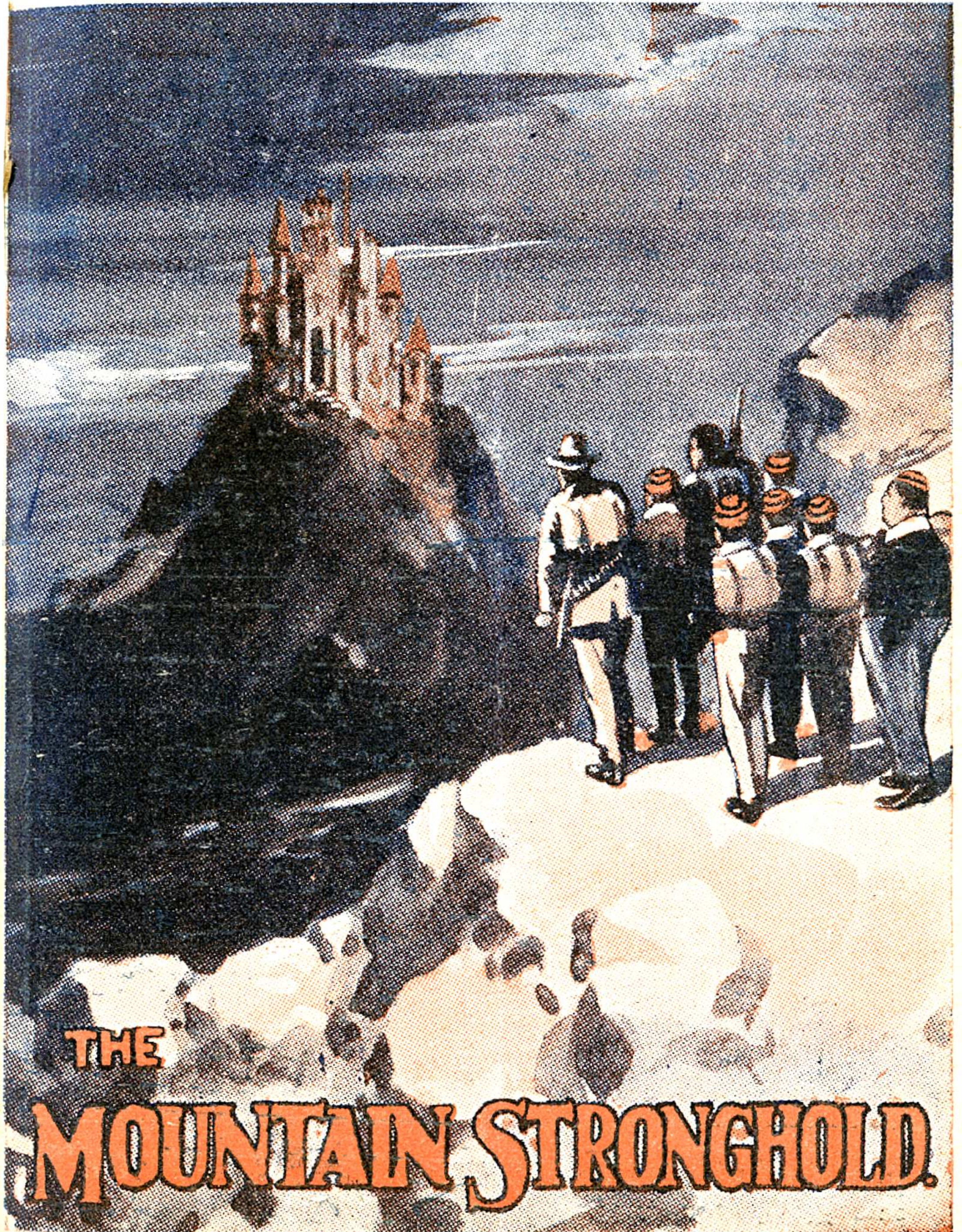


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# THE MOUNTAIN STRONGHOLD

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure, introducing **NELSON LEE, LORD DORRIMORE, NIPPER** and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Fooled at the Finish," "Adrift in Mid-Air," "The Ship of Mystery," and many other Stirring Tales.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

## CHAPTER I.

### ON A BARREN SHORE.

**S**IR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST gazed at his reflection in the mirror with an expression of acute dismay and consternation upon his noble countenance.

"Begad!" he exclaimed. "How truly frightful!"

I looked at Sir Montie critically.

"Not so bad as all that," I said. "Of course, your face might be better, old son; but I've seen many far worse."

"Really, Nipper, old boy, I must protest!" said Tregellis-West stiffly. "You are deliberately misunderstandin' me. I was not referring to my face at all."

"Oh, sorry!" I grinned.

"I was alludin' to my general appearance," went on Tregellis-West. "An' I repeat that it is truly frightful. I look a shockin' sight—I do, really! 'This collar is absolutely beyond all hope, an' I have no change. I was never in such an appallin' fix in all my life."

Sir Montie continued to gaze upon his reflection. It wasn't half so bad as he made out. His face was clean, and his hair was carefully brushed. Certainly, his Eton collar was not everything that could be desired; in the first place, it was far from clean, and it also possessed

a large number of sea-water stains. And, on the top of this, it closely resembled a limp rag.

His necktie, once a glorious thing of exquisite beauty, was now stained and sadly creased; and his Eton suit looked as though it would have been greatly improved by a press.

"It will be utterly impossible for me to venture abroad in this state," went on Sir Montie plaintively. "It simply cannot be done, dear old boy. I look nothing better than a scarecrow!"

"Rats!" said Tommy Watson. "We're all in the same boat, if it comes to that; all our collars are crumpled and dirty. What else can you expect? After being soaked through to the skin by sea-water, a chap can't help looking a bit moth-eaten. The main thing is that we're all safe and sound."

"Hear, hear!" put in Bob Christine cheerfully. "Don't worry, Montie; it won't be long before we go ashore, and then perhaps we'll come upon some shops where you can buy a new outfit."

I chuckled, but Sir Montie brightened up.

"Begad! 'That's a rippin' idea!" he exclaimed. "But do you think we shall be able to find any shops?" he added doubtfully. "By what I can see of the country, it doesn't appear to be over-populated!"

Sir Montie's doubts were justified. The probability of finding a shop where

Eton collars were on sale was an exceedingly slim one. My noble chum would probably have to wait until he reached England before obtaining his new outfit.

All the other members of the St. Frank's party were in a similar plight with regard to clothing and clean linen. We had all suffered many adventures and excitements of late, and, among other things, we had been drenched through by sea-water—and sea-water does not improve the appearance of starched linen.

And, unfortunately, we had no change of attire. We had started out on this trip on board the airship, Suffolk Queen, fondly imagining that we were merely bound for a six hours' cruise over the English countryside.

But fate had decided otherwise.

It is not necessary for me to describe all that happened to us in detail, for I have done so already. We had met with many strange and startling adventures, and the most remarkable fact of all was that we were all safe and unharmed.

Strictly speaking, and according to all the rules of chance, we ought to have been dead several times over; but a kindly Providence had watched over us and had pulled us through many perils unscathed.

The first disaster had been when the airship attempted to effect a landing shortly after the start, the pilot having decided to come down, owing to the fact that a rapid change in the weather conditions had come about.

Also, before we knew where we were the airship had struck the ground, and her forward power plant was put out of action. By this time most members of her crew had swarmed down ropes to the ground. Then the wind had lifted the gigantic gasbag, and had sent it down with stunning force.

This resulted in the complete smash-up of the two power cars in the rear, to say nothing of disabling the elevators and the rudders. The airship was now helpless — unsteerable, unmanageable, and without power. She was, in short, in very much the same position as an old-fashioned balloon.

In one very important respect, however, the balloon had a distinct advantage, for the pilot could rest her engines without very much danger to his passengers. It was a very different matter

with an enormous rigid airship of the Suffolk Queen type.

To attempt to land in a wind, without any means of control, would be suicidal, for the great ship would drag along the ground and smash itself to atoms before any of the passengers had a chance.

When the airship had gone off in that way it had on board twenty-five souls, and sixteen of these were St. Frank's juniors, including myself. The others were Handforth and Co., Reginald Pitt, Farman, Fatty Little, Bob Christine and Co., Lawrence, and several others.

The remaining nine were men, consisting of Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrinore, Captain Mason—the pilot of the airship—three officers, named Morgan, Leighton, and Bateman, and three engineers.

I had been in the central saloon with the other fellows, and we had had an extraordinary voyage. After passing over the North Sea, over Holland and South Germany, the night had come on, and we had finally found ourselves many hundreds of miles from our starting point, hovering over the Adriatic Sea.

We had maintained a good height at first, but now the gas containers were leaking, and the airship was driven lower and lower, in spite of all Captain Mason's efforts to give the vessel added buoyancy.

Finally, a gust of wind had tipped the airship almost on end, her nose rising high in the air, and her stern touching the water. Once this happened, there was no hope of saving the craft.

She rapidly settled down into the sea; but not before everybody on board had had time to climb on the top of the great envelope. And there we had remained, high and dry, until a schooner had appeared, with all sails set.

Strangely enough, the schooner butted full tilt into the airship wreckage, and we were thus able to scramble on board without even getting our feet wet. Luck was certainly with us.

To our utter astonishment, we discovered that the schooner was abandoned. Not a soul was on board—at least, so it had appeared at first sight. And yet the vessel was in perfect condition; she was by no means a wreck. Everything was intact, and all her sails were set.

This had been a great mystery to

start with, but, later, Nelson Lee had managed to ascertain some very significant facts. For we discovered that the schooner contained a large cargo of small-arms and ammunition—revolvers and rifles, for the most part, and thousands of cases of cartridges.

This had been startling enough in itself, but, on the top of this, we found that a large quantity of high explosive was stored well below the water-line, and this deadly charge was connected up with an electric battery and a clock. In short, it was a kind of infernal machine, timed to go off at a given hour.

But, unfortunately for the men who had planned the disaster, the clock had struck work half an hour before the appointed time. Thus the explosion had never taken place, and we had been provided with a haven of refuge. But for the fact that this schooner came along we should undoubtedly have perished.

And even this was not the end of our adventures, for a most extraordinary individual had been discovered on board—a madman, apparently, in ragged clothing, and with overgrown hair and beard. Everything indicated that he had been kept a prisoner for some months, and that he had been placed on the schooner so that he should be blown up with the ship.

It was Nelson Lee's theory that the poor man had been imprisoned below, with the full knowledge that the vessel was to be sent sky high. And this knowledge turned his brain; the agonising wait for the last terrible moment had been too much for him, and his mind had given way.

A hair-cut and a shave had brought about an amazing revelation, for Nelson Lee recognised the man now as Paul, Crown Prince of Mordania! This was certainly startling, but not entirely unconnected with the other facts concerning the abandoned schooner.

For, earlier, Nelson Lee had come upon a scrap of paper bearing a roughly executed design, which represented a flaming torch. This was the sign of the Tagossa, a dreaded Mordanian secret society.

Personally, I knew very little about the Tagossa, and everybody else on board knew less—with the exception of Nelson Lee. He, however, was well acquainted with the subject, since he

made it his business to be familiar with all secret societies and criminal organisations.

We had no time to go into the matter, for a fierce storm arose, driving the schooner before it. And, to put it in a few words, we were finally driven ashore on a rough and rugged coast, which Nelson Lee believed to be the coast of Mordania. It was rather a curious coincidence, and not without significance.

The schooner had gone ashore in a very curious way. The tide happened to be at the full, and the vessel, after being lifted on the crest of a huge wave, was driven forward and wedged firmly in the rocks. And there she remained, the tide receding rapidly, and leaving her beyond the reach of the defeated sea.

It was not morning, and we had been a fixture on the rocks for several hours. So far we were safe, and there was no danger; but the wind was still blowing with tremendous ferocity, and the sea was dangerously rough.

The tide, of course, was now fully out, and it would not return until five or six hours had elapsed. There was no immediate hurry, and, finding that the danger was over, we partook of food, and dried our clothing.

Most of the fellows were on deck, quite cheerful and light-hearted. Sir Montie Tregellis-West, however, found it difficult to drag himself away from the mirror. Not that he was charmed with his reflection; he was fascinated by it, in a dreadful kind of way. He was a bit of a dandy, and it would fill him with mortification to appear in public in his present condition.

"Come on, Montie; you've seen enough of yourself, I should think!" I exclaimed briskly. "Let's get out of this stuffy cabin, and go on deck. If you gaze into that mirror much longer, you'll probably crack it!"

Sir Montie sighed.

"But, dear old boy, I can't go on deck—I can't, really!" he protested. "I'm a frightful sight, an' it would fill me with horror to appear before the public gaze—"

"Rubbish!" I interrupted. "You ought to see Handforth! He hasn't got a collar at all, and he looks a perfect wreck. What does it matter? We shan't meet any strangers—and, even if we do, they won't take any notice.

Shipwrecked mariners can't look at their best, you know."

"I suppose you're right, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "After all, we have some excuse for looking so frightful, haven't we? But I'm afraid people won't understand, an' they'll think I'm appallin'ly untidy."

I grinned, seized Sir Montie by the arm, and dragged him out of the cabin. Then we went up the companion, and on deck. We found Handforth and Co. and several other juniors standing against the side of the ship, chatting together.

Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Captain Mason were up on the poop, in earnest conversation. They were apparently discussing ways and means; they were deciding what the next move was to be.

"Well, we're in a pretty pickle now," Handforth was saying. "I don't like to be pessimistic, but it's my opinion that we sha'n't see civilisation again for weeks. Things have gone from bad to worse."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said De Valerie. "We're safe and sound, anyhow, and there's not much prospect of further danger. It's simply a question of finding a native village, being put on a road to a big town, and then we can get on a train and be home in less than a week."

Pitt nodded.

"If we do that, we shall only be a day or two late for the new term at St. Frank's," he said. "My hat! What yarns we shall be able to tell the other chaps when we get home. I don't suppose we shall be believed!"

