

The Riddle of the Riderless Horse

By JEAN & CYRIL CASALIS

Once in the cave, he made straight for the well-remembered maze of passages. "Method is the only hope here," he decided. "I'll start with the one on the right and work them off one by one. So here goes!"

But passage after passage ended abruptly in solid rock, and he was beginning to resign himself to failure, when luck came to his aid. The passage he was in had come as usual to a dead end; but unlike those he had already searched a narrow opening rose above it almost vertically, like a ventilator shaft and as he sent the exploring beam of his torch up to it, the light revealed the hind quarters of an animal—a large animal. "A rook!" he exclaimed Malcolm, who had seen photographs of one of these lynx-like creatures shot by Cornelle. "A rook! A rook! Where isn't he perching for a sparrow!" At that moment the animal sprang; not downwards but up and away, vanishing into the darkness above. For a moment Malcolm was too surprised to grasp what it meant; then, as realization came, he gave up all thought of continuing his search inside the cave. "Out you go my lad," he said, "and find the opening where that rook got out."

Scrambling every nerve to retain some idea of the directions of his return journey, and counting every step he made his way back to the cave, raced out and out of the spruitt to a spot which he considered must be directly above the cave.

THE FOLLOWER FOLLOWED

"Now," he muttered, "the passage went straight then turned to the left." He moved off counting his steps. His calculations brought him to a point midway between the house, where a yish-green bushes grew between patches of bare flat rock. Searching and probing under every bush he found at last what he was looking for—a crack in the rock about two feet wide that tapered away to a narrow fissure twenty or thirty feet below. Without hesitation he scrambled in.

This time his search was brief. A few feet below the surface he was satisfied that he had found the rook's opening; moreover its presence in that narrow passage was easily explained. A bulge in one side of the crack concealed the mouth of a comparatively wide passage that sloped gently towards the spruitt. With soaring hopes Malcolm entered it. "The tunnel I've found it," he murmured. He had to crawl on all fours, for the tunnel was low. It was the safe place of which Maraka had spoken, and if Mortimer had really been taken away through this tunnel it must have been a grim journey. Then, to his relief the tunnel opened out into a wider passage whose uneven walls sloped upwards to meet above his head in a sort of rough arch.

He went on, searching as he walked, but the tunnel had no more secrets to reveal. Then just as he was beginning to feel the oppression of never-ending rock and darkness the floor changed to a rubble of large stones, and as he reached them a sudden breath of fresh air warned him that he was approaching an opening. The ground was rising. He switched off his torch, and gazing upwards saw at last a more and his outstretched hand brushed against the branch of a bush. He crawled under it and was once more in the open. And then he saw where he was!

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Joseph and Channing had failed to discover the reputed tunnel. Its entrance was not in the cave, but outside it; for he was just below the rock terrace before the Campsie cave. He turned to look at the entrance from which he had just emerged but could see only a bush growing between the face of the terrace and a great grey boulder. He drew in a great breath of the fresh night air but choked in the middle of it, holding his breath. There was someone in the cave. How he got under that bush again, Malcolm never knew. Prone in the tunnel entrance peering out through the sheltering branches he waited his pulses racing. It came again; a faint scuffle then a dull thud; and the figure of a man came against the dark sky as it stood for a moment on the terrace. In that momentary glimpse it was impossible to discern the identity of that blanketed figure. And the next moment the man had dropped from the terrace to the ground below, as if he was moving away towards the trees.

Ten seconds' grace Malcolm gave him whoever he was, and then he was trying to distinguish between the quiet steady movements of the man ahead and some other sound, the faint but insistent. And then he would track that man's feet, but he was sure of him once, and for all. His job for the moment was just to keep in sight of his unsuspecting quarry. But they had hardly reached the pathway through the poplars when he realized that he had made a mistake. For a few seconds he had been trying to distinguish between the quiet steady movements of the man ahead and some other sound, the faint but insistent. And then he would track that man's feet, but he was sure of him once, and for all. His job for the moment was just to keep in sight of his unsuspecting quarry.

CHAPTER XXIII A TRAP OR NOT?

Malcolm glanced back. And even as he had seen the man ahead so now he saw the shadow behind him moving after him through the trees. If he had known that he was being followed before they entered the trees, he might have managed to escape slipping aside to hide against a boulder. Here, escape was impossible. The trees grew so close together every inch of space between them was so closed up with saplings, that any attempt to escape

through them would sound like the blunderings of an elephant. He cursed his impulsiveness. They had caught him nearly those two men. He had handed himself over to them by rushing off in pursuit, and now they were shepherding him away awaiting only their own moment for disposing of him.

