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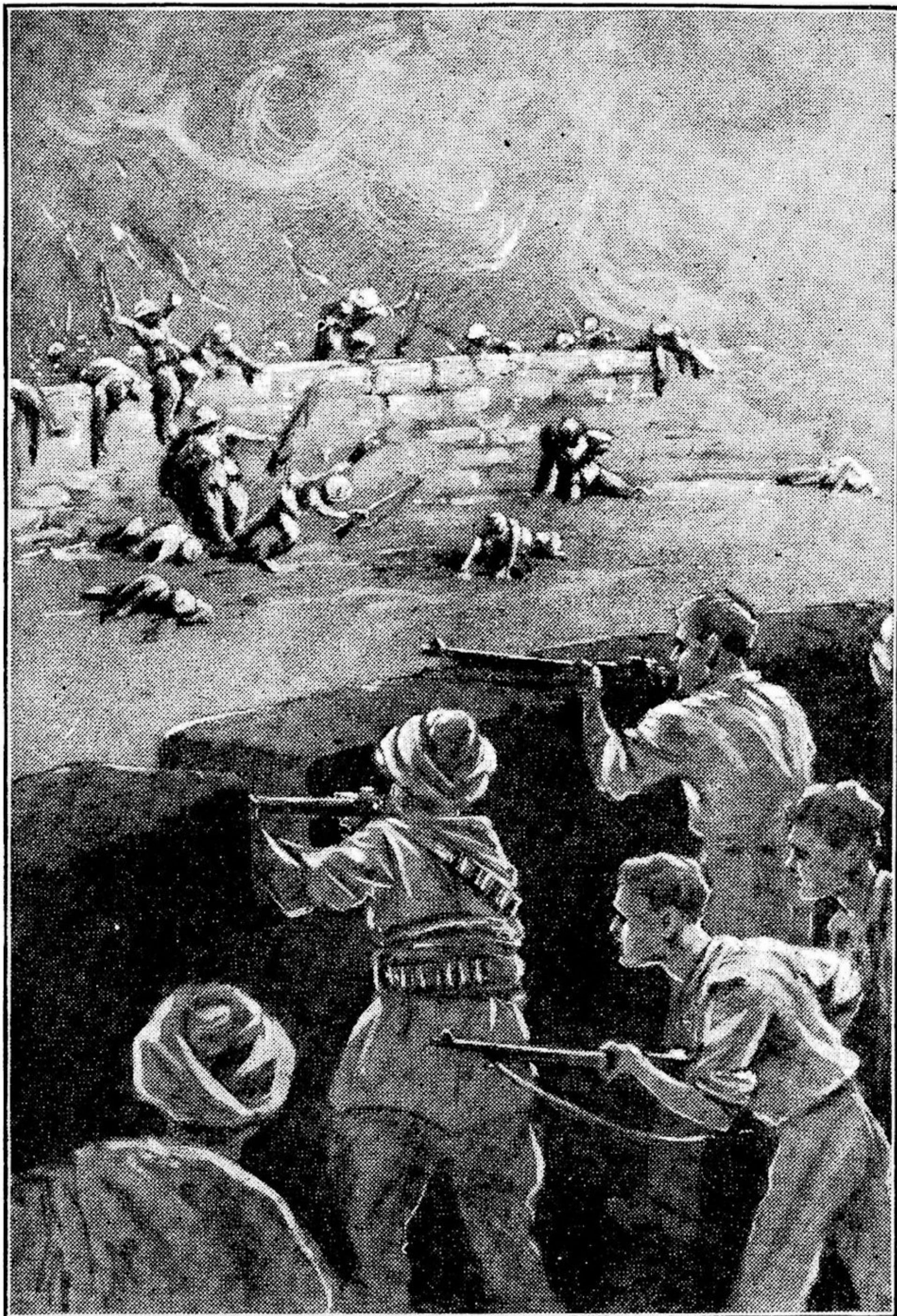
THE TYRANT OF RISHNIR!

A dramatic incident from the enthralling long complete adventure story, featuring the Chums of St. Frank's in India, inside.

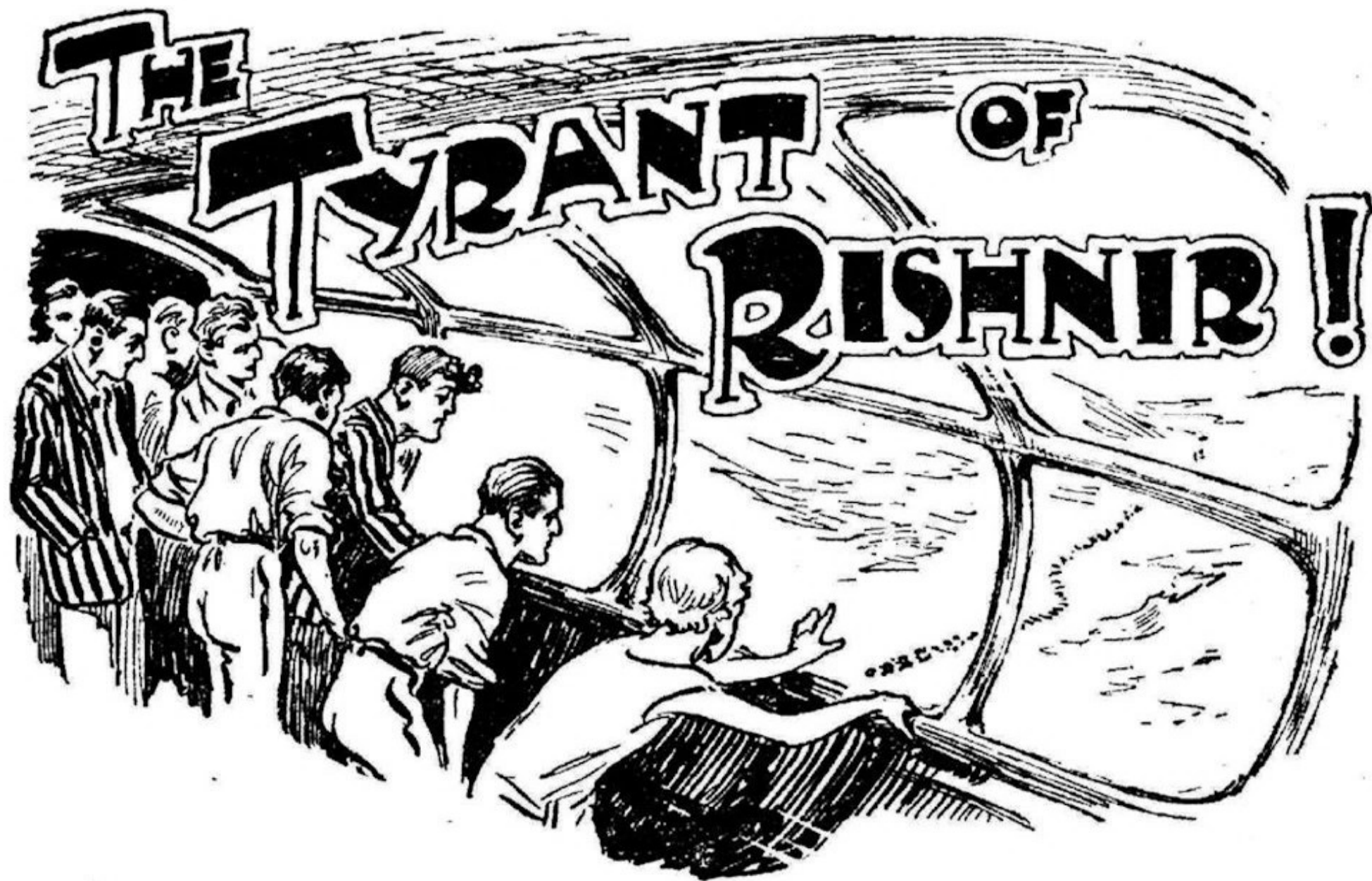
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OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

September 1st, 1928.



Bang ! Fizz ! Bang ! Tiny trails of fire shot towards the outer walls of the fortress, and in the burst of dazzling fire, a number of flares split the darkness, lighting up the Ameer's soldiers. The defenders were firing steadily, and one after another the Ameer's men dropped in their mad rush towards the walls of the fortress.

Besieged in a Fortress !Exciting Adventures in Far-off India !

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

A party of St. Frank's juniors against the ruthless might of the Ameer of Rishnir ! What chance do these plucky juniors stand of ever seeing St. Frank's again alive ?

CHAPTER 1.

The Way to Liberty !

EXCITEMENT was at fever pitch on the famous Idar Crag, of Rishnir. The darkness of the night was split by the roaring flares that towered up from many quarters. Far, far below, the city of Idar was awakening into a feverish activity. Here, in this remote corner of India, an extraordinary drama was being enacted.

A fairly large group of St. Frank's juniors, and a smaller group of Moor View schoolgirls, were standing in the full light of the flares, excited and flushed. Nelson Lee, the famous schoolmaster-detective, was holding an earnest conversation with Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Hobart Manners.

"There's only one chance for us!" Nelson Lee was saying. "If we are to get away from this hateful captivity, we must act instantly. Dawn is on the point of breaking, and we cannot delay."

Boom!

The deep, resonant crash of a gun sounded from some distance, and a second later a shell came screaming over the top of the gigantic crag. It exploded harmlessly, quite a long distance away.

"We're not afraid of those rotten guns!" said Lord Dorrimore contemptuously. "It'll take them hours to get the correct range; and, in any case, they're bad marksmen."

"All the same, Dorrie, a stray shell may ruin all our chances," put in Mr. Manners earnestly. "Lee is right. The sooner we are off the better."

But how could they hope to escape from this formidable prison?

The Idar Crag, famous throughout history, was all of a thousand feet high; a gigantic pencil of rock, jutting straight upwards from the ground, with sheer, smooth sides. And there, perched on the very summit, was the Ameer's white marble palace. A monument of ingenuity—a triumph of the builder's art.

Until to-night, the plight of the prisoners had been well-nigh hopeless. Here they were, in the heart of the city, surrounded by thousands of the Ameer's soldiers. It was true that they had seized the palace, and that they had withstood the siege. In spite of all the Ameer's efforts, his prisoners had defied him.

But now it was different.

For there, standing in the centre of the great roof-garden of the palace, was an enormous metal monoplane; a glittering monster, fitted with cabins, sleeping accommodation, dining saloons, and every modern luxury.

She had been designed by Mr. Manners, and was the property of Lord Dorrimore. In it, the party had come out from England, their original intention being to rescue young Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, of the St. Frank's Remove.

But since arriving in India they had learned that Hussi Kahn was safely in Kurpana—his own country.

Making a forced landing in Rishnir, the party had fallen into the hands of Ali Rajen, the Ameer—the tyrant of Rishnir.

So they had abandoned their machine—there had been nothing else for it, since they were prisoners. They had been brought to the top of this crag, and the Ameer had played with them, very much as a cat will play with a mouse.

But in his egotism he had under-rated their indomitable spirit.

For many years, the Ameer had been collecting British subjects—butlers, gardeners, cooks, housemaids. His entire palace had been staffed by men and women of British blood. For it had been the Ameer's delight to have these hated Britishers in his power.

Once on that crag, they were lost to the world for ever.

Nobody had ever been known to escape, although many had committed suicide by flinging themselves to the ground, far, far beneath.

It was the Ameer's way of showing his contempt for the British. All his menials, his servants, were British. He contended that men and women of his own blood were too good to act in the capacity of household servants.

And he had made the mistake of placing Nelson Lee and his party in the same category. He had brought them to the palace, fully intending that they should never see the outside world again. They were his prisoners—to be dealt with as he thought fit. And he had made no secret of the fact that

he meant to kill them, one and all, after he had grown tired of his amusing game.

Then they had sprung a dramatic surprise.

The palace had been seized, and the great lift which communicated with the ground had been destroyed. None of the Ameer's soldiers had been able to reach this desperate garrison, and so, for quite a number of days, the prisoners had held the crag.

And they had been galled by the sight of the Wanderer of the Skies—their own aeroplane—flying over Idar. The Ameer's soldiers and mechanics had repaired the damage, and they had made the machine airworthy once more. And the Ameer had flaunted the great monoplane before his captives.

That, again, had been another mistake.

For Nelson Lee, with rare ingenuity, had devised a couple of parachutes, and he and Dorrie had floated down from the crag in the blackness of the night. It had been a comparatively easy task for them to seize the Wanderer, to start her up, and to fly off in her. Now they had succeeded in effecting a landing on the roof-garden—where all the trees had been levelled, the flower-beds destroyed, and everything else sacrificed, in order to make this "landing-ground" safe.

Their enforced idleness had been rendered all the more exasperating because they knew that the Ameer's armies had been advancing into Kurpana—with the intention of invading that peaceful province and conquering it. For it was Ali Rajen's ambition to be monarch of both Rishnir and Kurpana, and to thenceforward extend his activities deeper and deeper into India. He wanted to become so powerful that he could even defy the might of the British Government.

But the St. Frank's party had given him more than one surprise.

This, of course, was the biggest of all. They had seized the aeroplane, and there was more than a chance that they would gain their liberty. And not only that, they would carry with them the Maharajah of Kurpana, and his heir, Goolah Kahn. For these two unfortunates had been prisoners on the crag, and they had been rescued, owing to the wit and skill of Nipper, the popular captain of the Remove.

That was the situation—and it was fraught with immense possibilities.



CHAPTER 2

The Ameer's Vow!

THE Ameer of Rishnir was like a man demented.

For days he had been well-nigh impossible to approach; officers who had offended him, and men who had been guilty of purely imaginary faults, had been put to death.

The citizens of Idar were in terror. They had seen many executions during the past week! The Ameer was in a greater rage than he had ever been before, and his very approach aroused terror.

Since he had been defied—since he had been shut out from his own palace by these daring Britishers—he had been living in the magnificent house of his chancellor. This unhappy individual, who had dared to protest that his dwelling was too humble and insignificant, had been ruthlessly slain.

During these dramatic days, the Ameer had executed dozens of his most valuable advisers in his insensate rage. And had he but known it a growing feeling of bitterness and hatred was arising amongst his subjects. He had always been a tyrant, he had always spread terror; but now he was going beyond the limits.

Not that there was any possibility of a revolt.

The people of Rishnir were too accustomed to this tyrant—too down-trodden to arise.

From his new headquarters, the Ameer had organised his operations against the prisoners on the crag. He had tried poison gas; he had sent his fighting aeroplanes with machine-guns; he had done everything possible. And all of no avail. The prisoners had continued to hold the palace against all attacks.

And after the first few days the notorious Ali Rajen had calmed down; he had realised the folly of his rage. There was no hurry, he told himself. These defiant Britishers were imprisoned on the top of that crag; they would never be able to get free. Therefore, it was only a waiting game. Sooner or later he, the Ameer, would win.

In the meantime, he knew that his strongest force was on the march towards Kurpana. His plans were maturing rapidly. The only set-back had been caused by these insolent Britishers who had so defied him; and they, he was convinced, must inevitably fall into his hands again before long—and then he would have his fiendish revenge.

Thus this latest development had taken him off his guard.

In the middle of the night he was awakened by gunfire. Then his officers came, and told him that the great metal aeroplane had been seized and stolen. It was an incredible thing.

But an explanation was soon forthcoming; for a report came in telling of the two parachutes that had been found abandoned on the aerodrome. Then the Ameer knew how this thing had been done.

Once again these Britishers had beaten him!

Two of them had dropped down from the crag, and they had recaptured their own machine. Now it was up there, on the roof-garden, and there would be no doubt that the entire party was preparing to make off.

In that hour the Ameer became utterly maddened again.

He gave orders one minute, and countermanded them the next. He had his officers

at sixes and sevens. And he made a great vow, swearing that he would demolish his own palace, destroying it utterly, sooner than let these enemies escape.

He gave orders for his fighting planes to take to the air; he gave instructions that every piece of artillery should be trained upon the palace. And he was like a maniac in his fury because these things could not be accomplished on the instant.

It took time to prepare the fighting planes for the air; it took time to train the guns, and to man them.

Moreover, there were not many guns available. All his finest field-pieces had gone off towards Kurpana. Idar was left with a few of the old-fashioned weapons, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to operate these so that their shells burst a thousand feet into the air.

And while these frenzied activities were afoot, the party at the crag top was preparing to leave.

Hitherto, the Ameer had refrained from shelling that gleaming marble palace. It had cost him hundreds of thousands of pounds; it was his pride. For centuries there had been a palace on the crag, but the previous edifices had been mere huts compared to the magnificent palace that he had had built.

But the Ameer cared nothing for marble now. If the palace was utterly wrecked he would not care. His one and only thought was to destroy these determined Britishers. For he knew well enough that if they escaped he would be ruined.

He had long since sent out false reports, to the effect that the Wanderer of the Skies had crashed in some remote territory. He had allowed the world to believe that every soul on board had perished.

What if they escaped?

This was the thought that maddened the Ameer. If that giant aeroplane got off, and flew into Kurpana, or any other territory, the news would be flashed across the world that the first report had been false. The world would know that he, the Ameer, had captured these British subjects, and had threatened their lives.

There could only be one result. The British authorities would take drastic action. An army would be sent into Rishnir—a relentless, determined army—and he, the Ameer, would be dethroned, robbed of his powers.

Later on, after his armies had grown, he would be able to defy the British. But he could not defy them now—and he knew it. It would mean disaster, utter and complete, if that aeroplane flew away!

So his entire resources were thrown into this struggle. His wonderful palace had become of no importance.

So it came about that guns were trained upon that noble building; aeroplanes were sent out with bombs and machine-guns. At all costs, these defiant prisoners must be subdued!

The situation was critical—not only for the Ameer, but for the St. Frank's party. The

aeroplane was up there on the crag. But, as yet, the escape had not been made.

There were difficulties to contend with—many, many difficulties. And the greatest problem of all was a question of accommodation. Only a certain number of the exiles could be taken off the crag.

What of the others?

CHAPTER 3

The Decision!



BOOM!

The sound of guns was becoming louder. They were firing more frequently.

Happily, no shell had actually hit the palace yet, and, in the excitement of the moment, nobody seemed to be aware of the danger.

It was Nelson Lee who made the first decisive move.

He faced them all—the St. Frank's fellows, the Moor View girls, Lord Dorrimore, Mr. Manners, and all those men and women of the palace staff.

"Listen to me!" he shouted earnestly. "There is something that you must know—and there is something that we must decide."

"Hurrah!"

"We've got the machine, sir—and we can fly off to liberty!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Liberty, yes!" agreed Nelson Lee. "Liberty for some of us—but not for all!"

There was a silence.

"That is the point that you must realise at once, before we can make any move!" continued Lee grimly. "As you all know, his Highness, the Maharajah of Kurpana, is with us; so, also, is Goolah Kahn, the heir to the Kurpana throne. These two unfortunate people must have a place in the aeroplane."

"Yes, rather, sir!"

"They come first!"

"Absolutely!"

"The original party which flew out in the Wanderer numbered nearly thirty souls!" said Nelson Lee. "But I have been having a discussion with Mr. Manners, and it was he who designed this wonderful plane. He has told me that she might carry, at a pinch, at most another thirty individuals—sixty, all told."

"Sixty!" muttered Handforth, as he looked at the great crowd. "By George! Then—then we shan't all be able to go!"

"Good gad!" said Archie Glenthorne. "That's pretty frightful, laddies! I mean to say, poisonous, and so forth!"

Smith, the wizened valet—the man who had made himself so useful since the St. Frank's party had arrived—now stepped forward from amongst the members of the palace staff.

"There's one thing I'd like to say, gents!" he exclaimed. "All these young gents and young ladies must go in the plane. They came in it, and it's only right that they should be considered first."

"You're right, Smith!"

"The youngsters first!"

There were many murmurs of assent from the other palace workers.

"I am glad to hear you say that," exclaimed Nelson Lee quietly. "Therefore, we can reckon that thirty places in the aeroplane are already taken. There is room for still another thirty—although I would remind you that the machine will be heavily overloaded."

"That does not matter!" said Mr. Manners. "This is a case of life and death, and we must be ready to take risks."

"Hurrah!"

"But thirty others will still leave a good few more," continued Nelson Lee. "But we must face the facts. We have only this one machine, and we cannot do impossibilities—"

"It's easily settled, sir!" interrupted Smith. "There are thirty-four women-folk belonging to the palace staff, and I reckon that they have the first claim. Let them go off in the machine. We men will stay behind."

"By glory!" said Lord Dorrimore. "Spoken like a Britisher!"

"Good old Smith!"

"I'm ready to stay behind, too," went on Dorrie. "If there's any question—"

"No, Dorrie—you must come!" interrupted Lee. "You are an expert pilot, and we cannot spare you."

"Why can't we stay behind, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly. "We don't mind taking the risk. Blow the rotten Ameer! He can't do us any harm—"

But Handforth was not allowed to proceed. In fact, the discussion was over. The thing was settled.

The entire St. Frank's party was to fly off in the aeroplane, and thirty odd women-folk were to go, too. Only the men of the palace would remain on the crag. And they, brave fellows, were resigned.

They felt in their hearts that there would be no hope of rescue for them. For the Ameer would take a terrible revenge after the machine had gone—always providing that it got safely away.

But what other solution was there to the problem?

The women came first. And this was as it should be.

Boom! Boom!

The guns were becoming more dangerous. Two shells at least had struck a portion of the palace, and a certain amount of minor damage had been done.

But it was difficult for the gunners to make a direct hit on the aeroplane. Nelson Lee knew this, and he was not in any particular anxiety regarding the safety of the machine. Yet it was necessary that a start should be made quickly.

"You must not give up hope!" he said to the assembled men. "It is splendid of you to volunteer to remain, and to continue to defy the Ameer. But you may be sure that we shall fly the aeroplane back at the first moment, so that you may be taken off."

"We'll wait for you, sir—confidently!" said Smith.

"My plan is to fly straight into Kurpana," continued Nelson Lee. "As soon as the safety zone is reached, the party will be landed, and then I shall fly back. I may not arrive until late in the day—perhaps not until evening. If you can possibly hold out, do so."

"Leave it to us, sir!" said one of the other men. "You've taught us how to defy this brute. We've regained our spirit; we're not his rotten slaves any longer."

There was much enthusiasm. Even the men who were to remain behind seemed excited and animated. They were in no fear.

And then commenced the activity. Irene & Co., and all the St. Frank's fellows, were ordered into the Wanderer of the Skies. They piled in, and after them came all the women-folk of the palace.

By the time they were all aboard, the great monoplane was heavily loaded. The saloon was packed; the cabins were filled; even the little passages were crowded. In the control-room, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, and Mr. Manners, were at their posts. The maharajah and his son were aboard, too. Cheer after cheer rang out from the assembled men.

