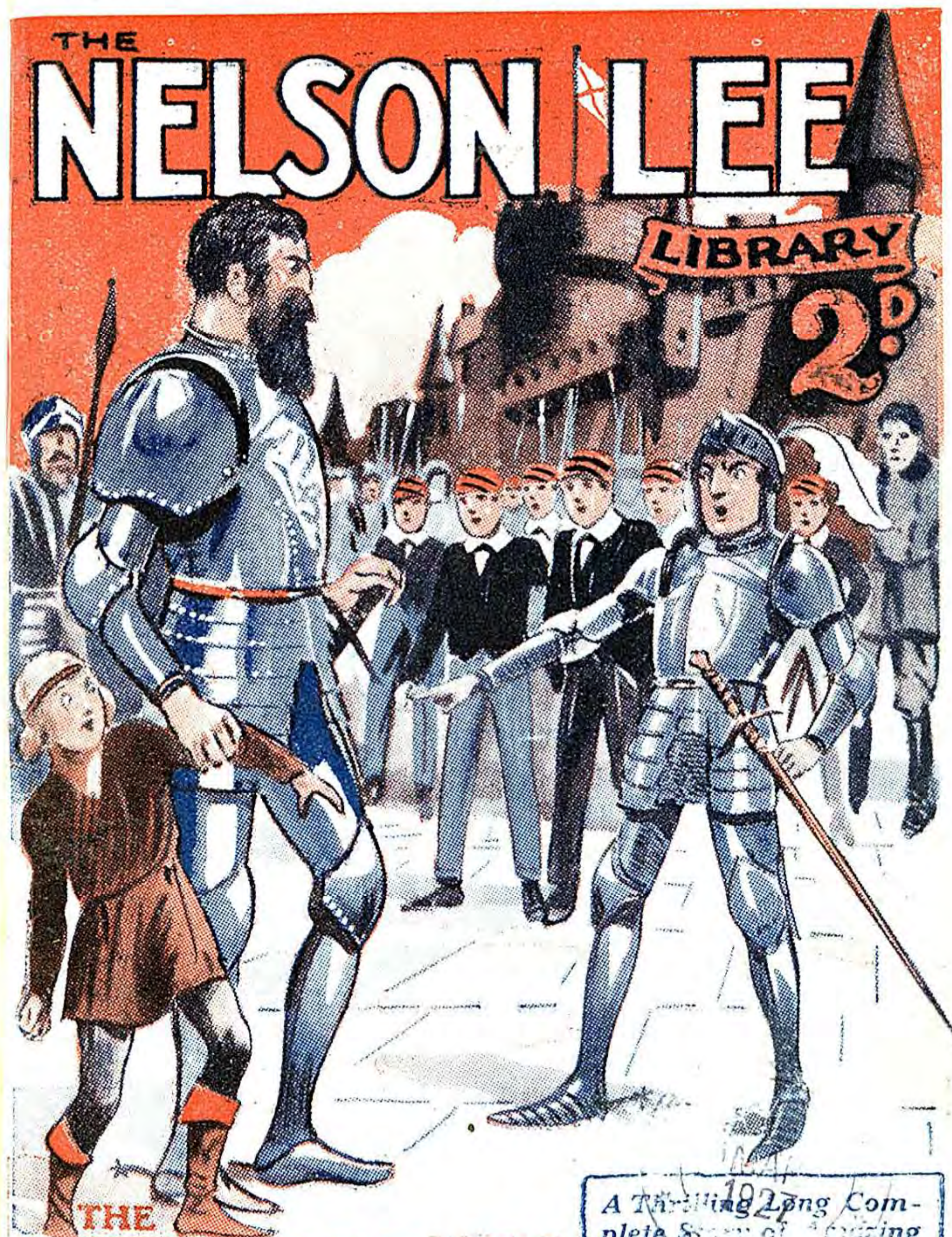


Fun & Thrills
In This Week's

Rousing Schoolboy-Adventure Yarn

—Complete
INSIDE!



THE
SCHOOLBOY
KNIGHT-ERRANTS!

A Thrilling Long Com-
plete Story of a Rousing
Advent. ... the Be ... ank's.

New Series No. 33.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

January 22nd, 1927.



"Egburt the Fair," exclaimed Handforth, "you can jolly well go and eat coke. I am boss here! Understand? E-O-double S--BOSS! Any more of your rot, my lad, and I'll biff you one on the nose!"

THE SCHOOLBOY KNIGHT-ERRANTS!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

*Handforth leads the way in this grand long complete story
of the Boys of St. Frank's.*

CHAPTER 1.

TROUBLE IN THE FAMILY!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, brought his fist down on the sturdy table with a resounding thud.

"I'm fed up!" he said fiercely. "If there's one thing I hate worse than another, it's procrastination!"

"That's a good word!" remarked Church. "Pass the bread, Mac!"

"Handy's fond of that word," grinned McClure, as he pushed a huge slab of bread across the table. "He's used it about ten times this morning already, and it's beginning to spoil my appetite for breakfast. I don't believe he knows what it means——"

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Arnold McClure, I'm ready to hand you one at any minute!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "Don't forget that I'm captain, and that you're under my orders! Procrastination means putting things off—and I never put things off!"

He thumped the table again, and a plate clattered to the stone floor.

"Never put things off, eh?" said Church, with a sniff. "You didn't take long to put that plate off the table! How the dickens

can we have breakfast in comfort while you act like a cat on hot bricks?"

It might be supposed that the celebrated chums of the Remove were seated at the table in Study D. But nothing could be less akin to the actual picture. They were at the head of a great table with a bare wooden surface, and they were sitting on long benches. Overhead, the roof was hung with enormous hams, and dried meats of other kinds. The walls were bare, except for shields hanging on their hooks, enormous bows, and sheaves of wicked-looking arrows.

Handforth was attired in a gleaming suit of chainmail, with a heavy sword at his side. His chums, although minus the chainmail, were nevertheless picturesque in costumes which were reminiscent of the days of Richard Cœur de Lion. A little further down the table sat Willy Handforth, of the Third—and Willy was watching and listening with a kindly air of amused toleration.

"By the bones of Senlac!" came a chuckling growl from a stout man in the doorway. "Thou art a strange youth, Handforth the Bold, in all truth! Art never content to remain still?"

Handforth turned, and regarded the big man with a frown.

"If I was as content as you, Wynwed, this country of yours would slowly sink back into its former state of fatheaded stupor!" he declared coldly. "Even as it is, the majority of the people are walking about the streets in a sort of dead condition. Northestria needs waking up!"

"Ay, by my faith, and thou hast accomplished much already!" declared Wynwed the Jovial, as he sat down on one of the benches. "'Twas a great day for Northestria when thou didst become captain of her Majesty's bodyguard."

Handforth continued to frown.

"Considering that you're second in command, I'm not particularly pleased with you, my lad!" he said severely. "By George! I don't believe you'd worry if things went on like this for weeks! You don't mind being idle, and any kind of action seems to leave you gasping. The very thought of it gives you the pip!"

"Marry, but thy words art both strange and scurrilous!" declared Wynwed. "'Tis twice thy age I am, and yet thou dost address me thus! 'Tis not for me to question the wisdom of our good Princess Mercia, but to me it seemeth that thou art over young to carry the responsibilities—"

"It can seemeth what it likes!" interrupted Handforth grimly. "Princess Mercia was sensible enough to make me skipper, and when I give orders, they've got to be obeyed!" He paused and glared. "And the sooner you take that grin off your face, Willy, my lad, the sooner you'll be safe!" he added darkly. "For two pins, I'll come over there, and push your face into that bowl of porridge!"

"You're welcome to try!" said Willy calmly. "But you'd have a job—considering that the porridge has gone down to its allotted crevice beneath the sword-belt. You're excited, Ted," he added, shaking his head. "It's this beer, I expect—you've been drinking too much of it."

"Beer!" snorted Handforth, thrusting aside a heavy metal pot. "Beer for breakfast—beer for dinner—and beer for every other meal! What wouldn't I give for a cup of good old hot tea!"

"It isn't ordinary beer," grinned Church. "This stuff is non-intoxicating—and it's the universal drink of the country, so why grumble? Nothing seems to satisfy you this morning, old man."

Willy looked thoughtful.

"Joking aside, we can't blame him," he said. "After all, two days have passed since that great feast, and Mr. Lee and old Dorrie and all the others are still prisoners in Athelstane Castle. Old Ethelbert the Red does nothing, and the princess is guided by him in everything."

"Well, he's her chief adviser," said Church, nodding. "A kind of Prime Minister, or Lord Chamberlain. The princess is only about sixteen or seventeen, and she naturally needs somebody to give her advice—"

"Exactly!" snapped Handforth. "Then why choose a doddering old bounder like

Ethelbert the Red? What's he good for, anyhow? He's full of suspicions—he's as slow as a snail—and he's no more idea of statesmanship than the heel of my boot! Ethelbert the Red is a wash-out!"

"Thou art rash in thy choice of words, good Handforth!" exclaimed Wynwed, with some alarm. "'Tis ill to speak thus of the great Ethelbert. I would advise caution. Thy tongue is liable to lead thee into trouble."

"Rats!" retorted Handforth. "I'm not afraid of old Ethelbert."

"And yet, beshrew me, he hath sent men to the block for less!" said the jovial one, looking really concerned. "'Tis merely a matter of an order, my Handforth. Thou art a comely youth, but I doubt not that thy beauty would suffer, should thy head be separated from thy body!—And 'tis a fate which is like to be, if thou art still so rash with thy tongue."

"So you'd better look out, Handy!" said McClure. "You may be the captain of the bodyguard, but you're just a unit when it comes down to brass tacks. Ethelbert the Red is the big cheese in this country, and we don't want to see you carved up by the Royal executioner!"

Handforth was utterly contemptuous.

"Do you think I'm scared?" he asked tartly. "The princess would never allow me to go to the chopping-block! Didn't I round up that gang of spies? Didn't the princess hold a great feast in my honour—"

"Nevertheless, good youth, 'twould be easy for Ethelbert to order thy execution—and to make his explanations to her Majesty later," put in Wynwed the Jovial. "And thou art well formed and of goodly appearance. We wish not to lose thee in such fashion. 'Twould be well to heed our warnings. Speak not treason, my Handforth. 'Twere ever better to be discreet."

Willy sighed.

"You might as well save your breath, Wynwed, old son," he said. "This comely youth, as you call him, couldn't be discreet if he tried for a month of Sundays! He was born rash—but, thank goodness, he was born lucky, too!"

"I'faith, I vow thou art right, Willy the Pert!" declared Wynwed.

"I'm all in favour of this 'Wynwed the Jovial' and 'Ethelbert the Red' business," said Willy, "but what's the idea of calling me 'the Pert'? I'm a good-natured chap, but there's a limit—"

"'Tis surely a suitable description of thy characteristics," interrupted Wynwed, chuckling. "For art thou not of a ready tongue? Is not thy wit swift and cunning? Art thou not wondrous saucy? 'Tis meet that thou shouldst be called the Pert."

"Oh, well, we won't argue," said Willy. "But it's a bit thick to call my major Handforth the Bold! It would suit him a lot better if we thought of something really fitting, like 'Handforth the Chump,' or 'Handforth the Reckless,' or 'Handforth the Blithering'!"

Fortunately, Edward Oswald was not listening.

He was staring through one of the windows into the wide courtyard of the castle. A frown was upon his brow, and his eyes smouldered with impatience and irritation.

He was essentially a fellow of action, and two days of complete inactivity had rendered him gloomy and generally touchy. He was anxious that something should be done. But no orders had come from the Princess Mercia, or from her chief adviser. The Royal bodyguard had been left idle.

"Two days!" muttered Handforth grimly. "By George, I'm not going to stand this any longer! I'll see the princess now—and have it out! I'm not going to be messed about like this."

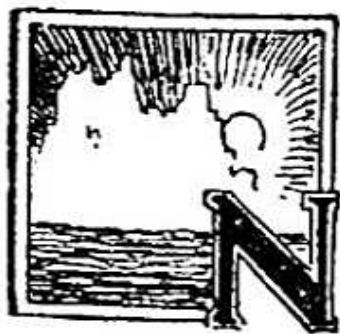
The two days had been reckoned only by the clock, for in this strange country of Northestria there was no darkness. Continuous light poured down from the upper sky—a soft, luminous light which was so akin to the rays of the sun that the schoolboy adventurers had already forgotten that they were really within the Arctic Circle—where, at this period of the year, practically no sunlight penetrated.

For they were in a kind of sub-tropical oasis—a great volcanic basin amid the everlasting ice of the North Polar region. They had only been among these quaint Northestrian people—these folks who seemed to be still living in the period of the Middle Ages—for a few days, but it seemed weeks.

The airship journey already seemed remote. They recalled it as a dream—the great storm which had swept them away from their base—the nightmare-like battle with the Arctic blizzards—and then the general amazement when the crippled dirigible had found herself within the windless, peaceful zone of this amazing volcanic basin.

For hundreds of miles it stretched, surrounded by enormous peaks, with continuous storms raging outside the rim. There were tremendous volcanoes, too—craters which boiled with molten fire, and which reflected their white-hot luminosity on the mist clouds overhead.

And here, down in this fair valley, were people—two complete races, distinct and separate, and at enmity. A limpid blue lake, close upon fifty miles from shore to shore—and fair landscapes, with towns, villages, and feudal castles. It was a strange adventure, indeed—but Edward Oswald Handforth, at least, had fitted himself into the new environment with that ready, matter-of-fact ram-headedness for which he was famous.



CHAPTER 2.

HANDFORTH DECIDES!

NORTHESTRIA was the main section of this vast Arctic oasis, and it was peopled by a race which was evidently of Anglo-Saxon stock. Nobody could tell exactly how

they came there, or when—but it was fairly obvious that these people had lived thus, isolated from the rest of the world, for many centuries.

They were ruled by a kind of Princess Charming—a gentle, sweet-faced young girl of not more than seventeen. Her father, the late king, had insisted that she should be on the throne until the coming-of-age of Prince Oswy, her young brother. And Ethelbert the Red, a tried and trusted courtier, was the princess' chief adviser. He, indeed, was virtually the ruler of Northestria.

And beyond the lake was that other land, where lived the Gothlanders. These people, so the adventurers believed, were pure descendants from the ancient Goths. By all that could be heard, the Gothlanders were a grim and brutal people. Kassker the Grim, the overlord of the Gothlanders, was a man of ambition. He was planning, even now, to send his invading hosts into Northestria, and to seize that fair land for himself. His scheme, apparently, was to rule in supreme command over the entire oasis.

And Handforth was naturally impatient.

Owing to a brave action of his, in saving the Princess Mercia from the deadly arrow of an enemy spy, he had been appointed captain of the Royal bodyguard. This, indeed, had been the princess' whim, for there were indications that the girl had taken a rather warm liking to the impulsive schoolboy.

Handforth had again revealed his aggressiveness by taking out the bodyguard, and rounding up the gang of spies. Since then, however, nothing had been done. The main section of the airship's party languished behind the grim walls of Athelstane Castle—a fortress a mile or two beyond the city gates. Even now, Ethelbert the Red distrusted these visitors to the Northestrian realm.

It seemed a somewhat ungracious way of welcoming the voyagers from the great outside world. Instead of treating them as honoured guests, they were practically clapped into prison, and held there without any hint of their impending fate. But their hosts were deeply suspicious. At first, indeed, they had believed that the airship was some monstrosity of Kassker's construction. But this wild idea was now dying a natural death.

For Handforth & Co. had clearly proved that they were strongly opposed to the Gothlanders. Had not Handforth tracked down those spies, and had he not discovered the whereabouts of Prince Oswy's prison?

For the young heir to the Northestrian throne was a captive in the hands of Kassker the Grim. Although the two peoples had been on friendly terms for a great many years, and although commerce had grown between them, at present all diplomatic relations, so to speak, were broken off.

Considering Handforth's recent efforts, he felt that it was churlish for the Northestrians to keep the main body of the party in captivity.

True, Irene & Co., of the Moor View School, were accommodated in the princess'

own household—but they were, when all was said and done, placed in the menial positions of hand-maidens. They were little better than servants, and Handforth was naturally incensed.

Just because he had chanced to be near the princess when a Gothlander spy had loosed an arrow, he was now the chief of the bodyguard—and he had managed to get Church and McClure and Willy into it, too. But the rest were still held captive, and it seemed that nothing was being done to free them.

Yet there had been a big feast two days earlier, and Handforth had believed that the princess was to choose a certain number of the visitors, so that she could send them on a rescue expedition into Gothland. But that feast was now almost forgotten, and still time went on.

"Thou art thoughtful, good Handforth," said Wynwed softly.

Edward Oswald started, and turned.

"I'm wild!" he retorted, with a glare. "I'm fed up to the neck, too! Delay—delay—delay! That's all there is in this country! You're all tarred with the same brush, too—from old Ethelbert downwards! The fact is, you're all asleep—you haven't got a pennyworth of go among the whole crowd of you! You need a few fireworks to make you jump!"

"By my bones! Thou art strange in thy talk—"

"Haven't I reason to be strange?" roared Handforth fiercely. "From one end of the country to the other, you're absolutely dormant. Nobody seems to have any idea of time, or any inkling of the value of action! You just dawdle through your daily round, and you expect to-morrow to look after itself!"

"Perchance thy words are justified—"

"There's no perchance about it!" snorted Handforth. "You all know jolly well that Kassker and those rotten Gothlanders are planning an invasion, but you simply do nothing! You have visitors from the outside world, and you shove them into captivity! And then, instead of using a heaven-sent opportunity, you allow more time to drag by. By George, it makes me boil! Mr. Lee and Dorrie and the others could do heaps of things to smash those Gothlanders—and there they lie—in prison! I—I feel so mad about it—"

"It's no good, Ted," interrupted Willy. "These people are built differently to us. Perhaps it's the climate. They just let things drift on—"

"Climate be blowed!" snapped his major. "The climate's just the same in Gothland, and they've got plenty of pep there! No, it's because there's no leader over here—because the people haven't been made to realise the danger."

The jovial Wynwed smiled indulgently.

"Marry, but thou art a true jester!" he chuckled. "Is't possible that thou art truly of a thought that Kassker can do harm? By St. Attalus! Knowest thou, good Handforth, that these Gothlanders are but savages. For countless years have we held them in contempt. 'Twas only by toleration that we

traded with the dogs. There's nought to fear from such vermin!"

"You're just as bad as the rest!" retorted Handforth curtly. "These Gothlanders have been held in contempt for so many centuries that you don't realise their strength. You just think they're a lot of riff-raff, without any organisation, or anything. But unless Northestria wakes up, Kassker's men will sweep over the lake, and over-run your whole country before you can look round!"

"'Tis a pretty picture!" smiled Wynwed indolently.

"You don't believe it, eh?" snapped Edward Oswald. "You think I'm just spinning a fairy-tale? But when we came over Gothland in our airship, we saw the preparations in full swing! Thousands of soldiers being drilled! Boats by the hundred—lying in rocky coves, ready to start out! And what about the spies? We collared a few, but there must be dozens of others!"

"In that, I grant thee, there is truth."

"Kassker's agents are everywhere!" went on the schoolboy warrior. "Isn't that a proof of his methods? He means to take advantage of your unpreparedness, and to conquer all Northestria, and make himself king of the entire place! And none of you people can see it—or, if you do see it, you just shrug your shoulders, and go off into another doze!"

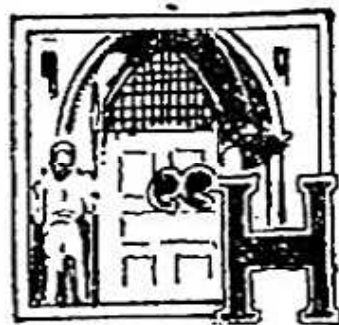
Wynwed the Jovial took a deep breath.

"By the soul of Calwold!" he exclaimed. "But thou art stirring my blood, bold youth! Methinks there is a goodly portion of truth in thy ravings. But 'tis idle to talk of war. Kassker will never dare to send his paltry knaves into this fair land! For no Gothlander may associate with a Northestrian—under pain of death for both parties. 'Tis the law."

Handforth gave a pitying smile.

"Who the dickens cares for laws in war-time?" he demanded. "You'll all look pretty sick if ten thousand Gothlanders suddenly sweep up, and take possession of your fine city, won't you? But what's the good of talking? I might as well save my breath for something more profitable!" he added, with sudden determination. "I'm going straight to the princess."

And before his chums or Willy could attempt to argue with him, he had marched out of the quarters of the bodyguard, and was striding across the great courtyard with a jingling of chainmail and a clanking of spurs.



CHAPTER 3.

THE AUDIENCE CHAMBER! OLD!"

Handforth pulled up shortly as the challenge rang out. He had entered the great arched doorway of the castle, and now he beheld two stalwart lackeys barring his further progress. He glared at them.

"What's the idea of this 'Hold' business?"

he demanded. "Out of the way, varlets, or by my halidom, I'll smite thee on the mazard! So take a chew at that!"

The two lackeys remained firm.

"My lord hath instructed that none shall disturb," said one of the lackeys. "'Tis our duty to inform thee——"

"Your Lord Ethelbert, I suppose?" interrupted Handforth. "Well, you can get out of my way! I'm captain of the Royal body-guard, and I don't allow any footmen to bar me out!"

"I beseech thee, good youth——"

"Oh, all right!" said Handforth grimly.

"If you want trouble, I'll let you have it! Am I going to pass, or not?"

He doubled his fists, and looked very warlike. The two lackeys glanced at one another, and they well remembered how Handforth had defeated Siegan the Slim in combat—how, indeed, Handforth had vanquished his enemy by the use of his fists alone.

They both fell back, and Handforth strode on with a triumphant snort. These Northestrians were easy enough to deal with! He went along, without being quite sure of his bearings, but he had an idea that the Princess Mercia's private quarters were situated in this particular direction.

He was sure of it a minute later, for he found himself confronted by three of the fair Mercia's serving-maids—in other words, Irene Manners, Doris Berkeley, and Winnie Pitt, of the Moor View School.

