

THE **NELSON LEE**

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An illustration depicting a dramatic scene from a story. Two figures are shown descending from the sky using parachutes. They are positioned in the center of the frame, with one slightly higher and further to the left than the other. Below them, a city is visible, with various buildings and structures. A large, dark, vertical shape, possibly a plume of smoke or a wall of fire, rises from the city towards the top of the image. The overall tone is one of action and suspense.

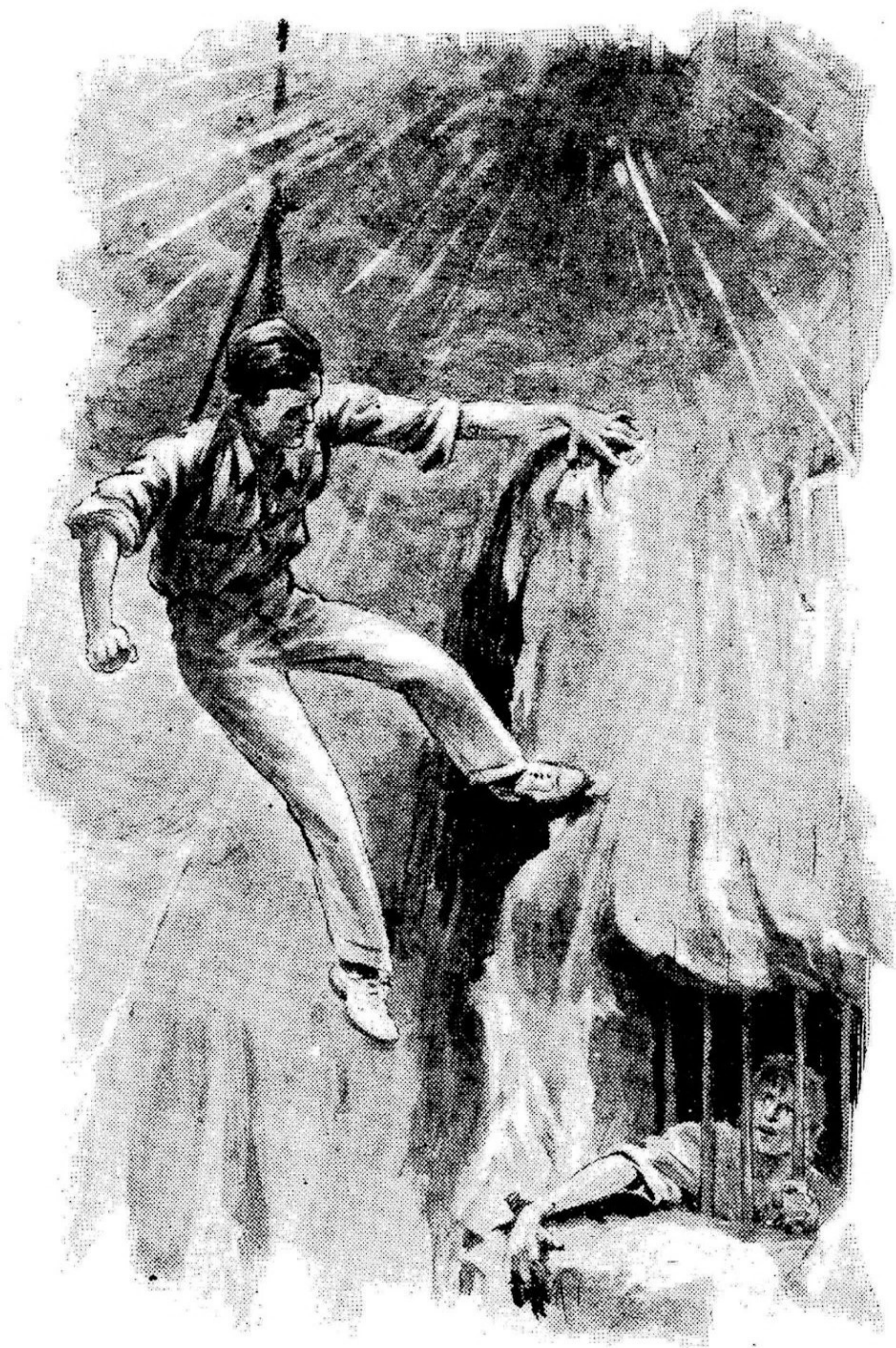
**THE
SIEGE IN
THE CLOUDS!**

A thrilling incident from this week's sensational story featuring
the boys of St. Frank's in India!

New Series No. 121.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY

August 25th, 1928.



Boom! Nipper was almost within reach of the secret cell when, with a terrific explosion, a shell burst at a point not more than ten yards away from him. Splinters of rock flew in all directions, but luckily Nipper escaped injury.

The Boys of St. Frank's in India! Thrills galore!



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

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

Poison-gas! Machine-guns! Bombs! A startling discovery! A rescue! These are some of the thrills packed into this superb yarn. The Ameer of Rishnir will stop at nothing in his one mad desire for revenge upon the plucky defenders of the Palace on the Crag. But the party is British and has no thoughts of surrender. This is surely one of the finest stories that ever came from the gifted pen of Edwy Searles Brooks.—ED.

CHAPTER 1.

The Prisoners of the Crag!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the St. Frank's Remove, leaned over the marble balustrade, looking intently downwards.

"Steady, Handy!" said Church, in alarm. "Don't be so reckless, you ass! You'll topple over unless you're careful!"

"Yes, go easy, Handy!" urged McClure.

The three chums of Study D were quite alone at the moment, lounging in the shade of one of the numerous palm trees that grew in clumps in that wonderful garden.

"There seems to be nothing doing yet," remarked Handforth, as he assumed a more upright position. "And don't keep telling me about leaning over, you chumps! Do you think I can't take care of myself?"

Church and McClure had their own ideas, and they thought it advisable to keep them to themselves. Quite apart from this, they had no desire to "rag" their leader at the moment. They were very pleased with him, for he had recently done some very remarkable things.

They looked over the marble parapet, and when they gazed down they had an uninterrupted view for a thousand feet—straight down, into the wide courtyard which surrounded the famous Idar Crag.

They were becoming accustomed to their novel surroundings by now. But at first they had never ceased to marvel. It had seemed incredible to them that they were actually a thousand feet in the air, with nothing round them but a sheer abyss on every side.

In a word, they were on the roof of the Ameer's palace, and the Indian sun was beating down fiercely on the lawns, and on the gardens.

Lawns and gardens—a thousand feet in the air!

The Idar Palace was a place of many astounding surprises, but this, perhaps, was the most remarkable of all. Gorgeous flower-beds, resplendent with brilliant colours—tennis lawns—fountains—gravel paths—shady arbours—palm trees; everything, in fact, that one could normally find in a millionaire's garden.

And all this on the roof, and, what was more, on the roof of a palace that was perched on a thousand-foot crag.

Even before they had come to the palace most of the fellows had heard of the Idar Crag. It was historic. It had stood here for thousands and thousands of years. For many centuries there had been a palace perched on the top of it, the home of the reigning Ameers of Rishnir.

The present Ameer was more progressive than any of his forebears, and he had converted this wonderful marble palace into a fairyland of modern glories. He had lavished hundreds of thousands of pounds upon the perfection of his cloudland home.

And this was no exaggeration. Frequently the clouds were below the level of the palace, drifting lazily by, swirling round the crag indolently and reluctantly.

"I don't believe in this inaction," said Handforth, after a pause. "We must be doing something, you chaps. We're not going to stick on this crag all our lives, are we?"

"Leave it to Mr. Lee, old son," said Church. "He's in complete command, and we're ready to obey his orders."

"That's all very well," argued Handforth, "but how about getting away, to a place that isn't filled with enemy soldiers? After what's happened the Ameer is practically at war with us, and that means that he's at war with Great Britain."

"The trouble is, old man, everybody believes that we are all dead," put in McClure. "We came out from England in Mr. Manners' aeroplane, the Wanderer of the Skies, and we made a forced landing in Rishnir—"

"Don't I know it?" asked Handforth staring.

"And then we were collared by the Ameer's soldiers," went on Mac. "But the worst of it was, the Ameer sent out false messages, saying that the machine had crashed, and that we were all dead. So there hasn't been any search-party, and there won't be one. This war of ours is a little private one, and I don't very well see how we can win. In the long run we're bound to lose."

"How the dickens can we lose?" demanded Handforth tartly. "They can't get at us, can they? There's only one way of reaching the ground from this palace, and that is by

means of the great lift. And that has been destroyed. They can't even repair it, because we hold the shaft. No, we're safe enough up here."

"But I thought you said that we ought to get off?" asked Church with interest.

"So we ought!" growled Handforth. "Being safe isn't everything. Why can't we lower a lot of ropes and get to the ground in that way?"

"And fall right into the hands of the Ameer's soldiers?"

"H'm! I suppose it's pretty difficult," admitted Handforth.

"It certainly is!" said Church. "We've had enough action to be going on with, and now we can have a little breather. Why, you ass, it was only this morning that we seized the palace and dished the Ameer."

"It seems as though it was weeks ago," said Handforth wonderingly.

A great deal had happened in a little time.

Only that morning Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners had been nearly certain of death. They and the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls had been bottled up in one of the wings of the palace, with hundreds of the Ameer's soldiers attacking them.

But by stern resistance, and by more than one stroke of good fortune, the defenders had won the day. And the culminating triumph had come when the great lift had been destroyed—shattered by an explosion which had wrecked it completely.

Only a few of the Ameer's soldiers had been on the crag at the time, and the majority of these had been injured. The rest surrendered without any trouble, since they knew perfectly well that there was no chance for them. All these men were now locked away, and they were not able to cause any trouble.

In the meantime the great palace, that magnificent edifice of marble, with its priceless treasures, was in the possession of the Britishers.

Really, it was an extraordinary situation.

Here in the very heart of Idar, the great capital city of Rishnir, this small party of Britishers was defying the might of the all-powerful Ameer. Far, far below them were thousands and thousands of enemies. But up here the party was safe. It was as isolated from the city as though separated by hundreds of miles.

Of course, the Ameer could have trained his big guns on the crag and he could have destroyed it. But Nelson Lee was convinced that the Ameer would do nothing so rash. For that tyrannical potentate would not destroy his own superb, historic palace for the sake of his revenge. He would surely choose different methods.

And so for the moment the visitors were enjoying a breathing spell, and they were happy in the knowledge that they were the masters of the situation.



CHAPTER 2.

In Absolute Possession!

A GREAT many things had happened to bring about this strange state of affairs.

Nelson Lee's party had originally come out to India in an effort to save young Hussi Kahn, of the St. Frank's Remove, from the hands of his enemies.

But later they had found that Hussi Kahn had been actually seized and carried off by his own friends. And Hussi Kahn was now in Kurpana, his own country, actively preparing for the invasion that the Ameer of Rishnir threatened. The Ameer had already seized the peaceful Prince Rao Kahn, the Maharajah of Kurpana. Goolah Kahn, the heir to the throne, was also a prisoner in the Ameer's hands. So young Hussi Kahn had been taken to Sakri, the capital of Kurpana, and his arrival there had aroused the populace to enthusiasm—his presence had improved the morale of the entire population.

Not that the affairs of these two great Indian provinces were any concern of Nelson Lee's. Neither he nor Lord Dorrimore desired to interfere in the politics of these independent states. Indeed, by so doing, they would be gravely wrong.

But their quarrel with the Ameer of Rishnir was of a personal character.

He had captured them, and he had openly stated his intention of putting them all to death. Therefore with them it was a battle for their very existence, and they had been perfectly justified in seizing the palace, for they were fighting for their lives.

Lee would have been glad if he could have found the captive maharajah and his son; but he was doubtful if it would be permissible for him to aid that unhappy pair, even if they could be found. For such an action would be an interference in the political affairs of Rishnir, and the Ameer would then have an excuse for anti-British activity.

But as long as Lee and his party limited their movements to the fight for their own lives they were always on the right side.

At the present moment Nelson Lee was making a tour of the palace accompanied by Lord Dorrimore. They were making certain that all the men were at their posts, and that everything was shipshape.

"Really, Dorrie, the affairs of Rishnir and Kurpana are of no interest to us," Lee was saying. "That is, they are not officially interesting. It is only natural that we should desire the complete triumph of Kurpana, for its ruler and its people are loyal to Britain and representative of the true India."

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "Rishnir, on the other hand, is a sort of blighted blot on the landscape. A wonderful sort of country, in

its own way, but it has the wrong people living in it."

"You are quite incorrect there, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee, shaking his head. "The people are all right; they are as sound and as true as any of the inhabitants of Kurpana. It is this one man—this Ameer—who is the evil genius."

"Well, he's evil enough!" growled his lordship. "I don't know about his genius."

"Ali Rajen, the Ameer, is the villain of the piece," continued Lee. "He is the lord of life and death in Rishnir. None of his officers dare to thwart him, since to do so would mean instant death. It is the same with any of his subjects. He levies taxes, and if they are not paid the punishment is drastic. He compels obedience from the highest and the lowest. During his reign, he has terrorised the entire population."

"But they are all anti-British."

"They are anti-British because the Ameer commands them to be so," replied Lee. "Yet, at heart, these people are honest, peaceful, and hardworking. They have no dreams of world conquest, as the Ameer has. His death would be a wonderful thing for this unhappy province."

"I'll think about it," said Dorrie, as he pulled out a revolver and examined it.

"No, old man, it is not for us to set ourselves up as the Ameer's executioners—or even as his judges," said Lee. "We have had a bitter fight with him, but only because he threatened our lives. He still threatens us—and we must continue to fight."

"Well, if he falls during the course of the shindy, so much the better," said his lordship. "Personally, I haven't the slightest compunction in killing a serpent. And if ever I met a serpent, the Ameer is one. A slimy, sleek, smooth-tongued hound! Educated, refined, cultured. Pah! A fig for his rotten culture. Beneath his outer skin, he is as heathen and as savage as a Papuan cannibal!"

"But the fact remains, Dorrie—the hard, uncomfortable fact—that the Ameer is the ruler of all this domain," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "Another hard fact is that he is, at this present moment, preparing to make things rather hot for us. And we mustn't congratulate ourselves too heartily. We may have gained possession of the palace, but we are not yet out of the wood."

"We seem pretty helpless, don't we, perched up hero in the clouds?" asked Dorrie with a grunt. "And the worst of it is, we're in the very middle of the city of Idar. Even if we managed to get to the ground, we couldn't escape. The whole situation is well-nigh unbelievable. It's fantastic. It's like some confounded Arabian Nights yarn!"

Nelson Lee nodded, and they paused for a few moments to inspect a group of sentries who were in the big central foyer of the palace. They were guarding the lift shaft—for that was the most important of all the spots to be protected. Everything was in

order, and Lee and Dorrie continued their round of inspection.

"And here we are, in absolute possession of the palace," said Lee musingly. "As you say, Dorrie, an extraordinary situation. And the very nature of this palace—perched, as it is, upon the crag—makes our possession possible. With the lift shattered, the Ameer cannot get any of his soldiers at us. And so, for the time being, we are in no danger."

"The problem is, how can we communicate with the outer world?"

"That, indeed, is *the* problem," nodded Lee, frowning. "We have been so busy that we have not yet had time to make a thorough round of the palace. We may find a telegraph somewhere—although, of course, it is almost certain that the wires will have been cut by now."

"But they can't cut the wires of wireless!" said Lord Dorrimore keenly. "You've seen the aerial on the roof-garden, haven't you?"

"I have!" said Lee. "And my next task, Dorrie, is to locate the instruments. This is the first chance we have had—and we mustn't lose any time. The radio may be our only means of communicating with the British authorities."

"That sounds good," murmured his lordship. "If we can only get in touch, we shall soon have a big expeditionary force on the way here—to teach this confounded Ameer a sharp lesson."



CHAPTER 3.

The Wireless Room !

NELSON LEE'S one main hope was to get into touch with the British authorities. It might take a good many weeks for an expeditionary force to reach Rishnir, and to overcome the Ameer's resistance.

But Lee felt certain that he and his companions would be able to hold out—that they would be able to stand the siege. And it was equally certain that the British Government would throw all its resources into the struggle. For the Ameer had taken hostile action against British subjects, and it was necessary that he should be punished. It would mean war, and this thought troubled Lee not a little. Yet he consoled himself by the reflection that it must mean war, in any case. Only a small war, it was true—and the sooner it was over, the better: There would be no peace in Rishnir until this egotistical Ameer was dethroned and robbed of his arbitrary powers.

There had been a very singular series of events at the palace.

In the first place, the Ameer had played with his victims as a cat will play with a mouse. He had treated them as his guests, fully believing that they were in no way

dangerous. And he had told them quite frankly that it was his intention to kill them all.

Whether he had actually meant this was open to question; but a sudden crisis had precipitated drastic action. The Ameer had ordered his soldiers to fire on the "guests" and to kill them.

So the St. Frank's boys, under Nelson Lee's guidance, had seized the summer wing of the palace, and had held it against all attacks. They knew, then, that it was to be a fight for their very existence. And in the end they had triumphed. They had not only beaten the Ameer's men, but they had gained possession of the entire palace.

And there was a significance in this that was not at first apparent.

For, by seizing the palace, the victorious party had gained the loyal support of a strong body of men—all British.

It was one of the Ameer's whims to employ no servants unless they were of British nationality. At first sight, it seemed a contradiction of things, but it was not really so. The Ameer's hatred of the British was so intense—so fanatical—that it afforded him pleasure to have British subjects about him, in his palace, in menial capacities.

In his opinion, they were only fit to be slaves.

And slaves they were, on this crag! People of his own blood were too good to act as servants, according to the Ameer; therefore he employed none but British. Thus, when he was displeased with them, he could order their execution. He could have them tortured. He could treat them with less mercy than the average man would treat a black beetle.

For many years, the Ameer had been collecting his servants. They had all been brought into Idar by false pretences—lured there by empty promises. They had come, believing that Rishnir was very similar to any other Indian province, and that employment in the Ameer's palace would be congenial.

But all these servants had come—and not one had gone back!

For, once on the crag, they had remained. There was no escape for them. They were literally slaves, and as long as they did their duties, they were left in peace, and they led fairly comfortable lives.

But if any man or woman was rash enough to murmur a word of revolt, his or her punishment was immediate and drastic. Many, indeed, had been put to the torture.

And the others, consequently, lived in constant dread of their lives.

And now all these men—footmen, valets, gardeners, cooks—all of them were available to assist in the defence of the palace.

Nelson Lee's leadership had inspired them with new courage. Their manhood had been taken from them, but, with the coming of the St. Frank's fellows, and Nelson Lee and

Dorrie, these workers of the palace had regained their British spirit.

Now they were enthusiastic, and painfully anxious to help. For they, too, wanted to escape—they longed to get back to their own people. They had had enough of slavery. And they were willing to risk their lives in this one great effort.

Thus it was that the Idar Palace was a kind of armed fortress.

There were plenty of rifles to go round, for the Ameer's soldiers had left their weapons behind, and an excellent supply of ammunition had been found. There was no concern in that direction.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, continuing their tour of inspection, finally arrived at the Ameer's private suite of rooms. They had not entered these before—since these rooms were sacred.

Until now, indeed, Lee had had no time to look round at all. All his energies had been taken up by placing sentries on duty at every corner of the palace. There were men watching, keeping constant guard. There were a hundred and one things to attend to, and Lee was the only man to do it. Dorrie was altogether too careless—too happy-go-lucky. And Mr. Manners did not possess an organising mind. He was a singularly clever engineer, but he frankly confessed that he was no general.

But now Lee was free to attend to other important matters.

"By glory!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore, in wonder.

They had entered the private suite, and were now standing in the main hall. This suite was like a palace in itself. It would take hours to go over it, from one end to the other. And the domestic staff was large. There were fully two-score of men available for the defences, and this left plenty of others—and any amount of maidservants for the less important matters of preparing meals, and attending to household duties.

"Yes, Dorrie, it's wonderful!" said Nelson Lee, as he took a swift glance round. "But we can pause to admire the decorations later on. For the moment, my one anxiety is to locate the wireless-room."

"How do you know there is a wireless-room?" asked Dorrie. "There may be only a receiving set here."

"There may be—but I am inclined to think otherwise," replied Lee.

They went from apartment to apartment, and it seemed that they would not succeed in their quest. Then, at last, going through the Ameer's superb library, they found an inner door, and, passing through, they found a flight of stairs leading upwards.

Lee paused on the threshold, sniffing.

"This will be it, Dorrie!" he said keenly. "Jove, you can smell the place!"

"I never knew that wireless-rooms had an odour of their own before," said Dorrie, grinning.

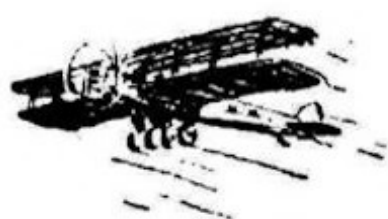
"But they have," replied Lee. "You should train your nose better, old man. Come, let us see."

They mounted the stairs, and a moment later Nelson Lee caught his breath in sharply. They entered a strange apartment, with a glass-domed roof.

It was entirely surrounded by complicated-looking instrument boards, and there were rows and rows of wireless valves. A great switchboard stood in one corner, and there were rows of giant accumulators.

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie. "The wireless-room!"

"Yes, and it is not merely a receiving station, Dorrie!" said Nelson Lee tensely. "Cannot you see? This is a *sending* station! It is a transmitting set! And, by Jove, one of the most elaborate and perfectly equipped I have ever seen!"



CHAPTER 4.

The Interrupted Message!

BOTH Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were lost in admiration for the first few moments. They could appreciate anything mechanically perfect, and here, as they could see, the apparatus was the finest that money could buy. The contents of this room alone must have cost the Ameer hundreds of pounds.

"This is most deucedly interesting," said Dorrie, as he inspected the various instruments. "Of course, most of it is absolute black magic to me. What I don't know about wireless would surprise you, Lee. But I dare say you'll be able to wangle the various gadgets, won't you?"

Nelson Lee did not answer for a moment. He sat down at one of the seats and fingered the switches and the knobs.