It was an impressive scene, with flares lighting up the Indian sky, and with the scream of shells ringing in the ears of those watchers.

It was Lord Dorrimore who sat at the controls; he was the most daring pilot, perhaps. Lee was sound and steady, but Dorrie was a man who did not hesitate to take big chances.

And here was an occasion when risks were necessary.



CHAPTER 4

The Start!

NELSON LEE and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners, as they prepared for the take-off, knew that the next few minutes would be critical.

The Wanderer, in spite of her great size, in spite of her proven airworthiness, was loaded far beyond her normal capacity. If she had been taking off from the ground, she would have needed an enormously long run—and even then there could be no guarantee that she would rise.

Here, on the crag top, it was different.

They were a thousand feet in the air, and this gave them an advantage. Moreover, the wind was fairly strong, and, by taking off

against it, there would be a better chance of success. But there was no sense in hesitation. The longer they delayed, the greater the risks.

In any case, to remain was certain death. To go was to risk death. To take the risk, therefore, was the only course. There was no alternative.

Crash!

A shell hit the marble parapet of the palace roof, some little distance from the spot where the aeroplane was standing. The air became filled with flying splinters, and there were one or two loud pings as some of these splinters struck the plane.

"It's getting hot!" remarked Dorrie. "Everythin' ready?"

"Yes!" said Mr. Manners. "Everybody is aboard, and the doors are sealed. I pray to Heaven that we shall succeed!"

"Cheer up!" said his lordship. "We've won the game so far, and we're not dead yet!"

The St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls were in the main saloon, packed closely. Some of them were near the windows, and they were able to look out upon that dramatic scene. They could see the flares, and the figures of the men, as they stood well clear of the Wanderer. In the sky, were the first streaks of dawn.

"We're off!" shouted Handforth suddenly.

"Hurrah!"

"Hold tight, everybody!" warned Nipper. "When we go over the edge, we shall drop sheer for a bit. Hold on to everything that's near you!"

Suddenly, the great engines of the machine had opened right out. The saloon vibrated with the terrific power. Now the boys and girls at the windows could see that the machine was moving—going faster and faster over the big roof.

It was touch and go!

The distance was comparatively short, and at the end an abyss! The parapet had been demolished, so that the aeroplane would have a clear course right over the edge.

As they were on the point of going over, Nipper caught sight of something black and wicked-looking darting through the sky—diving towards them. He knew, in a moment, that it was one of the Ameer's fighting aeroplanes. Nipper saw, too, a sudden spurt of flame. The machine was using its machine-guns.

But at that fateful moment the Wanderer of the Skies shot over the edge of the crag.

Just for a second she seemed to be flying on an even keel. Then her nose dropped. She went down—down—

Everybody in that great 'plane believed that the end had come. She seemed to be out of control. She dropped like a stone, her engines still roaring at full power, the wind shrieking past the planes, and through the stays of the under-carriage. But, by this very drop, the Wanderer had escaped the menace of that fighter, with its machine-gun.

Even Lord Dorrimore, optimist though he was, had an impression that all his skill would

be useless. The Wanderer was too heavily loaded! There was not sufficient air space! Before she could be brought on to a level keel, she would hit the ground, and—

Down—down!

For the passengers, there was no time to think; there was no panic or fright. Everything was happening so quickly. They only knew that they were dropping sheer, and they expected, every second, to be dashed to death.

Dorrie, at the control-wheel, was grim, but cool. He knew that they were diving, and that control was practically gone. But he did not lose his head.

The great 'plane swung round abruptly, as Dorrie shifted the controls. She zoomed over, banking so steeply that she almost went over on to her back. She staggered, recovered an even keel, and then zoomed upwards!

"It's all right!" yelled his lordship cheerily. "We've done it, you fellows!"

"Thank Heaven!" panted Mr. Manners. "I—I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought!" shouted Dorrie. "This machine of yours is a better proposition than you believed, Manners. Gad! She's marvellous!"

They were over Idar now—not two hundred feet above the housetops.

The Wanderer had dropped sheer for six or seven hundred feet, and then, at the last moment, control had been regained. After a few seconds she was flying perfectly, skimming over the rooftops, but rising—gradually slowly rising.

"Hurrah!"

It was a cheer in the saloon. The boys and girls were madly excited.

"We've done it, you chaps!" panted Handforth, with glistening eyes. "Look! We're only just over the tops of the houses! But we're flying properly now! We're not dropping!"

"I was sure we'd do it!" said Irene breathlessly. "Oh, isn't it splendid? We've got away from that crag! And now we're flying to liberty!"

"Absolutely, old girl!" said Archie, who was jammed between two or three fellows, a couple of feet away. "Good gad! Liberty, what? I trust it won't be long before we arrive at the good old destination."

"I don't care if it takes a day!" said Fullwood happily. "We're a bit uncomfortable in here, but what does it matter? We're flying away from Idar—clear of the rotten Ameer! And the old Wanderer has done the trick for us!"

"Hurrah!"

"And as soon as we get back to civilisation we can send telegrams to our people!" said Reggie Pitt gladly. "My only sainted aunt! Won't there be a sensation when the news leaks out? Everybody has thought us dead until now!"

They all talked, and, for the most part, their conversation was disjointed and erratic. They hardly knew what they were saying—and they certainly did not care.

But the boys and girls were rather premature, perhaps.

Having successfully started on the trip from the crag, they believed that the worst was over. But they had overlooked the Ameer's fighting 'planes! Even now, half a dozen of these hornet-like machines were in the air, in chase of the Wanderer. And their purpose was a deadly one!



CHAPTER 5

The Fight in the Air!



It was lighter than any of the adventurers had thought.

Owing to the flares on the crag top, they had believed that the night was still dark. But now that they had left the crag far behind they were aware of the fact that the dawn had definitely broken. They were flying through a grey, subdued light, and it was growing stronger every moment.

Furthermore, they were enabled to see much. And among the things they saw were the six deadly fighting 'planes that were in chase of them.

At the moment, Nelson Lee was the only one who saw them.

He had gone up into the upper part of the machine. He was on the promenade deck—that railed enclosure on the top of the main wing, and entirely covered by a dome of unsplinterable glass—and from this point of vantage Nelson Lee could obtain a clear view of the upper air.

He had a telephone outfit affixed to his head—a speaker near his mouth, and ear-phones clapped to his ears. Lord Dorrimore, down in the control-room, had a similar apparatus.

"Can you hear me, Dorrie?" asked Lee, as soon as he had fixed the outfit.

"Yes, old man," came Dorrie's voice. "Everything all right?"

"So far—but be ready to obey any instructions that I might 'phone through."

"I'm ready now," said Dorrie. "Shall I keep on the same course?"

"Yes—straight ahead!"

They left Idar behind, and were now flying over the open country. But, owing to the enormous load, the machine was still only five or six hundred feet from the ground. She was rising steadily, however, and there was no cause for anxiety.

Lord Dorrimore, who was a reckless beggar, was inclined to zoom upwards, just to see exactly what the machine would do. But he refrained. He resisted the temptation. He knew that he had a precious load aboard, and he took no rash chances. By zooming up suddenly, there was a possibility of the machine stalling, and then diving to destruction owing to the lack of air space.

Yet the possibility was very slim, since Mr. Manners had repeatedly proved that the Wanderer was proof against any of those

Nelson Lee looked up at the frowning fortress above and waved his handkerchief steadily at the figure looking out from one of the slit-like windows. "Great Scott!" he gasped suddenly. "Old Hussi's here, then—in this isolated fortress!"



fatal tricks. Still, this was no time to experiment.

Some of the juniors had wondered why they were not allowed to go up on the promenade deck, for it was quite large, and would have accommodated nearly all of them in comfort. But Lee had a definite object in packing everybody inside the machine.

He knew that the fighting 'planes were about, and that they were equipped with machine-guns; and that glass dome, although unsplinterable, was not proof against machine-gun bullets. A sudden hail of lead from above, and every occupant of the enclosed decks would be riddled.

Later, supposing that the machine got safely away from the pursuers, it would be easy enough to make new arrangements.

But, for the moment, the position was still critical. The passengers did not quite realise this, and they were already rejoicing over their triumph. They did not realise that the greatest danger of all was yet to come.

Nelson Lee, gazing through that glass dome, was by no means gratified. He could see the crag in the distance, rising sheer from the city; he could see the dying flares on its summit. And there were no longer any puffs of smoke from the shells. The Wanderer had escaped, so there was no further reason for shell fire. The Ameer had evidently abandoned those tactics. Insane with rage though he was, he saw no reason for deliberately demolishing his own palace now that most of the prisoners had gone.

The fighting 'planes were now entrusted with the work of destruction. It was for them to bring the Wanderer down, a crash-

ing wreck, so that all her occupants would be killed.

And, surely, the task did not seem so difficult! There were six of these 'planes, and they were of the very latest design—deadly little machines which could shoot upwards vertically, dive like stones, twirl and twist; and they all had machine-guns of the deadliest pattern.

Nelson Lee could see four of them, now. They were far overhead, flying some little distance apart, and evidently awaiting their chance. They seemed to be in no particular hurry. Perhaps they were waiting for the light to grow stronger.

"See if you can get higher, Dorrie," said Lee, through the mouthpiece. "It's worth taking a risk. Push her all you can. We must have altitude."

"Right you are!" came Dorrie's voice. "Are those fighters anywhere about?"

"They're waiting to attack!"

"Good egg!" said Dorrie. "We'll show them something!"

His lordship was irrepressible. He seemed to enjoy the prospect of a fight. But Nelson Lee was not quite so rash. He knew that if those machine-guns fired into the Wanderer's propellers, the great 'plane would be crippled. It wasn't even necessary to destroy her in the air. Once she was crippled, she would be forced to land, and that would be fatal enough. For, underneath, the ground was rocky and impossible. No machine could hope to make a safe landing.

Lord Dorrimore was amazed a few moments later.

Taking Nelson Lee at his word, he sent the Wanderer zooming upwards like a rocket. She answered far more quickly than he would have believed possible. In spite of her great load, she was still handy in the air—still quick and nippy.

"Gad!" said Dorrie. "She's a wonder!"

The enormous machine answered with incredulous readiness. Up she went—up, up! Then she banked round, steeply, sharply, and rose at another acute angle. Dorrie was putting her through a few tests, so that he would be able to know exactly how far he could go, if any danger arose.

"Steady—steady!" said Mr. Manners, who was standing by the control seat.

"It's all right!" shouted his lordship. "We needn't be afraid of those fighting 'planes. I'm talking to Manners," he added, in explanation to Nelson Lee. "How's everything up there, old man? Are those blighters still hanging on our tail?"

"No, they're getting ahead," replied Lee. "They're on a much higher level, and they are several miles in advance. I don't quite like it. I think they mean to turn and then dive at us!"

"That *will* be exciting!" said Dorrie cheerfully.

A moment later he gave a little chirrup.

"Good!" he said. "I see the beggars myself now. There they are—like little specks in the grey sky. Can you spot 'em, Manners?"

Mr. Manners was gazing upwards through the glass shield of the navigating room.

"Yes," he muttered. "They mean mischief, Dorrie!"

"Of course they do!" agreed his lordship. "They're askin' for trouble, and, you can take it from me, we'll give them more than they need!"

CHAPTER 6

Dorrie's Daring!



NELSON LEE pursed his lips tightly as he looked in the rear of the Wanderer. There, coming along menacingly, were the other two pursuing 'planes. They were on a lower level, and mounting steadily. Their object, it seemed, was to take the great 'plane in the rear.

The whole thing was a carefully planned attack. The six enemy machines would probably sweep at once, their object being to send the Wanderer to destruction in one bewildering attack.

The light was now much stronger, and the Wanderer was flying along at a height of twelve hundred feet. Dorrie felt much safer here. He had air-room. If necessity arose, he would be able to dive, zoom, and perform other tricky manœuvres.

"Well, if they're goin' to start on us, why don't they get busy?" he asked after a while. "What are the beggars doin'?"

"Nothing, at the moment," replied Nelson Lee. "They're taking their time, Dorrie. They know there's no hurry. It would have been much better if they had attacked at random. I don't like the look of this concentrated move."

The boys and girls knew nothing of what was happening. They could only see out from the side windows, and so they could obtain no view of the enemy machines. This, perhaps, was all to the good, since they became calm and less excited. It seemed to them that all the danger was over.

"Well, there's no reason why we shouldn't go up into the observation room—or the promenade deck, or whatever it's called," said Handforth. "What about it, you fellows?"

"Not until Mr. Lee gives us word," replied Nipper.

"But Mr. Lee is in the control-room!" said Handforth. "He's probably forgotten that we're all jammed in here——"

"It's not like the gov'nor to forget things," put in Nipper. "We've had orders to stay here—and we'll stay. What do the rest of you fellows and girls say?"

"Yes, of course!" they chorused.

"I knew it!" said Handforth bitterly. "I've only got to suggest something, and everybody is against me!"

There were some chuckles, and, at that moment Tommy Watson, at one of the windows, gave an excited shout.

"Hallo!" he sang out. "There's an acroplane behind us, and coming along at a terrific speed! A red thing—looks no bigger than a dragon-fly!"

Nipper nodded.

"That's why we're still kept in here!" he said. "The Ameer's 'planes are in chase of us. They mean to shoot us down, if they can!"

"Some hopes!" said Travers lightly.

"Well, we're not out of the wood yet," remarked Reggie Pitt. "There's some trouble brewing, by all appearances!"

"A good old spot of bother, what?" asked Archie. "Oh, well, laddie, we've got nothing to grumble at. I mean to say, considering everything, and this, that, and the other, we've done dashed well!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Archie—that's the spirit!"

"Never say die!" grinned Handforth. "And, as for these fighting 'planes, we'll show them a clean pair of heels! The Wanderer is the fastest machine in the world!"

But in this Edward Oswald was wrong. The Wanderer was certainly fast, and, with a normal load, she could outdistance the majority of other aeroplanes.

But these fighters of the Ameer's were the very latest speed machines. They were capable of incredible speeds; and, just at this particular moment, they were going all out.

"Go easy now, Dorrie!" warned Nelson Lee, through the 'phone. "There are two

of the beggars on our tail—and they're coming upwards, with the idea, I presume, of taking us from underneath!"

"Right!" rapped out Lord Dorrimore.

But Mr. Manners knew well enough that Dorrie was scarcely giving a thought to the two machines at the rear. For there was a grim menace from ahead, and above.

Like bullets out of the sky, the four other machines were shooting downwards right on top of the Wanderer. They were in a straight line, the two outer 'planes converging somewhat as they came down to the attack.

And then, in that second, Dorrie did something that was purely reckless and foolhardy. But he couldn't help himself—and, unquestionably, the need for something drastic was very acute.

He believed that there would be no escape for the Wanderer unless something exceptionally daring was done. And there was no time for hesitation. It was a matter of split seconds.

In another instant, the four 'planes would roar overhead, and their machine-guns were already spitting bullets and fire. This concentrated attack could not fail to bring disaster.

"Dorrie!" shouted Mr. Manners, in horror.

For his lordship had abruptly pulled up the elevator control to its fullest extent. It seemed a mad move. For the Wanderer, answering on the instant, zoomed upwards like a rocket. She went up—to meet those tiny, wasp-like 'planes, head on!

It was all over in a flash.

And in the infinitesimal moment, Dorrie had seen that there was no danger of the enemy 'planes striking the Wanderer in the centre, where her engines and propellers were situated.

In a word, it was a piece of perfect judgment.

Before the pilots of those attacking machines could be aware of the danger, the thing happened. The great metal monoplane shot upwards, and met the two inner 'planes full tilt.

Crash! Crash!

The flimsy fighters struck the enormous metal plane of the Wanderer at the extreme wing-tips. They simply splintered to atoms and disintegrated like matchwood.

At the same second, a double stream of bullets came roaring and tearing through the glass dome of the observation-room. Nelson Lee could hear the deadly hail on the metal floor. But, miraculously enough, he was not in the exact line of fire.

The Wanderer had staggered, shivering from stem to stern, and now she dropped, nose-diving in consequence of that collision. Her speed had been checked, and there was a possibility, even now, that she was crippled to such an extent that she would dive to destruction.

What actually happened was astounding.

For as she dropped she fell upon one of the other fighting 'planes that had been

coming up from the rear. The shock was hardly felt. The flimsy red fighter was twisted over, out of control, and she dropped like a stone, her wings parting from the body.

The second fighter tried to turn, and performed an extraordinary manoeuvre—only to collide full tilt with one of his remaining companions.

In that one minute—or, to be more exact, quarter-minute—five of the Amcer's precious fighting 'planes had been sent to destruction!

And the Wanderer of the Skies still flew on, damaged, but triumphant.



CHAPTER 7

Over the Mountains!

MR. HOBART MANNERS took a deep breath.

"It is incredible!" he ejaculated

hoarsely. "Dorrie! What on earth possessed you?"

"Don't know!" jerked Lord Dorrimore. "Couldn't help it. Only thing to do."

"But, man alive, you might have killed us all!"

"Those blighters would have killed us all if we hadn't smashed them up!" retorted Dorrie. "I took a chance—and I don't even know why I did it. But I was justified, wasn't I?"

"Good heavens, yes!" said Mr. Manners. "But—but I never believed that my machine would stand such a dreadful shock! Those fighters hit us head-on."

"These 'planes are of a tremendous size, and they're made of metal," replied Dorrie. "They're so thick that there are cabins and passages in the middle of them. I was pretty sure that they wouldn't crumple up."

"You did wisely Dorrie!" came Nelson Lee's voice through the telephones. "There was no time for hesitation, and you took the only course. There's only one enemy machine left now, and I don't think we need be afraid of him."

"He'll probably sheer off, scared," said his lordship.

And this proved to be the case.

The last fighting 'plane hovered about for a time, and then turned tail and vanished into the ever-lightening sky. He had had a sickener of the fight, and he probably saw no reason why he should sacrifice himself. For it was obviously impossible to prevent the Wanderer from escaping.

But a few moments later the true reason for this last 'plane's abandonment of the battle was seen.

The tail of his aeroplane was observed to part company from the rest of the machine. There could be no doubt that he had been hit, accidentally, by one of his companions. The red fighter dropped, circling, crippled. The chances were that the pilot managed to

land her safely, but it didn't matter. The menace was over.

"Poor beggars!" said Nelson Lee quietly, after he had joined Dorrie and Mr. Manners in the navigating-room. "I can't help feeling sorry for them. They were only carrying out their orders."

"But we had to destroy them, old man," said Dorrie. "It was our lives or theirs."

"I do not think there can be much doubt that they were sent into the air at a moment's notice," continued Lee. "Perhaps they were not highly-skilled pilots—and there is more than a chance that they had never had a taste of air-fighting before. Thus, they were not prepared for that daring manœuvre of yours, Dorrie."

"I think I took them rather by surprise," said his lordship.

Mr. Manners took the controls now, and Dorrie went with Nelson Lee on an important mission.

They mounted to the promenade deck, and, through the glass dome, they made careful observations of the great wing. On the left, towards the tip, there were a number of ugly dents, and in places the metal was gaping slightly where it had been torn.

On the other side there was hardly a mark—the metal being only slightly crumpled.

"Nothin' much," commented Dorrie at length. "Considerin' everythin', old man, we came off pretty lightly, eh?"

"I saw the whole thing from here!" said Nelson Lee. "Dorrie, it was terrible! I thought, for a moment, that it meant the end. Those two machines hit us at precisely the same moment. You crashed right into them, head-on."

"That was the wheeze," nodded Dorrie.

"You never saw such a thing in all your life!" continued Nelson Lee. "The machines simply shattered themselves to smithereens. They disintegrated a second after the impact, and although we checked for a moment, it was only trivial. That surely proves the advantage of these enormous 'planes? But let us go down and see how things are progressing with the boys and girls, and with the other passengers. I rather think we can give them some more comfort now."

They went down, and the St. Frank's fellows, and the girls, were delighted to learn that they could now mount to the promenade deck. There was plenty of room for them there, and their exit from the saloon meant that the other compartments of the great machine could be half-emptied. There was less crowding.

"But what happened?" asked Mary Summers, when she was under that glass dome. "Look! There are lots of holes in this glass, and the air is rushing through—"

"Machine-gun holes!" said Nipper. "Those 'planes tried to get us, but they failed. The majority of them crashed, and the danger is over."

"I can't believe it, you know," said Tommy Watson breathlessly. "It—it seems

so unreal! Only about half an hour ago we were on that crag, and—"

"Why talk about it?" asked Handforth. "We're safe now. We're flying to Sakri, the capital of Kurpana, and, once we're there, we shall be as safe as houses. There are all sorts of British residents, and a regular European quarter. Trains and telegraphs, and—and everything! We're going back to civilisation!"

It certainly seemed too good to be true.

At the moment, the Wanderer was striving for height. Her engines were going all out, and steadily she was rising. It was very necessary that she should gain height, for a big mountain range was looming in the near distance. In order to reach Sakri, this mountain range had to be crossed. The peaks rose for thousands of feet into the air, and Mr. Manners was wondering if his machine would be able to attain the necessary altitude with her great load.

There was something else, too—something that was worrying Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee. Mr. Manners, at the controls, knew nothing of this. There had been no time to tell him. But the moment was drawing near when he would have to know.

And the confidence of the boys and girls would have received a rude shock if they had only known the true position.



CHAPTER 8

Into Kurpana!

TAKE the controls, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I'd better tell Manners." "Yes," nodded his lordship. "He'll have to know."

They were back in the navigating-room, and a moment later Lord Dorrimore was in full charge. Mr. Hobart Manners, looking flushed, tired, but triumphant, joined Nelson Lee.

"I think we shall do it," he said contentedly. "She's behaving splendidly, Lee. Another two or three thousand feet, and we shall clear the mountains quite nicely."

Nelson Lee did not answer for a moment. He was looking out into the distance ahead. He was looking at the rugged country below. There was no sign of cultivation here; no towns or villages. It was all uneven, rocky scenery—hills, valleys, mountains. A long vista of wild, inhospitable country.

