and straight, and the face was stern, the eyes steady.

The prisoners were facing the Ameer—and the Ameer was none other than Sir Akbar Laldhi, late Balghanistan Ambassador in London!

CHAPTER 6.

In the Dungeons!

"WE have previously met, Mr. Nelson Lee, in happier circumstances," said Sir Akbar smoothly.

"You are the Ameer of Balghanistan?" asked Lee.

"I am."

"Let me congratulate you, Sir Akbar," said Lee mockingly. "I had been foolish in assuming that you only had two personalities."

He Would Know!

Backward Student (examining skull of donkey): "I wonder, professor, how long a donkey could live without brains."

Professor: "Wait and see!"

(Miss Anna O'Connor, 1, Parnell Terrace, Glenagary, Co. Dublin, has been awarded a penknife.)

Aye, Aye!

A fiery-tempered man was having a round of golf. Much to his annoyance, another player persisted in crossing his line of vision. Driven to desperation, he went up to this pest and, after a few heated words, ended up by giving him two black eyes. The fiery-tempered man was reported to the committee, and asked for an explanation.

"Well," said the accused, "he crossed my 't's, so I dotted his 'i's!"

(Ian Middlemiss, 94, Thirlstone Road, Edinburgh, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

A Weight on His "Memory"!

The absent-minded mayor had laid the foundation stone of a new wing for the hospital, and there was a long, awkward pause as the



spectators waited for his worship to begin his speech. Finally, the mayor turned to one of the officials with a harassed look.

"What can I do?" he groaned. "I've laid the stone on top of my speech!"

(V. Turner, 61, North Road Avenue, Brentwood, has been awarded a penknife.)

Optimistic!

The tramp knocked at the kitchen door.

"Please, kind lady, I'm a sick man. The doctor gimme this medicine, but I need something to take it with."

"Poor fellow. Do you want a spoon and a glass of water?"

"No, lady. But this medicine has to be took before meals. Have you got a meal handy?"

(J. Fox, 34, Summerfield Street, Sheffield, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Did He Take the Hint?

Stingy patron (in billiard saloon): "These cues want tipping badly."

Attendant: "Yes, sir; I know just how they feel."

(J. Nicholls, 109, Park Terrace, Newcastle, has been awarded a penknife.)

The Ameer stiffened slightly and his eyes glinted. He knew well enough that Lee was referring to that hideous monstrosity—Dacca, the Dwarf. This man—this ruler of such a vast, rich domain—was extraordinary in more ways than one. He was capable of twisting and contorting himself into a vile, shapeless hunchback, and in this guise he had committed more than one atrocious murder in London. At the point of the revolver, Nelson Lee had compelled Sir Akbar Laldhi to assume that dwarf shape, proving to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary that Sir Akbar and Dacca were one and the same person. And Sir Akbar had not forgotten that scene in the Premier's private room at No. 10, Downing Street.

"I regret, Mr. Lee, that you should have found it necessary to interfere in my affairs so stubbornly," said the Ameer, his voice full of menace. "Your companions, no doubt, were influenced by you, and it is singularly regrettable that they should be compelled, now, to share your own fate."

"Just a minute, old friend," said Lord Dorrimore. "We stand by Mr. Lee to the last ditch."

"Yes, rather!" chorused the three boys.

The Ameer permitted himself an evil smile.

"I cannot imagine what folly caused you to enter my dominion," he said, in a tone of wonder. "In all truth, you have entered the lion's den—and the lion is dangerous. I shall, of course, kill you," he added evenly.

"I would beg of you to remember, Sir Akbar, that I am an accredited agent of the British Government," said Nelson Lee. "My companions have a similar status. You will interfere with our liberties at your peril."

The Ameer laughed.

"You are disposed to be humorous," he said. "What do you think I care for your British Government? You are in Balghanistan now. You are beyond the jurisdiction of your own laws. You are here—in the capital city of my own domain. Do you understand? Fools! Are you serious when you prattle to me of the reprisals that your Government might take? In this country I am Master. My word is the law, and the whole law. In Balghanistan there are no courts or judges or juries. If I say that a man shall die, that man dies. If I say that a thousand men shall die, those thousand men die!"

Nelson Lee was not awed as, apparently, the Ameer intended him to be.

"You are playing a risky game, Sir Akbar," he replied. "You come to England as the Ambassador of your country, and yet it appears you are the Supreme Ruler of Balghanistan. In England you commit murder—as foully and as brutally as any ruffianly footpad. You are now threatening to murder us. I have no doubt that you will carry out that threat. But do not imagine, for one moment, that these practices will be allowed to continue indefinitely. The British Government looks after its subjects. Sooner or later we shall be avenged; you will be made to answer for your crimes. Great Britain has a long arm——"

"Enough!" interrupted the other, his eyes burning with sudden hatred. "My time is more valuable than to waste it on such vermin as you."

"If we're going to die, let's die quickly," said Lord Dorrimore, leaping forward.

His right fist flashed, and it came up with devastating force, striking the Ameer on the point of the chin. His Imperial Highness went toppling over on to the soft carpet. A dozen soldiers rushed out from the curtained doorways, and Lord Dorrimore was seized. Half a dozen bayonets were held at his back and at his chest.

"Good man, Dorrie!" said Lee. "I was just going to do that myself."

"Well, there's a limit," granted his lordship. "Vermin, eh? Confound his infernal carcase. Does he think we're afraid of him?"

The Ameer picked himself up, breathing hard.

"I apologise, gentlemen, for so foolishly underrating your courage," he said quietly. "Having spent so many years in England, I should have known better. But I have not fallen into your trap."

"Trap?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "What trap?"

"Did you not desire my soldiers to bayonet you, and thus end your life?" asked the Ameer. "No, my friend. You shall not die so quickly—not so painlessly. I have other plans."

Nelson Lee stiffened.

"If it is your will to torture me, Sir Akbar—torture me," he said. "And if you are determined to torture Lord Dorrimore, I still have nothing to say. But these boys are different."

"They are white—they are English!" retorted the Ameer. "And they defied me in London. They shall share the same fate as yourself. And the other members of your party shall be traced and captured—and annihilated. Every one! Already my soldiers are searching. Your movements are being tracked—and, mark my words, your camp will be located and the other members of your party taken."

Nelson Lee made as if to speak, but changed his mind.

Why plead with this arch-fiend? He had been about to urge that Nipper and Handforth and Waldo should be provided with water and food. But why tell the Ameer that they were parched and hungry? He would be all the more likely to give orders that no food or drink was to be given them.

"I bid you good-bye, Mr. Lee," said the Ameer mockingly. "We part now and we shall not meet again. And remember, when you are going to your death, that Dacca once promised you that he would get even."

"A word of advice, your Highness," said Lord Dorrimore. "Far better order your soldiers to bayonet us on the spot. It might spoil your sumptuous carpet, but you would, at least, be certain of our removal. We're tricky customers, and if you give us half a chance, we'll escape."

"You shall not have a fraction of a chance," promised the Ameer. "It is not a wise policy for me to have you executed in this city—or, indeed, executed in any normal way."

"You admit, then, that you fear the British Government's long arm?" asked Lee dryly.

"I admit that your Government might become inquisitive," replied the Ameer. "They shall obtain no satisfaction. There shall be no proof—no evidence whatsoever of your untimely demise. I am a cautious man, gentleman, as you will find out for yourselves before many hours have elapsed. When you are going to your death, remember these words of mine, and you will appreciate the subtlety of my methods."

He clapped his hands, the soldiers sprang to attention, and he gave some sharp orders in Balghanistani. The prisoners were seized, turned about, and marched out of the apartment.

THEY were taken through long corridors of the palace, down many steps, until at length they found themselves far underground. They were marched down a dank stone passage, where primitive oil lamps burned at infrequent intervals. Finally, they were thrust into a foul-smelling dungeon, and the door was slammed and locked and bolted upon them.

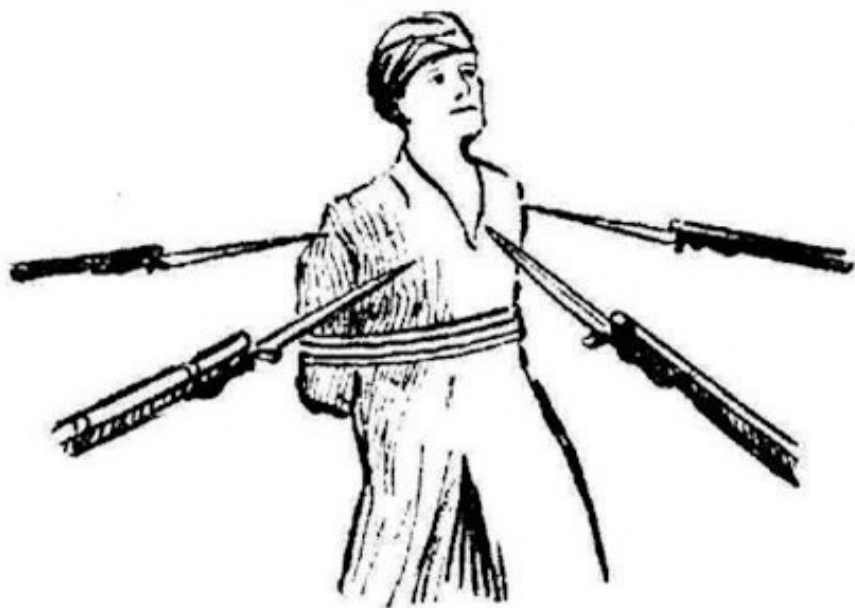
"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore. "You saw, Lee?"

"Yes," muttered Nelson Lee. "You mean in the other dungeons?"

"White men—all the way along!" said Dorrie.

"I caught a glimpse of a face here and there. I don't suppose they recognised us as white men—we look too nondescript."

It was true. All the way down this tunnel there were dungeons, and every dungeon contained several white men. Air pilots, mail officials, innocent passengers—white people all. They were the victims of all those aeroplane disasters. Machine after machine had vanished, and it was now certain that they had been captured in some way by the Ameer, and they had been brought to earth near Balghan. But why were all these pilots and mechanics being held prisoners? Perhaps they were to be utilised later—for they were skilled, trained men.



"Poor beggars," muttered Dorrie. "They've got the worst of it, Lee. They're going to be kept here—perhaps for months to come. We're booked for an early journey into Eternity."

"This accursed murderer will pay in the end," said Nelson Lee tensely. "Dorrie, old man, I'm sorry. I dragged you into this—and these boys, too. It's the boys I'm mostly concerned about—"

"Cheese it, gov'nor!" interrupted Nipper. "We're not grumbling, are we?"

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "Blow the Ameer and all his rotten army! And, anyway, we might escape him, even now."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm the last man in the world, young 'un, to spread a wet blanket," he said, "but we had better realise at once that Sir Akbar—or the Ameer—is in deadly earnest. He's got us now, and he doesn't mean to let us go. There's something particularly diabolical in store for us."

"Well, it's no good anticipating it," said Lord Dorrimore. "Confound his rotten hide! He might at least have had the decency to give us a good feed before he sends us on our last journey. Glory! What I could do to a fat, juicy steak and a pint of honest English beer!"

Minutes passed—minutes of dreadful suspense—and then a tramping of feet made itself heard. The tramping stopped outside their door; the bolts were shot, and a key was turned in the lock.

CHAPTER 7.

The Raft of Death!

"By the Lord Harry!" muttered Lord Dorrimore. "This is pretty quick, isn't it?"

"Not too quick for me," whispered Lee. "Suspense is worse than anything, Dorrie. Far better to get it over and done with."

"You're right there, of course," admitted his lordship.

