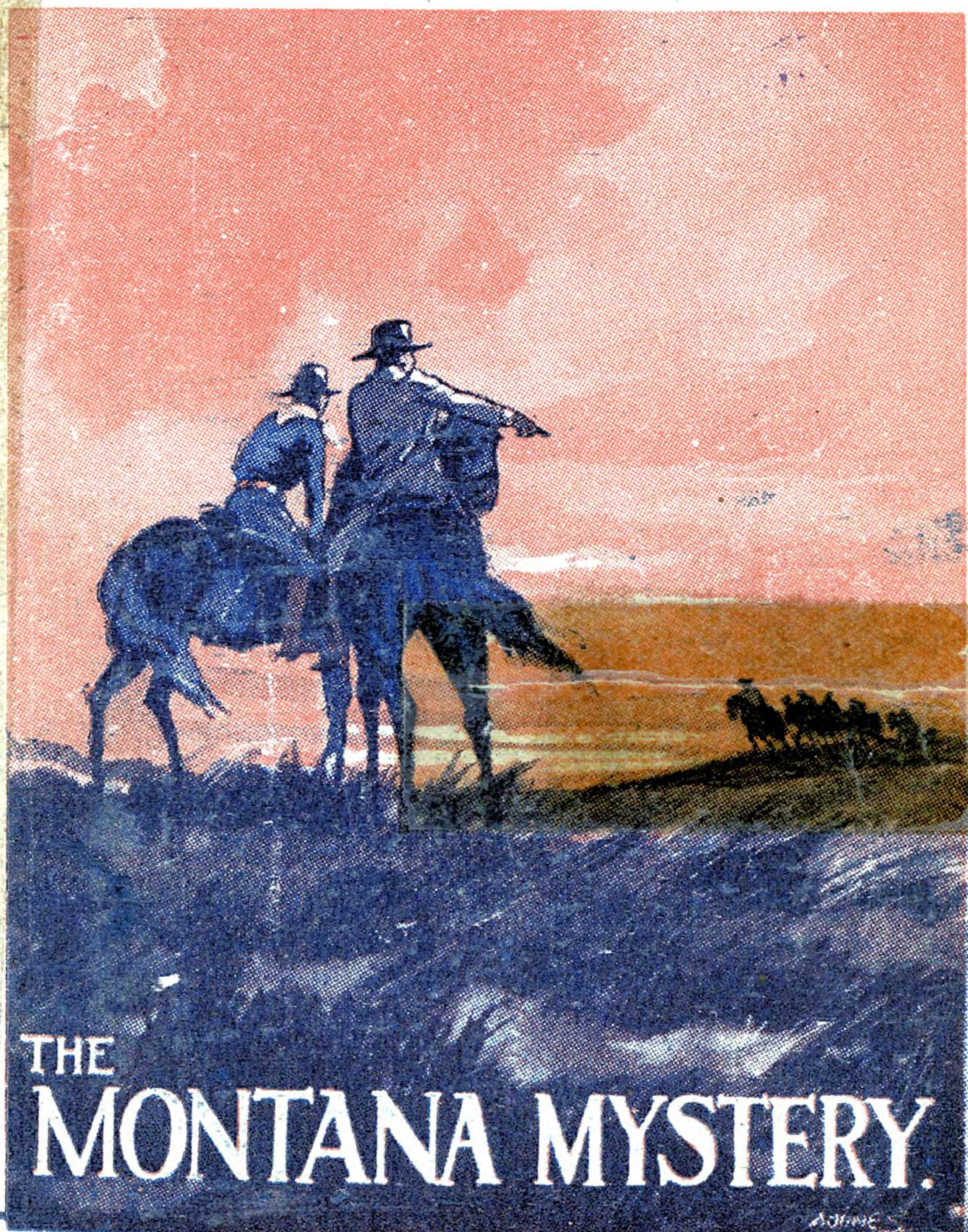


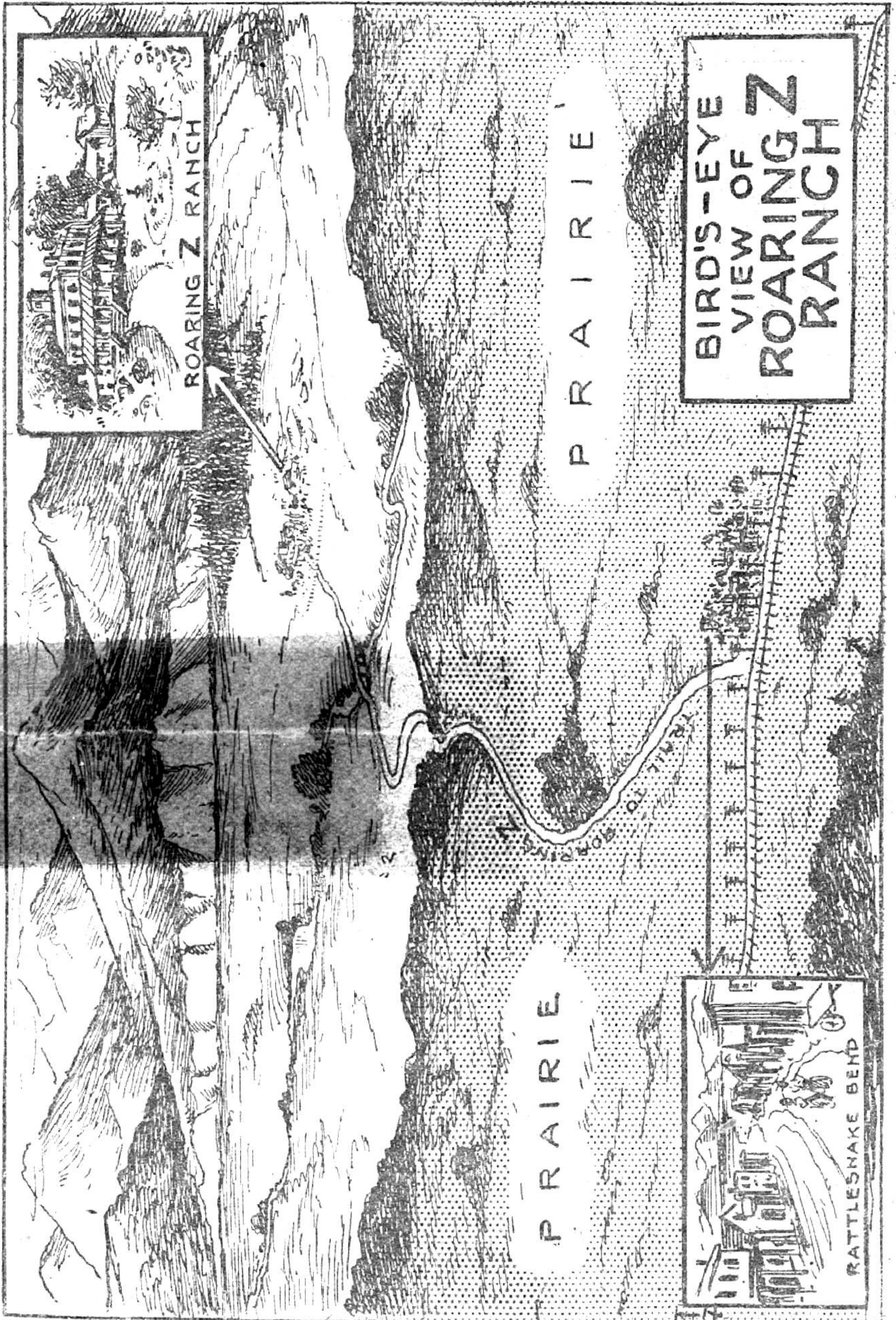
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THE MONTANA MYSTERY.

Every one of the approaching men wore a heavy black mask.
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ROARING Z RANCH



BIRD'S-EYE
VIEW OF
ROARING Z
RANCH

PRAIRIE



RATTLESNAKE BEND

TRAIL TO GOBBING



THE MONTANA MYSTERY.

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing **NELSON LEE, NIPPER, LORD DORRIMORE**, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Fateful Fifteenth," "The Brand of the Twin Stars," "The Test Match Triumph," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

RATTLESNAKE BEND!

"GEE! Ain't it just—bully!" Justin B. Farman, of the Remove Form of St. Frank's, stood looking straight before him with glistening eyes, flushed cheeks, and with his whole body rigid with tense, inward excitement.

"Say, I guess we're here—right here!" went on the American junior enthusiastically. "Happy? Say, I guess I'm so all-fired content that I just don't know what to hand out in the way of swell talk. I should worry!"

Edward Oswald Handforth sniffed.

"Well, I'm blessed if I can see much to shout about," he observed. "Do you mean to tell me that this place is Rattlesnake Bend?"

"Sure!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"Wal, what's wrong?"

"I'm not saying that there's anything wrong," replied Handforth. "But I've understood all along that Rattlesnake Bend was a town, and not a mouldy collection of old wooden huts!"

Nelson Lee, who was standing nearby, chuckled.

"My dear Handforth, you mustn't expect too much," he smiled. "Rattlesnake Bend, after all, is merely a small prairie township, and does not presume to be a place of any importance."

The scene was, perhaps, rather a curious one. Not ten minutes since, the lumbering American train had pulled out of the insignificant little station of Rattlesnake Bend, to go thundering on its way further west.

As a matter of fact, we were in Montana, and right away in the distance the towering peaks of the Rocky Mountains raised their snowcapped summits to the clear sky of the summer's day.

It was only a little after noon, and the heat was somewhat stifling. But we had grown somewhat accustomed to this during the last day or so. The long journey by railroad across the United States had been attractive and full of interest—at first. But we had grown tired of it, and now we were only too relieved to be on solid ground, and in the open air—out of the stifling coaches.

In short, we had arrived.

It is hardly necessary for me to explain that our party, numbering sixteen all told, had left London about a fortnight earlier, at the beginning of the long summer St. Frank's vacation.

We were all the guests of Mr. James Farman—Justin B.'s pater. His real home was in California, and we should probably go on there later. At present, however, we were to stay, at Mr. Farman's invitation, at his extensive ranch here in Montana. We had all looked forward with keen excitement to the experience.

Montana was not new to me, for I had visited the Western States with Nelson Lee on two or three occasions—mainly in connection with detective cases. And, incidentally, there was a bit of a mystery here, on the Roaring Z Ranch, which Nelson Lee was determined to inquire into during our stay.

But, after all, it was a holiday trip, and we were all "out West" with the intention of enjoying ourselves. Our party was an interesting one, the grown-ups numbering four—Mr. Farman himself, Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore (that famous, lovable, sporting nobleman) and Umlosi, the giant African negro. Old Umlosi was rather out of his element here, but he wouldn't be parted from Dorrie.

The other members of the party consisted of Farman junior, Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, myself, Handforth, Church, McClure, Fattle Little, Reginald Pitt, Bob Christine, Talmadge, and Ernest Lawrence. Quite a number of other juniors had been invited—De Valerie, Grey, Somerton, and a lot more—but their parents had not been able to spare them.

However, we were a fairly representative crowd, and there were quite enough of us to make things merry and bright.

And now, after crossing three-parts of the vast American continent, we had arrived at Rattlesnake Bend, the little western township which was the nearest place of any importance to Roaring Z Ranch.

Mr. Farman was bustling about, as genial as ever. A big, bluff, hearty son of the west, "Big Jim" Farman was altogether likeable; the juniors already regarded him as a kind of generous uncle.

"Well, boys, we've hit the Bend, and I've got a sort of notion that there'll be something of a sensation right here," he exclaimed cheerfully. "I guess I told my little Connie to be along with the two automobiles. We'll need to have something to tote us over the trail to the ranch."

"Gee! I'd forgotten Connie!" said Farman junior, his eyes sparkling. "Won't it be just dandy to see her again, dad? I reckon she was seventeen in May, and——"

"Sure!" said his father. "Just the prettiest little girl in Montana, son, you can take it from me. Ah, that cloud of dust looks suggestive!"

We were all standing in various attitudes beside the railroad track, with our luggage—mainly consisting of handbags and suitcases—piled all round in confusion. I had been wondering what arrangements had been made for our conveyance to the ranch, which, I believe, was four or five miles from the township.

There was no actual station here—not even a platform. A little distance up the line a signal cabin stood up upon spidery legs, and near it there was a big water tank. Just a couple of sidings completed the station. A booking-office or waiting-room was not to be seen—and neither existed.

The scene, in fact, was by no means enlivening.

Rattlesnake Bend lay just a little distance away from the depot, down in a slight hollow. Beyond, the undulating prairie rolled on into the dim, hazy distance—right to the foothills of the Rockies.

There was no actual road, as far as I could see, but simply the prairie beaten hard and bare by local traffic. And this trail certainly had a great amount of dust upon it, to judge by the clouds which arose from two large motor-cars which appeared in sight. They pulled up close to where we were waiting.

From one of them jumped a lithe, active young lady attired in a simple, light cotton frock. She was slim and dainty, and her long, dark hair was caught together at the back by means of a piece of black silk ribbon.

In a moment she was in the arms of her father, and then she bestowed her affection upon her brother, who received her salutations somewhat awkwardly.

"I guess you've sure grown a piece, sis!" said Farman. "Gee! It's just bully to see you again. How's everybody? Say, I've got to introduce you to these friends of mine. They'll be glad to meet you."

She was introduced to us all, and there was no doubt about it that we were very much impressed by Miss Farman's vivacity and undoubted beauty. We had never credited Farman with having such a delightful sister.

The other motor-car had been piloted by a short, stumpy man with a very red face, attired in breeches, leggings, and a cotton shirt with a coloured neckerchief tied loosely round the collar. A wide-brimmed hat completed his attire. He

turned out to be Mr. Buck Mason, the ranch foreman.

"I'll allow these hyar trains are improving some," he remarked, with a grin. "Say, chief, I didn't calculate on that 'Limited' getting around the Bend until two o'clock. I guess I was plumb scared when I caught sight of her five minutes ago——"

"Oh, Buck, it wasn't your fault!" put in Miss Constance smilingly. "You were ready in good time, and it was I who kept you waiting. But you needn't be afraid that dad is angry. We didn't keep them waiting long, anyway."