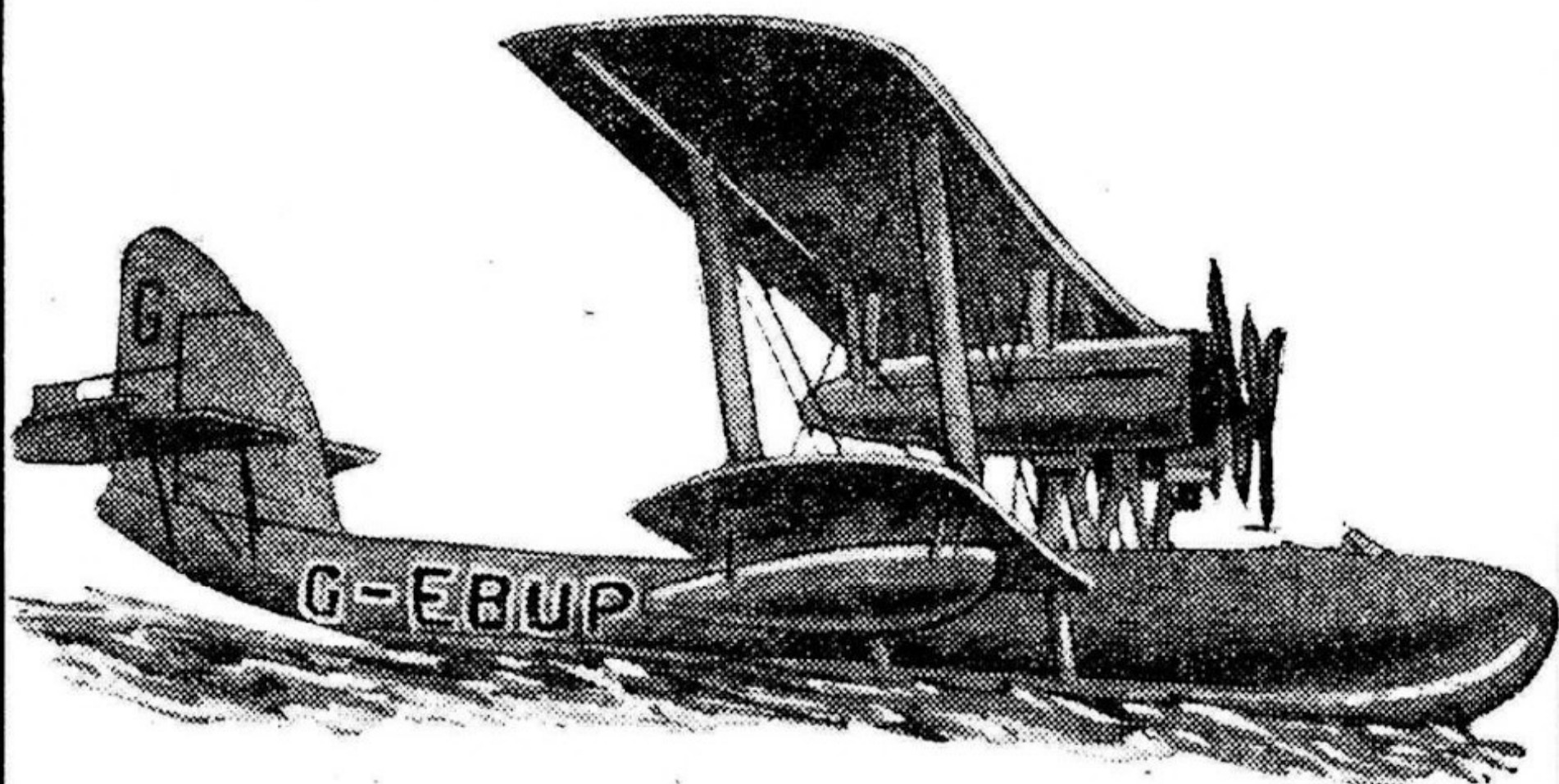
"Yes, it's pretty rough, eh?" said Mr. Manners, as he looked, too. "Pretty bad for us if we were compelled to make a forced landing. In fact, we should never do it. There's not a level patch of ground anywhere."

Nelson Lee turned, and looked at the inventor. The latter was surprised to see that the detective was looking grim.

(Continued on page 14.)

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THE TYRANT OF RISHNIR !

(Continued from page 12.)

"Manners," Lee said bluntly, "we've got to make a landing soon!"

Mr. Manners stared.

"But—but I don't understand!" he ejaculated in alarm.

"Petrol!" replied Lee briefly.

"Good gracious! You—you don't mean—"

"I do!" replied Nelson Lee. "Our supplies are totally inadequate. I didn't tell you before, because there was no need to worry you. But the fact remains that our tanks are not far from empty."

"But—but this is disastrous!" said Mr. Manners huskily. "Just as I was confident, too, that our trials were over! If I had only thought, I would have examined the gauges—"

"We were pleased that you did not do so, Manners," said Lee. "But you can go and look at them now, if you care to."

Mr. Manners did care to. Lord Dorrimore, glancing up, made a wry grimace, but he offered no comment. That grimace had been eloquent enough.

"This is appalling!" said Mr. Manners, when he rejoined Nelson Lee. "There are only a few gallons, and we are using it up at an alarming rate."

"Our engines are going all out, since it is necessary for us to climb," replied Lee. "We must get over the mountains, Manners. On the other side, we shall be in Kurpana. And that, at least, will be something to the good."

"But what about landing?" gasped Mr. Manners, staring. "We can never make a safe landing on this sort of ground, Lee! It's impossible! We came down into the jungle once, and we were lucky enough to escape. But the jungle is very different to this rocky ground. It will mean disaster!"

"It's just one darned thing after another, eh?" said Lord Dorrimore, glancing round.

They had no difficulty in speaking in the control-room, for it was more or less sound-proof. The continuous roaring of the engines could be heard, of course, but only in a subdued way. The enormous power units were situated on either side of the body, some little distance from the control-room, which jutted forward, in the very nose of the plane.

"Let us be thankful, Manners, that we have escaped from Idar," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"I am thankful—of course," said Mr. Manners. "But—but this has hit me rather hard. I did not anticipate any such shock."

"And yet we could not guarantee how much petrol the tanks would contain," said Nelson Lee. "When Lord Dorrimore and I seized the machine, we had to take her just as she was. In fact, when you take everything into consideration, we are very

lucky to have enough petrol aboard to get out of Rishnir."

"That is true."

"One of my first tasks, after landing the machine on the crag, was to find out how much petrol she had in her tanks," continued Nelson Lee. "I do not mind admitting that I was quite gratified. But I knew, at the time, that we should never be able to reach Sakri. The Kurpana capital is several hundred miles away, and even after we have crossed the mountains the country is wild and rugged for many, many miles."

"That is what I am worried about," said Mr. Manners. "If we are compelled to make a forced landing, we shall be in a dreadful fix."

"But there is no sense in worrying over these things before they arrive," replied Lee. "There can be no doubt that we shall do a lot of damage to the plane, but that does not mean to say that we shall endanger any lives, and, after all, we shall be in Kurpana. We shall be amongst friends—"

"Look!" interrupted Mr. Manners suddenly.

He was staring downwards, at the ground, far, far below. The air was very clear now, and it was possible to see for dozens of miles. A long distance away, progressing steadily towards the mountains, a snake-like thing could be seen. It was moving so slowly that it hardly seemed to progress at all. As Nelson Lee looked, he gave a start and then frowned.

"The Ameer's army!" he muttered. "H'm! It is rather remarkable that we should be flying over it in this way. They are approaching the mountains, too."

"Ready to invade Kurpana!" said Mr. Manners. "I have seen armies on the move from the air before, and I judge this one to be quite considerable in size. There are several regiments there, with transports, guns, and everything!"

The "snake-like thing" was really a long line of troops, marching steadily, slowly. They were evidently on a rough sort of road, otherwise the motor transports could not have progressed. But the road itself was invisible at this distance, particularly as the Wanderer was not immediately overhead.

"The power and the might of the Ameer are in great evidence, wherever we go," said Nelson Lee. "But there will be an enormous difference after we have landed in Kurpana. The return of the Maharajah will have a big effect among the people. They will be fired to tremendous enthusiasm, and they will offer the Ameer a stern resistance."

"But to return to our problem," said Mr. Manners. "It would be more satisfactory if we could reduce the engines to half-power. In that way, we could conserve our petrol. But, of course, it is impossible—since we must rise higher and higher."

"Not now, Manners," said Nelson Lee. "We are crossing the mountains. From now onwards, we can proceed at quarter-throttle."

This, at all events, was gratifying.

Lord Dorrimore was taking the great plane through a fairly narrow space between two of the highest peaks of the mountain range. The rocks towered up on either side, menacingly.

For ten minutes the machine flew through this great gorge, and then, after winding round somewhat, she came out into the full open again. And there, stretched before her, was the great, wild vista of rugged rock country.

In the dim distance ahead signs of vegetation could be seen, with evidences, too, of cultivation and a teeming population.

But for many miles there was nothing but rock—cruel, unfriendly gullies and ridges.

On the promenade deck the boys and girls were freshly excited.

"We're over the mountains!" said Handforth boisterously. "And that means that everything is O.K.! We're in Kurpana, and out of the Ameer's clutches!"

"And within another hour we shall be in Sakri," said Nipper cheerfully. "Sakri—the capital! Once again we shall be free—we shall be at liberty to go where we please, and to snap our fingers at the Ameer!"

It seemed too good to be true. And, unfortunately, it was!



CHAPTER 9

The Outpost Fortress!

THAT'S better!" said Mr. Manners with relief.

The thunder of the engines had dropped to a mere purring murmur. They were all throttled down until they only had sufficient power to keep the machine at an even height. It wouldn't matter, indeed, if she dropped a little, and speed was unimportant.

"You'd better keep your eyes open, both of you!" remarked Dorrie, as he half-turned and glanced at them. "If you see any likely landing-ground, give me the word. I'll be on the look-out, too."

"There is nothing—nothing!" said Mr. Manners. "A landing on these rocks would mean a complete wreck."

"We're not goin' to be wrecked," said Dorrie cheerily. "After all we've been through, Manners, you can't kid me into believin' that we're goin' to finish up with disaster."

"There is enough petrol left to carry us perhaps ten miles," said Lee steadily.

"Ten miles! And Sakri is at least a hundred miles distant."

"Not quite, I fancy—although that is a small point," said Lee. "I think, Dorrie, you had better shut the engines off altogether. We'll glide for a bit, in the hope of spotting some likely place."

The engines seemed to be spluttering, and Dorrie's attention became concentrated for a few moments. Then he shook his head.

"The starboard motors are giving up the ghost already," he said bluntly. "No more juice that side, it seems."

"Take her round a bit, Dorrie," advised Nelson Lee. "The Ameer's army, it seems, is making towards the pass in the mountains. That means that there must be a road on this side, too. If there is a road, there is a chance that we might be able to land on it."

"A pass!" said Mr. Manners, starting. "Then, surely, it must be the famous Kypur Pass."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Lee. "There are several mountain passes from Rishnir into Kurpana, and the Kypur Pass is well known. It is probably well guarded, but I fancy that the Ameer's army is of such strength that it will soon wear down any possible resistance."

"It doesn't seem much good takin' this course, old man," remarked Dorrie. "The ground is more rocky than ever over here. We can't make any landing—"

"Yes, we had better change our course," put in Mr. Manners. "This is foolhardy, Lee!"

"I think not," said Nelson Lee steadily. "As I said before, the Kypur Pass means that there is a road there. And if the Pass itself is guarded by the Kurpana soldiers, it stands to reason that there must be some local headquarters. A fortress, perhaps. We do not want to land miles and miles from humanity. It will be far better if we can reach the ground in the vicinity of a fortress, for there we can find water—food. And it is very necessary, considering that our passengers are mostly women and boys."

"Hallo!" said Dorrie suddenly. "What have we here? Good glory! I'm hanged if you're not right, Lee! Have a squint down in the north-east corner!"

Both Nelson Lee and Mr. Manners looked eagerly at the spot his lordship indicated. A jutting spur of rock had obstructed their view until now; but they had passed it, and they could see beyond.

The country was more rugged than ever—wild, mountainous, with rocks and jagged crags on every hand.

But there, perched in the midst of this wild scenery, was a remote hill station.

It was a squat building, surrounded by a dusty courtyard, apparently with a stout wall all the way round. That it was inhabited was obvious from the fact that smoke was rising from it.

The sun was shining now, and the little fortress stood out boldly from amongst the surrounding rocks.

"How are your port engines, Dorrie?" asked Lee sharply.

Lord Dorrimore touched the controls, and the great aeroplane swayed slightly, in answer. The engines spluttered badly.

"They're pretty nearly dead," replied Dorrie. "Not enough petrol to run them for a minute."

"Then we must make a landing—here!" said Lee.

"But, man alive, it's impossible!" protested Mr. Manners. "There's not a square inch of level ground!"

"It is no use talking like that, Manners!" retorted Nelson Lee, with a touch of impatience. "We have no petrol—and this is not a gasbag. We must land!"

"Of course," muttered Mr. Manners. "I'm sorry. But after our escape from Idar, and after our hopes of reaching Sakri, this hits us pretty hard."

"Still, we're in Kurpana—and that's all to the good," remarked Lord Dorrimore. "Easy, now—easy! We're still a few thousand feet up, and there's no immediate danger. I dare say we shall be able to make a pretty good landing, even if we bust up the wheels a bit. Can't have everythin' in this life, you know!"

He was taking it very coolly. The giant monoplane was now gliding downwards towards the little fortress. Far up in the hills, in the region of the Kypur Pass, unseen figures were watching. The Ameer's outposts were on the alert.

They, too, saw this great machine gliding down towards the fortress. Within five minutes, the information was being signalled back to the main army, on the other side of the Pass.



CHAPTER 10

The Landing!

NIPPER frowned in a puzzled way.

"I'm jiggered if I can understand it!" he said. "Why are we gliding down like this?"

"Perhaps they're going to drop a message on this fortress," said Mary Summers. "Isn't it exciting? And isn't it glorious to know that there's no danger?"

"Yes, rather!"

The boys and girls were still up on the deck, under that glass dome, and they had a clear view of the fortress in the distance ahead. They could tell that they were gliding down towards it, and they were full of conjectures.

Handforth was inclined to be impatient.

"It's all rot, in my opinion!" he said bluntly. "We ought to get straight on to Sakri. What's the good of wasting time here?"

"The gov'nor must have a good reason for it," said Nipper gruffly.

"A very good reason, Nipper," said Nelson Lee.

He had just come up the little stairway, from the main body of the machine. And he was looking grave. Everybody could see, at once, that there was something important to be disclosed.

"You must all come down," said Nelson Lee. "It is necessary that you should keep clear of all this glass."

"But why, sir?"

"Is there any danger, sir?"

"There may be danger," replied Lee. "We are going to land."

"What?"

There was an immediate buzz of excitement.

"Good gad!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"For the love of Samson!"

"But why are we going to land, sir?" burst out Nipper. "We're only just into Kurpana! And the Ameer's armies are perilously close, too! Besides, once we've landed, we shan't be able to get into the air again! There's no proper ground——"

"I am just as much aware of all this, Nipper, as you are," interrupted Nelson Lee. "But, the fact remains—we're going to land! There is no alternative. You might as well know the truth, all of you," he added, looking round him steadily. "Our petrol supply has given out!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Odds shocks and disasters!"

"So that's why!" ejaculated Handforth. "By George! Then it was jolly careless of somebody. Why didn't we have more petrol?"

"Unfortunately, Handforth, the Ameer was very neglectful," said Nelson Lee dryly. "He was thoughtless enough to leave the Wanderer with her tanks only partially filled. As you say, it was most careless of him."

Handforth coloured.

"I—I'd forgotten, sir!" he said. "Of course, it was Hobson's choice, wasn't it? I suppose we were jolly lucky to get hold of the machine at all."

"It has enabled us, at least, to escape from Rishnir," said Nelson Lee. "Now, boys and girls! There is not a minute to be lost. I have wasted too much time talking to you already. Come down at once, and remain, if possible, in the little corridors. There will be less danger there when the crash comes."

"The—the crash, sir?"

"I am afraid that a crash will be inevitable," replied Lee. "Naturally, Dorrie will do his best to land the machine on an even keel. But the ground is so rocky, so difficult, that a smooth landing will be well nigh out of the question."

And so they went crowding down, talking excitedly, agog with fresh animation. They were not actually afraid, although they were aware of rapidly beating hearts.

What was going to happen during the next few minutes?

In the control-room, Lord Dorrimore was becoming tense and strained. He had refused to let anybody else take the controls, and he was aware of the fact that an enormous responsibility rested on his shoulders.

He was grimly determined to land the machine without injury to a single soul on board. But it would be ticklish work—difficult work. For, as far as he could see, there was not a square yard of smooth ground.

Rocks everywhere—jagged, ugly masses of rock, gleaming in the early morning sunlight.



Before Church and McClure realised what their leader was doing, Handforth pushed them headlong into a small stone cell. "That's what you get," he said, "for trying to ruin my plans!"

And there was not very much time left.

The great monoplane was only seven or eight hundred feet from the ground now, and she was dropping fairly rapidly. The climax would arrive within the next minute or two.

With the air rushing past her idle propellers, she glided over the roof of the fortress, and for a moment Dorrie and the others in the control-room caught a glimpse of startled men, on the battlements. In fact, one or two rifles were fired at them, for it was pretty clear that the soldiers in the fortress believed that this machine belonged to the Ameer, and had come to create havoc and destruction.

"By the Lord Harry!" shouted Dorrie abruptly.

A second earlier he had been in a state of despair. A landing *must* be effected, and there was nowhere to land! A fatal crash seemed certain.

But then, just after the machine had passed over the fortress, another view of the place, hitherto hidden, opened out.

The fortress itself was perched in amongst the rocks. Just outside the outer walls there was a fairly level space, although it was smothered with boulders and uneven hollows.

But at the very rear of the fortress, and considerably lower down, was a kind of rock plateau.

It was level in comparison to all the other ground thereabouts. On one side the walls of the fortress rose sheer from it: on the

other it dropped away sharply, down a rocky, jagged hillside.

But there was that little plateau!

No bigger than an ordinary meadow—and with a few unfriendly humps and hollows. On two sides, steep, unprotected hills; on the other two sides, rocks and walls of the fortress.

"Steady, now—steady!" muttered Dorrie.

Mr. Manners and Nelson Lee were in an agony of suspense. They could tell what Dorrie was about to attempt. He meant to make a shot at landing on that little plateau! It was, indeed, the only possible spot. But if he failed, and the machine overshot the ground, it would go hurtling down the hillside to positive destruction.

And there was no room for manœuvring. There was no air space. They were only a hundred feet from the ground, and heading straight for the worst of the rocks.

At the last moment, when disaster seemed certain—when Nelson Lee and Mr. Manners were stupefied at Dorrie's inactivity—his lordship pulled back the controls, and the machine staggered, dipped sideways, and gave a giddy, lurching side-slip.

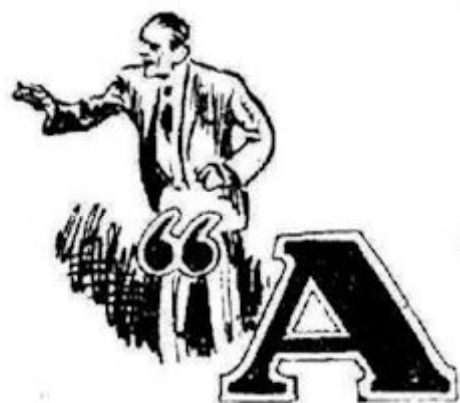
"Look out!" shouted Mr. Manners hoarsely.

He believed, in that second, that they were to crash in wreckage. But in that final split second Dorrie brought the Wanderer's nose up, and she came round on an even keel.

Her landing wheels touched, bounced, and then the great machine thudded heavily back on the ground, her metal creaking.

She ran forward, lumbering and swaying. Again Dorrie acted, and the whole machine swerved round, throwing many people off their feet. Then she came to a standstill—with her starboard wheels only a foot from the edge of the plateau.

"Not so bad!" remarked Dorrie coolly. "Anyhow, we've landed, and I don't believe the old 'bus has even burst a tyre!"



CHAPTER 11

An Old Friend!

"AMAZING!" said Mr. Manners breathlessly. "Upon my soul, Dorrie, it's absolutely amazing!"

"What's amazin'?"

"The way you landed——"

"Cheese it!" growled his lordship. "I don't want you to hand me any bouquets."

"Both Manners and I are pilots, Dorrie, and we can appreciate the superb skill you have just displayed," said Nelson Lee. "Frankly, I didn't think it was possible to land a huge machine like this on such a small piece of ground. I couldn't have done it myself."

"Rot!" laughed Dorrie. "That's just your natural modesty, old man. I dare say you could have done it a lot better!"

And this was perfectly true—although Lee would not admit it. In any case, it was no time for entering into a useless argument. The main thing—the glorious thing—was that they had landed, and that nobody was hurt.

The next thing was to satisfy the inhabitants of the fortress that they were friends. Otherwise they were liable to be in deadly peril.

Nelson Lee fought his way through a crowd of juniors and girls to the main door. They all wanted to follow him, but he forbade it.

"Wait!" he said. "I must see how things are going first. Nobody must leave the machine!"

He opened the door in the side of the great body, and the first thing he heard was the sharp crack-crack of rifles. In the same second, came the ping of the bullets as they struck the metal plane.

"This is ugly!" muttered Lee, under his breath.

He tore a handkerchief out of his pocket, and stepped boldly out upon the main wing. He stood there, waving the handkerchief steadily.

"Hold!" he shouted, looking up at the frowning fortress above. "We are friends! We are British!"

Crack-crack!

Lee heard a bullet sing past his ear, and for a dazed second he wondered if they had made a mistake. Was this fortress in the

hands of the Amcer's soldiers? Had it already been seized? If so, they had merely fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire.

Then a familiar voice came to his ears. At the moment, it was using language that was certainly not English. It sounded rather like Hindustani, but Lee could not be sure. He only knew that the voice itself was familiar. Then it came again.

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee!" it shouted excitedly. "This is most wonderful and magnificent! I have told my soldiers to hold their fire."

"All right, Hussi!" sang out Nelson Lee, and waved his handkerchief in greeting. "As long as you understand, all well and good. We're not enemies, you know."

He could see the figure now—high up in the fortress, looking out from one of the slit-like windows—and he recognised Hussi Ranjit Lal Kahn, the Indian boy, of the St. Frank's Remove.

This was a big surprise.

Nelson Lee had never expected to find Hussi Kahn here, in this mountain outpost. It was a gratifying discovery, for the maharajah's younger son had taken prompt measures to silence the rifles.

"I am coming, Mr. Lee!" shouted Hussi. "I will soon be in your honourable presence, sir!"

Nelson Lee turned back to the doorway, and he found himself looking at Nipper.

"It's all right, young 'un!" he said briskly. "Tell everybody to come out—and there is no need for hurry. Take it quietly. And you youngsters had better help the ladies, too."

"Wasn't that old Hussi's voice just now, sir?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Yes."

"Great Scott! He's here, then—in this isolated fortress?"

"So it appears," said Lee. "And that means that we are amongst friends. It really seems that our troubles are lessening—although I won't go so far as to say that they are over."

"Good old Hussi!"

