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Into the Acid Desert

Being a Stirring Account of how NELSON LEE, the Great Detective, NIPPER, his Assistant, and the Boys of St. Frank's spend the Summer Vacation in Northern Africa in quest of Treasure.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE CHOSEN SIX!

NELSON LEE, attired in a spotless white drill suit and a Panama hat, mounted the accommodation-ladder of the steam-yacht *Wanderer*. Lord Dorrimore was close behind him; and that redoubtable individual was followed in turn by a gigantic specimen of humanity with a black skin.

He was Umlosi, the chief of the Kutanas. He was not very particular about clothing as a rule, but at present he was dressed in white drill, too—and he looked far from comfortable.

The *Wanderer* was lying in the sweltering harbour of Agabat, a seaport of minor importance on the North African coast. The day was a blazing one, and everything baked in the scorching sun.

I was lolling on deck, beneath the awning, with several other St. Frank's juniors. A little further off a group of girls were collected round Lady Helen Tregellis-West. And Dr. Brett was dozing in a deck chair.

We had not been in port long—only a matter of a few days. The whole party was under the care of Sir Crawford Grey, who owned the yacht. And we were spending our summer holidays in style.

The party which had left St. Frank's was a large one—sixteen juniors, including myself, four seniors, and the four girls, who were all sisters of St. Frank's fellows.

Our trip had been wonderfully enjoyable so far. The yacht's stay in port was likely to be rather a long one, for an expedition was soon to set off into the very heart of the desert.

Umlosi, Lord Dorrimore's trusted friend and slave—for Umlosi would have laid down his life for Dorrie—had met the boat when it dropped anchor. And he had been preparing for the desert journey for some weeks, having received instructions before the start of the yacht from England.

"Well, boys, how does this weather suit you?" smiled Lee, as he strolled under the awning. "Are you feeling warm enough?"

"I'm shivering, guv'nor," I said, pulling my coat round me.

"Wau! Then thou art a strange mortal, indeed, O son of Umtagati," rumbled Umlosi, regarding me with astonishment. "For even I, who have lived in these hot places since childhood, am feeling heated on this blazing day. It is strange that thou should shiver——"

"You old ass!" grinned Dorrie. "He's pulling your leg!"

"Thou art surely mistaken, O my father," said Umlosi gravely. "My leg has not been touched——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I look as if I'm shivering, don't I?" I grinned, fanning myself. "If you could bring me a whole iceberg along, Umlosi, I'd be awfully obliged. But icebergs don't agree with you, do they?"

"Thou art using strange words, O nimble one," remarked Umlosi. "I would fetch thee anything within reason, but I fear I cannot fetch that which is unknown to me."

"And if it was known to you, you couldn't fetch it," grinned Dorrie. "I shouldn't mind a few icebergs on my own account—but they're too dear about here. The price is prohibitive."

"When you have quite finished talking nonsense, I should like to say a few words seriously," remarked Nelson Lee. "You see, Nipper, our preparations for the trip into the desert are nearly completed, and the caravan will be ready to start before long."

"Oh, good!" I exclaimed. "That means that we shall hunt for the giddy treasure—and I'm particularly keen on treasure-hunts."

"We shall have a ripping time," remarked Handforth. "Crossing the desert strikes me as being an easy job——"

"That's because you've never crossed one, my lad," put in Dorrie calmly.

"This'll be our first experience, sir," said Christine.

Nelson Lee sat down in a deck chair.

"Now, I wish to make myself quite clear," he said. "You boys seem to imagine that you are all going on this desert trip. But it is really impossible to take twenty of you——"

"Ain't—ain't we going, sir?" asked Handforth, in alarm.

"I am afraid not—"

"Oh!"

"At the most, the number of juniors must be limited to six," continued Lee. "Grey will be included among that six, of course, since he is the son of our host. And Nipper is also privileged. The other four must be chosen from amongst your number; but I shall leave that to you. You see, it is quite impossible for all of you to go—and quite needless, too."

"But those chaps who stay behind will miss all the fun, sir," said Watson.

"Perhaps they will miss something different to fun, Watson," said the guv'nor grimly. "A journey across the desert, at this time of the year, is by no means a holiday, I can assure you."

"Take my advice, my lads, an' stay behind," said Dorrie, shaking his head. "There's comfort here, an' safety, too. I wouldn't dream of goin', only Mr. Lee would be lost without me!"

Everybody grinned.

"They don't believe me!" said Dorrie, shaking his head. "It's frightfully sad, you know—nobody takes me seriously."

The juniors were soon talking rather excitedly. It came as a bit of a shock to them to know that they could not all go on the trip into the desert—on the trip to the barren oasis which contained the treasure.

"Something will have to be done," declared Handforth firmly. "If Nipper and Grey are going, that only leaves one other chap to choose—"

"One!" said Pitt. "Four, you mean!"

"No, one, you ass!" replied Handforth. "It stands to reason that Church and McClure and I are going."

"Rather!" said Church and McClure.

"Does it?" asked De Valerie. "Don't you make any giddy mistake, Handforth. I've got just as much right to go as you have, and—"

"What about me?" put in Christine.

"I guess I'd give a heap to join that outfit," put in Farman.

"We'd all like to go," I said. "And it seems to me that we'd better call a meeting of the Remove in the common-room. That sounds as if we're back at St. Frank's, doesn't it? Still, you know what I mean. The sixteen of us must meet together and discuss the problem."

De Valerie nodded.

"It'll need a bit of deciding," he said.

"Sixteen of us who all want to go—and only six who can go! There'll be a few scraps if we ain't careful."

The meeting in the recreation room below was called at once, because the occasion was an important one. A point of great concern had to be decided. And it was better that it should be decided at once.

We were all keen on the treasure-hunt. It was adventurous, to begin with—and there aren't many fellows who don't love adventure.

It was a pity we couldn't all go; but I suppose sixteen would have been too many.

There had already been a little excitement concerning the treasure. For we had with us on board a man named Simon Grell. He was our staunch ally, and he meant to help us to the full extent of his power.

Grell had been connected with a scoundrel named Captain Nixon, and another man named Jake Starkey. Grell had always been on our side in spirit, although, for a time, he had been compelled to join hands with Nixon. Starkey, a former friend of Grell's, had deserted him in favour of the rascally skipper.

Grell had been thrown overboard from Nixon's ship, and we had rescued him from the sea when he was almost on the point of exhaustion. Nelson Lee had made a great effort to have Starkey and Nixon captured, but the pair had escaped into the dense bush, which lay between the coast and the desert.

Nixon and his companion were lurking there now, probably—waiting for a chance to strike a blow at us. For they were after the treasure, too. And they were desperate. It behoved us to be careful and cautious.

I was not thinking of Nixon, however, just then.

The question to be decided was—which fellows would form the chosen six? Unless the question was handled delicately, there was likely to be a lot of jealousy. We were all great friends; but in a matter of this sort we had to be jolly careful.

"I don't see why Nipper should go—any more than any of us," said Talmadge obstinately. "Grey, of course—he's Sir Crawford's son—"

"And Nipper's Nelson Lee's assistant," put in Pitt. "Don't be an ass, Talmadge! Nipper's got more right to go than any of us."

"Hear, hear!" said many voices.

"Well, I don't see that," remarked Church, shaking his head.

"I do!" snapped Handforth. "It's a cheek that Nipper should have preference, of course—but he's been out in these parts before; he's been across the desert, too. And he knows all about it."

"That's an argument against his going," declared Tommy. "Nipper's been before, and we haven't. He ought to stand down in favour of a chap who hasn't enjoyed a trip—"

"I don't suppose there'll be much enjoyment about it," I put in grimly. "You wouldn't be so eager, perhaps, if you knew what it was really like. But I've got a suggestion to make—to you, Grey."

"What is it?" asked Jack, smiling.

"Well, I don't exactly like being privileged—"

"Neither do I."

"And if you're willing, old man, we'll chuck in our lot with the rest," I said. "There are sixteen of us, and ten must remain behind. It seems to me that the only satisfactory manner in which to settle the thing

is to cast lots. Those who draw the lucky numbers will go."

"By George!" said Handforth. "That's a good idea—and jolly sporting of you, Nipper. We all stand an equal chance, and there's no favouritism. But I think Grey ought to be cut of it. He's going in any case——"

"No," said Grey. "I'll stand my chance with the rest. It's only fair, anyhow. How are we going to do it?"

"Nothing easier," I said. "We can get sixteen pieces of paper, and shove a black cross on six of them, leaving the other ten blank. The chaps who draw the marked slips will go."

Nobody could object to that idea. And a piece of the yacht's notepaper was quickly torn into sixteen portions. Six were marked, and then the whole collection was placed into a hat.

As the papers were all folded into little squares, it was impossible to tell which were the marked ones and which the plain. The hat was passed round, and everybody shook it in turn.

Then the drawing commenced.

The hat stood in the centre of a small table, and the fellows were told that they could draw as they liked—but only one at a time. Everybody was reluctant to be the first.

"Go on, somebody!" said Christine encouragingly.

"Why don't you go on?" grinned Pitt.

"Oh, all right!"

Christine dived his hand in, pulled out a slip, and unfolded it with an air of elaborate carelessness which didn't deceive anybody. His hand shook as he smoothed the paper out.

"Blank!" he grunted. "Rotten!"

He stood looking on gloomily.

The next one to draw was Handforth.

"What's the good of hesitating?" he demanded. "I've got an idea that I shall pick a dud—everybody knows I never have any luck at drawing lots. It'll be a beastly shame, of course, but——"

"You've drawn lucky!" yelled McClure excitedly.

Handforth stared at his paper in astonishment.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "So I have!"

He continued to stare at his paper, and meanwhile Grey drew his own. There was rather a hush as he did so, for it would be regretted by all if he drew blank. He didn't, and there was a murmur of approval.

I was lucky, too, for I picked out a slip with a cross upon it. The other fellows were looking somewhat concerned now.

"There ain't much chance for us chaps," said De Valerie. "There are only three left now—and a dozen of us to draw."

De Valerie, Yorke, Talmadge, and Somerton all drew blanks in succession. Then Sir Montie Tregellis-West had success. More failures followed, until Tom Burton dived his clumsy hand into the hat. Tom was the son

of the yacht's captain, and loved by everybody.

"Souise my scuppers!" he exclaimed, as he unfolded his slip. "I've hit lucky, mates! I've signed on for the voyage!"

"That leaves one more to come," said Pitt. "I'll take the last slip—so you fellows can go ahead."

When there were only two papers left, Pitt and the other remaining junior—Nicodemus Trotwood—looked at one another. One of those two papers was a blank, and neither junior liked to make the plunge.

"I trust I am polite, my good Pitt," said Nicodemus, in his quaint way. "I will take my turn after you."

"No, you won't!" said Pitt. "I'm last man in."

"Oh, very well!" beamed Nicodemus.

He took his paper, and Pitt snatched his at the same time. His face grew somewhat long when he found that Trotwood was the lucky one.

"Hard lines, Reggie!" said Jack Grey feelingly.

"Perhaps Pitt would very much like to go?" suggested Nicodemus. "He is your chum, Grey, and I will surrender my——"

"Rats!" said Pitt gruffly. "Thanks all the same, Nicky—it's jolly sporty of you; but I couldn't accept. Good luck to the lot of you; and perhaps the fellows who remain will have the best time, after all," he added drily.

The question was settled, and I went along to Nelson Lee and told him how we had chosen the six. The gov'nor nodded and smiled.

"So there is no jealousy, eh?" he asked.

"Well, Nipper, I am not at all sure that the chosen six are the lucky ones."

"Are any of the seniors coming, sir?"

"Yes—Morrow and Fenton."

"And who else?"

"Dr. Brett will be in charge of the party, though I fancy that Umlosi will be the guiding head," replied Nelson Lee. "Captain Burton cannot leave his ship, and Sir Crawford cannot leave his guests. So there will be nobody else——"

"Nobody else!" I broke in. "What about you, sir? What about Dorrie?"

Lord Dorrimore, who was there, wagged his head knowingly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "What about us?"

"We shall not join the caravan, Nipper," said Nelson Lee.

"But that's rotten, sir!" I protested. "I made sure that you'd come! I'm blessed if I don't give up my place to somebody else!"

"Dorrie and I will reach the large oasis before the caravan, Nipper," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "For, as you know, the party will cross the desert to a fairly well-populated oasis before embarking upon the final stage of the trip. Dorrie and I will reach that oasis before you do—although we shall not start from here until several days later."

"I suppose you'll fly?" I asked sarcastically.

"Exactly!" was Nelson Lee's calm reply.

"Dorrie and I will fly. You have apparently

overlooked the fact that Sir Crawford Grey had a modern aeroplane of the most powerful type stowed on board before leaving England."

I simply stared and gasped.

"An aeroplane!" I exclaimed breathlessly. "Yes, you did say something about it, guv'nor; but I'd forgotten. Oh, my hat! Couldn't you manage to take me by air, sir? There's room for three, surely?"

"Perhaps there is——"

"And I can pilot an aeroplane, too," I added, not without a touch of pride. "I've got a certificate; and I'm reckoned to be one of the youngest pilots in England. Suppose anything happened to you in the desert? Dorrie would be stranded; he couldn't fly a kite!"

Lord Dorrimore beamed.

"Don't mind me!" he murmured. "Go ahead, young 'un!"

"Well, you can't control an aeroplane," I declared. "And it would only be a measure of safety if you took me, guv'nor."

"Do you really think so, Nipper?" asked Nelson Lee drily. "The machine will be carrying a very full load, remember, for we must take sufficient petrol to see us back here at the coast——"

"What type of aeroplane is it, sir?"

"A large twin-engine biplane."

"Twin engine!" I echoed eagerly. "What power is she?"

"Seven hundred horse-power," replied Lee. "Her petrol capacity is large, for she is capable of flying at least a thousand miles with one load. It is necessary to be careful in that respect—since it is impossible to obtain fuel supplies in the desert. The distance from here to El Safra is well under two hundred miles, so you will see that we shall have plenty of reserve petrol, in case of mishaps. The direct flight there and back will consume less than half our supply—which leaves us with an ample reserve."

"Rather, guv'nor!" I agreed. "And there'll be plenty of room on board for me, too. You can't possibly leave me out of this, sir," I went on warmly. "Dash it all, I'm your assistant—I'm not a mere schoolboy, like the others. It's only right that I should——"

"Well, well, Nipper, since you have pointed all this out to me so clearly, perhaps I will allow you to do the journey by air," interrupted Nelson Lee smilingly. "After all, the machine is designed to carry five or six passengers, and your weight will not make much difference. But I want her to fly as light as possible, for a trip across the desert is a somewhat hazardous adventure, and we cannot be too careful in the matter of small details."

