

The **NELSON LEE**

2d

"The PIT of TERROR!"



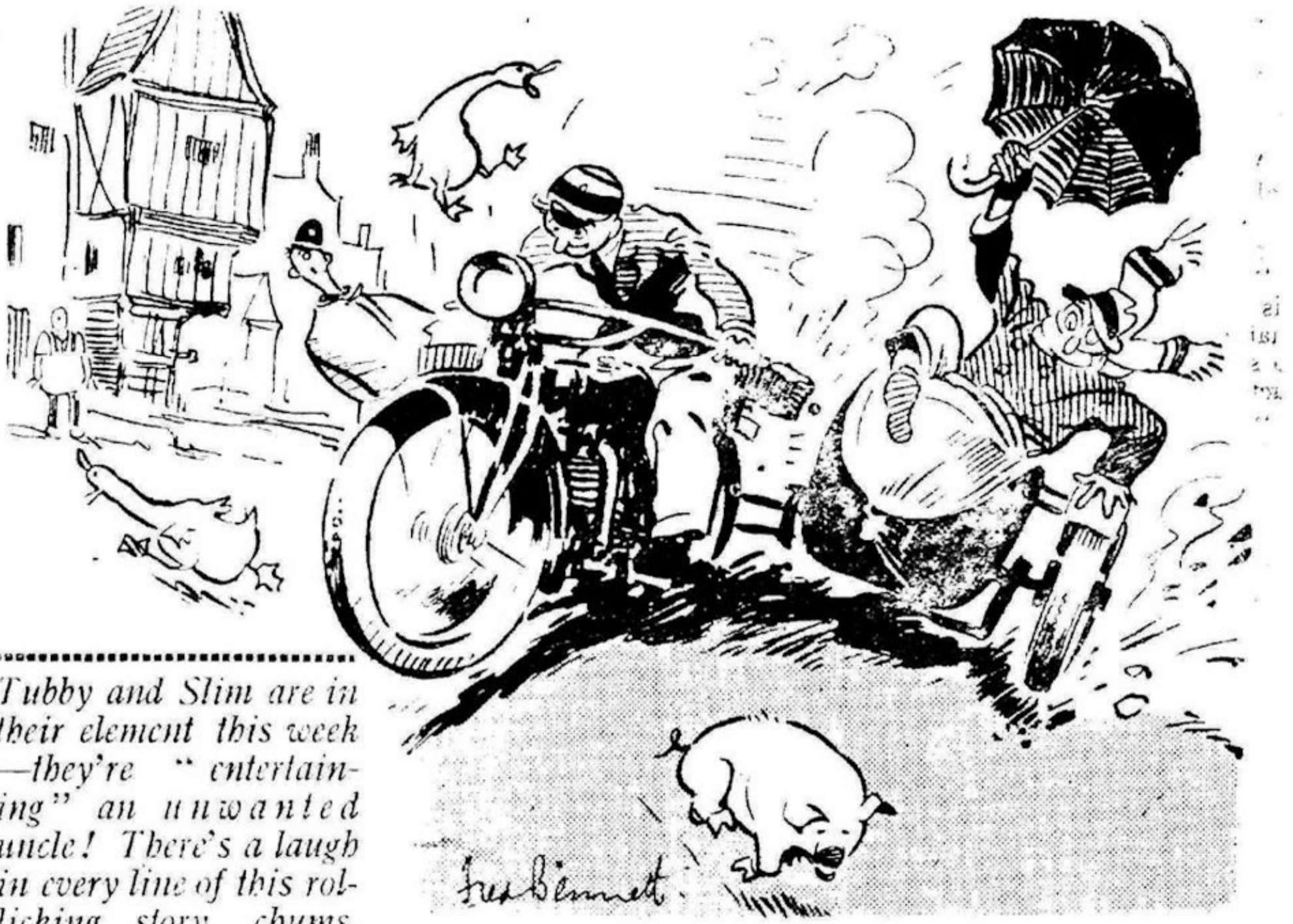
One of the many exciting adventures in this week's thrilling long complete yarn of amazing adventure, featuring Nelson Lee, the famous detective, and his schoolboy assistants.

New Series No. 3,

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

March 15th, 1930.

The Laughable Larks of TUBBY AND SLIM!



Tubby and Slim are in their element this week—they're "entertaining" an unwanted uncle! There's a laugh in every line of this rollicking story, chums.

An Unwanted Visitor!

TING-a-ling-a-ling! Crash! Thud!

Tubby Bootle suddenly awoke to find himself hurtling from his comfortable bed towards the floor.

"Ow!" he yelped, as he landed with a bump. "Thunder and earthquakes! Run for your life, Slim!" he shouted to his brother. "The thumping house is falling down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Slim Bootle, sitting up in bed and thoroughly awakened by the din. "It's all right, Tubby, don't get alarmed."

Tubby, seated on the floor and surrounded by pillows and blankets, folded his arms and gazed suspiciously at Slim.

"What's all right?" he demanded indignantly. "I'm on the floor—not you. I'm chucked out of bed by some upcanny power, and you sit there in the warm and say it's all right. Well, it isn't—see?"

"Ha, ha, ha! 'Scuse me, Tubby, but you do look funny sitting there."

"Oh, do I?" yelled that exasperated youth. "Ditto to you!" And he gave a sudden tug at his brother's sheets.

Slim was caught off his guard, and executed a graceful curve backwards to the floor on the other side of his bed. One of his flying

legs hit and tipped over the water-jug, which discharged its chilly contents into his ear.

"Oouch! Grrr!" burred Slim, shaking his head like a wet dog and scattering drops of water all around him.

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Tubby with great enjoyment. "'Scuse me, Slim, but you do look funny sitting—"

Biff! A well-aimed pillow from Slim hit him in the neck and effectively silenced the remark, and, grinning good-humouredly at each other, the Bootle brothers began to dress.

"Wonder how I came to fall out of bed?" mused Tubby, drying himself vigorously until his full round face glowed like a red apple. "Must have been dreaming of a scrap, and punched myself out."

"No! It was the alarm clock," said Slim, with an innocent look which did not deceive his brother.

"Talk sense, Skinny!" growled Tubby.

"'Sense' is my other name, old man," replied Slim. "I was only trying out an early-rising invention. The alarm clock is electrically wired to your bed, and when contact is made at the hour set, the mattress does a cakewalk and slings out the occupant. I faked the bed last night."

"Why, you—you fatheaded apology for a hairpin!" cried Tubby disgustedly. "Why didn't you try it on your own bed, you chump!"

"There was no need," said Slim, crossing his fingers for pax. "I knew that I should wake up if the early-riser was a success."

The breakfast gong sounded and put an end to the argument. Burying the hatchet, the two boys linked arms and descended to feed.

At the foot of the stairs their guardian, Colonel Squint, was standing, a deep frown puckering his purple visage. In his hand was a telegram.

"Ah, good-morning, boys!" he boomed to his wards. "You will not be glad to know that your Uncle George has invited himself to stay here for a week or two while he transacts some business in Tumbledown."

"What a nerve, sir!" exclaimed the boys.

"He's such a stingy old bounder, too," said Slim. "And he mugs himself up as if he were an invalid."

"Stingy!" burst out Tubby. "Why, I've heard that he wears two suits at once; he's afraid to leave one off in case the moth gets at it."

"Good gracious!" snorted the colonel. "You don't say so. I have met him only once, and I must say I cordially disliked the man, although he is a distant relative of mine."

"Same as you said, sir," agreed Tubby. "Why not write and put him off. Tell him the cat's got the mumps or something, and it's catching."

"Too late!" groaned the little soldier. "He's on his way."

"I'll tell you what, sir!" trilled Slim brightly. "You go off for the day and leave us to look after Uncle George. We'll guarantee that he won't stay over the night—won't we, Tubby?"

Tubby's features almost disappeared—he was smiling. Ruffling his tousled mop of hair, he joyously begged the colonel to adopt Slim's suggestion, and after some hesitation their guardian consented.

It seemed rather rough on the man; rather like cruelty to uncles to leave him to the tender mercy of the two boys, but he so detested the fellow that he felt he would do anything sooner than have him spoil a week or two of their existence.

With full permission to entertain Uncle George, the brothers set to work to concoct plans whereby that gentleman's sober life would be brightened up for an hour or two at least. They had been supplied with funds for the emergency, and the first disbursement was to the taxi driver, who was waiting with his decrepit cab in the station yard.

For the modest sum of half-a-crown, he agreed that his antediluvian vehicle should unaccountably break down half-way to the colonel's house. Tubby therefore waited for the train, whilst Slim streaked off into the

town to hire a motor-bike and side-car from a motor-dealing friend of theirs.

When the train from London arrived, Tubby pointed out Uncle George to the chauffeur, and then faded away to watch from afar off.

Out of the station entrance came the stingy uncle, staggering under the weight of a large suitcase. A hopeful porter touched his cap and offered to carry the case, but the traveller scowled down his long nose at him. The man, with a muttered "Hope the handle falls off," slouched away to try his luck elsewhere.

"How much to drive me to Colonel Squint's house?" asked uncle of the taxi-man.

"Five bob," replied that worthy.

"How much?" snarled uncle, aghast, winding a large scarf several times round his neck. "Do you think I want to buy the cab?"

"Huh!" said the chauffeur sentimentally. "Buy the cab. Why, I wouldn't exchange this car for a Haustin saloon."

"Ha, ha! You'd be lucky to change it for a penny balloon!" sneered the other. "Why, I've thrown better cars than this into the gutter."

"Oh, have you?" rejoined the driver excitedly. "And this old car's thrown better men than you into the gutter, so there! Make it four bob, and I'll take you. Cash in advance."

"Monstrous!" ejaculated the miserable old buffer, but he climbed into the cab, and they started jerkily out of the station yard.

They had been travelling for a few minutes when the cab suddenly stopped. Out got the driver and began to tinker with the works. After about five minutes of this pantomime, the man looked up at his fuming fare.

"Don't seem to be able to get her to go, mister," he said.

Uncle George stood up and raved, waving his umbrella with such angry energy that he caught the handle in his scarf and nearly strangled himself. It was at this moment that Slim chuffed up with his motor-bike combination.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, with an offside wink at the cabman. "Can I be of any assistance? Well"—he broke off with a surprised look—"if it isn't Uncle George! How d'you do?"

His uncle favoured him with a sour look.

"And who might you be?" he growled unpleasantly, for it was some years since he had seen the lad.

"What! Don't you know me?" asked Slim, with an affected catch in his voice. "I'm Bertie Bootle, your nephew."

"Oh! And where's your guardian?" snapped the man. "The least he could do would be to meet the train, and not leave me to be stranded by this fool and his Noah's Ark!"

"Ark at him!" burst out the cabby with indignation; but Slim held up a peaceful hand.

"I have arrived in the nick of time," he said soothingly. "If you will get into the

sidecar, sir, I shall be pleased to drive you home."

"I must, I suppose," said Uncle George without enthusiasm, and, turning to the taximan, he demanded the return of his fare.

"Gertcher!" cried the old fellow, which epithet, being translated into Oxford accents, means: "Get out, you!" or, in other words: "You'll be lucky if you get it!"

Uncle George was unlucky!

Finally, he mounted the sidecar with a nasty look, and ensconced himself, complete with scarf, while the cabman transferred his suitcase to the luggage carrier on the back. Then, with a toot, Slim vaulted into the saddle and shoosh!—they had left the taxi a furlong behind them.

Slim took the right hand lane instead of the left, it being his intention to give his uncle a cross-country run before reaching home. There was a perfectly straight road for two or three miles, and Slim let it rip. The combination might have been a flying machine, for its wheels hardly seemed to touch the ground as they whizzed along.

Uncle George sat with chattering teeth, and once he attempted to remonstrate. They were going so fast, though, that his words were swept away before reaching the ears of the driver.

Buzzz! To keep the wind out of his eyes, the passenger made a desperate attempt to put up his umbrella, but the rush of air snatched at it and nearly pulled him out of his seat. With a scared yell, he let go of the handle, and the umbrella went sailing away, to be seen by him no more.

Suddenly, Slim stopped with a jerk, jumped off, opened a gate and remounted.

"A short cut!" he shouted, as he turned the combination into a ploughed field.

Before his relative could utter a word of protest, they were through the gate and careering across the furrowed land with jolts and bumps. Uncle George turned green, and wished he had been more careful in choosing what he had eaten for breakfast that morning.

At the other side of the field, Slim headed the bike for a large gap in the hedge, and with a swishing of twigs they emerged into a lane, Uncle George crouching ever lower and lower in the sidecar. Then, with another burst of speed, Slim headed for home, having completed a circle of six miles further than he need have done!

Entertaining Uncle George!

TUBBY, rubicund, round and cheerful, met them at the gate. He noted the exhausted-looking passenger in the sidecar, and grinned slyly at his brother.

"Hallo, sir!" he said heartily. "I'm your nephew, Benny Bootle." He seized his uncle's hand and pumped it up and down until that gentleman snarled at him dazedly, and attempted to rise.

"Help me out!" he snapped, and thus commanded Tubby grasped the man under the

arms and lifted him clean out as easily as if he were a child, dumping him down with a bang on the front steps.

"Where is Colonel Squint?" barked Uncle George.

"He's away, so I'm afraid you won't be able to put up here as suggested—by you."

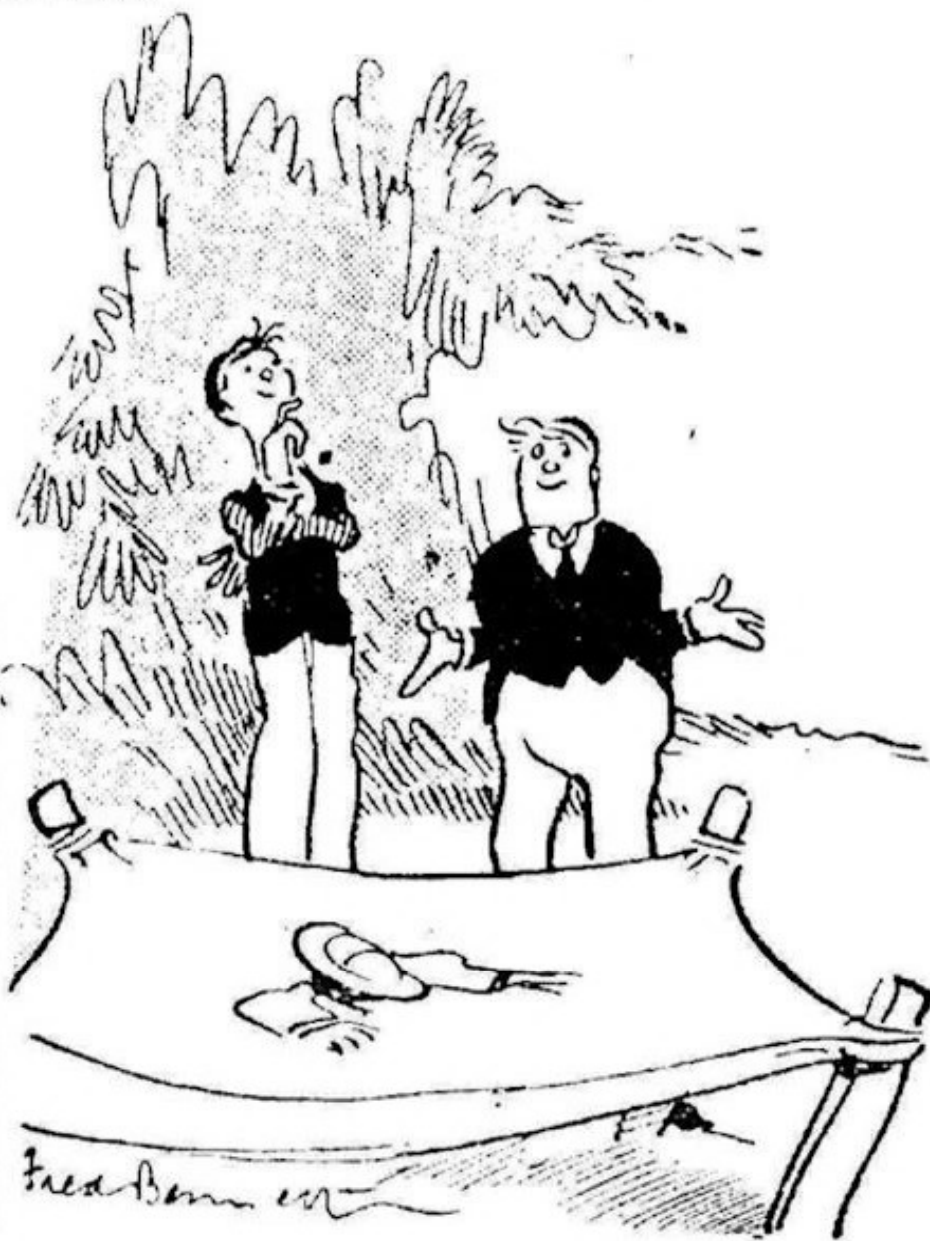
"Nonsense! When do you expect him back?"

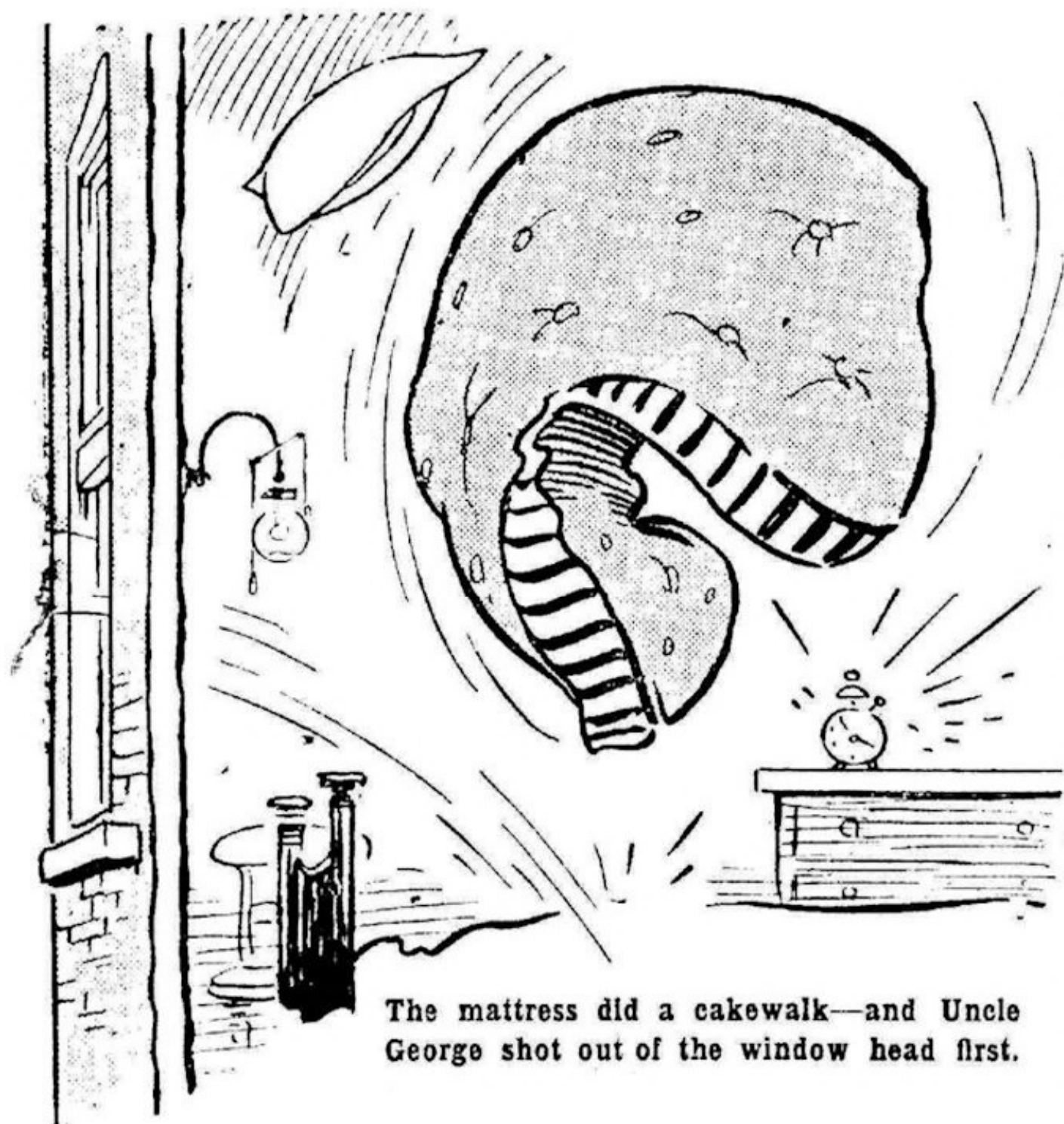
"You can never tell, with the colonel," explained Slim guilelessly. "He's just as likely to go out and take the next boat to India—and then again, he's just as likely not to, more so, in fact."

"Huh! Well, I'll put up here in the meantime," sniffed the visitor, not quite knowing how to take the lucid statement. "Is lunch ready? I'm hungry."

"Y e s," replied Tubby eagerly. "The cook is out, but I have prepared it."

He led Uncle George into the dining-room where lunch was laid for one only. The man flopped down in the solitary place, and Slim placed a basin before him. A loaf of bread and a steaming teapot completed the arrangements, and, as uncle looked round for the lunch, Tubby said to him:





The mattress did a cakewalk—and Uncle George shot out of the window head first.

In his endeavour to reach down his collar to get hold of the intruder, he bent double and almost stood upon his head, squirming and shaking himself violently the while. The white mouse was dislodged and scampered away, but uncle's position tempted Slim irresistibly, and he applied his foot and pushed. The yelling man turned a catherine wheel and ended up in the fireplace amidst a clatter of fire-irons.

Hooting madly, uncle staggered to his feet, a pair of coal tongs hanging round his neck and a poker sticking out of his pocket.

The brothers were helpless with unsympathetic and immoderate laughter, and their yells of mirth goaded the man to fury. He stamped out of the fireplace and removed the poker from its unusual position. Waving this weapon threateningly, it looked as if he were about to throw it, and Slim and

"There you are, sir. It's all ready."

The other looked up with a surprised scowl.

"What's ready?" he growled. "Where is it?"

"There, sir!" Tubby pointed. "Your dinner's in the teapot!"

"Wha-at!"

"Soup, you know," said the amateur cook.

"Soup with plenty of body in it. I had to use the teapot because I couldn't find the tureen."

"Scandalous!" muttered uncle, grabbing the teapot.

He poured the contents through the large spout into his basin. It was a colourless, non-descript-looking concoction. Then, bending forward, he peered at the liquid. There was something floating in it.

"Uck!" he shuddered. "What the dickens is this?"

Tubby stretched across the table and examined the "soup" critically. He stood up and ruffled his hair in perplexity.

"It looks like a dead mouse," he hazarded. "I wonder how it got into there?"

At this moment Slim dropped a live mouse—a tame white one—down the gaping collar of the unfortunate visitor, and placed another on the table.

"Ow-wow!" roared the guest, jumping up and wriggling spasmodically, and trying to reach the small of his back with one of his hands. "Ow! Something's got down my back! Take it out—take it out!"

Tubby got ready to duck.

