

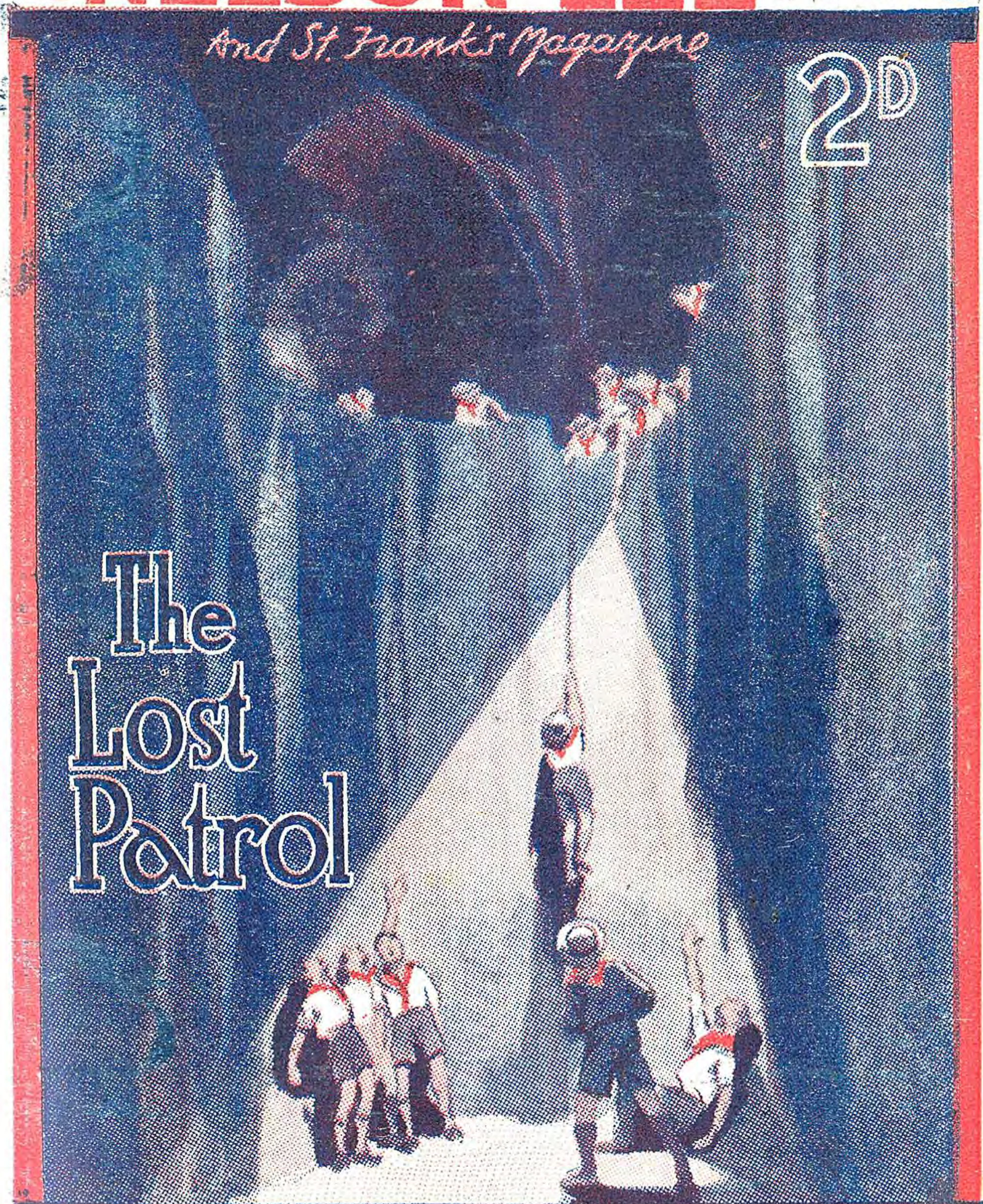
MORE ABOUT THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE!

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The Lost Patrol



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One by one the men climbed up the face of the cliff. And after mounting to a height of about twelve feet they vanished, leaving no trace.



THE LOST PATROL!

While encamped near Shingle Head, the St. Frank's Boy Scouts discover that Captain Starkey, a disreputable character from Caistowe, is conducting secret operations not far from the camp. The Scouts have good reason to suspect Starkey of trafficking in contraband, and they mean to investigate at no small risk to themselves. Starkey being a dangerous man when interfered with, as the story you are about to read will show.

THE EDITOR

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER I.

ROUND THE CAMP-FIRE.

"SMUGGLERS!" said Handforth impressively.

"Eh?"

"That's the truth of it, or I'm a Chinaman!" went on the leader of the Tiger Patrol. "Smugglers, by George! And if Captain Starkey isn't at the bottom of the whole giddy business I'll eat my haversack!"

There were six Scouts round the camp-fire. In addition to Church and McClure, the redoubtable Tigers consisted of Tom Burton, Owen major, and Dick Goodwin. Edward Oswald Handforth was the Patrol Leader, and his Scouts were never in any doubt regarding this point.

Shingle Camp was at peace.

It was just the hour when the St. Frank's Scouts were taking things easy—the hour before bed-time. Camp-fires were glowing in every part of the triple camp, and the summer evening was warm and quiet. The last glow of sunset was still visible in the western sky, but overhead the heavens were velvety, and countless stars twinkled.

Strictly speaking, there were three camps here, for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd St. Frank's Troops were complete units to themselves. There was a good deal of rivalry between the Ancient House and the Modern House Fourth-Formers, and so far, in scouting

practice, the honours were fairly even. The 3rd Troop, composed of Willy Handforth and his redoubtable fags, was not considered to be worthy of notice. But the fags were good Scouts, nevertheless.

"Smugglers!" repeated Handforth dreamily.

McClure threw a fresh log on the fire and grinned.

"You seem to have got smugglers on the brain, old man," he observed. "We don't know anything about it, so far. Have you been making some investigations on your own? We're all bursting to know!"

"Then you'll have to burst!" said Handforth, frowning. "I'm not ready yet; I'm thinking. And how the dickens can I think with you chaps asking me all sorts of dotty questions?"

"Oh, all right!" replied McClure contentedly. "We thought you wanted to discuss things. We'll talk about something else—cricket, for example. That wasn't a bad game we had yesterday, Dick."

"Jolly good game!" said Dick Goodwin, nodding.

Handforth glared round aggressively.

"We're not talking about cricket now, so don't start any of your rot!" he growled. "Captain Starkey is a smuggler, and he's using some of the caves for his nefarious purposes!"

"Souise me! That sounds a good word, messmate!" grinned Tom Burton.

"It means wicked," explained Handforth generously. "I've decided that the Tiger Patrol shall capture these rotten smugglers, and hand them over to the police. What's more, we're going out on special night practice later on—to do some investigating."

The Tigers looked at one another without their former grins.

"Here I say, chuck it!" protested Church. "It wouldn't do for us to interfere——"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "It won't be interfering to collar these smugglers! We're going to show all the other Patrols that we're the smartest in the camp. And you fellows have got to back me up!"

"But there's no proof——" began Owen major.

"Perhaps not—but we'll get it!" said Handforth grimly. "We've got heaps of suspicions. What about that affair on Starkey's schooner? There was something fishy about that. And what about the ghost a few days ago? Somebody tried to scare us all into changing our camping-ground, and nearly succeeded. I'll bet Starkey was at the bottom of the whole business!"

The other — Tigers made no comment. Handforth's shot was quite a shrewd one. For once he displayed genuine astuteness. The Scouts remembered the Ghost of Pirate Cove, for the affair was still fresh in their minds. The ghost had been exposed as a fake, but nobody had known who the culprit was.

It was true enough that Captain Jonas Starkey was in the neighbourhood with his schooner. And it was not much of a guess to conclude that he was bent upon some underhand work. And smuggling seemed to fit the case perfectly, particularly as the cliffs in this region were fairly honeycombed with deep and almost impenetrable caves.

Indeed, Nelson Lee, the Scoutmaster of the 1st Troop, had privately confided to Nipper that he had many suspicions regarding Captain Starkey. And Nipper himself

had come to the conclusion that the rascally skipper had attempted to scare the Scouts out of the neighbourhood. But this was the first time that Handforth had brought out such a suggestion.

Since the affair of the ghost the camp had quietened down, and the Scouts had devoted themselves mainly to practice and general sports. In fact, they had been having a very good time.

It was not really a holiday-camp, for the term was not yet over. But as St. Frank's was undergoing drastic repairs and altera-

tions, all the juniors were under canvas. There was only sufficient room at the old school for the seniors. Taking all in all, the juniors were highly satisfied with the arrangement. They were having the best of the bargain.

It was rather good sport being Scouts. By this time many of them had passed the tenderfoot stage, and were well on the way to winning various proficiency badges. They were out to prove that the St. Frank's Troops were as good, if not better than any others.

"It's all very well, Handy, but it can't be done!" said Church at length. "We're on our honour not to break bounds—not to leave the camp boundaries. So your investigating stunt is off!"

Handforth started, and then sniffed.

"Rats!" he exclaimed. "That was only in connection with the ghost. We're not on our word of honour now, so don't

try any of those tricks, my lad. We're going out on a tour of investigation to-night—and that's final!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TIGERS RECEIVE THEIR ORDERS.

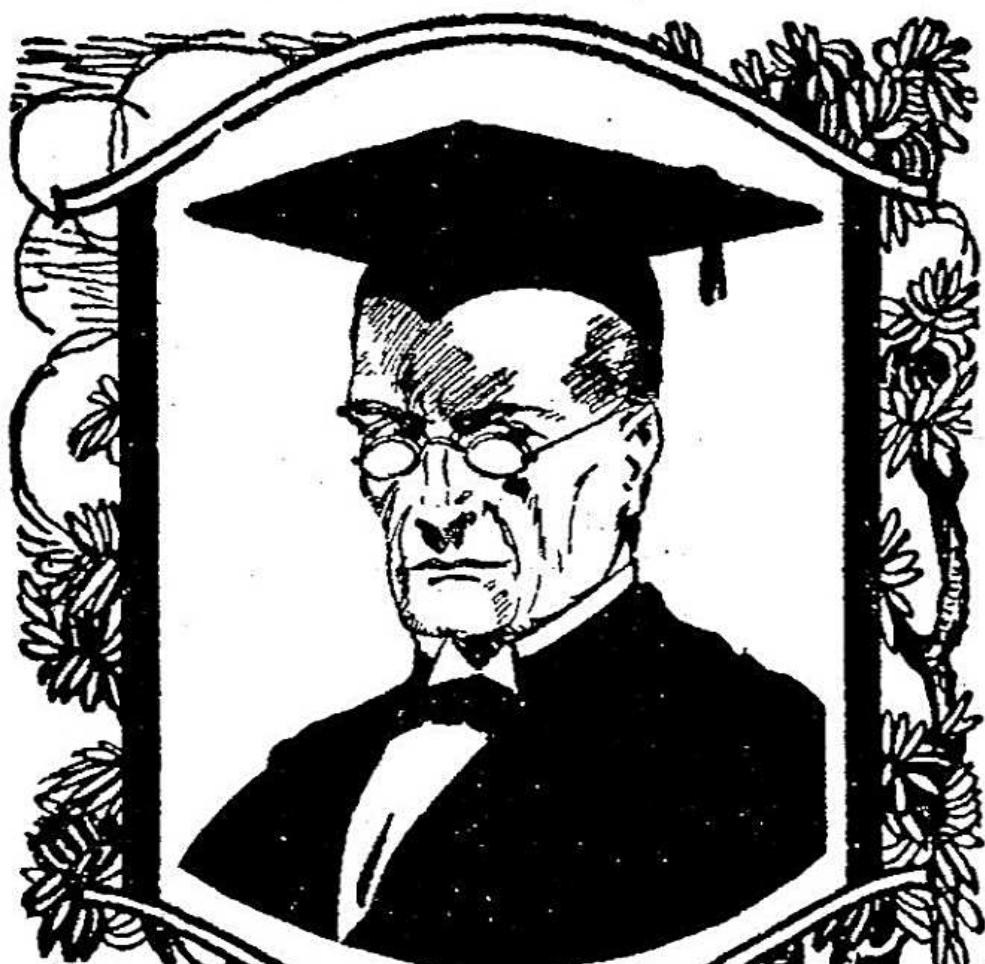


A FIGURE appeared in the firelight and approached.

"Hallo, Ted!" it said cheerfully. "Taking things easy? What's this about a tour of investigation?"

PORTRAIT GALLERY AND WHO'S WHO.

Fifth Series—Masters.



No. 5.—Mr. James Crowell.

The Master of the Ancient House section of the Fourth Form. A severe man, as a rule, but is generally just and fair. Is respected by all his boys, although, behind his back, they commonly refer to him as "Old Crow's Feet".

Willy Handforth lounged up with his hands in his pockets. His major looked at him severely. Somehow Willy generally had an irritating effect upon his elder brother.

"You mind your own business!" he said curtly. "And what are you doing in this camp? You clear off, my lad!"

"Well, that's a nice way to greet visitors, I must say!" exclaimed Willy. "I come here on purpose to cheer you up with my smiling dial, and all you can do is to insult me!"

"We don't want cheering up!" retorted Handforth. "This isn't your camp at all, and——"

"As a matter of fact, I was wondering if you had some cash," went on Willy calmly. "Funds are rather low among the Panthers, and just a small loan wouldn't come at all amiss. What about five bob?"

"My only hat!" groaned Handforth. "You always come bothering for five bob! It's a funny thing you can't think of any other sum——"

"That's easy!" interrupted Willy. "Supposing we say ten bob?"

"You won't get a penny!" roared Handforth, as the other Scouts grinned. "Understand—not a penny!"

"But I don't want a penny—I wouldn't take a penny," replied Willy. "Nothing less than five bob, but half a quid would be better. Don't make a fuss, Ted—fork out, and keep smiling!"

Handforth rose to his feet with deliberate grimness.

"Nine times out of ten you rush me into handing over some money," he said firmly. "But this is the tenth time. So you can clear off, and go to somebody else for your giddy cash. You don't get a brass farthing out of me!"

Willy shook his head sadly.

"I suppose that means that you're broke yourself?" he asked.

"Then you suppose wrong—I'm not broke!" retorted Handforth triumphantly. "But this time I'm not knuckling under to your demands. The Tiger Patrol needs all its cash to hunt the smugglers. We shall have to buy electric-torches, and all sorts of other things!"

"Smugglers, eh?" said Willy thoughtfully. "So that's the meaning of the tour of investigation to-night? My poor, deluded old chump! You don't really think that you'll catch a few tame smugglers, do you? Now, if you were talking about shrimps——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled the Tigers.

"Don't mention shrimps to me!" thundered Handforth, turning red.

Shrimps were a sore point with him. Only the previous week he had taken his Patrol out shrimping with the object of raising

some cash, but the affair had been a ghastly failure.

"And who told you anything about smugglers, anyhow?" he went on fiercely. "You don't know what you're talking about. Are you going quietly, or shall I chuck you out of this camp?"

Willy shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you won't lend me five bob?" he asked.

"No, I won't!"

"Then I shall have to think of some scheme for raising funds," said Willy. "All the same, Ted, you needn't think I've given up hope. I'll make your life a misery until you part with that cash."

He nodded, and strolled off. For once the cool leader of the Third had failed to "touch" his major. As a general rule, he bothered Edward Oswald until the latter, in sheer desperation, forked out the cash.

Doubtless Willy would have succeeded on this occasion, but for some reason he gave up the task before he had really started on it. When he left the vicinity of the Tigers' camp-fire he was wearing a thoughtful, reflective expression.

"Hallo! Bedtime!" exclaimed Church, as he rose to his feet. "Well, I'm not sorry! This open-air life is a bit strenuous, and I can do with a good sleep!"

Handforth frowned.

"What's the good of talking about sleep!" he demanded. "Haven't I told you that we're going on a tour of exploration? We'll capture those smugglers to-night——"

"My hat!" groaned McClure. "Are you still harping on that dotty idea? Cut it out, Handy, for goodness' sake! We're not going to back you up in this potty scheme!"

"Not likely!" agreed the other Tigers. "Bed for us!"

"By George! Mutiny!" gasped Handforth. "What's this? You—you rotters! Are you refusing to obey orders? Don't forget the Scout law!"

"Oh, my goodness——"

"And particularly Law 7!" added Handforth firmly. "You've got to obey orders without question——"

"We know it by heart, old man!" groaned McClure. "We know every law by heart, and we ought to, considering that you din 'em into us about twenty times a day. But it won't work, Handy. It's bedtime now, and any orders from you aren't official."

The other Scouts nodded. They had used the same argument before, and had more than once escaped duties which did not appeal to them. Their impulsive Patrol Leader was always getting up to some hare-brained scheme or other.

"Not official, eh?" snapped Handforth. "You've dished me like that before! But

never again, my sons! I've looked it up, and I find that Scouts are always Scouts. They've got to obey orders at any time of the day or night—and if they refuse they're not fit to wear the uniform!"

"Oh, but look here——"

"I'm not looking anywhere!" interrupted Handforth. "I've given you my orders, and if you don't obey them there'll be trouble. We're going on that investigation tour, and if you don't come willingly I'll drag you out of bed by your giddy hair!"

And the Tigers retired into their tent with hope definitely gone. There was something in Handforth's tone which told them that further excuses would be useless. Edward Oswald Handforth had made up his mind to search for smugglers, and wild horses wouldn't keep him from his purpose.

CHAPTER III.

THE FIGURE IN THE SOU'-WESTER.



SILENCE lay upon the camp. All lights were out, and only the last embers of the dying camp-fires revealed the presence of sleeping humanity. In all the tents the Scouts were sleeping after a hard, strenuous day.

In all, that is, except one. This tent was empty, and for the simple reason that the Tiger Patrol had just left it, and Handforth and his Scouts were now setting out on their special expedition.

They were in Scout formation, and moved at the Scout pace—walking and running alternately from one point of cover to another. Instead of creeping slowly and deliberately over the ground, they progressed in a succession of bursts, all dropping into cover for a few minutes to look round and see if the coast was clear for the next move. This was the recognised Scout practice.

Not that it was necessary now, but Handforth insisted. He further insisted on being the leading Scout of the formation, although this was contrary to custom. As Patrol Leader, his place was in the centre, with No. 2 leading the way. But Handforth airily maintained that he knew far better than Baden-Powell. In his opinion it was all rot for the Patrol Leader to be in the middle. How could he be a leader if he didn't lead?

The Scouts were equipped with well-equipped haversacks. They carried torches, ropes, and other articles which Handforth thought necessary for exploring the caves.

Church and McClure and the others were not particularly keen.

It was quite a jolly experience, exploring caves by daylight, but in the dead of night

the adventure didn't seem quite so entertaining. True, it made little difference once they were within the caves, for darkness would envelope them whatever the hour. But there is tremendous power in the imagination, and with the hour approaching midnight, the investigation struck a rather eerie note.

Besides, if there were really smugglers in the caves they were far more likely to be present now than in the daytime. For these gentlemen were figures of the night, and only appeared after darkness had descended.

But this was just Handforth's trump card.

"What's the good of going in the daytime?" he declared firmly. "It's like looking for a horse after the stable door has been left open. We shouldn't find a thing, but at night-time it's different. Ten to one we shall run right into the smugglers, and round 'em up!"

It was useless for his companions to point out that there was a slim possibility of getting rounded up themselves. Handforth took it for granted that the Scouts would get the better of the argument. Danger never entered into his calculations at all. When the point was mentioned he brushed it aside.

Progressing by their short runs and pauses, the Patrol reached the cliff edge. They all took care to crouch low as they moved, so that their figures would not show above the skyline. Handforth's followers had no difficulty in keeping their leader in sight, for he stood out against the skyline all the time. As a night-tracker, Handforth was hardly a good example.

The cliffs at this point were not sheer. They sloped steeply down to the beach, with one or two recognised cliff paths. The Tigers made their way down cautiously.

True, Handforth caused one or two minor avalanches now and again, and he constantly issued warnings to his chums to keep silent. But as he used his celebrated whispers for this purpose, all hope of silence was gone. Edward Oswald's whispers carried for about half a mile in the still air of the summer night.

The beach was reached in safety, and the Tigers were rather disappointed. With utter callousness, they had been inwardly hoping that Handforth would include himself in one of the avalanches, and be so buffeted that he would give up the project. But luck was against them.

"Good!" murmured Handforth, as they paused on the shingle. "The next move is to get to the edge of the bay, and then explore the first cave. We'll do the thing systematically, entering cave after cave until we find the smugglers."

"That'll take us about six weeks!" said Church sarcastically. "These caves extend for a tremendous way——"

"If it takes us six months we're going to do the job!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "Now come on, and remember, no noise!"