"Never mind about that," said Bob Christine. "The thing which is worrying me is this: What are our people thinking?"

"Oh, I suppose they reckon we're all dead!" said Church.

"That's all they can think," went on Christine. "Ever since we started we haven't been able to send a word home; we've never had an opportunity of communicating with England. Consequently, they're all in a state of doubt

"I don't know about that," I interrupted thoughtfully. "It's quite likely that one or two steamers saw the wreckage of the airship before it sank. If so, they certainly reported the matter, and

that report would be sent to England without delay. Accordingly, everybody at home must take it for granted that we went down with the Suffolk Queen. But it ought not to be long now before we can send messages home."

Our position was indeed a curious one.

Owing to our peculiar adventures, we had not been in a position to communicate with home. We had thought it possible that we should cross the path of a steamer, but we had not done so. And the schooner, not being fitted with wireless, had held us silent; and now, to cap everything, we had been shipwrecked on a barren shore, which did not look at all promising.

I strolled up on to the poop, and approached Nelson Lee and the others. They were still talking seriously, but Nelson Lee turned as I came up.

"What's the programme, sir?" I asked. "Are we going to remain on board, or go ashore? It's got to be one or the other."

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"There is only one course open to us, Nipper," he replied. "We must all leave this ship before the tide returns. The sea is still rough, and it is quite possible that the vessel will break up when the tide comes in. We can afford to take no chances; we must go ashore, and leave the rest to luck."

I gazed over the side of the ship, and realised why Nelson Lee's tone was so serious. Certainly, the scenery was not gratifying, although, in a sinister kind of way, it was grand and impressive.

The schooner was perched high on the rocks, wedged firmly on an even keel, and, between her and the high cliffs which rose at the shore, there were piles and piles of seaweed-smothered rocks, but no large stretches of water. Innumerable pools, of course; but it would be a comparatively easy matter for us all to walk ashore with only obtaining wet feet on our journey.

In the other direction lay the sea, rough and angry, with "white horses" chasing themselves by the thousand. There was every prospect of a fierce high tide, and Nelson Lee was quite right when he said it would be too risky to remain on board.

The battering of the waves would probably dislodge the schooner from her perch, and then, with her timbers stove in, she would fill like a sieve and rapidly

break to pieces. There would be no chance for us under those circumstances.

Away beyond the cliffs I could catch glimpses of a wild and rugged country, with high mountains rising in the far background. There was not a sign of any living soul—not a house, not any indication of inhabitants.

Nelson Lee knew this coast slightly, for he had been down the Adriatic more than once, and he declared quite positively that we were now in Mordania. And this meant a great deal more than appeared at first sight.

"What do you think will happen when we go ashore, sir?" I asked. "Shall we be able to strike a road, and then get to a railway—"

"That's what I've been saying," put in Lord Dorrimore. "But your respected gov'nor scoffs at the idea and politely informs me not to talk out of the back of my neck. By all reports, Mordania is a trifle less civilised than the cannibal country at the back of the Congo!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"My dear Dorrie, you exaggerate in the most outrageous manner," he said. "Mordania is a very peculiar country, and it is practically unknown to the average European—indeed, very few men have ever penetrated into its grim recesses. The inner secrets of the country are like a sealed book to most people."

"But, surely we can get out of this country—we can cross the border into Greece, or Serbia, or some other place?" I exclaimed. "I don't exactly know where Mordania is situated on the map—"

"And a great many people are in a similar plight," put in Nelson Lee. "As a matter of fact, Mordania does not appear on many maps. It is a very insignificant little spot, hardly worth noticing, when one is gazing at a map of Europe. But to be in Mordania itself is a very different proposition. One does not find it so small then—and certainly not insignificant."

"It seems to be somewhat inaccessible," put in Captain Mason.

"It is more than that," said Nelson Lee. "Were it not for the people, we could, perhaps, get over the border and reach civilisation. And even then we should have a tremendous task, for in Mordania there are no recognised roads or highways. As for a railway track,

such a thing does not exist in the whole country; it could not exist, owing to the wildly mountainous nature of the ground. Even supposing that we are not molested, we shall have a giant's task before us in crossing these mountains to the border."

"And what if we are molested?" asked Captain Mason.

"We cannot possibly conjecture what the result will be," replied Nelson Lee gravely. "At the present moment Mordania is practically ruled by the Tagossa, and that murderous society does not allow strangers over the border. They are shot at sight, or else captured and held prisoners."

"That sounds frightfully cheerful," said Dorrie.

"Well, we must look at the facts, and we must be prepared," said Lee. "There is no sense in minimising the dangers, or bluffing ourselves that our position is a happy one. It is not; and the sooner we realise the exact truth the better. This is the very last place on the map I should have chosen as a landing spot; but fate decided that we should come here, and we can say nothing. After all, we must consider ourselves lucky, for I expected to be dead long since."

"And you propose going ashore almost at once?" asked Dorrie.

"Yes."

"Shall we take anything with us?"

"Naturally, we shall take a supply of food—as much as we can reasonably carry," said Lee. "Water, of course, we shall find in plenty, but food will be practically unobtainable in the mountains. I propose, therefore, that we lose no time in making a respectable parcel for every member of our party; and then we'll pick our way over these rocks and get ashore. To remain on board until the tide comes in would be madness itself. The time for talking is over; we must act."

Lord Dorrimore heaved a sigh.

"Thank goodness!" he exclaimed.

"Chin-wagging always makes me tired. And now for some hard work—there's nothing like it for keeping a fellow's pecker up."

It was not long before we were all busy. The ship's stores were systematically raided, and great parcels were made for every member of the party, including the juniors. We took enough food with

us to last about a week, providing we rationed ourselves carefully.

And Nelson Lee also insisted upon all the men of the party carrying two revolvers apiece. There were plenty of these weapons at hand—many thousands, in fact. They were splendid revolvers; all brand new.

I carried two on my own person, but the other juniors were not allowed to have firearms. They did not know how to use them, so, in any case, they would have been a mere incumbrance. We were also supplied with a fair amount of ammunition. It was just as well to be prepared for any emergencies.

At about noon everything was ready.

We all had our parcels strapped to our backs, and nothing remained except for us to go ashore and commence our journey into the unknown. Where it would lead us we did not know, and we started off from the ship with a feeling of uncertainty in our hearts.

## CHAPTER II.

### INTO THE UNKNOWN.

**T**HE journey across the rocks was not so simple as it appeared.

The ship was about two hundred yards from the dry shore, and the intervening space was covered with jagged rocks, which, for the most part, were smothered with slimy seaweed. And it proved a slippery business.

We stumbled and staggered on, our loads causing us a great deal of inconvenience. And it was necessary to go with extreme caution, for in places there were deep gulleys, where the water was lying in treacherous pools. One unwary step, and we should be plunged in.

This would not necessarily mean that any one of us would meet with real disaster, but we did not want to get soaked through again. And so we took the journey carefully, and struggled on, testing each footstep before we went forward.

And at last we arrived on the beach, above the high water mark. Now, looking back, the schooner presented a strange sight. She was perched up there on the rocks, with the well behind.

And she looked far more perilous now. It would seem that a series of big waves would send her toppling over; and for us to be on board when such an occurrence took place would be fatal. It would be impossible to get ashore when the tide was at the full.

Some of the juniors wanted to wait; they were anxious to remain until the tide came in, to see whether the schooner would survive or not. But Nelson Lee would have none of this.

"No, boys; we must go ahead," he said. "We must get as far into the interior as possible before nightfall. I do not know what adventures will befall us, but you may be sure that I shall do my best to protect you from danger. Under the present circumstances, we have only one course, and that is to go forward and to discover our exact whereabouts. Then, perhaps, we shall be able to reach a recognised town, where we can communicate with the outside world, and where we can make a real start for home."

There was sound sense in what Nelson Lee said, and so we started off.

The cliffs, as we had seen at first, were not sheer; they sloped back in ragged and fantastic formations, and it seemed quite an easy task to climb to the top. But, at close quarters, it was not so easy, after all.

At first we found the going possible, for the ground was rough and firm, and sloped back considerably; but, as we mounted higher, the surface became loose, and it was only with extreme difficulty that we kept our feet.

Shortly afterwards Nelson Lee called a halt.

We had plenty of rope with us, and we formed ourselves into a number of parties, and each party was securely roped together. Thus, in the event of one member falling, the others would be able to save him—in the same style as the Alpine climbers adopt.

This was a necessary precaution, for a hasty step on that loose ground, and one would go slithering down with ever-gathering speed, to finally crash below on the rocks, and receive deadly injuries.

Being roped together, however, made the task much safer.

"There's only one danger," remarked Handforth, after we had restarted. "If Fatty Little happens to fall, he'll drag everybody else with him; we can't pos-



sibly stand against his weight!"

"That's all right," grinned Pitt. "The rope will break before he drags anybody!"

Fatty made no objections to this banter, and, as a matter of fact, he was as agile and sure-footed as anybody. In spite of his bulk, he was wonderfully active on his feet, and as agile as any normal being.

He carried an enormous parcel, for, as he said, he needed double the amount of food; his system required a far larger amount of sustenance than any ordinary fellow. And as we all carried our own supply, Fatty's was accordingly much larger in proportion. But he made no objection; carrying food was a pleasure to him.

Yard by yard we went up the cliff, struggling over onwards, and finding no lack of minor excitements. For every row and again one or other of us would make a false step; there would be a slip, and then a sudden tightening of the ropes. But, notwithstanding these little difficulties, we continued onwards.

And at last, perspiring freely, and with aching limbs, we reached the summit of the cliffs; and here we paused for a rest, and gazed about us with great interest. Far below lay the schooner, looking like a mere toy now, with the sea lapping closer and closer, for the tide was returning.

On the other hand lay the unknown region upon which we were entering—a vast, awe-inspiring land of bare hills and valleys. The air was singularly clear, and we could see for miles.

Right in front of us stretched a long slope, leading to a valley. At the bottom of this valley ran a swift river, with many picturesque waterfalls here and there. There were very few trees to be seen, and the grasses were coarse and sparse.

It would be necessary for us to go down into this valley, and then climb up the further hillside, at the top of which were perched high rocks and jagged peaks. A more desolate scene could hardly be imagined.

Of life there was no sign, except for a few birds. Not a human being, not an animal, and not the trace of any roadway or human habitation. It was a scene of desolation—a scene which filled us with doubts and troubled thoughts.

"Not a very promising aspect, my boys," said Nelson Lee. "But we must go on, and hope for the best. Perhaps, after we have crossed those peaks in the distance, we may find a more alluring landscape to gaze upon. We shall see. I judge that it will take us until nightfall to cross this valley and reach the peaks."

"Nightfall!" echoed Handforth. "Why, sir, it's not far! We ought to do it in an hour or two. The ground is fairly rough, but nothing like the cliffs we have just scaled."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I think you will find that you are mistaken, Handforth," he said. "Distances are very deceptive in a country like this. It appears to be but a matter of two or three miles across this valley. As a matter of fact, it is probably eight or nine miles, if it is an inch. This ultra clear atmosphere gives one a false impression. And now we must go on."

Fatty Little looked startled.

"But ain't we going to have some grub now, sir?" he asked blankly.

"Not yet, my boy," smiled Nelson Lee. "We must wait until four o'clock, at least—and that will be in about another two hours."

"Oh, great pancakes!" groaned Fatty. "I'm starving already!"

"A little exercise will bring your superfluous fat down, my son," said Pitt cheerfully. "And when we do call a halt for food, we shall have to keep a sharp eye on you. That parcel of yours has got to last a week, probably, and we're not going to let you scoff the whole lot up at one sitting."

Fatty Little heaved a sigh.

"I never bargained for anything like this!" he said plaintively. "By the time evening comes I shall be nothing better than a wreck. But as for this parcel lasting me a week, the idea is simply ridiculous. Great doughnuts! I shall be a shadow in less than three days."

"A pretty solid shadow, anyhow," said Church. "Get a move on, my son, and don't jaw so much. Perhaps we shall come upon a town or a village before long, and then we can hire some guides and carriers. Then we sha'n't need to trouble about grub at all."

Fatty Little brightened up considerably, and he went on his way even smiling. The thought of obtaining

plentiful supplies of food kept his spirits up in a wonderful manner.

And we started down into the valley with high hopes.

This, at all events, applies to the juniors, for hope never dies in the youthful breast. Perhaps Nelson Lee and Dorrie were not quite so confident in their own hearts; but they never uttered a word that would bring discouragement to the others.

We were in a bad fix, and we knew it. Getting gloomy wouldn't make things better; all we had to do was to keep smiling and plod along.

The journey into the valley was not so difficult; the going was fairly good on the whole, although, of course, there was no sign of any roadway, or even a path. Boulders lay about in confusion, and the surface upon which we were walking was of a varied character—sometimes grassy, but more frequently consisting of loose gravel and hard rock.

As we went down, so the opposite hills appeared to decrease in size. This is a phenomenon always noticeable in such circumstances. I have myself frequently observed the same effect when motor cycling on the peaceful country roads of England.

But, at the same time, it was certain that we had an arduous task in front of us. The very absence of other human beings made us feel cut off from the world. It hardly seemed possible that such a country as this could exist in Europe.

But we were in the Balkans; and there are many astonishing things to be seen even in that quarter of the world. It seemed impossible that we could go on for very long without coming upon a settlement of some kind.

Nelson Lee was not deceived by the appearance of the landscape. At first glance it seemed that no town or village could exist at all; but in a mountainous country of this kind a general view is impossible.

And one may suddenly come upon a sleepy little town, perched in a ridiculous position, high on a mountain side. It makes a stranger wonder how on earth such a town ever came to be built. But there are hundreds of these curious hillside towns and villages among the mountains.

Therefore, at any moment we might come within sight of some such place.

We didn't know. At one minute we might be staring into a barren waste, and then, without warning, we might be gazing upon a crowded collection of whitewashed houses, apparently clinging to the mountain side.

