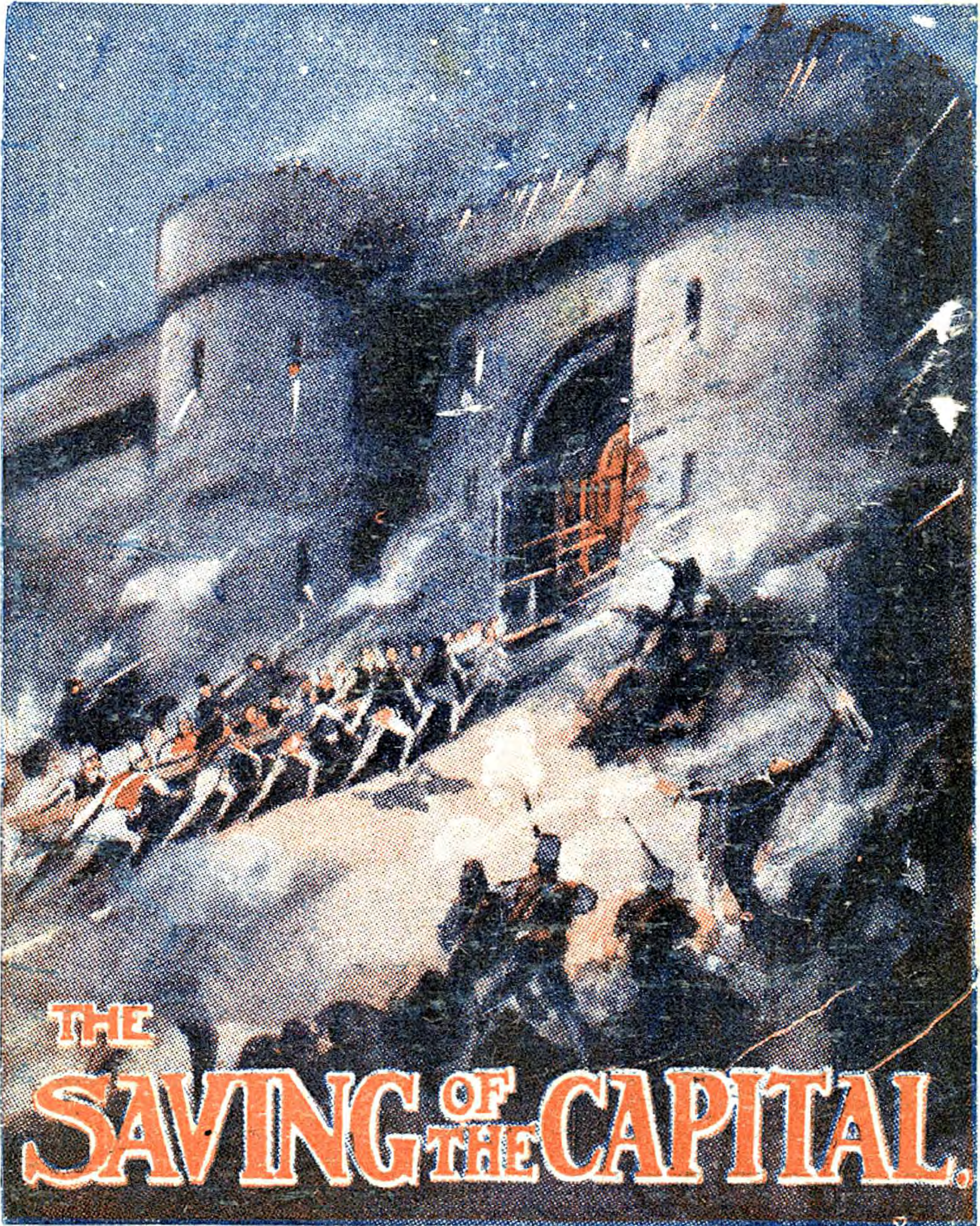


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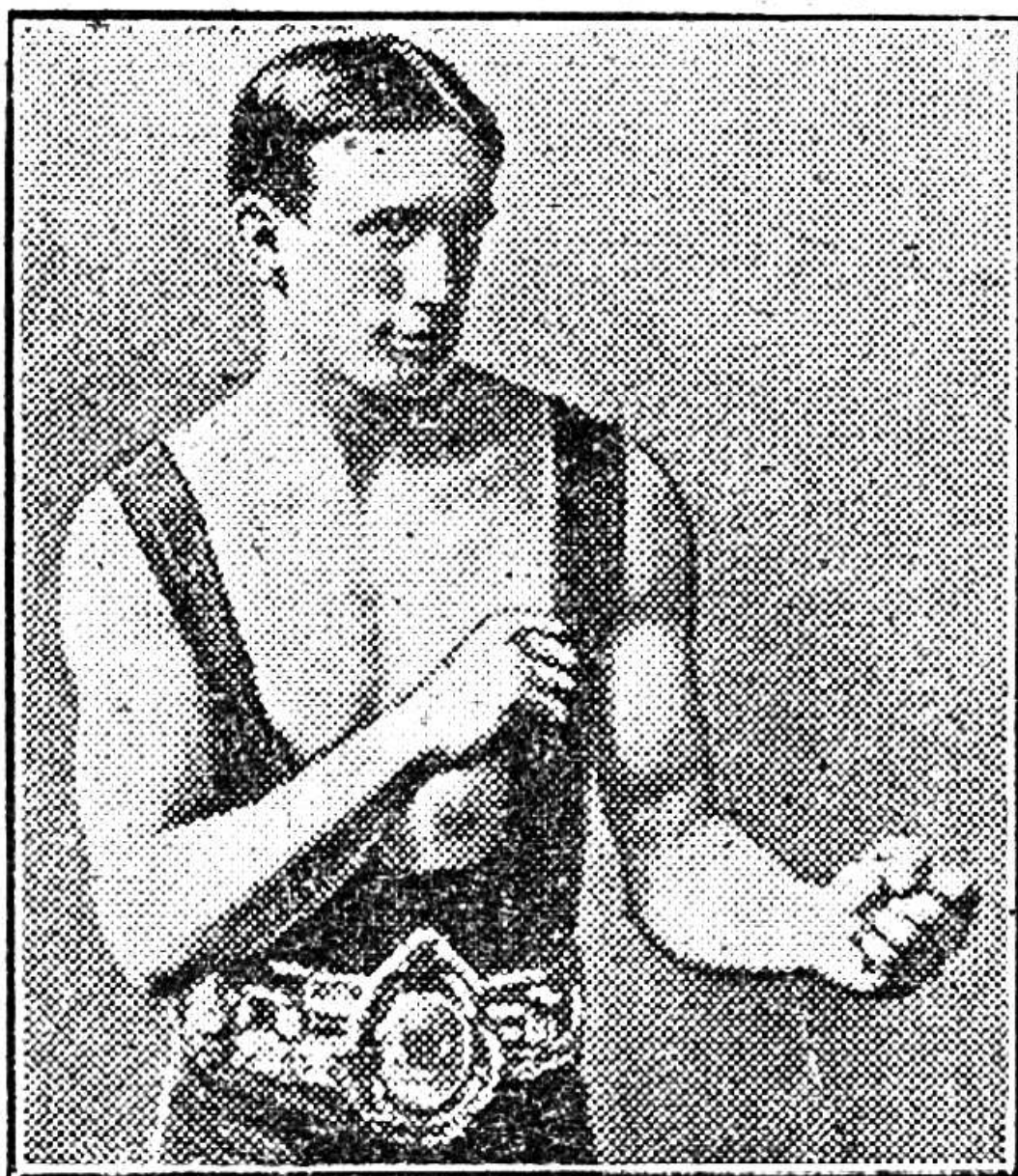
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FLEEING FROM THE TAGOSSA!

THE scene was wild in the extreme. On every hand stretched the rugged mountains, bathed in the cold, silvery light of a nearly full moon. The ground itself was rough and strewn with jagged boulders. Not in any direction could there be seen a light or a human habitation.

Nothing but the mountains—nothing but this cold and desolate vista of rocks and boulders; no trees, and scarcely any sign of vegetation. A more barren waste could hardly be imagined.

But this was probably the wildest corner of all Europe—Mordania, tucked away in the Balkans; a place hardly, if ever, visited by the ordinary European. It was the home of the rough mountaineer.

And down one of these desolate mountain slopes a large party was making its way—slowly, cautiously, but with grim determination.

That this party should consist largely of St. Frank's juniors was astonishing enough; but it was the truth. All the best-known fellows of the Remove were there, including Handforth and Co., Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Reginald Pitt, Fatty Little, Bob Christine, and quite a few others.

Needless to say, I was a member of the party. Nelson Lee was there, and Lord Dorriamore. It would seem

astounding that we should be in this rugged, mountainous region of Mordania, and it was even more astounding that we should be even then fleeing from the hands of the deadly Tagossa, the great secret society which was headed and ruled by the arch-brigand, Kol Palak.

But, taking everything into consideration, there was nothing peculiar about this state of affairs. We had met with many amazing adventures since taking our departure from England—adventures which almost took one's breath away, and which seemed to be the imaginings of some writer of fiction.

Originally, we had started out from our own shores during the Easter holidays; but that seemed ages ago now, and we had almost forgotten what it was like to be in school at St. Frank's.

With us there were several members of the crew of the gigantic airship, *Suffolk Queen*, for we had started out on this craft, merely for a short pleasure cruise. But a gale had arisen, the airship's engines were disabled, and we were blown hundreds of miles across Europe, to fall, finally, in the Adriatic Sea. And then we had managed to get ashore on the coast of Mordania.

But fresh trouble had met us here, for we had fallen into the hands of the Tagossa, and with us were placed King Boris and Prince Paul of Mordania. We could not have arrived in that turbulent little country at a more inopportune time.

For it so happened that a revolution

had recently taken place, and the king had been compelled to flee from his own capital—Ludari, tucked away in the mountains, almost beyond reach of the average traveller.

We had since learned, however, that Ludari had been wrenched from Kol Palak's grip, and that it was once more held by the royalists.

This was excellent news, but it did not affect us much at the moment, for we ourselves were in a tight corner. Only a few hours since nearly every member of our party had been imprisoned in Palak's mountain stronghold. Tregellis-West and Watson and I, however, had not been captured by these brigands. More by luck than anything else, we had managed to elude them.

I have already described these events in detail, so it is unnecessary for me to go into them afresh. Aided by a faithful royalist named Nepoli, my two chums and I had travelled through the mountains to Kol Palak's lair.

And then we had found our way into the stronghold, and had rescued Nelson Lee and all the others.

That had been a very short while ago, and even now we were making our way down the mountain side towards safety. So far, our escape had not been discovered; we assumed this, at all events, since we had heard no sign of pursuit, and had seen nothing to alarm us.

But at any moment the Tagossa men might come swooping down on our track, and so, although our movements were cautious, they were as hurried as possible. Many of the fellows were tired and worn out, but they had forgotten this in the excitement. They were kept going by the thought that they might soon be in safety and free from all menace. But it was a nerve-trying ordeal, this flight down into the valley.

Our escape had been made comparatively easy by the fact that the brigands were at sixes and sevens. Kol Palak himself had given us scant attention when we had been brought in. I am referring now to the party in general, and not to myself in particular, for I, of course, had not even seen the brigand chief.

The news had only just reached him that Ludari had been retaken by the royalists, and Palak was intensely worried, and was planning an immediate counter attack. For, having tasted suc-

cess, he was determined to be completely victorious, and make himself the permanent ruler of Mordania.

But my statement above is not quite correct. Palak had been compelled to flee from Ludari when the king's party had sprung their surprise. The brigand chief had thought himself secure; he had believed that the Tagossa was all-powerful, and that no effort on the part of the royalists could alter the position.

But Palak, like many another revolutionary, had discovered to his cost that over-confidence is a fatal mistake; and now he was planning ways and means of making a fresh attack upon Ludari, with as little delay as possible.

What he would say when he discovered that his prisoners had escaped, we could only imagine. And the knowledge that King Boris and Prince Paul had fled with us would not cheer him up in the slightest degree.

The escape itself had been a simple matter.

This was quite surprising, for only a short time earlier the prisoners had come to the conclusion that escape was absolutely impossible. They had been taken into a great cavern, lighted by torches, and then cast into a low-ceilinged cave which led out of this. There was only one entrance, apparently, and this was closely guarded by two or three armed members of the Tagossa.

Nelson Lee and the other members of the party were, naturally, quite unarmed; all their weapons had been taken from them. Thus, a fight was out of the question. If they had attempted the task of rushing the guards, they would have been shot down without mercy.

But then I had come along, with Tregellis-West and Watson and Nepoli, the mountaineer. We had gained admittance to the brigands' lair by means of a tunnel, the entrance of which we had discovered quite by accident.

This tunnel led straight to an iron door, which opened into the very cave occupied by the prisoners. Such a stroke of luck was more than fortunate—it was positively providential. One by one the prisoners had passed out of the cave, and then the iron door had been closed and bolted.

The men on guard knew nothing. The fact that all was silent in the cave would not arouse their suspicions, since it would be assumed that the captives had fallen asleep. Thus, it was quite possible that

many hours would elapse before the escape was discovered.

And now we were in the open, some little distance from Kol Palak's stronghold, making our way down the mountain side to the moonlit valley. And we were all in high spirits, since fortune was now smiling upon us in her most kindly fashion. Whether our luck would last, we could not tell; but we were hoping for the best.

"The more I think of it, the more amazin' it all seems," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Dear old boys, it's positively astoundin'—it is, really. When we arrived at that mountain we were dead beat—absolutely at the last gasp, bogad! And we had no idea that we were so near to you all; we thought you were dozens of miles away, in Ludari."

"Yes, everything's happened wonderfully well," said Pitt. "If we can only get clear away, it won't be long before we're back in a civilised country. This place is fairly getting on my nerves."

"And the average person in England doesn't know that such a region exists," said Bob Christine. "Just fancy! Brigands, and all that kind of thing, running wild—just the same as they did hundreds and thousands of years ago! Mordania doesn't seem to have advanced a step during the centuries!"

"Except in the matter of firearms," I put in. "These 'Tagossa fellows—and the other Mordanians, if it comes to that—are rough mountaineers, but they know how to use firearms, and they're all supplied with the latest pattern rifles and revolvers. In all other respects they're rank heathens; but I dare say some of them are decent enough at heart."