"Oh, hallo, Ted!" said Irene eagerly. "Any news?"

They crowded round him, looking very charming in their simple Northestrian clothing—for their own frocks had been severely condemned.

"News!" echoed Handforth. "That's just what I'm here for. I'm so tired of waiting for something to happen that I'm going to the princess to see if I can stir things up a bit."

Irene looked at him rather suspiciously.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

He started, and turned red.

"Eh?" he gasped. "I—I mean—— Here, I say, Irene, you know! This—this is purely a business call! What's the idea of looking at me in that suspicious way?"

"I'm not exactly suspicious, Ted," replied Irene. "But isn't it a bit risky? The princess is awfully keen on you, you know."

"Keen on me?" said Handforth feebly.

"Frightfully keen!" said Doris firmly. "She wants to know where you are, what you're doing, how you slept, whether you've got a good appetite, and all sorts of things like that. And here you are—deliberately going to her! Ted, it's not merely suspicious, but conclusive!"

"Oh, chuck it!" protested Handforth.

"You're kidding me!"

"Honest injun!" declared Doris. "During the past two or three days, the princess has made us tell her your whole family history!"

"Great corks!"

"She's heard all about your father, and we've had to tell her everything about your

character, and your personal habits," continued Doris. "She's fairly sweet on you, Ted, and you'll be taking a tremendous risk if you go after her like this."

"After her!" breathed Handforth. "But—but——"

"Before you know where you are, she'll have you in the net, and she'll probably crown you king, or something," said Winnie. "In a way, it might be a good idea, when you come to think of it. But there's Irene——"

"Don't drag me into it!" said Irene coldly.

Handforth looked at his special girl chum in alarm.

"Cheese it, Renie!" he said. "You'd make a lot better princess than Mercia, any day—although we've got to admit that she's a jolly pretty girl. Those eyes of hers!" he added dreamily. "By George, when she looks at me with those blue eyes, I—I——"

"Well?" asked Irene frigidly.

"Of course, I don't take any notice of her," went on Handforth, in haste. "But she's a bit soft on me, I believe, so I've got to be careful. As long as I keep in with her, there's just a chance that I can help poor old Dorrie, and Mr. Lee, and Nipper, and all the other chaps. Why, if I offend her, I stand a jolly good chance of having my head chopped off! They think nothing of that sort of thing in this country!"

Irene abandoned her mock severity.

"Yes, you've got to be careful, Ted," she agreed. "But do try to do something. We're fairly comfortable here, although it's not very pleasant being in the position of servants. But what about Winnie's brother Reggie, and poor Ralph Fullwood, and Archie Glen-thorne, and all the others? Can't you persuade the princess to have them released?"

"Do try, Ted!" urged Winnie anxiously.

"You needn't think I need any pushing," replied Handforth. "Something's got to be done—and I'm here to see that it's going to be done. We can't have any more of this messing about!"

"I'm afraid that Ethelbert is the stumbling block," said Doris, with a shake of her pretty head. "I believe he's all right in the main, but he's like all the rest—full of silly suspicions."

"And full of sluggishness!" growled Handforth, with a sniff. "I've never known any people who need waking up more than these do! Ethelbert the Red, eh? He ought to be called Ethelbert the Unready. If those Goth-landers come over here to invade the place, they'll have everything their own way."

"Then it's your job to tell the princess exactly how the position stands," declared Irene. "She'll take more notice of you than of anybody, Ted. Do you know that she's been wanting to see you for two days?"

"By George, has she?"

"Yes—but Ethelbert has persuaded her to let things drag on," continued Irene. "Being her hand-maidens, we've heard a lot——"

"Hush!" murmured Winnie. "One of the

princess' ladies-in-waiting approacheth! Cave, Ted!"

Handforth grinned.

"I'm not afraid of the ladies-in-waiting," he replied calmly. "All right, girls, you can leave this to me. I'll fix things!"

He moved through the stone-floored apartment, and passed through an arched passage, where heavy tapestries were hanging. And he suddenly found himself within the audience chamber. It was a high, noble apartment, very severe and simple, but quaintly dignified. On the far side, Princess Mercia was sitting in a great carved chair, and Ethelbert the Red was talking to her.

Handforth hesitated.

For the moment, he hardly knew what to do. His entry had not been observed yet, for Ethelbert the Red was standing immediately in front of the princess, talking earnestly, and with his back to the new arrival. And Ethelbert's very bulk prevented the princess from seeing Handforth, either.

And the St. Frank's junior just stood there, nonplussed. He knew that it was a rule of the Court that no newcomer should speak until the princess acknowledged his presence. Indeed, Handforth now realised that he ought not to have entered the audience chamber at all. But he was there, and his business was urgent. So he waited—until the fair princess should catch his eye.

"Thou art over-cautious, my Ethelbert!" the princess was saying. "'Tis my wish that these strangers within our realm should be released, and treated as honoured guests. Enough of this delay!"

Handforth brightened up.

"Good egg!" he told himself. "She's got the right idea, anyhow!"

The next moment he frowned, for her chief adviser was speaking.

"Let not the appearance of these strangers deceive thee, sweet Majesty," he urged. "'Tis my wish that they should be tested. Ere they become guests under thy roof, 'tis meet that they should be proved——"

"Again, thou art over-fearful," interrupted Mercia coldly. "What of Handforth the Bold? What of his young companions? Did they not venture forth with the bodyguard, and seize the scurvy spies who attempted to kill me? Verily, Handforth the Bold hath proved himself right well and truly! And since he hath been so proven, why demand needless proofs from all his compatriots? I will pledge my faith, good Ethelbert, that they are loyal and true."

Handforth nearly betrayed himself by voicing his approval. But again he was stayed by the chief adviser's words.

"'Tis true that Handforth the Bold is our good friend," he said softly. "But thou wilt be wise to have a care, Majesty. Let twelve of these strangers go into Gothland—let them undertake this mission, and let them rescue our fair Prince Oswy from the hands of the accursed Gothlanders. Then, indeed, will it be proven that they are to be trusted."



CHAPTER 4.

ETHELBERT'S SUSPICIONS!

FOR a moment Handforth was filled with a glow of excitement.

A dash into Gothland—a rescue-party to wrest the captive prince from his enemies! The very thought of it caused the adventurous Edward Oswald to feel warmed towards Ethelbert the Red. But during the next moment his feelings changed. Would this be a stirring adventure, or would it be a trip into the jaws of certain death?

The Princess Mercia, at least, appeared to take the latter view.

"Nay, nay!" she cried, in alarm. "I will not agree, Ethelbert! Shame on thee for suggesting such a deadly plan."

Ethelbert the Red started back, and Handforth could see him pulling at his red beard. The princess was in full sight, and her sweet young face was troubled, and her eyes were angry. But she did not see Handforth standing there. And the next second Ethelbert moved, and the junior was again concealed.

"Thou art harsh in thy choice of words, gracious Majesty," protested Ethelbert in a hurt voice. "I would wish these strangers no harm. But, by my soul, since they are here, 'tis well to test them. Thou art sorely distraught over the fate of our fair Prince Oswy. Well, then, let these good strangers venture into Gothland, and bring him hither."

"Thou art surely mad, Ethelbert!" protested the princess. "'Tis an ugly fact that all Northeistriians who venture into Gothland are put to the chopping block—without trial, without mercy, and without a minute of delay. Wouldst thou, then, send these innocent people to their deaths?"

"By George!" muttered Handforth, aghast.

"Wouldst thou do this thing?" went on Princess Mercia angrily. "Again I say, Ethelbert—shame on thee! Kassker the Grim, the overlord of all Gothland, hath sworn death on every Northeistriian. What chance of life will these twelve strangers have on that foul soil?"

"Thou art hasty, my Majesty—thou art cruel!" said Ethelbert gravely. "I am not the man to deal thus harshly with innocent people. Listen to me, and thou wilt then understand the better."

"Thy words will need to be convincing," said the girl.

"A murrain take me if I suggest a cowardly plan," declared Ethelbert the Red earnestly. "Thou art overlooking one fact, sweet Majesty. Kassker hath sworn death on every Northeistriian. But these strangers are not Northeistriians."

"That is true."

"Indeed, I have my suspicions that these strangers are even connected with the Gothlanders——"

"Nay, I will not have that, my Ethelbert!" interrupted the princess. "For if they are



Under Handforth's directions, the motor-boat was carried down to the lake and launched. A little distance away was the big wooden galleon, but this was no longer needed, as the motor-boat was speedier and handier for the rescue party.

connected with our onemies—why, then, so is Handforth the Bold! And we know that Handforth the Bold is true and loyal. If one, why not the others?"

"I will grant the wisdom of thy reasoning," agreed the chief adviser. "But let me insist upon the voicing of my former logic. These strangers are not Northeistrians, and thus they will not be treated as such in Gothland. And if their loyalty to thee is as sincere as they proclaim, then will they take this risk. And if, perchance, they return with Prince Oswy, their allegiance will be proven for all North-estria to see. Let this plan be put into execution, good Majesty, and thou wilt not regret it. Choose twelve of the strangers, and send them forth. Thou hast seen them all, and thou hast studied them. At the recent feast, 'twas my plan to select these good braves. But thou didst hesitate——"

"Ay, and still I hesitate, my Ethelbert," interrupted the princess quietly. "But since thou art so eloquent, methinks I will give way. Let us devise some plan at once. Let us go to Athelstane Castle and choose these twelve rescuers."

Handforth came to a sudden decision. Silently, he backed out of the audience chamber, and allowed the curtains to fall into position. He had heard—but he had not been seen. By a strange fluke, neither the princess

nor Ethelbert the Red had become aware of his proximity. He did not consider that he had been eavesdropping by remaining silent; he had only carried out the orders of the Court. But the circumstances were such that he felt justified in retreating.

With every second he expected to be called back—he feared that his spurs would betray him, that the jingling of his chainmail would reach Ethelbert's ears. But those heavy tapestries had a deadening effect.

"By George!" breathed Handforth, his heart beating rapidly. "The old rotter! The treacherous old blighter! So that's his game, is it? He's going to send a dozen of our chaps into Gothland! And it means certain death!"

The junior was thoroughly indignant. Not that the prospect would have appalled him if he had been chosen as a member of the party. Indeed, he would have revelled in it—he would have undertaken the risk with a pure joy.

But it was quite clear that he was not to appear in this act. Twelve members of the main party were to be selected—and so Handforth was full of fears. While he would have jumped at the chance of going himself, he hated to think of the others undertaking the risk.

"I've got to get to Athelstane Castle, and warn them!" muttered Handforth urgently.

"I'll give them the tip, and tell 'em to have nothing to do with the beastly scheme. Blow old Ethelbert and his rotten suspicions! I don't think he's really a rascal, but it's about time he knew that we're all friendly. There's no reason for this fatheaded test!"

He hurried away, and managed to get out of the castle without being accosted or questioned. It made him angry to think of a mere dozen strangers being sent into the enemy country. Wouldn't it be a thousand times better to send him—at the head of the entire bodyguard? This mission into Gothland was a military one, and a small army of determined soldiers would stand a better chance than a dozen visitors, unfamiliar with the ground.

He hurried on, crossed the courtyard, and found Church and McClure and Willy in the common-room of the officers' quarters.

"Good!" said Handforth, as he looked round. "Nobody else here, eh? Where's Wynwed?"

"Having a nap, I believe," said Willy tartly.

"That's just what he would be doing!" growled Handforth. "And these fellows call themselves soldiers! I've never seen such a ragtime bodyguard in all my life! Until I came to stir them up, they were half dead."

"You're looking excited, Handy," said Church curiously. "Did you see the princess? Have you done anything?"

"I've heard something," replied Handforth grimly.

And he briefly explained the circumstances.

"So you can see how the land lies!" he concluded. "Twelve of our chaps are to be chosen, and they're going to be sent over to Gothland—into a death-trap! We've got to get on our horses, and gallop to Athelstane Castle at once."

"What for?" asked Willy.

"To warn them, of course," replied his major. "By George, what wouldn't I give for my Austin Seven now?"

"I don't know what you'd give, but it wouldn't be any good to you!" said McClure. "The roads about here weren't built for motoring, and a little car like your Austin would be tossed about over the cobbles like a ship in a storm. The gee-gees are the best form of locomotion in Northestria, Handy."

"Hold on!" said Willy calmly. "Why go to Athelstane at all? What's all this rot about warning the crowd? You ass, Ted, they'll be only too jolly pleased to have a chance of getting out!"

"But—but this trip means certain death!" said Handforth. "You silly young ass, it'll be fatal—and they've got to be warned. It's our job to go into Gothland, and if Mr. Lee and the others refuse the thing, we shall step in and do it."

Willy grinned.

"I thought there was something behind it," he chuckled. "You're jolly keen to save the others from certain death, Ted, but you want to walk into it yourself, eh?"

"And walk us into it with him!" said Church indignantly.

Handforth stared.

"We're different," he said coldly.

"I'm blessed if I can see how," said McClure. "Our necks are made of the same kind of flesh and blood, and they're just as liable to be laid across the chopping block as any other necks. You've got rummy ideas of pleasure, Handy! Let's be content with our present lot! Besides, the chosen twelve will probably be Mr. Lee and Dorrie and Umlosi and nine of the airship men."

"And you want to see them all sent to their deaths?" demanded Handforth.

"Of course not—but I don't want to be sent to mine!"

"Pure selfishness—that's all it is!" snapped Edward Oswald coldly. "Come on! We'll get on our hacks, and gallop to Athelstane Castle!"

A great clanging sounded, and Handforth started.

"Rats!" he snapped. "Blow! The call for the bodyguard!"

His chums were relieved, for they knew what that clanging meant. It was an order for the princess' bodyguard to turn out, and it implied a journey. In a word, it was too late for Handforth to get to Athelstane Castle in advance, and deliver his warning.



CHAPTER 5.

THE CAPTIVES IN THE CASTLE I

ORD DORRIMORE thoughtfully fingered a piece of rope.

"I wonder!" he said abstractedly. "By gad,

Lee, I wonder!"

Nelson Lee and Captain Waring, who were talking close by, turned and gazed at the sporting peer. They were in the great hall of Athelstane Castle, and a meal had just been finished. Dick Hamilton and Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Archie Glenthorne and a number of other St. Frank's fellows were standing about, looking rather dejected and forlorn. The great doors were guarded by soldiers in armour, with swords ready.

"What are you wondering about, old man?" asked Nelson Lee.

"No, I don't suppose it would be much good," said Dorrie, with a weak grin. "I was thinkin' that this rope might come in useful," he added, holding it up.

"My dear man, you're dreaming," said Lee. "The rope isn't more than a yard long, and it wouldn't bear a man's weight, anyhow. There's no way of escaping—"

"Escapin'!" interrupted Dorrie, staring. "Good glory! I was thinkin' about a smoke, that's all!"

"A smoke!"

"Well, hang it, we're gettin' pretty desperate, aren't we?" growled his lordship. "I haven't tasted tobacco for days, an' even rope might be better than nothin'. But I haven't got a pipe on me, an'—"

Given Away!

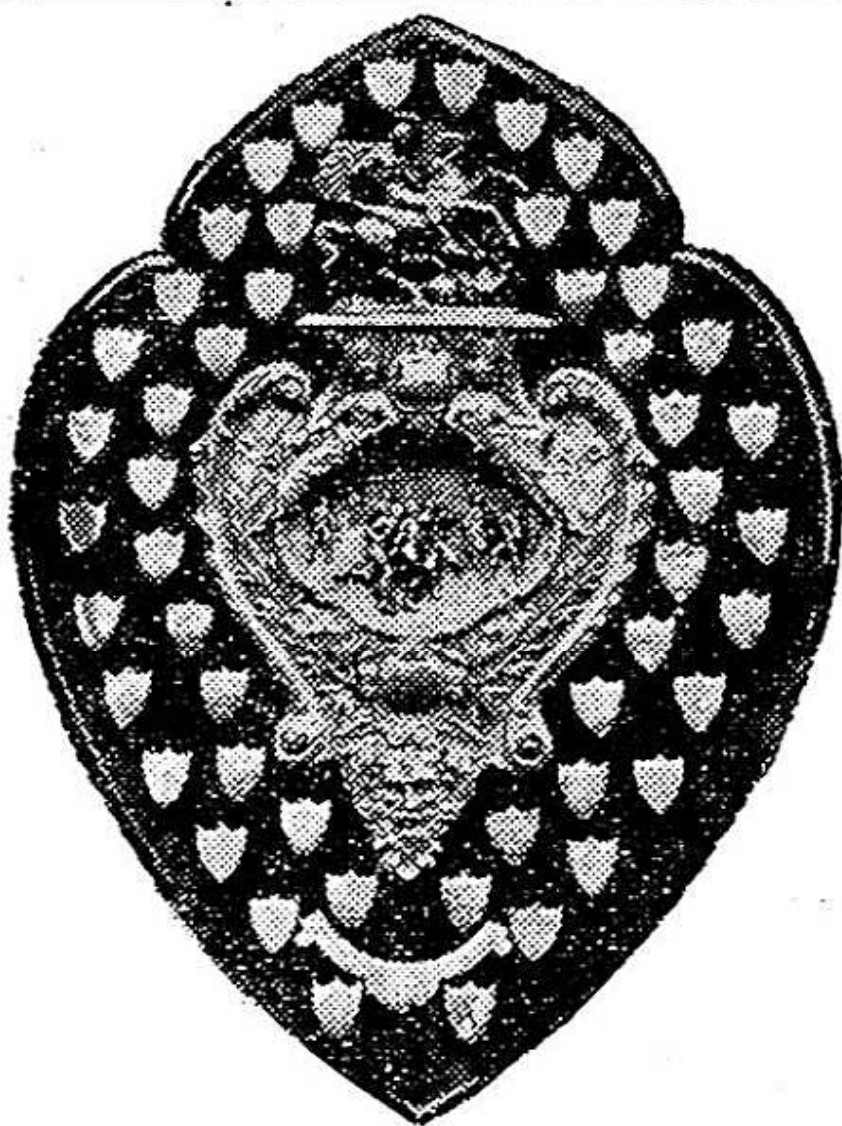
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"Let's be thankful that you are pipeless, Dorrie," interrupted the famous schoolmaster-detective. "If you tried to smoke that rope, I'm afraid you'd soon be on the sick-list. I am surprised at you! You're admitting that you are a slave to nicotine!"

"It's a fact!" agreed Dorrie mournfully. "I'd give a thousand quid down for a packet of cigarettes! And to think that I've got thousands of 'em in the airship!"

Captain Waring winced.

"Poor old Titan," he said, with a sad note in his voice. "The finest airship of her class that ever left the sheds! And there she lies, strewn over that little valley, just outside the capital! What a darned shame, Mr. Lee!"

"I've got nothing but praise for the Titan," retorted Nelson Lee. "When we expected to be battered to death in the blizzard, she brought us through, and landed us safely in this haven."

"There may, of course, be different ideas regarding havens," said Lord Dorrimore. "But I've always understood that a haven meant a sort of peaceful spot. Bein' locked up in a feudal castle isn't my notion of quiet comfort."

"I don't think we shall be held here much longer, Dorrie," replied Lee, smiling. "These people are a slow-going lot, by the look of things. They seem to take life very easily, and time, apparently, means little or nothing to them. We can only hope that Handforth and the other juniors will hasten matters."

Lord Dorrimore shook his head.

"I'm a great believer in Handforth," he replied. "In his own way, he's a wonderful kid, and I couldn't wish for a better companion in a good old scrap. But when it comes to a question of tact and diplomacy—well, if I had a hundred fellows to choose from, I should find Handforth's name at the bottom of the list! He's far more likely to start a civil war!"

Nelson Lee made no comment—for, to tell the truth, he had had similar ideas in his own head, although not quite so extreme. Handforth would probably get into trouble, but he was hardly likely to cause a civil war.

It seemed such a ridiculous state of affairs that three Remove fellows and a mere fag should enjoy complete liberty while the actual leaders of the party were held in captivity. It was the result, of course, of a young princess being in control of the affairs of State. And the whole situation was so extraordinary. Lee had several times attempted to communicate with the princess, but his host had always smilingly explained that they all had to await the princess' will.

This host was known as Athelstane the Great—the feudal lord of this castle, and of all the lands which surrounded it. He was faithful in his allegiance to the Crown, but, at the same time, with his own serfs he was a kind of king in his own right.

And all these prisoners were ostensibly his guests. Their captivity was not rigorous, for

they were provided with the best of food, and they were waited upon by lackeys. But under no circumstances was it possible to leave the grim old building. They were not even allowed to cross the moat into the grounds.

"It wouldn't be so bad if these bally people allowed us to fetch some of our things from the wrecked airship," went on Dorrie indignantly. "We could go under escort, bag a supply of cigarettes and cigars and tobacco, and——"

"It's no good, Dorrie, I've tried it," interrupted Lee. "The Northeistriians don't understand smoking. Such words as 'tobacco' and 'cigarette' are utterly foreign to them. Perhaps it's just as well that we should be compulsory abstainers; for, if we smoked, they would only think we were mad or bewitched."

"We're not all so lucky as you, Mr. Lee," put in Captain Waring ruefully. "You can become a non-smoker, it seems, without suffering. But I'm hanged if I don't agree with Lord Dorrimore. I'm just dying for a good puff."

"Well, there seems to be some activity to relieve the monotony," said Nelson Lee, as he glanced round. "The boys are crowding at the windows, and they look excited. What is it, Nipper?" he added.

Dick Hamilton, the popular captain of the St. Frank's Remove, glanced round.

"There's a whole cavalcade coming up to the drawbridge, guv'nor," he replied. "And Handforth's at the head!"

"He would be!" said Dorrie, grinning. "Gad, there's a chance that this might mean some action! Anythin' to relieve the monotony!"

