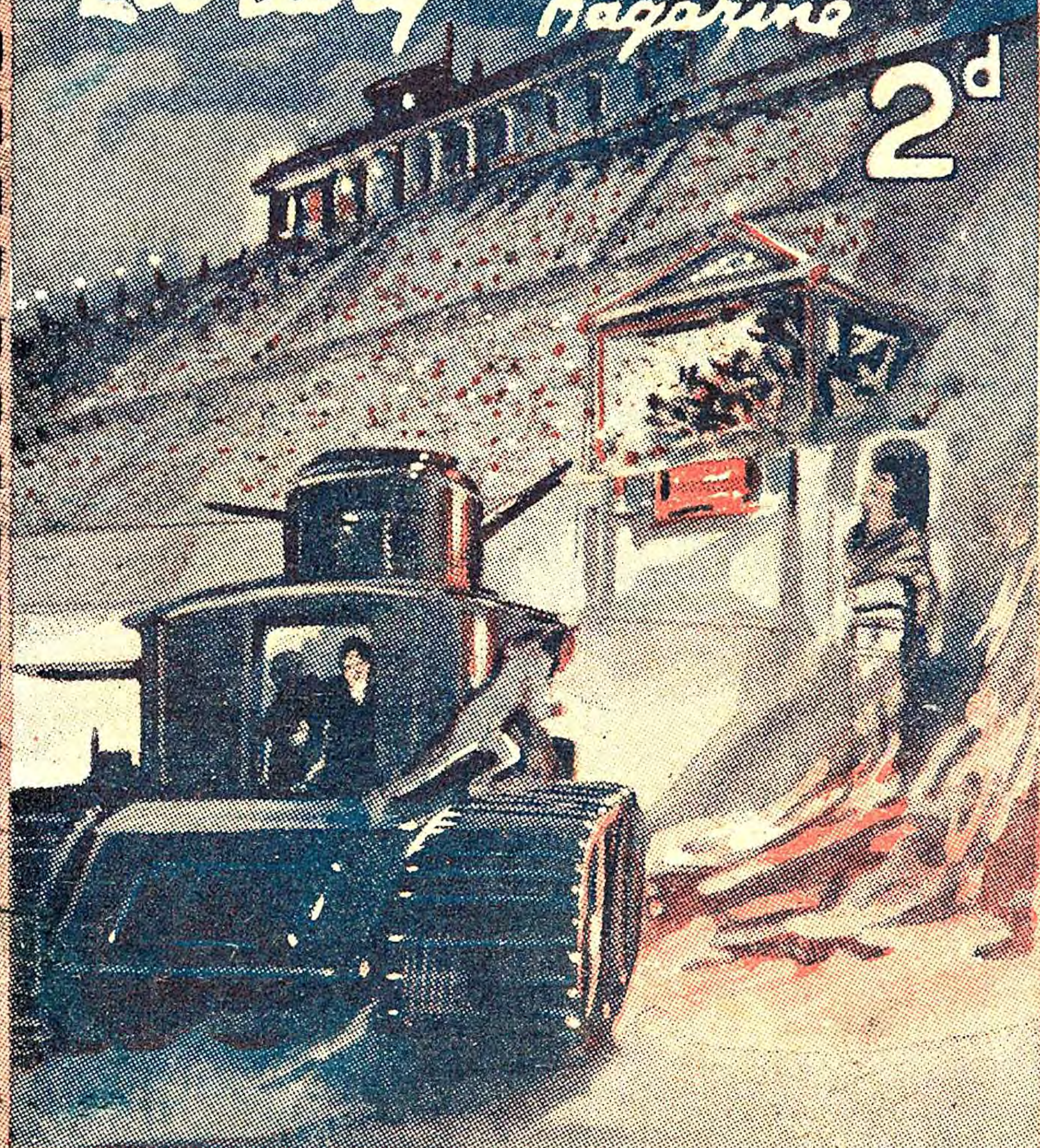


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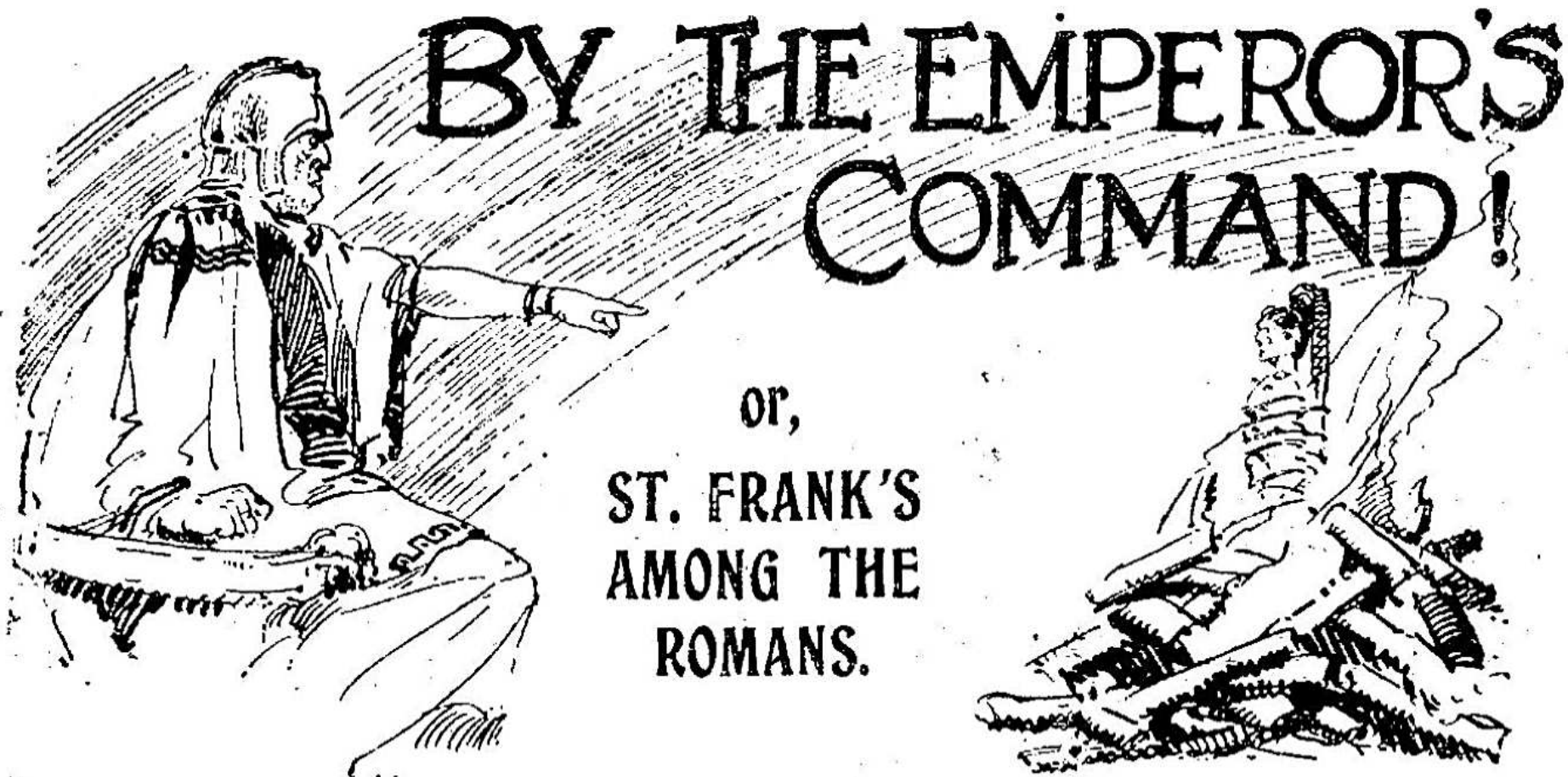


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THE EDITOR.

Related Throughout by Nipper and Set Down by E. Searles Brooks

CHAPTER I.

THE CONQUERING HERO.

"THOU dog! Dost dare to defy me?" The Emperor of Isirium shouted the words harshly. There was a grim flash in his eyes as he did so.

"Nay, noble sire!" protested the other. "I am but suggesting——"

"Then thou wilt keep a still tongue in thine head, or, perchance, thou wilt have no head at all!" broke in the emperor curtly. "Get thee gone, my fine centurion, and have a care in future!"

The emperor raised an imperious hand, and pointed down the wide, mosaic steps of the palace—a gesture of dismissal. But the centurion seemed to hesitate.

"That fellow's asking for trouble," I said thoughtfully. "Old Titus is in a pretty beastly mood this morning, and he's just about ripe for any mischief."

"What's he saying, anyway?" asked Tommy Watson curiously.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Of course I heard—but I didn't understand," replied Tommy. "This giddy Latin gives me the pip! I wouldn't mind if they spoke slowly, but they gabble so much."

I grinned.

"I'm afraid your Latin's a bit frayed at the edge, old man," I chuckled. "This is what comes of neglecting your studies. If I can understand the language, why can't you?"

We were both leaning over the rail of the Conqueror's promenade-deck, and the African sun was slanting down and gathering in intensity with every minute. It was quite early morning, but the heat was already oppressive.

The breakfast gong had not yet sounded—indeed, Tommy and I were the only St. Frank's fellows on deck. The rest were

either dressing or washing, and would soon appear in big numbers.

It possibly sounds rather queer, but we were in Isirium—in the great central square of the capital, with the emperor's imperial palace immediately facing us. Rather to our surprise, Titus IV had appeared on the steps a few minutes earlier.

It was not usual for the emperor to appear at such an hour. But he was escorting the centurion out through the great marble colonnade, and it was only too clear that the officer had annoyed his royal master.

We had been in Isirium for several days, and were becoming more and more interested in this remarkable country which lay in the very heart of the unexplored Sahara—a great desert oasis surrounded by giant mountain peaks which barred all progress.

But for the fact that we had come on Mr. Travers Earle's remarkable land yacht, the Conqueror, we could never have accomplished the feat. Not only would this valley have proved impregnable, but we should never have even reached the mountains themselves.

We had already met with several exciting adventures in the strange city. It was amazingly like a city of the Ancient Romans. The people themselves were like the Ancient Romans, too. And this was natural, since they were the direct descendants of a vast army of fugitives who had fled from the famous Roman city of Tingad, on the edge of the Northern Sahara, in the dim ages of the past.

We had got over our surprise at these astonishing discoveries, and were just beginning to settle ourselves to the strange surroundings. And we all felt that our sojourn in Isirium would not end tamely.

Tommy Watson and I watched the pair of richly-robed figures on the palace steps with growing interest. And while we were doing so, a footstep sounded behind us.

We turned, and beheld Edward Oswald Handforth, in all the full glory of spotless white flannels and a straw hat. And Handforth no sooner approached the rail than a shout of acclamation went up from a crowd of citizens who stood round the outer edges of the square—obviously watching and waiting.

"My hat! They're at it again!" said Handforth in dismay.

I grinned.

"Behold, the conquering hero!" I remarked. "You can't expect anything else, Handy. If you will go and punch lions on the nose, and rescue fair damsels from the arena, you must be prepared for the cheers of the populace. Don't you realise you're the idol of the crowd?"

"What absolute rot!" growled Handforth.

At the same time, he looked rather pleased with himself as he eyed the throng and bowed his acknowledgments. When it came to something really big, Handforth was quite a modest fellow.

"Hallo, they're at it again!" exclaimed Watson with interest.

"Didn't I just say so?" asked Handforth. "It's a pity you can't find some words of your own—"

"I'm not talking about the people—I mean the emperor and this fellow he's having a squabble with," said Watson.

"Oh, the emperor?" said Handforth contemptuously. "Blow him!"

Edward Oswald's contempt for Titus IV was an indication of all our feelings. After what had happened in the great amphitheatre a day or two earlier, we all regarded the emperor with scorn and mistrust.

The pair on the palace steps had been talking again—Titus apparently having listened a while longer to his captain. And Titus had lost his temper.

"For this thou shalt be whipped until thy flesh bleeds!" he shouted. "Ho! Come hither, thou sluggards! Arrest this man—"

"Nay, sire, thou art surely harsh with me!" protested the centurion, taking a step backwards, and turning rather pale. "I am but protesting that it would be unwise to force this measure on the people of my village. Already they are fitting themselves for war—"

"Enough!" interrupted the emperor. "Thou art insolent."

He waved his hand to an officer near by, and to a group of soldiers. The centurion gripped himself hard, and waited. Apparently, he was in command of the garrison of an outlying village, and the territory under his rule was stirring itself up to revolt, for some reason.

"If naught is done, thy soldiers will be surprised and slaughtered in their quarters," he urged. "I implore thee, sire, to reconsider this matter, and to draft a further—"

"Another word, and thou shalt die as thou standest!" raved the emperor.

"Then I am ready!" retorted the centurion angrily. "I have come to thee, sire, to protest against the harsh measures thou hast adopted in regard to my garrison. My soldiers are restless, and the population itself may take action at any moment—"

"Let this still thy tongue!" shouted Titus furiously.

"With one movement he drew his sword, and before the centurion could make a move to defend himself, the weapon thrust at his heart. And the unfortunate man uttered one gurgling cry and collapsed on the steps—run clean through the heart by that cold steel."

CHAPTER II.

THE BRUTE.



HANDFORTH caught his breath in sharply. "The brute—the absolute beast!" he panted thickly. "Oh, my hat! He's killed him—he's murdered

the chap in cold blood!"

"Oh!" muttered Tommy Watson.

I merely set my teeth and continued to watch. The murder had been committed so quietly, and in such a matter-of-fact way that its full horror was concealed. But the fact remained that the centurion was dead—lying on the steps, with his life blood flowing away.

A low, growling murmur came from the crowds of people on the outskirts of the square—for this foul deed had been witnessed by hundreds. The emperor frowned as he looked round.

"'Tis well!" he grunted. "I will show these fools whether I am to be defied! By Mars! Am I the ruler of this land, or not?"

We heard laughing voices behind us, and saw Irene and Co. just appearing on deck.

"Quick! Take the girls below again, Handy!" I said sharply. "Or, at least, keep them away from this side of the ship."

Handforth hesitated. He had been in the act of climbing over the rail, and I had spoken on the spur of the moment. Left to himself, Edward Oswald would have swarmed down to the ground, and after that he might have committed any act of rash impulsiveness.

"But—but look here! I'm going to smash that beast for——"

"Quick!" I urged. "They'll see that dead centurion if they come here!"

Handforth made up his mind, and hurried to the girls, and carried them off down the deck.

"Thank goodness for that!" I breathed. "For two pins the emperor would have used his sword against Handforth, too! He's in a rotten mood this morning."

The emperor was not alone now.

Several of his nobles had come hurrying out of the palace, for word of this deed had quickly spread. Lars Melos himself was there, his brutal face expressing the satisfaction that thrilled him. For Lars Melos was as great a brute as his emperor.

"'Tis naught but an incident," growled Titus. "The man was loose with his tongue, and I was compelled to slay him as he stood. Am I to be defied by my own officers?"

"Nay, sire—thy action was necessary," said Melos.

And now a portly figure appeared from between two of the marble columns—a

figure we instantly recognised. The new-comer was Horatius Placidus, the chief of the emperor's household, and a kindly, genial soul. He was already greatly liked by the St. Frank's fellows.

"By Venus! What is this?" he gasped, holding up his hands in horror. "Hast murder been committed? And on the palace steps, foorsooth! This is a terrible——"

"Still thy foolish tongue, my Placidus!" growled the emperor. "There has been no murder. 'Twas I who killed the man—and rightly, since his insolent tongue became far too loose."

Placidus backed away.

"But, sire," he protested, "'tis a dangerous thing to commit such an act! Hast forgotten the tumult that arose on the last occasion thy temper got the better of thee?"

"Silence!" thundered Titus. "By Mercury! Hast thou, too, taken leave of thy wits, Placidus? Am I a slave, to be addressed thus? Get thee hence, dog, ere I slit thy heart, too!"

Horatius Placidus drew himself up stiffly.

"If it is thy pleasure to strike—strike!" he said calmly. "'Tis not in my power to lift a hand against my emperor. The advantage is with thee, sire. But I maintain that this crime was unnecessary——"

"Crime?" shouted the emperor.

"Ay, crime!" repeated Placidus stoutly. "What else?"

"By all the gods of war!" choked the emperor. "Thou art even worse than this dog I have slain. 'Tis a sign that my own court officials are becoming insolent. My rule is too easy. Come hither, you gaping fools, and place this man under arrest!"

A captain came up smartly with a group of soldiers.

"Nay, sire, consider what thou art about!" protested Placidus. "Thou art surely of a strange humour this morning——"

"Ay, thou hast spoken truly, O Placidus," interrupted the emperor. "And it is my will to make an exhibition of thee. It is plain that all are moved by the same spirit of insubordination."

He turned to the captain, and waved his hand.

"To the arena with this fat dog!" he commanded curtly.

"By Mars! The arena!" gasped Placidus, pale to the lips.

"Ay, my Placidus—to the arena, where thou wilt be burnt at the stake ere evening comes," said Titus, with a laugh. "The prospect pleaseth? Enough of this——"

"Burnt at the stake!" muttered Placidus hoarsely. "But, sire! Such an act will stir the people beyond——"

"Such an act will rid thee of thy useless life, and provide me with a spectacle which

will please me greatly," interrupted the emperor calmly. "Tis many days since my eyes were delighted by the sight of a man screaming out his life as the flames curled round him! It shall happen this afternoon, my Placidus—with thou as the central figure!"

CHAPTER III.

THE GATHERING STORM.



HORATIUS PLACIDUS held his head erect. He was marched away by the guard, and our stout friend maintained a brave front, in spite of the appalling sen-

tence which had been passed upon him. Without any adequate reason, the emperor had decided that he should be burnt at the stake.

It was a clear insight into Titus' character.

Placidus was the chief of his household—a man who held a most exalted position in the palace. And yet, by a mere whim of his royal master's, he had been condemned to the most ghastly death imaginable.

"The brute—the absolute cur!" I muttered. "We shall have to do something about this, Tommy; we can't let it go on!"

"Can't let what go on?" asked Watson. "The man's dead—they've carried the body away by this time, thank goodness."

"No, I don't mean that—I'm talking about Placidus."

"Yes, what's he been arrested for?" asked Tommy. "I can't get the hang of this silly Latin, and I don't understand—"

"Placidus has been taken away to the arena—to be burnt at the stake this afternoon!" I replied grimly. "That's the kind of man the emperor happens to be! He's committed old Placidus to the stake!"

"Oh, the awful beast!" said Watson, horrified.

Willy Handforth had come up, and he looked at me thoughtfully.

"And do you mean to say it's going to happen?" he asked. "Do you mean to tell me that the Remove will stand by and see Placidus burnt at the stake? Rats! The Remove's got more sense than that!"

"It's very nice of you to say so, Willy," I replied. "But what can the Remove do? It isn't so easy—"

"Who's talking about it being easy?" interrupted the fag. "But don't tear your hair. If it's too much for you chaps, I'll take the job on! Anyhow, the Third is always game!"

"You cheeky young bounder!" I growled. "You'd better clear off while you're safe! If the Remove can do anything—"

"Shush! The girls!" whispered Willy carelessly. "Don't want to let them know about this affair—they're too young!"

But it so happened that the young ladies

were already aware of the position. They had been told about the murder of the centurion by one of the stewardesses, and there had been no difficulty in getting the rest of the story.

"Oh, but it's dreadful!" said Irene indignantly. "It's too dreadful for words! There must be some mistake—"

"There isn't!" interrupted Handforth gloomily. "I saw it with my own eyes—and Nipper wouldn't let me buzz down and punch the emperor in the eye!"

"And I think Nipper was very wise," said Irene. "I know what a fellow you are for acting impulsively, Ted, and there's no knowing how such a scheme would end. But—but I can't imagine that Placidus is to be burnt at the stake! It's altogether too terrible!"

"But they don't really burn people at the stake, do they?" asked Tessa.

"It may be only a threat," I pointed out. "But, if I'm any judge of the emperor's character, he'll be quite delighted to see the horrible spectacle. The man's a brute!"

"But why should it be done? Why?" asked Marjorie. "Placidus is such a nice man—so jolly and cheerful. Surely he's not going to be burnt at the stake just because he was brave enough to protest against a brutal murder?"

"He defied the emperor—and, that, of course, is a crime of the worst possible description—in the eyes of Titus," I said. "Of course, something has got to be done!"

"Oh, it must—it must!" declared the girls.

"Something will certainly be done with Titus if that poor chap is murdered!" said Ena Handforth calmly. "If nobody else takes a hand, I'll execute justice myself."

"My hat!" said Willy. "I believe you could, too!"

In the meantime, a little confab was taking place on another part of the Conqueror's deck. Nelson Lee and Lord Dornmore were talking gravely, with Mr. Earle and Mr. Manners standing by.

