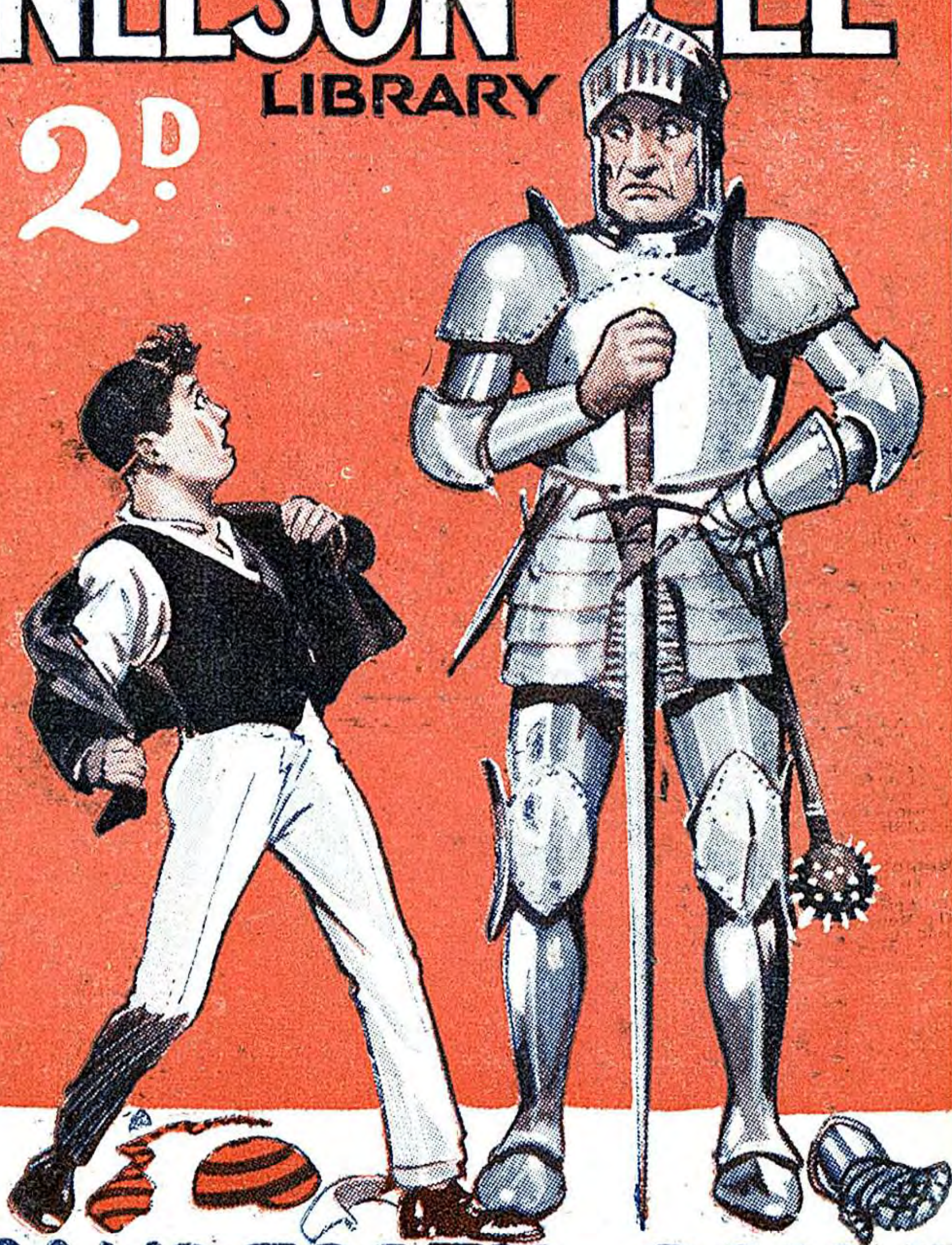


Amazing Adventure! **THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S IN NORTHESTRIA!** Complete Story
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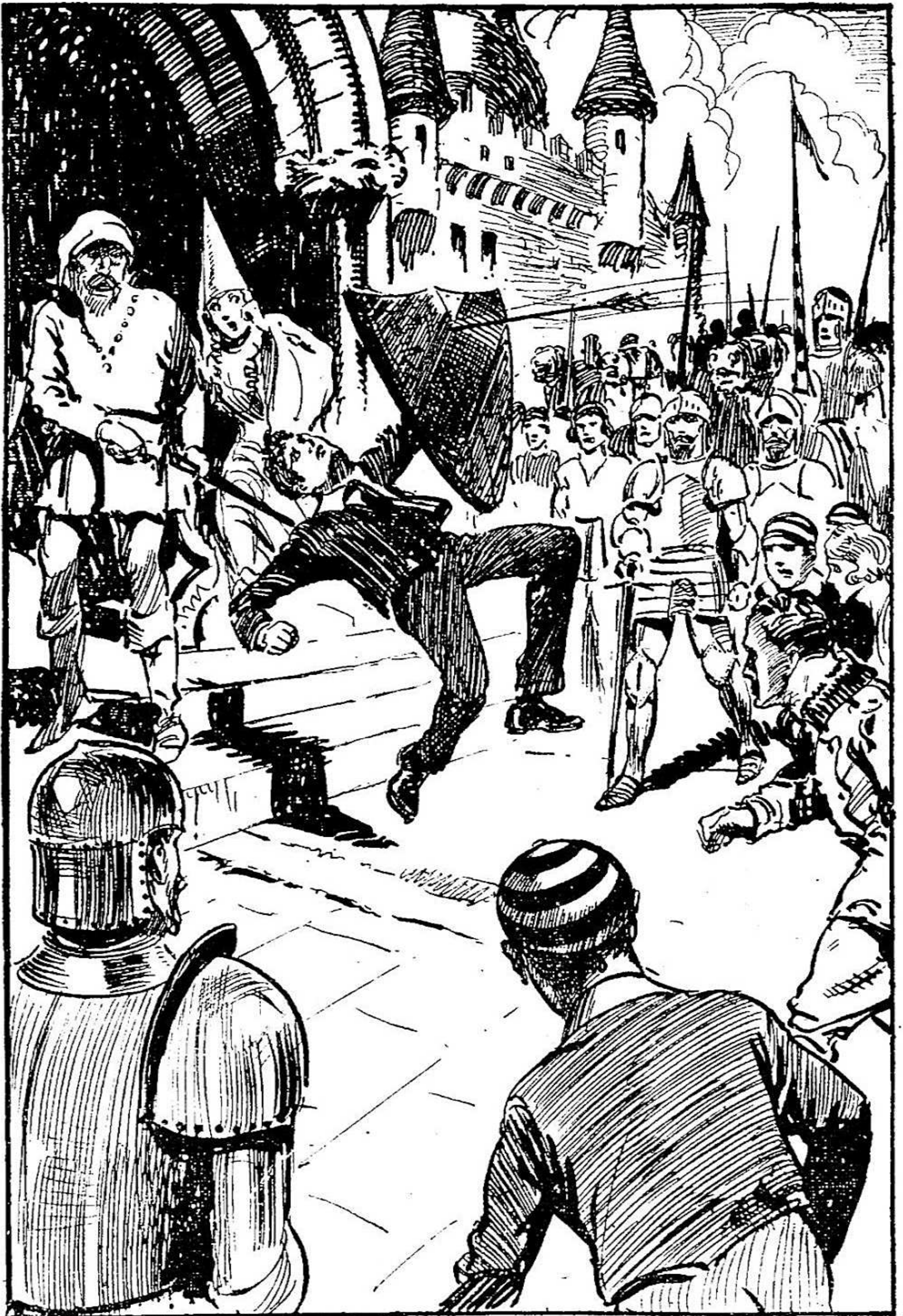
HANDFORTH THE BOLD

An enthralling long complete story of schoolboy adventure

New Series No. 37.

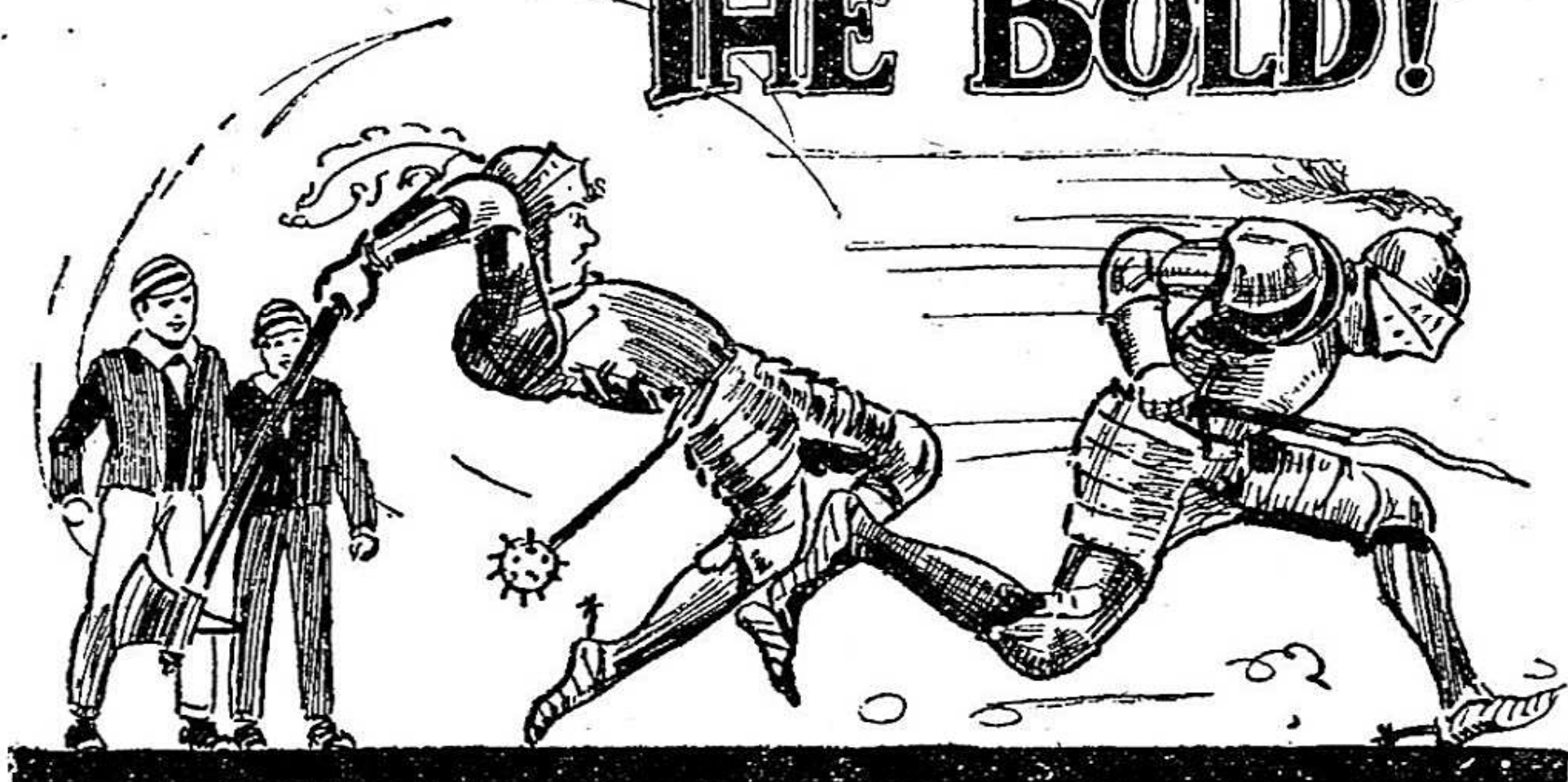
OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

January 15th 1929



Handy gave a shout, snatched a shield from the nearest soldier, and threw himself in front of Princess Mercia. He was only just in time to ward off an arrow aimed at the Princess!

HANDFORTH THE BOLD!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Handforth surprises the Northeistriens in this week's stunning long complete story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

IN THE LAND OF WONDER!

"**H**ALT!"

The order rang out at the head of the column, and with a jangling of stirrups and jingling of chain-mail, the mounted horsemen pulled up their steeds. The heavy drawbridge, rumbling and creaking, descended slowly over the broad moat, and settled into position.

From the big courtyard beyond rode a knight in armour, bearing a great standard. On either side of him were six mounted trumpeters, and they thundered across the drawbridge, and spread out fanwise on either side. The trumpets were in full blare.

"Anybody might think we were conquering heroes, instead of prisoners!" grunted Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. "What's the idea of all this silly palaver?"

Church, one of his chums of Study D, was beside him—but Church was looking excited and flushed. He gave Handforth an indignant glance.

"Haven't you got an eye for colour or scenery, Handy?" he demanded. "My stars! Look at this gorgeous assembly! I—I'm still dazed! This must be the Royal castle, and I expect we're to be presented to the princess!"

"We're more likely to be presented to the chopping block!" said Handforth tartly. "They've only just brought me out of the dungeons, the rotters! They've only just unchained me! They're going to execute us, or I'm a Dutchman!"

Church sniffed.

"They didn't chain anybody else but you, Handy," he growled. "You asked for trouble, and you got it—that's all. Let's be thankful that we're out in the open again, and that something is beginning to move. I expect we're to be taken before the Princess Mercia, and tried."

"Tried!" snapped Handforth. "What for? We haven't done these people any harm—Eh? Steady with your arms, blow you!" he added, as one of the guards gave his shoulder a grip.

"By my faith, thy tongue is ceaseless," said the soldier grimly. "Be thou silent, or 'twill go ill with thee."

Handforth caught his breath, and compressed his lips. He didn't want to be chained up again, so he controlled himself with an effort. He had already learned that he could not do as he liked in Northestria.

"Look!" murmured Church, nudging him. Another rider had appeared from the courtyard, and his horse was now prancing on the drawbridge. He made a fine figure in his glittering armour, and with his horse decked out with all the accoutrements of military splendour. Particularly noticeable was the chamfron upon the animal's head, with its spike projecting from the front. The rider was a big man with a great red beard. He sat his horse nobly.

He gazed upon a curious scene.

On the other side of the drawbridge the column of prisoners had been brought to a halt. They were closely guarded on either side by foot soldiers. And as far as the eye could see, right across the central square of the city, and filling every side street, were the curious, eager crowds.

It was like a picture of an English city in mediæval times.

There was one difference, however. The soldiers fitted the scene, so did the populace, and so did the buildings, and the cobbled streets, and the general air of pageantry—but in the midst of all this was a modern note.

Over twenty boys and girls, belonging to St. Frank's College and the Moor View School, were lined up in that double column of prisoners. There stood Mr. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Umlosi, and a number of sturdy-looking men in blue uniforms with peaked caps. The latter were the officers and crew of the airship, Titan, which had brought the voyagers to this strange land—and which now lay several miles from the city, sprawled over a grassy valley, wrecked and shattered.

"By St. Attalus!" muttered the horseman with the red beard. "An ill-assorted company indeed! What garb is this they wear? And what meaneth the presence of these beardless boys and these young maidens? A murrain upon Kassker for his knavish tricks!"

But if this impressive-looking knight was astonished by the sight of the prisoners, the prisoners were even more astonished by the sight of their captors. They had not been in this strange country for long, but they were already dumbfounded.

Indeed, it seemed only a few hours since the great airship, battling hopelessly against the icy blizzards within the Arctic Circle, had miraculously escaped destruction—only to be thrust through the vortex of air currents into this peaceful haven of the Polar regions.

They knew that the great oasis was half as big as England itself. Down in this great basin there was a vast blue lake, and hundreds of miles of fair country, with forests, cities, moated castles, and scattered villages. But, entirely encircling the strange area of

sub-tropical green were endless chains of mountains and glaciers, with appalling volcanoes. Indeed, these volcanoes provided the false daylight which pervaded the entire basin. Over thirty thousand feet above there was a haze of everlasting mist—mist which reflected the glare from the volcanic fires in a bathing flood of golden radiance.

So far, the adventurers only knew that this warm, equable zone was volcanic in origin, and that it was inhabited by a long-forgotten remnant of Anglo-Saxon stock—which had survived through the centuries, progressing little. On the other side of the great lake, too, there were other people—true descendants of the ancient Goths, by all that could be heard.

The airship party had had little chance of telling their story, or of conversing with their hosts. For they had been surrounded immediately after the crash, had been marched to the city, and been placed down in the dungeons of a castle.

But this captivity had not lasted for long.

Within four hours they had been brought out of those noisome prisons, and marched through the city again to the Royal castle itself. And now they were on the point of entering the great courtyard, with its picturesque stone gateway, and with the quaint towers and turrets of the castle peeping up above the outer walls.

It was evident that something was to be done at once, and all the prisoners were glad of this. They had hardly known what to think after being cast down into the black depths of the underground cells. Of all the captives, Handforth, of Study D, had been the only one to suffer the indignity of being chained—and this because of his aggressive, rebellious manner.

It was already known that these people of the Arctic oasis spoke English—the English of the Middle Ages. And, from snatches of conversation that had been heard, the airship party believed that they were to be taken before Princess Mercia—whoever she was. Whether she ruled over this people or not, no members of the party knew. But they had heard no mention of a king. What kind of woman would this princess prove to be?

The Moor View girls were particularly curious. Indeed, most members of the party had ceased to wonder now—and had ceased to be apprehensive. Their chief emotion was one of curiosity.

The juniors had certainly experienced a qualm or two earlier—when they had been led down into the dungeons. For they had passed through a grim-looking torture chamber, where many instruments of horror were in plain evidence. They did not know that that place had been a kind of museum, and that the modern Northestrians did not practice torture.

Hopes were now soaring. Clearly, they were being taken before the princess, and it was generally felt that Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore would soon explain the situation, and that a totally different treatment would be meted out to them all. It seemed that

their captors suspected them of being enemies—from Gothland. And this place they called Gothland was merely the country on the other side of the big lake.

They had several times heard the name of "Kassker," and it needed no deduction to gather that Kaesker was the king, or ruling chief, of the modern Goths. And these people—these Northeistriars—seemed to imagine that the airship and her passengers had been sent into their country by a trick of this unknown Kassker.

Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee were thankful that English was the spoken language, for they would soon be able to set all misapprehensions at rest, and make it clear that they were all peaceful and friendly.

A new order came, and there was a movement among the armoured soldiers. He of the red beard had swung round, and was riding into the courtyard again. And the double column of soldiers, with the prisoners marching in their midst, entered upon the drawbridge, and went through the great stone archway to the thunder of hoofs and marching feet.

"Good glory!" said Lord Dorrimore, glancing at Nelson Lee. "This is gettin' rummier an' rummier, old man. Gad, but here's a picture for you!"

"Remark a b l e!" agreed Lee, nodding. And a great "Oh!" went up from the girls. The St. Frank's fellows were less demonstrative, but they were decidedly awed.

They found themselves in a vast courtyard, with the Royal castle as a background. There were many balconies to be seen, and upon these were standing the ladies and gentlemen of the Court—the ladies wearing rich, flowing silks and tall conical hats—almost exactly similar to the costumes that one associates with the mediæval Courts of Europe.

The gentlemen were no less grand in their exterior, and most of them were full-bearded—and generally fair.

The captives forgot their unhappy plight in this new scene of enchantment—for it was, without any exaggeration, a picture that filled their minds with a kind of wondering awe.

"Whatever must they think of us?" murmured Irene Manners, as she glanced down

at her neat costume, with its short skirt. "I'm afraid they must take us for terribly brazen girls, Winnie."

Winnie Pitt, who was beside her, glanced in turn at her own slim legs, encased in silk stockings.

"I expect we've horrified everybody," she murmured. "And, do you know, I feel so frightfully out of place, Renie. We ought to be wearing clothes like these other girls and women. No wonder they give us such cold looks!"

"Oh, well, we can't help it," said Irene philosophically. "How were we to know that we should be sent tumbling back through the centuries?"

Not only were the scenes and the people reminiscent of that age-old period, but the very manner of speech was almost identical.

The prisoners were separated into three parties—the men together, the boys together, and the girls together. And all were ranged round a lower balcony, where some wide, sweeping steps led up to it. Behind was a low archway, with trumpeters standing at attention on either side.

"Yes, this is the Royal castle all right!" murmured Dick Hamilton. "The rumours we heard are true, I expect—we are going to be tried before the Princess Mercia. Let's hope she's the right sort."

"There's nothing to worry about," said Reggie Pitt. "As soon as she finds out who we are, and how we

came here, she'll probably throw open the castle, and treat us as honoured guests—Hullo! What's this?"

"The princess is coming!" murmured Jack Grey.

The trumpeters were heralding the approach of a high personage, and a moment later the Princess Mercia had arrived.



CHAPTER 2.

BEFORE THE PRINCESS!
WILLIAM NAPOLEON BROWNE, of the Fifth Form, smiled benevolently.

"We have no trouble, Brother Horace, in singling out the fair

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princess," he murmured. "Without making use of any superlatives, I think we can safely describe her as a peach."

"By Jove, she's lovely!" agreed Horace Stevens, nodding.

There was, indeed, no difficulty in recognising the Royal personage among the richly attired attendants. And the most surprising fact of all was that the princess appeared to be no more than a slip of a girl. Her age might have been seventeen, but certainly no more than eighteen.

She carried herself proudly, and with a stately dignity. And yet, with all this, nothing could alter the fact that she was just a young girl. Her beauty was of the porcelain type, for she appeared rather fragile. Her fairness was remarkable, and her eyes were of the deepest blue.

Edward Oswald Handforth was fascinated—for he had a particular weakness for fair femininity. Irene Manners was his particular girl chum, and she was pretty, her eyes were blue, and her bobbed hair was fair. But the Princess Mercia's beauty was of a more delicate type. Indeed, she looked almost too dainty to be really alive.

