

THE ST. FRANK'S BOYS GO THROUGH IT

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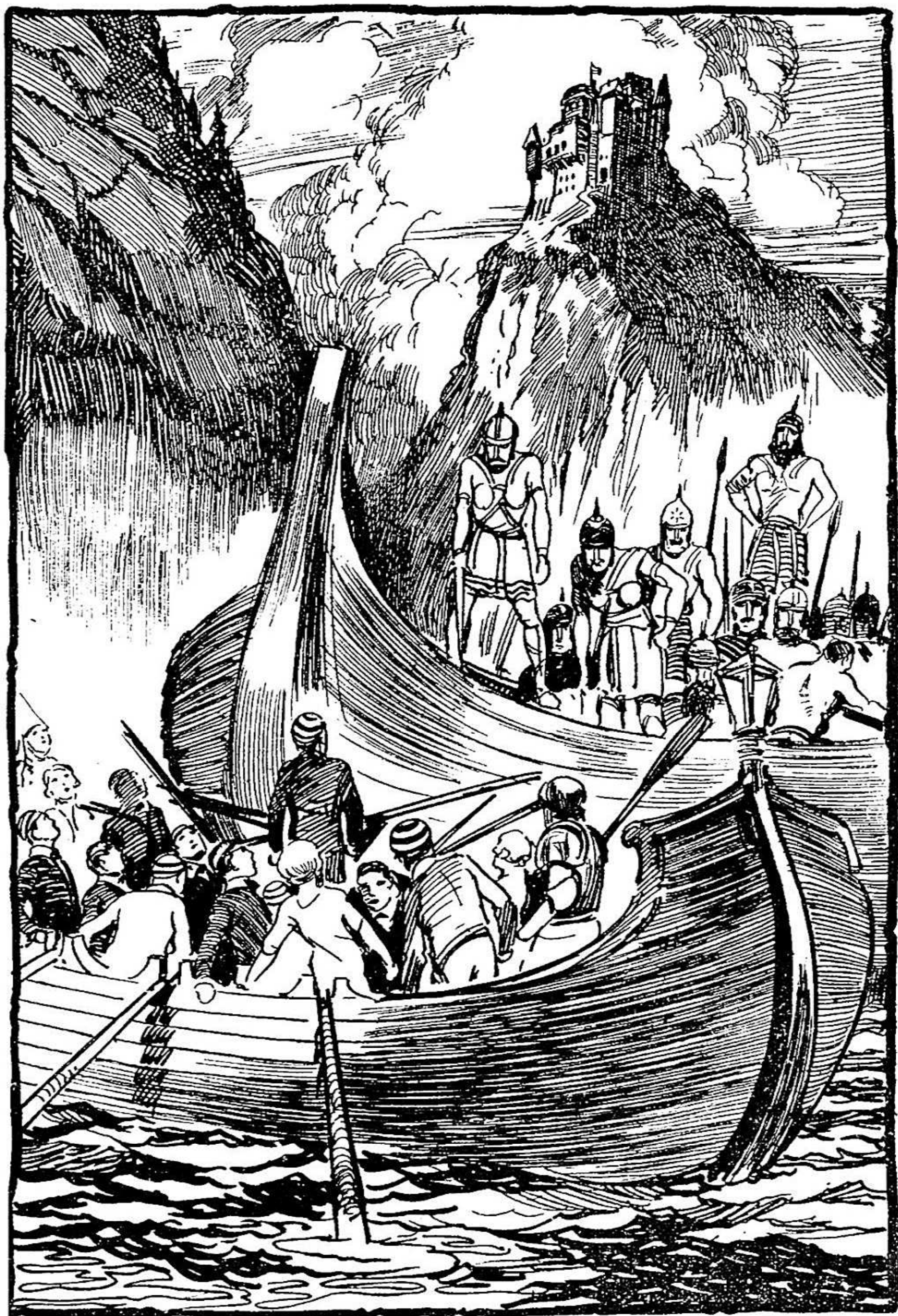
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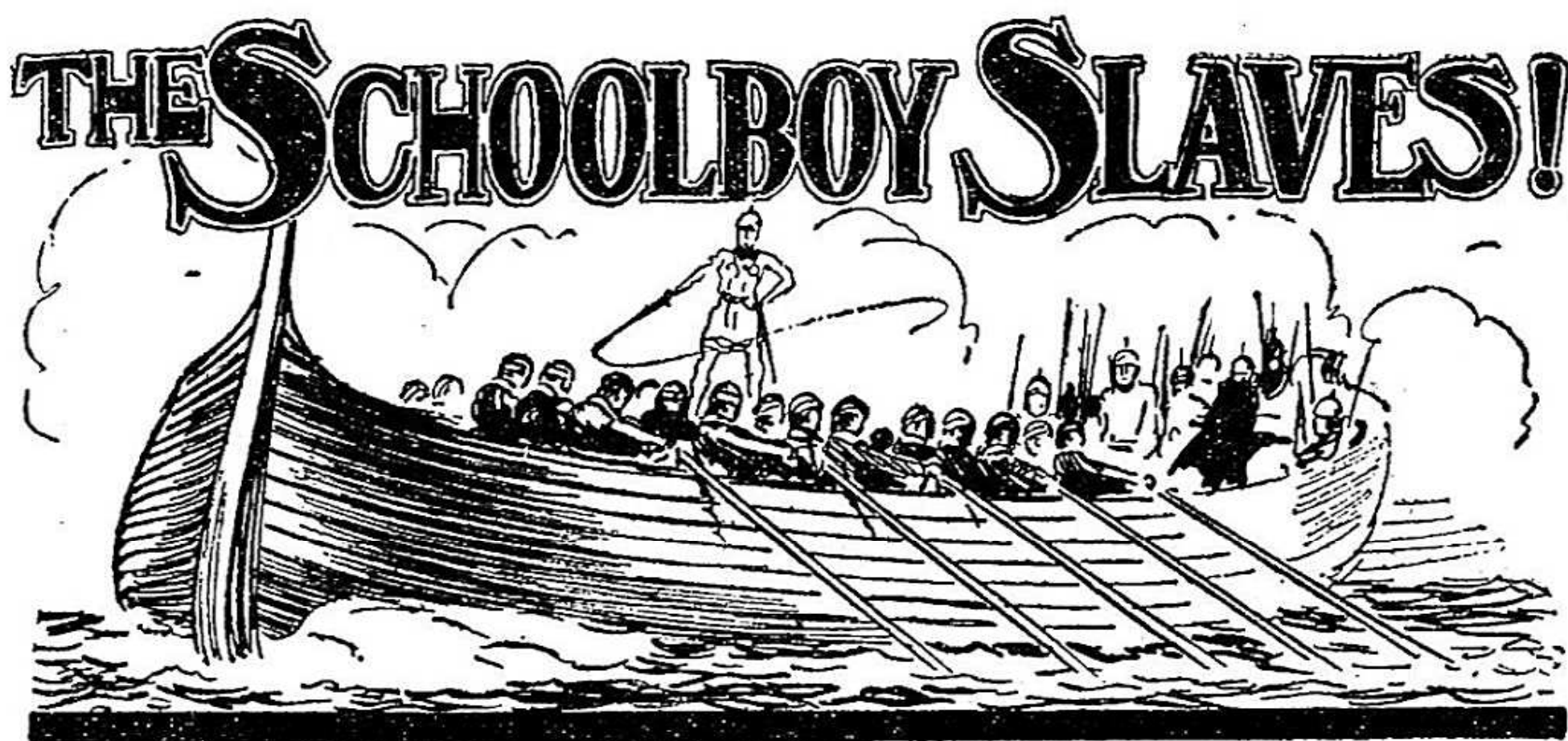
Captured by pirates and chained to the sweeps! Handy and Co. have a tough time of it in this week's rough ride.

THE SCHOOLBOY SLAVES

Read the thrilling adventures of the Boys of St. Frank in this week's topping long complete story.



As the pirate vessel crashed into the Royal craft, there was a loud splintering of wood. Above the shouts and wild confusion which followed came the clear and commanding voice of Browne. "Hold your swords!" he roared. "We surrender!"



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

The Boys of St. Frank's are captured by pirates in this week's exciting long complete story.

CHAPTER 1.

THE SCHOOLBOY KNIGHT-ERRANTS!

"WELL, it's all over, bar shouting," said Church complacently.

"Yes, and Handy'll do the shouting," grinned McClure. "In fact, he's doing it now. He's a queer chap, you know. Never satisfied!"

Edward Oswald Handforth was, in fact, indignant.

"I'm not saying anything about the victory," he snorted. "Our side has won—and the enemy is routed. But where did we come in? That's what I want to know!" he added grimly. "What part did we play?"

"The most important part of all, old man," said Nipper.

"Eh? You silly ass——"

"We're in charge of the Princess Mercia," explained Nipper, "and we've brought her through the danger zone, and——"

"I know that, you chump!" interrupted Handforth, with a sniff. "But what about the fighting? We didn't even get a sniff of it. That's what I'm grumbling about. All the others have had a hot time in battle, and we've simply dawdled along in this giddy barge, as safe as babes in a cradle."

All the fellows within earshot grinned at Handforth's complaint. So far as they were

concerned, they had nothing to grumble at, and they were perfectly content with the situation. They were not such fire-eaters as the war-like leader of Study D, and they felt that they had played their own part with creditable distinction.

The vessel which Handforth so contemptuously alluded to as a barge was, in point of fact, a singularly well-appointed craft of much distinction. In some ways it resembled a galley, for it was propelled by means of great sweeps. Yet Handforth wasn't far wrong in his general idea, for the ship might well be described as the royal barge of Northestria.

It carried the Princess Mercia herself—the reigning monarch of this strange, isolated nation hidden in the wastes of the Arctic. After all, she was only a mere girl—not older than seventeen—and it was a necessary precaution that she should be conveyed to a place of safety, far from the battle zone.

Her escort was the Royal Bodyguard, and the Royal Bodyguard consisted of St. Frank's fellows, from the highest officer to the lowest subordinate. Even the princess' ladies-in-waiting were mainly composed of girls from the Moor View School. So the main complement of the royal barge was largely British.

The princess herself was not only high in

spirits, but her eyes were sparkling with excitement and enthusiastic joy. Those brown eyes of hers had missed nothing during the past few hours, and she had every reason to be grateful towards these enforced visitors from the outer world.

For Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Umlosi, and the other members of the ill-fated airship party had saved Northestria from utter and absolute defeat. There was not a soul in that quaint little country who did not give "Lee the Lionhearted" full credit for his masterly handling of the situation.

And now the crisis was over.

"Brothers, we can safely continue our trip in the knowledge that all is well," remarked William Napoleon Browne, the genial skipper of St. Frank's Fifth. "We have done our bit, and Brother William is safely in our midst. Upon the whole, we have every reason to congratulate ourselves."

"Hear, hear!"

"What-ho! Absolutely!"

Handforth thought fit to disagree.

"Rats!" he growled. "We've got a fat lot to congratulate ourselves! We left before anything happened, and we've only looked at the battle from a distance."

"Didn't we rescue your young brother?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"Oh, Willy!" said Handforth. "Well, I suppose we did; but it was the young fat-head's fault for dropping into the lake. Why couldn't he have dropped two or three miles further up the coast?"

"If he had, we should have been in the heart of the fighting!" said Church.

"Exactly!" agreed Handforth pointedly.

Nipper grinned.

"You're a bloodthirsty bounder, Handy," he said cheerfully. "You'd like to go straight back now, and charge into battle, wouldn't you? But it can't be done, old son. We've got our orders, and we've got to carry 'em out. The Princess Mercia has got to be conveyed safely to Westwold Castle."

Handforth made no comment. In his heart, he knew that Dick Hamilton was right. But it galled him to think that they had just missed the most exciting part of the grim engagement. True, they had rescued young Willy Handforth from a watery death in the lake, and had delayed their own journey considerably by so doing. But, fortunately, no harm had been done.

And now the battle was over.

The aggressive Gothlanders, under their Overlord, Kassker the Grim, had been turned back. The enemy fleets were now scattered all over the lake, disordered and disorganised. They were fleeing back to Gothland. Many of these enemy ships were in view, and could be seen from the royal craft as it turned towards a rugged river-mouth on the Northestrian coast.

There had been many thrills of late.

The St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls had been guests on Lord Dorrimore's airship for just a few hours; they had been

carried northwards with the idea of spending a fortnight on the dear old Wanderer, Dorrie's famous yacht, which was anchored in a quiet bay off a deserted coast in the far North. The yacht had been equipped as a base for the great dirigible.

But unexpected disaster had shattered every plan.

Dorrie had brought this airship up into the Arctic so that he could search for a lost friend—a rash explorer, who had ventured on a flight to the North Pole by aeroplane. Even while the rescue airship had been secured to her mooring-mast the latter had given way, and part of the great ship had fouled the wreckage, rendering her uncontrollable in the gale.

And so the whole party had been blown into the unknown wastes of the Arctic night. None of them quite knew how they had survived, for the blizzards had been so terrific that every soul had expected disaster and death.

And then, just when things had seemed at their worst—when the fury of the elements had been utterly demoniac—the great airship had been hurled over the tortured elements into a strange zone of peace. She had been pitched there like a shuttlecock, and it was only by a miracle that she had escaped destruction in the upper air.

Crippled, losing gas rapidly, the Titan had drifted, and had descended to earth in this unheard-of oasis of the frozen North. It was a huge natural basin, hundreds of miles in extent, entirely surrounded by frowning mountains and glaciers. There were volcanoes, too—such volcanoes as the outer world had never suspected.

Although the entire upper air of this basin was everlastingly tortured, the lower atmosphere was calm and equable in temperature. For the volcanic nature of the whole district made it more or less sub-tropical. Down here there were forests, hills and valleys. A false daylight flooded the oasis with radiance. For those great volcanoes reflected their white-hot fires upon the everlasting mists of the upper air. Far, far above there was never any peace. Storms raged year in, year out. But not the faintest echo of their fury came down to the nestling hills and valleys of this miniature world.

Having safely landed—although the airship had been wrecked beyond all possibility of repair—the adventurers had found themselves in a whirl of unexpected excitements. For here lived people of the Middle Ages, it seemed. There were walled cities, moated castles, and vast feudal territories, each ruled over by its own Overlord, but all subservient to the Crown.

The unbidden visitors had learned that these people called themselves the Northestrians. They were pure descendants of Anglo-Saxon stock. In the dim past their ancestors—so their skimpy records told—had been trapped while on a voyage, probably to the Netherlands. A number of primitive

ships had been caught up in a strange current and carried northwards, in spite of every effort.

Nelson Lee assumed that in that long-past century there had been a gigantic volcanic upheaval, and a powerful current had been caused in the sea—a current that had carried those primitive ships helplessly on its bosom. And so the forefathers of these Northestrians had found themselves within the great oasis. The upheavals had ceased, the seas had become normal, and so the unfortunates had found themselves hemmed in—shut off from the world.

Perhaps a similar phenomenon had taken place centuries earlier than that, for the Anglo-Saxons had found other inhabitants in that stricken basin—a type of savage who were easily recognised as descendants of the ancient Goths. And these savages had been used as slaves through the centuries.

The airship-party found Northestria and its people asleep and heedless of approaching peril. Indeed, at first the Britons had been suspected—they had been imprisoned and subjected to many indignities. But Ethelbert the Red, the princess' chief adviser, had since learned that these strangers were actually the saviours of his race.

The Gothlanders were a brutal, warlike tribe, and they lived on the other side of the great central lake—the inland sea that was the most remarkable feature of this hidden country. For untold years the Gothlanders had been held in contempt—they had been regarded as an inferior race, and deserving only of scorn.

But Kassker the Grim, the modern leader of the Gothlanders, was a man of ambition. As Nelson Lee and Dorrie had rapidly found out, he was a murderous tyrant of the most villainous type, and his chief followers were little better. And Lee had made the Northestrians realise that their complacency was unjustified—that the Gothland invasion, when it came, would be a massacre.

That Lee's warning had been justified was now well proved. For Kassker's men had made their first attempt. An enormous army had swept across the lake in hundreds of ships. But, owing to the twentieth century methods of Lee and his helpers, the brutes had been turned back. Yet it had been touch and go.

And even now the danger was not past!



CHAPTER 2.

THE SECRET OF THE COVE!

HAD the Gothlanders maintained their assault upon the Northestrian coast, the land would now have been over-run by the bloodthirsty invaders.

True, the Northestrian armies had been hastily formed and trained, and the whole nation was alive to the danger. But they had

never been a warlike people, and these new soldiers were untried and little better than raw recruits. They would never have been able to withstand the onslaught of Kassker's trained armies.

Nelson Lee's devices had started the rout. Some clumsily contrived "tanks"—made, indeed, from the wrecked airship's gondolas—had assisted in the defeat. First one company of the enemy had retreated in panic, then another had caught the fever. And so, almost before the desperate defenders could quite realise it, this disease of fear had spread like a plague. And once the Gothlanders had commenced the retreat, the issue was decided.

Thoroughly panic-stricken, the invaders had fled, and the other ships, laden with troops and war materials, had turned about. All this the St. Frank's fellows had seen from the royal barge as it was taken down the coast out of the danger zone. And now the last of the Gothlander vessels were straggling back to their own country—no longer a proud, imposing armada, but a disorganised rabble.

And from one end of Northestria to the other the people were rejoicing. Victory! The enemy had been thrust back and the battle was won—but every Northestrian knew that Nelson Lee and the others were the real victors.

"So far as I can see, we might just as well turn back," said Handforth, as he stared across the lake. "Why should we take the princess to this inland fortress now?"

"Orders," said Church briefly.

"Rats! Who's orders?"

"The commander-in-chief's."

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"Mr. Lee's, you mean?" asked Handforth, frowning. "Very likely, but things are different now. The battle's over, so we might just as well go back to Dunstane. Now then, you chaps! Ease up! We'll turn about, and make tracks for the capital! And then we can hear all the news!"

"You ass!" muttered Church. "It's not your place to give orders."

"I'm Captain of the Bodyguard, aren't I?" roared Handforth.

"A delusion, Brother Ted!" said Browne, shaking his head. "I have heard a rumour to the effect that you once held that post, but you are now a mere lieutenant. I am in command, and thus far our voyage has progressed with success. Pray do not make it necessary for me to remonstrate."

Handforth glared.

"Yes, I'd forgotten for the minute," he said bitterly. "I've been pushed out of the captaincy, and I'm just a lieutenant now—the same as Nipper and Pitt! There's no justice in this world!"

Browne smiled agreeably.

"We must learn to take our troubles philosophically, Brother Handforth," he said gently. "I can only advise you to hope. Hope is a wonderful stimulant. Perhaps I shall fall in battle, and then will come your chance of promotion. One never knows."

"You can go and eat coke!" said Handforth gruffly.

"A strange way for a junior officer to address his senior; but no matter, we will let it pass," said Browne. "Experience has taught me that any argument with you is fraught with lurking dangers. You shall have your own way, Brother Ted. I graciously permit you to have the last word."

Handforth was so disgusted that he didn't want it. He took his turn at one of the sweeps, and resigned himself to the inevitable.

The princess and her ladies-in-waiting now appeared from the well-appointed deck cabin aft, and they were all looking happy. The young princess felt quite safe in charge of these St. Frank's fellows. There were no others on board—not a single Northestrian soldier. Indeed, with the exception of the princess and two of her native ladies and Prince Oswy, everybody on board was British, consisting entirely of St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls.

Nelson Lee, of course, had a definite object in sending them all to Westwold Castle. He was assured that there could be no danger there, and it was a good way of getting his young charges safely out of the battle area. Both Nelson Lee and Dorrie were hopeful of returning to the outer world one day, and they had no desire to go back with several members of the youthful party missing.

Exactly how any escape from this oasis was to be made was a problem which could hardly be considered now. The airship's wireless was in full working order, but not

a single message could be got through. At all events, although the operator was constantly at work, he received no replies. Perhaps the volcanic nature of this place, with the added disadvantage of the continuous air disturbances above, rendered wireless transmission an impossibility.

Lee was determined to take action soon; but, as these people had appointed him commander-in-chief of their armies, he could do nothing else but confine his attentions to the grim work in hand. Indeed, it was essential that he should do so, for the very safety of his own party. For if the Gothlanders once gained control, death for these Britons would be swift and sudden.

Kassker the Grim had sworn to annihilate them, for he knew how effectively they had helped the Northestrians to defeat his hordes. So, in helping the fair princess, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were also helping their own party.

Westwold Castle was, according to Ethelbert the Red, a spot where perfect safety could be found. Even if Northestria was over-run by the enemy, Westwold would provide a haven of refuge for the princess. It was a moated castle, some way up one of the smaller rivers.

This river was entered by means of a gorge. A rocky cove opened up, and the gorge drove inland between frowning cliffs. There could be no question of danger now, since the enemy had not landed on this remote part of the Northestrian coast. And once the barge was well up the river, with that narrow gorge behind it, there could be no chance of pursuit. And William Napoleon Browne was determined to carry out his trust to the letter. Soldiers were waiting at Westwold, the trained troops of the local Overlord. Everything, in fact, was in readiness for the princess' reception.

Prince Oswy, who accompanied his sister, was a mere child; but one day it was hoped that he would ascend the throne. So his life was valuable, and Browne would not be content until his charges were safely delivered behind the gates of Westwold. The other St. Frank's fellows were entirely in agreement with their captain. Handforth, naturally, was in opposition. Life meant nothing for him unless he opposed everybody about him.

