

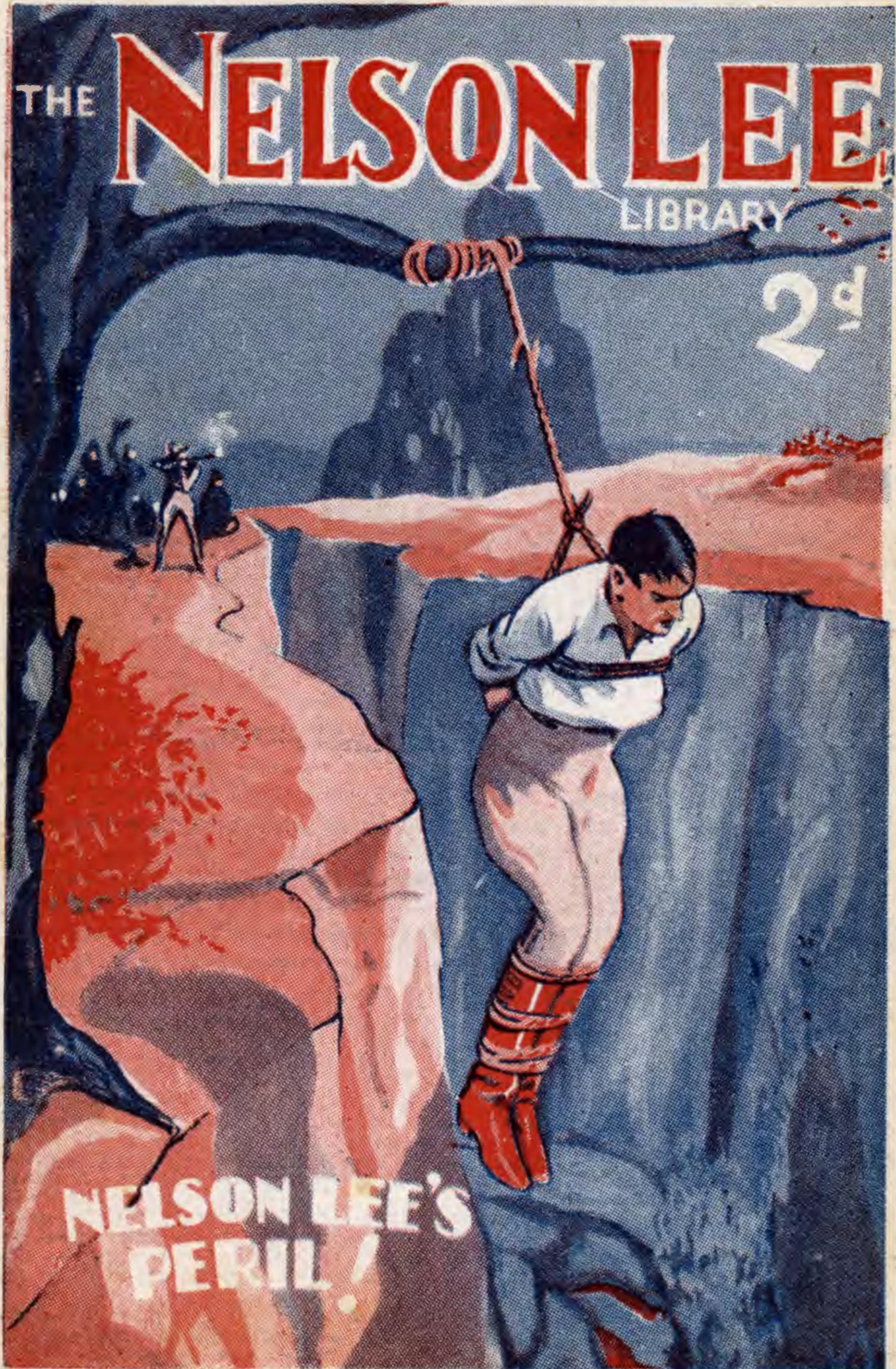
NELSON LEE—DETECTIVE—IN AUSTRALIA

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**NELSON LEE'S
PERIL!**

New Series No. 114.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

March 26th, 1932.

The MISSING



Halfway round the world, a titanic fight for possession of a small statue which contains the secret to a fabulous fortune, has been waged between Nelson Lee and his arch enemy, Professor Rymer. The next phase in this amazing battle of wits is staged in the wild bush country of Australia, where Rymer, matching cunning and villainy against the fearless resourcefulness of Nelson Lee, seeks to win for himself the famous Easington millions.

CHAPTER 1.

The Start of the Race!

ON the east side of Pitt Street, in Sydney, Australia, not far from the famous Circular Quay, stands a handsome block of buildings known as Vickery's Chambers.

The greater part of this building is occupied by an insurance company; but on one of the floors, approached by a private staircase, is a commodious suite of offices, the windows of which are screened by wire blinds, on which, in letters of gold, is the inscription, "Sinclair's Detective Agency."

A few minutes before three o'clock on a spring afternoon, a tall and distinguished-looking Britisher stepped out of a taxi at the

door of Vickery's Chambers and mounted the private staircase leading to Sinclair's Detective Agency.

"Can I see Mr. Sinclair, please?" he asked, addressing the clerk in the outer office.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "What name?"

The new arrival handed him a visiting-card. The clerk gave one glance at it, then he jumped down from his stool and dived through an adjoining doorway. A moment later a stalwart Australian, with a ruddy face and piercing light grey eyes, burst into the outer office with a breezy shout of welcome, grasped the Britisher warmly by the hand, and literally dragged him into the inner office.

The Britisher was none other than Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective. The

—starring Nelson Lee in amazing adventures in Australia!



Australian was Dudley Sinclair, the leading crime investigator in Australia.

"I can't tell you how delighted I am to see you again," said Sinclair as he thrust Nelson Lee into the most comfortable chair. "It must be ten years at least since we last met. When did you arrive?"

"This morning," replied Nelson Lee.

"And you've called to see me this afternoon," said Sinclair. "Now that's what I call real friendly on your part!"

"Don't be too sure of that!" said Nelson Lee with a smile. "It isn't only friendship that has brought me here this afternoon. I want some help from you——"

"Which I shall only be too pleased to render," said Sinclair. "In what way can I assist you?"

"Before I answer your question," said Nelson Lee, "I must first tell you this story. Lord Easington, of Easington Towers, in Cornwall, was thrown from his horse, and died a few hours later. He had always been regarded as a bachelor, and Professor Mark Rymer, of the Westminster University, had always been regarded as his lordship's heir. On his deathbed, however, Lord Easington confessed to Mark Rymer and me that he had contracted a secret marriage in nineteen hundred and seven, and that his wife had borne him a son, who is now, of course, the lawful heir to the title and the estates.

"This confession was made at Penleven Grange, which is nearly twenty miles from Easington Towers. Before his lordship could give me the full particulars of his marriage, or the present address of his son, he died,

but he managed to gasp out the words: 'The proof of my marriage—go to my house—the Silver Dwarf!'

"I afterwards found that the Silver Dwarf was the name of a quaint little silver figure which stood upon the mantelpiece of one of the rooms at Easington Towers. To all appearance it was solid, but in reality it was hollow, and inside it were a number of documents relating to his lordship's marriage and the whereabouts of his son.

"When I tell you that Professor Rymer is an exceedingly clever and thoroughly unscrupulous scoundrel, you will, doubtless, be able to guess what happened next. Lord Easington made me promise to find his son and restore him to his rightful position.

"Before I could do this, of course, it was absolutely necessary that I should obtain possession of the Silver Dwarf and examine the documents inside it. But the Silver Dwarf was twenty miles away, and almost before the breath was out of Lord Easington's body Mark Rymer was on his way to Easington Towers. He had heard Lord Easington's dying words, and he was shrewd enough to see that if he could get to Easington Towers first and destroy the Silver Dwarf before I arrived, it would then be impossible for anybody to prove that Lord Easington had ever married, or to find the missing heir.

"Needless, I lost no time of following him. But when we arrived at Easington Towers we found that the place was in flames, and the Silver Dwarf had been stolen!

"From that day till this, Mark Rymer and I have been engaged in a neck-and-neck race in pursuit of the Silver Dwarf. Finally, we ran it to earth here in Sydney, at the house of a certain Mrs. Robinson, who lives in the suburb of Waverley.

"Mark Rymer was the first to reach Mrs. Robinson's house, and when I arrived he had just secured the Silver Dwarf, had torn up the papers, and was in the act of burning them. Fortunately, I was just in time to save

them from total destruction; but in the confusion Mark Rymer escaped.

"This happened about half-past eleven this morning. Since then I have pieced the papers together again, and have deposited them, together with the Silver Dwarf, at the Sydney branch of the Bank of Australasia.

"According to these papers, Lord Easington was secretly married, under the name of Bruce, in nineteen hundred and seven. On December twentieth, nineteen hundred and eight, his son was born, and was christened Richard Bruce, and nine days later his wife died.

"The nurse who attended her in her last illness was a widow named Seymour, and his lordship states that he gave this woman a thousand pounds to adopt the child as her own. Henceforward, therefore, the child was known by the name of Richard Seymour.

"This brings me to the point where I want your help.

"In one of the papers found in the Silver Dwarf, Lord Easington states that Mrs. Seymour and her adopted son emigrated to New South Wales. He further states that he wrote to you in nineteen hundred and twenty-six, and asked you to ascertain privately and confidentially if Richard Seymour were still alive, and where he was living.

"He gives the substance of your reply, but, unfortunately, the paper is badly burned at that particular place, and all that I can make out is that in nineteen hundred and twenty-six Richard Seymour was employed as a stockman on one of the sheep farms in the interior of New South Wales. What I want you to do for me, therefore, is this; I want you to turn up your books for 1926, and give me the same information as you gave to Lord Easington. Will you do that?"

By way of reply, Dudley Sinclair rose to his feet and began to pace the room with rapid, agitated strides. Presently he came to a halt, and laid his hand on Nelson Lee's shoulder.

"I'm awfully sorry, old man," he said, "but I'm afraid I've been working against you. Not knowingly, of course, but in total ignorance of the true state of affairs."

"What do you mean?" demanded Nelson Lee.

"In the first place," said Sinclair, "it was I who gave Mark Rymer Mrs. Robinson's address. He cabled me from Ceylon, and, not knowing the circumstances, I wired back the information. Rymer himself has been here to-day—obviously having come straight from Mrs. Robinson's after leaving you. And he is now on his way to find Seymour!"

Nelson Lee jumped to his feet.

"You have given Rymer Richard Seymour's address?" he asked sharply.

"No," replied Sinclair, shaking his head. "There was no need for me to do that. He knew it already."

"How?"

"He must have read the papers before he tore them up, I suppose."

"Impossible! He hadn't time."

"Well, he must have glanced at them, at any rate," went on Sinclair. "Anyway, he asked me to verify that Seymour was employed at Andrew Macpherson's station on the Garoo Downs, in the interior of New South Wales. I did so, and then he said that he wished to get there as quickly as possible.

"The Garoo Downs are some sixty miles south of Nyngan, which is about three hundred and seventy miles from here. I suddenly remembered that a fellow named Harrison-Smith, an engineer in Sydney, was going to Nyngan by aeroplane in connection with the laying of some cables over the Downs. I suggested that he might be willing to take Rymer with him as far as Nyngan, and the professor jumped at the opportunity. I've heard nothing since, and I take it that Rymer was successful and is now flying to Nyngan. Wait a minute, and I'll find out definitely."

He darted from the room, and sprang to the telephone in the outer-office. A moment or two later he returned.

"Yes," he said, "the 'plane left for Nyngan at two o'clock, and is expected to do the flight in four and half hours. There were only two passengers aboard—Harrison-Smith and Professor Mary Rymer."

"Then there isn't a moment to be lost!" cried Nelson Lee, pulling out his cheque-book. "I have prevented Mark Rymer from destroying the proofs of Lord Easington's marriage; but unless I can prevent him destroying Lord Easington's son my labour will have been in vain."

"What are you going to do?"

"Charter a 'plane and follow him."

"But you can't possibly catch him up. He left at two and is due to arrive at Nyngan about seven to-night. At the earliest, you won't be able to leave Sydney until half-past four—if then. I doubt if any pilot will undertake to fly you there and try to land at such a wild place as Nyngan after dark. Even so, Rymer has the start of you."

"True," said Nelson Lee. "But you have given me to understand that it is impossible to fly over the Garoo Downs because of the lack of landing-grounds, and so on. The Garoo country is very little known. From Nyngan the professor must make his way to the up-country station by horse or motor, or any conveyance that offers itself. In that sixty miles or so of wild bush country I have a sporting chance of overtaking him. At any rate, I am going to try. Give me a cheque in exchange for this."

He wrote a cheque for two thousand pounds, and handed it to Dudley Sinclair, who gave him a cheque for a similar amount in return.

Ten minutes later Nelson Lee was back at the Bank of Australasia, where he opened an account with Dudley Sinclair's cheque, and drew out three hundred pounds in notes and silver.

A quarter of an hour later he was at the aerodrome, where with his name and Dudley Sinclair's recommendation he was able to

secure a 'plane and the services of a pilot. At twenty-past four he shook hands with Dudley Sinclair and took his seat in the aeroplane.

"Good-bye and good luck to you!" said Sinclair.

"And confusion to Mark Rymer!" added Nelson Lee.

Then, with a roar, the 'plane taxied across the 'drome and rose gracefully in the air. The race for the missing heir had begun!

CHAPTER 2.

In the Bush.

BEFORE leaving Sydney the detective had provided himself with a large scale map of the district to the south of Nyngan. He studied this and made himself thoroughly well acquainted with the route to Garoo Downs.

The flight to Nyngan took rather longer than he anticipated owing to head winds, and it was quite dark when they managed to land, fortunately without mishap, in a field on the outskirts of the township. It was then about one a.m.

Nelson Lee's first act was to find where Harrison-Smith's 'plane was parked. He found it eventually in another field behind the railway station, in charge of a young night watchman. Money passed from hand to hand, and the young fellow was quite talkative.

"Yes, sir," he said, in reply to the detective's question. "They got here just after sunset, and they've gone to the Great Western, the only hotel we've got in these parts."

"You know nothing of their arrangements for to-morrow?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Nothing at all, sir. You'd find out more at the hotel. My brother works in the yard there. He's on night work this week. People arrive here from up-country at all hours, you see—either in cars or on horseback, and there's got to be someone there to attend to 'em. You go and ask him—tell him I sent you, sir—and he'll tell you all you want to know."

"Where is the hotel?" asked the detective.

The young fellow directed him, and Nelson Lee made his way thither. He found the ostler yawning in the yard. The detective soon made it clear who he was and what he wanted to know, and money changed hands once more.

"Yes, sir," said the ostler. "Mr. Harrison-Smith and his friend arrived here after sundown. Mr. Harrison-Smith is staying here for several days, but his friend is going south and has ordered a horse to be ready saddled by six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Is there no other means of travelling to Garoo Downs?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Folks in these parts who own private cars have them for use, and as a rule can't spare them very easily," explained the ostler.

"The carrier has got a motor-lorry, but he only goes out once a week, and he won't be leaving here again for another two days. Taking it all round a horse is as quick as a motor, really. You can cut across country, you see, sir."

"Can I have a horse?" asked the detective.

"I shall have to arrange that with the boss, sir. I won't be long, sir."

He hastened away to the office. The detective was well satisfied with the turn of events. Mark Rymer had either been too tired, or had viewed the prospect of a night in the bush with disfavour. In any case, he would not start for Garoo Downs until six o'clock that morning, and it was now getting on for four a.m. In other words, the detective would get at least a start of a hour and a half over his resolute and unscrupulous rival.

But the ostler had to rouse his employer, and Nelson Lee had to prove his identity and satisfy the proprietor as to his bone fides before a horse was forthcoming. Then the detective thought it advisable to snatch a hasty meal, so that it was five o'clock and the sun was rising, when he mounted his horse and rode away.

For the first two hours his route lay along the banks of the Bogan River, where signs of human habitation and human occupation were comparatively frequent. After that, however, he struck out towards the west, and by twelve o'clock he had practically left all traces of civilisation behind him.

His route now lay across a dreary desolate table land, thickly covered with prickly scrub and interspersed with numerous deep ravines. Here and there the monotony of the scene was varied by a tiny coppice of blue gum-trees, but for the most part his eyes encountered nothing save an endless expanse of bush, which stretched away to the horizon on every side like a vast and limitless sea.

Shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon he saw in the distance, five or six miles away, the wooden roofs of the little mining settlement of Bobalong. Between him and the settlement was a straggling plantation of eucalyptus trees, fringing the edge of one of the numerous gullies.

As the detective approached this plantation he was startled to hear a piercing yell, whilst a moment later the silence was rent by a series of ear-splitting screams, mingled with roars of brutal laughter.

Quick as thought the detective put spurs to his horse and galloped in the direction from which the sounds had proceeded. The sight which met his gaze when he reached the heart of the plantation filled him with a terrible fury.

Hanging head downwards from the branch of a tree, immediately over a blazing bonfire, was the writhing form of an Australian native. Seated on the ground in front of him, shaking their sides with laughter, were half a dozen villainous-looking miners, evidently from the neighbouring settlement of

Bobalong. Each man had a rifle slung over his shoulder, and in his belt was either a revolver or a knife, and in some cases both.

Five of the six men were of ordinary stature, but the sixth, who was evidently the ringleader of the party, was a burly, swarthy-complexioned giant, whose jet-black hair and beard had gained for him the nick-name of "Black Pete."

These fiends had taken an afternoon stroll into the bush, and had accidentally encountered the unfortunate native, who, at some previous time, had annoyed them by refusing to steal from other miners and hand the proceeds over to them.

At Black Pete's suggestion they had promptly taken him prisoner, and had then proceeded not only to "amuse" themselves, but also to wreak vengeance, by slinging him up to the nearest tree, head downwards, and lighting a bonfire under his head.

So engrossed were the ruffians in their brutal amusement, that Nelson Lee was in their midst before they realised his approach. Acting on the impulse of the moment, they leaped to their feet with cries of alarm, and took to their heels in panic-stricken flight.

Knowing that it would not be long before they returned, the detective hurriedly sprang from his horse, kicked the blazing brushwood aside, and severed the rope by which the native was bound.

Scarcely had he done so ere a bullet whistled past his ear, and the next instant, before he could mount his horse again—before he could whip out his revolver—three of the miners dashed out of the wood and flung themselves upon him.

Despite the odds against him, the detective defended himself with so much vigour that for fully a minute he more than held his own. At the end of that time, however, the other three miners came trooping back, and with their assistance he was finally overpowered and pinioned hand and foot.

In the meantime, the native had seized the opportunity to make his escape, and though two of the miners were promptly despatched in pursuit, they presently returned with the news that he had easily outdistanced them, and had given them the slip.

"Escaped, has he?" growled Black Pete, with a savage oath. "Then what d'you think we ought to do to this chap for spoiling our afternoon?"

"Shoot him!" said one of his companions.

"String him up!" said another.

"Chuck him into the ravine!" suggested a third.

"I know a better plan than any of those," said Black Pete, with a malignant chuckle.

"He spoilt our sport with the black, so it's only fair he should take the black's place."

"'Ear, 'ear!" cried the assembled miners. "That's the ticket, Pete. Bully for you! Hang him up by his heels!"

Black Pete, with an evil smile, shook his head. He pointed to a tree growing on the very edge of the ravine. One of its lower branches projected over the ravine, and be-

neath it was a sheer drop of a couple of hundred feet, terminating in the rocky bed of a dried-up watercourse.

"We'll sling a rope under his armpits," continued Black Pete, "and we'll hang him to the branch that sticks out over the gully. We'll then have a little shooting competition—two shots apiece—and the man what cuts the rope and drops him into the gully shall have his horse as a prize!"

This diabolical suggestion was received with a yell of applause, and without any further loss of time the ruffians set to work to put it into execution.

The detective's arms were already pinioned to his sides and his legs were lashed together from the ankles to the knees. A rope was passed under his armpits and secured with running nooses just above the shoulders, leaving a single length of the rope dangling. Then, with much difficulty and no little danger, he was hauled into the tree and the length of rope was fastened to the projecting branch.

While this was being done the detective was supported in the arms of two of the miners, but as soon as the rope was knotted he was cautiously lowered, and was finally dangling with two hundred feet of space between the soles of his feet and the rocky channel below.

Two hundred paces were then stepped out along the edge of the ravine, and lots were drawn to decide the order of shooting.

To Black Pete's disgust he drew the lot which entitled him to the last turn of all—a result which was greeted by the rest with an ironical cheer.

"All right, boys, grin away!" he growled. "You think because I'm last on the list that I haven't a chance. But I've seen you fellows shoot before, and I'm not afraid. I don't believe there's a man amongst you what could hit a haystack, let alone a rope, at two hundred paces. However, we shall soon see. Fire away!"

The shooting began.

The first three men missed completely. The fourth man missed with his first shot, and struck the branch of the tree with his second. The fifth man grazed the detective's cheek with one shot, and his boot with the other.

"What did I tell you?" cried Black Pete. "The horse is as good as mine! This is the way to shoot!"

He placed his rifle to his shoulder, took careful aim, and fired.

Mingling with the crack of the rifle came a thunderous roar of applause, for the bullet had frayed the rope, and Nelson Lee was swinging to and fro, like the pendulum of a clock.

"Bullseye number one!" said Black Pete, as he reloaded his rifle. "Now, for number two!"

For the second time Black Pete raised his rifle to his shoulder, but even as he did so a boomerang came whizzing through the air, and struck him a violent blow on the head.

Half dazed by the blow, he staggered back, missed his footing on the edge of the ravine,

and fell headlong into the abyss. The next instant the air was rent by a chorus of discordant yells, and almost before the bewildered miners had realised what was happening, they found themselves confronted by a score or more of bushy-headed natives, led by the man whom Nelson Lee had rescued.