And then the mouse on the table caught his eye and diverted his attention. He glared balefully at the little animal and aimed a vicious blow at it. The mouse didn't wait, though, for with a squeak of dismay it scooted like a streak of lightning and vanished before the blow fell.

"Now, uncle," chided Slim, "you mustn't hit poor little Micky. His family can't spare him."

"I'll—I'll—"

"He wasn't doing any harm!" protested Slim, still referring to the rodent. "And now you've frightened him away. There's three of the little beggars, you know," he continued chattily to his almost speechless relative. "We call them Mick, Mike and Moses, the three mouse-keteers."

"Disgraceful!" fumed their uncle. "Over-running the place with mice. I'll report this to your guardian. I'll see that you get the biggest whacking of your lives, you—you horrible young apaches!"

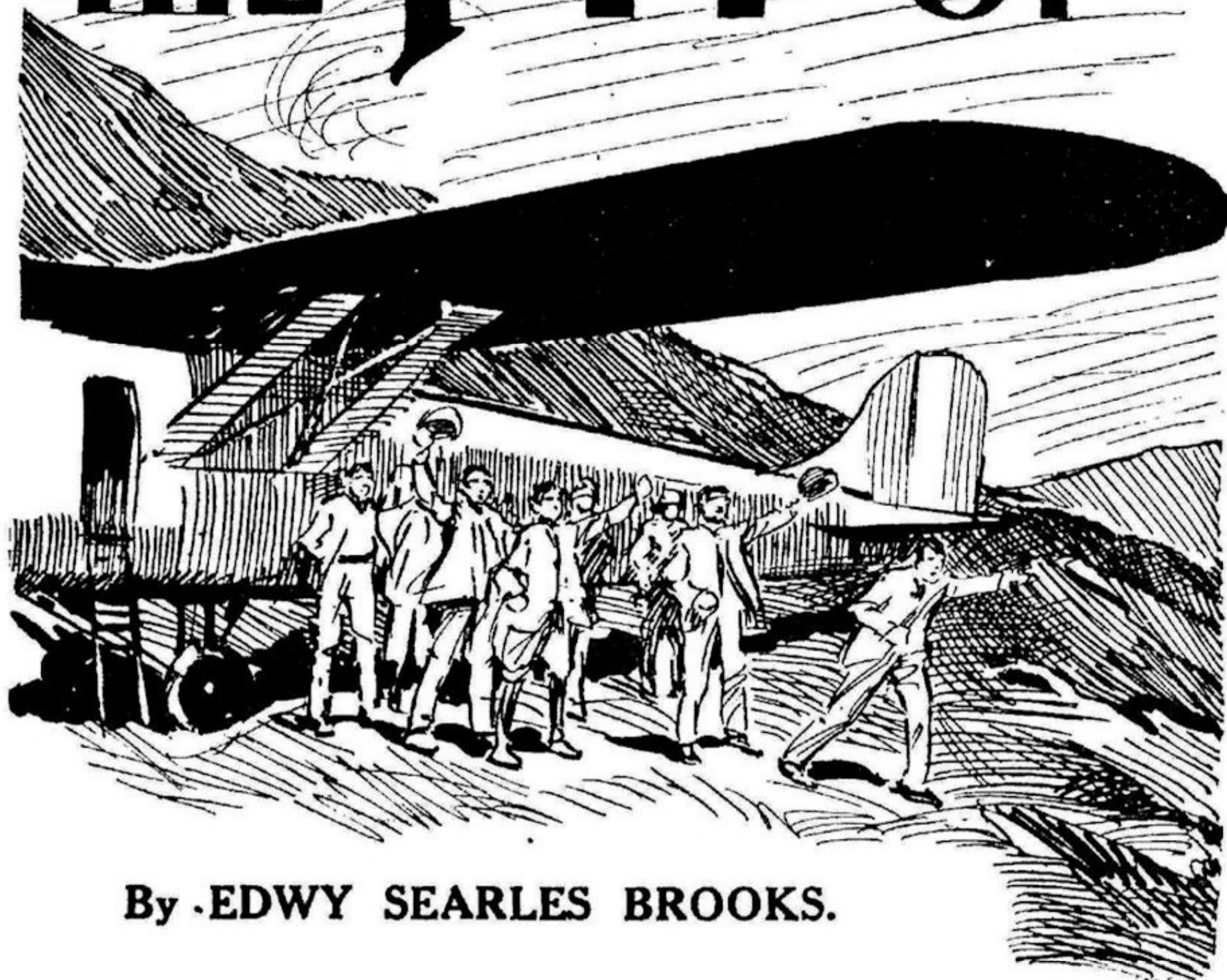
"I should go and lie down for a bit," suggested Tubby. "You are over-excited. I'll show you upstairs, and you can have forty winks."

Still vowing vengeance, Uncle George followed the boy, for he was feeling the effects of his strenuous activity since leaving the train. Tubby indicated his own bed which

(Continued on page 44.)

THE BEST ADVENTURE-THRILLS YARN OF THE WEEK!

THE PIT OF



By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Captured by the brutal Ameer of Balghanistan! Nelson Lee and his young assistants are in desperate straits. Escape seems impossible; a horrible fate awaits them. . . .

CHAPTER 1.

The Alarm!

ANXIETY was written on every face—anxiety which amounted to dread. There were seven or eight figures in the group which sheltered under the mass of overhanging rock from the glare of the morning sunshine. They stood near to the enormous six-engined monoplane, with its bluish-green body and wings. One or two figures could be seen inside the machine; and perched on the great plane, working at the engines, were two mechanics in overalls.

"Time something happened, Fred," said one of the mechanics, pausing in his work.

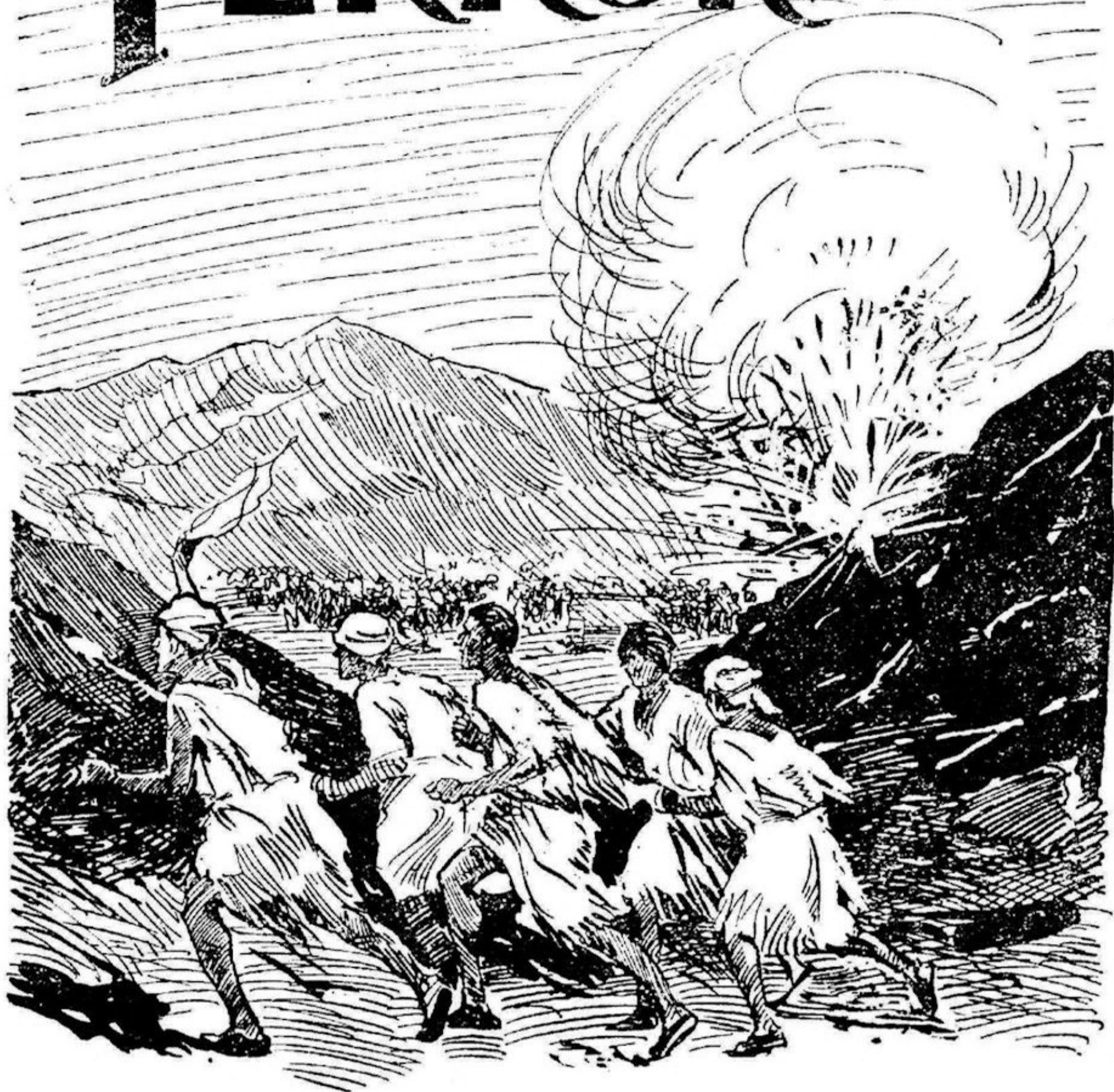
Fred Thompson nodded.

"Looks like they've been collared," he said gloomily. "The worst of it is, we can't do anything. Mr. Lee gave us strict orders to remain here until he returned—or until he sent word. But this waiting is awful, Jim! I'm beginning to get the wind up."

Jim Barnes and Fred Thompson spoke in low tones. They did not want the others to hear. These others were all members of Nelson Lee's famous Detective Academy. The group below, in the shade, included such stalwarts as William Napoleon Browne, Edgar Fenton, Reggie Pitt, Archie Glenthorne, and Vivian Travers. Most of them were silent. Their gaze was directed out into the wide valley. They were watching constantly—watching and listening. It was another day now, and they were hoping that something definite would develop.

START READING IT NOW—HOURS AND HOURS OF ENJOYMENT!

TERROR!



The vista, from beneath that overhanging rock, was not particularly cheering. A great stony valley, without a tree or a blade of grass to be seen. A sun-scorched waste, with piles of volcanic rock rising in grotesque mounds. This valley, in the heart of the Balghanistan hills, was peculiar, too, for its echoing properties. If one stood in the centre of that waste and shouted, one's voice boomed back from a score of different points, like a growling and grumbling of thunder.

The place was Nelson Lee's main camp, the spot where the great aeroplane had been forced down with four of its six propellers out of commission.

Nelson Lee had brought all his "cub" detectives on this adventure, and at the very outset a brush with one of the Balghanistan aeroplanes had brought trouble—if not disaster. At all events, Lord Dorrimore, at the controls, had been compelled to make a forced landing. He had done so with rare skill, causing no damage. But it was an undeniable fact that this valley was in the forbidden country of Balghanistan—and if the Ameer's soldiers found this party of white people, there would be a battle, and probably a massacre.

There was no war between Balghanistan and Great Britain, but Nelson Lee had undertaken, on behalf of the British Government, to investigate the mysterious disappearances of many aeroplanes on the Indian Mail Route. All these machines had vanished while on the last lap of the journey, somewhere between Bushire and Karachi. They had vanished whilst flying over the hill country bordering upon Balghanistan.

The only natives who had come near the crippled aeroplane had been a small party of five gipsy-like people. These had been promptly seized, and even now they were being kept imprisoned in the saloon of the big 'plane. And Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Nipper, Handforth, and Waldo had ventured inland on foot, disguised as those five brown-skinned natives.

Not a single word had come from them since they had set forth.

"**I**T was madness for them to go," said Tommy Watson, his voice full of worry. "Handforth, too! He gives everything away—and it's ten to one that he has caused the whole five to be collared."

"Handy's all right," said McClure defensively. "He's cautious enough in a real crisis. Useful, too."

"We've talked on these lines until we've exhausted the subject, brothers," remarked William Napoleon Browne. "I venture to suggest that we change the subject. Undeniably, the situation is scaly in the extreme, but we must not give way to despair."

"The trouble is, we don't know what to do," said Edgar Fenton, frowning. "So far we've escaped discovery, but at any hour the Balghars may twig us, and come down in full force."

"Well, we could dish them, couldn't we?" asked Church. "The 'plane's all right now—capable of flying. Jim Barnes can pilot her, too. He's only a mechanic on this trip, but he's got his certificate as a pilot."

"If we do that, we might land Mr. Lee and Dorrie and the others in the cart," said Watson. "They're reckoning on finding us here—and they'll be in an awful mess if we clear off."

"They would, of course, be up to their necks in the ox-tail," agreed Browne, nodding. "But we have not cleared off, Brother Watson. Let us not be pessimistic. Brother Willy is mounted on the heights, keeping watch. If the enemy approaches, he will signal us. Instead of being worried, let us rather be cheerful. It is at least heartening to know that the old bus is again airworthy."

This was a fact. The two mechanics had worked like niggers; they had conjured and juggled with two spare propellers that the machine had carried. All the six engines of the machine were now capable of exerting their full power. As Browne had said, it was heartening to realise that the party could, if necessary, take off and escape any possible enemy force.

For the cubs did not doubt that the Balghars would be hostile. War or no war, there was no question about Sir Akbar Laldhi's hostility. In London, the young detectives had had several adventures with the Balghanistan Ambassador. They know that this man, refined and cultured in his personality of Sir Akbar Laldhi, was the very opposite in his other self. He was a man with two identities, as it were. He was capable of changing himself into a hideous, misshapen dwarf. In that guise he was known as Dacca—and he had more than once attempted to annihilate the whole Detective Academy.

But what these boys did not know was that Sir Akbar had a third personality, too. He was, in reality, the Ameer of Balghanistan! He was the all-powerful, all-highest monarch of this wild domain. His word was law—he was a lord of life and death.

In England he had attempted to murder the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, and he had only escaped by seizing a great mail 'plane at Croydon Aerodrome. Lord Dorrimore, coming to the rescue, had offered Nelson Lee the use of his own "flying yacht." So Lee and the boys had flown out to Balghanistan, only to meet with an early check. There was no telling what the next move in the game would be. It was known that Sir Akbar Laldhi had arrived—the party had seen his 'plane flying overhead. Had he captured Nelson Lee and Dorrie?

The suspense of waiting was very, very trying.

PERCHED amid the rocks, high over the valley, sat a small, watchful figure. It belonged to Willy Handforth. He was keeping guard—watching the valley and the wild country beyond. From this point of vantage he could command a view extending over scores of miles. And Willy was now standing up, binoculars to his eyes. His face was flushed, and his figure was rigid.

"Well, there's something doing at last!" he muttered. "Better than this rotten inactivity, anyhow! By jingo! This looks pretty ugly!"

The atmosphere was so clear that the binoculars brought distant objects into sharp definition. What Willy could see was significant. There was a thin ribbon of whiteness eight or nine miles away. It was a road. It was only visible for about half a mile, for it twisted away to the north, missing this rugged valley altogether.

On this road, appearing from behind a high bluff, hundreds of figures had come into sight. Even at this distance—with the aid of the glasses—Willy could catch the flashing of sunlight on steel. He could see the colours of uniforms. Soldiers! They were all mounted, and to Willy's astonishment he could see two or three small pieces of artillery. Just coming into sight were some tanks. Altogether, a strong force!

Where were these soldiers bound for? The question was answered almost at once, for the leaders of this miniature army, instead of keeping to the road, now struck off into the rough ground at the head of the valley. Willy Handforth whistled. Without doubt this force was coming into the valley itself. And for what reason other than to wipe out the British party?

"Well, that's done it!" muttered Willy grimly.

He turned and unfurled a big, improvised flag. He stuck this up between two of the rocks, and the breeze immediately caused the material to flutter out. It was the signal—meaning that

danger was imminent. Willy put the glasses to his eyes again, and searched the floor of the valley, near those overhanging rocks which concealed his companions.

Within twenty seconds he saw a figure waving its arms. His signal had been seen.

LOOKS like big trouble," said Fenton, frowning. "Young Handforth wouldn't have given that signal unless the danger was serious."

"What are we going to do?" asked one of the others. "Shall we stay here, and make a fight for it, or shall we clear out? What about Mr. Lee? Supposing he returns?"

"It's difficult," said Fenton. "Anyhow, there'll be no harm in getting the aeroplane out and having everything ready for an immediate take off."

It was a case of "all hands to the pumps." Everybody was required to help. The machine was of an enormous size, and if the ground had not been slightly sloping, the youngsters could never have shifted her. But once they managed to get her on the move, she rolled out from under the overhanging rocks on her enormous wheels. When this was done, Barnes busied himself with the engines, helped by Fred Thompson, the other mechanic. All the boys stood ready to climb aboard at a moment's notice. Many eyes were anxiously searching for Willy Handforth—for, of course, the 'plane could not take off without him.

A sudden cry came from Archie Glenthorne.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated. "Look what's blowing up, dear old things! I mean to say, tanks, and so forth!"

"Tanks!" yelled Fullwood.

"Absolutely!" said Archie, pointing. "If those dashed things in the distance aren't tanks, I'll swallow my bally eyeglass!"

The others all stared, and they caught in their breath. Sure enough, in the far distance, right up at the head of the valley, a number of moving objects could be seen. They were evidently mechanical; they were not ordinary motor-cars; and their caterpillar mode of progress gave a



hint of their real character.

"By Jove! I believe Archie's right!" said Fenton. "Tanks here—in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth!"

"The sooner we are in the air, brothers, the better," remarked Browne. "We have rifles and revolvers, and we are, I fancy, good shots, but I venture to predict that we should stand little chance against a tank attack. There is, however, the question of Brother William——"

"Here he comes!" yelled Chubby Heath suddenly.

A small figure was running towards the silent, motionless aeroplane. It came speeding up at the double, and there was a chorus of eager inquiries when Willy finally arrived.

"Start the engines—get her into the air!" gasped Willy urgently. "Tanks—thousands of men—artillery! Coming into the valley now!"

"Artillery!" said Morrow.

"Field guns," nodded Willy, panting hard. "If they once get the range——"

Boom-oom-OOM!

A sharp report sounded from the distance, and it echoed and re-echoed until it sounded like a rolling thunder clap. All the boys stood stock-still, their hearts jumping. They heard a new sound, something between a whine and a scream. A shell! It fairly shrieked overhead.

Crash!

The shell struck and exploded nearly half a mile away, but the report was devastating, and a vast cloud of smoke and dust pitched up from the ground. If any confirmation of Willy's statement had been needed, here it was! One field gun, at least, was already opening fire—and within a few minutes, perhaps, the gunners would get the correct range!

CHAPTER 2.

Touch and Go!

THAT one shell was grimly significant.

It told the party of British schoolboys many things in the same second. Firstly, the Balghars knew, definitely, that the boys' camp was situated here. Then again, that shell showed that the Balghars were determined to wipe out the camp. There was evidently to be no close fighting—no taking of prisoners. The Ameer's soldiers had come here to annihilate the white party.

Boom-oom-OOM!

Again that explosive roar—again the whining scream—again the crash as the shell exploded. And this time the distance was shorter. Already the gunners were shortening the range. And in the distance those tanks were advancing. If the guns failed to accomplish the murderous work, the tanks and the mounted soldiers would come into action.

"Buck up, Fred!" sang out Jim Barnes. "You attend to the starboard engines—I'll start up the port ones! You youngsters had better get aboard."

"Yes, and we'll pitch out those Balghar natives, too," said Fenton. "Come on! I only hope to goodness that we get into the air before it's too late!"

Zurrrrrrh!

With a crackling, spluttering roar, the first of the engines awoke to life. Then another—and another. The mechanics had had everything ready, and their only fear—now—was that the cold engines would fail in their task. There wasn't time to warm them up effectively.

Everybody was in a state of tension. Gazing up the valley, they could see the mounted troops galloping at full speed towards the scene. Another shell came, but this, like the others, went far beyond.

"Rotten guns—and rotten gunners," commented Browne. "I'll bet they could fire at the Pyramids for hours and miss the lot!"

He was one of the last to climb aboard. The five captured Balghars had now been released, and they were running madly for shelter amongst the rocks. It had been essential to turn them loose, for their extra weight aboard the machine might have made all the difference between success and failure.

"All aboard?" roared Fenton, hurrying into the big saloon.

"Yes!" shouted somebody.

The machine was already moving. Jim Barnes, at the controls, had opened out the engines to their fullest extent, and the colossal monoplane, lumbering forward, increased its speed.

"We've got to do it, Fred!" said Jim Barnes, between his teeth.

The other mechanic, who was staring out through the windows of the enclosed cockpit, suddenly clutched at the pilot's shoulder.

"Stop!" he shouted hoarsely. "Look! They're here! Mr. Lee and the others! Stop, Jim! We can't take off without them!"

Jim Barnes acted promptly. He closed the throttle, and all the engines ceased their devastating roar. The great machine, rocking and swaying, came to a standstill. A shell exploded several hundred yards away, the report being terrific.

"Where—where?" panted Jim, staring wildly out of the windows. "You're mad, Fred! You've ruined everything now!"

"You darned idiot! We couldn't leave without them!" panted Fred. "It's them, I tell you!"

He pointed, and Jim caught in his breath. Five ragged, nondescript figures had appeared from a side gulch which joined up with the main valley close by. These five figures were running at full speed towards the now stationary plane. In the body of the big machine, a veritable tumult was taking place. The boys had seen those figures, too. Somebody opened the main door, and leapt down. Others followed. The excitement was at fever pitch. Everybody had forgotten the enemy in that dramatic moment.

But the enemy had not forgotten them! The tanks were now in full sight, comparatively near at hand, and machine guns were already firing. The mounted soldiers were on the gallop. The enemy knew that it would have to be quick work if they were to stop this great machine from getting into the air.

Cra-a-a-ash!

Another shell exploded with shattering effect only a hundred yards away, and rocks and dust went flying skywards. In the midst of all this, the five figures ran up—and now it was clear to all that they belonged to Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, Nipper, Handforth, and Waldo.

"Hurrah!" went up a wild cheer.

The newcomers were grimy and haggard and well-nigh exhausted.

"Don't waste time, boys—get aboard!" croaked Nelson Lee. "Get aboard, all of you!"

There was no time for any talk. It was doubtful, indeed, if the plane would ever be able to get off. Nobody knew how they got back on board the machine. It was a mad rush. Lord Dorrimore, his face flushed, his eyes gleaming, rushed through to the pilot's cockpit.

"Propellers all right?" he sang out, as he leapt into the pilot's seat—vacated a second earlier by Jim Barnes.

"Yes, sir," said Jim breathlessly.

"Good man! You're a marvel, Jim," said Dorrie. "Stand by! We've got to get this box of tricks into the air somehow!"

Jim's face was flushed. Willingly, eagerly, he had given up the controls. He was a pilot himself, but he knew that he was a mere novice compared with the doughty Lord Dorrimore. Dorrie possessed a magic touch—and he would need that touch now more than ever he had needed it before.