He crunched off through the shingle with enough commotion for a mortar-mixing machine. And the other Scouts followed, being equally careless. If their leader was making all this noise, why should they worry. Besides, how could any human being walk on shingle without kicking up a din?

But they had hardly progressed ten yards before Handforth came to a halt, and caught his breath in. Near the water's edge a dim, uncertain figure was moving. Even in the gloom the Scouts could see that the figure was wearing an oilskin and a sou'-wester. He was moving along in a stealthy, mysterious fashion.

"Great Scott!" breathed Handforth. "One of the smugglers!"

But it seemed rather remarkable that the smuggler should proceed on his way, all unconscious of the Scouts. He never once looked round, but progressed along the beach with even more stealthiness than before. Possibly he was very deaf, for it certainly seemed remarkable that he knew nothing of the shingle-crunching Scouts in his rear.

CHAPTER IV.

WELL ON THE TRACK.



"SOUSE my scuppers!" murmured Tom Burton. "But that lubber seems unconcerned. It strikes me he's just luring us on to the rocks, shipmates. Before we know where we are we shall founder!"

"I don't believe he's a smuggler at all," said Church suspiciously.

"All the better!" whispered McClure.

"Handy seems satisfied, so we might as well follow. I've got my own suspicions, but I won't say anything."

"By gum. You don't mean——" began Dick Goodwin.

McClure grinned and nodded, and the rest felt happy.

This expedition had suddenly taken on a different aspect. Instead of Handforth's followers being uneasy and unwilling, they entered into the chase with wholehearted keenness.

Edward Oswald, in the meantime, was thrilling with importance. He led the way along the beach in the wake of the sou'-wester clad stranger. He had taken it for granted that this mysterious figure

was a smuggler, and he never paused for a moment to consider the matter. Handforth was a wonderful chap for jumping to conclusions.

He didn't even ask himself why the smuggler was so small, or why he was so deaf. Surely no smuggler could be really successful when he couldn't hear six human beings in his immediate rear, crunching over loose pebbles?

"By George! He's going straight to the caves!" murmured Handforth triumphantly. "I knew it! He's going to meet old Captain Starkey with his giddy contraband! We shall capture the whole gang!"

Handforth's idea of straightness was peculiar. The smuggler was taking a zigzag course, and his movements indeed seemed singularly aimless. First of all he walked along the beach near the water's edge, then he turned at right-angles, and progressed up the beach.

He reached the cliff face, but failed to disappear, for at this point there were no caves at all. And, curiously enough, he started back in the direction he had come. One glance of his head to the left would have revealed the six followers. But for some unknown reason he kept his head completely averted.

The Tigers were beginning to realise that this was no ordinary case of tracking. Their quarry was fully aware of what was happening, and he was leading them on. But as Handforth didn't seem to be aware of this, the other Scouts took no steps to enlighten him. After all, he was the leader, and it was his duty to give orders. They ceased to take the affair seriously.

Once again the figure in the sou'-wester went down towards the sea. There was a sandy patch here, and he paused for two or three minutes, while he crouched low upon the sand. In the meantime the Tigers dropped down and waited.

"He must be waiting for somebody," whispered Handforth. "This is probably the meeting-place, and we shall see——"

He broke off as the miscreant rose to his feet, and set off on his travels once more. The Scouts followed, but Church suddenly paused, and stared at the sand where the stranger had been standing.

"My hat! Look here!" he breathed.

There were some marks on the smooth sand, clearly visible in the starlight. They represented a skull and crossbones, with one or two strange and weird symbols beside them.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth. "This is a message to the other smugglers, I'll bet. No. 5. You stand here on guard, and don't move until you get orders from me!"

But No. 5, as soon as the other Tigers had moved off, stealthily followed. He felt that he was quite justified in disobeying

orders. None of the Tigers really took their leader seriously.

The gentleman in the sou'-wester was now performing further mysterious rites. But this time he was standing near the water's edge, waving his arms like mill-sails. At first Handforth thought he was doing some semaphore signalling. But the Scouts knew such signals by heart, and it only took Edward Oswald a moment to see that the stranger's signals were apparently meaningless.

"It's a kind of code!" murmured Handforth promptly. "It must be the secret code of the smugglers. And what's that over there? My goodness! A boat!"

True enough, a small boat was pulling in-shore towards the beach. Even the other Tigers were now becoming intensely interested. They watched closely. Two figures jumped out of the boat, with astonishingly youthful alacrity, considering that they were hardened smugglers.

The newcomers were also clad in sou'-westers. Exactly why they should wear this garb remained a mystery. There was no wind, the sky was cloudless, and the necessity for storm garments appeared nil. But the fact didn't strike Handforth at all.

The desperate trio consulted together for a few moments. The two new arrivals had brought a huge bundle with them. They all set off along the beach with grim, stealthy strides.

"Come on!" whispered Handforth. "They've got the stuff with 'em! We've only got to follow 'em to their lair, and we can collar 'em red-handed! By George! We shall capture 'em with the goods!"

And the Tigers took up the trail again with increased interest.

CHAPTER V.

DOING HANDY A FAVOUR.



EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was surprised. For the past fifteen minutes he had been leading his scouts on the track of the villains. But the three smugglers, instead of making for the caves, had climbed the cliff-path, and were now on the downs—and making, for some extraordinary reason, for No. 3 camp.

At least, the reason was extraordinary to Handforth. The other Tigers were grinning in the darkness. Edward Oswald wasn't really a simpleton, although he appeared to be one at the moment. As Church had whispered to McClure, any fool could see what the game was.

But Handforth couldn't—and he was by no means a fool. But his obsession for detective work was so great that when he

was on the track he never paused to think things out. His one watchword in life was speed. He was hasty in everything. A moment's cool, collected thought would have told him the truth. But he had firmly made up his mind that these figures were smugglers, and there was an end of it. It was just one of Handy's little kinks.

"I'll bet they're on the pinch," he decided. "They've come to the camp to lay hands on anything they can grab. All the same, it's a bit mysterious," he added, frowning.

It wasn't mysterious for long.

Having penetrated into the camp of the 3rd Troop, the smugglers paused to stir up one of the camp-fires—one which had been well stocked with fuel beforehand. It blazed up readily, and the Scouts all paused, watching.

The first smuggler removed his oilskin and sou'-wester, and threw them aside.

Strangely enough, this desperate criminal was wearing the uniform of a Scout—and, incidentally, he was wearing a grin.

"Well, that's over, my sons," he remarked cheerfully. "A first-class piece of night-practice—"

"Willy!" gasped Handforth blankly.

He stood there, fighting for breath. It was a terrible shock to him to find that this desperate criminal was merely his younger brother. And the other smugglers now revealed themselves as Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon, Willy's closest companions, and also members of the Panther Patrol.

To the other Scouts the revelation came as no surprise. They had, indeed, suspected it all along—not that they would ever be rash enough to mention this to their leader. Their duty was to be thoroughly astonished.

"Willy!" ejaculated Church. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

"Souise my main deck!" gurgled the Bo'sun.

Handforth attempted to speak, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Mingled with his disappointment was a rapid rising sense of indignation, tinged with rage. He had led his Scouts on a wild-goose chase for the last half-hour. They had simply been following a trio of fags!

Handforth rushed forward, red in the face with emotion.

"You—you young rotters!" he burst out breathlessly.

"Eh?" ejaculated Willy, turning. "Oh, hallo, Ted! What about the tour of investigation? How's everything going?"

"You—you young spoofer!" howled Handforth. "What are you doing out of your beds at this time of the night—wearing sou'-westers—prowling about the beach? And what's in that bundle?"

"This?" said Willy, referring to the parcel his chums had carried. "Oh, nothing—merely a bag of straw."

"Straw!" gasped Handforth. "But—but —"

"Well, we had to carry something," ex-

plained Willy calmly. "You see, we've been doing a little night practice."

"Night practice! I—I thought——" Handforth paused, and controlled himself with an effort. "What do you mean, night practice?" he went on, seizing his minor by the shoulder. "I believe you went down to the beach on purpose."

"Of course, I went on purpose," agreed Willy. "You don't think I walked there in my sleep, I suppose? As a matter of fact, Chubby and Juicy and I had a little talk just before lights-out, and we decided to do you Tigers a good turn."

"A good turn?" repeated Handforth dazedly.

"Sorry for us?" repeated Handforth feebly.

"Well, that smuggling business, you know," said Willy. "We thought it was a bit rotten that you should spend your time tracking, and meet no genuine smugglers. So we provided you with a thrill."

"A thrill!" roared Handforth, recovering his voice. "Why, you—you young fathead! You deliberately tricked us! You went down on the beach, dressed in those sou'-westers, on purpose to put us on the wrong track!"

Willy looked round in amazement.

"Hear that, you chaps?" he asked blankly. "That's all the thanks we get! We lose



There were some marks on the smooth sand, clearly visible in the starlight. They represented a skull and crossbones, with one or two strange symbols beside them.

"Well, a good deed, if you like," amended Willy. "Strictly speaking, this is Tuesday's good deed—we're about three behind. Those good deeds come round so jolly quickly, you know. A chap's liable to forget 'em, and it's awkward when they accumulate."

The Tigers grinned, and Handforth closed his fists convulsively. Willy coolly stirred up the fire, and made the blaze brighter.

"You—you did us a good turn?" repeated Handforth thickly.

"Exactly," said his minor, turning with a blazing stick in his hand. "The fact is, we were sorry for you."

our beauty sleep, we trudge up and down that beach for miles, and all he can do is to abuse us!"

"Disgusting!" said Chubby Heath severely.

"Base ingratitude!" declared Juicy Lemon, with a snort.

Handforth clenched his fists dangerously.

"All right—just you wait!" he said tensely. "I won't do anything now—there isn't time! But wait until to-morrow! By George, I'll pay you out for this business!"

He turned on his heel, and found his own Scouts grinning from ear to ear. But they instantly composed themselves, and he glared at them aggressively.

"Come on—we've had enough of this rot!" he declared. "Now then, No 3! None of that edging away! Get into formation, and follow me!"

The Tigers marched away, and Handforth gnashed his teeth as he heard gleeful chuckles from the rear. Willy & Co., at all events, seemed to be enjoying themselves.

CHAPTER VI. SCOUT SIGNS.



"WELL, it was a bit of a frost, but you can't blame those kids," remarked

Church. "They're an irresponsible crowd. They never seem to realise that you're in deadly earnest, Handy. They always try to pull your leg."

"I'll make 'em suffer for it!" growled Handforth fiercely.

"Oh, well, let's get to bed," yawned McClure. "I'm feeling tired—"

"Bed!" echoed Handforth, staring. "You—you dotty lunatic! What are you talking about bed for?"

"It's not far from midnight—"

"What do we care about the hour?" snorted Edward Oswald. "We came out to-night to hunt for smugglers—and we're going to hunt for smugglers! Understand? We haven't started yet!"

The patient Tigers were on the point of showing their claws.

"Haven't started?" ejaculated Owen major indignantly. "Why, we've been out an hour! It wasn't our fault that you followed your minor about! We knew who it was all the time—I—I mean—"

"Chuck it, Handy!" put in Church hastily. "Save it up for to-morrow. It'll be a lot better to explore the caves by daylight. It's a half-holiday, too. The smugglers must have gone by this time, anyhow."

The Tigers gathered round their leader in a mutinous knot.

"All right!" said Handforth, with deadly calmness. "All right! Go back to bed! Who cares? Go and sleep like a lot of—of sloths! I don't want you with me now—I wouldn't have you at any price!"

"Oh, but look here—"

"I'm through with you!" interrupted Handforth bitterly. "Do you hear—finished! I'll go and capture these smugglers single-handed. And you can go and loll in your beds, and dream! It's all right—you needn't say anything more. But I'm disgusted with you!"

The Tigers looked at one another uncomfortably. When Handforth was in this mood he could put an awful amount of sting into his tone. Besides, his suggestion was unthinkable. To let him go off on his own was quite out of the question. It seemed that his patrol would be compelled to con-

tinue the night's adventure, after all. Rebellion was worse than useless.

"All right—we'll all go!" growled Church. "Hear, hear!"

The others assented reluctantly, knowing it was the only course.

"I'm not sure I want you now!" snapped Handforth. "But as you've begged me so persistently I'll let you come! But don't forget—no more growls! You don't seem to realise that I'm doing you an honour! Think of the prominence we shall receive in the newspapers! 'Tiger Patrol of the 1st St. Frank's Troop captures smugglers near Caistowe.' That's one of the headlines! Doesn't it make you thrill with pride?"

Church sighed.

"Oh, rather!" he said resignedly. "Well, let's go and capture the smugglers, and get it done with! With luck, we ought to have it over in an hour! Perhaps one of us had better go to the coastguard station, and report the capture at once," he added, with a tinge of sarcasm.

"No, that wouldn't do," said Handforth, taking him seriously. "We'll grab the rotters, and march them to the coastguard station ourselves. That'll be a lot more dramatic. Come on!"

"Just a minute," put in Dick Goodwin. "Wouldn't it be a good idea to leave some signs as we go along?"

"Signs?"

"You know—Scout signs," said Dick. "For example, we'll pile up the stones when we see them. Bend shrubs, make marks in the sand, and that sort of thing. You know—arrows pointing in the direction we've gone. It'll help the others, in case they have to come and search for us," he added.

Handforth glared.

"Do you think we're going to get lost?" he demanded wrathfully.

"Well, it's a bit of a risky game, tha knows," said Goodwin. "And you're a real champion at making signs, Handy. It's all Scout practice, too—"

"Oh, well, perhaps you're right," admitted Handforth, thawing. "There's nothing like taking every precaution—although, of course, nobody will ever need to follow the marks. We shall probably be back in about an hour."

His optimism was as strong as ever. As for the other Tigers, they assured themselves that they would be back within the hour if their persuasive powers were of any use. They would give Handforth his head for a brief time, but after that they would drag him back by force, if necessary.

Goodwin's idea to leave signs in their wake was an excellent one, for it caused a certain amount of delay, and thus Handforth wouldn't be able to get too far from camp. Sooner or later his own enthusiasm would wane, and he would be only too ready to return. His chums knew him.

It is doubtful if Edward Oswald himself really expected to find any smugglers. But he always liked to delude himself in these matters. While he was actually engaged on the task his belief was strong. But he was a volatile sort of fellow, and his effervescence soon simmered down if he met with no swift results.

And so the Tigers once more went on their quest. But as they passed down the cliff-path, stones were piled one on top of the other, grasses were twisted into knots, small bushes were bent over, and similar signs were made—indicating the route which had been taken.

Down on the beach every available patch of sand was used for the purpose of leaving arrows and other indications of direction, with a roughly executed Tiger's head now and again.

The caves were approached at last, and even Handforth himself had no inkling of the startling events which were to immediately follow.

CHAPTER VII.

NOT ACCORDING TO PROGRAMME.



HANDFORTH came to a halt and peered forward.

"This looks like one of the most promising caves," he murmured. "I'll go in first, you fellows, and you can follow in single file. Got your torches? Good! Don't switch 'em on until we're right inside."

"All right—lead, on, old son!" said Church.

They entered the cave with just a slight thrill. None of the Scouts were nervous—being six strong they had little to fear. They were armed, too, for their staves would come in very useful in the event of a fight. Not that there was likely to be one.

The cave proved to be uninteresting. It only penetrated twelve or fifteen feet, and then ended abruptly. But Handforth insisted upon placing his light in every corner and investigating every inch of floor space.

"Satisfied?" asked Owen major at length.

"Yes, there's nothing here," growled Handforth. "But you never know with these caves—they've got all sorts of hidden openings. There's one cave along here which you can't see until you're right up to it. We shall come to that presently."

The Tigers reached the open once more, went some yards along the beach, and then entered the next cave. This seemed to be more promising. Although the opening was wide the rock sides narrowed in, and became almost a tunnel. And this led sharply upwards into mysterious blackness.

"By George! Footprints!" muttered Handforth keenly, as he flashed his torch-

light upon the sandy floor. "See 'em? They're recent ones, too!"

The other scouts could see that the sand was, indeed, covered with recent footprints. They were large, too, and could only have been made by men.

"I say, we'd better not venture in here," murmured Church uneasily. "I'm not a funk, and I know there are six of us, but it would be a bit awkward if we met three or four men—"

"No need to worry," interrupted Goodwin. "I expect these footprints were made by some of the visitors from Caistowe. They come and explore these caves sometimes."

Most of the Tigers regarded the prospect of finding smugglers as too ridiculous for words. Yet Handforth, in all truth, was not such a duffer in his calculations and deductions. He was far nearer the truth than his chums believed. His one mistake was in his methods. It was a fatal move to enter the caves with such rashness.

"Visitors be blowed!" said Handforth tensely. "These footprints were made by the smugglers. And, what's more, they're in the cave now. Haven't you chaps got any noses?"

The others sniffed the air and started.

"Tobacco!" breathed Church, startled.

It was very faint and very difficult to distinguish amid the smell of seaweed, but all the Scouts were trained to use their sense of smell. And, sure enough, there was a trace of stale tobacco-smoke in the air.

Before the others could make any further comment, Handforth led the way onwards. They followed with a new sensation. The affair wasn't a mere "lark," after all. There was a chance of something exciting. That which they had considered impossible now seemed even probable.

The further they penetrated into the cave, the narrower it grew. And after a time there was a sharp turning to the left. And here the cave abruptly opened out again. Handforth found himself stepping into a kind of big cavern, where his light failed to penetrate.

The other five Tigers came in his rear, and walked out into the wider cavern. Church was the last man, and he fancied he heard a movement close beside him. He glanced round, and saw a kind of shadow.

"I say!" he gasped. "I just saw something—"

"Good-evening, young gents!" exclaimed a harsh voice out of the darkness. "This is an unexpected pleasure, I'm sure! By sharks! We've caught 'em nicely, Mr. Trapp—the whole crew!"

The Scouts, utterly startled, turned their lights upon the voice. Captain Jonas Starkey was standing there, and on one side of him was Mr. Trapp, his mate. On the other side was another man—a big,

burly-looking ruffian of the longshoreman type.

They had trapped the juniors with extreme simplicity.

Hearing them coming up the cave, they had waited in the darkness against the rocks until all the Scouts were in the wide cavern, which was, in fact, a blind end. And now Captain Starkey and his two men were barring the only exit, which was narrow and low.

The three men were armed with powerful electric-lamps—not torches, but lights of much greater intensity. These had been switched on, and the cave was brilliantly illuminated.

"I knew it!" roared Handforth triumphantly. "Smugglers!"

"Howling cyclones!" roared Captain Starkey. "D'ye mean you came here on purpose to— By mackerel, Mr. Trapp! It's a good thing we laid low. These kids are dangerous!"

"I allus said so," declared the mate grimly. "Interferin' young varmint— that's what they are! We did our best to scare 'em away, but it wasn't no good! Seems like we'll 'ave to do something more drastic."

"You silly fat-heads!" snorted Handforth. "We've come here to capture you—and we've done it, too! Come on, you chaps! One rush, and it's over! We've got 'em whacked!"

And the Tiger Patrol made a sudden rush at the enemy. All six juniors realised that it was their only chance of escape. Handforth was the only one who had hopes of capturing the smugglers. The other five were thinking of getting out of this trap with whole skins.

Within ten seconds a fierce battle was raging.

And the odds, although they were in the minority, were entirely with Captain Starkey and his two burly companions. The six Scouts, with all their pluck and fighting ability, were no match for such grim, relentless opponents.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MISSING PATROL.



FATTY LITTLE, of the Curlew Patrol, and the chief cook of the 1st St. Frank's Troop, looked round the marquee with an eagle eye. It was breakfast-time in camp, and practically all the Scouts were present. "Can't see any of the Tigers," said Fatty, frowning. "What's the good of me getting a special breakfast if the chaps don't turn up? It isn't often we have mushrooms—"

"Don't worry about Handy and his crowd," interrupted Nicodemus Trotwood. "Nobody's seen the Tigers this morning. They must have got up early and gone off on some cross-country practice. There's no accounting for Handforth. It would be like him to rouse his Patrol out in the middle of the night."

"All the same, it's rather queer that they should be absent at breakfast-time," said Reggie Pitt, the Leader of the Hawks. "It isn't often that chaps keep away at meal-times. I expect they'll turn up in a few minutes."

And Handforth & Co. were forgotten again.

There had been many comments during the past hour. For the Tigers had failed to turn out of their tent at the usual hour. Investigations had proved that the tent was empty. So it was quite clear that the Tiger Patrol had left camp while all

the others slept.

By the time breakfast was over the talk was starting again, for Handforth and his men were still conspicuous by their absence. And when lessons commenced, Nelson Lee himself evinced a curiosity.

All the Scouts, of course, were obliged to spend a few hours a day at their ordinary school work, and lessons were conducted by the respective Scoutmasters of the three Troops.