By the time we got right into the valley an hour or two had elapsed, and we were feeling hungry, thirsty, and tremendously tired. We were unaccustomed to the exercise, and our loads were appallingly heavy.

At first they had seemed slight, and we had made nothing of them; we reckoned that we could carry the burdens without feeling any undue fatigue. But in actual practice it was very different.

Our parcels seemed to grow heavier and heavier, until now they positively weighed us down and made every movement an effort.

But a short rest and some food and drink made a wonderful difference; we were refreshed and ready for further efforts. And when we restarted we had before us a more difficult task, for we had to climb the hillside, which stretched up, mile after mile. And the ground was rough, and we knew well enough that we should be weary to the point of exhaustion by the time we arrived at the summit.

But our only course was to go ahead. We started off in double file, Nelson Lee and Dorrie leading, and all the others following behind in even numbers. The juniors, of course, did their utmost to cheer things up. Some of them joked, and six or seven commenced singing, and before long half the fellows were roaring a popular song at the top of their voices, swinging to it with a will.

Nelson Lee smiled as he turned round.

"A very excellent plan, boys; but you must not overdo it," he said. "Sing, if you wish; but sing softly. I can assure you that you will need all your reserve of breath; there is no necessity to waste energy."

And so, after a while, we continued onwards, with everybody humming and whistling; but before long a little incident occurred which put an abrupt stop to the singing, and which caused everybody to think deeply.

We had been going about an hour, and were well on our way up the mountainous hillside; then Bob Christine

suddenly paused in his stride and stared away towards the left. Handforth, who was coming just behind, bumped forcibly into Christine.

"You--you ass!" snorted Handforth. "What's the idea of stopping like that?"

"I thought I saw something---"

"Well, you'd better be more careful! I bashed my nose into your beastly parcel!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "If you ain't careful, my son, I'll jolly soon show you what I can do, you blessed Monk!"

"Now then--no House rows now, Handy!" I grinned. "We're not at St. Frank's."

Nelson Lee turned, for he was now some distance ahead.

"Why are you stopping, boys?" he called out.

"I just saw something over there, sir," shouted Christine, pointing; "something white among the rocks. I wondered what it could be. Only a piece of chalk, I suppose, or a white stone."

I looked in the direction, and saw the object which had attracted Christine's attention. It appeared to be round and smooth, and about the size of a large turnip. It was certainly a peculiar-looking object.

I walked in the direction, and the others followed. And then suddenly I broke into a run, for I had recognised the character of that white round thing. I caught my breath in sharply as I came to a halt, and stared round amongst the rocks.

"Oh, my goodness!" ejaculated Handforth, running up.

"Great Scott!"

"A--a human skeleton!"

The juniors collected round, and suddenly became silent. The object upon which they were looking was, indeed, a human skeleton, bleached white by the action of the weather and the sun. Partially clinging to it were some shreds of clothing, faded beyond all recognition.

"It must have been here for years," I said in a low voice. "Some poor traveller, I dare say, who lost his way and died from hunger."

I don't know why it was, but we all spoke in whispers; and then Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore came up, with the other members of the party behind. We all stood round, watching silently,

while Nelson Lee bent over the pitiful bones.

"Dear me!" murmured the gov'nor. "This man did not die of hunger or exhaustion. Do you see this, Dorrie?"

Lee moved the skull slightly, and we could then see that there was a hole almost in the centre of the forehead. Undoubtedly it was a bullet hole; the man had been shot dead. It was an unpleasant discovery.

We continued to gaze at the ominous remains in a fascinated kind of way. What story was there attached to this skeleton? In my mind, I could picture the man walking along the bare, rocky ground, then suddenly a rifle shot, the man had fallen, to lay there, exposed to the weather and sun. And this was the result.

Nelson Lee was about to move away when he paused. He suddenly bent down, picked up a flat piece of rock. It was a curiously formed boulder, with one perfectly flat surface, and upon this, obviously scratched by some sharp instrument, was a crude design. It was the sign of a flaming torch! The weather had not affected it in the slightest degree, for, to all intents and purposes, it was engraved upon the stone.

"The Tagossa!" muttered Dorrie.

"Without the slightest doubt," said Nelson Lee. "I think it proves beyond question that we are actually in Mor-dania. This unfortunate man was probably escaping from the Tagossa when he was overtaken by pursuers. The rest, of course, followed quickly. He was shot down, and left where he fell."

"Well, there's one consolation," put in Captain Mason. "This proves that we're not the only human beings who have passed this way. Perhaps we shall come upon a settlement, or something, before long. I'm infernally curious to know exactly where I am, and what chance we have of reaching civilisation."

When we went on our way again we did not sing any more. We could not help thinking of those bones among the rocks--of the man who had been shot down by the Tagossa; and it was some little time before we recovered our spirits.

The hours crept on, and the day drew to a close. The wind still came fiercely, but, fortunately, it was behind us, and helped rather than hindered. Overhead

the sky was cloudy and threatening, and we all felt certain that with night-fall more rain would pelt down.

The prospect was by no means a cheerful one.

The darkness was premature; long before the real darkness was due, the whole landscape became dim and indistinct. We could not see right into the distance as we had done at first.

But we were now nearly at the top of the hill. Many of the juniors only kept going because they did not like to admit defeat; but they were done—absolutely whacked, as De Valerie put it.

It was as much as they could do to drag one leg behind the other, and every effort was an agony. It had been a hard, strenuous day, and we all needed rest—sleep. And what prospect was there before us?

A wild, rocky landscape, with no shelter, and with a grim promise of rain in the air, our plight seemed to be a bad one indeed. And at last we mounted the top of the hill, and could see beyond.

The view was not exactly promising.

In every direction rose the mountain peaks with valleys and gulleys, black and inky in the dim evening light; but no sign of a town or village—no sign of any human habitation.

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Watson. "It's worse than ever!"

"Dear old boy, it seems that you are right," said Sir Montie wearily. "What a frightful ass I was to worry about my appearance! Begad! There's nobody to see me, except ourselves!"

We walked on, since there was nothing else to do; then Nelson Lee came to a halt, and stood staring away towards the right of our position. I could see a tall peak of rock rising close at hand, and I wondered why the gov'nor was so interested in it.

But, as I soon discovered, he was not looking at this peak at all, but at something beyond, which had suddenly come into view, and which, at the moment, was invisible to the rest of us.

When we did see it, we all shouted with surprise and joy.

Running forward, I obtained a better view. That peak of rock had obstructed our vision, but I was now beyond it, and there, about a mile distant, a most extraordinary sight met our gaze.

A curiously formed hill rose up high

from the surrounding country—a kind of hill which, I believe, is popularly called a "sugar loaf." It rose fairly steeply, and its sides were of black rock. And there, built right upon the top of this sugar loaf, was a building.

But what a building!

It reminded me of the pictures one sees in a volume of fairy stories, with towers and turrets, and tiny, slit-like windows. It was a picturesque, mediæval building, and it looked like a fairy palace to us, for it was a haven; we could find rest there, and shelter.

Actually, the place was gloomy and forbidding, but we did not see this at the time. We only knew that it was a civilised habitation, and behind those grim walls there would be warmth and hot food and comfortable beds.

It had a wonderfully stimulating effect upon us. Our loads seemed to lighten as we walked, and our legs regained their normal strength and steadiness. We marched on, eager and filled with hope.

The whole aspect of things had changed.

For now we should be able to find out where we actually were; we should be able to obtain guides; we should be set upon our right path. In fact, everything seemed rosy just then; our troubles were over!

Fortunately for us, we did not know the actual truth, so we went on with light hearts. And we covered the ground in a very short time, and scarcely took any notice of the fact that rain was now beginning to fall.

By the time we reached that curious rock the rain was pelting down in real earnest, and the darkness had set in grimly. But we were not out in the open now, we told ourselves; we were not in a barren waste, but upon the point of getting behind closed doors, where the storm could do its worst.

We were cheered by the fact that smoke was rising from one or two chimneys, and, although the peculiar-shaped windows were shuttered, a chink or two of warm light came out here and there. The place was inhabited—that was an undoubted fact.

"By Jingo, what luck!" said Pitt. "I don't care who these people are—Mordanians, or anything else. They can't possibly refuse to give us shelter. And in the morning we shall be refreshed, and ready for further efforts."

"Rather!" put in Church. "And the main thing is that we shall get guides, and we shall be set on the right road to real civilisation."

We found the approach to the quaint building a very difficult one. There was no road or pathway, and we wondered how on earth the inhabitants ever got in and out. Probably they did not stir from the place for months on end, for this was no ordinary building.

"What do you think it is, old man?" asked Dorrie, as they drew near.

"Without a doubt, a monastery," replied Nelson Lee, in a low voice. "And, to be quite frank, Dorrie, I don't much care for the look of things."

Dorrie stared.

"Why, what do you mean?" he asked.

"There is no telling what these monks will do," replied Lee. "I am even afraid that we shall not be able to gain admittance. We are strangers—outsiders. Possibly these fanatical people will not allow us to enter their precincts."

"Oh, but hang it all, they couldn't possibly refuse," protested his lordship. "We're wayfarers in distress. Nobody would have the heart to leave us out in this rain and cold. Why, I positively believe that it would be the finish of some of these boys!"

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"That is why I am so concerned, Dorrie," he replied. "To spend the night out here is impossible. But what can we do if the people in this monastery will not allow us to enter?"

"We could break in!"

"Do you think so?" said Nelson Lee, with a grim smile. "My dear fellow, this place is a stronghold in the mountains—a veritable fortress. See for yourself! What chance is there for an attacking party so small as ours? Even supposing we were driven to such measures, we could not hope to succeed. The walls are of solid stone, with all the windows fully twenty or thirty feet above the ground level. There is the door, it is true; but the door is barred, and, unless my eyes are mistaken, there are great iron gates in addition."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "Then we've been hopin' in vain."

"No, I don't say that. I only fear that an entry may not be so simple as you all appear to think," said Nelson Lee. "But we shall soon find out."

By this time they were right in front of the massive door. It had been a stiff climb up the steeply sloping rock, but now that we were at the top we found ourselves upon a kind of wide ledge of rock, flat and smooth, which appeared to encircle the entire building.

And, facing us, there was the door—a huge, massive affair of solid oak, with iron studs and bindings; and, in front of it, there was built a great double gate of wrought iron. This gate itself was at least twelve feet in height, surmounted by cruel, jagged spikes.

"My only hat!" muttered Tommy Watson. "How the dickens can we get in?"

"Oh, leave it to Mr. Lee!" said Pitt confidently.

Nelson Lee found a kind of bell-pull near the gate—a great knob which projected from the wrought ironwork. He seized this, and pulled it with all his strength. It worked rustily, but with a certain amount of spring, clearly proving that it was not out of action.

Our ears, too, told us that the thing was working.

For, dim and far away, we heard a faint clanging sound; and, if we could hear it out here, there could be no doubt that it was plainly audible to those within the monastery. It could not be long before the door was opened.

We waited.

Five minutes passed. Nelson Lee had again pulled the bell, but there was no response. And now we were getting soaked, chilled, and despondent; it seemed that no notice was to be taken of our appeal. This was extraordinary—at least, it seemed so to the juniors.

Nelson Lee was not surprised, for he had been anticipating something of the kind. Peal after peal clanged out within the building, but we received no sign whatever that we had been heard.

True, the chinks of light still beamed behind the shuttered windows, high above, but the door in front of us remained fixed and immovable, and the rain pelted down pitilessly.

"Well, this is a fine go!" said Dorrie. "We might just as well be out in the mountains. The infernal ruffians! Don't they possess hearts? Why, the savages of Africa are more hospitable!"

"We do not know all the facts, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "You must remember that the Tagossa is abroad."

Possibly these monks live in constant terror of interference from that dreadful band. Under such circumstances, they may have decided to ignore all peals of the bell, and to remain silent."

"But we're not the Tagossa!" protested Dorrie.

"No; but these monks are suspicious," said Lee. "They may believe that it is an attempt to trick them."

"Well, they've only got to examine us, and they'll soon see that we're perfectly harmless," said Dorrie. "They might at least open the door and find out exactly who we are. By gad! If they don't, there'll be trouble!"

But still no sign came from the monastery, and it was obvious that the inhabitants had no intention of appearing.

What could we do?

Out there in the pouring rain, so tired that we could hardly stand, our position seemed to be worse than ever, for we were practically within arms' reach of shelter and comfort.

And yet it was absolutely impossible for us to enter!

### CHAPTER III.

#### STRANGE HOSTS.

NELSON LEE was looking very serious when the juniors crowded round him. They could not understand why no answer had come to the peals of the bell, and it was only natural that they should turn to Nelson Lee with eager questions.

"Aren't they going to let us in, sir?" asked De Valerie wearily. "We can't stay out here all night—it would be the finish of Talmadge. He's in a terrible state now, poor chap!"

Nelson Lee glanced at Talmadge, who, indeed, was feeling the effects of the difficult journey very severely. He had only just managed to keep on the go towards the last, assisted by Bob Christine and Yorke. And now he was leaning against his two chums, pale, shivering, and almost exhausted.

And he was not the only fellow who was in this state.

Oldfield and McClure were just about done up and Tommy Watson and Pitt

stood huddled together with chattering teeth, chilled to the marrow. If they were compelled to remain in the open throughout the night they would all be in a raging fever by the morning.

Exposure of that kind, after their hardships, would be more than they could stand. It was therefore positively vital that shelter should be obtained, and with as little delay as possible.

But what was to be done?

We could not break down the gates, and, even supposing such a herculean task was possible, we should never be able to smash down the door. Dorrie suggested that we should fire our revolvers in a continuous volley at the door. He argued that this would attract a great deal of attention, and the monks would probably come out to find what was wrong.

But Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm afraid that would be the very worst possible move, Dorrie," he said. "It would lead these monks to think that we were indeed a hostile party, and they would never open the door to us. No, we must think of some other method."