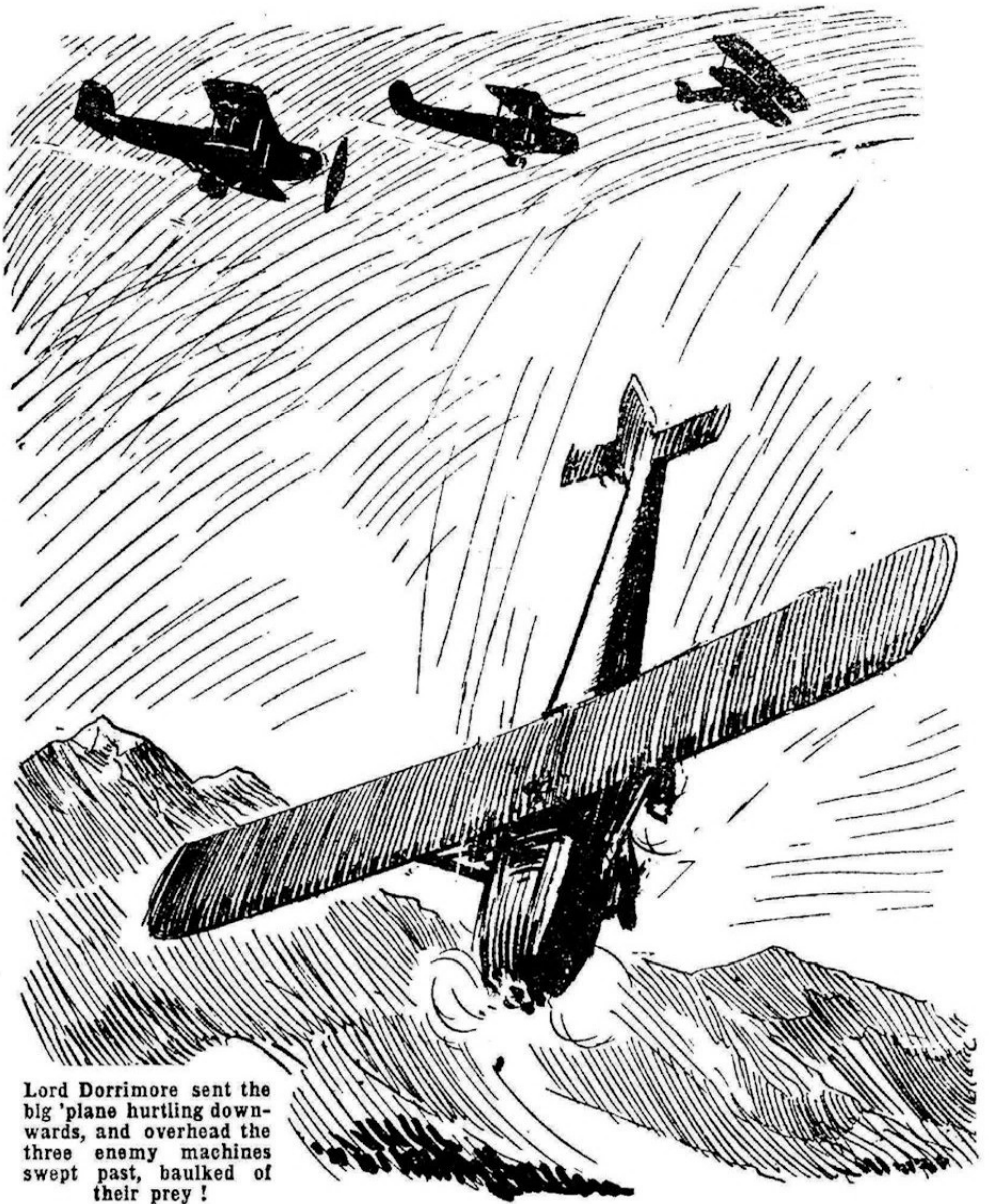
"O.K.!" came a shout from the doorway which led from the cockpit into the main body.

"Everybody's aboard, Dorrie! Let her go!"

"Hold tight!" said his lordship.

Precious minutes had been wasted. There was only one point in favour of the fugitives. The artillery had ceased fire. The gunners were afraid to continue, as their own men were in danger of being involved. Up the valley, not five hundred yards away, several tanks were bearing down upon the great monoplane. Machine guns were rattling ominously, and on either flank large bodies of mounted soldiers were galloping to the attack. It was, indeed, touch and go.

The aeroplane's engines roared. They were warmed up by now, and in answer to Lord Dorrie's touch they sent forth a powerful booming note of defiance. Dorrie himself, in spite of his tiredness, felt a tremor pass through him as he noted that quick, decisive response. It was akin to the quiver of a well-trained horse at the touch of its master. The great machine rolled forward, gathering speed rapidly. Dorrie set his teeth, and charged straight at the oncoming tanks—at the flanking cavalry. It was neck or nothing now. Either the machine would get into the air, or it would crash head-on into the enemy. The two mechanics, still in that cockpit, stared out with their hearts in their mouths. By a hair's breadth, Dorrie avoided a great boulder,



Lord Dorrimore sent the big 'plane hurtling downwards, and overhead the three enemy machines swept past, baulked of their prey!

and the machine skimmed past a pile of rocks on the other side. It charged like some monstrous juggernaut at the approaching tanks.

"Look out!" yelled Dorrie. "Here we go!"

It was a moment of blinding tension. Dorrie, his hand as firm as a rock, jerked at the control wheel. The great machine lifted her nose, zoomed up, and leapt over the enemy's tanks at the crucial second. It is doubtful if the under-carriage cleared the tanks by more than five or six inches. There was a devastating roar of mingled sounds—the thunder of the engines—the rattle of the wildly-firing machine guns—the shouts and shrieks of the Balghar soldiers. In the main body of the machine, Nelson Lee and the boys clutched at anything they could lay hands on. They held their breath—every one of them expecting a death-dealing crash. It seemed impossible that the machine could successfully get into the air.

Lord Dorrimore's brain was steady, however, and a great sense of exultation filled him. Under his magic touch, the great monoplane banked over, shaving another mass of rock by so narrow a margin that Jim Barnes, who saw it flash by, felt physically sick. At the right second, to a

fraction, Lord Dorrimore had banked, or the machine would have gone to its doom then and there. Round she went, her engines singing a song of triumph. She dipped, and for one instant it seemed that she was going to dive down on the heads of the madly-scattering cavalry. Then, with a zooming roar of victory, she raced down the valley, the obstacles cleared.

She was climbing now—climbing magnificently. Up she went, and Lord Dorrimore deliberately headed her for a great cleft in the crags, away to the south of the valley. She went flying through a gulch, the rocks flashing past on either hand. She was beyond reach of the guns now—beyond reach of the tanks and the armed soldiers. She was climbing higher and higher, and within a few moments she had left the gulch behind.

"You can take her now, Jim," said Lord Dorrimore calmly.

Jim Barnes seemed to come out of a trance.

"You're a marvel, sir!" he ejaculated. "I've never seen anything like it in all my life!"

"I reckon we must be dreaming, Jim," said the other mechanic, passing a hand dazedly over his eyes. "We've missed death about a dozen times by a sixteenth of an inch! I believe the boss could get this bus into the air from my back-yard, home in Balham!"

"Rot!" said Lord Dorrimore, with a laugh. "Take these controls, Jim, you ruffian! I'm so thirsty that I could drink the very petrol out of the tanks!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Madman of Balghan!

WITHIN twenty minutes the five ragamuffins had been changed into two respectable gentlemen and three equally respectable boys. They had washed, changed, and, except for the indications of their recent adventures in their haggard faces, they were normal again.

Meanwhile, the great monoplane had been climbing steadily and was now twelve thousand feet up. Jim Barnes, at the controls, was delighted to find that the patched-up propellers were behaving perfectly; the machine, indeed, was just as good as when she had left her hangar in England. In the saloon, Nelson Lee was briefly telling the crowd of boys what had recently happened.

"You seem to have had an awful time of it, sir," commented Fenton. "You were captured, thrown into the dungeons under the Ameer's palace, and then taken out into a rough valley and tied to a raft."

"We have to thank Waldo for our salvation," said Nelson Lee quietly. "The plan was to send us all, on that raft, to our death. The river flows into the mountain—underground. Once the raft had plunged into that tunnel, we should have been lost for ever."

"Thank goodness you've got back safely, sir," said Pitt. "It seems that your trip was more or less wasted."

"By no means," replied Lee, his voice becoming hard. "We have made many vitally important discoveries. We know that the Ameer of Balghanistan is the man we have known as Sir Akbar Laldhi, alias Dacca the Dwarf."

"Good gad, yes!" said Archie. "A pretty foul sort of blighter, I mean. You never know who he's going to be next, what?"

"We have also definitely established the fact that the pilots and passengers of all the missing Air Mail planes are alive—but prisoners," continued Nelson Lee. "Most important of all, we know that this mad monarch is planning an invasion of India. His soldiers are ready in hundreds of thousands."

"Phew!"

"He has tanks, big guns, aeroplanes, everything!" said Lee. "Balghan, and the country surrounding the capital, is seething with warlike activity."

"No wonder the Ameer collared all those aeroplanes, sir," said Fenton. "He was afraid that one of the British planes would spot the activities, and take back a report."

"Exactly," replied Nelson Lee. "Therefore, the Ameer captured every aeroplane that dared to fly over the Balghanistan border. Furthermore, he captured the Royal Air Force planes because he needs them in his forthcoming campaign."

"I wonder why he didn't kill the pilots out of hand?" asked one of the boys.

"Because those pilots are no doubt required," replied Lee. "When the crucial time comes, they will probably be forced to fly their machines—against their own countrymen. This madman of Balghan is desperate and determined and ruthless."

Lord Dorrimore, who had been absent inspecting the plane, now made his appearance.

"O.K., Chief," he said briefly.

"Good!" said Lee, his eyes gleaming. "Then we'll do it, Dorrie!"

"That's the style," said his lordship, with enthusiasm.

"Do what, sir?" asked half-a-dozen voices.

"We're going to take this machine over Balghan—over the Hidden City!" replied Nelson Lee, amid a breathless hush. "I don't want to return to Bushire unless I can make a very complete report. I want evidence—in the form of photographs."

"By George! That's a ripping idea, sir," said Handforth.

"We have all the necessary apparatus aboard," continued Lee. "We will take photographs of the barracks, camps, aerodrome—and, in fact, every military depot we can spot. This will be something concrete to show the authorities—something, I have no doubt, which will compel them to take instant and drastic action. It will be a risky business for us, but it must be done."

Fortunately this machine is faster than any that the Ameer possesses, and we are well armed. If we are attacked in the air, I rather think that we can triumph."

"I'll give orders to Jim to alter her course," said Dorrie, moving towards the door. "We'll fly straight towards the Hidden City."

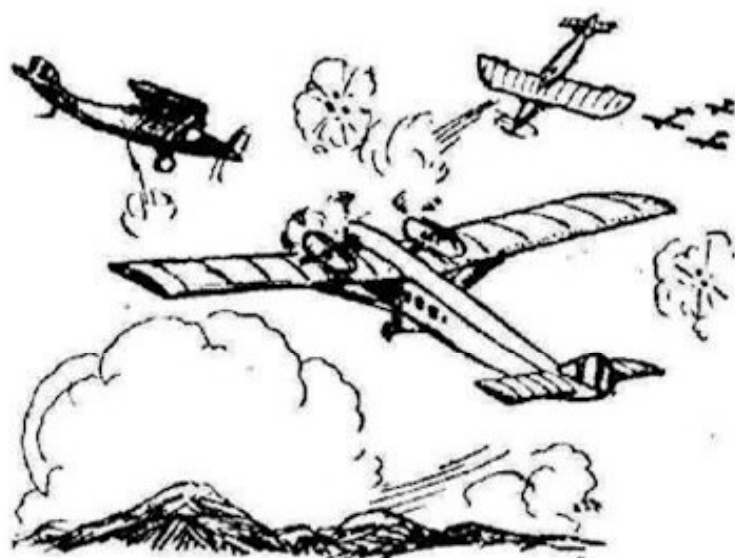
He went off, as cheery as ever.

"I shall require some of you fellows to help," said Lee, his voice becoming grave. "You, Fenton, and you, Morrow—and one or two of you other senior boys. You're capable of handling machine guns, aren't you?"

"We've had plenty of training in the Cadet Corps at St. Frank's, sir," said Fenton promptly.

"I don't suppose it will come to any serious fighting—but it is well to be prepared," said Lee.

IN the dazzling palace of the Ameer, in the heart of Balghan, a tall, stately figure was pacing slowly up and down. The apartment was luxurious to a degree; rich Oriental carpets, silky rugs, sumptuous draperies, and furnishings on a similar scale. One of the great windows overlooked the big courtyard in front of the palace, and occasionally the man would halt at this window and gaze reflectively out into the hot sunshine. There was much activity in the courtyard; the passing to and fro of fast motor-cars, the movements of gaily-uniformed troops. There was an air of bustle and almost feverish activity.



The tall man was dressed in a loose-fitting robe and soft slippers. His skin was only slightly brown, and he was cultured and refined. This man, indeed, was the Ameer of Balghanistan. Recently he had been in England, posing there as Ambassador, and using the name of Sir Akbar Laldhi. Owing to Nelson Lee's activities many of his plans in England had gone wrong, and he had felt it expedient to return hot-foot to his own country. The die was cast. He was determined to commence his great invasion forthwith. Any delay might mean disaster, for the British had been warned and they were probably preparing. The sooner the Ameer could strike, the better. He suddenly swung round, frowning. A soft buzzing noise had sounded. The Ameer strode to a curtained alcove, and drew the hangings aside. An elaborate radio instrument was revealed. The Ameer turned a switch, and a tiny red light glowed.

"Ug-ug-zit-zat-zot," came an extraordinarily clear voice. "Ug-ug——"

It was a strange, staccato utterance. It was the sheerest double Dutch to any ordinary listener but to the Ameer it made sense. It was, in fact, a vocal code. Only those who knew the key could possibly decipher the message. This very code had been used in England by Sir Akbar Laldhi, and the accidental picking up of signals had caused much mystification at Nelson Lee's Detective Agency. As the Ameer listened, the calm expression fled from his eyes. They became fierce with burning fury.

"Fools—fools!" he panted. "They shall suffer for this! Death will be their reward! Those who fail to carry out my orders must die!"

His fury became more intense; he was like a madman as he crouched there next to the instrument, listening intently. The guttural sounds ceased, and the Ameer snapped the switch. He turned, strode to a central desk, and pressed a bell-push. Within a few moments some curtains drifted aside, and a soft-footed man in soldier's uniform appeared.

"What is wrong, Your Highness?" he asked, in Balghanistani, as he saw the Ameer's expression.

"Much is wrong!" snapped the other. "By the will of Allah, those white dogs have escaped, Singh!"

Singh made no comment. He felt that it would be risky to do so. His master was obviously in an evil mood. Singh was the Ameer's personal attendant—a sort of adjutant. He was the chief officer of the Imperial Guard.

"Word has come through by wireless," continued the Ameer harshly. "The big aeroplane has successfully got into the air. Who were the fools who reported that the machine was crippled?"

"Such was the case, Your Highness, yesterday," said Singh. "No doubt repairs have been effected——"

"In spite of my mounted soldiers, in spite of my guns and tanks, that machine has got into the air!" interrupted the Ameer, speaking with such ferocity that the other recoiled. "And that is not all, Singh. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and those three boys are in that machine."

The adjutant was incredulous.

"Impossible, Your Highness!" he protested. "Those five perished yesterday, in the great gorge!"

"They did not perish!" said Sir Akbar intently. "The definite information has just come through that Lee and Dorrimore and the boys leapt on board the aeroplane just before it escaped. There is no doubt of this information. It is authentic. By Allah! There has been some criminal blundering, and the blunderers, my friend, shall pay! They shall pay with their lives!" He clenched both his fists, and he raised his hands into the air. "Always Lee!" he panted. "I order his death—I take measures to have him executed—and he escapes! Always he escapes!"

The little buzz sounded again, and the Ameer waved towards the instrument.

"See what is is, Singh!" he ordered curtly.

The officer went over, and turned the switch.

"Ug-ug——"

It started again. Singh listened for some moments, and then twirled round and stared at his master.

"Did you hear, Your Highness?" he panted. "The aeroplane is making across country towards our city!"

The Ameer's eyes burned more intently than ever.

"Yes, I heard!" he said. "Is it possible that these white men are so madly reckless as to risk their lives yet again? There is no accounting for what the English do!"

"They are brave men to fly towards Balghan," said Singh impressively.

"With the English, there is no difference between bravery and folly," said the Ameer contemptuously. "Go, Singh! Take my orders to the commander of the Air Fleet! Twenty of our most skilful air-fighters are to go up. They are to meet this British 'plane—and they are to bring it down. If they fail to destroy it, they will all be put to death!"

CHAPTER 4.

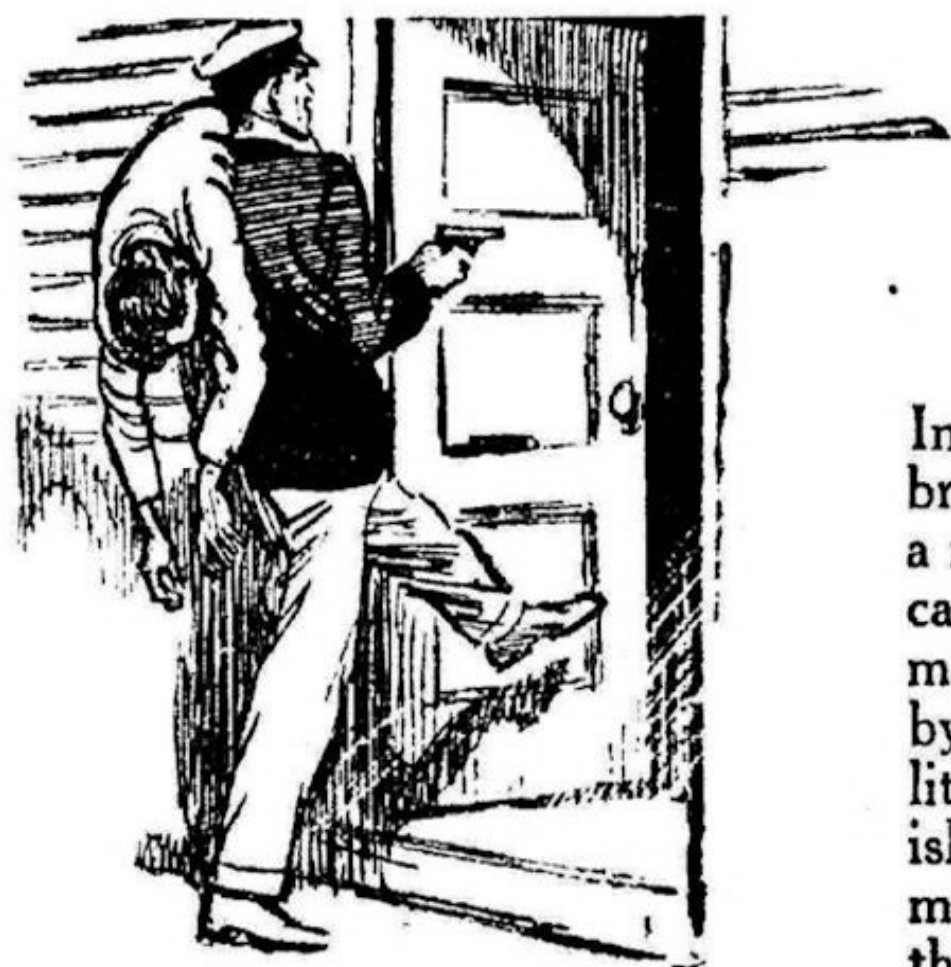
The Dragon-fly and the Gnats!

"BY Jove!" said Reggie Pitt wonderingly. "It's a tidy big city, you chaps!"

"Tremendous place," said Handforth, with the air of one who knows exactly what he is talking about. "When we were marched through it, as prisoners, we thought it large enough, anyhow."

"Things are better now, Brother Handy," commented Browne.

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They were looking out of the windows in the big saloon. The aeroplane was at a great height, flying smoothly and steadily. The atmosphere was crystal clear, and, far below, there was a vast panorama. The Balghan valley lay stretched underneath the big 'plane.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the three boys had made a rapid recovery. Their limbs still ached, and their feet were still blistered; but none of them thought of resting. They had had a short sleep during the night, and the recent excitement had completely driven all weariness away. And now there was work to be done. Rest could come later.

At Lee's suggestion, Dorrie had taken over the controls. There might be some fighting—in fact, the detective was certain that the Ameer's fighter-'planes would cause some trouble—but Lee was confident, in spite of the fact that once before this great machine had been brought down by one of the Ameer's 'planes. Lord Dorrimore had been reckless then—but he was not likely to be reckless again. Well on his guard, he would be able to deal with any attackers.

Lee, with one of the mechanics and Nipper and two of the boys, was busy with the special camera. It was a very intricate instrument, fitted in a special receptacle beneath the floor of the lounge. Its operation was automatic; the film was changed and the shutter clicked at regular intervals. Nevertheless, the camera needed careful looking after.

Fenton, Morrow, and some of the other "cubs," were manning the big machine guns. There were four of these. Two were mounted for'ard, in special little gun-towers, on the top wing. Another was right in the tail, and yet another was amidships, its muzzle pointing downwards. No enemy machine could find an unprotected spot.

So far there had been no sign of an alarm. The city of Balghan lay below—a wonderful picturesque sight. It was difficult to estimate the size of the city, but it could be easily seen that Balghan was astonishingly large. And surrounding it, on the plains, there were immense camps. There was the aerodrome, too—plainly distinguishable by the hangars, and the many machines which stood out in the open. Every road could be traced—every river and creek. There were great buildings which possessed tall chimneys, belching forth masses of smoke. Munition factories, without doubt. There were fortress-like places, surrounded by high walls, and guarded by hundreds of men. Arsenals, no doubt, containing enormous quantities of war material. From the air, everything could be seen, and the great monoplane, flying over, its camera clicking, was taking large numbers of invaluable photographs.

The peaceful nature of the situation was not destined to last for long—as Nelson Lee had anticipated. Before the great city was fairly underneath the raiding 'plane, a number of whitish specks were to be seen moving rapidly over the aerodrome.

"Trouble soon, Fred," said Lord Dorrimore, glancing at the second-mechanic. "Did you spot those single-seaters hopping off?"

"Yes, sir—half-a-dozen of 'em at once," replied Fred Thompson. "Look! There comes the next batch."

Far below they could see the white specks shooting across the aerodrome. They took off as one unit, and soon came winging skywards. Others followed—until at least twenty were to be seen.

"Poor devils," said Lord Dorrimore. "They don't know what they're in for! I wonder how many of that lot will escape?"

"You think they're going to attack us, sir?"

"Come, come, Fred, use your wits!" protested Dorrie. "What do you think they're doing? Just coming up to form an escort for us? Those 'planes are armed with machine-guns, or I'm cock-eyed! It's going to be a massed attack, my beauty! Oh, well, they say that excitement is good for the circulation!"

"We're not afraid of those beggars, sir," said Fred, with a sniff.

THE great 'plane continued serenely on its mission. It circled over Balghan, making no attempt whatever to bolt. It seemed unconscious of the swarm of single-seater fighters that were mounting higher and higher on every side. Far below, hundreds of thousands of eyes were turned upwards—watching for the commencement of the battle.