They joined the boys on the other side of the great hall. The windows on this side overlooked the moat and the cumbersome old drawbridge, with a clear view of the drive beyond. A brave procession was now sweeping up. At its head rode Edward Oswald Handforth on his charger—gleaming in his steel armour and helmet, as captain of the bodyguard. Immediately behind rode Church and McClure and Willy, and then twenty members of the bodyguard followed, with the princess' carriage rumbling onwards immediately behind. Ethelbert the Red trotted beside the carriage on his own horse, and in the rear came Wynwed and another strong detachment of the bodyguard. It was a noisy, glittering cavalcade, full of colour and life, and amazingly reminiscent of mediaeval Britain.

Handforth thundered across the drawbridge and vanished from sight.

He had passed through the stone archway, and was in the inner courtyard. Apparently he had forgotten his duties as captain, for he left the other members of his bodyguard to escort the princess' carriage within. He flung himself off his horse, and swept past the lackeys who were waiting near the great doorway.

"Stand aside!" he shouted curtly. "Make way for your betters!"

None of the men attempted to stop him. His aggressive manner was sufficient in itself, although the fact that he was the captain of the bodyguard would have been ample warrant.

"Hallo, you chaps!" he roared, as he passed inside.

"Handy!"

"Good man!"

"What's the news, Handy, old son?"

"Absolutely!"

"Are we free now?"

Edward Oswald Handforth grinned, in spite of his worried state of mind. He was fairly surrounded by the eager fellows, and Handforth liked nothing better than the limelight. Even Browne and Stevens, of the Fifth, joined in the pressing crowd. Nipper and Tregellis-West and Reggie Pitt and Fullwood were among the foremost juniors.

"Steady on—don't all speak at once!" said Handforth breathlessly. "And you needn't kid yourselves that you're going to be set at liberty yet! Old Ethelbert the Red has brought the princess here—and they're going to choose a round dozen of you for a special mission."

"Hurrah!"

"Action at last!"

"You needn't gloat!" said Handforth gruffly. "There's nothing very glorious about this mission; it only means certain death for the chosen twelve!"



CHAPTER 6.

THE GOBLETS OF WINE.

EATH!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Odds shocks and starts!"

"Chuck it, Handy—you're spoofing!"

The fellows were all shouting at once again.

"I'm not, and I've dashed in to give you the tip!" said Edward Oswald quickly. "I don't know how they're going to do the choosing, but if the princess asks for any volunteers, don't you jump into the trap! Let's hope she chooses her twelve from among the airship's men."

"But what is this death mission?" asked Nipper curiously.

"A raid into Gothland!" retorted Handforth. "A scheme to rescue Prince Oswy from the hands of that beast, Kassker! As captain of the bodyguard, it's my job."

"Eh?"

"My job!" repeated Handforth grimly.

"Good gad!"

"So you chaps keep off the grass!" went on Edward Oswald with a glare. "If there's any call for volunteers, ignore it! This is

a mission of certain death, and I'm giving you the straight tip——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come off it, Handy!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "You seem pretty keen on walking into the jaws of death yourself, don't you? I don't believe your spoofo, my son! You're jealous; that's the trouble!"

"Absolutely!" nodded Archie Glenthorne, fixing Handforth with a frigid stare. "I mean to say, dash it, you've heard that some of us are to be invited into this ripping adventure, and you're absolutely green with jealousy. A frightfully useless sort of trick, Handy, old bird! If it's a question of volunteering, I shall be the first dashed chappie to offer the good old right hand!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We're with you, Archie—we'll rally round!"

"What-ho! I mean to say——"

"Why, you—you——" Handforth paused, his gaze intense. "Do you mean to say that you ignore this warning of mine?" he hissed. "Is this all the thanks I get for rushing in, at the risk of slighting the princess, to warn you?"

William Napoleon Browne waved a benevolent hand.

"Peace, Brother Handforth!" he said gently. "It is needless for me to remark that we thoroughly understand your motives, and that we appreciate them to the full. We extend you our united and heartfelt thanks."

"Oh, well——"

"We realise, brother, that it is your desire to nab this cheery adventure for yourself," continued Browne calmly. "And so, in the fulness of your heart, you come amongst us and talk glibly of death and similar trifles. Fortunately, brother, we understand your ways, and thus we shall know exactly what to do when the volunteers are called for."

"You bet we shall!" said Boots, of the Fourth.

"By Jingo, rather!" agreed De Valerie.

Handforth automatically clenched his fists. He had spoofed himself into believing that he was really giving a warning; but the frankly expressed views of his companions convinced him that their conclusions were right. His real object was to choke them off, so that he could undertake this rescue himself.

But he had no further opportunity of urging his warnings, for he noticed that Ethelbert the Red was already within the great hall; and Ethelbert the Red, moreover, was looking at him with something that was very akin to suspicion.

Indeed, the chief adviser was indicating Handforth to the fair Mercia, whom he was escorting, with other courtiers hovering round.

"Hast thou seen, good Majesty?" murmured Ethelbert. "Our Handforth the Bold did take good care to enter first, and to speak secretly with his kith. Is't further

proof thou need'st, my Majesty? By the bones of Senlac, methinks there hath been plotting, even during this brief minute!"

"Thy mind is unduly disposed to evil," frowned the princess.

"A harsh comment, forsooth!" said Ethelbert the Red, aggrieved. "I only desire to be cautious, sweet Majesty! 'Tis well that these people should be put to the test. I faith, I will not trust them else!"

"Have them ranged before me," said the young princess quietly.

Handforth was close by now, and he saluted.

"You want them all lined up?" he asked briskly. "Right-ho! You can leave this to me."

He turned and looked round comprehensively.

"Now then, you chaps, form up in a double line, and look slippy!" he commanded. "Mr. Lee—Dorrie—Captain Waring! Sorry, and all that, but you might obey orders, and line up with the rest!"

"I like your infernal cheek!" said Lord Dorrimore warmly.

"You mustn't forget, Dorrie, that we're the prisoners," murmured Lee dryly. "And I think I would prefer to take my orders from Handforth than these Northestrians. Besides, I have an idea that there is something big in the wind."

Within a minute the whole party was ranged up and down the quaint old hall. At one end stood the princess upon a raised platform, with Ethelbert the Red hovering near on one side, and Athelstane the Great on the other. The bodyguard had disposed itself round the walls, and all doorways were heavily guarded.

"So!" said Ethelbert, when everything was ready. "Fear naught, good strangers; our one great wish is to believe thy professions of good faith. 'Tis her Majesty's desire that an opportunity should be provided for the testing of this loyalty. Ye are to be given a chance of proving your allegiance."

"Good!" exclaimed Dorrie, with relief. "It's all we ask."

"But why should any proof be necessary?" put in Handforth, appealing to the princess. "I'm loyal enough, and so are all these others! I think they ought to be released——"

"Hold, good Handforth," interrupted Ethelbert. "Her Majesty would speak."

Edward Oswald felt suddenly confused. The string of words that had been on the tip of his tongue became lost. The Princess Mercia was looking straight at him, and there was something in the expression of her deep blue eyes which made him quail.

"Fear naught, fair youth!" she said softly. "Thou wilt not be sent into danger. Thy place is near me, as captain of my bodyguard. Never will I let thee venture forth upon a mission of deadly peril."

"Oh, corks!" muttered Handforth. "But——"

The princess turned from him, and looked at the captives.

"'Tis upon the advice of my good Ethelbert that ye are to be put to the test," she said, in her soft, musical voice. "Ye know of Prince Oswy, my brother. It has reached the ears of all of ye that my gentle Oswy is a captive in the hands of the vile Gothlanders. And 'twas Handforth the Bold who secured the knowledge of Prince Oswy's exact whereabouts. His place of captivity is known. And 'tis my wish that he should be rescued and brought hither to my side."

"You want us to go on this rescue raid, then?" asked Nelson Lee. "Your Majesty, we shall be eager to comply."

"Rather!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Only too glad. What do you say, Umlosi?"

"Wau! I am with thee, N'Kose," rumbled the African chieftain. "These days of idleness have turned my blood to water and my bones to jelly! If it is a fight, my father, then will I enter it with joy."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll all go and rescue Prince Oswy!"

There was a general shout of eager acquiescence, and the princess gave Ethelbert the Red a curious little glance.

"How now, good adviser?" she murmured. "Art still fearful, lest these good strangers should be enemies?"

"'Tis, mayhap, a ruse," said Ethelbert obstinately.

"Marry, but thou art as the mule!" retorted the princess, with a toss of her head. "Is't never possible to convince thee, stubborn one? These good people are our friends, as thou shouldst know."

"I urge thee, nevertheless, to send them forth," said Ethelbert tensely.

The young princess sighed.

"Let the twelve goblets of wine be brought in," she commanded. "'Tis with reluctance I pursue this course. But thou art a man, Ethelbert, and thou hast greater knowledge of men than I. Thou canst have thy way. But, by my faith, I think mine own judgment of human kind is better than thine! For myself, I would have none of this testing, so I am full satisfied already."

So it was perfectly clear that Ethelbert the Red was the real obstacle. He was a man of slow-going ways—a man with settled, stubborn convictions. Before admitting these strangers into full and complete freedom, he needed a concrete proof of their goodwill.

Happily, they were only too ready to supply the proof.



CHAPTER 7.

THE CHOSEN TWELVE.

TWELVE lackeys now appeared, and each one carried a polished metal salver. Upon this rested gleaming goblets, filled

almost to the brim with red wine. There

were over thirty of these goblets, and all the members of the party received one each—but they were commanded not to drink.

"Hold on!" said Handforth, as the lackeys were departing. "Where's mine?"

"And mine?" demanded Willy.

"Thou art not included in this ceremony, Handforth the Bold," said Ethelbert. "Neither are thy companions of the body-guard. 'Tis her Majesty's desire."

"Yes, but look here! I mean, hang it——"

"You've had your hour, Handy," interrupted Dick Hamilton. "This is our show."

"What-ho! Absolutely!"

"So cheese it, old horse, and try to look pleasant!" grinned Pitt.

Handforth "cheesed it," but his efforts to look pleasant were scarcely a success. In point of fact, he looked very far from pleasant. The expression on his face was one of bitter resentment. Here was the commencement of the finest bit of excitement yet, and he was left out of it!

"I thank ye all, good people, for your willingness of spirit," the princess was saying softly. "But 'tis a dangerous mission ye are to venture upon. Perchance death will be the only reward—for in Gothland there is naught but cruelty. I am giving ye fair warning of this, and 'tis my desire that ye shall have a fair chance. Twelve are to go upon this mission, but only twelve. And thus it will be left to chance."

"In what way, your Majesty?" asked Lee.

"Each of ye holds a goblet of wine," replied the princess. "Twelve of them are marked with a cross in the bottom of the bowl. At my word of command, ye will drink, and ye who hold the marked goblets will go."

"This is gettin' interestin'," remarked Dorrie, peering into his wine.

"By jingo, I hope I'm one of the lucky ones!" said Pitt eagerly.

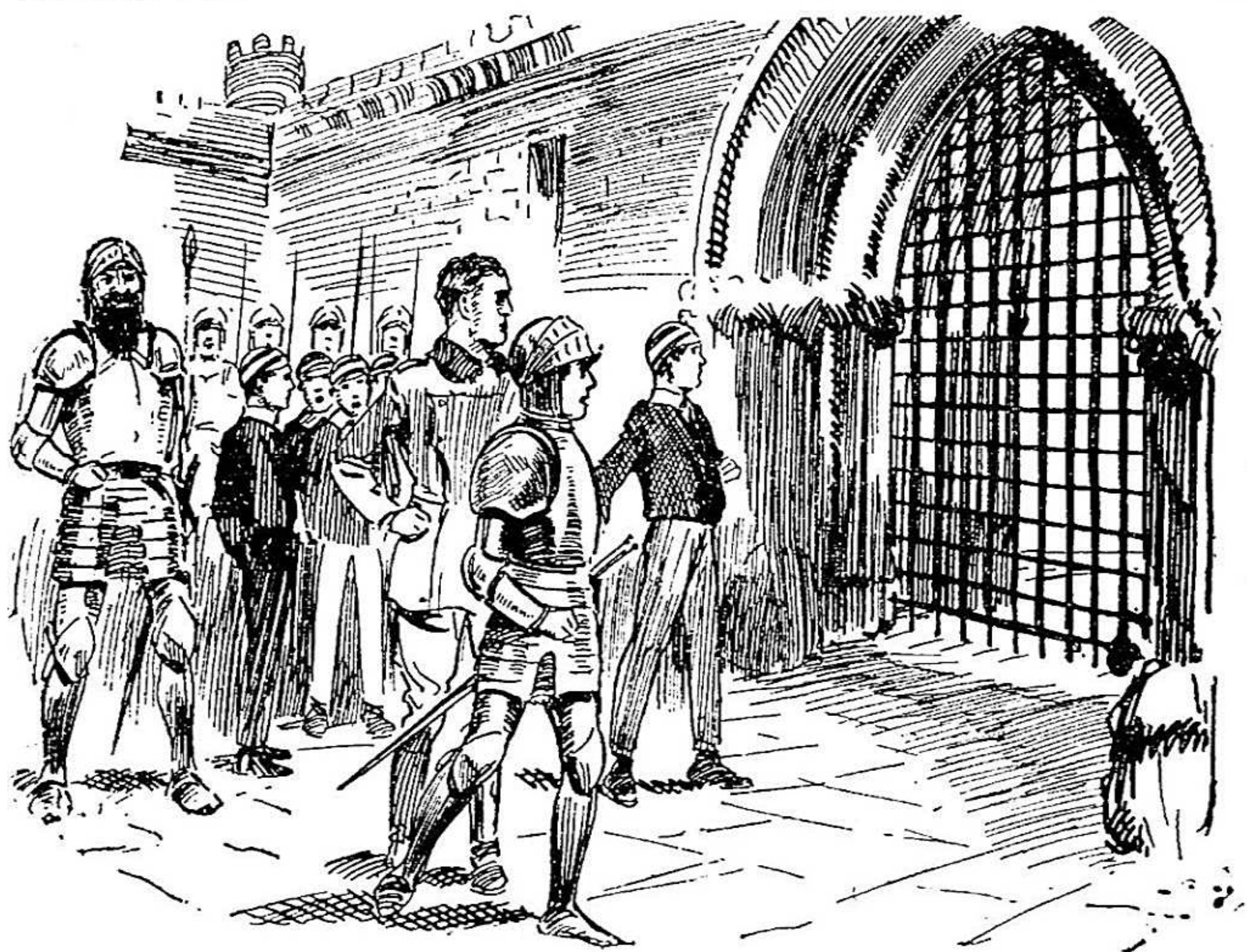
"What-ho!" breathed Archie. "The same, laddie, with brass fittings!"

But it was useless to look into the depths of the wine, for the liquid was deep red, and slightly opaque. They could only wait until the order came for them to drink, for not until the wine had been swallowed could they know their fate. A dozen of them were to be chosen. Not by their captors, but by chance.

"Before I command ye to drink, I would have ye know the nature of this mission," continued the princess earnestly. "As Handforth the Bold hath discovered, my dear brother is a captive in the hands of Kassker the Grim, and we know precisely where he is to be found—the very castle—the very doorway by which entry can be made—the actual dungeon in which he lies. All this is known to us. When ye have been chosen by Fate, then will directions be imparted."

"We are ready—and willing!" declared Nelson Lee.

"Thou art of a brave heart," said Princess Mercia. "But hast thou an inkling of the



The schoolboy adventurers whirled round as they heard a loud clanging—a great metal grille had descended on the gateway, cutting off their only possible means of escape! “By George!” gasped Handforth. “They’ve shut us in!”

peril? Thou and thy companions must land upon Gothland soil, proceed to this castle fortress, and wrest Oswy from his cruel guards. ’Tis a mission that might well cause the stoutest heart to quail. For the enemy will fall upon ye all, and give battle. ’Tis such a risk, indeed, that I have commanded the use of the marked goblets. I wish ye all to have an equal chance of life.”

“That sounds pretty cheerful, your Majesty, but you needn’t worry,” said Lord Dorrimore genially. “Personally, I don’t think these Gothlanders will prove such a handful as you believe. Anyhow, I am ready enough to take a chance—an’ I’m just bubblin’ over with eagerness to have a look at the bottom of this goblet!”

“I don’t believe in the scheme at all, sir,” protested Handforth indignantly. “Where do I come in, anyhow? Why can’t I take the bodyguard into Gothland?” he went on, turning to the princess. “If it comes to that, why can’t a thousand men raid Kassker’s country, and rescue the prince? Wouldn’t that be better than sending twelve innocent people to certain death?”

Ethelbert the Red held up his hand.

“’Twould be fatal,” he declared. “For years have these dogs been preparing for war, and no invading army could survive.”

This was a significant statement, indeed. For if an invading army was certain of annihilation, what chance would a mere dozen stand? It was, after all, a matter of proportion. And perhaps this particular dozen would prove stronger, in effective methods, than a thousand Northestrians.

“I am pained by the suspense,” said the princess, rising to her feet. “I bid ye drink, gentlemen—drink to the success of the enterprise, and to the health and safety of Prince Oswy.”

“Hurrah!”

“To the success of the enterprise!”

They all raised their goblets, and drank. The wine was very mild—exactly similar to some they had tasted during the recent feast. One or two members of the party vaguely wondered if there was some trick in this. They had dim suspicions that the wine might possibly be drugged or poisoned.

But these suspicions, after all, were unjust—for the young princess would never have lent herself to such a treacherous deception. To the last drop, the wine was drained, and eager eyes examined the polished metal at the bottom of the cups.

“By glory!” exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. “I’m one of the lucky twelve!”

"Hurrah!" yelled Nipper. "So am I! Guv'nor, what about you?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, there is a cross for me," he said quietly.

"Oh, rats!" said Tommy Watson disgustedly. "I'm out of it!"

"And so am I, blow it!" growled Tregellis-West.

"Fear nothing, brothers, for I shall be going on this mission," said Browne, of the Fifth, as he displayed his own goblet. "Success is assured, since I——"

"Chuck it, Browne!" snapped Stevens. "What about me? I think this is a perfectly rotten idea!"

"Fearful!" said Bob Christine. "I'm out in the cold, too!"

But Umlosi was one of the fateful twelve, and there were three members of the airship's crew also included. It was rather curious how Chance had selected the three fighting leaders of the party—Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Umlosi. There were three other men, but all the rest were boys.

"Stand forward, those who have been selected," commanded Ethelbert the Red.

The twelve stood out, well in advance of the others.

"'Tis well," commented the princess, nodding. "I am glad that so many of ye are men grown. I pray for your safety——"

"I protest, your Majesty," declared Lee earnestly. "I beg leave to utter a strong protest against this procedure."

"What is thy objection?" demanded Ethelbert curtly.

"There are other men here," replied Lee, indicating Captain Waring and the rest of the airship's officers and crew. "Let six of them be substituted for these six boys."

"They have been chosen," said the princess hesitatingly.

"Of course we have, sir!" roared Nipper. "We're going, too!"

"Absolutely!"

"You can't dish us out of it, sir!"

"I urge you to let these boys stand down, and to choose six men in their places," went on Nelson Lee, ignoring the youthful protests. "You have described this mission as one of peril—as one that may possibly lead to death. It is wrong that such young people should be deliberately sent——"

"Oh, chuck it, sir!" shouted Pitt. "We want to go!"

"Yes, rather, Mr. Lee!"

The princess was nonplussed.

"I will grant that thy wish is a reasonable one," she said. "But, strangely enough, the good youths are eager for the enterprise. And if they are so willing, why should I change that which Fate has decided?"

Ethelbert bent, and spoke into her ear.

"Nevertheless, I urge you to reconsider——" began Lee.

"Nay, 'tis over," said the princess, evidently influenced by her adviser's whisper. "The goblets have decided—and 'tis not for me to make any changes. The die is cast."

"Where do I come in, your Majesty?" asked Handforth, striding forward.

"Thou wilt remain in the Royal castle, good Handforth," said the princess softly.

"'Tis thy duty to remain, and to watch over my safety. Is not that the greatest honour of all?"

And she gave him such a look of admiration and affection that Edward Oswald stood there, helpless. Speech left him, and he could only lower his gaze in utter confusion. Somehow those blue eyes of Mercia's always made him feel as nervous as a kitten.



CHAPTER 8.

NELSON LEE'S SUGGESTION!

FIVE minutes later the twelve adventurers were out in the courtyard, and the princess was already being escorted back into

Dunstane, the capital. Edward Oswald Handforth, much against his will, had been obliged to ride at the head of the cavalcade.

Ethelbert the Red, however, remained behind, and a number of the Athelstane soldiers—for each feudal lord had his own guard—were in charge of the twelve captives. Although they had been chosen to go on this mission, they were still treated as prisoners. The rest were again confined within the castle. Their fate would depend upon the success or failure of the rescue trip.

"I bid ye success in this venture, gentlemen," Ethelbert was saying in a grave voice. "With this escort, ye will now be marched to the shore of the lake, where a ship awaits in readiness."

"And what then?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Ye will be taken in this ship to within an hour's row of Gothland," replied Ethelbert. "At that point ye will be transferred into a small boat, and must then proceed alone. If success attends your cause, the ship will be awaiting in the same place upon your return."

"How long will this ship remain at anchor?"

"Full three days."

"Two days and a half too long, old man," said Dorrie cheerfully. "One hour to get to Gothland, another hour or two in the enemy's camp, and then we'll be back again. That's the way I figure it out, anyhow."

"Thou art full of high hope," said Ethelbert wonderingly.

"That's better than bein' gloomy," retorted his lordship.

"Prince Oswy, you say, is imprisoned in Gunmarc Fortress?" asked Nelson Lee. "And this building is to be found two or three miles inland, beyond the small village of Vertilla?"

"'Tis so," agreed the chief adviser. "Danzia, the capital of Gothland, lies some miles further down the lakeside. But it behoves thee to be wary of Hunric Castle, where dwelleth the grim Kassker himself."

"It will be largely a matter of chance," nodded Nelson Lee. "But you may be sure that we shall do our utmost to outwit the wiles of friend Kassker."

