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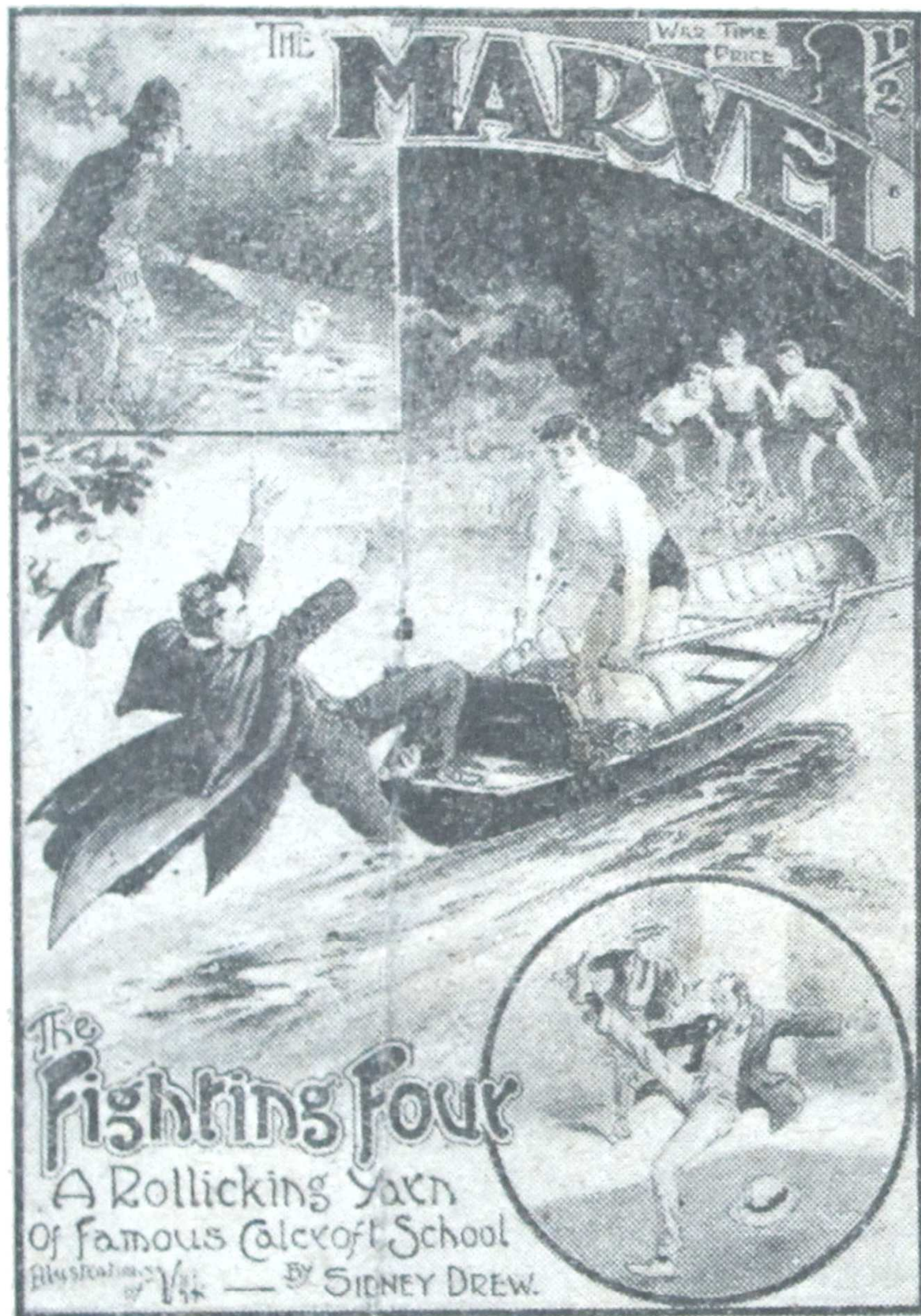
THE FIGHT FOR MASTERY!

A Story of Exciting Adventure in the South Sea Islands, introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, THE BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S, EILEEN DARE, LORD DORRIMORE, and UMLOSI. By the Author of "The Valley of the Unknown," "Marooned," etc.

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By the Author of "The Valley of the Unknown,"
"Marooned," etc.

(The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

NELSON LEE'S SCHEME—GREAT ACTIVITY—A VISIT TO THE SOHOONER.

HOLIDAY ISLAND was teeming with activity.

The tropical sun hung in the azure sky, blazing down heat at about fifty-five thousand horse-power, more or less. That's not exactly poetical, but it's jolly near the truth.

I was perspiring freely, although I had been lazing about all the morning. Nearly everybody else was similarly affected. Not that we minded the heat much; we had got used to it. Umlosi, in fact, gloried in it, declaring that it reminded him of his beloved Kutanalani.

High spirits abounded everywhere, for our position had undergone such a complete change during the last twenty-four hours that the prospects were rosy in every way. Disaster had overtaken us at one time, but triumph had taken its place.

Of course, you know all about the situation, don't you?

In case you may have forgotten, I'll just give a few details—only don't complain that I'm a bore. These little things are necessary in life.

Holiday Island was situated in the far-off Pacific, and our trip had been mainly concerned with a treasure of Spanish gold. It had been Captain Burton's idea at the start, and Lord Dorrimore had placed his magnificent yacht, the *Adventure*, at the skipper's disposal.

Nelson Lee and I and the Bo'sun—Captain Burton's son—had been specially invited for the trip. The summer holidays were in progress at St. Frank's, and so we were taking advantage of the long vacation. My two chums, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, were with us—to say nothing of those famous youths, Handforth, Church, and McClure. Then, of course, Farman was with us, and De Valerie and Yakama—quite

a representative crowd of the St. Frank's Remove.

Other guests with the party were Miss Eileen Dare and her Aunt Esther; and, altogether, we comprised a lively throng. But peril and excitement had dogged us practically all the time since we had left the shores of old England.

This was mainly because a rascal named Captain Ebenezer Jelks had decided to diddle us and collar the treasure for himself. As it happened, Captain Jelks was the diddled one, being a prisoner in our hands, and the treasure, worth over half a million sterling, was ours also.

But there had been much peril. To begin with, a volcanic disturbance had caused disaster almost as soon as we arrived at Holiday Island. A barrier of rocks had been thrust up across the mouth of the bay, completely bottling up the yacht in the lagoon, and making escape for us impossible.

But Nature evidently considered that she hadn't done enough. She very unkindly emptied the lagoon during the night—just as though it were a wash-basin, and somebody had pulled the plug out. Nelson Lee declared that a crack must have opened in the lagoon bed—or, possibly, a number of cracks—and the water had filtered out. The yacht was left high and dry, utterly useless for purposes of sailing. We could not refloat her without lifting the vessel bodily over the rock barrier and depositing her into the sea. Even Umlosi, strong as he was, couldn't quite manage that! Steam yachts are hefty things.

It really seemed as though Nature had conspired against us. The rock barrier shut out the sea so that the lagoon remained dry, and did not refill. After that some bright specimens of humanity with cannibalistic inclinations had appeared on the scene.

These gentlemen were natives of Zambua, an island fifteen miles to the southward—and the only other land in these latitudes. There had been a battle, and we had been

captured. The unexpected arrival of Captain Jelks and his men had saved us from the Zambuan; but worse was to follow. Jelks had come on a schooner called the Aurora, owned and skippered by an American ruffian named Captain "Bully" Barrow.

Well, the rascals had taken the gov'nor and Eileen and all the rest of them to Zambua, with the genial intention of having them eaten by the cannibals, and thus placed out of the way. Jelks meant to collar both the treasure and the yacht, his ambitions having soared higher.

Dorrie and I and three others had managed to remain on Holiday Island, unknown to Jelks. We had removed all the treasure and the guns and other things of value, and had secreted them in a cache amongst the rocks. Then Jelks had returned and had got hold of us.

Meanwhile, our friends on Zambua were having some excitement. Hordes of blacks appeared, headed by the chief. Umlosi, without waiting to exchange compliments, went for the chief bald-headed, and a terrific combat had resulted. Net result: Umlosi finished off the chief and was elected chief himself.

You can guess what that means. Instead of the Zambuan being hostile, they were friendly. It was their custom to elect any man chief who succeeded in killing their ruler in a fair combat. They were ready to obey Umlosi in every respect—and, needless to say, Umlosi was not at all averse to the arrangement.

"Wau! I like not these ugly savages," declared Umlosi; "but it is better to lead them than to have them arrayed against us. As warriors they are but unskilled dogs, but dangerous withal. It is well that they should be friendly."

The blacks were quite thorough; they showed no sign of treachery, but accepted Umlosi's leadership like so many sheep. And the whole party had returned to Holiday Island in native canoes, and had arrived just in time to save us from the villainies of Captain Jelks and his men.

There was just a short scrap, and then Jelks and Co. were beaten, the schooner was ours, and, as Handforth put it, everything in the garden was lovely. It really seemed as though our perils were at an end.

At present the Zambuan were camped in a glade some little distance from the shore and hidden from the dry lagoon bed by clumps of cocoanut palms. They were not such bad fellows when we got to know them, and we were fully satisfied that they would not turn on us.

As for Jelks and his fellow-scoundrels, they were prisoners on their own schooner, guarded night and day by armed men. It was Nelson Lee's idea to leave the island almost at once, using the schooner instead of the yacht—as the latter was quite useless for seagoing purposes.

And now preparations were being made for departure. We reckoned to leave on the following day, and we should sail for a South American port. There Jelks and Co.

would be landed and we should get on board a homeward-bound steamer.

"It's a rotten idea, really," said Lord Dorrimore. "It hits me pretty hard, you know, to leave this yacht stranded on this confounded little coral island. She is as seaworthy as she was when she left the slips——"

"My dear man, I quite agree with you there," said Nelson Lee. "But if you can suggest a means of floating the yacht, all the better. We ought to consider ourselves very lucky that we have a vessel of any sort to reach civilisation in. We might have stayed here for years, but for Jelks's activities."

Dorrie nodded.

"All the same, I'm cut up," he declared. "I've been rackin' my brains for days, tryin' to think of a wheeze. But it's no good—my brains ain't made for thinkin' with. Why don't you suggest somethin', you grinning young idiot?"

"Talking to me?" I said.

"Well, there are several grinning young idiots, I'll admit," replied Dorrie, looking round, "but I was referrin' to you, Nipper. Why can't you think of some startlin' stunt?"

We were on the yacht's deck—Nelson Lee and Dorrie, two or three juniors, and myself.

"Well, there might be another volcanic disturbance," I suggested. "These rocks were thrust up in about an hour, so why shouldn't they be thrust down again? I suppose it's only a question of waiting."

Lord Dorrimore snorted.

"You don't want us to stay here until we've got whiskers a mile long, do you?" he demanded. "Why, it might be ninety years before another volcanic disturbance takes place."

"Or it might be only ninety hours," said Nelson Lee. "However, we cannot rely upon such a ghostly chance. We have this schooner, and we can sail to civilisation—Of course, there is another way," he added slowly.

"Begad! Is there, sir?" asked Sir Montie.

"He's rottin'!" declared Lord Dorrimore.

"No, I'm not—I'm serious," said the gov'nor. "I have been thinking of the thing for a day or two, but I'm very much afraid that the experiment would be a failure. Still, we might try it."

"Try what, gov'nor?" I asked.

"Before I make any statement, I wish to think over the matter further," was Nelson Lee's aggravating reply. "I expect you will laugh at it in derision when you hear the scheme."

"Now, I call that mean—shockin'ly mean," said his lordship in a pained voice. "We've been turnin' our brains inside out, an' spring-cleanin' them, as it were, an' you've got an idea all the time!"

"It's only a suggestion, Dorrie——"

"I don't care what it is—if you thought of it, it's bound to be the real goods," said Lord Dorrimore, with supreme confidence. "I'm not flatterin' you, but I've heard of your suggestions before. They're rippin', Lec, old man."

"I hope this one will not deprive me of your unbounded faith," smiled Nelson Lee. "Come down with me into the saloon, and we will talk over the idea. It certainly presents possibilities."

They walked towards the companion, and I followed.

"No outsiders admitted," said Dorrie, frowning. "Buzz off, you inquisitive young beggar! We don't allow third parties——"

"Look here——" I began warmly.

"I think you'd better leave us to ourselves for a while, Nipper," put in Nelson Lee. "If the scheme comes to anything, you'll hear about it soon enough. But I wish to avoid chatter—we don't want everybody to have their hopes raised, only to fall again."

"I sha'n't chatter, guv'nor," I protested.

I could see that he was firm, however, and he and Dorrie went below, leaving me on deck with Sir Montie and Tommy Watson and Farman.

"I guess there'll be something doing just directly," said the American boy. "Say, Mr. Lee's a real hustler, and when he gets busy—waal, things get goin' good an' plenty!"

"I wish I knew what the idea is," I grumbled. "How the dickens can we get the yacht out of this fix? It's impossible!"

"Dear fellow, take my advice an' leave it to your guv'nor," said Sir Montie. "He wouldn't speak like that unless he was pretty sure of himself. Suppose we take a row out to the schooner, just for a change?"

"Oh, any old thing!" I growled.

We left the yacht, descending right to the ground. We had got quite accustomed to this novelty by now. The vessel was wedged between two masses of rock, and maintained a perfectly even keel.

Handforth and Co. were sprawling on the sand in the shade cast by the stern of the yacht. Handforth was asleep, and took care to let everybody know it. Church and McClure were mainly occupied in waking him up every five minutes so that they might obtain some little peace themselves.

"It's the heat, I suppose," said McClure, as we paused to look on. "Handy used to be bad enough at St. Frank's, goodness knows, but he's simply shocking now! Just listen to that! Sounds like a giddy fog-horn!"

I grinned.

"Drop something into his mouth," I suggested.

"I did that five minutes ago," said Church. "The silly ass nearly swallowed it and choked himself. And I only stuffed a cake of soap in, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's risky to try those games," said McClure. "Church got a thick ear through stuffing that chunk of soap into Handy's mouth. You should have heard the way the fathead carried on!"

"Well, we'll leave you to your worries," I said. "But I must say you're a couple of asses!"

"Look here——"

"Why don't you leave him by himself?" I

went on. "You're not tied to him by strings, I suppose?"

McClure shook his head.