"But, my dear, good chap, there is no other method," objected his lordship.

"We will see."

And, to begin with, Nelson Lee led the way round the wide rock ledge. He thought it probable that another entrance lay at the other side of the building—in any case, it was worth trying.

By this time we had, of course, unburdened ourselves. Our parcels lay in an untidy pile near the big gates. It was a great relief to be free; but, even so, many of the juniors found it difficult to drag themselves along the ledge.

Personally, I was fairly all right, although I was certainly very tired. But I suppose I am more accustomed to hardships than other fellows, having served a pretty strenuous apprenticeship with Nelson Lee; moreover, I have travelled in many strange parts of the world.

Our hopes were by no means raised when we found another doorway at the back of the monastery, for this door seemed even more impregnable than the other. It was a very curious door, being cut into a solid rock at the base of a deep recess. The door itself was made of iron, apparently, and it

sounded absolutely solid when we thudded our fists against it.

It was difficult to see, owing to the darkness, but Nelson Lee improved matters by producing an electric torch. He flashed the light of this upon the door, and then we could see that about halfway up there existed a tiny opening, covered by a slide. The front was heavily barred. Apparently this slide could be pushed back, thus allowing anybody within to inspect suspicious callers without running any risk.

"It doesn't seem to be any good staying here, Lee," said Lord Dorriemore. "There's no bell, and we could hammer on this door for ages without making ourselves heard. I vote we go back to the front, and continue clanging that bally boll until they get fed up and answer it!"

"We will do that if we gain no success here," said Nelson Lee. "But the front is very exposed, whilst here we are completely sheltered from the wind and the rain. In this tunnel-like recess we are safe from the elements, and I am quite sure the boys will be glad of a short rest."

"Rather, sir!" said Christine.

"Let's stay here for a bit, sir!"

"The infernal ruffians!" exclaimed Captain Mason indignantly. "I thought these monks were religious, and that one of their specialities was to render aid to the sick and the weary. They appear to be as heartless as the rock upon which their monastery is built!"

"There may be a reason for their strange behaviour," said Lee. "I can hardly think that they would act in this way under ordinary circumstances."

A combined assault was made upon the door. It was hammered fiercely with revolver butts, and the noise was considerable. At first no notice was taken, and the monastery might have been a deserted ruin, for all the attention we received.

But then, just as Nelson Lee and Dorrie were about to recommence the onslaught, the iron slide shot back, revealing a black, barred cavity, about eight inches square. A curious shaped lantern was held up, and behind this appeared a wizened old face, covered by a grey hood.

"At last!" breathed Dorrie. "Thank goodness!"

Everybody remained silent. The juniors stood round, gazing eagerly at

the little grating. After their hopeless wait they were filled by the thought that they were about to be admitted.

The man in the grey hood did not utter a word. He stood there motionless, only a portion of his face being visible. It was clear that he was examining us, although the light from his lamp was not penetrating, and he could not have formed a very clear opinion as to our characters.

But Nelson Lee came to his assistance. He flashed the light of his electric torch upon us one by one, with the idea, apparently, of showing the old monk that we were not brigands.

"We need shelter," said Nelson Lee, at length. "Perhaps you will be good enough to allow us to enter?"

The old monk shook his head.

It was clear that he could not understand, and then Nelson Lee tried him in several languages, including French, Russian, Italian. The monk nodded, but his face remained fixed and grim.

"Who are you, and what is it you require?" he asked in Italian, although this was apparently not his own language. "This is the Monastery of St. Peter, and we cannot give admittance to strangers——"

"But surely you will make an exception in this case?" interrupted Nelson Lee quickly. "We are not hostile; we have no intention of harming you. All we need is shelter and rest. As you will see, my party consists mainly of boys. For them to be exposed during the night in this weather would be fatal."

"Why are you here?" asked the old monk. "You are English? How is it that you are in Mordania? It is dangerous for you to be wandering in the mountains. Why did you come into this country?"

"We came because we could do nothing else," replied Lee. "Our ship was wrecked on the coast, and our only course was to go inland. This monastery is the first habitation that we have sighted. You must give us shelter—I demand it. You cannot possibly refuse!"

The old monk did not reply at once. He continued his inspection, and at last he apparently came to the conclusion that we were quite harmless. But while he was arriving at this decision it was an anxious time for us all.

And at last the slide was shot back

into position. We stared at one another blankly.

"Good heavens!" muttered Tommy Watson. "He's not going to let us in, after all!"

"The awful brute!" snorted Handforth. "Why, if I could get at him, I'd—I'd——"

"Listen!" interrupted Church huskily.

But there was no need to be particularly quiet, for we could distinctly hear the sound of heavy bolts being shot back.

The door was being opened!

"By gad, old man, you are right!" whispered Dorrie. "It was the best thing for us to remain here, although why on earth the old idiot should be so long in opening the door is a mystery to me. Do we look like brigands? Do we look dangerous?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, our appearance is not all that could be desired," he replied. "If you could only see yourself in a mirror, Dorrie, you would probably receive a shock. You look an awful ruffian!"

"Thanks!" said Dorrie. "I won't say what you look like!"

The door slowly opened, its great iron hinges creaking rustily. Evidently the door hadn't been used for many months. It was pushed back, revealing a narrow stone passage, with a domed roof, and the monk stood there in his long grey cloak and cowl, a somewhat sinister figure.

"You may enter!" he said gravely.

"We will give you shelter."

"Thank you!" said Nelson Lee. "We will follow you."

"What's that he said?" whispered Handforth. "I can't understand Russian!"

"You ass!" muttered Church. "They were talking in Italian."

"Oh, well, it's the same thing," said Handforth. "What did they say?"

"How the dickens should I know?" replied Church. "I don't care—we've got in, and that's all that matters. By Jingo! I hope we have something hot to drink—tea or coffee, or something!"

We passed in one by one, for the passage was so narrow that it was necessary for us to go in single file. Nelson Lee briefly gave us instructions, and repeated them in Italian for our host's benefit. We were going along the pas-

sage until we were all inside, and then came to a halt.

And this is what we did.

I was the last of the juniors to enter; then came Mr. Morgan and the other two officers, the three men and Captain Mason. The unfortunate Prince Paul—the man we had found on the schooner—entered next, with Dorrie and Nelson Lee to bring up the rear.

And a very peculiar thing happened at this point.

Prince Paul was still quite out of his mind. He could not speak; he had entirely lost the use of his tongue, and his eyes were vacant and expressionless. Yet we had had no trouble with him; he had marched with the rest of us without raising any objections. Being dumb, he could not very well do so, but he had showed no sign that he disliked the proceedings. He was haggard and tired, and passed in through the doorway in a mechanical kind of way.

But then, as he came opposite to the monk, the latter looked at him squarely, in the light of the peculiar lantern. Then the monk showed the first sign that he was capable of emotion.

His wrinkled old face changed colour, and he started. Then, holding the lamp up, he gazed eagerly into the face of Prince Paul.

The next moment he was speaking rapidly in a language which I could not understand. He put question after question to the prince, but the latter took no notice. He did not seem to understand that he was being addressed.

But Nelson Lee had been listening intently, and he nodded and glanced at Dorrie.

"Did you hear?" he asked softly. "We were right, old man. The unfortunate man from the schooner is indeed Prince Paul of Mordania. Our host has recognised him. See!"

The monk was now bowing low, and making every sign of humble obedience. But Prince Paul remained perfectly unaffected by this display.

"I'm afraid the prince does not understand," said Nelson Lee, in Italian. "His royal highness has been through great hardships, and it is to be feared that his mind is affected."

"Why did you not tell me that Prince Paul was with you?" asked the old monk, now speaking with much greater respect in his voice. "I tender a thou-



sand apologies, sir! I was unaware of the true nature of things!"

"Perhaps, after we have been allowed to dry our clothing, we may discuss matters at greater length," said Nelson Lee; "but, at the moment, I am deeply anxious concerning the younger members of my party. I urge you to waste no time."

Our host bowed.

"It shall be as you wish," he said gravely. "No time shall be wasted. I am grieved that our noble prince should be in this distressing condition, but, maybe, he will recover."

The monk bowed again, and then led the way down the narrow passage. He made his way, to begin with, past the juniors, and then headed the little procession. For we moved along in single file, going apparently right into the heart of the rock. According to my calculations, we were actually beneath the monastery, for the rock ledge outside had sloped down steeply towards the rear, bringing us to a much lower level. The rear door was twelve or fifteen feet below the main entrance.

It seemed that the passage would never come to an end. We went on and on, turning corners and negotiating bends, with the monk always keeping in advance, walking in an exasperatingly stately manner. Certainly, he did not hurry himself.

But at last the grim passage came to an end, and we found ourselves mounting a flight of worn stone steps. They wound upwards in circular fashion, finally terminating in a heavy open door.

We passed through into a large apartment, which, it seemed, was a kind of hall, although whether this was at the rear or the front of the building we could not tell. It was bare in the extreme, and singularly comfortless.

Only two or three candles were burning, and the corners were dim and shadowy. The floor was of stone, and the walls grey and cheerless. But the atmosphere, much to our gratification, was warm, and, after the wild night outside, the place seemed a glorious haven of luxury. We gave no attention to details at such a time as this.

But, although the other fellows were not greatly interested in their surroundings, I took care to notice everything. The hall was devoid of furniture, unless two bare oaken benches can be called

by that name. Fortunately, however, we were not destined to remain here.

For, without pausing, the monk led the way across the hall, through another doorway, and into a high apartment.

This was more cheerfully lighted, having two powerful lamps burning, and, in addition, a great fire was blazing in an open grate. In the centre of the room stood a long table, covered with some rich cloth; and there were plenty of chairs in all parts of the room—hard, comfortless chairs, but strong and substantial.

"Sit down, boys," said Nelson Lee. "You others sit down, too. I will converse with our host, and see what can be done. The first thing is to see about a complete change of clothing——"

"What about food, sir?" asked Fatty Little anxiously.

"Food is of secondary importance, my boy," replied Lee. "What we need more than anything else at present is dry clothing."

"Oh, great pancakes!" groaned Fatty. "I can't wait any longer—and we've left all the grub outside. What an ass I was not to stick tight to my parcel!"

Nelson Lee took no notice of Fatty Little's complaints. He turned towards the old monk once more, but then discovered that that curious old individual had vanished. We were quite alone in the big room.

"Which way did he go, Dorrie?" asked Lee.

"Through that doorway over there," replied his lordship. "But I don't suppose he will be long; he's probably making some arrangements with the housekeeper. I suppose these places have a housekeeper, or somebody to attend to such matters. By gad! What a frightful place to spend one's existence in!"

He looked round him curiously, and he was not particularly impressed, although just at that time he felt that this shelter was quite excellent. And before Nelson Lee could speak again, the monk appeared, followed by three other cloaked and hooded figures.

They were all aged men, and they all wore expressions of tremendous gravity. One of the newcomers commenced speaking to Nelson Lee in Italian, and the gov'nor had a short conversation with him. Then Nelson Lee turned to us.

"Food is being prepared," he said. "In the meantime we are to follow one of these monks—that is, you boys must place yourselves in the care of one of our hosts, and the rest of us will be dealt with separately. No doubt we are to be provided with a change of clothing."

We needed it, too, for at present we were chilled to the bone, and our things were clinging to us, for we were soaked through.

The juniors followed one of the monks, and we ascended some more stairs, and presently found ourselves in a long apartment in which a number of beds were placed. It was like a dormitory, for there were fully twenty beds in that room—at least they were probably meant to serve as beds. They were crude affairs of wood, and they did not seem to possess any springs. The monks of St. Peter were certainly not experts in comfort.

But there were plenty of blankets—warm, thick blankets; and our host indicated them to us with a wave of his hand. He did not speak, but this was possibly because he could not talk English, and he knew that we should not understand Italian. But we grasped exactly what he meant, and we lost no time in getting busy.

With stiff, numbed fingers we divested ourselves of our wet clothing, and then rolled luxuriously into the blankets. As a makeshift they could not have been improved upon, and, in any case, it was probably far better for us to be wrapped in blankets than anything else. It would prevent us from catching a chill. And gradually we warmed up, and began to take more interest in our surroundings. Some of the fellows dozed off through sheer weariness.

"Well, this is a queer state of affairs, if you like!" said Handforth. "By George, what an experience! Just think what's happened to us since we left England! It sounds like a fairy tale!"

"And yet it all happened so naturally," said De Valeric. "First the airship, and then the schooner, and now we find ourselves in the wild, mountainous country of Mordania, wrapped in blankets in a monastery! I wonder where the dickens we shall get to next?"

"Oh, our adventures must surely be nearly over now!" said Tommy Watson. "Isn't it amazing? Ever since we left

England we haven't had a chance of sending a word home!"

"Yes, and we seem to have less chance than ever now," I put in grimly.

"What do you mean?"

"It's no good you chaps thinking that we shall be in civilisation within a day or two," I went on. "It couldn't be done. Mordania is in a terrible state of turmoil, and it's dangerous to move about in a country like this. It's quite likely that we shall be compelled to remain here—refugees from the revolutionaries—for weeks on end!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Draw it mild, Nipper!"

"Talk sense, for goodness' sake!"

"That's just what I am talking!" I replied. "But you fellows don't seem to realise the true position. The gov'nor knows all about it, and he's been telling me a few facts about Mordania. We're really lucky to have reached this monastery without being captured by brigands—by the Tagossa. And now that we are here we may have to remain, and we sha'n't be able to send out any messages, or communicate with England."

"Great pip!" said Handforth blankly. "Remain here? But we couldn't! It's all right now, just for a day or two, as a refuge; but I should go dotty if I remained here for more than a week!"

"Well, it remains to be seen what will happen," I exclaimed. "But just suppose, for example, that in order to reach the border we must pass through a section of the country where the Tagossa are in full power?"

"Well, we should go!" said Handforth promptly. "You don't think I'm scared of these blessed brigands, do you? Just let me meet a few—I'd show 'em what was what! I'd punch their silly noses!"