"Does anybody know why the Tigers are not here for roll-call?" asked Nelson Lee,

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when Handforth and his five Scouts failed to answer their names. "I understand they have not been seen at all this morning?"

"That's right, sir," replied Nipper, nodding. "But there's nothing very alarming in that. Handforth is capable of taking his Patrol off on any sort of wild-goose chase."

"I hardly think his Patrol would willingly remain absent all this time," replied Nelson Lee. "I shall have to make inquiries. I have heard a rumour that the Tigers left the camp late last night."

"You mean they've been away all night, sir?" asked Pitt curiously.

"So it would seem—"

Nelson Lee broke off as Willy Handforth entered the tent. The captain of the Third saluted and nodded cheerfully. But he was not looking quite so cheerful and care-free as usual.

"Seen anything of my major, sir?" he asked after a glance round.

"No," replied Lee. "As a matter of fact, we were just talking about him. None of the Tigers have been seen this morning—"

"Then it's jolly queer, sir," interrupted Willy. "I think something must have happened to 'em. They left the camp late last night, and went off on a tour of investigation—looking for smugglers, or something."

Nelson Lee started, and the other Scouts looked alert.

"Looking for smugglers, eh?" repeated Lee slowly. "How do you know this, Handforth minor?"

"I happened to hear Ted saying something, sir," replied Willy. "In fact, Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon and I did all we could to stop the thing. We led the Tigers on a wild-goose chase, and we thought they'd go to bed after that. But it seems to me they went after the smugglers, in spite of our strenuous efforts."

"Tell me the whole truth, Willy," said Nelson Lee quietly.

The fag did so, and the Fourth-Formers listened with interest. They were all grinning by the time Willy had finished.

"I was just doing Ted a good turn, sir," he concluded. "But what's the good? The fathead never learns anything, and the more you do for him the less he appreciates it! I'll bet he took the Tigers off to the caves, and they've lost themselves. I'm feeling a bit anxious, sir."

Nelson Lee considered the position. It was more alarming than he cared to admit. He was well aware that Captain Starkey was active in the neighbourhood, and that the rascally skipper was engaged in some secret and underhand work. And the non-return of the Tigers indicated that something of this sort had occurred.

Nelson Lee, however, was not the kind of man to act on impulse. There was no direct evidence that Handforth & Co. had

met with disaster. Knowing Edward Oswald well, Lee was quite prepared to believe that the Tigers had gone off on a perfectly innocent and harmless mission.

At the same time, a move of some kind was essential. And the Scoutmaster-detective made up his mind after a very brief deliberation.

"There will be no lessons this morning, boys," he said crisply. "Each Patrol will set off in different directions, and search for the Tigers. The instant any sign of them is discovered word must be sent back to camp."

"Oh!"

"Hurrah!"

"Thanks awfully, sir!"

"This matter may be trivial, or it may be serious," continued Lee. "I am inclined to believe that it is trivial. But as it would be inadvisable to take any chances, a search must be made at once."

"We'll all start without delay, sir," said Nipper.

"I'll leave it to the Patrol Leaders to select their fields of search," went on Nelson Lee. "It will be better, I think, if you hold a little consultation to begin with, and map out your ground beforehand. Then there will be no possibility of two Patrols covering the same locality. In any case, you must all return by lunchtime."

And the 1st Troop set about their task with great eagerness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SEARCH-PARTIES.



BEFORE ten minutes had elapsed the 2nd and 3rd Troops were also in the swim. Mr. Beverley Stokes allowed his own boys to miss lessons, and so the Wolves and the Buffaloes and the other Modern House Patrols took their places in the hunt.

Willy had very little difficulty with Mr. Clifford. Indeed, the Scoutmaster declared that he would take an active part in the search himself. And so within a very short time all the St. Frank's Scouts were setting off in a dozen different directions.

The consultation of Patrol Leaders was a good idea. For practically every Patrol wanted to go off to the beach and explore the caves. But this, as Nipper and Pitt realised, would have been a mere waste of time. There was a strong possibility that Handforth & Co. had gone in that direction, but it did not amount to a certainty.

According to Willy's story, the Tigers had been out all night. And this was as good as verified, for an examination of the Tiger's tent proved that the beds had not been slept in. This was direct evidence

that the six Scouts had left the camp the previous night.

But with such an erratic fellow as Handforth in control, the movements of the Patrol could only be guessed at. They might have gone to the caves, and they might not. It was quite like Handforth to suggest a long cross-country patrol, for no other reason than to give his Scouts some extra practice.

So many search-parties set off towards Bannington, Caistowe, Edgemore, Bellton, and in fact in every possible direction. The Lions and the Hawks were the two Troops which explored the beach.

And they met with partial success at once.

"Hallo! Look at this!" exclaimed Nipper keenly, as he led his Patrol down the cliff path. "Stones piled on the top of one another. And there are some bent bushes down there, too!"

"They left plenty of signs, to show their direction, anyhow!" declared Watson. "We're on the track!"

"Hadn't we better call to the other Patrols, and let 'em know that we've picked up the trail?" suggested Alf Brent.

"No," replied Nipper. "We've picked it up, but we don't know how far it will lead us. And it's far better to have every inch of ground covered."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie Glenthorpe. "I must observe, laddies, that the dashed thing appeals to me. I mean, this tracking stuff. It provides a good old thrill in the marrowbone department."

"I'll bet we're wasting our time," said Singleton. "The Tigers will probably turn up in camp while we're all away. That would be just like Handy."

"Well, never mind—it's a lovely morning, and we've been excused lessons, so why should we worry?" said Nipper briskly. "Let's get on."

They followed the signs without much difficulty. Down on the beach they spread out in open fashion. A little further off, the Hawks, under Reggie Pitt, were similarly engaged.

And in several patches of sand they found roughly executed marks, pointing arrows, the Patrol sign of the Tigers, and so forth. And they were led with certainty towards the caves.

"It looks a bit serious," said Reggie Pitt, as he and Nipper consulted in front of one of the cave-entrances. "The Tigers came here all right, and there's no indication that they returned. I'll bet my boots they've got lost in one of the deep caverns! These cliffs are simply honeycombed with caves, you know. Some of them penetrate a terrific way!"

"We shall have to explore every one until we come upon a definite clue," said Nipper grimly. "You take this cave, Reggie, and

I'll lead my men to the next one. And keep your eyes open for the enemy."

But a thorough exploration of the caves failed to bring any good result. Here and there a few marks were found, but there was nothing which could really be called a clue. Footprints and disturbances in the sand were only to be expected, for at this time of the year all sorts of people took it into their heads to explore the famous Caistowe caves.

The Panthers and the Rams and another Third Form Patrol were exploring the caves, too, for Willy was almost certain that his major had come in this direction. And the fags had not been included in the general plan of campaign. Their search-parties chose their own fields of activity.

And while the caves were being thoroughly explored by all these Scouts, other Patrols were going up and down the countryside, keen and alert. Inquiries were made in every direction.

But all efforts were fruitless.

The morning was passing, and Handforth & Co. still remained missing. Not one of the searchers had met with success. Even the Lions and the Hawks, after their hopes had been raised high, were baffled.

The Tiger Patrol had utterly disappeared, leaving no trace.

CHAPTER X.

A GLIMPSE OF ST. FRANK'S.



THE Curlews happened to join forces with the Wolves in Bellton High Street. The two Patrols belonged to rival Troops, but there were no attempts at mimic warfare this morning. All the Scouts were concentrating their efforts on the search.

"Any luck?" asked Buster Boots, as he called his Wolves to a halt.

"Haven't heard a thing," replied Nicodemus Trotwood. "We've been searching all the lanes, and a good part of the downs. Nobody seems to have seen any Scouts at all this morning."

"We found the same," said Boots. "I thought about going along to St. Frank's and inquiring there."

"Why, that's our idea!" declared Solomon Levi. "Handforth is such an erratic chap that he might have taken his Tigers back to the school for something. We'd better all go together."

"The suggestion is gloriously preposterous," agreed Hussi Kahn, the Indian junior, who was also a Curlew. "Come, we will rush onwards, and dawdle towards St. Frank's. The greater the magnificent speed, the sooner shall we know the ridiculous truth."

So the Curlews and the Wolves joined forces, and descended upon St. Frank's together. They were so near-by that it seemed a pity to leave the old school out of their search. But they had very little hope of making any startling discoveries. They all believed in their hearts that Handforth & Co. were somewhere on the beach.

They arrived at the familiar old gateway, and turned into the Triangle. Somehow, it was rather good to catch a glimpse of St. Frank's again. Camp life was all very well, but even living under canvas had certain disadvantages. And all the juniors were interested in the old school.

"By jingo!" ejaculated Buster. "They've been busy!"

St. Frank's was looking different.

Where the Modern House had once stood there now arose festoons of scaffolding, with grey stone buildings coming into being behind the skeleton of woodwork.

"I believe they're putting up two new Houses instead of one," remarked Nick Trotwood with interest. "We can't see very well at present, but I believe I'm right. There'll be some big changes here by the end of the summer holidays, anyhow."

"Rather!" agreed Percy Bray nodding. "They've started on the Ancient House, too—they're changing the shape of everything. I expect some of the fellows will kick. They don't like alterations."

John Busterfield Boots sniffed.

"Old fashioned fatheads!" he said tartly. "That's the worst of most English people—they like to stick to old ideas. I'm English, but I'm different to that. Progress is my motto—advancement! The more changes there are the better. It shows we're alive and kicking. Schools that always remain the same are simply dead!"

"There's something in that," agreed Nick. "Well, I must say they're making a good job of it. See the old-fashioned windows and buttresses? They're putting up these buildings in the old style, so that they'll harmonise with the Ancient House."

"A jolly good idea, too!" declared Levi. "The Modern House always looked too new and out of place. By my life! By the time they've finished St. Frank's will be worth living in."

A whole army of workmen was busy, and the place was simply a hive of activity. Steam engines were hissing, cranes were groaning, and great lorries were constantly coming and going. And in the midst of all this building activity the Ancient House remained sedate and undisturbed. It was filled with the senior Forms—now at work.

But as the two Patrols advanced into the Triangle, a tall, lanky figure in flannels emerged from the lobby. He paused for a moment, and then came out, smiling benevolently

"Ah, a few of Britain's future warriors!" he observed with a beaming smile. "Good-morning, brothers. Take no notice of the noise from the north-east corner. We are becoming accustomed to these distressing sounds. Correct me if I am wrong, but do I not detect slight traces of worry upon your massive brows?"

William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, was always long-winded, and his manner was so courtly that none could lose patience with him. The juniors grinned as they gave him the salute.

"Well, we are a bit worried, to tell the truth," said Buster Boots. "The Tigers have got lost, and we're looking for 'em."

"Ah, the Tigers?" said Browne kindly. "I must confess, Brother Boots, that I am strangely moved. I shiver at the marrows, for your news has shaken me like a jelly. I trust the Tigers are not absolutely loose? I cannot imagine anything more unnerving than to meet a couple of Tigers face to face in one of the murky passages——"

"Not real tigers, you ass!" grinned Boots. "I mean Handforth & Co. Handy took his Patrol out last night—and they're all missing—six of 'em. Have you seen anything of them here?"

Browne shook his head.

"Much as I hate to disappoint you, Brother Buster, I must crash the door of your hopes," he replied. "I can safely assure you that Brother Handforth has not been within a mile of this noble edifice. For had he approached within that distance we should surely have heard his clarion call. As you all know, there is only one such voice in the entire universe."

The Scouts were not fully satisfied with Browne's evidence. For the tall Fifth-Former was an irresistible sort of fellow, and it was impossible to take him seriously. However, a few inquiries in the school elicited no further satisfaction. The Tiger Patrol had certainly been nowhere near St. Frank's.

And the scouts, leaving, ran into a party of the Moor View girls just outside the gates.

CHAPTER XI.

NO TRACE.



IRENE MANNERS & Co. were looking more charming than ever.

There were six girls in the party. In addition to Irene and her two study chums—Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple—the party included Violet Watson, Winnie Pitt, and Ena Handforth.

The girls were all dressed in gay summer frocks, and formed a pretty picture against the background of green hedges and sunlit meadows.

"Hallo!" said Irene. "What are you fellows doing so far from camp?"

"Looking for the Tigers," replied Nick Trotwood. "I suppose you haven't seen anything of your brother, Ena?"

"You mean Ted?" asked Ena Handforth. "I haven't seen him for over a week, thank goodness. That's why I'm looking so cheerful. Ted always gives me a pain, you know."

"Well, he's missing," said Boots bluntly.

"Missing!" echoed the girls.

"He and all the other members of his Patrol," explained Denny. "They went off last night somewhere, and they haven't been seen since. Some of the others think that they've got lost in the caves."

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Irene, concerned. "It sounds serious."

"Don't you believe it," said Ena firmly. "I know Ted better than you do. He's probably gone off to the lighthouse, or something like that—and he'll turn up as bold as brass, wondering what everybody's excited about. When he's at home he's always doing something of that sort, and scaring the pater and mater."

At the same time, Ena was looking rather concerned. Her words were light, but she was evidently trying to still any fears that may have arisen within her.

"I'll tell you what—let's join in the search," exclaimed Doris eagerly. "We're practically Girl Guides already, and we might as well make a good start. We'll join in—"

"There's really no need to," interrupted Nick. "All the Scouts are on the job, you know—three Troops. If we can't find the Tigers, it'll be a funny thing. But what's that you were saying about Girl Guides?"

"Ah, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?" said Doris tantalisingly. "But if you wait, you'll see. In about ten days from now—There! I'm telling you already! And I didn't mean to say anything about our camp at all!"

"Why, Doris, you're just as bad as Ted!" said Ena. "You pretend to be secretive, and you let everything out!"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," smiled Doris. "Why shouldn't these chaps know? At the end of next week we're going into camp, Buster. I expect we shall have a ripping time—and we'll probably see something of your Scouts, too."

"They need us!" said Irene tartly. "They can't go out without getting lost! It'll be necessary for us to be somewhere about, so

that we can guide them home! But that's only my joke!" she added, becoming serious. "Our camp, of course, will be miles from yours, so we shall only run up against one another when we're out practising."

The Scouts bade good-bye to the girls soon afterwards, rather pleased at the news. It might liven things up a bit later on, when Irene & Co. became Girl Guides. But just at present there was not much time to discuss the subject. It was nearly lunch-time, and the Wolves and the Curlews had to get back to camp in order to report.

When they arrived, they found all the other patrols in—for they were a trifle late. And they soon discovered that there was no news. Even the cave search parties had found no tangible clue.

"I believe the Tigers went into one of the caves, but there's no certainty of it," said Nipper, when Buster chatted with him. "We've looked everywhere—we've explored practically every cave there is. Towards the last, seven or eight Patrols were at work. There isn't a cave left that I know of."

"And the Tigers are as far off as ever?"

"We don't know how far off they are—but we can't find any trace of them," replied Nipper, with a worried frown. "It's getting serious now, you know. All night long, and all the morning! It looks bad!"

"Isn't Mr. Lee going to call the police in?" asked Denny.

"No, the gov'nor doesn't think it's necessary," replied Nipper. "You see, Handforth is such a fathead. He might have taken it into his head to go for a row in one of the boats—and the other Tigers naturally went with him. Perhaps they landed somewhere down the coast, and are coming back by road. There's no telling. Anyhow, the sea's been calm for days, so there's not much need to worry."

Nobody, in fact, believed that a tragedy had occurred. Many of the fellows felt convinced that Handforth & Co. had been captured by the smugglers, but Nelson Lee could not take this theory as a certainty. And to call in the police would have been an unwise step at this point.

But Lee had told Nipper that he had strong suspicions concerning Captain Starkey. And the Scoutmaster-detective had already gone off into Caistowe to make inquiries concerning Captain Starkey's schooner, the Lotus. She hadn't been seen off the coast for a day or two, and was probably in some other port.

But the conviction was spreading throughout the camp that Handforth & Co. were not keeping away of their own free will. They had encountered the smugglers, and the smugglers had captured them!

That was the ever-growing belief—and it was a belief which hit the nail exactly on the head.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE TIGER'S PIT.



"I T'S no good, Handy—we're as helpless as the giddy bears in the pit at the Zoo," said Church despondently. "There's no more chance of getting out of here than there is of flying. And we might as well admit it."

Edward Oswald Handforth glared.

"I don't admit it!" he snorted. "There must be some way out or another! There must be! Don't talk to me, you ass! Do you think I'm going to sit down and twiddle my thumbs until we starve?"

The other Tigers made no response.

They were, in fact, getting rather tired of Handforth's constant declaration that everything would come all right. For many hours they had listened to him, but as nothing had been done, it was hardly surprising that their hopes were beginning to fade. Even Handforth himself felt that his voice carried no conviction.

And, indeed, the plight of the Tiger Patrol was a serious one.

They were in an extraordinary prison. It was a natural pit, a great crevice in the rocks, at the far end of one of the deepest caves. And this cave had apparently missed the search-parties, for nobody had entered it since the departure of Captain Starkey and his men, the previous night.

Since their capture, the Tigers had been left severely alone.

The pit was at least thirty-four feet deep, and the rock sides were as smooth as glass. There were no jagged edges here—no inequalities or crevices. Just the smooth sides rearing upwards towards the cavity in the rock floor of the cave, far above.

At some period, no doubt, the sea itself had washed through this funnel-like formation of the rock. And so, through countless tides, the rocksides had become smooth and glossy.

To climb to the top of the pit was out of the question. For there was not the slightest finger-grip or foothold.

The six juniors were not suffering any particular discomfort. The floor was of dry, powdery sand, and it was about twelve feet across by seven wide—a rough oval. And all round them the rock sides rose sheer.

They would have been in inky darkness but for their electric torches. After the fight of the previous night only three of these torches now remained in their possession. And only one was flashed on at a time—and even this was carefully used. Just a flash now and again in order to dissipate the inky blackness.

All the Tigers had vivid recollections of the battle.

It had been short and sharp. And after one junior had gone down another had quickly followed. And the other four, in spite of their valiant efforts, had soon suc-



The rock walls were piled with strong wooden cases. They were of all sizes, but most of them were bound with iron, and fairly heavy. Without doubt, they contained valuable goods on which a high duty was payable.

cumbed to the strength of the three powerful men. The Tigers had all been tied up with their own rope.

And then, blindfolded, they had been carried somewhere. None of them knew how they had got into this cave, or where the entrance was. One by one they had been lowered into the pit—their bonds being cut just before they were cast down. And, owing to a slip-knot arrangement of the ropes, even these had been pulled up, so that they could not have the use of them.

And all the operations had been carried out in pitch darkness.

It wasn't until the last prisoner had been lowered into the pit, and all sounds from above had stopped, that one of the electric torches had been flashed on. And then the captured juniors realised the helplessness of their position.

All this had happened nearly eighteen hours previously. Both Church and Burton had kept their watches going, and they knew that the hour was getting on for six o'clock in the evening. They had slept a good deal of the time, but now they were all wakeful again.

And they were famished—and dreadfully thirsty.

Not a soul had come near them. Captain Starkey had lowered his victims into this pit, and had deserted them. And it was hardly surprising that the juniors were becoming more and more alarmed.

For it seemed that they had been cast down here and abandoned! In this pit, far away at the back of some secret cave, they could lie for weeks—months—years! Already one of the juniors had drawn a vivid picture of their discovery ten years hence. A collection of skeletons—a few rags and tatters—

At this point the imaginative one—Owen major—had been firmly but quietly squashed by his companions. And Handforth was as optimistic as ever. At all events, he pretended to be.

"Just because we haven't escaped, it doesn't mean to say we can't," he argued. "There's bound to be a way, and if you chaps didn't talk so much I might be able to think of it."

"You can think until you're blue in the face, but it won't make any difference," growled McClure. "Even if we could stand upon one another's shoulders, and make a living pyramid, we couldn't get out. But it's impossible—there's nothing to hold on to. These rocks are all smooth."

"I expect they're searching for us outside," said Dick Goodwin thoughtfully. "By gum, they must be in a stew, too! Ay, Handy, but you're a champion for getting people into a hole! We warned you about this expedition before we started—"

"You needn't crow!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "It was only a piece of bad luck, and you know it. But old Starkey will come back later on—you see. And then our chance'll come!"

The other Tigers were not quite so hopeful. They couldn't believe that Captain Starkey had deliberately left them in the pit to perish. They all expected that somebody would come later on—as soon as darkness had descended. Food and drink would be brought, probably. But liberty seemed remote. And the very fact that they had not been rescued by the other Scouts proved that this hiding-place was well hidden.

The lot of the Tigers was an unhappy one indeed.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIPPER DECIDES UPON ACTION.



"CAN you make her out?" asked Tommy Watson tensely.