"Well, I don't fancy Mordania as a health spot," said Church. "The sooner we get out of this blessed country the better. Even now I'm expecting a few hundred of these brigands to surround us and cart us all back to that rotten cave!"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We're not going back now—not likely! Now that we're free, we're going to remain free. And I'm not so keen about getting away from Mordania, either!"

"Not keen about it?" said McClure. "Do you like the country?"

"No, you ass!"

"Then what's the idea of wanting to stay?"

"Well, I'd like to get my own back!" replied Handforth grimly. "Do you think I'm going to be content to skip out of the country like this? These beastly brigands have insulted us and treated us like dogs. I'd like to smash one or two of them up before I go away for good!"

"It's all very well to talk like that, Handy, but we must consider ourselves lucky if we escape from here with whole skins," I said. "Taking everything into consideration, we've done jolly well. We're all healthy, there's not a chap really hurt, and there's every chance that we shall get to the border. I may be fond of adventure, but I should take dashed good care to steer clear of Mordania in future!"

We did not know exactly where we were making for, but we had a vague plan to reach the river. Once there we could find a crossing; and reach the country on the other side. According to King Boris, we should find friends, for the 'Tagossa was not strong in that section of the country. Nearly all the inhabitants were adherents of the king, and would welcome us with open arms, and show us every hospitality. It seemed, therefore, that all the Mordanians were not of Kol Palak's type.

But the problem was to get to the river, and, once there, to cross it. But all we could do was to keep on—to keep going. And we were not allowed to lag, for we knew that the enemy might come swooping down after us at any moment.

We were extremely fortunate to have escaped without Kol Palak's men knowing of the fact. Indeed, escape would have been impossible under any other conditions, for the whole mountain swarmed with members of the 'Tagossa. By leaving by the back exit, so to speak, we had defeated our captors.

"Well, old man, everything is turning out top nole," said Lord Dorrimore, as he walked along with Nelson Lee. "I can't help admiring Nipper for his pluck and perseverance. For cool cheek, this performance of his just about beats everything."

"Yes, it was certainly a fine piece of work," agreed Lee.

"For those three youngsters to come on our track, with the object of setting us at liberty—well, it nearly beats me!" said Dorrie. "An' the amazin' part of it is that they succeeded! That's what fairly takes the wind out of my sails."

The young beggars found us, and then let us slip out of the trap. The rest ought to be simple."

"Yes, it ought," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "But I can't think, Dorrie, that we shall be allowed to escape so tamely. I've got a kind of idea that our present peace of mind will soon be rudely disturbed. It's a long way to the river yet, and——"

"By gad! What's that?" interrupted Dorrie abruptly.

There was no need for him to ask that question. Everybody halted, and was standing perfectly still, listening. The air was quite calm, for practically no wind was blowing. And quite clearly, from some distance at the rear, came the sound of shooting.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

They were rifle shots, and they sounded startlingly distinct in the night air. There was a short pause, and then other shots came to our ears, until at last the shooting seemed to be coming from all directions.

"They seem to be having some trouble," remarked Dorrie. "The men have turned on their leaders, perhaps——"

"I think not," interrupted Nelson Lee. "In my opinion, Dorrie, those shots are merely an alarm signal. In plain words, it means that our escape has been discovered, and the Tagossa is on the track."

"My hat!" I muttered. "Then we shall have to look sharp!"

Nepoli, who was standing near by, gazed at me anxiously.

"A thousand curses!" he exclaimed, in Italian. "It is the Tagossa! They have discovered the truth, and they will soon be here, on our trail like a pack of hounds. I beseech you, young master, to lose no time."

"You can trust Mr. Lee to do the best thing," I replied. "The Tagossa won't get us, Nepoli."

"Ah, you do not know—you do not realise the difficulties," said the Moldavian gravely. "These accursed men are everywhere, lurking in the mountains where one would least expect them. If we reach the river without being attacked it will be wonderful."

Even while he was speaking a sudden flare became visible at the mountain top—a great red glow which could have been seen for scores of miles. Nelson Lee pursed his lips grimly as he looked back.

"Yes, without a doubt the alarm has been given," he said. "That signal will be seen over the whole district, and the men of the Tagossa will be on the watch. We must lose no time."

"It is a pity we have so few firearms," exclaimed King Boris. "But perhaps fortune will remain on our side, and lead us to safety."

"It is to be hoped that such will be the case, monseigneur," said Nelson Lee. "But come, we will lead the way."

Our movements were now much more hurried; we went down the rough, sloping ground at the double. Occasionally one of us would slip on the rocky surface and go slithering along some distance. But, in spite of these mishaps, no one was hurt, and we managed to keep up the pace.

And it was necessary to go fast, too.

For, glancing back, I could see scores of twinkling lights moving about on the mountain side, high above us. I needed no telling what those lights meant. They were torches, held in the hands of our pursuers.

There must have been hundreds of men on our track, and it was clear that they would be able to travel at a greater speed than we were capable of. For they were accustomed to this ground, and they knew the mountains as I knew the Triangle at St. Frank's. They were familiar with every cleft and pass.

The moonlight was now a great boon to us. It enabled us to see our way and to avoid treacherous pitfalls, and we were now hastening on recklessly, and with no thought of accidents.

If, indeed, a mishap did occur, it would mean disaster for the whole party, for we could not go on and leave the unfortunate one to fall into the hands of the enemy. But, so far, there had been no such mishaps.

And we were very glad to find that the ground became smoother and less difficult as we progressed. We were now roughly about a mile from the river; but we had lost sight of it, owing to the fact that a small hill intervened. We should have to rise to the top of this before seeing the water again.

Before long we found that the ground was covered with short, coarse grass, and it was not difficult to run swiftly over this surface. Even the fellows who were tired out sprinted like champions. The prospect of being captured by the

Mordanians spurred them on as nothing else could.

"We must not relax our efforts for an instant," shouted Nelson Lee. "Keep up the speed, boys—everything depends upon it. Our pursuers are gaining rapidly, but, if we make an extra effort, we may foil them yet."

"We'll whack the rotters, sir!"

"Rather!"

"Hurrah!"

"On the ball, St. Frank's!"

The juniors yelled out in their excitement and enthusiasm, and ran as they had never run before. And, in the rear, came the pursuers, streaming down the mountain side in hundreds.

Their torches had now been cast aside, for we were distinctly visible to them in the moonlight; but, fortunately, we were well beyond rifle range. But I knew that Nelson Lee had been thinking of this when he urged the fellows to keep up the pace.

As soon as we did get within range, the Tagossa men would not hesitate to fire. On the first occasion Kol Palak had given instructions that nobody was to be hurt—that we were to be captured uninjured.

But it was most unlikely that such an order had been given now. The chances were that we should be fired upon without mercy. So, although the juniors did not fully realise the peril of the position, Nelson Lee did, and he was filled with keen anxiety during these strenuous minutes.

And even when we reached the river, how should we know that we could find safety? Perhaps the stream was rapid—perhaps there was no possible method of crossing. In that case our efforts would have been for nothing, and we should be compelled to surrender tamely. The very thought of it made me go hot and cold.

If it came to the pinch we were all determined to plunge into the river, and chance whether we reached the other side or not. There wasn't a fellow among us who couldn't swim well—with the single exception, perhaps, of Fatty Little. And it didn't matter much about him, because he would float.

It was a time of great anxiety, travelling over that last stretch of ground. We reached the little hill, with our pursuers growing ever nearer and nearer, and when we topped the rise a volley of rifle shots rang out.

We were just within range, but the distance was so great that accurate aim was impossible. Not one of us was even touched. And then we plunged down the opposite hillside towards the river, which was now practically at our foot.

And it cheered us greatly to see that the water was still and calm, and not particularly wide. However, appearances were deceptive, for when at last we reached the river bank, we found that a very strong current was flowing. Nelson Lee shook his head at once.

"No, we can't attempt it," he said decidedly. "It would be certain death to plunge into this water——"

"But we must do something!" I gasped.

"By gad! Do my eyes deceive me, or is it a fact?" ejaculated Lord Dorrie. "Ye gods and little fishes! Look! Boats! By the Lord Harry—boats!"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

If we had doubted that luck was with us, those doubts were now dispelled, for, only a short distance away, we could see three fairly large boats lying on the river bank, ready to be pushed into the water.

We didn't wait to talk about it.

We simply hurled ourselves at the roughly constructed craft, and shoved them with all our strength over the edge of the bank into the river. Then, tumbling in, we pushed off. The other two boats left before mine. Nelson Lee and Dorrie, Handforth and Co., and a few others were also in this particular boat.

"Crouch low—everybody!" said Nelson Lee. "We shall be fired on!"

Crack! Crack!

Several shots rang out while he was speaking, and the pursuers came tearing down after us. But we had won the race; they were still too far distant to fire with any accurate aim.

And the strong current caught the boats in its grip, and bore them rapidly down the stream. And on the bank the Tagossa men stood firing wildly and impotently. We were beyond their grasp!

CHAPTER II.

AMONGST FRIENDS!

SAFE!

For the time being, at all events, we were safe. There were no other boats near at hand in which the brigands could give chase.

And in all probability they would have been of very little use on the water, for these men were mountaineers, and not accustomed to the handling of river craft.

"Of all the blessed luck!" exclaimed Handforth breathlessly. "You might have thought those boats were put there all ready for us—just like you see in a giddy picture-play! I wonder who they belong to?"

"It doesn't matter to me who the owner happens to be," said Church. "We've got away from those beastly murderers, anyway!"

"I suppose these boats are used for fishing purposes," I said. "They belong to some peaceful people who live in this valley—I noticed a few buildings on the opposite bank just before we took to the water. But I'm not particular about making inquiries. We whacked the Tagossa, and we're not going to be taken again!"

"We must not be too sure, Nipper," put in Captain Mason. "This river winds a good bit, and it's just possible that our pursuers may take a short cut and head us off."

"That's right—be cheerful!" said Dorrie. "Just when everything is going beautifully you make a remark of that kind! We're heading for safety—I can feel it in my bones. Everything is all serene!"

Further down the river the current became stronger, for the river narrowed a great deal, and we were soon shooting along past high, cliff-like banks. In these spots everything was pitchy dark, for the moonlight did not penetrate.

And we had to trust to luck whether there were any rocks in our path.

The other two boats were some little way ahead, sweeping along just where the current took them. For there were no oars or any other means of guiding the craft; we simply had to let them go as they would.

All signs of pursuit were now at an end.

I did not think a great deal about Captain Mason's suggestion—that the Tagossa men might be able to head us off. But I was fully alive to the danger of rapids. It was practically certain that we should strike some rapids before long.

And in that case it would be most extraordinary if we got through intact. At the first sign of any waterfall or

cataract we should do our utmost to reach the bank. Not that our efforts would be of much avail in this direction, since we were well-nigh helpless.

However, there was no sense in anticipating trouble; we should probably find quite enough of it without looking for more. And now that the excitement of the escape was over, most of us were feeling completely worn out and weary. Not that we were allowed to have any rest.

Fortunately, our boats kept well apart, so there was not much danger of disaster owing to collision. And we still swept onwards, through the dark and unknown gorges, where the river banks rose in frowning masses of rock on either side.

"If we strike a waterfall, there'll be no hope for us," said Nelson Lee. "But, after all, we cannot grumble. We are safe so far, and——"

"By gad! Talking about waterfalls is rather curious just now," put in Dorrie. "Unless my eyes deceive me there is somethin' pretty rough just ahead. Look at the way the leadin' boat is bobbin' and swervin' about!"

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth. "Dorrie's right!"

We all looked down the river with interest and anxiety. The leading boat was certainly behaving in a very peculiar fashion. And now the second craft was following its example. Instead of gliding down smoothly as before, they were turning and acting in a very violent way, as though they had suddenly struck a patch of wildly disturbed water. And this actually proved to be the case.

For, almost immediately afterwards, our own boat followed the tactics of the others, and we were compelled to cling tight to anything, in order to prevent ourselves from being flung headlong.

Masses of water splashed in, half drenching some of us; but, so far, there was no real danger. We could not quite understand what was occurring, for the water looked smooth enough, and there was no sign of any rocks. But we were now shooting down the river at an alarming speed.

The current here was appallingly swift, and even if we had had oars and a rudder, we should have been unable to keep the boat under control. We could only trust ourselves to fate.

And then the real excitement began. Staring ahead, I noticed that the sur-

face of the water was no longer black. Creamy masses of foam could be seen here and there, plainly indicating the presence of rocks. And I watched the leading boats with keen anxiety; but they still swept on through the rapids, for it was now quite obvious to us all that we had indeed struck some rapids of a very deadly nature.

Whether we should get through them or not remained to be seen. Once, while on a trip out to Western America with Nelson Lee, I had shot some rapids in a canoe. That experience had been impressed on my mind in a very vivid manner. But the conditions then were very different.

For the canoe had been under perfect control, and it was a craft suitable for the purpose. But these boats were clumsy, rudderless, and with no control whatever, and we swept on to what seemed certain disaster.

But shooting the rapids is always a terrifying experience, whether there is any real danger or not, and the current, having caught us firmly in its grip, carried us on relentlessly, and with ever-increasing speed. Very soon we were simply rolling down, and the wind was rushing past our ears in a way which proved that we were travelling with the rapidity of an express train.

Rocks flashed by on either side of us, the boat heaved and jerked, and we could do nothing but sit tight and cling to one another. Conversation was almost out of the question.

The noise was now overpowering, and it seemed impossible that we could get through without coming to grief. The climax was rather terrifying.

Quite suddenly, and without any previous warning, the bows of the boat tipped steeply downwards, and we literally fell sheer for what seemed to be hundreds of feet. Actually, it was nothing of the kind. It was not a real waterfall, but a long, sloping drop into deep water. We found ourselves smothered; the river came pouring into the boat, drenching us all to the skin, and it was astounding that the craft kept afloat at all.

It was waterlogged and heavy, but, to our astonishment, we found ourselves still afloat, sweeping sluggishly in comparatively smooth water. The banks here were almost level with the river—we had come through the gorge. The river was wide, and on either side lay

low, grassy banks. The moonlight was rather weaker now, but the first indications of dawn were appearing in the distant sky.

"Well, of course, there's only one thing to think," said Lord Dorrimore. "We weren't destined to die out in Mordania. We ought to have been dead four or five times over, but every time we managed to escape by a hair's breadth. I sha'n't be scared at anything in future—I shall know we're coming through in safety."

"It certainly seems like it, Dorrie," agreed Nelson Lee. "By Jove! The first boat is already ashore, and the second is being carried towards the bank."

Dorrie nodded.

"Exactly," he said calmly. "It'll be our turn next."

