

Corking **DOUBLE-LENGTH** St. Frank's Yarns Every Week!

NELSON LEE

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THE VALLEY of FEAR!

A valley of prehistoric monsters! Exciting adventures befall the cheery Chums of St. Frank's in this week's enthralling double-length yarn.

New Series No. 68.

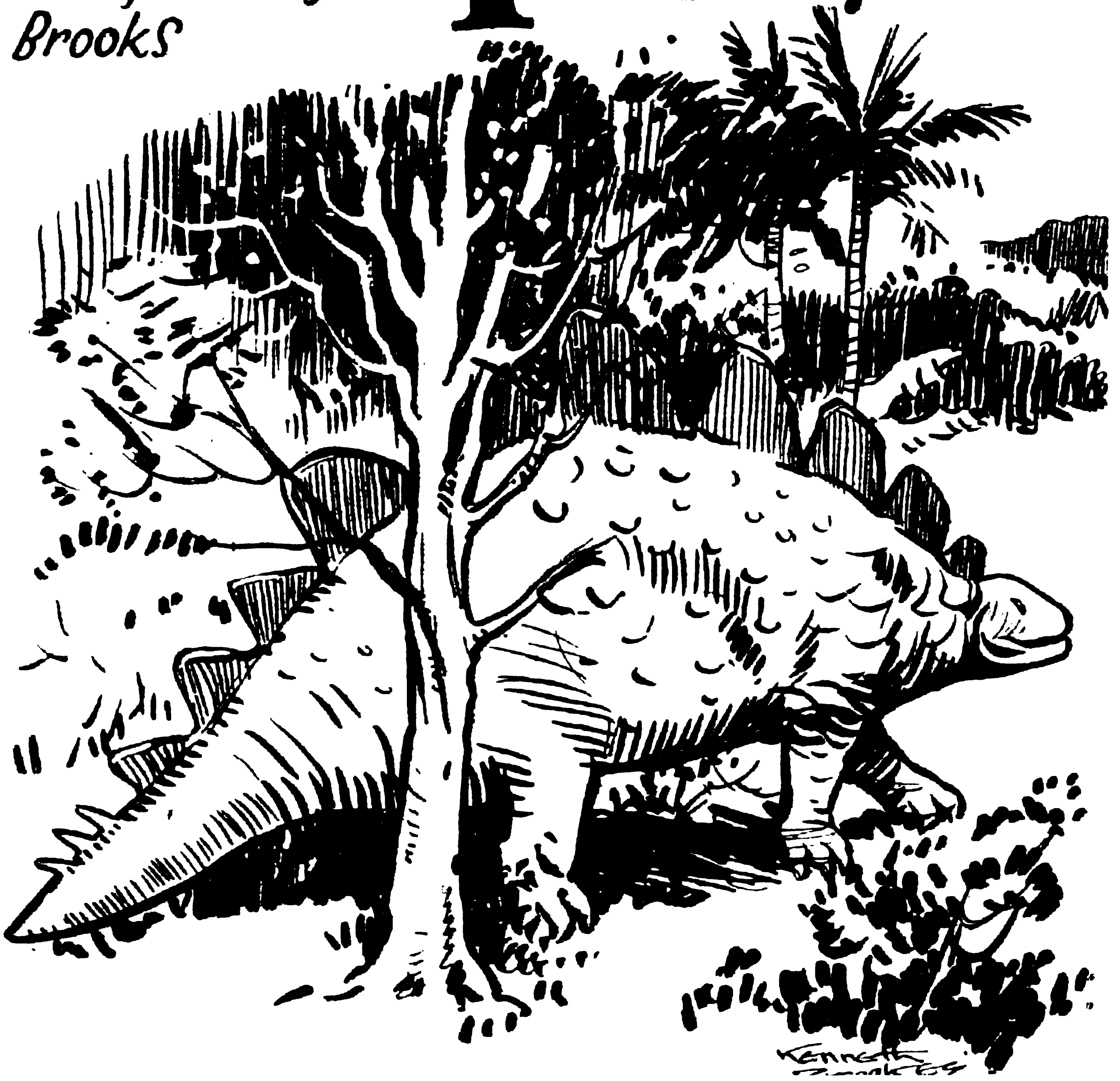
OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

May 9th, 1931.

Thrills and Excitement for Nipper and Co. in Northestria This Week!

The Valley of Fear!

By
Edwy Searles
Brooks



CHAPTER 1.

The Spy Hunters!

THE fight was silent except for the thudding of clenched fists against muscle and sinew and flesh, the shuffling and clattering of feet upon the rough cobbles, and the quick, hoarse breathing of the fighters.

There were no spectators, for this was one of the back alleys of the quaint, mediæval-like town of Ixwell, cut off from any of the main thoroughfares.

The fight seemed uneven, for there were three against two. Yet the two were unquestionably winning. A ragged, unkempt, dirty-looking pair, but they

certainly knew how to use their fists. The other three were respectable-looking citizens, but, unfortunately for them, their defence was crude and unskilful.

Thud! Crash! Thud!

The ragged ruffians were making short work of it now. The taller and uglier of the pair, swinging his right round with devastating effect, caught one of the opponents a deadly blow on the point of the chin, and the man crashed over to the cobbles, to lie motionless.

Like a whirlwind, the victorious ruffian swung round, and again his right came into operation. Another man fell, groaning. At the same moment the



second ruffian overwhelmed his own opponent.

Breathing hard, the rascally-looking twain stood back, surveying their handiwork.

"Well done, brother!" said the taller of the ruffians, with an approving nod. "Not exactly an unpretty piece of work."

"Hadn't we better rope 'em up?" asked the other ruffian breathlessly.

"A brainy suggestion, Brother Horace—and, coming from you, a surprising suggestion," said the other. "Roping them up would not be entirely out of order."

"I suppose they really are spies, Browne?" asked the other dubiously.

"Leave it to me, Brother Horace," said the tall one. "I venture to predict that these blighters will prove to be spies of the worst kind. Didn't we overhear them gloating in advance over the gold they would receive from Brother Cedric, in return for their valuable information? Make no mistake; we shall receive medals for this morning's work."

It was difficult to

recognise William Napoleon Browne and Horace Stevens, of the Fifth Form at St. Frank's, as these ragged-looking ruffians. But then, everything was quaint and unusual in Ixwell.

BROWNE and Stevens, donning themselves in rags and tatters, and skilfully coarsening their features by means of make-up, had been spy-hunting. Stevens, the most brilliant amateur actor of St. Frank's, was a past-master in the art of make-up. It had been Browne's idea.

The times were not quite normal. Ixwell, for example, was an important country town in Northestria. And Northestria was a land practically unknown to the world at large, tucked away behind the barriers of the Polar ice.

Lord Dorrimore, accompanied by Nelson Lee, Mr. Alington Wilkes, Sir Hobart Manners, and a crowd of St. Frank's fellows and Moor View girls had penetrated into this astonishing oasis in the super-submarine, Pioneer.

St Frank's adventurers captured by Gothland tyrants—and doomed to live among prehistoric monsters!

The oasis was nearly half as large as England itself, a great tract of fertile country, completely surrounded by impassable mountain barriers and glaciers, with numerous giant volcanoes, their craters boiling with white-hot lava, sending their reflected light down upon the country.

Even these volcanoes were unique, for in the whole history of Northestria—and this history went back for many hundreds of years—no violent eruption had ever been recorded. Even earthquakes were practically unknown. Although intensely active, the volcanoes maintained an even level, neither reducing their intensity nor increasing it.

For the most part, the oasis consisted of a fair, rolling countryside, with meadows and woods and undulating hills, not unlike the rural districts of England. Centrally there was a great lake, which divided the land of Northestria from the land of Gothland. The latter was by far the smaller.

And everything here was "back in the Middle Ages" For many centuries the peoples of this oasis had been completely cut off from the rest of the world, and time had stood still.

The St. Frank's party found themselves in a land of feudal castles and overlords and serfs. There were two distinct races here, one descended from the ancient Goths, and the other of Anglo-Saxon stock. And quaint, old-fashioned English was the spoken tongue.

It was all very fascinating, but by now Lord Dorrimore and his party had grown accustomed to the novelty of it. There was little time, in any case, for marveling at the wonders of this newly-discovered country. For the whole oasis was in a turmoil—a welter of warfare.

The brutal Gothlanders, led by a bloodthirsty tyrant known as Cedric the Cruel, had crossed the lake in their war galleys, and had overwhelmed the peace-loving Northestrians. When the submarine had arrived in the oasis, Lord Dorrimore and his party had found the Northestrians groaning under the ruthless heel of the tyrant. Cedric had proclaimed himself king, and throughout that peaceful land he had established his fortresses, and his men-at-arms were active in every town, village and hamlet. The unfortunate people were taxed, oppressed, and held in subjection.

Great changes had taken place, however, since the Pioneer's arrival. Princess Mercia, the true ruler of Northestria, had been rescued from Cedric's clutches, and

once again she reigned, with Ethelbert the Red as her regent and chief adviser.

She was now in Ixwell Castle, holding her court. This part of Northestria had been wrested from the Gothland tyrant, and the Northestrians, in their thousands, were rising. Several battles had already been won, and the revolt was spreading like wildfire throughout the entire land. Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee and the others had felt impelled to throw in their lot with the unfortunate Northestrians.

For Dorrie, at least, had dreams in connection with this remarkable country. He wanted to bring peace to Northestria; he wanted to drive the Gothlanders back to their own smaller country. And then Dorrie would establish a regular service of super-submarines to this Arctic wonderland. His dream was that Northestria should become a great winter resort for the benefit of all nations—a second Riviera, easily accessible by submarine liner, these latter vessels travelling beneath the Polar ice.

But, first of all, Cedric the Cruel had to be subdued.

Ixwell had been seized, and by now a full third of Northestria had been retaken by its people. The Gothlanders were in flight. Even now another battle was taking place, and news was hourly expected in Ixwell.

"I DON'T like the look of that chap!" said Handforth suspiciously.

The redoubtable leader of Study D, accompanied by Church and McClure, stood in the busy market square of the town. The three Removites were attired in flannel trousers and tennis shirts—a strange contrast to the old-world garb of the natives. Everywhere they went they were treated with almost reverential deference. Men backed out of their way, so that they should not be inconvenienced; women and girls curtsied; children watched them with awe. For in Ixwell the people regarded all the Britishers as deliverers—which, indeed, they were. But the simple Northestrians believed that they were possessed of magical powers, so great were the marvels they performed.

"Cheese it, Handy!" said Church. "You're suspicious of everybody."

"And why not?" retorted Edward Oswald Handforth. "This town is infested with spies! What did Mr. Lee say this morning, at breakfast-time? Didn't he tell us that that brute Cedric has organised one of the cleverest spy systems he's ever heard of? The Northestrians would have been even more successful if there hadn't been so many rotten spies!"

"That's true," said McClure, the Scottish junior. "But lots of these spies are being rounded up now, and in any case there's no reason why you should suspect every stranger you set eyes on."

"We're going round the town spy-hunting!" said Handforth firmly. "Leave it to me, my sons! I'll spot the rotters, and I'll capture them, too!"

Handforth was impatient, as usual. He badly wanted to be at the "front," where the battle was in progress, but he and all the other boys were forbidden to leave Ixwell. The city walls were their "bounds." And they had given Nelson Lee their promise that they would never attempt to break bounds.

"Hallo, boys!" said a cheery voice.

The chums of Study D glanced round, and they found Mr. Alington Wilkes, their popular Housemaster, surveying them. Mr. Wilkes, as usual, was attired in his baggy flannel trousers and his comfortable old Norfolk jacket.

"Hallo, sir!" said Handforth. "We're just going spy-hunting!"

"I wish you success," replied old Wilkey, with a sigh. "You ought to be at lessons, really, at this hour of the morning. I'm afraid you'll all be terribly rusty by the time we get back to St. Frank's and our normal routine."

"We're learning things here, sir, that we should never learn in school," said Handforth cheerfully. "This is a lot better for our education—and we can easily make up for lost time later on."

"That's one way of looking at it," admitted Mr. Wilkes. "By the way things are going, our sojourn in this strange land will not be unduly prolonged. News has just come through that the battle of Yeldham has been decisively won by the Northeistriars."

"Good egg!" said Handforth eagerly.

"Yeldham is the most important town between here and the capital," went on Mr. Wilkes. "It was strongly held by Cedric's most formidable army. But these Northeistriars have such a spirit in them that they are all-conquering. Splendid fellows! Untrained in war, they are yet invincible in spirit. The battle front has been advanced a number of miles, and the Gothlanders are pressed farther back. The town of Tey is in our hands, too, to say nothing of the villages of Thaxted, Buxhall and Ovington. The Northeistriars are now before Lidgate, and there is every hope that that town will soon fall."

"I say, sir, this is jolly good!" said Church breathlessly. "At this rate, it won't be long before the Northeistriars are in Dunstane!"

"And when that happens, Cedric will be well on the run," nodded Mr. Wilkes. "Well, go ahead with your spy-hunting."

He bustled off, and the three Removites fell to discussing this latest piece of welcome news. Church and McClure were glad, since it took Handforth's mind off the original subject. But he soon got back to it.

"It's jolly good to hear of these victories, but none of us is really safe while there are spies lurking all over the place," he said. "Don't forget what happened the other day. Some of us were tricked by spies, collared, and taken into Dunstane. If it hadn't been for Mr. Lee, we should have been beheaded."

"That's true," admitted Church soberly. "My only hat! That was a narrow shave!"

"It might happen again, too—unless we clean up the town properly," said Handforth. "I believe that Dorrie and some of the Pioneer's crew are busy on the job to-day—Hallo! By George! I don't like the look of these fellows!"

Church and McClure followed Handforth's glance, and they beheld a ruffianly pair of ragged beggars approaching. There was a number of beggars in Ixwell, but none so battered and evil-looking as these.

Handforth braced himself, and bore down upon them.

CHAPTER 2.

The Fury of Cedric the Cruel!

"HALT!"

Handforth rapped out the command sharply, authoritatively. The two ragged beggars looked at him, cowered, and halted. At close quarters they were even less savoury. One was tall and skinny and indescribably dirty. The other was of nondescript appearance, but just as dirty.

They regarded Handforth with open curiosity at first, and then the skinny one gave his companion a slight nudge, and assumed a guilty, hangdog expression.

"Great master, thou has commanded," he whined. "Who am I to do aught but obey?"

"Where are you from, and what do you do?" demanded Handforth sternly.

Church and McClure, who had been looking keenly at the two ragged beggars, now gave Handforth a quick look, and they exchanged grins.

"I say, Handy—" began Church.

"You dry up, my lad!" interrupted Handforth. "Leave this to me!"

"You silly ass! Can't you see—"

"I can see that these men are suspicious characters!" said Handforth promptly. "They're not natives of Ixwell—and I doubt very much if they are Northeistrians."

"I don't think they're Northeistrians, either," said McClure solemnly.

"Oh! They're Gothlanders, eh?"

"I don't believe they're Gothlanders, either," said McClure.

"If they're not Northeistrians they must be Gothlanders!" growled Handforth. "And I'm going to find out what they're doing in Ixwell! Now then, you two! You'd better give me a good account of yourselves, or you'll be handed over to the guard!"

"My lord, we are but passing mendicants," wailed the skinny one.

"Passing which?"

"I crave thy pardon, my lord, for making use of words with which thou art unacquainted," said the lanky beggar. "But then, thou art young, and therefore ignorant. My brother and I crave naught but thy mercy."

"So he's your brother, is he?" demanded Handforth suspiciously.

"'Tis but an expression, my lord," said the skinny one. "By the sinews and marrowbones of my grandfather's ghost, I would not own him as a blood brother."

"I say, look here——" began the other beggar warmly.

"Peace, Horatius!" urged the skinny one. "Wouldst argue in the presence of my Lord of the Rugged Phizog? Nay, remember thy manners, even though thou art but a Stevanicus dog!"

Church and McClure, who were fully aware of the identity of the "beggars," were having a hard job to keep their faces straight. Handforth, on the other hand, was frowning darkly.

"Did you hear that, you chaps?" he asked. "This—this loafer said something about my rugged phizog!"

"You can't blame him for that," said Church. "He doesn't see a face like that every day, remember!"

"Forsooth, good sir, I gaze upon it with awe and reverence," said the disguised Browne. "'Tis a face I have oft-times seen in my dreams. Nay, in my nightmares. I marvel, my lord, that thou art not in the front line of battle, since thy face would assuredly put such fear into the hearts of the Gothlanders that they would flee in their thousands."

Handforth turned red.

"That's enough about my face!" he roared. "You—you insulting rotter! You're a spy!"

"By the knee-joints of St. Bernard!" gasped Browne, shrinking back. "We

are but dogs, Brother Horatius, to be thus unmasked! My lord seeth through to our very skins!"

"He'd better take another look," growled Horatius.

"You can consider yourselves under arrest!" snapped Handforth. "Both of you! I'm not satisfied that you're genuine beggars!"

He yelled to another group of St. Frank's fellows who had just come within sight. Church and McClure tried to stop him, but it was too late. Nipper, Travers, Archie Glenthorne, Reggie Pitt and several others collected round, grinning.

"Jolly glad you chaps have come!" said Handforth breathlessly. "I've just collared a couple of spies—and they might try to escape. Surround 'em!"

Nipper looked at the "spies" searchingly.

"These fellows?" he asked. "My dear ass——"

"We needn't argue!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "I'm satisfied that they're spies—and we'd better march 'em to the castle and chuck 'em in a dungeon!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Alas, Brother Horatius, the outlook seemeth murky," said the tall, lean beggar. "I would e'en go so far as to say that the outlook seemeth blue at the edges. What thinkest thou of the prospect of mouldering in a dark and dismal dungeon? Tell me, Brother Horatius, art keen on mouldering?"

"I'm not!" retorted Brother Horace. "And I'm not keen on keeping up this farce, either. What's the matter with this young fathead? Is he blind, or what?"

"Methinks our make-up hath bemused him," replied Browne. "At which I do not marvel, since we have long known that his brain-power is infinitesimal. By the walls of St. Frank's! I verily believe he twiggeth at last!"

Handforth, his eyes goggling, was staring at the two "beggars" in bewilderment.

"I say!" he burst out. "You're not Northeistrians at all!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the other fellows.

"Thou art truly right, O Fathead," said Browne, grinning. "Look again, Brother Handy, and look well and truly."

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "You're Browne of the Fifth!"

"Yes, and you've been done brown," chuckled Church. "Why, you chump, Mac and I could have told you this at the beginning. Didn't you know that Browne

and Stevens disguised themselves this morning, to go on a spy hunt?"

"I'd—I'd forgotten!" said Handforth feebly. "I—I mean, I don't think I knew anything about it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

William Napoleon Browne patted Handforth on the shoulder.

"Alas, Brother Handy, I fear you are ill-equipped to be a spy-hunter," he said kindly. "Take my advice, and confine yourself to those pursuits at which you are pre-eminent—such as marbles, tiddley-winks, and snakes and ladders. I have heard it said, on the best authority, that at the game of 'touch' you are invincible."

And Browne, taking Stevens' arm, strolled away. Handforth looked after him, so full of indignation that speech failed him entirely.

MEANWHILE, some miles from Ixwell, the victorious Northestrians were consolidating their position. They were helped in this by Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore, who had both been in the forefront of the battle, directing operations and assisting with the two whippet tanks which Dorrie had brought aboard the Pioneer. These tanks, in fact, had played a big part in the victory.

In Yeldham and in Tey, both towns of some importance, the people were mad with excitement and joy at their deliverance. And more and more volunteers were

Disguised as Northestrians, Browne and Stevens sailed in with flying fists and made short work of the Gothland spies.



pouring into the rebel camps. This same spirit was infecting all Northestria. Castles were being stormed, and their Gothlander overlords were being turned out.

In Dunstane, the capital of Northestria, Cedric the Cruel fumed and cursed with rage and fear.

There had been no revolt in Dunstane, which was a city fully ten times as large as any other in the country. Here the people were directly under the tyrant's heel. The city swarmed with Gothlander men-at-arms, and no meetings or gatherings were permitted. Cedric had an iron grip on Dunstane.

Yet he was growing fearful.

At first he had thought that this rising was insignificant, and that he could quell it with ease. He had been contemptuous of the "Strangers from Beyond the Great Ice." What could they do, a mere handful, coming in a curious metal vessel? How could they drive him out of Northestria?

But now he was learning that the rising was getting beyond him; the people themselves, hitherto so peaceful and meek, were imbued with a ferocity which carried them to invincible triumphs.

In the great council chamber of Dunstane Castle, Cedric paced up and down like a man possessed. He was a huge brute of a man, tall, brawny, and coarse. His great beard was unkempt, for he tugged and pulled at it restlessly.

"By my soul! If Guntha were in command of my forces, there would be less misfortune!" he grated. "I vow there is not a soldier among them. I hear of naught but defeat."

"Even Guntha himself could not keep these dogs of Northestrians back, sire," said Attawulf the Terrible.