Then another thought surged through his mind. Supposing that it was not a trap at all, that they had not seen him before they left the cave that they did not know that three men, not two, were walking through the trees? Then the man behind him must think he saw only his friend ahead, and he, if he heard any sound that Malcolm made, must attribute it to his companion. If they really did not know he was between them then the danger was of another kind; and he walked on,

less expectant of the rushing steps that would mean attack, though grimly aware that the man behind him could see him all the time. But if he could play out the game he was safe—unless the man in front stopped to wait for his friend to come up.

But the man in front was just disappearing round the bend where the path turned towards the small cave. Now if his first impression was the right one would come the moment for attack, one man waiting concealed beyond the turn the other hurrying up from behind. Malcolm's steps did not slacken, but his finger was on the trigger of his revolver as he approached the bend. He came round it but the path lay empty ahead. The man had disappeared.

Malcolm hurried on past the dark vault of the cave. When at last another curve in the path took him out of range of it he found that the sweat was running down his face. But the plantation was thinning, trees giving place to scrub and boulders. He looked back and reached them; the path was empty, and he turned quickly aside to a hiding-place below an overhanging boulder from which he could watch the path. If he had missed the first man, he would at least secure the second; and with his revolver in one hand his torch in the other, he awaited his coming.

Five leaden minutes passed, and still he had not appeared and Malcolm had just decided that it was useless to wait any longer when a shadowy figure detached itself from the darkness beneath the trees and came swiftly towards him.

Malcolm rose noiselessly to his feet. He waited until the man was within a yard of him then with a low fierce ejaculation of "Hands up!" he flashed his torch straight into his face. He had no more than those of Maraka unfolded that face, for next moment his torch was twisted out of his hand and the light switched off.

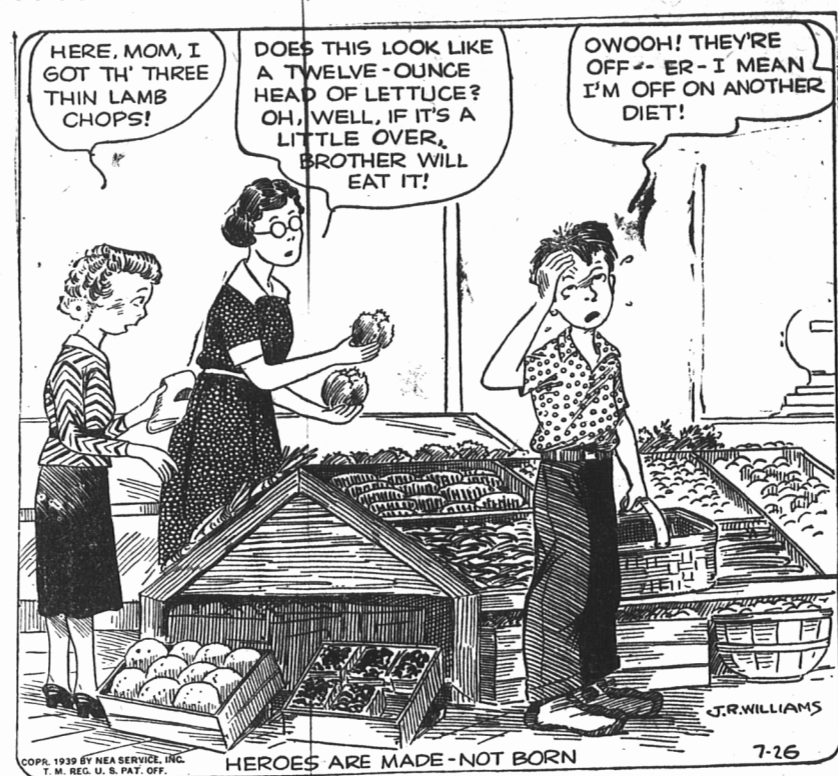
"Fish, Bass," hissed the man; "Left-Hand him plenty near, Bass. His efforts had been as successful as those of Malcolm. Indeed his journey of discovery had been remarkably similar to that of Malcolm. When he emerged from the cave, he had been confronted by the two blanketed figures that Malcolm had followed that night.

And it was in that good place that, ten minutes later, Malcolm heard the explanation, not only of the cook's presence in the kitchen at that hour of the night but of the mysterious disappearance of the man he had tried to shadow since his emergence from the tunnel he had discovered.

The story that Maraka unfolded dated back to the night when the boy Sam had been killed. While Malcolm and Cornelle had been at the river, explained Maraka, he had taken the opportunity of searching for that safe hiding-place which he knew Left-Hand must rely upon. His efforts had been as successful as those of Malcolm. Indeed his journey of discovery had been remarkably similar to that of Malcolm. When he emerged from the cave, he had been confronted by the two blanketed figures that Malcolm had followed that night.

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