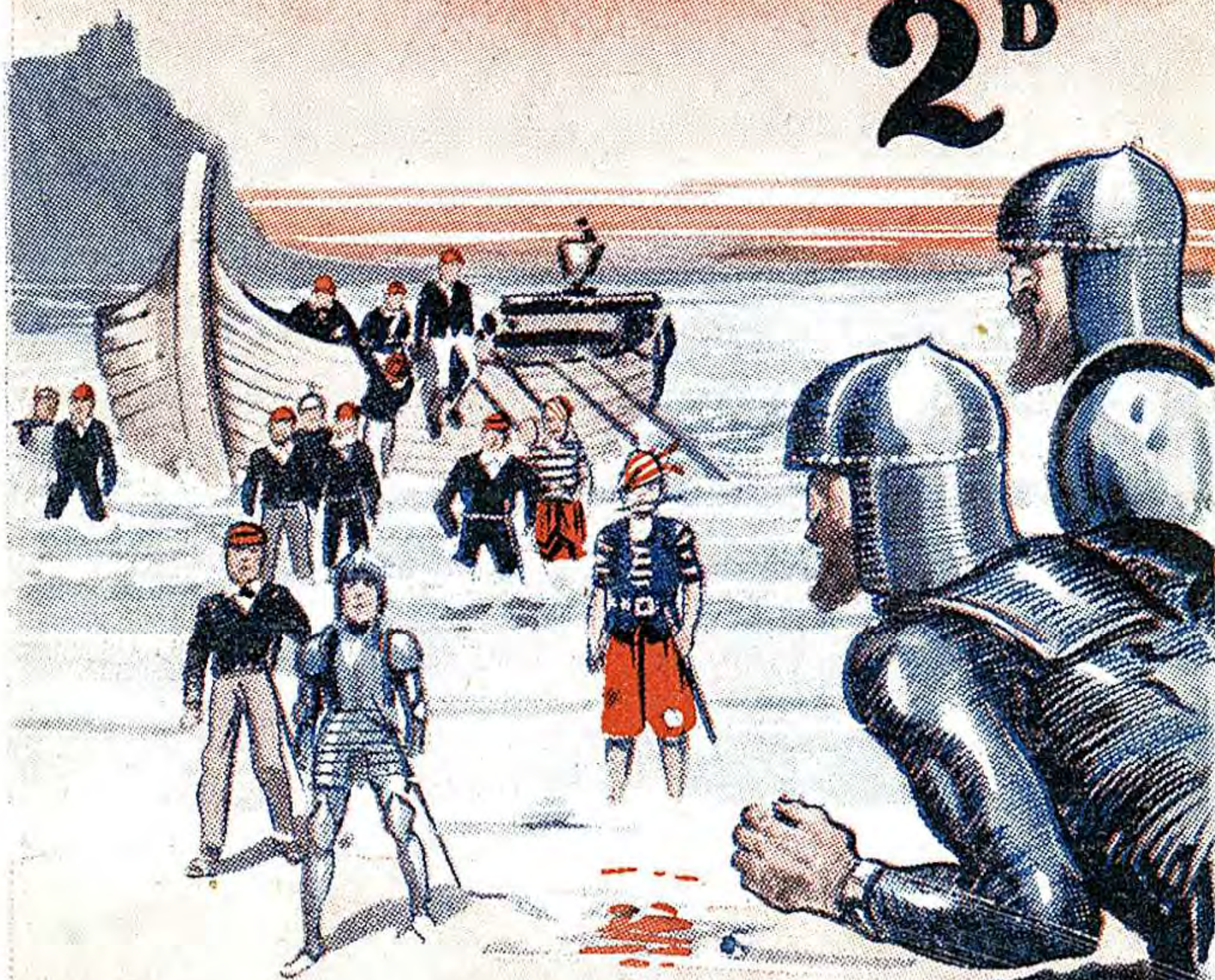


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THE ST. FRANK'S CRUSADE

A thrilling long complete story of breathless adventure featuring the Boys of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 41.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

February 12th, 1927.



Before the two big, burly Gothlanders could draw their swords the juniors swept down upon them. The pair stood no chance against the crowd of boys ; they were speedily brought to the ground and overpowered.

THE ST. FRANK'S CRUSADERS !



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

Handy and Co. have a lively time in this week's thrilling, long complete story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER 1.

THE SCHOOLBOY PIRATES.

THE pirate galley, with her great oars flashing evenly, swept out of the rocky inlet, and rounded the spur of the island.

She was a big vessel, with raised decks at either end, and a long gangway running down the centre. Slaves were at the oars, and a number of pirates, in nondescript costumes, lounged about the decks.

There was no wheel to this galley, but a great tiller, aft, and two of the pirates were manning it, one on either side. And here there was a wide deck, where the commander could obtain a full view of the entire ship in front of him.

One of the figures, burlier than the others, turned to the helmsmen.

"Two points starboard!" he said curtly.

"Ay, ay, sir!" replied one.

"Absolutely!" said the other. "Starboard what? In good old plain English, to the right, laddie! Kindly shove the tiller your way, Watson, old bean!"

Watson shoved, and the other helmsman went over with a crash as the heavy rudder caused the tiller to swing violently round.

"Sorry, Archie!" grinned Tommy Watson. "My mistake!"

"Good gad!" gasped Archie, as he picked himself up. "I'm absolutely ready to do my jolly old trick at the rudder, dash it, but

this biffing over-stuff is hardly in the contract, what?"

The burly figure turned, and surveyed the helmsmen.

"That's about enough of that!" he said sternly. "If you lubbers can't control the tiller properly, I'll have you put in irons!"

"Rats!" said one of the lubbers.

"Did you say 'Rats' to me, Tommy Watson?" roared the other.

"Yes, I jolly well did—and you can go and eat coke, too!" snapped Watson. "Who do you think you are, anyhow?"

"I'm the skipper of this ship!"

"Just another of your delusions, Handy, old son," said Watson. "Nipper's our skipper, and you're just one of the crew. So if you think we're going to take orders from you, there must be something wrong with your works!"

Edward Oswald Handforth took a deep breath.

"Am I the captain of the bodyguard, or am I not?" he roared.

"You're not!"

"What?"

"Of course you're not," repeated Watson. "Why rake up old history? We all left the bodyguard days ago, and now we're sea scouts!"

"How the dickens can we be sea scouts on a lake?"

"Oh, help!" groaned Watson. "You know

what I mean, you chump! It's our duty to scour the lake up and down, and to keep our eyes open for any enemy activities. Nipper's our skipper, and we're fed up with your rot!"

"Why, you—you insubordinate rotter!" thundered Handforth. "If you talk to me like that again, I'll make you walk the plank!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey approached, and Pitt shook his head.

"Poor chap, this pirate business has got into his head," he remarked sadly. "That's the worst of Handy—he always takes things so much to heart. I believe he thinks he's a real pirate—and that we're actually living in the Middle Ages!"

"Seems like it," agreed Jack, eyeing Handforth warily.

Edward Oswald sniffed.

"Thank goodness, I'm capable of fitting myself into my environment!" he said tartly. "This is a pirate galley, and we're supposed to be pirates. This country is like a slice out of mediæval England—so I'm living the part. You chaps, poor fatheads, are still St. Frank's fellows—and you seem to have an idea that the bell will ring for lessons every minute."

Reggie Pitt chuckled.

"I think Handy must be the reincarnation of some bloodthirsty buccaneer of the Spanish Main!" he grinned. "He takes to this fake piracy as a fish takes to water! It's not a bad idea, Handy, but we've got to remember that it's only a pose—a bluff—and that our real job is to keep an eye on the enemy movements."

Handforth turned aside, frowning.

"Well, I'm skipper!" he growled. "I don't want any arguments, and you chaps had better clear off to your posts! Helmsmen, another point to starboard!"

Tommy Watson obeyed—not because he thought that such a move was necessary, but because it saved all argument. As a matter of fact, it was immaterial which direction the galley took, for she had just come out of her lair on an aimless cruise—to patrol the lake in search of information.

The galley was entirely in charge of Nipper & Co., of the St. Frank's Remove. True, there were Boots and Christine of the Fourth, and Willy & Co. of the Third, included in the party—but they hardly counted in the eyes of the others. This was essentially a Remove enterprise.

The "slaves" at the oars were all loyal and true—men who, just recently, had been slaves in real earnest, but who were now living a life of ease and luxury compared to their former torture. The galley only cruised for an hour or two at a time, and then returned to its base.

But how was it that the St. Frank's juniors were mixed up in such an extraordinary business? If they had been asked, they might have been unable to give any ade-

quate reply—for they were, themselves, more or less bewildered by the startling happenings of the past few weeks.

Strictly speaking, it was almost time for them to be back at the old school. The holidays had been extended for two weeks at St. Frank's, owing to a minor attack of diphtheria near by—but that period of extension was now practically over.

How could the St. Frank's fellows get back, however, when they were bottled up in this strange, unsuspected oasis of the snow-bound Arctic? So far as they knew at present there was practically no prospect of ever reaching civilisation again. The airship which had brought them here was a shattered wreck, and there was no way out. Even though the wireless was in working order, no messages could be obtained. The operator was at it during all hours of the day, but so far he had received only one or two faint signals, which had meant nothing.

This great basin, hidden away in the icy North, was several hundred miles in extent, with an enormous lake dividing the two fertile sections of the great valley. On every side towered the immense mountains and glaciers—and overhead hung a pall of mist.

But this mist was at such a height that from the ground it resembled the ordinary sky. At this time of the year there was no sunlight here, but there were huge volcanoes surrounding the oasis. And the light from the molten craters, impinging on the everlasting mists, filled the entire valley with a brilliant radiance which was almost akin to sunlight.

The whole place was volcanic, but there were wonderful tracts of fertile country along the lake shore, and the natural warmth of the place was such that every kind of vegetation grew abundantly. Equable all the year round, there were never any storms in this protected spot. Indeed, there was scarcely any wind, although on the outer side of the oasis the most appalling blizzards raged continuously. The sudden change in temperature, no doubt, was the cause of these everlasting storms.

Only by a miracle of luck had the airship got through. She had been helpless at the time, after drifting away from her mooring-mast, many hundreds of miles distant. Every soul of Lord Dorrimore's party had expected death. It had seemed impossible that the dirigible could weather such raging hurricanes.

Then, just when all hope had been lost, the airship had shot into this placid zone, and had descended, mortally crippled, to the ground. To rise again was impracticable, and Nelson Lee was of the opinion that no aircraft would ever successfully combat the storms which encircled the basin. So, at any rate, even if wireless communication was established, there would be still no hope.

Not that any of the adventurers had had much time to think of escape.

For they found this queer country peopled by two remnants of mediæval civilisation—the principal one being represented by the Northestrians. There was little doubt that the Northestrians were direct descendants of Anglo-Saxons, for they spoke a quaint form of English, and, with their moated castles and walled cities, they irresistibly reminded the fellows of mediæval Britain.

The other race was more ancient—a direct offshoot of the savage Goths. Indeed, they even now called themselves Gothlanders. They were inferior in numbers, but vastly superior in aggression and arrogance. Their present ruler, Kassker the Grim, was a man of brutal savagery and iron determination.

For centuries, his people had been held in subjection by the Northestrians. They had, indeed, been the slaves. But more recently they had settled on the other side of the lake, and had developed independently. And now, just when the airship party had dropped so dramatically from the skies, the Gothlanders were waging a terrible war against their former masters.

Kassker the Grim was set upon ruling the entire little world. But for the timely aid of Lee, Dorrie & Co., the brute's ambition would already have been realised.

Lee, realising that the very safety of his own party depended upon action, had thrown in his lot with Princess Mercia of Northestria. And the first grim battle of the campaign had resulted in a colossal defeat for Kassker and his murderous hordes.

Even now the Northestrians were toiling strenuously, preparing further defences, and getting their newly-formed armies into shape. Nelson Lee was the commander-in-chief, and for long he had been dubbed, "Lee the Lion-hearted." In the same way, Dorrie was known as "Dorrimore the Brave." All prominent people in Northestria had such descriptive appellations after their names.

The St. Frank's fellows had played their parts in the drama, and, for that matter, so had Irene & Co., of the Moor View School. All had done their share in various ways.

The latest exploit, perhaps, had been the most dramatic. For Princess Mercia and all the St. Frank's fellows, with Irene & Co., had been captured by pirates—to be sold into the hands of the Gothlanders.

But, through a brilliant move on the part of the girls, followed up by brisk activity from the Remove, the tables had been turned. Princess Mercia was now safely placed in an inland fortress, and all the pirates were in captivity, awaiting trial.

But their galley remained in the hands of the victors.

Dick Hamilton had seen no reason why they shouldn't retain the vessel. The idea was quite simple. He had suggested to Lee that he and the other fellows should remain on board—dressed as pirates. They would cruise in the lake, and if seen from afar, would be taken for a pirate vessel. But,

actually, they were keeping their eyes open, and watching for Kassker's next move.

Nelson Lee had approved of the scheme, for it had seemed to him that the high-spirited juniors would thus be kept harmlessly occupied.

The galley's headquarters were on Pirate Island, in mid-lake, or, rather, in the great grotto which the island concealed. And so the St. Frank's juniors became a band of pirates, in charge of a great galley!



CHAPTER 2.

HANDFORTH ISN'T PLEASED!

OF course, there had been a lot of preliminary preparations.

Large quantities of stores had been taken to the island, and the galley itself had been scoured from stem to stern by workmen. Furniture had even been taken aboard, and the juniors were given all the comforts they needed.

It had been Handforth's idea to have some special clothing made, and, as a result, some of them were attired in picturesque costumes which befitted their occupation, the while others still wore their ordinary school clothes; Handy himself retained the suit of light armour he had worn when he was captain of the princess' bodyguard. From a distance they looked genuine enough pirates. And it was one of Nelson Lee's strict orders that the galley was to keep its distance always. Under no circumstances was it to approach any enemy vessel; and it must always cruise in mid-lake, never approaching nearer than five miles from the Gothland shore.

In this way, there were some chances that the boys might be useful. For they were provided with powerful telescopes, and thus had the advantage. During their cruises they could watch the enemy coastline continuously, and report any occurrence of especial interest.

In the event of a sudden alarm—the beginning, say, of a determined invasion—the galley was provided with powerful smoke rockets. These would not only be visible from the Northestrian coast, but the devastating reports, as they exploded in the air, would be clearly heard. But these rockets were only to be utilised in sudden emergency.

On the after-deck, Handforth was pacing up and down and frowning.

"What's the trouble, old man?" asked Church, approaching him.

"Go away!" said Handforth.

"Look here——"

"Clear off!"

Church shrugged his shoulders, and strolled away and joined McClure, who was leaning over the bulwarks near by, intently watching

his line. An improvised float was bobbing about in the foam from the easily-moving oars.

Handforth glared bitterly.

"You rotter!" he called out. "What's the idea of ignoring me like this?"

"My stars!" ejaculated Church, turning. "Didn't you tell me to clear off? Didn't you order me to go away?"

"You don't think I expected you to obey, do you?" snapped the leader of Study D. "I want to talk to you chaps. Come here!"

Church grinned, and nudged his companion.

"Let's humour him!" he murmured.

"Rats!" said Mac. "I'm expecting a bite every minute——"

"You duffer! You'll get no bite while we're moving!" grinned Church. "I doubt if you'll get a bite anyhow; I've seen no fish in this lake."

"What about that frightful thing which nearly dragged Willy under?"

"Oh, well, if you're anxious to catch one of those for your lunch, you're welcome," said Church sarcastically. "It was a monster—an awful thing that nearly put an end to poor old Willy. It put an end to all our ideas of bathing in this lake, anyhow!"

Handforth snorted. He was in very much the same position as Mohammed of old—since the mountain would not come to him, he was reluctantly compelled to go to the mountain. He strode across the deck and joined his chums.

"I'm fed-up!" he announced curtly.

"That's nothing new," said Church. "You're always fed-up about something, Handy. What's biting you this time?"

"Nothing's biting me."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Everything!"

"Hadn't you better be lucid?" suggested Church.

"Well, about this trip—this pirate stuff," said Handforth gruffly. "That bounder of a Nipper has pushed himself forward, and most of the chaps are accepting him as the skipper!"

"Sad, but true," admitted Church. "Life's full of these worries, Handy. You ought to be philosophical——"

"I'm not philosophical!" roared Handforth. "And I'm not going to put up with this rot, either! I was captain of the bodyguard, and so it stands to reason that I should be captain of this ship."

"Reason doesn't enter into it at all," said McClure. "Nine-tenths of the fellows prefer to be led by Nipper, and there's an end of it. Dick's a good scout, anyhow, and the right man for the job. He's got a cool head, and he doesn't enter into any rash undertakings."

"Haven't I got a cool head?" bawled Handforth violently.

"Just about as cool as a volcano!" nodded Church. "No, Handy, this isn't your line. You're a great chap in battle, and you can

use your fists like a good 'un; but if you had control of this ship, you'd get us all captured by the enemy inside an hour."

Handforth simply stared, speechless.

"By George!" he breathed at last. "Are you against me, too?"

"Of course not, old son," said Church affectionately. "We're with you to the last ditch; but with regard to this affair, both Mac and I think that Nipper is the right man——"

"Don't talk to me about last ditches!" hooted Handforth. "You're no chums of mine! Blow you! I'm captain of this galley, and I'm going to assert myself—now!"

"Go ahead!" said McClure.

Handforth was staggered by the recent insubordination. From his viewpoint it was nothing less. For some utterly ridiculous reason the other juniors treated him as one of themselves. They called him "Handy," they chaffed him, they pulled his leg; they did everything, in fact, to prove that he was no higher in their esteem than anybody else.

And yet he was the captain—the leader!

To Handforth's amazement, to his undying indignation, he was becoming aware of the fact that Dick Hamilton was really in control of the reins. If any of the fellows wanted advice, they went to Nipper. If they were keen to know the orders for the day, they went to Nipper. And it was Nipper who always gave the orders, and planned out the cruises.

If Handforth suggested anything, he was shouted down or laughed at, or treated with tolerant amusement. It was getting beyond all bearing. And Edward Oswald decided that the time had come for an alteration.

There was something to be said in his favour. Always fond of the limelight, Handforth had recently been in it a little more than was good for him. For some reason which no sane person could explain, the Princess Mercia had taken a particular fancy to him, and had not only dubbed him "Handforth the Bold," but had placed him in a position of authority over her very own bodyguard!

Handforth, naturally, took to the job as a duck takes to water. And for some time he had been throwing his weight about, until the rest of the fellows were ready to slaughter him at the slightest provocation. They simply couldn't understand it, for the princess was a sweet girl of seventeen, pretty, dainty, and altogether charming. What she could see in Handforth passed everybody's comprehension. Besides, what about Irene Manners? The juniors firmly declared that Handforth was neglecting his girl chum in the most shameful manner.

Events moved swiftly in Northestria nowadays, and now that Nelson Lee had been given full control of the military forces, Handforth's reign of supremacy had ended. William Napoleon Browne, of the Fifth, had been placed at the head of the bodyguard,

and that had been the beginning of Handforth's tumble.

True, Browne preferred to remain ashore now; he considered that the juniors were better on their own. Nobody had been appointed captain of the galley, but it was tacitly understood that Nipper was in command. And Handforth, so to speak, was left flat. He had been chafing under the indignity ever since.

"Yes, I'm going to assert myself—now!" he repeated grimly.

He gazed over the galley and raised his hand.

"Hey, you fellows at the oars!" he thundered. "Cease rowing!"

The oarsmen glanced over their shoulders, looking rather puzzled, but they still kept up their regular stroke. They were all Northeistrians, ex-slaves, and proud to be in the service of these bold youths from the Beyond.

"Cease rowing!" repeated Handforth fiercely. "You rotters, if you don't obey me, I'll jolly well——"

"Hallo! What's the trouble here?" asked Dick Hamilton, as he appeared from the cabin. "All right, men—carry on! Handy, you'll only upset the men if you mess about like this."

"Mess about!" said Handforth thickly.

"What else do you call it?" asked Nipper.

A group of other juniors appeared, coming along the central gangway, and congregating on the deck. They were all grinning. Somehow they had been expecting something of this sort.

"Who's commander of this ship?" asked Handforth fiercely. "That's what I want to know! Who's commander?"

"I can tell you who isn't—and that's you!" replied Nipper coolly. "So far as I know, there's been no commander appointed. We're just a free and easy crowd—scouts in the service of Northeistria. This galley isn't going into action, or venturing upon any raids, so we don't need a commander."

Handforth pointed an accusing finger.

"That's just it!" he snapped. "This galley isn't going into action! By George, you've admitted it! This galley isn't going into action! Don't those words burn your mouth as you speak 'em?"

"Chuck it, old man——"

"Don't they?" bellowed Handforth.

"Well, not to notice," smiled Nipper, humouring him.