I smiled grimly.

"Oh, yes, you'd do a lot of punching!" I said. "You wouldn't have a chance, my son; you'd have a bullet through you before you knew what had happened! That's what these men are like. They don't ask questions first—they shoot on sight!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And do you think the gov'nor would allow us to take such risks?" I went on. "Not likely! Rather than expose us to danger of that kind, he'll make us stay here for months—until the country gets quieter. We're practically safe here, I should think—even the members of the



But before we came within sight of the party below, I suddenly came to a halt. Down there, in the hall, pandemonium reigned. The Tagossa had got in — had broken past the barricades.

Tagossa wouldn't dare to interfere with a monastery. So, as long as we remain in this shelter we shall be all serene. It's a stronghold, and we're safe."

But the juniors were rather dismayed. Not that I wished to alarm them unduly. I had merely been pointing out to them some of the possibilities. They could not understand the nature of the country, and the dangers that were to be faced; but I knew the exact truth, and, frankly, I was pessimistic.

However, there was not much time for me to talk matters over with the other fellows, for only a short time elapsed before our hooded host returned, and bade us follow him. This was rather a difficult matter, but we accomplished it somehow.

Fortunately, we were provided with comfortable slippers, and, with our feet encased in these, and with our bodies wrapped round with blankets, we tumbled downstairs, two or three of the fellows literally falling headlong. I had warned them to be careful of the trailing blankets, but they had not heeded me. Handforth was the first to go.

He was about halfway downstairs when he suddenly tripped in his blanket. He gave one wild howl, and fell headlong, his blankets flying all over the show, and Handforth charging like an avalanche into the juniors who were in front of him. They descended the stairs with a terrific rush, and all landed in a heap at the bottom.

"You—you ass!" gasped Church.

"Get your silly foot out of my ear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth struggled up, and recovered his blankets hastily. He glared round, and would probably have punched somebody in the eye—a favourite trick of his—but at that moment Nelson Lee appeared.

"Ah, boys, I can see that you're more cheerful now," he said pleasantly. "Excellent! All wrapped in blankets, eh? Well, nothing could be better; and after you have partaken of some warming food, you must go straight to sleep."

"Rather, sir; but I hope we shall have plenty of grub!" said Fatty Little anxiously.

"I have no doubt that our host will see to that," smiled Nelson Lee. "After all, boys, we aren't doing so badly; things have greatly improved since our first arrival at the monastery. We had

hard thoughts concerning these grim old monks to begin with, but I think they will prove to be very hospitable hosts in the finish."

Nelson Lee himself was attired in a very similar manner to the juniors except for the fact that he had a kind of dressing-gown on the top of his blankets. Thus he presented a more rational appearance.

We went straight back into the big apartment, where the fire was burning, and where the long table now had a very different appearance.

It was no longer bare.

Upon it were plates, cups, and other articles of crockery—clumsy, plain crockery, but very serviceable, by the look of it. Many of the dishes were of rough earthenware, but they were filled with excellent contents.

There were large numbers of small articles which looked like muffins, and which, upon being tasted, proved to be extremely palatable. We had been living on very questionable food for the last three or four days, for the schooner had not provided us with extravagant fare.

If it comes to that, we did not receive extravagant fare here; everything was plain, but very wholesome. There was a plentiful supply of boiled eggs, and the fellows made great inroads into the food. And by the time they had done they were all feeling satisfied and thoroughly tired out.

We finished up the meal with great steaming mugs of hot chocolate—not quite the same as the English variety, but very delicious. There were some hard biscuits to go with the chocolate.

Nelson Lee and Dorrie and the others enjoyed the food as much as anybody, and when they had finished they were provided with long, peculiar-looking cigarettes, which they enjoyed with much relish. The inmates of this monastery were evidently not non-smokers; by all appearances, in fact, the monks were in the habit of doing themselves remarkably well.

It was not long before we all went to bed. We returned to the big apartment in the upper part of the building. It didn't matter a toss about the beds being hard; we were so tired that we didn't notice such trivial details as this, and before five minutes had elapsed everybody in the big room was sound asleep.

Meanwhile, Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee found themselves in a comparatively small apartment on the ground floor. Their only companion was Prince Paul, who was already sound asleep. They were in complete darkness. And, as Nelson Lee lay upon his bed, he wondered what the end of this amazing adventure was to be.

He would have been rather startled could he have known!

## CHAPTER IV.

### HIS MAJESTY THE KING.

**L**ORD DORRIMORE turned over, and then sat up.

"Hanged if I can sleep!" he said. "I'm as tired as a dog, but I can't get a wink! What's the reason for that, Lee—I suppose you're awake, eh?"

"Oh, yes, I'm awake, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee's voice in the darkness. "The reason for your insomnia is quite simple, I imagine. You are so tired that sleep comes difficult—I have been that way myself many a time. Moreover, your mind is very full, and you are probably thinking over all the events which have recently taken place."

"That's just it," said his lordship. "I can't get the hang of things. It's more like a dream to me, by gad! Who would have thought, a week ago, that we should be in this extraordinary position to-night—thousands of miles from England, tucked away in a monastery on the top of a bally mountain?"

"It is certainly an amazing state of affairs," said Nelson Lee. "And we must consider ourselves very lucky, Dorrie. We might have perished ten times over during the course of our travels, and yet we came through without a scratch. And although things looked so bad this evening, I don't think any of the boys will suffer from ill-effects."

"But we were only just in time," said Dorrie. "Another half-hour out in the cold and rain, and pneumonia would be making rapid strides through half of us. By the way, do you happen to have one of those elongated cigarettes on you? I don't particularly care for the flavour, but their length is a distinct advantage; they last the very deuce of a time."

Nelson Lee had a supply of cigarettes, and he passed one over. And very soon he and Dorrie were smoking with much enjoyment. Somehow they didn't want to sleep; they preferred to talk.

"The more I think of this position, Dorrie, the more grave I become," went on Nelson Lee, after a moment or two. "Were we by ourselves I should not worry so much, but I am thinking of the boys. We are responsible for them. Mason, of course, claims responsibility, as he was the captain of the airship; but I take very little notice of that. The safety of the boys rests with us. And you know as well as I do that we may have to face grave dangers before we escape from this accursed country."

"Go easy, old man!" said Dorrie. "The country's not so bad—a bit hilly, perhaps; but otherwise it's all right. I reckon it's the people who are accursed. If we could only get to the border, and —"

"That's just it, Dorrie—'if'!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "If we could do this, and if we could do the other, everything would be all right. But can we reach the border? Shall we be able to run the gauntlet of the Tagossa in safety?"

"Do you think we might be stopped?"

"I don't think—I know!" said Lee. "I tell you in all seriousness, Dorrie, that it will be absolutely impossible for us to get to the border without coming into contact with some scattered patrols of this infernal Tagossa. And these men won't ask questions—they'll shoot. We shall be ambushed, and shot down without mercy."

"Two can play at that game!" said Dorrie. "We're armed, and we sha'n't go under tamely. But I see your point, Lee. You don't want any of the boys to undergo this risk at all. Well, what's the alternative? Either we go out and take our chance, or we stay here until Doomsday!"

"I am hardly so pessimistic as that," said Nelson Lee. "But it is quite likely that we may have to remain for many weeks. Such a thought does not commend itself to me at all; but I would stay here a year rather than subject those youngsters to any unnecessary peril. To-morrow I will question our excellent hosts, and obtain all the information from them that is possible. The

ice will be broken by then, and perhaps they will lose some of their reserve."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said Dorrie. "They're very hospitable, and all that kind of thing, but I haven't seen one of the beggars smile yet. I think they must have forgotten how to."

"I think the monks are somewhat at a loss to account for the presence of Prince Paul with us," went on Nelson Lee. "At all events, the fact that he is a member of the party made a great deal of difference. I hardly think our hosts would have been so considerate if the prince had not appeared."

They continued talking for some little time, and then Nelson Lee glanced over towards the doorway. A chink of light had appeared on the floor, and soft footsteps were heard. A moment later the door opened, and the monk they had first seen—he of the wizened face—made his appearance, carrying the same curious lantern as before. He paused as he saw that Nelson Lee and Dorrie were awake.

"My apologies, gentlemen," he said. "I thought, maybe, I could enter without disturbing you. But since you are awake, it is perhaps to the good. I have brought visitors to see our unhappy prince."

"Visitors?" said Nelson Lee questioningly.

"Yes; for we had guests under our roof before you arrived," replied the monk, still speaking in Italian. "They are distinguished guests, gentlemen, although I fear that their presence may endanger the monastery."

Neither Nelson Lee nor Dorrie could quite understand what the old fellow was getting at; but, a moment later, three strangers were ushered into the apartment by two of the other monks. Nelson Lee jumped up at once, for he could see at a glance that these visitors were no ordinary men.

They were attired in very smart uniforms, which, however, bore the marks of long and difficult travel. The foremost of the three was a big, powerful man of perhaps fifty, with iron grey hair and a bristling moustache. His jaw was stern and strong, and he seemed to be labouring under some great trouble, for there were lines round his eyes, and there was something of a droop to his shoulders, which, as a rule, were probably square.

"You will pardon me for interrupting

you in this unmannerly fashion," said the tall man, in perfect English; "but I could not curb my impatience. Father Dmitri has informed me of the presence of Prince Paul—not that I can believe that such is the case. I have been consumed with impatience to make sure. And I trust, gentlemen, that you will forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, monseigneur," replied Nelson Lee courteously.

The tall man started.

"You know me?" he inquired quickly.

"I rather fancy I have the honour of addressing King Boris of Mordania," replied Nelson Lee. "Am I wrong, monseigneur?"

"No; your surmise is quite correct," said the other. "Yes; I am King Boris; but I am afraid you meet me under unhappy circumstances, my dear sir. You are English, and I should be most honoured if you would introduce yourself and your friend. But perhaps you will permit me to look at my son first—if, indeed, he is my son? I can hardly believe that such good fortune is to be mine!"

King Boris of Mordania did not wait for Nelson Lee to reply. Indeed, he had only managed to keep up the polite conversation with difficulty, for Nelson Lee could see quite well that the king was labouring under great emotion—he was, in short, consumed with impatience.

He passed across the room, Father Dmitri—as evidently the old monk was called—leading the way, and they paused over the bed of the third occupant of the room. He was sleeping soundly, and King Boris gazed down upon him intently, and with a catch in his breath. Nelson Lee could see that his hands were quivering as he passed his fingers over the sleeping man's forehead.

"Thank Heaven, yes!" he muttered. "It is he—my son!"

And thus, for a moment or two, he stood there, saying nothing further.

Lord Dorrinore gave Nelson Lee a significant glance.

"Queer!" he murmured. "We seem to have been pitchforked among the royalty, by gad! First a prince, and now a king! Things are getting quite interesting!"

"I have no doubt that King Boris has taken refuge in this monastery,"

murmured Nelson Lee. "And I am beginning to understand why we had such great difficulty in gaining admittance. With such distinguished guests under their roof, the monks were chary of admitting others—who might be spies!"

"This seems to be a very happy country!" said Dorrie softly.

At that moment Prince Paul awoke. He lay for some few seconds staring up into the light of the lantern; then his gaze slowly travelled from the wrinkled face of Father Dmitri to the face of King Boris. Everybody else looked on intently. Did the king know that his son was out of his mind? Apparently he did, for he gazed down at the young man with tender compassion.

But the Crown Prince of Mordania was acting in a strange way now—not as he had acted before. True, that vacant stare was still in his eyes, but it was changing.

He sat up, rigid and intent, and he stared in a fascinated kind of way at his father. Then, for a moment, he closed his eyes tightly, and passed a hand across his brow. Again he opened his eyes, and now they contained a look of intelligence—a look of intense, burning eagerness.

He muttered something which Nelson Lee and Dorrie could not catch; but evidently King Boris heard the words. The next moment father and son were in one another's arms. They remained thus for what seemed to be an interminable time.

"My son!" exclaimed the king, now speaking in Italian. "They told me that you had lost your reason—"

"It was true, father—it was true!" said Prince Paul dazedly. "I was insane—I was dumb. But now, in a flash, that which was blank has become filled with memories. Speech has returned to me!"

Nelson Lee placed a hand on Dorrie's shoulder.

"Wonderful!" he murmured. "Don't you understand, old man? The shock has returned his reason. The familiar face of his father has brought back everything, and nullified the effects of that ghastly experience on the schooner. Splendid! Nothing could be better!"

"By gad, rather!" said Dorrie. "But will the prince remember us?"

"His mind will probably be a blank," replied Lee. "It is quite possible that

he will remember nothing since his adventure on the schooner. I never thought for a moment that we should be able to bring about such a happy reunion as this!"

"But there's one thing I can't quite get the hang of," said Dorrie. "They are Mordanians, but they're speaking to one another in Italian. These religious merchants in the monastery speak Italian, too—and they're all Mordanians. What's the idea?"

"I take it that Italian is the language of the elect in this country," replied Nelson Lee. "In just the same way, society in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, speak French and Italian."

"Well, it seems queer, but I expect they know best," said Dorrie.

By this time father and son had finished their greeting, and King Boris turned to Nelson Lee with sparkling eyes and flushed face.

"I realise, my dear sir, that I have you to thank for this wonderful happening!" he said fervently. "I will not attempt to express my gratitude—for I would find it impossible to do so in mere words. But you have restored my son to me—my son who has been missing for many months now, and who I assumed to be dead. I only pray that I may be able to repay this great debt in some fitting way."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I am undeserving of your gratitude, Monseigneur!" he exclaimed. "If I have been the means of restoring your son to you, it has been quite an unconscious service on my part. It was only by pure chance that we found Prince Paul—and, again, it was chance which led us to this monastery."

"No, it was Providence!" said the King quietly. "I cannot believe that chance had any hand in such a wonderful occurrence as this. And my son has been restored to his own senses—and that is the most wonderful of all!"