But it was only by the strenuous efforts of the others that our boat was not carried back into mid-stream. The first two craft had been caught in an eddy, and carried towards the bank. We went in that direction to a certain extent, but then another current caught us and commenced taking us back.

Captain Mason was in one of the other boats, and he just managed to fling himself outwards and catch the bows of our craft as it was sweeping by. Mason was pulled into the water with great force, but his efforts were rewarded, for we were momentarily checked, and that was sufficient.

Other hands grasped our craft, and drew it in, and Mason soon scrambled ashore. Within five minutes we were all on the bank—wet, cold, and shivering, but otherwise unharmed.

"We seem to tumble from one peril into another," said De Valerie; "but I'm blessed if I can imagine what's going to happen now. We've got no food, no blankets, and no dry clothing. After passing through all these excitements, it seems that we're destined to die of exposure."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "There'll be some way out."

Nepoli came hurrying up, and his face was wreathed in smiles. He caught hold of my arm, and shook me joyously.

"Why are you not smiling, my young master?" he asked rapturously. "Is not everything amazingly good? We have beaten the Tagossa, and—may a thousand blessings be sent to Heaven—

his majesty the king is alive and with us!"

"Yes, that's very fine, Nepoli," I agreed. "But what shall we do now? We've beaten the Tagossa, as you say, and we've beaten the river, too. But what's to become of us?"

Nepoli smiled.

"You must surely be tired and worn, since you have not used your eyes," he exclaimed. "See! We are near friends. Food and shelter is within reach."

"By Jove!" I said, staring. "Where?"

Nepoli pointed.

And then I saw, for the first time, that quite a number of curious little whitewashed houses were clustered together upon a hill, not more than half a mile distant. I had seen them at first, but in the moonlight they looked like chalky cliffs on the hillside. But now that I knew what they actually were I easily recognised them as the whitewashed walls of dwelling places.

"A village!" I exclaimed. "But there's no sign of anybody about, Nepoli."

Our late guide shrugged his shoulders.

"Would you expect the good folk to be about at this hour?" he asked. "They are asleep; but they will soon be awake, and attending to our wants."

"Yes, but they may be members of the Tagossa——"

"Nay, not that!" interrupted Nepoli, smiling. "Do I not know this country? Have I not lived in this region all my life? There are none of the accursed Tagossa here. These are the good people of the valley—to a man, supporters of the king; ay, and to a child! No member of the Tagossa would be safe in these valleys. They belong to the mountains, and would not venture into this region. Yes, my young master, we are safe. We are in the hands of friends."

And Nepoli went off, as happy as a sand boy, leaving me staring at the cottages with a new hope. Several of the other juniors were collected about, and they looked at me inquiringly, and with much interest.

"What was he talking about?" asked Tommy Watson.

But it was unnecessary for me to answer, for, even then, all the others were striding away in the direction of the village. And it was quite obvious to everybody what our plans were. Nepoli had gone on in advance, at a

swift, graceful run. In spite of his bulk, it was astounding how easily he covered the ground.

And when we arrived in the village we found much signs of activity. Lights were appearing, doors were open, and many wondering faces were at the windows. We could hear the screaming of babies, too, and it all contributed to make a welcome and cheerful change. We felt that we were really among civilised human beings at last.

"It's the first time I welcome the yelling of a baby!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "And it seems home-like, somehow. There's an air about this place which makes me feel that everything will soon be all serene. By Jingo! I'm jolly hungry, too; I hope they give us something decent to eat!"

Fatty Little sighed.

"Talk about miracles!" he said. "You chaps may think it queer that we've got through all our troubles, but it's nothing compared to me. How on earth I've survived the last day or two is the most amazing thing that ever happened. Great doughnuts! It's a wonder I'm not a skeleton!"

"It only shows, Fatty, that you can hold out if you're compelled to," said Bob Christine. "So you'd better not tell any more of your yarns about starving. We're pretty certain to get some good grub now, although, personally, I'd prefer a sleep in a warm bed!"

And nearly all the juniors were of Christine's opinion. They were certainly hungry, but they were also shivering and tired. The most important thing, to their minds, was a long sleep. Food would come later.

There was a great deal of excitement among the peaceful inhabitants of the little village, but they rose to the occasion, and did their very best for us all. In a surprisingly short space of time we were distributed among all the houses—three or four of us in each. And we were provided with all the available sleeping accommodation; the natives, in fact, turned out for our benefit.

Food was prepared, too, but very little of this was touched. Fatty Little and one or two others were the only fellows who waited to eat; all the rest stripped off their wet things, got into the warm bedding, and fell into sound slumber. I was one of these latter.

And I did not awaken until a full round of the clock. It was, indeed, even-

ing when I sat up in bed, and found all my clothing dried and neatly stacked near my side. I was feeling completely refreshed, although somewhat stiff.

And I was tremendously hungry. By the time I had dressed I found that I was just right for the substantial evening meal which had been prepared by the lady of this particular household. She was a somewhat stout, pleasant-faced woman of about forty, attired in the picturesque costume of the country.

There were quite a number of little children standing about, open-eyed with amazement and wonder. They were queer little boggars, full of excitement, and probably setting us all down as extraordinary looking people. They had certainly never seen any English boys before.

And, as a matter of fact, we were a pretty untidy crew. Our clothing was in a shocking condition, having been soaked through and through on two or three occasions, and there were tears and stains galore. We had no collars, for these had long since become unwearable. There wasn't a fellow among us who wasn't in bad need of a hair-cut. In England we should have attracted general attention, so it was scarcely surprising that we made these people regard us open-eyed.

But these were minor troubles, and of no importance. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and all the other men of the party were in a similar plight. Dorrie himself didn't care a jot. He was accustomed to looking like a tramp, for when out in the wild corners of the earth, as he frequently was, he never cared a toss about his personal appearance. He always hated to look smart.

But it was a sad blow for Sir Montie. My noble chum never ceased to bewail the fact that he had no stock of clean collars and other snowy white linen. But we told him not to worry. The things he was wearing were at least quite clean, since everything had been thoroughly washed during our long sleep. And now, even if we did not feel smart, we were certainly comfortable.

The evening meal was a mixed-up affair, consisting of mutton, rice, potatoes and bread of a not very palatable nature; but we were getting used to it by this time, and we consumed it with gusto.

The meal finished up with mugs of hot, strong coffee, and some home-

made cake which was not at all unpalatable.

"Well, boys, our position is very different now from what it was twenty-four hours ago," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "I am thankful that we have escaped from those rough men of the mountains, and that we are all here, in safety."

"It's amazin'," said Sir Montie. "We never expected to be so lucky—we didn't, really. Do you think we shall be able to get to a big town before long? I simply must have some clean collars and a new necktie!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I'm afraid you won't obtain any of those luxuries for some time, my boy," he said. "We are a considerable distance from the border, and I do not know whether we shall be able to leave Mordania for some time."

"Why, can't we travel to the frontier at once, sir?" asked Church.

We were all collected together in the wide open space before the curious whitewashed houses. It was a fine, mild evening, and we were enjoying the air after our substantial meal.

Nelson Lee looked rather troubled as he replied to Church's question.

"There are difficulties in the way, Church," he said. "Our friends of this village have been telling us quite a lot of facts about the country, and we have learned, to our disappointment, that the journey to the frontier is an extremely difficult one."

"But we've had difficult journeys before, sir," said Handforth.

"Very possibly; but this is quite another proposition," replied Nelson Lee. "You see, in order to reach the border we must pass through a section of the country which is strongly held by the Tagossa."

"Oh!"

"That's done it!"

"I'm afraid it has," said Lee. "I would not even consider making the journey with you boys if there was any possibility of being recaptured by Kol Palak's men. For you can be assured that the Tagessa would treat us very harshly if once they got their fingers upon us. We cannot risk being captured again."

"Then what can we do, sir?" I inquired.

"Wait here!"

"Yes, but for how long, gov'nor?"

"Goodness only knows!" put in Lord Dorrimore. "But we shall have to kick our heels in this magnificent city until the country has settled down. That may be in a week or two, or it may not be until the end of the summer!"

"Great Scott!"

"We're in for it now; we've got to stick it," went on Dorrie. "A month or so doesn't make much difference, I suppose. What you young chaps will be like when you get back to St. Frank's, I tremble to imagine. You won't know a bally thing, and you'll have to go down in to the First Form again!"

Many of the juniors grinned.

"Oh, it won't be so bad as that, sir," said De Valerie. "I dare say we shall be a bit stale, but we'll soon get over that. Perhaps something will happen before long so that we can get completely out of Mordania. My hat! What a country this is—it's like one big prison!"

The fellows were rather concerned to hear the news, but they were so relieved by the general situation that they did not worry themselves unduly.

And, a little later on, Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Captain Mason had a confidential talk with King Boris and the Crown Prince. They were all seated together just outside the door of one of the cottages, smoking some excellent cigarettes which had been provided by the natives.

"There's no doubt about it, we've been amazingly fortunate," said Nelson Lee. "We have much to be thankful for, and, on the whole, I am highly satisfied. But we must consider our position."

"We have been considerin' it," said Dorrie. "And, as you told the boys, all we can do is to wait here until this restless little country quiets down."

"I sincerely wish that I could do something to help," put in King Boris. "My gratitude to you, gentlemen, is more than I can express, and I should like, if possible, to repay you in some measure for the great service you have rendered me. If, for example, I could get back to Ludari, matters might be greatly improved. I am determined to stamp out this Tagossa—to kill it like the evil thing it is. But I can do nothing here."

"Why not, sire?" asked the Crown Prince. "These valleys are not largely populated, it is true, but I imagine we

could gather together a formidable force within a short time, and then we could advance through the Tagossa region——"

"It is quite impossible, Paul," interrupted the king. "I will agree that we could raise the men. But these people of the valley are peaceful; they have no modern firearms, and practically no ammunition. Of what use would a strong force be if it carried no arms? We should simply be taking these men to their deaths. It would be the height of folly to advance upon Ludari——"

"By gad!" interrupted Lord Dorrimore softly. "I've just thought of something. I've just been overwhelmed by a brain wave. How far from the sea are we here?"

"Not such a great distance," replied Prince Paul. "And the sea could be easily reached, too, since we are on the river, and there is a clear stretch of water right down to the coast. But why do you ask?"

"That schooner!" replied Dorrie keenly. "Don't you remember? You were on it yourself, Prince Paul, and we left it high and dry on the rocks. There are sufficient rifles and revolvers in that wreck to supply an army corps!"

Nelson Lee leaned forward.

"Upon my soul!" he said. "You are right, old man; and, what is more, there is every likelihood of the wreck being still intact. There has been no rough weather since that wild night when we were cast ashore. In all probability the schooner is still high and dry on the rocks, with her cargo unharmed, and, if the coast can be easily reached, there is no reason why a rush party should not make the trip, and come back with the spoils. I understand that there are many boats available lower down the stream."

"You are right, Mr. Lee—absolutely right!" said King Boris, with shining eyes. "A wonderful idea! If we could only obtain those rifles and revolvers, and plenty of ammunition, our position would be very different. I could gather many hundreds of men together, arm them, and lead them on to Ludari."

The king and the Crown Prince were both highly animated by the prospect. But then Nepoli, the mountaineer, bowed low and stepped forward. His face was grave, and his words were not encouraging.

CHAPTER III.

PREPARING FOR THE FRAY!

NEPOLI addressed himself to Nelson Lee.

"A thousand pardons for interrupting, excellency," he said. "but I have been listening, and I have heard all. I know much of these mountains and valleys, and I fear that the plans that have been discussed are not possible of accomplishment."

"If you have anything to say, Nepoli, you are at liberty to speak," said Nelson Lee. "You have heard the plan? You know that his majesty is thinking about advancing upon Ludari, with a large army of men from these valleys?"

"Yes, and it is a wonderful idea, excellency," replied Nepoli. "I only crave that his majesty will permit me to render my small services. But it is one thing to speak of travelling to Ludari, and it is another thing to go. I know these mountains. Such a journey would be fraught with grave dangers, and would be well-nigh impossible, even to a highly trained army."

"Just explain what you mean," said Nelson Lee.

They were all listening with great interest, for they understood that this rough mountaineer knew exactly what he was talking about. He was not highly educated, and he was not refined. But he had lived in these regions all his life, and he knew every mountain pass and every gorge. Indeed, he was far more useful in a matter of this kind than the villagers themselves, for the latter lived in the valley, and scarcely ever ventured up into the hills.

"Ludari lies away yonder," went on Nepoli, raising a hand and pointing in a north-westerly direction. "Maybe you think it is many miles distant, but, as the crow flies, it is no more than twenty miles."

"Twenty miles!" repeated Dorrie. "Why, that's nothing; we could do it in a few hours! I thought we were something like sixty or seventy miles from the capital."

"Unfortunately, your excellency, it is impossible to go by the direct route," said Nepoli, "for the great mountain range that you see bars the way. It is not possible to cross those mountains direct."

"That is what I assumed," said Nelson Lee. "Which is the nearest pass from here, Nepoli?"

"The nearest is some twenty miles distant," replied the mountaineer. "And then it is still twenty miles further to Ludari. This route is by the Spezzi Pass, and it is the nearest possible cut from where we are standing. And the Spezzi Pass is a treacherous, dangerous place."

"Well, forty miles isn't so bad," said Dorrie. "This new army ought to do the journey within a couple of days, at the most."

Nepoli shook his head.

"It is a thousand pities, but such a journey could not be accomplished, your excellency," he exclaimed. "For the Spezzi Pass is strongly guarded and held by the accursed Tagossa. May a thousand demons come and consume Kol Palak to dust!"

"Well, that's rather a decent idea," said Dorrie. "I shouldn't mind if Kol Palak met with a fate of that kind. Unfortunately, we can't get demons nowadays. So the Spezzi Pass is strongly held by our excellent friends of the Tagossa? In other words, there's nothing doing in that direction."

"So it appears," said Nelson Lee. "Nepoli is quite right, for I've heard from one or two others in this village that the Spezzi Pass is not only very dangerous in a natural sense, but it is entirely in the hands of Palak's men. At one point it is necessary to travel along a treacherous six foot ledge, with perpendicular rocks on one side, and a yawning chasm of a thousand feet on the other."

"How infernally interestin'!" said Dorrie. "It's evidently not the place to choose for a motor-bus route—a skid would be rather unfortunate, by gad!"