"I don't think it will take me long to get the hang of this set, Dorrie," he replied intently. "By Jove! Everything is of the very latest—the most modern type. It's a miniature 2 LO!"

"In that case, you might be able to get hold of an important British station, eh?" asked his lordship. "Gad! I hope you'll be able to tell them that we're in a pretty nasty pickle here. It would do my old heart good to hear that a few battalions of British Tommies were being sent to the rescue."

"It may not be necessary for the British Government to send any hostile force, Dorrie," said Lee. "The very fact that they know of our plight might be sufficient. Representations will at once be made to the Ameer, and he will be a very rash man indeed if he harms any of us. It'll make all the difference in the world when we make it known that we are all alive—and not killed in the aeroplane crash, as the false reports stated."

"I rather fancy His Nibs will be in for a packet of trouble, eh?"

Nelson Lee turned some of the switches, and Dorrie stood looking on wonderingly. After a while he cocked an ear into the air, and listened intently.

"You seem to have started something, anyhow," he remarked. "Oh, sorry, old man! Didn't notice you had the earphones on."

Nelson Lee glanced round.

"What can you hear, Dorrie?" he inquired.

"Nothing much—except a kind of humming noise," replied his lordship. "Listen! Can't you hear it? It seems to be getting a bit louder, too."

Nelson Lee removed the earphones.

"There's no humming caused by this transmitting set," he replied, frowning. "As a matter of fact, I haven't had the time to get the hang of things yet. It will only take me a few minutes— By Jove! That's an aeroplane."

"Now you come to mention it, I believe it is!" grinned Dorrie, going to one of the windows, and looking out.

Then an intent look came into his eyes, and he stared at Nelson Lee curiously.

"I wonder!" he said. "Think it's possible that the Ameer is getting busy?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied Lee, getting up from the seat. "Anyhow, that hum is getting much louder. Perhaps we had better go out and have a look at the fellow."

"Hang it, Lee, I know what's in your mind—but isn't it a bit too thick?" asked Dorrie dubiously. "We know that the Ameer is pretty desperate, but he wouldn't attack us by aeroplane."

"You must remember that the Ameer has no other method left—at the moment," replied Nelson Lee. "We have prevented his men from getting up to the palace, and we have seized the place. We cannot prevent an attack from the air, however."

"But if he drops bombs on us, or anything silly like that, he'll ruin his own show!" protested the sporting peer. "And it would be a downright shame to drop bombs on all this marble! Nobody but a madman would order such a thing."

"You seem to forget, Dorrie, that money is absolutely no object to the Ameer," said Lee sharply. "If damage is done, it can be repaired. He thinks nothing of labour—nothing of cost. And if he can take his revenge on us, he will be satisfied. Come! We had better be on the scene if anything drastic is to happen."

Truth to tell, Nelson Lee was thinking of the St. Frank's boys and the Moor View girls. He wanted to make sure that they were safely out of the way. The chances were that they would be on the roof garden—on those lawns. And there, of course, they would provide an excellent mark for the aeroplane.

It was possible that this machine would be equipped with machine guns. One swoop, and half the garrison would be wiped out—if they were rash enough to remain in the open, on the roof garden.

So Nelson Lee interrupted his message—or, to be more exact, he left the wireless-room before the message was even commenced. The

delay would only be a brief one, he told himself, and it was necessary that he should be reassured about the aeroplane.

Leaving the Ameer's private suite, Lee and Dorrie hurried along, went through the central foyer, and then up a noble flight of marble stairs. Finally, they came out into the open. Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed as he looked quickly round.

"I thought so!" he said gruffly.

Every one of the St. Frank's fellows were up there, gazing into the sky. And the Moor View girls were with them.

Nelson Lee gave them one glance, and then he looked into the sky—picking out the small aeroplane that was circling round the crag, a full two thousand feet above.

"I don't think he's up to any mischief," said Dorrie. "Just having a look round, I suppose."

"There is no danger at the moment, I will admit," said Nelson Lee, with some relief. "As long as he remains at that height, there is nothing to fear. He would not be foolish enough to drop bombs—"

"I say, you know, draw it mild, old fellow!" interrupted Dorrie. "I don't want to think that you're an alarmist, Lee, but it seems a bit thick to get these ideas into your head. Why on earth should the Ameer drop bombs on us? What would be the good? He might destroy half his palace, and not kill a fly!"

Nelson Lee made no answer. He continued to watch the evolutions of the aeroplane, far above. And he could not help remaining uneasy. The machine was circling, and every now and again the pilot would shut off the engine, and drop for a few hundred feet—only to open up again, and zoom round.

It really seemed that the flight was a mere reconnoitring expedition. But then, just as Lee was becoming more satisfied in mind, the pilot shut off his engine completely, and came gliding slowly down—straight towards the crag.

CHAPTER 5.

Too Late!



"HIS only fooling about!" said Handforth critically.

"Let's hope so, anyway," remarked Jack

Grey. "I was passing Mr. Lee and Dorrie just now, and I heard one of them saying something about bombs."

"Oh, but that's silly!" protested Irene Manners. "The Ameer wouldn't drop bombs on his own palace!"

"Absolutely not, dear old girl!" agreed Archie Glenthorpe.

"Of course not!"

"You must have heard it wrong, Jack," said Reggie Pitt.

The juniors, in a group, watched the aeroplane with interest—but without any anticipation of danger. They could see that the machine was now gliding smoothly down to—



Nelson Lee caught his breath as he and Dorrie entered the strange apartment. "The wireless-room!" ejaculated Dorrie. "Yes, and not only a receiving station," said Nelson Lee tensely, "but a transmitting station as well."

wards the crag. There was something very peaceful in the appearance of it.

It was not one of the fast machines—but one of the fighters. Indeed, it appeared to be a fairly large biplane, and it was occupied, apparently, by two or three men.

"Boys, you'd better get down as quickly as possible—and you girls, too!" said Nelson Lee, hurrying up.

They all turned.

"Get down, sir?" asked Fullwood. "Why?"

"I do not think it is necessary for you to ask why, Fullwood!" replied Lee. "I want you all to go under cover, and to get as far down into the palace as possible. And do not approach any of the windows."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth. "You don't think they're going to bomb us, do you, sir?"

"Don't question the orders of your commanding officer, young man!" said Dorrie severely. "I expect I shall be ordered indoors soon. There's nothin' like bein' on the safe side."

While they were speaking the aeroplane suddenly dived. She came straight downwards, and they could hear the whistle of the wind past the struts and wires. And when she was only a hundred feet above the roof garden, she flattened out, and glided quietly over the entire length of the crag.

But nothing happened.

No bombs were dropped, and no machine-guns were fired. Dorrie could not help looking at Nelson Lee, and grinning.

"Do you think they'd still better go down?" he asked dryly.

"Yes, I do!" retorted Nelson Lee. "Now, boys—no more hesitating. Hurry!"

"Oh, but sir——"

"At once!" snapped Lee.

And there was such firmness in his voice that the juniors, grumbling a little, vanished from sight. The girls had already gone.

"Anybody might think we were still at St. Frank's!" said Handforth indignantly. "He's acting as though he were still our Housemaster!"

"The guv'nor knows best!" said Nipper. "There may not be any danger, but prevention is better than cure!"

On the roof, Dorrie chuckled.

"They didn't like going, Lee," he remarked.

"Man alive, do you still think there's no danger?" asked Nelson Lee sharply. "Get your revolver ready—and be ready to fire!"

"Good glory! What the deuce——"

"Are you blind?" demanded Lee. "Didn't you see the bombs hanging from her undercarriage? And didn't you see the machine-guns—two of them—in the rear cockpit?"

"I'm hanged if I did!" ejaculated Dorrie, startled.

"Then you had better learn to use your eyes."

"This sort of game doesn't appeal to me," grumbled Lord Dorrimore. "Give me an elephant gun, and an African jungle, and you won't have cause to grumble at my eyes. But any sort of machinery fogs me."

Lee was watching the aeroplane.

"We'd better get near the staircase," he said. "And as soon as she comes round again, we'll dodge down, out of danger. This fellow means mischief!"

And at last Dorrie was convinced. Lee had been right from the very first—and, after all, it was very natural that the Ameer should take prompt measures against the insignificant force that had defied him.

Since it was impossible to reach the crag by any ordinary means from the ground, he had sent one of his war-planes up. And, although it might only be a game of bluff, it was liable to be a dangerous game.

"Be ready!" said Lee quietly.

They were standing at the top of the marble staircase—where it led straight downwards into the wide halls and corridors of the palace proper. The machine was much lower now—indeed, only thirty or forty feet above the top of the roof. But, as yet, it was well beyond the crag, and swerving at a slight angle.

She banked round, but made no attempt to fly over the part of the roof where Lee and Dorrie were standing.

Zoom!

With a tremendous roar, her engine opened full out, and she seemed to rise almost vertically into the air. And at exactly the same second Nelson Lee saw something drop—swiftly, dramatically.

Cra-a-a-sh!

A devastating explosion followed. It was not particularly violent, for the part of the roof on which Nelson Lee and Dorrie were standing hardly quivered. But a great column of smoke had arisen from farther afield, and the aeroplane was now shooting up into the sky, its deadly work accomplished.

"The cunning hound!" said Lee savagely.

"Well, I don't think much of his aim, anyhow!" exclaimed Dorrie. "He seems to have hit the Ameer's own private suite, and there's nobody there——"

"The aim was amazingly true, Dorrie!" broke in Nelson Lee. "Don't you understand? That bomb wasn't intended to kill any of us! It was dropped for one purpose, and for one purpose only. And, by Jove, the pilot has succeeded in his task! Look at the wireless aerial!"

"By the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Dorrie, staring.

He had hardly taken any notice of the wireless aerial—which had been so cunningly constructed that it was—or had been—quite ornamental. But now there was nothing of

it left. The posts were shattered and gone. The wires lay in a tangled mass over the other end of the roof-garden.

"We're too late now, old man!" said Lee, with regret. "But we can't blame ourselves—we had no time to send any messages previously. But we shall never be able to let the outer world know the truth!"

"Gad! You don't mean——"

"What else?" said Lee. "That bomb was dropped clean on the wireless-room. All those delicate instruments are shattered. Don't you see, Dorrie? The Ameer guessed that we should use these instruments, and he has destroyed them."

"And—and this means that we really *are* cut off from the world?"

"Yes, it means that we are completely cut off," replied Lee steadily. "It's a bitter pill to swallow—particularly when we remember how near we were to sending the message. But it's no good crying over spilt milk, Dorrie. Let us be thankful that we are still alive!"

"By glory, yes!" said his lordship, starting. "We were in that wireless-room, weren't we? And if it had been left to me, we should have been there still! Phew! I rather think we've had a narrow escape!"



CHAPTER 6.

More Frightfulness!

"HIS gone!"
"Well, thank goodness for that!"
"Yes, but what damage has he done?"

The juniors were all excited. They had heard the crash, and they had felt the concussion as the explosion had taken effect. But as nobody seemed hurt, and as there was no repetition of the alarming incident, they cooled down.

Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners joined them, while Nelson Lee hurried off to the Ameer's private suite. He wanted to see exactly how much damage had been done to the wireless apparatus.

"What happened, Dorrie?" asked Nipper curiously.

"Well, I hope you've changed your minds about Mr. Lee's orders for you to come off the roof," said Dorrie. "You all thought that he was wrong, didn't you?"

"We couldn't believe it!" said Doris Berkeley. "But Mr. Lee was quite right, of course—as he generally is. But what a dreadful thing to drop bombs on this wonderful palace!"

"The palace hasn't come to much harm," said Dorrie, with a frown. "They bombed the wireless-room—that's all."

"Oh, my hat!" said Nipper. "That means that we can't receive any messages—or send any?"

"I'm afraid it does," said his lordship. "Mr. Lee and I went to the wireless-room not long ago in order to get into communication with some sort of British station. But we're dished now. That cunning rascal of an Ameer has thrown a spanner into the works. The villain has foiled us, drat him!"

Nelson Lee soon returned.

"It's no good!" he announced briefly. "The whole plant is wrecked."

"Beyond repair?" asked Mr. Manners.

"Oh, quite!" said Lee. "It is not merely a question of repair, but of replacements. The batteries are absolutely destroyed, to say nothing of intricate coils and valves. The wireless is completely out of action."

"If only we had used it earlier!" said Mr. Manners regretfully.

"We ought to have done so!" nodded Lee. "I blame myself entirely——"

"Cheese it, man!" protested Dorrie. "What chance have you had? Besides, how on earth could we guess that the Ameer would take such an action?"

At this moment, Smith, the wizened little valet, came hurrying up, rifle in hand. He was one of the first men who had come upon the crag. He had been there for ten years, and he had never thought that he would see the outer world again. He was now one of the most enthusiastic defenders.

"Sorry to interrupt, gents!" he panted. "But we don't like the looks of that 'plane. She's still circling about—but this time she's flying past all the windows on the other side!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Lee. "I wonder——"

"She's coming round here now, sir!" called out somebody from one of the big windows.

"Stand back, boys—stand back!" shouted Lee urgently.

"Why, what the dickens——"

"Down—all of you!" roared Lee. "Flat on your faces! Yes, you girls, too! Quickly!"
Zurrrrrrh!

Nelson Lee was one of the last to drop flat on the floor, and the others were utterly dumbfounded at this sudden order. But Lee's tone had been so urgent that they had obeyed. And Lee, glancing up, caught a glimpse of the big biplane as it flew past the windows. It was astonishingly close. And then——

Zip-zip-zinnng!

There came the sudden splutter and rattle of a machine-gun, rising to a devastating roar as the machine actually passed the window where they were all crouching.

The sound of shattering glass filled the air, and of loud "pings!" as machine-gun bullets struck the walls. Then the 'plane had gone past.

Lee leapt to his feet, and all the others followed his example. They were looking flushed and excited.

"Phew! That was pretty nasty!" said Mr. Manners, taking a deep breath.

"We shouldn't have dropped down if you hadn't told us to, sir!" said Handforth. "Oh, my hat! Half of us might have been killed! Those bullets came in here like rain!"

They were all startled by the narrowness of their escape. And, without doubt, they had to thank Nelson Lee for their salvation. The swiftness with which they had dropped had undoubtedly saved them.

The aeroplane, flying close, was sending a hail of machine-gun bullets into the very windows of the palace! The Ameer undoubtedly meant business!

"Let me have a rifle!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

"I'll buzz round, and see if anybody has been winged!" said Dorrie, as he hurried off. "The beggars! Not that we can really complain," he added. "Strictly speaking, we're at war with the Ameer, and he's doin' the best he can to polish us off!"

Nelson Lee, anticipating that the machine would bank round at the farther end of the crag, and then fly past the opposite windows of the palace, hurried across to another room. He placed himself behind a balcony, and watched. The juniors and the girls had received strict orders to remain in the central corridors, where they were quite safe from any stray bullets.

Nelson Lee's eyes glittered as he saw the machine coming along, zooming close to the crag, with a machine-gun spitting fire and bullets straight into all the windows.

Crack, crack!

As the machine came within range Nelson Lee fired. His rifle was a repeater, and he sent a stream of bullets directly into the whirling propeller, and then he prepared to duck behind the protective marble.

But at the last second he paused.

For the machine seemed to suddenly develop an extraordinary shivering. In a flash Lee knew that the propeller had been shattered to fragments. With a wild swerve the aeroplane spun round, banking giddily. But there was no space for the machine to manoeuvre.

Craaaaaaash!

With a shattering, splintering roar the left wing of the aeroplane ripped into the side of the crag lower down, just beneath the level of the palace. And the wing shivered to fragments, the machine spun round again, tilted against the rock, and then dropped like a stone, fragments falling on every hand.

"That's settled his hash, anyway!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

He watched the destruction of the aeroplane without the slightest emotion. The men in her were going to their death, but who could say that they did not deserve their fate? They had been using their machine-guns upon helpless boys and girls, and they had received their just reward.



CHAPTER 7.

What the Telescope
Revealed!

“WELL, they asked for it!” said Handforth.
“Yes, rather!”
“And they might have killed some of us, too!”

The juniors were standing on one of the many balconies of the palace, staring downwards, down, down to the ground, a thousand feet below. Standing on the top of the world's highest skyscraper and looking down at the street was nothing compared to this.

Down in that wide courtyard the men looked like insects. And the boys could now see soldiers running about, picking up pieces of wreckage and lifting out the remains of the victims.

The machine had crashed in fragments, and there wasn't the slightest doubt that its occupants were killed. But only justice had been done.

It was found that three people in the palace had been struck by the machine-gun bullets. Two men were rather seriously injured, and one woman—a member of the domestic staff—was struck in the neck and badly hit.

“This is proof, Dorrie, that the Ameer means to give us no rest,” said Nelson Lee, as he and Dorrie discussed the situation. “He may send half a dozen aeroplanes next time, and we shall have to be prepared.”

“You don't think he'll drop any more bombs on us, do you?”

“I fancy not,” said Lee. “That bomb was dropped for the special purpose of wrecking the wireless. I do not think the Ameer will deliberately destroy his own palatial abode.”

“Well, we needn't worry,” said his lordship. “We've had our lesson, and we've only got to keep well clear of all the windows when an aeroplane is about. Besides, we might be able to drop a few more, and then he'll get tired of the game.”

Nelson Lee thoughtfully stroked his chin.

“The question is, how long will the game last?” he asked. “The whole game, I mean, Dorrie. We can't get away from the fact that we are in a most uncomfortable predicament. We have seized the palace, yes, but what next? We cannot communicate with the outer world, and therefore we cannot expect rescue. We are in the midst of enemies, and there seems to be no way of getting down from this crag.”

“Yes, the outlook is a bit murky,” admitted his lordship. “It seems that we shall have to stand a long siege. By the way, how about grub? Have you made any inquiries with regard to provisions?”

“There are plenty of provisions,” said Lee. “Enough to last us two or three months if necessary. The palace store-rooms and larders are amply stocked.”

“Well, that's good hearing, anyhow,” said Dorrie. “They can't starve us out of the confounded place. And the water supply?”

“That is quite another matter,” said Lee. “I have given very strict orders about the water supply, Dorrie. There is more than a chance that the Ameer will attempt to poison it.”

“The deuce he will!”

“He will be up to every sort of trick,” said Lee. “The water, I have discovered, is forced right up to the top of this crag. I do not know exactly what means are employed, but there has always been an ample supply. We shall have to watch the thing carefully.”

“And supposin' he poisons it?”

“Then we must rely upon rain-water,” said Lee. “Fortunately, this is not the dry season, and we can count upon fairly frequent rainstorms.”

Lee had already given orders that all water was to be carefully tested before it was used. But so far there had been no trouble in this direction.

Perhaps the destruction of the aeroplane had given the Ameer a minor shock. At all events, there were no further manifestations during the remainder of the day. Evening drew on, and the siege continued without any excitement.

No other aeroplane had come into sight, and the afternoon had passed away uneventfully. The heat was tremendous, and most of the boys and girls at least were content to lounge about doing nothing.

Meals were served at regular intervals as though everything was normal. And all the sentries were changed at intervals, Nelson Lee and Dorrie taking it in turns to go round on tours of inspection.

In the comparative cool of the evening, however, Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners stood on the roof-garden looking out over the city of Idar. The sunlight was slanting down on the picturesque roofs, and the scene was quite delightful.

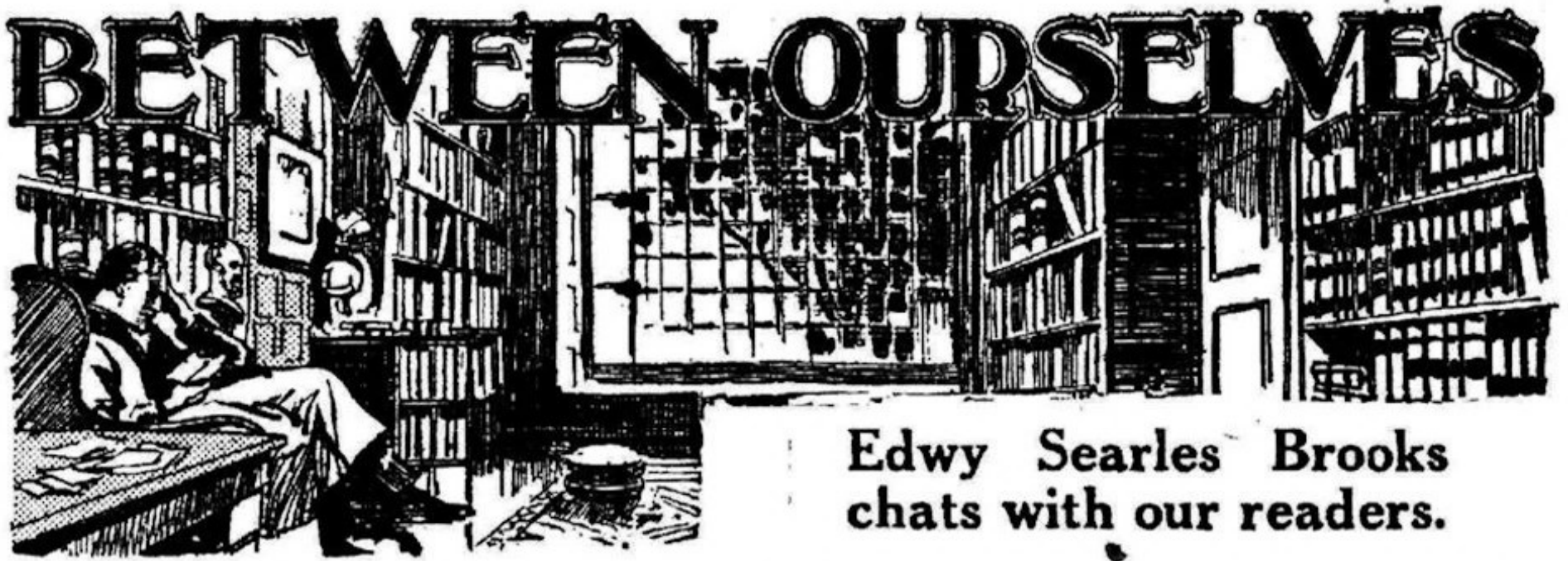
“It's been fairly hot up here this afternoon,” said Mr. Manners. “I wonder how it has been down in the city! Poor beggars! They must have been positively baking.”