After a random volley of revolver shots, in which nobody was injured, the miners broke and fled. Somewhat to Nelson Lee's surprise, the natives made no attempt to follow them, but hastened to release him from his perilous position, and cut the ropes by which he was bound.

Whilst so engaged, the man whom he had rescued explained in broken English that his name was Dargo, and that he was the headman, or chief, of a neighbouring tribe of aborigines.

Whilst he and a number of his tribesmen had been hunting in the bush, he had strayed away from the rest, and had been captured by the miners, who had a grudge against him. After his escape he had hurried back to his followers and had told them what had happened, and had brought them back to the rescue of the man who had rescued him.

"But why didn't you pursue the scoundrels?" asked Nelson Lee, who knew that the Australian natives were not the sort of men lightly to forego a chance of revenge.

"Plenty much no time," said Dargo, shaking his head. "More bad white men come from Bobalong. Listen!"

The detective strained his ears, and distinctly heard the far-off murmur of excited voices. The five men who had fled had evidently fallen in with another party of miners coming from the settlement at Bobalong. Reinforced by these, they were returning to avenge the death of Black Pete.

"You hear?" said Dargo. "You no want stay meet dem?"

"Jove, no!" said Nelson Lee. "I've had more than enough of their company for the present. But what about you?"

"We plenty much take care of ourselves," said Dargo, with a contemptuous grin. "Where you go?"

"To Garoo Downs," said Nelson Lee.

"Good!" said Dargo. "You jump on horse, ride away, fast. We draw white men away from you, lead dem wrong trail. You no worry 'bout us."

There was no time for hesitation or discussion, for the voices were now unpleasantly close, and were coming nearer every moment. Moreover, the detective had another reason for wishing to lose no further time.

Nelson Lee had set off from Nyngan at five o'clock in the morning. Two hours had been spent in the middle of the day in rest and refreshment for himself and his horse. Another hour had been wasted in his encounter with the miners. Altogether, therefore, he had been in the saddle something like eight hours, and had covered over forty miles, so that Garoo Downs was still about twenty miles away.

Mark Rymer had arranged to leave Nyngan at six o'clock—one hour after Nelson Lee.

In other words, the detective had started out from Nyngan an hour before the professor, but had lost an hour on the way, so that if Mark Rymer had ridden at the same pace as Nelson Lee, and had spent an equal time in resting, he ought by now to have overtaken the detective, and to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of the very plantation in which the detective stood.

In these circumstances, it will be readily understood that Nelson Lee was desperately anxious to resume his journey at the earliest possible moment. He hardly liked the idea of leaving his dusky allies to battle with the miners alone; but on receiving Dargo's assurance that they had no intention whatever of showing fight, but merely intended to lure the miners away on a false scent, he swallowed his scruples, mounted his horse, and cantered away.

The moment he reached the confines of the little wood he stood up in his stirrups and swept the surrounding bush with an eager, circling glance. No sooner had he done so than he saw a solitary horseman some two or three miles ahead. Without drawing rein the detective whipped out his binoculars and raised them to his eyes. Then a thrill of excitement shot through him. His forebodings were justified—the horseman was Mark Rymer.

A moment later the professor happened to glance back. Then he, too, raised glasses to his eyes. Immediately he recognised Nelson Lee, the professor put spurs to his horse, and galloped through the bush as fast as the jaded beast could cover the ground.

The detective lost no time in following suit, but the pace was too hot to last. Both horses had already done a hard day's work, and although they were good for another thirty miles if allowed to take their own time, they were not in a condition, and still less in the humour, to take part in a cross-country race. The consequence was that before many minutes had passed, the horses began to slow down, and the race, which had begun as a gallop, deteriorated into a lope, and ended in an easy-going amble.

"After all, what's the hurry?" muttered Nelson Lee to himself. So long as I can keep the professor in sight until we reach Macpherson's station that's all I need care about."

A similar train of thought was at that moment passing through Mark Rymer's mind. His object was to reach Macpherson's station, and in some way or other to make an end of Lord Easington's son before Nelson Lee arrived. Like the detective, he was shrewd enough to see that this would be impossible if he reached the station on a minute or two before his rival.

After a while he came to the foot of the Nymawarra Mountains, a lofty range of bush-clad hills, some of them over two thousand feet in height, which stretched

across the plain from east to west for a distance of thirty miles. The northern aspect of the range, which was the one that confronted Mark Rymer and Nelson Lee, rose sheer and perpendicular, like the wall of a house. To cross this formidable barrier, and to get to Garoo Downs, which lay on the other side, seemed a physical impossibility.

A reference to the map, however, revealed the fact that at one particular spot, and at one spot only, the range was pierced by a deep and narrow ravine.

Dingo Gulch, which was the name of this ravine, led straight to Garoo Downs. The only other way of reaching the Downs was by riding round by Nymagee, a distance of well-nigh twenty miles. As a matter of course, therefore, both Mark Rymer and Nelson Lee headed for Dingo Gulch.

It was close upon six o'clock when the professor rode into the ravine, which was nowhere more than a quarter of a mile in width, and was bounded on each side by lofty and precipitous cliffs, not even a mountain goat could have climbed.

Except for a narrow bridle path running down the middle, the floor of the ravine, as well as the hills on each side, was thickly coated with the all-pervading scrub. Not a single tree or a single stream was anywhere to be seen—nothing save the interminable carpet of bush which rolled down one side of the ravine, across the bottom, and up the other side, with the bridle path running like a dark brown thread through the midst of it.

For upwards of a mile Mark Rymer rambled along this path, sullen, silent and dejected. Then suddenly the look of despondency vanished from his face, and his deep-sunk eyes began to glitter like live coals. A daring idea had suddenly occurred to him, so daring that it almost took away his breath.

"Great Scott! Why didn't I think of that before!" he muttered under his breath.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Nelson Lee had not yet entered the ravine. Rymer dug his spurs into horse's flanks and forced it into an unwilling gallop. For more than a mile he kept the jaded beast at the stretch. Then once again he rose in his stirrups and glanced behind him. Nelson Lee had just ridden into the ravine.

Chuckling softly to himself, the professor reined in his horse and sprang to the ground. Having collected an armful of dry twigs, he divided them into two heaps, and placed one on each side of the bridle path. Then he struck a match and applied a light to his miniature bonfires.

The result was obvious. No rain had fallen for months, and the scrub was as dry as tinder. A stiffish breeze was blowing up the ravine from the direction of Garoo Downs. In less than a quarter of an hour the bush was blazing merrily, and the bridle path was enclosed between two living walls of flame.

Onwards and sideways the fire spread with incredible rapidity. In five minutes it had

reached the foot of the hills, and was creeping up their precipitous sides. In ten minutes' time a continuous belt of smoke and flame was sweeping up the ravine in the direction of Nelson Lee.

Nothing daunted, the detective put spurs to his horse, and galloped to meet the advancing line of fire, hoping to be able to pierce his way through, but the attempt was foredoomed to failure. As soon as the horse came in sight of the flames it wheeled round with a snort of terror and endeavoured to gallop back.

Whilst the detective was striving to restrain it, a blazing twig borne by the wind, settled on the horse's flank.

With a scream that was almost human the terrified animal suddenly bounded forward. The detective was flung violently to the ground, and the next instant was lying on his back within fifty yards of the advancing flame, whilst the maddened horse, freed from its rider's weight, was galloping up the ravine in a series of frenzied leaps and bounds.

CHAPTER 3.

Captured by Bushrangers!

THE shadows of evening were stealing across the sky when Professor Mark Rymer, tired but triumphant, drew at the foot of the verandah steps of a lonely-looking house on the edge of Garoo Downs. The clatter of his horse's hoofs had already announced his arrival, and a typical middle-aged squatter, with iron-grey hair and ruddy cheeks was standing at the door.

"Good-evening," said the professor, dismounting. "Mr. Andrew Macpherson, I presume?"

"That's me, sir," said the squatter. "And whom have I the honour of addressing?"

"My name is Shaw," said the professor, lying with his accustomed facility. "I am one of Mr. Dudley Sinclair's agents. You know Mr. Sinclair, I believe?"

"The Sydney detective?" asked Macpherson.

"Yes," said the professor. "You may possibly remember that he wrote to you in 1926 with reference to a stockman in your employ—a young fellow named Richard Seymour."

"Yes, I remember," agreed Macpherson. "But you're wrong about him writing. He didn't write; he came up here himself, and he questioned Dick for nearly an hour about his early days, and his mother, and how long he'd been in Australia, and heaps of other things. Poor Dick was flabbergasted! He couldn't make it out at all, and Sinclair wouldn't tell him anything, for he said he was sworn to secrecy, and wasn't at liberty to divulge the name of the person who had sent him, or the object of his inquiries."

"Quite so," said the professor gravely. "That was perfectly true in 1926. Since then, however, the seal of secrecy which was

set on Mr. Sinclair's lips has been removed. That is why I am here."

"Man alive, you don't mean to say you've come all the way from Sydney to see Dick Seymour?" gasped Macpherson.

"Certainly, I have," said the professor. "I haven't come to tell him anything, however. As a matter of fact I know no more than he does. I have merely come, by Mr. Sinclair's orders, to ask you to be so good as to allow Dick Seymour to go back with me to Sydney at once. When he gets to Sydney Mr. Sinclair will tell him—"

"But—but you don't seem to understand!"

"However, it's too late to be wise now. Do you know where Seymour is?"

"In New Zealand, I believe," said Macpherson. "At least, he was there when I last heard from him, but that's a couple of years ago."

The professor choked back a savage oath.

"Can you give me his exact address?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I can't," said Macpherson. "But, look here, upon my word, I don't know what I'm thinking about to let you stand outside all this time! You'll stay with me to-night, of course! My wife is

TELL ALL YOUR PALS ABOUT THESE STAR ATTRACTIONS!

NELSON LEE

the detective
who "always
gets his man."



Professor RYMER

Clever — and
unscrupulous.



said Macpherson, interrupting him. "Dick Seymour isn't here!"

"Not here?" cried the professor, in dismay.

"No. He left my service three years ago!"

If a bombshell had suddenly exploded at Mark Rymer's feet he could hardly have shown more agitation or consternation than he did upon hearing this news. It had never occurred to him that Richard Seymour might have left Macpherson's station. He had taken it for granted that he had only to reach the station and lure Dick Seymour into his clutches before Nelson Lee arrived, and the prize for which he had struggled so long would at last be his. And now he learned that his intended victim had left the station three years before!

"I don't wonder you feel mad!" said Macpherson sympathetically. "I should feel mad if anybody had sent me on a wild-goose chase like this. Mr. Sinclair ought to have written me and found out whether Seymour was still here or not before he sent you on a four-hundred mile journey."

"So he ought!" said the professor testily.



The Silver Dwarf
Just a statue—but the
key to a fortune.

away at present, but, nevertheless, I dare say we can manage to make you comfortable."

The professor hesitated before he replied. He was thinking of Nelson Lee, and what would happen if the detective arrived and found him there.

"Of course you'll stay!" insisted Macpherson. "You've ridden over from Nyngan today, I suppose?"

The professor nodded his head.

"I guessed as much from the look of your horse," said the squatter. "The poor brute is completely done up. He'll carry you no further to-night, that's certain, so you'll have to put up with such accommodation as I can offer you."

"Thanks," said the professor, with a tinge of reckless desperation in his voice. "If you'll have me, I'll be very glad to stay."

Macpherson accordingly called to one of his men and instructed him to take the horse round to the stables. Then he led the professor into the house, and set him down to a plain but substantial supper.

"And now about Dick Seymour," said the professor, when the table had been cleared, and the two men had lit their pipes. "When did he leave you?"

"At the beginning of 1929," replied Macpherson, "I rather fancy he had inherited a bit of money—maybe a hundred pounds—from his mother, and he'd saved about as much himself. He never really settled down to a squatter's life, and on the day that he was twenty-one he came to me and told me that he had decided to give up farming, and was going to try his luck in New Zealand.

"He wrote to me about six months after he left, telling me that he had invested his savings in a small frozen-meat concern in Napier. He wrote again, a few months later, saying that his partner had absconded and had left him with a bankrupt concern on his hands, but he hoped to be able to pull the business round and set it on its legs again. Whether he succeeded or not I cannot say, for from that day to this I have never had another line from him."

"Do you remember the name of his firm?" asked the professor.

"I'm sorry to say I don't," replied Macpherson. "I burnt his letters as soon as I'd read them, and all I remember is that they were written from Napier, in New Zealand, and that the business in which he was employed had something to do with the frozen meat trade."

For more than an hour the professor closely questioned his host, but without obtaining any further information of importance. Then he knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose to his feet.

"I think I shall go to bed, if you've no objection," he said, stifling a yawn. "I've had a pretty hard day to-day, and I shall have another hard day to-morrow."

"Your intend to return to Nyngan to-morrow, I suppose?" said Macpherson, as he ushered him into his bed-room.

"Yes," said the professor. "I shall ride back to Nyngan to-morrow, from thence to Sydney as quickly as I can, and then to New Zealand by the first available boat. Good-night!"

He waited until Macpherson's footsteps died away, then he dragged the bed across the room, planted it against the door, and unfastened the window.

"In case Mr. Nelson Lee arrives in the middle of the night," he murmured to himself.

He examined his revolver, saw that it was loaded in every chamber, laid it on a chair by the side of the bed. Then, without undressing, he flung himself down on the bed, and in ten minutes' time was fast asleep.

It was six o'clock when he awoke. Macpherson had been up for more than an hour, and greeted him with an announcement that made Mark Rymer's blood run cold.

"I've got bad news for you," he said, as he shook the professor's hand. "You can't go back to Nyngan to-day. In fact, I shall be very much surprised if you're able to get through to Nyngan before the end of the week!"

For a moment the professor stared at him in speechless amazement.

"What do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely.

"The bush is on fire," said the squatter. "I've just come back from Dingo Gulch, where the fire appears to have originated. It must have started shortly after you rode through the gulch yesterday evening. Luckily for us, the wind is from the south, so that the fire isn't spreading in this direction, but is creeping along the plain on the north side of the mountains, in the direction of Bobalong. The line of fire already extends for miles and miles across the plain, and, considering the dry state of the bush, it will certainly be three or four days, and may be a week, before it burns itself out."

The professor ground his teeth in impotent exasperation. The biter was bit! He had fired the bush to delay Nelson Lee, and now it appeared that the fire he had kindled was going to keep him a prisoner at Macpherson's station until Nelson Lee arrived. It was just possible, of course, that the detective had perished in the conflagration; but the chance of this was so remote that Mark Rymer dared not count on it.

"Is there no other route by which I can get back to Sydney except via Nyngan?" he asked.

"Yes," said Macpherson. "There's a southern route, by Eauabalong to Condobolin. The carrier's motor-lorry leaves Nymagee at six o'clock this morning and runs to Eauabalong, which is seventy or eighty odd miles from here. From Eauabalong another carrier runs a service, connecting with the former, to Condobolin, and from Condobolin the railway runs to Sydney. Come with me."

He led the professor to the door, and pointed to a crystal stream which threaded its way across the bush-clad downs.

"If you follow that stream for about nine miles," he said, "you will come to a fairly big wood, which is known as Barnby Coppice. The road from Nymagee to Eauabalong runs through the middle of that wood, and is carried across the stream by a wooden trestle bridge. The carrier's lorry, as I have already told you, starts from Nymagee at six o'clock, and is due at that bridge about half-past eight."

"And it is now a quarter-past six," said the professor, pulling out his watch. "Half an hour for breakfast, and an hour and three-quarters to ride to Barnby Coppice—capital! Nothing could be more convenient. But what shall I do with my horse after I have persuaded the carrier to give me a lift in the lorry?"

"I'll buy him if you'll sell," said Macpherson.

"But I shall need him to carry me to Barnby Coppice."

"Of course," said Macpherson. "But as soon as you reach the bridge you can tether the horse to one of the rails, and I'll send one of my stockmen for him later in the day. I'd send one of them with you now, and then he could bring the horse back with him, but

they're all engaged at present, and are waiting for me to join them."

"Then don't let me detain you," said the professor.

The hospitable squatter gave him a substantial meal, and at a quarter to seven, the richer by thirty pounds, the professor mounted his horse and rode away.

It was twenty minutes past eight when he reached the bridge which Macpherson had described. It was situated in the very heart of the wood, and from each end of it the road ran steeply uphill—in one direction towards Nymagee, and in the other direction towards Eauabalong. Both sides of the road were lined by a perfect forest of trees.

Before dismounting, the professor decided to ride to the top of the hill on the north side of the bridge in order to see if there was any sign of the carrier's motor. Before his horse had taken a dozen strides, however, a couple of villainous-looking cut-throats, armed with rifles and revolvers,

sprang out of the wood and called upon him to halt.

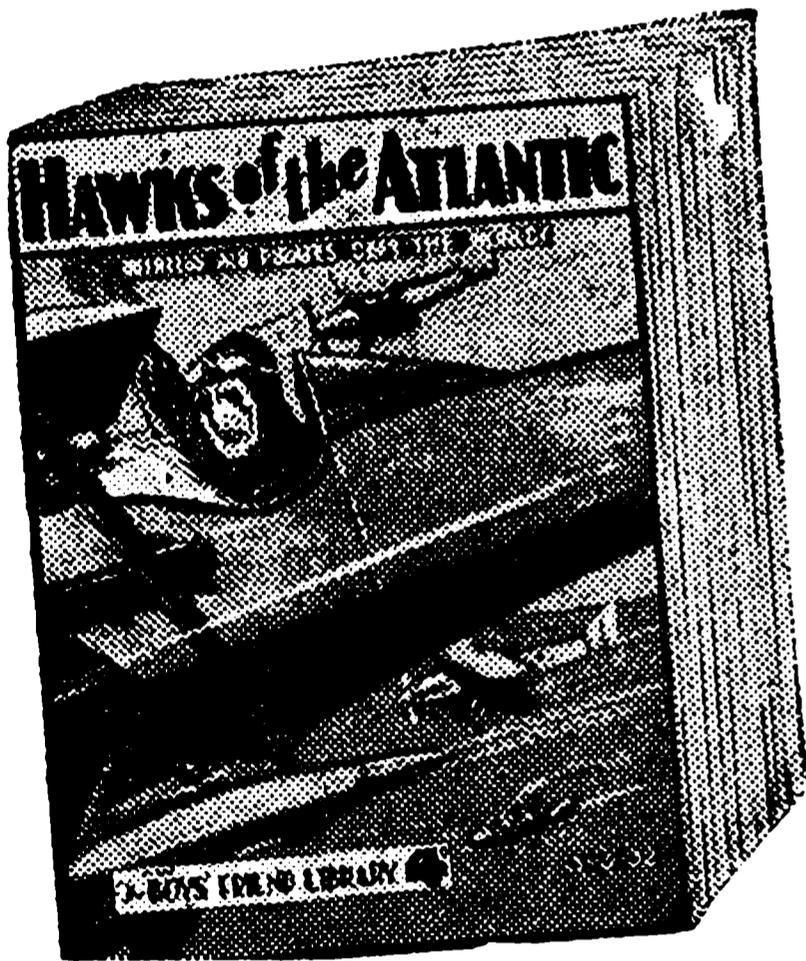
Acting on the impulse of the moment, Rymer dug his spurs into his horse's sides. But even as he did so one of the men made a grab at the reins, whilst the other seized him by the leg and dragged him to the ground. An instant later a dozen other ruffians leaped into the road and surrounded the professor with a gleaming circle of revolvers.

CHAPTER 4.

Held Up!

"**H**URRY up, or the carrier will be here before we're ready!" cried the man who had seized Rymer's horse, and who was evidently the leader of the gang. "There isn't time to search him now. Truss him up, and stuff a handkerchief into

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his mouth, and we'll rifle his pockets when we've stuck up the carrier!"

Mark Rymer now realised what had happened. It was only too plain that the men who had captured him were bushrangers.

Having gagged him with a pocket-handkerchief, they dragged him into the wood, and bound him to the trunk of one of the trees.

Their own horses were hobbled close by, and as soon as the professor's had been similarly treated, the whole fourteen returned to their former positions and silently awaited the arrival of the carrier.

Five minutes passed. Then the distant roar of the lorry's engine, and the rumbling of the solid tyres were heard. Nearer and nearer came the sounds, until the rather antiquated lorry itself came into sight.

From his position in the wood Mark Rymer caught a fleeting glimpse of the lorry as it thundered down the hill towards the bridge. The bushrangers had run out a log across the road to stop the cumbersome vehicle, but Mark Rymer did not notice it. His eyes were focussed on the lorry.

There were three men on the seat in front. One was the driver. Next to him sat a trooper, and beyond sat Nelson Lee!

WHEN Nelson Lee was thrown from his horse in Dingo Gulch, within fifty yards of the advancing line of fire, he might well have been excused if he had yielded to despair.

So far from this being the case, however, the terrible peril by which he was menaced served only to stimulate him to fresh vigour; and in a flash he had scrambled to his feet and raced up the ravine.

When he reached the end of the gorge he was relieved to find that the horse had partly recovered from its terror and was quietly jogging back in the direction of Bobalong.

Needless to say, he lost no time in giving chase, but by the time he had caught the beast the fire had reached the mouth of the ravine and was spreading with incredible rapidity.

The only other way of reaching Garoo Downs—except through Dingo Gulch, which was now impassable, of course—was by riding round by Nymagee, a distance altogether of close upon twenty miles.

A hurried reference to the map disclosed the fact that the road, which was little more than a bridle path, ran through the bush for five or six miles in a westerly direction, crossed the Garoo River at a spot called Stony Ford, wound round by the western spur of the Nymawarra Mountains, and finally joined the road from Cobar to Nyamgee, a mile and a half to the north of the latter town.

As soon as Nelson Lee had mastered these facts he mounted his horse, turned the animal's head towards the west, and urged him forward with all the speed of which he was capable.

Fast as he rode, however, the fire spread still faster; and when at last he came within sight of the river, about seven o'clock in the

evening, he was dismayed to find that the bush on each side of the road had fallen a prey to the all-devouring flames, and that, in order to reach the ford, he would have to ride for nearly half a mile between two walls of fiercely blazing scrub.