The King was attended by Attawulf the Terrible and Redwold the Ruthless, two of Gothland's most powerful overlords. There were others in that council chamber, too, nobles of all rank, richly garbed, and all grave and uneasy.

"But Guntha the Crafty is a hostage in the hands of these strangers," went on the King. "Methinks I had best take the field in person. Thus, and thus only, will my armies be led to victory!"

"'Tis a good suggestion, sire," said Redwold. "Thy presence would do much to put a bold spirit into the men."

Messengers were coming and going continuously; couriers were constantly arriving. One of the latter, who came now and spoke with Attawulf, left the overlord more grave than ever.

"Well?" shouted the King. "What now? More ill-tidings, I'll swear!"

"'Tis said, sire, that the towns of Yeldham and Tey have fallen into the hands of the rebels," said Attawulf. "Urstan the Valiant hath fallen in battle, with many hundreds of his men."

Cedric raised his hands and beat the air.

"Always ill-tidings!" he shouted furiously. "By the bones of Senlac! I am lost unless my soldiers gain a decisive victory! Ere long these rebel dogs will be at the gates of Dunstane itself!"

He swung round upon Redwold, his eyes blazing.

"Go thou, Redwold, and do my bidding!" he went on darkly. "Take as many men as thou thinkest fit. Ride hard and go from castle to castle and from mansion to mansion. Seize a hundred Northestrian nobles—ay, two hundred, three hundred! Seize them, no matter whether they are men, women, or children, and put them to death!"

"Your Majesty!" protested Redwold, aghast.

"Go, knave, and obey my will!" thundered the King. "Let these nobles be executed in full sight of the peasantry. Behead them—burn them at the stake! Let the people see that my wrath is great. Thus shall I fill them with terror, and this rising which spreadeth so alarmingly will be checked."

Attawulf came nearer, calm and steady-voiced, and lurking at the back of his eyes there was a contempt for the King's lamentable weakness in the hour of danger.

"Such methods, sire, will have the opposite effect from what thou thinkest," he said grimly. "Putting the nobles to death will not quell the rising. Rather will it fire the populace to even greater enthusiasm for battle."

"Away—away!" snarled the King. "I will not hear thy words, Attawulf! My mind is made up!"

"Then, sire, the fall of Dunstane is indeed inevitable," said Attawulf. "And it will but remain for us to flee to our galleys and retire in humiliation to Gothland. For such methods as thou hast spoken of will arouse the people to fanatical ferocity. Vengeance will be the cry. Far better would it be to moderate the iron rule that thou hast put upon the land. Ay, relieve the taxes, and give the people greater freedom."

"Art mad, Attawulf?" asked the King, sobered by this strange counsel.

"I think not, sire," replied the overlord quietly. "Goad the people, and they will turn upon thee. Show them

some measure of leniency, and their ardour will be dampened. 'Tis no time for ruthless methods. Cunning, sire, is our best weapon. Strategy will win where force would fail."

The King tugged at his beard.

"And where is thy strategy, Attawulf?" he sneered. "Thou art ready with thy counsel, but where is thy plan?"

"I have one, sire," replied Attawulf. "And methinks, if it is executed well, the tide of war may well turn in our favour. Have I thy ear, sire?"

"Speak on," growled the King.

He listened; his attention became concentrated after only a few minutes, and soon he was in a changed humour.

"'Tis a brave plan, Attawulf," he said. "By St. Attalus! I will give orders that this thing shall be done. And mayhap these dogs of strangers will yet bend to my will!"

CHAPTER 3.

The Strolling Players!

"HALLO! What's this?" asked Handforth curiously.

It was two days since he had "arrested" William Napoleon Browne, and Handforth wasn't so keen on spy-hunting now. Moreover, the Northestrians themselves had been so diligent in searching out spies that Ixwell was considered to be practically free of them.

Handforth & Co. were in the busy market square, which was thronged, as usual. Traders had their various stalls, offering all manner of commodities for sale—vegetables, fruit, poultry, eggs, cheese, hand-woven cloth and lace, and so forth. Normally, Ixwell was a sleepy old town; but in these stirring times the population was nearly doubled, and there were always crowds.

And where there are crowds there are generally people to amuse the crowds. Handforth was attracted by a quaint group of strolling players—the first he had seen.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he said wonderingly. "Just like England of medieval days!"

"That's not very surprising, is it?" asked Church. "Everything in this country is hundreds of years behind the times."

"By George! It's a pity we didn't bring an apparatus with us for showing talking pictures!" grinned Handforth. "I say, what a sensation we'd create!"

"Sensation isn't the word," grinned McClure. "The people would bolt in terror, and they'd be more than ever con-

vinced that we are capable of wizardry. If it comes to that, it wouldn't surprise me in the least to find that Dorrie has brought a complete apparatus on the Pioneer. He's surprised us once or twice already."

They drew nearer to the strolling players, who were giving their entertainment in the open, after the fashion of their kind. A considerable crowd of on-lookers had gathered round in a semi-circle, and they were enjoying the performance. There were some other St. Frank's fellows there, too, attracted by the novelty of it.

"Reminds me of that giddy comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan," said Handforth. "'The Yeoman of the Guard,' isn't it? There's a party of strolling players in that, with a jester—By George! I'm blessed if there isn't a jester here, too!"

"Well, these people are still living back in the old times," said Church. "No need to be surprised, old man."

Handforth was not particularly impressed with the jester, who was a middle-aged, shrivelled fellow, attired in multi-coloured pantaloons, curiously pointed shoes, and a close-fitting garment like a blouse. His tunic was of red, his sleeves of blue, his cap of green. And his jests and quips were so lacking in wit that the St. Frank's fellows saw no point in them. The simple spectators, however, seemed to be quite amused.

But there were others in this party of strolling players. At least four of them were girls—pretty young girls, too. They were dressed in all colours of the rainbow, bedecked with ribbons and flounces and embroidery.

One of the girls was singing now, and Handforth listened approvingly. He looked even more approvingly. For this particular girl was very easy to look upon. She could not have been more than seventeen, and her dark beauty was bewitching. Most of the Northestrian girls were fair, and this one, therefore, was a contrast. And she naturally attracted Handforth's eye—he being an expert in feminine beauty.

"Let's get a move on," said Church carelessly.

"That's what I was thinking," said McClure, giving him a look. "Come on, Handy. This isn't very interesting."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "What's the hurry? This girl's got a ripping voice."

Incidentally, she also had a ripping pair of eyes; eyes which had been turned frequently upon Handforth—much to his gratification.

"By George!" murmured Handforth. "This girl's clever!"

His chums tugged at him.

"Now be sensible, Handy," murmured Church. "You'd far better come away."

"What are you getting at, ass?" asked Handforth coldly.

"Well, you know what you're like with girls."

"Eh?"

"You're always getting smitten——"

"You—you silly fathead!" said Handforth, turning red. "Can't I appreciate good singing now without you duffers talking rot like that? Clear off, if you want to. Blow you!"

Church and McClure desisted, partly because they felt that their efforts would be useless, and partly because many of the Northestrian spectators were looking at them in wonder. Wherever they went the people showed great deference. To stand in the market square squabbling was undignified. The people hardly expected that sort of thing from these noble youths.

Handforth unconsciously brushed his hair back, and tidied himself up. The dark-eyed girl was looking at him again, and although her glances were shy, a certain mischievousness lurked in her eyes.

No sooner had she finished her song than two other strolling players—both girls—commenced a duet, accompanied by a quaint dance on the part of the jester. In the meantime, the dark-eyed girl threaded her way in and out of the crowds, seeking coppers—or the Northestrian equivalent of coppers. There was a recognised coinage in this country, but it was somewhat crude.

Handforth was nonplussed, even taken aback, when the girl suddenly confronted him and smiled right into his face. At such close quarters she looked prettier than ever, with her dark curls falling over her healthy cheeks.

"I crave forgiveness, my lord, for having the daring to speak to thee," murmured the girl. "But thou hast a kindly face, and perchance thou wilt overlook my boldness."

"Oh, rather!" said Handforth, pulling himself together with an effort.

"We come to Ixwell from the far hill country," continued the girl. "Much we have heard, my lord, of you and your noble companions. I had but a faint hope that we should see you. And behold, thou and thy companions walk amongst the people without pride."

"Well, why shouldn't we walk?" asked Handforth. "I say, that song of yours was awfully good, you know."

"Thou art but flattering me, my lord," she said shyly.

"No, I'm not!" protested Handforth. "I thought you sang gloriously. Didn't she sing gloriously, you chaps?" he added, turning to Church and McClure.

"Rather!" said Church and McClure, hoping that their prompt acquiescence would hasten matters.

"These are my chums, you know," continued Handforth, turning back to the girl. "Church and McClure—pretty good chaps, on the whole."

"I am indeed lucky to be noticed by such noble young lords," murmured the maiden.

"Did you hear that, you chaps?" grinned Handforth. "You're noble young lords. You'll make them conceited if you talk like that, Miss—Miss—— What's your name?" he ended abruptly.

"I am called Vanda, my lord," said the girl.

"By George! That's a nice name," said Handforth enthusiastically. "Well, look here, Miss Vanda, there's no need for you to be so jolly respectful. You needn't kow-tow to us. We're only ordinary chaps."

Vanda's eyes opened wider.

"I vow, good sir, thy words bewilder me," she protested.

"Well, here's half-a-crown—good old English money," said Handforth. "I don't know whether you'll be able to use it in Ixwell, but I expect so."

"Thou art wondrous generous, my lord," said Vanda gratefully. "I'faith 'tis the happiest day of my life. That thou hast spoken to me, e'en as though I were thy equal, is beyond my wildest dreams."

"I say, chuck it!" said Handforth un- easily. "I'm not a tin god, you know."

"Again, my lord, thou art bewildering me with thy strange words," said the girl in wonder. "But I must go, or thou wilt deem me tiresome."

She heaved a little sigh, and seemed to be about to say something, but relapsed into silence.

"What is it?" asked Handforth.

"Alas, I am sad at heart, and yet I must sing and make merry," said Vanda, with a little smile. "For am I not a strolling player?"

"But why are you sad?" asked Handforth eagerly. "I say, if there's anything I can do——"

"Nay, I would not presume, my lord," said Vanda. "Ah, me, 'tis wonderful to have spoken with thee, and to know that thou art so good and kindly. Yet would I have given all I possess—and 'tis little enough—to see the beautiful young maids



The St. Frank's boys stopped and listened to the strolling players, and Handforth was particularly bucked when he saw that Vanda the Singer was eyeing him with interest.

of thine own race who accompanied thee hither."

"Oh, you mean the Moor View girls?" asked Handforth with a grin. "Irene and Doris and Mary and the others? Yes, they came with us—ten of them, including my own sister."

"Thou hast a sister?" asked Vanda, open-eyed. "I vow she must be beautiful."

"Who, Ena?" chuckled Handforth. "Did you hear that, you chaps? Ena beautiful. She's as plain as the dickens."

"Well, you're her brother, and you wouldn't think much of her, anyhow," said Church. "But there are lots of girls plainer than Ena. She's pretty good-looking, if you ask me."

"You don't know anything about good looks," sniffed Handforth, as he eyed Vanda with admiration.

She blushed, and lowered her eyes.

"Nay, my lord," she murmured. "Thou are but jesting with me. Ah, how I would love to see these maidens of whom thou speakest!"

"I'm afraid it's a bit difficult," said Handforth, frowning. "You see, they're at the castle. They're the princess' ladies-in-waiting. Goodness only knows why they took on the job; but you know what girls are. They get out sometimes, but they're pretty well tied."

"Could I but see them once—only just set eyes on them—I would depart from Ixwell on my wanderings happy," said Vanda wistfully. "I have heard so much of these sweet maidens, my lord. 'Tis said they are as beautiful as the angels, as gentle as the butterfly."

She sighed again, and prepared to move off, dropping a respectful curtsy.

Handforth looked disappointed.

Vanda had created a big impression on him, and he didn't want her to go away just yet.

He thought furiously—and in doing so screwed his face up with such comical effect that Vanda involuntarily halted and eyed him in mingled amusement and wonder.

"I say, wait a minute!" said Handforth, as an idea occurred to him.

"Now, look here, Handy——" began Church.

"You dry up!" said Handforth briskly. "I've thought of a wheeze."

"Yes, but——"

"And I don't want any rot from you," continued Handforth, in his most aggressive way. "What's the good of being a person of importance if I never do anything important?"

This was a poser which Church and McClure found unanswerable.

"Everybody in Ixwell thinks we're little tin gods," continued Handforth. "Our lightest wishes are commands. We've got practically as much power as royalty. And how much of that power do we ever use? Well, you're now going to see some of it used."

He was thinking of Vanda's wistful desire to see the "fair maidens." Handforth walked in amongst the strolling

players, interrupting their show without compunction. They stopped at once, of course, and at first they looked alarmed. Perhaps they thought that they were to be sent about their business. Vanda watched with glowing eyes.

"Jolly good!" said Handforth boisterously. "This singing and dancing is too good for the market square. How about coming along to the castle?"

"By my soul!" exclaimed the jester, open-eyed. "Thou art jesting, my lord!"

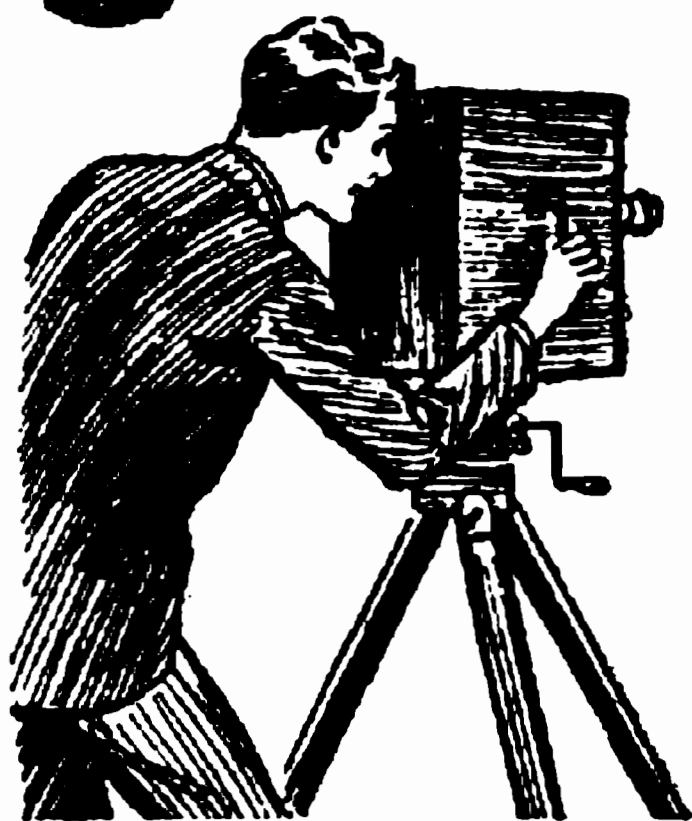
"You're the chap to do the jesting," grinned Handforth. "Come on—all of you. I'm inviting you to give your show at the castle."

"My lord!" panted Vanda, running up. "I meant not this when I spoke to thee——"

"That's all right," said Handforth graciously. "You wanted to see the girls—so you'll see them. I'm taking you all

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to the castle, so that you can give your performance in front of the princess herself."

"Nay, 't'would be too presumptuous!" said one of the players, awed.

They were all incredulous, and crowds of people standing round could hardly believe their ears. The St. Frank's fellows were chuckling. Just like old Handy! From their point of view, there was nothing out of the way in Handforth's idea. Why shouldn't these people go to the castle to give their show?

Handforth was properly in his element now. He was in the limelight, and he loved it. Church and McClure were helpless; not that they were opposed to the scheme. On the whole, it was the very best thing that could happen. For once Vanda got with the Moor View girls she would soon forget Handforth.

And so they started, with Edward Oswald Handforth leading the way, fully conscious of his importance. Across the square went the little procession, the strolling players still fearful of what might befall them for having the temerity to enter the castle courtyard; and so across the great drawbridge, over the deep moat.

CHAPTER 4.

Vanda's Secret!

THE strolling players were really and truly overawed as they stood under the turrets and battlements of Irwell Castle—for they knew that this was the Court of Princess Mercia. And in this land of Northestria, strolling players were forbidden even to enter the precincts of a squire's dwelling.

Did they but dare to perform before nobility, they were liable to be whipped, or even imprisoned. And this castle was the home of Princess Mercia! Small wonder that they were awestruck, and even fearful.

The nobles of the Court were aghast when they knew what was happening, and they came out upon the castle galleries and gazed amazedly into the courtyard. Yet, when they learned that the strolling players were here at the invitation of Handforth, they smiled.

"Our good friends from beyond the great ice know not our customs," said one of the nobles tolerantly. "Therefore must these strolling players be forgiven."

The princess, when she heard, was amused. Since Handforth the Bold—as he was known—had done this thing, it was right. The princess, accompanied by her young brother, Prince Oswy, came out upon one of the balconies to watch, and even Ethelbert the Red, the Regent, graced the scene.

The strolling players, nervous at first, but gathering confidence, gave their performance. When it was over, Irene Manners and Mary

Summers and Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple and the other girls came tripping down, eager to congratulate the performers. It was really Handforth's idea, for he had whispered round to the girls that he particularly wanted them to come down.

"Just have a word with these people," he said. "They seem to think that we're too jolly proud to speak to them. One of them—a girl named Vanda—is as keen as mustard on seeing you all."

"We're only too pleased, of course," said Irene, smiling.

Down in the courtyard, Handforth, with many a flourish, made the introductions. He thoroughly enjoyed himself. Vanda was almost overwhelmed when Irene & Co. surrounded her and proved themselves to be friendly and devoid of all "side."

"I scarce dared believe that ye would be so wondrous kind," said Vanda, with tears in her bright eyes. "And I am in sore need of kindness, sweet noble ladies."

"You mustn't cry!" said Doris gently.

"Ah, but thou knowest not of my woes," murmured the Northestrian girl. "And 't'would be bold of me to speak of them."

"Come in—out with it, Vanda," said Irene kindly. "Why are you so troubled? Why are you crying?"

"Thou art wondrous good, fair lady," murmured Vanda. "And thou art so kind and generous that I am fain disposed to tell thee of the great trouble that is on my mind. By my soul! I hope ye will not consider me presumptuous. 'Tis my small brother of whom I am thinking."

"Your brother!" said Irene, in wonder.

"Ay, noble lady," said Vanda quickly. "He is starving, and like to die!"

"I say, can't we do something?" asked Doris. "What about your parents?"

"Alas, I am alone," sighed Vanda. "My mother is dead and my father is chained to an oar in a Gothlander galley," said Vanda, her voice becoming fierce. "A plague upon Cedric the Cruel! 'Twas his brutal soldiers who seized my father and tore him from my mother, causing her death. Why else would I be earning my living in a company of strolling players? Alas, my poor father may never return."

"But he will!" said Doris. "We're going to smash Cedric completely—and then your father will be released and restored to you. Where is your brother now?"

"I left him outside the town, in a little wood," said Vanda, her eyes welling with tears again.

All the girls were deeply sorry for the young girl.

"I think we ought to do something about this," said Mary Summers. "Look here, Vanda, supposing we go along and fetch your brother and look after him?"

Vanda looked at the girls with eager wonder.

"Thou wouldst do this?" she asked, staring at Mary.

"Why not?" said Mary. "We can't let you go from town to town, leaving your

brother behind in that way. You say he's ill, don't you?"

"Ay, desperately!" sobbed Vanda.

"Then we will bring him to the castle, and we'll look after him ourselves," said Irene. "He'll have every care, and before long we'll restore him to health. We'll do everything we possibly can."

Vanda almost fell upon her knees in her gratitude.

"Such kindness bewilders me," she sobbed. "Wilt come with me now, good ladies? Perchance I can slip away, without my companions noticing."

"Yes, of course," said Irene. "Come along!"

Nobody took any particular notice as the Moor View girls left the castle courtyard with Vanda in their midst. Handforth, of course, saw them go, since he was watching. He made to go over and join them, but Irene waved him away.

"Well, that's a bit thick!" he said tartly. "I introduce that giddy girl to Irene and the others, and they calmly buzz off with her!"

"And a jolly good thing, too," said Church. "I'm not altogether sure I like that girl, Vanda. If you ask me, she was setting her cap at you, Handy."

"What rot!" snorted Handforth. "She wasn't even wearing a cap!"

The girls walked quickly through the town, and the people made haste to make way for them.

"Poor thing!" said Irene softly, as Vanda quietly sobbed. "No wonder you're crying! I don't know how you managed to sing your songs as you did."

"I sang, sweet lady, with my heart breaking."

"But couldn't you have got somebody to look after your little brother while you were in the town?" asked Doris, in some surprise. "Some cottager, perhaps?"

"'Twas my custom, always," replied Vanda. "But one dreadful day, when I sought my brother, I found that he had been ill used, and since then I have trusted nobody. 'Tis better to wrap him up well and leave him in some quiet nook where he will be safe until my return."

The girls could understand Vanda's agonised state of mind, and when she hurried the pace they did not protest. They passed out through the northern gate of the town and were soon walking across the meadows towards a wood. Farther beyond was the great lake.

