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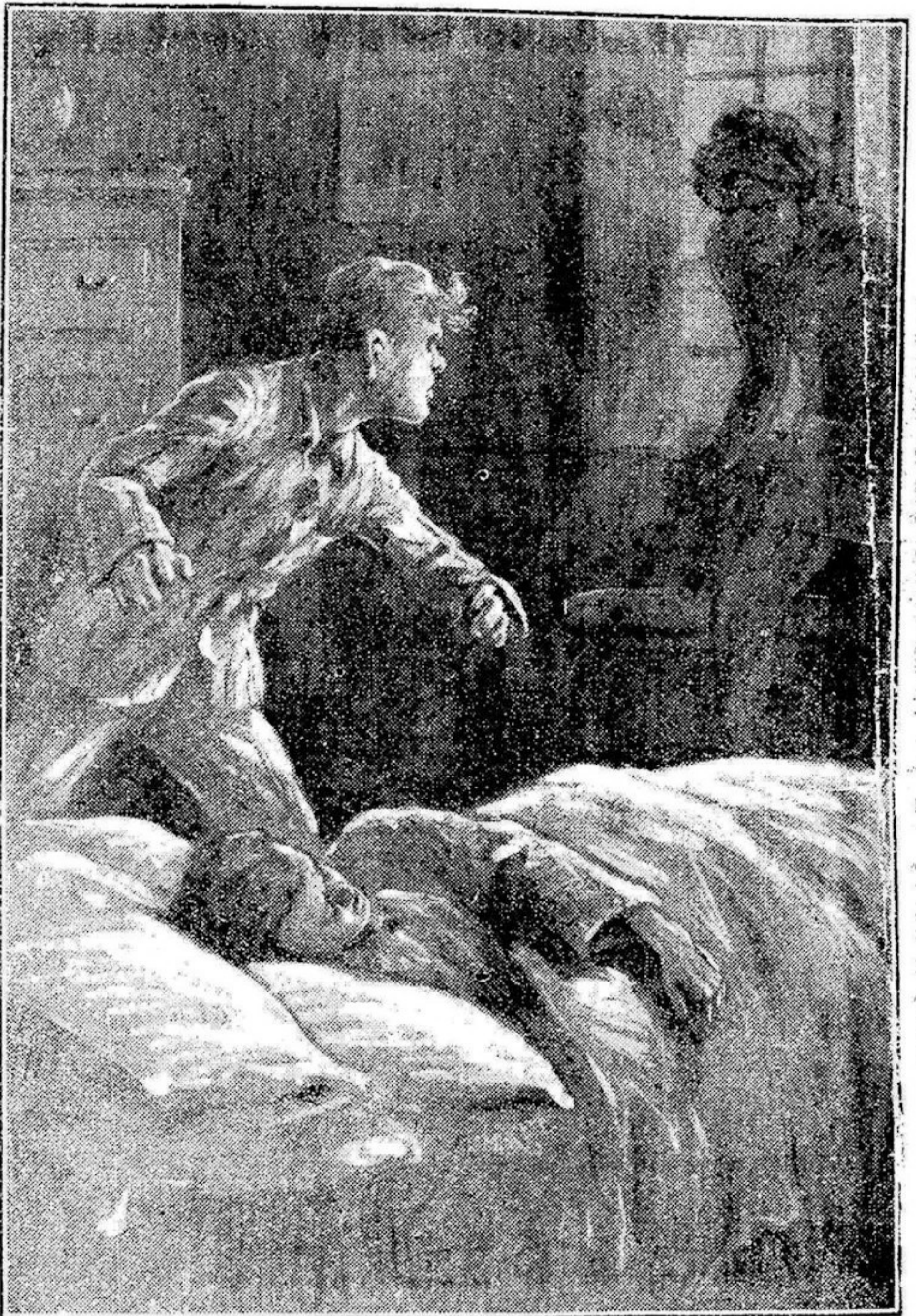
SPIRITED AWAY!

The opening story of a magnificent new series of holiday adventure yarns featuring the Boys of St. Francis and Lord Dorrimore.

New Series No. 118.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

August 4th, 1922.



Creak! Handforth spun round from the bed with a gasp as he heard a board creaking. Then his jaw dropped and his eyes grew larger. Between him and the window there was a figure—dim, ghostly, unreal. Next moment Handforth made a sudden rush at the mysterious intruder.

The Kidnapping of Hussi Kahn!

Grand new Holiday Adventure Series!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

(Author of the St. Frank's stories now appearing in "The Popular" every Tuesday.)

When the party of St. Frank's Removites and girls from Moor View School go down to Vivian Travers' country house in Essex, they little realise that soon they are to be plunged into a whirl of adventures that will leave them gasping—and which will lead them to far-off India. This new holiday series is one of the most brilliant Edwy Searles Brooks has ever penned. Get started on the opening story now—Ed.

CHAPTER 1.

The Bank Holiday Merrymakers!

"HERE we are!" said Handforth contentedly. "The little old bus has brought us down like a dream!"

This, of course, was one way of looking at it; but Church and McClure, in the rear seat of the handy little Austin Seven, were inclined to regard the journey from London as a nightmare. The celebrated leader of Study D at St. Frank's had been arguing the point all the way.

Incidentally, there was nothing much to argue about, but Edward Oswald Handforth had found plenty of subjects. His chums were now heartily glad that they had reached Heddingstead.

It was August Bank Holiday, hot, sunny, and joyful. And Handforth & Co., who had been invited to spend a couple of days at Vivian Travers' place, had come down in the Austin Seven.

"What's the name of the place?" asked Handforth, as they coasted down a long hill into the town. "Towerton Stables, isn't it?"

"No, you ass!" grinned Church. "It's Stapleton Towers."

"Well, what's the difference?" said Handforth. "I expect Stapleton is a little village, or something like that, outside the town. We'd better go into the main street, and make inquiries."

They were soon in the centre of the sleepy little Essex town. They went over the railway crossing, round the bend into the High Street, and came to a halt at the foot of the wide, imposing hill which comprised the main section of the town.

One brief inquiry was sufficient. Stapleton Towers, they were informed, was on the Sibleford road, and the Sibleford road was the first turning to the left at the top of the hill.

"We can't go wrong now, Handy," said Church, as they re-started. "The Towers are about a mile away, and we've got to look out for some big double gates. Buck up! It's getting on for lunch-time."

"And we don't want to be late for lunch!" said McClure.

They took the Sibleford road, and, in due course, they came to the lodge gates of Stapleton Towers. After that, speeding through a picturesque parkland, they were charmed by the general scenery.

"Never knew there was such pretty country in Essex!" said Church, as he gazed admiringly round. "I always had an idea that Essex was flat and uninteresting. But it's lovely up here."

"Gorgeous!" agreed McClure.

"Eh?" said Handforth, as he glanced at the landscape. "H'm! I can't see anything particularly nice about it. Hallo! This is the place, I suppose! Not a bad-looking shack, is it?"

They had turned a bend in the drive, and had rounded a clump of stately chestnuts. And there, before them, stood Stapleton Towers. It was an imposing country residence, and dotted about on the lawns and terraces were a number of white-clad figures. Some of them waved as the Austin Seven came nearer.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "There's a whole crowd of chaps here! And girls, too!"

"Well, you needn't be so surprised," remarked Church wearily. "Didn't Travers tell us that he was inviting a crowd?"

As the Austin drew to a standstill on the gravel terrace, the white figures came up, most of them giving some sort of cheery hail.

"Well, well!" said Vivian Travers, as he shook hands with the new arrivals. "Last, but by no means least, what?"

"By George!" said Handforth. "Are we last?"

"It is a matter of small importance, dear old fellow," said Travers, smiling. "Hop out, and make yourselves thoroughly at home. Don't forget that this is Liberty Hall!"

"That's funny!" said Handforth. "I thought it was called Stapleton Towers!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth couldn't understand why everybody laughed; but then, he always took everybody literally.

For the next two or three minutes there was a good deal of handshaking. Nipper & Co., of Study C, were present, and Archie Glenthorne, and Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, and Fullwood, and Jimmy Potts, and Reggie Pitt, and Jack Grey, and Alan Castleton—to say nothing of such fellows as Harry Gresham, and Duncan, and Russell. Then, too, there were Irene Manners, and Doris Berkeley, and Mary Summers, and Marjorie Temple, and Winnie Pitt. Vivian Travers had done the thing thoroughly.

"Did you see the circus as you came through the town, Ted?" asked Irene.

"Well, I'm jiggered! I'd forgotten all about the circus!" replied Handforth, scratching his head.

"But that's why we're here!" laughed Irene. "At least, it's one of the reasons."

"Oh, come!" protested Travers. "Don't forget, dear old girl, that you're all my guests. The circus is merely incidental."

Mr. Travers came out at this minute, and greeted his new visitors. Travers' father was a breezy, keen-faced gentleman, very likeable and cordial. He was "something in the City"—a very rich man.

Handforth suggested going down to have a look at the circus straight away, but when it was pointed out to him that lunch was practically ready, he changed his mind.

"Besides," said Nipper, with a smile, "we don't want to go down to the circus until this evening. We should only be in the way if we went down during the afternoon."

As Irene had hinted, it was mainly because of the circus in Hedingstead that this party of St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls had come to Stapleton Towers. For it wasn't an ordinary circus.

More by chance than anything else, Johnny Onions, of the West House, had mentioned that his father's circus would be at Hedingstead on August Bank Holiday; and Travers, pricking up his ears, had mentioned that Hedingstead was his own native town, more or less.

So the thing had been fixed up.

Professor Onions' Gigantic Circus was pitched in this Essex town for the Bank Holiday, and the schoolboys and schoolgirls thought it a ripping plan to visit the show.

They remembered the days when they had helped the circus—before Johnny and Bertie Onions had come to St. Frank's; before Tessa Love had been adopted by the professor, and had been sent to the Moor View School. There were lots of friendly associations to be revived.

The Great Onions Circus was now more prosperous than ever—bigger and better. And it was now at the height of its touring season.

There was a further reason why the St. Frank's fellows should be eager to make Stapleton Towers their headquarters for a day or two. It was within easy reach of Hadleigh, in Suffolk—where the big aerodrome on Martlesham Heath is situated. Their old friend, Lord Dorrimore, was very busy at Martlesham Aerodrome just now.

To the boys and girls it was just a jolly little party—an enjoyable way of spending two or three days of the holidays. Little did they realise how Fate was preparing to involve them in an adventure of startling mystery!

CHAPTER 2.



Dorrie's Great Venture!

AFTER lunch, the hot afternoon was spent in tennis and in generally lazing about. Vivian

Travers' guests enjoyed themselves immensely.

It was while preparations were afoot for tea—which was to be an *al fresco* meal in the shade of the chestnuts—that Lord Dorrimore arrived.

His appearance was quite unexpected—at least, by the majority of the guests. His lordship's powerful racing car hummed up the drive, and it was some few moments before the boys and girls realised his identity.

Vivian Travers was the first to greet him; and nobody seemed to notice that Travers had been waiting on the terrace, as though expecting this visit.

"Well, how goes it, young 'un?" said Lord Dorrimore, as he climbed out of the car.

"Everything all serene, sir," replied Travers promptly.

"Are they all here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do they know anything?"

"Not a thing, sir!"

"Do they suspect?"

"Haven't the faintest suspicion!" chuckled Travers.

"Good man!" grinned Lord Dorrimore, as he clapped Travers on the back. "Well, here they come! Whoa! Steady, you young fatheads! Good glory! What in the name of wonder——"

Lord Dorrimore broke off as Nipper, and Fullwood, and Reggie Pitt and the others came rushing up, all trying to shake hands with him at once. The girls were just as eager, too. Lord Dorrimore was very popular with them all.

"By Jove! This is a pleasant surprise, Dorrie!" said Nipper. "We didn't expect to see you until to-morrow!"

"I thought I'd just drop in and give you a look," said his lordship cheerily. "How's everybody? All going strong, eh?"

"Rather, sir!" chorused the crowd.

"Well, you look fit enough!" said Dorrie, casting his eye over the young people. "H'm! What's the excitement about?"

"We want to hear about your big flight, sir!" said Fullwood eagerly.

"Which big flight?"

"Oh, come off it, sir!" grinned Harry Gresham. "Aren't you going to fly to San Francisco?"

"Well, there has been some talk of such a project," admitted Lord Dorrimore. "I'm pretty certain that the Manners' plane can do the trick, too. Six thousand miles—non-stop. It will be rather an excellent achievement if it comes off, eh?"

"Oh, it will!" cried Irene excitedly. "I know it will!"

Dorrie chuckled.

"Well, of course, since the aeroplane was designed by your father, you won't hear of failure, will you?" he said dryly. "Not that I don't agree with you, young lady. This 'plane of your father's is the last word in perfection."

"We're going to see it to-morrow, sir!" said Jimmy Potts.

"Exactly!" agreed Lord Dorrimore. "So why should I go to the trouble of describing

it to you now? It would be simply a waste of good breath."

His lordship looked as bronzed and as fit as ever. He was tall, well-built and lithe. There was something in his manner which spoke of strength and quiet determination. Yet, at the same time, he was geniality itself. Free and easy, ever-smiling, it was impossible not to like Lord Dorrimore with a whole-hearted affection.

"This machine is something quite new in aeroplanes, isn't it, sir?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"There's never been anything like it before!" said Irene Manners promptly. "My father designed it, and it's going to revolutionise commercial flying."

Dorrie grinned.

"Hear, hear!" he said approvingly. "Not that there's anything particularly revolutionary about the design. The machine itself is an enormous monoplane, fitted with four engines, and with the cabins extending right into the hollow wing. By this method, an enormous passenger-carrying space is available, with cabins and saloons."

"And do you think the machine will really fly, sir?" asked one of the interested juniors.

"Fly!" retorted Dorrie. "My dear, poor young ass! This 'plane has already flown for thousands of miles! She's been on her trials for the last three months—although, officially, she hasn't flown at all."

"It's the safest aeroplane that was ever designed!" said Irene proudly.

"And that's the literal truth!" nodded Lord Dorrimore, becoming quite serious. "Of all the 'planes that I have ever driven, or travelled in, the Manners' plane is undoubtedly the safest. We've tried to upset her scores of times, but she simply won't lose her equilibrium."

"She's got slotted wings, hasn't she, sir?" asked Nipper interestedly.

"Well, the wings are of Mr. Manners' own design—they are self-stabilising," replied Dorrie. "In other words, the machine cannot stall. I really do believe that she is the safe aeroplane at last. And when you see her accommodation, you'll be surprised. There are cabins for fifty passengers, with dining-saloons, lounges, and everythin' that the heart could desire. Mr. Manners designed her for the cross-Atlantic service, and I have no doubt that ultimately there will be dozens of these 'planes put into service."

"But this summer she's only going on her trials, isn't she, sir?" asked Pitt.

"Well, we've got beyond the trial stages," said Dorrie. "The Manners aeroplane is an established success. The idea of a non-stop flight from England to San Francisco is merely to prove that she's capable of enormous distances. But that flight isn't to be undertaken just yet."

"Why, we thought you were starting to-morrow, Dorrie!" said Nipper.

"I'm starting to-morrow—but not for 'Frisco," replied his lordship, shaking his head. "No, young 'un. The flight which starts in the morning is merely a big Euro-

pean tour. A joy-ride. We shall take a large number of passengers aboard, and set off for Rome; then we shall have a look at Egypt, perhaps, and then dodge back to Vienna. After that, possibly, we'll go to Sweden, and so on. Personally, I have an idea that the flight will be comparatively tame."

"Ye gods and little fishes!" ejaculated Reggie Pitt. "I only wish that I could go on it, sir!"

"Same here!" echoed a dozen other voices. Dorrie grinned.

"Why, would you all like to come?" he asked genially.

"Yes, rather, sir!"

"That's all right!" said his lordship. "You shall!"



CHAPTER 3.

Something to be Excited About!

FOR a moment there was complete silence. Lord Dorrimore's words had taken everybody by surprise. But after that brief pause a number of grins appeared upon the faces of the juniors.

"Cheese it, sir!" said Fullwood. "You don't mean it!"

"But I do mean it!" said Dorrie smoothly. "Of course I mean it. If any of you youngsters want to come along on this flight—why, you're welcome!"

"But—but— Not really, Dorrie?" asked Nipper tensely. "Not honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!" said Dorrie, grinning.

"Good gad!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne, allowing his eyeglass to drop out of his eye. "I mean to say, odds surprises and shocks! You don't absolutely mean to tell us, dear old sportsman, that we can whizz off tomorrow on the dashed plane, buzzing hither and thither, and so forth?"

"It's up to you, of course," replied his lordship. "If you don't want to come, you needn't come. But as far as I'm concerned, the more the merrier!"

They were all amazed—excited and staggered. Lord Dorrimore's cool pronouncement had knocked them off their balance.

"Why, it's simply glorious!" said Winnie Pitt breathlessly. "It's—it's too good to be true!"

"Just what I was thinking, sis!" agreed Reggie.

"What about our parents?" put in somebody.

"But we've been with Lord Dorrimore before," said Doris Berkeley quickly. "I'm sure that my parents would agree——"

"Don't let that worry you, old girl!" chimed in Vivian Travers, with a chuckle. "It may interest you to know that Dorrie has been in communication with all sorts of parents. He received official permission days ago—even before we left St. Frank's."

"What!"

"Fact!" grinned Travers. "Dorrie and I fixed it up together."

"You—you scheming bounder!" said Handforth, grabbing Travers and swinging him round. "This is one of your plots, isn't it?"

"Guilty, my lord!"

"And you never told us anything about it!" roared Handforth.

"Not a word!" replied Travers. "The fact is, I didn't want to say anything, in case of disappointments. But I invited all you fellows to come here for the Bank Holiday, and at the same time Dorrie wrote round to the various homes and hearths. Result—plain sailing for the lot of us. If we all want to go, we can go."

"By jingo! This is simply marvellous!" said Church, in amazement. "I—I can't believe that my people have agreed!"

"But they have!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I wouldn't issue an invitation like this unless I had full parental authority. Not me! I'm not taking any risks!"

"You're a brick, sir!" ejaculated Castleton delightedly. "Of course, we'll all go!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Our delight in the journey will be magnificent and stupendous!" said Hussi Kahn. "And our thanks for the honourable invitation are of such magnitude that they cannot be expressed in the insignificant words that are at our command."

"Well said, Hussi, old man!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Dorrie!"

The cheers were given with tremendous gusto, and in the middle of them Mr. Travers came up, laughing.

"So the secret's out, eh?" he smiled. "Well, I'm glad to hear it! I suppose they're all going on this trip with you, Lord Dorrimore, eh?"

"Every one of them, I imagine!" replied Dorrie dryly.

Naturally, the excitement was tremendous. The circus had faded into insignificance. Quite a number of the fellows had no desire to go—even though they would meet their schoolfellows, Johnny and Bertie Onions. They thought of nothing but the great flight now. A tour round Europe—perhaps touching Egypt, and the outskirts of Asia. It was a wonderful programme.

It was just like Dorrie to leave it until the last moment—to make his plans in secret, and then to spring his surprise. But on this occasion he had had the connivance of Vivian Travers, who was famous at St. Frank's for his scheming.

None of the parents had offered the slightest resistance when the proposition had been put before them. They knew that they could trust Lord Dorrimore. He was a millionaire several times over, and it was an absolute certainty that he would give his youthful guests a very wonderful time.

Moreover, the Manners aeroplane was no freak machine; it had been proved and tested. By many experts, it was declared to be far safer than any railway train. This particular

machine was the first of a great fleet that was being constructed, and as there was no wild-cat scheme afoot, for breaking world's long-distance records, or going off into the wilds, the parents of the various fellows and girls had been only too willing to give their consent.

It would have been quite different if Dorrie had suggested taking this particular party with him on his proposed non-stop flight to San Francisco. Safe as this would be, there was, nevertheless, the Atlantic crossing to be considered—and the Atlantic crossing, no matter how perfect the machine, was not without its hazards.

The proposed flight would be a mere pleasure cruise, with an aerodrome always within comparatively easy reach. Moreover, it would be overland the whole time—except, perhaps, for a trip over the Mediterranean.

Lord Dorrimore himself was quite delighted.

There was nothing he liked better than youthful society. He simply revelled in the company of schoolboys and schoolgirls. On many occasions, he had been mercilessly clipped at his club for this partiality of his; but he had only laughed. In his heart, he was nothing but a schoolboy himself.

Incidentally, it was he who had financed Irene Manners' father; it was Dorrie who had made this project possible. The great fleet of aeroplanes, now under construction, was being financed by his lordship. But he knew perfectly well that it was a safe investment. The fleet, when completed, would revolutionise commercial flying.

"We'd love to go with you on the non-stop flight to 'Frisco, sir," remarked Nipper, after tea, as he and a number of other juniors were chatting with Lord Dorrimore. "That would be a real thrill."

"Upon my word! You're not satisfied with a cruise round Europe, eh?" said Dorrie sternly.

"Oh, yes, we are, sir!" said Nipper, grinning. "But at the same time—"

"Rats!" said his lordship. "We're going for a fortnight's cruise—perhaps it'll extend to three weeks. And after that, before the summer is finally over, I shall go on this voyage across the Atlantic. We mean to give this machine a very thorough trial before she is put into public service."

"And we're honoured, Dorrie, because we're to be on board during her trials," said Reggie Pitt enthusiastically.

"Quite so!" agreed Dorrie. "But what about this circus? I thought you young people were going off to a circus this evening? Hadn't you better be starting?"

"Well, I suppose we had," admitted Nipper reluctantly. "But, somehow, the circus doesn't seem to be very important now."

But half-an-hour later—after Lord Dorrimore had taken his departure—interest in the circus was revived. With Dorrie gone, the fellows felt that a visit to the circus would be an excellent way of passing the time.



CHAPTER 4.

Professor Onions' Gigantic Circus!

"G

OOD gad!"

Archie Glenthorne uttered that ejaculation as he and a crowd of others stood

before the gigantic tent which represented the arena of Professor Onions' Circus.

It was truly a magnificent tent, and all round it there were other tents, to say nothing of gaily-coloured caravans. Bunting was flying everywhere in the evening sunshine, and there was a general atmosphere of gaiety and lightheartedness.

The circus was pitched on the outskirts of Hedingstead, in a meadow close to the railway line, and although it was not yet time for the public to be admitted, crowds of small boys were standing about in the road, watching with awe.

They were envious, too, when the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls walked boldly into the meadow, and strolled about as though they owned the whole show.

"Hallo, you chaps!" came a cheery hail. "This way, girls! Jolly pleased to see you all!"

"Good old Johnny!"

Johnny Onions came hurrying forward to greet his guests. Johnny belonged to the Remove at St. Frank's; he and his brother, Bertie, were prominent members of the West House. But Bertie was very seldom in the forefront, for he was a quiet, silent sort of fellow. Johnny was the acrobat—the tight-rope walker.

"Are you going to perform to-night, Onions?" asked Fullwood, with interest, after the greetings had been disposed of.