The Moor View girls and the fellows came tumbling out, helter-skelter, excited and animated. They did not appreciate, perhaps, the wonder of Dorrie's example of airmanship. They only knew that they had landed, and, perhaps, they had taken this for granted. Yet, actually, they were lucky to be alive.

Within ten minutes, they were all standing on the hard rock, in the glaring sunshine. Nipper was the only junior member of the party who seemed to realise what a wonderful feat Lord Dorrimore had accomplished.

"How did you manage it, Dorrie?" he asked, walking up to his lordship.

"Eh?" said Dorrie. "How did I manage what?"

"Look!" said Nipper, pointing. "This piece of ground is hardly any bigger than a paddock! Even as it is, one of the wings is completely overhanging the hillside. We might have gone tumbling down."

"But we didn't, did me?" smiled Dorrie. "Don't make such a fuss, you young donkey!"

"The gov'nor says that you did it, Dorrie," said Nipper. "That's twice you saved us since we left the crag!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Dorrie!"

Other fellows were crowding round, shouting enthusiastically. Lord Dorrimore, thoroughly uncomfortable, glared at them with ferocious eyes.

"Are you goin' to shut up?" he demanded angrily. "The next chap who cheers will get the toe of my boot in his rear! I'm fed up with this rot!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Dorrie!"

The cheers were given with tremendous gusto, in spite of his lordship's grim threat. In the middle of this fresh outburst a number of figures came hurrying round a spur of the rock, and it could be seen that they were wearing uniforms. In the forefront was a smallish figure, attired in soiled cricketing flannels.

"Hussi!" yelled Nipper. "Here he is, you chaps!"

There was a rush, and Dorrie felt relieved.

"Nerve!" he muttered. "If they start any of that rot again, I'll get really wild!"

But there was no danger of it at the moment. The St. Frank's fellows were crowding round Hussi Kahn, who was smiling joyously, showing all his white teeth.

"This is an honourable surprise!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "It is a wondrous marvel! For did I not believe that you were all dead?"

"We don't know what you believed, old man, but we're very much alive," replied Reggie Pitt. "I'm not saying that we haven't been through a few adventures, but we're out of the Ameer's clutches now."

Little did Reggie Pitt realise what the immediate future held in store!

CHAPTER 12

A Respite!



THE scene was one of great animation. The little rocky plateau was filled with figures, the majority of them being girls and women. In a way, it was an extraordinary sight, in this remote hill station. The six Moor View girls were almost lost amidst the crowd of St. Frank's fellows. They felt that they belonged to the original party. The women of the palace household staff were all grouped together. Some of them were elderly, some fairly young. They were all bewildered and excited and tired. A few were inclined to be hysterical.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners stood apart, talking to Hussi Kahn and two clean-limbed officers who had accompanied their young prince from the fortress.

"There is another little surprise for you, Hussi," said Lee, after the first excitement was over. "I think you had better come with me."

"Yes, sir?" said Hussi Kahn, in wonder. "What further surprise can there be? Have I not had sufficient shocks for one morning?"

"I do not think this will be a shock, young 'un," replied Lee. "Come! And I should like your officers to accompany us."

"We'll come with pleasure, sir," said one of the officers, in perfect English. "I am afraid we are in very much the same position as his Highness. We have not yet recovered from these first surprises."

"You thought we were dead, eh?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"We heard many rumours, sir," replied the officer. "But it appeared to be an established fact that a great machine from England had crashed, killing every occupant. And we knew, of course, that the machine contained a number of his Highness' young schoolfellows."

"There is much for you to learn, old man," said Dorrie, shaking his head. "We've been having a little argument with the Ameer just recently. The blighter kept us bottled up in his palace, but we didn't care for the idea of it, so we came away."

Hussi and the officers were frankly amazed.

"You have been on the famous Idar Crag?" asked one of the officers.

"We have!" nodded his lordship, grinning. "Had a very pleasant time. The Ameer was most charming. He treated us like lords, and served up the most luxurious dishes, including poison-gas."

"We can talk of this later, Dorrie—after we get into the fortress," said Nelson Lee. "There is much to be done—and, I fancy, there is no time to be lost."

"Hang it! You're not sayin' that we're in danger still, are you?"

"We're not in danger now—but we shall probably be in danger before long," replied Lee. "Have you forgotten the Ameer's army? Have you overlooked the fact, Dorrie, that it is approaching the Kypur Pass?"

"H'm! More trouble comin'!" grunted his lordship. "Well, never mind! We're used to it!"

Nelson Lee led the way into the body of the great machine, and in the passage he caught Hussi Kahn by the shoulder, and looked at him steadily.

"While we were on the Idar Crag, Hussi," he said, "we were fortunate enough to rescue your father and brother. They are here."

Hussi Kahn opened his eyes wide.

"My father!" he ejaculated breathlessly. "My brother Goolah! But—but this is too wonderful, sir!"

"It is true, Hussi."

"Since you say so, sir, it must be so," said the Indian boy gladly. "Oh, I did not hope for such happiness as this!"

Two or three minutes later he was talking with his father and brother. They were in the little saloon, waiting. Nelson Lee had thought it advisable to keep them there, since, owing to their exalted position, it would have been unseemly for them to mix with the crowd.

Not that the kindly old maharajah would have minded. He was very democratic; he was very popular amongst his people.

"My son, I did not expect to find you here, in this remote corner of our country," he said to Hussi, after the first greetings were over. "What do you do here?"

"I came, father, because it was the nearest point to Rishnur," replied Hussi Kahn. "I desired to be as near to you as possible."

"And our country?" asked the maharajah. "Does all go well? Are the people arming themselves for the big struggle against our enemy, the Ameer?"

"Great armies are being formed, my father," replied Hussi proudly. "The people are splendidly equipping themselves for the struggle. And I, in my anxiety concerning your safety, came to this fortress of Kypur. It was my desire to be in the first battle against the accursed enemy."

"You knew of the danger to these good friends of ours?" asked the maharajah. "Mr. Lee has informed me that the Ameer sent you a message——"

"I did not believe it, my father," replied Hussi. "Neither did any of my officers. It was thought to be a ruse. For, previously, we had heard that the great machine had crashed, killing all in her. It was decided, by a large council, that the Ameer was planning to trick us. But now we know that his story was true."

"It is just as well that you misunderstood," said his father. "And now, my son, I am back in Kurpana. Ere long I shall be in Sakri, and my health will be restored."

Since his rescue, the maharajah had made good progress. He was a white-haired, elderly man, of gentle, dignified bearing. Just at present, he and his elder son, Goolah, were attired in some of the Ameer's borrowed robes. Their own clothing had been taken from them, and they had been found in rags.

"We will go into the fortress," continued the maharajah, "and all these women-folk must be attended to and made comfortable. Let them have the first consideration."

"But what of yourself, my father?"

"I can wait," said the old man. "Is it not a British tradition to succour the women-folk first? Let them be taken into the fortress in advance; and let them be fed and let them have the best quarters."

Before long, a general move was made towards the fortress—round the jagged rocks, and then through the outer walls into the dusty courtyard.

Until now the St. Frank's fellows had not realised how utterly weary they were.

They had had no sleep during the previous night, and they had been working like niggers for hours on end. A reaction was setting in now—particularly as all immediate danger was over. They were dog-tired and unutterably weary.

All they wanted was sleep—rest. And here, in this fortress, they had found a haven.

CHAPTER 13

Preparing for the Next Move!



THE accommodation in the fortress was totally inadequate.

In the first place, it was only a small hill station, with a normal garrison of forty or fifty men.

But just at present it contained well over a hundred soldiers, and it was learned that a bigger force was on the way. So now, with the sudden descent of between thirty and forty feminine visitors, to say nothing of a crowd of schoolboys, the resources of the place were taxed to the uttermost.

All the officers' quarters were given up to the women, and all the men's quarters, too, if it came to that. Not that there was likely to be any prolonged stay here.

After the boys had had something to eat and drink, they told themselves that they would remain wakeful, and join in the general activities.

"We're not going to sleep yet!" declared Handforth. "Not likely! We want to know what's happening."

"Yes, rather!" said two or three of the others.

"We shan't stay here long, either," went on Handforth. "An hour or two, at the most, I expect. So what's the good of sleeping? We shall soon be on our way to Sakri."

"The girls are having a nap," remarked Church, yawning.

"Never mind the girls—we're different!" said Handforth. "We're not so jolly weak."

And exactly five minutes later Handforth and every other junior was sound asleep.

They slept anywhere—out in the courtyard, in the shade; in the passages leading to the living-quarters; on the battlements of the fortress, under the walls. They were littered about everywhere, and the maharajah's soldiers merely smiled and left them alone.

In the commandant's quarters, the maharajah and Goolah Kahn and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were holding a discussion. The commandant himself was there, too—grave and troubled. He was one of the maharajah's most trusted soldiers—one of his keenest officers. His name was Kumah Bhat, and he was rather overwhelmed by the presence of his monarch.

"We must decide what is to be done," Nelson Lee was saying. "It is, of course,

impossible for us to remain here in this fortress."

"And yet it is a considerable distance to Sakri," said Kumah Bhat. "A difficult road, sir, even for trained men. With so many women and young girls, I fear that the journey would be impracticable."

"Is there no nearer city than Sakri?" asked Dorrie.

"There are small towns, and a few isolated villages," put in Goolah Kahn. "This part of our country is very desolate and wild. It is in the other direction that the population is big. But here, in the hills, all is primitive."

"But we have a telephone," said the commandant.

"That is something, at all events," smiled Nelson Lee. "The line, I take it, communicates with Sakri?"

"Yes."

"Then it should not be so difficult to make our arrangements," replied Lee thoughtfully.

He had long since come to the conclusion that Kurpana was rather backward. This fortress, for example, was ill-equipped. It should have been a place of considerable strength, standing as it did in such close proximity to the Kypur Pass. But it was becoming more and more evident to Lee that the peaceful maharajah had made little or no preparations for war. It was not until now, almost at the last moment, that the people of Kurpana were arousing themselves.

"A large body of men is on the way now," said Kumah Bhat. "They are coming here to strengthen our force—since we have learned that the Kypur Pass may be in peril."

"How strong is this force?" asked Lee.

"Four hundred men strong."

"A mere handful," said Nelson Lee, frowning. "You need four thousand. The Ameer's army is a formidable menace, and it is marching to the Pass even now. You will be well advised to telephone at once to Sakri, and to give orders for a strong body of troops to come out forthwith. I am not presuming to know what is best—"

"Your suggestions, Mr. Lee, shall be put into operation," said the maharajah quietly.

"Thank you, your Highness," said Lee. "And these four hundred men?" he added, turning to the commandant. "When are they expected?"

"During the day—perhaps this evening."

"Then, as soon as they arrive, they must return," said the maharajah. "They will provide us with the escort we need. At dawn to-morrow we shall leave for Sakri."

Within ten minutes, Kumah Bhat was talking to the officers in the Sakri palace; he was giving the news that the maharajah had been rescued, and that he and his British friends would soon be marching to the capital. This piece of news was calculated to send Sakri wild with enthusiasm and joy.

And then, before the commandant could even begin to give any instructions regard-

ing the relief force, an interruption occurred. An officer entered, flustered and anxious.

"Wait!" said the maharajah curtly.

The officer went, fearful of disobeying that command.

Kumah Bhat continued his conversation at the telephone and precise instructions were given. A relief force would be sent on its way within six hours. It would be a strong force, numbering thousands.

"It is well!" said the maharajah, when the thing had been done. "Now, let us see what the officer desired."

He was brought in, and he was nearly frantic with worry.

"You have news?" asked the commandant sharply.

The officer answered in his own language and, as he continued speaking, Kumah Bhat and the maharajah changed their expressions.

"It is bad news!" said the commandant, turning to Nelson Lee and Dorrie. "The force of four hundred men marching towards the hills has been completely cut up. A big enemy army is now between us and Sakri. And this is incredible, since it has not come through the Kypur Pass!"

"But there are other passes!" said Lee. "The Ameer has commenced his invasion. And this means, of course, that we are cut off in this hill fortress."

"Gad! A pretty lively situation!" said Dorrie, pursing his lips. "With the Ameer's main army making for the Kypur Pass, and with another of his armies between us and Sakri, we seem to be in a pretty nasty mess!"



CHAPTER 14

Cut Off!

IT was serious—but not unexpected.

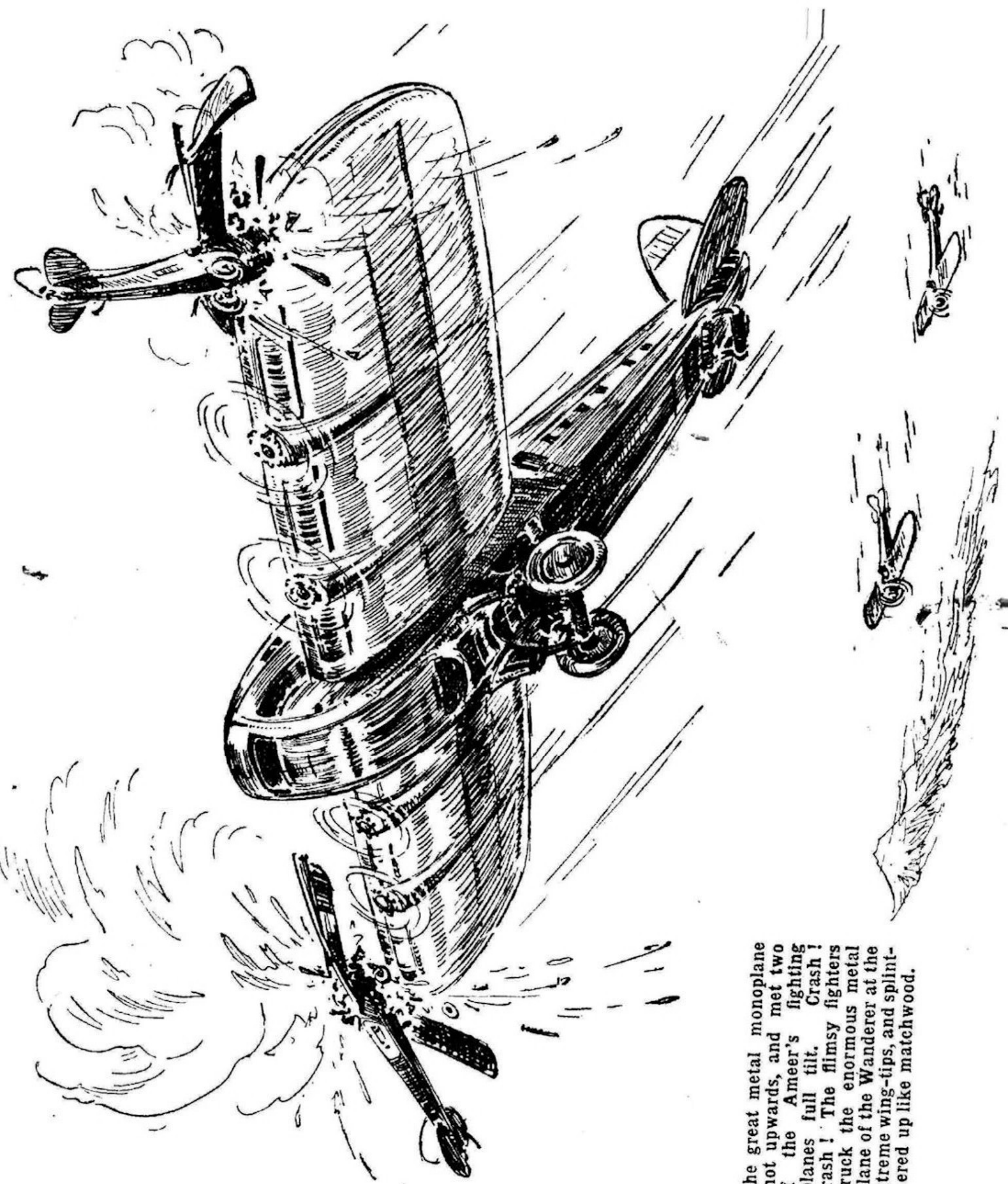
Nelson Lee, at all events, had feared that the position would prove to be very much like this. He had known that the Ameer's forces were on the march, with the intention of invading Kurpana.

Now, by a curious mischance, the British party was cut off in the hills. One of the Ameer's forces was between them and Sakri, and the Ameer's main army was on the point of coming through the Kypur Pass. Very soon they would be surrounded by the enemy.

After all their recent troubles this was a knock-down blow.

There was the consolation, it was true, to be gained from the knowledge that a big army was immediately setting out from Sakri. It was a relief force, and it might possibly arrive in time. It might rescue the garrison before it was compelled to surrender, or before it was wiped out.

Furthermore, there was satisfaction to be gained from the reflection that even this



The great metal monoplane shot upwards, and met two of the Ameer's fighting 'planes full tilt. Crash! Crash! The flimsy fighters struck the enormous metal 'plane of the Wanderer at the extreme wing-tips, and splintered up like matchwood.

situation was far, far better than the one they had left behind them.

This fortress was on Kurpana soil; whereas, previously, they had been in the heart of the City of Idar, surrounded by teeming thousands of the enemy.

In any case, what was the good of complaining? Luck had been with them all along the line. They had escaped from the Ameer's clutches; they had miraculously escaped being shot down by the Ameer's fighting 'planes; and, just as miraculously, they had landed in security near this fortress.

So there was certainly no occasion for complaining. And, whatever the immediate position, there was always the knowledge that a big relief force was on the way.

"It would be folly for us to move from here now," said Lee thoughtfully. "The enemy has invaded your country, Your Highness, and if we take this rough mountain track, we shall inevitably encounter the invaders. And the meeting might be fatal."

"My country invaded!" muttered the maharajah. "Fool! Fool that I was not to prepare for this sooner!"

"We can do nothing but remain here," continued Nelson Lee. "We must make the best of things. Roughly, we have one hundred and fifty men at least, one hundred and fifty able-bodied fighters. I am including the St. Frank's boys. What are your resources, sir?" he added, turning to the commandant.

"We have several guns, and a good supply of ammunition," replied Kumah Bhat. "And we command a strong position here. Our guns overlook the road from the Kypur Pass, and the fortress itself is of great strength. We shall be able to resist successfully."

"Even though the Ameer throws thousands of his men into the fight?" asked Dorrie.

"Even though he throws thousands of men into the fight, sir," replied the commandant quietly. "I am confident. We shall be able to resist these attacks, if and when they develop. But, as Mr. Lee has said, there can be no journey undertaken. We must remain here, and fortify ourselves strongly. We must wait until the main army reaches us from Sakri."

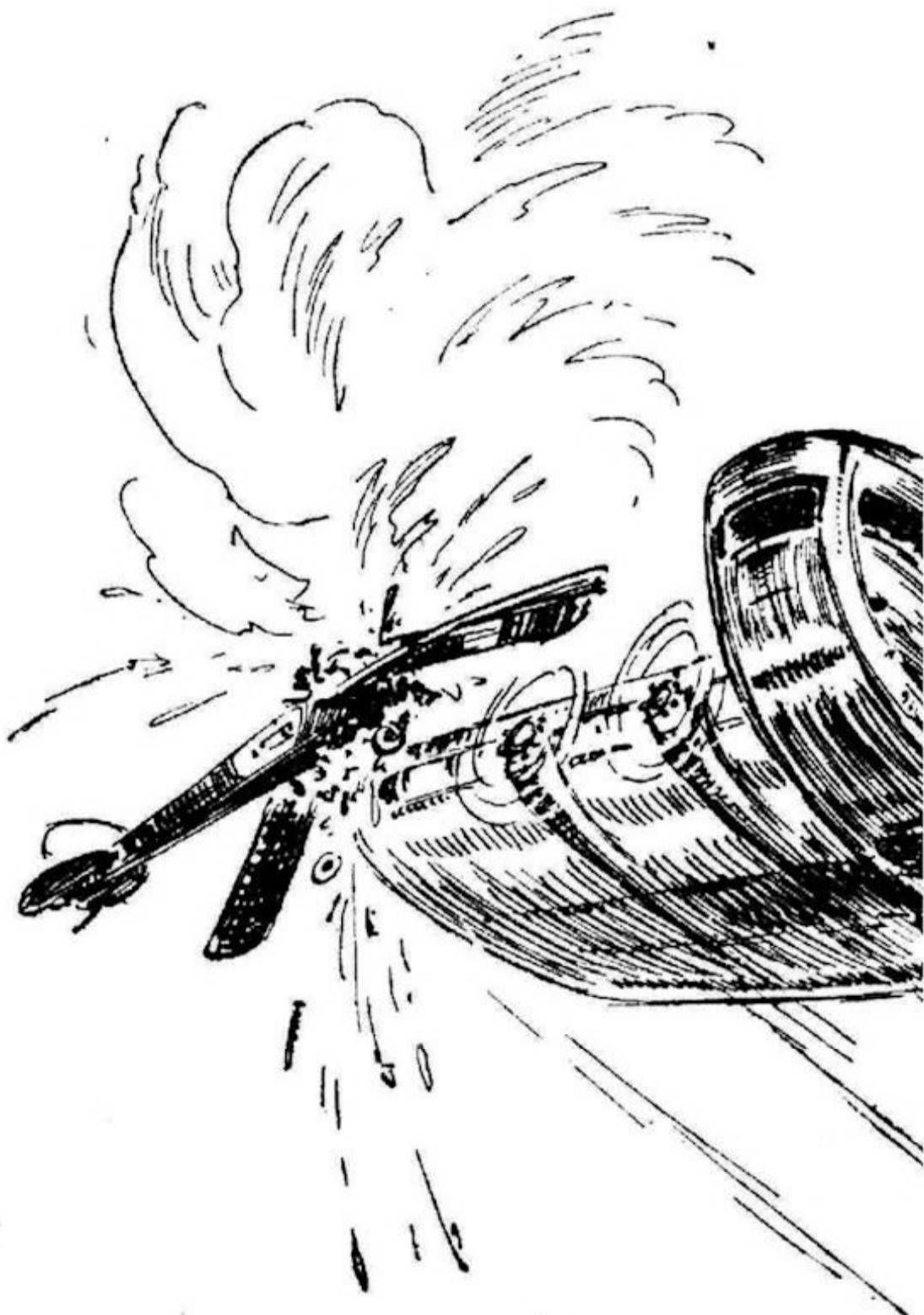
Nelson Lee made no comment, but he did not share the commandant's confidence. Kumah Bhat was inclined to speak contemptuously of the Ameer's forces; but Nelson Lee knew better. There was even a chance that the big relief force would be encountered on its way, and cut up, for the cunning Ali Rajen had sent a large army to invade Kurpana.