Prince Paul came forward, eager and boyish.

"How can I thank you, Mr. Lee?" he said, his voice quivering with emotion. "Yes, I know you—I know that you are Mr. Nelson Lee, and that this other gentleman is Lord Dorrimore. My gratitude is intense—for you have done a great deal for me. It is strange indeed that I should be restored after giving myself up for lost—and that you,

a stranger to me, should be the means of my good fortune."

"As I have already informed your gracious father, my actions were quite involuntary," said Nelson Lee. "You were on the schooner when we came on board—and it was only natural that we should take every possible care of you. You must not thank us for that. But I take it that your memory is good?"

"Yes, amazing as it may seem, I remember all," said Prince Paul. "Everything that occurred is still fresh in my mind. And now it comes vaguely to me that I was doing my utmost to speak—that I was wrestling within. But I could not comprehend—I could not connect my thoughts. My mind would not obey, and I was, indeed, bereft of my wits. But all is right now, thank Heaven."

"So far, yes," said Nelson Lee. "But I am greatly concerned regarding our present position. I cannot help thinking that matters must be gravely wrong in the kingdom of Mordania."

"Ah, Mr. Lee, those words are only too true," exclaimed the King quietly. "Things have come to a terrible pass in my poor little country. And you see before you—not a King, but a refugee—a fugitive. There is no reason why I should not tell you this. For you are a friend—I need not be told that."

"And, I take it, Monseigneur, that you sought shelter under this hospitable roof?" said Nelson Lee. "I came here, with my party, because it was the only refuge possible. We are all very grateful to Father Dmitri and his fellow monks."

The King nodded.

"A fine old man, Mr. Lee," he said. "But perhaps you thought him rather brusque and cold when you first gained admittance. That was because he was afraid. He feared that you might be spies of the Tagossa. Need I explain the meaning of that word to you?"

"I hardly think so, Monseigneur," replied Nelson Lee. "In my own country it is my business to track criminals, and I have also made it my business to become acquainted with the methods of all secret societies. And the Tagossa has always interested me. I know it to be a dangerous semi-political organisation which dabbles in murder, blackmail and other criminal pursuits as a side line."

"A very apt description, Mr. Lee,"

replied the King. "Hitherto, I will grant, the Tagossa has been exactly as you suggest—semi-political. But of late its character has changed—and perhaps you are unaware of this. It has become more intensely political than ever, and is now a terrible gang of ruffians whose one aim is to bring disgrace and ruin upon the little kingdom of Mordania."

Father Dmitri came forward, bowing.

"It is ill that I should interrupt, your Excellency!" he said humbly. "But would it not be better for you to talk in the living-room, where there is a cheerful fire, and where I may be honoured to offer you slight refreshment?"

"That's what I call a good suggestion!" said Dorri promptly.

And so, very soon afterwards, they were all seated round the big roaring fire in the spacious living apartment. Lee and Dorrie sat next to the King and the Crown Prince. The other two uniformed gentlemen—who turned out to be two high officers of the Court—sat some little distance off. And Father Dmitri, now smiling and genial, insisted upon his guests partaking of some rare liqueur—which was entirely manufactured by the monks themselves.

"Ah, this is better—far better!" said the King. "If our worthy host can make us cheerful, he will do so—although, I fear, I am in no way disposed to think lightly about the future. True, I have been overjoyed at the events of this evening. But my burdens are beginning to weigh down upon my shoulders once more, for I realise that our position is well nigh hopeless."

"I don't wish to be inquisitive," put in Dorrie. "But may I enquire, Monseigneur how this unfortunate business came about? I am honoured to meet you, but I should have preferred the introduction to have been under more favourable circumstances."

"I, too, am of that way of thinking," said King Boris sadly. "But as I have already told you, I am a fugitive from my own people. It is a hard thing to say, but I must not shirk the truth. My own people have turned against me, gentlemen—for, after all, these men of the Tagossa are Mordanians."

"And they have driven you from your capital?" asked Lee.

"Alas, yes," said his Majesty. "It is unsafe for me to be in Ludari—which,



as you know, is the capital of my country. A mere village, in your way of thinking—an insignificant spot hardly worthy of being placed on the map. But it is my capital, and I love it. And, yes, I was compelled to flee."

"Owing to hostile demonstrations?"

"Not merely that, but worse," said the King. "During the past months I had grown accustomed to demonstrations, and my palace was well guarded. But, only ten days since, a dastardly attempt was made to blow up the entire building. It only partially succeeded, for a number of my picked guards detected the plot. However, the palace was half demolished, and I only escaped by a hair's breadth. It was the beginning of the revolution—for, without a doubt, a revolution has occurred in Mordania!"

"It saddens me to hear it, Monsiigneur," said Nelson Lee. "I hardly thought that things would come to such a pass in your country. I am extremely thankful that you escaped from the capital in safety, and that you found a secure haven of refuge."

The King sighed.

"Ah, it was a terrible journey!" he said. "To think that I should come to such a pass! Sneaking like a thief in the night—hiding in corners in the darkness—skulking where nobody could see! But, with the aid of my faithful officers whom you see on your left, I eluded my pursuers. And at length, after many exhausting days and nights, we arrived here—where, thank Heaven, all is quiet and peaceful."

"And have you covered your trail?" asked Lee interestedly.

"I think so—I fervently hope so!" replied the King. "I have every reason to believe that our pursuers have been defeated, and that our destination is unknown to the Tagossa. And here I must remain—a prisoner, knowing nothing of what occurs in my country, and living in the hope that one day matters may be better."

"And your son—Prince Paul?" asked Lee. "What of him?"

"It will not take me long to explain what occurred," said the King. "But it would be far better, perhaps, for Paul to tell you himself."

"I was captured by a band of ruffians several months ago," said Prince Paul, getting straight to the point. "It was

one evening while I was walking outside the capital. It was foolish of me, perhaps, but I had never regarded the danger as being serious. Well, to relieve you of unnecessary details, I was seized by the Tagossa, and, after making a pretty stiff fight, I was carried off—and held a prisoner in the mountains."

"With what object?" asked Lee.

"I don't quite know," replied the Prince. "But I rather fancy that the idea was to blackmail my father. He was to be informed of my capture, and told, that unless he abdicated, my life would pay the forfeit. But this plan, I believe, was abandoned, and I was merely kept in captivity. Then, one day, I was taken out, and marched to the coast."

"And placed on board the schooner?"

"Exactly," said Paul. "Again I give you no details, but I believe some supporters of my father—influential men near the border—had chartered the schooner, and filled her with arms and ammunition. They were to be used against the Tagossa. But the schooner was captured—obviously because of treachery on somebody's part: I was placed on board, tied hand and foot, and left in one of the cabins. And there I was to remain until the vessel blew to atoms."

"That is precisely what I anticipated," said Nelson Lee. "But the hastily contrived infernal machine failed to go off."

"Yes. The schooner was abandoned, with only myself on board," said the Prince. "I cannot describe to you the agony of mind I endured. With all sails set, the schooner was left to seek her own course—with that clock set for a certain hour. I can remember waiting for the explosion—for I had been informed of the precise time it was due. And it was all the more exasperating because I had nearly succeeded in getting free from my bonds. And then, at the critical minute, something seemed to go wrong in my head. I know for a fact that I went into a frenzy, and literally tore the ropes to shreds in my madness."

"And you made no attempt to disconnect the mechanism?" asked Lee curiously.

"After that frenzy, I think I became unconscious for many hours," said the Prince. "At all events, I remember nothing more for a long time. Then,

when I did awake, I was not myself. I wandered about the ship aimlessly, and my chief idea seemed to be to hide. I don't know why, for I had the ship to myself."

"Do you remember the schooner striking the wreck of the airship?"

"Plainly," said the other. "I was crouching behind an obstruction, so that I should not be seen. And before you came on board I went below, and concealed myself—for I was afraid of being seen. As you know, I was nothing better than a lunatic then—my mind had given way, and I was dumb."

"Thank Heaven you are well now," said Nelson Lee. "It has distressed me exceedingly to hear all these terrible details of your trials and troubles. Monseigneur," he added, turning to the King. "But may I be permitted to ask a few questions concerning the Tagossa?"

"You may ask just what you wish, Mr. Lee,"

"Do I understand that the Tagossa has gained complete control of Mordania?"

"In effect, yes," said King Boris. "For years the Tagossa was under the leadership of an old ruffian—a mountain brigand—named Lez Palak. He was an unmitigated scoundrel, but he was content to rule the Tagossa as it had been ruled by his forefathers—it was merely a mountain band of robbers and plunderers which no effort on the part of the authorities could suppress. It was a recognised thing, this Tagossa."

"And then its character changed?"

"Yes, decidedly," replied the King. "This happened five or six years ago—that is to say—it was the beginning of the change. And it coincided with the death of old Lez, and the accession of his son, Kol, to the leadership. Kol Palak was a hot young firebrand then—and he has grown worse. He was not content for the Tagossa to be a band of brigands—he aspired to higher things. In short, he wanted to rule the whole of Mordania."

"And that was when the trouble really started?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Yes," said the King. "At first Kol Palak did not succeed in his efforts, and he found it difficult to obtain adherence to his cause. But, gradually, insidiously, his agents wrought their deadly work in every part of my little country—in the

hills, down in the valleys, and in the towns and villages. There are very few of the latter in Mordania, I may add."

"And, at last, the Tagossa became a really serious menace?"

"Yes—it was not only a brigand band, but a well-organised and deadly revolutionary party," said King Boris. "Until, at last, almost open warfare was declared. Bands of the Tagossa were constantly ambushing my own soldiers, and burning and plundering wherever they could."

"By gad!" murmured Dorrie. "It sounds like Ireland!"

The King nodded.

"Yes, in some respects, the tiny affairs of my own country resemble the sad state of things in your Ireland," he replied. "There is no necessity to say much more, for you know all. I have already explained how I was compelled to flee. And now Kol Palak rules in Ludari."

"Something like a president, eh?" said Lord Dorrinore.

"Yes, he has appointed himself the ruling chief of the whole country," said King Boris. "A terrible calamity gentlemen, for it will be the ruin of Mordania. Already commerce with our neighbouring states is at an end—for nobody will trust this brigand chief. I can see ruin and desolation descending upon Mordania. Within a few months starvation will be rife, and my people will suffer as they have never suffered before in the history of the country. Oh, it makes me almost mad when I think of it!" added the King, rising to his feet and pacing up and down. "And here I am helpless! I feel that I am a coward—that I ought to be doing everything within my power to help my people."

"But they wanted this change," put in Dorrie.

The King turned swiftly.

"They wanted it?" he repeated.

"Yes, some of them—but only the minority. It is always the same—the minority leads the majority! Do you think my people—my peaceful subjects—are happy because of this accursed revolution? No! They are thunderstruck, but helpless. A reign of terror exists in Ludari, and no man dare say a word against Kol Palak or his so-called government!"

"I am deeply sympathetic, Monseigneur," said Nelson Lee. "I only wish that I could be of assistance to—"

Boom! Boo-oom!

Everybody in the room started up with hoarse cries. The very floor under their feet shook. For, at that moment, a dull, rumbling explosion had sounded—an explosion which seemed to rock the whole monastery to its foundations.

What could it mean? What had happened?

## CHAPTER V.

### THE DREADED TAGOSSA!

**B**OOM! Boom!

Again, even as Nelson Lee and all the others stood stock still, the monastery shook. Another explosion had taken place! But this one sounded in an opposite direction. And then came silence—complete, ominous silence.

All those in the room gazed at one another with startled expressions. Nelson Lee was quite calm and grim; Lord Dorrimore stood with clenched fists, his jaw set firmly, for he had instinctively put himself in an attitude of defence. He knew that trouble was coming.

And the others knew it, too.

There could be only one explanation of those sinister explosions. The monastery was being attacked by the Tagossa. This was the only possible explanation. There could be no other meaning to those grim sounds. In spite of all the king's precautions, he had been trailed—tracked—to the Monastery of St. Peter. And the Tagossa, in the darkness of the night, were now making an attack.

"Old man, it seems that things are goin' to get lively!" murmured Lord Dorrimore.

He was the first to speak, and then all the others' tongues were loosened.

"The Tagossa!" exclaimed King Boris huskily. "Heaven help us now!"

"Yes, and Heaven help these good friends, the monks, who have given us shelter!" exclaimed the Crown Prince. "I am afraid this is the end, father. There will be no return for us. But we will die like men—yes, we will die fighting!"

Father Dmitri had started back, and now he was pale and trembling, his face haggard and worried.

"Alas—alas! We are lost!" he shouted, in Italian. "The Tagossa is here, and it will mean the end of us all! Forgive me, your majesty, for exposing you to such danger—"

"No, friend; it is I who must be forgiven!" interrupted the king. "For I have brought this trouble upon your holy house. I sought refuge here, and you gave me shelter. And now it is you who must pay the penalty!"

"Well, it's no good standing here and talking!" put in Dorrie. "The best thing we can do is to get busy. Surely we're not goin' to let these ruffians have everythin' their own way? We're armed—we've got weapons—an', by gad, we'll use 'em! If we're slick, we may be able to keep these brutes at bay!"

"Splendid advice!" said Lee sharply.

But just at that moment the door of the room burst open and one of the other monks appeared. He was an elderly man, and he was panting heavily, his eyes staring, and his face like chalk.

"They have broken in! They are even now within the building!" he gasped.

"What?"

"They have gained admittance?"

"Ay, they are inside!" replied the monk. "Both the great door in the front and the smaller door in the rear have been blown down, shattered by explosives, and the way is clear for these murderers to enter!"

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee. "So they were the sounds we heard! They have used high explosive in order to get into the monastery! Well, we must do what we can. Keep your pecker up, Dorrie—fight to the last! I'm going upstairs to the boys now, but I will be down before the fight has commenced!"

"The boys!" muttered Dorrie. "By the Lord Harry, what will happen to them, poor lads? This is a terrible business, Lee!"