"You don't know Handy," he said sadly. "If we did that he'd say that we were deserters, and that we couldn't stick to our old pal. Oh, he's awful! We've got to humour him at every giddy turn!"

"Begad! You have my sympathy, old boys," murmured Sir Montie. "Personally, I shouldn't have the patience—I shouldn't, really!"

We proceeded on our way, meeting Miss Eileen and her aunt near the rock barrier. Eileen had been collecting shells further along the beach, and had really secured some beautiful specimens.

After admiring them, we climbed over the rocks and were soon rowing towards the schooner—that is, Sir Montie and Tommy and myself. Farman had gone off to join De Valerie and the Bo'sun.

Everything was peaceful on the island, but I shouldn't be exactly sorry to sail for old England once more. Now that we were away from St. Frank's I felt a longing to return. It seemed ages since we had seen the ivy-covered old walls.

Reaching the schooner, we were soon on board. It was really a temporary prison at present. For Captain Jelks and Captain Barrow and all their followers were being kept closely guarded.

Mr. Scott, the yacht's first officer, was in charge at present. He had six men with him, and they were all fully armed. The prisoners were quite helpless in face of these conditions, the majority of them being cooped up in the hold. Only half a dozen were allowed on deck at a time—and they, of course, knew better than to attempt any tricks.

As we dropped on to the deck we found ourselves facing Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson. The pair had been pacing up and down, taking exercise, and I had never seen two gloomier faces in my life.

Jelks scowled as he caught sight of me.

"Lookin' cheerful, ain't you?" he snarled savagely.

"Rather!" I replied. "I've got reason to, Jelks, old son. You can see what villainy has brought you to——"

"I ain't done yet!" snapped Jelks, scowling again.

"Now then—now then!" exclaimed Mr. Scott, walking along the deck. "There's no need for you to talk, Jelks."

"Oh, let him ramble on, Mr. Scott," I grinned. "It's a pleasure to listen to such a sweet voice, isn't it? I don't believe in gloating over a fallen foe, but if Jelks likes to jaw, I've no objection."

Captain Jelks nodded.

"Mebbe I 'ave fallen," he agreed. "But don't you think I've finished yet, young shaver! Ho, no! Afore I've done, you'll be sorry that you was ever born! The whole darned crowd of you will be sorry! By ginger! You ain't finished with Captain Ben

Jelks yet—not by long chalks! Wot do you say, Bill?"

"Why, I think you're a blamed fool!" snapped Mr. Larson.

As a rule the mate agreed with Jelks upon every point, but he couldn't do so on this occasion; the captain's threats were completely hollow, in spite of their ferocity.

"Y' think I can't do nothing—hey?" sneered Jelks. "Don't you make no bloomin' mistake, Bill. I've got piles of fight in me yet, an' that dood, Lord Dorrimore, will find it out afore long——"

"That's enough!" snapped Mr. Scott sharply. "Don't be such a fool, Jelks. Go for'ard, and hold your tongue!"

Captain Jelks nearly choked; to be spoken to as he was in the habit of speaking to his own men was rather more than he could swallow.

"You wait!" he snarled thickly.

He went for'ard, and Mr. Scott smiled at us. But, somehow, I must acknowledge that Jelks' threat impressed me. He couldn't escape, of course, but I knew that he was a cunning rascal.

Had he some unexpected move up his sleeve?

Whether he had or not, I decided to advise the gov'nor to place a stronger guard upon the schooner. As events turned out, it would be necessary!

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE'S SCHEME—LAYING THE MINES— EVERYTHING READY.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH sat up and yawned.

"I wish you asses would keep quiet," he growled. "Blessed if you haven't been jawing for hours. How can a chap get a nap with all that row going on. I should like to know?"

"Why, you've been asleep for half an hour past!" said McClure.

"Rot!"

"Oh, all right!" snapped McClure. "I know jolly well you've been snoring for half an hour, anyhow! And if you make that thundering noise while you're awake you ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself!"

Handforth glared.

"If you accuse me of snoring——" he began.

"If!" gasped McClure. "Why, you silly ass, you—you made the whole ground shake five minutes ago; didn't he, Church?"

"Well, nearly," admitted Church, who realized that McClure's description was somewhat exaggerated. "It's a lazy thing, anyhow, to sleep during the morning. I vote we go on deck and rout out some cold drinks."

Handforth snorted.

"I'll settle with you chaps later on," he said darkly. "My hat! I'll teach you to say I snore and call me lazy! If I wasn't so blessed hot I'd punch you straight away. I'm going to bathe——"

"Oh, don't be silly!" exclaimed Church.

"I'm going to bathe!" repeated Handforth firmly. "Captain Burton says that we mustn't, but that's all rot. There's a nice little stretch of beach round the bay, and we can have a ripping swim and freshen ourselves up."

"What about the sharks, you idiot?" yelled McClure.

"Oh, they won't touch us!"

"Well, I'm blessed if I'll risk it!" said Church flatly. "I don't suppose the sharks would touch you, Handy—you're too jolly tough! But I'm not going to let them have a go at me—no fear!"

"Taint likely," agreed McClure.

Handforth regarded his chums witheringly.

"And you call yourselves my pals!" he exclaimed. "I'm beginning to feel sorry that I brought you on this trip——"

"You—you brought us!" stuttered McClure.

"Yes, I did!" said Handforth. "If it hadn't been for me you'd never have come—and now you can't stick by me! Funky—that's what you are. Frightened to go into the water because of some fatheaded sharks!"

"I'm not funky!" roared Church. "And you're a potty idiot to think of bathing after what Captain Burton told us. We'll jolly well drag you back if you try any of those mad games——"

"We can bathe at St. Frank's, so why shouldn't we bathe here?" argued Handforth obstinately. "A fellow wants a bathe a lot more out here than he does in England. As for the sharks, there's no fear of them coming near the shore."

"I don't suppose there is, actually," agreed Church. "At the same time, it's best to be on the safe side. We might bathe a hundred times without anything happening—quite likely, in fact. But we might be collared within two minutes of getting into the water!"

Church's argument was quite sound, and Handforth knew it. But his natural obstinacy did not allow him to admit the fact. He was the most reckless fellow on earth, and never counted odds. As Church said, bathing would probably be perfectly safe; indeed, Captain Burton had said as much. At the same time, there were many queer sea monsters in these waters, and the boys had been strictly forbidden to go in the sea on any account.

"That's all rot!" said Handforth firmly. "If von chaps don't like to come in, you can watch me——"

"Here's Nipper!" interrupted McClure. "We'll ask him!"

Tregellis-West and Watson and I were just returning from the schooner, and we arrived in the middle of the argument. We could easily see that there was trouble of some sort.

"I say, Nipper, we want your advice," shouted McClure.

"Rot!" roared Handforth. "Buzz off, you fatheads!"

We walked to the heated trio.

"What's wrong?" I asked calmly. "Have you been jamming another piece of soap down Handforth's throat?"

"No; the silly cuckoo says that he's going to bathe!" snorted Church.

"Well, the silly cuckoo won't bathe," I replied promptly. "It's forbidden, for one thing, and only a silly idiot like Handforth would suggest such a dotty idea!"

"Begad, it would be too dangerous!" said Tregellis-West. "I could do with a bathe myself, if it comes to that, an' I'm not a nervous chap. But this is a queer place to bathe——"

"I don't want your fatheaded advice!" snapped Handforth. "I can do as I like, I suppose?"

"No, you can't," I replied.

"Who'll stop me?"

"I will!"

"You'll stop me?" roared Handforth, rolling up his sleeves ominously.

"My dear fathead, it's too hot to scrap now," I said. "But if you're very anxious to receive a punch on the nose, I'll oblige. Anyhow, you're not going to make a bigger idiot of yourself than Nature succeeded in doing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Put up your hands!" roared Handforth excitedly.

"I say, when you kids have done arguin', you might come up on deck!" came a voice from above. "By gad! What's the matter with your face, Handforth? Have you been boilin' it, or what?"

Lord Dorrimore was looking down upon us, leaning over the rail leisurely.

"Just a little chat," I grinned. "Handforth wants to do something, and we're not going to let him do it. We sha'n't be long, Dorrie!"

"I don't allow any fightin'," said his lordship severely. "Come up here an' listen to the professor's wheeze. It's stunnin'—so stunnin' that I really can't believe that it'll happen."

We all hurried up quickly, with the exception of Handforth. He remained below, looking round for somebody to punch. Realising that we had all gone, he followed up with a disgusted snort. The incident was over, for something of a far more important nature was on the board.

Nelson Lee was on deck under the awning, chatting with Captain Burton and Eileen Dare. By the time we had joined them the party was complete, for Farman and De Valerie and Yakama had been on board some time.

"What's the great idea, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"There isn't one, Nipper," replied the guv'nor. "My scheme is by no means original, and the chances are that it will fail miserably. It would be foolish to leave the island, however, without making an attempt to get the yacht afloat again."

"But that's impossible, sir," I protested.

"I believe you are right, my boy. But there is one course which we can try. Fortunately we have a considerable quantity of

explosives on board," said Nelson Lee. "My scheme is quite simple, although it will entail a certain risk. The question is, are we prepared to take that risk?"

"You can rely on us, sir, if you think the idea's O.K.," I replied.

"Briefly, the plan is to lay a number of explosives in the centre of the rock barrier, and carry wires to the normal beach, and place a switch there. There is just a chance that the explosion will blow a gap of sufficient depth and width to enable the yacht to float out into the open sea."

We all looked somewhat dismayed.

"But what's going to happen to the yacht during the explosion, sir?" I asked. "By the time the gap's made the yacht won't be worth floating! At this short distance she'd be smashed all up."

"That's what I thought," said Dorrie calmly. "But don't you be in such a hurry—that's only half the wheeze!"

"Naturally, I was aware of what you say, Nipper," smiled Nelson Lee. "It would be foolish to fire the explosives in the manner you intimate. We shall lay the mines in preparation, and then transfer our attentions to the barrier at a spot as far from the yacht as possible—at the extreme end, in fact, near the shore."

"And what then, sir?"

"A much smaller charge will be placed there, and the explosion will smash away the barrier in a minor degree, and allow the sea to pour into the lagoon-bed," exclaimed the guv'nor. "The result will be that the lagoon will slowly fill to its former level, for there are certainly no cracks in its bed now. The yacht will be refloated."

"Why, it's—it's splendid, sir!" I gasped admiringly.

"That's what I told him, but he won't believe me!" commented Lord Dorrimore. "It's as easy as eatin' cocoanuts. After the water's in we'll blow the other mine—the big fellow—an' it won't cause much commotion, bein' far under water. After that we'll simply steam out an' make for home!"

"Sounds quite simple, doesn't it?" smiled Nelson Lee.

"Oh, but it will succeed, won't it?" asked Eileen.

"It all depends, Miss Dare," replied the guv'nor. "As Dorrie has just said, it seems as though it would be as easy as eating cocoanuts—and there is no doubt that that is quite simple. However, it is merely a theory and has yet to be tested. If it fails we shall be unable to do anything further, since we have only a limited supply of explosives. Or, again, our experiments might possibly work out correctly in the main, and still leave a passage too shallow for the safe exit of the yacht. It will all be a matter of chance."

"It's a lot better than sailin' away without tryin' anythin' at all," declared Lord Dorrimore. "I shall feel easier in mind, even if we don't get the yacht out. But we shall. You're plannin' the thing, professor—an' that's good enough for me!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I hope you won't be disappointed," he said. "What do you think about it all, Umlosi?"

"I keep my own counsel, O Umtagati," replied Umlosi, in his deep, rumbling voice. "It is not for me to question thy doings, or to state an opinion when I am sadly ignorant of the subject. I leave it to thee, my master, and share the confidence of my father, N'kose."

"Good for you, old man!" said Dorrie.

"It is well, O Thou-of-the-Shimmerlug-Eye," exclaimed the black giant. "Ere long we shall leave this island, but I fear that there will be further flowing of blood before—"

"What, more battles?" asked Dorrie. "I thought we'd finished with 'em, you old rascal? Are your handsome subjects causing trouble?"

"Nay, the Zambuanas obey my commands willingly, for I am their chief," said Umlosi gravely. "But I should urge thee to take great care of thy white prisoners on the vessel thou callest a schooner."

"I was going to say something of the same sort, guv'nor," I put in. "I shouldn't be surprised if Jelks tries some more of his tricks on—"

"I fancy Jelks is quite harmless," interrupted Nelson Lee. "At the same time, I fully intend to give him less liberty than he has enjoyed since his capture. In future he will be kept locked in his cabin—alone."

"That's all right, then," I said. "He can't do any harm there."

The subject was changed, and we all eagerly discussed the prospects of freeing the yacht. Luncheon was served soon after our talk, and during the afternoon the preparations for the great experiment were commenced.

Nelson Lee superintended everything, and he and Dorrie and Captain Burton chose the spots where the explosives were to be laid. Personally, I was very confident, and thought that the guv'nor's idea was first-class.

If it failed our position wouldn't be any worse—we should not be taking a hazard. And there was a distinct possibility that a passage would be opened of sufficient depth to allow the yacht to steam out.

It all depended upon the laying of the explosives. To blow the main charge at once would be a mad move, for, even if the explosion itself spared the yacht, the enormous inrush of sea would certainly swamp it—and swamp half the island, too. So we had to go cautiously.

By nightfall everything was in train for the actual work. And on the following morning the men were set to work in earnest. The whole programme was an ambitious one, and we were optimistic.

It would be splendid if we could salvage the yacht in this comparatively simple manner. The thought of abandoning it nearly broke the hearts of Lord Dorrimore and Captain Burton.

After a strenuous day's work the explosives were all in position. Nelson Lee himself laid the wires and connected them to a powerful battery. One set of wires would have to withstand the rush of the sea, of course, and

these had to be placed with particular care, so that they would not be washed away or disconnected.

However, just before nightfall, the guv'nor declared that he was satisfied. And if he was satisfied we were. The switches themselves were placed near the shore, but behind a clump of palms and protected by means of a stout wooden box, which was fitted with a strong lock. We didn't want any of the natives to get monkeying about with such dangerous articles as those switches.

"When will the show start?" asked Lord Dorrimore.

"Not until the morning. We want daylight for the job, old man," said Nelson Lee. "If my calculations prove correct the lagoon will fill during the course of to-morrow, and we shall be able to try the main experiment on the following morning."