"Yes," said Nipper. "She's the Lotus all right. She's stealing in like a shadow, without a single light showing. She's well-nigh

invisible, too, creeping in-shore inch by inch."

The Lion Patrol was in ambush, crouching down on the edge of the cliffs, overlooking Shingle Bay. Night had descended, and the hour was rather late. There was no moon, and high, fleecy clouds obscured the stars. And there was a distinct haze over the sea.

Looking down from the cliff-edge, the wide expanse of the Channel stretched away in darkness, it was practically impossible to detect where sea and sky met. Owing to the haze, no lights could be seen out to sea, although the steady flashing of the Shingle Head Lighthouse was clearly visible.

Nipper's keen eyes had first detected a black spot on the water—a kind of darker blob on the dark background. At first he had thought that his imagination was at work. But a careful survey through a pair of night-glasses dispelled all doubts.

Aided by the glasses, he could see the vessel with a fair amount of distinctness. She was a schooner, right enough. And the very fact that she was creeping up with no lights was significant enough in itself. Without doubt, she was the Lotus—Captain Starkey's mysterious craft. For a week or two the schooner had been in the habit of paying night visits to the coast, generally when the weather was thick or hazy.

"What are we going to do?" asked Alf Brent tensely.

"Leave it to Nipper, dear old boy," murmured Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It's a habit I fell into long ago, begad! If we leave everythin' to Nipper, there'll be nothin' to worry about."

Nipper lowered his glasses.

"I believe she's dropped anchor," he said softly. "Thanks for those bright words of praise, Montie, but I'm afraid I don't deserve 'em. I'm hanged if I know what to do in this case, anyhow."

"You'll think of something," said Montie complacently.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "When you come to think of it, it's a dashed priceless sort of thing to have a chappie who always reels out brain-waves to order. I mean, this Scouting stuff is bally good, and so forth, but it seems to me that it requires brains."

All the Lions were crouching in the grass on the cliff-edge. They had left the camp on purpose to make a survey. Not far off the Hawks were active, too. And in the camp the Scouts were going about with serious expressions. It was past the usual bed-time but so far none of the Patrols had turned in.

Not a single word had come to hand regarding the missing Tigers. The Scouts had searched until they were footsore and weary. The caves had been explored again and again. And all with no result.

Nelson Lee and the other Scoutmasters had told their troops not to be unduly alarmed. And Lee had hinted that he would seek the help of the police. For by now the disappearance of Handforth & Co. had become grave. There could no longer be any doubt that the Tiger Patrol had met with foul play. Even Handforth would not have kept his Scouts absent for such a long time as this.

"I'd like to have a word with the guv'nor, but I think he's gone into Caistowe," said Nipper. "He tried to locate the schooner this afternoon, but couldn't get hold of any information. And here she is, right under our very eyes!"

"Wouldn't it be better to go down on the beach?" suggested Watson.

"Yes, but it'll be better still to take out a boat, get on board the schooner, and investigate," replied Nipper grimly. "That's the idea. Why on earth didn't I think of it before?"

The other Lions were greatly interested.

"Oddslife!" breathed Archie. "You don't think the Tigers are on the good old lugger, what? I mean to say, once aboard the——"

"Those chaps are not in the caves, and we're pretty certain that they encountered Starkey & Co. last night," interrupted Nipper. "They're not dead—Starkey may be a tough old villain, but he's not a murderer. It's a ten to one chance that the Tigers are on board."

"But why?" asked Brent.

"There may be one of a dozen reasons," said Nipper. "But we needn't puzzle our heads. I expect Handforth & Co. butted into the skipper's affairs, so he shoved 'em on board. Perhaps they'd seen too much. So he's holding them until he can clear his stuff away—that is, if he's really a smuggler."

The Lions were thrilled by the thought of boarding the schooner and finding out for themselves. It was a direct line of action, and it appealed to the Scouts powerfully. Anything was better than waiting about, inactive. And without saying anything to any of the other Patrols, the Lions stole down the cliff-path and reached the beach.

Less than five minutes later they had launched a boat and were stealing out across the bay.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON BOARD THE LOTUS.



NIPPER called a halt after a few strokes had been made at the oars. "No good going on like this," he murmured. "Those rowlocks creak horribly, and we shall advertise our approach too loudly. Off with your scarves, my sons. They'll prob-

ably be ruined, but anything's allowable in the cause of justice."

The oars were carefully padded, and the rowlocks so silenced that when rowing was again started no sounds came. By using their oars with great care, hardly a splash was made. And the boat crept nearer and nearer to the schooner, invisible in the darkness, and noiseless owing to the care of the occupants.

All the Lions were feeling inwardly excited.

There was something thrilling about this adventure. The prospect of finding Handforth & Co. on board was big enough in itself. And the knowledge that they were making a bold move filled the Scouts with eagerness. At last something definite was about to be accomplished.

The schooner lay as silent as ever. She was almost like a derelict, for no light showed, and her spars were faintly outlined against the night sky, bare and empty. But she was securely anchored—proving that she was under complete control.

The sea was quite calm, but the running tide caused a splashing and gurgling round the vessel's stern. This was all to the good, since the slight sound helped to conceal the faint movements of the rowing-boat. It drew nearer and nearer, until at last it stole under the very stern of the anchored schooner. And here the boat was held, hidden from any possible watchman on deck, unless he happened to come completely aft and gazed directly down.

"Hold her here!" breathed Nipper. "I'll swarm up one of these ropes and get on board. No need for anybody else to come—we can't take any risks. Be ready to push off at a second's notice."

"Hold on!" whispered Watson. "Supposing you're collared?"

"I'll give the Patrol call at the first sign of trouble," replied Nipper softly. "Unless you hear that, don't move. But if you do hear it, buzz on deck as fast as you know how."

"Good luck!" whispered Alf Brent.

Nipper nimbly got on board. There were plenty of ropes hanging down, and, by swarming up, he reached the deck without much difficulty. Then, moving forward like a shadow, he took a careful survey.

As far as he could see the deck was deserted.

He moved further along, relaxing none of his caution. It was quite likely that a watchman was standing perfectly still, concealed in the shadows. But by the time Nipper had got amidships he was convinced that he had the deck to himself. Captain Starkey evidently had no fear that the schooner would be disturbed.

Indeed, Nipper was beginning to believe that the craft was completely deserted. Her captain and crew had probably gone

ashore, leaving the vessel to look after herself. This seemed the most likely explanation. If it proved to be the case, and Handforth & Co. were locked below, then their rescue would be a very simple matter.

But as Nipper stood there, he thought he detected a sound.

Near him was the cabin skylight. It was securely closed, and a heavy tarpaulin was covering it. It suddenly struck Nipper that this was significant. Why a tarpaulin on such a warm summer's night?

Obviously to shut in the light!

Nipper crept nearer and placed his ear to the spot where the tarpaulin hung a trifle loose. At first he could detect nothing. Then he fancied he heard the faint blur of voices. A moment later he was certain of it, for one of the speakers raised his tones.

"Starkey!" breathed Nipper. "So they're on board, after all!"

He glanced round, and saw that the companion-way was open. Without hesitation, he decided to steal down and investigate more thoroughly. The risk, after all, was not very great. For at the first sign of danger, his Patrol call would bring the other Lions hot-foot on the scene.

He descended the steep stairs cautiously. But even so they creaked now and again. But he needn't have worried. The door of the skipper's cabin was closed, and the sounds did not travel.

At last Nipper stood just outside the door. Down here the air was full of a mingled reek—tar, stale food, strong tobacco, and spirits. The combination was by no means pleasant to the nostrils. But Nipper hardly noticed the state of the atmosphere. His ear was closely applied to one of the door panels, for there seemed to be no keyhole.

He could hear with surprising distinctness.

"To-night, Mr. Trapp," came the voice of Captain Starkey, in the middle of a sentence. "It's no good wasting time. The thing's got to be done now or not at all. It's getting too hot for us on this coast, what with them blamed coastguards and the interferin' Boy Scouts! By sharks! Them boys is worse than all the others!"

"They've properly messed up our game!" growled Mr. Trapp, the mate.

"We did all we could to scare 'em off, but there's too many of 'em!" growled the skipper. "Steady with that bottle, Mr. Trapp. When you've done with it you can pass it over—Howlin' gales! Do you want to get drunk before we start?"

"I'm all right!" grunted Mr. Trapp.

"There's work to do to-night," said the captain. "We've got to get all the stuff aboard, an' be off. We're makin' for Jersey—that's our port! Once there, we can make fresh plans."

"What about them durned Scouts!" asked the mate thickly. "You ain't goin'

to leave them prisoners in that cave, I s'pose?"

Nipper drew a long breath. At last! Mr. Trapp's words were what he had been hoping to hear, for they explained the Tiger Patrol's disappearance beyond all doubt.

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN STARKEY'S PLAN.



SUCCESS!

The investigation had proved fruitful already, and Nipper was fairly thrilled as he crouched there against the door. He was puzzled, too. The Tigers were imprisoned in a cave, after all. But where? Every cave had been explored from end to end.

Obviously, there was a place which had escaped attention—some hidden cavity known only to these smugglers. For Nipper was now convinced that Captain Starkey was engaged in that risky game.

"Them Scouts, eh?" came the skipper's voice. "I'd like to wring their necks, darn my skin! Six of 'em, ain't there? They're lucky to be alive, Mr. Trapp. That's what they are. Great cyclones! If I wasn't a fool, I'd 'ave settled with 'em more drastic!"

"There wasn't no need to do more than what you did, cap'n," said Mr. Trapp. "They can't get out o' that pit—not if they was to try for a 'undred years. I reckon they'll be well nigh starved by this time, to say nothin' o' being thirsty. We ain't been near 'em for twenty-four hours."

The captain laughed harshly.

"It won't do 'em no 'arm—they allus eat too much, anyways," he replied. "An' I ain't the kind o' man to leave 'em to die. But this 'ere business of ours is more important, Mr. Trapp. We've got to see to it as soon as the tide turns. Arter that we'll 'ave a look at the boys."

"An' let 'em out?"

"Mebbe—and mebbe not!" replied Captain Starkey. "I ain't goin' to do nothin' that might spoilt our chances of gettin' away. We'd best take 'em some grub, an' leave 'em where they are."

"But they'll starve later on—"

"You allus was a fool, Simon!" interrupted Captain Starkey harshly. "Soapy ain't comin' with us—e'll stay ashore, in Caistowe. When we've got this business done I'll give 'im a letter to post. It'll reach the Scouts in the mornin', an' they can go along an' find their long-lost pals. But perhaps we'd better leave it for two or three days—it might be safer."

There was a brief silence, except for the chink of glasses.

"We shall 'ave to be startin' soon—" began Mr. Trapp.

"Not for another 'our," interrupted the captain. "Midnight is when we go, as you ought to know. Fred an' the others won't be along until twelve o'clock, so there's no sense in us movin' yet. You'd best go on deck, an' 'ave a look round. I ain't feelin' none too safe!"

"All right—I'll go in 'arf a minute!"

Nipper lost no time in making himself scarce. He believed that Mr. Trapp's half minute would be longer, and he took the chance. Instead of concealing himself, he padded his way astern, and slid noiselessly down into the waiting boat.

"Well?" breathed two or three voices.

"Shush!" whispered Nipper. "Not a word! Trapp's coming on deck, and if he spots us, it'll be all up!"

The Scouts remained absolutely noiseless. Holding their breaths, they waited tensely. And after a minute had elapsed they heard the pacing of heavy boots on the deck. They paused, came nearer, and paused again. At any moment they expected to see the mate looking down on them.

But after what seemed an age the footsteps sounded again, and this time they were receding. Finally, after another pause, they disappeared altogether. The faint sound of stumbling was welcome. Mr. Trapp had evidently gone below again, after satisfying himself that everything was quiet and secure.

"Now!" whispered Nipper. "Pull away!"

His companions wasted no time. They dipped their oars, and the boat slid silently through the water, and the distance between the Scouts and the schooner gradually increased. But it wasn't until they were a clear two hundred yards distant that Nipper allowed any conversation.

"If we only take advantage of the situation we've got 'em!" whispered Nipper at length. "Handforth and the other Tigers are prisoners, in one of the caves."

"Good gad!"

"But we searched the caves—"

"I know that, but we didn't search the right one!" interrupted Nipper grimly. "Anyhow, I've definitely learned that the Tigers have been prisoners for twenty-four hours, and that they're likely to be prisoners for another twenty-four, or even longer. And here's our chance to rescue 'em, and capture old Starkey at the same time!"

His companions clamoured for further information. And before the boat had reached the beach, Nipper explained everything he had heard. The Lions were all eager and excited.

"But what can we do?" asked Watson breathlessly. "It's past eleven already, and they're coming ashore at midnight—"

"We've got heaps of time," interrupted

Nipper. "We'll rush to camp, get the Hawks and some of the other Patrols, and set an ambush. Then, when those rotters go into the cave, we'll follow them, and— Well, you can imagine the rest."

The Lions did, and as they hurried towards camp they were thrilled at the prospect of what was to come.

CHAPTER XV.

THE AMBUSH.



REGGIE PITT looked worried.

"Well, it's a mystery!" he said, frowning.

"Another Patrol gone now!"

"That's the second one to disappear. This is getting a bit thick, you know. Hasn't anybody seen the Lions at all?"

"Not for over an hour, anyhow," said Cecil de Valerie, the leader of the Eagles. "I saw Nipper going off just after ten, and the other Lions were with him. I expect they'll be back soon."

No. I camp was rather disturbed.

Nobody thought of going to bed, and Nelson Lee had not returned from Caistowe. Nipper, as Troop Leader, was nominally in charge. But Nipper hadn't been seen for a considerable time. And a few inquiries elicited the fact that the Lions were all absent.

It was just after eleven now, and the haze had increased. The air was heavy and sultry, and seemed to indicate a coming spell of bad weather. But so far the sea was calm, and there was no wind.

Willy Handforth and his Patrol came up, looking very worried. Willy was at last showing some signs of his inner feelings. All day he had pretended to be careless, but now that night had arrived he was becoming more and more concerned.

"Heard anything, you chaps?" he asked briskly.

"Not a word," replied Reggie.

"Well, it beats me!" growled Willy. "I can understand Ted getting himself into a mess, but it's twenty-four hours since he was last seen. I say, we shall have to do something drastic."

"That's what we all keep saying; but what can we do?" asked Pitt. "And now the Lions have vanished, too! They haven't been seen—"

"Vanished?" interrupted Willy. "Who's this, then?"

Two figures came up out of the gloom, and Reggie Pitt uttered a cry. The newcomers were Nipper and Tommy Watson, and they were both looking breathless and rather hot.

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Pitt. "We thought you were lost, too!"

"Not just yet!" said Nipper crisply. "We've been doing a bit of investigating. In fact, I've just been on board the Lotus."

"Captain Starkey's schooner?" ejaculated Willy.

"Yes."

"But it's not anywhere about—" began Jack Grey.

"You can't see her, but she's lying down there in the haze, without lights," went on Nipper. "I've made a few discoveries, and I want two or three Patrols to lend a hand. We're going to set an ambush."

"My hat!" exclaimed De Valerie.

"Then—then you discovered something?" asked Willy quickly. "I say, have you heard anything about Ted?"

"I've heard a good deal about him," replied Nipper. "As far as I can understand, he's quite safe, and so are the other Tigers. But they're being held prisoners in one of the caves. Starkey and Trapp are coming ashore soon, and they're going to that cave. What we've got to do is to get an ambush ready, and spring at the right moment, and catch 'em red-handed."

All Willy's worries vanished, and his face cleared.

"I knew it!" he said tartly. "Just fancy me worrying. We can always trust Ted to get himself collared, and to lead all his pals into a mess. My hat! You chaps ought to be thankful you haven't got a brother like mine!"

"Callous young rotter!" said Watson severely. "Your major may be in awful danger, for all you know."

"I'll admit I've been a bit windy," said Willy. "I thought the ass had drowned himself, or fallen into a crevice, or something. But if he's only a prisoner in a cave, there's nothing much to worry about."

Willy, however, was as keen as mustard to help in the ambush. He hurried back to his own camp, and gathered his Panthers round him.

In the meantime the Hawks and the Curlews and the Wolves and the Eagles rallied round Nipper, and the story was soon all over the camp. But Nipper told the Scouts plainly that only a few Patrols could take part in the ambush. It was necessary to have a sufficient number of men, but it would be fatal for everybody to take part in the affair.

And so the picked Patrols set off, and arrived on the beach. Down at this level, the haze was so thick that all sign of the Lotus was lost. It was impossible to see for more than four or five hundred yards out to sea.

"Now, don't forget, the main thing is silence," said Nipper softly. "There's no wind to-night, and all sounds carry. Once we get into our positions we mustn't move, and we must be ready to act when the right second comes. The best thing is for us to distribute ourselves along the beach, and get into cover."

"But how shall we know when Starkey and Trapp come ashore?"

"We may not all see the boat, but some of us are bound to spot it," replied Nipper. "It'll be the duty of other chaps to mark the exact cave the rotters go into, and then call the others by giving his own particular Patrol-call. We shall all know what it means."

"Good egg!" said Reggie Pitt approvingly. "There's only one thing I'm sorry for. Mr. Lee ought to have been in on this affair—"

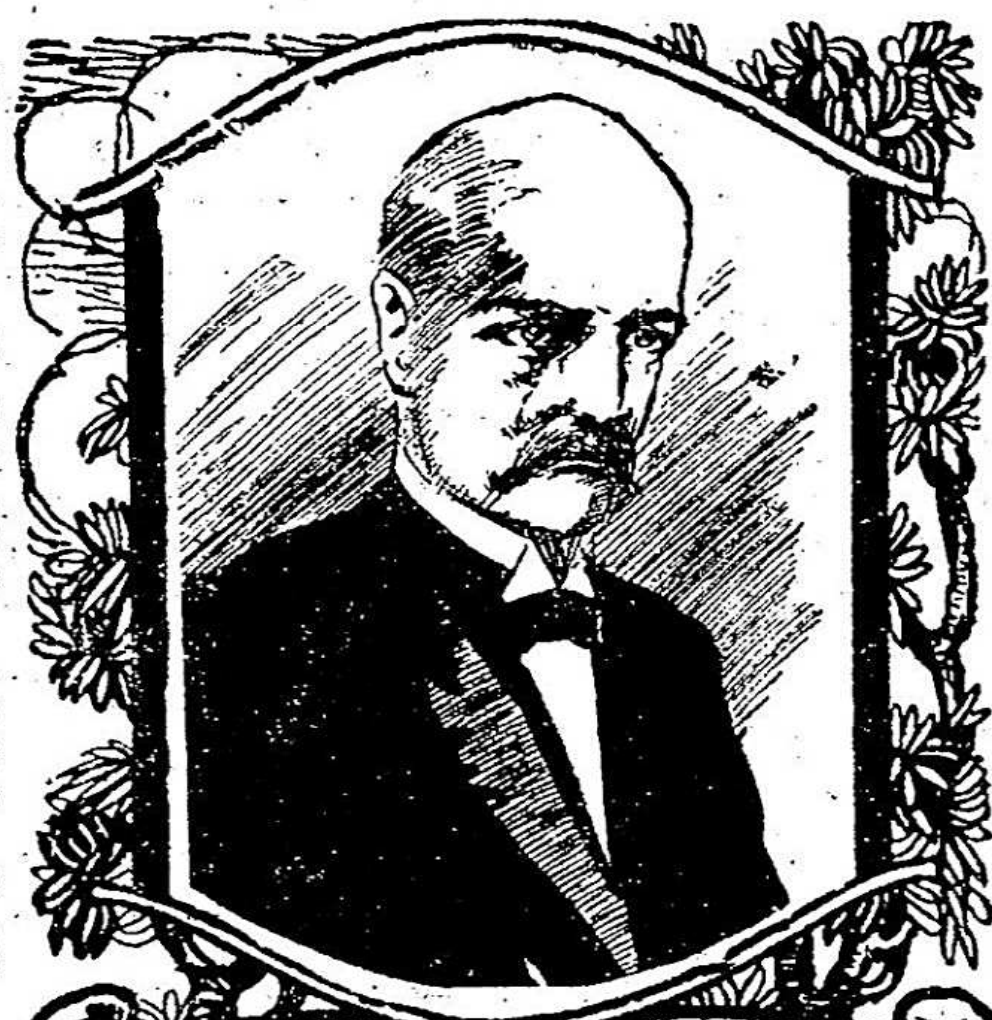
"Perhaps he is," interrupted Nipper. "You never know what the gov'nor's up to. But we know Starkey's plans, and it's up to us to put a spoke in his wheel. We're thirty strong, and if we can't capture a few smugglers, we're not fit to be called Scouts!"

They had a double motive now. For not only were they bent upon rescuing the missing Tigers, but there was every chance of capturing Starkey and his confederates red-handed.