“They are accustomed to it, and probably like it,” said Lee. “But we are a thousand feet up in the air and that makes rather a big difference. See, Dorrie,” he added, pointing. “There are some large bodies of troops moving over there, outside the city.”

It was possible to see for scores of miles in the clear light of the evening, and Lee had a telescope with him, too. But with the naked eye the troops could easily be seen. There were hundreds and hundreds of men moving away, on the march.

“Setting off towards Kurpana, I suppose,” said Mr. Manners. “The Ameer was not bluffing when he said that he was intending to invade the neighbouring province. The trouble in this part of the world is only just beginning.”

(Continued on page 14.)



Edwy Searles Brooks chats with our readers.

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed: EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., LONDON, E.C.4.

THE titles you want—Francis Ronald Lowe (Derby)—are as follows (all in the Old Series: 113—"The Abduction of Lady Marjorie," 165—"A Bid For Gold," 265—"Bound For Brazil," 295—"The Schoolboy Lightweight," 296—"The Black-mailed Schoolboy," 502—"The Schoolboy Drudges." If you would like a complete list of the Remove studies and their occupants printed in the Old Paper, you had better write to the Editor about it. Perhaps he'll be able to find room somewhere.

* * *

If I answered all your questions in this Chat—George J. Hart (Coburg)—there wouldn't be room for anything else. But here are a few of the details you want to know. Study M in the West House is occupied by Guy Pepys, Johnny Onions and Bertie Onions; Study O, West House, by Solomon Levi and Dick Goodwin; Study Q, West House, by Clarence Fellowe, Timothy Tucker and Robert Canham; Study R, West House, by Harold Doyle, Yung Ching, and Larry Scott. Study T in the West House is at present an empty room. Fullwood and Russell are in Study I, of the Ancient House. The St. Frank's colours are: Ancient House—red and blue. West House—mauve and yellow. Modern House—green and gold. East House—black and orange. O'Grady and Vandyke are in the Fourth—Study No. 8, Modern House. Crowe and Webb are also in the Fourth—Study No. 5, Modern House, with Crooke.

* * *

I'm glad you are at last convinced—Reg. T. Staples (Walworth, S.E.17)—that this page is quite genuine. Right you are, old man, I'll take it that I have kicked you. Hope I didn't hurt you too much. Yes, Justin B. Farman is still in the Remove—Study P, West House, with Owen major and Augustus Hart. I'm afraid I haven't mentioned him much lately. Nipper appeared in the very first St. Frank's story that was written—No. 112, Old Series, called "Nipper at St. Frank's." All right, I'll put Nipper into the limelight—

very much so—before long. Certainly, old scout. I can bear a letter every week, if you like. There's no doubt that I shall like it.

* * *

The Ezra Quirke Series appeared in Nos. 542 to 549 inclusive, Old Series—Norman Campbell (Edinburgh).

* * *

Yes—E. R. Veater (Merton, S.W.19)—I am giving my photograph in exchange for a reader's. Sends yours along to me, and I'll send you mine in return—duly soiled with my autograph. No. 1 of the Old Paper was called "The Mystery of Limehouse Reach."

* * *

You are quite right—Tom Byran (Chingford)—about old Handy being under the usual age for holding a motor-car driving licence. But I'm a bit surprised that you should bring up this question, for it indicates that you are either a new reader or else a forgetful one. It has been mentioned several times in the stories that Handy's doting aunt "wangled" a special driving licence for him.

* * *

Very pleased to hear from you again—Tom Treadwell (E.C.2). Sorry you haven't seen any acknowledgments of your previous letters; but I think you must have been a bit careless, old man, because many of them have been acknowledged on this page. Besides, you've heard from me through the post, too. You'll be hearing some more about Ezra Quirke later on in the year. Glad to hear that you are still keeping young, although you've reached maturity. There's nothing like it. Nothing like keeping young. I mean.

Edwy Searles Brooks



(Continued from page 12.)

"The town is excited, too," said Dorrie. "I've noticed it for some time. The people are moving about much more rapidly than usual. Everything seems to be stirring."

Nelson Lee now had the telescope to his eye, and he was sweeping the distant landscape. Suddenly a little exclamation escaped him. He was holding the telescope quite still and he was gazing intently.

"Hallo, hallo!" he murmured. "This is interesting, Mr. Manners, particularly to you."

"Why to me?" asked Mr. Manners.

"Look through this telescope," said Lee. "No, don't move it; keep it exactly as it stands. I fancy you will see something rather surprising."

Mr. Manners, puzzled, put his eye to the telescope and watched for some moments. Then he uttered a sharp ejaculation.

"What's all the excitement?" asked Dorrie. "Why am I left out of it?"

"The Wanderer!" ejaculated Mr. Manners in amazement. "That machine is the Wanderer of the Skies!"

"What!" shouted Dorrie. "Let me have a look!"

He took the telescope and directed it at that fateful spot. He soon got the focus, and then the thing sprang into sharp relief.

He saw a large number of men moving about, and there was an aeroplane there. It was an enormous machine, and it was standing in a flat stretch of land which had been obviously cleared. And without question the machine was the Wanderer of the Skies, the enormous monoplane that Mr. Hobart Manners had designed, and which Lord Dorrimore had purchased.

"The infernal thief!" said Dorrie hotly. "He's bagged our 'plane, Lee!"

"So it seems."

"But what the deuce for?" demanded his lordship. "And what are all those men doing?"

"Isn't it fairly obvious?" said Lee. "We were compelled to make a forced landing in the jungle and the machine was jammed there in amongst the trees. Only the under-carriage was badly damaged and the wing-tips. In the main, the 'plane was practically unharmed."

"We know that," said Dorrie. "And this burglin' blighter of an Ameer—"

"Naturally, the Ameer saw no reason why such a costly 'plane should be allowed to rot

in the jungle," continued Lee. "He sent an army of mechanics and other men to free her from the trees, and to take her out into this open space. No doubt the under-carriage is being repaired, and the whole machine is being made ready for the air. In a word, the Ameer has annexed her, and probably means to use her."

"Against us, eh?" said Mr. Manners with a whistle. "That would be rather too awful."

Nelson Lee was looking rather intent.

"Personally, I'm glad to see this," he remarked slowly. "The Wanderer, made ready for the air, might be very useful to us, if we could only get down from this crag."

"By glory!" said Dorrie, starting. "You—you mean—"

"There is practically no escape for us from this province of Rishnir, if we are compelled to go by road," said Nelson Lee quietly. "But if the Wanderer of the Skies is repaired and kept in readiness the story is quite different. But I am afraid it is all very much of a dream. We are still on the crag, still besieged. We must not allow our thoughts to run into such fantastic channels."

But Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners were flushed and inwardly excited. What if they could escape from the crag—and regain possession of their own great aeroplane?

It was a picture that certainly looked too good to be true!



CHAPTER 8.

The First Night!

DARKNESS fell, and the situation remained unchanged.

There was not likely to be any trouble with the boys and girls at bedtime. They were all thoroughly tired out, and ready for a good sleep. They did not like to admit that they were weary, but it was impossible for them to conceal their yawns. And after dinner it only needed a hint or two for them to seek their bed-rooms.

"Somehow, Dorrie, I don't quite like the prospect," said Lee, as he and Dorrie smoked a cigarette on one of the balconies. "I have an idea that the Ameer will attempt something ugly during the night."

"But what can he do in the darkness?"

"That remains to be seen," replied Lee. "I do not think he will be able to get any of his soldiers up to the top of the crag, and he will certainly not use any aeroplanes. But the night is going to be very black—very still. And I have an uncomfortable feeling that we shall not get through to the morning without trouble. We must keep a strict watch, Dorrie."

Lord Dorrimore laughed.

"Well, I must say, old man, that I don't share your uneasiness," he replied. "For the life of me, I can't see how there can be any danger from the Ameer. As you say, we

can wipe aeroplanes out altogether—they'd be too noisy, to say nothin' of bein' useless in the darkness. If it were a stormy, wild night, I could understand your feelin's better."

"Perhaps I am influenced by 'the spell of the magic East,' Dorrie," said Lee, with a smile. "At all events, I shall make it my business to be on the alert to-night. By Jove! What a magnificent view!"

It was truly wonderful.

Night had completely fallen now, and Idar lay stretched below the great crag, an odd assortment of twinkling lights. And it was so excessively still that as Lee and Lord Dorri-more stood leaning over the marble balustrade they could hear the murmur of the city coming up—mysterious, strange, fascinating. It was a mingled murmur of human voices, and of cries, and minor traffic sounds, all mingled into a fantastic whole. And all illusive, throbbing on the still air softly, and gently rising and falling.

And overhead the purple heavens of the Indian night, with the myriad stars twinkling and gleaming like a dome of diamonds.

Nelson Lee pointed.

"See, Dorrie!" he murmured, in a low voice.

"Why the whisper?"

"I am sure I don't know!" smiled Lee. "But, somehow, the very peace of the night makes it seem well nigh indecent to speak in ordinary tones. There's some sort of magic in it, Dorrie."

"Gad, you're right there!" agreed his lordship. "That's why I can't understand why you've got the wind up."

"You confounded ass!" growled Nelson Lee. "I haven't got the wind up!"

"Well, you seem to be pretty scared that the Ameer will——"

"Rubbish!" said Lee, giving Dorrie a thump on the back. "I'm only cautious—that's all. And I can't help feeling—right in my bones—that the Ameer will get up to some of his devilish tricks. But I pointed something out to you, Dorrie, and you, in your usual manner of exquisite politeness, quite ignored me."

"Oh, sorry!" said his lordship. "What did you point out? The North Star? Or the Great Bear——"

"I pointed out that glow in the distance," said Lee, pointing again.

"Oh, that!" nodded Dorrie. "Splendid! In fact, wonderful! Never seen anything so exquisite in all my life! I believe somebody has lit a bonfire!"

"The excitement of the day has evidently turned your head, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee sadly. "I am well aware, of course, that there was never much inside your head to turn, but I hate to see a normally healthy man go out of his mind. That glow over there, Dorrie, is not caused by a bonfire, as you so brilliantly suggest, but by a large number of flares. The Ameer's soldiers and mechanics are evidently working day and night on the Wanderer of the Skies."

"By glory!" said his lordship, becoming more interested. "I believe you're right! That's the exact spot, isn't it? I hope they're not burnin' the old bus!"

"No; the glare is too subdued," said Lee. "They're working on her, and I cannot help feeling a small measure of satisfaction. One day, Dorrie, we may find the Wanderer useful."

They turned and went indoors. The boys had already vanished, and Dorrie was yawning prodigiously.

"When's my first spell of duty?" he asked.

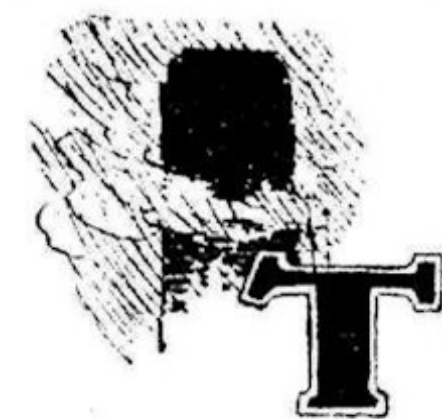
"Oh, later on in the night," replied Lee. "I will give you a call, old man. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" mumbled Dorrie. "Must be this elevation, I suppose—a thousand feet up, and all that. Feel deucedly fagged."

Nelson Lee smiled, and went on a quick round of inspection. When he looked into the boys' bed-rooms, he found them all sound asleep. They, at least, were not worrying over the situation. They were healthy, strong, and optimistic.

CHAPTER 9.

The Mystery of the Night!



THE Idar Crag was silent and still.

Several hours had elapsed since Nelson Lee had peeped into the boys' bed-rooms. The night was black and mysterious; not a breath of wind stirred, and the air was hot. It was one of those sultry, motionless Indian nights.

But the Ameer's Palace was not quite so sound asleep as any chance observer might have been led to believe. On the roof-garden, and on several of the balconies, men were on duty, watching. They were listening, they were tensed for any unusual sound.

But nothing had happened. Quietness had succeeded bustle in the courtyard, far, far below. Light after light had become extinguished, and the City of Idar was sleeping, like the rest of this black, mysterious world.

Not a single light was showing from the palace.

Rather to the surprise of everybody, the current had not been cut off. They had rather taken it for granted that the Ameer would deprive them of "juice," for the supply station was somewhere down in the city.

Yet they had found the lights as usual. There had been no interference with the current.

It could scarcely have been an oversight. No doubt the Ameer had an excellent reason for leaving the power on. Perhaps he wanted his prisoners to use the electric lights, to leave the palace shining like a beacon on the top of its crag. Possibly he had some programme in mind, whereby the lights would assist his men.

If so, he was disappointed.

For Nelson Lee had given strict orders that every light in the palace was to be extinguished after a certain hour. And they were only to be switched on in case of emergency. So it was that the palace stood on the top of its great rock, as black and dim as the velvety sky.

Perhaps it was the heat of the night that caused Nipper to be uneasy in his sleep. Nor was he the only one. Two or three of the fellows in his particular bed-room were restless, although none of them had actually awakened.

Nipper was the first to sit up in his bed, and to fling the single sheet from him. He sat there, and one of his hands strayed uncertainly to his throat.

"Must be dreaming!" he muttered. "But I seem to be choking! Never felt anything like it! Imagination, I expect!"

He looked round, and he noticed that Handforth and Fullwood were moving uneasily in their sleep. Similar to himself, they had their beds right beneath the wide-open windows.

"I'm thirsty, too!" Nipper told himself. "But I'm blessed if I can understand why my throat should feel so beastly tight. I hope I'm not catching some sort of Indian fever! Anyhow, I feel groggy."

He got out of bed, and walked towards one of the bath-rooms, where there was a plentiful supply of fresh water. But, to his astonishment, he swayed dizzily, and nearly fell. It was necessary for him to put out a hand in order to save himself. His fingers clutched at the first available object, which happened to be Reggie Pitt's face.

"Ugh!" gurgled Pitt.

"Sorry, old man—whoever you are!" muttered Nipper. "But I'm unsteady on my pins! Never felt like it in my life before! What the——"

"That you, Nipper?" came Pitt's voice.

"Yes."

"Are you jabbering to yourself, or to me?"

"I don't quite know," said Nipper. "But I feel dizzy—and my throat is all parched and tightened."

Reggie Pitt uttered an ejaculation.

"That's funny!" he said. "I'm feeling a bit like that myself."

"What?"

"It's only a trifle, and I wasn't going to say anything about it," continued Pitt. "I thought perhaps I'd caught a little chill last night, through standing outside too long."

Nipper moved away, and he staggered again.

"This is silly!" he said, trying to pull himself together. "I'd better go out on the balcony, and get a breath of fresh air. Perhaps it's too stuffy in here."

"That won't wash," said Pitt. "How can it be stuffy, with all these windows standing wide open—and French windows at that? Come along, my son! If I didn't know you for a fellow of temperate habits, I should have grave suspicions."

"Ass!"

They went out on to one of the little balconies, and stood there, leaning on the

marble, looking down into the dim blackness of the great abyss.

But if they expected to get any relief, they were disappointed.

"Feeling any better?" asked Pitt, after a brief spell.

"Not a bit—worse, in fact."

"Rummily enough, I'm feeling worse, too," said Reggie, passing a hand over his brow. "I'm getting as dizzy as the very dickens."

"I'm wondering if it's the water," said Nipper grimly.

"The water!"

"Why not?" asked Nipper. "We're suspecting the Ameer of all sorts of trickery, aren't we? Well, if he poisons the water supply, we shall all get some of it. The gov'nor is pretty anxious about it——"

"Yes, Mr. Lee made some remark, I know," put in Reggie. "But, hang it, if there was anything wrong with the water, we should have felt the effects long before we came to bed."

"There's no guarantee of that," replied Nipper. "There might be some sort of subtle poisoning in it that doesn't take effect for hours afterwards. Don't you remember how those Indians drugged old Hussi Kahn at Travers' place in England? At the time, he hardly knew it, but hours afterwards he went into a complete trance, and they carried him off without any trouble."

"My goodness!"

"What's the matter?"

"I hope we don't go into a trance!" said Pitt. "It would be a fine thing if we were all sound asleep in the morning, so that the Ameer's men could find a way up here, and butcher us before we could awaken."

"There's no need to draw upon the imagination, old man," chuckled Nipper. "I don't suppose this theory is right, anyhow. The gov'nor was very certain about the water——"

"Gug-gug-gurrrrrh!"

A peculiar, remarkable sound came from the bed-room, and both the juniors crossed the balcony and entered. They found Edward Oswald Handforth sitting up in bed, holding his throat. He, too, was a victim! Proof positive that the other two had not been imagining.

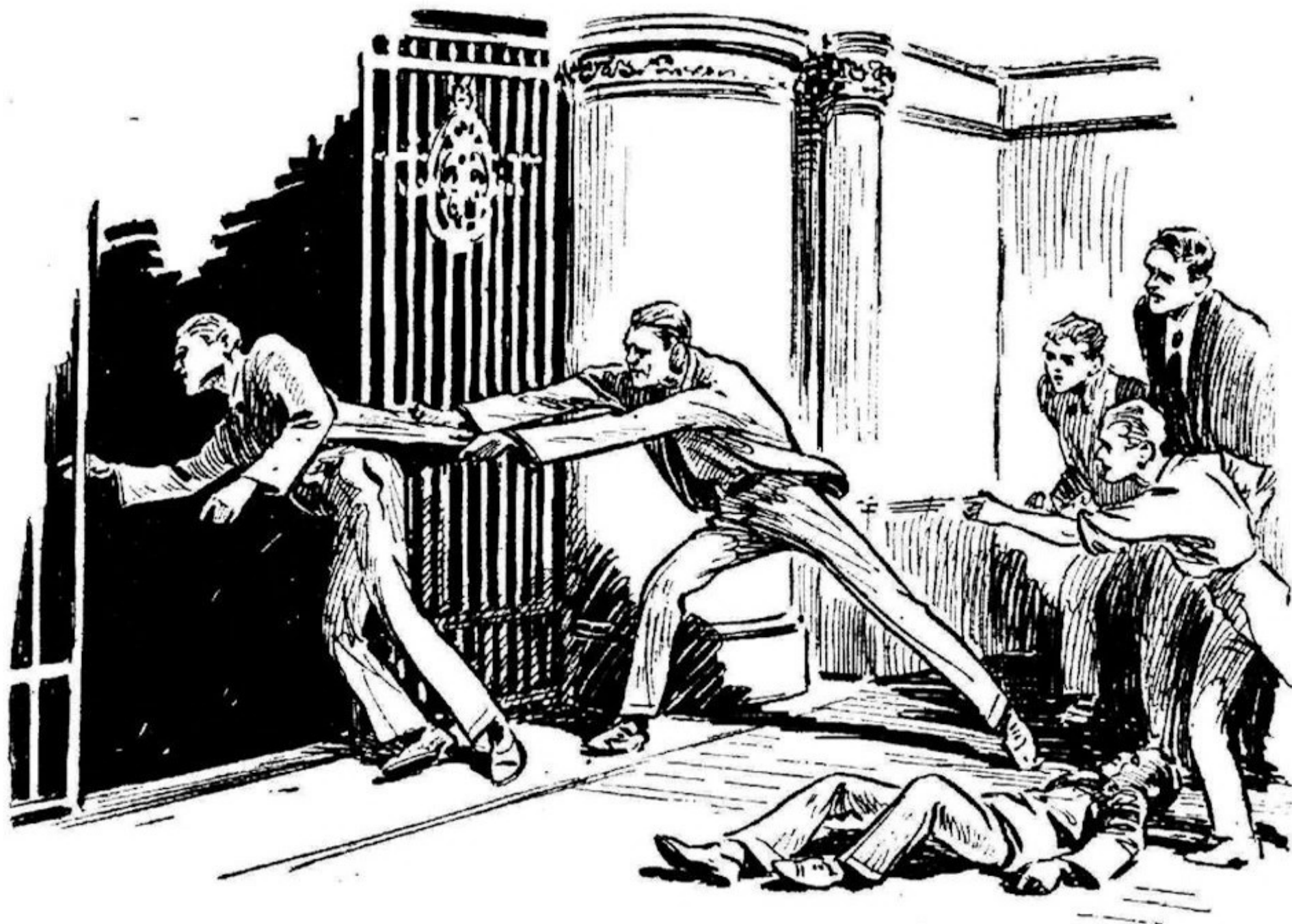
"What is it, Handy?" asked Nipper quickly.

"I dunno!" panted Handforth. "But I woke up suddenly—and I feel awful. I—I thought something was clutching at my throat at first. I was dreaming, and there was an enormous black chap in my dream——"

"Never mind about the dream, old man," said Nipper hastily. "What are your sensations now?"

"I'm jiggered if I can explain them," replied Handforth. "All I know is that my throat feels tight. And I'm all funny in the head, too. I feel sort of brainless!"

"That's nothing!" said Pitt gently. "That's only a natural feeling, Handy."



"Dorrie!" With a shout of alarm, Mr. Manners clutched at Lord Dorrimore as he swayed over the deadly chasm, and caught the back of his coat in the nick of time.

"You—you silly fathead!" frowned Handforth. "I don't mean brainless in that way."

"No? Sorry!"

"I—I feel that my head's absolutely empty!" continued Handforth. "I can't properly describe it—I feel light and airy up there. Here, lemme get out of bed! I want some fresh air!"

He stepped out, and moved towards the balcony—only to stagger half-way there, and reel drunkenly sideways. He fell with a crash to the floor, and nearly everybody else in the room was aroused.



CHAPTER 10.

The Unseen Weapon!

AS Handforth was getting to his feet, helped by Nipper and Reggie Pitt, the door opened, and Nelson Lee looked in. But it was impossible to know his identity at the moment, owing to the prevailing darkness.

"Boys!" he said sharply. "Are you all right in here?"

"Guv'nor!" said Nipper. "Why do you ask that?"