"A long job, ain't it?"

"It doesn't do to hurry these things, Dorrie—and, if it comes to that, I think we have accomplished the matter in a remarkably short space of time," said Nelson Lee. "Let us hope our efforts will be rewarded."

"No harm in hopin'," said Dorrie. "Why, if it's all serene, we shall be sailin' for England, home an' beauty before the end of the week!"

"It sounds too good to be true," I remarked. "Unless you're talking about sailing in the schooner."

"Hang the schooner!" said Dorrie. "It's about the dirtiest old hooker I've ever set eyes on. If we're spared makin' a voyage in her I'll sing songs of joy for weeks!"

That night we were all very hopeful, and felt fairly certain that the first part of the programme would be accomplished all right. As for the other project—making a passage for the yacht—there were a great many doubts. As the guv'nor had said, it would be largely a matter of chance. Explosions are queer things, and don't always pan out as one would expect.

But a good deal was to happen before those explosions were fired—although we didn't know it now. As Umlosi had prophesied, more blood was to flow and further perils were to come our way.

CHAPTER III.

JELKS MAKES A MOVE—AT DEAD OF NIGHT— A HORDE OF SUPPORTERS.

CAPTAIN JELKS was by no means subdued.

Certainly it would appear as though he had every reason to be. His plotting and planning had brought him nothing but disaster, and he was the first to acknowledge this. He couldn't very well do anything else, seeing that he was a prisoner in the hands of the people he had sought to victimise.

As for escape, the very idea of it was out of the question. Not only was the Aurora guarded night and day by armed men, but Jelks was separated from his companions,

and any organised dash for freedom was impossible.

Even supposing they escaped from the schooner, their position would be really far worse, for there was only the island to go to, and we occupied that so strongly that it would be madness to land.

Yet, in spite of all these realisations, Captain Ebenezer Jelks was not subdued. His cunning, crafty brain attempted to scheme out a plan whereby he could gain the upper hand.

He sat in his cabin at night, being locked in there until the morning. His feet were free, but his hands were manacled. Nelson Lee had decided upon this in consequence of my warning. And Jelks, needless to say, was not at all grateful.

"It'll have to be a night attack—a surprise!" he muttered fiercely, as he paced up and down the confines of the cabin in the darkness. "By thunder! I wish I could think of something. Curse 'em—they've got me done!"

He caught his breath in sharply.

"But I ain't done!" he told himself. "By ginger! Ben Jelks ain't finished yet; no, not by no means! Things are bad, but not so bad as but wot a bit of trickery will turn the tables. I wish I 'ad Barrow 'ere to talk to—'e's a masterpiece for ideas!"

But Captain Barrow was in another part of the ship, as securely imprisoned as Jelks himself. And Mr. Larson occupied a cabin next to Jelks's—but he might as well have been a mile away. Conversation was only possible in loud voices, and that would have brought the guard down at once.

Jelks realised that he would have to work the trick himself if it was to be worked at all. Without a doubt he was a clever scoundrel in his own way and as cunning as a fox.

"If we can only git them guards squared it'll 'be all right," he muttered savagely. "But the blamed fools won't listen. They don't take no notice o' promises, hang 'em! It'll have to be some other way."

Jelks had already made an attempt to win over the members of the yacht's crew who had been placed on board the schooner as temporary warders. But every man was staunch to Lord Dorrimore—and they were not likely to forget, either, that Jelks had marooned them on the Island of Zambua, fully believing that they would be murdered by savages.

The position seemed positively hopeless, and Jelks worked himself into a frenzy. The whole thing was getting on his nerves; it was too much for him, and he felt that he would rather die than suffer the indignity of being taken to civilisation and cast into prison.

Strong as he was, it seemed as though his nerve broke down. For he ceased his pacing, clutched his head between his hands, and yelled aloud with hysterical laughter, his voice rising to awful shrieks.

He fell, writhing, upon the cabin floor, beating the planks madly in his frenzy. We heard nothing of this on shore, for the continuous roar of the surf further along the coast drowned all ordinary sounds.

But the guards on deck were instantly aware that something unusual was occurring. Four men were on night duty on the schooner—it was really not necessary to have more than one, since all the prisoners were locked in their separate prisons and every man-jack of them was handcuffed. But both Nelson Lee and Captain Burton decided to be on the safe side, and told off four men to guard the prisoners.

These men would be relieved at four in the morning; the time now was only half an hour after midnight, and everything was quiet ashore.

"Lummy! Wot's that, Jim?" asked one of the guards, startled.

"Somebody 'avin' a fit, I reckon!" replied the other. "Better come down with me an' see. You other blokes stay on deck," he added.

The pair seized a lamp and hurried to the companion-way aft. It could be heard that the strange cries were coming from one of the cabins. And the uproar below decks was terrific.

"Jelks!" exclaimed Jim. "Gone barmy. I reckon!"

"Better 'ave your gun ready, mate!" said the other man.

"You bet!"

The door was unlocked, and the two guards went in cautiously, holding their revolvers in readiness for instant service if necessary. But the precaution was in vain, for Captain Jelks was writhing upon the floor, beating the planks in a frenzy with his manacled hands. Already he had grazed his wrists so severely that the blood was flowing.

"It's a fit!" declared Jim. "Wot shall we do, matey? Send a boat ashore for 'elp—"

"'E'll git quiet afore long," said the other man. "I've seen a bloke in a fit afore. Arter a time he'll grow quiet an' sleep like a bloomin' baby! 'E won't git no pity from me, the murderous 'umbug!"

The two guards felt rather helpless. Captain Jelks was gasping and gurgling and fighting for breath. Suddenly he jumped to his feet, reeling, and he presented such an awful aspect that the two men backed away. Jelks dashed at them, his eyes rolling.

"Stand back, you fool!" shouted Jim.

Jelks took no notice, but came on. The two guards backed out of the cabin, slammed the door, and locked it. They couldn't possibly fire upon Jelks in his present state—for he was not responsible for his actions. It would have been like shooting him in cold blood.

"We shall 'ave to do somethink, mate!" said one of the guards hoarsely.

The other man realised the truth of the assertion. Jelks was more frenzied than ever, shouting and shrieking and blundering round the cabin like a raging bull. To leave him to himself would be inhuman, for it was quite likely that he would do himself an injury. And these sailors, although rough men, were kindly in their own way.

"Better call down the others," suggested Jim anxiously.

The two men who had been left on deck were now below, and a short consultation was held. Jelks was more violent than ever, if anything, and it was decided to enter the cabin and put the frenzied man in his bunk, and to hold him there by force until he grew quiet.

The door was unlocked again, and once more the cabin was entered. Jelks emitted an insane roar and dashed at the intruders. They met the rush squarely, and the next second a tremendous struggle was taking place.

Jelks was as strong as a horse—wiry and hard and he kept all four men busy. The handcuffs were a menace rather than anything, since a blow from his clenched fists would have done great damage. Jelks's wrists were torn and bleeding where the irons had chafed.

But at last his resistance grew weak and he collapsed suddenly, falling in a heap upon the floor. He lay there moaning. And the guards, completely out of breath, had a respite.

"Better lift 'im into 'is bunk while 'e's quiet," suggested one man.

This was done with some little difficulty, and then Jelks's handcuffs were removed. His wrists needed bandaging, and in the event of a fresh outburst the guards would prefer his hands to be free—for he could be held much easier.

"E'd 'ave killed 'isself if we 'adn't come down," said Jim. "Can't 'elp feelin' sorry for the 'ound, though. A man in a fit allus makes me feel queer. It don't seem natural, some'ow."

Captain Jelks rolled over in his bunk, still moaning. Then with one bound he leapt to the floor, reached the door, and shot through.

Slam!

The door closed with a crash, and even as the four startled guards dashed to it the key turned in the lock and a bolt was shot! Captain Jelks, panting heavily, hung on to the handle.

"Done 'em!" he muttered triumphantly. "By ginger! Done 'em!"

The imprisoned guards shouted and yelled, and several revolver-shots rang out. But Captain Jelks merely moved aside and attempted to recover his breath. There was little prospect of the disturbance being heard ashore, owing to the roar of the surf. For the first time in his life Jelks mentally blessed that sound—the sound which usually meant danger to shipmasters.

"Done 'em!" he repeated huskily.

And there was no doubt that Captain Jelks had achieved a complete victory. It had cost him practically all his strength and a considerable amount of skin from his wrists. But he didn't care; grazes didn't hurt him, and his object was gained. He was free, and the guards were imprisoned. Not only that, but he had the key of the handcuffs. It had lain on the table, and Jelks had grabbed it as he made his exit.

He hadn't bargained for this, but it was all to the good. In fact, the position was far easier now that he possessed that key. His keen eyes had spotted it, and he had grabbed wildly as he passed, chancing whether he seized it or not. Luckily for him, he did so.

The cunning of the whole thing was astonishing.

Jelks had been in no fit—his frenzy had been assumed from the first moment. But he had not escaped from the cabin until his hands had been freed, although he could have made the dash earlier had he chosen. To begin with, he had grazed his wrists by accident, but shrewdly realised that the flowing blood looked effective. And he grazed them still further deliberately.

His audacious trick had succeeded. But it was only by the coolest of cool cheek that he had gained his end. The effort had well-nigh exhausted him, but success gave him fresh strength.

"There's the whole night before me!" he muttered, as he staggered to another cabin and shot back the bolt. "By gosh! We'll gain the upper 'and even now! We'll make them dogs be sorry for themselves!"

He pushed the door open and peered into the darkness.

"Who's that?" came a sharp voice.

"It's me, Bill—your old skipper!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Mr. Larson amazedly. "I wondered wot all that darned row was about! 'Ow the thunder—"

"Don't ask no questions," interrupted Jelks quickly. "We've got to git busy!"

Larson was released in a few seconds, and then the pair went all over the ship, freeing the other men. Captain Barrow and his mate, Ned Brown, were overjoyed when they gained their liberty.

"Master o' my own craft agin!" exclaimed Barrow huskily. "Hully gee! I guess you're some guy, Jelks! Say, shake!"

The two skippers shook hands heartily.

"We've got to git a move on!" said Jelks. "There's no tellin' but wot them shots was 'eard on the island, an' the sooner we're away the better. You're skipper—git the men busy!"

Captain Barrow didn't waste a moment. And twenty minutes later the Aurora was sailing away from Holiday Island, her canvas bulging under the keen breeze. Jelks and Co. had escaped!

With the island astern, all danger of defeat disappeared. Nobody could follow the schooner, since there was no vessel. And the departure of the Aurora would probably mean a fresh disaster for the island garrison. If the plan to free the yacht failed there would be no means of reaching civilisation.

Not only that, but Jelks was inspired by this victory to further efforts. To begin with, the four guards were dealt with. As they were armed, this was a ticklish matter. There was quite a battle at the outset, but Jelks's men threatened to fire through the partition of the next cabin until the four men surrendered. They did so for a time, and one

of the guards was injured. The others realised the hopelessness of their position and gave in.

They were at once disarmed, bound, and cast into the for'ard hold. And then Jelks and Barrow held a consultation in their cabin. Both men were ready to fight any odds under the influence of whisky.

"No, we mustn't take any more!" said Jelks, as Barrow reached for the bottle for a fourth time. "We want clear 'eads, Bill, an' there's a lot to be done. I'm wonderin' if we can't attack the island?"

"By gee! We can!" declared Captain Barrow grimly.

"How?"

"Waal, I reckon we should be fool guys if we tried the game on ourselves—without 'elp," replied Barrow. "But I guess I've been thinkin', an' there's a way we can get the better of—"

"Blame you, why don't you talk out straight?" asked Jelks irritably. "'Ow in thunder can we git help? You talk as though we was lying off 'Frisco or Wappin'!—We can't git anybody to—"

"Don't you talk so fast, old mate!" interjected Barrow. "I say there's a way we can git hundreds of helpers—an' I guess that ain't hot air. Mebbe you know these waters good an' well? If so, I reckon I know 'em a heap better."

"Wot about it?"

"There's a blamed island named Zambua," said Captain Barrow calmly. "I guess them blacks are friendly to that dood lot on the island. Waal, we can't do anything in that direction. But mebbe you know that there's another tribe of black devils on Zambua?"

"Another tribe?" repeated Jelks. "I didn't know it, an' I'll bet you're wrong."

"Say, I wouldn't take your money," said Barrow. "I kinder know—an' I ain't the feller to take an advantage. This tribe hangs around the lower end of the island. I guess they ain't as strong as they might be, an' the Zambuans proper sort o' crush 'em down under their heels. Waal, these chaps don't like that, an' I don't blame 'em."

"Look 'ere, if we try any o' them games, Barrow, we'll be shoved into the blamed cook-pot ourselves!" said Jelks uneasily. "These blacks are funny cusses to monkey with."

"They know me," said Barrow easily, "an' I guess I know them. We ain't wot you might call friends, but my ship's safe off their coast. An' if we git around there and pow-wow with the chief, waal, he'll jest fall over hisself in his eagerness to come right back with us."

"Wot for?"

"To have a smack at them Zambuans!" replied Barrow. "This tribe I'm referrin' to hates 'em like poison, and if they git to hear that a comparatively small force is cut off on that coral rock, they'll come along without no persuadin'. A big victory for them would make a heap of difference—and you can reckon that they'll fall in with the scheme."

"An' 'ow will it affect us?" asked Jelks, becoming excited.

"Say, it'll jest be great!" declared Barrow. "We've got the hull night before us, an' if we can manage an attack at dawn—waal, say, them dood guys will be just wiped off the map, slick! We shall 'ave the island, an' I guess you can calc'late the rest for yourself!"

"By ginger!" muttered Captain Jelks tensely.

The two men discussed the matter for nearly an hour, and made complete plans. It was a bold move, and there was a distinct prospect that it would be successful. It all depended upon the attitude of the savages they were intent upon approaching.

The distance to Zambua was comparatively slight, and the island soon loomed up in the semi-darkness ahead. Then, skirting the coast, the schooner sailed down to the lower shore. The island itself was by no means large.

Jelks and Barrow were completely confident. This was a grim attempt to gain the mastery—and they meant to succeed!

CHAPTER IV.

JELKS'S PLAN SUCCEEDS—THE ATTACK AT DAWN—COMPELLED TO RETREAT!