"Oh, we shall come through all right," I declared, with sparkling eyes. "Thanks awfully, guv'nor! You're a brick—and Dorrie's a brick, too! Couldn't we take Umlool with us by air——"

"Ye gods!" roared Dorrie, grinning all over his face. "I suggested the idea to the old beggar—just for fun—an' he nearly had a fit. He said that he didn't want to travel

in the 'devil machine' which flies, and the very idea of it was enough to scare him. Besides, he'd jump out as soon as we got up to a thousand feet—an' that wouldn't do his head any good, hard as it is."

"No, three is the limit," said Nelson Lee. "I'm afraid there will be some jealousy amongst your young friends——"

"That can't be helped, sir," I broke in. "We're not going to draw lots for this. I'm a pilot, but they're helpless. They'll understand in a minute that there can't be any question of anybody else going."

But the juniors, when I told them, were decidedly envious of me—and I don't suppose they could be blamed. But they had sense enough to realise—as I had told the guv'nor—that my own position was unique. Handforth, of course, had a lot to say.

"Cheek, I call it!" he declared. "Why should this ass go in that ripping aeroplane, and leave us to drag our weary legs across the desert?"

"If you don't care for the trip, Handy, I'll take your place," said Pitt obligingly.

"You silly ass!" snapped Handforth.

"But look here," put in Church, "if Nipper's going by air, that leaves another opening in the desert party. Mr. Lee said that six could go, so I reckon we'd better draw lots again—for the last one."

"Good idea!" declared everybody.

The job didn't take long, and I was very pleased when Watson selected the lucky slip. This meant that Study C would be complete—Tommy and Montie going on foot and myself by air.

The trip promised to be an interesting one; but none of us guessed how really full of adventure and peril it was to prove!

CHAPTER II.

THE START INTO THE BUSH.

TWO days later everything was ready for the start.

The Wanderer was alive with bustle and activity. Those guests who were destined to remain behind had recovered from their disappointment—I am referring to the juniors—and they watched the preparations with lively interest.

The girls, of course, had never expected to go. It wasn't a trip suitable to members of the fair sex. But Watson's sister was rather anxious; she was rather sorry that Tommy had been selected to go.

"You will be careful, won't you, Tom?" she asked, as they stood on the deck, in the shade of the big awning. "It's a terrible journey——"

"Terrible rats!" interrupted Watson abruptly. "Don't you be silly, sis. There's no danger at all, but I expect you'll have the best of it here, in any case. There'll be plenty of people on the yacht to keep things lively, and we shall all be back within a fortnight or three weeks—bringing the treasure with us."

"But it seems so reckless to me," went on the girl, shaking her pretty head. "Sir Crawford is rich enough—and so is Lord Dorrimore. And yet they want to risk their lives for—for nothing!"

Watson grinned.

"You don't understand," he said. "But girls never do. If it wasn't for chaps like Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee, nothing would ever be discovered. People have got to take risks in this world."

The other three girls were just as concerned—and Handforth was inclined to be contemptuous—although, of course, he was gentlemanly enough not to show this in front of the girls themselves.

He would have been perfectly willing to set out if a thousand known perils were to be faced, and if there was practically no prospect of a return. Handforth rarely looked into the future, and he never considered the minor question of odds. His method was to charge ahead blindly, and trust to luck.

It was really a good thing that Handforth was booked to go, for if he had remained behind he would have made everybody on the yacht miserable until the treasure-searchers returned.

The plan which had been adopted was quite simple and straightforward.

The caravan which was destined to cross the desert would consist of Umlosi, Dr. Brett, Simon Grell, Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, and the six Removites. There would also be a good many natives, and camels and all the rest of it.

And Lord Dorrimore, Nelson Lee, and I would travel by aeroplane. For the first three days the expedition would travel through dense forest country—and this part of the journey would be undertaken on foot. Then the desert would be reached, where the camels were waiting in readiness.

After a short rest the party would make the desert crossing to the large oasis of Zambé. The aeroplane, of course, would fly direct from the coast to Zambé in one trip. And in all probability we should pass over the heads of the large party during the last stage of the journey—for we reckoned to get to Zambé first, although we should not start until long after the others had gone.

From Zambé to the tiny oasis of El Safra was not a long trip, but it would really be the most difficult part of the journey. For there was no beaten track, and the party would be obliged to wander over the barren desert.

Sir Crawford Grey was quite content to trust the party in the capable hands of Dr. Brett and Umlosi. Simon Grell would go, because there was a bare possibility of treachery on Captain Nixon's part, and Grell would be handy in a fight.

In the cool of the early morning the start was made.

The African sun blazed down, but it was not very fierce yet. The juniors, looking eager and alert, were collected on the deck, ready to be carried ashore by the launch. Everybody was up to see the start.

I was there, chatting with Sir Montie and Tommy.

"Dear fellow, I wish you were comin' with us," remarked Tregellis-West. "An' I wish Mr. Lee was comin', too, begad! We shall feel frightfully lonely without you. An' there's no tellin' what might happen—"

"My dear ass, we are coming," I broke in.

"Yes, I know," said Montie. "But you are doin' the journey by aeroplane. You won't be a member of the real expedition. An' deserts are shockin' things. If we get lost we shall have camels an' Arabs, an' all sorts of things. We shall be able to reach safety—"

"Then what are you grumbling at?" I inquired.

"Dear boy, I ain't grumblin'," protested Montie. "I'm thinkin' about you."

"About me?"

"Exactly," he went on. "Supposin' your engines fail, or supposin' a sand storm comes up, an' you are compelled to land in the desert? Supposin' you can't get the machine into the air again? You'll be in a frightful hole, begad!"

I chuckled.

"You're all 'supposin''," I grinned. "The aeroplane isn't one of that kind, old son. It's a proper flier. There's practically no prospect of a forced descent—and even if we do come down for some reason, we shall be able to get up again. It's not like flying across the Atlantic, you know. We shall have solid ground beneath us all the time. And there'll be enough petrol aboard to take us a thousand miles. The double trip isn't half that distance."

"All the same, I shall be anxious," said Sir Montie firmly.

"Come on, my son," broke in Tommy Watson. "It's time to get into the launch. Well, so long, Nipper! See you in Zambé."

And Watson went off quite unconcerned. He kissed his sister good-bye with great reluctance, although the other juniors would have jumped at the chance of kissing Violet. She was certainly a mighty pretty girl.

Half an hour had elapsed before all the farewells had been said, and then the launch set off for the shore. I went with it, and so did Nelson Lee and Dorrie. Umlosi had already gone—for it was his business to get the native carriers in readiness for the start.

The town of Agabat was of no great size, and it did not profess to be important. The inhabitants were mostly of negro origin, with a sprinkling of Moorish and Fulah elements.

We could have entered a much larger port, of course, but Agabat was the nearest point to the oasis of El Safra. The Europeans in the town were mainly French and British, and they were all agog with interest and excitement. For the word had been passed round that we had a modern aeroplane with us.

Sir Crawford and his remaining guests were likely to have a good time during our absence, for they would be invited everywhere, and there would be many parties on board the Wanderer.

However, I preferred to undertake the trip—and so did the other fellows. Practically all the European population had turned out to see the start of the expedition, and almost all the native population, too, I think.

"Well, good-bye, Brett," said Nelson Lee, when all was ready. "I fancy this little expedition will be quite a success—even if our object is not achieved. The trip in itself will be worth while."

"You can be quite assured, Lee, that I shall do my best to see after all those who are in my care," said the doctor. "I have Umlozi with me—and his support is worth a very great deal in a country of this sort."

"The old beggar's worth three of us, for example," observed Lord Dorrimore.

"I won't say that," smiled Brett. "But I shall have you, too, Lord Dorrimore. I understand that Mr. Lee and Nipper and yourself will be in Zambezi before I can arrive—that is, if all goes well."

"Make not the mistake of being too sure, O man of medicine!" exclaimed Umlozi, shaking his head gravely. "It is not to be that we shall reach Zambezi without our troubles."

"Well, we must expect a few, I suppose," said Brett.

"It will be well if our troubles are so light," said Umlozi. "But thou must be prepared for dangers and difficulties, my master. As I lay sleeping last night I was troubled by a dream. I saw much blood flowing; I saw many dead men. Wau! Our journey is not to be easy. I have spoken."

"Yes, by gad, you've spoken pretty cheerfully, too!" said Dorrimore. "This looks serious, Brett. Whenever Umlozi dreams about blood and dead men—well, you can reckon there's goin' to be somethin' doin'."

Fortunately, nobody took much notice of Umlozi, and when the expedition moved away up the straggling main street of the little town everybody was cheerful and happy. The junior members of the party were particularly keen.

After they had gone things seemed a bit quiet on the sea front, and on board the yacht. But there were still plenty of us to keep things lively. And Nelson Lee, Dorrie, and I lost no time in starting our preparations for the flight.

"Well, there's one consolation in our being left behind," said Reginald Pitt, as he stood watching the hatches being opened by the sailors. "We shall be here to see the aeroplane fitted up, and to watch the trial flights."

"If we're lucky we may be able to go up," said Church.

"Say, I guess that would be sure dandy," remarked Farman. "Gee! I'd give all the dollars I've got to fly around in that aeroplane."

"Aaa!" said McClure. "Mr. Lee wouldn't take your dollars!"

"And I don't suppose he'll take Farman, either," I put in. "Not until we get back from the trip, anyhow."

The aeroplane was in sections, each one

boxed up and marked. The work of assembling the machine was not difficult—especially with an expert on the job like Nelson Lee. And all the yacht's engineers were at work on the machine, too.

And while we were busy in the blazing heat, the expedition was making headway into the forest. Once the coast was left behind the party plunged right into the heart of the dense bush.

There were no roads or railways out of Agabat—only a narrow track which led to a small native kraal near the edge of the desert. There were plenty of blacks in the neighbourhood near the coast; villages were passed constantly; but further on the country was less populated, and more wild.

Towards the end of the first day's march practically no cultivated areas were passed. The forest became more primeval in aspect.

Umlozi and Dr. Brett led the party, with Fenton and Morrow, and Handforth and Tregellis-West came next. Behind them were Watson and Grey, and then Trotwood and Burton. The path was only of sufficient width to allow two abreast.

The native carriers followed with their loads, and Simon Grell brought up the rear; it was his task to see after the native "boys."

The St. Frank's fellows were all greatly interested in everything they saw. It was all new to them. The nature of the country—the bird life—the insect life—everything was novel and entertaining.

And the heat in the forest was not so bad as the fellows had feared it to be, for the giant trees shielded the party from the fierce rays of the sun. The dense masses of foliage and the profusion of wild flowers, gorgeously coloured, provided constant and ever-changing interest.

Camp was made in a little clearing, and in the morning everybody was up with the sun—for it was as well to get ahead while the air was still cool. Throughout that day everything went smoothly, and Umlozi was looking pleased with himself.

"Mayhap my dream was false, my master," he remarked to Brett. "It seems that we shall finish our journey to the desert with no dangers to mar our progress. But thou must be none too sure—"

"Don't you worry, Umlozi," smiled the doctor. "What dangers could beset us, in any case? The natives in this region are not hostile towards white people."

"Wise words," rumbled Umlozi. "But thou must remember, O my master, that these black peoples are of a somewhat low type. They are peaceful, mayhap, but gold and fire-water are much prized. These pigs would not hesitate to attack us if they were well paid."

"But who would pay them?" asked Fenton curiously.

"Thou art surely acquainted with all the facts?" asked Umlozi in return. "Is it not true that a wretch of a white man has been making plots against thee? Is it not true that he escaped into this same forest with an

evil companion? Methinks they will not be idle!"

"You mean Nixon and Starkey?" said Dr. Brett. "We needn't fear them, Umlosi. Mr. Lee—Umtagati—was rather anxious, but I convinced him that our party would not run into danger. What could Nixon do, in any case? We have rifles and revolvers, and we can fight——"

"True," interrupted Umlosi. "But we are small in number."

He said no more, for the party had arrived in a wide clearing which looked suitable for a cabin place, and the swift twilight of the African evening would soon be upon them.

The tents were soon up, and the evening meal was well on its way before half an hour had passed. Fenton had accompanied Dr. Brett through the forest for some distance, and when they returned they reported that a fairly large river flowed past a short distance away.

"A river, eh?" said Handforth, who was chatting with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Watson. "What price we go and have a look at it?"

"I'm perfectly willin', old boy," said Sir Montie.

"It might help us to get cool," remarked Watson. "Phew! Isn't it stewing?"

"That's just about the right word," said Handforth, as they walked off. "This atmosphere is moist, you know—and I don't reckon it's particularly healthy. I suppose we sha'n't all be down with malaria, or typhoid, or smallpox, or something of that kind?"

"I don't think there's much danger of smallpox," grinned Watson. "Malaria is more likely, of course; but old Brett doses us up regularly with that awful quinine stuff, and I reckon we're safe enough. But be more cheerful, Handy, you ass. Don't talk about fevers!"

They soon reached the bank of the river, and the air was certainly cooler in the vicinity of the water. The stream was fairly wide, but almost stagnant. Scarcely a trace of current could be seen.

The trees on the opposite bank were reflected sharply in the stretch of water, and further down the trees overhung the banks on both sides, forming a kind of tunnel of foliage.

"Begad! It's frightfully pretty, dear boys," said Sir Montie. "It's a pity we didn't bring a camera——"

"By George!" ejaculated Handforth abruptly.

"What's the matter, you ass?"

Handforth peeled off his white drill jacket. "Why didn't we think of it before?" he asked. "Just what we're all gasping for, and——"

"Gasping for what?" asked Watson. "What's the idea, you lunatic?"

"Begad! You ain't going to drink that water?" ejaculated Montie. "It's full of frightful little insects——"

"Drink it!" roared Handforth. "I'm going to bathe!"

"Bathe!" gasped Watson, in alarm. "Don't be mad, Handy! You mustn't bathe in this river! Don't forget what Mr. Lee told us——"

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth obstinately. "About crocodiles, you mean? Anybody can see there's nothing of that sort in this river. The water's as clear as crystal, and I'm going to have a dip. You chaps had better come in, too."

Both Watson and Tregellis-West looked very alarmed.

"Pray listen to reason, Handforth," said the latter earnestly. "Both Mr. Lee and Dr. Brett warned us particularly about bathin'. We were told not to go into any water at all—so as to be on the safe side. Put your clothes on again, dear fellow, and come back to camp——"

"I'll put my clothes on again after I've had a bathe," said Handforth stubbornly.