"Then you're not fit to be commander!" retorted Handforth. "Listen, you fellows!" he added, addressing the crowd. "I was captain of the bodyguard, and I want to be captain of this galley. Hands up, everybody in favour of my appointment as sole commander."

A yell of laughter was the only answer.

"Dear old boys, hands up, everybody in favour of appointin' Nipper!" sang out Tregellis-West. "I think it's a frightfully good

idea to have this matter settled at once; I do, really! Who votes for Nipper?"

Every hand went up, and every face was grinning.

"Exactly!" said Sir Montie urbanely.

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

"Frightfully sorry, Handy, old boy, but there it is!" smiled Tregellis-West apologetically. "But you can't get away from that, can you?"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"All right—go ahead!" he said bitterly. "I'm not a bit surprised; I expected something like this. The Princess Mercia appreciated my value; but there's plenty of truth in that old proverb, 'A prophet is of no account in his own country.'"

"You've had your fling, Handy, so you ought to be satisfied," said Reggie Pitt. "What's the good of getting excited, anyhow?"

"Isn't it enough to make anybody excited?" retorted Handforth. "My idea is to take advantage of this situation; I don't believe in frittering away opportunities."

"What, exactly, would you do, then?" asked Nipper.

"I'd give orders to sail straight for Gothland!" retorted Handforth. "I'd raid the enemy's coast, and——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Dick. "What about Mr. Lee's orders?"

"What orders?"

"We're not to approach nearer than five miles——"

"Wait a minute!" said Edward Oswald coldly. "If I had had any voice, I wouldn't have agreed to that rot in the first place! We're pirates, and it's our duty to act as pirates. We ought to be raiding Gothland every day, and routing out the enemy's secrets."

A yell of laughter greeted this statement, and Handforth had no idea that he had hopelessly given himself away. He was so infatuated with this piece of strategy that he actually looked upon himself as a pirate. He always took everything literally. Nipper, on the other hand, knew well enough that the whole thing was a pose, and that the galley was merely out for scouting purposes.

"It's no good, old son," said the Remove captain, shaking his head. "You're too wholesale! If it wasn't for that, you'd be just about perfect. But you spoil everything by failing to recognise a reasonable limit. You'd raid Gothland, you say?"

"Action!" snapped Handforth, in defence of his policy.

"I agree with you about the action, but wisdom seems to be lacking," replied Nipper soberly. "My dear old chap, you'd get the whole crowd of us beheaded in the very first raid! Kassker has set a price on all of us, and if we once got into the hands of his soldiers, we'd be shewn no mercy. Personally, I'm fond of action; but I'm not going anywhere near Gothland unless I'm

forced to. I'm game enough for any excitement when it's necessary, but this galley isn't cruising about on the look-out for trouble. So the sooner you curb your war-like spirit, the better."

And as everybody else agreed with Nipper's summing-up, Edward Oswald Handforth was left without a single adherent. Even his own chums were against him.



CHAPTER 3.

THE RAFT!

NEXT day the galley was again cruising on the bosom of the lake. She was now a good deal nearer to the Gothland shore, but well beyond the five-mile limit. However, the enemy shores were in clear sight, and through the telescopes and binoculars the juniors were able to examine the ground minutely.

They saw nothing to alarm them.

Gothland seemed to be very quiet and peaceful; but, after all, the galley was well down the lake, forty or fifty miles from the enemy capital. This part of the country was remote from the war zone. But Nipper believed in taking observations everywhere, for he had a lurking suspicion that Kassker the Grim was secretly planning a big offensive.

Edward Oswald Handforth was very quiet; he had been very quiet ever since the previous day, and he had evidently accepted the situation with a good grace. Handforth, when all was said and done, was a true sportsman.

"Nothing doing," remarked Reggie Pitt, as he lowered a telescope.

"What did you expect?" asked Handforth tartly. "There's no sign of enemy activity because Kassker's a beaten man. If all you fellows are thinking that there's going to be another battle——"

"We're not thinking it, Handy—we know it for a cert," put in Nipper.

"Rot!"

"Don't take any notice of him," grinned Church. "He's only saying this because he likes to be different to everybody else. My hat! Don't you know him yet? Don't you know that he's an obstinate, pig-headed, self-willed chump?"

"We knew it," said Pitt, "but we were too polite to say it."

"You—you——" began Handforth thickly.

"But Handy's a good-hearted ass, all the same," continued Church. "He's a pal in a tight corner, and in spite of his faults, we love him still."

Handforth refused to be mollified by this soft soap, although Church meant it sincerely enough—and he changed the subject. He always pretended to resent criticism, but he hated praise still more.

"You're wrong about Kassker," he growled. "After his armies were thrashed last week, he's whacked. We're simply wasting our time on this galley, and we should be better employed in trying to find a way of escape. What about getting back to St. Frank's?" he demanded. "What about the football?"

"Don't!" said Pitt. "It's bad enough to be bottled up in this lost world, without you reminding us of it. Ye gods and little fishes! St. Frank's—football—skating on the Stowe! And to think that we might never get back there!"

Everybody was silent. Although they had made very few references to the subject, of late they had been feeling very homesick between the exciting episodes. Whenever a lull came, such as this, they caught themselves wistfully thinking of old England. After all, it was a serious problem. Were they doomed to remain in this strange oasis for the rest of their lives?

Nipper shook himself.

"We don't want to think about that!" he growled. "Our job is to find out if Kassker's doing anything along these shores. Personally, I believe we're on a wild-goose chase. Kassker, in my opinion, is preparing a huge army well inland. When he makes his next swoop, it'll be sudden and dramatic."

Handforth started.

"Then why not take a trip inland, and see?" he asked.

"There you go again, you die-hard!" snapped Nipper. "We're not going inland, or anywhere near the coast, either. After we've patrolled this stretch of shore—keeping five miles out—we'll get back to our base."

"Oh, rats!" snorted Handforth. "Do as you like! I'm fed-up!"

He marched below, and found Church and McClure having a snack in the spacious cabin which formed the boys' feeding-quarters while cruising. None of the other fellows was present, and Handforth's eyes gleamed.

"Good!" he said. "I want to have a word with you chaps. I'm sick of Nipper's inactivities, and I've got an idea."

"Oh!" said his chums, without interest.

"In that grotto there's a small galley," said Handforth tensely. "You know the one I mean—it's a galley just like this, only a quarter of the size. Well, why shouldn't we break away from this crowd, and go off on our own?"

"I could tell you a hundred reasons why we shouldn't, but I wouldn't dream of boring you," said McClure sarcastically. "Is that the idea? You're improving, Handy, you're getting brilliant!"

Church nudged him, and gave a sidelong wink.

"It's not such a bad scheme, though," he said slowly.

"You agree, then?" asked Handforth, with an eager note. "When we get back to the island to-night, we'll have a talk with some of the oarsmen. And in the morning we'll nip off with the small galley, and I'll



"By Jove," exclaimed Nipper; "she's alive!" And as the raft swirled alongside the galley, there were many willing hands straining to grasp the unfortunate woman. Disregarding the danger to themselves, two of the juniors jumped into the sea to assist in the work of rescue.

be the commander! See? We'll form ourselves into a rival concern, as it were."

"By jingo!" said Church. "What a stunning wheeze!"

"Marvellous!" said McClure breathlessly.

Handforth regarded them with rather less enthusiasm.

"Oh!" he breathed. "So you think it's good, do you?"

"Good!" breathed Church. "I can't find words to describe it!"

There was something rather cunning in this attitude. Handforth's chums knew well enough that opposition to any of his schemes was the surest method of increasing his enthusiasm—and, on the other hand, to approve of such schemes was equally certain to dampen him. Handforth lived on opposition.

"You're jolly quick to agree with me, aren't you?" he asked suspiciously.

"My dear chap, it's your own fault for springing the surprise like this," exclaimed Church, his eyes shining with wide-open and exaggerated enthusiasm. "A rival concern! A galley of our own! And—and I suppose you'll raid Gothland, eh?"

"Just my idea!" nodded Handforth.

"Better and better!" panted McClure. "I'll tell you what—in fact, I'll bet I've guessed your real secret! You mean to swoop down on the enemy capital, and capture Kassker the Grim!"

Handforth started.

"I hadn't exactly thought— By George!" he breathed. "Capture Kassker the Grim, eh? H'm! I'm not so sure, though," he said dubiously. "It's quite likely that Kassker will have a lot of his troops round him."

Church stared.

"Why should we worry about Kassker's troops?" he asked blankly.

"Well, you know, they're pretty savage —"

"Who cares?" asked Mac. "If we can't take on five hundred men each, what's the good of us? But perhaps Kassker would only have about a thousand round him—so that'll work out, roughly, at about three hundred and thirty each."

"Why roughly?" asked Church. "A third of a thousand is three hundred and thirty-three and a third."

"You fathead!" snapped Handforth. "There can't be a third of a man!"

"Well, anyhow, we'll have some excitement if we go on that raid," said Church, brushing the objection aside. "I'm afraid it'll be rather grubby in the galley—but we can't have everything."

"Grubby?" said Handforth, with another start.

"Filthy would be a better word," put in McClure, nodding. "That small galley hasn't been cleaned out, you know—it's just as the pirates left it. And we all know what a mouldy crowd they were. One of

the chaps said that the cabin of the small galley is more like a pig-sty than anything else. But if you're keen on this game, Handy——"

"Of course he's keen!" interrupted Church. "The whole thing will be in secret, and we shall have to sneak off without any stores or food."

"Eh?"

"My dear chap, we can't breathe a word to the others," said Church. "They'd squash us on the spot if we even hinted at it. And the stores are all guarded in one of those inner grottos, and they'd soon start making inquiries if we nosed about in there. No, we shall have to go off without any grub. We can raid Gothland for our supplies, if it comes to that."

Handforth glared.

"You're mad!" he said tartly. "How the dickens can we be sure of getting enough to eat? Besides, I wouldn't live in that dirty little galley for a pension! Whenever you chaps get any ideas, they're potty!"

"But this one's gorgeous——"

"It's crazy!" interrupted Edward Oswald, with a snort. "We couldn't get the oarsmen to help us, anyhow. No, we'll think of something better than that—at least, I will. We'll——"

"There seems to be something doing on deck," interrupted McClure diplomatically. "Can't you hear those chaps shouting? Let's buck up and have a look."

He and Church went out, thoroughly satisfied that they had effectually squashed Handforth's latest folly. They were right, too. Edward Oswald came to the conclusion that the command of a rival galley was not all that it had seemed to be at first thought.

And two minutes later he had forgotten all about the affair. For McClure had made no mistake. On deck, there was something of interest going on, apparently. For when the chums of Study D. arrived in the open, they found a number of fellows all focusing their glasses on one particular spot.

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "What's happening?"

"Nothing," said Fullwood.

"Then what are they all staring at through the glasses?"

"Nipper thought he saw something floating on the water, a mile or two away," said Fullwood. "Only a tiny object—probably a piece of wood, or some wreckage. We're going in that direction now—although we can't go far."

Handforth sniffed.

"All this fuss over a bit of floating flotsam!" he said tartly.

"You never know, it might be jetsam!" said Church.

"You fathead! What's the difference?"

"Oh, a lot!" said Church, shaking his head. "Flotsam is stuff from a shipwreck, but jetsam is material that has been deliberately thrown overboard. I expect that's where they get the word 'jettison,' you know——"

"Hold on!" snapped Handforth. "Is this a lesson, or what? And why the dickens can't we go much nearer? There's nothing in the way—it's all clear water."

"But we're within half a mile of the zone," explained Fullwood.

"The zone?"

"The five mile limit, you know."

Handforth gave an explosive snort of disgust.

"Five mile limit!" he barked. "Of all the absolute rot! Supposing that piece of wreckage is valuable? A sea-chest, full of gold? Mustn't we cross the five mile line even then?"

"It can't be a sea-chest full of gold," said Church, shaking his head.

"Why can't it?"

"Because a chest full of gold wouldn't float."

"If you're asking for a thick ear, Walter Church, I'll jolly well give you one!" roared Handforth. "Quibbling and arguing over trifles! I think we ought to steer straight for this piece of flotsam——"

"Or jetsam," said McClure.

"Flotsam!" howled Handforth. "Let's steer straight—— Here, gimme those glasses, De Valerie! Give a chap a chance!"

But before Handforth could borrow De Valerie's binoculars, Nipper sang out to the oarsmen to put on speed, and to row straight ahead. The man at the tiller was ordered to keep a direct course.

"We shall be over the five mile line," said Watson.

"Can't help that," replied Nipper briskly. "In any case, there's no sign of another ship, and we shan't be far wrong, at the worst."

"But why the hurry?" asked Fullwood curiously.

"I'm not quite so sure about that piece of wreckage," replied Nipper. "It looks more like a little raft to me. And there's something bound to it, too—a huddled-looking shape. You fellows had better get ready for an unpleasant shock, because I have my suspicions about that thing. But we can't sheer off without making sure."

Dick's words were by no means definite, but the others could easily guess at his meaning. They all watched that little floating object with fascinated interest.



CHAPTER 4.

ONE OF KASSKER'S VICTIMS!

HANDFORTH gave a shout.

"It's a body!" he exclaimed tensely.

"Dry up, you ass——"

"I tell you it's a body—huddled up, and bound to that raft," continued Handforth excitedly. "I just caught a glimpse of a foot——"

"Then dry up about it," muttered Church. "The thing seems bad enough without you jawing! Let's wait until we know some-

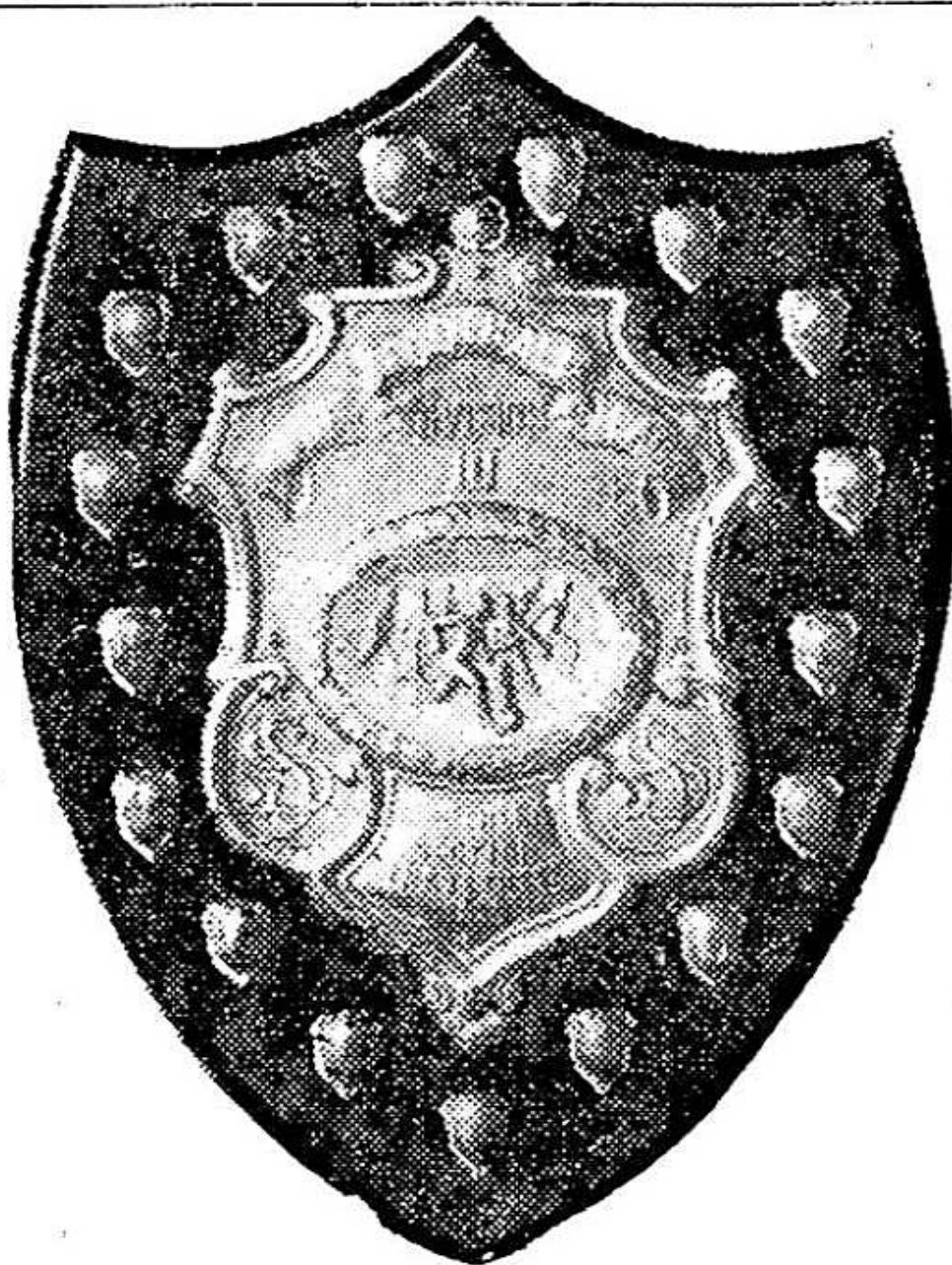
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thing for certain. It'll only be another minute or two now."

They had crossed the five mile limit some little time ago, and the raft, which had been only distinguishable through the glasses, was now clearly visible to the naked eye.

It seemed to be a roughly-made affair of uneven logs, roped together. Other ropes were visible, binding down the huddled form which lay in the centre of the raft. There was no sign of movement.

The galley was going easy now, and the shores of Gothland seemed surprisingly close. In this oasis, the atmosphere was singularly clear and crystal, and one could see for long distances, so excellent was the visibility.

The low shores of the lake were of white sand—exactly like the seaside, except for the fact that thick forests grew closely down to the very beach in places. Elsewhere, there were river inlets and grassy slopes. And here and there nestled a small village of picturesque red cottages. This part of Gothland seemed to be very rural and sleepy, different from the busy, industrial, active country thirty or forty miles up the lake.

Not that the juniors were paying any attention to the coastline. They were confining their interest to this floating thing which was getting nearer and nearer. Nipper had made quite sure that there were no enemy vessels about. And he felt justi-

fied in verifying his suspicions before turning away.

After all, there was very little danger.

For this galley, having been a pirate craft, was necessarily faster than any of the other native ships. In the event of an enemy approach, even by a fleet, the imitation pirates could speed away in perfect safety.

"It's a woman!" said Willy keenly, as he stood upon the bulwarks, in a very precarious-looking position. "It's a woman, you chaps—bound to that raft!"

"Rats!"

"Don't be an ass, Handforth minor!"

"He's right," put in Nipper. "I saw it some little time ago, but I didn't say anything. Reggie, take the helm, and veer round gently. Tell the oarsmen to cease rowing, and let them be ready to back water at the order."

Very little was said now, as the galley came up. The raft was ahead, a point or two to port, and the pirate ship was swinging gently round, so that the raft would drift alongside.

There was a feeling in the air that they were in the presence of a tragedy.

But none could guess the exact nature of it. It seemed certain that there had been foul play. The raft contained the body of a woman, sure enough, and she was lashed cruelly by many ropes, so that there was no chance of the body slipping off into the water.

The juniors could see that the woman was wearing the plain, simple garb of a peasant, and her hair was straggling down and trailing in the water. Most of the fellows were looking worried. They wished they hadn't come near this tragedy. What good could they do, anyhow?

"Of course, we'll lift the poor thing gently out, and give it a decent burial," said Handforth huskily. "By George! I'd like to find out who's responsible——"

"Some of those beasts of Kassker's, I expect," muttered Church. "All those Gothlander soldiers are savages!"

"By Jove, you chaps!" exclaimed Nipper, from the bows. "Get ready, there! She's alive——"

"What!"

"Her eyes are open, and I'll swear she's alive!"

"Hurrah!"

They didn't quite know why they gave a cheer, but after the thoughts of tragedy it was a relief to hear Nipper's announcement. And the eyes of the schoolboy pirates were more keenly searching than ever as the galley swung gently up and the raft swirled alongside.

"Come on!" sang out Handforth.

He heaved himself on the side of the boat, straining to reach the raft. Two of the other fellows lost no time in jumping overboard, and a moment later they were grabbing at the edges of the raft, careless of any possible danger from the deep waters. They regarded the unfortunate woman with growing rage.

"Oh, I say!" muttered Pitt. "This is terrible!"

"Where's a knife?" snapped Handforth. "Quick, a knife! Can't one of you idiots——"

"All right, I've got one," said Pitt tensely.

At such close quarters they were appalled. The woman, it seemed, was of about middle age, but there was no sign of consciousness now, although it was quite evident that she was alive. Her cheeks were slightly tinged with colour, and there was a regular movement of her bosom. She was breathing, and that was enough for the rescuers.

But they were horrified by the evidences of torture.

The poor woman was bound so tightly that her wrists were terribly bloated and swollen. Another cord passed round her neck, so that her head was held immovably down upon the raft. Her ankles were tethered in the same way.