CAPTAIN "BULLY" BARROW rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "Say, wot did I tell you, Jelks?" he asked. "Wot did I tell you—hey?"

A couple of hours had passed, and the schooner was lying quietly off a sandy bay on the southern coast of Zambua. Great activity could be seen on the shore, where fires and torches were blazing by the hundred.

A canoe had just left the Aurora, bearing with it the chief of the tribe, who had been paying a visit. The interview had been somewhat difficult, but was a complete success. Hence the satisfaction of Jelks and Barrow.

There had been some little danger to commence with, for these blacks were suspicious and readily misunderstood. But, under the influence of some whisky, and with the promise of a whole bottleful for himself, the chief had been ready enough to listen to the proposal.

When he learned that a force of Zambuans were upon Holiday Island, and that it would be possible to send a greatly superior force and catch the enemy off their guard, the chief was mad with eagerness to start.

There was tremendous activity. Warriors were donning their war-paint, and canoes were being prepared by the hundred. They were much smaller canoes than those used by Umlosi's new army, but there were many more of them.

The force which started back for Holiday Island with the Aurora consisted of fifteen hundred men strong—and possibly more. There were less than six hundred on Holiday

Island, and so the attacking force would be vastly superior. Furthermore, they would have all the advantage of surprise—for Jelks wanted, if possible, to get all his men ashore before the alarm was given. The yacht would thus be surrounded, and the fate of its occupants sealed.

It was a bold scheme, and Jelks and Barrow were undoubtedly delivering a masterly strategic blow. Whether it would succeed or not remained to be seen. Certainly, the advantage was all with the rascals.

As for the savages, they were eager enough to undertake the trip. If they succeeded in winning the battle—and it was almost certain that they would—there was a distinct possibility that they would gain complete mastery of the island of Zambua—a dream they had never been able to realise. So the blacks were not merely the tools of Jelks; they were eager to attack on their own account.

The breeze was still fairly strong, and the schooner was able to make the journey back to Holiday Island direct; in coming out she had been obliged to tack somewhat, thus losing a certain amount of time.

The native canoes could have outdistanced her easily, but Jelks had told the chief that he wanted him to arrive at the same time. It was reckoned that they would make the attack just before dawn—and nothing could be better than that.

"I guess we'll stop aboard the old hooker, Jelks," said Captain Barrow, as he paced the poop with his fellow-skipper. "I allow I ain't hunkerin' after tastin' lead pizen!"

"We can direct the operation from 'ere, on the deck," agreed Jelks. "They've got machine-guns, an' if they've found out that we've slipped off, well, they'll be on their guard. It don't matter a cuss if a hundred o' them niggers git done in. We've got to think of ourselves."

Captain Barrow chuckled.

"Say, we'll jest walk in afterwards, when all the excitement's over," he said, spitting overside and replacing his pipe. "It won't take them nigs. long to finish off the hull crowd. Gee! I guess you were smart, old man, to get hold o' the old schooner like you did!"

Jelks nodded. As a matter of fact he was very pleased with himself, and made no pretence of it. He fully believed that he would gain complete victory without a fight. But he would very soon find that this supposition was wrong. For there would be a fight—and a grim one, too!

Just before dawn Holiday Island lay still and silent. This morning the experiments with the explosives were to be tried, and everybody was to be up early. I was in my bunk, fast asleep, and everybody else was in a similar state.

There was no thought of danger now. Perhaps we were too confident; anyhow, even the gov'nor did not suspect that Jelks could make any further move. And it was only by a sheer chance and an act of desperation

that Jelks had succeeded in tricking the guards.

Some little time before dawn the four men who were to relieve the guards on the Aurora were roused by Mr. Scott, and they tumbled out and went along to the rock barrier to where two boats were drawn up. But as soon as they mounted the rocks they made the discovery that the schooner had mysteriously vanished.

The men were startled, and rushed back to the yacht at full speed, breathlessly informing Mr. Scott of the astounding fact.

He wouldn't believe it, and went and had a look himself. Not being possessed of eyesight that could see below the horizon, he failed to observe the Aurora. And his alarm was considerable.

"Jelks must have escaped somehow!" he declared. "Those scoundrels have taken the schooner off—although Heaven knows how they managed it!"

Without a minute's delay Captain Burton was aroused and acquainted with the news. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were next routed out of their state-rooms, and they held a quick consultation.

"I can't understand it!" said Captain Burton, clenching his fists. "By the Lord Harry! Have those four men turned against us? Did they deliberately release the prisoners?"

"I don't think so, sir," said Mr. Scott quietly. "In fact, I can positively vouch for the staunchness of the men I placed on guard."

Nelson Lee snapped his fingers impatiently.

"It really doesn't matter how the thing occurred—we are not concerned with that," he said. "Jelks has got away, and we must face the fact. It is quite likely that we shall never see him again."

"Practically certain, I should imagine, old man," remarked Dorrie. "By gad! The fellow will put as much sea between himself an' this island as he can possibly manage. Well, I'm not worryin'. Good riddance to bad rubbish!"

"You seem to forget, Lord Dorrimore, that we shall be marooned on this island for goodness knows how long if our experiments fail!" put in Captain Burton.

"They won't fail!" declared Dorrie serenely. "Why, man alive, it's one of Lee's special stunts—an' I've never known one of 'em to fail yet!"

"It's very kind of you to say that, Dorrie, but it doesn't alter the fact that the thing will probably fail," said Nelson Lee. "The loss of the schooner is a great blow to us—and it's no good throwing dust in our eyes. And there is another point to consider."

"What's that?" asked Dorrie.

"Have Jelks and his men departed for good, or do they intend to make another bid for that treasure?" asked Lee keenly. "There is just a possibility—a faint chance—that the majority of the men have landed, and are even now skulking somewhere near by, waiting to attack."

"Oh, rot!" protested Dorrimore.

"I expect it is rot, but we can't be too careful with desperate men of that nature."

said Nelson Lee. "I think we had better rouse everybody at once, so that we shall be prepared for any emergency. Breakfast will be somewhat early, but I don't suppose anybody will grumble."

Even the gov'nor did not suspect the actual truth. Why should he? How could he possibly know that Jelks had pressed into service the blacks who occupied the southern section of Zambua? How could any of us guess that a horde of savages was even now nearing the island?

Very soon we had all been roused, and the whole yacht was buzzing with talk and excitement just as dawn broke. Sir Montie and Tommy and the other fellows were not particularly upset, although it was a bit of a shock to know that Jelks had slipped through our fingers.

And then, just as we were beginning to trickle up on deck in twos and threes, the real excitement commenced. I was on deck, talking with Dorrie and Umlosi. Suddenly a man who had climbed aloft gave a yell of alarm and surprise.

"What's wrong up there?" shouted Captain Burton.

"The schooner, sir—the schooner!" yelled the look-out. "She's just coming round the island—and there are hundreds of canoes—"

"What!" roared Nelson Lee.

He skipped up the rigging like a monkey, and descended even more quickly. His face was grim and set as he ran across the deck.

"By Heaven! The position is far worse than I suspected!" he declared huskily. "Jelks has returned with a veritable army, and the cunning scoundrel approached the island from the northern side so that we should not be aware of his arrival until the last moment."

"But—but the blacks are friendly, sir—to us!" I gasped.

"The fact that these blacks are with Jelks proves that they are enemies," snapped the gov'nor. "Our own particular Zambuanas were talking about another tribe yesterday. I couldn't quite understand the drift of their jabber at the time, but I know now. There is not a second to waste."

"We can fight them, can't we?" asked Dorrie grimly.

"My dear man, they're landing already—a dozen canoes are discharging their human cargoes at this very second," said Nelson Lee rapidly. "It would be madness to remain on the yacht, it will be surrounded in less than fifteen minutes, and we have only one machine-gun—the others are inland!"

"Great glory!" muttered Dorrie blankly.

"Oh, my only hat!" I gasped.

The whole thing was so sudden and unexpected that we were bowled over by the surprise of it. To be forced to retreat in this fashion—in confusion—was more than we had bargained for.

But the situation had to be faced. Retreat was our only course, for once the yacht was surrounded we shouldn't stand a dog's chance.

As Nelson Lee had said, five of our machine-guns were up on the hill, inland, where

Dorrie and I and two or three others had taken them during a former adventure. But even if they had been on the yacht, we should have been forced to retreat. A veritable horde was advancing upon us.

Even as we commenced leaving the yacht I saw wave after wave of black figures running up the beach in the distance. The idea was evidently to surround the lagoon-bed, thus bottling us up, and with our retreat cut off.

Even now there was just a chance that we should not be able to slip through in time. It was a surprise blow, and I shivered when I thought of what would have occurred if we had all been asleep at the time.

The ladies were hastened off first. Eileen, of course, kept her head perfectly and behaved like the brick she was. The two maids—her own and Aunt Esther's—were inclined to be hysterical, but Eileen soon calmed them down.

The crew followed next, then we boys, and Captain Burton and Dorrie and Umlosi and Nelson Lee brought up the rear.

We had not had time to bring an ounce of grub with us, or even water. In a way, I suppose we were compelled to execute what military people would call a "disorderly retreat." It's not nice to admit, but it was the case.

After being masters of the situation completely and finally—as we had believed—this blow was all the more bitter. The thought that Captain Jelks had gained the upper hand once more drove us nearly dotty with rage and chagrin.

Our life on Holiday Island had been one of ups and downs indeed! This was one of the "downs," but there was no reason for pessimism if we succeeded in reaching the hill. For there we had machine-guns and ammunition in plenty—in addition, the treasure was also in the same spot. So, even if Jelks captured the yacht and beat our Zambuan army, he wouldn't obtain the prize.

Umlosi rushed off fleetly as soon as he left the yacht, with the object of organising the Zambuanas for a quick defence. As it happened, we found them more than ready. They had already discovered the landing of hostile troops, so to speak, and were getting ready to give battle.

We had thought hard things about the Zambuanas a few days before, but the plucky, reckless manner in which they prepared to resist the new foe earned our frank admiration. These heathen blacks were not such bad fellows after all.

I had taken good care to grab hold of Boz just before leaving the yacht—Boz was my little spaniel—and he was worth his weight in gold. For Boz had undoubtedly saved Eileen's life on one famous occasion, owing to his amazing tracking powers, which fully equalled those of a trained bloodhound.

The yells of the invaders sounded clearly in the still morning air, and I must acknowledge that I felt a bit queer inside as I thought of the possibility of our being cut off. But we managed to get through just in time.

A party of the invaders, numbering a hundred strong, rushed at our rear, but were beaten off by revolver-fire from Dorrie and Nelson Lee and the others. But a determined rush would have settled things, had not a force of Umlosi's Zambuanas appeared at the critical moment.

They hurled themselves to the attack with wild cries, and a pitched battle was taking place as we continued our retreat. Nobody knew where Umlosi was, but one fact was certain—our black friend was far from the rear. He was leading his army in the battle.

Our haven of refuge was reached at last—a great cavern in the side of a rocky hill. It was in this cavern, cunningly concealed from any possible searchers, that we had hidden the machine-guns and the gold.

The place was spacious, penetrating into the hill for a great distance, and being as black as night towards the rear. But we didn't mind this. There was ample accommodation for us all, and only the one exit.

"It's bally rotten, but we're safe for the present," exclaimed Dorrie.

"How do you call it rotten, then?" I asked pantingly.

"It's rotten to be forced to retreat. I mean," explained his lordship gloomily. "But life's full of worries, an' grumblin' won't make things any better. Let's be thankful that we've dished Jelks durin' the first round."

"It strikes me that Jelks has dished us," growled Handforth. "Oh, my only aunt! Why the dickens couldn't we have avoided this? If my advice had been taken we should have been prepared——"

"Oh, don't start your rot now, Handy. for goodness sake!" I snapped. "The position's serious, and we can't afford to joke."

"Who's joking?" demanded Handforth.

"Oh, rats!" I said, turning away.

I was irritable, and showed it. Having reached a place of safety the tension was relaxed, and we were all able to realise the full nature of this disaster. But there was not much time for connected thought.

Our machine-guns were rapidly fished out of their hiding-place and placed in the wide mouth of the cave. We, at all events, could repel any number of attacks so long as our ammunition lasted.

And this was already being used lavishly.

Fully three hundred invaders had worked their way round and were intent upon attacking our stronghold. Lead was pumped into them rapidly, and the great cave was filled with choking, acrid smoke and fumes. The noise was truly appalling, echoing and re-echoing until we were well-nigh deafened.

For perhaps half an hour the battle raged furiously. Many of the invaders were killed and scores were wounded. This was a fight for the mastery, and we should certainly not give in until the last cartridge had been spent.

So far there had been no sign of Jelks and Co. Those astute rascals followed the example of the celebrated Duke of Plaza Toro, who "led his regiment from behind; he found it less exciting!" At all events, Jelks

and his men were well in the rear, being content to leave the hard work to the blacks.

The fight in front of the cave soon exhausted itself. The blacks had no great liking for machine-guns, and retreated in disorder almost before the attack had fully developed.

But although the fighting swayed away from our vicinity, it continued in other parts of the island for hours. Parties of the defenders were constantly fighting the invaders.

But gradually, as the hours wore on, Jelks's blacks developed an encircling movement. Umlosi's army was practically surrounded, and retreated foot by foot, fighting continuously.

The odds were greatly against us, but the Zambuanas put up a magnificent resistance, only yielding ground after close hand to hand fighting. We were ready to dash out with our machine-guns to lend a hand, but Nelson Lee realised that we should have done more harm than good.

The Zambuanas themselves were scared of the guns, although they were on their own side, and much preferred to fight with the spear alone. But towards evening we found an opportunity of helping.

Throughout the day the attacks of the invaders had been pressed, and at last the Zambuanas had been compelled to retreat in a compact body until they were grouped round the hill.

Then Lord Dorrimore and Mr. Scott and Nelson Lee went off in different directions with machine-guns, taking two men each with them. They crept forward amongst the trees, concealed their guns in advantageous positions, and poured in a withering fire.

The effect was very soon seen.

The invaders, after one or two attempts to rush the machine-gun posts, gave up the project and retreated. They took all their dead with them, and when at last the fighting was over there was scarcely any sign of the deadly conflict.