Ten minutes later the ambush was complete, and along the whole stretch of beach

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there was not the faintest sign of human life. The Scouts had vanished as though they were mist. And they waited.

Although the shore looked deserted and desolate, there were many pairs of sharp eyes watching—unseen eyes—and the owners of those eyes were waiting for that moment to come when they would be able to spring.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRET.



SPLASH — splash — creak!! The sounds were very faint, and seemed almost unreal. Nipper, crouching behind a friendly rock, so that he should be invisible,

"It was just as well, perhaps, that the incoming boat should strike the shingle close to the spot where Nipper and Watson were concealed. For the faint splashing and creaking was caused by the oars of Captain Starkey's boat as Mr. Trapp drove it through the water.

And within ten yards of Nipper and Watson the two men cautiously pulled their little craft clear of the sea, and then walked heavily up the beach. They passed within three yards of the concealed Scouts, but had no inkling of their presence. Nipper had felt quite safe in this respect—for he knew that the men would not dare to carry any lights.

Almost at the same time two other figures appeared round the cliffs. They had come



"Better take it easy, Captain Starkey," said Willy Handforth calmly. "You're our prisoner!"

heard the sounds from the direction of the sea.

The only other Scout with him was Tommy Watson. All the rest were lurking along the beach in similar pairs. There wasn't a foot of ground along the base of the cliff that wasn't under observation. Even in the gloom of midnight the Scouts were so placed that they would be able to see exactly what took place. Nipper had organised his men well.

"Hear anything?" breathed Watson.
"I think so—but don't speak!" whispered Nipper.

along from the direction of Caistowe. Captain Starkey was very pleased, for the meeting could not have been timed better. His associates had turned up to the minute.

"Seems like we saw one another coming, Cap'n!" said one of the men, in a deep, low voice. "Couldn't 'ave a better night for the job, eh? Looks like bein' a bit thicker, too."

"Yes, we're in luck," said Captain Starkey. "About time we had some, Fred. Where's Soapy? I thought he was comin' with you."

"It's all right, he's coming along later"

said the other man. "What's that you've got there, Simon?" he added, as he noticed that Mr. Trapp was carrying a half-filled sack.

"Grub!" replied the mate. "Grub and a couple o' bottles o' water. The cap'n says them kids mustn't be 'urt! A rare kind-hearted bloke—that's the skipper," he added sarcastically.

"Not so much o' your durned lip, sink you!" growled Captain Starkey. "I 'ates them kids, but I ain't the kind o' man to do 'em no 'arm. Raging blizzards! Who the thunder are you to criticise your cap'n?"

"All right, skipper—don't get 'asty!" said Mr. Trapp.

"You're enough to rile a hangel," said the captain sourly. "What with you and these 'ere kids, and one thing and another, life ain't 'ardly worth livin'! Come, on let's see about that stuff!"

They moved along up the beach, making straight for the cliff face. Nipper and Tommy Watson had heard every word, for they had only been a few yards distant. And now they watched with keen eyes.

Just a little further away Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were watching, too. And they were viewing the proceedings from a different angle. The captain and his men would have been startled if they had known of these keen eyes.

Starkey was making for a point where no caves existed at all. Practically all the dark cavities were just round the headland. The boat had come ashore at the point where the cliffs jutted out, plain and bare, without any mark or crevice to denote an opening.

One by one, however, the men climbed up the face of the cliff. In the gloom, it seemed as though they were gaining a foothold on nothing. And after mounting to a height of about twelve feet they vanished. One by one they seemed to disappear into the very face of the cliff, leaving no trace.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" murmured Watson, blankly.

"So that's how it was done, eh?" whispered Nipper. "As simple as A B C when you know it! But who could have thought of that?"

"Come on! We'll call the others——"

"Give 'em half a minute's grace," interrupted Nipper. "They might hear the call, and come back."

That half-minute seemed like an age to Tommy Watson. But at last Nipper rose to his feet, and gave vent to a low, penetrating cry. It was the call of his own Patrol, but the Hawks and the Wolves and the others knew that it was for their ears, too.

And from all along the beach came running figures. They crowded up, excited and eager. And within a few moments the entire Scout army was on the spot. They

crowded round, anxious to know what had happened.

"Follow me!" exclaimed Nipper briskly. "Captain Starkey and his men have gone into the cliff here. Two of you chaps had better stay outside, on guard. All ready? Good! This way!"

Close to the cliff face Nipper could see that there were little natural steps in the rock. But hardly any of the searchers had examined this part of the cliff at all—for even in broad daylight there was no sign of a cave opening. The cliff overhung a good deal, so that from the top it was impossible to see any cavity. And from the beach level the cavity was equally invisible.

Climbing up, Nipper soon found out why. There was a narrow ledge here, but near the cliff face it shelved sharply downwards, and descended into a kind of cup. Lowering himself into this, Nipper soon found that a tunnel lay immediately ahead—the entrance to a cave!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAPTURE.



IT was a perfectly natural formation, but from every angle the cave entrance was quite invisible. It was one of Nature's most cunning devices. Until one was actually in the entrance, it would not be seen, or even suspected.

The Scouts were obliged to go in single file.

And Nipper, who was leading, did not pressed the switch of his torch, although he held it in his hand ready. He proceeded with extreme caution, feeling his way inch by inch.

The cave was narrow, so that he could feel both sides as he crept along. But it eventually widened out. There were inequalities in the floor, and at last he felt that he would be obliged to switch the light on. With the cave widening, and the floor treacherous, it was becoming dangerous to continue in the dark.

But then he paused. Somewhere ahead he could detect a faint, indistinct glow. A few yards took him to a spot where the cave widened out into a considerable cavern. Beyond this was another low tunnel and the light was proceeding from this opening. There were also sounds of voices.

Nipper felt his heart beating more rapidly. The formation of the cave could not have suited him better. For he merely waited, and all the scouts came along and collected in the wide cavern where there was ample room for all of them. They kept a strict silence—although it was an effort.

"This way!" breathed Nipper tensely.

He switched on his own electric torch, and this was a signal for the others to do the same. And, with one accord, the

Scouts rushed towards the inner cave, all silence and caution thrown to the winds. The crucial moment had arrived. With a rush, the juniors flooded through the opening, and surged upon Captain Starkey and his men like a tidal wave.

The surprise was complete and absolute.

"On 'em!" roared Pitt recklessly.

"Hurrah!"

"St. Frank's for ever!"

The Scouts paid no heed to their surroundings. They only saw the four men in their midst—four desperate rogues, who were literally swept off their feet, both by surprise, and the force of the rush.

"Howling cyclones!" bellowed Captain Starkey. "Them kids! Quick, Simon! Let 'em 'ave it— By sharks and swordfish! What's all this 'ere? Leggo, ye young varmints!"

But about half a dozen Scouts dragged at the desperate skipper, and yanked him to the ground. This fight was a very different affair from the previous one. The Scouts were now in an overwhelming majority, and they simply flooded over the enemy in one swamping cascade.

The four men went down—and, once down, were unable to rise again. Ropes were brought out, and within five minutes the fight was all over. Captain Starkey and his confederates were prisoners—bound hand and foot, helpless. And the triumphant Scouts were dusting themselves down, hot, dusty, but victorious.

"Phew! Well, that was soon over!" panted Nipper cheerfully.

"Mark my words, you young swab!" gurgled Captain Starkey. "You'll pay for this 'ere! I'll skin the life off of ye! Blusterin' tornadoes! Beaten by a pack of Boy Scouts!"

"Bust my eyes!" groaned Mr. Trapp disgustedly.

But they descended to more violent forms of abuse, and the Scouts moved off up the inner cave. Their captives were quite helpless, and it now only remained for them to be carried away, and handed over into custody.

"Hold on!" shouted Nipper. "Be quiet, you chaps! I thought I heard something just now. 'I'll give the call."

He did so, and all the scouts listened. And from far up the cave came a chorus of excited, crackling Tiger calls. They were extraordinarily badly executed, but there was no mistaking them.

"Handy & Co!" yelled de Valerie.

"Come on!" gasped Buster Boots.

They raced up the cave where it narrowed down. And Nipper, who had leapt off in advance, only just pulled himself up in time, in spite of the light he carried. He pulled himself to an abrupt halt on the very edge of the thirty-foot pit.

"Great Scott!" he gasped.

He flashed his light down the smooth rock sides. And there, far down, he could see six excited faces looking up at him. At

the first glance he could tell that the Tiger Patrol was intact, and practically unharmed.

"It's the chaps!" yelled Church excitedly.

"Hurrah!"

"We're saved!" gurgled Owen major.

"Didn't I say we'd be saved?" roared Handforth triumphantly. "And you were talking about skeletons and rags!"

"Well, anyway, we couldn't get ourselves out of the hole, could we?" retaliated Owen major. "But what does it matter? The chaps are here, and we'll soon be out of this mess now!"

"Souise my maindeck! That's the way, messmate!" grinned Tom Burton. "Ahoy there, you lubbers! Throw a rope down, so that we can come out of dry dock! You've just pulled into port in time!"

The edge of the pit was crowded with faces and flashing electric torches.

"You don't seem to be very much hurt, anyhow!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "We'll have you out of there in about two shakes of a cat's tail! Who's got the ropes? Come on—all together!"

Ropes were flung down, and one by one the Tigers were hauled up the smooth rock face. Handforth insisted upon being last—like a captain forsaking his sinking ship. The excitement was dying down, but the general satisfaction was complete.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED SURPRISE.



"BY George! I'm as thirsty as a giddy fish!" exclaimed

Handforth, as soon as everybody had pumped his hand up and down. "I'm hungry, too—

although I don't care a toss for grub!"

"How about a long, cool limejuice, with ice in it?" suggested Pitt.

The rescued scouts licked their dry lips thirstily.

"Lead me to it!" said Church thickly.

"Sorry, old man, but there's nothing doing," grinned Pitt. "All the same, I've got a bottle of lemonade, if that'll do as a substitute."

"Lemonade!" howled Handforth. "I'll give you a quid for it!"

Until now, the Tigers had not dared to tell themselves how really thirsty they were. They had come to no harm, but being without food and drink for twenty-four hours had made them realise what thirst really was.

Pitt and several others opened their haversacks, and produced bottles of lemonade and parcels of sandwiches. Reggie had thought of this at the last moment, and Fatty Little had provided the stuff like a magician.

"Ah! Gimme another!" breathed Handforth deliriously.

He threw the empty bottle down, but only received a sandwich.

"I want some more drink!" he gasped.

"Can't have it!" replied Nipper. "Don't be greedy, my son! Eat something first, and then I'll let you have another swig. It isn't good to drink too much on an empty stomach. Well, I'm jolly glad we've found you."

"We thought we were going to be left in that pit for years!" said McClure, as he attacked his first sandwich. "Urrrh! Fine! I've never tasted such a gorgeous sandwich in all my giddy life!"

It was a real pleasure to watch the rescued ones eating and drinking. And as Handforth's thirst and appetite became slightly appeased, his indignation arose.

"The rotters!" he said fiercely. "The inhuman bounders! Starving us like that for nearly a week! If I hadn't had an iron constitution I should have pegged out!"

"It isn't nearly a week, Handy—it's only twenty-four hours!" Church reminded him. "But that's bad enough!"

"I don't feel like arguing now!" said Handforth, with his mouth full. "What about those rotters who shoved us down in the pit—Starkey and the others? We've got to go and capture them!"

"Too late, old man—they're prisoners already," said Nipper.

"Yes, and now we're going to take 'em to Caistowe, and hand 'em over to the police," added Reggie Pitt. "Or perhaps it would be better to give 'em to the coastguards. We'd better form a kind of escort——"

He broke off as he moved down the cave, flashing his light in front of him. Then he let out a sudden yell.

"They've gone!"

"What!" shouted the Scouts.

"They've gone!" roared Pitt, rushing down the cave. "Look! Here are the ropes, lying on the floor! They've escaped!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

The others came running up, flashing their torches. Nipper bit his lip as he looked at the ropes on the floor. One glance was sufficient. Captain Starkey and his fellow-prisoners had all escaped! While their victors had been attending to Handforth and Co. they had mysteriously vanished.

"But—but I can't understand it!" ejaculated Tommy Watson blankly. "We tied 'em up like trussed chickens! They couldn't have escaped—it was impossible!"

"What's the good of saying that?" growled Handforth. "They're not here, and the ropes are lying on the floor! A fat lot of good you chaps tying 'em up! They must have wriggled out as soon as you left 'em! Now, if I had been in charge——"

"Soapy!" exclaimed Nipper abruptly.

"Eh?"

"Soapy!" repeated Nipper. "Look at these ropes! They've been cut! Starkey and his men didn't wriggle free—they were cut free! That's the explanation!"

"But who's Soapy?" demanded Handforth.

"We heard Starkey and the others talking," explained Nipper quickly. "One of the men said that a chap named Soapy was coming along later. He must have come into the cave, and of course he spotted what was wrong in a tick. So he cut the ropes, and they've all scooted! I thought I told somebody to stay on guard outside!"

But in the excitement, it seemed, nobody had paid any heed to Nipper's words. And all the Scouts had entered the cave together. Soapy, therefore, had walked in all unwittingly, and had found his companions tied up on the floor. They had escaped, and had gained a good start by this time.

"Perhaps there's a chance even yet!" said Nipper quickly. "They can't have got very far, and it's not much good staying here. We'll hurry out and have a look, anyhow!"

A rush was made for the exit. The Scouts had no fear of a surprise attack, for they were in such strength that Starkey and Co. would naturally concentrate all their efforts on flight. The hardened old skipper knew when he was beaten. His one thought now would be to get away.

Nipper was the first to get out. Arriving on the ledge, he took a clean leap down to the beach, and the others followed. The night was still black and sultry, and the haze was creeping over the bay so thick that it was first cousin to a mist. Nothing could be seen out to sea. Even the intermittent light from the Shingle Head lighthouse seemed dim and ghostly.

One glance up and down the beach was sufficient.

"It's no good," said Nipper, shaking his head. "We might as well give it up at once. The boat's gone, so it's clear enough they've rowed off to the schooner."

"But can't we follow?" asked Watson.

"All our boats are half a mile along the beach, and by the time we got to 'em and rowed out, the schooner would be gone. It's a pretty hopeless proposition. So we won't attempt it. It's a pity; but let's be thankful that we've rescued the Tigers."

CHAPTER XX.

THE SMUGGLERS' CAVE.



"WAIT a minute!" put in Handforth eagerly. "There's no reason why we should give up the chase so tamely! We'll get the boats and row out! They can't escape. And we'll storm the schooner and capture it!"

"Good egg!"

"We can do it, too—there's over thirty of us!"

The Scouts were freshly excited. Handforth's idea struck them as being adven-

turous. It would be something really worth while to storm the schooner and take possession of her.

"I tell you it's impossible!" said Nipper.

"And I tell you it isn't!" roared Handforth. "There's one thing you've forgotten, my son—but I haven't! There's no wind to-night, and the schooner won't be able to move a yard, even if she sets all her giddy sails!"

"By jingo!"

"Handy's right!"

"Handy's just about as right as he usually is!" said Nipper tartly. "He's the one who's forgotten something—not me! That schooner is fitted with an auxiliary motor, and it's independent of all wind. They've only got to yank the anchor up, and they can be under way within two minutes. Now what about it?"

Handforth's expression was fortunately hidden by the gloom.

"By George!" he gasped. "That's right! I'd overlooked that rotten motor!"

"Left to yourself, you'd have rushed off for those boats," said Nipper. "I expect that's the way you got captured—by being ram-headed. By the way, how did it happen?"

It was Church who explained the disaster. It was very much as the others had anticipated. Owing solely to Handforth's impulsive methods, the Tigers had run their heads into the noose. A little caution, and they would have returned that same night, and all would have been well.

"I'm blessed if I can understand what they were doing in that other cave, though," added Church. "I think they keep all their stuff in this one. I think they just went in there on the off-chance. Or perhaps there was some stuff they wanted to remove."

"By the way, let's explore this cave while we're about it," said Nipper. "Perhaps we shall find something that'll give us a clue to Starkey's activities. And it'll all be evidence, you know. The old rascal had planned to clear off to Jersey to-night. Things were getting a bit too hot for him. It's quite likely he'll still go there—because he hasn't got the faintest idea that I know anything about his plans."

"You mean, we'll have a look in the cave, find the evidence, and then tell the police or the coastguards?" asked Pitt. "Then they'll cable to Jersey, and collar the schooner when it comes in?"

"Yes, it's quite likely," said Nipper. "Anyhow, let's get back. It's no good being worried about them escaping. They'll be almost on board by this time, and there's an end of it."

They turned back to the cave, and were soon penetrating into the depths again. This time they gave more attention to their surroundings. And they found that a narrow tunnel led into a second inner cave. And here they discovered all the evidence they needed.

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed De Valerie.

"A real smugglers' cave, by George!" said Handforth.

The rock walls were piled with strong wooden cases. They were of all sizes, but most of them were bound with iron, and fairly heavy. Without doubt they contained valuable goods on which a high duty was payable. Captain Starkey had been smuggling them into the country—and perhaps this was merely one consignment out of scores.

Or it was just as likely that they were goods to be taken abroad. This latter, indeed, seemed to be the most likely theory, since the skipper had talked of getting "the stuff" aboard that night. For months probably he had been smuggling cargoes into England, and taking cargoes back, and smuggling them into France or some other country. He had been making a regular trade of it.

But Starkey was a wily old sea-dog, and although the coastguards strongly suspected him, they had never been able to "catch him with the goods." Time after time his schooner had been searched, but the officers had never found any incriminating evidence.

Indeed, they knew well enough that Captain Starkey was engaged in smuggling. But knowing was not sufficient—they had to prove it. Ostensibly, the Lotus was engaged in a perfectly legitimate trade. She went to and fro carrying lawful cargoes. But somehow Starkey generally managed to land his contraband goods, and take on further supplies without the coastguards being any the wiser.

But now at last he was beaten. It was the irony of fate perhaps that he should have found his match in the St. Frank's Boy Scouts!

CHAPTER XXI.

ALL THE CREDIT.



HANDFORTH drew himself up majestically.

"Well, things haven't turned out so badly on the whole," he remarked.

"Starkey's escaped, but only for the minute. After we've given our information he'll soon be collared. I shouldn't be surprised if they send a destroyer after him."

The others grinned.

"Puzzle, find the destroyer!" chuckled Pitt. "I didn't know they kept them at Caistowe, Handy. I don't suppose we'd better open any of these boxes—we might get into trouble with the coastguards. But I rather think we can pat ourselves on the back. At least, Nipper can. He's responsible for all this."

"Rats!" said Nipper. "We're all in it together."

"I like that!" snorted Handforth. "Goodness knows, I'm not the kind of chap to boast, but if you've got an ounce of fairness in you, you'll all admit that this is my capture."

"Yours!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have come here at all; you wouldn't have known anything about the cave. I was the first chap to start this investigation——"

"But you only got yourself collared, you fathead!"

"That was just a slip——"

"You can call it what you like, but you were all helpless!" growled Pitt. "What's more, you weren't going to be released for a few days, and by that time Starkey would have collected this stuff and cleared off. So how do you make out there's any credit due to you?"

"Didn't I come down to the caves first?" roared Handforth.

"It's no good arguing, old man," chuckled Nipper. "In a way, he's right, too. Let's call it quits, and divide the honours. And now we'd better get back to camp, and find out what's been happening. The gov'nor ought to be back by this time."

* * *

While the Scouts were leaving the cave, Captain Starkey and Mr. Trapp were approaching the schooner. Soapy was with them, but the other men had kept to the land, for they were not members of the schooner's crew. In the panic and the excitement, Mr. Trapp had nearly run the boat on to the rocks, and had got completely off his bearings. In the haze, indeed, he had missed the Lotus altogether, and it was only by luck that they had now located her. For the past five minutes Captain Starkey had been swearing continuously.

"A blamed fine mate I've got!" he growled, for the twentieth time. "Can't

find his way to his own craft. You an' me'll 'ave to part, Simon. By mackerel! You're gettin' on my nerves more an' more every day!"

"Oh, shut your head!" snapped Mr. Trapp.

"That ain't no way to talk to your cap'n!" shouted Starkey. "Another word from you, you mutinous lubber, an' I'll refuse to take you aboard! By hurricanes! This is a fine night's work!" he added, with a curse.

"We're lucky to get away, free!" declared Mr. Trapp.

"Ay, ay, sir, an' so we are!" said Soapy. "It was a good thing I come along when I did. I 'ope you'll remember that, cap'n. If it wasn't for me, you'd a bin lyin' in that there cave——"

"I won't forget it, Soapy!" grunted the captain. "You come along in the nick o' time. We'll be off as soon as we get aboard. I don't like usin' the motor—it can be 'eard too plain on these quiet nights. I wanted to slip away on the tide, but we can't wait. An' all them goods in the cave, too! Two hundred quids' worth, if there's a penn'orth!"