On the big 'plane, Nelson Lee had left the camera in charge of Morrow, and he had taken his position at one of the machine guns. Truth to tell, Nelson Lee was just as eager for this scrap as was Dorrie. Here, over the Hidden City itself, the first battle in this campaign would take place!

Lord Dorrimore did not increase his height by a foot; he continued to fly evenly and steadily. He piloted the big machine according to a pre-arranged system, passing backwards and forwards over Balghan, so that every yard of the city and the surrounding country should be photographed. Not by one inch did Dorrie deviate from this set plan—until he was compelled to. And then the battle became of more importance than the photography.

Four of the Ameer's machines had outdistanced the others, and they were now on a higher level than the British monoplane. As though by a mutual signal, they put their noses down and came diving with terrifying velocity upon their intended victim. Lord Dorrimore, at the controls, watched keenly. He opened up his engines to their fullest extent, and they gave a deep throaty roar in answer. It was like a roar of defiance.

Zurrrrrrh!

At the same moment, both the for'ard machine guns, mounted on the top of the wing, opened fire. Lee, at one gun, and Nipper at another, held their breath. It seemed to them that the enemy machines were going to crash head-on. They operated their guns resolutely, however, as though no crash was possible. One of the single-seaters staggered, twisted over, and burst into flame.

"Hurrah!" came a muffled yell from the saloon. "One of them's down!"

The blazing machine, getting into a nose-dive, went streaking earthwards, disintegrating as it fell. The remaining three fighters held to their course, and at the last second Dorrie sent the nose of his great machine dipping down. Those aboard had a horrid sensation in the pit of their stomachs, and they clung to anything that was handy. The big 'plane dropped like a stone, her nose right down. And overhead the fighters swept past, baffled.

Zoo-oo-oom!

Dorrie pulled back the control, and the monoplane zoomed up again with a roar of triumph, banking steeply at the same time.

Crack-k-k-k!

The machine guns were operating again, sending streams of bullets towards another four of the single-seater fighters which had come up on the flank. One of them staggered, slewed round, and crashed into the tail of the 'plane in front. The air became filled with splinters and wreckage. Two more accounted for!

Away went the all-metal monster, soaring off in a great spectacular turn. Dorrie, in fact, was avoiding the Ameer's 'planes with the greatest of ease. His lordship was thoroughly enjoying this scrap; it was a fight which sent his blood coursing tumultuously through his veins.

"We're winning!" shouted Handforth exultantly. "By George! Isn't Dorrie a marvel?"

"Hold tight!" gasped McClure.

The floor seemed to come up and hit them. Actually, the great plane was shooting straight upwards. Up she went, up! Three of the Ameer's fighters, charging to the attack, found the great machine gone. She had climbed out of their reach, and now she actually went over in a superb loop—to swoop down right on the top of the machines which had just menaced her.

Zurrrrrrh-zurrrrrh!

The machine guns, wickedly active, did deadly work. Two more of the enemy went down, crippled and out of control. And so the fight went on—with all the advantage with the big all-metal machine. Some of the Ameer's fighters managed to get the range for a moment or two, and bullets spattered over the metal planes of the monster. But not one vital hit was registered—not a propeller was touched or an engine damaged. Dorrie was too cute—he was too tricky. He handled that enormous machine as though she had been a nippy single-seater scout. She answered to her controls with amazing readiness. In spite of her great bulk, she could dive, loop, bank, and side-slip as nippily as a single-seater.

Seven or eight of the enemy had been accounted for—but, to the credit of the other Balghanistan pilots, they did not give up the fight. They must have known that there was very little chance for them, for they had seen their companions go down to their death. Yet they kept on, no doubt because they knew that if they failed in this mission they would die an even worse death. The Ameer's words had not been idle! If these pilots failed, they would die—and perhaps be put to the torture! Far better to die in the air, in the execution of their duty.

So it was that the battle continued—and the participants, engrossed in their grim work, failed to take note of an even greater force which was about to join in the scrap!

CHAPTER 5.

The Death Wind!

"THEY'RE sheering off, sir—they're scared!" said Fred Thompson exultantly.

"Looks like it," agreed Lord Dorrimore. "Well, we're ready for them when they make up their minds to have another shot at us."

The enemy planes, scattered in disorder, were flying away down the valley. The idea, no doubt, was for them to re-form. There wasn't much chance for them to conquer this great enemy unless they attacked by some set plan. Lord Dorrimore set his course so that he would arrive at approximately the spot where the photographic work had been interrupted. He was coolly continuing the task. The fighter scouts were now some miles away, manoeuvring for height, and getting into some sort of formation again. From the saloon windows, the boys were watching with eager eyes. It was rather difficult to see those small machines in the distance, however, for there was a queer kind of haze behind them.

"I wonder what that haze is?" asked Waldo curiously. "It wasn't there ten minutes ago. The sky was as clear as crystal, and the visibility perfect."

"Yes, I've noticed it," said Reggie Pitt.

The whole sky, indeed, had changed its aspect. The blue was not so intense; it had assumed a dull, brazen effect. The sunshine was yellowish and unnatural. Some atmospheric change, evidently, had occurred. And there were indications that it was only affecting the Balghan valley itself.

This valley was of curious formation. It was like a vast oval basin, fifty or sixty miles wide, perhaps. From the aeroplane's great height the mountains which formed the sides of the valley were clearly visible. They rose in great picturesque peaks and ridges. Some of them were snow-capped. And far, far below there was the fertile valley, with the rivers and the forests and the great stretches of cultivated land.

The ends of the valley, in the far, dim distance, were hazy and indistinct. The mountains were just as high, and one end seemed to be a veritable cul de sac. The peaks and the crags were continuous, there was no visible outlet. At the other end there was a great rift in the heights—a formidable pass. Perhaps this was the only outlet from the valley. It was in the

direction of this pass that the strange haze had made its appearance. In that direction, too, the enemy planes had flown off in order to re-form.

"They're coming back now," said Waldo suddenly.

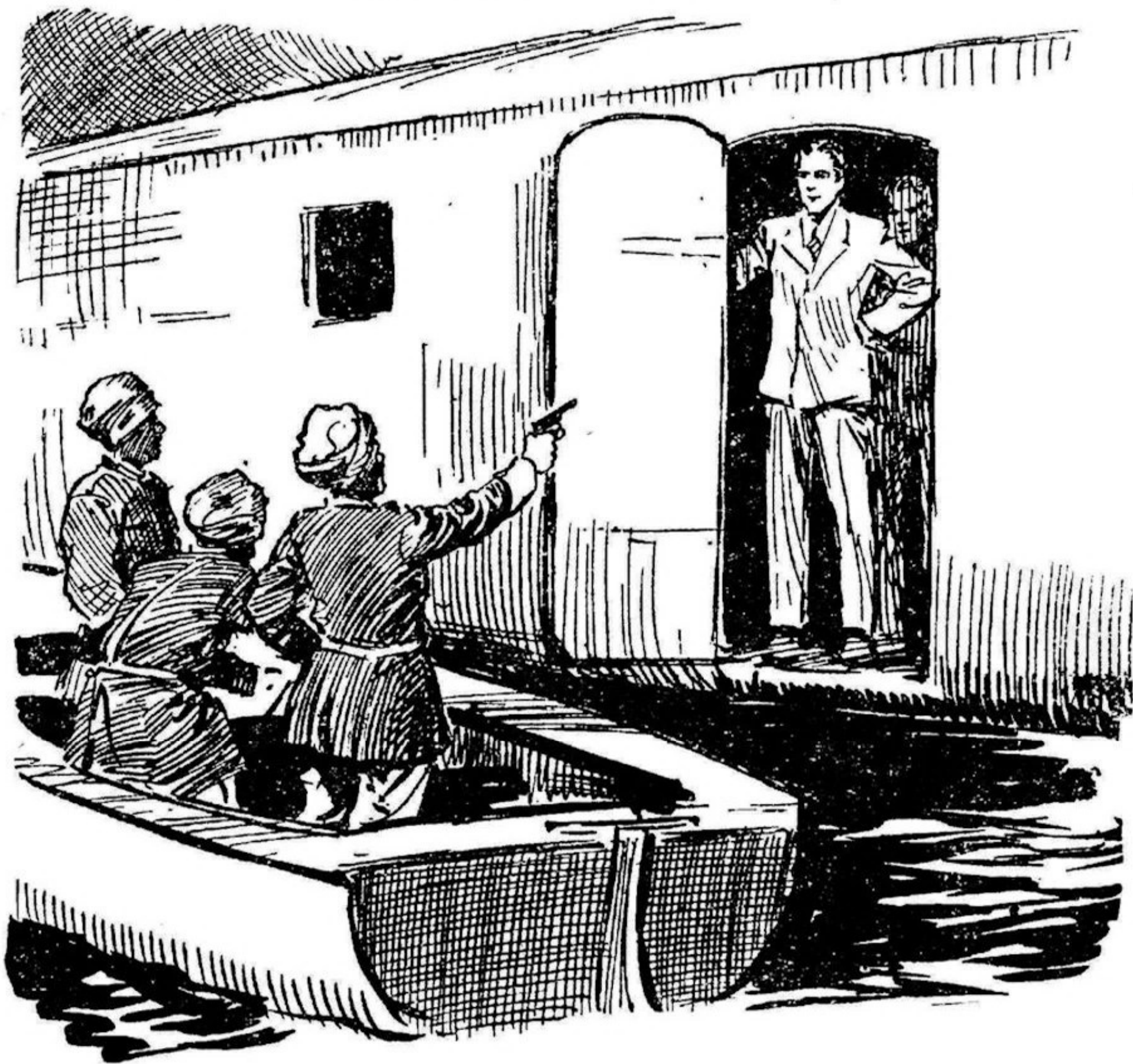
"How the dickens do you know?" asked Handforth. "They've vanished!"

"No; I can still see them," replied Waldo.

"Oh, well, you've got eyes like telescopes," grunted Handforth, as he stared. "Jiggered if I can see anything in that funny haze. It isn't a cloud, and it isn't a mist. I wonder—— Hullo! I can spot them now! By George, they are coming! Got the wind behind them, I expect."

"But there isn't any wind, Handy," protested McClure.

The enemy fighters, appearing out of that haze, were not in such good formation as one might have expected. They were scattering as they flew. The haze behind them was growing denser. It was assuming an extraordinary coppery hue.



Nelson Lee opened the door of the wrecked 'plane, to find himself confronted by a Balghar officer who pointed a revolver straight at him!

"Look at 'em!" ejaculated Pitt, in wonder. "They must be flying at a terrific speed! They're coming down on us like lightning. And see how those first two are rocking and swaying!"

"By Samson!" muttered Travers. "I'll bet that haze is caused by wind—a sort of cyclone—and those planes have caught the full force of it! I dare say we shall get it later on."

"It won't affect us," commented Handforth.

"Look!" yelled Church excitedly.

As Dorrie was taking the big plane at right angles across the valley, the boys had a perfect view of the oncoming enemy machines. The two on the flank now behaved in an extraordinary way. They shot upwards as though completely out of control, fluttering helplessly. They went bodily sideways, some mighty force evidently influencing them. Then, with tragic swiftiness, one of the planes fell to pieces in mid-air. The wings crumpled up, dropped off, and were scattered into a thousand fragments—just as though an invisible hammer had dealt a devastating

blow. The other machine, diving, lost its tail. Then one wing crumpled, and the machine went shooting earthwards to its doom.

"What's happening?" gasped McClure.

"Perhaps they were hit in the fight," suggested Pitt. "Perhaps their struts were weakened——"

"Look! Two more going!" shouted somebody.

It was true. Another two of those sturdy little fighting planes were smashed to pieces in the air, as though hit by some invisible sledge-hammer. The rest were scattering madly, most of them diving in panic-stricken abandon. And that haze was increasing—it was getting nearer and nearer to the centre of the valley. Dorrie's great plane, in the meantime, was flying serenely on, carrying out its original task.

"I've hit it!" said Travers abruptly. "That haze is caused by a tremendous wind! And those machines have been sent to their doom by it. It must be an awful cyclone—and it's coming this way! I'm going to warn Dorrie, dear old fellows."

He hurried off, but he did not reach the cockpit. Something happened before he got there; something sensational.

Nelson Lee had just reached the navigating chamber, having hurried there from his machine-gun station. In that little turret, on the upper part of the wing, Lee had had a clear view of the singular disaster which had overtaken the enemy.

"Dorrie, you'd better be ready for trouble!" said Lee urgently.

His lordship glanced round.

"Trouble?" he repeated. "Why, the enemy is nowhere near us. You're not thinking of anti-aircraft guns, are you? I don't believe these beggars have got any—and, anyhow, we're too high for——"

"Not that!" interrupted Lee. "Haven't you heard of the Balghan Maelstrom?"

"Can't say that I have—and it doesn't sound particularly nice."

"It isn't, Dorrie," said Lee, speaking quickly. "The Balghan Maelstrom has been known for centuries—since the beginning of time. The formation of this valley is curious, and for most months of the year there is a prevailing wind. If this wind changes suddenly, a strange phenomenon develops—a terrific local cyclone comes into being. No clouds—no rain—but a terrific wind, which carries everything before it. I've heard, too, that this devastating wind expends most of its force in the upper air."

"That's cheerful—for us."



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature. If you know of a good rib tickler send it along now—and win a prize! A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; all other readers whose efforts are published will receive a pocket wallet or a penknife. Address your jokes to: "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

And No Wonder!

Slick: "Had any luck this afternoon?"

Smarte: "Yes. I shot twenty ducks."

Slick: "Were they wild?"

Smarte: "No, but the man who owned them was!"

(A. Simons, 5, Finchley Lane, Hendon, has been awarded a handsome gill watch.)

Mother's Mistake!

Jimmy came home with his hair ruffled, his jacket torn, his trousers split; in fact, looking considerably battered.

"What have you been doing, Jimmy?" asked his mother.

"Had a fight with the new boy next door," replied Jimmy proudly.



"I'm ashamed of you," said Jimmy's mother sternly. "And I'm certainly surprised at the boy next door. I thought he had such a nice face."

"Well, he hasn't now," replied Jimmy promptly.

(C. Hartley, 7, Necropolis Road, Lidge Green, Bradford, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

What a Voice!

The builder's foreman called at the house across the road.

"Excuse me, but are you the lady wot's singing?"

"Yes, I was singing. Why?"

"Well, might I ask you not to hang out on the top note so long, ma'am? The men have knocked off twice already, mistaking it for the dinner whistle."

(R. Wiltshire, 10, Shaftesbury Road, Gosport, has been awarded a penknife.)

Nothing Doing!

Railway Surveyor: "I want to run a line through your barn."

Farmer: "Well, you can't. Do you think I've nothing else to do but to open and shut that door every time a train wants to pass through?"

(O. Rowland, Holt Hall, Castle Street, Holt, nr. Wrexham, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

"It comes suddenly—without warning," continued Lee. "There's a peculiar kind of haze over the valley now, and I think we'd better dive——"

"Whoa! What the—— Old man, we've hit it!" yelled Dorrie.

The controls were nearly jerked out of his hands. The great metal plane heeled over in spite of all his efforts to keep control. It was just as though a mighty grip had fastened on the starboard wing and had tipped the whole machine over.

"Glory!" ejaculated Lord Dorrimore.

The machine was like a mere leaf in that frenzy of wind. Above the roar of the motors came the howl and scream of the gale. Nelson Lee was pitched over, and he crashed into a heap on the floor of the navigating chamber. In the saloon, and in every other part of the monoplane, the occupants were sent hurtling over. The starboard wing came up, and the entire craft side-slipped giddily. Over she went—until, indeed, she was upside down for a moment. Then her nose was forced right up, and she stood giddily on her tail. Lord Dorrimore, jamming himself in his seat, did everything in his power to keep control, but he was helpless.

It was a staggerer for his lordship; for he had believed, until that moment, that no wind could destroy the stability of this super-plane. The forces of Nature, however, were proving that they were supreme. This maelstrom of wind was utterly devastating. The metal monoplane might have been a mere paper glider. It rocked, heeled over, dived, and staggered. Her enormous engine power was of no avail. Compared with this tumultuous wind, that engine power was practically useless.

Nobody tried to do anything except hold tight. Those in the saloon were sprawling on the floor, clutching at anything that was fastened. And while they had only been thrilled during the earlier fight, they were now positively and unashamedly frightened. This vast natural force really scared them.

Lord Dorrimore was aghast. Never before in his life had he felt so helpless. The machine simply refused to answer her controls. It made no difference whether her engines were switched on or switched off. Her rudder, although answering perfectly to the controls, made no difference. Tossing this way and that, the great machine bumped and slid and jarred. Finally, she went into an appalling spin. Her nose was right down, and the gale, howling and shrieking with unbelievable fury, sent her diving headlong to earth. She dropped a thousand feet—two thousand feet—three thousand——

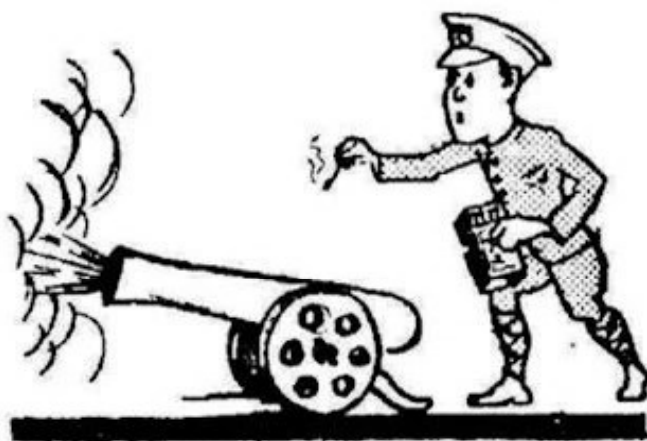
"Well, this is the end," thought his lordship, with regret. "Poor kids, what a rotten finish!"

Obvious!

Gunner: "Sir, the enemy are as thick as peas!"

General: "Then shell them, idiot!"

(H. Croker, 68, Tewson Road, Plumstead, S.E. 18, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)



give him because he's just swallowed half a bottle of ink."

(D. McGee, 42, Strathville Road, Southfields, S.W. 18, has been awarded a penknife.)

"Wat-er" Yarn!

Farmer Giles (to visitor who has been pestering him with all sorts of ridiculous questions): "We're planting potatoes and onions alternately this year."

Visitor: "What's the reason?"

Farmer Giles: "So that the onions will make the eyes of the potatoes water and irrigate the soil, of course."

(H. F. Toone, 14, Adelaide Road, Reading, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Sound Advice!

An overdressed lady stepped out of a taxi and handed the driver her fare, plus 2d. tip.

"I am not giving you this because you deserve it," she said, "or because you need it, but because it pleases me to do so."

"Well," advised the driver, "make it a tanner and properly enjoy yourself."

(E. B. Brown, 53, Milson Road, West Ham, has been awarded a penknife.)

Ditto!

Teacher: "Now, children, I hope you have a nice week-end, and come back to school with a little sense in your heads."

Class (in unison): "Same to you, sir!"

(R. Jenkins, Post Office, Brynamman, S. Wales, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

An Honour!

1st Tramp: "Yus, I've 'ad a lord speak to me."

2nd Tramp: "Wot did he say?"

1st Tramp: "Two quid or sixty days."

(S. Brackenborough, 262a, Lea Bridge Road, Leyton, London, has been awarded a penknife.)

Go Hon!

Pompous old lady: "I say, young fellow, must I put this stamp on myself?"

Post office clerk: "Well, you can if you like, madam, but it is usually put on the letter."

(William Giles, 53, Prince's Road, Romford, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

Baby's New Diet!

Nurse: "Oh, you wicked boy, to give the baby blotting paper to eat!"

Boy: "Well, I thought it the best thing to

But it crossed his mind that the end, when it came, would be instantaneous. Nobody would know what had happened. Diving at this speed, the machine would crash into pulp. Dorrie, still struggling in vain with the controls, had a confused vision of the earth leaping up to meet him. Not merely the earth, but the river, houses, trees. The dive was taking the monoplane into the heart of the Hidden City. Four thousand feet—five thousand! Down she went, falling like a stone. The houses spun dizzily before the pilot's confused eyes.

And then, when only about nine hundred feet separated her from destruction, Dorrie felt the controls answering sluggishly in his hands. In an instant a quiver passed through his frame. A wild hope surged in his brain. He braced himself and gripped the controlling wheel with sudden determination.

CHAPTER 6.

The Ameer's Captives!

LORD DORRIMORE felt that there was a slim chance. The controls were answering. There was scarcely sufficient air space to avert a disaster, but Dorrie knew that the great plane had dropped out of the zone of the maelstrom. There was a chance—slender enough—but it was a chance.

Not one pilot out of a hundred could have averted a death crash. Dorrie, with uncanny skill, succeeded in edging his plane out of its headlong plunge. Any sudden attempt to get on an even keel would undoubtedly have led to disaster. The wings would simply not have stood it. In spite of their amazing strength, they would have crumpled. Dorrie got the great monoplane into a spiral movement, banking steeply and gradually, insidiously forcing her to answer the controls.

The houses of Balghan were rushing up to meet the machine. They were only just below—and death was near. Dorrie's judgment was extraordinary in its accuracy. He felt, at length, that he could take the big risk. It was now the only chance. He jerked the wheel back, and the great machine staggered drunkenly. There was a straining of metal, a series of sharp reports as several of the inner struts gave way under the strain. The monoplane went round in a great banking curve, her under-carriage missing the roof of a tall building by less than four feet. Down in the streets crowds were shrieking and gesticulating. They were running madly in every direction, believing that the machine was about to crash on to them.

"Done it!" gasped Dorrie exultantly.

He felt master of the situation. But in spite of his efforts the tall minaret of a temple appeared out of nowhere. The port wing grazed it, and there was a shrieking of metal. The top of the minaret crashed over. The machine staggered, shuddered from stem to stern, and spun like a top. A second earlier, Dorrie had believed that he would be capable of flying the machine straight over the housetops, and getting into a climb that would take him and his passengers to safety. But that minaret had cast the die.

The thing that happened next was all over within a space of twenty seconds. Dorrie had done marvels in saving his passengers from death, but he could not do the impossible. The collision with that minaret had completely upset the plane's balance. She dipped, and shot downwards in a long, steep glide. Even now the pilot tried to recover; but the port wing was damaged, and she listed badly.

The river lay directly ahead. Miraculously, the machine skimmed the buildings by the riverside, and she plunged down towards the water. In the last second Dorrie managed to flatten her out, but it was beyond human skill to keep her in the air. The under-carriage touched the water, sending up tremendous sprays. She tipped for a moment, then slumped down with a terrific slapping noise, striking the water bodily. The wonder was that she did not stand on her nose and capsize completely. Only Dorrie's genius saved her from doing that. She came to rest, floating on an even keel, not twenty yards from the river bank. Lord Dorrimore had been jerked forward, and his chest was bruised and most of the wind was knocked out of him.

"By glory!" he panted. "That was pretty hot!"

Nelson Lee was on his feet, unsteady and dizzy.

"We're in the river, Dorrie!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "Man alive, I don't know how you did it!"

"Neither do I," muttered his lordship. "But what's the use? Hanged if we haven't come down right opposite the palace of His Nibs. It would have been better if we had crashed."