Nothing daunted, he sprang to the ground, and blindfolded his horse with his pocket-handkerchief. He then took off his coat, and wrapped it round his head, leaving only the smallest of peep-holes for his eyes. Finally, having vaulted back into the saddle, he wound the reins around his wrists, bent himself nearly double over his horse's neck, drove his spurs into the animal's quivering flanks, and dashed into the lane of fire at a furious, reckless gallop.

Words fail to describe the horrors and perils of the next few minutes. Death in a thousand shapes menaced the detective at every stride of his terrified mount. Long, snakelike tongues of flame darted out at him from each side of the narrow track. Blazing twigs rained down on him in a ceaseless shower. So fierce was the heat that it blistered his hands and scorched his clothes; whilst last, but by no means least, the air was filled with dense black clouds of suffocating smoke, which made breathing all but impossible.

The memory of that awful ride was branded on his brain in letters of fire. Half a dozen times in the course of as many minutes, he gave himself up for lost. But, at last, just as he was beginning to succumb to the heat and smoke, the welcome sound of running water fell on his ears. With a superhuman effort, he roused himself from his apathy; but even as he did so his horse began to reel, and an instant later, with a gasping moan, the poor brute stumbled forward on its knees, and rolled over, dead!

Half dazed though he was, the detective still retained sufficient presence of mind to extricate his feet from the stirrup irons, and slid to the ground before the horse rolled over on top of him.

His fate now seemed to be sealed, but with indomitable courage he staggered blindly forward through smoke, and had covered perhaps a dozen yards when all at once the ground seemed to sink from under his feet, and he found himself falling through space.

An involuntary cry burst from him at this new and unexpected catastrophe; but almost before the cry had crossed his lips he plunged into five or six feet of cool, refreshing water, and realised that he had merely stumbled over the river's edge, and had fallen into the stream.

This discovery galvanised his flagging energies into life again, for he knew that the river would form an impassable barrier to the further advance of the fire, and that if he could reach the other side his troubles would be over.

Sustained by this hope, he rose to the surface and struck out for the opposite bank, which was dimly to be seen through the haze of smoke that hung over the river.

When he reached mid-stream the force of the current proved almost more than strength could battle with; but by dint of heart-breaking exertions, he at last succeeded in gaining the shore, and hauling himself out of the water.

No sooner had he done so—no sooner did he realise that he was safe—than his overstrained nerves gave way, and after scrambling up the sloping bank, he tottered forward a yard or two, stood for a moment with both hands clasped to his aching brow, and then pitched forward on his face in a dead faint.

It was broad daylight when his wandering wits returned. The fire had burnt itself out on the opposite bank of the river, but away in the distance, in the direction of Bobalong and Nyngan, a dull red glow and an overhanging pall of smoke bore witness to the fact that its devastating march had by no means been arrested.

On the west side of the river, however, all was clear and tranquil, and as soon as the detective had wrung some of the water from his clothes, and had fortified himself with a pull at his flask, he started out for Nymagee.

Five o'clock was striking when he entered the little town and dragged his weary limbs to the nearest hotel.

"I want a horse," he said to the clean-shaven, ruddy-complexioned man who appeared to be the landlord.

"Oh, you do, do you?" replied the man, surveying him from top to toe with a critical stare. "Well, I'm sorry to say that I can't oblige. The fact of the matter is that I don't happen to have any horses to give away at present."

"Don't be absurd!" said the detective somewhat tartly. "I'm not begging a horse—I want to hire one. My name is Nelson Lee."

"The detective?" gasped the landlord.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm blowed! And I took you for a hoboe! What in thunder has happened?"

Briefly the detective explained.

"Ah, now I understand," said the landlord, when he had finished. "You want a horse to ride to Macpherson's station on Garoo Downs."

"Exactly."

"Well, take my advice and go by the carrier's lorry," said the landlord. "You'll be there almost as quickly—possibly quicker—and it'll be a jolly sight easier for you in your present condition."

"What carrier are you talking about?"

"Bill Walkley. He runs a lorry service between here and Eauabalong."

"When does it start?"

"In an hour's time."

"From this hotel?"

"Yes. It crosses Garoo Downs and will set you down at Barnby Coppice, which isn't more than a couple of hour's walk from Macpherson's station."

The advice seemed good to Nelson Lee, and he decided to do as the landlord had suggested. First of all, however, he purchased a fresh suit of clothes from a neighbouring

store, and then, having had a bath and changed his things, he sat down to a substantial breakfast. Just as he was finishing the landlord came into the coffee-room.

"The lorry starts in five minutes," he said. "I've fixed it up with Bill Walkley for you to have a seat up on the box with him and the trooper."

"The trooper?" said Nelson Lee. "Does the lorry carry a trooper?"

"Always. We send a lot of goods to the railhead, and it don't do to run risks."

"But surely there aren't any bushrangers around here?"

"Aren't there, though!" replied the landlord, shaking his head. "You're a stranger in this district, that's obvious, or you wouldn't have asked a question like that! Haven't you ever heard of Bush Billy's Gang?"

"Never!" said the detective. "Who are they?"

In reply to this question the landlord explained that Bush Billy's Gang was the name of a gang of bushrangers whose lawless doings had made them notorious throughout the whole of the western region of New South Wales.

Their leader was an escaped convict whose real name was William Randerson, but who was better known by the nickname of Bush Billy. Under his skilful guidance the gang had ravaged the district between Cobar and Eauabalong for some considerable time, lifting cattle, raiding stations, holding up the lorries that were taking goods to and from the railhead, and many other crimes.

The Government police—commonly known as "the troopers"—had made desperate efforts to run this rascally gang to earth, but so far without the slightest success.

It was known that the gang had a secret retreat somewhere in the mountains, but though fabulous sums had been offered for information leading to the discovery of its whereabouts, no one had yet come forward to claim the reward.

"The scoundrels have been lying low lately," said the landlord in conclusion. "Nothing has been seen or heard of them for over six months. Some people think that the gang has been disbanded, but I'm not of that opinion myself. In former times, every lorry that crossed the down was accompanied by an escort of half a dozen armed and mounted troopers. A month or two ago the escort was reduced to three, and now it's reduced to a single trooper, who rides beside the man at the wheel, and carries both a rifle and a revolver. It's a mistake not to have more, and some day—but there's his horn. You'd better be taking your seat."

The detective accordingly left the hotel and climbed up on to the front of the lorry, and seated himself beside the trooper, and punctually on the stroke of six o'clock the lorry started off on its eighty miles journey to Eauabalong.

For the first twelve or fourteen miles the road was more or less up-hill all the way, and

the surface was so poor that any speed was practically impossible.

Then suddenly, the road began to run steeply downhill, so the driver of the lorry was able to coax his complaining engine into a bumping thirty miles per hour. But he soon had to throttle down for the hill was so steep as to be dangerous, and they more or less crawled down the lower slopes.

"That's Barnby Coppice," said the trooper, turning to Nelson Lee and pointing to a thickly planted wood at the bottom of the hill. "You can see, the road runs down

Long before the echoes of the shot had died away a number of men, armed with rifles and revolvers, dashed out of the wood on each side of the lorry and sprang into the middle of the road. Before them appeared a log, placed across the road.

"Bush Billy!" gasped the man at the wheel, clapping on his brakes.

Fortunately, the speed of the lorry was not very great at the time, or there might have been a disastrous skid. As it was, the cumbrous vehicle struck the log and swung



Stretched helpless on the sacrifice stone before the hideous native idol, Nelson Lee and his companion listened to the dreaded words of the witch-doctor spelling their doom. . . .

through the wood, across that bridge, and up the hill on the other side of the stream."

"I leave you at the bridge, don't I?" said the detective.

"Yes," replied the trooper. "Macpherson's station lies over there." He pointed towards the north. "You can't miss it," he continued. "It's the only house between Barnby Coppice and Dingo Gulch. All you've got to do is to follow that stream, and it'll lead you straight to—"

Crack!

With startling suddenness a rifle shot rang out. The trooper's head fell forward on his breast. For one half second his body swayed from side to side, limply. Then he slid down from the seat and lay in a heap at the detective's feet.

round athwart the road before it could be brought to a standstill.

Both Nelson Lee and the driver were covered by two men who sprang on either side of the running-board, whilst the rest of the hold-up gang stood in the roadway.

Never was a surprise more skilfully planned. Never was a victory more complete. Resistance was out of the question, and the stern command, "Hands up," was obeyed in sullen silence.

"Now then, gents, we'll trouble you to step down and bail up as quickly as possible," said Bush Billy. "No doubt you've got important engagements at Eauabalong, and we don't want to keep you here any longer than we can help."

Nelson Lee was the first to alight. When he had been disarmed and robbed of everything he possessed, Bush Billy pointed to the end of the bridge.

"Go and stand there till we've finished here," he said. "As soon as we've looted the lorry you can take yer seat again and go on to Eauabalong."

"Thank you for nothing," said the detective, shrugging his shoulders. "This is as far as I was going, anyway. With your permission I'll bid you good-morning, now."

able. Saddle-bags were filled. Parcels were tossed into a bush to be stowed away later on the pack horses.

It was not until the last package had been opened and looted that Bush Billy remembered Mark Rymer. They hurried into the wood, loosed the professor's bonds, and removed the gag from his mouth.

"Sorry to 'ave kept you waiting, mister," said Bush Billy, with a grin. "But we've been too busy to attend to you before. 'Owever, we shan't detain you much longer now. Hand over all you've got, and be as



. . . And while the ominous words of the witch-doctor rang through the cave the natives prostrated themselves in obelance.

He turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Come back!" roared Bush Billy, raising his revolver. "Where are you off to?"

"Macpherson's Station," said Nelson Lee.

Bush Billy reflected. Macpherson's was the nearest station, and was eight or nine miles away. The detective was on foot. It was impossible for him to reach the station and return with help before they had completed their work.

"All right, you can go!" he said.

Once more the detective turned away, and a moment later he had crossed the bridge, and had vanished into the wood.

The work of plundering the lorry was then proceeded with. A capacious sack was filled with anything of value that was also port-

quick as you can about it, for the lorry is just about ready to start, and you'll be wanting to go with it, I reckon."

"That was my intention," said Mark Rymer, as he handed over his purse, and his watch and chain. "But I've changed my mind."

"Then where are you going?" asked Bush Billy.

"That remains to be seen," replied the professor. "It all depends upon whether you and I can come to terms."

"Terms?" said Bush Billy with a puzzled air.

The professor nodded his head.

"I have a proposal to make to you," he said, "a proposal that will put five hundred pounds in your pocket. But we won't dis-

cuss the matter now. You haven't told any of those fellows on the lorry that I am here, I hope?"

"No," said Bush Billy. "I'd forgotten you existed till this minute."

"All the better," said Mark Rymer. "Send them away and then I'll tell you what my proposal is."

More mystified than ever, Bush Billy returned to the road.

"Finished?" he asked, addressing one of his men.

"Yes," said the man pointing to a couple of well-filled sacks. "The best haul we've had this year."

Bush Billy turned to the lorry driver.

"Off you go," he said. "A pleasant journey and better luck next time. And look after your passenger."

The passenger was the dead trooper, whose body now sprawled in the lorry amongst the broken packages.

The driver took his seat at the wheel, looking white and scared, the bushrangers raised an ironical cheer, and in five minutes' time the lorry was out of sight.

CHAPTER 5.

The Trap!

"**N**OW, mister, better be quick," growled Bush Billy, returning to Mark Rymer. "Wot's this 'ere proposal of yours?"

The professor answered the question with another.

"You remember the man who was sitting on the lorry beside the trooper—not the driver—the other man?"

"The chap wot's said he was going to Macpherson's Station?"

"Yes. Do you know who he was?"

Bush Billy shook his head.

"He was Nelson Lee."

"The English detective?"

"Yes. He and I are deadly enemies. To be perfectly frank with you, he's trying to find the missing heir to a fortune of over a hundred thousand pounds a year. If he fails to find the heir the fortune comes to me. If he finds him, it goes to the heir. Is that plain?"

"As plain as the nose on yer face, which is mighty plain to me," said Bush Billy with a grin.

"The heir is now in New Zealand," continued the professor, ignoring this pointed allusion to the size of his nose. "If I can get to New Zealand first, before Nelson Lee, the fortune is as good as mine."

"I see," said Bush Billy. "You're a man after my own 'eart. You'll go to New Zealand, find the heir, and quietly swipe him."

"You have described my intentions to a T," said the professor. "In the meantime, you will easily understand that it would be a very great relief to me to know that Nelson

Lee was out of the way and incapable of giving me any further trouble. To put the matter in a nutshell, I want to stop him going to New Zealand. He is now on his way to Macpherson's station. He is on foot and unarmed. You are mounted and armed. You can easily overtake him before he reaches Macpherson's. If you follow him and put a bullet through his head, I'll give you five hundred pounds."

"Rats!" said Bush Billy. "How are you goin' to give us five hundred quid, when we've just cleared you out of all you've got?"

The professor shrugged his shoulders.

"It's quite true that you've taken all my cash in hand," he said. "But I've plenty more in the Commercial Bank of Sydney, which has a branch at Nymagee, I believe. When you've shot Nelson Lee, one of your men can accompany me to Nymagee, where I'll write out a cheque for five hundred pounds, cash it at the bank, and give the man the money to bring to you."

Bush Billy placed a grimy finger by the side of his nose and solemnly winked one eye.

"See any green?" he asked with a coarse laugh.

"I don't understand you?" said the professor somewhat haughtily.

"No, but I understand you," said Bush Billy. "First of all, I'm to oblige you by shooting Nelson Lee, and then I'm to let one of my men go with you to Nymagee?"

"Exactly," said the professor.

"And what would happen when you and my man got to Nymagee?" asked Bush Billy.

"I should get the money from the bank and give it to him, of course," said the professor.

Bush Billy burst into a scornful laugh.

"You don't gull me with a simple trick like that!" he growled. "Why, as soon as we'd shot at Nelson Lee, you could afford to snap your fingers at us, and as likely as not you'd give my man over to the troopers the moment you got him safely into Nymagee."

The professor bit his lip. For once in a way he had really meant to play fair, but he was shrewd enough to see that it would be impossible to persuade Bush Billy of this fact.

"I'll tell you what I will do, if you like," said Bush Billy, after a moment's pause. "We'll ride after Nelson Lee and capture him. We won't shoot him—not yet awhile—but we'll bring him back to Barnby Coppice. One of my men shall then go with you to Nymagee to get the money. The rest of us will camp in the wood with Nelson Lee, and wait for you till five o'clock this afternoon. If you can get the money to-day you can come back here with my man, if you like, and then you can shoot Nelson Lee yourself, so as to be sure the job's done properly."

"But suppose I don't get the money till to-morrow morning?" asked the professor.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Bush Billy. "Give me time to finish. As I was sayin', we'll wait for you in this wood till five o'clock this afternoon. If you don't turn up by then we shall take Mr. Nelson Lee

to our snug little home in the mountains, and you'll have to follow us there to-morrow night."

"But how shall I find the place?" asked the professor.

"Haven't I just told you that one of my men will go with you?" said Bush Billy. "We shall keep you with us till we've collared Nelson Lee, but as soon as we've done the trick you and one of my men will ride together to Nymagee. If you get the money this afternoon, you've only got to ride back here and give me the money, and Nelson Lee will be handed over to you to do wot you like with him. If you can't get the rhino till to-morrow, you'll have to provide my man with board and lodging at the same hotel as yourself."

"I see," said the professor. "And to-morrow your man will guide me to your hidden retreat."

"Exactly," said Bush Billy. "Nelson Lee will be there waiting for you, and as soon as you've forked out the five hundred pounds you'll be free to put a bullet through his head and trot off to New Zealand in search of the missing heir. Will that suit you?"

"Down to the ground," said the professor delightedly.

"Then away we go after Nelson Lee," cried the bandit.

He untethered his horse and vaulted into the saddle. His comrades followed suit, and a moment later the whole fourteen, with Mark Rymer in their midst, were in hot pursuit of the lone and unarmed detective.

CHAPTER 6.

The Lull Before the Storm!

IT was a quarter to nine when Nelson Lee, with empty pockets and a heavy heart, set out to walk from Barnby Coppice to Macpherson's station. For upwards of an hour he trudged along amid perfect solitude and silence; then all at once he heard a strangely familiar sound—the sound of a motor. And a moment later an old Ford car came into view, bumping along over the uneven ground like a small boat in a choppy sea. At the wheel sat a typical Australian squatter.

On seeing Nelson Lee he brought the ancient car to a standstill and glanced at him inquiringly.

"Am I right for Macpherson's station?" asked the detective.

"Yes," replied the squatter, regarding him with a somewhat curious expression. "You've only to follow this stream for another five or six miles, and it'll lead you straight to the house."

"Do you know Mr. Macpherson?" queried the detective.

"Slightly," said the squatter with a peculiar smile.

"Do you happen to know if he's at home?" asked Nelson Lee.

"No, he isn't," said the squatter.

An expression of annoyance crossed the detective's face.

"Is it any use asking if you know where he is?" he inquired.

"Yes," said the squatter. "He's here!"

"Here?" The detective's face grew radiant again. "Are you Mr. Macpherson?"

"I am," said the squatter. "And you?"

"My name is Nelson Lee."

"The great detective?"

"The detective, anyhow."

Macpherson offered him his hand.

"I'm proud to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lee," he said. "Did I understand you to say that you were going to my house?"

"Yes. I hope I am not too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To save Dick Seymour."

Macpherson started.

"What! Are you hunting for Dick Seymour, too?" he said. "But what do you mean by asking if you're too late?"

"Professor Rymer arrived at your house last night," said Nelson Lee.

"If he did it was unknown to me," said Macpherson. "The only man who was at my house last night was a man named Shaw, who is one of Dudley Sinclair's agents. You know Dudley Sinclair, the Sydney detective, of course?"

"Very well indeed," said Nelson Lee. "But the man who was at your house last night was no more an agent of Sinclair's than you are. What was he like?"

Macpherson described the man. The description, of course, was that of the professor.

"And he said his name was Shaw, did he?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes. He said that Sinclair had sent him to ask me to allow him to take Dick Seymour back to Sydney with him."

"That was another lie. The man who came to your house last night was Professor Mark Rymer, and he was there for the sole purpose of luring Dick Seymour into his clutches and murdering him."

"Then he came on a fool's errand," said Macpherson. "Dick left my place three years ago, and when I last heard of him he was junior partner in a frozen meat concern in Napier, New Zealand."

Briefly, the detective told Macpherson of Lord Easington's secret marriage, of the hunt for the Silver Dwarf, of the discovery that Dick Seymour was Lord Easington's son, and of the race between himself and the professor to find the missing heir. Following this, he described how Mark Rymer had fired the bush at Dingo Gulch, how he—Nelson Lee—had fought his way through to Nymagee, how he had travelled on the lorry from Nymagee toward Eauabalong, and how the lorry had been held up by Bush Billy's gang in Barnby Coppice.

"Then, surely, you must have seen Professor Rymer," said Macpherson, when the detective had finished his tale.

"When?"

"This morning, at Barnby Coppice."

The detective shook his head.

"I've never set eyes on Mark Rymer since yesterday afternoon," he said. "Where is he now?"

"That's just what I'm wondering myself," replied Macpherson. "He arrived at my house about sunset last night, and spun me that yarn about Sinclair having sent him to fetch Dick Seymour back to Sydney. He seemed awfully put out when I told him that he must return to Sydney at once, and cross to New Zealand as quickly as possible.

"He stayed at my house all night, and at a quarter to seven this morning he mounted his horse and started out for Barnby Coppice with the intention of getting a lift on the lorry to Eauabalong. Before he left me he sold me his horse for thirty pounds, the arrangement being that he should tether the beast to the bridge and leave him there, and I would send one of my men for it later in the day. As a matter of fact I am now on my way to the part of my station where my men are working to get one of them to ride down there for the horse. I'd go myself, but I'm getting on in years, and I can't stand too much saddle work. That's why I use this old tin lizzie now and again on the station. Not a bad old car, but it don't do to go too far from home in her, as she has a knack of conking out at awkward times.

"If Mark Rymer left my house at a quarter to seven, as he did, he ought to have been at Barnby Coppice in plenty of time to catch the lorry. Then why didn't you see him? Had the bush-whackers shot him and robbed him, and collared his horse before the lorry arrived? Or did he see them lying in wait and sheer off towards Eauabalong before they noticed him?"

"It is impossible to say," said Nelson Lee. "All I know is that there was no Mark Rymer waiting for the lorry, and no horse tethered to the bridge. He might have been murdered, as you suggest, before the lorry arrived, or he may have gone farther along the road, having given the bushrangers the slip, to join the lorry higher up the road. In either case, my duty is clear. I must take no risks. I must act as though it were absolutely certain that Mark Rymer is now on his way to Sydney. In other words, I must lose no time in returning to Sydney myself."

"Then you'll have to follow the lorry to Eauabalong," said Macpherson. "The bush fire is still raging on the north side of the mountains, and it will be several days before anybody will be able to get through to Nyngan."

"That isn't the difficulty," said Nelson Lee. "Before I can follow the lorry to Eauabalong I must have a horse and some money, for those confounded bush-whackers have cleared me out of every penny I possessed."

"There need be no difficulty about that," said Macpherson promptly. "If you'll come with me to my house I'll provide you with a fresh horse and as much money as will see

you through to Sydney. You can sell the horse at Eauabalong, and send me the money, together with what I lend you, whenever it suits your convenience. Now, no thanks, if you please. Not another word. I've helped Mark Rymer, unwittingly, and innocently—and now I'm going to make amends by helping you."

With some fuss and confusion he turned the old car.

"Jump in," he said, "and let's hope the old tin can will hold together until we get home."

The detective obeyed, and a moment later they were chugging an uncomfortable way back towards Macpherson's station. On the way, the squatter repeated to Nelson Lee the information he had previously given to Mark Rymer concerning Dick Seymour.