"No, worse luck!" said Johnny, shaking his head. "Bertie and I are just outsiders now. Dad says that the circus has grown so much that there's no need for any of us to perform. But what does that matter? We'd love to do some turns!"

Professor Onions himself came up, smiling genially.

"What's that?" he exclaimed boisterously. "What's that? No, Johnny, my boy, no more circus performing for you—or for Bertie. Things ain't the same as they were in the old days. I can afford to engage the finest talent of Europe."

"That doesn't say much for us, dad!" protested Johnny.

His father chuckled.

"You're both very clever—and why shouldn't you be, considering who your father is?" he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "In my young days, wasn't I the star acrobat in a dozen circuses? Well, well! We won't go back as far as that! There's no need for any of you youngsters to perform now. Business is booming."

Professor Onions was a regular showman—genial, bluff, and a gentleman to the fingertips.

Tessa Love soon joined the party, and she was made the big fuss of by the Moor View girls.

"There's utterly no need for my sons, and for my adopted daughter, to live in these caravans," said the professor, with a touch of gruffness in his voice. "They could just as well live in the best hotel in the town. But there! Young people will be young people—and I suppose these caravans have a certain fascination for them."

"I don't wonder at it, sir!" said Handforth enthusiastically. "By George! They're not ordinary caravans! I wouldn't mind living in one like this myself!"

"It would be too gorgeous for words!" said Irene.

There were two splendidly-equipped caravans, standing fairly close together. One of them belonged to Johnny and Bertie; and the other was owned by Tessa. A good half-hour was spent by the visitors, examining the caravans inside and out, and the youthful owners were much gratified.

"You're going to see a very special show this evening," remarked the professor, after he had escorted all his little guests into one of the best "boxes" in the auditorium. "And I rather think it will be particularly interesting to you, young man!" he added, smiling at Hussi Kahn.

"In what way, dear sir, will it be of such entertainment to me?" asked the Indian boy.

"Well, you are going to see the Chandra Magicians," replied the professor, rubbing his hands together. "And I venture to state that the Chandra Magicians will surprise this little town! Such a turn is unprecedented in a circus. Until quite recently, the Chandra Magicians were performing at one of the most exclusive entertainment houses in the West End of London."

"Yes, sir, I seem to have heard of them," said Nipper thoughtfully. "They're pretty marvellous, aren't they?"

"Extraordinary!" declared the professor. "This will be their first performance in my arena. It seems that their engagement in London is over, and as they are anxious to see a little of the English countryside, they asked to appear in my circus."

"Why, sir, did they propose the engagement themselves?" inquired Nipper.

"Surprising enough, they did!" replied the professor. "Their agent came to me only on Saturday, and in less than an hour the details were fixed up. I need hardly tell you that I was delighted. I had never imagined that such an exclusive turn would condescend to appear in my humble tent."

"Not so humble, either, sir!" said Handforth, looking up at the gigantic dome.

"I was speaking figuratively," said the professor. "A circus, after all, is hardly regarded, nowadays, as a high-class type of entertainment. Yet I am convinced that circuses will one day come into their own

again. And I am doing my utmost to popularise the refined and artistic circus show."

Before long, the professor had to go off, for the public was now being admitted, and there was bustle and activity going on all round.

It was Bank Holiday, and the crowds were full of the Bank Holiday spirit. Everybody was joyful and merry. Hedingstead had had one or two other circuses during the summer, but none of them was to be compared to this enormous show. Professor Onion's Circus was famed throughout the length and breadth of the land. It was the greatest circus now touring.

Incidentally the professor was no professor at all. The adoption of that prefix was merely a little conceit of his—more for the sake of effect than anything else. For Professor Onions was one of the most modest of men.

Hussi Kahn, who had been bland and smiling all the day, was now looking somewhat thoughtful. Perhaps the change in him was caused by the knowledge that he was about to see some of his own countrymen in a magical act.

Not that Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn had any faith in "Indian magic." Hussi was a very modern youth; he was the younger son of the enormously rich Maharajah of Kurpana—one of the most splendid of the far-distant Indian provinces. And he had little or no faith in the so-called "magic" that was practised by some of his compatriots.

Yet he seldom had the chance of seeing or talking with any of his own countrymen. Perhaps he would not even have the chance now—since these Indian performers would probably be barred from speaking to him, owing to some rigid law of caste. For while he was of the aristocracy they, no doubt, belonged to the humbler people. In India, the laws of caste are extraordinarily strict.



CHAPTER 5.

The Chandra Magicians!

J

OLLY good!" said Handforth enthusiastically.

"Yes, rather!"

"Priceless, laddies,

—absolutely priceless!"

"Hear, hear!"

The St. Frank's fellows were lavish in their praise. The circus programme was nearing its conclusion, and, from the very first moment, the show had been a long round of excitement and fun. Not for a single instant had the interest flagged.

"It's the best circus we've ever seen!" declared Irene firmly.

"You ought to feel proud, Johnny, for belonging to such a splendid show!" remarked Doris, turning to Johnny Onions. "And you, Tessa, too."



Lord Dorrimore's announcement that they were to go for a trip round Europe was received by the boys and girls with tremendous excitement. "Three cheers for Dorrie!" called somebody, and the cheers were given with gusto.

They both laughed.

"We've always been proud of dad!" said Tessa quietly.

She was the professor's adopted daughter, and she had always regarded Johnny and Bertie Onions as her brothers. At such times as this, all three of them longed to be back in the arena—back on the trapeze, and on the tightrope. But their father was firm; he insisted that they were at school, and therefore they must confine their energies to their education.

Yet they always managed to "keep their hands in"; they were always practising, and keeping themselves fit. As Johnny had sometimes remarked, "one never knew," and one day, perhaps, their father would be glad of their skill. Things might not always be rosy with him.

"Hallo!" said Handforth, with interest. "The Chandra Magicians next! Look lively, Hussi, old son! This ought to be something special for you!"

But Hussi Kahn shook his head.

"I have no faith in these magicians," he replied. "They are but men, just the same as other tricksters. Possibly they will give a magnificent performance of wonderment, but beyond that what can one say?"

Except for a little floweriness of talk, Hussi Kahn's English was quite ordinary. He had not been the same when he had first

come to St. Frank's; but long association with the juniors had knocked most of the peculiarities out of him.

In an impressive voice, Profession Onions announced the Chandra Magicians from the centre of the ring. He explained that this was the first time that the celebrated Indians had performed in a circus, and he was justly proud of placing such artists before the public. And so, with much solemnity, the Chandra Magicians were introduced. They came into the ring slowly, looking very magnificent in their silken robes. There were three of them; all dark brown, and all bearded. Nipper, as he eyed them closely, had an idea that the beards were false. Not that there was anything peculiar in this. It was doubtless part of their stock-in-trade to pretend to be bearded fakirs.

Not a word was spoken at first. The Indians set to work with impressive deliberation. A basket was brought into the ring, also a long pole. Opening the basket, the chief magician allowed the audience to see that it was completely empty. Then he spoke a few words in his native tongue, and his companions clapped their hands.

"This is indeed interesting!" murmured Hussi Kahn wonderingly.

"I can't see anything startling yet!" said Handforth, with a grunt.

"I was referring to the language," murmured Hussi Kahn. "This man spoke in the language of Kurpana—or Rishnir, our neighbouring province. Both states use the same tongue. But yet their tongue is different from that of the Central Provinces, or of Southern India. I am interested."

"I hope we shall be—soon!" said Reggie Pitt dryly.

A small boy now came into the arena—a dark brown boy, but it was questionable whether he was Indian, too. Possibly, he was only browned for the occasion. But in his rich robes he certainly looked the part.

He was tucked into the basket, and then the basket was raised to the top of the long pole—which was firmly set into the ground.

Again one of the Indians clapped his hands.

The lid of the basket opened, and the boy showed himself to the audience. Then he closed the lid. The chief magician muttered curious incantations, and very abruptly he clapped his hands loudly, and dramatically pointed to the basket, perched up there at the top of the pole.

The other Indians quickly operated the ropes, and the basket came running down. The lid was whisked open, and nothing but emptiness was seen. The boy had vanished—in mid-air. There, under those glaring lights, without any curtains or draperies, the thing had been accomplished.

A gasp went up from the audience, and then came a big round of applause.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" murmured Nipper.

"Pretty good, eh?" said Handforth. "Of course, the kid was taken out of the basket while he was in the air. I can't quite see how it was done—"

"Rats!" murmured Nipper. "He's in the basket still!"

"What!"

"One of the crudest tricks imaginable!" said Nipper, in surprise. "It's been done to death on the ordinary music-hall stage. Can't you see that that basket is twice as big as the boy? It's got a false bottom or something, and he simply slipped into it."

Nipper was probably right. The basket was carried out by the circus attendants, and before the audience had a chance to think over the trick another one was on the go.

This proved to be just as commonplace as the first. Professor Onions, standing back in the entrance, was looking slightly surprised. He had been expecting something much better than this. The Chandra Magicians had a great name; but, so far, they had performed nothing but the most ordinary of illusions.

There was now a display of sleight-of-hand, and similar trickery. Finally the chief magician stepped forward from the others, and raised his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in perfect English, "we are now about to perform our most wonderful act of magic. But in this we require a member of the audience to

assist us. Will somebody be generous enough to come forward?"

"Oh, the usual kind of stuff!" murmured Reggie Pitt.

Nobody accepted the offer, and the magician pointed straight at Hussi Kahn.

"You, perhaps, will consent?" he suggested. "For I perceive that you are a member of my own race. Your blood is my blood. Would it not be fitting for you to assist?"

"Go on, Hussi!" said Handforth, grinning.

"Yes, try your luck, old man!" said Fullwood.

Hussi Kahn promptly arose.

"If it will be of any assistance, I am agreeable and willing," he said, with a smile.

He went into the ring, amid the applause from the audience. And, in taking that simple action, Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn took a far more serious step than he ever dreamed of!



CHAPTER 6.

The Mystic Symbol!

THE illusion which followed was rather wonderful to the majority of the people in the great tent, but to Nipper it was elementary. Many of the other St. Frank's fellows, too, were disappointed. They had seen such illusions on many occasions at the London theatres. The Chandra Magicians, after all, were less clever than the usual run of such "turns."

Hussi Kahn was led into the centre of the ring, and then the circus attendants brought forward a big cabinet. Two of the magicians opened the cabinet, revealing the fact that it was quite empty. In the meantime, the magician-in-chief stood by, standing close to Hussi Kahn.

And the latter had a curious sparkle in his eyes. He was looking at a curiously-designed symbol which was glittering on the robe of his companion.

"You are from Kurpana?" he inquired, in a low voice, using his native tongue.

"It would be better, youth, for you to remain silent!" replied the bearded Indian.

"Or perhaps you are from Rishnir?" insisted Hussi.

"It is well said that he who asks no question is told no lie!" retorted the other. "It is well that you should assist in this magic—"

"And it is well that my tongue should remain silent regarding the nature of this magic!" said Hussi, with some contempt. "For, in truth, your magic is no magic at all! There are men in Kurpana who can teach you much."

For an instant the chief magician turned his flashing eyes upon Hussi Kahn, but he made no reply. And Hussi was now gazing

at a quaint ring upon his companion's finger. It bore the same symbol as the robe.

It seemed that the Indian boy was about to ask more questions, but he had no opportunity. He was taken forwards, and led into the cabinet. Then the curtains were drawn, and the doors were closed.

"Old stuff!" said Handforth gruffly. "I've seen this dozens of times!"

And he was right.

When the cabinet was opened, Hussi Kahn had completely vanished. And while the unsophisticated members of the audience were clapping, Hussi suddenly appeared on the other side of the ring, from behind two or three of the attendants.

This concluded the performance of the Chandra Magicians, and the ring was soon filled with trotting horses.

Johnny Onions, who had joined his father, saw that the latter was looking thoughtful and slightly annoyed.

"They are very poor!" said the professor tartly. "Had I known that their performance was so ordinary I should not have engaged them. Fortunately, the audience is not too *blasé*."

"Oh, I think they went down all right, dad," said Johnny. "At the same time, they're nothing to write home about. I wonder how they got their name?"

"I cannot understand it!" replied Professor Onions. "And yet, they are not the first. A London reputation is worth much money."

Hussi Kahn was back in his seat, and he was now silent and serious.

"How was it done, old son?" whispered Harry Gresham.

The Indian boy looked at him abstractedly.

"It was crude!" he replied briefly.

"Yes—but how?"

"Is it necessary to explain?" said Hussi. "Later, it will do. Yes?"

He fell silent again. There was a most remarkable change in the young Indian prince. Not only was he thoughtful, but his eyes were troubled and filled with a sort of dull wonder.

Even when the show was over, and the party had started off for Stapleton Towers, Hussi was still in that same silent mood.

It was all the more noticeable, because he was usually so bright and cheery. There was ever a flashing smile on his face, a cheery word from him. But now he was so different. Most of the fellows spoke to him, but he did not smile in return. He only answered in the briefest way.

"Something's happened to the chap!" said Nipper keenly. "Ever since he had some words with that chief magician, he's been like this. They're people of his own blood—or, at least, they come either from Kurpana or Rishnir. Why the dickens is he so strange now?"

"We've got to find out!" said Handforth firmly. "We're not going to let the chap mope about like this. If those Indians have been bothering him, we'll jolly well know the reason why!"

But after the Towers had been reached Hussi Kahn was no different.

"It is good of you to concern yourselves over me," he said, in reply to a number of questions. "But no purpose can be served by these inquiries. I can tell you nothing."

"But those men?" said Handforth. "What did they say to you?"

"They said nothing that I can particularly remember."

"Then why are you so jolly queer?"

"I am distressed that I should be queer," said Hussi Kahn, with concern. "I did not know it. Yet I feel—How can I explain? I feel—different. I do not know why, but, nevertheless, there is something strange."

"I believe those rotters hypnotised you, or something!" said Handforth darkly.

"Do you, then, believe in this mysticism?" asked Hussi Kahn, with a ghost of a smile returning to his face. "Hypnotism, good Handforth, is not so easy. I doubt if hypnotism is more than a myth. No, I am not hypnotised."

"Then what's the matter with you?"

"There is nothing the matter with me," replied Hussi Kahn quietly. "Can you not see that I am just myself?"

"Leave him alone, Handy!" urged Church. "Can't the chap be thoughtful if he wants to? I expect those men, being Indians, reminded him of his own country. Don't bother him!"

And Handforth had to give it up. It was certainly a thankless task to question the Indian boy. But there was not the slightest doubt that he was vastly changed. And after supper he was even more listless and silent.

He went to his own bed-room almost like a fellow in a dream; he had not even said "Good-night" to any of the others. And they, for their part, allowed him to go off.

"There's something rather fishy about it," said Nipper, frowning. "I don't like it, either. I wonder what on earth those Indians did to him?"

"We ought to make a thorough investigation!" said Handforth firmly. "It's no good messing about, you chaps. I vote we go back to the circus, see those Indians, and get the truth out of them!"

"Rats!"

"Cheese it, Handy!"

"Well, I'm going, anyway!" declared Handforth. "And Church and McClure are going, too!"

"Are they?" said Church, looking at Mac.

"They are not!" said McClure promptly.

"Why, you silly asses—"

"Well, well!" said Vivian Travers genially. "We mustn't quarrel, Handy, dear old fellow. Leave it until the morning. Then, perhaps, Hussi Kahn will be himself again. It is not our business, and why should we interest ourselves?"

And Edward Oswald Handforth was induced to go to bed. Not that this affected in any way his determination to "investigate."



CHAPTER 7.

Handforth Means Business!

"RUBBISH!" said Handforth sternly.

He had just finished undressing, and Church and McClure

were already in bed. As it was usual for them to sleep in one room at St. Frank's, Travers had arranged so that they occupied a bed-room to themselves here at the Towers.

"Sheer rubbish!" said Handforth, with a grunt. "Why can't we go down to the circus, and see those beastly Indians? I don't like the way they've upset old Hussi. He's not the same chap since he went to the circus. Something's happened to him!"

"But, as Travers said, it's not our business, is it?" murmured Church. "Why not settle down, Handy? Don't forget about tomorrow. We're starting off on that big round-Europe trip——"

"I'm not so selfish as you chaps, thank goodness!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "I don't like to see old Hussi mooning about, and looking so worried."

"Yes, but, dash it, what can we do?" asked McClure indignantly. "Hussi won't answer our questions, and I don't see that we can do any good if we go to the circus. Those Indian chaps will be just as silent. You know what they're like."

"We ought to investigate!" said Handforth stubbornly.

Church and McClure thought it advisable to say as little possible. In fact, they snored gently, pretending to be asleep. They knew, from past experience, that Handforth had "a bee in his bonnet" on the subject of investigation. He fancied himself as an amateur detective, and at the slightest excuse he would practice his "art." He was the biggest blunderer under the sun, and, if he started any activity, he would only land himself into trouble.

"There's something rummy about the whole affair!" he said, as he sat on the edge of his own bed. "And the trouble is, we don't know what the dickens to make of it. Hussi went into the ring, with those other Indians, and he came back with a squiffy look in his eye. They must have told him something—and he as good as admitted that they're men of his own blood. Well, everybody knows that there are hundreds of different tribes in India. Isn't it a bit queer that these chaps should come from Rishnir, or whatever the name of the outlandish place is?"

Two gentle snores formed the only answer.

"Hey!" bawled Handforth. "I'm talking to you chaps!"

Church blinked, and turned over.

"Dry up, Handy!" he mumbled. "We're asleep!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow!" added Church. "Let's get as much rest as possible."

As a matter of fact, Church and McClure did not feel like sleep at all. They were tremendously excited about the morrow, and Handforth was, too. But he was further intrigued by the little mystery of Hussi Kahn. Between the two, he found that sleep was out of the question.

After he had put the light out, he tossed about in bed, thinking first of Hussi Kahn, then of the big aeroplane trip. In this way, two hours elapsed, and midnight had long since chimed out from the great grandfather's clock in the hall.

At last, Handforth decided that action was the only possible way out of this deadlock.

"It's no good!" he said firmly. "I'm blessed if I see why I should be awake all night. I've got to do something!"

This time, Church and McClure really were asleep, and their heavy breathing told Handforth that it was useless to address them.

So he decided to slip off to Hussi Kahn's bed-room, and to have a quiet, heart-to-heart talk with the Indian boy.

"Yes, that's the wheeze!" he told himself. "Funny thing I didn't think of it before! I daresay that Hussi will confide in me—he knows that he can trust me. He didn't like to tell all the others—but I'm different."

With these thoughts in his mind, he crept out of the bed-room, slipped along the corridor, and went to Hussi Kahn's bed-room. In deference to the Indian boy's princely rank, he had been given an apartment all to himself. When Handforth crept in, he found Hussi Kahn sound asleep.

The summer moonlight was streaming through the window, which stood wide open, and it fell in a slanting ray across Hussi's peaceful face. Handforth sat down on the edge of the bed, and gently shook the Indian boy's shoulder.

"Wake up, Hussi, old son!" murmured the visitor. "Sorry to disturb you, but—— Come on! Wake up, you ass!"

Handforth shook harder, but Hussi Kahn still remained in a deep, sound sleep.

It never occurred to the leader of Study D that this action of his was not only inconsiderate, but bordering on the outrageous. To disturb a fellow, in the middle of the night, in order to pester him with personal questions, was decidedly thick. But Handforth really had no intention of being inquisitive.

His motive was excellent, even if his methods were questionable. He wanted to be quite certain that Hussi Kahn was safe and sound. For Edward Oswald's mind, at the slightest provocation, immediately jumped to melodramatic conclusions.

For once, perhaps, he was not far wrong!

For there was something very strange about the still form of Hussi Kahn. He was well known at St. Frank's as a light sleeper. He was generally one of the first down, for it was his practice to jump out of bed at the first sound of the rising-bell.

But now he remained like a log.

In spite of Handforth's vigorous shaking, he gave no sign of wakefulness. He remained there, with his head on the pillow, breathing evenly. Handforth stared at him in wonder at first, and then a light of alarm crept into his eyes.

"Hussi, old man!" panted Handforth. "Why don't you wake up? What's the matter with you?"

This time he went to work in earnest. He seized both of the sleeper's shoulders, and he lifted him clean up. He shook him until his head rolled about grotesquely on his shoulders.

"Hey!" gasped Handforth. "Why don't you wake up, Hussi?"

He paused in his efforts, breathing hard. Hussi's head had sunk down on to his chest, and he remained limp and inanimate in Handforth's grasp. It wasn't merely a question of being sound asleep. Hussi Kahn was unconscious in quite a different way.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Handforth breathlessly. "I knew it! There's something fishy about this! There was something fishy about it at the very start! Those rotten Indians at the circus must have done something to him!"

He allowed the Indian boy to fall back again upon the pillow, and he sat there, staring at him. In the pale moonlight, there was something unreal and rather ghostly about Hussi Kahn's appearance. He wasn't pale—because it was difficult for a brown boy to be pale. Yet his face seemed somehow changed.

"He's been drugged!" gasped Handforth, starting to his feet. "I'd better fetch help! There's been some dirty work afoot! By George! I'm going to investigate the case, too—and find out what it all means!"

And then, at that second, he thought he caught sight of something on the other side of the dark room. A slight movement—just a glimpse of a slim, shiny limb. Then it vanished.

A sound came to Handforth's ears—the tiniest creak. He sat there, every nerve on the stretch, his heart thumping madly within him!

CHAPTER 8.

The Figure in the Night!

HANDFORTH shook himself.

"Pull yourself together, you silly idiot!" he muttered

under his breath. "There's nothing there! It's only your silly imagination!"

The silence was oppressive. Outside, the summer night was still—with an unearthly stillness. Not a tree stirred in the intense calm. From a distant point of the parkland came the cry of an owl, and it was echoed by the wailing sound of some other night creature.

But here, within this bed-room, everything was eerily quiet. Even the sound of Hussi

Kahn's breathing had merged itself into the intent stillness until it was hardly noticeable.

Handforth got to his feet, and crept across the room to the door. He wanted to shout out—to call for help. But something seemed to check him; before he made any outcry, he must get outside, into the corridor. This room was filled with some unaccountable mystery.

Creak!

Handforth spun round with a gasp as he heard a board creaking within a yard of him. Then his jaw dropped, and his eyes grew larger. Between him and the window there was a figure—dim, ghostly, unreal.

He only glimpsed it for a split second; a lithe, slim figure. But Handforth did not run. He did not make a dash for the door, and escape.

Instead, he made a sudden dash at the mysterious intruder.

Thud!

He hit against something—a soft, warm body. And in the same second he grappled.

"Got you!" he panted. "You—you rotter! Who the dickens— Oh, my hat! What the — How the —"

Handforth was not only surprised, but he was stupefied. For an instant he had touched the figure, but it wriggled out of his hold with the agility of a snake. It seemed to him that the very limbs of the intruder were greased and slippery.

With an involuntary shudder, Handforth experienced a sensation of wrestling with an enormous eel. The thing had slithered out of his grasp without the slightest effort.

And now it had gone!