The door of the dungeon was flung open, and a large body of soldiers could now be seen, many of them carrying brightly-burning lanterns.

"Come on," gasped Handforth. "Let's make a dash for it! Better to go under fighting than suffer a lot of tortures."

But Lee, at a glance, could see that these soldiers had no intention of killing them. They carried no weapons. A rush, such as Handforth suggested, would be worse than useless. The tunnel was blocked in both directions, and the soldiers were in great force.

"Steady, young 'un," said Lee. "Don't let these beggars see that we are ruffled."

"The true British stoicism, what?" chuckled Dorrie, with amazing cheerfulness. "Foreigners generally look upon it as stolidity, but I could give it a different name."

It was, in all truth, sterling courage. Dorrie himself was a perfect example. He did not seem to care a twopenny tinker's cuss.

(Continued on page 24.)



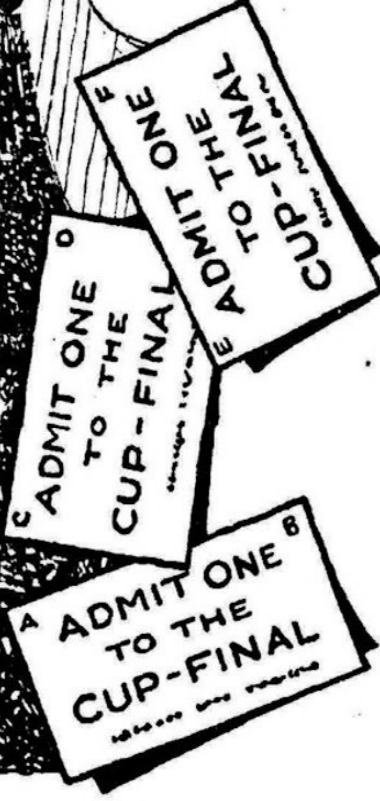
"Who Scored those Goals?"

A Simple 4 Week Competition

O'TOPPING MEAD "CYCLES and Wembley Cup-Final Tickets OFFERED

Must Be Won!
LAST WEEK—
—POST NOW!

Who Kicked Them? SET 4



We have now come to the fourth and final week of our grand competition, so you must send in your entries for those Grand Bikes and Cup Final Tickets without delay. Below you will find the Fourth Puzzle-Set to solve. In the goalmouth, which you see, are eight circles, and, as before, in each of them is a picture-puzzle representing a well-known footballer's name. You should have no difficulty in solving the puzzles, but in any case a list of names is given below which contains the answers to all this week's puzzles.

As you find the answers, write them IN INK against the corresponding numbers on the Entry Form given below, sign your name and address, also in ink, and cut out the whole form. Now gather together the three previous entry forms, see that all the answers are filled in; then pin all four together in order so as to form one complete entry. Place the entry in a properly stamped envelope and post it early to:

NELSON LEE,
 "Who Kicked Them,"
 5, Carmelite Street,
 London, E.C.4 (Comp.),
 so as to reach there *not later than Friday, March 14th, 1930.* Any entries arriving after that date will be disqualified. The Competition Rules are given on page 27, and should be read through carefully.

Look for the Answers HERE!

- | | | |
|-----------|---------|------------|
| ANDREWS | HANDLEY | PORTER |
| ASTLEY | HINE | PRICE |
| ATTWOOD | JACK | ROLSON |
| BEDFORD | JAMES | ROCKE |
| BERESFORD | JOHN | RUFFELL |
| BRADFORD | JOHNSON | RUSSELL |
| BRUCE | KEEN | SEED |
| CAPE | KEENOR | SHARP |
| CHANDLER | KENNEDY | SLICER |
| CLAY | LANE | SMART |
| COOK | LAMBERT | STEEL |
| DEACON | LINDSAY | TALBOT |
| DIMMOCK | LOWE | TAYLOR |
| DUTTON | MALLOCK | THACKERAY |
| EASTON | MANTIE | THOMAS |
| EDMONDS | MARTIN | THOMPSON |
| FITTON | MORRALL | VALLANCE |
| GIBBINS | NAIRN | WADE |
| GODDARD | NIMMO | WALTERS |
| GOODALL | OSBORNE | WATERFIELD |
| GRAHAM | PARKER | WATSON |
| HADEN | PIPE | YARDLEY |
| | | YEWS |

"Who Kicked Them?"

FREE ENTRY FORM No. 4.

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

I agree to accept the Editor's decision as final and binding.

Signed.....

Address.....

4

THE CITY OF HIDDEN DREAD!

(Continued from page 21.)

One by one the prisoners were brought out of the dungeon, and they were secured by strong handcuffs.

"Well, we're not being marched out to be shot at dawn," said Dorrie. "It's about mid-morning by now, I should imagine. Or perhaps only breakfast-time. And shooting, of course, would be altogether too simple."

None of them could imagine what the Ameer had in store for them. They were weary in body, and their thirst was such that they were beginning to lose interest in what their fate might be. Perhaps the Ameer himself had suspected something of the kind. For presently, after being marched through a great stone chamber, they were placed in a row along a heavy bench. Great mugs of water were placed in front of them, together with hunks of rough bread.

"Poisoned, I'll bet," said Handforth.

In spite of his words, however, he was one of the first to seize a mug and gulp down the contents. Yet that food and drink was perfectly wholesome, and by the time it had all been consumed the five prisoners were feeling refreshed and heartened.

"There's something fishy about this," said Lord Dorrimore. "Why give us water and grub? Can you think of any explanation, Lee?"

"Only that the Ameer was afraid of us becoming dull and listless, and unappreciative of his special treat," said the great detective.

"You've hit it, old man," nodded Dorrie. "He wants us to be fit enough to enjoy the picnic, eh?"

THEY were rather surprised, on being marched out, to find a big modern car waiting. The body was different from that of an ordinary car, however, because there was a wide platform running all round the rear of it, with a handrail attached to the bodywork. The prisoners were ordered to get into the car, and they seated themselves. In front there was a driver and two soldiers. Other soldiers climbed aboard that semi-circular platform, forming a bodyguard all round the prisoners.

"Well, we're going for a ride, it seems," said Handforth, looking round. "By George! How about making a dash for it now?"

Handforth was incorrigible. Never would he give up hope. But, of course, it would have been sheer madness to make any attempt to leap out of the car. They would only have been dragged back, and flung into their places with ignominious violence.

The car moved off, and went gliding through the crowded, busy streets of this great Oriental city. Scarcely anybody took any notice; the throngs moved about their business, and if any of them did happen to look towards the car, they merely spat contemptuously. Seeing white prisoners conveyed through the streets was apparently a commonplace sight.

The car took one of the main roads out of the town—and these roads, for the most part, were in excellent condition. Lee noted, subconsciously, that the route led out towards the hill country where the main camp was situated—where Dorrie's great crippled plane lay hidden. This,

Lord Dorrimore's right fist crashed against the Ameer's chin, and his Imperial Highness toppled over. Next moment the soldiers were rushing forward.



perhaps, was only a coincidence, for Lee hardly thought it possible that the Ameer had any certain knowledge of the main camp's whereabouts. The good roads were left behind after a run of an hour or two, and the car was now climbing rough, rocky tracks, and winding its way down rugged gulches. They went down into a particularly wild valley, where a stream could be seen wending its way, snake-like, into the distance.

Presently the car stopped, and the guards dismounted. The prisoners were ordered to get out, and from this point they were marched onwards on foot. Down they went, along winding tracks, getting deeper and deeper into the heart of this strange valley. Nelson Lee was intrigued. All the prisoners racked their brains to arrive at some explanation of this trip. Where were they being taken? What was the cruel nature of the torture which Sir Akbar had devised? And how long would it be before they knew their fate?

Lee had no real hope of turning the tables on the enemy. They were too numerous—too well-armed, and too much on the alert. Nevertheless, Lee knew, from past experience, that "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." Even at this stage of the proceedings, there might be some little hitch—some miscarriage which would turn the tide in the favour of the captives. It was only one chance in a thousand, but Nelson Lee never allowed his vigilance to relax. If any remote chance came, he would seize it.

One minute he would be hoping that something would turn up; and the next minute he would groan with the impotence of his position. The guard was twenty strong—for another car had followed the first one. All these Balghanistan soldiers were armed. The prisoners, on the other hand, had not so much as a pocket-knife between them. Their hands were manacled, and they were roped, too. As for any help coming from an outside source, this was a possibility too remote to be even considered. The other boys in the main camp had no knowledge of the route which Nelson Lee had taken; moreover, they had been given strict orders to remain in camp. No,

there was no chance of help from that quarter.



A HALT was called by the rocky bank of a swiftly-moving stream.

It was a fairly wide river, where the current surged and boiled. The stream went careering along through a mighty gorge. The water's edge could be reached here, but further along the sides became sheer.

Men were at work at this spot. They were not soldiers, but powerful Balghanistan natives. They were labouring on a roughly-constructed raft. It was square, consisting of long logs, lashed securely together, with powerful cross-pieces. At various places on this raft loose ropes had been placed securely in position during the manufacture. These loose ends were lying on the surface of the raft.

One look was sufficient for Nelson Lee. He understood the meaning of those loose ropes. They passed under the logs, and they were of sufficient length to provide powerful lashings. He and his fellow prisoners, without doubt, were to be bound hand and foot to this raft.

And what then? Was the raft to be set adrift in this swiftly-moving river?

Lee himself was the first to be taken. He was separated from the others, his handcuffs were removed, and he was held by four powerful soldiers. Even if he had contemplated any flight, it was impossible for him to move. He was held in a vice-like grip. Forced down by his captors, he was stretched full length on the raft, and the lashings were quickly made tight round his ankles.

"What's the idea?" asked Handforth, staring. "What are they up to now? Why are they binding us to this rotten raft?"

"Looks as if we're booked for drowning, young 'uns," muttered Lord Dorrimore. "Yet that seems queer. Not half devilish enough for our friend, the Ameer."

"I'll bet they'll put this raft in the river—when we're all on it—upside down," said Nipper. "If they do that, we shan't stand an earthly."

Dorrie shook his head.

"Too simple, old son," he replied. "Too easy a death. I hate to be pessimistic—quite against my nature—but, hang it, it's against all reason. We shouldn't have been carted all this way unless there was something pretty filthy at the end of it. And drowning, as I've said, is altogether too easy."

"Well, we shall soon know," said Waldo quietly.

Lord Dorrimore was the next one to be taken. He, too, was bound to the raft. Nelson Lee, by this time, had been completely spread-eagled. His arms were outflung, above his head, and these were lashed round the wrists. Any movement on his part was practically impossible. Dorrie was treated in the same way, and then came the boys. Waldo was last, and when he had been dealt with the raft presented an extraordinary spectacle. Nelson Lee occupied the centre, and the other four were at the corners, as it were. They were all flat on their backs, spread-eagled, bound hand and foot.

The Balghars, during these operations, had apparently enjoyed themselves. They had talked continuously in their own language, laughing and shouting and occasionally barking contemptuous epithets at their victims. It seemed, indeed, that these Balghars were enjoying some joke. They knew, no doubt, what was in store for their victims, and this knowledge amused them.

With more shouts of laughter, they prepared to shift the raft. They crowded round, lifting and levering, and edging the clumsy structure over the rocks towards the water. It dipped, slithered and slewed round. Finally, with a great plunge, it descended into the stream. There was a tremendous splash. The raft went right under at first, and for one moment the prisoners believed that they would sink. But the raft came sluggishly and clumsily to the surface. It floated there, held by ropes from the bank. It was just awash, so that the captives were clear of the water—which, owing to the stationary condition of the raft, swirled and eddied round their heads and bodies and limbs.