Furthermore, Nelson Lee was quite convinced that the Ameer knew, by this time, that the aeroplane had descended near this fortress. Thus, the Ameer would know that his recent prisoners were again bottled up.

And it was only natural that he would concentrate his attention here, first of all—before invading Kurpana deeper. He would do everything in his power to wipe the fortress out, including every one of its occupants.

So Nelson Lee had every reason for being less confident than the commandant.

But he knew there was no escape. They would have to remain and face the difficulties.



The great metal monoplane shot upwards, and met two of the Ameer's fighting 'planes full tilt. Crash! Crash! The flimsy fighters struck the enormous metal 'plane of the Wanderer at the extreme wing-tips, and splintered up like matchwood.



He had learned, to his regret, that there was no petrol in this fortress—not even a gallon. Thus, the Wanderer of the Skies could not again take to the air. Until more fuel could be brought for her, she was just about as useful as a mass of scrap-iron.

Yet this was not quite correct—as events turned out.

"There is one course that we might successfully take," said Nelson Lee, after a while. "If it is in any way possible, I should like to communicate with the nearest British authorities. This is no longer a conflict between Kurpana and Rishnir. The Ameer has waged his warfare against British subjects—and thus he has laid himself open to punishment."

"It is possible to communicate with the British authorities from Sakri," put in Goolah

hitherto, I did not think that my quarrel with Rishnir warranted the intervention of Britain's might."

"As I have said, Your Highness, the Ameer has laid himself open to punishment," replied Nelson Lee. "Thus, it is now a job for the British Army. And if, as you say, we can communicate by means of the telephone, all well and good. Our instructions can be 'phoned to Sakri, and they can then be telephoned from there to a British garrison. It will only be necessary to send out the appeal."

"It shall be done!" said the maharajah.

But it wasn't done. For, when the telephone was operated, it was found to be "dead." In vain, the commandant tried to get through. And there was only one conclusion to be drawn.

The wires had been cut!

Here was proof, indeed, that the Ameer's forces were between them and Sakri! The telephone was useless. They were isolated from all help!

"Well, it's a dashed good thing that we got that first message through," said Dorrie, as he lit a cigarette. "Still, I should have felt more comfortable if Tommy Atkins had been told of our plight. Rather a pity we haven't got any wireless here."

"No; there's none," said the commandant.

"I think there is!" said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "By Jove! We might be able to work the trick, after all!"

CHAPTER 15

Wireless!



ALL eyes were turned upon Nelson Lee.

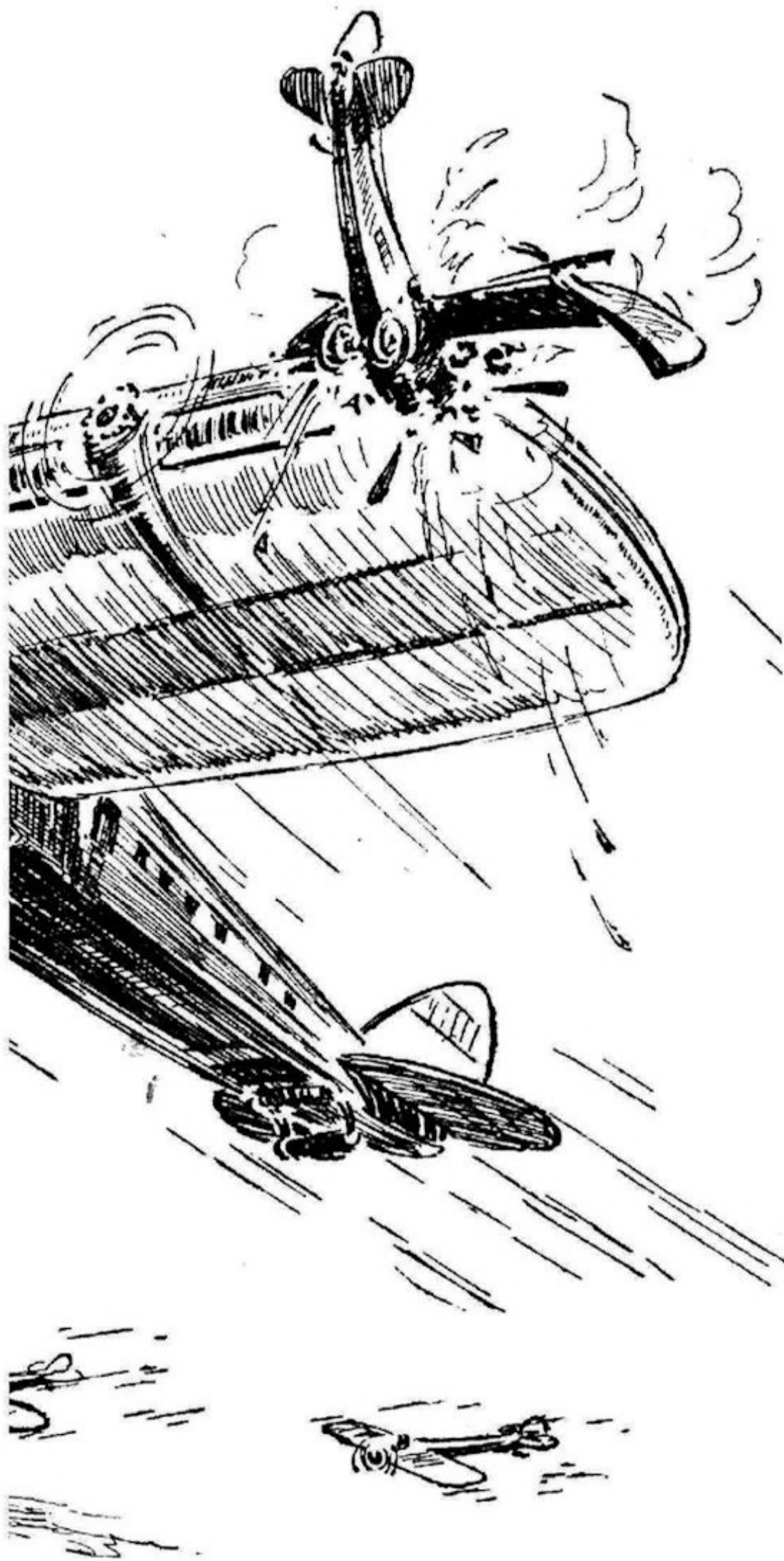
"You mean—the Wanderer?"

asked Manners, who had joined the council. "I am afraid, Lee, that the aeroplane's wireless is out of commission. As you know, we were unable to operate it in the air; and, in any case, it can only be operated from the air."

"In that you are mistaken," said Lee. "And you must remember that we had no time to even think of making repairs or adjustments. The instruments are in the machine, Manners—together with all the necessary batteries and apparatus. My idea is to transfer it here, into the fortress, and to rig up a temporary aerial. There is more than a possibility that we can succeed."

"By glory! That's good hearing!" commented Lord Dorrimore.

"I see—I see!" said Mr. Manners. "As the outfit is at present installed, it can only be used while the machine is actually in flight since the aerial is of the hanging type, and not available on the ground. But it might be possible to convert the apparatus."



Kahn. "We are in telephonic and telegraphic communication with several important garrisons. They are a long distance off, but—"

"Then let the telephone be used!" interrupted the maharajah. "Let these British garrisons be informed. I should be grateful for British aid during this hour of trial. But,

"We'll try, anyway," said Lee. "And it will make an enormous difference to our position if the British authorities are told of our dangerous position."

"They'll never be able to get here in time, surely?" asked Goolah Kahn.

"It all depends how they come," replied Lee. "But I was hardly thinking of the actual relief force that might be sent. Once the British authorities learn of our predicament, they will probably make immediate representations to the Ameer's Government—perhaps to the Ameer personally."

"By the Lord Harry!" said Dorrie, his eyes glinting.

"And then it will be up to the Ameer to choose," continued Lee shrewdly. "I think it is very possible that he will hesitate to continue his present warlike course—once he has been warned by the British authorities. So you see, gentlemen, how important it is for us to get into communication. A stern warning to the Ameer, direct from the British military authorities, may have a very big effect."

"Good!" said his lordship. "Let's get busy, then!"

Within half an hour Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Mr. Manners, accompanied by a number of officers and soldiers, were hard at work within the Wanderer of the Skies.

It was certainly necessary that no time should be lost.

Nothing could alter the fact that they were cut off in this outpost. Telephonic communication was interrupted, and the only forces of the maharajah within reasonable distance were either destroyed or captured.

Bluntly, then, it meant that the victorious enemy was advancing towards the fortress; and another big army was already on its way through the Kypur Pass.

In quite ordinary circumstances, the first object of this invading force would be to destroy the fortress, including its garrison. But the Ameer probably knew that it sheltered those prisoners of his who had escaped from the crag. So he would naturally use every effort to capture it.

If, however, this wireless could be rigged up, and the British authorities communicated with, the position would be changed. The Ameer would hear direct from the British, and he might be ~~afraid to~~ continue his insane course. For he would know, then, that his punishment would be drastic.

Everything connected with the Wanderer's wireless was removed from the machine, and carried carefully to the fortress. Mr. Manners and Nelson Lee were the last to

leave, and the former looked wistfully at the great plane as he prepared to depart.

"She's done well, Lee," he said. "She's done infernally well! It seems a downright shame to leave her here!"

"You're thinking of the Ameer's soldiers when they arrive?"

"Yes," nodded Mr. Manners. "In their rage they will probably destroy her."

"I rather think not," said Lee. "She is a valuable machine, Manners—far better in every way than anything that the Ameer possesses. I do not think she will be harmed."

"Well, what we think really makes no difference, does it?" said Mr. Manners dryly.

"We certainly cannot shift her, and, even if we could dismantle her, there is no room in the fortress. Let us hope that everything will turn out well."

They walked over the rocks, towards those sun-baked buildings.

"This will be a bit of a shock for the boys when they wake up," continued Mr. Manners. "They went to sleep, believing that we should soon be starting for Sakri. What a disappointment for them!"

Nelson Lee could not help smiling.

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Personally, I have an idea that the boys will be pleased. They're a bloodthirsty lot of young rascals. I fear! If there's a prospect of a fight they'll revel in it. They don't quite realise the appalling danger."

"Even if they realise it, it will make no difference," said Mr. Manners. "Bless them! They're not afraid of dangers! Haven't they proved it already? And the girls, too—including my own Irene. Gad, Lee, they've been fine!"

They went into the courtyard, and the enormous doors were closed and barricaded. On the battlements men were on guard, watching the distant rocks—keeping their eyes open for the first sign of the enemy.

But, so far, nothing had been seen.

It was practically mid-day, and the sun was scorchingly hot; the whole fortress quivered in the overpowering heat. The outlook on every hand was sinister. Bare rocks, jagged and unkind. Mountain peaks in the distance, their summits, in some cases, permanently snow-capped. It was indeed a wild, desolate region.

In one of the store-rooms, at the rear of the fortress, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrmore spent hours on the wireless. For a long time they laboured, and in the end their efforts were crowned with success.

At last everything was ready, and Lee himself sat down at the instruments and operated them.

Zip-zip-zip-zip!

"She seems to go all right," said Dorrie critically.

Twenty minutes later there were no longer any doubts. For Nelson Lee had succeeded in getting into direct touch with a large north-west frontier garrison. Briefly, concisely, and in a businesslike way, he transmitted the startling news

GOOD NEWS!

A grand long story dealing with the early adventures of Nipper and his cheery chums at St. Frank's appears in this week's issue of

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Mr. Manners and Lord Dorrimore looked at one another eagerly as they stood watching and listening.

"That's another step!" murmured Dorrie. "And, by glory, another nail in the Ameer's coffin!"



CHAPTER 16

A Rude Awakening!

NIPPER stretched himself, yawned, and sat up.

"Well, by jingo, I've had a decent nap!" he murmured contentedly. "I feel as fresh as paint now. Must have been sleeping for two or three hours, I suppose."

He looked about him wonderingly. He dimly remembered having fallen to sleep out of doors, in the shade of one of the walls. But now he was in a long, stone-walled apartment, and he could see that a number of the other juniors were sprawled round. At the end of the apartment a curious lamp was burning, giving forth a flickering, dim light.

"What on earth——" began Nipper.

He rubbed his eyes, and then shook the junior who was next to him. It happened to be Vivian Travers.

"All right, dear old fellow—don't shove!" murmured Travers. "Plenty of time!"

"Travers!" said Nipper sharply. "Wake up! There's something rummy——"

"Eh?" said Travers, sitting up, and arousing Handforth at the same time. "Rummy? Well, well! Where are we?"

"It's dark!" said Nipper wonderingly. "And we went to sleep in the early morning! What can have happened? I thought we were all going to Sakri to-day?"

"By George!" said Handforth. "They must have dished us! They've let the whole day go by, and——"

"Listen!" interrupted Travers. "What was that?"

Crack-crack!

"Rifle-fire!" said Nipper breathlessly.

They were on their feet now, and the other fellows were being aroused. In the middle of it a door opened and Lord Dorrimore looked in.

"Hallo! Awake?" he said cheerfully. "Good lads! I'll bet you're feeling hungry?"

"What's the time, Dorrie?" asked Nipper.

"Just after midnight."

"What!"

"There's no need to bark at me, young 'un!" said Dorrie. "Roughly speaking, you've been sleeping for about sixteen or seventeen hours. Positively disgustin'. The girls were up hours ago."

All the juniors clamoured round him.

"But—but why are we still here, Dorrie?" asked Reggie Pitt quickly.

"Why aren't we on our way to the capital?" demanded Handforth.

"Steady—steady!" protested his lordship. "I can't answer all these questions at once. The fact is, young 'uns, our good friend, the Ameer, has dropped a spanner into the works and chewed them up."

"Good gad!"

"Exactly!" said Dorrie. "As you say, Archie—good gad! His Nibs is a nasty, tricky sort of merchant, isn't he?"

"Look here, Dorrie, be a sport!" said Nipper. "Let's know what the position is!"

"Good enough!" said his lordship. "We're bottled up in this fortress."

"Bottled up!"

"Absolutely bottled up!" nodded Dorrie coolly. "They've cut the telephone, and they've invaded Kurpana. There's a big force of the Ameer's soldiers between us and Sakri, and if we went along that road we should probably have a hot time."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Cut off from the capital!"

"My only sainted aunt!"

"Yes, we're cut off," said Dorrie. "There's another of the Ameer's armies coming through the Kypur Pass. And a good few of the advance guard are gathering round the fortress, having a pot-shot at us now and again. Haven't you heard the rifle-fire?"

"Yes," said Nipper tensely. "But can't we help, Dorrie? Can't we do something?"

"I dare say you'll be called upon to do quite a lot before we've finished," said Lord Dorrimore, with a touch of grimness in his voice. "This is only the beginning of the picnic. We know definitely that the Ameer is gathering his forces round us. He's going to move heaven and earth to capture this fortress, and to do his worst to us."

"But we can't hold out against the Ameer's armies!" said Nipper, aghast. "There aren't more than a hundred and fifty men in this place!"

"Fortunately, we've got plenty of ammunition, and a few good guns," said Dorrie. "And, if it's any satisfaction to you youngsters, I might as well tell you that a big relief force is on its way to us from Sakri."

"That's a jolly good piece of news, anyhow," said Reggie Pitt.

"How long it will take to get here we don't quite know," continued Dorrie. "And there's another piece of news, too. We've been in wireless communication with Mr. Thomas Atkins, and this latter gentleman, very enthusiastic, is now on his way from quite another quarter with various weapons of offence. In other words, a considerable British force is marching to the relief of Mafeking. I should say, the relief of Kypur."

The excitement was tremendous.

"Well, it's not so bad, after all!" said Handforth eagerly. "We may be surrounded, but this is a pretty good fortress, and I dare say we can hold out. It's jolly good to know that the maharajah's army is on its way—and better still to know that the British Tommies are coming to our rescue."

"Yes, rather!"

"Absolutely in chunks, laddie!" said Archie. "Good gad, and odds life! I rather thought we had finished with that poisonous blighter, the Ameer. But I'm dashed if the beggar isn't starting his dashed tricks again!"

Crash!

In the distance a dull, muffled explosion sounded, and Lord Dorrimore jerked his head.

"That's nothin'," he said lightly. "Only a shell."

"A what?"

"A shell," explained Dorrie. "They've got a chunk of ordnance somewhere up in the hills, and every now and again they drop a shell over here. But they're rotten marksmen. They haven't landed one within half a mile of us yet."

"Can't we come out, and help?" asked Nipper.

"You can come out and help yourself to something to eat, if you like," replied Lord Dorrimore. "But that's all you'll do at the moment. And, talking of eats, I'm afraid you'll have to go pretty easily. We're rationed. They weren't expecting so many guests all of a sudden."

But the fellows were not much concerned about the food problem. They had had a rude awakening, and they were eager and excited. They wanted to know more of the position—they wanted to make themselves useful. They had had a long sleep, and were feeling fresh.

The occasional bursts of rifle fire, and the intermittent crashing of distant shells, was very significant.

The fortress was being besieged; the Ameer's soldiers were gathering round; and the prospect was—to say the least—a lively one!



CHAPTER 17

The Night Attack!

"A

RE there many of them, do you think?" asked Mr. Manners, in a low tone.

"Only a scattered few, so far," replied Nelson Lee. "But other units are coming along, Manners. Before morning we shall have hordes of the beggars round us. And, with full daylight, no doubt there will be a determined attack."

They were on the flat roof of the fortress, behind the battlements. It was a squat place, and it was not a difficult jump from the roof to the ground. There was only one floor, strictly speaking, although a good many apartments in the fortress were underground, and could only be reached by means of narrow stairs. So, in a way, it might be said that the place had two or three floors.

However, from the battlements, the distance to the courtyard was a mere jump. In short, as a fortress, the place was more or less of a joke. At least, judging by modern standards.

"It'll be a bad thing for us if the Ameer's troops have any big guns with them," remarked Nelson Lee. "One large shell hitting this affair squarely in the middle would demolish it completely."

"I don't think their guns are particularly large," said Mr. Manners. "The ordinary type of field-piece, I imagine, of a fairly small calibre. In the matter of artillery, the Ameer seems to be badly equipped."

"It may only be a dodge," said Lee. "There is more than a chance that he has some big guns in reserve."

Boom!

"Here comes another!" muttered Mr. Manners.

They could hear the scream of the shell as it came towards them through the air. The gun had been fired a long distance away—somewhere far up in the hills—and the shell, when it exploded, did no damage. It fell amongst the rocks, two or three hundred yards away from the fort.

"As long as they don't come nearer than that, we shan't grumble," observed Lord Dorrimore, as he joined the others. "How are things goin'? Seen many of the enemy?"

"Not yet, Dorrie," said Lee. "They haven't started properly yet."

Lord Dorrimore strolled round the battlement. There were a good many of the Kurpana soldiers at their posts, with their rifles in position through the narrow slits in the stonework. No sound came from them; they were very much on the alert, however.

Crack-crack! Crack-crack-crack!

The reports came erratically, and from many points of the surrounding rocks spurts of fire appeared. One or two bullets hissed harmlessly overhead, and some others struck the stonework with thudding sounds.

"Hallo!" said Dorrie. "This looks like business!"

The sharp rattle of rifle fire came once more, and it was now intensified. Nelson Lee, looking through one of the slits, with his rifle ready, saw some lurking figures beyond the outer wall. They were perched on the rocks, creeping from cover to cover.

Lee took his aim and fired.

A scream rang out, and one of the enemy toppled over from the rocks. Then, as though his fall had been a signal, a chorus of wild cries rang out on the night air. From every side they came, and the next moment hundreds of swarming forms were seen coming over the top of the outer wall.

"By jingo!" said Mr. Manners. "Here they are!"

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The defenders sent out a devastating fire. From every corner of the battlements the rifles spat; screams rang out, and shouts

rent the air. In a moment everything seemed to be confusion.

In the gloom, too, scarcely anything could be seen. But it was practically certain that the enemy were making a determined effort to capture the fortress. More and more men were swarming over the walls, taking advantage of the darkness.

It was a grim, impressive scene.

Overhead, the purple sky was studded with glistening stars, and these provided the only light.

Just then one of the Kurpana officers gave a sharp order, and there followed a number of quick explosions.

Bang! Fizz! Bang!

Tiny trails of fire shot towards the outer walls, and then, in a burst of dazzling fire, a number of flares split the darkness. Every wall was now brilliantly, blazingly lit up. The figures of the Ameer's soldiers could be seen with startling distinctness.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The defenders were firing steadily, ruthlessly. Man after man fell. A few of them succeeded in dropping to the ground, and they came rushing towards the walls of the fortress. But they were picked off, and dropped, long before they could reach any cover.

Zurrrrrrh!

A machine-gun now opened its vicious throat, and made the night hideous with its vindictive roar. In the middle of it all came the booming of artillery from a distance. Shells fell uncomfortably near the fortress—one exploding, indeed, right against one of the lower walls.

Within that grim little building, and all round the battlements, there was perfect coolness and calmness. The defenders were firing steadily, without the slightest hint of flurry. Full sixty men must have fallen during that brief period. And then, shouting frenziedly, the attacking force retired.

The onslaught ceased as quickly and dramatically as it had begun.

No more forms came over the walls, and none but the dead and dying remained. Mysteriously on the night air, the sound of the retreating enemy could be heard.

"Well, that wasn't particularly excitin'," remarked Lord Dorrimore, as he reloaded his rifle. "If they can't do anything better than that, we're not in any particular danger."

"It was only a preliminary skirmish, Dorrie," said Lee. "The officers, no doubt, wanted to test our strength. They care nothing for the lives of their soldiers. The Ameer has proved that on more than one occasion. He is utterly ruthless and brutal."

After half an hour, it was obvious that the attack had fizzled out. It was, as Nelson Lee had said, merely a skirmish. But it had cost the enemy dearly.

The wounded men were attended to, and left out in the open, under the night air. It was impossible to accommodate them

within the fortress, since there was no room. But they were made as comfortable as possible.

And then began a period of suspense. There was no further sign of the enemy—no stray shots from the rocks.

But everybody within the fortress knew, perfectly well, that there were many lurking figures, although they were unseen.

When would the next attack come?



CHAPTER 18

Handy Wants to Help!

HANDFORTH grunted disconsolately.

"Why can't we do something?" he demanded. "What's

the good of us sticking in here, bottled up in this place—stewing in this heat? We might as well be outside, with guns—helping in the defences!"

"Orders are orders, old man," said Nipper. "The gov'nor has said that we must not go out until we are needed."

"Then why aren't we needed?"

"Well, there's nothing doing at the moment," said Nipper. "That first attack was only a trifle, it seems. Anyhow, there weren't any casualties on our side, except for a minor flesh wound or two."