"You will have no difficulty in realising that a mere handful of men could hold this pass against thousands," went on Nelson Lee. "A narrow ledge, with a rocky surface, exposed to the overhanging cliffs above—why, half a dozen snipers concealed behind the boulders could pick off a big army one by one. No, if this pass is held by the Tagossa, to cross the mountains in that way would be impossible."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Lee," said King Boris. "I am ashamed to admit it, but even I did not know of the difficulties to be encountered. This is my own country, but I am ignorant of many facts concerning these mountain

ranges. It is right that I should be told."

Nelson Lee turned to Nepoli.

"Is there any other way across the range?" he asked in Italian.

"Yes, there is one, my master," said the mountaineer. "This is by way of the Goni Pass, which lies in the opposite direction, and the total distance to Ludari by this route is not one mile less than sixty."

"Phew!" whistled Dorrie. "Ludari appears to be getting further and further away. I hope this pass is all right, or the next one will be further away still."

"The Goni Pass is far safer than the Spezzi," said Nepoli. "There is much difficult ground to traverse, however, before the pass can be reached; but this, too, is constantly watched by the Tagossa, and there is no other method of crossing the mountains. The Spezzi Pass and the Goni Pass are the only gateways to the great plains beyond."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"So you see, monseigneur, our little plan is not capable of being put into operation," he said. "It is galling in the extreme. Ludari is but twenty miles distant, but absolutely beyond our reach."

"Such a state of affairs is terribly unfortunate," said the king. "But surely there must be some method—this Goni Pass, for example? Could it not be conquered during the darkness? Would it not be possible for a large force of armed men to press through?"

"It might be possible—one never knows, your majesty," said Nepoli. "Certainly, the difficulties are not so great here, since the Goni Pass is less easily held, and there are no natural dangers. The Tagossa are in stronger force on the Spezzi Pass."

"We shall travel by means of the Goni Pass," said King Boris firmly. "We may meet with difficulties, but difficulties were made to be overcome, and I am convinced that, with determination and courage, we shall be able to defeat the Tagossa."

But Nepoli shook his head doubtfully, although he said nothing further. King Boris had come to a decision, and it was not for the mountaineer to argue. But Nelson Lee knew what troubles would have to be faced, and he certainly would never allow the juniors to go on this dangerous expedition.

It would be at least a week before a

move could be made. A strong force must be gathered together, and a journey made to the coast. The arms and ammunition had to be brought up the river and then distributed among the newly formed army. There was food to be considered, and a hundred and one other details. Then, even when the expedition started, there was no guarantee that it would succeed in getting through. In Nelson Lee's opinion, it would be a forlorn hope.

And it was just then, while they were all thinking about the king's plans, that two newcomers arrived. They were rough-looking specimens — murderous cut-throats, by their general appearance; swarthy men with piercing black eyes, unkempt hair and beards, and rough clothing.

But, as a matter of fact, these men were quite harmless, and, no doubt, good-natured and kindly at heart. One could not always judge by appearances in Mordania.

The new arrivals were greatly excited, and as they came down towards the spot where Nelson Lee and the others were seated, they were jabbering rapidly to a number of men who had collected round. I imagined that they were then informed of the king's presence, for they paused, stared in amazement, and then went forward.

They were awkward, and flushed of face, and bowed clumsily before King Boris. Then, both together, they commenced talking as hard as they could go. It was impossible for the king to understand, and he raised his hand.

He said something to them in their own tongue, and then one of the fellows commenced speaking alone. He talked rapidly, and assisted his speech by many gestures and wavings of the hand. It seemed that he would never finish, but at last he did so, breathless and still very excited.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie had not been able to understand a word of the long rigmarole, but they gathered that the man's speech was of some importance, for not only the king and the Crown Prince were looking flushed and eager, but Nepoli himself was standing forward in a tense attitude, his eyes gleaming, and in a state of considerable excitement.

King Boris beckoned to him.

"Tell me, my friend," he said. "Are

these men to be trusted?" He indicated the two strangers.

"Your majesty, they are two of your most faithful subjects," replied Nepoli, without hesitation. "Have I not known them for many years, and are they not the greatest enemies of the Tagossa?"

"Then there is the most wonderful news to be told," said the king, turning to Nelson Lee and Dorrie. "It is astonishing that we should have been discussing this subject at such a time; but these men have brought word of a great avalanche in the mountains—a vast fall of rock which occurred but thirty-six hours since."

"An avalanche!" repeated Dorrie. "Very interestin', of course, but I don't see that it's frightfully important."

"You will understand when I explain," went on the king. "Our friends, as you will see, are tired and worn; they have only just arrived from the upper passes. It was only by chance that they escaped death when the great fall of rock took place."

"But has this any bearing upon your plans, monseigneur?" asked Lee.

"It has," said the king. "This great avalanche has opened up a new pass through the mountains—"

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "Do you mean that it's possible to get through to Ludari without using either the Spezzi or the Goni Passes?"

"Exactly," replied the king; "that is the literal truth, Lord Dorrimore. These men examined the pass thoroughly before leaving, and they tell me that it is far easier to negotiate than either of the other passes; in fact, it is only a question of climbing the hills, and then walking straight through this newly opened gorge to the slopes on the other side. There are no difficulties—no dangerous places. And these men of the mountains hurried down without loss of time to acquaint the valley folk of their discovery. It is the height of good fortune that I am here to learn this news at first hand."

"And where is this new pass?" asked Lee keenly.

"Not more than ten miles distant—almost a direct route from this spot," put in Prince Paul. "The entire journey through to Ludari is not more than thirty miles, and, most important of all, the Tagossa know nothing about this avalanche. The pass is not guarded,

and the nearest members of the Tagossa are miles away."

"By the Lord Harry! Our phenomenal luck again!" said Dorrie. "It simply follows us wherever we go. This finally settles it, Lee, old man. When King Boris and his army go forward, we go, too—all the bally crowd of us."

"I'm not quite so sure about that, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "It certainly makes the position much clearer and much easier. If only we could take advantage of this accident of nature it will be splendid. But no time must be lost; from now onwards every minute must be employed."

Before an hour had elapsed there were great signs of activity; men were sent out in all directions to the neighbouring villages and valleys. They were instructed to gather together every available able-bodied man, and to bring them post haste. A large party was to be collected for the coast trip.

Long before dawn a hundred men were ready; but all these were not required. About twenty boats left, from a spot further down the river. They were in the charge of Captain Mason, who knew exactly where the wrecked schooner lay, and all the other details. It was Captain Mason's task to load up the boats with the ship's cargo, and to bring it back in as short a space of time as possible.

While this was going on the juniors, of course, were sound asleep. They could do nothing in the matter, except watch and talk about everything. But they were all eager to go on the journey to Ludari, for, if this could be accomplished in safety, we should all be far better off in the capital than we were at present. From Ludari we could get to the frontier without trouble, whilst here we were hemmed in.

And so for about two days we had nothing whatever to do. We had a lazy time of it, quite enjoying ourselves, and extremely glad of the long rest, after all our arduous adventures.

And while the party was on the way to the coast, with the object of bringing back the spoils from the schooner, another strong party had been dispatched into the mountains. It was their duty to take possession of the new pass, and to hold it. Thus, in the event of the Tagossa discovering the truth, they would arrive too late—they would find the pass already held by the king's men.

On the morning of the third day, we awoke to find tremendous activity in the little place. Gazing down at the river, which lay a short distance away, I could see many boats drawn in near the shore. The coast party had returned, and, what was more, they had brought their booty with them.

"It was perfectly easy," said Captain Mason, as he was explaining matters to Nelson Lee and Dorrie. "We found the old tub still perched on the rocks, just the same as we left her. We merely had to wait until the tide was out, and then pile into the work. We stripped her of every ounce of cargo within twenty-four hours, and here we are, with enough killing material for half a dozen divisions."

It was splendid news, and we learned something else which was of even greater interest. In the cargo Captain Mason had found several large packing-cases which were different from the others, and which proved to contain machine-guns of the very latest type. These would indeed come in useful.

The Tagossa, although supplied with rifles and revolvers, had no machine-guns, and Kol Palak's men would receive a big surprise when they found themselves facing the deadly fire from such weapons.

It was decided that the real start should be made on the evening of the following day. By this time all the valley men would be gathered together, ready and eager to march forward in the king's aid. Although rough and uneducated, these men were patriotic to a surprising degree, and were ready to face any dangers in the service of their king—for, after all, it was a kind of personal matter. The king was there himself, leading the impromptu army.

During the following day the men would come from all quarters, and would start out on the journey just before nightfall. It was reckoned that Ludari would be reached within two days.

For, although the distance was not very great, the ground was difficult, and the king had decided that no travelling should be done in the daylight; as far as possible, the advance upon Ludari was to be in secret.

The capital itself was, of course, in the hands of the royalists, so there would be no trouble when the party arrived. But it was necessary to exercise great caution, for the Tagossa men were

watching the capital from all sides. Kol Palak intended to make a big and determined attack as soon as he could get his men together.

"Well, gov'nor, what about us?" I inquired, addressing Nelson Lee as I met him outside one of the houses. "Are we going on this expedition or not?"

"Well, my boy, I don't quite like it, but I suppose we shall have to go——"

"Oh, good!"

"Looking at the position from every aspect, I think you boys will be safer with us," said Lee. "Practically all the men will be taken, and you would be unprotected if you remained here. On the other hand, by coming with us, you will be at least guaranteed a well-armed escort, and it is most improbable that the entire army will be captured. At the first sign of any danger, you boys will return."

I grinned.

"We'll see about that later, sir," I said cheerfully. "Personally, I think we shall have an easy time of it. This new pass is unknown to the Tagossa, and it won't even be watched. We shall slip through, and get to Ludari without a shot being fired. That's my opinion, anyway."

"I hope you are a true prophet, Nipper," said the gov'nor, "and I certainly think that all the odds are in our favour."

Pitt came forward.

"I suppose there's no possibility of this being a trap, sir?" he asked.

"There is a possibility, certainly, but a very remote one," replied Lee.

"A trap?" said Handforth. "What rot! Just as if——"

"We can't be too careful," went on Pitt. "Supposing the whole thing was humbug? Supposing all this talk about an avalanche was spoof? We might be going into the mountains on a fool's errand—right into an ambush of Tagossa agents. For example, it would be easy for us to walk into a blind gulch, and then have our retreat cut off. We should be caught like rats in a trap."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You may be quite sure, Pitt, that we have considered all those possibilities," he said. "But we have come to the conclusion that there is no humbug about the story; we believe, in fact, that it is the perfect truth, and that this new pass through the mountains is a reality."

Nepoli himself knows the men who brought the information, and he vouches for their honesty and loyalty to the king. And Nepoli, as you know, is staunch to the backbone. No, Pitt, I do not think there is any cause for uneasiness."

"Well, that's good enough, sir," said Pitt; "but I just thought I'd mention it."

"Quite right, too," said Lee. "It indicates that you are taking an intelligent interest in the position, and I sincerely trust that the general situation will be greatly improved before many days have elapsed."

We had no time to say anything further then, for Nelson Lee was called away by Dorrie, who was busily engaged in attending to matters connected with the commissariat department of the newly formed army.

Dorrie was working with a will, right in his element, and doing his utmost to further the plans of King Boris. Captain Mason had already performed his share, for he had done magnificent work in going to the wrecked schooner and returning with all the booty in the shape of rifles, revolvers, machine-guns, and ammunition.

It is only fair to say, in fact, that all the members of our party did their best. The juniors were perfectly willing to lend a hand, but there was very little that they could do. And now they were going on, not as members of the army, but under the wing of their escort.

King Boris himself would lead his forces, which, of course, were all on foot. There were close upon three thousand men, all told—a much greater number than I had anticipated. But they had come from all quarters, post haste, in answer to their sovereign's call. They were all faithful subjects—true born Mordanians whom the Tagossa had left untarnished.

It was a magnificent rally, and, fortunately, there were arms for all—and plenty of food, too. Each man carried sufficient rations for the whole trip, in addition to their weapons and bandoliers.

All the picked men went in advance, with the king himself. In the event of a sudden surprise, these men—the vanguard—would bear the brunt of the fighting. Behind them came other sturdy fellows. Dorrie, of course, in-

sisted upon being with the king—in the very front line.

Captain Mason, the airship officers, too, were not very far in the rear. I was quite certain that Nelson Lee would have preferred to be with the others. But he felt that it was his duty to stay with the juniors, and they, of course, were not allowed to be anywhere near the advance-guard.

In fact, we were quite near to the rear, with about two hundred men behind us. If the king's forces were attacked in the mountains, we should have ample warning, and there would be time for the St. Frank's party to beat a retreat, safely guarded by at least two hundred armed men. If Nelson Lee had not thought we were quite safe, he would never have allowed us to come on this trip.

The excitement and enthusiasm was intense when the time came for starting off. It was, indeed, a wonderful spectacle—three thousand of these sturdy Mordanians, all armed to the teeth, setting out with their king across the mountains to the capital.

It was a magnificent enterprise, and worthy of complete success. In any case, it was something which Kol Palak never expected. He was not prepared for any such rally on the part of the royalists.

Strictly speaking, we were responsible for all this. But for us the king would have been dead by this time. And it was his majesty's presence here which had brought the men of the valley hastening to their monarch's side. They would never have answered the call in this manner if the king had not been actually present.

There was a feeling of victory in the air as we started out—a great, long column of men stretching across the countryside towards the distant hills. And night closed down upon us, shadowing our movements and hiding us from view. We had set out on the great venture.

What was the result to be?

CHAPTER IV.

WITHIN THE CAPITAL!

I DON'T think I shall ever forget that wonderful journey into the mountains. There was a feeling in the air that we were going forward to something tremendously exciting and good. We were all in the highest pos-

sible spirits, fresh, and ready for any trouble.

It was a very different feeling to what we had experienced when we had travelled from the Monastery of St. Peter to Kol Palak's stronghold in the mountains. That had been a nerve-trying ordeal—a wearying journey of many hardships. We had been expecting attacks at any moment.

But now there was a feeling abroad that we were masters of the situation—that we were capable of beating off any attacks that might be made, and we marched along easily and without fatigue.

I was rather sorry that Dorrie was not with us, with his cheerful conversation and constant jokes. But Dorrie was well ahead—two or three miles ahead, in fact—with King Boris in the forefront of his forces.

Nelson Lee was the only member of our party who accompanied the juniors. He wanted to be with us in case we were separated, through any mishap, from the rest; but, of course, we did not expect that any mishaps would occur.