"I shall be most interested to meet the gentleman," said Dorrie happily. "Gad, anythin's better than moonin' about day after day! Umlosi, you old chunk of soot, we're out for a fight this time!"

"Wau!" growled Umlosi. "Wondrous words, N'Kose!"

"And we'll show old Kassker something!" declared Reggie Pitt.

"Absolutely!" grinned Archie. "What ho! Tally-O for the good old scrap, as it were! St. Frank's to the rescue, what? Odds battles and skirmishes! Off for the front-line trenches, dash it!"

"Hurrah!"

Ethelbert the Red was amazed at this enthusiasm.

"By St. Guthrie!" he exclaimed, staring. "'Tis strange, indeed! Ye are right merry over the prospect, by my faith! I bid ye success! Out upon this accursed Kassker, for the foul knave he is!"

"Hurrah!"

"Let's get a move on!"

"Exactly what I was goin' to say," remarked Dorrie, nodding. "If we come back with Prince Oswy, we've proved our loyalty, eh? An' all the rest of the fellows will be given full freedom. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"I'faith, sirrah, thou art of a brave spirit!" declared Ethelbert, some of his lethargy knocked out of him. "A murrain take these Gothlanders if they should harm ye!"

The chief adviser was beginning to see that these strangers were of a bold type. Far from being appalled at the prospect of their enterprise, they were eager for it. Even the boys were full of impatience. And Nelson Lee could not help feeling rather pleased with them. They knew the dangers well enough, but they were in no way dismayed.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie listened with very great care while Ethelbert again repeated his directions. The ship would carry them to within an hour's rowing of the Gothlander coast—and by keeping a straight course, they would land in close proximity to the small village of Vertilla. The fortress would then be found a mile or two inland—but, unhappily, Kassker's own castle was within sight. It would be almost impossible to land without the enemy seeing them. This was a problem which the adventurers themselves would have to solve.

There was no darkness in this oasis, so there could be no night raid—no secret landing, followed by an unsuspected dash. The light came from the continuous volcanic fires, and was never dimmed.

And so, soon afterwards, the fated twelve were being marched under escort towards the lake. Their guards were quite friendly, and allowed them to talk as they wished. Their only orders were to see these twelve upon the ship.

"Looks like being a pretty long journey, sir," remarked Dick Hamilton, who was walking beside Nelson Lee. "How long did Ethelbert say? With twenty men at the sweeps, the ship will take nearly six hours, won't it?"

"So we have been informed," replied Lee, frowning. "And then another hour in the small boat. So, at the very best—assuming that we are successful in Gothland—we cannot hope to be back here until fifteen or sixteen hours have passed. It is more likely to be in the neighbourhood of twenty-four."

"Do you think we stand a chance, sir?"

"That's a very difficult question to answer, Nipper," replied Lee. "A similar number of Northestrians would, I am sure, be utterly useless. But we have certain advantages."

"This, for example," remarked Lord Dorrimore.

He had pulled his automatic out of his hip-pocket, and Lee nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "These people of the oasis know nothing of firearms."

"You've got yours handy, old man?" asked Dorrie.

"I have—and I shall not hesitate to use it."

"Rather a pity about old Umlosi's spear," said Dorrie. "The old beggar left it behind when we were hauled out of the airship. Gad! It seems an age since we left civilised surroundings! Which reminds me!" he added, with a start. "I wonder if there's any chance of gettin' near the airship, an' baggin' a pocketful of cigarettes?"

"They'd be jolly useful, sir," urged Reggie Pitt. "These people might be scared at the very sight—they'd think you were on fire! Look what happened in the old days, when Sir Walter Raleigh first introduced smoking!"

"There's no need to make any detour, anyhow," said Lee, as they reached the top of a rise. "For there's the poor old Titan now—exactly as we last saw her."

"By Jove, yes!"

"Good old Titan!"

"Doesn't she look forlorn!"

Gazing down into the neighbouring valley, they could see the great airship. She had crashed in that spot, and nothing had been touched since that fateful minute. Indeed, the Northestrians had been reluctant to go near that sprawling mass of gleaming girders and torn fabric. They looked upon the airship as something beyond their ken—and there had been no swarms of curio hunters and souvenir fiends. Lee had feared that the cabins would be rifled, and that similar activities would have been afoot. But no. The wreckage of the Titan was strewn there as though it had only been left an hour since.

Even the two whippet aeroplanes were standing on the grass just as they had been pulled clear by the airship men. These two little single-seater 'planes were quite intact, and ready to fly at a minute's notice, if necessary. And there was plenty of fuel, too—for the tanks of the great airship had come to no harm, and were over three-quarters full of the precious spirit.

But until this minute the voyagers had had no chance of going near the vessel again. And even now they were under escort, and far from being their own masters. Dorrie's eyes, however, were sparkling.

"Who's leader of this bunch?" he asked briskly. "Hang it, it would be a sin to walk right by this—without grabbing a few smokes! Besides, I want some more shells for my automatic. And there's Umlosi's spear."

"Hold on, old man—hold on," interrupted Lee, his eyes gleaming. "I've got a better idea. What about the motor-boat?"

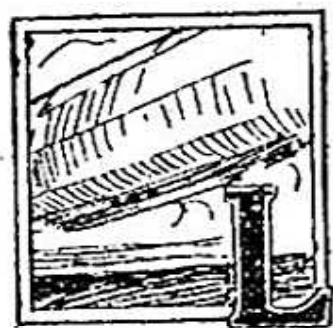
"Eh?"

"She could do that trip across the lake in less than an hour," went on Lee tensely. "That would make a bit of difference to our schedule, wouldn't it?"

"By the Lord Harry!" said Dorrie. "Just a little!"

"There are other advantages, too," said Lee. "It might aid our cause in many ways. The very sight of such a craft would cause consternation——"

"She's got a machine-gun on her, too!" interrupted Lord Dorrimore. "Lee, old man, it's a brainwave! This trip into Gothland is goin' to be a genuine rip-roarin' picnic!"



CHAPTER 9.

NOT SO EASY!

LORD DORRIMORE had provided for almost any contingency when he had given orders for equipping the ill-fated airship. For there were not only the handy little aeroplanes, but a stout motor-boat, with a powerful racing engine. These had been slung on the underside of the great aircraft. All, too, were provided with small but efficient machine-guns.

And in the airship's great cabins—in the store-rooms—were rifles, ammunition, and all manner of warlike material. Notwithstanding the peaceful nature of the airship's mission (for she had merely set out from England to search the Polar regions for a lost explorer), Dorrie had prepared himself for every kind of eventuality.

As he had said, there wasn't one chance in a thousand that machine-guns or revolvers or bombs would be wanted. But an airship might possibly get adrift, and come down in some wild quarter of the earth. And it wouldn't be much good wishing for weapons then. So as there was plenty of space on the giant craft, what harm could there be in taking a few war materials along?

People had smiled at the millionaire peer at the time, but Dorrie was thankful, indeed, that he had insisted. For now, with this raid into Gothland afoot, some of those weapons might prove fairly useful!

"The motor-boat's the thing!" said Nipper enthusiastically. "By Jove, guv'nor, it's a stunning idea! A machine-gun, too! And

what about rifles? Can't we all be armed? Why, we could make a raid——"

"Exactly," interrupted Lee. "The perils of this mission will be tremendously lessened if we can obtain the supplies we need. Captain!" he added loudly. "Hi! Who is in command of this escort? A word, good friend!"

A man at the head of the column looked round, and a halt was called.

"We would regard it as a favour if we were allowed to visit the airship yonder," said Lee, pointing, as the man came up. "Instead of using the ship which Ethelbert the Red has provided, we would desire to use our own."

The man gazed, and then shook his head.

"'Tis impossible," he replied firmly.

"I don't mean the great ship of the air, but a boat by which we can cross the lake," explained Lee, speaking deliberately. "It is much smaller than your own ship, but considerably faster. It will aid our quest if you will allow us to fetch this boat, and if you will order it to be conveyed to the water."

The man looked very dubious.

"In faith, I would like to please thee, good friend, but 'tis more than I dare do," he replied. "I have my orders from my lord, and 'twould go ill with me should I disregard them."

"Hang it, you want us to rescue Prince Oswy, don't you?" demanded Dorrie.

"'Tis the dearest wish of all Northestria that the young prince should be restored to us," replied the man. "But I fear me that I am unable——"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Lord Dorrimore gruffly. "We want that boat, an' we want some other things from the wreckage, too. We've been chosen to go into Gothland, an' to rescue Prince Oswy. So I rather think it's up to us to chose our own methods. What difference does it make to you, anyhow?"

The man was looking rather bewildered.

"We will take the responsibility," went on Nelson Lee. "Our only desire is to bring success to our venture. Let us travel in our own boat. An order from you will be sufficient."

"I grant thee the truth of thy words—but 'tis more than I dare," replied the man, shaking his head. "By the bones of Offa, I believe thee, good friend, and would grant thy wish. But 'tis not in my power."

"What is your name?"

"I am known as Egburt the Fair," replied the officer.

"Then, Egburt the Fair, grant us this, at least," said Lee crisply. "Dispatch a man forthwith to your lord, and acquaint him with our wishes. Perhaps he will grant the request which you, yourself, are afraid to——"

"Nay, 'tis impossible," interrupted Egburt the Fair stubbornly. "My orders are to march ye all to the lakeside, and to see ye safely placed upon the waiting ship. Did

I ought else, 'twould be hard with me. My great lord is a man who demands obedience, and I am powerless to listen further."

"But, look here——"

"I must give orders to march, and if ye are wise, ye will obey," interrupted the man grimly. "Let us remain friends, I pray ye!"

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore exchanged rather helpless glances, and the other members of the party were equally dismayed. It seemed that nothing could be done. This man had received orders from his master, and he was afraid to depart from them. It seemed that the great idea was to come to nothing, after all.

But the position was not quite so hopeless as it appeared.

For, in the meantime, Handforth the Bold had been getting into one of his most aggressive moods, and that generally meant action of some kind. When the celebrated Edward Oswald really got going, things happened rapidly.

True to his trust, he had escorted the princess back to the Royal castle. This was his duty, and he had performed it without question. But during those three or four miles along the country road and into the city he had literally fumed.

Twelve of the party had been selected to go into Gothland, and he, Handforth, had been coolly left out of the fun! A thing of this sort was simply too ridiculous for words. It wasn't to be stood.

And after the princess' carriage had rumbled over the drawbridge, and after the fair Mercia had made her way into the castle, Handforth withdrew his guards and stormed into his own quarters. He gathered Church and McClure and Willy about him, and glared at them with all his old power.

"Well?" he snapped. "What about it?"

"Something," said Willy, "has got to be done."

"Glad you know it!" retorted his major. "Something has got to be done! By George, are we going to allow those others to raid Gothland without us?"

"Never!" said Willy promptly.

"It's all very well to talk like this, but what the dickens can we do?" put in Church. "In any case, aren't we pretty lucky? I'm sorry for those poor chaps, if you ask me——"

"Sorry for them!" howled Handforth. "Why, you—you fathead! You doddering lunatic! They're having all the luck, and we're left in the lurch! We've got to get permission to follow 'em up, and to go on that ship!"

Willy looked thoughtful.

"It may be a good idea, but I've got a better one," he said. "Why trouble about asking for permission? It's too much of a risk, old son. Much easier to ride off and say nothing. Old Ethelbert the Rabbit-hearted might have too much to say if we asked for permission."

Handforth had been thinking of this idea himself, but since Willy had mooted it, he naturally put his foot down on the thing at once.

"Not likely!" he snapped. "I'm not going to do anything against the princess' orders! I'm going to her now, and I mean to get her sanction!"

"It's taking a big chance," said Willy dubiously. "Far better let me go, old man. Tact is required here, not bull-headedness. I'll twist the princess round my little finger in half a minute——"

But Handforth, without waiting for his minor to finish, turned on his heel and rushed away. He went into the castle, and although several courtiers attempted to stop him, he charged through the lot of them and made straight for Princess Mercia's private quarters.

"Hallo, here's Ted!" exclaimed an eager voice as he burst through into an inner apartment. "He'll be able to tell us the news!"

Irene & Co. surrounded him, all of them excited and anxious.

"Where's the princess?" demanded Handforth feverishly.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Doris. "Did you hear that, Renie? He's after the princess again—and he's bragging about it openly. This is becoming altogether too thick! Ted, we can't allow it!"

"I'm sure I don't mind," said Irene indifferently.

Handforth looked at her in agony.

"Oh, I say, cheese it, Irene!" he protested. "What's all this rot about me running after the princess? I've come here on business——"

"That's what they all say!" put in Winnie severely.

"But—but those twelve chaps have been sent off into Gothland to rescue Prince Oswy," roared Handforth. "And I'm left out of it! Me, mark you! I've been ordered to stay behind—and I'm not having any!"

He was in such an aggressive mood that he did not even wait to hear what they said, and he committed the unpardonable sin of thrusting himself unannounced into the presence of the fair princess.



CHAPTER 10.

HANDFORTH ON THE JOB.

HERE was one factor in Handforth's favour.

Princess Mercia was alone, for Ethelbert the Red had not yet returned from Athelstane Castle, and although Handforth had broken all the etiquette of the court, the young princess forgave him, not, however, without a pretence of severity.

"Hold!" she exclaimed frigidly. "What

is this? Thou wretch! Knowest thou no better than to enter my presence so boisterously?"

"I beg your pardon, your Majesty!" gasped Handforth, as he pulled up, flustered. "But I've come here to ask for your permission. I want to go into Gothland with the others."

The girl's manner changed.

"I will overlook thy rashness, bold youth," she said softly. "But as for this other thing—as for granting thee permission to go upon a death journey, I must refuse."

"Then—then you mean that you've sent all those others to their death?" asked Handforth accusingly. "You've deliberately sent them there to die!"

"They were eager for the adventure," said the princess, rather overpowered by his vehemence. "And 'twas not my scheme, bold Handforth. 'Twas Ethelbert's plan, and I will tell thee that mine own inclinations were against it."

"Oh, well, it's too late now, anyhow," said Handforth. "That's not the point, either. I want to go, your Majesty; and if they are willing to die for you, so am I!" he added, striking an attitude. "It will be an honour, your Majesty."

She looked at him in wonder.

"Thy bravery is wondrous indeed," she murmured tenderly. "Come hither, fair youth."

"Oh, corks!" gasped Handforth, turning pale.

"I cannot let thee go, my sweet Handforth," murmured Mercia softly. "Thou art here to protect me. 'Tis thy duty to remain as captain of my bodyguard."

For a moment Handforth was in grave danger of succumbing. To his utter alarm, he knew that the lovely Mercia was "soft" about him. In a word, she was practically vamping him in her own gentle, innocent way. And the unhappy Edward Oswald was almost struck dumb with apprehension. In fact, the situation was so perilous that he backed away and flung up a hand.

"Let me go into Gothland to help in the rescue of Prince Oswy!" he thundered. "There is no danger here, your Majesty! Am I to remain idle and useless while those others brave dangers for your sake? Let me brave them, too! I demand it as a right—for Prince Oswy is your brother!"

The young princess looked at him with glowing eyes.

"Thou art right!" she cried. "Go! Thou wilt take success with thee, for thy boldness hath been proven—thy bravery is a byword in Northestria. In faith, I was wrong to refuse thee before!"

"By George, you're a brick!" yelled Handforth. "Then it's O.K.? Good egg!"

The startled princess was nearly bowled over as Handforth rushed up to her, seized her hand, and shook it with vigour. This sort of thing wasn't quite in accordance with the etiquette of the court. But in another moment Handforth had rushed out, and

Irene & Co. had no chance of speaking to him, for he had vanished before they could even look round.

He tore into the quarters of the bodyguard, and let out a whoop as Willy and Church and McClure surrounded him.

"It's all right!" he yelled. "I've got permission!"

"Miracles aren't things of the past, after all, then," said Willy staring. "How in the name of marvellous did you do it, Ted?"

"None of your cheek!" snapped Handforth. "Where's Wynwed the Jovial? Up, the guard! Rally round, blow you!"

"You're not taking the whole bodyguard, are you?" asked Church, aghast.

"Only as far as the lake," replied Edward Oswald swiftly. "We might as well go in style. But as soon as we get to the ship I shall send the bodyguard back. And I think I'll send you back with 'em, young Willy! This isn't any sort of picnic for kids!"

Willy grinned.

"I've always heard that dotty people had delusions," he said calmly. "Think again, Ted! Why, if you tried to stop me—"

But his major didn't wait to listen. He was running about, yelling out his orders, and the members of the bodyguard were startled into sudden activity. Wynwed the Jovial was exceedingly flustered.

"By my bones, but art thou mad?" he growled. "'Tis time for food, good Handforth! What is this confusion? Have we not done enough for one day?"

Handforth gasped.

"You—you lazy rotter!" he roared. "You do an hour's work, and think you've finished! Order out the full bodyguard!"

"A murrain take thee!" vowed Wynwed. "I'll do no such thing—"

"Who's captain?" thundered Edward Oswald.

"'Tis thyself—"

"Then don't argue," interrupted Handforth. "I'm captain, and I'm going to be obeyed! Horses! Look sharp! Saddle them, and get all the men out in double quick time. They're my orders—and I don't want any rot!"

There was something rather comic in the picture of this mere schoolboy ordering such men about. But these Northestrians were a sluggish, lackadaisical lot, and the ram-headed St. Frank's junior was like a bullock among a crowd of sheep. They were too flustered and startled to question his orders.

Handforth was anxious, too.

He was afraid that the princess would change her mind, and recall him. Indeed, she was certain to do so if Ethelbert the Red returned. It was only his absence which had caused the princess to be so ready to give way.

Handforth meant to seize his chance now, and the sooner he was off, the better. Within twenty minutes, three-quarters of the men of the bodyguard were on their horses, and

Handforth was at their head, impatient and eager to be off. Wynwed the Jovial was slowly recovering.

"By my soul, there is no need for this fuss and fluster!" he protested. "Thy friends are being marched afoot, and are yet not half-way to the lake. 'Twill be better if we take our time——"

"I'm giving orders, and I'm going to be obeyed!" interrupted Handforth. "I like you, Wynwed, old man, but you've got one bad fault—you're too jolly lazy! Action is what we want—and plenty of it! It's high time that you Northeistriians woke up. You've been asleep for centuries, and you ought to be refreshed by this time. Anyhow, I'll show you some briskness!"

Wynwed heaved a fat sigh.

"Marry, but thou art beyond me!" he said.

And all the other members of the bodyguard were of the same opinion. They simply couldn't understand a fellow who deliberately went out of his way to rush about on horseback when there was a chance of idling within the castle grounds. The fact was, the bodyguard had had an easy time of it for so long that they hardly knew what discipline meant, and hard work was foreign to them.

But Edward Oswald was rapidly having a bombshell effect. It was useless to argue with him. When he gave his orders, they had to be obeyed, and nothing could alter the fact that he had been appointed commander by the princess herself.

And at last the bodyguard thundered out of the courtyard and galloped noisily over the drawbridge. A hundred strong, they made a stirring picture with their chain-mail, their accoutrements, and their decorated steeds.

"Lead the way to the road that the other party is taking!" shouted Handforth, as he galloped beside Wynwed. "The same road, remember! I want to overtake them before they get to the lake!"

Wynwed had no thought of disagreeing. He had found that it was better, in the long run, to let this arrogant young captain have his own way. Indeed, it was the only method of obtaining any peace.

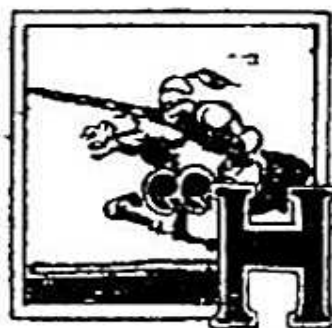
And so it chanced that Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore did not find it necessary to lay forcible hands upon Egburt the Fair. They had been seriously considering this drastic measure after the man's stubborn refusal to listen to their wishes. He remained obdurate, and ordered the entire procession to march.

It was at this moment that a cloud of dust appeared on the summit of a neighbouring hill. And a large body of soldiers, galloping hard, came into view. The sight was so unexpected that everybody stared.

"Handforth, I'll be bound," muttered Lee quickly.

"In that case, we may be all right even now," smiled Dorrie. "Upon my word, Lee,

there's somethin' pretty inspirin' about this Handforth youngster! He may be a bit of a blunderer, and several kinds of an ass, but, by gad, he's a beggar for action!"



CHAPTER 11.

GETTING A MOVE ON.

ALT!"

Handforth roared out the order, and there was a note of gloating satisfaction in his voice. The bodyguard pulled up on the rough road, a few paces from the foot soldiers. And Egburt the Fair looked on with a rather startled expression in his eyes.

He was not accustomed to seeing such boisterous activity as this. Life had always been so quiet and uneventful in Northestria. Even the bodyguard's horses were looking as flustered as horses could look. Galloping was an unusual exercise for them—and for this reason, perhaps, they had enjoyed it the more.

"What's the idea?" shouted Handforth, as he rode up alongside the others. "You're pretty slow, aren't you? I thought you'd be half-way across the lake by now!"

"You've just come in time, Handy!" said Nipper eagerly.

"In time for what?"

"We want you to gallop to the castle——"

"Oh, do you?" interrupted Handforth coldly. "Well, you've made a bloomer! I've come along to join you! I'm going on this expedition into Gothland, and don't you forget it! Thought I was going to be left out in the cold, didn't you?"

"Thou art coming, thou warrior?" shouted Umlosi.

"Yes, rather!"

"Wau, N'Kose, this is good news!" exclaimed the African. "The young white master is of the type we need. He is a wondrous fighter, and——"

"Just a minute, Umlosi," said Nelson Lee. "Handforth, I admire your determined spirit, but there is something you can do for us. Egburt the Fair has declined to let us use our own motor-boat for this adventure. He even refuses to send a messenger to the court——"

"Half a jiffy, sir!" said Handforth. "Who's Egburt the Fair?"

"I am he!" said the man, standing forward.