"But you don't mean it, you idiot!" snapped Watson.

"Yes, I do——"

"But look here——"

"Oh, dry up, for goodness' sake," put in Handforth, with a sigh. "Don't keep nagging me like a couple of old fishwives! If you don't want to come in—stay on the bank and watch me."

"We'd better keep the ass out of the water by force," said Watson grimly. "It's the only way to deal with lunatics——"

But Handforth dodged away, and although the other two tried to get near him, he succeeded in eluding them every time. He seemed to treat the whole affair as a joke; but Montie and Tommy were deadly serious.

They knew that crocodiles might be lurking under the water, or behind the cover of some bushes. And once Handy was seized there would be practically no hope for him.

"This is just the kind of river croc. favour, too," panted Watson, coming to a halt. "This still, stagnant water—— Look here, Handy!" he roared suddenly. "Are you going to be sensible?"

"Yes," yelled Handforth, from behind a tree—"I'm going in!"

"Begad! It's fatal, old boy!" said Montie in great distress.

"Rats!"

Tommy Watson clenched his fists.

"I'm off for Dr. Brett!" he panted. "Come on, Montie!"

They raced off with all speed. Their efforts were useless, so it was only left for them to appeal to the others. Perhaps there would still be time to haul Handforth out of the river before he was seized by a crocodile.

Handforth sniffed, hesitated, and continued disrobing himself.

Watson and Tregellis-West burst into the camp like a miniature whirlwind. The others knew that something was wrong at once, and the pair were surrounded.

Dr. Brett grasped Watson's arm.

"What is it, lad?" he demanded.

"Where is Handforth?"

"In the river, sir!" gasped Tommy.

"In the river?" said the doctor, aghast. "You—you don't mean that Handforth is drowned?"

"Begad! No, sir—not so bad as that," put in Sir Montie. "But Handforth is a shockin' ass. He wants to bathe, an' he started undressin'. We begged of him to be sensible—but it's impossible! Handy can't be sensible——"

"And is he in the river—actually bathing?" asked Brett sharply.

"I expect he is by this time," said Watson.

"Good gracious! We must fetch the young idiot out at once!" said Brett. "I don't know for certain, but it is quite likely that this river is infested with crocodiles or hippos——"

"Thy words are true, N'Kose," put in Umlosi. "This river is, indeed, filled with the reptiles which thou callest crocodiles. Nearer the coast they are countless; and even here they may be numerous. The boy was foolish to venture in the stream. Wau! I fear we shall be too late!"

"Great Scott!" muttered Grey. "Handy can't be—dead!"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Watson. "And we tried to prevent him——"

But Brett and Umlosi were already hurrying away; and the juniors followed, headed by Morrow and Fenton. The party dashed with all speed to the river bank, and looked anxiously round.

There was no sign of Handforth whatever.

"Handforth!" shouted the doctor loudly—"Handforth!"

Silence—and then a swish and a swirl from the dark, sinister water. Just for a second everybody saw the ugly snout of a crocodile; then it had vanished. And there was no reply from Handforth.

"Look!" whispered Watson huskily. "There are his clothes!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Fenton, horrified.

An untidy pile of clothing lay near the bank, and it was easily recognised as Handforth's property. There seemed to be little doubt that the foolish junior had jumped into the river, and that he had been killed by a crocodile!

And every member of the party was stunned by the shock of it—every member except Umlosi. But Umlosi seemed to be more alert than ever, for he was examining the ground closely and eagerly.

He could see something which was invisible to the others.

What was it?

CHAPTER III.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HANDFORTH.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was obstinate, but he was not a fool.

He fully realised that the warning issued by Tregellis-West and Watson was a sensible one. And he had only persisted in his threats to enter the river in order to "kid" the other juniors.

As soon as they had vanished into the forest Handforth grinned.

"Silly asses!" he muttered. "They think I'm going to bathe in this giddy river! I wouldn't dive in for a ransom!"

And Handforth, with a chuckle, prepared to attire himself again; he was only wearing his shirt, boots, and socks. He meant to roar with laughter when Watson and Sir Montie returned with the whole camp.

But things happened differently.

Handforth was about to seize his trousers when he heard a slight noise in the bush behind him. He turned, stared—and gasped.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

For there, eyeing him steadily, crouched two black men. They were almost without clothing, and their features were not particularly handsome; as a matter of fact, the negroes were decidedly repulsive in aspect.

They were of a different tribe to those blacks who carried the packs for the expedition. Handforth had never seen them before—and he began to feel rather queer.

"Who—who the dickens are you?" he asked huskily.

The blacks made no reply, and as they did not seem to be at all menacing, Handforth became somewhat impatient.

"You might have a bit of decency about you!" he exclaimed, apparently ignoring the fact that he couldn't possibly be understood. "A jolly nice thing, I must say! Standing there looking on while a chap's dressing! Buzz off!"

One of the blacks said something—and Handforth stared.

"Don't make that awful noise!" he exclaimed. "Can't you speak?"

And then something rather startling happened. For the two men advanced. Handforth backed away instinctively, and gave a gasp as he felt himself seized by strong, powerful hands.

He turned abruptly, and then found that there were three or four other black men there. He struggled and twisted in alarm.

"Lemme go, confound you!" he roared. "You—you—U-u-u-ugh!"

A huge hand was clapped over Handforth's mouth, and, although he was strong, he found himself absolutely powerless in the grip of his captors. The whole incident was amazing to him.

Before he could collect his wits he was taken through the bush, and conveyed several hundred yards away from the river. Then a halt was called, and Handforth was placed upon his feet.

But his hands were tied behind him with some tough grass, and a piece of aged calico was bound over his mouth. Then he was forced along between the two leading blacks. The others brought up the rear.

By this time Handforth was really alarmed, and not a little scared.

What did it mean?

Why had he been captured by those uncouth natives? Where were they taking him to? A dozen questions presented them-

solves to Handforth; but he could not find any definite answer for any of them.

Then an inspiration came to him—and his alarm was greater than before.

"Cannibals!" he told himself, with a queer sensation running down his spine. "That's what they are—cannibals! I'm being taken to the native village—and they'll shove me in the giddy stock-pot for supper!"

Handforth had always had a sneaking desire to see some cannibals—but certainly not in this manner. This adventure was rather too real for Handy's liking. His feelings were decidedly unpleasant.

The very uncertainty was worrying. He had never dreamed that there was any danger in being left alone, or he would not have allowed Watson and Sir Montie to go. But perhaps it was just as well that they had gone—or they might have been made prisoners, too.

"And they'll think I've got eaten up by crocodiles!" Handforth told himself, suddenly remembering his little joke. "All my giddy clothes are on the bank, and there won't be a sign of me. Oh, my only hat!"

Handforth had had another thought.

"Believing that I'm dead, there won't even be a search!" he mused. "They'll think that I've got done in, and that'll be the end of it! And I shall be eaten for supper by these beastly blacks!"

His position was grave, it appeared. Handforth began to be thankful that he had not been killed outright. But it was easier for his captors to take him on his own feet than to carry him.

They would probably kill him quickly enough when their destination was reached. To make any attempt to get away would be worse than futile. He could only march on, helpless and fearful.

But his position was not as bad as it seemed—for Handforth had put the worst possible construction on his capture.

He was marched through the forest for miles, it appeared to him. At all events, darkness had fallen in earnest before there was any sign of the journey coming to an end.

And then Handforth caught sight of some flickering lights through the trees, and presently he was led into a big clearing. It was not a native village, as he had half expected.

The place was a camp.

And Handforth's heart gave a jump as he saw two white tents beneath the branches of a huge tree.

"Cannibals don't use tents!" he told himself quickly. "There must be some white men here!"

His heart was beating faster now, and he was not feeling quite so pessimistic. He saw that the camp was of considerable size. There were hundreds of black warriors in the clearing.

Some were sleeping, some were eating, and others crouched in groups round the fires. It was a scene which Handforth remembered

for many a day. He saw that most of the blacks were armed.

Some had rifles, but the majority of them had spears near them. In any case, it seemed certain to Handforth that the party was not a peaceful one; it had evidently set out upon a warlike mission.

The prisoner was taken right across the clearing, and brought to a halt before the opening of one of the tents. And Handforth's heart gave another jump as he saw the figure of a white man.

The fellow was dressed in seafaring garb, with an old Panama hat on his head. He came out of the tent quickly, stared at Handforth, and then put some swift questions to the blacks—evidently in their own language.

After they had replied the man looked pleased, and nodded.

He gave another order, and Handforth was forced into the tent. His bonds were removed, and he was allowed to sit down on a stool. And now he saw that there was another white man present.

"I've seen you before somewhere," exclaimed Handforth, staring at the second man. "By George! I know—you're Starkey! You used to be with that chap Grell—and you were near St. Frank's for weeks——"

"I didn't know I was so famous!" exclaimed the man, nodding. "Yes, sonny—I'm Jake Starkey!"

"Then—then you must be Captain Nixon!" gasped Handforth, turning to the other.

"Right fust time!"

"You—you scoundrelly rotters!" shouted Handforth warmly. "The pair of you ought to be shoved in prison! And what the dickens does this mean? What's the idea of those blacks bringing me here?"

"Don't get excited, an' you won't come to no harm," said Captain Nixon. "Fust of all, young shaver, what's your name?"

"Rats!" snapped Handforth.

"Oh, is it?" said Captain Nixon. "That don't seem a nice name——"

"It's not my name!" growled Handforth. "I'm Handforth, of St. Frank's. And if you harm me, you ruffian, you'll have to answer to Mr. Nelson Lee! You'd better not lay your fingers——"

"And you'd better not get lippy!" interjected the captain. "I've got my runners out in all directions, an' they know exactly what's goin' on. I sent out a party to scout round your camp—with orders to bring home a prisoner if they could collar one without being spotted."

"Look here, if you think I'm a prisoner——"

"Think nothing!" snapped Nixon. "You are a prisoner, my lad, an' don't you forget it. And you've got to tell me just what I order you to—savvy? You've got to obey me!"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"You can go and eat coke!" he retorted hotly.

"If he spoke to me in that way, cap'n, I'd

give him a swipe over the jaw!" put in Mr. Starkey, as he filled his pipe.

Nixon shook his head.

"There's no call for violence—yet," he said grimly. "Look here, Rats——"

"My name's Handforth!" snorted the junior.

"You said it was 'Rats' at first—and it suits me better," said the captain. "Now, see here, Rats, what you've got to do is to give me truthful answers to the questions I'm going to put. I want to know what plans Lee has made—you've got to tell me the programme of your expedition."

"Have I?" said Handforth. "That's funny! I don't think I have, somehow! I sha'n't answer anything, you rotter!"

Nixon scowled.

"I sha'n't deal with you lightly much longer," he said threateningly. "Now, understand, my lad. If you do as I say you won't be hurt; but if you remain obstinate I'll take measures that'll open your lips—and they won't be gentle measures, neither."

"I'd take a strap to him if I was you!" advised Starkey.

"You shut up!" said Captain Nixon. "Now, Handforth, out with it! After your party gets to the desert, what does Lee intend to do? What's goin' to be your first port o' call?"

"Timbuctoo!" said Handforth sarcastically.

Nixon started.

"By jinks!" he exclaimed. "You ain't goin' all that way inland! Timbuctoo is right out in the Sahara, nigh on a thousand miles from here! I thought that oasis was in a strip o' desert near the coast——"

"He's pulling your leg, cap'n," said Starkey.

"I believe he is, too, by thunder!" snapped Nixon. "You'd better not try them games with me! I ain't to be played with, young shaver! Are you going to answer my questions or not?"

"Not!" said Handforth.

"Why, you young hound——"

"You can jaw till doomsday if you like!" went on the junior. "If you think I'm going to turn traitor, Captain Nixon, you've made a bloomer! You won't get a word out of me—not a giddy word!"

The captain crossed over to Handforth deliberately, and his fist shot out. Handforth received the blow on the side of his head, and he toppled to the floor before he could recover his balance.

"Now will you speak?" snarled Nixon.

Handforth jumped up

"No!" he shouted furiously. "And you can take that!"

Crash!

His fist landed upon Captain Nixon's nose with tremendous force. The man went over backwards, colliding with the table, and causing great havoc. Handforth stood in the centre of the tent, flushed and warlike.

"And I'll give you one, too!" he shouted, rushing at Starkey.

Before he could carry out his intention

Nixon was on his feet, his nose streaming with blood. His face was livid with fury, and for a moment he was hardly capable of speech. But he grasped Handforth from behind, swung him round, and glared into his face.

"I won't hit you now!" he rasped. "But you're going to pay for that show of temper, my lad! In less than an hour from now you'll be put to the torture!"

"Torture!" gasped Handforth.

"Yes—an' I mean it, too," snarled the captain. "These blacks know more about torturing than the Chinese! We'll soon see whether you'll speak or not, by thunder!"

Nixon yelled out an order, and four blacks entered the tent. Handforth was grasped, and after a short delay was marched out into the night. He was too confused to be afraid.

He found himself being led in the direction of several small huts, which stood by themselves at the edge of the clearing. They had obviously been there for years, and were probably the remains of a native village which had once stood upon the spot. Handforth wondered vaguely what the idea could be.

Was it possible that Captain Nixon meant to torture him? Handforth felt quite sure that the threat was an empty one. But then he remembered the heavy punch he had delivered.

Nixon would certainly make him suffer for that.

But Handforth would never betray any of the plans of the treasure-hunting party. Handy only knew the general outline of the programme, and it would probably be useless to Nixon. But even this Handforth meant to keep to himself—no matter what happened.

The hut was circular, and was provided with a thatched roof. The only opening to be seen was a low doorway—and through this Handforth was thrust like a sack of coals into a shute.

He sprawled on all fours, and found himself lying in a mass of rotten twigs and dead leaves. In all probability, the place was infested with tropical insects; but, happily, Handforth was in darkness.

There was no door, and as no sound came to the prisoner's ears he started to make an attempt to creep out. But he very soon found that that game was quite out of the question.

For he had hardly projected his head out into the night before a big foot came from nowhere, and thrust itself forward. Handforth was rolled over again—and he knew that the doorway was guarded by one of the blacks.

"Well, I'm in a pretty fix, and no giddy mistake!" he muttered. "I wonder if I shall ever see those other bounders again?"

Escape was obviously out of the question, and all Handforth could do was to sit tight and wait for something to happen. But this was not so easy as it sounded. He was hardly clothed, and to sit down at all was im-

possible. The ground was too prickly and coarse.