They had left the road behind, with its throngs of men constantly coming and going. Most of these men were eager to serve in the fighting line, and they had armed themselves for the most part with agricultural implements. Weapons of war were scarce in Northestria, for it was a peace-loving land.

The girls were entering the wood now, and with Vanda leading the way they penetrated through the trees into the very heart of the undergrowth. There were four of the Moor View girls with Vanda—Irene

Manners, Doris Berkeley, Ena Handforth and Mary Summers.

"Hist! We come near, noble ladies," murmured Vanda, holding up her finger. "See! My brother sleepeth within the little hut."

She ran forward with a little catch in her voice, and the girls, eager and curious, followed her. The door of the hut was standing wide open, and they went in singly, Irene leading the way.

Suddenly Irene halted, and a gasp sounded in her voice—a cry of astonishment and bewilderment.

"Let me go!" came her voice. "You brute! How dare you——"

Then, in the same moment, the other three girls found themselves surrounded by powerful men—soldiers—coarse, brutal Gothlander men-at-arms!

CHAPTER 5.

Prisoners!

THE Moor View girls were hopelessly trapped.

There was no chance for them to put up a fight, since each girl was in the grip of two men. Their arms were quickly forced behind them, and leather thongs were tied round their wrists.

"Oh! You beasts!" panted Doris Berkeley. "How did you know we were coming?"

"Nay, good wench, 'twill avail thee naught to struggle," said one of the soldiers in a mocking voice. "Henceforth thou art Cedric's property."

"Where's Vanda?" cried Mary, looking round. "Was she caught, too?"

A silvery laugh sounded, and Vanda glided into view.

"Caught, sayest thou, noble lady?" she asked, her voice and manner so different that the Moor View girls stared in wonder. "I'faith! 'Twas I who led ye into the trap!"

Irene & Co. stared aghast.

"You!" ejaculated Doris. "Then—then that story about your sick brother——"

"How easy it was!" scoffed Vanda. "Poor fools all, to harken to such a tale of woe! But methinks it served well."

"Oh, you—you treacherous wretch!" said Irene fiercely.

And Vanda laughed in her face.

It was a great shock to the girls. Startled as they were to find themselves in the hands of Gothlanders, they were doubly startled to realise that they had been cunningly led into the trap by this seemingly charming girl—this girl who had so cleverly influenced Handforth into taking her to the castle.

That she was a brilliant actress was now obvious. Earlier, she had seemed everything that was sweet and charming and innocent. Now her eyes glittered with contemptuous insolence; her very facial expression had changed.

"And you a Northestrian!" said Mary coldly. "A spy!"

Vanda's expression changed, and she stepped nearer.

"What have I to thank Northestria for?" she asked fiercely. "Did not a Northestrian noble whip my father until he died? I hate them all! 'Tis well that the men of Gothland come here and rule the land! And I get big rewards for this day's work."

"Truly spoken, girl!" said one of the Gothlanders, who was apparently an officer. "Thou hast done well. And when the King hears of thy service, he will give thee riches so that thou canst live even as a noble. Thou wilt become one of the favourites of the Court. King Cedric doth not forget those who serve him."

"Ay, and well do I know it," said Vanda coolly.

The girls were dumb with the horror of it. Vanda had told lies. Her father was not in the hands of the Gothlanders. He was dead; had been whipped to death by a Northestrian noble; and the girl, embittered, had betrayed her own people.

"We're in an awful mess, you girls," said Irene in a whisper. "The more I think of it, the more I'm frightened. We didn't tell anybody where we were coming, so there can't even be a search for us."

"I know," said Mary. "That's the worst of it. We just walked out of the town and came here, and there's not a chance in a thousand that we shall be rescued."

"Oh, well, it's no good being scared," said Ena Handforth, who had an aggressive nature, very much like that of her brother. "We're not dead yet."

They were taken out and commanded to stand still. Bitterly resentful, they were forced to stand there whilst the Gothland soldiers seized and bound them hand and foot.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Ena defiantly.

"Thou wilt see, wench," replied the officer with a laugh. "But fear naught. Thou art in no danger of death. 'Tis King Cedric's command that ye shall be removed from Northestria as prisoners."

"Removed from Northestria!" said Irene, her blue eyes opening wider.

"His Majesty goeth cautiously," replied the officer. "Thy friends might well rescue you were you to remain in this land. So other plans have been made. By my soul! This is no hurried plot. The preparations are extensive."

The girls were beginning to realise that their position was grave. Their capture might mean utter disaster to the Northestria cause. Cedric, knowing full well that his soldiers were in danger of being overwhelmingly defeated, had resorted to strategy and subterfuge.

The girls were lightly picked up in the arms of the powerful men, and, with Vanda going in advance, the Gothlanders penetrated to the farther end of the wood, where

they descended into a steep, narrow gully. It was a rocky break in the hillside, and the girls soon found that it led down towards the lake shore.

The place had been very cunningly selected, for, in this gully, the Gothlanders were free from all observation. They would be able to get right down to the lake without being seen.

And this was important, since the entire territory was in the hands of the Northestrian rebels. The Gothlanders, no doubt, had come by water—and although the lake was being well watched, they could easily have deceived the look-outs. Perhaps their galley had been disguised as a harmless trading vessel. Many such were constantly passing up and down the lake shore.

Fearful of what their fate was to be, the girls kept their eyes well open. They knew that it would be useless to scream, for if they uttered so much as a sound they would be gagged. They had been warned to keep silent under such a penalty.

As they had half-expected, they found a small but serviceable-looking galley lurking in a tiny inlet at the end of the gully. Many powerful men were waiting at the oars. They were not slaves, but Gothlanders. This was one of King Cedric's "express" galleys.

The four girls were carried aboard, and quickly taken into a little cubby-hole astern. To their relief, they were roughly laid down upon the floor, and the soldiers retired, closing a door after them. Then the girls heard the great oars dipped into the water, and the galley shot out upon the lake, gathering speed.

These men of Gothland were clearly in fear of being interrupted—of having their prisoners wrested from them before they could get well away. The oars creaked as the men pulled on them desperately.

"Perhaps somebody will spot us from the shore," said Doris hopefully.

"Supposing they do?" asked Ena. "What good will that be? This isn't a war galley, and even if it is it won't attract much attention. Where do you suppose we're going?"

"Perhaps to Dunstane," said Irene. "King Cedric is there, isn't he?"

"But those awful men said something about taking us right out of Northestria."

"That may have been just bluff," said Irene. "Anyhow, it doesn't make much difference, does it? We've got to go where we're taken. Oh, my hat! I've never felt so horribly helpless in all my life! What prize chumps we were to fall into the trap so easily!"

"It wasn't our fault," said Ena gruffly. "How were we to know that that girl, Vanda, would turn out to be such a treacherous wretch? Her acting was simply marvellous! We've got to hand it to her, girls, that she's jolly clever."

"And because of her cleverness, here we are—booked for goodness only knows what!" said Mary dismally.

"Ted Handforth is really to blame," remarked Doris. "It was he who brought Vanda to the castle."

"It isn't fair to blame Ted," protested Irene. "He was fooled no more than we were."

"Ted's all right," said his sister. "I'd be the first to jump on him if I thought he deserved it. That girl vamped him, I suppose, and naturally he fell for it. If you ask me, the whole thing was cleverly arranged."

They judged that they were well out on the lake by now. Presently they noticed that the oars were being plied less vigorously, and soon after that the sounds ceased altogether. The galley glided along slowly.

The prisoners felt a bump, and they knew that another vessel had come alongside. They waited expectantly, wondering if they were to be taken off.

The second vessel was only a small boat—small, compared with the galley. It contained four oarsmen and two others. The Gothlander officer spoke earnestly with them for some time. Then Vanda was transferred from the galley to the boat, and the latter pushed off.

And now, while the galley set out for the very centre of the lake, the other boat kept close to the Northestrian shore, working steadily upwards towards Dunstane, the capital.

BY the time the boat reached Dunstane, the galley was but a mere speck on the horizon. For this lake was a veritable inland sea, and the opposite coastline—the Gothland shore—was quite out of sight.

Two men took Vanda with them into the city, and, arriving at the castle, they were instantly admitted. They had audience with Attawulf the Terrible.

Attawulf, his eyes glowing, his face flushed, hurried to the King's private dining chamber, where Cedric was at a meal.

"'Tis done, sire!" shouted Attawulf exultantly.

Cedric glowered upon him.

"Sayest thou so?" he grunted. "And what is it, my Attawulf, that is done? Bear ye good tidings?"

"Ay, sire, wondrous tidings."

"Then speak, for I am sick unto death with ill tidings," said the king, without enthusiasm.

He sat at the head of a big, solid-topped table, and great metal vessels, containing cooked meats and other foods, surrounded him in a semicircle. He was in the act of forking a roasted fowl upon his plate, when he suddenly checked and looked at Attawulf with a new light in his eyes.

"By my bones!" he ejaculated. "Meanest thou, Attawulf, that thy plan hath matured? Speak, man! Am I to be kept in suspense?"

"Thou didst give me no opportunity of imparting the information, sire," said the

overlord. "But 'tis true. Four of the stranger wenches are in our hands, and are even now on their way to Gothland in a fast galley."

Cedric sprang to his feet, sending his chair crashing over.

"Art sure of this?" he demanded hoarsely.

"The messenger is waiting, sire, in the ante-room, shouldst thou desire speech with him," said Attawulf. "There is also a comely wench, one Vanda, whose cunning it was which brought about the capture. Thou wilt remember, sire, that I spoke of Vanda to thee earlier. I knew her to be a girl of wondrous cleverness."

"Let her be brought to me," ordered the King, his eyes glowing. "This wench shall be rewarded. Let her have silks and jewels. And if she is comely, as thou sayest, Attawulf, let her become one of the ladies of my court! No reward is too great for her if she hath indeed accomplished this thing."

When Cedric was convinced—when he had heard all the details from his spies, and from Vanda herself—his delight knew no bounds.

"'Twas thy plan, Attawulf, and for this success I will double thy possessions."

"I thought only of thy service, sire," murmured Attawulf, but his eyes burned greedily.

"With these stranger wenches secure in Gothland—imprisoned where thou hast cunningly selected, Attawulf—I hold the whip hand."

"Thou canst dictate thine own terms, sire."

"And so will I!" shouted the King triumphantly. "Bring me parchment—bring me pen! A courier shall be dispatched to Ixwell without delay. By the marrow of my bones! The proud Princess Mercia shall bend to my will now!"

CHAPTER 6.

Nelson Lee Decides!

"**S**PIES?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "I wondered what had delayed you, old man."

"Yes, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee, frowning, "we come back to Ixwell and I find spies actually within the castle courtyard."

"Well, you've got to admire their impudence," said his lordship, helping himself to food. "Come on, old man. There's some top-hole meat here. This spy business isn't so urgent that you need to miss your meal, is it?"

Nelson Lee did not reply for a moment. He was more serious-minded than Lord Dorrimore.

They were in their private apartment of the castle—a fine, lofty chamber, with rich furnishings. Both Lee and Dorrie had had a hard day, and they were thoroughly tired. They had left things going well on the "battle fronts."

Led into the trap by Vanda, who stood looking on mockingly, Irene & Co. were surrounded by the Gothland soldiers and made prisoners.



"I don't like it, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee, at length. "Young Handforth, I understand, invited these people to the castle—but I don't blame him for that. He took them to be ordinary strolling players."

"But how do you know they're not ordinary strolling players?"

"I didn't like the looks of them when I first saw them," replied Lee. "I wasn't actually suspicious, but I distrusted them. There was something about them which made me question them closely. They told me that they were harmless people, and that they had wandered into Ixwell, hoping to pick up a little reward."

"Well, that sounded truthful enough."

"I asked them where they came from, how long they took over the journey, where they intended going after leaving Ixwell," continued Lee. "And their answers, Dorrie, were most unsatisfactory. You must understand that I questioned them separately."

"And tripped them up, eh?" asked Dorrie.

"I tripped them up badly," replied Lee. "Their answers, given separately, were utterly conflicting. What I can't understand is why they should desire to come into the castle grounds. I can't help suspecting that they were planning something big. Anyway, I've locked them up and I'm going to question them again later."

He commenced his meal abstractedly, for he was worried. Lee with his profound knowledge of human nature, had quickly sensed that those strolling players were not what they pretended to be. Quite by chance, he had encountered some of them in the castle courtyard.

A heavy knock sounded upon the door of the chamber, and a moment later Handforth came in, accompanied by Church and McClure.

"Come in, Handforth," said Lee, sitting back in his chair. "Don't look so scared. I want to have a word with you."

"One of the castle officials told me, sir, that you wanted to speak to me—urgently," said Handforth.

"And so I do."

"I've been out in the town, sir, with these chaps," said Handforth. "We've been looking for the girls."

"Well, this is more important than looking for the girls."

"But you don't understand, sir," said Handforth. "Something mysterious has happened—"

"We'll hear about that later," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I rather fancy the girls can look after themselves. Now, Handforth, I have been told that you invited a party of strolling players to give their performance in the courtyard, here."

"Yes, sir," panted Handforth. "And that's what I was going to tell you about. Vanda went off with those girls—"

"We'll leave the girls," interrupted Lee, somewhat impatiently. "Now, I'm not blaming you for this, Handforth, but I will say that it was rash of you to use your privileges to invite such people to a spot where they were within reach of Princess Mercia. You know as well as I do that we must take very great precautions. Cedric has his spies everywhere—and those strolling players, I believe, are spies!"

"Spies, sir!" gasped Handforth, turning deathly pale.

"Oh, crumbs!" groaned Church. "Handy, those girls—"

"Are you sure, sir?" asked Handforth desperately. "I mean, have you proved

that those strolling players are spies? I never dreamed—"

"Come, come, there's no need to get so excited or flurried," said Nelson Lee kindly. "I don't think any harm has been done. It is not yet definitely established that the strolling players are spies. But I will warrant—"

"Listen, sir," urged Handforth. "There is need to be excited! You don't understand! You don't even know what's happened! Four of our girls are missing!"

Nelson Lee looked at him steadily.

"Missing?" he asked. "What, exactly, do you mean by that, Handforth?"

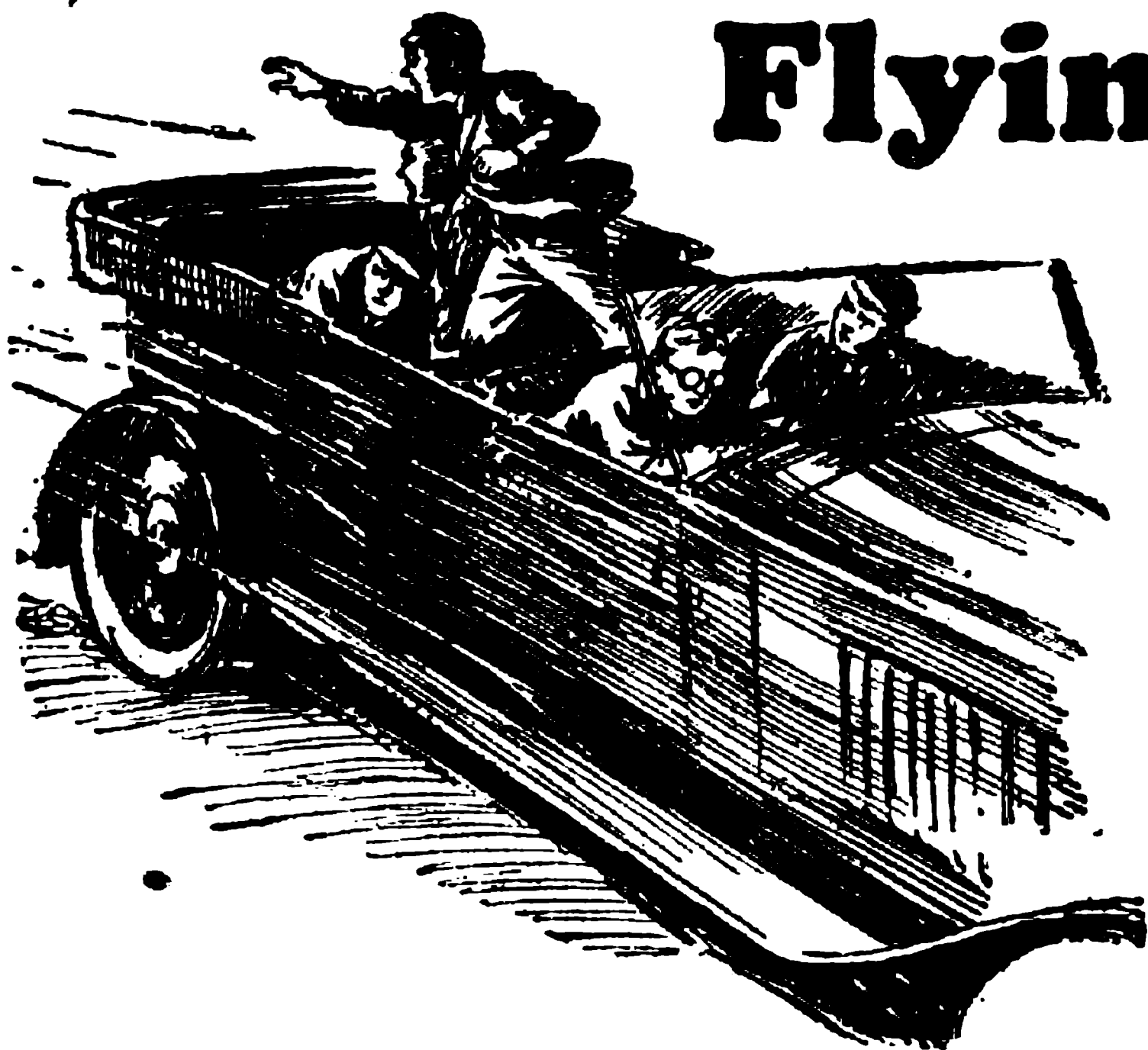
"You haven't got all those strolling players, sir," replied Edward Oswald huskily. "There was another one—a girl named Vanda. It was she who induced me to invite the strolling players to the castle. She got talking with Irene and Doris and Mary and my sister, and they all went off together!"

"Good gad!" ejaculated Dorrie, in dismay.

"When was this?" asked Lee sharply.

"Hours ago, sir!" groaned Handforth. "Churchy and Mac and I have been going all over the town, searching. Mind you, we weren't actually frightened or worried, but we thought it queer that Vanda should have gone off with those four girls and not returned. She told them something, and they wouldn't let us into the secret. But it's

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as clear as daylight, now, that she spun them a yarn—just on purpose to get them to go with her!”

Nelson Lee rose to his feet, his expression grave.

“This is very serious indeed, Handforth,” he said. “Why wasn’t I told of this before? Good heavens, Dorrie, the boy says that those girls have been missing for hours! Anything might have happened to them by this time!”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, sir,” said Handforth wretchedly. “I hadn’t the faintest idea that those people were spies! I can hardly believe it, even now.”

“Don’t take this too hardly, Handforth,” said Nelson Lee, in a kindly voice. “You acted in all good faith; you did not realise what you were doing.”

Lee left his meal and, hurrying out, he made quick inquiries. He learned from Marjorie Temple and some of the other Moor View girls that Irene, Mary, Doris and Ena had not yet returned. The girls, in fact, were getting worried. They could not understand why their companions should have been absent for so many hours.

Lee gave himself no rest.

He organised parties, and Ixwell was combed from north to south and east to west.

The net result of all this was that some soldiers and peasants were found who swore that they had seen Irene & Co. leaving the city with a gaily-attired Northestrian girl. But none of them was very sure; there had been such comings and goings that it was difficult to speak with absolute accuracy.

“I think we can be certain, Dorrie, that this girl, Vanda, took them out of the town,” said Lee. “We know that Vanda is a spy—or we have a strong suspicion in that direction. What could she have done with those four girls? Where could she have lured them? We have scoured the city, but it will be a very different matter to scour the entire countryside.”

“But, man alive, they can’t be far off!” protested Lord Dorrimore. “The whole district is swarming with soldiers.”

“The roads are swarming with soldiers, if that’s what you mean,” replied Lee. “But get off the roads, Dorrie, and the countryside is practically deserted. That’s what you don’t seem to realise. The Northestrians have advanced their lines some miles towards Dunstane, and all the country round about here is empty—except, as I say, for the roads. And, naturally, those girls would not have been taken anywhere near a road. One of a hundred things might have happened to them. Quite close to Ixwell there are dense clumps of woodland—deep, rocky valleys and gullies. Once outside the town, the girls would naturally be lost sight of.”

“Well, let’s hope they turn up all right—and that our fears are groundless,” said his lordship. “I say, this is a perfectly ghastly business. It was bad enough to have some of the boys fall into Cedric’s hands, but girls—”

“Yes, it’s ugly,” said Nelson Lee quietly.

THEN came the real bombshell.

A dusty, travel-stained horseman arrived, escorted by a dozen Northestrian men-at-arms. The man was a Gothlander courier from the Royal Court of Dunstane.