IN the saloon, the boys were struggling to their feet. They stared out of the windows at the lapping water of the river. They were bewildered, half-stunned, dumbfounded.

"He's got us down—we're safe!" panted Handforth. "My only sainted aunt! I thought we were all going to be killed!"

"Look at the boats!" said Reggie Pitt, pointing.

As though by magic, a number of powerful motor-boats were shooting towards the floating aeroplane. The great machine was in no danger of sinking, for she had been designed to float. Her builders guaranteed that if she was compelled to make a forced landing in mid-ocean, she would ride out the worst storm. At least a dozen motor-boats were rushing up. All of them contained large numbers of armed soldiers. And mounted in the bows of each boat there was a wicked-looking machine gun. Resistance, of course, was out of the question.

Lee had expected that the enemy would fire without asking any questions—without giving any quarter—but the Balghars were apparently acting under strict orders. These white people,

it seemed, were to be taken alive. Nelson Lee made his way into the saloon, where most of the "cubs" were crowding. They were just getting over the first shock, and the pallor of their cheeks was being replaced by an excited flush.

"I'm afraid the situation is ugly, boys," said the detective quietly.

"Can't we fight, sir?" panted Handforth. "We're not done yet! Can't we——"

"To fight, Handforth, will mean instant death," interrupted Nelson Lee. "And, as we have already proved, while there is life there is hope. It would be madness to offer any resistance."

He opened the big main door. One of the motor-boats was alongside, and a Balghar officer was pointing his revolver straight at Lee as the door opened.

"You are required to surrender!" said the officer. "If you resist——"

"Wait, my friends," broke in Nelson Lee. "There is no necessity for you to utter threats. We are ready to accept the inevitable."

It required a great deal of strength for Nelson Lee to say that; but all the time he was thinking of those boys. A fight now could only end in death for them all. Those motor-boats surrounded the plane—they were filled with soldiers who were armed with machine-guns and rifles and revolvers. Even if the adventurers offered resistance—even if they killed a score of the enemy—they were bound to succumb before many minutes had elapsed.

Why deliberately precipitate that ghastly bloodshed? Even now, with the situation so desperate, Nelson Lee did not give up hope. Once before he had been captured—and he had escaped. This drama had not yet run its course.

THE prisoners were taken aboard the motor-boats in batches. As they came out of the aeroplane, and dropped into the boats, they were quickly searched. Then they were roped up and roughly handled.

Arriving at some great stone steps which led on to an imposing esplanade, the prisoners were forced to land. They were formed into a long double line by the soldiers. And then, when every one of them had been brought ashore, a march commenced. Soldiers went in advance, other soldiers marched on either flank of the prisoners' column. More soldiers brought up the rear.

The air was filled with the shouting and jeering of the crowds. The excitement was tremendous. The sun was shining again now with full force, and all sign of the recent maelstrom of the air had vanished. These strange phenomena of the Balghar Valley dispersed as quickly as they came.

The prisoners were marched to the Ameer's palace. They were led through a great stone doorway, and then down long, cool passages. They were taken below—thrust into dank, evil-smelling dungeons—black holes without ventilation, without comfort.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore found themselves separated from the younger members of the party. They had seen these dungeons once before; but the circumstances were very different now. For all the other members of the party were captives. The two mechanics, all the boys, and even the youth known as "Tadpole," who acted as steward.

"Luck!" grunted the sporting peer, in a tone of utter disgust. "Just plain, rotten luck, Lee!"

"Certainly, the Ameer cannot attribute our capture to any prowess on the part of his airmen," replied Nelson Lee. "It was that wind which conquered us, Dorrie."

His lordship grunted.

"What the deuce is going to happen to us now? Something bloodcurdling, I'll bet."

A voice came floating in through the little grating in the massive door:

"Are we downhearted, you chaps?" came the voice—unmistakably Handforth's.

And a roaring chorus gave reply:

"No!"

"Are we afraid of His Beastly Highness?"

"Not likely!"

It was a great tumult of shouting, and Nelson Lee gripped Lord Dorrimore's arm in the darkness.

"By Jove, those youngsters have the right spirit," he muttered. "It's wonderful, Dorrie."

"As long as they've got that spirit, we shall win," said Lord Dorrimore confidently. "The Ameer can't whack us, old man!"

Footsteps sounded on the flagged floor outside in the tunnel. Lights flashed through the grating in the door, and the bolts were shot back. The door opened, and a number of armed soldiers stood outside, with an officer in command.

"Gentlemen, you will be good enough to follow me," said the officer briefly.

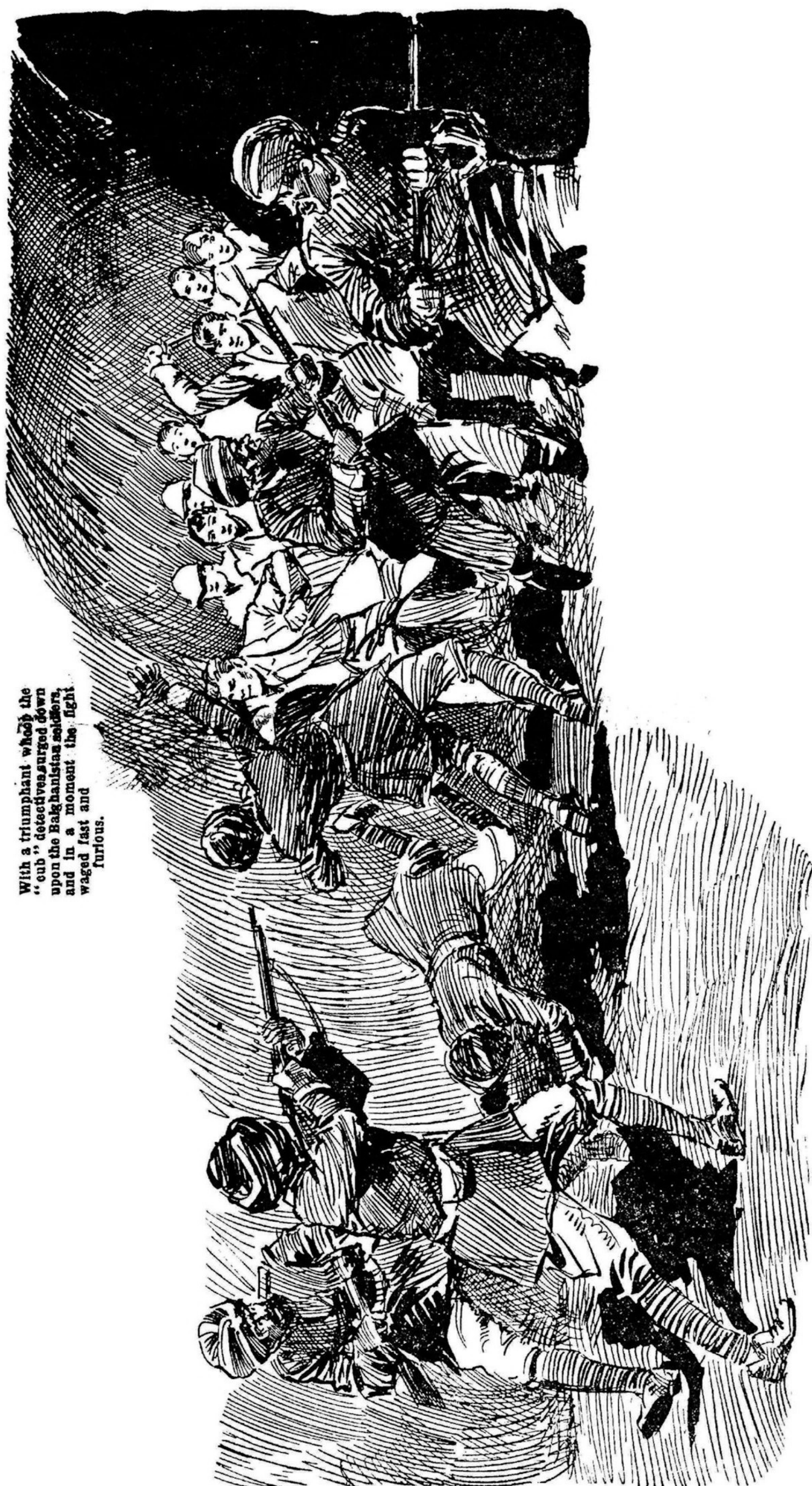
"Splendid," said Dorrie. "I'm glad you're taking us out of these quarters so quickly, my friend. I must confess that they are capable of improvement. I hope you're going to put us into something distinctly better."

There was no breaking the redoubtable Dorrie's spirit. He was as cool and as jovial as ever. Nelson Lee was equally spirited, but he did not show it as Dorrie did.

They found themselves in the centre of the armed escort, and once again they went down the long tunnels, mounting several flights of stone steps soon afterwards. Then they were marched through the palace, and finally ushered into a sumptuous, richly-furnished apartment.

"Better—much better!" commented Dorrie ironically, as he looked round. "What do you say, Lee? This will suit us nicely for the time being."

With a triumphant whoop the "cub" detectives surged down upon the Balghistan soldiers, and in a moment the fight waged fast and furious.



He glanced round to smile at the Balghar officer, but the man had already gone. The curtains had dropped into place. Nelson Lee and Dorrie found themselves alone.

"Hallo! What's the idea?" asked Dorrie wonderingly.

Lee went to the curtains, and pulled them aside. He found a heavy door, and it was locked. The apartment was hung with heavy draperies on every wall, and there were one or two high windows—so high that there was no chance of reaching them.

"Queer!" muttered Lee. "They must have brought us here with an object, Dorrie."

"I don't like the look of it," said his lordship, shaking his head. "It smells deucedly fishy to me. This Ameer chap is several kinds of a devil. What kind of a death do you think he has planned for us? I wonder if there are some snakes hidden away somewhere, ready to squirm out at us?"

As he spoke, the curtains on the other side of the room drew aside. A figure appeared—a stunted, misshapen dwarf, with an ugly hump on his back. He crouched there, watching the two prisoners—his face alight with evil, his eyes burning with hatred.

In an instant, Nelson Lee recognised this figure. He and Dorrie were face to face with Dacca, the Dwarf!

With a triumphant
"cub" detected
upon the Balghar
and in a moment
waged fast and
furious.



CHAPTER 7.

The Fanatic!

"**H**IS HIGHNESS, THE AMEER!" said Lord Dorrimore, bowing with mocking gravity. And, absurd as his words sounded, they were true. This monstrous object—this hideous caricature of humanity—was none other than His Imperial Highness, the Ameer of Balghanistan! It was evidently some kink in his make-up which had induced the Ameer to appear before his prisoners in the repulsive character of his "other self."

"Mad Englishmen!" he said contemptuously, as he advanced into the room. "You are all the same, you of your race! Never do you know when you are defeated."

"Not a bad characteristic, either," said Dorrie, with a nod.

"Fool!" snarled Dacca. "Do you think you have any chance now?"

"I shouldn't be surprised in the least," said his lordship coolly. "Anyhow, we're not dead yet, are we?"

"Not dead, my friend—and you will soon regret that fact," said the fanatical ruler. "You



will wish that you had crashed to your death in the aeroplane. I have planned an end for you which will not be so merciful."

Nelson Lee shrugged.

"Hadn't you better get on with it?" he asked. "Or must you continue to gloat over us?"

"I have reason to gloat," retorted the Ameer ferociously. "You hindered me in England—you and your boys dared to pit your wits against mine. You have even been crazy enough to follow me—right into my own country. But now, my friends, you have overreached yourselves."

"You needn't crow," said Dorrie. "If it hadn't been for your special brand of whirlwind, we should have been perfectly safe."

The dwarf scowled, his yellow fangs showing horribly. Nelson Lee had an idea that the Ameer, when he assumed the Dwarf's character, placed a dental plate containing those fangs in his mouth.

"I will admit that I have much to thank the wind for," said the Ameer, advancing still further, and looking at the two men closely. "But why talk of that? You are here—you are my prisoners. Before long I shall have other prisoners—hundreds—thousands! You and your accursed race will be conquered!"

"A dream," retorted Lee. "A fantasy of your imagination."

"We shall see!" replied Dacca gloatingly. "No, no, Lord Dorrimore! Do not glance at Mr. Lee in that fashion. It will be a pity if you attempt to attack me. We are alone—yes—but I am not entirely helpless." He removed his two hands from beneath his clothing, showing

two automatic pistols. "Apart from these weapons, my own strength is quite sufficient to deal with the pair of you," added Dacca. "But I am not in the mood for a brawl. I should not like to kill you in this way; I have other plans."

"Better spring on this skunk and risk it!" snapped Dorrie, glancing at Lee. "A bullet is better than what he hints at. And we should, at least, go under in action."

Dacca backed away.

"You think you can spring on me?" he asked mockingly. "You English blockheads! You will be dead within the hour. You have given me sufficient trouble already. By nightfall my troops will be on the march—armies of them. I shall lead my soldiers into India."

"They'll soon be defeated," said Dorrie curtly.

"You think so?" sneered the Ameer. "But you are wrong, my friend! My agents have been working in secret for months—for years. We have friends in India—thousands—hundreds of thousands! When my conquering army appears, these hundreds of thousands will fly to the banner. Your own British troops will be wiped out. They will be massacred in every town and village as our triumphant march progresses. It is the brown man who will rule in Balghistan, in India, in Burmah—in this entire part of the world."

As he was speaking, the misshapen wretch became more and more frenzied. In his character of Dacca he could let himself go—he did not feel the necessity to retain his cultured exterior.

"Do you understand?" he went on. "Having conquered India, I shall be the supreme ruler of this entire domain. And then I shall proceed to dictate my terms to the world. The brown man shall be supreme."

His voice rose to a great shout, and he was positively fearsome as he crouched there, fired by his fanatical frenzy. Nelson Lee knew that the creature was voicing an impossible ideal—a fantasy conjured up in his own mad mind. Yet it was clear enough that this man could do incalculable harm. He would stir up an appalling amount of strife, and, without question, hordes of ignorant natives would rally to his banner. There would be a second Indian Mutiny—and this one, perhaps, would be infinitely worse than the original. There would be bloodshed—grim warfare. Great Britain would be involved in the great struggle, and her money and her men would have to be poured forth in lavish quantities.

The entire population of Balghistan, fed for years on this madman's dream, was almost as fanatical as himself. The people had been fooled—deceived—led astray. The awakening would only come after the war had been started, and after the Ameer's armies had met with defeat. Yet at first, no doubt, those armies would meet with success. It might be months before the British authorities could get the upper hand. And during those months there would be chaos—revolution—wholesale destruction of property and life.



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Nelson Lee suddenly leapt forward. He was reckless—his only desire was to get his fingers at this mad monarch's throat. But Dacca, understanding his intention, gave vent to a fiendish laugh, and jumped across the room with the agility of an ape. He vanished behind some silken draperies—and when Nelson Lee got there, there was nothing but a blank solid wall.

"By heavens!" panted Lee. "If I had got my hands on him, Dorrie, I would have choked him!"

"I wanted to get my fingers on his throat long ago," snorted Lord Dorrimore. "But what's the good? He knows the tricks of this infernal room—and we don't."

"This man is going to cause a world upheaval, Dorrie," said Lee huskily. "And we can do nothing to avert it—"

He broke off as some sounds made themselves heard. They looked round, and found that soldiers had appeared from several concealed doors. They were advancing upon Lee and Dorrie menacingly, hatred in their eyes.

"Take them!" said a soft voice in English. "Take them to the Pit."

The voice belonged to the Ameer—the man Nelson Lee and Dorrie had known as Sir Akbar Laldhi. They both glanced round, and saw the stately, dignified figure, clothed in rich robes. It was almost impossible to believe that this figure was the same man as the hideous, misshapen dwarf who had so recently vanished.

"A quick-change artist now, eh?" asked Dorrie.

"A whim, my friend—a mere whim," replied the Ameer. "I find it easier, in my other guise, to give vent to my feelings towards the English."

Nelson Lee was not surprised. Anything that the Ameer did would not have astonished him. For this man was palpably insane—but his insanity was of that type which confines itself to one set mania.

"You will not escape me this time, my dear Mr. Lee," said the Ameer silkily. "I am taking very stringent precautions. You and your friend will be escorted by fifty of my soldiers to a certain spot on the heights overlooking the city. There you will find a pit—— But I will not waste my breath with a description of that interesting spot. You will see it for yourselves very shortly. It is my intention that you shall be food for my rats."

"Rats?" repeated Lee, with a sharp intake of breath.

"Ah, that reminds you of something, does it not?" sneered the Ameer. "A certain incident in Epping Forest. I intended that you should die by my rats there, but you escaped me. This time Mr. Lee, your fate will be somewhat different. These rats are of another type."

And the Ameer laughed softly to himself, as though in the enjoyment of some hideous joke.

"Trying to scare us, I suppose?" asked Dorrie contemptuously. "What do you think we care for your filthy rats?"

"You will care when you know what your fate is to be," replied the Ameer. "And your companions will follow—two by two. You are to have the honour of being the first pair. Two others will follow this evening—two in the morning—two to-morrow at midday—two to-morrow night. My rats will have excellent meals for quite a number of days!"

WHILE this conversation was taking place in the sumptuous apartment of the Palace, something rather exciting was going on down in the dungeons. The prisoners had been taken into a long tunnel, where there were dungeons in a double row. In one of these prisons were Jim Barnes, Fred Thompson, Nipper, Handforth, and Browne. The rest were distributed up and down the tunnel.

"This isn't the same place as we were brought to when we were imprisoned before," said Nipper, soon after they had been locked in. "It's filthier—darker."

"Does it make much difference?" asked Jim Barnes.

"No, I suppose not," replied Nipper. "Only in the other tunnels we found scores of English chaps—pilots of the missing aeroplanes, you know, mail officials, and others. We might have shouted something to them."

"We couldn't have shouted anything cheery, so what does it matter?" grunted Handforth. "By George! What a rotten frost, you know! Just when we thought that everything was going so toppingly, too!"

"I'm worried about the gov'nor—and Dorrie," said Nipper, his voice husky. "They've just been taken away. Oh, if we could only get out of here!"

They had seen, through the bars in their door, Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore being escorted off. They could easily guess why the pair had been taken. They were to be put to death first!

"If only we had some weapons!" muttered Handforth. "But we've nothing! Those curs searched us and took everything away."

"Even my faithful watch, brothers," sighed Browne. "Ah, we need a magician to assist us in our extremity."

Clink-clink!

"What's that?" whispered Nipper.

"Only me," came Jim Barnes' voice. "Look here, all of you! They searched me, but they missed something! When I knew that we were booked for capture, I shoved these files under my puttees."

"Files!" breathed Nipper incredulously.

"Four of them," came the head mechanic's voice.

"Speak of magicians, and they appear before us!" murmured William Napoleon Browne. "Brother Jim, let me embrace you!"

"Chuck it, Mr. Browne," said Barnes. "This isn't any time for rotting. There's a chance that we might be able to get out—but it's only a slim one. These files may be no good at all. Anyhow, I managed to conceal them——"

"Let's have one!" urged Handforth. "My only sainted aunt! It's like what you read about in stories!"

"It was something I read in a story which suggested the idea to me," admitted Jim. "The story ended happily—but it may go differently in real life."

"Don't you believe it," declared Browne stoutly. "Files! A way to freedom! Come, brothers, let us to work! Have a squint out through the bay window, and see if the enemy is without."

Nipper was already at the grating of the door. He was feeling it over eagerly.

"Three iron bars!" he whispered. "This hole is big enough for one of us to squeeze through, if necessary. There aren't any guards out here—not a light, or a sign of any living soul."

"Then it seems that we'd better start work while we've got the chance," said Barnes. "I'll have the first go."

"Isn't there room enough for two of us to work together?" asked Nipper. "Come on! By Jove, this has given me new heart!"

A moment later Jim Barnes and Nipper were plying the files, and their hearts leapt with exultant joy when they felt the metal of the bars giving way before the onslaught of those tools. Aches and pains meant nothing in this tense situation; the prisoners worked feverishly, urged on by a wild hope.

CHAPTER 8.

The Pit of Terror.

IT was a hard, strenuous climb, but when the summit was reached a magnificent view of the great Oriental city was obtained. The sunshine, slanting down, glinted on the towers and minarets and domes. Not that Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore cared much for this picture. They were not interested in scenery just then.

Their hands were bound behind them, and thick ropes, passed round their bodies, secured them together like a couple of animals. That rope just allowed them to walk freely. The escort consisted of a large number of the Ameer's personal bodyguard. There were one or two high officers—and the Ameer himself. After being conveyed in a car to the foot of a great rocky hill, the captives had been forced to alight. The climb up that hill had been exhausting, for it was steep, and the foothold was none too good.

"We are nearly at our destination, my friends," said the Ameer. "I have honoured you with my presence because it is my desire to be with you at the end."

He chuckled evilly, and Lee and Dorrie pretended to ignore him.

"These Englishmen are stolid, are they not, my good Singh?" said the Ameer, addressing his adjutant, who walked beside him. "Even when they have fear in their hearts they show nothing but boldness on their faces. A queer race!"

"They are brave men, your Highness," said Singh.

The Ameer scowled.

"Brave—yes!" he snapped. "I am not denying it. But such bravery as theirs is folly."

The adjutant spoke again—this time in Balghanistani—but the Ameer held up his hand.

"Continue to use the language of our brave prisoners, Singh," he said. "Let us converse in English; I have no desire to hide my comments from these two courageous men. English is an excellent language: I have a mind to adopt it permanently," he added in a mocking voice.

They had now come to a halt. There was a small plateau here—a flat, rocky tableland. Just in front, there was something which appeared to be a great hollow in the rock, and it was guarded by a low wooden rail.

"Come!" said the Ameer, touching Nelson Lee's arm. "I will let you have a glimpse of something interesting."

Nelson Lee was already taking in the scene. On the other side of the hollow there was a huge derrick-like contrivance, crudely constructed. Suspended from it was an iron cage. This cage was not particularly large, measuring perhaps five feet square.

The two prisoners walked forward, their hearts beating rather more rapidly than usual. And now they saw that what they had taken to be a hollow was, in reality, an amazingly deep pit. Reaching the rail, they stared down into a chasm. The sides were of smooth rock, and utterly sheer. The pit was at least three hundred feet deep, and the bottom, in deep shadow, was difficult to see.

"A pretty tidy drop," remarked Lord Dorrimore.

"You must not imagine that you are to be pitched down into this abyss," said the Ameer gently. "I do not approve of such violence. But gaze closely, my friends. Do you not see something moving at the pit bottom?"

Lee and Dorrie were already straining their eyes. There was something moving down there. Something that looked, at first, like a mass of black mud, seething and moving to and fro.

"Glory!" muttered Dorrie. "Volcanic, eh?"

"I think not," said Lee.

And then the Ameer's purring voice broke in.

"Gentlemen, behold my rats—my four-footed army of destruction!"

"Rats!" ejaculated Dorrie, biting his under-lip.

He had been inwardly horrified at the thought of being thrown down into a pit of boiling mud; but that, at least, would have been a fairly quick death. He almost shuddered now as he realised that the Ameer's words were true. Gazing more closely, he could see that the moving black mass was, indeed, composed of hundreds and thousands of rats, swarming like some nightmare phantasy.