The Royal craft was already swinging round into the cove, and more than one of the Remove fellows felt that this trip was a little more than they had bargained for. It was hard work, wielding those great oars, and the vessel itself was by no means a racer. She plunged along rather clumsily, answering slowly to her helm, and sluggishly to the pull of the sweeps.

"It'll be a jolly good thing when we finish this trip," remarked Tommy Watson, as he took a brief rest. "How much farther is it to Westwold, anyhow?"

"Two miles up the river, I understand," replied Nipper.

Tommy pulled a long face.

"Against the current," he grumbled.

"It's not powerful—only just an easy flow," smiled Nipper. "I should think it'll take us another three hours, at the most."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Three hours, dear old boy? An' we haven't eaten for over four! That'll make seven hours without a feed!"

"It was very thoughtless of them not to pack up some sandwiches, and provide a few thermos flasks!" said Nipper dryly. "Never mind, my lads—we shall survive, I dare say. We're fairly into the gorge by now."

The open lake had been left, and the rugged cliffs rose on both sides. On this part of the coast there were no villages, for the land was barren and rocky. There was no sign of human life anywhere.

At least, so it appeared at first. But before the Royal vessel had progressed another hundred yards, a surprise came. From beyond a jutting spur of rock appeared a great galley, and the vessel bore down menacingly upon the schoolboy knight-errants and their charges.



CHAPTER 3.

THE PIRATE GALLEY.

As yet, the strange galley was nearly half a mile distant, having appeared so dramatically from the rocks on the other side of the wide cove. It almost seemed that that craft had been lying in wait.

"Hallo!" said Stevens of the Fifth. "Who's this?"

"I don't know; but I don't like her looks!" replied Browne, staring across the calm waters of the bay. "Brothers, we must be ready for action."

"By Jove!" breathed Nipper. "You don't suspect—"

"I may be wrong—I trust I am wide of the mark—but I have a feeling that there is dirty work afoot," said Browne calmly. "Seldom have I seen such a sinister-looking craft as this."

They were all staring at the approaching vessel, and many of the fellows at the sweeps relaxed their efforts in their curiosity. It seemed incredible to them that there could be any danger. Handforth, in fact, laughed outright.

"Rats!" he said. "This is a Northeastrian ship—sent here on purpose to guard the bay until we arrived, I expect. You're not suggesting, Browne, that she's a Gothlander, I suppose?"

Browne was looking very perturbed.

"Neither Gothlander nor Northeastrian," he said significantly.

Handforth stared.

"There aren't any others, you chump!" he retorted. "You know as well as I do that—"

"A pirate!" broke in Nipper with a jump. "Exactly," muttered Browne. "Such, Brother Hamilton, is my fear."

"Oh, corks!"

"A pirate!"

"Odds corsairs and galley slaves!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, yo-ho for the Spanish Main—what? Dash it, we shall all be walking the plank next! Life, laddies, is becoming somewhat too strenuous for the Pride of the Glenthornes! Absolutely!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Pirates!" he said tensely. "By George! Of course! I guessed she was a pirate as soon as I set eyes on her! Good! This means a scrap!"

"You hopeless optimist!" snapped Nipper. "What chance shall we have against a galley like this? It's over twice our size, and she seems to be swarming with men. Pirates! Hang it, the thing seems impossible! We shall wake up soon."

Browne shook his head.

"Unfortunately, we are dealing with realities," he said gravely. "Possibly we are mistaken, but there is something about this galley which looks unhealthy. We were told of no escorting vessel. We were led to believe that this gorge would be quite open and deserted. I venture to suggest that there is no premeditated work here whatever. Merely a mischance, brothers. The meeting is as much a surprise to them as it is to us; but the odds are all on their side."

This was true enough. And the galley was now approaching with greater speed than ever. That she was a pirate ship became more and more obvious. Men could even be seen on the gangway amidships, wielding heavy whips, lashing the unfortunate galley slaves at the sweeps.

Curiously enough, nobody had taken the possibility of pirate intervention into account. When Nelson Lee had sent this Royal ship on her journey, he had feared that the Gothlander invaders would swoop down in their thousands, and he had dispatched the St. Frank's fellows in charge of the princess at an hour's notice. None of the Northeastrians had warned him of pirates. On the contrary, they had assured him that the Royal ship would have a free and unhampered journey.

As Browne had said, it was probably a pure mischance.

For years prior to the recent enmity the Northeastrians and the Gothlanders had developed a considerable commerce. And trading ships had regularly plied to and fro across the lake.

Naturally enough, perhaps, piracy had developed at the same time as the commerce. For here was rich prey—vessels laden with merchandise of every kind. And so speedy galleys had made their appearance, filled with armed ruffians, their great oars wielded by slaves. Most of these slaves were prisoners, men who had been captured from raided and sunken merchant ships.

But of late there had been little or no traffic between the two countries, and the pirates had been having a lean time of it. Their headquarters were known to be among the rocky islets in mid-lake, and it had been the custom to swoop down suddenly upon unsuspecting trading vessels.

But since this commerce had practically ceased, the majority of the pirates had gone out of business. Perhaps this was why Lee had received no warning of such a danger. Piracy, nowadays, was almost dead. Practically only one galley of this type was known to exist, and even then only rumours of it reached the capital. But the simple fishermen of the coastal villages were in no doubt. For this particular pirate galley had made a habit of raiding the mainland for supplies.

Possibly this was the very galley!

In view of all the turmoil on the lake—the clash of the opposing fleets—the pirates had sought refuge in this gorge. She was no warship of the ordinary type, and she wanted to escape the chance of being embroiled in actual warfare. It was an ill chance that had led her commander to seek shelter here.

"She's a pirate, all right!" said Nipper grimly. "If it comes to a fight, you chaps, we shall be done. There's not an earthly chance of beating them off. We didn't come prepared for trouble of this sort."

"We can try to escape, though," said Fullwood.

"Yes, but is it much good?" asked Dick quietly.

The question was really unnecessary, for anybody with half an eye could see that flight was out of the question. The galley, with its slave labour, was making double the speed of the Royal barge, and it also had the advantage of the current. It was impossible for the St. Frank's fellows to continue up the river, and it seemed equally futile to turn about and make for the open lake again. There simply wasn't time for such manœuvres. The pirate was almost upon them.

The Princess Mercia heard echoes of the alarm. And she was now looking at the approaching galley with deep concern. Her two native ladies-in-waiting were visibly affrighted, although the Moor View girls were far more curious than scared.

"Is there any danger, your Majesty?" asked Irene Manners wonderingly.

"I fear so!" replied the princess. "For this galley is surely a pirate! We thought not of such dangers when we set forth."

"Oh, but surely they won't dare to attack us?" asked Doris Berkeley. "It's too absurd! They must know that they'll be caught and executed if they dare anything so rash. It's more in their line to raid helpless villages."

"But see!" said Mercia, pointing. "They come apace."

There was no denying the aggressive appearance of the galley. Exactly what the

pirates could hope to gain was a mystery. There was no plunder on this ship, and, as Doris had pointed out, it seemed like sheer madness for the pirates to attack. For, if they did so, the news would fly rapidly, and then a hundred Northestrian boats would search for the pirates, and wipe them out. It seemed far more likely that the outlaws would give the Royal vessel a wide berth.

And yet the galley still surged onwards.

And now there was no doubt whatever regarding her intention. Men could be seen waiting on her bulwarks, ready to spring aboard the Royal barge at the moment of contact. Raucous orders were being shouted, and the motley throng of ruffians outnumbered the bodyguard by three or four to one.

"Oh, what can we do?" asked Irene, in alarm.

"Fear not!" said the princess. "They will not dare harm us."

"We'll fight!" roared Handforth excitedly. "Get ready, you chaps! As soon as these rotters try to board us, slam into 'em!"

"Hear, hear!"

"St. Frank's for ever!"

The fellows at the oars abandoned them, and reached for any handy object that might serve as a weapon. For now, at the last moment, it was clear that a fight was inevitable, and equally clear that flight was impossible.

William Napoleon Browne pursed his lips.

"Stay!" he shouted. "Let them take us!"

"What?" yelled a dozen juniors.

"We must surrender!" shouted Browne. "Steady, brothers! When these brutes come aboard, make no attempt to hinder them!"

"You're mad!" gasped Handforth. "You're off your rocker!"



CHAPTER 4.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

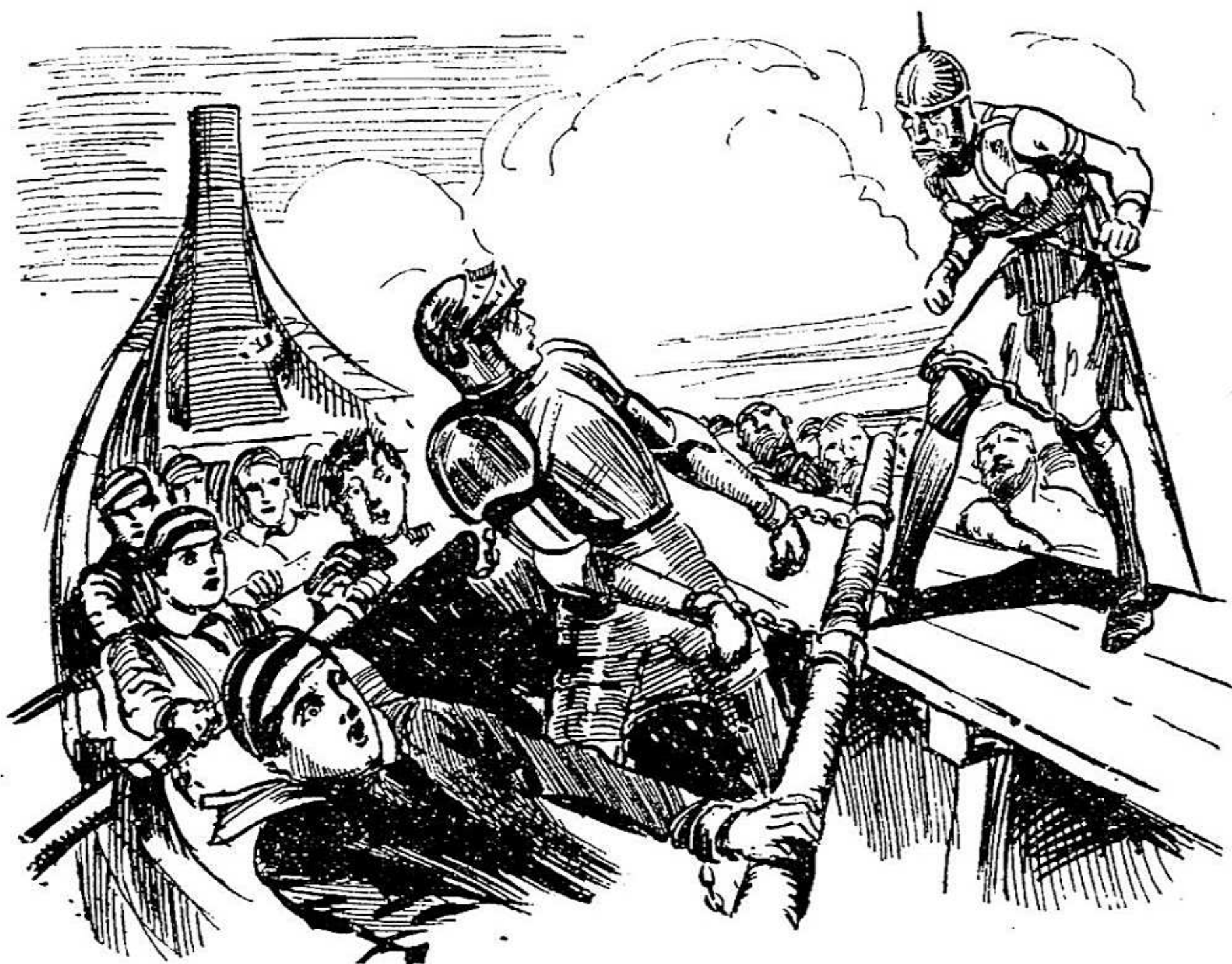
UT Browne was very sane, and he was proving his qualities as a leader, as compared with the excitable Handforth's.

For this was indeed a case where surrender was wise and in no way cowardly.

Browne had seen at one glance that fighting would be fatal—that resistance would only lead to unnecessary bloodshed. What good would it do if half these youngsters gave their lives for absolutely nothing? The pirates were so overwhelmingly superior that a defeat was certain.

Far better, then, courageously to surrender.

Nipper agreed with Browne wholeheartedly, and so did such fellows as Fullwood and Reggie Pitt. They had cool heads, and they could see the futility of any fight. It went against the grain, but they were not super-beings, and could not perform miracles. As



Maddened by Siegan's vicious kick, Handforth tore frantically at his chains. "You coward!" he panted. "I'll make you pay for that!"

members of the bodyguard, they were all armed with swords.

But they were opposed to at least a hundred pirates—ruffians with pikes and other deadly weapons. It would be little short of suicide to engage such an enemy as this.

Crash!

The two vessels came together, the idle oars of the Royal craft being smashed to matchwood. In a second the air was filled with wild and alarming shouts. Confusion reigned.

"Hold your swords!" roared Browne. "We surrender!"

"'Tis well!" shouted the pirate leader as he leapt aboard. "Thou art wise in such a decision. Remember my orders, men! No blood is to be spilt; none of these young puppies are to be harmed."

Browne sighed.

"Alas!" he murmured. "It seems, then, that we could have had a smack at them, after all. They didn't mean to perform their little massacre, in any case. Life is full of such blows."

There was no fight—although, of course, Handforth ignored all orders, and went into action on his own. He was lucky to escape alive, for he was beset by a dozen pirates, and he was quickly disarmed and subdued.

The young princess had remained near the

doorway of her cabin throughout, watching the scene with wide eyes. She had gone pale, but otherwise she held herself well in hand. But her two native ladies were in a sad condition of fright. Irene & Co. just watched with breathless excitement.

"What is this?" murmured the princess suddenly. "In faith, do mine eyes deceive me, or is it a truth? Siegan! 'Tis Siegan, as I live!"

The pirate commander turned, and swept off his hat.

"We meet again, fair Majesty!" he said mockingly as he bowed. "But methinks this time the circumstances are more favourable. Thou art in no danger, so let the colour return to thy pallid cheeks."

The princess' eyes blazed.

"I fear not a cur such as thou!" she retorted proudly.

Siegan the Slim scowled.

"'Tis idle talk!" he snapped. "You are all my prisoners, and 'twill go ill with any of these boys if they attempt mischief."

"Siegan the Slim!" shouted Handforth, staring. "The rotter I smashed in combat! The ex-captain of the bodyguard!"

"Yes, by Jove, the same man!" said Nipper. "We wondered what had become of him—and now we know! He's turned pirate!"

Siegan, a man with vicious-looking eyes, nodded.

"Ay, pirate!" he agreed. "What else? Thou knewest naught of my escape from prison, good Majesty! Ay, 'twas well concealed from thee, I doubt not! An outcast and an outlaw, to whom could I turn but to these good friends of the lake? And now, by the bones of Sarus, 'tis my hour!"

There was something wickedly sinister in his tone. This man had been the captain of the Royal bodyguard, and Handforth had defeated him with his bare fists. Since then, none of the St. Frank's fellows had given the man a thought. But here he was—an avowed pirate.

Disgraced and outlawed, it was clear that he had thrown in his lot with the pirates of the great lake. Indeed, he was their commander. And what a crew they were, too!

Most of them were Gothlanders, as the juniors could see by their bestial faces. Others were Northestrians, however—rogues who had been driven out of decent society by their very habits. This motley mob, indeed, represented the scum of both races.

And Siegan's present activity could be guessed at.

In all probability he had been hiding in this cove by mere chance. Recognising the Royal barge, however, his quick brain had decided upon a sudden coup, and so he had seized the vessel and all her company.

But what could his object be? What could he hope to gain by this act of madness? He surely knew that he would have a thousand men on his trail as soon as this knowledge reached the ears of Ethelbert the Red, Northestria's real ruler and the princess' chief adviser.

But Siegan seemed perfectly cool and calm. He had changed greatly during the course of the past week or so—since his public disgrace. He had allowed his beard to grow, and his hair was matted and untidy. His clothing was soiled, and his whole appearance was like that of a ruffian. Association with these pirates had quickly had effect. Siegan the Slim was as ruffianly as any of his associates, and his rapid descent seemed to indicate that he had found his true level.

"Thou art rash, Siegan!" said the princess quietly. "It were better for thee to order our release. Naught but disaster will overtake thee—"

"I know what I am doing, my proud Mercia!" interrupted Siegan sneeringly. "By St. Attalus! The boy is here, too," he added in a gloating voice. "The young Oswy! 'Tis a greater coup than I anticipated! Marry, but my triumph will be complete!"

"You idiot!" roared Handforth. "You'll all be wiped out for this! If you dare to harm any of us—"

"A murrain take thee!" snarled Siegan, turning upon him with blazing eyes. "Thou art the youth! I have full reason to remem-

ber thee, thou cur! And well shalt thou suffer! My memory is good!"

Church and McClure and the other fellows were alarmed, for they half expected to see Handforth done to death on the spot. This man naturally had a terrible grudge against Edward Oswald. For the leader of Study D had not only disgraced him in public, but, owing to that combat, Siegan had lost favour with the princess, and had been thrown into prison.

He had a big score to settle with Handforth! But Siegan included all these boys in his enmity, it seemed. His expression, as he looked them over, was proof enough of his evil designs.

And while this was taking place, Irene & Co. were acting in a somewhat curious manner. Far from accepting this situation with plucky reserve, they were fairly whimpering with fright, clinging to one another like helpless children. And more than one St. Frank's fellow was looking at them in wonder.

The girls presented a sorry picture.

Sobbing and whimpering, they were clustered round the princess, their eyes large with terror, their limbs scarcely stable enough to support them.

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth, as he stared.

"Ass!" whispered Church. "They're bluffing!"

"Eh? What the dickens—"

"They must be!" insisted Church. "They wouldn't act like that otherwise."

Handforth looked relieved, but he was very puzzled. Why were the girls behaving as though they were bereft of all courage?

The reason was not far to seek.

The princess' two native ladies-in-waiting were so timid and frightened that Irene & Co. had at first felt very uncomfortable. These Northestrian ladies, it seemed, were very frail and fragile. So Irene Manners decided that it was up to the rest of them to act in the same way—so as not to appear brazen in the princess' eyes. Timidity seemed to be expected of them, so they obliged.

The girls had another reason, too.

It might help them, later on, if they made a big pretence of being helpless. They would be treated with contempt, and thus they might escape indignities that would otherwise be heaped upon them.

CHAPTER 5.

THE SCHOOLBOY GALLEY-SLAVES!



SIEGAN THE SLIM was evidently a man of action.

He turned to a group of his subordinates, and gave them some muttered

orders. The men regarded him askance.

"Well, fools!" snarled Siegan. "What ails ye?"

"'Tis a risky thing, bold Siegan——" began one of them.

"By St. Guthrie! Am I to be questioned by such scum as thou?" roared the pirate chief. "Out upon thee, Aspar! Do as I bid, or 'twill go hard with thee! I am here to be obeyed!"

The man turned aside, scowling. It was fairly obvious that the rank and file of the pirates were alarmed. They did not like this enterprise at all. It seemed to them, likely enough, that they were deliberately running their heads into a noose. To seize the royal barge, and all its occupants, was a feat they had never bargained for.

What would be the inevitable result? A vast uproar throughout the whole of North-estria—a grim search for the captives—and death to their captors. And how could this one pirate craft hope to defy, not only the Northestrians, but these accursed strangers, with their own uncanny craft? Certainly, it seemed to Siegan's followers that the proceeding was rash.

But Siegan the Slim was perfectly at ease.

"Think ye I am mad?" he asked gruffly. "I know what I do! There will be no danger—but wealth! By this one stroke we make ourselves secure for life—ay, and gain high favour, too!"

He said no more than that, but insisted upon his orders being carried out.

The Royal bodyguard was helpless—much to their chagrin. But even Handforth was now realising that William Napoleon Browne's attitude was the correct one. At least, they were all alive and unharmed. On the other hand, had they shown fight, it was a certainty that they would have been slain. Siegan may have given orders that no blood was to be shed, but, in a desperate fight, these pirates would not have remembered such unnatural instructions.

"Things look very bad, my lads," murmured Nipper. "But we can't do better than maintain old Browne's policy. We'll take a tip from the girl, too, and pretend to be scared out of our wits."

"It goes frightfully against the grain, old boy, but I suppose you're right," said Archie. "I mean to say, we'll make these dashed blighters think we're a platoon of milksops, what? Good gad! The old Glen-thorne blood rises against it, but it's got to be done."

"Rot!" growled Handforth. "I'm going to take a smack at Siegan as soon as I get near him!"

"Handy, you'll be crazy if you do!" urged Church. "Can't you see that Nipper's right?"

"Blow Nipper!"

"And Browne's right, too!" put in McClure. "There's no sense in fighting when the odds are all against us."

"Odds!" retorted Handforth. "I never count the odds!"

"I know you don't," said Church bitterly. "And one of these days you'll never count anything else, either! Be reasonable, Handy! These pirates are armed with swords and cutlasses and pikes, and goodness knows what else. They're double our size, and they're three to one against us. And they're all murderers—pirates who have been preying on trading ships for years! We're lucky to be alive now, so we don't want deliberately to ask for trouble."

Handforth grunted. Not being exactly devoid of wits, he knew that the others were right. But he felt that it was necessary for him to oppose them—if only for the sake of argument. Edward Oswald was one of the best chaps in the world, but occasionally he could be exasperating to a degree.

As it happened, he had no chance to argue further.