He knew not where—but it had undoubtedly gone. He looked round blankly, dazedly. There was nothing whatever in the room—nothing but that moonbeam, slanting in through the open window. He could see Hussi's face, full in the moonlight, and—

Something touched his arm, and he spun round, with a loud gasp.

He was gripped and pulled over. Not one figure, but two were on him now. He felt himself falling backwards, down on to the floor. He struck the carpet, and his horror was intensified. For he could feel those slippery limbs all over him. He was being knelt upon—he was being held down.

"Help!" he roared. "Hi! Rescue—"

But his outcry was feeble. He had intended that shout to be a powerful roar, but something was clutching at his throat, and the sound, in reality, was only a faint kind of gurgle.

In all truth, there had been excellent reason for Handforth's suspicions!

Now that the first shock was over, he found his wits returning to him. He had read sensational stories of Indian dacoits—desperate robbers who went about their nefarious work in a naked condition, except for a loin-cloth. It was a general practice—in the stories that Handforth had read, at all events—for these dacoits to oil their bodies, so that in the event of a struggle they could slip away. There was, of course, excellent ground for such

stories, for it is a well-known fact that Indian criminals sometimes resort to this expedient.

Here was a genuine example of the sensational dodge!

For Handforth's assailants were, without question, Indians. Furthermore, they were practically unclothed, and their bodies and limbs were greased.

Handforth had never felt so helpless in all his life.

He was a born fighter, and, in normal circumstances, he would have put up a great struggle. But now he found himself helpless. When he tried to grip, his fingers slithered away. His assailants, on the other hand, had all the advantage. They held him down, and they prevented him from making any outcry. And they themselves remained eerily quiet.

Something was pulled over his face and drawn tight. It was a sheet, and Handforth found it impossible to make any outcry, other than a mumbled gurgle deep down in his throat.

While he continued to struggle, he was wrapped in a blanket, and wrapped in such a fashion that any movement was impossible. His legs were locked behind him, and his arms were held straight down to his sides. He was trussed like a chicken.

Dazed, bewildered, and half suffocated, he felt himself being carried bodily. He thudded on the floor, and he thought he heard a door closing. As a matter of fact, he had been placed in a deep cupboard, at the far end of Hussi Kahn's bed-room, and the door had been closed and locked.

And then those mysterious figures went to the door of the room, listened, and a few whispered words passed between them.

Then they crossed towards Hussi Kahn's unconscious figure.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "It isn't time to get up yet. It's still night——"

"Handforth's gone!" said Church.

"Gone! Gone where?"

"How should I know?" said Church. "I woke up just now, and when I looked at Handy's bed I saw that it was empty."

"That's nothing," said McClure, yawning. "You know what an ass he is! I suppose he's excited, and he's probably gone for a walk, or something."

"It's far more likely that he's gone down to Hedingstead, to that circus," said Church gruffly. "You know what he was saying before we went to sleep! He thinks there's some mystery about Hussi Kahn."

"My hat, yes!" said McClure, becoming more wakeful. "Well, we can't do anything, can we?"

"We can go after him."

"Not likely!" said Mac firmly. "Blow him!"

"Wait a minute, though!" murmured Church. "He couldn't have gone out, after all. Here are all his clothes! He's gone off somewhere in his pyjamas!"

"That's nothing!" said McClure. "He's capable of going to Hedingstead in his pyjamas! Still, I'll admit it looks as though he's still somewhere in the house. Perhaps we'd better turn out and search for him. Rats to the silly ass!"

They found their slippers, got into their dressing-gowns, and ventured out. But once they were in the corridor they did not know which way to go. So they paused against a window, and held a brief consultation.

"We'd better go easy, you know!" whispered Church. "If Mr. Travers came along, and saw us out here like this, he'd wonder what the dickens was the matter."

"Well, we can explain, can't we?" said Mac. "We can say that Handy is wandering about somewhere. Hadn't we better look into one of the bath-rooms, as a start? He may have gone for a drink."

"That's not likely. There's plenty of water in the bed-room."

While they were talking, a door opened, and the next second a figure came towards them.

"Here he is!" said McClure, with relief.

"Handy, you ass, where the dickens——"

"I'm not Handy," said a voice. "What on earth are you chaps doing out here in the middle of the night?"

The newcomer was Nipper.

"We're looking for Handy," said Church. "We thought we'd found him for a tick. Haven't you seen anything of him?"

"Of course I haven't," said Nipper. "But I woke up, and I heard footsteps out here. What's the matter? Why isn't Handy in bed?"

"It's no good asking us," said Church gruffly. "I woke up, and found that he'd gone. But before we went to sleep he was talking about Hussi Kahn. He suggested going down to the circus, and having a jaw with those Indian magicians."

"We'd better go along to Hussi Kahn's bed-room," said Nipper crisply. "If Handy's



CHAPTER 9.

The Alarm!

WALTER CHURCH sat up in bed and stared.

"My only sainted aunt!" he muttered.

He had been awakened some minutes earlier, and had stared unseeingly at the ceiling. He had been very restless ever since he had first dropped off. He had dreamed about flying, about menacing Indians, and somehow the Indians and the flying had become mixed. The truth was Church was excited, and normal sleep was difficult.

Now he sat up, fully awake. The moonlight was streaming through the big window, and it fell across Handforth's bed. Church was astonished to see that the bed was empty.

"I say, Mac!" he exclaimed, leaping out of bed and tugging at McClure's shoulder. "Just a minute, old man! Wake up!"

McClure awoke and blinked.

gone anywhere, he's gone there. Oh, my goodness! What a chap he is!"

They were a little uncertain as to the Indian boy's bed-room, but before they had time to make any mistakes another door opened, and Vivian Travers strolled out and joined them.

"Well, well!" murmured Travers, with characteristic coolness. "Night marauders, eh? I'll guarantee that Handforth is at the bottom of all this!"

"Then you're right!" said Nipper. "We're looking for him now."

He explained the circumstances, and Travers nodded.

"I haven't been exceedingly sleepy to-night," he admitted. "Fact is, I'm more or less excited about to-morrow."

"I didn't know you could be excited," said Nipper.

"Oh, yes, quite easily," said Travers. "I don't show it, perhaps, but I'm just as human as anybody else. And now, for the love of Samson, let's find out what Handforth has been up to."

He led the way to Hussi Kahn's bed-room. Handforth himself had found it easily enough, because he had followed the Indian boy to his bed-room at the hour of retiring, hoping to get some information from him.

Travers led the way in, and he came to a halt just inside the door, his face expressive of astonishment and doubt.

"Hallo! What's this?" he murmured. "H'm! It doesn't look any too good!"

The other three juniors crowded in, and they saw why Vivian Travers had expressed himself so gravely. Hussi Kahn's bed was empty!

The sheets and the blankets were thrown back in disorder, but of the Indian boy himself there was no sign. The window stood wide open, and there were some clothes on a chair near the bed.

Nipper sniffed the air sharply.

"What's the matter?" asked Travers, looking curiously at Nipper.

"Don't you notice anything?" asked the Remore skipper. "There's a peculiar kind of odour in here—something like oil. Pungent oil—with a curious reek about it."

"Now you come to mention it, yes!" said Church, sniffing in turn. "But why bother about it? Where's Hussi? And where's Handy?"

"Well, neither of them are here," said Travers, as he stood looking round. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to have some light on the subject."

As he spoke he turned the switch, and the bed-room became flooded with electric light. By this time all the juniors were aware that their hearts were beating more rapidly than usual. There was no direct evidence of anything sensational; but there was more than a hint that unusual events had been taking place in the dead of the night.

"Here are Hussi's clothes," said McClure, as he stood looking at the chair beside the

bed. "What on earth can it mean? Both he and Handy have gone off without any clobber!"

"Don't jump to conclusions!" said Nipper steadily. "There's no evidence that either of them have 'gone off.' I expect they're somewhere in the house. It stands to reason——"

"Listen!" interrupted Travers, holding up a hand.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The juniors looked at one another in a startled way. Those thuds were very feeble, very subdued, but there could be no doubt that they were coming from somewhere close at hand.

"Did you hear them?" whispered Travers.

"By jingo, yes!" said Church, with a gasp. "What is it? They—they seem to be coming from——"

"Yes—from that cupboard!" said Nipper, nodding.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

There was no longer any doubt. The strange, muffled sounds were coming from a cupboard on the other side of the bed-room. It seemed to the excited juniors that some half-strangled gasps accompanied those thuds, too. But they could not be sure.

But there was an easy way of setting all doubts at rest.

Nipper strode across the room, turned the key in the cupboard door, and then glanced at his companions.

"Look out!" he muttered.

He swung the door open, and a burly figure, wrapped tightly in a blanket, came tumbling out at their feet!



CHAPTER 10.

The Search!

FOR the love of Samson!" ejaculated Travers.

He and the others stared in bewilderment at the bundle, and then Nipper gave a short laugh. It was generally his way to think of some commonplace explanation, rather than jump to melodramatic conclusions.

"I'll bet this is Handy's work!" he said. "He must have come here to have a talk with Hussi Kahn, and they had a row. So Handy bundled poor Hussi Kahn into a blanket, and shoved him into this cupboard. I expect that's the explanation!"

"It sounds probable, anyway!" chuckled Travers. "Handy isn't any too particular."

With nimble fingers they unfastened the blanket. And they were considerably astonished when they found that Edward Oswald himself was the victim. He sat on the floor, red with rage and heat. He was perspiring freely, having nearly been suffocated.

"Phew!" he breathed, as the makeshift gag was taken from his mouth. "Oh, my goodness! Phoo! Whoo! Oh, crumbs!"

They allowed him to recover a little of his breath. Obviously, it was impossible for him to speak at the moment. Indeed, for nearly a minute Handforth allowed his limbs to relax, and he lay spreadeagled on the floor, breathing heavily.

"Leave him alone for half a tick!" said Nipper quietly. "Poor chap, he was nearly smothered in those blankets. It was a dirty trick to tie him up like that."

"But Hussi couldn't have done it," protested Church.

"Of course he couldn't!" agreed Nipper. "In any case, Hussi *wouldn't* do it, even if it had been possible. The people who did this were brutes!"

Handforth struggled into a sitting position. He looked at the juniors dazedly. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, his face was puffy and hot.

"Where—where are they?" he gasped. "Have you seen 'em, you fellows?"

"We've seen nothing, except you," replied Church.

"But they were here!" panted Handforth desperately. "Two or three of them! Greasy, oily Indians——"

"Oily?" put in Nipper sharply.

"Yes—as slippery as eels!" said Handforth. "I struggled with a couple of them, but I couldn't do anything! They had me down before I could even give a yell. And when I tried to grab them, they slipped away!"

Nipper was beginning to look grave.

"I wondered what that oily smell was!" he muttered. "Great Scott! Indians—with oiled bodies! I say, you fellows, this is beginning to look serious!"

"But—but I don't understand!" protested Church blankly.

"Hussi Kahn has gone!" said Nipper. "He was taken away by these Indians, I expect. And don't forget how strange Hussi was after he saw those men in the circus——"

"That's it!" broke in Handforth, recovering his wits. "Those Chandra Magicians! I'll bet they're at the bottom of it all! They've taken Hussi away! I tried to stop them, but—but——"

"Keep cool, old man!" urged Travers. "It won't do any good to get excited."

"I'm not excited!" roared Handforth. "Where's Hussi Kahn?"

"We don't know," replied Travers. "He's not in his bed, and——"

"Then they've taken him!" said Handforth, struggling to his feet. "By George! Those—those greasy rotters have pinched old Hussi! He's been kidnapped, you chaps! Don't you understand?"

"Kidnapped!" said Church and McClure, in one voice.

"Yes!"

"Oh, but hang it——"

"Don't you believe it?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, it seems such—such a rummy sort of thing!" protested Church. "I mean, it's like you see in the films! Dacoits, or whatever they're called——"

"That's it!" nodded Handforth. "Dacoits! Old Hussi has been spirited away by Indian bandits!"

"I don't think those fellows were bandits; Handy, old man," said Nipper quietly. "There's something deeper behind it all. Hussi Kahn wouldn't be taken away merely for the sake of robbery, or of ransom, or anything like that. There must be something pretty big at the back of all this!"

"That's what I'm thinking!" nodded Vivian Travers. "And I'd better run along and wake the pater. This is too serious for us to deal with. You're absolutely sure, Handy, about those greased figures, aren't you?"

"What do you mean—sure?" demanded Handforth. "Do you think I imagined it?"

"Well, no; but you're inclined to exaggerate——"

"Well, I haven't exaggerated this time!" broke in Handforth. "I came into this bedroom to have a few words with Hussi, and I couldn't wake him up."

"Oh!" said Nipper. "You didn't tell us that before, Handy. You say you couldn't wake him up?"

"No; he was like a log!"

"Then that explains why Hussi didn't interfere while the Indians were bundling you into a blanket," said Travers. "That point was puzzling me. Great Samson! What can it all mean?"

"There's a deep mystery here," said Edward Oswald tensely. "Poor old Hussi was completely unconscious—just as if he had been drugged. I expect he had been drugged, too! Those rotten Indians at the circus know something about this, I'll bet!"

"He was breathing properly, I suppose?" asked Nipper.

"Oh, yes; he only seemed to be in a very heavy sleep; and I couldn't wake him up!"

"Then he must have been doped," nodded Travers. "The question is, how the dickens was the dope administered—and when? And why in the name of all that's rummy has he been taken away?"

"Well, we shan't do any good by staying here, jabbering about the affair," said Nipper practically. "The sooner you can tell your pater, Travers, the better. And I suppose we shall have to make a search, too. With luck, we might be able to get on Hussi's track!"

Vivian Travers hurried off. Nipper went to the window, and looked out over the moonlit grounds. Everything was still and silent. It was difficult to believe that anything mysterious or dramatic had taken place so recently in this eminently respectable country residence.

"You didn't recognise these figures, I suppose, Handy?" asked Nipper, after a few moments.



Nipper swung the cupboard door open, and a burly figure, wrapped tightly in a blanket, came tumbling out at the juniors' feet.

"Recognise them?" said Handforth. "I didn't even see them! I just had an impression of shadowy figures; and then I felt their rotten, greasy bodies. Ugh! It almost makes me shudder to think of it! I can tell you, it gave me a turn!"

"Yes, I suppose it did!" agreed Nipper. "Well, Travers seems to be doing his work all right!" he added grimly. "He's not only awakening his father, but the whole household!"

And this was true enough.

Within five minutes lights were gleaming from every window of Stapleton Towers. The St. Frank's juniors were all hurrying up and down the corridors, asking questions; servants were appearing, startled and alarmed. From end to end of the great residence a bustle and activity was making itself apparent.

heard of such an astounding thing! Here—in the heart of Essex—on a quiet summer's night! To think that the boy should have been carried off in this astounding fashion!"

"Well, it's a fact, pater, and we ought to be doing something!" said Vivian pointedly. "Wouldn't it be a good idea to tell the police? Can't we ring up Hedingstead police station?"

"No, no!" said his father. "Good gracious! I don't want the Towers to be over-run by police officers at this hour of the night!"

"But something's got to be done, sir!" said Fullwood anxiously.

"Oh, absolutely!" declared Archie Glen-thorne. "I mean to say, dash it, when a chappie is absolutely spirited away from under our dashed noses, it's time for a little whizzing hither and thither, searching, and so forth."

"I'm afraid a search won't be of much use, Archie," remarked Nipper, shaking his head. "Hussi Kahn was taken away well over an hour ago, and it isn't likely that he'll still be anywhere near the premises—or in the grounds."

"Then where can he be?" asked Tommy Watson.

Mr. Travers suddenly looked up, his eyes gleaming.

CHAPTER 11.

Nelson Lee on the Job!



MR. TRAVERS was grave and agitated. "I can hardly believe it, boys!" he said, with deep concern. "It is extraordinary! I have never

"We must keep level heads, boys!" he said. "On no account must we lose our sense of proportion. This may be nothing but a joke—an absurd joke, of course. It would be foolish to fetch the police at this early stage."

"But—but those Indians, sir?" protested Handforth.

"We do not know that they were Indians!" replied Mr. Travers. "It would be simply ridiculous if we called the police in, and then found that somebody had been playing a practical joke."

"That's true enough, pater," nodded Travers. "And perhaps we'd better institute a big search straight away. Let's go all over the house, and over the grounds, too."

"Hear, hear!"

"Come on, you fellows!"

In less than five minutes, several search parties were organised. Nearly all the men-servants of the establishment were brought into the hunt. The Moor View girls had appeared, of course, but they were not allowed to take any part in the proceedings. They just waited about indoors, eager to hear of the latest developments—and somewhat indignant because they were kept in.

But this preliminary hunt was very necessary. As Mr. Travers had pointed out, there was more than a chance that the whole thing was nothing more than an ill-timed joke, and it would only be aiding the jokers if the police were called in.

However, this theory was soon knocked on the head.

Nipper and Handforth and a number of others discovered some recently-made motor-car tracks on the gravel drive. This, in itself, was not a particularly enlightening clue; but the tracks veered off the drive near the house, and for some distance they were plainly visible on the grass.

"This looks very significant, you chaps!" said Nipper, as he stood staring down at the grass in the moonlight. "A car came along here not so long ago—and it was driven off the gravel and on to the turf."

"For the sake of silence, eh?" asked Handforth.

"Obviously."

"What about the engine?"

"There are plenty of motor-cars that are almost silent," said Nipper. "Anyhow, this car came along, and was driven on to the grass. You can see where it stood for some time—there are clear depressions here, on the turf. And it went back the same way as it came. If you look closely enough, you can see the double tracks."

"By George! You're right!" declared Handforth eagerly. "But what does it mean?"

"Simply that the car waited here while the kidnappers got into the house, and grabbed old Hussi," said Travers. "Having got him, they bundled him into the car, and drove off. There's no practical joke about it, dear old fellows."

Mr. Travers came up at this minute, and he was vastly concerned when he learned of this latest evidence. He, too, was forced to the conclusion that there was something really dramatic and important about Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn's disappearance.

"Then it will have to be the police, after all!" he said reluctantly. "And yet I don't like calling them in. What can they do? And think of the publicity!"

"I'll tell you what, sir!" said Nipper keenly. "Why not ring up my guv'nor?"

"Ahem! I'm afraid I do not quite understand," said Mr. Travers impatiently. "I fail to see how your father can——"

"No, not my father, sir," said Nipper. "Possibly you don't know it, but my guardian is Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective."

"Why, good heavens, yes!" said Mr. Travers, with a start. "You're Hamilton, are you not? Nipper? Splendid! For the moment, I had overlooked the fact that I had such a distinguished young gentleman under my roof! Do you think that Mr. Lee would consent to——"

"Of course he would, sir!" broke in Nipper. "You're on the 'phone, aren't you? Well, the guv'nor's at his place in Gray's Inn Road just now. He generally goes up to London during the holidays. We can soon get through to him, and he'll be here within a couple of hours!"

"I will ring him up at once!" said Mr. Travers promptly. "An excellent suggestion, my boy! Without wishing to disparage the local police, I must nevertheless frankly say that I would greatly prefer Mr. Nelson Lee's assistance."

He hurried indoors, and within five minutes he was talking to the famous Housemaster-detective over the telephone. Nelson Lee heard the brief facts, and he promised to start off in his racing car at once.

"At this time of night the roads are all clear and, barring accidents, I shall be with you within ninety minutes," he promised. "In the meantime, Mr. Travers, I hope that you will leave everything undisturbed."

"Would it be advisable to inform the Heddingstead police?"

"No; I think you had better take no action whatever," replied Lee. "I fancy that this is a matter well outside the jurisdiction of the police."

Mr. Travers rang off, and everybody was pleased when they heard that Nelson Lee was on his way. Nobody went to bed; they hung about in the hall, in the reception-rooms, talking. And it seemed that hardly any time had elapsed before a throbbing was heard outside on the terrace.

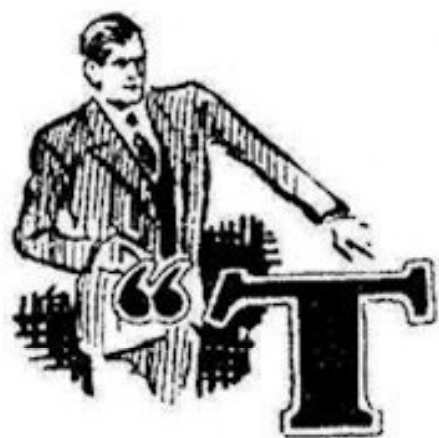
Nipper and Handforth and crowd of other juniors went hurrying out through the big hall, and they flung the great door open. Nelson Lee was just climbing out of his powerful racer.

"Well done, guv'nor!" said Nipper, as he sprang forward. "I don't believe you've been more than an hour!"

"Well, I certainly came along at a decent speed, young 'un," smiled Nelson Lee. "Don't forget that the roads were quite deserted. How are you, Mr. Travers?" he added, as the host came bustling up. "Any fresh news?"

"None wha ever!" said Mr. Travers anxiously. "I am very glad that you have come, Mr. Lee! The boy has disappeared, and there is absolutely no trace of him. I cannot help thinking that there is something sinister behind the whole business!"

And it wasn't long before Nelson Lee arrived at the same conclusion!



CHAPTER 12.

A few Discoveries!

THERE can be little doubt that Hussi Kahn was drugged at the circus," declared Nelson Lee gravely. "The drug, of course, did not take effect until some hours afterwards. He was then a very easy victim. But for Handforth's intervention you would probably have known nothing of his disappearance until the morning."

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly. "That just shows you!"

"Yes, it shows us that you can be useful sometimes, old man!" said Nipper. "But even you'll admit that you made the discovery more or less by accident."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Some sort of instinct told me! Being a born detective, I was drawn irresistibly towards Hussi Kahn's bed-room."

"And you arrived at the crucial moment," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "It is a great pity, Handforth, that you were unable to sound the alarm at the time. However, you did your best, and we must be thankful for small mercies."

"Do you really think that Hussi Kahn is in danger, sir?" asked Fullwood.

"It is impossible to hazard any theory at the moment," replied Lee. "He may be in no danger at all. I rather fancy that he is perfectly safe. If these men had intended him any harm, they could easily have done their worst here, under this roof. The fact that he has been kidnapped indicates that he is not in any particular danger."

"Then where can he be, sir?"

"There is plenty of evidence of a well-laid plot," said Lee slowly. "We can only definitely establish the fact that Hussi Kahn was taken away from this house by motor-car. And the presence of those Indian magicians in the circus is very significant. Our first move must be to pay a visit to the circus. It is still in the town, I understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Nipper. "It's in Hedingstead for two days—so they haven't moved on. Do you suspect the Chandra Magicians?"

"I certainly do," said Lee. "And, as nothing can be done here, we must necessarily go to the circus."

Everybody, of course, wanted to go, too. But Nelson Lee advised Mr. Travers and his young guests to go to bed. He suggested that they should leave the matter in his hands. He promised that he would let them know of the latest developments at the first opportunity.