"Ugh!" muttered Dorrie involuntarily. Then he pulled himself together, and glanced at Nelson Lee. "It'll be quick, anyhow," he grunted. "At first I thought it might be a bit dragged-out. But the fall itself will finish us off. We shan't know what happens afterwards."

The Ameer approached, closely guarded by four soldiers with fixed bayonets, who kept their weapons pointed at the prisoners.

"You have seen, gentlemen?" inquired the Ameer. "Quite an interesting nest, is it not? You will be interested further to know that all those rats are infected with that distressing disease commonly known as the Black Plague."

Lee shook his head.

"You surely do not expect us to believe that?" he asked. "If those rats were infected, as you say, you would not be here—so near the edge of this pit."

"The pit is over three hundred feet deep—and the plague germs cannot possibly escape into the upper air," replied the Ameer amusedly. "Furthermore, if you look closely you will see a number of small boxes, hung on cords, only twenty feet down the sides of the pit. These boxes, gentlemen, are fitted with automatic devices which release antiseptic sprays at frequent intervals. The air in the upper part of this pit is permanently sterilised."



"And the object of breeding these—er—interesting creatures?" asked Lee.

"When my hour strikes—and it will not be long delayed now—these rats will be moved into every city where white men congregate," said the Ameer, his voice becoming impassioned. "Do you understand? The plague shall be spread—and the white man exterminated."

"And a few million brown men will be exterminated, too," retorted Lee grimly.

"Oh, no! They will be warned," said the Ameer. "Perhaps a certain number of my own race will suffer, but what does it matter? In the end I shall conquer! The world will be at my feet!"

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders, but made no comment. Mad as the Ameer's other plans were, this scheme was incredibly crazy.

"You and your fellow prisoners shall be fed to my rats at every meal-time," continued the Ameer gloatingly. "You two will be the first! Do you see that cage?" he added, pointing.

Lee and Dorrie saw it—and they were sickened.

"You are not to be thrown down, to be instantly killed," said the Ameer evilly. "Oh, no, my friends! That would be too simple! You are to be lowered in the cage—and the cage will be brought to a stop many feet above the rats. Some of them will leap up—and they will bite you and infect you. Do you see? Then the cage will be lowered another foot—and more rats will attack you. Your death, gentlemen, will be prolonged. I shall be interested to watch the developments."

If he expected Nelson Lee and Dorrie to show some signs of horror and apprehension at his words, he was bitterly disappointed. They appeared to be quite indifferent—Dorrie, indeed, being even flippant.

"A rash business," he said, shaking his head. "Think of the chances of life we shall have. The winch-gear may get stuck—the rats may not be hungry. You're taking a lot of unnecessary risks, old man. Wouldn't it be a lot better to chuck us down and get it over? I mean, so much safer—and so much more certain. Here one minute and gone the next, what?"

The Ameer compressed his lips.

"You English are all the same!" he said coldly. "You are so stupid that you do not even know when torture is staring you in the face!"

Lord Dorrimore yawned.

"Well, get on with it," he said carelessly. "And don't say that I haven't warned you. If we escape a second time, it'll be your own fault. You've got us now—and you could finish us off. You may be sorry for this dilly-dallying business later on."

The Ameer waved a hand.

"Enough!" he said harshly. "You seek to turn me from my purpose—but you shall not succeed. I have given my orders, and they shall be carried out to the letter."

And he signed to the soldiers, who moved grimly towards the two prisoners.

CHAPTER 9.

A Dash for Liberty!

"DOES it move?" asked Nipper breathlessly.

"It's coming, I think!" gasped Jim Barnes. He was tugging hard at the second of the iron bars in the dungeon door. Two bars had been eaten through by the files, and one of them had been removed. "Here we are—she's free!" he added exultantly.

The bars were sunken into deep sockets in the hard wood. These doors were six inches thick, and the wood was as tough as oak, but once the bars had been sawn through at the base they

could be levered. Only slightly at first, but gradually they became loosened in the top socket. The second one came out now.

"Good work, brothers," commented William Napoleon Browne approvingly. "I might even say, brilliant work. We are certainly progressing."

"Now for the next bar!" muttered Handforth.

"Wait a minute! Why waste time by filing through the third bar?" asked Nipper tensely. "If you chaps give me a push, I think I can manage to squeeze through the hole now that two bars have gone."

Helped by the two mechanics, Nipper squirmed his way through the hole in the upper section of the door. It was a very tight fit, but at last, after a good deal of wriggling and twisting, Nipper collapsed on to the floor of the tunnel outside. He picked himself up in a flash, and glanced up and down. Then his heart almost jumped into his mouth. A light had appeared from an angle of the tunnel and a figure was now in sight, moving towards him.

"It's all up!" muttered Nipper, in despair. "Oh, my hat! What a frost!"

Before they could do anything really effective, one of the guards was coming along! It was the height of misfortune. Since they had been imprisoned in these dungeons, no living creature had come near them. It was just the "cussedness" of things which caused this man to come on his rounds now.

Nipper squeezed himself into the recess of the dungeon doorway, trying to flatten himself out. But what was the use? He would be discovered within a few moments—and the soldier not only carried firearms, but a sword, too. Then, like a flash, Nipper remembered something.

"Jim!" he hissed. "Hand me one of those iron bars!"

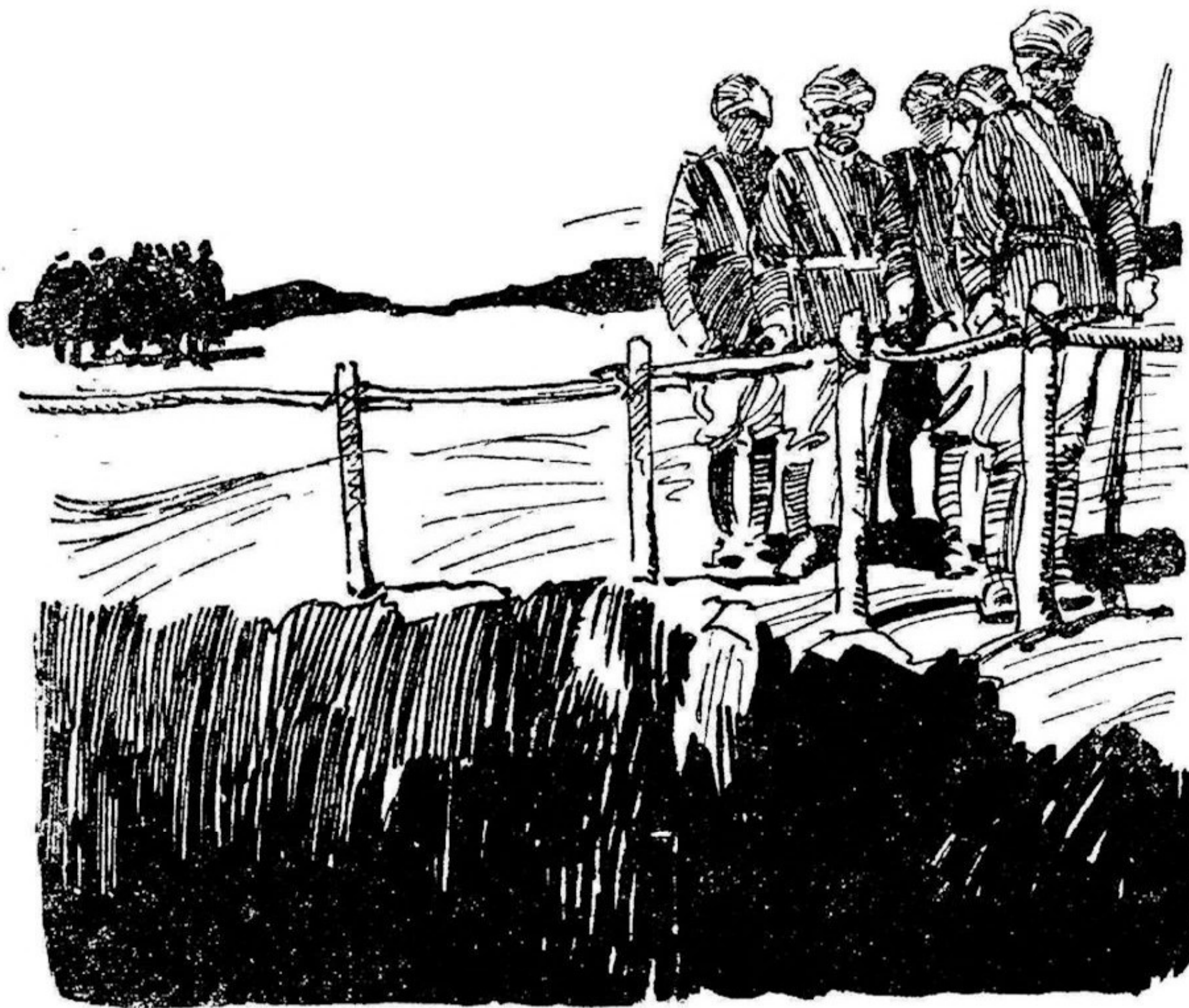
But it was Browne who passed the bar of iron through the hole in the door.

"Brains, my lad—brains!" he breathed. "May your aim be true and may your strength be adequate!"

There was no time for making any elaborate plan. The guard was walking fairly quickly, and he was now close at hand. Nipper's brain worked rapidly, and he decided that it would be a mistake for him to wait until he was discovered. Far better spring out now—and thus have the advantage.

Like a panther, he leapt out. The Balghar soldier—a big, repulsive type of man—halted in his tracks and stared blankly at the sudden apparition. His mouth opened, and he sucked in his breath preparatory to giving a shout.

Crash!



The iron bar, whirling with deadly effect, came down on the soldier's helmet. The man simply sagged at the knees, pitched forward, and rolled over on his side. He had not even had time to utter his shout.

"Stout work!" came a soft comment from Browne.

Nipper quickly righted the lantern, which had toppled over. Husky whispers came from many of the dungeon doors. A number of the prisoners had witnessed that sensational incident.

"He's only stunned!" muttered Nipper, with a gulp. "I don't know what——"

He broke off, forgetting what he was going to say. His gaze had suddenly fallen upon a heavy, old-fashioned type of key which was fastened by a chain and a spring catch to the soldier's belt. A key! And only one key!

With feverish hands, Nipper jerked back the spring catch and removed the key. He spun round, inserted the key into the lock of the dungeon door and—turned it. A moment later he had shot the bolts. He did so silently.

"Come on out!" he panted.

"We're out!" said Handforth.

Nipper tried the key in the next dungeon door. To his supreme joy, it turned. There was one key for all these locks!

"Not a sound, you chaps!" hissed Nipper, as he unlocked the fourth door. "Come out—all of you! Wait in the tunnel, here."

The prisoners could hardly believe in their good fortune. Dungeon after dungeon was opened. Everybody was released. All the members of Nelson Lee's Detective Academy were there, to say nothing of the two aeroplane mechanics and "Tadpole," the steward. Only Lee and Dorrie were missing.

"How on earth did you manage it?" asked Edgar Fenton amazedly.

"Never mind that now," replied Nipper. "We're free! We've got to decide what we shall do next——"

A sudden shout interrupted him.

"The guard!" yelled Handforth. "Quick! The beggar's bolting! He'll give the alarm. Grab him, for goodness sake!"

Amid the general tension and excitement of escaping from the dungeons, the stunned soldier had been momentarily overlooked. The boys, in fact, had believed that he was well-nigh done for. But they were wrong. The man was streaking down the tunnel, shouting at the top of his voice. Realising the hopelessness of his position, he was giving the alarm.

"There's only one thing for it!" shouted Nipper tensely. "We've got to make a rush! And don't forget, we'll fight!"



Lord Dorrimore uttered a horrified cry as he saw what was at the foot of that pit—for it was into that pit that he and Nelson Lee were to be flung!

"Hurrah!"

Bubbling with excitement, they went tearing down the tunnel. All hope of secrecy was now at an end. Within a minute the fight would be on—and everything would depend upon their own efforts. They were unarmed, but they were desperate. And they were determined to go down fighting rather than submit to recapture. Imbued with that spirit they were a formidable force.

The clanging of gongs and the shouts of men now came echoing down the tunnel. Figures appeared ahead, some carrying flares. If the prisoners were excited, the Balghar soldiers were in a veritable panic.

"Now for it!" roared Handforth exultantly.

He ran like the wind, striving to gain the lead. His rugged face was flushed, and his fists were clenched. A fight! A hand-to-hand scrap with these brown-skinned rotters! Handforth was in his element.

The first clash was violent and desperate. There were about ten of the Ameer's soldiers; they appeared from a big cavern which opened out from the tunnel. Perhaps it was a sort of guard-room, and the soldiers, surprised at the dramatic news, were more or less confused. One or two of them fired their rifles, but the shots were at random. Before they could organise themselves the schoolboys were on them. Other soldiers, yelling at the top of their voices, were dashing away down a wider tunnel, which doubtless led into the open. The alarm was becoming general.

One or two of the boys—such as Nipper and Fenton—knew only too well that their last hope was vanishing. Unless they acted like lightning, recapture—or death—was certain. Once the alarm *did* become general, their number would be up. Only by the element of surprise could they hope to get free. So they entered into this preliminary scrap with a ferocity which startled and dismayed the Balghar soldiers.

There was one violent rush, a terrific clash of bodies, a thudding of fists. Handforth got in two terrific right-handers, and Fenton and Morrow and Nipper and most of the others hit out with just as much effect. The Balghar soldiers were literally swept out of the way—driven back—knocked out like ninepins.

"The rifles!" panted Fenton. "Grab their rifles!"

He and Browne and the two mechanics and one or two of the other boys managed to snatch up some of the rifles. The rest of the fugitives were running on, Handforth now well in the lead, with his minor at his heels.

"Look out for squalls when we get into the open—if we ever do!" shouted Nipper. "The whole hornets' nest is aroused!"

"Who cares?" yelled Handforth. "Come on, you chaps!"

"Hurrah!"

Their voices cracked with strange excitement as they beheld some rough steps just ahead. They swept up them in a body. Soldiers were running about madly. These Balghars, evidently, were not at their best in an emergency. The men who had carried the alarm outside were spreading disorder among their comrades. Officers were shouting wild orders.

"Ye gods!" breathed Nipper, his eyes glowing. "Look!"

He pointed to a number of big open motor-cars which were standing in the courtyard, in readiness, no doubt, for the use of the Ameer's staff officers. They were comparatively close.

"The cars!" yelled Handforth. "Come on—let's grab 'em!"

In spite of the fact that the alarm had already been given, the Ameer's household guard was flustered and disordered. Such an incident as this had never before occurred, and they were taken completely by surprise.

Crack-crack-crack!

Rifle-shots rang out, and a number of bullets, hastily fired, hummed over the heads of the boys. Fenton's rifle answered—and Jim Barnes', too. Their aim was more accurate. A Balghar officer fell, screaming, and a soldier tottered.

"The cars!" went up the cry.

There was a sudden rush of men. The fight was too close for rifle-firing now. The soldiers, using their rifles as clubs, rushed at the schoolboy party. Handforth, in the lead, dodged adroitly as a rifle butt swung at his head.

Crash!

His fist took the soldier on the point of the chin, and as the man fell, Handforth grabbed his rifle by the barrel and swung it round. In the same moment, Archie Glenthorne dived at the legs of a man who was making a murderous attack, and they both rolled over. Everything was confusion and noise. But the boys, because of their ferocity and determination, had all the advantage.

Nipper, out of the corner of his eye, saw hundreds of men pouring through a great gateway on the far side of the courtyard. The reinforcements were coming! Once they arrived——

"Quick! Jump in!" came a roar from Fenton.

He and Jim Barnes had already fought their way to one of the waiting cars. It was now a question of split seconds. The boys, tearing themselves away from the fight, leapt into the cars. Many of them were bleeding and reeking about, half-stunned. Archie grabbed young Chubby Heath and literally hurled him into one of the cars. Willy Handforth seized Juicy Lemon, who was well-nigh exhausted, and dragged him aboard. Fighting every inch of the way, the boys managed to get to their objective. The hordes of soldiers, racing across the courtyard, were becoming perilously close.

Crack-crack-crack!

More rifles were being fired. Jim Barnes and Browne, in the driving seats of the two seized cars, touched the electric starters. The engines sprang into life, the exhausts roaring.

"All aboard?" asked Browne, his voice steady and calm.

He gave one look. His car was packed to suffocation. Balghar soldiers were swarming round it, and the boys were desperately trying to beat them off. Exactly the same thing was happening round the other car.

"Look out!" said Browne grimly.

He let the clutch in and the car, with the gears screaming, shot forward as though it had been released from a catapult.

"Hurrah!"

Crack-crack-crack!

It was over—the British youngsters had won! They were away into the streets of Balghar, and behind them they left confusion and disorder.

CHAPTER 10.

The Rescue!

JIM BARNES proved himself to be a driver of extraordinary skill. The way he sent his car thundering through the busy streets of the Hidden City was a staggering exhibition of coolness and nerve. But then, Jim had spent years at Brooklands and other motor-racing tracks; his nerves were of steel. Browne, in the second car, had much the easier task. The way was cleared for him by Jim. The two vehicles roared madly out towards the open country.

The very suddenness of this bold dash was all in favour of the fugitives. For the crowds in the street scattered in terror as the cars came tearing along, and then congregated again after the cars had gone. This hindered the pursuit disastrously. Many cars, filled with soldiers, were giving chase. Some of them met with disaster, others had difficulty in forcing their way through the crowded streets.

Meanwhile, the fugitives were gaining. Jim Barnes had an excellent bump of location, and he knew the direction to take. The city was left behind, and the aerodrome came in sight.

One machine was standing apart from the others—for there were large numbers of aeroplanes out in the open. This one machine had wings of a pale blue colour. The propellers were ticking over. In an instant, the boys recognised the plane as the great machine which was fitted with Mr. Robert Harding's invention—the one which had caused the Indian Air Mail liners to become trapped. Jim's eyes shone as he drove. This was the bus to seize! It was big—capable of carrying them all—and it was ready to take the air.

Jim sent his car swerving off the road, over the grassland. The second car followed. One or two Balghar mechanics were standing near the blue plane. They gazed in astonishment as the cars roared up. The next moment the boys were out, tumbling to the ground in a flood. The Balghar mechanics were overpowered before they could even guess what all this excitement meant.

"Into the cabin, boys!" yelled Jim Barnes. "Hurry!"

He himself dashed up a ladder which was standing against the nose of the machine, and which, he knew, would permit him to get into the cockpit. It was all over within a minute—before a small force of soldiers from the hangars could arrive. The boys piled into the cabin, and almost before the last one was in Jim was sitting at the controls, with Fred Thompson beside him. He flicked the throttle, and the engines gave an answering roar.

"All clear!" came a bellow from Fenton.

Jim set his teeth. He opened out the engines to their fullest extent, and the 'plane rolled forward. From the distance, the soldiers fired, but they were too excited and flurried to take accurate aim. The 'plane, gathering speed, raced over the aerodrome, bumped, and took off. A mighty rousing cheer came from the cabin.

"We've done it!" yelled Handforth hysterically. "Oh, my only hat! We're off!"

Within five minutes the blue 'plane was soaring up, a thousand feet high. A rare commotion could be seen in the streets of the city and in the aerodrome, but the boys felt that they were comparatively safe now. Then came another excitement. Jim, more by chance than design, steered the 'plane towards the heights overlooking the city. And Nipper, at one of the windows of the cabin, suddenly pointed.

"Look!" he ejaculated hoarsely.

But he didn't wait; he dashed through the little communicating passage to the cockpit. He found the two mechanics staring at a queer derrick-like contrivance on the heights. A cage was suspended from it, and in the cage were two figures.

"Jim!" roared Nipper. "It's the gov'nor—and Dorrie!"

"I know!" gasped Jim Barnes. "In that cage! What can we do? There's a horrible pit there, and they're just going to be lowered into it!"

"To their death!" shouted Nipper. "Oh, can't we do something?"

He was horrified. They had found Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore—only to see that the unfortunate pair were on the point of death! There was no possibility of landing on that rocky height. Then an inspiration came to Nipper.



"Wait!" he panted. "I remember seeing a length of steel cable in the cabin—and a grappling hook on the end. Jim! I'm going to get that cable, and I'll climb down on to the under-carriage—and fasten the cable. If you fly slowly over the cage, do you think you could grab it as we pass?"

"It's madness," said Jim Barnes, between his teeth, "but I'll try it!"

THE Ameer, standing near the rail which surrounded that foul pit, gazed in wonder at the great blue 'plane which was approaching with throttled engines—flying at her minimum speed, and dropping slowly.

"What folly is this?" snapped Sir Akbar harshly.

He knew nothing of what had been taking place in the city. Up here, on these heights, no word of that drama had been able to reach him. The cage was ready to be dropped into the pit, it was suspended from the derrick, level with the pit edge. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, inside, had no suspicion that a forlorn attempt to save them was being tried. They were resigned to their fate, and they were cool, and apparently indifferent.

"The fool in that machine shall have his head off for this!" shouted the Ameer furiously.

"Your Highness!" gasped Singh, in alarm. "The machine is dropping—it is coming towards us! Run, Your Highness!"

"Fool!" snapped the Ameer. "Do you think that this pilot will dare——"

He broke off, his eyes bulging. He had just caught sight of a small figure crouching in the big 'plane's under-carriage. And a steel cable was hanging down—with a grappling-hook on the end of it.

"Ten thousand curses!" screamed the Ameer.

He went mad. He could see that that slim figure belonged to a white youth! Nipper! It was incredible. Once again these accursed English boys had got free! But there was no time for the Ameer to think—or even to run.

The aeroplane was overhead—and Nipper, with deadly accuracy, guided the dragging cable. The grappling-hook caught in the top bars of the cage, and the cage was jerked violently and forcibly from its supporting ropes. For one sickening moment it seemed that the top bars would smash—but, mercifully, they held.

The cage swung back wildly—full upon the Ameer. He put out his hands to save himself, but the cage had got to the end of its swing by then, and the Ameer only just clutched at the bars. As he did so, the aeroplane's engines roared with their full power, and the machine soared up, carrying the cage under it.

And the Ameer's officers and soldiers, to their horrified consternation, saw their Imperial Master carried off under their very eyes, clinging desperately to the cage bars. It had all happened in a moment. Before the Ameer could let go, the cage had risen, dragging him with it. The Balghar soldiers had their rifles to their shoulders, but now they dared not fire. Disaster to the aeroplane would mean disaster to their ruler!

JIM BARNES, in the cockpit, was filled with apprehension.

The incredible thing had happened. That cage had been grappled, and was being carried along with the aeroplane. But at any moment the hook might give way—the bars might smash. The two rescued men must be landed at the first possible second.

But how? Jim knew that his problem was a grave one. There was only one possibility. To land in the ordinary way was out of the question. The cage would strike first, and would be reduced to scrap-iron, its occupants being mangled beyond recognition. There was the river. It was the only hope.

Jim Barnes did not even attempt to get to the main stream, which flowed through Balghar. There was a smaller river within sight, a tributary. It flowed through a valley, almost beneath the 'plane. It was at the back of those heights which overlooked the city. And near the river banks, as Jim could see, there was a short stretch of flat ground. A possible landing-place. It was an isolated spot, too, for no houses were to be seen anywhere in the vicinity.