Long poles were now brought into use, and the raft was heaved out further and further into the stream, the ropes being loosened in order to give it play. Then, finally, these ropes were released, and the raft rode free. Caught by the current, it slewed round, reached mid-stream, and then went shooting down into the gorge at the mercy of the current.

And from the rocky bank came a wild chorus of jeering shouts.

CHAPTER 8.

The Death Ride!

"WELL, I suppose this is the last act?" came Lord Dorrimore's voice. "Well, cheerio, Lee, old warhorse. So long, young 'uns!"

"We're not beaten yet, sir!" panted Handforth, wrenching madly at his bonds.

Nelson Lee inwardly groaned. He believed that he had hit upon the truth now. No doubt there were some foaming rapids further down the stream. The idea was that the luckless five should be battered to death in the seething whirlpool. The torture would come beforehand, during this grim, nightmare voyage. Mental torture! A cunning, devilish scheme—for, as Lee well knew, there is no torture so agonising as mental torture.

"Afraid it's all up, guv'nor," said Nipper hoarsely.

The great detective did not reply, but he, too, thought the same thing. Yet there was one of those five who had not given up hope. The exception was Stanley Waldo.

And he had every reason to be the exception. For was he not the son of Rupert Waldo, the one-time Wonder Man? And Stanley inherited most of his father's amazing qualities. It was here that he had the advantage over his companions—the advantage, too, over his enemies.

For Waldo had been bound in exactly the same way as the other prisoners. The soldiers, apparently, had not known that he was an exception. Or, if they had known, they had overlooked this vital fact. Yet even Waldo was no magician. He could not perform miracles. His strength was phenomenal, but even he could not burst those heavy ropes which bound him to the raft. He had known this from the very first second.

There was something else, however. Whilst Waldo was being bound, he had attempted to make his ankles and his wrists rigid; and, in a measure, he had succeeded. Nelson Lee had tried the same dodge, but the ropes had been drawn so tightly that he had gained no advantage. With Waldo it was not quite the same. His muscles were like iron. He had pretended to be limp and fearful, and had even whimpered with terror. Never for a moment had his tormentors suspected that he had "enlarged" the size of his wrists during the binding process.

There was another point. Both Nelson Lee and Dorrie, being men, had received greater attention. They had been bound with cruel tightness. The boys were not regarded as so

important, and the ropes, although tightly secured, had not been drawn so fast. It was only a trifle—a mere matter of fractions—and, while it made no difference to Nipper and Handforth, it certainly made a difference to Waldo.

The second the raft was let loose, Waldo commenced work. With all that amazing strength of his—all that cunning agility—he worked and writhed with his wrists. He slackened them, allowing them to become limp. His heart gave a bound when he felt a certain amount of play. And the wetting of the ropes, rather than hindering, helped. This was a point which had not occurred to the Balghars. The ropes, becoming wet, also became rigid and stiff.

Waldo was wise. He had uttered no word of his hopes to the others. He did not believe, for a second, that he would be able to accomplish anything. Then why give his companions the additional agony of hoping for something that would almost certainly fail? And then, with a gasp of incredulous joy, Waldo felt his right hand slipping from beneath the rope. In another second, it was free!

The raft was now gathering speed. It would half leap out of the water, plunging back with a jolting shock, sending the spray flying in all directions. The gorge had narrowed, and occasionally trees would appear overhead. Some of them overhung to such an extent that they almost touched the raft as it swept under. A turn had hidden the Balghars by this time. The victims were alone—left to their fate.

Nelson Lee received one of the greatest shocks of his life when, turning his head, he saw a figure rising up on the raft. The sight was so unexpected—so bewildering—that Lee could only



OUR COMPETITION RULES.

See pages 22 and 23 for final puzzles and sending-in instructions.

The Six "Mead" Bicycles will be awarded to the six readers whose solutions of the four sets of puzzles are correct or most nearly correct, the other prizes of Twelve Cup-Final Tickets following in order of merit.

In case of ties, the Editor may divide the prizes, or their value, as he considers necessary, but in any case the full value will be awarded.

Any number of entries may be sent, but each must be made out on a separate set of the "Who Kicked Them?" Entry Forms (Nos. 1-4, inclusive that is). No responsibility can be taken for entries lost, mislaid, or delayed in the post or otherwise, and no correspondence will be allowed.

The Editor's decision will be final and legally binding throughout. Entries mutilated or bearing alterations or alternative solutions will be disqualified. Employees of the proprietors of "NELSON LEE" and of "Gem," whose readers are also taking part in this contest, must not compete.

stare for a moment. Then he gripped himself, and he knew that this was no hallucination.

"Waldo!" he panted amazedly.

"Got my hands free, sir!" sang out Waldo, as he stood up. "I'm going to have a shot at my feet now——"

"Waldo's free!" gurgled Handforth. "Oh, my hat! Good old Waldo! Hurrah!"

"By the Lord Harry!" came from Dorrie. "The boy must be uncanny!"

A cry of horror escaped Waldo's lips.

"It's no good!" he shouted hoarsely. "There's no time—we're doomed!"

He was staring ahead—down-stream—and in his eyes there was an expression of untold dismay. For he knew, in that moment, the nature of the fate which the Ameer had planned for them. And never in his young life had Waldo known of anything so hideous!

CHAPTER 9.

The Human Rope!

WALDO was momentarily stunned. What he saw dulled his senses and paralysed his limbs.

The others, flat on the raft, their vision limited, were not yet able to see the nature of the danger ahead. But Waldo saw. He stared. And his heart, after nearly stopping its beat, now raced on madly. The gorge, for a long straight stretch, was almost like a tunnel, for overhead the trees reached over until they practically met. In places they hung low over the water. Beyond this tunnel there was an open stretch, where the water foamed and boiled and seethed. A vortex of deadly cross-currents. But even this was not the cause of Waldo's dismay. It was something farther on still.

Where the rapids were at their worst, the river suddenly vanished. A great wall of rock rose up—a mountain. The river went swirling into the very heart of this mountain—disappearing in a white, foaming smother through a tunnel entrance which was no more than four or five feet high although fifty or sixty feet wide.

An underground river!

Here, then, was the kernel of Sir Akbar's scheme! This raft, carried by the swift stream, would whirl into those rapids, and then plunge headlong into the tunnel. Waldo knew, as he stared, that this river had no outlet. It vanished into the earth here—vanished for good. They were to be carried down into this subterranean death-trap. The chances were that the raft would collide with the tunnel entrance, and smash itself to fragments, including its human freight. Then all the remnants would be tossed hither and thither, and sucked into the blackness of the unknown. And no trace would be left!

The instinct of self-preservation is paramount in us all. And Waldo, after that first moment of shocked paralysis, crouched down, working frantically at the ropes which bound his feet to the raft. Even while his fingers were plucking at the ropes he gave up the task and stood upright again. Fool! How could he hope to escape now? Even if he did unfasten those ropes he could do nothing but jump from the raft; and, strong swimmer as he was, he could never get out of this deadly current. He would be swept down to his death, just the same as the others!

The others!

What hope was there for them? During these tense moments, Waldo felt that he did not want to escape if the others were doomed. Far better go all together.

"Waldo!" came a shout from Nipper. "What are you doing? Why don't you try to get your feet free?"

Waldo started. He looked down at Nipper, who was lying helpless on the raft. He looked at the others. All eyes were upon him. The raft, for a few moments, was riding freely, without much tossing. The four who were still helpless regarded Waldo anxiously and with much bewilderment. Why was he wasting the precious seconds?

"It's no good!" he said, a world of hopelessness in his voice. "There isn't time!"

"But you can try, can't you?" asked Handforth, amazed. "Hang it, you've got your hands free—and your feet ought to be more simple. Don't throw up the sponge, Waldo!"

"It'll take me three or four minutes, at least, to get my own feet free," said Waldo dully. "And within two minutes we shall be——"

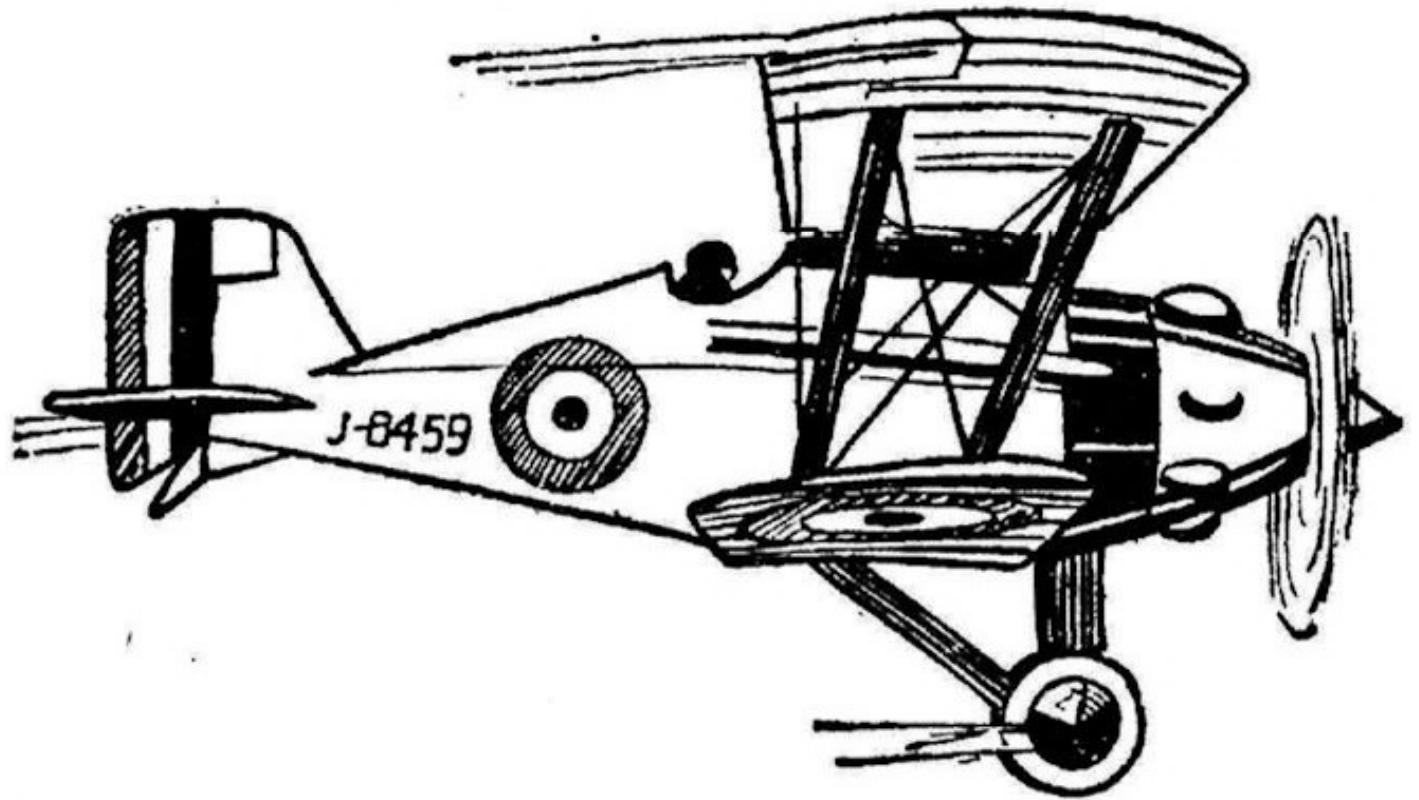
He broke off, a great gulp coming into his throat.

"The tree—the tree!" he shouted hoarsely.

