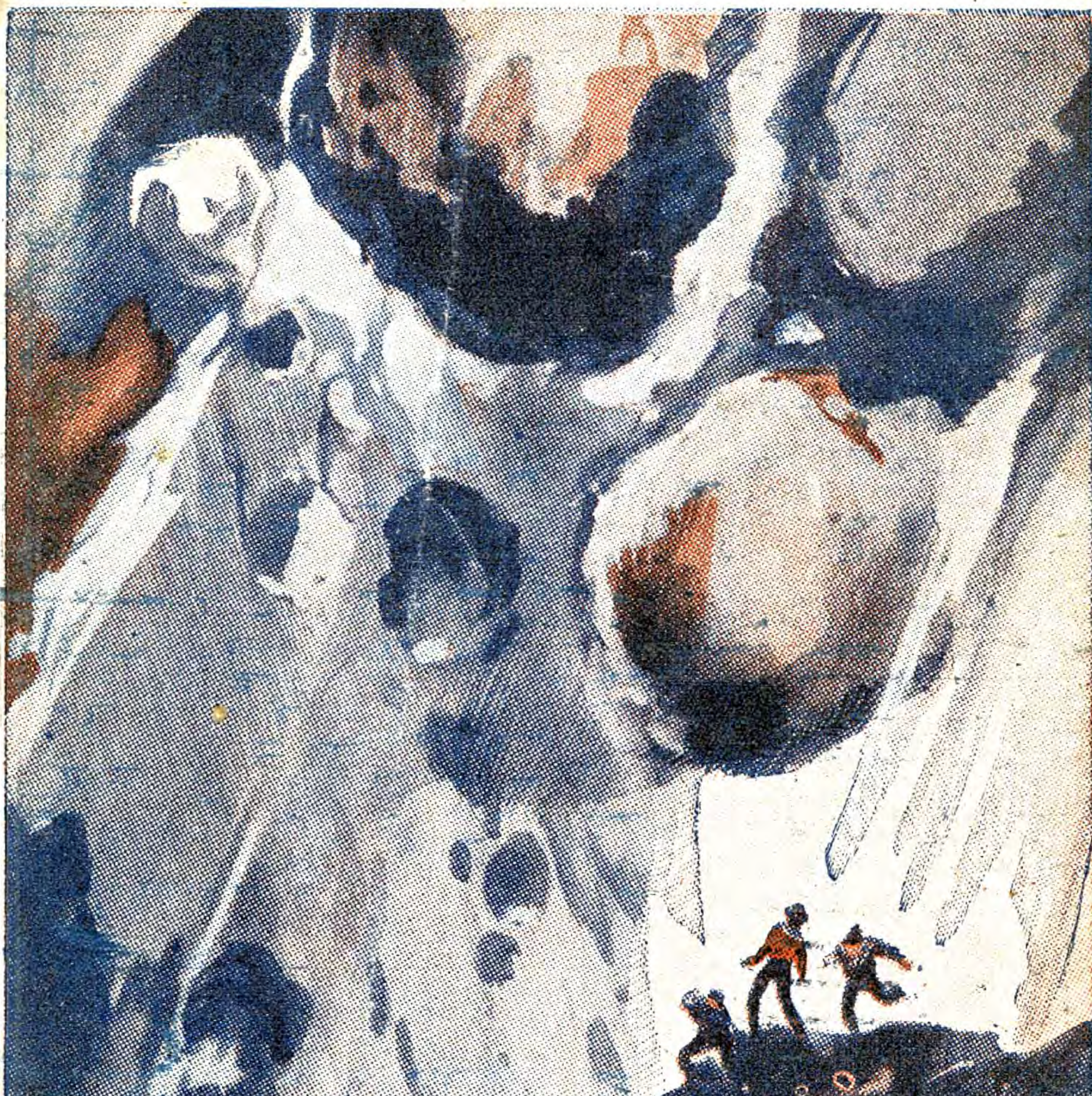


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY OF WONDERS!

"**G**OLD!" said Handforth excitedly. "Great Scott! Just look at it!" exclaimed Church. "Why, you can pick it up by the handful! I always thought that gold had to be washed out, and that you only got an ounce or two after working for a week."

Square-Deal Reeve nodded.

"Guess you ain't far wrong, my lad," he agreed. "I'm handin' it out t' you right now that gold is jest about the most difficult stuff on this hyar airth t' get a-hold of. Say, I've known men work weeks on a claim, an' all the gold they've gotten by the end o' that time could be perched on my dog-gone thumb-nail!"

"Yes, but this is different," said Handforth.

"Diff'rent?" echoed Square-Deal. "Jumpin' coyotes! I'd sure say it was diff'rent! Gee! I guess this is the richest pay dirt I've ever struck. Say, it ain't pay dirt neither; it's jest pure gold dust, wi' a sprinklin' o' sand mixed up with it. I calc'late it don't need washin' any."

A group of the juniors were with Square-Deal Reeve, and they were standing on the bank of a little rippling creek. The volume of water was only small, the stream itself being so shallow that it was easy to stand in the middle

of the creek without the water rising above one's ankles.

Square-Deal Reeve was standing in mid-stream now. Again and again he dug his hands into the sand at the bed of the creek, and when he lifted them up they were full of a bright golden yellow substance, which looked like wonderfully bright sand.

The weight of it was astounding—a sure indication of its real nature. For, without any exaggeration, that sand—or "pay dirt"—was at least fifty per cent gold. The whole bed of the creek was nothing more or less than a treasure worth millions of pounds.

And this was not the only creek of the same nature in the valley. Almost every rippling stream which came down from the mountain was laden with gold. Handforth and the other juniors were not nearly so impressed as Square-Deal Reeve. The big Montana cowboy had seen "gold strikes" at other periods of his life, but these had been as nothing compared to this staggering discovery.

I had ceased to wonder at the marvels of this unknown valley—a valley which was not on any map, and which had never been heard of in civilised places. And it was situated a good many miles up the Ghost River, beyond Fort Derwent, in the Athabasca region of North-West Canada.

I strolled up while Handforth and the others were letting the heavy gold-dust trickle through their fingers.

"Can't resist it—eh?" I said, smiling. "Well, when we return to England, we ought to be rich enough. We shall all go back blotted millionaires, and in a few years' time this valley will be a hive of industry."

"Won't it be glorious?" asked Church excitedly. "Just fancy us going back home and telling our people that we're giddy millionaires."

"Ripping!" grinned Handforth.

"Well, we've got all our claims staked out, and there are enough claims in this valley to produce millionaires by the score," I went on. "We sha'n't stay here much longer, you know. We shall have to get back to Fort Derwent, and then down to Winnipeg, or some other big Canadian town, where we can file our claims. After that, everything will be left in Mr. Farman's hands, and we shall buzz off back to England as fast as railways and steamers'll carry us. If we don't buck up, we shall be weeks late for the autumn term at St. Frank's."

"Oh, blow St. Frank's!" said Handforth. "You silly ass! What the dickens does St. Frank's matter now, when we're all as rich as—as Jack Dempsey?"

I grinned.

"The fact that we've staked our claims doesn't mean that we've got to forget everything else in life," I replied. "And the gov'nor's got to see that we're all back according to the original plan."

"Quite right, young 'un; that's the way to talk!" said Lord Dorrimore, strolling up. "No back-sliding, you know. Lee's as stern as a county court judge, by gad! He means to cart you off within a couple of days now."

Nelson Lee, who was with Dorrie, nodded.

"Yes, boys, our holiday is coming to an end," he said pleasantly. "We've had some exciting times, and some thrilling adventures. But we can't stay here for ever, and I don't fancy you would care for this part of the world in the winter time."

"Why, is it a great deal different, sir?" asked Church.

"My dear lad, when the winter sets in, this part of the country becomes frozen up," replied Lee. "Indeed, if we stayed here too long now we should probably find ourselves booked to remain

in the Far North until the spring break-up. We must get outside before the end of the summer."

I was aware of a little feeling of regret at the thought of having to leave this valley. During this last day or two we had thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Previous to that, things had been very perilous and exciting.

We had originally been spending our summer holiday in Montana, at the big ranch-house belonging to Justin B. Farman's father—Big Jim Farman, the millionaire. Then we had come north, having heard word of this extraordinary gold strike.

And we had not gained possession of the valley without perils and excitements. Four scoundrels, led by a man named Jake Crasher, had menaced us at first, but we had settled their hash. We had had trouble with the Nassi Indians, an aggressive tribe who had settled in the valley. But these Indians had fled, leaving us in full possession.

Looking at it in one way, it seemed rather a shady trick on our part to boot the Indians out. But we had come with peaceful intentions, and the Redskins would have been unharmed if they had treated us well. But they had adopted aggressive tactics, and we had been obliged to defend ourselves.

The valley was a most curious one, being hidden in the mountains, and was absolutely unknown to the outside world. There were only two ways into it—one by means of a tunnel beneath a waterfall, and the other entrance led through a secret gorge, a natural formation of rock which we had named the Caribou Pass.

The waterfall exit from the valley was closed, for the tunnel had collapsed, and it would be a sheer impossibility to clear the thousands of tons of rock away. Our only method of getting out of the valley was by means of the pass.

We had satisfied ourselves that there was no other exit. Enormous cliffs, thousands of feet in height, rose up on every side. These cliffs were unscalable, and, even supposing we reached the top of one of them, it is extremely doubtful if we could have proceeded. For outside the valley the whole country was a wild expanse of rocky peaks and treacherous canyons.

But we were quite content in mind. We had performed the work we had

come for, our claims were all staked, and there was really nothing to do now except get back to civilisation.

And Nelson Lee meant to make a start within a day or two, after we had enjoyed a comfortable rest. There were twenty in our party—twelve being St. Frank's juniors. The others were Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Mr. Farman, Umlosi, three cowboys from Mr. Farman's ranch, and Leon Ascara, our French-Indian half-breed guide. From first to last Leon had proved a faithful servant.

I am not including Jake Crasher, Bob Doane, Pat Hara, and Josh Sims in the party, although they were in the valley with us. We did not recognise these four rascals as belonging to us.

By force of circumstances, they were in this valley, and we could not very well pitch them out, rascals as they were. Nelson Lee had decided that they should accompany us back to civilisation—as prisoners. Once there, they would be handed over to the police to answer for their misdeeds.

Indeed, they were prisoners even now, since their weapons had been taken from them and they were constantly under our observation. They were four against twenty, and they knew well enough—and we knew—that they had no chance of gaining the upper hand.

Their best policy, in fact, was to accept the position. For, by doing that, they would at least be assured of a safe passage to the outside world. A kind of peace had been patched up, and we really believed that Crasher and Co. possessed some feelings of gratitude towards us, for we had saved them from a horrible death at the Indians' hands. Only in the nick of time had we prevented the four men from being burned to death.

And since the departure of the Indians, Jake Crasher had behaved himself. He had done everything humanly possible to make himself agreeable. By nature, he was a brutal bully, but I believed that his recent experience had softened him somewhat.

We had a central camp on the bank of the quiet river which flowed through the valley, and most of our stores were here, although our dugouts, which we had used to carry us down the Ghost River, were outside the valley, and the problem of reaching them was one

which worried Nelson Lee more than a little.

Half a mile down the valley there was another camp, and this was Jake Crasher's quarters. They had not exactly been expelled by us, but they had evidently thought it better to keep strictly aloof. Needless to say, we all entirely approved of the idea.

And now, as I strolled back towards the camp with Nelson Lee, leaving all the others still excitedly discussing the gold, I saw Jake Crasher and one of his companions approaching us. Crasher was a big man, beefy, and extremely coarse. He was looking none the pleasanter now because his chin had not been shaven for several days. The man with him was Josh Sims.

"Mebbe you'll allow me to speak some?" suggested Jake, as he came up.

"What have you to say, Crasher?" asked Nelson Lee curtly. "I think we understand one another quite well already, and I am quite sure that my presence is just as distasteful to you as your presence is to me."

"I'll sure allow you hev a straight way of handin' out the talk," said Jake Crasher gruffly. "See hyar, boss! Can't we jest patch things up a bit? I'm kinder figgerin' that me an' my pards re'lise we'd sure ha' bin cold meat b' now if you hadn't got around. An', say, we're grateful—"

"There's no need for you to talk about the matter, Crasher," interrupted Leo. "If you wish to display this gratitude you speak of, you can do so in your actions. You know the position, and it is a mere waste of breath for me to repeat it."

"Say, what about this durned gold?" broke in Josh eagerly.

"The gold?"

"Don't we look in nowheres?"

"You don't deserve an ounce of gold between the lot of you," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "Since you entered this country, you have consistently acted in every villainous way possible. You have attempted more than once to injure me and my party. What right do you claim to any of this gold?"

"Guess we ain't got no right at all," said Crasher humbly. "No, sir. We've sure chucked away our chances by actin' crooked. But, seeing as the hull trouble has blown over—waal, I was figgerin'

that you might get busy lettin' bygones be bygones, an' give us a kinder fresh start."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Very simple, isn't it?" he said smoothly. "No, Crasher, that sort of thing won't do. It is just possible that I might overlook your behaviour during the recent week or so, since you and your friends were rendered reckless by the lust for gold. But I have not forgotten your dastardly behaviour in Montana."

"Aw, I guess that's dead now," growled Jake.

"I rather fancy the Montana police are of a different opinion," said Nelson Lee. "You are all badly wanted for cattle-thieving and attempted murder, and I shall consider it my duty to take you back to more civilised regions as prisoners. And you will all be wise to accept the position."

Crasher shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm figgerin' we can't do anythin' else," he said. "Say, we're sure in your hands. See hyar, Josh! Mr. Lee's dead right. We acted on the crook, an' we've got to pay. That's as it should be. Guess I don't see things now as I did afore, an' I'm ready t' let Mr. Lee do as he thinks best."

This was a very different spirit, and I was pleased to see it. Crasher was evidently no longer the truculent bully he had been. His very demeanour was changed; he looked almost humble.

"Much depends upon your behaviour between now and when we reach civilisation," said Nelson Lee. "I need say no more, Jake. If you and your friends behave yourself, you will not find me harsh."

Jake hesitated.

"About this hyar gold," he said slowly. "I'm allowin' ther's a hull heap more in this valley than you folks know what t' do with. And—say, it ain't no more yours than mine, strictly speakin'."

"Any man has a right to stake his claim," said Nelson Lee. "It is a question whether you have forfeited that right or not. As far as I am concerned, you may all stake any claims you wish to select, and I will see that they are officially filed with the Canadian authorities."