"You don't need to worry any," said Mr. Farman. "Come along, boys; you'd best get straight in as soon as you can sort out your grips. Maybe it'll be a bit of a squash, but we'll soon fix things. I guess one of those big British charabancs would come in real handy right here at this moment."

"Dear old boy, I didn't expect to see a motor-car even," murmured Sir Montie in my ear. "Begad! I am frightfully relieved—I am, really! I was expectin' to be placed in one of those horrid buckboards or buggies, the same as we've seen on the films. It's a ripplin' relief to see these motor-cars."

"Rather!" I agreed. "But you didn't expect to find the conditions out here as they are depicted in the American Western film dramas? The period of these stories is generally forty or fifty years ago—and things have changed mightily in that time. Montana and the Western States of America generally is no longer a land of armed desperadoes and scalp-hunting Indians."

"It's a giddy fraud," said Handforth. "I was expecting something quite different to this. Where are all the men on horseback, with those woolly trousers, and revolvers at their belts?"

"Oh, they're only to be found in stories and films," I grinned. "Still, we're right out on the prairie here, and I don't think you'll be disappointed when you get among the real cowboys, Handy. They'll prove to be a lively bunch, I expect. I've been out this way before, and Montana hasn't absolutely lost its romance and dangers."

Further conversation was impossible, for we were already getting into the motor-cars. And it was not long before everybody was on board. Buck Mason took the wheel of one car, and Miss Connie insisted upon driving the other.

As we passed down the trail towards Rattlesnake Bend we all looked about us with big interest. It seemed that the township consisted of a single unpaved street. On one side lay a collection of wooden houses of every conceivable variety and condition. In different places there were gaps—probably with the intention of making roads. But these were unmade as yet.

So far as I could see nearly all the houses were of a commercial type. Away back, behind these, could be seen a straggling of smaller houses, mostly of the "frame" variety. And beyond, the prairie stretched away, and there behind, lost in the hazy distance, were the snowy ramparts of the Rocky Mountains.

The whole town apparently occupied one side of the trail, and if I had been asked to give a candid opinion of the place my remarks would not have been exceedingly complimentary.

Handforth and one or two others did not require to be asked. They proceeded to air their views in no uncertain terms. Handforth, in particular, was somewhat scathing.

"Why, it's no more like a town than a collection of hen-coops," he said witheringly. "There's not a single brick building, no roads, and no pavements! And what about street lamps, and trams——"

"My dear ass, this is only a prairie village," I put in. "The inhabitants probably call it a city, but that's because they're optimistic. They expect it will be a city one day."

Handforth sniffed, and cast his eye up and down. He was, of course, exceedingly interested, and he was only finding fault because this was a natural habit of his. He was in the second car, with me and several others. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Mr. Farman were in the leading car. And this was brought to a standstill in the centre portion of Main Street.

It was hard to understand why the straggling collection of wooden houses was dignified by this name, but the words were roughly painted on a board, for all and sundry to see. Since it was the only street in the whole place, it was rather unnecessary to give it a name.

I now saw that the leading car had pulled up outside the post-office, and our host had alighted, and was just entering the building. Next door to it there

was a big general store, upon the verandah of which a number of idle men were lounging. On the other side of the post-office was a fairly large place with a board over the door which informed us of the fact that it was the "Bonanza Saloon." This struck me as rather an inappropriate title, since nothing could look less like a mine of wealth.

"I suppose this is where the cowboys collect on a Saturday night?" asked Tommy Watson. "They drink rye whisky and——"

"Not in the saloon," I grinned. "It's dry now, my son, although I expect there's plenty of whisky to be obtained on the quiet. Hallo! We seem to be attracting some attention."

A number of rough specimens of humanity had emerged from the saloon, and were now standing on the verandah. The building was an ordinary frame house, square and unornamental, very much like a big packing-case, with a few holes in it to represent windows. At one time it had probably been painted white, but this had changed to a dirty drab by the influence of the sun and weather.

The scene was not altogether novel to me, for I had seen the same kind of thing before. Rattlesnake Bend was a typical western prairie township, with its one long street, running parallel to the railroad track, with the quaint buildings looking like a row of uneven hoardings. Some of them had sloping roofs, others were fairly well made, whilst quite a few were literally falling to pieces with neglect. Quite half the buildings on Main Street were stores, and they included hardware, drugs, and even an ice-cream soda fountain.

Our stoppage had brought out the inhabitants to have a look at us, and we certainly attracted a good deal of attention, which was not surprising. Nearly a dozen British boys in a Western township was a spectacle which was rarely seen.

"Say, would you believe it?" shouted one man from the verandah. "Gee! Just come out here, boys, and look what's come to town! I'll sure allow I've seen a few purty-faced babbies in my time, but this bunch kinder amuses me some!"

The man who spoke was a big, brawny fellow with a scrubby beard. He was

attired in a nondescript garb, with his trousers tucked into his top boots. And as he gazed at us he seemed to pay particular attention to Handforth.

"Cheeky rotter!" said Handforth, frowning.

The man stepped down from the verandah, and looked us over critically. A crowd of other grinning men were behind, and it was evidently apparent that this individual was a local humorist. If he had wanted to stir up trouble he couldn't have done better than address himself to Handforth.

"I guess you're strangers around this city?" he asked casually.

"This what?" said Handforth, with a sniff.

"Kinder deaf?"

"No; but if you call this place a city, I've got a different opinion," replied Handforth tartly. "I'm not rude enough to tell you what I think of Rattlesnake Bend, but if you were to ask me I should say that it's the dirtiest hole——"

"Dry up, you ass," I muttered. "No need to be insulting!"

The man in the top boots threw away his cigarette end.

"Waal, son, I'm waiting!" he said smoothly.

"Say, Slim, you don't need to take no sass from these hyar pink-faced galoots!" put in one of the crowd. "Guess that guy is jest a bit fresh. We don't allow no strangers to hand out no insults about this city."

"You can leave it to me, partner," said Slim calmly. "I'll allow I'm amused—some. Guess it makes me feel real glad to see so many strangers in town at once. Rattlesnake Bend is kinder booming, I reckon. And I'll sure allow these guys are jest about the sweetest-looking bunch we've ever had around. Did you ever see such little innocents?"

Handforth glared.

"I don't know whether you're talking to me, or those pals of yours," he said. "In case you don't happen to know it, we come from England, and we're here on a visit. And it stands to reason that we're strangers. And the stranger we are to this town the better!"

Slim nodded.

"You sure have a delicate way of slinging out information," he observed. "What you need is some advice. Say,

I'm a dandy fellow at handing out that stuff. You'd best get busy and realise right now that we don't stand for no all-fired sass in this township. No, sir! I'll need to point out that we're requiring an apology."

"From me?" snorted Handforth. "Well, of all the nerve! What have I got to apologise for? I'm not going to—"

"It's all right, you fellows," I put in, smiling at the inhabitants. "You mustn't take any notice of this chap. He's a tenderfoot; he hasn't been out West before. As a matter of fact, we're rather overwhelmed by the magnificence of Rattlesnake Bend. No offence, of course."

"Say, that's real swell talk, I figger," said Slim, nodding. "As strangers around this settlement we feel good and honoured to welcome you. I guess we don't have a heap to say in the way of compliments, but we kinder expect visitors to be polite. And I'm still waiting—for that apology!"

"You'd better do it, Handy," whispered Church, nudging his leader. "After all, you were a bit boastly, you know. There's no need to air your views—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "This is a free country, I suppose? A chap's entitled to say what he likes, ain't he? There's no harm in saying that Rattlesnake Bend is a mouldy collection of old huts—anybody can see it. In any case, why should I apologise to this chap? He doesn't happen to be the mayor, I suppose?"

Slim took a step forward, and he was still smiling.

"No, I don't figure on being the mayor," he said. "But, as one of the most prominent citizens of this hyar town, I guess it's up to me to see this thing through. You sure handed out a lively heap of hot air, son. Mebbe you need cooling down some. I'll be real obliged if you'll step right down on to the trail. That autymobile don't suit you none."

"Rot!" said Handforth gruffly. "I'm not going to shift!"

"I reckon you'd better guess again," said Slim, producing an enormous revolver and twirling it easily in his fingers.

Handforth started, and the other juniors became quite interested. One or

two were scared. This show of firearms was quite unexpected. Personally, I was rather amused, for I realised that Slim was indulging in a little joke. He knew that Handforth was as "fresh" as paint, and he intended raising a laugh at the junior's expense.

"What's—what's the idea of this?" asked Handforth huskily.

"I reckon I'm waiting for you to get real busy on the apologisin' stunt," said Slim, producing a cheroot and sticking it into a corner of his mouth. "Say, I didn't figure to make no display of shootin' materials, but I guess you're one o' them obstinit guys. Get me? I'd advise you to hustle some; this durned gun has a nasty habit o' slingin' out lead!"

Slim took a single match from his pocket, and ignited it by the simple process of nipping the head between his fingernails. He lit his cheroot, and blew out a big puff of strong smoke.

"The feller who lets loose a pile of insults respectin' this township is sure booked fer trouble," he went on casually. "Yup, sir! Every time! An' I 'lows I'm gettin' kinder stiff waitin' hyar. Ther's a cramp settlin' in my trigger-finger, an' it's 'most sure to jerk afore long. Say, son, air you figgerin' to step right down, or shall I bore daylight through your carkis?"

Handforth breathed hard. The revolver was directed straight at his head, and he looked down the barrel nervously. As a rule it took a lot to scare Handforth, but this thing looked real. The West was still a bit "wild," after all.

"All—all right!" gasped Edward Oswald. "I'll—I'll come."

"Guess that's sure sensible," observed Slim. "You've got to get it fixed in your head that Rattlesnake Bend is jest the greatest city around Montana. Mebbe you'll figger that I'm handin' out a heap o' hot air? Not on your life, sir! This township ain't ezactly elegant. You don't see no trolley-cars buzzin' around, an' I'll allow the 'lectric-light plant ain't fixed yet. But these hyar things are comin', an' Rattlesnake Bend will soon be as important as lil' old Noo York. Get me? So it sorter stands to reason that we citizens don't stand fer no insults. You'll get busy on that ther' apology."

Handforth was out of the car by now,

and the "gun" was pressed against his side. Handy shivered as he felt the muzzle, and as he heard an ominous click. Slim glanced round, and saw that all the other men were grinning widely. Many, indeed, could hardly contain themselves.

The other juniors in the car were looking a bit alarmed.

"I say, this is a bit rotten, you know," muttered McClure. "This chap must be drunk, or something. If that revolver goes off——"

"Don't you worry," I interrupted. "Handy's safe enough."

Handforth regarded Slim with nervous aggressiveness.

"Well?" he growled. "What the dickens do you want, you—you—— Hi, Steady on! Don't press that revolver——"

"I'm kinder remindin' you that my time is val'able," said Slim calmly.

"I—I didn't mean what I said just now," panted Handforth. "I—I think Rattlesnake Bend is—is a wonderful town!"

"Gee! That ain't bad fer a start!" exclaimed Slim. "But I guess you'll need to make it more han'some, sonny. Start right in an' repeat this hyar: 'I'm a wall-eyed galoot, an' I reckon that Rattlesnake Bend is the dandiest city ever.' Get that? Now, you durned tenderfoot—get busy!"

Handforth repeated the words hurriedly, and a howl of laughter went up.

"That's sure good," grinned Slim. "Say, son, you air certainly a real babby-face! You've made the boys laff good'n plenty. Mebbe you'd care to take a peek at this gun o' mine?"

He "broke" the weapon, and Handforth nearly choked when he saw that the revolver was quite innocent of cartridges. It was, in fact, empty. Slim roared with laughter, and delivered a thump on Handforth's back which sent the junior flying.

"Sufferin' snakes!" he roared. "I guess you're as green as prairie grass when it fust comes up in the spring! How does it go, boys? Wouldn't I jest do fer a real dandy 'bad man?' What do you know about it?"

The "boys" yelled in chorus. Handforth seemed to realise, quite suddenly, that he had been spoofed—that his leg

had been severely pulled. And the blood rushed into his cheeks and his neck.

"You—you awful rotter!" he bel-lowed. "You were only kidding me! I'll punch your blessed nose——"

"Steady on, Handy!" I grinned. "A joke's a joke, you know!"

"Yes, but I'm not going to stand——"

Handforth got no further, for he was suddenly yanked into the car by several pairs of strong hands. And just then Mr. Farman emerged from the post-office, and smiled at the crowd of men.

"I had a kind of notion that Slim was up to his tricks," he chuckled. "Say, Anderson, these young gentlemen are my guests, I reckon, and——"

"I jest couldn't help it, Mr. Farman," grinned Slim Anderson. "Did you ever see sech dandy tenderfeet? Say, they're sure as fresh as noo-born babbies! An' that guy with the big chin kinder got my goat."

"Big chin, eh?" gasped Handforth fiercely. "Lemme go, you asses! I'm going to smash this funny fathead! I'm going to——"

"You're going to Roaring Z Ranch!" I said sweetly, as the car glided forward.

CHAPTER II.

BUCK MASON'S NEWS.

RATTLESNAKE BEND was soon left behind.

The trail led out of the shallow valley, and so on to the rolling, expansive prairie. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but grass—smooth, undulating knolls and hillocks, with only a small clump of trees here and there, at wide intervals.

And after leaving the township behind, this completely vanished—down in the hollow. The scenery was now uninteresting in the extreme. With the prairie on all sides of us, scarcely anything less romantic and picturesque could be imagined. I noted the expression on the faces of all the juniors, and I was not surprised to see that most of them were rather disappointed.

"How far is it to the ranch?" asked Watson, turning to me.

"Oh, about four miles, I think."

"Rats! It must be more than that," went on Tommy. "Why, we can see

for eight or ten miles in every direction—and there's nothing but grass."

"How far is Rattlesnake Bend?" I smiled.

"Not much more than a mile——"

"Can you see it?"

Tommy Watson turned and looked.

"No," he replied.

"Very well—the ranch is probably hidden in just the same way," I explained. "It's down in one of these valleys. The prairie is full of them—strange, hidden valleys which one never expects to find, and which appear suddenly as you ride along. The scenery isn't quite so drab as you might think, Tommy."