Nipper, however, insisted upon accompanying his master. Fortunately, none of the other fellows knew of this, and a good deal of trouble was averted. Handforth would have kicked up a terrific noise if he had known that Nipper, instead of going back to bed, had crept out silently, and had joined Nelson Lee's car some distance down the drive.

"Well, that's that, sir!" grinned Nipper, as they sped along the country road towards Hedingstead. "I'm jolly glad that I'm with you—it reminds me of old times."

"You really oughtn't to have come, young 'un," said Lee. "I don't see that you can be of much use, anyhow."

"Thanks, guv'nor!" said Nipper. "But just you wait and see! Anyhow, they always say that two heads are better than one!"

They arrived at the circus, and found everything quiet and dark. There was a night watchman, however, and he soon aroused Professor Onions, much to that gentleman's astonishment and consternation.

"What does it mean?" he inquired, as he came out of his big caravan, attired in a flowing dressing-gown and wearing an old-fashioned sleeping-cap. "Ah, young man!"

"This is Mr. Lee," said Nipper. "Guv'nor, this is Professor Onions, the boss. He's an old friend of ours, you know."

"My dear Nipper, why on earth are you introducing us?" laughed Nelson Lee. "I am very well acquainted with Professor Onions."

"Why, yes, to be sure!" said the professor, as he peered forward in the moonlight. "Mr. Lee—how absurd of me! But why are you here, Mr. Lee, at this time of the night? Has anything happened?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Lee quietly. "I am rather anxious to question the Indian magicians who have recently joined your circus."

And the brief facts of the case were told. Professor Onions listened with growing alarm.

"But why should these men desire to harm a St. Frank's boy?" he asked. "Hussi Kahn is an Indian, I know, but it seems so pointless——"

"Nearly all mysteries are pointless until the solution is arrived at, professor," broke in Nelson Lee. "If you will lead me to the quarters of these Indian magicians——"

"Certainly—certainly!" said the professor. "The sooner, the better! I must admit that I have been suspicious of the fellows ever since they came. Their performance was poor, and I did not care for their appear-

ance. I shall be very glad when their engagement is at an end."

They arrived at a large caravan which had been set aside for the use of the Chandra Magicians. After knocking without avail for some time, Professor Onions opened the door and walked in. A moment later he appeared, his face alight with alarm.

"They have gone!" he exclaimed in amazement. "The Indians are not here!"

Nelson Lee was perfectly cool.

"I did not expect them to be here, professor," he said quietly. "I was quite prepared for this item of news. It merely fits in with the theory that I have formed. Hussi Kahn was taken from Stapleton Towers by your Chandra Magicians."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper. "What's the next move, guv'nor?"

"We are going straight to London," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "Do you happen to know, Professor Onions, where these Indian performers were staying, previous to their visit to your show?"

"I don't know for certain, but I have an idea that their headquarters were at the Hotel Cyril," replied the professor, with some agitation. "As I think you know, I was very surprised that such a famous act would condescend to appear in my circus. Not that my circus is inferior to any London place of amusement!" he added proudly. "I claim that the Onions Circus is second to none—"

"Exactly!" murmured Lee. "Well, professor, many thanks for your information. Since it is difficult for me to go forward, I must necessarily work backwards. Our next inquiries will be at the Hotel Cyril. Once we have traced these Chandra Magicians, the rest may be simple."

"I am utterly at a loss!" declared the professor. "These Indian illusionists are world-famous, Mr. Lee. They came to England with a splendid reputation. They have appeared in France, Germany, Italy, the United States—in fact, everywhere. It is inconceivable to me that they can be mixed up in this sordid kidnapping affair. What possible reason can they have for stealing this young boy away?"

"There may be one of a hundred reasons," replied Nelson Lee. "You must not forget, professor, that Hussi Kahn is the younger son of the Maharajah of Kurpana. He is, indeed, a very important personage. At St. Frank's, of course, he has merely been a junior schoolboy. But in India he is a very different personage."

"Yes, yes, of course!" said the professor, nodding. "For the moment, I had overlooked that fact. Dear me! Then you think that he has been seized and spirited away because of some Indian intrigue?"

"I believe nothing, professor," said Lee smoothly. "My only concern, at the moment, is to get on the track of his kidnappers. And I really feel that a visit to the Hotel Cyril will be of much service."

Nelson Lee and Nipper were soon off, and, as they were speeding towards London, Nipper was looking puzzled.

"Why is it so important to go to the Hotel Cyril, guv'nor?" he asked. "You know jolly well that the Chandra Magicians aren't there. They wouldn't go back to their London hotel, would they?"

"I very much doubt, Nipper, if the genuine Chandra Magicians ever left their London hotel!" replied Nelson Lee quietly.



CHAPTER 13.

On the Track!

NIPPER was very astonished.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, after a fairly long pause.

"Then you're suggesting, sir, that the men who performed in the Onions Circus last night were not the Chandra Magicians at all?"

"That is the theory in my mind," agreed Nelson Lee.

They were just entering Chelmsford, and Nipper made no comment as they threaded their way through the quiet, empty streets. Not until they were on the main London road, and hurtling along at fifty miles an hour on their way to Ingatestone and Brentwood, did Nipper make any other comment.

"Of course, guv'nor, it does look a bit suspicious, doesn't it?" he remarked. "Even Professor Onions was surprised that the Chandra Magicians should offer themselves to his circus."

"Exactly!" said Lee. "And when these so-called magicians prove to be very ordinary in their performance, the thing becomes even more sinister."

"Those men must have used the name of the Chandra Magicians in order to get themselves admitted," nodded Nipper. "But doesn't all this suggest something else, sir?"

"It undoubtedly suggests that the Indians were well aware of Hussi Kahn's plans," agreed Nelson Lee. "They knew, for example, that he would attend the circus, in the company of many other St. Frank's boys. Therefore they installed themselves in the circus beforehand, in order to be ready."

"That's what I mean," said Nipper slowly. "But, my hat! How did they know all this?"

"It is fairly clear that they have been spying on Hussi Kahn for some time," said Nelson Lee. "Why they did not act sooner is a puzzle. But very possibly there is an excellent reason. For example, they did not want to kidnap the boy until they were absolutely ready to receive him. His presence would only be an embarrassment if they were compelled to hold him a prisoner. I imagine that the kidnapping was arranged many weeks ago—and these men probably assumed that Hussi Kahn would still be at school."

"And then they found, suddenly, that he was in Travers' party, you mean?"

"Something like that," said Nelson Lee. "Not that we need go into any of these details. We know that the Indians were well prepared, and now our task must be to trace them, and recover Hussi Kahn before it is too late."

"Too late for what, sir?" asked Nipper curiously. "You don't think they're going to kill him, do you?"

"There is very little risk of that," said the famous detective. "No, Nipper; I believe that Hussi Kahn is being smuggled out of England—probably to India. For some reason, best known to themselves, these men require Hussi Kahn's presence in his own country. So they have taken these drastic measures in order to ensure his presence there."

After passing through Brentwood, it seemed to Nipper that London was reached in a flash. Through Romford, and then along the brilliantly-lit streets of Ilford, Stratford, and so on into the heart of London. There was no traffic to speak of, and Lee made record time.

At the Hotel Cyril, Nelson Lee's theory was soon confirmed. The Chandra Magicians were supposed to be performing in the Onions Circus, yet now they were asleep in their own suite. This fact was established beyond question.

"As I thought, Nipper!" said Lee, as they left. "Those men who approached Professor Onions were impostors. Their only object was to get into close touch with Hussi Kahn. In their own personalities, they could not do this."

"But who are they, sir—and where are they now?" asked Nipper anxiously. "We've got to a loose end! We're no better off than we were when we started! How can we possibly trace that motor-car? How can we tell where the men went to with old Hussi?"

"Fortunately, I am not at such a loose end as you seem to believe, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee. "Indians are not common in England, and wealthy Indians cannot very well operate without a certain amount of publicity. We are now going to Croydon aerodrome."

Nipper looked blank.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "You—you don't mean Prince Sinji?"

"Yes, Nipper—I mean Prince Sinji!" said Lee grimly.

As they sped through the quiet London streets—through Kennington and Brixton and Streatham—Nipper had a fresh train of thought in his mind. It was now becoming clear to him that the mysterious Indians had laid their plans very carefully and very cunningly.

He remembered how they had invited Hussi Kahn into the ring, at the circus. Without question, they had given him some drug then—probably by the simple process of sticking a needle into his arm, or leg. While the unsuspecting Hussi had been "helping" with the trick, that simple operation had been performed.

The drug, taking effect some hours later, had sent Hussi into a deep sleep. Then there had been no difficulty in spiriting him away.

Handforth's intervention had nearly upset the apple-cart, and the truth had become known early in the night. If all had gone well, Mr. Travers' household would have known nothing until breakfast-time.

As matters were, there was just a chance that Hussi Kahn might be rescued.

"Prince Sinji!" murmured Nipper thoughtfully. "By Jove, guv'nor, it does look suspicious, doesn't it?"

"Not only suspicious, but more or less conclusive," said Nelson Lee, as the car was shooting past Thornton Heath Pond. "Just look at the facts, Nipper. Three Indians present themselves at Professor Onions' Circus, and they claim to be the Chandra Magicians. It is very patent that they are highly-educated men—indeed, Indian gentlemen. There is nothing crude about them—nothing commonplace. They are provided with the most expensive silken robes, and the most elaborate paraphernalia. Money, therefore, is no object."

"And Prince Sinji is known to be very rich, sir," nodded Nipper.

"Yes, but who is Prince Sinji?" demanded Nelson Lee. "The newspapers have made a good deal of fuss about him and his companions. But do we know who he is? An Indian potentate! A wealthy gentleman of brown colour! And he and two companions—mark you, three of them—have been preparing, for some weeks, to make a spectacular flight from England to India!"

"It's becoming more and more significant, guv'nor!" declared Nipper.

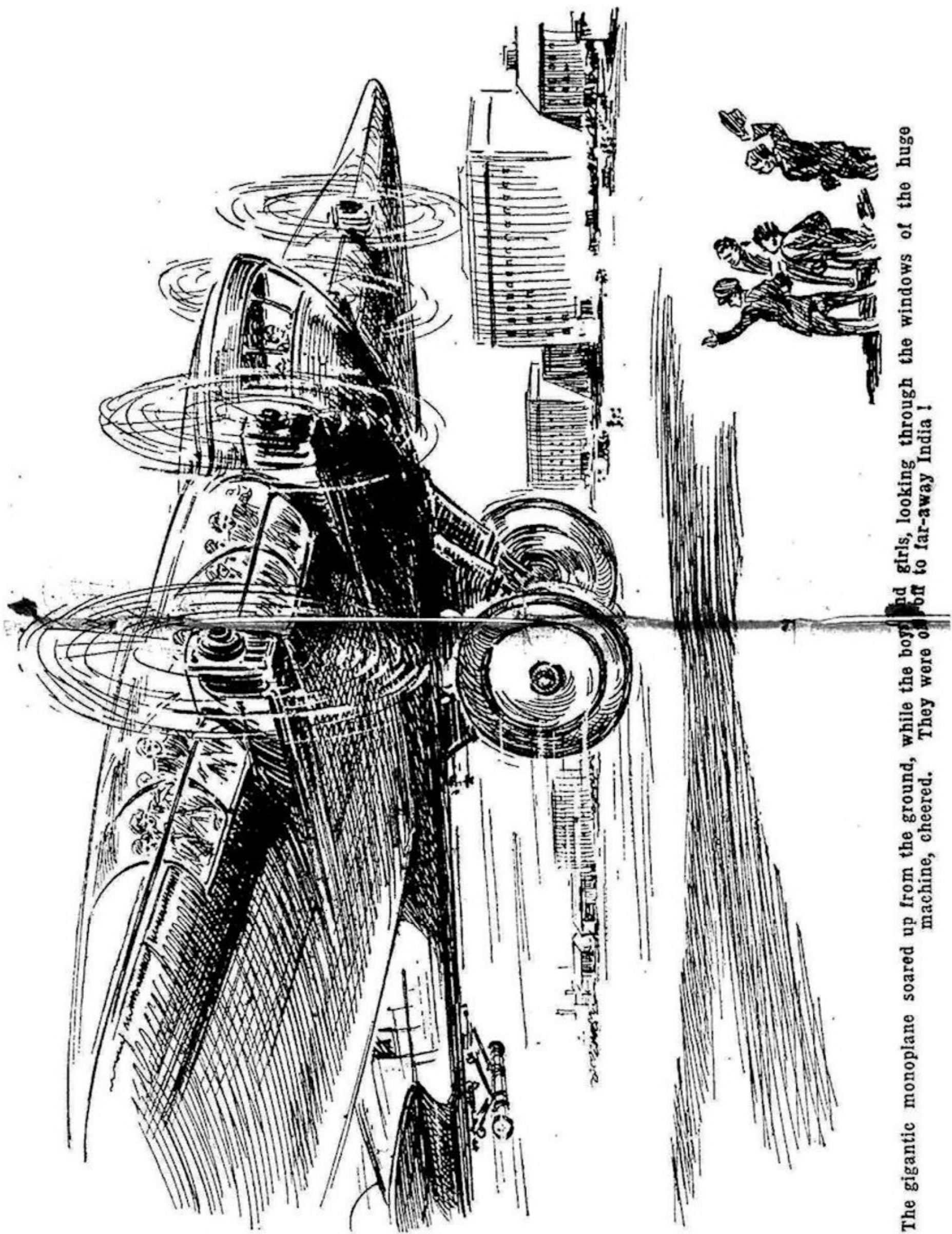
"And yet, we must not take anything for granted," warned Lee. "There may be no connection whatever between Prince Sinji and these kidnappers. Yet the evidence is all in favour of the suspicion. These three rich Indian gentlemen have bought one of the finest aeroplanes this country can produce. They have not chartered it, Nipper—but bought it outright. And their object in flying to India is to prove that native Indians can do these things just as effectively as white men."

"When did you think of all this, guv'nor?"

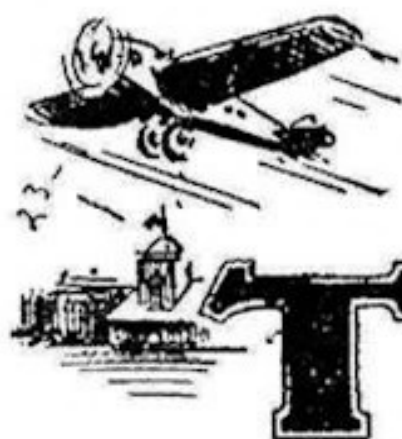
"It has been in my mind ever since I arrived at Stapleton Towers," replied Nelson Lee. "I remembered that Prince Sinji was preparing to leave Croydon aerodrome at dawn this morning—"

"What!" gasped Nipper. "Why, I—Yes, that's right, sir! Now you come to mention it, that's the plan, isn't it? I saw it in the newspaper yesterday. Prince Sinji and his two companions have made every arrangement to start from Croydon at dawn this morning!"

"And we are almost within an hour of dawn, Nipper," said Lee. "I rather fancy that we shall get there just in time to have a few chatty words with his Excellency, the prince!"



The gigantic monoplane soared up from the ground, while the boys and girls, looking through the windows of the huge machine, cheered. They were off to far-away India!



CHAPTER 14.

Too Late!

THE problem was unfolding itself very smoothly in Nelson Lee's able hands.

Nipper did not

doubt for a moment that his master had hit upon the correct solution. For weeks past Prince Sinji and his companions had been preparing for this ambitious flight. The newspapers had given much publicity to the exploit.

The start had been timed for dawn this morning!

And during the night Hussi Kahn had been spirited away from Stapleton Towers—he had been taken by motor-car!

If Prince Sinji and his companions were responsible, the thing fitted like a glove. They could not have kidnapped Hussi Kahn earlier, because his presence would have been exceedingly awkward for them. They had left it until the very night prior to their departure. In this way they would be able to convey him straight to the waiting aeroplane, and smuggle him on board. And, once away, everything would be clear and straightforward.

As for why Prince Sinji was kidnapping the Indian schoolboy, this was a point which could not be cleared up at the moment. The main thing was to arrive at the aerodrome in time—to challenge the prince, and to search the very aeroplane, if necessary.

When Lee and Nipper arrived at the aerodrome, they found many lights blazing, and there were one or two knots of people standing about near the great hangars. But it was still an hour from dawn.

"Hallo, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed a genial-faced individual, who encountered Lee and Nipper as they were moving away from their car. "What on earth are you doing here at this hour of the night?"

"There's no accounting for my movements, Wilton," replied Lee, with a smile. "But I can easily guess why you are present. Waiting for the big flight to start, eh?"

Wilton chuckled. He was, as Nipper knew, a prominent Fleet Street journalist.

"As far as I'm concerned, the waiting is over," he remarked dryly. "You're not telling me, Mr. Lee, that you've come here to see the Nabob or Jam, or whatever he is, take off?"

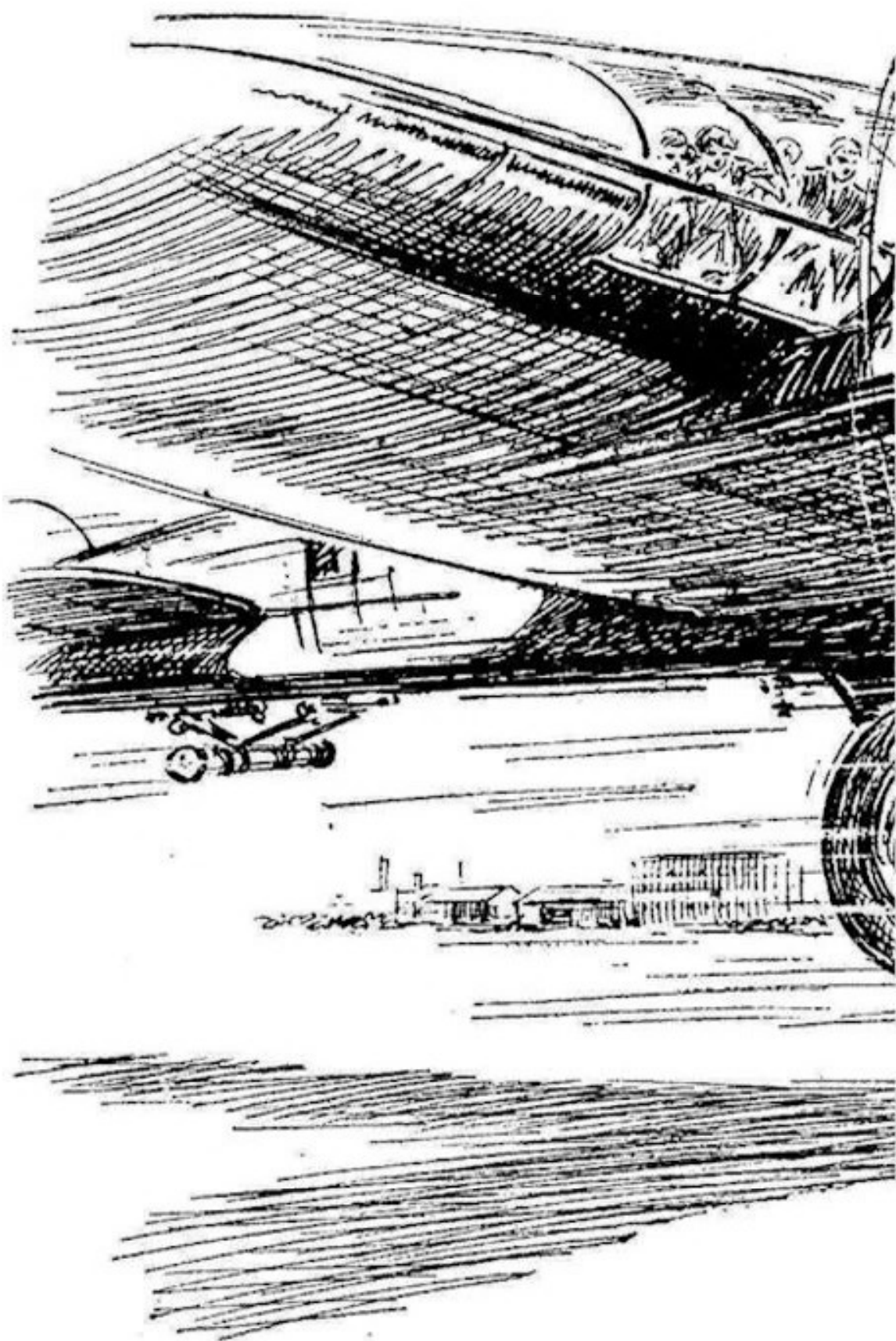
"Not exactly," replied Nelson Lee. "But I wanted to have a few words with Prince Sinji—"

"Then you're late for the fair!" said Wilton. "The 'plane has gone."

"Gone!" said Lee sharply.

"Twenty minutes ago," nodded the journalist. "We were all a bit surprised, and one or two fellows who arrived a few minutes ago were thoroughly disgusted. They called it a dirty trick."

"But—but the machine wasn't supposed to start until dawn," put in Nipper anxiously.



The gigantic monoplane soared up from the ground, while the machine, cheered. The

"These Indian chaps were ready, and they thought it wasn't worth waiting until then," replied Wilton. "Flying conditions were perfect, and they decided to make the most of them."

Nipper gave Nelson Lee a sharp, meaning glance.