"Never mind why I ask, Nipper!" said Lee, striding further into the room. "Is there anything wrong in this apartment? Do you boys feel perfectly normal?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we don't, sir."

"What is wrong?"

"We feel dizzy and chokey at the throat," said Nipper. "I was the first to notice it, and—"

He paused, as he heard Nelson Lee draw his breath in very sharply.

"What does it mean, guv'nor?" he added quickly.

"I cannot tell you, Nipper," replied Lee. "But there is evidently something very wrong. I don't want to alarm any of you, but I cannot help thinking that the Ameer is responsible for this extraordinary malady. It is affecting everybody in the palace. I have already found several of the sentries suffering severely, although, so far, nobody has deserted his post."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What's the cause of it, sir?"

"Have they been poisoning the food, or something?" asked Fullwood. "Everything seemed all right at dinner-time last night."

"I do not think it is food poisoning—or water poisoning, either," said Lee. "Therefore, boys, you need not get any such fears into your heads. I have only warned you now, because I want you to remain awake."

I have sent two of the women in to the girls to arouse them also."

"But what's the harm in being asleep, sir?" ejaculated Handforth blankly.

"I don't know yet," said Lee. "I can only tell you that one man, on the other side of the palace, has fallen into a deep slumber, and it is impossible to awaken him. I do not want any of you to go off like that. Stay here until I come back. I shall not be long."

Without another word, Nelson Lee left the bed-room, and went out into the corridor, where one or two electric lights were glowing. He met Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners, and he inspected them keenly under one of the lights. At the very first glance, he could tell that they were not quite normal. Their skins seemed to have a yellowish tinge.

"We found another two fellows asleep on the west balcony, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Manners. "They seem to be getting worse. Every now and again I find myself swaying, too, and it is as much as I can do to keep myself from swooning off."

"Same here!" muttered Dorrie dully. "What the thunder does it mean, Lee?"

"I have my suspicions—but I would prefer not to voice them at the moment," said Lee. "Come—the more we can keep on the move, the better. I suggest that we go into the central foyer, and see how things are going there. The foyer, remember, is the most vital spot, since the great lift shaft opens out on it. And if the Ameer has any scheme for getting his soldiers into the palace, the shaft is the only method of entry."

"But that means getting the lift into working order again," protested Dorrie. "And you know they can't do anything like that, Lee. All the gear is smashed up."

Nelson Lee did not answer. He led the way down the corridor, and before long they arrived in the vast foyer which was the pride of the Ameer of Rishnir. It was, indeed, a truly superb place, with great marble pillars, domed arches, and a hundred other beauties.

Nelson Lee switched one of the lights on, and then he compressed his lips. There were three men on duty here. Smith, the valet, and two of the footmen. All three of them were stretched on the floor, near the great metal gates which guarded the lift-shaft.

"Unconscious!" muttered Lee, as he turned one of the men over. "Absolutely dead to the world!"

"Not really dead?" asked Mr. Manners.

"No—that was only a figure of speech," said Lee. "They're still very much alive, but I am afraid it will be impossible to arouse them. This is most extraordinary!"

Dorrie had wandered to the lift-shaft, and he opened one of the big gates. He stood there, peering downwards—looking down into that apparently bottomless well. And

suddenly Mr. Manners gave a loud shout of alarm.

"Dorrie!" he roared.

For his lordship, without warning, had suddenly swayed forward—right over that deadly chasm! His fingers clutched at the other gate, but they slipped. In one stride, Mr. Manners reached him, and caught the back of his coat in the nick of time.

Slurrrr!

Lord Dorrimore slithered on the marble floor, hovered for a second on the brink of the chasm, and then he was drawn to safety. Mr. Manners slammed the gate, and leaned against it, half-closing his eyes.

"Well done, Manners!" said Lee. "You saved him—just as he was going over."

"I—I don't know—I don't remember——"

Mr. Manners sagged down. But both he and Lord Dorrimore were not yet unconscious. They were fighting against the overpowering sensation that was overcoming them.

"The lift-shaft!" shouted Lee hoarsely. "Good heavens! Why didn't we think of it before? Quickly, Dorrie! You, too, Manners! Get away from that shaft! Come!"

He half-dragged them, and they managed to get to their feet, and staggered away. And when they reached one of the inner corridors, they found it possible to breathe more freely. This was very significant.

"The shaft!" muttered Lee, his eyes burning. "Don't you understand, Dorrie? That great shaft is like a chimney—a huge flue!"

"Yes, but—but——"

"There's no mystery about this malady that has attacked us all!" continued the schoolmaster-detective in a voice of horror. "The Ameer is using poison-gas on us!"

"Good glory!"

"Poison-gas!"

"What else?" snapped Lee. "Those men near the lift-shaft are unconscious, and other people throughout the palace are feeling the effects."

"Great Scott!" said Dorrie blankly.

"So far, the general atmosphere is only partially affected," continued Lee. "If it were otherwise, we should have been dead before this. I do not suppose there is two per cent of the poison-gas mixed with the atmosphere. But it is getting stronger—every minute it is getting stronger!"

"But—but what are we to do?" asked Mr. Manners helplessly. "We can't escape! We can't flee from the place, as we could from any other building! We are besieged up here, on the top of this crag!"

"We must keep our heads!" said Lee steadily. "I believe that the poison-gas has only just commenced to arrive at the top of the shaft. Naturally, it will increase in intensity every minute. But if we all go up to the roof-garden, there will be relief—and safety. The Ameer, no doubt, hoped that we should all perish in our sleep. But we shall get the better of him yet!"

Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners pulled themselves together. And a minute later they were hurrying to various parts of the palace—to give orders to everybody to make a dash for the roof-garden. There, at all events, they would be safe from this noxious poison-gas that was relentlessly making the air unbreathable.



CHAPTER 11.

The Only Chance!

NELSON LEE was frankly horrified at the possibilities.

Poison-gas!

He had had a vague suspicion of it in his mind from the very first; but he had been puzzled as to its source. He thought, perhaps, that the aeroplane had dropped a gas-bomb upon the wireless-room in addition to the explosive bomb. And the noxious fumes had only just begun to spread.

But the real situation was a hundredfold more terrible.

The deadly gas was pouring up that great shaft—that enormous thousand-foot flue—and, insidiously, the vapour was spreading throughout the length and breadth of the palace.

It was a truly devilish scheme—in keeping with everything else that the Ameer of Rishnir had done. And it was so simple, too!

What could the prisoners do? There was no escape for them here. They could not run away from the palace, and it was equally impossible for them to fight this deadly danger. Perched up there, on the top of that giant crag, they were trapped. There was only one hope, it seemed—and that was to flee to the roof-garden, where they would be able to breathe the pure night air.

But was this a certain safeguard? Nelson Lee had his own suspicions, but he said nothing. The least they could do was to try it.

And so, helter-skelter, a wild rush commenced for the roof. The girls were aroused and hurried off; the boys stumbled along the corridors, and mounted into the open air. And all the members of the domestic staff, all the sentries and guards, came out into the open, too.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners, with wet handkerchiefs tied over their mouths and nostrils, made a quick rush round, in order to see that everybody was clear of the danger zone.

The trouble was, the danger zone seemed to encompass the whole palace. And even when the roof-garden was reached, and they were all standing about in groups, discussing the situation, they still felt a dreadful catchiness in the throat; they still felt their brains reeling. They did not obtain the relief they had hoped for.

"My only sainted aunt!" muttered Fullwood. "It seems just as bad up here, you chaps!"

"Worse, I believe!" panted Jack Grey.

"Good gad! Absolutely, laddie!" breathed Archie. "I mean to say, I went to the good old balcony a minute ago, with the idea of gulping in a few chunks of ozone. And, dash it, the atmosphere appeared to be several degrees fouler than ever. It's absolutely oozing upwards in squadrons!"

"But it can't be!" protested Reggie Pitt. "Great Scott! The poison-gas is only coming up from the main shaft. The air out here is pure enough——"

"Quick!" gasped Handforth. "Look at old Churchy!"

They all stared round. In the gloom they could see Church at one of the marble parapets. He had suddenly sagged down, and was now lying full length on the roof. Nelson Lee hastened towards him, and Handforth and McClure rushed up.

"Steady—steady!" muttered Lee. "He is slightly overcome—that's all!"

"But why, sir?" panted Handforth. "He was only leaning over the——"

"Stand away from there!" rapped out Nelson Lee. "All of you! Stand away!"

His tone was so sharp that the boys were startled afresh. What danger could there be out here, in the open air?

It was perfectly true that they could all feel the effects of the gas: they were becoming dull and listless, and their throats were getting more and more choked. Probably the percentage of poison-gas mixed with the atmosphere was quite trivial, but it was sufficient to affect them more or less seriously.

And now, at last, Nelson Lee was no longer suspicious. He knew the shocking truth.

The poison-gas, obviously, was lighter than air, and was rising slowly and insidiously from the ground. And it was not only being released up the great lift-shaft, but it was creeping up the very walls of the crag—all the way round! It was coming upwards from every direction, overwhelming and surrounding the palace in an unseen cloud of death!

The situation was not only horrible, but it was hopeless.

As Mr. Manners had said, there was no escape from this palace: they were all trapped. Even if they devised some desperate system of ropes, down which they could be lowered, it would be fatal. For they would only descend into the more heavily-poisoned air. And, in any case, there were no ropes of sufficient length to make any such scheme possible.

One fact was certain. It was humanly impracticable to get away from this crag.

And the Ameer, with rare cunning, had devised this plan to annihilate them all. He had taken advantage of the still, sultry night. There was not a breath of air stirring—not the faintest suspicion of a breeze.

And so the poison-gas was allowed free play. It was rising up the shaft, it was

rising from perhaps a dozen points all round the crag. Slowly, and with deadly certainty, it was getting stronger and stronger.

That gas had to rise a full thousand feet, and in such still air it was naturally a slow process. Lee was quite certain that the air at the top of the crag was still ninety-five per cent pure. But even this five per cent admixture of poison-gas was proving sufficient to render them unconscious.

What would happen as the night advanced—as the percentage grew greater and greater? The thought was too dreadful for words.

This poison-gas, at full strength, would undoubtedly have destroyed human life in a second.

Nelson Lee said nothing of his suspicions to any of the others, but they had brains of their own, and they were beginning to use them. Most of them, in fact, were already beginning to understand the true position.

"What are we going to do, sir?" asked Nipper huskily.

"I don't know, young 'un—I don't know!" replied Lee.

"It's not like you to say that, sir!"

"There are times, Nipper, when the best of us are helpless," said Nelson Lee practically.

"I am making no claims to be different from anybody else; I am mortal. We are all mortal. And if this poison-gas becomes stronger, as it certainly will, it is inevitable that we should——"

He broke off, and Nipper could hear him draw his breath in sharply.

"Have you thought of something, guv'nor?" he asked quickly.

"Thought of something? No!" came Nelson Lee's bitter reply. "What is there to be thought of? I paused, Nipper, because I saw a flash of lightning over yonder."

"Lightning!" gasped Nipper, staring. "That means a storm!"

"I have been anticipating a storm for some hours," replied Lee, nodding. "The atmosphere is very electrical—very thundery."

"But—but if there's a storm, sir, it'll mean—wind!" breathed Nipper. "And with wind we shall be saved!"

"Do not delude yourself, young 'un," said Lee quietly. "This storm cannot possibly develop until at least another hour has elapsed. And during that hour we shall all perish. Then it will be too late!"

never be able to survive. For the coming of the wind would find them all stretched out in death.

The Ameer had played his ace!

But even an ace is no certainty—when a trump card is left in the hands of an opponent. And at that critical moment, when every hope seemed dead, Nelson Lee had an enlightening thought.

He had ordered everybody to come up upon the roof because he had believed that safety lay there. But he had found that the opposite was the case.

Another vivid flash of lightning in the distance told him that the storm was certainly developing—that it would, sooner or later, sweep over Idar and whirl these noxious poison-fumes away.

But how were they all to survive until that welcome wind arrived?

Nelson Lee leapt upon an ornamental fountain which stood near by, and those nearest to him looked at him in wonder.

"Listen, everybody!" shouted Lee urgently. "Come here—quickly! It is as well that we should all know the truth—that we should be fully aware of the danger. Every second is of value!"

They gathered round listlessly, for their strength was being sapped, and their brains were becoming dull. But life was dear to them, and they were momentarily revived by Nelson Lee's urgent voice.

"The Ameer has decided to wipe us all out!" continued Lee tensely. "He has adopted a cunning, cruel method. But there is just a chance in a thousand that we might be able to frustrate him!"

"How, sir?"

"What shall we do?"

"It's getting worse and worse!"

"We can't live much longer!"

"You must all do as I tell you!" shouted Nelson Lee, his voice strained and cracked. "A storm is developing, and if we can only live for another hour this diabolical plan of the Ameer's will be rendered useless by the very forces of Nature. And a dead calm such as this is not likely to occur again for months. The Ameer has proved his opportunism by his quick seizure of the remote chance."

"But we can't live for another hour, old man!" muttered Dorrie dully.

"We can—if we can only get somewhere beyond the reach of this ghastly poison-gas," replied Nelson Lee. "Listen! Down below, in what might be called the cellars of the palace—carved out of the solid crag—there is an enormous refrigerator plant."

"Oh, my hat!"

"But—but——"

"It is one of the many modern innovations that the Ameer has installed in this curious palace," continued Lee. "There are many of you here who know the quickest way to this refrigerator plant, and I call upon you now to hurry there with all speed. The rest of us will follow."

CHAPTER 12.

A Chance in a Thousand!



TOO late!

Nipper heard the words as though in a dream. And he was quite convinced, too,

that Nelson Lee had spoken the truth. Even if the storm was brewing—and there seemed little doubt that this was the case—they would

"You're right, sir—blowed if you ain't!" shouted one of the men, who had formerly been a cook. "That plant has got room for us all. And the doors are sealed, and——"

"At the present moment, the entire plant is out of action," continued Lee. "But I believe it is closed up, and this means that the air inside is comparatively pure. Let us make a quick dash. It is our only hope of salvation."

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Mr. Lee!"

"Absolutely!"

"He's going to save us, after all, you chaps!"

"Quick—to the refrigerator plant!"

"Steady, there!" shouted Nelson Lee. "Do not be in *too* much of a hurry! A panic will do more harm than good! Take it coolly!"

His words had effect, and all those who had commenced blindly rushing now moderated their pace. The way was led by certain members of the domestic staff—men and women who knew every passage and corridor and staircase of the palace. They knew the shortest cut down into the domestic quarters—towards that refrigerating plant which offered a hope of life.

"Brains! That's what it is!" said Dorrie admiringly. "Gad, Lee, old man, you're a wonder!"

"Nonsense!" growled Nelson Lee. "And do not crow, Dorrie. This plan of mine may be a miserable failure!"

Down in the corridor the atmosphere was becoming more deadly than ever. One or two of the girls nearly swooned, and they were caught by the St. Frank's fellows and half carried, half dragged along.

Afterwards, they could hardly remember how they accomplished the journey. Some of them remembered nothing whatever. They only knew that they actually *did* arrive in the great cold storage plant.

It opened out from the palace kitchens, and was entered by means of two great double doors—like the doors of a strong-room. Similar to all such cold storage plants, the doors were capable of being hermetically sealed.

In they piled, some reeling drunkenly, some being dragged, some still in possession of all their faculties. Actually, they were all in within a couple of minutes, but it seemed more like a couple of hours.

There was plenty of light, for the electricity supply had not been cut off. Nelson Lee went all round, searching for ventilators, for air shafts. His object was to block them up.

It was a case of all hands to the pumps, and in less than five minutes the big refrigerating plant was, as Archie Glenthorne put it, as tightly sealed as a dashed sardine tin.

And it was an apt illustration, too. For, large as the place was, there was hardly room to move about. They were all packed in

there tightly, and they could only stand and stare at once another, watching, wondering—and inwardly fearful.

Mercifully, the air was pure.

None of the deadly gas fumes had reached this sealed room, with its many compartments.

"Do you think we'll do it?" murmured Mr. Manners, into Nelson Lee's ear, as they stood together near the big doors.

"We might," replied Lee guardedly. "There's just a chance. It all depends on the storm. If it fails to develop, there is absolutely no hope for us!"

"How long do you think we can last out in here?"

"Not more than an hour," replied Lee. "The air will gradually become more and more vitiated. The fact is, Manners, we are now between the devil and the deep sea. The longer we remain in here, the more certain our fate will be—for once the oxygen is used up, we shall perish of suffocation. Yet we cannot venture out, since we should only die of poisoning."

"Better be suffocated!" muttered Mr. Manners huskily.

"Far better!" agreed Lee. "Such a death, at all events, will be painless. One after another, we shall merely sink into a stupor, and death will come to us mercifully."

Amongst the boys and girls, optimism was paramount.

"We shall do it, of course!" said Handforth confidently. "That storm won't take long to come up, and then it'll blow all that rotten gas away. We shall soon be able to get out of here!"

"Hope so, anyway!" murmured Travers. "If we don't, it'll be pretty rotten, dear old fellows."

"How will it be rotten?" asked Handforth. "We're safe, aren't we?"

"For the time being," said Nipper.

"Rats! We can stay here all night, if necessary!"

"Don't forget, Handy, that there's only a limited amount of pure air in this place," said Travers. "I don't want to be an alarmist, but oxygen is necessary to life. We're using it pretty rapidly—and there's no more coming in."

"By George!" said Handforth, with a start.

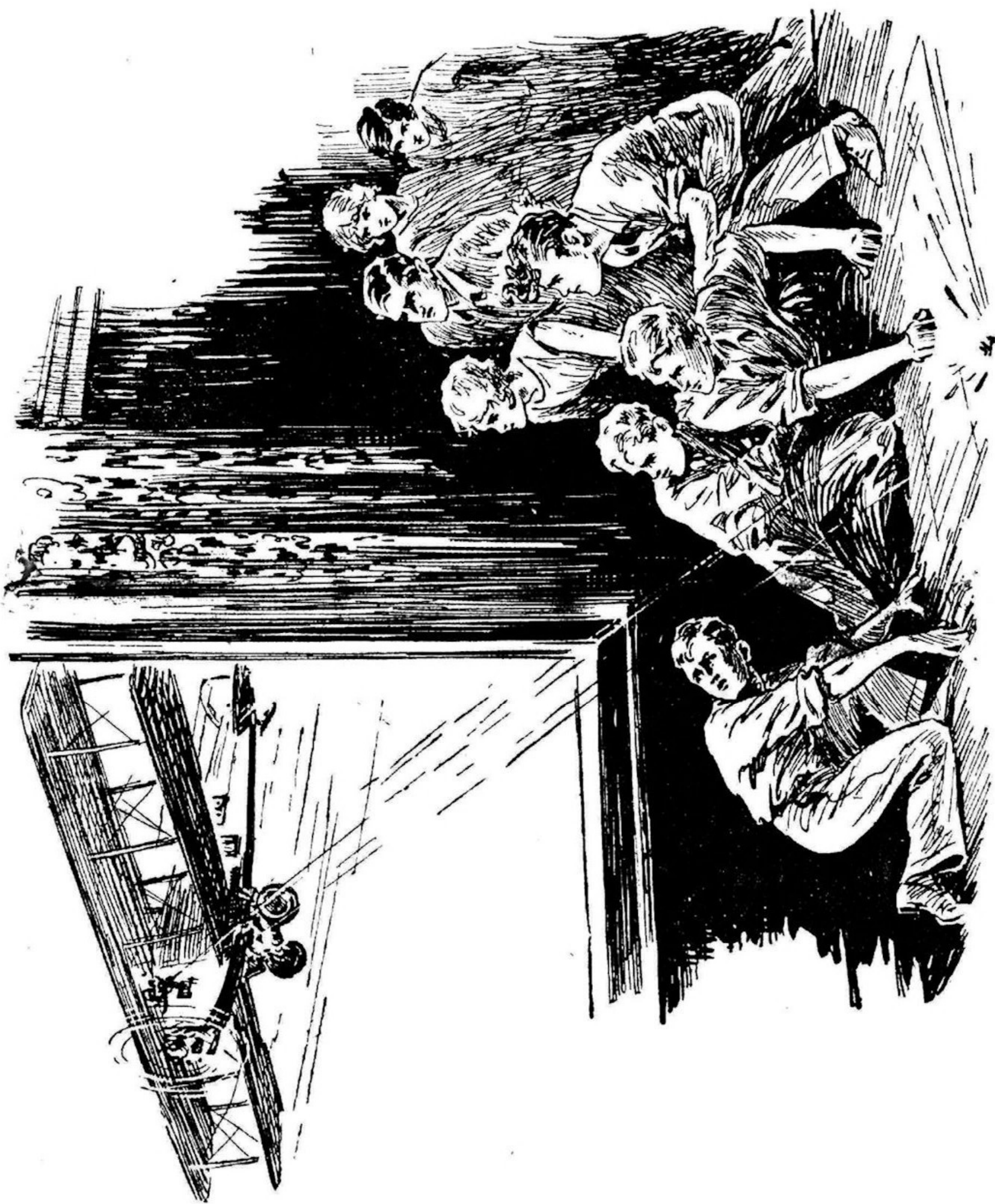
"Oh, dry up, Travers!" said Russell. "Let's be thankful for small mercies."

"Hear, hear!"

"We're safe, for the present, anyhow," went on Russell. "I'm feeling heaps better already. That horrible choking sensation has gone."

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie Glenthorne. "The good old lungs are feeling slightly more normal, as it were."

And so they waited—in dread suspense. For the moment they had defeated the Ameer's ghastly plan. The poison-gas no longer menaced them; but would they be able to hold out?



"Down—quickly—all of you!" roared Nelson Lee. "Flat on your faces!" Zurrrrrh! Zip—zip—zinnnnng! There was the sudden splutter and rattle of a machine-gun, followed by the sound of shattering glass as the 'plane passed the windows.

CHAPTER 13.

The Next Move !



H

A L F-A N-H O U R
dragged by.

It seemed an
eternity to those
bottled-up prisoners in

the cold-storage plant. Every minute was like an hour. Slowly but surely they were feeling the difference in the atmosphere. It was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe.