She had been cast out upon the lake alive, bound hand and foot to that raft, so that no movement was possible. And the fellows were equally sure that she was a Gothlander, for her features were different to those of the typical Northestrian peasant.

Pitt slashed through the cords viciously. And he and the others, between them, succeeded in gently lifting that tortured body and raising it to Handy's willing arms, which were waiting above. The woman was lifted

on board and taken gently down into the big cabin.

All the juniors were Boy Scouts, and they knew something about First Aid. But they had never had a case like this to deal with.

"Massage!" said Handforth quickly. "That's what she needs! Come on, you chaps, lend a hand with her arms! We'd better massage 'em until the circulation's restored."

"It's a pity we haven't got any brandy," said Nipper, frowning. "That's what she needs more than anything else just now."

"But didn't you say she was 'conscious?'"

"So she was, but the sight of us, I expect, going to her rescue, was such a shock that she fainted," said Dick. "Tommy, there's a big pot of meat extract somewhere. See if you can't make some beef tea!"

"That's a good idea," said Watson briskly.

That meat extract, of course, was a part of the wrecked airship's stores. The juniors were provided with quite a number of luxuries of this type—piquant reminders of home. For in Northestria the fare was very plain, and the people knew nothing about such things as meat extract, or relishes, or preserves.

Gradually the woman showed some signs of recovery. It made no difference to the juniors that she was of the enemy. Northestrian or Gothlander, it made no difference. She was in a pitiable condition, and she was a woman. That made it imperative for them to give all the aid within their power.

Watson was quickly on the spot with the beef tea. For there was a spirit-stove aboard, and no time had been lost in getting it going. The grateful beverage soon had effect, for after about five minutes the woman opened her eyes. A good deal of beef tea had been forced down her throat, and now at last her eyelids fluttered, and then she attempted to sit up.

"Gently—gently!" murmured Nipper. "Don't exert yourself——"

"Spare me!" moaned the woman. "Of your charity! I wish but to die——"

"No, you won't die!" interrupted Nipper. "You're with friends. We're not going to harm you."

But she was panic-stricken with fright. Perhaps she mistook them all for pirates, but it was far more probable that she recognised them as members of that party from the Outer World, which had wrought such havoc upon her countrymen. Perhaps she expected to be brutally killed.

"We are friendly," repeated Nipper. "See, we have rescued you from the raft, and now we want to restore you. Tell us where you live, and how you came in such trouble. We will try to land you on your own shore."

Gradually the woman's fears subsided. She refused to speak, however. They could only get murmured words out of her—words that were disjointed and incoherent. It was taking her some time to fully realise that she was in safe hands.

"Better leave her alone for half an hour."

suggested Pitt softly. "There's a kind of couch on the other side of the cabin here. Let's put her on it, cover her with a blanket, and leave her there. If she's alone she may get over this panic."

It was an excellent suggestion, and within a couple of minutes the Gothlander woman was left alone, and the fellows went on deck and discussed the affair. Nipper gave no orders for the galley to proceed, and the vessel remained there, with still oars, the men resting and waiting.

"We'd better go easy," said Handforth warningly. "For all we know, it may be a trap. Perhaps it's just a wheeze to get us into the hands of the enemy——"

"I admire your forethought, old man, but you're wrong," said Nipper. "There's no trap here. This woman would have been dead within a couple of hours if we hadn't released her from that raft. She couldn't have lasted long."

"Perhaps she's been floating for days," said Watson.

"Not for more than an hour or two," replied Nipper grimly. "My dear chaps, she couldn't have lived! It's my opinion that she was tied to that raft only a short time ago. There's a river almost opposite this spot—look! Can't you see how the current is sweeping down the lake? It's one of those rapid streams which tumble down from the upper glaciers, and there's big force behind the current. The raft was swept out into the lake in a very short time."

"But why?" asked Pitt. "Who could have done it?"

"Perhaps we shall never find out," replied Nipper. "Not that it matters much, in any case—we've done all that's possible. On the whole, I think we'd better take her across to Northestria. She'll be safe there."

"I say, Nipper!" called Church. "She's talking!"

They hurried into the cabin, and found a big change already. The rescued woman was not merely talking, but sobbing pitifully. There was something rather terrible in her anguish.

"My children!" she sobbed. "Oh, my children!"

"Can't you tell us——" began Nipper.

"My children!" she repeated dazedly.

"What of them?" said Nipper. "Perhaps we can help——"

"May a curse fall upon the soldiers of Kassker!" shouted the half-demented creature, suddenly becoming coherent. "May Kassker die a thousand deaths! I hate him! I hate his soldiers! My children—my poor children!"

Her eyes were blazing, and for a moment she sat up, tense and terrible to look upon. Then, just as suddenly, she relaxed, and sobbed hysterically. Nothing further could be got out of her for the moment.

The juniors were looking at one another uncomfortably.

"She may be a Gothlander, but she doesn't seem to be particularly loyal to Kassker."

murmured Pitt. "What do you make of this outcry about her children?"

Nipper shrugged.

"Isn't it pretty obvious?" he asked quietly.

"I don't quite see——"

"The anguish is all for her children," said Nipper. "She hasn't spoken a word about her own plight—her own torture. I say, the whole affair's worrying me. Doesn't it prove what a hound Kassker is? Even his own people curse him."

"Well, that's a surprise, anyhow," said Fullwood. "We always thought that all the Gothlanders were tarred with the same brush. But there must be some good among them, I suppose. By Jove, I'd like to see Kassker where he deserves to be—with his head on the chopping block!"

Handforth got excited.

"Doesn't this prove that I was right?" he asked fiercely. "Doesn't it prove that we ought to raid——"

"Don't start that again now, Handy, for goodness' sake," interrupted Dick. "We want to learn this woman's story, if we can. If there's any possible way of helping——" He broke off. "By Jove!" he muttered. "If it's necessary, we'll do some raiding, too—in spite of the gov'nor's orders!"

"Good man!" said Handforth heartily.

"But the need will have to be pretty acute before I'll permit such a thing," went on Nipper, cooling down. "Anyhow, we've got to find out the truth first. Come, good lady, there is nothing to fear," he added, as he bent over the woman. "Perhaps we can help. Tell us of your trouble."

For the first time the woman had a light of understanding in her eyes, but her expression was one of such anguish that the watching juniors felt more and more uncomfortable.

"I will tell you!" she whispered. "Thou hast been kind to me, good young friend," she added, clutching at Nipper's hand. "I will tell thee of my terrible troubles."



CHAPTER 5.

THE HOUNDS OF KASSKER!

FROM every part of the ship the St. Frank's fellows gathered in that big cabin, eager to hear the woman's story. But Nipper, at least, did not forget the necessity of maintaining a watch, and he insisted upon two of the juniors going on deck, in order to keep their eyes wide open.

The rescued woman was now sitting up, and she was looking much stronger. A light of agonised resignation had come into her eyes, as though she had had her battle, and knew that all was lost.

"I am of Gernfrith, a peaceful village not a mile up the river," she began. "Until to-day I knew not of Kassker's real brutality. Yet for long had we suspected the truth. By

name, I am called Bessber—Mistress Bessber, since that is the name of my husband. Alas, he is dead—killed by those hounds from Kassker's Court. Only to-day did he die—and before mine eyes."

"But why?" asked Nipper gently. "Why did they kill him?"

"Because he did desert from the army," she replied.

Some of the fellows exchanged glances, feeling that this piece of information put a new light on the affair. After all, Kassker's army was on active service, and death is the due of any soldier who deserts at such a time.

"Nay, ye are all wrong!" cried the woman, as she saw the glances. "My husband did not desert because he was afraid. I tell ye that most of us in Gothland hate Kassker and his cruel, murderous ways. 'Tis only the soldiers who favour him—for they are of the same breed, and delight in bloodshed. In our little towns and villages, we desire peace with Northestria. But Kassker is ruthless. Has he not swept every man into his armies? And my children! My poor——"

"Wait!" interrupted Nipper, fearing that she was about to become incoherent again. "What of your husband? Tell us why he deserted, Mistress Bessber."

"'Twas ill that he should have been chosen as a soldier," murmured the woman. "My good man was always ailing. I faith, I thought to look the last upon him when he was taken away, for he was mortally ill with some inside complaint, of which no doctors could cure him. Ah, the everlasting agonies he suffered! He was a dying man ere he was snatched from his cottage."

"In spite of this, he was forced into the army?" asked Nipper.

"Thinkest thou that those cruel curs care of aught that ails a man?" she said bitterly. "Nay, good youth, they take all in Gothland, whether they be old, infirm, or crippled. Three days ago my poor husband returned. In despair, he had deserted, knowing full well that death was near. 'Twas his wish to die in my keeping."

She broke off, overcome for a moment. And her listeners were now beginning to get a better grasp of the situation. Their gore arose as they pondered over it. A poor wretch of a peasant—dying—and deserting from Kassker's army. Of what service could he be, in any case?

"We did think that his last hour would be peaceful," continued Mistress Bessber sadly. "But nay—Kassker's hounds were not to be denied. We were warned of approaching soldiery, and 'twas then that we were alarmed. A party, perchance, searching for my poor, dying husband. And so I concealed him amid the rafters of our little cottage, trusting to Providence that he would not be discovered. I well knew that none in the village would betray us—for not in the whole of Gernfrith is there one who loves Kassker's soldiery."

It was becoming more and more obvious that Kassker the Grim was a greater ogre than ever the juniors had imagined. Sad though the woman's story had been, there was yet worse to come.

"They searched—these soldiers?" asked Pitt quietly.

"Ay, they searched—in vain," she replied. "All seemed well, and those cruel brutes were about to depart—and then, by my soul, my poor man was attacked by a fit of agony from within him, and groans were forced from his trembling lips. They dragged him down, those soldiers! They dragged him outside!"

"They killed him?" asked Handforth, in a fierce voice.

"Slowly—by inches—before mine eyes!" she sobbed. "'Twas an example to all the other villagers, who were forced to stand round under pain of death. I would that I had died on the lake, rather than remember all——" She broke off, shuddering. "Oh, I can speak no more."

"You must!" insisted Nipper. "Why did they tie you to that raft?"

"Why?" she said dully. "'Twas an example to the other women of my village. Perchance they might harbour husbands or sons who deserted. So the officer in charge caused the logs to be hewn, and the raft to be made. And thus I was cast into the river, to be swept into the lake, there to die of agony, alone. Ye have saved me from that, good youths, but I almost wish ye had left me there. My children——"

Her voice thickened, and a sobbing wail came from her.

All the juniors were aghast. The first part of her story had angered them, but they were now horrified beyond measure. Not content with putting the deserter to death, these soldiers of Kassker had vented their savagery upon the wife, sending her to a dreadful death as an example. There was something terrible in the very simplicity of her story—in the direct way she told it. And there could be no doubt that they were hearing the simple truth.

Perhaps this sort of thing was but an everyday incident in Gothland, where the people were ground under the heel of the military. In all probability the woman was right in what she said. The majority of the simple Gothlanders only desired peace. It was Kassker the Grim who had such warlike ambitions—Kassker and his brutal officers. The soldiers, of course, were forced to obey orders. The juniors had already known that the Gothlander army was ruled with harsh and brutal tyranny.

"Leave her alone now!" murmured Pitt, with compassion. "Haven't we heard enough? Poor thing, she's gone through enough tortures, without us pressing her for the awful details."

"Yes, and she's just about whacked, too," said Watson.

"Can't we do something?" said Handforth



Handforth, Church, and McClure were securely tied side by side to the stakes while faggots were piled up around them. "It's all up with us now!" gasped Handy. The leader of the trio was enduring agonies at the thought of bringing his chums to this terrible end.

thickly, as they moved away. "By George! Can't we take some sort of revenge?"

"Be reasonable, Handy," urged Church. "What do you suppose we can do? If we go to this village, we shall only find the place swarming with soldiers, and we might run right into their hands."

"All the better!" rapped out Handforth.

"You idiot! They'd kill us!"

"Huh! They can kill half-dying men, and innocent women—but they'd have a job to kill me!" said Edward Oswald, with fine disdain. "No fear! I'm not afraid of these butchers! Let's go and avenge her!"

"We can't do anything like that, Handy, although I must admit I feel as worked-up as you do," said Nipper quietly. "There'll probably be hundreds of soldiers there——"

"Why not ask her how many?" said Handforth quickly.

"No, it's useless——"

"I say, she's getting hysterical again!" murmured Jack Grey. "You're the one she seems to like best, Nipper. Try and soothe her, for goodness' sake! I'm feeling all miserable—particularly when she sobs like that."

Nipper went over, and found that Mistress Bessber was attempting to leave her couch. She pushed Nipper back when he tried to stop her.

"Nay, let me rise!" she pleaded. "I must return! I must go back——"

"But you can't do that!" broke in Nipper. "They'll only kill you!"

"Don't you understand?" she said, her voice almost mechanical in its set purpose. "I must go! My children! Perchance they are dying now, at the hands of those monsters!"

"They would never dare to harm your children——"

"Dare!" she cried wailingly. "Did they not tell me before setting me adrift?"

"Tell you?" said Handforth. "Tell you what?"

"My five little ones are to be burnt!" she said huskily.

"Burnt!" went up a horrified chorus.

"No less! Burnt at the stake, as an added lesson to the people of the village," she said. "I must go—I must try to save them. Oh, do not attempt to keep me here——"

"Burnt at the stake!" shouted Nipper, aghast.

"It can't be true!" muttered Watson, with a shudder. "Even Kassker's men wouldn't go to such a length as that! They wouldn't wipe out the whole family!"

"No, she must be dreaming."

But the woman shook her head.

"I neither dream nor imagine," she replied.

"'Twas the last thing said to me ere I was thrown upon the current. Later in the day, they told me, my five children were to be burnt in public—burnt alive! I cannot bear it! I cannot—"

"One moment!" interrupted Nipper, conquering his horror. "Later in the day? Then your children may still be alive?"

She nodded dully.

"'Tis why I wish to go," she said simply.

"How long is it since you were sent forth on that raft?"

"I know not; but it seemeth many hours," she said. "Perchance the time is less. I remember little of what happened, save for the dreadful agony. But the officer clearly made it plain that the burnings were to take place after the evening meal."

"By Jove!" murmured Nipper. "And this village is only a mile or two inland?"

"Scarce even that distance—beyond the woods."

"And where do you think they will—"

Nipper paused, hardly knowing how to put it.

"My little ones?" she asked. "In the market-place, I expect. I feel they are still alive; I know it within me. The soldiers are gathering the country folk from all the surrounding villages, so that they will see this execution. 'Twill be a warning to them. And my children are to be the lesson—"

"Please!" interrupted Nipper. "How many soldiers are there?"

"Full a score."

"A score!" yelled Handforth. "Only twenty!"

"Great Scott!"

"Only a score!"

"Ye seem surprised?" she asked, gaining more confidence in their presence. "A score—enough! Twenty such men can ravage the countryside. There is one officer—no man, but a devil! 'Tis he who is the worst!"

"And what of other soldiers?" asked Nipper, his voice tense. "Aren't there any other soldiers close at hand?"

"None nearer than ten leagues."

"Thirty miles!" muttered Pitt. "Only twenty soldiers within a radius of thirty miles, you chaps, and the village is right near the coast."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"Why not make a crusade?" he asked excitedly. "By George, that's it! We'll be crusaders, and dash to this village and rescue the children from the stake!"

"Hurrah!"

"We'll do it!"

The woman was looking at them, dumb-founded.

"Ye will do this?" she asked, without belief. "Nay, 'tis not to be hoped for! Ye are but youths—"

"But there are only twenty men, and we're game to try it!" said Nipper keenly.

"Yes, Mistress Bessber, we'll make an attempt to rescue your children."

"Oh! If thou really meanest—"

"We've got to!" said Nipper. "We can't think of your youngsters being burnt at the stake, and just leave them there! We'll do everything in our power to save them. This time, if we can prevent it, Kassker's brutes—"

"We've got to prevent it!" broke in Handforth fiercely. "Cheer up, Mrs. Bessber! Leave everything to us, and we'll have your children here in next to no time. We'll dash right off, and save them from the soldiers!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's go at once!"

The poor woman was so overcome with sudden hope that she suffered a relapse, and fainted again. They made her as comfortable as possible on the couch, and then Nipper called a council on deck.

"Well, we've pledged ourselves now, and there's no getting out of it," he said quietly.

"Who wants to get out of it?" asked Handforth.

"Nobody, but you'd all better realise that it's going to be a desperate mission," continued Dick. "You may sneer at twenty Gothlander soldiers, but there's more than a chance that some of us'll never come back. I suppose you realise that, don't you?"

Reggie Pitt expressed the opinions of the others.

"This isn't a case where there's any choice," he said simply. "We've got to go, Nipper, and that's all there is about it!"



CHAPTER 6.

ACTIVE PREPARATIONS.

THE whole affair was unexpected.

An hour earlier there had been no prospect of action. And now, what a dramatic change! The juniors had pledged themselves to venture on to Gothland soil, and to make an attempt to rescue Mistress Bessber's children from the hands of the ogre's henchmen! Even Handforth, the fire-eater, could not grumble now! He had wanted action, and he seemed like getting it.

"As long as we all know where we stand, I needn't say any more on the subject," said Dick Hamilton. "We're going, so that's that! I wish I could believe that we shall only be faced with twenty soldiers. But how can she know? There might be a hundred actually."

"Never mind 'might be'; we know there are twenty," said Handforth practically. "And if it comes to that, what do we care? We're not afraid of the beggars! When it comes to a real fight, they'll crumple up—"

"If possible, I want to avoid a fight," said Nipper.

"You want to avoid it?" gasped Handforth.

"Yes, I do!" snapped Dick. "As you say, we know there are twenty soldiers, but it's any chances that there are more. So a direct assault on our part would be madness. I think you'll agree, Reggie, that this is a case for strategy."

"Yes," said Pitt promptly. "And you're the fellow to plan the thing."

"I think it's all rot," protested Handforth. "Why not make a direct raid of it, and have a good smack at the brutes?"

"Because it'll be a lot better to achieve our object, if we can, without any bloodshed," replied Nipper. "The gov'nor gave me orders not to pass beyond the five-mile limit——"

"Bother the five-mile limit!"

"I agree with you—bother it!" said Nipper. "But at the same time, we mustn't take any unnecessary risks. Circumstances alter cases, and it's no time for obeying strict orders. Five children are threatened with being burnt alive, and we can't stand by, idle. They're Gothlander children, but that doesn't matter a toss. If we can avert this tragedy, we'll do it!"

Nipper turned and surveyed the shore—now only two or three miles distant. The swift river, down which the raft had been borne, was in clear view. The village of Gernfrith, then, was a mile or so in that direction, hidden by the belt of dense woodland which came almost down to the lake-side.

Some of the fellows half-expected to see smoke arising in the still air, but, as a matter of fact, there wasn't a sign of any living thing. The whole coast hereabouts appeared to be devoid of any humanity.

"Where's the danger?" asked Handforth scoffingly.

"Well, it isn't in view, at all events," said Church. "But hidden danger is worse than the open kind. You've got to admit it, Handy—Nipper's right. If ever there was a case for caution, this is one."

Edward Oswald was not a favourable subject for such teaching.

"Caution—caution—caution!" he said fiercely. "Always caution! If I were in command, I'd run the galley straight up the river, sweep into the village, grab the kids, and it would be all over in five minutes."

"I believe it would," said Church, nodding.

"Then why shouldn't we do it?"

"Because it would be all over in the wrong sort of way," said Church tartly. "Before we could escape, we should be in the thick of a fight——"

"All the better! Do you think we shouldn't win free?"

"Yes, somehow I think we should," replied Church. "But we should leave some of the fellows behind; perhaps you, Mac, perhaps me. We couldn't fight armed soldiers like that without having casualties, horrible casualties."

Handforth was rather sobered.

"I expect you're right!" he muttered, scratching his head. "If it did come to a real hand-to-hand scrap, there'd be some pretty deadly work. H'm! It's a pity, but—— Anyhow, what else can we do?" he asked aggressively. "We can't leave those kids to die at the stake! What else can we do?"

"Nipper said something about strategy," remarked McClure.

Nipper was saying something about it, now, and Handforth turned to listen.

"I don't want to repeat what I said about the dangers," he was remarking. "You all know them, and I think you're all prepared to undertake the risks. It's an exceptional case, and there isn't a minute to be lost."

"Then why aren't we doing something?" put in Handforth.

"We are; we're under way already."

Handforth looked round, and saw that the oarsmen were pulling hard at the sweeps, and the great galley was plunging along, straight towards the enemy coast.

"We've got nearly twenty minutes to make preparations, twenty minutes before we can land," continued Nipper. "I'm not going to call for volunteers to go, but I want a couple of volunteers to stay behind."

"Not likely!" said a dozen voices.