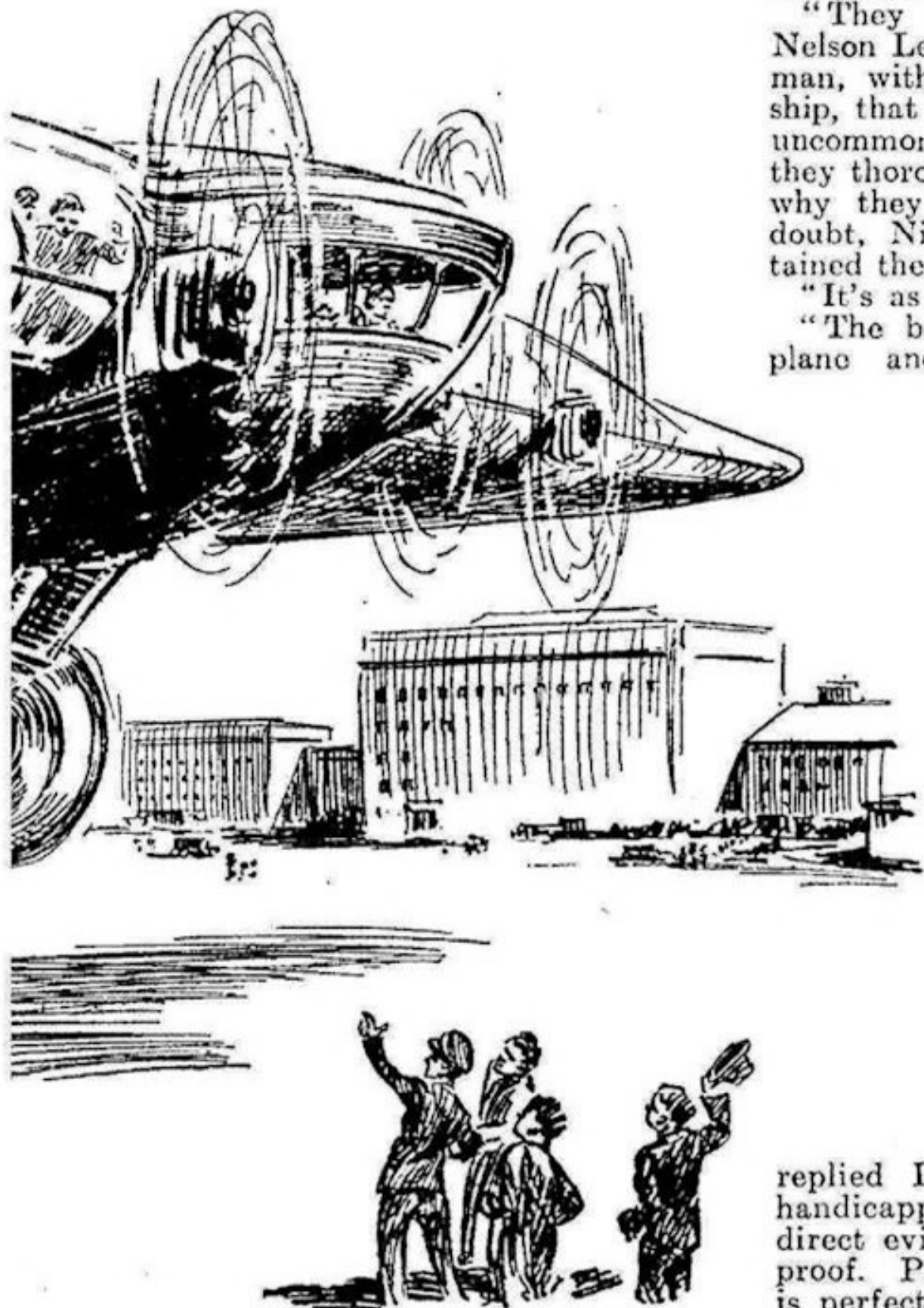
"Thanks, Wilton," said Lee briefly.

Two minutes later he was in close conversation with one of the responsible officials of

the aerodrome. Nelson Lee was not only surprised, but very annoyed. He had not counted upon this contingency. But the very fact that the Indians had left an hour before their time indicated that there was some deep motive behind it. Their departure, it seemed, had been almost precipitate.

Nipper did not hear the details until he and Lee were back in the car, hurrying towards London.

"They've stolen a march on us, Nipper,"



rls, looking through the windows of the huge far-away India!

said Lee gruffly. "And there's no guesswork about it now. Prince Sinji and his companions are the kidnappers!"

"But how can you be so sure, guv'nor?"

"The evidence is conclusive," replied Nelson Lee. "If only we had been half an hour earlier, we might have saved the boy! As it is, we shall have to move heaven and earth in order to rescue him."

"But how can you be positive——"

"Listen to me, Nipper!" broke in Lee tensely. "Prince Sinji and his two companions have been staying at the Aerodrome Hotel for two or three days, so that they should be on the spot. They attended to the final details of their flight yesterday. They went away in the early evening, by car."

"Phew!" whistled Nipper.

"They did not appear again until about an hour ago," continued Lee. "They brought with them a fairish-sized hamper, ostensibly containing a few last-minute presents, to take back to India."

"But didn't the customs people examine the hamper, sir?"

"They did, but only cursorily," replied Nelson Lee. "The prince is such a wealthy man, with such a reputation for sportsmanship, that he was trusted. It is by no means uncommon for customs officials to trust people they thoroughly know, and there is no reason why they should not do this. But can we doubt, Nipper, that that hamper really contained the unconscious form of Hussi Kahn?"

"It's as clear as daylight, sir."

"The boy was taken on board the aeroplane and stowed away," continued Lee.

"Prince Sinji expressed a desire to leave at once. He did not want to wait until dawn. And you can easily understand why he was so anxious."

"I don't quite follow, sir."

"Think, Nipper," said Lee. "According to the original plan, the flight was to start at dawn. But remember Handforth!"

"By jingo!"

"Handforth intervened, and these Indians were compelled to lock him in a cupboard," said Lee. "But they were nevertheless alarmed, and as soon as they arrived at the aerodrome with their victim, they immediately took to the air."

"But isn't there any way of stopping them, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I have already set the telegraphs at work, but I very much doubt if anything will be done,"

replied Lee. "You see, Nipper, we are handicapped by the fact that we have no direct evidence. We know, but there is no proof. Prince Sinji probably thinks that he is perfectly safe. There is nothing to connect him with the impostors who appeared in Professor Onions' circus, and there is still less to connect him with the marauders who broke into Stapleton Towers."

"Prince Sinji is the pilot of the machine, isn't he, sir?"

"One of the pilots," replied Lee. "He is ostensibly the owner, and the other two men with him are relief pilots. Their first stop will be somewhere in mid-Europe, and then they will proceed to take the customary course to India, and land at various aerodromes for fresh supplies."

"Goolah Kahn!" murmured Lee thoughtfully. "He came to England once—to St. Frank's. I am very well acquainted with Goolah Kahn. A quiet, studious, though temperamental, fellow."

"The Ameer is a despot!" said Sir Howard gruffly. "Cannot you see how the wind is blowing, Mr. Lee? Can there be any doubt that the Ameer's agents have now seized Hussi Kahn, too? He has been taken out of England by aeroplane, and the inference is that he is to be conveyed to Rishnir—there to join his father and brother in exile. At this very moment, both Kurpana and Rishnir are seething. Actual war is on the point of breaking out, and it is causing us a great deal of concern. For Rishnir is by far the more powerful province."

"The situation is indeed delicate."

"It is more than that, Mr. Lee!" said Sir Howard, with much agitation. "It is vital that this boy should be rescued and brought back. For it would be absolutely fatal to India's safety if the Ameer of Rishnir seized Kurpana and conquered it. As I have already told you, Kurpana is a buffer state, and it would be a tragedy if it fell into the hands of this despotic savage. For, in spite of the Ameer's veneer of education and refinement, at heart he is a tyrant and a savage."

"If there is anything that I can do, I will gladly do it," said Nelson Lee promptly. "I have, of course, telegraphed to the various stopping-places on the route to India. Before leaving, Prince Sinji made very elaborate plans, and his course is known."

"Would it not be possible to follow him," asked Sir Howard quickly. "I have little faith in anything else. Prince Sinji is a man of wealth—with great influence. His credentials are unimpeachable. I very much doubt if any action will be taken by the Central European authorities, if he chances to land at any of those aerodromes."

"I am of the same opinion," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, the only certain way to rescue Hussi Kahn is to follow Prince Sinji, and to get the boy back—by force, if necessary."

"And it is very necessary to get him back!" said the diplomat anxiously. "We are very concerned over the whole situation, Mr. Lee. At all costs, we wish to avoid a war. The boy's abduction means that Kurpana is left without a single representative of the House of Kahn. And once the Ameer looses his war legions, Kurpana will be overrun. That will mean, incidentally, that a British force must go there to relieve the situation. Heaven knows what might happen! We may find ourselves involved in a very costly campaign."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You may rely upon me, Sir Howard, to do everything within my power," he said. "I will start for India as quickly as possible—in the fastest aeroplane that I can charter. If Hussi Kahn can be rescued, I will rescue him."

"I would sooner rely upon you, Mr. Lee, than upon anybody else!" said Sir Howard quietly.

For about half an hour Nelson Lee and Sir Howard Portman discussed the matter carefully and gravely. Nipper sat listening, but making no interruptions. He realised the serious nature of the whole situation.

But inwardly Nipper was wildly excited.

Nelson Lee had promised to go in chase of Hussi Kahn! That meant a flight towards India—and perhaps he, Nipper, would be allowed to go. This would be even better than the pleasure trip round Europe!

When Nelson Lee and Nipper went out into the open again, it was broad daylight. Lee, without a word, took his place in the driving seat of the car, and started off. Nipper was almost afraid to ask any questions—but he ventured upon one.

"Where to, gov'nor?" he asked breathlessly.

"Martlesham Aerodrome!" replied Nelson Lee, with a grim note in his voice.

And very soon the racing car was roaring back along the Essex roads—through Brentwood, Chelmsford, and so on towards the quiet little Suffolk town of Hadleigh.

CHAPTER 16.

Ready for the Great Adventure!



HAD HEARD anything yet, Travers?"

A group of Remove juniors surrounded Vivian Travers as he came out of the big hall at Stapleton Towers. But Travers merely shook his head and smiled.

"Well, well! What a lot of excitement!" he said coolly. "There's no sense in getting the wind up, dear old fellows. Besides, it's nearly time for us to start."

"But what about Mr. Lee—and Nipper?" asked Tommy Watson. "Haven't you heard anything about them?"

"Not a word."

"Hasn't your pater?"

"I've just seen the pater, and he is still waiting," replied Travers. "Mr. Lee went off in the middle of the night, and nothing more has been heard of him. Let us hope that he is well on the track of Hussi Kahn."

"Good gad, yes!" said Archie Glenthorne. "It's rather frightful to think of the dear old boy in the hands of his dashed enemies."

"Yes, and what about Nipper?" said Handforth indignantly. "The rotter! He sneaked off with Mr. Lee, and didn't tell us anything about it! If I had known anything at the time, I should have insisted upon going with him."

"That's why he sneaked off, Handy!" said Fullwood, with a chuckle.

"Oh, we shall hear something before long, I expect," said Reggie Pitt easily. "There's

no sense in jumping to conclusions, or guessing at things. It's still jolly early, don't forget. Mr. Lee and Nipper haven't been gone for very long."

This was quite true.

The hour was only just five o'clock, and the summer's morning was fine and sunny. All the guests at Stapleton Towers were up early, for they were due to go to Martlesham Aerodrome—there to take their places in the great Manners aeroplane. In their excitement over the coming trip they were rather inclined to look lightly on the misfortunes of Hussi Kahn.

Nevertheless, they had been expecting to hear something from Nelson Lee—or, at least, from Nipper. But no word had yet come. And the disappearance of Hussi Kahn still remained a complete mystery.

Irene & Co. were up, too, and they were just as eager as the boys to be off. The one subject under discussion generally was the coming trip.

"We shall soon be starting now," said Winnie Pitt, as she came running up to her brother. "They're getting the motor-cars ready. And it's only about an hour's run from here, isn't it, Reggie?"

"Just about," said Reggie Pitt. "But I don't quite like going, you know, without Nipper. If he fails to turn up, it'll be rotten."

"Oh, we shall hear something of him soon," remarked Mary Summers, with an anxious light in her eyes. "And perhaps he'll come back with good news."

"Well, we're not going to wait for him!" said Handforth firmly. "Old Dorrie has arranged to start fairly early this morning, and we've got to be on the spot. If Nipper gets left behind, it'll be his own fault—and it'll serve him jolly well right, too! He shouldn't steal away like that!"

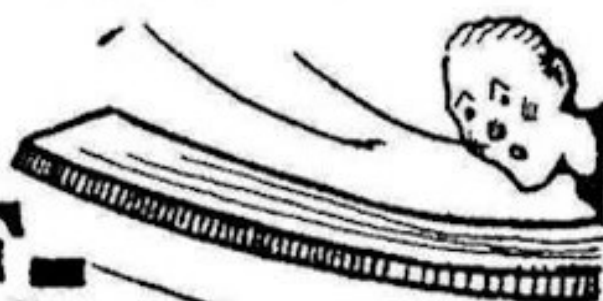
"Oh, Ted! You're jealous!" said Irene. Handforth went red.

"Jealous!" he blustered. "Here, I say!"

"You needn't deny it, because it's as clear as daylight!" went on Irene coldly. "If you had had the chance, Ted, you would have gone off in search of Hussi Kahn, too."

"Of course I would!" agreed Handforth indignantly. "It was a piece of sheer nerve for Mr. Lee and Nipper to slip away without me! Wasn't I the chap who made the discovery? Why, if it hadn't been for

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me, nobody would have known anything about the affair until this morning! And I'm coolly left out in the cold!"

However, Handforth did not find much sympathy among his companions. They were far more interested in the coming flight than in the troubles of Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn. Not that they were callous regarding the Indian boy's fate.

They thought very highly of Hussi, and they were puzzled and troubled over his disappearance. But they realised full well that they were helpless in the matter.

Nelson Lee had taken the case up, and it could not be in better hands.

And so, while the morning was still very young, the big party set out. They went in two or three of Mr. Travers' cars—Handforth & Co., Tregellis-West, Watson, Archie, Pitt, and the rest, and, of course, the Moor View girls, too. And in Hedingstead Johnny Onions and Tessa Love were picked up. Bertie Onions had elected to remain with the circus. He was a quiet youth, and the proposed flight did not particularly appeal to him.

The cars sped on through Sudbury, Boxford, and then to Hadleigh, which was just beginning to awaken for the day.

"We shan't be long now!" said Handforth eagerly. "The aerodrome isn't far."

During that last mile or two they all kept their eyes well open, in case the 'plane was making an early trial flight. They were at the aerodrome almost before they knew it.

And there, standing on the ground, outside the hangars, was the great Manners monoplane. A small army of mechanics hovered about the machine, seeing that everything was all O.K. Two of the great engines were ticking over, and further mechanics were giving them a final tuning.

"By jingo!" said Church breathlessly. "Isn't she a beauty?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hurrah!"

The boys and girls swarmed out of the motor-cars, and ran eagerly across the grass. Irene was in the forefront, and she gave a glad cry as she recognised one of the greasy figures in overalls.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed happily.

Mr. Hobart Manners turned, and smiled.

"Well, you're here in good time, young lady!" he said, as he backed away from his daughter. "No, don't come near me! Can't you see that I'm all over grease and oil?"

"That doesn't matter, daddy!" cried Irene. "You're generally smothered in grease and oil, if it comes to that!"

Her father chuckled. He was a tall, well-built man—and it was quite true that he was never happier than when tuning engines, or working at any sort of mechanism. Mr. Hobart Manners was a brilliantly-clever engineer, with a practical knowledge of everything he undertook.

This great monoplane, for example, was entirely of his own design. From nose to tail, and from wing-tip to wing-tip, the machine

was a novelty. It incorporated dozens of Mr. Manners' own patents.

As Lord Dorrimore had explained, he had provided the cash, and Mr. Manners had provided the brains. Dorrie cheerfully admitted that when it came to brains, he was a wash-out. But this was unjust to himself—for, really, Dorrie was as brainy as the average man.

"By George!" said Handforth, as he stood there, looking up at the gigantic 'plane. "She's a wonder!"

"Absolutely!" declared Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, you're not going to tell me that this dashed thing can fly. Good gad, and so forth! It's as big as a row of houses!"

And Archie was not far wrong.

The Manners monoplane was an enormous machine. She was built entirely of metal, and this metal—an alloy of Mr. Manners' own discovery—resembled burnished bronze. It was non-corrosive, and no changes of weather condition could mar its brilliance. It possessed the strength and characteristics of stainless steel, whilst being infinitely lighter.

There was one enormous wing, with four great engines jutting out from the front of it, each one housed separately. The main body was like a great Pullman coach, and each landing wheel was ten feet in height. At close quarters, one could not help being overawed. The size of the machine took one's breath away.

The wing, too, was hollow—tapering slightly towards the tips. Near the main body, where it was deepest, there were cabins and sleeping-bunks—right within the wing.

"It doesn't seem possible, sir, that she can really fly!" said Fullwood, as he looked up at Mr. Manners. "She's so big—so enormous!"

Mr. Manners smiled.

"Yes, she's perhaps the largest monoplane in the world," he said, not without a touch of pride. "And you need have no doubts regarding her flying qualities, young man. She has been tested again and again. She has been tested in every conceivable way. If her airworthiness was not positively established, you may be sure that you boys and girls would not be allowed to make the trip. We don't take any chances with passengers. No; she's far safer than the average railway train."

And when Mr. Manners said that, he said the literal truth.



CHAPTER 17.

The Rover of the Air!

HERE'S old Dorrie?" asked Reggie Pitt, looking round. "We haven't seen him yet!"

Mr. Manners, who heard the words, turned. "Dorrie was here half an hour ago, and when Mr. Lee and Nipper arrived, they took possession of my little office," he said. "I don't know what they're jawing about——"

"Mr. Lee and Nipper!" yelled Handforth.

"Are they here, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Handforth. "They're here—and we didn't know anything about it! Where, sir? Can we see them? Have they found Hussi?"

Mr. Manners looked rather bewildered.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about!" he said. "I've been busy here for a couple of hours, and when Mr. Lee came I merely bade him good morning. But now that I come to think of it, it seems to me that something is in the wind," he added thoughtfully. "Mr. Lee was certainly looking unusually grave."

"Well, you chaps, don't let's bother now," said Reggie Pitt diplomatically. "I expect Dorrie and Mr. Lee will be here soon—and then we shall hear the news."

"That's all very well!" argued Handforth obstinately. "Why hasn't Nipper joined us? Couldn't he have told us the latest news about old Hussi?"

"Perhaps Nipper doesn't know that we're here old man," said Fullwood gently.

"Then he ought to know!"

"Well, well!" murmured Travers. "We mustn't get excited, Handy, dear old fellow. I suggest that we get aboard, and make ourselves acquainted with our cabins. The steward and the stewardess are waiting to escort us."

"Hear, hear!"

"That's a good wheeze, Travers!"

"Rather!"

And, much to Mr. Manners' relief, the crowd of young people went off, even Handforth forgetting Nelson Lee and Nipper and Hussi Kahn in the excitement of the new thrill.

They entered the machine through a doorway in the side of the body, and found themselves in a narrow passageway, decorated rather like the corridor of a steamer, with little electric lights glowing overhead. The short corridor led into the main saloon, and this proved to be amazingly large.

It was situated in the broadest and deepest part of the main body, and there were windows on each side, with little tables all round. There were easy chairs, too—and a soft carpet underfoot.

"Why, it's too wonderful for words!" said Winnie Pitt breathlessly.

"Yes, there's tons more room than one would suppose!" said Fullwood, nodding. "But these things are always deceptive, you know. Look at an Austin Seven saloon, for instance. It seems to be a mere midget on the road. Yet, when you get inside one, you find there's heaps of room."

The saloon was capable of accommodating twenty or thirty passengers at a sitting. It could be quickly converted from a dining-room into a lounge. At the end, there was a kind of buffet—this, in turn, leading into the kitchen.

But beyond the saloon proper there was another corridor, with a little passage leading at right angles on either hand. These pas-

sages went straight into the great wing. But if one kept straight ahead, one came to the navigation chamber—a fairish-sized room right in the nose of the great 'plane. Here, the pilot and the navigator would be on duty. The place was as big as the navigation-room of an airship.

The cabins, in the wings, proved to be delightful little places. They were extremely small, but each cabin was a little gem in itself. There were two bunks in each—although one or two of the cabins contained three bunks. Everything was in miniature; wash basins, mirrors, and everything else similar to the equipment of an ocean liner. But although everything was small, everything was extremely neat.

There was another novelty about this 'plane, too.

Unlike any other machine, it actually boasted a promenade deck! Going up a narrow stairway from the main corridor, one emerged on the top of the great wing. And an extensive section of the wing was closed in with non-splinterable glass.

It was all stream-lined, of course. But one received the impression, at first, of walking into a low-built conservatory. There was a sort of deck-rail all round, highly burnished, and there were a good few wicker chairs dotted about, too.

The space was ample for allowing passengers to indulge in plenty of exercise. Here, on this promenade deck, protected from all the winds that blew, it was possible to get wonderful views.

"Well, all you young people, what do you think of her?" asked Mr. Manners genially.

He came on to the promenade deck while a good many of the St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls were up there. Mr. Manners had now discarded his overalls, and he was looking quite respectable.

"It's marvellous, sir!" said Reggie Pitt. "In fact, it's so wonderful that we can hardly believe that this enormous machine can fly!"

Mr. Manners laughed.

"You'll soon find out whether she can fly or not!" he replied dryly. "This is merely the first of a fleet. She has already been a few thousand miles, and never once has she made a bad landing. Neither has she had any trouble in taking off."

"But don't you need an awfully large ground for taking off, sir?" asked Church.

"Curiously enough, this machine can get off successfully out of a mere meadow," replied Mr. Manners. "Owing to her enormous engine power, and the construction of the wings, a short hop is quite sufficient. Indeed, when she is lightly loaded, she can practically jump straight off the ground from her starting point. Seems impossible, doesn't it?"

"Supposing the engines fail in mid-air, sir?" asked somebody else.

"Well, there's hardly any risk of that," replied Mr. Manners. "There are four engines, and any two of them are sufficient to keep the 'plane in the air. So, in the unlikely event of two engines petering out, there is still sufficient power left. And yet

me add that this machine has been through every possible trial. The automatic stabilisers, wonderful invention, preserve her balance under the most severe test."

"Well, that's a comfort, sir!" chuckled Travers. "I imagine that we shall be able to sleep quite peacefully during the night."

"You certainly will!" agreed Mr. Manners. "And, what is more, you will only hear a moderate drone. For no matter how much we silence the engines, we cannot do away with the sound caused by the machine rushing through the air. And if, by chance, we are compelled to make a forced landing in mid-ocean, there is still no need to worry. For this machine is an amphibian. She is as much at home on the water as on the land."

"There's no end of her marvels, sir!" said Fullwood enthusiastically.

And the others were all in hearty agreement.



In her fight against the terrific tropical storm, the great monoplane was rocking and shuddering alarmingly. Nipper, in the cabin he shared with Tommy Watson, found himself hurled violently against the wall.



CHAPTER 18.

A Bit of a Problem!

MR. MANNERS turned as the steward—a small, neat man in uniform—called to him from the companion way.

"Sorry, sir, but his lordship is asking for you!" said the steward. "Wants you to come straight away, if you can, sir."

"That's all right, Butler," said Mr. Manners. "I'll come. Excuse me for the time being, young people."

"When do we make the start, sir?" asked Harry Gresham.

"In about another hour, I imagine," replied Mr. Manners, as he prepared to descend from the promenade deck. "In the meantime, you can sort out your cabins, and generally get yourselves settled."

He went down, and Handforth gave Church and McClure a significant glance.

"There's something on!" he said darkly. "They can't fool me! Something to do with old Hussi, too! Just you wait, my lads!"

"You don't think it's going to interfere with our flight, do you?" asked Church, in some alarm.

"By George, I hadn't thought of that!" replied Handforth, in a startled voice. "It'll be like their giddy nerve if they delay our start because of that fathead, Hussi Kahn! Why the dickens couldn't he look after himself better?"

Church and McClure chuckled.

"Haven't you changed your tone a bit, old man?" suggested Mac mildly. "Not long ago you were keen on the hunt."

"But if it's going to interfere with our holiday, I'm not so eager after the hunt!" replied Handforth, with perfect frankness. "Oh, but we needn't worry. I expect they've found Hussi by this time."

In the meantime, Mr. Manners had reached the little room in one of the hangars which he had made into his office. Nelson Lee and Nipper and Lord Dorrimore were there.