There was no longer any acute pain, such as the poison-gas had caused, but, none the less, the sensations were serious enough.

They were being suffocated—slowly, but surely, suffocated.

They were breathing more quickly, more jerkily. Their tongues seemed larger, and their throats smaller. And one or two had nearly given in, and were semi-conscious only.

The St. Frank's fellows had ceased to discuss the situation. They were silent, and the Moor View girls, too, were equally stoical. Not a word of complaint came from any of them.

Two of the palace maidservants, however, were hysterical, and their cries and the murmurs of those who comforted them were distressing in the extreme.

"Gad!" muttered Lord Dorrimore. "It's the black hole of Calcutta over again. But this is worse, because we know that we daren't get out. We can open the doors if we want to, but it'll only mean a more ghastly form of death."

"How long now?" came a whisper from Mr. Manners.

"Not long!" replied Lee dully.

"Another half-hour perhaps. The oxygen is being rapidly used; the air is becoming terribly vitiated."

"Listen!" panted Dorrie suddenly.

His whisper carried over the entire cold-storage plant, and there was an immediate hush. It seemed to some of them that the very place quivered, and others were convinced that they had heard a low, muttering rumble. Then all became silent again.

"Did you hear it?" asked Nipper, arousing himself. "Or—or was it only imagination?"

"I can't hear anything!" whispered Tommy Watson. "Only a terrible singing in my ears."

"But there was a rumble," said Nipper. "It might have been thunder. Perhaps that storm——"

"Oh, it's too good to be true!" breathed Mary Summers.

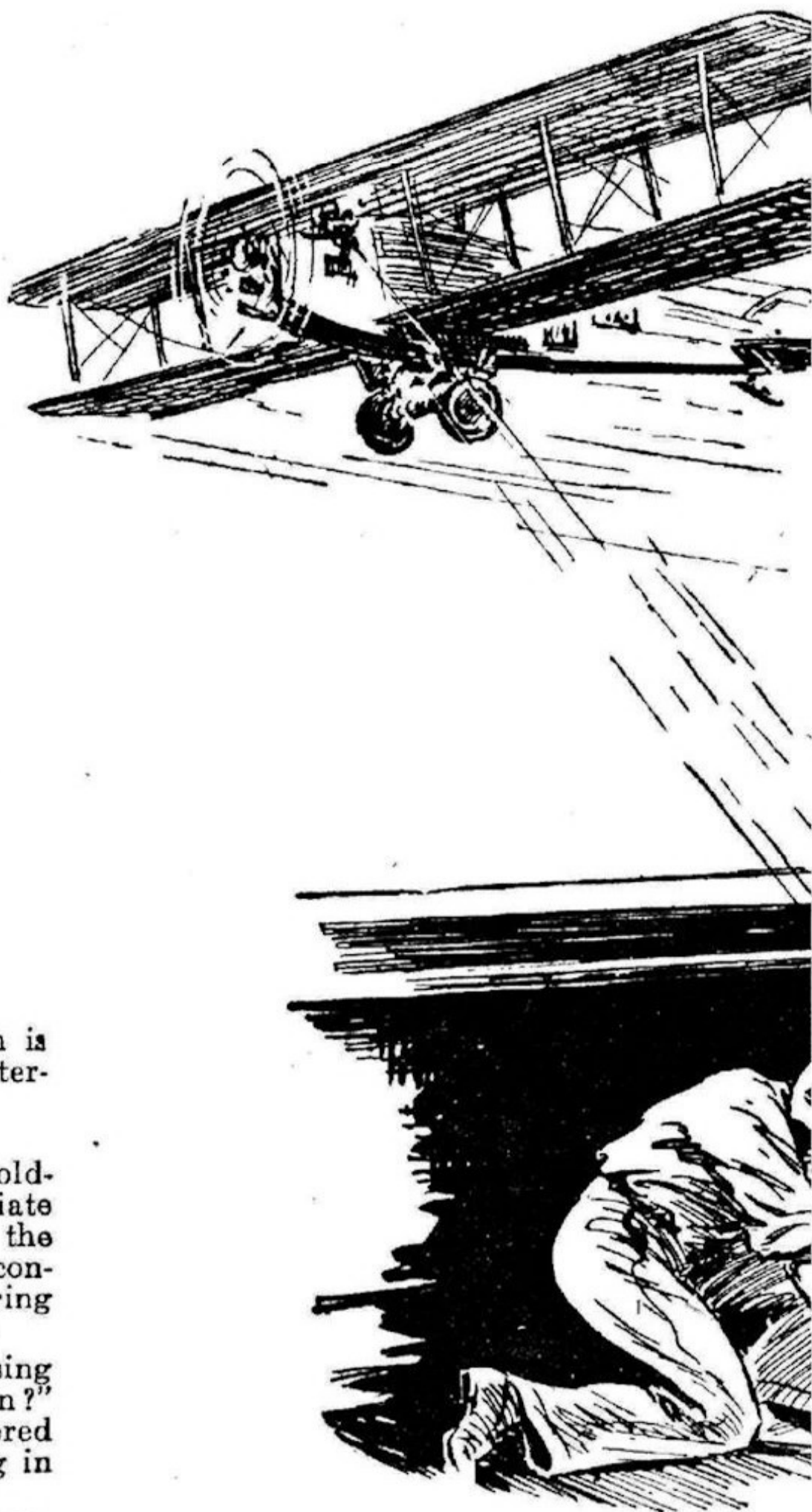
Over by the doors Nelson Lee took out his handkerchief and tied it round his mouth and nostrils. He could feel his own senses becoming dulled. He was losing his grip; he, like the others, was suffering acutely.

And he knew that this fight could not continue much longer.

"What are you going to do, Lee?" asked Dorrie, staring.

"I am going out!" replied Lee grimly. "As soon as I have gone shut these doors, and keep them tightly closed. I may not be gone longer than thirty seconds. Be ready to admit me when I return."

"But, hang it, it's death——"



"Down—quickly—all of you!" roared Nelson Lee the sudden splutter and rattle of a machine-gun, for

Before Lord Dorrimore could say anything more Nelson Lee had gone out. He slammed the door after him and Dorrie secured it.

Outside in the kitchen Nelson Lee was instantly aware of the presence of Death. He was partially protected by his handker-

chief, but nevertheless, he could tell that the atmosphere was deadly.

He ran blindly, drunkenly. Through one of the windows he had seen a dazzling, searing flash of lightning.

He reached the window and flung it wide open. Until this minute it had remained closed, for nobody had had time to go round opening any of the ordinary windows. Indeed, it had been better to keep them

in through the window. Those first gulps had a miraculously reviving effect. Nelson Lee's brain seemed to clear, on the instant. And he sent up a prayer of thankfulness.

The storm had broken and was raging with all its might.

Gazing downwards Nelson Lee could see the roofs of the city illuminated by the almost continuous flashes of dazzling lightning. The rain pelted into his face and the wind surged past him.

And it was a real wind, too. A howling, raging hurricane. For this storm was truly tropical, and it was terrifying in its force.

At least, it would have been terrifying under any normal conditions. But just at present Nelson Lee welcomed it with heart-felt fervour. Never had he so desired a storm as he did now.

Tearing himself away from the window he ran quickly round, opening every other window he could see, careless of whether they dashed themselves to splinters in the roaring wind. It was air that was needed, strong currents of air that would sweep the poison out of these rooms.

Five minutes Nelson Lee spent at this work, for he had no intention of leaving anything to chance. Then he ran back to the cold-storage plant, turned the great handles, and swung the doors wide.

"Come!" he shouted. "The storm has broken and the gas has gone!"

"Good glory!" muttered Lord Dorri-more. "You—you can't mean it, Lee! You're foolin' us! You—you—"

He was almost lightheaded from the effects of semi-suffocation. He staggered out, followed by the others. And Lee, as he watched, could scarcely believe his eyes. Never had he seen such an extraordinary spectacle.

They came out without any expressions of joy, without gladness. They were too far gone. They reeled drunkenly, and they clutched at one another for support. It was a pitiful sight, and yet at the same time a gratifying one.

Only for about five minutes did this state of things last. Then as they all began to recover their senses they made a move towards the roof-garden. They went out into the pouring rain, into the lightning, and they revelled in it.

They were soaked to the skin, but who cared? The air was pure, gloriously pure. Every trace of that horrible gas had been blown away. It was dissipated and gone.

"Well, we're safe now, you chaps!" said Nipper breathlessly. "Good old guv'nor! It was his idea! He pulled us through!"

"Yes, rather!"

"And it's another nail in the Ameer's coffin!" said Nipper. "By Jove! There'll be a long account against him in the end."

But nobody cared particularly what happened to the Ameer just then. There



faces!" Zurrerrrh! Zip—zip—zinnnnng! There was a loud sound of shattering glass as the 'plane passed the windows.

closed, since opening them only admitted the fumes.

"Thank Heaven!" gasped Nelson Lee fervently.

Rain was pouring down in torrents, and a cool, refreshing wind was blowing directly

was the reaction. They were all feeling utterly exhausted. Their lives had been spared, and they were suffering, too, from the effects of the slight dose of poison-gas they had breathed in.

Less than an hour later, in spite of the continuous thunder, they were all soundly asleep. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and one or two of the men were the only ones who remained awake, and even this was difficult for them.

They took it in turns later on, and when daylight dawned the prisoners of the crag were getting back to their normal state of health. The great storm had gone and the sun rose in a blaze. But a strong wind was blowing round the crag top, making any further poison-gas attempts futile.

And later on in the morning the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls turned out, refreshed and cheerful. The events of the night seemed like a horrible dream. They could hardly believe that they had really passed through that experience.

Nelson Lee made a point of examining everybody, and he was relieved to find that no actual harm had been done. Even the men who had received the largest doses of gas were now recovered.

Towards mid-morning an aeroplane appeared over the city, and it came circling upwards, nearer and nearer to the palace.

Orders were given for everybody to get into the inner corridors of the palace. It was foolish to risk any lives. Perhaps this plane was going to try some more machine-gun dodges, or perhaps bombs were to be dropped.

As it happened, nothing of the sort transpired.

The machine merely flew overhead and dropped a package on to the wide tennis-courts on the roof-garden. And in the package there was a message from the Ameer.



CHAPTER 14.

The Limit !

LORD DORRIMORE
grinned.

"A love-letter from
His Nibs, eh?" he
said cheerily. "I

hope he's sent me a few kisses, Lee!"

The aeroplane had gone, and the boys and girls were coming up on to the roof-garden again. Nelson Lee was standing on one of the lawns, reading the message that the aeroplane had dropped.

"It is quite characteristic of His Imperial Highness," he said with a smile. "No doubt the Ameer is irritable because of his failure. He expected us to be all dead by this time, Dorrie."

His lordship read the note with considerable amusement. It was written in the most exquisite English, and it stated very politely that the Ameer was by no means impatient. He could wait. There was no particular hurry. The poison-gas experiment had failed, but the Ameer pointed out at some pains that it had only been an experiment. On the next occasion there would be no failure.

But what this next occasion would be, and when it would come, His Highness did not state. The object of the note evidently was to put the prisoners into a fever of anxiety. But it really did nothing of the sort. The prisoners of the palace treated it with scorn and contempt.

"All the same, Dorrie, there's rather a demoniac tone in this letter," said Nelson Lee, after the excitement had died down. "The Ameer has shown us that he is relentless, that he is ruthless. And we can be quite sure that he has only just commenced his experiments, as he calls them."

"You don't really think there'll be another opportunity like last night's, do you?"

"I think not," replied Lee. "It is most unusual for the air to be so utterly still. No, Dorrie; there is very little prospect of another poison-gas attempt. But do you realise that the Ameer could wipe us all out within ten minutes if he so chose?"

"Could he, by gad! How?"

"By shelling the palace and destroying it," replied Lee. "There are guns in plenty round the fortress on the outskirts of the city. I haven't the slightest doubt that they are now trained upon the palace. And at a word from the Ameer they could blow us to smithereens."

"I'm not worried about that," said Dorrie lightly.

"Why not?"

"Because the Ameer wouldn't be such a fool as to destroy his own palace——"

"Don't be too sure, Dorrie!" broke in Lee grimly. "This is quite between ourselves, remember, and I wouldn't like any of the boys or girls to get a whisper of it. But do you realise that the danger of being shelled is not merely possible, but highly probable?"

"But, hang it, look at the money he's spent——"

"Money!" broke in Lee. "The Ameer cares nothing for money! If everything else fails, he will unquestionably shell us. He'll destroy every stick and stone of this palace rather than have us continue to defy him."

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"H'm! I dare say there's somethin' in it!" admitted his lordship.

"There's a great deal in it," said Nelson Lee. "The Ameer, of course, dare not let us escape from Rishnir. He knows well enough that the British Government would come along with all its might and literally destroy him. On the other hand, the loss of his palace would be comparatively small. The Ameer is a man of fabulous wealth, and he could build everything again—on a larger, more elaborate scale. Make no mistake, Dorrie—this man is in deadly earnest!"

Lord Dorrimore shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I'm a fatalist," he said. "If I've got to be blown to bits, I shall be blown to bits. What's the good of worryin' about it? But, for the sake of the boys and girls, I hope he thinks of one or two less drastic schemes to start with."

Just then a shout came from a group of juniors who were standing near the marble parapet.

"Look, sir!" yelled one of them. "It's the old Wanderer. She's flying! She's up in the air!"

"Did you hear that, Dorrie?" asked Lee.

"I did, by glory!"

"I've been expecting it," nodded Lee.

"They've got our 'plane repaired, and now they are evidently testing her."

"The infernal nerve!" fumed Dorrie furiously. "Hang it, Lee, this is just about the limit!"

And all the boys were equally indignant. They regarded it as a piece of pure nerve on the Ameer's part to seize the Wanderer of the Skies, and to use her for his own purposes. For, without doubt, this was the Ameer's plan.

Gazing out over the city, they could see a large tract of smooth ground, with many big buildings on one side of it. This was obviously the Ameer's chief aerodrome. Flying over it was the great all-metal monoplane, the Wanderer of the Skies.

Mr. Manners was particularly upset.

The machine had been compelled to make a forced landing, and she had been abandoned in the jungle. But the Ameer's soldiers had been very busy. Hundreds of them had been working, and they had cleared the jungle, and had freed the great aeroplane from its embrace. Now the Wanderer was not only repaired, but she was airworthy again, and was being flown by one of the Ameer's expert pilots.

"If only we could get hold of her!" muttered Mr. Manners feverishly. "The way to freedom and liberty! But, of course, the thing is impossible."

Before long it became evident that the Wanderer was approaching the crag. She was rising, too, and less than twenty minutes later she flew right overhead, and it was a galling experience for Mr. Hobart Manners, and for all those who had flown from England in that shapely 'plane.

"They're flaunting her!" muttered Mr. Manners. "That's all it is, Lee! They're flaunting her before our eyes!"

And this, evidently, was the Ameer's intention. He was showing these prisoners of his how helpless they really were. Here was their machine, the one that had brought them into his country, airworthy and intact. She was literally the magic carpet on which they could be wafted to freedom. But she was out of their reach; it was a case of "so near and yet so far."

"The rotter!" said Nipper, as he stood leaning over the parapet, watching the Wanderer, as she returned to the aerodrome. "He probably thinks that he'll weaken us by these demonstrations. But he's wrong. We're more determined than ever to get free, and to make him pay."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West nodded.

"The trouble is, dear old boy, there's no prospect of us gettin' our liberty," he said. "It doesn't matter how much we hope, we're helpless. We're surrounded by thousands of the Ameer's soldiers, and by thousands more of his civilian subjects."

"Yes," agreed Nipper. "We're only safe because we happen to be at the top of this great crag. And the more you think of it the more forlorn the position seems. Thank goodness the majority of the fellows aren't taking it too much to heart. They're keeping up their spirits—and so are the girls."

"There seems to be some activity down below—in the courtyard," said Tommy Watson, staring downwards.

But nothing of an alarming nature was taking place. Some soldiers were moving about, but this was more or less usual. Looking down, it was almost like gazing out of the window of a high-flying aeroplane. The soldiers in the courtyard were apparently no bigger than insects. They seemed to move about grotesquely—tiny specks, far, far below.

And while Nipper was watching, his gaze suddenly became concentrated and acute.

But he wasn't looking down into the courtyard now—but at a spot on the rocky side of the crag, only three hundred feet below the marble palace.

"That's rummy!" he said with a puzzled frown. "There's nothing but smooth rock there—solid rock. And yet I thought I saw—"

"Begad!" interrupted Sir Montie. "What are you talkin' about, dear old boy? How could you see anythin' in a place like that?"

"It was probably my fancy," said Nipper, frowning. "Yet it seemed to me that a human hand appeared for a moment."

"A human hand!" ejaculated Tommy, staggered.

"Yes."

"You're off your rocker!" said Tommy. "Must be the effects of that poison-gas—"

"There!" shouted Nipper abruptly. "Look!"

They all stared, fascinated. And, sure enough, for a brief moment they caught a

glimpse of a human hand, waving feebly in the air. And then, as dramatically as it had appeared, it vanished.



CHAPTER 15.

Nipper's Discovery!

THERE was something strangely moving in that brief incident.

It was eloquent of drama. It told of things that the juniors had never hitherto dreamed about.

A human hand—appearing from the bare face of the crag, over seven hundred feet from the ground, and yet three hundred feet below the level of the palace! What could it mean? From the roof here, it seemed that the rock was smooth and unbroken. Yet this could not be so; there was obviously a ledge, or a hidden window.

"By Jove!" muttered Nipper tensely. "This crag must be full of mysteries and surprises! Until now, we thought that it was solid rock, from top to bottom. But it can't be, you fellows! And I believe I've hit upon the truth, too."

"What is the truth?" asked Sir Montie.

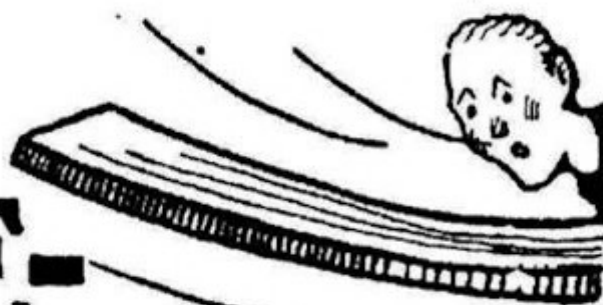
"Well, doesn't it seem probable to you that there might be caves—or sort of caves—down the faces of these rock precipices? Imagine the plight of a poor prisoner in such a place! There's no telling what horrible things the Ameer is responsible for!"

"But can't we do anything?" asked Tommy Watson excitedly. "Hadn't we better tell Mr. Lee, and——"

"No; wait a minute!" interrupted Nipper. "Let's keep this little thing to ourselves for the time being. We'll see if we can't help that poor fellow somehow. He's still alive, or he couldn't have waved his hand. There must be a crevice down there, or a cave."

"But what can we do, dear old boy?" asked Tregellis-West.

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"We'll go down to the lowest floor of the palace, and we'll get some ropes," replied Nipper briskly. "Tell Handy and one or two of the others. Then you can all lower me down at the end of the rope, and I'll have a squint at the place."

"But—but you can't!" gasped Watson.

"Why not?"

"Think of the danger! All those hundreds of feet from the ground——"

"Rats!" said Nipper. "How can there be any danger? You can be sure that we shall get a strong rope, and you fellows can lower me, can't you? I've been down a cliff many times, home in England—and there's nothing to be scared about!"

"It seems frightfully puzzlin', dear old boy—it does, really!" protested Montie. "How is it that that fellow in the cave is alive? Why wasn't he killed by the poison-gas?"

"I've been wondering about that, too," said Nipper. "But why waste time? We shall probably know the reason for his escape later on, after we have questioned him. The main thing is to see who he is, and get him up into the palace. It won't take long for you to lower me, and to pull me up again."

And, without any more delay, Nipper & Co. informed Handforth and two or three others, and they set about their self-appointed task. They saw no reason why they should not do this thing on their own.

And it was a welcome diversion, too.

The fellows hardly knew what to do with themselves. They could only lounge about and talk, and wonder what the Ameer's next move would be. It was really splendid to have something definite to do.

Nipper had already marked the exact spot in his mind, and he led the way to the very lowest possible window—one that was a good distance down from the roof-garden. He leaned over and made a careful inspection of the rock face of the great cliff.

"Yes, this is the place," he said, as he came in again. "How about the ropes?"

"Here they are," said Handforth, as he came bustling up with some long coils of strong rope. "Of course, I think it's all rot. I don't believe there's anybody down there, on a ledge or in a cave. You fellows must have been seeing things!"

"Well, it won't take us long to make certain, Handy," said Nipper.

"And, what's more, I think I ought to go down on the rope!" went on Handforth stubbornly. "I'm the chap for the job!"

"How do you make that out?" put in Watson. "Didn't you just say that it's all rot? If you don't believe in it, why do you want to go down?"

"That's a poser for you, Handy, old man!" chuckled Nipper. "But never mind—we won't argue. I'm the chap who's going to descend. We only brought you into it because you've got good muscles."

"What have my muscles got to do with it?" demanded Handforth, staring.

"Everything," replied Nipper. "I'm relying upon you fellows to lower me safely, and to pull me up again."

Handforth didn't like it, but he grudgingly assented. It was certainly better than idling his time away elsewhere. Here was an adventure! It might come to nothing, but, while it lasted, it would be entertaining.

The rope was stout and strong, and Nipper made certain of the knots. It was looped under his armpits, and made doubly certain by a second lock-knot. Nipper coolly climbed out of the window, and prepared to let himself go.

"Take it easily, you chaps," he said. "There's no particular hurry, and I'll give a hail when you've lowered me far enough. There's plenty of rope here, isn't there?"

"Over five hundred feet," said Reggie Pitt, nodding.

"That'll be heaps," said Nipper. "Well, so-long! Don't worry about me—I'm going to enjoy myself."

They lowered him carefully, and watched the rope as it passed over the edge of the window. A big pad of cushions had been placed there, so that there would be no possibility of the rope chafing. And it was quite easy for the juniors to lower Nipper foot by foot, with due caution.