"There ought to be three, really," said Nipper. "As you're the youngest, Willy, I think that you and your two chums had better stay on board."

Willy Handforth glared.

"Then you'd better think again!" he retorted.

"You'd better think hard!" said Chubby Heath.

"And leave us out of your thoughts!" said Juicy Lemon.

The Third Form trio spoke with conviction.

"But look here, my lads, you're only fags——" began Nipper.

"I like your nerve!" growled Willy. "Only fags! We're not at St. Frank's, are we? Age doesn't count here! It doesn't matter whether we're in the Third, or any other Form. We're all in this affair, and we're not going to be left out in the cold, just because we're fags!"

Nipper realised that he had been too blunt.

"Oh, all right; I don't suppose it'll be any good arguing!" he said. "There's no time for us to draw lots. Somebody's got to volunteer."

"But why?" asked Pitt. "There'll be nothing to do on board. What about all these oarsmen? Can't they look after the galley? We shan't be gone for more than half an hour."

"Half an hour!" said Handforth. "You mean half a minute! This village is on the river-side——"

"It may be, but we're not taking the galley up the river," said Nipper.

"Why not?"

"It'll be too risky; we might get ourselves into a hopeless trap," replied Dick, with

rare wisdom. "No, our best method will be to leave the galley out here, in the open. We'll go to within two or three hundred yards of the shore, and then take the boat. We'll penetrate the wood. According to Mistress Bessber, Gernfrith is only just beyond."

"He's right, you chaps," said Buster Boots, nodding. "Always trust Nipper to know the best thing to do when it comes to generalship. Even if we're spotted, it'll be difficult to round us up in the recesses of a wood."

"I'm thinking of the escape," said Nipper. "We want to get these children, if we can, and make a dash for it. We shall stand a lot more chance in the wood than out in the open—especially if we keep together, and mark the path in advance. There's only a short strip of beach, and once across it we shall be practically safe, although there might be the risk of arrows."

"I agree with all this," said Pitt. "But why do you find it necessary to leave three fellows on board?"

Nipper looked thoughtful.

"As I've told you before, we want to rescue those children, if possible, without getting any of ourselves killed," he replied. "That's putting it bluntly; but this is no time for choosing any words. Look at the thing squarely," he added, addressing everybody in a grim voice. "What do you think Mr. Lee or Dorrie will say if we go back with five Gothlander children, and leave five or six of our own fellows, dead, in the enemy's country?"

The others were silent.

"So we mustn't lose any opportunity of safeguarding ourselves," continued Nipper. "There's another point. This 'pirate galley' deception will be exploded once and for all."

"How do you mean—exploded?" asked Tregellis-West.

"Well, we can't expect to rescue these children without showing our true colours," replied Nipper. "Kassker's men are bound to know the truth, whatever happens, so it'll be good policy to take the bull by the horns, and summon help."

"Summon help!" said Handforth. "How?"

"By giving the signal that I arranged with the gov'nor."

"You—you hopeless chump!" said Handforth. "The Northestrian coast is thirty miles away. We can't stop to get help—"

"We're not stopping for anything, my dear chap," interrupted Dick. "This is where a bit of strategy will come in. After the main party has penetrated the wood, the fellows left on board will let off a whole volley of smoke rockets."

"But you're crazy!" ejaculated Reggie Pitt, staring. "That's the very thing to attract the enemy! Over in Northestria they'll hear the report, and they'll shoot over in a motor-boat to see what's up; but

that doesn't alter the fact that the enemy'll be on the job, too."

"Exactly! That's my idea," said Nipper coolly. "I want those soldiers in Grenfrith to be startled by the explosions. The chances are that they'll get the wind up and leave anything they happen to be doing. Perhaps they'll rush to the shore here."

"And leave us the village to ourselves!" gasped Pitt.

"That's what I'm hoping."

"By Jove, Dick, you're a brainy beggar!" said Reggie admiringly. "It's a priceless scheme!"

"As far as I can see, it's the only thing to be done," replied Nipper gruffly. "The soldiers can't harm the galley, because it'll be out of arrow-shot. And during all the confusion we may be able to get hold of the children. In any case, the whole affair will be a gamble, and we shall have to leave a lot to chance."

"And they'll hear those explosions in Northestria, and dash to our help," said Fullwood. "If Mr. Lee comes in the motor-boat, he'll be across the lake in less than an hour."

"I'm counting on that, too," nodded Nipper. "If we fail to come back, the fellows on the galley will know that something bad has happened. That's where the gov'nor will come in. The motor-boat will be handy to dash up the river, and there's the machine-gun on board. You see, we shall have two chances of success by taking this course. And the fellows who remain on board will have a serious duty to discharge. Who'll volunteer?"

Nobody wanted to stay—for all of them were eager to take part in the actual "crusade," as Handforth insisted upon calling it. But at last Tommy Watson, Archie Glenhorne and Jack Grey were persuaded to remain behind in charge of the rockets.

Nipper gave them very full instructions.

"Don't let them off until we've been in the wood for ten minutes," he said. "That'll give us a chance to get near the village. Bang will go the rockets, and if we're lucky, the soldiers will bolt, or something. And during the lull, we can make the raid. As for getting back, we shall have to take our chance."

And so, without any further planning, the affair was arranged.

There was one thing strongly in the schoolboys' favour. The coast was very deserted and empty. Not many miles farther up the lake, there was hardly a mile without a village or a town. But here there was none to see the galley's approach. At least, the juniors could see no sign of life.

And by this time the pirate vessel had got close within shore, and many of the men at the sweeps were looking uneasy. They weren't made of the same material as the British schoolboys, although they were loyal enough.

The boat was got ready, and the fellows

prepared themselves for the big adventure. Nobody made any further reference to the dangers. They all knew them, but thought it better to keep silent on the subject. And even Handforth was satisfied that Nipper's plan of campaign was the best.

The poor woman below, in spite of her anxiety—perhaps because of it—had fallen into a deep, troubled sleep, which was almost real unconsciousness. Nature was having its way, and she was bodily exhausted. And possibly she had faith that these boys would be successful. Her presence on board was another reason for leaving two or three fellows in charge. They had to look after her, as well as attend to the other matters.

"Everything seems quiet, thank goodness!" said Nipper, as he examined the shore. "There's nobody watching, and there's nothing but these woods in front of us. I wanted to have another talk with Mistress Bessber, to make sure of the distances, but we can't wake her up now. We'll just go ahead, and trust to luck."

Five minutes later the boat had put off, and the great galley was left waiting off shore. Her oarsmen were ready to spring into instant action, and the vessel's bows were pointing towards the open lake.

At last the boat grounded upon the beach, and the raiders experienced a curious little thrill as they felt the grind of the enemy soil beneath their feet.



CHAPTER 7.

IN THE THICK OF IT.

It is quite possible that the fellows failed to realise the epic nature of their undertaking.

It seemed to them that it was just an exciting adventure, made necessary by reason of the acute peril. Five children were threatened with the most ghastly death imaginable. So St. Frank's rose to the occasion.

But, really, there was something rather fine in this quickly-decided-upon raid. Here were a mere handful of schoolboys penetrating the country of Kassker the Grim, and practically unarmed!

It wasn't as though they knew nothing of Kassker's methods. On one occasion, they had been threatened with death at the hands of the Gothlanders, and they knew these men to be murderous savages of the most atrocious type. So they were going into the lion's den with their eyes open.

And, after all, they only had that woman's story to go upon. What if they found five hundred soldiers? What if they discovered the wood to be swarming with waiting men?

But the fellows didn't even think of these possibilities, and it was just as well, perhaps, that they didn't. And because they were so confident, luck seemed to favour them.

Not a moment was wasted on the beach. The boat was left there, and they made a swift dash for the cover of the trees. Within a few seconds they were swallowed up in the wood.

"They've gone!" murmured Tommy Watson, as he and the other two stood on the galley's deck, watching. "My only hat! They just seemed to vanish like smoke! I wonder if we shall ever see them again?" he added, with a catch in his voice.

Archie Glenthorne thoughtfully polished his monocle, for, in spite of his pirate garb, nothing could part him from his eyeglass. The incongruity of wearing the thing didn't worry him in the least.

"Personally, laddies, I am feeling absolutely chirpy," he said calmly. "I mean to say, the good old lads of the village have dashed into action, and we can expect a few solid, chunky results."

"But supposing they get trapped?"

"Odds fears and misgivings!" frowned Archie. "Dash it all, laddie, there's no need to gaze upon the murky side. I mean, we can leave all that sort of stuff severely alone, what? You can take it from Archie that the dear old chappies will soon appear in the offing, lugging the kindergarten with them."

"And we've got to see about those rockets," said Jack Grey. "They're all right—ready to be fired, but we'd better keep our eye on the time."

"Don't worry, there's hardly a minute gone yet," growled Watson. "My hat. Doesn't the time seem to drag?"

But if the minutes passed slowly for them, the other juniors were not particularly aware of the slow passage of time. They were already well into the wood, and, acting upon Nipper's advice, they were keeping as close together as possible.

The trees in this strange country were very much the same as English trees, but there was less undergrowth. The trunks were clean, and the ground under foot was almost devoid of grass. Overhead, the foliage spread in a complete pall, high above. It was gloomy in the wood—and still. Now and again a wild creature would scurry off, but the raiders were satisfied that there was no ambush. Their landing had been unobserved. Mistress Bessber's story was no trick, as some of the fellows had vaguely suspected at first.

"What's the idea of this slow, deliberate progress?" asked Handforth impatiently, as he pushed ahead of the little column. "You're leading, Nipper—why can't you run for it?"

Nipper was looking at his watch.

"Four minutes!" he murmured. "We've got another six before those rockets go off. I'm trying to time it exactly, you ass, so that we shall get within sight of the village at the critical moment. And I'm taking stock of these trees, too. We don't want to get lost on the return trip."

Handforth glanced round him.

"There's nothing to note here," he said. "All these trees are the same."

"That doesn't say much for your woodcraft, old man," said Nipper grimly. "As a Boy Scout, you ought to be more advanced than this. If you'll only look, you'll see a hundred different signs to memorise—not that it's really necessary, anyhow, because we're leaving our footprints pretty clearly in the soft ground."

They continued onwards, and Nipper was beginning to feel anxious when he saw that eight of the specified ten minutes had elapsed. They still seemed to be buried in the heart of the wood. One or two of the juniors were wondering if they had been going round in circles—quite an easy blunder to make in a wood. But Dick Hamilton, who was leading, was not likely to make such a mistake.

As he had said, the whole thing was a gamble.

They knew that the river flowed somewhere away to their right, and if Mistress Bessber had given correct directions, the village of Gernfrith should now be only a short distance ahead.

And then, just as they were beginning to have serious doubts, the trees suddenly thinned, and almost before they knew it, they emerged.

"Back!" murmured Nipper. "We mustn't let ourselves be seen yet."

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth.

"Houses! It must be the village—"

"Look!" muttered Church, pointing.

"They hung back, half hidden by the trees. And they found that they could gaze down into a small, shallow valley. Only four or five hundred yards away nestled a quiet village. It was planned in almost the same way as the Northestrian villages—the picturesque little houses straggling round a big market place. Almost every village had this same central square, and all these squares were spacious.

This particular one was thronged.

People were crowding round it on every side. There must have been hundreds present, and among the sombre colours of the peasants' garb gleamed the chainmail, here and there, of a soldier.

Nipper's eyes were eager as he took in the view.

"Can she have been right?" he murmured. "I can't count more than fifteen or sixteen soldiers—"

"Never mind the soldiers, dear old boy!" burst out Tregellis-West. "Look! In the centre of the square! Begad! Don't you see?"

"Yes," muttered Nipper.

There were long poles sticking upwards—stakes! And to each was fastened a figure, and the watchers could gain a glimpse, here and there, of faggots being piled up.

The rescuers had come none too soon!

The children were bound to the stakes already, and were being prepared for the burning!

As they watched, the St. Frank's fellows

felt their hearts rise into their throats, and they were one and all filled with a great and burning fury. It seemed incredible that such a ghastly massacre could be contemplated. But yet these people were living in the realms of the Middle Ages—and all the fellows knew that burning at the stake was practised in those days. And the Gothlanders were savages of the most atrocious type.

"Come on!" rasped out Handforth. "By George! I'll smash—"

"Wait!" urged Nipper. "Wait for the rockets!"

He looked at his watch—the ten minutes were up. Nipper vaguely wondered if those on the galley would do their part properly. He wondered if these Gothland peasants would misunderstand the raid. There were hundreds of the country people in this village, and it occurred to Nipper that these men might turn on them. He could not forget that they were Gothlanders.

All these people did not belong to the one village, but to many. Exactly as Mistress Bessber had said, they had been collected from all the surrounding hamlets, on purpose to witness this act of "justice." A deserter had been punished, and his children were to be burnt at the stake!

"What have they done, poor little beggars?" muttered Pitt. "Oh, the brutality of it! Even if their father had been to blame, it's—"

Boom!

"The rockets!" gasped Handforth.

"By Jove, yes!"

The explosion had sounded clearly, high in the air, a mile away. It was a sharp, echoing concussion, which, even at this distance, caused one's ears to tingle in the drums. And there was a sort of echoing sound with it, too, rolling like miniature thunder.

"Look!" said Church breathlessly.

There was a big stir in the market place. Faces were turned—a sea of faces. People were moving, and it was clear that the entire assembly had been startled by that unaccustomed sound. For here, in Gothland, they knew nothing of high explosives.

Boom! Boom!

Two more came—sharp and penetrating.

"Good man, Tommy!" murmured Nipper.

"That's the stuff to give 'em! Let's have the other three now, as soon as you like! Jove, they're having an effect, anyhow."

They were!

The movement in the market place had become a stampede. The soldiers, particularly, were hurrying off, and groups of them could be seen forcing their way into the streets.

"It's worked!" said Pitt. "Those soldiers are hurrying off to investigate the explosions. They probably think there's an attack, or something. When do we go, Nipper? Just say the word!"

Boom! Boom! Boom!

"Now!" said Nipper grimly.

"Hurrah!"

"St. Frank's to the rescue!"

"Come on, you chaps—make a dash for it!"

They needed no urging. Angered and indignant, they were only too ready to rush hotly into action. The other three explosions had come, and there could be no question that the six penetrating reports had carried far across the lake to the friendly shores of Northestria. The very distance of those reports would warn Nelson Lee that the need was urgent.

But just now the raiders had no time to think of Nelson Lee.

They were dashing into the fray. And, as they rushed towards the village, so the soldiers of Kassker rushed away. It was exactly as Nipper had desired. Everything seemed to be going with wonderful precision.

Panic had seized the peasants.

They were running in all directions, scattering through the streets madly, although there was no peril for them. Nipper rather wondered at this scare, for he had hardly expected such a result.

Perhaps the volcanoes sometimes went into violent eruption, and caused hot cinders to drop. If so, there might be an explanation of this panic. The villagers thought that those reports were caused by a neighbouring volcano, and they were now rushing for shelter.

Whatever the reason, Nipper was highly pleased.

Never for an instant did he forget that they were on enemy soil. They were here on an errand of mercy—to save five of the Gothland children. But, at the same time, it was more than possible that the people themselves would misunderstand.

"Don't waste time on anything!" yelled Nipper, as they approached. "Go straight for the kids, grab them, and bolt again!"

"Hear, hear!"

"None of your tricks, Handy!" gasped Church. "Don't start scrapping with anybody."

"Don't worry about me," grunted Handforth. "I know what I'm doing."

They were already in the outskirts of the village, still running hard, and quite breathless. They were meeting the first of the fleeing inhabitants, and they instinctively prepared themselves for fighting. But they were not interfered with. The people were so full of their own panic that they scarcely gave a second glance at the running schoolboys. And then, a minute later, the entire group burst into the market square.

About fifty or sixty people remained here, the majority of them too old to move quickly. They were all looking dazed. They stood watching these "pirates" in a sort of trance.

There were soldiers, too—two of them. Obviously, they had been left on guard, so that the victims of the stake would not be

released. Edward Oswald Handforth gave a wild bellow as he spotted them.

"You chaps go for the children!" he roared. "I'll do the scrapping!"

But Nipper wouldn't hear of it.

"All of us!" he panted. "We'll settle these fellows first!"

And, with one accord, they hurled themselves upon the startled units of Kassker's army. The two men were not even prepared for fighting, for they had expected no attack from any quarter.

Before they could even draw their swords, the crowd of juniors swept upon them.

Crash!

Handforth, of course, was well in the lead, and he got home a beautiful uppercut in the first rush. Nipper, at the same time, was taking on the other soldier, helped by half a dozen others.

The battle was swift and sure.

Both the Gothlanders were burly brutes—powerful, muscular men of the type that the juniors had previously seen. But they stood no chance against such an onslaught.

Crash! Biff! Thud!

Howling and cursing, the soldiers simply vanished beneath the pile of infuriated juniors. These accursed brutes were participating in the terrible torture, and they deserved nothing but death. But as the members of the St. Frank's Remove were not in the habit of killing people, those Gothlander soldiers were lucky.

They suffered nothing worse than a score of ugly bruises. They were flung to the ground, their wrists were bound behind them, and their ankles were tied together. Then they were left.

Nipper, breathing hard, looked round.

"Good egg!" he murmured. "The coast's clear!"



CHAPTER 8.

GREAT NEWS!

HANDFORTH glared round aggressively.

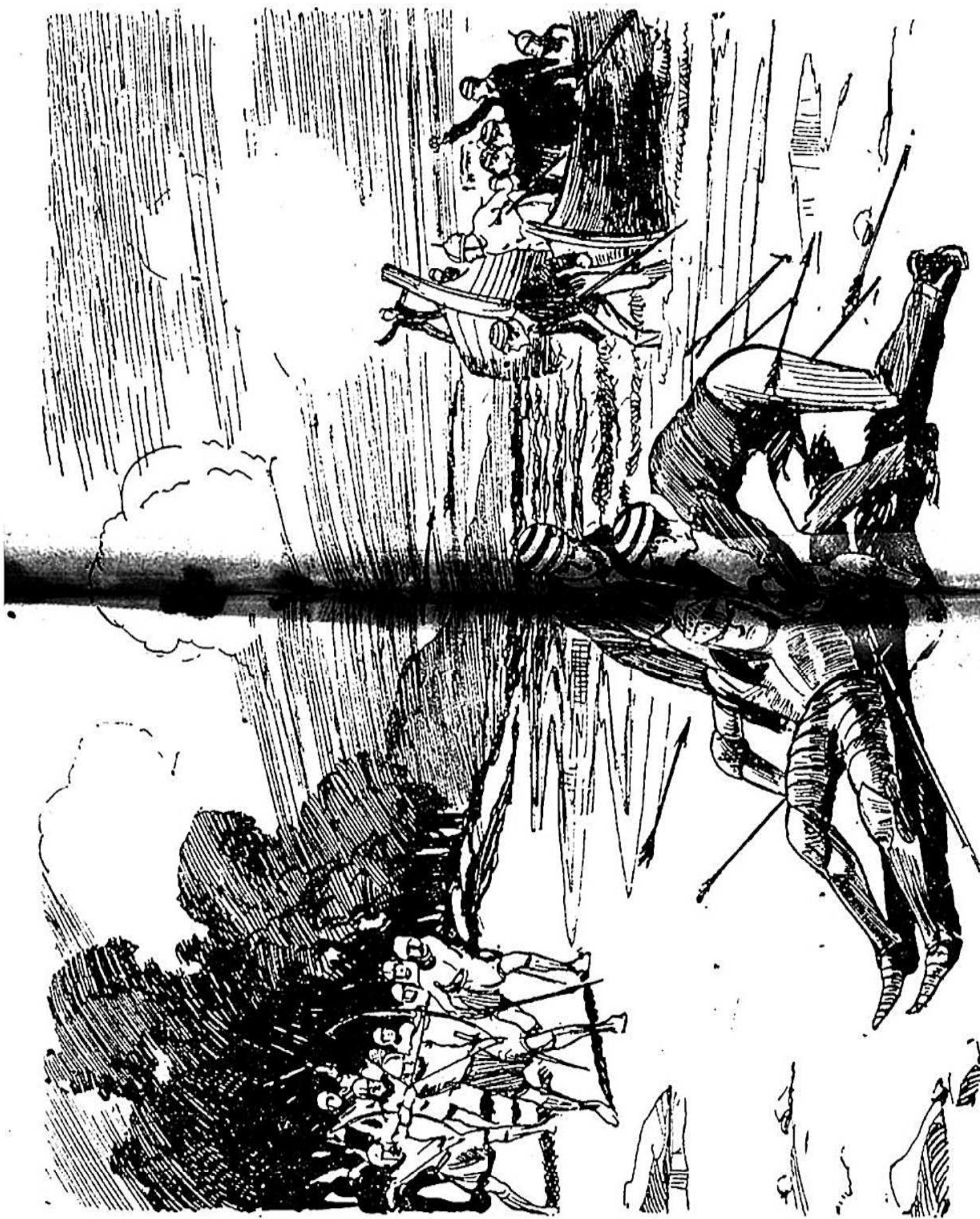
"Any more?" he thundered. "Where are the rest of the rotters? It's a swindle! Mrs. Bessber said there were twenty soldiers, and we've only found two!"