Siegan the Slim was giving more orders, and a number of the pirates were hustling the St. Frank's fellows, and edging them towards the side of the vessel.

"Over with ye!" roared one of the men. "Aboard the galley, ye puppies!"

But there was no help for it.

The entire bodyguard—which, indeed, consisted of the Remove juniors, the two Fifth-Formers, Boots and Christine of the Fourth, and Willy & Co. of the Third—was transferred to the pirate galley. There were about twenty of them all told—strong, healthy youngsters who were simply longing to fight these ruffians. But the pirates numbered full seventy, and had all the advantage.

Curbing their inward fury, the St. Frank's crowd tumbled over the bulwarks of the galley, and were there seized upon by other pirates. They were placed in groups of five as they came, and held in these groups.

In the meantime, certain activities were afoot among the galley-slaves. A number of these hapless wretches were being unchained, and the movement was a significant one. The juniors watched, with a dim suspicion of what was coming.

This pirate craft was a galley of the recognised pattern—similar to those deadly vessels which were once the scourge of the Mediterranean—manned by corsairs, with Christian slaves at the oars.

There were slaves here, too—men who had been captured for the purpose. They were a pitiable-looking lot. Each great sweep had five men to it, and all were chained to their seats.

Right down the centre of the galley ran a wide gangway, with the oar-pits on either side. In all, there were twenty oars—a hundred slaves to propel this ship through the water. Up and down the gangway strode the burliest of the pirates—armed with cruel lashes. Every slave was bare to the waist, and many of them bore ugly scars across their backs.

The juniors were horrified by the very nearness of this terror.

And Princess Mercia herself was not

spared. She was transferred to the galley, too, with Lady Githa and Lady Elfrida, her two native companions. The Moor View girls were taken aboard immediately afterwards. And all were escorted into the galley's great cabin by Siegan himself.

"Fear naught, gentle ladies," said Siegan mockingly. "Ye shall have this chamber to yourselves, and none shall disturb ye. I may be a pirate, but I am still a gentleman!" "Thou art flattering thyself, knave!" retorted the princess coldly.

He laughed, and turned aside. Many of his men were now manning the Royal barge, and the unchained slaves were being hustled across to take their places at the captive vessel's oars.

And into their vacant seats the St. Frank's fellows were thrust.

"'Tis well!" gloated Siegan. "Chain them tightly, my bold henchmen! Let them have a taste of the whip, too. Never did I hope for such sweet revenge as this!"

"Look!" murmured Irene Manners, as she peered through the window of the cabin. "Look, Doris! They're chaining them all to the oars!"

"The brutes!" said Doris hotly. "Don't worry, Renie—they'll pay for this before long!"

"I hope so," said Irene quietly. "But how can we be sure? I believe they're going to take us out to those islands! Or—or perhaps —" She paused, and a startled expression came into her eyes. "Oh!" she went on. "I wonder!"

"You wonder what?" asked Mary Summers.

"Why, don't you remember?" breathed Irene. "Wasn't there some talk of Siegan being a paid spy for Kassker? Perhaps he means to take us all into Gothland—prisoners! And that's why he is so confident!"

"There's nothing like being cheerful!" said Doris drily. "So we might be taken into Gothland, eh? What a lovely prospect!"

All the girls knew that Irene had made a shrewd guess, and the prospect was enough to alarm the stoutest heart. Siegan's very complacency seemed to indicate that he planned something deeper than a mere act of piracy.

Undoubtedly, Siegan was looking flushed with triumph. Would he have looked like that if he had not conceived some master-stroke? The Gothlanders were routed—flying back in disorder to their own land. But what a reversal of the whole position if the Princess Mercia and her young brother were taken by the enemy!



CHAPTER 6.

SIEGAN TALKS TOO MUCH!

OOD gad!"

Archie Glenthorne gazed in dismay at his delicate, shapely wrists. Rough iron cuffs had been

clamped about them, and he was securely

chained to the middle section of one of the great oars. With him, two on either side, were Dick Hamilton and Tregellis-West, and Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Clive Russell.

All the other fellows were chained to other sweeps in the same way—five apiece. Four of the powerful oars were thus manned, the other sixteen, of course, still being in charge of the slaves.

A miserable, wretched-looking crew they were! Long weeks of hardship had reduced them to craven, spineless caricatures of humanity. None had shaved since the first moment of their slavery, neither had their hair been cut. They were matted, dirty, and altogether repulsive. Not that this was their fault, poor beggars! Chained to those oars, day in, day out, life had ceased to be life, and had become a tortured existence.

Siegan the Slim came down the gangway, and surveyed his new slaves with open exultation.

"So-ho, my fine striplings!" he jeered. "A taste of hard work will do ye good, I dare swear! And, i'faith, ye shall work now! Beshrew ye for the mischievous brats ye are! Work—work until ye drop! That's the order!"

Most of the fellows had sense enough to keep quiet, but the irrepressible Handforth, who was nearest the gangway, glared defiance into Siegan's face.

"All right—jeer away!" he snapped. "It's your turn now, you ruffian, but ours'll come soon!"

Siegan roared with laughter.

"Ho-ho! Bold, fine words from a galley-slave!" he gloated. "Fool! Thinkest thou there will be any escape? Naught but death will release thee from this bondage!"

"We'll see about that!" roared Handforth fiercely.

"Thou wilt!" retorted Siegan. "Once these padlocks are fastened around thy wrists—even as now—death alone bringeth their release. Thou art chained to that oar from now until the hour of thy perishing comes. Thou art a galley-slave, boy—and there is no future for a galley-slave except slavery!"

The fellows were horrified—sickened by the grim conviction which Siegan's tone carried. There was something appalling in this situation. And it had come about so abruptly, too—so unexpectedly.

Less than an hour earlier the fellows had felt joyous in the knowledge that the enemy was beaten. They were escorting their precious charges to that inland fortress, where no harm could befall them.

And now—what a difference!

All of them captives in the hands of a ruthless foe!

The girls, too, were not altogether acting a part. Their terror, although largely exaggerated outwardly, was real enough. It seemed to them that this was a real disaster, and that the future was entirely black. What help could reach them?

They were supposed to be in safety, and

all the available Northestrian ships were many miles up the lake. Before any rescue hunt could be organised, this pirate galley would be far across the lake—beyond reach.

"You're mad!" said Handforth, as he continued to glare into Siegan's face. "Just wait until Mr. Lee or Dorrie gets to hear of this! They'll sweep up with the motor-boat, or the aeroplane, and you'll be wiped out!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Handy!"

Siegan the Slim scowled viciously.

"I fear not thy friends, young cur!" he snarled. "Ere they can know of this affair, we shall be in safety. Silence, or 'twill go ill with thee! Enough of this insolence! Thou art a slave, and——"

"Rats!" retorted Handforth. "I'm not afraid of you, you snake!"

Thud!

Siegan's heavy boot swept out, and the point of it caught the unfortunate Edward Oswald on the side of his head. He reeled, and his face went deathly pale, only to flush crimson.

"You coward!" he panted dizzily.

Handforth wrenched madly at his chains, but it was useless.

"I'll pay you back for that!" he muttered.

"By George! I shall get my chance before long——"

"Don't, Handy—don't!" breathed Church miserably. "You'll only goad him again."

It seemed that Siegan the Slim was about to deliver another murderous kick, but he thought better of it, and laughed jeeringly.

"I waste my time!" he snapped. "What manner of fool I am to converse with dogs of slaves? Hey! Come, ye carrion!" he added, beckoning to a group of the pirates. "Hither with the whips! Let these young pups taste the lash if they work less hard than their fellows!"

Siegan walked away, and most of the juniors took a little breath of relief. They had been half-expecting a tragedy, for Handforth was a reckless idiot at the best of times.

"You'd better go easy, Handy, old man," said Nipper, from the next oar. "We're helpless now, and there's no sense in inviting such kicks."

"Are we going to take this lying down, then?" asked Handforth thickly.

"What else can we do?"

"You—you boneless sardine!" ejaculated Handforth. "We're St. Frank's chaps, aren't we? Are we going to knuckle under to these filthy pirates? Not likely! Up, the Remove! Down with——"

"Steady, Ted!" broke in Willy soberly.

"Eh?"

"I said, steady!" said Willy. "I'm with you heart and soul when there's a chance of escape—even if it's only a hundred to one chance. But all this 'Up, the Remove!' stuff sounds silly."

"Silly!" breathed Handforth darkly.

"Potty!" said Willy. "What's the good of it? How the dickens can we get up when

we're chained down? You'll only get one of those whips across your shoulders if you keep up this attitude—and that won't help us, will it? This is one of those cases where we've got to possess our souls in patience, as some Johnny once said. Strategy, my son!"

"By George!" said his major, with a start.

"Of course, you'd thought of that already," went on Willy cunningly. "There's nothing like strategy, Ted. We'll pretend to be scared into fits, and we'll cringe and crouch down whenever Siegan comes near us. He's a conceited fool, and we can bluff him as easy as falling off a form. That's your game, isn't it? That's the idea you've got in mind, eh?"

Handforth gave another start.

"Bluff him, eh?" he whispered. "By George, rather! That's just what I was planning in my own mind! Then, perhaps, we might get a chance——"

"Exactly!" said Willy, nodding. "The girls are doing the same stunt, and there's just a chance that we might be able to turn the tables later on. We've got to use our brains here—not our muscles. Think of Irene, too. How can you get to her aid if you get laid out by another of Siegan's kicks?"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Yes, we'll pretend to be terrified," he murmured. "When Siegan comes by again, I'll cringe down and yelp like a frightened mongrel!"

Willy winked at the juniors who surrounded him. And they wisely said nothing. The Third-Former had cleverly brought his major round to a sensible point of view.

And Siegan, in the meantime, was talking.

In fact, he was talking too much. The glamour of his victory had got into his head, and he could not resist the opportunity of revealing his plans to his chief victims. He anticipated no miscarriage, so spoke freely.

"Let not thy brow be worried, good Mercia!" he was saying to the princess. "No harm will come to thee or thy companions. 'Tis my aim to adopt a simple and old-fashioned method. Thou art to be held for ransom."

He spoke familiarly enough, indeed, his tone was insultingly so. But the princess caught her breath in with a momentary note of relief. And her ladies-in-waiting listened eagerly.

"Ransom?" said Mercia. "Thou art bold, wretch!"

"Boldness in a pirate is a necessary qualification," retorted Siegan.

"And thinkest thou there is any chance for thee?" went on the princess contemptuously. "By my faith! A ransom, forsooth! What manner of folly is this? Thou wilt do better to release us whilst thy head is still upon those worthless shoulders of thine!"

Siegan grinned with triumph.

"Perchance thou art misreading my statement," he said softly. "'Tis not to Ethelbert the Red that I shall go. I require no ransom from Northestria."

The princess opened her eyes wide.
 "Not—not Gothland? You won't hand us to Kassker the Grim?" she faltered, momentarily staggered.

"Who else?" asked Siegan the Slim. "I bargain with Kassker—and none other!"



CHAPTER 7.

THE ISLAND GROTTO.

PRINCESS MERCIA had turned pale, for she knew that hope was now dead.

"Thou wilt bargain with Kassker?" she repeated in a husky voice.

"Ay, to be sure!" said the pirate. "With whom else? Kassker the Grim will pay a wondrous price for such hostages, I doubt not! A fortune, fair Mercia! Wealth untold! Lookest thou at the picture! An offer to Kassker to hand him not only a prince and a princess, but full twenty of these stranger youths! Could better hostages be secured? And what of these young ladies?" he went on, indicating Irene & Co. "Ay, I am well provided for such bargaining!"

"You would never hand us over to the enemy!" shouted young Prince Oswy, his voice shrill with anger. "And thou a Northestrian!"

"Pah!" snarled Siegan. "I am naught! An outlaw—a pirate—a man whose head would not rest on his shoulders for a day if he set foot ashore! A Northestrian! I? Nay, I prefer to throw in my lot with Kassker's tribe!"

"You traitor!" cried the princess scathingly.

"'Tis true!" cried Siegan, without a tremor. "Didst thou not spurn me, and appoint one of these stranger youths in my place? 'Tis now my turn, proud Mercia, and thou wilt see that my revenge is bitter! By the bones of Offa! 'Twill mean complete victory for Gothland without an invasion, since Ethelbert must surrender in order to save thy necks from the chopping-block!"

He turned aside and went out.

"He means it, too!" said Doris Berkeley with conviction. "So that's his dodge! The awful rotter! He's going to hand us over to the Gothlanders for a huge price, and sell his own country!"

The young princess proudly held up her head.

"Siegan is over-confident," she declared. "Neither Ethelbert nor any other Northestrian will surrender his country to Kassker!"

"But they'll be forced to do so," said Irene quickly. "Don't you see? They can't allow us all to die! They'll be in such a position that surrender will be the only possible course."

"Can they not save us from this fate?" asked the Lady Elfrida timidly.

"We can hope for it, but I don't think

there's a single chance," replied Doris with shrewd conviction. "You can be sure we shall be taken to an inland fortress, and guarded by thousands of men. And if any attempt is made to rescue us, Kassker will threaten to have us killed. No; once we get into the Gothlanders' hands, Northestria's fate will be sealed."

"My poor country!" murmured the princess brokenly.

Out of all this trouble there seemed to be but one satisfactory point. The girls realised that they were in no immediate danger—neither, for that matter, were the lives of the St. Frank's fellows. They were all too valuable to Siegan! For every life meant a bigger ransom, a greater price! And he would see, too, that no harm befell them, for it would be a part of Kassker's bargain that they should all be handed over safely.

But what of Northestria?

Just when the Gothlanders had been driven off, when it seemed that the defensive measures were entirely successful, this devastating blow would fall! When Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the Northestrian leaders heard of the capture, they would be helpless. How could they leave their princess and her brother to die? How could they allow the other boys and girls to languish in a Gothland prison? A rescue raid would be futile, and thus surrender would be the only course.

Without a doubt, Siegan the Slim had dealt a master-stroke!

And all by chance—all on the spur of the moment! That was, perhaps the most galling part of the whole affair. Greed was at the bottom of his action—even more than revenge. For Siegan, the outlaw, had clearly seen that here was a chance for him to gain not only vast wealth, but power, too. If he sold his prisoners to Kassker, it was certain that the enemy overlord would appoint him to a high official position. So Siegan's throw was a desperate one.

And he meant to act swiftly, too.

Any kind of delay might be fatal, for it would not be so very long before the non-arrival of the Royal barge would be talked about. The news would spread like wild-fire, and then ships would come searching. It was even possible that the pirate galley's swoop had been witnessed by some of the simple peasants ashore. No, there was not a second to be lost.

Siegan knew well enough that if this plan were to develop, he must act instantly. So the great oars of the galley were kept furiously at work. The majority of the slaves toiled mechanically. But the St. Frank's contingent found the labour well-nigh unendurable.

They perspired freely, and there was no rest.

At the first sign of slacking, the guards on the gangway cracked their cruel whips. And sometimes they flicked the lashes upon the



The courier pulled his horse back on to its haunches as he gasped : " I bring thee ill-tidings, Lee the Lion-hearted. The Royal Barge hath been captured by pirates—and the boys have been taken prisoner ! "

backs of their victims. Clearly, they had been ordered not to strike hard.

And, as some of the prisoners had suspected, the mid-lake islands were the galley's objective. There was one rocky island, and several jutting crags. For many a year they had been the resort of pirates. It was an impregnable fortress, this mass of rock. On many an occasion, the combined merchants of Northestria and Gothland had sought to destroy the corsairs, but had never succeeded.

True, the pirates were now practically non-existent, and it was probable that this one galley was the sole surviving ship of the previous villainous fleet. But this galley was quite sufficient for Nipper & Co.

It seemed that there was no possible landing spot. The rocks were mainly volcanic, and rose sheer from the water, barren and stark, without a trace of grass or shrub.

But the appearance was deceptive.

Swinging round a jutting crag, the galley swept into a rocky inlet, and directly ahead lay a low cave. It was wide, but the roof descended to within ten feet of the water.

The schoolboy galley-slaves could see

nothing of this, for they had their backs to it as they rowed, but the girls had a clear view. And they could now understand why the galley was constructed on low lines. This cave was its haunt, its harbour. Little wonder that the pirates had never been conquered! For that cave entrance could be easily held by a handful of men against a thousand.

On every side stretched the lake, and so far out was this island that all sight of the mainland was lost. They seemed to be upon an open sea, and not a ship of any kind was in view. They were alone—at the mercy of these pirates.

The order rang out for all rowing to cease, and oars were held still. The galley shot into the cave entrance, and for the first time in weeks the juniors were treated to a taste of darkness. In this great oasis there was no night, since the volcanic fires were continually burning, and reflected down by the everlasting mists of the upper air.

At first, the blackness of that cave was bewildering. The boys and girls were blinded; they stared into impenetrable gloom.

But later, when their eyes grew accustomed to the change, they were able to see with a fair amount of distinctness.

And they found that this was no ordinary cave.

The roof domed upwards just inside the entrance, and in every direction there were dark, mysterious grottos, penetrating far into the rock. These grottos, doubtless, were filled with loot—stores and other things. The living quarters of the pirates were here, too, in all probability.

The Royal barge was brought up alongside the moored galley, and there was great activity. Siegan the Slim was not waiting.

Near by, the juniors could see one or two other galleys—smaller vessels. But, curiously enough, all the chained slaves were ignored. They were left at their oars, quite helpless there, since it was an impossibility to break those iron bonds.

But the other prisoners—all those members of the fair sex—were quickly ordered into a boat, and rowed to a wide ledge of rock which formed the background of the great cave. Hardly a word was spoken. Siegan himself was not there, a dozen pirates forming the escort.

Flaming torches were lighted, and with three men leading the way, the prisoners were taken up a great flight of stairs, hewed out of the solid rock. It seemed that these stairs were endless, but at last a heavy stone door was reached. It was an enormous thing, with bolts as large as a man's arm.

"Ye will all pass within!" growled one of the guards.

Neither the princess nor any of the others made comment. They went through that doorway, and after the last of them had passed through, the massive stone clanged into position, and the bolts were shot home.

"Well, this is better than the galley, anyway," said Doris practically.

"Yes, but where are we?" asked the princess, looking round. "I would that I could punish these carrion!"

The prison was a low cave, high up the cliff. It was of curious shape, with odd twists and corners, but there seemed to be no other exit. The roof was low, so that it was almost necessary to crouch when walking. But there was a plentiful air supply, and light, too.

For at the far end of the cave there was a small opening, just a little gap in the rocks. It was high above, and Doris stood beneath it, her eyes gleaming.

"Quick!" she said. "Give me a hoist up!"

Three of the athletic Moor View girls obeyed, and a moment later Doris was peering out of that little rock opening. She found nothing to cheer her up. Outside there was a brief, narrow ledge, and then sheer rock right down to the water. A cliff, without a ride or a spur. A cliff that no four-legged creature, even, could descend or ascend.

Even the view was limited, for the opening was set deeply into that inlet, and nothing but frowning rocks were in sight. Doris tried to crane round, but she could not see the open lake. And she realised why. No prisoners would be placed in such a cave as this if any passing ship could be signalled.

No, it seemed that escape was utterly impossible.



CHAPTER 8.

THE FIRST NEWS.

NELSON LEE stood back and surveyed his handiwork.

"You'll do, Dorrie," he said genially.

"I should have done without any of this messin' about," growled Lord Dorrimore. "Plaster here, an' plaster there, until I'm nothing but a botch!"

Lee chuckled.

"My dear man, you've got to be patched up," he said. "The battle's over, and the wounded must be attended to. Where's Umlosi?" added Lee, looking round. "Confound the fellow! I distinctly told him to wait!"

"He saw what you were doin' to me, an' naturally got scared," said his lordship. "By the Lord Harry, it's a good thing there isn't a mirror handy, or I'd tear these infernal things off!"

The famous sporting peer was grossly exaggerating, of course, for the "infernal things" were merely one or two patches of adhesive plaster which Nelson Lee had affixed to Dorrie's wounds, after washing them. His lordship had got gashed on the arm, and in three different parts of his face.

Nelson Lee himself had hardly come off any better, and most of the hurts were from stray arrows, which had fortunately spent their force before striking. Upon the whole, Lee and his men had come through the recent battle with amazing good fortune. There were no serious casualties, and only a few injuries. Umlosi, perhaps, was the most serious case of all.

The giant African chief had not been content with using a rifle, or manipulating a machine-gun. To ride in one of the improvised "tanks" had not been his idea of battle. He had charged into the thick of the fray with his trusty spear—and the invading Gothlanders had known all about it!

Exactly how many men Umlosi had slain nobody knew, but it was an established fact that he had wrought havoc among the Gothlander ranks. Their chain-mail had had little effect against Umlosi's terrific thrusts.

And all the Gothlanders were gone now, all except the dead and injured. Over a thousand bodies were being cleared away and buried by the Northestrian troops, and the Red Cross stations were overcrowded with thousands of the injured, friends and foes alike.

Taking all in all, however, the casualties were light. Kassker's savage hordes had been beaten back. They had invaded Northestria, and they had been thrust out again, and the last enemy transport had long since vanished over the horizon of the lake. The Gothlanders had fled back to their own land in utter disorder.

All round Dunstane, the Northestrian capital—which had been the point of invasion—there was joy and jubilation. Not only were the troops celebrating the victory, but the entire populace was intoxicated with the wonderful achievement. In spite of Kassker's immense superiority, he had been beaten off.

"It was warm work while it lasted," said Lord Dorrimore, lighting a cigarette, "but it's all over now, bar shoutin'."

Lee looked at him soberly.