The great blue 'plane dropped lower and lower, Jim handling her with rare skill. Nipper, his heart thudding, still clung to his perch on the under-carriage. He was waiting. He knew what Jim Barnes was attempting to do. Lower and lower dropped the 'plane, until only thirty feet separated her from the water. Suddenly she almost stalled, dropping another ten feet. At the same instant Nipper forced out a bolt which held the end of the wire to the under-carriage. The cage dropped like a stone, struck the water, and sank. The aeroplane staggered, rose slightly, but dropped again. Her wheels touched the bank, ran on, and Jim effected a forced landing of remarkable skill.

Before the machine had stopped, Nipper had swung himself from the under-carriage and was racing towards the river bank. The main door of the 'plane opened, and Fenton and Browne and Handforth and the others came pouring out. Nipper, to his untold joy, saw that the cage was still visible. The water was not deep! But there was evidently a submerged rock just there—for the cage had struck it, and one corner of it was gaping open.

"Guv'nor!" gasped Nipper, as he saw his famous master swimming—or, rather, wading towards the bank.

Lord Dorrimore was there, too. But Nipper's first impression was wrong. Lee and Dorrie were not wading towards the bank—they were making for some object which floated near by. They seized it, and then Nipper saw that it was the figure of the Ameer.

"They're safe, you chaps—they're alive!"

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"Only just alive, my sons," gurgled Lord Dorrimore. "By the Lord Harry! I've led an adventurous life, but I've never had so many narrow escapes tucked into one hour as I have to-day!"

They were fairly pulled out of the river. Both of them were bruised in every limb, and they were, indeed, in no fit condition to carry on. But the circumstances were so exceptional—so dramatic—that they gave no thought to their injuries. Nelson Lee was attending to Sir Akbar Laldhi. His Imperial Highness was unconscious—knocked senseless by the force of striking the water, and by the cage crashing on top of him. He was by no means dead, however. And Nelson Lee's eyes were burning with an intense fire.

"Carry him into the 'plane, boys!" he ordered. "No questions—do as I say! There'll be time, later on, for me to thank you for what you have just done."

"We don't need any thanks, guv'nor," panted Nipper. "Oh, my hat! It's ripping to know that you're alive, sir—and saved from those fiends!"

Swiftly the unconscious Ameer was carried to the aeroplane, and everybody tumbled aboard. Jim Barnes and Fred Thompson, in the cockpit, were the only ones who did not share the general rejoicing.

"It's no good!" Jim was saying despairingly. "We can't get off, Fred! It's impossible!"

"Just what I was thinking," said Fred, with a gulp.

There was sufficient room for the aeroplane to take off, but only by speeding along the level strip of ground which bordered the river. And this very strip was occupied by a dozen powerful motor-cars, which had suddenly appeared on the scene and were bearing down at full speed upon the aeroplane!

CHAPTER 11.

Nelson Lee's Triumph!

SINGH, the Ameer's Chief-of-Staff, was in the leading car. Despair was in his eyes—for he believed that his Imperial Master had been killed. Hatred was in his eyes, too. These white men and boys should be made to pay! As his master would have served them, he would serve them—only with an even worse torture.

But as the car came to a halt almost beneath the enormous wing of the aeroplane, a figure appeared in the open doorway of the body. A wet, bedraggled figure, attired in the rich uniform which the Balghar soldiers knew so well. Heavy bandages more than half concealed the face.

The other cars were swinging up now. They all came to a halt, and there was a hush as the Ameer raised an impressive hand.

"Singh, I have orders for you," came the Ameer's well-known voice. "If a single shot is fired at these Britishers, death will be the penalty!"

"Your Highness!" ejaculated Singh, running forward and speaking in Balghanistani. "We feared that you were dead——"

"Wait! Use the language of those who have saved my life!" interrupted the Ameer. "Speak English, my good Singh. Mr. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and these white boys are my friends. It is my will that they shall be honoured."

"Your Highness!" ejaculated Singh, dumbfounded.

"It was in their power to leave me to die," said the Ameer impressively. "You know what happened, Singh—you saw me carried off accidentally by that cage. These people saved me from certain death. So, within this short space of time, my outlook has been changed. I repeat, these people are my friends. Their race shall benefit because of their action. It is my order that this aeroplane shall not be molested in any way; it shall be allowed to take the air at once."

Singh listened in bewilderment. And the other soldiers, who could not understand English, were equally puzzled.

"Go!" commanded the bandaged Ameer, pointing. "Return to Balghan, my excellent Singh. Give orders that every white man shall be released from the dungeons. Have them escorted to the aerodrome, so that they can once more take possession of their machines and fly off to their own country. These are my definite instructions, Singh, and if you fail to carry them out there shall be a heavy reckoning."

"All the white men—to be liberated?" asked Singh incredulously.

"All of them—and at once," commanded the Ameer.

"And you? What will you do, Your Highness?"

"By Allah! Is it for you to question what I do?" shouted the Ameer angrily.

"I go, Your Highness," muttered Singh, saluting.

He turned, and gave some rapid orders in Balghanistani. There was a commotion, but the motor-cars were started up and turned about. And as they made off the door of the aeroplane closed, and Lord Dorrimore clutched feverishly at the Ameer's arm.

"And they tell me that I've got nerve!" he breathed. "Lee, old man, your nerve is simply colossal!"

Nelson Lee removed the heavy bandages from his face.

"It was a desperate chance, Dorrie—but the only possible one we could take," he replied. "Fortunately, Singh and the other soldiers were too flustered to think deeply. The sunlight was in their eyes, too, whilst I was in shadow."

"Never saw anything so quick in all my life!" gurgled Handforth. "The way Mr. Lee shoved those giddy clothes on was miraculous."

"I needed to be quick, young 'un," replied Lee. "If I had not appeared at once—in the guise of the Ameer—the results would have been disastrous."

"But the voice, it was the Ameer's to a T!" said Dorrie, breathing hard. "I'm so infernally flabbergasted that I can't think clearly even now. What are we going to do with His Nibs?"

"He is still unconscious—but that does not matter," replied Nelson Lee grimly. "He is our prisoner, and we shall fly off with him at once. He returns with us to Bushire, there to be handed over into the care of the British authorities!"

BOOM-OOM!

An explosion, loud and violent, shook the very ground. The blue 'plane was just taking off. There had been a delay—a fairly long delay—owing to the fact that the landing-wheels had been damaged when Jim Barnes had brought the machine so cleverly to earth.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie, the two mechanics and half the boys had piled out, and they had worked feverishly to repair the damage. At any moment the enemy might return. At length the damaged wheel had been sufficiently patched to risk a take-off. Lord Dorrimore was now at the controls, and that booming explosion had sounded in the distance just as the machine was lifting.

"Hurrah! We're off!" went up a general yell of triumph.

"Good old Dorrie!" panted Nipper. "We knew he'd do it!"

"And those rotten Balghars haven't returned—we're safely in the air now," said Handforth exultantly. "By George! We're all on this 'plane—every giddy one of us! I hope there's enough juice aboard to carry us safely out of this beastly country."

"The tanks are full," said Nipper. "Jim told me five minutes ago."

"And this machine, too, carries Mr. Harding's invention," said Fenton. "Didn't you spot it in the wing? A curious-looking contrivance, something like a dynamo. I understand that it exerts a tremendous radio-magnetic influence. It's a sort of ray, and when it is directed towards another machine in mid-air everybody on that machine is paralysed, and the machine itself is compelled to follow this one."

"Never mind that now," said Handforth. "We're off—we're safely out of this mess——"

"Look!" yelled McClure.

He pointed out to one of the windows. In spite of the roar of the engines, another explosion had been heard from the ground—a dull, thudding sound. And McClure was pointing at a great livid blaze which had suddenly burst out from the heart of the Hidden City. A tremendous column of smoke and debris shot into the air.

"What's happened?" asked Nipper wonderingly.

"Goodness knows; but look at all those machines in the air!" yelled Pitt. "My only hat! I believe they're bombing the city!"

AND Reggie Pitt's guess, fantastic as it sounded, was the literal truth.

Singh, having no suspicion that he had been duped, had carried out the "Ameer's" orders to the letter. Every one of those captured British pilots had been released.

They had been conveyed to the aerodrome. And then it was that these men, freshly out from a hideous captivity, "saw red." They could hardly be blamed. For weeks they had been kept like animals in dungeons—half-starved—in the filthiest possible conditions. They had suffered tortures.

With joy they leapt into the waiting aeroplanes—their own machines—and they took to the air. Many of these 'planes were R.A.F. bombers, still carrying their loads of deadly missiles. Who could blame these tortured pilots for seeing red? Who could blame them for flying over Balghan's arsenals and munition factories and dropping their bombs on these vulnerable points? It was an unexpected development—and it was one which sent a wave of consternation throughout the Balghan Valley.

Boom-oom!

The bombs were dropping everywhere. Yet, frenzied as the released air pilots were, they only dropped the bombs on legitimate objectives—military camps, arsenals and munition works.

Nelson Lee, in the cockpit with Lord Dorrimore, knew exactly what had happened, and he was quietly confident.

"I'll warrant that this has started a panic which will spread from end to end of Balghanistan," he said grimly. "And with the Ameer our prisoner, we shall—— Good heavens! Look out there, Dorrie!" the detective added in a startled voice.

He pointed. Everybody had been so engrossed in what was happening immediately beneath that no attention had been paid to the sky. Below, a dozen great fires were spreading in Balghan. Flames and smoke were rolling skywards. But there, in the far distance, a vast fleet of aeroplanes was coming into sight. Not twenty or thirty—but a fleet of hundreds!

"R.A.F. machines, or I'm a Laplander!" yelled Dorrie.

HE was right. The newly-appointed Air Minister in England, having heard nothing whatever from Nelson Lee, had decided to take drastic action. So he had ordered a formidable fleet of British 'planes to fly over Balghanistan. This new Air Minister was a man of purpose—a man of strength. And this expression of Britain's might could not have occurred at a better moment.

"Well, this ends the case as far as we are concerned, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "This trouble in Balghanistan is over. There will be no war—no invasion of India. The whole thing is squashed."

"Thanks to you, old man," nodded Dorrie.

Lee turned and passed through the little passage into the main body of the machine. As he did so, Nipper came bumping into him.

"Quick, gov'nor!" he panted. "The Ameer has come to himself!"

Lee hurried forward, and found Sir Akbar standing in the cabin, with the boys occupying the rear end. The Ameer cut a sorry figure. A blanket was wrapped round him in lieu of clothes, his head was bandaged, and blood was trickling down one of his cheeks. In his eyes there was an unnatural, feverish light.

"You win, Mr. Lee," he said, his voice quivering.

As he spoke a great spasmodic shudder passed over him; and before the eyes of Lee and the boys the Ameer transformed himself into—Dacca, the Dwarf! The hump appeared on his back, he seemed to shrivel, and his face became hideous.

"Hold him!" shouted Nelson Lee sharply.

"No!" screamed the Ameer. "You win, Mr. Lee—but never will you hold me—never will you triumph to that extent!"

And with a great frenzied leap the Ameer hurled himself with all his strength at the nearest window. There was a crashing and rending as the non-splinterable glass was forced clean out of its frame. There was just a flash as the Ameer tumbled through—and then he had gone.

Nelson Lee swallowed hard.

"Perhaps it is all for the best," he said quietly.

AND that, indeed, was the end of the case.

With the landing of the great R.A.F. force, panic, utter and complete, reigned in Balghan. The town was surrendered, and the British authorities took command. But it was recognised by all that Nelson Lee, owing to his coup, had been the main cause of the Ameer's defeat.

And so, after a brief stay in the captured capital, Nelson Lee and the members of his Detective Academy flew off to England—back to their normal work. None of them was sorry, either. Greatly as they enjoyed thrills, they felt that they had had their fill—for the time being, at all events!

THE END.

That's the end of that fine series, chums. Next week Nelson Lee and his "cub" detectives are back in England—meeting with many more thrilling adventures. "The Two-Headed Viper!" is the title of next Wednesday's yarn—and it's a real corker. Order your copy of the Old Paper Now!

PRIMO THE TERRIBLE!



The Blackbirders' Trap!

WHIZZ-ZZ! Phut!

A bullet whizzed by the ear of Primo, missing it by about an inch, and then burying itself in the soft wood of a tree-trunk. Primo wheeled, his face distorted with rage. This was the third time that day that bullets had been fired mysteriously at him as he made his way through the forest.

His nostrils distended. With an animal-like roar he leaped forward. The bullet must have been fired from a tangle of undergrowth near at hand, and Primo the Terrible did not hesitate.

With one mighty bound he sprang towards a young tree that was growing near at hand. The next moment he had seized it in his two mighty hands. There was a jerk—and the tree came out of the ground, torn up bodily by the roots! Then, using the tree like a flail, Primo began to pound the undergrowth.

He seemed to be raving mad at that moment. The tree, wielded with a strength that was superhuman, rose and fell, crushing the undergrowth beneath it as a steam-roller might have done.

Swish, swish, swish! Bushes and young trees were squashed flat by the intensity of Primo's attack, but no cry of crushed humanity came to his ears, and Primo eventually desisted. The would-be assassin had

made good his escape, not waiting to witness the result of his shot. Throwing down the tree on top of the battered undergrowth, Primo strode off with darkened face towards the village over which he ruled.

Tim Murphy, who, despite his seventeen years of beef and muscle, looked like a mere pigmy beside his giant friend, came to meet him, and Tim saw at once that all was not well.

"Again they have tried!" said Primo. "The natives have no firearms. It must have been one of the Blackbirders who escaped when I wrecked their vessel. Would that you had let me smash them all to pulp!"

Tim stroked his chin. Something had to be done. Since Primo had routed the Blackbirders who had attempted to kidnap his natives for forced labour, several attempts had been made on the lives of both

No. 5: "Edgar the Elephant!"

The world's strongest man—so strong that he can throw an elephant—that's Primo! Exciting are his adventures; amazing his deeds. Read and be thrilled by Primo!

Primo and Tim.

"I'll call the village to arms!" Tim said. "We shall have a man-hunt for the Blackbirders!"

In a few moments the village was aroused. The natives, armed with their primitive weapons, fell in, with Wanga—Tim's assistant and interpreter—in charge of them. Then, when the reason for the alarm had been explained to them, the beating of the jungle was commenced.

Primo—always the first when danger threatened—pushed on ahead, closely followed by

Tim. The natives disposed themselves in semi-circular formation, following behind, and on the flanks of Primo and Tim. But, so anxious was the mighty giant to bring the Blackbirders to book that he consistently pressed on so quickly that it was difficult for even the skilled native trackers to keep pace with him.

The trackers avoided trees and bushes—Primo went through them, bending them aside as easily as if they had been striplings. Behind him he left a track of broken and crushed trees and undergrowth battered down to a mere mass on the ground of the forest. Hard on his heels went Tim, running in order to keep up with Primo.

They had proceeded a great distance without signs of the men for whom they hunted, and every minute saw Primo forging ahead farther away from his followers. Eventually he came into a clearing, and stood for a second, looking around him.

Crack!

A report rang out from the trees on the other side of the clearing, and again a bullet narrowly missed Primo. Stung to the quick, he dashed forward with a bellow of rage, for a thin wisp of bluish smoke showed whence the shot had come. Tim was close behind him. Through the concealing screen of undergrowth they dashed, and then—

It seemed as though the ground had opened and swallowed them! There was a crashing sound, and the mighty Primo staggered and fought to regain his footing. But it was in vain! Down he crashed into a mighty pit which had been dug to receive him, and after him pitched Tim Murphy.

Tim fell on Primo, and broke his fall. Shaken to the core, the lad scrambled up and looked anxiously towards Primo. But, as the giant rose to his feet, Tim gave a sigh of relief, for Primo had broken no bones.

Then they looked around. Soft earth walls enclosed them, and high above they could see the sky, framed in a tangle of broken branches. They were prisoners, and their captors had captured them as hunters capture elephants!

The shot had been a decoy to make them dash in that direction. Once out of the clearing they had run on to a thin covering of branches and earth which roofed the pit. The Blackbirders had left nothing to chance. The pit was too deep for the prisoners to climb out of it.

And Primo and Tim knew that, robbed of their white men leaders, the natives would be helpless, and would fall easy victims to the scoundrelly Blackbirders!

An Unexpected Ally!

PRIMO raged like a wild animal. Tim drew himself back and squeezed himself against the walls of the pit, for Primo was rushing here and there, shouting at the top of his voice, and tearing, in the excess of his anger, at the walls which

enclosed them. Every now and then he attempted to jump to the brink of the pit, but he merely fell back upon the ground.

They were caged and helpless, and they both knew that the Blackbirders would take no steps to release them, but would allow them to remain there and die a lingering death.

And then, with the suddenness of the tropics, darkness fell. The night that followed was one of misery and torture for the helpless captives. It was bitterly cold, and the dew soaked down into the pit and chilled them to the very bones. Primo ceased his ravings, and Tim attempted to sleep, but sleep would not come to him. Throughout the whole long night he cowered there, waiting for daylight.

The forest above was full of sounds, and, in the dark hour that precedes the dawn, the sounds increased. Tim jumped to his feet as he heard above the noise of heavy, trampling footsteps—footsteps that seemed to make the very ground shake.

He looked upward. Through the hole in the roof at the top of the pit he could see that the first few pale flushes of dawn were streaking the sky. The heavy trampling came nearer, and then, for one brief moment, the light above was blotted out and all was darkness.

The next moment there came a thunderous crashing. Tim suddenly found himself picked up as though he was a baby, and flung violently against the walls of the pit. It was good for him that this happened, for Primo, his quick wits working, had seen what was about to happen, and had seized Tim and flung him clear of the space below the opening in the roof.

Crash! Something tremendously large and heavy came hurtling down into the pit, bringing with it the rest of the trap above. Tim found himself buried under a mass of branches, and struggled desperately to free himself from them.

Eventually his head poked out from the debris, and the sight he saw made him give an alarming cry. The trap had caught another victim—a great bull elephant!

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"Keep back!" yelled Primo, and the warning was necessary.

For, after its first fright, the bull elephant had staggered to its feet, and was trumpeting furiously and pounding the ground wildly with its huge feet. Tim looked round him, and saw that a branch, bigger than the rest, had torn a hole in the side of the pit—a hole just large enough to allow him to squeeze himself into it!

In a flash he was in this place of safety, and away from the terrified and maddened elephant, which was now dashing wildly round and round the pit. But there was no place of safety for Primo, and the next moment Tim was witnessing the strangest struggle he had ever seen. The elephant, catching sight of Primo, and connecting the human with the trap into which it had fallen, had dashed at him.

Primo, despite his great bulk, was athletic and lithe. As the elephant bore down upon him he dodged, and the great beast went headlong into the wall of the pit. Again and again was this manœuvre carried out, and again and again was the mighty bull shaken by the impact of his rushes against the wall of the pit.

Primo was breathing heavily—but, bit by bit, the elephant was weakening. And then Primo decided that he had waited long enough, and his opponent was more shaken and less fit for the final stage of the battle.

This time Primo did not dodge very far as the elephant charged. He side-stepped neatly, and, as the elephant's trunk whirled in the air, Primo made a leap and caught it, hanging on to it like a leech, and dragging it down.

During his association with Primo, Tim had learned to expect anything from this primeval man. But he had certainly never expected to witness such a grim battle as this that was taking place in the elephant pit!

Backwards and forwards struggled Primo and the maddened bull, the elephant trying desperately to wrench its trunk from the powerful grip of the superman, and Primo grimly determined to exert mastery over the maddened brute.

Every minute the light grew stronger, and Tim, fascinated, watched with eager eyes. It seemed impossible that Primo could win. At any moment Tim expected to see the elephant wind its trunk about the superman, drag him down, and trample him underfoot.

But, though it tugged and tore, the mighty bull had met its match at last! It was obviously weakening, and Primo, watching his chance, rushed in suddenly and caught it by the forelegs. Tim saw Primo's muscles and sinews stand out like bars of iron, and his face was tense and strong.

"Urgh!" growled Primo at last, and gave a mighty heave.

Crash! The elephant toppled over and lay there, conscious now that it had met its match. And Primo, a smile of triumph breaking out on his face, jumped lightly upon its back.

Like a dog that suddenly knows its master, the elephant made no further attempt at resistance, but lay there, with a look of wonder in its eyes. Like Primo, its rage had left it, and its mighty bulk trembled as Primo looked down straight into its eyes.

Perhaps the animal beheld the look of comradeship in Primo's eyes. Perhaps it realised that it need fear no harm from this mighty human who had so aptly proved to be its superior.

Primo leaped down from its back, and grinned.

"Get up!" he cried, and made a motion with his hands.

The bull seemed to understand him. It scrambled to its feet, and stood there as sheepishly as ever an elephant could have done. Then Primo called to Tim to come from his hiding-place, and the boy did so.

"It is a bit of luck for us, eh, Tim!" said Primo. "The elephant—see, he is my friend now!" And to prove it, he stroked the animal's trunk, and the elephant seemed to understand his words.

A sudden light came into Tim's eyes.

"My hat!" he cried. "A way of escape! Look, Primo, if the elephant can be persuaded to lift us with his trunk and throw us out of the pit, we are safe!"

Primo Strikes Back!

PRIMO and Tim staggered on through the forest, followed by the trumpeting of the bull elephant. It had taken some time for Primo to make the animal understand what he wished it to do, but at last it had picked up Tim and thrown him out of the pit.

Primo had patted its trunk and whispered caressing words to it, and it had repeated the performance with him. And then, as it realised that it was alone, it trumpeted its annoyance at thus being left by the humans whom it had helped.

But Primo and Tim had other work to do, and they hurried on through the forest intent upon gaining the little harbour where the wrecked Blackbirding craft lay. They gained the rocky eminence which overlooked the bay, and one glance was enough for Tim.

"As I thought!" he cried. "Look, we did not smash up their boats, and they have got them afloat, and are evidently going to attempt to make the passage to the mainland in them!"

Below they could see the Blackbirders at work. The ship's longboat and two lifeboats were being made ready for the passage. They had been lowered from the wreck, and had been prepared for sea, with their masts already in position.

Tim and Primo saw more—for they saw many of the natives being driven along the beach. The Blackbirders were not going back empty-handed. Primo gave a bellow of rage, and would have rushed down to the beach, had not Tim prevented him.

"No!" said Tim. "Wait a moment! The Blackbirders are making the natives provision and water the boats. Look, they are driving them to the river, and back again with water-barrels. I think I see a way of outwitting them!"

In silence they watched. The natives, formed into a long line, were being driven backwards and forwards from the boat, bearing with them water and provisions which had been salvaged from the wreck. Tim turned to Primo.

"Wait here until I come back!" he cried, and, watching his chance, he slipped away.

The boats were unguarded, and Primo wondered what was in Tim's mind. He saw the boy go first to the wreck, and then emerge from it, bearing the end of a wire hawser. Then Tim dived overboard, and Primo did not see him again until some time after, when Tim emerged from the water and staggered

With a whoop of triumph which made the Blackbirders turn and gaze shorewards, he stepped from his hiding-place, and slipped the great steel hawser over his shoulder. Then he began to trudge up the beach, and, as the hawser tightened, the boats were dragged backward.