Under the white flag he had crossed the Northestrian lines, and had been closely escorted to Ixwell, bearing with him a sealed parchment for Princess Mercia.

“This is significant, Dorrie,” said Lee grimly, as he stood in the immense entrance-hall of the castle. “Is it mere coincidence that this courier should have arrived at such a time?”

“It might be—but I’m doubtful,” replied Dorrie.

Sir Hobart Manners, who had been out searching with the others, was looking haggard and worn. One of the missing girls was his own daughter.

“Why are we waiting?” he asked impatiently. “This courier has come from Cedric! Good heavens, Lee! If my girl has fallen into Cedric’s clutches—”

“Take it easily, old man,” interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. “We may be the virtual bosses in this castle, but we can’t go blundering into the princess’ apartments. She’ll send for us if that message is anything of importance.”

Within two minutes an agitated Court official informed them that her Majesty desired an immediate audience. They went to her chambers, now accompanied by Mr. Wilkes, who had just come in after another fruitless search.

The young princess was pale with apprehension when they reached her. Ethelbert the Red, her adviser, was no less agitated.

“Alas, my good friends, Cedric hath dealt us a cruel blow,” said the princess tremulously.

She indicated the parchment; Nelson Lee took it, and read it. The writing, in old English characters, was difficult to decipher, but Lee quickly mastered it.

“Well?” asked Sir Hobart hoarsely.

“It is as we feared, Manners,” said Nelson Lee. “Your daughter and those other three girls have been captured by Cedric’s agents.”

“The devils!” shouted Sir Hobart. “What can we do? They must be rescued!”

“Unfortunately, we have not the faintest idea where they are being kept prisoners,” replied Lee steadily. “Cedric has sent an ultimatum. He has ordered the princess to call an immediate halt. The uprising of the Northestrians must be abandoned; every inch of territory that has been gained must be immediately surrendered.”

“And if we refuse those four maidens will never be seen again,” said the princess tragically. “I’faith, good friends, we no sooner gain a victory than Cedric, by his cunning, putteth us in his power.”

“My poor Irene!” murmured Sir Hobart. “This is awful, Lee! We can’t betray the

Northestrians—the people, I mean! And yet my little girl——”

“Nay, we must bow to Cedric’s will,” put in the princess quickly. “He hath the whip hand, and we are helpless.”

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

“Your victorious armies are on the move, princess,” he said calmly. “Let them advance.”

“And permit those four sweet girls to perish?” put in Ethelbert, amazed.

“Are you mad, Lee?” demanded Sir Hobart, with mingled anger and consternation.

“Not at all,” replied Nelson Lee coolly. “And don’t worry about Irene, either, Manners. Do you think I take any notice of this arrogant ultimatum? It is bluff—pure and simple.”

“Bluff!” echoed Dorrie. “But Cedric has those girls in his power! They’re prisoners!”

“Exactly,” agreed Nelson Lee. “Having captured them, Cedric will take very good care to keep them alive. Not merely alive, but unharmed. He won’t dare to hurt a hair of their heads. Their lives are too valuable to him.”

“By my soul! Perchance thou art right, Lee the Lionheart,” said Ethelbert quickly.

“I am quite certain that I am right,” replied Nelson Lee. “Cedric is a bloodthirsty tyrant, but he is no fool. Were he to harm those girls—and were we to discover it—his leverage would be gone, and the people of Northestria, aided by us, would crush him utterly. Our best policy will be to ignore his ultimatum completely—unless, perhaps, we offer to exchange Guntha the Crafty, his commander-in-chief, for the four girls. He’ll refuse, of course, but it will mean a fairly long delay while the couriers pass to and fro. And delay is what we need.”

“Delay!” echoed Sir Hobart. “You say that we need delay?”

“While these messages are passing to and fro, we can act,” said Lee crisply. “Don’t forget those other spies who are now in custody—the supposed strolling players. I’ll warrant that they know a good few details of the plot—and if I can’t extract the information from them, I’m a Dutchman!”

CHAPTER 7.

Into the Mysterious Valley!

GOTHLAND stretched inland from the lake shore as far as the eye could reach; and, as the galley approached, the four girl prisoners watched with eager curiosity. During the latter part of the voyage they had been allowed more freedom, and they were in the open. Their bonds had been removed.

They had long since ceased to wonder regarding their destination. For the galley had continued her voyage right across the lake, until Northestria had sunk below the horizon. And now Gothland was before

them. The countryside stretched away in rolling expanses of meadowland and forest, with villages showing here and there.

This land was smaller than Northestria, and more rugged. Many miles inland the hills rose menacingly, until they merged into the impenetrable mountains which formed the outer rim of the great basin.

“So this is Gothland!” said Irene Manners, as she surveyed the approaching landscape. “Well, I don’t think much of it!”

“Not half so good as Northestria,” agreed Doris Berkeley. “No wonder Cedric envied the Northestrians! No wonder he sent his hordes of soldiers over the lake.”

In all respects, Gothland was a smaller, cruder edition of Northestria. Even the vegetation seemed more rank. The fields were not so fair; the forests were not so trim. The towns and villages, for the most part, were shabby and dilapidated and neglected-looking. The moated castles which could be seen here and there were strongly built, but they were very inferior to the noble piles in Northestria.

The girls were cool outwardly, but their inward apprehension was considerable. Why were they being brought to Gothland in this way? They knew well enough why they had been released from their bonds, and why they were allowed the freedom of the galley. For now that they were on the Gothland side of the lake, there was no danger of their being seen. They were now well within the enemy’s own territory.

The galley slipped into a narrow cove, and here she was met by a smaller boat. A powerful-looking officer came aboard, and for some time he talked with the officers who had crossed from Northestria. Then, bowing with courtly dignity, he presented himself to the four girls.

“Sweet ladies, I crave your forgiveness for the humiliation which hath been put upon ye,” he said smoothly. “Yet I would remind ye that the exigencies of war maketh no distinctions. The highest and the lowest—all are like to suffer.”

“Who are you, and what do you mean to do with us?” asked Ena Handforth bluntly.

“I am Edfrith of Hunric,” replied the other. “I have orders from his Majesty, King Cedric, to escort ye into Gothland. Lest ye be fearful, let me say that no harm shall befall ye. ’Tis his Majesty’s order that ye shall be cared for with every consideration. Not one fair hair of your pretty heads shall be harmed.”

Edfrith spoke almost mockingly, and the girls were suspicious. However, they were quite helpless in the presence of all these Gothlander soldiers, and they did their utmost to maintain a calm bearing.

“Why are we being taken into Gothland?” asked Irene, her gaze never faltering under Edfrith’s mocking stare.

(Continued on page 24.)

LINE UP HERE FOR A GOOD LAUGH, LADS!



HANDFORTH'S Weekly

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EDITORIAL STAFF.

MAY 9th, 1931.

THE EDITOR'S CHIN-WAG

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Editor E. O. Handforth
Chief Sub-Editor
E. O. Handforth
Literary Editor
E. O. Handforth
Art Editor E. O. Handforth
Rest of Staff E. O. Handforth

INQUISITIVE INTERVIEWS

No. 2. Cornelius Trotwood.

HALLO, everybody!

The postman has just been and brought another pantehnicon-load of letters from WEEKLY readers.

Study D is snowed up with them, and Churchy and Mac are grouching like the dickens from somewhere under them. They were having their tea, you see, and Churchy ate a bundle of letters in mistake for a doughnut. I apologise to the senders of those letters on behalf of Church for his bad manners.

There's nothing much further to say this week beyond the fact that the WEEKLY is selling like Mrs. Hake's hot pies, and that it will get better and better with each number, so make sure you don't miss a single copy.

Yours cheerily, E. O. HANDFORTH.

BRIEF REPLIES.

"Enthusiast" (London), thinks I must be a very brainy fellow to be able to write and produce the WEEKLY. Never state the obvious, "Enthusiast."

Reg (Stockport), unlike my former correspondent, is positively insulting and states that he considers the WEEKLY to be a lot of bosh. I think I'll give you "Enthusiast's" address and let you fight it out between you. The right man is bound to win, so order yourself an ambulance, Reg.

Doris (Leyton).—Thank you for your charming letter and even more charming photo. I can't carry it next to my heart because I haven't a suit with a pocket big enough on that side, so I've put it next to my right lung instead.

When were you born?

No; I don't suffer very much from corns.

Have you tried to cure your deafness?

I'm not out of breath—and don't call me an ass.

Do you read much?

Yes; I tried to breed some rabbits in a hutch, but they died of water on the brain after I gave them some damp cabbage.

What do you think of the WEEKLY?

I see no reason why you shouldn't drink with weak knees.

What is your favourite hobby?

What's that about a bobby—I haven't stolen any of Farmer Holt's apples.

What is your favourite sport?

Never touch it—port is bad for you.

Can you sing?

No; I haven't got wings yet.

What are you going to do when you leave school?

I certainly won't clean out the fountain pool—do it yourself.

Do you know you're driving me crackers?

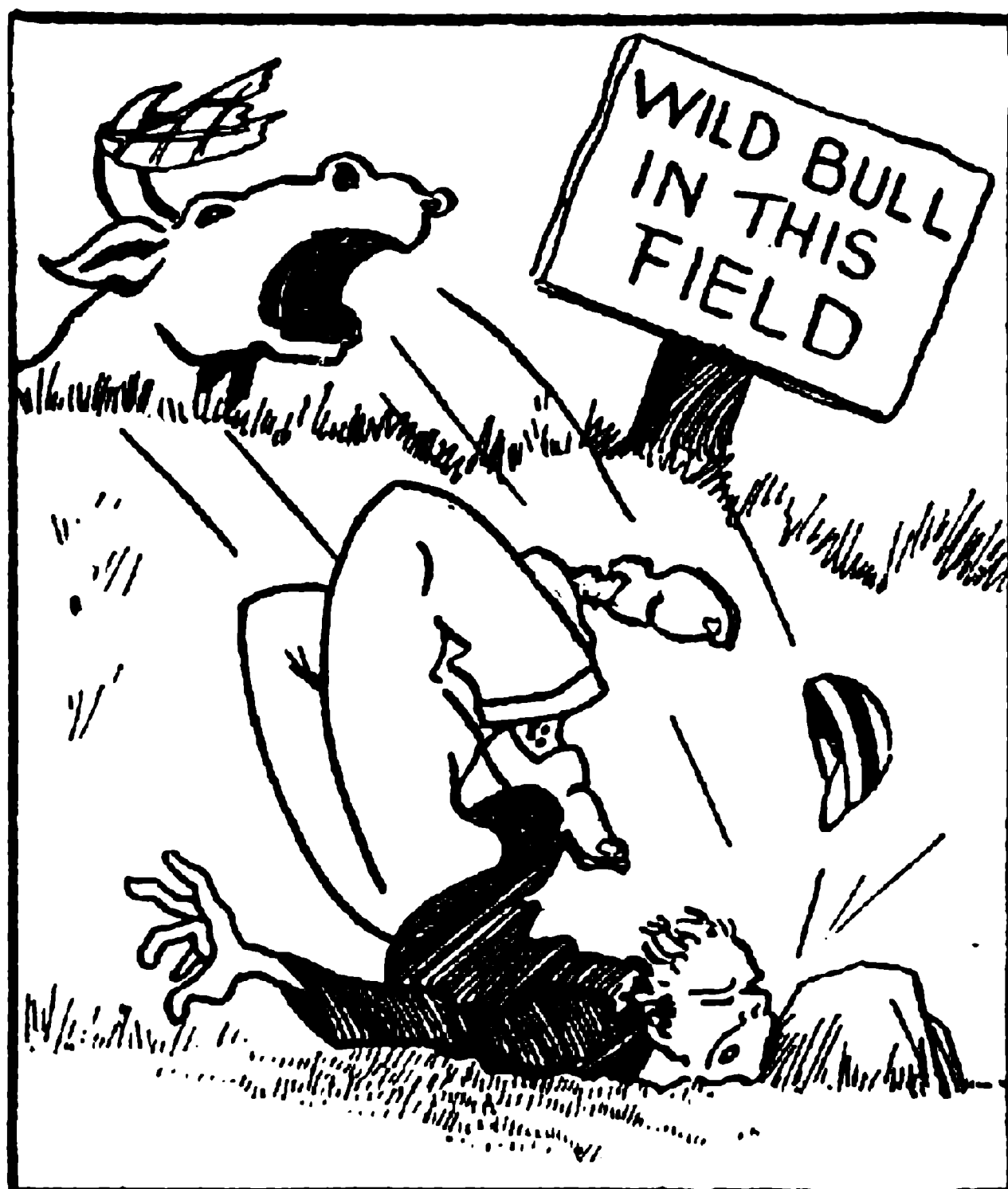
Glad to hear it—all Boy Scouts should be good trackers.

What is your pet aversion?
Eh?

I repeat—what is your pet aversion?

People who shout at me because I'm slightly deaf.!

PICTURED PROVERBS



"Actions speak louder than words."
Tommy Watson missed the words—but found the action.

HANDY'S HINTS—No. 3

How to Write a Story.

This week's article is specially written in response to many readers who state that they have been literally staggered by my efforts as an author. All would-be writers should read and digest these helpful hints—they'll be surprised at the results!

Chew for Inspiration.

A STORY must have a theme, so this is obviously the first thing for would-be authors to work out. Everybody has their method of doing this, of course; personally, I like to sit in an armchair, chew Church's chocolate or Mac's toffee, and then gradually let my brain revolve until it is working in top gear. Churchy has often told me that sight of my face when I am thinking furiously makes him dizzy.

Having told you how to get the plot, the next thing is the actual writing of the story.

You must have perfect peace and solitude to do this with justice. When I write my masterpieces I always insist upon Church and Mac vacating the study. Sometimes they go

quietly; sometimes I have to use force.

Using force should be avoided, however, because it is rather unsettling and shatters your train of thought. Also there is the possibility of your getting a black eye, and working with the remaining optic would be rather a strain.

Developing the Plot.

Because words flow so rapidly through my brain when it is in full blast, I use a typewriter, and I always keep a fire extinguisher handy to cool the keys when they become red-hot.

When you're half-way through the story you'll find that your brain needs cooling, too, so a large chunk of ice will come in handy at this stage.

And so you go on and on, working out your original plot of a few words into thousands of words. Then, when the story is finished, you send it to a grateful editor, who accepts it and clamours for more.

That, lads, is how you write a masterpiece. You'll find it easy if you have read my instructions carefully.

EXCHANGE AND MART

EARN SOME POCKET-MONEY. Archie Glenthorne, of Study E, Remove Passage, requires for to-morrow only somebody who will make him numerous cups of tea at numerous intervals during the day. (Phipps is attending funeral of his late lamented grandmother—so he says!) Good tea—good pay; rotten tea—no pay.

FOR SALE. A handsome watch (once looked like gold). Owner has taken said watch to pieces and is unable to put it together again. Willing to accept anything over 3d. A good bargain for Chinese puzzle experts. Apply Buster Boots, Modern House.

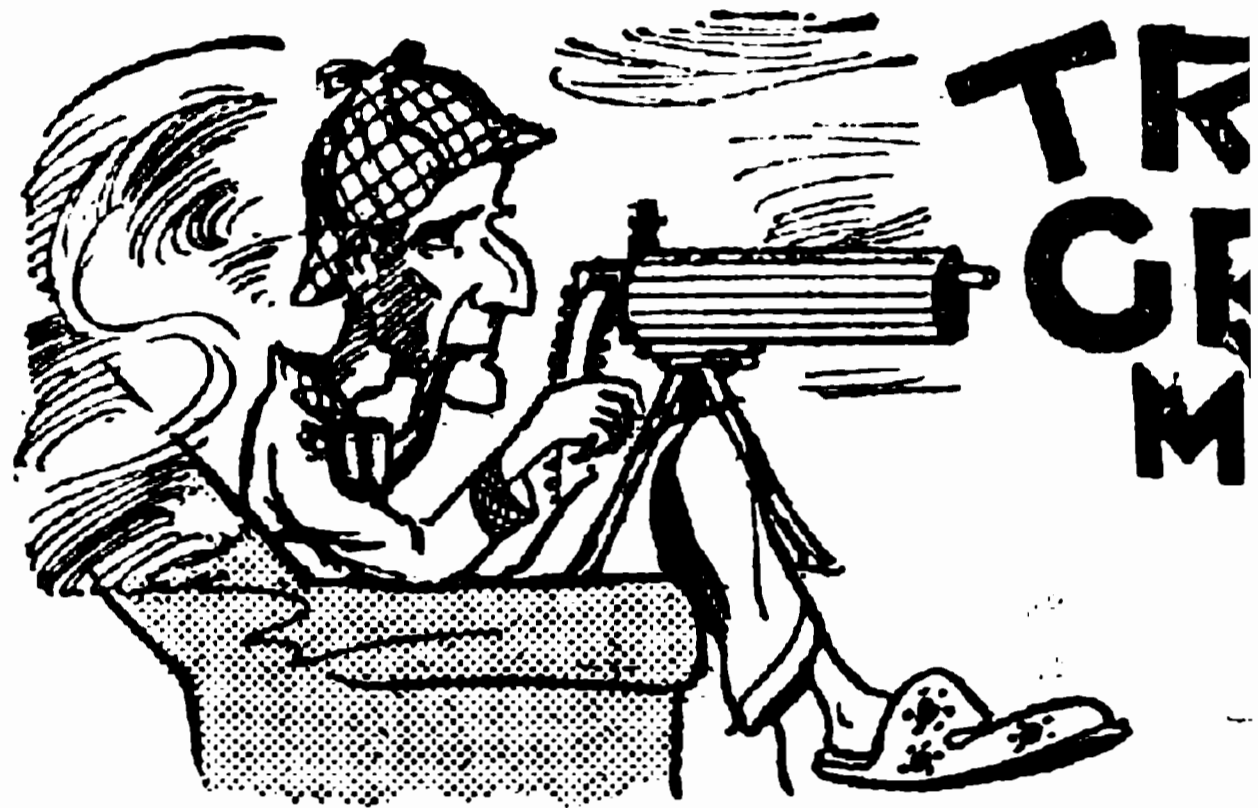
LOAN WANTED. Will anyone lend Albert Gulliver the sum of 10s. 6d. immediately? Ruin and disgrace stare him in the face if bookie is not paid by 2.30 to-morrow afternoon. He throws himself upon the mercy of the Form. Money repaid by

instalments, with use of fountain pen in lieu of interest.

Timothy Armstrong, of the Fourth Form, finds it difficult to sit with any degree of comfort following a spot of trouble with Form-master. To anybody who loans him an AIR CUSHION during this trying period he will reward them at the rate of two doughnuts per day. Apply as soon as possible—and don't forget to bring the cushion.

FOR SALE. An excellent cricket bat—BRAND NEW (five years ago). Just the thing for tanning Teddy Long. No reasonable offer refused. Jimmy Potts, Study H, Remove Form.

HARRY GRESHAM wants to know who stuck a drawing-pin on the seat of his desk in the Form-room yesterday. He will award the culprit with a wonderful surprise packet which he is carrying in his arms. (Good old Gresham! He packs a nifty left and right when he likes, E.O.H.)



TRACKETT GRIM, the famous detective, receives a visit from Knock-kneed Nesbitt, the King of London's underworld, who demands the valuable Bilton jewels. Grim knocks him out and, disguised as the crook, goes to Nesbitt's lair in Limehouse.

Grim Comes a Cropper!

TRACKETT GRIM, disguised as Knock-kneed Nesbitt, King of the Underworld, approached Pong Ping's den in Limehouse with the fullest confidence.

His make-up was a masterpiece, and he had even forced himself to become knock-kneed. This was causing him excruciating agony, for it's no fun to have to bang your knees together at every step you take. However, as Grim told himself, it was all for the good of the cause, and a few bruises would be worth while if he could round up the gang which had terrorised all London. As he made his way along the squalid streets he passed men of all nationalities—all cut-throats—all members of Nesbitt's vast criminal organisations; and every one of them saluted at sight of Trackett Grim, and mumbled "Howdy, Chief."

Pong Ping's den was ostensibly a place where the local gentry chopped sticks over chop suey; in reality it was the headquarters of Knock-kneed Nesbitt. It was shut up and shuttered when Trackett Grim arrived. He approached the door and gave four peculiar taps—for the famous detective knew the secret knock of every criminal gang. A small section of the door moved and the leering face of a Chinaman appeared.

"Passwordee?" asked the Chink.

For a moment Trackett Grim was non-plussed. He had been hoping that when the keeper of the door saw who he was supposed to be he would be admitted without question. The famous detective decided to try and bluster his way out of the awkward situation.

"Go and eat coke——" he began in-



The floor opens and Trackett GRIM

TRACKETT GRIM— MASTER CRIMINAL!

A super-super detective-thriller story,
specially written by the world-famous
author, E. O. HANDWORTH.

dignantly, then stopped as he saw the Chink nod.

"Paswordee okayee!" said the Oriental. The door was opened and Grim found himself in a dark passage. He walked forward, then pulled up with a wild howl of agony as his boko biffed into something solid in front of him.