He could see better than the others, for he was standing up and they were lying full length on the raft, half-blinded by the water which constantly swept over them—either in bulk or in the form of spray. The raft was twisting and turning continuously, sometimes going round in mad whirls as the current caught it with full force.

Stanley Waldo was looking at a great tree branch which hung right over the stream—and which came down, in fact, to within four feet of the water. In this fateful moment, he breathed a

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prayer or thankfulness that his feet were securely tied to the raft. For an idea had come to him. A fantastic, grotesque idea—but he had no time to think of the after-consequences.

All his wits were capable of understanding, just then, was that here was a means of checking the raft's mad progress. Certain death lay beyond, on the other side of that roaring, boiling cataract. In such a crisis, it was difficult to reason or even to think clearly. Waldo's action was more or less instinctive. He waited until the raft swept under the tree branch, and he clutched. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, who saw what he was doing, caught their breath in horror.

"Gad! It's plucky!" muttered Dorrie. "But the poor youngster will be torn limb from limb!"

"Don't do it, Waldo!" shouted Lee. "Let go, boy—let go!"

But Waldo was holding. He had obtained a grip on that tree branch which reached like some tentacle right across the stream. The raft, caught in the mighty grip of the current, endeavoured to pull him away and continue on its course. Waldo was stretched out—a veritable human rope! His hands were gripping on to that tree branch, and his feet were bound to the raft. So long as he held, the raft would be checked. Overhead, the branch was sagging and bending; there came the straining and cracking of twigs.

"Glory!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore. "The boy must be made of elastic!"

"He'll kill himself!" muttered Nelson Lee.

Not many powerful men could have done what Stanley Waldo was doing. Certainly, no other boy of his age could have done it. But he was exceptional. Yet the ordeal was not prolonged. The raft swung round as the full checking movement came into effect. Waldo did not give way, but the tree branch did. It was supple and springy, but there was a limit to its powers of resistance. Suddenly there was a sound of splintering and cracking. The branch, with a mass of foliage, fell with a splash into the river, and the raft shot onwards again. Waldo sagged back, falling. He groaned. He had failed. He wanted to shout a warning to the others of what lay ahead, but the words would not come.

And then it was that the miracle happened! At least, it seemed a miracle to Waldo—and yet, actually, it was a perfectly natural consequence of Waldo's own action. By clinging to that tree branch, the boy had caused the raft to swing out of the main current, and it had headed for the less disturbed water at the edge of the gorge. So now, when the tree branch suddenly gave way, the raft received a great impetus. It shot off—not down the river, as before, but towards the side of the gorge, and out of the treacherous main flow.

The whole thing was over within a few moments. The raft swung round, tossed about wildly for a brief spell, and then was caught in a violent back eddy. It spun almost like a top, and hurtled itself against the rocks. There was a sudden jarring, thudding crash. Again the raft swung round, but now it failed to continue its journey. It hung there, as though anchored, one corner partially under water. It was Handforth's corner, and Handforth's head was nearly under. He could only just manage to breathe as the water surged past his head.

"What's happened?" gasped Waldo, staring wildly.

"We've stuck!" yelled Nipper.

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Nelson Lee. "We've hit some submerged rock!"

Nipper suddenly gave a shout.

"Here, I've got an idea!" he exclaimed, his voice shaking with excitement. "When those brutes set us adrift, they left some ropes trailing. Is it possible for you to reach one of those ropes, Waldo?"

Waldo looked round.

"Yes, I believe so!" he replied.

"Then reach it now—before you waste time by unfastening your feet!" said Nipper. "Perhaps you can make a loop and sling it over one of these rocky projections. Then, if the raft slips, we shall be more or less anchored."

"The boy's got brains!" said Lord Dorrimore admiringly.

By stretching at full length, Waldo just managed to reach the edge of the raft, and when he felt round he got hold of one of those trailing ropes. He drew the wet mass in, and looped the end of it. He looked round, his attention fixed upon the rocky side of the gulch. He soon noted a jagged piece of rock which stuck up handily. With one throw, he hooked that loop over the rock.

"Done it!" Waldo said exultantly. "Now for my feet—and, after that, I shall be able to get the rest of you free!"

CHAPTER 10.

The Lurking Peril.

TWO men stood on a rocky elevation, their gazes fixed eagerly and intently on the boiling cataract below them.

They were Balghar natives; big, powerful fellows, dressed in the costume of the country, and they had rifles slung over their shoulders. The little elevation on which they stood commanded a clear view of the river. They could not see for any great distance, because of the trees which grew further along the gulch. On one side of them the mountain rose in a sheer precipice—with the river seething into its underground home near by.

"They should come," said one of the men, in Balghanistani.

"Have patience," said the other. "They will be here soon. There can have been no blunder."

The watchers waited, stolid and unemotional.

"GOT it!" said Waldo triumphantly.

His second foot was free—and he was no longer tethered in any way to that fatal raft. His limbs ached—he was, in fact, badly strained—but he took no notice. His constitution was so peculiar that he could bear an extraordinary amount of pain and scarcely feel it. In this respect he was like his celebrated father.

And now he gave all his attention to his companions. The raft was rocking gently to the movement of the side currents, but it had shown no sign of dragging itself from its rocky anchorage.

"Pity I haven't got a knife, sir," said Waldo, as he bent over Nelson Lee.

"Never mind that, young 'un—do the best you can with your fingers," said Lee. "And leave me until the last. Attend to Nipper and Handforth—and then Dorrie."

Waldo took no notice, however. He continued to pull and strain at Nelson Lee's bonds, and such was his strength that he soon conquered the ropes, and Lee was partially freed.

"See about the others!" said the detective. "I can manage my feet, Waldo."

One by one, they were released. Nipper was next, and as soon as his wrists were freed he tackled his own feet. And so with Handforth and Lord Dorrimore. By the time Nipper's hands were freed, Nelson Lee had gained his full liberty, and he, too, gave a hand. Thus the whole process was speeded up; and, within five minutes, all the captives had their liberty.

"Well done, Waldo!" said Lee, pressing Waldo's arm. "You've saved our lives, my boy."

"I hope so, sir—but we're not out of the wood yet," said Waldo.

"By gad, though, we now stand a sporting chance," said Dorrie, as he looked up at the rocks. "There's a ledge here and it may lead somewhere."

There was only one possible way of escape, and there was no guarantee that this would lead anywhere. The rocky sides of the gulch were sheer for the most part, but near to the water's edge there was a rough platform which ran down stream. It was the only route. In the other direction the ledge petered out completely, the rock face rising sheer from the water's edge. The adventurers' only hope was that there would be some method of getting out of this gulch by following the stream down for some distance.

"Let's get ashore, anyhow," said Handforth eagerly.

"Steady, young 'un!" urged Lee. "Any sudden movement might cause the raft to jolt off the submerged rock. And there is no certainty that the rope will hold. Once free, this raft will plunge out into the main current again."

They were very cautious. Lee insisted upon remaining on the raft until all the boys had leapt clear. Dorrie was next, and Lee took the final leap. It was necessary for him to make haste, too; for the lightening of the raft had made it precarious. It was rocking madly. As Lee leapt so the raft freed itself from its anchorage, and it surged away, only to be brought up short as the rope came into effect. But not for long.

With a loud "twang," the rope broke. That one strand had not been sufficient to hold the raft. And now the roughly constructed thing went surging out into mid-stream, gathering speed and rocking up and down with great violence.

"By Jove, look at that!" said Nipper, pointing.

The raft had suddenly reared right up, as though some fearful force had caught it from underneath. With a tremendous cascade of water, the raft turned right over and went plunging on into the very vortex of the cataract!

"SEE!" said one of the Balghar watchers, lifting a hand.

The raft had come in sight. The two Balghars could only see it indistinctly, owing to the smother of spray which surrounded it. They looked eagerly for the helpless figures of the victims. Before they could make out any details, however, the raft reared itself right up and overturned with a mighty splash.

These two watchers, round that bend of the rocks, were witnessing the self-same incident which Nipper had pointed out. And it was quite natural that the two Balghars should believe that the raft was occupied, as it should be. They had seen the thing overturn—thus it was obvious to them that the victims must now be on the under side of the raft.

The thing came swirling down, tossing this way and that, spinning madly. It was sucked under the white foaming water; it appeared again for a moment; a corner was thrust up, only to be dragged under again. And then, as though realising its fate, the raft jumped up just as the river took it into the tunnel mouth. A corner struck the rock, and the whole thing shivered into fragments, logs flying madly in all directions. The disintegrated mass was sucked down into the black depths of the subterranean tunnel.

"It was quick," said one of the watchers. "So quick that the accursed whites must have suffered little. But they are gone now."

"They are but the first," said the other man, his eyes burning with fanatical frenzy. "In time to come, their like will all die! For is not our race to be supreme?"

They climbed higher up the rocks. One of them unfurled a dirty white sheet, and waved it as a signal. From this elevation, it was possible to see a long way up the gorge; and in the far distance some grouped figures could be observed. An answer came to the signal—the waving of another such "flag." The soldiers, who had been waiting, now prepared to return to Balghan. They had received the signal they required. The raft had plunged successfully into the tunnel.

The two watchers, having fulfilled their duties, now took things leisurely. They were evidently not attached to the party which had come out from the Hidden City: they were probably men from some local village, men who were thoroughly acquainted with the geography of this gorge.

They climbed down the rock until they came to a narrow pass, and after following this for some little distance, they found a crevice in the side of the gulch. Suddenly one of the men checked, his head flung back as though he had heard something.

"What is it?" muttered the other.

"Voices!" hissed the first man, his eyes filled with amazement. "Can you not hear, fool?"

Both men unslung their rifles, and stood ready. Sure enough, they could hear voices a little further down the pass. It was difficult to see, because there were many rocky projections in the way. There were trees, too, and stunted bushes. And all the time there was the hissing, swirling roar of the river.



The raft, with its human cargo, went rushing down the seething river. Disaster seemed inevitable. And then Waldo caught sight of an overhanging branch.

"THERE seems to be a way along here," said Lord Dorrimore cheerfully. "I say, we're in luck! I was beginning to fear that there was no escape from this gorge." After pushing their way through a number of thick bushes, the English party had found this pass. It did not exactly follow the course of the river, but twisted inwards a bit, so that by now the river itself was hidden from view. They were picking their way through a narrow crevice, and by all appearances this continued onwards.

The weary five began to hope. Perhaps they would be able to discover a way out of this dreadful place. But they were soon to know that their troubles were not yet over! Nelson Lee, who was leading the way, with Dorrie close behind, abruptly pulled himself to a halt. He had just passed round a rocky projection, and he could now see for some little distance ahead.

The scene was by no means encouraging. The full sweep of the river was in view, with the cataract and the tunnel entrance at the base of the high precipice. A wild, fantastic spot. The boiling, seething river did not claim Lee's attention, however. He saw that the pass now narrowed into a mere ledge. One side of the pass dropped away altogether. It was possible to continue onwards, but the going would be precarious. There was this rock ledge, only a few feet above the water's edge. On one side rose the sheer cliffs, and on the other there was the treacherous river.

And there, ahead, were two Balghars, with rifles to their shoulders!

CHAPTER 11.

A Fight For Freedom!

CRACK!

One of the rifles spoke, and Nelson Lee heard the whine and whistle of the bullet as it sped past his head.

"Back!" he shouted hoarsely.

He flung himself down, and at the same second the other rifle cracked. If Lee had not dropped, he would certainly have been hit. The others, amazed and startled, managed to seek cover behind some of the rocks. Lee contrived to get back before there was any more shooting. They all crouched there, safe for the time being, but disconcerted by this fresh peril.