We were going into an unknown wilderness, a section of the mountains which hardly one man knew anything about, and we were guided by the two mountaineers who had first brought the news. They, with Nepoli, were in the very front of the column. The Spezzi Pass lay miles away to our left, along a totally different route, and the Goni Pass was still further away to our right.

Our own route wended its way through a narrow valley, where the rocky hills rose sharply on either side, shutting out the surrounding country completely. It was something like walking along the bottom of a gigantic railway cutting.

I think this direction had been taken on purpose. If Kol Palak had any scouts in the region they were not likely to see any sign of the king's advancing army, for the whole big column was completely hidden in these deep mountain recesses. And as the night advanced we climbed higher and higher. The surroundings became more rugged, and the ground rocky and extremely rough.

We had started off at a good round speed, but this, of course, could not be maintained. Upon rough ground it was impossible to go far. However, we progressed steadily and cheerfully, until, towards dawn, we were thousands of feet

above our starting point, right in the very heart of the mountain range.

Less than a week earlier this place had been absolutely impassable. There had been no way through the peaks, and the latter were incapable of being scaled. They had formed a barrier which no human being could conquer.

But then the avalanche had come, opening up a way through which we could pass. A gigantic canyon had been formed by that avalanche—a tremendous cleft, miles in length, which cut right through between two of the highest peaks.

When at last dawn broke, we could see the exact nature of our surroundings, and we were somewhat awed by the grandeur of the scenery. It was a tremendous spectacle—one which I shall remember for many a long day.

We were picking our way up the rock-strewn gorge. Away in front stretched the great column of marching men, apparently right into the invisible distance, and on either side arose frowning masses of rock. For thousands of feet these rocks rose into the air, until their summits were literally enshrouded by the clouds, and we were right down in this canyon, where constant gloom prevailed, and where the sunlight could never penetrate.

In places the mountainous rocks overhung in a terrifying way. I shuddered when I thought of what would happen if another landslide took place. We should be crushed to atoms beneath the millions of tons of falling rock.

But it was not pleasant to dwell upon such thoughts as these, and yet I could hardly prevent myself from doing so. The very nature of our position made me think deeply. I pictured to myself our plight if the rocks fell in our rear, and in front, too. We should simply be hemmed in, bottled up in a gigantic cleft from which no man could escape. I should be extremely glad when we emerged from this sinister gorge.

And the thought of spending the day there in sleep did not make me feel extremely comfortable. But it had to be done. The entire army camped as soon as dawn broke—there, in that awful canyon. And, strictly speaking, it was the only thing that could be done.

For, down here we were hidden from sight—we were completely concealed by the gigantic natural walls which hemmed us in. Even if there were a



Away in front stretched the great column of marching men, apparently right into the invisible distance, and on either side arose frowning masses of rock.

thousand members of the Tagossa near by, they could never know of our presence. And King Boris had had fully fifty scouts on the watch for the past three or four days.

We had completed the first part of our programme without a hitch. During the night we had travelled the twelve miles to the pass, and now we were resting, waiting for the night to fall again.

When darkness came the army would move forward once more, to emerge into the open, under the eyes of any watchers who might be near by. But the darkness would cover us, for there would be no moon until the early hours of the morning. And this part of the journey would be easier, for we should descend into the fertile valley of Ludari.

Although the journey had not been very arduous, we were quite ready for sleep after a good meal. I was awake and active some time before nightfall, but the other juniors were not disturbed until an hour before the time fixed for departure. A good meal was disposed of, and then we were ready.

And this would prove to be the most difficult part of our trip. Extreme caution was necessary. Every man was told that conversation was forbidden, no man was to smoke, and very little noise was to be made, for we were descending into the valley in secret, perhaps under the very eyes of our enemies.

It was rather a thrilling experience, and the St. Frank's fellows entered into the spirit of the thing with enormous interest. Would a surprise attack come? Should we be seen and fired upon by Kol Palak's men? There was just a possibility that this would happen, but we were hoping that our entry into Ludari would be secret.

The weather favoured us, for the sky was overcast by heavy clouds, completely shutting out all the starlight and making the countryside intensely black. We were not visible even at a distance of two hundred yards, and a fairly high wind drowned the noise of our marching.

There was something very thrilling about this secret advance upon Ludari. If we succeeded, it was almost a certainty that we would spring a surprise upon the revolutionaries which they would probably never recover from.

For Kol Palak was planning an attack on the capital. That attack would not come off for a day or two—we were convinced of that. When it did mate-

rialise, the brigands would believe that Ludari was still held by a comparatively small band of royalists, who were not particularly well supplied with arms and ammunition.

And then would come the surprise.

For Kol Palak and his men would find the capital in the hands of a huge, determined force. There would be a great battle, and the result of that battle would be almost a certainty from the very first shot.

This, of course, was the rosy side of the picture. We did not overlook the fact that the Tagossa men would be on the alert. They knew that we had all escaped, and that the king himself was at liberty. And the Tagossa had spies everywhere. Perhaps we were fondly deluding ourselves; perhaps Kol Palak knew everything. And even now we might be walking blindly into a great ambush which had been prepared for our benefit. It hardly seemed possible that we should be able to fool the Tagossa in the way we had planned. But there was the one fact that our route was not known, and that Palak had probably set no watchers on this part of the mountain range.

"It'll be tremendously rich if those blighters are watching those two other passes," I exclaimed in a low whisper, as I marched along with my chums. "Just think of it, my children! While they're kicking their heels miles away, we're stealing through at this point. I only hope that everything goes all serene, and that we arrive in Ludari according to programme."

"You bet we shall," said Handforth. "Those rotten brigands are reserving all their forces to guard the Jazzi Pass—"

"You ass!" said Church. "You mean the Spezzi Pass."

"Same thing!" said Handforth. "I knew it had two 'z's' in it, anyway. But why argue about a fatheaded word? Then there's that other pass—Kol Palak has concentrated his forces there, too, I expect."

"Better not talk so loud, Handy," whispered McClure. "You know the orders—no conversation."

"Well, I'm only whispering, you ass!" said Handforth, in a voice that could have been heard fifty yards away.

"Shut up, Handy!"

Handforth would probably have continued but for the fact that Nelson Lee

came along and put a stop to it. Handforth thought that he was whispering—but his whisper was of the stage variety; he let everybody know what he was talking about.

By this time we were well out of the pass, under the open sky, and heading downwards into the valley of Ludari. We were all glad to be free from those overhanging, menacing rocks, and, although the darkness was intense, we instinctively knew that the scene on this side of the mountain range was very different from the scene on the other.

And the air was singularly clear. Right away in the distance we could see numbers of twinkling lights—for it was not very late, and we were wondering what those lights could mean.

"I should say they're about ten miles off, right down in the bottom of the valley," whispered Tommy Watson. "I wonder if it's a camp—Tagossa men, waiting for us to come along?"

"Do show some sense!" I said. "Is it likely that the enemy would give the show away in such a manner? No, that's not a camp——"

"They're the lights of Ludari itself!" put in Handforth. "You chaps haven't got any sense. We're within sight of our destination."

"Exactly," I grinned. "It's a pretty certain fact that those lights are in the capital. They don't seem a great distance off, but I expect we have a lot of rough ground to cover before we arrive. By Jingo! What a cheerful prospect, to go into a real town at last, where there is a direct route into countries where they have railways and telegraphs! It's like coming into the world again."

There could be no doubt that Handforth's suggestion was correct. Those lights were in Ludari—for, after all, the town was not a great distance away, and we were several thousands of feet above. We continued on our journey, feeling more confident than ever.

As the time passed, one by one the lights disappeared until at length total darkness lay ahead. The people in the capital had all retired, and no lights were now burning.

It was reckoned that we should arrive, barring mishaps, just before dawn, in time for the whole army to get within the city gates before daylight came to betray their presence.

And when we were still two hours' march away, a number of fast scouts

were sent on in advance. These men had orders to go on at the double and to prepare those within the capital for our arrival.

It was necessary that the gates should be open to admit us, and that other preparations should be made. Ludari, we learned, was entirely surrounded by a high stone wall—a tremendously thick structure which had been standing for centuries, and which was as firm and solid as ever.

The city was, indeed, in many ways similar to the design of the Middle Ages, and very picturesque. We should all be interested to see it, and to explore its many odd corners, and to take snapshots. Not that we should have much chance of doing the latter, for we hadn't a camera among us, and it was most unlikely that such articles were procurable in Ludari.

The nearer we got to the capital the more cautious became our movements. A keen watch was kept on either side, and we were constantly on the jump, half expecting a sudden, swift attack.

But no such attack came, and the great column of men went on its way unmolested. In spite of the gloom, we could see that the country was of a very different character here. There were forests and vast tracts of cultivated land, and quite constantly we passed great flocks of sheep peacefully grazing on the hillside. We had left the wild, rugged region behind us and were now entering upon a country which was fertile, green and good to look upon.

And all our hopes were realised.

For at length Ludari became a reality, and not a possibility. It lay just in front of us, less than half a mile distant. We could distinguish the high walls against the sky line, and we presently found ourselves striding along a fairly good road which led straight towards the main gateway.

There were only two gates to the city—one at the south, and one at the north. Everywhere else the high walls completely encircled the buildings. Thus, providing a proper guard was kept, Ludari could never be taken by an enemy. Kol Palak had seized it, in the first place, owing to the treachery of the guards within. He knew that he would not do so on a second occasion, but he believed that greatly superior forces would win the day for him.

When the time came he would find himself sadly mistaken.

We were greatly excited as we approached the gates. As we had expected, they were standing wide open, ready to receive us. And King Boris and his three thousand men entered quietly, and without demonstration, like an army of ghosts.

It was a most impressive affair. A great many of the inhabitants of the city were awake, thrilled with excitement at the rumours which had been spread about. Not many of them would believe that their king and prince had returned.

But they were all ordered to remain quiet, and, whatever they saw, to refrain from noisy demonstrations.

I was very sorry that I could not be in front, with the vanguard; but, as I heard later, it was a rather wonderful experience.

King Boris marched at the head of his army, with the Crown Prince by his side. Both of them were calm, cool, and filled with gratitude that they should be in their capital once more, and, on either hand, large numbers of the populace lined the quaintly cobbled streets, giving a silent but heartfelt welcome.

What Ludari thought of it all, I could not imagine. But they were tremendously elated and excited. To awaken at dead of night to find their king returned, bringing with him three thousand men, all fully armed, was indeed an event of the utmost importance.

And when we were all within the gates, these latter were closed and guarded. We had done the trick. We had journeyed across the great mountain range, and were now within the comparative safety of Mordania's capital.

"Good business!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "What did I tell you? I jolly well knew it could be done!"

"Rather!" said Church. "My hat! It's been a long walk, and I'm feeling tired. But I don't want to go to bed yet; I want to see what's going to happen."

"I don't suppose much will happen to-night—or, rather, this morning," I put in. "You can bet your boots, my sons, that we shall be found accommodation as soon as possible, and then we shall tuck in and go to sleep——"

"Tuck in?" said Fatty Little, prick-

ing up his ears. "That's just what I need! I'm positively famished——"

"My goodness!" said Pitt. "What about that huge parcel of grub you carried on your back—extra rations, as you called them?"

"Why, that's all gone, you ass!" said Fatty indignantly. "You didn't expect it to last for ever, I suppose?"

"You've scoffed all that grub yourself?"

"Of course!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Pitt. "I thought those extra rations were for the entire army! If you eat anything now, you're a marvel!"

It wasn't long before Fatty had an opportunity of proving that he was indeed a marvel, for we were all taken away to the king's palace, and provided with food in plenty. And now it was real food—almost the same as we were accustomed to having in England.

The palace was much more magnificent than we had anticipated—a large white stone building of mediæval design, with many turrets and towers of extremely picturesque appearance.

And within there were many comforts. For the first time since leaving England we found ourselves provided with real beds, and we were able to tuck ourselves between snowy white sheets. But this was not until after we had fed ourselves and bathed; then, feeling really good, we retired to rest.

"Well, my sons, things are getting better and better," I said sleepily, as I turned in. "We're in Ludari now, and it ought to be quite an easy job to get out to the world beyond. In any case, we sha'n't go into those awful mountains again. Practically all our troubles are over."

"Begad! I hope so, dear old boy," said Sir Montie sleepily. "I'm wonderin' if it would be possible to obtain a fresh supply of clean collars——"

"Oh; blow you and your collars!" interrupted Handforth. "I'm thinking about the scrap that's coming off. My hat! Won't it be gorgeous? Kol Palak and his men wiped out! If they dare to attack this city, they'll get the biggest surprise of their guilty old lives!"

"And we shall soon be on our way back to England," murmured Tommy Watson; "back to St. Frank's, and to everybody we know! My only hat! Doesn't it make you chaps feel impatient to be getting on the move?"

"Rather!" I said. "But just at present we can't do anything, Tommy. We've just got to sit tight and wait until Kol Palak gets busy!"

CHAPTER V.

HANDFORTH'S CAPTURE I

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH thrust his hand into his trousers pockets, and looked about him with a critical eye. Then he nodded condescendingly.

"Not so bad," he remarked, in a grudging way. "Of course, it's simply awful compared to one of our towns; but, on the whole, it's not half so dusty."

"Jolly interesting, I call it," said Church.

"It's just like one of those pictures you see in a book of fairy tales," declared McClure. "There's everything here—cobble streets, the round, cone-shaped roofs of red tiles, and everything. What a shame we haven't got a camera with us."

The juniors were standing in the centre of Ludari's central square. The sun was shining gloriously, and it was now morning; we had all been within the capital for just about thirty-two hours.

Our sleep had been a long one, for we had not been aroused until the evening on the previous day. It had then been too late to do any exploring. We had been entertained at a great banquet given by King Boris. It had been a magnificent affair, in which every member of our party figured. There were scores of other people present—prominent Ludari citizens, members of the army, and so forth.

The banquet hall was a huge place, and, after the feed, there had been patriotic speeches and events of that kind. The great hall was illuminated by hundreds of candles, which gave the whole affair an extremely quaint and charming appearance.

And then, after this affair, nearly all the fellows had gone to bed again—not that they were sleepy, but because there was nothing else to do. But now it was morning, and Ludari was looking at its best.

A large party of juniors had set out to explore the town, and they were tremendously interested in all they saw. The natives were greatly interested in

us, too. Wherever we went we attracted general attention. We were the heroes of the hour; we were respected and saluted on every hand.

King Boris had made known to his subjects the whole truth; he had proclaimed that we were responsible for his return to the capital; that we had saved his life; and that we had made the defeat of the Tagossa almost a certainty.