The Chink came pattering up; in his hand was a fluttering candle and on his inscrutable face a look of surprise.

"Most honourable excellency, you forgetee door?" he asked.

As he spoke he pressed the wall by his side, and the partition on which Grim had dented his nose shot up into the ceiling, revealing beyond a lighted room.



and beneath him, Grim went hurtling forwards.

It was Nesbitt's office and council chamber. There were two men in the room, both of whom Trackett recognised. One was "Lightning" Ed Lefty, Nesbitt's second-in-command, and the slickest gunman in the gang. The other was Pong Ping, proprietor of this alleged Chinese tuckshop, and also a member of the gang.

"Howdy, Chief!" greeted Lefty. "Did you get the sparklers from that punk detective? Say, I bet you made that big-footed baboon look small."

Trackett Grim nearly forgot himself. He objected to being called a punk detective, because he knew he was a good detective, and he hadn't got big feet, anyway, taking only size nines. Just in time he clasped himself in a vice-like grip and prevented his clenched fist from flashing out and knocking Lefty through the floor.

(Continued at foot of next column.)

CLASS-ROOM CLIPPINGS

OWEN MAJOR is a regular film fan. Mr. Crowell asked him for his exercise book, and Owen major replied, "Okay, baby!" But it wasn't "okay" when he got the stick.

Stanley Waldo has broken a Form record by jumping over six rows of desks. The only incident which marred the feat was the fact that Gulliver was sitting in his desk, and one of Waldo's flying feet caught him a wallop on the head. Jolly inconsiderate of Gulliver, I think. He might have been the cause of Waldo coming a terrific cropper and breaking his neck. The Remove can afford to be without Gulliver, but not Waldo.

During Mr. Crowell's absence the other day, Biggleswade of the Sixth took us for lessons. At least, he was supposed to; but Biggy is a bit of a slacker himself, and he let us do what we liked.

Archie Glenthorne produced an air cushion and went to sleep. Fatty Little stuffed himself so full of grub that he put

Instead, it was he himself who went for a free trip into the basement. Trackett Grim was a clever man; he could roll his eyes so that he could see out of them sideways. But even he had his limitations and couldn't see out of the back of his head. Hence he did not spot the Chinaman who was creeping through the doorway behind him; he did not see him touch a lever.

The first he knew of it was when the floor suddenly opened beneath him and he was swallowed up. He plunged through the trapdoor, to land with a jar that stunned him and nearly broke every bone in his body. He was on his feet in an instant.

"Say, what's the big idea?" he bellowed angrily, then suddenly stopped. Amazed consternation filled him, but being an expert poker player he did not show it. For, standing on the edge of the trapdoor and staring down at him in mocking triumph, was Knock-kneed Nesbitt himself—and dangling in his hand were the Bilton jewels!

(To be continued.)

on four pounds in two hours, and then had to go into the sanatorium for two days with violent pains. Some of us amused ourselves by throwing French grammars at each other, and I scored a bull by hitting Mr. Wilkes in the eye when he came in to find out what all the noise was about. We all got lines and Biggy got ticked off. Still, I wish Biggy were our Form-master.

Vivian Travers is a reckless chap. He can't stand history, so he hid all the books appertaining to Bill the Conqueror, etc. Mr. Crowell, suspecting something of the sort, promptly gave us a Latin lesson instead. But Travers was determined that his stunt shouldn't come unstuck altogether. He happens to sit at the back of the class, and when the master wasn't looking he shoved the clock on twenty minutes. It worked, too!

Enoch Snipe is a hopeless dunce. During geography lesson Mr. Crowell asked him where Ceylon was. Snipe replied:

"He's sitting next to me, sir, but don't you mean Teddy Long?"

SPORTS BULLETIN.

THE annual contest for the Third Form ink-slinging championship was held the other day in "stormy weather"—caused by the unexpected re-appearance of Mr. Suncliffe in the class-room. The meeting was postponed indefinitely—until the competitors have recovered from the cramp which affected their hands after being forced to write several hundred lines.

THE latest craze in the Remove is ping-pong. Nipper organised a knock-out competition and he and I reached the final. The game was brought to an abrupt conclusion by Archie Glenthorne nearly swallowing the ball. As usual he was asleep in the armchair, and one of my devastating drives popped into his open mouth. He bit a hole in the ball—and we hadn't another one.

THE VALLEY OF FEAR

(Continued from page 20.)

"I'faith, fair lady, 'tis not for me to question his Majesty's orders," protested the officer. "I but obey my sire's commands. Thou and thy fair companions will make ready for the journey."

Very soon afterwards the girls were in the small boat, being transferred ashore. Here, lined up on the beach, there was a great cavalcade of mounted Gothlander soldiers—a fine spectacle in their chainmail. There were four empty horses for the girls, and they were bidden to mount.

"'Twill be a long, hard ride, I fear," said Edfrith apologetically. "But as I have already assured ye, no harm shall befall ye."

The Gothlander soldiers stared in wonder as the girls lightly leapt upon the saddles. Their short skirts enabled them to sit astride in comfort, and they handled their steeds with confidence.

"By my bones!" growled one of the men. "'Tis well said that these stranger maidens are as active and as accomplished as men! See how they sit their horses!"

"Ay, there is no softness about these wenches, I vow!" murmured another.

At a word of command from Edfrith, the cavalcade started forth. A dozen soldiers rode in advance. Then came the four girls, with Edfrith on one hand and another officer on the other, and, behind, another dozen men.

Thus into Gothland went the prisoners.

EDFRITH had been right when he had said that the journey was to be long and arduous.

Hour after hour the cavalcade rode through the half-deserted towns and villages of Gothland. The only people seen were old men, women and children. All the younger men of Gothland were soldiers in Cedric's service, and were far away in Northestria.

As the journey continued, so the towns and villages grew fewer. The girls were being taken far inland, into the rugged hills, through deep ravines and rocky valleys. The country became more and more wild.

Finally, the leading horsemen entered a narrow defile. It was so narrow that they could only ride in single file. The rocks, sheer and ugly, arose steeply on either side. There was a menace in this place, and the girls wondered more than ever what their ultimate fate was to be.

But they could easily guess, by now, that they were being taken into a secure haven, from which they could not be rescued.

King Cedric was making sure of his prisoners!

Suddenly the leading soldiers turned out of the defile, and came into a grassy open space where the rocks rose steeply. This open space was of considerable size, like a flat basin up in the hills. All the men dismounted, and the girls were bidden to do the same.

"Our journey hence will be on foot, fair ladies," said Edfrith. "But ere we start on this final stage, a halt will be made for food and rest."

To the relief and surprise of the girls, they were led to a little pavilion which had been erected in a sheltered corner of the rocks. It was a well-equipped tent, and here they were allowed to be in private.

"So this is where we're going to rest?" said Irene, as she looked round. "Well, thank goodness, these men have had the decency to provide us with a special tent. Oh, my hat! I can do with a rest, too."

"I'm jiggered if I can understand why they're so considerate," said Doris. "I've always heard that these Gothlanders are brutes and blackguards."

"So they are," said Ena. "They wouldn't treat us like this if they hadn't been ordered to do so. Cedric must have some plan up his sleeve—and it's a part of his plan that we must be treated with every consideration and kindness. But if something goes wrong, these men will change their front. Let's be thankful for small mercies."

"Rather!"

"And if any of these beastly Gothlanders do try any tricks with us, we've got a few tricks of our own," said Doris gamely. "We're not scared of them, anyway."

Yet the four girls felt their position keenly. They were now completely cut off from Northestria—from their own friends. Not only the great lake separated them, but many miles of this wild country. They felt remote—isolated. It spoke volumes for their pluck that they should maintain an outward calm.

Food was brought to them—cooked meats and a rough kind of bread. They were ravenous, and they ate heartily. Then, after about an hour's welcome rest, they were told that they must prepare for the final lap of the journey.

There were no horses this time. Only a dozen men, with Edfrith in command, formed a guard for the prisoners. They set off towards the narrow end of the rocky basin in single file, the girls in the centre of the procession. Practically nothing had been said.

"Wonder what's in the wind now," murmured Doris. "I'm blessed if I can understand the reason for all this."

"I expect we shall know sooner or later," replied Irene.

They soon found themselves walking through a narrow defile which rapidly degenerated into a mere crevice in the rocks. It was like a split in the mountainside, and was undoubtedly of volcanic origin. In the remote past, perhaps, an earthquake had rocked the mountain range and had caused this cleft.

The ground underfoot was rough, and the going was slow. On both sides the rocks stretched upwards for hundreds and hundreds of feet—two sheer walls, with only a narrow slit of sky showing remotely above.

It was gloomy and depressing—and strangely hot.

There were twists and turns, and occasionally the soldiers were compelled to squeeze sideways through the narrowing rocks. The girls, being so much smaller, had no difficulty in getting through.

But if they had any ideas of making a sudden break for liberty, these ideas were quickly dispelled. With soldiers ahead of them, soldiers in the rear, and rocks rising sheerly on either side, escape was impossible.

The journey seemed endless, and the heat became more and more oppressive as the party penetrated deeper and deeper into the mountain range. The girls were soon parched with thirst.

"They mean to make sure of us, anyway," said Irene listlessly. "I expect this is the only entrance to a valley of some kind. My hat! One man could guard it against an army!"

"They might have given us a bit of warning," grumbled Ena. "Then I could have changed my shoes. I've got blisters on my heels as big as pennies!"

The end of the ordeal came unexpectedly.

The girls suddenly discovered that the leading soldiers were no longer in front. They emerged from the narrow crevice to find themselves gazing down upon a scene of astonishing beauty.

The rocky crevice had ended abruptly, and now the girls were standing on a wide ledge, high up on the side of a hill. Immediately in front of them lay a deep valley. Farther afield, on all sides, the mountains rose up menacingly. This valley, in fact, was a smaller edition of the great oasis itself. It was an oasis within the oasis. And the very thing they had been thinking was voiced by Edfrith a moment later.

"Fair ladies, this is the end of the journey," said the Gothlander officer, with a mocking bow. "The valley is yours. Roam as ye will, for there is none to question or hinder ye."

"And what is this place?" asked Ena bluntly.

"A valley from which there can be no escape—except by this one rocky crevice," replied Edfrith. "And, as ye may well gather, this crevice will be closed." He swept his hand outwards. "Gaze in which direction ye may, the valley stretches like a gem of fair greenery. But on every side the rocks rise sheer, so that there is no escape. We bid ye adieu, sweet ladies."

Again he bowed, and then, with a sharp turn, he gave a word of command to his soldiers. The men were grinning and leering at the girls—and there was something in their expressions which told the girls that there was some secret in connection with this valley which they had yet to discover—but of which the soldiers knew.

Some of the men laughed as they marched back into the crevice. Edfrith was the last to go, and soon after he had disappeared the girls heard a curious thudding rumble.

Irene ran back into the rocky defile, and then she uttered a little cry.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing.

The exit was closed! Enormous rocks, weighing hundreds of tons, had been shifted, and the crevice was closed completely!

CHAPTER 8.

Mystery!

"BUT how did they do it?" asked Doris, in wonder.

"These rocks must work on a pivot, or something," said Irene. "That's the only explanation. Anyhow, what does it matter? The path is barred, and there's no possible escape."

The four girls stood looking up at the rocks. The section which had moved, blocking the crevice, stretched upwards for fifty or sixty feet—sheer, smooth rock. To scale it was impossible.

"But—but it's so strange!" said Mary Summers, bewildered. "Why have we been brought to this valley—alone? What's the idea of leaving us here? I'm begining to get frightened."

"We're all frightened," said Ena gruffly. "What's the good of pretending? We did the right thing in keeping up a bold front when those beastly soldiers could see us, but we're alone now—and we might as well be frank with ourselves. We're scared stiff!"

"It's true," murmured Irene. "Oh, what can it all mean?"

The feeling that they were trapped had gripped them like something tangible. They were now looking down into the valley—and the view itself was different from anything they had seen before in this remarkable land.

The vegetation had a tropical aspect; the forests were tangled and dense; the stretches of open grassland were thick with coarse vegetation and creepers. And the whole atmosphere of the place was humid and enervating.

"It's awful!" whispered Doris, with a little shudder. "Everything is so rank—so swampy. And look over there!" she added, pointing. "Isn't that steam rising up? I can see it in two or three places."

"Boiling geysers, I expect," said Irene. "That's why the whole valley is so hot and tropical."

They looked at one another wonderingly.

"But it's all so extraordinary!" protested Mary. "Have they brought us here to starve? They've just dumped us in this place, and they haven't left us any food, or water, or anything! Not even a tent!"

"Perhaps they're not going to keep us here for long," suggested Ena.

"But that's silly," said Irene. "If they weren't going to keep us here long, why did they go to the trouble of bringing us here—over miles and miles of difficult mountain country? It seems to me they're going to

keep us here indefinitely. Can't you understand? That awful King means to use us as hostages."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Ena Handforth. "He caught some of the boys once—and they were rescued. Old Cedric is scared of our tanks and machine-guns and things. He meant to be on the safe side this time—and that's why he brought us over to Gothland and dumped us in this valley. He reckons that we're safe from rescue here. You've got to hand it to the brute that he knows what he's doing."

This theory was clearly the right one. Cedric had taken all this trouble to dispose of his prisoners so that they should be completely out of reach of their friends.

"Well, it's no good standing here," said Ena practically. "This valley seems to be ours, so we might as well have a closer look at it. I'm parched, anyway. I can spot a stream down there."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Irene. "At least, we can get some water."

They commenced the descent of the rocky hillside; and, curiously enough, they were now more nervous than they had been in the presence of the brutal Gothlanders. In spite of their bold front, they had feared those men. But now they feared something else—something intangible. The horror of the unknown was upon them. The very isolation of this valley gripped them.

After they had made the descent, their prison presented an even more terrifying appearance. From the bottom of the valley the rocky barriers seemed higher than ever. Down here, too, the heat was more pronounced. There was not a breath of air to relieve the damp, stifling humidity; and at close quarters the vegetation proved to be more rank and coarse than it had seemed from a distance.

In places the girls were forced to fight their way through the tangle of high grass and creepers, but at length they came upon a clear, crystal-running stream. Gratefully they knelt by the side of it and cupped their hands in the water. It proved to be fresh and palatable. After they had drunk deeply, and had bathed their necks and faces, they felt better.

"We'd better do some more exploring now," suggested Doris.

"But where can we go—and what can we do?" asked Mary helplessly. "What's the good of wandering about?"

"Well, anyway, we can find a better place than this," said Ena practically. "From up above, we spotted a fairly clear patch beyond that dense clump of trees. There might be a spot where we can make a sort of camp."

So they plunged on through the coarse vegetation, feeling more helpless than ever. At the back of their minds, they felt that there was something deeper in this affair than was yet apparent. They were aware of a vague sense of impending terror.

Their next surprise was a big one.

Fighting their way through a dense clump of woodland, they emerged into a great clearing where the grass was not so rank. It stretched away for fully a mile, and was at least half a mile wide, almost entirely surrounded by the tangled forests. During their wanderings, they had seen no signs of life—except for myriads of birds which arose in fluttering fear at their approach.

Irene was the first to come into that big clearing, and for a moment she stood stock-still, staring as though she could not believe her eyes. She even closed her eyes, and then rubbed them.

"Am I dreaming, you girls—or can I really see something?" she asked huskily.

THE others could see clearly enough. And what they saw bewildered them. For right in the middle of that clearing stood a squat, fortress-like building of stone!

The sight of it was so unexpected that the girls were startled. Hitherto, they had believed this valley to be a place of virgin solitude—a spot untouched by human hand. Yet here was this very solid-looking building!

They advanced upon it cautiously, their curiosity getting the better of their fear.

"It's—it's so strange!" whispered Doris. "I wonder if anybody lives here? The ogre of the valley, I expect! And those Gothlanders brought us in as the ogre's next meal!"

"Oh, do dry up!" protested Mary.

They were struck by the fact that the only windows in that squat, square building were the merest slits. Even the door was a slit. At close quarters, they found that this doorway was no wider than twelve inches, and only four feet high.

"Almost like the hole in front of a dog kennel," murmured Doris, who was irrepressible. "I say, what a giddy thrill!"

They had approached to the very walls of the tiny fortress, and they had not been challenged. This building, like all the rest of the valley, was apparently deserted.

"Hallo!" shouted Ena boldly. "Anybody at home? Why can't you show yourself?"

There was no reply.

"I say!" exclaimed Mary, in an excited whisper. "Have you spotted this doorway? Look how deep it is. Just like a tunnel!"

It was a fact. That narrow slit of a doorway penetrated deeply into the building; and the girls were astounded to see that the wall was at least eight feet thick—and built of solid blocks of rock.

"But why build a place like this here?" asked Irene, deeply puzzled. "It's—it's like those concrete pill-boxes they used during the war—only about ten times as strong. Shall we go in?"

"Why not?" replied Ena. "We're pretty scared already—and we shall only be on pins and needles until we know what's inside this rummy place. Come on! I'll lead the way!"

She squeezed her way through the tunnel-like doorway boldly. There was no sense in prolonging the suspense. One after the other, the girls passed through.

"Phew! It's lovely and cool in here, anyway," said Ena, as she looked round in the half light. "Well, I'm jiggered! Tables and chairs and things!"

The atmosphere within that stone building was, indeed, cool compared with the heated air outside. And after the girls had grown accustomed to the subdued light, they could see quite clearly. There were numerous slit-like windows all round, and the doorway, they now saw, could be completely closed by pushing a great solid slab of rock which worked on crude rollers.

"Well, there's one thing about it," said Doris. "We've only got to close this door, and the whole Gothlander army couldn't get at us! We could defy a thousand men!"

"But—but it's all so queer," said Ena, frowning. "You can see that this isn't an ordinary fortress. It's a specially-built place—for a special purpose. But what?"

"Never mind riddles now," said Irene briskly. "I say, girls! Look at all this! Food!"

"What!" cried the others, dashing up.

It was true.

On a big side table were stocks of dried meats, similar to venison; there were large supplies of big teacakes-like biscuits, hard but palatable. A number of cheeses, too, and a large quantity of eggs.

In addition, there was a number of earthenware bottles, each holding about a gallon, containing water.



Under a flag of truce came Cedric's messenger—bringing with him an ultimatum upon which hung the fate of Irene and Co.!

"Well, this is the rummiest thing imaginable," said Mary Summers, as she stood looking round. "Tables and chairs—even beds for us to sleep on. Food enough to last us for a week or two."

"And we're all alone in this valley," said Irene. "That's another rummy thing. I can understand King Cedric taking us prisoners and holding us as hostages until he can make a bargain with Mr. Lee and the others, but why leave us in this valley, alone, completely isolated from all other human beings? That's the mystery of it!"

Ena Handforth, like her brother, was practical.

"Why puzzle our heads?" she asked. "Let's get busy, and make the place present-

able. We can push that slab of stone over the doorway, and we shall be private. Then we can get to work and convert this place into something like home."

The girls, still very puzzled, set to work. They were glad enough to do so, since any activity took their minds off the general situation. Yet at heart they were all apprehensive. They had an intuitive feeling that there was something sinister behind all this mystery.

CHAPTER 9.

Nelson Lee the Tyrant!

"ANY luck?" asked Lord Dorrimore quickly.

"None," replied Nelson Lee.

"They steadfastly refuse to speak—or, at least, they maintain that they know absolutely nothing. In spite of all my questioning, they swear that they have no knowledge of the girls' whereabouts."

"Lying, of course," said Dorrie.

"Yes, they're lying, old man," agreed Lee grimly. "And I am inclined to take extreme measures."

They were in their own private apartment of Ixwell Castle, and Sir Hobart Manners and Mr. Wilkes were with them. Nelson Lee had just been questioning the spies—the captured strolling players. His efforts were barren of result.

"We must do something drastic, Mr. Lee," said Sir Hobart anxiously. "Heaven alone knows how many hours have passed since my girl was spirited away with her three companions. Where are they now? What is happening to them? I am almost mad with suspense!"

"We know from Cedric's ultimatum that the girls are safe——"

"Safe?" broke in Sir Hobart harshly. "Are you crazy, Lee? How can they be safe while they are in the hands of those infernal brutes? Alive, yes! But they may be undergoing untold tortures!"

"Now, Manners, you must not exaggerate the situation," said Nelson Lee gently. "I can quite understand your deep concern. But, really, I do believe that those girls are unharmed. Cedric is no fool. And he is hoping that we will agree to his demands. Were he to send those girls back suffering from brutal treatment, all he had gained would be valueless."

"Yet the girls must be found!" urged Sir Hobart.

"Of course—and as quickly as possible," agreed Nelson Lee. "That is why I am thinking of taking drastic measures with these spies. I am convinced they know something."

"But how can you make them speak?" asked Dorrie. "I expect the beggars are laughing up their sleeves. They know that we don't approve of torture."



Jokes from readers wanted for this feature! If you know a good rib-tickler, send it along now. A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; pocket wallets, penknives and bumper books are also offered as prizes. Address your jokes to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

THE BUSINESS "MAN."