Church, who wasn't taking part in the activities, was leaning out of the window, watching. He saw Nipper going further and further down.

"Better go easy now!" he said after a while. "He's well over two hundred feet down, and—— Hallo! He's just waved his hand."

They lowered him a little further, and then Nipper gave a yell. His voice came floating up to Church.

"That'll do!" sang out Nipper. "Great Scott!"

"What have you found?" shouted Church excitedly.

But Nipper made no reply. He was hanging there, staring straight at the face of the rock, as it seemed. But it was quite obvious that he was attracted by something of a very different nature.



CHAPTER 16.

A Startling Surprise!

NIPPER had been expecting to find a little crevice, or, perhaps, as he had hinted, a cave.

So he was hardly prepared for the actual surprise.

Until he was almost upon it, he had no idea that the thing existed. Then suddenly, as he was being lowered, he found himself immediately opposite a small, funnel-like hole in the crag. From the ground, no

doubt, it was quite invisible, for the funnel dipped deeply downwards into the heart of the rock.

And it was equally invisible from above, owing to a slight projection just over it. And in this funnel-like opening there were a number of heavy iron bars.

"Great Jupiter!" breathed Nipper. "It's a cell!"

He clutched at the rock, near the mouth of the opening, and tried to peer in through the blackness.

"Hallo, there!" he sang out. "Is there anybody—"

"Oh!" came a voice from somewhere within. "It is one of the white boys! It is one of Hussi's schoolfellows!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Nipper in amazement. "Who are you? You're talking in English! Are you English?"

"Let us have water!" came the gasping voice. "It is difficult for us to speak. But I will tell you that my name is Goolah Kahn—"

"Goolah Kahn!" shouted Nipper. "The Maharajah's son! Old Hussi's brother!"

"Yes!" said the hidden voice. "My father is here, likewise."

"The Maharajah himself!" said Nipper breathlessly. "By jingo! This is a discovery, if you like! We'd no idea that you were on the crag! We thought you were hidden in a prison somewhere—down in the city!"

"Wait!" came the voice of Goolah Kahn. "I will try— Yes, I think I can do it."

Nipper was aware of a kind of scrambling noise, and then, a few moments later, he saw a strange, haggard face behind the bars. There was several weeks' growth of beard on the chin, and the man's hair was tousled and long. But in spite of this, Nipper at once recognised Goolah Kahn, the heir to the throne of Kurpana.

At one period, Goolah Kahn had visited St. Frank's, and he was, of course, as well acquainted with England as Hussi Kahn—being, in fact, an old boy of St. Frank's.

"You are Hamilton, of the Remove!" said Goolah Kahn with a faint smile. "It is splendid! How are you?"

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Nipper. "No need for formalities, is there? I saw your hand waving, and I came down on this rope to find out—"

"I have waved many times, my young friend," said Goolah Kahn. "And every time it has been an agony of suspense. But at last I have attracted your attention. We need water badly. My father is in sore need."

"We hadn't the faintest idea that you were here," replied Nipper. "I'll give the signal, and I'll bring some water down as quickly as I can!"

"It is well," said Goolah Kahn.

"But where are you?" asked Nipper eagerly. "Let me give a few details to Mr.

Lee, if you can. How did you get into this—this place?"

"It is a type of prison cell," replied the other. "It is reached by means of the great lift—a passage-way through the rock communicating with this noisome hole."

"Oh!" said Nipper. "I understand now! They can stop the lift over half-way up, and—and— Oh, but what about last night?" he added, startled. "How is it that you escaped the poison-gas?"

"We did not entirely escape," said Goolah Kahn, looking through the bars at Nipper with a strange, wild look in his eyes. "Some of the fumes crept in beneath the door, but we were able to block the crevice. There is a heavy stone door, shutting this cell off from the passage."

"But the window?"

"It is, as you see, shaped curiously," replied Goolah Kahn. "The fumes, I imagine, arose on the still air."

"Yes, yes," said Nipper, nodding. "That gas was lighter than air, and it was bound to rise. And this window is almost a funnel, sloping downwards. The gas naturally missed it."

"Not altogether," said the other. "My father and myself were unconscious for several hours. Let me add that we have had no water since the great explosion in the lift-shaft. I can hold on no longer, my young friend. I urge you to make haste —"

He seemed to sag as he spoke, and then he vanished. Nipper heard a slight scuffle, and then came the voice again.

"I am not hurt!" it said. "I fell, but all is well. If you can do so, please hurry. My father is in great need!"

"Cheer up!" sang out Nipper, shouting through those bars. "We'll not only give you water, but we'll rescue you. It won't take us long to get down the lift-shaft, and then we shall be able to smash the door in and carry you up to the palace."

"A wondrous prospect, indeed!" said Goolah Kahn.

Nipper looked upwards, and saw Church, far above, staring down at him. Incidentally, Church and the other juniors were filled with wild conjectures. They had heard Nipper talking, although they had not been able to distinguish any of his words. And they wondered what it could all mean.

As for Nipper, he was unusually excited.

Here was an extraordinary discovery! The Maharajah of Kurpana and his heir! Imprisoned here, in the very heart of the great crag! It was something that none of them had guessed. All this time, they had been comparatively near to the two unfortunates, and they, for their part, had known of the situation, but had been unable to attract attention.



Down in the corridor, leading to the refrigerating-room, the atmosphere became more deadly than ever. One or two of the girls nearly swooned, but they were caught by the St. Frank's fellows and half-carried, half-dragged along.

Boom!

Nipper was about to shout to Church, when a loud bang sounded from somewhere far, far below. Nipper heard a kind of scream, and then—crash!

There came a thudding explosion from a point not more than ten yards away from him. Splinters of rock flew about, and he was miraculously lucky to escape injury.

Boom!

"My only aunt!" gasped Nipper. "They're firing! They're shelling me!"

In a flash he knew the truth. The Ameer's soldiers had seen what was going on—and they were using artillery!

True, it was only a very small gun, firing tiny shells. But if one of them struck the rock close to the dangling junior, death would be certain.

As that second boom sounded, he instinctively closed his eyes.

Thud!

This time it was a very curious sound, not loud, and not startling. He knew the truth. The second shell had failed to explode—it was a "dud." It had struck the rock harmlessly.

But it had come even closer to him—and the next one was not likely to fail, too!



CHAPTER 17.

More Thrills!

CHURCH was pale with excitement and alarm. "Quick, you chaps!" he gasped. "They're firing—they're shooting at Nipper! Pull—pull! They'll kill him unless we get him up!"

Above, on the roof-garden, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were staring down—and now, for the first time, they were aware of the situation.

"What have those boys been up to?" snapped Nelson Lee angrily. "Good heavens, Dorrie! There's one of them down there—on a rope!"

"It's Nipper!" nodded his lordship.

"The young idiot!" snapped Lee. "I cannot imagine what can have possessed him!"

It was evident that the Ameer's soldiers were firing at the rock because they knew they could do no harm—except to Nipper. They had hesitated before firing at the palace—but this was different.

Boom!

Nipper had hardly been raised twenty feet before another shell came screaming at the crag.

Crash!

He was deafened by the explosion of the small shell, and several fragments of rock and burning-hot metal shrieked past his ears. But again he escaped injury. He was only aware of one or two grazes.

"Up with him!" roared Handforth.

"Wait!" gasped Church, who was staring down with horrified eyes. "Easy, you fellows—for goodness' sake, go easy! They've hit the rope!"

"What?"

"Don't pull on it—or it'll break!" went on Church hoarsely. "Oh, my goodness! If it should snap——"

He broke off, unable to complete his sentence. The prospect was too frightful. An eight hundred foot drop to the solid ground!

He could see the rope, about twenty feet above Nipper's head—and two or three of the strands had parted, and were slowly and deliberately unwinding!

Nipper, at the end of the rope, was even more alarmed. He had seen those broken strands, and it had occurred to him, in a flash of certainty, that his companions would never be able to draw him up all that distance. Long before he could have reached the safety of the window, the rope would have snapped completely.

Ping!

Another strand went, and Nipper felt a distinct jerk.

Besides, there was the knowledge that other shells would come. They would get him before he reached that window—yes, and they might kill two or three of the other fellows, above there, too.

"Hi, you fellows!" shouted Nipper quickly. "You'll never do it! This rope won't last! Lower me!"

"But—but——" began Church, in horror.

"Lower me!" urged Nipper. "There's a crevice here—a kind of rock window in the crag. I can crouch in there, and——"

He broke off, as the rope gave another ominous twitch. At any second, now, it might snap like a cotton, and send him hurtling down to his death.

There seemed very little chance for him, in any case. But, by lowering him to that hidden cell, there was the faintest of faint hopes that he might be able to survive. And those above would not be in any acute danger.

At last he clutched at the rocks, and as he did so there came another boom, another screaming, whining sound—and then another crash, from some distance overhead.

The rope parted, and Nipper clung there, just inside that funnel-like entrance. He was physically sick with the narrowness of his escape.

For he knew, now, that if his companions had continued to pull him upwards he would have been sent down to his death. But by lowering him he was still alive.

Boom!

Nipper crouched aside, trying to make himself as small as possible—trying to get deeper and deeper into that hole in the rock face. He clung to the bars of the secret cell.

He heard the whining of the shell, and—thud!

For a fraction of a second he thought that it was all over. As he clutched at the bars, he felt a terrible jarring sensation in his arm, and he was bewildered and dazed.

It seemed to him that he had heard another thud, from inside that cell, followed by confused shufflings, and hoarse shouts.

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When he opened his eyes, he found that clouds of dust were surging out of the opening, and then, to his further stupefaction, he saw that two of the bars were jagged and bent—completely broken away. There was an opening!

"Great Scott!" he panted.

In a flash, he knew what had happened—and he knew that the Ameer's gunners had provided him with the means of temporary safety.

That last shell had been another "dud." But it had been aimed with deadly accuracy, and it had plunged clean through the heavy iron bars, smashing them in its progress.

Then it had evidently carried on, and had struck the opposite wall of the cell—still without exploding.

That there was nothing particularly miraculous about this was proved by the fact—

that the same gun fired nearly a dozen rounds before it finally gave up the task—and of these dozen, no less than five of the shells failed to explode.

Not that Nipper waited for any of those shells to hit him.

Wriggling and squirming, he managed to squeeze his way through the opening in the bars, and after a hard struggle he succeeded in getting through. He dropped—and thought, for a dreadful moment, that he was going down into an inner abyss. Then, with a jar, he struck the floor. He had not realised that that window was so high up in the wall

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of the cell. Goolah Kahn had climbed precariously up the wall in order to get near the bars.

"Come!" came Goolah Kahn's voice in Nipper's ear, as he staggered dazedly to his feet. "Let us get away from here!"

"But—but how?" asked Nipper. "Didn't you tell me that there was a stone door—"

"See!" interrupted the other.

And Nipper saw.

The stone door was shattered into fragments, and had crumpled into an untidy heap. The shell had hit it with full force. The Ameer's gunners had given liberty to these prisoners!

The shell, of course, at the moment of striking, had been falling slightly, and so it had shot clean down that funnel opening, striking the door in its natural flight.

Nipper found himself helping Goolah Kahn

with a white-haired, weakly gentleman, who was obviously the Maharajah himself. Both he and his son were clothed in rags, and their condition was pitiable.

They soon found themselves in a rock passage, far from any possible danger. Not even a naval gun could have done them any damage now, for they were right in the heart of the great crag.

The passage led straight through; it was low and narrow, and had apparently been hewn out of the solid rock.

"I—I can't believe it!" said Nipepr, when they all paused for a rest, after they had got out of the danger zone. "It seems so—so strange!"

"And yet, my young friend, what has happened was purely logical," said Goolah Kahn. "You sought safety in the cell opening, and the shell broke through, providing you with that very safety you desired."

"Yes!" muttered Nipper. "And we'll soon be up in the palace now. We've only got to attract the attention of those at the top of the lift-shaft, and everything will be all right."

And once again, in the black darkness, they pressed on through that passage—until, at length, they reached another door. Opening it, they found themselves on the brink of the great lift-shaft. A chasm lay at their feet, and, looking upwards, they could see the great shaft stretching far, far above them.



CHAPTER 18.

Safe!

HANDFORTH leaned out of the window, and the other fellows were on either side of him. Tommy Watson and

Tregellis-West were pale with anxiety.

"He's gone!" said Handforth hoarsely. "There's no sign of him now! He—he seemed to vanish! That shell struck—"

"Nipper—Nipper!" shouted Watson. "Are you there, old man?"

But there was no reply.

And before the juniors could shout any more Nelson Lee and Dorrie came running in. And Nelson Lee's heart nearly missed a beat when he observed that the rope was lying loose, and that Nipper was not present.

"Where is he?" he asked harshly. "You cannot tell me that—"

"We—we don't know, sir!" said Reggie Pitt. "He managed to get into a kind of crevice, just before the rope was severed. But since then we haven't seen anything of him. And they're still firing, too!"

"Stand back from this window—all of you!" ordered Nelson Lee. "It will be serious enough if there is one death. We do not want several!"

Boom!

They heard the shell explode on the face of the crag, some distance below, and Nelson Lee went to the window, and leaned out. He was just in time to see the puff of smoke, and his face was drawn.

"Poor lad—poor lad!" he murmured. "But it was foolish of him to go down!"

Boom!

Another shot. Nelson Lee turned impatiently from the window, and his eyes were full of concern.

"Why did Nipper take this unnecessary risk?" he asked. "What possessed him to lower himself at the end of a rope? Usually, he is level-headed and cautious—"

"He said he saw a human hand waving, sir," put in Handforth. "And he reckoned there was somebody in a sort of cave, on the face of the crag. So he went down to investigate. I wanted to go, but—"

"Quite so, Handforth," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I see—I see! There was evidently some method in Nipper's madness, then. But he ought to have informed me."

"How could he guess, sir, that those rotters would start shelling?" asked Reggie Pitt. "I expect it's all up with him now, poor chap! They've been firing at that spot all the time, and I don't see how he can have escaped."

"I have repeatedly warned you that the Ameer is a man of grim determination," said Nelson Lee. "Nipper knew it, too. Even if they could take the life of one of us, these hounds of the Ameer's will rejoice."

Nelson Lee became silent, and the pain in his eyes could be seen by all. Lord Dorrimore, who was at the window, turned back, and he, too, was looking troubled.

"The young ass must have been crazy!" he said. "How on earth could there have been a human hand sticking out from the rock face? We can't do anything for him, either!" he added unhappily. "I'd go down on this rope if I thought there was the faintest chance of—"

At that moment Smith, the wizened valet, came running in, a-quiver with excitement.

"You're wanted, gents—you're wanted!" he panted.

"What has happened?" asked Nelson Lee sharply.

"In the central foyer, sir!" ejaculated Smith, his eyes aglow with feverishness. "There's voices comin' up from the big lift-shaft! Young Mr. Nipper's voice—"

"What!" roared the St. Frank's fellows.

"Are you sure of this, Smith?" demanded Lee, seizing the man by the arm.

"Yes, sir—I know the young gent's voice well enough!" said Smith. "I couldn't make it out. It don't seem possible, either. But he's there right enough—a good way down. Shouting for ropes to be lowered, so that he can get up!"

Nelson Lee breathed a quick sigh of relief; for there was something very convincing in Smith's tone. There seemed to be no doubt on the subject.

On the instant Lee had an inkling of the truth. A passage through the rock, communicating with the lift-shaft. That could be the only explanation.

"I will come!" he said quickly. "Dorrie, you'd better accompany me."

"You bet!" said his lordship. "By the Lord Harry! What will these youngsters be up to next?"

They hurried away, and Tommy Watson and Handforth and the other juniors rushed after them. And when they arrived at the great marble foyer they found two or three men leaning over the well of the lift. Irene and Mary and two or three other girls were hovering about, too, very excited.

"Is it true, Renie?" shouted Handforth, as he ran up.

"Yes, yes!" said Irene. "We all heard Nipper's voice! He's down there, somewhere!"

"Begad! It's most frightfully puzzlin'—it is, really!" said Sir Montie.

"We didn't know that anything had happened to him!" said Mary Summers anxiously. "How did he get down there?"

But nobody could answer her at the moment. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were standing on the brink of the chasm, staring down into the blackness of the immense shaft. A long, long way down there was a good deal of wreckage, where the lift itself had been blown to smithereens earlier. And, fortunately, there was now no hint of the poison-gas that had befouled the shaft during the night.

"Nipper!" shouted Nelson Lee urgently. "Nipper! Are you there?"

"Yes, guv'nor!" came a far-away, hollow voice. "Throw some ropes down, will you? And tell those other chaps that I'm safe. The Ameer didn't get me, after all, blow him!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Ropes you fellows!" sang out Dorrie boisterously. "Go, and get some ropes—and look lively!"

"I'd like you to come down, too, guv'nor!" came Nipper's voice. "There are three of us here—"

"Three of you!" called Nelson Lee. "But I thought you went down alone?"

"So I did, sir—but I have found two of the Ameer's prisoners," came Nipper's voice. "His Highness, the Maharajah of Kurpana, and his son!"

For a moment there was a complete silence, after that dramatic announcement. Nelson Lee looked at Lord Dorrimore; and Lord Dorrimore looked at Nelson Lee.

"Good gracious!" murmured the school-master-detective. "This is a surprise, Dorrie!"

"You can call me a lop-eared son of a sea-cook!" ejaculated his lordship blankly. "The maharajah and his son! Ye gods and little fishes! It seems to me that young Nipper isn't quite such an ass, after all!"

CHAPTER 19.

Nelson Lee's Big Idea!



H

ALF-AN-HOUR later the palace was still seething with excitement.

Nipper and the two newly-found captives had been brought successfully to the top of the shaft. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners were now attending to the immediate wants of the maharajah and his help. Nipper was in the centre of a big crowd of St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls.

The shelling had ceased, the Ameer's gunners evidently believing that they had demolished that cell, and that the occupants were dead. And there could be no question that the cell itself was demolished, for many of the shells had hit the bull's-eye.

But who cared? Nipper was safe, and, although he was bandaged in one or two places, he was cheerful enough. But he was certainly fed-up with being cheered and congratulated.

"There's nothing to make a fuss about, you asses!" he said gruffly. "The whole thing was an accident. A sheer piece of chance. By all the laws of probability, I ought to have been killed. But one of those shells was a dud, and it smashed clean through the bars of the cell, and then through the stone door. It was the luckiest thing imaginable!"

"It was providential," said Mary Summers thankfully. "That particular shell was never meant to explode. I'm sure of it! Because it not only allowed you to escape, but you were able to rescue Hussi Kahn's father and brother, too!"

In another of the palace apartments Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were talking. They had left the maharajah and Goolah Kahn.

"They must sleep, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "Both of them are very weak. They have had no food for several days, and their lack of water has been a terrible strain. Happily they are alive, and I see no reason why they should not pull through."

"But they mustn't be disturbed for at least twenty-four hours," nodded Dorrie. "What a confounded shame, Lee! By glory! This accursed Ameer will have to answer for a lot by the time he has done!"

Nelson Lee sighed.

"And that brings us back to our problem, Dorrie," he said quietly. "We're as far from solving it as ever. Thanks to Nipper's keenness, these two unfortunate people have been brought into the palace, where they will be well cared for, and nursed back to health. But what prospect of escape is there? Man alive! It's the most difficult riddle we have ever been called upon to solve!"

Dorrie scratched his head.

"I'm afraid you're right," he admitted. "Hanged if I can suggest anythin'! If only we had our big 'plane it would be different. And there she is, practically in full sight."

"It's no good suggesting impossibilities, old man," said Nelson Lee. "The Wanderer of the Skies is quite beyond our reach. No; we must face the truth. And as far as we can see at present there is no possibility of escape!"

Towards evening there was some little anxiety felt by the majority of the prisoners. None of them, however, gave voice to the thoughts that were in their minds. Would it be another night of dead calmness? If so, then, indeed, would all hope be gone. For they could never expect a second storm to come to their rescue.

Nelson Lee, however, who believed in being prepared, had made definite arrangements. A general alarm signal had been planned, and, at the sounding of this, everybody was to make straight for the cold-storage plant. Men had been at work all day, making alterations and placing a store of water and food in the place. As Lee had said, it gave the men something to do, and no possible harm could come of being ready.

But there was no need for any fears.

There was a stiff breeze that evening, with very little prospect of it lessening. It was blowing steadily, and, if anything, it was inclined to freshen.

Towards dusk, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore stood on the roof-garden, gazing out over the City of Idar towards the open country beyond.

"There she is!" said Lord Dorrimore, as Mr. Manners joined them. "Gad! It makes my blood boil! In full sight—and yet we can't do a confounded thing!"

Mr. Manners pursed his lips as he gazed out at the Wanderer of the Skies. She was standing in the open, and several men could be seen, like tiny dots in the distance, walking near her. Not far off there were many sheds, but there could be no doubt that they were too small to accommodate the giant metal monoplane.

"They're going to leave her in the open, of course," said Mr. Manners slowly. "Not that she'll come to any harm. But it's awfully galling to know that she is repaired, and airworthy—and to realise that we cannot get aboard her. With that machine, we could fly into Kurpana in a few hours."

"Might as well talk about flyin' to the moon!" grunted Dorrie disconsolately.

It was rather unusual for his lordship to be anything but cheery. When he saw the Wanderer, however, he was apt to be grumpy. Dorrie was essentially a man of action, and the recent events had jarred upon him. He wanted to be "up and doing."

"The fact is, Lee——" he began.

Then he paused. Nelson Lee was looking up into the sky, and there was an intent expression in his eyes. He held up his hands

and felt the air, as though judging the pressure of the wind. Then, still with that intent look in his eyes, he moved away from the marble parapet, and walked across the wide roof. He paced the green lawns, and stood for some time inspecting the central fountain and the gaily-coloured flower-beds.

After that he paced up and down for some little period, examining the path, the palm-trees, the exquisite summer-houses and rose-arbours. Then he came back, thoughtful and abstracted.

Once again he felt the pressure of the wind, and once again he turned and stared out towards the Wanderer of the Skies. And after that he took a deep, deep breath.