"Don't you believe it, Dorrie," he snapped. "All over, eh? I wish it were true! Kassker will come back, and we must be prepared for a much greater onslaught than the one we have beaten."

Lord Dorrimore shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, it's no good worryin'," he said philosophically. "If there's gain to be another battle, there'll be another dose of excitement, that's all. I'm not grumblin'! Let 'em all come! The more the merrier!"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"It's all very well to take that irresponsible attitude, Dorrie, but this is no picnic," he growled. "It was only by a fluke that we beat the brutes off this time. Our tanks started a panic, and it spread. You don't quite realise how lucky we are to be rid of the enemy so soon."

Captain Waring, the airship commander, had just come up, leading Umlosi with him.

"I think you want the gentleman, don't you, Mr. Lee?" he asked dryly. "We found him going down to the lake——"

"I need but to wash my trivial hurts," rumbled Umlosi sullenly. "What need of messes and ointments?"

"I've had messes an' ointments, Umlosi, an' you've got to have messes an' ointments!" said Lord Dorrimore grimly. "An' you look as if you need 'em, too! Gad, that's a nasty slash on your shoulder; an' that's not such a pretty wound in your chest. The man's cut to ribbons!"

Umlosi was indeed a sorry spectacle. Several deep gashes were visible on his great, half-naked body. All had been bleeding, and he was in a serious condition, to judge by appearances. But his eyes blazed at Dorrie's words.

"They are nothing, N'Kose!" he protested. "Wau! Am I a baby, to be frightened by a few scratches? These are nothing, my master. In mine own country I have been really wounded in battle."

"These little pin-pricks are just nothin', eh?" said Dorrie. "You'd better take him, Lee, and bung him in hospital for a fortnight."

"That's just where he's going!" said Nelson Lee firmly.

And, in spite of all Umlosi's protests, he was handed over to a group of Red Cross men, with strict instructions that he should be washed, bandaged, and put to bed. The black giant was utterly disgusted, but as Lord Dorrimore insisted, he made no further demur. With him, Dorrie's word was law.

Lee took a deep breath, and turned to the sporting peer.

"Don't be greedy with the cigarettes, old man," he smiled. "I haven't had one for hours, and this is the first breathing space——"

"You need a good steak more than you need a cigarette—an' so do I," interrupted Lord Dorrimore. "Ye gods! Now I come to think of it, I'm hungry enough to eat boot-leather! Which way to the field-kitchen? Lead me to somethin' edible!"

Nelson Lee lighted his cigarette, and nodded.

"Yes, we need some food," he admitted. "We've had nothing for nearly twelve hours, I believe. To tell the truth, I've rather lost count of time."

"I don't wonder at it," said Dorrie. "It's a frightful job to know exactly where we are in this bally place, without any darkness to remind us. But who's this desperate gentleman?"

He was watching a horseman, a courier, apparently, who was dashing up at the gallop, approaching from the city walls. His horse was well-nigh exhausted, and the man flung himself limply out of the saddle.

"I was directed to seek thee here, Lee the Lionhearted," he panted urgently. "I bring news—ill-tidings, forsooth!"

"What!" shouted Dorrie. "Have the beggars landed further down the coast?"

"Nay, 'tis concerning her Majesty!" replied the courier, addressing himself to Lee. "The Royal barge has not arrived at Westwold!"

Nelson Lee started slightly.

"Not arrived!" he repeated. "Where did you hear this?"

"Our men were posted on every hill-top 'twixt the capital and Westwold," replied the other. "As thou knowest, my lord, we have in Northestria a system of signalling. I come from the inland town of Ixwell, where we heard definite news of grave import."

"And this—news?" demanded Lee curtly.

"'Tis said by some of the coast peasants that the Royal barge hath been captured by a pirate galley!" replied the courier. "Happily, 'tis only a rumour, so far, but methinks it should be investigated forthwith. I seek my lord Ethelbert, but none can say where he is to be found——"

"He comes now," interrupted Lee, nodding.

Ethelbert the Red, the chief adviser to the princess—the actual ruler of Northestria—came hurrying up on horseback, and his very expression as he dismounted indicated that he had heard the news.

"Is't possible?" he panted, as he joined the others. "By St. Guthric, this news has reduced me to a poltroon! Her Majesty captured by pirates! I'faith, 'tis unthinkable!"

"We must lose not a minute in making close inquiries," said Nelson Lee quickly. "It certainly seems impossible. The Royal galley was in charge of the bodyguard—"

"Boys—mere boys!" broke in Ethelbert.

"Yes, but fighters!" said Dorrie pointedly.

"Of what use to be fighters against such odds?" shouted the chief adviser, in a very frenzy of anxiety. "A pirate galley could swoop down and slay them all in a twinkling."

"Why was I not warned of this?" demanded Lee angrily, turning a pair of blazing eyes upon Ethelbert. "Why was I not told that pirates were abroad? I was led to understand that such vermin had long since been inactive—indeed, exterminated!"

Ethelbert groaned.

"I fear 'tis my fault!" he muttered. "Amid these endless anxieties and excitements I forgot such paltry knaves as pirates! There can be but one galley, at the most—although 'twas enough to overwhelm our dear princess!"

"Well, it's no good standing here and talking," said Lee gruffly. "We've got to move at once—and, if necessary, get after this pirate galley, and seek it."

"Thou art optimistic, good Lee!" shouted Ethelbert. "Even with thine own wondrous methods, 'twill be impossible to seize these curs, if once they have penetrated into their lair."

Nelson Lee compressed his lips.

"We'll have a good shot at it, anyway," he said.

"By glory, you bet we will!" agreed Lord Dorrimore, with conviction.



CHAPTER 9.

GUNTHA THE CRAFTY!

IEGAN THE SLIM was losing no time.

While the princess and her brother were being escorted to that cave-prison, far above the level of the lake, accompanied by the Moor View girls, the pirate chief was busy in the great grotto below.

The smallest galley was being prepared for a trip.

And none of the slaves were being put to the oars. Under Siegan's orders, the pirates themselves manned the sweeps. And all of that motley crew prepared to leave. It seemed that none were being left on guard.

The galley was ready within fifteen minutes, and with the oars creaking and splashing, the craft swept out of the low opening, and went its way. Not a word had been addressed to the chained slaves in the big galley.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Nipper, as the pirates left. "That's rummy!"

"What's rummy?" asked Reggie Pitt, from a near-by seat.

"They've left us here without anybody in charge of us."

"Nothing rummy about that," said Handforth, with a sniff. "What the dickens can we do, anyhow? These chains are as effective as prison bars!"

And the others realised that Handforth was right.

"Yes, there was no need to leave any guard over us," admitted William Napoleon Brown. "Alas, we are helpless. For, even if some of us broke free, what could be done? I fear we are very much in the soup, brothers."

"I'm not a bit surprised," said Handforth bitterly. "It's Mr. Lee's fault for taking the command of the bodyguard out of my hands—"

"Dry up, Handy!" interrupted Nipper. "Browne did the right thing!"

"A champion!" murmured Browne. "At least, I have one champion."

"Don't worry, old man—you've got nearly a score," said Nipper. "If Handy had been in charge we should have been all dead by this time, I expect. As it is, we may be prisoners, but we're still alive. Just imagine it! Galley-slaves—chained to our oars—like they used to do in the days of the corsairs!"

"The puzzle is, where the dickens have those rogues gone to?" asked Fullwood. "They're up to some mischief, I'll bet. A special mission, too, or they wouldn't have gone on their own. It's no pirate trip they've undertaken."

Nipper nodded.

"Well, we don't happen to be blockheads, so we can easily guess," he said quietly. "We're all being held as hostages—Prince Oswy, the princess, and all the girls, too. Ransom is the stunt, I'll guarantee."

"By George, ransom!" said Handforth. "They've put a price on our heads, eh? Then—then that means that we shall probably get free? If they pay the ransom, we'll be handed over!"

"Hurrah!" yelled some of the fellows, with great relief.

"Don't cheer too soon!" shouted Dick. "We don't know who we're going to be ransomed to yet."

"Good gad!" gasped Archie. "Odds horrors and ghastly prospects! Old bean, you're not absolutely suggesting—"

"I think it's far more likely that a man like Siegan would sell us to the Gothlanders, rather than to his own people," interrupted Nipper grimly. "And if that happens, we shall be in the ox-tail up to our necks—as Browne would put it."

"Not necessarily, Brother Nipper," said Browne.

"Kassker has threatened to behead all of us!" said Watson.

"That, I believe, is one of Kassker's pet ideas of a little recreation, but I am not so

pessimistic," said Browne. "We shall be more valuable to him alive, brothers. I take it that Siegan will sell us to Kassker, and that Kassker will sell us to Northestria, at a large profit. The profit being, of course, the surrender of Princess Mercia's lands."

"Yes, and as soon as Northestria has surrendered, and the Gothlanders take possession, there'll be a nice little public exhibition," said Handforth bluntly. "A few beheadings, or something like that! So what's the difference? As far as I can see, we're booked for the chopping block in any case!"

"Your reasoning powers, Brother Handforth, are disconcertingly acute," said Browne, shaking his head. "I fear that you are horribly near the truth. But let us take heart in the knowledge that the entertainment will be delayed. And I have sometimes heard a succinct remark to the effect that while there is life there is hope. And so, brothers, let us hope!"

"There's a fat lot of consolation in that!" growled two or three voices.

Before long, the juniors began to exchange conversation with the slaves, and they learned quite a lot—and, incidentally, it was made fairly clear to them that any hope of escape was futile. Some of these men had been captive for years. It was a custom of the pirates to leave the poor wretches chained to the oars in this fashion. They were safe there—for they could not possibly break those heavy shackles.

Handforth got the wonderful idea of rowing away—out into the lake. But Siegan was not such a fool as to leave the galley free. Heavy anchor chains, locked and bolted, secured the vessel to the rocks. And any of the juniors, examining the iron cuffs which encircled their wrists and ankles, knew that nothing could be done.

And while the galley-slaves talked in this fashion, Siegan the Slim was making good progress across the lake, towards Gothland. It was twenty miles from that island to the enemy shore, but this light galley was capable of high speed. And there was something else in Siegan's favour, too, for after travelling seven or eight miles, a ship came in view—a crippled Gothlander craft, one that was crawling back home after a hot encounter with the Northestrians.

Siegan at once recognised this ship as one of Kassker's leading vessels—with an important commander on board, in all probability. It was a chance that could not be missed. The pirate galley bore down upon the other ship.

"You think 'tis safe to approach?" murmured one of Siegan's companions.

"Safe!" echoed Siegan. "What fear is there?"

"Mayhap there are archers aboard—and they will readily recognise our character," said the other uneasily. "I'faith, we have none too good a name on the lake! Twere better to go cautious."

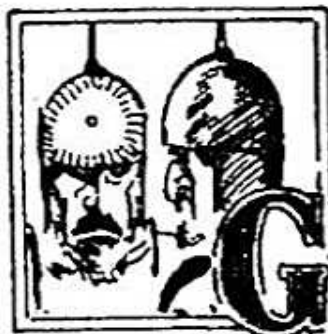
Siegan the Slim laughed.

"Fear naught!" he replied. "There seemeth but little fight in this sorry craft at the best! 'Tis full of wounded, I'll swear! But we'll fly them a white flag, as a token of our friendliness."

Siegan's description of the Gothlander vessel was accurate enough, for this particular ship was one that had fared badly in the recent battle. Over half her company had perished during the brief invasion, and the rest were panic-stricken and demoralised. There were scarcely sufficient men aboard to man the sweeps, and as a fighting unit the ship was a negligible quantity.

So the pirate galley swept alongside, and Siegan found himself looking at the figure of a man he knew well by sight. And Siegan's heart leapt, and his eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"Guntha!" he muttered. "By my soul! Guntha the Crafty!"



CHAPTER 10.

THE BARGAIN!

GUNTHA THE CRAFTY!

It was a name to conjure with, as Siegan well knew. Kassker the Grim had two high commanders—two men whom he entrusted with his armies, when it was impossible for him to command personally. One was Attawulf the Terrible, and the other Guntha the Crafty.

And here, looking at Siegan, was this latter Gothlander general!

Nothing could have suited the pirate's plans better. Luck was with him, for he had deemed it necessary to journey right into Gothland, in search of such a man. It was far better to make his bargain here, on the open lake, where there could be no danger whatever.

"What is this foolery?" thundered the Gothlander, his voice savage and angry. "Pirates, by my bones! Have we not suffered enough indignities this day, without these pirate scum?"

"Hold!" shouted Siegan. "I bring news for thee, Guntha the Crafty. 'Tis in my power to convert thy recent defeat into an overwhelming victory!"

"Pah! Empty words!" retorted Guntha ferociously. "Make off, thou dog! I tarry not with pirates!"

"I have prisoners," said Siegan quickly. "If thou art willing, good Guntha, these prisoners can be transferred to thy care."

"What want I with prisoners?" snarled Guntha, from the deck of the other ship. "Am I not already hampered with injured and dying?"

"The prisoners of whom I speak are not soldiers," replied Siegan cunningly. "They are Northestrians—nobles! 'Twill well repay thee, Guntha, if thou wilt consent to a private conference. Either thou wilt hear me, or I go straight to Kassker himself."

Guntha stroked his great beard impatiently.

"Come on board, then," he said gruffly.

"Nay—I desire thy presence with me," replied Siegan. "If thou art mistrustful, I will order a dozen of my men to place themselves on your ship, as hostages for thy safe return."

After a good deal of haggling—for neither one nor the other trusted the situation—the Gothlander general came aboard the pirate galley. He was led at once into the cabin, where Siegan lost no time in dealing his cards.

"Thou art mistrustful of me, Guntha, but I will soon set thy fears at rest," he said. "I come to thee with something worthy of the selling, and 'tis my desire to strike a bargain."

"Apt words from a pirate!" retorted Guntha.

Siegan frowned.

"Thou art in a tigerish humour, by my soul!" he protested.

"Ay, and who would not be?" snarled Guntha. "Need I tell thee what has happened? By St. Guthric! Kassker will take a heavy toll for this day's defeat! In Northestria, they may think themselves safe—but ere long we Gothlanders will overrun the entire country, and make good this humiliation! And thou!" he added, staring. "Thou art a Northestrian! What is thy will?"

"A Northestrian!" sneered Siegan. "Nay, good Guntha, thou art wrong. I am but a pirate—with ambitions to become a loyal subject of Kassker. In Northestria, I received naught but kicks and slurs. I am ready to join forces with thee and thine own warriors. But to business! What sayest thou to the prospect of carrying the Princess Mercia into Gothland as a hostage?"

Guntha the Crafty stared.

"What folly is this?" he growled. "I cannot waste my time in such——"

"And what sayest thou to the prospect of carrying the Prince Oswy as a hostage, also?" continued Siegan.

"A plague take thee!" thundered Guntha. "Art mad? What riddles are these?"

"No riddles, my lord—but plain, simple facts!" replied Siegan. "I have, in my power, both the prince and the princess. At a price, they shall be handed over to you. There are other prisoners—other valuable hostages. A number of these stranger youths and maidens of whom, no doubt, you have heard."

Guntha recoiled as though he had been struck.

"Remind me not of those accursed strangers!" he said thickly. "Our disasters to-day are due to them and their monstrous appliances——"

"'Tis your chance to seize over a score of them," interrupted Siegan quickly. "Think, my lord Guntha! What will Kassker say to thee if thy ship enters Gothland with the princess and prince as hostages?"

"Lies—lies!" snarled Guntha. "I believe not this fantastic tale. 'Tis but a trick to fool me, dog! What manner of magician art thou, to conjure up these great personages at thy pleasure? Nay, Siegan, I believe not this story. Where is thy proof?"

"Here!" retorted Siegan the Slim.

He produced evidence—the Royal necklets of Princess Mercia and Prince Oswy. He had taken care to remove these insignia before making his journey. Guntha the Crafty stared at them dazedly, and then picked them up.

"Marry, but they seem genuine——" He broke off, and picked the necklets up from the table. "By my bones, 'tis true!"

Siegan watched him as he continued his examination. The pirate knew well enough that these trinkets would provide satisfactory proof. For they were unmistakable emblems, and the very fact that they were in Siegan's possession could mean but one thing. Unless he had those Royal persons in his power, how could he have become possessed of these intimate trinkets?

"Is't enough?" asked Siegan gently.

"The picture doth blind me!" muttered Guntha, in a breathless voice. "Meanest thou I can take these two into Gothland?"

"Ay, and a score of the stranger youths, too," replied Siegan gloatingly. "Rare hostages, Guntha! And worth much gold, I vow! Thou art a man of power—of authority! Thy guarantees will satisfy me."

The Gothlander chief was overwhelmed with triumph.

"'Twill mean victory—vast, overwhelming victory!" he muttered. "And I will be the man to gain this fame! If I can but carry such hostages to Kassker, those dogs of Northestrians will be obliged to capitulate. Ay, and Kassker can make what terms pleases him!"

"'Tis worth a fortune," said Siegan. "And 'tis part of my bargain, Guntha, that I shall be placed in a position of high command."

Guntha the Crafty waved his hand.

"Be sure thy reward will be ample," he said quickly. "Where are these Northestrian nobles? Where are these stranger youths and maidens? Bring them forth!"

Siegan shook his head.

"I am not such a fool as to bring them on this galley," he replied. "They are in safe keeping—and will be handed over after our bargain hath been sealed, Guntha. 'Tis not my way to be rash."

"When canst thou produce them, then?"

"Within three hours from the sealing of your word," replied Siegan promptly. "It must be signed, Guntha—but 'twill be possible for thee to protect thyself in the document. I ask nothing unreasonable. I receive my payment only upon production of the hostages."

Guntha scowled.

"Thou art a crafty one!" he muttered, glaring.

"It seemeth, then, that we are a pair!" replied Siegan. "'Twould be better, per-

haps, for thee to take me before Kassker. He, I doubt not, will readily seal such a bargain as I have suggested."

"Nay, nay!" said Guntha hastily. "Not so speedily, Siegan! I am empowered to deal with this. Am I not next to Kassker himself? That which I promise will be fulfilled. Let us bargain, and then let us have this document drawn and signed. I will make good terms with thee, never fear."

And so, for over twenty minutes, they talked. And Guntha was so eager to seize these valuable hostages that he suggested far better terms than Siegan had ever dreamed of. The Northestrian rascal made no mention of his men—his cut-throat pirates. He saw no reason why they should share in his ill-gotten wealth.

Guntha the Crafty was flushed with excitement. In Gothland he was famed as a man of strategy. And, then and there, he decided that he would conduct this affair entirely on his own. He would wait here, out on the lake, until Siegan returned with his great galley. Then Guntha would have all the prisoners transferred on to his ship, and he would proceed to Gothland and give Kassker the Grim the surprise of his life.

Already high in Kassker's esteem, this exploit would place him even higher than Attawulf the Terrible—Guntha's only rival.

After such a coup, anything in the land would be his for the asking.



CHAPTER 11.

DORIS' GREAT IDEA.

PRINCESS MERCIA smiled rather wanly.

"We are in sorry plight, indeed," she murmured sadly. "It grieveth me to

think that so many of you are also drawn into this vortex—'tis my quarrel, not yours. I would that I could do something to—"

"Please, princess!" interrupted Irene. "We're all in the same boat, and we're not grumbling. And, after all, things might be worse."

"Worse!" echoed the Princess. "How so?"

"Well, we're all safe, at least—and those savage brutes haven't had the nerve to interfere with us," replied Irene thankfully. "I was half afraid— But what's the good of talking like that? We're all here together, and the boys are down below, chained to that terrible galley!"

"All in all, we're in a nice, cheerful position," said Doris Berkeley dryly. "But you never know your luck! Perhaps we can do something, after all. Anyhow, we can have a jolly good shot at it."

Mercia looked at the Moor View girls with wonder.

"What is this?" she asked. "You are soon recovering your strength, it seems."

"We were only spoofing," smiled Doris.

"I know not the word," confessed the princess.

"Spoofing, you know—just pretending," said Irene. "We wanted those men to think that we're weak and frail. In your country, princess—and in Gothland, too—all the men seem to regard the women and girls with contempt. They think we're not worth considering."

"They don't know the modern British girl, then!" said Ena Handforth quietly. "We're not going to sit down and sob, are we, girls? If there's anything to be done, we'll get on the job! How about making an attempt to escape? There's an exit here," she added, indicating the hole in the rocks.

"No good," said Doris, shaking her head. "The cliffs are as smooth as glass, and— Wait a minute, though," she added, "I'll take another look. Lend a hand, you girls."

In a twinkling she was hoisted up, so that she could look out through the opening. The Northestrian ladies watched wonderingly—for they were, indeed, very frail and helpless compared to these sturdy British schoolgirls.

"It might be done," murmured Doris, taking a quick breath. "Anyhow, I'm game to chance it— Hallo! What the—"

She paused, watching a craft that had just come into sight.

Down below there, the pirate galley was just starting out. Doris was watching Siegan the Slim starting off on his treacherous mission. Only for a moment did she glimpse the galley, but in that moment she noted that the vessel was filled with the pirates, and they even manned the oars. The slaves, evidently, were left behind.

What could it mean?

"I've got it!" murmured the girl. "The brute is off to offer us as hostages to the enemy! We're safe up here, and the boys are all chained in the galley! I wonder if there's any chance of doing something?"

She got down, and the other girls listened eagerly while she told of what she had seen. The princess was freshly startled, and the other two Northestrian ladies were horrified.

"We shall be taken into Gothland!" whispered the Lady Elfrida tremulously. "Oh! It were better if they killed us now!"

"That's not the way to talk!" said Mary Summers, with a frown. "The pirates have gone, and it seems that they haven't even left a watch. Can't we do something?"