"It's just one darn thing after another," sighed Lord Dorrimore. "We're in a nice mess now!"

"But it's not such a mess as the one we've just got out of," remarked Nipper.

"We're safe if we don't show ourselves," said Handforth. "How many men are there, sir?"

"I don't know," replied Lee. "I saw two, but there may be twenty. We might have expected something of this sort," he added grimly. "These men were evidently on the watch—waiting for us to go to our death. Now they know that we escaped from the raft, and they will be desperate in their efforts to kill us. They would never dare to face the Ameer with a story of failure."

Nelson Lee had no means of knowing that the situation was favourable to him and his companions. He did not know that those two Balghars, ahead, had already given the signal which had sent the Ameer's soldiers back to the Hidden City—there to report that the executions had been duly carried out.

The two Balghars, because of their blunder, were frightened. They had given that signal in all faith—and now, unexpectedly, they came upon these five accursed whites!

Cautiously Lee edged his head round one of the boulders and took a quick look. He saw the two men standing farther along that ledge. They were talking together, and their rifles were ready.

Crack!

Lee withdrew his head in the nick of time.

"Don't do that again, gov'nor, for goodness' sake, or you'll make me die of heart failure!" said Nipper. "They'll pot you, as sure as a gun!"

"Yes, we must be careful," admitted Lee. "These men are good shots—and they are on the alert. As far as I can see, there are only two of them."

"And there's no way round," said Lord Dorrimore. "Only this ledge. We can't go back, because the ledge peters out. A nice, healthy outlook! If those two men have sufficient ammunition they can hold us at bay until we die of starvation!"

"Supposing they make a sudden rush?" asked Nipper anxiously. "My only hat! What a rotten hole we're in! No weapons, and all of us half-dead with exhaustion! Just when we thought that luck was on our side, too!"

"Cheer up, old son," said Lord Dorrimore. "What about all these bits of loose rock? Wouldn't it be a good idea to collect them up into piles? If these beggars make a rush we can give a pretty good account of ourselves. Even bits of rock are better than nothing when it comes to a scrap."

"An excellent suggestion, Dorrie," said Lee.

LORD DORRIMORE shifted his position slightly.

"Well, things seem to be getting pretty dull," he remarked. "No more shots, and the beggars aren't venturing to come to close quarters. I don't believe there are more than the two you saw, Lee."

"It seems like it, but I can hardly understand why these two men should be here alone," replied Nelson Lee. "In any case, all we can do is to wait. It would be madness for us to show ourselves again—By James!" he added abruptly. "Down—all of you—crouch down and keep as close to the rocks as possible!"

These Treats In Store For You Next Wednesday, Chums!



The Pit of Terror!

By E. S. BROOKS.

Nelson Lee and his party have escaped from the Ameer's clutches, but that tyrannical ruler is far from beaten. Once again he succeeds in capturing the gallant English adventurers. Once more they find themselves faced with death—a horrible, hideous death, and this time—

Next week's yarn is one long thrill from start to finish. Make sure you read it, chums!

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Make A Point Of Ordering Your "NELSON LEE" In Advance!

Lee had glanced upwards, and he had seen a figure climbing the rock some distance ahead. In a flash Lee knew the dodge. One of the Balghars was climbing up so that he could fire over the top of the obstructing rocks. The situation had suddenly become desperate.

If Lee and Dorrie and the boys made a run back along the pass they would almost certainly be shot at and brought down before they could get far. If they remained, they might—or might not—be protected by those low rocks. It all depended upon how high that man with the rifle could climb. If he could get a clear sight over the rocks, he would be able to pick his victims off one by one.

"Well, as we're apparently for it, why not make a quick dash?" suggested Dorrie, seizing two of the chunks of rock. "I don't fancy waiting here until this beastly sniper——"

Crack!

The man's rifle spoke, and a bullet came pinging on to the rocks next to Handforth.

"My only sainted aunt!" gurgled Edward Oswald.

Lord Dorrimore acted like lightning. He suddenly jerked himself to his feet, his arm swung round, and one of those rocks went hurtling forwards and upwards. It was a mighty throw, and it took the two Balghars by surprise.

The man on the ledge fired wildly, and his bullet went wide. The other man, high up on that rock-face, received Dorrie's missile on one of his shins. The fellow lost his balance, and with a wild cry he went hurtling down. The fall itself was not considerable—but there was the river on the other side of that ledge, and there was no protection.

More than this. The second man, staring upwards as he heard that shout, had no time to dodge. He saw his companion falling, and the next moment he was struck. Both men went flying backwards—to fall with a mighty plunge into the river. They came to the surface, shrieking with maddened fear.

Lee leapt up, and all the others followed his example. They were just in time to see the two Balghars being swept into the current, their rifles gone. They were fighting for their lives—fighting against a current that was like the grip of a horrible monster.

"I rather think," said Dorrie, "that I've sent them on a nasty journey."

"It was their own doing, old man," said Lee. "The man on the ledge was a fool to stand immediately underneath his companion. But for that fact they might both have escaped."

"Look!" said Handforth, pointing.

They could still see the two men—just ahead. They were being drawn further out into the stream, and always towards that boiling smother of the cataract. At last those heads vanished altogether. The two men were dragged under, sucked into that underground vortex.

Another crisis had been passed—another danger averted.

"Those men were not soldiers," said Nelson Lee slowly. "They were ordinary hillmen, by the look of their clothing. And there don't seem to be any more."

"Perhaps our luck's in, after all," said Dorrie.

"Well, the only thing we can do is to press on," continued Lee. "This place is a trap. One armed man could hold us at bay indefinitely, so the sooner we are out in the open, the better."

"Hear, hear!" muttered Nipper.

THEY proceeded along the ledge, every footstep an agony. Their feet were blistered, their limbs worn out and weary. Exhaustion was overtaking them.

Hope was renewed soon afterwards when they found a tiny crevice entering the gulch like a slash in its side. It was narrow and rocky, and it led steeply upwards. No doubt those two men had been entering this crevice when they had spotted the little party. This seemed to indicate that freedom lay in this direction. There were no other Balghars here. There was not a sign of human life.

Before long the climb became steeper, and only by sheer grit and determination did the boys carry on. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were more hardened, perhaps, but even they required all their will-power to keep them on the move. This narrow canyon, with the sheer rock sides, seemed endless. It twisted and turned, doubled and re-doubled, and always it rose steeply upwards. In places the going was terribly difficult. There were rocks and boulders to be surmounted.

Then, when it seemed that they must fall down and give up the fight, Nelson Lee uttered a husky ejaculation of satisfaction. A turn had revealed a wide, open vista to him. The crevice had abruptly come to an end. And Lee now found himself overlooking another big valley.

He and his companions had come out on a hill side, and at their feet stretched a long, gradual descent. There was a quiet stream, many hundreds of feet below, in the valley. There were trees near it, and stretching away into the distance were many patches of green. It was a rugged scene, on the whole, but peaceful and restful compared with the tumultuous canyon they had recently left.

And in that whole landscape there was no indication of any living thing. By now, indeed, it had been brought home to the fugitives—with a sense of untold relief—that there were no more enemies in the immediate vicinity.

A new light was showing in Nelson Lee's eyes—a light of half-surprise mingled with a grim determination. Nipper did not fail to see this light, and he pulled at Lee's arm.

"What is it, gov'nor?" he asked hoarsely. "Do you think there's any hope for us?"

"I do!" replied Lee. "But before we move another step we must rest. There is a cavern here, close at hand. We will get into that and sleep."

"By George! I could just do with a nap now!" said Handforth, in a tone of utter weariness.

"An hour or two at the most—until nightfall, perhaps," went on Nelson Lee. "After that we must press on. I would like to press on now—but it is impossible. Our endurance is at an end; we must have a little rest."

"Press on, sir?" put in Waldo. "But where to? What can we do in this wilderness? The chances are that we shall run into the enemy again."

Nelson Lee pointed.

"Do you see that curiously-shaped hill on the other side of the valley, several miles away?" he asked.

"By glory!" ejaculated Dorrie, with a start. "I seem to have seen that hill before!"

"You have," agreed Lee. "The Ameer has very kindly brought us out in the direction of our own camp. We traversed a section of this valley on our earlier journey. We are not more than seven or eight miles from camp."

"You—you mean that you know the way there, sir?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"I noted all the landmarks as we came," replied Lee. "I recognise some of those landmarks now. There will be a moon to-night. Yes, young 'un, I think we can find our way back—and it is good to know that the distance is not excessive."

"There's hope!" said Handforth, with a gulp. "Oh, my hat! After all, it's pretty good to be alive!"

Then Nelson Lee uttered a note of warning.

"Come, we must rest," he said. "Every minute is of value. But unless we rest we cannot hope to get anywhere. Do not forget the Ameer's words."

"How do you mean?" asked Lord Dorrimore, staring.

"The Ameer is sending out his soldiers to search for the main camp," replied Lee. "Those soldiers, we may be sure, are at their work already. But there is a pretty large tract of country to be searched, and the odds are in our favour. My object is to get back to the main camp in time—to warn the other boys of the danger that is coming."

"And by the time we get there, perhaps the mechanics will have repaired those propellers," said Nipper tensely.

"That is exactly what I am thinking—what I am hoping for," replied Lee. "Yes, there is a chance for us, after all!"

AND so, in this wild spot, they crept in the cover of that little cave and slept. The outlook was not exceedingly promising, but there was distinctly a chance. Perhaps the fanatical Ameer of Balghanistan would find out, ere long, that he had underrated the courage and ability of his white enemies! Perhaps Nelson Lee and his schoolboys would triumph in spite of everything!

THE END.

The position is certainly full of hope for Nelson Lee and his gallant party—but, unknown to them, they are to encounter many more perils before success is theirs. You'll enjoy the next full-of-thrills yarn in this stirring series, which is entitled: "The Pit of Terror!" Don't miss it—next Wednesday!