"What's wrong?" asked Mr. Manners curiously.

Nelson Lee was looking very grave; Lord Dorrimore was his old, cheery, happy-go-lucky self; and Nipper was openly excited.

"Come in, Manners," said Lee quietly. "Something of the utmost importance has cropped up. I wanted to speak to you earlier, but Dorrie insisted that your decision is a foregone conclusion."

"My decision?" repeated Mr. Manners. "My decision about what?"

"We're thinking of changing the plans, old man," said Dorrie calmly. "I told Lee that it doesn't matter a toss—because the new route will be altogether more interesting. You'll go crazy with joy when you hear about it."

Mr. Manners was amazed.

"New route?" he repeated. "But, my dear man, everything is arranged! The whole trip is mapped out in detail! Aerodromes all over the continent have been informed of our coming, and—"

"They'll have to be informed differently, then!" said Dorrie. "The fact is, we're not going round Europe at all, Manners. We're going to India."

"India!" ejaculated Mr. Manners, aghast.

"That place where the snakes come from!" nodded his lordship.

"But, man alive—"

"India, the home of curry and chutney!" said his lordship cheerily.

"Why can't you be serious, Dorrie?" said Nelson Lee impatiently.

"Sorry, old man—but I'm a hopeless case," said Dorrie, with a chuckle. "The fact is, I can't see anythin' to be serious about. Personally, I'm frightfully bucked. The idea of goin' to India is tophole."

Mr. Manners turned appealingly to Nelson Lee.

"Perhaps you'll explain?" he asked.

"That is why I have requested you to come here, Manners," said Nelson Lee. "Briefly, Hussi Kahn, the younger son of the Maharajah of Kurpana, has been kidnapped."

"Yes, I heard something about it."

"He has been taken out of England this morning—before dawn, indeed—by Prince Sinji and his companions—"

"Here, I say!" protested Mr. Manners, in amazement. "You can't mean that, Mr. Lee. Prince Sinji and his associates are famous! They have been preparing for their flight to India for weeks. They are men of absolute integrity, and—"

"Nevertheless, they are responsible for the abduction of the maharajah's son!" broke in Nelson Lee grimly. "They kidnapped him from Stapleton Towers during the night, conveyed him to Croydon Aerodrome, and smuggled him aboard their plane. By this time they are well on their way."

"Well, I'm hanged!"

"I have already been in communication with Sir Howard Portman, of the India Office," continued Nelson Lee. "And, in strict confidence, Manners, I've got to tell

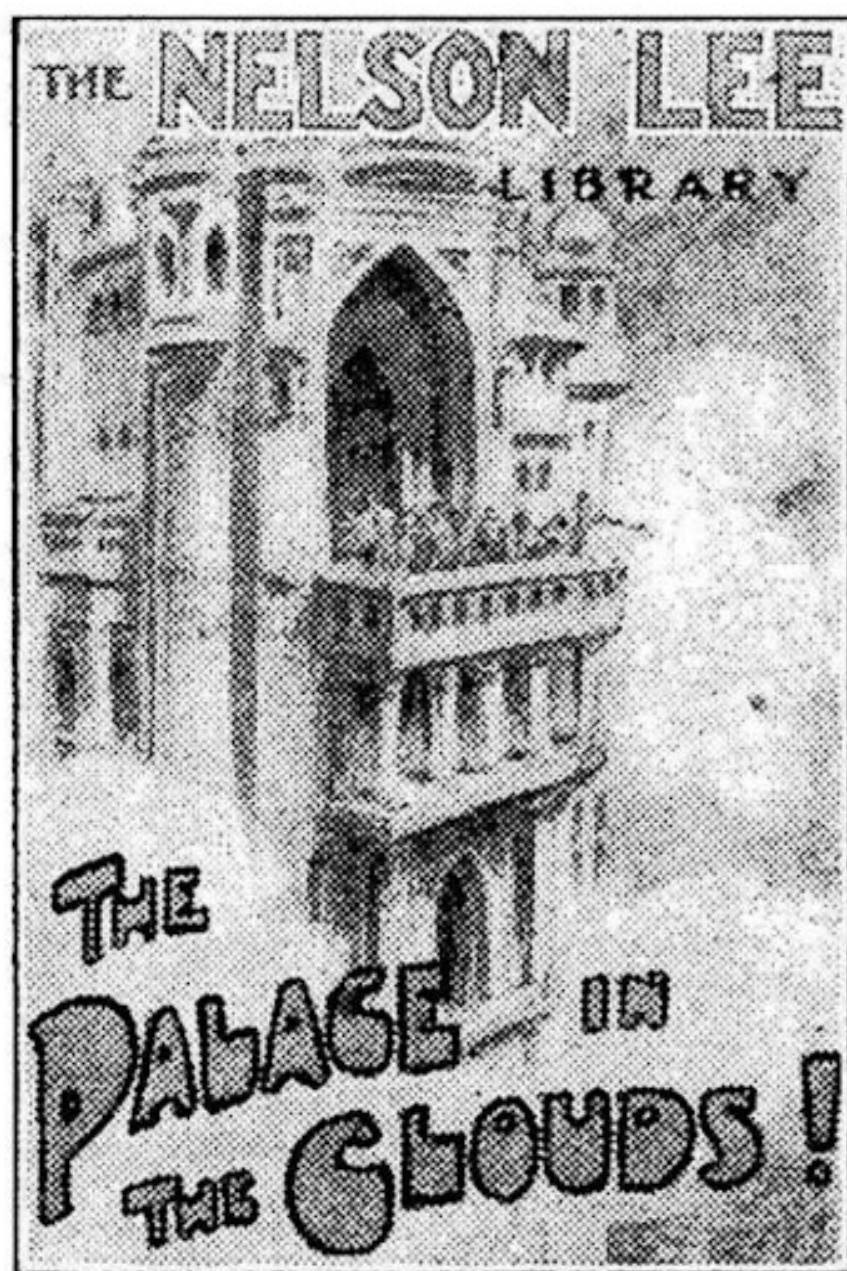
you that the rescue of Hussi Kahn is not only important but vital."

And Lee proceeded to give a few details. Mr. Manners learnt of the trouble that was brewing between Kurpana and Rishnir, and he was further and further astonished as he listened.

"But what has this got to do with us?" he asked, at length. "What can we do, Mr. Lee? You're not suggesting that we should go in chase of Prince Sinji, are you?"

"That is exactly what I am suggesting," replied Nelson Lee.

NEXT WEDNESDAY! ~~~~~



"The stuff to give them, eh?" murmured Dorrie.

"But, hang it, it can't be done!" protested Mr. Manners. "At such short notice as this—"

"There you have it exactly!" broke in Lee. "The notice is exceedingly short, Manners. There is not a 'plane in the whole kingdom that is ready for such a big flight. I will grant that there are many aeroplanes capable of a trip to India, but they are not tuned up—they are not loaded. It would take twenty-four hours, at least, for any machine to be prepared. But your 'plane is ready—filled with petrol, tuned up. If necessary, she can start within twenty minutes!"

"But—but this is amazing!" said Mr. Manners breathlessly. "Of course I'll agree,

Mr. Lee. Since it is so vitally important, I naturally consent. Lord Dorrimore has done so, in any case, and the machine is his—"Rubbish!" interrupted Dorrie. "It's as much yours as mine, Manners."

"I have already heard from the Air Ministry," continued Nelson Lee. "Prince Sinji arranged his route very carefully, and it is known that he has planned to land for fuel and supplies at Buda Pesth, Constantinople, Bagdad, Basra, and possibly Karachi. So you see, our quarry ought to be fairly easy prey. Roughly, if we

sibility. But what about the boys and girls?" he added, with a start. "Great Scott! What are we to say to them?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Exactly!" he exclaimed. "What are we to say to them?"

"That's not the point that's worrying me at all!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I'm wonderin' what they're goin' to say to us!"



CHAPTER 19.

All Aboard!

NIPPER was listening in astonishment. "Why, what do you mean, guv'nor?" he asked. "We're all going, aren't we?"

"I'm afraid not, young 'un," replied Nelson Lee. "You see, the whole situation is changed. It is necessary for the machine to travel light, so that all speed can be made —"

"Well, of course, that's nothing!" interrupted Dorrie. "The 'plane is such an enormous one that passengers make little or no difference. We've tried her empty, we've tried her fully loaded, and there's only a matter of about two or three miles an hour difference."

"And as for her fuel-carrying capacity, that need not worry us!" said Mr. Manners. "It will be easy enough to make arrangements by cablegram, and fuel will be ready for us at various points on the route to India. So those details can be dismissed."

"Then why worry?" asked Nipper. "Why can't we all go?"

"Well, would it be right?" said Mr. Manners slowly. "The parents of these boys and girls have consented to their going on a trip round Europe. But a trip to India is a very different proposition. They might object —"

"And there is certainly no time to communicate with anybody," said Nelson Lee. "Much as I hate to disappoint the young people, they really ought not to come."

"Let's hear what the young people have to say about it," grinned Dorrie. "Personally, I'm all in favour of their comin'. Sorry, Lee, but I don't think there's a mite of danger. You don't know this machine as I do. I'd take the whole crowd of boys and girls across the Atlantic without a qualm. That 'plane is as safe as the Mauretania!"

"In that statement, of course, Dorrie is quite correct," declared Mr. Manners, looking at Nelson Lee. "Although I am the designer of the machine, I have no desire to boast when I say that she is the last word in safety."

"And, hang it all, we're going on a regular air route, aren't we?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "I mean, there's no blazing of fresh

"THE PALACE IN THE CLOUDS!"

Stranded in the heart of the Indian jungle in the Province of Rishnir, which is ruled by a cruel, despotic Ameer who hates everything and everybody British!

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start within the next hour, Prince Sinji will have about six hours start of us."

"Why, that's nothing!" said Mr. Manners tensely. "This machine of mine is faster than anything else with wings!"

"Just what I've been sayin'!" murmured Dorrie.

"Furthermore, we can make one direct hop to Constantinople—or even Bagdad!" continued Mr. Manners. "I don't think there's any doubt at all that we shall be able to overtake Prince Sinji's 'plane—long before it gets anywhere near India."

"That's exactly why I want us to make this trip!" said Nelson Lee evenly. "No other machine could do it, Manners. Yours can."

"Then we'll go!" said the inventor quickly. "Of course we'll go! There's no other pos-

trails, Lee. We shall simply follow the route taken by Prince Sinji. Buda Pesth—Bagdad—Basra. All these places have their air stations, and there's not much doubt that we shall overtake the quarry long before we get to Basra."

"I quite agree," said Lee. "But we must be prepared for any emergency, Dorrie. If, for example, we are compelled to go right into India, we might find ourselves embroiled in the Kurpana trouble."

"All the better!" said Dorrie stoutly. "I'm longing for a bit of excitement!"

"Oh, you're hopeless!" said Lee gruffly.

"I know it," murmured Dorrie. "But, dash it all, where's the danger? At the very worst, even if we have to fly right to Kurpana, we shall be amongst friends. And our very presence there might cause the Ameer of Rishnir to hesitate before letting off any fireworks."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Well, of course, that is very possible," he admitted. "Our presence in Kurpana would be of extreme value, particularly as the maharajah has been seized, and is held prisoner. Our arrival might, indeed, put an end to the crisis."

"Then what the deuce are you hesitating about?" asked Dorrie. "Let's go! As for the boys and girls—bless 'em—we can't let them down, Lee. It would be absolutely rotten if we left them behind!"

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"I think it's quite likely that they'll refuse to be left behind," he said dryly. "However, we cannot take them off on this chase without letting them know the main facts. No need to go into details, of course. But I'm inclined to believe that it will be better to carry on."

"Good man!" said his lordship. "The parents of all these youngsters have consented to the trip, and if we change our plans a bit, what does it matter? We'll send a few dozen cablegrams from Buda Pesth, saying that we're carrying on towards India."

"Yes, that will be quite sufficient," said Mr. Manners, nodding. "The boys and girls aren't expected back until the end of the month, at the earliest."

And so it was decided.

Nelson Lee was satisfied that it was the better course, for, indeed, the presence of the young people on board would probably be of great advantage. It might put the enemy off the scent, for, with so many boys and girls in the party, everybody would immediately come to the conclusion that the trip was a mere pleasure cruise. The real significance of the flight would not be dreamed of.

Lord Dorrimore went out, and he found most of the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls standing about near the giant 'plane. They all came swarming round as he hailed them.

"All here?" asked Dorrie cheerily.

"Yes, sir!" sang out several voices.

"Good enough!" said his lordship. "Well, look here, all you young people! There's a

change of plan. Instead of making a trip round Europe, we're thinking of going a little farther afield."

"Oh!"

"Where to, sir?"

"Are you going to fly the Atlantic, sir?"

"Well, hardly," replied Dorrie, as many eager shouts went up. "We're going in the other direction. The general idea is to have a look at the East."

"Oh, good egg!"

"Hurrah!"

"We shall hop to Buda Pesth, to start with," said Lord Dorrimore, grinning. "Then we might go along to Bagdad, and after that we'll have a look at the Persian Gulf. I want to know what you boys and girls have got to say about it. Would you prefer to go on the previously arranged trip, or——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cheese it, Dorrie!"

"We'd ten times rather go to the East, sir!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Well, I rather thought you would!" grinned Dorrie. "That's settled, then! All aboard, everybody! We're startin' practically at once."

"Hurrah!"

"Yes, but dash it!" protested Archie. "I mean to say, good gad! Odds shocks and staggers! I mean, what about the good old pith helmets and drill suits, and what not? If we're going to the dashed East, we shall require all sorts of dashed tropical thingummies and what-do-you-call 'ems!"

"Dry up, Archie!" said Handforth boisterously. "What do we care about tropical suits and things? We've all got flannels, haven't we? And you can bet your boots that the girls are well supplied with silks and voiles. Girls are always prepared for the tropics, anyhow," he added. "It always puzzles me how the dickens they can keep warm in our climate!"

The girls laughed merrily, but everybody else agreed that Handforth had hit the nail on the head.

And from that minute onwards everything was bustle and action. The decision had been made, and the chase after Hussi Kahn was about to begin!



CHAPTER 20.

OH!



"HALLO! Here we go!" said Doris Berkeley eagerly.

"My hat! We're starting!"

"Hurrah!"

The promenade deck of the great monoplane was crowded with St. Frank's juniors and girls. Everybody was on board. The doors were sealed; the engines were running.

Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Hobart Manners and Nelson Lee were in the navigating cham-

ber, and swarms of mechanics were dodging round the great 'plane.

She was just about to take off.

Her four enormous engines were droning musically. The noise was not excessive; it was in no way annoying. Indeed, after a little while all the passengers would become so accustomed to the sound that they would hardly be aware of it.

From the promenade deck, on the top of the gigantic wing, a clear view of the ground ahead could be obtained. Turning, one could see the substantial body, tapering away to the tail fins and rudder; and all round, on that enclosed promenade deck, was the shining rail and the unsplinterable glass screening. It went overhead in a great dome, the whole being streamlined.

"We're moving properly now!" said Fullwood breathlessly. "By Jove! Here we go!"

"Good egg!"

They could feel the enormous machine quivering and jolting beneath them. They were gathering speed, rushing over the turf with ever-increasing momentum. Glancing back, they could see all the mechanics, standing there near the hangars, waving their hands.

And then suddenly the vibration ceased; the jolting was no more.

"We're off!" shouted Nipper. "By Jove, that's quick, you chaps! We're clear of the ground!"

The others could hardly believe it, but it was a fact. The aeroplane had taken off, and now she was soaring amazingly. Up she went—up and up! Then round in a graceful, slightly-banked turn.

Rising all the time, she circled over the crowd of mechanics, over the hangars, and then off she went across country. The juniors on the promenade deck had a momentary glimpse of spectators along the road. One or two motor-cars had stopped there, and the occupants were staring upwards at the receding 'plane.

"Well, we're off for the East!" said Nipper complacently. "Off after Hussi Kahn!"

Handforth turned upon him.

"Yes, by George, that reminds me," he said grimly. "What about it, Nipper?"

"What about what?"

"You know jolly well what I mean," growled Handforth. "Until now there hasn't been a chance to speak to you. But you haven't told us anything about Hussi Kahn. Where did you bunk off to? And what have you been doing all the time?"

"Yes, Nipper, we're all anxious to know, dear old boy," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West reproachfully.

"Please tell us!" urged Mary Summers.

Nipper was standing against the rail, looking downwards at the ground, which now seemed to be slipping underneath quite slowly. But the 'plane was gaining height with every minute, rising into the upper skies, and speeding forward at something approaching one hundred and fifty miles an hour.

Indeed, the great town of Ipswich was now practically underneath, although it seemed to the boys and girls that they had only just started; and within a minute or two the sea would be within sight. Distances were covered incredibly fast on this giant machine.

"There's not very much to tell, you fellows," said Nipper slowly. "Those Chandra Magicians at the circus were fakes. They weren't the Chandra Magicians at all."

"Oh!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"They were impostors," said Nipper. "It was just a wheeze to get hold of Hussi Kahn. But you mustn't think that the men were common kidnappers, or anything like that. The gov'nor has every reason to believe that they were Prince Sinji and his two companions!"

"Prince Sinji!" echoed Irene Manners, in amazement. "But Prince Sinji is the great Indian airman!"

"Exactly!" nodded Nipper. "And Prince Sinji started from Croydon Aerodrome this morning, on a flight to India. We're pretty certain that Hussi Kahn is on that 'plane. They're taking him off to Rishnir."

"But isn't Kurpana his country?" inquired Mary Summers.

"Yes," said Nipper. "But it seems that the Ameer of Rishnir is a warlike sort of chap, and he's preparing to start some trouble. The Ameer is an enemy of England, too, whilst Hussi Kahn's father has always been friendly towards us. Our job is to get Hussi Kahn back from Prince Sinji before India is reached."

"Well, it ought to be easy enough," said Handforth confidently. "In a 'plane like this, anything is possible! I expect we shall overtake the rotters in a few hours."

But Nipper shook his head.

"We can't hope for anything so good as that, Handy," he said. "Prince Sinji's 'plane is a good one—a very fast one. And it's got a long start of us. If we overtake it anywhere between Buda Pesth and Basra we shall do jolly well. It might even be necessary to carry right on to Karachi before we can do the trick."

"But supposing Prince Sinji refuses to hand Hussi Kahn over?" asked Travers. "It seems to me, dear old fellows, that there's liable to be a spot of trouble."

"There'll be trouble for Prince Sinji if he defies the gov'nor!" said Nipper grimly. "Mr. Lee has the full authority of the India Office, and for the time being he's really a representative of his Majesty's Government. So if the prince starts any rot, he'll soon be shoved in his place."

"Well, everything looks pretty good to me!" said Travers smoothly. "We're off to India, and there's more than a chance that we shall have a look at Kurpana before we come back. Better than flying round Europe, eh?"

"Yes, rather!" said half a dozen eager voices.

"And after we've rescued old Hussi, our time will be our own," continued Travers.

"We're going to the East, dear old fellows where there's mystery and adventure."

Vivian Travers spoke with some jocularly; but never had he given voice to truer words! The Manners monoplane was indeed setting out for a land of mystery and adventure!



CHAPTER 21.

Unexpected News!

BUDA PESTH!" said Lord Dorrimore, pointing.

It was much later in the day, and the great 'plane had been flying steadily and sedately, hour after hour. Now, in the distance ahead, a great city could be seen, far below, partially hidden in a heat haze.

"They're expecting us here," said Dorrie. "We shall land, take on some more juice, and make a few inquiries about Prince Sinji."

"What about the night, sir?" asked Handforth. "We're not going to stop anywhere during the night, are we?"

"Not that I know of," replied his lordship. "Our stay at Buda Pesth will be very brief. Then we shall take to the air again, and carry straight on. Of course, all you youngsters will go to bed at the usual hour. Everything on this ship will follow the usual routine of a yacht, or a liner. Night flying is perfectly safe for a machine of this size. Incidentally, we can't afford to lose any time."

"Talking about yachts, sir, reminds me of the good old Wanderer!" said Fullwood. "I suppose she's still as sound as ever?"

"Bless her heart, she's in hospital at the moment, undergoing an internal operation," said Dorrie. "In other words, a new type of engine is being installed, and she's in dry dock. But we're not doing so badly, are we?"

"I think we ought to call this 'plane the Wanderer of the Skies," said Nipper. "What do you say, Dorrie?"

"A jolly good name!" agreed his lordship. "From this minute onwards, young 'un, she's the Wanderer of the Skies. A bit of a mouthful, I'll admit, but who cares?"

Almost immediately afterwards the engines were cut off, and the Wanderer of the Skies—to give her her new name—planed gently downwards until she finally arrived at the big aerodrome outside the city.

"Now, understand, boys and girls, nobody is to leave the aerodrome," said Nelson Lee, just before the machine came to a standstill. "We shall not be here for long, and there must be no delays. I trust you not to wander too far afield."

"Aren't we going to have a look at Buda Pesth, sir?" asked Handforth.

"I'm afraid not—except from the air, when we re-start," replied Nelson Lee. "We can do all our pleasure-seeking—all our sight-seeing—after this chase is successfully over."

"Oh, rather, sir!" agreed Handforth promptly. "Of course, I'd forgotten, for the moment, that we were chasing Hussi Kahn. When I meet this Prince Sinji, I've a jolly good mind to dot him one on the nose!"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't do much good to Prince Sinji, or to yourself, or to anybody else," chuckled Nelson Lee. "Now don't forget what I've told you, will you?"

"That's all right, sir—you can trust us!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We won't go far away from the machine, sir!"

They were glad enough, however, to jump out and to look round with interest at the Hungarian officials and the civilians who came bustling round. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore vanished almost at once, and it was nearly half an hour before they returned. In the meantime, the Wanderer's tank had been replenished, and her water supplies renewed.

"Any news, sir?" asked Nipper eagerly, as Lee and Dorrie returned.

"Yes—and it is not particularly encouraging," replied Nelson Lee, in a low voice. "Prince Sinji's 'plane flew over Buda Pesth some hours ago—but it did not stop."

"Didn't stop, sir?"

"No; it flew straight on, although Prince Sinji had given word beforehand that he would descend at this aerodrome for fresh petrol supplies," replied Lee. "It looks rather significant, Nipper. And it also means that every minute is of importance. According to all calculations, too, the prince's 'plane is much faster than we had been led to believe."

"But not faster than the Wanderer of the Skies, sir?"

"No, not faster; but I am afraid there is not much difference between them, as regards speed," replied Lee. "We must be off again as quickly as possible."

"Haven't they heard anything about the other 'plane, sir? Hasn't it come down anywhere else?"

"Not that we know of," replied Lee. "The telegraphs have been busy, as you can imagine, but no word has come of Prince Sinji's machine. There is a rumour from a Bulgarian town that a strange aeroplane was seen there some time to-day, but it is unconfirmed."

Within twenty minutes the Wanderer was again soaring upwards, and within a very short time she was eight or ten thousand feet up, flying at just on two hundred miles an hour—her engines going nearly "all out," for the chase was now becoming a stern one.