"Yes!" breathed Doris. "We can!"

"Oh!" breathed Irene. "You—you've got an idea, Doris?"

"The beginning of one, anyhow," replied Doris, her dark eyes sparkling with excitement. "Listen! Am I dreaming or not? You remember when they chained Ted and all the other poor chaps to the oars?"

"Yes," said Winnie eagerly. "Poor old Reg is there, too—"

"Never mind your brother now," interrupted Doris. "Siegan went to the fellows and padlocked them to the oars, didn't he?"



The two Moor View girls drew themselves cautiously out of the water until they could see the St. Frank's juniors sitting chained to the great oars of the pirate galley. "Winnie! Doris!" he gasped, aghast at the sight they were taking.

We watched him—we saw him fasten them all up."

"Of course we did," agreed Irene impatiently.

"What did he do with the key?" asked Doris.

The other girls jumped.

"The key!" cried Mary. "Why, he—he came into that cabin, where we were pretending to be half dead with fright! He put the key on a big hook, just beside the doorway."

Doris nodded.

"Thought so!" she agreed. "Then I was right."

All the girls remembered that little incident, although they had never believed that it would have any special significance. That key, apparently, was always kept on the hook in the deck shelter. Why not? Of what use was it to any of the slaves, since they could not even move six inches from their places? And there was probably a sinister reason for the key's handy position. Although none of the girls spoke their thoughts, they individually came to the same conclusion. No doubt a slave would occasionally faint or die at his post, and it was thus necessary to unlock his bonds speedily, drag him free, and replace him with an effective unit.

But, after all, what did it matter? Doris knew that the key was there, and nothing else concerned her at the moment.

"They think we're all mollycoddles!" she murmured breathlessly. "So they've left us up here, taking it for granted that we can't possibly escape. But isn't there a chance for us to do something while those brutes are away?"

"But what can be done?" asked the princess wonderingly. "We are prisoners. The door is of solid stone—"

"I am not thinking of the door," said Doris.

"But there is no other exit," declared Mercia, in greater wonder than ever.

"What of this?" asked Doris, pointing to the hole in the rocks.

"You—you mean—dive?" asked Winnie Pitt, with a start.

"Right on the nail!" nodded Doris.

The princess uttered a cry.

"Dive!" she exclaimed, horrified. "Art mad? 'Tis an impossibility! 'Twould be death to make the attempt. Think of the great drop—"

"It's a pretty high dive, I'll admit," said Doris. "But I'm not such a bad diver at school—in fact, I've taken prizes for it," she added modestly. "And this one doesn't particularly scare me. My idea is to take a dip, swim into the cave, and see if there's any chance of getting hold of that key. Just think of the way we can turn the tables if I can unlock all the slaves!"

"You can't go alone," said Winnie warmly. "I'll go with you!"

"No, no!" shouted the others. "I'll go!" They all wanted to go, in fact, but Irene



The two Moor View girls drew themselves cautiously chained to the great oars of the pirate agast

controlled her excitement, and shook her head firmly.

"It's Winnie's job—and Doris'!" she said. "They're the champion divers of the school, and the rest of us aren't exactly up to it. Besides, it's Doris' idea, and two will be ample for the job."

"I tell thee 'tis impossible!" panted Mercia, seizing Doris, and swinging her round. "I implore thee not to embark upon this rash venture, sweet Doris! 'Twill be death itself, no less! Hast thought of the monsters?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Irene, with a start.

"Remember how the boy, Willy, nearly lost his life by one of the great creatures which infest these waters."

"Crumbs!" murmured Mary. "We'd forgotten those beauties!"

But Doris was not to be scared.

"Willy was right out in the lake, miles from shore," she argued. "It's not likely that any of the beastly things will venture



er until they could see the St. Frank's juniors the two. "Winnie! Doris!" he gasped, re taking.

near this inlet. Besides, the swim's practically nothing. It's the dive that matters. Once we're in the water, we've only got to swim a few strokes, and we shall be in the cave. We can dive in just as we are, fully dressed."

"There'll be nothing else for it, anyhow," said Winnie practically. "It was very thoughtless of us to come along without bathing costumes! Well, the longer we talk, the less time we shall have; so let's be off!"

"Nay!" pleaded the princess. "I beg of you! Perchance there are men down there, on guard——"

"There can't be many, if any at all," interrupted Doris. "Perhaps one—or two. Well, we may be able to avoid them. They're lazy beggars, and it's quite likely they'll be having a nap in one of those grottos. And supposing they're not? Supposing they collar us? Well, they can only bring us back up the staircase, so we shan't be any worse off."

"You're right, Doris," said Winnie. "The whole thing's a chance, at the best. I don't suppose for a moment that we shall be successful, but I should never forgive myself if we didn't have a good try."

And the two girls made a move towards the outlet in the cliff wall.



CHAPTER 12.

NIPPER AND CO.'S FAIR RESCUERS.

ALTHOUGH Doris Berkeley and Winnie Pitt made light of the projected undertaking, they both knew that it would be a

desperate venture.

But there was just a slim chance that they might be successful in their enterprise, or even partially successful. It seemed the only thing to be done. For while there was a chance, no matter how slim, it was their duty to take it. The St. Frank's fellows were, for once, utterly helpless.

This was a chance for the girls to do their bit!

They lost no time, either. Doris insisted upon taking the first dive, and the other girls, although they were inwardly filled with apprehension, encouraged her with cheery words and confident predictions of success. It was the spirit of the whole affair which was so admirable.

They all pretended that there was no danger, that it was just an everyday sort of adventure. And Doris, having waved her hand, wormed her way through that narrow opening, and cautiously stood upon the precarious ledge.

Her heart was beating rapidly, and when she took a look down at the lake, it seemed a far greater drop than she had previously imagined. What if the water was shallow immediately beneath? What if there were hidden crags just beneath the surface? What if one of those monsters——

"Oh, it's no good imagining things!" muttered Doris pluckily. "The job's got to be done, so here goes!"

"Just a minute!" cried Winnie. "Isn't there room on that ledge for the two of us? Wait, Doris, and we'll both dive together!"

"All right, come along," said Doris.

She was glad. Somehow, it wouldn't seem such an ordeal if Winnie took the dive with her. And a minute later, Reggie Pitt's sister was out on that narrow ledge of rock, too. The two girls stood with their backs to the cliff, and within the prison-cave the rest waited with bated breath.

"Cheerio!" sang out Doris. "Ready, Win?"

"Yes!" murmured Winnie.

"Right you are, then. Go!"

At the same second they both took off, lithe and graceful. Both were excellent.

divers, and never before had they shot downwards so cleanly and fearlessly. For it was a higher dive than they had ever attempted, and one that might lead to disaster.

They struck the water simultaneously, and vanished beneath the surface. Such perfect dives could not have been better executed, even from a specially prepared high-diving board. Doris was up first, and, shaking the water out of her eyes, she struck out strongly, looking round for her companion.

"Oh, thank goodness?" she breathed as Winnie appeared close to her. "All right, old girl?"

"Rather!" panted Winnie. "I say, what a lucky thing we're only wearing these light frocks!"

Both girls, in fact, were thankful on this score. The climate in this oasis was so warm that heavy clothing was unnecessary. Of late, Irene & Co. had taken to wearing the flowing robes of Mercia's court—mainly out of courtesy to their Royal host. But since there had been such friendly feeling between the airship party and the Northestrians, Princess Mercia had suggested that the school-girls should revert back to their own neat frocks. For one thing, she had grown to like the novelty of them, but, more particularly, she had realised that the girls were uncomfortable in the long, flowing skirts of Northestria.

So the girls had now been wearing their own light frocks, with skirts which reached no farther than their knees. So, in this swimming venture, Doris and Winnie were scarcely hampered. Had they been attired in court clothing, however, swimming would have been out of the question.

"Come on!" said Doris cheerily. "Might as well go into the dark depths side by side. My hat! Doesn't it look eerie?"

They were far down the inlet, and the low, wide cave entrance was quite near at hand, a fact for which they were both grateful. For, as they swam, they could not help remembering that these waters were dangerous for swimmers.

Swimming strongly, the two girls passed within the cave, and they could dimly see the shape of the great galley farther down. There was very little movement, and no sign of an armed guard. The rock ledges in the depths of the grotto were dark and deserted.

"I—I believe we're going to do the trick!" murmured Doris.

"Oh!" breathed Winnie. "We mustn't be too confident."

In spite of their vague fears regarding the dangers of the water, both the girls swam slowly. Guards might be near at hand, although invisible, so it was necessary to exercise every precaution. It would be a sorry end to their adventure if they gave

themselves away at the outset through carelessness.

By the time they reached the side of the big galley, their eyes had grown accustomed to the dense gloom. Side by side they clung to the timbers of the craft and took breath. From above—from the body of the galley—came a continuous murmur of voices. But as yet there was no sound of alarm or surprise.

"We haven't been spotted yet," whispered Winnie breathlessly. "Who's going up first?"

"Better both go together, then there can't be any argument," replied Doris with a smile. "Anyhow, I think we're safe from the creatures of the deep! But somehow I think I'd prefer them to these other creatures of the skull and crossbones brigade!"

It was a comparatively simple task to pull themselves out of the water. There was plenty of hand-grip, and foothold, too. Cautiously the two girls raised themselves to the top of the great bulwarks and peered over.

Nipper got the surprise of his life.

He was leaning back, frowning, trying to puzzle out some desperate plan which might result in liberty. But it seemed to him that this was a case when nothing could be done. No amount of ingenuity could sever those iron bonds.

The others were still talking, conversing, mostly, with the hapless slaves who were chained to the oars near by. And then, from nowhere, it seemed, two faces appeared over the bulwark, close against Nipper's face.

He stared, his heart leaping into his mouth.

"Doris!" he breathed, aghast. "Winnie!"

In spite of their wet hair, and in spite of the gloom, he recognised them in a flash.

"Hush!" urged Winnie. "The guard!"

"There's no guard!" shouted Nipper. "But—how on earth—"

"No guard!" cried Doris. "Thank goodness!"

The two girls swung themselves over the side of the galley and sat there, streaming with water, their flimsy clothing clinging tightly to their graceful figures; and for one moment there was a complete, amazed hush.

And then the clamour broke out.

"The girls!"

"Odds miracles and thunderbolts!"

"Winnie!" shouted Reggie Pitt, as he wrenched at his bonds. "What in the name of all that's mysterious—"

"Don't get so excited," interrupted Winnie. "We've come along to lend you fellows a hand, but we never dreamed that you wouldn't have any guard watching over you. Why, this is as easy as rolling off a log."

"Hurrah!"

"The girls to the rescue!"

The clamour continued for a full minute, for a great deal of the excitement spread to those other unfortunate galley-slaves. It seemed incredible—unbelievable—that these

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two fragile-looking girls should have undertaken such a desperate mission.

"We saw the galley go out, and Winnie and I dived—just to see if we could be of any use," explained Doris. "Oh, you poor dears! No wonder you couldn't get free, with these awful shackles round your wrists and ankles."

"If I may say so, precisely!" said Browne gently. "I have no wish to discourage you, Sister Doris, and I need hardly add that my pleasure at seeing you thus dramatically is beyond all computation. At the same time, let me point out that your mission is even now doomed to failure."

"Why?" asked Doris. "There are no guards—"

"Agreed," said Browne. "And neither, I take it, are there files and drills, and such-like instruments essential to the breaking of such aforementioned awful shackles. I fully realise, sisters, that your powers are limited."

"Oh, my hat!" said Reggie. "Then we're no better off!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"The girls have dived for nothing!"

Doris looked at the dismayed juniors with quiet amusement.

"Dry up!" she said coldly. "What do you take us for? Do you think we should come on a rescue stunt like this, unless we had a fair probability of success? We don't want any files to get you free."

"But—but—"

"These things are locked to your wrists and ankles by clamps," went on Doris. "There's a key to unfasten them—and I happen to know where that key is!"



CHAPTER 13.

PREPARING TO TURN THE TABLES!

WINNIE PITT uttered a note of warning.

"We mustn't be too sure, Doris," she cried.

"Perhaps that wretch, Siegan, took the key with him."

"We'll soon make sure," replied Doris quickly.

She reached the gangway, stepping across two or three of the juniors, and lightly along to that cabin, where she and the other girls had been held earlier. And now a fresh tumult was breaking out—a regular wave of excitement.

"She knows where the key is!" muttered Nipper.

"It's too good to be true!" breathed Handforth. "Siegan's taken it with him, as sure as a gun! You fellows needn't kid yourselves! In fact, I believe I remember seeing him putting the key in his pocket."

"Got it!" came a victorious cry from Doris, as she appeared again.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Doris!"

"Free! We're going to get free!"

"Brothers, this is a moment of gladness," said Browne, in his calm, placid way. "Let me urge you, therefore, to remain cool and sedate. At any moment the Black Gang may return, so it behoves us to remain as quiet as possible."

For the first minute or two, nobody took any notice of his excellent advice. This was a situation that needed a loud and lusty outlet. They all had thought themselves to be hopelessly in the power of Siegan the Slim, and even after the girls had so unexpectedly appeared, there seemed little chance of escape. But the knowledge that Doris held the key made all the difference in the world.

First of all, she tested the key on one of the juniors, and she gave a little gasp of relief when one of the heavy clamps fell loose. But it required a little tug before it came free.

"It's the right one!" she said gloatingly. "Oh, thank goodness! We've done the trick, Winnie! We can release them all!"

Tommy Watson was the junior who was first freed, and he took the key from Doris.

"I'll do it now!" he panted. "You mustn't bother, Doris! Oh, you're a brick! What a brain-wave! You girls deserve the Victoria Cross!"

"Rats!" said Winnie. "We've done nothing to shout about."

And so, for the next ten minutes or so, the key went round—passing from one fellow to another as they were each released.

"By George!" shouted Handforth, as he arose and stretched himself. "Now I feel myself again! I'd just like to meet Siegan at this minute!"

"Well, I wouldn't!" said Nipper. "We've got a lot to do before we want to meet Siegan. Thanks to Doris and Winnie, we've got a chance of turning the tables."

"Turning the tables!" said Handforth, staring.

"Why not?" asked Nipper. "All you fellows had better remain where you are, in your places—and, if you take my advice, you'll clamp those irons round your wrists again, as though they're locked. It's quite safe to do so—they won't snap fastened. They'll only seem locked."

"But, odds mysteries and puzzles, what's the dashed idea, laddie?" asked Archie, in wonder. "I mean to say, we've only just stretched the good old limbs, and exercised the tissues! A bit murky, I mean, to suggest getting back into the old bracelets, what?"

"It may be murky, but the only thing to be done," replied Dick grimly. "Don't you see? We'll release all these slaves—no need to ask if they'll be loyal! They're on our side against the pirates. And Siegan and his men may be back at any minute."

"When they come, we'll smash 'em!" roared Handforth.

"You hopeless ass, they'll escape unless we use some strategy!" retorted Nipper. "We've got to pretend to be all locked up—just the same as when they left us. And then, at a given signal, we can throw off our irons, and take the whole crowd by surprise."

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the idea, Nipper!"

"Absolutely!"

"The scheme has my full approval" declared Browne, nodding. "In fact, brothers, as captain of this bodyguard, I now issue an order that nobody shall leave his place. Brother Handforth, be good enough to subside."

But Handforth was looking flushed and hot.

"A trap!" he gloated. "Turning the tables on the pirates, eh? That's what we'll do! We'll make out that we're scared into fits, and as meek and mild as Third Form kids!"

"Do I look meek and mild?" demanded Willy indignantly.

But Handforth waved aside the protest, and within a minute he was labouring under the fixed delusion that the idea was entirely his own. As nobody took much notice of him, it didn't matter.

The whole galley was throbbing with excitement and activity.

"Oh, I felt sure that we should do something pretty good!" said Doris thankfully. "It's a wonderful idea, to spring on the pirates, and overpower them! Perhaps we can get back to Northestria, and arrive at Westwold Castle, safe and sound, after all."

"That's exactly what we're planning," replied Reggie Pitt. "Doris, old girl, you've done marvels—and so has Sis!"

Winnie smiled.

"Anyhow, we've done our part, and now it's up to you," she replied.

And while they continued their bustling activities, a motor-boat was proceeding up the rocky gorge on the Northestrian shore. It contained Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Ethelbert the Red, and two or three other high Northestrian nobles. All were filled with acute anxiety.

They had been making close inquiries all along the coast, and now they were penetrating that gorge, on the chance of learning something definite. So far, they had only heard rumours—and Nelson Lee knew enough about rumours to have little faith in them. Even now he was hoping that the Royal barge would be safely found. It was possible that it had really been taken out upon the lake, captured by a pirate galley, but nothing certain could be ascertained—and it would take hours to make a thorough survey of that great stretch of water, and perhaps days. Along this part of the Northestrian coast there were endless inlets and caves, and the barge might have been concealed in any one of them.

"It's no good being impatient, my lord," Lee was saying to Ethelbert. "The whole situation is serious, but before we commence an actual search, we must fully verify the report that the princess has not reached her destination."

"It'll be a bally shame if those rumours are true," said Lord Dorrimore, with a frown.

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"After all our high hopes, it won't be particularly cheerin' to have them all shattered."

Ethelbert the Red was clasping and unclasping his hands.

"I fear that Kassker has dealt a master blow!" he muttered. "We were too ready to celebrate our victory, it seemeth. While yet we were cheering, and congratulating ourselves, our fair young princess was in the enemy's vile hands!"

And so they went right up the river to Westwold Castle.

And here there was a fine turmoil, for everything had been in readiness for her Majesty's reception. Her non-arrival had thrown the entire establishment into dismay, and the continued lack of news was not only significant, but alarming.

"Well, it's got to be the lake," declared Nelson Lee.

"Why did we not search the lake earlier?" asked Ethelbert.

"My lord, I have little hope of achieving success by searching the lake," replied Lee quietly. "You must remember that it has recently been infested with enemy vessels. Providing the Royal barge kept to your own coastline, all would have been well—or so we thought. But if the vessel fell into the hands of pirates, and was taken out upon the lake, by now it may be in the hands of the enemy fleet."

"By my soul!" moaned Ethelbert. "What will come of all this?"

"You're right, Lee, old man," agreed Dorrie, with a gloomy nod. "It'll be like searching for a needle in a haystack, I'm afraid. Still, the princess is missing—and so are all those boys and girls. We've just got to keep on until we learn somethin' regardin' their fate."

"Exactly," said Lee quietly. "We've just got to keep on."



CHAPTER 14.

SETTING THE-STAGE!

DICK HAMILTON stood on the gangway of the galley, and looked about him.

"Nobody could tell that you weren't all chained up, just the same as before!" he said, with satisfaction. "I'll come back to my place in five minutes. Handy, you and the others go round among these poor beggars, and finish unlocking the whole crowd of 'em."

"And what are you going to do?" asked Handforth.

"I'm going to escort the girls back to their prison."

"Thanks all the same, Nipper, but you needn't trouble," said Doris, smiling. "We know the way—it's along the ledge, and then up a stone stairway. There's a great door, heavily bolted——"

"That's just the point," said Nipper. "I've got to go with you, so that I can bolt the door again."

"Why, yes, of course," laughed Doris. "How silly!"

Handforth frowned.

"I don't approve of this," he said firmly. "There's a chance here to escape—to get clear away. I think we ought to get the princess down, and all the other girls, too. It seems dotty to take Doris and Winnie back, and bolt them up again."

"Nipper knows best," said Winnie quietly.

"If I thought there was any possibility of failure, I'd bolt at once, with all of us," replied Nipper. "But we want to do better than just escape. We're going to grab these pirates, and have them thrown into prison, where they belong. And unless Doris and Winnie are back in that cave, Siegan will know that something rummy has been happening. So come along, girls."

A boat was floating at the stern of the galley, and in a moment the trio were in it, and they quickly reached the rock ledge, at the base of the grotto. Then Doris led the way to the stone stairs.

And this time the ascent seemed very different. Previously, they had gone into the unknown, with the knowledge that they were in the hands of the pirates. But now, there was something exciting and intriguing to look forward to.

At last the heavy door was reached, although it was necessary to feel their way, since the darkness was pitchy, and they had no torches to guide them.

Nipper pulled the bolts back, and the door swung open.

"Doris!" shouted Irene joyously, as Doris walked in.

"Winnie—and Nipper!" shouted the others. "Oh, you did the trick, then!"

"Just luck," said Winnie modestly. "There's not a soul on guard, and it was child's play. Everybody's released——"

"Oh, and are we going to make a dash for freedom?" asked Mary breathlessly.

"Not just yet," replied Nipper. "Doris and Winnie will tell you all about it. Some of you girls had better help them with their wet clothing, too—they're soaked to the skin."

"It doesn't matter," said Doris. "The air's so warm that we shan't come to any harm. We've got nothing to change into, anyhow. We can only hope that the pirates won't notice our damp condition when they lug us out."

"But aren't we going to escape?" asked Irene, in wonder.

"You bet we are!" replied Nipper.

Princess Mercia, who had been watching and listening in a kind of trance, now swept forward, her sweet young face alight with wondering amazement.

"By my faith, 'tis almost too wondrous to be true!" she exclaimed. "Ye are still alive, sweet girls! And I thought ye went to your deaths! I am overwrought with anxiety and curiosity! What has happened? Tell me of this strange exploit. You are even as resourceful and courageous as the men!"

Doris and Winnie laughed, and Nipper did not wait to hear the explanation. Besides, there was much to be done below, and there was no telling when the pirate galley would return.