"Well, it does look a bit flat," said Watson. "Over there, of course, it's different," he added, pointing away to the distant foothills, in the great shadow of the Rockies. "I expect there are plenty of trees and rivers there——"

"And you'll find plenty of trees on this prairie before long," I said. "It's pretty well certain that the Roaring Z Ranch is down in one of these curious valleys. Just you wait and see if I'm not right."

Handforth had not quite got over his experience yet, and he was still looking fierce-eyed and indignant. He couldn't forget the way in which Slim Anderson had pulled his leg in front of a crowd. But it was all experience for him—not that experience ever did Handforth any good. He never learned a lesson. It could be taught him twenty times, and he would put his foot in the same hole again and again.

The trail was well marked—a beaten track across the prairie where no grass could grow—a trail made solid by the passage of vehicles and animals. In winter it was probably a morass of mud, but now merely a hard, uneven, dusty road with no particular edges to define it.

The two motor-cars bumped along at a fair speed. It was impossible to drive very quickly, or we should either have been jerked out, or the springs would have gone—probably the latter, since the cars were so well loaded.

We continued onwards, and still there was no sign of the ranch. We were heading in the direction of the hills, but these, of course, were at least ten miles distant, and we should reach the ranch

long before then. But always we could see the grim ramparts of the Rocky Mountains, away there in the distance, raising their summits up in magnificent grandeur. At first we had all been rather awed by their appearance, but the novelty was wearing off somewhat.

All around stretched the limitless plains. Somehow, I couldn't help wishing for the sight of some really good trees, or a river, or even a cultivated patch of land. But there was nothing of this—nothing but the long, tawny grass for miles. And the scorching sunlight blazed down with intense heat, baking us all, and causing us to perspire, although we were inactive.

There was probably only one member of our party who really enjoyed this heat. And that member, needless to say, was Umlosi, the giant Kutana chief. The heat in his native Africa was rather more moist, perhaps, but he was at home in all sorts of scorching atmospheres.

Umlosi had come along with us mainly because he wanted to be with his beloved Dorrie, and because Lord Dorrimore had an idea of taking a boat straight to Africa after our visit to Mr. Farman's ranch had concluded. And Umlosi wanted to be with "his father" during this trip. He was attired in a white drill suit which, in spite of careful measurements, still seemed to be somewhat too small for him. No matter how good the clothes happened to be, Umlosi could never wear them. He would put on a new suit, and it would look a wreck within five minutes. As a matter of fact, he was far more comfortable without any suit at all. A loin-cloth was all he required. But this attire would be somewhat too scanty for ordinary use in the United States.

I could see Umlosi now, seated in the back of the first car. He was talking with Dorrimore, and was probably pointing out the fact that this country could not compare with his own beloved Africa. But, if so, he was judging it too soon.

For, just as I had mentioned to Tommy Watson, we came upon a wonderful valley. We hit it, so to speak, all in a moment. I had been chatting with Sir Montie, and nothing was visible ahead but the grass-covered prairie. And then I felt the motor-car tip downwards at an angle—it was now proceeding at a crawl, under the skilful guidance

of Miss Constance, who was at the wheel.

And then I saw the valley.

It lay straight before and below us. And the sight was one which caused all the juniors to cry out in wonder and admiration. It had been so unexpected to most of them that they could hardly believe it possible.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "This is remarkable, dear old fellow—quite remarkable! I am sure this valley was not here a moment ago."

"It was here, but you couldn't see it," I smiled.

"My hat! It's lovely!" said Watson. "Just gorgeous!"

"Rather!" agreed Pitt. "Look at those trees, look at that river! Yes, and there is the ranch! Can't you see it, nestling round that bend a couple of miles away?"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed McClure.

The scene was, indeed, one which held us spellbound. Where there had been nothing but the limitless prairie before, there now came to our view a lovely scene of green woodland and river. This river wound its way along the bottom of the valley in a twisting, snake-like form. It was bounded by great woods of high trees, and little clumps of willows and delightful meadows. We were looking along the valley, rather than across it, and we could see that it wound its way to the west like some enormous furrow in the prairie—a furrow which extended several miles across. It was astonishing how this could have been hidden for so long.

In some respects the scenery reminded me of that of a peaceful English valley. There was a gorgeous variation of colour in the foliage of the trees. And there was a noticeable difference in the atmosphere already. A cool, refreshing breeze came into our faces—a breeze which we had not felt until this valley came within view.

The trail led down steeply, and, indeed, rather dangerously for a motor-car. But both the vehicles were taking it with extreme caution, with engines shut off, and with brakes hard on.

I could see that the opposite hillside was much smaller—indeed, only a gradual rise. The ranch, naturally, was built on the opposite side of the river, for the prairie here was easy of access,

and no doubt the many thousand head of cattle owned by Mr. Farman were stretched away on the prairie right to the foothills.

The ranch was a big one, extending for miles and miles, and I knew that "Big Jim's" cattle went into enormous numbers—to say nothing of his horses. Ranching was his hobby, and a very profitable hobby, too. Montana was not his actual home. He lived most of his time in California, where he had other business interests. For our host was a millionaire—a man who had made himself what he was by his own effort.

It was hard to imagine that the land as far as the eye could see up this valley belonged to our host, and that every yard of it was fenced in. These fences, chiefly composed of barbed wire, stretched for miles and miles, completely round the ranch property.

We were descending this long hill, which was a kind of gigantic step from the plains to the valley. The trail went down so steeply that the descent was soon over, and now we went speeding along towards the river. But here we could see a firmly constructed wooden bridge. Beyond this, half hidden by a large clump of willows, cornfields could be observed, and other cultivated lands. It was a sight for which we had longed. It was not long before we arrived at the bridge, and we passed over.

"A bit better now, isn't it?" I asked, turning to Watson.

"Rather!" he agreed. "This is lovely!"

The green was wonderful in this valley, so different from the scorched grass of the prairie above. There were pastures rich and humid, and everything seemed to grow with tropical energy and luxuriance.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "The house looks great, doesn't it? I was expecting to find one of those beastly wooden huts like they've got in Rattlesnake Bend. We're going to have a fine time here, I'll bet!"

Roaring Z Ranch was already within sight, suddenly exposed to our view as we passed round a belt of woodland. The ranchhouse and all the buildings connected with it stood in a wide clearing, with gently rising ground beyond. Right at the back lay a dense pine-wood, and the house itself faced the river. And to the west lay the valley,

with the prairie rolling out into apparently limitless space.

As we drew nearer we could see that the ranchhouse stood well apart from the other buildings—the barns, and the out-houses, etc. Beyond these lay the corrals.

Our first impression was a good one, for we could see that Roaring Z Ranch was a magnificent place, and there was no doubt of the wealth of its owner. It was with great interest that I took in every detail of the scene. This ranch was evidently a big enterprise, and not merely a gentleman's hobby. I almost felt as though I were gazing upon some valley of fairyland, where there was a magic in the soft breezes and the golden sunlight.

Then perhaps I was aware of just a little feeling of disappointment—a feeling which was shared by the other juniors.

There was not the bustle and the hustle that the fellows had expected. There were no bechapped cowboys, riding round on horseback, cracking whips, and breaking in bronchos. There was no shouting, no atmosphere of the "Wild West" such as one is apt to get after witnessing an American film drama of ranch life.

There was hardly an animal to be seen. Just one or two horses grazing peacefully in a little meadow, and a number of milch cows mooning together near a big barn, probably wondering how long it would be before milking time came around. One or two dogs could be seen running about, and the stray figure of a man here and there.

For the rest all was peace and quietness—still, gentle peace.

The ranch-house itself was a wonderful structure, as we could see from this distance. It was a great, square, two-storied house of the frame type—that is, made of wood. But this was very different from the ordinary frame house.

The architect was a clever man. A wonderful tower arose in the centre of the building, and right round the house extended a wide, exquisitely designed verandah, supported by wonderfully carved columns, which looked, at this distance, as though they were made of white marble.

The whole house, from roof to ground, was painted a dazzling white, with the window frames and doors picked out

in delightful green. There were sun awnings and blinds at every window, and all round there were some artistic flower gardens, perfectly planned and exceedingly well kept. It was the home of a millionaire, and merely a summer home at that, for Mr. Farman was never here in the winter.

The other buildings of the ranch were on a similar basis. Even the barns were wonderful structures, all painted white, and as neat and clean as a new pin. It made one feel refreshed to look at them.

There was an appearance of solid wealth about the whole atmosphere which was very pleasing. The big collection of buildings, set in that fairy-like valley, reminded me of some summer health resort, where the fashionable congregate. It was difficult to realize that this gorgeous place was tucked away in a depression of the great Montana prairie.

But, as I have said before, a peaceful calm brooded over the whole scene—a calm which was accentuated by the glorious fineness of the afternoon. But I looked forward with pleasure to reclining on that shady verandah.

"Ah, this is more like the real thing," observed Bob Christine, from the back seat of the car. "By jingo! What an ideal place to spend a summer holiday! I was beginning to think that we were in for a dull time, but this makes a difference."

"Rather!" said Pitt, with shining eyes.

I looked round.

"There'll be plenty for us to do," I said. "Just think of the swimming we can get in this lovely river—fishing, too. Then we can go out shooting—there are plenty of prairie chicken to be found, I'll warrant. It'll be jolly interesting, too, to watch the cowboys at work."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "There ain't any cowboys. They only exist in pictures and stories. We shan't find any cowboys here. The ranch looks topping, but it's a bit of a swindle!"

I grinned.

"Don't you worry, old son," I said. "And don't you take it for granted that cowboys don't exist. They do, but you don't suppose they're lounging around the ranch at this time of the day, I suppose? They've got their work to do, and they probably won't be in until the evening. They're out in distant parts of

the ranch, looking after the horses and cattle."

There was no time for any more conversation, for our cars were now rolling up towards the white-painted wooden fence which surrounded the ranch-house. Even this wooden fence was picturesque, for it was artistically designed. A big gateway led on to a wide drive, and through this gateway we rolled.

And then, at length, we pulled up in front of the wide steps opposite the main door. It was all very homely. In the doorway stood a middle-aged lady attired in a silky dress of quiet, dark colouring. She had one or two grey hairs, and her face was somewhat lined—a pleasant, motherly face which attracted us at once. Mrs. Farman, although the wife of a millionaire, was a very homely soul.

Her son simply flew into her arms, and they hugged one another for minutes on end. Meanwhile, we were tumbling out of the cars. It was a scene of bustle and merry laughter. Miss Constance was much in evidence, talking gaily, and highly excited over the whole event.

"Well, boys, I guess we've arrived at last," said Mr. Farman, smiling at us all. "It's been a tidy journey, but I hope the result pleases you. Say, you didn't figure on finding this little shanty tucked away down here, eh?"

"It's a tremendous surprise, sir!"

"Good!" said our host. "I want you to enjoy yourselves until you're fair busting with spirits. And now you've got to get busy indoors and remove a whole pile of dust. After that there'll be some grub!"

"Hurrah!" said Fatty Little promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty, of course, was starving. This was his natural state, to judge by his own remarks. He passed inside with all the other juniors, and they were taken in tow by a grinning negro, who escorted them upstairs to a large, well-appointed bath-room.

I lingered for a while on the verandah.

"Well, Nipper, you'd better go in and scrape yourself," remarked Lord Dorri-more. "By gad! The dust on your neck is thick enough to grow potatoes in! An' mine's just as bad, I believe. What a blessing it would be to have a skin like old Umlosi's?"

"Wau! Wouldst thou prefer to be

black, O, my father?" asked Umlosi, in his rumbling voice.

"Well, it has certain advantages," grinned Dorrie. "For example, you're probably just as dirty as we are, but it doesn't show. That neck of yours can be frightfully grimy, an' yet it looks in splendid condition."

"Thou are jesting with me, O, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "I need to cleanse myself even as thou dost. Possibly the dust of the vast plains we have crossed does not betray itself on my skin. but I feel that I am unclean. Is that not so, my father? One is not comfortable unless one's skin has been washed."

Dorrie chuckled.

"Well, perhaps we think that way," he grinned. "But some of these youngsters are far more comfortable, I believe, in an unwashed state. When I was a kid I received about two wallopings every day for havin' a grubby neck!"

"Yes, Dorrie, and you'll receive another wallop if you don't get along indoors now," I said cheerfully. "What with travelling on the train, and then coming across the prairie, we're all carrying a mile or so of land about with us. You coming in, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee replied that he was, and presently we were revelling in the joys of a glorious wash in icy-cold water. I was astonished at the perfect arrangements of this great ranch-house. Situated right out here, miles from any big town, it had every modern convenience one could imagine.

The whole place was installed with electric light—and this, of course, was manufactured in one of the outbuildings, by means of a dynamo and an oil engine. Hot and cold water was laid on, not only in the bathroom, but in every bedroom. These latter were wonderfully complete, and furnished with an artistic touch which spoke well for Mrs. Farman's taste—for, no doubt, our hostess had arranged everything. She was not the kind of woman to leave such matters to others.

The twelve of us—the juniors, I mean—were provided with two large, airy bedrooms, six beds in each, and every comfort we could wish for was there. By the time we had washed and changed, we were feeling supremely content. We had never expected anything so pleasant as this.

Nelson Lee had a bedroom to himself, and so had Dorrie and Umlosi. These

were on the other side of the building to our own bedrooms. The apartments on the upper floor of the house were astonishing in their number.

Downstairs there was everything—a perfect drawing-room, a solidly furnished dining-room, a breakfast parlour, a cosy smoking-room for the gentlemen, and a truly wonderful billiard-room. As a spot to spend a peaceful holiday, Roaring Z Ranch would be difficult to beat. Indeed, within this house it was almost impossible to realise that we were on a ranch at all.

One expected, on looking out of the window, to see a busy city street, and to hear the hum of passing traffic. But the view was quite different—a scene of woodland and river, with the prairie beyond. And over all there brooded a peaceful silence.

Strictly speaking, it was not the correct time for a meal, being mid-afternoon. But luncheon had been delayed for our benefit, and the food proved to be in keeping with everything else in this wonderful house. It was plain, wholesome, and perfectly cooked. We ate with the huge gusto of healthy appetites.