The faces of the two men lit up.

"Gee, that's bully!" shouted Crasher. "Guess you're real while!"

"But you must not imagine that you will be free to return to these claims as soon as the formalities are over," said Nelson Lee. "You must thoroughly understand, Crasher, that I am determined to see justice done, and you must answer for your crimes in Montana as soon as we return."

"Guess that don't faze me any," said Jake. "Say, me an' my pards wus all actin' fer Travers, our boss. He's the guy who handed out the orders. Guess we'll be located in the penitentiary for a year or so, an' I ain't sayin' that we don't deserve it. But life in the pen. won't be so all-fired bad when we know that we'll be millionaires when we come out."

Nelson Lee nodded, and we walked on, having no desire to continue the conversation. I was feeling rather indignant.

"It's not right that those scoundrels should have an equal share of this gold, guv'nor," I protested.

"My dear Nipper, this valley does not belong to us," replied Lee. "Crasher and his friends have as much right here as we have, strictly speaking. They are quite justified in staking their claims, and after they have served their sentences for their various crimes, they will probably hold different views of life. And, in any case, they will not resort to villainy again, since they will possess so much money that there will be no occasion to commit any further crimes."

"That's one way of looking at it, guv'nor," I said. "And I suppose you're right. It's pretty certain that the rotters won't attempt any tricks, because they're relying on us to get them down the river to Graham Settlement. They can't very well go alone, without guns or supplies."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"They will stick to us because there is no other course," he said. "They will refrain from treachery because treachery would not possibly pay them under these present circumstances. Hallo! Those boys are going rather too close to that flame. Handforth—Church!"

I looked round, and saw that Handforth and Co. were standing near a jet of flame which was burning between two blackened rocks, on the top of a small

hillock. The flame was caused by natural gas, which spurted up out of the earth in a most peculiar way.

Indeed, we owed our present security to this natural gas jet. The Indians had been scared out of the valley by the igniting of that gas—which, at the time, had flung up a flame fifty or sixty feet in height. It had soon died down, however, and was now a mere ghost of its former self.

"There's no danger, sir," I said.

"There may be, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "On one or two occasions that flame has awakened into life, and there is no telling with a phenomenon of this kind. The gas is evidently stored up far below the surface in some natural subterranean cavern. And it bursts forth at intervals."

It was rather curious that Nelson Lee should issue this warning just then, for the wisdom of his words was proved practically at the same moment. Handforth and Co., on the hillock, were examining the gas jet closely, and with much interest.

"Don't go too near, you ass!" said Church, as Handforth bent down.

"Oh, rot! There's no danger," said Edward Oswald. "Even if the flame suddenly spurted up——"

He didn't get any further. For, even as he was speaking, there was an appalling roar, and a column of fire shot into the air to a height of forty feet. Handforth staggered back, tripped up, and fell.

Somehow or other Church and McClure dragged him out of danger, and only just in the nick of time. There was a smell of burnt hair in the atmosphere. I rushed up, and for the life of me I couldn't help grinning.

Handforth sat there, in the grass, looking dazed and bewildered. His face was as black as a sweep's, and his eyebrows were missing—they had been singed off. He scrambled up, gasping.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated. "What—what happened?"

"Oh, you reckless idiot!" panted Church. "Two inches nearer, and you'd have been burnt to death! We told you not to——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm all right!"

And, fortunately, he was. Within a few minutes the huge gas jet died down. But Handforth's experience had proved

very effectively that it would be advisable to give the hillock a wide berth in future.

This enchanting valley was full of wealth and beautiful scenery—but it also contained its perils.

CHAPTER II.

JAKE CRASHER'S DECISION.

BOB DOANE grunted. "Waal, I guess mobbe it'll be best," he said slowly. "Anyways, we ain't in a persition to argue any. Guess our on'y charnce is to stick around this hyar outfit, an' behave ourselves like we wus Sunday-school kids. I guess we'll hit the pen, good an' hard, but we'll saro hev' somethin' to look forward to."

Crasher and Co. were seated round their campfire. It was late evening, and supper was over. The men were smoking before rolling into their blankets. Further up the valley the flickering lights of the main camp could be plainly seen. These four men preferred to be alone—and we preferred it, too. The arrangement was mutually agreeable.

"Aw, I guess this Lee guy was saro blowin' hot air," said Josh Sims, as he rolled a cigarette with deft fingers. "Say, boys, we'd best sit tight an' do as Bob reckons. We'll be so blamed good that we'll get into the practice of sayin' grace afore feedin'! We'll bluff these hyar guys good an' proper!"

Jake Crasher shook his head.

"I'm allowin' that Lee is a Britisher," he said. "But I can tell you right now, boys, that ther' ain't no flies on him—an' he ain't the kinder guy to be bluffed. Nope! It can't be done!"

"Aw, he ain't sech a cutesy as all that!" objected Doane. "If we kinder behave as like as not we'll be able to slide off when we git down to Graham Settlement. We've just gotter sit tight until then——"

"Cut that gassin'!" interrupted Jake curtly. "Look hyar, boys, I've bin thinkin'. Say, I've been thinkin' so almighty hard my brain's kinder mussed up. But I've saro got th' right scheme. An' I'm going to hand it out to you fellers afore we go any further."

His companions looked at him with interest.

"First, we're going to light out from the valley—alone," said Jake.

"Jumpin' rattle snakes!"

"Say, what in blazes——"

"Aw, gwan! You can't mean——"

"Air you figgerin' t' do th' talkin'?" snapped Crasher. "Say, cut that fool talk, an' listen! We're lightin' out from this valley alone. I'm guessin' we ain't got no sorter use fer these other guys."

"But we can't get down the river——"

"We can!"

"Without dugouts, or boats?" asked Doane.

"Say, hev these fellers got dugouts?" demanded Jake curtly. "I figger they're in the same position as we are. And, anyways, that don't matter a cuss. We've gotter think o' the hull thing together—an' I guess we've gotter do th' best we kin fer ourselves. Anyways, we ain't takin' none o' Lee's doggone medicine."

Jake's companions were thoroughly interested, and on the alert. They had not imagined that their leader would decide upon any scheme of his own. For it seemed madness to attempt any trickery.

"What's this durned idee?" asked Josh Sims.

"Waal, I'm handin' it out now," replied Crasher. "Say, if we go down wi' this crowd we won't hev no sorter chance o' gettin' away. An', as sure as death, we'll be handed over to the sheriff. Guess you know what happened way back in Montana. We'll be landed in the pen, for twenty years—the hull crowd of us. That's how I figger."

The others were silent.

"And it ain't good enough," went on Jake. "Guess I ain't hankerin' after a life o' that sort. Say, d'you reckon we'd ever see a durned sight o' this gold?"

"Waal, I guess that Lee's straight," said Josh.

"Straight—sure!" agreed Jake. "But that don't signify any. After twenty years in the pen, we'll be kinder settin' one foot in the grave—we ain't chickens, none of us. An', say, what'll this valley be like after twenty years? I guess ther'll be a city right on this spot wi' half a million folks around. Our claims will sure be jumped—they'll be jumped in the first rush."

"Guess I was thinkin' the same way," said Bob slowly. "But see hyar, Jake,

we don't need t' do anythin' drastic—yet. We'll go wi' this crowd outside. An' when we git ther'—waal, we kin slip off, I guess."

"You guess wrong," said Doane. "No, boys, it couldn't be done. We shouldn't stand a dorg's chance. Our only hope is to light out right now, while these guys ain't suspectin' nothin'."

"And what about the gold?"

"Say, it's lyin' around by the cart-load," replied Jake tensely. "See hyar! You boys sit around an' say nothin'—I'll talk some. This is how I figger. This hyar gold is sure lyin' loose in the creek beds. We can carry ten thousand dollars' worth at a time! When the camp is asleep we'll get busy, an' work until dawn. We'll shift as much of this yeller stuff as we kin durin' the night. We'll sure hev half a million dollars in the Pass before mornin', an' them fools won't guess a thing."

The others crowded nearer.

"Gee! I'm allowin' that's a likely stunt!" said Josh.

"By cripes!" exclaimed Pat Hara. "You're dead right."

"Sure, he's dead right," went on Jake Crasher. "Now, boys, it's up to us to put this thing over. Got me? They ain't figgerin' on hittin' the trail until Friday morning—an' it's Sunday night now. Guess we've got two clear nights fer our work."

"Three!" said Bob Doane.

"Nope! I reckon we'll need to get busy on somethin' else Thursday mornin'," said Jake. "An' we kin sure shift enough in two nights to last us the rest of our lives—I ain't greedy. We'll work to-night an' to-morrow night. I'm allowin' I've got some other ideas, but they'll keep."

Jake didn't say any more just then, but rolled himself in his blanket and calmly went to sleep. The others talked on for a while, rather excited over this new plan. They had not troubled to use their own wits. But it struck them that Jake Crasher's suggestion was a good one.

Their position was not exactly enviable. They could either stick to Nelson Lee and be sent to gaol, or they could take this chance and get out of the country with as much gold as they could carry.

And, after all, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. The rascals agreed with Jake that it would be far

better to hit the trail now with a small fortune in their possession than to stake their claims and gain a large fortune—and a problematical one—after they emerged from the “pen.”

And so, as soon as everything was all quiet for the night, Jake and his friends got to work. It was necessary for them to act with great caution. For Nelson Lee was not so foolish as to leave his camp unguarded. A watch was constantly kept—not because an attack by Jake and Co. was feared, but simply as a matter of principle. There was always a chance, too, the Indians might return, although this was a very slim chance.

Fortunately for the plotters, the night was pretty dark, and it was impossible to see for more than ten or fifteen feet. Crasher's own camp fire had died down long since. But the men, instead of being wrapped in their blankets, were well over a mile away, at the further end of the valley—as near as possible to Caribou Pass.

Here a fresh little creek babbled noiselessly on its way down to the big stream. And the bed of this creek was literally composed of solid gold, in the form of dust. There was, perhaps, a fifty per cent. admixture of sand and gravel. But for gold to be found in such quantities was almost unknown in history.

The four men worked at great pressure throughout the night—they worked until they were nearly fit to drop with exhaustion. The rich “pay dirt” was carried laboriously into the pass, load by load, the men using a couple of sacks for this purpose. And the stuff they were carrying was appallingly heavy.

But, just before dawn, they had succeeded in transferring an astonishing amount of gravel and gold into the pass. They did not attempt to wash out the rubbish on the spot—that operation would do later.

The main thing, now, was to get every available ounce of “dirt” out of the valley. Jake knew something about gold, and when he roughly reckoned up what they had already shifted, he was so pleased that he forgot his tiredness.

The last half-hour was spent in covering up tracks.

“I ain't sayin' nuthin' about the others, but that doggone Lee has sure got eyes like gimlets!” declared Jake. “We don't need t' leave a sign of anythin' that'll get him suspicionin'.”

The creek bed showed no trace of the recent operations, for the swiftly flowing water covered up all signs. And there was very little danger of Nelson Lee noticing that the grass was trampled down between the creek and the pass.

The conspirators did everything they could, at all events, and just when the first faint flush of dawn was appearing, they crept to their camp, rolled into their blankets, and slept like logs—absolutely tired out.

They were still asleep when the sun was high. We suspected nothing, and it did not concern us when Jake and his companions arose. Having nothing to do they were evidently sleeping the time away. If any of us thought of the matter at all we looked at it in this way.

That day was one of lazy enjoyment for the juniors, and active preparation for Nelson Lee and the other grown-up members of the party. Stores were being packed, and plans were being discussed.

We should only be one more day in the valley, we reckoned. And then, at dawn on the Friday morning, we were to hit the trail through Caribou Pass. Exactly how we should reach our dug-outs we didn't know; but I was leaving all that to the gov'nor. He had everything in hand.

We saw no sign whatever of the Indians, and the weather still kept fine and clear. After all our recent excitements, life seemed a trifle dull. We didn't know that the most thrilling episodes of all were yet to come!

When nightfall came we were fast asleep in camp, with the single exception of Square-Deal Reeve, who was on watch. He would be relieved at the end of two hours by Twirly Sam, and the watch would be kept up in this way.

As before, Jake Crasher and Co. worked like shadows—like ghosts of the darkness. Unseen, and unheard, they were busily employed between the creek and the pass, devoting every energy to the task of shifting the gold.

When dawn came, and we arose, we found them fast asleep. There was not the slightest sign that they had been active. Even Nelson Lee, alert as he was, had no suspicions that Jake Crasher was planning treachery.

That day passed fairly rapidly, and the weather was not quite so fine, the sky being thickly clouded for the greater part of the time.

Towards evening, however, the weather cleared, and nightfall found us all ready for immediate departure on the morrow. Crasher and his men had been active in the evening, too, packing up and making ready. This, of course, was quite natural. We assumed that they were coming with us.

Crasher had altered his plans. Upon second thoughts he had decided to utilise the third night, also. The touch of the gold had awakened his greed, and he was anxious to shift every possible ounce.

Darkness again found the four men busy. And still they gave us no clue as to their movements. They worked so cautiously and carefully that those who kept watch were not permitted to know the truth.

In the small hours of the morning—about three hours before dawn—Jake Crasher called a halt. He and his men were now in the pass, safely out of ear-shot, and free from all observation.

"I'm guessin' we've brought the last load out, boys," he said. "It's up to us to get busy now."

"You mean—we'll quit?" asked Josh.

"Nope! Not just yet," said Crasher. "I'm figgerin' ther's somethin' more important to be done."

"See hyar, Jake, we can't waste no more time," put in Bob Doane. "I reckon we need t' git a start over these guys, an' we've left it durned late already. How in blazes d'you reckon we're goin' t' keep ahead o' that crowd, an' carry all that gold——"

"Aw, let me talk some!" snapped Jake. "Say, Bob you've got jest about as much brain as a durned beetle! This game is a stiff one—an' I'm not hankerin' after seein' the thing fall through. The job's gotter be done properly."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' this," replied Jake grimly. "We'll hit t' trail soon—but we ain't allowin' them others t' follow. D'you git me?"

"I guess I don't," said Josh Sims. "Ther's only one trail, I fear, an' it stands t' reason that Lee's crowd will come out o' the valley by th' same route."

Crasher looked at his companion squarely.

"Lee's crowd won't leave th' valley nohow!" he declared.

Bob Doane looked startled.

"Say, you ain't thinkin' o' killin'——" he began.