The juniors were in one of the quaint rooms of the fortress, and most of them were feeling impatient. They were fresh, after their long sleep, and they wanted to be doing something. They were rather jealous of the Moor view girls, too.

For these latter were a little further along the passage, in another room, which had been dubbed "the hospital." Irene & Co. were officially on the Red Cross staff, and they were preparing bandages, antiseptics, and everything necessary for dealing with injuries and wounds. It was rather a grim occupation, but it certainly had to be done. Sooner or later, there would be many casualties.

"I don't see why we couldn't help," remarked Handforth stubbornly.

"Oh, dry up, old man!" said Church. "There'll be a heavy attack before long, I expect, and some of our men will fall. It may be necessary for us to take our places at the defences."

"Well, I hope it will be!" said Handforth.

"You callous rotter!" ejaculated McClure. "That means to say that you hope some of our soldiers will go under?"

"No, it doesn't!" retorted Handforth. "But they're bound to get tired before long, and then our chance will come."

"We've got to obey orders, Handy," said Travers. "Remember, dear old fellow, that a good soldier is always obedient."

Hussi Kahn, who was with the juniors, was looking at them with burning eyes.

"I am saddened beyond measure that you, my friends, should be placed in this unfortunate position," he was saying. "It is not right—it is not fair! Why should the troubles of my unhappy country be visited upon your courageous heads?"

Blow our courageous heads, Hussi!" chuckled Reggie Pitt. "There's something we've been wanting to ask you, and now that we've got you here, we'll get busy. How was it that you were kidnapped from England?"

"I was taken away by Prince Sinji—as, I thought, you knew," replied Hussi Kahn.

"But we thought that Prince Sinji was a rotter!" said Handforth. "We thought you had been pinched by the enemy."

"It was a plan," replied Hussi quietly. "It was deemed unwise to take me away in the ordinary manner. It was felt by Prince Sinji that my guardian in London would object. It was also felt that the British Government would, possibly, keep me in England."

"And so they carried you off in that aeroplane, and made a non-stop flight to India?"

"It was a wonderful voyage," said Hussi enthusiastically. "And yet, I believe, the outer world knows nothing of it. Is it not always thus? Those who perform the feats of the greatest merit are not rewarded by their fellows."

"Prince Sinji will be famous all the same," said Nipper. "The truth will come out one day, Hussi. And who is this Prince Sinji, anyhow?"

"He is head of our government, in Sakri," replied Hussi Khan. "He is my honourable father's most trusted and faithful minister. He is even now in Sakri, in full command of our army, and in full charge of the palace, during my honourable father's absence."

"And we thought he was a wrong 'un," said Handforth. "Well, of course, how could we think anything else? You were kidnapped from Travers' place, in Essex, and we naturally believed that you were in the hands of the enemy. Even Mr. Lee believed it—and so did Dorrie. That's why we came out to India. So that we could rescue you."

"And now," said Hussi gravely, "you are in more exquisite trouble than ever. It is a great sadness, and an appalling misfortune. Yet, my schoolfellows, I am grateful indeed for your company."

"On the whole, Hussi, we haven't done so badly," said Travers contentedly. "We've shown the Ameer just what we think of him, and we have rescued your father and brother. I say 'we,' but, by Samson, Mr. Lee has done most of the hard work. A real corker is Mr. Lee!"

"It's not fair that he should have everything on his shoulders," said Handforth. "The rest of us ought to take our share. And I say that it's all wrong for us to be inside like this. Why can't we take our turns——"

"Dear old fellow, do you mind putting on a new record?" asked Travers languidly.

"I am afraid we have heard this one before."

"Oh, rats!" grunted Handforth.

Nobody would listen to him, and he went out into the narrow stone passage, disconsolate and grumpy. Church and McClure followed him, like a couple of faithful watchdogs. They knew, from long experience, that Edward Oswald could not be trusted alone. He could generally be relied on to get himself into an unholy mess if he was left to his own devices.

"Oh, you're here, are you?" he said as he looked round and saw them. "Well, I don't want you!"

"Why can't you be reasonable, old man?" said Church anxiously. "We don't want to give Mr. Lee any trouble—or Dorrie, either. The situation is pretty serious here, and it might get worse at any minute. They say that the enemy is gathering for a stronger attack."

"But they don't know anything for certain," said Handforth. "They haven't sent any scouts out, have they?"

"I don't think so."

"Then they ought to send scouts out!" argued Handforth. "I never heard of such a thing! Here we are, hemmed in, with the enemy all round us, and nobody has gone out to do any scouting. And that's our job!"

"How is it?"

"We're boy scouts, aren't we?" asked Handforth triumphantly. "Well, here's a chance for us to help. I'm going to suggest that we shall creep out, climb over the wall, and find out the strength of the enemy."

Church and McClure could not help grinning.

"You'd better not suggest that to Mr. Lee!" said Church. "If you do, he'll squash it on the spot!"

"By George! I suppose you're right!" said Handforth, after a thoughtful pause. "All right, then—I won't suggest it to him. Thanks for the tip, old son. We'll go out, scouting—without telling anybody!"

And Handforth meant it, too!



CHAPTER 19

Rough on Church and McClure!

H! So we're going out scouting, and we're not going to tell anybody?" said Church ominously.

"Is that it, Handy?"

"Yes; that's it!"

"You must be dotty!" said McClure. "Why, you don't suppose that we'll let you do it, do you?"

"You silly ass!" snorted Handforth. "If I make up my mind to do it, I'll do it! And I have made up my mind! Come on! Let's slip out before we're missed by the other fellows."



Another of the enemy's soldiers dropped to the ground within a foot of Handforth. But before he could recover his balance the burly junior's right shot out. Crash! The man dropped to the ground to keep his companion company.

Church and McClure instinctively clutched at their leader.

"Steady on, Handy!" said Church. "None of this!"

"Eh? What the dickens——"

"Cheese it!" went on Church. "It's about time you woke up! You hopeless chump! Do you think that Mac and I are going to help you in this crazy wheeze?"

"If you don't help me, I'll biff the pair of you!"

"As a general rule," said McClure, "we let you have your own way, Handy——"

"What!"

"We let you have your own way," repeated Mac. "It saves a lot of argument, and, besides, Churchy and I like to look fairly respectable. We don't want always to go about with black eyes and thick ears. So we allow you to have your own way."

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"But now and again there comes a time when we've got to squash you!" continued Mac, in a calm, determined voice. "This is one of those occasions, old man. We don't want to be nasty—we haven't the slightest intention of getting your back up. But you're not going out scouting!"

"By George!"

"Is that understood?" asked Mac.

"Why, you—you—you——"

"Answer the question, Handy!" said Church sternly. "It is understood that you're not going out?"

Handforth was breathless.

"You traitors!" he said bitterly. "You treacherous rotters! You calmly stand here, and tell me that you won't help me in a good cause like this! Don't you realise that it's most important that we should know the full strength of the enemy?"

"The only thing that we shall know, if you go out into the night, is that there'll be another body to bury!" said McClure.

"Hang it all, Handy, can't you see that it's madness?" he added earnestly. "Can't you see that you'll be committing suicide?"

"That's a hint that I shall make a mess of it!" said Handforth hotly. "When I go out scouting, I come back! And let me tell you this, my lads! I shouldn't be surprised if I brought some prisoners with me!"

"Oh, my only topper!"

"I don't want you fellows with me now!" continued Handforth disparagingly. "I wouldn't have you as a gift! You'd only be more trouble than you're worth! So you can both go and eat coke!"

"No; we'll go and tell Mr. Lee!" snapped Church. "That's better than eating coke!"

Handforth started.

He hadn't thought of this contingency. It was quite on the cards that Church and

McClure would tell Nelson Lee or Dorrie, or somebody else. And then, of course, he would be stopped. They, like his chums, had an extraordinary lack of faith in him. Handforth was never able to understand it.

"Just a minute!" he said thickly. "Hold on, you fellows!"

And then, before Church and McClure could realise what their leader was about to do, he gave them a violent shove. They shot forward, and went slithering down some stone steps which led to a kind of passage, at the bottom. Handforth had seen that his chums were just opposite that handy stairway.

"Hi!" gasped Church. "What the——"

But Handforth had followed them down, and he gave them another shove—before they could have time to regain their breath. The next second they found themselves pushed headlong into a small stone cell. It was one of many under the fortress. These cells were presumably used for prisoners in time of battle.

Slam!

The door closed, and Handforth breathed hard with triumph.

"That's what you get for trying to ruin my plans!" he said, through the door. "You can jolly well stay there now, you bounders! I'll let you out when I come back!"

"Handy!" came a gasp from the other side of the door. "Don't go, old man! We're not wild with you for doing this. For goodness sake, don't go! You'll never come back!"

"Rats!" said Handforth.

He strode off, mounted the steps, and looked round him cautiously. He was aware of some dull thuds from below, but he took no notice. He went off towards the back of the fortress. The floor space was considerable, the whole building being rambling and crudely constructed. There were passages leading off in all sorts of ways, and stairs leading down here, and stairs leading down there.

But Handforth had a general idea of the ground floor, and at last he found himself at a small door, of immense strength, provided with enormous bolts.

He pulled the bolts back, opened the door very carefully, and looked out.

"Good egg!" he murmured gloatingly.

He caught a glimpse of the twinkling stars, about to perform a very foolhardy thing. It struck him that it was quite in order. He was going out scouting—just to find the strength of the enemy. Handforth was an optimist.

He caught a glimpse of the twinkling stars, and he could see the outline of the surrounding wall, on the far side of the open space. He could also see the rocks, beyond, and the hills rising in sinister, shadowy outline.

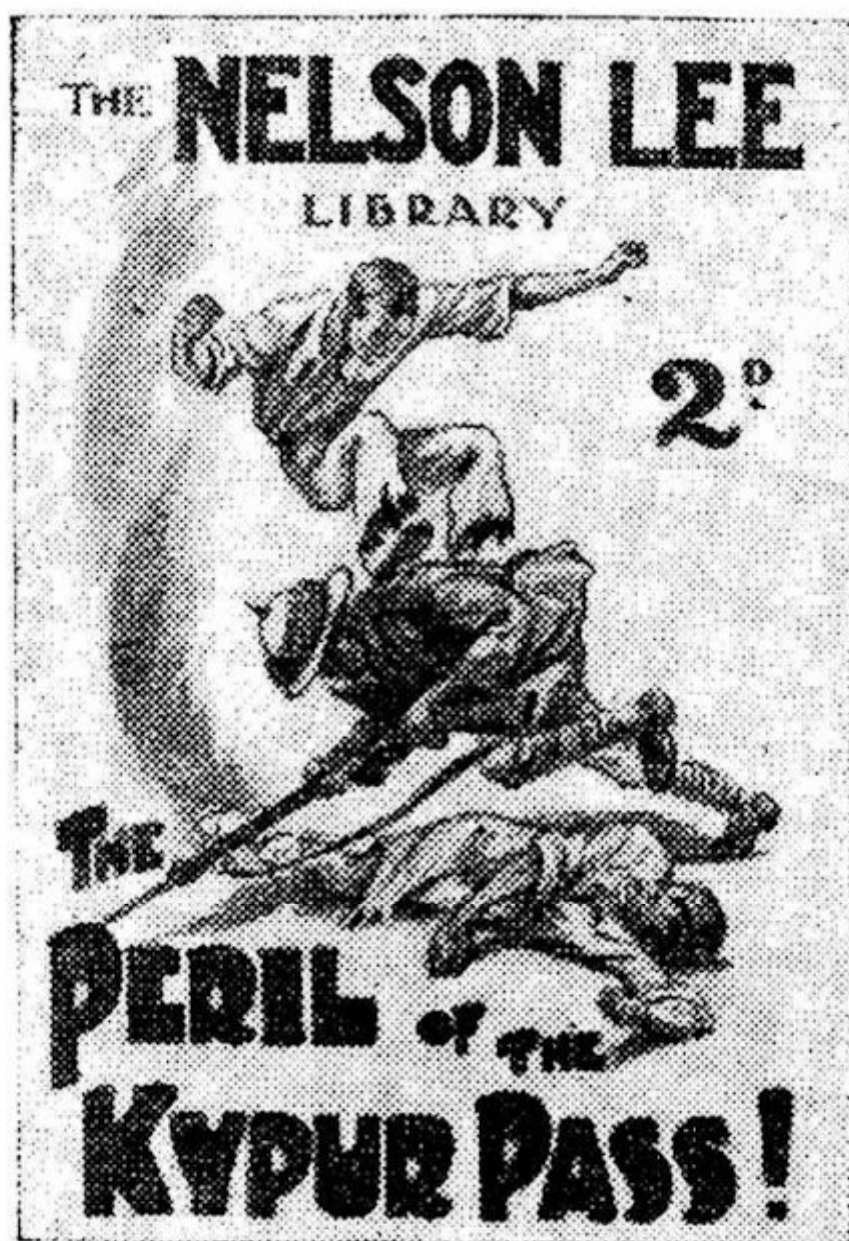
It was really a perfect night, with a cooling breeze coming down from the mountains. And everything was silent. There was not even the distant sound of a rifle, or the boom-

ing of a gun. Every sign of activity had ceased.

"I don't like the look of it!" murmured Handforth, frowning. "They're up to some deep game. I shouldn't be surprised if I find them creeping up in thousands. That's about the size of it! They're going to make a surprise attack! Well, I'm going to make sure!"

He closed the door softly behind him, and stole forward into the black shadows. At about this time, Nipper and Travers and one or two others became aware of thudding noises; and when they investigated they found

NEXT WEDNESDAY!



that the sounds were coming from the cells, at the bottom of the little stairway.

"Rummy!" said Nipper, frowning. "Who's down there? We haven't taken any prisoners, that I know of!"

"Hadn't we better go and see?" asked Reggie Pitt. "Listen! I can hear voices, too! They're shouting!"

They hurried down the worn steps, and two or three moments later Church and McClure were amongst them, frantically asking if they had seen Handforth.

"No; we don't know where he is!" said Nipper. "What on earth are you doing in here? Did he lock you in?"

"Yes!" gasped Church. "He said he was going out scouting, and we protested. So he locked us in——"

"Scouting!" shouted Nipper, aghast. "You're not telling us that Handy has gone out of the fortress?"

"I don't know; but he said he was going!" ejaculated Church, in dire alarm. "You know what an ass he is! He's reckless enough for anything!"

"How long ago was this?" asked Nipper.

"About five minutes."

"Quick, you fellows!" said Nipper sharply. "We shall have to make a search! If that idiot has gone, we shall never see him again! He'll be potted, as sure as Fate!"

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"He's always the same!" sighed Travers. "It's merely a repetition of what he did on the crag. Don't you remember how he punched the Ameer in the eyes, and nearly got dropped over the abyss?"

A voice came down from the other passages.

"What are you boys doing down there?" said the voice. "There is too much shouting going on here——"

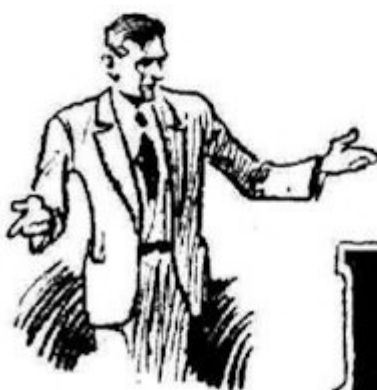
"Guv'nor!" exclaimed Nipper, running up. "It's Handy! The silly ass has sneaked out!"

"Out!" repeated Lee. "You don't mean——"

"He's gone scouting, sir!" exclaimed Church. "We tried to stop him, but he shoved us down into these cells, and locked us 'in!'"

"He will have to be brought back!" said Lee angrily. "Upon my soul! What will

that reckless young idiot be up to next? When we get him back, I'll put him in irons!"



CHAPTER 20

Handforth Enjoys Himself!

IN the meantime, Handforth had successfully reached the outer wall of the fortress.

He was, perhaps, a little disappointed. Everything was so quiet that he was afraid that his mission would be a frost. There was, he told himself, no fun in scouting for an enemy who wasn't there.

"It'll be a swindle!" he muttered. "Still, I might as well get over the wall, and have a prow round among the rocks. Won't do any harm, anyway."

He commenced climbing the wall. It was not very difficult, for there were plenty of niches where he could find handgrip and foothold. Foot by foot he mounted, and at last he was able to clutch at the top of the wall, and pull himself up.

His idea was to get astride, but it was just as well, perhaps, that he did not succeed. For some of the soldiers, on duty on the roof, might easily have potted him.

He hung there for a moment or two, looking over the wall. And he was instantly aware of faint whispers. He caught his breath in, and scarcely moved a muscle.

Then he made a startling discovery.

Men were climbing the wall from the other side at precisely this same spot!

If he climbed over the wall, and dropped, he would be amongst them. A moment or two earlier he had believed himself to be quite alone. But now, practically in the presence of the enemy, he became aware of a trickling sensation down his spine. He remembered, with a start, that he was unarmed. It hadn't occurred to him before starting out that it would be a good idea to take a weapon of some kind.

"My only hat!" he breathed.

As quietly as a shadow, he commenced the descent. He had climbed that wall quietly, but he went down like a ghost. Having reached the foot of the wall, he crouched there—waiting, his muscles tensed, his every sense on the alert.

He looked up, and he saw dim shadows moving immediately above him. Men were climbing the wall—were coming down! And they were like ghosts, too!

Thud!

Handforth nearly gave a gasp of surprise, for, without warning, one of the enemy soldiers had dropped to the ground, within a foot of him!

In the deep gloom, Handforth caught a glimpse of a dark brown face, and a curious sort of turban.

He heard a faint rattle, and then he saw some wires. He hadn't the faintest idea why

this man had come, or how many companions he had.

Handforth only knew that he was in a ticklish position, and he acted as he generally acted under such conditions.

Crash!

With all his strength, his right came round, and it went driving into the back of the enemy soldier's head. The man went down with only a faint kind of groan, nearly knocked out by that terrific right-hander.

Thud!

Another man came down, unaware of the disaster that had befallen his comrade. But before he could recover his balance, Handforth's right came round once more.

Crash!

The second enemy dropped in the dust, and Handforth looked up at the top of the wall, his face flushed, his knuckles tingling painfully.

"Come on!" he said invitingly. "The more the merrier!"

But there were no more, it seemed. Complete silence had descended once again. Then—

Crack!

A rifle sounded, and a bullet struck the wall within a foot of Handforth's head. He spun round, startled.

"Hi!" he yelled. "Steady there, you fat-heads! It's me!"

"Great glory!" came Lord Dorrimore's voice from the fortress. "Am I dreamin', or is that young Handforth's voice?"

"Steady on with that firing, Dorrie!" called Handforth. "Some of our chaps are trying to pot me!"

"Well, you can skin me for a rabbit!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore blankly. "What, in the name of all that's mad, are you doin' out there, young 'un? Here, I say, Lee—"

Nelson Lee came hurrying up.

"Did I hear you talking to Handforth, Dorrie?" he asked sharply.

"The young fathead is out there—over by the wall!" said Dorrie. "We heard a kind of scuffle, and one of the men fired. Then Handy, if you please, told us to go easy!"

"Handforth!" shouted Lee, leaning over the wall.

"It's all right, sir—no need to get excited!" said Handforth. "The whole thing's spoilt now. I was just going out on a scouting expedition, but I've been too busy—"

"Come into the fortress at once!" ordered Lee. "How did you get out?"

"By that little door, at the back, sir," replied Handforth. "It's really at the side, but—"

"Never mind that!" broke in Lee. "Come at once! I will meet you at the door, and see that it is securely locked and bolted after you are in."

Handforth grunted.

"Did you hear me?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir."

"Then do as I say," said the schoolmaster's detective. "Upon my word, Handforth, you have given me an anxious five minutes! Come into the fortress at once!"

Handforth promised, and he heard Lord Dorrimore chuckling. Nelson Lee had gone, and Handforth felt aggrieved. However, there was some little consolation. He noticed that the two enemy soldiers were beginning to come round. He bent down, seized them roughly by the scruffs of their necks, and dragged them across the yard.

He found Nelson Lee waiting just outside the little door, and, behind, were a number of the juniors.

"Come on, Handforth!" said Lee sharply. "What are you bringing with you?"

"Prisoners, sir."

"Prisoners!" ejaculated Nelson Lee, startled.

"Two of 'em, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

In spite of themselves, the juniors could not help bursting into a roar of laughter. It was so characteristic of Handforth to announce coolly that he had brought some prisoners with him. Any other fellow would probably have got excited; but Handforth took it all as a matter of course.

Nelson Lee ran out, hardly able to believe his ears. But a moment later he was convinced. The two soldiers were becoming active, and they looked like giving trouble.

"Send two or three men down, Dorrie!" called Lee swiftly. "Handforth has spoken the truth. Amazingly enough, he has brought a couple of prisoners with him!"

One of the Kurpana officers spoke a few words, and two men dropped down from the shallow battlements. The prisoners were disarmed and promptly taken charge of.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Handforth!" said Nelson Lee wonderingly.

"What did you do to those two men?"

"Punched them on the head, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But how on earth did you get the chance to punch them on the head?" asked Lee. "Good gracious! You ought to be dead! It's a wonder they didn't put their bayonets through you!"

"They never had the chance, sir," said Handforth. "They dropped down from the top of the wall, and as they arrived I biffed them. You see, I was thinking about going out on a scouting tour, but those two beggars stopped me. They were up to mischief, too. They were bringing some wires over the wall—"

"Wires?" said Lee sharply. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir, I saw them."

"Come—we'll go inside," said Lee shortly. "And, after this, Handforth, you must promise me to—"

Boom!

Once again the report of a gun. A shell screamed; the sound grew louder—

Crash!

It struck in the courtyard, and there was a blinding, shattering explosion.

Handforth reeled over, and fell limply into Nelson Lee's arms!



CHAPTER 21

The Wounded Soldier!

HANDY!" shouted Church desperately. He and McClure and Nipper and one or two others crowded round in alarm. The shell had exploded well on the other side of the yard, but a splinter, apparently, had hit Handforth. Nobody else was touched.

"Stand clear, boys!" said Lee grimly. "I must carry him inside."

"Cheese it, sir!" said Handforth dazedly. "I don't want to be carried! I'm all right—nothing wrong with me!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Church. "We—we thought——"

"Never mind what you thought!" said Handforth, as he passed a hand over his forehead. "There's not a mark—— Hallo, what the—— My hat, I'm bleeding!"

Nelson Lee was relieved. The fragment of shell had only given Handforth an insignificant snip. His scalp was torn slightly, and, in consequence, he was bleeding. It was the shock, more than anything else, that had caused him to reel into Lee's arms.

"Take him inside, boys," said Lee. "I think perhaps I had better remain here for a few moments. Take him straight to the Red Cross room."