And then, afterwards, Mr. Farman announced that we were at liberty to wander about as we chose. We could go out into the corrals, round the out-buildings—in short, we could amuse ourselves to our heart's content.

Mr. Farman himself was not bent on pleasure. With Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore he passed out of the house, and went straight down to a neat little dwelling some two hundred yards away. This was the home of Buck Mason, the foreman, who was a married man with a couple of children. "Big Jim" led the way straight into Buck's office—a plain, business-like apartment attached to the neat little house, and entered by a separate doorway.

Buck Mason was seated before his desk, and he looked up with rather a grim expression on his face as his employer appeared. Nelson Lee and Dorrie followed Mr. Farman in, and the door was closed.

"You figured that you wanted to speak some," said Mr. Farman shortly.

"Yep, that's sure right, chief," replied the foreman, who was, in fact, the manager of the whole ranch. "And, say, it's—wal, serious. I don't need to use a heap of swell language, and I guess we're all wise to what's doing?"

"Sure!" said Mr. Farman. "You've met Mr. Nelson Lee, and I don't need to tell you he's just about the finest detective the British Isles can boast of—"

"Come, come!" protested Lee smilingly.

"It's the truth, Mr. Lee, and I'm just tellin' Buck all about it," said "Big Jim." "We've come right here as soon as we could get free. Say, Buck, Mr. Lee knows that he ain't here exactly for pleasure. There's work to be done."

"We're all willing to lend a hand, if necessary," put in Lord Dorrimore. "Of course, I'm no good at detective work—hate the idea of it, by gad! But if you can find a job for me at somethin' else, I'm game. Huntin' a few desperate criminals, for example, an' pumping lead into 'em. Old Umlosi might be of some use, too—at the present moment he's rockin' the ranch-house to its foundations with his musical snore. He's having a nap in the smoking-room, I believe. Never knew such a lazy bounder!"

They all smiled, and seated themselves. Mr. Farman handed round cigars, they lit up, and then the real business of the meeting began. Buck Mason was leaning forward on his desk, his face unusually serious.

"Well, Buck, it's up to you to do the talking," said Mr. Farman. "I guess I've been away for a good few weeks, and I don't know a thing about what's been takin' place right here."

"Yep, that's sure true," said Buck. "But I figger you handed me the instructions that you weren't to be bothered with no business details—"

"Sure!" said Mr. Farman. "So you'll need to talk some."

"Mr. Lee knows about the—rustling?" inquired Buck, looking up.

"Sure, he knows everything."

"Then I'll hand out the dope," said the foreman. "Mebbe I'll scare you a heap, chief. What I've got to say is bad!"

"It won't scare me any," said Mr. Farman. "Go right ahead."

"Wal, we've lost—eighteen hundred and fifty," said Buck Mason grimly.

"By glory!" ejaculated Mr. Farman, biting his lip. "Say, Buck, is that the total, or—"

"I guess that's what we've lost since you went."

"Eighteen-fifty," muttered the millionaire. "One thousand eight hundred and fifty—on top of the other twelve hundred! Gee! That makes something over three thousand, all told. What do you make of it, Mr. Lee? Three thousand. It's—it's appalling!"

"I guess you're sure right, sir," said the foreman. "I'll allow this is a big ranch, and right now we've got over forty thousand beasts somewhere around, to say nothing of a matter of fifteen thousand horses."

"A large number," said Nelson Lee. "But, at the same time, to lose three thousand is a very serious business. These thieves are apparently a very determined band of men. And what I cannot quite understand is how these beasts can be taken away in secret. Cattle cannot be concealed like so many diamonds, and smuggled away on the quiet."

"That's just where you've hit it, Mr. Lee," said the millionaire. "It's a mystery that we've been trying to get hold of for a good few months. I don't figure this affair is much in your line, strictly speaking. Cattle rustling is one of the oldest games out in this part of the world, but I thought it was dead. These fellows seem to have revived it, and it's sure crowded with life."

"I kinder reckon that my hair oughter hev been grey weeks since," said Buck slowly. "Say, the worry I've had is enough to kill most men, and I don't reckon to be anything particular myself. Say, chief, it gets me proper—it gets me fair and square. I've always been a fellow with a hard head. Spirits never interested me none, but if I wasn't dead against all such trash I've got a notion I'd get guessin' that these durned cattle were toted away from this ranch by magic. Blazes! There ain't nowhere they could go. There ain't a spot that the boys ain't been watchin' night and day. It's sure the biggest mystery that ever struck Montana. Three thousand head gone into smoke. That's what it amounts to, chief."

"It is certainly a very mysterious occurrence," said Nelson Lee slowly.

"Do I understand, Mr. Mason—"

"Buck, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Buck—"

"I reckon I said Buck!" insisted the foreman.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Buck it shall be, then," he said, with a laugh. "Well, Buck, it simply amounts to this. Over three thousand head of cattle have vanished, without any reasonable means of showing how they went?"

"You've hit it, sir."

"Can you give me a few details about the topography of the ranch?" asked Lee.

"I ain't grand at long words," replied Buck. "I'm guessing that you mean a kinder description of the locality?"

"Exactly."

"Wal, sir, that ain't a difficult proposition," said Buck Mason. "Right here, as we sit, we're lookin' out through the winder across the river. The Roaring Z Ranch don't extend that way none."

"The river is the boundary."

"Yup, sure," agreed Mason. "To the west the ranch extends for a whole heap of miles, and the boundary is marked by a barbed wire fence, which has been kinder strengthened since these rustlers got busy. This fence extends into the foothills towards the north. Get me?"

"I understand perfectly."

"Wal, the northern boundary of the ranch is right among the hills," said Buck. "I'll allow it's a lonesome spot up there, but that don't alter the position any. Them hills are as safe as the walls of the Roman Empire—I guess there's no way through. The Rockies rise up in a barrier that ain't to be passed—not by cattle, leastways. The other boundary is barbed wire, too; and I'll have you know, folks, that these boundaries are guarded day and night. Ther' ain't been a wire disturbed, or a strange hossman seen for weeks on end. I'm handin' out the simple truth, chief. How them cattle went is just about the biggest mystery that ever hit us."

Nelson Lee leaned forward.

"With regard to the northern boundary," he said. "Is this fenced in?"

"Mostly."

"But not altogether?"

"Ther's parts where it ain't necessary," said Buck. "Guess you'll need to get around to the ranch before you're fully wise to the position. For about four miles the boundary sort of

hits an almighty big cliff. Do you get me? This cliff kinder rises from the level ground and goes towards Heaven at such a speed that it don't stop till it's reached close upon three thousand feet. You can take it from me, sir, that it's some cliff."

"It rises quite sheer?"

"It does, sir—as sheer as blazes," replied Mason. "You ain't figgerin' that these cattle have been hoisted up over that cliff?"

"Well, hardly," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I understand that this is the only part of the ranch boundary which has not been constantly watched?"

The foreman shrugged his shoulders.

"Say, it don't seem reasonable to set useful men watchin' a cliff that's three thousand foot high, an' which is jest about as solid as the big canyon of Colorado. Nothin' human could raise cattle up that cliff—not the biggest cranes that was ever turned out of a steel city. An' cattle ain't toted around in that fashion—no, sir."

"There is no possibility of a gorge through this barrier?"

The foreman smiled.

"Say, I guess ther's one good answer to that question," he said. "Jest directly we'll saddle some horseflesh, and we'll get on the trail. I'll show you that cliff boundary close up. You won't need no second look, sir."

"It is my habit to exhaust all possible lines of inquiry," said Nelson Lee. "You may possibly consider that some of my questions are needless and, indeed, ridiculous. You must forgive me if this is the case, Buck; but I like to gather all my facts together, and then I know exactly where I stand. You have stated that the cattle could not get past the ranch boundaries to the west and the east, and the north is guarded by Nature's own barrier?"

"I guess you've put that real dandy, sir," said Mason, nodding.

"What about the south?"

"The south boundary is the river," put in Mr. Farman. "It's a deep river, Mr. Lee, and it's a sheer impossibility that any cattle could be taken across in that way. But we will assume for a moment that they were taken. Where will they get to? Right in that direction lie half a dozen townships and villages, and I don't figure that three

thousand head of cattle could pass without being noticed. No cattle thief would be fool enough to choose that way."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Then, according to all this information—according to the unassailable laws of logic—the stolen cattle must have passed out of this property by means of the northern boundary," he said.

"But that's impossible," protested the millionaire.

"Quite so; and we appear to be up against it pretty hard," said Lee. "To the south, west, and east the boundaries are watched. To the north the boundary is impassable. And yet these cattle have gone. What lies beyond this enormous cliff?"

"The Rocky Mountains," replied Buck shortly.

"And beyond them?"

"Wal, say, I don't figger we need go into them details," replied the foreman, somewhat impatiently. "I guess ther's a whole heap beyond—plains, prairie, ranches, and townships; but them cattle couldn't have gone, Mr. Lee. I fancy I know what I'm talkin' about—I'm handin' out the stuff I know. I've lived around this ranch for ten years, and what I don't know concerning the locality—wal, it ain't worth a heap of learnin'. Blazes! This thing is gettin' on my nerves a hull heap!"

"I don't wonder at that," put in Lord Dorrimore. "It reminds me of one of these problems you're pretty fond of, Lee—on a large scale. It's like a robbery in a bank where every exit has been guarded. The thieves must have got through solid ground, along with a herd of cattle that would just about fill up a whole English county!"

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Well, I don't see that we can do much more here," he said. "I know all the facts, and talking won't do much good. I'm very curious to go round the ranch—very curious indeed."

"I'll tote you around during the evening," said Buck. "I guess it'll be cool then, and ther'll be daylight until nigh upon ten. Guess I'd come right now, but some of the boys need lookin' after."

"In that case, perhaps you would not mind me taking a preliminary survey?" asked Nelson Lee.

"By all means, Mr. Lee," said the

millionaire. "You can do exactly as you choose—you have a free hand in everything, I figure. Just say what you'd like, and it'll be done. I've a sort of notion that you'll find out a whole heap."

Buck Mason said nothing, but it was fairly obvious by his expression that he did not share his employer's confidence. This, perhaps, was only to be expected. The ranchman could not believe that a stranger from England could solve this problem after so many natives of the State had failed.

"I'll be gettin' busy saddlin' the hoss," said the foreman, rising.

"Perhaps you will saddle two while you're about it," put in Nelson Lee. "I should like to take Nipper with me. We will be back in time for tea, and then, after the meal is over, we will go out on our big survey."

The arrangement was made, and very shortly afterwards Nelson Lee found me round by one of the big outbuildings. I was with the other fellows, who were making a round of the premises, deeply occupied in all they saw.

I was greatly interested when I found that the guv'nor and I were to set off on horseback, although I did not know where we were bound for, or why we were going. We were provided with two excellent mounts, and within fifteen minutes we were off, making straight for the open prairie in the direction of the distant foothills.

"Well, sir, what's the idea?" I asked, after a while. "I say, these are ripping horses, eh? I suppose we're just out for a joy ride?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, Nipper, I should hardly describe it as a joy ride," he replied. "On the contrary, I wish to think; and I wish to have a few words with you in private. This cattle mystery is a most puzzling affair."

"Yes, it's hard to think how a thousand bullocks, or whatever they are, could be pinched," I said. "By the way, sir, have any more been stolen?"

"Yes; nearly two thousand."

"Great Scott!" I gasped, staring.

Nelson Lee and I were trotting along side by side, and as I uttered the ejaculation, I involuntarily pressed my heels into my steed's sides. He bounded forward, and it was a moment or two before Nelson Lee came up.

"Two thousand more, guv'nor!" I ejaculated. "But—but it's impossible!"

"So one would imagine," agreed Nelson Lee. "Of course, Mr. Farman does not particularly care, so far as a financial outlook is concerned. This ranch is merely one of his enterprises. At the same time, he is a keen business man, and to see his cattle vanishing at such a rate is decidedly disconcerting. Any profits that the ranch may show are probably wiped out by this serious loss. Moreover, Mr. Farman's sense of justice demands that the criminals shall be brought to book."

"Rather, sir," I agreed. "I thought the days of cattle rustling were over; but this seems to be about the biggest thing that's ever been done. Why, if it goes on, the figure will be doubled in no time. Have you any clue as to how the thefts have been accomplished?"

"Not the faintest suspicion of a clue," replied Nelson Lee. "According to all my reasoning, there is only one possible means of outlet—in the northern direction. And the ranch boundary to the northward is a formidable cliff three thousand feet high."

"That's a bit contradictory, sir," I remarked.

"Yes, I suppose it is," smiled the guv'nor. "You see, Nipper, this is the only boundary that is not constantly watched."

"It hardly seems necessary to watch it."

"That is Buck Mason's opinion," went on Lee. "However, I'm not quite sure that it is a wise policy. I shall be able to judge better after I have seen this gigantic cliff. No doubt Mason is right—he is fully acquainted with the surroundings. I want, if possible, to examine the northern boundary now—this afternoon. But I doubt if we shall be able to approach within six or seven miles—there is hardly time."

We rode on, and I could see that Nelson Lee was very puzzled and thoughtful. This mystery, after all, was not precisely in his line—not that that mattered in the slightest degree. Any mystery always attracted the guv'nor, and the more puzzling it was, the greater his interest.

I knew very well that he would not be willing to leave Roaring Z Ranch

until he had probed the matter to the bottom. And it was certain to be a great triumph for him if he succeeded where so many others had failed.

After a while we had lost complete sight of the ranch—it had disappeared behind the rolling masses of grassland, concealed in its own luxurious valley. And now, on all sides, we could only see the prairie, stretching away in its vast, limitless way. A great distance off, to the westward, we could faintly discern herds of cattle, and an isolated figure here and there, like a dot.

And then we came upon another hidden valley, but quite a small one this time. It sloped away before us, and down at the bottom there trickled an insignificant creek, with stunted bunches of willow here and there. It was a miniature edition of the big valley we had so recently left, and contained none of its big brother's beauties.

"It will only take us a few minutes to cross this dip, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "It is, as you see, merely a depression in the prairie, which is full of such little valleys."

By the time we reached the creek the great expanse of prairie had passed from our view. Our horizon was limited to a very restricted space; but this would soon be altered, of course, after we had mounted the opposite hill.