"It's all very well to talk, old man, but what in the name of thunder can we do?" asked Dorrie. "It was a horrible affair—a deliberate murder without provocation. I'd like to take Titus, tie him to a fence, and take pot-shots at the infernal rat!"

"My dear Dorrie, it's no good talking like that," said Nelson Lee patiently. "Indeed, I doubt if it is any use talking at all."

"We're not goin' to let Placidus die at the stake, are we?" demanded his lordship gruffly. "Man alive! This is the twentieth century—"

"In our own world—yes," agreed Lee. "But in this tiny kingdom progress has almost stood still, and they are no further than the second or third century. But we needn't discuss that, old man. Are we justified in interfering?"

"To save a man from torture?" put in Mr. Earle. "Yes, by Heaven!"

"I agree, of course—but we must be very

diplomatic," said Nelson Lee. "Remember, we are his guests. We cannot go about giving orders, just as though we were the rulers here. Such high-handed action on our part would only precipitate serious trouble. And we must always remember that we are more or less in the hands of Titus."

"I don't quite see that," said Dorrie. "With this ship under us we're always the masters of the situation——"

"On the contrary, Dorrie," interrupted Lee quietly. "There is only one way out of this valley—by the great canyon through the mountains. What would happen to us if that canyon were hopelessly choked? If we

CHAPTER IV.

A FATHER'S GRIEF.



BREAKFAST was over, and I was strolling along one of the main streets, accompanied by Archie Glenthorne and Reggie Pitt.

We could not help noticing the tension in the air.

The usual placid peace of the city was absent. The inhabitants were standing about in little groups, talking excitedly together. The flower-girls—dainty maidens, with stalls of wonderful blossoms—were doing scarcely

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incur the enmity of the emperor, he might give orders for such a drastic step. No, we must be very cautious indeed."

Lord Dorrimore nodded.

"You think of everythin', old man," he said thoughtfully. "Now, I'm hanged if I should remember those details. Thank goodness, we've got you with us! We must certainly look after ourselves—for we are responsible for the safety of all these boys an' girls."

"My idea precisely," agreed Nelson Lee. "With regard to poor Placidus—well, I shall do my utmost to persuade the emperor that his decision is harsh and unjust. It is a bad business altogether."

any business, for nobody thought of flowers. Chariots were constantly hurrying and scurrying down the paved streets.

"Reminds me of incidents that have occurred in European history," remarked Reggie Pitt. "A brutal act by a king, committed in the heat of temper—and a great war as a result! I shouldn't be a bit surprised that this business about poor old Placidus is the beginning of a deadly conflict."

"Well, let's hope not," I said.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "I mean, dash it, we don't want that sort of thing disturbing the old peace and quietness—what? These Roman chappies are too fright-

fully warlike, you know. At the same time, something distinctly ought to be done. I mean, burning poor coves to death! A bit thick, if you grasp the old trend!"

We noticed a man coming along the street—a slave, by his garb. He was running fast, and his face was drawn and haggard. As he drew practically level with us, I recognised the fellow. He was a slave I had frequently seen in close attendance upon Horatius Placidus. For the latter, being a man of exalted position, had had many slaves.

"Hold!" I exclaimed. "Whither goest thou, friend?"

I spoke in Latin, and the slave came to a halt, and paused before us, breathing hard. He was not purely bred, but with a little dark blood in his veins. Nevertheless, he was a handsome-looking young fellow.

"I go to my master's father, away yonder in Alona," replied the man pantingly. "I am Alaric, my master's body slave. I am broken with grief, for a kinder and nobler master no man could have! And he is to die at the stake—the greatest of all horrors!"

There was something tragic in this man's attitude—a faithful servant who loved his master. And his words confirmed our own opinion of Horatius Placidus, for we had liked the stout, hearty Horatius very much.

"Why go you to this place you call Alona?" I asked. "Think you that your master's father can help in this terrible affair?"

"I am distraught. There is a chance, and so I must seize it," replied Alaric simply. "If one man in all Isirium can save my master from this fate, that one man is Flavius Placidus—a great noble of the land. Perchance the emperor will listen to his plea."

"But how goest thou—on foot?" I asked.

"Ay—I am fleet."

"But would not a chariot be swifter?" I said quickly.

"It would so, but I am a slave, and have no money," replied Alaric quietly. "I go on foot, my young master—and I crave your pardon for hastening away. Alona is a village, a full two hours' run hence. I must not tarry."

"Waitest thou?" I commanded. "Speed is everything, my friend. Let us assist thee."

I looked round, and saw a chariot standing idly by. It was in charge of a luxurious young noble, who apparently had nothing to do—a personal chariot of much beauty, drawn by four white horses.

"Canst drive?" I asked, turning to Alaric.

"Ay, but 'tis not to be thought of—"

I didn't wait, but hurried to the young man in the chariot, and sounded him. A few words convinced me that he was a friend of Horatius Placidus, and he bemoaned the

fate that was about to overtake the late Master of the King's Household.

"Then help me!" I said. "Let us use thy chariot."

At first the young fellow was dubious, but he gave in. And Alaric joyously seized the reins, and Archie and Reggie and I leapt in. And then we drove out through the city at a reckless speed.

We left the outskirts behind at last, and the chariot tore along the paved highway through the open country. Now and again we passed farmhouses and isolated mansions, and it was good to be out.

And at length we came to a halt in front of a small, exquisite mansion surrounded by even more exquisite gardens—a perfect little gem of a place. Slaves were at work among the flowers, and everything was peaceful.

And in a little stone garden building—something like a summer-house—we beheld an old man. He was playing idly upon the strings of some quaint musical instrument, and he looked up with a smile as we approached.

Flavius Placidus was a kind of patriarch, with a flowing white beard, and a dignified manner. He was big, too, in the same mould as his son. And it was clear that he had heard no word of the terrible disaster.

Alaric told him in simple language, and the changing expression on his face was pitiful to see.

"My son—my Horatius!" he muttered brokenly. "Condemned to the stake! 'Tis horrible—'tis foul, indeed!"

"I sped to thee, my master, hoping that thou couldst persuade the emperor to change his unhappy decision," said the slave. "And it was these young strangers who hastened my coming."

"I give thee thanks, O, kindly youths," exclaimed the old man, turning to us. "I must hasten to the capital, to have audience with his Imperial Majesty. A foul decision—and yet so like him!"

"I fear me the emperor is a brute, sire," I said quietly.

"Thou art surely right!" exclaimed Flavius. "May the curses of all the gods be upon his wicked head! To condemn my son to the stake for such a paltry trifle! But I must plead with this dog of cruelty, since there is no other way! Prepare! We will hasten hence!"

And two minutes later we were roaring back to the capital.

CHAPTER V.

THE APPEAL.



"**W**HERE the dickens have you chaps been to?"

Handforth asked that question as Archie and Reggie and I entered the big square. We had just returned the chariot to its owner—giving him

adequate thanks for the use of the vehicle. And Flavius Placidus had hastened to the palace with Alaric.

It didn't take me long to explain.

"Well, of all the nerve!" said Handforth indignantly. "Why wasn't I in it? Like your cheek, to clear off without telling me."

"There was no time, old son, so don't grumble," I said. "Has anything fresh happened while we've been away?"

"Not much—but the public is getting a bit restive," said Handforth. "There have been several meetings, but the soldiers have come along and cleared the crowds away. The public seems to be absolutely mad about this execution."

"I don't wonder at it," said Reggie. "If Lars Melos were condemned I rather fancy the public would cheer. But poor old Placidus is a sport, and everybody loves him. The emperor's a fool to incite the populace in this way. He's only asking for trouble."

Even while we were talking, another excited crowd of citizens was being broken up by the soldiers. And then a wild cheer rang out from the other side of the square—a cheer that was taken up by hundreds of throats, until it became a roaring tumult.

"Hallo! What's the excitement about?" asked Handforth.

"I rather fancy, old bird, that good old Methuselah is getting a somewhat priceless reception," said Archie. "The gentleman is on the palace steps, and the crowd appears to like the look of him."

Flavius Placidus was just entering the palace. And the throngs of people, recognising him, cheered him to the echo—realising full well that he was on his way to see the emperor—with the object of obtaining a reprieve for the condemned man.

Old Placidus was heartened by the expressions of friendship from the throng, and he gravely waved a hand, and passed between the great marble pillars. He entered the palace foyer—to be instantly confronted by Lars Melos.

"Ho! Greetings, old friend!" exclaimed Melos boisterously. "What bringeth thou here, so early in the day? Thy legs are not such useless stumps, after all!"

"I came to save my son," replied the old man simply.

A sneer appeared on the other's face, and his evil eyes glittered with keen enjoyment.

"Thou art surely an optimist, O Flavius," he jeered. "Thinkest thou it possible to change the mind of the emperor? When Titus has given an order—that order is as certain as the laws of all the gods!"

"Nay, not so!" replied Flavius. "My son shall not die—he shall not be committed to the stake! 'Tis a foul outrage—"

"Let thy emperor hear such words, and thou wilt join thy son!" interrupted Lars Melos harshly. "Have a care, Flavius! Such words are not for thee to use! And get thee hence, since there is naught to be done here!"

The unfortunate man uttered one gurgling cry and collapsed on the steps—run clean through the heart by that cold steel.



The old noble faced the other squarely.

"Art thou the emperor?" he asked fiercely.

"Not yet—but who knows?" jeered Melos.

"May the saints preserve Isirium if thou dost become emperor!" said Flavius fervently. "I am come to have audience with his Imperial Majesty. I desire my presence here to be made known."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"If thou wilt be stubborn, it is not for me to argue," he replied. "I will acquaint the emperor of thy arrival, and perchance he will see thee. Perchance he will not!" he added pleasantly.

Lars Melos walked across the mosaic floor, and paused before passing between some rich curtains. He waved a hand to a captain and a group of soldiers who were on guard.

"It will be well to watch the old fellow closely, my captain," he said. "Let him not pass, or thy punishment will be drastic."

Flavius Placidus sat down on one of the carved marble seats, and waited. He had not expected such treatment as this. It seemed that Lars Melos was becoming all-powerful in the palace—the most powerful, indeed, of all the emperor's advisers.

As a noble, Flavius was entitled to consideration and respect. But his son was disgraced—condemned to the stake. And so he, the father, had lost prestige, and was now of no account.

A few minutes passed, and then Lars Melos appeared again, the malicious expression on his face intensified.

"Thou hast seen the emperor?" demanded Flavius, jumping up shakily, and his voice quivering with anxiety.

"'Tis so!" replied Melos. "It pleaseth

the emperor to send thee a message by my lips."

"What is it—tell me the message!" begged the old man.

"By Mercury! Thou art impatient for so old a wreck!" laughed Lars Melos. "The emperor's message is but brief. A private box will be reserved in the amphitheatre for thee—so that thou wilt be able to witness the final struggles of thy son as he writhes in his death agonies!"

The words made Flavius recoil as though he had been struck. For not only were they cruel and callous in themselves, but this brute of a man uttered them in tones of stinging contempt.

"Thou cursed reptile!" shouted the old man hoarsely. "Is it possible that thy tongue is of no use but to lash me? Is my pain not sufficient?"

"I will be the greater ere long," snarled Melos.

"Treacherous dog! I believe not you took my message to the emperor!" exclaimed old Placidus passionately. "Tis a trick! I demand to see his Majesty in person—"

"How now? A fine to-do, my friend!" interrupted the cold voice of Titus IV. "Methinks thou art bereft of thy wits. Get thee hence before I order my slaves to hurl thee into the street!"

Flavius turned, and beheld the emperor standing at the curtains.

"Your Majesty!" he said eagerly. "Thou wilt hear me—"

"I have heard more than sufficient," interrupted the emperor curtly. "Get thee gone, and bear in mind that thy son will burn at the stake. No more will I say."

Flavius Placidus clenched his fists, and compressed his lips. He made as if to speak, but refrained, and turned his flagging steps towards the great exit.

"Wait!" commanded the emperor softly.

"Thou wilt reconsider—" began Flavius, turning, with shining eyes.

"Nay—cherish no such hopes!" exclaimed Titus viciously. "There is but one further thing I wish to say. I will postpone the execution until the evening—so that the burning shall be the brighter!"

"By Mars! A witty joke, your Majesty!" laughed Lars Melos.

CHAPTER VI.

HANDFORTH'S BRIGHT IDEA.



"SOMETHING," said Handforth slowly, "has got to be done."

"Eh?" asked Church.

"It's not a bit of good standing still at a time like this," went on Handy. "Poor old Placidus is in the cart, and it seems to me that we're the only fellows who can help him."

Church and McClure regarded their leader with interest.

"Perhaps you'll explain how?" suggested McClure.

"How?" said Handforth, waving a hand. "Don't bring up trifling difficulties! The first thing to decide is what we shall do. Placidus is a prisoner at the arena."

"That doesn't take us very far," said Church.

"Therefore, we've got to go to the arena to rescue him."

"Wonderful!" said Church admiringly. "That's the kind of deduction you make in your Trackett Grim stories—Hi! Steady—"

"Another word from you, my lad, and you go overboard!" said Handforth darkly. "This is no time for silly rot of that kind! That poor chap is doomed to be burnt at the stake—and if the St. Frank's Remove can't rescue him—then we ought to be burnt at the stake, too!"

"Hallo! Who's talking about steaks?" asked Fatty Little, coming up. "Of course, I like chops better, but still—"

"You—you greedy glutton!" roared Handforth. "I'm not talking about steaks! I'm talking about stakes!"

Fatty stared.

"Mad!" he said blankly. "First you say you're not, and then you say you are! When it comes to mutton chops, I can always do with a couple—"

"Take him away, and smother him!" said Handforth thickly. "Here am I, trying to think of a way to rescue a man from certain death, and this greedy lump of lard comes along and talks about chops!"

"Lard!" roared Fatty. "Lard comes from pigs!"

"That's why I said it!" retorted Handforth biting.

Fatty stuck his nose in the air and marched off.

"Thought that would get rid of the fat-head!" growled Handforth. "Of all the nerve! Coming here and talking about his giddy appetite! Now, are we going to the arena, or not?"

"I don't know!" said Church. "Are we?"

"We are!" said Handforth firmly.

"Then what's the good of asking unnecessary questions," said McClure. "If you knew we were going all the time, it was sheer waste of breath to say anything at all. But what are we going to do after we get to the arena?"

Handforth glared.

"We're going to rescue Placidus!" he replied.

"Good!" said Church. "Of course, you've got the dynamite?"

"The which?"

"Gunpowder might do—"

"Who's talking about dynamite or gunpowder?" howled Edward Oswald.

"My dear chap, you can't expect us to nibble our way into the arena cells by our teeth!" said Church sarcastically. "And pickaxes wouldn't be much good, either. Still, you know best, I suppose. I'm not going to argue."

Handforth looked thoughtful.

"Well, of course, we've got to be ready for some hard work," he admitted. "And now you come to mention it, it might be a trouble to break into the poor chap's cell."

"It might," said McClure. "There's no telling."

"But what's the good of making a fuss over trifles?" went on Handforth, with his usual optimism. "Here's a man that needs saving from a horrible death. Are we going to be hindered by a few rotten bars, and one or two silly walls?"

"Never!" said Church and McClure promptly.

"Then come on—and don't let the other chaps know what we're doing," said Handforth, in a mysterious voice. "Just think of the sensation when we turn up with good old Placidus!"

"We can think of it all right," admitted Church.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," said Church hastily. "Let's be going!"

And the chums of Study D passed down from the deck, and were soon hurrying through the city towards the great Amphitheatre—which, at this hour of the morning, was practically deserted.

The juniors got into the arena by the simple process of climbing the great wall, and then dropping into the open enclosures. And as they entered the ring itself, Church looked round rather uneasily.

"I hope they don't let the lions out for exercise," he remarked.

"We don't want to worry about the lions," said Handforth. "They're dead, anyway. Didn't I kill 'em? At least, didn't Mr. Lee and Umlosi help me to kill 'em?"

"But there might be some other lions——"

"There might be snakes and buffaloes and gorillas, but it doesn't interest me," said Handforth tartly. "We've got to find—— By George! I believe I can spot him now!"

They had caught sight of a figure at a small window, set deeply into the stonework of the arena wall. And as they quickly approached, they saw that the window was barred with great iron stanchions.

And the figure within that prison was Horatius Placidus.

CHAPTER VII.

NELSON LEE TAKES A HAND.



THE condemned man was surprisingly cheerful.

Perhaps it was only a mask for his inner feelings, but Handforth and Co. were astonished at the stoical attitude of Placidus. And one

glance at the barred windows convinced them that they could never get him out.

"'Tis foolish to be concerned on my account, young friends," said Placidus. "And even if thou couldst aid me in escaping, such an event would be of little purpose."

"We would help you to escape," said Handforth laboriously.

His Latin was awful. But he had understood sufficient of the prisoner's remark to take in the sense of it.

"If I were to escape, it would only bring destruction and death on those who aided me," said Placidus quietly. "And the emperor would be harsh with all—making thousands suffer who had done naught to deserve it. I thank thee for thy good intentions, but 'tis impossible to aid me."

Church and McClure soon grasped the full meaning of the unfortunate man's words. They had, indeed, known from the very start that this mission of theirs was doomed to failure. But Handforth needed a lot more convincing. Yet even he was satisfied at length.

And they departed, disconsolate and miserable, after assuring Placidus that no stone should be left unturned in order to save him from the stake. But Placidus, no doubt, was already resigned. For in Isirium a man once condemned was seldom, if ever, reprieved.

"Poor old chap!" muttered Handforth gloomily. "It's a shame—it's a rotten, beastly shame! If this horrible thing really happens, I'll—I'll go up to the emperor and biff him——"

And Handforth went into full and gory details of the punishment he would mete out to Titus IV.

In the meantime, old Flavius Placidus had found his way on board the Conqueror. He had seen the vessel before, but only at a distance. And now he was awed by the novelty and wonder of his surroundings. If this Roman-like city astounded us, the Conqueror fairly staggered this aged resident.

"I come hither, for I have been told that thou art men of mercy and gentleness," said Placidus, as he stood before Nelson Lee and Mr. Travers Earle. "And thou hast the ear of the emperor, too—for he fears to displease thee."

"What would you desire of us?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I would desire much—but fear I may obtain but little," replied Placidus, shaking his head. "Wilt thou appeal to the emperor and show to him the injustice of this decree?"

"Old friend, leave it to me—although I can promise naught," replied Nelson Lee. "Many of my own friends did witness this incident, and well we know the innocence of thy son."

"May all the gods praise thee for those words," murmured Flavius.

"And, knowing that thy son is innocent, my task will be the easier," went on Nelson Lee. "I will see the emperor forthwith, and demand the life of thy Horatius. For we of the great outer world regard such base killings with the utmost horror."

And Nelson Lee lost no time in fulfilling his promise.

He went straight to the palace, and requested an audience with his majesty. And even Lars Melos himself dared not place anything in the way of the audience. Nelson Lee was admitted into the emperor's presence after only a few minutes' delay.

"Hail, friend!" exclaimed Titus briskly. "It seemeth thou art enjoying the hospitality of my great capital——"

"I came not to discuss enjoyment, your majesty, but to plead with you for the life of a man who deserves not death," interrupted Nelson Lee coldly. "You frown, I observe."

The emperor, in fact, was scowling fiercely.

"It makes me impatient, good friend, to see thee wasting thy time on this paltry wretch," he said, trying to speak carelessly. "Horatius Placidus was my trusted servant but a few hours gone. He has fallen from grace, and shall be burnt at the stake, as I have ordained."

"'Tis a terrible death, your majesty——"

"'Tis a death that all traitors deserve."

"But hast thou not made a cruel mistake?" asked Nelson Lee grimly. "This man, Placidus, is a kind-hearted servant—a man of much joviality and good nature. Were it treachery for him to protest against the reckless killing of a friend?"

"Thou art of plain speech!" snapped the emperor. "Knowest thou that the reckless killing was of my own doing?"

"Ay, 'tis a fact I am full aware of," replied Nelson Lee gravely. "But I come not to speak of that. The man is dead, and naught can be done. But Placidus be still alive, and a word from you will release him, and restore him to his sorrowing and aged father."

"By Mars! Speak not of that doddering fool!" snarled Titus. "And pain me no further, my friend. For I must decline this request. The life of Placidus is forfeit, and naught can alter the sentence."

"I would urge thee——"

"Enough! The dog will be burnt soon after nightfall, when the darkness will render the spectacle more pleasing to my eye!" interrupted the emperor fiercely. "Bear in mind that thou art a stranger in my land, and that I will suffer no dictation from such lips as thine."

Nelson Lee compressed his lips.

"Let me warn thee, O Titus, that thou art taking a grave step," he said grimly.