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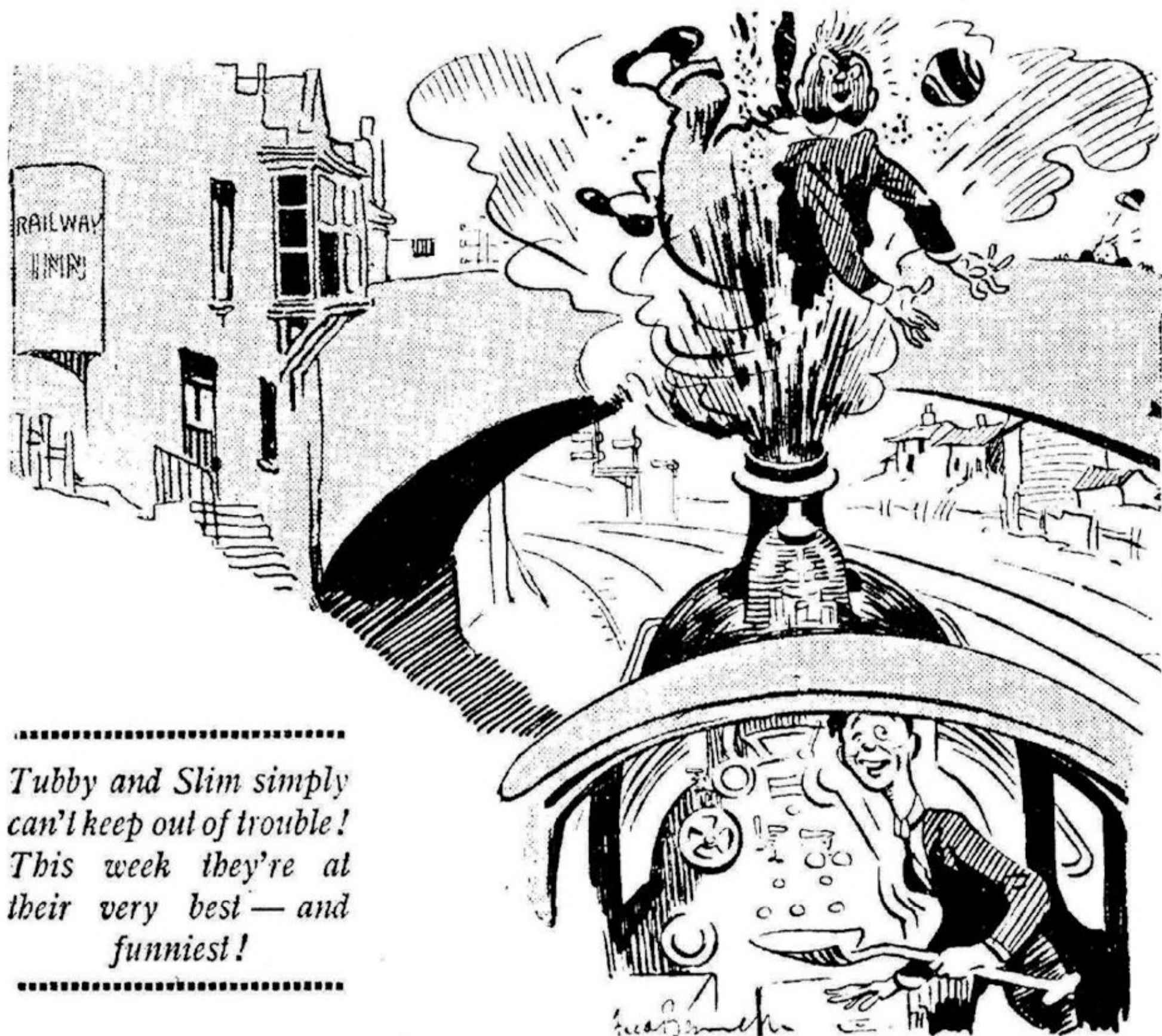
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The Laughable Larks of TUBBY AND SLIM!



.....
*Tubby and Slim simply
 can't keep out of trouble!
 This week they're at
 their very best — and
 funniest!*

Tubby Gets A Rise In The World!

NOW, then—altogether—jump!" The irrepressible brothers, Benny and Bertie Bootle, were going out. To ordinary human beings, the best way to descend a flight of stairs is to walk down them. Slim and Tubby were not ordinary human beings, and they stood hand in hand at the head of the flight and then jumped.

Crash!

They landed together on a mat at the foot of the stairs, skidded, and barged into the hall-stand. The din and clatter was not unnoticed, and Colonel Squint, their guardian, came rushing out of his study to see what all the uproar was about.

"What the blazes——" he snorted at them as they rose from the floor.

"Sorry, sir," said Tubby, the elder boy, controlling his ever-ready grin with an effort. "We came down, and the mat slipped!"

"No! The mat slipped and we came down," corrected his brother precisely.

"Tcha!" yapped the colonel irately. "Haven't I told you always to descend those stairs quietly? Go upstairs again, both of you, and come down quietly so that I am not disturbed."

"All right, sir," replied Tubby, winking at his brother. "You won't hear us go out next time."

With that the two boys went upstairs again, climbed out of their bed-room window and shinned down the water-pipe. Their steps led them away from the town, and soon they reached a railway siding where occasional shunting of goods trains took place. Choosing a spot where the railway cutting widened to accommodate the many junction lines necessary for the shunting operations, the lads slid down the steep bank, and, after crossing the two main lines, stopped amidst a crowd of trucks and wagons and looked about them.

"I'm for up here," said Slim, and he gave a short run, turned a somersault, and landed feet first on top of a covered horse van.

Tubby, notwithstanding his body was as round as an apple, was the possessor of a pair of legs which were as strong and as supple as steel springs. He also gave a short run and leaped high into the air, but, over-jumping himself, he went clean over the horse wagon and dropped into an open truck adjoining it.

Plop! Whoosh!

This truck happened to contain sacks of flour, and Tubby landed with a dull thud, bursting two of the sacks, which discharged most of their contents into his face.

"Gug, gug!" he spluttered, and for a minute the atmosphere surrounding him looked like a young snowstorm.

As the clouds of flour gradually subsided, Tubby crawled back to Slim's wagon looking for all the world like a snow man. Slim was convulsed with mirth at his brother's mishap, and was shouting with glee.

"What did you do that for, Tubby?" he cried, holding his sides.

"Fun!" snapped Tubby peevishly. "I like it!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You look like the first stage of an omelet!"

"Hur, hur, hur! Do I? Well, stop cackling, else I'll sling you in!" Tubby soon recovered his usual cheeriness and playfully clapped Slim on the back. "Tell you what," he added challengingly, "I'll race you along the top of this line of trucks to the end—loser to pay a penny."

"Done!" exclaimed Slim heartily, and away they scampered, leaping up on to the covered wagons, leaping down into the open trucks, jumping the gaps, and pursuing the uneven journey with remarkable speed and agility.

Tubby won by a yard, and the pair pulled up, breathing quickly, and leaned against the tender of an engine which was joined to the goods wagons over which they had just been racing. The lads dropped to the ground and inquisitively inspected the locomotive. They found it deserted. What a chance!

"Driver's not here, Tubby," remarked Slim conversationally. "It seems a shame to leave a good engine here all alone."

"Yes, it does!" agreed Tubby, looking around to see if anyone was about. "We had better see if the fire wants stoking, eh?"

"Up you go, then!"

The cab of the engine looked enticing. The fire was banked down, and Tubby laid hold of a long poker and raked about in the furnace. Slim, whose mechanical mind rejoiced at the sight, started fiddling about with the handles and levers which adorned the locomotive. Soon the flames began to roar, and a wisp of smoke ascended from the funnel.

"Better uncouple the engine from the trucks," said Slim, showing signs of excitement. "We'll have a little jaunt up the line as far as the bridge."

Tubby enthusiastically detached the engine and jumped back into the cab. Slim touched one or two promising-looking levers which caused the engine to snort at them from somewhere underneath, and then, with a shudder, it crawled forward.

"She's off! Hooray!"

Slim manipulated the lever again, causing the locomotive to puff vigorously and slightly accelerate. They were not travelling very fast, but Slim looked askance at the smoke puffing up into the air, and which, of course, could be seen from a great distance by anyone looking that way.

"Look here, Tubby," said Slim. "If we keep puffing huge clouds of smoke out of the engine like this, people at the station will spot us and come buzzing along before we've had time to enjoy ourselves."

"You're right, Slim. What can we do to stop it?"

"Supposing you climb up there and sit on the funnel so as to shut the smoke in?"

"Supposing I don't," jeered Tubby. "What do you take me for—a thumping valve?"

"Don't be an ass, Tubby. All you have to do is to bottle up the smoke so that it doesn't rise into the air and give us away."

"H'm!" retorted Tubby doubtfully. "It sounds easy. I'll try it, anyway." And he slid out of the driver's cab and, with the agility of a monkey, clambered up and gingerly seated himself on the funnel.

Tubby's bulk had the desired effect, and prevented the smoke from escaping. Perched on the funnel like a mascot on a motor-car, he felt but little inconvenience from his unusual position, except that at every few revolutions of the wheels the force of the smoke bumped him up slightly off his seat.

The locomotive was now within a couple of hundred yards of a bridge which spanned the line, and bowling along in fine style. Slim, in the driver's cab, stooped down to stoke the fire. He shovelled on some coal and then slammed the furnace door. This action of his was the beginning of an unlooked-for series of events.

The slam of the door caused the bottled smoke to feel a sudden urge to escape, and, giving a furious belch, it puffed and roared out of the funnel with such a force that it blew Tubby dozens of feet into the air. Fortunately for him, he missed striking the bridge under which the engine disappeared whilst he was still making his involuntary flight.

Tubby wondered where his rise in the world would end, and even as the question flashed through his mind, he went feet foremost through a window on the first floor of the Railway Inn, an hotel which stood just at the side of the bridge.

* * *

Immediately before this, and in the same room, a bewhiskered old fellow was addressing a small party held in honour of his birthday. He was doing the thing properly, and

he was on his feet as the door opened to admit a white-aproned chef bearing a pie of great size.

"Aha!" babbled the old buffer to his friends seated round the table. "This pie, gentlemen, is a surprise pie. I have had it specially prepared by Monsieur Froggie, our famous chef, for the occasion of my hundred and twenty-first birthday, to-day."

His centenarian chums patted their hands in applause.

"Congratulations on your hundred and twenty-first birthday!" croaked one of them. "By the way," he added, "how's your old dad keeping?"

"Chickens," replied the other. "Eh? Oh, how's he keeping? I thought you said what's he keeping."

The gigantic pie was placed before the old boy, and his antique accomplices began to lick their lips in anticipation.

"This pipe," jabbered the host, "contains a very rare species of white blackbird——"

Bang! Crash!

Tubby made his entrance through the window, and ended his journey by dropping in the beautiful pie with a lovely splosh. His appearance was the signal for confusion, and startled squeaks came from the ancient gourmands.

The boy was streaked with white from his encounter with the flour, and smudged with black from contact with the coal—in truth, a white blackbird. He stood up in the pie, and some engine smoke which had entered his clothing escaped from his collar in curly trickles.

"I am the demon king!" Tubby exclaimed with dramatical gruffness to the frightened occupants of the room. And he looked it!

"Ow! Help me! What is it?" twittered the host, wiping a chunk of piecrust out of his ear, and he tottered towards the door. The other gaffers followed on his heels. It was a regular "old boys' " race.

Tubby heard them locking the door to prevent his pursuit. He looked at the sideboard and spotted a bottle of ginger ale and grabbed it. A couple of jam puffs kept it company, and he took the opportunity of pocketing a few apples for future use.

A rumpus below made him realise that he was something of an interloper, and he wedged a chair under the door-handle to stop anyone from entering while he planned his escape. He crossed to the broken window and looked out. The chef, Monsieur Froggie, was standing outside, waving his hand in despair.

"Ze pie," he moaned—"ze most beautiful pie! Busted! Ze pie of ze white and ze black bird—busted!" He broke down and wept bitterly at the shattering of his masterpiece.

Tubby grinned heartlessly, and wondered if it would be safe to jump from the window to the ground. The excited chatter of the hotel servants sounded too close to make this method certain, and he looked up to the roof.

Telegraph wires! That was the way out!

Without waiting to think further, Tubby flung up the window and jumped on the sill. Then, with a marvellous spring, he launched himself into space and miraculously landed across the telegraph wires some ten feet away. A miss, and he would have hurtled down on to the railway lines; but such a calamity never entered his head. Someone saw him from the hotel, and a shout went up.

"There he is! Look at him!"

"Come down, you ruffian!"

Tubby pretended to jump down on them, and they scattered quickly away. Then, with mocking ease, the boy stood up, and, balancing himself with outstretched hands, he walked as on a tight-rope along the wires which extended right across the railway cutting.

By the time the pursuers had crossed the bridge by the road, he had descended a convenient pole, and was far away from danger.

Slim Gives 'Em The Slip!

SLIM had seen his brother fly into the air just before the locomotive went under the bridge, and he promptly wrenched at a lever which indicated reverse. There was a clatter of machinery, and the engine did a little fox-trot to and fro before deciding to obey the command of its temporary driver and run backwards.