Handforth was frankly disappointed.

"I thought it was going to be pretty exciting," he said gruffly. "But, instead of that, it's as tame as the dickens."

"We'd better tell the pilot to do a few stunts, then!" said Church sarcastically.

"Rot!" growled Handforth. "That would only mean a loss of time. But just look at everything! What is there to see?"

They were standing on the promenade deck, looking down at the vast expanse of country. It was just a bit hazy, and it was unquestionably a dull and uninteresting vista.

Handforth was really bored. The motion of the aeroplane was so smooth and steady that one could hardly believe that the machine was progressing at all. Now and again, perhaps, there was a diversion when banks of clouds were encountered. Otherwise, the flight was monotonous.

Indeed, when darkness began to fall, the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls were only too glad to congregate in the saloon, and to read or sit chatting.

Dinner was a great success, although neither Dorrie nor Mr. Manners appeared.

"It's just like being on an ordinary ship," remarked Harry Gresham, when dinner was over. "We're flying as steadily as though we were on a railway train—a lot steadier, even. Let's hope we shall hear some news in the morning, so that we can bring this chase to an end. Then, perhaps, we shall be allowed to have a look round the places where we land."

Soon afterwards they all went to bed, and there was a certain novelty in sleeping in the little bunks. But they were all thoroughly tired, and they were asleep in a very short time.

When morning came, they were a good deal further east, and they were surprised to learn that they had made a landing during the night, and had started off again. Everything had been done so smoothly that none of the passengers had awakened.

Further disquieting news was now going round.

They had now definitely learned that Prince Sinji's machine had been sighted, flying Eastward—but, again, it had not descended. It was becoming more and more certain that the Indian machine was attempting a non-stop flight to Rishnir.

And this meant that every effort would have to be made if Prince Sinji was to be overtaken.

Thus it resolved itself into a very stern chase, with hardly a minute lost anywhere. Onwards—ever onwards—into the mysterious East!

"Well, we're all a bit worried, if it comes to that," replied Lord Dorrimore. "Poor old Manners is properly fed up. He had believed that his machine was the fastest thing in the air, and that it would be an easy matter to overtake the quarry."

"There is no need for Manners to worry," said Lee gruffly. "Prince Sinji's machine is very much smaller—and cannot be compared in any way to this vast air liner. The thing which has upset our calculations is this non-stop business. We did not reckon upon Prince Sinji making such a flight. He has not lost a minute anywhere. He has continued straight on—and, by all appearances, he has been very successful."

"We've heard nothing of him since we left Bagdad, though," said Lord Dorrimore. "He may have crashed—he may have been forced down somewhere. Still, the only thing we can do is to carry on until we get to Karachi. And then, if necessary, we shall have to go right into Kurpana."

The chase had continued—hour after hour. It was now getting on towards midday, and most of the boys and girls were longing for the opportunity to land and to stretch their legs.

True, they had landed once or twice, but always they had been off again within a very short time. Not once had they been allowed to go out of sight of the Wanderer of the Skies. There had been no exploring—no sight-seeing—and the further East they got, the hotter became the chase.

That same evening, they were actually over India—with vast stretches of mountainous country in the distance, with rugged peaks rising into the mists. Far, far below, they could see rough country—with patches of jungle here and there, and with great plains rolling away into the hazy distance. But the machine was flying at such a height that nothing definite could be distinguished.

"Well, you chaps, there's something definite decided upon at last," said Nipper, as he joined the group of juniors on the promenade deck. "I've just seen the gov'nor and Dorrie."

"What's the new plan?" asked Handforth eagerly.

"Well, it's not a new plan," replied Nipper. "The latest news we heard about Prince Sinji is that he crossed the Rishnir border. So we're going straight on to Kurpana."

"Why not to Rishnir?" asked Handforth. Nipper grinned.

"It's quite likely that you're anxious to drop into a hornets' nest, Handy—but the rest of us aren't quite so keen," he replied. "Rishnir, at the present moment, is seething with anti-British agitation. It might not be wise to land in such a country!"

Handforth scratched his head.

"But I thought that India was all British?" he asked.

"My dear chap, you seem to imagine that India is a small country, about the size of England, with one language and one set of customs."

"Well, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 22.

India!



NELSON LEE was looking thoughtful and troubled.

"I don't like it, Dorrie!" he said

bluntly. "We are already well beyond the Persian Gulf; we are approaching India. And Prince Sinji is still ahead of us."

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!" groaned Nipper. "For goodness' sake, Handy, don't air your ignorance like that! Do you realise that India is half as big as Europe?"

"Good gall!" ejaculated Archie Glenthorne, who was listening with interest. "Not really, old Cheddar?"

"Yes, really!" said Nipper. "India is divided into as many regional sections as Europe is divided into kingdoms and republics. And each region has its different climate and weather and habits and customs. Why, some of the highlanders of the frontier hills are as different from the inhabitants of Bengal as a Norwegian is different from a Spaniard."

"Here endeth the first lesson!" murmured Travers.

"Cheese it!" growled Nipper. "I'm not trying to air my knowledge—"

"Sorry, dear old fellow!" grinned Travers. "Go ahead! I'm most frightfully interested."

"Well, so am I, if it comes to that!" admitted Handforth. "I'm jiggered if I ever realised that India was such a big place, or that it contained so many different peoples."

"Rishnir and Kurpana are twin-States. They are provinces that adjoin one another," explained Nipper. "I might mention that I have just been learning all this from the gov'nor, although I had an inkling of it beforehand. Well, both Rishnir and Kurpana are sort of independent States; but while Kurpana is faithful to Great Britain, Rishnir is plotting against her. So there you have the thing in a nutshell. If we landed in Rishnir, we should land into a nice little packet of trouble. The Ameer would probably have us beheaded in about two shakes of a lamb's tail!"

"How frightfully frightful!" said Archie, with a shudder. "I mean to say, I'm prepared to face sundry dangers, and all that sort of thing, but I rather draw the line at having my head lopped off. Absolutely!"

"You needn't worry, Archie," chuckled Nipper. "Although we shall fly right over Rishnir territory, we shall actually land in Kurpana. Dorrie and the gov'nor have been calculating it all out on the charts, and by compass. They reckon that we shall be in Kurpana by the morning. Throughout the night we shall be flying over Rishnir."

"And what about Hussi Kahn?" asked Fullwood.

"Well, it seems that we've drawn a blank," replied Nipper gravely. "Prince Sinji was too cunning for us. His machine was much faster than he led people to believe. On the top of that, he has made a non-stop flight. So we haven't been able to overtake him."

"Yes, he may be in Rishnir by now," said Gresham gloomily. "And poor old Hussi will be in the hands of the enemy! By jingo, you chaps! I don't think we ought to leave India until we've rescued him, do you?"

"Never!" declared Handforth. "We've got to get old Hussi back before we return!"

Further discussion was of very little use. The St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls knew that their destination was now Kurpana. The chase after Hussi Kahn was

more or less a failure. But, once in Kurpana, they might be able to make other plans.

In the short dusk of the evening, they could see the strange, unfamiliar country far below them. And as the dusk deepened into night, they could detect twinkling lights here and there, denoting towns or villages. But they kept straight onwards—Mr. Mangers and Dorrie flying by compass, and keeping true to their course.

So, at the usual hour, the passengers went to bed, thrilled by the knowledge that when they awoke and dressed they would be over the domain of Kurpana.



CHAPTER 23.

The Forced Landing!

BOOM-BOOM!

Nipper sat up in his bunk, his eyes startled, his heart thumping rapidly.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "What on earth— Oh, my goodness!"

He had awakened suddenly, and even now he was still bewildered and dazed. He did not know what the time was, but it was obviously some hour of the night.

Near his bunk there was a little sealed window, and outside everything was pitchy black. The great aeroplane was rocking alarmingly, although her engines were still giving forth the same comforting, rhythmic purr.

Suddenly there was a blinding blaze of bluish-white flame, and Nipper was momentarily blinded. Following the blaze came a thunderous booming which reduced the purring of the engines to a whisper.

"My hat!" said Nipper. "We're in the middle of a giddy storm!"

He experienced an awful sensation at the pit of his stomach, and he knew that the machine was dropping—falling sheer. Then the sensation vanished. Once again, the Wanderer of the Skies was flying evenly. Probably she had encountered a big air pocket. But the next second she was heeling over again, rocking and shuddering terribly.

"What's wrong?" came a gasp from the darkness. "Nipper! Are you there?"

"Keep your hair on, Tommy!" said Nipper, as he got out of his bed. "We're only in the middle of a storm."

"Only!" panted Tommy Watson. "I—I thought we were going to turn completely over just then!"

"Look out!" yelled Nipper.

As he spoke, the little cabin seemed nearly to loop the loop. Up it went, over and over, and Nipper was flung across the little space, until he thudded violently against the wall. He sagged down as the great machine tilted over and then tilted back again.

Nipper knew the size of this giant 'plane—and the comparative tininess of this cabin. It was obvious to him that the machine was

being tossed about like a feather on an angry sea.

He switched the light on, and, somehow, he and Watson—who shared this little cabin together—managed to get some clothes on. Then they opened the door, and reeled out into the corridor.

"Is there any danger?" asked an agitated voice.

Nipper and Watson found that there were other figures in the corridor—Irene Manners, Mary Summers, Archie Glenthorne, Handforth. In fact, nearly all the passengers were coming out of their snug cabins.

"I don't suppose it's anything much!" said Travers coolly. "Only a storm."

"But we've been tossing about dreadfully!" said Winnie Pitt. "I was nearly thrown—Oh, look, look!"

Her voice rose almost to a shriek. Another blinding flash of lightning had come, and the lurid flames and sparks seemed to penetrate right into the very corridor. All those boys and girls experienced a shivering sensation down their spines, and their very skins seemed to tingle.

Just then Nelson Lee appeared, reeling drunkenly as the 'plane staggered afresh.

"Keep cool, everybody!" said the House-master-detective. "We're in a pretty nasty storm, and we're right over Rishnir, but neither Dorrie nor Mr. Manners is worried. They are sure that we shall be able to get through all right."

"We're not worrying, sir," said Travers. "It's a bit of a diversion. Can we go up on to the promenade deck?"

"I don't think you'd better," replied Lee. "The machine is tossing badly, and some of you might get hurt. You'd far better remain here, or go back into your cabins."

"Oh, have a heart, sir!" protested Handforth. "We can't sleep through this! Let's go into the saloon!"

"Yes, yes!" said Doris. "We can look through the windows of the saloon!"

Before Nelson Lee could stop them, they all went crowding into the big lounge, and they took their seats at the windows, or crowded round, leaning over one another's shoulders.

In the meantime the Wanderer of the Skies was continuing her battle against the violent storm. It was no ordinary thunderstorm—not the kind that can be encountered in a temperate zone. It was appallingly fierce.

Suddenly, the great machine seemed to stagger, to come to a halt in mid-air; the floor and the walls quivered and shook. Then, with a sickening lurch, she slid downwards through the air. She was dropping—dropping—

"What was that?" panted Gresham, startled.

They had all heard it—a kind of splintering, metallic sound. It seemed to come from the rear, and immediately afterwards the vast machine took a bad tilt to starboard. The howling and roaring of the wind was terrifying, and the sound of the engines was now lessened.

Nipper could imagine Dorrie and Mr. Manners at the dual controls—fighting valiantly against the tropical storm.

"Something went just then, sir!" muttered Nipper, turning to Nelson Lee. "One of the tail fins—or the rudder! We're crippled!"

"Hush!" murmured Nelson Lee. "I believe you are right, but—"

"Oh, we're dropping at a terrible rate!" shouted somebody.

And this was true. They could all tell by the sensation. They were going down—down. And now and again, the machine would right herself, then tilt over once more. Once she stalled, however, and dipped.

"Stay here, you youngsters!" shouted Lee, trying to make his voice calm. "I'll be back in a minute, and then I'll tell you how things are going."

He forced his way forward—through the passage, and then into the navigation chamber.

He found the little place in darkness, with Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners sitting in the twin-pilot seats, staring ahead of them through the glass screens. A blaze of light was shooting out from the nose of the 'plane. Giant searchlights had been switched on, and in the very first glimpse Nelson Lee could see trees, only a few hundred feet below.

"Look out, there!" sang out Dorrie, as he half glanced round. "We can't make it, Lee. We've got to land!"

"Good heavens!" panted Nelson Lee.

"Our tail fins are damaged!" put in Mr. Manners tensely. "If we don't land at once, we shall probably be out of control within three minutes, and that will mean—"

He broke off meaningly.

Nelson Lee turned, in order to make his way back to the saloon. He went to prepare the passengers for the coming shock. For he did not doubt that the machine would land with terrific violence, and cause injury to many.

But while he was still in the passage, he felt the floor drop from under him. He clutched at one of the electric light fittings, and pressed his other hand against the passage wall. In a flash he knew what was happening.

Mr. Manners had allowed the whole machine to drop in what airmen call a "pancake" descent.

In this way, there was a good chance for them all. The machine might be wrecked, but she would fall more or less on an even keel; there would be no danger of her driving her nose with dreadful violence into the ground.

Cra-a-a-sh!

It came suddenly, dramatically. The whole air was filled with the splintering of woodwork, the straining of metal, and a hundred and one other terrifying sounds. Then, in the next second, everything was

(Concluded on page 44.)

BETWEEN OURSELVES!

YOUR logic is very sound—Leslie Strachan (Forest Hill)—I am awfully glad that you intend to keep on reading the Old Paper, notwithstanding the fact that you are "at that critical age when young chaps ask themselves if they are too old to continue reading school stories." As you say: "I don't care what other people think—let them think!" You state that you are going to judge for yourself, and that's the right thing to do. After all, why *shouldn't* you read school stories if you want to? It is only the weaklings who are afraid of being chipped. Yes, I think I can safely promise that this Chat is now a permanent feature in the Old Paper.

* * *

I want you to write to your sister—Clyde Clinto (Palmerston North, New Zealand)—and I want you to thank her on my behalf. Without her permission I am going to repeat what she said to you in a letter: "Your NELSON LEE LIBRARY is the best medicine for the dumps that I can find. Every week I wait anxiously for the next number, and although people laugh at me, I maintain that it is the best paper of fiction I know." And you tell me that she receives many other books and papers, which, as you say, makes her words all the weightier.

* * *

Glad to know that the St. Frank's League has been so useful to you—Neville Kirknan

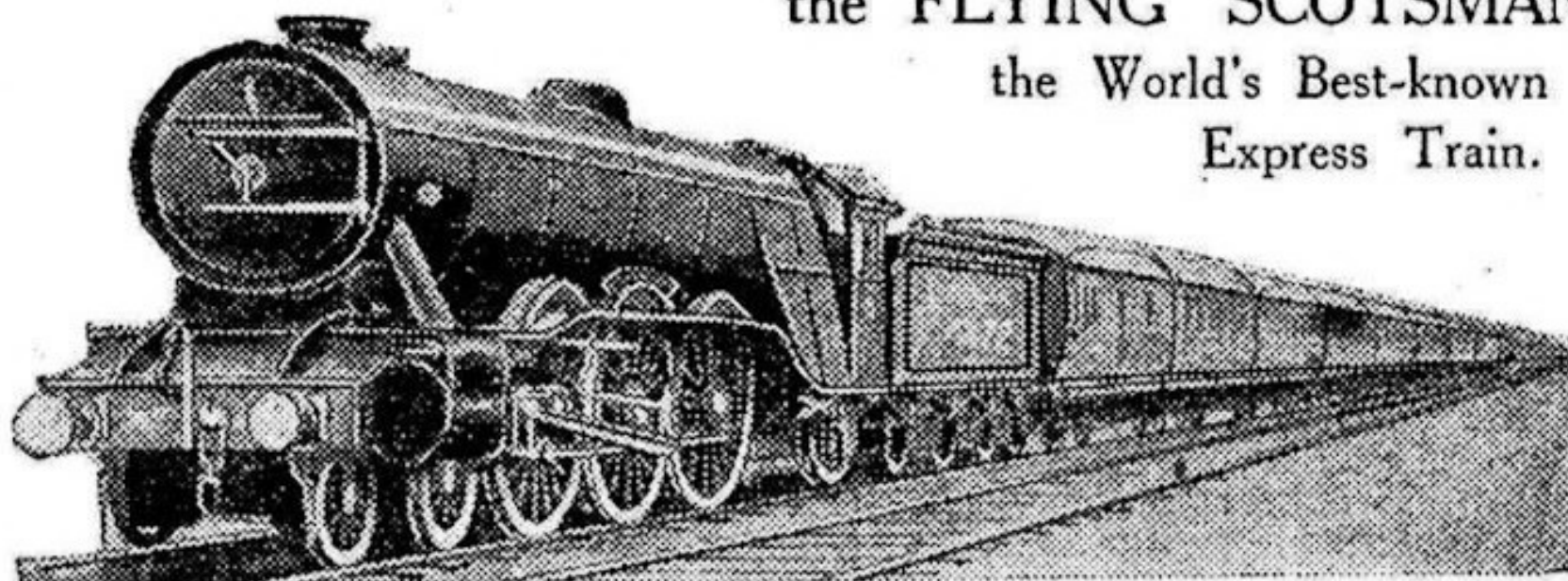
(Pietermaritzburg). You tell me that, in response to the notice that was put in the Correspondents Wanted Column, you have had letters pouring in from all over the world. I'll repeat a few lines from your letter, for the benefit of other readers: "I only regret now that I had not known of your wonderful mag. years and years ago. I have received some awfully nice snaps, post-cards, stamps, etc., from these numerous pen-friends. And they are still coming along with nearly every mail, and I am quite happy." Yes, you are quite right about Nicodemus and Cornelius Trotwood. I haven't brought them prominently into the stories for a long time now. But they are still at St. Frank's, and I shall have to give them a showing before long.

* * *

You are quite right in one thing—J. Gallimore (Hanwell, W.7). I do have a holiday every now and again. But in spite of your lurking idea I certainly do *not* have somebody else to help me in my yarns. Every story that appears under my name has splashed direct from my own pen, and from no other.

Henry B. Swobbs

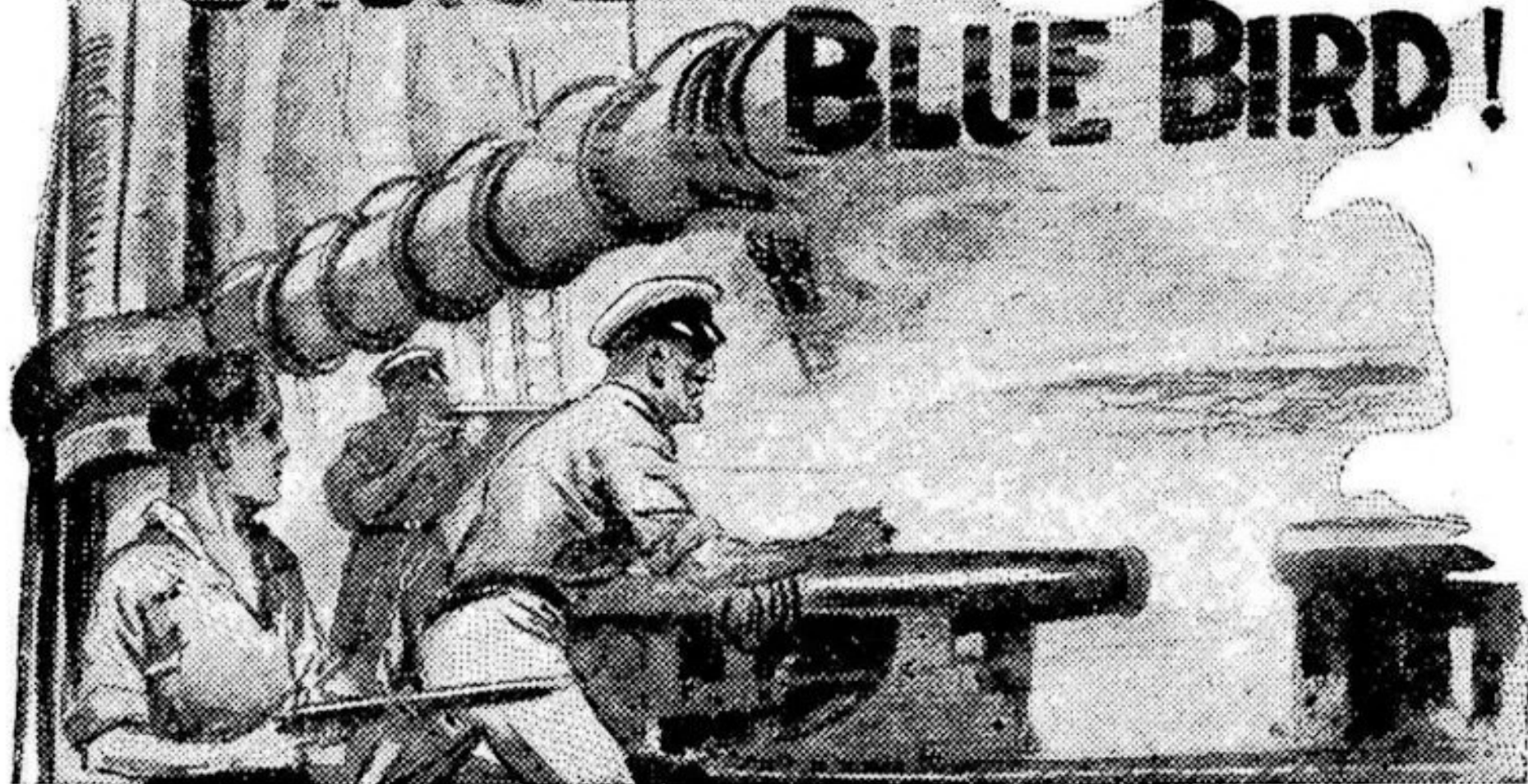
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THRILLS AND FORTUNE-HUNTING ADVENTURE AMID THE SOUTHERN SEAS

THE CRUISE OF THE BLUE BIRD!



By COUTTS BRISBANE

WHAT'S ALREADY HAPPENED:

CAPTAIN MANBY is skipper of the schooner Blue Bird, which is bound for the Malea atolls, in the Southern Pacific. He is accompanied by his son

JACK MANBY, and his nephew

NED SUTTON, two adventure-loving boys. From a native Captain Manby has learned that in these atolls is an uncharted island—supposed to be practically inaccessible—the lagoon of which is full of pearl shell. The captain is successful in finding this unknown island; and to his surprise discovers that it is inhabited by a number of French castaways. They appear to be

very friendly, but later the captain is not too sure about them. Meanwhile, the native's story proves to be correct. The lagoon is full of pearl shell. Diving operations commence. The two boys and a native are under-sea collecting the oysters, when suddenly the native is attacked by an octopus. Ned and Jack succeed in rescuing him, but are themselves caught in the grip of the tentacles. Ned feels his diver's helmet being torn from off his head—the end seems very near!

(Now read on.)

The Under-Sea Fight!

CAPTAIN MANBY had started away from the schooner some time before the boys got into their diving kit.