"'Tis not for me to dictate—'tis not for

me to order. As thou sayest, I am but a visitor, and must stand idly by. But I think thou art mad to continue this foul and diabolical course!"

The emperor sprang to his feet.

"Thou art insulting!" he shouted furiously.

"Ay, 'tis well that you know it!" retorted Nelson Lee. "And remember that I shall lift not one finger to aid thee if the populace rises in wrath against thy cruelties and brutalities!"

And Lee turned on his heel and strode out, fuming.

CHAPTER VIII.

TITUS, THE TYRANT.



LORD DORRIMORE met Nelson Lee at the gangway.

"Any luck, old man?" he asked keenly.

"None," replied Nelson Lee. "The infernal ruffian refuses to grant a reprieve, and the poor fellow's to be burnt. By Heaven, Dorrie, I felt like choking the life out of the brute!"

"Then why in the name of wonder didn't you do it?" growled Dorrie. "A thing like that isn't human—he's lower than the dirtiest reptile! An', what's more, old man, I mean to take a hand——"

"Dorrie, we can't!" broke in Lee. "Man alive! Think of the girls we've got with us—and these boys! Much as I hate to think of Placidus suffering this fate, our plain duty is to protect the lives of our own party. And to save the condemned man, in defiance of the emperor, would probably precipitate a fearful conflict."

"Couldn't we win the day?" demanded Dorrie.

"I believe we could, but it's no good believing," said Lee quietly. "If it were just you and I, Dorrie, it would be a different matter. In that case, by James, I'd snap my fingers in that devil's face! But with all our priceless company to think of, our hands are tied."

"I suppose you're right," grunted his lordship. "But it makes me boil, by gad! And why worry about the canyon? It's our only way of escape from this valley, I know, but Titus would never block it up."

"In a moment of mad rage and hatred, he might."

"But he would then imprison himself an' all his people," insisted Dorrie. "Never again would his parties scour the desert for prisoners—to add to the slaves who already work under his rule. No, Lee, Titus would never order that pass to be blocked."

"We cannot possibly take the chance," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head. "If there were time for us to save Placidus,

and then take to flight, it would be a different matter. But as we cannot do that, Dorrie, our one and only course is to accept the inevitable, and let this foul crime take place."

Nelson Lee's reasoning was perfectly sound, as Dorrie fully realised. But it went against the grain. Even now, Lee was ready to seize upon any slight opportunity. But the position was apparently quite hopeless.

It was a sad, cruel ordeal to break the news to old Flavius. But it had to be done, and Nelson Lee performed the task as tactfully as possible.

"I thank thee for thy kindly efforts, and I leave thee heartbroken!" exclaimed the old man huskily. "My son dies, and life for me will become a sham. By all the gods! This tyrant's day is nearly over! And if my son dies to release the people from Titus, he will not have done it in vain."

They were sitting under the awning on deck, and the old man took the blow bravely after the first flood of emotion. Perhaps he had realised from the first that all hope was dead.

"Is Titus so hated?" asked Lee.

"Ay, hated like the most foul of serpents!" replied Placidus. "'Twas always my fear that my son would end thus. For to serve the emperor is to serve a fiend!"

"He has reigned for long?"

"For many years," replied Flavius. "And he hath kept his throne intact by the continued use of harsh measures. Gathered round him are the cruellest and most vicious of all Isirium. The army itself is officered by the harshest of men. And the soldiers are so drilled and trained that they will instantly obey every order. For to disobey means death."

"Then they have sometimes revolted?" asked Lee.

"Once—twice," said the old man. "By Mars! Has Isirium forgot the last occasion? A dozen men were burning at the stake, in the arena at the same time. A dozen other men torn limb from limb by the lions."

"Is it possible?" muttered Dorrie.

"To Titus, aught is possible," said Flavius. "'Twas a lesson to the others, and it was one that sank in right well. For since that day no man had dared to disobey the slightest command of the emperor. His rule is one of terrorism, and ninety-nine out of every hundred citizens hate him as they hate the plague."

"It seemeth strange that such a man should be ruler," remarked Lee thoughtfully. "And yet 'tis but an echo of history. Have there not been tyrants on the throne of many nations?"

Flavius Placidus looked round him cautiously.

"'Tis a secret I tell thee, but thou art

friends, and I trust thee," he murmured. "This man, Titus, is naught but an impostor—a charlatan. Many years ago he thrust the rightful emperor from the sight of his subjects, and entered upon the throne himself."

"You mean he killed the emperor?"

"Nay. The unfortunate man is imprisoned in a tower within the great forest," replied Flavius. "And there he is kept away from all, but there are many who hope to see him mount the throne again. For Marcus Phillipus would have made an emperor of emperors."

"Thou speakest highly of this Marcus."

"Long may he live!" said the old fellow fervently.

"But why is he held a captive, instead of being killed—since Titus taketh such pleasure in killing?" asked Dorrie. "'Tis a point which causeth me to wonder, good friend."

"Titus can kill ordinary men, but not Marcus Phillipus," replied Flavius. "For is not Marcus of royal blood—and to kill him would be to bring down the wrath of the gods. Even Titus, with all his brutality, would not go to that length."

"I am surprised the public does not arise," said Lee.

"The people dare not—fearing a massacre," replied the old man. "Wilt thou assist in the great task of overthrowing this vile wretch? 'Twould be some measure of consolation to me for the foul murder of my son!"

Nelson Lee gave no promise, but he informed Flavius Placidus that something might be done—and, if so, it would be done swiftly.

And this was no idle promise.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EXECUTION.



REGGIE PITT leaned over the rail gloomily.

"Poor old chap—he'll soon be going now!" he exclaimed. "It's dark already, and you can hear the noise from the

Amphitheatre even here! By Jove! What a lot of bestial curs!"

"I don't think the general public cares for this sort of thing," said Dick Grey.

"I'm not talking about the general public—I am referring to the emperor and his own dirty clique!" replied Reggie. "I'd like to see the whole crowd of them swallowed up in an earthquake, or buried in a landslide! People like that aren't fit to be alive!"

Pitt and Grey were not the only juniors who were talking in this strain. Handforth and Co. were, on the other side of the deck, and Tommy Watson and I were talking

with Archie and Bob Christine and a few others.

It was evening now, and the darkness of the African night had spread over the valley. The city, however, was brilliant with its myriad lights, and from that distant spot the glare was significant.

The arena was brilliant with lamps—ready for this ghastly occasion. And the emperor and his nobles had already passed through the streets to the Amphitheatre.

On the Conqueror, everybody was on board.

Not one of them had been allowed to go down into the square even. Both Nelson Lee and Mr. Earle had deemed it advisable to confine everybody to the ship. For no good could come of venturing abroad. This crime was to be committed, and we were helpless.

"Can't we do something, can't we think of a plan?" asked Handforth feverishly. "Oh, this is horrible—this waiting! And poor old Placidus tied to a stake, with burning flames swirling round—"

"Don't!" muttered Church huskily.

It was good advice, for nothing but harm could come of such ghastly thoughts. The sooner the tragedy was over, the better. For it seemed that the execution was now inevitable.

In the great Amphitheatre all was brilliant and dazzling.

Hundreds of lamps were alight round the arena—those strange lamps which were an invention of the Isirium people. The lights burned brightly and steadily, but with no visible source of supply; yet they were certainly not gas.

The arena was gay with soldiers in flashing attire—men in full uniform, and wearing glittering, polished helmets.

The public was being admitted into the great enclosures; but not a quarter of the space seemed likely to fill. For most of the populace shunned this horrible exhibition.

Those who came were the morbid and the callous; and the emperor's enclosure was well-nigh filled. The nobles and the other supporters of Titus were thrilled at the thought of the fine entertainment that was soon to be theirs.

The chief interest at the moment was in discussing the coming death, and in watching the erection of the big stake in the very centre of the arena. A dozen soldiers were busy at this work now, spurred on to brisk effort by their officer.

Nearby there lay piles of wood, and Lars Melos chuckled cruelly as he watched the stake rising into position.

"'Tis well!" he said gloatingly. "To-night, your Majesty, we shall see a sight that will give us a real enjoyment."

"Well said, my Melos!" agreed the

emperor. "But I see not our friend, Flavius Placidus. Has he not come hither to join in this revel?"

The emperor's nobles roared at the grim jest.

"See! The stake is affixed," said Lars Melos, pointing. "'Twill soon be time for us to witness the burning! Ay, but 'tis a pity, your Majesty, that traitors are so few! Gladly would I welcome such a spectacle as this nightly."

The emperor shook his head.

"Thou art bloodthirsty, my Melos," he said; "but no matter. Take care that thou art never a traitor to me, lest thou, too, should be the chief performer in a similar entertainment to this!"

"'Tis but a sorry jest, your Majesty!" growled Melos.

The preparations were now practically complete.

The stake was not only erected and in position, but the piles of wood were gathered round, in full readiness for the great moment; and then a great roar went up from the excited watchers.

For Horatius Placidus had appeared.

He was being led into the arena by a dozen soldiers—six on either side of him. The big man walked steadily, his head erect, his arms held loosely behind him.

He knew the dreadful death that awaited him, but there was a smile on his face, and a curl on his lips, as he glanced up at the emperor's imposing throne. The lights were powerful, and Titus could see that contemptuous, calm expression.

"The insolent dog!" he snarled. "Even now, at the point of death, he does not cringe! When the flames lick round him, perchance he will scream, and realise the fate that is his!"

At that moment, however, Placidus was apparently as calm as though no ordeal awaited him. Yet he must have known that the most horrible death of any would soon be overwhelming him.

He was still calm and uncomplaining as he was bound tightly to the stake. And at last he was in position, helpless and immovable; and still that calm smile was on his lips.

The soldiers moved away and formed a complete circle round the victim. But one man stepped forward, holding aloft a great flaming torch. He was watching the emperor.

"Bah! Burn the hound at once!" shouted Titus.

He raised his hand—the expected signal.

And with one lunging thrust, the soldier drove the torch into the heart of the faggots which encircled the doomed man. The twigs crackled and smoked, and the flames leapt upwards.

CHAPTER X.

A FAINT HOPE.



"BY Jingo!" murmured Reggie Pitt. "I wonder!"

"Eh? You wonder what?" I asked.

"Oh, was I talking?" asked Reggie, looking at me with gleaming eyes. "I didn't mean to—I was only thinking. But it's just struck me, Nipper—an idea, you know."

We were seated on one of the deck lounges, waiting for the word to come that the terrible tragedy was over. No such message was expected yet, for the execution had yet to take place.

"An idea?" I repeated. "You don't mean——"

"Yes! Is there time?" asked Reggie. "If we acted now, shouldn't we be able to get to the arena before——"

"Yes, I think so, but the idea's impossible, Reggie," I broke in. "It isn't a question of getting there—that's easy enough. But how can we defy the soldiers, and break through?"

"We can't—but something else can!"

"You mean the Conqueror," I said dubiously. "Of course, but it's out of the question. The gov'nor won't hear of it, old son. He doesn't want to precipitate any violence——"

"I don't mean the Conqueror," interrupted Pitt.

"You don't mean——"

"What about one of these whippets?" demanded Reggie, getting straight to the point. "They're nothing else but armoured cars! They can travel swiftly, and there's one point of the arena that is merely protected by wooden doors. We could smash straight through, and snatch poor old Placidus away from the very stake, if necessary!"

"I looked at Pitt breathlessly.

"But—but—— By Jove, it's an idea!" I panted. "It's capable of being done, too! And why shouldn't we? I can't bear to think of that man suffering such a horrible fate."

"Neither can I," said Reggie eagerly.

"Look here—let's put it to some of the others, and if they're game we'll do it!"

"Yes, we can't take this on alone—must have six, at least," I agreed. "We've got to be strong enough to put up a scrap, in case of emergencies. And the emperor can't kick up much of a racket, because we're doing this entirely on our own."

Within a few moments we had obtained Handforth and Tommy Watson and Bob Christine and Archie. Fortunately, none of the other fellows came round inquiring, and we took care to talk softly.

"Mustn't let the others know, or there'll be too much noise," I explained; "and the

whole secret of the enterprise will be to get off quickly, before we can be stopped."

The other fellows were eager and excited.

"It's a queer thing, but I got exactly the same idea," declared Handforth. "I was just going to suggest it——"

"Yes, old man, we know all about that," I interrupted. "But we haven't got time to talk about it now. The best thing we can do is to slip over the side and get to the ground down one of the ropes."

"But what about the whippet?" asked Watson quickly.

"My dear fellow, there are two of them on the ground—and they're ready for instant action," I replied. "All we've got to do is to slip into one, and drive off. I know exactly how to handle the controls."

Unobtrusively, we swarmed down from the deck by means of an overhanging rope, and in the gloom we reached the ground, and crept silently up to the whippet we had selected.

The Conqueror, while closely resembling a sea-going yacht in many ways, was provided with an excellent substitute for lifeboats.

Along both sides were slung a number of small whippet tanks and light motor-cars—suspended from davits, just like the lifeboats of a ship.

Two of the whippets had been lowered, and were merely intended for use in case of emergencies. If we could only get straight off, without being stopped, there was still a chance that we might reach the arena in time—a faint hope that we should snatch Horatius Placidus from the stake.

We were successful in getting into the armoured car. A member of the crew was on duty, but he merely grinned as we appeared. He probably thought that we were just having a look round. And we didn't think it necessary to explain our intentions.

"All ready?" I asked tensely.

"Yes—fire ahead!" said Handforth. "I'll drive if you like——"

"Thanks all the same; but we want to get to the arena!" I interrupted. "Look out, you chaps, she'll probably jerk——"

"Boys, what are you doing down there?"

It was Nelson Lee's voice, curt and commanding, and he was leaning over the yacht's rail, gazing down at the whippet.

"My goodness!" gasped Pitt. "Let her go!"

I started up the engine, and she gave a roar.

"Good heavens! Come back at once, you reckless young——"

Nelson Lee paused, for the whippet gave a lurching movement, and charged forward across the square. He heard a mingled yell of triumph from the miniature tank, and he gripped the rail hard. He knew that it was impossible to get that whippet back now.

"By gad!" said Lord Dorrimore. "That's what I call smart!"

Nelson Lee turned.

"Upon my soul, Dorrie, I'm glad!" he

said simply. "I couldn't give the order for any such move myself, and my conscience was infernally troublesome. The die is cast now—so it's no good talking. I hope to Heaven those boys succeed in this forlorn hope."

The whippet was out of sight by this time—for she was shooting down the main thoroughfares of the city, causing widespread consternation and comment. She was capable of fairly high speed, notwithstanding her caterpillar method of locomotion.

I was clinging to the wheel, using every ounce of my strength and ability to control the vehicle. The other fellows were behind me—and we were all protected by the heavy armour of the car.

Should we be in time?

CHAPTER XI.

SNATCHED FROM THE FLAMES.



LARS MELOS gripped the arms of his gilded seat and leaned forward.

"See! The flames lick upwards!" he muttered gloatingly. "Ere many seconds have passed the do will be screaming in his death agonies! 'Tis a noble sight, my emperor!"

Titus grunted.

"'Tis well enough, but I have seen better," he declared. "And what is one man, after all? I would see a dozen, my friend! And if there is any evidence of further discontent, so shall the traitors suffer!"

In the middle of the arena Horatius Placidus was calmly awaiting death.

He was safe so far—and would be safe for another three or four minutes. It was not the emperor's way to let his victims escape the exquisite torture of watching the flames grow bigger and fiercer.

And so the faggots were arranged in a wide circle, so that they would burn for quite a considerable time before licking the bound and helpless body of the victim. In this way the wretch would have full opportunity to shriek for mercy, and to provide amusement for the onlookers.

"Why does he not scream? May the curses of all the saints be upon him!" growled the emperor. "Not a sound! This man—this Placidus—be indeed a lifeless cur!"

In this way the emperor regarded courage and endurance.

But Placidus, although he uttered no

sound, was surely suffering the torture. He felt no pain yet—only a wave or two of hot air passed over him as the breeze sent the flames in his direction.

But so far the circle of fire was well clear of the stake—yet growing nearer and nearer with every second that passed. There was something fascinating in this creeping, relentless growing of the fire.

"Ah! The flames begin to lick more surely now!" muttered Lars Melos. "'Tis time for the helpless wretch to scream aloud—By Venus! But what is this—"

He broke off, startled and amazed. And at the same moment the emperor sprang to his feet with a hoarse cry. For something had suddenly appeared in the arena on the far side.

It was a swiftly moving object—a low, rakish, sinister object. It plunged on across the sandy arena towards the centre.

A moment before the whippet had crashed through the wooden gateway. It had been a severe test—and even now the juniors were still sorting themselves out after that terrific jolt. I was clinging to the wheel for dear life.

But the whippet had not failed us.

Charging the door at full tilt, she had cleaved a way clean through it, giving one stupendous leap which seemed to carry us upwards and over the obstruction in one bound. And now we were within the great circus itself—and Handforth gave a mighty roar.

"We're too late," he thundered. "He's burning!"

"He's not—the flames haven't reached him!" declared Pitt.

"By George!" you're right!"

"Quick! Your knives! Have them ready!"

Even while speaking, Pitt was flinging back the great steel coverings which protected the top of the tank. They were immensely strong, but light and easily handled. And the juniors held themselves ready for the crucial moment.

In the royal enclosure the emperor was raving.

"Seize those fools!" he shouted harshly. "If my orders are not obeyed, every soldier here will be put to the death!"

This was rather a harsh edict, for the soldiers could do nothing against this steel monster that charged on like a juggernaut. Already it was in the centre of the arena, and pulling up to a halt.

"Hurrah! He's alive!" yelled Handforth.

In next to no time four of the juniors leapt out of their places, and swarmed round the stake. I had driven the whippet over the flaming mass of wood—right through the circle of fire to the very centre.

The heat was appalling, and dense masses of sparks and smoke arose from the crushed faggots. But we were in time—although it was purely a matter of touch and go.

The juniors had their knives ready, and they slashed through the condemned man's

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bonds. It was the work of a few moments to cut him loose and drag him bodily into the whippet. Fortunately, Placidus helped himself in this way, or he might never have got in.

"All right—full speed ahead!" yelled Pitt.

"Hurrah!"

The other juniors leapt on board—just as the startled soldiers came rushing up for battle. The whole affair had happened so swiftly that they had had no opportunity hitherto.

Placidus was lying in a heap at the rear of the whippet, with Watson and Archie and Bob Christine swarming all over him. "By Mars! Am I still alive, or is this but death?" panted the rescued man. "I am bewildered—"

"That's all right, laddie—say absolutely nothing!" interrupted Archie. "The fact is, I can't understand that dashed lingo of yours. But here we are, I mean, all jolly well intact, what? I regard the whole business as somewhat topping!"

By this time I had steered the whippet round, and a number of clattering crashes on the sides of the armour plates told us that spears were being hurled. But they were futile.

Ahead, a number of soldiers barred the way. But I only smiled grimly. At the last moment these men scattered madly, for there was no stopping the relentless rush of this steel monster.

And, with one tremendous swoop, the whippet climbed over the wreckage of the gate, and was out in the public highway. Our mission had been successful. And the emperor's vile plot was frustrated.

CHAPTER XII.

WAR!



"**F**OOLS—accursed fools—treacherous fools!" raved the emperor madly.

He was standing up in his great seat in the Amphitheatre, waving his arms wildly, and shouting at the top of his voice. For he had been cheated out of the great spectacle at the last moment, and his soldiers were running about like frightened rabbits.

The whippet had gone—and so had Horatius Placidus.

The victim had been snatched away before a single flame had even licked him. And all the emperor's might was of no avail. For that little whippet had sped out upon the highway again, and was now roaring along on its way back to the Conqueror.

"Wilt stand this, your Majesty?" demanded Lars Melos, quivering with excitement. "'Tis the work of those strangers—and now is the time for us to strike!"



And the figure within that prison was Horatius Placidus.

"Ay, thy words are wise," snarled the emperor. "My soldiers shall snatch this strange chariot from the fools, and every one shall become my slaves. 'Tis a dream I have already cherished!"

"I advised thee earlier to adopt such a course—"

"True, my Melos—true!" rapped out Titus. "But I was afraid—these people have strange and mysterious weapons. I was reluctant to risk the lives of my soldiers. But now 'tis different. Let a thousand men die in the battle, but I shall have my way!"

"'Tis fine!" muttered Melos.

He allowed his thoughts to dwell upon the probable result of this decision. Everybody on the Conqueror would become slaves, and Lars Melos was already deciding what he would do with those St. Frank's fellows who came under his own sway.

Without a moment's delay, the emperor sent for the chiefs of his army. The Prime Commander was a great burly man known as Spurius Gallus—a fellow after the emperor's own heart—harsh and owning the heart of a tyrant.