But before we could do so we became aware of the approach of strangers. Happening to glance up the valley, I saw some moving figures. A band of horsemen was coming up at a gallop; there was about a dozen men, all told.

"Some of the ranch cowboys, I suppose," I remarked.

Nelson Lee did not reply. He had drawn in his horse, and now stood waiting. And then, both at the same moment, we saw something which took us by surprise—something which we had never anticipated. In a film drama, perhaps; but never in real life. I found myself staring in blank astonishment.

Every one of the approaching men wore a heavy black mask!

CHAPTER III.

WHICH INTRODUCES "THE HAPPY BUNCH."

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST nodded with approval.

"Excellent, dear old boys—it is, really!" he observed. "I'm most frightfully interested, but I should

take a lot more interest in everythin' if it wasn't for this appallin' heat. It makes a fellow awfully limp, begad!"

"Well, it'll be tea-time in a minute or two," said Tommy Watson. "By the way, it's about time Nipper came back. He and Mr. Lee have been gone for some time. I wonder where they buzzed off to?"

"Goodness knows, dear old fellow!" said Sir Montie. "In any case, I'm not worryin' my head about them—"

"Rather a nerve, I call it," put in Handforth. "Nipper seems to get all the giddy privileges. Why couldn't we go for a ride on horseback, too?"

"For one thing, you've got to know how to ride," said Pitt calmly.

Handforth glared.

"Are you suggesting that I can't ride a horse?" he roared. "It's not my way to boast, but I can tell you straight from the shoulder that I can ride anything that's got four feet!"

"I'd like to see you ride a mouse!" grinned Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny ass!" snapped Handforth.

"Well, a mouse has got four legs—"

"I didn't mean it literally, you giddy lunatic!" snorted Handforth. "I was talking about horses—"

"Not about donkeys?" asked Pitt thoughtfully. "Now, you can ride a donkey, Handy. I remember seeing you at the seaside once, sitting astride a giddy donkey, and the poor thing nearly had its back broken—"

"Oh, I shall punch somebody's nose in a minute!" roared Handforth. "Horses don't need much riding—at least, some fellows take to it naturally. They can help themselves, so to speak. I'm one of those chaps. Just put me on a horse, and I'll be off in a minute!"

"That's just about true," grinned Pitt.

"Eh?"

"Well, you'd soon be off—on your head, I expect!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I meant I'd be off—riding away!" snapped Handforth hastily. "There's not a horse living that could throw me—"

"Waal, say, you're some wise guy!" The juniors turned round, and found

themselves looking at a gentleman who was lazily chewing a straw. They were all standing in the shade of one of the big barns, a little distance from the ranchhouse. They had believed themselves to be alone.

And they regarded the newcomer with great interest.

For he was something new—something they had hoped to see from the very first—a genuine cowboy. His attire was just exactly the same as the juniors had seen many a time in cowboy films—a loose cotton shirt with a gaily coloured neckerchief, a wide-brimmed hat, leather cuffs; and woolly sheepskin chapps encased his legs. He was quite an interesting individual.

"My hat!" exclaimed Handforth, staring.

"I 'lows that statement o' yours gets me kinder rattled, pard," said the cowboy politely. "You was figgerin' that ther' ain't a hoss livin' that could get you off'n its back? Say, did I get you right?"

Handforth had not made his remark for experienced ears to hear.

"Well, yes," he agreed slowly. "I rather fancy myself on a horse, you know. In fact, I'm pretty good at riding."

The cowboy nodded.

"Aw, that's bully," he exclaimed. "Say, I'm jest bustin' to interdooce myself. I heard that you young guys was gettin' around the ranch this week. Say, you're welcome—as the leader of the Happy Bunch I hand out my best respects."

"Thanks awfully," said the juniors.

"Mebbe you're puzzled some?" went on the cowpuncher, shifting the straw from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Waal, you're some elegant to look at, an' I 'lows I'm kinder impressed. Yes, sirs! Ef you don't happen to know my name, I'll get busy slingin' it around. Thomas Reeve—most generally known as Square-Deal Reeve. Guess that's because I've got a kinder bankerin' after seein' things done right. And that swell talk about hoss ridin' interests me a hull heap."

"I—I suppose you're a cowboy?" asked Church diffidently.

Square-Deal Reeve twisted his bronzed, clean-shaven face into a grin.

"Jumpin' coyotes!" he ejaculated.

"Aw, do I look like—a book agent?"

"I—I wasn't sure," said Church lamely.

"Guess I'll have to bring the boys around," went on Square-Deal cheerfully. "I cal'c'late they'll be so durned interested that they'll plumb forget what work is. Say, you're jest about the sweetest collection of innocents I ever set eyes on. British, eh? Waal, I'm proud to know you—sure, I am!"

And Square-Deal Reeve removed his wide brimmed hat, and made a sweeping bow. Then, chuckling, he took his departure, and disappeared round the building. The juniors looked at one another somewhat uncertainly.

"You ass, Handy!" muttered McClure. "He heard what you said."

"I don't care about that," snapped Handforth.

"But he thinks you can ride a horse!"

"Can't I?" snorted Handforth.

"Why, you duffers, it won't take me long to show you what I can do! But what do you think of that chap, eh? A real cowboy—just the same as we've read about in stories!"

"Rather!" said Pitt. "My hat! Here are some more!"

The juniors had not had time to move, and now they became aware of the fact that Square-Deal Reeve was returning with a number of companions. They came swaggering along in their clumsy-looking chapps, and with their spurs jingling musically. Arriving near the juniors, they performed a surprising act.

With one accord they halted, removed their hats and bowed. It was evidently a prearranged little plan. They were all looking as serious as judges—but in no other respect did they resemble those learned gentlemen.

There were six of them altogether, including Square-Deal. The others were a quaint looking quartette. The first in the line was a short, stumpy man with a straggling brown moustache, and a half-bald head. Square-Deal indicated him with a wave of his hat.

"Young gents, meet Mr. Loco Jack!" he said smoothly. "Guess he's real elegant with notions. Say, this guy hez so many notions in his garret that he makes a patent office look kinder mean. Got me? Loco Jack is sure the dandiest fellow for ideas that ever wus."

"But why is he called 'Loco'?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Aw, gwan!" said Loco Jack. "You



The animal simply leapt into the air like a cat, and then shot forward with such surprising abruptness that Handforth described a kind of arc, and sat down in the dust with a dull thud.

don't need to take no sort o' notice o' those guys. I figger loco means loony, and of I wasn't a peaceable galoot I'd sure start somethin' nasty. Guess I'm a feller with ideas—that's why they get blowin' hot air to the effec' that I'm loco. Don't take no sort o' notice, pardners."

The introduction was quite a long business, and was duly carried out with much solemnity. The juniors stood looking on and listening, greatly attracted by the quaint talk of the cowboys. Indeed, a great deal of the conversation was double clutch to them, but they would soon get accustomed to it.

The other four cowpunchers were introduced as Two-Gun Milligan, a raw-boned lanky individual with rugged features; Ace-High Peter, a small, slim man with a sharp nose and a brisk, alert manner; Twirly Sam, quite a youngster with fair hair and a constant smile; and Slick Ed, an elderly man who was apparently too fatigued to move himself with any speed or energy.

These cowboys were evidently fellows of character, and the juniors were rather surprised. They had hardly expected to find these men of the prairie so greatly interesting. There was a certain attractiveness about them which could not be overlooked. And, for all their seriousness, Pitt could not help noticing that their eyes were twinkling. Slick Ed was the only one who seemed half asleep.

"I'm figgerin' you'll be around fer some weeks," said Square-Deal. "That bein' so, it's kinder natural that we should all be gettin' our heads alongside one another, and makin' friends. We'll be sure pleased to entertain you in the bunkhouse, ef you feel so inclined. Jest get around after supper any evenin'. Say, Twirly Sam is that light on his feet he could waltz over a newly varnished floor without makin' a smear! Ther's only one of us guys who wouldn't speak none. I guess that's Slick Ed. Say, he's got a tongue—an it's sure a swell one, when he gets busy usin' it. His vocab'lary is 'most as complete as a two volume dictionary. But he don't figger to use his voice much—he guesses it's too much trouble. Slick? Waal, he's that slick he could sure race a tortoise in a mile handicap of he wus given ha'f-a-mile start!"

Slick Ed turned his face towards Square-Deal, and he raised his eyes.

"Aw, quit gassin'!" he drawled laboriously.

"Gee! Guess you ain't been so a'mighty oloquent fer weeks!" chuckled Square-Deal. "Say, boys, did you get that? He sure let loose three words in one durned breath! You're livenin' up, some, Ed!"

The juniors chuckled.

"Mebbe you're wonderin' a heap?" went on Square-Deal. "Ther's six of us right here, pards—and we're most generally known as the Happy Bunch. Happy? Say, we're that bustin' wi' happiness we sure laff ef the shampain is missin' from the supper menu!"

"We're jolly pleased to know you all," said Bob Christine. "We shall be here for two or three weeks, I expect, and we shall probably have some good times together. We'd like you to show us over the ranch, if you don't mind us going with you—to-morrow, or the next day."

"Sure!" said Square-Deal. "The boys don't mind any. Guess they're the most o-bliging bunch o' fellers you could find knockin' around. But, say, I'm jest killin' myself wi' curiosity. This young guy standin' right here is a hossman—sure! Ain't it easy to see that he's born to the saddle?"

The cowboy indicated Handforth, who looked rather self-conscious.

"Oh, don't try to be funny!" he growled.

"Funny? Not on your life!" said Square-Deal solemnly. "You wus hand-in' out the information that you can ride anythin' that travels on four legs. Say, that was bully. Guess you please me a heap. Ride? I'd sure say you can do 'most anything in that line. I'm kinder experienced when it comes to hosses, an' you've got the figure that makes a real dandy rider. What do you say, boys?"

"Yup, sure!" said the boys, in one voice.

Handforth pulled himself together. He realised, quite suddenly, that these men were impressed—that they had seen at once that he was an exceptional personality. All the other juniors realised that the great Edward Oswald was being spoofed.

"Well, of course, I've always prided myself about my riding capabilities," said Handforth casually. "Horses don't scare me a little bit. They all come the

same—bucking bronchos, or anything you like."

"Gee! This feller is wuth grabbin' with both hands!" exclaimed Ace-High Peter. "He don't look kinder right in them fancy fixin's. Say, boys, we'll need to rig him out in a real man's soot."

"Aw, sure!"

Before Handforth could protest, he was seized by the cowboys, and carried off in their midst. The other juniors looked after them, grinning hugely. They could guess quite easily that the Happy Bunch had decided to have a little fun at Handy's expense. They, like Slim Anderson of Rattlesnake Bend, had instantly seen that the one and only Handforth was fairly begging for trouble. They were quite willing to supply some.

"What the dickens are they going to do?" asked Church, rather anxiously.

"Goodness knows!"

"Oh, they won't hurt him," grinned Pitt. "It'll serve the ass right if he's put through the giddy mill. Swanking about what he can do on a horse—and he can't even ride a donkey! There's going to be some fun, my children!"

Meanwhile, Handforth was carried along in triumph to the bunkhouse—a building which was not similar to the bunk house on an average ranch. This was a super-excellent place. Each cowboy had his own private cubicle, and each cubicle was supplied with a neat bed and fittings. And there were washing facilities and all sorts of other conveniences. Mr. Farman believed in looking after his men well.

"I—I say, what's the idea?" asked Handforth uncertainly.

"Why, I guess you're going to provide a little surprise for your young pards," said Twirly Sam genially. "Sufferin' snakes! Ef we don't make you look real dandy—waal, you can call me a pig-eyed coyote!"

"Strip!" said Square-Deal shortly.

"Eh?"

"Deaf?" asked the cowboy. "I guess I said—strip!"

"Take my clothes off?" asked Handforth, staring.

"I figger that's the only meanin' o' the word 'strip'," said Square-Deal. "We're sure gonna rig you out plumb dandy!"

"But—but——"

Handforth, however, was not allowed to protest. Being somewhat slow in commencing to disrobe, he was seized by

the cowboys who assisted him in the process. In vain Handforth protested.

He was deprived of his ordinary garb, and very soon he was presenting a weird and wonderful spectacle. The Happy Bunch had done the thing thoroughly, and Handforth as a cowboy, was a positive scream.

He was all complete, even to the spurs. He wore a pair of thick, woolly sheepskin chapps; a belt encircled his waist, and two revolvers were thrust into the big leather holsters at his hips. Needless to say, these revolvers were unloaded. The Happy Bunch did not wish to have any member of its number summarily dispatched into another world.

Handforth wore a red cotton shirt, and a flaming yellow neckerchief. His wrists were encased in leather cuffs, and upon his head reposed a wide brimmed hat with tassels complete. The Happy Bunch regarded him critically.

"Say, don't he look jest good?" asked Twirly Sam admiringly. "Gee! Ef he can't ride a hoss now——"

"Aw, there's no need to get gassin'!" interrupted Square-Deal. "This new pard is the finest rider in the State of Montana. Didn't he hand out that information himself? Say, we'll get busy, and put him on Frisky Bess!"

"By cripes!" grinned Two-Gun Milligan.

The notion of putting Handforth on Frisky Bess evidently tickled the cowboys, for they all grinned with appreciation. And Handforth was forthwith carried off into an empty corral.

The rest of the juniors approached. They saw Handforth, and they gasped. Then they chuckled, and finally they howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Oh, my only hat!" grinned Christine. "These giddy cowboys are the limit! I say, what a crowd, too! No wonder they call themselves the Happy Bunch! We'd better be jolly careful, or we shall be japed!"

"They're a lot of knuts!" chuckled Pitt.

"Oh, rather!"

And the juniors gathered round the railings of the corral to look on. While they were doing so, Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi hove in view, and they joined the spectators, much appreciating the performance.

"I am filled with wonder, my master,"

said Umlosi. "For is this not truly a wondrous place? Wan! Did ever thou see men attired in such strange and bewildering attire? In a land of great heat, is it not extraordinary that great trousers of wool should be worn?"