"Mebbe Fred'll look after them goods!" said Mr. Trapp.

"It'll take him all his time to look arter 'is 'o w n skin!" retorted Captain Starkey. "Why, 'e wouldn't go into that cave if somebody were to offer 'im a pension! T h e m blamed young Scouts 'as got their noses into everything, an'

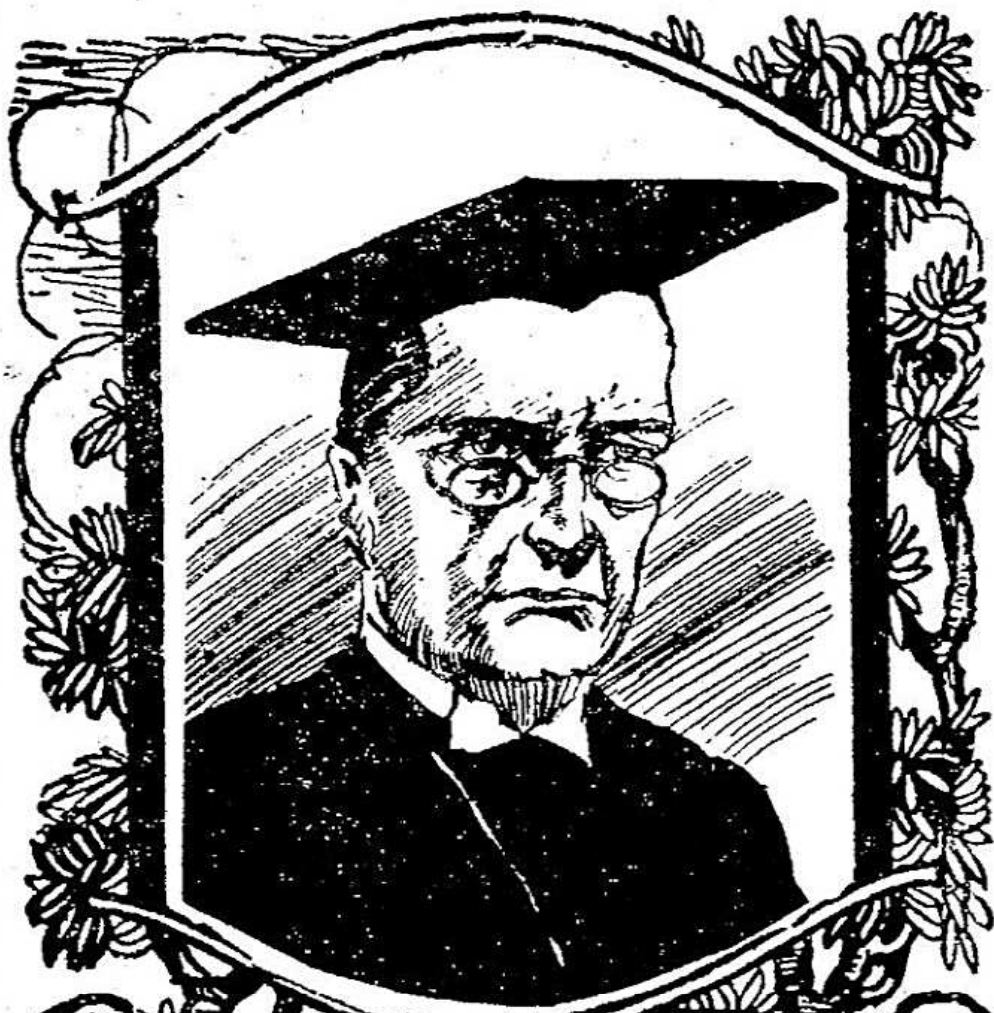
by this time the coastguards 'ave bin told, like as not. No, we can give that stuff up for good!"

By this time the boat had pushed its way alongside the schooner. The three men got out, climbed up the ladder, and arrived on deck. The skipper heaved a sigh of satisfaction as he felt the deck planks beneath his feet.

"Ay, it's good to be on board agin!" he said gruffly. "Soapy, you git for'ard, an—— Hey, Jim! Where's Jim?"

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"He ought to be on watch," said the mate. "Jim, you scum!"

There was no reply from any quarter of the deck. Jim was the other member of the crew. And it seemed that he wasn't performing his duty with any particular diligence. As a watchman, Jim was obviously a failure.

"Gone to sleep, I s'pose!" snapped Mr. Trapp. "Swab me! I'll kick the life out o' that lubber! He allus was a good-for-nothing cuss! Hi, Soapy, see if 'e's up there in the fo'c'sle!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" sang out Soapy, as he ran forward.

He was glad enough to be on board, too, and he was anxious to get the anchor up and be away. He had an awful feeling that the coastguards might come along at any minute. Soapy had already had one taste of hard labour, and he wasn't inclined to sample another.

"Look out, Jim!" he said hoarsely, as he dived into the fo'c'sle. "The old man's aboard, an' he's in a rare old temper. You're goin' to get swiped, me lad! Hey, Jim!"

A muffled sound came from one of the bunks, and Soapy grunted. It was only too clear to him that Jim had been drinking, and was too dead asleep to understand.

But just at that moment something occurred which startled Soapy out of his wits. He was fumbling for a match, for it was safe to strike one here, well inside. But just then something hurled itself at his feet. He was conscious of a rush.

He went over on his back with a terrific thud, and the next second he felt himself being held down, and his cries for help were smothered before they could find an outlet.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN AT THE DEATH.

CAPTAIN STARKEY stamped up and down fiercely.

"Where's them men?" he snapped. "Hey, Mr. Trapp!

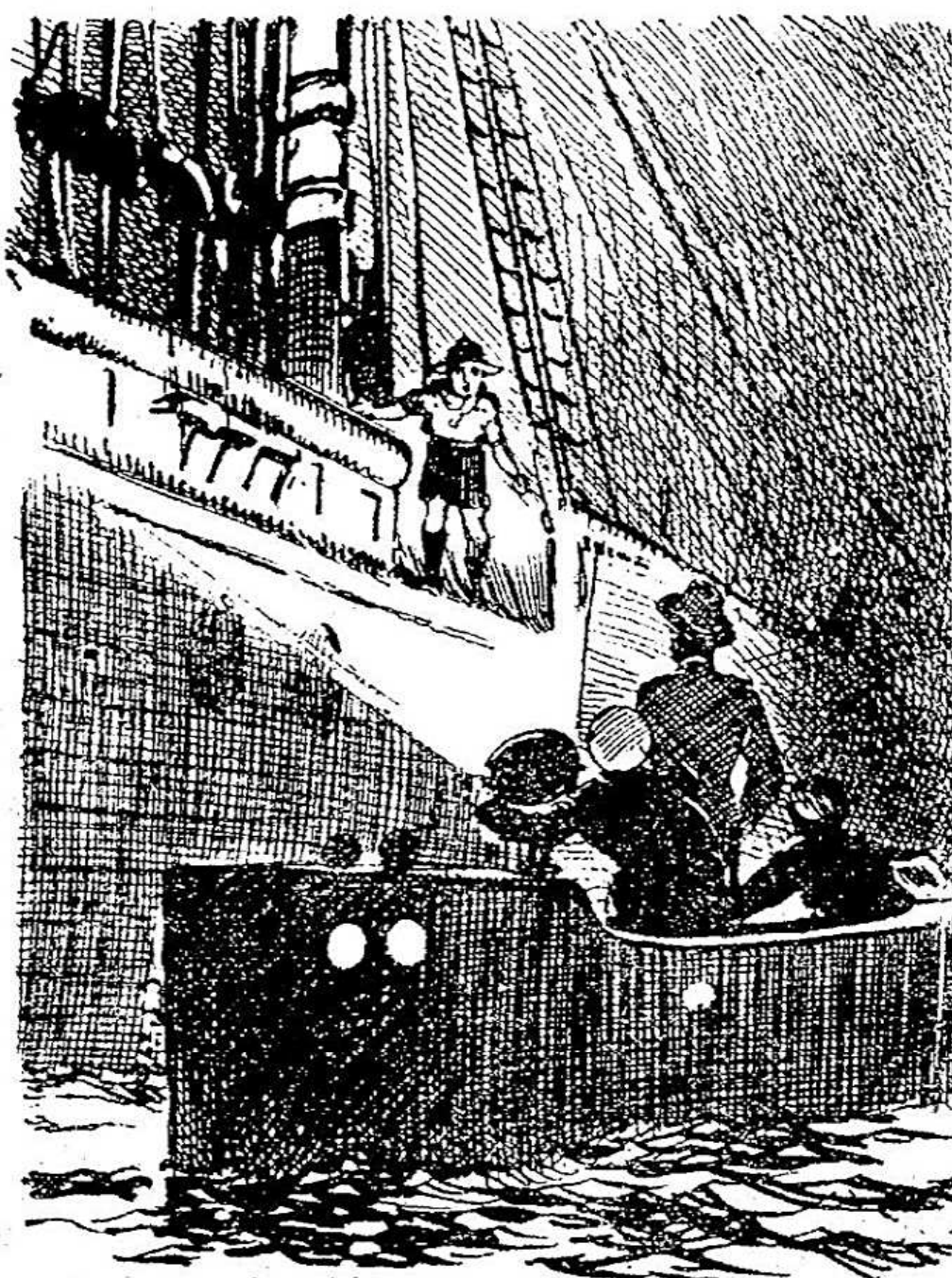
Are you asleep, or what's the matter wi' ye? Jumpin' sharks! Ain't we ever goin' to git a move on this craft?"

"Bust me if I can understand it!" snorted the mate. "There's no sign o' Jim, an' Soapy don't seem to be about now!"

"He went forward, you fool!" roared the skipper. "Get the anchor up, an' start the engine! I'll be up on deck agin in three minutes, an' if somethin' isn't movin' I'll raise blazes!"

He stumped below, thinking of his rum-bottle. And Mr. Trapp, cursing loudly, went forward. He dived into the fo'c'sle, and stared round in the blackness.

"You 'ere, Soapy?" he asked sharply.



"Stop down there!" ordered Willy Handforth. "Nobody's allowed on board this schooner without my consent! The first man who attempts to come aboard will——"

He thought he heard a faint gurgle, and he started. And then the same fate befell Mr. Trapp as had befallen Soapy, only a few minutes earlier. He was swept off his feet, and before he knew what had happened, something smothered his face, and a rope was twisted round his lashing feet. The mate was nearly startled out of his wits.

Muffled as he was, he could make no outcry. He heard no voices. He only knew that he was in the hands of several active assailants. Gagged and bound, he was dumped into an empty bunk, and left there.

Then the fo'c'sle door was closed, and secured on the outside. It had all happened so quickly that Mr. Trapp hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels. Gurgles from near by told him that Soapy was in another bunk. It stood to reason, therefore, that the unseen Jim was similarly hors de combat. It was now quite easy to understand why Jim had failed to be on the watch.

In the meantime, Captain Starkey was below in his own cabin. The smelly oil-lamp was still alight, and he turned it up. Then he made for the rum-bottle. He

helped himself to a good-sized tot, and drank it in one gulp.

"Them lubbers!" he snapped. "I can't hear a sound! Might as well 'ave dummies aboard!"

He broke off with a kind of gasp, and the glass fell from his hand, and dropped with a thud on the table, rolling over on its side. In the doorway stood two Boy Scouts, looking very smart in their uniforms. Their yellow shoulder-knots revealed the fact that they belonged to the Panther Patrol.

"Better take it easy, Captain Starkey!" said Willy Handforth calmly. "You're our prisoner!"

forced him to flee, abandoning all his contraband goods. And now they were on his ship, taking command of it, and ordering him to surrender. What was more, they had seized his crew, and he was left to put up a fight without any possibility of help.

At the first glance he could see that these Scouts were younger than the others. But they were just as neat and business-like. Willy, indeed, was as composed as though he were in a drawing-room.

"That's all right—take your time," he said kindly. "I know it's a bit of a blow, but you've got to expect these things when

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OUT ON FRIDAY!

PRICE FOURPENCE EACH!

"Good gosh!" spluttered Captain Starkey. "What the thunder——"

"The Panthers and the Rams are in full command of the Lotus," went on Willy, with perfect composure. "I shouldn't try any funny business, if I were you, skipper. Your crew and mate are all bound and helpless. There's twelve of us against you. So it isn't much good putting up a scrap, is it? I just thought you'd like to know."

The captain was so staggered he could only stand there, staring.

These Scouts seemed to haunt him. They had captured him in the cave, and had

you act the giddy ox. It's a jolly serious thing to be a smuggler!"

"Roaring gales!" bellowed Captain Starkey. "You—you infernal young monkey!"

"Your mistake—I'm a Panther!"

"You saucy young imp!" thundered the skipper. "If you think you can talk to me aboard my own craft, you've made a mistake! Get out o' this cabin! Get off this ship! By sharks! I'll show you who's master aboard this schooner!"

"Look out!" gasped Juicy Lemon frantically.

Captain Starkey had grabbed the rum-bottle, and was whirling it aloft. He was in a dangerous mood. Desperate, he realised that his last chance of escape was slipping away. With his crew captured, and with these Scouts in control of the ship, he was virtually a prisoner. It maddened him beyond all sanity.

With a wild yell of rage, he swung the bottle round, and flung it with all his strength at Willy Handforth's head. It was a murderous attack, and one that might have had serious consequences but for Willy's extraordinary presence of mind and swiftness of action.

In a split fraction of a second, he realised that he daren't duck or dodge, for that would allow the bottle to strike—and probably kill—one of his companions in the doorway.

Almost instinctively, his brain acting like lightning, Willy flung up his Scout's staff and met the rum bottle in the nick of time. It struck the staff, veered off, and splintered itself to fragments against the wall!

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE GRIP OF THE PANTHERS.



CAPTAIN STARKEY was by no means beaten. "Out of the way!" he thundered thickly. "By Christmas! If you don't move, I'll make you—"

"We've had about enough of you, Captain Starkey!" interrupted Willy. "You might have killed one of us that time. Quick, you chaps! Go for him! Don't let him grab that glass!"

The skipper was making an attempt to seize the glass, but Willy swung it off the table with one sweep of his staff. With the same blow, he caught the captain on the arm, and it was a lucky thrust. For it hit the old rascal on his bent elbow, striking that portion of the anatomy known as the funny-bone."

The pain was so excruciating that the skipper's whole arm was completely numbed for a second, and his arm was momentarily useless. And in that second Willy Handforth acted.

He leapt at the captain, making a low dive. Before Starkey could be aware of it, he was lifted right up and flung completely over Willy's back. He crashed to the floor, only to find himself pounced upon by Chubby Heath, Juicy Lemon, Dicky Jones, and two or three others.

But even now the skipper wasn't done.

In his time he had been known to fight four policemen, and win. In the confined space of the cabin, lying on his back on

the floor, he was at a big disadvantage. But he succeeded in giving the fags a decidedly warm two minutes.

It was only by sheer luck that Chubby Heath wasn't bitten to the bone. In his frenzy the old sea-dog hardly knew what he was doing. His teeth seized upon Chubby's arm, but Chubby managed to pull it away in time. But even then a great hole was torn in his shirt.

"My hat! He's like a wild beast!" gasped Chubby.

In the meantime, Starkey's legs were lashing, in spite of the two or three fags who were trying to hold them down. Willy had been prepared for a tough task, but he was certainly taken aback.

"Stick to him—he'll soon give in!" he panted.

Handforth minor was doing most of the sticking on his own account. And at last he succeeded in getting a rope round the infuriated man's wrists. After that the rest was comparatively easy.

Starkey was at last dragged up and deposited in his own bunk. And here his bonds were made more secure. All the fags were looking hot and dishevelled. They had won, but the fight had been strenuous.

"Well, here's a lark!" exclaimed Chubby breathlessly. "We've got four giddy prisoners. And we're in possession of the schooner! I say, there's going to be some trouble over this!"

"Don't you believe it," said Willy calmly. "We shall be hailed as conquering heroes. I can see the headlines now—'Boy Scouts Capture Desperate Smugglers!' My mater will have about ten fits if she sees my name in the paper. Not that they wouldn't do her good!" he added reflectively.

"But we didn't bargain for anything like this!" exclaimed Juicy. "We only came on board to collar the schooner. We thought those other chaps were going to grab the smugglers—"

"Ass!" interrupted Willy tartly. "What's the good of relying on those fatheaded Fourth-Formers? If a thing needs to be done, it's the Third that does it! Besides, my major probably messed things up again. I didn't worry about him," added Willy. "I knew Nipper and the rest had gone to rescue him, and I knew he was safe, and this affair was more important—"

"What's that?" interrupted Dicky Jones suddenly.

"Eh? What's what?"

"Listen!"

The Scouts remained tensely silent. A throbbing sounded on the air—muffled, but nevertheless distinct.

"An aeroplane!" said Tommy Hobbs brilliantly.

"You silly chump!" snapped Willy. "It's only a motor-boat."

"Some of Captain Starkey's pals come to rescue him!" ejaculated Chubby Heath. "Quick—we'd better get on deck so that we can ward 'em off—"

There was a general rush for the companion-way, and the fags flooded up on deck, anxious to see what this new sound meant. A rapidly moving craft of some kind was approaching, for the port and starboard lights could be clearly seen in the haze. A searchlight was flashed on, and the beam illuminated the schooner clearly. The oncoming craft veered round abruptly, or there might have been a collision. She was finely handled. Swing ing round, she glided alongside, and was held fast.

"Stop down there!" ordered Willy Handforth. "Nobody's allowed on board this schooner without my consent! The first man who attempts to come aboard will—"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated a well-known voice. "Handforth minor!"

"Jumping corks!" breathed Willy. "It's Mr. Lee!"

"What are you doing on this ship, Handforth minor?" demanded Nelson Lee, standing up in the motor-boat and preparing to climb up. "Upon my word! This is a most surprising state of affairs!"

Willy recovered his composure like magic. "Not so surprising, sir," he said calmly. "We've captured the schooner, that's all! The other fellows were rescuing the Tigers, and we thought we'd join in the fun!"

CHAPTER XXIV. HONOURS EVEN.



NELSON LEE climbed on deck, hardly knowing what to think. To find Willy Handforth & Co. in possession of the Lotus was about the last thing he had anticipated. And Willy's cool assurance was rather startling. In Nelson Lee's wake came two or three coastguard officers and blue-jackets.

"Seems to me there's something wrong about this affair," said one of the officers. "We've searched this ship a dozen times, and it's never been any good—"

"Don't you worry yourself, sir," interrupted Willy. "Mr. Lee wouldn't have brought you here for nothing. He's not the kind of chap to sell you a pig in a poke. If you're looking for contraband stuff, you'll probably find it ashore in the cave."

"Indeed!" said the officers. "And what are you doing here?"

"Oh, we came along to hold the schooner in case of trouble," explained Willy. "It's just as well we did, too, because Starkey and his crew were preparing to make tracks for the Spanish Main, or somewhere."

"Is Captain Starkey on board?" asked Nelson Lee quickly.

"Yes, sir. Below."

"Below!" shouted the officers.

"In his bunk," said Willy calmly. "No, he's not asleep. But we thought he'd be more comfortable there, particularly as we roped him up. You'll find the crew in the fo'c'sle."

"Good gracious!" said Nelson Lee. "It seems to me that you boys have done everything in advance."

Willy shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing much, sir," he said modestly. Of course, it's just as well that you came along, although it wasn't really necessary. As a matter of fact, we were just going to get under way and run into Caistowe."

"Oh, you were!" said Lee.

"Yes, sir. Of course, we might have run on a rock or two, but that wouldn't have mattered much," said Willy. "Still, perhaps it's just as well. Under the circumstances, I don't mind handing the ship over to these coastguards."

"It's very obliging of you not to mind, Handforth minor," said Nelson Lee gravely. "I think it's time I had a quick look round."

Within five minutes the new arrivals had located the prisoners, and then Captain Jonas Starkey knew that the game was up indeed. With the coastguards in possession of his vessel, and all that contraband stuff exposed in the cave, his chances of bluffing the Customs officials were this time nil.

"Well, Handforth minor, I must congratulate you on the smartness of your Patrol," said Nelson Lee at length. "I learned that Starkey intended stealing away to-night, and I should have been on the scene much sooner if—well, it doesn't really matter."

Nelson Lee had been going to say that he wanted to come well over an hour since. But the coastguard officers had delayed repeatedly, assuring Lee that the quest was a hopeless one. The Scoutmaster-detective had been practically forced to threaten before the officers would consent.

And but for the intervention of the Scouts they would have been too late. As it was, everything had turned out satisfactorily.