"And I'll tell you what I've remembered since Mark Rymer left," he added. "In the first letter which he wrote to me, Dick mentioned the name of a certain Dr. Irving, who is one of the surgeons at the Napier Hospital. He said that he and the doctor had struck up a tremendous friendship, and that he spent nearly all his spare time in the doctor's company. In his second letter—the only other letter I received from him—he referred to the doctor again, and said how awfully kind he had been in advancing him money, and all that sort of thing. It seems to me, therefore, that if anybody will be able to tell you where Dick is, and what he is doing, it will be Dr. Irving; so that, if I were you, the first thing I should do when I got to Napier would be to call upon Dr. Irving."

"I will," said Nelson Lee. "Thanks very much for such a valuable hint."

"Thank goodness I didn't remember it when Mark Rymer was here," said Macpherson. "But here we are. This is my house. Hi! Anybody about?"

In answer to his summons a lanky, red-headed youth appeared.

"Take this tin can back to the garage," said Macpherson, when he and the detective had alighted. "Saddle Charlie, and bring him round to the front door in half an hour."

The lad accordingly drove the old car away, and the two men entered the house, where Macpherson ushered his companion into a cosily furnished sitting-room.

"Now, just sit down and make yourself at home, while I run upstairs and fetch the money," he said, waving the detective towards the couch. "How much do you think you'd better have? Will twenty pounds be enough?"

Before the detective had time to reply Macpherson suddenly uttered an exclamation of alarm and sprang to the window. He had just caught sight of a couple of his stockmen, who were racing towards the house at breakneck speed.

"Something's wrong," he gasped. He threw up the window and thrust out his

head. "What's up?" he cried, when the two men came within hail.

"Bush Billy's gang!" was the panting reply.

"Where?" asked Macpherson, turning pale.

"They were half-way between here and Barnby Coppice when we spotted 'em," said one of the stockmen, mopping his brow. "They'd off-saddled, and were jawing to that fellow who was here last night."

"Did he appear to be a prisoner in the hands of the gang?"

"Bless you, no, sir! He was jawing away to Bush Billy as free and easy as if he'd been a regular member of the gang."

"You heard him, then?"

"Yes, sir—me and Jim. We crawled on our hands and knees to where the beggars were palavering. Apparently they found out by the hall-marks of your car that you must have met up with a chap named Nelson Lee. And so they were making plans for attacking this place. We crept away and rushed off here to— Look there they are!"

It was only too true.

About a couple of miles away, yet clearly visible in the dazzling sunlight with which the downs were flooded, a troop of fifteen horsemen were galloping down on the Macpherson's Station.

CHAPTER 7.

The Raid!

AT the sight of the oncoming bandits, the station became a hive of industry. The red-haired stable-boy was placed on the squatter's speediest horse and told to ride to Nymagee as fast as he could go, and give warning to the troopers. Front and back doors were locked and bolted, and barricaded with heavy chests of drawers. Sacks of flour and bales of wool were piled up inside two of the windows at the front of the house, and two at the back, and behind each of these novel barriers a man was stationed with a rifle and a revolver, and an ample supply of cartridges.

Scarcely had these preparations been completed ere the bushrangers came thundering across the narrow strip of lawn in front of the house. The moment they came within range a couple of rifle-shots rang out, and two of the scoundrels fell from their horses.

Somewhat dismayed by this hot reception, the rest of the gang beat a hasty retreat, and held a hurried council of war. As a result of their deliberations, they decided to try an attack in the rear, but on finding that a similar reception awaited them there, they once more retired to cover.

While they were conferring they were joined by the professor.

"If I might be so bold as to offer a word of advice," he said, when the situation was explained to him. "I would suggest that you divide yourselves into three parties of four

apiece. So far as we know, there are only four men in the house, and two of these are apparently defending the front, and two the back. But there is a window at the side of the house—the window of the bed-room in which I slept last night—and the probability is that it will be undefended. Now, if four of you keep blazing away at the front of the house, and four of you do the same at the back, just to distract the attention of those inside, what's to prevent the other four creeping round to the side of the house and breaking in through the window I have just pointed out to you?"

"Bully for you, mister!" said Bush Billy with an approving nod of his head. "That's the ticket, I reckon. We'll try it!"

Without any further ado, the professor's plan was promptly put into execution. Four of the scoundrels, including Bush Billy, took cover in front of the house, and opened fire on the windows which were defended by Nelson Lee and Macpherson. Four others crept round to the back of the house, and blazed away at the windows where the stockmen were stationed. The remaining four crawled away on their hands and knees, with instructions to make a wide detour, and to fire a revolver as soon as they reached the window the professor had described.

For nearly ten minutes nothing was heard save the rifle shots of the attackers, and the answering shots of the defenders. Then, suddenly, above the din, was heard the short, sharp crack of a revolver, followed an instant later by a perfect pandemonium of yells and shouts inside the house.

"They're in the house! Come on!" yelled Bush Billy, leaping to his feet.

Followed by his three companions, he dashed towards the house. A solitary rifle shot rang out as he raced across the lawn, but the bullet merely grazed his cheek, and a moment later he had reached one of the windows, and was smashing both the glass and the woodwork into splinters with his axe. By this time the four men at the back of the house had joined their pals at the front, and it was not long before the eight exultant rogues crawled through the shattered window and rushed into the sitting-room, where Nelson Lee and Macpherson were engaged in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle with the four men who had broken in through the bed-room window, and killed the two stockmen.

The arrival of Bush Billy turned the tide of battle against the detective. A shot from the bandit leader's revolver pierced Macpherson's chest, and stretched him senseless at the detective's feet. Then a rush was made for Nelson Lee, who was swept off his feet and borne to the ground.

Whilst three of the scoundrels held him down, Bush Billy clubbed his revolver, and dealt him a sledge hammer blow between the eyes. With a stifled groan, the detective ceased the struggle, and lapsed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 8.

Captured by Blacks!

WHEN Nelson Lee recovered consciousness he found that his captors had placed him on a bare-backed horse and had lashed him down with leathern thongs. What had happened whilst he had been unconscious he could only guess, but it was evident that he had been insensible for some considerable time, for when he opened his eyes he discovered that he was no longer at Macpherson's Station, but was back at Barnby Coppice.

By cautiously moving his head from side to side, he perceived that the bushrangers were busily employed in loading their horses with plunder they had taken from the lorry.

"Hi, Sam!" called out Bush Billy. "Come here!"

Sam sprang to his horse's back and rode over to his leader's side.

"This gentleman is impatient to be off," said Bush Billy. "You know wot you've got to do, don't you?"

"Yes," said Sam. "I've got to ride with him to Nymagee and stay with him till he gets the oof from the bank, and then I've got to bring him to the Glen."

"That's right," said Bush Billy. "Off you go, the pair of you, and we'll look out for you at the Glen about midnight to-morrow."

The professor and Sam accordingly took their departure, and a few minutes later the gang reformed, and started out on their forty-miles ride to the Glen.

By two o'clock in the afternoon they had left all signs of civilisation far behind them, and had entered that wild and rugged region of mountain, forest and scrub, only partially explored, and known to be inhabited by some of the fiercest tribes on the Australian continent—that runs from the edge of Garoo Downs, northwards to the confines of the town of Cobar and westward to the banks of the Darling River. For upwards of an hour they rode through this desolate region without drawing rein; then Bush Billy called a halt.

"We'll off-saddle here and give the 'osses a rest," he said, wheeling round and holding up his hand. "They've done a big day's work to-day, and we've still another fifteen miles to go, so we may as well——"

The sentence ended in a startled oath, for at that moment a shower of spears came whizzing through the air, while an instant later a horde of bushy-headed natives, fully five hundred strong, dashed out of a thicket some distance in the rear, hurling their spears and boomerangs as they ran. The air echoed to the sound of their shrill discordant war-cry.

Though taken completely by surprise, the bushrangers quickly closed their ranks, and greeted the blacks with a withering volley of rifle-fire. To this the natives replied with a second shower of spears and boomerangs, but most of the missiles flew wide of the mark; a moment later, seeing that the bushrangers

were preparing to fire again, they flew back into the thicket and took cover behind the trees.

"Now, boys, fall into line and ride like the dickens!" cried Bush Billy. "We haven't finished with the beggars, yet! And as soon as they've got over their fright they'll be round us like a swarm of bees, and we can't afford to stand and fight against odds of forty to one."

He drove his spurs into his horse's sides and dashed away at a furious gallop. His gang lost no time following his example. But before they had covered a hundred yards the blacks broke cover, with another earsplitting yell, and raced in hot pursuit.

Now, the natives of Australia are noted for their marvellous running powers. In many respects they may be justly described as the lowest race on the face of the earth, but as runners they are absolutely unrivalled. Both in speed and endurance they are more than a match for an ordinary horse, as they can not only cover the ground more quickly than a horse can gallop, but they can also keep up the pace for hours at a stretch.

"It's all U.P., boys," groaned Bush Billy, when the chase had lasted some ten or fifteen minutes. "The 'osses is just dead beat, and we're losing ground at every stride." He ducked his head just in time to dodge a skimming boomerang. "They've got within range of us now," he continued. "It's no use going on like this, for they'll simply pick us off, one by one, the same as if we were cokernuts at a fair!"

"What about turning the pack horses adrift?" suggested one of the gang. "If we was to send 'em gallopin' back towards the blacks, the beggars would perhaps be satisfied, and wouldn't foller us no farther."

"Oh, yes, they would," said Bush Billy, shaking his head. "I know those beggars by the way they do their hair. They're cannibals! It isn't plunder they want—it's a nice fat white man for their Sunday dinner!"

"Then give 'em Nelson Lee!" said another of the gang.

"Gosh, that's not a bad idea," exclaimed Bush Billy, shaking his head. "I don't know whether it'll answer or not, but, at any rate, we can try it. If it doesn't stop the beggars altogether it'll give us a few minutes breathing space."

"But, look here," objected one of the gang, "if we lose Nelson Lee we lose the professor's five hundred quid."

"Gosh!" retorted Bush Billy. "What odds does it make to the professor whether he shoots Nelson Lee or whether the blacks makes a meal off him? As for losing the five hundred quid, that rot! The professor won't know nothing about the matter till he turns up at the Glen to-morrow night, with the money in his pocket, and it'll be rather late in the day for him to start objecting, then."

He glanced back over his shoulder, and saw that the horse to which Nelson Lee was bound was twenty or thirty yards behind.

"Ride on, boys!" he cried, addressing those in the immediate neighbourhood. "I'll be after you in half a mo'!"

He wheeled his horse round, pulled up, and waited until the detective's horse was abreast of him.

"Give me hold o' that leading rein," he shouted to the man who was acting as the detective's escort.

The man obeyed, and in the twinkling of an eye Bush Billy turned the horse's head towards the blacks.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nelson Lee, as an inkling of the truth dawned in upon him.

"What am I going to do?" replied Bush Billy, dropping the rein. "This is what I'm a-going to do!"

As he uttered these words he raised his quirt and lashed savagely at the detective's horse. With a snort of pain, the terrified beast made a sudden plunge forward, and then, taking the bit between its teeth, it dashed away towards the blacks, in a series of maddened leaps and bounds.

For a moment the natives could scarcely believe their eyes. Then surprise gave place to exultation, and the forest rang with their savage cries of triumph. Further pursuit of Bush Billy and his gang was instantly abandoned, and almost before the detective had realised what was happening the horse was caught, and he found himself surrounded on every side by a surging mob of yelling and gesticulating natives.

CHAPTER 9.

Dargo, the Head-man!

IT was one of Nelson Lee's boasts that he knew a little—in some cases a great deal—of every language and every dialect under the sun. As luck would have it, the language of his captors was one of those tongues in which he was fairly proficient, so that he had little or no difficulty in understanding the general drift of the somewhat lengthy and somewhat heated discussion which followed his capture.

A great many expressions which were used were perfectly unintelligible to him, but he understood sufficient of what was said to grasp the fact that some of his captors were in favour of killing him on the spot, whilst the others insisted that the proper thing to do with him was to take him to their village and leave his fate to be decided, some said by the head-man or chief of the tribe, and the others said by the "witch-doctor."

In the end the views of the latter prevailed, and a move was accordingly made for the natives' village, which was simply a scattered collection of rudely-constructed bowers, or gunyahs, as they are called—built of branches and twigs, and nestling at the foot of a precipitous hill about twenty miles from the spot where Nelson Lee had been captured.

Afternoon had given place to evening, and evening was fast merging into night, when the dusky warriors with their captive in their midst, arrived at their destination. On the outskirts of the village they were met by a jubilant crowd of men and women, who greeted their return with vociferous shouts of welcome, and escorted them in triumph to an open space in the centre of the encampment. Here the head man, surrounded by a bodyguard of half a dozen men, was waiting to receive them.

After listening to the story of the white man's capture, the head man took a torch from the hand of one of his bodyguard and strode up to the horse on which Nelson Lee was bound. He raised the torch above his head and peered into the detective's face. Then a low gasp of amazement burst from his lips, followed by a rapturous cry from Nelson Lee.

For the head man was none other than Dargo, whom Nelson Lee had rescued the day before from the clutches of the miners who were torturing him.

Each man recognised the other at the same moment, and the look of despair, which had hitherto enshrouded the detective's face, gave place to one of new-born hope and confidence. Had he not rescued Dargo from a horrible death. Had not Dargo already shown that he was grateful, by returning with his followers and driving the miners away? Did he not help the detective to escape? Surely, then, it was not too much to hope that Dargo would now give a further proof of his gratitude by ordering his followers to set their prisoner free?

Somewhat to the detective's surprise, however, Dargo made no move in this direction, but simply stood and stared at him in sorrowful, pitying silence.

"Don't you know me?" asked the detective at last.

"Yes, me know you," said Dargo, with a heavy sigh. "Dis plenty much bad job. Wish it anybody but you."

"So do I," said Nelson Lee. "But it might have been much worse really—worse for me, I mean. I might have fallen into the hands of a tribe whose head man I did not know, and who had no cause to be friendly disposed towards me."

Dargo heaved another deep-drawn sigh, but vouchsafed no reply. The detective's spirits, so lately raised, began to droop again.

"Well, aren't you going to tell your men to see me free?" he asked after an awkward pause.

"Not much good if me did," said Dargo, shaking his woolly head. "Dey not do as I tell dem."

"Why not?" demanded Nelson Lee. "You're the head man of this tribe, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Dargo. "But we had plenty much sickness among my people, and great heap men and women die. Witch-doctor say dat Buddai angry 'cause we not sacrifice no white man to him for many moons. Him tell my men to hunt for white man, so he ca"

offer him up to Buddai and we hab no more sickness. Me send my men to capture white man. Dey get you. Dey plenty pleased dey got one, and dey not let you go—nebber!”

The detective's checks grew pale as he listened to this calm recital of the fate in store for him. He was to be offered up as a human sacrifice to Buddai, the principal god in the native mythology.

“And this is to be my reward for saving your life, is it?” he asked bitterly. “Although you are the head man of your tribe, invested with supreme authority, you are going to stand idly by and allow me to be murdered in cold blood. I thought better of you than that!”

“What can Dargo do?” said Dargo piteously. “Me no ungrateful. Me gladly gib life to save you, but de witch-doctor want a white man. Black man no good. What can Dargo do?”

“Order your men to cut these thongs and stand back,” said Nelson Lee.

Again Dargo shook his head.

“Dey not listen to me,” he said. “Dargo count for nothing 'gainst de word ob de witch-doctor. All my people 'fraid ob him. Me 'fraid ob him, too. Him terrible powerful. Him blast us all wid his magic if we not do what he say.”

“Where is he?” asked Nelson Lee.

Dargo pointed to the rugged hill at the back of the village.

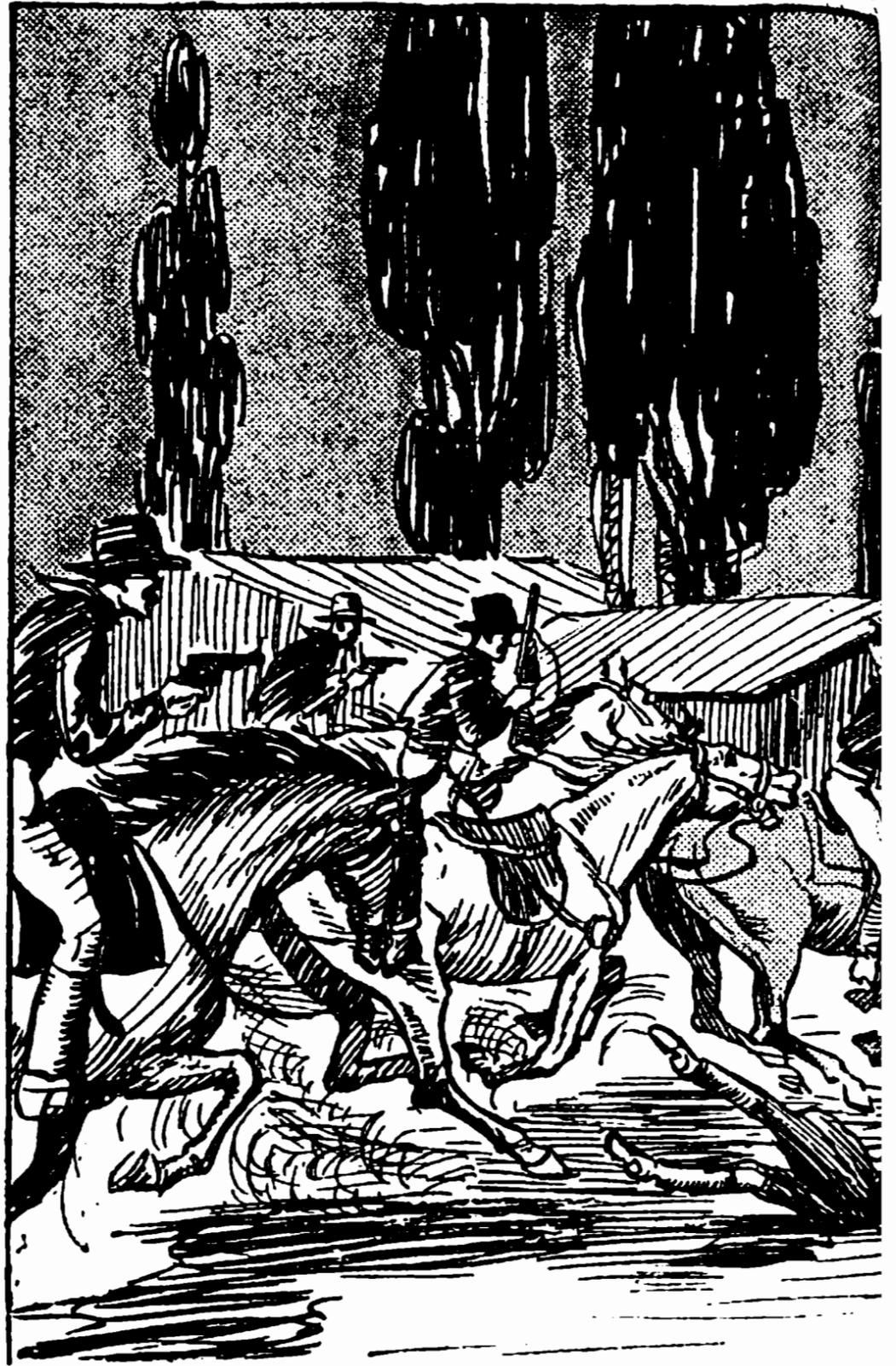
“Him up dat hill, in the cave of Buddai,” he said. “Him gone tell Buddai we got white man. When him come down, me beg him let you go. Me swear catch many white men if he—”

The rest of the sentence was drowned by a deep-toned reverential murmur of applause. The dreaded witch-doctor had descended from the sacred hill and was coming to inspect his prospective victim! Some of the natives flung themselves on the ground in order that he might walk over their prostrate forms. The rest drew back, in superstitious awe, and formed a sort of living lane, through which, with slow and solemn steps, he advanced towards the horse to which the detective was lashed.

As seen by the fitful torchlight, there was something decidedly weird and fantastic about the witch-doctor's appearance. To compensate for his shortness of stature—for he was little, old and wrinkled—his hair was piled up on the top of his head in a towering cone, fully nine inches high, and surmounted with a nodding plume of emu's feathers.

“Thy warriors have done well,” he said, addressing Dargo in a harsh and strident voice. “I have spoken to Buddai. He accepts his faithful children's offering. Let the white man be taken from his horse and bound afresh. Let him then be carried to the sacred cave, and laid at Buddai's feet. It is Buddai's wish that the offering shall be made at the rising of the sun.”

Dargo listened to these instructions in dull and stupefied silence. Then, acting on the sudden impulse, he flung himself at the witch-



As the ruthless band of bushrangers charged the ranch poured a withering fire into their midst. Sad

doctor's feet, and burst into an impassioned appeal for mercy.

He explained that the white man whom his warriors had captured was the man who had rescued him from the miners the day before. He urged the claims of gratitude. In simple but eloquent language he pleaded for the detective's life, swearing by all that he held holy that if Nelson Lee were spared he himself would undertake to supply as many substitutes as the witch-doctor might think fit to demand.

The witch-doctor heard him in cold, disdainful silence. He might never have heard of the proverb, “a bird in the hand's worth two in the bush,” but those were his sentiments.

“Thou speakest the words of foolishness!” he said, when Dargo had concluded. “What is it to Buddai that this white man hath saved thy life? Even if he were thine own father, and Buddai claimed him from thee, it is thy duty to submit.

“Enough!” he cried, as Dargo broke into



buildings, Nelson Lee and his little band of defenders
 was emptied, but still the bandits came on!

a fresh appeal. "I will hear no more. Speak another word, and I will call down fire from the skies to consume thee!"

He raised his hand as he spoke, and a thrill of superstitious terror ran through the crowd. There was not a man amongst them who did not believe that the witch-doctor was able to carry out his threat if he chose to do so. Dargo certainly believed it, and he crept away, trembling violently, and completely cowed and disheartened.