"Then, Egburt the Fair, you can go and eat coke!" said Handforth curtly.

"Thy words are of a strange character——"

"And my actions will be stranger, my lad!" said Edward Oswald. "I'll biff you one on the nose if you start any of your rot! I'm boss here! Understand? B-O-double S—Boss! I'm captain of the bodyguard, and if you want to challenge my authority, just say so!"

Egburt the Fair was taken aback.

"I am but obeying orders——"

"That's all right, then—I'm in charge now," said Handforth. "So you can take the rest of your orders from me. I'm here by her Majesty's command. So you'd better look out!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Handy!"

"What ho! Absolutely in the nick of time, dash it!"

Handforth dismounted, and a great deal of his arrogance vanished as he glanced at Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore. He instinctively felt that it was hardly the thing to use the same tone to them—although, without any question, he was in supreme command here, and could do practically as he liked.

"Sorry, sir," he said apologetically. "But it's the only way to treat these chaps, you know. They're walking about as though they'd been drugged—half-dead, you know. You can't make 'em move unless you yell."

"Gad, I wonder you're still alive!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Why don't these men pounce on you, Handy, and simply destroy you? Imagine it! A junior schoolboy bully in a crowd of soldiers!"

"And yet it isn't so remarkable, after all," said Nelson Lee. "Age doesn't count in an affair like this, Dorrie. It's a case of a strong personality triumphing over a lot of sleepy-heads. Well, Handforth, you have certainly come at a most opportune time."

In a few words he explained what was required.

"And a jolly good idea, too, sir," said Handforth eagerly. "By George! You mean, go in our own motor-boat, instead of using this slow old tub of a Northestrian ship? It's as good as done, sir."

"Can you make these men obey your orders?" asked Dorrie wonderingly.

"Just watch me!" said Handforth.

"Wait a minute, young 'un," said his lordship. "These fellows belong to Athelstane Castle——"

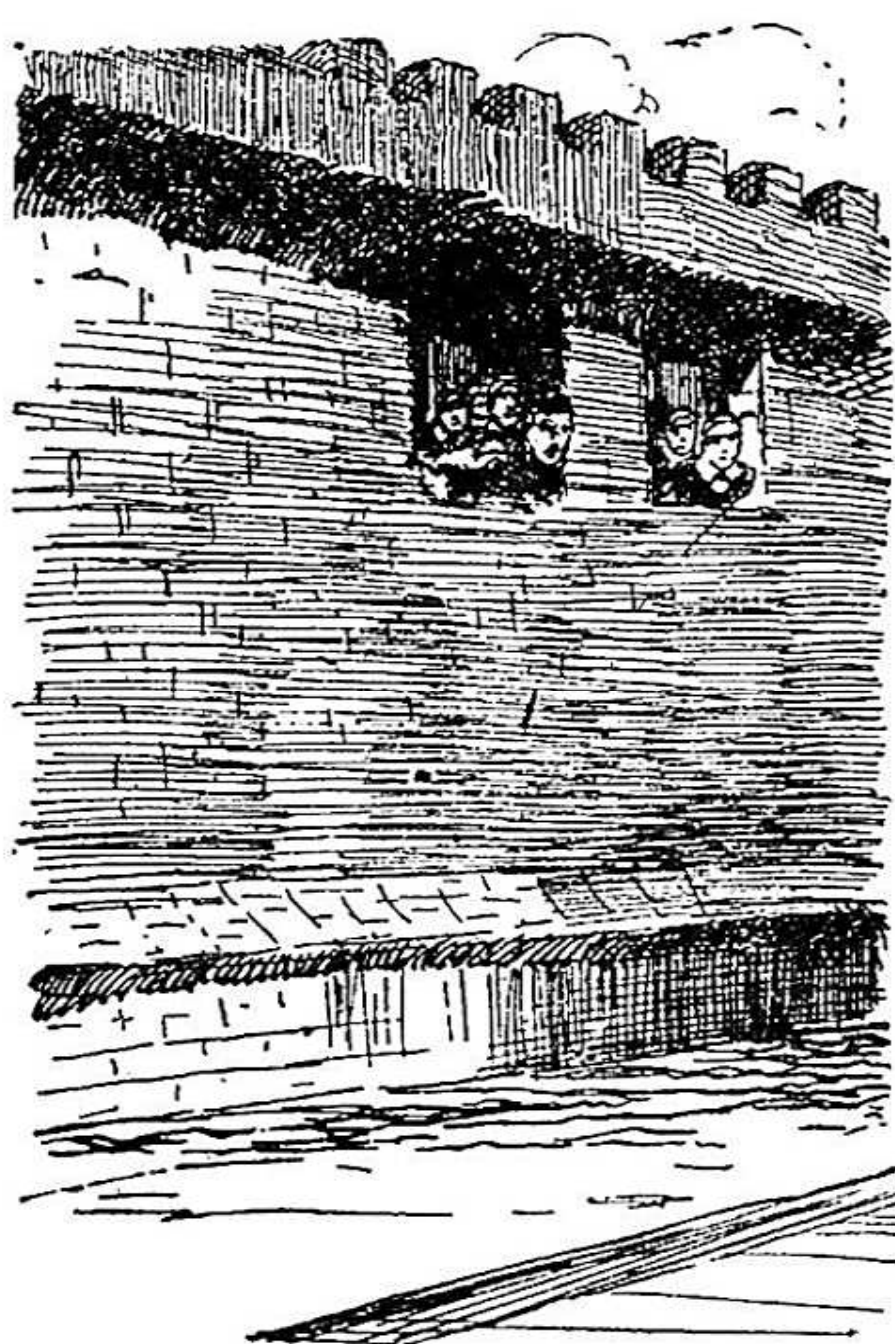
"That doesn't make any difference, sir—they're all lower than I am, when it comes to a question of authority," said Handforth. "I'm the commander of the Royal bodyguard—and that's the highest military force in the country! They daren't try any tricks with me!"

He turned, and strode up to Egburt the Fair, who was looking very doubtful and worried.

"This matter is now in my hands, old son," he said genially. "You can withdraw your escort, and trot back to your quarters and have a nice afternoon nap."

"My orders are to convey the captives—thy friends—to the waiting ship——" began Egburt.

"That's all right—I'll see to it," interrupted Handforth briskly. "Get thee hence, varlet, and go and chop chips! In other words, vamoose! Or, if you want it in plain English—bunk! From this minute, I'm in full command, but if you like to hang about



Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore joined the boys at the windows overlooking the moat and, galloping across the ancient drawbridge, they saw—

with your escort, looking on, that's your affair."

"'Tis a strange youth thou art, by my faith!" muttered Egburt.

But he knew that Handforth was the princess' favourite. Every soldier knew it, in fact—and none dared to disobey. For it would be a foolish thing, indeed, to ignore Handforth. With such power as he possessed, he could make things very unpleasant if he chose to complain to the fair princess.

"All right, that's settled, then," said Edward Oswald, with a nod. "As for the boat, we'll have her detached from the airship, Mr. Lee—and I'll get my men to carry it down to the water. It's a good job I brought the whole bodyguard."

Within a very few minutes, feverish preparations were afoot. It was Nelson Lee who suggested the orders, and Handforth who gave them.

The whole body of men entered the valley, and approached the wrecked airship. They were reluctant to do so at first, for they regarded this great mass of strange material with suspicion.

However, there was no question of mutiny. Orders had to be obeyed, and many hands helped to detach the motor-boat, and place it on the ground.

It was no light task, either.

The huge body of the airship was lying half on her side, and the motor-boat had



—Edward Oswald Handforth, in gleaming armour, mounted on a charger and leading a cavalcade of the Princess' Bodyguard. It was an impressive spectacle, reminiscent of the romantic Middle Ages.

been clamped securely to the hull. It was a ticklish operation to get it down, and a full hour had elapsed before the task was satisfactorily completed. Small as the motor-boat had looked when attached to the airship, she now revealed herself as a craft of considerable size, when on the ground.

Two of the chosen twelve were engineers belonging to the airship, and they lost no time in getting busy with the motor-boat's engine, examining every vital part. Petrol was obtained from the main tanks, and a full supply was taken on board.

In the meantime, Lord Dorrimore had made a bee-line for the half-wrecked passenger quarters. The saloon, the lounge, and the state-rooms were all grouped in the very centre of the giant aircraft, and in the crash they had come off lightly. It was the stern of the dirigible which had crumpled up and reduced itself into a mass of twisted girders and torn fabric. The rest was battered, but by no means destroyed.

And Dorrie, climbing through one of the saloon windows, looked round eagerly. Nelson Lee had followed him.

"By glory, I'm all for this mediæval stuff, but it does my old heart good to see something modern again," said his lordship, as he gingerly picked his way across the saloon, and rescued a whisky decanter. "Here we

are, old man—soda, too! What price a little tot?"

"Please yourself, Dorrie—I'm after something more important than a drink," replied Nelson Lee. "We're setting out on a desperate mission, and we need ammunition—and other requirements of a similar character. I'll join you in a drink when we come back."

His lordship sighed.

"Well, there's no need to tell me off quite so bluntly," he protested. "You're right about the drink, but I'm hanged if I'll deprive myself of a smoke! By the Lord Harry! Coronas, old man! You simply can't refuse one!"

He lovingly grasped a box of cigars, and Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Later on, Dorrie," he said. "There's no time to smoke now."

"Well I'm hanged!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore blankly.



CHAPTER 12.

SURPRISING THE NATIVES!

NELSON LEE hurried off along the main corridor, and Lord Dorrimore was left to himself.

The airship had settled down with a decided list to starboard, and all

the floors, in consequence, were at a sharp angle, and walking was rather difficult. Not that Dorrie minded this—for he wasn't walking. He leaned against the built-in sideboard, and lit up.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" he murmured dreamily.

The first few puffs of that cigar were sheer joy, and Dorrie forgot all else in the ecstasy of the moment. Then he pulled himself together, and went on a hunt for further supplies. He wasn't going to be left smokeless again!

And presently, when he emerged into the open, he carried a huge bundle with him—cigars, tobacco, and cigarettes. Many shouts arose from the Northestrian soldiers as Dorrie appeared.

"What mystery is this?" gasped Wynwed the Jovial. "By St. Attalus! The man is afire! The smoke doth appear from his very mouth!"

"He is bewitched!"

"Water! Fling water——"

"Dry up!" said Handforth, looking round. "It's only Dorrie—he's having a cigar. Oh, I'd forgotten!" he added, with a grin. "You people don't smoke, do you? Oh, well, you'll soon get used to it!"

"'Tis a madness!" muttered Egburt the Fair.

And all the other soldiers were of the same opinion—and so, if it came to that, was Nelson Lee.

"Dorrie, you ought to be horsewhipped!" he said severely. "I had no idea you actually meant it when you offered me a cigar."

"My dear old man, where's the harm?" asked Dorrie blankly.

"This is an airship!" retorted Lee. "And it's still half-full of gas!"

"By glory!" breathed his lordship, throwing the cigar upon the ground, and stamping on it. "I ought to be horsewhipped, eh? You're wrong, Lee. I deserve penal servitude for life! I was so keen on a smoke that I'd forgotten the usual precautions. What's all that stuff you've got there?" he added.

"It's something that may come in useful—and there will be plenty of work for us during our journey across the lake," replied Nelson Lee.

Handforth came bustling up.

"All ready now, sir?" he asked. "The engineers report that the motor-boat is fit, and some of my men are getting restive. The sooner we're off, the better. The fact is, I'm afraid old Ethelbert might come nosing about, and we don't want to take any chances."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You're quite right, Handforth," he replied. "We'll move."

Following Handforth's orders, a great crowd of his men lifted the boat, and hoisted it upon their shoulders. With so many men,

the task of carrying the motor-boat was a simple one.

And so, in due course, it was carried straight down to the waters of the lake, and launched. This lake was smooth and peaceful, with scarcely a ripple upon its limpid surface. A short distance away, and a hundred yards from the shore, a fairly big ship was anchored—a quaint vessel with a high stern. Great sweeps were standing out from it, with men ready at them.

But this vessel was not needed now.

For the modern motor-boat was a much handier craft for the purpose in view. With its powerful racing-type engine, it was capable of forty or fifty miles an hour, and would be able to cross this inland sea in less than an hour.

"By Jove, doesn't it look different now?" remarked Nipper, as he stood on the beach, gazing out over the water. "The last time we saw this lake was from the airship, as we were gliding over it. We saw it from a height of thousands of feet, too. The view from the ground level is totally different."

They seemed to be standing upon the beach of a genuine sea, for the water stretched away into the crystal distance as far as the eye could see. Dimly visible on the horizon were one or two rocks, but these did not denote the opposite shore, but merely a group of small islands.

There were throngs of people there on the beach—crowds who had come down to see the departure of this ship, with its twelve adventurers. By this time, most of the inhabitants of Dunstane had got word of the princess' decree, and those natives who had enough energy had brought themselves to the beach to witness the start.

They saw something they had never expected to see!

Nelson Lee was in command now, although Handforth tried to maintain his authority for the edification of the general public. But it was Lee who ordered them all into the boat, and it was Lee who gave the engineers the word to start the powerful motor.

Handforth had already instructed Wynwed the Jovial to take the bodyguard back to the castle at once. He had added that he would see Wynwed again within an hour or so. Handforth was a great optimist.

And now the boat was ready for departure. It contained sixteen souls—for Handforth & Co. and Willy had now been added to the original twelve. Not a single Northestrian was taken, for such an inclusion was unnecessary. Nelson Lee had very careful instructions, and he knew exactly what landmarks to look for on the Gothland shore.

"Right away, guard!" said Dorrie cheerily, as the powerful engine roared into life.

Within a second it was creating a terrific din from the open exhausts. The engineer had deliberately opened the cut-outs, and the motor was running sweetly and powerfully—tuned up to perfection.

Shouts of consternation arose from hundreds of throats. A craft that made a noise like this was a novelty, indeed! But the

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consternation changed rapidly to bewilderment and amazement. For the motor-boat sped off with a triumphant roar, leaving a bluish trail of smoke behind it.

Round she swung, and raced alongside the shore for a matter of two or three hundred yards. And the Northestrians, civilians and soldiers alike, stared, and then fled with one accord.

These strangers were in league with witches and demons!

"What ho!" grinned Archie Glenthorne. "The absolute stuff to whack out to the good old troops, what? I mean to say, observe the populace, laddies!"

"They've had the shock of their lives!" chuckled Reggie Pitt.

"They'll have a bigger shock when we come back, bringing Prince Oswy with us," declared Dick. "Somehow, you fellows, I've got an idea that we're going to be successful. I expect we shall have to fight for it, but we'll win."

"Rather!"

"St. Frank's for ever!"

"Hurrah!"

"Not so much crowin', my lads," said Lord Dorrimore. "It's never wise to count one's chickens before they're hatched. I seem to have heard somethin' to that effect before, anyhow."

Handforth was looking supremely happy.

"It's a cert, sir," he declared. "If those Northestrian people were ready to bolt just because we started off in this motor-boat, what are the Gothlanders going to do when they see us arriving? It'll be as easy as falling off a form, sir."

"I'd like to believe you, Handforth," smiled Nelson Lee. "But, by all accounts, the Kassker tribe is of a somewhat more aggressive breed than our gentle friends, the Northestrians. We must take nothing for granted—and we must make every preparation we can. There's work for all of us during this brief voyage. Remember, we're not on this lake for pleasure."

"Well, it's better than being in that slow old tub they'd prepared for us, sir," said Reggie Pitt. "We've got to thank Handy for all this, too. Who in the world would have thought that he could be so useful?"

"Wonders," said Dorrie, "will never cease."

"Well, I like that!" began Handforth indignantly.

"I was only chippin' you, old man," chuckled his lordship. "But I say, Lee, we're a pair of pie-cans, aren't we?"

"If you are speaking for yourself——"

"Why didn't we think of usin' one of the aeroplanes?" went on Dorrie. "They're just as ready to take the air as this craft was to take the water."

"I did think of the aeroplanes," said Lee quietly. "But you must remember that this is a test for us, Dorrie. We are on trial, as it were. It would hardly have been fair if we had resorted to such methods. We have been chosen to raid Gothland—all of us. So, in order to prove our worth, we must all go.

If only we can rescue the young prince, our standing in Northestria will be established. It's worth the trouble, Dorrie—and I am beginning to think that we shall stand a good chance of success. This motor-boat makes all the difference. We've just got to come back with Prince Oswy."

"Hear, hear, sir!"

"And, to tell the truth, I'm rather keen on this visit to Gothland, too," went on Nelson Lee. "So far, we have only heard the Northestrians' story. I want to see Kassker's subjects with my own eyes, and then I can form a much better judgment of the true position."

And then Lee suggested many active preparations, and while Lord Dorrimore contentedly sat at the wheel of the speeding motor-boat, the others worked.



CHAPTER 13.

KASSKER THE GRIM!

HUNRIC CASTLE was a great, forbidding pile of stone, with towering battlements and grim-looking walls. It stood some distance inland, on the Gothland shore, but commanded a clear, uninterrupted view of the great lake.

Not far down the shore nestled the little village of Vertilla, with its quaint houses, and with forests descending almost to the water's edge. There was a river here, too. It was only a small one, but it penetrated inland, and the current was fairly strong as the water came tumbling down from the hills.

The entire Gothland landscape was very similar to that of Northestria. The feudal castles were of precisely the same type; the towns and villages were the same, too. But, somehow, Gothland lacked the neatness and clean-looking aspect of its rival country.

The language was the same over here. Both races spoke the same tongue, and this, of course, was only natural. Many, many centuries had elapsed since the ancestors of Kassker's subjects had been trapped in this mysterious oasis of the Arctic. These people were descendants of the ancient Goths, and the blood was still comparatively pure.

For when the forbears of the Northestrians had arrived—Anglo-Saxons all—these Goths had been a kind of wild, savage tribe. And for centuries they had been held in bondage—serfs and slaves. Intermarriage had been strictly forbidden, for the Goths were looked upon as a low-grade race.

And so this surprising little community had developed. Hundreds of years earlier the Goths had been cast out by their masters after revolts and rebellions. They had been banished to the other side of the oasis. And here they had developed and multiplied, becoming stronger and stronger as the years had gone on.

And at last they had become a rival race—speaking the same language, and with the

same customs, and using all the ideas of their former masters. Commerce had even been established, and for many years peaceful trading had gone on.

But then, with the advent of the ambitious Kassker, an arrogant spirit had arisen in Gothland, and the airship party had apparently arrived at a critical period—when Kassker was almost ready to declare war upon his unprepared rivals.

Trading relations had already been stopped, and the Northeistrians knew of what might come. But their inborn lethargy was such that they made no efforts to protect themselves. The Gothlanders were regarded as inferior beings. They were held in contempt. What was there to fear from such savages?

That was the general spirit in Northeistria—the root cause of the present unpreparedness. The Princess Mercia had something to do with it, perhaps, too. Just when the people needed a strong, vigorous ruler, they had this gentle princess, guided by the dull, deliberate, slow-minded Ethelbert the Red.

With no actual leader, the country's sleepiness was hardly surprising. But in Gothland it was very different. For Kassker the Grim was a man of vast power, the absolute lord of life and death. Practically every able-bodied man in Gothland was a soldier. The country was a military camp. For years these preparations had been going on. And although the Gothlanders were far

less in number, taking population for population, Kassker's armies were infinitely superior.

On the battlements of that grim castle there were men on duty. One of them was an officer named Attawulf the Terrible. His name fitted him, for he was a tall, savage-looking brute with fierce, baleful eyes. His features were coarse, and his beard was dark and bushy. He was, indeed, one of Kassker's chief military advisers.

"What is yon moving object?" he growled, as he pulled a sentry to a halt, and pointed out across the water.

The soldier looked, his eyes widening.

"I know not, master," he replied. "'Tis a strange object, by my soul! A thing which moveth with great speed——"

"Ay, and it cometh nigh these shores!" broke in Attawulf, his tone becoming alarmed. "What is't? By my beard! Mayhap 'tis some devilry of those strangers who dwell within the domain of Northeistria! Thou call'st to mind what befel a few days ago, fool?" he added.

"Ay, master, right well I do!" said the man nervously. "Is not all Gothland still talking? A vast thing of the air which did float over our land! I like not the looks of this strange object which moveth so speedily——"

"'Tis connected with those people, by my sword, or I know not what I speak!" muttered Attawulf. "I must acquaint Kassker with this information."

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He hurried down from the battlements and blundered heavily down a flight of circular stone stairs. Once out of the tower, he burst in upon the private chamber of Kassker the Grim.

"Well, knave?" thundered a coarse, enraged voice. "What meaneth this blundering intrusion? Marry, but thy head will pay the penalty——"

"Thy pardon, my lord," panted Attawulf, startled.

"'Tis thine, my good soldier!" interrupted the other. "Well, speak! What meaneth this clumsy entry? Hast news?"

Kassker the Grim was even bigger than Attawulf—a hulking great mass of a man with villainous features, and a vast beard which almost reached his waist. This beard of his was so intensely black that it seemed to possess a bluish tinge. All in all, he was hardly the kind of man one would care to meet on a dark night. His arrogance was patent in every line of his features, in every word of his speech. The lives of men meant nothing to him. He sent them to the chopping-block with utter callousness. The vilest vermin of the earth received better treatment at Kassker's hands than many of his own subjects.

His apartment fitted him, too—a great, untidy barn of a place with a bare floor, and uncouth wooden benches and stools. Rough earthenware plates were on the table, and the remains of a meal. Here was a picture of primitive civilisation indeed.

"Well, Attawulf, art thou dumb?" boomed Kassker.

"A strange thing hath appeared upon the lake, my lord," said Attawulf the Terrible. "Perchance it is caused by the strangers who are within the Northestrian——"

"Let me see!" interrupted Kassker harshly.

He hurried up the stone steps to the battlements and stared out across the waters of the lake. There were other soldiers gazing out, too—many of them below, on the castle walls. All were fascinated by the strange sight which was to be seen. A small and extraordinary craft—a boat which sped through the waters without sweeps or oars, and which created a loud, throbbing noise as it moved. And the speed of it was terrible.