Exploring the town was an interesting occupation. We saw much to interest us, for Ludari was astoundingly old-fashioned. It was hardly possible to imagine that we were living in an age of electricity, wireless, aviation, and so forth. Here, in Ludari, these things had scarcely been heard of.

All the people were attired in native costume. Not a man or a woman would have dreamed of going abroad in any other attire. The streets, therefore, presented a very picturesque appearance, with the many highly coloured dresses constantly passing to and fro. It all seemed so peaceful and charming.

It was hardly possible to realise that the country had recently been in a state of turmoil, and that Kol Palak, the revolutionary leader, had seized the capital and compelled the king to flee.

But this, as we all knew, had actually happened. And it had only been after desperate fighting that the brigand chief had been flung out. He had been overconfident—he had taken it for granted that his position was secure, and that the royalists, without their king, would never dream of counter-attacking. Palak now knew that it is an unwise thing to take matters for granted.

And he was preparing a fresh attack on the capital. Even now, while we were exploring Ludari, the members of the Tagossa were gathering themselves together for a determined onslaught.

But we had all the advantage of the situation.

We believed that we had entered Ludari in secret, and that Palak knew nothing whatever about our arrival. Accordingly, the brigand chief would assume that his task was not a very difficult one.

All he had to do was to get a strong body of men and attack the capital by surprise. Once within the city's streets, a brief fight would be sufficient. The defenders would never be able to withstand the onslaughts of the Tagossa.

But, unknown to Palak, three thousand determined men had entered the city's gates—men who were staunch to their king, and who were ready to die. They were all well armed, and at various points round the city walls machine-guns had been placed. When the Tagossa's attack came it would not be a walk-over, after all!

Great precautions had been taken.

The city gates were constantly closed and guarded. No man was allowed to leave Ludari, and no strangers were admitted. The city was locked up, tight and secure. And Palak would suspect nothing; he would assume that the royalists were nervous and in great fear of an attack.

It was necessary to be careful. Possibly there were spies in the city—agents of the Tagossa, who would be eager to go forth in the night and to warn Palak that everything was not as he imagined. And so all the inhabitants were kept within the city walls. At night a most strict watch was kept. There were sentries stationed along the walls every few yards, within and without. It would be utterly impossible for any human being to leave Ludari without being seen and stopped.

These were all warlike precautions; but there was nothing whatever warlike about the town's appearance in the bright warmth of the spring sunshine. Handforth and Co. and several of the other fellows were enjoying themselves greatly.

"It's about the most wonderful town I've ever seen," exclaimed Reginald Pitt. "We haven't explored half of it yet, but what we have seen is tremendously fine. These houses must have been built four or five hundred years ago. And look at them—as firm and strong as ever."

"Yes, they knew how to build in those days," said Bob Christine, nodding. "They didn't shove houses up in two minutes, with walls made of coke blocks, and all sorts of old rubbish. These houses will still be intact after all our new villas have dropped into decay."

"Well, that's true enough, I suppose," said Pitt, "but we needn't go into any argument about it. I was thinking it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to explore the north half of the city to-day, and the south half to-morrow.

We might as well do the job thoroughly while we're about it. Isn't it glorious to know that we're free, and that it will only be a matter of days before we're off for home?"

"Rather!"

"Hurrah!"

"Home—and St. Frank's!"

"Good old St. Frank's!" said De Valerie, almost lovingly. "We didn't use to appreciate it much, but we shall when we go back. I'd love to be out in the old Triangle now or on the playing fields, punting a football about——"

"Don't!" said Handforth. "It makes my mouth water."

"But you're wrong about the football," put in Church. "You'd be handling a bat, I expect, because the cricket season's already in."

"By Jingo, so it is!" exclaimed De Valerie, with sparkling eyes. "Cricket! A ripping game, you know; and I expect these people out here have never even heard of it. Wouldn't it be grand if we could find a bat, a ball, and some wickets——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" interrupted Pitt. "We'd all like a game of cricket. I dare say; but cricket, somehow, doesn't seem to fit in with these surroundings. It would be completely out of the picture. And besides, where should we find a field?"

"It's no good arguing," put in Tommy Watson. "We shall all be back at St. Frank's before so very long, and then we shall be able to play cricket properly."

"Yes, rather!"

"What a ripplin' prospect, begad!"

It bucked the fellows up to think about it. And there certainly was every reason to believe that we should soon be shaking the dust of Mordania from our feet. We should be overjoyed to get back to England and home; but, somehow, I felt just a little pang at the thought of going back to the ordinary hum-drum existence at St. Frank's.

Mordania, at all events, was providing us with plenty of excitement!

Soon after midday news came in from the hills—news of the greatest importance. The king's scouts had ascertained that Kol Palak and his men were concentrating in the district. Great numbers of the Tagossa were preparing for their big attack on the city.

It was apparent, in fact, that the battle was to be that night.

"Well, it's better to get it over," said Pitt. "Waiting will only cause suspense and all that sort of thing. Ludari will either be safe for good in the morning, or in the hands of the Tagossa."

"If I was a betting chap, I'd wager twenty to one on the king's men," said Bob Christine. "Why, Palak doesn't stand a chance. If he only knew what kind of a reception was waiting for him, he'd buzz back into the hills, without making any giddy attack at all!"

Outwardly, the city presented the same appearance as usual during the afternoon; but, searching closely, and taking heed of every little action and expression, one could see that the inhabitants were in a state of suppressed excitement. There was a feeling in the air that something of a dramatic character was soon to take place.

After tea in the palace, Nelson Lee addressed all the juniors, and told them clearly and concisely that they were all to be within doors at nightfall. These were strict orders, and must be obeyed.

"I don't want you to take my words lightly, boys," said Nelson Lee. "It is practically certain that Kol Palak will make his attack to-night, and it is most imperative that you should be safely within the palace walls when nightfall comes."

"But you don't expect the attack to happen in the evening, sir?" exclaimed Pitt.

"Perhaps not," said Nelson Lee. "But I mean to be on the safe side. Personally, I do not anticipate this attack until midnight, or perhaps the small hours of the morning. But I am responsible for the safety of you all, and you must report yourselves to me here, in this apartment, before complete darkness arrives."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"An' quite right, too," he said. "No nonsense, you kids. If you ain't all in by the time stated, you'll get a tannin'. There'll probably be some stray bullets flyin' about, an' it ain't necessary for you to stop 'em. An' even a spent bullet can do a deuce of a lot of harm if it likes!"

All the juniors knew that there would be no escaping from these orders, and when they ventured out into the city's streets in the evening, they did so with the express intention of getting back before darkness fell.

Handforth and Co. went off by them-

selves, Edward Oswald having expressed a desire to examine an old ruin in the south-east corner of the town. Church and McClure, who wanted to go in quite a different direction, only went with their leader because they thought him incapable of taking care of himself.

It would be fatal to let Handforth wander about on his own. If he hadn't got Church and McClure to argue with, he would start his little games on some of the inhabitants. Reactions would certainly follow. Church and McClure felt that it was their duty to keep Handforth out of mischief.

So they went with him, and were obliged to suffer from his conversation all the time. Handforth talked a great deal about architecture, and he spoke with the air of a lecturer as he surveyed the old ruins. His chums had the greatest difficulty in keeping their faces straight, for about ninety per cent. of Handforth's remarks were hopelessly inaccurate. But, to Handforth, this was merely a detail.

They were in a very quiet corner of the city—a section where there were few dwelling houses, and no business premises whatever. Immediately in front of them lay the ruin of an old monastery—a place of wonderful historical interest. In the immediate vicinity were two or three other buildings, which were not frequented in the evening—a school, a structure which appeared to be a place of worship, and one or two similar buildings. And only a few citizens were to be seen in the narrow, twisted, cobbled streets. Handforth and Co. had the place almost to themselves.

"Wonderfully quiet here," remarked Church. "Peaceful, too. It's jolly difficult to imagine that this city has been through two or three battles recently, and that another battle is to take place to-night."

"Well, thank goodness the enemy doesn't possess artillery!" said McClure. "They can't shell the town——"

"It wouldn't matter to me if they did," broke in Handforth disdainfully. "I'm not afraid of being under fire."

"I wasn't talking about that at all," said McClure. "I was thinking about the buildings—these marvellous old structures which have stood the test of centuries. What an awful shame it is when an enemy comes and shells historical ruins and buildings like this! It's—it's almost like sacrilege."

Handforth sniffed.

"Rot!" he said bluntly. "What if these buildings were shelled and ruined? There are plenty more bricks, and plenty of mortar. It wouldn't take long to build new houses, and it would give the workmen something to do!"

"You ass! What about the historical value of these places?"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Handforth. "I'm a materialist—there's no fatheaded sentiment about me, thank goodness! A building's a building, and if it's new, it's all the better!"

Of course, he was only saying this for the sake of argument, because if Handforth didn't find any legitimate reason to argue, he would invent one. He had come to this quarter of the city on purpose to inspect these historical ruins, and he was greatly interested. For even Handforth could not fail to see the picturesque beauty in the old buildings. He and his chums were about to move back towards the palace when Handforth's attention suddenly became arrested. He was gazing down the narrow, cobbled street with great interest. Church and McClure stood by impatiently.

"We shall have to buck up, Handy," said Church, at length. "It's getting dusk, you know, and we mustn't forget Mr. Lee's orders."

"Don't you worry about that," said Handforth mysteriously. "I know what I'm doing. Look at that chap down there. What do you make of him?"

Church and McClure stared down the street at a figure which had come into view. Its back was towards them, and it was crouching flat against the wall, as though seeking to escape observation. The juniors had only just turned the corner, and the other man, probably, was unaware of their presence.

"There's nothing particularly interesting about the chap," said Church; "just one of these Mordanians, with woollen trousers, skull cap, and everything complete. What are you making a mystery about, Handy?"

Handforth glared.

"Who's making a mystery?" he demanded. "But that chap has been acting in a queer way. Look at him! Why is he hiding himself like that? What's the idea of flattening himself against the wall?"

"That's his business, I suppose," said McClure impatiently. "What a chap you are for interesting yourself in other

people's affairs, Handy! I dare say the poor chap has spotted his tailor, or something, and has dodged out of the way until——"

"You—you prize ass!" snorted Handforth. "We ain't in London; men don't dodge their tailors in Ludari! I'm pretty sure of one thing; I've formed a theory, and I mean to investigate."

Church and McClure groaned. The use of those words meant only one thing. Handforth fancied himself as a detective—this was one of his pet illusions. And whenever he began to talk about theories and investigations, it was a signal that he had developed a fresh attack of the fever.

"Oh, come on!" muttered Church.

"I'll come on when I'm ready!" exclaimed Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "I'm going to get on the track of this chap, my sons. He's a spy! He's a member of the 'Iagossa! And if we don't watch him, he'll escape from the city and warn Kol Palak of what we've prepared!"

"Oh, my goodness!" whispered McClure. "A spy! How the dickens do you know that? I've never known such a chap for jumping to conclusions. Grab him, Churchy! We've got to haul him out of the danger zone."

"My hat!" ejaculated Handforth suddenly. "Did you see that? The fellow just dropped a piece of paper! I saw him scrawling something a minute ago—a note, I expect. I don't suppose it's satisfied him, so he threw it away!"

"But—but what's the idea?" asked Church.

"Why, we'll get hold of that note. There you are!" said Handforth excitedly. "He's off now! Come on! We shall have to buck up, or we shall lose sight of him in these twisting streets!"

It was quite hopeless for Church and McClure to stop their leader now. He was fairly on the go, and was not likely to take any notice of what they said. There was a keen light in his eyes, and his jaw was set. The great Edward Oswald was on the track!

He ran forward lightly—at least, his movements were light in his own opinion. Church and McClure were inclined to compare his actions to those of an elephant.

The Mordanian in front of them was a smallish, bent man, rather elderly, according to his rear aspect, and he was

walking straight on down the street, apparently oblivious of the fact that he was being followed. Handforth searched about eagerly as he came to the spot where the man had been standing, and he gave a little exclamation of triumph as he saw a screwed-up scrap of paper.

"By George!" he muttered.

Handforth snatched it up, unfolded it, and gazed eagerly at the crumpled surface. And there, right in the centre of the paper, was an unmistakable symbol—a hastily scrawled design in pencil, representing a torch with a big flame at the top.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth.

"What is it, you ass?"

"Let's have a look!"

"The sign of the flaming torch!" said Handforth, with fierce triumph. "What did I tell you? The sign of the Tagossa! That chap's a spy—one of Kol Palak's men! Come on, we're going to collar him!"

"But—but——"

"Hold on, Handy——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I haven't got any time to argue. We've got to capture that rotter, and take him to the palace. My word, what a sensation we shall cause, bringing in a spy! I'll bet he'll be court-martialled and shot within the hour!"

Church and McClure had suspicions. Somehow they felt that it wasn't quite such an easy matter to capture a real spy. But to remonstrate with Handforth was just about as profitable as telling a funny story to a brazen image.

"Buck up!" said Handforth. "I expect the chap's armed, so we shall have to be careful."

He ran forward at full speed now, lumbering along, and making no attempt to hide his movements. The man in native costume turned sharply as he heard the running footsteps of the juniors. He was an elderly man, with a long grey beard, and brown, wrinkled countenance. Just for a moment he seemed startled, and appeared to hesitate. Then he shrugged his shoulders, stood back against the wall, and waited.

Handforth and Co. arrived, breathless. Church and McClure were not at all comfortable, but they were obliged to back their impulsive leader. They could never leave him to deal with this matter single-handed.

"Collar him!" panted Handforth grimly.

"But—but he may be a harmless citizen——"

"We're not taking any chances," said Handforth, reaching forward and grasping the elderly native by the shoulder. "You rotter! You're a spy, and we've got you! We're going to cart you along to the king's palace!"

The man protested, speaking volubly in a language which the juniors could not understand, but which they believed to be Italian. The man struggled and protested vigorously, but he was helpless in the grasp of the three juniors.

A few other citizens were in sight now, and it seemed likely that a scene would be created. But the prisoner had the good sense to take it quietly, and, after a shrug of his shoulders, he walked quietly along with Handforth and Co., Edward Oswald keeping a firm grip on his shoulder.

They walked through the streets briskly, and at last arrived within the courtyard of the king's palace. They marched in between the sentries, who closed the big gates behind them; the juniors, of course, were admitted as often as they pleased. They had full permission to come and go as they pleased.