That she was immensely popular there could be no doubt. Cheer after cheer greeted her appearance, and the prisoners could hear this cheer echoing and re-echoing from outside, where the masses of the populace were waiting. The whole community, indeed, seemed to be in a ferment over the coming of these strangers.

Lord Dorrimore unconsciously straightened his necktie.

"Old man, it's goin' to be easy!" he murmured, glancing at Lee's twinkling eyes. "Shall I do the talkin', or will you?"

"I think we had better share it, Dorrie," smiled Lee.

"That suits me!" said his lordship cheerfully.

A great deal of their uneasiness had gone. They hadn't had a chance to explain things yet, but this first glimpse of the Princess Mercia placed their doubts at rest. One glance at her was enough to show that she could not possibly be cruel or harsh. And the tumult from the populace proved that her heart was as kindly as her beauty. There was no mistaking that roar of welcome.

"We're all right now, Handy, old man," murmured McClure breathlessly. "By Jupiter, I'm glad to see you safe, old son! Church and I thought you were going to be put to death down in those dungeons!"

Handforth looked at him coldly.

"Wait!" he said curtly. "Wait until I get a word with the princess! I'll soon show her that she can't let her soldiers mess about with British subjects—"

"You ass, don't you say a word!" interrupted Church, in alarm. "Let Mr. Lee and Dorrie do the talking. I say, what a difference in these people!" he added. "They're all kindly looking and gentle."

Church's description was indeed apt. Very few of the Northeistrials bore any traces of

harshness. While the ladies were mostly fair and gentle, the soldiers and the gentlemen of the Court were of a handsome, amiable type. There were one or two, perhaps, who might have been cast in a coarser mould, but the majority were of the same general type.

The juniors remembered their previous adventure—some little time before the airship had crashed. It seemed long enough ago, although, in reality, only a few hours had elapsed.

They had travelled low over the country on the other side of the great lake—that country which they now knew to be Gothland. These Northeistrials believed that their prisoners were from Gothland. It was an amazing situation, and all the captives were wondering how such a misapprehension could have arisen. But perhaps they would soon know now.

And in Gothland the people had been very different. Practically every face had looked evil and coarse—every man had had the appearance of a ruffian. Although the country was very similar to Northeistria, it had, nevertheless, appeared more untidy, more neglected and slipshod. Here, in Northeistria, the land and the people were alike pleasant.

The man with the red beard had long since dismounted, and now he was standing at the top of the great steps on the balcony, talking earnestly with the young princess. She had taken her seat upon a carved chair, which lackeys had brought forward under the orders of the Court attendants. And now the lovely Mercia was even more charming—as she listened to what the man with the red beard was saying, and as she glanced occasionally at the prisoners ranged before her.

"The old boy seems to be somebody of importance," murmured Reggie Pitt. "Prime Minister, or Lord Chamberlain, or Chancellor, or something."

"Shush!" breathed Fullwood. "She's looking at us!"

The man with the red beard turned at this moment, and he faced the captives with a stern expression on his face. At close quarters, they could now see that he was a man of about fifty, well preserved, and as straight as a ramrod.

"Stand forward, he who commandeth this motley host!" he said coldly.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore glanced at one another, and both stepped out of the ranks together.

"I am responsible for my party being here, but Mr. Lee will do most of the talkin'. I expect," said Lord Dorrimore easily. "Of course, Captain Waring is the actual commander of the airship, but he's a modest fellow, and hates public speakin'—"

"Silence!" thundered the man with the red beard. "Dost dare to prattle in the presence of her Majesty? Thou art from Gothland, sent hither by Kassker the Grim. Is't possible thou wilt attempt to deny this?"

"We do deny it," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "We have heard some of your soldiers talking of Kassker the Grim, but we do not know the gentleman—"

"Gentleman!" interrupted the other sharply. "By the soul of Sarus! Is not Kassker the knave of knaves—the surly brute who is overlord of all Gothland? Out upon thee, dog, for uttering such——"

"I crave your pardon," interrupted Nelson Lee quickly. "If I have made a slip, I regret it. But let me insist that we know nothing of Kassker, and have never set foot upon this land you call Gothland. Before proceeding further, we shall be honoured if you will let us know to whom we speak."

"Marry, but thy insolence is impressive!" said the man with the red beard grimly. "Thou art in the presence of her Majesty, Princess Mercia, and I am Ethelbert the Red, upon whom falls the honour of being her chief adviser."

"I thank you," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Wait, good Ethelbert," said the princess, in a voice of singular sweetness. "I cannot believe that these people are of Gothlander blood. For are they not gentle to look upon, and very different from Kassker's rabble."

"A trick, Majesty!" declared Ethelbert the Red. "If not from Gothland, whence came these strangers? As thou knowest, there is no other living soul upon this earth."

"We come from England!" put in Lord Dorrimore, in astonishment. "By the Lord Harry! You don't—you don't actually believe that—— Gad, Lee, they can't think that the rest of the earth is uninhabited, surely?"

Nelson Lee took a step forward.

"Let me assure you, with all sincerity, that we are friendly and peaceful," he said earnestly. "We are not from Gothland, but from the great world beyond the glaciers and the snows. We are from England—from the country of your ancestors. In England we have castles similar to this noble building, but times have changed greatly during——"

"Enough!" interrupted Ethelbert the Red. "Thinkest thou to befool us? In faith, sirrah, thou speakest wondrous nonsense! Are thy brains so paltry that thou knowest not that there is no outer world, as thou sayest? Why talk thou of these fables and legends? I grant that thou art all of a different type to Kassker's brood, but that he sent thee hither is clear. Ay, and ye camest in a monstrous vehicle which seemeth to defy the law of the earth itself."

A great laugh had gone up at Nelson Lee's words—an expression of derision. Even the princess was smiling in a scornful sort of way, although it was rather difficult for her to look anything but sweet. Amazing though it seemed, these people of Northestria believed that there was no outer world.

"I can only repeat, your Majesty, that we came from the lands beyond the ice," said Nelson Lee, looking at the princess. "We came in the craft which you have seen, which we brought to earth after being nearly killed in the great blizzards which raged around this fair country of yours."

The princess lifted her hand.

"Thou speakest wildly, stranger," she said with a shake of her head. "It hath been said that our forbears entered this country from the great outer world. We have it in legend and in story. But is there one who dares to say that these stories are aught but fanciful fables? The lands of Northestria and Gothland are the sole inhabitable regions of the earth."

"I beg your pardon, but you are wrong," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Knave, dost dare to contradict?" demanded Ethelbert.

"Nay, let him speak, my Ethelbert," said the princess. "My faith, but I like it. The manner in which these strangers do talk. It is neither similar to the Gothlander speech nor to our own. List to me, stranger. Do we not know that for centuries past daring explorers have attempted to emerge from our fair valley? They have been lost, or have returned with wondrous stories of endless snows and cruel blizzards. Life beyond is impossible. This we know—so thou must moderate thy story if thou art desirous of being credited."

Nelson Lee hardly knew what to say. He was staggered—as, indeed, were all the other members of the party. These people actually believed that they and the Gothlanders were the whole inhabitants of the world—that this great valley, indeed, *was* the world.



CHAPTER 3.

THE DEATH ARROW!

It was a startling fact to digest.

And, of course, it made all the difference to their position. They were now able to tell their story—to explain how they came into the oasis. But nobody would believe it. That was the uncomfortable position to be faced.

Perhaps the general belief of these people was justifiable. Neither they nor their fathers nor their grandfathers had ever heard of anybody from beyond the snows. For long centuries this remnant of European civilisation had been cut off—had been left here in utter isolation.

Was it very surprising, therefore, that they should discredit these strangers when they spoke of the "outer world." The Northestrians knew of the absolutely impassable snows and blizzards beyond the fertile basin. It was more than they could imagine, to picture the passage of the great airship over the glacier tops. So their only resource was to believe that these newcomers arrived from Gothland.

Nelson Lee looked at the princess earnestly.

"At the risk of incurring your disfavour, your Majesty, I must repeat my former statement," he declared. "We are not from

Gothland, but from far, far beyond. We are of your own blood, and we desire to be nothing but friendly."

Ethelbert the Red glanced at the princess, and she nodded.

"By the bones of Offa!" said Ethelbert angrily. "So thou art foolish enough to repeat these lies? Thou art from Gothland—"

"Are these Gothlanders, then, such wonderful people that they can build ships that fly over the lake, and over your city?" asked Lee sharply.

"A point, good Ethelbert!" said the princess. "We know of Kassker's treacherous nature, and we know that he is preparing many warlike inventions. But we have never given him credit for such wonders as this."

"And do we look like warriors?" went on Lee, turning round and indicating the schoolboys and schoolgirls. "Would Kassker send mere boys and harmless girls? If we were from beyond the lake, as you imagine, should we come in such company? Once again I urge you to believe that we are friends, and not enemies."

The princess looked at her chief adviser rather helplessly.

"Perchance I shock thee, my Ethelbert, but I like the manner of these people," she said. "Truly, thou canst not set them in the same class as Kassker and his Gothland brutes? See! The fair skins, the beardless faces, the straight, noble carriages! These are not of Gothland, even though they may come from that accursed land!"

Ethelbert the Red tugged at his beard.

"I beseech thee, Majesty, to harden thy heart," he said. "Let not Kassker's tricks and wiles deceive thee. There is some treachery behind this, by my faith! Mark my words—"

"Why can't you understand a thing when it's staring you in the face?" demanded Handforth, losing all patience, and running up. "You dry up, Walter Church!" he added, as Church tried to call him back. "I'm going to have my say!"

Nelson Lee turned, and found Handforth, hot and flushed, by his side.

"You had better go back, Handforth," he said quietly.

"But it makes me wild, sir!" snorted Edward Oswald. "The thing's as clear as daylight, and yet they won't see it! Look here, Ethelred, or whatever your name is, I'll tell you something!"

The princess' adviser was frowning.

"Hey, knaves!" he shouted, beckoning to some soldiers. "Remove this young hot-head. Is her Majesty to be flouted and—"

"Nay, good Ethelbert, but stay!" interrupted the princess, looking at Handforth with great interest. "He seemeth a comely youth."

"A which?" asked Handforth, starting.

"If unhandsome, at least he seemeth to be strong, determined, and of a fiery eye," con-

tinued the princess. "I like his looks, my Ethelbert. He is no Gothlander."

"I will grant thee that, fair Majesty," agreed Ethelbert the Red. "Not one of these invaders are of Gothlander blood. Yet whence came they, if not from Gothland? We have none such in our own glorious Northestia. Kassker thinketh to entrap us—"

"You've got Kassker on the brain!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "My hat! Can't you see that we're your pals? If it comes to that, we can give you a warning about Gothland! We saw hundreds and thousands of soldiers over there—and ships lined up on the beach—endless numbers of them! Those Gothland chaps are getting a move on, and if we were your enemies, we shouldn't warn you, should we?"

Ethelbert the Red frowned—particularly because the Princess Mercia was already showing signs of sympathy and understanding. But her chief adviser was made of sterner stuff, it seemed.

"A plausible story, but—" he began.

"It is true!" interrupted Nelson Lee quickly. "If we can do anything to help—if we can serve your Majesty by any means, we are yours to command."

"Absolutely!" agreed Dorrie. "Say the word, and we're at your service. If you really want to hurt us, just look upon us as enemies. We're not—an' we don't like bein' suspected."

A murmur went up from many of the surrounding courtiers and soldiers. At first they had found some difficulty in understanding the speech of these newcomers, but they were now better able to do so. And it was evident that they discredited Lord Dorri-more's words. They were deeply suspicious. They still had it fixed in their minds that Kassker the Grim was responsible for the airship's advent.

"You had better go back, Handforth," said Nelson Lee softly. "You can do no good by arguing here."

"But it makes me wild, sir—" began Handforth.

"Yes, yes—but go!"

Handforth nodded, and glanced at the princess. He was somewhat embarrassed to find that she was watching him closely, and her blue eyes were even more devastating than Irene's. At such close quarters as this Handforth was startled by the fair Mercia's dazzling beauty. To a susceptible fellow like Edward Oswald it was bewildering.

"Oh, corks!" he murmured breathlessly.

He turned away, confused and red. And then, in the next second, an expression of alarm leapt into his eyes. He gave a great shout, and seized a shield from the nearest soldier. In practically one movement he snatched it away, and hurled himself in front of the princess.

Crash!

There was a roar from the assembly as Handforth rolled over backwards, almost up-



Dodging a terrific swipe from Siegan Slim's mace, Handforth replied by a magnificent drive from his famous right. The man sagged over sideways, and fell to the ground—knocked out.

setting her Majesty as he did so. The shield lay upon the wide steps, and close to it was a great arrow, smashed and splintered.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Lord Dorrimore blankly.

"Splendid, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee quietly. "That was a quick piece of work."

Ethelbert the Red strode forward.

"By St. Attalus!" he shouted. "What is this melee? Remove this presumptuous youth—"

"Wait—oh, wait!" cried the princess, with one hand over her heart. "Art blind, Ethelbert? This youth protected me from the death arrow! But for him, I should now be lifeless, and Northestria would be without a ruler."

A great roar went up from the St. Frank's fellows, and from the girls, and from the officers and crew of the airship.

"Hurrah! Bravo, Handy!"

"Well done!"

And the natives themselves caught some of the excitement, and shouted, too. But it had all happened so quickly that Ethelbert the Red was still half confused. Handforth was just beginning to pick himself up.

"My hat!" he gasped. "That arrow came with some force, didn't it? I thought it was going to be easy, but I nearly broke my back—"

"Where stood the would-be murderer?" demanded Ethelbert sharply.

"Over there!" replied Handforth, pointing. "I only saw him by accident. He was on the battlements—on the top of that wall—and he had a whacking great bow, and the arrow was pointing straight at the princess. So I just butted in."

"'Twas a noble act," said the princess softly. "Hither, good youth! Kneel before me, and let me take good stock of thy looks."

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "You—you mean—"

"Her Majesty hath commanded thee to kneel!" said Ethelbert the Red. "'Twas a swift and goodly deed, forsooth. Gramercy, but I wonder if thou art enemy or friend? By my faith, I know not!"

The chief adviser was obviously puzzled, Handforth knelt down before the princess, and felt very quaky. His recent act had been more or less instinctive—he would have done the same thing, in a different way, on the cricket-field, if a fellow-player had been menaced by a carelessly flung ball. He didn't altogether care for this kneeling business.

He knew that Irene Manners was looking at him, for one thing, and all the Remove chaps were probably grinning like Cheshire

cats, too. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were exchanging glances of immense satisfaction. That unforeseen little incident was liable to put a completely different complexion on their position.

"I—I say, don't make a fuss, you know!" muttered Handforth in distress. "I just saw that arrow coming, so I grabbed at something to protect you. That's all, your—your Majesty!"

The princess was looking at him rather wonderingly.

"'Twas a brave deed," she murmured. "And so quick—so wondrous quick! Never have I seen the like. I am pleased with thee, my youth. Thy name? Tell me thy name?"

She reached forward and gently stroked his hair.



CHAPTER 4.

SIEGAN THE SLIM.

THE whole assembly watched with bated breath.

To kneel before the princess was in itself a great honour, but for the princess to act as she was now acting rendered the honour doubly precious. That she had taken a fancy to the embarrassed Edward Oswald was as clear as daylight.

And all the members of the adventure party were anxious. They were so anxious, indeed, that they hardly dared to speak. If Handforth could only succeed in maintaining the princess' favour, everything might be well.

But would he utilise this golden opportunity?

They all knew him—they were fully aware of his aggressive methods, and his rough and ready manner. At any moment he was liable to do something rash—some thoughtless act which would alienate the princess again. They fervently hoped that Edward Oswald would be tactful. Church and McClure, who knew that every atom of Handforth's tact could be accommodated on a pinhead, were pale with apprehension.

"He's got the chance—but he'll mess it up!" moaned Church.

"She's ready to eat out of his giddy hand, and he'll spoil everything in a minute!" breathed McClure, in agony. "I'm going to shut my eyes, Churchy! I can't bear to look at him!"

But the others were looking, and they waited breathlessly. They were ready to give Handforth full credit for his swift presence of mind. Practically any of the other fellows would have done the same thing under the same circumstances—but Handforth, of course, had got all the luck, as usual.

"I am pleased with this youth, my Ethelbert," said the princess softly. "Perchance we have suspected the strangers wrongly.

Would this brave boy have risked his life to save mine if he were an enemy? Thy name, bold one?" she added, looking at Handforth. "Tell me thy name."

"Handforth," said Edward Oswald uncomfortably.

"Hand—forth," said the princess slowly. "'Tis a quaint enough name, in all truth. Thou art quick of eye, and quick of movement, brave Handforth. Thou hast pleased me well."

Again she stroked his hair, and smiled into his face. The unfortunate Handforth was hoping against hope that the stone steps would open and swallow him. He wasn't usually very nervous in the presence of a girl, but there was something about the Princess Mercia which rendered him as limp as a jelly. He was so close to her, too—and her fair hand was still caressing his hair. When he looked up, her blue eyes were upon him in frank admiration and warmth. At such close quarters he could see that her beauty was even more startling than he had ever imagined. There was something almost fairy-like in her actions. And she wasn't much older than he was—perhaps no older at all. She looked ridiculously young now that he was quite near to her.

"Can—can I get up?" he asked helplessly.

"Arise, good youth, and stand by my side," replied the princess tenderly. "Thou shalt be rewarded for thy wondrous prowess. What suggesteth thou, my Ethelbert?"

Ethelbert the Red was tugging at his ruddy beard again.

"I think not of the youth, but of thy safety," he replied anxiously. "'Twas against my wishes that these strangers were brought before thee in the open courtyard. 'Tis ever a risk for thee to be out here, where the populace can have access to thy precious person."

The princess laughed merrily.

"Marry, but thou art nervous, Ethelbert!" she cried in a mocking voice.

"Ay, 'tis but the truth!" agreed Ethelbert promptly. "Do we not know that many spies are in the land—Kassker's spies? Have we not had warnings enough? Repeatedly have I beseeched thee to remain closeted behind the castle walls——"

"And repeatedly will I refuse such attempts to make me a prisoner!" interrupted the princess, her eyes flashing. "'Twas my dear father's wish that I should sit upon the throne of Northestria until the coming of age of my brother, young Prince Oswy. And I will not fear my own people, good Ethelbert. If death is to be mine, then will I face it as becometh a princess."

"I have learned to expect such a spirit from thee, fair Majesty," replied the chief adviser with pride. "But hast thou not just witnessed another of these murderous attempts? The death arrow! But for the swiftness of this youth's eye and arm, all Northestria would now be mourning thy death. Thou spake of Prince Oswy, and I

would remind thee that our noble prince is even now a captive in Gothland—hidden away in some dismal dungeon by Kassker the Grim."

"Alas, yes," said the princess sadly. "'Tis long since my brother dwelt with us. Kassker hath sworn to kill thee, and why is it that poor Oswy still liveth?"

"By my sword," swore Ethelbert, "is't not clear that those Gothlander dogs are keeping his Highness for the torture? I entreat thee, Majesty, to retire at once, ere another arrow can—"

"Nay, I stay!" interrupted the princess firmly. "Kassker may have set his heart upon being the supreme ruler of our world, but I fear him not. I beg of thee, Ethelbert, to speak no more of this subject. Let us decide upon some suitable reward for our brave Handforth."

"I—I don't want any reward!" muttered Handforth uncomfortably. "I'd do just the same again if I'd the chance, your Majesty! We're all friends—we're not—"

"Wait!" interrupted the princess. "I have an idea."

She sat there thinking a moment, and her eyes were still upon the embarrassed Edward Oswald. It was apparent to all that she looked upon him with an eye that was more than kindly.

A good deal of the anxiety was passing, for Handforth hadn't "put his foot in it" yet, and the princess was still in the best of humours. Nelson Lee and Dorrie had wisely remained silent, realising that this impulsive Remove junior might unconsciously accomplish far more than they could hope to do.

"Thou spake of an idea?" said Ethelbert questioningly.

"Some hours ago a report reached me concerning Siegan the Slim," said the princess, glancing at her chief adviser. "Let him be brought hither, good Ethelbert. He hath been guilty of unseemly conduct, I learn—a grave offence for the captain of my bodyguard."

Ethelbert the Red frowned.

"Siegan the Slim shall be brought to book," he said angrily. "Long have I questioned his honour and his fitness to hold such a position. 'Twas my intention to bring him to trial, your Majesty, but these strangers have put aught else from mine head."

"And well can I believe it," said the princess, nodding. "This youth hath saved my life, and he hath won my esteem. Let him be arrayed in costly garments, let him wear the uniform and chainmail of my bodyguard. Let him take his place as—captain!"

"Thou art in earnest, Majesty?" gasped Ethelbert, amazed.

"'Tis my wish," said the princess simply.

Edward Oswald looked at her rather dazedly.

"The—the captain of your bodyguard," he repeated in a feeble voice. "Oh, I say! I mean— Yes, but—"

"Thou hast saved my life once, and thou hast proven thyself fitted for such a trust," interrupted the princess, giving him another of those looks which turned his bones to india-rubber. "Thou hast pleased me, noble Handforth, and my reward is but trivial compared to what thou dost deserve."

She treated him to another smile—a friendly, admiring smile, and poor old Handforth felt weak all over. At the back of his mind he could not forget that Irene was watching all this. And yet, at the same time, he was aware of a little thrill. By George! After all, it was something to be in the princess' favour like this! And she was such a glorious girl, too. Handforth was dimly aware of a growing sense of exultation.