Auntie: "Tommy, come and kiss auntie, and auntie will give you a penny."

Tommy: "It isn't worth it, auntie. I get sixpence from dad for drinking castor oil."

(Arthur Drew, 145, Goldhurst Terrace, Hampstead, N.W.6, has been awarded a handsome watch.)

A JUSTIFIABLE MISTAKE.

Policeman: "Now then, what's the number of your car?"

Driver (of antiquated vehicle): "A.D. 1672."

Policeman: "Don't kid me. I want its number, not when it was built."

(P. Stilley, 59, Leeming Street, Mansfield, Notts, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

TWO MEANINGS.

Man (to boy): "You can't break coals with a roller, stupid. Why don't you use your head?"

(R. Wild, 43, Spruce Hill Road, Walthamstow, E.17, has been awarded a penknife.)

EXTRAORDINARY.

The newly-recruited village constable was investigating the case of a broken window. Measuring the gash, he entered the details in his notebook, and passed through into the room.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "It's worse than I expected. The window is broken on both sides."

(S. Holmes, 10, Orchard Terrace, Primrose Hill, Huddersfield, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

ACCORDING TO CIRCUMSTANCES.

Old Gent: "How old are you, my little man?"

Jack: "I am five at home, six at school, and three on the trams."

(D. Jones, 12, Keyes Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg, S. Africa, has been awarded a book.)

MISUNDERSTOOD.

Willie: "A chicken, please."

Farmer: "Do you want a pullet?"

Willie: "No, I wanta carry it."

(T. Murphy, Stoke Road, Bishops Cleeve, Nr. Cheltenham, has been awarded a penknife.)

"But while we are in Rome, Dorrie, it may be necessary for us to do as Rome does."

"By the Lord Harry! You don't mean—"

"There is a splendidly-equipped torture-chamber in this castle," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I think I am going to use it."

"But, man alive—"

"Manners' daughter and those other three girls are in the hands of the Gothlanders—and these strolling players know more than they will say," continued Nelson Lee. "In such an extremity as this, Dorrie, I think that we can put our scruples aside."

"Yes, yes!" said Sir Hobart tensely. "Heaven forgive me for advocating torture, Lee, but in the circumstances—"

"We'll see," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I fancy we might be able to achieve some results."

He walked out, and paced down one of the wide, imposing corridors of the castle. He encountered Handforth and Nipper and a crowd of other St. Frank's fellows, who were hanging about anxiously for news.

"No, nothing, boys," said Lee, in answer to their inquiries. "So far, we have discovered no trace. I have sent men out in all directions, and inquiries are being made in every nook and cranny of the countryside."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Handforth. "And it's all my fault, sir! I shall never forgive myself for this!"

"Nobody has blamed you, Handforth," said Lee quietly. "You were victimised by the enemy's cunning. Don't worry. We may yet retrieve the position."

He passed on, not caring to discuss the matter further with the boys—mainly because he had no definite information to impart to them. And he knew that they were fraught with intense anxiety.

All the victories that the Northestrians had gained were rendered valueless by Cedric's capture of the four Moor View girls.

It was a great coup for the Gothlander tyrant.

THE torture-chamber of Ixwell Castle was a veritable Chamber of Horrors.

Everything necessary for the extraction of the truth from prisoners was there; thumb-screws, racks, branding-irons, and all the other instruments of torture which were so commonplace in the Middle Ages.

There were two of these apartments, separated by a wall which only half divided them. Nelson Lee, obtaining the services of a dozen stalwart Northestrian soldiers, made active preparations.

Furnaces were lit, branding-irons were thrust into the heart of the flames, and many other instruments of torture were got ready.

Only Nelson Lee, in addition to the Northestrians, was present. Lord Dorrimore, Sir Hobart, and the others had been

A STIFF 'UN.

To win a £5 bet, Pat and Mike had to ride a tandem up a very steep hill. After a lot of puffing on the part of Mike, they finally reached the top. Turning to Pat, Mike said:

"Shure, that was a stiff 'un."

"It was," agreed Pat. "If I hadn't had the brakes on we should have gone backwards."

(V. Parry, 1, Pare-y-Dolau, Llanbardarn, Wales, has been awarded a penknife.)

NEARLY RIGHT.

Teacher: "What is an island?"

Pupil: "A brick in a puddle, sir."

(E. Merritt, Ward B.4, St. Mary's Hospital, Highgate, has been awarded a book.)

EXCAVATIONS.

"Here's something queer," said the dentist. "You say this tooth has never been touched before, but I find small flakes of gold on my instrument."

"I think you've struck my back collar stud," replied the victim."

(Miss A. Tadman, "Duncarn," Grange Park, Rhyl, has been awarded a book.)

ARTFUL.

Mother: "You look very pale. Are you ill, dear?"

Jimmy: "Yes, ma. I'm too

ill to go to school, but not ill enough to go to bed."

(F. Burns, 2, Chilham Road, Walkden, Lancs, has been awarded a penknife.)

PESSIMISTIC.

Barber (shaving customer): "Do you want anything on your face when I've finished?"

Customer: "Well, I hope you'll leave my nose."

(G. Heard, 2, Church End, Walthamstow, E.17, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

NOT NEEDED.

Artist: "I have some sketches here that will do for your paper."

Editor: "No doubt. But we don't want our paper done for, thank you."

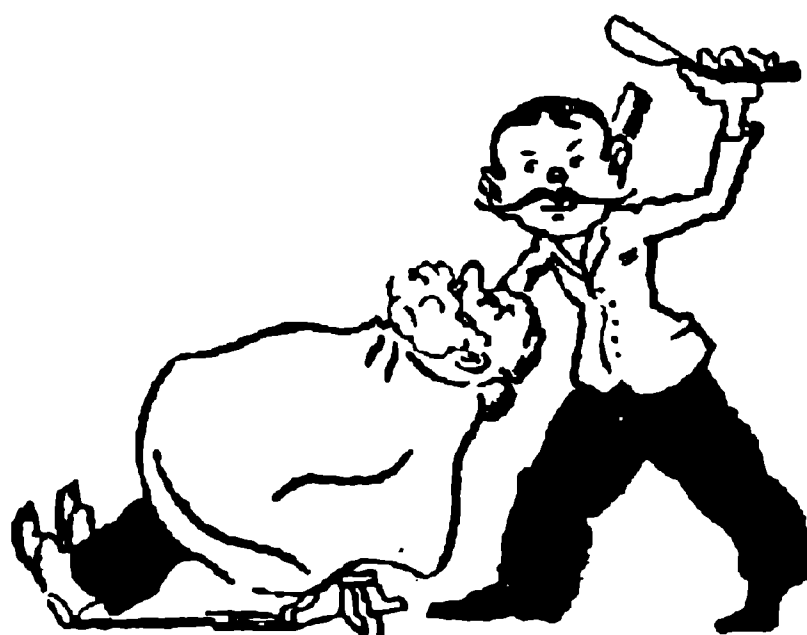
(D. Hagell, 64, Hartnup Street, Maidstone, has been awarded a penknife.)

VERY CLEVER.

Father: "How are you getting on at school, my boy?"

Billy: "Awfully well, dad. The teacher said that if all the boys were like me, he would shut up the school to-morrow. He must think I know a lot!"

(T. Hutchinson, P.O. Box 4609, Johannesburg, South Africa, has been awarded a book.)



requested to stay away. Lee had a definite object in this, for he was afraid that his friends would be too tender-hearted for the work in hand. And Lee was so grimly determined to extract the truth from the spies that he was taking no chances.

Dorrie, in any case, had very urgent work to do. Many of the Pioneer's engineers were busy on the beach, assembling one of the special fighting aeroplanes which Dorrie had brought with him.

One machine was practically ready, and Dorrie was anxious to put it through its tests—so that it would be ready for immediate service, should the occasion arise.

In the torture-chamber, Lee had a last look round, and saw that all was prepared. Then he had the prisoners brought up from the dungeons. Four of them only were required, and they were escorted into the torture-chamber, manacled with heavy chains. They were confident and calm. Yet they flinched when they beheld the nature of this chamber into which they were now led.

"Listen carefully to me," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I have questioned you, and you have refused to give me truthful answers. I intend to give you one more chance."

"Thou art wrong, my lord!" protested one of the men. "We know naught! 'Tis true that we came into Ixwell as spies; but none of us knows more."

"You persist in saying that you do not know where Vanda took those four girls?"

"Ay, my lord!" said the man. "The wench tricked them, 'tis true, but whither she led them is unknown to us."

"Lies—lies!" thundered Lee. "By Heaven! Since you are so reluctant to speak the truth, I will force it out of you!"

His manner had changed so abruptly that the spies were startled and afraid. All in a moment, Nelson Lee's manner had become ferocious—terrifying. He seemed to grow taller, his face became brutal in its expression; his eyes blazed with ruthless cruelty.

"By my soul! I will make you speak!" raved Lee. "Ho! This way, men! Take these dogs and do with them as I command!"

The Northestrian soldiers, themselves scared by Lee's attitude, sprang to do his bidding. The spies were seized.

"This one you will take to the rack, yonder!" ordered Lee harshly. "See that he is stretched with unmerciful cruelty. This one you will bind to the central pillar, and see to it that the white-hot brands are ready!"

"Mercy, my lord!" panted one of the spies, as white as a sheet.

"There shall be no mercy for you, my friend!" retorted Lee savagely. "So! You thought I was soft and kindly, did you? Fools! I will show you that I am in earnest! This other man you will suspend from the beams by his thumbs! But hold! Secure his thumbs in the torturing implements, but

leave the rope slack. Then, when I give the word, you will obey!"

The wretch was dragged away. He and his companions were now terrified. They had never expected to see such a remarkable change in Lee the Lionheart. All Northestria knew that Lee was a man of incredible bravery and resource; but Northestria had yet to learn that he could also be as great a brute as Cedric the Cruel!

Lee himself superintended the work of fixing one of the victims to the dreadful rack.

It was a crudely fashioned affair, but there was no doubt about the efficacy of its operation. The victim, bound to the deadly machine, face upwards, was practically spread-eagled. A great crank could then be operated, and the unfortunate man would be stretched until his very arms and legs were forced out of their sockets.

This particular man, as Nelson Lee knew, was the leader of the "strolling players." He was, therefore, the fellow most likely to know the full truth. Lee distrusted him more than the others, too; he was a lean, saturnine, evil-looking rascal, with shifty eyes.

"My lord, thou art wrong!" panted the fellow as he was strapped to the rack. "I know naught! I swear it!"

"Dog!" snarled Lee. "You will swear differently soon, no doubt!"

"Nay, my lord! I tell thee I know naught!"

"Are you ready, fools?" shouted Lee, turning to his assistants. "Why this delay? Get ready with the crank. If this man will not speak, then I will tear him asunder, and his shrieks of agony will be music in my ears."

"We are ready, my lord," faltered one of the soldiers.

"Then wait!" commanded Lee, striding towards the other compartment. "Ah! So this fine fellow is strung up ready? Raise him, men! Hasten, you rats! Raise him until his feet have left the floor—until all his weight is borne by his unclean thumbs!"

The man on the rack perspired coldly. He could picture what was happening beyond that intervening wall. The next moment he shuddered, for a wild, piercing scream of dire agony rent the air. It was repeated, accompanied by terrible pleas for mercy.

"Mercy!" came Lee's voice. "There shall be no mercy for you, dog! Speak! What do you know of Vanda and the four girls she enticed away?"

Lee came striding back, and he glowered down upon the man who was stretched on the rack. The Northestrian soldiers stood ready at the great crank.

"Slowly!" ordered Lee, with a glance at the soldiers. "Turn the crank slowly—so that the agony shall be the greater!"

The men commenced their deadly work, and the victim sobbed with apprehension.

"This is your last chance!" snarled Lee. "Speak now, and you shall be spared from the torture!"

Another wild, piercing scream echoed through the chamber; and at the same moment the victim on the rack felt his arms and legs being stretched; but, as Lee knew well enough, he was suffering no pain as yet, and would not do so for some moments.

"My lord—my lord!" sobbed the wretch. "Spare me!"

"Speak, and you shall be spared!"

"Ay, I will speak, my lord!" shrieked the man. "But tell them to desist, and I will speak!"

"Hold!" commanded Lee, swinging upon his assistants. They held their hands, and Lee bent closer. "Well?" he snapped. "If you are tricking me——"

"Nay, my lord, nay!" sobbed the fellow. "I do know that the wench Vanda tricked the girls to a spot in a wood, not many miles from Ixwell. Thence the fair prisoners were to be taken to a galley. By now, the galley hath reached Gothland."

"This is the truth?" demanded Lee tensely.

"I swear it!" cried the victim. "But, by the soul of St. Attalus, I know not where the prisoners go after reaching Gothland. Torture me as thou wilt, I can say no more!"

"You are lying!" snarled Lee. "You know what part of Gothland those girls have been taken to! The crank, men! Turn the crank so that this information shall be forced from the rat!"

Before the crank could be turned the man was shrinking with fear, protesting that he knew no more. And Lee, with a sudden certainty that the fellow was indeed speaking the truth, gave the order for the "torture" to end.

His expression, although still remaining grim, had lost all its ferocity. He even smiled.

"I think, my friends, that we tricked these wretches rather neatly," he said to his assistants. "It is well said that anticipation is far worse than realisation. There has been no torture, yet I have gained the information I sought."

"No torture, my lord?" protested one of the soldiers. "But the cries from yonder chamber——"

"Those cries were uttered by me," explained Nelson Lee calmly. "The other prisoners have not been harmed in any way."

The fellow on the rack went limp with relief—and mingled with his relief was a savage fury. He had been tricked into giving that information! There had been no torture at all; only Nelson Lee's brilliant acting had created the necessary "atmosphere."

Lee wasted no time now.

He hurried out, and he was soon in council with Ethelbert the Red, Sir Hobart Manners, Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Alington Wilkes. He briefly told them of what he had learned.

"We know something, at any rate," he said. "The girls have been taken across to Gothland in a galley—and by now they are in the enemy's own country."

"Good heavens! Worse and worse!" said Sir Robert tragically.

"Not at all," replied Lee. "We take the Pioneer over to Gothland immediately—and with all the resources at our command, I am convinced that we shall succeed."

"Gad, here's a chance for me, too!" said Lord Dorrimore eagerly. "The 'plane's ready, Lee. I'll dodge over the lake and do some scouting. I can keep in touch with you all the time by wireless, and as soon as I spot something of importance I'll tell you."

Within a very short time, the rescue work commenced.

The St. Frank's fellows, of course, were keen enough to join in, and they saw to it that they were aboard the Pioneer when she started her dash across the great lake.

And overhead soared Lord Dorrimore in the powerful fighter 'plane.

CHAPTER 10.

The Valley of Fear!

AT almost exactly that same minute—as the rescue party was setting out from Northestria—Irene and the other girls, locked away in that secret Gothland valley, were venturing out of the queer fortress, building.

They had tidied up, and they now came to the conclusion that there was no real necessity for them to remain bottled up within the building. They had decided, in fact, to go to the little stream which flowed near at hand, and to indulge in a bathe.

Suddenly Doris spun round and stared across the clearing towards the distant forest.

"What's the matter?" asked Mary.

"I—I don't know," said Doris. "But I thought I heard something over there just now. It was a queer sort of sound. Didn't you hear it? Like bushes and trees being crushed down and—— Oh, crumbs! Look! What's—that's that coming out of the trees?"

There had been a catch in her voice at first, but it quickly rose to a little shriek. The other girls, now thoroughly frightened, stared intently; and their terror was well justified.

For something unbelievably horrible had emerged from the belt of thick forest land—something fantastically impossible. A great monster—a creature like nothing else on earth.

The head had appeared first, and it was this which had attracted Doris's attention. A great head, greenish-black in colour, not unlike that of a monstrous lizard. An enormous scaly neck followed, and then the body. When the monster came fully into sight it was seen that the four legs were ludicrously small in comparison with the rest of the animal; and its great, thick tail was mottled and knobbly. The uncouth thing lurched forward in a series of queer jumps, and it was followed by a second creature of the same species. Both of them were as tall as a modern villa.

"What—what are they?" panted Irene. "Are we mad? I saw some things like that once in a book—prehistoric monsters!"

"You've got it—they're dinosaurs!" cried Ena, in amazement. "Oh, my only hat! Dinosaurs in the twentieth century!"

"Look! They're coming for us!" shouted Mary.

It was a fact. The two monsters, after raising their heads and scenting the atmosphere, were now lumbering across the great clearing, and their speed was so great that the girls were deceived for the moment.

All in a second, they could see that the two monsters were half way across the intervening ground. With one accord the girls broke into a run and fled for the fortress—the sturdy nature of which they now understood.

Only in the nick of time did they squeeze through that narrow doorway. Breathlessly, they rolled the heavy stone slab into position. Outside they could hear the thunderous shuffling of the great brutes.

The four girls were pale and shaky. They did not mind admitting that they were sick with apprehension. This sudden shock was far worse than anything that had yet happened.

Dinosaurs — prehistoric monsters — in this secret valley of Gothland!

Outside the monsters roved round, sniffing in at the slit-like windows, and making such vile and terrible noises that the girls clung to one another in abject terror.

During the first moments they were nearly fainting, but rapidly their confidence was restored. They knew that they were safe here. This place had been built with eight-foot-thick walls; none of those vile creatures could get in. The girls now realised why the door was so thick, why the window-slits were so narrow.

They were prisoners in this valley—in this fortress—and they were prevented from making any attempt to escape by reason of those atrocious creatures which roamed outside.

"I shall go mad—mad!" sobbed Mary, covering her face with her hands. "Oh, listen to them! They'll break in—I know they'll break in!"

"They won't," said Ena softly. "Buck up, old girl! Thank goodness, we got back in time. I'm afraid there'll be no bathing for us."

Presently Irene and Doris ventured to climb upon some of the furniture and peer through the windows. Occasionally, they caught a glimpse of the dinosaur-like creatures as they wandered round the fortress, sniffing and making terrifying grunting noises.

"Look!" whispered Doris, after a while. "There are other animals now! Oh, my goodness!"

"That one in the distance is a brontosaurus," said Irene breathlessly. "It's even bigger than these other beggars! Oh, my hat! There's an elephant, too—a horrid-looking elephant with fur or hair."

"It must be a mastodon," said Doris, in awe. "Think of it, you girls—a mastodon in this age!"

As they continued to watch, they saw other almost unbelievable monstrosities — one creature which closely resembled the pictures of the long-necked plesiosaurus.

The whole valley seemed to be swarming with the horrible things. The girls, imprisoned in their fortress, were terrified. Outside they could hear some of the monsters lumbering against the outer walls as they moved ceaselessly to and fro.

But even now the imprisoned girls did not quite realise the truth.

Cedric the Cruel was playing a trump card here. There were two of these tropical valleys, and it was well known throughout Gothland that imprisoned in their fastnesses were these monsters of a bygone age. For countless centuries they must have been bottled up here—originally imprisoned by some prehistoric volcanic eruption or earthquake. Unable to get out, they had continued to breed. The hot geysers had provided the valleys with a continuous tropic heat. Thus had the creatures survived.

And cunningly the Gothlanders had made use of the monsters.

A gully was the only means of getting from one valley to the other, and the monsters mostly lived in the other valley—of which the girls were unaware.

Prisoners were sometimes brought here—just as Irene & Co. had been brought. It was any odds that they would be able to reach the stone building without mishap. Once there, they were smelt out by the creatures. In all probability the monsters were harmless enough—as much frightened of the humans as the humans were of them. But their very appearance was sufficient.

Obstinate and recalcitrant nobles had sometimes been imprisoned in this valley. A week of it, and any man was ready to capitulate. A fortnight of it meant madness. Many and many a man, stubbornly refusing to submit, had gone stark, raving mad.

BACK in Dunstane, Cedric the Cruel gloated.