Under the witch-doctor's directions, the detective was then removed from his horse and pinioned hand and foot. About half-way up the precipice was a vast and gloomy cave which could only be approached by a narrow, winding path which the natives had cut in the steep face of the rock. At the far end of this cave was an enormous wooden idol, representing a gigantic old man, lying asleep with his head pillowed on his arm. In front of this idol—which was a figure of Buddai—was a massive stone slab, supported on four roughly-carved pillars of wood.

Bound and helpless, the detective was carried into this cave, and laid upon the "stone of sacrifice," as it was called.

For upwards of an hour the natives remained by his side, chanting monotonous dirges, and ever and anon prostrating themselves before the wooden idol. Then the witch-doctor made a sign, and one by one the natives filed out of the cave.

When the last man had departed, the witch doctor examined the detective's bonds, to make sure that they were secure. Then he, too, took his departure, and left Nelson Lee to ponder over his coming fate in solitude and darkness.

CHAPTER 10.

One Good Turn—

NO sooner did the detective find himself alone than he set to work to endeavour to loosen the cords by which he was bound. But the natives had done their work too well. For more than an hour he struggled and strained, but without avail. At last he abandoned the attempt in despair.

"It's no use!" he groaned. "I may as well resign myself to—"

He paused, for at that moment the sound of a stealthy footstep fell on his ears. He held his breath and listened. Was it the witch-doctor coming to have another look at his prisoner? Was it one of the natives drawn to the sacred cave by morbid curiosity? Or was it—could it be?—Dargo, who had overcome his superstitious dread and was coming to release him?

This last thought sent a thrill of exultation through his frame. Every nerve in his body began to tingle with suppressed excitement. He could bear the suspense no longer.

"Who's there?" he demanded in a low, tense whisper.

"Me—Dargo!" said a trembling voice at his elbow.

The detective could scarcely refrain from crying out with mingled relief and thankfulness.

"You have come to set me free?"

"Yes," said Dargo. "You sabe my life, me gib it back to you."

"Nonsense!" said Nelson Lee in an encouraging voice. "You're not going to give your life to me or anybody else. Why should you?"

"Witch-doctor kill me when he know me helped you get away," said Dargo.

"But how's he to know that it was you who helped me to escape?"

"Him find out by him magic," said Dargo simply.

The detective laughed. His spirits were rising by leaps and bounds.

"You seem to have a mighty big respect for that precious witch-doctor of yours," he said. "However, since you're frightened of him finding out that it was you who cheated him out of his prey, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll help me to escape, I'll take you away with me, and you shall be my servant. Will you come?"

"Yes," said Dargo. "Me come."

And bending his head he kissed the detective's pinioned hands.

"Then we'll consider that settled," said Nelson Lee. "Now cut these cords; whilst you're doing so, we'll discuss our plans for escape. What has become of the horse that brought me here?"

"Me left him standing at de bottom ob de hill," said Dargo, as he set to work to sever the detective's bonds. "Me tink you want to ride away when me set you free."

"Quite right," said Nelson Lee approvingly. "You can run as fast as the horse can canter, I suppose?"

"Plenty faster," said Dargo.

"Good!" said the detective. "Then you shall run by my side and act as my guide; and as soon as we reach Nymagee—What's that?"

A sudden flicker of light had illumined the rocky wall at the entrance to the cave.

"Somebody coming up path wid torch!" gasped Dargo, commencing to shiver with fright. "De witch doctor! We're lost!"

"Not a bit of it!" said the detective fiercely. "Quick! Cut these bonds!"

Dargo slashed at the last of the detective's bonds, and an instant later Nelson Lee was free. Quivering with excitement, he leaped down from the stone of sacrifice; but even as he did so the grotesque figure of the witch-doctor appeared at the mouth of the cave, a blazing torch in his uplifted hand, and his evil face distorted with savage and vindictive fury.

Like an arrow from a bow the detective darted towards him. Quick as thought the witch-doctor hurled the torch into the detective's face. Half-blinded by the burning wood, half-dazed by the force of the blow, the detective staggered back and measured his length on the floor of the cave.

The next instant, before Nelson Lee could scramble to his feet, the witch-doctor was scurrying down the narrow path, blowing his horn at one moment and yelling to the natives at another.

Pale with excitement, but in no wise disheartened, the detective picked himself up and darted from the cave, shouting to Dargo to follow him.

By the time they reached the open air, however, the witch-doctor was more than half-way down the hill; and although they could not see him—for the night was pitch dark—they could not only hear his yells and the hooting of his horn, but they could also hear an ominous hum of excited voices, which rapidly swelled into a roar, and which told them only too plainly that the natives had been aroused and were flocking out of their gunyahs like a swarm of angry bees.

The path which led to the sacred cave had been cut out of the solid rock by the labour of the natives. There was nothing in its construction to entitle it to rank as a triumph of engineering. As a matter of fact, it was simply a narrow zigzag ledge of rock, abounding in numerous pitfalls, and nowhere more than three feet wide.

If Dargo had been alone, he would doubtless have been able to reach the foot of the hill as soon, or almost as soon, as the witch-doctor, for he knew every inch of the path and would have found no difficulty in racing down it blindfolded.

It was different with Nelson Lee.

In the first place, the detective had never seen the path in the day-time, and, in the second place, his limbs had been tightly bound for nearly twelve hours, and were consequently stiff and cramped.

The result of all this was that, in spite of Dargo's frenzied appeals for haste, the detective was compelled to grope his way down the treacherous path, with the utmost care and deliberation, since a single false step—as Dargo had warned him—would be followed by instant death.

Presently a torch burst into flame at the foot of the hill. Others followed suit in quick succession, and by the means of their fitful, flickering light the detective saw that the lower end of the path was guarded by a surging crowd of natives, all of whom were armed with spears and boomerangs. The witch-doctor was addressing them in a passionate and excited voice, and ever and anon his hearers gave vent to an angry yell and brandished their spears in a manner that boded ill for Nelson Lee and his companion.

"It's no use going any farther in this direction," said the detective, and, signing to Dargo to halt a moment. "Even if I had my revolver it would be hopeless to try to force our way through that crowd. As it is, it would be downright madness to attempt it."

"What we do, den?" asked Dargo. "Wait here till dey come up to us?"

"No fear!" said Nelson Lee. "Is this the only path on this side of the hill?"

Dargo nodded his head.

"Then we must go back," said the detective.

"To de cave?" asked Dargo.

"No. What I mean is that we must go up the hill instead of down. In other words, we must climb to the top of the hill and try to find some other way of getting down on the other side."

"But how you get to de top of hill?" asked Dargo. "Dis am de only path dere is, and it stops at de cave. Rest ob hill so steep dat eben a squirrel plenty much not able run up."

The detective groaned.

"Do you mean to say," he asked, "that there is absolutely no other way of getting down this hill except by this path?"

Again Dargo nodded his head.

"Dere was no way at all till we make dis path," he said. "If dere been anoder way, we not make dis. But look! Dey come up to fetch us!"

It was true. The natives had sighted them, and were advancing up the path in single file, each man holding a torch in one hand and a spear or boomerang in the other.

"What you do now?" asked Dargo despondently. "You let dem take you back in

cabe and offer you up to Buddai, or you fight till dey kill you?"

"I fight!" said Nelson Lee.

"Me, too!" said Dargo simply. "Plenty much better dat way dan be offered to Buddai."

"You think they'd kill you, then, for attempting to rescue me?"

"Sure," said Dargo. "If dey take us alive dey offer me up to Buddai same time as you. But me not let dem take me alive. Me hab spear and waddy. You take spear and me keep waddy. We wait here till dey come, den we fight, side by side, till we die."

The detective made no reply. He was not listening. He was gazing at a ponderous boulder poised on the edge of the path. The sight of it had given him an idea. Could he and Dargo manage to set it rolling. He decided they could.

"You told me in the cave," he said, turning to Dargo, "that you had brought my horse to the bottom of the hill. Where did you leave it?"

Dargo pointed to a clump of bushes about thirty yards from the foot of the hill.

"Behind those bushes," he said.

"Good!" said Nelson Lee. "Now, listen to me. You and I are now going to dislodge that lump of rock, and send it rolling down the path. In the confusion which will follow we are going to make a desperate attempt to fight our way through to those bushes. If we succeed, we are both going to mount the horse and gallop away. It's a forlorn hope, I admit, but it's the only chance that's open to us. Are you willing to try it?"

Dargo grunted his assent.

"Then lay down your weapons for a moment," said the detective.

Dargo laid down his spear and his waddy. The foremost of the advancing blacks was then but twenty yards below.

"Now, do as I do," said Nelson Lee.

He crouched behind the boulder and applied his left shoulder to it. Dargo followed his example.

"Now, push for all you're worth!" said Nelson Lee.

Suiting the action to the word, he summoned up all his remaining strength, and gave the rocky mass a vigorous, long-sustained push.

Again Dargo followed his example.

For a moment, however, the boulder refused to move; but at last, in response to a herculean thrust, it glided forward an inch or two, came to a standstill, moved again, rocked and swayed from side to side, and then, with a thunderous roar, went rolling down the steep and narrow path.

The scene which ensued was terrible. Like some remorseless Juggernaut, the boulder bounded down the hill, smashing straight into the oncoming warriors. Of the vanguard of the natives not a single man escaped.

Those in the rear, being warned of what was coming, sought safety in a hurried stampede at the foot of the hill. Most of them were successful in reaching level ground

before the boulder overtook them; but many were overwhelmed and crushed, whilst not a few, in their panic-stricken haste, missed their footing on the narrow ledge, and were dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

The instant the boulder darted on its downward career, the detective snatched up Dargo's spear, and flew down the path at the top of his speed. Dargo, armed with his waddy, lost no time in following suit.

Guided by the torches of those below, they reached the foot of the hill without mishap, and a moment later they were charging through the ranks of the panic-stricken natives like a couple of Malays "running amok."

So fierce and impetuous was their onslaught, so well did the detective ply his spear, so ably did Dargo wield his waddy, that the natives were completely demoralised, and almost before they had realised what was happening, the two men had fought their way to the bushes, where they scrambled on to the horse's back—and dashed away at a reckless, breakneck gallop!

At the sight of the horse—which had hitherto escaped their notice—the natives seemed instantly to recover their presence of mind, and in the twinkling of an eye about half a hundred of them were racing after the fugitives, in hot and furious pursuit. For upwards of a mile, however, the latter maintained their lead, and the detective was just beginning to congratulate himself that their escape was as good as accomplished, when a shower of spears came hurtling through the air, and one of them buried itself in the horse's flank.

With a shrill scream of pain, the horse leaped into the air, and so suddenly and unexpectedly that Dargo was unseated, and thrown to the ground. Relieved of half its burden, the horse then bolted through the wood with the fleetness of the wind, and before Nelson Lee could pull him up he had left his dusky comrade a couple of hundred yards behind.

An exultant yell burst from the blacks when they witnessed Dargo's fall. He was on his feet again in an instant, but ere he had time to take cover a boomerang caught him a violent blow on the side of the head, and once more felled him to the ground. Nothing daunted, he scrambled to his feet again, but even as he did so his pursuers dashed up with a whoop of triumph and flung themselves upon him.

Nelson Lee never thought for a moment of riding on and leaving Dargo to his fate. Dargo had risked his life by attempting to save the detective, and the detective was both ready and determined to risk his life in a last attempt to save Dargo. With this end in view, as soon as he had got the horse under control again he wheeled him round, and galloped back towards the scene of the disaster.

By that time the natives had overpowered Dargo by the simple process of stunning him with their waddies. When they saw that

Nelson Lee was coming back, a few of them fled to the shelter of the trees; but the great majority stood their ground, and greeted the detective with a cloud of spears and boomerangs. Amazingly enough, he escaped without a single scratch, and an instant later he burst upon them like a thunder-clap, scattering them to right and left with his spear, like chaffs before the whirlwind.

For a moment it seemed as though his daredevil courage would be crowned with success, for the natives promptly took to their heels in terror-stricken flight. But it was only for a moment, and just as the detective sprang to the ground with the object of lifting Dargo on to the horse, the blacks plucked up their courage and returned to the attack in overwhelming numbers.

Standing over Dargo's prostrate form, with Dargo's spear as his only weapon, the detective defended himself with such vigour and determination that for fully five minutes he kept his assailants at bay. At the end of that time, however, a sudden rush on the part of his foes—who were bent on taking him alive—swept him off his feet, whilst a moment later a crack on the skull with the haft of a spear robbed him of all consciousness, and stretched him senseless by his dusky comrade's side.

CHAPTER 11.

The Dance of Death!

AT the far end of the sacred cave stood the monstrous wooden idol, representing a gigantic old man, lying asleep with his head pillowed on his arm.

In front of this idol stood the stone sacrifice, a massive slab of dark-red stone, supported on four short, thick, roughly-carved wooden legs. In the east wall of the cave was a long, straight, tube-like tunnel, about four inches in diameter. This tunnel communicated with the open air, and was so arranged that every morning, about the time of sunrise, a beam of golden sunlight passed along the tunnel and fell on the idol's face.

The idol was supposed to represent the native god, Buddai, asleep. Inserted in each of the eyes, however, was a large and almost flawless diamond; and once a day, when the first beams of the rising sun fell on those diamonds, and caused them to sparkle, Buddai was said to be awake. Needless to say he did not remain awake for long. As the sun rose higher above the horizon, his rays no longer passed through the tube-like channel, and the moment the diamonds ceased to sparkle Buddai was said to have fallen asleep again.

On those mornings when the sky was clouded and overcast, poor Buddai never woke at all. On the brightest and sunniest mornings, and at the most favourable season of the year, he was never "awake" for more than a couple of minutes. And it was during those two minutes—or less, at certain seasons of the year—that human sacrifices were always offered up to him.

When Nelson Lee's stupor passed away he found that the natives had once more bound

him hand and foot and carried him back to the sacred cave, where they had laid him on the stone of sacrifice. Dargo, similarly pinioned, was lying by his side, and had apparently recovered consciousness some time before. Day was evidently breaking in the world outside, for the cave was filled with an eerie twilight, which was brightening at every minute, and which seemed to suggest that the hour of sunrise was very near at hand.

The witch-doctor was kneeling in front of the idol, with a long-bladed knife in one hand, and a silver bowi in the other. Half a dozen natives were standing on each side of him, each man armed with a hollow gourd, which was partly filled with pebbles.

Behind the stone of sacrifice, covering every inch of the floor space of the cave, was a grovelling crowd of men and women, all of them with their hands clasped behind their heads, and their foreheads pressed to the ground.

"What's going to happen?" asked Nelson Lee, turning his head and addressing Dargo, in a low, tense whisper.

"We are to be offered to Buddai," answered Dargo, without the slightest trace of emotion in his voice. "Buddai sleeping now. By-and-by de witch-doctor gib de signal, and de people dance and shout and sing, and make music. Dat wake Buddai. Den de witch-doctor kill us to gib to Buddai."

He had scarcely finished speaking ere the witch-doctor rose to his feet and signed to the men with the gourds. These men formed the orchestra, so to speak, and the gourds were their musical instruments.

As soon as the witch-doctor gave them their cue, they promptly set to work to rattle the pebbles inside the gourds, and thus produced the music of which Dargo had spoken.

When the music had lasted for two or three minutes, the witch-doctor made another sign. Instantly the grovelling natives leaped to their feet and began to dance the "Corroboree," or "Dance of Death."

Presently, at another sign from the witch-doctor, they broke into a low, monotonous chant, which gradually grew louder and louder until at last every man was yelling and screaming at the top of his voice in a laudible attempt to wake the sleeping Buddai.

Suddenly the witch-doctor held up his hand, and the uproar ceased as if by magic.

For five—ten—fifteen seconds the natives gazed in spellbound expectation at the idol's hideous face. Then a wild, exultant shout burst from their throats.

The diamond eyes had suddenly flashed into dazzling points of light!

"Behold!" cried the witch-doctor, pointing to the glittering eyes. "Great Buddai wakes! In answer to our supplications the mighty one has returned from the land of dreams to receive his people's offerings! What shall we offer unto him?"

"Dargo and the white man!"

The answering shout reverberated through the echoing cave like the roar of the storm-tossed sea.

"It is well," said the witch-doctor, bowing his head.

With slow and solemn steps he advanced to the stone of sacrifice. He placed the silver bowl on the bloodstained slab and laid one hand on the detective's breast. With the other hand he raised his knife in the air, and was just about to plunge it into his victim's heart, when—

Miracle of miracles!

The idol spoke!

"Beware!" it cried in a low-toned, menacing voice. "Your offering is an abomination unto me! Both Dargo and the white man have found favour in my eyes. If a hair of their heads be injured I will blow upon this mountain with my breath and will cause it to fall upon you and overwhelm you!"

A terrific sensation was produced amongst the ignorant and superstitious natives by this startling and apparently supernatural phenomenon.

What had actually happened was a clever performance in ventriloquism on the part of Nelson Lee, who, not for the first time in his career, had used his wonderful skill as a ventriloquist. The natives had never heard of ventriloquism so that they had imagined their god had spoken to them.

For one brief instant they stared at the wooden effigy in awestruck stupefaction. Then, with a shuddering moan of fear, they flung themselves on their faces in abject terror.

After waiting a moment or two, in order to let the "miracle" sink in, the detective once more threw his voice and made the idol speak.

"Hear now my commands!" he said, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Let the white man be released and treated as an honoured guest. Let Dargo also be released and restored to his position as your chief. As for the man who would have slain them, ye shall suffer him to dwell amongst you no more, for his works are evil and his teaching false. Ye shall not molest him if he hasteneth away before the hour of noon, neither shall ye follow him to do violence unto him, but if he tarry in your midst beyond the hour of noon, ye shall slay him with spears."

Again he paused. Not a native stirred. Fear held them spellbound. He glanced at the wooden face of the idol, and saw that the diamond eyes were beginning to grow dim.

Buddai would soon be "asleep" again.

"Wherefore do you tarry to obey my commands?" he thundered. "Thou worker of evil, thou who wouldst have slain my faithful servants, rise and flee, lest I send my lightning to consume thee!"

The witch-doctor leaped to his feet and fled from the cave in panic-stricken terror.

"Now set the prisoners free!" continued the image. "Quick, ere I breathe upon these solid rocks and cause them to fall down on you!"

Almost before the words were out of his mouth a score or more of the natives were

slashing at the cords by which he and Dargo were bound. A moment later they were free.

"It is well! My anger is appeased!" said the idol, speaking for the last time. "I now return to the land of dreams. Farewell!"

The rising sun sent a parting gleam of light into the diamond eyes. For the hundredth part of a second they flashed and sparkled with all their former radiance.

Then suddenly the light was quenched, the glittering gems grew cold and lustreless, and from all the watching throng there burst the sob-like cry:

"Great Buddai sleeps!"

THERE is nothing so fickle as a crowd of human beings, and nothing more uncertain than popularity.

If the natives had been canvassed at the moment when Buddai "woke" and had been asked to vote for the most popular man in the tribe, there is not the slightest doubt that the witch-doctor would have headed the poll.

If a similar vote had been taken after Buddai had "fallen asleep" again, it is equally certain that every man in the cave would have voted for Dargo, and never one for the witch-doctor.

In fact—thanks to the "miracle" Nelson Lee had performed—the tables were completely turned, and the same men who had been thirsting for the blood of Dargo and the detective now fawned upon them and kissed their feet, and ultimately escorted them from the cave with enthusiastic shouts of acclamation.

"This is a red letter day for you, Dargo," said Nelson Lee, when he and the head man had at last been permitted to withdraw into the latter's gunyah. "After what has happened his morning, you'll be a hero in the eyes of your people for the rest of your life."

"Dat's so," said Dargo with a self-complacent wag of the head. "Me sacred person now. My people nebber forget that Buddai spoke for me! Me nebber forget it, too! Plenty much most wonderful ting dat ever happened."

The detective smiled. For one half-second he was tempted to tell Dargo how the miracle had been performed, but, on second thoughts, he deemed it wiser to hold his tongue.

"Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise," he muttered to himself. "If I hadn't thought of that trick I'd never have had the chance to see St. Frank's again, and Dargo would be dead. Why should I spoil it all now? Let the little beggar believe that his god interfered on his behalf."

"You'll have changed your mind now, I suppose?" he said aloud.

"What you mean?" demanded Dargo.

"When you came to the sacred cave last night," said Nelson Lee, "I promised that if you would help me to escape I would take you with me as my servant. At the time you expressed your willingness to go, but you would rather stay with your own people now, I expect."

"Sure," said Dargo. "Me sacred person now. Buddai spoke for me! Me heap more

powerful dan before! De witch-doctor gone, and him nebber dare come back. Why me go?"

"No reason at all," said the detective. "At the same time, I hope I may still rely upon receiving your assistance?"

"For sure," said Dargo again. "Buddai say me gib you plenty honour, and not going to disobey him. We do eberyting you say. If you want to stay——"

"But I don't," said Nelson Lee, interrupting him. "On the contrary, I'm anxious to be off at the earliest possible moment."

"Me understand," said Dargo sadly. "Black men no good for white man."

"Don't talk nonsense," said the detective, laying his hand on the native's shoulder.

"That isn't the reason at all. If I were free to consult my own wishes, there is nothing I should like better than to stay with you for a week or two. But I have work to do—work that demands my immediate attention. Do you know where I was going when your people captured me?"

Dargo shook his head.

"Then I'll tell you," said Nelson Lee. "I was captured by the bushrangers at Macpherson's station yesterday morning. After they had captured me they lashed me to a bare-backed horse, and we set out for the bushrangers secret lair, which is known as the Glen."

"Me now understand," said Dargo. "You were going to de Glen when my people attacked de bushrangers and took you prisoner."

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee.

"What you want us to do?" asked Dargo.

The detective answered his question with another.

"Do you know where the Glen is situated?" he asked.

Again Dargo shook his head.