"By the bones of Sarus!" muttered Kassker, with a start. "Thou art right, Attawulf! This is no Northestrian craft. It bringeth some of those dangerous strangers we have heard about."

He swore hard, and Attawulf was looking alarmed. Spies had brought word of Northestria's peculiar visitors—those people who had arrived from the air. And news had come, too, of Handforth's activities, and of the manner in which many of Kassker's men had been captured and flung into dungeons.

"Ay, these bold strangers are like to land upon our soil," continued the overlord of Gothland. "Marry, but I make them welcome!"

"Welcome?" echoed Attawulf, aghast.

"'Twas the word I said."

"But these men are possessed of demons' powers!" exclaimed the other fearfully. "How else could they make this craft rush through the water in this mad way? Kill them, my lord! They are a menace! Beshrew them for the dogs they are!"

Kassker nodded.

"I agree with thee, good Attawulf!" he replied. "But 'tis necessary that we should be cautious. Mayhap these men may have weapons of which we know naught. I have heard strange and wondrous stories concerning them, stories which I ridiculed. But, having seen this, I bethink me that perchance they are true. I must go warily, my Attawulf."

Kassker, it seemed, was craftier than the sleepy Northestrians.

"Go thee hence," he continued, turning to Attawulf the Terrible. "Take men with thee, and bid these strangers welcome. Tell them that Kassker the Grim desireth to greet them with friendly salutes."

"Art mad, my lord?"

"Nay, fool!" roared Kassker. "Obey my orders. Take a hundred men—nay, two hundred. Escort these strangers into the castle. In the meantime, preparations shall be made. Their heads will drop from their shoulders ere an hour hath elapsed!"

"Ah!" breathed Attawulf with relief.

"There shall be no delay!" vowed Kassker the Grim. "The block will be ready—and the axe sharpened! But, first—get these strangers within the gates. Go, Attawulf, and fail at thy peril!"

Kassker, without doubt, was essentially a man of action!



CHAPTER 14.

TRAPPED!

ORD DORRIMORE tossed his cigarette-end away and compressed his lips.

"Well, I don't think much of it," he remarked, as he inspected Hunric Castle through his powerful binoculars. "In my considered opinion, Lee, it's a nasty-looking place."

"Yes, we don't want to find ourselves bottled up behind those walls," agreed Nelson Lee. "And yet we must land in this vicinity, I imagine. There is the village of Vertilla," he went on, pointing. "And the fortress must, therefore, lie inland, and almost immediately ahead of us."

"And that means landing almost beneath the walls of this place, sir," said Nipper. "Well, we're ready for the beggars if they try to attack us. It's rather a pity there's no darkness in this land—it hardly gives us a chance."

"A quick rush, sir, that's the idea," declared Handforth. "I think we ought to dash

straight for the door, and then make a rush for the fortress."

"Exactly!" grinned Church. "Mr. Lee suggested that ten minutes ago, in just the same words."

"Well, it was my idea," said Handforth calmly. "There's some talk about leaving a few of us in charge of the boat. Well, I'm not going to be left here, and that's flat!"

"As I have some regard for those who will be left, I shall take you with me, Handforth," put in Nelson Lee dryly. "I don't want any arguments over this matter, either. Several of you must remain in charge of the boat. I think four will be sufficient. One of you engineers, and three of the boys."

"Which of us, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt anxiously.

"You, Gunby, will be in nominal charge," said Nelson Lee, looking at one of the engineers. "As for the others, in order to save all argument, I will name them—Boots Glenthorne, and De Valerie."

"Oh, sir!" said the three juniors in dismay.

"This may be a little disappointment to you, but this task is every bit as responsible as the actual mission," continued Lee. "At all costs, this boat must be held in readiness. It is possible that we shall make a wild dash for the shore, and the speedy handling of the boat may make all the difference between life and death. Moreover, it must be guarded constantly. There is a machine-gun here, and at all costs the enemy must be held at bay."

"Leave it to us, sir," said Gunby, the engineer.

"A frightfully sad blow, laddies, but Mr. Lee knows best," said Archie philosophically. "My visions of dashing to the rescue are not merely bent, but absolutely shattered, dash it!"

"Orders are orders, and we've got to obey," said De Valerie.

Lord Dorrimore was inspecting his automatic.

"The idea, then, is to make one speedy dash?" he asked cheerfully. "Grab Prince Oswy, scoot back, and snap our fingers at old Kassker? Easy!"

"It may sound easy, but I'm not so sure of it," replied Nelson Lee. "I earnestly hope we can do the trick, Dorrie. If only we can pull it off, and return to Northestria post haste, arriving back within three hours of our departure, old Ethelbert's breath will be fairly taken away. That's what I want to achieve. The quicker we are, the greater will be our triumph. And, by the same token, the greater our triumph, the more certain we shall be of absolute liberty."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll do the trick, sir!"

"Rather, sir!"

Everybody was full of enthusiasm. They were all tired of being held as captives. One swift dash, and they would prove to all the

Northestrians that they were people to be relied upon and trusted. And then, instead of being shut up within a castle, they would be showered with honours.

And it was liberty they needed.

For, without liberty, they were unable to make any experiments with the airship's wireless apparatus. They wanted to communicate with the outside world to get the wireless into working order. But nothing could be done while this present state of affairs lasted. So there would be something more than honour in the balance when they started on this wild dash into the enemy country.

At least, it had been described as an enemy country. Actually, they had had no positive proof of the Gothlanders' hostility. It was just possible that Kassker's people would greet them in a friendly spirit. Why should it be otherwise? What reason would they have to harm them?

Nothing could be known until they were actually ashore, but Nelson Lee was determined to be very cautious. And the period of suspense was not likely to be prolonged, for everything was now ready for the final rush.

The motor-boat shut off her engines and glided towards the beach. And then the twelve adventurers leapt out and waded ashore. They were led by Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Umlosi—and the latter now had his beloved spear. With that in his hand he feared no man, or no hundred men, if it came to that.

"Keep all together!" shouted Lee, as they ran forward. "And if there is any sign of danger, Dorrie and I will make the first move——"

"By the Lord Harry!" shouted Lord Dorrimore. "These beggars don't waste much time, Lee! There's a pretty good sign of danger already! Quick—give us the word! What's to be done?"

They all came to a halt. From a thick belt of trees, two hundred yards ahead, scores of men were appearing on horseback. All were in armour, and all held long, dangerous-looking lances. In front rode a standard-bearer, and the entire body of men looked impressive. They continued to pour out of the forest.

"H'm! We've got to make up our minds swiftly!" muttered Nelson Lee. "I hate giving the order to retreat during the first minute of our——"

"Hold on!" said Nipper. "They're friendly, sir."

"By jingo, so they are!" exclaimed Church.

"Look!"

All the horsemen in armour were holding up their right hands in token of salute. There was no sign of hostility. The Gothlanders swept up in stately formation, but they proved to be a grim-looking body of men.



As the bullet from Lee's automatic tore through Kassker's armour, the Overlord of the Gothlanders uttered a scream of agony, his injured arm dropping limply by his side. "By my marrow! What is this?" he snarled, startled and mystified.

They had none of the peaceful, gentle appearance of the Northeistriars.

"We'll see it through!" muttered Lee. "In any case, it is too late to retreat."

It was, indeed.

Even Nelson Lee had not suspected the abrupt appearance of so many soldiers. It was clear enough that they had been waiting, hiding in the shelter of the woods until the party should land. And now they had swept out without a second's warning.

"Welcome!" shouted Attawulf the Terrible in cordial tones.

He was riding in advance of his men, and as he came up he repeated his salute, and he did his utmost to look pleasant. But Nature had given him such repulsive features that this was hardly possible.

"Welcome, good strangers!" he said as he drew rein, and held up a hand to his men.

"Thou art the wondrous people who have come, mysteriously into our lands from some unknown region? We have heard of ye."

"To whom do we speak?" asked Nelson Lee.

"I am Attawulf, an officer of the great Kassker's court," replied the other. "My lord hath bid me make ye welcome. With his own eyes did he see the approach of your

strange vessel. 'Tis his desire that ye should be met with friendly greetings."

"That's very nice of Mr. Kassker," said Dorrie, nodding. "I'm sure we're only too willin' to be on friendly terms."

"Does Kassker send any other message?" asked Nelson Lee.

"It is his desire that ye should accompany us into the hospitable walls of Hunrio Castle," replied Attawulf. "A feast is even now being prepared in your honour. Ye will come, good strangers."

It was more of a statement than a query. And, indeed, there was no alternative, it seemed. For they were fairly surrounded by the mounted soldiers. And so, without any delay, they marched off, watched in dismay by those who had been left in the motor-boat.

It was a period of swift tension. Were these Gothlanders really friendly, or was this a trick? The adventurers soon received an inkling of the truth.

For when they reached the castle draw-bridge and marched over it into the great courtyard, a clanging of metal sounded behind them. They looked round and saw that a great metal grille had descended, barring all possible exit!



CHAPTER 15.

KASSKER'S SWIFT METHODS.

H, my goodness!"

"By George!" gasped Handforth. "They've shut us in!"

"Did — did you see

that?" asked another.

"We're trapped!"

Most of the fellows murmured some such remark—for the shutting of that metal grille was grim and significant. Nelson Lee noticed that Lord Dorrimore was glancing at him, but the schoolmaster-detective only gave a slight nod. He appeared to be quite calm and serene.

"It doesn't seem very cheery, old man," murmured his lordship. "I'm not sure we've done the right thing."

"I want to meet Kassker," said Lee smoothly.

There was something in his manner which restored a good deal of confidence among the others. They realised, of course, that action could have been taken earlier. For example, if a number of revolvers had been fired when they had first been surrounded, every Gothlander horse would have stamped. And no doubt their riders would have been in a panic, too. But Nelson Lee had not chosen to take such a course. He was deliberately entering the trap, it seemed.

But Nelson Lee knew what he was doing!

If an escape could have been made earlier, it would be just as possible to make it now. True, he had not foreseen the grille, but it was not likely to prove much of an obstacle, for he had noted that it was operated by clumsy great levers out in the open.

The party found itself in an enclosed courtyard. It was very different from the courtyard of the princess' castle in Dunstane. There was nothing picturesque. Everything was grim.

On all sides rose the massive walls, immense and forbidding. It was almost like a great hall without a roof, for it was practically square, and after they had entered, a door clanged. All the horsemen had remained outside. Here there were other soldiers on guard, and there was another spectacle, too.

Exactly opposite the freshly arrived visitors stood a giant of a man—an enormous fellow, between six-foot-six and seven feet. In his hands he held a cruel-looking axe, and immediately in front of him stood a great wooden block.

"My only hat!" murmured Pitt, with a start.

"The—the chopper!"

"We're going to have our heads lopped off!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Handforth looked at the executioner with defiance.

"He'd better try it on, that's all!" he mut-

tered. "Mr. Lee wouldn't have calmly walked in here if he had suspected——"

He broke off, for Kassker the Grim had appeared, coming from behind a number of his soldiers. The overlord of the Gothlanders was gorgeous in his chainmail and massive head-dress. He made an imposing figure, but, at the same time, a repellent one. There was something about him which told the adventurers all they wanted to know. The Northeastrian stories, far from being exaggerated, had been remarkably inadequate. These Gothlanders were brutes all, and Kassker the Grim a super-brute.

They were men of a low type, with bestial features and coarse habits. If they were anything like the normal inhabitants, then Gothland was indeed a place to be avoided.

"Remain quite calm, all," murmured Lee warningly. "I had anticipated this. I have seen these people, and I am satisfied."

"But how the deuce are we going to get out?" murmured Dorrie.

"Let me wield my spear, N'Kose," rumbled Umlosi eagerly. "Is not my blood afire to commence this battle? Wau! Sustain not this suspense!"

"Wait, old friend—wait!" whispered Lee. Kassker came forward with exaggerated slowness.

"Welcome, good friends!" he said, his voice filled with sarcasm. "'Tis not my way to dally. Which of ye would prefer to have his head removed from his carcase first?"

"Is this the way you greet us, Kassker?" asked Lee smoothly.

"By my soul!" roared Kassker. "Thou shalt be the first! Darest thou to address me thus? We have heard of thee, stranger, and thy companions. 'Tis my custom to deal swiftly and drastically with those to whom I take a dislike. Ere twelve minutes have sped, twelve heads will roll in the dust."

The man's arrogance was amazing.

"You are very sure of yourself," said Nelson Lee grimly. "But we are not such fools. Kassker. Do you think you can bully us as you wish? We have come here to verify our suspicions. We have been told that you Gothlanders are a brutal race. We have been informed that you are of a low, savage type. We have received the proof we needed."

Kassker the Grim let out a tremendous roar.

"I'faith, Attawulf, didst hear?" he thundered. "Methinks I will reserve this fool, and put him to the torture!"

"Ay, 'tis an excellent suggestion," agreed Attawulf.

"Ho!" roared Kassker. "Seize thou this young fool!" he went on, indicating Willy Handforth. "It seemeth he wears the uniform of Mercia's bodyguard. 'Tis well! Let him be the first to suffer this death."

Willy didn't turn a hair.

"Go ahead!" he said curtly. "Just try it on!"

But the other juniors were looking at the scene with grave apprehension. Their hearts were beating furiously. There was something terrible in Kassker's swift, drastic methods.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!

"KASSKER'S ARMADA!"

A thrilling story of the invasion of Northestria by Kassker the Grim.

Nelson Lee takes over supreme command of the Northestrians and the invaders get a warm reception.

Handforth again distinguishes himself and provides endless fun.

You'll enjoy this yarn. It is one of the best of the present series.

"SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!"

Next week's exciting chapters describe Germany's attempt to capture London. You must not miss this smashing instalment!



Look out for this cover of next week's NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

There were no inquiries—there was no trial—there was nothing except the executioner and the axe!

"Hold! Hold!" commanded Lee. "Order thy men to retreat, Kassker. I give thee warning! Lay no hands upon us, or it will go ill with you."

The Gothlander glared.

"And who art thou to threaten?" he sneered. "Out upon thee, fool! Dost think thy words carry weight? Soldiers surround all of ye! The axe awaits thy necks! Thou hast a nerve to bid me hold!"

"You will be wise to abandon this murderous project, Kassker," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We came here for the purpose of demanding the person of Prince Oswy of Northestria. Hand him to us, and we will go in peace."

Kassker stared in amazement, and then turned to Attawulf the Terrible.

"Didst hear?" he ejaculated. "This fool would try to bargain with me! And he and his rabble are in my power, to treat as I wish. By my bones! Not one shall suffer the swift death of the axe! All will go to the torture!"

"Thou art wise, my lord," agreed Attawulf viciously.

"Ay, we will have some merry entertainment," agreed Kassker, nodding. "Since these carrion hold themselves capable of bargaining, I will show them my power."

"Perhaps we shall show you ours," said Lee briefly.

"And what powers hast thou, rat?" asked Kassker contemptuously.

"Many, boastful Kassker!" replied Lee, with equal contempt. "If it so pleased me, I could kill you as you now stand. Your armour would avail you naught. Did you think we came here blindly, like so many animals going to the slaughter?"

Kassker's eyes narrowed.

"Away with them!" he thundered. "Nay, let us see one execution first! It pleaseth me to see the axe descend. Take this young boy."

Two men seized Willy, and dragged him away. Edward Oswald Handforth gave a thick shout of alarm, but before he could take any action, Nelson Lee decided that the time had come for a little demonstration.

Crack!

Leo had pulled the trigger of his automatic pistol. The bullet ripped a hole clean through Kassker's armour, and the overlord of the Gothlanders gave a wild scream of agony.



CHAPTER 16.

TURNING THE TABLES!

FOR about three seconds there was a tense silence.

Kassker the Grim was staring at his right arm—staring at it with wide, startled eyes. And on all sides, the other Gothlanders were looking frightened and uneasy. Many were getting their weapons ready. Lances were being raised, and swords were being drawn. The air was electrical with impending strife.

"By my marrow and bones!" snarled Kassker. "What is this? A wound! My armour pierced as though it were matting!"

They stared at Nelson Lee with sudden fear. Kassker's wound was slight—a deep furrow of the fore-arm, exactly as Lee had intended. To a delicate man, such a wound would have been serious. But to a brute like Kassker, it was little worse than a graze. This savage was hardly capable of feeling pain.

"Hold!" shouted Nelson Lee, swinging round, and addressing his words to all. "Thou hast seen my power! If any man dares to disobey my orders, Kassker will die. I have but to act, and he will fall, a corpse."

The soldiers murmured with frightened amazement.

"Fool!" thundered Kassker. "Thinkest thou to frighten my swordsmen with thy lies? 'Twas a trick——"

"And I have another trick," interrupted Lee. "You will die, Kassker, if any of your men move a single step. Order them to remain as they stand—motionless. If any one dares to raise a hand, or to attempt to use a weapon, you will fall dead."

There was such a world of intensity in Nelson Lee's tone that even Kassker was taken aback.

"See!" shouted Lee, seizing an unexpected opportunity.

For at that very moment a large, sluggish bird had perched itself on one of the high walls of the courtyard. It flew off at that very second, and Lee gave a slight nod to Lord Dorrimore. Dorrie understood.

Crack!

To a hunter of his lordship's type, such a target was ridiculously easy. His shot sped true, and the bird, half-way across the open space, suddenly fluttered in its flight, and then fell with a thud upon the stones, and gave one or two convulsive twists. It was stone dead.

"By my faith!" breathed Attawulf the Terrible.

His face had gone yellowish—a pale, ugly colour. His eyes were filled with utter terror. And Kassker the Grim was hardly in better

condition. All the soldiers were standing like men of stone. They had heard Lee's words—they had seen this bird mysteriously killed—and they were apprehensive lest Kassker himself should fall next.

"Did you imagine that we should come here unprepared?" demanded Lee curtly. "We are not mad enough to trust you, Kassker. You will die just as that bird died, if I so please." He whirled round, and addressed the soldiers. "Every man will remove his armour," he continued curtly. "Let there be no delay!"

Kassker gave a curious gurgle.

"Obey!" he croaked. "Strip your armour, accursed knaves!"

The overlord of the Gothlanders was nothing but a craven wretch now. His arrogance had gone—his bullying tone was a thing of the past. He had seen two examples of what these strangers could do. And he knew—the conviction was strongly upon him—that death would come to him if any of his men made the slightest effort to disobey.

And Lee was not bluffing! If any of those juniors had stood in danger of being beheaded by Kassker's orders, Lee would have shot the man with less pity than he would have shot a rattlesnake.

For it was absolutely evident that this situation was perilous.

And the only way now was to take the bull by the horns, and to beat Kassker the Grim at his own game. Afterwards, such a chance might not occur—for the Gothlanders would be accustomed to these modern methods of death-dealing. But now, all the advantage was with the invaders.

"The armour!" shouted Lord Dorrimore. "Off with it!"

The soldiers needed no urging. Kassker's order had been enough. For these men knew, from long experience in the Gothland army, that the slightest act of disobedience meant instant death.

"I am sick at heart, N'Kose!" muttered Umlosi miserably. "There is no fight—there is no use for my trusty spear! What manner of battle is this? Wau! Thou hast brought me to a mare's nest, my father!"

"Sorry, old lad, but we can't have everythin' in this life," grinned his lordship, who was just beginning to enjoy himself. "But you never know your luck. There might be plenty of scrappin' soon."

"What's the guv'nor up to?" muttered Nipper curiously.

Nobody could quite understand why Nelson Lee had ordered the soldiers to remove their armour. But by this time all had obeyed. And the men lost their impressive appearance—they stood out as uncouth ruffians.

"You all have rope!" said Lee briskly. "Use it!"

"Bind up these men, sir?" yelled Handforth.

"Yes—and swiftly!"

"Hurrah!"

During the trip over the lake, Nelson Lee had provided every member of the party with a length of rope, and this had been worn

round the waist. Leo was not certain that the rope would be of any use—but the wisdom of bringing it was now obvious. Rope is very handy stuff when one is engaged on a reckless mission of this type.

In less than three minutes the work was half over. All the members of the raiding-party worked with a will. The helpless soldiers were bound hand and foot—and bound so securely that there was no possibility of them getting free.

Attawulf was treated in exactly the same fashion as the others. Kassker received the attention of Nelson Lee, and it was Lee who secured the overlord's special armour—a glittering armour which was of a totally different type to any of the other. It was gleaming, blatantly ornamental, and unmistakable.

"Now!" ordered Lee. "Get into this armour as quickly as you can."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hurrah!"

"We've got the idea, sir."

"By George!" yelled Handforth. "We'll show these giddy Goths!"

"Northestria for us!"

"Hear, hear!"

It was no light job, getting into that armour, but there was little fear of being attacked now—for every man within that courtyard, hidden from all outside eyes, was a roped-up prisoner. The tables had been completely turned. Even Kassker himself was bound as tightly as any of his men.

And soon the twelve visitors were looking very different.

They had donned the armour of their hosts, and the disguise proved to be completely effective. For all the helmets were provided with visors, and when these were pulled down, every face was completely hidden.

"What's the next move, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly. "By George, I believe we're going to pull this affair off yet! And—and only ten minutes ago I was afraid that poor old Willy was going to have his head carved off."

"You need not have worried, Handforth—I came into this trap with my eyes open," said Nelson Lee briskly. "It was a risk—but, if it comes to that, the whole adventure is a risk. We were between the devil and the deep sea, and it mattered little which course we took. And at least we have gained first-hand knowledge of Kassker's Hunnish character."

"By Jove, rather, sir!"

"He's a beast, sir!"

"Those Northestrians were dead right!"

"But what's to be done now, sir?" repeated Handforth. "I'll tell you what! I've got some pocket scissors here! Why not cut off old Kassker's beard?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was a somewhat high-pitched laugh from the juniors, but even Handforth was surprised when Nelson Lee nodded.