"Quite enough!" rapped out Nipper. "Now for the children!"

They were within a few yards of the stakes.

The poor youngsters were nearly crazed with fright, and it was quite clear that the rescue had only come in the nick of time. The faggots were all in place, and the juniors were quite convinced that had they come ten minutes afterwards, they would have been too late.

It was pitiful. Two of the children were mere babies—not more than two or three. The others ranged upwards, the eldest being perhaps seven. They were all timid children,



Without uttering a sound, Handforth collapsed in a heap, the flight of arrows hissing all about him. Church and McClure immediately rushed to their leader's assistance, as a squad of enemy soldiers suddenly appeared from the trees. There was now no time for Handy & Co. to get back to the boat!

however. To burn them at the stake in this fashion was not merely an outrageous crime, but an offence against humanity. Once again the St. Frank's juniors boiled with utter rage.

"Poor little beggars!" panted Nipper, as he cut one of them free. "It's all right, kiddie—you're safe now."

But the child in his grasp was screaming with fresh fright, for the poor, half-demented mite probably thought that it was only being taken to some other torture. All the youngsters were in the last stage of terror.

Happily, the rescuers were not interfered with.

Numbers of the villagers were looking on. Women had returned by the score, and for a moment Nipper had feared that they were about to snatch the children away. And this, of course, would have been fatal for them, since the soldiers would only have reclaimed them, and continued the interrupted orgy after the raiders had gone.

But perhaps these unhappy people had an inkling of the truth. The soldiers had been attacked and beaten, and that was surely a welcome sight to these oppressed peasants. It was an indication also that these strangers were not ill-disposed towards the children.

"We've got them!" shouted Handforth triumphantly, as he hugged one of the mites to his chest. "Everybody else ready?"

"Yes!"

"Good! Then let's make a move!"

"Hurrah!"

"Back to the galley!"

From first to last, the raid had not occupied more than four minutes, and it was this very speed, in fact, which had ensured the success. The idea was to rush back to the galley, and get well out upon the lake before there could be any intervention.

Then for Northestria!

Over there, the Gothlander woman and her children would be safe. Nelson Lee would make certain of that, even if the Northestrians were disposed to treat the enemy family otherwise. But this was hardly likely, for the subjects of Princess Mercia were gentle, kindly people.

But the raiders hadn't escaped yet!

And while they were in the thick of all this, fraught with perils on all sides, there was a little breath of excitement miles away, on the Northestrian coast.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, in fact, were on the beach, near Dunstane, the capital. They were superintending the manufacture of some great floats.

And there were signs of feverish activity. For Northestria, since Nelson Lee had taken command, was a changed country. From end to end, the people were awakened, and were training as soldiers.

"I've got an idea that these new destroyers will be somethin' special," Dorrie was remarking, with a grin. "Rather a pity to dismantle the old tanks, though—they did well in that first attack."

"I know they did, Dorrie," agreed Nelson



Without uttering a sound, Handforth collapsed and McClure immediately rushed to their leader from the trees. There was now

Lee. "But I think they'll be much more effective on the water. We want to keep the enemy out—we want to prevent them from ever setting foot on this soil. So the tanks will have to be sacrificed."

They were looking upon two unwieldy monsters which stood upon the beach. Each was provided with enormous wheels, and the bodies could be recognised easily enough. They were the main engine gondolas of the wrecked airship.

Having served their time as tanks, they were now, apparently, to be converted into water craft. The designs were Nelson Lee's, and the huge floats were already under construction. A great army of joiners and carpenters were at work.

"Any news from the boys to-day, sir?" asked one of the airship engineers, as he passed by.

"No, but we shall probably hear some-



light of arrows hissing all about him. Church's squad of enemy soldiers suddenly appeared & Co. to get back to the boat!

thing later," replied Nelson Lee. "I'm not worried about them. They're well out of mischief on that galley—playing at pirates." Out of mischief!

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," grinned Lord Dorrimore, who knew them. "I'd back those youngsters anywhere, old man. If they haven't managed to find some excitement, you can call me a Solomon Islander!"

But Nelson Lee smilingly shook his head. "There's nothing to be afraid of in mid-lake," he replied. "The boys are well out of trouble, and——"

"Ye gods—here comes Sparks! An' he looks excited!" interrupted Lord Dorrimore, as another figure came hurrying up.

The newcomer was the airship's wireless operator, and he was bursting with his news.

"I am receiving signals, sir!" he panted. "Definite signals?" asked Lee quietly, although his heart was thumping.

"Not yet, sir—but they're getting stronger," replied Sparks. "Several words have come through pretty clearly, but no actual message. I believe our transmission is being picked up all right, but we can't seem to get into direct communication with anybody. But I'm hopeful——"

"I'll come along and have a look at this for myself," said Lee. "If only we can establish communication with the outer world, we shall be in luck. We shan't feel so utterly isolated."

There was more in this than Nelson Lee cared to say. Ever since landing in this oasis, the non-working of the wireless apparatus had been one of Lee's chief worries. Lord Dorrimore was a philosophical individual, and he never worried over anything. Yet, nominally, he was in charge of the whole party, and responsible for its safety. Actually, it was Lee who took the responsibility on his shoulders.

One of his greatest anxieties was to get in touch with home, so that he could tell the parents of all the boys and girls that they were safe and well. He could easily imagine the consternation that had been caused by the airship's disappearance into the Arctic zone. In all probability, the entire ship's company had been mourned long since, and were still being mourned.

What joyous news, if only word could be got through! But wireless signals seemed to be difficult here. Perhaps the volcanic surroundings were responsible, coupled with the continuous storms which raged all round the oasis? Whatever the reason, no definite communication had been established.

So Lee was naturally anxious, now that there was a chance.

"Yes, I'll come with you, Sparks," he repeated. "You'd better stay here, Dorrie, and keep your eye on——"

"Nothin' doin'," interrupted his lordship indignantly. "Of all the infernal nerve! Don't you think I'm interested in——"

"Upon my soul!" interrupted Lee. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Didn't you hear something?"

"Nothin' in particular——"

"A kind of vague report, sir," said the wireless operator. "It seemed to come from over——"

"Listen!" snapped Nelson Lee.

He was staring out across the lake, and he frowned angrily as a number of the carpenters set up a clattering noise near by. But, in spite of this din, a distinct, far-away report sounded.

"Gad!" muttered Dorrie. "I heard it that time."

Nelson Lee pointed.

"Look over there!" he said. "If that's not a smoke signal, I've never seen one!"

"But it can't be!" protested Lord Dorrimore. "You mean that little puff, low down, near the edge of the lake? There's another one now——"

"And here's the report," said Lee, after an appreciable spell.

"But those smoke signals are terrifically powerful things; they explode nearly a thousand feet in the air," said his lordship. "These are low down——"

"Proof positive that they are being fired at a great distance, pretty nearly on the Gothland shore, I should think," interrupted Nelson Lee. "If it wasn't for this clear atmosphere, and the absence of wind, we should neither hear nor see them."

"The boys!" said Dorrie.

"Of course; who else?" replied Lee, frowning. "They're in trouble."

"Good glory! I knew it! Didn't I say so?"

"But how?" said the famous detective. "I gave them strict instructions——"

"My poor, deluded creature!" broke in Dorrie. "Haven't you learned that it's of no earthly use to give instructions to those high-spirited young animals? An' Nipper's no exception, either, let me tell you. You've got an awful amount of faith in that youngster, but if there's any excitement or adventure in the wind, he smells it like a bally retriever!"

Nelson Lee slowly shook his head.

"I'll admit that Nipper is as ready for adventure as any healthy youngster ought to be, but he wouldn't get into trouble with that galley unless there was something very exceptional in the wind. It's the pre-arranged signal, Dorrie. Don't you understand? I don't suppose the boys are in danger, but it means that something important has happened."

"By the Lord Harry!" said Lord Dorrimore, staring. "You mean, the beginnin' of another invasion?"

"Doesn't it look like it?"

"By the beard of St. Attalus, it does!" said his lordship, with a happy smile. "Rather a pity we couldn't get these gondolas fitted up in time——"

"Never mind them now; we'll shoot out at once," said Nelson Lee. "The motor-boat's all ready—engine tuned, petrol tanks full. We'll be across in forty minutes or less."

"Why not go by 'plane?"

"Because she isn't fitted with floats, for one thing; and besides, we may have to stop in the lake," said Lee briskly. "Coming, Dorrie? We can leave the wireless until afterwards, Sparks; I've got to attend to this other affair at once."

"Shall I sound any warnings, sir?" asked the young wireless officer.

"Not yet. I want to verify the meaning of these signals," replied Lee. "Say nothing, Sparks; just carry on as usual. I don't think

anybody else has noticed those reports. Lord Dorrimore and I will hurry out."

They went down to the motor-boat, which was moored just off the beach, near at hand, and none of the Northeistriens took much notice of them as they set out. The natives had grown accustomed to these things by now.

"Don't look so serious, man," said Dorrie, as they purred out across the lake. "I don't suppose it's anythin' particularly grave."

"Well, I believe it is," replied Lee. "Nipper gave me his word that he wouldn't fire those rockets unless the emergency was genuine. And they must have been let off extraordinarily near the enemy coast. That's what I don't like."

"By the ribs of Offa, you're right!" nodded Dorrie. "It's certainly a bit significant. Notice how I'm catchin' these picturesque native expressions?"

Lee grunted.

"I notice that you're still as irresponsible as a child, if that's what you mean," he replied. "Upon my word, Dorrie, when will you learn to treat life seriously?"

"Never!" said his lordship promptly. "Why should I? For one thing, life isn't serious, and for another thing, I'm too old to change my habits now."

"Old!" growled Lee. "You're just about fourteen!"

Dorrie chuckled, and went forward upon this trip with a perfectly light heart.



CHAPTER 9.

THE AMBUSH.

EGGIE PITT'S face was glowing with triumph.

"We've done it!" he panted victoriously. "I don't know how the

dickens we did it, but we've got clean away."

"And the rest is easy," said De Valerie. "Just through this wood, and then we can be on board in no time——"

"Yes, but we aren't out of the wood yet!" remarked Church.

"Is that supposed to be witty?" demanded Handforth, with a glare. "The only thing I'm wild about is that we left too soon. We ought to have waited until those other soldiers came back, so that we could have a good smack at 'em!"

"Some chaps are never satisfied," said Nipper. "Let's all be pleased that we're safe and sound. And Church is right, too—we're not out of the wood, by any means. I shan't be comfortable until we're out on the lake."

The raiders had successfully got out of the village, with its crowds of startled, half-paralysed inhabitants. Those unfortunate people had been altogether too bewildered to even question the schoolboy party. They

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had seen the children being carried off, but nobody had interfered.

From their dazed manner, the boys had easily read the truth. All these peasants were terrified by the fear of Kassker's soldiers. Their wits were dulled by that tragedy which had been so narrowly averted.

As for the soldiers, none of the others had been seen; just those two who had been left on guard, but no more. Handforth was quite confident that the main body had fled, and he was fairly disgusted. He was still anxious to try conclusions with the brutes.

Nipper was not so optimistic.

There wasn't a fellow in the Remove who was more confident than Dick Hamilton, but he never made the mistake of counting his chickens before they were hatched. And although everything looked so smooth now, he was prepared for the worst.

Not a moment was lost.

The juniors were hurrying through the wood at the double, five of them carrying the still sobbing children. It would be days, perhaps weeks, before those unhappy youngsters got over their terrible fright. Possibly their nerves would be affected for life. But, at least, they were saved.

There was no difficulty in following the trail. Nipper led the way, and he made sure that Handforth kept comparatively near to him. Handforth was Nipper's chief anxiety, for the leader of Study D, at the slightest provocation, would dash off on his own, searching for somebody to fight!

But he seemed safe now, for the edge of the wood was at hand.

They broke out upon the open beach, and Nipper took a swift glance to right and left. He breathed a sigh of relief. Not a soul! The long beach was empty, and there was the boat, waiting. A hundred yards out lay the great galley, and a frantic figure was waving on it, to be instantly joined by two other frantic figures.

"Hurrah!" yelled the crowd. "We're safe!"

"We've done it!" grinned Handforth. "Didn't I say we should? It's been so jolly tame that I think we ought to go back—"

"Collar him, somebody!" growled Pitt. "Let's be thankful that we've got through unharmed. By Jove, doesn't it make you feel good to see the old galley? We'll soon be on board now, and then we can snap our fingers at Mr. Kassker and his cut-throats."

They were all exuberant.

The thing seemed too good to be true. Not only had they landed on enemy soil, but they had penetrated inland, and would soon be restoring those five frightened little children to their bereaved mother. It was a thought which made all the fellows happy.

Tommy Watson was dancing madly on the deck of the galley, and he was waving his arms so strenuously that he seemed to have gone off his mind. Nipper rather wondered, for it wasn't like Tommy to be so demonstrative. But perhaps, under the circum-

stances, his usual stolidity had deserted him.

And then the reason for Watson's behaviour became clear.

Without warning, something came hissing through the air, past Nipper's head. It struck the ground close against the water's edge.

"An arrow!"

"Quick!" roared Nipper. "An ambush! They've been waiting for us, and the brutes are afraid to come out into the open!"

"All aboard!" yelled Buster Boots.

Tommy Watson, out on the galley, had ceased his gymnastics, for he could now see that it was too late. He had only seen the danger a few moments earlier—just before the juniors had appeared.

A lurking figure or two among the trees had first attracted his attention. He had caught the gleam of uniforms. And then, almost at the same minute, the St. Frank's fellows had burst into view, apparently unconscious of the danger. Small wonder that Watson had made such frantic signals! And the juniors had mistaken them for gesticulations of welcome!

Hiss! Hiss!

Arrows were now coming across the beach in ever-increasing numbers. By great good fortune, the majority of the fellows were near the boat, and they piled in, the five little children being placed in safety first. At any moment the juniors expected to receive a deadly wound.

But perhaps those arrows were dispatched hastily, for most of them fell either short or wide.

"For goodness' sake, buck up!" panted Nipper.

"You rotters!" roared Handforth, turning and shaking his fist at the invisible foe. "Why can't you come out in the open, and fight like men?"

An arrow fell almost at his feet, and he seized it and hurled it back. That little movement of his was to mean such a lot, too. For the brief action delayed him. Only a moment, but during that time the others had got into the boats, and were ready to push off. Even now the danger was acute. This adventure was not to end so easily, after all.

"Come on, Handy!" gasped Church, in an agony.

"Buck up, you ass!"

"With one accord Church and McClure left the boat—in order to drag Handforth up by sheer force. The leader of Study D was glaring defiance in the trees. He turned contemptuously.

"Think I'm afraid of 'em?" he asked with a snort.

And at the very same second a veritable flight of arrows swept across the beach. How they missed Church and McClure, the two juniors never knew. Edward Oswald Handforth fell. Without a sound his knees crumpled under him, and he collapsed in a limp heap.

"Oh!" sobbed Church. "He's hit!"
There was no doubt on the point. The unfortunate Edward Oswald was put out of action, and the dramatic suddenness of his collapse struck his chums with the force of a blow. It had seemed uncanny. Handforth simply fell prone, although nothing had seemed to hit him.

"Quick!" yelled Church. "Help me, Mac!"

They rushed to Handforth's side and bent over him.

Nipper and the others were on the point of getting out of the boat to help, too, but Nipper shouted out a warning. For he had seen something which the others missed. Nearly a score of soldiers were bursting out from the trees. And even before the first Removite could leave the boat, Handforth & Co. were surrounded.

"Heaven help them!" muttered Nipper huskily.

"They'll be killed!" panted Pitt. "Can't we—"

He broke off, expecting to see the unfortunate trio hacked to pieces by those brutal soldiers. For these men of Kassker's were not only armed with swords, but they carried wicked-looking pikes—weapons which resembled spears, with arrowheads as sharp as a razor-blade.

"Come on—rescue!" yelled Boots desperately.

And even Nipper was prepared to risk

everything in an attempt to save the lives of the trio who had been cut off. But it was not to be. Over half the men had seized Handforth & Co., and were rushing them into the wood. The other soldiers were turning towards the boat, and they were fixing arrows into their bows.

Nipper realised in a flash that it would be suicide to face this peril. They had no means of retaliation, and to charge against these arrows would be fatal. Nothing on earth could save all of them from death. Even as it was, their chance of escape seemed remote.

"We can't do it!" shouted Nipper hoarsely. "Row, you chaps—row!"

And they all knew the truth. In order to save their own lives, they must go—and abandon Handforth & Co. to the enemy!

What else was there for it?

How could they aid the unhappy three by getting themselves all killed? Besides, there wasn't a fellow there who didn't fear that the chums of Study D were already lifeless. Why should these savages spare them?"

The arrows hissed round the boat in a deadly shower.

Thud! Splash! Thud!

Many of those deadly shafts entered the water, but others buried themselves in the woodwork of the boat. There was one merciful feature in favour of the juniors. The boat was a clumsy, curiously-built affair. The sides were unusually high, the oars projecting

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through holes, and not resting upon rowlocks, as in the usual type of boat.

"Down—down for you lives!" exclaimed Nipper.

And as they wielded the oars, they crouched low, offering very little target to the archers. One arrow struck Pitt on the shoulder, inflicting a painful cut. Christine was hit in the arm, and two other juniors had narrow escapes.

But the tension was soon over.

The boat rapidly drew away, and got out of effective range. The Gothlanders went right to the water's edge, sending their arrows skimming over the water. None of the fellows could quite understand why the soldiers had not attacked bodily in the first place, with their pikes and swords. But the explanation, after all, was probably simple enough.

The soldiers had noted that these "pirates" were themselves armed with swords, and they had no relish to take any risks. They assumed that the arrows would have the necessary effect. The brutes had never dreamed for a moment that their victims could escape.

This was fairly obvious now, for the enemy stood at the water's edge, furious and chagrined. It amazed them to see the boat still under control, with all its occupants alive.

And thus the galley was reached.

But what a sorry end to the great adventure! Those five Gothlander children had been saved. But what was the cost? In order to rescue five enemy children, three of the British boys had been lost. It was too tragic to be realised during those first tense moments.

On the beach the Gothlanders were retiring. They went back into the wood, and within another minute there was no sign that the peace of this spot had ever been disturbed. And what of Handforth & Co.? Where were they? Alive, or dead? None of the others could answer these questions.

Tommy Watson was leaning over the galley's side as the boat came up.

"I tried to warn you!" he shouted. "Oh, I tried to give you the tip! Thank Heaven you've got here!"

"Odds tragedies and horrors!" said Archie Glenthorne. "But where's Handforth? I don't see the dear old lad——"

"They got him!" groaned Nipper.

"Good gad!"

"Church and McClure, too!" shouted one of the others. "Handy was hit—killed, I think, and his chums, like bricks, went to his help. And they were all swooped on by those devils!"

"It was all Handy's fault!" said Christine chokingly. "He would stop behind and shake his fist. If he had only come with all the rest of us——"

"It's no good saying that now, old man," broke in Nipper. "Handy might have been hit just the same—we can't tell. But I'm afraid there's no hope now. What a terrible

end, just when we had been congratulating ourselves, too."

"And poor old Church said that we weren't out of the wood!" muttered De Valeric. "The chap must have had a presentiment."

They got back on board the galley listlessly, with their hearts as heavy as lead. Of hope they had none. Their joy at rescuing the children had turned to gall. Why had they ever gone on that mad exploit? And yet they couldn't justify this attitude. For their mission had been successful. And, after all, they had covered themselves with glory. Those helpless little children had been saved from death by burning at the stake. And Handforth & Co., it seemed, had sacrificed their lives in the noble adventure.



CHAPTER 10.

A FORLORN HOPE.

"Y children—my little ones!"

The mother's joy was good to see, and afforded some slight compensation for the tragedy. Poor

Mistress Bessber had come on deck now, probably aroused by the commotion, but it was far more likely that she had heard the voice of one of her mites.

And there she crouched on the deck, with the children nearly smothering her. They, poor little innocents, only knew that they had their mother back. Perhaps they had seen her cast away on that raft, and had thought her dead. The scene, indeed, was affecting.

Nipper bent over the woman.

"We'll take you to Northestria," he said quietly. "One of the other cabins is being prepared for you, and——"

"I know not what to say, fair youth!" sobbed the woman, looking up with shining eyes. "Thou hast restored my children to me! How can I ever thank thee? My heart is full——"

"That's all right," growled Nipper, trying to swallow a lump in his throat. "We tricked the soldiers, and saved your little ones just in time. You can't land on your own soil again, but must go with us to Northestria."

For a moment she looked alarmed.

"Is't safe?" she asked tremulously.