So Nipper took his leave, and closed and bolted the door—exactly as he had found it. Then, quickly, he felt his way down the stairs, and joined the others. Everything was going well. By the time Nipper reached the deck of the galley again, the last of the eighty slaves had been released. Another twenty were found, packed cruelly away down in a kind of noisome hold. There were the unfortunate wretches who had been unchained to make place for the juniors.

"There's no help for it, brothers, but I'm afraid you'll have to remain in this prison for a further period," said Browne. "You will be needed when the fighting starts, and so your door will be left unfastened. Come forth at the first sign of conflict."

All the slaves were pitifully eager to obey. Most of them were Northeastrians—harmless, simple enough fellows who had had a great deal of their manhood thrashed out of them by long months under the pirates' lash. But the prospect of early release—the thought of turning upon their tormentors—made new men of them.

Their gratitude towards the St. Frank's fellows was touching. One and all, they were like faithful dogs—loyal to a man, and ready to obey any command at the faintest whisper.

"We do thy bidding, good youths!" said one of the slaves. "'Tis for thee to command, and we will heed!"

"We desire nothing but a fight on level terms with these foul monsters who have tortured us," said another. "All hail to our rescuers!"

And from every part of the galley arose a throbbing cheer.

But the St. Frank's fellows soon put a stop to it. The time was getting on, and they were rather surprised that Siegan should still be absent. It was certain that he would return now at almost any minute.

Browne and Nipper took a last look round. Standing on the central gangway, they beheld the slaves—chained, as before, to their oars. All of them were looking different now—eager-eyed, alert, and flushed.

"You'll have to seem a bit more downcast than this!" said Nipper, addressing them all. "Try to be just as you were—dejected and miserable. We don't want the pirates to guess anything."

"I think it would be a lot better to smash 'em as soon as they turn up," sang out Handforth. "Something might go wrong if we keep up this game. In fact, we ought to go straight back to Northeastria—"

"Don't start again, Handy!" muttered Church. "The whole thing's cut and dried, and we're going through with it. Besides, if Nipper suggested going back to Northeastria, you'd be the first to jump on the idea!"

This was true enough, and Handforth grunted.

"Oh, all right," he said. "I wash my hands of the whole affair!"

A minute later, Browne and Nipper were in their own places, and, to all intents and purposes, not a thing had happened.

And now commenced an anxious wait.

Everybody was longing for the return of the pirates, for they were all keyed up to concert pitch. A sustained wait would have bad effects, for a reaction would probably set in, and a great deal of enthusiasm would ooze away. Nipper was particularly anxious for the pirates to return.

The minutes passed, and the grotto remained deserted.

And then, at last, came a word from one of the slaves at the far end of the galley—a man who could manage to see out through the cave entrance, from his position.

"They come!" he murmured. "I see the galley even now!"

A kind of tremor passed through that craft, with its hundred odd souls. Not a word was spoken, and only the intense breathing of the slaves could be heard. But then came another sound—a steady falling of oars, and the splashing of water.

Thirty seconds later, a shadow fell across the cave entrance, and then the pirate galley swept in, with oars uplifted, and with Siegan the Slim standing ready with his orders.

The pirates had returned, and the moment for action was near at hand!



CHAPTER 15.

THE SURPRISE!

SIEGAN THE SLIM was in a gloating humour.

His bargain with Guntha the Crafty was a far better one than he had anticipated, and he had no fear of the Gothlander general going back on his written pledge. Guntha was one of Kassker's chief men, and even though he was a savage enough brute, he would never dare to dishonour his sealed word.

Besides, for such prizes as these Royal prisoners, and the British schoolboys and school-girls, Kassker the Grim would readily endorse Guntha's bargain. Siegan had no fear of the outcome.

And now he was all eagerness to deliver his victims over.

For he did not lose sight of the fact that victory might yet be wrested from his grasp. Valuable hours had gone by, and it was inevitable that the Northeastrians should now have become aware of the Royal barge's disappearance.

That meant that a search was in progress.

Siegan knew of the aeroplane and the motor-boat, and the other wonders that were in the possession of these strangers from the outer world. He feared them. He feared that his plans would be wrecked before he could complete them. And now that he had



As Dorrie switched on the searchlight, a powerful beam suddenly lit up the gloomy interior of the cave. "See!" shouted Ethelbert, pointing. "The Royal Galley!" "But where are the boys?" exclaimed Lee. "The ship is deserted!" They were too late, it seemed. The prisoners had been taken to Gothland!

returned to the cave, he was all eagerness to be off again.

The majority of his crew were grumbling—talking of penetrating their grottos, and preparing a meal. But Siegan would not hear of it. Food could wait until afterwards. At present there was only one thing to be done, and that was to speed back to Guntha's ship, and deliver over the hostages.

So now, in a moment, all was activity.

The pirates swarmed on board the big galley, and preparations for departure were made. Men with whips took up their positions on the gangway, and sharp orders were given for the slaves to get ready. More than one whip was cruelly lashed—and more than one slave nearly precipitated premature action by hurling himself upon his tormentor.

Never for a moment did Siegan suspect the truth.

Once or twice, on his homeward trip, he had called himself a fool for leaving no men on guard, but, in his eagerness, he had sped off with all his crew. And now he could see that his fears had been unfounded.

The slaves were exactly as he had left them, including these "stranger" schoolboys, of whom he had seen and heard so much. They were hardly behaving in keeping with their reputation.

For they cringed and whimpered as the pirates paced along the gangway with their whips. Siegan could not prevent himself from openly jeering.

"Your marrow has melted in your bones, I vow!" he sneered as he stared down at the cowering St. Frank's fellows. "Fine, brave valiants when all is well, but curs when ye are aware of a master! Spineless puppies! Ye will soon learn the real meaning of fear!"

"Don't—don't hand us over to the Gothlanders!" begged Nipper, his voice breaking with terror.

Siegan laughed loudly.

"'Tis exactly my aim!" he retorted.

"Oh!"

A prolonged wail went up from the juniors.

"'Tis something which affrights ye, eh?" shouted Siegan gloatingly. "Within the hour ye will be in the hands of the enemy! Guntha the Crafty himself is now awaiting—and once in his hands——"

"Guntha the Crafty!" shouted Fullwood, horrified. "You're not going to deliver us into that brute's hands!"

"His vessel is lying some miles hence, waiting to receive ye," replied Siegan, with complete satisfaction. "A little voyage, my valiants! A pleasant little hour at the oars, and then ye will no longer be galley-slaves, but hostages in the hands of Kassker!"

"But he'll kill us!" shouted Nipper.

"Mayhap!" replied Siegan. "But 'twill be none of my business. Ye will pass into his hands unharmed."

"But—but what about the princess?" demanded Handforth angrily.

Siegan turned and surveyed him with lowering eyes. Little did he guess that all this talk was deliberately planned, on purpose to draw him out, so that he would reveal his full programme! In his colossal pride, Siegan had forsaken every vestige of caution.

"The princess?" he replied darkly. "The princess and her young cur of a brother are going with ye—ay, by my faith, and the other maidens, too!"

"You cur!" shouted Nipper. "You're going to send us all to our death! If you give us into the hands of the Gothlanders, we shall all be killed! It's all a lie—you're just trying to frighten us."

"Thou shalt see, foolish youth!" retorted Siegan. "Guntha's ship is but five miles distant, and there will soon be an end to this comedy."

Siegan spoke more truly than he believed. But, at the moment, he was deceived by his own brilliance. He took it for granted that there could be no possible mutiny among these slaves. His one and only fear was that Nelson Lee or Lord Dorrimore might appear on the scene.

So a quick departure was ordered.

By this time the princess, Prince Oswy, and all the girls were on the galley, having been brought down from the upper cave by a strong escort. They played their parts well, for they gave no sign of their real feelings. They were thrust into the galley's cabin, and Siegan the Slim appeared in the doorway.

"Good ladies, I regret this further disturbance, but I find it necessary to place ye in fresh quarters," he said glibly. "Have no fear—ye are passing into good hands—the hands of Guntha the Crafty."

The princess gave a cry.

"A Gothlander!" she exclaimed timidly.

Siegan laughed harshly, and bowed.

"And is not a Gothlander preferable to a pirate?" he jeered. "Be at ease, good princess—for this period of strife will soon be at an end. There will be no invasion of North-estria, methinks, but a triumphant entry of Kassker the Grim and his armies."

He withdrew, still laughing, and Irene slammed the door.

"Oh, the brute—the awful brute!" she panted.

"Never mind!" whispered Doris. "The fellows will give the signal at any moment now, and then he'll get a surprise-package! Oh, I can hardly believe it! Everything's going exactly as we planned."

"Think ye it will go well?" asked the princess, with anxious eyes.

"It's a certainty now!" replied Irene. "Oh, listen! Let's just stand here and listen! They're bound to give the signal in a minute."

"Aren't they going to wait until we get out into the open?" asked Mary.

"No—they mean to spring the surprise here."

And so they waited, tense and expectant.

And outside, Siegan was giving orders, and

the slave-drivers were getting their whips ready. A command rang out, and all the slaves dipped their oars in mechanical obedience, as they had done thousands of times before.

Siegan watched with satisfaction. The idea of unchaining his prisoners before Guntha's eyes appealed to him. He would let the Gothlander general see them at the sweeps—for it occurred to him that Guntha would take pleasure at the sight.

And then came the order to start. It was followed, however, without an instant's pause, by another order.

Edward Oswald Handforth was watching Nipper closely—and Nipper nodded. On the second, Handforth leapt to his feet, and his chains rattled loose.

"Now!" he thundered. "Up, everybody! Up!"

It had previously been arranged that Handforth should give the signal, his voice being the loudest. And he let out such a terrific bellow that every slave on board was electrified into instantaneous life.

Siegan started back at that shout, and he was scowling.

"By my bones!" he snarled. "What folly——" He broke off, his eyes goggling, for scores of the slaves were breaking free, as though their iron bonds were no stronger than cotton. "A murrain! Am I mad? The lash, fools! Make these curs obey——"

But the other pirates were equally startled—equally incapable of action. It seemed to them that a miracle had happened. As though actuated by a single spring, the hundred slaves had leapt to their feet, and every chain had been flung aside.

The slaves were free!

Little wonder that the pirates fell back, frightened and aghast. A moment before, these prisoners had been helpless in their chains. And now they were an enraged, fierce, dangerous body of fighting enemies!



CHAPTER 16.

THE BATTLE!

"HURRAH!"

"At 'em, St. Frank's!"

"Come on, everybody!"

The advantage was wholly with the boys and their slave supporters. Siegan's men had been taken utterly off their guard, and before they had a chance to recover themselves, they were overwhelmingly attacked.

There was one particular object in this form of surprise.

The juniors did not want the pirates to have a chance of using their ugly weapons. The whole idea was to render them helpless at the outset, before they could cause any bloodshed. It was not to be a gory fight, but a swift, dramatic capture.

That was the main idea.

Altogether, there were between fifty and

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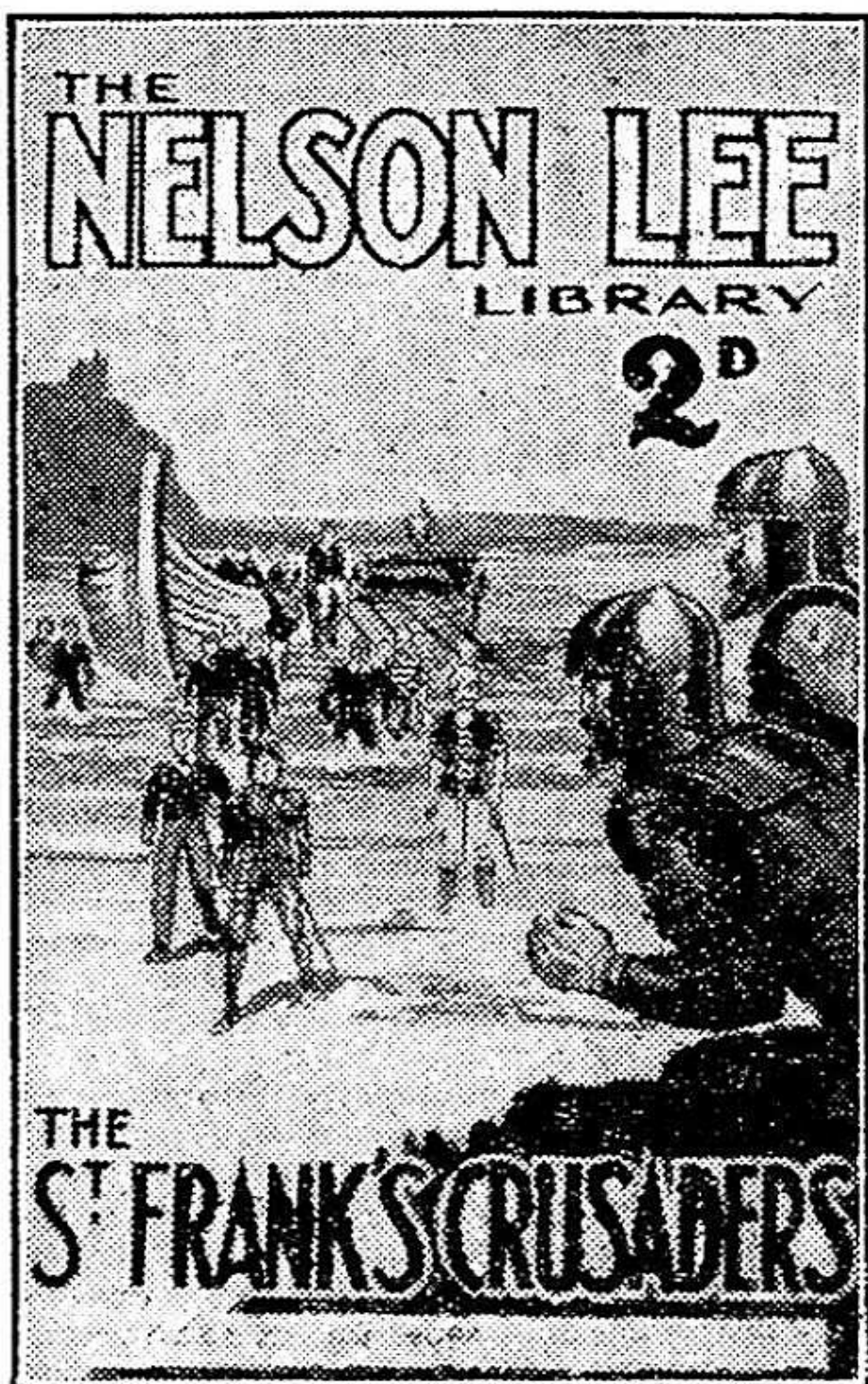
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sixty of the pirates, but quite a number had been left on the other galley, for Siegan did not see any reason to take all his supporters with him on this trip.

Thus, when the hundred arose, the odds were all with them.

"I'll take Siegan!" roared Handforth.

"Hurrah!"

"Hold on, old man—we'll help you!" gasped Church.

McClure was there, too. Handforth's chums had no intention of letting him take Siegan on single-handed. For while the pirate chief was armed to the teeth, Edward Oswald was without any weapons.

Siegan swung round, and grabbed for his sword. His feelings were too confused for any expression. He was only aware of one appalling truth. His scheme had gone wrong, and he believed that death was upon him.

But before he could draw his sword, Handforth arrived in one tremendous leap, and his right fist smashed devastatingly into Siegan's face.

Crash!

It was a terrific punch, and Siegan reeled

over. The next second, Handforth was astride his prostrate body, and Church and McClure were holding down his lashing legs.

Up and down the galley, from stem to stern, there was one roar of noise, and a smother of confusion. The battle was at its height, and hardly anybody knew exactly what was happening.

From the other galley, the pirates were attempting to come to the aid of their fellows, but they only came to disaster. For as they swarmed over the bulwarks, they were seized, and sent reeling into the slave-pits.

Handforth glanced round, and his face was aflame.

"Good man!" he panted. "Come on—drag him to the left here—we've got the chains ready for him!"

"He'll be the first to taste the whip, too!" growled Church. "My stars! I'm just longing to give him a few lashes, the brute!"

Swearing and blaspheming, the helpless Siegan was dragged off the gangway. And before he could recover from the effects of that blow, he found himself chained up—and Handforth himself had turned the key. The

man sat there at the oar, wrenching so madly at his iron bonds that he tore his flesh. He was literally foaming at the mouth with rage, and his voice was a scream of hatred.

"That's it—fire away!" snapped Handforth. "You've had your turn, my son—and this is ours! You thought you could do just as you liked with us, didn't you? But you didn't think that a couple of girls would spoil your little game, did you?"

Siegan was altogether too maddened to hear or to heed. The knowledge that his dream was shattered bereft him of his senses, and he was little better than a maniac.

In every other part of the galley the same story was told.

The pirates were swiftly overpowered. Indeed, only a very few of them put up any kind of fight. They were scum of the worst type. And when they found themselves face to face with real danger, they crumpled up. And this danger was very real!

For those released slaves had many scores to wipe off, and but for continual curbing on the part of Browne, Nipper, and others, many of the frenzied wretches would have done their victims to death.

As it was, the whole affair was over within five minutes.

By then, the galley was in the hands of those who had engineered the surprise, and scarcely a pirate had escaped. Most of those who had not been on board at first had come later, only to share the fate of their fellows. Others were rounded up in the grottos. And all were held. Against such an enemy as this, they were powerless.

Nipper was the first to rush to the cabin, and he burst in joyously.

"Victory!" he shouted breathlessly.

"Yes, we know!" cried Doris. "We heard everything. We want to come out——"

"Sorry, but you can't," interrupted Nipper. "Not yet, anyway. Keep in here, and don't move until we give the signal. We haven't finished yet—but we'll soon be ready for you!"

He was off again, and he closed the door.

And now a fresh development was taking place. The pirates were being dragged out of their clothing. Not all of them, but the most picturesque of the ruffians—those who wore the most distinctive clothes.

And everyone of the St. Frank's fellows donned the pirate garb.

"It's a bit of a struggle, but we've got to do it, and it's all in a good cause," roared Handforth, as he got into his new attire. "I've always wanted to be a pirate, and now I'm going to be one!"

Archie Glenthorne was horrified.

"Absolutely not!" he protested, aghast. "I mean, dash it! I'm ready to do any jolly old thing for the good of the populace, but this is too dashed much! Odds horrors and atrocities! I can't get into these blighting things!"

"You've got to, Archie—there's no escape!" grinned Nipper.

"But, I mean, they're dashed unclean!" protested Archie.

"I know it—but you've got to be brave."

"What would Phipps say?" moaned Archie pleadingly. "The poor old boy would simply wilt away on the spot, and perish!" He pulled himself together. "However, if it's for the sake of the princess, Archie will resign himself. I mean to say, for a lady, nothing is too much!"

But as he donned the nondescript garb which had been allotted to him, he nearly wilted away himself. The other fellows were too excited to take much notice, and before long they were all transformed. Instead of being St. Frank's schoolboys, they had become a ragged crew of pirates.

And as each pirate was forced into the discarded clothes of his captor, he was chained to the oars, and the key was turned. It was a full half hour before the transfer was completed. But by then the job was efficiently done.

The former masters were chained and padlocked, and the slaves were in command. Siegan had partially recovered by now, and his eyes were baleful as he watched the activities. Yet he could do nothing. He had exhausted himself by his frenzied struggling, and, moreover, he was chained by both wrists and both ankles. He who had chained men to this oar was now chained to it himself.

"Let me bargain!" he shouted suddenly. "Set me at liberty, and I will betray Guntha the Crafty into your hands! I ask not for the liberty of these other scum—they are best chained!"

"And so are you!" said Browne gently. "And let me also inform you, Brother Siegan, that we already have our plans for Brother Guntha. So the less you say, the better."

"I will give ye valuable information——"

Siegan got no further, for his next door neighbour had half risen in his seat, and he attempted to fling himself upon his late captain. In spite of his chains, he succeeded in delivering a vicious blow with his elbow, and Siegan subsided. And at the same moment he realised that there could be no bargaining with his captors.

Handforth was rushing to the cabin, and he thundered upon the door.

"All right—you can all come out now!" he shouted. "It's all clear!"

The door opened, and Irene & Co. burst out. But they recoiled at sight of Edward Oswald.

"Ted!" cried Irene, aghast.

"You needn't be scared," said Handforth, grinning. "This is just a part of the scheme, you know. We're going along to make another capture. We've collared the pirates, but we're not satisfied. We want to take back one of the enemy generals with us as a kind of trophy!"

Princess Mercia was bewildered.

"'Tis more than I can grasp!" she murmured. "Is there no end to the energy and enterprise of these wondrous youths?"

"What about the girls?" asked Handforth. "They've done as much as we—and more. In fact, we couldn't have done a thing without them."

The princess regarded him fondly out of her deep brown eyes, and Handforth fell back a pace, terrified. He had begun to think that the princess had lost her interest in him, but now he was freshly alarmed.

"You are all wonderful!" exclaimed Mercia softly. "Was I not right when I placed thee in my bodyguard, good Handforth the Bold? Praise for one is scarcely fair, for ye are all deserving of the same praise. I am in complete amaze by all these swift happenings."

"We shall soon be back in Northestria, princess," said Irene cheerfully. "And then we shall be safe again. But, oh, hasn't it been worth all our worries and anxieties? My hat, what a gorgeous day we've had!"



CHAPTER 17.

A SHOCK FOR GUNTHA THE CRAFTY.

HE galley swung out of the inlet, and bore round the frowning rocks towards the open lake.

Even from a short distance it seemed that the vessel was really and truly in command of pirates. All the figures that could be seen on the deck were ill-dressed ruffians, and many of them were cracking their whips with seemingly practised skill.