"Do you think you could find out?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Plenty much too easily," said Dargo. "Me only got to go to de place where my people captured you, and den me follow track on de bushrangers' horses."

"Will you do so?"

"Yes," said Dargo promptly. "Do more dan dat. Take my warriors wid me, and when we come to de Glen, fight de bushrangers and kill dem all."

"Thanks for your offer, but I'd rather you didn't," said Nelson Lee. "I merely want you to show me when the Glen is situated, and then I want you to guide me to the nearest township."

"Me understand," said Dargo. "You find out where de Glen is, and den go to police troopers, and tell dem."

"That's the idea," said Nelson Lee. "A white man enemy of mine named Mark Rymer and one of the bushrangers went to Nymagee yesterday afternoon in order to get the money from the bank. They know nothing of what has happened here, of course, and consequently they are under the impression that I am now at the Glen. It was arranged that they should bring the money

to the Glen at midnight to-night, and I want to be there, with a company of troopers to welcome them. Will you help me to do that?"

"Me will," said Dargo.

He was as good as his word; and as soon as he and the detective had satisfied the cravings of hunger, they took their departure, the detective on his horse, Dargo running by his side.

It was nine o'clock when they reached the spot where Nelson Lee had fallen into the hands of the natives. Rain had fallen during the night, and even to the detective's practised eye the tracks of the bushrangers' horses were no longer visible. To Dargo, however, the trail was as plain as the nose on his face, and for upwards of three hours he trotted along, a yard or two in front of the detective's horse.

Shortly after noon they came within sight of a straggling chain of rugged and precipitous hills. As they drew nearer to this rocky barrier the detective perceived that it was pierced by a number of narrow ravines, and when Dargo came to a halt at the end of one of these ravines, the detective knew that the first part of his task was as good as accomplished.

Bidding Dargo take charge of the horse, the detective dismounted and stole up the ravine, which was no where more than twenty feet wide and was bounded on each side by smooth, bare walls of rock, fully two hundred feet in height.

When he reached the other end he found that the ravine suddenly opened out into a sort of natural amphitheatre, surrounded on every side by towering mountain peaks. In appearance, it was not unlike an enormous basin, planted in the heart of the hills, and, so far as Nelson Lee could see, the only way of getting into it, or out of it, was by means of the narrow, ravine.

On one side of this rocky basin was a row of wooden stables, with corrugated iron roofs. On the other side, nestling at the foot of one of the peaks, was a long, low wooden shanty.

A man was standing at the door of this shanty, smoking an after-dinner pipe. If there had been any lingering doubt in the mind of Nelson Lee as to whether he had found the Glen or not, it would have been banished by the sight of this man. For the man was Bush Billy!

With every nerve strung up to concert pitch, the detective crept back to where he had left his horse.

"So far so good!" he said, as he vaulted into the saddle. "We have found the Glen! Now, take me to the nearest town where there's a police depot."

Dargo pondered for a moment, then trotted off in a northerly direction.

Four hours later he pointed to a distant line of roofs, interspersed with derricks.

"Dat Cobar," he said. "Plenty troopers dere. Me go no farder, now. Not like white men's towns. Go back to my people."



Putting his shoulder to the great boulder, Nelson Lee exerted all his strength and sent the great rock hurtling down on his enemies.

The detective nodded and took farewell of his dusky ally, and rode on unaccompanied. By half-past five he was closeted with the commissioner of the Cobar police, in the latter's cosy office at the depot. By six o'clock he had put the commissioner in full possession of the main facts of the situation.

By seven o'clock the commissioner had mustered a company of twenty armed and mounted troopers, and had placed them at Nelson Lee's disposal.

By a quarter to twelve the little cavalcade,

with Nelson Lee at their head, had reached the ravine which led to the Glen, and had hobbled their horses in a neighbouring coppice.

"We'll wait in this coppice until Professor Rymer arrives," said Nelson Lee. "As soon as we've seen him walk into the trap——"

He paused, and held up a warning hand. A couple of horsemen, plainly visible in the starlight, were approaching the mouth of the ravine. A moment later they had vanished into the narrow defile.

"Trapped at last!" whispered Nelson Lee exultingly. "That man on the right was Mark Rymer! The other was his bushranger guide!"

CHAPTER 12.

The Bushrangers' Lair!

"SO this is the Glen, is it?" asked Mark Rymer, as he and his guide rode leisurely down the star-lit ravine.

"Well, this isn't exactly the Glen," replied the bandit, "but it's a part of the Glen. This gorge leads about two hundred yards further on it, and widens out into a cup-shaped hollow, with sides as steep as the walls of a house. The hollow is what we call the Glen. This is only the entrance hall, in a manner of speaking."

"And a capital entrance hall it is," remarked the professor as he allowed his eyes to wander up the precipitous sides of the ravine. "Half a dozen determined men, entrenched in this narrow ravine, would have no difficulty in keeping a whole army at bay. All the troopers in the world would never be able to force their way into the Glen so long as your ammunition lasted."

"Mebbe not," said Sam indifferently.

"On second thoughts," continued the professor, "it seems to me that, after all, the ease with which this gorge could be made impregnable is a source of weakness to you rather than of strength. Just as it would be impossible for the troopers to force their way into the Glen in the face of opposition, so it would be equally impossible for you and your comrades to force their way out, if the troopers blockaded the entrance and exit. You would be caught like rats in a trap."

"No fear, we wouldn't," said Sam with a scornful laugh. "You don't suppose we're such idiots as to——"

Having said so much, he suddenly checked himself as though it had occurred to him that he was letting his tongue run away with him.

"You were going to say——" said the professor meaningly.

"I was going to say," said Sam, somewhat sullenly, "that afore the troopers can blockade this gorge they've got to find out where it is, which they haven't been able to do up to now, and which they never will. But here we are. This is the Glen. See them sheds over there? Them's the stables for our 'osses. That big one at the end is where we keeps the stuff till we can find a market for it. That wooden shanty on the other side of the hollow is where we eats and sleeps and generally amuses ourselves. Coo ee!"

The door of the shanty in the bushranger's lair stood wide open, for the night was close and sultry, with scarcely a breath of wind.

The yellow light of a paraffin lamp illumined a couple of windows and streamed through the open door.

In answer to the bushranger's hail a dark form silhouetted itself against one of the

windows, vanished, and reappeared in the doorway. It was Bush Billy.

"Is that you, Sam?" he shouted, peering across the intervening twenty yards of darkness.

"Ay, it's me," replied Sam.

"Is that the professor with you?"

"Yes."

"Has he got the money?"

"You bet!"

"Then put up your horses and bring him along in."

The two arrivals stabled their horses, and then walked across to the wooded shant, which was built of rough-hewn logs, and covered with a corrugated iron roof. It consisted, of course, of a single, long, low room, lighted in the daytime by a couple of small square windows, guarded on the inside by a criss-cross of iron bars. Running down the middle was a long, narrow table, flanked by wooden forms. At one end was an old-fashioned cooking-range, which had been "lifted" from a station fifty miles away. At the other end, suspended from the spars of the roof, were a score or more of untidy-looking hammocks.

At the moment when Sam and Mark Rymer entered the room, Bush Billy was standing with his back to the range, immediately underneath a hanging lamp.

The rest of the gang were sitting round the table, some of them playing cards, others playing dominoes and throwing dice, and others cleaning their rifles and revolvers. The hammocks, with one exception, were empty.

"Glad to see you," said Bush Billy, when the two men entered. "Don't shut the door, Sam, for we're well nigh grilled as it is! Take a seat, professor, and help yourself to anything you fancy to drink."

He pointed to a brown stone jar which stood on the table, with a small tin mug by its side. The professor shook his head, and glanced round the room with an eager, anxious stare.

"Where's Nelson Lee?" he asked.

"Oh, he's all right!" replied Bush Billy, jerking his thumb towards one of the hammocks. "He's gone to by-by!"

The professor glanced at the hammock, but the light was dim, and the room was filled with a foggy haze of vile tobacco-smoke. All he could see was a somewhat bulky form, lying in the hammock, and covered with a horse rug.

"Now, professor," said Bush Billy, "if you'll hand over the 'dough,' you can do what you like with that thing in the hammock—just whatever you like!"

The professor produced a canvas bag, from which he shook out a bundle of notes and a double handful of silver coins.

"Five hundred pounds," he said. "That was the sum we agreed upon, I think. Count it, and see that it's right."

Bush Billy counted the heap and announced that it was O.K. He divided the money in equal shares amongst his confederates and himself, then he pulled out his revolver and

his knife and threw them down upon the table in front of the professor.

"Use whichever you like," he said, with a sly wink at his companions.

The professor picked up the knife, and moved towards the hammock. The bushrangers held their breath in gleeful expectation. He stretched out a trembling hand and dragged the horse rug aside. Then he spun round on his heel with an imprecation, whilst at the same instant the bushrangers burst into a blatant roar of loud-voiced laughter.

For that which the professor had uncovered was not the pinioned form of Nelson Lee, but the lifeless carcass of a sheep!

For several moments he stared at the jeering crowd in speechless and vindictive fury. The veins in his high-domed forehead stood out like knotted whipcord. His quivering lips, half-parted in a malignant scowl, revealed two gleaming rows of tightly-clenched teeth. His eyes contracted to the merest slits, whilst the long, thin fingers of his unoccupied hand twined and curled like the tentacles of an octopus feeling for its prey.

At last, however, with a superhuman effort, he regained his self-control. Having tossed the knife on to the table, he folded his arms across his chest, arched his rounded shoulders, and blinked at his tormentors like some half-awakened owl.

"Finished?" said the professor, as the uproar slowly abated. "Very good! And now, having enjoyed your little joke, you will, perhaps, be good enough to explain it!"

"Explain it!" chuckled Bush Billy, whose massive brain had planned the joke. "Bless yer, it don't need explaining! It explains itself! We knew you'd be terribly disappointed if you didn't have something to have a go at, so we provided you with a sheep."

"I still fail to see where the joke comes in," said the professor, striving to speak calmly. "Am I to understand that you have played me false—that you have taken my money, and have allowed Nelson Lee to escape?"

"No fear!" said Bush Billy, with an air of injured innocence. "We ain't such low-down skunks as that!"

"But, you promised——"

"Yes, yes, I know what we promised," said Bush Billy. "But circumstances was too much for us, and we couldn't keep our promise—leastways, we couldn't keep it in the way we arranged, though we've kept it in another. The fact of the matter is that we were set on by a crowd of black fellows on our way to the Glen, and we had to make them a present of Nelson Lee in order to get rid of 'em!"

"You let him go, after promising to keep him until I brought the money?"

"We couldn't help it," said Bush Billy. "If we hadn't let him go the blacks would have took him just the same, and would have took us along with him."

The professor tried to speak, but rage and disappointment choked his utterance.

"Now, don't get nasty," said Bush Billy soothingly. "You've nothing to complain about! So long as Nelson Lee's dead, what odd's does it make whether you knife him yourself, or whether he was cooked and eaten by the blacks?"

"That's just the point," said the professor huskily. "It would make no odds whatever, of course, if I could only be sure that he was dead! But I can't be sure."

"Why not?" demanded Bush Billy. "Haven't I just told you that he was captured by the blacks?"

"But that doesn't prove he's dead."

"Beggin' your pardon, I think it does," said Bush Billy. "I know more about them black fellers than you do, Mister Professor. The tribe what attacked us was cannibals. They don't take prisoners for the fun of the thing. When they capture a white man they treat him the same as I should treat a fat lamb—they kill him and eat him!"

"But Nelson Lee is such a slippery customer," said Mark Rymer. "How do you know that he didn't escape?"

"He did!"

The words rang out the clearness of a bugle call. Their effect was electrical. Mark Rymer reeled across the room as though he had been struck. Bush Billy rapped out a startled oath, and snatched up his revolver. His comrades grabbed their weapons and leaped to their feet, whilst at the same time every eye was turned towards the open door, where Nelson Lee, with arms akimbo, was standing and surveying the scene with a cool and critical stare.

"Good evening," he drawled, with a nod and a smile. "Quite a nice little family party, 'pon my word! Eight, ten, twelve—just a dozen, not including my excellent friend, the professor."

His audacity took their breath away. They thought that he was alone, that he had blundered into the Glen by accident, and they gazed at his unruffled face in mingled admiration for his pluck and amazement at his recklessness in showing himself.

"Look here, boys," cried Bush Billy, thrusting his revolver into his belt, and striking his horny hands together. "I like this fellow's grit, and I'd like to give him a chance of saving himself. What d'you say if we make a ring and let him and the professor fight it out between them?"

Before his confederates could reply the detective spoke again.

"Pardon me," he said, in his most winning manner. "You appear to be labouring under a delusion. I haven't come to the Glen to fight with the professor. I've come to bring you all an invitation to the Cobar lock-up! See?"

He held up his hand, and in the twinkling of an eye four rifle-barrels crashed through each of the two windows, whilst four more of the troopers, who were standing just behind him, levelled their weapons over his shoulders.

"Every man in the shanty is covered, except Mark Rymer," continued the detective, as he whipped out his revolver and levelled it at the professor's head. "And he's covered, now! Under these circumstances you will, doubtless, see the advisability of accepting my invitation without any further fuss. I have only to say the word to drop him!"

Bush Billy, who was standing under the hanging lamp, had suddenly flung up his hand. The trooper who was covering him immediately pressed the trigger of his carbine, but the bullet merely grazed Bush Billy's check, and the next instant, with a single blow of his ponderous fist he had smashed the lamp to smithereens and had plunged the room in utter darkness.

"Look out! They're going to make a rush for it!" yelled Nelson Lee, springing back from the open door. "Stand back a few yards, and give them a volley as they come out!"

The troopers behind him retreated about a dozen yards from the door, and raised their rifles to their shoulders. Instead of the rush which the detective had predicted, however, the door was instantly slammed to and barred and bolted on the inside.

"Stand back from those windows!" roared Nelson Lee. "Quick! Down on your faces, or else——"

The rest of his sentence was drowned by a

perfect hurricane of rifle and revolver shots, for as soon as the bushrangers had barred the door they had turned their weapons towards the windows and had fired a withering volley.

Thanks to the detective's warning shout, however, not a single trooper was hit, and a moment later they had crawled to the spot where Nelson Lee and the others were mounting guard over the door.

"What's their idea?" asked one of the men, addressing Nelson Lee. "Why have they barred themselves in?"

"To gain time, I suppose," said the detective. "They'll be going to make a concerted rush, as soon as they've pulled themselves together, I expect. But they can't escape. There are fifteen of us, here, and six more guarding the entrance to the ravine; so we've only got to wait until they show themselves, and then we can drop them, one by one, as they come out. Of course, we could bring the affair to a speedier conclusion, if you prefer to do so, by attacking the door and breaking it down. But we should be certain to lose lives in the attempt; and I hardly think it's worth while to pay such a price when we can obtain the same result by quietly biding our time. There are only two ways by which they can get out of the shanty—through the door, or through the windows; and they can't get out through either without us seeing them."

"PRISCILLA the PEACEMAKER"

My name is Monty Lowther, I'm a member of the Shell,
And when it comes to making puns, by Jove I'm really swell!
With Merry and with Manners I share Study No. 10,
But they're so dense they only see my humour now and then.
This week it is no joke at all, though other fellows laugh,
For Miss Priscilla Fawcett's here, she's come to stop the
strafe!

She says that we must fight no more, with Figgins or with
Blake,

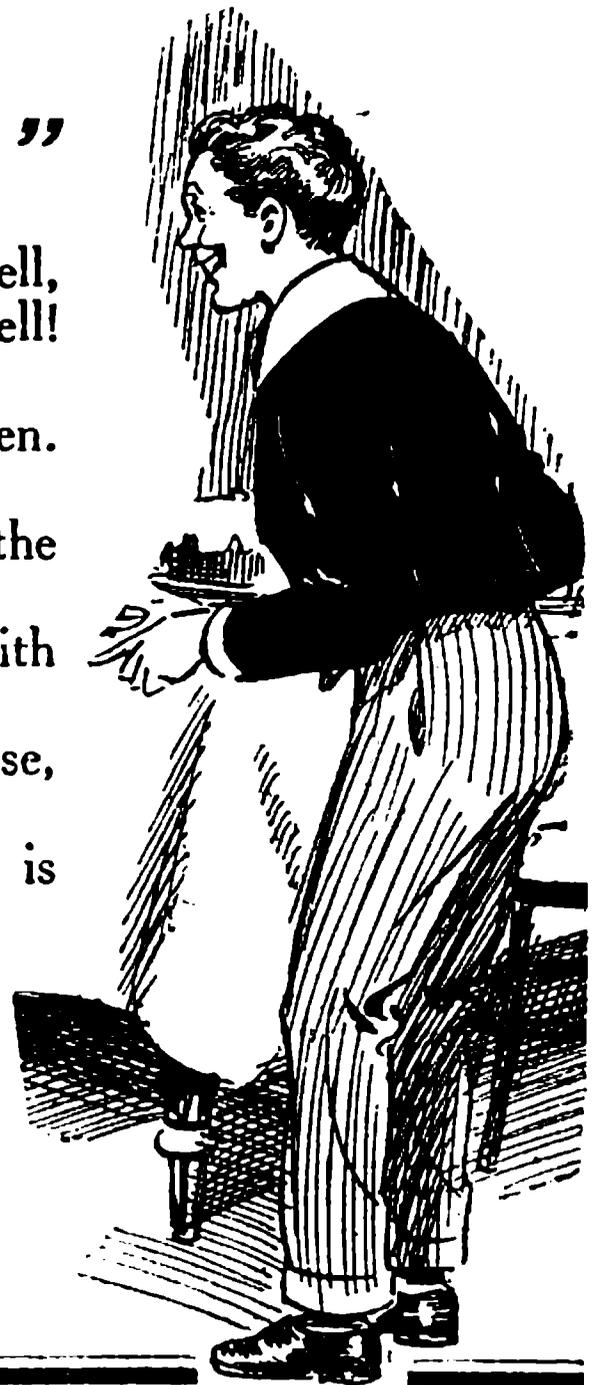
We must be friends with Grammar cads, "Oh, please,
dears, for my sake!"

What can we do? D'you want to know? Well, here is
my advice,

Spend two-pence on this Wednesday's GEM, it's
worth ten times the price!

THE GEM 2d.

EVERY WEDNESDAY



All this sounded plausible enough, and the troopers were unanimous in their approval of Nelson Lee's tactics. When five minutes had elapsed, however, without any move on the part of the beleaguered bushrangers, the detective began to feel very uneasy.

"What in thunder can they be up to?" he muttered to himself. "Surely they're not going to stand a siege, and wait for us to starve them out? Then why don't they try making a rush for it? It's their only chance, and they've had plenty of time to reload their guns and make their plans."

Five more minutes passed. Not a sound could be heard inside the shanty. All was dark and silent as the grave.

"Hang it all, I can't stand this suspense any longer!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "At all risks, I must find out what the beggars are doing."

Bidding the troopers remain at their posts, he crawled on his hands and knees towards the shanty. Upon reaching the door he applied his ear to the outside and listened intently. Still not a sound! Cautiously he raised himself on his knees and peered into the dark interior.

Then a startled cry of mortified surprise burst from his lips.

The shanty was deserted. Bush Billy and his gang, together with Mark Rymer, had disappeared as completely and mysteriously as if they had melted into the air.

WHEN Bush Billy had smashed the lamp and plunged the shanty into darkness, he had yelled to his men to close and bar the door; and when this had been done, a concerted volley of rifle and revolver-fire was directed at the windows.

The next moment he dived beneath the table. There was a sound of shooting bolts and creaking hinges; then a muffled thud, as of wood falling back on wood.

"Now, boys, it's open!" whispered Bush Billy, emerging from beneath the table again. "Down you go, one at a time."

"What about Mister Professor?" asked one of the gang. "Are we going to take him with us?"

Bush Billy scratched his head. In the excitement of the last few minutes he had forgotten Mark Rymer's existence.

"Why, yes, we may as well take him," he said. "He's acted fair by us, and it's only right as we should do the same by him. Down you go, professor."

The professor dropped on his hands and knees and crawled underneath the table. He then saw, as he had already guessed, that Bush Billy had opened a trap-door in the wooden floor of the shanty. From a couple of iron hooks on one side of the opening hung a stout rope-ladder, the lower end of which was lost in utter blackness.

The professor descended the swaying ladder, and presently found himself in a natural, underground vault, about the same size as the shanty.

"Are they still watching the door?" asked

Bush Billy when they were all gathered in the underground cave, addressing Sam, who had been the last to leave the shanty.

"The troopers are," said Sam. "But just as I turned away from the window that detective fellow started to crawl towards the door."

"Then it's time we were making tracks," said Bush Billy. "Pull down that ladder, somebody."

One of his followers seized the ladder and gave it a jerk, which threw it off the hooks and brought it clattering down into the vault.

"What will you do if they pursue you?" asked the professor, who was shivering like a man in the throes of ague.

Before Bush Billy could reply the detective's shout of surprise was heard.

"He's found out that the nest is empty," said Bush Billy excitedly. "They'll be in the shanty in two ticks. In you go, boys! Me and the professor will come last!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Secret Way!

LIKE startled rabbits, scuttling into their burrows, the bushrangers raced across the vault and vanished down a narrow passage. When the last man had disappeared, the professor and Bush Billy followed suit, and almost before they were fairly inside the passage the crash of a bursting door was heard, followed by the tramp of the trooper's feet in the shanty overhead.

"They've broken down the door!" exclaimed the professor, as he and his companions hurried along the passage. "They're in the shanty. Hark! They've discovered the trap-door! Nelson Lee is shouting for a lantern and a rope! They'll be after us in no time!"

"I hope they will!" said Bush Billy grimly. "See that?"

He pointed to a dark object about fifteen or twenty yards farther along the passage.

"That's a barrel of blasting powder," he said. "There's a fuse in the bung-hole, which'll burn for exactly sixty seconds. The rock above is only waiting for a shock to bring it tumbling down. Twig the idea?"

"You're going to blow up the passage?"