"Killin'—nothin'!" interrupted Jake. "How d'you figger we'd do it, anyway? We ain't got guns, an' ther's twenty o' the guys agin us. An' ther' ain't no need t' act that aways. See hyar, boys, I'll put it t' you in haf a dozen words. By the time we've left th' valley ther' won't be no way out. An' for why? Because our game is to block this pass clean up!"

"Gee!"

"Block it up!" repeated Jake. "Ther's no other way out, I figger. We'll hit th' trail, an' Lee an' th' hull bunch'll be bottled up in this valley. Guess they'll stay right hyar until they grow old an' die!"

The other men were startled by this suggestion.

"I'm allowin' it's a real live stunt!" said Josh Sims. "But I'm a curious feller, Jake. I guess I like t' ask a heap o' questions. Hyar's one right now—an' I'll be real pleased if you'll answer it. How in th' name o' blazes d'you figger t' block up this pass?"

"Waal, I'm guessin' it'll be easy," said Crasher calmly.

"Easy! Say, it's a thousand feet high!" said Josh. "These durned rocks are as solid as anythin' could be. We could work for a hull year without blockin' up th' pass."

"Say, you make me tired!" grunted Crasher. "Mebbe you've forgot that in th' stores they've gotter box full o' dynamite charges. They wus brought out in case any blastin' operations were needed. Say, what's goin' t' happen when them doses o' dynamite git busy? This hyar pass will crumble t' bits—it'll cave in, an' them galoots in th' valley will be caught like rats in a trap. An' while they're wonderin' what's happened, we'll walk away."

The other men were staggered by this idea.

"Gee! It's sure the best stunt ever!" declared Bob Doane admiringly. "Say, Jake, I'm allowin' your brain is full o' dandy notions. But ther's jest one thing I'd like t' know. How d' reckon t' get a-holt o' this dynamite?"

"I'm allowin' that's a problem," replied Jake, rubbing his scrubby ehin. "But I kinder kept my eyes open while the things wus bein' packed. Say, I hung around, careless like. An' I know

for a fact that that dynamite is all stowed away in a canvas pack tied with rope. It's rather a curious shape—diff'rent from the others. I'd sure know it in a second."

"But all th' packs are laid out in a long line near the camp—ready for th' mornin'," objected Josh Sims. "I don't reckon we kin do it, Jake. We'll sure be spotted if we go too near."

But Jake Crasher was determined upon his dastardly scheme. Everything depended on it. And he was taking the chance. A plan was quickly formulated. They would all creep near to the camp, and then Jake would go forward alone. He knew the particular pack which contained the dynamite, and he would be able to pick it out from the others.

And, within half an hour, Crasher was approaching the camp like a snake in the grass. His companions were some distance ahead. Foot by foot, Jake advanced, pausing now and again to have a good look ahead.

Only one fire was burning, and this was low. Seated in front of it, Square-Deal Reeve was pulling idly away at his pipe, and whittling a stick with his big jack-knife to pass the time.

His position could not have been more favourable for Jake's purpose, for his broad back was presented to the creeping scoundrel. And all the packs were clearly visible in a pile—ready to be shouldered by the various members of the party when the start was made.

As silently as a spirit, Jake came up. In spite of his burly frame, he was active enough. And, at last, he reached the packs. They afforded him cover, and, although this venture was risky, he was almost leisurely as he examined one bundle after another. Within two minutes he had found the one he wanted.

It was fairly large, and of irregular shape, and out of one corner of it projected the handle of a frying-pan. This, alone, had been enough to tell Jake that it was the right pack.

To lift it was impossible, in his present position. And so he dragged it back with extreme stealthiness. It slid silently through the grass. Square-Deal Reeve, sitting near the fire, heard nothing—and Crasher's operation was greatly aided by the fact that the fire was crackling noisily.

Reeve had thrown a handful of thick

twigs upon it, and they caused so much row in burning that I awakened. At least, I believed that this loud crackling was the cause of my rousing up.

I sat up in my blankets, and yawned. Square-Deal looked round.

"Say, sonny, 'tain't time for you to roll out yet," he observed.

"The fire's kicking up a fat lot of noise!" I grumbled. "Anyway, I'll have a stretch now. I'm feeling cramped, somehow."

I got-out of my blankets, and slipped into my jacket—I was already wearing the bulk of my clothing, in case of any surprise. And, as I looked round into the gloom, I suddenly stood stock still, and stared.

Whether it was my imagination, or not, I thought I saw something bulky moving slowly away from the camp. And, as I watched, it disappeared behind a bush. Square-Deal Reeve regarded me curiously.

"Did you see that?" I asked, in a whisper.

"See what?"

"Why, there was something moving

"Say, you're still dreamin', young 'un," declared Reeve lightly.

"I tell you I saw something—distinctly!" I insisted. "It may have been an animal—I don't know. But I'll swear something moved. We might as well have a look, just to make certain."

Square-Deal Reeve rose with a good-natured chuckle.

"I've been sittin' right hyar fer over an hour, an' I ain't seen nothin', nor heard nothin'," he said. "Say, if it'll please you any we'll take a walk around. I reckon my legs will be better for a stretch, anyways."

I knew that he did not take me seriously, but I was distinctly curious. And I led the way straight towards the spot where I had seen the object moving. We arrived there, and found nothing.

"Satisfied?" asked Square-Deal, grinning.

"Not yet," I replied. "I'm not the kind of chap to fancy things, and I'm jolly certain that I wasn't dreaming. We can't see properly in this gloom."

I pulled out my electric torch, and switched it on. A bright beam of light shot out, and illuminated the ground. I uttered a swift ejaculation. For the grass was flattened down in an unmistakable way.

"Look at this!" I said tensely. "Don't you see, Square-Deal? Something's been dragged through the grass—one of our bundles, by Jove! That's about the truth of it! But who'd do it?"

"Gee! I'm allowin' you're right!" exclaimed Reeve, in surprise.

We were both eager now, and we went forward swiftly, guided by the light of my torch. The coarse grass and wild flowers were flattened down in a clear trail, and we had no difficulty in following it.

We went for several hundred yards, leaving the camp far behind us—a most unwise thing to do, as I realised afterwards. For everybody in camp was asleep. But, at the moment, neither Square-Deal nor I thought of this.

And then, suddenly, there was a swift movement upon my right. Before I could even turn the torch was knocked out of my hand, and I crashed down on my back, my head striking the ground so forcibly that for a second or two I felt dazed.

A huge horny hand was placed over my mouth, making any outcry impossible. In the meantime, Square-Deal was faring in the same way. Before he had had time to draw his gun, or put up any defence, he received a crashing blow on his head. He fell like a log, stunned into insensibility.

Jake Crasher, with a soft curse, flung a heavy piece of wood aside, and bent down.

"Guess that's fixed him!" he muttered. "Gee! We did it well, boys! They didn't hev time t' know what hit 'em!"

I was struggling feebly now, but a filthy scarf was tied round my mouth, and my hands were already bound. And, still rather dizzy and sick, I felt myself dragged along by my captors.

I couldn't tell exactly how far I was taken, but when we finally came to a halt I found that it was impossible to see anything. I only knew that Jake and Co. were on the spot by the sound of their movements and their voices.

I knew that we hadn't come far enough to be near any rocks or caverns, and this darkness was by no means the ordinary gloom of the night. It was obvious, therefore, that we were in some dense patch of woodland, where the thick foliage of the trees shut out all starlight.

A great rage surged within me.

My wits were returning, and, except for a dull headache, I felt almost all right. I know, of course, that Jake Crasher and his companions had captured us. But why? What could their object be? It was the last thing in the world we had anticipated. For those men to turn on us was astounding.

I was bewildered by the knowledge. What had they to gain? How could they hope to benefit by acting in this way? The more I thought of it the more puzzling it became. And I realised, too, that the camp now lay unguarded. If anybody had awakened, it would be impossible to know what had become of Square-Deal Reeve and me.

The whole thing was staggering.

After the way we had treated these four—after we had rescued them from a ghastly death—it seemed incredible that they should turn traitor and harm us. I thought I had judged Crasher's character pretty well. But, evidently, I had made a bad mistake.

Square-Deal Reeve lay beside me, and he was gagged in the same way as myself. He was bound, too—secured by thick ropes. His hands and his feet were tied—in just the same manner as my own.

It had been a strenuous ten minutes for our captors, but they had succeeded in their efforts. And now they stood round us in the darkness, breathing hard. Bob Doane was cursing volubly.

"Guess it was like these durned fools to butt in!" he snapped. "Say, Jake, it's spoilt everything—"

"I'm figgerin' it was th' best thing that could hev happened," interrupted Crasher. "Say, these galoots won't be able t' move a yard, an' I reckon th' camp is all asleep—ev'ry durned son ther'. They ain't likely to wake up till long after dawn. An', say, we'll wake 'em up good an' proper."

"We'll wake 'em up?" repeated Josh.

"Sure!" said Jake. "Say, we'll create sech an almighty bang that the hull crowd'll give one jump an' wonder how many earthquakes hev happened. Say, Reeve, air you still dreamin'?"

He gave Square-Deal Reeve a shake, and the big cowboy uttered a muffled grunt. His eyes glittered, and it was quite obvious that he was fully alive to the situation, and blazing with anger, too. He had recovered from the blow.

"Good!" said Crasher evilly. "Guess

it's just as well you can't speak any—we ain't got time fer conversation. But I'd sure like t' put you wise t' the play we're makin'. Say, we're lightin' out right now—we're hittin' the trail through Caribou Pass. It gives me a kinder pain t' leave you so sudden, but a feller can't help these hyar sad moments in life."

Square-Deal's eyes blazed more than ever.

"I'm guessin' you'd sure like t' hand out some swell language," observed Jake. "Wall, your silence is more welcome. As I was sayin', we're hittin' out before dawn. Mebbe it'll please you a heap t' know that this hyar valley is goin' t' be your permanent address. Guess it's an elegant place, anyways. Folks kin live hyar an' be real peaceful. You're sure goin' t' be corked up like you was in a bottle. An' I'm tellin' you ther' won't be no escape. Caribou Pass will kinder vanish when dawn comes around."

"Aw, come on, Jake!" interrupted Josh impatiently. "Ther's no call fer you t' hand out this talk——"

"Guess it pleases me a heap," said the other coarsely. "These guys hev had the upper hand so long, it kinder makes me feel good t' talk this aways. I'm just tellin' these two guys that ther' won't be no sech place as Caribou Pass after we've lit up the earthquake mixture!"

Jake laughed harshly.

"D'you get that?" he asked, giving Square-Deal a kick with the toes of his boot. "Mebbe you'll be able t' guess things; but I ain't givin' you no more information. I'm hopin' you'll enjoy life shut up hyar."

Without another word Jake vanished into the blackness, accompanied by the others. At first they had thought that their plan was about to fail. And it undoubtedly would have failed if they had not taken such drastic steps. By capturing both Square-Deal and myself it was now impossible for the alarm to be given. And the enemy was still in a position to carry out the programme.

But we know the terrible truth.

At least, I did, and I felt sure that Square-Deal's wits were sharp enough for him to penetrate Jake Crasher's meaning. Earthquake mixture! That could only imply explosives, and I fairly shook with rage as I realised the infernal nature of this plot.

Right at the start we had known that a bundle had been dragged away from the camp. Now I knew why! That bundle had contained the blasting charges which Nelson Lee had brought to the valley, and which we had had no occasion to use. So Jake Crasher was utilising them himself!

He was going to explode those dynamite charges in Caribou Pass, and cause the rocks to tumble down and bar all exit. It was a diabolical scheme, for once this pass was closed, there was absolutely no other way out of the valley.

As Jake had said, we would be prisoners for life!

Would these scoundrels be able to accomplish their villainous designs, or would something crop up to prevent them?

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE LEARNS THE TRUTH.

JAKE CRASHER gave a growl of satisfaction as his fingers closed over a metal box. He had been rummaging through the open bundle, and just for a tense moment he had feared that the wrong pack had been brought away.

"Guess this is it, boys," he said oxultantly.

They were all in the pass, quite alone, and free from any observation or interference. It still wanted an hour before dawn would break, and the night was perfectly calm and still.

The four men had been working hard, even harder than they had bargained for. They were tired and weary with their exertions, but the excitement of this business was keeping them at fever pitch, and they were not even aware of their fatigue.

The gold dust had been carried at least a mile up the canyon, and was cached there at a spot where a little brook trickled down. There was no danger of this place being affected by the explosion, and it would be possible to wash the sand away from the gold by means of the water. These operations, of course, could be done at leisure, after the valley had been sealed up.

The chief item on the programme just now was to explode the dynamite charges, and to cause the enormously high rock sides of the pass to cave in.

At this particular spot the pass was curiously formed. Just against the valley itself the rocks met above, forming an enormously high tunnel. Jake did not think it advisable to place the explosive here, for it was just possible that the solid rocks would withstand the charge.

And so he had chosen a spot further back, where the walls of the pass rose up, jagged and frowning, thousands of feet in height. Correctly placed, the dynamite would simply make these walls collapse, and bring about the wholesale destruction of the pass.

And Crasher and Co. were now on the exact spot which had been selected.

"I'm almighty pleased t' see this dynamite, boys," said Jake. "I'll allow I was gettin' some skeered. But we got th' right bundle, an' ther' ain't no reason for us t' worry now."

"Gee, it'll sure make some bang!" said Bob Doane.

"Some bang?" repeated Jake. "Why, there are nine durned charges hyar, an' I guess one of 'em would be about enough fer this job. But we ain't takin' no chances. No, sir; the hull lot is goin' off together."

"In one bust-up?"

"Sure!"

"Wouldn't it be better t' put two or three in different places—"

"Nope. I guess not," interrupted Jake. "That game wouldn't pay. What we want is one almighty big earthquake in one spot—an' this'll sure do the trick. Get me?"

"Sure! But what about fuses?" asked Josh.

"Guess we've got ha'f a mile o' fuse in this same box," replied Jake. "Say, I'll allow that Lee is an elegant guy! It was sure obligin' of him t' bring this hyar stuff along."

Jake took out the dynamite charges gingerly, and laid them in a row, side by side. Then he produced a long coil of fuse. There was plenty to connect up all the blasting charges, and still have sufficient for a long train of fuse, which would take between eight and ten minutes to burn. Thus the fuse could be ignited, and there would be plenty of time for Jake to get clear away from the danger zone.