He was ordered to gather all his forces

together, and to seize the Conqueror at all costs.

"It shall be done, sire!" exclaimed Gallus. "But I warn thee that many men may die in this battle——"

"Let them die!" snarled the emperor. "I have been defied—thwarted! To accept this position would be fatal! I must fight—and show these curs that I am the ruler in this domain! My legions shall conquer!"

And before many minutes had elapsed, express chariots were speeding to every quarter of the city, with word that the emperor's army was to prepare for fighting.

In the meantime, the whippet was completing its journey.

It scudded into the great square, amid a roaring cheer from the Conqueror's deck. And the blaze of a powerful searchlight flashed into my eyes as I shut off the power.

Everybody on the Conqueror knew of our enterprise, and the excitement was tremendous when it was seen that we were all safe. Cheers rang out, too, when the bulky form of Horatius Placidus raised itself out of the whippet.

"Oh, they've got him!" cried Irene joyously. "They've saved him!"

"Hurrah!"

Within two minutes we were on board, and the portly Placidus was confused and bewildered by this mad rush, following so closely upon his narrow escape. He found himself clasped in his father's arms.

"My son—my Horatius!" muttered the old man brokenly.

"I did not expect to see thee here, my father!" panted Horatius.

"Thou has to thank these good friends for thy life, my son!" went on Flavius.

"Twill be a fight now—but all the better, methinks! For with these wondrous warriors on our side, perchance the tyrant will be beaten, and our own Phillipus will return to the throne!"

Nelson Lee was giving rapid orders.

"Have those whippets raised at once!" he exclaimed. "Every man must get to his post, and be ready for fighting! All boys and girls will keep out of the way. Dorrie, I want you to get them below at once."

"Good enough!" said his lordship crisply.

"Oh, look! here——" I began.

"You must go, Nipper—it's no good talking!" interrupted Dorrie. "You've done wonders, but we'll talk about that later. And there's goin' to be ructions by the look o' things."

"Of course, it's our doing, really," I said. "But we had to rescue Placidus—we couldn't leave him——"

"I understand!" interrupted Dorrie. "An' between ourselves, young 'un, I'm deucedly glad. 'Nothin' pleases me better than a fight against this foul brute and his myrmidons! If we can rid Isirium of such a gang, we shall have done good service!"

"By Jove, Dorrie, you're right!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

Much as the juniors disliked it, they were

hustled below. The decks were cleared for action, and Mr. Earle and Mr. Manners were both on the bridge, waiting for the storm to break. Below, the engines were ready for action at any moment.

The searchlight had been shut off, and to all intents and purposes the Conqueror was peaceful and quiet. But appearances are deceptive!

Men were at the machine-guns, and others were in position with fully loaded magazine rifles. The emperor might have a keen desire to capture the land yacht, but he would find it no easy task!

In spite of his hundreds and thousands of soldiers, the Conqueror was so constructed that any attempts to board her were almost doomed to failure from the start. For her main deck was a good height from the ground, and there was no other means of getting on board.

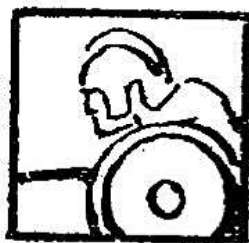
And, with men lining the rail on all sides, it would indeed be a difficult proposition to take the ship by storm. And these Isirium soldiers were armed with nothing more formidable than javelins and bows and arrows.

"It's come to a fight, Dorrie, but I don't think there's anything to worry about," said Nelson Lee. "And perhaps it's just as well that we should be frankly at enmity with Titus."

"It's a deuced lot more cleanly!" growled Lord Dorrimore. "There's nothin' I hate worse than pretending to like a fellow you really detest! Let the fight begin as soon as it likes—I'm ready!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BY THE EMPEROR'S COMMAND.



FROM every quarter of the city came the confused shouting of men, the cries of children, and the alarmed talking of women. The people were flocking about in all the main streets, thoroughly aroused.

It was obvious that some big movement was afoot, for the soldiers were scurrying here and there, and gathering their forces together in no uncertain way. And all the legions of the Emperor Titus were converging on the great central square.

"Here they come, by George!" said Sir Edward Handforth grimly.

"Yes—and we shall soon be in the thick of it," remarked Mr. Earle. "Well, it's not much good shifting our position; we're more secure in this open space, in my opinion."

"Better not to move until the situation becomes desperate—and that is hardly likely," said Nelson Lee. "To retreat would be a bad blunder—for the population would at once assume that we were fleeing. It would be a severe blow to the emperor's prestige if we calmly remain here, withstand all attacks, and emerge calmly triumphant."

"What about bloodshed?" asked Mr. Pitt. "I'm afraid it will be hardly possible to avoid—"

"The fight is none of our making," interrupted Lee quietly. "And if we are attacked, our only course is to defend ourselves. So if there is any blood shed, the emperor himself will be the culprit. But I have given instructions to all our men to fire only when necessary, and to fire to injure rather than to kill."

Umlozi grunted.

"Wau! Thou art of gentle heart, my father!" he growled. "Is it not better to kill this scum, and thus make a clean task? 'Tis surely a mistake to be of such kindness!"

"Don't you worry, old man—there won't be much kindness," said Lord Dorrimore. "By glory! Here they come! Sixteen to the dozen! Get ready for the fireworks!"

His lordship was right. Down every roadway which converged on the square came troops and troops of soldiers in glittering helmets and impressive tunics. All were armed with their javelins, or short-handled spears. And they came forward with ringing shouts and cries.

It was certainly impressive.

And if the Conqueror had been a less sturdy craft, those on her deck might have felt a little qualm. But this rather theatrical display of force meant nothing to the defenders.

With the machine-guns alone they could riddle the oncoming ranks, and create instantaneous confusion. Such weapons were unknown to the Isirium soldiers, and they would never stand up against sustained machine-gun fire. So there was nothing to worry about.

The affair, indeed, was merely interesting.

But it was awe-inspiring to those who watched. The great masses of soldiers crowding into the square, and charging recklessly towards the Conqueror. Below, most of the juniors had crowded to the state-room windows, where they could obtain a clear view of the proceedings.

"My hat! Millions of 'em!" said Handforth breathlessly.

"Things are looking black!" gasped Church.

"The only thing that looks black on this ship is your face!" retorted Handforth. "I don't believe you've washed it for a month! There's nothing to worry about at all—we're the absolute masters of the situation!"

"I believe we are," said McClure. "But it looks pretty bad."

"It's a shame we're not allowed to go out, and join in," went on Edward Oswald indignantly. "What's the good of us, stuck down here, doing nothing? We might just as well—"

"Come on, you boys!" shouted Sir Edward from the doorway.

The juniors turned, excited.

"Can we go up on deck, sir?" shouted Church.

"No, confound you, you can't!" snorted Handforth's pater. "You've all got to collect in the saloon! Both Mr. Lee and Mr. Earle are insistent on the point. Come along—no objections!"

"But—but we're looking on at the fight!" protested Handforth.

"Are you going to argue, Edward?" stormed his father.

"Of course not, dad—I never do!" panted Handy. "But if we go to the saloon we shan't see a thing! There's only a skylight, and that's all covered up with shutters and things! Besides, it's dark—"

"Good heavens! Is this what you call not arguing?" raved Sir Edward impatiently. "Another word, my lad, and I'll take you below, and lock you in a cupboard! How dare you defy me? Do you hear, sir? Another word, and I'll thrash you!"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Handforth disgustedly.

The other juniors were no less disappointed. It hadn't been so bad, looking on from the windows, but this imprisonment in the saloon was a bit too thick. They could simply hear the sounds of strife, but had no indications as to how the battle was raging.

"It's a beastly shame!" grumbled Bob Christine. "We're not a crowd of babies, I suppose?"

"No; but I think the gov'nor's right," I said thoughtfully.

"He's—right?" snorted Handforth.

"Yes," I declared. "These soldiers are hurling their javelins by the score, and how would you look framed in one of the state-room windows with a javelin penetrating your manly chest?"

"My goodness! I hadn't thought of that," said Handforth.

"It's a good thing we've got somebody who does think of such things," I said drily. "And here we're safe. Besides, the battle won't last long. It'll be over in next to no time."

Everybody on board was filled with complete confidence—a confidence born of the knowledge that the Conqueror was unconquerable!

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED SITUATION.



UMLOSI stood watching, fuming with impatience.

"And this is what I have come to, N'Kose!" he rumbled, his voice fairly quivering with disgust. "A warrior—the chief of the great Kutana tribe—to stand here in idleness, and watch these dogs play at fighting! Wau! I am filled with anger, my master."

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Can't be helped, old coal-box! You may get your turn later on," he said consolingly. "If some of these beggars get a footing on board—well, then you'll be able to sail in with a will."

"Methinks there will be no fighting on this wondrous ship that walks on the land!" said Umlosi gloomily. "The defence is too good, N'Kose. I would that a score of them had got past the guard."

He continued to watch the fight with growing impatience. It was not at all what he would have desired. The Isirium soldiers were swarming up, rank after rank—literally forced on by their officers at the rear.

And they could do little upon closely approaching, for there was no manner of climbing up the Conqueror's side. The soldiers, in fact, hindered one another, and made an orderly attack into a confused crush.

Sharp, ugly javelins were dropping on the deck at intervals; but the majority of these weapons clattered harmlessly against the vessel's sides. Lee was already slashed on the arm, but it was a trivial wound, and he carried on as though nothing had happened.

The machine-guns had not yet been used; but the men were ready, waiting for the order.

The rifles, however, had been cracking regularly and persistently—each man taking careful aim, and firing with the deliberate intention of causing a painful, but non-fatal injury.

The policy was a good one, for the Isirium warriors who received these bullets were startled and frightened. And they only made the confusion greater in their frantic efforts to get out of range.

Several of the attacking force were killed—for it sometimes happened that the bullets were deflected. But the death-roll was comparatively insignificant, on the whole.

From a distance the emperor was watching, with Lars Melos and Spurius Gallus on either side of him. The trio were not exactly the happiest men in all Isirium.

"What ails the fools?" growled the emperor. "Have they no courage, that they should fall in this way? These dogs of strangers should have been vanquished long since!"

"My warriors are fighting their hardest, sire," said Gallus.

The chief of the Isirium army had done everything possible, for every available man had been flung into this battle. But there stood the Conqueror, as intact as ever. And there was no indication that her defeat was imminent. The emperor was rapidly losing his temper.

He had thought that it would be a simple matter for a great force like this to swarm on board the Conqueror, and overpower her defenders during the first five minutes. Instead of this, the attackers were already in a state of confusion that bordered on panic.

And Umlosi, watching from the forward deck lost every ounce of his remaining

patience. His trained eye could see that the battle was waning, and his instinct told him that he would have no opportunity to wield his trusty spear as he desired.

Every fibre within him was on the stretch, eager to get into action. And the black giant's control was gone when he realised that in a very short time he would have no chance of entering the battle.

"Wau! Is this a fit position for such as I?" he rumbled fiercely. "Nay! I must fight—and so it shall be!"

Without a word to the other defenders, Umlosi gave a mighty leap clean over the yacht's rail. Down he went—yelling his favourite war-cry—the echo of it even reaching the juniors' ears in the saloon.

Umlosi landed upon the shoulders of two Isirium warriors, sending them hurtling to the ground. But he recovered his balance at once, and found himself in the thick of a heavy press.

"Now, thou pigs of pigs!" he thundered. "How likest thou this?"

And Umlosi commenced using his spear with deadly effect. Man after man fell, screaming with pain and fright. And the great Kutana chief fairly cleaved a way for himself through the mass of Isirium troopers.

"Confound that bloodthirsty ruffian!" growled Dorrie, as he looked on. "Why on earth did he leap down like that? He can't stand the pace! He's bound to go under in a moment or two! But, by gad, it's worth watchin'! Just look at that, Lee! Ever seen anythin' like it?"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"I don't blame Umlosi, but this might change the whole situation, Dorrie," he said anxiously. "We were quite safe without this exhibition of spearmanship; we had the battle well in hand. And now——"

Lee paused, catching his breath in. For at that moment Umlosi found that his task was a little too heavy for him.

Already he had slain twenty men, and others were fleeing from him. But he was surrounded by scores, and they were turning their full attention upon him. A well-aimed javelin caught Umlosi on the shoulder, and it struck, entering his flesh, to remain there, quivering.

"By gad!" muttered Dorrie, tensely.

Umlosi plucked the weapon out with contempt and flung it away from him. But even his mighty strength had a limit. He plunged forward to take revenge for that thrust, but he stumbled over a fallen man. And the next moment he was down—with several warriors pouncing on him.

"That's done it!" roared Dorrie.

Thinking only of his faithful companion—the friend of a hundred fights—Lord Dorrie swarmed over the rail and dropped recklessly to the ground. He didn't make a clean jump, but landed on the caterpillar tractor, and then dropped the remaining distance.

Crack! Crack!

Dorrie's revolver spurted flame and lead, and two men dropped instantly. His lordship was determined to bring Umlosi back, and he raced up to the spot with set face and gleaming eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

PRISONERS OF WAR.



NELSON LEE caught his breath in sharply. Instinctively, he knew that disaster was coming. It had been bad enough for Umlosi to leave the Conqueror—but the position was made a thousand times worse by Dorrie's impulsive leap.

But the thing was done now—and it could be easily understood. Umlosi's desire for battle was proverbial, and it had been humanly impossible for him to remain idle. And Dorrie had leapt to the rescue without a single thought for anything else but his stricken friend.

"Out of the way!" roared Dorrie recklessly. "I'll shoot the first infernal—"

Two men lunged at him, and he dodged—pulling the trigger of his revolver at the same instant.

Click! Click!

The weapon failed to respond—for the very simple reason that the cartridge chambers were empty. In the excitement, Dorrie had forgotten to reload—an unpardonable oversight in a man of his experience, but forgivable under the circumstances.

"Hold! Spare these lives!" thundered a centurion, forcing his way madly through the crush of soldiers. "'Tis the order of Commander Gallus himself! Kill not these dogs!"

Only in the nick of time the order had come.

Dorrie was about to be javelined to death when the troopers held their hands. Dorrie was seized and held. His struggles were of no avail against such numbers. Umlosi was already pinned down by a dozen enemies.

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Nelson Lee fervently.

But he was intensely worried, nevertheless. The pair lived, but they were prisoners. What would the result be? Without doubt, there was some sinister, significant motive behind this apparently merciful action.

Excitement reigned on the Conqueror's deck. Mr. Manners and Sir Edward Handforth and the others were thunderstruck by this swift, unexpected development. But they breathed with relief when they saw Dorrie and Umlosi being hustled away through the throngs of soldiers.

Bugles blared out and trumpets sounded. And, instantly, the Isirium troops retreated en masse. They had received the order to abandon this attack—much to their delight.

"The searchlight—quick!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "Pick out Dorrie, if you can—Heaven only knows what fate these demons are preparing for him! His life was not spared for the sake of mercy!"

The others were realising this, too. Without question, both Dorrie and Umlosi had been saved from death—only so that they could be put to some diabolical torture—that was the general idea.

But, as it happened, this solution was wrong.

The two prisoners—Dorrie calm and grim, and Umlosi faint with loss of blood—were roughly forced across the square, and into the presence of the emperor. Titus looked them over with gloating triumph.

"So! Thou hast played into my hands, my fine friends!" he exclaimed, contemptuously, "for thou art prisoners of war! Dost understand? Thou art hostages—to be used as I think fit!"

Dorrie looked at the emperor calmly.

"Pat thyself not on the back, my friend," he exclaimed. "'Twas no cleverness of your soldiery that brought about this position. Luck hath played into your hands right well."

The emperor frowned.

"Keep thou silent, or thou wilt be put to the death—" he began.

"Not so!" interrupted Dorrie. "Thou art foolish to attempt to frighten me by such words. I am more valuable to thee alive, my Titus. My dead body would be of no use—is that not so?"

Titus IV smiled maliciously.

"Thou art of quick wit," he agreed. "Ay, thou art of more use to me alive, and thy black companion also." He turned and waved an imperious hand. "Have these prisoners taken hence," he commanded. "I will give further orders later."

By this time the searchlight was playing over the square, and the little group on the far side was easily picked out. Dorrie turned as the brilliant light flashed into his face. He wrenched one hand free, and waved it cheerfully.

"Safe so far, at least," muttered Mr. Travers Earle, as he stared through his binoculars. "They are being taken away, Manners. Do you think they're going to be tortured?"

"Possibly—but it rather strikes me that the emperor is up to a deeper game," said the chief engineer. "But I don't suppose we shall be left long in doubt. What an infernal pity they were captured."

A hint of the news had leaked below, and everybody was anxiously excited. And the sudden cessation of hostilities was significant. A sudden quietness had come and the juniors clamoured for news.

Irene and her friends were calm but pale. They were in the lounge with Mrs. Manners. And they discussed the battle in low tones and with expressions of horror.

And then came word that the juniors could

go on deck. It was Nelson Lee who had sent this permission. For he realised how impatient the fellows must be, and there was no danger now, for the strife was at an end.

The juniors tore up the stairs in a crush, and swarmed on deck eager and excited. And they were surprised to find that everything was looking practically normal. There was no sign of battle.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" roared Handforth indignantly. "What a swindle! There's no giddy fight at all!"

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Archie. "I mean to say, it appears that the good old conflict is somewhat weak at the knees, as it were. Dash it all, I can't see a single dashed casualty!"

And this was a fact. The Isirium soldiers had carried their dead and dying with them when they retreated—and it had all been done swiftly and quietly. The great square was now deserted, and there was not a sign of the recent surging battle.

"But what's happened?" I asked blankly.

"About the worst calamity has happened, young man!" growled Sir Edward Handforth. "Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were rash enough to leave the ship—and now they're prisoners!"

"Prisoners!" shouted a dozen juniors, aghast.

"Yes—that's why everything is so quiet," replied Sir Edward, with a snort.

It was some little time before we fully grasped the position. But when we did gain a full understanding, we were silent with concern. For we all felt that the emperor now held the trump card!



Dorrie was seized and held. His struggles were of no avail against such numbers.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EMPEROR'S THREAT.



SPURIUS GALLUS stalked into the great square, surrounded by an imposing bevy of his officers. There was something rather pompous and overbearing in his attitude.

In advance of the little group marched a single soldier, bearing a great white banner—which was obviously a flag of truce. The banner-bearer came to a halt at a respectable distance from the Conqueror.

"Hail! A word with thee, O strangers from afar!" he shouted.

The decks were lined with excited juniors—and even a few of the girls had now come up to look on. Nelson Lee was with Mr. Earle and Mr. Manners, and they were all grave.

"What is thy pleasure?" shouted Lee, in Latin.

"The great commander, Spurius Gallus, would confab with thee, and begs permission to come nigh," went on the banner-bearer. "As thou wilt see, we are unarmed, and desire but peaceful converse."

"'Tis well," replied Lee. "Bid thy commander approach."

Spurius Gallus and his officers drew near, and approached, indeed, until they were just below—so that conversation could be comfortably maintained in normal speaking voices.

"I was expecting something of this kind," murmured Lee. "And the emperor has got a temporary advantage now. This parley will have to be carefully dealt with—or poor Dorrie and Umlosi may forfeit their lives."

Spurius Gallus held his hand aloft.

"I would speak with the chief commander!" he exclaimed pompously.

"'Tis well—speak on!" replied Lee. "What is thy mission? What message hast thou brought from the Emperor?"

"'Tis a message of friendship and goodwill," replied Gallus, with a touch of mockery in his voice. "As thou well knoweth, we have two of thy companions in our hands, and they are being held as hostages. Fear not for their safety—they are well and safely cared for."

"What of the black man?" asked Lee. "Is his wound over serious?"

"Nay—a mere trifle," replied the commander. "As for the other, he suffers not even a scratch. But methinks he will be less fortunate if thou art not reasonable."

"Speak not in riddles, my friend—but let us have your message."

"The emperor hath decreed that thou and all thy companions must surrender forthwith," replied Spurius Gallus gloatingly. "Thou art to give me word that thou wilt agree."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Thy optimism is as great as thy folly!" he exclaimed. "Return to thy emperor and tell him that there shall be no surrender. 'Twas the emperor himself who forced this fight, and 'tis just as well, since we are now on equal footing. Go hence, my Gallus, and do not return unless thou hast a more reasonable proposal."

The chief commander laughed unpleasantly. "It would be well, I think, if I were to give you the remainder of the emperor's message," he exclaimed. "Unless thou dost agree to surrender—the two prisoners will die! And think not they will die swiftly! 'Twill be a slow, painful death!"

Nelson Lee compressed his lips. He was not surprised to hear this threat. He had been expecting it. For the capture of Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi placed a powerful lever in the emperor's hand.

"Wait!" exclaimed Lee. "I will consult with my companions."