"I wonder!" he muttered tensely. "By Jove, there's just a chance! It might be possible——"

"Great gad, man, what are you sayin'?" asked Dorrie, seizing Lee by the arm. "Why have you got that look in your eyes? Have you thought of something?"

"Yes," replied Lee briefly.

"A—a way of escape?" questioned Mr. Manners hesitatingly.

"Yes, a way of escape," replied Lee. "It is a wild, fantastic idea; but is this a time to think of anything rational? Desperate deeds require desperate remedies."

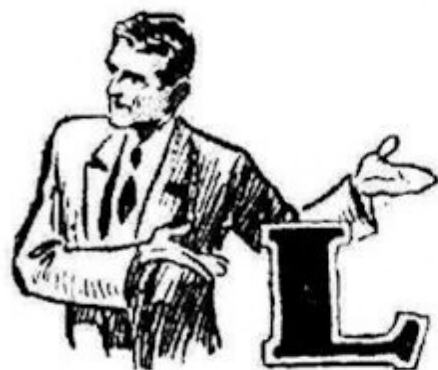
Lord Dorrimore's eyes blazed with excitement.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "By the Lord Harry! Didn't I tell you, Manners, that old Lee would think of something sooner or later."

"Really, Dorrie, you mustn't take anything for granted," said Nelson Lee. "This scheme of mine is really and truly desperate. I would not think of putting it into operation if there was the ghost of another chance. But we must remember that the Ameer is ruthless, and he may adopt some fresh devilry at any hour——"

"But the idea, man?" insisted Dorrie.

"I will tell you in a nutshell," said Nelson Lee tensely. "My plan is to get to the Wanderer during the night, seize her, fly off in her, and land her on this roof-garden!"



CHAPTER 20.

A Desperate Plan!

LORD DORRIMORE and Mr. Manners stared in amazement. "Is this a joke?" asked Mr. Manners bluntly.

"Far from it," replied Lee, in level tones.

"Then what can you mean?" asked Irene's father. "I will admit that it is feasible for the monoplane to be landed on this tennis lawn, although to be sure, the space is dreadfully limited. But how can you reach the machine in order to seize her?"

"There are such things as parachutes," replied Lee calmly.

"Parachutes!" shouted Mr. Manners. "But—but——"

"There are none here, to my knowledge; but I have seen any quantity of fine silk," said Nelson Lee. "And silk, after all, is the essential material for a parachute."

"Great glory!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore. "You mean, make a parachute and—and—— Lee, it's the idea of the century! That aeroplane is standing out there in the open, and the chances are that it will be left unguarded during the night."

"And the wind, as you will have observed, is blowing straight from the crag towards the aerodrome," said Nelson Lee keenly. "That was why I was testing the air a little while ago. Look, gentlemen. The wind is steady, and you must remember that we are a thousand feet from the ground. Even allowing for a steady drop, the wind will probably carry a parachute well over the aerodrome——"

"Two parachutes!" interrupted Dorrie grimly. "Gad! I'm not goin' to let you do this thing alone, Lee. Two parachutes. I'll go with you, and if one of us gets blown out of the way the other might possibly land safely. It'll be just as well to have a double shot at it."

Nelson Lee went closer to his two companions.

"Look here, Dorrie—you, too, Manners," he said in a low voice. "I'm not fooling. I mean this. Our need is utterly desperate, and unless we take a long chance like this we shall all perish. The Ameer means mischief. He might even adopt some fresh horror before the morning. And there is a slim chance of success in this seemingly crazy scheme."

"But it's not crazy," protested Mr. Manners. "It's sound, Mr. Lee. Why, it's amazing."

"There'll have to be a good deal of preparation," continued Lee, as he looked round. "These flower-beds must be levelled, the fountains taken completely away. The palm trees must be hewn down, and the bushes and other trees ruthlessly destroyed. In a word, the whole of the roof must be levelled."

"It can be done, too," said Dorrie promptly. "What about all the boys—yes, and the girls? They'll help. They'll work like Trojans. And the men, too. It'll give 'em all something to do!"

"I have thought of that," nodded Lee. "We'll get them to work without any delay, but remember, nothing must be done near the edges of the roof, for there is more than a chance that we are under constant observation through telescopes or field-glasses. Anything that must be done near the parapets can be done later in the darkness."

"And taking off?" asked Mr. Manners dubiously. "Do you think the machine will be able to take off successfully?"

"Let us get her landed on this roof before we talk of anything else," replied Nelson Lee. "Once we have her here, Manners, the

battle will be half over. Frankly, there is not one chance in a hundred that we shall ever get hold of the machine, let alone fly her to the crag."

"Nothing venture, nothing win," said Dorrie. "I'm game for the business, anyhow. Let's get at it."

And within half an hour the entire palace was seething afresh.

The news spread like wildfire. There was no sense in keeping it secret, since everybody had to be employed. The St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls were wild with almost uncontrolled excitement. An attempt was to be made to seize the Wanderer of the Skies and to land her on the crag. Here was something to go "dotty" about.

The girls were set to work, with many of the women of the domestic staff, searching out silks, finding thread and cords. The manufacture of two parachutes was commenced without any delay.

Nelson Lee himself designed them, cut the silk, and prepared it for the amateur seamstresses. Fortunately, any amount of fine silk had been found, and it was only a question of the labour.

And there was plenty of labour, too.

Outside on the roof-garden the fellows were already hard at work. Piece by piece the ornamental fountains were being demolished and removed. The flower-beds were being flattened, so as to bring them

level with the lawns. Every obstacle was in the process of being taken away.

"This is what I call good," said Handforth breathlessly. "The only trouble is, they ought to be making three parachutes instead of two."

"Why three?" asked Church. "Mr. Manners is to be left in charge of us here. It wouldn't be good policy for them all to go, Handy."

"Fathead!" said Handforth scornfully. "I meant the third parachute to be for me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure and several of the other juniors roared with laughter. It was the first time they had let out such a hearty yell for many days. They were all light-hearted and gay. There was hope now—a prospect of getting away.

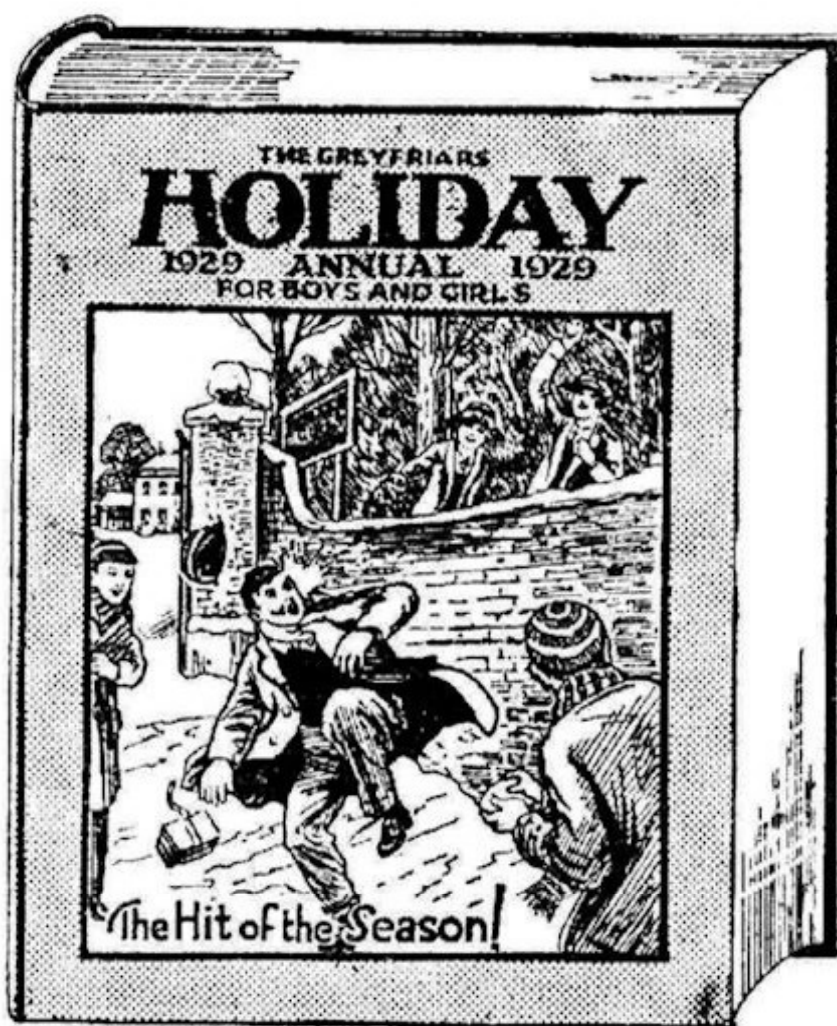
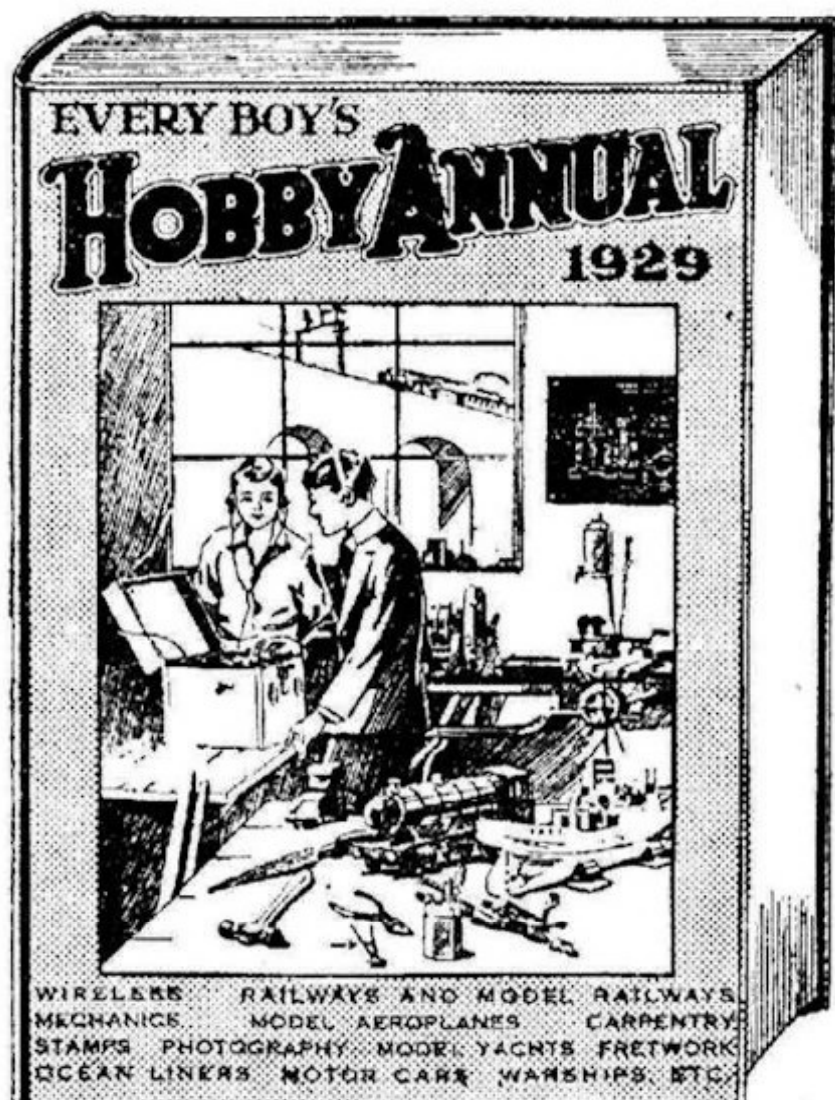
The juniors, of course, were frankly optimistic. They would not hear of any failure. They regarded it as a certainty that Nelson Lee and Dorrie would be able to seize the Wanderer and land her on the roof-garden. It was preposterous to presuppose any hitch.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore worked harder than anybody else. And Lee all the time gave the necessary directions.

He was the only one perhaps who fully appreciated the enormous difficulties. He was the only one who knew that Luck, with

(Continued overleaf.)

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a capital L, would need to be on their side if they were to triumph.

He kept an anxious eye open during those remaining minutes of dusk, while everybody was getting down to hard work. He did not want an aeroplane to fly over and to observe the feverish activities.

But as it happened everything was quiet.

The Ameer no doubt was patiently waiting, as he had hinted in his note. He did not believe that the prisoners could do anything for themselves. Certainly he could never have dreamed of the desperate plan that Nelson Lee had now decided to put into operation.

And when night fell the workers were going at it harder than ever, buoyed up by the glorious prospect of liberation.

CHAPTER 21.

Ready for the Desperate
Bid!



NIGHT!

Night, with gleaming stars and purple skies. Night, with a strong, steady breeze

still blowing directly over the crag and towards the now-hidden aerodrome.

Everything was going smoothly. There had been no indication of activity from the Ameer; the city of Idar was placid and normal. Leaning over the parapet the prisoners could occasionally hear the murmur of the city floating up to the top of the great rock. But there was nothing to give any hint that the Ameer was planning a fresh surprise. Poison-gas, in any case, was quite ruled out, owing to the steady breeze.

On the roof-garden a magical change had been effected.

The Ameer's gardeners, far from disliking their work of demolishing the flower-beds and arbours and rock-gardens, were overjoyed to perform this labour.

It was the Ameer's garden, and they took a kind of feverish joy in wrecking it. As for the St. Frank's fellows, they had only one thought. This great roof-garden had to be made into a landing-ground—level and spacious. Nothing else mattered.

And after darkness had fallen the palm trees were chopped down and the work of removing the end parapet was commenced.

This was a ticklish business, for it was absolutely imperative that not a single scrap of marble should be allowed to drop over the edge of the abyss. No hint of what was taking place must be given to the Ameer's guards.

And it was highly essential that the parapet should be removed. Everything had to be ready, just in case of success. For once the machine was successfully landed on the top of the crag there would have to be

a very quick get-away. Delay might easily prove fatal.

The available space of the roof-garden—that is to say, the "ground" that was capable of being completely levelled—was two or three hundred yards in length, by fully a hundred yards wide. The palace itself was an enormous structure, and fortunately there were no towers or domes.

Hour succeeded hour, and there was no pause in the work, except for frequent drinks and an occasional bite. The St. Frank's fellows and the men worked in relays, however, taking it in turn to do the harder work.

And all the time there was a feverish, thrilling sensation in the air. Even Nelson Lee himself was beginning to have the highest possible hopes of success.

The steadiness of the wind was gratifying. And, later, when the two great parachutes were completed, there were some careful tests.

And as the wind caught the light, flimsy folds of silk, they billowed out, and the parachutes soared upward into the sky.

But this was only a trial; the parachutes were held by ropes.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore hovered for some little time over the roof-garden, and they were satisfied with the buoyancy of these contrivances that were to carry them down to the ground, a thousand feet below.

"They're big," said Nelson Lee, when he had been hauled down. "Over big, perhaps, Manners."

"Isn't that a good fault?"

"I'm not sure," replied Lee thoughtfully. "We don't want to be carried miles beyond the aerodrome. That would be an unfortunate development. Still, we must take our chance."

"Well, anyway," said Dorrie, "it'll be better to get carried beyond the aerodrome than to fall somewhere into the heart of the bally city! Of two evils, choose the lesser. Personally, I've an idea that these parachutes will just do the trick. They'll land us within half a mile of the 'drome."

Nelson Lee looked grave as he glanced at Dorrie.

"Do you think it's really necessary for you to come, old man?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, I do!"

"But consider——"

"I have already considered, thanks!"

"The chances are that we shall be captured," continued Lee steadily. "Naturally, we shall carry revolvers, and we shall be ready to shoot if necessary. But, looking at the thing coldly, the odds are all against us. Why not let me go alone?"

"Hang it, I won't!" said his lordship obstinately. "Two heads are always better than one——"

"Not in this case," interrupted Lee. "There is an exception to every rule. If I can reach the aerodrome there is just a chance that I might be able to get into the machine, and start the engines before any of the guards discover me. And, once the

engines are going, there is a good prospect of getting off."

"But supposin' you fail?" asked Dorrie. "It's far better to have two strings to our bow. For example, if you're spotted and collared I might easily grab the machine while the guards are attending to you. Or vice versa. It's no good, old man. I've made up my mind—and you know what an obstinate beggar I am!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said briefly. "If you will, Dorrie, you will!"

"And that's that!" said his lordship.

As a final precaution, Nelson Lee fixed a kind of rip-cord to the parachutes. Thus, if they found themselves drifting well beyond the aerodrome they could pull these cords, and the parachutes would then drop more rapidly. There was little or no danger of them being landed in the city; quite the contrary. With this strong wind, and with a drop of a thousand feet, there was every prospect that they would be carried well beyond the spot where the Wanderer of the Skies was standing in the open.

"Good luck, sir!" said Nipper, as he clasped his "guv'nor's" hand, just before the fateful moment. "We're going to see you again, sir—and quickly, too!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Good luck, Dorrie!"

"And don't forget, we shall all be watching—and listening!"

"Good gad! Absolutely!" said Archie, with a nod. "I mean to say, we shall be waiting to hear the dashed engines of the good old machine!"

"And don't forget the flares," said Nelson Lee. "If, by some lucky chance, we *do* get the Wanderer into the air, you must keep a strict watch, and, when you see us overhead, the flares are to be lit. We do not want to have any mistake in landing."

There was no fuss—no hysterical outbursts. Even the girls stood by, calm and confident.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie, secured to their parachutes, stood on the extreme edge of the roof-garden—against the parapet at the far end. The parachutes were billowing out, fully extended by the breeze.

"All right!" said Lee smoothly. "Ready, Dorrie?"

"Waitin'!" said his lordship.

The ropes were released, and the next moment the two parachutes soared out beyond the crag—into space.

The great adventure had started!



CHAPTER 22.

Touch and Go!

NIPPER clasped at Handforth and Tregellis-West—the two juniors who were nearest to him. They had been straining their eyes for some

minutes, and they had now lost sight of the two parachutes in the darkness.

"My only hat!" muttered Nipper tremblingly. "I wonder! I wonder if they'll do it?"

"No need to wonder!" said Handforth, with serene confidence. "Of course they'll do it!"

"Thanks, old man," muttered Nipper. "It's good to hear you speak like that!"

The suspense was even worse than the prisoners had anticipated. They knew nothing—they *could* know nothing. There would be one signal and one signal only, to tell them if success had been gained. And that would be the starting up of the Wanderer's engines.

Mr. Manners, perhaps, was the most anxious of them all.

Not that he had the slightest doubt regarding his machine. He had designed the Wanderer of the Skies, and he knew how perfectly she could be controlled. He knew that it would only be necessary for Lee and Dorrie—or one of them—to enter the control-room, and press the electrical contact. The engines would then start on the instant, all in unison. The machine was perfectly fit and airworthy, since she had been flying during the evening.

As for the rest, it was all enshrouded in mystery. Nobody knew whether the machine was guarded, or what difficulties Lee and Dorrie would encounter on their mission.

The wind still blew steadily.

And as the parachutes had started off at precisely the same second, they kept astonishingly close together. Furthermore, owing to the breeze, they made rapid progress.

Over the heart of the city, they had only descended two or three hundred feet, and they were not more than fifty feet apart.

If they had chosen, Lee and Dorrie could have conversed.

But they remained silent. Like ghosts of the night, they floated noiselessly over the city, carried by the wind, dropping steadily, dropping perfectly.

At last, the outskirts, and both the adventurers were gratified by the knowledge that they were still on their true course. The wind had played them no tricks; they were being blown directly over the big aerodrome.

And now they were only three or four hundred feet from the ground. The breeze, here, was much less—and this they had expected. It was naturally fresher on the higher level. Their progress became slightly slower, and they dropped slightly more quickly.

Nelson Lee was the first to land.

He had not found it necessary to use the rip-cord; for, according to his calculations, he was landing in the very centre of the open space of ground which constituted the aerodrome. Nothing, indeed, could have been more gratifying.

Bump!

Lee struck the ground with his feet, he was dragged along for several yards, and then the home-made parachute collapsed like

a pricked bladder, spreading itself in giant folds on the ground. Nelson Lee got to his feet, and, in a flash, he had disengaged himself from the ropes. His revolver was in his hand a second later—and a second revolver was ready.

"This is too good to be true!" muttered Lee wonderingly.

But, of course, he was wrong. His calculations had panned out correctly—that was all.

He looked about him in the deep gloom of the Indian night, and his heart gave a little jump when he saw a shadowy something moving on the ground a hundred yards away. It looked like a pale sort of ghost, and he knew it to be Lord Dorrimore's parachute. Dorrie, too, had landed!

Less than a minute later they were together, and his lordship was chuckling with glee.

"By glory!" he whispered. "What about it now, Lee, old man? Could anythin' be more tophole?"

"Well, it is certainly a case of 'so far, so good,' Dorrie," agreed Nelson Lee. "Now for the big move!"

"Act two begins!" nodded Dorrie calmly. "Scene one: a dark night, and two desperate men in the heart of the enemy's lines. The big thrill of the act consists of these same two men fighting single-handed a horde of —,"

"Dry up, you idiot!" said Lee softly. "This is a serious adventure—not a practical joke!"

"Sorry!" grinned his lordship. "Opinions differ, of course. Personally, I regard the whole affair as a pleasant jaunt!"

He was irrepressible. This early success had given him unbounded confidence. And when he and Nelson Lee crept nearer and nearer to the giant monoplane, their spirits rose even higher.

So far as they could see there was no guard. The great machine was standing there, some little distance from the hangars, silent and still.

Lee and Dorrie approached the tail, and it was not until they were actually alongside the enormous, towering body that they became aware of danger.

Then at the same moment they saw two uniformed soldiers standing under the great main wing, leaning on their rifles and talking in low voices.

It was the guard.

Nelson Lee could have shouted with joy. Only two men! And he had been expecting a much worse problem than this.

"No firing, Dorrie, unless absolutely necessary!" he whispered. "Ready?"

"You bet!" breathed Dorrie.

With one accord they leapt over the intervening ground, holding their revolvers by the barrels. The two guards knew nothing of their approach until they were practically upon them.

Then the men turned, gasping, both of them prepared to shout with all their strength.

Thud! Crack!