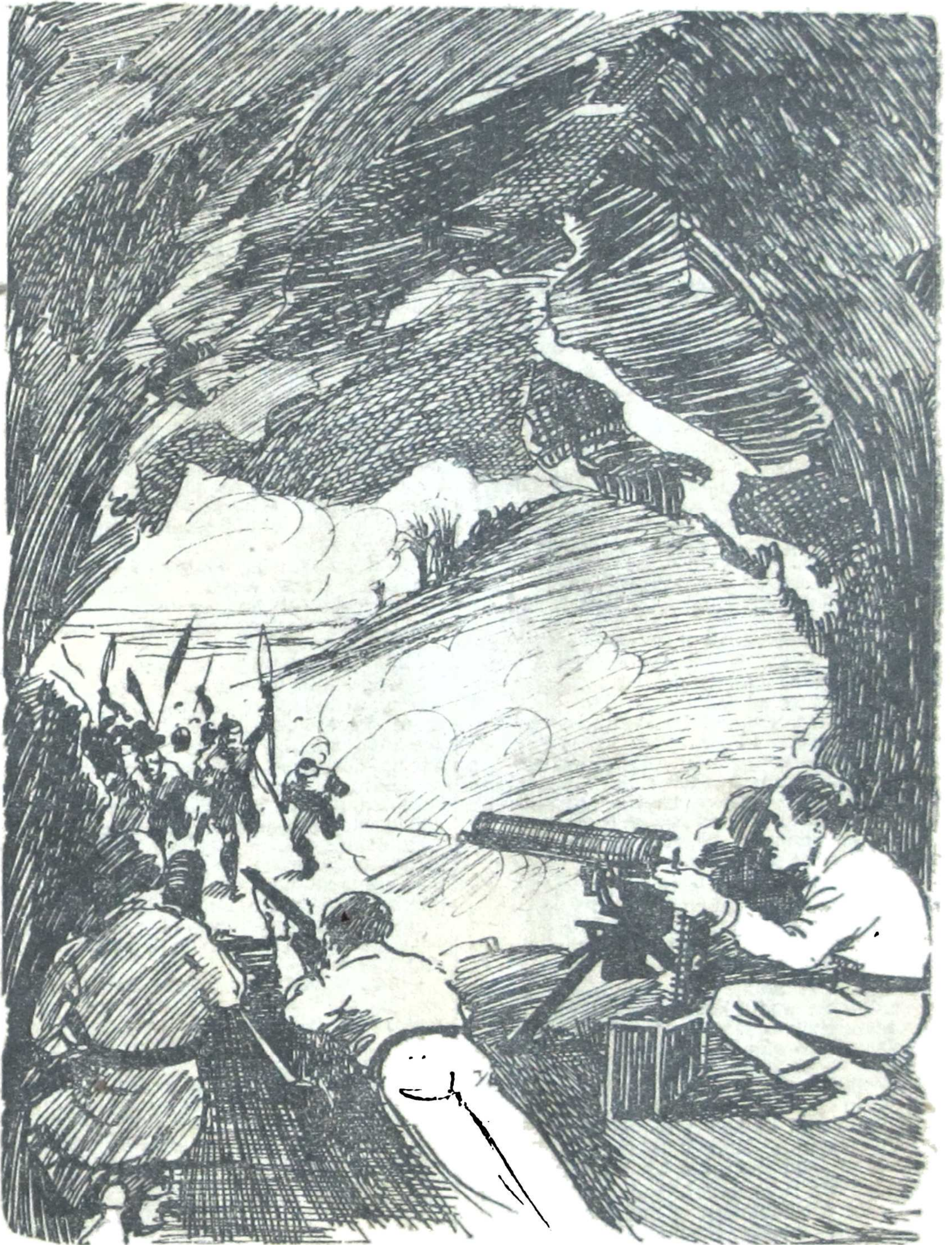
Umlosi's Zambuanas had lost fifty-three men all told, and a great many others were slightly wounded. But the invader's casualties must have been fully four times this number.

They had retreated beyond the belt of trees which grew between us and the shore, and after that all was quiet. Our defenders were exhausted after the strenuous day's work, and needed rest.

There was no lack of water, for a creek ran quite near by. And many tropical fruits and nuts provided us with ample food. We should not starve, even if we had to keep up this warfare for weeks. In the event of further fierce attacks, however, it was certain that our supply of ammunition would run out—that was the chief danger.

Nightfall found everything quiet. But our vigilance was not relaxed for a moment. Nelson Lee believed that an attack would be made in the darkness, for Jelks was not likely to be content with such an indecisive result. He wanted the treasure, and he was anxious to have us killed out of hand by the blacks. Therefore another attack was almost inevitable.

How long would the tension last?



Lead was pumped into the invaders rapidly, and the whole cave was filled with smoke and acrid fumes. —(See page 12.)

CHAPTER V.

THE INVADERS MAKE CAMP—NELSON LEE'S
BRAIN WAVE—A DESPERATE STRATAGEM!

UMLOSI made his appearance some time after darkness had fallen upon the island. He was absolutely unscratched, although he had participated in some of the fiercest fighting.

"I am ill at ease, N'Kose," he declared gravely. "These accursed blacks greatly outnumber us, and the position is serious. If it were possible to adopt some ruse we might gain the mastery. But I fear that a direct attack would have little result, except, perchance, to reduce our numbers."

"Where is the enemy now, old friend," asked Nelson Lee.

"I know not, Umtagati, except that the dogs retreated beyond the trees," replied Umlosi. "I suspect that they are waiting there—waiting until they receive the order to advance. But fear not. They will never outwit us during this night. It is a prolonged battle that I fear."

"We shall have to settle the matter one way or the other before dawn!" declared Nelson Lee grimly. "I shall have to think. I must try to evolve some scheme or other. But it's difficult, Umlosi—it's difficult."

"Wise words, O my master," rumbled Umlosi. "But do thou rack thy brain; thou hast delivered us from many difficulties in the past, and I fear not the situation now. Thou wilt triumph again, Umtagati. I have spoken!"

"I hope you're right, that's all!" said Dorrie. "You'd better go an' have some grub, old man. You look a bit fagged, an' I don't wonder at it."

Umlosi went off, and I edged away by myself. The other fellows were all within the cavern, talking together. My idea was to sneak off on a scouting trip; but I was afraid to mention the matter to the gov'nor. He would refuse to let me go, of course.

So, a few minutes later, I managed to slip away into the darkness.

Possibly there was a certain amount of risk attached to the undertaking, for I might meet a few enemy prowlers. But I didn't think of risks, and crept forward into the darkness silently and stealthily.

The gov'nor would have forbidden any such move, but he would have been thinking of my skin more than anything else. I rather prided myself on my scouting capabilities, however, and was eager to show what I could do.

I worked my way round through the trees and bushes, making sure that I could find my way back, and at last I found myself in the enemy's country—that is to say, beyond the stretch of land occupied by Umlosi's men.

Everything was quiet, and I listened intently for the first sign of any possible movement from enemy scouts. But the woods were deserted and a murmur in the distance, which grew louder as I progressed, seemed to prove that the invaders were celebrating their victory.

"By jingo!" I muttered. "I wonder if the devils are looting the yacht."

The thought rather startled me, I'll admit. Jelks would have no hesitation in inciting the blacks to violence. Or, possibly, they might have got out of hand in their excitement. And the thought of the yacht being looted, and possibly set on fire, gave me a turn.

It caused me to press on grimly. I wormed my way through the bushes like a snake, and at length reached a small hillock which enabled me to gaze right down into the lagoon-bed.

A surprising sight met my vision.

Several great camp-fires were smoking and commencing to blaze, having just been lit; many others were being built. The blacks swarmed over the lagoon-bed like so many blackbeetles. The invaders evidently were making camp on a grand style.

The stranded yacht was a blaze of electric-light, proving that Jelks and Co. had taken possession and were on board. In the clear atmosphere I could see men dancing about the deck—and they were not blacks.

A regular orgy was in progress, in fact. Jelks's crew had obtained rum and whisky, and were celebrating their victory in their own peculiar manner. The blacks themselves would probably commence their dances, and all the rest of it, as soon as the camp-fires were blazing. I realised, with a shudder, that the feast would probably consist of the captured Zambians.

"Well, there's no danger of another attack to-night," I told myself. "That's something to be thankful for, anyhow. These rotters are so jolly busy making merry that there's no fight left in 'em!"

Jelks undoubtedly believed that we were helpless. And we certainly were, so far as making a frontal attack was concerned. Even if we succeeded in getting our machine-guns down to the lagoon, the invaders were so strong in numbers that we should only succeed in killing a few hundred at the most—and then we should be rushed. So it would be idiocy to commence an offensive.

It struck me, also, that there were more blacks than ever; and then I noticed that the savages were climbing over the rock barrier in a continuous flood. Evidently reinforcements had arrived. Another strong detachment of canoes must have put in an appearance.

I did not wait any longer, but slipped back to the cave as rapidly as possible. There was no great need for caution, since the blacks were not intent upon attacking. At the same time, I went with silent footsteps.

Nelson Lee collared me just as I was entering the cave.

"Where have you been, Nipper?" he demanded curtly. "Good gracious, young 'un, I didn't see you slip away—"

"No, I took good care of that, sir," I replied calmly. "I've just been scouting—"

"You've been what?" rapped out the gov'nor.

"Scouting, sir."

"How far did you go?"

"Oh, a long way—right into the enemy's lines."

"You reckless young beggar!" snapped Lee. "What do you think of this, Dorrie?"

Nipper has just come back from a trip to the enemy's lines, if you please! What do you think of it?"

Lord Dorrimore grinned.

"Why, I think it's just like Nipper!" he replied calmly. "You don't suppose he'd ask you first, do you? Nipper's got sense in his head, and I'll bet he's found out a few things, too."

"I was about to go scouting myself," said the gov'nor, turning to me again. "I suppose you have saved me the trouble, Nipper?"

"Rather, sir," I replied. "I've found out several things."

"Well, go ahead."

I quickly told Nelson Lee and Dorrie and Captain Burton of what I had seen—that the invaders were feasting and dancing, and that Jelks and Co. were in possession of the yacht.

"The infernal burglars!" growled Dorrimore fiercely.

"And there's something else, sir," I went on. "We reckoned that close upon twelve hundred blacks had invaded the island, didn't we? Well, other hordes are just arriving—another twelve hundred, I dare say."

Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"This is serious!" he commented. "It means that a determined attack, pressed relentlessly, will break down our defence. Jelks evidently means to renew the fighting in the morning. I don't wish to be gloomy, but I am positive that unless something happens in the meantime we shall be literally wiped out during the course of to-morrow."

"Oh, that's cheerin'!" remarked Dorrie. "Nothin' gloomy in that, old man!"

"I wish you'd be serious," said Nelson Lee, frowning slightly. "The exact position is this: if we remain inactive during the night, to-morrow will witness the last fight. We certainly cannot stand against such overwhelming odds, for our ammunition will run out after five or six hours' continuous fighting."

"But we can't do anything during the night, Mr. Lee," said Captain Burton. "By jings! It makes me mad to think of it, but it's a fact. If we were foolish enough to attack these savages before dawn, we should gain no victory, and half our men would be needlessly sacrificed. So what is the alternative?"

"By gad! There isn't one," remarked Dorrie.

"So it would seem," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully.

Dorrie looked up with a quick glance.

"There's somethin' behind that," he declared. "Don't you deny it, professor, because I can see it in your eye! You've got an idea!"

"Well, perhaps I have——"

"What is it, sir?" I broke in eagerly.

Sir Montie and Tommy Watson and two or three other fellows had strolled up, and they were all standing round listening anxiously and with tense expressions. Something had to be decided, or we were doomed, and it was

only natural that we should look to Nelson Lee.

"I think there is just one chance for us," said the gov'nor slowly. "When it comes to actual fighting we are outnumbered hopelessly. We can only gain the mastery by adopting a trick—and there is an idea in my mind which might conceivably reverse the position completely."

"I'm not worryin' any longer," declared Lord Dorrimore. "When you talk like that, Lee, it means that things are goin' to happen. Don't keep us in suspense for long, old man—we can't stand it!"

"If you will persist in interrupting," smiled the gov'nor, "I shall naturally take more time in explaining. Now, look here, the idea was put into my mind by reason of the information which Nipper has brought."

"How, sir?" I asked intently.

"You are quite sure, young 'un, that the invaders have made their camp on the sandy bed of the lagoon?"

"There's thousands of the rotters there, sir!"

"Well, the position is not so difficult as we first believed," pursued the gov'nor. "These blacks are mortally afraid of the volcano—we know that quite well. Now, if an eruption were to commence in about an hour from now, the effect upon the savages would be enormous. I am confident that they would flee in their canoes as fast as they could work their paddles."

We all looked rather blank.

"But, my dear man, volcanoes ain't so obliging as all that," protested Dorrie. "We can't go up to the crater an' ask it to start operations, can we? It wouldn't listen to us, by gad!"

"Your remarks, Dorrie, are certainly to the point," said the gov'nor calmly. "The volcano, as you say, would not discharge merely because we wanted it to do so. My idea is far more certain. We can make a false eruption of our own—a fake eruption, which will deceive the blacks. Do you catch on?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do," growled Captain Burton.

"Umfosi will, of course, warn his warriors of the coming display," continued Nelson Lee. "They will be prepared, and will not flee with the other blacks—as they certainly would do if they were not previously informed."

"But how can we make a fake eruption, sir?" I demanded incredulously.

"Well, I should imagine that you and Dorrie would be the first people to jump to my meaning," replied the gov'nor. "Several days ago, when you were left on this island by yourselves, you seized the whole store of fireworks from the yacht——"

"Fireworks!" yelled everybody.

"Exactly."

"But—but——"

"Fireworks may prove our salvation," went on Nelson Lee calmly. "These rockets and Roman candles and other pretty toys are even now in this very cave. Surely you begin to realize what I am driving at? A number

of rockets sent up from the crater and masses of red fire burning will undoubtedly cause the natives to believe that an eruption has commenced. They will be scared out of their lives——"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "What a stunnin' idea!"

"It's splendid, sir—terrific!" I gasped.

"But will the blacks scoot?" asked Lord Dorrimore, a trifle doubtfully. "The volcano's a good way inland, don't forget, an'——"

"I shall supplement the eruption by something else," continued Nelson Lee. "As you all know, those mines are laid in readiness for the blowing away of the rock barrier. We don't want to interfere with the chief explosive, but there's no reason why we shouldn't carry out the first part of the programme and admit the water into the lagoon bed."