He turned and briefly explained the situation—although most of the others had grasped the full trend.

"I say, this is terrible!" exclaimed Mr. Manners. "What can we do? It seems to be a horrible dilemma, Mr. Lee! If we refuse, Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi will be put to the death!"

"And if we agree, we shall all be made powerless and condemned to slavery for life," added Nelson Lee quietly.

"Good heavens!"

"That, gentlemen, is the position," said Lee. "Were it just ourselves we might be disposed to take the risk and surrender, but such a thought in the present circumstances is unthinkable. We have the boys and girls to look after—and there can be only one way."

"To refuse to surrender?" growled Sir Edward.

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "Even at the cost of two precious lives, we must send the emperor that message."

It was useless discussing the position any further, for nothing would come of it. As Nelson Lee had said, there was only one possible answer to the emperor's demand.

And Nelson Lee leaned over the rail, and curtly gave the decision to Spurius Gallus. The man started back, scowling.

"Art thou mad?" he shouted. "Thy friends will die—"

"Enough!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "There shall be no surrender!"

The chief Commander could hardly believe his ears—for both he and Titus had been convinced that their newly found lever would force the Conqueror to submit. And so Gallus returned to the palace in a state of alarm, and he quickly reported to the emperor.

"By the power of all the gods!" raved Titus. "So they refuse? What now, Gallus? It seemeth that our scheme fails! And yet I shall be turned into a reptile before I give up this fight!"



Can you find the correct wording for this sketch from this week's story? See Page iii. of cover for a new and attractive competition.

This ought not to have been a difficult matter—seeing that the emperor was very much of a reptile already. But Spurius Gallus did not quite see the words in that light.

"I know not what to suggest, sire," he growled. "Perchance it would be as well to slay these prisoners forthwith—"

"Thou art as brainless as a lizard!" snarled the emperor. "Of what use to us are these men dead? Nay, my friend—'tis but a bluff! Return to these dogs, and tell them that they have until dawn to give me their decision! Go!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPY.



THE Conqueror lay peaceful and quiet.

Only a brief half-hour had elapsed since the battle, and yet it seemed that there had been no battle at all. Beyond the great square, the entrances to which were guarded by soldiers, the town was seething with excited inhabitants, all eager for news. But on the Conqueror's deck, this clamour arrived as a mere murmur—a faint, confused sound on the air. The land yacht was as impregnable as ever, but everybody on board was uneasy.

For Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were in the hands of the enemy, and it seemed that no power on earth could save them.

It was by no means late—indeed, the greater part of the night lay ahead. The

sky was starlit, but dark, and only a faint breeze stirred the close air. There was a hint of mystery about.

Gallus had delivered the emperor's message, and Nelson Lee and the others were greatly relieved. They had until dawn, at least—and even this respite was welcome. For it gave them a chance to discuss the position in all its bearings, and to suggest plans.

Lee did not fear that the emperor would break his word. The two prisoners were valuable, and so they would be held securely, without injury. But Lee would have given much to know exactly where Dorrie and Umlosi had been taken to.

Some of the juniors were on deck, but they were very subdued and quiet. There was none of the usual noisy clatter—none of the shouts of laughter. The situation was tense, and the fellows spoke only in whispers.

Handforth and Co. were lounging back on one of the deck seats, almost hidden by the canvas awning. And they were a somewhat gloomy trio.

"Poor old Dorrie!" muttered Handforth. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he's hooked for the lions, or something! Or perhaps they're going to burn him at the stake—"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Church.

"It's no good blinking at the facts," persisted Handforth. "This is what comes of leaving me out of the game! If I had been on deck, Dorrie would never have been colared!"

"There's nothing like modesty, of course—" began McClure.

"For the simple reason that I shouldn't have let Dorrie go overboard!" continued Handforth. "My hat! Of all the mad tricks! Diving over like that into all those soldiers!"

Edward Oswald spoke indignantly—quite failing to realise that Dorrie's action had been precisely the kind of thing that he himself would have indulged in.

"You can't blame Dorrie," said Church quietly. "It was Umlosi's doing in the first place. He was the one to make the bloomer. But I don't blame him, either. In a fight like that a chap is liable to lose his head."

Handforth scoffed.

"No chance of that when they're fighting with spears," he replied, taking the remark literally. "Of course, a sword is capable of slicing a chap's head off—"

"I didn't mean that way—" began Church.

But he paused, and grabbed at Handforth's knee. Quite suddenly he had become tense and rigid.

"Not a word!" he breathed. "Look! No—don't move! Don't make a sound! Look straight down the deck, between those chairs! Can you see something moving just against the rail?"

Handforth stared hard—his heart suddenly

beating with greater rapidity. And McClure caught his breath in. And he, too, was staring intently into the thick gloom.

"Yes!" he whispered. "There's somebody squirming under the rail."

"I knew it!" breathed Church. "It can't be one of our crowd. Must be a spy—"

"By George!" hissed Handforth. "Look here—keep as still as mice, and let him get on deck. Then we'll creep forward like shadows, and pounce on him. Shush! Don't even speak!"

They sat there, hidden by the awning, silent and motionless. This part of the deck was deserted, and at that particular spot there appeared to be nobody on the watch—although there were two men against the opposite rail, conversing in low tones. One of them, apparently, had left his point of duty, and the mysterious figure had taken advantage of the opportunity.

"It's a jolly good thing I've got such sharp eyes!" murmured Handforth. "If we can only collar this spy—"

"I like your blessed cheek!" objected Church warmly. "I'm the chap who first saw—"

"Bother what you first saw!" interrupted Handforth. "Hallo! He's on deck now! Get yourselves ready, and we'll give one terrific swoop, and land him! We shall probably save the whole ship by doing this! I expect he's come on board to drop a bomb down the skylight, or something!"

Church and McClure didn't think it necessary to point out that bombs were rather scarce in Isirium. And Handforth was too excited to realise his mistake. His mind always drifted to sensational channels.

It was impossible to see the figure distinctly. It was just a slow moving patch against the rail. Handforth would have leapt forward at once, but Church and McClure deterred him. Hasty action might give the intruder a chance to leap to the ground, and escape.

"Now!" breathed Church, at length.

With one movement, they fairly leapt across the deck, and pounced upon the figure before it could make any attempt to flee.

"Got him!" roared Handforth triumphantly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SECRET INFORMATION.



THE prisoner made no attempt to struggle.

He was a slightly-built man, attired in rich robes, with a black cloak almost enveloping him. He lay on the deck, looking up

into the faces of the juniors with an expression of anxiety and alarm in his eyes.

"Thou art mistaken," he panted, in his own language. "I am no enemy of thine! I am come to speak with Horatius Placidus —"

"Placidus?" repeated Handforth, catching the name.

"Ay! I am not of the emperor's warriors—"

"It's no good, my lad—you're collared!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "And it's no good jabbering at me in that lingo! If you want to speak at all, why don't you use Latin? I can understand you then!"

"Fathead! He is talking Latin!" exclaimed Church.

"I don't care—"

"What is this, boys?" asked Nelson Lee sharply, as he strode up. "Hallo! Who is that on the deck?"

"A prisoner, sir—we caught him squirming on board a minute ago!" said Church breathlessly. "He must be a spy, I think. Anyhow, we've put a stop to his little game."

Nelson Lee looked round keenly, and at the same moment one of the crew appeared, looking flustered and alarmed. Nelson Lee censured him severely, much to the fellow's discomfiture.

"And now, my friend, what of thee?" he went on, addressing the intruder. "What business had thou in coming on board so stealthily? It will be well if thou art truthful in thy answer."

The man fairly panted with relief as he heard his own tongue.

"'Tis well! Thou art the commander—is this not so?" he said eagerly. "I am come to speak with Horatius Placidus—ay, and with his father, Flavius, also. I have news—word of thy friends, who are captives in the hands of the tyrant emperor. Gaze not at me with suspicion," he added proudly.

"If I am misjudging you, I have ample excuse," replied Nelson Lee. "For thou art here by a strange method, my friend. But this matter shall be proven. If Placidus is indeed thy friend, he will claim thee as one."

"'Tis well," said the other. "I desire no better test."

Handforth was rather dismayed at the gentlemanly way that Nelson Lee was treating this captive. And he was quite astonished when they walked off together, and descended the main stairway.

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

"I believe he's on our side!" said Church eagerly. "He's a spy all right, but not the kind we thought he was. Anyhow, it won't be long before we know the truth."

Nelson Lee escorted the stranger to his own state-room, and then rang the bell for a steward. The latter came, and was instructed to bring Horatius Placidus and his father at once. For, of course, the pair were on board, having thrown in their lot with the adventurers. Indeed, there was nothing else to be done, for the portly Placidus was a condemned man. It meant death to return to his own people.

They soon appeared, and Horatius started forward with a glad cry as soon as he saw the figure of his countryman.

"Ho, Claudius!" he exclaimed, with an excited flush on his cheeks. "What doest thou here, friend? 'Twill be death for thee if the emperor discovereth thy movements!"

"'Twas a chance that had to be taken, my Horatius," replied the other. "For I bring news for thee, and for thy friends. Since they did snatch thee from the stake, they are my life-long friends, too. I am proud to be here."

The old man greeted Claudius with equal fervour, and there was no longer any doubt that he was what he claimed to be. As a matter of fact, he was the young noble who had lent his chariot for the purpose of fetching old Flavius Placidus to the city.

"A stouter heart doth not beat than that of my friend, Claudius Regulus," exclaimed Horatius, as he turned to Nelson Lee. "A rich young noble, and a secret supporter of our true emperor—who doth languish in exile. 'Tis well that he should be here."

The old man came forward eagerly.

"Thou wilt bring to mind what I told thee?" he asked, addressing Lee. "Good Claudius is a man of much use to us. For while being apparently staunch to Titus, and holding a high position in the palace, he is truly a friend of our exiled emperor, Marcus Phillipus."

"Then, indeed, thou art welcome," smiled Nelson Lee, giving his hand to the young noble. "And thou hast brought news? I trust it be of good import, and concerning our captive friends."

"Ay, even so," replied Claudius quickly. "'Tis idle for me to dwell upon detail, since thou hast no patience for that. Thy friends are well, and in no immediate danger."

"That is good hearing," commented Lee.

"But what I have to tell thee now is not so good," went on Claudius. "Even while I am speaking, thy two friends are speeding away from the city—prisoners in a special chariot that travels fast."

Nelson Lee was rather startled to hear this. He had taken it for granted that Dorrie and Umlosi would be kept somewhere close at hand. This was grave news, indeed—to learn that they were being carried far away.

For it seemed that it would necessarily complicate matters. With the pair near by, there was just a chance that they might be rescued. But now that chance appeared to dwindle.

"Speak on, friend Claudius—I am anxious to hear further," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Whither are these friends of ours being taken? If thou can'st answer that, much anxiety will be relieved."

Claudius Regulus nodded.

"I can answer even that," he replied. "It pleaseth the emperor to send the captives afar—indeed, right into the great forest at the end of the valley. For he feareth that this great chariot of thine may effect a release if the pair were kept in the city. And so he has sent them far

off, believing it impossible for thee to know their whereabouts."

"And canst say it with truth?" asked Placidus eagerly.

"Ay, they are being taken to the great tower in the forest!" replied Claudius readily. "And there they are to be imprisoned, where none can render them aid."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PLAN OF ACTION.



OLD FLAVIUS uttered a cry of surprise. "To the tower?" he echoed. "Is't possible? Dost mean, friend Claudius, the great tower where our good Marcus

is imprisoned?"

"Ay, the same!" said Claudius.

The excitement that affected the old man now communicated itself to his son. Nelson Lee could not quite see why they were so animated. The information pleased him, for it was good to know where Dorrie and Umlosi were imprisoned. But there was nothing particularly cheerful about the news.

"Why are thou so pleased?" he asked at length.

"There is here an opportunity to help Isirium as no man in all our history has helped the land!" replied the old man, his voice quivering. "'Tis thy wish to rescue thy friends?"

"More than anything else," agreed Nelson Lee.

"And it is our wish also," went on Flavius. "But, much as we respect thee and thy companions, 'tis only natural that we should be more interested in our own exiled monarch. Would it not be possible for this great chariot to travel to the great tower?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Nelson Lee softly.

He thought for a moment, realising exactly what these men were saying. And then he turned to Flavius.

"It would be not only possible, but easy," he replied. "It is thy plan to rescue Marcus at the same time? An excellent scheme, good Flavius, but is it wise? Would not the risk be too great?"

"Not so," replied Flavius eagerly. "With one blow we could have thy friends and our emperor—our true emperor. And there is time for this great journey even before the dawn, for thy chariot speeds fast. And the appearance of good Marcus in the capital at such a time as this would surely be a signal for a popular outburst."

"'Tis a fine scheme, indeed!" said Claudius excitedly. "Who knows? Before the dawn, Marcus may be on the throne,

and the tyrant Titus a defeated man—indeed, a mere corpse!"

But this was travelling a little too fast, and Nelson Lee thought it advisable to pull his friends up. He quietly pointed out that while the plan was excellent, it would not be quite so easy.

"What of the army?" he asked. "'Tis unwise to act hurriedly, and without due preparation. While I am anxious to rescue my own companions, I am also anxious to assist you in your cause. I know not this Marcus, but he can be no worse than Titus, even if he is the veriest brute."

"Marcus Phillipus is a good man—kind and generous to his people," said old Flavius stiffly. "With our true emperor on the throne, there will be no more brutality, and the soldiers will be free to go back to the land. I urge thee to assist us—"

"Urge not, friend Flavius," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I am quite eager without any such stimulus. For are our fortunes not bound together? But I was speaking of the soldiers. Think you that some would turn against Titus, and throw in their lot with the exiled Marcus?"

"Ay, many thousands of them!" put in Horatius grimly. "It needs only Marcus himself to enter the capital to bring about a complete victory. As things are the people are sorely afraid, since any word breathed against Titus, and overheard by one of his spies, means a ghastly death in the arena."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Let me discuss this with my friends," he exclaimed. "I will return to thee, and give thee our decision."

Nelson Lee left the state-room and went straight on deck. And he was quickly in conversation with Mr. Hobart Manners and Mr. Travers Earle. They listened eagerly while he imparted the news.

"If this is true, it's amazingly good," said the inventor.

"Oh, it is true enough—"

"But have you proof?" put in Mr. Manners. "You don't think it's a mere trick, to lead the Conqueror into some trap or other?"

"My dear Manners, these three men are absolutely honest," he said. "They hate Titus, and have every reason to be grateful to us. It would be out of the question to assume that there is treachery here. And you can rely on me, because I am a very cautious man as a rule. The great question is, shall we make this attempt?"

"Most decidedly," said Mr. Earle.

"I agree with that, too," added the engineer.

"Then we will quietly prepare for departure at once," said Lee. "We had better not tell the others anything about it until we are actually on the move. The boys, in particular, would be excited. And

we can't take any risks. We don't want to betray our plans to the enemy."

And within a very few minutes silent preparations were being made. The engine-room staff was told to report for duty, and every other man of the crew was instructed to hold himself ready for action.

The start was to be made without any preliminary indication. And once off, the *Conqueror* would be piloted by Horatius Placidus. He would know the road by heart, and would stand on the bridge next to the man at the wheel, giving directions.

Nelson Lee went below, and entered his state-room again. The three Isirium nobles looked at him with eager, anxious eyes.

"We have decided," said Nelson Lee briefly. "We start at once, and we shall throw every effort into making this venture a success."

"May the saints be praised!" said old Flavius fervently. "At last! To-night, perchance, the emperor Marcus will come into his own."

CHAPTER XX.

THE TOWER IN THE FOREST.



LORD DORRIMORE chuckled.

"Well, we're seein' life, if nothin' else," he said cheerfully. "Upon amazin' the adventures that my word, Umlosi, it's really

you an' I drop into! Eh, you old war-horse?"

"Thou art of remarkably light heart, my father," growled Umlosi. "And methinks this adventure will surely end in disaster. Mayhap we shall emerge triumphant, but there is naught but blackness before us."

"There's always blackness where you go—that's certain," agreed Dorrie drily. "By the way, how's the shoulder?"

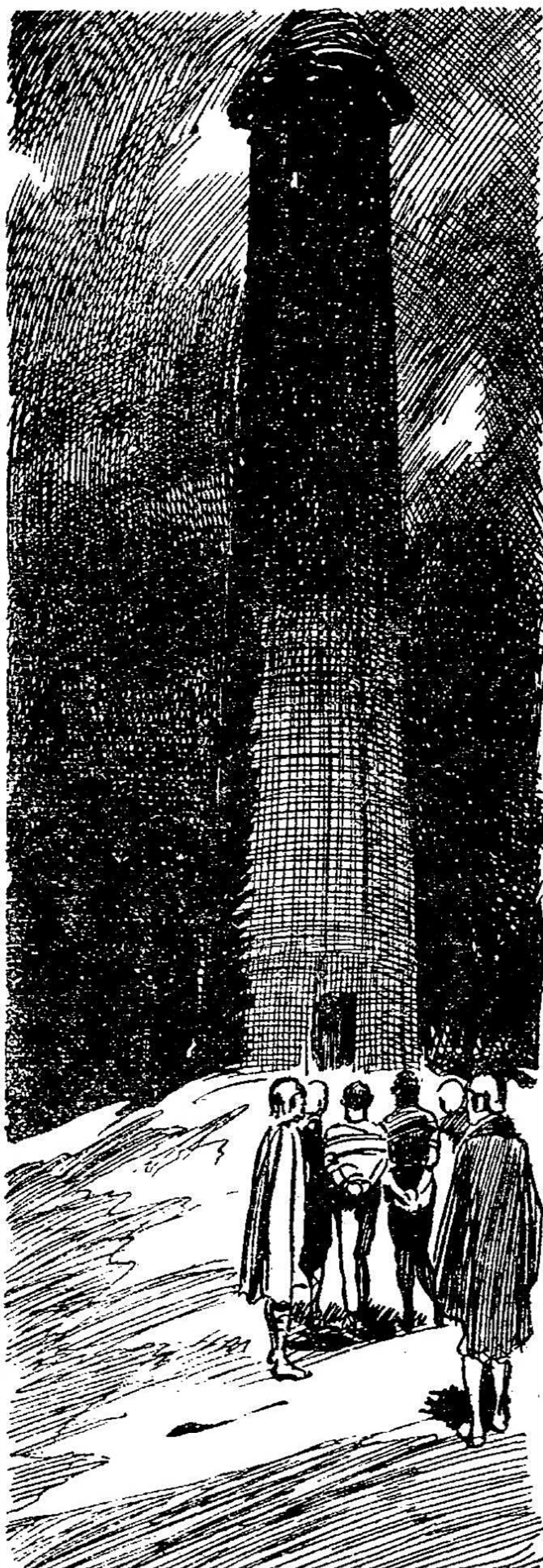
Umlosi grunted with disgust.

"Have I not already told thee, N'Kose, that the subject pains me?" he rumbled. "The shoulder—nay! A mere scratch—and am I not a great warrior? Am I a man to complain because of a paltry wound? I am well, my master, but ill in my mind."

"You've lost a fair amount of blood, old man," said his lordship. "My dear chap, it simply poured out—pints and pints! And yet you tell me you're not in pain? By gad! You've got some endurance!"

The pair were marching side by side along a rough path which led into the heart of a dense forest. Overhead the sky was completely concealed by the heavy foliage, and on both sides the trees were thick and close. Intense darkness prevailed.

But even if the pair had thought of



They drew close to the massive tower, and a halt was called.

making a break for liberty, the matter ended there.

For they were completely surrounded by soldiers—six in front, six behind, and a double row on either side. And all these warriors were armed with javelins, ready to strike. There was no likelihood of the two captives making any break-away.

Umlosi was hardly himself. He had recovered his first faintness, and was completely disgusted with himself for having given way to it. He made no excuses—the fact that he had lost blood didn't weigh with him. His view was that he was a warrior, and that he had no right to show weakness.

But this march must have caused him intense agony, although never a hint of it came from his lips. As usual, Dorrie was disposed to be cheerful. His lordship was always in the best of spirits when the general position seemed the blackest. It was one of Dorrie's little characteristics.

They had been on the road for a considerable time—mainly riding in a big, cumbersome chariot, drawn by no less than eight horses. The chariot had finally halted high up the valley, at the edge of a dense forest.

And for some time the prisoners had been marching, not having the faintest idea as to where they were being taken, or why. It was not pleasant to realise that their friends were so far away. But, as Dorrie told himself, it really made little difference, for the Conqueror was capable of annihilating any amount of space.

"I didn't know they had a forest like this," remarked his lordship, as they trudged on. "It's a bit more like the real Africa, eh? Reminds you of home, old man—"

"Wau! Thou art but teasing me, N'Kose," interrupted Umlosi. "Do you compare these paltry spots with my own Kutanaland? Let us change the subject, my father, and speak of a thing that sorely troubles me. For I am greatly worried."