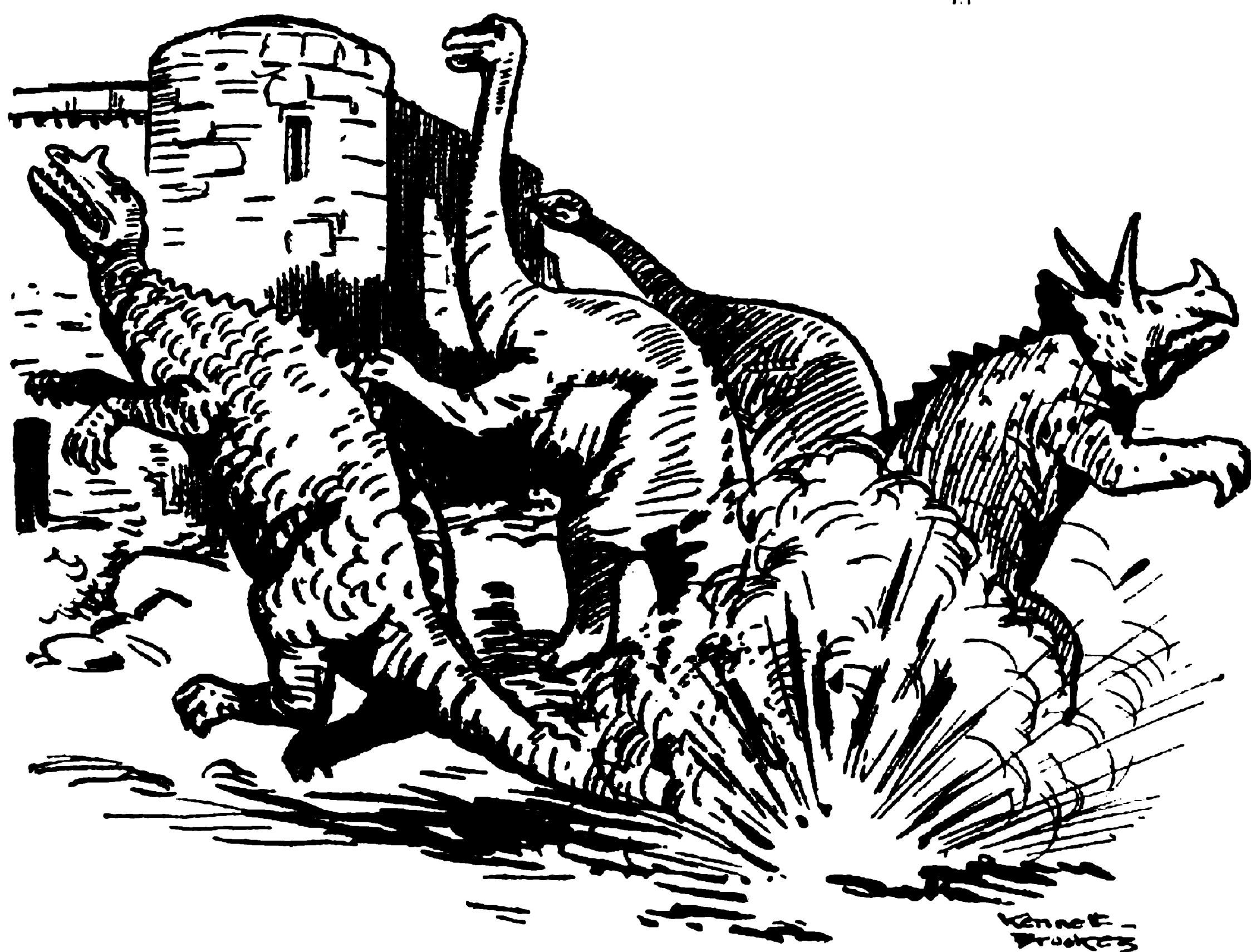
He was convinced that the girls would never be discovered in their inaccessible prison.

"We have done well, Attawulf!" said Cedric boisterously. "In three days from now one of these wenches will be removed, and I vow she will be half crazed with terror."

"As many another before her, sire," agreed Attawulf the Terrible.

"When she reaches Ixwell, her condition and her story will be enough!" continued Cedric. "By my bones! We have these accursed strangers in the hollow of our hands! Either they will agree to complete surrender, or those other three wenches will be left to their doom! Is it not a goodly scheme?"

Dorrie released a bomb, and it exploded with a shattering crash among the monsters, scattering them in all directions.



CHAPTER 11.

Dorrie on the Job!

A SPECK, high in the sky, and making a soft, purring noise, represented Lord Dorrimore in his 'plane.

Before the Pioneer was half-way across the lake—and she was tearing along at full speed—Dorrie was well over Gothland. For a considerable time, in fact, he had been cruising about, keeping his eyes well open.

His 'plane was of the very latest type, equipped with a saloon which was as comfortable and as compact as any limousine car.

The pilot sat forward in a special cockpit of his own, and the 'plane was so constructed that Dorrie had a clear view of the ground beneath. The single engine, of enormous power, was scarcely more than ticking over, for Dorrie had no desire to indulge in any

speed work. He was cruising along at a height of three or four thousand feet.

Sometimes with his naked eye, sometimes through glasses, he searched the countryside below. He had crossed the coastline repeatedly, and he was beginning to realise the insuperable difficulties of his task. He had set out full of hope, but already he was despairing.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack, old man," he said, talking to Nelson Lee as though Lee were sitting next to him. "I'm hanged if I can see what we can do."

"Keep your eyes open, Dorrie—you might pick up a clue at any moment," replied Lee. "Look out for Gothlander soldiers. Those girls must have been taken inland by a fairly strong force of men. The chances are they are tucked away in a castle or fortress. So keep a strict watch for such buildings."

"There are so many of the darned things," objected Dorrie.

The wireless communication between the 'plane and the Pioneer was perfect. Dorrie had the earphones fixed to his ears and a mouthpiece in front of him. He could talk with ease—and Lee could hear all he said, and answer. It was one of the miracles of modern science.

"There's no sense in us jawing like this, anyway," continued Dorrie. "As soon as I spot anything valuable, Lee, I'll get in touch with you again."

He flew down the Gothland coastline. This was a rough country. For some miles inland, from the lake shore, Gothland was very similar to Northestria. There were towns and villages, and numerous feudal castles. But farther inland, among the hills and valleys, the country became wild and

rugged. Dorrie did not pay much attention to this part of Gothland. He was searching out every castle and fortress, sometimes flying low over them in the hope of the girls hearing his 'plane and making some signal.

But, so far, nothing had happened.

He had seen plenty of Gothlanders staring upwards, pointing excitedly. He was quite sure that they were shouting in fear, but he was not interested. He was on the lookout for some significant sign—something which might hint at the presence of the girl prisoners.

The 'plane, even at her minimum speed, was capable of going from one end of Gothland to another within the space of an hour or so. Dorrie adopted a criss-cross course, now flying at a height of only seven or eight hundred feet.

He had gone inland, having spotted a picturesque castle on a rocky crag. He had circled this castle, but had seen nothing of particular interest. And now he made a wide, sweeping half-circle, which took him farther back into the hill country.

Suddenly his heart gave a little jump. Tiny dots were visible on a white ribbon of road, deep in the mountains. He altered his controls and flew in that direction. Diving, he took a closer look.

"Jove!" he murmured. "I wonder if this can mean anything?"

He was looking at a number of mounted men—Gothlander soldiers. They were coming down a rocky mountain road from the direction of the Gothland hills. Yet as far as Lord Dorrimore could make out there was no castle in the vicinity. Where, then, were these men coming from?

"Hallo, hallo!" called Dorrie, when he had got into communication with the Pioneer again. "That you, Lee?"

"Yes."

"Just spotted some Gothlander soldiers coming down from the hills," said Dorrie. "Looks a bit queer, eh? They're mounted men, and there doesn't seem to be any castle up in that direction. Think I'd better follow up the mountain trail?"

"Go ahead, Dorrie—see if it leads to anywhere in particular," came Lee's advice.

That was just the peculiar part of it. It seemed to Dorrie that that mountain road led to nowhere at all. Flying on, he made another remarkable discovery.

For he suddenly espied a camp, tucked away in a shallow basin, high in the mountains. There were several tents, and seven or eight men were standing about, staring upwards and pointing.

A military camp here, right in the heart of the mountains!

It was indeed significant.

Lord Dorrimore became thoroughly excited. It seemed to him, in fact, that he had reached the end of the quest. Why these tents? Why a camp in these mountains at all? Clearly there was nothing beyond except rugged, impassable country.

"Gad, I've hit on it!" muttered Dorrie, purposely refraining from getting in touch with the Pioneer again. "This is the spot. Those girls are here—hidden in one of the tents! I'll bet a penny to a pound that this is where they're being held prisoners!"

Sweeping down lower, he suddenly opened up his motor, and it roared powerfully. The Gothlanders ran in fear. Dorrie, watching closely, half expected to see the girls appear from one of the tents. But they did not do so. Bound hand and foot, probably—helpless. Dorrie now wondered if it would be possible for him to effect a landing.

COMING NEXT WEDNESDAY



He swept round skilfully, and once again crossed over the shallow, grassy basin. He made swift calculations. Yes, it might be done—and safely, too. At all events, he was certain that he would be able to land. As for getting off again—well, that would have to be left to chance. Dorrie was a reckless fellow, anyway, and he was always ready to take a risk.

Suddenly making up his mind, he flew to the very end of the mountain pass, turned, and with his engine throttled right down, he dived.

By this time the Gothlanders had come into the open again, staring fearfully. Now they ran helter-skelter as this monster of the sky swept down upon them.

The 'plane roared downwards, her landing-wheels touched; she ran on, and the landing

was as perfect as any Dorrie had made. He brought his machine to a standstill almost exactly in the centre of the grassy basin.

Leaving the engine ticking over, Dorrie opened the door of his cabin-cockpit and leapt out. At the same second he reached round for his automatic pistol and got it comfortably into his hand.

"Now then, you blighters!" he yelled. "We'll soon find out what's what!"

He made a dash for the nearest tent. The Gothlander soldiers, far down the pass, watched him in amazement. They had not yet recovered from the shock of seeing this

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fearsome thing which had dropped down from the skies. The Northestrians were more or less used to the marvels which the people from "Beyond the Great Ice" had brought with them, but the Gothlanders were still deadly afraid of them.

From tent to tent Dorrie rushed, and his disappointment was overwhelming when he discovered that the girls were not there. He had drawn blank. Perhaps this camp, after all, was in no way connected with—

"By the Lord Harry!" roared Dorrie, with a sudden quickening of his pulse.

He had just emerged from the last of the tents, and he made a dive for the grass. He picked something up and held it in his hand. It was nothing much—merely a girl's side-comb, ornamented with some paste brilliants.

But, as a clue, the comb was of inestimable value. For it proved that Irene & Co. had been here, even if they were not here now. No doubt one of the girls had caught her head in the tent-flap as she had emerged, and the comb had become dislodged without its owner knowing.

Having found this one clue, Dorrie found another almost immediately. The grass was sparse just in front of the tent, and he spotted some footprints—small, dainty footprints—and one, at least, was ribbed, proving that the wearer had been using tennis shoes.

"By gad," shouted Dorrie, "we're getting warm!"

"What doest thou here, stranger?" demanded a harsh, yet tremulous voice.

For the first time Dorrie saw that five or six men had approached him. The Gothlander soldiers, gaining courage now that they saw they only had to deal with one enemy, were practically upon him. Dorrie returned their gaze boldly.

"Dogs," he shouted, "where are the girl prisoners?"

"Thou hast a courage, stranger, to come hither in thy strange carriage of the air," replied one of the Gothlanders, who was evidently an officer. "Quick, men! Surround him! We take him prisoner!"

"Ay, and we shall be richly rewarded!" said one of the soldiers greedily.

They advanced with a rush, and Dorrie gritted his teeth. He was in no mood for a scrap, but if these fellows wanted one he was ready.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times his automatic pistol spoke, and the soldiers held back, momentarily startled. Dorrie could have killed them all had he wished, but that savoured of murder. These men had no weapons similar to his own, and in that respect they were defenceless. So Dorrie fired above their heads. At the same moment he leapt forward, and his left crashed into the jaw of the nearest man. Like a flash he twirled round, hooking his foot round the ankle of another soldier. The man went flying. Dorrie's right, now gripping the revolver by the barrel, swung up. The butt of the weapon thudded into another soldier's face, and down he went.

"Sorry I can't stay to finish the scrap, but I'm in a deuce of a hurry!" sang out Dorrie. "I might see you later. So-long for the present!"

Dodging round two other men who were rushing at him, he ran like a hare down the pass. With one leap he reached the cockpit, and as the men thundered after him he opened up the engine with a roar. The very noise was enough. The men checked, halted, and backed away. Dorrie laughed.

A moment later the 'plane was taxiing over the grass to the farthest end of the basin. The soldiers, nonplussed, stood watching—expecting, no doubt, that some sort of mysterious death would menace them.

They weren't far wrong, either. For Dorrie, as soon as he reached the end of the

pass, taxied his machine round, and then opened up the engine to its fullest extent. There was a terrific roar, echoed enormously by the rocks on either hand. The 'plane gathered speed, and went careering straight at the Gothlander soldiers. They scattered madly.

Lord Dorrimore, in spite of his coolness, really had his heart in his mouth. This might mean sudden death for him. It was touch and go whether he got the 'plane up in time.

The wheels left the ground, and at the same instant Dorrie forced her straight upwards. She rose obediently, soaring magnificently.

With only a bare inch to spare, she cleared the rocks at the farther end of the pass. Still rising steeply, she scraped past the mountain-side, one wing tip nearly meeting with disaster.

By skilful piloting, by brilliant judgment, Dorrie got his machine up, and after another moment he knew that he was safe.

He soared away—now grimly determined to bring his lone search to a successful conclusion.

CHAPTER 12.

Dorrie Does It!

"LISTEN!" said Irene Manners tensely. "Oh, don't—don't!" panted Mary. "What's the good of listening? I'm not a coward, but the sounds of those awful beasts——"

"No, no—it's not that!" interrupted Irene. "I thought I heard something else!"

The four girls were fairly calm; but they found it impossible to get over their terror. The prehistoric-like monsters were still roaming about outside the fortress.

The girls strained their ears, but all they could hear was the thudding of the creatures outside—the deep, noisy breathing, the occasional croaking cries.

"What was it you thought you heard, Renie?" asked Doris curiously.

"Oh, I suppose I must be going dotty," said Irene, passing a weary hand over her brow; "but I could have sworn I heard the distant hum of an aeroplane engine."

"What!" cried the others.

"It must have been fancy," said Irene. "Don't get excited."

"But—but there's Dorrie!" said Mary, her eyes gleaming. "You know jolly well that Dorrie has got a 'plane—and before we left Ixwell he was talking about having it fixed up so that he could fly——"

"Listen!" shouted Ena abruptly. "Oh, do be quiet, girls! I believe Renie's right! I could swear I heard——"

She broke off, holding her breath. And this time the other girls were infected by the same thrill. There was certainly an unusual sound throbbing in the atmosphere. It was far distant, yet it seemed to be growing nearer. The purring hum of an aeroplane engine!

"It is—it is!" cried Mary, almost hysterically. "It's a 'plane!"

"Then it must be Dorrie!" said Ena, who was more calm than any of the others. "It can't be anybody else! Oh, what shall we do? We daren't go out!"

"Can't we signal, somehow?" asked Mary, her eyes wild. "Oh, crumbs! These windows are six or eight feet thick, aren't they? We can't even get a hand out!"

"But there are some poles here," said Ena briskly. "That's it, you girls! And look! Here's a piece of light cloth. We can tie it on to the end of one of the poles!"

Even as she spoke she was suiting action to words. Grabbing one of the poles, she tied the length of cloth on to the end, and then waved it frantically through one of the slit-like windows.

LORD DORRIMORE, flying out of that basin in the hills, was filled with only one purpose.

He knew that the four girl prisoners had been in that camp quite recently. They had been taken somewhere else. Where? Not back to the lowlands of Gothland, clearly, or he would have seen them with that cavalcade of soldiers earlier. This meant that they must be somewhere farther into the hills.

As he flew onwards, he searched with almost painful intensity. It was not an easy task, for he now found himself flying over an extraordinarily deep valley—the floor of which seemed to be choked with a denser kind of vegetation than was usual in Gothland.

And now Dorrie had difficulties with his 'plane.

She was bumping badly. Once she seemed to drop sheer for two or three hundred feet, and then she side-slipped. The air pockets here were considerable.

Lord Dorrimore knew the reason. He could feel the difference in the temperature. This valley, no doubt, was filled with boiling geysers, and the sudden changes of temperature, due to the hills, was playing havoc with the air.

His one idea was to get out of this valley. He was convinced that there could be no hope here, for it seemed to him that the valley was completely cut off from the rest of the countryside.

Yet, just as he was preparing to turn, he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head again, staring.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" he ejaculated blankly.

For his 'plane had just flown clear of a patch of forest land, and he had caught sight of a squat, small building right in the centre of a mile-long clearing.

A building—here. And, what was more, a kind of fortress.

Dorrie opened up the throttle hard and flew on. But if he had been astonished before, he was now bewildered and amazed.

For he could see a number of gigantic monsters, shuffling and edging round that squat building. Not ordinary animals, these—but creatures of a maddened imagination.

"Well, this country has given me one or two shocks, but this beats the band!" muttered Dorrie, staring unbelievably. "Either I'm dreaming, or I'm looking at a mastodon! Yes, by gad, and a brontosaurus—and a dinosaur! Oh, well! I'm a hard-boiled egg, and I can stand anything!"

He quickly recovered. He was suspicious. The proximity of this valley, and the squat fortress, were significant. He dropped lower, throttling down now.

It was at this point, as he was approaching the fortress, that he saw something else—something that made his heart give a jump. Signals were being made from the narrow, slit-like windows which, until now, Dorrie had not even seen. He could see the fluttering of a light-coloured cloth at the end of a pole.

"The girls!" he muttered triumphantly.

There wasn't a doubt of it. In all Northcristia and Gothland there wasn't a spot more likely to contain the girls than this. For this fortress was, in all truth, a grim prison. A prison surrounded by monstrous creatures, making any attempt at escape impossible.

Dorrie flew well over the fortress, and he could see that the monsters had taken to flight, obviously frightened by the roar of the 'plane. They were thundering across the valley in a stampeding horde.

Dorrie decided to give them something to be really frightened about. Flying well to the side—for he had no wish to jeopardise his taking-off ground—he dropped a bomb. He had started on this flight well prepared.

Boom!

The bomb was only a small one, but it exploded with a deafening, shattering roar. The monsters were crazy with terror. Their stampede became a rout. Within a couple of minutes, there was not a monster in sight; all had fled into the forests.

And Lord Dorrimore, swinging his 'plane round, throttled down the engine and dived.

"IT'S Dorrie! Oh, it's Dorrie!" sobbed Irene. "Can't some of you girls cheer?"

She tried to cheer herself, but her voice was only a croak. Somehow, they managed to roll that heavy door aside, and, dishevelled and wild-looking, they ran out. They were well aware of the fact that the monsters had decamped.

"Look! He's landed!" cried Mary. "Come on, girls!"

"Hurrah!"

As they ran up, Dorrie leapt to the ground, and they fairly hurled themselves at him.

"Hi, steady!" he gasped. "Have a heart, girls!"

"Oh, thank Heaven you've come, Dorrie!" panted Irene. "We're saved—we're saved!"

"Of course you're saved," said his lordship calmly. "What on earth put the idea into your head that you wouldn't be saved?"

"But—but those awful monsters——"

"Forget 'em!" said Dorrie with a wave of his hand. "Great Scott! You don't suppose that we'd let old Cedric grab you, and that we shouldn't make any attempt to rescue you? When Lee and I start a thing, we finish it! Hop in!"

Dorrie, who quickly saw that the girls were nearly hysterical with fear and relief—nearly crying with joy—decided that a matter-of-fact manner would be best. So he treated the whole affair as though it were a mere trifle. Yet he knew well enough that these girls had been through a terrifying experience.

Even now they were not quite out of the wood, however.

For as they climbed into the cabin, almost falling over one another's heels, Dorrie saw one of the huge brontosaurus emerging from the forest-land, half a mile away. Dorrie kept his eye on that brute. It was quite capable of making a sudden, blind charge.

"All in?" asked Dorrie cheerily. "Good enough! Hold tight! We're taking off straight away!"

That his half-formed fear was justified was obvious enough only a minute later. For the brontosaurus suddenly charged forward. On he came, thundering madly across the turf. Infuriated by the invasion of this monster from the air, the enormous creature was bent upon destruction.

Dorrie opened the throttle, the engine roared, and the 'plane shot across the grass-land, rising quickly. It was an amazing scene—but there was none to see.

The brontosaurus, still charging blindly, was missed by a mere foot or so, the 'plane rising in the nick of time and soaring over the brute's enormous body.

But that was the last of the peril. The 'plane, with the rescued girls aboard, rose higher and higher, and so the quest was successfully ended.

Less than an hour later the rescued girls were aboard the Pioneer, and the rejoicings were general.

Once again Cedric the Cruel had been frustrated in his evil designs, and all the honours were with the submarine's party—with a few very special honours for Dorrie!

THE END.

(Next week Nelson Lee carries the fight into the enemy's own camp when he himself enters Dunstan Castle, the stronghold of Cedric the Cruel. The very audacity of the scheme makes it deserve success—but for all Lee's cleverness, he finds himself confronted by many perils. Look out for this corking yarn, chums entitled "Lee the Lionheart!" Have you told your pals about the double-length St. Frank's yarns which are now appearing in the Old Paper?)



BETWEEN OURSELVES

Edwy Searles Brooks, popular author
of the St. Frank's stories, chats with
readers of the "Nelson Lee."

THIS week, and in future, I shall start this page by printing the names of all readers whose letters have been received during the week: Francis H. Burrow* (Tooting), Ralph Leadbeater (Clapham), "Critic" (Bury, Lancs.), B. Sheppard (Highbridge, Somerset), Ernest S. Holman* (Leyton, E.10), M. Kersey (Blaydon-on-Tyne), Alec Walker (Balham, S.W.12), Sam Polevoy (Bethnal Green, E.2).