"Aw, quit that smokin'!" growled Jake suddenly. "I ain't figgerin' t' be

blown up wi' these durned rocks! Make some o' this stuff into a torch an' light it, but stand about twenty feet away. We ain't takin' no risks."

The torch was made, and Josh Sims held it. He was even more careful than Jake, for he stood fully thirty feet distant. The flickering yellow light, however, was quite sufficient for Jake to work by.

He looked round carefully, and at length pointed to a certain spot.

"Guess that's wher' we plant the stuff," he said.

This particular place was about five foot from the ground level—a ledge of rock where there were several enormous cracks in the great cliff. To look at these cracks one would almost think that the whole vast cliff was on the verge of collapsing. But, of course, it was perfectly secure.

However, if this cracked portion was suddenly jarred by a terrific explosion, it was practically certain that something would give way; and once one of those great portions of rock shifted, the rest would come tumbling down in enormous masses.

"You ain't puttin' the stuff in th' tunnel, then?" asked Bob.

"I guess not," replied Jake. "This spot is a heap better, I guess. There can't be no sorter mistake."

One by one he placed the dynamite charges on the rock ledge. They all stood there in a clump. On second thoughts Jake placed them in the metal box, and jammed them all tight with other articles, so that they formed a compact mass.

"I'm figgerin' there's more power in an explosion when the stuff's packed tight," he remarked. "And, say, we won't leave nothin' to chance. I'll show you what I'll do after I've got th' fuses fixed up."

There was no hurry, and Jake took fully twenty minutes to connect the fuses to his satisfaction. They were all joined up in such a way that all the charges would explode in the same second.

And then Jake took the metal box in his hands, and with some difficulty wedged it firmly in between two of the great masses of rock. By doing this, he insured the explosion taking full effect. The charge would not merely go off and

waste itself on the empty air. Something big was bound to go.

"I guess that's all ready now," said Jake at length, glancing at his watch. "Gee, I guess it'll be dawn inside an hour! Say, our best plan is t' get up on a porch, so that we kin look right down into th' valley an' see what's doing."

"Sure!"

And before so very long the four men were in a position high on the rocks, where they were unseen themselves, and where they could gaze right across to the encampment. They would be able to see everything when daylight came, and in the event of any members of the party approaching the pass, there would still be plenty of time to explode the charge.

Now that there was nothing to do the men felt sleepy, and two of them dropped off at once, sprawling there on the hard rock. But Jake knew what was at stake, and he kept wakeful.

So far his scheme had gone well, except for one little hitch, but this had been remedied at once. Jake could see no reason why the plan should not be completed in exactly the way he had reckoned upon.

And the thought of gaining such a victory made him gloat openly, for it would be a victory! He and his companions would get clear away with a fortune, and the whole of Nelson Lee's party would be imprisoned for life in the valley. It was a very big scheme.

Over in the east the dawn was making its appearance. The sky was gradually changing from black to dull grey. It lightened slowly, until everything in the valley looked ghostly and unreal, with a slight trace of mist hovering over some of the low-lying meadows.

The sky turned from grey to orange, and there was no doubt that the day would be a very fine one. It had been arranged that a move should be made at dawn, for Nelson Lee had decided to start early.

The camp was perfectly quiet, and everybody was sleeping. But Lee roused himself long before the sun came up, and threw his blankets aside. He expected to see Twirly Sam on the watch, for by this time it was Twirly's turn.

Rather to Nelson Lee's surprise nobody was awake. Moreover, the fire had completely died down, till it was

now only a heap of smouldering embers.

Nelson Lee frowned.

"I shall have to reprimand Sam severely for this," he told himself grimly. "As it happens, it doesn't matter; but this sort of thing won't do. Going to sleep on duty is a serious offence."

Nelson Lee walked towards the sleeping forms, and saw Twirly at once, lying in his blankets, slumbering loudly. Then before Lee roused the man, he noticed that Square-Deal Reeve's blankets were empty.

"Hallo, hallo! What does this mean?" murmured the detective. "Reeve ought to have been sleeping for hours. It seems that Twirly hasn't even been awakened to take the relief."

Sam was soon wide awake after Lee had shaken him. He looked round bewildered for a moment or two.

"I guess I'm sure puzzled, sir," he said. "Square-Deal didn't wake me, an' I'll allow I sleep good an' heavy. But, say, ther's somebody else missin', I figger! What about them blankets?"

He pointed, and Nelson Lee looked grave.

"Nipper's blankets!" he said. "I wonder where on earth the youngster can have got to? He and Reeve must have gone off together, and they've evidently been away for some little time. It is very puzzling——"

Nelson Lee suddenly broke off, and stared down the valley. For the first time he had noticed that something was missing from the landscape. Jake Crasher's camp was no longer there! It had vanished completely! There was no further sign of the camp.

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee softly. "We have been sleeping. Twirly, and it appears that strange things have been happening. Not only are Nipper and Reeve missing, but our delightful friends, Crasher and Co., are also conspicuous by their absence."

Twirly Sam stared blankly.

"Sufferin' rattlesnakes!" he ejaculated.

"We must arouse the others, and set about a search at once," went on Lee crisply. "I am beginning to fear that there has been some foul play. We were unwise, after all, not to keep a sharper watch upon Crasher."

"The all-fired skunk!" said Twirly Sam fiercely.

The camp was soon fully awake, and consternation reigned when it was heard that Square-Deal Reeve and I were missing. It was concluded at once that Jake Crasher was responsible for this state of affairs.

"My only hat!" said Tommy Watson, in alarm. "Goodness only knows what's happening to 'em! Perhaps they've been murdered!"

"Those rotters are capable of anything!" said Church.

"Rather!" agreed Handforth. "Oh, there's no sense in being optimistic! They're bound to be dead by this time. Poor old Nipper! Won't it be rotten at St. Frank's without him? Of course, they'll make me Remove skipper, and that'll be some consolation——"

"You—you silly fathead!" exclaimed Pitt hotly. "There's no evidence that Nipper's been killed, so what's the good of trying to create a panic by talking that rubbish? I'll bet I know the truth Square-Deal saw Crasher and Co. stealing away, and he woke Nipper up, and they're both on the track now."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Bob Christine.

"Not a bad suggestion," remarked Tommy Watson. "But why should Square-Deal wake Nipper up instead of Mr. Lee?"

This was a point which puzzled the others, and nobody could answer it. In the meantime, Dorrie and Umlosi were informed of the facts, and they were equally grave. They both agreed that something dramatic had occurred while the camp was asleep.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Dorrie helplessly. "We can't search the whole bally valley, can we?"

"Possibly not, but we will attempt to get on the track," said Nelson Lee. "I have already noted that the grass is distinctly flattened down in one particular place, and it trails away into the distance, as though something has been dragged over the ground."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "That sounds bad, old man! Somethin' dragged over the ground—eh? Either Nipper or Reeve, I expect. I'm beginnin' to get the wind up, you know."

It was not long before they were off, and the trail, after all, was very easy to follow. The marks in the grass were clear and obvious. Jake Crasher and

Co. had overlooked this point when they left us in the wood. But through powerful binoculars, they were watching every movement that was taking place in the valley.

With hardly a pause, Nelson Lee and Umlosi led the way towards the wood, which was situated on a rising piece of ground, about half a mile from camp. In one or two little places Lee was at fault for a moment; but Umlosi never made a mistake. He was an expert tracker.

And when the wood itself was entered there was no difficulty at all. The marks made by Jake and Co. were clear enough. It was impossible to go wrong, and after penetrating about a hundred yards, the end of the trail was reached.

Square-Deal Reeve and I were fully aware of the fact that rescue was at hand. I could distinctly hear the gov'nor's voice as he talked with the others. Then came Umlosi's rumble, and Dorrie's easy, languid tones. Further in the distance we could hear the excited talking of the juniors.

I was feeling greatly relieved, and I could see an answering gleam of satisfaction in Square-Deal Reeve's eye. Conversation between us was, of course, impossible, for our mouths were securely bound by the rough scarves. I had attempted time after time to free myself, but had given up the task as hopeless.

And then, as we looked eagerly through the trees in the dim morning light, figures came—the gov'nor, Dorrie, and others. They broke into a run as soon as they saw us, and I could read the infinite relief in Nelson Lee's expression as they saw that we were alive and kicking, although helpless at the moment.

"Good gracious, Nipper, how on earth did you get into this fix?" asked Lee, as he quickly untied the scarf. "And you, Square-Deal! I am extremely pleased to find that you are both safe and sound."

"We've been worryin' frightfully, you bounders," said Lord Dorrimore.

"Hurrah! They're safe!" yelled Tommy Watson from the rear.

"Oh, good egg!"

For a moment or two I was unable to speak after the scarf had been removed. It had been pulled so tightly that my mouth was sore. Square-Deal Reeve made one or two expressive grunts.

"Say, boss. I guess I'm dead ashamed

to look you in the eye!" he said. "Gee! I'm allowin' I ain't bin caught nappin' so bad as this before!"

"It—it was Crasher who did it, sir!" I panted. "They're going to bottle us up in the valley; they mean to imprison us here for good; they're going to smash down Caribou Pass, and make it impossible for us to get out."

"What!" shouted Handforth.

"You must have been dreaming," remarked Dorrie. "How do you suppose these confounded fellows are going to block up a pass a thousand feet high?"

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"Quick, Nipper, tell me what you mean!" he said curtly.

"I'll do it in a dozen words, sir," I replied. "Square-Deal and I happened to notice that something was moving near the camp. We followed, and fell into an ambush, which Jake and Co. had prepared. They left us like this, and Jake said that he meant to blow Caribou Pass to pieces. He's taken the dynamite, and the explosion might occur at any minute——"

"Ah, that was the object which was dragged away from the camp—the bundle containing the dynamite!" exclaimed Nelson Lee grimly. "We must not waste a second! Our only chance is to rush into the pass, and put a stop to this villainous scheme before it can materialise."

"But—but——"

"There's no time for talking, Dorrie," interrupted Lee. "We must go now, without delaying a second. Who will come?"

"I will!"

"And I!"

"We all want to come!" shouted Handforth.

"No, I cannot have any boys on such a trip as this," exclaimed Nelson Lee firmly. "It may be deadly dangerous, and I cannot allow you youngsters to risk your lives."

It was a tearing rush. And the party which finally went was a small one, consisting of Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Umlosi, Square-Deal Reeve, and Twirly Sam. I felt pretty rotten, and was persuaded by the gov'nor to remain behind.

So I returned to the camp, and the others hurried off for Caribou Pass. Would they be in time to avert the disaster of disasters?

CHAPTER IV

CAUGHT IN THEIR OWN TRAP.

JOSH SIMS caught his breath in sharply.

"Say, Jake, I guess we can't waste no more time," he exclaimed. "The hull crowd air in that wood, an' I guess they know what's doin' by now. It's time that durned fuso was lit up!"

Jake nodded.

"Leave it to me, pard," he said. "I've got this game in hand."

His eyes were gazing intently through a pair of powerful field-glasses, and he could see across the valley clearly and distinctly. Jake and his companions had been watching since dawn, and they were acquainted with the whole course of events.

They had seen the first sign of movement in the camp, followed by the general move towards the little wood. By this Jake knew that the trail was being followed, and that Square-Deal Reeve and I would soon be found.

But Jake made no move at the moment. He waited until some members of the party re-appeared—five of them altogether, headed by Nelson Lee. These five came racing across the valley towards the pass.

Crasher and his companions were perched high up in a cluster of rocks. From this point of vantage they could gaze down into the valley. And it would be a simple matter for them to scramble down into the pass and to ignite the fuse. The work could be accomplished within three minutes. By another ten they would be a long distance away, out of the danger zone.

And Nelson Lee and the others could not possibly reach the pass within fifteen minutes. Jake's eyes glittered evilly as he thought of the chances. It would be better, perhaps, if the explosion took place at the last possible moment.

He took a last look through the binoculars.

"Lee, Lord Dorrimore, that durned nigger, Reeve, and Sam!" he muttered. "Yop, I've sure got 'em fixed. Gee! I'd sure smile if they hit the pass when the explosion happened. I'd feel a sight more comfortable afterwards."

Within a minute the conspirators had left their perch, and were scrambling down the rocks into the pass. They did not all approach the dynamite. Only Jake went in this direction. The others

made haste to get to a place of safety. They had heard of fuses burning too quickly, and they were not inclined to take any risks.

With his face aglow with excitement and villainous anticipation, Jake Crasher struck a match, and applied the flame to the extreme end of the long fuse, which trailed away down the rocks. It spluttered for a moment or two, and then settled down into a steady hiss, giving forth a trail of smoke.

Jake Crasher raced away at full speed. Just for a second a doubt crept into his mind. Had he left it until too late? Would Lee and the others reach the pass in time to extinguish the fuse before the dynamite exploded?

A moment's consideration told Jake that such a thing was impossible. The fuse could not last longer than seven minutes now, and the approaching party would never be able to cover the distance in that time.

Jake and his companions had previously selected a spot where they could watch the proceedings. Crasher, with grim humour, declared that they would have front seats in the grand stand. This spot was a ledge two hundred feet above the ground level, nearly half a mile away from the scene of the coming explosion.

Crasher raced along with all his speed, and reached the ledge with just half a minute to spare. He was perspiring freely, and red of face. In his eyes there was a glimmer of fierce joy.

"They'll be trapped—the durned five of 'em!" he gloated. "Say, boys, git ready for the bang! I guess it's goin' to happen right now."

"Mebbe that gosh-darned fuse will fizzle out," suggested Doane.

"Not on your life!"

They waited, almost holding their breath in anticipation. Their united gaze was fixed upon that spot down the pass, half a mile away. They were waiting to see the blinding flash, and the wholesale collapse of the rock sides.

Every second seemed like a minute, and even Jake began to doubt at last. It seemed that the explosion would never come. All was peaceful. The sun was now shining brilliantly, and there was a feeling of comfortable warmth in the crisp atmosphere.

"I guess you've mused the hull cussed game up!" sparled Josh Sims.

"I lit the doggone fuse. What more could I do?" shouted Jake savagely. "By thunder, if that explosion don't happen——"

"Of course it won't happen," snapped Doane. "I sorter figgered something o' this kind would take place. Gee! You're a bright boy, ain't you? Said you was figgerin' on lightin' out wi' that gold, an' now we sha'n't stand no durned chance o' gettin' anywheres!"