"But why?" asked Dorrie. "My dear old chap, it's not a bit of good worryin'. It's a thing I never do. Worry is the chief cause of the world's misery. The position may seem a bit mottled at the moment, but all sorts of good things will probably turn up."

"I am not worried because of our position, my father," said Umlosi. "My worry is occasioned by the knowledge that I am entirely to blame. 'Twas I who led you into this—"

"What absolute nonsense!" laughed Dorrie. "I don't know whether you know it or not, Umlosi, but you speak in very much the same way as these Isirium chaps—only they, of course, use Latin. Perhaps it's just as well they can't understand what we're talkin' about—"

"Thou art rambling on, N'Kose, in order

to have the subject changed," rumbled the black giant. "But it will not serve, since I am determined to speak. 'Twas I who brought about this disaster. I think not of ourselves and of our own peril, but of the young masters who are left on the great ship. I have caused them to be in danger. And Umtagati, too—he is worried because thou art missing. And mayhap the entire party has met with disaster because of my foolishness."

"That's right—keep it up!" said Dorrie, with a grunt. "Man alive! If you go on at this rate, you'll make me gloomy, too! I'll admit it was a mad thing for you to jump overboard like that, but it's over—so forget the whole infernal business!"

"Wise words, my father," said Umlosi. "I am glad that thou art full aware of my madness—"

"And it happens that I'm just as much aware of my own crack-brained idiocy," growled his lordship. "What on earth made me jump down to your rescue? And why was I fool enough to take an empty gun with me?"

"'Twas done in the heat of the moment, O, impulsive one!"

"But I'm not usually so rash, confound it!" said his lordship. "What I ought to have done was to get the machine-guns going. A few bursts of lead round the spot where those brutes had you down would have done the trick. Then I could have nipped along an' given you a hand. Oh, well, it's no good talkin'. We're in the soup now, and there's an end of it. By the way, I'm feelin' peckish. I hope they give us a decent feed after this nice midnight stroll."

Dorrie did his best to console the unhappy Umlosi. The giant black insisted, however, upon taking every atom of the blame, and his worry was all for Nelson Lee and the rest of the company on the Conqueror. Umlosi gave no thought to his own safety.

They suddenly emerged from the dense belt of woodland, and saw a grassy slope rising ahead. The trees were some distance beyond, and all round. The knoll, in fact, was a mere clearing in the forest, and probably quite invisible from the surrounding country.

The light was almost negligible, the sky being cloudy, and the stars hidden. But in the intense gloom Lord Dorrimore could just see a sturdy tower rising from the top of the knoll.

It was a massive structure of stone, cold and inartistic. There appeared to be no windows, just a mass of heavy stone-work rising up from the ground, and capped by a great overhanging parapet.

They drew close, and a halt was called.

Then some of the soldiers went forward, and vanished in the darkness. But they soon returned, and Dorrie and Umlosi were marched on again. They were taken round

the tower, and led straight into a narrow opening in the wall.

They found themselves in utter blackness. There came the clang of a heavy door, and they were alone.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CUNNING OF TITUS.



"EVERYTHING ready?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"Yes," murmured Mr. Earle. "When you give the word, Lee, we can start off as soon as you like. And the sooner the better, in my opinion. We want to risk everything on this one throw."

They were on the bridge of the Conqueror, and although there was no sign of activity, the great land yacht was ready to roll off across the square at the first touch of the engine-room telegraph.

The juniors, under Nelson Lee's orders, had gone to bed. They would probably be very much in evidence as soon as the Conqueror sprang into motion, but at the moment they knew nothing.

"Well, I think we had better be off—"

Nelson Lee stopped speaking, and stared intently over the square at a curious round column which jutted out beyond the emperor's palace. He had seen this column on several occasions, and had wondered at its purpose. For it was quite narrow, and the top could only be reached by means of a heavy metal ladder which ran up the outside.

"There's somebody moving on the top of that column!" muttered Lee. "I wonder what on earth— Got the glasses, there, Manners?"

Before Mr. Manners could hand Nelson Lee the glasses they were rendered unnecessary. For a sudden flame appeared at the top of the column, and spread rapidly, until it was flickering upwards for all to see.

The watchers were now aware of the fact that a man was on the big round summit, and he was making the fire flare and glow. And when it was burning to his satisfaction, he stood back and watched.

"Queer!" muttered Mr. Earle, puzzled.

"A signal—no doubt of it!" exclaimed Lee. "A beacon of some kind. I don't like it, Mr. Earle—there's something significant about this. I rather think we'd better delay our departure until we can obtain some information."

"Perhaps our Isirium friends can enlighten us," suggested Mr. Manners.

"I intend fetching Placidus at once," replied Lee. "This fire-tower did not enter into our calculations."

They stood watching for a moment longer, and the flare was now burning brilliantly and powerfully. The picture was a mysterious one. The surrounding blackness, the

ghostly buildings on every hand, and that stone column, with the platform at the summit, and the blazing fire. The figure of the attendant was clearly visible in the blaze.

And then came a movement from across the square.

A company of soldiers marched briskly across to the Conqueror—and at their head strode Spurius Gallus, the Chief Commander. He came to a halt smartly within speaking distance.

"Ho, there!" he called pompously.

"Speak on!" shouted Lee. "What is thy message?"

"Behold, yonder, a fire beacon," replied Gallus. "I am come with word from the emperor. 'Tis but a brief message, but one that thou wilt perchance heed. Thy friends are afar, having been removed where none can find them."

"What of that?" demanded Lee curtly.

"The Emperor desireth me to inform you that the column of fire is a sign of safety," said Gallus calmly. "If your great chariot moves but one yard, the fire will be instantly extinguished."

"By James!" muttered Lee, biting his lip.

"And the extinguishing of the fire will be read afar as a sign—as a command of the emperor's that the two prisoners shall be forthwith slain!" said the army chief pleasantly. "So be on thy guard, good friends—move thy great chariot not from this spot. For to move it will mean death to thy friends!"

He gave a rough laugh, twirled on his heel, and marched away. For some moments there was complete silence on the Conqueror's deck. Nelson Lee and the others looked at one another grimly.

"This—this is appalling!" said Mr. Earle, at length. "We can do nothing—we are helpless!"

"But can't we risk it, Mr. Lee?" asked Hobart Manners impatiently. "It may only be bluff—"

"On the contrary, it may be a threat in deadly earnest," interrupted Nelson Lee. "And if we move the Conqueror, and that fire is extinguished, Lord Dorrimore and Uralosi will be murdered in cold blood. No, Manners, we can't do it—we must wait."

And the others knew that Nelson Lee was right.

For the moment the Emperor Titus IV. held the trump cards. But although this thrilling episode had ended in victory for the tyrant, the Conqueror's staunch company was by no means beaten.

Another Fine Story of this Splendid Series Next Week, entitled:—

"THROWN TO THE LIONS!"

THE END.



MY AMERICAN NOTE-BOOK

By the Author of our St Frank's Stories.



No. 38. A TRIP TO HOLLYWOOD.

HOLLYWOOD is a city of film studios and residential bungalows.

A great many people have an idea that the films are made in Los Angeles. They are not. Los Angeles is a commercial centre, a show place, a pleasure resort; but they don't make films there.

Hollywood is the great "movie" city. Of course, there are others. For example, the great Universal organisation have their studios at Culver City. And, in a way of speaking, both Hollywood and Culver City are in Los Angeles—for they are all connected by street-car lines. But out there, Hollywood is regarded by all the natives as a distinctly separate town.

After all I'd heard about Hollywood I was quite keen on the visit, and I've got to confess that I was rather disappointed. The bungalows are certainly neat and very picturesque, and the palm-trees, which abound, are perfectly charming. And the wide roads are also a distinct advantage.

But, somehow, Hollywood is too glaringly new to be really picturesque. Everywhere everything is brand new. And the whole country is dead flat. For miles round Hollywood in every direction the land is a great plain. And this, as anybody will agree, does not tend towards the beautiful and the picturesque.

But what would disappoint me would possibly delight others. After all, I am merely giving my own impressions—and these notes are in no way intended to be the general British opinion. The desert in Arizona, for example, struck me as being singularly barren and uninteresting. I hated it at first sight, and hated it more as I saw further into it.

But some people—British people, too—go raving with delight over the Arizona desert. It all depends. You either like it, and then love it more and more, or you hate it for always.

And, as I was saying, Hollywood disappointed me. As a beauty spot, it failed to

appeal. The bungalows, I repeat, pleased me greatly. And some of these Californian bungalows are exquisitely beautiful—and nothing would please me better than to see our own builders copying the design. For the most part, each residence stands in its own grounds, detached, and although there are no dividing fences, there are plenty of lawns—lawns at the sides, and lawns in front, right down to the pavement.

And these lawns, in fact, are characteristic of all the Southern Californian towns. Avenue after avenue is the same. At first you rather like the look of them but one can always have too much of a good thing. And before I left California I was heartily tired of these ubiquitous lawns and their stereotyped sameness.

Hollywood is a comparatively quiet place—vastly different from the noise and tear of Los Angeles. In the middle of the afternoon, for example, the main street is almost sleepy. There are plenty of shops, and any amount of nice hotels. And there are one or two beautiful picture theatres—notably, Graumann's Egyptian Theatre. Another celebrated spot in this town is the Hollywood Bowl—a great natural open-air arena, where all sorts of entertainments are held—where speeches are delivered, and so forth.

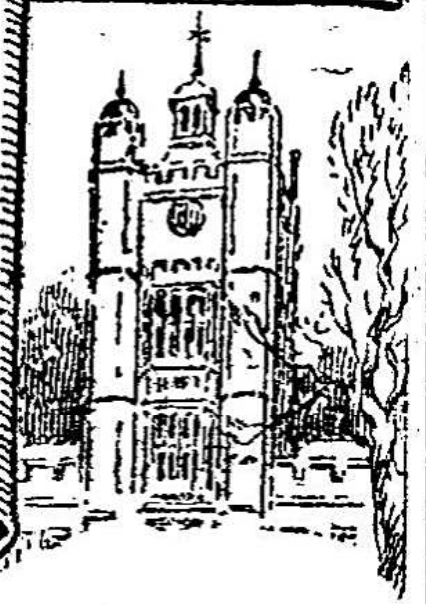
My real object, however, in visiting Hollywood was to go through the Famous Players-Lasky Studios. And next week I shall describe everything I saw in this celebrated establishment.

NEXT WEEK:

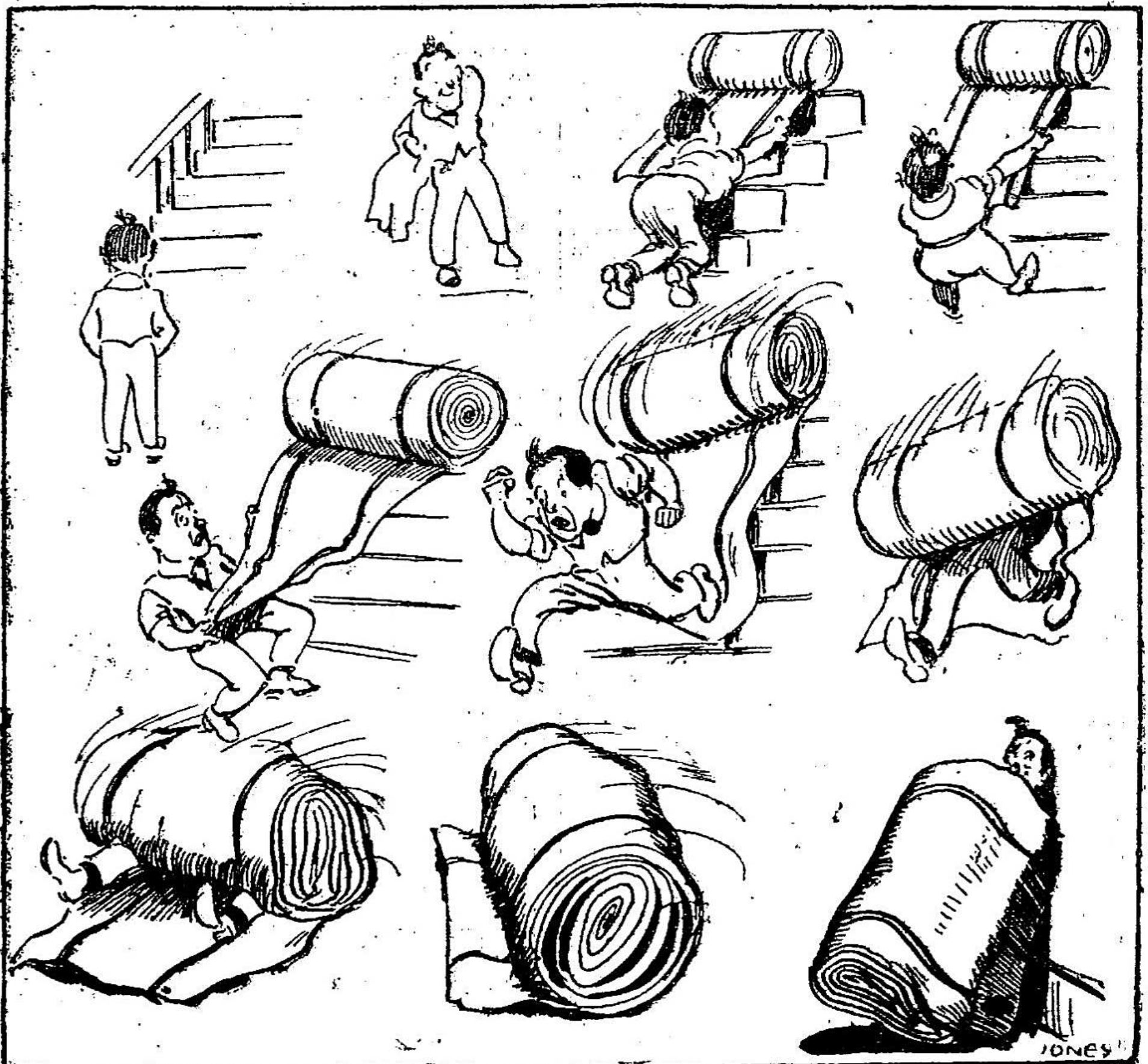
**"THROUGH THE FAMOUS
PLAYERS-LASKY STUDIOS."**

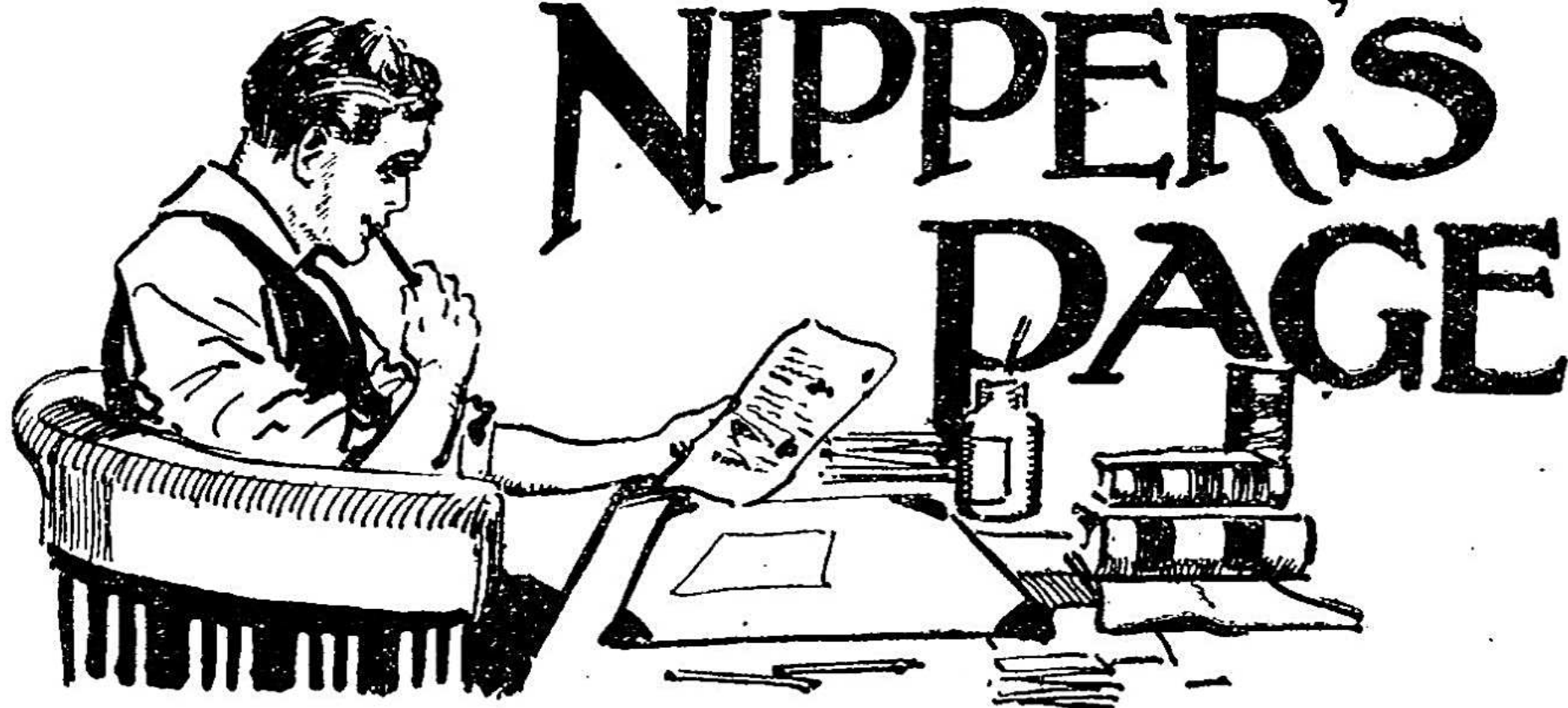


St. Frank's Magazine



ADVENTURES OF E. O. HANDFORTH LAYING A CARPET ON THE STAIRS *A Story Without Words.*





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St. Frank's.

My dear Chums,

Uncle Edward, I notice, has been promising last week to include a number of "Replies" to readers in the present issue. He has assumed, of course, that I would publish an extra page or two of the "Replies." The fact that I have not been able to do so, owing to the heavy demands on my space, may, therefore, cause some disappointment among those readers. I would like to assure them that every effort will be made to publish their "Replies" next week. Uncle Edward is largely to blame for making his individual "Replies" so long. They are supposed to be "Brief Replies," but Uncle Edward has been dealing with each letter as though nothing else in the Mag. mattered—except his Trackett Grim yarns. I have accordingly written to ask him to shorten his "Replies" so that everyone will receive an answer to his letter without having to wait so long.

PORTRAIT GALLERY AND WHO'S WHO.

I note that Uncle Edward is continually being asked when we are going to start a Portrait Gallery and a Who's Who. So insistent have been these inquiries that I feel I must say something about them. Writing on behalf of Nipper, the real Editor, I can safely promise you, my chums, that arrangements will be made to provide for these much-requested features as soon as the autumn term begins. A list of all the boys whose portraits will ultimately appear is being drawn up, and will be published, showing the studies they occupy, a week before the series begins. I will suggest to Nipper that we publish four portraits every week. There are sure to be a few changes made when the new term begins, and that is one reason why I am keeping these features until the new term. A new map of St. Frank's and the surrounding country will also be prepared.

MR. BRISCDE'S SCHOOL SKETCHES.

If your school has not yet appeared in our Gallery of Schools, do not delay sending along photo, badge and history during the next few weeks—that is, if you want to see a drawing of your school by our famous artist in the Mag., and to own the original sketch.

HANDY'S STORIES WITHOUT WORDS.

These new series of humorous sketches relating in wordless pictures a complete story of the great E. O. H. in many varied adventures, looks like scoring as big a success as the Trackett Grim stories. I don't suppose Handy himself will be pleased at being made the butt of our artist's humour. But perhaps he will not think these sketches humorous, and may even take them as a compliment.

CLARENCE FELLOWE'S GREAT HIT.

After weeks of silence, the School Poet broke out last week into as brilliant a piece of verse I have ever known him to produce. After reading it, there is not a reader who will not feel moved at the poet's eulogy for the famous detective, Trackett Grim, and his assistant, Splinter.

ANOTHER NERO.

According to Nipper's account from the Roman city in the Sahara, the Emperor Titus is causing the Holiday Party much anxiety. This survival of a cruel and despotic age has much in common with the notorious Nero, an account of whom is published on another page. How this emperor's wretched subjects could tolerate such an inhuman monster for so long is more than I can understand. One cannot help but admire our chaps for the plucky way in which they are fighting against this wretch.

Let us wish them a speedy victory!

Your old friend,

BUSTER (Acting Editor).