It was equally impossible to stand upright, for the hut was low. So Handforth was compelled to crouch. And his troubles were increased when he felt unseen insects crawling up his legs, and others dropping down his back.

The hut was a perfect horror, and Handforth would have given anything to be out of it.

It was quite clear that his detention there was to be of short duration. For the prison was only a temporary one—and Nixon had declared that the "torture" would commence within an hour.

Therefore, if there was any chance of escape, Handforth must seize that chance at once. But what could he do? How could he hope to overpower the gigantic native who was guarding the door?

Handforth did not even consider the possibility. He gave his attention to the other wall of the hut. It was only made of straw and reeds, coated with dry clay, or something of a similar nature.

But even as Handforth commenced operations, he found himself thinking of his difficulties—even if he did succeed in escaping, what could he do in the forest alone? The possibility of his locating the camp was decidedly remote. But Handforth persisted in his efforts.

Very cautiously he scraped away at the rough material. It was difficult to work in the darkness, and Handforth had not proceeded far with his work before he gave it up as a hopeless task.

It would take him two or three hours at the very least to break a way through, for the sun-baked clay was as hard as bricks. And with only his bare hands to use as tools Handy's prospects of success were slim.

So, very wisely, he desisted.

And then he heard a rather curious sound just outside the door of his hut. There was a quick intake of breath, a low gasp, and then a heavy thud. After that came silence.

Handforth held his breath.

The doorway was clearly outlined now, for the prisoner had grown accustomed to the darkness within. And as he watched he saw a shadowy shape creeping low. It moved slightly, and a head came into the hut. Handforth prepared himself to punch with all his strength.

"Thou art here, O reckless Handforth?" came a low whisper.

The imprisoned junior gave a quick, joyous gasp.

"Umlosi!" he ejaculated breathlessly.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN NIXON'S MOVE.

UMLOSI it was!

He crept into the hut, and took hold of Handforth's arm.

"Thou must come with me swiftly," he murmured. "It was but child's play to

deal with the pig who stood on guard, but there are vast numbers of these degraded warriors near by, and we cannot take chances."

"But—but how did you get here, Umlosi?" asked Handforth, filled with relief and joy. "How did you know I was in this hut? Oh, you ripping old bounder! I could hug you!"

"But that would be a waste of time, thou reckless one," said Umlosi. "These poor fools imagined that they concealed their movements. I tracked thee with no difficulty, and watched the camp. I see thee brought into this hut, and merely awaited my opportunity. Wau! It is a pity there were no more heads to break!"

"Do you think we can get away all right?" breathed Handforth.

"Aye! Trust thyself to me," murmured the Kutana chief. "Within the hour, my worthy son, we shall be back in the midst of our friends. Have no fear. But thou must be silent in thy movements, or all is over."

"Trust me!" said Handforth excitedly.

They passed out of the hut like shadows, and then moved away in the direction of the trees. But before they had covered many yards there came a series of shouts, and numerous forms rushed towards them.

"Oh, corks!" gasped Handforth. "We're spotted!"

And this was only too true. Half a dozen blacks were there almost before Handforth had finished speaking, and Umlosi was fighting them all. He was an amazing fellow, and he fought with the strength of a dozen men.

He had a supreme contempt for these blacks, and they went down one after the other. Four of them were felled to the ground within fifteen seconds, and the other two fled, yelling for assistance.

"Quickly, my good Handforth!" panted Umlosi.

"My hat! You didn't waste much time——"

"Silence thy tongue!" hissed Umlosi.

He seized Handforth, and whirled him off his feet before the junior could protest. Then he rushed away into the darkness. But not for long. Beneath a huge tree he set Handforth down.

"Wait!" he rumbled. "I will assist thee into the branches."

Within one minute the pair were hidden in the tree. Handforth was bewildered, and couldn't understand the reason for this move on Umlosi's part. And he listened to the shouts of the blacks in a dazed kind of way.

"What's the idea, Umlosi?" he whispered.

"Mayhap we shall be safe here," breathed Handforth's rescuer. "But be thou silent, my son. Had I been alone I could have outstripped these worthless vermin with ease. But not thou. Thou art unused to these forests, and capture would have been certain if we had persisted in flight. It is safer to remain here. I have spoken."

"Yes, but I want to know——"

"Be thou quiet, O chatterer!" muttered Umlosi.

Handforth subsided. He realised that there was much wisdom in Umlosi's move. It would certainly have been impossible for Handforth to elude capture. Umlosi himself could have got away with ease. But the black giant would not dream of seeking safety himself at the cost of deserting his charge.

And his ruse, as it happened, was entirely successful.

Captain Nixon's men went in all directions through the forest, but not one of them halted near the tree, or attempted to examine it. And after half an hour had elapsed the searchers returned to report their failure.

Captain Nixon was furious.

"A set of slab-sided lubbers—that's what they are!" he snapped harshly. "What's to be done now, Jake?"

"Don't ask me!" said Starkey.

"That wouldn't be much good, would it?" growled the captain. "I don't reckon you're any good for me, Jake—you're too blamed slow! What's to be done, I say! Just look at the position."

"It ain't no worse," said Starkey.

"No worse! You——" Nixon swore violently. "No worse! What about that kid, you sop-brained fool?"

"What about him?" asked Starkey. "And there ain't no call for you to get abusive, cap'n——"

"You don't seem to realise what position we're in!" exclaimed Nixon. "That kid will go back to his camp—an' he'll report that we're here. Then Lee and his lot will be warned, an' they'll take precautions against attack."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Jake, startled.

"You don't never think of anything!"

Apparently Captain Nixon believed that the whole party was on the way to the desert—including Nelson Lee. The rascally skipper had no information to warn him of the fact that the famous detective would make the journey by aeroplane.

"Don't you see?" went on Nixon. "As soon as that boy gets back, our own position will be known; Lee and his crowd will know that I'm after 'em. And that'll make all the difference to us. We sha'n't be able to make the surprise attack we was plannin'. There's only one thing to do."

"Attack at once—now!" said Starkey brilliantly.

"By jinks! I'm blamed if you don't have a flash of intelligence now and agin!" said the captain. "Yea, Jake, that's the plan. We'll attack right now, and collar the whole party. We'll force the secret of the treasure out of them, and leave the whole bunch in this forest while we go to the oasis."

"Sounds easy," said Starkey. "We'll do it, cap'n."

Ten minutes later there was a tremendous bustle in the big clearing. Nixon had given his orders. And the blacks were preparing

for the march and for the attack. Hundreds of them were lining up.

And then, after a short delay, the army moved forward. It was a ragged, untidy crowd, but it had the advantage of numbers. Nixon's men outnumbered Dr. Brett's party by at least ten to one.

And the captain was certain of gaining a swift and complete victory. He wanted to arrive on the scene before Handforth returned, if possible. But in any case the other party would not be expecting an attack so soon. Thus they would be taken unawares.

The distance which separated the two camps was not great, and the march was, therefore, a comparatively short one. Little more than an hour later the attack started. And it started just when Dr. Brett was becoming terribly anxious concerning the safety of Umlosi and Handforth.

Umlosi had told Brett that Handforth had been carried away—that he had not plunged into the river. And the Kutana chief had insisted upon tracking Handforth's captors alone.

Neither of the pair had returned yet—and this was not surprising, considering that they had been "treed" for so long. But they were safe, and that was the main thing.

Their friends did not know it, however, and there was much anxiety in the camp.

"I think you boys had better get some sleep," said Dr. Brett at last, addressing the juniors. "Fenton and Morrow and I will wait——"

"Begad! We couldn't think of sleeping, sir!" exclaimed Tregellis-West. "It would be frightfully heartless for us to sleep while poor old Handforth is missin'. And there's Umlosi, too."

"You needn't be afraid for Umlosi," said Brett. "There is little possibility of his getting into any trouble. But several hours have passed since Handforth's disappearance, and I am intensely worried. I am responsible for his safety——"

"Beg pardon, sir!"

Simon Grell had suddenly rushed up, and the doctor turned quickly.

"The boys are getting restless, sir," said Grell.

"What about?"

"It seems that they can scent mischief, sir," replied Grell. "I understand their lingo, you know, and they say they've seen black forms. The boys reckon that we're bein' surrounded——"

"Nonsense," said Brett. "Such a thing is impossible. There are no hostile tribes in this region, Grell——"

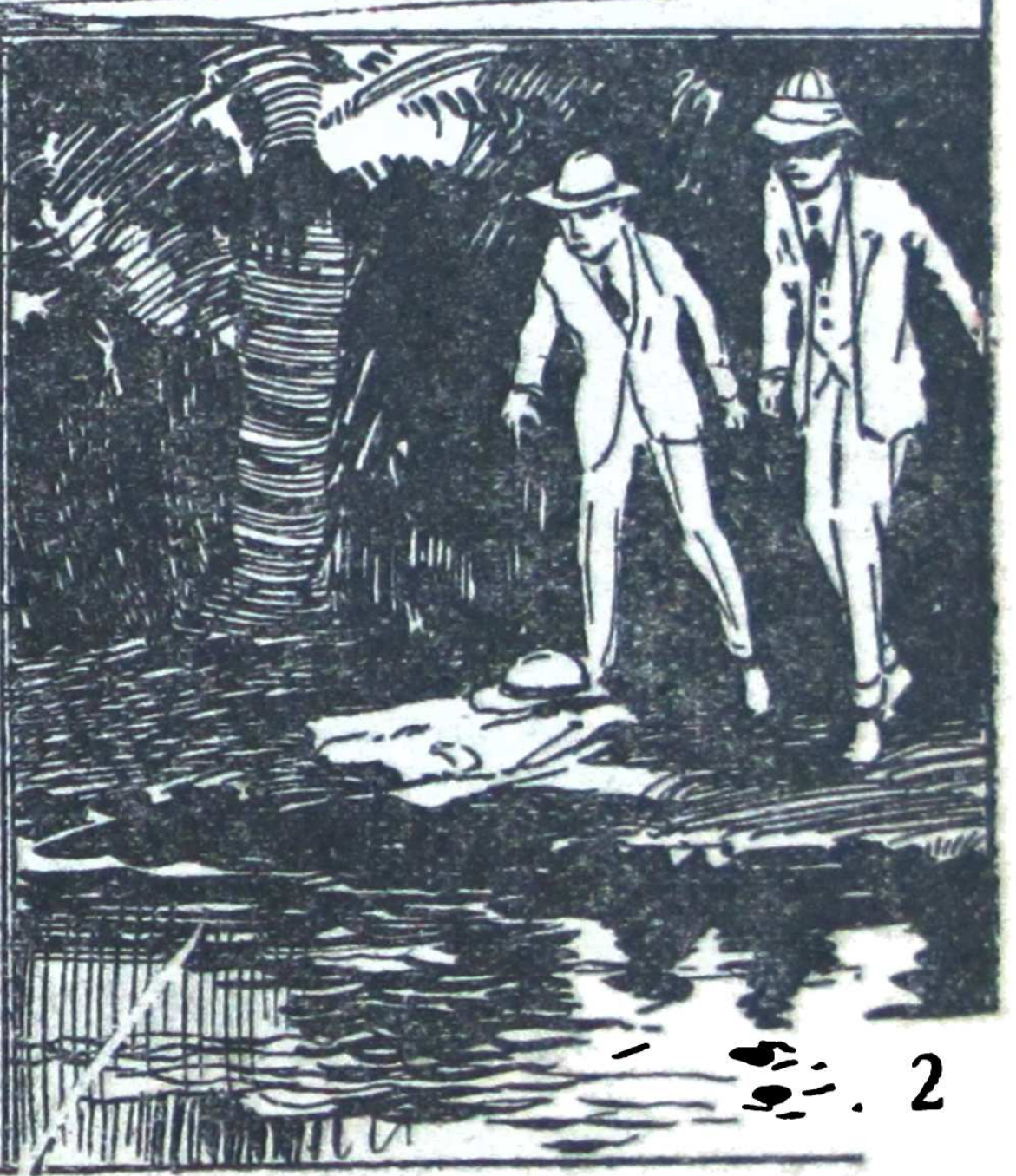
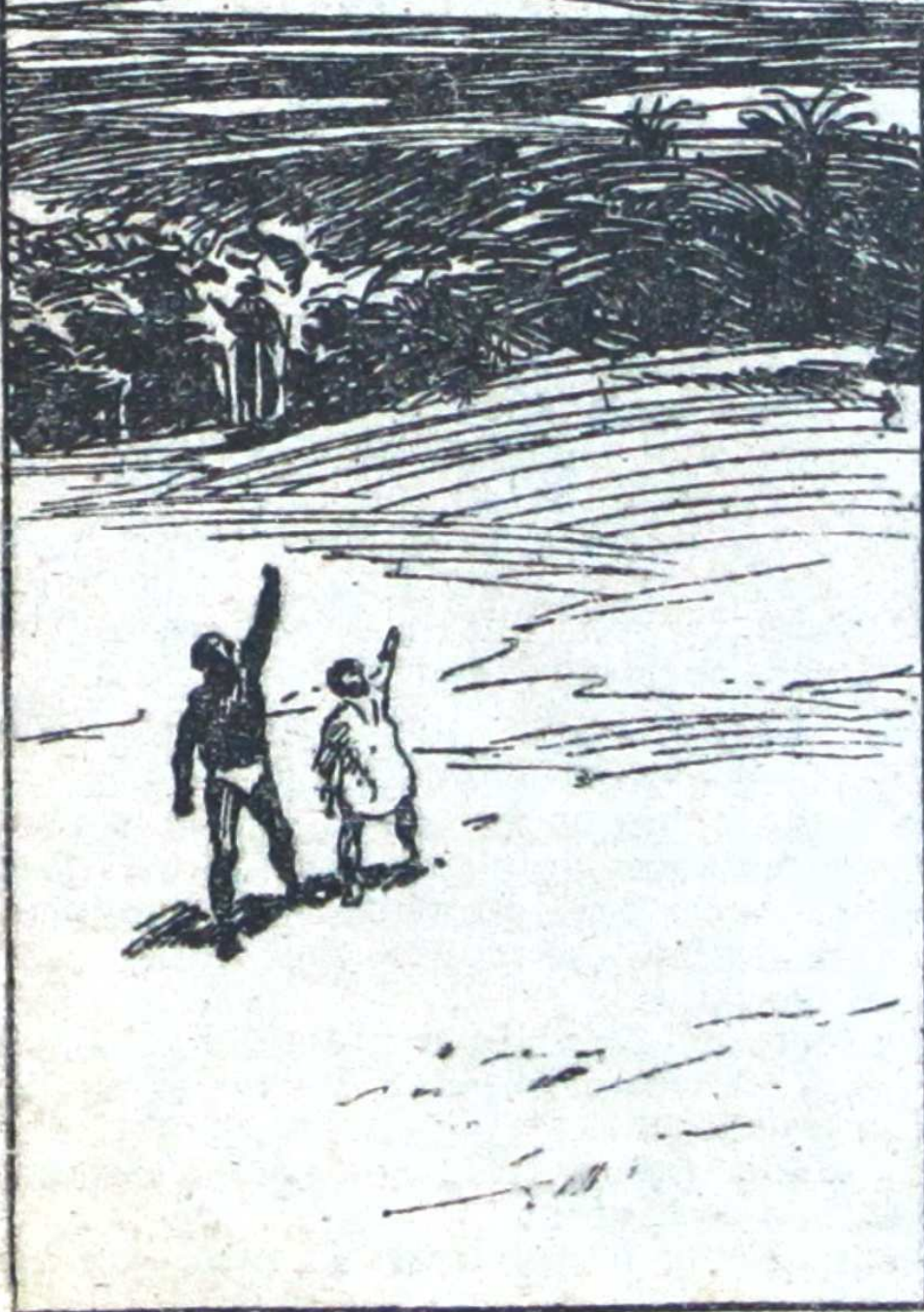
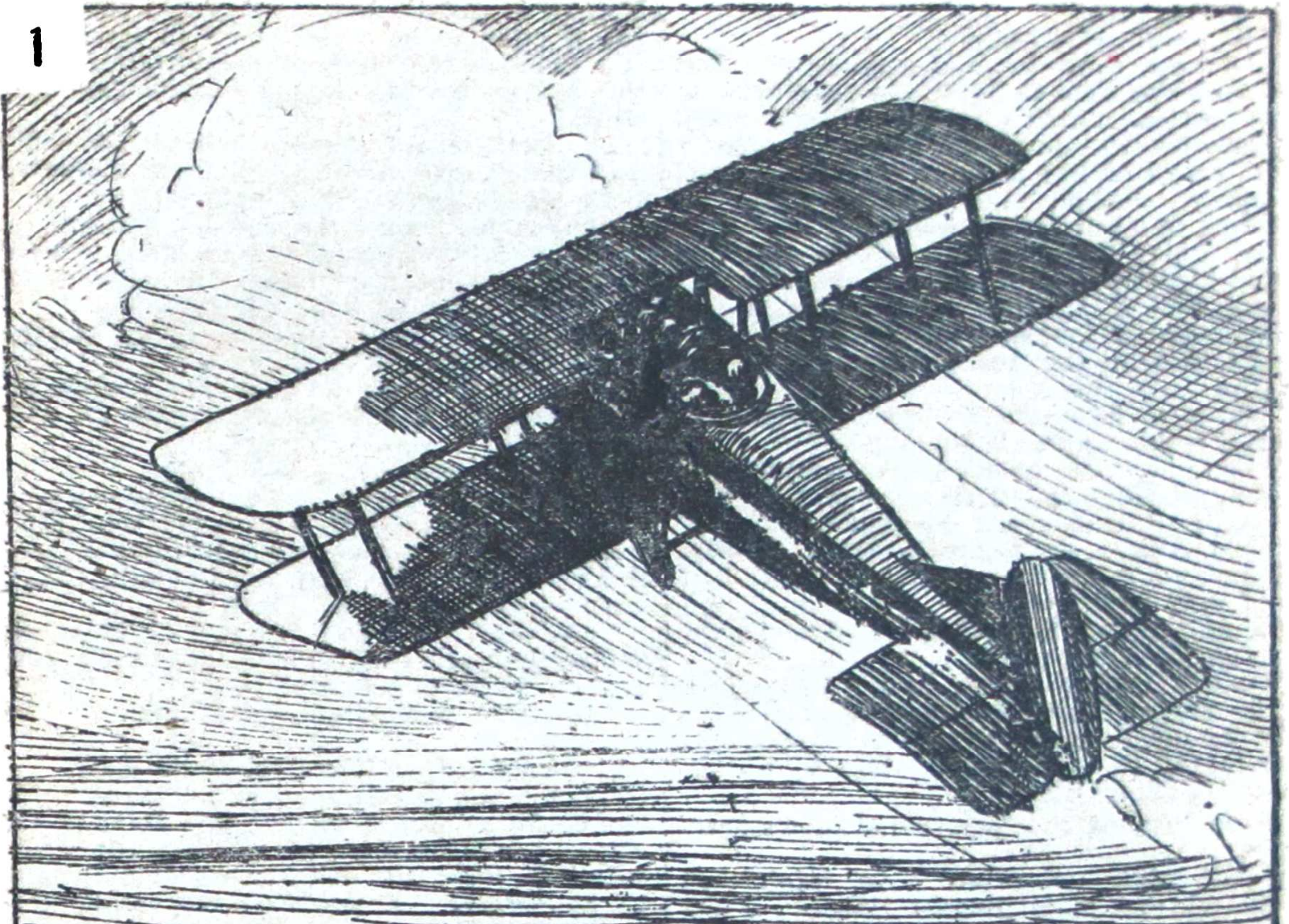
He was interrupted by a most extraordinary commotion. From all sides came the hoarse shouting of men. And dark figures could be seen rushing forward in great numbers.