Slim was thrown off his feet by the sudden change of motion, and as the engine rushed eagerly back to its deserted goods train, he bumped against the furnace door. With a terrific yell he removed his person from the vicinity of the hot door, and, as he stood up, he saw the foremost of the goods wagons about a dozen yards away.

He quickly realised that a crash was imminent, and promptly hurled himself from the driver's cab on to the track. With a thunderous rattle the engine ended its run by charging full-tilt at the stationary train.

The locomotive, by its superior weight, was easily the victor of the rough-and-tumble that followed. The first three wagons tried to play leapfrog, and the remainder of the trucks, feeling the shock, clanged and banged their buffers as if applauding, and staggered about with a noise fit to awaken the seven sleepers.

Slim sat on the line and looked dazedly at the exhibition of bullying on the part of the engine. He was about to rise when a hand fell roughly on his shoulder.

"Got you, my lad!" exclaimed a voice, and, turning his head, Slim saw that he was in the grip of what appeared to be a railway detective. Several other figures seemed to have materialised from nowhere, and were surrounding him with menacing attitudes.

A thin drizzle of rain was beginning to fall, but this did not deter the detective from taking notes on the spot.

"Now, then, young fellow," he said ominously, while the other men gathered in a ring, completely blocking any chance of a

dash on the part of their captive. "You're in for something, I can tell you. Messing about with the company's engines and doing damage to our wagons, not to mention the contents of the aforesaid wagons. What's your name?"

"Little Willie," said Slim, assuming his most childlike and innocent expression. And then, a look of terrible fright contorting his face, he pointed to a high chimney rising into the air close by. "Look! Oh, look!" he screamed. "It's coming down!"

All heads swung up to where the boy was pointing.

"What's coming down?" anxiously asked one of the men, screwing up his eyes.

"The rain!" yelled Slim, and with a quick

road along by the siding. What do you mean by it, eh? Grrr!"

The boys' hearts sank with this news. They had diddled the railway and hotel folk, but had been spotted by their guardian. What tough luck!

They shuffled their muddy feet on the carpet and gazed with innocent expressions anywhere but at the face of the dapper little colonel with the purple face and the voice of a foghorn.

"And this disgraceful episode has finally decided me that I shall get no peace until you have been packed off to St. Fluke's, where you will be more thoroughly under supervision. To-morrow you go!"

The two boys turned with downcast looks,

.....
Tubby hurtled through the window and landed in the middle of the huge pie with a resounding splash!



slither he dived between the legs of the detective and was off up the line before they realised that they had been duped.

Taking a circuitous route he ran into Tubby, and the two scarecrows wended their way home, hoping that their luck would still hold and that their guardian would be out. They were disappointed in this, for he was on the look-out for them, and, no sooner had they crossed the threshold, than he bundled them without ceremony into his study.

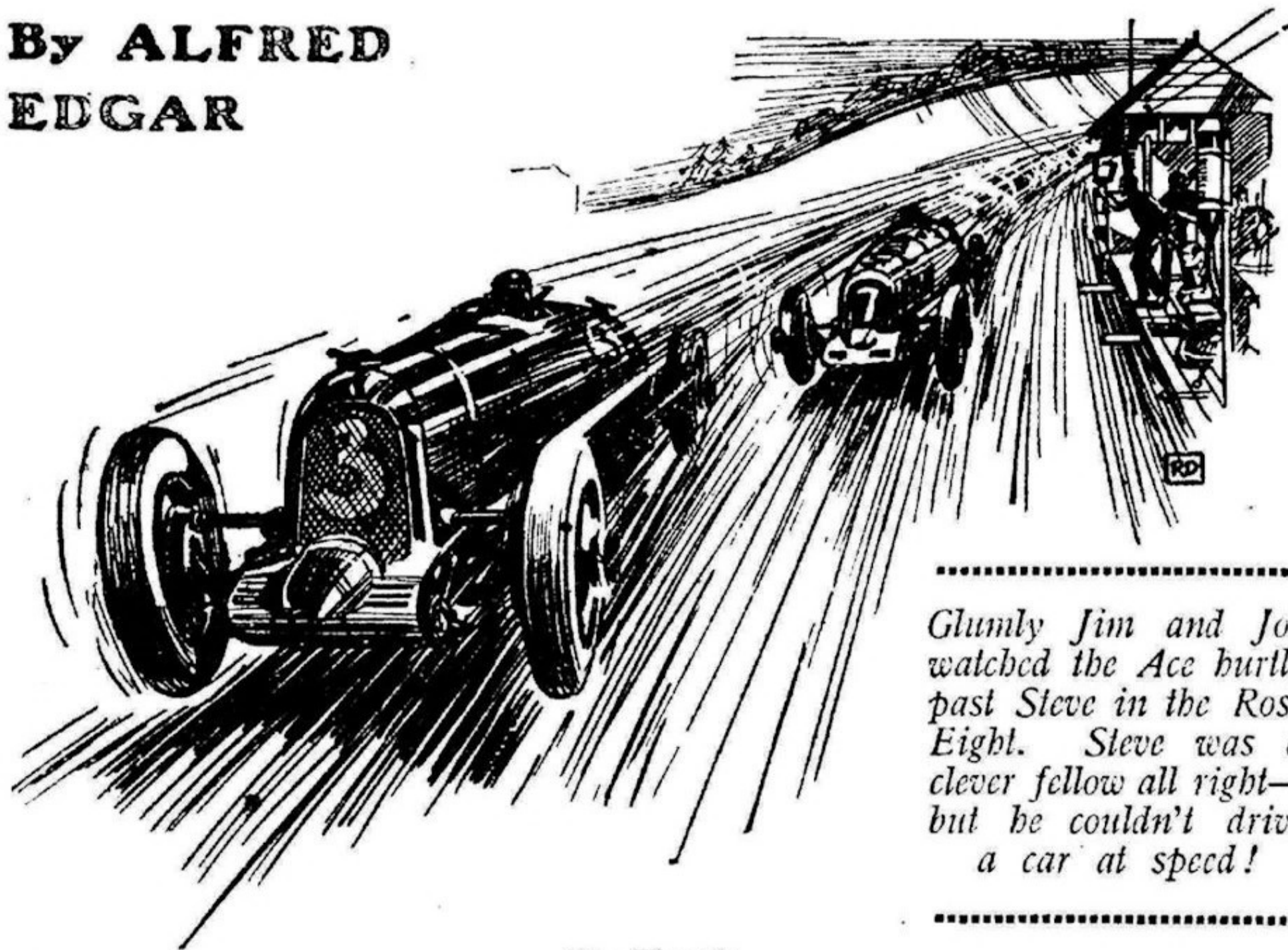
"Ah!" roared the colonel. "So you've come back, have you?" No answer being forthcoming to this rather unnecessary question he went on with rising voice: "I saw it all, you scallywags. I saw it all from the

and prepared to leave the study. But the colonel hadn't finished his tirade yet; he had thought of several more things to say.

"Wait!" he boomed, in his largest barrack-square voice, and the two brothers, after recovering from the shock of that blast, obeyed.

Tubby, who was never noted for his dainty actions, stopped abruptly in his stride, one foot in the air. Slim, who was close behind him, received the full force of that heavy foot as it descended, and for a moment thought that his toes had been pulped. Then, with a shriek he leapt about holding his damaged foot.

(Continued on page 44.)

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!**By ALFRED
EDGAR**

.....

Glumly Jim and Joe watched the Ace hurtle past Steve in the Ross Eight. Steve was a clever fellow all right—but he couldn't drive a car at speed!

.....

The Threat!

OVER by the fork was a long line of "replenishment pits"—little erections, open at the front and back, at which the cars could be worked on during the race, and where they would call for fresh fuel.

Most of the teams used these pits during practice. Jim and Joe dumped the tools they had brought in the pit allotted to them, and then stood by the Ross-Eight while Steve donned crash helmet and gauntlets.

He looked a little pale in the morning sunlight, and his voice quivered as he slid down into the cockpit and called to Jim:

"Swing her over!"

Jim stepped to the front of the machine and tucked the starting-handle home. It taxed his strength to turn the engine against its high compression, but he spun it, Joe lending a hand, and the power-unit suddenly awakened with a roar, which Steve instantly throttled down.

He kept the engine running for five minutes before he beckoned to the boys.

"I'm going to do a few slow laps to find out how she rides," he said. "Then I'll open up. When I wave to you—take my time. You brought a stop-watch, didn't you?"

"Yes," Jim nodded, and stepped away.

He looked at the long, low-built car, with the sun shining on its gleaming aluminium body, winking off the polished wheel-hubs and the fixing of the tiny wind-shield. He heard Steve revving up the engine, and after a moment the car started smoothly away, exhaust snapping back with a crisp crackle which hardened to a deep-throated, thunderous boom as the car gained speed.

The two climbed on to the pit-plank to watch it go, and as it slid down the railway straight the Ace team came on the scene, taking the next pit. The boys saw Lon Stargie there, with Sniff Dix and other mechanics, but the rival speedman did not even glance at them.

Soon the Ross-Eight came booming towards the pits again, running very steadily. At the first sound of it every man in the Ace pits stopped whatever he was doing to watch the silvery car go past.

"He's not shifting at more than eighty!" Jim said.

"He wants to get her properly warmed up," Joe said. "Bet he takes her round at about a hundred an' forty before he comes off!"

Five times the silvery car went past, and then as it came by again the two saw that its speed had grown. Steve lifted a hand and waved to them.

"Clock him!" Joe gasped, and Jim snicked the catch on the stop-watch he held.

The boys watched the car as far as they could see it, and it travelled like a shining arrow down the railway straight, to climb on to the long Byfleet banking and slither swiftly round it. It came off the end of the curve and then ripped towards the pits, with its booming exhaust rising above all other sound.

Jim poised the watch, then clicked it as the car ripped past, its exhaust note seeming to change to a challenging howl. Jim looked at the hand, then at the time-chart which Joe held.

"Just a hundred an' fifteen miles an hour!" Jim exclaimed.

"That ain't so fast," grunted Joe. "Hallo, Stargie's goin' out!"

They saw that the Ace had been started up. The speedman was shouting something to Sniff Dix, and a few seconds later Stargie sent the car away, leaving Dix behind him.

The Ace seemed to zoom off, disappearing down the track. Steve came round again.

"Hundred an' twenty that time," Jim said. "That's better."

Almost immediately afterwards, Stargie went by, and when Steve came into sight again the boys saw that the Ace was close on his tail.

"C'm on, Steve!" Jim gasped. "Don't let him pass you!"

Even as he spoke, the Ace surged level with the Ross-Eight, ripped by and went streaking ahead, leaving Steve yards behind by the time he flashed past the pits.

He could see Sniff Dix and the Ace mechanics with him all grinning at the way their star driver had gone by the Ross-Eight. Then, to his surprise, Jim saw Steve coming round the curve, slowing as he drew in towards the pit. The boys jumped to the side of the car and stopped, and Steve lowered his goggles, then got out.

His knees seemed to give a little beneath him, and he had to grab at the edge of the cockpit to steady himself.

"How did she go?" Jim asked.

Steve did not answer. He rubbed the back of his hand across his brow, and the boys were startled to see that his face was white beneath the dust and grime flung there during his speed-burst around the track.

"Your fastest lap was about a hundred and twenty miles an hour," Joe told him.

"Why didn't you put your foot down and keep in front of Stargie, instead of letting him pass you?" Jim asked.

Still Steve did not answer. The boys saw that his hands were shaking, and Jim stared at him as he asked suddenly:

"Steve, you haven't had a narrow squeak, have you? You look all tuckered up!"

"I'm—all right!" His brother's voice came in a husky whisper. His lips quivered and his clever face looked drawn. "Push the car—back to—the paddock!"