"Precisely," said Bush Billy. "That's what the barrel's there for. It's a dodge we always meant to work if ever we were cornered."

By that time they had reached the barrel. A moment later Bush Billy had lit the fuse, and he and Mark Rymer were tearing down the passage.

Twenty—thirty—forty—fifty seconds passed. Then Nelson Lee, with a lantern in one hand and his revolver in the other, appeared at the end of the passage.

"This is the way they've gone!" he cried, turning and addressing the troopers who were swarming down into the vault by means of a rope. "Come along! We'll have them yet!"

Quivering with excitement, he darted down the passage at the top of his speed. Suddenly, however, he checked himself with a gasp of alarm. He had just caught sight of the cask of powder and the smouldering fuse.

"Back—for your lives!" he yelled, wheeling round. "The scoundrels have——"

It was too late. Even as he spoke the gloom was rent by a dazzling flash of light, accompanied by a deafening roar, and followed by an avalanche of flying stones and masses of rock.

So violent was the concussion of the air that Nelson Lee was swept violently off his feet and hurled back into the arms of the troopers who were behind him.

Incredible as it may sound, however, the only injuries he sustained were a number of bruises and a skin-deep wound on the side of the head. That he was not more seriously injured was due, of course, to the fact that there was plenty of space for the powder to explode. If the space had been more confined the damage would have been far greater.

Having hastily bound up his wound, and having ascertained that none of his companions were seriously hurt, the detective set to work to examine the fallen mass, in the hope of finding some way of getting past it. A very brief examination, however, sufficed to show that at least five hundred tons of earth and rock had fallen into the passage, filling it up from side to side and from floor to roof like a tightly-fitting cork. To get past this obstruction, or under it or over it, was impossible. To tunnel a way through it would have needed the services of a steam-navvy and a gang of labourers.

"It's a case of checkmate this time, sir," said one of the troopers ruefully.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," said Nelson Lee. "It's check, I admit. But it remains to be seen whether it's mate. We have still another move left."

"What's that?" cried a dozen eager voices.

The detective placed a pocket compass on the ground and pointed to the quivering needle.

"This portion of the tunnel runs due north and south," he said. "Supposing it continues to run in the same direction to the end, where will it come out?"

"On the other side of the hill at the back of the shanty."

"And what is there on the other side of the hill?"

"The Wangonilla Valley."

"Then the men we are after will ultimately reach the open in Wangonilla Valley?"

"Of course."

"Then that's where we must go."

"But what's the use?" asked one of the troopers. "The valley lies on the other side of the mountain range, and the only way of reaching it from here, now that the passage is blocked, is by riding round by Goodman's Gap, a distance of nearly twenty miles. However fast we ride, we can't possibly reach the other end of this passage under two hours and a half, while Bush Billy and his men will

be there in another twenty minutes at the very outside."

"And what do you suppose they will do when they get there?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Scoot!" said the trooper shortly. "Vamoose—skedaddle—make tracks! Clear out of this part of the country as quickly as ever they can."

"On foot?" said the detective quietly.

"H'm! I'd forgotten they'd left their horses behind," said the trooper. "Still, I don't see how we can hope——" Suddenly he checked himself and a gleam of intelligence flashed into his eyes. "Gosh, I begin to see what you're driving at!" he cried. "Bully for you, Mr. Lee! You've got it in a nutshell! Why, of course, it's as plain as a pikestaff what Bush Billy and his men will do as soon as they reach the open air. They'll make a raid on the nearest station and collar a nag apiece."

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "A bush-ranger without a horse is like a bird without wings. In my opinion, there isn't the slightest room for doubt that as soon as they reach the valley of which you have spoken they will immediately make their way to the nearest station in order to provide themselves with horses. Now, you know the Wangonilla Valley better than I do. Supposing we are right as to the situation of the other end of this passage, which is the likeliest station for them to raid?"

"Tom Bellamy's!" cried all the troopers in one breath.

"And how far is Bellamy's station from the probable outlet of the passage?"

"Eight or nine miles."

"There is no other station nearer?"

"No. It's the only station in the Wangonilla Valley."

"How long will it take them to get there, reckoning from the time they reach the end of the passage? A couple of hours?"

"Every minute of it."

"And we can be there in two hours and half?"

"In two hours and a quarter, at a pinch. It isn't quite so far from here to Bellamy's station as it is from here to the other end of this passage."

"Then what could be simpler?" said Nelson Lee triumphantly. "All we've got to do is to ride to Bellamy's station as quickly as ever we can. The moon will be up in another hour, so that if the road is anything like decent we may possibly reach the station in time to give Bush Billy and his gang a rousing welcome when they arrive. In any case, we certainly ought to be able to reach the station before they have time to clear off with their plunder. Are you game to make the attempt?"

"Yes!"

The answering shout re-echoed through the passage like a salvo of artillery.

"Come on, then!" cried Nelson Lee.

He darted back into the underground vault, and swarmed up the rope into the shanty overhead. The troopers lost no time in fol-

lowing suit, and a moment later they were racing down the starlit ravine towards the plantation in which they had left their horses.

CHAPTER 14.

Nelson Lee's Peril!

"THE Wangouilla Valley!"

It was one of the troopers who spoke, addressing Nelson Lee. They had ridden through Goodman's Gap, and had halted on the edge of an elevated plateau which overlooked the valley. The silver sickle of the waning moon was high in the starry heavens, and the whole valley below lay spread out before them in a picturesque patchwork of pearly white patches of light and black blots of shadow.

From east to west the valley was close upon twenty miles wide. On each side was a lofty range of rugged hills, whilst running down the middle was a broad but shallow river.

The plateau upon which the troopers halted formed one of the lower slopes of one of the hills of the eastern range. At the foot of this range was a narrow belt of virgin forest, about a couple of miles in breadth. Between this forest and the river was an undulating grassy plain with here and there a tiny clump of trees, and here and there a patch of scrub.

On the other side of the river, between the river and the range of hills on the west side of the valley, was an arid wilderness of broken and unfertile ground, thickly covered with prickly scrub, and interspersed with numerous gullies and ravines.

Almost in the middle of the grassy plain, and plainly visible from the trooper's halting place, was a compact block of wooden buildings, roofed with corrugated iron. The back of the buildings, which faced towards the south-east, was bathed in silvery moonlight. The front was immersed in a jet-black mass of shadow.

"That's Tom Bellamy's station," said one of the troopers, as he drew Nelson Lee's attention to this block of buildings. "And unless I'm out of my reckoning—" He pointed to a distant hill at the southern end of the valley. "That's the hill at the back of the shanty in the Glen. If we are right in thinking that the underground passage comes out on this side of that hill, and if Bush Billy and his men are making for Bellamy's station, they ought to be somewhere on a line between that hill and those buildings. I don't see anything of 'em, though."

"Neither do I," said Nelson Lee, after allowing his eyes to travel along the line which the trooper had indicated. "All the same, that doesn't prove that my prophecy was wrong. For anything we know, the bush-whackers may have already—"

The sentence ended in a little gasp, for at that moment the black mass of shadow in

front of the station was suddenly bespangled with five or six flashes of light, which were followed a few seconds later by the clear, crisp crackles of an equal number of rifle-shots.

"There they are!"

A dozen voices uttered the words at the self-same moment.

"But why the deuce are they blazing away like that?" added one of the men. "I should have thought that their wisest plan would have been to have crept round to the paddock or the stables, collared the horses, and ridden away as hard as they could go."

"That's probably what they intended to do," said Nelson Lee. "But Bellamy and his men have evidently seen them coming, or have discovered them at work, and have opened fired on them. All those flashes we saw just now came from the windows of the house. See?"

Again was the darkness in the front of the station bespattered with flashes of light; again was the silence rent by the crackle of rifle fire.

"That was Bush Billy and his men," continued the detective. "They have taken cover some distance in front of the house, and are firing at the windows. By-and-by, if they follow their usual tactics, they'll make a rush and attempt to take the place by storm. Come on! We shall have to ride like the dickens to get there in time!"

Suiting the action to the word, he drove his spurs into his horse's sides, and galloped down the hill at a reckless, dare-devil pace. The troopers promptly followed suit, and a quarter of an hour later they had threaded their way through the gloomy mazes of the forest at the foot of the hill, and were galloping across the moonlit plain.

During the whole of the time that they had been in the forest, the station, of course, had been completely hidden from their view. Even as they rode across the plain they could only catch an occasional glimpse of its corrugated iron roof, for the surface of the ground was undulating and uneven, and the station stood in one of the hollows. On the other hand, though they could not see what was taking place, they could hear the ceaseless rattle of rifle fire, which told them that the fight was still going on, and that Bellamy and his men were still succeeding in keeping the bushrangers at bay.

"We shall be in time, after all!" cried Nelson Lee exultingly. "We can't be more than a couple of miles from the station now. If Bellamy and his men can only hold out for another ten minutes or so—"

He checked himself, and uttered a groan of despair. Whilst he had been speaking the character of the firing had suddenly changed. The rifle fire had ceased, and the angry bark of revolvers had taken its place. For a second or two the air was rent by a perfect pandemonium of shots and shouts, mingled with the clatter of breaking glass and the crash of splintering wood. Then all at once

the tumult died down, and a gravelike silence reigned.

"You spoke too soon, sir," said one of the troopers, riding up to Nelson Lee's side. "Instead of being just in time, we are just too late."

"Too late to save the lives of Bellamy and his men, perhaps," said the detective. "But not too late to settle accounts with Bush Billy and the other murderers!"

The troopers fell back, and a few minutes later they reached the rim of the hollow in which the station stood. This hollow was a good half-mile in diameter, and the station stood in the centre, so that when the troopers came within sight of the house, it was four or five hundred yards away. At the first glance it appeared to be deserted, for most of the bushrangers were rummaging the house in search of plunder, whilst the rest, together with Mark Rymer, were in the stables, selecting the pick of the horses.

"We must first surround the house," began Nelson Lee, but almost before the words had crossed his lips, Mark Rymer emerged from one of the stables, leading Bellamy's favourite horse.

Upon seeing the troopers he raised his voice in a lusty shout of alarm, whilst at the same time he scrambled on to the back of the horse he had already saddled and dashed away up the opposite side of the hollow at a furious breakneck gallop.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Half a dozen bullets instantly flew after him; but his life appeared to be charmed, for he still rode on, apparently uninjured, and a moment later he had gained the crest of the slope, and had vanished into the shelter of a clump of trees.

"Come back!" roared Nelson Lee, as several of the troopers started in pursuit. "Leave the professor to me! You stay here and look after this lot!"

"This lot" was Bush Billy and his gang, who now came flocking out of the house, or out of the stables and outbuildings, like a swarm of frightened bees. Before the scoundrels had time to recover from their surprise, the troopers were amongst them—riding this man down, shooting this man at close range, or clubbing another with the butt-end of a rifle.

Nothing would have given Nelson Lee greater pleasure than to have taken part in that wild and inspiring charge; but he had the professor to look after. With a parting shout of encouragement to his comrades, he galloped off in swift pursuit of the fugitive professor.

By the time he reached the clump of trees into which Mark Rymer had vanished, the latter had passed out at the other side, and was heading straight for the river. He was mounted on Bellamy's favourite horse, which was noted alike for its speed and endurance.

Unknown to the professor, however, the horse had carried its owner upwards of fifty miles that same day, so that it was hardly in the mood or in the condition to extend itself.

On the other hand, the detective's horse—which he had procured from the police depot at Cobar—had already carried him from Cobar to the Glen, and from the Glen to Bellamy's station—a distance of close on sixty miles.

Moreover, the horse which Mark Rymer was riding had been resting for the last half-hour, whilst Nelson Lee's had been "on the go" ever since he had left the Glen.

Half an hour's rest after a hard day's work does not sound much, but it gave the professor an undoubted advantage at the start, and by this time he had reached the river's

COMING NEXT WEDNESDAY!



edge he had increased his lead from five hundred yards to six.

To his dismay, however, the horse pulled up the moment he reached the water's edge and refused to advance another step, which roused all the latent savagery in Mark Rymer's nature. He hacked at the animal's sides with his spurs, and lashed at its flanks with his riding-whip.

Unused to such brutality, the horse began to rear and plunge, to buck and prance and kick—in fact, to do everything except go forwards into the water.

In the meantime, Nelson Lee was gaining ground at every stride. When he saw that his rival's horse had declined to enter the stream, a thrill of triumph shot through his nerves, and he whipped out his revolver.

No sooner had he done so, however, than the light began to fail, and, on glancing up at the sky, he saw to his chagrin that a long black cloud was now in the act of drifting over the moon.

Taking advantage of what little light still remained he took careful aim at Mark Rymer's back, but even as he did so the moon retired behind the clouds, and horse and rider were enveloped in pitch darkness.

The next instant the sound of vigorous splashing fell on his ears and told him that Mark Rymer had at last conquered, and had forced his horse to enter the stream. By the time the detective had persuaded his horse

in this reckless fashion when all at once the moon emerged from behind the clouds and flooded the scene with silvery light. To Mark Rymer's dismay, he then perceived that Nelson Lee was but twenty yards behind him, whilst immediately in front of him—stretching right across his path—was the yawning chasm of a dried-up watercourse.

To clear this chasm, which was fully twenty feet in width, and of unknown depth, seemed a perfect impossibility. What was to be done?

There was no time for hesitation or consideration. One glance sufficed to reveal the situation—one second sufficed for him to make up his mind.

Sitting well in the saddle, he clenched his teeth and rode right for the brink of the chasm. The chasm raced towards him. Digging his heels into his horse's sides, he rose in the air, then dropped safely on the other side.

No sooner had he landed than he reined in his horse, and literally rolled out of the saddle. Quivering with excitement, he scrambled to his feet and whipped out his revolver. By that time the detective had reached the edge of the chasm and was in the act of taking off. As the horse rose for the leap the professor levelled his weapon and fired. What happened next he could not see, for even as he pressed the trigger the moon retired behind the clouds, and inky darkness fell.

But across the darkness there came the scream of a mortally-wounded horse, accompanied by a cry from Nelson Lee, and followed by a rumbling, rolling sound that ended in a sickening crash on the jagged rocks below!

TWELVE hours later Mark Rymer rode into Hermidale, a township on the line between Cobar and Sydney. It was then Wednesday afternoon, and he travelled leisurely by train to Sydney and caught the first available boat to New Zealand.

When he landed at Wellington he wasted no time there, but took train immediately for Napier, where Dick Seymour had last been heard of.

Arrived at Napier, he took up his quarters at the Clarendon Hotel, and, early next morning, he sallied forth, with no Nelson Lee to interfere with his plans, and commenced his quest for Lord Easington's missing heir.

CHAPTER 15.

In New Zealand!

WHEN Mark Rymer had rolled out of his saddle, after completing his leap, sprang to his feet, and whipped out his revolver, Nelson Lee realised what his quarry meant to do. In the twinkling of an eye, though his horse had already risen for the leap, the detective loosed his hold on the reins, kicked his feet out of

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to take to the water, Mark Rymer had gained the opposite bank, and was galloping towards the hills on the western side of the valley.

Between the river and the foot of these hills was a wild and desolate country—an expanse of rugged and uneven ground, fissured with innumerable chasms and crevasses, and thickly covered with a breast-high carpet of stunted scrub.

As the light of the moon was no longer available, the professor, of course, was compelled to proceed with a certain amount of caution, since a single false step might have landed him in one of the crevasses. Eventually, however, hearing the detective thundering after him, urged his horse on, and dashed away at a furious gallop.

About a mile and a half had been covered

the stirrup-irons, and flung himself backwards off the horse's back.

In some respects, it was the narrowest shave he had ever experienced. At the self-same instant as he flung himself off the horse's back, Mark Rymer's bullet buried itself in the animal's neck, and the wounded brute rolled headlong down the side of the chasm, and was dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath. The detective, however, alighted on the small of his back on the very brink of the chasm, with the lower half of his body dangling over the abyss.

For one brief fraction of a second his fate hung in the balance, but, with a superhuman effort, he rolled himself over on his face and dug his finger-nails into the hard, unyielding soil.

Having thus anchored himself, as it were, he paused for a moment to recover his wind; then, inch by inch, he dragged himself over the edge until his safety was assured.

When he attempted to rise to his feet, however, he found to his dismay that he had wrenched his knee to such an extent that walking was impossible. Under these circumstances, it was manifestly impossible for him to continue his pursuit of the professor; and, accordingly, with a heavy heart, he abandoned the chase and started to crawl back on his hands and knees to Bellamy's station.

Shortly before he reached the river he was met by a party of troopers who had been sent to search for him. From these he learned that the whole of Bush Billy's gang, with the exception of Bush Billy himself had either been captured or shot.

Bush Billy, it appeared, had been examining the horses in the paddock, when the troopers had surrounded the station, and as soon as he had heard the sound of firing he had jumped on to one of the horses and had made his escape before his whereabouts had been discovered.

Having carried Nelson Lee to the station, the troopers placed him in the murdered squatter's old car, and drove him in comparative comfort to Cobar. By the time he reached Cobar his knee had swollen to more than double its normal size; and from Wednesday afternoon until Friday night he was compelled to keep his bed, with a cold compress on the injured joint. On Saturday morning, however, he was so much better that the doctor reluctantly gave him permission to leave, and he hastened to Sydney.

What had become of Mark Rymer he did not know, and could not learn. Despite his injury he had not been idle. While lying in bed at Cobar he had sent telegrams to Dudley Sinclair, with the result that when he was able to leave for Sydney there was an aeroplane ready and waiting to take him to the city, thereby saving much valuable time.

Mark Rymer had had several days' start, and to reduce this advantage, Nelson Lee decided to fly to New Zealand, despite the fact that the flight across the Pacific was still something of an achievement, and by no means a common happening.

He had no difficulty in finding an aviator willing to pilot the machine. If Nelson Lee had travelled by liner he would have landed at Wellington, as Mark Rymer had done, and then have wasted time getting to Napier, either by motor or train. The aeroplane, however, could save time by flying direct to Napier, thus actually saving at least two days, if not more, on the journey.

He arrived at Napier a few minutes before seven one evening, and having engaged rooms at the Masonic Hotel, he had just time to look round the city, which had been largely rebuilt after the disastrous earthquake of the year before.

Night came, and under the glow of the lights from shops and lamps, Nelson Lee retraced his steps to his hotel, his mind in a turmoil.

The quest for the Missing Heir had led him into many strange corners of the earth—and full well he realised the bitter struggle that was destined to be fought in New Zealand, and perhaps other parts of the world, before the Easington Fortunes were restored to their rightful owner.

THE END.

(Another extra long, thrill-packed complete story of Nelson Lee, the famous detective, will be found in next week's issue. The story is staged in New Zealand, the South Seas, and New York—and, you bet, the adventures are as thrilling as they are surprising!)

C RRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Georges Jourdan, Lycée de Coutances, Manche, France, wants English correspondents

Geoffrey Armstrong, 3, Dodwell Lane, Bursledon, nr. Southampton, wants correspondents keen on conjuring; Scouts preferred.

Peter Ashe, Haden Cross, Old Hill, Staffs., wants correspondents; interested in the St. Frank's stories, boxing, football, hockey, etc.

B. Wisbey, 349, South Avenue, Southend, Essex, desires correspondents interested in home cinematographs.

Miss Heather White, 3, Church Green East, Redditch, Worcestershire, would like to hear from a girl in Canada.

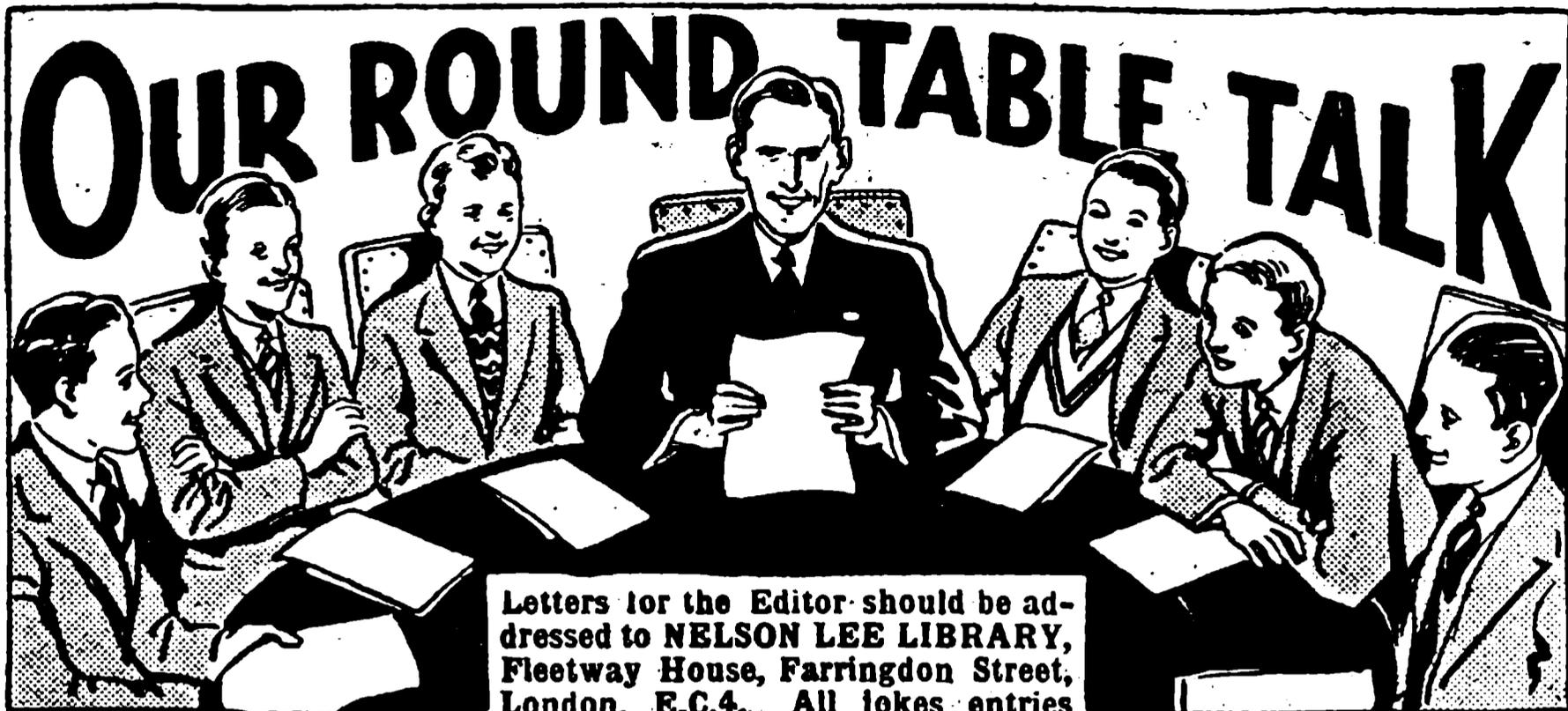
L. R. Haigh, Grove House, Odsal, Bradford, wants to hear from readers who are keen on the old St. Frank's yarns.