They were coming from all directions at once, converging upon the party in the centre of the clearing.

"Good heavens!" panted the doctor.

"We're bein' captured, begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie.

1



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1. Handforth and Umlosi were observed to be signalling for the aeroplane to land on the clearing.
2. There was no sign of Handforth whatever. "Look!" said Watson, huskily. "There are his clothes!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Run—run, you asses!"

There was confusion and excitement. But there was no time to fight, and there was no time to run. Entirely surrounded and taken by surprise, the party was captured after a short battle of five minutes' duration. But, curiously enough, the blacks made no attempt to harm their prisoners.

The white section of the party was collected together, and surrounded entirely. Dr. Brett, Fenton, Morrow, and the five juniors were crowded together with Simon Grell.

And through the hostile blacks came two figures.

"Sorry to inconvenience you, gentlemen," said a rough voice. "But we—"

"You infernal scoundrel!" shouted the doctor. "What is the meaning of this—this outrage? How dare you lay hands upon—"

"It's Nixon, sir!" put in Grell fiercely. "I guessed it all along! By heavens, if I could only get at him!"

Captain Nixon faced his prisoners in the deep gloom of the night.

"Didn't I hear Grell's voice?" he asked. "The skunk! The miserable traitor! It's a pity he didn't go to the bottom—where he was meant to go! But for him we should have had things easy!"

Nixon scanned the faces round him searchingly.

"You ain't all here!" he exclaimed. "Where's that black beggar? Where's Handforth? I s'pose he aint come back yet. Got lost in the forest, p'raps! Good thing, too!"

"Did you take Handforth away from this camp?" asked Brett hotly.

"I wanted some information," said Nixon. "But that kid wouldn't say a thing—not a blamed word! An' he escaped, arter nigh on killin' the man what was guarding the door of his hut."

Brett guessed that Umlool was responsible for the disaster to Handforth's guard; but the doctor did not mention this.

"Where's Lee?" went on Nixon. "Where's that Harrimore feller?"

"They didn't come," said Brett angrily. "Mr. Lee and Lord Dogrimore are left on the yacht. Are you satisfied, you rascal? How long is this farce to continue? You had better order your black ruffians off——"

"Not just yet—not just yet, my friend," said the captain easily. "So Lee an' that dook chap didn't come—hey? Well, it's all the better, perhaps. I can deal wi' you better an' easier."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?" asked Fenton sharply. "I suppose you realise that this is a crime for which you can be punished severely——"

"Don't bring out them jokes, kid!" interrupted Nixon. "Nobody can't punish me in this here forest. And you'd best realise—all of you—that you're my prisoners. Savvy? My prisoners!"

"Are you mad?" shouted Dr. Brett.

"No, I ain't mad," said Nixon calmly.

"I'm arter that treasure—that's all. An'

I mean to get it, too. The whole crowd of you is goin' to be marched off to my camp. It's right in the thick o' the forest—far off the beaten tracks. Nobody won't find you there."

Dr. Brett could hardly believe his ears. And the juniors were dismayed and alarmed. They stood together in a little knot.

"Captured!" muttered Tommy Watson. "Housse my scuppers!" said Burton. "This is a fine voyage messmates! It seems that we sha'n't make port for many a week!"

"It's awful!" remarked Jack Grey seriously. "But I can't believe that Nixon is really serious. If he likes, he can keep us here in the forest for weeks—while he goes for the treasure!"

"That's his game!" said Watson.

"And there is no hope of our being rescued, my dear friends," said Nicodemus Trotwood. "Well, well! I suppose we shall survive. And think what a lot we shall have to talk about when we get back to St. Frank's!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Watson. "Think of our position now—that's more important, you duffer! We're in a frightful hole!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "We are, really!"

They listened, as Nixon raised his voice.

"You'll all march as you're ordered," he exclaimed. "An' if any of you attempt to escape, you'll be sorry for it. My men have orders to spear any feller tryin' that dodge. So be careful. I won't be responsible for accidents."

"You confounded rascal!" shouted Dr. Brett.

"Maybe," said Nixon calmly. "But my motto is allus the same. A feller might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. See? An' I don't care how far I go—so long as I get what I'm arter."

Before many minutes had passed the whole party was being marched through the forest. They were all furious—but helpless. They could do nothing, except obey the orders of Captain Nixon.

"Make no attempt to escape, boys," said Brett quietly. "I don't suppose any harm would come to you, but it is not worth the risk. Keep together, and remain calm."

"Oh, that's easy, sir!" said Watson gruffly. "We're as calm as anything!"

Their anger began to subside after a considerable distance had been covered. It was impossible to remain at white heat for long. And they began to realise the full nature of their position.

They were prisoners in a practically barren section of African forest. There were no white people there, and very few blacks. The latter would not be able to help the unfortunate adventurers.

Captain Nixon had played his card—and he had won.

It was not until later that Dr. Brett understood the real nature of the affair. The great clearing was reached, and the larger tent was placed at the disposal of the prisoners.

"You'll be a bit crowded here," said Nixon; "but that can't be helped. I reckon

you'll rub along somehow—durin' the next five or six weeks!"

He went out, and the boys regarded one another in dismay.

"Five or six weeks!" exclaimed Watson, looking pale.

"You need not worry yourselves to any great extent, boys," said Dr. Brett. "Nixon cannot keep us here for that length of time; and, remember, that Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrmore have not been captured. They will come to our rescue, if nobody else does. And you have also forgotten Umlosi. But do not refer to these matters; Nixon must obtain no information."

It was very soon found that the tent was entirely surrounded by blacks. The captain did not mean these prisoners to get away. The boys, tired out, were not long in getting to sleep.

Ever Fenton and Morrow joined the juniors in slumber, and Dr. Brett and Grell were left awake by themselves.

"We seem to be in a bit of a pickle, sir," said Grell. "And I've been worrying about something, too. I hope you won't think that I've had any hand in treachery, that I led the party into danger——"

"What nonsense, Grell," said the doctor. "I am quite satisfied that you are true to us—and there was never any question of you leading us at all. Umlosi and I were in the vanguard, and——"

Dr. Brett was interrupted at this point by the entrance of Nixon. He was smoking a pipe, and looked quite pleased with himself.

"Boys asleep?" he asked pleasantly. "Good! I'd like a word with you, Dr. Brett. There's a few things that need discussing."

"I wish to discuss nothing with you," said Dr. Brett curtly.

"As it happens, you'll have to," exclaimed Nixon. "I s'pose you realise your position, my friend? There's no hope of your gettin' away, and if you want to make your life easy while you're in this fix—well, you'd best be meek and mild. A high-an'-mighty attitude won't help you at all."

Dr. Brett made no comment.

"To begin with," went on Nixon, "what you've got to do is to tell me all your plans with regard to lifting that treasure. Understand? You've got to tell me the exact position of the oasis, and I want to know what that golden locket contains—the locket which tells the position of the treasure."

"Your requirements are modest," said Brett grimly.

"Well, they are," agreed the captain. "I might ask for a lot more—but I'm not doin' it. You've got to tell me everything. If you don't I shall take measures to force you. That's one advantage of being in a part of the world where there ain't no laws—except what I make. If you don't obey 'em—well, you'll be forced."

"These threats have no effect upon me," said Dr. Brett calmly. "I may as well tell you, Nixon, that I have not the slightest intention of obeying any of your orders. You

can do what you like—since it appears that you have the power to do so. But threats will not change my attitude."

"Threats mightn't," said Nixon harshly, "but action will. An' if my threats don't work—then I shall take action. Still, I'll give you until the morning to make up your mind."

He passed out of the tent with a laugh.

"The impudent scoundrel!" said Brett hotly.

"He's worse than that, sir," declared Grell. "I know him—worse luck! And he means those threats of his, too. That man's capable of anything, and it strikes me that we're in a bad hole."

Yet the position was not so serious as the prisoners believed.

For, hovering near the big clearing, were two figures in the night. They belonged to Umlosi and to Edward Oswald Handforth. They knew exactly what had taken place; they had seen all.

But, alone, they were powerless to help.

Handforth had wanted to rush forward in a hopeless attempt at rescue. But Umlosi had more wisdom. He knew that it was impossible to do anything during that night. He and Handforth were free—and it was far better that they should remain free.

Nixon's party was a large one, and it could not be easily beaten. The position, on the whole, was grave. But it was not hopeless.

CHAPTER V.

RESCUE FROM THE AIR!

CECIL DE VALERIE'S eyes gleamed. "She's a spanker," he declared enthusiastically. "By Jove! What a ripping machine!"

He and several other juniors were standing on the promenade deck of the Wanderer, in Agabat harbour. And overhead soared a huge twin-engined biplane. It was, indeed, a splendid machine.

And I ought to know, considering that I was seated in one of the passenger seats at the time. Lord Dorrmore and Nelson Lee were with me—the gov'nor right in front, in the pilot's cockpit.

The aeroplane was one of the finest which could be obtained. Her engines were perfect, and, in the hands of a good pilot, she was as safe as any baby carriage.

She had been in readiness for flight the previous evening, but Nelson Lee had waited until dawn before putting her to her test. He had gone up in her alone at first, and had found everything perfect.

So now, later on in the morning, he was putting the machine through a more rigid test. Her two powerful engines were roaring away merrily, and we were performing evolutions over the bay and over the town, at a height of about three thousand feet.

From the ground the machine looked

glorious, with the sun shining on her polished woodwork and silver-grey wings. Everybody on board the yacht was on deck, watching, and the whole population of the district had come out to look on.