"Shet your blamed trap!" roared Jake furiously. "What more could I do? I guess I fixed the fuse good, an' set fire to it. It's a pity one o' you fellers couldn't ha' got busy instead. Gee! The way you talk——"

And then, before Jake could get any further, the heated argument was brought to an abrupt end. For as the four men gazed down into the pass, a blinding, dazzling flash of light appeared, followed immediately afterwards by an appalling explosion—an explosion which shook Caribou Pass to its foundations.

Even the ledge upon which the conspirators stood shook with the force of the dreadful concussion. Their ears were deafened, and their eyes dazzled.

"There you are!" shouted Jake hoarsely. "What's wrong wi' that?"

The others didn't hear him, and Jake himself was hardly aware of having spoken. The four of them stood rooted to the rock by the terrible nature of the upheaval which was even then taking place before their eyes.

Huge boulders were sent spinning into the air as though they were feather-weights, thousands of smaller pieces of rock showered down on every side, and the bottom of the pass was a confused mass of dust and choking fumes.

Then, before the echo of the first explosion had died away, the rocks began to fall—not small pieces, but the very cliffs themselves. Slabs of rock weighing thousands of tons crashed against one another, splintered with devastating roars, and thundered down into the confusion below. Caribou Pass simply crumpled up. Both those enormous cliffs seemed to sink down twenty or thirty feet, disintegrating and collapsing in one long series of movement.

To those watching it was a sight which could never be forgotten—and, in all truth, Crasher and Co. were not to be allowed to remember it for long. It was unbelievable—it simply made the men



Jako Crasher ignited the fuse. It spluttered for a moment or two and then settled down to a steady hiss. (See page 16.)

stand there without movement. They could not speak, and they could not lift a finger.

From the first they had believed that the explosion would cause a lot of damage, but never for a fleeting second had they imagined that such wide-spread destruction as this would be wrought.

And, most amazing of all, it did not cease.

The seconds passed, and still the rocks kept tumbling down—still great portions of the very mountain collapsed. It seemed that the cataclysm would never cease, and, after those first few moments, Jake Crasher became nervous.

"Boys, we'd best git!" he gasped. "Geo! The airth's shakin' like the upper floor of a rotten barn! I guess we've started somethin' that can't be stopped. Say, I'm plumb skeered!"

The others caught his sudden fright, and turned to flee from that wide rock ledge. While they were doing so millions of tons of rock and earth were collapsing like the walls of a burnt-out warehouse. They came down in thunderous, nerve-shattering volumes.

And then, just as Jake and Co. were about to leave the ledge, they became aware of something else. Behind them, at their very backs, there came an ear-splitting crack—a crack which was like a fearful explosion. Jake, half turning, saw the rock, five hundred feet up, part in twain. It was the most staggering thing he had ever beheld.

All four men were now half dead with fear. Their faces were the colour of putty, and their eyes rolled with abject terror. Now that it was too late they all realised that that explosion had set the very mountains on the move. The foundations of Caribou Pass had been blown away.

This had caused the towering masses of rock above to collapse, and this gigantic collapse, in turn, led to the wholesale destruction of the very landscape. These mountains, which had been standing for thousands of years, crumpled up. And as each succeeding collapse took place the next was ten times more formidable. And so it went on, growing into a veritable upheaval of nature—instead of dying away at once, as Jake had imagined. Heaven only knew when the frightful thing would stop.

"Run!" shrieked Josh wildly. "We'll sure be trapped!"

"It's too late!" screamed Hara. "By cripes, we're finished! There's no hope of—"

Jake Crasher himself, strong man though he was, was simply whimpering with fear. But it was too late. He and the others turned to fly down the gully. But at that very moment the mountain above them came tumbling down, shivering into a thousand fragments. When it is remembered that this very mountain reached up for thousands of feet, the devastating nature of this collapse can be imagined.

A portion of the rock, a hundred yards broad by fifty feet high, parted company from the rest of the cliff—one solid piece of the mountain weighing millions of tons. It hit the ledge upon which Jake Crasher and his companions stood.

The four men ceased to exist. Their death was painless, and they knew absolutely nothing.

In that one brief second they were smashed out of existence. The appalling weight of the rock which fell upon them wiped them out in exactly the same way as a man's boot will wipe out an ant.

And the whole of Caribou Pass shivered and shook as though in the throes of a ghastly and terrible earthquake. Jake Crasher and his three companions had been caught in their own trap—they had been killed by the very rocks which Jake had hoped would kill Nelson Lee and those with him.

In the meantime, what was happening in the valley?

Needless to say, consternation of the most awful description reigned. That explosion—the first roar—had caused everybody in camp to rush towards the pass. Nelson Lee and the four with him were practically on the spot—they were, in point of fact, about to enter the pass.

Then came that explosion, and they all paused, their ears stunned, and throbbing. Right over them towered the frowning rocks—towered in such a way that the summits seemed to stretch right up to outer space.

They knew that the explosion had been severe. But then came those other sounds—those devastating crashes. Over to their left the cliffs were crumbling up, and the ground upon which they stood trembled so violently that it was only with difficulty they kept their feet.

"Good heavens!" shouted Nelson Lee hoarsely. "The whole mountains

"are falling! Back—all of you! Back!"
 "Wau!" panted Umlosi. "I am sorely frightened, Umtagati! A thousand men will not cause me to tremble—but this has made my blood turn to water in my veins. Wau! Evil spirits are at work——"

"Stop!" shouted Lee, in a great voice. "We cannot go back—it is too late! Great heaven above! We are doomed!"

Lee was looking up, and he was horrified to see the whole massive cliff falling down—one great body of rock which would smash them to pulp, even as Crusher and Co. had been smashed. To run would be futile.

The falling cliff would spread itself over half a mile of ground, and every living creature within that space would be crushed. In that second Nelson Lee felt that death was upon him, and his companions were of the same opinion.

Left to themselves, they would probably have run wildly away—only to be killed within the next few moments. But Nelson Lee ran forward—towards the cliff. After all, what difference did it make? Death seemed certain in any case.

Never in my life before have I experienced such a horrifying shock.

Running like mad, with most of the juniors before me, I saw those five figures beneath the cliff. Then I came to a halt, my voice choking in my throat. It was incredible—impossible! But the thousand-foot cliff was falling.

"Guv'nor!" I screamed despairingly.

Then it was all over. The cliff came down—in one earth-shaking crash. Where those five figures had stood there now lay a million tons of rock—and yet the cliff looked hardly any smaller!

For half a mile out from the cliff face the rocks were spread out, some of them even now rolling along with enormous speed and power. One great boulder—a jagged chunk of rock twenty feet in diameter, crashed along, destroying stately trees as though they were daisies.

As for us, we were thrown off our feet, for the surface of the earth was quivering and shaking like a jelly. Never in my life before have I known such an awe-inspiring spectacle.

We were deafened, numbed, and stricken with an unknown fear. And there, where the guv'nor had stood, lay

these masses of rock. They had been buried alive—Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Umlosi, Square-Deal Reevo, and Twirly Sam! They had been killed in one swift moment.

It was certain—escape for them had been impossible. How, indeed, could they have lived after that fall of rock? Try as I would, I could see no way of escape for them. That they had perished was, to my mind, a certainty.

And I lay there in the grass, feeling that nothing in the world mattered. My only thought at that horrible moment was concerning the rocks. I hoped with all my heart that they would fall, and bury me, too.

And the catastrophe was not over, even now.

Boom after boom sounded. The ground shivered and shook again and again. But these falls of rocks were unseen by us, for they were taking place within Caribou Pass. But then, finally, came another spectacular collapse. This happened away to the south—two miles distant, at least. It proved how vast had been this upheaval, and it proved, too, that even now the disaster might not be over. Once rendered precarious, other cliffs might come tumbling down, even after the lapse of days.

A portion of the gigantic cliff to the southward, as I said, fell. Viewed at a distance, it looked almost unreal. It was hardly possible to imagine that that vast cliff was crumbling to dust before our eyes. The shock was tremendous, and again came that earthquake-like shaking of the ground, to the accompaniment of a grinding, crashing, unearthly roar.

And yet, after this had throbbed away into silence, that cliff looked very little different. The face of it for two or three hundred yards had come away—a section which went back eighty or ninety feet. And even these terrible landslides left but small marks upon the view!

Exactly how much time passed I haven't any idea—even now I can't remember exactly what took place immediately after the gigantic catastrophe. My brain was put out of action by the dreadful sight which I had witnessed—the sight of Nelson Lee and Dorrie and the others being overwhelmed by those falling masses of rock. When I got to my feet my face was as pale as death, and I was shivering from head to foot.

I looked round.

The other juniors were standing in groups, awed, and their voices were hushed. Mr. Farman was talking with Ace-High Peter and Leon Ascaro. And, overhead, the sun shone down peacefully.

Nothing remained to remind us of what had occurred except the hovering clouds of dust over the cliff—and the absence of five of our number.

Several of the juniors were sobbing openly—and they didn't care who saw them. The thing had been too much for them, and they couldn't control themselves. But I was too horrified to relieve my feelings in that way.

Suddenly, my limbs regained their normal functions, and I ran across to where Mr. Farman was standing.

"Did—did you see, sir?" I panted hoarsely.

"Yes, my dear boy, I did see," said Big Jim, placing an arm on my shoulder. "Words are useless. I am dumb with the horror of it."

"Do—do you think they might be alive, sir?" I asked, clutching at his sleeve. "Isn't there a chance? We must search!" I went on frantically. "We must do everything we can——"

"Gee! Don't talk like that, young 'un," broke in Ace-High Peter huskily. "Say, it's no sorter use to search. And, anyways, we'd need to shift haf a million tons o' rock!"

"But they might be safe, even now!" I panted.

"My poor lad, it's impossible!" said Mr. Farman quietly. "You know yourself, but you daren't believe it. There was no escape—the cliff came down on the top of them—and—and—— By glory! It's no good talking about it!" he added brokenly.

And, instinctively, I knew that Mr. Farman was right.

"They're gone—never to be seen again!" I muttered, in a frenzy of despair. "Oh, we've got to find Jake Crasher and shoot him for this!"

"There is little doubt that Crasher and those with him perished at the same time," said Mr. Farman. "In such an upheaval as this they could never have been spared. It was beyond all their expectations. I am certain that those foul scoundrels have met their deaths."

But I wasn't thinking about Crasher and Co. My thoughts were still with the gov'nor. If the earth had opened and

had swallowed up that little party of five it would have been no different. The result was the same. They were lost to us for ever!

If only we had known the actual truth our despair would have changed to maddening joy!

CHAPTER V.

ENTOMBED IN NATURE'S PRISON.

NELSON LEE had no distinct recollection of what actually occurred.

He found himself lying half across Lord Dorrimore's prostrate body. He felt choked with awful dust. His lungs were full of it. His mouth seemed to be a mass of mud. Breathing was difficult, and in his ears there sang a throbbing and singing such as he had never before experienced. He could feel something warm trickling down his face, and his head ached to such an extent that for a few moments he believed that his skull was fractured.

Intense, pitchy darkness surrounded him—the darkness of a tomb.

He knew, instinctively, that the moist warmth on his face was caused by blood—for blood was trickling from his nose and from his ears.

Lee's chief realisation was that he was alive—that, owing to some miracle, he had not perished in that terrible fall of rock. Just for one second the thought flashed into his mind that this might even be death, so extraordinary were his sensations. But then a moment's clear consideration told him that he was not only very much alive, but practically uninjured.

He attempted to rise, but his head throbbed so much that for several minutes he could not do so. But he managed to pull out his brandy flask, which—fortunately—was full. He unscrewed the stopper, and took a big gulp. The fiery spirit surged within him, and caused the blood to flow swiftly through his veins. He felt enormously better.

Then he managed to get into an upright position, although he was unsteady for the first few minutes. His right shoulder hurt him quite a lot. He felt there, and found that his jacket was torn, and that his shoulder was exposed, a deep gash penetrating into the flesh.

Then he pulled out his electric torch, and switched it on.

At first he could see very little, for the rays of light vainly tried to penetrate a thick dust which hung in the air like fog. Moving a yard forward, however, Lee came to a rock wall. Against this lay Square-Deal Reeve and Twirly Sam. They both presented an appalling sight, and at first Lee thought they were dead. As a matter of fact, they didn't look nearly so bad as he did himself, if he could only have known.

And they were suffering from the same complaint—shock.

It was just that, and nothing more. The dreadful concussion of the falling cliff had knocked every one of the five insensible. They were stunned, not by blows, but by the awful force of the air which had been compressed. All their noses and ears were bleeding.

Dorrie lay there, too, and Umlosi. Umlosi was the first to show any signs of returning consciousness. One by one, Lee examined his companions, and his relief was unbounded when he discovered that all were sound in limb.

"Thank Heaven for this!" he muttered. "As soon as the effect of the shock wears off they will be all right. Upon my soul! The most amazing thing of all is that we still breathe! I was certain that death was upon us."

He dosed them all with brandy. Then he made a most welcome discovery. Square-Deal Reeve had quite a large leather water-bottle swung round his shoulders—and, what was more to the point, it was full.

The cold water, with the brandy, soon revived them all. Twirly Sam was the last to recover consciousness—but this was undoubtedly because he had struck his head against the rock wall, inflicting a large bruise.

Lord Dorrimore was, as usual, quite calm.

"Old man, I've got a shockin' taste in my mouth," he observed plaintively. "By gad! I was dead certain we were booked for Kingdom Come that time. This doesn't exactly agree with my idea of Heaven, and I don't think we are wicked enough to go anywhere else, although I must say this spot resembles the general idea of the lower regions!"

"Don't worry, Dorrie—we're in the land of the living," said Nelson Lee. "By some miraculous chance we escaped death, although hundreds of thousands of tons of rock fell and now lies over our heads."

"Jumpin' coyotes!" said Square-Deal Reeve. "What d'you make of it, boss? I guess I'm sure tuckered out this trip. My brains ain't wuth a cent!"

"Before forming any opinion, I want to examine our surroundings," said Nelson Lee. "This dust is infernally irritating. But, fortunately, it is settling down. Dorrie, you might put a bandage on this shoulder of mine."

The gash was a nasty one, doubtless caused by a small piece of flying rock. The most wonderful thing was that they were not all severely wounded by similar missiles.

It was not long before Nelson Lee arrived at the explanation.

Feeling much better after his shoulder had been bandaged, he went round with the electric torch. And he discovered, to his secret dismay, that the prison was roughly twelve feet long by about eight feet wide, tapering to mere crevices at either end.