"Let me beseech thee to reconsider this decision, good Majesty," said Ethelbert the Red. "By the soul of Sarus, meanest thou this appointment? Thou art intent upon making this youth the captain of thy bodyguard?"

"It is done, my Ethelbert," smiled the princess.

"Ay, so thou sayest. But think!" urged the chief adviser.

"I have thought—and I have given thee my orders!" replied the princess, turning a cold glance upon him. "Let them be obeyed."

At this moment a new development arose. A tall man came forward, his face working with anger and amazement. He was gorgeously attired in rich clothing, and his chainmail was glittering and gleaming and jingling. This new arrival was slim, his face was rather vicious, and he was probably forty years of age.

"Majesty," he shouted, "I protest against this indignity!"

"Beshrew thee for a knave!" thundered Ethelbert the Red. "Away, Siegan the Slim! Dost thou dare to address thy princess in such uncouth terms?"

Siegan the Slim scowled.

"And have I not good reason to protest?" he demanded hotly. "Am I to be deposed in favour of this upstart? 'Tis becoming to my dignity that I should protest!"

He gave a leap forward, glared into Handforth's face, and then struck Edward Oswald a sharp, vicious blow across the cheek with the back of his hand.

A great cry arose from hundreds of throats.

"A combat—a combat!" went the shout. "Clear a ring for the combat!"



CHAPTER 5.

DEADLY DANGER.

HANDFORTH was bewildered for a moment, but only for a moment.

"You—you rotter!" he gasped, with burning indignation. "I'll punch your head for—"

"Thou art pledged to a combat, rash youth!" interrupted Ethelbert the Red sharply. "Stand aside! Siegan the Slim hath issued the challenge, and if thou art to retain thy prestige, thou must engage. 'Tis a law of Northestia."

Handforth snorted.

"I'm ready for him!" he shouted. "A combat, eh? Nothing I'd like better! The boulder sloshed me across the face, and I'll slaughter him for it!"

Not many understood his words, but there could be no mistaking his fiery attitude—his air of aggression as he glared at Siegan the Slim. And a great shout went up from every throat.

"He accepteth the challenge!"

"I should think I do accepteth it," roared Handforth. "Make way there, you chaps! I'm ready for the beggar—with or without gloves!"

But the princess was looking very pale now, and a light of alarm and anxiety dwelt in her lovely eyes. At first Handforth had believed her to be delicate in health, but he could now see that she was as strong and as healthy as any of the Moor View girls. It was her beauty that was of such a delicate character.

"Nay, nay!" she protested. "By my soul, good Ethelbert, this cannot be! 'Twill be nought else but murder itself! The fair youth cannot hope to live in combat against such a man as Siegan the Slim!"

"Art serious, Majesty?" asked Ethelbert, aghast. "A challenge hath been issued! The captain of thy bodyguard must defend himself, or everlasting disgrace will be upon his head."

The princess rose to her feet.

"'Tis different!" she declared hotly. "The brave Handforth is so much younger—and he knoweth not the ways of our national combats. I urge thee, my Ethelbert, to stay this terrible thing—"

"By my soul, Majesty, it cannot be!" interrupted her chief adviser grimly.

"It shall be!" she cried. "Let Siegan the Slim be banished forthwith."

But Ethelbert the Red was looking very determined.

"'Twas the wish of thy father, his late Majesty, that I should advise thee well and truly," he exclaimed firmly. "A challenge hath been issued, and 'twere a blot upon this noble court if the captain of thy bodyguard ignored it. Nay, Majesty, thou didst precipitate this combat, and, in faith, thou must be the judge. 'Tis my wish."

There was something very masterful about Ethelbert the Red now. Apparently he was more or less the real ruler. The Princess Mercia sat upon the throne, but it was her chief adviser who did most of the ruling.

She gave him a little hopeless look, and her eyes were frightened now. Probably she realised the truth of what he had said—that she herself had precipitated this combat. Conse-

quently she could do nothing now but stand by and watch it.

Handforth was in no way alarmed. The prospect of a fight with Siegan the Slim had the effect of bringing him back to his normal self. He found that he could look at the princess with greater confidence now.

"Thou wilt forgive me, brave youth," murmured Mercia. "I did not imagine that Siegan, the knave, would challenge thee."

"That's all right," said Handforth, freshly alarmed by the look of concern in her eyes. "I'm ready for him. By George, rather! I'm not afraid of the beggar!"

"Thou knowest the nature of this combat?" she asked timidly.

"Why, a fight, isn't it?"

"Ay, a fight—thou hast spoken truly," agreed the princess. "Ethelbert, I would that it were possible to delay—"

"Nay, 'tis too late," replied Ethelbert the Red.

He pointed. Active preparations were already afoot. It appeared that a blow upon the face was a challenge that could not be ignored—unless the recipient of the blow wished to be everlastingly disgraced. A great ring was being formed in the courtyard, with soldiers all round it.

And then a man appeared with two identical shields, and two murderous-looking clubs. In the business ends of these clubs were ugly, glittering spikes. Handforth stared in astonishment.

"Not—not with those things?" he shouted, suddenly aghast.

"Ay, bold youth!" said Ethelbert. "'Tis to be a combat with clubs—a battle to the death, as thou shouldst surely know."

A shout went up from the Remove fellows, and from the others.

"He'll be killed!"

"Stop the fight!"

"It isn't fair; Handy doesn't fight with clubs!"

Nelson Lee turned to Lord Dorrimore, and they both advanced towards Ethelbert the Red. The princess was not available, for she was surrounded by many of her ladies in waiting.

"This cannot be, Ethelbert!" said Nelson Lee quickly. "Siegan may be an expert fighter with the spiked club, but this youth is but a schoolboy. He knows nothing of such bloodshed."

Handforth interrupted.

"It's all right, sir," he said hoarsely. "I'm game!"

"Good lad!" nodded Lee. "But we are not doubting your gameness, Handforth. This will be no fight at all—but a murder. Don't you understand that you cannot possibly hope to defend yourself against a man nearly double your height—and a man, moreover, who is experienced in this type of combat?"

"Ay, experienced enough," said Ethelbert the Red, turning. "Siegan the Slim hath slayed no less than seven men in combat."

"Oh, corks!" said Handforth blankly.

"It just can't go on, that's all!" snapped Lord Dorrimore. "Why, hang it, the infernal brute gave the challenge on purpose to destroy the poor kid, because he was angry at being deposed. Can't you see it was just a trick? You're not going to let this slaughter go on?"

"I am helpless——" began Ethelbert.

"I must add my voice to that of my friend," put in Nelson Lee quickly. "If this boy enters into the combat, it will be nothing short of deliberate murder. This man, Siegan, knows his own prowess, and he will make short work of our unfortunate young companion."

Unhappily, Handforth butted in just then.

"Don't worry about me, sir," he said gruffly. "I'll fight!"

Ethelbert the Red looked relieved.

"'Tis well," he growled. "The youth accepteth the challenge, and nought can be done to avert the combat."

He went off to attend to some of the details, and Handforth was about to follow, when Nelson Lee pulled him back.

"You mustn't attempt it, Handforth," he said urgently. "My boy, do you realise that it will mean certain death? You've never fought with anything else but your fists in all your life!"

"This man will crack your skull in during the first second!" urged Lord Dorrimore. "Stay with us, Handy; we'll put everythin' right."

Edward Oswald's jaw set squarely.

"I've got to go, sir," he said, with a stubborn note in his voice. "They're all expecting me to, and they'll think I'm a coward if I refuse. By George! The princess has appointed me captain of her bodyguard, and I'm not going to be labelled a funk during the first ten minutes!"

"But listen——"

"Sorry, sir," interrupted Handforth. "What's the difference, anyhow? I'm in for it now, so I might as well make a decent scrap of it. If I refuse to fight, they'll probably chuck me to the crowd, and then I shall be lynched. Either that, or they'll chop my head off! So what's the difference?"

"Gad, the boy's probably right!" muttered Dorrie miserably.

"But while there is a chance, we must grasp it!" said Nelson Lee. "I shall do everything in my power to stop this murderous combat."

He hurried off, and tried to reach Ethelbert the Red. But soldiers in armour with long lances barred the way. Nelson Lee was forced back.

Other soldiers came forward and seized the unfortunate Handforth. He shook them off, and glared.

"Keep your hands away!" he roared. "I'm the captain of the bodyguard, and I'm not going to be mauled about by any of you! Stand back! I'll show Siegan the Slim how to fight!"

A cry came from the princess.

"Bravely spoken!" she exclaimed joyously.

"My blessing go with thee, fair Handforth!"

The soldiers fell back, rather nonplussed by Handforth's attitude, and they suddenly remembered that he was, indeed, the captain of the bodyguard, appointed to that exalted position by the princess herself.

In strict truth, Edward Oswald's heart was beating with much greater rapidity than usual, and he was aware of a vague sense of apprehension. He had expected a combat as he understood the word—a mere bloodless fight.

But now he knew that this battle was to be a ghastly affair with spiked clubs—a fight to the death!



CHAPTER 6.

THE COMBAT.

UT it was not like Edward Oswald Handforth to show the white feather.

He was irrevocably committed to this battle now, and it is possible that he entertained a hope of winning, for his supreme optimism was as celebrated as his aggressiveness.

But even the thought of victory appalled him, for victory would mean that the blood of Siegan the Slim would be on his hands—it would mean that he had killed a man! But, at least, whatever he did, he would only do in self-defence. There was that consolation.

He swept the soldiers aside and marched boldly down the steps towards the combat ground. The whole assembly was talking excitedly, and from every window of the castle there were eager faces looking down.

"Ted!" came a shout from Ena Handforth, as he passed the guarded girls. "Oh, Ted, don't try it; you'll be killed!"

Handforth paused.

"That's all right, sis," he said gruffly. "Don't worry about me; I shall be safe enough."

"But it's not fair!" cried Irene in agony. "Oh, it's cruel—it's murderous!"

Willy Handforth, of the Third, gave his major a handwave.

"Good luck, Ted, old son," he said cheerily.

"Thanks!" muttered Handforth.

He didn't realise how much effort it had cost Willy to appear so careless—for Willy was in a mortal funk for the safety of his brother. But the shrewd youngster knew better than to show any sign of it. He knew that it would be utterly useless. This combat was now inevitable.

Handforth went within the circle of soldiers, and they closed up.

"Poor boy, I'm afraid he's done for!" muttered Nelson Lee, his face pale and haggard. "It's cruel, Dorrie, it's utterly——"

"Man alive, can't we do something?" panted his lordship. "They're going to mur-

der the boy! We can't stand here and watch a thing like this!"

A rumble came from behind him.

"N'Kose, let me go among this rabble of warriors, and bring the young white master back!" urged Umlosi, the huge African chieftain. "Wau! Command, my father, and it shall be done!"

"It's an idea!" muttered Lord Dorrinore. "Yes, Umlosi—"

"No, Dorrie—no!" broke in Lee quickly. "That would only make matters much worse. If Umlosi fights, this courtyard will soon become a veritable battleground, and instead of one boy being done to death, all of them will be put to the sword. No, we can do nothing. We are helpless against this unexpected tragedy."

Curiously enough, the one member of the airship party who was quite at his ease was Handforth. Now that he was well within the combat ground, the rapid beating of his heart moderated. He was only aware of a fierce excitement—a grim desire to acquit himself well before the princess and before the whole assemblage.

Not for a minute would he admit that he had no hope.

There was something rather fine in Edward Oswald's contemptuous refusal of a coat of mail—which two members of the bodyguard urged upon him. He brushed them aside.

"No fear!" he said. "I don't want that stuff! The lighter I am, the better! By what I can see, I shall have to do a lot of dodging, so you can clear off!"

The majority of his words were double Dutch to the soldiers, but they could easily understand his purport. And a moment later a great shout went up from the whole concourse.

The combat was about to be joined!

Handforth was now holding the heavy, spiked club in his right hand. In his left hand he held the shield, a massive affair of glittering metal. He was looking at it doubtfully, and Siegan the Slim, some yards away, was waiting. Ethelbert the Red stood ready, his hand upraised.

"Prepare, combaters!" he exclaimed grimly.

"I'm ready for the beggar!" roared Handforth aggressively. "And I don't want this giddy shield, either! It's no good to me."

He threw it aside, and advanced, unprotected.

A fresh shout went up from the crowds. This was a strange "combateer" indeed! Not only had he refused chainmail, but even his shield was discarded. To the Northerners it seemed a sign of amazing valour. Even Siegan the Slim stared, and an uneasy qualm smote him. Had he made a mistake? Was this opponent so greatly beneath his contempt, after all?

"Oh, Handy!" muttered Church, clinging to McClure's arm. "Look, Mac! He's chucked his shield away!"

"He's mad, poor chap; he's dotty!" babbled McClure.

Willy Handforth flashed a look at them.

"Don't you believe it!" he snapped. "I didn't give Ted credit for so much sense! That shield was no good to him, and he's well rid of it. He wants freedom of movement, my sons!"

"But—but he won't last ten seconds!" muttered Church huskily.

"Won't he?" growled Willy. "He's a Handforth!"

"Yes, but even the Handforths are only made of flesh and blood!" said Chubby Heath desperately. "Your major's got a wooden skull, though, Willy, and it might help him a bit—"

He broke off as Willy looked at him with a pained coldness.

"Sorry!" said Chubby, flushing. "I—I didn't mean—"

"Look!" shouted the other juniors. "They're off!"

Ethelbert the Red had dropped his hand, and at the same moment Siegan the Slim came rushing forward, his heavy club whirling viciously. Clearly he meant to settle this combat during the first few moments—as a proof of his prowess. He believed, too, that victory might restore him to his appointment. For a victory would mean the downfall of his successor.

"That's all right!" roared Handforth contemptuously. "You can't fool me with that sort of stuff, you rotter!"

He side-stepped like lightning, although he left it dangerously late. Siegan's club came within an inch of his shoulder as it swept down, and that blow alone would have been sufficient to tear his bones and sinews to pulp.

The boys and girls watched with a kind of sick horror. Some of them were trying to close their eyes, but couldn't do so. They were fascinated by this spectacle—watching and waiting for their chum to be done to death.

But Handforth's training in the boxing-ring stood him in excellent stead. There was something extraordinary in the panther-like agility of his movements. Edward Oswald had always been a good boxer, but never in his life before had he used his feet so adroitly as he used them now.

For he knew that it was a question of life or death.

Siegan the Slim meant to kill him. This would be no combat of wounds, so far as Siegan was concerned. If he happened to strike his youthful opponent down, he would finish the job with some more deadly blows. The expression on the man's face was more than sufficient to tell Handforth the truth.

"Fight, bold Handforth—fight well!" came a cry from the balcony.

"By George!" roared Handforth. "The princess!"

He was also aware of a roar from the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls.



Handforth reined up his horse before the little sleepy hostelry of Ina. "Hi!" he shouted to the surprised innkeeper. "Have three rotten spies passed by here? Three horsemen, I mean. Wake up, dunder-head! Answer, thou varlet!"

And, although he needed no encouragement, he became imbued with a fierce determination to win this combat.

Siegan the Slim meant to kill him; but he had no such deadly intentions regarding Siegan the Slim. Another idea had struck him, and he was concentrating all his attention upon keeping himself intact. No matter which way Siegan leapt at him, he was always just missing when the club swung down. His activity was already beginning to delight the great audience.

And then came the crucial moment.

Siegan was confident now, and his eyes were glittering evilly. Not once had Handforth attempted to strike a blow, and, to Siegan's mind, this seemed to be a certain indication of timidity. This beardless boy was afraid of him.

Again he swung in with his club, but this time Handforth leapt high, and the spiked head of the deadly weapon swished under him, where his legs had just been. Before Siegan could recover, Handforth's own club came hurtling round.

Crash!

With a shower of sparks, the head of Handforth's club battered against his opponent's shield, and the latter was wrenched out of

Siegan's hand by the very force of the impact.

"Now, you rotter!" panted Edward Oswald fiercely.

Not for one second did he wait.

He flung his club down. But the man still held his club, and it was already hissing round for another terrible thrust.

"Die!" he snarled.

But Handforth didn't die—he moved so quickly that Ena and the other girls, closing their eyes to escape the awful sight, nearly missed the real cream of the encounter. As Siegan's club cleft the air, Handforth's famous right swung round.

Biff!

It was a glorious uppercut—a fierce, terrific swipe on the point of Siegan's jaw—and it had all the weight of Handforth's shoulder behind it.

It was all so quick, too. A second earlier, Handforth had ducked like a streak, and he had got in his blow as the club was whistling past his ear—a piece of work that he could never have accomplished had his life not been in danger.

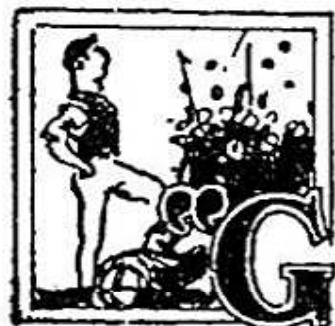
And here he was, going for his brutal assailant with bare fists.

Crash! Thud!

As the man staggered back, dazed and agonised by that uppercut, Handforth fol-

lowed up his advantage. Left—right! A tremendous full-fisted blow on Siegan's ear, and another on the point of his nose.

With a lurching, crumpling movement, the man sagged over sideways, his club dropping from his nerveless grasp. And the next moment he rolled over, and lay perfectly still—knocked out utterly and completely.



CHAPTER 7.

HANDFORTH THE BOLD!

GOOD old 'Ted!' yelled Willy, his voice crackling with relief and excitement. "Look, you chaps! 'Ted's' won! 'Ted's' the

victor!"

"Hurrah!"

Handforth, flushed and excited, melodramatically stepped up to the vanquished, and placed one foot upon his senseless body. Then he faced round to the balcony of the castle, and threw up his hand. It was an eloquent sign—that salute.

He was the victor!

"That's the way I treat 'em!" roared Handforth. "I haven't hurt the chap—he's only knocked out! We don't kill people where I come from!"

"Hurrah! Good old Handy!"

"Bravo!"

The shouts from the airship party were certainly echoed and re-echoed by all the Northeistriens. For a moment, these latter had been amazed—bewildered by the fact that this boy had beaten his opponent with bare fists alone! It was something they had never witnessed before.

"Thank heaven, Dorrie!" muttered Nelson Lee fervently.

"The boy's a marvel!" declared Lord Dorrimore. "Good glory, I've seen a few knock-outs, but that uppercut was a real beauty!"

And yet, after all, Handforth's victory was not so very miraculous. He had adopted tactics that Siegan the Slim had been unprepared for—and he had been wise, too, in refusing the heavy chainmail and the heavier shield. They would have burdened him to such an extent that he could never have dodged—and it had been by agility alone that he had won the combat.

The air was now filled with continuous cheering.

Without any question, Handforth had gained the favour of the people—and that was an extraordinary lucky circumstance. That which had seemed so tragic had turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Edward Oswald Handforth, at least, was a popular hero in the eyes of the Northeistriens.

With his bare hands, he had beaten the captain of her Majesty's bodyguard—a man who was famous for his victories in combat. And it really seemed that Siegan the Slim was actually dead. Not a movement came from him. He sprawled on the ground, ap-

parently lifeless. Handforth wasn't surprised, for his fists were still filled with agony as the result of those terrific blows. He rather thought his knuckles were fractured. For the leader of Study D had been fighting for his life, and he had used his strength to the last ounce.

"Hold!" shouted Ethelbert the Red. "Hither, men, and remove this carrion! The victor standeth here!"

He raised Handforth's arm, and the people cheered afresh.

"The Bold!" they cried in loud voices. "He is the Bold!"

"By the bones of Offa!" exclaimed Ethelbert. "A fitting title, indeed! Handforth the Bold he is! Well done, brave youth! Thou art truly worthy of her Majesty's gracious esteem."

"Bring him hither, good Ethelbert," cried the princess excitedly.

Handforth, much against his will, was triumphantly led up the steps to the open balcony. The princess bade him kneel before her again, and she held one hand on his head, while she faced the great crowds.

"List ye all!" she cried. "Handforth the Bold is henceforth the captain of my bodyguard—and who shall say that he is unfitted to protect me?"

"Nay!" went up a roar. "Let him be thy captain, sweet Majesty!"

"All honour to Handforth the Bold!"

The princess smiled into Handforth's startled face.

"Thou hast done wondrous well!" she said breathlessly. "I feared for thee, and yet thou dealt speedily with that scurvy knave by thy bare hands alone! Truly, thou art the only captain for my bodyguard!"

"I—I haven't done anything to brag about," muttered Handforth uncomfortably. "That rotter wanted to kill me, so I laid him out—that's all. By George! Am I really going to be the captain of your bodyguard?" he added eagerly. "It's a ripping idea, your Majesty——"

"Thou art in full command!" said the princess, her blue eyes full of admiration and tenderness. "Go thou with good Ethelbert, and he will take thee to thy noble quarters. Siegan the Slim is for ever banished, and thou art the captain of my bodyguard, with a full thousand men at thy beck and call."

Handforth staggered.

"Eh? A thousand men!" he gurgled. "I—I——"

She laughed, and gave him another of those devastating smiles. Then he found himself facing Ethelbert the Red, who was now looking much more friendly. Handforth's astonishment was so great that he could only stand there and gape. He had pictured the princess' bodyguard as a group of fifteen or twenty men. But, apparently, every soldier that he could see was a member of that noble corps. And all these men in armour—all these valiant horsemen and skilled archers—all were under his command!