Just as it happened, in the courtyard several juniors were talking to Lord Dorrimore, and he turned and stared as he saw the newcomers arriving with their prisoner.

"Hallo! What's this?" he asked mildly.

"I want to see Mr. Lee!" said Handforth, with great importance. "I've got a prisoner here—a spy! We found him under suspicious circumstances. I want to see Mr. Lee at once."

"By gad!" said Dorrie, with a twinkle in his eye. "So this gentleman is a spy, eh? Poor old thing! I'm afraid you've made a frightful bloomer this time."

"A—a bloomer?" gasped Handforth.

"Yes, my son, you have!" exclaimed the prisoner cheerfully. "I didn't want to cause trouble in the town, so I came along quietly. And now I suppose you're pretty well pleased with yourself! That little scrap of paper spoofed you nicely!"

Handforth and Co. stared in amazement, for the prisoner had peeled off his

beard, and stood revealed as a very youthful person.

"Nipper!" yelled Church and McClure.

"Well, I always knew you were a fat-head, but, for sheer idiocy, this just about carries off the biscuit!" said Handforth indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better luck next time, old son!" I grinned. "You collared me in a masterly way, and it was rather a compliment to my disguise."

Handforth glared.

"But what was the idea of getting yourself up in that mad way?" he demanded. "Why can't you behave like a decent human being, instead of—"

"My dear ass, I was merely prowling about, looking for spies," I explained. "The gov'nor has been at the same game. We became a bit suspicious regarding two or three men, so we just kept on their tracks, watching them. As it happened, there's been nothing in the way of—"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

We all started, and stared out of the courtyard with rather startled expressions. Quite distinctly on the late evening air came the sharp cracking of rifles—not one or two, but many. They increased.

Then came another sound—one that I instantly recognised.

The rattling roar of machine-gun fire!

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "The Tagossa men are here! The attack has commenced!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROUT OF THE TAGOSSA!

THE battle had started!

Just as King Boris had anticipated, Kol Palak and his men had chosen a moment when everything seemed to be peaceful and quiet—when it seemed impossible that the inhabitants of Ludari were on guard.

For it was late evening, almost the hour when the citizens retired to rest. Personally, I had expected Palak to make his attack during the night; but, for some reason, the brigand chief commenced the battle now.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for us to witness the actual battle, for Nelson Lee would not allow us to depart from

the centre of the city. We were to be idle watchers, out of all danger.

But later on I heard all the details of that great tussle. So I find it possible to set them all down as they actually happened.

The Tagossa evidently knew that they would not have everything their own way, and that they would need to fight hard in order to gain possession of Ludari, for they were outside the city wall in thousands—a great many thousands.

They came in swarms, concentrating on all sides. As there were no guns in the city—indeed, no artillery of any sort—it was possible for the Tagossa to form into battle array in full view of the enemy. For they were quite out of range, and they fondly imagined that they would only be worried by a very scattered fire when they made their attempts to smash down the gates and to scale the walls.

But then they received the surprise of their lives.

The defenders knew all about the projected attack long before it actually took place, and, quietly and calmly, they prepared. Hundreds of men were placed upon the walls, where special firing posts had been erected—well-protected firing posts through which the defenders could rake the enemy with bullets.

And then, as the attackers drew near, stealthily and silently, the first shot had been fired. It was the signal for a general fusillade. With a rattling roar the rifles at two or three hundred shoulders spat out their missiles of death.

The brigands had expected nothing of this kind, and large numbers of them crumpled up at once, and those following were filled with blank dismay. They fell back hurriedly, leaving many dead and wounded near the walls.

But then the leaders urged them on, shouting that the defenders were weak and could not do much damage.

A determined rush took place, and this was just outside the main gateway. Hundreds of the Tagossa men hurled themselves forward. They came surging on, firing continuously with rifles and revolvers as they did so.

But the majority of their bullets struck harmlessly against the stone walls. And into their ranks was poured a devastating fire—it was the fire from two machine-guns, which suddenly

opened out their death-dealing voices with startling and devastating effects. The columns of attackers simply melted away, leaving only a few scattered remnants.

It was the biggest surprise the Tagossa men had ever received.

And from the main gateway, those men who escaped death fled helterskelter, back into the darkness which lay beyond.

It was the same story round the other sections of the great wall. In all there had been twenty simultaneous attacks, the Tagossa men believing that they could bring about the swift downfall of the city by using all their forces in one determined assault. They had brought great scaling ladders with them—rudely constructed affairs which required many men to carry them. These were rushed forward, flung against the walls, and then the revolutionaries swarmed up, their object being to swoop on to the city in great numbers. And Kol Palak had given them orders to shoot everybody on sight—soldiers, civilians, women and children.

They were to institute a reign of terror in Ludari—such a terror that resistance would be beaten down by blood itself. But, fortunately, Kol Palak's dire scheme was never put into operation.

For not one attacking party succeeded in breaking down the defence. In most cases the ladders were cast aside long before they could be erected, their carriers either lying dead or fleeing in terror.

But in two cases the ladders were erected, and scores of men swarmed up on to the city's walls, and then, just as they were expecting to get through, a machine-gun was rushed to the spot, and fire was opened.

Grrrrr!

The deadly weapon sent forth its grating roar, and a hail of bullets raked the ladders up and down. Men fell in all directions, screaming and groaning, and others who were about to climb up lost heart, and fled into the darkness. There was not the slightest doubt that the Tagossa men were receiving more than they bargained for.

Indeed, it was obvious by the very method of attack that Kol Palak had known nothing about the new army's arrival and the presence of machine-guns in the city.

But, although the Tagossa was de-

feated in no uncertain way at the outset of the fight, the attackers did not give up the battle. They merely retired for some little time, in order to gather their strength, and to accustom themselves to the unexpected conditions.

On the city walls the defenders were practically intact, not a soul being killed, and only one or two men suffering injuries. They had had all the advantage with them—but only because they had sprung this surprise.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Tagossa army were making hurried plans, and, before half an hour had passed, the most grim attack of all took place. This was of a different character from the others, for the entire forces of Kol Palak hurled themselves at the main gateway—they concentrated on one spot.

Certainly there was more chance of success by doing this, and there commenced a terrible and bloodthirsty battle. It was not as though the defenders were dealing with a mere raiding party. The Tagossa men were to be numbered in thousands, and they were all enraged by the fate which had overtaken their comrades. And when the second attack took place there was considerable method employed.

Large numbers of sharp-shooters crept up in the darkness. They opened fire simultaneously, picking off at least a score of royalists who were incautiously revealing themselves above the parapet. Hidden behind banks of earth or boulders, these snipers kept up their deadly work, firing at every opportunity.

And, meanwhile, another great party came surging forward, armed with a great tree trunk, which was sent hurtling forward with awful and tremendous force.

Crash! Crash!

The log struck the gate with shattering force, smashing the ironwork to smithereens, but only breaking a clean hole through the gate. Machine-guns roared, rifles cracked, and many members of the Tagossa fell, dead, dying or wounded.

And then, almost in the same minute, the log was again brought into action. And this time the gates could not withstand the tremendous shock; they shivered to atoms under the impact, and fell away in a crumpled mass of twisted iron.

And through the gateway surged the men of the Tagossa—hundreds upon hun-

dred. They were filled with wild excitement now, and they cared nothing for machine-guns or rifles—they cared nothing for death.

Large numbers were shot down as they surged into the city. But the affair was serious enough, nevertheless, for hundreds entered, and they commenced firing at random as they rushed through the city streets. But all the civilian inhabitants were within doors, safe out of harm's way.

If the Tagossa men believed that they would sweep through the city to the palace, they had made a terrible mistake, for almost at once large numbers of the king's men came racing along the cobbled roadways, rushing up from all directions. And then commenced a terrible battle—a hand-to-hand struggle, in which most of these men fought with bare fists or with the butts of revolvers.

It was a terrible scene, and the shouts of the fighters, the moans of the wounded, the cracking and spurling of rifles, all contributed to make a picture which was one of terror and bloodshed.

Just for a short period it seemed that the Tagossa men would gain the day—that by sheer weight of numbers they would beat down the grim defence of the Royalists.

But then, without warning, another party came on the scene—led by Lord Dorrimore himself. Dorrie positively declared that he wasn't going to be out of the excitement, so he collected a large number of men, and went into battle. He arrived at the rear of the Tagossa men. And there was only one possible thing for the attackers to do—and that was to surrender.

But the majority of them did not surrender—they fought on to the death, caring nothing whether they lived or died. And from without, came other sounds which spoke of grim battles.

As a matter of fact, Kol Palak's men were retreating in disorder. All their efforts had been in vain, and nearly fifty per cent of their effectives were either dead or wounded. The casualties among the Tagossa were appalling.

And the leaders realised that this could not possibly go on. There was only one course—and that was to retreat, and disappear into the mountains, where they would be safe. And many orders were given, and

the invaders fell away from their positions and commenced a wild, hurried backward movement.

But then came the biggest shock of all.

Their retreat was barred!

During the height of the battle over a thousand men had left the City by secret means and had taken up their stations on the only possible route by which the Tagossa could escape. And here with many machine guns to assist them the Royalists waited; for they knew that sooner or later the enemy would beat a hasty retreat.

It was a complete ambush, and fire was opened without any mercy. Kol Palak's men were called upon to surrender, but this they refused to do; for, after all, these mountain ruffians were as brave as lions.

And so the battle was left to take its course. A great many men were killed, a great many others were wounded, and there were thousands of prisoners. Indeed, there could be only one possible truth about this great fight.

Kol Palak had gathered together his entire forces for the battle. Every man had been sent into action—there were no reserves. For Palak had believed that this one swift, overpowering rush would end in complete success to his arms. But nothing of the kind had happened. The Tagossa was beaten.

It was not until the night was well advanced that the last shot was fired. But then there was no peace for the City. The place was filled with wounded men, who all needed—and received—medical attention.

It happened to catch sight of Dorrie striding across the central square in his shirt sleeves, with bloodstains on his arms, with his hair all tousled.

"Hallo, young un!" exclaimed his lordship cheerfully. "Ripping scrap—what? Talk about beggars for fighting—I've never seen anything like it. I can't help admiring them all for sticking it out so long."

"But we've won, haven't we, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Won?" repeated Dorrie. "My dear chap, the Tagossa has ceased to exist! It has been routed completely. Palak sent all his forces into this battle—every man he could get hold of. They're either dead, dying or prisoners."

"But a good many escaped, surely?" I asked.

Dorrie shook his head.

"I'll guarantee that not more than a hundred got away," he said. "You see, they couldn't do the trick—their retreat was cut off, and they either had to surrender tamely, or show fight. They showed fight."

"And do you mean to say that the Tagossa is wiped out of existence, sir?" asked Handforth.

"I verily believe it is," replied Dorrie.

"And what about Kol Palak, sir?"

"His fate isn't known yet, but I heard a rumour that he fell during that last grim encounter," said Dorrie. "But everything is at sixes and sevens just now. We shall get the facts straightened out before long——"

Boom-booom!

A long, rolling explosion sounded, far, far away up in the mountains. The sound was felt rather than heard, proving that it had occurred at a great distance away. Dorrie looked at me significantly.

"I was expectin' that," he said quietly.

"Why, what was it?" I asked, full of eagerness.

"The final indication that Kol Palak's power is at an end," said Dorrie. "His vast mountain stronghold has been blown to atoms."

"Great Scott!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"But—but how do you know?" I asked quickly.

"There can be no other explanation," said his lordship. "Many hours ago a secret party left Ludari under the leadership of our old friend, Nepoli. A fine fellow, that! The object was to reach the stronghold in the mountains, and send it to smithereens. You see, they knew they would find it practically deserted and almost unguarded. But they took a machine gun with them, in case of trouble. That explosion means that the brigands' lair has gone up in smoke and powder."

And less than an hour later, we

learnt that Kol Palak himself was no longer in the land of the living. He had died with his forces, fighting the battle. And the following day, the full, tremendous extent of the Tagossa's defeat became apparent.

Raiding parties were sent out from the capital in all directions. But only a few scattered remnants of Kol Palak's army were brought in. The Tagossa had ceased to exist. Its leaders were dead, and those members of the great society who had not taken part in this battle thought it wise to change their political opinions, and they became loyal to the King. This was in keeping with the national character. These rough, mountain fellows respected the party which was the strongest.

Of course, quite a number of the Tagossa men escaped; they fled to the border, and vanished into other countries. And among these were two or three of the leaders—two or three of Kol Palak's generals. They would certainly never cause any further trouble in Mordania. Death would be their penalty if they set foot once again on their own soil.

And that great day was the beginning of a new era in Mordania. Strife was at an end, and the people themselves were glad of it. King Boris ruled supreme once again, and it was practically certain that there would be no more revolutions for many a long day. But the King openly admitted—that his victory was due solely to the efforts of Nelson Lee and the St. Frank's party.

We only spent a day or two more in Ludari.

They were days crowded with public functions and festivities. More than once we were all publicly thanked by King Boris. And then, one great day, we started off with a huge escort for the frontier.

We were on our way back to England—back to St. Frank's.

But if we thought that we had finished for good with the Tagossa, we had made a very big mistake!

THE END.

ANOTHER THRILLING YARN NEXT WEEK, ENTITLED

THE SIGN OF THE FLAMING TORCH.

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(Now read on.)

The Slaying of the Stegosaur.

THEY had traversed something over half the distance when Harding, who had his eyes on the water, grunted.

"I say, you fellows, it's pretty deep here, you know," said he. "Quite as deep as along opposite the caves, I should say. Hadn't we better go back a bit, and follow the shoals along close to the shore?"

"Oh, we'll be all right. There's nothing about, and we will be in shallow water again in five minutes," returned Jack Maxwell reassuringly.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the wheel rocked ominously, and something bumped against the lower part with a tremendous, grinding crash. The whole structure quivered and groaned, but it had been well made by its original builders, and kept in good repair by the men who risked their lives in it, so nothing gave.

"Full speed ahead!" yelled Maxwell. "What in thunder was it? Did you see the brute, Jim?"

"No! Don't want to. Ouch! Here it comes again."

Once more the swell rose and again that terrible rending thud all but upset them. And this time as they reeled forward they had a sight of a broad, dark shell back—the back of an enormous turtle.

Or, at least, that was what the thing looked like, though, even as it swirled past, a great head, ending in a cruel-looking bony beak, snaked out, and fierce, small reptilian eyes glared at them.

"Anson, you're great on a snap shot. Pot the brute in the head if you get a chance," said Maxwell. "Another bump like that will just about settle us. We're riding lower in the water. Our floats have been damaged."