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"It does seem a bit queer, old man, but there's a reason for it," he exclaimed. "You see, those leather chapps—"

"Thou art jesting with me, surely, O father," interrupted Umlosi. "These men are even as thou and I—made of flesh and blood, and not of leather—"

"My dear old ass, you've misunderstood!" said his lordship, nearly exploding. "A chapp—or a pair of chapps—are those things that these fellows wear on their legs."

"Thy language is a wondrous one, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "A chap is a man, and a chapp is a leg covering! Is it not only natural that I should mistake thy meaning? I am sorely troubled by these many mistakes."

"That's the worst of you, you bally coal-heaver!" chuckled Dorrie. "You always worry over trifling details. I was just explaining about these chapps. They are worn because on certain parts of the ranch the grass is long and dangerously tough. If these woolly things weren't worn by the horsemen, their legs would be frightfully cut. But just have a look at this!"

Dorrie nodded towards the corral, and Umlosi's big black face broke into a beaming smile. He was to be excused for allowing it.

Handforth was just being hoisted into the saddle of a magnificent chestnut horse, which was standing quite docile and calm. Dorrie, however, noticed that its ears were well back, and one or two other indications told his experienced eye that that horse was not quite so docile as it appeared to be.

"Say, guess you fit that saddle like as if you was made on the same pattern!" said Square-Deal Reeve, looking up at Handforth with approval. "Mobbe you'll give us an exhibition of real riding? I'd sure be tickled to death if you was to do a few stunts. Say, pard, do you know any?"

"Stunts?" repeated Handforth weakly.

"Sure! Didn't you let on that you were some dandy hossman?" put in

Two-Gun Milligan. "By cripes! I allows you look durned purty, but I got a kinder hunch thet there'll be a kinder change afore long."

"I say!" said Handforth nervously. "I suppose this horse is quiet?"

Square-Deal roared.

"Quiet!" he repeated. "Why, he's thet quiet he wouldn't scare a bunch of school marms at a missionary meeting! Howsum, you kinder calculated thet it didn't matter what hoss-flesh was placed underneath your karkiss. Take my advice, pard, and sit tight. We're going to raise the anchor!"

"Yes, but look here!"

Handforth got no further, for at that moment the Happy Bunch stepped away from the horse, leaving Handforth marooned, so to speak, on its back. He had a dreadful feeling that all was not as it should be.

"Oh, mamma! I guess we'll sure see some elegant ridin'!" murmured Twirly Sam.

It was only necessary to wait about ten seconds. Handforth's steed remained perfectly docile for that period, and made not the slightest attempt to move. Handforth was mentally conscious of the fact that he presented a ludicrous spectacle. There he was, seated on this horse, and all the fellows were grinning at him.

His attire worried him intensely. At first he had thought that he would look very impressive; but he was rapidly coming to the conclusion that this was not the case.

He longed to end this situation, and he thought the best possible way of doing so was to satisfy the cowboys that he was capable of carrying out his boast. It would only be necessary to ride round the corral once or twice, and he would have an excuse for dismounting.

As it happened, Handforth dismounted much sooner.

He dug his spurs lightly into the horse's sides—not because he thought this was the correct thing to do, but because he had seen other horsemen perform the manœuvre. Handy's own knowledge of horsemanship was so limited that he felt utterly helpless now that he was in the saddle.

The effect of his touch with the spurs was magical.

Handforth received the shock of his life.

His steed, so docile a second before, became a mass of volcanic springs. The animal simply leapt into the air like a cat. Up Handforth went, out of the saddle, and he fell with a jerk upon the horse's neck. More by luck than anything else, he slid back into the saddle, and he clung there desperately.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The sight was altogether too much for the onlookers. Handforth was not unseated at the moment. He clung to the saddle as desperately as a drowning man clings at a lifebelt. He was heaved this way and that until, finally, by some extraordinary circumstance, he was facing the tail of the horse instead of the head.

And he was just in this position when his steed came to the conclusion that something else ought to be done. It suddenly bolted, and it shot forward with such surprising abruptness that Handforth was left in the air. He described a kind of arc, and sat down in the dust with a dull thud.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gee!" grinned Square-Deal. "He's sure some swell rider!"

"Oh, say, I'm kinder ready to laff to death!" gasped Twirly Sam. "Sufferin' snakes! Thet young' guy fair makes my innards roll."

Even Slick Ed was shouting with laughter—a most unusual burst of energy for him.

Handforth picked himself up in a dazed kind of way, saw the laughing cowboys and juniors, and he set his teeth. He looked round into the corral, and saw that the horse was within easy reach, looking at him quite mildly.

Handforth was not to be done. He strode up to the animal, and gave a terrific leap into the saddle—at least he meant to do so. Actually, he misjudged the distance, and jumped right over the other side, landing with another crash. He got to his feet, as red as a beetroot, and this time he made no mistake. He arrived squarely in the saddle, and stayed there for about one second.

Then he was shot out like a stone from a catapult. He regained his feet, bruised, sore, and much subdued. He didn't try any more. He preferred the ridicule of the cowboys to the strenuous effort of riding.

He didn't quite remember how he

tore his outfit off and got back into his own clothing. But when he had done so he strode off towards the ranch-house with an expression of dignified contempt upon his face, and with a grim determination within him to get his own back on the Happy Bunch at the earliest possible opportunity.

Handforth had had quite sufficient excitement for one afternoon.

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISING ADVENTURE.

NELSON LEE and I could hardly believe our eyes as we beheld the party of masked horsemen approaching. There was something unreal about the incident, something which seemed almost grotesque.

We were quite unobserved from any part of the ranch, owing to the fact that we were down in the shallow little valley. The horsemen numbered ten or twelve, and from the condition of their steaming mounts, it was fairly obvious that they had been riding hard.

All the men were attired in the customary garb of the country, and it was impossible to recognise any of their features, owing to the heavy black masks. Just for the first moment I thought it was some joke.

"Why, guv'nor, what on earth——"

"Sit quite still, Nipper, and don't attempt to escape," broke in Nelson Lee curtly. "I did not anticipate this move on the enemy's part, but——"

"The enemy!" I ejaculated, startled.

"Undoubtedly," snapped the guv'nor. "Our approach was observed, and this opportunity has been seized with alacrity. We might possibly forfeit our lives if we attempt to get away. These men are armed, and, if I judge their character correctly, they will not hesitate to shoot."

Before I could say anything in reply to this startling remark, we found ourselves surrounded. The horsemen pulled up their mounts, rearing and breathing hard. We were enclosed by the circle of steaming animals, and I looked round with amazement and anger. At least a dozen revolvers were glittering in the sunlight, all pointing at Nelson Lee and I. There was no doubt as to the grim nature of this hold-up.

"Guess you'd best raise your paws!" said one of the strangers sharply. "Right slick, too! Say, stranger, that right hand o' yours is sure near your hip pocket, an' I'll allow it would give me a real pain if I was to shoot. Guess you'd best be sensible."

Nelson Lee, who had, in fact, been about to draw his own revolver, raised his hands at once. There was absolutely no sense in resisting the order. The odds were quite hopeless.

"That's a heap better," said the man who had spoken. "Allow me, mister."

He edged his horse close, and, still keeping Nelson Lee covered, he reached forward and drew Nelson Lee's "gun" out of his hip pocket. It was a small automatic, and the masked man eyed it with a contemptuous curl of his lip.

"Guess I needn't have been scared any," he said witheringly. "Gee! This durned thing couldn't bore a hole through a sheet of paper! Mobbe you're some surprised at bein' treated this aways?" he added.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I certainly think it is somewhat unusual," he suggested.

"Mobbe; but we've got a reason," said the man. "What's your name?"

"I do not think I am compelled to answer—"

"I'll allow you've got more hoss-sense than a blamed prairie dorg!" cut in the other sharply. "You've got to git it fixed right in your skull that we're serious. Get me? These guns ain't toys—no, sir! They're loaded with lead, an' I'd sure hate to let daylight into you!"

Nelson Lee eyed the horseman steadily.

"I don't think you will be so rash as all that," he said calmly.

"Gee! This guy has got nerve!" muttered one of the others.

"Sure!"

"He's chock full o' sand!"

The leader of the band jerked his revolver suggestively.

"Guess I'm still waitin'!" he said.

"Please don't let me detain you," retorted Nelson Lee smoothly.

The man uttered an oath.

"Your name is Nelson Lee?" he asked abruptly.

"Since you are aware of that fact it is quite useless for me to make any statement," said the famous detective.

"I am hardly in a position to deceive you, since a search in my pocket-book would rapidly tell you the truth. What do you require? What is the meaning of this hold-up?"

"I guess the kid is Nipper?" went on the man.

"Yes," I replied promptly; "and if you think you can scare us by this show of guns, you've made a bloomer!"

Nelson Lee gave me a warning glance, and I thought I detected just a trace of satisfaction in his eye. Perhaps the gov'nor was rather pleased with this dramatic hold-up. At all events, nobody would dare to act in this way except those who were responsible for the cattle rustling. By surrounding us in this fashion, the enemy had shown his hand.

"Personally, I ain't got no sort o' grudge against you folks," said the masked horseman; "but I'll be real obliged if you'll ride along jest as we direct. It ain't my place to hand out any information. You've jest got to come right along without askin' a thing."

"That, no doubt, would suit you admirably," said Nelson Lee; "but I should like to put one or two questions—"

"That elegant chin music don't count any!" broke in the stranger curtly. "Say, I don't want to use force—'tain't my way; but if you don't do jest exactly as you're told—wal, I'll need to give my men a few orders."

"Well I'm blessed!" I muttered. "What are we going to do, gov'nor? I don't like the look of these guns. I shouldn't be surprised if these fellows are in deadly earnest."

"It would certainly not be safe for us to make any resistance," said Nelson Lee. "Well, my friends, we are ready just as soon as you like," he added. "I may as well inform you that Nipper and myself are agreeing to this outrage under protest."

"Outrage nothin'!" said the masked man. "We ain't touched you—an' if you act sensible you won't come to no sort of harm. Guess you'll give me your words that you won't try to make any break-away while we're riding?"

"No, I will not," replied Nelson Lee promptly.

"Wal, it don't make no sort of difference."

An order was given, and the twelve

horsemen wheeled their steeds round, and passed up the sloping sides of the valley, and out on to the prairie. They took good care to keep us within their midst; any attempt to get away would, of course, be futile. These men were armed to the teeth, and at the first sign of any action on our part they would probably bring their revolvers into play.

We did not know how long we were booked to ride, or where our ultimate destination would be. The whole affair was most surprising, and both the gov'nor and I were taken off our guard. We had never dreamed that anything of this nature would occur on our first reconnoitre. But, in my opinion, it proved one thing—that these men were afraid of the gov'nor. They would never have taken this step otherwise. It was rather a compliment to Nelson Lee.

However, I cannot say that I appreciated the compliment very much. The whole incident savoured of melodrama. One does not meet with bands of masked desperadoes nowadays, even in Montana, and the very nerve of this affair was astounding. To capture us in this way, in broad daylight, on the open prairie! It was startling in the extreme, and we could do nothing.

We continued on, mile after mile, at a steady pace. We were still on the Roaring Z Ranch property, but in this direction there were no cowboys to be seen. We were making for the foothills, and these were looming nearer and nearer with every mile we covered.

I wondered what had happened to Buck Mason's guards, if any of them had chanced to be watching this section. Perhaps they had been shot, or possibly they were only rendered helpless. There could not be many, at all events. The ranch was so enormously large that it was utterly impossible to set a really effective watch on all boundaries at the same time.

The afternoon was wearing away, and by this time we should already have been back at the ranch-house. What would they think there when we did not turn up?

I was wondering all sorts of things as we rode on, and then I became interested in the changing appearance of the landscape. The prairie was giving place to ground of a different character.

Before long we were travelling

through little valleys, up hill sides, and here there were trees in plenty, and the ground in many parts was smothered with wild flowers of every description. And, just in the distance ahead loomed the immense bulk of the Rocky Mountains. Actually, they were still many miles distant, but they seemed to tower right over us.

Pine forests were growing in size, and we found ourselves picking our way through little secret valleys and gullies, with trees towering on either side. And when we were least expecting it, we arrived at a rocky pass, the entrance to which was rough and uneven, and would certainly provide very dangerous going for the horses.

As it happened, the horses were not required at all.

We were brought to a halt and told to dismount. It was impossible for us to disobey, and so we complied with the command. There was a short delay while we were kept guarded by six of the masked men. Then, at a word, we were marched forward.

We passed into the rocky gully and were soon picking our way amongst great boulders. Under foot the surface was bad, being mostly loose stones and jagged pieces of rock. The general landscape was blotted out from our view, for on all sides frowned the overhanging rocks, with little clumps of vegetation growing here and there.

It was a wild place and apparently did not lead to anywhere. I began to suspect that this was the secret retreat of the rustlers. But could this be possible? This pass was easily accessible, and it must surely have been fully examined and searched by Buck Mason and his men.

The walk was not a long one as I had feared. We were halted before a shallow cave—merely a low cavity in the rocks—where a small tent was pitched. Outside this tent we halted.

The leader of the masked men gave a word to his companions and entered the tent.

"This is a rum go, gov'nor," I murmured. "I can't make head or tail of it. Do you think these fellows are going to harm us? Perhaps they are afraid that you'll find out their secret—about the cattle stealing, I mean—"

"You must not take things for granted, Nipper," put in Nelson Lee softly. "We have received no

indication that these men are actually connected with the cattle robberies."

"But who else could they be?"

"I cannot say, unless the idea is to hold us prisoners and extort money from our host," murmured the gov'nor. "Mind you, Nipper, I do not believe this to be so—I am in favour of your own theory. But it is never wise to be too sure. We shall probably know the truth very soon."

We had only been able to speak in whispers, since any louder tone would have been overheard by the masked men who surrounded us. And now the flaps of the tent moved, and the leader came out. He was now accompanied by another man, who, apparently was of a totally different type.

He was just in an ordinary lounge suit, with a soft collar and a Stetson hat. His mask was a big one which practically covered his entire face. He looked at us up and down silently for a moment or two. Then he sat forward.

"I sort of regret that we should meet this way, Mr. Nelson Lee," he said, in a soft, refined voice. "But under these special circumstances there was nothing else for it. I can't introduce myself to you—as you'll probably imagine. And I wish to say right here that it is not my intention to argue."