"I'll swear that you will be well cared for."

"I believe thee," she murmured. "For hast thou not done this for me? In Northestria they are gentle people. Do I not know this? My own grandfather did serve his Northestrian masters, and was ever treated well. There, in that land, I may be happy."

Nobody told her that three of the rescuers had failed to return.

Why should they mar any of her joy by such a disclosure? And so she was taken to

one of the cabins on the other end of the galley, her children with her. And she heard nothing of the doleful talk that went on among the miserable and horror-stricken schoolboys.

The galley scarcely moved, for even Nipper did not know what to do. There was no danger now, for there were no Gothlander boats within miles. The fellows could only stand on deck, staring helplessly at the shore.

"Well, we can't keep on like this," said Nipper, at length. "I'd better have a look at your shoulder, Reggie, old man. And you're hit in the arm, aren't you, Bob?"

"Never mind about my shoulder," muttered Pitt. "What does it matter?"

"My arm's only scratched," added Christine. "What about Handy? That's the terrible——"

"It won't do any good to talk about the poor chaps," said Nipper. "They've gone. And by this time I expect they'll be dead. I believe they were killed before we even left the beach."

The others were silent, for they had the same thoughts.

They still stood there gazing at the beach. Perhaps they half expected to see the remains of Handforth & Co. flung out of the woods, mutilated and crushed. To imagine that their lives had been spared was impossible. They knew from past experience that these Gothlander soldiers were worse than savago cannibals. They shed blood for the sheer love of it, and it was well known that Kassker the Grim had set a price on the heads of these British boys.

This thought gave Pitt a momentary flash of hope.

"I say!" he burst out. "Hasn't Kassker offered big rewards for our capture?"

"So we've heard," said Nipper.

"Then—then perhaps they've kept those chaps alive," said Reggie. "Don't you see? They'll get the reward if they can hand them over to Kassker!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Odds hopes and visions!" exclaimed Archie. "A brainy idea, laddie! Perhaps the dear old cucumbers are still in the land of the living, what? Perhaps the old tissues are still throbbing with chunks of vitality! I mean, if only we can discover——"

"Don't, Archie!" interrupted Nipper. "And you other fellows, too. It's no good raising your hopes like that."

"But Kassker's put a price on our heads!" insisted Pitt.

"Dead or alive!" said Nipper quietly.

They stared at him for a moment, and then groaned.

"What a fool!" said Reggie Pitt. "Why hadn't I enough sense to see that at first? They'll get the same price, won't they? And they'll never deliver their victims alive, if they've got a chance of murdering them first. Poor old Handy! And Church and McClure, too. Three of the best!"

Watson nodded miserably.

"We were always chipping Handy, and always ragging him," he said. "But there wasn't a better chap breathing."

There was one junior there who had scarcely said a word from the very beginning. But now he came across from the other side of the deck, where he had been left alone with his grief.

And that junior, of course, was Willy.

"I don't believe it, you chaps," he said quietly. "Ted's alive."

"It's no good, Willy——"

"I tell you, he's alive!" insisted Willy stoutly. "I think we ought to go ashore again. Are you chaps game? It's my brother, you know—and his chums. I can't go away from this spot until I know for certain. I believe Ted's alive! I don't know why, but it's too awful to think——"

"Poor old Willy!" murmured Nipper, gripping his arm. "It's a bigger blow to you than to anybody, and yet you're keeping a stiff upper lip. You're a plucked 'un, old son. We'll go ashore if you want us to, but I don't think it'll be any good. We shall be too late. It was too late a minute after your brother fell."

Willy's reserve broke down.

"I don't believe it!" he burst out passionately. "How do we know for certain? Ted may have been only winged! Perhaps they've taken him prisoner——"

"I've been trying to hope the same thing myself, but there's no earthly reason why they should take him prisoner," said Nipper gently. "Poor old Willy, I'd like to give you a shadow of hope, but——"

And then came a welcome interruption.

"The motor-boat!" shouted somebody.

"The gov'nor!" said Nipper, turning. "Oh, my hat!"

He was both relieved and worried. What could he say to Nelson Lee? He had been in command, and he had permitted this affair. It was his fault that Handforth & Co. were now dead. But Nipper set his teeth, and resolved to tell the full story. He was ready to face the music.

The other juniors were glad of the excuse to leave Willy, for the youngster's emotion was difficult to see. He was left alone again, standing there against the clumsy bulwark of the galley, gazing across to the shore.

The others gave their attention to the lake. The motor-boat was still a mile distant, but speeding up with remarkable rapidity. In next to no time she seemed to swing alongside, leaving a great wake of foam in her rear.

A minute later, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrmore were on board.

They could tell at the first glance that something tragic had happened. Seldom had they seen these happy-go-lucky juniors looking so pale and haggard. On every hand there were the same horrified expressions.

"What has happened, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee quietly. "Why did you send up those signal rockets?"



Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore came dashing up, taking Redwald completely by surprise. "Kill them!" shouted the Gothlander officer. But these were his last words, for, at that moment, Dorrie's revolver spurted flame. Redwald staggered back and crashed to the ground.

"Handforth and his chums are dead, sir," said Nipper.

"Great gad!" muttered Lord Dorrimore. For two seconds Nelson Lee said nothing, but his lips were compressed.

"Dead?" he repeated at length.

"We fear so, guv'nor."

"You fear so?" interrupted Lee sharply. "Then you don't know?"

"It's almost a certainty——"

"Almost! Quickly, Nipper—tell me!" rapped out Lee. "You are here, within a hundred yards of the Gothland coast, in defiance of my strict orders. I take it that something very exceptional impelled you to disregard——"

"Don't blame Nipper, sir!" interrupted Pitt. "We were all in it."

"I'll tell you exactly what happened, sir," said Dick.

He told the simple story—how they had first seen the raft—how they had saved the unfortunate woman from death. Every detail of the events were told in as few words as possible.

"Under the circumstances, guv'nor, I thought we were justified in doing the thing," concluded Nipper. "There were no

enemy ships here, and there was no time to get you here. Even as it was, we only rescued the poor mites at the last minute."

Nelson Lee patted him on the shoulder.

"Of course you did right, Nipper," he said quietly. "I am proud of you all for this exploit. At the risk of your own lives, you entered the enemy country to save those children from the stake."

"Gad, it was noble!" exclaimed Dorrie. "But what an infernal shame that those poor chaps should have been lost! So near to victory, too! Isn't it often the case, Lee? Everthin' all right until the last minute—an' then dashed tragedy! Life's a queer thing! I knew a poor chap who went all through the war without a scratch, an' one minute before the soundin' of the armistice he was killed! By glory, these sort of things make you think!"

But Nelson Lee was scarcely listening.

"You tell me that you all escaped, after being showered with arrows?" he said. "How many soldiers were there?"

"Not more than fifteen or sixteen, sir," said Nipper. "But what could we do against them?"

"Nothing," said Lee. "It would have

been sheer suicide to remain on the beach. You did quite right to escape. This tragedy might have been appalling, indeed, if you had given way to any quixotic impulse to help those unfortunate boys. But tell me. You saw them surrounded?"

"Yes, sir."

"Handforth fell first, and Church and McClure rushed up to him?"

"That's what happened, sir——"

"Do you know where Handforth was hit?"

"I can't be sure, but I believe an arrow struck him on the head, and glanced off," replied Nipper. "But perhaps he was killed outright——"

"It's far more likely that he was only stunned," interrupted Lee. "Church and McClure did not actually fall in your sight? They were just surrounded by these enemy soldiers?"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"And then the three of them were whisked off and carried into the wood?"

"Yes—we all saw them taken, sir," put in Reggie Pitt.

Nelson Lee slammed his fist into his other palm.

"They're alive!" he said, with untold conviction.

"Alive?" yelled the juniors.

"Of course they're alive," put in Willy, pushing forward. "Didn't I say so all along?"

"You're a wonderful chap, Willy, and I admire you," said Lee quietly. "We'll do everything we possibly can to save your brother——"

"Hold on—hold on!" begged Lord Dorri-more. "I may be as dense as a Dutch cheese, but I'm hanged if I can see what you're drivin' at, Lee. Why are you so sure?"

"To my mind, the thing is absolutely obvious," replied Nelson Lee. "If those soldiers had intended to kill the boys, they would have done so on the spot. They had pikes, hadn't they? Why didn't they drive them home, then and there? Why didn't they cut the poor youngsters to ribbons?"

"I don't quite see——"

"And we know that the boys were carried into the wood," continued Lee tensely.

"That's another item of proof. They were taken alive, Dorrie—and with a purpose. There's not a moment to be lost."

Nipper suddenly gave a jump.

"Guv'nor!" he gasped. "You—you don't mean——"

"What else is there to think?" asked Lee.

"When you two have finished these secret chats, perhaps you'll explain?" asked Dorrie gruffly. "Hang it, I'm not a thought-reader——"

"Those boys were taken away alive, and with a purpose, Dorrie."

"Yes, you said that before——"

"The Gothlander soldiers saw their five victims being taken away from them," went on Lee significantly. "They seized three

other victims in place of them. As I first said, it seems obvious."

"Great glory!" shouted Dorrie. "You mean they're goin' to be burnt at the stake?"

"I mean that we've got to get into that motor-boat, and make a dash up the river as fast as we can go," said Lee curtly. "Thank heaven, the village is near—we can get there within ten minutes. And the boys were captured less than an hour ago. I don't suppose those brutes will delay, but there's still a chance."

"Good man!" roared Dorrie. "I'm on!"

"Burnt at the stake!" panted Reggie Pitt, horrified. "Why couldn't we have thought of that before? Of course! They lost the five children, and so they grabbed Handforth & Co.!"

"That's why they didn't kill them on the beach!" said Tommy Watson. "They wanted them alive, so that they could watch them——" He broke off. "Oh, I can't bear to think of it!" he added, with a shiver.

Lee and Dorrie made a swift move for the side.

"I'm coming, sir," said Willy Handforth steadily.

"My dear boy——"

"I'm coming, sir!" repeated Willy. "You needn't try to put me off, because I mean it! Please, sir!" he added huskily.

"Get down into the boat!" said Lee, nodding.

"And I, sir?" asked Nipper. "The boat can hold half a dozen of us——"

Dorrie came to the rescue.

"We'd better have them—it may be a tight thing!" he said. "There's no time for pickin' an' choosin', though. Nipper—Pitt—Fullwood—Christine! What do you say, Lee?"

"All right," replied Nelson Lee. "Perhaps you'll come in useful—and I haven't the heart to refuse you. The rest of you must stay on board—and your oarsmen will make straight for Northestria at full speed."

"And you, sir?" asked Watson huskily.

"We'll follow as quickly as we can, and you may be sure that we'll not linger," replied Lee, as he climbed overside.



CHAPTER 11.

HANDFORTH & CO.'S FATE!

Y my bones! A goodly trio, I'll swear!"

The Gothlander officer was gloating openly as he surveyed the three figures, which were prostrate at his feet. Round him stood his men—ugly, coarse-looking ruffians of Kassker's army.

"'Twas a good capture, Redwald," said one of the men, with a laugh. "Though 'tis a pity we failed to kill the other young curs."

"No matter—we'll make these suffer," said the officer. "'Tis a rich haul—for good

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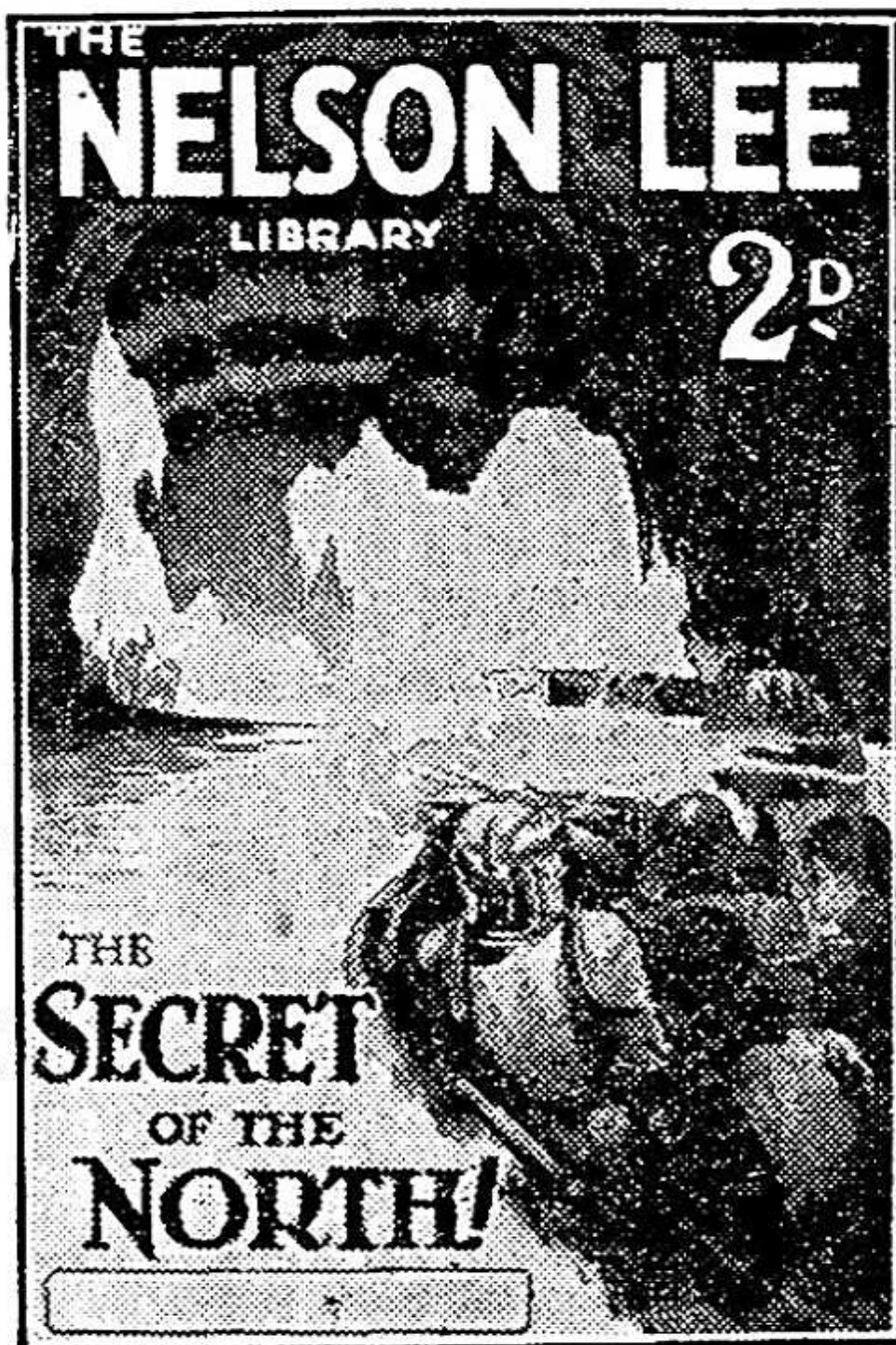
Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Handy and the rest of the St. Frank's party engage in a great sea fight, and it is after that that the astonishing secret of the North is revealed.

You'll find fun and thrills and real excitement in next week's rousing long story.

Don't fail to read the concluding chapters of

"SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!"

The announcement of another great serial will be made next Wednesday.



Here is a small reproduction of next week's fine cover. Look out for it on the bookstalls.

ORDER IN ADVANCE!

Kassker hath promised much reward for their heads."

The soldiers were within the wood, and their victims were scarcely in a position to put up any fight. For the three juniors were cruelly bound, and could scarcely move an inch.

They were very much alive.

Church and McClure were not even scratched. They had come out of the fight unharmed, for they had been seized before they could even ascertain the extent of their leader's injuries.

Handforth was only just recovering.

As Nipper had suspected, an arrow had hit him on the side of the head, glancing off. A nasty cut had been inflicted, and for the time being, Handforth had been stunned. The blow had felled him as though he had dropped dead.

His chums had been terribly scared at first, for they had thought Handforth a corpse. The wound had bled profusely, and the unfortunate Handforth presented an ugly spectacle. But, as a matter of fact, he was very little hurt. Once the effects of

that stunning blow wore off, he became himself. But for a blinding headache and a feeling that he was weakened, he had no ill-effects. His spirit was as strong as ever, and now that full consciousness had returned to him, the glare that he bestowed upon the enemy was as powerful as his best. And Handforth's glares could be very baleful.

"You think you're clever, don't you?" he shouted. "But you'd better go easy! Those other fellows'll come along, and——"

"Silence, brat!" interrupted Redwald. "A murrain take thee! I'faith, thou hast a ready tongue for one who stares into the face of death! 'Twould be better if thou didst prepare thyself for the torture which awaits thee."

"What are you going to do—behead us?" asked Handforth contemptuously. "That's just about your mark——"

"Nay, fool!" snarled Redwald. "The stake! That is thy fate—ay, and the fate of thy companions, too! By my soul, 'twas a good deed, perchance, to take the children,

but thou wilt suffer in their stead, so what matters?"

All the soldiers shouted with laughter.

"We're going to be burnt at the stake!" muttered Church. "We rescued those poor kids, and now we're going to be put in their places! Oh, crumbs! It's—it's too awful—"

"Don't you believe it," growled Handforth. "We'll get out of this somehow. Just leave it to me—I'll see you through."

He looked at them rather mistily.

"After all, you came back to save me, didn't you?" he muttered. "Good old Mac! Good old Churchy! You're not going to be sacrificed like this if I can help it!"

They said nothing, for Redwald's threat had horrified them.

"We will see how ye like the licking tongues of flame," jeered the officer. "I'll take a good care that the faggots are placed wide, and then the torture will be prolonged. 'Twill be a rare spectacle, i'faith! And Kassker will pay much gold for your heads!"

Handforth laughed.

"You can't fool me with that bluff!" he retorted. "If Kassker's going to pay a lot of money for our heads, how are you going to burn us at the stake? I've caught you, you rotter!"

Redwald roared in derision.

"Thinkest thou that Kassker cares?" he replied. "'Twill be of no concern to him if thy head is charred! And thou wilt be dead, I'll swear, long before the flames reach that wagging tongue of thine!"

For once that tongue was stilled. For Handforth was utterly startled. The man was probably speaking the truth. Kassker the Grim would still pay the money, even if the three juniors were dead!

"My only hat!" murmured Edward Oswald. "This doesn't look any too healthy."

Without any further delay, the captives were roughly hoisted up and carried. They were being taken to the village—to that market square—where the stakes and the faggots were still ready.

At first, Redwald had been infuriated at the loss of his victims. But now he was in the best of humours. He had lost five, but he had gained three. And the three were far better prizes!

For this Gothlander officer had been merely pandering to his own bloodthirsty pleasures when he had ordered the deaths of the five children. But the burning of Handforth & Co. would be a very different pleasure!

Firstly, they were three members of the accursed stranger tribe from Northestria; and, secondly, he would gain much money from Kassker when he made his report, and exhibited his gruesome proofs. So, while he had been angered at first, he was now delighted.

His men had already reported that the galley had made no move, and Redwald was quite satisfied that there would be no other attack. He and his men had given the

enemy a taste of the arrows, and they were not likely to come again. Indeed, the man convinced himself that half the "pirate" force had been put out of action.

So he went forward with his fresh plans complacently.

Several of his soldiers had been sent on in advance, to round up the peasantry again. There should be a good audience for this great spectacle! What did it matter who was burned so long as there were victims? Redwald was not particular.

Handforth & Co. were not carried far, for their captors found them rather too heavy. After about a hundred yards they were set down, and their legs were freed. They were compelled to walk.

"Now, my fine young puppies, walk!" said Redwald coarsely. "And remember, if ye are tardy, a pike is ready to bestir ye. Spare them not, men. A wound or two will make little difference, I vow."

Handforth & Co. walked. They didn't argue. Even Edward Oswald made no attempt to tarry. He was a great fellow for arguing—but not with the business end of a pike. He received just one jab, and that was enough for him. By a supreme effort he succeeded in holding himself in control.

"It's all right—our time will come soon!" he muttered tensely. "These brutes are going to pay for this piece of work!"

But Church and McClure were not such hopeless optimists.

As far as they could see, they were utterly doomed. It was like Handforth to fool himself—to think that he would be able to extricate himself from this ghastly tangle. But his chums had no such delusions.

They were unarmed, and they were surrounded by over six times their number of savages. If it came to an attempt to escape, these men would inflict the most terrible wounds without compunction. What did it matter? They were going to be burnt at the stake, anyhow, so a little torture in advance might be all the better.

The juniors were very cautious, therefore, and gave their captors no opportunity of attacking them. They obeyed orders implicitly, and were spared. Spared so that they would reach the stake whole!

For that was what it really amounted to. And Handforth & Co.'s feelings were indescribable when they were marched into that peaceful market place. The crowds were there—old men, boys, women and children. Everybody had been brought out to witness this torture.