"By George!" he muttered breathlessly.

It was an amazing situation—but not so bizarre, when all the circumstances were taken into account. In one way, it was a pure stroke of luck. For it had all developed from that incident when Handforth had saved the princess from the arrow. And any one of the juniors might have done the same thing. But it is doubtful if the others could have vanquished Siegan the Slim. Even Dick Hamilton, with all his pluck and boxing skill, did not possess that ram-headed temperament which had been Handforth's salvation.

"Thou art to be placed in her Majesty's own household," said Ethelbert the Red, with a friendly grip on Handforth's arm. "Come with me, bold youth, for, by my halidom, thou art deserving of naught but praise."

"But—but what about the others?" asked Handforth quickly.

"Ay, tarry a moment, good Ethelbert!" cried the princess. "Let Handforth the Bold be arrayed in the finest uniform. And let these other strangers be taken to the castle beyond the Eastern gate. There they shall remain pending a decision."

"Does that mean that they're still prisoners?" asked Handforth.

"'Tis impossible to grant them freedom," replied Ethelbert the Red.

"Just a moment," put in Lord Dorrimore, stepping forward. "Your Majesty, I beg leave to speak."

The princess nodded.

"Speak on," she commanded.

"Among our number there are six maidens," continued Dorrie earnestly. "I urge you to take them into your household, where there are other ladies. Treat them well, for they are young and unprotected. Do not fear that they are filled with treachery. We others can remain in captivity, if it is your order—but is it fair that these young girls should be treated with the same harshness?"

"Thou art well spoken, stranger," said the young princess. "What suggesteth thou, my Ethelbert?"

"Perchance the wenches can be used as serving maids," replied the chief. "'Tis ill, I will grant, that they should be kept prisoners. For no danger can come from such maidens."

"Then see to it, Ethelbert—nay, I will take them myself," said Princess Mercia. "Let the maidens be brought within the castle. They can be well cared for—and, by my faith, they shall be arrayed in garments that are more pleasing to the eye."

"Thank you," said Lord Dorrimore quietly.

"Oh, but wait a minute!" put in Handforth, in alarm. "Why should anybody be kept in captivity? We're all friends, your Majesty! Can't you trust us now, after what's happened?"

Ethelbert the Red went to the young princess' side.

"This youth can we trust—but I doubt the others," he murmured. "Be advised by me, good Majesty, and heed not these supplications. Let them be placed in captivity."

"But not harshly, Ethelbert," said the princess, with grave concern. "Let them not be thrust into the dungeons."

"Nay, they will be merely kept within the precincts of the Athelstane Castle," promised Ethelbert the Red. "Well shall they be looked to, and provided with every comfort. But 'twould be rash to grant them liberty—yet."

"As thou sayest, Ethelbert," agreed the princess.

The chief adviser turned back to Handforth.

"Fear not, Handforth the Bold," he said. "Thy friends are to be removed to the Athelstane Castle, beyond the Eastern gate. And there, by St. Attalus, they will be granted every consideration. 'Tis her Majesty's wish to consider yet awhile ere further steps are taken."

"We are quite agreeable, Handforth," said Nelson Lee, giving him a keen look. "Let the matter stand. I am thankful, indeed, that the affair has ended so satisfactorily."

But Handforth was now rapidly recovering. He was fully aware that he was in a strong position—for, as captain of the Royal bodyguard, he could command.

"At least, I insist upon three of my friends being placed in the bodyguard with me!" he said firmly. "I want more than three, really—in fact, all the chaps you see over there!" he added, pointing to the St. Frank's fellows. "I require them in the bodyguard."

"Good old Handy!" said Reggie Pitt. "He hasn't forgotten us!"

"We shan't have any luck, though," murmured Fullwood.

In that remark he was right. But Handforth was so insistent that the princess gave way to him in one respect—he was allowed to select three companions from among the schoolboys.

"'Twill be strange for our brave Handforth to be alone among the soldiers," said the princess. "But with three of his own companions he will be more at home. Let them be chosen, Ethelbert. It is my wish."

It seemed, indeed, that she was ready enough to grant almost any wish of Handforth's, and the leader of Study D received permission to select his three companions



CHAPTER 8.

HANDFORTH MEANS BUSINESS!

Of course, everybody knew who the lucky ones would be—Church, McClure, and Willy. Handforth was always lost without his celebrated chums, and although he pretended to be contemptuous of his minor, he

was ever ready to give him privileges. Besides, he had learned from experience that Willy was a very useful sort of chap to have about the place.

Dick Hamilton and Reggie Pitt and Napoleon Browne and the other unfortunates were compelled to form up into line, and they were marched off to the mysteries of Athelstane Castle, together with Nelson Lee and Dorrie and all the other men.

The whole business was not without its humorous side.

Here was a mere Remove junior in a position of command—and even Lord Dorrimore himself was marched off into captivity! Even Nelson Lee, who was Handforth's Housemaster, was just a captive—while Handforth was the commander of a thousand men! It was a topsy-turvy situation, in all conscience!

But, if it came to that, Nelson Lee and Dorrie were perfectly satisfied.

There was everything to congratulate themselves upon.

These Northestrians had taken them to be enemies, and they might easily have been summarily put to death. But now there was not the slightest danger of that. Handforth could fool about as he pleased for a time, but Lee was convinced that complete liberty would soon be the lot of them all. Even now, they were merely being taken to a castle, and would be well looked after there. They were to be guarded, but were not to be treated as prisoners. And the girls were safely placed in the princess' own suite—to act as hand-maidens! This was not a particularly dignified avocation, but they would certainly be safe.

And, as Lord Dorrimore remarked, they ought to feel themselves jolly lucky—for there was no telling what might happen in the Middle Ages!

Ethelbert the Red, much to Handforth's satisfaction, did not remain with him long. He called a stoutish man to his side—a soldier with many glittering ornaments on his uniform. This individual was the soul of good-nature, according to his beaming face, and he proved to be the second-in-command of the Royal bodyguard. He was known, indeed, as Wynwed the Jovial.

"Take thou these goodly youths in charge, Wynwed," said Ethelbert the Red. "'Tis thy duty to obey the orders of Handforth the Bold, since he is now thy superior officer. But 'twill be well, methinks, if thou wert to instruct him in the various methods of the bodyguard," he added drily. "Haply, our good Handforth will be feeling strange at first. 'Tis for thee to make things easy."

"Ay, and right willingly will I do it!" declared Wynwed the Jovial, in a hearty, approving voice. "Come thou with me, great and noble youth! 'Tis with pride that I accept thee as my captain!"

"That's all right," said Handforth genially. "We'll go along to our quarters, and have a little chat to begin with. Come on, you chaps. And none of your larks, Willy, my

lad! Don't forget—two words from me, and it'll be you for the dungeons!"

"Cheese it!" grinned Willy.

They were all feeling happy.

The situation had changed tremendously during the last hour or two. And Handforth had already made up his mind to have a look at Athelstane Castle at the first opportunity. As captain of the bodyguard, he was going to make sure that all the other members of his party were well treated. The very least he could do was to make things as comfortable as possible for all concerned.

He wasn't worried about the girls, either. He had seen them pass into the castle, and they had been surrounded by a group of chattering Northestrian girls and women.

"They'll have heaps to jaw about—and they're safe, anyhow," said Handforth practically. "We've got work ahead of us, my lads!"

"Work?" said Church happily. "I thought a little sleep wouldn't do us much harm!"

"You ass! You'll get no sleep yet!" declared Edward Oswald.

"Then some grub, then," suggested McClure. "I don't know about you, Handy, but I'm half-starved. I haven't eaten a bite since the week before last! At least, it seems as long as that!"

"I've forgotten all about the time," remarked Willy. "There's no darkness in this queer country—and you can't tell night from day! Still, we can't expect the volcanoes to die down at regular intervals, can we? I wonder how they arrange things? Must be pretty hard for the Northestrian burglars!"

Handforth frowned.

"This is no time for being funny!" he said gruffly. "I'm not even sure that we shall have an opportunity of feeding. There's grim work to be done—as soon as we've got into our uniforms. And let me warn you—unless you chaps behave, I'll push you off to join the others."

They didn't take much notice of him—particularly as they were just entering the officers' quarters of the bodyguard. This was a portion of the castle itself, and Wynwed the Jovial escorted them round. He was full of good-nature, and his friendliness towards the boys was very obvious.

"By the bald scalp of Joseph, I never saw the like!" he declared. "Thou art truly a youth of much prowess, good Handforth! Thou didst beat Siegan the Slim in fair combat as no man hath been beaten. 'Twas a sight to quicken the beating of my old heart! Marry, but 'tis a great day!"

"By the way, how do you know when it's day or night?" asked Willy.

"'Tis but an expression with us, as thou shouldst know," replied Wynwed, looking at the boys curiously. "'Tis said, in the old legends, that in the past ages there were days and nights—periods when there was light and when there was darkness. 'Tis our custom to reckon by so many hours——"

"That's jolly interesting, but I want to ask you a lot of questions," interrupted Handforth. "First of all, what about our uni-

forms? Then we shall want some food. After that, you'd better prepare a full parade of the bodyguard. I want to inspect my men."

Wynwed chuckled.

"By my faith, but her Majesty knoweth but little!" he said. "A thousand men, said she! 'Twere but a quarter, good Handforth! Methinks that Ethelbert the Red hath been telling her some fine tales!"

"Aren't there a thousand men in the bodyguard, then?"

"'Twould be difficult to muster a hundred, by St. Attalus," replied the jovial one. "Another hundred could be fetched, perchance, from other districts. But here, in the city, we have but a hundred."

"Oh, well, it's a swindle," said Handforth gruffly. "Still, I don't suppose it's your fault, so I won't say much. What about Siegan the Slim?"

They soon heard all they wanted to know about the deposed captain—who by this time, it seemed, had been cast adrift. The idea of banishment, it appeared, was to merely turn the man out.

While Handforth & Co. and Willy were changing into their new clothing, they learned many things. Wynwed the Jovial and several other members of the bodyguard helped them with the uniforms, and it turned out that the entire body of soldiery was whole-heartedly delighted at Siegan's downfall. For he had been heartily detested—and Handforth the Bold was already well on the way to popularity. He was a novelty—and his great victory in the combat had earned him the respect and honour of all his men.

It was no easy task, fixing them up with the necessary uniforms, for none were in stock of the necessary size. However, by dint of a few deft alterations, they were soon in their new clothing—Handforth gorgeous in chainmail and head-dress and jingling spurs, and the other three juniors in a simpler form of garb.

And after that came food.

In the officers' common-room, they were provided with a splendid meal—roast beef, a brownish, coarse-looking bread, cheese, and numerous pastries. The bread was singularly appetising, and the whole meal was served upon a great wooden bench, the soldiers standing about, and taking an enormous amount of interest in their new captain and his young companions.

"Comest thou from Gothland?" asked Wynwed the Jovial, when the food was partially gone. "What manner of trickery doth Kassker attempt?"

"The sooner you get Kassker out of your mind, the better," interrupted Handforth. "We've never set foot in Gothland, and by all that I can hear of Kassker, we never want to! We're from England—beyond the snows—and if you don't like to believe it, you needn't."

"Beshrew me for a knave, but I am like to believe thee!" declared Wynwed. "For, i

faith, I have never seen such as thou, bold youth!"

"Lots of people say that," remarked Church. "In England, where we really live, Handforth is just as big a clown as he is here!"

Handforth glared across the table.

"Any more of that, my lad, and the dungeons!" he roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure and Willy yelled, and the other members of the bodyguard laughed at them. Most of these men were frankly unable to understand these youngsters, but they were perfectly satisfied that they were in no way connected with Kassker the Grim.

During that meal, the chums of Study D learned quite a lot.

It seemed that the city was called Dunstane, and it was the capital of Northestria. There were other cities, too, and many villages. Most of the land in the country was owned by feudal barons, each with their own serfs and soldiery. But all were subject to the princess' rule.

Gothland, it appeared, was a place of no account whatever. Until a year or so back, there had been a considerable amount of trading with Gothland—for the Gothlanders, although a despised race, were energetic enough, and there were many of their products which the Northestrians desired. But more recently Kassker the Grim had displayed a great deal of hostility towards the Northestrian traders, and very little commerce was now indulged in. Indeed, in this land of medieval customs, with no telegraphs and no modern means of communication, very little was known of Gothland's latest doings. There were rumours that Kassker's subjects were preparing for a war, but nobody in Northestria appeared to take any notice.

"It's about time somebody came along to wake you all up!" said Handforth firmly. "In fact, I'm going to start using the prod from this minute onwards!"



CHAPTER 9.

THE MAN OF ACTION.

WYNWED THE JOVIAL shook his head.

"Thou art a wit, forsooth," he said, with a chuckle. "Thou art from

the great world beyond the snows, so thou sayest. In truth, I believe thee! For I will grant that Gothland bred no such marrow as thine! And 'tis a fact that thou art new in Northestria."

"Ay, 'tis like to be as thou sayest, Wynwed!" said one of the other soldiers.

There was a murmur from some of the others.

"I wish old Ethelbert had as much sense as you fellows," said Handforth gruffly. "He

thinks we're a lot of enemies, come here to indulge in a sort of gunpowder plot, or something. And we simply dropped in for an afternoon call! I'm not grumbling now—because I'm captain of the bodyguard, and I mean to show the princess that we're made of the right stuff."

"What's the programme, Ted?" asked Willy. "By jingo, that grub was good! After all these excitements, I think we ought to get a few hours' sleep."

"Hear, hear," said McClure, yawning. "I suppose you do go to bed here?" he asked, turning to Wynwed. "You sleep sometimes?"

"Thou art jesting," smiled Wynwed. "If thou wilt repair upstairs, goodly beds are awaiting thee. We have a system of close shutters, so that one may sleep in the peaceful darkness. Come, good sirs——"

"Nothing doing!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "You're my second-in-command, Wynwed, and I want a full parade of the bodyguard out in the courtyard at once. So just buzz round, and give the orders."

Wynwed the Jovial looked puzzled.

"A parade?" he repeated. "Buzz? By my bones, but thou art full of strange sounding words, sirrah! What art thy wishes? Thou art here in place of Siegan, and well are we by the change."

"I want the bodyguard in the castle courtyard," said Handforth. "I suppose I'd better talk in your rummy lingo, and then you'll know what I'm getting at. Call thou the body-guard, Wynwed, and have the full company lined up for inspection."

"What's the idea of it?" asked McClure. "You don't want to start any of your funny business, Handy—these men aren't cadets, or boy scouts, you know. You can't mess them about——"

"I'll trouble you to obey orders, and ask no questions," interrupted Handforth coldly. "I'm in command, and I'm going to alter things in this country! They're not only asleep, but they're practically walking about dead! So it's up to me to put some pep into them!"

"But you can't go the pace too fast, Ted," warned Willy. "You ought to be jolly thankful that——"

"Enough!" thundered Handforth. "Out upon thee, blow you, for a silly knave! Clear off, and get out into the courtyard! I've got an idea in my head, and I mean to start some action."

His chums and Willy made no further comment. They didn't quite know what he was up to, but the gleam in his eyes betokened some scheme. Willy felt rather glad that he had been chosen to stay behind. He might be able to help Church and McClure to keep a check on their impulsive leader.

Wynwed was soon convinced that Edward Oswald meant what he said. And in less than half an hour a full parade of the bodyguard was mustered. They were as a matter of fact, a well-trained, splendid-looking body of

men, and they all treated Handforth with respect, but, at the same time, it was clear enough that they regarded him as a joke. It had been the princess' whim to appoint him and they, being loyal fellows, were willing enough to obey his orders. But everything in this land seemed to be free and easy and singularly slow-going.

There were well over a hundred men, and they made a fine picture in the courtyard, as they stood there at attention while Handforth made his inspection. Church and McClure and Willy were obliged to stand in the ranks, at attention. Handforth would have no exceptions.

"I thought that fathead had more sense," growled Church. "Just like his giddy swank to drag the whole bodyguard out here for nothing. Just because he's had some luck, he seems to think he's everybody."

"It's a jolly good thing there are only about a hundred soldiers, instead of a thousand," remarked Willy. "There's just a bare chance there won't be a mutiny now. But if he had a thousand to deal with, he'd have the whole crowd rounding on him in less than half an hour."

They had learned that quite a number of the soldiers had gathered from various feudal estates—that is, the soldiers who had been on the scene earlier. Most of these had now returned to their overlords. And the only men of war left in the capital were the princess' bodyguard. In a way, Handforth was pleased, for he had things very much his own way.

A hail came from one of the balconies as he was reviewing the troops, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction when he looked up, and recognised Irene Manners and two of the other girls.

"Any orders, captain?" called down Irene.

"By George, you're looking a bit different!" shouted Handforth.

"I think I can return the compliment," laughed Irene. "What's the full dress parade for, Ted?"

"I'm getting them ready for action," replied Handforth promptly. "But how are you getting on in there? Everything O.K. now?"

"We're having a lovely time," replied Doris Berkeley. "Everybody's ever so nice to us, and we're only worrying about Mr. Lee and all the rest. Can't you do something to bail them out, Ted?"

"I'm going to attend to them next," replied Handforth. "But there's something else to be done first—something important—something——"

He broke off with a little gasp. For at that moment the Princess Mercia herself appeared at one of the lower doorways. He was quite close, too, and she favoured him with a gracious smile. Hastily, he pulled himself upright, and saluted.

"It is said that the uniform maketh the man!" laughed the princess. "Thou art truly changed now, Handforth the Bold! I

thought thee comely in thy former garb, but now thou art truly splendid."

"As the captain of your bodyguard, your Majesty, my only wish is to serve you," said Handforth with dignity.

"Come hither, sweet youth, and let me gaze upon thee," commanded the fair Mercia.

"Oh, corks!" murmured Handforth under his breath.

It was just his luck that Irene should be present again! And here was the princess pretty well vamping him! And she was such a lovely girl, too—so dazzling, indeed, that Handforth was acutely aware of the fact that he was continually comparing her to Irene.

"Thou art a wondrous captain now, in all sooth," declared the princess, as she inspected Handforth at close quarters. "But what meaneth this array of thy troops?"

"We're starting at once—on a spy hunt," replied Handforth calmly.

"A spy hunt!" echoed Church involuntarily. "By Jove, so that's his great wheeze, is it? I thought he had something up his sleeve!"

The princess was mildly astonished.

"What is thy plan, good Handforth?" she cried. "I' faith it seemeth that I chose well when I placed thee at the head of my bodyguard! So thou art intent upon hunting down the rascally knave who cast the arrow at me?"

"Yes, your Majesty," replied Handforth firmly. "But not him alone—the whole gang of spies. I've heard that there's a crowd of the beggars knocking about, so I mean to round them up!"

The princess was obviously delighted.

"I bid thee all speed in thy enterprise, my splendid Handforth!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Here, indeed, is a youth of action! 'Tis uncommonly good to hear thy brave talk!"

Handforth regarded her in surprise.

"But those spies have got to be caught!" he protested. "We can't let them run loose, can we, your Majesty?"

"Harken unto him!" said the princess, addressing all the soldiers. "I bid thee heed him well, my soldiers! For in Handforth the Bold thou hast a leader of strange and wondrous qualities."

Handforth was more and more puzzled. But Willy wasn't. Their talk with Wynwed and the other soldiers made one fact very clear. The Northeistriians were singularly apathetic. They were a peace-loving people—prosperous, easy-going, and blind to the peril from the Gothlanders.

Strangely enough, they all seemed to know that Kassker the Grim, of Gothland, was preparing a war—and yet, at the same time, they all discussed the subject with a shrug of the shoulders, and with a smile on their faces.

They seemed to believe that there would be nothing to fear during their own lifetime. For centuries the Gothlanders had been little better than serfs and slaves. They were not worthy of serious consideration. And so,

when the danger was practically at their gates, they paid no heed.

This indifference to a very real peril was not born of cowardice or want of vision. It was just a kind of national disease. Nobody ever thought of taking any action. Why go to the trouble? Life in Northeustria, it seemed, was a very peaceful, ambling sort of affair. It was small wonder that these people had made practically no progress throughout the centuries.

But Handforth was going to show these sleepyheads a thing or two!



CHAPTER 10.

ON THE TRAIL!

IT was rather a relief when the princess retired, and Handforth was able to devote his whole-hearted attention to the business in hand. Somehow, that slim girl—the princess of this fair domain—always left him feeling rather weak. He instinctively knew that she was more than interested in him, and he had never experienced anything like that in his life before. Irene, of course, was just a good sort of chum, but that was a different thing.

"Now then—attention!" roared Handforth, striding down the double column of troops.

"Wynwed, old son, what about some horses?"

"Horses?"

"Don't tell me you don't know what horses are—because I've seen heaps here," retorted Handforth. "You don't use another word, do you?"

"Horses thou shalt have," replied Wynwed, in surprise. "Art thinking of taking a journey, good Handforth? Whither goest?"

"I don't know whither—but we've got to get after those spies—those rotten traitors who tried to murder the princess," retorted the new captain. "It's no good hanging about here and doing nothing! Haven't you got any police in this town?"

"Police?" repeated Wynwed helplessly.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Handforth. "We shall never get anything done if we keep on jawing! How many horses have you got?"

"Full thirty are ready in the stables——"

"Then give orders for the full thirty to be saddled and harnessed and brought here without delay," interrupted Handforth. "In the meantime, I've got a few investigations to make. Willy, you'd better come with me—and you chaps, too," he added, looking at his chums.

"Hold!" said the stout Wynwed. "Thou art too fast for me, good Handforth. What of this journey? Meanest thou, in all faith, to hunt for the accursed spies? Marry, but thou art a strange captain."