The St. Frank's yarns, Alec Walker, may be "really for boys of fifteen," as you say, but I think I can truthfully say that thousands of others readers of your own age, and many other thousands of double your age, find an interest in them as well as the youngsters.

I can save a little space here by replying to two readers in one paragraph. Lionel Corcoran is still the captain of the Fourth, M. Kersey and Ernest S. Holman. If there has been any misunderstanding about Corcoran's position, it is because he is the Junior leader of the East House, and Buster Boots is the Junior leader of the Modern House. Thus, if I am dealing with Modern House chaps, I refer to them in the yarns as "Buster Boots & Co." But "Corky" is the official Fourth skipper. Owing to his being the owner of the Blue Crusaders Football Club, he has occasionally been forced to absent himself from school for short periods, and during these periods Boots has taken on the rôle of skipper. But I don't think there's any likelihood of Corcoran being absent again, and in all future yarns he will be definitely the one and only captain of the Fourth.

Talking about the Blue Crusaders, reminds me that Tich Harborough, the schoolboy winger, is no longer at St. Frank's. At one time he shared Study H in the Ancient House with Vivian Travers and Sir James Potts. But his duties for the Football Club made it difficult for him to remain a St. Frank's scholar, and his father has now provided him with a private tutor. He's still with the Blues, of course, and

if ever these famous footballers appear in the yarns, Tich will certainly be with them.

All questions regarding the St. Frank's League, B. Sheppard, should be addressed to the Chief Officer, and not to me. His address is the same as mine: Caro of The NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

The creator of Nelson Lee and Nipper, Sam Polevoy, was a gentleman named Mr. Maxwell Scott, and the first story I ever wrote about these famous characters was called "Twenty Fathoms Deep" and it appeared in No. 16 (Old Series) of this paper, on September 25th, 1915. All the St. Frank's characters, with the exception of the above two, are of my own creation. The titles you want are these: No. 113 (Old Series), "The Abduction of Lady Marjorie"; No. 114 (Old Series), "The Boy From California"; No. 115 (Old Series), "Eileen Dare's Triumph"; No. 116 (Old Series), "Fullwood's Victory."

Don't forget that I'd like to have your photographs. They need not be expensive studio portraits. Clear-cut snapshots of the portrait kind—mostly face—will do fine. I am thinking of the Readers' Portrait Gallery, which will probably be revived shortly, and I want to get a good stock of photographs in hand to choose from. When I say "choose" I don't mean that any particular readers will be specially favoured; but simply that the photos selected will be those which are likely to reproduce best.

Edwy Searles Brooks

(Edwy Searles Brooks will be pleased to hear from "N.L." readers. Send him a letter now. Here is his address: c/o NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.)

Concluding Chapters of "The VALLEY OF HOT SPRINGS!" by Ladbroke Black.

A RACE WITH DEATH!



Dashing to Disaster!

ERIC and his three companions were about to dash into the tunnel, when Professor Denning uttered a cry of astonishment.

"The river's vanished!" he exclaimed. "That's going to help us. If only we can keep ahead of the lava, which is bound to follow, we may do it."

Without another word he plunged into the tunnel. Throughout that nightmare journey in the darkness, Eric had the uncomfortable feeling that at any moment the solid walls of rock might dissolve about them, and leave them imprisoned

in a trap with no hope of escape. It was with a sigh of relief that he saw the faint glow which showed the exit. Within a few minutes they were out on that bare plateau.

There was no green stretch now. The Arctic cold had come into its own. And where once had been the stream, there was only a smooth rocky causeway, glazed with ice.

Behind them they could hear the thunder of the eruption. Vast clouds of smoke and flame turned all the surrounding heights into fantastic, shimmering pinnacles of reflected colours. And every step they took the cold became more intense.

"Got an idea, Mr. Eric!" Danny panted. "The bed of this here stream is covered with ice. I've picked up a couple of shields that them guys must have dropped when they were working for you here. With the two we've got, they'll do for toboggans."

"Tell the professor," Eric panted. "It seems a sound scheme."

The professor, after some moments of hesitation, agreed to try the experiment.

"You go first, Mr. Eric, along with that guy!"

Danny had placed the shield with its innermost side upwards on the smooth icy bed of the vanished stream, and leaning over the edge, was holding it in position. Eric stepped gingerly down from the bank, seated himself with his legs stretched out in front of him, and Jackson still held clutched in his arms.

"Let her go, Danny!" he shouted.

Danny released his hold. The shield began to move slowly at first down the gentle icy slope, and then gathered speed. Presently, bumping from side to side,

Eric realised that he must be travelling at nearly fifteen miles an hour.

Then suddenly he remembered the cataract. Unless he could stop himself he would sweep over the edge and be dashed to pieces below.

The boy looked ahead of him through the twilight. It seemed to him that he could distinguish the two rocks through which the stream had cut its way before its great leap into the valley below. He put out one hand and tried to stay himself by clutching at the bank, but the only effect of that action was to make the shield spin round.

He dug both his heels into the ice, but that had no result. Then, in despair, he disentangled the spear he had brought with him, and carefully watching the bank, jabbed the point into a boulder which rose above the general level of the river bed.

Once more the shield slithered sideways, but by exerting all his strength, Eric was able to bring his toboggan to a standstill. It was not merely the cold which made the youngster shiver as he glanced round. There, not ten yards away, was the edge of the waterfall. In another second he must have crashed to his death.

Gingerly Eric stepped off the shield and managed to reach the bank. Having first placed Jackson on the ground, he leaned over ready to catch his companions as they arrived. To his great satisfaction he discovered that the spear exactly spanned the chasm formed by the water. By driving the point into the opposite bank and jamming the blunt end against the boulder which he himself had used as a brake, he found he had engineered a very satisfactory form of buffer.

He had hardly done this when out of the dim light there shot the fur-clad figure of the Daughter of the Sun. As the end of her shield collided with the spear, he caught her in his arms and lifted her bodily on to the bank. The professor and Danny followed immediately.

"Thanks, Mr. Eric!" Danny exclaimed gratefully. "I'd got pretty cold feet from thinking of that nasty drop, and wondering how I was going to stop."

"Now we must make our descent," the professor broke in. "Thank goodness we shall have no waterfall to contend with. Let's hope we're keeping well ahead of the lava stream."

But their immediate departure was delayed. As Eric stooped to pick up Jackson he saw that the man's little eyes were wide open.

"Got me away, have you? What did you do it for? What's the game?"

The voice was hardly louder than a whisper.

"My uncle refused to leave you," explained Eric. "Though it meant risking his own life, he got you out of the Temple and we've carried you between us as far as this. We're going to make a descent of the waterfall now."

A curious smile appeared on the man's lips.

"You and your push have got me beat. You savvied, didn't you, that I meant to kill the lot of you, so that I'd get home with the stuff alone?"

"Yes, of course we did."

"And yet you bothered to bring me with you?" His voice trailed off into a gasp. "I don't understand. It seems funny to me. All the same, you can leave me now. I'm finished." His white face twitched. "The treasure house of the world!" he whispered. "And I've missed it at the finish."

Suddenly he lay very still. Eric, feeling rather queer, presently rose to his feet.

"He's gone!" he exclaimed in a low voice.

Without a word the professor turned and began to lead the way down the giant frozen waterfall.

Thus died Jackson, whose real name, unknown to Eric and his companions, was "Boss" Maunsell, murderer of Professor Denning's friend, John Peters. The man who had dared all, stooped to every crime to get the wealth of the Valley of Hot Springs for himself, lay under the Arctic skies, while far away above him the volcano scattered the wealth for which he had sold his honour and his soul.

Danny Turns Up Trumps!

THE ascent to the Valley of Hot Springs had taken them more than two days. Their return, thanks to Danny's suggestion of using their shields as toboggans, occupied hardly more than the same number of hours. There on the strand was the kayak which they had left nearly a month ago.

"You must be quick, Danny!" the professor exclaimed impatiently. "We have no time to lose. The lava stream is almost on us."

A warm wind had suddenly sprung up. The air was filled with a hissing sound. Looking over his shoulder as he helped Danny to launch the kayak, Eric saw a great moving, steaming mass, which seemed to fill the narrow valley, pouring swiftly down upon them.

"We'll just have this for a bit of ballast, Mr. Eric," Danny remarked coolly,

as he placed a sack containing a number of heavy metal blocks into the boat. "It'll steady her. Now then, Miss Sun, give us your hand."

They were all aboard. They had pushed off. Eric and Danny were plying their paddles, while the professor raised the sail. There was a roar behind them, a sound like a mass of white molten metal being plunged into cold water, and the surface of the fiord was violently agitated, so that the kayak rocked from side to side.

"Just in time!" the professor exclaimed, and looking round Eric saw the stream of lava had already poured over the strand upon which they had been standing only a moment ago, and was now being vomited into the waters of the fiord.

At that moment the breeze caught the sail, and helped by the paddles, the kayak began to move swiftly southwards. But their escape from those haunted waters was not an easy one. Deprived of the warm stream that had flowed from the valley, ice had begun to form over the surface.

It was a long and dangerous journey. Two days elapsed before they reached Holstenberg, utterly exhausted, and with the small supply of food they had brought with them entirely gone. There,

lying in the bay over which the Arctic ice had not yet closed, was a ship.

"That ain't the Ice King, Mr. Eric!" Danny exclaimed.

The first person to greet them on landing was Sagdloq, a very astonished and rather frightened Sagdloq, to whom the professor delivered a long and eloquent lecture on cowardice, and the evil influences of superstition. That done, he inquired of him what had become of the Ice King.

"Crew all bad men, O Tuluwit. They make trouble, and the captain refused to stay. He want to get to where there is a warship."

"And not a bad judge, either," Danny commented when this had been translated to him. "Those were all Jackson's boys, and I'd as soon put to sea with a lot of hyenas."

The ship in the bay was just about to leave for England, and the professor, after an interview with the captain, secured berths for the whole of his party. Eric watched the face of the Daughter of the Sun as she stepped on deck. There was terror in her eyes, and she glanced with horror at the smoke that was rising from the funnels.

"O, Tuluwit, is this another Temple of Tormansuk?" she whispered.

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It was some time before Eric could reassure her, but by the end of the voyage, when they once more steamed into Dundee, she had become quite used to the ship. Her terror revived, however, when they took their places in the train. Eric, remembering how she had stood by his side and with spear and shield had tried to defend him against the infuriated guards of the valley, could hardly believe that this wild-eyed, white-faced girl was the same person.

The following evening the whole party were collected once more in the professor's cottage at Chalcombe. Except for the presence of the beautiful golden-haired girl who sat dazedly in a chair by the fireside, the whole adventure of the Valley of Hot Springs, Eric felt, might have been a dream. Danny, who had returned to his duties in the kitchen, was handing round coffee in his best and most dignified manner. Suddenly the professor, who had been leaning back in his chair fingering his beard, spoke in a very mild voice.

"Danny, I hope to give you a month's salary in lieu of notice to-morrow. Eric, you must go to the Colonial Office the first thing and see about that appointment of yours in the Imperial Police. The fact is, I sank every penny I had in this expedition, and owing to accidents I never foresaw, I have been unable to bring back anything which would repay me for the expenses."

He rose to his feet.

"I find, after a very unpleasant interview with my bankers this afternoon, that I have precisely one thousand and fifty-one pounds, two and ninepence left, and that after mortgaging my remuneration as professor of Anglo-Saxon for some years. That money, except for a hundred pounds, I propose to settle upon this young lady. It will provide for her education and expenses for, let us say, three years."

Danny had halted in the middle of the room with the tray so much on one side that all the coffee was leaking over into the saucers.

"Wotcher talking about, guv'nor? I ain't going to leave you."

"Don't be an idiot, Danny!" the professor roared, blinking rather hard. "I shall have the greatest difficulty in supporting myself, let alone supporting you."

Danny placed the tray on the table. Turning, he left the room.

"I'm sorry about Danny, you know, Eric," remarked the professor. "He's been a good and faithful servant, and I

shall miss him. Of course, when I've written the history of the valley, I may receive some adequate remuneration which will help me a little. In which case I shall certainly try and do something for him."

He sighed. At that moment the door opened again, and Danny staggered in with a huge box, which he carried with difficulty.

"Here you are, guv'nor! That's the ballast I had for that there kayak."

With a screwdriver and a hammer he prised off the lid. Inside were the identical blocks that Eric remembered Danny placing in the kayak when they were fleeing from the stream of lava.

"When we got to the bottom of that there staircase waterway, guv'nor, I seed all the stuff Mr. Eric had chucked there—gold and platinum. 'Some of it may come in handy,' I says to myself, so I puts a few blocks of it in a sack I was carrying, and off we goes. Just have a look at it, guv'nor."

Again he left the room, while a very astonished Professor Denning fingered and examined the blocks of ore that the box contained.

"There's a fortune here!" he stammered. "All the money we need. Divided up among us, we shall have sufficient for the rest of our lives."

"And these here are worth something, guv'nor."

Danny had come once more into the room, carrying in his arms three shirts of golden mail, part of the regalia of the Angekok, and one of the shields.

"I know a pop-shop down in Shore-ditch, guv'nor, wot'd lend you two thousand quid on that lot."

"Don't be an infernal little idiot, Danny!" the professor roared. "Two thousand, indeed—more like twenty thousand. Why, that headdress alone, partly made of platinum, is immensely valuable."

A broad grin spread itself on Danny's face.

"Well, as we ain't going to be sold up, guv'nor, and as I ain't going to get the sack, and as Miss Sun there ain't going to be turned loose in a girl's school—what about this coffee? It'll be getting a bit cold."

He gave the lapels of his black coat a pull, assumed a dignified expression, picked up the tray, and with the air of a perfect butler approached the professor.

"Coffee, sir?" he exclaimed.

"Put that tray down, you old fool!" the professor roared.

Danny obeyed.

"Now, listen to me, you old scoundrel. I don't know what to say to you. You are perhaps the worst manservant that anybody ever had. Look at all that coffee you've spilt in the saucers! But—the truth is, I don't know what to say to you, Danny. You—you've saved us all."

Leaning forward, the professor seized Danny's hand and shook it warmly. For some moments he opened and closed his mouth, as if wishing to say something more and failing to find the words.

"I couldn't discover Number Five note-book this morning, guv'nor. All the others are on your desk in your study."

The professor started as if he had been shot. With bristling beard, muttering something about Danny's criminal carelessness, he rushed from the room. As soon as he disappeared Danny performed a little dance.

"That was a fair knock-out for the guv'nor, wasn't it? But look here, I've got to do something to celebrate this. I'm going to kiss Miss Sun, for a start."

The next moment he had stooped over the Daughter of the Sun and kissed her. Then he turned to Eric with a wink.

"Tell me again, Mr. Eric. what she used to call me."

"He-on-whose-face-Tormansuk-has-set his-mark," grinned Eric. "By the looks of your ugly old mug, I should have thought he'd kicked you with his hoof!"

Danny grinned broadly. He always grinned broadly when Eric chaffed him about his lack of facial beauty. The expugilist was proud of his face, with its obvious signs of many a battering taken—and given—in the boxing ring. Before he could make a suitable retort, however, from somewhere upstairs came the professor's booming voice:

"Danny! You infernal scoundrel, that note-book was there all the time!"

Danny winked gravely at both Eric and the girl.

"Sorry, sir," he called back. "Must have been my mistake."

THE END.

(The Night Hawk for thrills! He's coming again next week in a magnificent new serial entitled "The Phantom Foe!" Don't miss the opening instalment—a whirl of excitement from the first line.)

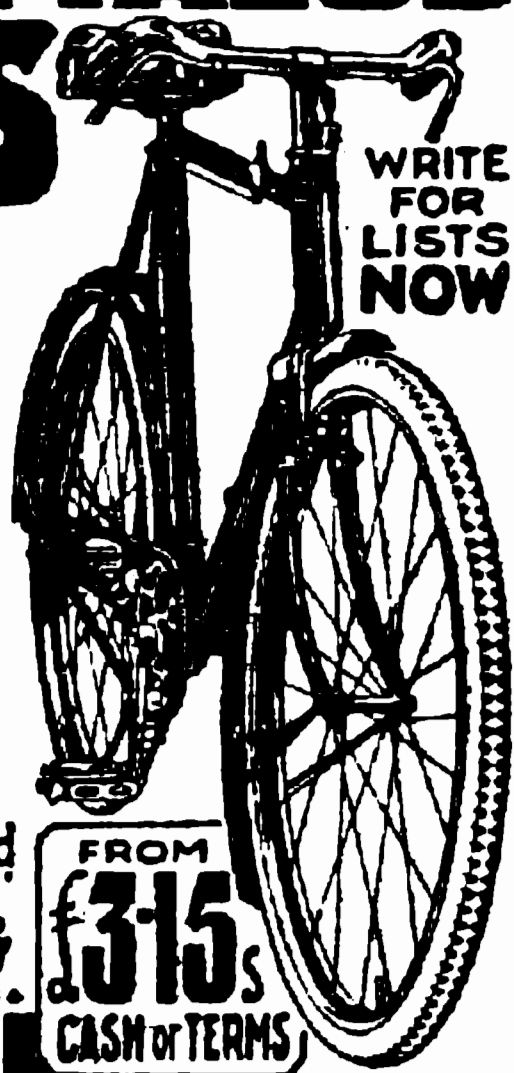
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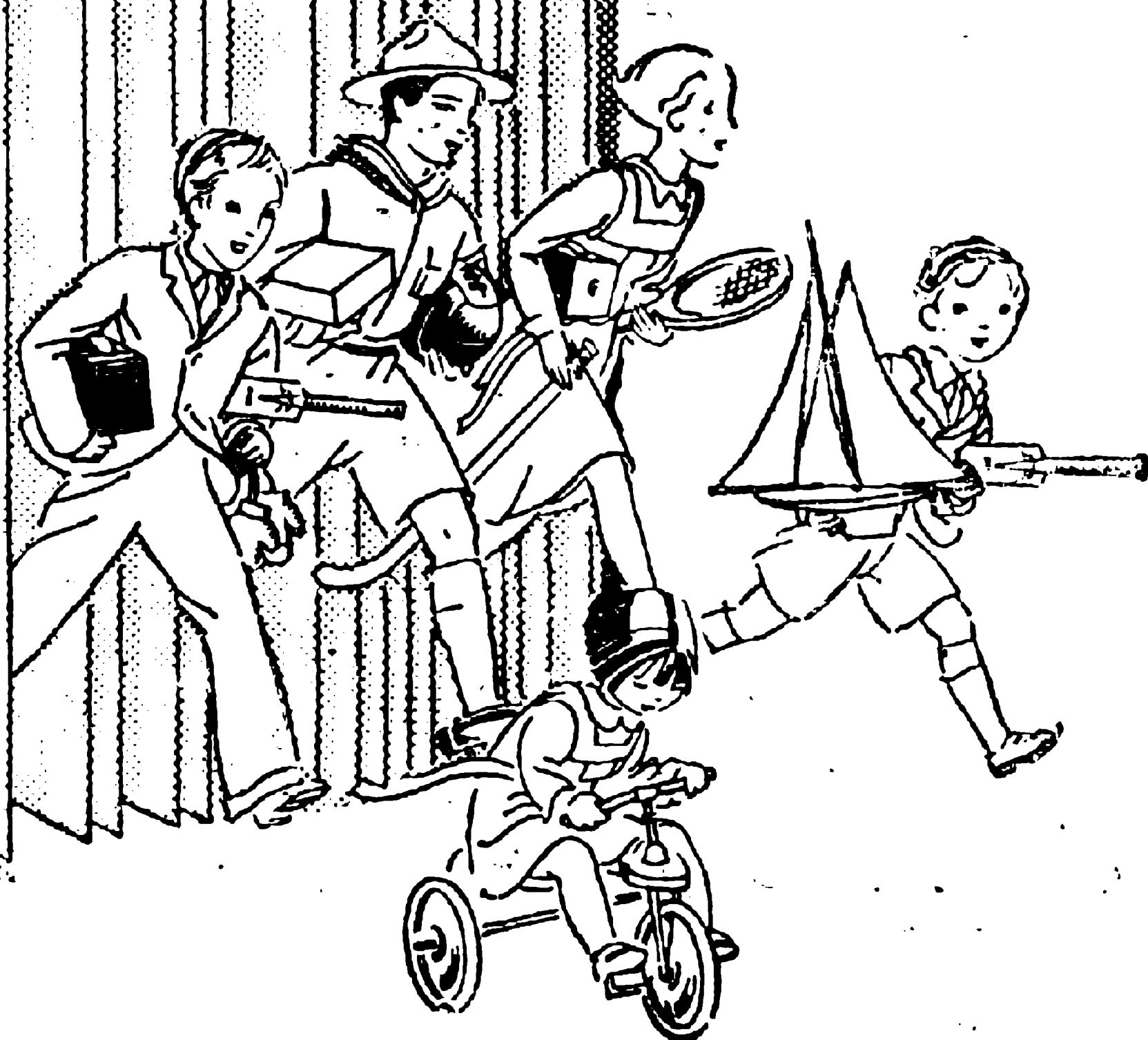
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