And this tomb was formed in quite a simple way. A gigantic slab of rock, weighing thousands of tons, had fallen at an angle, and had not smashed up upon contact. Thus, the five men had escaped destruction, for this huge rock had borne the weight of all the other rocks which had fallen after it. And the prisoners had also been saved from flying debris. The whole thing had happened in one flash.

Had Nelson Lee and the others remained in their original position, they would have been crushed to death in a second. By leaping towards the cliff face they had saved their lives. But for how long? Lee, in his examination, discovered that there was no outlet. They were entombed!

Before saying anything to his companions, Nelson Lee made another complete circuit of the extraordinary prison. He examined crevices and little spaces, in the hope that he would be able to find something which might possibly prove to be an outlet.

But there was nothing. The largest hole of all was three feet wide by two feet high—plenty large enough to admit a man. But when Nelson Lee flashed his light into this cavity he found that it was shallow, with solid rock behind.

By now all the others were beginning to think for themselves. They had recovered from the first effects, and the

settling of the dust left the air comparatively clear. And the very fact that it was breathable—indeed, fresh—gave Lee some measure of hope.

"Any luck, old man?" asked Dorrie quietly.

Nelson Lee turned, and found his lordship at his elbow.

"Luck?" he repeated.

"Look here, Lee, you can't spoof me with that tone," said Lord Dorrimore. "I know for a fact that we're buried alive, an' it ain't a very cheerin' situation. The whole cliff fell on the top of us, an' we've got to thank our stars we're still livin'. But we can't shift all this rock, can we?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, it stands to reason that we're here for good unless a kindly Providence has left a hole big enough for us to squeeze through—an' that's not very likely," went on Dorrie. "We haven't got a tool among the lot of us, exceptin' a pocket-knife—an' I think you're ready to admit that pocket-knives ain't very effective when you want to bore through a few hundred feet of rock."

"Yes, Dorrie, there's no sense in blinking at the fact," said Lee quietly. "I might as well tell you all while I'm about it. We escaped death at the very outset, but it's more than likely that we are doomed to a far worse one."

"Guess you're right, boss," said Square-Deal Reeve grimly. "Sure, I'd rather be russed up into a heap o' pulp straight off, than die like a durned rat in a blocked-up hole. But don't you figger ther's any chance?"

"To be quite truthful," said Nelson Lee steadily, "I think our chances are very slim."

"Thy words are true, O Umtagati," said Umlosi. "But a few words have passed my lips since thou gavest me the fire spirit. I'm feeling much better within my body, but my heart is sore. And yet, even though we are cast into this tomb, I do not give up hope. He who gives up hope is lost. We live—and so we have still a chance."

"That's the way to speak, old man," exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "And even a slim chance is better than no chance at all. Now, Lee, hadn't we better go round this rabbit warren carefully?"

"Certainly," said Nelson Lee.

He had already been round carefully, but he had no objection to going again,

since there was nothing else that could be done. The result was the same. No outlet of any description was found.

"Gee! I'm sure gettin' skeered some!" muttered Twirly Sam, who was sitting with his back to the rock wall, with his head bandaged. "Say, Squar'-Deal, do you reckon ther's any chance of us——"

"It don't do no good to talk!" interrupted Reeve bluntly.

The examination had affected them all, for it was being brought home to them that this prison was like a living grave. But, all the while, Nelson Lee could not help remembering the current of air.

Umlosi found it, too.

"Hast thou felt the slight wind that bloweth through this strange place of darkness?" he asked softly. "Does it not prove that there must not only be an outlet, but also an inlet? It is significant, my father."

"Yes, Umlosi, but we cannot gain much hope from that," said Nelson Lee. "You see, there are tiny cracks everywhere—perhaps no bigger than two inches across. This provides ample room for any amount of draught—for strong currents of air—but we could never hope to squeeze through an inch crevice."

"Not unless we turned ourselves into genii, like those queer merchants in the 'Arabian Nights,'" said Dorrie. "There's a strange lookin' place in the floor here, Lee. I'd like to know what you make of it—although I suppose you've already given it a thorough examination."

Nelson Lee crossed the dark cavern, switching his electric torch round to the spot which Lord Dorrimore occupied. Dorrie had been using his own torch, but this only gave a feeble light.

Nelson Lee found himself looking down upon a fairly big crack in the floor—which, of course, was a rock. The settled dust lay thick everywhere. There were other cracks, too, spreading out like splintered glass. And the rock did not feel perfectly solid when stepped upon.

Lee put his hand down, close to the crack.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed. "I can feel a distinct draught coming up through here. Not that we must hope too much. Even if this floor collapses, we shall only find ourselves down in the earth."

"Waal, I'm guessin' we might just as well stay right here," said Square-Deal. "Sufferin' rattle snakes! I 'lows I've been in a few tight corners in my time—but, say, this sure beats the hull collection."

Nelson Lee walked away from the spot, and flashed the light of his torch up high, carefully looking at the formation of the rocks above. There was no possible chance except in one direction.

In this spot a black hole could be seen going back from the face of the rock. It was fully five feet high, by about three feet broad. Standing well back, Lee tried to flash his light into it, but could not do so.

"I suspect it to be a mere shallow opening," he said. "One cannot tell, of course, but it is most improbable that there will be an outlet there. In any case, we cannot reach it, for it is fully twenty feet above our heads."

"Say, couldn't we try somethin'?" asked Twirly eagerly. "Supposin' I get on Squar'-Deal's shoulders, and then one of you others climbs up the pair of us? Don't you reckon we might——"

"It is an idea, Twirly, of course," said Nelson Lee. "But I am afraid we could never reach to that height. It requires a considerable amount of acrobatic ability to perform such feats. Furthermore, there is not the slightest hold against the rock base, which is smooth."

An attempt was made, but, try as they would, the feat could not be accomplished. Again and again they tried to hoist themselves up, and although they got within reasonable distance once or twice, the thing could not be done.

Rather puffed with their efforts, they took a rest. And each and everyone knew they had only used such strenuous efforts because they had a faint idea that they might find an outlet from this terrible place.

Never for a second did they believe that an outlet actually existed. Every man felt convinced, in his own mind, that they were doomed to die—just in the same way as miners down a coal-pit are doomed when they are cut off after an explosion.

But the miners could, possibly, hope, for they knew that rescuers would be making every effort to dig them out. But what rescue would come here? Nelson Lee pictured to himself the scenes which were being enacted out in the open.

And he knew quite well that Mr. Farman and the others would never be able to affect a rescue.

And then, suddenly, a change came in the situation.

A peculiar sound penetrated the cavern—a sound which filled every one of those five with wonder. It was a low whining noise, which rose and fell in an eerie manner. It seemed to come from the very earth itself.

"By gad!" muttered Dorrie. "What's that?"

A puff of air came into his face, and surged across the darkness. At the same moment Nelson Lee felt a fierce draught blowing on his left leg. The whining sound grew louder and louder. Nelson Lee rose, torch in hand.

He flashed the light upon those cracks in the floor. The dust was being disturbed at the edges of the cracks, and was being blown upwards. It was clear, therefore, that the draught was coming from here.

Even as Nelson Lee stood there, it rose to a shrill and powerful shriek. He staggered back, flying particles of rock having blown into his face. The others were crowding near.

"I don't pretend to understand what this means, but we must get back!" said Lee quickly. "Some extraordinary phenomenon is about to occur. This draught is of enormous power—Why, what——"

He broke off abruptly, for the whole prison became filled with roaring noises. The rushing wind rose to a higher shriek than ever. And as the five men backed away, the rocks were blown clean upwards in great pieces, five and six inches square. And, immediately following, a tremendous gush of water roared in.

"Good heavens!" shouted Dorrie.

It was like the bursting of a gigantic water main. It shot up eight or ten feet in height, and came down in foaming cascades. Almost before they knew it, the five imprisoned men were up to their knees in foaming water. It rose at an appalling speed, until they were standing waist deep.

And still the rush continued.

"There's only one explanation!" shouted Lee above the tumult of sound. "The enormous upheaval outside has caused an underground river to find a fresh course for itself—and it's just found

it. The power of water is terrific, and it has forced its way in here in spite of everything."

"Yes, by gad, but how's it goin' to force its way out?" gasped Dorrie.

"Once this place fills, and the water continues to gush up, it must find an outlet," said Nelson Lee. "Even if it has to press thousands of tons of rock back, the pressure of water will do it."

"And where do we come in?" asked his lordship.

"I'm afraid this is the end for us," replied Lee quietly. "Well, it makes little difference now—and perhaps it is better that we should be drowned at once, than suffer the tortures of thirst and starvation."

As a matter of fact, they hardly had time to think. The water was rising even more swiftly. They were carried off their feet, and were now swimming about desperately. Fortunately, they could all swim fairly well—Lee and Dorrie and Umlosi, of course, were like fish. The other two were not so adept.

But they managed to keep up. Foot by foot the water rose, and it seemed certain that before many minutes had passed the prisoners would be thrust against the rock roof, and forced under.

Then Nelson Lee noticed that the water had already reached the level of that hole, far above the floor level. Within the last few seconds the cavern had filled at amazing speed.

And now the water was pouring out through that hole just as water will gush down a gutter drain. It went down with a curious sucking sound, clearly indicating that it had a direct outlet.

And then came turmoil and pandemonium.

Lee was the first one to be sucked into the vortex. In spite of all his efforts, he was drawn towards the hole. When within a few feet he shot forward, and simply went through at a pace which prevented all thought and reason.

Gasping for breath, with water entering his lungs, with his ears filled with awful rushing sounds, he was carried on. His injured shoulder caught against a rock, and the pain numbed him.

But he went on and on, and the seconds seemed like hours. How long this sewer-like tunnel actually was not one of them could ever tell. Certainly, it could only have been short, or they would have perished. But it seemed to go on for miles.

Then, just as Lee's senses were reeling—just as he was going off into unconsciousness—he felt his lungs filled with air, and he found himself struggling in deep water, which was boiling and foaming like a whirlpool.

Blindly, he struck out, opening his eyes as he did so. Then, although nearly swooning with exhaustion, he gave a gasp of incredible joy. For, in the distance, he could see a tiny white spot—an outlet to the open air!

It was almost more than he could believe. Then Dorrie came tumbling on the top of him, with the others close behind. They were all shot through a hole in the rock above, where the water was pouring into this pool in a miniature edition of the Niagara Falls.

Lee struck out desperately. A splutter told him that Lord Dorrimore was near by. Then, to the detective's fresh joy, he felt solid ground under his foot. He dragged himself out, and made a masterly effort to control his wits.

Throughout the whole nightmare-like journey he had clutched the electric torch in his hand. It was waterproof, and still capable of giving light. He pressed the button, and was greatly relieved to find that all his four companions were there. Square-Deal Reeve and Twirly Sam were nearly unconscious.

They were pulled into the shallow water, and laid back against the rocks. They remained there, utterly spent. Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and Umlosi, badly bruised and with their lungs filled with water, had nothing to say for several minutes.

Then, as they gradually got better, Dorrie gave a broken laugh.

"By gad! That was a quick trip!" he exclaimed huskily. "Did we come ten miles, or only five, Lee? Now I know what it must be like for a beetle, when it's sucked into a sewer. Poor little beggar!"

"And yet the explanation of this is simple enough," said Lee. "This is the underground river which, I suppose, was blocked by the upheaval. The water forced its way through the ground, and we have been carried back into the cliff, if you understand what I mean. And now we have fallen into this pool, and the stream leads out into the open."

"Thank goodness for that!" said Dorrie. "I vote we go at once."

It was a forlorn group that struggled along towards the exit—Square-Deal

Reeve and Twirly Sam so played out that they hardly knew what they were doing. They were big, burly men, as strong as horses, but they did not pretend to be experts in water. And this last experience had nearly finished them.

At last they came out into the open—to find themselves in a deep pool under a small, overhanging cliff. They managed to get ashore, and force their way through a tangle of dense bushes.

All except Nelson Lee flopped down in the grass, too thankful to be saved to say anything. They had come through one of the most amazing adventures that could possibly happen to any man. After being doomed to what seemed certain death, they had been brought to life.

Nelson Lee made his way up a rising piece of ground, and then he gave a little exclamation of surprised pleasure. There, not half a mile away, lay the camp. By what Lee could see, it was quite deserted, and he guessed that everybody was searching.

The joy in Nelson Lee's heart was almost overwhelming.

CHAPTER VI.

NO WAY OUT!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH nearly choked.

"It's no good!" he said, in a stifled voice. "We might just as well give it up now, Nipper. We shall never be able to find 'em—never! They must have been killed on the spot!"

"Don't be an ass!" muttered Church.

"Thanks, Church, old man, but it doesn't matter," I said quietly. "This thing has got to be faced bravely, and I'm not the kind of fellow to go into hysterics. The guv'nor's gone—with Dorrie and Umlosi and the others."

The juniors looked so scared that their expressions were drawn and haggard. I had never before seen them so white and strained. But the happenings of the last hour had been absolutely unnerving.

The terrible falls of rock and cliff had ceased now, and the whole valley was peaceful. The sun was shining down gently from a cloudless sky. The green stuff and the wild flowers looked just the same as ever—but to us they were drab and chill. No matter which way we turned, we could see nothing to cheer us up.

For we believed, in our hearts, that Nelson Lee and four other members of our party had perished. How could we doubt? We had seen that enormous cliff fall right upon them, probably crushing them to death in a fraction of a second.

And now we were standing against that pile of debris—against the fallen mass of rocks near the cliff face. It rose up to a height of a hundred feet—a veritable mountain of rocky boulders.

Somewhere, beneath this vast pile, Nelson Lee and the rest were lying—or what remained of them. I shuddered as I looked, but I would not give up hope. I tried to make myself believe that there was still a chance.

"We must do something," I said desperately. "Anyhow, we're not going to leave this valley until we know the truth. If we stop here a year, we'll shift every ounce of this rock—we'll move every stone!"

Mr. Farman laid a hand on my shoulder.

"It's no good saying that, Nipper," he exclaimed gently. "That sort of talk won't do, I guess. We couldn't shift this rock—not if we were assisted by cranes. There's nothing we can do, son—absolutely nothing!"

"They all kill!" said Leon Ascara quietly. "Moch quick, I guess. They kill lak they know not'ing. No feel pain—come too sudden."

"I think the same as you, Leon, but—but it's too awful!" I muttered. "It seems certain that they must be dead—but I can't give up hope. I don't know why, but I've got an idea that there's a chance."