He thought that all would be well with them, since Big Timo, who was with them, had had experience of diving for shell before. Also they had learned how to deal with the shark, and, anyhow, the noise made by the Kanakas was enough to keep it at a respectful distance.

Therefore the captain went off in the dinghy, with a couple of men to row him, without any fears for the boys' safety. He had made a waterglass the previous evening, by letting a piece of glass into the bottom of an old bucket. By putting this in the water and looking down

through it, he was able to scan the bottom without any distortion caused by ripples, and thus observe the size of the oysters at various points.

He had brought with him a few empty tin cans and bits of wood made fast to lines weighted with stones. By using these as buoys, he proposed to mark the most promising areas and thus save time. Leaning over the stern of the boat, he peered below, while the men paddled as he directed. When he saw an especially fine patch of shell, he dropped a buoy.

Something over an hour had passed, and he had prospected a considerable area when one of the men grunted.

"Dem fella in cutter makee racket, cap'n boss," he said, and pointed towards the

Fathoms deep and in the grip
of an octopus—that's one of
Ned's and Jack's thrilling
adventures this week, boys!

boat. "Dem fella look somet'ing under-side."

Captain Manby sat up, heaved in the waterglass and stared hard. In an instant he saw that something unusual must be happening, for the men in the cutter were no longer hauling up the nets of shell, but were leaning overside, cackling excitedly. Two of them were tugging hard at a rope evidently held fast below, while Big Timo was yelling something to Mr. Sinclair aboard the schooner. The captain heard the word "harpoon."

"Give way!" he snapped. "For all you're worth!"

The men obeyed, and the dinghy foamed through the water towards the cutter. Manby saw Sinclair run along the deck, dive into the after cabin, and reappear with the long harpoon kept there—a formidable weapon with a long shaft and sharply-barbed head. Sinclair sprang down into the quarter boat which was lying in the water alongside, cast off, and sculled to the cutter.

Big Timo had stripped off his shirt and shorts. He grabbed the harpoon, balanced for a moment on the thwart, then plunged into the water.

"Pull! There's something wrong below!" cried Captain Manby. "Ah, one man up!"

The men tugging at the line had fallen back suddenly. A dark form came shooting to the surface, to be gripped and hauled in. Manby could see that he was limp, perhaps lifeless. And the two boys were below, at grips with some terror of the underworld of waters!

"Row!" Manby said hoarsely, and mechanically took off his coat and shirt, drew his long sheath-knife and put it between his teeth. "Row!"

And under water, on the slippery slopes of the pit in the lagoon bed, the two boys were in extremity. Ned, his strength nearly gone, choking now—for the air-supply in his diving-suit was fast oozing away—hacked blindly at the encircling tentacles of the octopus, knowing that every moment brought the horror of the pit nearer.

Jack, one arm held firmly, tried to transfer the knife to the other hand. It was made fast to his wrist by a lanyard, and this he could not loose, while it was too short to allow him to use the knife freely. The grip about his legs tightened. He felt himself beginning to slide down and down towards those horrible, unblinking eyes.

Below them he saw the brute's parrot-like beak working in anticipation. It was hauling itself up, certain of its prey. In a few moments more it would drag the hapless pair to its slimy embrace, and then—

A long shadow came sliding past the pair. For a moment Jack thought it was some other abomination of the sea come to dispute possession of them with the octopus. Then he recognised Big Timo. The bo'sun had no time to waste. He had guessed what was amiss, and as he saw the entangling tentacles about the boys he knew that he

was right, and knew, moreover, exactly what to do.

With one hand he gripped a projecting knob of coral, with the other he brought the harpoon to bear in a straight line for the brute's body. Then he thrust with all his might, even as one of the tentacles, loosing Ned, laid hold upon him, a second too late.

The thrust went home, inflicting a fatal wound. The entangling coils fell away, a great cloud of darkness jetted from the creature.

Timo drew back his harpoon as the octopus slithered down into the depths of the pit; he thrust with his legs and shot to the surface.

"Pull up dem boys!" he yelled, as he reached the top. "Dem drown!"

Manby, now only a dozen lengths away, arrived alongside the cutter as first Jack and then Ned were drawn up. Scrambling aboard, he helped to haul them in. Jack was in no trouble. His hands went to his helmet and opened the front.

"I'm all right. Golly, what a horrible brute! Timo settled him, though, I think. Is Ned hurt?" he exclaimed in gasps.

"Sit still!" growled Manby, busy with Ned's helmet. "This has been nearly hauled off." He unfastened the clasps, drew off the helmet.

Ned's eyes were closed, but the eyelids flickered. He gasped painfully, choked, spluttered; his lips moved.

"Like wet leather. Won't cut!" he muttered hoarsely.

"He's all right, sir," cried Sinclair from the quarter boat alongside. "We'll get him aboard. Get those boots off. Hand him across, Timo!"

"You did well, Timo," said Captain Manby. "They were both held, I suppose?"

"Yes, dad, he had us both," put in Jack. "An awful, big brute, with eyes like dinner-plates. But Timo went right into him with the harpoon, and he let go."

"Heap big. Heap good harpoon," observed Timo. "Big hole down there. Mebbe 'nother octopus there."

"We'll see about that presently," said Manby.

Ned's gasping had ceased, he breathed more normally. His eyes opened, stared for a moment, then he realised that the nightmare struggle was over and that he was safe.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Timo went down with a harpoon and killed him," said Jack. "He's saved us."

"Thanks, Timo." Ned held out his hand. The big bo'sun took it gingerly. "I shan't forget it, Timo."

"Stick um harpoon, him dead," remarked Timo. "Next time, you take um harpoon down. Prod um middle. Him dead. Me go down look, cap'n?"

"No. Knock off till I've cleared the bottom," said Captain Manby. "You boys come aboard. You've done enough diving for to-day."

A Peculiar Request!

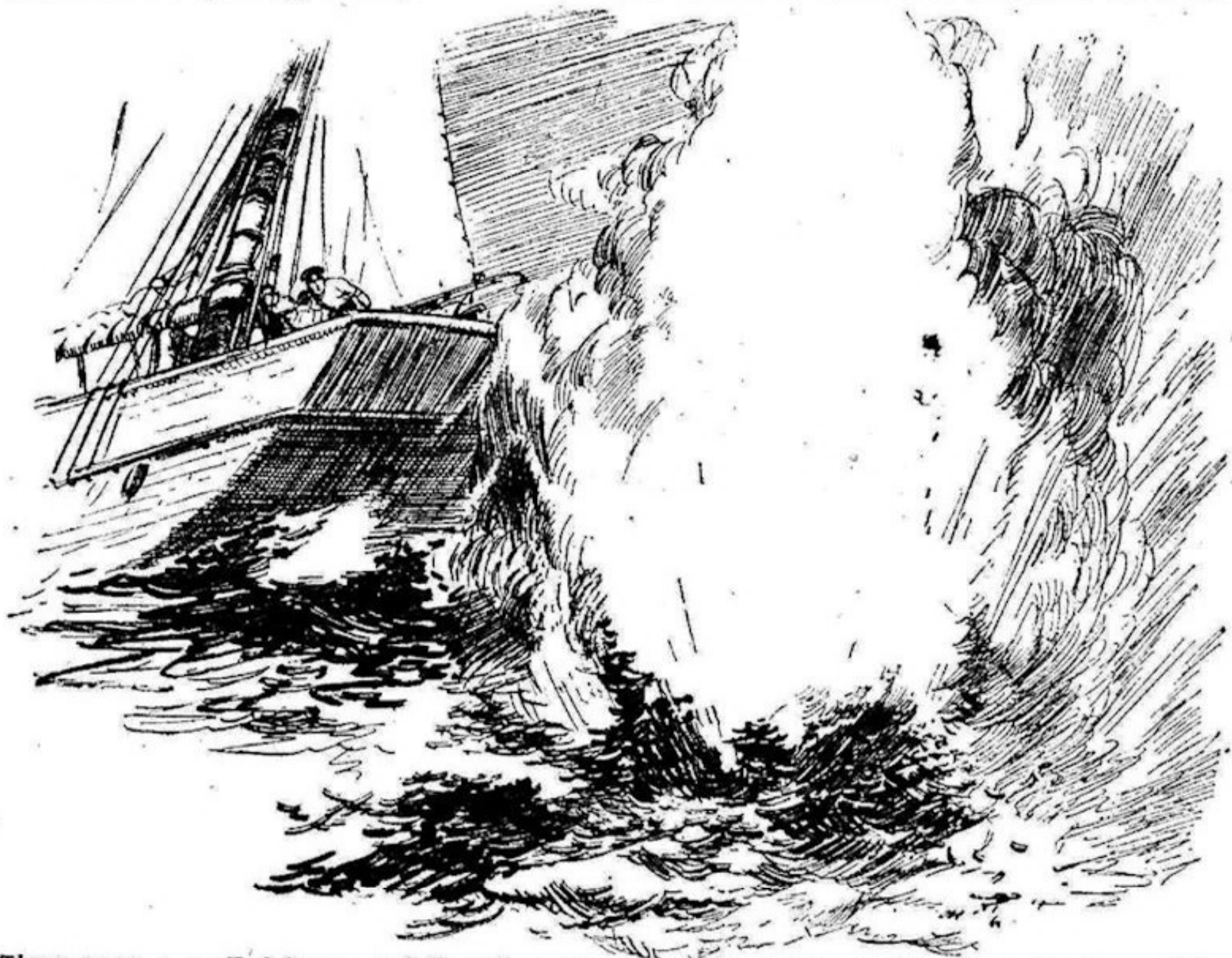
NED was still feeling groggy when he boarded the Blue Bird, for he had been half-suffocated. Both the boys discovered that their legs were badly bruised by the grip of the tentacles, and so they were quite content to drop into deck-chairs and sit still while Captain Manby prepared what he called a depth-charge calculated to settle any other octopus that might be lurking in the depths of the pit.

It was a simple enough arrangement of a couple of large dynamite cartridges bound together, and placed in a biscuit-tin, with an electric detonator and connecting wires attached to a sparking-battery.

handle of the magneto. There was a moment's pause, then the schooner quivered from the force of the underwater detonation. A balloon of water rose astern, and up flew a fountain of shell, bits of coral, bits of crabs and a dark tangle of writhing tentacles, twisting convulsively in a death agony.

"Jiminy Christmas!" shouted Sinclair. "There was a second one, sir, and you got him clean as a whistle. There's a bit of another. Number two must have started in to feed on his dear brother. Wow! Look at the small fry!"

For a few moments the dead and the dying octopods swirled about on the surface amidst a number of small fishes, stunned or killed



There came a muffled boom, and the schooner quivered from stem to stern from the force of the underwater detonation.

"Come aft. Now we'll just lower this where it will do most good," said Manby, with a grim smile. "Using bombs is prohibited now in all civilised lagoons, because they destroy so much of the fry, but I reckon one won't matter here. Up anchor, Mr. Sinclair, and let her drift up a little. About three fathoms west of the cutter will do nicely."

The anchor was broken out, and before a gentle breeze which had sprung up with the sun, the schooner moved slowly over to the desired spot.

Captain Manby lowered his depth-charge overboard. As the line ceased to run out, he gave the word, and Jack twirled the

by the explosion, then slowly began to sink. Up the lagoon came the Keeper. His fin clove the surface, then disappeared as he sank with his prey, while from all quarters other fish hurried to partake of the feast provided for them.

"Anyhow, you've done Johnny Shark a bit of good, sir, and made this part of the lagoon a bit safer for diving," said Sinclair. "And judging by the row they're making, you've given those Frenchies something to talk about. Here comes that chap Benoist to ask about it."

Benoist, paddling the outrigger, came alongside presently.

"What is the matter?" he shouted. "It was a blow-up on the underside, eh? You have mines?"

Manby explained. Benoist nodded.

"So. I comprehend. But these dynamites, you have plenty?"

"Oh, a fair lot! I brought them along in case we found that there wasn't water enough in the entrance to the lagoon. I intended to blast a way in, in that case."

"So. Yes. Perhaps I might beg one, one day. I have the use for it."

"Oh, I dare say I can spare you one, M. Benoist. What do you wish to do with it?"

"I have a thought. Once, when I was young, I studied mining for a little. It is in my mind that here at a certain place there is something. Perhaps I am wrong. A little blow-up would settle the point. If it is right, you shall share. I tell you, perhaps it is platinum. That would be very fine, eh? Better than pearls, even?"

"Yes. But pearls are good. So is shell. I must turn my fellows to work again. Wait a moment and I'll give you a cartridge now, M. Benoist."

"Now, I wonder what in thunder he wants with the thing?" said Captain Manby, when Benoist had received a dynamite cartridge, a cap detonator and a bit of fuse, and departed with them. "That talk about platinum is all eyewash. I don't know much about that sort of thing, but I know that it's an impossibility for platinum to be found on an island of this type, which is originally volcanic. I know that nothing of the sort has ever been found on one."

"That's so," agreed Sinclair. "But he has some notion up his sleeve. I dare say he'll tell you later. Rummy bird."

"Very rum. Says he's been a wine merchant and was going to help those others build up a business in wines grown in the Solomons, and then talks about mining. Well, I'll get to work again. See about mending that suit young Ned was wearing, and I'll have one of the Kanakas try it this afternoon."

The Explosion!

CAPTAIN MANBY went back to the cutter, and soon the work of getting up the shell was going on as before.

The lines of oysters laid out on the beach to rot grew longer and longer. Mr. Sinclair, busy on repairs, nodded towards it approvingly.

"We're getting on fine!" he said. "Three or four weeks at this rate and we'll make our cargo. To-morrow you will be able to start searching that lot of shell you got out yesterday. It's rotting splendidly."

"Shouldn't call the smell splendid," grumbled Ned, for whiffs of a high quality floated from the beach. "It's like a fish shop gone a long way wrong."

"It'll be worse to-morrow, sonny," returned Sinclair, with a chuckle. "But you won't notice it once you get to washing out the

shells and looking for pearls in 'em, 'specially if you find one or two right off the bat!"

After dinner, when the captain handed over one diving-suit to Sinclair and put the other on Tom Tiddler, a Kanaka whom he had drilled in its use, the boys found that the smell was becoming stronger every moment.

"It isn't attar of roses, certainly," said Captain Manby. "And we'll drop down the lagoon a bit when the men knock off. But meantime, why don't you get into the dinghy and drift down towards the other end beyond the entrance? Take the waterglass, and perhaps you may locate more shell. Anyhow, your sensitive noses won't be offended."

Though their bruised legs were stiff, the boys jumped at the suggestion. They got aboard, and, with Jack at the oars, paddled away down the lagoon.

They passed the Frenchmen at some distance. The latter were diving and making a great noise, but they didn't appear to be bringing up much shell.

"They're playing at it," said Jack. "All that gang ought to have done a great deal better. They're a lazy lot. What are you looking at?"

"Benoist—and that man Pascal," replied Ned. "They're walking along the beach. Now they've gone into the bush."

Ned lowered the glasses through which he had been looking, and turned his attention to the lagoon bottom. There were no oysters visible. Instead, a fairy garden was displayed beneath them, a garden of coloured corals twisted into fantastic shapes, with anemones like weird tropic flowers, and a multitude of brilliant-hued fish. It was all so beautiful that for a while they gave no heed to anything else, till they found themselves running out of the lagoon entrance on the ebb tide.

Jack resumed his oars, pulled back, and proceeded along the part of the lagoon which they had not as yet visited. It was much the same as the other portion. Some little distance from the outlet the oyster beds began again. They noted that the shells were even larger and more abundant than where they had been working, and, as at the further end, the water shoaled gradually. The lagoon ended in a stretch of open beach, where they landed.

"We've come a long way round," said Jack, as they crossed it and began to ascend a slope of the hill, from the top of which floated the light pall of smoke which told of still unquenched volcanic fires. "I wonder if we could climb up there?"

"Not to-day, thanks!" replied Ned, and sat down on a chunk of rock. "The going's too rough. We'll try it one day later on. Hallo, there go Benoist and Pascal!"

The two Frenchmen had come in sight again, climbing the flank of the hill about half a mile away. Ned brought his glasses to bear.

"I wonder what they're up to?" he murmured idly. "They've stopped. Benoist is

ing to a sort of cleft. It looks like the mouth of a cave. Now they've gone in." "He's prospecting for the platinum," said Ned lazily. "Benoist has come out again," went on Ned. "He's looking round. I guess he can't see us, or the boat, either, from where he is. He's gone in again."

He continued to scrutinise the hillside idly. Suddenly he sat up and stared eagerly.

"Benoist is out again. He's running—he— Oh, golly! Look!"

A gush of smoke jetted from the mouth of the cleft, or cave, and a few moments later the crash of an explosion came rolling down to them. Bits of rock and debris, flung high in the air by the explosion, rolled down the slope, on which Benoist had flung himself flat.

"The dynamite!" Jack exclaimed. "They've set it off. Where's the other man?"

"Can't see him. I believe there's been an accident. Benoist is prancing around and wringing his hands. He's going back to the cave. Come on!" cried Ned, and, springing to his feet, he began to climb around the shoulder of the hill slope, with Jack hard behind.

The Tragedy!

FORGOTTEN were bruises and aches and pains. They felt certain that something had gone amiss, and they wanted to help. Panting, slipping, stumbling, they yet made good time, and soon were within shouting distance of the apparently demented Benoist. As their calls reached his ears he turned, saw them, and still seeming incoherently, came running down the slope to meet them.

"Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Quel horreur! What a misfortune!" he babbled. "C'est le pauvre Pascal! He is smash, -erased! The dynamite, he go off. I tell him to come out quick when he light the fuse, but he was too slow. He is dead, exterminated!"

"How d'you know? He may be lying hurt, and you're not helping him by howling here," said Jack roughly. "Hurry, you ass!"

"Yes, yes! You have the cool head. Lgo. We will have him out if we must tear the hill asunder. The poor fellow!"

He began to scramble back. Breathless, the boys hurried after him and reached the mouth of the cave—or, rather, the place where the mouth had been, for tons of debris had fallen, blocking it up.

"He is dead! He is buried!" cried Benoist. "My poor comrade. We can do nothing."

"Rot!" snapped Ned. "Cut these saplings and we can use them as levers and shift those rocks easily enough."

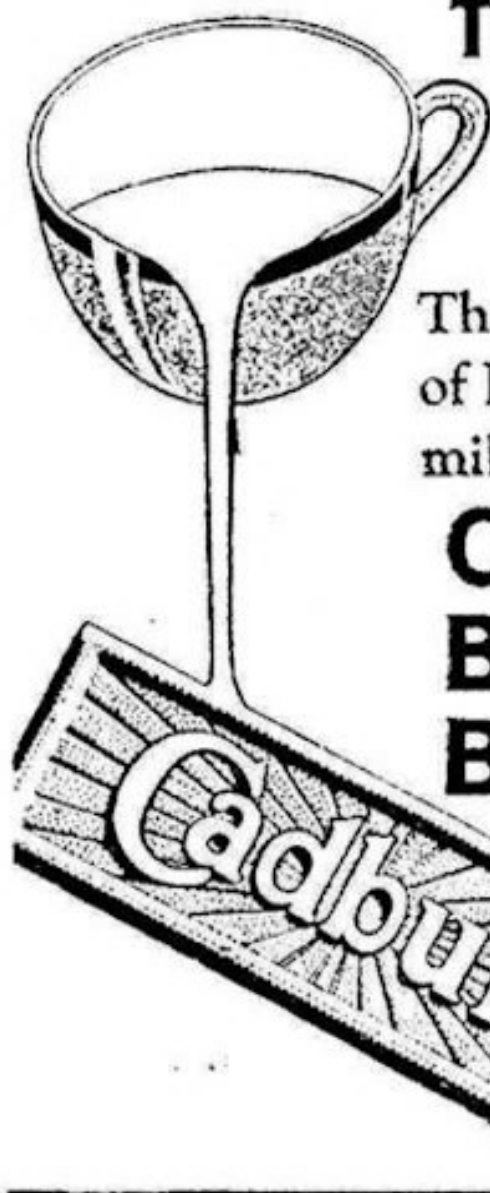
He set the example by hacking at a stout sapling that grew in a pocket of earth close by. Jack did the like with another, and Benoist, galvanised into action, began to work furiously on a third.

In a few minutes they brought them to bear, thrusting them deep amidst the piled rubble of rock fragments.

"Now, all together!" said Ned. "Heave!" They bore on the levers and, with a grind and a cloud of upflung dust, the upper part of the mass began to move. In a moment it was rumbling down the hillside, leaving only a few big pieces behind.

(Will the boys be in time to save the unfortunate M. Pascal? And how did the accident happen? Once again, it seems, there is a mystery connected with these French castaways. Many thrilling instalments of this serial have already appeared, and next week's is no exception. Don't miss reading it!)

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(Continued from page 37.)

silent. The great plane was still. No sound from her engines—no quiver in an inch of her!

There came a confused shouting from the saloon. Nelson Lee shook himself, and he muttered a prayer of thankfulness. Miraculously enough, Mr. Manners had effected a perfectly safe landing!

"Well, I mean to say!" came Archie Glen-thorne's voice. "Good, gad, and all that sort of thing! It seems to me, laddies, that we're absolutely on terra firma!"

"We've landed!" yelled Handforth. "By George! I thought we were all going to be smashed up!"

There was a wild rush for the companion, and they all tore up on to the promenade deck. Not a scrap of glass had been broken, and the great searchlights were still sending their gleams out into the depths of the jungle.

On the promenade deck, the passengers could see everything.

All round them, trees were towering, and close at hand other trees were smashed and splintered and torn. The aeroplane had landed in the midst of the jungle—had dropped straight down upon the trees, crashing through them by the sheer weight of her.

And there she lay, crippled, tangled in the jungle, with blinding rain splashing on

her metal plates, and with lightning playing in the skies.

"Well, now we're in a mess!" said Handforth, with a whistle.

"Oh, I can't believe it!" said Irene breathlessly. "We're all safe—we're all unharmed. Not one of us has received so much as a scratch! I think it's marvellous!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Bravo, Dorrie!"

"Rats!" came Lord Dorrimore's voice from the companionway. "It was Mr. Manners who made this miraculous landing. You've got to thank your father, Irene!"

"And we're safe!" cried Winnie Pitt.

"Oh, we're safe!"

"But were they?"

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Nipper exchanged significant glances. They had not forgotten that they were in Rishmir—the territory that was ruled by the antagonistic Ameer!

They had crashed in the heart of the jungle of Rishmir, and they were surrounded by enemies! Many miles from the Kurpana border, they were imprisoned, locked in the forests!

If the St. Frank's fellows had been longing for excitement, then there was every prospect that they would get plenty in the immediate future!

THE END.

(The St. Frank's party have had plenty of excitement so far, but now that they're in India they're booked for further amazing adventures, the like of which they have never dreamed! Don't miss next week's serial yarn entitled, "The Palace in the Clouds!" And, by the way, don't forget to write and tell your Editor what you think about this series.)



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New Series No. 118.

D/R

August 4th, 1928.