Ashore, there were great rejoicings in camp. Handforth & Co. had returned, and the Scouts had been successful. It wasn't until everybody was thoroughly tired out and ready for bed that Willy & Co.'s absence was noticed. Nobody had thought anything about the fags until Handforth happened to mention his minor.

"By the way, where's Willy?" he demanded. "He's a fine brother, if you like! Doesn't even come and welcome me back! After being nearly starved to death, too!"

"Mr. Lee hasn't turned up, either," said Reggie Pitt. "I believe something's been

(Concluded on page 40).



Mr EDWY SEARLES
BROOKS CHATS
TO HIS READERS

(NOTE.—If any readers write to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. If you have any suggestions—send them along. If you have any grumbles, make them to me. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Remember, my aim is to please as many of you as I possibly can. So it's up to you to let me know your likes and dislikes.—E.S.B.)

Harry Lucas (Balham), Rob the Rover (Selsey), William Slade (E.16), S. J. Ward (Bluntisham), S. Sirrah (Nottingham), Walter Hancock (Snodland). I'll see what I can do for you, Walter Hancock. You are puzzled over the following marks in my stories—“!—” The first is a mark of exclamation (!), and is used to emphasize any statement in a story, either in the text or the dialogue. It generally follows a shout, or an excited remark. For example, an “Oh” like this doesn't look so impressive as one of this kind—Oh!” The quotation marks (“”) are obvious. They are always used to denote a spoken word or sentence.

Theo. D. Drew (Torquay), Kitty Lee (Walthamstow), A Tenderfoot (Kentish Town), Roger and Coughdrop (Ealing), Regular Reader (Worthing), C.H.W.O.B.M. (Gloucester). Your letter certainly did not irritate me, Kitty Lee. It was one of the most interesting I have received for some time, and I wish I could reply in full. However, there is one point I can deal with. The Fourth-Formers DO keep pets of their own, but I couldn't possibly bring everybody's pets into the stories, could I? I make a feature of Willy's, because his pets are far more novel than anybody else's in the school, and therefore the most interesting.

Harold Cheers (Liverpool), Old Maid (Attleborough), T. Beach (Bethnal Green), Ethel Dutton (Gt. Yarmouth), Edith Sharpe (Pinner), W. G. Payne Jr. (Devonport). Please accept very special thanks for your delightful letter, Old Maid. Once

again it affords me clear proof that my stories are appreciated by grown-ups to the same extent as youth. If it gives you pleasure to read about the boys of St. Frank's, it gives me double pleasure to know that my modest work has helped to pass away some of your leisure hours. I am hoping that other readers will take an example, and realise that age has nothing whatever to do with reading school-boy stories. I hope you won't be disappointed that the St. Frank's boys are in camp this year, and not caravanning, as you wished. The summer adventure stories will follow later. As for “puzzling out” your letter, there is nothing I should like better than another “puzzle” of the same kind.

Nelson Lee-ite (Nelson), J.D.F. (Newcastle), Harold Doughty (Chesterfield), William George White (Nuneaton), Bert Thurstans (Anerley). With regard to the map of St. Frank's and district, Harold Doughty, I have already mentioned in these columns that it won't be appearing till the autumn. I think others will be interested in this statement, too. It'll be a lot better to wait until the autumn, because when the boys go back to St. Frank's after the summer holidays there will be a few changes. As you know, St. Frank's will be different, with some new Houses. So when the map is done, it will be right up to date, with all the alterations included. The Editor is thinking about publishing the map like a serial, so that it can be pieced together when completed, thus forming a really large scale map of the entire St. Frank's locality. As I mentioned to Charles Price somewhere else, if a thing's good it's worth waiting for.

Ada and Louis (Glasgow), The Scarlet Pimpernel (Finsbury Park), Richard Richards (Walworth), T. C. Jones (Brecon), William Knight (E.2), Len Waterman (South Chingford.) I say, that album of yours seems rather wonderful, Scarlet Pimpernel. I wish you would let me know your name and address. (I know this is not a matter of general interest, but I hope everybody else will forgive me).

(Other replies unavoidably held over.)

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

(All communications to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleet-way House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.)

To Members of the St. Frank's League.

My dear Leaguemates,

A hearty welcome to you all!

It is too early for me to comment on the number who have qualified for membership, as I am writing this during the first week in June so as to be in time for the July 4th issue. I can only hope that the response will be as great as I anticipate it will be, so that we can proceed without any unnecessary loss of time with some of the attractive schemes I mentioned last week.

I have already emphasised the important part the Organising Officers will play in making this League a permanent success. It is, therefore, necessary for me at this stage to say something about the appointments and duties of Organising Officers, for the benefit of members who are anxious to assist the League in this way.

As you know, we received many volunteers for Organising Officers before we officially decided to run the League. In recognition of their whole-hearted enthusiasm in so generously offering their services, and incidentally giving the League the necessary fillip at the very beginning, I have granted these deserving volunteers the distinction of Foundation Membership, together with the first opportunity of proving their capabilities as Organising Officers. All other members aspiring to become Organising Officers will be required to qualify first for the St. Frank's Bronze Medal before they can be considered for appointment.

While I am grateful to every volunteer for coming forward to undertake the duties of Organising Officer, and welcome every Bronze Medallist who applies for this post, for the sake of efficiency, all candidates for appointment, before they are finally approved, will be subject to a simple kind of test. And even when they are selected, Organising Officers will be expected to conform to the rules laid down by the Chief Officer. These will not be difficult or arduous, and a copy of them will be posted to each officer on appointment along with his instructions.

A complete list of names and addresses of all officers appointed up to June 20th will be published in THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY as soon as possible after that date, allowing, of course, three or four weeks for the paper to go to press. In the meantime, Organising Officers can do quite a lot of useful work getting in touch with prospective members

and non-readers in their respective localities. When the names and addresses of Organising Officers are published, members and readers can communicate with their local officers. Social and sports clubs can then be formed by these officers, who will be advised by Headquarters how to set to work and what to do when in difficulties. This concludes for the present my remarks on Organising Officers.

I am afraid I have left hardly enough space to discuss other subjects this week, but before I come to the end of this letter I would like to exhort every member to do his utmost to increase the membership of the League, and at the same time qualify for the Bronze Medal by obtaining six more new readers.

Wishing you all the best of luck,

Your sincere friend,

CHIEF OFFICER
(The St. Frank's League).

To my Readers.

My dear Readers,

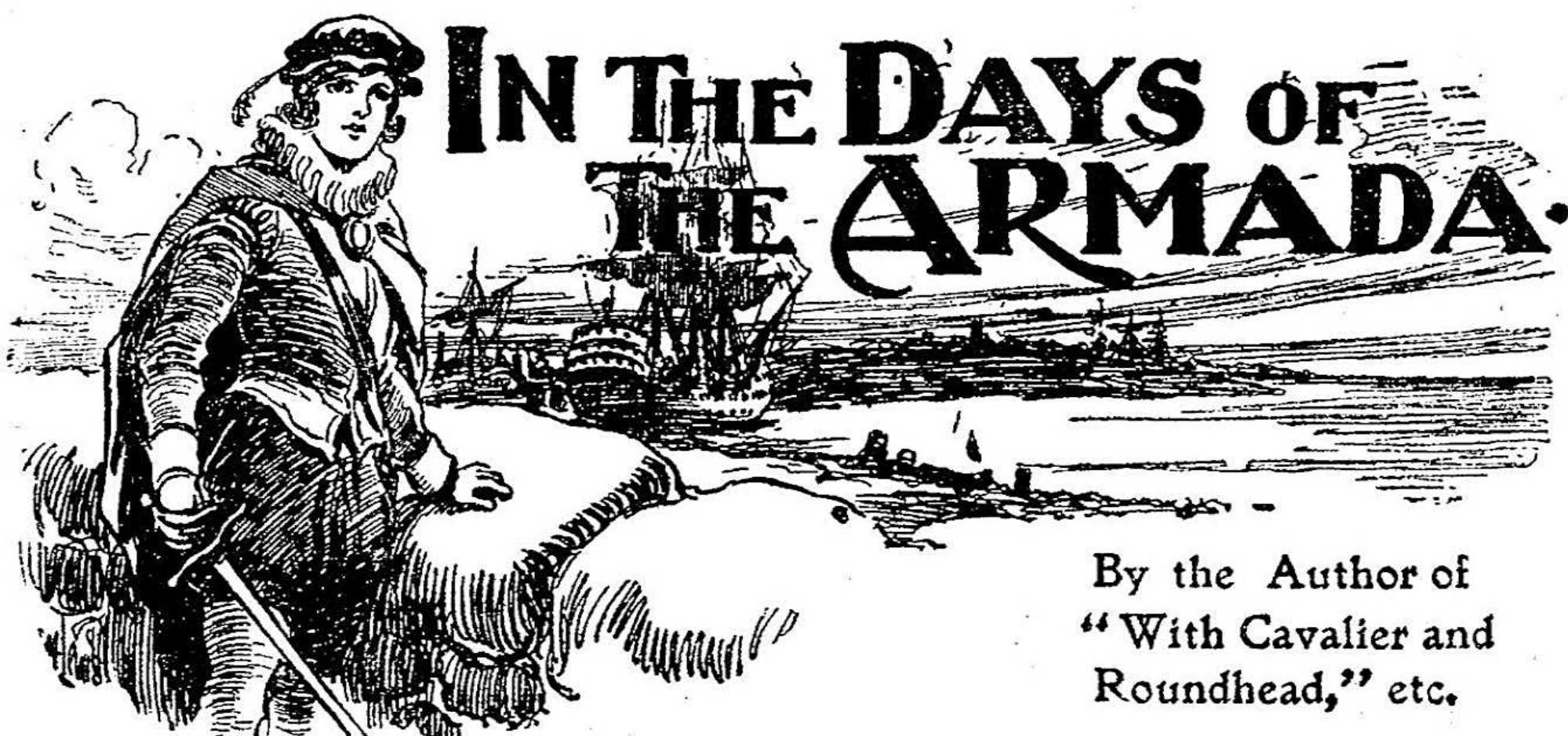
The great majority of you, I hope, intend to join the St. Frank's League, if you have not already sent in your applications. Those of you who are by now convinced that the League is well worth the little trouble of joining, and who are only waiting until you see how your fellow-readers respond, are only wasting time and retarding the progress of the League's development by hanging back. Don't be one of a crowd of spectators merely watching which way the cat will jump before making your decision. Instead, show your own strength of character and individuality by acting at once, for, as I have said before, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by becoming a member of one of the biggest boys' clubs in existence.

Many of the schemes I have outlined last week in connection with the League will depend on the membership reaching at least 25,000 before these schemes can begin to operate. So, for the sake of your fellow-readers and your own individual benefits, join the merry throng at once, and rope in as many more as you can.

In order to hasten the recruiting of members, I am making the conditions for joining much simpler than last week, and these new conditions will begin from this week onwards. All you are required to do now to become a member is to buy one extra copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY and hand it to a friend who you think might become a permanent reader. Before handing the copy to your friend, you are asked to cut out the coupon and get that friend to fill in and sign the coupon as a kind of receipt for receiving the paper from you. Thus, instead of being asked to get a new reader, you have only to hand a copy of the paper to a likely new reader. We are confident that the story

(Continued on page 40.)

A STIRRING TALE OF A BRITISH BOY'S EXPLOITS WHEN SIR FRANCIS DRAKE
SAILED THE HIGH SEAS.



By the Author of
"With Cavalier and
Roundhead," etc.

FOR NEW READERS.—The story begins in 1587, when Giles Montford, the sixteen-year-old master of Templeton, decides to take up arms under Drake against the Spaniards, in defiance of his uncle, Don Ferdinand Gonzales, who has invited him to go over to Spain. Giles is sent to London on an important mission, and returns with a dispatch from the queen to Admiral Drake. He has barely arrived back at Templeton when the house is rushed by five Spanish soldiers, and Giles is overpowered and carried off to Spain as a prisoner of his uncle, Don Gonzales. He is rescued by Simon Trent, his trusty servitor, and later sees much fighting against the Spanish under Drake before returning to England. Then Giles sets forth on the *Adventurer* to Sluys, in Holland, to relieve the garrison, which is besieged by the Spaniards. The ship is led into a trap by Dirk Maas, who had been employed as a pilot, and the relief party falls into the hands of the enemy.

(Now read on.)

than mine. I shall stay here and perish with the rest."

"That is my duty," replied Captain Vane. "I command you to go. Dare you refuse to obey your officer?"

"I refuse!" said Trent. "Waste no more words, but be off at once."

"You are a brave fellow!" cried Captain Vane. "But you must yield to duty. The dispatches are of great importance, and by saving them you will do more valuable service to your country than if——"

The loud report of an arquebuse cut short his utterance, and he fell heavily to the deck with a ball through his forehead. He gasped once or twice, held the dispatches toward his companion, and then died.

Trent no longer hesitated, sorely as he hated the duty thus thrust upon him, he tucked the little packet of parchments under his head-piece, and looked sadly at the body of the brave officer. Then, with a last glance at the gallant comrades he was leaving to their fate, he slipped forward through the gloom.

He had a narrow shave of it on the way, for two Spaniards made savagely at him from the bulwarks. He killed one ruffian and crippled the other, and then a quick dash carried him out of reach of pursuit.

He safely gained the ship's bow, which pointed upstream, and a hasty observation satisfied him that none of the Spanish boats was close by. He stripped off his armour and the heavier part of his clothing, lowered himself softly into the black water, and swam vigorously upstream against the sluggish tide.

HERE they were safe for the present, and Captain Vane briefly explained the situation to Trent.

"You must save these," he added, handing him the dispatches. "You know what to do. Slip forward while you have the chance, and drop into the water. You will find the boat waiting above the barrier."

"Nay, do you go!" Trent obstinately cried. "Your life is worth more to England

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN WHICH GILES AND SYDNEY ARE PRISONERS
IN THE SPANISH CAMP.

"THERE is one with life yet in him. He seems too young for an officer, nor does he look like an ordinary seaman. Shall I empty my pistol into his head, captain?"

"No, fool; it will likely get you into trouble if you do. You know the Duke's order concerning prisoners. They are certain to hang in the end, and that will be a far better vengeance for our slain comrades."

The above conversation, uttered in gruff Spanish and interlarded with savage oaths, had the effect of rousing Giles from the stupor which he had been weakly struggling to throw off for some minutes.

It was a bitter awakening, for his dazed mind quickly comprehended the situation. He painfully lifted his head and shoulders, and crawled a couple of feet to a fallen spar, against which he propped his back. The two men whose voices he had heard were now standing by the bulwark, looking over the water.

By the sickly light of a lantern fastened to the stump of the mainmast groups of Spanish soldiers could be seen moving here and there over the deck, and above the hum of angry voices rose occasionally a pitiful cry for water from some wounded Englishman or Spaniard.

How long a time had elapsed since the end of the struggle Giles could not tell. He knew by the rippling of water that the captured ship, with its prize of arms and provisions, was in motion, and he judged that it was being towed to shore.

The effort of looking round was too much for him, and sharp pains began to shoot through his head. He leaned back with a groan, and just then a faint voice called his name. Turning to one side, he saw Sydney sitting a few feet away.

Though every movement caused him acute agony, Giles crawled over to his friend, and they leaned against each other. Before they could speak the vessel grounded with a dull bump and quiver, and then stood still. Over the bulwark in front of the lads rose the black outline of the Spanish earthworks and batteries that were planted on top of the dykes.

Evidently the ship was a few yards out from the bank, for the splash of oars was followed an instant later by the appearance on deck of a group of splendidly uniformed officers, while numbers of soldiers crowded upon the earthworks.

At a command from one of the officers the work of lowering the dead and wounded into boats was begun, and the lads watched the terrible scene for a time, shuddering at the frequent cries of agony. They realised now, as never before, with what horrors the dark side of war was invested.

"The wounded they are taking away are all Spaniards," said Sydney. "I don't see an Englishman among them."

"And not a single prisoner except ourselves," replied Giles. "We are the only ones alive. Captain Vane must be dead, and poor Stephen."

"It is awful!" groaned Sydney. "I wonder what they will do with us. Just before you sat up a ruffianly soldier was going to shoot you, but an officer interfered."

"I heard him," said Giles. "That was what brought me to my senses. He said any prisoners they took would be hanged in the end. The Duke of Parma is a cruel and bloodthirsty man, and he is not likely to show us any mercy."

"I have heard it said that he is far milder than the Duke of Alva," declared Sydney, "so there is some chance for us. Isn't it strange that you and I should have lived to be made prisoners when all the rest of the brave crew of the Adventure are dead?"

"We came close to sharing their fate," replied Giles, "which may have been the best thing for us. Do you remember when you were hit? It was with the wrong end of a pike, and you dropped without a cry."

Sydney put his hand to a great purple lump on the side of his head.

"I don't remember anything about it," he said: "but when I opened my eyes a while ago I thought my head was split in two. It feels a little better now."

"But you have a far worse hurt, Giles," he added. "There is a broad cut straight across your forehead. It looks as though the flesh had been ploughed out by a bullet."

"That's what it must have been," said Giles, "for I heard the report of an arquebuse, and then I felt a stinging pain over the eyes. I don't remember anything after that."

He tenderly put his fingers to the wound.

"Does it hurt much?" asked Sydney.

"Badly," answered Giles, with a groan; "but the most pain is in my head. I don't mind the other so much. It is only a flesh wound, and doesn't seem to have even laid bare the bone."

Just then a young and fierce-looking Spanish officer came up to the lads and cursed them roundly, threatening to blow off their heads if they uttered another word. He stepped aside for a moment, and returned with four soldiers, who at once took hold of Giles and Sydney, and lifted them up with brutal carelessness.

It was all that the lads could do to keep from crying out with pain as they were carried to the bulwark and roughly lowered into a boat. The bank was only a few yards away, and when the boat touched the prisoners were compelled to stand on their feet. Then they were dragged over the dyke, past frowning cannon and pits full of powder and ball, and thence along what

seemed to be the main street of the Spanish camp. As far as they could see misty rows of tents stretched away under the starry night, with here and there a solitary camp-fire shining on the surrounding canvas. In the foreground were bustle and excitement, and groups of swarthy soldiers came pressing up to the guards, eager for a glimpse of the English prisoners.

A number of bewildering turns were made through the camp, and when the lads were finally pushed into a small-sized tent, they had no idea in which direction the river lay. Their present quarters were provided with a couple of straw pallets, and they threw themselves down on these, too sick and wretched to talk, or to feel worried over their uncertain fate.

After the day broke they obtained a few hours' sleep, and in the afternoon they were visited by a German physician attached to the camp, who greatly relieved the pain they were suffering by medicines and by bandaging their injuries.

They slept well that night, and awoke feeling much better and stronger. Giles' wound was beginning to heal, and Sydney's swollen bruise had gone down. They were able to eat with a relish the food that was brought them, but they did not get a glimpse outside, though their curiosity was excited by the incessant commotion. Two soldiers kept guard at the entrance to the tent, the flaps of which were tightly drawn.

On the following morning the Duke of Parma himself, accompanied by several of his staff, condescended to visit the prisoners, and Giles and Sydney looked with interest and dread at the famous commander. His features were rather mild in expression, but his hard, piercing eyes showed that he was not a stranger to cruelty and passion.

By a few adroit questions the duke quickly ascertained that the lads had no information of value. The fact was a fortunate one for them, since had they been possessed of any important knowledge they would certainly have refused to divulge it, and thereby would have incurred serious peril.

They readily admitted that they had been with Drake on his expedition, and at this the duke's brow contracted with anger; he had long since received word of the Spanish disasters at Cadiz and Cape St. Vincent.

But he made no further mention of the matter, and contented himself with inquiring of the lads if they knew the nature of the despatches Captain Vane was bearing to Sluys, and whether they had knowledge of what had become of the despatches themselves.

They unhesitatingly answered no to both these questions, and the duke appeared to be satisfied that they were speaking the truth. He brusquely cut short the interview, and departed with his staff, leaving the lads as ignorant as ever as to what their ultimate fate would be.

The fact that the despatches had not been found puzzled the lads considerably, and for the first time a suspicion entered their minds that either Captain Vane or some other of the crew of the *Adventurer* had succeeded in escaping. They heartily wished that such was the case.

Strangely enough, the duke had failed to ask them their names—an omission that was greatly to Giles' relief. He knew that Don Ferdinand Gonzales was almost certainly known to the Duke of Parma, and he much preferred his present circumstances to falling into the clutches of his cruel uncle—to which Sydney assented.

It did not occur to either that the relationship might prove of service in case they were in any danger of death. The fear of hanging constantly overshadowed them during the first three or four days of their captivity, but it gradually passed away as the dread summons failed to come, and they concluded that their lives were to be spared.