"My boy, dismiss such ideas——"

"I can't help it, Mr. Farman—it's there!" I interrupted grimly. "I'm not usually a kind of chap to have convictions, and all that sort of thing. But, somehow, I sort of feel—just feel—that the guv'nor is still alive."

"My hat! I wish I could feel the same!" said Reginald Pitt. "But I can't, Nipper! Dash it all, we saw Mr. Leo and the others buried under all those rocks. How can they have escaped?"

"It's—it's terrible, dear old boys!" exclaimed Sir Montie miserably. "What shall we do at St. Frank's without Mr. Leo? Begad! Everything seems to be getting worse and worse—it does really!"

The fellows talked for the sake of talk-

ing. They hardly knew what they said. Some spoke the most ridiculous nonsense without realising it. Their nerves were on edge, and they were hardly responsible for their words.

Handforth suddenly broke out into a rage.

"And Crasher was the cause of all this!" he shouted violently. "Crasher did it! He started the whole thing by setting off that dynamite! The cur! The murderous hound! I—I'd like to punch him until he's knocked into a pulp!"

"You may be sure, Handforth, that Crasher is dead by this time," said Mr. Farman. "In this enormous upheaval it is hardly possible that those rascals could have escaped. But why should we worry our heads about them? I reckon we've got something more important to think about."

"Poor old gov'nor!" I muttered brokenly. "To—to think that he should peg out in this way! It was so sudden, too! We couldn't even shout a warning—we couldn't do anything. Oh, but I won't believe it—I can't! The gov'nor's alive—and I'll keep on saying it until I've proved it!"

I walked away by myself—I couldn't bear to have the others near me. Their very words of comfort jarred upon me. They all loved and respected Nelson Lee—but my case was quite different. The gov'nor was all I had in the world, and for him to have been taken like this stunned me.

I wouldn't believe it—I couldn't believe it!

And I walked round that great pile of fallen rock, looking for any sign of an opening—trying to make myself believe that Nelson Lee could have escaped. But, down in my heart, I knew that I was foolish.

Why should I have that strange conviction, though? Why should I be so certain in mind that Nelson Lee, at least, was not dead? It seemed very strange, and I thought more and more of the matter. But although I kept walking round that pile of rocks, I saw nothing whatever to give me a spark of encouragement.

Our helplessness maddened me.

We could do nothing—absolutely nothing. To shift those great chunks of rock was absolutely impossible. Our

only actions were to wander round and round, doing nothing, and looking intensely miserable over it.

At last, Mr. Farman made up his mind.

"Look here, boys, this sort of thing won't do," he said firmly. "Nipper, you mustn't stay here any longer. You will drive yourself to distraction, and only harm will come of that. Do you realise that we've had no breakfast yet?"

"Breakfast!" I echoed bitterly. "I couldn't eat a mouthful, sir!"

"See here, my lad, that talk won't go down!" exclaimed the millionaire gently. "You can eat breakfast—and you shall. Food will make you feel better—will give you new courage and hope. We can't live without something to sustain us."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Fatty Little promptly. "I was about to suggest the same thing, but I hardly liked to. Great doughnuts! I've been starving for hours! Jolly good grub, is just what you want, Nipper."

"Oh, all right!" I said dully.

We went back to camp. I didn't want to leave that spot, but I knew that Mr. Farman would not allow me to remain alone. And so we trailed back across the meadows to our little tents. Miserable as the juniors were, the prospect of something to eat brightened them up.

And, as we were nearing the camp, my own spirits were slightly improved, and I felt that I certainly could enjoy a cup of something hot and some food. I was feeling faint and utterly sick. After a square meal, we should all be stronger and more capable of bearing this awful blow.

Handforth was the first to get into the deserted camp. He had hurried on in advance so that he should make himself useful. It was his idea to light a fire quickly. But, as he went into the middle of the camp, he came to an abrupt halt. A great gasp arose in his throat, and his face went like chalk.

He stared down at one of the little, half-open tents. A figure was lying there, wrapped in the blankets. It was the figure of a man, lying perfectly still. And the face was that of Nelson Lee!

Handforth gave a gulp, and then saw other figures—Dorrie, Umlosi, Square-Deal, Twirly! They were all there—wrapped in blankets, and sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Handforth turned, his eyes blazing.

"Quick!" he shouted hoarsely. "They're here!"

"What!" yelled Church. "Who's there?"

"Mr. Lee and the others!"

"Oh, he's gone mad—the poor chap's right 'out of his mind!" muttered Pitt huskily. "I never thought——"

He broke off as the other fellows ran forward at full speed. I was running, too. I had heard Handforth's words, but I had thought nothing of them at first. But then I saw several figures wrapped in blankets, and my heart leapt.

I simply tore into the camp like a demented thing, and arrived at the same time as all the others. And I was just in time to see Nelson Lee sit up, and smile. His face was haggard and drawn, but it was Nelson Lee all right.

"Guv'nor!" I shouted madly.

"It's all right, Nipper—don't go off your head!" said Leo. "Yes, we're alive, but considerably worn out."

I fell on my knees, and hugged him.

"Oh, guv'nor!" I said chokingly. "We—we thought——"

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth.

"They're saved—they're saved!"

"Hurrah!"

The juniors simply awoke the echoes with their cheers. I don't think I've ever seen such excitement. Everybody was jumping and dancing about and shouting. Mr. Farman himself was as bad as the juniors.

And Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi and Square-Deal and Twirly Sam slept on without making a sign. Even this terrific din did not disturb them. Nelson Lee himself was the only one who had awakened.

"Oh, but—but what does it mean?" I asked. "We saw you trapped under that falling cliff, guv'nor, and it seemed as though you were all crushed to atoms. And yet we find you here—in your blankets——"

"Nipper, I feel too exhausted to tell you the whole story now," interrupted Lee wearily. "We passed through some amazing adventures. We saw the camp and entered. We were too tired out to go further, and you were so far off that we could not attract your attention. So we got into our blankets. Let us sleep."

Even as Nelson Lee was speaking he fell back on his pillow, and dropped off. It was not so much sleepiness with him,

but absolute fatigue. Never in my life before had I seen him so thoroughly worn out.

But what did we care about hearing the truth now? We were so overjoyed to find out that they were alive we hardly knew what we were doing. We talked excitedly, and acted the fool generally. Breakfast was a farce, although we managed to eat something—and our appetites were big, after all.

Nothing seemed to matter now. The load which was lifted from our minds was so great that the whole world was shining again. The valley became a place of beauty. And the hours passed away and we hardly realised it. Not until evening did Nelson Lee show any sign of awakening.

Then he roused himself up, and was more like his usual self. He awoke the others, too, and they all turned out, stiff, bruised, and sore in every joint. But they were cheerful.

And then, while we partook of our evening meal, we heard the whole yarn. It struck us as being almost impossible—but it was the literal truth. And we were very grateful to that underground spring, for it had been the means of saving these five valuable lives.

Nelson Lee's shoulder was painful, and for the time being, he lost the use of his arm. He and all the others were so bruised that it was an effort for them to walk. Nelson Lee had acted sensibly in going straight into the camp, and making his companions strip and get into the dry blankets. It had been a terrible effort at the time, but it had saved them all from rheumatic fever, and probably something worse.

We talked of a hundred things that evening as we sat round the camp fire. We discussed Crasher and Co., and were all convinced that those rascals had perished. And, later, we rolled ourselves in our blankets, and slept like tops. No watch was kept—we couldn't think of it.

And we didn't get up at dawn, either. Nobody was awake until the sun was well up. But now we felt better in every way, and we arose refreshed and invigorated.

There was a remarkable change in the five patients, too. Their aches were much less, and Nelson Lee declared that the rest had thoroughly set them upon their feet.

"The main thing is to see exactly how

we stand," declared the gov'nor, after breakfast had been disposed of. "We're alive, and we're intact—the whole party. Nothing could be better. Our departure has been delayed, but now we must see how we can make our exit from the valley."

We looked at Leo keenly.

"That's what I've been thinking about, gov'nor," I said. "Crasher's idea was to bottle us up in this valley—and, judging by the fall of rocks, it seems that he's done it. But I don't care a jot now. You're alive, and nothing else matters."

The gov'nor smiled, and then we set out in three different parties to explore the valley, particularly in the direction of the Caribou Pass.

We spent the whole morning—four solid hours. But when we had done we could only look at one another blankly and with grave doubt expressed in our eyes. For we knew the truth now, and it was just beginning to appal us.

Caribou Pass had ceased to exist. It was one solid, frowning mass of rocks, stretching up thousands of feet. The valley was encircled by unscalable

precipices, reaching up into the very heavens. There was no canyon, no pass, no gulley through which we could make our exit.

We were imprisoned in this far northern valley in the unknown Canadian North-West. Episode after episode had come upon us in rapid succession, and we had passed through thrilling and undreamt-of excitements.

And now, at the end of it all, we had come to—this!

In a valley which was literally choked with gold, we were bottled up like rats in a trap, with no possible hope of ever getting out. Nature, assisted by dynamite, had sealed the valley completely up. The irony of it was grim. With enough gold to make us individual millionaires, we could not move—we could not return to civilisation.

But if we supposed that our adventures were to halt at this point we were quite off the mark. For, almost without a pause, other amazing events were destined to occur—events which would lead us back to the civilised places of mankind—and, ultimately, St. Frank's!

THE END.

To My Readers.

Only too well had Crasher and his accomplices carried out their evil plans. It had cost them their lives, it is true, but Nelson Lee and his party of holiday-makers were as effectively imprisoned in the well of the Secret Valley as if they had been beetles in a jam-jar.

No longer had they to fear attacks from Crasher or the Redskins. Nevertheless, it was not a pleasant prospect to feel that they might have to face the rigours of a North American winter, and to subsist on what they could find in the valley. If they had such thoughts, these were soon to be dispelled by another terrible calamity indirectly caused by the explosion. It will be fully described in Next Week's Story, "THE FURY OF THUNDER RAPIDS!" This will be the last story of the popular Holiday Adventure series, and, I am sure, the most thrilling of them all.

THE EDITOR.

THE MARVEL 2

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The Ghosts of Marsh Manor



BEGIN TO-DAY THIS THRILLING NARRATIVE OF

THE GREAT DETECTIVE OF GRAY'S INN ROAD.

CHIEF CHARACTERS.

NELSON LEE, as *Mr. Herbert Drake, B.A.*, secures a position as games master at Marsh Manor School in order to investigate strange visits of ghosts at the school.

NIPPER, Lee's assistant, comes to the school as Barton, a backward boy.

THE REV. OCTAVIUS CHARD, Headmaster of Marsh Manor School.

ADOLPHE MALINES, a Belgian refugee, living near the school, who has invented a new method of colour photography.

JULES TROCHON and **MADAME TROCHON**, compatriots and neighbours of Malines.

INGLEBY-CHARTERIS, wealthy stockbroker, who befriends the Belgian refugees.

MONSIEUR VILOTTE, French master at the school, an avowed enemy of the Belgians, and against whom suspicions are directed.

SEYMOUR, GURLING, and TULK, boys at the school, who seem to know more about the ghosts than they will admit.

(Now read on.)

CHAPTER VI. (Continued.)

Called Away.

TEN minutes passed by, a quarter of an hour, and still they waited. Then the clock in the turret chimed half-past, and he turned to Malines.

"It is over for to-night," he said. "Will you come to-morrow, or has it tired you?"

"I will come every night for a week, if you like," said the photographer, removing his camera to the other end of the study and carefully replacing the piece of wood in the door panel.

Nelson Lee let him out noiselessly, locked the front door, and returned to his room. And for the next two nights the process was repeated, but the ghost did not appear.

"We'll give it a rest," said Lee. "I won't tax your kindness any farther until the end of the week. Shall you want your camera, or will you leave it with me? It will be in safe hands."

"You are welcome to use it as long as you like," said Adolphe Malines.

But, though the lens was in position each

night, and Nipper was ready for the signal, there was not a sign of the white abbot.

"Well, Nipper, what do you think of it?" said the great detective.

Nipper sat at his study table, with a pile of volumes beside him, and an open exercise-book, in which he had not written a word.

"Can't make it out, guv'nor," replied the boy. "Whoever it is, they seem to have had warning of what we were going to do."

Lee nodded.

"I've come to the same conclusion," he said, puffing rapidly at his pipe. "In my opinion, there is somebody in this house who is in collusion with the white monk, and I suspect that fellow there."

He jerked his head in the direction of the French master's study, which adjoined his own.

"Monsieur Vilotte?"

"Monsieur Vilotte. There is something cynical and saturnine about that man. I took a dislike to him the first time we met, and he has gone out of his way to run down the Belgian refugees quite unnecessarily, as we know from our own experience of them. Which brings me to the one thing I always try to discover. What is the motive? If one can find out that, it's the best kicking-off point possible. Now, you young rascal, I know what it means when those eyes of yours twinkle like that. Have you got any theory?"

"It's only a wild notion," said Nipper, lowering his voice, with his habitual caution. "What about that purse-proud stockbroker fellow, who told you the price of his cigars before you'd had time to say, 'How d'you do?' Boy-wow!"

"Mr. Ingleby-Charteris? I don't quite follow you," said Lee.

"There may be nothing in it, but I look at it this way," continued Nipper. "Mr. Ingleby-Charteris went to live near Peterborough three years ago. You found that out when you were investigating the disappearance of his niece."

"What a memory you've got, Nipper! Go on."

"Well, Mr. Ingleby-Charteris, motoring about the country, must have seen this Manor House, and we know he covets it."

It's only about that time since the owner, Miss Varnay, left it, because she couldn't afford to live here any longer, and the village people have told you that they never heard of a ghost in her time."

"True, O king!" said his master approvingly. "But if there's anything in your idea, the man is going to a lot of trouble to get the place."

"Wouldn't you do so, guv'nor, if you were dead keen and had pots of money to burn?"

"Perhaps. But hold on. Even suppose there is anybody in the village in his pay, prepared to take the risks, how would they get into the house, to begin with? We've searched thoroughly, and we're no fools at the game."

"Between ourselves, guv'nor," said Nipper, "I don't think we know half there is to learn about it yet. It wouldn't surprise me if every other panel in this room would move if we'd only got the secret. If you're right about the French master, how would he know that Mr. Malines were here with his camera better than by the existence of some squint-hole between your room and his?"

"Nipper, you make me creepy!" laughed Nelson Lee.

But, for all that, his face was serious.

"It seems a trivial sort of thing," he said at last; "but I'm on my mettle, and I'm determined to hang on until I've got to the bottom of it. I take it you're having a good time here?"