Nelson Lee needed no telling, and he rushed off out of the apartment and into the gloomy hall. Captain Mason and Mr. Morgan and Mr. Leighton had appeared at that moment, but Nelson Lee had no time to speak to them. He hurried up the stairs as fast as he could go.

Meanwhile, in the room occupied by the boys, we were all awake. Some of the fellows had slept on, in spite of the booming explosions and the rocking of the building; but they had soon awakened when the other juniors were talking. As a matter of fact, they were

nearly all speaking at once—half asleep, bewildered, and just a little bit scared.

"There's no sense in going on like this!" I said sharply. "Don't jaw so much, you asses——"

"But—but what was it?" panted Talmadge. "Didn't you hear two tremendous explosions? The place may be on fire! We've got to escape——"

"Don't get into a panic, my sons!" I interrupted. "That won't do any good. We don't know what's happened, and it's no good imagining things."

Handforth wrapped his blankets round him.

"I'm going out to see what's the matter, anyway!" he said firmly. "I'm blessed if I'm going to stick here, without knowing what's in the wind! Who's coming with me?"

"I am!"

"Same here!"

"We'll come, Handy!"

Quite a number of fellows answered, for they were all excited and alarmed.

"There's no sense in acting like this, I tell you!" I repeated. "We don't know why those explosions happened, and it won't do any good to——"

But just at that moment the door opened, and Nelson Lee appeared. Just behind him were two monks, carrying lanterns. They were also carrying great piles of clothing—the juniors' suits, now thoroughly dried and aired.

"I am glad to see that you are awake and on the alert, boys," said Nelson Lee. "You must dress yourselves as quickly as possible——"

"What's happened, sir?"

"What were those explosions, sir?"

"Is anything wrong?"

"We're dying to know, sir!"

"Are we in danger?"

Everybody spoke at once, and Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"It is not my way to calm you by a mis-statement," he said. "Yes, boys, there is danger——"

"My only hat!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"But you may rely upon me to do the best I can for your safety," went on the gov'nor. "I urge you to keep calm, boys, and to remember that no possible good can come of allowing excitement to get hold of you. Dress as soon as you can."

"And what then, sir?"

"You will be told what to do then. But you must dress now—within three

minutes, if it can be managed!"

"Bogad! That's quite impossible, sir!" protested Montie, in dismay.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We can dress in two!"

Handforth was probably correct, for in an extraordinarily short space of time the juniors tumbled into their clothing. Although tired and sleepy—they had not been in bed for long—they had no desire to sleep now. This fresh excitement had awakened them in a very thorough manner.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was outside. He had gone into the hall, in order to ascertain how things were going, and it was learned that a number of monks were busily barricading the stone passage which led from the front door. Dozens of brigands were seeking an entry. It was the same with the other entrance—the one by which we had come. This passage was easier to hold, since it was quite narrow. A barricade there was a simple matter to erect.

But, as we all knew now, these members of the Tagossa were provided with high explosives, and no simple barricade would be likely to last for long. It behoved us, therefore, to waste no time in preparing a defence.

"I am ready to join in the scrap when you like," said Dorrie eagerly. "By gad! It'll do me good to have a shot at these fellows! Accordin' to all I can hear, they seem to be about the brightest set I've ever been up against."

"We can only do our best," said King Boris quietly. "But I am afraid, gentlemen, that we cannot hold out for long. We are just a handful in comparison to this hoard, and, sooner or later, they will triumph."

"Perhaps so; but we'll thin their ranks before they do!" retorted Dorrie. "An', before now, a small party of determined men has often held at bay a multitude! It depends upon the nature of the men who are holding the fort. We've got to realise that we're capable of defeating these ruffians, and then get busy and do it!"

Lord Dorrimore did not know the meaning of the word "surrender." He was one of those men who would fight on until the last gasp. But, as it happened, it seemed that it would not be necessary to take any grave risks in this instance.

For, while the excitement was at its height—while the invaders were at-

tempting to break down the barricades—Father Dmitri came into the big central hall, where the whole party had gathered, for by this time the juniors had appeared upon the scene. They were standing together in a crowd, near the staircase, wondering what to do, and half expecting awful things to happen at any minute.

There was an expression of hope and eagerness upon the old monk's face, and when he spoke, it was in a low, tense tone.

"There is just a chance, your majesty, that we may be able to defeat these enemies," he exclaimed. "If they gain admittance to the monastery, and can find no sign of any strangers, they would probably take their leave. For they cannot know that you are here—they can only guess."

"That is possibly true," said the king. "But, good friend, what can be done? How is it possible for these enemies to search the monastery without finding us?"

Father Dmitri came closer.

"There is a secret chamber within these old walls," he exclaimed softly. "It is so secret that it is known only to myself and one or two other members of my faith. It would be impossible for these Tagossa men to enter."

"A secret chamber, eh?" said Nelson Lee keenly. "That's an excellent idea!"

Dorrie looked up.

"Sorry, I can't agree, with you, old man," he said. "I don't care for it at all. It doesn't suit me to hide away when there's danger afoot. I'd rather face the music like a man——"

"You do not understand, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "I am not thinking of myself, or of you; my thoughts are for the boys. We cannot permit them to fight, and I would like them to be in safety. Do you see? If they can only be placed in this secret chamber, they may escape detection!"

"By gad, you're right!" said Dorrie. "That's just like me—I always was an ass! I think of myself first, instead of the others. Yes, we must get the boys into this secret chamber as soon as possible—and you, too, monseigneur," he added, turning to King Boris.

But his majesty shook his head.

"No, it is not my way to skulk away from danger——"

"But you must not think of that!"

put in Nelson Lee quickly. "It is not right that you should risk your life unnecessarily. If there is a place of safety, you must go to it. You must cast your own feelings aside, and you must think of Mordania. You will be needed, monseigneur!"

The king hesitated.

"I urge you, your majesty, to hasten!" said Father Dmitri anxiously.

"Very well," said the king, "I will come. And you, too, Paul—you must not incur any risks!"

Nelson Lee turned to the boys.

"Now, my lads, you must be as quiet as you can, and place yourself entirely in the hands of Father Dmitri," he said. "He is about to lead you to a place of safety, where you will be in no danger while this affair lasts."

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good, sir!"

"We're all ready!"

"But we could do with some grub, sir!" came Fatty Little's voice. "If we're going to be locked up for long, we might as well——"

But he was smothered by several of the other juniors, and they were about to move off when I suddenly came to a standstill.

"My only hat!" I ejaculated.

"What's wrong?" asked Tommy Watson.

"I've just remembered something," I said. "I left my two revolvers upstairs in the room where we slept. I took them out of my clothes when I undressed, and left them in a corner."

"Well, you'd better fetch 'em," said Watson.

"Begad! We'll come with you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "We don't want to be separated, an' everythin' will be all serene if we keep together. We shall be down in two minutes."

And up we rushed, never dreaming what far-reaching consequences my apparently insignificant lapse of memory was to result in.

It only took me a brief moment to pick up the two revolvers and stuff them into my pockets. Then, with Sir Montie and Tommy, we hurried to the cold stone stairs, and commenced descending. We could not actually see the hall yet, owing to the circular nature of the staircase.

But before we came within sight of the party below, I suddenly came to a halt. Down there, in the hall, pande-

monium seemed to be reigning. There were shouts, yells, thuds and scuffles, but, curiously enough, no revolver shots. And my heart leapt into my mouth, for I guessed what had happened.

The Tagossa had got in—had broken past the barricades!

It was too late for Father Dmitri to lead his guests to the hidden chamber, where safety lay.

It was a great surprise to all, for they had assumed that the barricades were secure, and that the brigands could not get past. Then suddenly, without warning, a motley crowd of strange figures had appeared. The majority of them were soaking wet, for it was still raining hard outside. They were wearing quaint clothing, the most peculiar feature of which consisted of tightly fitting white woollen trousers. At least, they were supposed to be white. As a matter of fact, they were dirty and drab. Queer looking tunics, mostly of glaring colours, and each man carried a perfect arsenal of small weapons—revolvers, knives, and belts of cartridges. These men were wild-looking creatures—swarthy and dark, many of them wearing long moustaches. They were fierce men, and they came charging into the big central hall to the attack.

But they did not use their weapons, so it seemed apparent that it was their object to capture the party rather than kill them. This was unusual and decidedly opposed to all the methods of the Tagossa. Nelson Lee could only think that Kol Palak had given special instructions. Probably the leader of the Tagossa had a special reason for taking his victims alive.

The fight was short and sharp.

Neither Nelson Lee nor Dorrie cared to loose off their revolvers until they themselves had been fired upon; they did not wish to start any bloodshed. And so they fought with their bare hands, even though the odds were hopeless.

For the men of the Tagossa came from all directions, from every passage and doorway, swarming into the hall with ever-increasing numbers. The barricades had given way everywhere, and the enemy was within.

Father Dmitri had hoped for a second that he would be able to flee with the boys, and still get them into a place of safety, for the grim old monk had,

beneath his grey exterior a heart of gold.

But it was not to be.

The entire party found itself surrounded—Nelson Lee, Dorrie, Captain Mason, the airship officers, King Boris and the Crown Prince—everybody.

At least, everybody except three.

And those three were halfway up the stairs, aware of what was going on, but pausing there.

The fight did not last long, for it was impossible to keep on against such overwhelming numbers. In a very short time they were all rendered helpless, including Nelson Lee and King Boris.

Handforth had been fighting with all his strength—only too pleased, as a matter of fact, to have an opportunity of delivering a few of his famous punches. But even Handforth didn't last for long.

Grasped from behind by a powerful brigand, he was swept off his feet and lifted on high. Then he was held helpless, roaring at the top of his voice.

Numerous ropes were brought, and with these everybody was bound together. The juniors were included in this business; their hands were tied behind their backs, and all the prisoners were roped up in groups. It was staggering, this change. They had been compelled to give in, without having made a proper fight.

For the Tagossa had sprung a surprise. They had forced the barricades by sheer strength of numbers. It had been assumed by the monks that the band consisted only of fifty or so men.

Actually, the attackers numbered close upon two hundred.

Nelson Lee, with set lips, looked round. He could see that these men were mountaineers—hard, rugged fellows, and naturally cruel. They were almost savages, and it was only with great restraint that they kept themselves from falling upon their prisoners and killing them.

There was not the slightest doubt that Kol Palak had given very distinct instructions, with a promise of punishment if his orders were disobeyed. And punishment, with the Tagossa, was probably death.

"Bright looking crowd, what?" said Lord Dorrimore calmly. "I don't know how it is, Lee, but we seem to tumble from one bally hole to another, and each hole gets deeper as we go along. Did you ever see such exquisite beauties

in all your natural? Ain't they simply the limit?"

Nelson Lee did not feel like replying.

The Tagossa men were talking together in loud voices, but they all paused when one of their number suddenly held up his hand and gave some brisk orders. This man, dressed more gorgeously than the rest, was apparently the leader of the band.

The instructions were precise, it seemed, for, without any delay, the prisoners were taken away. They went, in double file, guarded on all sides. And the juniors were now thoroughly scared, and they could not be blamed for this.

Nelson Lee's feelings were grim and terrible. Heaven only knew what would happen to them all now! In the hands of the Tagossa, the most dreaded secret society in the Balkans!

It was an appalling position.

And the boys—they were prisoners, too. But Nelson Lee could not blame himself for this; he had done his best all along.

And what was to be the end?

Nobody could tell, for they were now at the mercy of this Mordanian gang. That they would be subjected to harsh treatment was certain, for they had in their midst King Boris himself and the Crown Prince.

There was one fact which pleased Nelson Lee among all these dreadful happenings—Father Dmitri and his fellow monks were not interfered with. Indeed, they were ignored with contempt. The Tagossa took no notice of the monks, and it was clear that they would not harm them.

In the big hall a party of the Tagossa men had been left behind. And, half-way up the stairs, Tregellis-West, Watson and I were listening, breathless and excited. I ventured to take a peep, and I knew what was happening.

All the others had been captured!

"Great Scott! What shall we do?" gasped Tommy Watson. "They're going without us. They're being taken away——"

"Yes; and if we can remain undiscovered, we will!" I interrupted grimly.

"But we shall be separated, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie; "separated from all the rest!"

"That's better than being captured," I said. "If we're with them, we can do nothing; but if we can manage to remain behind, we might be able to help. Don't you see? We shall be far more useful by ourselves; we might even be able to help the others escape. Going upstairs a little while ago was providential!"

But we found it necessary to move sharply, for a party of the brigands commenced ascending, with the evident intention of searching the place. We had to hide, and hide quickly.

Where?

"Come on—the blankets!" I gasped. "It's the only chance."

We rushed upstairs silently, and dashed into the room where we had been sleeping. There were great piles of blankets on the floor, cast aside by the juniors as they were dressing. We literally swarmed underneath them, our bodies making practically no difference to the size of the big piles.

And, as I had hoped, the Tagossa men merely gave the room a glance. One of the fellows certainly kicked a pile of blankets, but he did not suspect. And, less than fifteen minutes later, the brigands had gone; they had departed completely from the monastery.

And we crawled out, safe for the time being.

"My sons," I said grimly, "there is work to be done—heavy, important work. Thank goodness we're still at liberty!"

But what of the others?

What had happened to Nelson Lee, King Boris, and all the rest? We did not know; but, before so very long, certain events were destined to take place which would lead to many further excitements and adventures!

THE END.

**NEXT WEEK!**

**IN THE BRIGAND'S LAIR!**

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Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding have come to settle in Australia from the Old Country. They go to Cairns, where Jack has an uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been absent in the interior for some months, the young Englishmen decide to try and find him. They are joined by Tom Anson, an Australian, with whom they have struck up a friendship. Accompanied by Snapus, a black tracker, they start off across the desert until they come to a dried up water-hole. Here they find a message from Jack's uncle, directing them to the Secret Valley where, after many strange adventures they find the professor, and together they explore this wonderful new world.

(Now read on.)