It was the first time an aeroplane had been seen there. They had been talked of, of course, but no other machine had given a display. The natives were inclined to be scared.

After a flight of an hour's duration Nelson Lee brought the machine down as gently as a feather on the wide stretch of solid sand which adorned the foreshore. It provided an excellent landing ground.

The aeroplane, however, was fitted with special wheels and runners—at Nelson Lee's suggestion. The ground on which she would alight was likely to be rough, and an ordinary chassis would not have been suitable.

"Well, Dorrie, I think she'll do—eh?" smiled Nelson Lee, as he climbed out of the pilot's seat.

"By gad, rather!" said his lordship. "I've been in a few aeroplanes, but I think this machine beats the lot. What do you say, Nipper?"

"She's glorious," I replied enthusiastically: "and all I want is to get at the helm! I'd love to pilot her, sir."

"Perhaps you'll have the chance before long," said the gov'nor.

"Are you going to take anybody up to-day—Sir Crawford, or the girls, or some of the fellows?" I asked. "They're dying for a flight."

"Then I'm afraid we must be callous, and let them die," said Nelson Lee. "Business before pleasure, Nipper. It is our duty to set off at the earliest possible moment for Zambi—and I intend to make the flight to-day. The wind is favourable, and there is no prospect of bad weather. The passenger flights can wait over until we have more time at our disposal."

The gov'nor was quite right, of course; but the party on the yacht was rather disappointed.

There's no need for me to go into any details regarding the start. After everything was prepared—after the petrol and oil tanks were filled—both the gov'nor and I went over the machine in detail, and found her perfect.

And the start was made without further delay.

We were given a hearty send-off, and before setting out across country Nelson Lee mounted to a height of eight thousand feet over the bay. Then, after circling once or twice round the yacht, we set off inland.

The modern aeroplane simply annihilates distance, especially in a country of that kind, which is practically roadless and railwayless. In the ordinary course a journey which would occupy a day could be accomplished in a few minutes by aeroplane.

We travelled by compass, for it was impossible to distinguish any track in the forest. Our course was straight ahead until we hit the desert—and then it would not take us long to locate the little village from which

the desert caravan had planned to commence its journey.

"This is the way to travel in Africa!" I shouted to Dorrie. "Better than progressing at ten miles a way through the bush."

"It's quicker, anyway," said Dorrie. "But I reckon the other's the most certain, young 'un. What's going to happen if we're compelled to descend on this lot?"

He pointed below at the masses of tropical forest.

"Well, it wouldn't do us any good if we hit those trees," I replied. "But we're high up, Dorrie, and even if the engines failed we could make a safe landing somewhere. I can see at least three decent clearings now—and we could easily plane down to one of them."

"Yes, I suppose we could," agreed his lordship. "But then we might not be able to get up again—"

"You're a cheerful sort, I must say!" I broke in. "There's not much chance of this machine petering out, Dorrie. I expect we shall find the other members of the party half-way across the desert. They'll feel a bit sick when we fly over them, won't they?"

"Still, it's just as well they've gone," said Dorrie. "It wouldn't have been wise to trust to the aeroplane alone. If they get in a hole we can help them; and if we get in a hole they can help us. Safety first, my sons."

"That was the gov'nor's idea," I agreed. "It's my belief that we shall do the trip without a hitch; but you can't be too sure."

Flying over the forest was an experience which I had not hitherto enjoyed. It was an entire novelty, and I revelled in it. It was vastly different to flying over the green fields and meadows of old England.

The stately nature of the country was grand, and we forgot to consider the possibility of danger. It did not seem that anything could go wrong as we flew swiftly and steadily over the vast forest.

And at last we came within sight of the desert.

In the distance ahead trees faded away into a kind of haze, and after that there was nothing but a dull, drab waste, monotonous to the eye. It was the desert which we were destined to fly.

"Do we land at the village before starting across—before going on to Zambi?" I asked.

"I don't think so," said Dorrie. "I'll ask Lee."

There was a telephone to the pilot—for ordinary speech was impossible, owing to the roar of the engines. Dorrimore spoke for a few moments, and then turned to me and shook his head.

"No, we sha'n't land," he said. "We're goin' to make a non-stop flight to Zambi."

It only seemed that a minute or two had passed before we had left the bulk of the forest behind us. The trees which grew below were now stunted and sparse. And the sand of the desert lay everywhere.

Nelson Lee was looking at the ground closely as we flew, and we had now dropped

to about four thousand feet. The village for which we were searching was not difficult to find.

We all saw it at about the same moment—mainly owing to the fact that a considerable number of running figures attracted our attention. And Nelson Lee searched the ground with his binoculars.

Then, to my surprise, he switched off both the engines, and we glided down gently and easily.

"What's wrong, sir?" I shouted above the whistle of the air through the propellers. "I thought we weren't going to land? I suppose you're going to give the natives a little display of acrobatics?"

"My thoughts are not so frivolous, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "But you have apparently failed to notice something which I saw at once. Don't you see those camels down yonder—to the left of the village?"

"What about them, sir?" I asked, as I looked.

"Why are they there?"

"I suppose somebody wants to use them," observed Dorrie.

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "But I have heard of no other caravan that is crossing the desert to Zambi just at present."

"You mean that—"

"My dear Nipper, I mean that those camels are the ones that Umlosi arranged for. Their presence here clearly proves that Dr. Brett's party has not traversed the forest yet."

"By gad!" said Dorrimore. "That's queer. They ought to have been here yesterday mornin' at the latest—even allowin' for delays."

"That's what I figure," agreed Nelson Lee. "It will be very strange if the party has not set off across the desert; it will prove that something unforeseen has occurred during the early stage of the trip. And it will be just as well for us to make a landing, in order to make sure."

"Well, don't bust up the bally old machine," said Dorrie.

We were fairly close to the ground by this time, and Nelson Lee switched on the engines again, and we roared along over the village. It was only a tiny place, solely inhabited by blacks. And the manner in which they rushed about clearly told of their fright and consternation.

Nelson Lee found a good landing ground a little distance from the settlement. The surface was smooth, although not as hard as it might have been. Still, we landed in perfect safety.

And then the gov'nor climbed out, and went away on foot to seek information. Dorrie and I were left with the aeroplane. A full hour elapsed before Nelson Lee returned.

"You've been time enough, sir," I remarked.

"If you had seen the condition of the natives you would compliment me upon my swift return," said Nelson Lee grimly. "They were scared out of their wits, Nipper, and it was a long while before I could get a word

out of them. Umlosi's Arabs and camels are here—waiting."

"And what about the party?" I asked. "Brett and Tommy Watson and Montie—"

"Nothing has been seen of them, and not a word has been heard," said Nelson Lee rather grimly. "The party should have been here two days ago, but there has been no sign. It looks rather serious."

"Serious?" echoed Dorrie.

"Anything might have delayed them," I put in. "Perhaps one of the chaps has been taken ill—"

"I think not, my lad," put in Nelson Lee. "It is far more likely that Brett has had trouble with Captain Nixon."

"Ye gods!" said Dorrie, startled. "You don't think that, do you?"

"I do," replied Lee. "Nixon was desperate, don't forget, and I feared that he would act in some way or other. But Brett was confident, and I was foolish, perhaps, in listening to him. We cannot continue our journey to Zambi under the circumstances."

"Then what shall we do, old man?" asked Dorrie.

"Well, to begin with, we'll fly back over the forest—as low as we can fly in safety," said Nelson Lee. "It ought to be a fairly easy task to locate the party—for it is certain that they will see us before we see them—and they will signal. So watch the ground very carefully. If we have no success we must return to the yacht, and traverse the forest on foot."

"That sounds lively," I remarked.

We climbed into our places again, and Nelson Lee started up the engines, and brought the aeroplane round head to the wind. She required a long run, owing to the soft ground, but she got off in safety.

And this time, instead of flying at a height of between four and ten thousand feet, we soared over the forest barely five hundred feet from the tree-tops. We seemed to be perilously near, in fact.

We mounted higher after a while, in order to obtain a wider vision. And we searched in this manner for fully two hours, going backwards and forwards in every direction. The engines never faltered.

And just when we were beginning to regard our quest as hopeless, we came within sight of a fairly large clearing. Right in the centre of it two figures were standing; and they were both waving wildly.

I stood up in my seat, and grabbed my binoculars.

"It's Umlosi!" I yelled. "I don't know who the other chap is—but one of the Remove chaps, I'll swear. They're alone, too."

"It looks as if they've got separated from the rest of the party—lost or somethin'," said Dorrimore. "Perhaps that accounts for the delay. But do you think we can land there, Nipper?"

"Looks a bit risky," I said keenly.

We were now circling round and round the clearing, quite low. And it was now possible to see that the junior was Handforth. He appeared to be weazing the minimum amount

of attire—his shirt being the chief article of apparel.

Both he and Umlosi were gesticulating and shouting—although, naturally, we couldn't hear a word that was said. Perhaps they thought that we didn't mean to land. But Lee was only looking for a suitable spot.

Handforth pointed continuously to the ground. In his opinion, evidently, the surface was good enough for a landing. And Nelson Lee decided to risk it. He shut off his engines, and we glided steadily to the earth.

Bump! Bump!

We hit the ground rather forcibly, ran forward, and then came to rest. But no damage was done.

Nelson Lee again switched off the engines—for he had been obliged to start them again in order to effect the landing—and the great propellers came to rest.

Umlosi and Handforth ran up, shouting with excitement and delight.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEFEAT OF CAPTAIN NIXON!

"**T**HOU art truly a worker of wonders, Umtagati," exclaimed Umlosi, his eyes sparkling. "It is well that thou should appear at this moment. And thou, too, N'Kose. I greet thee both!"

"My only hat!" shouted Handforth, dancing with excitement. "This is stunning, Mr. Lee! What a fine thing you spotted us!"

"It was easy enough to spot you—wearing nothing but a torn shirt," I said, grinning. "I believe in being cool, Handy, but you can carry a thing too far——"

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth warmly. "I've been like this for days! I was collared when I was undressed, and I haven't got my clobber back yet! I've been bitten by thousands of rotten insects!"

Nelson Lee smiled as he climbed to the ground.

"Tell me what has happened," he said. "Where are the others, Umlosi?"

"I had grave news for thee, O my master," replied Umlosi. "There has been bad happenings. The white man, thine enemy, has collected the scum of the forests about him—doubtless paying them with fire-water or gold; and this rabble has attacked the camp."

"Has anybody been killed?" asked Lee sharply.

"Nay, Umtagati," said Umlosi. "Mayhap a scratch or two, but no killing."

"That is good news, at all events," said the gov'nor. "Well, go on."

"The rotters sprang on the camp while we were away, sir," declared Handforth indignantly. "You see, I was collared first, and Umlosi tracked me, and there was a regular mix-up——"

"There will be another mix-up here, unless you tell me the story in a straightforward manner," said Lee. "I want to know everything."

After a while, Umlosi and Handforth, between them, managed to give us a full account of what had occurred. We were concerned, of course, but the position did not strike me as being very bad.

"We ought to be able to deal with that rotten crowd, sir," I remarked. "Nobody seems to be hurt, and if we can rescue them they can laugh at the whole adventure afterwards."

"But this 'rotten crowd,' as you call it, numbers several hundreds, Nipper," Lee reminded me. "We are a mere handful. It is not so easy to tackle such a formidable force. They may be rough and untrained, but they have the advantage of numbers. We must act with great care."

"I reckon we can do the trick easily," said Lord Dorrimore. "At all events, this aeroplane will——"

"The aeroplane?" I asked, staring.

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "Don't you remember the consternation which reigned in that village near the desert? What's goin' to happen when we fly low over the camp, where our pals are held prisoners? The blacks will scatter everywhere, an' there won't be a punch left in 'em."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You are right, Dorrie," he said grimly. "But it will be all the better if we can land, for we have a machine-gun mounted on the machine. And in the event of desperate necessity, we can make use of it."

"The ground's all right, sir," said Handforth. "It's a bigger clearing than this; and I reckon you ought to land easily. But do you think you'll be able to rise from this place? The trees ain't far off."

Nelson Lee inspected the ground.

"We might just manage it—with luck," he said at length.

"Will it be better if Nipper an' I get out?" suggested Dorrie.

"No, it won't!" I said warmly.

"I was thinking of taking Umlosi and Handforth on board," smiled Nelson Lee. "We have the wind in our favour, and an abundance of engine-power, which is the most important factor of all. We shall bump a bit, but we'll do it."

We did.

After a surprisingly short run the huge aeroplane soared off the ground, and charged straight at the trees at the edge of the clearing. But she rose well, and was not in danger even for a moment.

Handforth was wildly excited; he had not hoped for an adventure like this, and he considered that his hardships were being well compensated for. Umlosi was not so keen; he felt far safer on the ground.

"Wau!" he exclaimed. "I like not this monster which flies even as the bird, N'Kose. It fills me with fear, and that is a strange sensation, indeed. Thou art smiling, my father; but I tremble."

"That's because of the vibration," chuckled Dorrie.

However, the journey was not a long one. The position of Captain Nixon's encamp-

ment was located easily—once we had risen to two thousand feet. We could see the big clearing with ease; and we could see the figures of scores of blacks. All were gazing skywards. And Nixon was running up and down—apparently trying to calm them.

"They'll be more scared than that soon," I said grimly. "You wait till we shoot over their heads, only twenty feet from the ground, Handy! The gov'nor's going to give a display of flying that'll make your hair stand on end."

"Good!" said Handiorth heartily.

Quite abruptly Nelson Lee shut off the engines, and we glided down and down. It would be more effective to recommence the shattering roar when we were quite close to the ground.

The sound of an aeroplane engine picking up abruptly after a long glide has been accomplished, and when the machine is near the ground, is startling enough to ears familiar with the sound. What effect it would have on these blacks was something of a problem—but we could guess.

At last we were only fifty feet above the heads of the crowd—and already they were scattering. Then Nelson Lee started up the engines abruptly. They spluttered for a second or two, then burst forth into the full roar of their powerful song.

The effect was electrical.

The blacks ran wildly in all directions—anywhere to escape. Captain Nixon was hurled to the ground, and he had great difficulty in preventing himself being trampled upon.

Within two minutes the clearing was deserted. Not a single black was to be seen; they had all fled into the forest. But some other figures were visible which made us feel content.

Dr. Brett and Fenton and all the rest of them were outside their tent—waving and cheering wildly. Nobody had expected the adventure to end in such a really dramatic manner.

And it wasn't ended even now, we were to find.