The Adventures of TRACKETT GRIM



THE MAN WITH THE HEART-SHAPED SCAR!

In this marvellous story of detective narrative, Trackett Grim and Splinter make their first acquaintance with the two greatest crooks in the world Hector Harrogate and the Mutt.

By

E. O. HANDFORTH

PROLOGUE.

TRACKETT GRIM, the world-famous incriminator, sat at his table facing his bright young assistant.

"Huff!" snapped Grim.

The two were playing a hand at the most difficult game in the world. They were playing at draughts.

Grim had won the Open World's Singles Handicap Doubles (under 18), Section 50, on three occasions. While Splinter had won outright the Championship of Tooting-on-the-Trout. Therefore a game of draughts between these two was a gigantic struggle. Even the calm, unemotional features of the incriminator sometimes became ruffled and his strong chin would jut forward.

As he said the terrible word "huff" it did one of its juts, and the board fell with a crash to the floor, spreading the draughtsmen all over the room.

"Now you've done it, guv'nor!" cried Splinter.

"Poof!" commented Grim. "It is only a game! I have other and more important things to think about. Listen! I heard someone creeping up the stairs without being heard!"

As though to prove his words, the door suddenly opened with intense softness, and a man came in, shutting the door behind him. He was a big man, measuring at least sixty-five round in the shade, and perhaps over forty in the sun. His weight was hundreds of stones, and, in fact, must have totalled up to several good-sized rocks.

Added to that he was strikingly handsome, with a clever, dare-devil face that was almost reckless. He smoked a cigar at a jaunty angle, and puffed at a cigarette with his lower lip. In his right hand he carried a large travelling bag. And in his left hand he had a gold-knobbed cane. On his forehead, just below the brim of his hat, was a wonderful scar. It was shaped in the form of the ace of hearts!

Almost at once Grim realised this man was no ordinary person. But he did not show a trace of this. He merely waved his hand towards a chair.

"Good-bye!" remarked the visitor, also waving his hand but not sitting down. "You are Grim, the world-famous incriminator," he added, in a wonderful voice, puffing a cloud of cigar smoke at the sleuth.

"You are right!" Grim agreed, scarcely understanding the other's remark.

"I am always right!" snapped the other. "I am Hector Harrogate, the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar. I am the greatest crook the world has ever seen, and I am going to rob every rich man in the country. Ha!"

He flung his cigar in the grate with a contemptuous gesture. But Grim was ready. It was not his habit to be flummoxed by even the most astute crooks. He leapt across the room and picked the cigar up. Then he carefully put it behind his ear. It might come in handy later. And Grim never wasted the slightest chance of a clue.

"So you are Hector Harrogate," the incriminator murmured. "You are the man who is wanted by all the police in Europe and the United States. You have robbed all the crowned heads of the world of their crowns. It is just as I supposed. You are a thief—a robber!"

"Well done, Mister Tec," snarled the other, showing his teeth. "I give you credit for your marvellous sagacity. But you will never catch me. I have with me my assistant. He is the second best crook in the world."

"I care not for your threats!" Grim replied calmly. "I do not believe there is any assistant of yours in the room!"

At Grim's bold words Hector Harrogate suddenly stooped and undid the catch of his suitcase. The side flapped open, and

St Frank's Magazine



Into the room slipped a little man in a perfect suit of tweeds.

into the room stepped a little man in a perfect suit of tweeds.

"I am George Bung," he announced squeakily. "I am known all over the English-speaking world as the Mutt."

"You are a dwarf!" Grim announced, after a steady look at the tiny man.

The Mutt's face whitened, and he darted a quick look at Grim.

"All the papers have said is true," he squeaked. "This sleuth knows everything! I'm going home!"

As he spoke he crept into his suitcase, and the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar shut his front door with a snap.

"It is to be a battle of wits between us," he said boastfully. "And I warn you I shall not lose." He picked up his bag and calmly began to go out of the room.

"If you are rude I shall arrest you at once!" Grim threatened, puffing out his chest.

At the words the scar on Hector Harrogate's forehead began to swell visibly. It turned a pale puce, then faded to a pea green. He was evidently a bit annoyed. Grim noticed the signs, and it suddenly flashed upon him that the scar had something to do with the crook's queer nickname.

"Great Pip!" he shouted. "I have fathomed your secret! I know why you are called the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar!"

Hector Harrogate recoiled, almost dropping the bag he held. But in a second he had pulled himself together.

"Pah!" he grunted. "I care for no man! In two days' time I shall rob Lord Noddington of his gold-plated soup tureen. And

I warn you, Grim, that if you try to stop me I shall show no mercy."

In a fraction of a moment Grim's mind was made up. There was only one way he could stop this terrible outrage. He must arrest Harrogate at once. He therefore stepped up to the telephone.

"Wait a minute, Hector," he called. "I am going to ring up the police to arrest you. After that we will have a little talk."

But to Grim's surprise the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar did not wait. Bag in hand, he slipped through the door without even saying fare-

well. From the window Grim and Splinter saw him let himself into the Baker's Inn Road with his skeleton latchkey, and, without a glance, stride away.

"My goodness!" ejaculated Grim. "So that is Hector Harrogate, who is wanted by all the police in the world. And he has slipped through my fingers!"

"How could you help it, guv'nor?" asked Splinter. "He took you at a disadvantage."

"Quite right, you clever lad!" returned Grim. "I had not thought of that for the moment."

CHAPTER I.

LORD NODDINGTON IS ROBBED!

It was midnight!

Noddington Towers were wrapped in slumber. Not a light gleamed. All the household was fast asleep. A large car crept slowly down the drive. It pulled up at the front door, and two dark figures wearing gas-masks got out.

They were Hector Harrogate and the Mutt.

They strolled to one of the windows, and Hector opened it with a skewer which he produced from a large brown-paper packet in his hand.

"In you get, Horace!" he said. And his assistant crept through. He then ran to the front door, which he opened, and let in the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar. Why were these sinister happenings happening? Why, because the desperate couple of expert cracksmen were going to rob Lord Noddington!

They stole upstairs, tapping on every door to make sure everyone was asleep. Then

they reached his lordship's bed-room and entered. He was fast asleep. But Harrogate did not care. He tapped him on the forehead. Then the Mutt produced a large hammer.

"Sorry to disturb you," said Hector, when Lord Noddington opened his eyes. "But we are expert cracksmen, and we wish to rob you. I hope you won't be offended if I send you to sleep."

"Not in the least," said his lordship. "I want to go to sleep."

"Right-ho!" returned Harrogate, and hit the peer a whack over the head with his hammer.

After that the two strolled down to the dining-room, where was kept the famous soup tureen. They found it on the sideboard, and Harrogate soon wrapped it up in the paper he carried.

"Now we must leave a few clues, Horace," he said.

So the two scattered about on the floor a few footprints and finger-prints. They left their handkerchiefs as well. And then they turned on the light, and, after singing a little song, left the house.

By this time the staff had been quite disturbed. And as the two crooks climbed into their car and went off, the butler came rushing into the dining-room. He was followed by the rest of the staff, who stood gasping in amazement as they saw what had been stolen.

"We must wake the master," said the butler, who was only half-dressed. He ran upstairs and shook Lord Noddington by the shoulder.

"Wake up—wake up—wake up!" he said sternly. "You have been foully robbed of your golden soup tureen!"

At the words Lord Noddington sat up in bed, completely dazed.

When he recovered the butler told him of what had happened.

"There is only one thing to do," cried Lord Noddington. "You must ring up Trackett Grim, the world-famous incriminator. He is the only man who can recover my tureen for me."

At once Grim was rung up, and less than ten minutes later he came dashing up to the Towers on his motor-bike, with Splinter sitting across the back wheel on the luggage carrier. As soon as the famous couple arrived they

were shown up to Lord Noddington's bed-room. The earl was sitting up in bed, propped up by pillows.

Grim's sharp eyes took in the whole situation at a glance. He turned to Lord Noddington.

"You have been asleep, my lord," he snapped.

"You are right," cried the earl, falling back on to his pillows in his excitement.

"And now you are awake," Grim went on relentlessly. "I deduce that you have sent for me to clear up this case."

"That is quite right," Lord Noddington agreed. "I have been ruthlessly robbed. I have been beastly burgled, in fact. My golden soup tureen, from which seventeen generations of Noddingtons have taken their dinner, has been stolen!"

"That alters the case entirely," Grim said slowly. "If what you say is true, I should suspect that someone calling himself a thief has been on your premises."

"Bless me!" gulped the peer. "You astound me with your cleverness. I dare say you are right."

"I am always right!" snapped Grim. "And now about the soup plate. I presume you kept it in the house?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Very likely in some room?"

"Very likely!"

"Possibly in your dining-room?"

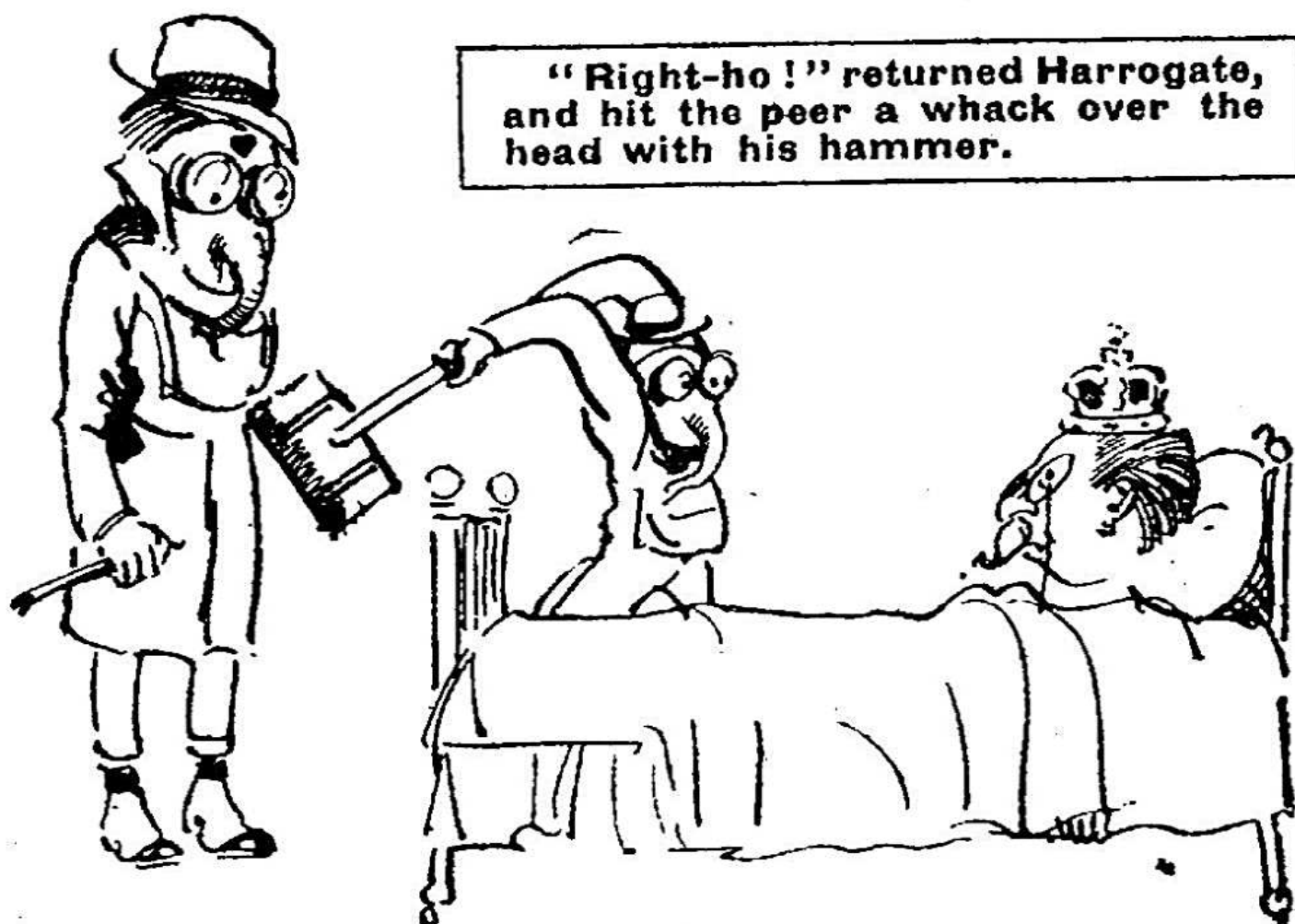
"You are marvellous!" gasped Lord Noddington. "Is nothing hid from you, my dear sir? You will tell me next that it was on the sideboard."

"It was on the sideboard, your grace," Grim said imperturbably.

"You astonish me with your wonderful powers," went on his lordship. "I can almost believe you have second sight."

"I have sight in every class," Grim

"Right-ho!" returned Harrogate, and hit the peer a whack over the head with his hammer.



replied. "First, second, and third. I also have a monthly season, which enables me to travel at any time, night or day."

"Then you will find my tureen?" begged the earl.

"I will." But first you must show me your dining-room. I suspect I shall find a clue or two there. It is usual in these baffling cases."

The butler immediately took Grim downstairs, and the incriminator posted him at the window in case of accidents. He then posted Splinter in front of the fireplace.

Then he searched steadily round the room for clues. He was only searching for half an hour. At the end of that time he had picked up two footprints, made of light cardboard, and a pocket handkerchief marked "Harrogate" in the left-hand top corner.

These he waved triumphantly in the air. Then he called Splinter and the butler upstairs again.

"Your lordship," Grim announced, "I have now practically solved the great mystery. I have found two footprints. With your permission I will see if they belong to anyone here."

The permission was granted, and Grim fitted the prints against the feet of all the staff. But it was only to draw a blank. They would not fit.

Another man might have been baffled at this failure. But not Grim.

"I see there is trickery here," he said to Splinter. "These footsteps must have been made by someone not now in the house. Who could that be, my lad?"

"The milkman," replied the bright lad at once.

"No!"

"The policeman on the beat," the lad replied again.

Grim smiled, pleased at Splinter's cleverness.

"You are a little wrong, my dear lad," he said. "These clues were accidentally left behind by the thief!"

"By jingo!" gasped the lad. "You've got it!"

By his wonderful power of deduction Grim had now come to a conclusion. He was certain that he was on the right track. He had penetrated almost to the heart of the plot.

CHAPTER II.

GRIM'S MASTER STROKE.

"WHAT can be done?" asked Splinter the next day.

Grim still sat in an armchair in Lord Noddington's bed-room.

"I have it," Grim answered thoughtfully. "I have thought of a plan to trap him. It is a master stroke! I shall stop for ever the trickery of the Man with the Heart-shaped Scar!"

As he spoke he stepped to the table and wrote out an advertisement:

"Will the person who accidentally took Lord Noddington's soup tureen kindly call to-morrow night at the same address and exchange it for another much more valuable tureen, which is being carelessly left on the sideboard?"

"We will insert this in all the papers to-day," Grim explained. "The rest is easy."

"But, guv'nor," said the lad, "Lord Noddington has not got another tureen."

"That is just the idea," Grim said. "I am going to fool Harrogate. Instead of a soup tureen, I myself am going to take up my position on the sideboard. And when he comes I will smack his face so that he will never dare show it again."

Grim was as good as his word. The advertisement appeared, and next evening the incriminator curled up on the sideboard. Splinter sat at the foot of the stairs with an alarm-clock, which he was going to set off the moment Grim had made his capture.

The hours passed slowly by. Then through the window came two sinister forms. They were Hector Harrogate and the Mutt. They glided into the room and up to the sideboard.

Hector stretched forth his hand and—

"Foiled!" shrieked Grim, and flung himself at the cracksman.

It was a wonderful bit of cleverness. The moment Grim fell on the man the rogue crashed to the floor. Splinter rang his alarm-clock, and the old butler, who had been concealed all the time in the coal scuttle, scuttled into the room and turned on the lights.

Something bulged in Hector's coat pocket. Grim grabbed it!

It was the missing soup tureen!

Grim's ruse had worked, but in the excitement he had overlooked someone.

George Bung, the Mutt, had been watching with bated breath. As the butler crawled from the scuttle he pounced upon Grim, and so sudden was his attack that the incriminator rolled off his man. In a twinkling Hector was on his feet.

"So you have foiled me, Grim!" he said. "It shall not happen again. Next time I will foil you!"

As he spoke the heart-shaped scar swelled until it looked like a pumpkin. Even Grim was amazed. And Hector took advantage of his amazement to creep silently out of the room, followed by the Mutt.

Ten minutes later Grim realised that they had given him the slip. But he did not mind. He had got back the soup tureen and cleared up the most baffling case he had ever succeeded in clearing up.

THE END.



IN REPLY TO YOURS

Correspondence Answered by UNCLE EDWARD

(NOTE.—Readers of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY can write to me, and I will reply on this page. But don't expect a reply for four or five weeks. Address your letters or postcards to UNCLE EDWARD, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.—UNCLE EDWARD.)

"PEG" (Shropshire): Thanks for your nice little letter. I'd better tell you that I never get swelled head, and never show off, and I can't imagine what put such ideas into your head. I've told Willy that you'd like to hug him, and he says that he's not taking any risks. He says he only wants to be hugged by extra nice girls. So I told him that you're one, and he says he's willing to take a chance. I've given your love to Archie and Nipper, but they didn't seem very excited about it.

E. FRANCHEL (Kilburn): You must have quite a nice time, working at the British Empire Exhibition. The next time I'm there I'll adopt your suggestion, and bring some gloves with me, and we can have some boxing. But I warn you, you'll get floored in the first round.

ROSIE M. M. S. (Ilford): I wonder why all you girls ask me if I mind being called Ted? Why the dickens should I mind? Isn't it my own name? Thanks for your sympathy regarding Willy. My hat! You haven't any idea what I have to put up with from that young sweep. Still, he's my brother, and I suppose I've got to bear my own troubles.

J. W. B. G. A. F. W. (Wantage): Are you trying to be funny, or have you really got all those initials? So you are sorry to tell me that I am an absolute idiot? By George! You'd be a lot sorrier if I was with you now. And if you think it's a simple matter to pull my leg, you'd better think again! And what do you mean by saying that I should get a shock if I heard Irene's real honest

opinion about me? Of course, I can tell you the Seven Wonders of the World—but after you calling me an idiot, I won't. Not likely!

H. W. (Liverpool): Very nice of you to be so disappointed because there was no Trackett Grim story in the "Mag." the week you wrote. But don't sob about it—I shall keep them up indefinitely. Fatty Little doesn't write much for the "Mag." because he's always in the tuck-shop, and hasn't got time for anything else. The best swimmer in the Remove is Tom Burton.

"FELIX" (Ireland): Who's been calling me foolish and dunder-headed? Of course, it's only jealousy, as you say—but I'd like you to give me the names of the offenders. So my stories are only rubbish? I don't believe you're Irish at all! If you were, you wouldn't talk such rot.

"A REGULAR READER" (Edinburgh): So you've been reading the Old Paper for five years? You're the kind of chap I admire—especially when you say that you want the Trackett Grim stories to be a permanent feature. I am glad you liked the Dr. Karnak stories, but it isn't really a question for Nipper to decide whether we shall have some more on this style. Yes, lessons are forgotten until the holidays are over, thank goodness. I've given your kind regards to everybody in the Remove, and I hope you'll continue to follow our adventures for years to come. As for shifting Archie into the Remove dormitory, I think he's better where he is. He'd give us the pip with his fussy methods. But he's not such a soft chap as you seem to imagine. When it comes to a pinch, Archie always turns up trumps.

GEORGE TINDALL (Kensington): The champion fighting man in the Remove is Ernest Lawrence. At least, he's supposed to be. One of these days I shall have to challenge him, and then you'll know the real truth. Among the seniors, Edgar Fenton is the best all-round athlete. Thanks awfully for your nice remarks about Trackett Grim. You're one of the few sensible chaps who agree with me that my stories are

thrilling, and who appreciate the plots at their true value. Your desire for another competition is now fulfilled, I think, and I wish you the best of luck.

IRENE (Ireland): I don't know whether Ireland is your name, or whether you live there—but as your letter came from Greenwich, there's something suspicious about this. Still, it's only a detail. What does it matter where a letter comes from as long as I get it? But now I come to read your letter again. I've changed my mind. I didn't want your letter at all! You think the Trackett Grim stories spoil the "Mag." You call me a great bully! You don't believe a word about Irene Manners. You don't think she's got any good looks! By George! If you weren't a girl, I'd call you a silly idiot! And I don't believe your name is Irene at all. No girl with a name like Irene could write such piffle. And don't bother about loving Willy—he doesn't want it. And after writing all these insults, you calmly ask me for "a lovely long answer." Well, you won't get one. I made up my mind that I'd only give you a single line—so you see what you get for being saucy!