"Great Scott!" I yelled. "You—you mean to flood the lagoon while all the blacks are in it?"

"Precisely!"

"And the eruption will take place at the same time!" ejaculated Captain Burton. "By the Lord Harry! The blacks will be scared into fits—the explosion alone will create havoc, for it'll come as a complete surprise."

"And the volcano, in addition, will complete the panic," said Nelson Lee. "That, at least, is my idea."

"A splendid idea, too!" declared Lord Dorrimore. "You're simply a wonder, old man! I should never have thought of such a dodge in fifty years! Why, we shall be masters of the island within a few hours!"

"Don't be too sure!" warned the gov'nor. "Our plans may fail utterly; but it is the only thing we can do. The sooner we can spring the surprise the better, for the enemy may be intent upon springing a surprise on us. We must get the first blow in, or we are doomed!"

"By George!" said Handforth admiringly. "Fancy us not thinking of that wheeze! I can't understand why I didn't get hold of it—it's just the kind of idea I usually think of. In fact, I expect I should have——"

"Oh, none of your rot!" said McClure bluntly.

"If you're talking to me, McClure——"

"Shut up, you ass!"

Handforth shut up merely because Nelson Lee and Dorrie were present; otherwise McClure's nose would have been in great danger of receiving punishment. But we were all excited, and Handforth usually resorted to physical violence when in that condition. If Handforth was excited somebody generally suffered.

"I shall leave the fireworks in your charge, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "You have got to mount the volcano and fix the rockets and the rest of the things as near the crater as possible. Take several men with you——"

"And us, sir!" put in Handforth eagerly.

"Well, I'll leave that to Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "You can take the boys with you, old man, if you think they'll be of any use. I shall steal down to the pitches——"

which, fortunately, are some little distance from the shore. Had they been on the yacht we should have been completely helpless."

"But how shall we know when to start the circus?" asked Lord Dorrimore. "We don't want to mess the thing up, you know."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"It is just eight-thirty," he said. "What is the time on your watch, Dorrimore?"

"Twenty-five to nine."

"Well, set it exactly the same as mine," said Lee. "That's right. Now we are synchronised, and at ten o'clock precisely you will commence the firework display and I shall blow the mine. One moment, though. I think it would be as well if you discharged the fireworks five minutes earlier—enabling the blacks to be somewhat scared by the time the explosion occurs. The explosion will just put the finishing touch to their fright."

This arrangement was regarded by everybody as being satisfactory, and within ten minutes everything was a-bustle.

The fireworks were all brought into the open—several cases of them. They were quickly examined and sorted out, and it was found that there were fifty rockets of the most expensive kind, which would give a glaring display of coloured fire. In addition to these, there were twenty rockets of a different type—those queer things that whistle and moan up in the air, creating quite a weird effect.

There was red fire and green fire and blue fire, and hundreds of giant crackers, which would create an unearthly din if they were all let off together—which they certainly would be. It was decided that three explosions of this kind would commence the "eruption." Red fire would follow, and then all the rest of it.

"Now, we've got to organise ourselves," said Lord Dorrimore. "Two or three of us can't do the thing properly. I shall want about a dozen assistants—more, if I can get 'em. Once the fireworks are set we've got to let 'em off simultaneously, or the whole game'll fizzle out. It's got to be done in rotation, so to speak, so that we can keep up a continuous display for half an hour."

I could not go with the volcano party, for the gov'nor had consented to let me run the gauntlet with him to the switch-box. Umlosi had already gone down to the Zambuans' camp to warn our black friends that the display would be a fake and that there was nothing to fear. He would remain with them, and would then lead an attack upon the fleeing enemy.

The whole campaign was planned out to the last detail, and everybody was in high spirits. We were confident of success—and it was just as well that we should be. For if this failed our fate would be too awful to think of!

Eileen Dare was left in sole charge of the cave—for only her aunt and the women would be left there, except for a few members of the crew to guard the entrance and man the guns. Captain Burton and Mr. Scott were to help Umlosi by taking charge of

separate detachments of Zambuanas, and having them ready for a combined attack at the right moment.

We started off on our various errands cheerfully. Nelson Lee and I had probably the most dangerous task of all, for we should have to penetrate to a spot where the invaders were overrunning. However, the darkness would help us, and we had no fear of failure.

Afterwards, when I thought the whole matter out, it seemed amazing, almost childish, that a few harmless fireworks could alter such a hopeless situation as ours. The blacks themselves would undoubtedly be scared; but would they be scared sufficiently? That was the great point.

Jelks and his men would guess the truth in a second—they would not be deceived. And they would certainly use all their efforts to quell any panic which might ensue. If—and it was a very big "if"—Jelks and his men succeeded in restoring the natives' equanimity—well, our great effort would have been in vain. It was Jelks who caused us the greatest anxiety.

Nelson Lee and I did not find our task so very difficult, after all. The invaders were so busy over their wild feasting and dancing that they had not even placed scouts round the lagoon; they were confident of their own superiority, knowing that we should not attack.

We arrived at the switch-box without mishap, and, crouching near it, we lay completely concealed in the long grass and luxuriant bushes. A gap just ahead of us enabled us to see the lagoon bed quite distinctly.

The scene was a wild one.

All the fires were burning brilliantly now, and they formed a circle practically round the dry lagoon. It was an enormous gathering—a solid black mass of humanity, dancing and yelling like so many demons.

The yacht itself was just beyond the zone of the cannibals' camp. And here, too, everything was noise and light. The leaders of this invasion were drinking themselves into a hopeless state—as might have been expected. Jelks and his ruffians were not able to take this victory calmly. They were celebrating in a fashion after their own hearts.

"Nothing could be better, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee. "The whole crowd—whites and blacks—are supremely confident of their own power. They are masters of the situation, and they know it. But Jelks is a fool—he has gained a victory, and does not know how to maintain it. If he acted as a shrewd general should act, we should have been unable to carry out this project."

"The success has turned his brain, gov'nor," I whispered. "He thinks we're all shivering and shaking, fearing what will happen to-morrow. My hat! I'll bet our plans will succeed everywhere!"

"I hope so, young 'un!" muttered the gov'nor. "But I don't think it is success which has turned Jelks's brain—it is whisky. In one way, I am extremely glad that there was an ample supply of strong spirit on

board the yacht. Jelks with a cool head is a dangerous man; but Jelks drunk is an absolute fool."

"Then thank goodness he's drunk!" I said.

Nelson Lee took out his watch. The luminous hands pointed to the figures clearly, showing us that the time was twenty minutes to ten.

"I didn't think it was so late as that," I murmured. "We must have taken a long while coming down here, sir. Why, the show starts in a quarter of an hour!"

"Exactly," nodded Lee. "And it could not start at a more opportune time. The orgy will be at its height, and the shock will be all the greater. Can we see the volcano from here, young 'un?"

He turned as he spoke, but thick bushes made it impossible for us to see inland. By shifting our position, however, we obtained the desired effect. By glancing round we could distinguish the dim outline of the hill against the sky; and it was still possible to gaze into the lagoon bed.

The minutes passed slowly now, and it was an anxious time. Somewhere, not far off, I knew, the Zambuanas were waiting in three separate parties, captained by Umlosi, Mr. Scott, and Captain Burton respectively.

Nelson Lee kept his watch in his hand. This was not really necessary, but we were anxious to be aware of the exact time. As the minute hand crept round it seemed as though it would never reach the appointed time; but at last the gov'nor slipped his watch into his pocket.

"Five to ten!" he murmured. "It's time for Dorrie to commence, Nipper. It won't matter if the 'eruption' doesn't begin until after ten, but I fancy Dorrie will be prompt."

Even while he was speaking the operations commenced.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Three dull explosions sounded from the volcano, and, although I knew they were caused by hundreds of giant crackers going off together, I was startled by the realistic sound. I could have sworn the explosions were those of the volcano itself.

"There they go!" I gasped excitedly.

There was no doubt about it. The whole skyline at the top of the volcano was glaring luridly, outlined in intensely crimson fire. It was an imposing sight. Turning my head for a second, I saw that the invaders had already become aware of the phenomenon. The volcano was in full sight from the yacht and the greater portion of the lagoon.

Hundreds of startled cries went up, and the savages were running about in a state of semi-panic already. Then, again, came two more explosions. I turned my attention to the volcano, and saw that the red fire was dying down and that brilliant green was taking its place. It was a pretty sight, but I had no thoughts for its beauty just then.

"There go the rockets!" I muttered tensely.

"Splendid, Nipper!" breathed the gov'nor. "Dorrie is excelling himself!"

Fullly ten loud reports sounded, and a number of hissing lines of fire soared up into the sky—apparently right out of the crater. High above the island there were puffing explosions, followed by showers of coloured fire.

The panic increased, but it was nothing to the terrific consternation which ensued when the other fireworks got busy in earnest. The whole hilltop was spouting fire and sparks. Every colour of the rainbow could be seen, and the effect was grand and awe-inspiring.

"Now we'll do our bit, Nipper!" muttered Nelson Lee.

As he spoke he crept back to the switch-box. The door was already open, and the gov'nor placed his fingers upon the correct switch and turned his head.

"Watch, Nipper!" he exclaimed.

I watched. Click! The switch was pressed over, but I scarcely heard it. A tremendous, shattering explosion occurred at the far side of the lagoon. I just saw one flash of red flame and a great puff of smoke. Then the thing was over.

What was the result?

CHAPTER VI.

VICTORY—JELKS AND CO. TAKE TO FLIGHT— THE MASTERY GAINED!

BOOM!

Again and again the sound came from the volcano, and the display of fire continued without intermission. But I paid no attention to it; I was gazing into the lagoon, awestruck and wild with excitement.

The rock barrier had been broken!

That explosion had performed far more than we had bargained for; yet the charge had not been excessive. The confusion was so great that I could scarcely see what was actually occurring during the first few moments.

I knew, however, that the sea was surging into the lagoon with an appalling force. The roar of the water was enormous, drowning nearly every other sound. Foaming, hissing, carrying all before it, the flood burst upon the startled blacks while they were in the greatest state of panic.

The result was tremendous.

The panic gave way to sheer, utter terror. Screaming and yelling, the blacks fled in all directions, not only demoralised, but in the last stage of funk. Many of them were caught by the incoming water, but the majority rushed for the barrier and scrambled over.

The fires were extinguished rapidly, one after the other, and the flood surged over the entire bed.

Jelks and his men, terrified themselves, were making a mad rush for the barrier also. Our idea that they would attempt to restore order was quite wrong, for Jelks and Co. only thought of their own safety.

The whole crowd abandoned the yacht helter-skelter, reeling drunkenly down the

accommodation-ladder, and nearly pitching one another off in their panic-stricken haste. They descended into a foot of surging, foamy water, which rose visibly even as they splashed their way to the barrier.

Nelson Lee had reckoned that twelve hours would elapse before the water rose to its normal height; but, by the look of it, the yacht would be afloat in less than three. Thousands of tons of water were pouring through the gap every minute.

"The tide is at the flood, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, clutching my shoulder. "That is why the inrush is so terrific. By James! The scheme is panning out far better than I had hoped for."

We were gazing upon a scene of disorder and terror. A great many blacks had fled to the shore side of the lagoon—quite a large force, in fact. But these were unable to penetrate far.

For, with yells and screams, the Zambians charged to the attack, led by Umlosi. At the same time two other detachments appeared from the left and right. The result was inevitable.

Terrified as they were, the invaders did not possess an ounce of fight amongst the lot of them. They surrendered en masse, being compelled to do so, as the surging flood made retreat impossible. Moreover, they did not carry more than a dozen spears between them.

As Umlosi afterwards said, it was a paltry affair, and his disgust was a sight to see. Just when he had been expecting a really gory fight, there was nothing doing at all. Umlosi felt that he had been swindled.

Left to themselves, the Zambians would have cut their scared enemies to pieces; but Umlosi and the other "generals" wouldn't allow this. The blacks were given to understand that they could depart, and the prompt manner in which they rushed for their canoes was almost comic.

During all this time Lord Dorrimore kept up his part of the business in the most determined manner. Rockets were going up in a continuous succession, and red and blue and green fire literally glowed over the volcano.

The fleeing savages were not only scared at the outset, but so thoroughly frightened that any return to the island on their part was unlikely. Nelson Lee, in fact, declared that we had seen the last of them. The cannibals had had quite enough of Holiday Island!

By the time the display died down there wasn't an invader left, except for one or two wounded. None of them had been drowned during the first inrush of water, although a few very nearly got swamped.

As for Captain Jelks and Captain Barrow and their half-drunken followers, they fled also. They were not scared by the firework display or the inrush of water into the lagoon. But they were certainly terrified by the thought of falling into the hands of the Zambians—and subsequently into our hands.

Captain Jelks, although under the influence of drink, had sufficient sense to know that the sooner he got off the island the better. And

his first thought had been to return to the schooner.

To flee in this way was the essence of humiliation for the triumphant scoundrels. They had gained the mastery by a clever trick, and had lost it—by another clever trick. There was certainly no chance of their turning the tables a second time.

Flight was their only course, and they took it.

Nelson Lee did his utmost to cut off their retreat. But in the confusion there was little chance of organising the Zambians for a stern-chase. Large numbers of canoes were sent off in pursuit of the schooner, the gov'nor's idea being to surround it and to force the captain to surrender.

But a stiff breeze was blowing, and Jelks had lost no time in getting Captain Barrow to have all sail set. And before the canoes could fairly start away the Aurora was bowling across the sea smartly.

She escaped completely, but her occupants had nothing to crow over. They had not gained a penny-piece, and left Holiday Island a defeated mob. Upon the whole, we could afford to feel satisfied.

The awful doom which had overshadowed us had vanished; Jelks and Co. would trouble us no more and the hostile blacks were gone for good.

Thus by means of a comparatively simple trick Nelson Lee had succeeded in turning the tide. Not only this, but the first part of our experiment had been a huge success, for the lagoon was filling in the most gratifying manner.

By eleven o'clock exactly—just an hour after the performance had commenced—we had complete command of the situation. Nelson Lee and I compared notes with Captain Burton and Mr. Scott and Umlosi.