Nelson Lee decided that it would be safe to land; but he took the precaution to do so in that portion of the clearing which was occupied by our friends. The machine had not come to a standstill before they were swarming round us.

"Hurrah!" yelled the juniors.

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

"Great Scott!" shouted Watson. "Handiorth's in there!"

"Begad!"

"And old Umlosi, too!"

The shouts were numerous, and when we climbed down to the ground we were surrounded and rendered breathless by the thumps and Handshakes. But Nelson Lee did not consider that all the peril was past.

"We must not be too confident," he exclaimed. "These blacks are still surrounding this clearing, and now that the aeroplane has landed, and is silent, they will prob-

ably regain their courage. We must be on the alert."

Dr. Brett nodded.

"It will be wise, of course," he said; "but I think we are safe now, Lee."

Exchanging yarns did not take long. In a very short time everybody knew what everybody else had been doing.

"Our object now must be to get to the desert as soon as possible," said Nelson Lee. "You must lead your party as before, Brett, while Nipper and Dorrimore and I continue our flight by aeroplane."

"I think we can find our way——"

Crack! Crack!

Several rifle-shots rang out, and we heard one or two shrill whistles as the bullets flew harmlessly over our heads.

Nelson Lee turned sharply.

"Down, boys!" he ordered. "Seek what cover you can. Nixon means to press an attack even now, it seems. He is getting his men in hand; and that means that we shall have some more trouble. I feared it."

Umlosi uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"Fear nothing, O Umtagati!" he said. "What firing is this? Thinkest thou that these pigs can use the fire-sticks? Wau! It would be impossible for them to hit us were we as large as mountains!"

"I expect the firing will be pretty wild," said the gov'nor. "Very few of these blacks ever learn to handle a rifle properly. But there are large numbers of them—and stray bullets are frequently fatal!"

"But we can hit back, old man," said Dorrie grimly. "We've got a few revolvers and rifles amongst us—an' it happens that we can shoot straight. If these brutes ask for trouble they can't blame us if they find it!"

And the party prepared for action.

Meanwhile, Captain Nixon was in a fine state of excitement. By superhuman effort he had succeeded in getting the greater number of his men into something like control. The promise of a large reward had much to do with it, and the silence of the aeroplane engines was also a factor.

"This is our chance, Starkey," declared Nixon tensely. "This blamed aeroplane took us by surprise—we wasn't lookin' for anything o' that sort. But we're hundreds agin a handful. We've only got to make a swift attack, and we shall have the whole crowd. We'll fire, too; it don't matter to us if we kill a few of 'em——"

"What, them boys?" asked Starkey, startled.

"Hang the boys——"

"I don't hold with that, old man," said Starkey, shaking his head. "I didn't agree to do no killin', nor to be mixed up in any. I draw the line at that, cap'n. Jake Starkey ain't so bad as that!"

"Shut your lip!" snapped Nixon. "Don't forget that we're done if we lose now. And we've got everything to gain, too. A swift attack will beat 'em—and we can get hold of that aeroplane!"

"Supposin' we do?" asked Starkey. "We can't fly it."

"Mebbe not; but it's worth a good many hundreds," said Nixon. "And I ain't so sure that we can't fly it, neither. If we take Lee a prisoner we can make him do what we want. Anyhow, it's worth makin' a big attack."

And shortly after that Nixon passed the order round. The snipers in the trees were collected, and a force of several hundreds was got ready to make a desperate charge. The position looked rather grim.

Nixon decided that a frontal attack would be more effective—one solid onslaught, which would overpower all resistance immediately. If some of the blacks were killed—well, it wouldn't matter much.

Nixon would take care that he and Starkey remained in the background—in safety. The captain believed in following the noteworthy example of the famous Duke of Plazatoro, who "led his regiment from behind; he found it less exciting."

The attack was not long in coming.

With fiendish yells the blacks sprang from their cover in hordes. They rushed forward wildly, firing what rifles they had in the most erratic manner. They met with a return fire; but all the shots were aimed low, according to Nelson Lee's instructions. He did not want more bloodshed than was necessary.

There was a machine-gun fitted in the aeroplane; but Lee hesitated to use it. Its effect would be deadly, and the detective had no wish to cause wholesale slaughter. He decided to try another ruse first.

As the attackers came on it seemed as though they would completely overwhelm the party, which was collected round the aeroplane. But Lee was ready—in the pilot's seat of the machine.

He started the engines with a roar, opened the throttle until the roar became deafening, and the biplane moved swiftly forward.

That charging monster struck fresh terror into the hearts of the blacks—and little wonder! Trained soldiers would have scattered before such an onrush. For the whirling screws were a menace of themselves.

For a moment the crowd of savages wavered. Then they broke ranks, and scattered with fearful cries into the forest. And this time they went right out of the vicinity. They had had enough!

Captain Nixon would certainly never see his "army" again. It had gone for good this time.

And Nixon and Starkey, finding themselves alone, took to the bush also. They fled in a panic, and there was no further prospect for them. Nixon's plot had failed miserably.

His plan had been frustrated, and flight was the only course.

CHAPTER VII.

INTO THE ARID DESERT.

EVENING came, and it saw a vast difference in the whole situation.

We had recovered our spirits completely. Everything that was to be

told had been told, and the whole party was cheerful. A scouting expedition, undertaken by Umlosi and several of our black "boys," had revealed the fact that there were no hostile savages anywhere near.

And, judging from the manner in which they had fled, there was very little chance of them renewing the attack.

But it would have been a mistake for us to conclude that Captain Nixon would be content to give up all hope. He was not the kind of man to acknowledge defeat so easily. In a way, he was now more dangerous than ever.

But he could do nothing at the moment, and it was highly probable that he would never have another chance to strike any blow. However, it was as well for us to be on the alert.

We were a merry party that night, round the camp fires. We had passed through some exciting adventures without mishap, and everybody was pleased. Now that it was all over, the juniors were rather glad that it had happened. For they would have something really exciting to talk about when they got back.

And the next day Dr. Brett and Umlosi led their expedition once more. Shortly after they had departed, Dorrie and I and Nelson Lee took our seats in the aeroplane and flew to the edge of the desert.

And there we waited for the arrival of the main party.

They turned up just at about the time we expected, and the caravan was not long in getting under way. It consisted of Dr. Brett and his party and a dozen Arabs. They were villainous-looking fellows, but honest enough probably. And there were about twenty camels.

Here, of course, the party dismissed the black carriers—for their loads were now taken by the camels.

Umlosi eyed the desert somewhat uncertainly when the preparations for departure were nearly completed. The sun was shining down in a pitiless blaze, and the sand radiated the heat in an awful manner.

"Wau! I like it not, N'Kose, my father," he exclaimed, in his rumbling voice. "These vast sands are not new to me, since I have journeyed in like regions before. But I am ill at ease, N'Kose. I prefer the forests and the rivers in far-off Kutaland. And I have been seeing strange visions——"

"What, more of them?" asked Dorrie mildly.

"Thou art pleased to laugh at me, my father," went on Umlosi. "Thou speakest lightly. Yet I am troubled. The mists have been swimming before my eyes, and I have seen things which cause me unrest. Even as Umtagati has told us, there is a green spot in the yellow desert—far, far off. Ere we reach that we shall spend a while in a fair land of waving palms. But on that green spot in the desert there will be perils to face——"

"Draw it mild, you pessimistic bounder," I exclaimed.

"Thou are young, O Manzie of the shining eye," said Umlosi. "Thou art light-hearted. Yet I have seen the sands whirl up in clouds—I have seen this in my visions. There will be choking masses, and the air will be as fire."

"That sounds like a sandstorm," observed Dorrie. "I've always noticed that Umlosi is amazin'ly cheerful on these occasions."

"My visions are my visions, my father," said Umlosi. "Thou prefer to be light-tongued; but what is destined to come to pass will pass. I have spoken."

"And that's that," I said. "Well, it seems that we shall survive the sandstorm—or, rather, you chaps will—or Umlosi would have seen still forms lying about, and all the rest of it."

The party did not waste much time in getting off.

Handforth and the other juniors had some trouble with the camels—but that was because of inexperience. Camels are very queer merchants to deal with. A riding camel looks a very docile creature. I suppose all camels look that way, more or less. But you can't go by looks.

Camels, taken as a whole, are about the most obstinate beggars in existence. The Saharan camel is steered, as a rule, with a guiding rein passed through a ring in its right nostril.

And before a fellow mounts the angular beast he has to make him squat down on its haunches. Then the camel is seized by the nostril, and at the same time the rider has to turn the brute's head towards the near side of the saddle. A grab is made at the rein in the right hand, and it is placed on the front of the saddle. After that the rider throws his right leg over, and, as the camel rises, it is necessary to cross your feet on his neck. The whole thing is quite a trying performance.

Handforth thought it was easy, and as a result he hit the ground with more force than comfort. For a camel, when he gets to his feet, performs several weird movements. He jerks his body violently forward, and then backwards. Unless a fellow is used to it he can't possibly keep his seat.

However, everybody got off at last. The trip into the arid desert commenced. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and I certainly had the best of it, for we performed the difficult journey in the easiest possible manner.

The caravan, however, was slow in progress. The sun was fierce, but otherwise the day was glorious. Soon after starting all sign of the forest was lost sight of, and the desert stretched away on every hand.

"Makes a fellow feel small, doesn't it?" asked Watson, in rather an awed voice. "Just fancy—this desert stretches for thousands of miles, and there must be some parts of it that have never been explored."

"Yes, it makes you think," said Jack Grey. "I've never been in a desert before, and it sort of scares a fellow."

"Oh, rot!" said Handforth. "There's nothing to be scared about."

"The vastness of it all, I mean," said Grey.

"Well, it is a bit vast," admitted Handforth.

They looked across at the horizon. The sands of the desert stretched right away as far as the eye could reach. The limitless expanses, ochre and violet in hue, were almost terrifying. The sun made the cloudless sky shimmer with golden light.

There was a curious fascination in the great wastes of sand. The silence could almost be felt. It was a silence which, once experienced, is always remembered. Anybody lost in the desert for even a short period would probably become insane. To live in that dreadful silence was almost impossible.

By the end of the day quite good progress had been made. But everybody was feeling worn out. The thermometer must have registered something like 115 degrees—in the shade!

The night was cool, however, and everybody was refreshed when the journey was restarted in the morning. The big sunshades which were carried afforded some relief from the glaring sun, but the heat was stifling, nevertheless.

It was even necessary at times for the travellers to muffle their mouths, for the heat waves rising from the scorching sands were suffocating.

But there was a plentiful supply of water, and everybody was able to quench their thirsts to their hearts' content—and that was a big consideration. Thirst in the desert is the most terrible thing on earth.

The camels were quite good ones, and they travelled for ten hours at a stretch, practically without halting. And food was taken whilst riding. This was not easy, for camels have a peculiar swaying, slouching walk.

But nothing of any particular interest occurred during that trip in the desert. The track was a well-known one, and there was not much prospect of the party getting lost. The oasis of Zambé was fairly well populated, and fruit and other things were exported to the coast fairly regularly.

The party sighted the oasis towards the evening, and their pleasure was considerable. Nelson Lee and Dorrie and I had arrived long since, of course, and we were on the look-out for the caravan, and we had made full preparations for their arrival.

Zambé was quite a large oasis in its way. It was a big, natural depression in the desert, and there were some salt marshes and lakes dotted about. The population, numbering two or three thousand, consisted mostly of Arabs.

Olive trees and date palms grew in profusion on the oasis, and there were a good many fruit trees of other varieties—such as oranges and pomegranates.

Zambé was not short of water. There were eighty or ninety fresh-water wells, some of them being enclosed in glorious gardens, abundant with tropical growths. It was quite a pleasure to enter the cultivated area after

passing a few days in the drab barrenness of the desert.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "I shouldn't like to live here for good! How the dickens do these people get on when they want any newspapers?"

"You ass! They don't get any," grinned Watson.

"And think how awful it must be if you want to get to the seaside!" went on Handy.

"Why, I'd rather live on an island in the Pacific! A fellow would get news of the outer world there!"

"These people have never been accustomed to anything else," said Dr. Brett. "No doubt they are content enough with their lot. But by the time we get back to the Wanderer I expect we shall have had quite enough of deserts."

"Rather, sir," said Handforth.

We met our friends on the edge of the oasis, and accompanied them to the encampment which Nelson Lee had prepared. And after the camels had been unloaded, and a thousand other details attended to, darkness fell.

"I think we've shaken Captain Nixon off for good—eh?" asked Dr. Brett, with a smile. "It seems weeks since we were prisoners in that rascal's hands. What a fortunate thing Sir Crawford brought that aeroplane, Lee!"

"Yes," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "But I have been thinking about Nixon. Before you commenced the desert crossing I learned that an Arab caravan is due to arrive here within a day or two—starting from a point twenty or thirty miles from the village we left."

"What about it, sir?" asked Fenton.

"Well, there is just a chance that Nixon and Starkey will join that caravan," said Lee. "We must be on the look-out, in any case. Those men are desperate, and they mean to gain success if it is possible. It will do no harm if we remain strictly on our guard."

"Oh, they won't dare to come here, sir," said Handforth.

"You have had one unpleasant experience of Nixon, my boy, and I don't think you require another," exclaimed Lee. "And you must not forget that we have to get back. Perhaps Nixon is waiting to spring later on—after we have secured the treasure. There is no telling."

"And what is the programme?" asked Brett.

"Well, the oasis of El Safra is an empty one," said Nelson Lee. "That is to say,

there is no water there fit to drink. Consequently, the oasis is never visited by the wandering tribes who frequent these deserts. The place is quite isolated, with no track leading to it."

"Then how are we going to get there, sir?" asked Grey.

"By compass, mainly," said the gov'nor. "Perhaps it will be as well if you all remain behind——"

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting. "Remain behind, sir?"

"Exactly."

"But—but——"

"It is not necessary for us all to go," said Nelson Lee. "If the aeroplane undertakes the trip, it will be sufficient, I imagine. However, we can arrange these matters afterwards. We shall take a few days' rest here, in any case."

Lord Dorrimore looked pleased.

"That's good hearin', anyhow," he said. "It's frightfully wearyin', travellin' across the desert!"

"In an aeroplane?" chuckled Brett.

"By gad! Rather!" said Dorrie. "Think of the worry we had—wonderin' if we were comin' down, to be lost in the bally sand! It wasn't any joke, I can tell you. Besides, Umlosi's been seein' visions. We ain't out of the wood yet, by any means."

Umlosi revealed all his white teeth.