#### The Disappearance of Snapus.

**Y**OU are wasting ammunition. You would need a howitzer to slay the brute. He has half a dozen nerve centres, or brains, along his spine, and unless you destroy all, he will be little the worse. The vitality of these reptiles is amazing. Let me try if fire will scare him."

Aided by the others he collected dry grass and twigs enough to make a large bundle, and, setting fire to this, dropped it on the monster's back, where, held by the spiky horns of its armour, the stuff blazed merrily. A smell as of burning bones rose sickeningly, but it was several seconds before the slow-blooded brute felt anything. Then, however, it wheeled about, shook itself, and, as the flaming fragments showered around it, took fright, and, waving its scaly tail, bolted towards the lake.

"So, gentlemen!" remarked Maxwell, with the air of one giving a demonstration in a laboratory. "Thus we discover that the reptile kind fears fire as much as the mammal when their attention is once roused. Let us get on, but take the precaution of carrying a large bundle of this excellent

grass with us in case we are called upon to repeat the demonstration."

So the Bheels were loaded up with grass ere the party took to the road again. They made no objection, for now they revered these men before whom the monster bogey of their narrow land fled.

Naturally, the party kept a bright lookout, but they saw nothing more of the Stegosaur, and after another hour's tramp were close to the end of the valley. But they looked in vain for any sign of a pass, any crack in the towering rock walls that hemmed them in. Though the lower parts of the precipices might have been climbed by a nimble man, no one could have scaled the beetling heights beyond.

Here at the highest elevation of the valley floor the ground was sandy, and more like the desert outside than any they had seen so far. But even here there was an abundance of life. Kangaroo rats scuttled from bush to bush as they advanced.

Suddenly, one of the Bheels halted and tugged at Jack Maxwell's sleeve, while he pointed with the other hand at a circular pit, a man's length in width and about as deep, which lay directly in their path, making sign that they should steer clear of it.

"What made this, uncle?" asked Jack. "I have noticed several more scattered about here. What made them?"

Professor Maxwell peered and shook his head; but the Bheel apparently understood, and, with an absurd, if unconscious, imitation of the professorial manner, picked up a bit of dry branch, made it fast to a grass line, and threw it into the pit.

As it fell he jerked it back, much as if a live thing were trying to climb out. Instantly the sand at the bottom of the funnel stirred, and out shot something that looked more like a Chinese dragon than anything living should. It was several feet in length, it had legs and claws, a horrid triangular mouth, and horny eyes which popped out of sockets as it emerged from the sand where it had lurked.

With demoniac energy it leapt upon the stick, only to loose it as it realised it had been fooled. There was a shower of sand,



a commotion at the bottom of the hole, and then it was gone.

"A development of the ant bear which catches ants and other small fry in a similar trap," cooed the professor, who, this time had been on the alert, and had secured a photograph, "only somewhat larger—about a hundred times larger. I think it is most probably poisonous."

"Its looks alone are that," said Harding. "We must be careful not to fall into one of these holes. Ugh! I shouldn't care to have that horror clawing at me!"

They went no further, for the sands seemed riddled with these pitfalls for the unwary. Besides, it was past noon, and time for them to start back if they would reach the safety of the ledge before dark. So, after a short halt for rest and refreshment, they turned about.

No incident enlivened the homeward march, though several times they saw animals which might, or might not, have been dangerous, moving in the distance. They climbed to the ledge, passed the dip, crossed the swing bridge, all without trouble, and so at last reached the village.

All seemed unnaturally quiet. There were no Bheels beyond the wall, no Worgees lounging at their doors. With an unspoken fear in their hearts the adventurers rushed to the door of the cave they had made their own.

The poles barring the entrance had been taken away, a pool of blood lay on the floor around the stake where Gom had been secured, but there was no further sign of him or of Snaplus.

### The Quenching of the Worgees.

FOR a moment they stood still, staring around the cave, observing the signs of the struggle that had evidently taken place before Snaplus had been overpowered. A faint smell of gunpowder still hung on the air. He had fired at least one shot, perhaps more, before he had been overpowered.

"But how the deuce did he come to be caught napping?" growled Anson. "I should have thought it would have been as easy as to catch a dingo asleep. All our stuff has gone, too. Where?"

Professor Maxwell turned to the four Bheels who had accompanied them. They squatted by the door of the cave, shivering and almost grey with fear. He began to talk to them softly, encouragingly.

"Go and look around, boys," he said, turning to the others. "Examine the caves. The Worgees must be hidden in some cavern that we know nothing of. I will try to make these little chaps understand what we want. Hurry!"

They went out and into the big cave where the Worgees had lived. As they expected, it was quite empty. They passed through into several other small caves which opened from it, peering into every recess, holding high the torch they had lit from the smouldering

fire outside. But though they saw plenty of evidence of hurried departure, they could find no clue to the elusive Worgees' whereabouts.

Next they hurried to the dens inhabited by the Bheels, and, undeterred by the smells that permeated them, examined every nook and cranny, still without result. The little people had left no more hint of their path than had their masters.

Baffled, but not discouraged, they returned to Professor Maxwell, meeting him at the cave door. He looked puzzled.

"It's like trying to get information from very young children," he said. "They're willing enough, but they know little, and can't express themselves. But at least I can make out that the Worgees have retreated to some interior cavern, taking the Bheels with them. They don't know where the entrance is, and they are horribly frightened. This cavern is associated in their minds with dreadful things. We must help ourselves. Let us examine the rocks outside first, then the caves."

He set the four Bheels to making torches, and bent all his faculties to the job of finding a trail. Such a number of people could surely not have disappeared without leaving some traces by which they might be followed.

However, they went to and fro over the plateau for some time without finding anything in the least helpful. The light began to fail. Shortly it would be dark, and their chances of recovering the lost Snaplus almost at an end. Perhaps he was already dead. Then, just as they were losing hope, chance aided them.

A last shaft of light from the sinking sun fell through a gap in the jagged scarp on the further side of the valley, and lighted up something which fluttered on the face of the cliff overhanging the water, a little below the level of the path, some distance beyond the mouth of the big cave. Even at a distance there was no mistaking it for anything but a bit of cloth, a handkerchief perhaps.

Now the Worgees did no weaving. If they had ever possessed the art, they had lost it. Such clothing as they wore was of skins, eked out with dried, fibrous leaves; and handkerchiefs were as far beyond their ken as locomotives. Therefore this fluttering rag must have come from the baggage of one of the four white men.

As he spied the thing Anson pointed to it excitedly.

"Look! They must have gone over the cliff there. Ten to one there is another opening below. Stand here and call out when I am over the place."

With that he began to run, and, when a shout halted him, stopped, and, kneeling down, peered over. The mystery was solved. Below the edge were steps cut in the rock at regular intervals, leading to a shelf some twenty or thirty feet beneath the level of the path, and perhaps fifty above the water. And from the trampling of the weeds that

grew from the crannies of the rock it was easy to see that many people had passed that way not long before.

Anson saw something else as well, which made him pause as he was about to swing his legs over the verge and descend. The point of a long spear projected from the mouth of the cave. Someone was on guard!

He unrolled his invaluable rope from his waist, and made it fast to a knob of rock behind, as the rest came up.

"I'll go down first," he said. "There's a chap at the door there. He may try to stop me. Pot him if necessary. Stand by!"

Gripping the rope in one hand, he drew his long pistol with the other and began the descent, treading as softly as he could, an eye on the tip of the spear, which jutted at an angle from the mouth of the hole. He could see it moving up and down with a regular motion. Stealthily as a hunting leopard, he dropped on the narrow shelf and saw what he had half expected.

Inside the mouth of the cave, which was barely man high, squatted a very fat young man, one of the Worgee braves, hugging his spear with arms and knees, and fast asleep. Shiftless in everything, he had been unable to keep awake, even though his safety and the security of his people depended on it.

He stirred uneasily as Anson alighted, opened one eye, and then closed it again as the pistol butt fell heavily on his head, stunning him. Anson beckoned the others to descend, while swiftly and dexterously he cut the fat man's skin mantle into strips and tied and gagged him securely. This done, they lighted a torch, and, followed by the Bheels, who were in a state bordering on panic, but nevertheless persisted in coming, they entered the cave.

The floor sloped steeply for some distance, then became level. For a few yards the tunnel ran straight in, then it began to twist. The light of day was cut off, but the flaring torch sufficed to show that the dust of the floor had been trampled by many feet. It glinted on the walls, too, and here and there was reflected by crystals embedded in the rock.

Anson glanced sharply at these as he passed.

"Queer place this. We must take a look at it when we have more leisure," he said. "Hark! Do you hear anything?"

They halted and listened. From somewhere, no very great distance away, came a low rumble as of many voices. It rose and fell, rose again, and ended abruptly. Then a shrill screaming succeeded, a horrid sound torn from someone in dire torment. The eldest of the Bheels uttered a low, plaintive cry, and plucked nervously at Harding's coat. Glancing at him, the young man saw that he was shaking as though he had ague.

"I think he knows the meaning of that," said he, and patted a shivering shoulder. "There's something beastly going forward. We must stop it. Poor Snaplus! I fear it's all over with him."

They lit more torches, and hurried on.

Nearer and nearer rang the awful crying, till at last the low roof echoed with it. Turning a corner of the tunnel, they came abruptly on as weird a scene as one might see out of a nightmare.

They had come out on the edge of a sort of natural amphitheatre; the floor of a cave, nearly circular, sloped down in a series of terraces to a central pool of black water. The place was lit by scores of torches, which cast an ample light upon the proceedings.

All the Worgees, with the exception of half a dozen of the men, were gathered on the upper terraces on one side. Facing them, huddled together in a body, were the Bheels. About midway between the two groups a platform of rock overhung the central pool, and on this stood six Worgees. Several Bheels, bound hand and foot, crouched at their feet, while on a rock, a little in the rear, sat Snaplus, so tied about with thongs that he looked as though he wore a net. The waters of the pool below swirled. Something evil lurked there!

Three of the Worgees held one of the Bheels, and he it was who screamed as they lowered him a little way towards the water, then drew him back to the platform, prolonging his agonies, while the Worgees on the terraces rocked and chuckled with horrible laughter. Assuredly they were enjoying themselves.

"The infernal beasts!" ejaculated the professor. "Quick, boys! Shoot, but beware of hitting Snaplus. Ready? Fire!"

They let drive together just as the three tormentors had deposited their helpless victim on the platform, while they mopped their heads, for they were sweating profusely. Two of them dropped and remained still, the third reeled, and with a frightful scream fell backwards into the pool.

There was a terrible splashing, something black and awful threw itself upon the floundering man and bore him down. But the four had no time to see what the terror of the black pool was. As their shots roared and echoed across the vault a panic yell rang out from the Worgees. They had thought themselves secure to indulge their bestial lust for cruelty, and lo! here were the avengers upon them. They rose from the rocks on which they had been seated, and fled pell mell towards a dark opening that loomed on the further side of the place.

Not all, though. There had been six men on the rock platform. Three were down at the first discharge, and a fourth wounded, though not vitally. Maddened by pain, this fellow howled something to the two who remained unhurt, and, as they scuttled away for safety, turned towards where Snaplus sat helpless.

A big, green stone knife flashed dully in his hand, and, as another volley crashed, he fell forward on his face before the captive.

And now the three were sprinting towards Snaplus, while Professor Maxwell, with the four Bheels clinging to him, went down the terrace towards the other little men, who

(Continued on page III of cover.)

utterly bewildered by these terrible doings, crouched squealing. He comforted him as best he could, while the young men, having loosed Snaplus, who was almost paralysed by his bonds; left him to recover while they pursued the flying Worgees with shouts and stones.

By this the last of the fugitives was flying down the dark cavern opposite the entrance, and thither the three followed, each provided with a torch. The way sloped down steeply, and the roof was low, so that the frenzied howling of the Worgees was redoubled by echoes.

"Tally-ho!" yelled Jack Maxwell. "Run, you brutes! You'll be all the better for losing some tallow. Hark forrard!"

Harding and Anson added their voices to the clamour, and for a minute drowned the racket of the pursued. Then, as they ceased to draw breath, they paused and peered ahead. The noise had ceased. There were no yells, no thudding of feet all unused to hard exercise, no bellows of Worgees' fathers pricked to exertion by fear for their skins.

"Stop! Hush!" said Jack.

They halted, holding their breath, and listened. There was never a whisper of sound before them.

"What in thunder has become of them?" asked Anson, in an awed whisper. "They weren't far ahead. Even if they'd stopped yelling we should still hear their movements. They can't have fallen over a precipice, surely? Some of them would be left."

"We'll see," replied Jack. "Let's go forward carefully. No hurry."

They advanced slowly, stepping with care, for the slope grew steeper. Jack held his torch on high, then lowered it, intending to see if there were tracks on the ground. He had a wild notion that perhaps the fugitives had turned into some bolt-hole close at hand.

As the torch reached the level of his knees it went out!

He stopped short.

"Back! Don't move quickly. Keep your lights high," he whispered. "Danger!"

They obeyed in silence. Slowly and deliberately they moved back and back up the slope until they neared the amphitheatre. Not till then did Jack pause, and, taking Harding's torch, held it near the ground. It burned steadily.

"It's all right now," he said. "But we had a narrow squeak. If we had been running, we should have plunged into it as those Worgees did."

"Into what? What are you talking about?" demanded Anson and Harding together.

(To be continued.)

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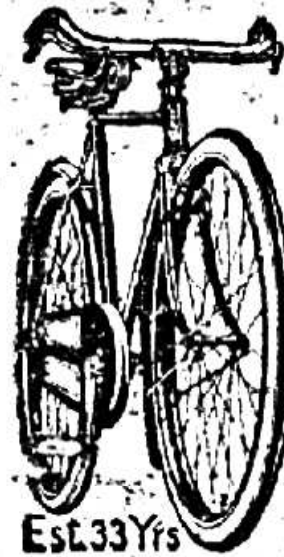
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