He turned abruptly and strode away, past the line of pits and the staring Ace men. Jim saw Sniff Dix looking at Steve's white face, and slowly a grin came on the Ace tester's lips. He strolled towards the two chums.

"What's up with 'im?" Sniff jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the direction in which Steve had gone.

"Nothing; he's all right," Jim said.

"Looked like he was scared stiff," and Sniff's grin broadened. "My bloke must ha' put the breeze up him!"

"Lon Stargie couldn't scare anybody!" Jim answered. "Steve's not well, or something."

"Too true, he ain't well!" The Ace tester stepped nearer and glanced at the Ross-Eight, then went on: "Shall I tell you what's wrong with 'im?"

The boys did not answer. Neither liked the jeering, gloating expression that sat Sniff's features.

"I've seen 'em like 'im before," the tester said. "He's frightened—the car's scared 'im!"

HOW THE STORY BEGAN.

JIM ROSS, iron-nerved, daring, is a born racing driver. His father was a star speedman, and Jim is following in his footsteps. Big Ross, as his father was known, is dead—killed in a race—but he left behind him the plans of a special racing car, which is called the Ross Eight. Jim's brother, Steve, is building up the car, and it is entered for a big event at Brooklands. Jim's chum is

JOE COOPER, who acts as a mechanic at the small garage owned by the two brothers. Jim learns that his father was deliberately killed by

LON STARGIE, the crack speedman of Ace Motors, and an enmity springs up between the two. The Ross Eight is at last completed, and the two brothers and Joe take it to Brooklands for the big race, which is due to be run in three days' time. Steve prepares to take the car out for a trial spin. All three are on tenterhooks, for this is the machine's first run. Will it prove a success—or a failure?

(Now read on.)

"Say that again!" said Jim dangerously.

"He's scared of speed!" said Sniff. "He funks it!"

Jim bent towards him, his jaw squaring.

"Say that again—and I'll knock you across the track!" he growled.

Sniff glanced over his shoulder. He had five Ace mechanics behind him, and they were all listening.

"He funks it!" said Sniff, and leaped backwards—but he was too slow.

Jim's bunched right fist came out and round in a tearing swing, landing like the end of a flung beam to the side of the tester's jaw. Sniff crashed flat on his back on the oil-smirched concrete.

He lay there a moment, looking dazedly at Jim. He twisted and propped himself on one elbow as he called to his mates.

"Come on—into 'im!"

"Yes, come on!" Jim bent, eyes glittering and his fists ready. Joe was at his side, jaw sticking out and every muscle tensed.

Not one of the five Ace mechanics moved. Anybody who could knock a fellow like Sniff Dix clean off his feet was a tough nut to crack. They stood watching as the tester came upright, holding his bruised jaw.

"I'll get even with you for that!" he snarled. "You made me crash the other day, an' now you——"

"Let Steve alone, or I'll come and do it again!" Jim ripped at him, then dropped his hands and turned with Joe to their racing car.

Jim's Chance!

STEVE was not in sight when they pushed the Ross-Eight into the paddock, but they sighted him walking slowly along the road which led back to the old hangars. His crash helmet swung from one hand, and his shoulders were hunched.

"He's upset about something, all right!" Jim said, as he stared after him.

"Yes, and what Sniff Dix just said was right," Joe answered quietly.

Jim turned slowly and faced him.

"D'you want a smack on the jaw as well?" he asked.

"I don't—but Sniff was right all the same!" Joe said, and stepped back quickly as he saw Jim's fist bunch. "Only it isn't Steve's fault!"

Jim regarded him uncertainly.

"Have you gone potty?" he asked. "Steve's been taken queer, that's the trouble. Maybe he rode without a tummy-belt and got shaken up; the bumps on this track will make a man sick, I've heard."

"He had a belt, I saw him put it on," Joe told him. "Put your fists down, you big fathead, and listen."

"Any more talk like that and I'll——"

"You can do what you blessed well like, but I'm going to tell you, all the same!" Joe said, and his oil-marked face was serious. "Steve can't drive a car, that's the trouble!"

"He's a better driver than anybody here knows how to be!" Jim came back at him.

"Yes, but not at two miles a minute!" Joe answered. "He's clever, Steve is—brainy! But there ain't anything of him. I mean, a bump on th' track what'd just shift you in your seat must very nigh jolt him out of the car. Besides, he doesn't like going fast—and when a chap doesn't like that he naturally can't drive fast."

"Steve's all right!" Jim growled. He had always idealised Steve; it seemed incredible to him that there could be anything amiss with his elder brother.

"Didn't he look groggy when he came in?" Joe asked. "Didn't——"

"He was feeling sick!" Jim countered.

"Yes, he was," agreed Joe. "He'd been trying to go fast and he'd just scared himself sick."

"Look here"—Jim stepped closer—"I'm not going to stand here and listen to you running Steve down!"

"Whether you'll listen or not, what I'm saying is right—and Steve'll admit it himself if we ask him!" Joe half snapped.

Jim stared at him blankly and Joe went on:

"Can't you see what's upsetting him, Jim? Your dad left him the car to finish, and now he's built it he's found out that he can't do justice to it—he can't drive it fast enough to do any good. I bet he's pretty near broken-hearted—look at 'im!"

Steve was still walking along close to the edge of the road, his crash helmet swinging listlessly, his shoulders humped and his head bent. Jim swallowed hard as he looked at him; then, suddenly, he started after his brother, Joe running at his heels.

Panting, the two boys overtook the tall fellow, and he stopped short when they pulled up before him. The colour had come back to his face, and he smiled wryly as he saw them.

"What's up, Steve?" Jim asked.

(Continued on next page.)

A WORD FROM YOUR EDITOR

OUR MOTTO!

TOPPING!

That seems to be the verdict of readers regarding the NELSON LEE'S new story programme, judging from the hundreds of letters I have received during the last few weeks on this subject.

These days, everybody wants thrills—and the NELSON LEE is giving 'em! This factor, allied with the magnificent Free Gifts which have been presented recently, have brought many new readers rallying around the Old Paper's banner, and to those I want to say a few words—although my remarks will apply to old readers as well.

By now they will have had the time to sample and judge the contents of the NELSON LEE. They will have had time to realise and to appreciate the excellent quality of the features contained therein. I can assure everybody that the present high standard will be maintained—and improved upon as time goes on. The best stories by the best boys' authors—that's the motto of the NELSON LEE.

RALLY ROUND!

THE Old Paper is undoubtedly full value for twopence; it is the best twopenny-worth of its kind on the market. A sweeping statement that, perhaps, but I feel sure you will agree with me that it is quite justified.

Rally round the NELSON LEE banner, chums. And don't keep a good thing to yourselves, either. Those pals of yours who are non-readers—just tip them the wink. Tell them what they're missing. Get them to buy a copy of the NELSON LEE and see for themselves what a splendid paper it is; show them your own copy and ask them to read it through with a view to their buying it regularly in future. They'll thank you for putting them on to a good thing. You'll be doing them a good turn, and at the same time you'll be doing your Editor a good turn, too. The band of NELSON LEE readers is large; very large. But why not make it even larger? The more the merrier!

THE EDITOR.

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

(Continued from previous page.)

"Very nearly everything," he answered slowly. "I'm going to withdraw the car from the big race."

"Why?" Jim gasped. "What's wrong with it? It ran fine!"

"The car's all right," Steve answered him, "but I—I can't get the best out of it, and we can't afford to pay somebody to drive it for us. You see, I—I had a little bit of a skid coming off the banking and it made me go kind of—limp. I haven't got the nerve to push the car up to more than a hundred and twenty miles an hour—and the Aces can travel ten miles faster than that!"

Jim glanced at Joe, then looked at his brother again.

"Get away, Steve, your nerve's all right!"

"I hoped it would be, but it isn't," Steve said quietly. "You know the way some people are scared of heights? Well, I'm the same way about speed. I've tried to kid myself that I wasn't, but I am. I've been nervous all the way down here, and I couldn't sleep last night. I just haven't got it in me." Again he smiled faintly as he looked at the boys. "I'm sorry I'm letting you down, after the way you've worked."

Jim scratched his ear thoughtfully. It was the first time he'd even thought that Steve had any weakness, but, of course, it was understandable. A chap with big muscles can lift a hundredweight off the ground, whereas a fellow not so strong couldn't do it; nerve was similar. Not everybody who could drive a car at sixty had the recklessness, or nerve, or plain foolishness—whatever you may call it—to drive a machine at a hundred and more.

Now Jim came to think about it, he remembered that Steve never handled fast cars at the garage—not really fast cars, anyway.

"So the Ross-Eight won't run," Steve said quietly.

"Won't—?" Jim blinked at him. "Won't it, by gosh!" he exclaimed. "You've got dad's brains, but I've got his muscle. I'm jolly nearly as big and as strong as he was—you've told me so yourself. I'm no good at building cars or tuning 'em up—but I can drive 'em!"

He stood in front of Steve and Joe, with his jaw jutting and his eyes narrowed, and at sight of him Steve's own eyes lit up.

"I've never driven a car round this track," said Jim, "but I'm going to take the machine out—now! And I'm going to make it go faster than Lon Stargie's or any other Ace!"

"If you can do that," said Steve, "you can drive instead of me in the race!"

At last Jim has got his chance, with the prospect of driving in the big Brooklands race hanging on the result. You can bet Jim will take full advantage of this wonderful opportunity. Look out for plenty of thrills in next Wednesday's corking instalment of this fine serial, chums!

THE LAUGHABLE LARKS OF TUBBY AND SLIM!

(Continued from page 39.)

"You clumsy ass!" he hooted violently, hopping backwards with a suddenness that caused the colonel to back quickly out of the way.

Crack!

Right into the grandfather clock the colonel went in reverse gear. There was a tinkle and clatter of falling glass, and the little soldier remained jammed, inextricably mixed up with the chains and pendulum.

"That's bent it!" murmured Tubby; and Slim, surprised at the crash, forgot his own hurt and burst out laughing.

"Peep-bo!" he chirruped to the colonel, whose beaked nose and purple face was sticking out from the framework of the timepiece.

"You—you—grrr, oompah!" was the reply. "Come and help me out, you young scoundrels. Help me out—I'm stuck!"

"I think we'd better wait until you have calmed down a little, sir," said Tubby doubtfully, wagging his ears. "You're sending us off to school tomorrow, so that you can't expect us to approach you when you're in such a temper!"

"In a temper, you rascals! Why, I'll—I'll— Help me out, I say! I can't move without bringing the clock over!"

"If you could reverse your decision as to sending us off, we might be able to assist you, sir," said Slim. "Otherwise——"

The boys' guardian knew from past experience that his wards were capable of going off and leaving him in his predicament, and he shuddered to think that he might be found in this foolish position by the visitor whom he was expecting to call at any moment. Rather than be the laughing-stock of his friends, he was forced to give way.

"All right!" he growled, swallowing his wrath. "I'll overlook your scrape this time—but never again!"

Joyfully Tubby and Slim bounded forward. And then began a real, hectic tug-o-war. Slim grabbed hold of his guardian's head—that being the most convenient portion of Colonel Squint's anatomy to grab—and Tubby seized his brother's coat tails. Together they heaved—right heftily. In between the colonel's violent roars of wrath could be heard cracks and creaks as that unfortunate gentleman's headpiece was jolted up and down and sideways. But at last the deed was done. Colonel Squint parted company with the grandfather clock and joined his two wards on the floor in a heap. Tubby and Slim were the first up—and they made themselves scarce very rapidly before their guardian changed his mind about St. Fluke's.

(Another rollicking Tubby and Slim story next Wednesday, chums.)

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