Garry Downward, c/o Darriman, Queen Street, Mornington, Victoria, Australia, wishes to correspond with Scouts, also with stamp collectors, and match brand collectors; a reader in British Guiana wanted especially.

Miss Greta Heywood, c/o Darriman, Queen Street, Mornington, Victoria, Australia, would like to hear from Girl Guides.

William M. Donaldson, Kismet, 128, Bay Street, Rockdale, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia, wants correspondents in France and England.

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must be sent to The Joke Editor, **NELSON LEE LIBRARY**, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4.

A Great Triumph!

THREE cheers for the NELSON LEE. We've done it again—we've scored another great triumph. And how? In this week's issue we publish the third of our Special Long Complete Detective-Thrillers which have been featuring the titanic battle between Nelson Lee and his arch-enemy, Professor Rymer.

The stories have been many thousands of words longer—packed full of high-speed thrills and unexpected adventures—and, to quote from only one of the many letters I have received: ". . . I've never enjoyed stories so much. I've always looked forward to reading the LEE every Wednesday. But now—gee, I'm simply crazy about the Old Paper! Good luck! And may we have more like it!"

Yes, that's the essence of every letter that has flooded into this office in response to **THE GREAT IDEA**.

The good old NELSON LEE lives up to its reputation. It is the brightest, best and most up-to-date story paper in the world.

Next Week's Story.

Next week the case of the "Silver Dwarf" gets hotter and hotter. In spite of the tremendous opposition and villainy of his enemy, Professor Rymer, Nelson Lee, the super-detective, has brought off a great triumph in discovering the secret of the little silver statuette. Now, in the search for the missing heir to the fabulous Easington Fortunes, he finds himself up against still more overwhelming odds. But the famous schoolmaster detective is always at his best when up against it, and in next week's story you will find him battling with both fists in New Zealand, the South Seas, and in New York.

Right round the world has he fought, and next week you will read how he fares in

"THE FINAL ROUND!"

Back to St. Frank's.

I should like to mention here that, after the conclusion of Nelson Lee's strange quest, he returns once again to St. Frank's. And what a home-coming the boys prepare for him. Nipper & Co. have been looking forward for weeks to the return of their beloved chief.

Back again at St. Frank's, Lee finds fresh work to be done. There's no rest for the successful detective-schoolmaster. So look out for thrills and surprises.

One last word. As there will be a bigger demand than ever for the Old Paper, I advise you all to make sure of obtaining your copy of next week's issue by ordering in advance—**TO-DAY**, in fact. **RIGHT AWAY!** Done it? Good!

YOUR EDITOR.

WISE LAD.

Guide: "Look, a lion's track!"

Hunter: "You're right. You go and see where the lion went, and I'll see where it came from."

(R. Carvel, 31, Garthland Drive, Glasgow—a pocket wallet.)

OPTIMISTIC.

Old lady: "Why are you crying, my boy?"

Boy: "I want a shilling to go and see my father and mother."

Old lady: "Where are they?"

Boy: "At the cinema."

(J. Allan, Burnside Claredon, by Thurso, Caithness—penknife.)

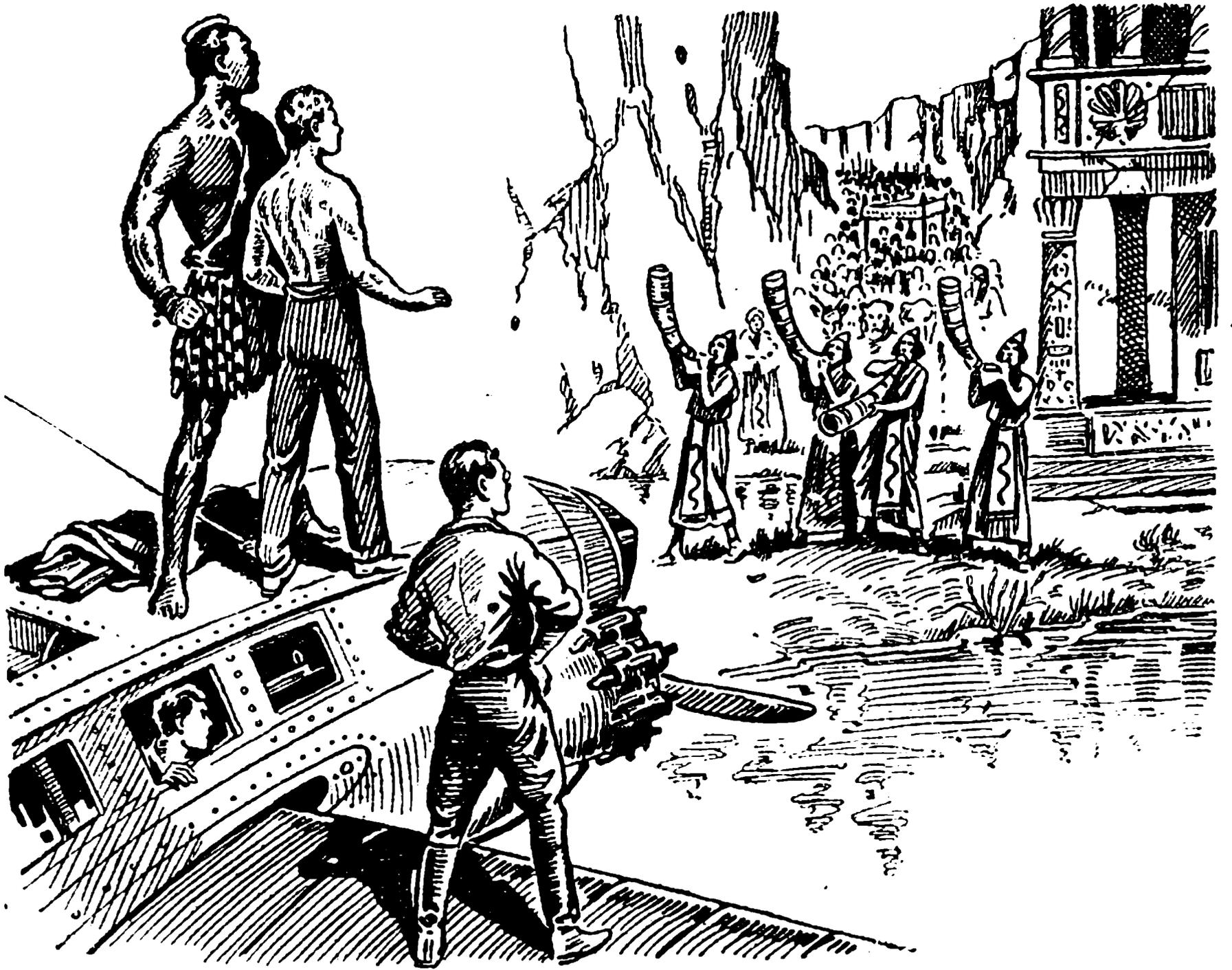
IRON.

Jones: "What would you say a man of mettle is like?"

Brown: "A man with a bronzed complexion, steely eyes, an iron jaw, copper hair and feet like lead!"

(W. R. Kitchener, 3, Claremont Cottages, Biggleswade, Beds—a penknife.)

The CITY of GOLD!



By **HERBERT FORD**

The search for the City of Gold has brought Tom Cook and his cousin Alva Vandeck to Mysterious Africa. When passing along a wide river in their wonder craft, the Flying Fish, they are attacked by cave-dwelling dwarfs. But at the sight of Tom Cook, the dwarfs suddenly cease fire and fall on their knees in homage!

The Rock of Wonder!

WELL!" Tom Cook drew a deep breath of surprise as the Flying Fish churned down the wide African river. He had stood for several minutes on the stern of the wonder craft staring at the fast disappearing shore where he had, only a few moments ago, seen the crowd of dwarfs falling on their knees, and raising their arms high in the air. Their acclamations were still ringing in his ears.

What did it all mean?

"What's up!"

The voice of Al brought him to his senses

again, and he turned with a start, as if pulling himself out of a bad dream.

"I—I dunno what it was, but I had a queer sort o' feeling—as if I had been through all this before and knew what was going to happen next, you know."

"Yep, I know—touch o' the sun," said the practical Alva. "You need a spot o' quinine, old chap. Go and lie down."

"I'm all right; sun be jiggered. I'm used to it. No, it was those poor little midgets—all twisted and scarred—ugh! I wish I could do something for 'em."

"H'mph! They durned nearly did for us, old bean. Take a look at this."

Al had picked up one of the tiny arrows which had fallen upon the deck, and gingerly held it out to his cousin. The sharp-pointed tip was stained with some glue-like substance for half an inch of its length.

"Poisoned, old bean," Al said drily. "If one of these had hit any of us—napoo."

Not knowing if there were any more of the little cliff dwellers about, they carried on at top speed until they had left that dismal canyon behind and had entered a wide stretch of river with great trees lining either side, followed by tracts of beautiful rolling veldt.

They tied up in a peaceful backwater, which was almost a lagoon, and indulged in a bathe, as it seemed free from crocodile. The fresh water and a good meal cleared away the feeling of depression which had affected them all, and afterwards Tom and Al lounged on deck, enjoying the cool breeze which came from over the smiling countryside.

Al seemed to be turning something over in his mind, and presently he asked:

"Say, Tommy, what was the name of your—great-granddad, wasn't it? Him that was guide to the Italian professor?"

"Funny you should ask that," smiled Tom. "Same name as me—Tom Cook."

"How long ago would that be—over a hundred years, I reckon, eh?"

"Ye-es, must be. Dad's fifty; his father was—oh, more'n that and—"

"By hokey, I've got it, old man! I b'lieve that your great-granddad wasn't lost at all, but settled down in these parts and made himself a sort o' little tin god. Those dwarfs yelped out 'Tom Cook' plain as the nose on your face, only they pronounced it 'Tom-Kuk.'"

"Rats! What are you giving me?" jeered Tom uncomfortably. "He died all right—and old Torella came back alone—"

"With a bag full o' diamonds and instructions how to get some more in the City o' Gold," retorted Al triumphantly. "What's more likely than that your ancestor, who was an adventurous sort o' feller, should have been made king? He'd be an intelligent kind o' hombre, with up-to-date arms and gadgets these heathen wouldn't know a thing about. They'd think 'em magical, and mebbe they made him stop among them."

"Aw shucks! Go to sleep—you're dreamin' already," laughed Tom; but, all the same, he lay awake for hours himself, with strange thoughts chasing themselves through his brain. Was there any truth in what his cousin said? That might account for the queer feeling that he had had of having been through all this before.

The morrow brought strange confirmation.

They carried on at a steady pace, the river widening as they travelled on through beautiful pastoral country, varied by kopjes and mountains.

Then, as they rounded a bend in the river, Al let out a yell that brought the others up on deck. He pointed ahead of them.

What looked like a huge rock stood up in the centre of the river bed, with the water rippling around it, whilst a mile lower down a great white building stood glistening in the sun's rays on the northern bank.

But as they neared it, the gigantic "rock"

took shape and form until they could see that it was an immense statue, fashioned in white marble with a glistening gold top to it.

Nearer and nearer they drew until, as they swung round it and Al brought the Fish to a standstill, Lulu let out a yell like a war whoop.

"Baas Tom, baas Tom! Look! That rock is your twin brother!" the Zulu cried; and as Tom stood with the sunlight shining on him, the others stared in awe and amazement.

For that carven marble statue, with the gilded curls, an expression of utmost majesty on the calm face was, feature for feature, the image of Tom as he stood there with his head thrown back and lips parted, gazing in wonderment at the chiselled replica of Tom Cook, his adventurer great-gran'dad.

The City of Gold

AFTER Lulu's first astonished yell neither of them spoke a word, the unexpected sight had bereft them of speech.

Al took a look at his cousin, then back again at the statue, and gasped as he looked—for the noble face seemed to be embued with life! Certainly it's features remained as calm and impassive as ever, but as the eyes stared back at Tom they seemed to have suddenly been filled with the light and understanding of life, and to be looking at the human counterpart with love and welcome.

Then Al's commonsense came to the rescue, and he saw that what had given the eyes their momentary impression of "seeing" was the sun shining direct upon them for a few moments.

Later he discovered that those eyes were diamonds into which had cunningly been inserted a deep blue stone and thus every ray of light would be reflected back from the hard stones and flash out that extraordinary look of living fire.

Now he began to take detailed stock of the heroic figure. It was most beautifully carved, by someone who was a master of the art and the muscles that rippled beneath Tom's white skin were almost line for line reproduced in his graven image. By some process the cheeks

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had been tinted to that same healthy tinge that Tom's wore.

The carven curls that encircled the sculptured head shone golden and were, in fact, solid gold, as was the crown which surmounted them.

Rising from the outstretched right hand and circling the muscled forearm was a golden snake whose fierce head, with wide open, threatening jaws, protruded from the crook of the arm, somewhat in the nature of a sceptre.

Then Al noticed that though the limbs and body showed signs of wear and tear from the stress of weather, the face itself was unmarred.

Afterwards, he found that the "Golden God" was regularly attended to and repaired by a special staff trained for the purpose, so that none of the ravages of the weather showed, so great was the veneration in which the god "Tom the Great" was held.

Then came the interruption, which was to crown that amazing journey with its dramatic climax.

From far in the distance came strains of music.

First the clarion sweet notes of a horn echoed through the hills, then voices raised in song sounded like the mellow treble notes of an organ in the distance, swelling gradually as the hidden choir drew nearer.

"Hallo, I'll bet this is some of the 'Golden Citizens' coming to have a pow-wow with your big twin brother, Tom!" Al called. "What shall we do—take cover 'til they're gone or stop and make their acquaintance?"

"Better stop and face 'em," replied Tom. "If we're goin' to get into the Golden City and find those diamonds we've got to make the acquaintance of these people some time or another, and I've got a motto—'Do it now!' Besides, they may have spies who know we're here, and if we scoot it'll look as if we're funkin' and runnin' away. Greet 'em as friends without showin' any fear, and I reckon they'll be all right. Most natives are like that!"

Al looked at him open-mouthed until he suddenly realised that Tom had not been so much impressed by his extraordinary likeness to the Golden God as were the others. Which, after all, was not so extraordinary, for very few of us know what we look like to others, and Tom came from the wilds where mirrors were not in every-day use! He knew he had golden hair, which, secretly, he was rather ashamed of, and would have clipped close to his head on the rare occasions when he visited a barber!

He had not an atom of conceit, and never realised that his face was well proportioned to a point of handsomeness. Thus he had gazed at and admired the statue, with a dim idea that he had seen a face something like that before, but without the vaguest notion that it was line for line his own!

"Better get the guns handy, but keep 'em out of sight," he said, still standing on the prow of the boat and looking out towards the ravine from which the sounds of music were coming. "I don't know what these Golden Citizens are like, or how they're armed, but I don't expect modern weapons have penetrated as far as this yet! Let's act friendly until they start something—then give 'em soaks, and they'll respect us!"

Al darted below, and he and Ben loaded the compressed air gun and put a supply of the small gas shells handy in case of need.

"You'd better stay below, Ben, and stand by to reload if necessary," said Al; "but I don't reckon we shall need to do any strong arm stuff. But if we do—we'll give it 'em hot—it'll save a lot o' trouble afterwards."

"Okay, baas. Say, ain't it a durned rummy turn about this yer statoo? It fair struck me in the bazooka, it was so like the young baas. Lummy, I had to look round to see that he was ill thar! Wonder how it come thar?"

"I guess we're goin' to do a lot o' wonderin' before we leave these parts, old timer!" said Al drily. "I've got a hunch that there's goin' to be trouble over that very likeness. Just shove an automatic out of sight somewhere and I'll do the same; they may not be needed, but they're handy things to have about the house! Hallo, the choir's comin' nearer!"

He struck his eyeglass in his eye and swaggered on deck with the blunt-nosed automatic handy to his fist.

"I'll bet there'll be some fun when those choir boys spot his nibs!" he chuckled. "Hallo, Lulu's all set for businay!"

Lulu, with the memory of the leprous dwarfs back in the canyon fresh in his memory, had shoved a couple of loaded magazine rifles under a sheet on the prow of the whaleback out of sight but within easy clutch of his huge hand, then took up his stand beside his "young baas."

Al was struck by the contrast between the two figures: the Zulu with his magnificent muscled frame, black as ebony, with his crisp, curly black hair with its warrior's "ring" embedded in the wool and the slight but athletic figure of his golden-haired "baas" with his unusually white skin.

"Chee, but they're both durn fine specimens of their types," thought Al. "Let's hope those Golden Citizens appreciate 'em and don't try any funny business or I shall have to clout 'em! Hallo, here they come. I think I'll just give 'em a toot on the old how-d'ye-do as a sort o' welcome home!"

Defiling down the ravine came a procession led by four tall men bearing great horns banded with gold made of some tusk four or five feet in length. As they came to the end of the pass they raised the horns to their lips and blew a blast which echoed amongst the rocks whilst the voices of the singers held a sustained note in unison, in greeting to the "Golden God."

"Very nice drop o' singin', but I think I can go one better though not so pretty!" grinned Al, and touching the button which operated the siren, he let out a blaring blast. He did not know what impelled him to do it, but he played on that syren as on an instrument, producing a very fair imitation of the "voice" of "Balaam's Ass."

Startled, the four horn players halted staring in amazement at the whalebacked craft which was floating so near their "Golden God." Then they yelled something as one man when they caught sight of Tom standing on the prow. The pushing of the crowd behind sent them forward, however, and they came down to the

little spit of sand which jutted out before the temple on the shore.

Behind them came some twenty or thirty men in white robes, each having the sacred snake embroidered in gold thread on their breasts. These apparently formed the choir, and behind them followed some hundred whose faces could not be seen by reason of the grotesque masks they were wearing. These represented almost every animal found in an African jungle, with here and there the head and open, threatening jaws of the "sacred snake."

Then came a big canopy held up on poles by coal black men nearly seven feet in height. Under this walked a curious and weird figure. It was that of an old, old man, whose wrinkled face was merely a puckered mass of skin stretched over a skeleton face.

But the eyes deep set in the skeleton head were like those of the vulture, darting hither and thither as though seeking out his prey. He was carrying a golden replica of the sacred snake at the top of an ebony staff like a bishop's, though it seemed all too heavy for the fragile frame.

Behind jostled a motley throng, varying in tint from coal black negroes to no deeper tint than the sallow olive skin of a Spaniard or Italian.

Down on their faces went the hornblowers followed by the "choir," whilst behind the canopy the soldiers and common people prostrated themselves. Tom and Al noticed that the curious masked figures backed away behind the canopy and each turned towards the old priest to see what he should do. He made a sign to one of the animal-headed men, who handed him a curiously shaped gilded instrument something like the nozzle of a vacuum cleaner, which he put to his lips.

"A megaphone, begosh!" chuckled Al. "What's he spieling, Tommy?"

"Can't quite follow, though it's remarkably like Bantu," said Tom. "Can you catch it, Lulu?"

"Ja, baas; it's like Bantu, somewhat. Stay but a little and I will tell you what the monkey man says. He speaks too fast until I become accustomed to his tongue."

He stood still with his arms folded across his massive chest, listening intently as the high, piping voice rattled out a tremendous flow of words. Then he cupped his hands and shouted through them:

"Talk slow, my uncle; we are weary and have travelled far and cannot follow your talk, and you do not speak our language. Slow, and I will tell the white men from a far land what you wish."

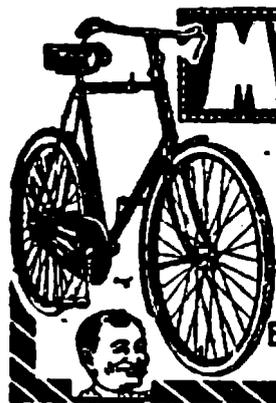
"Hail, strangers that come with the great Tom to visit his people. Once more has the Golden God designed to take upon himself the form of a young man, to come through the passage of The Voice to bring luck to his slaves of the Golden City. All that we have is the god's and those who serve him. His statue has waited still and silent for the coming of Tom, being but a shadow of the Golden God himself. Hail and welcome, Tom; now speak to thy servants and tell us what you would have us do?"

"What in peace is he talking about?" asked Tom in bewilderment. "Who's Tom, anyway?"

"You are, old cock!" cried Al, hopping about with excitement. "You're the livin' spit o' the Golden God. Don't move—stand just where you are. They think you're him come back to life. Chee, what a chance! Keep it up, Tom, and we can do what we like in the Golden City! Here, let's give 'em another toot on the old syren—it seems to do 'em good!"

Once more the braying voice of "Balaam's Ass" rang out, and all the multitude bowed to the earth. The aged High Priest was left standing by himself under his canopy for a moment, then, with a puzzled and curiously venomous glance at Tom he, too, flopped stiffly down on his marrow bones and touched the earth with his forehead.

(Tom Cook and his pals have arrived at last at the Golden City, and here start the most amazing of their adventures. Don't miss next week's chapters of this Gripping Tale of Treasure-hunting in Africa.)



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