SID HEPTONSTALL (Dewsbury): Fathead! Hoping that I'll grow into "a good little boy like Willy"! I'm twice his size! That "Who's Who?" is being prepared now, so have some patience. Can I drive a motor-car? My dear idiot, can I walk? And the next time you call me a bully I'll get wild!

EILEEN (Balham): I've given Nipper your love, and he didn't seem to appreciate it a bit. He just grinned. And I've told Willy that you'd like him for a cousin. He doesn't seem to care; but you're quite welcome to him, as far as I'm concerned. Irene is certainly a sport; but you needn't worry about all you girls writing to me. You don't write to me at all, strictly speaking, you only write to Uncle Edward. Nobody is supposed to know that I'm anybody else. You may be Irish, but I'll bet you're not green.

DAVE MILLER (Everton): Don't be silly! Archie may be chummy with Irene, but he likes Marjorie better. He's polite and chatty with all girls, if it comes to that. I'm glad my Trackett Grim stories take your breath away. That's what they're meant to do. I always make them so thrilling that even Church and McClure feel faint when they read them. I've given them your sympathy, as you asked, but I can't understand why you asked me to do it.

DORIS TEMPLEWOOD (Bromley): I say, cheese it! Fancy starting your letter "My Darling Little Edward!" I'm not a giddy infant! And I'm not a nice

little boy, either. I really haven't got space here to give the names of all the inmates of the studies—but if you'll be a little patient, your wish will be granted. Full list of studies will be published soon in another part of the Mag.

HAROLD GRANT (Leeds): The best way to keep a cricket bat in good order is to always have it in constant use. You needn't trouble to biff Nipper—I've decided to do it unless he agrees to "In Quest of Gold" being continued.

BEN WORMALD (Leeds): This time you've pinched so much of Charlie's paper that he hardly had any left for himself! It's a wonder he didn't biff you, you young bounder! Still, you're a brick—the way you praise the Trackett Grim stories proves that you've got plenty of sense. As for your father's toe, I expect it's well by this time, so I needn't give any remedy. Besides, I'm not a doctor.

JACK RICKETT (Hayle, Cornwall): Good old Jack! Glad you like the Trackett Grim yarns so much still. I say, what's the matter with your dictionary? Timothy Tucker may be an ass, but when it comes to long words, he's a terror. And all the words he uses are real dictionary words, and apply in their proper sense. So don't blame T.T. I don't think Fullwood and Co. have got any cigarette cards—although they've got plenty of cigarettes. So pleased you like Dorrie's little articles. I haven't told Irene and Co. what you said about them marrying St. Frank's chaps because they might feel a bit shy. Still, I agree with what you say.

F. H. (Devizes): That question you ask isn't a joke at all, old man. Which would weigh the heavier, a pound of lead or a pound of feathers? Why, the lead, of course—because by the time you got the feathers out, half of them would have blown away.

ONE WHO LIVES AT CLAPHAM: It takes more than red ink to put the wind up me, you dotty lunatic! And if you think you could make me as tame as a lamb, you'd better think again. The next time I'm in Clapham I'll track you down and make you eat your words—including the red ink and the post-card.

ROBERT P. (Worcester): Ventriloquism is very difficult, but, as you say, it comes quite easy to me. Miss Irene doesn't take an interest in me because I'm good-looking. I think she'd like me just as much if I was plain. If I got a job on a newspaper as a journalist, you could bet the newspaper would create a sensation. Sexton Blake hasn't retired, you ass! He's a real man, and Trackett Grim is only the creation of my own brain.

A LOVER OF BOYS' BOOKS, LEICESTER: The Old Paper has been on sale since June 12th, 1915, and the first story about St. Frank's appeared in the issue for July 28th, 1917. Thanks for your nice letter, and I hope you'll continue reading the Old Paper indefinitely. By the way, I only biff Church and McClure when they deserve it. It's not my fault if they ask for trouble every two or three hours, is it?

AN ADMIRER OF MY FEATURES (Hull): If Hull was a bit nearer, I'm blessed if I wouldn't take a trip there and trace you to your lair. I don't mind you calling me a fathead so much, but why underline it? It's nothing else but adding insult to injury—especially when you underline it twice. I'll admit that a lot of things in the Mag are bosh, as you say, and I'll agree that it's time I was put in the First. But at St. Frank's the First is always called the Sixth.

NELLIE (Birmingham): Awfully sorry to hear about the sad loss of your step-mother. Rough luck about the Competition coupons. I hope you'll have better good fortune this time. I've given that message of yours to the Editor about those lost English people, but I don't think we shall be visiting that strange country again. I'd like to as much as you would, because we had some ripping adventures there. I'll see what can be done about Archie writing for the Mag.—but he's such a languid ass that it takes weeks to get a contribution from him. You mustn't take my quarrels with Church and McClure so seriously. They're not quarrels at all, really. We're great pals, and a few biffs now and again make things all the more chummy. I give up that riddle of yours about grandpa. Let's know the answer, will you?

WALTER GARNER (Highbury): I don't think you're quite right about that portrait—it doesn't look like me a bit. It's a funny thing you couldn't find Baker's Inn Road on that map of London. It's somewhere between Baker Street and Gray's Inn Road. I should have thought you would have known that!

POTHY (Stretford): Thanks for admiring my hair so much. As a matter of fact, I don't use any preparation on it at all. The gloss on it is quite natural, and the curls are all my own. So it's no wonder that chemist friend of yours couldn't answer your questions. Give my regards to your pater, and the next time you write be careful to choose a longer sheet of paper, so that you don't get to the bottom so quickly. I like your letter very much, and I shall be quite pleased to hear from you again. I have given your message to Nipper.

IAN MAC (Wishaw): I've always said that the Scotch people are brilliantly clever, and now I know it. You prove your smartness by describing my Trackett Grim stories as masterpieces. As you say, only a chap with a brain like mine could fathom out the intricate plots. In fact, sometimes they are so deep that I can't even discover the solution myself! And if the author can't elucidate his own mysteries, they must be pretty smart, eh? There's a piece in your letter that I can't understand. You refer to Irene Manners' future husband. Who is he? I should like you to tell me the name of this chap, because I'm interested. Irene hasn't said a word to me about it, and I don't believe she's even thinking of getting engaged. She's only fifteen, and too young. Now for your questions. The best footballer is Reggie Pitt. The best runner is Nipper. I told some other chap that Teddy Long was, but that was only my fun. The best high-jumper is Johnny Onions, and the best swimmer Tom Burton. The best writer is myself. You didn't ask this last question, but I thought you'd be interested. The Trotwood twins are still at St. Frank's, and you're bound to read something about them sooner or later.

"ANXIOUS" (Moreton, Cheshire): I've handed that suggestion of yours to the Editor of the Old Paper, and now it's up to him.

T. W. GINGER (Manchester): I can see you know how to use a typewriter. That letter of yours was beautifully typed—just as well as I could have done it, if not better. I believe in being frank, and you must be off your rocker to suggest that Church and McClure have always lived in constant peril. Do you think I'm an ogre, or what? I wonder why the dickens all you chaps like Willy? Of course, I'm not jealous, but I'm blessed if I can see anything to like in the little beggar. If you could only see him grubbing about with his rotten beetles and things, you wouldn't touch him with a barge-pole. And he's got the cheek of a dozen. I don't know who he takes after. About Frinton. Yes, he's still here, and he's now quite a decent chap. The other fellows you mention are also at St. Frank's. My statement that I have one sister between Willy and me is quite correct. Ena comes between us. But my elder sister, Edith, is married, and so she doesn't count. She's out of the family, so now you can understand. Don't worry about that Portrait Gallery—it's coming along all right.

ALAN POLLOCK (Cavan, Ireland): I don't want to be boastful, but surely you

can't need to ask me if Trackett Grim is a better detective than Nelson Lee. Has Mr Lee ever performed the amazing feats that Trackett Grim is doing in every one of my stories? Use your wits, old man! The "T.T." article is no more, so you are probably pleased. As for a "Who's Who?" this is being prepared even now, I understand. Sorry I can't reply to you personally, old son. If I started that sort of thing, I'd have dozens of readers after me in the same way. And these girls, you know— Oh, well!

MUTT (Dundrum, Co. Dublin): Another Irishman! What do you mean by saying "when I grow up I'll be a second Mark Twain"? When I grow up, indeed! And it's absolutely false to say that I blusa when I meet Miss Irene. The redness is only the result of running, or something. Marjorie is a very nice girl, but Irene beats her. I don't mean she beats her with a stick, but in the other way. By the way, are you any relation to Jeff?"

EVELYN (Cromer): Good for you Evelyn! Of course Willy ought to be spanked—and, what's more, he frequently is! Glad you like Archie. He's a languid bounder, but one of the best at heart. So you get the old paper on the cheap—because your sister buys it to read about Reggie Pitt! Not a bad idea, either! Yes, that picture on the top of my page is "supposed" to be me. I'll admit I look like the Bellton chimney sweep, and unless the picture is changed, there'll be serious trouble in the Editorial Department. Sorry I can't tell you what size boots I take. Just at present I'm only wearing shoes.

FRED REECE (Burford, Oxon): Hallo, Fred! Good man! Glad to hear you always look for Trackett Grim first. You couldn't do anything better. Yes, rather—I'm jolly lucky to have Irene for a girl chum. But, my dear ass, you needn't be sorry for Church and McClure. They may get billed about a bit, but they're so used to it, they hardly feel anything! Of course, the Remove chaps are not sweet on the Moor View girls. What an idea! We're just friendly, that's all. What do you mean—how am I progressing with my ventriloquism? I'm an expert, and don't need any further progress. Well, Toodle-oo, old man. Write again when you feel inclined.

"EVERYBODY ELSE" (Everywhere): I've got all your letters, boys and girls, but there's no more space this week, so I shall have to leave my replies until next week. But don't worry. I always reply to everybody, and I get my answers in as quickly as I possibly can.

UNCLE EDWARD.

TRAVEL TALES.



By An Old Boy

(Lord Dorrimore's Weekly Trifle)

No. 12.—A TUSSLE WITH A LION.

TO be embraced by a lion is by no means an experience to be desired.

We were in Somaliland, my friend Swayne and I, and a native who had done us many little kindnesses one day complained that he was losing his stock through lions, which had grown very bold.

Having made all our preparations, we sallied forth, and before long we were on the track of the king of beasts. When we got close enough we let fly with our rifles. Swayne missed, but my shot found its billet in one of the lions—a big fellow, perhaps the leader. He was only wounded, however, and not disabled. He came for me, and before I knew it, he almost had me in his paws, and I was looking into his face. His eyes were full of fury, his bared teeth were gnashing together, and his foul breath caused me nearly to faint. He lashed his tail in rage, as Swayne told me afterwards.

He was looking on in horror, eager to put in a second shot, but to do this was difficult without hitting me, so close was the head of the lion to my body. And, of course, we were moving and struggling all the time. Though I was in agony, and not a little affrighted, I kept cool. My one aim was to force the body of the lion well out, and so give Swayne a chance for a shot broad on. He got in two shots, and I began to hope, and my enemy began to weaken. But I knew he would make a last dying effort. That would be the supreme moment. Before he could do this, however, a third shot settled him.

Then I swooned. The doctors found that I had been bitten all over the body, though no bones were broken, and no vital part was irreparably damaged. Several weeks of fuming and fretting in hospital followed. But I had no anxiety to meet another lion—at all events, just then.

NERO: THE SUPER SINNER

By JACK GREY

NERO'S name has become proverbial for abnormal depravity. He was not merely an ordinary sinner. He was a monster of vice, cruelty, and iniquity. He overtopped the average sinner just as Mount Everest overshadows the other mountains and hills. One of those men who cause us to marvel that so much evil and sin can be concentrated in one individual: men whose sins go before to judgment.

His wicked deeds are notorious. Lying and deceit, robbery, cruelty and murder, were ordinary every-day incidents in his career. From these he proceeded to organised atrocities on a wholesale scale. The arena reeked with the blood of man and beast, which was shed to satiate his greedy appetite for cruelty and blood-thirstiness.

Everybody knows how he ordered Christians to be thrown to the wild beasts to make sport for the Romans; how he lighted his grounds on festive occasions with the burning bodies of Christian men—and women, and even children—which had been soaked in oil; and how he instigated the firing of his own capital, and fiddled while Rome burned. All this has passed into proverb.

Can anything be said for him—in mitigation of his atrocious crimes? Only this: that he was, in some sense, the product of his times and their conditions, as every man is; but not in any such sense as to destroy, or even to diminish, his personal responsibility. That remained unimpaired, and therefore he must bear the full blame of his ghastly wickedness.

Moreover, he had the misfortune to live in an age—and a city—which were cursed by some of the vilest women that ever lived. One of these was his own mother, a woman so corrupt and vicious that she seemed to be an incarnation of the Devil. Not only by her example, but by advice, incitement, and active instigation, she encouraged him in all evil ways, pampered and flattered him, and pandered to him. Her reward was to be murdered by him in the end.

An even worse woman was his second wife, Poppaea. His first wife, Octavia, was, however, as gentle and pure and good a creature as ever lived—the sort of woman that might have saved even the worst of men. But her very virtues nauseated him, and made her hateful in his sight. Her goodness showed up his vileness and made her unbearable. So he got a divorce. She never had a chance to transform him. He was a devil-man, if ever there was one.

ROMAN BATHS

By

BOB CHRISTINE

THE Romans were great bathers. Wherever they went they built baths. At all events, they did so after B.C. 312, the date of their first baths. Macaenas was one of the first to build public baths at his own expense, and his example seems to have inspired the emperors. For they vied with each other in lavishing public money on these establishments in order to gain popularity. Hence the baths (or *thermae*) of Agrippa (21 B.C.); of Nero (65 A.D.); of Titus (81 A.D.); of Domitian (95 A.D.); of Commodus (185 A.D.); of Caracalla (217 A.D.); of Diocletian (302 A.D.). Even the Emperor Constantine founded baths, and these seem to have been among the last.

Roman baths were extensive and elaborate institutions. They had warm baths, tepid baths, hot-air baths, and vapour baths. Cold baths they didn't care about. Tepid baths were the most popular, and the *tepidarium* was the most frequented place in the building. It was a great meeting-place, a social centre, where the news and gossip of the town circulated. The *tepidarium*, as we see from the ruins of Pompeii, was often highly decorated with reliefs in stucco, with rich marbles and mosaics, and was, in fact, a hall of art treasures, lighted very skilfully by clerestory windows.

The highest technical skill was displayed by the Romans in making walls and reservoirs impervious to moisture, in carrying water and heating it, and in constructing flues for conveying hot air through the walls. In fact, our own engineers might learn a few things from them. They had in use methods of using and conserving heat as applied to water which our own builders and artificers have but recently adopted.

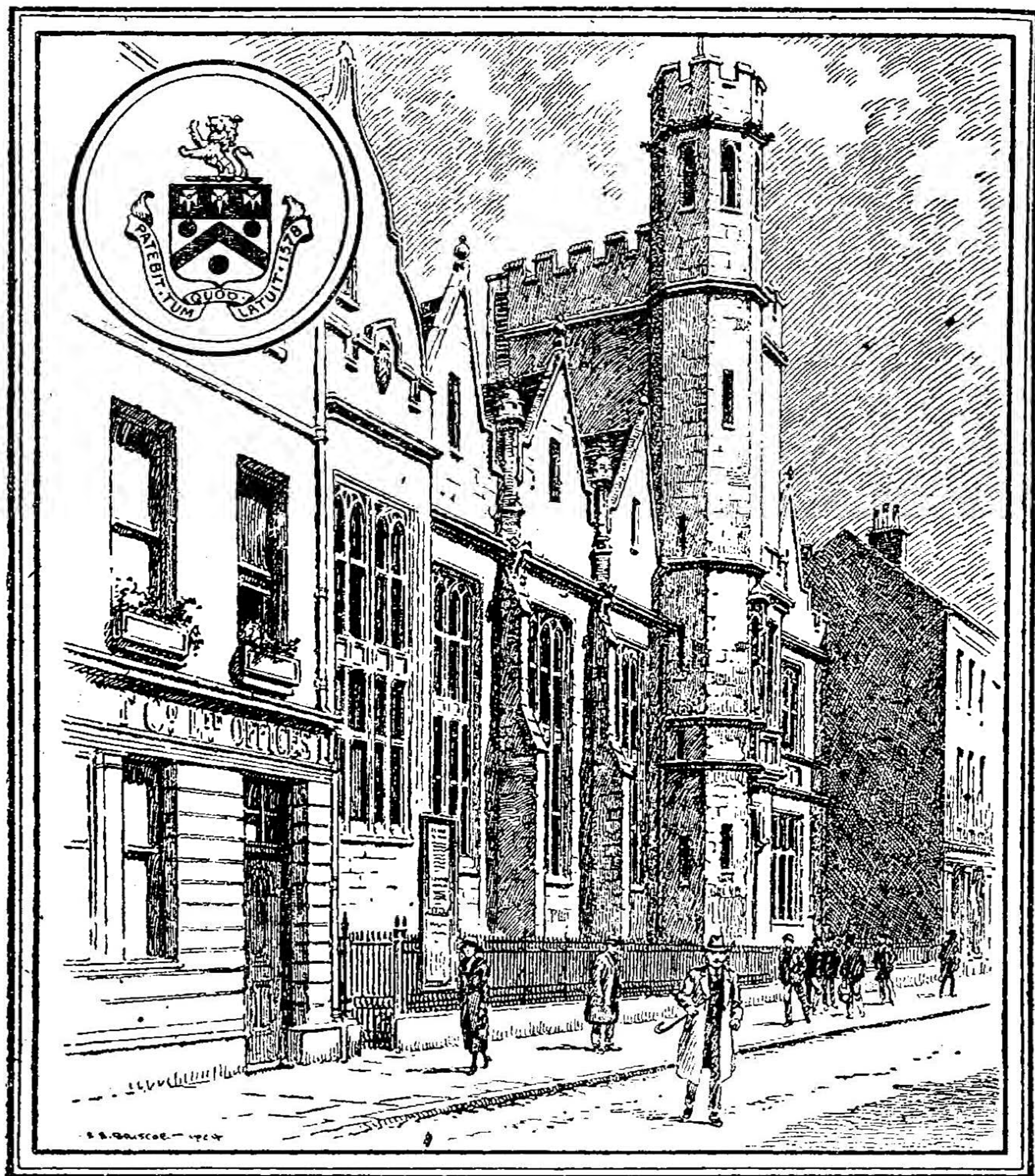
At Bath, which the Romans named *Aquae Sulis*, there are remains of magnificent Roman baths, and one of the principal baths there still receives its water through the original Roman conduit. These ruins, especially a part of a magnificent colonnade and the foundations on which it and the buildings above it rest, show how thorough the Romans were in their work. Their baths were as good as their roads. Higher praise could not be given.

Thermae, the name they gave their baths, proves their preference for hot water.

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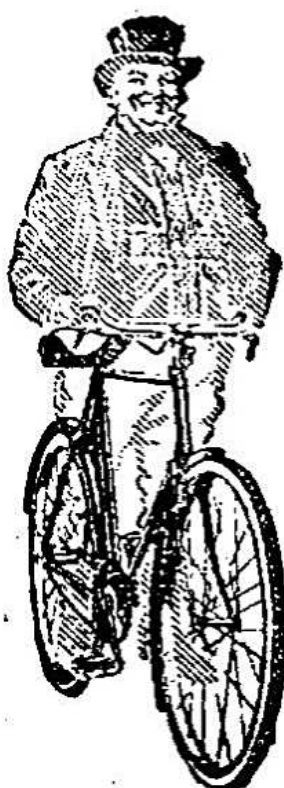
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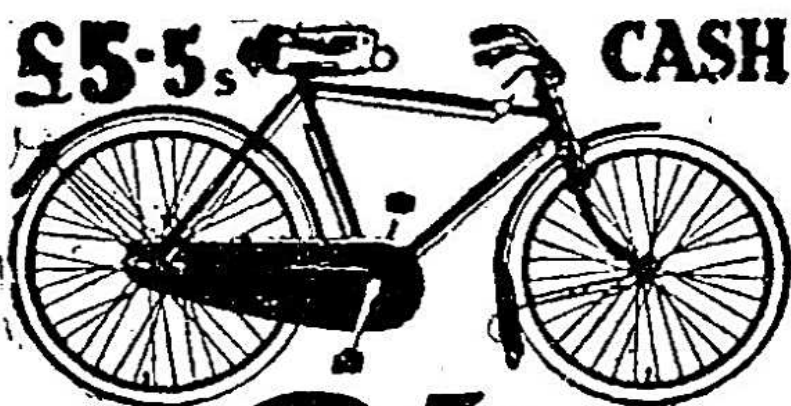
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