"Strange!" roared Handforth. "Aren't these traitors ever chased, or anything?"

"They come—and ere we can lay fingers upon them, they go," replied Wynwed.



As they charged round a bend in the cave, Handforth leading, a hefty chunk of rock came hurtling at their heads. "Duck!" yelled Handforth. The leading juniors instinctively bent forward—only just in time to allow the dangerous missile to split on the rocky floor beyond.

"Thrice have we nearly brought them down with arrows, but the elusive rascals win free."

"And haven't you chased them?"

Wynwed smilingly shook his head.

"I know not of that point," he replied.

Indeed, it seemed to fill him with astonishment that anybody should think of going to the trouble of pursuit. The very suggestion of conducting any sort of inquiry struck the soldiers as being extraordinary. They were dumbfounded at the very idea of it.

"It beats me!" said Handforth grimly. "A beastly traitor—probably a Gothlander—climbs to the top of the wall of the Royal castle, and nearly murders the princess! And nobody thinks of chasing the beggar!"

"But why?" asked Wynwed.

"Why!" yelled Handforth. "Why? Well I'm jiggered!"

He was at a loss for words, and it was not as though Wynwed were an exception. All the Northestrians were the same. They were so easy-going, and so lazy, that these spies could come into their very midst, and escape without trouble. It was high time that somebody came along to effect a change.

"I can see that Northestria needs a strong man!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath. "My only hat! What a crowd of helpless dummies! It ought to be as easy as pie to capture these traitors! They aren't expecting any pursuit, and we shall grab them in no time, once we get on the trail."

"I'm not sure that it's your duty, Handy —" began Church.

"Of course it's my duty!" snapped Handforth. "The princess relies upon old Ethelred the Bert—I mean Ethelbert the Red—and he's just about as useful as half-dead hippo! In my opinion, he's a doddering old chump! A fine chap to be Prime Minister!"

"He's chief adviser," said McClure.

"That's the same thing, isn't it?" retorted the energetic Handy. "If you ask me, he ought to be called the chief sluggard! His brain must work at about one mile in every thousand years! Look at the way he's pushed off our crowd into a moated castle! And any ordinary chap would know that they were friends! Thank goodness we're free, anyhow—and we're going to show the princess a bit of speed!"

"Ted, old son, you've got the right idea," said Willy approvingly. "This country needed a bomb, and she's got one. You've been exploding ever since you arrived!"

"Ass, I haven't started yet!" snapped Handforth. "Oh, my goodness!" he added, glancing round, and looking at Wynwed the Jovial. "What about those horses? Didn't I just give some orders?"

The stout one looked rather confused.

"I thought thou wert jesting—" he began.

"Jesting!" thundered Handforth. "I meant it! By the bones of St. Vitus! I'll make some of you chaps dance!"

Wynwed went off, decidedly scared—and there was something comical in the effect that this schoolboy produced on these lackadaisical



As they charged round a bend in the cave, heads. "Duck!" yelled Handforth. The allow the dangerous m

warriors. Never in their lives had they seen such energy. Everything in Northestria went along so smoothly and leisurely that a little hustling put them all in a fluster.

"Now, you chaps, come with me!" said Handforth briskly.

"Where are we going to?" asked Church.

"Never mind where we're going!" retorted Handforth. "You're here to obey orders—not to ask questions. There's the spot where the spy shot the arrow from," he went on, pointing to the top of the wall. "I'm going to have a look on the other side, to see what it's like out there—and we might be able to pick up some clues, too."

"Go ahead!" said Willy.

They marched out through the imposing archway, and went across the drawbridge. Veering round to the left, they walked for some distance down a dusty road, where there were low-built houses on the other side, with curious townspeople watching them. But Handforth took no notice of them. His mind was fixed upon his mission.

At last they came upon the exact spot they were looking for—where a loose stone at the top of the wall marked the precise place.



hefty chunk of rock came hurtling at their nervetively bent forward—only just in time to be rocky floor beyond.

The moat stretched across from them, and the sluggish water flowed flush with the castle wall, on the other side. The wall itself was twenty feet high, but there were plenty of interstices and projections by the help of which any active man could climb to the top of the wall.

Handforth stood there, scratching his head. "Beats me!" he said helplessly. "Just imagine these sort of things happening in England! Before the fellow could have got down from that wall, he would have been nabbed by a dozen people. Surely somebody must have been watching?"

He turned and looked at a bent old man who was standing in a doorway just opposite. He had a long white beard, and he was greatly interested in these boys in the princess' uniform.

"Were you here when that Gothlander spy tried to kill the Princess Mercia?" demanded Handforth, going up to him.

"Ay, noble sir!" replied the old fellow, nodding. "'Twas a dastard's deed, and 'tis said that thou art the one who saved our sweet young princess from the death arrow—"

"Never mind about that," interrupted Handforth hastily. "I'm trying to find out if that man was alone, or if he had any companions. What happened?"

The old man looked astonished.

"'Twas seen by many," he replied. "Three horsemen came up, and one dismounted and waded through the moat—"

"The moat's a fat lot of good, then!" grunted Handforth.

It did not take long to gather the rest. While the spy's two companions had waited with his horse, the man had climbed to the top of the wall, and had loosed his arrow—and all this in view of many people. But the rascals had acted so quickly that they had been gone before the sleepy Northestrians had had time to look round.

Almost at once it had been known that a daring attempt had been made on the princess' life—but even this had not influenced anybody to make an effort to give chase.

The trio of traitors had galloped off hard, passing through the east gate, and taking the highway for the town of Ina, ten miles distant.

"And nobody followed them!" said Handforth, in amazement, as he hurried back into the castle courtyard. "Think of it, you chaps! By George! Isn't it just about time these snails were put into top gear?"

"It'll be great if we can only capture those spies, and bring them back!" said Church, catching some of his leader's enthusiasm. "That'll show the princess that we're friendly, won't it?"

"Yes—if we can only capture them!" said McClure dubiously.

"If!" echoed Handforth tartly. "There's no if about it, you chumps. We're going straight off now, and we're not coming back until those prisoners come with us!"



CHAPTER 11.

THE SPY HUNTERS!

It was an undoubted fact that Edward Oswald Handforth was "surprising the natives." Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and all the other members of the party were equally as anxious to shine in the same way, but it wasn't their turn yet. Sheer chance had placed the leader of Study D in his lucky position, and he was making every ounce of capital out of it that he could. It wasn't like him to let any grass grow under his feet.

Even the princess' bodyguard was no better than any other section of the community. Soldiering, for them, had been just a kind of a picnic, and the juniors were learning that the recent activity, and the great display of armed forces, had been mustered from all quarters—especially for their benefit.

Normally, the town of Dunstane, and the whole Northestrian countryside, pursued its drowsy life in a state of semi-coma. There

were no hardships in this land, no poverty, and for endless years the people had carried on in the same sleepy, easy-going fashion.

The advent of the airship and its party had caused a far greater sensation than any of the fellows had realised. But by now the city was already dropping back into its former lethargy.

Wynwed the Jovial was just beginning to realise that his new captain meant business. He was also realising that business meant an expenditure of energy.

The horses were all ready, and most of them were splendid animals. One fact the juniors noted, however, and it filled them with satisfaction. The animals seemed to be stricken with the same disease as the humans. They were exceedingly quiet and docile. And Handforth & Co., who were not particularly famed for their horsemanship, experienced no difficulty in controlling their mounts.

Once in the saddle, Handforth dramatically drew his sword, and raised it aloft.

"Forward!" he shouted. "Men, follow me! We don't return until we bring those spies with us!"

"Marry, but thou art a wondrous youth!" grumbled Wynwed, as he followed. "'Tis naught but running hither and thither! Perchance we shall not return during these twenty-four hours!"

"That doesn't matter," replied Handforth, as they trotted over the drawbridge. "We've left half our men in the castle, and if I find any slackness when I get back, there's going to be trouble!"

The inhabitants of the city were freshly astonished as the cavalcade of thirty soldiers, with Handforth at their head, clattered noisily through the cobbled streets. The Eastern gate was reached within ten minutes, and although Handforth had no eyes for the sights of the town, Church and McClure had missed little.

"Of course, we're getting used to it by now," said Church. "But I've still got a feeling that we shall wake up. Look at these quaint old houses, and the shops with their signs outside! Just like London in the time of the Normans!"

"I don't wonder at it," said Willy. "These Northeistriens are so jolly slow that they can go on for another thousand years, and still be in the same spot! Of course, it makes a big difference, their being so isolated. They can't copy anything from the rest of the world. They've just been carrying on, century after century, using the same methods and the same speech."

"All the same, it's a knock-out," remarked McClure.

They rattled through a great archway, with battlements overhead—the Eastern gateway.

And beyond lay open country. The city was entirely enclosed in the high walls, and now a road stretched out before the cavalcade. It was a narrow road, ill-made, and with hedges on either side. But all the vegetation in this queer country was of a pale greenish tint—just as though it had been forced in a hot-house. The very air was mild, and sub-tropical. Handforth and the other juniors were feeling hot and stuffy already.

The whole oasis was, of course, volcanic, and at different spots the English-like aspect of the landscape was changed by the appearance of a great steaming geyser, gushing forth volumes of boiling hot water.

Half a mile from the city walls, a castle rose majestically on a neighbouring hilltop. Wynwed the Jovial pointed towards it as they were riding by.

"Athelstane Castle," he explained. "'Tis there thy friends are held prisoners. The ancient home of Athelstane the Great. Thou needst have no concern, brave Handforth, regarding thy friends. Athelstane the Great will protect them well. For he is one of our finest overlords, and loyal to her Majesty."

"Shall we go and have a look at them?" asked Church.

"It might cheer them up a bit, to see us free like this, and——"

But McClure was interrupted by a snort from his leader.

"There'll be plenty of time to cheer them up later," said Handforth. "For the moment, we've got to concentrate on these spies. And if these horses don't go a bit faster, I shall get the pip! There must be something in the air of this place!"

"By Jupiter! That's about it!" said McClure.

"Rats!" said Willy. "What about the spies? They moved pretty quickly, didn't they? And how about Kassker and his Gothlanders? By everything we can hear, they're overflowing with energy!"

Handforth had never had any eye for scenic beauty, and now he rode along with his mind fixed firmly upon the business in hand. He was, indeed, one of the most matter-of-fact fellows under the sun, and he had already forgotten the remarkable nature of his surroundings, and the entire novelty of this gigantic freak of nature.

He was feeling just a little bit depressed.

How wonderful it would have been if Nelson Lee and Dorrie and the rest could have joined in this hunt? It hurt the big-hearted Handforth to realise that just he and his chums were enjoying this freedom.

At any other time he would have expressed pure joy at the prospect of "lording it" over everybody, and at the idea of being his own master while such celebrities as Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi and Dick Hamilton and William Napoleon Browne were prisoners. But now that he was experiencing the thing, he didn't like it a bit.

"We've got to concentrate on two jobs, in fact," he declared, as they continued their

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ride along the narrow road. "As soon as we've grabbed these spies, we'll get all those poor chaps out of that castle. There's heaps of things to be done after that, too. Captain Waring and his men will probably try to patch up the airship, and we've got to set the wireless going, and—"

"Here, steady!" interrupted Willy. "You're beginning to surprise us with your giddy energy now! One thing at a time, Ted! It wouldn't be a bad idea if we made inquiries all along the road. If we meet anybody, we'll ask them if they saw three horsemen taking this road three or four hours ago."

"That's no good," said Handforth. "The people can't remember—"

"In that, good Handforth, thou art wrong," chimed in Wynwed. "Horsemen are not frequent along this road, methinks. Ay, and by my faith, these sleepy country folk will well remember the horsemen, if they chanced to ride along this road."

Handforth nearly reeled off his horse.

"Sleepy country folk!" he murmured. "Great jumping corks! Is he trying to tell us that the country folks are sleepier than the inhabitants of the capital?"

"Seems like it," grinned Church.

"My hat! What a country!" muttered Handforth.

In a way, he was rather glad to hear the jovial one's word. He would create all the bigger sensation when he and his cavalcade thundered through the villages. He had thought nothing of starting out on this mission—but it seemed that the Northestrians regarded it as an epoch-making event.

And they soon had proof of this.

They passed through one or two tiny hamlets before they reached the little town of Ina, and in these hamlets the entire population turned out and watched them ride by—and the expressions on the faces of these people were of blank, dazed amazement. In all probability, they had never even heard of the recent activities in Dunstane.

And it was almost the same in Ina itself.

Handforth hardly looked at the place; but Willy and Church and McClure were frankly fascinated. The capital had been quaint, but this little town was positively wonderful to look upon. It was more like a glimpse of early Britain than anything the mind could picture. Picturesque old houses, cobbled streets, and slow, lazy shops with their painted signs swinging outside.

The people were simply dressed, for the most part, and Wynwed the Jovial had been right enough in his prediction.

The inhabitants of Ina were only half as much awake as the people of the capital. Everybody in the little community turned out in the utmost astonishment at the arrival of a large body of the princess' soldiers. And then there was Handforth. And Handforth was creating enough surprise alone.

"Hi, innkeeper!" he shouted, pulling up his horse, and beckoning a man with an apron, who stood in the doorway of a little

hostelry. "We want to know if you've seen three horsemen going through the town. Three rotten spies, as a matter of fact. Back up! We can't stay here all day!"

The innkeeper simply stared, his wits momentarily removed. The speed of Handforth's quickfire questions bewildered him as much as the junior's mode of speech.

And a big crowd of inhabitants gathered round, open-mouthed. The town of Ina hadn't been awakened for years, and an event of this kind would probably last them, as a subject of gossip, for a decade.

"Horsemen!" roared Handforth, exasperated. "Three men! Hast seen them, dun-derhead? Where away, jackass?"

The innkeeper pointed vaguely down the long street of the town.

"Three horsemen, good sir!" he panted. "'Twas several hours ago. They rode straight through the town—"

"That's good enough for us!" interrupted Handforth, swinging his horse round. "Ready, everybody? Come on—let's go through at the gallop! Might as well do the thing in style while we're about it."

And the cavalcade thundered through the main street of Ina, to the consternation and amazement of the entire population. Indeed, it was generally believed that a crowd of madmen had descended upon the unfortunate community.

Activity of any brisk kind was simply an unknown quantity.



CHAPTER 12.

HANDFORTH'S METHOD.

"RUMMY!" remarked Willy Handforth thoughtfully.

They had ridden another five miles, and the nature of the country was now

changing. There were still little villages and hamlets, but the landscape was becoming hilly, and over on the left rose a craggy mass of mountainous rocks, obviously volcanic in their origin. And there were dense patches of woodland, too, with here and there another of those great moated castles, telling of the presence of some feudal lord.

Willy was gazing over towards the left, where a quaint old inn was perched on the side of the road. The road bore round in that direction, and before long the royal bodyguard would reach the building.

Willy was frowning. He had caught sight of a man at one of the upper windows at the rear of the inn. At first Willy thought he was merely shaking out a cloth of some kind, but a certain rhythmic movement caused Willy to come to a different conclusion. The man was obviously signalling. But it was impossible to say why, or to whom.

"Yes, jolly rummy," repeated Willy.

He looked into those craggy hills, half ex-

pecting to see some figures over there answering the signals. But there was no indication of life. He glanced at his major and grinned. Handforth, in spite of his unbounded energy, had not even noticed that man at the upper window of the inn.

As a matter of fact, Edward Oswald was beginning to feel tremendously tired. He hadn't noticed it much before, but the jogging motion of the horse had lulled him into a drowsy condition. He was aching a bit, too. And he was beginning to think that he ought to have taken a sleep before setting out on this mission.

Church and McClure had come to this conclusion long ago. They were interested in all they saw, but one's enthusiasm was inclined to wane when it was a sheer physical effort to keep awake on horseback.

Round the bend they came in full sight of the wayside inn, and Handforth brightened up again.

"We'll stop here and make inquiries," he declared. "And it wouldn't be a bad idea to have half an hour's rest, while we're about it. I'm not so sure, though," he added, pulling himself up. "We're getting hot on the trail now, and it won't do to lose any time."

They pulled up with a brave clattering of hoofs and a great jingling of stirrups and of chainmail. Handforth was glad enough to dismount, and to stretch his legs a bit. The

inn was a very small place—a low, poorly-built house, with a thatched roof.

The innkeeper himself was at the door, and there was something in his manner which Handforth didn't quite like. The man seemed to be very nervous, and he was watching the soldiers with frightened eyes. He was a hangdog-looking customer, with a permanent scowl. Indeed, Handforth set him down as a villain.

"Horsemen?" repeated the man, shaking his head. "Nay, thou art wrong, good officer! No horsemen have travelled this way many a day!"

"What!" said Handforth, startled. "Are you sure?"

"Hast seen no strangers?" put in Wynwed.

"Not one," smiled the other. "'Tis seldom enough that folks travel this road, my lords. Thou art come wrong."

Handforth scratched his head.

"H'm! This is a nice go!" he grunted. "Those rotters must have turned off the road somewhere between here and the last village. Well, the only thing we can do is to ride back, and make a thorough search."

"'Twill be a great task, methinks," grumbled Wynwed. "'Twould surely be better to tarry awhile in this hostelry, bold Handforth. 'Tis ill to strain our horses unduly."

Handforth hesitated.

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"Oh, well, perhaps we'd better have an hour," he admitted. "You see to the horses, Wynwed. Get some of the men to take them over to that pond, and let them have a good drink. Landlord, bring us coffee, and plenty of bread, and a good supply of cheese."

The innkeeper was flustered.

"I fain would do as my lord commands, but I am unprepared for such numbers," he protested. "If thou wilt forgive me—"

"Well, never mind," growled Handforth. "Let's get indoors, and have half an hour's rest. That'll be good enough."

He was ushered into a small room with a ceiling so low that it almost touched the top of his head. Church and McClure and Willy followed him, and the latter was looking rather keen.

"By George, that's good!" said Handforth, as he sat down on a low chair. "Is it, though? Whoa! I'm pretty sore, you chaps! Must be this riding—we're not used to it."

"You don't believe this innkeeper, do you?" asked Willy softly.

"Believe him?"

"Yes—you don't think he's telling the truth?" said Willy. "Because, if you do—I don't! He's seen those horsemen, Ted, and, what's more, I'll bet a quid to a stick of chewing-gum that he's mixed up with this spy crowd. This is probably one of their meeting-places."

Handforth was looking startled.

"Yes, now you come to mention it, the chap looks a real crook!" he muttered. "But we've got nothing to go on—"

"Only the man was signalling from one of the upper windows before we got here," said Willy quietly. "But, of course, I don't need to tell you that, Ted. You're in charge of this hunt—not me. Naturally, you saw him, didn't you?"

Handforth started.

"Well, yes," he said. "Of course—That is to say, no! Anyway, not exactly—not to notice! Signalling, eh?"

"Yes."

"From one of the back windows?"

"That's what he was doing," replied Willy.

"Then how the dickens did you see him?" asked Handforth suspiciously. "We haven't been at the back of a house—"

"Yes, but we came along that lane, didn't we?" interrupted Willy. "And the lane bends sharply about a hundred yards along. We had a clear view of the back of the inn as we rode along. What was the matter with you, Ted?"

"I must have been thinking," said Handforth hastily. "So this rotter was signalling, was he? Signalling to those dirty spies! All right, leave him to me. I'll soon make him cough up the truth."

Edward Oswald was fully awake now—and as grim as ever. He strode out of the inn, yelling loudly for the landlord. And that individual, hustled forward by two of the

soldiers, stood in front of Handforth, shivering.

"You've been lying!" snapped Handforth.

"Nay, my lord, 'tis not so—"

"You've been lying!" repeated Handforth. "You said that those horsemen didn't come this way. Well, they did! And, what's more, you know where they are, too! Come on—out with it!"

The man vigorously protested.

"Nay, good master! 'Tis naught I know!" he panted. "Thou hast made a blunder, my lord! Have I not already told thee—"

"Take him away!" snapped Handforth curtly. "Here, Wynwed! Cenwulf! Wilfrid! Forward, all of you! Take this dirty knave, and tie him to that fence! And get the archers ready!"

Screaming with terror, the innkeeper was grabbed by the soldiers, who were willing enough to obey Handforth's orders. Indeed, they were rather scared of the energetic captain—and this, astonishingly enough, in spite of his youth. Handforth had a way with him that these simple Northeistrials could not ignore.

"I know naught—I know naught!" shouted the innkeeper desperately. "Spare me, good master! Thou art accusing me falsely—"

"We'll see about that!" rapped out Handforth fiercely. "That's right! Tie him securely! I believe in doing these things swiftly—killing them out of hand! Now then, the archers! Get your arrows ready!"

A dozen archers stood on the other side of the road, and they unslung their powerful bows. There was something very grim and significant about the whole performance, and the innkeeper had gone white to the lips with fright.

"Now, get ready!" shouted Handforth. "Innkeeper, you've got just one minute! Where are those three horsemen? Speak now, and your life will be spared. When my hand drops, you'll be dead!"

He raised his hand, and the archers drew their bows, the arrows quivering, ready.

"Hold—hold!" screamed the landlord. "I will tell thee the truth, my lord, if only thou wilt spare my unworthy life!"



CHAPTER 13.

HOUNDED TO THEIR LAIR.

HANDFORTH took a deep breath.

It was really a breath of relief, although he did not show this. For, of course, he had no intention of giving the order to have the innkeeper killed. It was just a bluff—and it had worked.