"Your methods, my dear sir, are somewhat melodramatic," said Lee.

"Sure! I admit it!" agreed the other. "But I was forced to do something drastic—I wanted you to visit me real bad. Fact is, Mr. Lee, I've got a few words to say that had best be said straight off. Personally, I am honoured to meet you. But there's a notion in the back of my head that this particular region of Montana ain't healthy."

"I have been given to understand that it is a singularly health giving district," said Nelson Lee, deliberately misunderstanding.

"I guess you don't get me," said the other. "Maybe it's healthy for me; but I guess it's mighty unhealthy for you and for your young friend. Do you get that? And I'd like to advise you, Mr. Lee, to quit right now!"

"Quit?"

"That's the word I used, and I mean it," said the masked man, his voice cold and firm. "It'll be a disappointment to Mr. Farman to lose two of his

guests, but I dare say he'll recover from it. I advise you to quit, and the sooner you quit the better!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I regret that such a course is quite impossible," he said evenly.

The man regarded us closely through his mask.

"I've got to tell you that it'll be dangerous if you decide to stop around this ranch," he said. "Guess there's no man hates bloodshed more than I do; but if you're obstinate there'll be a big pile of trouble."

"Your suggestion is quite clear," said Nelson Lee calmly. "In dealing with matters of this kind one cannot be too precise. Generalities are of no use. If you will not be candid I must fill the gap. In plain words, you order Nipper and myself to leave Montana without further delay."

"Yes."

"And if we fail to do so we shall stand the risk of being shot?"

"I don't exactly agree to that, Mr. Lee," said the man in the mask. "But if you get busy looking into matters which don't concern you—well, it's not absolutely impossible that you might run your head into danger. There's no use me pretending that I'm a disinterested party. I'm not. I want you to quit, because I know blamed well that you are here on business, and because it's not often that you lose your man. I don't figure on your starting anything in this district. So I guess you'd better clear before you have a chance to get going."

"All this is very interesting, but I must tell you quite frankly that it has no effect upon me," said Nelson Lee. "I certainly refuse to leave the district of my own free will, and I will give you no such promise or undertaking. Is that quite plain?"

"I guess it's so plain that a deaf man could hear it," said the other. "And believe me, Mr. Lee, you've made a mighty big mistake. Quit now, and you won't get a scratch. But if you don't——"

He left his sentence unfinished.

"This sort of conversation rather bores me," said Nelson Lee. "In any case, it does not fit our surroundings in the slightest degree, and I repeat that neither Nipper nor I will make any promises."

"You'd rather risk—lead poisoning?"

"Yes."

"I guess you need a lot of time to think this thing over," said the masked stranger. "There's no need to hurry, Mr. Lee. I'm a reasonable man, and I won't expect you to give an answer right away. Maybe you and your young friend would care to have a quiet chat?"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I can tell you at the outset that the delay will be in vain. Nipper and myself are here as the guests of Mr. Farman, and I certainly do not mean to be intimidated by this kind of nonsense. As for your threats—I disregard them. Possibly you thought it would be easy to bluff me, but I'm not made of that stuff!"

The man swore savagely, and thrust aside the tent flap.

"Boys, sling them in here," he said grimly. "You'd best tie their hands behind their backs, in case they get gay."

Both the gov'nor and I were bound, and then we were pushed into the tent, and the flap was closed. We were alone, but we knew well enough that this thin wall of canvas only divided us from a gang of armed men.

"Quite a little drama, Nipper," said Nelson Lee smoothly.

"My hat, sir! I feel like punching that rotter on the nose!" I said hotly. "The way you talked to him was a treat. Do you think he meant what he said?"

"I am not quite sure—it's quite likely."

"If we don't go we shall be shot?"

"Yes; but not fatally," said Nelson Lee. "They would never go to such lengths. In any case, I will never consent to such a proposition. I couldn't even think of doing so, Nipper. I came out here to investigate this mystery, and I intend doing so."

"Well, it's proved now that these captors of ours are the rustlers," I said, with a certain amount of satisfaction. "Nobody else would want to clear us out of the neighbourhood, sir. They've shown their hand by doing this, and it's quite likely they may be tripped up."

The gov'nor nodded.

"I am thinking the same thing," he said softly. "By all appearances the enemy received a bit of a fright when they found we were on the ranch—quite

a nice compliment to us, by the way. And so they took the first opportunity to play this little trick. Of course, we shall maintain our refusal."

"But what do you think they'll do, sir?"

"Well, I have no fear of actual danger," said Lee. "But it is quite possible that things will be made very uncomfortable for us."

"I didn't think such a thing could be possible, sir!" I exclaimed. "To have cattle rustling in these days is surprising enough—but to be held up like this by a band of masked horsemen, is just about the limit! In any case, how did they know that we should be out riding to-day?"

"Either they were watching, or it was a matter of chance—most probably the former," replied Nelson Lee. "These fellows must have a very poor opinion of me if they think that I shall 'quit' the neighbourhood the very instant I am told to do so."

I knew well enough that this incident had made Nelson Lee all the more determined to carry on his investigations. The fact that he was feared clearly indicated that the rustlers were on the jump.

And although our position was not exactly pleasant at the moment, we were both confident that a change for the better would soon come. By tea-time we should be missed from the ranch, and there would be a search party sent out. In all probability Square-Deal Reeve and the other members of the Happy Bunch would scour the ranch for us.

But the time passed, and there came no sign.

At least three hours elapsed and we were not disturbed. Then, when the sun was low in the Western sky and the hot day was drawing to a close, the tent flap was thrown back. Our masked captor entered.

"Sorry to have kept you so long," he said smoothly. "I guess business detained me some. You've had a real nice time to make up your mind, Mr. Lee. Well, what is it to be?"

"You already know my decision," replied Lee curtly.

"You refuse to—quit?"

"I do!"

"I guess I know you're good and firm, Mr. Lee," said the other. "I'm sorry—darned sorry. I'll need to take

a heap of trouble now. There's one thing dead sure; you and your young friend are going to quit this State to-night. If you won't go of your own free will—well, there's such a thing as force."

"You intend to carry us off as prisoners?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Sure!"

"That will be rather difficult, won't it?"

"I guess so, but we've made a few preparations," said the masked man.

"You'll be taken right out of Montana, and you'll reveal a whole pile of horse-sense if you remain right out."

"And what if we return?" asked Lee smoothly.

"Well, there'll sure be trouble," replied the other. "You won't be treated like this again. No, sir. I guess there'll be a shooting around Roaring Z, and there'll be two victims. You don't need to be a magician to figure what that means."

He gave us a meaning look with his dark eyes peering through the mask, and passed out of the tent.

— — —

CHAPTER V.

UP AGAINST SOMETHING BIG.

SQUARE-DEAL REEVE, Twirly Sam, and the other members of the Happy Bunch were amusing themselves with a rope, and they were amusing a highly appreciative audience, too.

Justin B. Farman, Pitt, Handforth and all the others were leaning against the rails of one of the corrals. And within, the cowboys were disporting themselves, performing all sorts of clever tricks with a long rope—a lasso.

It was evening, and the juniors had been wondering what had happened to Nelson Lee and me. They assumed that we had gone for a long ride, and that we should be back well in time for dinner—or "supper" as they called it here. This meal was served at about seven o'clock in the evening.

Buck Mason was rather anxious.

"Guess I'm kinder puzzled some," he remarked, as he met Mr. Farman coming from the ranch-house. "Say, Chief, whar' in blazes have them fellers got to? They figgered on bein' back long before this."

"Perhaps they have lost themselves on the prairie," said Big Jim, with a

smile. "If so, they'll soon be locating the trail—— Say, Buck! What's this little procession, anyway?"

Mr. Farman nodded towards the sloping hill which led up to the prairie. A horseman was riding hard, leaving a cloud of dust behind him. And he was bringing in two riderless horses—both of them saddled.

He took the shortest cut to the corrals, and arrived there among the cowboys, who were now staring straight at him. The man who had just arrived was another of the Roaring Z cow-punchers, but he was not a member of the intimate little band known as the Happy Bunch.

"Say, boys, what d'you make out of this hyar?" he shouted. "Guess I found these two plugs grazin' around the little dip, lookin' as innercent as a couple o' Sunday school teachers readin' psalms!"

"Gee!" exclaimed Square-Deal. "Them plugs is the same as was handed out to the guys from England! Looks like they've had trouble. Say, Twirly, you'd best tote right around and locate Buck——"

"Guess he's comin' along right now," interrupted Two-Gun Milligan. "I don't kinder like the look o' this thing, pards. Guess ther's been somethin' doin' that don't sort o' fit in, by cripes!"

Buck Mason and Mr. Farman came hurrying into the corral. They both recognised the two horses immediately; they were the animals which had been given to Nelson Lee and me earlier in the afternoon. It was hardly surprising that both Big Jim and his manager were serious.

"How'd you come by these plugs?" demanded Buck sharply.

"They was jest foolin' around the little dip, in the next valley," replied the cowboy who had brought them in. "Say, Buck, they was that pleased with theirselves they'd got tired o' chawin'. I sorter guessed that they wusn't sent out in this hyar condition."

"Didn't you see anything of Mr. Lee and Nipper?" demanded Mr. Farman.

"Ther' wasn't no sign o' nobody," replied the cowboy.

"See here, Mike; I don't like the look of it," exclaimed Big Jim grimly. "The little dip is just upon eight miles from here, and Mr. Lee didn't figure

on going that distance. Something's happened, I guess."

"Sure!" agreed Buck. "These plugs ain't the kind to stray; they're sure as peaceable as a couple o' sleepy old cows. Mebbe you're thinkin' that Mr. Lee and the young 'un got off and the hosses strayed? No, sir—not on your life. Those plugs ain't the strayin' kind; they was left deliberate."

All the cowboys were listening keenly, and so were the juniors; in fact, there was quite a deal of excitement over the unexpected appearance of the two riderless horses. It seemed that Mike had only entered the dip by pure chance; otherwise the horses would not have been seen, and there would have been no telling what had happened.

"What the dickens does it mean?" asked Handforth. "Mr. Lee and Nipper! My only hat! I hope they're all right. Perhaps a grizzly bear——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "There aren't any grizzly bears about here!"

"Why, those cowboys told me that the whole place is swarming with them," said Handforth. "Twirly Sam said that you couldn't move five miles without meeting dozens of grizzlies and coyotes and——"

The other juniors interrupted Handforth by a roar of laughter. It was easy to see that the mighty leader of Study D had again been spoofed by the playful bunch of cowpunchers.

The cowboys themselves were all on their toes, eager enough.

"Guess we'd best cut around and get our plugs out!" said Square-Deal, to the others. "We'll sure be needed, I figger. Ther's goin' to be some big play around to-night, boys. I calc'late we'll be right in it. Got me?"

"Yup, sure!" said Ace-High Peter. "It jest shows you, boys, that it ain't no sorter use sendin' a galoot of a tenderfoot around the prairie. But I'm sure surprised at this hyar game; somebody was guessin' this mornin' that Mr. Lee knew a hull heap about this part o' the world!"

"That's certainly correct!" put in Twirly Sam. "Ef you boys reckon that Mr. Lee's a tenderfoot—waal, you're kinder off the track. I'm handin' out the talk right now that Mr. Lee knows as much about this same state of America as most of its

all-fired inhabitants. Get me? Mebbe it's set you thinkin' some."

Slick Ed nodded.

"Sure, it hez!" he said slowly. "That English guy ain't no babby, you can take it from me. No, pards. He's jest about as keen as a razor afore it's been around my chin, an' I guess he don't need stoppin' any. I take off my hat to Mr. Lee—a Britisher who is jest as much at home in Montana as any of us hoboos. An' it stands to reason that a man like that wouldn't lose hisself on the durned prairie. I 'lows I'm worritted. Ther's been somethin' doin' out yonder!"

"Jumpin' coyotes!" said Square-Deal. "Air you figgerin' that——"

"Guess I don't say—nothin'," interrupted Slick Ed. "But I'll allow wo'd best waste no time. Come on, boys; ther's jest about three hours o' daylight left, an' I'm thinkin' we'll search around good'n plenty afore the stars get busy!"

The whole Bunch rushed away to the stables, and their horses were rapidly brought out and saddled. Then they mounted, and rode in a cloud of dust to the spot where Mr. Farman and Buck Mason were still talking. Square-Deal had saddled an extra horse, and Buck's eyes expressed approval.

"Guess this is real thoughtful of you, boys," he said. "You figgered that we'd need to get busy? You were sure right. We're settin' off right now to search around for Mr. Nelson Lee and his young pard."

There was no waste of time. The cowboys, headed by Buck Mason, set off at a gallop, and they were soon lost to view in the cloud of dust which arose from the horses' hoofs. They vanished from sight over the brow of a hill.

And just then Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi came down from the ranch-house, accompanied by Miss Connie, who was all agog to know what the excitement was about. She was very concerned when she heard the story.

Lord Dorrimore, too, was somewhat upset.

"Just my infernal luck!" he exclaimed. "If I'd have come out five minutes earlier I could have gone off with the crowd. What could have happened to Lee, Mr. Farman? Have you any suggestion to make?"

Big Jim shook his head.

"I'm puzzled, sir—sure puzzled," he said. "And I guess I'm anxious, too."

And while they were waiting here, wondering what could have happened, and while the Happy Bunch and Buck Mason scoured the prairie, Nelson Lee and I were still prisoners in the hands of the mysterious masked men.

Our captors were probably unaware of the fact that the two horses had been seen and taken back to the ranch. No doubt the animals had been turned adrift in the little valley, these men believing that the "plugs" would not be discovered until the morning.

In any case, their discovery by Mike made practically no difference to the ultimate issue, for something was destined to occur which was just as unexpected to us as it was to our masked captors.

The dusk of the summer's day was growing deeper, and in this little gulch the shadows were growing dark and indistinct. In our little tent we could hardly see one another, and we still had the ropes bound round our ankles and wrists.

We had been told that we should be removed from the State of Montana that night, and we wondered how this operation was to be performed.

We knew, however, that nothing much could be done until nightfall descended over the prairie.