"Oh, ripping," cried Nipper—"for a backward boy!"

And they both laughed.

"Well, off you go now!"

And Nipper sought the companionship of his schoolmates, leaving the great detective obliged to admit to himself that he had been nearly five days in the house and was not an inch nearer.

Among the letters that arrived by the mail next morning was one for "Mr. Herbert Drake," marked "Urgent," and sealed with red wax.

When he opened it, it contained a code cablegram, which, being deciphered, read: "Liverpool. Sol Clitters landed from Floritania, which berthed here at noon to-day. Left for London."

The games-master's face clouded, and he went out quickly.

"Drake's got bad news of some sort," said Gurling to Tulk, while Nipper almost choked himself over his porridge.

Presently Nelson Lee put his head in at the door, and beckoned to the new boy.

"The crook's in town, Nipper," he said, in a low whisper, when they were outside. "I've got leave from Chard until to-morrow. Carry on just as though I were here. I shall come down on the afternoon train."

"Right-oh, guv'nor!"

And Lee, slipping an automatic pistol into the pocket of his loose dustcoat, walked briskly to the "Red Lion," where he hired a trap to put him over to Huntingdon.

Everybody missed him, none more so than Mr. Chard himself, and the trio were discon-

solate, to say nothing of Nipper, who knew that his master had gone to tackle one of the most desperate international criminals that the world held just then, and who bore on his cheekbone a scar he would carry to his grave, which Nelson Lee's bullet had scored deeply there six years before.

Mr. Sol Clitters' speciality was dealing in forged notes, and Lee shrewdly suspected him to be at the bottom of that three million pounds worth of counterfeits which the Treasury had reported to be in circulation.

The afternoon of the second day came and went, but of "Mr. Herbert Drake" there was no sign. When the noon of the third day arrived, still bringing no news of the absent one, Nipper went quietly up to his dormitory, opened his trunk, took from it certain things which shall be nameless, and when the boys assembled for tea his place at the table was vacant.

"Where's Barton?" said Mr. Jackson; but no one had seen him.

So Mr. Jackson reported to the Head, who instituted an inquiry, and read prayers that night in a very troubled tone.

Had the worthy man known the facts of the case, his tone would have been more troubled still!

CHAPTER VII.

In Which Nelson Lee Came Very Near To His End.

LEE had carefully removed the little patch of moustache in the waiting-room at Huntingdon station, pocketed his pince-nez, and now appeared in his proper character, without any attempt at camouflage. And so anxious was he to reach town that he could scarcely restrain his impatience as the black dot on the long straight run grew larger and larger with provoking slowness, until the train from the north pulled up at the platform and he swung himself up into his compartment.

At the terminus he hailed a taxi, and was whisked away to Gray's Inn Road, where he knew there was no welcome for him. He had given Mrs. Jones, his housekeeper, a fortnight's holiday from the day Nipper had joined him.

Everything in the rooms was precisely as he had left it, and, opening his bureau, he produced all the records he had bearing upon Sol Clitters, among them several photographs of that master-criminal.

He knew the haunts for which he would be likely to make on his arrival, and sat there, in a brown study, with the photographs spread out before him.

"I'll try Wood Green first," he said to himself, "and after that Shepherd's Bush; but I wish Billings had sent me a word as to the disguise he's wearing."

The photographs showed a tall, grey-haired man, with a strong face and very powerful frame, a man of gentlemanly exterior, except in one of the photographs, where he

wore his soft Homburg hat cocked slightly over one eye, a habit which spoils any man, be he gentle or simple.

"There's one thing about it," he said to himself, "he'll give me a wide berth. I nearly had him last time, and now there must be no mistakes. My shot in the café cost me forty guineas for that mirror, and spoiled what would have been one of the smartest captures I ever made."

He had got thus far, when his eyes lifted to the Empire looking-glass on the wall above the cabinet, and what he saw there made him spring up, but just the fraction of a second too late.

A smashing blow caught him on the side of the temple, dropping him like a stone, and the man whose photographs he had been studying laughed silently and stood looking down at his victim!

Sol Clitters had done the unexpected, and determined to carry the war into the enemy's camp, had come straightway to beard Nelson Lee in his den, armed with a skeleton key of his own invention, which seldom failed him, and which on this occasion had admitted him noiselessly into the house within half an hour of its owner's arrival.

"Got you, my beauty! By the living jingo, got you at last!" he muttered, gloating over the spectacle of the crumpled figure on the Turkey carpet. "I won't kill you yet. I want to talk to you before that happens. You've played me up too often to let you slide out of this life so easily. You shall see me in possession of your most secret documents. I will play with you like a cat plays with a mouse, and worse than that! And then, Mr. Blooming-Nelson-blooming Lee, you shall pay for spoiling my facial beauty!"

And the man's fingers went instinctively to the slough on his cheekbone, which had cost him more than one narrow shave since the police of the world had known of its existence.

Having indulged himself for a moment or so in his unholy triumph, Sol Clitters went back to the front door, and put the catch up, afterwards making a tour of the premises, to satisfy himself that he was alone.

Then he rolled Lee's own handkerchief into a ball, forced the parted teeth a little wider, and pushed it into his mouth. The towels in the bathroom made excellent bonds for wrists and ankles, and one of them he bound securely round the lower part of Lee's face, so that no sound could reach the ears of anyone outside.

Having accomplished all this to his satisfaction, he dragged him across the floor, propping his back against the sofa, in full view of the open bureau, tied him by the knees to one leg of the heavy table, to make assurance doubly sure, and, taking out a bottle of powerful salts, which he had often used for a similar purpose, held them under his nostrils until the lids closed and opened again and a faint colour returned into the face.

"Coming round, are you? Gave you rather a harder tap than I intended, but I guess you'll do now. Pity you can't speak, or I'd ask you where you keep the liquor for your friends; but it doesn't matter, as I'm going to do all the talking."

For an instant Lee's eyes closed again, not so much from the terrible throbbing in his head, though that was bad enough, but with the bitter realisation that all was over with him. Mrs. Jones away, Nipper down at Marsh Manor, and no earthly possibility of rescue in any shape or form!

Then he opened them, and looked his adversary—and his own fate—firmly in the face.

Sol Clitters drew off his buckskin gloves, and put on a pair of rubber ones that would leave no finger-prints, and, helping himself from a box of cigarettes, lit one, with a smile of supreme enjoyment.

"Glad you've stuck to the old brand! I always liked 'em," he said. "Now we'll see what little secrets you've got hidden away in this famous desk of yours."

And, turning his back on the helpless man, he seated himself in the padded chair, and commenced a systematic investigation of the contents of the bureau.

Many of the notebooks and documents were written in cipher, and these he tossed on to the floor. But from time to time he turned to the table, on which he had deposited a square travelling-bag, of green morocco leather, with yellow metal mountings, and dropped into it such papers as might be useful to himself and his associates.

To these he added a priceless collection of criminal photography, with the remark:

"These will pass away a very pleasant Sunday afternoon. Does one good to rub noses with old friends, Lee. Hullo! What have we got here?"

And, as he opened a drawer, he took out a thick bundle of brand-new Treasury notes, regarded them with an experienced eye, and chuckled with suppressed laughter.

"Of course, you know we've got three-millions-worth of these little flimsies floating around?" he said. "But this is the right stuff, and will pay my expenses for the trip. When I go back to the States I'm taking another three-millions-worth, that even the Bank of England couldn't spot, for home consumption. It's a great game, Lee, played slow, and we haven't hurried the pace this time. Watermark perfect, not a fault in the design—why, bless your soul, there are only two flaws in the whole outfit by which I can tell 'em myself, one in the pound-note and one in the ten-bobbers. Funny thing Lee, when you think of it, the cleverest engraver in the world always comes a bloomer somewhere. Don't trouble to reply." And he grinned maliciously. "If I had a couple of duds here now, I'd point out the differences to you; but, meanwhile, I'll pocket this lot, with many thanks, old man!"

He spoke in a tone of quiet banter, but every now and then there came a savage purpose in his cold, grey eyes, and his

listener knew only too well that, as he had said, he was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse.

"Well, I guess I'm through now," said the master-criminal. "And, as you don't seem inclined to offer me a cocktail, I'll make a move whilst my shoes are good."

He closed his bag with a snap, had just removed the rubber gloves, and was picking up the loaded cane, when the electric-bell rang, and he looked round sharply, hesitating.

"Now, if this should happen to be that cussed Nipper of yours, durned if I don't build a church, to show my gratitude!" said Sol Clitters, and, laying down the stick, he went out into the passage, with the bag still in his hand.

Opening the door, he paused, for the visitor who had claimed admittance was a short, elderly man, with a grey beard, who looked at him through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Oh, I thought it was Mr. Nelson Lee!" he said pleasantly. "Is he at home?"

"I'm expecting him back inside ten minutes," said Clitters, who noticed that the gentleman wore no hat, and was obviously a neighbour. "Can I give him any message?"

"No; it doesn't matter, thanks! You might say Dr. Hartop called in."

And the doctor descended, Clitters waiting, with one hand on the latch, until he had satisfied himself that the doctor had gone.

He was just about to turn back to the room, to carry out his murderous design, when he heard light footsteps coming up the stairs, and for a moment the man's nerve failed him. Should he wait, leaving the door ajar? Should he risk the chances of a cry before his hand could stifle Nipper's voice for ever? Or should he close the door, and let him ring?

For almost the first time in his career of crime, Clitters' powerful brain failed him at a quick conclusion, and, realising that he had got the wind up, he thought only of escape, and, pulling the door to behind him, before the newcomer had turned the angle of the staircase, he walked boldly down, carrying the green bag with him.

It was only a young lady, after all, and the master key was still in his possession; but, something seemed to draw him, step by step, in the direction of the street, and, stopping the first taxi that passed, he was driven away, leaving his work half done!

As the door of the flat closed, with a dull bang, Lee swooned off, overcome by the effects of the blow, and that totally unex-

pected lease of life which had been given him.

It was dark when he returned to his senses, but, though he wriggled and strove his hardest, he could neither free his mouth from the gag nor loosen wrists nor ankles. His head was buzzing and pulsating like a steam-hammer, and every attempt at movement was agony.

Footfalls, faintly heard, passed up and down the stairs, the dull murmur of the traffic came to his ears from the street below. As the night wore on the traffic ceased, and he found himself listening for a return of the villain, never dreaming for a moment that, having him at his mercy, he would deny himself the privilege of taking full advantage of it.

He was consumed by a raging thirst, and shivered with cold, lying, as he did, in a direct draught, and the chiming clock on the Chippendale sideboard brought him very little consolation.

Not a dozen yards away the telephone, in full view, in the hall mocked him, and the pile of the Turkey carpet was so thick that it, and the sound-proof floor, frustrated every attempt to attract Dr. Hartop's attention by drumming with his elbow.

If anything further were needed to convince him of his entire helplessness, it was the postman, who rang three times, having a registered packet to deliver, and then went away.

He saw in fancy the train by which Nipper would expect him gliding out of the terminus, and pictured the boy's distress when he did not put in an appearance; and by the time it grew dark again he knew that he was becoming light-headed.

Impeded circulation and agonising cramp made life almost unbearable, until another merciful swoon came to his aid, and when he opened his eyes again it was to find the electric-light full on, Dr. Hartop and Nipper kneeling one on either side of him, and sensation slowly returning to his limbs as they submitted them to violent massage.

His head was swathed in a surgical bandage, which Nipper kept moistening by squeezing cold water upon it from a sponge, and, when, at length, his rescuers ceased from sheer exhaustion, Lee sat slowly up and looked at the boy.

"How do you come here?" were his first words.

"Because I knew something was wrong when you didn't turn up twenty-four hours after the time you appointed. So I took French leave; and a jolly good job I did! Was it Clitters?"

"It was."

And he told them how the master crook had answered the ring at the bell, thinking it Nipper.

"And it was Dr. Hartop all the time," said that worthy. "If the blow had fallen half an inch lower than it did, he says, you

(Continued on page 111 of cover.)

ANSWERS
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would have been killed, so it's been a narrow shave for us both."

"How is the head feeling?" said the doctor.

"Stiff as an old horse, but that frightful throbbing has gone," replied Lee, with something of his old smile.

"Then I think we might venture to give you some Bovril."

"When I've seen my letters!" protested the great detective, picking himself up with surprising agility. "Look at the cabinet, Nipper! That scoundrel has taken away priceless documents with him, and nearly all our photographs. By the way, how have you been getting on at the Manor House? Seen anything more?"

Nipper shook his head.

"Hadn't you better leave the letters, guv'nor, until you've got something inside you?"

"No, dear lad; give them to me first, and then I'll take what food you can find. That was a pretty hefty welt he gave me, doctor. Is it going to leave any mark?"

"I don't think so," said his medical friend. "Oddly enough, the skin is not broken; but I prescribe absolute rest on your back for another twenty-four hours, and a couple of days of doing nothing before you attempt work again."

Lee made a wry face, but knew that Hartop was right, and, lying down on the

sofa, he opened his correspondence as Nipper bolted for the kitchen.

"I think Clitters and I are equal over the matter of that revolver-shot," he said. "But for the future I am going to devote all my energies to running him down."

He broke off suddenly, a spasm of annoyance puckering his face.

"Confound it! This is the sort of thing one has to contend with!" And he read aloud, decoding the message the first letter contained: "Clitters visited the rich widow at Wood Green the night before last. That was the night he attacked me. 'Spent the greater part of next day with Grimstone, at Kennington, and took a return ticket for Portsmouth this evening. Wire me instructions. He seems in high feather, and makes no attempt at disguise.' No; because he thinks he's laid me by the heels. Possibly he believes me dead. I'm certainly rather shaky." And he placed the other letters on the table unopened, as Nipper returned with food, which he took ravenously. "I'm going to follow your advice, doc. If you think you can patch up my head so that I can pass it off as a motor accident, I'll go down to Marsh Manor again for a few days. The investigations I am pursuing there entail no physical strain, and, in the meantime, Nipper, 'phone Watson to pick up the American's trail when he returns, and never lose sight of him for a moment."

(To be continued.)

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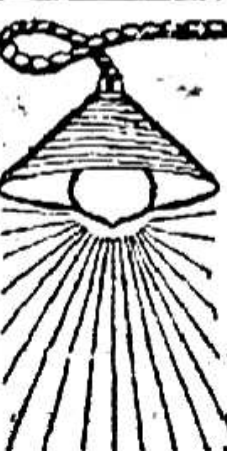
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