"Yes, sir," chorused the others.

Nelson Lee ran lightly across the yard, and examined the wires that were still hanging over the wall. There were two of them with loose ends, and there could be little doubt why they were there. Those two men had been told off to plant them near the fortress. Other men, perhaps, were ready to bring high explosives. The object being, of course, to blow the place up.

Handforth, by pure chance, had captured the two men with the wires. And, because of that, it was quite possible that the whole scheme would come to nothing.

Nelson Lee called to some of the men, and very soon they were busy at the wire, hauling the two lengths in. Lee was rather curious to see how much of it there was; for by this he could judge, roughly, how far away the enemy was operating.

But the wires came to a sudden end, and there seemed every indication that they had been cut. The enemy, finding out that the plan had failed, had abandoned the project. There was little chance of them succeeding now, since the garrison was on the alert.

"Well done, Handforth!" murmured Nelson Lee under his breath.

But when he went into the Red Cross room his brow was stern.

"And how is the wounded soldier?" he asked gravely.

Handforth was surrounded by girls. He didn't mind this so very much, particularly as one of them was Irene. But he hated

being fussed over. The girls had bathed his head with antiseptic, and they had wound yards of lint round him. His head was swathed in the stuff.

"You seem to have been badly hit, Handforth," added Nelson Lee, as he came forward with a concerned expression on his face.

"It's nothing, sir—only a scratch!" said Handforth. "I've told Irene and these other girls——"

"He must be kept quiet, sir," said Irene, with a twinkle in her blue eyes. "I believe he's inclined to be a little feverish. He's been talking very deliriously."

"That's just your little mistake, Irene," said Church. "That's the way Handy always talks."

There were many grins, and Handforth writhed.

"I think you are right, Irene," said Nelson Lee, as he gave Handforth a critical examination. "This wounded soldier must be very carefully attended to. He must not be allowed to walk; he must be kept quiet, with——"

"Here, I say, sir!" gasped Handforth. "No rotting, you know! These girls have been playing enough tricks on me! I'm not winged! I want to take part in the defence of the fortress!"

"I rather fancy you have done your share, young 'un," replied Lee. "You have stopped an attempt to blow us up!"

"My only hat!" said Handforth, staring.

"They have commenced shelling again, and it is possible that another attack will develop," continued Nelson Lee. "You and the other boys will only be called upon as a last extremity. While there are sufficient men to do this work, we shall not call——"

Crack-crack-crack-crack!

Suddenly a rattle of rifle fire broke out, clearly audible in this Red Cross room. And, on top of it, came the crashing explosion of three or four shells, in quick succession. Immediately after, the air became filled with the shattering din of rifle-fire.

"Remain here, all of you!" said Lee quickly. "I will come down again as soon as the affair is over. I do not suppose it will be much."

He hurried to the roof, where the garrison was grimly fighting. The air was deafened by the shattering reports of rifles, and Nelson Lee found Dorrie bending over a badly injured man. A shell had struck a corner of the battlements, and three men were down.

"They mean it this time, old man!" said Dorrie. "Swarm of 'em! Comin' up like ants!"

Flares were sent hurtling over towards the walls, and they blazed up, adding to the general weirdness of the scene. And now it could be seen that the enemy was swarming over in great numbers. This was a determined attack.

A machine-gun commenced to spit and splutter close to Lee, and he found Kumah

Bhat operating it. The gun was doing deadly destruction amongst the ranks of the enemy.

"It's all right, sir!" said the commandant. "I can attend to this side. Keep your eye on the rear, will you, sir? I believe they're coming up in droves over there!"

Nelson Lee could hear them. Pandemonium seemed to be let loose. This was no mere skirmish, like the first attack, but a carefully planned assault, with hundreds of men in reserve.

Nelson Lee had no doubt that the Amceer's main army had made the passage through the grim Kypur Pass, and the invaders were determined to wipe out this fortress and all its occupants.



CHAPTER 22

In Desperate Straits!

CRASH!

Lord Dorrimore, standing on the edge of the battlements, swung his rifle round,

and struck man after man as they swarmed up from the ground.

It was a hand-to-hand struggle now.

Rifles were useless. Scores of the enemy had been killed, and their comrades had pressed on, until they were yelling and screaming round the walls of the fortress itself. They had been climbing up and, in more than one place, they had broken through.

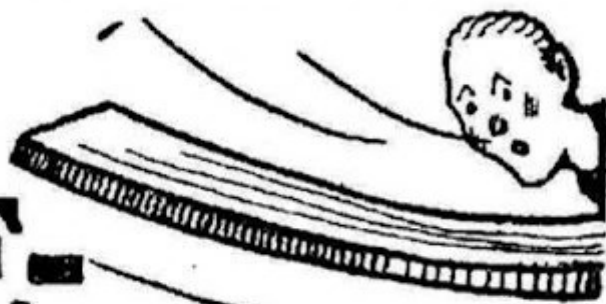
But the Amceer's men were finding that these defenders were desperate; that they were terrific fighters.

And it was a shock for the Rishnir soldiers.

They had been told that the men of Kurpana were weaklings, and that they would surrender when hard pressed. Instead, these plucky, wiry Indians were fighting like men possessed. How could they do otherwise, with the example of Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Manners before them? For these three were not only directing operations, but taking an active part in the fighting.

Right inside the building, the St. Frank's fellows were in a fever of impatience and anxiety. The girls, too, were pale-faced and breathless. Not that they had much time to

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think of the dreadful possibilities if the enemy prevailed.

For they were kept busy all the time. Wounded men were being brought in, and they had to receive attention. A good many of the women from the Idar Palace were now acting as nurses, too, and they all had their hands full.

"How long will it last?" asked Nipper tensely. "I feel that we ought to be helping——"

"If it was necessary for us to help, they would call upon us," said Travers. "The fact that we're left alone proves that the battle is going to favour us. We're the reserves, don't forget; and we haven't been called upon yet."

"But we feel so helpless!" muttered Pitt. "We're just idle—just passengers. I'd rather be in the thick of the fighting, with all its dangers, than cool my heels down here."

"Hear, hear!"

"Absolutely, dear old boy!"

But the suspense was over at last. After another half an hour had elapsed the noises of the battle grew less. The machine-guns ceased to bark, and the rifles only cracked occasionally.

Down one of the dimly-lit stone passages came Nelson Lee, blood streaming from a gash in his cheek, his left arm roughly bound, and badly stained.

Behind him was Lord Dorrimore, equally knocked about, but quite cheerful.

"Well, sir?" asked Nipper.

"I think we have won, young 'un," said Lee wearily. "Heavens! There must be hundreds of dead! Our machine-guns and rifles created terrific havoc. And the enemy has drawn off. They broke through once or twice, but we managed to hurl them out again. The fortress is still in our possession."

"Hurrah!"

"When do we have a turn, sir?" asked Handforth eagerly. "We want to take our share——"

"You will doubtless have ample opportunity to fight to your heart's content before long," said Nelson Lee significantly. "I am afraid our defence force is sadly depleted. Five men are dead, and at least a dozen wounded. The numbers may be greater. We cannot tell until daylight comes."

Cra-a-ash!

A shattering, devastating explosion sounded, and the whole passage shook and shivered. Wild shouts arose from a far corner of the fortress, and there was the sound of running feet. Nelson Lee hurried off at once, calling to the boys not to follow.

When he returned, ten minutes later, his

expression was even more haggard than before.

"Four more men dead!" he said gruffly. "A shell penetrated the wall, and did considerable damage. It was necessary for us to be careful with the water."

"Why, what do you mean, sir?" asked Nipper curiously.

"The shell has deprived us of our main water supply," said Lee. "Practically every gallon has drained away. There is no water in the fortress beyond the few jugfuls that are in the Red Cross room."

The statement did not sound very fateful, but Nipper, among the boys, at least, knew how dreadful it really was.

No water!

At the moment, perhaps, it did not mean much. But on the morrow, in the glaring heat of the day, with many wounded to care for—— It was a grim prospect.

For, without water, the garrison would soon be reduced to madness. And there was no possibility of obtaining a fresh supply. For the fortress was completely surrounded. The enemy was entrenched everywhere. There were thousands of the Ameer's men gathering round—and more were coming!

It seemed, indeed, that the resistance was hopeless.

For what could this mere handful do against the mighty hordes of the Ameer of Rishnir? How could they hope to live through the coming battles?

On the morrow, no doubt, the greatest assault of all would be launched. And then, when the defences gave way, the enemy would sweep through, and a complete massacre would be done.

It would be so easy, so swift. Once there was a big breach in the defences, there would be no stopping the enemy. They would take possession, and butcher them all.

That the position was desperate was clear to all. Their water was gone, their ammunition was running low. And the enemy was gathering in greater and greater strength.

Would the fortress be able to hold out? Would they withstand the siege until the relief force from Sakri broke through? Could they live until the British Tommies arrived?

For the moment, the ruthless Ameer of Rishnir was defeated. His forces were held, and it was inevitable that he would be dethroned and robbed of his powers.

But would the relief armies get to this isolated outpost in time to prevent the massacre of these British schoolboys and school-girls?

THE END.

(Yes, will they? Don't forget the Ameer of Rishnir is grimly determined to capture the St. Frank's party, and he is not likely to allow anything to stand in the way. He will go to almost incredible lengths to achieve his object, utterly regardless of the consequences. In next week's exciting yarn, entitled "The Peril of the Kypur Pass!" matters reach a grand and dramatic climax. On no account miss reading it.)

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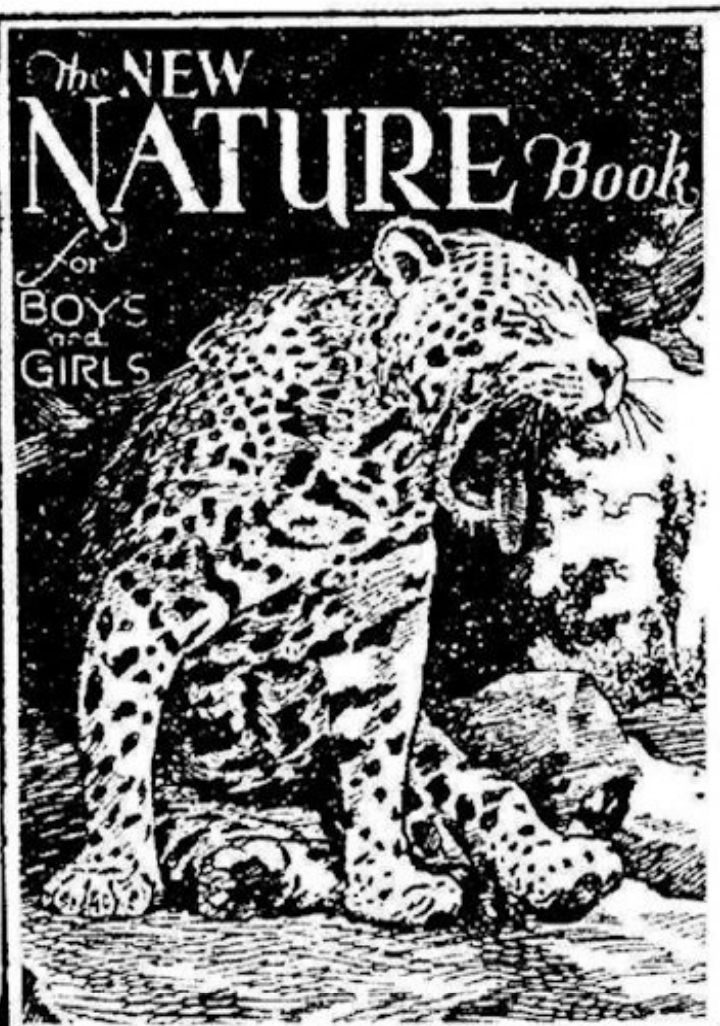


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In Quest of Information.

Mr. Brooks has no end of a job to please some readers. They like the yarns of St. Frank's, but they want further intelligence about the characters. For instance, points are asked for in regard to the Scout Troop. Now, Mr. Brooks has not found it necessary to deal specially with Scouts. There are some at the school, the same as elsewhere, but they are not in the story. The same with distant relatives of the best-known characters. Without a doubt these characters have sisters, cousin, aunts and all manner of people belonging to them, but it is a bit too much to expect the author to introduce the whole crowd. It is a fine tribute to the yarns, all this, but Mr. Brooks, though he is a whale at interesting detail, has to draw the line somewhere. Still, we can rely on him to put in all the facts that are really needful to the narrative.

The Camp Cook.

In preparation for the next camping-out season there's nothing like being well in advance. Jack Straw, of Manchester, says he is taking cookery lessons, as he was pitchforked into the job of head cook and bottle-washer-in-ordinary last time, and a fine old hash he made of the work. Tempers got badly frayed because of smoky stews, and meat so like leather as to make no odds. I hope he will emerge from the class a full-blown chef. Cooking is fairly simple, though naturally it calls for knack, and some folks can never catch this knack. You can see they have not an earthly of doing it just by a glance at their faces. Failure means a lot of cursory backchat. To cook well you want a nice style of treating the homely rasher—no blackened edges. An egg can be a definite failure in life by wrong handling, and one has known coffee—well, there were grounds for complaint—in fact, all grounds!

A Bunch of Letters.

G. R. Lewis, 67, Queen Street, Barry, South Wales, sends me an interesting letter about farming. He wants to hear from

readers on this subject, also photography and natural science. He wants to hear from readers in Canada, so that views may be exchanged about farming. He has a brother at Port Perry, Ontario.

Ross D. Chamberlin writes from 36, Grange Road, Erdington, Birmingham, about his amateur magazine. This is a real, live wire of a mag. He is anxious to have real school yarns of Handy & Co.

Home cinematographs appeal vastly to Albert E. Mitchell, 89, Angel Street, Hadleigh, Suffolk. Any reader the same way of thinking might write. A letter reaches me from Rio de Janeiro, the writer being Leslie Schama, of 211, Rua da Alfandego in that city. I am much obliged for his thumping compliment to the "N.L.L." He wants a complete set, old series.

John Franklin, 3, Eva Street, Rusholme, Manchester, has a good club going; he has been biking round the country and looked in at Lancaster Castle—a posh place, but he was disappointed.

Cyril Harris, 5, Tower Hill, St. Peter Port, Guernsey, Channel Islands, set the fashion of reading the "N.L.L." in his island. Guernsey is now going strong.

A Southampton chum wants details concerning date of birth of a friend of his. He must apply to Somerset House, London.

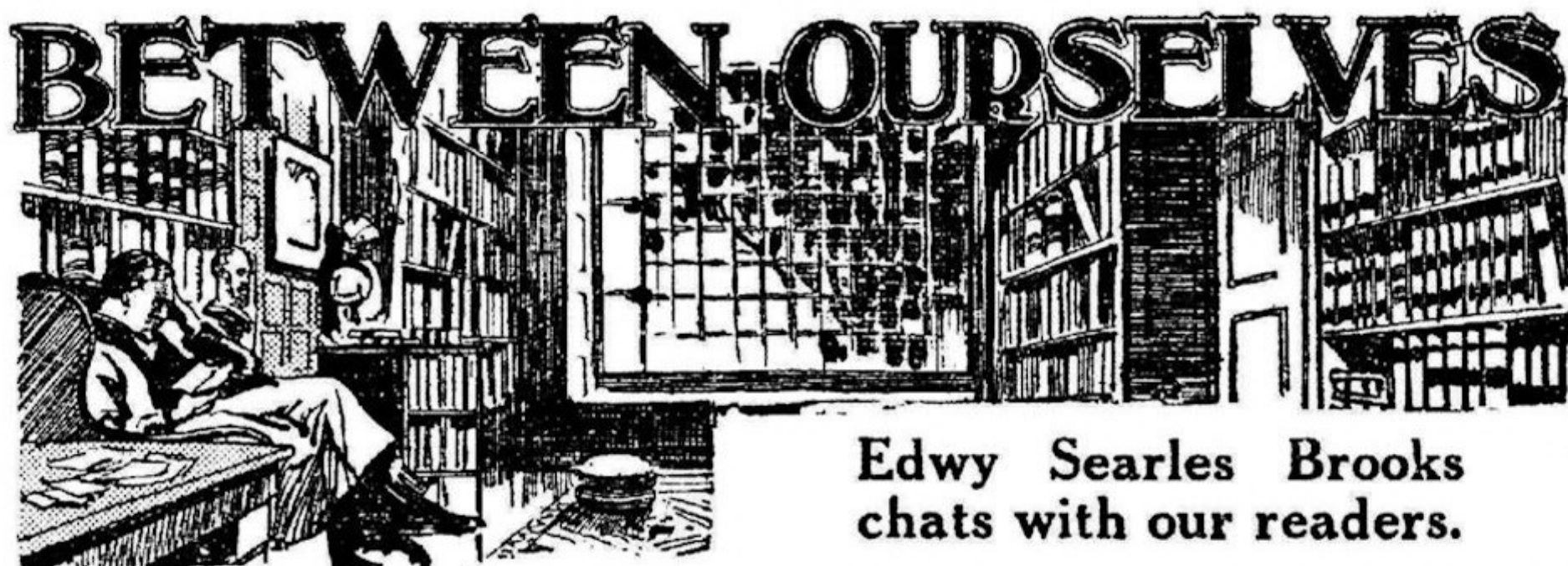
Will any reader in Bradford, Yorks., correspond with George Halliwell Mason, 174, Oakfield Road, Anfield, Liverpool?

S. L. Wise, 210, Kensington Crescent, Swansea, wants to hear from stamp collectors anywhere.

More Acknowledgments.

Miss Dorothy J. Smith, c/o Mrs. Mitchell, 10, Hillside Street, Edinburgh, sends a grand tribute to the "N.L.L." She wants to hear from girl readers interested in sport and films.

Bert J. Edwards, "Lamorna," East Hill, Tuckingmill, Camborne, Cornwall, wants Nipper to have a fair old bust up with the Remove. He also wants to hear from those keen on photography and films.



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 Fleet way House, Farringdon St., LONDON, E.C.4.

I'VE just been reading through an extraordinarily nice letter from Ralph Sewell—(Yes, Ralph, old man, you are quite right about my birthday)—and he raises an interesting point. It is one I have dealt with before, so I shan't say much about it now. He suggests that "a good number of readers would agree that a permanent cover design is not a bad idea." He thinks it would be a lot better if we had a really artistic sort of cover without any illustrations on it. And yet, in this same batch of letters, there is one from N. Brewerton. And N. Brewerton says: "I think the suggestion of a uniform cover design ought to be taken out and buried in the deepest, darkest recess." Now, what the dickens am I to do? Here we have two totally opposite views. And I expect hundreds and thousands of you will have totally opposite views, too. And as, after all, it's a purely editorial matter, the best thing I can do is to dry up.

Handy & Co., and all the rest, are not taken from living persons, Eric W. Neale. Jarrow, Sopp, and Fellowe will be trotting into the yarns again sooner or later. A revival of the "St. Frank's Magazine" depends chiefly on whether it would be popular with a large majority of readers.

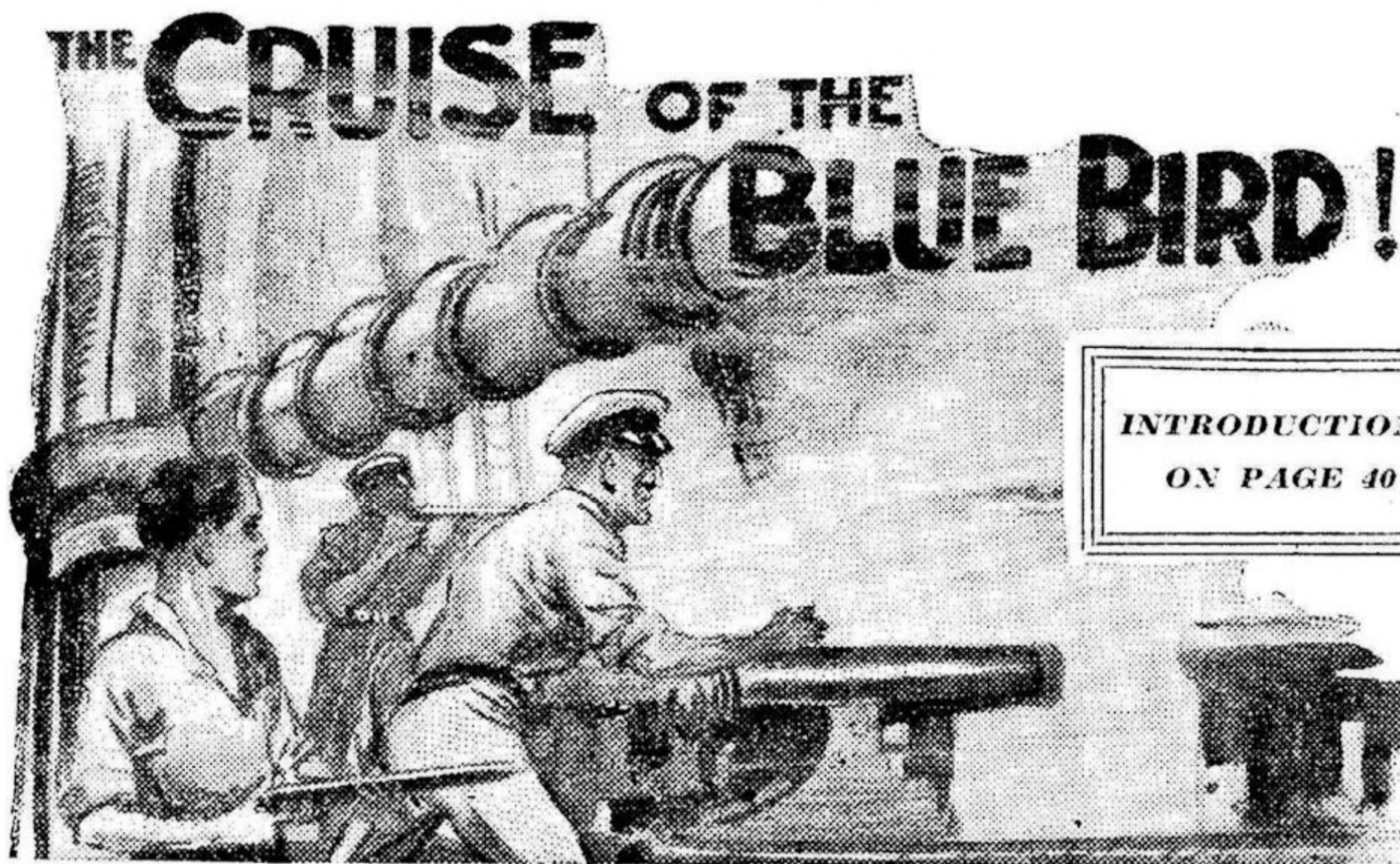
Do you want the St. Frank's yarns turned into love stories. "O. K."? You'd like jealousy to be stirred up between the St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girl chums by the introduction of rival new boys or new girls. That would want very careful handling without a love interest. I'm afraid such a theme would be out of place, and thoroughly unpopular in Our Paper.