Simultaneously Lee's revolver-butt and

Dorrie's revolver-butt took effect. This was no time for gentle methods. The two Indians went sprawling, both of them stunned. There was a slight clatter as their two rifles fell one on the top of the other. But neither Lee nor Dorrie waited for anything more.

Lee was already mounting towards the door in the side of the great fuselage. Would it be open? Would it be unsecured?

He grasped the handle, and a gulp of relief came from him as the door swung wide. He dived in, and a moment later Dorrie came tumbling after him.

They scrambled through the main cabin, down the little passage, and then into the navigating department.

"Done it!" gurgled Dorrie.

"Not yet, old man—not yet!" panted Leo. "Wait until we are in the air!"

He knew the controls by heart, and he pressed the contact button.

Zurrrrrrh!

With a terrific roar all the engines of the giant monoplane leapt into life. They spluttered for a moment or two and then settled down to a steady, deafening din.



CHAPTER 23.

Success!



LISTEN!" said Irene breathlessly.

She and a crowd of others were standing against the parapet on the roof-garden at the top of the crag. They were safe here. It was the other parapet that had been demolished—that had been levelled.

Burrrrrrh!

Far up there, a thousand feet from the ground, and two miles distant from the aerodrome, they could hear the steady, rhythmic purring of the Wanderer's great engines. They had started abruptly, dramatically. And now they were settling down into an ever-increasing roar.

"They've done it!" shouted Nipper hoarsely. "Oh, they've done it, you chaps!"

"Hurrah!"

"Now we can shout!" roared Handforth. "No need to keep silent any longer. The cat's out of the bag! Bravo, Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

Hardly anybody knew what they were doing. They were dancing, shouting and acting like so many lunatics. The suspense was broken, the ordeal was over. The very fact that the aeroplane engines were roaring proved that the machine had been seized.

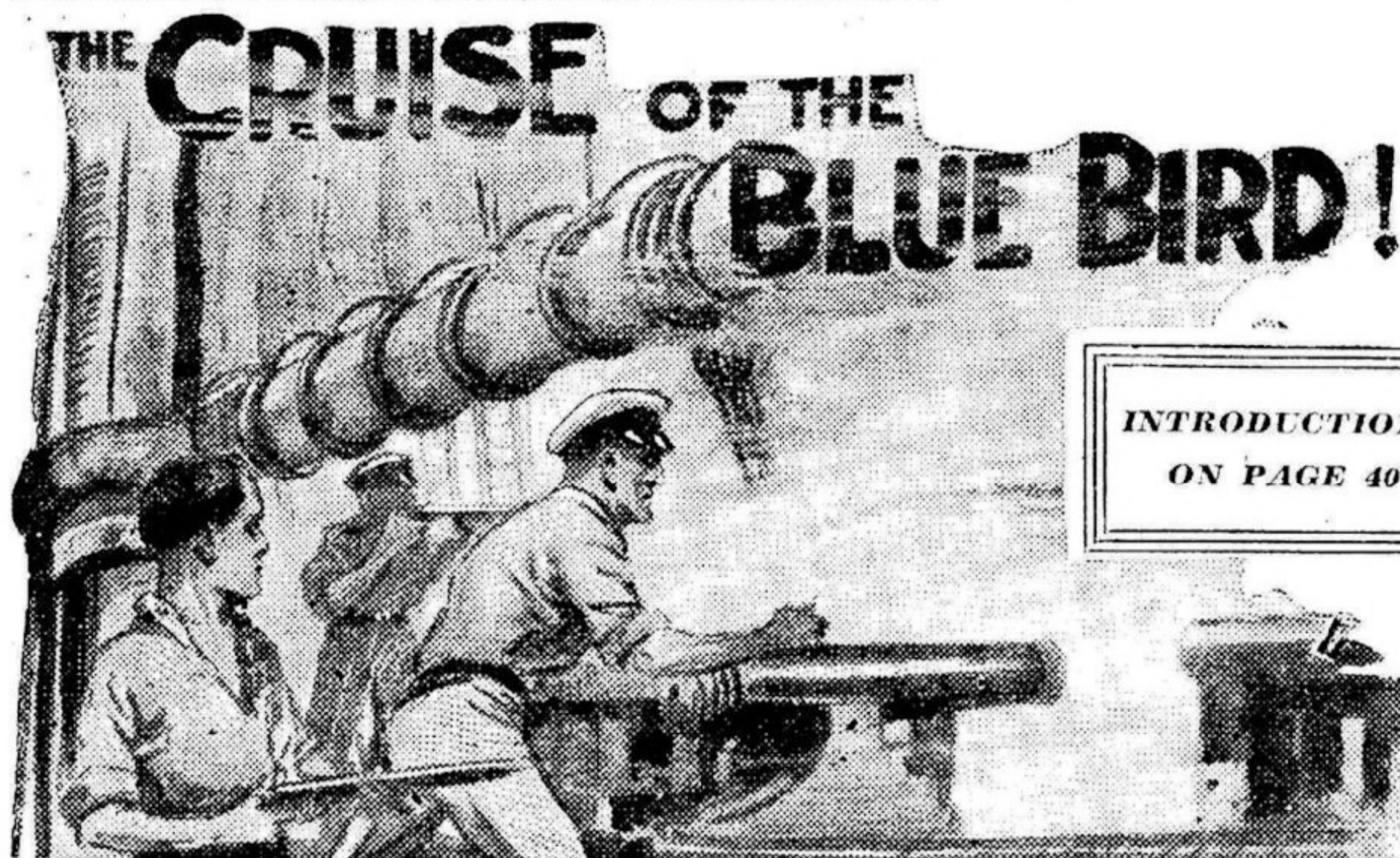
Lights were springing up near the hangars, and a number of tiny, pin-point flashes were now to be observed amid the darkness.

"Rifles!" said Nipper, calming down suddenly. "The Ameer's soldiers! They're firing; they're shooting at the 'plane!"

"Let's hope they don't cripple her!" said Handforth.

(Continued on page 43.)

ALL ABOARD FOR THE SOUTHERN SEAS!



By COUTTS BRISBANE

HOW'S THIS FOR ADVENTURE! Bound to a coral reef, with the tide rapidly rising and, in the distance, the glimmering fin of a shark rushing towards them, is destined to be the terrifying experience of Ned and Jack.

The Unfinished Message!

FOR a moment it looked as though the excited gang would thrust Ned aside and finish the unfortunate Voisin out of hand, but in that moment rose the voice of Benoist from the rear, commanding order. With butting shoulder and banging fists he came through the crowd and, halting by Ned's side, drove them back a little with a shower of words so rapidly delivered that Ned could make little or nothing of them. Then he turned to the boys.

"It is most unfortunate. These men, they fight. This Voisin he is very savage. He draw his knife and cut this man, and he draw his knife and cut back. Voisin then run away. Alas! that they should quarrel."

Benoist dropped on his knees beside the dying sailor and said something in a low voice. The dying man heard him, opened his eyes, saw Jack and Ned bending over him, and smiled at them.

"Anglais—" he whispered. "Ces — hommes—scelerats—ils—faire—"

"Mon pauvre ami," interrupted Benoist, in a loud voice. "Mistaire Manby, hold him up. I am faint. I—"

He seemed to lose his hold. Voisin slipped from Benoist's hands; he gasped, choked, strove to speak, then drooped back in Jack's arms. His head lolled over. Voisin was dead.

"He—I am faint—the blood—" muttered Benoist, and sat down abruptly, hiding his face in his hands. "It is terrible—terrible!" he muttered.

The others drew back, whispering among themselves. Jack and Ned lowered the dead man gently to the ground and rose. Benoist, with averted face, clutched at a drooping bough and hauled himself to his feet, trembling violently.

"Horrible! I was—in the water. I did not know—till it was too late!" he muttered. "That savage temper! Always Voisin has been gloomy and savage, but perhaps he was a little man. And the death of that poor Pascal, his friend, perhaps it made him go quite mad. It is terrible!" He turned to the whispering group, and ordered them to lift the dead man and take him back to the huts.

They obeyed in silence, walking softly, and not till they were gone did Benoist turn to the boys again.

"How truly terrible!" he exclaimed. "I regret that you should have seen it. I——"

"Well, what are you going to do to the other man?" demanded Ned. "We saw Voisin on the beach quarrelling with two other men, but I don't think either was the chap who is wounded. It seemed to me that they were going for him. Are you going to punish that fellow in any way?"

"Punish him? But he was only defend himself. This Voisin, he has for long been a bad-tempered man, I tell you. It is most horrible, much to be sorrowed for, but what would you? He makes the attack upon this man Delarey, who defends himself. He kill Voisin, true, but Voisin would have kill him. It is very sad, but there is nothing to do. I will make the report to Captain Manby. You will come with me?"

"Not now. Later. We came round in a boat, to the end of the lagoon. We must take her back. We will see you later," said Ned.

"Very well. It is very sad, but that is life," murmured Benoist, and went slowly away, his head drooping.

The boys went back towards the beach. They cut a couple of bunches of bananas to take back to the ship, but not till they were near the boat did they speak, for the tragedy had shocked both of them deeply.

"There's something queer about this," said Ned at last. "Both the sailors have died violent deaths since we came. And, you know, I think that Voisin wanted to tell us something when Benoist let him slip and stopped him."

"Maybe. But Benoist couldn't help it. He looked very pale. I thought he was going to faint. But what did Voisin say?" finished Jack.

"Something about these men being scelerats—that means scoundrels, or gaolbirds, or something of that sort. They certainly look like it."

"He'd naturally call 'em scoundrels," said Jack. "But still, I suppose he asked for trouble. That other man had been badly injured. I wonder what dad will do about it?"

Captain Manby heard the news with a grave face and a shake of the head when the boys returned.

"Yes, Benoist has been aboard to tell me," he said. "I gave him some disinfectant and

dressings for the wounded man. But I don't see that there's anything to be done. These Southern French are a fiery lot and whip out their knives at a word. All the evidence points to this fellow Voisin having struck the first blow, and that would acquit the other man."

"He had two wounds—and we've only got the word of those fellows, sir. And Voisin wanted to tell me something. He called them *scelerats*, and that means gaolbirds, I think, and he was going on to say more when Benoist let him fall and stopped him," put in Ned.

"Well, some of them may be scoundrels. Indeed, Benoist said as much. I dare say some of them are no loss to France, but we have nothing to do with that. And Benoist was very sorry about letting the poor fellow slip. He can't stand the sight of blood, he says. It's a pity—but as I say, it wouldn't do any good to punish the other fellow. Try and forget about it, boys."

But during the days that followed, the memory of that scene remained with Ned. He was convinced that Voisin had wanted to tell himself something important and that Benoist had deliberately prevented him from saying it. But he kept this thought to himself, for Jack did not agree with him.

The work went on at high pressure, the whole crew, with the exception of Ah Moy and one other man who stayed aboard with him, being now engaged either in diving or cleaning the shell. Pearls were found at irregular intervals. Sometimes a whole day would pass without one presenting itself, then in the course of an hour or two a number of good ones would be fished out of the slimy contents of the shells.

None noticed the smell now. They were all keyed up by the certainty of fortune, for already the take of pearls had far exceeded the most sanguine expectations. The cleaned shell had accumulated into a great pile, and Captain Manby detailed four men to take it aboard the schooner and stow it in the hold.

The French party seemed sobered by the two deaths. There was no more quarrelling or skylarking now. They all worked, or at least made a show of doing so, though their pile of cleansed shell did not increase very fast. The Blue Birds had no notion whether they had found any pearls or not. Time slipped by.

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 several incidents

cause Captain Manby to be suspicious of them. Meanwhile, the native's story proves to be correct, and during the next few days, the adventurers find many valuable pearls. On going to the island in search of fruit, Jack and Ned are amazed to see a man running up from the beach with a howling mob of Frenchmen in pursuit. He falls exhausted at the boys' feet, and while Ned keeps the others at bay, Jack makes a swift examination of his wounds. "Keep 'em back!" he cries. "The man's dying!"

(Now read on.)

One evening, however, about five weeks after their first coming, Captain Manby dropped into the hold and took a look round with Mr. Sinclair, who had supervised the stowing of the shell.

"Yes, I think we have quite enough aboard. It's a heavy, dead sort of cargo, like coals. We won't overload her. Better to leave a ton or two behind than make a wet ship of her, especially as we have to take those Frenchmen along. We'll have to stow tight. Now, I think we'd better have a day ashore and cut some timber to batten this stuff securely."

"I was going to mention that, sir. It wouldn't do to have it shifting in a bit of a snifter. There's plenty of young wood up along by the head of the lagoon that would do excellently. Tough and light, but stiff enough."

"And the Frenchmen's shell, sir? Shall we take that aboard? There isn't very much

bring off that shell and we'll stow it apart from the rest of the cargo. Most of us are going ashore to cut wood for battens to prevent the stuff shifting, so there will be no time lost. We shall probably sail in a couple of days at the most," Manby told him.

"That is most delightful!" cried Benoist. "This island has been a what you call refuge, yes, but one grows tired of it. We shall be glad to go, yes. If I might make the suggestion, there is good wood for the purpose down there beyond the entrance of the lagoon. Up here it is all palms."

"That is where we shall go. You must make your fellows work, M. Benoist, for I should like to take advantage of this spell of fine weather to get through the reefs. If



"At 'em!" yelled Jack. The two boys charged, slashing out right and left with their weapons. But their opponents were hefty fellows, and within a couple of minutes had beaten the knives from the boys' hands with their thick, heavy sticks.

and we could stow it easily. Indeed, it would help the ship's trim if we put it aft here."

"Very well. They can fetch it to-morrow and stow it, under your supervision, while I take a party to cut the wood. I'll signal to them."

There hadn't been much communication with the French party since the killing of the man Voisin. Benoist had come aboard two or three times a week, but the others had kept ashore. Now Captain Manby signalled the French beach by waving a handkerchief, and presently Benoist arrived alone.

"I wanted to tell you that we're about ready. To-morrow, you will have your men

it should come on to blow we may be held up for weeks."

"But, yes, they shall work. You must not be too hard on them. At the first coming here they work well, but it is the climate. It makes them lazy. Yes, I make them go."

"Have you found many pearls?" continued Manby.

Benoist smiled.

"But, yes, we have not done so badly. There is none very large, but we have some of a good quality. I will show them to you to-morrow, and perhaps you will be so good as to take care of them for us. You have a safe, perhaps?"

"Yes. All of ours are stowed there. Now,

let us drink a glass to the happy ending of all your trials."

Benoist drank, and went off beaming, and repeating that he would have his men ready early.

"And you two boys had better turn out early, too," said Manby, turning to the youngsters. "I want you to go and get some more bananas and any other fruit you can snaffle. That will be your job till we sail. Take the dinghy and start at dawn. Then you can make several trips before dinner."

Nothing loath to escape the hard work of wood cutting, the pair arose very early, even before the captain was stirring, and went to the galley where Ah Moy was lighting up the stove.

"Give us a bite of something, Ah Moy. We're off into the wild, wet woods to get bananas," said Jack.

"You no waitee glet hottie cloffee?"

"No waitee. Some of that sausage and some bread-and-butter. That'll do."

Ah Moy went swiftly to work packing various oddments in a basket.

"We sailee soon?" he asked.

"In two or three days. Those French fellows are bringing their shell aboard to-day, while our fellows are cutting wood for battens," replied Jack. "Mind you don't get quarrelling with them. They're nasty fellows with a knife."

"Me gottee knliffe, too," murmured Ah Moy. "Takee chow." He presented the basket filled with the materials for a liberal meal. "Cap'n say me oilee rifle. You gimmee key box?"

Jack nodded, and fished his key-ring from his pocket. Cleaning the arms was a job Ah Moy attended to at intervals. He was an excellent armourer.

"You know the one, don't you? The steel one. The big brass one belongs to the cartridge locker."

"Me knowee," murmured Ah Moy. "Now, you walkee. No room in galley."

Big Timo, the bo'sun, was bellowing down the fo'c'sle hatch as the pair lowered the dinghy and paddled off. They made directly for the French beach, as they had come to call the sands before the three huts, beached the boat, and stood for a moment looking back at the schooner.

The cutter was lying alongside, as it had lain every night for weeks past. They saw Ah Moy waddle across the deck and lower a long and apparently heavy parcel into it. Then he followed himself, cast off, and slowly and clumsily sculled himself to the reef. He landed with his parcel, and moving awkwardly amidst the chunks of coral, disappeared.

"What on earth is the Chink up to?" said Jack. "What's he taking ashore?"

"Dunno," said Ned indifferently. "Come on!"

The boys passed close to the huts. The Frenchmen were stirring. There was a good deal of talking, and someone began to sing a song. The boys entered the mouth of the

path through the bush, and strolled on.

Suddenly Ned pointed in the direction of the path. There was a sound of feet and voices.

"Hush! Some of those Frenchmen are coming! Let 'em pass. We don't want to talk to them," he whispered.

But the Frenchmen did not pass. They halted close by, almost within touching distance. Only a screen of drooping leaves hid the boys from them. There were four of them. They were talking in low tones, but at the distance Ned could hear them perfectly and understand a great part of what they were saying.

"They are on the beach, I expect," said one, "but is it wise to take them now?"

"Yes. Papa Benoist has it all planned. Everything occurs in the best way. This captain and the most of his men go to cut wood away down the lagoon, more than a mile away. We take one load aboard, and leave half the fellows to stow it. The boat returns. We load up more of the shells, also the rifles underneath. We enter into the ship; Papa Benoist gives the signal, and we use our knives. It goes on wheels. The mate is to be spared, for he is necessary to navigate the ship. For the others, the sharks will feed full for once."

"But these boys, what do we do with them?" asked the first voice.

They began to move on, and Ned ventured to breathe. In another minute they would be able to creep away and reach the beach through the palm grove, warn Captain Manby, and—

"Hold hard!" said a third voice. "Use your eyes, you lubbers! Look at the ground. Here are the tracks of their feet, and they go no farther. They have turned in here, and—"

There was a rustle of branches, and an evil face appeared.

"At 'em!" yelled Jack.

They charged, striking out right and left. But alas! for their good intentions, the men carried thick, heavy sticks. They were all hefty fellows, and in a couple of minutes had beaten the knives from the boys' hands and closed with them. One breathless moment of wrestling, and the pair were flung down.

Up went the thirsty blades.

"Stop!" screamed one of the men who had been hurt. "Wait! Don't settle them right off. I want them to pay for this. I want the English pigs to die slowly. Tie them up. Let us take them out and put them on the reef. The tide will rise in an hour—and then the sharks will come for them. That will teach them, the dogs!"

(Jack and Ned couldn't be in a worse corner. Just think of it—tied to a coral reef and left to the mercy of the tide and the sharks! But while there's life there's hope. If any of you chaps miss next week's trenchant instalment of this popular story you'll feel like kicking yourselves afterwards.)

THE SIEGE IN THE CLOUDS!

(Continued from page 38.)

"Heaven forbid!" murmured Mr. Manners between his teeth. "But we must not anticipate disaster. Are the flares ready? Let them be prepared on the instant!"

Men were running everywhere, awaiting the word. And everybody on that crag knew that it was necessary for them to keep strictly to the extreme edges. There had to be a clear space for the aeroplane.

And even now there was no certainty that the great machine could be successfully landed. Fortunately the wind was still fairly strong, and by coming down against it there was a good chance of success.

"Look!" shouted Fullwood suddenly. "Look, you chaps! She's up! They've got her into the air!"

"Where—where?" yelled Nipper. "I can't see her. I can't—"

"There—just beneath those two stars!" said Fullwood, pointing.

"Yes, yes!" cried Mary Summers. "There she is! I can see her now!"

"They've done it, then!" breathed Travers.

Boom!

Intermingled with the purring of the aeroplane came the sharp explosion of guns. Once, twice, three times. Anti-aircraft guns. The dazzling blaze of the exploding shells could be seen in the sky. The Ameer's soldiers had not been long in getting to work. They were trying to shoot the great machine down.

Not that there was much possibility of success. For there was no time for them to take careful aim, and the night was very dark. Moreover, the machine was skimming at full speed over the city, rising higher and higher every minute.

The excitement on the roof-garden was well-nigh uncontrollable as the great monoplane came roaring past the crag itself. She was still several hundred feet down, but she was flying perfectly and zooming upwards in a purposeful way.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Mr. Manners. "She hasn't been hit, and she's apparently as airworthy as ever!"

If the boys and girls were excited, so were all those members of the palace domestic staff. Liberty for them was something they had never dreamed of. They had been told often enough that they would never leave the crag alive. And here was a chance of rescue—of liberty!

Round came the great 'plane, and once more she flew past the crag. This time she was on a higher level, nearly as high up as the palace. And Mr. Manners gave orders for all the flares to be lit.

"Once more round and she'll do it!" said Nipper breathlessly.

From every point of the levelled roof the flares sprang into life.

Cheer after cheer rang out when the glittering monoplane soared over the roof, not twenty feet above the excited, shouting prisoners.

Round she came again, and then dramatically her engines were shut off. She was head to wind, dropping, dropping.

"Look out!" panted Handforth.

Never in their lives had they seen such a perfect landing.

When the machine was only fifteen feet over the edge of the roof her wheels touched bumped once or twice, settled down, and ran along the rest of the roof. Her offside wheel caught in some soft ground, and she swung round, her wing-tips dipping. Then abruptly she stopped.

She was landed—fairly and squarely in the centre of the roof-garden.

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, they've done the trick!"

"Guv'nor—guv'nor!" shouted Nipper frantically.

The door of the machine opened and Nelson Lee appeared. In a second he was on the ground, and another cheer of absolute joy went up when Lord Dorrimore was seen. They had both returned, and their task was accomplished.

The way to liberty was theirs.

Their own machine, the faithful Wanderer of the Skies, was ready. They could take off from this roof-garden and fly away to that liberty which they had almost looked upon as lost for ever.

Yet if the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls had only known it, the most exciting period of their adventure had not yet begun.

THE END.

(With the Wanderer of the Skies in their possession once more it looks as if the St. Frank's holiday adventurers are going to make things hum. And they do! Don't miss "The Tyrant of Rishnir!" the next story in this grand series. Out next Wednesday.)



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