There were many looks of compassion, particularly from the women. Perhaps some of them realised that these youths were their friends. They had seen the children rescued, and by these very boys. Obviously, since they were about to be tortured by the soldiers, they were worthy of compassion. For the soldiers were the enemies of all.

If Handforth & Co. had doubted this before, they did not doubt it any longer.

The soldiers of Gothland were all-powerful. To even question their methods was to invite death. Small wonder that Kassker was hated throughout his land.

The St. Frank's fellows had only just begun to realise this. Originally, they had thought that all the Gothlanders were cut in the same mould. But this was not the truth. The country people seemed to be harmless—it was only the hardened soldiers who were such outrageous brutes.

Handforth & Co. were placed with their backs to the great stakes, and there they were bound, side by side.

The soldiers gave themselves up to the rare pleasure of this entertainment. They had not bargained for three such prizes as these boys! Redwald, no doubt, felt that it was his real duty to hand the trio over to a superior officer. But he wanted to burn them himself. Their heads would be sufficient!

Faggots were packed round the hapless juniors—but at a distance. There was an object in this arrangement. Redwald did not want his victims to die too quickly. He wanted to witness their agonies as the flames licked up and grew more and more intense.

"I'm afraid it's all up, Handy!" said Church, turning his head and looking at his leader. "We're beyond help now."

Handforth's face was ghastly—haggard, blood-smeared, and white as a sheet.

"It's my fault, you chaps!" he muttered. "It wouldn't matter if it was only me—but I've dragged you into it, too. Why don't you tell me the truth straight out? Why don't you call me every name——"

"That's all right, Handy," put in McClure. "You couldn't help it—and Churchy and I haven't got anything to blame you with. We just happen to be in the same boat, that's all."

Handforth nearly choked.

"And I—I promised you that everything would be all right!" he muttered. "I thought we might be able to escape. And now—and now it's too late! We're going to be tortured by these curs!"

For once in his life, Edward Oswald Handforth was face to face with facts—or, to be more exact, for once in his life he realised the true position. There could be no escape! His crazy optimism could do no good now. And he felt that he was the cause of the whole disaster. He had dragged his chums into this morass of horror.

"Forgive me, old chaps!" he said brokenly. "We've had some good times together, haven't we? We're all finished now—this is the end!"

Strangely enough, now that Handforth was filled with a realisation of the true position, his chums attempted to be hopeful.

"We're not dead yet, Handy," said Church, with an effort. "Don't forget those smoke rockets! They must have been heard in Northestria, and Mr. Lee could be across the lake in an hour by using the motor-boat. It's been well over an hour since the signal was given."

For a moment, Handforth's eyes gleamed, but then he gulped.

"What can they do?" he muttered. "Look!"

A soldier was coming forward—Redwald himself. And in his hand he held a great blazing torch. He held it away from him as he gazed gloatingly at his victims.

"'Tis the moment, my merry youths from Northestria!" he exclaimed. "But fear not! 'Twill be many minutes before the life is choked out of ye by the heat! Watch the flames—'tis an interesting occupation for one who is doomed to taste them!"

Handforth wanted to shout out every imprecation he could lay his tongue to, but with a great effort he controlled himself. He said nothing. He just held his head up and stared at Redwald with contempt.

And the Gothlander flung his torch into the faggots at Handforth's feet, and at the same moment two other torches were set kindling the faggots of the other victims. The twigs crackled and blazed, and the flames spread rapidly. Waves of choking hot air and smoke burst into the faces of the juniors.

"Good-bye, you chaps!" muttered Handforth brokenly.

They tried to reply, but their voices had deserted them. All their efforts were required to keep themselves outwardly calm. For they swore to themselves that they would never give these Gothlander brutes the satisfaction of a single outcry.

And the flames licked closer.



CHAPTER 12.

TOUCH AND GO!

REDWALD seemed to remember something, for he came up close. The three stricken juniors could see him beyond the walls of flame and smoke, like some grinning demon from the Pit.

"A last word to cheer ye!" shouted the man jeeringly. "'Twill give ye satisfaction to know, I doubt not, that Kassker's armies are descending upon Northestria to-morrow. Ay, not one army, but three—and the invasion will be no mistake this time!"

Handforth gave a great laugh.

"You'll all be thrown out again!" he snorted. "And, if there's any justice in this world, you'll be one of the first to get killed!"

"Fool!" sneered Redwald. "Kassker's armies will smash into Northestria at three spots, and the whole accursed tribe will be wiped out. Take these thoughts into the grave with ye! And now to watch the interesting part! The flames are licking nearer, and the end is nigh. Scream, ye young dogs! Why don't ye scream for mercy?"

This taunt was enough to silence Hand-

forth and Church and McClure until the last atom of consciousness left them. The fumes swirled round them, and their ears were filled with the crackling roar of the ever-increasing flames.

If those faggots had been placed close, they would have been suffocated by this time. But the sticks were round in a wide circle, it being Redwald's intention to throw other faggots at the very feet of his victims when the fires were blazing well.

This man was something of an artist when it came to burning people at the stake! No doubt he had had much experience.

It seemed to Church that the fires were burning with a sudden curious intensity. Handforth noted the change, too. Not only was there a roaring crackle, but a strange throb, too—an insistent, rhythmic beat. Strangely enough, it somewhat resembled the sound of a powerful motor—

"The boat!" screamed Handforth. "The motor-boat!"

"They're coming for us!" choked McClure, his eyes blazing.

"Help—help!" shouted Church. "Rescue, Remove!"

Redwald laughed in derision. He mistook these shouts for cries of fear, for he failed to note that rhythmic throbbing. He was so intent upon his victims that he had no eyes for any other spot—notably the swift river, which flowed almost at his back, past the very edge of the village.

The river lay only just beyond the fringe of houses. And if Redwald had turned, he would have seen something to give him pause.

The motor-boat was in sight, making straight for the bank.

It contained a group of horror-stricken rescuers. For it seemed to them indeed, that they had arrived too late. They gazed at the spectacle with unbelievable agony. They saw three stakes, with flames leaping up round them. And beyond, just a faint glimpse of three helpless figures.

"Oh, we've failed!" sobbed Willy. "I can see Ted! There he is, in the middle! We're too late!"

"Poor boys—heaven help them!" panted Nelson Lee.

The nose of the boat rammed into the river bank, and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore leapt ashore. Even if they couldn't save these poor victims, they could, at least, avenge them.

Behind them came Nipper, Willy, and the others. For even now they tried to make themselves believe that there was a faint hope.

Redwald turned, startled by the shouts from some of his soldiers. He staggered back as he saw the approaching group. They were within ten yards already.

"Kill them!" he thundered, in alarm.

Crack!

Those words were Redwald's last. Lord Dorrimore's revolver spurted flame, and Dorrie was famed as a dead shot. The Goth-

lander officer fell, shot through the brain. And Dorrie killed him with less compunction than he would have killed a savage wolf. In any case, it was self-defence, since this raid was a desperate venture, with the rescuers hopelessly outnumbered.

Crack! Crack!

This time both revolvers spoke. Two more of Redwald's soldiers fell, and the others, panic-stricken by the fate of their comrades, staggered back. They had no stomach for such a fight as this.

"The boys!" shouted Lee. "Kick away the faggots!"

Nipper and the others needed no telling. They rushed recklessly upon the fires, and as they did so they gave shouts of joy. For now, at close quarters, they could see the truth. The fires were still some distance from the victims—and Handforth & Co. were not only alive, but conscious. More than conscious!

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth lustily. "You're in time, you chaps!"

"Quick!" gasped Church. "I'm getting scorched!"

"Scorched!" shouted Pitt. "We thought you were dead!"

"Not likely!" gasped Handforth.

The burning sticks were being kicked in every direction. Lee and Dorrie found it impossible to help, for all their attentions were needed elsewhere. The soldiers, reluctant to come to grips with the raiders, took note of the fact that they were only a small group. And arrows were beginning to hiss.

"Fire away, Lee!" roared Lord Dorrimore. "The boys are safe, and we're not going to have any casualties now!"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

If the arrows hissed, so did the bullets. Half a dozen of the Gothland soldiers fell, screaming and writhing. And the rest took utter fright and fled. Firearms were new to them, and they were panic-stricken. They bolted in every direction, leaving the entire market-place in possession of the newcomers.

Most of the peasants had gone, too, streaming away into the village streets, bewildered and dazed by all this confusion.

Handforth found himself free. Somebody had cut the ropes, and he staggered clear of the now smouldering faggots. Church and McClure at the same time broke out of that deadly circle of fire.

"Boys!" exclaimed Lee, running up. "Are you really alive? Thank heaven for this deliverance!"

"Alive?" said Lord Dorrimore gleefully. "Look at 'em! Except for a few blisters, they're as sound as I am! Somehow, I think we'd better be makin' a move, though. I'm a great chap for adventure, but I've had enough for one dose."

"Yes, to the boat," said Lee briskly.

"Oh, Ted!" grinned Willy, clutching at Handforth's arm. "Good old Ted! You're alive! And I—I thought you were killed!"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "You told everybody that you knew Handy was alive."

Willy lost his smile.

They hardly remembered getting back to the motor-boat. In fact, Handforth & Co. knew nothing until they found themselves rushing down the river—leaving that hapless village of Gernfrith well behind. And everybody was on board—and most of the fellows, too, were rather light-headed. They had all expected the worst, for they had never dared to hope for such a wonderful outcome as this.

"What about the chaps on board?" asked Church, when he could get a coherent thought. That brutal officer told us that half of them were killed on the way to the galley——"

"He was a liar," interrupted Nipper. "We were hardly hurt, and now that you three chaps are back with us, there aren't any casualties worth speaking of. But exactly what we should have done without the gov'nor, goodness knows!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"There's no need for you to cheer me, boys," he said quietly. "All the honours of this affair are yours, and I need hardly tell you how thankful I am that the outcome is so happy. You did a noble thing in saving those helpless children from the flames, but after this, I rather fancy I shall confine you to the Northestrian side. You're liable to turn our hair grey."

"I'm nearly white already," said Lord Dorrimore gruffly. "As for wrinkles, I'm all over 'em! These young beggars have aged me ten years in less than ten days! All the same, they're a pretty fine crowd, an' I'm proud of 'em! We'll have some fine yarns to tell when we get back home, eh? I'll bet you'll startle the other fellows at school."

"We're not back yet, Dorrie," said Nipper. "And it looks as though we never shall get back."

"Why, my lads, we'll have you at St. Frank's almost in time to start the term!" declared his lordship. "According to latest reports, they're getting into wireless communication with the outer world already."

"Have we got signals through?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"So Sparks says, but we had no time to give the thing a test," said his lordship. "We heard your signals, and buzzed off to see what the noise was about. We thought another invasion was beginnin'."

Handforth started.

"An invasion!" he said, turning, and looking from Nelson Lee to Lord Dorrimore with wide-open eyes. "That reminds me! The invasion is going to happen to-morrow!"

"Indeed!" said Lee. "How do you know?"

"That brute of an officer told me, sir," said Handforth breathlessly. "I remember

now! It was while he was gloating over us—he thought it was our last minute! He said that Kassker's men are starting out to-morrow, and they mean to invade Northestria in three different places at once!"

"Did you hear this, too?" asked Lee, turning to the others.

"Yes, sir," said Church and McClure.

"The man was in earnest, sir, I could see that in his eye," said Handforth. "It's going to be a terrific affair, too, a three-fold invasion. But what do we care? We'll give the brutes invasion, won't we?"

Nelson Lee was looking very thoughtful as the motor-boat swept out of the river mouth into the lake.

* * *

On the galley, now far out on the lake, eager eyes were watching—anxious, frantic eyes. And at the very first sight of the motor-boat, a shout of relief went up.

"They're coming!" panted Buster Boots. "Oh, but what have they done? They haven't had time to rescue those poor chaps! I expect they're all dead, and they've given up the quest as hopeless!"

"I can see Handy!" shrilled Juicy Lemon, as he held a telescope tremblingly to his eye. "Yes, it's Handy, with Willy beside him!"

"Gimme that telescope!" roared one of the others, grabbing it.

And all doubts were set at rest some little time later, when the motor-boat drew alongside.

Not only Handforth, but Church and McClure were there—grimy and stained, but obviously safe. Everybody was looking happy, and after they had all come on board the calm air of the lake was echoing to the sound of cheers.

They got back into the motor-boat, and the galley slowly followed, making straight for the Northestrian coast. Truth to tell, the boys were not sorry to be back. It had been a bit of an experience, acting as pirates, but they were perfectly satisfied!

"Well, anyway, we've had a jolly good day!" said Handforth happily, as the cut on his head was being dressed. "And to-morrow, it seems, we're going to be in the thick of another invasion! Who says we don't get plenty of excitement!"

And so another episode came to an end.

What would the morrow bring? None of the juniors could quite express their feelings, but they all had a sort of inner sensation that something big was in the wind. That reference to the wireless signals. Would it be possible to get away from this lost world? The future was all vague, except for the one, solid fact that Kassker the Grim and his hordes were preparing to pounce!

THE END.

(Look out for another exciting long, complete yarn of the Boys of St. Frank's in Northestria next Wednesday: "THE SECRET OF THE NORTH!")



BETWEEN OURSELVES

Mr. Edwy Seales 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.

TO begin with, many thanks to all readers who sent me such nice Christmas and New Year cards. As Our Paper goes to press several weeks before publication—and as, of course, I am writing this soon after Xmas—this is the first opportunity I have had of acknowledging these welcome tokens of friendship. It isn't the card that counts, but the token behind it.

* * *

Now to acknowledge this week's letters: Thomas Graham* (Gisborne, N.Z.), A. Cobbett (Camberley), J. Keith (Richmond, N.Z.), Percy W. Bowles (Sydney), R. Dunn* (Clapton, E.5), Sydney Smith (Scartho, Lincs), Reg. Galle (Wraidla, S. Aus.), Frank Voce, Junr. (Liverpool), Hec. J. McFarlane* (Glen Innes, N.S.W.), H. Langham (Winnipeg), J. S. Ricketts (Hayle), P. Roche (Wellbourne, Vic.), R. G. Scott (Townsville, Queensland), S. H. Rowell (Canterbury, Vic.), G. W. Linford (Worstead), G. Desmond Richardson (Burton-on-Trent), Leagueite 2652 (Liverpool), Charles McNab (Glasgow), Frank Lyon (Nottingham), Leslie Richards* (Margate), A. Feldman (E.1.), Kenneth Smith (Hornsey), Richard Richards (Walworth), Terence Sullivan (Tufnell Park), John C. Griffin (Deptford), Tom Hanney (Manor Park), T. Treadwell (E.C.2), Edmund Armitage (New Zealand), George Rudge (Plymouth).

* * *

I have put a star against your name, Thomas Graham, because you tell me that you always "make every effort to enlarge the Old Paper's popularity." I know that lots of readers have the same sentiments as yourself, but I don't think they quite realise the importance of "telling the other fellow."

* * *

And that's an interesting subject. I'm afraid that too many of you just take it for granted that "the other fellow" knows that there are such things as the St. Frank's tales. In all probability, he (or she) has never even heard of them. And, for all you know, he (or she) might be, for some inexplicable reason interested in such light

reading. What I want to get at is this—if you don't like my stories, write to me and tell me off. But if you *do* like them, tell your friends, particularly those friends who aren't readers. The bigger our circulation gets, the bigger the improvements will be.

* * *

For instance, that Sectional Map of St. Frank's and District, which you have all been waiting for. Thought I'd forgotten it, eh? A fat chance I should have of forgetting it, considering that dozens of you are always jogging my memory! No, that Map is on the stocks, so to speak, but it's a man's-size job. It'll come along one of these days. But don't be impatient. You wouldn't believe what a lot of work and expense is attached to such a thing. Here's a definite, solemn promise. You'll have that Map some time between now and Christmas of 1937. What more can I say? Of course, if you all buckled to, and acted as advertising agents for the Old Paper, and sent the circulation up with a leap, I shouldn't be surprised if the Editor hurried that Map along, and let you have it before the summer of this year.

* * *

Perhaps I'm different from most people, but if I like a thing, I go about telling everybody, and spreading the good news. And if so many of you are enthusiastic about St. Frank's, why not let that enthusiasm run loose? There's no accounting for tastes, and it's your fault if you look upon Wednesday as a special day. For all you know, it may become a special day for lots of others.

* * *

A. Cobbett, 21, Cromwell Road, Camberley, Surrey, has some back numbers to dispose of, dating from May 1st, 1926.

Edwy Seales Brooks

*Fighting in Oxford Street!**Thrills and Excitement!*

SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By

ROGER FOWEY

THE ENEMY IN LONDON!

Jack Bennett and his two school-chums, Tom Lee and Buster Kirk, are involved in the thick of the fighting on the South Coast when the Germans invade England in a War of Revenge. The enemy also land on the East Coast, and press forward on London. Eventually the Huns capture almost the whole of North London, and mass armies in the south with a view to capturing the capital. Unknown to them, however, the British assemble a huge army between Aylesbury and Hertford, in addition to huge reserves near Wormwood Scrubbs, in the West of London. The three chums are

captured by the enemy, and are sentenced to death by the German arch-spy, Stutz—who was at one time a master at the chums' school. The trio manage to escape from Lord's Cricket Ground—the enemy headquarters—during a terrific bombing raid by British aeroplanes. Pursued by German riflemen, the three—who have got away with all the papers in the enemy headquarters on which they could lay their hands!—manage to get down to the railway which runs under the cricket ground. Just as they enter the darkness of the tunnel, unseen hands grip them and fling them to the ground!

(Now start on this week's thrilling chapters.)

A Desperate Plan!

JACK hit out with all his strength as he felt himself flung down. A railway-line bit across his shoulders, and his heels dug into the loose flints between the sleepers as he fought.

He could hear Buster gasping and struggling close to him, and he heard Tom yell in a muffled sort of way.

Outside, the German riflemen were still sitting on top of the wall, blazing chance bullets into the black mouth of the tunnel in the hope that they might strike the brick walls and ricochet on to the fugitives.

Jack slugged one hand at the unseen figure grappling with him, and he heard the man yelp with pain as the bunched knuckles caught him well under the ear. Jack lashed out again; then, with a quick twist, he heaved the man off, and for an instant was free.

"Buster!" he yelled. "Where are you? What

"Here—quick! Two o' the brutes are—Ouch!" The fat junior's voice ended in a windy

gasp and then, to Jack's amazement, a voice roared:

"Let up! Half a minute, lads—these ain't Jerries! Pack up there—let 'em be!"

Jack, on his feet now, peered into the darkness. The sounds of struggling ceased, then the same voice grunted:

"Sorry, mates—I thought you was Germans! Who are you?"

"Germans—did you?" gasped Buster. "Gosh, I'm winded! Who was the rotter that dug his knee into my ribs! What's the blessed idea—jumping at fellows without so much as—My hat!" he gasped again.

"You came round that corner so slick," said the voice from the darkness. "You didn't give us a chance to see who you was—an' we know there ain't nobody but Germans that way!"

Jack stumbled across a rail as he made towards the speaker. Now his eyes were getting used to the darkness, and he made out an indistinct figure, with three others standing near. They were British soldiers, but that was about all he could make out.

"Were they shootin' at you?" the man asked. "What d'you think they were doing?" demanded the disgruntled Buster. "Pelting us with daisies, or something? Of course they were jolly well shooting at us! Who are you, anyway?"

"Territorials, we are," the man told him. "We've been here all day! When the others retired, we thought we could slip down this tunnel and cross the goods yard to Marylebone station. But the other end's all blocked up with Germans, and there's been a proper fight in the goods yard."

Buster got his wind back as the man explained further. There were just four of the Territorials, who had retired with the rest from the fighting at Kilburn and had got cut off. Apparently there had been a strong force of Britishers in the goods yard outside Marylebone Station, and they had put in a gallant fight when the Germans had advanced.

The Huns had thrown up a barricade where the line emerged, and when the four had tried to get along the railway back to the British troops, all progress had been barred by the fighting. They had hidden themselves, and were now waiting a chance to get through.

"It wasn't any good goin' bald-headed into the enemy," explained the corporal who led the little party. "So we just lay low. Where are you goin', anyway—an' what's your unit?"

"We're cadets," Jack answered. "We want to get to headquarters at once—we've got to, somehow. Our chaps have just bombed the German headquarters at Lord's, and they—"

"At Lord's!" gasped the corporal incredulously. "Why, that's right on top of here! Is that what all that banging and bumping was—bombs?"

"Yes, our airmen have knocked the place flat," Jack told him. "They pretty well blew the big pavilion to smithereens, and we got into the Long Room, where their Chief of the Staff was. We've bagged all the papers we could see on the table there, and if we can get 'em to H.Q. straight off, they might be useful!"

"You got them to headquarters, an' they'll be wanting to give you the V.C. or something!" said the corporal. "You say what you want, an' you can count on me an' my mates. Got any idea of how you can get through?"