And then at last the tent flap was flung back, and three men entered. They didn't say anything to us, but immediately set about the task of freeing our ankles. We were stood upon our feet, and then ordered to walk out into the open.

And at that very moment a curious sound came to our ears. It was a rumble, dull and far away at first. We halted before leaving the tent, and a mighty shout came from two or three of the men who were standing in the gulch.

"Boys, it's a landslide!" yelled one of them. "Quit, or we'll sure be smothered!"

I hardly knew what happened next. The men in our tent rushed out like mad, shouting with alarm, and all the time that ominous rumble sounded. The men scattered up the gulch like so many scared rabbits.

Nelson Lee hurried out of the tent, and then glanced upwards. He drew

back with a sudden gasp. Crash! A huge chunk of rock fell less than ten feet away, and the gov'nor staggered into the tent with his hands to his face. Two splinters had struck him, causing painful grazes.

"We—we must run, sir!" I panted huskily.

"Too late, Nipper!" said Leo gravely. "It would be useless——"

His voice was drowned in the terrific roar of the landslide. Hundreds of tons of rock came thundering down into the gorge—in the very spot where we should have stood if we had left the tent. But, as I have explained elsewhere, this tent was pitched in a kind of shallow cave, and was thus protected in a certain kind of way. But the possibility of being buried alive made me go hot and cold.

At the end of the gulch all the masked men had succeeded in outstripping the avalanche of rock. They had only just been in time, too, for several of them had nasty cuts and bruises, caused by flying splinters. In the gulch a tremendous cloud of dust was arising; everything was obscured from sight. The masked men wiped their brows, and trembled as they stood.

"By snakes!" said one of them. "I guess that was too near to be comfortable."

"I thought we wuz all booked for the long trail!"

"Gee! I wouldn't give a fig for them poor guys what was left!"

The leader of the party came up, and he removed his mask. His face was pale, but a gleam of satisfaction was apparent in his eyes.

"Say, boys, that landslide was rather unexpected!" he exclaimed. "Can any of you suggest how it was caused?"

"These durned things don't need no explaining, chief," said one of the men.

"A landslide is liable to occur a'most any time, and this hyar gully hez a kinder reputation fer slingin' chunks o' rock around."

"Well, it could not have happened better," said the leader. "Leo an' the boy were left behind, eh? I rather fancy that no effort on our part will be necessary now. This accident has simplified the whole game, I guess."

The men held a short consultation, and five minutes later they mounted

their horses, and rode off. They made no close examination, for they assumed that this was not necessary.

They were mistaken.

Less than fifteen minutes after they had gone, Nelson Lee and I calmly wormed our way through a gap in the rocks, and found ourselves in the open. The gully was quiet now, and the dust had died down; but the possibility of a further fall of rock made me long to be out on the open prairie.

"Well, that was a pretty close touch, gov'nor!" I remarked.

"Too close to be comfortable," agreed Nelson Lee. "But for the fact that we were in that little cave, we should have been crushed to pulp. Come—we will get into the open. I rather fancy our late friends have gone."

They had, and, since there was nothing else to be done, we set out on the long walk for the ranch. The events of the last half-hour had been most unexpected. Here we were, free, without a sign of our enemies, and we had been expecting to be prisoners, hurrying towards the border.

"Say, I'm feelin' that good I could

smile like this for a week!" remarked Buck Mason genially. "I guess I'm almighty pleased to see you, Mr. Lee. We were figgerin' that something had happened."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, Buck, something has happened," he replied. "I'll tell you all about it."

And, while the Happy Bunch stood round in an attentive circle, Nelson Lee and I explained what had taken place. The cowboys were tremendously interested, and they expressed their views in their own peculiar fashion.

The knowledge that we had met the rustlers, and had nearly been carried off by the gang, made Buck Mason and the Happy Bunch long to get on the trail; but, as Nelson Lee pointed out, such a course would be futile. It would be far better to wait—wait for the enemy to make the next move.

And so we returned to the ranch, to be accorded a great welcome when we arrived.

The first episode of our stay on Roaring Z Ranch was over, and I had an idea that we should shortly be in for some further stirring adventures.

My idea was not very wrong!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

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CHAPTER I.

The Strange Advertisement in "The Times."

"I SAY, guv'nor, listen to this!" laughed Nipper, looking up from the personal column of "The Times," as Nelson Lee, the great detective, helped himself to another grilled kidney. "Wanted at once, assistant-master in large private boarding-school, where great attention is given to the games side and the cadet corps. Scholastic attainments not so much required as a gentleman of strong nerves, with no belief in ghosts or apparitions of any kind. Good salary if suitable. Write in the first instance to Box R777."

An amused smile passed over the clean-shaven, thoughtful face.

"Yes, that's curious. I'll ring them up, and get the name of the advertiser."

Nipper listened with all his ears as Nelson Lee strode into the hall and took down the telephone-receiver.

"Holborn 3171, please!" he said, and they put him through. "Hullo! You are 'The Times' Classified Advertisement Department, are you? Good! There's an advertisement in your issue of this morning, Box R777; do you mind giving me the address of the advertiser? Nelson Lee speaking. Yes; I'll hold on." And, looking back over his shoulder, into the room, he nodded to his assistant, at the same time drawing the pad in front of him and holding the pencil in readiness. "Yes—Reverend Octavius Chard, Marsh Manor, near Huntingdon. Yes, I've got it. Many thanks! Good-bye!"

And, tearing off the leaf, he came back again.

"I've heard of Marsh Manor before," he said. "In fact, I motored through the place two years ago, and saw the celebrated haunted house from the road. Fine Tudor mansion, standing in its own grounds. They told us at the inn that no tenant would stay."

"Well, we don't believe in ghosts, do we, guv'nor?" laughed Nipper.

"Certainly not. Being individuals of

average intelligence, and realising that everything in this delightful world of ours can be traced down to a cause, we don't," said his master. "But there's the post. Just see what it brings us this morning."

Nipper had already jumped up as he heard the rattle of the letter-box, and returned with a letter in his hand.

"Only one?" queried the great detective; but as he took it from Nipper his eyes narrowed down, and he examined the envelope with evident curiosity.

It was addressed, in a large, boyish handwriting, to "Nelson Lee, Esq., Gray's Inn Road, London," and bore signs of having been crumpled in somebody's pocket.

"This is a rather strange coincidence, Nipper. The post-mark is Marsh Manor."

He opened the letter with provoking coolness.

"By Jove! Here's an odd sidelight on the business," he said. "It's a longish letter, too."

And he proceeded to read it aloud.

"Dear Sir,—We are devoted admirers of your great genius, and we are writing because we believe that you are the only person in the world who could fathom the strange mystery of this house. We know it is haunted, because we have all three seen the ghost, and one of the masters left last week because he couldn't stand it any longer. The Head is awfully wild, and thinks someone is playing tricks, but we assure you on our honour that it isn't so."

"The figure is dressed like a monk, in a white cowl, and comes and goes whenever it likes—but always at night."

"We ought to tell you that the master who left is the third one who has gone away for the same reason, and they have all had fearful rows with the Head, who won't believe a word of it."

"Do come down! But please don't on any account breathe a word of this letter, as it would get us into awful trouble. The whole school has been forbidden to even speak of the thing."

"(Signed) TOM GURLING,

"RICHARD A. SEYMOUR.

"HARRY TULK.

"P.S.—You can read all about the house in the guide-book. Lots of people come to see the old oak in it. It was built from the ruins of an abbey close by, and the ghost is supposed to be the abbot himself, who was hanged by Henry VIII. To get here you have to drive from Huntingdon and there is a good inn in the village."

"Well, Nipper, there's enterprise for you! And we certainly won't give Messrs. Tom, Dick, and Harry away," said the great detective, after a pause. "Do you know, I am half in the mind to investigate the matter. It would be interesting in these days of psychic research and spirit messages to bowl the credulous out. What have we got on just now?"

"Nothing but Clitters, the American crook, and the missing heiress," said Nipper, his face dancing with delight as he saw the great detective fill a particular pipe with his favourite mixture, an action that always indicated that he was on the war-path.

"The crook can wait," said Nelson Lee. "Although the Treasury report that there are already three million of these counterfeit Treasury notes in circulation, and I am convinced Clitters is at the bottom of it, still, we've not had the cablegram to say he's sailed from New York yet. As for the heiress, it is my belief that she is dead and buried, in spite of poor Major Rogerson's opinion. I've seen her grave, and there's not a particle of suspicion attaching to her uncle. No, there's nothing to keep us in town for a few days."

And, relapsing into his padded chair, he blew out a great volume of smoke.

"Then I'd better look out the trains, and see whether the inn is on the 'phone," said Nipper, going over to the revolving bookcase for the time-table.

"Save yourself the trouble," said his master quietly, "and take down a letter for me instead. I'm going to answer the principal's advertisement, and apply for the vacant post."

"But what about me, guv'nor?"

And Nipper's jaw fell.

"When I've got it, which I certainly shall," smiled Nelson Lee, "you will probably come down at the end of the week, as a backward boy, whose education requires polishing, and we'll work this thing out together."

"Oh, top-hole!" cried Nipper. "I can see we're going to have some rare fun out of it. What shall you say to your three correspondents?"

"Nothing for the moment. If they knew it, my presence there would be all through

the school like wildfire, and might spoil everything. Remember that for the immediate future I am 'Mr. Herbert Drake, B.A., Cantab.,' and if we catch the next post we ought to have a reply to-morrow."

Nipper took down the few well-chosen words which his master dictated, rattled them off on the typewriter, and took them out to the pillar-box, returning to find Nelson Lee wreathed in a cloud of blue smoke and thinking hard.

The following morning, as Nelson Lee had foretold, there came a letter from the Rev. Octavius Chard, asking for a speedy interview.

"Take that plain kit-bag round to the saddler's, and get him to put the initials 'H. D.' on the side of it. When that is done, pack me sufficient clothes for a week, and send it off by rail when you get my wire," said the great detective.

"You're making pretty sure, guv'nor, that you're going to stay down there!" laughed Nipper.

"I look upon it as an absolute cert.," said Nelson Lee, stretching out his muscular arms and expanding his chest. "I'm glad it's the games side he wants, and not arithmetic. And, by the way, when you've taken that bag, you might hop along to Bedford Row and tell Roddy Miles to be ready with a first-class testimonial as to my physical and moral fitness for the position when he hears from me."

Then, having first attached a tiny scrap of "toothbrush" moustache to his upper lip with spirit-gum, and put on a pair of rimless pince-nez, which completely altered his appearance, he left the flat, hailed a passing taxi, and arrived at King's Cross with ten minutes to spare for the Huntingdon train.

His quietly observant eyes, as he walked along it, saw no face that he knew, and he chose a smoking compartment in a corridor coach, travelling third class, as more in keeping with his assumed character of an assistant master in search of a job.

There were not many passengers that morning, but one got in and took the corner opposite to his own as the train started.

It had scarcely left the platform when Nipper arrived, breathless and just too late, with the tobacco-pouch his master had left on the mantelshelf in his hand.

"Oh, blow!" said Nipper, with vexation. "But there's nothing to be done—nothing but to wait until I hear from him where to send it."

A single glance had been sufficient to give the great detective a lightning summary of his fellow traveller, whom he set down as a foreigner and quite harmless, and, absorbed behind the pages of his morning paper, it was not until the train was gathering speed and running through New Barnet that a subtle, aromatic odour stole upon his nostrils, and his hand went mechanically to the side-pocket of his tweed coat.

He laid the paper down, and sat up in his corner, placing the empty pipe between

ANSWERS
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his lips and searching methodically for the missing pouch. Opening the handbag he had brought with him, he saw that it was not there, and, with a frown of annoyance, he was replacing the useless pipe in his pocket, when his companion leaned across the carriage.

"Monsieur has forgotten his tobacco, is it not so?" said the man, with a smile of inquiry.

"Yes, I'm afraid I have," replied Nelson Lee. "I shall have to get some at Huntingdon, but, unfortunately, it won't be my special mixture."

"Now I suggest, with all humility, that monsieur will do me the honour to try a pipe of this."

And the stranger produced a little green paper bag, which he held out to Lee, whose nostrils were expanding as he sniffed that curious aroma.

"It is not tobacco in the ordinary sense," continued his companion, "but a mixture of herbs—very nice, I assure you, when one gets used to it. I suffer from a little affection of the throat, and for twelve months I have found great benefit."

"It is very good of you," said Nelson Lee. "The smell is not at all objectionable—in fact, quite pleasant. Ah, Heath and Heather, St. Albans! I've heard of them. Thanks! I will accept your hospitality."

And he proceeded to load from the bag, which was a strange blend of what looked

like dry seaweed and chopped straw, with bits of crimson rose-leaf among it.

"Nice?" smiled the foreigner. "Ah, I am glad you like it! Very good, I promise you; less harmful than tobacco. After all, it is but a matter of taste, is it not?"

"I suppose it is," assented Lee. "And what part of the continent do you come from, sir?"

"Belgium," replied the man, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I arrived by the last boat that left Ostend in that terrible nineteen fourteen, and I have as yet no inducement to return to my home—at any rate"—and he laughed—"not while you kind English continue to hold out the hand of friendship. I and my friends have good reason to be grateful. Think of it, monsieur—a charming house, no rent, no taxes, no nodings! Mr. Ingleby Charteris pays them all, and we live, a happy little family, together. I and my compatriots. You know, possibly, Mr. Ingleby Charteris?"

"Yes, I have met him—the stockbroker, you mean?"

"That is it—the stockbroker, very wealthy, very kind man. We can nevaire forget, we Belgians!"

And the smoker of the herbal tobacco spread out his hands, which Nelson Lee had already noticed were long, thin hands that at first sight seemed very dirty, until a second glance showed them to be stained with yellow and purple markings, as from constant contact with some chemical.

(To be continued.)

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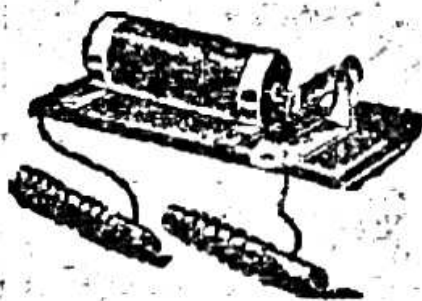
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