The first officer was sent without delay to the cave to impart the glad news to Eileen and the others and to fetch them down to the lagoon. I should have gone myself, only I was more anxious to hear what Dorrie and the other fellows would say when they appeared on the scene.

I did not wait, but hurried towards the volcano, intending to meet the party. But everything was silent, and there was no sign of Dorrie or the others. I was making my way through a particularly dense patch of woodland, when something moved quite close to me. Instantly I suspected that some of the blacks had escaped inland. I whipped out my revolver smartly.

"Who's that?" I rapped out.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed a well-known voice. "It's Nipper!"

"Handforth!" I roared.

At the same moment dozens of figures appeared from behind the bushes. They were all there—Dorrie and Sir Montie and the whole crowd. They surged around me somewhat excitedly.

"Did it work?" demanded Watson anxiously.

"What's the verdict?"

"I've been tellin' 'em that everythin's O.K.," exclaimed Lord Dorrimore. "But they won't believe me, you know. We've been

creepin' down cautiously, not knowin' exactly how the land lies. Are you retreating, Nipper, or—"

"Why," I yelled, "the blacks have bunked!"

"Bunked!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "Really, old boy?"

"Bunked like a lot a frightened rabbits," I went on. "Jelks and his lot have gone, too. Fancy you not knowing! The island's ours. All the troubles over, bar shouting!"

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Dorrie, with a sigh. "Could you see our little display all right? We heard that explosion of yours, an' saw it too, by gad! You didn't blow off the wrong charge, did you?"

"No," I replied. "But the explosion was rather more violent than we had bargained for. Why, the lagoon's practically flooded already!"

"And—and the danger's over!" gasped Handforth.

"Every bit of it!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Nelson Lee!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

Not only the juniors, but all the men yelled with all their might. The sudden relief was rather too much for them, and they had to let steam off somehow. After such prolonged suspense a reaction of sheer joy set in.

I realised then that the firework party had had no means of knowing how the experiment had panned out. They had done their part, but only a confusion of sounds came up to them from the direction of the lagoon.

In order to be on the safe side Dorrie had decided to descend the hill cautiously, in case of accidents. His idea was to work round towards the cave; for, although he declared that he had been positive of the result all along, he wasn't taking any chances.

But now the truth was known. All restrictions were at an end, and we simply pelted down towards the lagoon as fast as we could run. We forgot that we were still marooned upon Holiday Island and that everything depended upon the result of our explosive experiments. The first step was undoubtedly a success, but should we be able to get the yacht into the open sea?

We found everybody down on the beach. The water was lapping upon the sands musically, and in the starlight the scene looked delightful. There was no longer that vast expanse of bare sand—so unnatural. And all the time the sea surged into the lagoon in a continuous roaring flood.

"Well, we have won the day—or, to be more exact, the night," said Nelson Lee cheerfully. "Upon my soul, I must admit that I was rather doubtful at one time. But the peril has passed, and now I think we may congratulate ourselves all round."

"You're right, Mr. Lee," said Captain Burton heartily. "Men, I'm proud of you."

You've done your part splendidly, and I've no doubt that Lord Dorrimore will see that you are fully rewarded when the right time comes."

"You bet on that right through!" remarked Dorrie, nodding. "But, by gad, we're all in it, ain't we?"

"Three cheers for Lord Dorrimore!" shouted Mr. Scott enthusiastically. "Now then, men, give 'em with a will! And then give three cheers for Mr. Lee—and another for the skipper, by gosh!"

"Hurrah!"

Cheer after cheer rang out, and the boys joined in as heartily as anybody. The scene was one of tremendous excitement and enthusiasm, and it was fully ten minutes before the hubbub ceased—and then only because everybody was hoarse.

"The next thing is to get on board the yacht once more," said the gov'nor. "I'm afraid you won't get much rest to-night, men——"

"We don't mind, sir!" roared the crew.

"That's all right, then," smiled Nelson Lec. "Those brutes have made a pretty pickle of the yacht, I expect, and there'll have to be a lot of clearing-up work done. Mr. Scott, you had better ask the skipper for orders. We mustn't waste any further time ashore."

"How the dooce are we to get out to the yacht?" asked Dorrie suddenly. "We haven't got a boat, by gad!"

"I believe there are quite a number of very serviceable canoes close handy," said Nelson Lec. "They are light, and can be carried over the barrier without difficulty. But Captain Burton is already attending to that."

Two canoes were soon requisitioned, and then we paddled across to the yacht. She was still aground, for there was not sufficient depth of water to float her. But the sea was rising higher and higher with every minute that passed.

The yacht was in a frightful pickle, as the gov'nor had suspected. The luxurious saloon reeked of spirits and foul tobacco, and whisky bottles and glasses were strewn everywhere, to say nothing of cards and piles of money.

The deck was in a similar condition, where Jelks's crew had been celebrating under the awning. It was quite evident that the enemy had made merry with a hearty good will, and there was every sign of an extremely hurried departure. Jelks had not even searched the yacht, so certain had he been that nothing could assail his strong position. He had left all such details until after we had been wiped out, for we realised that the morrow would have been our last day on earth had Jelks had his own way.

At last, tired and weary, but thoroughly cheerful, we sought our banks. And the result of the first explosion made us supremely confident that the second—and more vital—explosive charge would be a complete success.

Everything depended upon that.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT—A COMPLETE SUCCESS—OFF FOR OLD ENGLAND.

BREAKFAST was a light-hearted meal in the morning. Everybody was bubbling with good spirits, and although there were one or two hints that we might still fail to get out of the lagoon, nobody heeded them.

Confidence reigned supreme.

This was partly owing to the fact that the yacht was now afloat. By the time we turned out the lagoon had resumed its normal aspect. Once again it was at its correct level, and the Adventure was floating in sufficient depth of water to enable her to cruise freely round the lagoon, if Captain Burton so desired it. But the rock barrier barred the way to the outer sea.

It still projected above the water in certain places, although the mines had been laid at a spot where the level was lowest. If the explosion was a success a clean gap would be caused.

"Dear fellows, there's nothin' to worry over whatever!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West languidly. "I sha'n't worry even if that explosion does fail. Mr. Lee will think of some other way of gettin' out——"

"But there isn't any other way, you ass!" I put in.

"That's all you know, old boy," said Montie serenely. "After what we've been through I'm confident of any old thing. It's a queer feature about Mr. Lec, but we've all noticed it, haven't we? He never knows when he's beaten, begad! If one thing fails he just sits down an' thinks of another. Oh, I ain't worryin'—I ain't, really!"

"Rather not!" declared Handforth. "If it comes to that, I might think of something——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared.

"Anything funny in that?" he roared.

"Rather!" I grinned. "The idea of you thinking of anything, Handy, is distinctly humorous. I don't think we shall ever get down to the awful depths of being forced to come to you for suggestions. Why, I'd sooner get an idea from Montie——"

"I'm awfully complimented, dear old boy!" murmured Tregellis-West.

"According to your own yarns, Montie, you're a frightful duffer," I went on. "Handforth's a frightful duffer—but there's a difference. You only say you are, but Handy can't help it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Edward Oswald Handforth sniffed.

"Just what I expected!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Blessed if you ain't jealous of me even on this trip! I suppose it's my misfortune to be sneered at and jeered at. Rats to you!"

And Handforth stalked off with his hands in his pockets, leaving us roaring. Handforth was a good fellow, but he simply couldn't take a joke when it was directed against himself. He always took people literally, even when leg-pulling was painfully obvious.

"You kids been scrappin'?" asked Lord Dorrimore, strolling along the deck, looking resplendent in a brand-new suit of white flannels, and with spotlessly clean linen. His monocle was screwed into his eye—a positive proof that Dorrie was in the best of spirits.

"Scrapping?" I repeated. "Do we look like it?"

"I was referrin' to Handforth," replied his lordship. "I just passed him, an' he made a funny feelin' go all down my back, by gad! The look he gave me was quite killin'—although I've done nothin', goodness knows."

We grinned, and explained.

"It strikes me you're too hard on Handforth," remarked Dorrie judiciously, observing that Handforth was within earshot. "The poor chap can't help it, can he? It's more of a misfortune than a failin'. I've felt the same feelin' towards him as a chap feels when he wanders into a lunatic asylum—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fact, I assure you," said Dorrie calmly. "Oh, fancy you bein' there, Handforth! My dear kid, don't look at me like that, or I shall seriously think of askin' Captain Burton to have one of the cabins padded—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was evidently trying to say something, but his indignation was so great that the words wouldn't come. Finally, he marched away, and Church and McClure experienced a very stormy half-hour. Handforth's chums generally had to bear the brunt of their leader's fury when anything upset him. The fact that Church and McClure were quite innocent made no difference whatever.

Nelson Lee's announcement that the great experiment was to be tried at once put a stop to all Handforth's jaw. He completely forgot his indignation in his eagerness to watch the proceedings. And Church and McClure breathed a sigh of relief and shook hands secretly.

The word was given that everybody had to go ashore. There was considerable risk from falling fragments of rock, and Nelson Lee meant to be on the safe side. The yacht was allowed to drift further towards the shore, so that she should not catch the full brunt of the explosion. It was certain that a big upheaval of the water would occur in any case.

We were a cheerful, laughing crowd. Nelson Lee was about the only one of us who really looked serious—except perhaps Captain Burton. For they both realised the critical nature of this experiment. Everything depended upon it.

Success would mean the freeing of the yacht and a return to England only a week behind our prearranged schedule. But failure—Well, failure would mean that we should all be marooned on Holiday Island for an indefinite period.

There was nothing to be done in the way of preparation. The mines were all laid, and the switch merely had to be pressed. There was just a chance that the wires had become parted during the first rush of water into the lagoon bed; but this was not probable.

For the sake of safety we retreated behind the cover of cocoanut-palms, and watched from there the whole collection of us stretched out in a long line. On either side the Zambians were watching with interest and curiosity. They had been warned as to what would occur, and there was no chance of their being scared out of their wits.

The fateful moment arrived, and we all held our breath. Exactly how much depended upon that experiment we should never be able to tell, for had we been forced to remain, our period on the island would have been a month, or six months, or possibly years. Not one of us actually realised how tremendously vital this moment was.

Nelson Lee pressed the switch.

Practically as he did so a terrific column of water rose against the barrier—a column which reached a height of sixty or seventy feet. Great masses of rock went with it, flying in every direction like pebbles.

Bo-o-om!

The report of the explosion did not reach our ears until a moment later. It was a shattering roar, muffled and thunderous.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth.

"Well, it's all over!" I remarked. "It now remains to be seen—Great Scott! Just look at that wave!"

A huge mass of water was rolling across the lagoon like a tremendous tidal wave. The yacht lifted giddily, tipped, and then the wave had passed, leaving her unharmed. But it had been rather a critical moment.

Crash!

The wave struck the shore in an appalling mass of foam, and the next moment we were nearly swamped. The white, frothing sea hissed up in a terrific flood, and some of it surged round several members of the crew. But the majority of us were on higher ground, and escaped.

The lagoon was rocking and shaking over its whole expanse, and the yacht lurched from side to side unsteadily. The explosion had certainly caused a great deal of damage to the barrier. But exactly how much rock had been torn away could not be known until soundings were taken.

Fortunately, the flying chunks of rock had descended into the water again. A few fragments had dropped upon the yacht's deck, but they only smashed one or two planks, and bent some of the brasswork.

"Well, we've burned our boats," smiled Nelson Lee. "If the passage is still blocked there is no other experiment to test. But I am extremely hopeful of extreme success. The charge exploded splendidly—exactly as we arranged. By all the laws of calculation, there ought to be a hole blown in the reef large enough to float a battleship through."

"An' so there is, old man!" said Dorrie. "I'll bet you a level tuppence on that!"

"My dear fellow, you shouldn't be so rash!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "I really wouldn't risk my money!"

Captain Burton was already pushing off in one of the boats, taking with him Mr. Scott

and several members of the crew. Nelson Lee and Dorrie ran down the beach and got into the boat as it was being floated.

We waited rather anxiously.

"What's the verdict going to be?" asked Tommy Watson, as though I knew already. "I reckon we shall——"

"Don't you reckon anything, my son!" I put in. "Just wait until the guv'nor comes back. It doesn't make any difference what we guess—the result will be just the same. And patience is a great virtue."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" snapped Handforth. "Personally, I reckon the explosion wasn't a success. If the charge had been placed as I wanted it there would have been no question at all——"

"Not the slightest," put in De Valerie, nodding. "The thing would have been a frightful failure—what?"

"No—it would have been a success!" roared Handforth. "I wouldn't mind betting anybody my giddy pocket-knife that we shan't get through!"

"I've seen that knife!" I grinned. "You ain't risking much, Handy. Both the blades are broken, and one handle's cracked——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You wait and see!" snorted Handforth. "I'm not a chap to boast——"

"Go hon!"

"I'm not a chap to boast," repeated Handforth firmly, "but I will say that I'm generally right in my ideas. And if this experiment proves a success I shall be jolly surprised—— What the dickens are you grinning at, Jappy?"

Yakama's smiled broadened.

"It is the great amusement I am enjoying, Handforth," he exclaimed. "You must nobly pardon my incivility, but please let me point out that your wonderful features were the principal cause of my delightful mirth!"

"Oh, were they?" snorted Handforth.

"And you must permit me to differ in the august opinion," went on Yakama. "I perceive that the elegant Lord Dorrimore is making strange and wonderful signs from the boat, and I am compelled to believe that they are the signs of joyfulness."

"By Jupiter!" I exclaimed. "You're right, Jappy!"

It certainly seemed as though Dorrie had gone off his rocker. For he was standing up in the boat, waving to us frantically.

"Oh, do you think he means that the passage is clear, Nipper?" asked Eileen, walking towards us. "Lord Dorrimore is very excited, isn't he?"

"Everything's all serene, Miss Eileen," I declared. "Dorrie wouldn't act like that unless he had good reason to. By jingo! We've been through a few adventures since we arrived on this island, haven't we?"

"It is really wonderful that we are still all safe and sound," declared Eileen gravely. "And when we started we thought it was going to be such a quiet affair!" she added.

"Once we get away in the yacht we shall be all right, Miss Eileen," I said. "Of

course, we may meet with some more adventures before we reach England—there's no telling, you know. But I must say we've had enough to last us for a month or two!"