Jack shook his head, while the rest gathered round to listen.

"We know that the Germans are being held along Oxford Street," he said. "Our headquarters are in Berkeley Square—that's near Hyde Park. We had an idea about getting through along the tube tunnels, or something like that; but if the Germans are blocking up the other end of the tunnel, there isn't much hope. There's no chance on the surface, because the streets are simply swarming with them!"

They stood listening. From the far end of the tunnel there came only the sound of a distant, confused roar which might have been anything.

"Don't sound as though there's any fighting going on there now," commented the corporal. "Wouldn't do any harm to go down there and have a look."

Jack agreed, and the little party formed up, with Jack and the corporal leading the way. They moved into the pitchy darkness of the tunnel, guided by their hands on the sooty wall. They walked some distance before a glimmer of light showed ahead.

"That's an opening," said the corporal. "There's another tunnel beyond there, where the line goes right under Lord's ground."

When they came nearer the opening, the corporal insisted upon going forward alone, to make certain that there were no Germans in the back entrance beyond the narrow stretch of daylight. He left his rifle behind, but borrowed

Jack's automatic, and he refused to allow anybody to accompany him.

"If you don't see anythin' of me," he said, "you'll know there's Germans in the tunnel. Better for one to chance it than have all of us get done in." Jack tried to protest, but the corporal wouldn't listen, and soon he was going forward alone, hugging the wall.

The corporal edged into the mouth of the tunnel, then disappeared, and for a long minute the little party watched. Suddenly he reappeared, waving to them, and they went on. This manoeuvre was repeated twice more, and then they came to a section of the tunnel which debouched on to the big goods yard. All sound of fighting at the far end had ceased, and soon they were standing staring at what was left of the barricade the Germans had built.

They saw a railway carriage half across the lines, with sandbags and sleepers scattered about it. Still forms showed half in the shadow and half in the sunlight—Germans in field grey, and a few British who had fallen in some desperate bayonet charge. Of living men there was no sign, and the chums went forward until they were standing amidst the debris, looking along the lines into the goods yard.

The railway lines, spreading out towards the right, were cluttered with trucks, many of which had been blown off the rails by shells and bombs. Amidst them showed the prostrate shapes of men, and the whole ground was littered with fallen. On the far side some Germans were moving in a compact little party, with the sun shining on the barrels of three machine-guns which they carried. Beyond these, there was no sign of life.

"If we keep straight on," said Buster, "we'll get into Marylebone Station, but I don't see that's going to be much good to us, because there's bound to be a lot of Germans about there, and we're sure to be spotted."

"What about the Underground?" asked the corporal. "Once we got into that, we'd be able to get right along to anywhere we wanted to go."

"But the Germans will have bottled that up," Jack said. "They're certain to have done that, although there's bound to be a lot of our chaps there. We might manage to get in—and not be able to get out again. Look here, what about getting ourselves up as Germans? There are plenty of uniforms about here, and we could shove 'em on over our ordinary clothes. If we saw anybody likely to challenge us, we could dodge 'em—and if we are spotted, we can fight!"

"Then, when we get to our own lines, rip the enemy duds off and appear in our own things—that the idea?" asked the corporal.

"Come on" grunted Buster, "let's do it. It's the only way we'll get through!"

They began to search around the barricade. In a little while Jack & Co were ready. They found that most of the German haversacks were well filled with food, and they made a meal of enemy sausage and bread. Then they lined up, German uniforms over their own khaki, and shouldering German rifles—loaded against emergencies.

"All ready?" asked the corporal. "Right, then off we go!" and they stepped out into the full sunlight and began to march straight forward!

In the Thick Of It!

THEY saw very little of any enemy movement as they marched towards the station. It was plain that the full tide of battle had swept across the goods yards, and it was equally apparent that the Germans were following up closely upon the battle-front.

They cleared the goods yards and moved on

into the tunnel which led direct to the Marylebone Station. No one spoke as they tramped steadily through the darkness; then, when light showed ahead, Jack scouted forward to make certain that they would not walk into any assembly of Germans beyond.

The station, with its multitudinous tracks, showed ahead of him, and the place was deserted. He waved for the others to come up, and they moved on together. Trains stood at the platforms, the doors of the carriages open; the platforms were littered with all sorts of refuse.

In many places, the glass of the roof was smashed. A bomb had fallen sheer through and had blown a mighty crater in one side of one platform.

They tramped boldly down the platform, past the crater. Beyond the ticket-barrier, Jack could see that there were Germans moving. As they drew nearer, he made out rows of stretchers, and amongst them were wounded Germans hobbling painfully.

"Dressing station!" he exclaimed to the corporal. "They're wounded, and they—"

"Shall we go back—or chance it?"

"Chance it!" Jack said, from between gritted teeth. "When we get through the barrier, turn to the left and then march out along the roadway."

"S'pose we meet an officer?" asked the corporal.

"How do we salute him?"

"I don't know—pretend you don't see him!"

They went on. All of them knew that it would be touch and go to get through—but it was the only way. They were marching at ease, and soon they reached the barrier.

They passed a German who was busy trying to extract chocolate from an automatic machine; he had smashed the glass front with the butt of his rifle, and was filling his pockets with little red packets. His left arm was in a rough sling, and he grinned at the chums as they passed him.

Jack grinned back, and they passed on. The Hun did not appear to notice anything wrong with them. They reached the roadway, and turned down it, skirting a lorry, driven by a German, and used as an ambulance.

They heard German spoken all about them, and they knew that the slightest suspicion of their identity would bring a fusillade of rifle shots. They walked in silence, hardly daring to breathe. It was as they passed under the arch leading into the street at the front of the station that the thing they most dreaded happened—an officer suddenly stepped towards them.

He was a big, heavy-faced man, and he roared something in German, then lifted a hand to point to where an omnibus lay on its side, half blocking the entrance from the street. It was plain from his gesture that he wanted them to shift the thing.

"Double forward!" Jack hissed to the corporal.

The man obeyed his behest. He jumped to attention, half saluted with his rifle while the officer was pointing to the lorry, turned and barked meaninglessly at the others; they covered his order with the thud of their feet as they started towards the 'bus.

The officer watched them go, and he remained watching until they had reached the shattered vehicle. There was a shell-hole on the other side of it, and it was plain that the 'bus had run into the hole and had overturned. Even as they stood surveying the machine, another 'bus lumbered slowly past them from the street—full of wounded. It pulled up between them and the officer, and Jack saw the chance offered.

"Come on—bunk!" he exclaimed. "Quick—before he sees us!"

With one accord they turned and dashed for the street, swept round the corner, then doubled steadily down to the broad expanse of the Marylebone road.

"Bunk across to Quebec Street!" Buster half yelled. "Over there to the left!"

They dived across the road, just missing a thundering lorry that was loaded with German infantry; the vehicle was followed by ten or a dozen more, all being driven at top speed and all making for the Edgware Road—reserves being hurried up to some sector where the British were pressing the enemy hard.

"We can keep right ahead into Oxford Street!" Jack said, as they reached the entrance to the side turning. "It'll be— Here, what about bagging that!"

He pointed to where a big touring car stood drawn up at the side of the road. The engine was running and they could hear the exhaust bubbling powerfully; the driver was standing on the pavement, staring up the street; evidently he was waiting for some German officers who had turned into one of the buildings near at hand.

"Leave that bloke to me!" said the corporal grimly, nodding to the driver, then they went forward at a run, with the corporal in the lead. He gripped his rifle by the barrel as he neared the man, and something in his attitude startled the fellow. He stared at them, then one hand dropped to the revolver at his belt. The weapon flashed out while the corporal was yet half a dozen yards from the man. He raised it, then—

Crack! Crack!

Both Buster and one of the Territorials fired at the same moment. The man staggered, then pitched backwards to the pavement.

"I got him—in the leg!" Buster gasped, and while he was speaking, Jack was flinging his rifle to the ground and leaping over the side of the car into the driving seat.

The others piled in after him, just as three German officers came to the door of the house outside which the car stood. They remained a moment, staring blankly, then one of them leaped out, dragging his automatic clear as he jumped.

Buster slung his rifle sheer at the man as he jumped to the footboard.

"Right!" he yelled to Jack, and the boy sent the powerful car off with a lurch, while the corporal and his men poured a fusillade of shots at the officers. They all fell, and the car went screaming up the street.

"Rip off your German togs!" the corporal yelled, as Buster tumbled over the side of the machine. "If anybody tries to stop us—shoot! Go on, mate—drive her all out!"

The big car skidded wildly as Jack took it round a shell-hole, then he was driving with one hand while he ripped off his German hat and unbuttoned his tunic. What they would find at the far end of the street, he did not know; anyway, the British would not be very distant, and it was certain to be a case of fighting their way across the battle front. If they appeared as Germans, the British would shoot them down; if they showed their khaki, the Huns would let fly at them—but it was better to face enemy bullets than those of their comrades.

With his free hand, Jack loosened the automatic which he still carried, then he piloted the car more slowly over the broken, shell-pocked ground which marked the west side of Montagu Square. The railings round the green were all broken down; men lay on the pavements, and at the exit into George Street the machine bumped and jarred over the remnants of a barricade.

They roared on. Ahead was smoke and moving forms—fighting forms. Through the smoke Jack saw the glint of steel, and glimpsed Britishers charging Germans who fought in the road.

Germans were running towards them—leaping figures which seemed to be ducking from pursuing bullets. The windows of the houses ahead were

alive with figures which fired down into the street—Germans!

Blazing barrels gouted bullets down on the little band of Britishers who had charged the barricade, routing the defenders and pursuing them up the street. To one side, a number of the khaki-clad men were battling fiercely about the shattered front of a shop, and, as the car raced up, Jack got a glimpse of what they were after.

Three trench-mortars stood in a row there; to put them out of action had been the object of this attack. Evidently the weapons had been hurling mortars from very close range into the British defences.

Behind Jack, his companions were slinging away their German tunics; the corporal and his mates were yelling wildly, snapping shots from over the side of the car at Germans in the windows they passed.

An instant after, and they were plunging through the thick smoke towards the dismantled barricade.

One side of it was down, and Jack wrenched the car towards it. The front wheels bounced from the shafts of a barrow which formed part of the barricade; the tail of the machine slid round and hit a pile of sandbags with a crash, and then the thing was heeling over.

It struck some sandbags—then Jack was sailing through the air, to crash and go slithering along the road.

He pushed himself up, just as a burly Britisher came at him with his bayonet levelled. Just in time, Jack wrenched open his tunic and disclosed the khaki beneath, and the man paused in his charge.

With a deft movement, Jack slipped the buckle of his belt, then tore the tunic off.

"It's all right—we've just come through the German lines!" he yelled. "I want to get to headquarters!" He snatched up his automatic from where it had fallen with his belt, then wheeled round.

Buster and Tom—in khaki from the waist upwards—were running towards him; the corporal and the rest were coming too, supporting one of their number, who was limping from a wound in the lower part of his leg.

The man with the bayonet looked from one to the other of them. "What the—" he began then, very suddenly, he jerked his weapon upwards and snapped a shot at a grey-clad figure dimly visible through the smoke.

As the gun roared, Jack yelled to the rest, and then went tearing across broad Oxford Street.

The whole length of the street on either side was shrouded in hazy smoke. Fires blazed here and there. The fronts of buildings had been torn out by shells and bombs, and it was plain that a terrific battle was waging across that strip of roadway.

One glimpse, towards the Circus, Jack had of men fighting hand to hand in the road; he saw distant shell-bursts—then one of the Territorials shouted in agony, and he wheeled round in time to see the man pitch forward on his face.

Jack and Buster were by his side in the same moment. They caught his arms, and dragged him forward with his feet trailing the ground. Tom came to their aid, picked up the man's legs, and they ran on together.

Something stung down the side of Jack's head—something that burned like the nearness of a red-hot poker. He felt a trickle across his forehead, then everything before his right eye became red—blood.

He was hit, but he ran on. The Territorials were in front now, the corporal and another man supporting the fellow with the foot wound. Jack saw the corporal stagger, almost fall, then straighten and go on.

They were near the other side of the street now. There was a low parapet of sandbags, with bayonets protruding above it. They saw the bronzed faces of soldiers. Men came leaping out of the shallow trench behind the parapet; strong hands seized them, and then they were being dragged down into the trench—and to safety!

Stutz Intervenes!

FOR what seemed an age, Jack lay at the bottom of the trench, staring through a blood-red mist at the haziness of a building looming high above him. Buster's face came into his range of vision.

"Jack's got it!" he heard the fat junior gasp. "My gosh, look at him, Tom—he's hit!"

"No I'm not!" Jack struggled up as he spoke breathlessly. He brushed the blood away from his eyes with the back of his hand, and sat up. The two looked at his wound. It was a shallow cut, probably made by a flying splinter of stone.

One of the soldiers in the trench paused in his job of giving covering fire to the fighting men across the road, and passed them a field dressing. Tom jammed the soft gauze over Jack's wound, then ran the khaki bandage round his head.

"I'm all right now!" Jack told them. "Let's get to headquarters. Where's that corporal?"

"Gone ahead with those two wounded chaps! The one we picked up got hit in the shoulder and head—machine-gun bullets," said Buster. "There they go!"

He pointed down the street to where the little, limping group was just turning a corner. The chums had cut across Oxford Street at an angle, and were now in Park Street, only a little distance from Berkeley Square.

The vista before them was just a churned-up mass of road-way, with paving stones and bricks from the shattered buildings littering the wreckage-strewn road.

"You fellows had better get out of this, if you're going back!"

A sergeant, with blood down his face and tunic, crawled to them along the trench.

"Our chaps are coming back, and there'll be a counter-attack in about two minutes. You aren't hurt, are you? Where are you going?"

"Headquarters!" Jack told him.

"Don't know where that is now," the sergeant answered. "Anyway, get out of this—lively!"

They obeyed, scrambling out of the trench and hugging the house-fronts as they trotted away.

The chums got into Brook Street, and then cut down one side of wrecked Grosvenor Square into Mount Street.

The chums came to Berkeley Square, and turned towards the headquarters they had last left as prisoners in a German tank.

There was a sentry on duty outside the door, and he barred their entrance with presented bayonet.

"We want General Marlow!" Jack told him. He let them pass, and they entered the hall.

Through a gap in one wall, the chums could see the General and his staff back in the room in which they had first seen them; they had not shifted their headquarters, despite the fact that the place was a wreck.

A staff officer met them. He recognised the chums as the trio who had twice before interviewed the General, and, when he heard that they had their pockets filled with German despatches, he took them straight to the Commander.

Stiffly, the three saluted.

"We were captured by the enemy, sir, and taken to their headquarters at Lord's," Jack reported. "The spy, Stutz, sentenced us to death, but we got away when our men bombed

NEXT WEDNESDAY!**FREE GIFTS FOR ALL "REALM" READERS!**

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the place. We went into the pavilion, found the German staff in the Long Room, and took all the papers we could lay our hands on. Don't know if they're any good, sir, but we brought 'em in case!"

The three of them emptied their pockets of the crumpled papers. The General picked some of them up, glanced at them, and his eyes lit up.

"Mr. Chester—can you read these?" he asked, and a keen-looking young officer stepped forward, taking the papers from the general's hand.

"Report—enemy troops retiring Zone X. Report—General Heinz occupied Zone J. Report—enemy warships concentrating Cromer steaming south. Report— Ah, here you are sir! Here's a list of their zones. Look—reserves here and numerical strength! Good heavens! Why, this is detail work for the whole of the German armies! Look here, reports from the southern armies, and—"

"Transcribe and report!" snapped the General. "We've got them! Colonel Peters, wireless no forward movements to take place until fresh orders from me—these papers will change everything. Everybody to stand by!" He spoke crisply; in ten seconds his whole staff was working swiftly, and he turned to the chums.

"Good work, boys—you don't know how good!

This is something that I shall not forget. You say you've seen Stutz?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jack.

"I'd given anything to get hold of that man!" the General exclaimed. "He seems to be able to come and go in our lines just as he likes. He's everywhere where we want him least. You say you saw him at Lord's, and he—"

He broke off as heels clicked behind the chums. Turning they saw an officer standing there and saluting.

"Verbal message from Colonel Poynters, sir, at Notting Hill. Position untenable, and he must retire for—"

The voice broke off, ending in a gasp. Jack was staring at the man—because he recognised that voice.

The man wore a dust-stained uniform, and there was a bandage about his brow; on his upper lip there was a cropped moustache, but his voice was the voice of—Stutz!

Jack stared at him in blank amazement. How could Stutz be there when they had left him in the wrecked Pavilion at Lords, on the other side of the firing-line? But if they could be at British headquarters, it was not impossible for the German spy to be there as well, for the distance was not great.

(Continued on page 44.)

HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 63.

SECTION

A

READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP.

I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge.

SECTION

B

MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS.

I, Member No..... (give Membership No.) hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me..... (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit.

SECTION

C

NEW READER'S DECLARATION.

I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

(FULL NAME)

(ADDRESS)

INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

These Application Forms can be posted for 1d., providing the envelope is not sealed and no letter is enclosed.

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You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Any enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

Hints on Biking.

ABSOLUTELY, I like the sound of that. A Yorks reader wants advice. It makes one think of the spring, the good old days when the ducks are in full song, and there is the call of the jigger. What bothered me over this query was as to what sort of information might be wanted. Does my Yorkshire pal want tips as to how to stick on? Has he got beyond the wobbling stage? Or is he out for long tours which call for a repairing kit and a book about how to use it? Let him send details and I will be on to them.

"Sparks."

Sparks is the man who is ship's listener-in. To hand is a really fascinating letter from Liverpool. The writer tells me her brother has been engaged in this exacting and highly valuable work for years. By the photograph enclosed he is a real man of the sea, keen, clever, and with that humorous twinkle of one who can see the funny side of things when occasion demands. The wireless officer is a wonderful fellow. He is in touch with other ships, and with the world at large. When peril comes, he is there at his post, dispatching messages fraught with life and death. One reads of heroes at this business who sit cool as cucumbers, doing their bit to the last. Hats off to them!

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

F. Tondeur, 13, Courtenay Square, Kennington, London, S.E.11, wishes to hear from readers in his district who are willing to help in a football club; also wants back numbers of "Monster Library."

William F. Stockwell, "Stockholm," 6, South View Crescent, King Street, Wokingham, Berks, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

H. F. Coomer, 197, Lloyd Street South, Wilbraham Estate, Manchester, wishes to correspond with readers in Johannesburg and Australia.

C. S. Taylor, 461, City Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, wishes to correspond with readers in Canada and in the British Isles; hobbies, stamp collecting and photography.

Miss Ella Rowlands, 9, Hunt Street, Balarat East, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with readers; very keen on photography.

Vera E. Selling, 7, Turnbull Street, Sunderland, wishes to correspond with readers.

Gertrude Clarke, 61, Church Street, St.

Peter's, Broadstairs, wishes to correspond with readers.

G. E. Stébbling, 80, High Road, Balham, London, S.W.12, wishes to correspond with members who will exchange Nos. 1-5 of the "Monster Library" for back numbers of the N.L.L., 170-330 and one bound vol., 154-166.

E. Watkins, 174, Baker Street, New Brighton, Christchurch, New Zealand, wishes to buy old copies of the N.L.L. from readers in the South Island, New Zealand.

C. A. Hinge, 25, Rancorn Road, Margate, wishes to hear from readers in Australia and New Zealand who are interested in stamps.

G. Desmond Richardson, 22, Astil Street, Stapenhill, Burton-on-Trent, Staffs, is forming a cricket team and a swimming club for the coming season, and he wants to hear from all readers in his district who will join, and thus increase the footing of the League round Burton-on-Trent.

V. Bond, Cookridge Street Baths, Leeds, wishes to hear from correspondents in England who are keen on swimming. He is an expert himself.

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SONS OF THE MEN OF MONS!



By
ROGER FOWEY.

(Continued from page 41.)

It was Stutz's voice—but it did not look like him! And then Jack saw the cold eyes glaring at him from beneath the peak of the man's cap. With a shout, he leaped forward, grabbing at the man's hands as he strove to draw the weapon at his belt. Jack's fingers wrapped about the fellow's wrist then both crashed to the floor.

"Buster—Tom! Grab him!" he yelled, then he was fighting with all his strength to prevent the man getting away. The fellow's cap rolled off; his moustache was brushed from his lip by Jack's struggling arm—disclosing the pallid, cruel features of the spy.

"It's Stutz!" Buster gasped, and then, with a mad access of strength, the fellow broke from them.

They flung themselves at him again; in the same moment he thrust his revolver forward, and blazed full at the tense figure of Captain Chester, the British officer who was deciphering the German despatches!

(Stutz is after the papers the chums have captured—trying to prevent the British from using the information the trio have brought. If he fails, the British will turn the tide of battle beyond all doubt. More real thrills in next week's exciting instalment; don't miss the concluding chapters of this amazing war story. Order your NELSON LEE LIBRARY in advance!)

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