True, the oars were being wielded clumsily, and now and again there was confusion among the slaves. But this was not very surprising, considering that the chained pirates were resisting continuously. Moreover, they were not accustomed to the sweeps of this big galley.

Up and down the gangway, the former slaves were whipping all those pirates who resisted or who cursed. The brutes were receiving a taste of their own medicine. And the St. Frank's fellows made no attempt to interfere. They knew that these pirates deserved the lash.

They had to set their course more by guesswork than anything else, for there was no sign of Guntha's ship when once they had swung round the island. But they knew that the vessel must be somewhere in the direction of Gothland.

To ask Siegan for directions was futile, for if he answered at all, he would probably lie. So the great galley set out, trusting to luck. And at just about the same time, the motor-boat, with Nelson Lee and Dorrie on board, was starting off from the Northestrian coast—bound for the island in mid-lake.

"It's our only course now," Nelson Lee was saying. "Things seem to be going

wrong generally, for I can hear the motor misfiring."

"The motor?" repeated Ethelbert the Red, staring.

"Yes, the engine."

"Thou meanest the mechanism which drives this craft?" asked the princess' chief adviser. "I no longer wonder at these marvels. Is aught amiss? It seemeth that we travel less speedily."

"I'll go and have a look at the works," said Lord Dorrimore. "We've got enough juice, because we filled the tanks before we started out. It'll just about put me in a cheerful mood if the old bus peters out."

He went to look at the engine. Fortunately, there was no lack of petrol there, for when the airship had crashed, she had done no damage to her great supply tanks, and these had been over two-thirds full.

While Dorrie tinkered with the engine, Lee kept a sharp look-out ahead. This search was presenting many difficulties. At last definite information had been gained that the Royal barge had been seen going out upon the lake in company with a great galley. But none could say which direction they had taken, although it was assumed that the vessels were making for the pirate islands.

So the motor-boat was now dashing off in chase.

Lee wanted to have a hundred ships in this affair, for then something might be accomplished. But the slow Northestrian vessels were practically useless in such an enterprise. This one motor-boat had to suffice, and Lee had grave fears that the captives had already been taken well over towards Gothland.

"You see, it's so confoundedly difficult," he said, turning to Ethelbert. "We might go right across to Gothland, and miss them by a mere mile or two. We might search this lake for days without happening to strike the exact spot. From this low level the horizon is limited—it's not as though we were on a yacht, with a high deck. We're almost on a level with the water, and our horizon is confined to a mile or two. And this lake is forty miles across."

"Let us, at all events, search these accursed islands," said Ethelbert anxiously.

And, in due course, the islands grew near. Dorrie had patched up the engine, and it was now operating at full power. Lee did not hesitate. He drove the motor-boat straight into the low cave entrance, with Lord Dorrimore at the machine-gun.

"Better switch on the searchlight, eh?" said his lordship.

"Yes—do so!" replied Nelson Lee.

A powerful searchlight was fitted in the bows of the motor-boat, and at the touch of a switch a great beam shot out. And, as the boat glided into the gloomy cave, the interior was dazzlingly lit up.

"See!" shouted Ethelbert, pointing. "The Royal galley!"

"By gad, he's right!" said Dorrie. "She's here, Lee!"

"Yes, but where are the boys?" exclaimed Lee. "And what of the pirates themselves? There's no one here, Dorrie—the place is deserted!"

It did not take long for them to discover this fact. The grotto was abandoned, and the Royal barge was empty and deserted. The absence of the big galley was significant—for this proved, beyond doubt, that the prisoners had been transferred on to it, and were being taken elsewhere. Gothland! It was obvious!

So once again the motor-boat went out in search, but with little hope. For by this time it seemed that the royal captives must be in the hands of the enemy. Little did Nelson Lee imagine what was really taking place!

For at that very time the pirate galley was bearing down upon Guntha's waiting ship. Guntha the Crafty was filled with pleasant anticipation. He watched the galley's approach with acute satisfaction, and he no longer had any doubts regarding Siegan's story. For here came Siegan with his prisoners!

On board the galley, the St. Frank's fellows were acting with caution.

Deliberately they had placed Princess Mercia, Prince Oswy and the girls in a prominent position on the high poop, where they could be seen distinctly by those on the enemy ship. And the bows of the galley were kept head-on, so that none of the Gothlanders could gain a clear view of the galley's lower decks.

Thus, Guntha had every reason to feel pleased, for he could see those royal prisoners long before the galley drew close. He could see them huddled together, frightened-looking and timid. He did not know that this was a mere trick to entrap him.

Handforth, Nipper and the other fellows were taking anxious stock of the enemy ship. They meant to capture her, if possible, but they weren't quite sure of her size or strength. But now that they were approaching, they were reassured. Guntha's vessel was not so very formidable, and there did not appear to be many men aboard. At all events, her decks were well nigh deserted.

"We'll chance it!" growled Nipper. "We'll sweep up, and board the beggar before they can guess our intention."

The prospect of returning to Northestria with such a prize was alluring, and none of the fellows could resist it. Such a feat would provide a fitting round-up to the day's adventures.

And so, when the galley swept majestically alongside, friendly grappling irons were cast across, and the Gothlanders had no suspicion of what was coming. Guntha's eyes were upon the princess, and his elation knew no bounds. How Kassker the Grim would honour him for this tremendous triumph!

And then, like the burst of a thunderclap, came the shock.

From every part of the galley men were sweeping on board the Gothlander vessel—and boys, too! All were armed with swords.

"Surrender!" went up the shout. "Surrender, and we'll spare you!"

Guntha started forward, his eyes ablaze.

"A trick!" he raved. "By my bones! A foul and dastardly trick!"

The clash of the fight was already beginning, but it was not likely to last for long. For this ship contained men who were mostly injured, and the rest had no fight left in them. They were already demoralised by their recent experiences, and the very nature of this new surprise unnerved them.

"There he is!" yelled Handforth triumphantly. "Come on, you chaps!"

Guntha was swept off his feet before he could even draw his sword, and he disappeared beneath a pile of shouting fellows. And Guntha's downfall in the first minute of the fight was enough.

The rest of the Gothlanders crumpled up.



CHAPTER 18.

THE RETURN!

WITHIN five minutes the victory was established.

After the first Gothlanders had gone down, the rest surrendered—abjectly. The schoolboy pirates had done well, for not only had they captured an enemy ship, but they had seized Guntha the Crafty—one of Kassker's right-hand men. And now for Northestria!

Fully fifty of the released slaves were left on board the captive, to act as a prize crew. Every Gothlander was disarmed, and the majority, indeed, were packed below and locked up. Only sufficient men were kept at the sweeps.

"By jingo, we've had some excitement, but everything's ended all right," grinned Reggie Pitt happily. "We've got the whole gang of pirates, an enemy ship, and an enemy commander! Who said we couldn't join in the actual fighting?"

"This is what comes of sending us off with the princess—so as to be out of all the fun!" said Handforth, grinning. "As a matter of fact, we've had more of the fighting than any of the others, I'll bet. And we've come out on top, too. Good luck to St. Frank's!"

"Rather!" said Nipper. "But now we've got to skedaddle back. We can't take any more chances—especially with the princess on board."

"Chances!" echoed Handforth. "We could capture a dozen Gothlander ships if we liked—with no chance about it, either. What's the good of being pirates if we don't set to work? I vote we raid—"

But he was shouted down.

"No, old man, we've got to deliver the princess safely," said Nipper. "Besides, I've got a sort of feeling that I could do with a

meal. How long is it since we ate? Six hours, or six days?"

"Feels like six weeks!" said Tommy Watson.

Browne was confronting the princess.

"We have the honour to present you with a captured enemy ship, your Highness," he was saying graciously. "We now propose to speed for Westwold—where, I fear, there is a certain amount of anxiety."

"I am lost for words," confessed the princess happily. "I knew ye to be youths of great resource and courage, but these exploits have surpassed all my expectations. Ye are truly youths of a great nation!"

Before Browne could answer, a shout went up.

"Look! The motor-boat!" yelled somebody.

"Hurrah! It must be Mr. Lee!"

Nipper jumped.

"We'd better signal—and do it quickly, too!" he exclaimed. "They'll mistake us for a pirate—and they've got a machine-gun on board."

"Oh, corks!"

"Let's signal the surrender, and make 'em think we're real pirates!" grinned Handforth. "Up with the white flag, you chaps!"

A signal of some kind was found, and it was frantically waved. And on board the motor-boat the approaching searchers were surprised—and suspicious.

"They're surrendering—even before we fire a shot!" said Lee. "We had better go cautiously, Dorrie—"

"My dear man, don't you believe it!" said his lordship. "They're scared—they've heard of us! The very sight of this motor-boat is enough to put these pirates into a funk—Ye gods and little fishes!" he added, in a shout of joy. "Look! It's the princess—and she's waving!"

"Thank heaven!" murmured Lee.

Ethelbert the Red was too anxious and relieved to make any comment. Even now he feared that some mishap might occur. The motor-boat swung round, and drew alongside the galley. And, as it did so, a number of the pirates raised their arms.

"Hallo, Mr. Lee!" went up a united shout. "Cheerio, Dorrie!"

"Good glory!" gasped his lordship.

"The boys!" exclaimed Lee. "Well, upon my soul! These—these pirates are our own boys, Dorrie!"

"Can't I see it?" roared Lord Dorrimore. "Of all the infernal young monkeys! I'll tan

their hides for this trick, confound 'em! But, by gad, they're a set of wonders! Good luck to 'em for their spirit!"

"It's all right, guv'nor!" sang out Nipper, from the galley. "The princess is safe, and so is Prince Oswy. We've got lots of prisoners, and we're just off to Westwold."

Dorrie shook his fist.

"Wait until I get at you!" he shouted. "What's the idea of foolin' us like this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A shout of laughter went up, and Dorrie was obliged to grin. Three minutes later he and Nelson Lee were in the midst of the triumphant juniors, and Ethelbert the Red was breathlessly inquiring of the princess if she was safe and well.

It was Nipper who briefly told Lee the facts. Browne wanted to be spokesman, but he was shouted down, in spite of the fact that he was a commander. The fellows were hungry, and they didn't want to wait all day while the locquacious Fifth-Former told the story.

"That's about all, sir," concluded Nipper, when he had given the main facts. "There's Siegan, chained to that oar—and we've colared Guntha the Crafty, too. Another blow for the Gothlanders, eh?"

Lee looked at the fellows with sparkling eyes.

"Boys, you've done splendidly," he said simply. "Against extraordinary difficulties you have conquered all along the line. Your efforts have been magnificent."

"Hold on, sir," said Nipper, with a frown. "This isn't our act at all—it's the girls'! All the honours go to Doris and Winnie."

"Hear, hear!" shouted the rest of the fellows. "Three cheers for Doris and Winnie! They're the heroes of the hour!"

"They're talking nonsense, Mr. Lee," said Winnie uncomfortably.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"On the contrary, they are talking with singular truth," he said. "It seems to me that you have all done your share in this exploit, and you may be sure that Northestria is as proud of you as I am."

And so another episode was ended, but this did not mean that the thrills of the sojourn in the Arctic oasis were over!

THE END.

(Next week's fine story is entitled "THE ST. FRANK'S CRUSADERS!" It relates the further adventures of the juniors, and is packed with thrills and surprises.)

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BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr. Edwy Searles Brooks
chats with his readers.



*NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star, thus *, against sender's name.*

E. S. B.

AS I can't think of anything to start writing about, and as I'm tremendously busy, as usual, I'll acknowledge a few of those old letters straight away. By the time I've got them down, I may have thought of something.

* * *

Jas. W. Cook and Joseph Hoser (Poplar), Lex (Aberdeen), Bourgeois (Hereford), A Scotch Laddie (Airdrie), Cricketer (Newcastle-on-Tyne), E's F. P. (Bethnal Green), D. A. D. (Manor Park), R. A. W. (Manor Park), Nipper of Remove (Brighton), V. B. Flower (Leek), Norman L. Roughley (Meathop), S. E. (Walworth), Betty (Melbourne), Melbourne (Melbourne), David Pearson (Burton-on-Trent), J. E. C. (Lowestoft), O. K. B. (Morwell, Vic.), A Loyal Reader, F.M.1115 (Forrest, Vic.).

* * *

Well, that's given me a chance to collect my scattered thoughts. I've been wondering what to write about for the next Series, and an idea has just occurred to me that it might be rather good to— But what's this got to do with you? A lot, I suppose you'll say, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait. Just at the moment, my job is to answer all those readers mentioned above. But as I'm not going to answer them, we haven't got much further. As I've mentioned before, if any of you up in that second paragraph want answers, you've only got to write again, at just about the same length, and I'll reply on this page as quickly as possible.

* * *

Wait a minute, though. I've just spotted one name up there that's given me a shock. Quite a pleasant shock, let me hasten to add, but still, a shock. If that particular reader writes again at the same length—as I've just invited—well, I've given that reader something to do! Because I've already had two letters from the same pen, and I should really imagine they're about the longest letters that have ever come out of Australia. I'll bet that particular reader has tumbled! I'd like to add that I read the letters from end to end, and still I wanted some more! In fact, I was quite curious to know what the writer looked like. I wonder if there's an old snap-

shot knocking about somewhere? If so, send it along with the next volume!

* * *

There are five fairly recent letters in front of me—almost the last that came to hand, so I'll acknowledge them straight away, and make one or two frivolous remarks. What's the good of being serious, anyhow? Not half an hour ago somebody told me I was a kid, and I believe he was right. Now, let's see about those letters. S. G. Thornton, (Longreach, Queensland), Leonard Leslie (Sydney, N.S.W.), Appreciative (Brixton), F. J. Potter (Biggleswade), Leslie Richards* (Margate).

* * *

If your friends scoff at the idea of your getting an answer from me, S. G. Thornton, just show them this. It seems to me that you Australians are just as unbelieving as lots of our people at home.

* * *

Well, I'm jiggered! The very next letter—yes, from you, Leonard Leslie—trots out the same sort of stuff! Your brother will be surprised if he sees an answer, will he? Perhaps he won't call this a proper answer, but let's hope he'll have the decency to be surprised.

* * *

Glad you like my yarns, Appreciative. You are not the first one who has become acquainted with them by picking up a discarded copy of the Old Paper. But please let me remove a misapprehension, which is shared by all too many, I fear. You say this: "I do hope I shall be one of the lucky ones whose letters are actually opened and sometimes read." Listen! EVERY letter is opened by ME, and every letter is READ by me.

Edwy Searles Brooks

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ROGER FOWEY**THE STRANGLE-HOLD ON LONDON!**

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taken before Stutz, the enemy's master-spy, and who used to be a master at the chums' old school. He questions the trio about the location of the British reserves, but they refuse to divulge any information. "Take these three fools out and shoot them," says Stutz carelessly to one of his staff, and the trio are marched out of the pavilion to a brick wall near the entrance. Half a dozen members of the famous Prussian Guards line up as the firing party. The officer in command of the party raises his handkerchief—the falling of which will be the signal for the death of the chums. The three stand staring straight at the smoke-blackened muzzles of the rifles. The handkerchief flutters in the officer's hand—

(Now get busy on this week's exciting instalment.)

Lord's Bombed!

JACK'S fists were bunched at his side, and he gritted his teeth until it hurt as he stared at the grim row of rifle-muzzles before him. Back of the weapons were the tense, burly figures of the six Prussian guardsmen, eyes glittering along the sights.

Two rifles were pointing straight at Jack. He could see the sun gleaming where the back-sights were worn, and on the metal buckles of the dangling slings.

Near the party little groups of German soldiers stood, watching idly. Clearly, Jack heard a man laugh shortly, and the sound of it made every muscle in his body tense.

He wasn't afraid. He knew that he was going to die. When that white handkerchief dropped, those six muzzles would belch stabbing flame, and— And that would be all!

The wind fluttered a loose end of the handkerchief. The officer was standing bolt upright, with his arm at full length.

"We're not afraid!" Buster growled the words

from where he stood at Jack's side. "Go on—shoot! Get it over, confound you!"

Once again the officer spoke—crisp German snapping on the air. There was a faint movement, a last tension about the men in the firing party. Jack glimpsed the officer's arm commence to move as he shaped to drop the handkerchief, and then—

Zurr-r-r-r! Bew-ew-ew-ew! Zurr-r-r-r!

Something came bellowing from out the sky. Jack had one single glance of a British aeroplane, diving low in a mad sweep—two machine-guns barking from the fuselage. He saw dust fly as bullets hit the ground before him. He saw the officer pitch forward on his face—two men dropped in the ranks of the firing party, while the fighting plane slashed down at them—a mad, menacing, fire-spitting giant all silvery-wings and blazing guns!

It swept down like an avalanche—and back of it came four more machines! All diving—all firing! They scattered the Huns like chaff before a wind—a leaden wind it was, a wind of searching, searing machine-gun bullets that felled the earth in spreading cones, bringing death and

swift destruction to the men grouped there—the men who had laughed at the prospect of seeing three khaki-clad British boys die!

The trio remained where they stood. They were too amazed, too gripped by their tension to move.

Whoo-oo-oom! Cr-r-r-rash!

The leading machine dropped a bomb full on the great pavilion. There was a rolling cloud of smoke with black debris spitting out of it—a cloud into which the second machine sped another bomb. Then the squadron was wheeling and circling over the playing-pitch, dropping bombs among the tanks and 'planes and infantrymen there, machine-guns chattering in a mad war-song all the while.

From out the sky came more—and more—and still more British 'planes!

On a sudden, it seemed as though the blue above had become filled with British craft, bombing the famous buildings, smashing up the enemy's nest!

Jack was the first to recover himself.

"Over the wall—quick!" he yelled. "Over the wall, Buster! Come on, Tom!"

"They didn't shoot us—my gosh, they didn't shoot us!" Jack heard Buster gasping. "We're not dead!"

"But you jolly soon will be if you don't get over that wall!" Tom ripped at him. "Pull yourself up—that's it!"

Buster went up, balanced for a moment, and then disappeared, and they heard him yell as he hit what lay on the other side. Tom and Jack leaped together and scrambled over, to see Buster sitting amidst the ruins of what had once been a seat, but was now only broken wood; apparently he had fallen squarely on top of it, and the thing had not been strong enough to stand his weight.

The two dropped beside him, while Buster grunted as he scrambled out of the wreck. They crouched together at the foot of the wall and stared about them. They were at one side of a hard tennis court; the red ground-work was all torn and smashed, and there was a shell-hole in the centre of it, with a post which carried remnants of a tangled net lying close to them.

A door in the wall to the left gave on to the St. John's Wood Road, which, the chums knew, was full of Germans.

"We've got to hide somewhere!" Jack said quickly. "There are some houses and gardens up there; perhaps we can find a place. Creep along—keep low!"

"They're not worrying about us!" Buster told him. "They're being kept too busy to— Gosh! Hark at those 'planes, they're givin' it to 'em!"

The air was racked and shivering from the terrific concussions of the bombs showering down from the sky. The wall quivered under the hands of the three as they moved along. They could hear machine-guns stammering in an endless racket, and it sounded as though the British 'planes must be razing all the buildings to the ground.

A dozen yards ahead, the wall seemed to bend inwards as though thrust by a mighty hand. For the veriest fraction of time, the three saw the brickwork breaking up—then everything was lost as black smoke surged outwards, and the bricks showered from the blasting roar of yet another bomb.

They flung themselves down. They could hear men shouting somewhere near. Out through the breach in the wall, a shadowy figure staggered, both hands pawing the smoke. It was a German, and they saw him fall. He picked himself up, staggered a little further, and then crashed full length and lay still.

They heard a wall collapse somewhere near—a rumbling of falling masonry and smashing

girgurs. A 'plane spun low, racing towards them as it dived through the clear space back of the pavilion towards the main entrance from the street.

Sun shone on the whirling propeller. They had the merest glimpse of the spitting flame of a machine-gun firing at men on the other side of the wall. Then the thing was above them, smashing past and with the draught from the propeller whirling up the dust all around.

That draught served to clear away something of the smoke by the broken wall, and the three stole forward. They bent above the German who lay there. They saw that he was an officer; he was quite dead when Jack swiftly examined him.

"Take his automatic—it may be useful!" suggested Tom, and Jack drew the heavy weapon from its holster. The cold touch of the thick, smooth butt was comforting, and he helped himself to some clips of cartridges from the man's belt.

With the weapon in his hand, he moved until he could see what lay beyond the break in the wall.

Into the Thick Of It!

IT was pretty clear to Jack and the others that the British command had located the enemy general headquarters, and the great aerial fleet of fighting machines and bombers had been ordered to smash the place flat. They were doing almost exactly the same thing as the Germans had attempted a while before in their sudden raid, when the chums had been captured.

The Germans had pushed their headquarters a little too close to the actual battle front, because they were so certain that they would have captured the whole of London by the evening of that day. Their General Staff was ready to move on into the very heart of London—to establish itself in Buckingham Palace or the Houses of Parliament, so convinced were the German commanders that the British defence had been routed.

Although Jack was appalled at what met his gaze as he peered over the debris of the shattered wall, he was not surprised.

The famous cricket pavilion was on fire at the far end. In front of him a mighty cavity had been shorn in the wall, revealing a smoke-filled room beyond. The distant end of the pavilion was just a tumbled mass of debris, with the fire getting a firmer hold with every passing moment.

German aeroplanes that had been parked on the turf showed blown to smithereens, their wings and bodies flung to where the tanks stood in a disorderly row. Some of the mighty craft were canted into fresh-made bomb craters, others were split down their length from explosions.