"Hold your arms, men!" he ordered. "Lower the arrows! Now, you rat, out with that story of yours! Where are these horsemen? Which way did they go, and where

can we find them? The whole truth, mark you, or back to that fence you go!"

The man was shaking in every limb.

"They—they are in the hills—yonder!" he panted, pointing with a quivering finger. "If thou wilt penetrate into this neighbouring wood, thou wilt find a pathway. And then, beyond, caves amid the rocks——"

"And is this where these men are hiding?"

"'Tis where they live," muttered the innkeeper tensely. "Spare me, good sire, I am but a poor man, and I did mean no harm——"

"Just a minute," interrupted Handforth. "Were you signalling to these pals of yours? Did you wave something from one of your back windows as soon as you caught sight of all the soldiers?"

"Nay, my lord, 'twas merely——"

"Back to the fence!" roared Handforth. "Archers, prepare——"

"I will tell the truth!" gasped the man. "Ay, good soldier, 'twas a signal, by my faith! 'Twas a warning that the soldiers were coming—but it seemeth that the men saw it not, for I received no answering signal——"

"Well, anyhow, we can't wait," interrupted Handforth. "Wynwed, make one of these men dismount, and let him remain here. This beggar will use the horse, and show us the way to these caves!"

"Good egg!" said Willy. "That's the stuff to give 'em! Ted, old man, you're doing wonders!"

"Trust me!" said Handforth gloatingly.

"Yes, you'd have been a fat lot of good without Willy, wouldn't you?" asked Church unkindly. "You wouldn't have suspected a thing if Willy hadn't given you the tip."

Handforth frowned.

"H'm! Well, perhaps Willy helped a bit," he admitted. "But we haven't got the spies yet!" he added. "Before we do any crowing, let's get something done."

Willy passed a hand over his brow.

"This air must agree with you, Ted," he said in astonishment. "At last you're beginning to get a glimmering of real brain-power. I've always said that there was something in you."

The innkeeper was forced to climb upon one of the horses, and he was given to understand, very clearly, that if he led the soldiers wrong, he would be promptly used as a target for a dozen arrows. The man was so thoroughly frightened that there was not much chance of him attempting any treachery.

All the juniors had forgotten their tiredness now, and were eager for the hunt. And even Wynwed the Jovial was looking excited and keen. In fact, all the soldiers were worked up to a pitch that had never fallen to their lot before. They had grown so accustomed to slack, sleepy methods, that this simple adventure was getting into their blood like fire.

"Forward!" commanded Handforth, when

they were all mounted. "Follow me, my lads! We'll soon have these spies by the heels, and we'll be back in Dunstane within two or three hours."

"Hurrah!" yelled Church. "Let's hurry on."

And the whole cavalcade went thundering off across a grassy meadow. The going was not particularly good, for here and there ditches had to be crossed, and then, a little farther on, the frightened innkeeper led the way into a dense wood. It was obvious that he was taking them along the correct path, for among the trees there was a clearly-defined track.

Fortunately, the actual journey was short—not more than a mile and a half. And suddenly a wall of rock loomed up in the semi-gloom of the high trees. The forest grew right against the cliff face, and here there were low cave entrances to be seen.

All the soldiers dismounted, and the horses were tethered to neighbouring trees.

"This looks like being a pretty ticklish job, Ted," said Willy. "The place is a warren, by what I can see. Look at the cave entrances. The best thing we can do is to send two or three men into each one at once, and if they're all connected inside the cliff, the spies will be trapped."

Handforth looked at him coldly.

"That's exactly what I've planned to do," he said. "It won't take me long to get these beggars out. Why, it's the first time they've ever been hounded down, and they're not ready for anything like this—and they'll get the shock of their lives. Come on; we'll take this biggest cave. Wynwed, get your men ready, and we'll all march in at the same minute. Leave three or four soldiers out here, though, in case of emergency."

"May I suggest, good Handforth, that we should tear down these tree branches, and make them into torches?" said Wynwed. "'Twill be better than penetrating these caves in the darkness. For, by St. Attalus, 'twill be a fool's task, fighting in the blackness of these caves!"

"The torches will take a long time to make——"

"Nay, these trees are wondrous full of gum," said the jovial one quickly. "And 'tis a gum which, by my faith, burneth swiftly. 'Twill take but a minute or two to prepare these torches."

"Go ahead, then," said Handforth. "We can do with 'em."

Wynwed was perfectly right. For the branches of the peculiar trees snapped off quite cleanly, and with no trouble. But when Handforth produced a box of matches and struck a light, the soldiers were all startled.

"Beshrew me for an ignorant dog!" gasped Wynwed. "But what strange wonder is this, Handforth the bold? Fire in a twinkling, as I live! I' faith, sirrah, thou art truly a youth of many surprises!"

"My hat!" said Handforth, glancing at his



"'Tis a great triumph, O brave Handforth!" exclaimed Princess Mercia, extending her hand. "'Tis thine to kiss!" Considerably flustered and flushing deeply, Handy bent down and kissed the lady's fair hand.

chums. "They don't even know what matches are. I'll tell you all about 'em when we get back to the castle, Wynwed. By George, these chunks of wood burn like real torches! Come on! Now for the spies!"

It was an impressive scene. The different parties of soldiers marched into the black openings of the caves, and Handforth and his three companions of St. Frank's took the biggest one to themselves. They found themselves penetrating into the very heart of the cliff, with jagged rocks on both sides, and with the roof high above them.

That cliff, indeed, proved to be a veritable warren.

But the methods employed were such that there could be no escape for the trapped spies. Every cave entrance had been located, and thus every exit had been blocked. It did not matter whether the caves joined up with one another or not. There were soldiers searching them all.

"Hallo!" shouted Handforth suddenly. "Here's somebody! I just caught a glimpse—Yes, that beggar who shot the arrow at Princess Mercia! I'd know his face in a thousand! Quick! This way!"

They ran round a bend of the tunnel-like cave, Handforth well in advance. An enor-

mous chunk of rock came hissing through the air.

"Duck!" yelled Handforth in alarm.

He dodged down as he shouted, and the other juniors were only just in the nick of time. The rock whistled over their bent backs, and dropped with a splintering thud on the rocky floor beyond.

"Better go easy, Handy!" gasped Church.

"We've got him!" roared Handforth. "The murderous rotter! That rock might have killed me! He won't do it again!"

Handforth threw himself forward, and found that the trapped man was quite alone—and the cave, at this point, was a dead end. With a concerted yell, the St. Frank's juniors hurled themselves upon the enemy.

"Mercy, I beseech thee!" shouted the spy. "I will come without struggling, good sirs! Thou hast caught me, and I admit defeat."

Handforth snorted.

"It doesn't matter whether you admit defeat or not, my lad—you're whacked!" he snapped. "And you'll just take this, too—to be going on with."

Crash!

The man took it—a tremendous crashing blow on the jaw. Handforth was in his element now. When it came to a fight, he forgot all about pains and tiredness, and

entered into the scrap with a whole-hearted enthusiasm which was good to see.

In less than a minute, the man they had trapped was lying on the floor of the cave, whimpering with fright. He was a fairly big fellow, too—dressed in nondescript garb, and wearing a full, dark beard. He looked such a ruffian that the juniors were convinced that he was a Gothlander—and no traitor Northestrian. He was one of Kassker's picked men.

"This'll mean the chopping block for you, you murderous cur!" said Handforth fiercely. "You're the man who tried to kill the princess! Come on—up with you! Where's that string, Church? Bind his arms behind him!"

The man was pulled to his feet, and rendered helpless. And then, with their prisoner marching in front of them, the juniors passed out of the cave again. And here they found that the majority of the soldiers had returned. And they were not only holding two other prisoners, but seven. This rock warren had produced eight spies altogether.

They were all men of the same type—all coarse-looking brutes with savage mouths and villainous expressions. Wynwed the Jovial was startled.

"Gothlanders, by my faith!" he declared. "Out upon them for knaves of the worst type! 'Twill create a sensation in Dunstane, methinks, when we ride in with this motley crew! 'Twill be the chopping block for them all!"



CHAPTER 14. THE PRICE OF LIFE!

THE prisoners were terrified. One look at them was sufficient to prove their guilt. Not that there was the slightest question on this point. They had been hounded down immediately following the attempt upon Princess Mercia's life. And that was all the evidence that was needed.

There were two amazing features in this whole affair.

Firstly, it was startling enough to realise that the Northestrians had never made any serious attempt to run the spies to earth. And, secondly, it was a remarkable fact that Edward Oswald Handforth had conducted the whole enterprise with a business-like precision.

True, he had gone wrong at the end, and but for Willy the captures might never have been made. Otherwise, Handforth had done remarkably well. Church and McClure were both convinced that it was a mere fluke—for they expected Handforth to blunder as a matter of course. It was far more characteristic of him to get on a wrong scent and end up the chase in a mare's-nest.

But Handforth was on his mettle—and, in a real emergency, he was generally a fellow to be relied upon. The Princess Mercia had

expressed tremendous faith in him—and he had been keyed up to the determination to justify that faith. What a triumph now—to return to the capital with a bag of spies like this!

"They're all Gothlanders," gloated Handforth. "After we hand these over, they can't accuse us of being mixed up with Kassker's rotten crowd, can they? It'll put all those dotty ideas out of their heads! And the rest of the crowd will be released, and everything in the garden will be lovely!"

"There'll be a public execution, I should think," remarked Church. "These miserable curs will be beheaded—and I don't suppose their trial will last for more than five minutes, either."

"They don't need any trial," snapped Handforth. "We caught them red-handed."

Wynwed the Jovial was looking unusually straight.

"Methinks 'twill be a great day in Dunstane!" he said. "Eight executions of spies! Marry, but 'twill arouse the populace to a right earnest realisation of their peril. Kassker is becoming dangerous!"

"Only just realised it?" asked Handforth sarcastically. "We haven't been in your country for a couple of minutes, but we know a lot more about your troubles than you know yourselves! The execution of these spies, though, will give Kassker a nasty jolt."

Such conversation as this, in the full hearing of the captives, was not calculated to cheer them up to any great extent. Two of them commenced babbling at once, and Handforth strove to silence them.

"It's no good—you can plead for mercy as much as you like," he said coldly. "It won't work. We've got you——"

"If thou wilt promise to save our heads from the block, we have information for thee!" urged one of the spies. "Thou wilt be willing to make a bargain? 'Tis well for both sides——"

"I don't make bargains with crooks!" growled Handforth.

"And yet we can supply thee with information which will surely please the heart of Princess Mercia," went on one of the men. "Let us be placed in a fortress—but spare our heads from the block!"

"Ay, we will speak freely!" exclaimed the others.

"Take no heed, good Handforth," said Wynwed. "These men are but carrion, and their word is not to be trusted——"

"I don't need any telling, thanks," interrupted Handforth curtly. "They won't do any bargaining with me. Now we've got to decide how to take them back. Eight of you must stay behind, and get fresh horses, and come later. The rest of us will ride to the capital with these prisoners in our midst——"

"Wait—I beseech thee, young sir!" shouted the Gothlander who had spoken at first. "We can tell thee where young Prince Oswy is to be found."

"By the bones of Offa!" ejaculated Wynwed, staring.

"Prince Oswy?" repeated Handforth.

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"Ay, 'tis even as I speak!" went on the man. "Givest thou thy word that thou wilt spare our necks from the block, and the exact spot of Prince Oswy's imprisonment will be given thee. Ay, not only the spot, but the door by which it can be reached, the passage into which to turn, the dungeon in which he languishes! All shall be spoken—if thou wilt promise."

"Lies, by my faith!" swore Wynwed.

"Perhaps so—but that's not very likely," put in Willy Handforth quickly. "Why not promise, Ted? It's worth trying?"

"You don't believe that rot?" said his major, frowning.

"Yes, I do."

"Then you're a young ass——"

"If you'd only think, Ted, instead of standing there and scoffing at everything, you'd realise that this information might be jolly valuable. Promise these men that they'll be spared from the chopping block—and get that information in return. Dash it, Ted, you're not a bloodthirsty chap, anyhow. And think of the princess' joy if she heard of her brother's exact whereabouts."

Handforth started.

"Yes, by George," he breathed into Willy's ear. "And perhaps we could go along and take a trip to Gothland one night, and steal Prince Oswy out of his prison in the darkness!"

Willy shook his head.

"Afraid we should have to wait a long time," he murmured. "This present day, according to all calculations, has lasted about eight hundred years——"

"My hat! It doesn't get dark here, does it?" interrupted Handforth. "H'm! That's a beastly nuisance, if you like!"

"Well, don't waste time on making plans about rescuing Prince Oswy," grinned Willy. "I think you've done enough chasing about for once. Promise to spare these rotters, and they'll give you the information."

"But supposing it's false?"

"It won't be false, ass," retorted the Third Former. "What would be the good of them giving you dud directions? If a party went over there, and found everything wrong, these spies would simply be executed. Naturally, you'll have to hold them until their story's been proved."

"Oh, rather," said Handforth, with a

start. "That's the idea! Yes, by George! I'll make this bargain with 'em! I don't much care for the poor beggars being be-headed, anyhow—it's such a messy business. They'll be just as harmless if they're shoved into one of these moated castles! They've got plenty to spare in this country."

"Good man!" said Willy. "Go ahead."

Handforth turned back to the prisoners.

"You say that you'll tell us where Prince Oswy is to be found?" he demanded. "You'll give us this information in return for your lives?"

"'Tis a bargain, great lord!" said one of them.

"You will be held prisoners until the story is proved," said Handforth grimly. "If it is found to be false, off come your nappers—I mean it'll be the chopping block for you directly after breakfast!"

"We will speak the truth by our souls!" panted the man fervently. "'Twas Kassker who forced us into this devil's business. 'Twill be death for us if we return to Gothland with our mission unaccomplished. Rather would we languish in one of thy prisons—for there, at least, shall we be safe from the great overlord's revenge."

"I promise," said Handforth solemnly. "As captain of her Majesty's bodyguard, I give you my promise that your lives shall be spared. Now, let's have that information."

The rascals were only too ready to adhere to their part of the bargain. Indeed, they were astounded that any bargain should have been made—for, judging by their own precepts, they had expected to be flung into the torture chamber, there to have their information wrung from them by vile and villainous instruments of horror.

But now their lives were to be spared, and imprisonment in a Northestrian dungeon did not hold many terrors for them. For they secretly believed that ere many weeks had elapsed, Kassker and his armies would be invading these lands, and then would come their release. They considered it a cunning trick—but then, of course, they were relying upon that invasion. The airship party, headed by Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, might have something to say about it, however.

And, anyhow, Handforth obtained that precious information from these captured spies—and his victory was thus a double one. Perhaps he did not quite realise that he had to thank his minor for his success in both instances.

But Willy was a very modest youngster, and he hadn't the slightest objection to Edward Oswald stealing all the thunder. After all, it was just what he lived for!

And so, when Handforth had written down every detail of those careful directions, the party started off. With Handforth leading, and ten mounted soldiers behind him, the procession looked imposing. In the centre came the eight captives, their hands bound behind them, their feet tethered to the stirrups of their horses. In the rear rode another dozen members of her Majesty's bodyguard.

It was a victorious cavalcade—and one that created wonder and awe in every village and town it passed through on its way back to the capital. There wasn't the slightest doubt that these schoolboys were waking things up with a vengeance!



CHAPTER 15.

ETHELBERT THE RED IS CAUTIOUS!

LL Dunstane was out in the streets to watch the bold procession as it came trotting through the city towards the Royal castle. And the air was filled with the sounds of acclamation and cheering. And these were all for Handforth, who was recognised as the great hero.

But it had been Willy's idea again to send a soldier galloping hard into the capital, in advance of the actual cavalcade, so that he could give warning of the victor's approach.

"Hail—hail!"

"Handforth the Bold!"

"Welcome, brave Handforth!"

"Thou hast done well, good youth!"

These and endless other cries made Edward Oswald feel decidedly good as he bowed his acknowledgments to the ever-increasing crowds. And when he crossed over the drawbridge, and clattered into the courtyard of the Royal castle, he found other throngs awaiting him—with the princess and Ethelbert the Red on the balcony, watching.

More cheers arose.

As a matter of fact, both the capital and the Royal Court were amazed. Handforth had been appointed captain of the bodyguard—much against the wishes of Ethelbert the Red. But the chief adviser was feeling a little different now. For in these brief hours, Handforth the Bold had already proved himself! His first duty had been to round up the spy who had attempted the Princess Mercia's life.

And that duty had been done!

The spy was not only brought in, a prisoner, but with him came seven companions. The whole nest of traitors had been apprehended! It was small wonder that the populace became freshly excited, and were once more shaken out of their sleepy trance.

"How now, good Ethelbert?" cried the princess, as she pointed to the dejected prisoners. "Thou wert angry with me, I think, for appointing this brave youth to the captaincy of my bodyguard. What hast to say?"

"By my soul, but the boy hath the makings of a wondrous soldier!" vowed Ethelbert the Red. "I will grant thee, Majesty, that thy judgment was truly sound."

"'Tis gracious in thee, my Ethelbert," smiled the princess. "But is there not something else? What of thy fears now?"

"Fears?"

"Were it not thy suspicion that these brave strangers were from Gothland—sent hither by Kassker's orders?" asked the lovely Mercia,

her eyes twinkling. "Surely, surely, good Ethelbert, thou art now willing to confess that thy first impression was wrong? These people are friendly—and, therefore, 'twould be but gracious to honour them as they all deserve. Let them be sent for. Let them be brought hither, and placed as Royal guests under my roof."

"But, think, dear Majesty——"

"'Tis my wish," said the princess quietly.

She walked gracefully down the steps, and met Handforth at the bottom, who had just strode up, and was now saluting.

"'Tis a great triumph, brave, brave Handforth!" said Princess Mercia, looking at him with tender eyes. "My hand!"

She extended her hand to him, and Handforth looked flustered.

"'Tis thine to kiss!" said the princess gently.

"Oh, I say!" gasped Handforth. "I—I mean—— Rather!"

He bent down and kissed that fair little hand, and then stood back, flushing deeply. The princess was still looking at him with those wonderful blue eyes of hers—those eyes which sent thrills down the unfortunate Handforth's back. He had had his speech all prepared, but every word of it had now vanished.

"I went for the spies, your Majesty, and here they are!" he managed to blurt out. "Eight of 'em. I thought it better to round them up at once."

"Thou hast taught mine own people a signal lesson," said the princess quietly. "For long have I urged an awakening. Perchance thy goodly deeds will have the desired effect."

"Well, I'll admit most of the towns and villages we passed through were as dead as mutton," said Handforth, nodding. "By George! I believe they've all been sound asleep for centuries—and the sound of our hoof beats must have awakened them! But there's one thing I want to ask your Majesty," he added suddenly. "Have we not proved our sincerity?"

"Thou hast, indeed."

"I don't think even old Ethelbert can now believe that we were all sent here by Kassker," went on Handforth. "So I was going to ask you to let our friends out of that fortress——"

"'Tis a request that shall be granted," put in the princess promptly. "Have I not already spoken with my Ethelbert——"

"Wait, good Majesty!" put in Ethelbert the Red, as he joined her. "Make no rash promises, I beseech thee! Harken to this youth's story, but make no declaration of what thou wilt do."

The princess turned upon him half angrily.

"Thou art full of suspicions, Ethelbert!" she exclaimed. "Is't not enough for these brave strangers to capture spies who did attempt my life? What else suggesteth thou, my adviser?"

But Handforth was speaking again.

"We have other news for you, your Majesty!" he exclaimed. "News of your brother, Prince Oswy."

"By my faith! Is this so?" cried the princess gladly.

"Rather!" said Handforth. "I told the spies that their heads would be saved from the chopping block—I gave them my word—and in return they have told me the exact whereabouts of Prince Oswy—how to find him, and every single detail of his prison. Is it not good news?"

"Wondrous news, indeed!" said the fair Mercia, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. "List ye, my Ethelbert! Is there no end to the favours of these people whom thou wouldst thrust into the dungeons? Out upon thee, Ethelbert! Shame that thou shouldst still——"

"Perchance I am at fault, Majesty!" interrupted Ethelbert the Red, his face flushed by these taunts. "Yet would I urge thee to listen to my counsel. I desire a few words, good Majesty."

He was tugging at his red beard, and his eyes were grave.

Rather impatiently, the princess went aside with him.

"Now, say on!" she murmured. "What is't?"

"My advice is that thou shouldst be cautious," replied Ethelbert softly. "Do not release these other prisoners from the Athalstane fortress yet awhile——"

"But I shall!"

"'Twas thy father's wish——"

"Stay!" interrupted the princess angrily. "If ever I wish to rule, my Ethelbert, and if ever my desires clash with thine, thou speakest of my father's wishes! 'Tis enough! These good people have proved themselves——"

"Ay, these good people before us," agreed Ethelbert quickly. "But the others are men—and strange, powerful, clever men—men with much brains. 'Twould be better, I urge, to put them to the test ere thou art too free with thy favours."

"And what test, pray, wouldst thou suggest?"

"'Tis but a simple one," replied the chief adviser. "Let a chosen party from these men go into Gothland to rescue Prince Oswy. Let them prove their allegiance to thee by the accomplishment of this task."

"Thou wouldst send them into the jaws of death?" asked the princess, in horror.

"If they are men of such wondrous powers, 'twill mean no death," replied Ethelbert grimly. "Is't not thy dearest wish to have Prince Oswy back by thy side? What North-estrian dare set foot in Gothland these days? Perchance these strangers will fare better in Kassker's country."

"'Tis an idea!" agreed the princess, her eyes shining. "Much would I give, indeed, to have dear Oswy back. By my faith, I am minded to agree with thee, my Ethelbert!"