"An excellent suggestion, Handforth," he said. "Yes, and we'll do it! A trophy to lay at the feet of the Princess Mercia! Kassker's

famous beard! I'll warrant there can be no other beard like it in the whole of Gothland."

"By glory!" grinned Dorrie. "You're right! And what a trophy! Proof that we've clipped the beggar's wings, eh?"

"I have another reason for this action," said Lee, as he took Handforth's scissors. "But there is no time to talk now. Kassker, I just ask you to hold quite still, or these scissors might cut something more than your beard."

"Thou reptile!" hissed Kassker, as his beard was neatly snipped off—that beard which was his proudest possession—that beard which was celebrated throughout his land. "A plague upon thee, thou rat! A terrible revenge will I have for this deed!"

Nelson Lee took no notice.

"By all the saints, I swear that I will invade Northestria forthwith!" snarled Kassker the Grim. 'Twill be an invasion of revenge—not of aggression only. Tell the Princess Mercia that her towns will be burned, her people put to the torture, her country destroyed from end to end!"



CHAPTER 17.

A DESPERATE VENTURE!

HERE was something utterly deadly in Kassker's tones.

He meant every word that he said—and Nelson Lee, although he triumphed at the moment, was full of grave doubts for the immediate future. Kassker the Grim was in a position to invade Northestria—and Princess Mercia was utterly helpless, for her own armies were unprepared.

But this was not the moment to think ahead.

The immediate peril was quite sufficient. Nelson Lee pocketed most of Kassker's enormous beard. But one or two wisps of that bluey-black hair he tucked into his helmet. These escaping wisps looked natural enough. And they added to the impression that the living man within this famous armour was Kassker himself.

"Two must remain on guard here," said Nelson Lee briskly. "You, Browne, and one other—let it be young Willy, for his ears are extra keen. Stay here, and guard these prisoners. But at the slightest sign of real danger, bolt—and make all speed to the waiting boat."

"And you, sir?" asked Browne.

"The rest of us go to Gunmarc Fortress," replied Lee. "We have an opportunity to effect Prince Oswy's rescue, and we must seize it. Somehow, I have a feeling that luck will be with us. Come! Let us go at once!"

"Hurrah!"

"But no cheering!" warned Lee. "We are now Gothlanders!"

While Browne and Willy remained on guard, Lee flung open the enormous doors, and swung through, clattering noisily in his armour. His eyes gleamed with satisfaction behind the helmet as he noted that the only

soldiers in sight were some considerable distance away, near the great grille which had descended to protect the drawbridge. The doings within that hidden courtyard were unknown to all outside.

"Horses!" thundered Lee. "Knaves—fools! Death to the man who is responsible for this delay! Horses! Bestir yourselves, ye slugs!"

"Good gad!" muttered Lord Dorrimore.

That voice, coming from behind Lee's visor, was so like the voice of Kassker the Grim, that Dorrie could scarcely believe his ears.

But now he saw the cleverness of Lee's dodge.

The soldiers outside were so flustered by the harsh command that they had no time to examine these armoured knights. Horses were brought with frantic speed, and the ten adventurers mounted them, and prepared to depart.

"The drawbridge!" raved Lee. "Up with the gate, accursed blunderers!"

The grille was raised by frightened serfs, and a minute later the ten daring raiders thundered out over the drawbridge. And then they set off inland—with only Nelson Lee's sense of direction to guide them.

He knew where the village of Vertilla lay, and from this, and from the woods, he was equally certain that he was making in the direction of the fortress. Once there, much would depend upon the swiftness of action.

Indeed, unless the whole thing went forward without a hitch, there might be a very tragic end to this exploit. The lives of the entire party depended upon this mission being carried out in one wild dash.

And the thrill of it was exhilarating—the excitement had got into their blood. This trip into Gothland was proving a hundredfold more breathless than any of them had ever dreamed possible.

On—on!

They galloped their horses hard, and the ground was covered rapidly. Thundering over the turf, they pressed on towards their goal. The St. Frank's juniors were behaving splendidly—riding well, and backing up their wonderful leader with perfect precision.

"Good man!" exclaimed Dorrie thickly, through his helmet. "The fortress!"

"Yes!" said Lee. "The Fortress of Gunmarc, without a doubt."

"Now for the final test!" breathed Handforth.

With a great clatter of armour, they pulled up their steeds in front of the forbidding-looking building. It was not surrounded by a moat, but the walls were of a great height, and the only gateway was guarded by soldiers.

"Make way, there, scullions!" thundered Nelson Lee. "Make way for thy overlord, Kassker the Grim."

Without lessening his speed in the slightest degree, he went charging forward, and the others followed in a body. And the soldiers, thoroughly scared by this abrupt surprise, scuttled out of the way like rabbits.

Never for a moment did they doubt that this figure in the gleaming armour was that of Kassker the Grim. They knew his arrogant methods, but this exploit rather surprised them. Even Kassker was not accustomed to behave with such madness.

At the actual door of the fortress, Lee flung himself from his horse. Dorrie and Umlosi did the same. And Lee turned to the rest.

"Remain mounted!" he shouted. "I will return apace!"

With his sword, he hammered wildly upon the great door. It was opened almost at once, and two or three startled-looking men stood there. They were not soldiers in uniform, but keepers, apparently.

"Why this delay?" snarled Lee. "Thou carrion—"

"We knew not of thy coming, my lord!" quavered one of the men.

"Then thou knowest now!" shouted Lee.

"What of the brat? What of Prince Oswy? Is the young reptile still living?"

"He's within, my lord, in the dungeon, as thou didst order—"

"Then fetch the cur forthwith!" commanded Lee. "Bring him hither, fools! 'Tis my desire that he should be put to the torture! Make thee haste, or thou wilt suffer the torture, too! I am in no mood for dalliance!"

The keepers scurried away, in a fine fever of anxiety. And Lee stamped into the stone-paved hall, followed by Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi. This was almost too good to be true.

Success had crowned their efforts so far, and the rescue of Prince Oswy was almost an accomplished fact. But it had only been made possible by these daring, dashing actions.

Would the luck last?

"Come, thou sluggards!" roared Lee. "Thinkest thou I can stay thy pleasure? Bring the young prince— Ah, 'tis well!" he added curtly.

But he had caught his breath in. The keepers had returned, and between them they were leading the frail figure of a young boy. His age was not more than eleven or twelve, but he looked even younger, by reason of his small stature and his delicate state of health. He was quailing with fear, for he probably had every reason to guess what ghastly fate awaited him.

"Give the boy to me!" rasped Lee harshly.

He half expected to hear Prince Oswy cry aloud, but this did not happen. The youngster just looked at him, but made no sound. He was apparently past mere visible fear. His eyes were shining curiously.

In another minute Lee was on his horse again, and Prince Oswy was sitting astride, immediately in front of him.

"Away!" shouted Lee.

And away they all galloped. Out through the great gates—and so on to the road again. Prince Oswy was with them! Through sheer, unadulterated nerve, they had accomplished the rescue.



CHAPTER 18.

THE ESCAPE!

NELSON LEE bent over the young prince as they galloped.

"Fear naught!" he said soothingly. "I am not Kassker, as you have been thinking. I come from Northestria—to restore you to your home."

Prince Oswy turned a frightened face half round.

"Thou art befooling me!" he shouted bitterly.

"Nay, 'tis true!" insisted Lee. "See!"

He raised his visor, and the young prince looked upon a face that he had never expected to see—a face that certainly belonged to no Gothlander. And for the first time the unhappy boy flushed with excitement.

But before he could make any further remark, a shout went up. Two horsemen in armour were dashing towards them at the gallop. And as they came closer, it could be seen that the armour of one was so big that it was only worn with difficulty.

"Browne and Willy!" roared Nipper.

And so it proved. They came up, but did not rein in their horses. Instead, they swung round and galloped with the rest.

"We only just got away in time!" shouted Browne. "On, brothers! An army is on its way to cut us off! They have discovered our little game, and unless we're quick we shall be fairly splashing in the oxtail!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Willy. "They've got the prince!"

This was no time or place to ask questions. It was a matter of seconds now. Kassker's armies had got wind of the affair—and Browne and Willy had only just escaped in time. Perhaps it would be impossible to reach the shore of the lake.

For Kassker was now free again—and if he had any wits, he would send his men to that spot on the lake where the motor-boat was hovering. It seemed that it was a question of touch and go.

And as the armour was now no longer necessary, many of the galloping riders shed their helmets and breast-plates as they thundered on. It was not well to be encumbered at a time like this.

"There they are!"

"By George! Hundreds of the beggars!"

"Keep behind, boys!" shouted Lee. "Now, Dorrie, be ready!"

"You bet!" said his lordship happily.

They were only a few hundred yards from the lake shore now, but there was only one way to reach it—through a little gully, where the hills rose up steeply on either side. And the entrance to this gully was swarming with mounted troops! There were score of them.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore rose up without attempting to slacken speed. And as they galloped, they hurled some small objects which they had managed to wrench

from their pockets. And immediately a number of blinding explosions occurred.

Bang! Crash! Bang!

The effect was staggering.

Those explosions were comparatively harmless, for they were caused by "grenades" made from signal rockets. Nelson Lee himself had manufactured them on the way across the lake.

The native horses were unfamiliar with such explosions, and a literal stampede took place.

"Follow me!" shouted Lee. "There's a chance!"

In every direction, the Gothlanders were fleeing. Many of them were carried on by the panic-stricken plunging of their mounts. Over half the horses had bolted, utterly uncontrollable, and the rest were being spurred away from this spot by their awe-stricken riders.

"We're through!" yelled Handforth, in triumph.

"Hurrah!"

They were practically by the side of the lake, and only a few of the Gothlanders were visible. And out there lay the motor-boat, its crew of four watching and waiting.

They heard that rousing cheer, and acted instantly. The engine roared, and the boat swept in towards the beach. Within three minutes the adventurous twelve were on board, and Prince Oswy was in their midst.

"Good gad!" shouted Archie. "Then you've got him?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Bravo!"

And with a united roar of defiance, the juniors glared at the Gothlanders who were now on the beach. A shower of arrows came hissing outwards, but most of them fell short. And the powerful motor-boat purred straight out upon the vast stretch of water—her bows turned towards Northestria.

And what a victorious return it was!

The city of Dunstane was stunned at first, and then went mad with joy. Within three hours of departure, these amazing strangers had returned, and they had brought the beloved Prince Oswy with them!

"Hail to the brave rescuers!"

That was the cry which went up from hundreds and thousands of throats. Princess Mercia was almost overwhelmed, and even Ethelbert the Red was in danger of breaking down when he saw the young prince, safe and sound. His antagonism had gone for ever. Every member of the adventure party was hailed as a hero.

But in the midst of all this joyous celebration there was a hint of warning. Kassker the Grim had sworn upon an invasion of revenge! And the shadow of that coming invasion was already beginning to spread over the fair face of peaceful Northestria!

THE END.

(The story of the invasion of Northestria, by Kassker the Grim, is related next week in "Kassker's Armada!" It is one of the most thrilling yarns of the series. Avoid disappointment by ordering your copy in advance!)



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.

Well, that New Year resolution of mine is still quite strong. I am as determined as ever to keep this page going with unfailing regularity. Of course, it's only the second week, I know, but most resolutions peter out during the first few days, so I'm well on the right road.

* * *

How do you like these new adventure stories, all about Northestria? You've already had two of them, and this week's issue contains the third, so you've had plenty of time to judge. Never forget that both the Editor and myself are as keen as mustard to hear your comments. Speaking for myself, I am particularly interested to know how this present series of yarns strikes you.

* * *

If there is anything in my stories that you don't like, write to me about it. If there's anything you *do* like, tell all your friends! Don't tell your friends your dislikes, but let me have it straight from the shoulder, and we'll see if we can't effect a cure.

* * *

I wonder if you have noticed a little change that has been creeping into my stories just recently. Can you guess what I mean? About Nipper, to be exact. So many of you have written, slanging me for dropping his nickname, that I have brought it into use once more. Henceforward, therefore, the free-and-easy style of referring to him will be maintained. And now I shall probably get lots of letters complaining bitterly about a fine chap like Dick Hamilton being saddled with the undignified name of "Nipper"! My hat! You *do* want a lot of pleasing, one way and another! Still, I'm here to please you, and don't forget that when you're pleased, I'm pleased. So please write and let me know exactly how pleased you are, or vice versa.

* * *

Oh, and there's another thing about Nipper. Yes—Nipper! All you "Dick Hamilton" fans can look the other way if you want to, or you can eat coke, whichever you like. But about Nipper. You'll find

that he'll gradually come into his own again, and be his old, reliable, forceful self. I'm giving you this tip in advance, because you're such an impatient lot, and I want to scotch any complaints on that score. If you've thought of any other complaints, though, wrap them up carefully, and send them along by parcel post. Or, better still, roll them into hard pellets and sling them at me.

* * *

When I started writing this rigmarole of nonsense, I meant it to be perfectly sane and staid. In fact, it was my intention to acknowledge about twenty of those old letters (the ones I haven't been able to reply to by post because the chumps didn't give me their addresses) and comment upon their remarks. But I've wandered on so much that I've only just got enough space to include the acknowledgments themselves. So write again, you eighteen, if there's anything important you want to know.

* * *

Below are the eighteen chumps: Reginald Rushworth (Gateshead), "A Staunch Admirer of Nipper" (Walworth, S.E.17), P. Vasavour (Brighton), Aida (Yorkshire), "Monnovian" (Bermondsey), "Wireless Willie" (Northampton), "Anon" (Hastings), "Leagueite No. 143" (Bradford), "Regular Reader" (Ringwood), "Leagueite No. 499" (Twickenham), "Unknown" (London, N.) May L. Winter (Dunfield), "An Australian Reader" (Mackay, Queensland), "1059" (Adelaide), J. Richards (Gateshead), "Admirer J. C." (Liverpool), Smith Thompson (Bradford), Cyril Jay (Hastings, N.Z.).

*The Fight for London!**Read This Week's Thrilling Chapters!*

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS



By

ROGER FOWEY

HOW THE WAR STARTED!

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 materially assists a tremendous attack by German forces on the north of London. At the same time, other enemy hordes sweep across Kent. The chums are involved in a strategic retirement by the British forces down the Edgware Road. British reinforcements lie at Wormwood Scrubbs waiting the order to advance, and more are in Regents Park, while a terrific army is massing between Hertford and Aylesbury ready to swoop down on the invader. The chums join some British troops who are entrenched under the very

shadow of the Marble Arch, and they see enemy tanks coming at them down the broad Edgware Road. At the same moment, news comes through that the British have failed to withstand a German attack on Regents Park and are retiring. This means that the whole of the British scheme is spoiled, and the enemy is within an ace of capturing the whole of north-west London, if not the City itself! The chums are shelled as the tanks attack; at the same moment, a flight of enemy 'planes bomb them from above. The three chums huddle together in their trench, firing, as fast as they can press the triggers of their rifles, at the grey hordes coming from behind the tanks and charging with naked steel at the trenches.

(Now start on this week's thrills.)

At Marble Arch!

JACK'S rifle kicked against his shoulder as he blazed through the mist of dust and smoke beyond the trench. The enemy tanks were bearing down like a moving, armoured wall. He could see their guns spouting flame and little goutts of bluish smoke.

From between the lumbering craft, exultant grey-clad figures came storming, racing ahead with their glittering bayonets lowered for the charge.

Behind and all around them, the chums could hear the shuddering shock of bursting bombs—and then the British guns spoke!

They fired from the fringe of trees beyond the railings of the park. The open ground between the trenches and the advancing enemy seemed to erupt in a smother of bursting, orange flame and smoke. In the veriest fraction of time, the whole scene was wiped out as the tanks were plastered from tops to tractors with bursting shells.

"Stopped 'em!" gasped Buster, as he ceased fire. He snapped back the bolt of his rifle as he

spoke, and a wisp of blue smoke crept from it. He reloaded the magazine, cartridges clattering as he forced them out of the clip.

"Gosh—I thought they were on us!" Tom grunted. "The road must be thick with Germans!"

Jack glanced about him. Crouched under the shell-riven side of the arch itself was a machine-gun crew. They were hunched behind a pile of sandbags, and the weapon was spitting a leaden hail through the smoke-cloud.

Behind him Jack saw that the railings of the park were now torn and twisted from shells and the effects of bombs. He had a glimpse of a howitzer's crew amidst the trees—shirtsleeved men who laboured with desperate haste to feed the bellowing monster towering in their midst.

Up above were darting aeroplanes, the sun flashing on their wings. Jack saw a bomber with iron-crosses on his wing-tips falling like some gigantic leaf out of the sky. It was pitching to their left, and he followed it with his gaze as it dropped.

Above it, a British fighting machine was wheeling, its guns spitting lead into the falling

hulk. Suddenly, the British 'plane zoomed upwards, and an instant after the German machine struck the roof of a building near the corner of the Edgware Road.

Jack saw slates and brickwork fly as the thing hit, then everything dissolved as the craft's cargo of bombs exploded. A gigantic plume of smoke with a lurid heart surged skywards—but no sound came to their ears through the inferno that raged all around them.

The trio crouched low. They heard the tearing thrust of shells overhead; bullets whipped and splattered the stone side of the arch near them. Buster gasped once at what felt like an unseen hand twitching his soft-topped cap; when he ducked down and took the cap off they saw that there was a jagged tear along one side of it.

"Narrow squeak!" Tom grunted.

"The perishin' rotters!" gasped Buster, then he thrust his rifle forward and emptied the magazine into the swirling smoke before them.

It was as he reloaded that the firing of the guns behind slackened, and the smoke cleared away a little.

Four of the five enemy tanks showed before them—battered hulks of twisted metal, with one of them blown over on its side. The fifth tank had reached the corner of the street, and was now coming sheer across the road, covered by the great structure of the Marble Arch from the fire of the British guns. Behind the craft, two-score German infantrymen were sheltering—and the whole thing was making straight for the corner where the chums were crouching.

In one side-turret a gun-muzzle hung shattered. The armour-plate was smothered with dust and criss-crossed with glittering traceries that shone like silver streaks—nickel and lead left by rifle and machine-gun bullets that had struck it.

The iron crosses on either grey prow showed defiant, and every weapon that the tank could use was blazing as fast as the gunners could fire.

"It's coming at us!" Tom gasped.

"Better shift!" Jack exclaimed. "Back along the trench before—"

"No—wait a minute!" Buster exclaimed. "Look!"

From the wrecked gates in the centre of the Arch a man suddenly appeared, running madly towards the tank. Under his right arm was something that left a stream of grey smoke behind it—a bomb, with the fuse ready lit. He was going to slam the thing at the tank's tractors, disabling it!

He wasn't a dozen yards from the chums when they saw him.

They watched him go. Suddenly, he staggered—stumbled—then ran on.

"He's hit!" Jack gasped.

"And they've got him again!" Buster yelled, as the man pitched forward abruptly, half stood up, then slumped down again. Even as he dropped he tried to thrust the bomb towards the tank, but he was too badly hurt.

Jack saw him fall, and before either of the others could realise what he had in mind, the boy shot out of the trench and went leaping forward. His boots slid on the pavement, then he plunged out to the road.

He heard bullets whipping all about him, then he was up to the fallen man. He saw the fellow stare at him, grin a little, then Jack picked up the bomb and ran on.

The little grey fuse was short, almost down to the canister—but he didn't think what that meant. He was only ten yards from the lumbering tank, he could hear the clatter of its tractors. He saw the smoking muzzle of a machine-gun depressed towards him, and he spurted—got beneath it as the thing gouted bullets over his

head. It could not depress far enough to hit him!

At the back of the tank he saw crouching figures. One lifted a rifle and fired at him—but he went on. He pitched the canister to the forward part of the tank, saw the thing begin to turn away from it, jumped and kicked the canister closer, then he whirled round and flung himself from the spot.

He saw the wounded man with his mouth open and shouting to him. Jack dived headlong at him. He chanced hurting the man as he got both hands under the soldier's body, and the force of his headlong dive carried them both tumbling over the lip of a shell-hole just to one side.

Road-blocks crumpled as they fell over the edge. Jack got the reek of explosive fumes in his nostrils as his hands and feet dug amidst the stones of the road-bed—then it seemed as though the whole world shuddered as the canister exploded!

A Desperate Enterprise!

THE two were flung together in the bottom of the shell-hole. Debris came pattering down, and a great wall of road-blocks and dirt heaved over the edge of the hole and slumped on them. For long seconds the two remained there, then the soldier grunted.

"See if we got him, mate—I can't move!"

Jack heaved himself up and cautiously poked his head above the rim of the hole.

The tank was still there, but it now lay on its side. The tractor nearest him was just a mass of shattered metal, with links trailing over a great hole in the road. All its guns were silent, and he could see a mighty gash all along the topmost side of the craft.

Of the soldiers who had been sheltering behind the thing, there was now no sign. Either they had run, or else they had been blown away.

From the trench he had left, Jack saw Buster and Tom come running. He shouted and waved his arm; they joined him in the shell-hole.

"Thought you'd gone up with it!" Buster exclaimed. "My hat, it wasn't half a bang! It nearly—Hullo, who's this?"

He looked down at the soldier, then recognised him as the man who had made the first attempt on the tank.

"I've got it through the leg somewhere," the man said. "I can't feel anything in my right arm either, it's all numb!"

They dug him out of the debris which had been showered into the shell-hole; they saw that he had been shot high up on the arm, and that there was a flesh-wound through the calf of one leg.

"Better get him out of it," Jack said. "If we can get to the other side of the Marble Arch, it'll be all right!"

"It'll be decent of you, if you will, mate," said the soldier. "This packet I've got will start hurtin' in a bit. There's a couple of my mates by the Arch; we had them bombs all ready in case tanks came up close enough. The engineers didn't have time to mine the road, else we'd have blown the blighters up!"

The chums surveyed the ground. It was a matter of yards to the safety of the Arch, but the road and the pavement between was swept by a storm of bullets. Germans had got into the houses on the opposite side of the road, and were now pouring a hail of rifle-fire into the trenches.

"If we try to shift, we shall get riddled!" commented Tom. "Better—Ouch!"