"Thou art pleased to jest, N'Kose," he said. "But my dreams are seldom wrong. I have seen storms of sand, and I fear that there will be vast troubles before the rich treasure is secured."

"But do you see any blood?" asked Dorrie.

"I see no blood," replied Umlosi. "Perils will come, and perils will be overcome. There will be fighting, and there will be many excitements. But there will be no death."

"That's a comfort, anyway," said his lordship. "You've bucked me up wonderfully, old man. By the way, I suppose you haven't been seein' any snow, for a change? We ain't like to have a frost to-morrow? We could do with one, by gad!"

Umlosi took no notice of Dorrie's bantering. And when the party broke up we all went to sleep peacefully and happily.

But, if we had only known it, Umlosi's visions were not far from the mark. Before we secured the treasure of El Safra we were destined to pass through many more thrilling adventures and perils.

And Captain John Nixon was not entirely unconnected with them!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK there will be a wonderful description of how Nelson Lee discovered the Treasure. The title of the Story will be:

"THE TREASURE OF EL SAFRA!"

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

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GRIPPING NEW SERIAL.

THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE;

OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION.

A Tale of the Adventures of an English Lad and a Young American in the Wild Heart of Africa in Quest of a Mysterious Valley.

By **ALFRED ARMITAGE.**

Author of "*Red Rose and White*," "*Cavalier and Roundhead*," etc., etc.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

ALAN CARNE, a young Britisher captured by the Germans in East Africa, is cast out at the end of the war, to wander in the jungle. He is joined by a Hottentot servant named

JAN SWART. After a few days of hardship they fall in with

DICK SELBY and his native servants. Alan and Dick become great pals. They witness the death of an old man named John Hammond, who tells them a wonderful story of a house in the jungle, where an English girl is kept captive. The chums set out to find this mysterious house situated in the Hidden Valley. They meet with a series of adventures, including attacks from the Bajangas, led by Tib Mohammed, a noted slave dealer. After crossing a lofty range of mountains, they suddenly come upon the Hidden Valley, where they meet Lorna Ferguson, the girl captive. She is living with her father, who is seriously ill, and a man named Taverner, who is trying to make the girl marry him against her will. Dick, who is familiar with drugs, examines the girl's father and suspects foul play. Lorna shows Dick and Alan the subterranean passage, which she explains is their sole means of escape in case of attack. Dick discovers Taverner's villainy. The poisoner is overpowered and imprisoned.

(Now read on.)

A Week of Suspense and Comfort—The Sound in the Night—Ralph Taverner's Escape—Alan Goes in Pursuit, and Meets the Girl—Lorna's Startling News—A Gloomy Prospect—A Visit to Mr. Ferguson's Room—A Sudden Recognition—Alan Tells the Story of the Past—A Surprise for Dick and the Girl—Lorna's Discovery.

THERE could be no doubt as to the use that had been made of the pot of vegetable poison that Dick Selby had discovered, for in the course of twenty-four hours, now that it was not in Ralph's Taverner's power to do him any further harm, there was a marked change for

the better in Robert Ferguson's condition. He ate more food, and began to show an interest in things. He spoke occasionally to the two lads, in regard to whom he was somewhat curious; and once or twice he inquired for Ralph Taverner, and was told that he was at the far end of the valley, helping to guard the pass.

He improved day by day, his strength gradually increasing, and by the end of the week the poison had been eradicated from his system. But he was far from well as yet. He was still very weak, and his memory was slightly impaired. He had forgotten what the state of affairs was when he was taken ill, and it was thought best not to tell him now.

Meanwhile, the prisoner in the cellar beneath the dwelling had been secretly fed by Dick and Alan, who had paid no heed to his threatening and violent language when, in order that he might eat and drink, they had removed the handkerchief with which he was gagged. And no grave news, no warning of danger, had been received from Chanka and the Somalis, who had been constantly on the alert, and had sent out scouts.

No news was not exactly good news in this instance, however. There was every reason to believe that Tib Mohammed was somewhere in the neighbourhood with his Arabs and the Bajangas, and that they were searching for the hidden cleft between the hills. Should their efforts fail they would ultimately withdraw, for they knew that they could not force the water-passage from the Bana River; but if they should discover the secret entrance—and it was to be feared that they would—they might fight their way through it, and raid the valley with disastrous results.

Two or three more days passed, fraught with increasing suspense, while Mr. Ferguson's improvement was steadily maintained. Alan went one afternoon to the end of the valley, leaving Dick with the girl, and found all well there. But he returned with the feeling that something was shortly going to happen, though no signs of the enemy had been observed. He had had a talk with the Masai, who had no knowledge of Ralph

Taverner's villainy. He had not been told by Lorna or the lads, and they were to regret that they had not done so.

That night Alan awoke and sat up in bed, under the impression that he had been roused by some noise. He listened for a few moments, and heard nothing except the querulous barking of zebras. But he could not get to sleep again. He had a premonition that something was wrong, and he could not shake it off.

"I had better be on the safe side, and investigate," he reflected. "That fellow Taverner may have succeeded in escaping, though it isn't at all likely. I looked at his fetters when I fed him last."

Getting out of bed, he pulled on his clothes and slipped his revolver into his pocket. And, with a glance at Dick, who was wrapped in heavy slumber, he left the room and went quietly downstairs to the lower part of the house. He groped about in darkness, and found and lighted a candle; and then, not doubting that he would have his trouble for nothing, he descended to the cellar.

He stood looking around him in consternation and dismay. There was nobody here. Ralph Taverner had contrived to free his limbs, and had taken to flight. On the floor lay the cords with which his wrists and ankles had been tied, and the handkerchief that had been bound across his mouth.

Alan was alarmed by the discovery. He was afraid that the man's escape might have serious consequences, and he had reasons to be apprehensive.

"So that's what I heard," he said to himself. "It was the sound of footsteps, or the creaking of a door, that awoke me. I wish I had come down at once, instead of trying to get to sleep again. What will the scoundrel do? I wonder. Will he try to leave by the water-passage? No, he knows he can't. He will go the other way, to the secret exit at the top of the valley. If Chanka and the Somalis see him at this hour of the night their suspicions will probably be aroused, and they won't let him pass. But he may slip through them unobserved, and if he does he will join Tib Mohammed and his bloodthirsty crew."

It was not long since Ralph Taverner had taken to flight. He could not have been gone for more than a quarter of an hour at the most, and Alan, having briefly considered the position, felt that there was a chance of his being able to overtake the scoundrel. He concluded that he would not delay to rouse Lorna and Dick, or to get Jan from his quarters.

He quietly ascended the stairs from the cellar, and as quietly he slipped out of the house and struck along the trail that led to the upper end of the valley. His heart was as heavy as lead. He had been worried for days past, and now his fears seemed to have culminated in the black, threatening shadow of a great disaster.

It would not make much difference, he reflected, even if he should succeed in preventing Ralph Taverner's escape. Something akin

to despair gripped him as he thought of the isolated situation of the valley, of the murderous Arabs and Baiangas, and of the hundreds and hundreds of miles of peril-infested wilderness that stretched on all sides.

For himself he did not care. He was thinking, with a sense of anguish, of the fate that might be in store for Robert Ferguson and his daughter.

"I would give my life for theirs," he said to himself. "I would risk anything for their sakes, if it came to the worst. And I am afraid that it will. Tib Mohammed knows there are diamonds in the valley. He will never abandon his efforts to get in here, and if he breaks through there will be an end of all of us."

The night was nearly over. A pallid glow was quivering above the horizon. The cool, grey dawn broke while Alan hurried on his way, and when he had gone for the better part of a mile he was surprised to hear a muffled patter of hoofs from close in front of him.

The sound grew rapidly near, and from out of a grove of trees appeared Lorna Ferguson, mounted bareback on her pet zebra. Her golden hair was floating in the breeze, and her cheeks were pale with distress. Drawing sharp rein, she slid to the ground and stared at the lad in amazement.

"Where are you going?" she asked, putting her hand on his arm.

"I'm after that fellow Taverner," Alan replied. "He has escaped from the cellar. And you? Where have you been?"

"I've been after him myself, Alan!"

"And you have had him caught? Did you get there in time?"

"No, I was too late! Too late by a very few moments!"

They looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, in their eyes the fear which they could not hide. Alan briefly explained what had brought him from the house, and the agitated girl then told her story. Awakened from slumber by some noise, she had got out of bed, and from her window she had had a glimpse of Ralph Taverner stealing off into the darkness.

"I knew what his object was," she continued. "I was sure that he would go to the secret exit, and deceive Chanka and the Somalis by some lie. I didn't wait to rouse you and Dick. I felt that I had better not lose any time. I dressed as quickly as I could and left the house, meaning to overtake Ralph Taverner, and bring him back at the point of my revolver. And I should have done so, I am sure, if I hadn't been delayed. The zebra was grazing in the corral, and he was in a playful mood. He wouldn't let me get near him at first. It was more than a quarter of an hour until I caught him and bridled him. I rode as fast as I could, but I got to the top of the valley too late, as I have said. Ralph Taverner had been there and was gone. He had lied to Chanka, as I had supposed he would. He told

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

him that he had seen the light of a fire from the summit of the cliff, where he had been to look for signs of Tib Mohammed and his party, and that he was going out scouting to try to locate their camp. And Chanka, of course, believed him, and let him pass. He was in a furious rage, and wanted to go after him, but I persuaded him not to. I knew that it wouldn't be any use, and that he might lose his life."

Alan shook his head gloomily.

"It is very unfortunate that the scoundrel has escaped," he replied. "It is a serious matter. The Arabs and Bajangas must be somewhere in the neighbourhood, and it is a dead certainty that Taverner will find them, and offer to guide them by the secret way through the hills."

"Yes, there can be no doubt he will," Lorna assented. "He will do anything for revenge, and for the diamonds that are in the valley. He will bargain with Tib Mohammed for a big share of them, on the condition that he shows him the secret way. And—and he wants me too, Alan. The very thought of him frightens me!"

"Don't talk like that! By heavens, he shall never have you!"

"He would, if he were to get through with that band of savages. You have just said that the situation was serious."

"So it is, Lorna. There's no use denying that. Things aren't as bad as you might think they are, though."

"They couldn't be much worse, Alan. Chanka has only about a dozen Somalis with him, and the half a dozen who are at the water-passage will have to stay there on guard. Tib Mohammed must have a couple of hundred men at the least, and it will be impossible for the Masai to prevent them getting into the valley if Ralph Taverner betrays the secret, as he will."

"That's true enough. Chanka and the Somalis won't be able to hold the pass very long, no matter how hard they may fight. But there is one thing we can do, and it has got to be done. Your father is improving rapidly. He will be much stronger in a day or so, and then we must all of us escape by the cavern in the cliffs, and by the stream that runs to the Bana River, and push on down country."

"I don't believe my father would consent," declared the girl. "At all events, I am sure that he wouldn't go until the very last minute. He loves this lonely place, and he has often said he would never return to civilisation."

"We'll have to reason with him," Alan replied. "I dare say he will change his mind when he knows how critical things are. He doesn't know as yet, and the sooner we tell him the better. We daren't put it off any longer."

"Very well. I will tell him myself to-day, Alan. But you will find that he will be obstinate. He will say that Chanka and the Somalis will be able to hold the pass, and

that he won't leave the valley while there is a ray of hope left."

"It will be foolish of him to refuse, Lorna. Delay might cost the lives of all of us."

"I fear it will, so I will do my best to persuade father."

It was fully daylight now. The girl mounted the zebra, and with Alan walking by her side, both in gloomy spirits, she rode slowly back to the dwelling in the cool air of the morning. As they entered, they had a glimpse of the servants, who were astir, but they did not encounter any of them. When they had gone quietly upstairs they exchanged a few words, and parted. The shadow of impending disaster was on them, pressing heavily.

Lorna slipped off to her own room, saying that she would have an hour or so of sleep if she could before breakfast. And Alan, having gone to the chamber which he shared with his chum, and found Dick still wrapped in slumber, hesitated for a little, and then went with wary tread into the sick-room.

A welcome surprise awaited him there. Robert Ferguson was awake, and was seated in a basket-chair by the window. He had been able to get out of bed, and to put on a dressing-gown and a pair of slippers. It was evident at a glance that there was a great improvement in his condition—a striking one. A healthy tinge of colour had crept into his cheeks. His eyes had been dull and lustreless, but they were bright now, and there was full, clear intelligence in them.

Alan paused on the threshold, and would have withdrawn. It was too late, however. He had been seen, and, with a choking sensation in his throat, his heart beating fast, he stepped across the floor.

"Good morning, sir," he said, in a tone of forced calmness. "I am glad to find that you are so much better."

"Yes, I am almost strong again," Robert Ferguson replied. "I feel as if I had just awoke from a long and refreshing sleep. I don't think I could have been quite right in my mind during the last few days, for my memory is clouded. I can only dimly recall your face, and what Lorna told me of you. You are one of the two lads who found your way to this remote place after many adventures."

"Yes, I came with a young American, Dick Selby by name, whom I ran across down-country."

"So my daughter said. But there is much that I cannot remember clearly. We were attacked by Tib Mohammed and his Arabs before I was taken ill, and I want to know what has happened since then. The situation was critical, for the Arabs knew that there were diamonds in the valley, and——"

"Nothing much has happened," Alan interrupted. "There has not been another attack. Don't worry about anything now. Wait for a day or so, when you will be stronger."

(Continued on page iv of Cover.)

"I can't help worrying," Robert Ferguson answered. "I have been thinking of it all this morning. Tib Mohammed is to be feared. He is a wicked old rascal, and he and his crew may break through by the water-passage, or by the secret entrance at the other end of the valley."

"No, sir, they can't. Chanka and the Somalis are guarding the entrance, and the water-passage is also guarded."

"Well, I must have a talk with Taverner. I instructed him what precautions to take, and I can rely on him. By the way, I haven't seen him for a few days, have I?"

"I don't suppose you have, Mr. Ferguson. He—he has been up the valley with the Masai."

"Then send Lorna to me. Where is she?"

"She is in bed, sir. It is still very early. The sun hasn't risen yet."

"You are not trying to deceive me, my boy. Can I believe that all is well here?"

"We are in no danger at present, sir. Your daughter will tell you to-day what has occurred while you were ill."

The sick man nodded, and leaned his head back. There was silence for a few seconds, and Alan was about to glide away when the first ray of the sun streamed in at the window, and shone full on his face. And at the

same instant Robert Ferguson, who had been gazing at him with a puzzled expression, started forward, and convulsively clenched his hands on the arms of his chair.

"You are my son!" he gasped—"my boy Alan! I know you are! I know it!"

(To be continued.)

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