Shouts of rage came from the Blackbirders. They attempted to hack the hawser—but Tim had made it fast to the rudder stanchions under water, and they could not reach it.

Despite the wind, the boats moved backwards towards the beach. The natives, as they saw Primo alive and in the flesh, gave a loud shout, and, as the Blackbirders strove to draw their revolvers and fire at Primo, the natives flung themselves upon them.

It was all over in a few brief moments. There was a grating as Primo lugged the boats high and dry on the beach, and then he and Tim ran down to secure the Black-

Primo exerted his mighty strength and began to drag the heavily laden sailing boats after him !



back up the beach, finding a hiding-place for himself behind a convenient group of rocks.

Then he waved to Primo, and the giant hurried down and slipped behind the rocks. Tim grinned and showed him the end of a wire hawser.

"This was the strongest one I could find!" he said. "I've made it fast to each one of the boats. Now it's up to you, Primo. When they set sail, and try to get away, all you've got to do is to tug on this hawser, and it'll bring the boats back!"

Primo grinned as he anticipated the surprise which was in store for the Blackbirders. Then they waited.

In due course the boats were provisioned and watered, and the natives were hurried aboard. There was a slight breeze blowing, and the sails filled out as the Blackbirders, taking their position in the stern of the boats, ordered the natives to work.

Slowly the boats moved over the surface of the bay, and then—

Primo decided that it was time to act!

The natives, however, had already done so, for, so long as Primo was near them, they lost their fear of the white scoundrels' weapons. And, before long, the Blackbirders were trussed like fowls, and Primo and Tim stood, grinning, over them.

"Take them to the village, Wangal!" ordered Tim.

"And tell half the men to follow me," added Primo. "For we must release the elephant who proved to be our salvation."

* * *

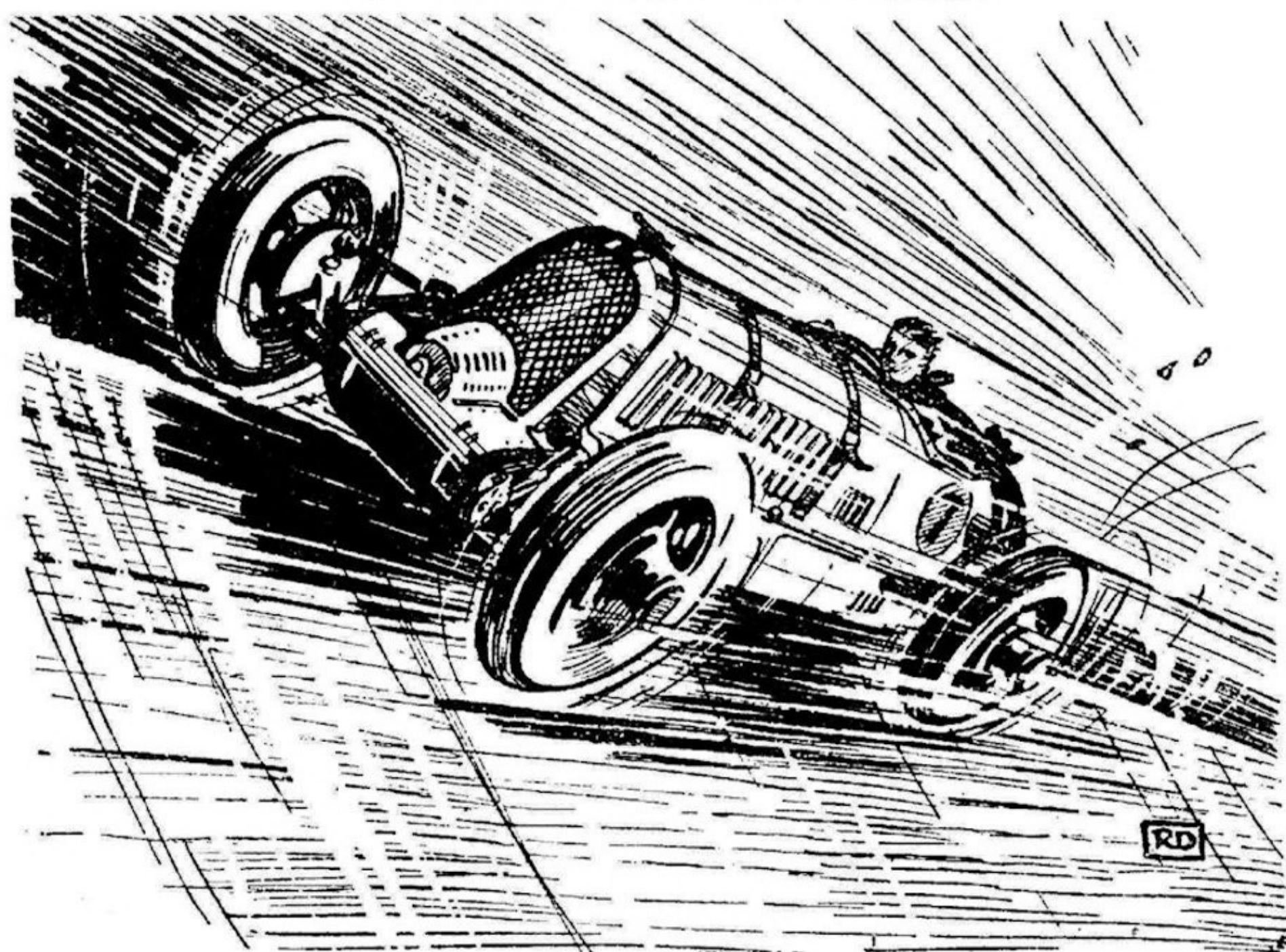
The elephant was dug out of the pit, and his first action on obtaining his liberty was to seize Primo and Tim, lift them high in the air, and place them safely upon his back. Then they went back to the village, Primo and Tim riding in the van on the back of their new-found friend, whom Tim facetiously christened "Edgar the Elephant!"

(There will be another grand story featuring Primo, the world's strongest man, and Tim Murphy in next week's issue of the NELSON LEE.)

Another Exciting Instalment of our Magnificent Motor-Racing Yarn—

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

By ALFRED EDGAR



"Beat Stargie and you can drive in the big race!" . That's what Steve Ross tells Jim—and this week Jim goes all out to prove his worth!

Jim Takes Out the Ross-Eight!

"I'LL take the car around the track now!" Jim Ross waved a capable hand towards the concrete expanse of Brooklands track. "And I'll make it do a hundred and forty miles an hour!"

"You've never driven it before!" Steve gasped.

"I know I haven't, and I've never been on the track before, either!" Jim grinned. "But I'll do the knots all right!"

"Don't be a young fool; you'll break your neck or smash the car if you——"

"What's that matter?" asked Jim grimly. "If I can't go fast enough, we can't win. And I'm going to find out how fast I can travel—now!" He turned as he spoke, but Steve caught his arm.

"Steady!" he gasped. "I said that if you could beat Lon Stargie's speed you could drive in the race, and that——"

"And that's what I'm going to do. Come on, Joe!"

Jim turned, and left Steve standing as he and Joe went running back to the paddock, where the glittering shape of the Ross-Eight racer stood just by the little stand near the rails.

"Let's get away before old Steve changes his mind!" Jim panted when they reached the car. "You sit on the tail and I'll run her round to the pits, then you can time me from there!"

He slid over the side of the cockpit as he had done many a time while they were making the machine ready at the little garage in Woodburn. His shoes fell naturally on the control

pedals, and his strong fingers wrapped about the thin, corded rim of the flexible steering-wheel.

"Buck up!" He glanced over his shoulder, to see that Steve was now running towards the paddock, shouting. "He's yelling for us to stop, or something. Shove her off, Joe!"

His chum hunched at the car's tail and sent the machine rolling forward. Jim slipped into gear, held out the clutch and switched on. A dozen yards Joe pushed the machine, gathering speed, then Jim let in the clutch and the warm engine fired with a roar, shooting forward.

Jim slowed and stopped to allow Joe to climb on to the tail. He sprawled almost full length, fingers clutching the back of the cockpit.

"Let 'er go!" he yelled in Jim's ear, and the racer shot off at his call, swinging for the paddock gates and rolling out to the concrete beyond, turning again to head up the breadth of the straight.

"G'wan, step on it!" Joe gasped, and the thundering bellow of the silvery machine's exhaust spanged furiously on the air as Jim trod the throttle wide open.

It was the first time that he had ever driven the car under its own power. The back of his seat seemed to kick him in the shoulders as the Ross-Eight accelerated, ripping away like something shot from a gun. There came a strangled yell from behind, then Joe was panting into Jim's ear:

"You nearly chucked me off, you mad ass!"

"Then hold on!" Jim grinned back at him, and took the centre of the track as its patched concrete zipped under the machine's threshing wheels.

The grandstand at the fork seemed to slide to meet them, then Jim reached for the brake-pedal and trod on it preliminary to taking the turn round to the pits.

When Jim used his brakes, he really did use them. There came the wild shriek of stressed tyres, the car slowed as though giant hands were dragging at it—and Joe slid forward from the tail, diving headfirst into the cockpit at Jim's side!

"You potty fathead!" came his choking voice, as he struggled to right himself, while Jim took the machine, half-skidding, around the turn. "Trying to kill me, or something?"

"I told you to hang on!" Jim grinned, as Joe came upright. "Look out, Sniff's watching us!"

They swung towards the Ace pit. Lon Stargie had brought his machine in, and he and Sniff Dix were standing alongside it. The star driver and the tester stared as they saw the Ross-Eight pass, with Jim at the wheel, and stop at the Ross pit just beyond.

"They can watch—we'll show 'em something in a bit!" Jim growled, as he climbed out.

"Am I coming round with you?" Joe asked.

"Not this trip," Jim told him. "You can come round later on! Got any goggles?"

He left the engine running as they looked through the kit and tools which lay on the pit-plank. Jim found a pair of goggles and he was clipping them around his neck when Sniff Dix came strolling across.

"Are you goin' to drive this sardine tin?" he asked Jim.

"I am," Jim answered coolly. "And if this is a sardine tin, it'll make Stargie's car look like a squashed tomato can!"

"Will it?" Sniff sneered, then worked his jaw to ease the bruise which Jim's fist had planted there a little while before. "What d'you think you'll get out of it?"

"Anything over 140 m.p.h.," Jim said cheerfully.

"Anything over——" Sniff gasped, then grinned as he turned and yelled to the men at his pit. "Hi, somebody go an' fetch the ambulance, this kid's goin' to break 'is neck! His brother's got the breeze up, so he——"

"Any more about my brother, and you'll need the ambulance!" Jim growled, and he spun on the Ace tester so suddenly that the fellow leaped back.

Jim glared at him for a moment, then stepped towards the car.

The rival mechanics watched him as he climbed into it. At the side of his own Ace stood Lon Stargie. His eyes were narrowed and his lips were set in a thin line, while the finger-tips of one hand drummed ceaselessly on the metalwork of his machine. He stood, tensed, missing no single movement of Jim as the boy settled down behind the wheel.

"Joe, I'll go round once to get up speed, see? You time me. If I'm not lapping at—"

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

JIM ROSS, iron-nerved, daring, is a born racing driver. His father, now dead, was a star speedman, and Jim is following in his footsteps. The boy's brother,

STEVE ROSS, has just completed building a special racing car known as the Ross Eight, and they take it down to Brooklands for a big race, which is due to be run in a few days' time. They are accompanied by

JOE COOPER, Jim's chum, who acts as mechanic. Steve takes out the car for a practice spin, and is easily passed by

LON STARGIE, the crack speedman of Ace Motors. Steve threatens to withdraw the Ross Eight from the race, for he realises that he hasn't the nerve to drive the car, whereat Jim says he will take his place. "I'm going to take the Ross Eight out now—and make it go faster than Stargie's or any other Ace!" "If you do that," replies Steve, "you can drive in the race!"

(Now read on.)

140 m.p.h., you wave me to go faster; when I do get round at that speed, hold both hands over your head."

"All right!" Joe nodded. "I say, don't—you know what I mean—don't be too blessed reckless, will you?"

"Don't you worry about me. I'll show Stargie something now!"

Jim's shout came through the accelerated roar of his engine as the car began to move.

Lon Stargie must have heard his words, because he suddenly turned and bawled orders to his mechanics—orders that were lost in the powerful crash of the Ross-Eight's exhaust.

Jim Shows 'Em How to Drive!

JIM wriggled himself low in his seat as he trod the throttle wide and sent the car hurtling to where the steep banking of a curve showed in front. He changed gear crisply, climbing on the banking as the machine's speed rose.

The whole of the Ross-Eight seemed to thrill as he himself was doing to the power of the engine and the threshing of the wheels as they spun against the grey concrete. Round the bend he went, with the banking rearing high above him; he glanced at it as he gathered speed.

"I'll be riding up the top of that when I'm travelling all out!" he thought, and changed gear again as he streaked beneath a red-painted bridge which spanned the track.

In front of him the concrete sloped from its banking down to a flat, wide stretch called the "railway straight." Practised Brooklands speedmen always rode as high as they could on the banking which Jim was now traversing, in order to gather momentum for the downward rush to this straight, along which some cars had travelled at speeds well above 150 m.p.h.

Jim held to the middle of the railway straight. He was in top gear now and he wasn't touching more than eighty miles an hour, but his speed was rising. Few racing cars have speedometers, but Steve had fitted one to the Ross-Eight, and it was calibrated up to two miles a minute—120 m.p.h.

Jim eased the throttle open and felt the car pick up. He saw the long, curving stretch of the Byfleet banking falling away at the end of the straight, and he thought:

"I'll do over a hundred while I'm going along that!"

The railway straight dropped behind him, then with a jump from some hump in the track, he was taking the curve to the banking, speedometer notching up to 100 m.p.h., and rising as the car went on.

Jim grinned now. The wind was starting to whistle past the edges of the little wind-screen, stirring his hair as it shot off the scuttle. He could feel the engine pulling magnificently—and he could see the black needle of the speedometer switching its way on around the dial: 110—115½—120 m.p.h.!

And that was the last Jim saw of the speedometer for some time, because all his attention was now needed to hold the car.

He had heard that the track was bumpy, and he found that what he had heard was true. The wheels seemed to stamp on the concrete, and to kick the car up under him. The front wheels twitched off bumps, so that he had to bore on the wheel to hold it.

Once a bump shot him up towards the lip of the banking, and he saw the trees and bushes beyond. For breathless moments he held the car there, then eased it down a bit, while the speed rose higher.

The track came at him in long, wavering streaks. He saw the old aviation sheds where the Ross-Eight racing camp lay. They went past in a wall of blackness, slamming back the sound of the machine. He sighted the curve in front, where the track turned to the Fork and the replenishment pits.

Jim kept his foot hard down as he took this bend—and the car tried to go straight on. He hauled the wheel over, and still the machine seemed to want to carry him to destruction amongst the bushes and trees which edged the track. It felt like some mighty steel horse which had taken the bit between its teeth, and again he braced his weight on the wheel, to feel the tail slide outwards in the start of a skid.

He checked the skid, then had the machine safe in the curve—to hit a bump which seemed to make the car leap high in the air. It felt an age before the tyres stamped the concrete again and he was hurtling on, with the Fork and the line of pits swooping to meet him.

He had a glimpse of the Ace mechanics, and of Lon Stargie—his car had just left the pits and was some way ahead—then he saw Joe standing, sweeping his right arm across his body in a signal for Jim to go faster.

"All right, I've got up speed now—I'll show you!" Jim yelled the words into the gale, and his right foot stamped the throttle pedal full down to the foot-grid.

The steep banking came at him and the car mounted it, rising to within a yard of the brim, tilting Jim to a wild angle as it stormed around. He saw the broken edge of the concrete, the bridge ahead—and then Lon Stargie's car. He went after it like a silver thunderbolt.

The Ace was already travelling fast, but it might have been standing still at the speed with which Jim caught it up. He saw the speedman glance over his shoulder, had a glimpse

(Continued on next page.)

The St. FRANK'S LEAGUE GOSSIP

The Chief Officer always welcomes letters from his fellow members of the St. Frank's League; he is always willing to help and to give advice. Here's his address: The Chief Officer, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

Still Going Great Guns!

CAST away your fears, chums. This "Gossip" has not appeared for the last few weeks, but let me assure you that it has not "gone for good."

Owing to the many new features which have been introduced recently, our space has been rather overtaxed, and I was unable to squeeze in even a few inches for our chat. This week I have just managed to get in by the skin of my teeth, so to speak—and having done so, I intend to get down to business right away. The League is still going great guns. Many new members have joined, and many more readers want to join. Some of the latter have pointed out that the Entry Form does not appear very frequently. This, unfortunately, is only too true, but as I have already stated, space has been very limited. I shall make a point of publishing the Form as often as I possibly can in the future.

Cricket Fixtures Wanted!

HERE'S a cricket announcement. The Higham "A" cricket club, hailing from the Gloucester district, require two fixtures for Whit Monday and August Bank Holiday. They are willing to travel to Bristol, Ross, Cheltenham, or anywhere else within a twenty-mile radius. Their average age is eighteen. Clubs interested should write to the secretary, Albert E. Hull, Ivy Cottage, Over Bridge, Nr. Gloucester.

Join These Clubs!

MEMBERS are wanted for the following four correspondence clubs: the Overseas Club, (Lloyd F. Whitehouse, 34, Uplands Road, Hillfields Park, Fishponds, Bristol); the Kiwi Club (Raymond Dixon, 71, Boston Road, Mt. Eden, Auckland, New Zealand); the Paramount Club (Colin E. Ford, 4, The Esplanade, North New Brighton, Christchurch, New Zealand); and the United Club (R. Meyer, 3, David Street, Marrickville, Sydney, Australia). The Springbok Hobby Club is also on the look-out for new members. Noel D. MacLean, P.O. Box 3116, Johannesburg, S. Africa, is in charge of this organisation. Bernard Rosen, Neardale House, Middleton Road, Nr. Crumpsall, Manchester, would also like to hear from readers who are interested in his club.

Girl League-ites Welcome!

NORAH KISBY, of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, is very keen to know if girls can join the St. Frank's League. I should say so! Why, the League numbers among its members many girl readers of the Old Paper. I shall look forward to receiving a Registration Form from you and your friends in the near future, Norah.

THE CHIEF OFFICER.

THE IRON SPEEDMAN!

(Continued from previous page.)

of his dark features, and then the Ross-Eight rocketed past him, its rear tyres tearing grit from the track surface and slinging the stuff back at its rival.

Down the straight went Jim, and his blood was leaping in his veins. The roar of the wind and of the engine, the scuttering whistle of the tyres and the whine of the supercharger, made a wild music which thrilled him.

He saw the curve to the Byfleet banking at the end, and he made no attempt to slow. He didn't cut out as did everybody else who approached it at more than a hundred miles an hour. He kept the throttle wide open, piled all his strength to his hands and arms, and fought the car around the bend!

It battled against him with little half-skids, seeming to scream as he mastered it and sent it on, with the Ace far in rear—Lon Stargie staring from behind his wind-shield in blank amazement at the way Jim took the turn and sent his car on, its pace hardly diminished.

The speed carried the machine to the very lip of the banking, and Jim held it there, tyres spinning within bare inches of the chipped rim, where a bump or a skid would send him hurtling to his death over the top!

Good old Jim! He's got Lon Stargie licked to a frazzle—but you can bet that Stargie, ruthless and cunning, will not stand for that! There's plenty of excitement in next week's stirring instalment of this fine serial, chums!

The Laughable Larks of TUBBY AND SLIM!

(Continued from page 5.)

had been drawn near the open window, and the guest tumbled on to it and rested his weary head on the pillow. In about five minutes the first man slept, lulled into unconsciousness by the monotonous ticking of the alarm clock.

Tubby descended and found his brother fixing a stout blanket to four pegs, which were driven into the ground directly underneath their open bed-room window.

"What's the game?" queried Tubby curiously. "Fire drill?"

"Precautionary measures," said Slim, grinning. "We don't want him to break his neck when he comes out—not here, anyway."

"Ha, ha, ha! I see. If he hasn't go after this, we've failed miserably."

"Well," stated Slim solemnly. "if he doesn't go after this, I shall begin to think he can't take a hint. Get his hat and scarf and then he needn't come in again."

Uncle's hat and scarf were duly placed on the blanket, and the boys retired indoors. With many chuckles they prepared to await the culmination of their plans. As the hour approached they took up their stand near the scene of impending action.

"Five minutes to go," announced Slim, looking at his watch, and the two brothers craned their necks expectantly.

Suddenly a faint noise broke the silence of the house.

Ting-a-ling! Tera-ling! It was the alarm clock at work.

"Exit, uncle!" the boys shouted, and as they spoke the body of their surplus relation came hurtling through the bed-room window and dropped with a thud into the suspended blanket beneath.

"Burglars! Fire! Assassins!" he bellowed, and automatically grabbing up his hat and scarf he struggled out of the blanket and belted down the lane towards Tumbledown, shouting frantically.

"Good-bye, uncle!" screamed Slim, waving his handkerchief. Uncle George heard the voice, half-turned, and shook his clenched fist at the boys, and then continued his lope down the road. His last adventure had got him groggy.

Half an hour later, Colonel Squint crept furtively into his own house and came face to face with his wards.

"Has he gone?" he boomed.

"Yes, sir. He has went!" cried the boys gleefully. "You will see him no more."

"Ha, excellent lads!" beamed their little guardian, grasping their hands gratefully. On releasing their mitts, the boys each found a ten-shilling note sticking to his palms.

"Ho-ay! Good old guardy!" chirped Slim.

"And good old Uncle George!" laughed Tubby happily.

(Look out for another hilarious story, featuring these two wirth-makers, in next week's issue of the NELSON LEE.)

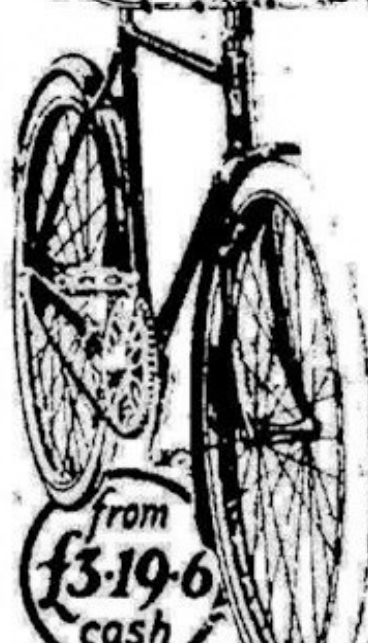
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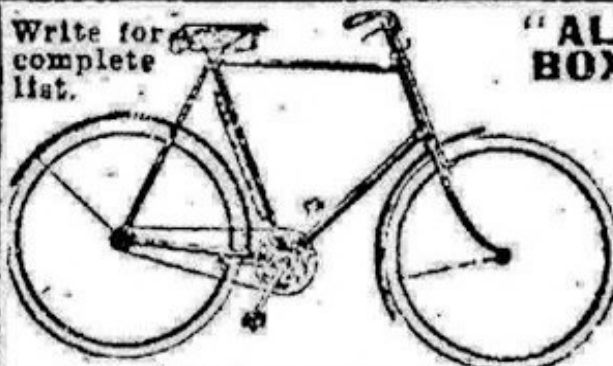
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