Everywhere Jack saw the little figures of men—some running madly, others falling as the vengeance from the skies smote them down. The bombardment went on ceaselessly. 'Planes still wheeled and circled in the sky, discharging what was left of their cargo of bombs, then winged away to make room for fresh squadrons which dropped from the sky on the tails of the leaders.

Tom and Buster moved up; they crouched, starting at the sight before them.

"By glory—that's the stuff to give 'em!" Buster whispered tensely. "What a mess! And look at the pavilion—what price Stutz now?"

Jack's clutch on the big automatic tightened at his chum's words. Stutz must be somewhere in that pavilion—and so must the German general staff. What a chance to get all their papers—to learn all their plans! The chums were not likely to be observed in the wild confusion. Even

if they were, they could make a flight of it. Their case was hard, anyway, and it would be difficult to get through the German lines to their own countrymen.

If they were lucky enough to get back, it would be a great coup to take information with them. They were just as likely to get through with it, as without. The extra hazard of getting into the pavilion was nothing when weighed against the bigger task of escaping entirely free.

"What about it?" asked Jack, and he put the scheme to the other two.

"You mean, go in there and grab what we can?" asked Tom.

"Yes. The General Staff would probably be in the Long Room!" Jack answered. "And—"

"Well, it looks as though a bomb must have hit 'em, then!" commented Buster. "We could climb through that hole there, up that bit of stairs, and the Long Room's somewhere the other side. I know it, because my pater took me there when we came to see the last Test Match! Chance it, Jack—it can't do any harm! They'll keep on bombing this place for a bit, by the look of it!"

"Might drop a bomb on us while we're in there!" Tom said. "But we'll risk it—I'm game, Jack!"

"Come on, then—I'll lead the way. If you see a chance of getting a gun or anything, take it!" Jack said, and then he scrambled forward over the still-smoking brickwork.

The pathway on the far side was filled with tumbled debris. One or two figures lay amidst it, and for a few moments the three stopped there, taking a survey of what lay before them. It would be easy enough to get into the pavilion, they could see that.

To the right, just beyond where they had been placed for the firing-party, they could see the bold gates, now marred by the shattered structure of the clock-tower, which had fallen forward. One or two men were climbing over the pile, striving to get away from the ground.

Beyond the gate, where the sky showed clear, were three or four more squadrons of British 'planes hurtling to the scene, with little white puffs marking the shells from enemy anti-aircraft guns peppered all about them.

Overhead, British fighting scouts were hammering at German 'planes which had come up; beyond the pavilion, the work of destruction continued.

Jack led the way forward, slithered a little as bricks gave under his tread, then went scrambling towards the pavilion, half on hands and knees as he sought for foothold. Back of him, both Tom and Buster paused by the forms entangled in the debris; when they caught up with Jack, Buster was carrying three "egg" bombs which he had taken from one of the Huns, while Tom had a rifle.

Together they hauled themselves up and over the crumbling edge of the holed wall before them. Their boots grated on fallen plaster and rubble that cluttered the floor beyond, then they made for the twisted remnants of the spiral staircase which showed to one side of the big cavity.

Luckily, the staircase was firmly secured at its upper end, and working themselves round the sharp edges of the riven metal, they clambered up the steps, until they reached a passage at the top.

Where there had once been a wall on the opposite side of the corridor, there was now nothing at all; the tilting floor ended in a row of shattered joists and torn woodwork.

Smoke was wafting out of the great hole beyond. They saw smashed furniture and pictures, bursts and framed photographs scattered amidst floor-coverings and bricks and plaster. Mingled here and there were Germans who had

perished at the explosion of the mighty bomb which had wrecked that part of the building.

"This way!" hissed Jack, and they scrambled along the sloping, creaking floor, expecting every moment that it might give and send them hurtling below. It held until they were clear of the danger-spot, and then they found themselves nearing the main hall, down which they had been marched to their doom bare minutes before.

"That door on the left!" Buster exclaimed. "That's the Long Room, Jack!" and he pointed to a wide doorway. One of the two doors hung slanting on its hinges, and many of the panes of leaded glass were smashed.

They stepped towards it—and in that moment the shaken structure of the pavilion quivered as yet another bomb struck it. The thing burst somewhere beyond the stairs by which the chums had entered. Merged with the crashing roar of the explosion came the wild, terrifying rumble of falling masonry.

They saw the very ceiling above them begin to tilt. Great flakes of plaster crashed down behind them. They saw the outer wall begin to fall slowly inwards. The paint on it cracked, a lath stabbed out into the air, white dust spurted from the hole, a floor-board suddenly stabbed through the matting—

"Jump—through the door!" gasped Tom.

The three flung their weight at the doors before them. Under the impact, the door hanging from its hinge smashed forward and crashed down—just as the corridor along which they had come began to drop. The outer wall collapsed with a rolling roar; the ceiling came down in a wild cloud of dust which smothered and hid everything.

A beam from the ceiling flogged at Buster's very heels, dropping with a mass of rubble which blocked the doorway behind the chums—and swinging to face them in the room beyond, they saw three German staff officers, one of whom thrust forward the pistol that he held and blazed point-blank at the chums!

The Enemy Plans!

THE shot from the German's automatic was lost in the terrific uproar outside. Jack thought that he felt the wind of the bullet from the spitting weapon, then his own automatic stabbed forward and he fired—twice!

The Hun staggered, his weapon dropped to the floor, and a second later he sprawled full length above it, rolled to one side, quivered, tried to get up—and then lay still.

Tom lifted his rifle as he saw the other two men snatching their weapons from their holsters. He fired from the hip, in the same moment that Buster hooked his finger through the metal ring at the side of one of his "egg" bombs.

The little, black-painted bomb snugged down to the palm of his right hand, and the pin "pinged" clearly as he drew it out. With all his strength he slammed the thing at the two men on the other side of the room.

"Down!" he yelled, and he flung Jack to the floor as he shouted, while Tom—seeing the bomb go—fell with him.

The Germans glimpsed Buster's action and they leaped aside with mad desperation. A yard—two yards—and then the little bomb exploded!

It went off with a crackling, snapping roar that shook the room. It changed from a rolling black speck to a spurt of orange flame which was lost in a whipping cloud of white smoke. It was a high-explosive bomb, and the little casing was blown to fragments. Plaster showered down from the broken ceiling, and the two German staff officers were blown head over heels.

"Grab 'em!" yelled Jack; he was on his feet with the words, racing at the nearest man. The German was rolling over and over, and he brought up against one of the long wooden benches set near one wall. Jack stooped over him, but the man had been stunned—so had his companion. Jack grabbed the fellow's weapon and a handful of cartridges in their clips, then twisted to Buster and Tom.

"Here you are, Tom—here's his gun. This chap's knocked out!"

"So's this one!" Tom answered. "Thanks!" He took the automatic. "That feels better!" he exclaimed as he flung the German rifle aside. "Now, what next?"

They stood looking about the historic room. As they had guessed, it had been used by the chief of the German Staff. The three heavy tables in the centre were covered with plans and papers, spread on the smooth surface. The far end of the room ended in a tangle of broken-brickwork, torn wall paper and shattered wood; another bomb had come through here, and it had taken its toll of the occupants of the room.

A dozen of the staff lay about the floor. Some were moving weakly, but of them the chums took no notice. At the centre table, close to where the three were grouped, there lay one whom they recognised as the German Commander-in-Chief himself.

His hard, cruel features were set and tense, but his eyes were closed. Blood smudged the grim face, and it looked as though he had been laid out by a bomb fragment. Everywhere showed bricks flung by the main explosion, and there was a little hole in the floor where Buster's "egg" bomb had gone off.

"Grab those papers!" Jack exclaimed. "All of 'em!"

At a spot where the commander must have been standing was a pile of papers, some blown to the floor, and others secured under the blade of an unsheathed sword. It was impossible for them to tell what the papers were, although Tom recognised a sheaf of messages from the field wireless station outside—now buried under stuff from the collapsing stand.

Tom thrust the flimsy sheets into his tunic pocket, and then grabbed more. The other two were busy and it was Jack who espied a slim, flat despatch case at the General's feet and snatched it up.

"Come on—let's get away!" Buster grunted. "We've got nearly everything! Are these maps any good, Jack? Shall we take 'em?"

"No—too bulky!" his chum answered. "How're we going to get out?"

"Those doors at the end there lead to the main hall!" the fat junior exclaimed, as he pointed to another pair of doors at the undamaged end of the room. "We can get out that way—and if we see anybody, we'll shoot! We're all armed now!"

He dashed forward, his boots clattering on the bare, polished boards of the floor. They went past oil-paintings and photographs hanging askew on the wall, and stumbled over the low-backed chairs scattered about the place. Jack just missed treading on the wooden-cased clock blown down from above the doors by which they had entered, and then Buster was pushing open the doors at the far end and stepping out.

There was no one in the hall, and they dashed for the rear exit. There was more debris here, more huddled shapes. Without pausing, they doubled round and made for the break in the wall guarding the tennis courts.

Five Huns showed up ahead of them; men who were doubling forward all crouched, as though they feared that the death-dealing 'planes above had got them spotted and might turn their machine-guns on to them. The five paused as

they saw the chums, then turned tail and bolted like hares.

"They think there are some more of us about!" Tom exclaimed. "Here we are—through here!"

They leaped through the hole in the wall, clattered over the loose bricks, and then went running along in its shelter towards the houses for which they had originally been making.

They reached the shattered buildings, which appeared to have contained lawn-mowers and tennis nets and rollers, then skirted a bomb crater and were brought up by the end wall. The three grouped there, staring at one another.

"If we try to get into any of these houses, we may find Germans inside them," Tom said. "We can't go back, because we're sure to be spotted—but we've got to try and get through with these papers somehow or other."

Jack nodded.

"We can't stop here, for fear of being seen. Whatever we do, we've got to run the risk of getting shot at—and the minute they find that all their papers and things have gone they'll have every blessed soldier within a mile looking for us!"

The Menace of the Tunnel!

JACK was right; his chums realised that. They had carried out a daring coup, and it was certain that the enemy staff, when they recovered, would strain every nerve to regain the despatches which the trio had taken.

Their pockets were stuffed with documents which were certain to be of inestimable value to British headquarters—if only they could get them there. In less than an hour, at the most, the Germans would commence searching the vicinity for them. The two officers who had been stunned by Buster's bomb would come round to tell their story.

"We ought to have finished 'em off," said Buster, as he thought of that. "When they recover they'll split on us—still, I don't suppose we could have shot 'em. It would have been a bit too cold-blooded, though it's what the rotters would have done to us!"

"Well, it's no good stopping here," Jack said, when they had discussed the situation. "The best thing we can do is to try and get as far away from here as—"

"Gosh, the railway!" Buster caught Jack's arm, his eyes shining as he spoke.

"Railway?" repeated Jack.

"Yes!" answered the fat junior. "Look here, the railway runs right under the Lord's practice ground, and it comes into the open somewhere by Cavendish Road. That means there's a tunnel—we could hide there for a week! What's more, we might be able to scout along the line right back to Marylebone Station, and then get into the Tube or something! Come on, over the wall, before these rotters recover enough to sit up and find out what's been happening!"

All three knew that the railway ran somewhere near. The tunnels would be a sanctuary if they could reach them. If they remained concealed until nightfall, they might be able to get back to the British lines.

Buster and Tom helped Jack up so that he could take a survey of what lay beyond the wall barring their further progress. He saw only a broad lawn, with bushes and rose trees growing in a bed immediately before him. There was no sign of any of the enemy.

"Right! Drop me, then we'll bunk Buster over!"

They negotiated the wall swiftly. They were now in the garden of a house which fronted on to Grove End Road. The next wall had been smashed down by a shell, and they passed

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through the gap. The next garden was wider, and they easily scouted through the bushes and raspberry canes to the further wall, beyond which was another garden set at right angles and belonging to an Elm Tree Road house—the road down which they must pass if they wanted to reach the railway.

As they climbed this wall, they all got glimpses of the havoc wrought in the cricket-ground. There was nothing left of the Tavern or of the white-fronted stands which stretched away from it and curved round the ground. They had all been blown down, and fires were burning everywhere.

The new pavilion was just a heap of debris; the broad stretch of turf was all ploughed up and littered with the remnants of planes and tanks, guns and men. From an efficiently organised headquarters, the place had been turned into a shambles—wreckage upon wreckage!

"Shall we chance the road?" asked Jack, as the three stood crouching against the wall. "We could get out around the side entrance of that house, and bunk along the street."

"It's a kind of backwater," Buster informed them. "I know it, 'cause the pater parked his car back here when we came to see the Test Match!"

"Let's go—and if we're seen we'll shoot!" said Tom.

They moved forward. They could now hear

Germans shouting in the cricket ground behind them, but the houses in front appeared deserted and silent. Most of them had their windows smashed, as though there had been fighting around there; it was almost certain that there had, and as they neared the house, they found evidence of it.

They saw a British Tommy lying crumpled at the foot of trellis-work that was ablaze with crimson ramblers. He looked as though he had been a gunner, for he wore a bandolier and spurs glittered on his boots. In his hand was the broken blade of a blood-stained sword, and near him lay three Germans—all dead.

The chums made sure that the gunner was past all aid, then they moved on and left him there, with the blood-red roses drooping above him.

They reached the house, taking cover all the way. They came to the side entrance and were relieved to find that the gate was open, affording a view of the short, curving drive in front of the house and the Elm Tree Road beyond.

All was silent until they got to the front garden, then they heard the beat of feet as men ran along the road outside. It was a company of German infantry, coming up at the double and carrying their rifles at the trail. They lumbered past as the chums crouched amidst thick rhododendron bushes, then vanished around the bend which led to the front of Lord's ground.

"All clear" said Jack, as he moved forward a little and peered over the low brick wall before them.

Buster joined him.

"If we go up that turning nearly opposite," he said, "We can cut through the houses into Cavendish Road and be under cover all the way. Across the road again then, and the gardens there give right on to the railway! Might as well run for it, eh?"

Jack agreed. The three crouched together at the gate. At a word from him, they rushed forward.

They tore across the road madly, expecting every moment to hear the crack of a rifle from the window of one of the houses. They skidded round the corner on the other side, and pelted to the houses on the right—reaching the entrance to the nearest as a shout sounded from up the street.

There was another company of Huns there, running like the others they had seen, and evidently coming to the aid of headquarters. The leaders stopped, but before they could bring their rifles up, the trio had dived through the gateway, slammed open the door of the tradesmen's entrance and were sprinting for the garden beyond.

They raced across the lawn and flung themselves at the wall beyond. Buster was over it in a twinkling, aided by the smack of a rifle bullet which struck the brickwork near one foot. More bullets winged over their heads as the three dropped together, then they ran on down the garden in which they found themselves.

Without pause, they shot out of the side entrance to the house. They did not stay to see if anyone was in the road which they had to cross, but streaked forward to yet another side entrance and a garden—beyond which was the high, blackened brick wall marking the railway.

They scrambled up it—and only just in time did they steady themselves, for beyond lay a sixty-foot drop sheer to the rails glimmering in the black depths below!

The rails emerged from a tunnel-mouth at either end. The wall on which they poised fell absolutely straight, without foothold of any sort—and back of them were Germans ready to shoot at the first fresh sight of them.

"We're done!" gasped Jack.

"We're not—look! There are some steps leading down!" Buster pointed to the right, where an iron ladder was hitched to the wall; the rungs led downwards, to a signal by the tunnel mouth; from the little platform on the signal head there was another ladder leading to the permanent way.

"Along the wall—run! We've got to chance a fall!" Jack gasped, as he heaved himself upright.

The soot-covered top of the wall was flat—but it was barely nine inches wide, and they had got to traverse twenty yards of it to reach the ladder! All the while, they would be outlined against the sky, magnificent targets for the rifles of the pursuing Germans.

Jack trotted forward, balancing himself with outstretched arms. He glanced to the right, and got a glimpse of a German racing across the Cavendish Road, with more men running back of him.

"They're coming—quick!" he yelled. He lengthened his stride. There came the crack of a rifle and he heard the Whew-w-w! of a bullet high above his head. The ladder was near now; he took a chance and broke into a run on that perilous path. Another bullet sung close to him, then he flung himself forward, caught the top-most rung and felt the ladder quiver as it took his weight. He slid madly down half a dozen rungs to give Tom room to drop.

The junior reaved himself over as Jack had done. His boots clanged against the iron, then he was safe. Buster bent above him. A bullet smacked dust and soot from the top of the wall near him; Jack heard him yell out, then Tom was steadying their fat chum as he pitched himself over the drop, both hands grabbing the side of the ladder.

He straightened with a jerk, and found a foothold. Tom gasped:

"You all right—are you hit?"

"Not touched!" Buster assured him. "Go on down—they'll get to the wall and pot at us, else!"

Jack went slithering downwards, reached the signal landing and then went on. His feet crunched amidst the flints which lined the side of the rails, then Tom and Buster joined him.

The black mouth of the tunnel gaped wide before them—pitchy dark, and together they leaped towards it.

"We've done it!" Jack exclaimed exultantly, as he thrust down in his tunic pocket the precious papers they had taken from the enemy commanders. "We'll get back to—"

Crack! A rifle shot from behind cut short his words, and a bullet whanged off the line near him, whistling as it ricocheted through the air. One of the Germans was at the top of the wall; a second shot sounded as the acrid fumes from the tunnel came to their nostrils.

They plunged into it, hugging one wall, and they vanished from the sight of the German riflemen as they reached the darkness of the tunnel.

"We're all right now," Jack heard Buster exclaim. "If they come after us here we can shoot them before—" His words ended in a gurgle.

An instant later, Jack heard Tom gasp, then he himself felt hands seize him from out the darkness. He tripped over a rail, and then crashed headlong, while the crushing weight of a struggling figure fell across him.

He heard Buster shout, and then he was fighting madly in the darkness.

(What has happened? Have the chums escaped the Germany infantry only to fall into the hands of more of the enemy? If they can get to Headquarters with the German despatches, they can turn the tide of battle. Look out for more real thrills in next week's smashing long chapters—and don't forget to make sure of your copy of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY by ordering in advance!)

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

The Application Form for joining the ST FRANK'S LEAGUE appeared in last week's issue. Owing to pressure on our space, it does not appear in this number, but it will be found as usual in next week's issue.

The Chief Officer's Chat is on the opposite page, and all readers who are thinking of joining the League can communicate with him at the address given at the head of this page.

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.

A Friend Indeed!

HERE is a letter of which I am extra proud. Of late there have been, more than ever before, the finest letters full of praise of the brilliant work done by the NELSON LEE LIBRARY and the League. Now, here comes my chum, George Irwin, 17, Pine Street, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, with a remark which clinches the matter. "I cannot thank the friend too much who introduced me to the NELSON LEE," he writes. "The book is full of thrills and enjoyment. We get many books, but out of the lot yours is the best." Thanks for that! You can almost hear the steady beat of the drums and the fanfare of the trumpets as good old Handy swings past in his triumphal progress. By the way, I must thank a lot of other correspondents for the really topping letters they send in. There are real high flyers from Australia, Canada and South Africa, as well as from the old country, letters plum full of thought, sparkle and horse sense.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Leslie Walters, 14, Haslemere Road, Southsea, Hants, wishes to correspond with readers.

R. R. J. A. Gleeson, 7, Laurel Villas, South Circular Road, Limerick, Ireland, wishes to correspond with members anywhere, interested in cricket and autograph collecting.

James Partridge, 42, Shelley Crescent, Swansea, wishes to correspond with readers interested in fretwork and meccano.

William Griffiths, 25, St. Andrew's Road, Small Heath, Birmingham, wishes to join a club in his district.

John A. Delves, 83, Caerau Square, Ely, Cardiff (a telegraph messenger), wishes to correspond with readers in London, Brighton and Canada, preferably those keen on football.

Norman Jones, 5, Sutton's Flats, Lyons Road, Drummoyne, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with readers in England.

B. Sofer, 1, Nuttal Road, Observatory, Cape Town, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers in Australia and New Zealand.

Miss Queenie Wright, 26, Knox Street,

Marylebone, London, W.1, wishes to correspond with readers.

F. J. Ryal, 102, Chaucer House, Long Lane, London, S.E.1, wishes to correspond with readers in the United States, China, India and Australia; interested in woodwork.

G. S. Hills, 28, Sunningdale Drive, Skegness, Lincs, wishes to correspond with readers who wish to obtain back copies of any boys' papers.

L. Chipperfield, 46, Fairley Way, Hamstead End, Cheshunt, Herts, wishes to correspond with readers in his district, also with those in Australia and New Zealand.

C. Malcolm, 28, Priory Lane, Dunfermline, N.B., wants to hear from readers wishing to purchase Nos. 1-14 of the Monster Library.

Reginald Jones, St. John's House, Kew Road, Richmond, Surrey, wishes to hear from readers willing to buy, sell, or exchange back numbers of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY.

Connie Martin, 62, Turner Road, Leicester, wishes to correspond with members.

Richard R. Timlett, 17, St. David Street, London, S.E.1, wishes to correspond with readers interested in stamps; Australia or at home; all letters answered.

Basil Goodall, 9a, Waterloo Street, Camberwell, London, S.E.5, wishes to correspond with readers interested in science or astronomy.

Joan Louis Lane, 13, Gladstone Road, Walton, Liverpool, wishes to hear from readers willing to join a corresponding club. Readers in Walton and Liverpool district preferred.

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George Irwin, 17, Pine Street, Newtown, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wishes to correspond with readers.

V. G. B. Hill, 4, Creswick Walk, Hendon, London, N.W.11, wishes to correspond with a reader aged about 10 in any land overseas.

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