"Hard a-starboard! Here it comes again! Let's give it a volley!" cried Harding.

And suiting the action to the word, drew and fired with the others.

The creature seemed to dive at the flash, and they could not tell whether they had scored or no; but at least it did not touch, and they rolled on, making but heavy weather of it.

The old wheel was obviously on its last voyage. Instead of riding high, it wallowed along awash, the water swishing over the ankles of the three who worked like demon squirrels or demented dachshunds to increase their pace.

They felt the wheel check as it touched bottom, then move on. The shore was but a few yards away, the water rippling across clean-looking sand. Another minute—nay, another few seconds—and they would be out of their cage.

"Look out! Fire!" yelled Anson, and let drive.

A wave of sand and water flew up against the grated side of the wheel, and out of it came the aggressive turtle—or whatever it was. It crashed against the grating, rending half of it away, quite oblivious that Anson's last shot had driven clean through its head, then drew back for another rush that should settle the affair.

"Out with you!" howled Maxwell, flinging open the door on the further side and thrusting his friends through only in time, for as they stepped clear, the brute dashed in again, the old wheel shrieked to the impact, and, with a shuddering groan in all its ancient timbers, fell in a heap upon the attacker.

That saved the three. Before the beast could get its bearings, they were safely ashore and ensconced behind a screen of bushes. They saw the beast smash the wheel to pieces and finally move away in dudgeon.

"Hang it all, we're lucky to be alive!" cried Maxwell. "Every shot we fired went home, yet it doesn't seem a whit the worse. One needs bombs or a field-piece for this place. Now that we're here we'll look for those skins. Come on!"

But they looked in vain. They found the tree easily enough, but something had either devoured the hides or torn them to shreds, leaving no trace. However, they wasted no time in vain regrets but made haste to get round the upper end of the lake, and with nothing to show for their excursion, returned to the cliff path, where they found their pair of Bheels awaiting them, and so got back to find the professor making a careful drawing of the fish which he had dissected.

He heard about the giant turtle with interest.

"But we have specimens alive at the present day which differ from their ancient predecessors—and this of yours—only in size. Now, that Stegosaur is unique. If only—But you mustn't run risks."

Then he became absorbed in his work and took no further notice of them.

"It's fairly plain that the old dear hankers for his Steggy, isn't it?" murmured Jack. "Well, it's a man-sized job. How, in the name of wonder, are we to settle a beast as big as a motor-bus and not nearly so sensitive? Firearms are no good, and a pitfall big enough to catch that hulk would take a month or two to dig, even if we could work without interruption—which isn't likely in this garden of endless delights. Now—I—wonder—"

His voice trailed off to silence, and he sat a while thinking. Then he rose, and, leaving Anson to do a bit of turquoise mining, took Harding off for a tramp along the ledge which brought them at last to the very end.

There they sat down with their feet dangling over space while Jack surveyed the landscape before them with a dreamy eye.

"That's the place," he muttered at length, pointing to a group of trees about a quarter of a mile away. "They're big enough—but not too big—and we could fence the place off a bit to give nunky time to do his carving. I expect he'll want to do a bit of that."

"What are you drivelling about?" inquired Harding kindly.

"Eh? About the Steggy, of course! What else did we walk all this way for?"

We'll settle Steggy in that grove if I can only find him and get him to follow me. I think I can keep ahead of him for a mile or so. I'll lead him in and then—"

"Yes? What will you do?"

"That, my sweet one, you will comprehend in a minute," replied Maxwell, and unfolded his simple plans.

By the time he had finished it was growing dark, and they had to return to the village. But very early the next morning they returned, accompanied by Anson and a great force of the Bheels, all provided with ropes of twisted grass and their stone hatchets.

Sentinels were set in the tree tops and all hands got to work with a will. The head of one of the largest trees in the grove was cut off, ropes were made fast to it so that when it was cut through at the base it still remained upright, supported by the stays.

This work consumed most of the day, so, abandoning the place for the night, they returned home, finding the professor in high glee. Aided by some of the Bheels, he had succeeded in goading the crab brute, which kept watch on the lower part of the cliff path, into climbing clear out of the water on to the ledge. Then, after taking several photographs and making many notes, he had given a sign to the Bheels, who had clambered aloft and loosed a heavy stone. Instantly they had released the missile, which, crashing on the great beast, effectually put it out of business.

"So now we may go to and fro without fear—until another takes the post!" said he, and concluded with a learned account of the creature, which he had named the Great Bheel Lake Crab, in honour of the little people.

But he forgot all about these feats when he heard what his nephew proposed to do on the morrow.

"But, my dear lad, you are taking a dreadful risk," he remonstrated.

"I think not," replied Jack. "In a long run the beggar would tire me down, I suppose, but I can keep ahead of him for a mile or two, and that is all we want. Only we must start very early, for I want you all to be in position by daylight."

So, with a small army of followers, who might be needed later, they set out in the small hours and reached the grove without mishap as the first rays of the sun began to warm the sky.

The Bheels had been left behind on the cliff till they should be needed, so there was plenty of room on the two little platforms which had been built high aloft in trees near the one which remained precariously balanced on its base, only upheld by the guy ropes, which were led to the platforms.

As they squatted forty feet from the ground and ate their breakfast, Jack explained his simple plan to the professor.

"We will stay here till we can get a sight of the beast," he said. "Then I will skirmish out and attract his attention, leading him this way. You see that log across the glade? I can hop over it on the run, but Steggy will check a little at it. He will be

broadside on to you. As he reaches it, you will cut this rope, while Anson and Harding will haul on those two others. If all goes well it should fall across Steggy's back, and if he can stand that he is even stronger than I think him."

"Rest assured that if it does drop on him he will not withstand it," answered the professor. "But it may miss him."

"In that case, we will try again another day, or adopt a different plan," said Jack. "But I think he is a big enough target. Now, sit tight, you fellows. I'm going to the crow's nest to have a look round."

He climbed to the top of the tree and settled down to watch. He saw several small deer grazing in the distance, and presently a couple of loping, high-shouldered wild dogs, bigger than the dingo of the outer continent, creeping towards them.

But long before the brutes got within striking distance, the deer spied—or winded—them, and were off into the blue.

Later a large, spotted cat, caught out late, came slinking across the open, entered the grove, spied the intruders aloft, and, cursing bitterly, sped away to a thicket.

The sun grew hot, and Jack began to tire of his vigil. Below him the others dozed.

"Lazy beggars!" he muttered enviously. "I'll stick it for another five minutes and then someone else can take a turn. I—Great Scott! There he is! Stand by, boys! The circus is about to begin."

For there at the edge of a thin clump of acacia and thorn bush, behind which he had probably lain for many hours, stood the Stegosaur, his nose in the air, sniffing the air.

Possibly the slow wind carried some whiff of the humans to him, or perhaps it was merely chance. Anyhow, he turned towards the grove and came slowly forward, pausing occasionally to snuffle at some track made during the night. Jack descended hastily.

"Remember not to let loose till he is at the log!" he cried, and ran out of the grove towards the monster.

It did not see him at once, but when it did the spines along its back stiffened and its long tail rose, switching the air. Lengthening its stride it made towards the young man, who halted, gauging its pace.

On it came. The ground shook to its heavy tread. Jack waved his arms, shouted, danced, then, as it put on full steam ahead, turned and ran for the grove. As he ran he continually glanced behind him, for he did not wish to get too far ahead lest the brute should have time to see or scent the snare laid for him.

But he had no cause for alarm on this score. In fact, it was rather the other way about. The huge animal, infuriated by his puny opponent who eluded it like a shadow, spurted and hurtled along at a truly amazing pace. It began to overhaul its quarry. Jack saw that he had utterly miscalculated the brute's powers. Instead of playing with

it, as he had imagined, it would presently be playing with him.

He was still some hundreds of yards from the place where the log had been felled across the open space through the grove, and he knew that he would have to put forth all his strength in order to reach it with a sufficient margin of safety. He looked no more behind him but ran as he had never run before.

And now he was in the shadow of the first trees of the grove, now he saw the log across the way in front of him, while his ears were filled with the hollow rumbling thud of the monster's feet as they drummed on the hard, sun-baked earth. Twenty yards more. He called up those reserves of nervous energy which lie stored in every man, ready for the moment of uttermost need, and, shooting ahead, took the log in his stride.

As he leapt he saw the Stegosaur almost at his heels.

"Cut!" he yelled, and darted aside between two huge trees behind which he halted, spent with his last, desperate effort.

He turned in time to see the result of his life-and-death race. There was a heavy thud as Steggy encountered the log, a grinding squeak as the huge trunk above swayed from its base, and then a terrible dull crash as its tremendous weight dropped upon the Stegosaur.

Nothing in the animal world could have withstood that terrific impact. Steggy, the boss beast in that museum of old world survivals, crumpled under the frightful blow which fell in the middle of his high-crested back, the spot where the "small" should have been if there had been anything small in his composition. With an enormous grunt and a ridiculously high-pitched squeal, the huge beast crumpled and fell, its tail cutting a swathe among the underbush as it flailed in agony.

Not even the reptile's tremendous vitality could survive such a shock. For a minute it continued to struggle, then the tail ceased to move, the twitching limbs relaxed, and it lay still.

An awed silence fell upon the grove, broken at last by the calm voice of Professor Maxwell.

"Boys, we have done something that no man has done before for ages—probably at no time—for never before have men and these enormous creatures been on the earth together—if we except the Worgees. But to gather the fruits of victory we had better get your Bheels and set them to making a ring of fires. Anson, will you go and escort them here?"

They descended and congratulated Jack, who had by this time begun to recover. Then they got busy. While Anson and Harding superintended the building of wood piles and kept a sharp look-out for prowlers, the professor, assisted by his nephew, took many photographs, made sketches, and at

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

last started on the business of dissection. When the Bheels had finished their task they were brought up to assist, and throughout the day the job went on.

It was not a specially pleasant one, but Maxwell insisted that it was necessary.

"I especially desire to preserve certain of the creature's internal organs, for a particular purpose," he said. "It may not be possible, but I have an idea for getting out of this valley. Otherwise, I would not have thought of sacrificing such an interesting creature."

"My aunt! A scientist can be mighty cold-blooded," whispered Harding to Anson. "The interesting creature came uncommonly near to catching poor old Jack. He had some close calls on the West front, but nothing nearer than that moment when the beggar's beak nearly touched his slacks."

"Oh, that's all right. It's only his little way," replied Anson. "But how on earth is the brute to help us get out of here?"

"Dunno. But it's time to see about those fires. The sun's getting low and we'll have a good attendance in the front rows to-night, if I'm not mistaken!"

He was not. Soon after sunset, even before the brief twilight had faded into night, various creatures began to show themselves around the outskirts of the grove. The wild dogs sneaked about the underbush, a pack of brutes resembling hyenas made the night hideous with their weird cries, and several times the trees shook to the roaring of two tiger-lions which prowled round the circle of fires, seeking a gap.

But they found none. The Bheels had provided fuel enough to keep up a bright blaze throughout the dark hours, and, safe behind the flaming barrier, mocked at the denizens of the wild.

With the first light all hands resumed their task with such goodwill that before mid-day they were back on the ledge, the Bheels burdened with certain gory bundles which the professor insisted on keeping keen watch over. He refused to tell what he intended doing, and when they arrived at the village, had his trophies deposited in a cave which had been occupied by the Worgees.

"Even an old fogey like myself may have a notion occasionally," he said, with a twinkle in his bright eyes. "You will keep out of this cave till I have either solved my problem or failed. Meantime, amuse yourselves by collecting such specimens as are strange to you, but run no risks. Now leave me to my work."

(To be continued.)

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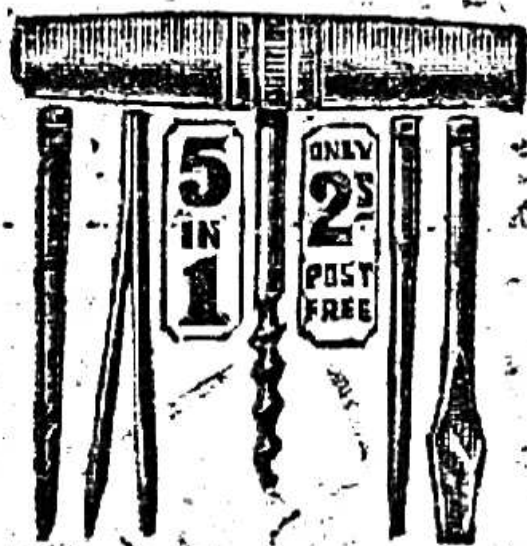
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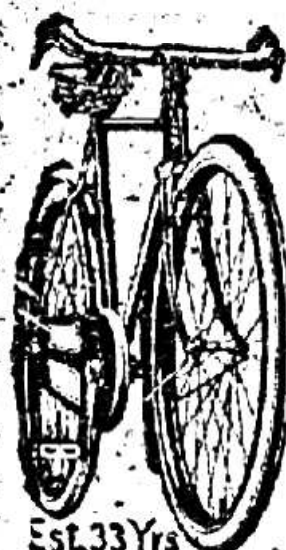


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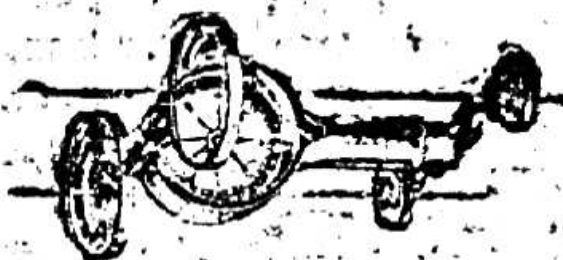
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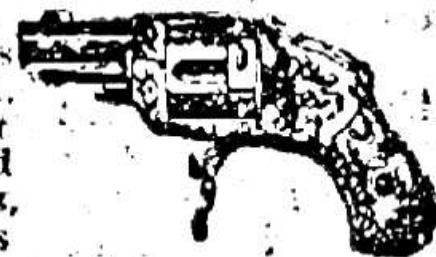
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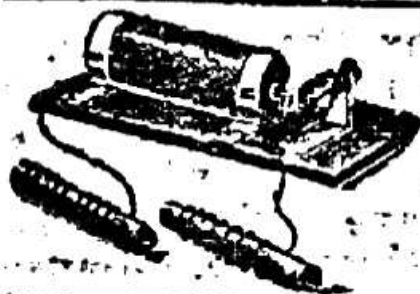
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