Yes, Micky Sullivan, I did write all the old "St. Frank's Magazine"—including, of course, the Clarence Fellowe Parodies. This is the letter in which you asked me to call you "Mick" instead of "Terry." But I started some time ago, as I had others of your weekly letters in hand to acknowledge. You'll notice I've tacked on a "y." Somehow, it seems to suit you better that way.

Of course I'd like to have that photo of you as an untidy lad of twelve or thirteen, Hugh Reginald Holmes (Regent's Park), and if you throw in the one at the age of six, with your two sisters, I shan't grumble a bit. And if you like to go one better and complete the series by including the one at eighteen months, taken with your elder sister, so much the better. Fancy thinking "these are of no use" to me! Why, if any of you readers were to send me complete series of pictures of yourselves (one for each year of your lives, or something of that sort), I should treasure them like the dickens. I'm not going to say "No!" to any sporting offers of that kind. No jolly fear! There's plenty of room in my albums—and on my study walls—for all the photos you like to shoot along. But don't expect a series of photos of myself in return, will you?

"Surfer" is terribly keen upon an Australian series. Like nearly all the other Aussie readers, he wants me to write a series about the St. Frank's chaps "Down Under." In fact, he even says: "If you only gave the word in 'Between Ourselves,' practically all the chaps out here would write and write loads of letters describing anything you want to know. I for one would write two letters a week willingly, and I know I am well supported out here. Every Australian reader waits and watches expectantly for the slightest indication." Well, all you Australian readers, I can't promise anything definitely, but it will be a big step towards that Australian series if you get busy and write me those letters, giving me all sorts of scenic descriptions, railway conditions, weather reports, and so on. Whatever happens, I shall be jolly interested to get such letters, so I'll leave it at that for the present.

ALL THE GLAMOUR OF THE SOUTH SEAS!



By COUTTS BRISBANE

The battle's never lost until its won, says Jack and Ned, and jingo, boys, they never said a truer thing in their lives! Get started on this amazing tale of peril and adventure right now!

Left to a Terrible Fate!

PAPA BENOIST said to settle them on hand," objected one of the Frenchmen. "We waste time that way. We cannot stay to see the fun!"

"It is none the less certain. Do as I say. It is not far, and there is time. Here, take this cord from my pocket! And you, pig, take that!"

He kicked Ned heavily in the ribs, then fell to tying up his wounded hand, while the others bound the boys' hands securely behind them. Neither said anything. There was nothing to say. They were doomed to an awful death, and so far as they could see, nothing on earth could save them.

But this silence didn't please the wounded man. He wanted to hear them cry out, to beg for mercy, to give him the chance of deriding them.

"What, my little pigs, have you nothing to say?" he snarled. "You understand some French, I know." And he kicked Ned again. "Understand, you are to be tied to the coral and the tide will come up and the sharks will eat you a little bit at a time, yes!"

"I understand," replied Ned. "I under-

stand, too, that the sharks are better than you. What I do not understand is that you should be Frenchmen."

"Frenchmen! Ha! I spit! I am of no country, I am a wolf. Yes, we are all wolves. You English are fools. You swallow the tale Papa Benoist tells you, you fools. You do not know that we were all going to Noumea, for life, yes. And the storm comes, and we rise up and kill the keepers and the crew, yes, just as we will kill your people. All but Pascal and Voisin, and those we have settled when they begin to think they would tell you, yes! Papa Benoist was the clever one. How he wept over the poor Pascal and the poor Voisin!"

The scoundrels roared with laughter, as picking up the boys, they began to carry them along the path towards the further beach.

So at last, when it was too late, Ned found all his vague suspicions realised. He had heard of Noumea, the headquarters of the French penal settlement on the island of New Caledonia, where the very worst of French criminals were confined. He shuddered as he thought of the abysmal treachery of these brutes in human form, of Benoist's monstrous hypocrisy.

"Who are they? What are they going to do with us?" asked Jack hoarsely.

"They are convicts who were being taken to Noumea. They murdered the crew of the ship. They are going to murder all our people. They are going to tie us on the reef for the sharks to eat as the tide rises," replied Ned in a flat voice.

"Oh!" Jack could say no more. Everything had happened so suddenly that he couldn't yet realise that he was to die horribly within an hour or so. "But, dad? He and the men——" he added after a pause. "They will——"

"These brutes have planned to seize the ship when most of the crew are absent cutting wood. I think they'll do it, too."

"And we'll be dead, then!"

"Enough jaw!" came the voice of the wounded man. "This will do, me braves. Dump them here. This crag of coral was made for a stake. Make them fast."

Swiftly the boys were tied on opposite sides of a chunk of coral upheaved by the sea upon a level platform now just awash. Their captors walked round them. The wounded man, leering horribly, nudged them playfully in the ribs.

"In an hour at most," he chuckled. "See, the tide rises fast. Soon the sharks will come, and then—ah, they will nibble you lovingly! Farewell, pigs!"

He turned away, the three others wheeled and followed him. But even as the last one, the youngest of them all, turned about, his hand shot out, he seemed to touch the cords that secured Jack's arms about the coral.

"Good-bye, little pigs!" he said. "Run, if you can!"

The wounded man looked back.

"What are waiting for, Achille? Is it that you wish to kiss them farewell?" he snapped. "Hurry your pins! We must be on hand for the second cargo, eh? Oh, pretty!"

He blew a kiss to the boys, hastened up the beach. In half a minute the four had vanished. Twenty yards away from the boys a big fin appeared in the channel of water that led directly to their feet. The first shark had arrived.

For a few moments after the four convicts had disappeared into the bush, the boys remained motionless, their eyes fixed on that

ominous fin. The shark, in some uncanny way had located his prey. In a little, when the tide had risen high enough, he would swim in and begin his meal.

Then, with one accord, the pair strained on the cords that bound them. Ned tugged in vain. He only managed to draw tighter the knots that secured him. But as Jack brought his weight to bear, something gave. With a gasp of incredulous joy, he felt the cords about his arms loosen.

"I believe that fellow did—something—to them!" he wheezed. "I can move my hands. I can feel the rope rub against the coral."

"Then rub for all you're worth! Hurry! The tide's rising," replied Ned, trying vainly to turn his head far enough to see his cousin plainly. "Perhaps you may get loose in time. There isn't much. That shark will be able to get at us in less than half an hour."

Jack sawed madly, up and down; no easy matter, for he had but little play. Slowly, all too slowly, he felt the strands of the tough cords give way one by one. He tugged. Another strand or two gave way—and then, as he wrenched hard sideways, there was a snap, and his arms were free.

As the cord slipped down he saw that it had been cut in two places. The young convict, less hardened than his fellows, had slashed it with his knife, giving them a chance for life.

But his legs still remained fastened, and now the tide was washing about his ankles, drawing the cords that bound them tighter. Still, he could stoop forward, and the coral was strewn with a variety of empty shells which could be made to serve as knives. As ill luck would have it, he had left his pocket-knife in the cabin that morning, and though Ned had one in his pocket, Jack couldn't reach him.

Stooping as low as he could, he picked up a long shell like a razor-case, and began to saw at the cords. The shells cut well for a stroke or two, then the edge became blunt. He used the other side, made a little more progress, then the thing was useless. He picked up another, sawed hard, with the same result. And as though to remind him of the penalty of delay, the shark sailed past within a few yards. A little more, and the rising tide would give it water enough to dash in and try a snap.

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 attacked by a number of the Frenchmen and overpowered. It seems as if the foreigners intend to kill the two boys there and then, but one of their number stops them, and suggests that instead the boys should be tied to a reef of coral and left to be eaten by the sharks!

Another shell was used and discarded. He reached for one more and a swirl of water washed it out of his fingers as they touched it. A groan escaped his lips, and in a fury of despair he strained even harder than he had been doing. The rope, weakened by the sawing, gave way, and he stumbled forward, only recovering himself in time to avoid plunging into the deeper channel where the shark waited.

With a shout of joy he turned to Ned.

"In my jacket pocket. My knife. Hurry!" gasped Ned hoarsely.

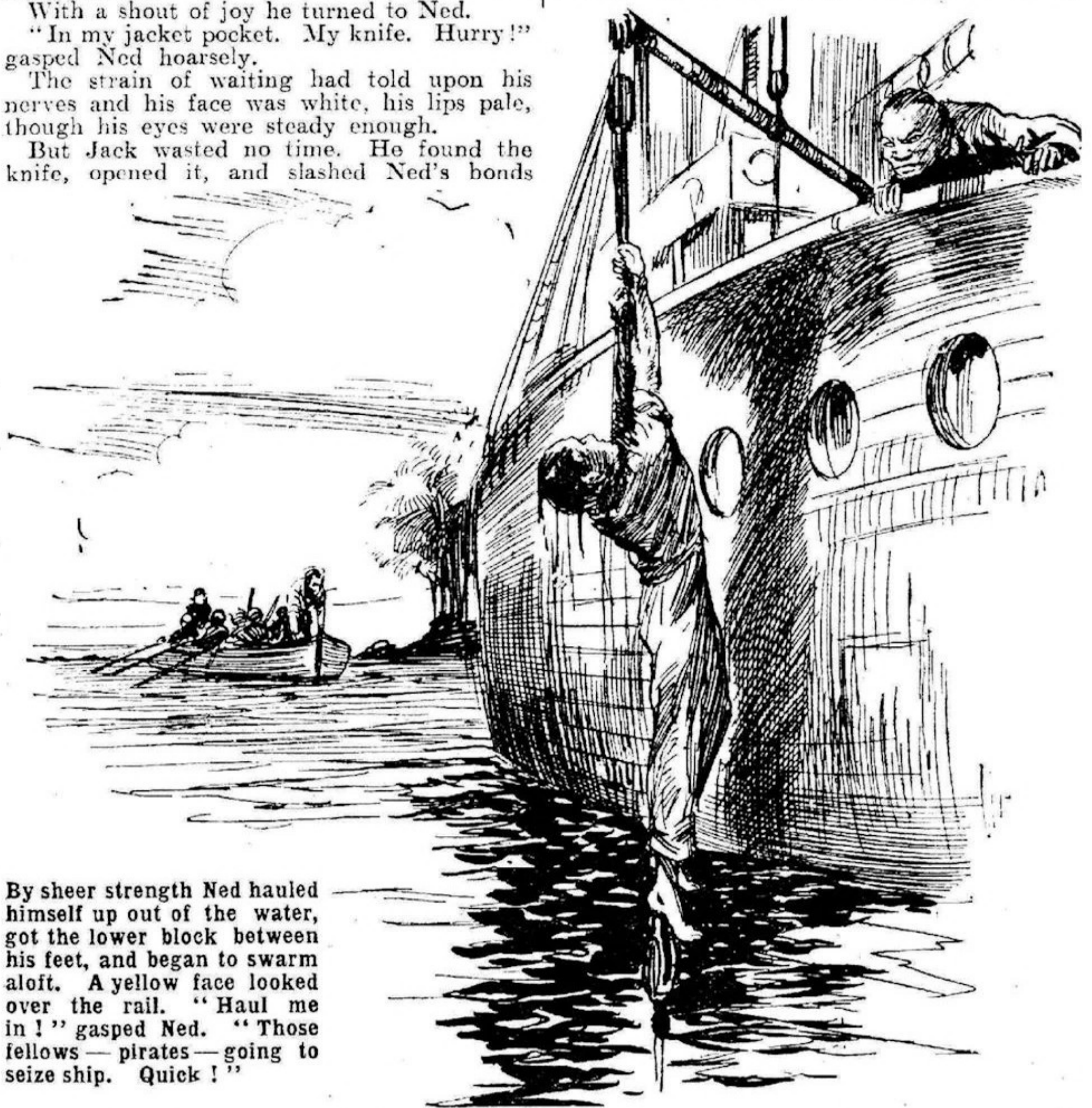
The strain of waiting had told upon his nerves and his face was white, his lips pale, though his eyes were steady enough.

But Jack wasted no time. He found the knife, opened it, and slashed Ned's bonds

and hauled him along the reef and on to the beach well above the high-water mark, where he let him drop.

"Now run. You can easily dodge round the huts and get to the lagoon if you're careful. I'll be after you in a minute. Oooh! I'm all pins and needles!"

Jack ran for the head of the path, dropped flat as he approached it, and went forward like a snake till he was certain that no one was



By sheer strength Ned hauled himself up out of the water, got the lower block between his feet, and began to swarm aloft. A yellow face looked over the rail. "Haul me in!" gasped Ned. "Those fellows — pirates — going to seize ship. Quick!"

loose. Ned's legs were numb, for the bonds had been drawn cruelly tight. But for Jack holding him up, he would have collapsed upon the coral ledge.

"All — right — presently!" he whispered. "Gimme a hoist up, to the beach — and then run for all you're worth and try to get to the lagoon."

"Can't leave you here!" snapped Jack.

"You must. I'll be all right. I'll get into the bush and stay there till I can follow on. Lift!"

Jack drew his arms over Ned's shoulders

near. Then he rose and began to run, halting before every turn to scout the ground beyond. Thus he came to within glimpse of the French huts. He heard a clamour of voices on the beach, and saw a man run out of the large hut carrying several rifles wrapped in a bit of coir cloth.

Jack was still in time, then. But there were some Frenchmen already aboard the Blue Bird. If they saw him, if he hailed the schooner, they would know that the game was up unless they moved fast, and they would act at once. On the other hand, if he

went down the beach towards the spot where Captain Manby and the greater part of the crew were at work cutting timber, he would probably be too late. Since it was unlikely that they would be armed, they would be shot down by the convicts as they approached the schooner.

Should he go to the right and try to attract the attention of the only man likely to be on deck, Ah Moy? Or should he turn to the left and race towards Captain Manby and his party?

Captain Manby's Peril:

WHILE he hesitated, Jack heard a faint noise behind him. Wheeling round, ready to dive into the brush, which here was more open, he saw Ned coming towards him, hobbling painfully.

"What are you waiting for?" Ned whispered fiercely. "Where are they?"

"Some of them are down at the Leach. I saw a man carrying rifles."

"That's the second lot. If they get aboard, the game's up. C'mon!"

Ned lurched forward into the bush, crashing through it regardless of noise, though the Frenchmen were making such a racket of shouting and singing that it was unlikely they would be heard. Heedless of thorn bushes, the pair ran towards the lagoon and came out upon the beach beyond a little headland that concealed them from the Frenchmen.

The schooner lay not far off. They ran along till they were opposite to her. There was no one visible on her deck, though there were sounds below that told the Frenchmen were busy under the supervision of Mr. Sinclair.

"If we hail her, some of those brutes will hear us and twig. If we wait here, the boat will come along with the rest of them," said Ned, measuring the distance to the schooner with his eye. "There's nothing else for it. I'll swim off, and try to get aboard without attracting attention. You hook it along down the lagoon and warn uncle. Keep in the bushes and you'll be all right."

"But—the keeper?" asked Jack. He had had enough of sharks for one day. "And you're all shaky. Let me go!"

"No; I'm all right now, and I swim better than you. Hook it!"

With that Ned threw off his jacket and shirt and, clad only in his shorts, walked softly down the beach and waded gently into the lagoon, avoiding any splash that might serve as a call to meat to the ever-alert keeper.

Jack should have gone off at once, but he couldn't. He had to see whether his cousin would make the perilous passage or—He turned his gaze down the lagoon. Away near the entry he saw the familiar big fin, but it didn't turn towards the swimmer. The keeper had been caught napping.

So far as the shark was concerned, Ned was safe for the moment. Reluctantly Jack

turned away and headed through the bush for the lower beaches.

Ned swam steadily on. The distance wasn't great, and he could have made it in fast time with an overhead stroke, but that would have meant a certain amount of splashing.

From the French beach Ned, hearing a long-drawn halloo, glanced over his shoulder, and saw the boat putting off. He was seen. The shout was to warn the men on board.

Ned threw caution aside and put on the pace. He foamed through the water, came surging up on the port side of the Blue Bird, and, lunging up out of the water, caught the dangling boatfalls that hung from the davits where the quarter boat had been lowered.

By sheer strength he hauled himself out of the water, got the lower block between his feet, and began to swarm aloft, while the French boat, pulling its hardest, came swiftly towards the schooner.

A yellow face looked over the rail, bland, half-smiling.

"Haul me in! Call Mr. Sinclair! Those fellows—pirates—going to seize ship—cut throat!" gasped Ned. "Quick!"

"Hold on tightee," remarked Ah Moy, and threw his weight on the tackle. Up went Ned, swung inboard, found the rail, and tumbled on to the deck.

As he did so a face appeared over the sill of the main hatch, which was open. It was the face of the man whose hand Ned had slashed during the brief struggle in the banana-grove.

He had his wits about him, that fellow. Instead of attempting to climb out and close with Ned, he cast one glance across the water, saw the boat within a dozen lengths, dropped back into the hold, and shouted something unintelligible.

There was a scream, a shout from Mr. Sinclair, the thud of a heavy blow, another long-drawn screech from the throat of one of the Kanaka crew, then a yell of triumph. Ned leapt towards the charthouse, which was also the armoury. If he could only get a rifle he might yet hope to stop the convicts below from gaining the deck. He forgot that the men in the boat were almost alongside, and that he would be shot or stabbed within the next minute.

Ah Moy, the cool-headed, didn't. He saw that the boat would be at the gangway, the men below on deck, in another twenty or thirty seconds.

"No can do! Gettee reefee!" he screamed.

He darted to his galley, and emerged later with his broad-bladed, Chinese short sword, keen as a razor, in his hand. Then, grabbing Ned's arm, he shoved him towards the starboard rail.

Came a rush from behind. One of the convicts had managed to haul himself on deck, and, with knife held aloft, with more courage than discretion, had launched himself at the Chinaman.

Ah Moy ducked and, as he did so, swept up his sword. There was a smothered yell,

and down went the convict, bleeding from a wound in his side.

"Walkee reefee!" yelled Ah Moy, and took a header over the rail.

Ned followed, thus avoiding a bullet that spun through the space he had occupied a second before. He struck out as he entered the water, swam a few yards below the surface, and came up a yard or two behind the Chinaman.

Whack! Wheeoo!

A bullet smacked the water with a tremendous splash between the pair, and ricocheted away with a whine.

Down went Ah Moy, down went Ned. They came up in a bay of reef, where they were sheltered for a moment, and clambered out. Another bullet sent a shower of coral chips about their ears. Ned flashed a glance over his shoulder as he flung himself forward in Ah Moy's wake towards a hefty chunk of coral that promised momentary shelter, and saw that the boat was coming towards the reef full pelt. They tumbled down behind the rock, and for an instant were out of reach of any bullets.

"Walkee! Rifle got!" panted Ah Moy, in a wheezy whisper. "Alongee heah!"

He scrambled along on all-fours, Ned close behind him. Ned couldn't understand what the Chinaman meant. There couldn't be any rifles on the reef.

But there were!

The yellow man had stopped. He was lugging a roll of canvas covered with weeds from out of a cleft in the rocks. He unrolled it and brought to light six Winchesters, smeared with grease, and a number of boxes of cartridges.

He thrust one of the weapons into Ned's hands, and took one himself.

"Them loadee! Looke out! Thley comee! Eeah!"

Three men appeared abruptly, climbing over the coral. They paused to look about them, certain that they would locate the fugitives in a moment. Ah Moy and Ned fired almost together, wounded one man, fired again, and heard another yell. They fired a third shot, but by this time the targets had disappeared.

The convict crew had thought to kill Ned and the Chinaman easily, to shoot them down at close range. To be shot at themselves instead was a horrid surprise, especially as the bullets scored hits. They beat a hasty retreat back to the boat.

"Walkee!" snapped Ah Moy, as they disappeared. "No waitee! Catchee hold!"

Ned took hold of one end of the canvas, and the Chinaman took the other. Carrying the rifles and ammunition thus, they retreated down the reef towards the opening, keeping on the lower part towards the outer side. It was rough going, but they didn't notice it for the moment.

Ah Moy's head switched back over his shoulder continually, but there was no pursuit.

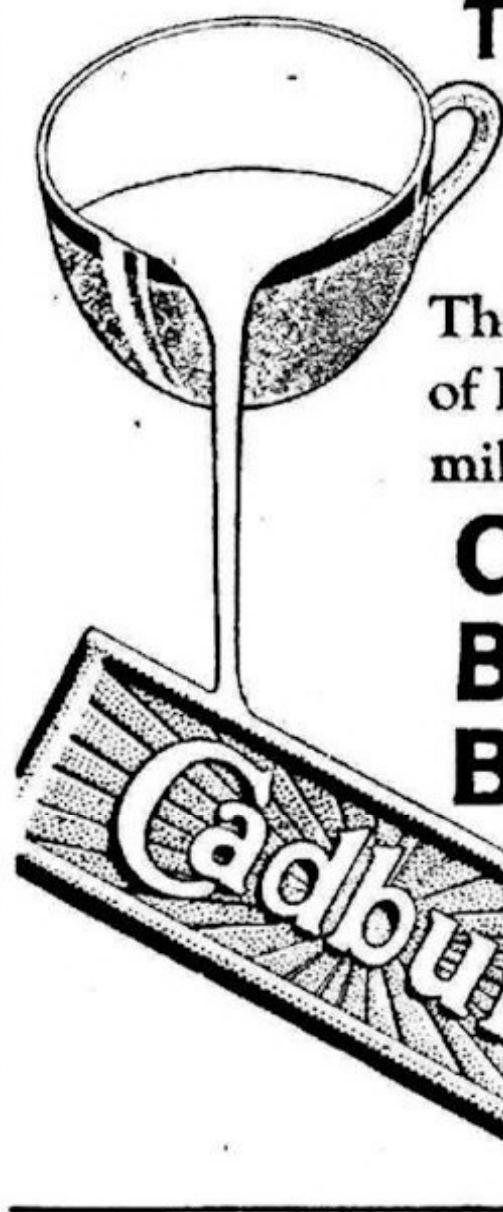
Papa Benoist, had been in that boat, and Benoist had the makings of a general in his cunning brain. He could distinguish between

the main objective and others of less importance. It would have been good to stop these two, especially as they had rifles. But he knew that Captain Manby must have heard the shots, and although he might not imagine the real cause of them, at least he would probably come up the lagoon to find out why they had been fired.

Papa Benoist intended to allow him to come close alongside and then settle him and the men with him with one volley.

(Will Jack warn Captain Manby in time? Look out for an exciting instalment next Wednesday).

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