For more than a week they were kept closely confined, and though the tent was in the rear quarter of the vast camp, they could hear plainly by day and night the ominous sounds that told of the desperate siege of Sluys—the roar of cannon, the crackle of musketry, the rumble of falling walls and tiles, and the explosions of the Spanish mines.

At rare intervals, through the tent flaps, they saw dead and wounded being carried by; or they gleaned from the conversation of passing soldiers that the garrison of Sluys was still maintaining a stubborn resistance, and that the town was as far from capture as ever.

They hoped that it would successfully hold out, or that an English force would come to its relief—in which latter event they stood a chance of being freed. But their hopes must have vanished had they known the strength of the Spanish camp, in the very midst of which they were held in close confinement and ignorance.

Under the Duke of Parma were assembled at least twenty thousand men, including a number of regiments of Germans, Italians, Burgundians, and twenty-four troops of horse. The garrison of Sluys, which was a strongly fortified town, however, consisted of about sixteen hundred English and Dutch.

So ten days slipped by, and at the end of that time Giles and Sydney were as strong as ever again, and were thoroughly satisfied that the utmost they need fear was an indefinite prolongation of their irksome captivity.

On the night of the 20th of July they went to sleep, as usual, to the pacing tread of the sentries. In the cold, grey dawn of the morning they were brutally awakened, and hauled to their feet. In the tent stood a grim-featured Spanish officer, and behind him were six soldiers, one of whom held a coil of rope.

In wondering tones the half-stupefied lads

demanded to know what was wanted with them.

"You are to be hanged immediately," replied the officer, "by command of the Duke of Parma."

"Hanged?" cried Giles.

"Ay, hanged—hanged by the neck till you are dead, you Protestant ruffians!" and the officer laughed mockingly. "It is the fault of your friends," he added. "At midnight two of our officers were taken in a sortie against Sluys, and they were at once hanged inside St. George's Gate. To retaliate, the Duke of Parma has ordered your execution. Come, it is time to start."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN WHICH GILES AND SYDNEY ARE VERY NEARLY HANGED.

HAD they been granted some time for preparation, the unfortunate lads would doubtless have faced their doom with fortitude and resignation. But it was a ghastly thing to be awakened thus from sleep and bidden to prepare for immediate death. Little wonder that their limbs trembled, or that their faces paled with horror.

They stupidly permitted their wrists to be fettered, and then they passed out of the tent, each in the custody of three soldiers. The officer marched at the head of the little party, leading the way across one end of the vast camp.

Dawn was just breaking, and patches of silvery light were glowing over the eastern horizon; westward the stars were twinkling out of the blackish sky. But early as was the hour the camp was astir, and here and there the breakfast fires were being kindled. Swarthy soldiers, with drowsiness still in their eyes, came running from all directions to get a look at the English lads who were going to their doom.

It was fully a mile to the place of execution, and before half the distance was traversed Giles and Sydney had shaken off every trace of fear or terror, and only the expression of their eyes showed how bitter was the prospect of so cruel and ignoble a death. They marched with a space of several yards between them, and so they had no chance to talk.

At last the clustered tents gave way to rows of baggage wagons, barrels of powder, stacks of cannon-balls, and all the litter and debris of a besieging camp. The dyke loomed up ahead, capped with its frowning earthworks, and here the party turned to the left, passing along the rear of the batteries, where the powder-grimed bombardiers were preparing for the day's action.

Then a quick passage through a slit in the dyke, a sharp turn to one side, and the dread spot was reached. The party halted before what was known as the small castle. It lay on the opposite bank of the river

from the town, and had fallen into the hands of the Spaniards at the commencement of the siege.

Though it was badly battered by the Dutch and English guns, the big, square gateway was still intact. The soldier with the coil of rope, and a companion, climbed to the top of this. They divided the rope in two parts, and began to fasten the ends to some iron hooks in the stonework. Two more soldiers dragged a rude cart out of the castle, and placed it under the gateway.

The two remaining soldiers guarded the prisoners, and the officer, after watching the preparations for a moment, strolled over.

"Have a little patience," he said, with a brutal laugh, "we shall soon be ready for you. Do you wish a priest? There may be one near."

At this sneering insult the lads flushed with anger. They said nothing, but merely shook their heads. They could scarcely realise that in a short time they would be dead, nor could they keep their eyes from lingering on the fair scene that stretched before them in the golden light of the rising sun.

They were but a few yards from the verge of the bank, and in clear view across the river Zwin lay the heroic little town of Sluys. Its line of ramparts and water-gates stretched right and left along the shore, dotted here and there with a clumsy windmill. In the background rose the tower of the town hall and the lofty spires of three churches.

The distance was not so far but that hundreds of eager faces could be seen gazing over the walls at the Spanish camp. Evidently the Duke of Parma had chosen this spot in order that the execution of the prisoners might be witnessed by the garrison of Sluys.

"We are ready for you," said the officer. "Take your last look."

He tapped the lads on the shoulders, and they turned round with a start to find that two noosed ropes were dangling from the top of the gateway. With pallid faces and wistful eyes they walked to the cart, and mounted it without assistances. Two soldiers climbed up behind them, and placed them side by side in the proper positions.

"Farewell, Sydney," Giles whispered. "It will be over in a moment. We will show them how Englishmen can die!"

"If they would only shoot us!" Sydney replied. "That is the true death for a soldier. But this——"

His voice choked as the noose was slipped about his neck.

At the same instant Giles felt the rope tighten under his chin, and he could not repress a shudder. The two soldiers jumped down, and hurried round to take hold of the shaft of the cart with their companions. The officer glanced up at the prisoners, and then looked carelessly across the river.

Instantly his expression changed, and he uttered a sharp exclamation. He made a signal to his men, and they dropped the shaft of the cart.

Giles and Sydney had closed their eyes, but they opened them as soon as they heard the commotion. Looking across the river, they saw that which stirred a sudden hope in their hearts. A skiff was moving swiftly over the Zwin toward the Spanish camp. One man was rowing, and another stood erect in the bow waving a flag. At

the mouth of an embrasure in the town ramparts stood a group of half a dozen people, and the two foremost wore Spanish uniforms.

"Are those our fellows who were taken last night?" exclaimed the officer, shading his eyes with his hand. "But no—they were certainly hanged."

"Then they have come to life again," declared one of the soldiers. "I'll swear they are the same."

"Yes, it seems so," said the officer. "The



"Farewell, Sydney," Giles whispered. "It will be over in a moment. We will show them how Englishmen can die."

execution must be deferred. Take the prisoners down."

The order was hesitatingly obeyed, and Giles and Sydney could scarcely realise their good fortune when they found themselves standing on the ground at some distance from the dangling nooses. But they were not sure yet that their lives would be spared, and they waited in anxious suspense to see the result of the interruption.

As the boat touched the shore the man with the flag sprang out, and handed a letter to the officer. The latter hastily opened and read it, and after a brief conversation he called one of his men to him and gave him an order. The soldier took the letter, hurried over the dyke, and was lost to sight in the camp.

The interval that followed seemed long and painful to the lads. They were still closely guarded by the soldiers. The officer stood on the edge of the bank, chatting with the two messengers from Sluys, and the group over at the foot of the town ramparts could be seen gazing intently across.

In a little less than half an hour the clatter of hoofs was heard at a distance, and presently the Duke of Parma, accompanied by three of his staff, rode down to the shore. They joined the officer and the messengers, and held a brief consultation, during which the letter was frequently referred to.

Then an agreement was suddenly reached, and the two envoys put off in their boat. They rowed swiftly across the river, and a minute or two after they had landed at the ramparts a larger craft started for the Spanish camp having six persons on board. It made a quick passage, and as it touched the shore in front of the castle the two officers who had been captured the night before stepped out, and were joyously received by the Duke of Parma and his companions.

Giles and Sydney now realised the thrilling truth. Not only were their lives safe, but they were about to be exchanged. So it proved, for the soldiers, at a signal from the duke, untied the lads' fetters and led them down to the waiting boat. They stepped in, trembling with happiness, and the four English oarsmen pulled lustily across the Zwin.

Five minutes later the boat landed at the foot of the ramparts, and the young prisoners, who had been so timely rescued from a cruel death, were warmly greeted by a number of soldiers from the garrison. Then the lads were taken into the town through one of the gates, and here they were surrounded by kind friends. The crowd that pressed forward to greet them was composed mostly of Dutch and English soldiers, but it also included Sir Roger Williams, the Governor of the town, a number of portly burghers, and a few women and children.

The first thing that Giles and Sydney heard was the explanation of their rescue.

It seems that two of the town people had been detected in sending dispatches to the enemy, and it was they who were hanged inside St. George's Gate at midnight. But a spy had slipped out of the town shortly afterward, and reported to the Duke of Parma that the two captive officers had been hanged.

The garrison of Sluys did not know that any English prisoners were in the Spanish camp, and their first intimation of it was when they saw the lads brought forward for execution. As quickly as possible they dispatched an envoy with an offer of exchange, and as the Spanish officers happened to be of high rank the Duke of Parma readily accepted the proposition. No doubt he believed he was getting the best of the bargain.

It was Sir Roger Williams himself who explained this to the lads, and when he saw that they were considerably unnerved by what they had passed through, he forbore to ask them any questions.

"I will speak with you later in the day," he said, "when you have rested and eaten. For the present, I will assign you to comfortable quarters, and see that your wants are cared for."

Meanwhile, a stalwart and handsome man, who was standing near, had been watching Giles in a most peculiar and attentive manner, and with a look of sadness in his eyes. He was richly dressed, and his face indicated culture and refinement. He was probably sixty-five years of age, and he might have passed for an English gentleman but for his long, pointed beard and curling moustache, which were iron-grey in colour.

As the English Governor ceased speaking this stranger stepped forward.

"Permit me to take charge of these brave lads, Sir Roger," he exclaimed. "I will show them every attention and hospitality, and they shall be at your service when you need them."

"I have no objection, Master Ruys Van Hartsen," replied Sir Roger; "they surely could not be in better hands."

He introduced the gentleman to Giles and Sydney as the burgomaster of Sluys, and after a cordial handshaking the lads started toward the centre of the town with their new friend.

They had gone but a short distance when Giles uttered a shrill exclamation, and frantically jerked Sydney's arm.

"Look!" he cried, pointing to one side of the street.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN WHICH BURGOMASTER RUY VAN HARTSEN TELLS A PATHETIC STORY.

HAD Giles beheld a ghostly apparition in this quaint, old-fashioned street of Sluys, he could not have been more astounded. And, indeed, as the lads gazed at the tall figure

with bandaged arm and plastered head that was leaning against the doorway of an inn to the right, they almost held their breath for fear it would melt away.

But the apparition did not vanish. It was none other than Stephen Trent, alive and in the flesh. It was his turn to be amazed when he caught sight of Giles and Sydney, and after an incredulous, open-mouthed stare, he hobbled out into the street with a yell of delight.

It was like a reunion of the dead, and the good burgomaster almost wept for sympathy as he saw Trent and the lads embracing one another, and heard their husky utterances of joy and wonder. He was evidently acquainted with Trent, and it did not take him long to get an inkling of the situation.

"You are old comrades," he cried. "Is it not so? Come, we will go to my house, and there you shall have your say—ay, and plenty to eat and drink."

So he hurried his companions along from street to street, picking the way between the obstructing heaps of fallen tiles, chimneys, and beams that showed the destructive work of the Spanish cannonading. Presently they came to a less damaged quarter of the town, and soon reached the mansion of the burgomaster, which stood about midway between the churches of St. John and Gray Friars, and had a good-sized garden front and rear.

Inside the house everything was spotlessly neat and clean, nor were signs of luxury and wealth lacking. The apartment in which Ruys Van Hartsen bade his guests be seated was something wonderful to see. The walls were panelled, and Eastern carpets covered the floor. Heavy curtains hung at the door and casements, and on the sideboard were a profusion of rich plate, and gold and silver vessels from foreign climes.

The host summoned two servants, and in a short time a table was spread with a most tempting repast. The guests needed no pressing invitation to fall to, and while Giles and Sydney ate and drank they described their experiences of the past ten days.

Then Trent told the thrilling story of his escape from the Adventure; and how he made his way up the river, by water and by the bridge of boats, to where a skiff was waiting for the luckless envoy from Sluys, who had perished in the fulfilment of his duty. His present injuries, he explained, had been received while aiding the garrison to repel a Spanish assault a few days before.

The tales were told over and over again, and many an eager question was asked and answered while the savoury food disappeared.

Master Van Hartsen ate and drank no less eagerly than his guests, but unlike the others, his mood seemed to change from joviality to melancholy, and once a tear was seen to glisten in the corner of his eye.

"I have seen many a happy party gathered around this board in the years that are gone," he said abruptly. "Ay, and many a goblet emptied to the good luck of the future. But all the good luck turned bad. Ah me, it is a sad lot for an old man!"

He was silent for a moment, and then he fixed his eyes intently on Giles.

"Who are you, lad?" he asked. "Tell me your name, and the names of your parents. Where have you spent your life?"

Though a little surprised by this request, Giles readily granted it, and gave the burgomaster a brief sketch of his family history.

"So your mother was Spanish?" said Ruys Van Hartsen. "Strange! You have no look of it in your features. Lad, you remind me strongly of my lost grandson. He would be just such a one as you if he is alive. It can be but a chance resemblance, of course. However, I will tell you my story, and mayhap you have some knowledge of that which has baffled me to this time."

The burgomaster blew his nose with a huge silk kerchief, preparatory to commencing his narrative.

"Nearly twenty years ago I was a happy man with a family," he began, settling back in the big chair. "My good wife was living, and we had a daughter Clara, who was as pretty and as plump as a peach. She was twenty years old when an Englishman came to Sluys. He was a handsome fellow, with plenty of money, and he called himself Walter Sheriton, though I doubt now if that was his true name. I liked him well, and he came here often. It ended, as you may suppose, in his marrying my Clara.

"They made a happy couple, and the house was merry in those days. My son-in-law had told me that his people were dead, and he seemed well content to settle down here in Sluys—that is, for a time. My daughter gave birth to a boy in 1571, and as she fancied an English name, she called him Cecil. There were four happy years after that, and then the change came. My son-in-law received a letter from England one day, and he left Sluys by the first vessel that sailed, promising to return in a week. But he never came back."

"Never?" exclaimed Giles, who was deeply interested in the story. "And that was seventeen years ago."

"We never saw him again," said the burgomaster. "From that day to this I have never heard a word from him. Nor is that the worst. A month after my son-in-law disappeared, the boy—my little Cecil—was mysteriously stolen from the door of this very house. We vainly sought trace of him for a year—for two years—

for three years. Then we gave him up. My poor daughter sickened and died of grief, and soon my dear wife followed her. I was left desolate and alone."

Ruys Van Hartsen's voice failed. He turned his head away, and it was apparent that he was deeply moved. When he looked towards his guests again there was a hard and bitter expression on his face.

"Half a score of times have I been to England," he resumed, "but I have never learned aught of Walter Sheriton. He may be dead now, and it is better so. Assuredly the boy was stolen by his means; the death of my daughter and my wife rests on his guilty soul. And, strangest of all, is the motive for the crime. I see nothing that he could have gained by stealing his own son; on the contrary, he must have known that the child would fall heir to my large fortune. Ay, it is a strange mystery—one that may never be fathomed."

"You have indeed suffered," said Giles. "I would it were in my power to help you; but I know nothing of Walter Sheriton."

"Nor I, my good sir," added Sydney, shaking his head.

"I am no wiser than my companions," declared Trent. "I have rubbed against

many Englishmen at home and abroad—men of peace and men of war—but none who answered to the name of Sheriton."

"It is what they all say!" muttered the burgomaster; "all whom I have met in my quest. But I still hope to find my grandson, and if I succeed, my last years will be peaceful. Before this siege I shipped my chests of money and other treasure to a banking-house in London, intending to follow them and settle permanently in England. But when the Spaniards invested this town, I felt it my duty to remain here. So soon as the struggle ends one way or the other I will go to England and renew my weary search."

"And I wish you all success!" exclaimed Trent; and this hope the lads heartily echoed.

Ruys Van Hartsen nodded gratefully; and then, as though he was conscious of having dipped too deeply into the bitter past, he turned the conversation into another channel. An hour was spent in grave discussion of the siege; then Giles and Sydney retired to a bed-chamber to obtain much-needed sleep, and Trent hurried off to report for duty at the ramparts.

(To be continued next week.)

THE LOST PATROL. *(Cont. from page 30)*

happening out in the bay. I've seen some lights out there in the haze."

But the Scouts were not left in doubt for long. And ten minutes later the Panthers and the Rams marched into camp, tired, but cheerful.

"Oh, there you are, Ted!" said Willy, as he came up. "Good! You don't look particularly mauled about!"

"What have you been doing?" demanded Handforth gruffly.

"Oh, nothing much—just capturing Captain Starkey and his crew!"

"What!"

"We thought we'd be in the fun as well," explained Willy. "We seized the schooner, and when those rotters tried to escape, we dished 'em. It's been a pretty exciting time, but everything's all serene now."

"Look here, are you serious?" asked Nipper curiously. "Do you mean to say you captured Starkey & Co.?"

"All by our little selves," said Willy, nodding. "It seems to me that honours are about even. So if you don't start crowing, Ted, we won't. That'll save all argument, won't it?"

"It'll be the cocks who'll start crowing soon!" put in Reggie Pitt, with a glance at the eastern sky. "By jingo! It's practically dawn already. Isn't it about time we turned in?"

Nelson Lee was on the scene now, and he heartily agreed with Reggie Pitt that it was time the Scouts turned in. Everything had ended satisfactorily, and the excitement was over.

But if the St. Frank's Scouts thought that the downfall of Captain Starkey meant the end of their adventures—Well, they were very wide of the truth!

THE END.

Next Week's Story:

"THE LIGHTHOUSE SCOUTS!"

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

(Continued from page 32)

itself will convert your friend into a regular reader, and possibly, later on, he may be induced to become a member of the League.

Hoping you will delay no longer in sending in your applications for membership of the League, and with every good wish,

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR

(Chief Officer of the St. Frank's League.)

To Overseas Readers.

My dear Friends Overseas,

By now you will have heard all about the League, and the particular advantages it offers to you who, though living thousands of miles away, look upon the dear Old Home Country with a regard and affection that can only be felt by those who have experienced living for long overseas. If only as a means of bringing you in touch with readers at home, the League is alone worth your while

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

(Continued from page 40.)

to join. But there will be many other benefits besides.

Should you desire to take an active part in the administration of the League, you have until August 8th to apply for appointments as Organising Officers, and those who apply by that date will be given the honorary rank of Foundation Membership. This distinction is also offered to the first hundred members to be enrolled (which includes

Organising Officers) from each of the following zones: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the first hundred from other parts of the world overseas not included in the above. This will make a total of 500 Foundation Members for Overseas Readers.

All of the best,

Your old friend,

THE EDITOR

(Chief Officer of the St. Frank's League).

AS SIMPLE AS A B C.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership: Cut out TWO complete coupons from TWO copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the coupons fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C by running the pen diagonally across both Sections. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of coupon. The second coupon is for your new prospective reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of coupon. Both coupons are then pinned together and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new regular readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete coupons are needed, and these

must be taken from copies of the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the coupons are sent in. On one of the coupons fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of coupon. The other coupon is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of the coupon. Now pin both coupons together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in coupons for two or more new readers at once, provided the coupons are taken from the latest issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the time when the coupons are sent in.

IMPORTANT.—Complete and post off this coupon before the next issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY is on sale. It then becomes out of date and useless.

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE COUPON No. 2.

July 4, 1925.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

Being a regular reader of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" since(give date), I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare myself to be a staunch supporter of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and that I have obtained one new regular reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second coupon attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with Membership Number assigned to me.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR BRONZE MEDAL.

I, Member No.....(give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have obtained one more new regular reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second coupon attached hereto. This leaves me (state number, or, if none, signify with a dash) new regular readers to obtain to entitle me to a Bronze Medal.

SECTION

C

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I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" (No....., dated), which I will read with a view to becoming a regular reader of this paper.

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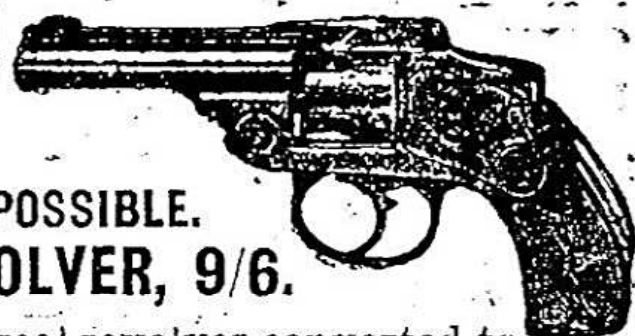
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