"'Tis well!" said the other. "Let me suggest a feast—a great feast in honour of this Handforth the Bold. Let all attend—all his companions. And, during this feast, 'twill be easy for thee to study the strangers, and to

pick out those that are to venture upon this mission into Gothland."

"'Tis done!" cried the princess. "A feast it shall be, splendid Ethelbert! And a good round dozen shall be chosen from the guests." She smiled disdainfully. "They will rescue my poor Oswy, never fear! If thou hast not faith in them, I have much."

"Hush, I beseech thee!" warned Ethelbert.

The princess turned back to Edward Oswald, and her eyes were twinkling with a new happiness.

"Get thee off to sleep, good Handforth!" she said gaily. "Thou art surely worn and weary after thy wondrous deeds. Poor, sweet youth! Thou art looking tired, indeed!"

"I—I'm all right!" muttered Handforth, with a gurgle.

Her voice had been so full of compassion that the unfortunate junior was frightened out of his wits. There was something in the princess' attitude which positively scared him stiff. He was afraid she was going to make him kiss her hand again.

"Such words of courage are to be expected from thy lips," said the princess gently.

"But get thee gone—and thy companions with thee. Kindly Wynwed will attend to thy wishes. And after thou hast slept, and are refreshed, then will there be a surprise."

"A surprise?" echoed Handforth.

"Alas, 'tis a surprise I must give thee now," laughed the princess. "For 'tis impossible for me to keep a secret. Whilst thou art sleeping, noble youth, a great feast will be prepared. Thou and thy friends will be the guests, and the castle will ring with our merriment."

"All of them?" asked Handforth eagerly. "They'll all be freed from that fortress?"

"All—for this feast, at least," replied the princess, as she found Ethelbert the Red's eyes upon her. "Go now, and sleep thee well."

And Handforth saluted and escaped. He found Church and McClure, and clapped them on the backs.

"It's all right, you chaps!" he said happily. "We can sleep now in comfort; and when we wake up, all the rest of the party will be free! On the whole, we haven't done so badly, have we?"



CHAPTER 16.

THE FATEFUL FEAST.

ORD DORRIMORE turned back from the window rather irritably.

"Nothin' doin'!" he said gruffly. "If you ask me,

Lee, it's a dirty trick to keep us bottled up like this. And I'd like you to know that I'm absolutely perishin'—dyin' inch by inch—for want of a smoke."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I don't think you stand much danger, Dorrie," he said dryly. "In fact, this enforced abstinence will probably do you a world of good—"

"That's bally cold comfort, I must say," grunted his lordship. "We've all run out of smokes—every man Jack of us! An' I've got thousands of cigarettes on that airship—a whole supply I was takin' along to the Wanderer— Good gad!" he added suddenly. "A most horrid thought has just shot through my brain!"

"About the cigarettes?"

"Absolutely," said Dorrie. "You remember when the airship was being lightened, and we chucked every loose article overboard? Glory! I'll bet my cigarettes went with the rest of the things!"

"One of life's minor tragedies," said Nelson Lee solemnly.

"A murrain upon thee!" growled Lord Dorrimore. "Out upon thee, base varlet, for a knave! If those cigarettes are lost, I'll find the chap who chucked them overboard, an' lead him to the local choppin'-block with my own hands!"

But Nelson Lee was not quite so concerned about the cigarettes. He was far more anxious with regard to the doings of Edward Oswald Handforth. While the bulk of the party was imprisoned in this fortress just outside the capital, Handforth himself was the captain of the princess' bodyguard. And Nelson Lee, being Handforth's house-master at St. Frank's, had a shrewd idea of what to expect. It would pain him deeply, but it would not particularly surprise him, to receive the tragic news that Edward Oswald had been beheaded.

But news of a very different character arrived, in point of fact.

While they were still talking near the window of the castle, a great array of the bodyguard rode sedately across the moat and pulled up in front of the castle with the beating of hoofs and the jangling of stirrups. And this noble company of gaily clad soldiers was commanded by Handforth the Bold himself.

Although Nelson Lee and the rest had been imprisoned, they had suffered no hardships in this castle. Indeed, they had been allowed complete freedom—but only within the walls. Every exit had been closely guarded.

But now the main doors were flung open, and Handforth himself came rushing in, with Church and McClure in the rear. They were all looking as fresh as paint after six hours of solid sleep.

"Hurrah!" yelled the Removites, rushing round.

"Hands off, you chaps!" roared Handforth. "You mustn't maul the captain of the bodyguard about like this. You're all invited to a terrific feast at the Royal castle—and you've got to come now."

"Hurrah!"

"Does this mean that our period of detention is over?" asked Lord Dorrimore politely. "Or must we come back to the punishment-room after the orgy?"

"I'm blessed if I know, quite, sir," replied Handforth. "Anyhow, there's lots to tell you, but you'll hear nearly all of it during the feast."

"We'll hear it now, blow you!" said Dick Hamilton grimly. "You fathead, if you think you're going to escape, you've made a mistake!"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie Glenthorne. "Be good enough to seize this strangely-garbed creature, and shove him against the wall, laddies! We demand to know what has been happening?"

But Nelson Lee waved them back.

"You had better wait, boys," he smiled. "We are glad enough to find that Handforth is alive and well. Perhaps the court is waiting for us—and it would not look well to keep her Royal Highness the Princess in suspense."

Handforth wasn't looking quite so pleased as he had thought he would look. The fact was, a few words that the princess had uttered had come back to him since he had awakened.

"A good round dozen shall be chosen from the guests," she had said. "They will rescue my poor Oswy, never fear."

And it suddenly occurred to Handforth that the princess had meant the guests at this particular feast. A dozen members of the airship's party were to be selected—chosen while they sat round the festive board. And then, later, they would be sent into Gothland in an attempt to rescue the young prince.

At first Handforth had thought little of it—indeed he had eagerly hoped that he would be one of the chosen. But he had since spoken with Wynwed the Jovial, and with several other members of the bodyguard. And all, without exception, vowed that it would be certain death for any party to venture upon that wild expedition into the enemy country.

For it undoubtedly was enemy country now. News of the capture of Kassker's spies would soon reach the ears of that ambitious overlord, for it seemed that he had a cunning system of communications, with boats constantly crossing the lake. Any party that landed upon his soil would be seized.

And there would be no arguing—no talking. Such unfortunates would be conveyed straight to Kassker's castle, and executed.

And Handforth had remembered the glimpses they had seen of Gothland while the airship had been drifting helplessly over Kassker's domain. He could well believe that any party would be utterly lost, should it venture to land upon those unfriendly shores.

For there was no such thing as darkness in this strange oasis.

It would be impossible for a rescue-party to steal ashore under cover of night, and to effect a lightning raid. Eyes were constantly watching, and no landing could be attained without Kassker's men being aware of the fact.

So what could this mean but death?

Handforth kept his suspicions to himself, for he had no certain knowledge. But during that feast he was anxious and concerned. He knew that some of their number—twelve of them, at least—were to be selected for this wild, perilous expedition.

And he could do nothing.

That feast was a wonderful success in every way. It was a glittering pageant of colour and laughter and gaiety. But over it hung the grim shadow of uncertainty and peril—the stark shadow of death!

Upon whom would the choice fall?

THE END.

(In next week's yarn of this splendid series, "THE SCHOOLBOY KNIGHT-ERRANTS!" Handforth adds fresh laurels to his fame by leading the expedition into Kassker's stronghold to rescue the young Prince Oswy. It is a daring coup, pulsating with stirring adventure and thrills. Don't forget to tell your chums about these wonderful yarns, and make certain of your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering in advance!)

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BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with his readers.



NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. 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. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of special merit will be distinguished by a star against the sender's name.—E. S. B.

Yes, you can well rub your eyes. I'm here again,* after being personally absent since the September 4th issue of last year. I say "personally absent" because I'm never *really* absent, am I? My weekly stories at least indicate that I am still in the land of the living.

The fact is, I have made a New Year Resolution.

Did I hear a few groans? I know I am a little bit late, but that cannot be helped! I can also hear some of you saying: "If the fathead thinks that we're going to believe that anybody on earth ever keeps a New Year Resolution, he's jolly well mistaken! All right—go ahead! You can say what you like, but time'll prove, won't it? I'll show you something about New Year Resolutions! And my one is to write this intimate pow-wow every week as regularly as clockwork. The first time I fail, you'll know that my New Year Resolution has gone the way of practically every other N.Y.R. Having said this, it is distinctly up to me to keep the Old Chat going merrily. I'm not going to let you readers have the laugh over me. No fear!

So if this page of mine fails to appear any week, don't slang me, but slang the Editor. Its non-appearance will simply mean that he has side-tracked it in order to print something important. This stuff of mine is, of course, just shoved in as a last resort, to fill up space, when there aren't any advertisements, and other similar copy of vital moment.

As far as I'm concerned, I shall write this page just as regularly as I write the story. You've asked for it, so you've got to have it. So from now onwards you can just grin and bear it.

I've had heaps and heaps of letters since the last "BETWEEN OURSELVES" came out, and if I acknowledged them all on this

page, there would be nothing but names and addresses for the next three or four weeks! So I have sent an acknowledgment by post to all those whose names and addresses were given. The rest I shall acknowledge in the next three or four issues, and comment upon matters of general interest which they have brought before my notice. I'm afraid there won't be room enough in this chat.

There was a bit of a fatality with regard to one little batch of letters. My secretary mislaid them, and, I fear, lost them. The result is, a few of you will not receive an acknowledgment of any kind. There were only about half a dozen letters lost, so if you six will write to me again—each of you will know it's *you*, because you've heard nothing—I'll reply on this page in due course. I need hardly say that my secretary came jolly near to getting the sack, for I value your letters very highly, and this little lost batch are the only ones that I haven't got filed away. You'll probably think this is bunkum, but it isn't. Sometimes you write to me, and appear to take it for granted that your letter will go into the waste-paper basket. But I'd like to make it quite clear now that I read **EVERY** letter personally, and then, after acknowledgment, store it carefully away as a treasure.

Well, I've told you about my New Year Resolution. What about yours? Let yours be something of the same kind. Why not resolve to write me at once? Don't keep thinking it over, and putting it off, but grab the first piece of paper handy, pick up the handiest pen (remember, I say "pen," not pencil) and fire away.

*The Retreat on London!**Amazing New War Story?***SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!**

By

ROGER FOWEY**HOW BRITAIN WAS INVADED!**

Jack Bennett and his two school-chums, Tom Lee and Buster Kirk, fall into the thick of the fighting when Germany invades England in a War of Revenge. The enemy forces are aided by a spy named Stutz, who poses as a master at Cliff House School and who escapes the efforts of the chums to capture him. The Germans forge across Kent, and draw the British forces to the south of London; at the same time, the enemy advances from the East Coast and attacks London from the north, driving the defenders back on the City. The chums are involved in the fighting at the Welsh Harp, on the Edgware Road, and they are at General Hamilton's headquarters—in an old 'bus garage—when news comes that the General

is getting false reports of the situation. Actually, the enemy forces have advanced to Golders Green and Hampstead Heath and are endeavouring to cut him off from London. A further British line of defence has been prepared at Maida Vale, and the General is ordered by Whitehall to endeavour to retire to this point. As the order comes through a tremendous shell hits the back of the 'bus garage and bursts, scattering the General and his staff. The chums are blown headlong, and Jack is knocked senseless. Buster, lying at the foot of the wall, sees a figure climbing down an iron ladder from the roof of the building. The boy recognises him. "Stutz!" Buster gasps. "Stutz!"

(Now get down to this week's thrill-packed instalment.)

At Grips with Stutz!

BUSTER tensed as he lay on the oily concrete, staring at the crouching figure above him.

There was no mistaking those white features, the bristly hair and the dark, glittering eyes! It was Stutz—one-time master at Cliff House School, and the arch-spy of the invading armies!

He was dressed in the uniform of a captain in the British Army, but Buster recognised him. The spy's face was grim-set, and a faint line of blood showed across one eye-brow, where he had been cut by a flying splinter of glass in his descent from the roof of the British headquarters. His thin lips were set to a hard line as he stared at the boy—and Buster knew that the man realised who he was.

Twice since the enemy had landed, Buster and his chums had run up against the spy. The last time, the trio had all but scotched his deep-laid plans, and Buster knew that he could expect no mercy now.

The boy saw Stutz's fist flash to the revolver

in the holster at his belt. He whipped the weapon out. Big and black and ugly it showed, and Buster heard the metallic snick of the safety-catch as the muzzle tipped down towards him.

Stutz was going to shoot him as he lay there.

Buster saw the revolver stab forward as Stutz's finger wrapped about the trigger. In that moment, Buster flung himself aside, and, as he moved, he heard a hoarse shout from somewhere behind him. From the corners of his eyes, he saw something black cleave the air above his head—then came a streak of orange flame and a gout of bluish smoke as Stutz fired.

The roar of the weapon filled Buster's ears, and something seared the side of his head. He thought he had been hit, then he realised that he had been struck by splinters of concrete flying upwards as the bullet gouged the floor.

He went rolling over and over. Expecting every moment to hear the roar of another shot, then a fallen girder from the shattered roof stopped him and he looked back.

Two khaki-clad figures were struggling on the floor. One was Stutz—and the other was Tom.

Near them lay the rifle which Tom had flung at the man, and the pair were struggling wildly for possession of the revolver.

Buster plunged to his feet and flung himself into the fray. He got both hands about the revolver and wrenched at it with all his strength. It came away, and the force of his pull sent him headlong. Tom was flung off as Stutz shot to his feet, and, in the same movement, dived into the rolling smoke-cloud which came from where the shell had burst, at the other end of the 'bus garage, but a minute or so before.

"After him!"

Buster plunged up, grabbed at Tom, hauled him to his feet and then leaped after the smoke-misted figure of the spy. From the corner of the building, the little group of Australians came, running through the smoke and making towards the wounded staff.

The acrid, pungent reek of explosives filled the nostrils of the chums. They glimpsed twisted, tangled figures of staff officers lying where the shell-burst had hurled them. They saw the overturned tables, and maps cluttered up with rubble from the shattered roof, then the two pitched headlong over the broken edge of the shell-hole.

They scrambled over the soft earth, blinded by the smoke and gasping for breath. Beyond the hole, the end wall of the garage had been blown almost completely down. They sighted the smashed bulk of a 'bus caught by the shell, then fresh air was blowing on their faces as they scrambled over the debris and looked about them.

There was no sign of Stutz—but everything was misted and blurred for them because of their streaming eyes, tortured by the smoke.

"He's got away!" gasped Tom.

"Must have gone out by a side door!" Buster said. "Round here—quick!"

They shot around the side of the garage. There were two doors here, and through either of them Stutz might have escaped.

Beyond was a length of railing, all shell-torn and smashed, with broken-down sheds on the other side of a small yard which was being used as a dressing-station.

"We've lost him!" Buster slipped up the safety-catch of the revolver as he spoke. "Gosh, I thought he'd got me—the rotter was going to shoot me while I was on the ground! Did you chuck your rifle at him, Tom?"

"I did!" growled the lean junior. "It caught him a fearful wallop on the shoulder—wish it had hit him on the nut, and—" He broke off as he stared at Buster, sudden alarm in his eyes. "I say, where's Jack?" he exclaimed.

"He was with me when that shell burst!" Buster answered. "I expect he—he—"

The two stared at one another. They had seen enough of the havoc wrought by the great shell to realise that Jack might not have been so fortunate as themselves. Even at that moment, he might be lying inside there, tangled up in the wreckage—still and silent!

The Last of the General Staff!

WITH one accord the pair turned for the door and plunged through the opening. Above them, the glass roof showed in jagged lines against the sky; twisted metal-work was hanging down, with slivers of glass still tinkling to the floor. Out through the hole, smoke was streaming in an ugly cloud, clearing away from the interior.

The General and his staff were scattered over the floor—crumpled, inert figures, but few of which moved at all. Among them, the Australians

were moving quickly, and stretcher-bearers were already running in from the Edgware Road.

Both the chums guessed that Stutz must have been up on the roof, signalling to some German battery. They had caught him doing much the same thing in the old school tower at the beginning of the invasion; evidently, on this occasion, the German guns had fired a little too quickly for him to get away.

His intention had, obviously, been the annihilation of the staff commanding the British in that area—and it looked as though he had succeeded. With no one to lead them, the British would have to fall back, and thus another barrier was wiped away in the enemy's triumphant progress towards London.

The signallers and their instruments appeared to have taken the brunt of the explosion. Tom and the Australians had been near the entrance to the headquarters, that was how they had escaped. Buster and Jack, had been standing before the General's table, supporting the wounded despatch-rider. Buster had simply been blown headlong, but Jack—

The two stumbled across the rubble-littered floor. They saw General Hamilton himself lying across one of the maps which had been on the table—a still, grey-haired form resting with his head pillowed on one bent arm.

Near him, half under the table itself, was Jack. At first, they thought that he was dead. Then, as Buster raised his head his eyes opened and he looked up at them with a dazed grin on his tanned features. So far as they could judge, one edge of the table had caught him across the temple and had stunned him.

"Hallo—Buster!" he grunted. "What—what happened?"

Buster didn't answer. The two lifted him up, then half carried him to where a row of fire buckets stood in a red line against one wall. They tipped half a bucket of chill water over his head—once they were sure that he was not seriously hurt—and in a little while they had him on his feet.

While they were bringing Jack round, stretcher-bearers and Red-Cross men showed, swift-moving and competent, amidst the wounded staff. Of them all, only one could stand—a captain who held his left arm stiffly down one side, with blood staining his hand and showing on one pallid, strained cheek.

The chums heard a despatch-rider come running in, his boots clattering on the concrete. He stopped dead as he saw the scene, then came up to Buster.

"Is this headquarters?" he asked; he realised it for himself as he saw the red-banded caps of the staff officers who were being carried away. "Have you been hit? Where's General Hamilton—who shall I report to?"

"Report to me, rider!" came the wounded captain's voice, and the man swung round, one hand flashing to the cap in a salute.

"Verbal message from Major Halse to General Hamilton, sir. Enemy advancing up the North Circular Road East. The 47th London Battery is firing point-blank, but cannot hold them without infantry. No officers left in the 47th, sir. Enemy tanks are being brought into action from the direction of Golders Green."

The officer stared at him for a moment, then with his foot he straightened out a crumpled map that lay on the floor. He bent over it, supporting himself with one hand on the overturned table. He studied the map for a few moments, then turned to the despatch-rider again, and said crisply:

"Verbal message from Captain Bray to Major Halse. General Hamilton severely wounded with the remainder of his staff. Major Halse to move his infantry over the embankment in advance of the 47th guns—and to hold

his ground at all cost until he gets orders to retire. Carry on, rider!"

The man saluted, spun on his heels and hurried out of the garage, while Captain Bray put his sound hand to his mouth and shouted: "Runners—at once!"

Four orderlies came racing in from the guard-room outside the headquarters, and to each of them the captain gave swift orders. Listening, the chums could see that he was withdrawing the whole of the British forces from the Welsh Harp, and retiring slantwise towards Wembley—to have stayed where he was, would have meant being surrounded.

In a few seconds of respite, he sighted the chums; Jack was now pretty well recovered, although he was going to have a headache until it worked off.

"You're the three boys from the barricade, aren't you?" he asked. "Do you think you fellows could get through to Whitehall for me? All I want you to do is to report to General Marlow that I am retiring on Wembley, and that General Hamilton and his staff are out of action. The three of you go—one is bound to get through. I can't send a message any other way, all the field telegraph wires are smashed—and I can't trust wireless after the false reports we have been getting!"

"We'll go, sir!" exclaimed Jack.

"Good lads—try and get down the Edgware road, but if you see that the enemy are cutting you off then bear off to the West and get round that way. Off you go, and good luck!"

The trio saluted and started for the door. Outside they met Jason, the big Australian who had been with them on the barricade; Jason and his mates had just taken the last of the wounded to the near-by dressing-station.

"We've got a message for Whitehall," said Buster. "Are you chaps coming that way?"

"No, I don't think so," answered Jason. "It looks as though there's going to be a pile of excitement round here. Me an' my coppers are goin' over to the embankment there with Major Halse's lot an' those guns. Looks like they could do with a bit of help out there—they mustn't let the Germans pass until everybody's got out of the other trenches. Maybe we'll see you later on, diggers! Best o' luck!"

Running the Gauntlet!

WHEN they reached the Edgware Road, the chums looked along it in the direction of London. On the railway bridge which crossed the road, a little distance from the headquarters, there had been three anti-aircraft guns, all blazing into the sky.

Where the bridge and the guns had been, there was now only a tangled mass of riven metal, hanging down and half blocking the road. One of the guns was poised in the heart of the break, its sleek muzzle still pointing defiantly towards the sky. Two Red-Cross men were clambering about amidst the wreckage—brown shapes that moved awkwardly against the gleaming edges of broken metal.

The three stood looking at the bridge for a few moments. As they stood there they heard the sudden heart-stopping Zow-w-w-w! Cr-rash! as a shell struck the tramlines. The trio ducked behind one of the concrete pillars by the entrance to the garage, and they heard steely splinters whanging through the air, while bits pattered down all about them.

When they looked out, they saw a hole in the middle of the road, with a length of tramline curling out of it like a metal snake and yellowish smoke billowing upwards.

"Pity they did that," commented Buster cheerfully. "We shan't be able to go by tram now—we could have had a lift as far as Cricklewood at any rate!"

Jack and Tom grinned. The only trams on the line were derelicts caught by the fighting into which the north of London had been plunged almost over-night.