The boat was pulling back to the shore now, and we heard the verdict long before the little craft grounded on the beach.

"Safe as houses!" shouted Lord Dorrimore cheerfully. "We could float five editions of the Adventure through as easy as winkin'! There's a gap blown away big enough to accommodate a bally White Star liner!"

"Oh, how splendid!" exclaimed Eileen, clapping her hands.

"Hurrah!"

"Good business!"

We were not quite so enthusiastic as we might have been, for this verdict had been expected all along. Nobody had seriously considered the possibility of failure. And, when you come to think of it, it was really an extraordinary affair, taking it all round.

Solely because of two charges of high explosive, the yacht was salvaged completely; instead of being a useless mass of metal and timber, she was now serviceable for the sea once more. Nature had bottled us up, but science had set us free.

"What about your pocket-knife, Handy?" I grinned.

"Well, I suppose I'm wrong!" admitted Handforth grudgingly. "Of course, we ain't sure yet. There's no telling, you know. I shan't give up that pocket-knife until the yacht's out in the open sea!"

Judging from that remark, one would suppose that Handforth was a fearfully mean fellow—for the pocket-knife was worth about one penny sterling. But Handy, on the contrary, was extremely open-handed in all ordinary matters. Why he should cherish that decrepit knife so much was a mystery.

"We've whacked Jelks, and we've whacked everybody else," I said comfortably. "Taking it all round, we haven't had such a bad time, my sons. It's rather a wonder we haven't got grey hairs, but dangers and excitements seem to suit us. The treasure's ours, and there's nothing else to do now except to sail away for England—and St. Frank's. I shan't be sorry to get back to the old school."

"Begad!" sighed Sir Montic. "I'm longin' to see Study C again, dear boys!"

"We shall be rather late home, too," I went on. "That'll mess up the cricket fixtures a bit. Still, we'll fake 'em up somehow when we get back. There's a long way to go before we see St. Frank's again!"

It was certainly rather early to be talking about junior cricket fixtures; but it was only natural, I suppose. We were just off for Old England once more, and our thoughts returned to home matters.

It was decided that a start should be made for England that very afternoon, since there was nothing to keep us at Holiday Island. Umlosi, however, pressed us to remain until the next day, as the Zambuans were anxious to do us honour by providing a special series of dances for our edification.

That night, therefore, we spent a couple of hours ashore. The dances were rather weird and wild, but quite interesting. The scene was very different on this occasion, although we couldn't help remembering that at one time these very same blacks were anxious to murder the lot of us. They had fought well, however, and we should have been poor specimens of humanity if we had not been grateful.

The treasure had already been transferred on board again, together with the machine-guns and the other stuff. Large numbers of cocoanuts and tropical fruits were gathered by Sir Montie and I and all the other fellows.

And the next morning, in glorious weather, the Adventure steamed serenely through the gap in the barrier reef and reached the open sea. It was a moment of triumph for Nelson Lee, but he didn't seem to know it.

We were escorted out by scores of native canoes, and the send-off we received was quite an enthusiastic one. The blacks were very much like a collection of children in many ways, and their dismay was great when they found that Umlosi was to leave them.

They were anxious to pit one of their number against Umlosi in a combat, in the cheerful hope that Umlosi would be killed and the other fellow elected chief. But, as

Umlosi didn't want to take the poor chap's life needlessly—and to no purpose—he arranged a little ceremony and elected a new chief himself. This savage was a man who had proved his worth during the battle in the most positive manner—a great giant as big as Umlosi himself, with the pluck of a lion. He received the honour modestly, and all the other Zambians acknowledged him as their leader without the slightest hesitation. Umlosi had said so, and so it stood. It was not quite in accordance with their custom, but the point was waived.

And so, after many thrilling adventures, we took our departure from Holiday Island, completely successful in our enterprise, and Lord Dorrimore's yacht steamed full speed ahead for the Old Country!

Nobody could say that we had not received our fill of excitements. But even now we had not yet finished with the rascally Captain Ebenezer Jelks. He was destined to make one more bid for the treasure—and that adventure would occur in dear old London itself.

It was to be the last attempt of Captain Jelks, and I'll set all the facts down later on.

In many ways the case was as stirring and as dramatic as any experience that had befallen us on Holiday Island.

THE END.

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MAGNIFICENT NEW SERIAL!**The Chums of Littleminster School.****A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.****By ARTHUR S. HARDY.***The First Chapters.**BASIL HOOD is a new boy at Littleminster School.**On his arrival he makes a friend of**JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.**MYERS and COGGIN are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. There is a knock at his door, and Mr. Evans, a master, enters.**(Now read on.)***CHALLIS JOINS THE CLUBS.****C**HALLIS rose, and glanced inquiringly, anxiously at his visitor.

What now was amiss?

"Oh, Challis," said the master, not unkindly, for he suspected how things were with this rebellious and high-spirited boy, "I'd like a word with you."

"Certainly, sir," said John placing a chair.

"The fact is, I've had a visit from Myers, Ryder, Ponsonby, Digby, and Chalfont. I believe they came to see you this afternoon about your joining the clubs."

"Yes, sir."

"And you refused?"

"I did. You see, the fees, small in themselves, mount up to a good deal in the aggregate, and I can't afford them. Besides, I can't afford the time. I'm not averse to games and sports, believe me, sir, but I've got a lot of leeway to make up."

Mr. Evans smiled.

"Are you quite sure of that?" he asked sympathetically. "Remember, I am in a position to judge, and I think I can say that there are few boys in Littleminster, and certainly hardly any in our house, who are as well up in classics, mathematics, and the languages as you are. For the rest all your work is much above the average. You are quick. Therefore, a little recreation——"

"You forget that I find plenty of that in my own way."

"Yes, but you hold yourself aloof. You don't mix with the others. It is as if you despised them. You ought to eradicate that impression, Challis."

"I did not create it, sir," replied Challis bitterly. "They have never treated me well. Whenever I did attempt to mix with them they snubbed me, insulted me."

Mr. Evans nodded.

"I know," said he. "Unfortunately you can't stamp out snobbery in a big and expensive school. But you can make yourself popular. Take my advice, Challis, and join the clubs now. Show them that you are fit to take part in the games, that you can hold your own with the average at athletics, and in a term or two you'll have wiped out the unfortunate impression that has grown up about you."

Challis frowned.

"How much would the combined fees amount to?" he asked.

The master made a rapid calculation and told him. Challis mentally referred to the amount of money which he'd managed to save during the last term or two out of his allowance, and saw that he had enough, with some to spare.

"And you think I ought to do it, sir?"

"I am certain you ought."

"Very well, I'll pay the fees, but I'll not promise to take an active part in the sports."

"Thanks, Challis. I'm glad you have adopted a reasonable attitude. It's a step in the right direction."

"To whom shall I pay the money?" asked the boy.

"To the joint treasurer—or, stay, if you prefer it, you can hand the sum to me. I'll pay it over and set things straight."

"Thank you," said Challis simply, and begging to be excused a moment, he fetched the money and gave it to the master.

"Challis, you have my sympathy," said Mr. Evans with an encouraging smile. "I know how things are. I had a similar ordeal to face when I started out at school. But we are going to put things right."

And so he departed.

Mr. Evans was as good as his word.

The money was promptly paid into the hands of the treasurer, and before the boys left hall that night the word had gone round that Challis had joined the clubs.

The next day the excitement was added to by an announcement fixed to the big notice board.

Challis had been chosen to play in the next sixteen against the house eleven.

Myers had been responsible for his choice.

It was Myers, too, who pinned the notice up.

"Now," said he, with a vindictive chuckle, as he turned away and pushed a path through the ring of gaping boys who

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

were busy reading the notice. "We shall soon see what cad Challis is made of."

And the boys, both large and small, gathered in an eager crowd to scan the names and criticise.

THE MATCH.

CAD CHALLIS had joined the clubs. The news flashed like magic through Evans's House, and was reported throughout the school, where the fact caused as great a sensation as the choosing of Challis to form one of the next sixteen against the House.

Evans, the master, was quietly elated. He'd kept close observation upon John Challis ever since the boy had come to Littleminster. He'd been attracted towards the lad, and he'd been one of the first to realise that Challis's aloofness, close devotion to his studies, and indifference to all forms of athletics, would do the boy much harm.

What made matters worse was Challis's utter indifference to popular opinion. He didn't seem to care what the others thought of him, but went his own way with undeviating and disconcerting obstinacy.

It was a pity. The boy possessed elements of character which should have made him popular in the school.

And so, when at last Challis joined the House clubs, the master regarded his intervention as a personal triumph.

Meeting the school captain, Percy Grainger, the next day, he referred gleefully to John Challis's submission.

"Mark my words," said the master, "he'll soon wipe out the bad impression his airs of superiority have made. He'll make a mark in the games, or I'm no judge. I'm glad."

Grainger smiled dubiously.

"I don't share your optimism, Mr. Evans," said he. "I've never known any good come of forcing a chap to do a thing yet. If his heart isn't in his work, what's the use of it? Challis has earned for himself the reputation of a cad—"

"But he's not, Grainger," said the master warmly. "I think I know him more intimately than anybody else in the school, and I can answer for that. He's straight as a die: a good fellow."

Percy Grainger shrugged.

"He may be all that," said he. "Can't say. I've never had anything to do with him. I know I tried to be polite to him once, but he froze me up. I didn't venture a second time. The fellows have sent him to Coventry. I don't think his joining the House clubs will make any difference, and I think it's perhaps a pity he didn't stop out."

"Grainger, you're unjust."

"I don't mean to be, sir. I speak as I find. Challis may be a good sort, but he's never proved it."

"They've chosen him for next sixteen against the house."

"H'm. What of that? I suspect Ponsonby, Digby, and some of those chaps have deliberately done it to show Challis up."

Mr. Evans started. It was an idea that hadn't occurred to him. On close examination he felt that it might be so. Oh, well, he could trust to Challis doing himself justice. The boy always did when he tried.

Meanwhile, Myers, Digby, Ponsonby, Ryder, and Chalfont were chuckling gleefully over the situation. As Grainger had shrewdly guessed, the selection of Challis for next sixteen was actuated by malice. Had any one of these imagined for a moment that Challis would make good in the field they would have crowded him out. Regarding him as an unpractised and indifferent cricketer, they'd put him in with the deliberate intention of "taking a rise out of the cad."

They intended to put Challis in early, so that he could get a duck, and afterwards, in fielding, place him at point or slip, where his lack of experience would render failure a practical certainty.

Then, after he'd proved himself a complete duffer, they'd ignore him altogether. He should have no more play with the teams than if he hadn't joined the cricket club. He'd be frozen out as before.

So much for the conspirators.

The smaller boys took things differently. That notice on the board fascinated them. They eyed the name of John Challis with awe. What would the cad do? How would he behave?

Whenever they saw Challis they stared at him as if he were some wonderful creature fresh from a museum, whilst that worthy, indifferent to their regard, heedless of the sensation he had caused in Evans's house, pursued the even tenour of his way as if nothing had happened.

Some of the bigger boys began to wonder if he knew that he'd been selected for the next sixteen. Digby, wanting to reassure himself on the point, stopped Challis as he was making his way through the hall one day.

"I say, have you seen the notice on the board?" he asked.

"There are many notices. Which one?" asked Challis shortly.

"Oh, the notice about the cricket match—the trial, you know, House eleven v. next sixteen."

"No."

"Come and look."

Challis went, hands in pockets, shoulders bowed, head bent, and frowning.

"They've chosen you to play for the sixteen," said Digby, with a malicious grin.

It was the first Challis had heard of it, even as Digby had supposed. He drew himself up and stared.

"Rot!" he growled. "I can't play cricket. Haven't handled a bat for years. Better scratch me out."

"Oh, no," retorted Digby. "We can't do that. You've got to play."

"Shan't play. Can't play. Won't play. Sorry, Digby, but you'd better put someone else in my place."

Without another word Challis turned and strode away, leaving Digby to stare after him aghast.

(Continued overleaf.)

"Brute!" he murmured. "Beast! Cad! But he sha'n't wriggle out of it like that. He'll have to play, else we can't show him up. He's got to play, and I'll see that he does."

It sounded all right to make definite plans on behalf of a schoolmate, but, even as he made himself the promise, Digby didn't quite see how he was going to force Challis on to the cricket-field if the big fellow refused to come. And if Challis didn't play, wouldn't there be dismay in the camp?

Frowning with annoyance, Digby strode off to convey the dismal intelligence to the others.

The morning of the match broke gloriously. With the first slant of sunlight through the blinds Challis was out of bed.

He had his tub, dressed himself, and was down in his study before even the porter was astir.

Throwing wide the window so that the pure air could filter in, he sat and worked as he hadn't worked for weeks past. He gloried in the going, as one might say of a racehorse that found the conditions of turf and course to its liking. And so, by the time the breakfast-bell clanged, he'd finished his tasks, and felt free to enjoy such leisure as the day would afford.

As Challis took his place at table his enemies were not slow to notice how serene and bright he looked. They had hoped to find him worried and depressed, and this mood didn't please them.

"What's the matter with the beast?" sneered Myers. "I've never seen him smile before."

"Can it be that he's glad because he's going to play?" asked Ponsonby uneasily.

"No," chimed in Digby, "for he told me he wasn't going to play."

"Might be bluff, you know. He looks cheerful, at any rate. Confound the fellow! We would look fools if he made a fine show!"

Ponsonby determined to find out how the land lay, and so challenged Challis after morning school.

"Oh, Challis," he said, in a tone of indifference. "Don't forget to be down at the ground early, for we shall have to arrange the order of batting and set the positions in the field, you know. And, I say, if you want any flannel bags, or that sort of thing, let me know, and I'll tell the others, and we'll see what we can do for you."

John Challis stared. By George, it was the day of the match, confound it! He'd forgotten that in his elation over the satisfactory conclusion of the morning's tasks. Indeed, his mind had soared far from the realm of cricket. He'd pictured instead the calm serenity and quietude of the river, that flowed in graceful winding curves a mile and a half from the school, where trout could be caught and one could loaf in healthful forgetfulness of school and toil.

Challis had got a new rod and his lines ready, had cleaned out his basket, and prepared for an afternoon's sport after his own heart. And he'd forgotten this.

His expression of blank dismay was not lost on Ponsonby, who inwardly rejoiced.

(To be continued.)

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