A bullet spanged into a tarry wood-block near him, showering him with slivers of tar and splinters. He ducked down again.

"They'll put some guns on to them blokes in the houses," the soldier assured them. "Hang on a bit, there ain't that much hurry. If it does look too risky, you chaps sheer off on your own—I'll get picked up all right, I expect."

Marksmen in the opposite buildings had spotted them, and they dared not look up again. As it was, the far side of the shell-hole was being continually pitted by bullets; they knew that they would be courting death, now, if they raised their heads to look out.

The battle all around merged to a crashing roar of exploding shells and whining bullets. All they could see was the sky above them, with aircraft wheeling and soaring in the sunshine. The enemy machines appeared to be driven off, for soon the sky cleared, save for an occasional plane streaking across their range of vision.

For nearly ten minutes they crouched there, then Buster noticed that bullets were no longer hitting the side of the shell-hole.

"I'm going to chance looking up!"

"And bob down quick!" counselled the soldier.

Buster poked his head up for a momentary glimpse—and he did not bob down again.

The building on the other side of the road, and from which they had been fired upon, was being plastered with shells from howitzers and field-guns. It was blazing in three places, and it seemed to him as though every window had received a shell during the past few minutes.

There were gaping, smoking holes everywhere; shells burst on the place in a continuous stream.

"All clear!" he said. "They're shelling the blighters! Let's make a move!"

The others were willing, and Tom, being the heftiest of the trio, agreed to carry the wounded man if they could get him on to his shoulders. They managed it, with a struggle. The soldier hung there, dead white in the face and his teeth gritted against the pain.

"Right!" exclaimed Jack. He and Buster gave Tom a heave out of the shell-hole and aided him as he trotted steadily towards the shattered Arch opposite.

They reached it in safety, though they saw the splash of dust from the road and chippings of stone from the pavement, marking shots which were being fired at them.

They dived into the shelter of the Arch, scrambled round a huge block of broken masonry, and then found a little group sheltering behind the rampart of stone. Some Red-cross men were rendering first aid, and they took the wounded man over.

A trench ran from this spot, under the park railings and across the open ground beyond. "Might as well go along that," Jack suggested as he saw it. "We can't do much here, anyway!"

The trench was narrow, and it zig-zagged along its length. Walking wounded moved with them, and they helped some of them along. On the far side, the chums hopped out of the trench and were almost stunned as a twelve-inch howitzer slammed off near them, firing at some target well up the Edgware Road.

It was as they jumped from the trench that an officer came running up to them.

"You men, join that party under the trees over there! Want you for street fighting—double across!"

He hurried on, not giving them a second glance as he searched for more unattached units for the squad that was being sent out. The trio glanced at one another.

"Wonder what's up!" Jack exclaimed. "Might as well go and see what it is, and—"

"I expect some of the Germans have got through, and they want them stopped!" Tom

suggested, and the three went on to where a small party of men were grouped not far away. There were about twenty men altogether, and they seemed a mixed lot.

There were several British Tommies; and the chums also saw a couple of husky Canadians and half a dozen men who looked as though they were from some South African unit. There were some cavalry men, three aircraft mechanics and a number of gunners whose weapons had been put out of action.

All carried rifles, as well as revolvers, and some had a belt full of hand-bombs around their waists. They were in the charge of a burly Australian sergeant, and he nodded as the trio came up and joined them in the shelter of a pile of sandbags.

"You coming with us?" he asked. "You look a bit young, but you'll do. D'you know what's on?" Jack shook his head, and the sergeant continued: "There's a lot of Germans got across Oxford Street. They've made a gap, and there's more coming through every minute. We've got to go and stop 'em. They're sending out other parties, and— Where's that officer gone to now?"

He frowned as he peered out across the turf.

"If we wait much longer, those Germans'll be through. Come on, diggers, let's get on with the job, we needn't wait for him to come back!"

He turned as he spoke, and led the way forward. The chums stopped with a Canadian who came running up, to take revolvers from a pile near the sandbags. They stuffed packets of revolver ammunition into the pockets of their stained tunics, and it was as they were about to move on that Buster exclaimed:

"What about some grub, you chaps? I'm beginnin' to feel hungry—goodness knows how long it is since we had anything to eat!"

"You can get some eats over by Grosvenor Gate!" the Canadian told them. "We're goin' out that way—but I'll say it's odds against us comin' back! You know what we're goin' into, boys?"

"Yes, street fighting," said Jack.

The Canadian nodded grimly, as he buckled the revolver belt about his waist.

"All that—and a bit more," he said. "Those Germans haven't broken through just by chance. There's a couple o' battalions of 'em, an' they're trying to get down to Berkeley Square."

"What for?" asked Buster.

"What for? Why, son, isn't Berkeley Square our headquarters? A couple o' thousand Germans could do a whole of a lot o' damage there if they get to the place. And they'll take some holding back in the streets once they get well away!"

"But Berkeley Square is not headquarters!" Jack told him.

"Think agen!" exclaimed the Canadian with a grin. "Everybody thinks it's at Whitehall, but headquarters was shifted last night, because the Germans started shelling it with big guns from the north. General Marlow moved to Berkeley Square with his staff—you can't fight a war with shells coming through the window every couple o' minutes!"

"Yes, but the Germans don't know we've shifted!" Tom said quickly.

"Don't they?" asked the Canadian. "I'll say they do! And I'll say they know a whole lot more than they ought—we've been overrun with spies since this business started. Those two battalions are a sort of raiding party, they're trying to capture our headquarters—and then we shall be in a fine mess, believe me! And I might tell you that the Aussie sergeant there is goin' to take us straight to Berkeley Square—you see!"

Enemy Cunning!

JACK realised that the Canadian's information was probably correct. If the Germans were shelling Whitehall, then it was certain that the general staff would have moved, not because they were afraid of the shells, but because they could not afford to lose their personnel or to stand the interruptions of the enemy.

Berkeley Square contained many big buildings, and it would be a simple matter to use one of these for the British headquarters. To make the change from Whitehall would involve much work, and it was not a manœuvre which could be repeated at a moment's notice.

No doubt when the move was made, General Marlow had had no information concerning the speed with which the enemy was advancing, otherwise he would have moved his headquarters further to the west of London instead of towards the north.

It was plain, too, that the enemy must have full knowledge of his movements, else they would not have risked their raiding party. In a little while, no doubt, there would be plenty of British troops around headquarters to repel the invaders—but just at the moment the move must be in the nature of a surprise. The British were being hard pressed along their front, and it was probably difficult to withdraw men enough to balk the enemy in time.

The Australian sergeant led the way at the double down the road inside the park railings. Shells were falling on the right and some crashed on the roofs of the buildings in Park Lane. The roar of battle drummed on the ears of the trio as they ran with the Canadian, and they saw more shells bursting by Grosvenor Gate, out which they would shortly be going.

"See what them shells mean?" the Canadian grunted. "They're stopping us getting any guns across the Berkeley Square. That's a barrage, that is—don't it prove what I said?"

The enemy were dropping a shell barrage to prevent field-guns being moved through that exit from the park, and as the chums drew nearer, they saw that the roadway was being churned up by continuous bursts.

Opposite the gate, there was a big Nissen hut. It looked like a canteen, and there were a couple of men at the counter at the front, sheltering behind the sandbags piled at either side of the entrance.

"That's the eats place!" growled the Canadian. "Take my tip—grab an' bunk with it!"

The three doubled up to the hut.

"Can we have some grub?" asked Buster.

"Help yourselves!" exclaimed one of the men. "Here y'are!"

He pushed a pile of bully-beef sandwiches at them, and the three ducked as a shell burst between the hut and the gate. The Aussie sergeant had led his men along the road past it, making for a spot where the high railings had been torn down by a burst.

The chums straightened up, grabbed a handful of sandwiches each, and then ran on, munching as they rejoined the Canadian. He grinned as they came up, then they followed the rest through the gap in the railings.

Overshot shells kept on bursting near at hand, and the party doubled across Park Lane to Mount Street two or three at a time. The sergeant led the way onwards when they were all across, by which time the chums had finished the sandwiches.

"Wish we'd brought about fifty more!" Buster grunted, as he ran with the others.

There was a first-aid dressing station at the corner of Mount Street. Beyond the wounded grouped there, the street was wide and empty;

except that every few moments, a little group of soldiers doubled across it and disappeared.

At the far end, the chums could see some troops hastily erecting a barricade. They had run a number of motor-cars into position and were plugging mattresses and sandbags in the gaps.

The group soon reached the barricade, and the Australian sergeant saluted the officer who stood directing operations.

"Can we give a hand, sir?"

"How many of you? Ah, a couple of dozen! Well, take your party, sergeant, to that house over there—it's next to headquarters. Barricade the windows. From there you'll be able to give support to the Davis Street barricade—the enemy are coming down there now! Jump to it!"

They doubled in the direction he indicated. The door of the house had already been smashed open, and the chums entered with the rest.

The place appeared to have been hurriedly vacated, but there were mats on the polished flooring of the broad hall, with pictures on the walls, and a salver on a small table.

"First ten downstairs—the rest up!" roared the Aussie sergeant, and the chums mounted the broad stairs with the Canadian and some others. They ran to the big rooms at the front of the house, on the first floor.

The Canadian made straight for the window, and, wielding his rifle-butt, shattered the panes, cleared them of the broken glass left at their edges.

"We'll shoot over the sills!" he exclaimed. "We shan't want any barricades here! Come on, boys—I can see 'em up that street! By glory, but I wish we'd got a machine gun!"

Jack jumped to his side, and peered out of the window. He commanded a view of the broad street leading from the square. Some way up it, he could see two tanks forging along—tanks with iron crosses at their prows. Behind them moved Germans, shooting past the tanks as they came.

Britishers were crouching in doorways and firing at the enemy as they advanced. Retiring as they drew closer, though they might have held the Germans but for the tanks, behind which they sheltered.

There was a barricade at the end of the street, and from it there woke a sudden blaze of firing, with three machine-guns stammering madly.

More troops came scuttling across the square, some entering the houses, and some running on to the barricades. In the far corner, half hidden by trees, was yet another barricade; the men behind it already in action.

"A couple o' tanks, eh!" grunted the Canadian, as he pushed his rifle forward. "There won't be much holding them unless we get some guns up!"

With one foot, he hitched a settee towards the window, knelt on it and then began to fire at the advancing enemy. Jack and Buster crouched beside him, while Tom took the other window with the rest of the men who had accompanied them.

Their rifles spanged out, while shells from the forward guns of the tanks crashed to the barricade which strove to bar their passage.

Down below, despatch-riders came tearing up on motor-cycles, dropping from their machines to race into headquarters, never heeding the battle raging so near them.

The German tanks came swiftly onwards, unhampered by the rifle and machine-gun fire, and, on a sudden, from a side turning there came yet another tank—bigger than the rest and built on different lines.

"A supply tank!" Jack heard the Canadian grunt as he re-loaded. "What do they— No, by glory, that's no supply tank—that's carryin' troops!"

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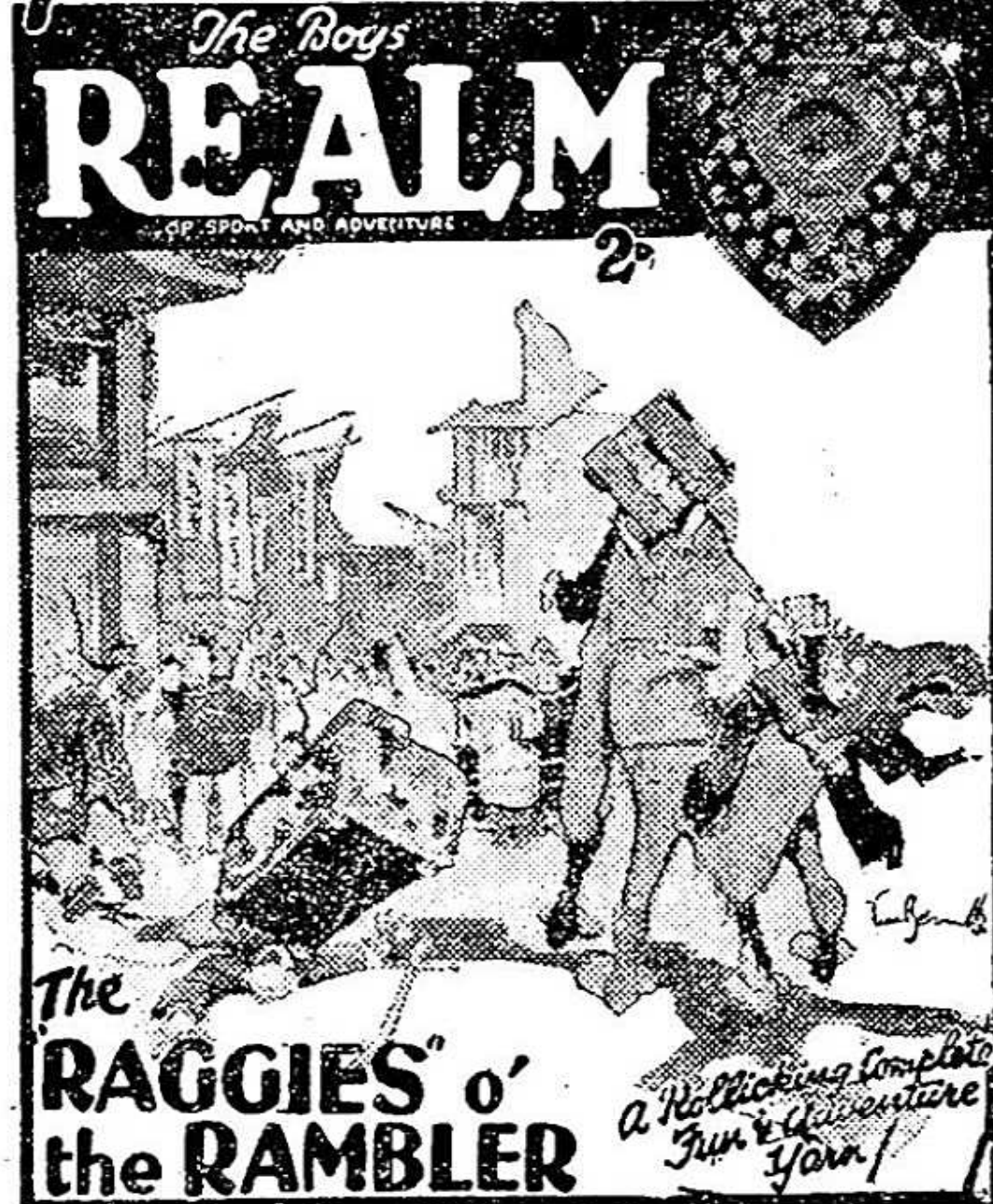
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Jack's rifle was kicking against his shoulder as he fired. Then he saw that the German soldiers were disappearing. They were running into houses, or pausing at the ends of side streets and dropping to the ground, returning the fire of Britishers attacking them.

The three tanks came on alone!

For a space, Jack could not see what was happening, then he realised that the foot soldiers were covering the line of retreat for the tanks. The two fighting machines would come up to British headquarters, and would guard the troop-carrying tank while its men came out and attacked the building—that was the scheme!

Even as he guessed at it, the leading machines reached the barrier.

He saw their guns depress as they blazed at the defenders. Hand-bombs burst uselessly on the sides of the craft, then their prows were lofting as they crunched over the barrier, smashing it down and waddling on.

They both checked to thud shells and machine-gun fire into the backs of the men fighting at the barricade which was set across the end of Mount Street, then they came on.

A little group of Britishers sensed the strategy of the attack, they came tearing across the square towards headquarters. Long before they reached the building the guns of the tanks mowed them down.

In less than half a minute their murderous fire drove everything in the square under cover. Headquarters was at the mercy of the tanks!

The Prussian Guard!

A SUDDEN spurt of machine-gun fire from one of the machines filled the windows at which the chums were crouching with a hail of brick-dust and shattered wood-work. They leaped back, as Jack exclaimed:

"They've got to come out of that troop-tank before they can do anything. Let's go out the back—get into headquarters that way. We might be able to hold 'em off!"

He was racing across the carpet for the door as he spoke, and went plunging down the stairs, the rest after him. Straight to the back of the hall, Jack ran, to a balcony which overlooked the garden.

With his rifle in one hand, he clambered over the ironwork and dropped to the soft lawn below. A brick wall cut off the grounds of the house from those at the back of headquarters, but he slung his rifle over his shoulder and made a leap for the top of the wall.

He was first over, but the others were close at his heels when he made a grab for the lower part of the balcony back of the house, and started hauling himself up.

(Continued on page 44.)

HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 61.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

(FULL NAME)

(ADDRESS)

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for ½d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

A FEW OF THE ADVANTAGES OF JOINING THE LEAGUE.

You can write to fellow-members living at home or in the most distant outposts of the Empire.

You are offered free advice on choosing a trade or calling, and on emigration to the colonies and dependencies.

If you want to form a sports or social club, you can do so amongst local members of the League.

You are offered free hints on holidays, whether walking, biking or camping.

You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.

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.

Those Silver Medals.

My chums all over the world will be glad to hear that the Silver Medal has arrived. Well has it been earned by numbers of my trusty supporters who have stood by the League through thick and thin. It is easy enough to back up a cause which is triumphing, but it is better still to pull your weight for a movement which is just beginning. I want to express my thanks to all those who kept the flag flying in face of a certain amount of opposition and ill-informed criticism. They showed that they knew the St. Frank's League was a winner. I congratulate all the numerous friends who realised from the very outset that the cause of the S.F.L. was a great and worthy one. And now look out for those Silver Medals.

A Splendid Letter.

Reginald Rushworth, 16, Durham Road, Low Fell, Gateshead, wants to hear from the Editor of an amateur magazine. This correspondent sends me news which we shall all be sorry for, since it concerns our chum, John Harrison, of Carlisle, who was killed by a motor-cycle. No keener member than Harrison. He has left a memory which is an inspiration—that of a loyal friend.

St. Frank's Weekly.

What's in a name? A correspondent suggests renaming the NELSON LEE LIBRARY as above. That may be neither here nor there, as the man said of the lost collar stud, but the idea, as regards the swing of the title, is admirable. Only it would not do for the N.L.L. It might come in, just as we had it before, for a special League paper.

A Jolt from Birmingham.

A clever letter reaches me from Brum. The writer says he is inclined to think that I am a lazy old josser. That is because some of his opinions are not acted on like a streak of the best lightning. He has fallen foul of one or two of the pictures. But then a crowd of readers approve of these illustrations. It is a funny world. Some fellows cannot see the other side. What they think is right. And right it may be, only sometimes such critics see a bit further ahead. They are before their time. One has to wait until the rest of the army comes up.

A Year of Big Booms.

I think that describes 1927 so far as we have gone. It will be truer yet. This New Year will see many vast improvements and tremendous advance in the NELSON LEE LIBRARY and the St. Frank's League. And

as to the League, there is extra good reason to be satisfied at the way in which the whole idea of it is soaking in. I have said it before; I will say it again. The main principle of the S.F.L. is the most important part of life. It stands for good cheer, for bold initiative, and playing the game in all seasons, for keeping a stiff upper lip when the luck seems out, and for remembering the other fellow who wants a leg up. That's our League. It is for all weathers. Can you better it?

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Edward Griffiths, 25, St. Andrews Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, wishes to correspond with a reader who is keen on drawing and painting.

Peter Young, c/o McLean, 23, White Street, Govan, Glasgow, wishes to correspond with readers overseas.

Cyril Harris, 5, Stanley Cottages, Les Petites Fontaines, St. Peter Port, Guernsey, Channel Islands, wishes to hear from readers anywhere.

Jeuan Phillips, 48, Packington Street, Islington, London, N.1, wishes to correspond with a reader in Wales.

Patrick Heffernan, 49, Portland Row, Dublin, wishes to hear from readers interested in amateur theatricals, especially in Dublin.

S. W. Le Roux, 10, Mackinnon Street, King William's Town, South Africa, wishes to hear from Leagueites who have back numbers of the N.L.L. and are prepared to exchange or sell.

James B. Singleton, 28, Orleans Road, Old Swan, Liverpool, wishes to correspond with a reader in Canada—preferably Toronto—about football, cycling, reading and stamp collecting.

William Denby, 213, Berkeley Street, Sandyford, Glasgow, would like to hear from Members willing to join the Mermaid Club, and from clubites generally.

S. Philip Kaminek, 30, Eileen Mansions, Christian Street, Commercial Road, London, E.1, desires to hear from readers who want back numbers of the Monster Library, Nos. 1 to 9, etc.

G. A. Eglinton, 45, Davenant Road, Upper Holloway, London, N., wishes to hear from readers in his district.

Bob Christian, P.O. Box 5977, Johannesburg, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers in London, Canada and New York. All letters answered.

P. Knapp, 28, King Street, Twickenham, Middx., wishes to hear from readers in China.

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By
ROGER FOWEY.

(Continued from page 41.)

He saw a pair of French windows on the other side; they were slightly open, and he plunged for them, tore them apart and then checked as he was about to dash into the room beyond. General Marlow and a group of officers were studying a big map spread out on the table.

"German troop-tank and two fighting machines in the street outside, sir!" said Jack. "It is a

He broke off as they heard a sudden shout, then a burst of rifle-fire that quickly died. A

crash came on the door, and it was heaved open as a man came staggering in, a wound at one side of his head.

"Germans—outside—sir!" he gasped.

Jack leaped to the doorway, with Buster and Tom beside him. The three plunged out into the hall, just in time to see Germans pouring up the broad steps from the street.

Jack fired from the hip, and he saw a man fall. The leaders paused; one of them lifted his hand, then slung a bomb down the hall.

Buster saw it coming—knew that if it burst it meant the finish for the three of them. He dropped his rifle and he leaped at the thing as it hummed through the air.

He caught it in both hands, then slung it back with all his strength. "Down!" he yelled, as he pitched himself full length to the floor. An instant after, and the bomb burst in the heart of the leaders of the Prussian Guard!

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