They stood considering the situation. The nearest way to Whitehall was straight down the Edgware Road—but the enemy was reported already to have tanks in Kilburn, while the British had built a last line of defence along the heights at Maids Vale.

It might be just possible to get down the Edgware Road before the Germans advanced sufficiently far to capture it. But it was risky! On the other hand, until Whitehall knew the situation and that the British at the Welsh Harp were falling back towards Wembley, Captain Bray could receive no fresh orders. It was essential that Whitehall should know as speedily as possible what had occurred.

"I think," said Jack at last, "that we'd better stroll down the Edgware Road—and chance it!"

"Right oh," agreed Tom. "But we might as well take rifles with us, we may need 'em!"

There was plenty of equipment at the dressing station—stuff discarded by wounded soldiers. With loaded rifles and reserve ammunition, gas masks and revolvers, the chums moved off, passing under the wrecked railway bridge to the broad road beyond.

The street showed strangely deserted. There was nothing moving on the whole of its length. With the houses and shops, and the tramlines down the centre of the road, and the sun shining brightly, it looked just as it might have been very early in any normal morning.

The only things out of the ordinary were a tram-car off the lines and half on the pavement, all its windows broken, and a motor-lorry lying overturned by a shell-hole. One or two of the roofs had holes in them, and, on the top of the slight rise ahead, a shop was in flames, with a plume of black smoke wreathing greasily skyward.

"I reckon we ought to be all right until we get to about Willesden Lane," said Jack. "If there's no chance of getting through, we can always dive off to the right and get round through Shepherds Bush, or somewhere like that."

"What we want is a tank," said Tom. "We could go through anything, then!"

They walked quickly onwards. From behind them came the terrific roar of battle. The crash of guns shook the air, and every few moments they heard the fierce whine of shells as they tore through the air and crashed somewhere out of sight on either side of the road.

Now and again, a shell burst in the road itself, or on one of the buildings which lined it. Once they saw the base of an arc-lamp standard hit. The thing was up-rooted and flung sheer across the road; then they stepped over it, they saw that the base was frayed and played out like the bottom of a wax-vesta that had been rubbed loose.

They walked close to the wall, and ducked whenever they heard a shell coming anywhere near. In a little while they saw the cross-roads at Cricklewood before them.

There was still no sign of life, although they could hear the rattle of rifle and machine-gun fire away on the left—where the enemy was advancing from the direction of Golders Green.

"Sounds as though they're coming along Cricklewood Lane," said Tom. "Some of our chaps must be trying to hold 'em!"

They hurried on. To one side of the tramway crossing before them showed a tram-car slewed half across the road; sandbags were littered about

it, and a lorry was overturned on its side, near by. It looked as though someone had started building a barricade there, but had abandoned the idea.

The front of a shop showed blown out, and there were two small, crumpled figures lying on the pavement before it—beyond all human aid. The chums passed the tramcar, and, as they did so, a fierce burst of firing struck their ears from up Cricklewood Lane. With their own weapons ready, they peered round the corner.

Some three hundred yards up the road were a couple of German tanks, moving side by side. Back of them, the chums could glimpse the field-grey of a mass of German infantry, sheltering behind the mighty, steel-sided land-craft.

Running along the road in front of the tanks were half a dozen British soldiers, some of whom fell even as they ran, while one or two gained the shelter of doorways and turned to fire. To one side of the road, barely fifty yards from the chums, was what had once been a draper's shop. The place had either been bombed or shelled, for there was no longer any front to the building.

There, with torn and stained fabric cluttering their feet, four artillery men were crouched behind a field-gun. The muzzle of it protruded around the broken brick-work which had once held the front of the shop. The gun-layer was bent behind the sights, lanyard in his hand. His companions were standing ready, one of them with a shell ready in his hands.

"They'll give those two tanks a surprise!" Buster exclaimed. "Bet they'll let 'em come close up, and then they'll— Look at those windows!"

On a sudden, the chums realised that all the windows on either side of the street were barricaded with sandbags, and from where they stood, they could get glimpses of steel-helmeted Britishers, waiting grimly with ready rifles and machine-guns for the enemy.

They picked out another field-gun in front of the first; it had been hauled into a greengrocer's shop; the gunlayer was munching an apple, while he continually laid his sights with every fresh movement of the tank that he was marking.

"Hi—come across, if you're coming!"

A voice roared at the chums from the other side of the road. An officer was standing there, waving to them from where he stood in the shelter of another draper's shop. He had a whistle in one hand, and even as he yelled to them he watched the advance of the enemy along the street.

"Better get over!" Jack grunted, and the three dashed across. As they went they heard the tearing "Whew-ew-ewooooo!" of machine-gun bullets from the weapons in the two tanks. One of the German gunners had spotted them, and a stream of bullets splashed and shattered the road back, but a final leap carried the chums safely to cover.

"You three—go up to one of the windows!" the officer said, as they came up. "I want every blessed man I can— Oh, who the dickens are you!"

He stood a moment, staring at their stained uniforms and at their youthful faces.

"Great Scott, you're cadets, aren't you?" he gasped. "What the deuce are you doing around here? The place for youngsters like you is with the noncombatants! You'd better get out of it! Drop those rifles, and—"

Jack grinned as he saluted.

"We're taking a message from Captain Bray—O.C. troops around the Welsh Harp, sir—to General Marlow at Whitehall. Do you think there's any chance of our getting through to Maida Vale from here?"

"Do I think—" The officer gasped, then he smiled. "Sorry, lads, if I've made a mistake, but you all look a bit young to be in this. I suppose you're some of the good old stock, eh—your fathers fought at Mons, and you're going to be in this just as they were in the other big dust-up! That's the spirit, boys! Well, you might get down the Edgware road, and you might not—I don't know! Matter of fact, I'm supposed to have retired with these lads, but we thought we'd hold the enemy up here as long as we could, in case they take the Welsh Harp boys in the back! I doubt it—"

He broke off as he turned his attention to the advancing enemy. He watched them keenly; by this time the tanks were only a matter of yards from the foremost gun, in the greengrocer's shop. He put his whistle to his lips, and blew a shrill blast on it.

Instantly, the blast was taken up and repeated by the whistles of other officers in the buildings all about.

Every window within sight down Cricklewood Lane suddenly blazed streaking lead. The two guns crashed out simultaneously, and the mighty sides of the tanks shook as shells hit them—and pierced them!

Again and again the light field-guns fired, pouring shells into the crippled hulks of the monsters, while two more guns suddenly whipped out from where they had been concealed on the far side of the cross-roads and rattled to the street, shooting the moment that the muzzles were aligned in the direction of the field-grey horde.

The officer to whom the chums had been speaking grabbed a couple of sandbags from the foot of the wall and dropped them to the pavement. He snatched a Lewis gun from where it had been standing and flung himself behind the low barrier, then the gun stammered its hail of death into the disorganised enemy forces milling and running wildly behind the disabled tanks.

From the houses, British infantry appeared, bayonets glittering. The chums saw them race into the fight, cheering fiercely as they met the enemy hand to hand. The two guns from the cross-roads were suddenly wheeled forward, straining men hauling on the ropes and putting their weight on the wheels as they trundled them swiftly past the chums—muzzles smoking and more men wheeling up the shell limbers.

The two guns were rushed to the disabled tanks, and got into action from there; the enemy was driven back along the road, and the battle passed almost out of sight.

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" Jack exclaimed, his eyes glowing as he turned to his chums.

From the pavement, the officer leaped up, Lewis gun in his hand.

"We'll make 'em run!" he roared. "You chaps had better get along! We shan't hold these Germans here for long—they'll fetch up reinforcement and we shall have to retire. I expect they'll try to get round us—so slip off before they trap you!"

It was sound advice, and they realised it.

The road of the battle of the cross-roads faded away as they hurried on along the broad street towards Shoot-Up Hill.

The Mystery Trenches!

THE chums moved at the double now, because they guessed that the Germans who had come down Cricklewood Lane were not an isolated party. The enemy was certain to be advancing down other roads running in the same direction. They might be

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held up by little bands of Britishers, but it was certain that they would not be held for long.

They heard fighting down the Minster Road, and saw grey figures shooting at the houses from around the far corner, while a German machine-gun stammered unceasingly. The chums raced past the turning and reached the top of the hill, then trotted steadily down the slope towards the railway bridge at Brondesbury Station.

The bridge was lying half in the road; some spy appeared to have blown it up, for there was no sign of shelled buildings here. Only heavy guns could have reached this spot, and it was unlikely that the enemy could have brought many of his big guns into action yet—those few available, he would be using for jobs like that of shelling the British headquarters, as he had done at the Welsh Harp.

With the bridge, the open country was left behind; nothing but shops showed before them now. Everywhere was deserted, and it was evident that all troops had been withdrawn to beyond the defences at Maida Vale.

Behind them, they could hear the booming roar of the battle at the Welsh Harp, like a background to the sharp crackle of rifles and machine-guns which sounded continually on their left.

They moved more cautiously now, but they saw nothing as they reached the empty beginning of Willesden Lane—no barricades, just a few

derelict vehicles in the streets. Here and there they saw the effects of the bombing raids to which London had been subjected, and once they had to clamber round an enormous crater which straddled the road, with all sorts of debris in it.

"Ought to be getting near something now," Jack observed, as they came in sight of Kilburn Station.

They reached the bridge, and looked over it. The spreading tracks on the right had been bombed, and showed broken and twisted in the sunlight, with brown craters against the blackness of the permanent way. A signal standard leaned against the remnants of a signal-box, and they could just make out the form of the man who had died at his post amidst the twisted and upturned levers—a strangely homely and forlorn figure, he made.

The station on the other side of the road had lost its roof, and through a great hole at the front—made when the station had been bombed—they could see the railway line behind. Just beyond the distant arch, they made out a small party of Germans, all advancing very cautiously along the side of the track, with their eyes on the embankments.

"Shall we stir 'em up?" asked Tom, as he thrust his rifle forward.

"Better leave them alone," counselled Jack. "There may be some more about, and we don't

want to get caught now we're so near to Maida Vale. Come on!"

They hurried on down the slope of the bridge. There was a broad fork at the bottom, and they scouted cautiously towards it. Still there was nothing to be seen, and in all the wide expanse of Maida Vale stretching before them, there was nothing but a brown smudge sheer across the road some four hundred yards distant.

"That'll be the trenches!" Jack exclaimed. "Gosh, the Germans haven't got here yet—we're through!"

Keeping to the right-hand side of the road, they trotted along, their boots ringing on the pavement and echoing through the silence all around.

As they drew nearer, they made out that the brown smudge was a low line of sandbags—a parapet to the trench which lay beyond. They all watched expectantly, thinking to see someone look up and challenge them.

It was not until they were within ten yards of the barrier that they saw it was not manned!

"There's nobody here!" Buster gasped blankly.

There was a little equipment at the bottom of the trench; beyond that, there was nothing. They saw that there was a whole network of trenches and barricades up Abercorn Place and along Elgin Avenue—but there was not a man in sight.

"Queer!" grunted Jack. "I suppose they must have retired—but it doesn't look as though there's been any sort of fight! Let's go on!"

They found no less than four systems of trenches, all of them quite empty and untouched, between that point and the hill which marked where St. John's Wood Road turned off by the Grand Junction Canal.

In blank amazement, they walked on, peering down each street as they came to it, and seeing nothing.

"This is about the limit!" Buster gasped. "You'd think there wasn't anybody about here except us—can't hear a thing!"

The muttering of guns seemed to have grown very distant. All sounds of rifle-fire had died away. Somewhere up above them sounded the harsh drone of aeroplanes, and when they looked to the sky, they saw a whole covey of aircraft wheel into view, show for a moment, and then disappear as they sped northwards.

"They were ours, anyway," said Jack. "What I can't make out is where everybody's got to. We heard that message from Whitehall—it said that the Maida Vale defences were a sort of last ditch, and here our chaps seem to have given 'em up without even a fight! I wouldn't mind——"

Bew-w-w-w!

Something winged through the air above them, then they heard the sharp crack of rifles behind. The trio ducked as they turned round. Some little way back, they saw a group of grey figures—all coming up at the double. Two of them fired from the hip as they ran, and their bullets smashed dust from the roadway beyond the chums.

"Germans!" exclaimed Buster. "My only hat—look! There's thousands of them!"

The roadway which they had just traversed suddenly became alive with running, grey-clad figures that debouched from the turnings which the trio had passed but a short time before.

"Run!" exclaimed Jack. "Keep close to the wall! Come on—run like mad!"

One behind the other they tore away. They saw the broad opening of Harrow road in front, and in a matter of seconds they were whisking round it. On the instant a machine-gun roared, it seemed, at their very feet, and they jumped away as they sighted a little party of Britishers grouped there.

"Where have you chaps come from!" A sergeant caught Jack's arm.

"Welsh Harp—message for General Marlow!" Jack said crisply. "What's happened, where's everybody gone to? Why haven't——"

"Orders to retire, that's all!" the sergeant said. "We're a scouting party, and—— Look!"

His last word came in a shout. Out from a turning a little way beyond the tube station, a German tank came lumbering, twisting as it reached the road. It was followed by another and another—and yet another! More appeared from turnings further along—and with one accord the little knot of Britishers sprang up and raced away down the road, the chums with them.

The leading tank sighted them, and loosed a shell from its forward gun. It gouged the road behind them, and they felt the hot breath of the burst as they ran. The road ahead was dead-straight, but, luckily for the Britishers, there were a number of hastily abandoned vehicles on it, and these masked the fire of the tanks.

Into The Thick Of It!

THEY passed the junction of Marylebone Road, leaping shallow trenches half-dug there. Right ahead, gleaming in the sunshine, the chums could see the white bulk of the Marble Arch, with the green of Hyde Park behind it—the heart of London, and the enemy bare yards away!

Jack was running beside the sergeant; between themselves and Marble Arch he saw more half-shaped trenches and barricades—all abandoned. From turnings and side-streets, other little parties of scouts appeared, all bearing in the same direction. A few stopped to watch the advance of the enemy, and a signaller clambered to the top of a derelict 'bus and began flicking his flags to another signaller, who took the message from the very top of Marble Arch.

"Why have we retired like this?" Jack gasped, as he ran.

The sergeant glanced at him sharply.

"Did you say you were going to Whitehall?" he asked, and when Jack nodded, he went on: "Then you're attached to H.Q., I suppose. Well, I should ha' thought you'd know what the game was—but if you don't, I'll tell you, not that I'm supposed to tell anybody!"

They ran on a little way, then he said:

"We're just drawin' the Germans on, now! Regents Park's absolutely packed tight with men, and those along the canal are doin' just enough to hold the Germans there. We're going to let 'em advance right up to Hyde Park—and then we're goin' to give 'em a taste of what they've been givin' us! We'll enfilade 'em from Regents Park, and there's a whole army down in Wormwood Scrubbs ready to advance and link up with the chaps comin' away from the Welsh Harp—they're Cornish and Devon lads, mostly. Then there's another terrific army massing up between Aylesbury and Hertford, if you ask me, them Germans is goin' to get it in the neck hot and strong before very long!"

Jack gasped, and he realised the position in a moment. This retirement along the Edgware Road was just a stratagem. The Germans would pour through the gap in the British lines, only to encounter iron resistance at Hyde Park.

While the troops there held them, the enemy armies would be crushed by the reserves from Wormwood Scrubbs—to the left of the firing line. At the same time, more troops would advance from the north, and the effect would be to pinch the enemy on three sides; before he knew what was happening he would be com-

(Continued on page 44.)

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

OUR SILVER MEDAL CAMPAIGN!

The Silver Medals are nearly ready, and we shall soon be dispatching them to all those members who have qualified. We must not allow an event of this kind, however, to pass by without making it an occasion for whipping up fresh enthusiasm for the League.

Very soon, therefore, we are going to start a big Silver Medal Campaign, and I want you to help me. Every Organising Officer should lead the way by qualifying for the new award, and encouraging the members of his particular club to do likewise. If every existing Bronze Medallist qualifies for the Silver Medal we shall be well on the road to the Gold Medal. But we are not stopping at that, for as the League grows in numbers so will it develop in countless other ways.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

The Burton-on-Trent O.O., Mr. G. Desmond Richardson, has changed his address, which is now 22, Astil Street, Stapenhill, Burton-on-Trent. He is forming a club, and wishes to hear from all Burton readers.

Thomas G. Mercer, 1, Sweden Grove, Waterloo, Liverpool, wishes to hear from readers who have back numbers of the "N. L. L." and "Monster Library." He is starting a club, and has a chance of a fine, well-lit and heated room if members come forward.

Israel Kerr, P.O. Box 3116, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers in Johannesburg and in England. He wishes to purchase back numbers of the "N. L. L."

A. W. Archer, 7, Tennyson Street, Brighton Beach, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader in England about cinematograph affairs.

H. Clark, 15, Harrison Street, Carlisle, wishes to correspond with an overseas reader interested in Meccano, photography or foreign stamps.

Miss Gertie Burge, 7, Richmond Road, Littleham Cross, Exmouth, South Devon, wishes to hear from girl readers.

H. F. Rhodes, 86, Tranmere Road, Earlsfield, London, S.W. 18, wishes to correspond with a reader in Egypt, China or Wales; stamp collecting.

George Witcombe, 10, Upper Arcade, St. James, Bristol, wishes to correspond with members in the United States interested in all kinds of sport and scouting.

G. Lake, 25, Selhurst New Road, South Norwood, London, S.E. 25, would like to hear from readers in Canada and Australia.

Eric Bournes, 25, Wentworth Street, Paddington, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, wishes to correspond with members in England and Africa who are interested in stamp collecting.

Fred Tucker, 1, Radnor Place, Canton, Cardiff, wishes to hear from readers who have back numbers of the N.L.L. (new series) for sale.

E. J. Robertson, 114, Berraga Road, Bellevue Hill, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader in South Africa who is interested in stamps.

J. R. Wilkinson, 10219-99, Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, wishes to buy any early issues of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY before No. 548.

F. Slann, 46, Park Street, Hereford, wishes to hear from all readers of the N.L.L. in Hereford.

Miss Harvey, 36, East Dulwich Grove, Dulwich, London, S.E. 22, would like to hear from a reader who could supply back numbers of the N.L.L.

G. H. Lloyd, c/o The Magnet Cinema, Winsford, Cheshire, wishes to hear from members who are interested in the films.

Peter Egbert Klen, Jun., c/o H.M. Customs, Kynsna, Port Elizabeth, South Africa (his new address), wishes to hear from his friend Benny Tree.

Arthur Trevaskis, 66, Pekin Street, Poplar, London, E. 14, would like to correspond with a Canadian reader interested in chess.

Norman Williams, 7, Woodberry Down, Finsbury Park, London, N. 4, wishes to hear from members in his district who would help form a sports club.

D. Mellors, 9, Edward Road, West Bridgford, Nottingham, wishes to correspond with members in his district to form a football club; ages 11-14.

Fred Norton, 15, Camden Street, Boulevard, Hull, wishes to correspond with stamp collectors at home or overseas.

Miss Kittle Brownbill, 8, Chapman Street, New Mile End, South Australia, wishes to correspond with a reader in England.

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By
ROGER FOWEY.

(Continued from page 42.)

pletely surrounded, because it was certain that more British troops would drive forward from the east.

It was a wonderful move. If it were successful, it would shatter the attack from the north. The enemy would be rolled up even more swiftly than he had advanced.

They reached the end of the road. The open area about the Marble Arch was nothing but a zig-zag of trenches; beyond the railings of Hyde Park showed more and more trenches; through the trees, Jack and his chums got glimpses of tanks—rank upon rank of them.

With the scouts, the chums tumbled into a trench. Hoarse-voiced officers ordered them back, but the three ducked along a trench until they found themselves in the shadow of the Marble Arch itself and with a full view of the broad stretch of the Edgware Road down which they had just come.

There was a little party of signallers, crouching together in a cavity cut out of the road, and close against the pavement about the Arch. Jack spoke to one of them.

"Are you in communication with Whitehall?"

"Yes—why?"

"We've come from the Welsh Harp, and we've

got a message from Captain Bray for General Marlow, who—"

"All right," the signaller smiled. "We've just got a report through from him by heliograph. He mentioned three cadets—that'll be you, I suppose! Well, you needn't bother about going to Whitehall—stop here and see the fun!"

A signaller at the field telephone suddenly whipped the 'phones from off his head.

"There's a battalion of German tanks attacking Regents Park!" he gasped. "Our boys can't hold 'em—we're being driven out! We—"

His voice was drowned by a sudden, tremendous explosion that shocked through an abrupt splutter of rifle-fire which welled all around.

Jack felt the earth quiver under his feet, then he saw a spreading pall of smoke surging up behind the Arch. In the same moment, he heard more explosions—swift and shattering. Smoke whipped across his gaze, and through it, he saw mistily the wheeling, diving shapes of giant German bombing machines over the trenches.

The sky above was thick with them. He had just a glimpse of the craft and of British machines racing to the attack, then a shell smashed to the side of the Arch above him, showering splinters of stone over himself and his chums.

The battle of Marble Arch had started—and the strategy of the British commanders had been half broken by the failure to hold the enemy at Regents Park. If they smashed through, the Germans would have captured the whole of north-west London!

Another shell burst on the side of the Arch.

The grey enemy hordes were now charging with naked steel at the trenches which scoured the earth before them!

(Will the Germans get through—or can the British hold them? Read all about the Battle of Marble Arch in next Wednesday's stirring chapters. You can make sure of your copy of the "Nelson Lee Library" if you order in advance.)

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D.R.

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