No. 217.—MAGNIFICENT HOLIDAY AND DETECTIVE YARN!

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A blinding sheet of flame leapt high up from the river.

THE RIVER OF FIRE!

A Story of Holiday Life and Detective Adventure in West Africa, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Into the Arid Desert," "'Neath African Skies," "The Treasure of El Safra," etc.

August 2, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FEARING THE WORST.

"POOR old Nipper!" said Tommy Watson hopelessly.

"An' Mr. Lee," put in Sir Montie Tregellis-West, his voice dull with misery. "They're both gone, Tommy boy. It's the most frightful thing that could have happened—but there's no hope."

"Mr. Lee, and Nipper, and Lord Dorrimore," said Jack Grey. "It's too terrible to realise! It's too awful to think that they all went to their death in that aeroplane! But it's true!"

"If you fellows don't be quiet, I shall smash something," put in Edward Oswald Handforth, clenching his fists. "I'm nearly dotty as it is. You've forgotten to mention poor old Trotwood—he's gone, too! Oh, it's the most ghastly thing that ever happened!"

"Souse me," said Tom Burton, "but you're right, messmate!"

The five members of the St. Frank's Remove were sitting in the shade of a great palm-tree. From the nature of their discussion, it would seem that something of a disastrous character had occurred.

They were under African skies—to be precise, on the oasis of Zambi, a considerable way into the desert. They represented only a small proportion of the large party which had left St. Frank's in Sir Crawford Grey's magnificent steam yacht, the Wanderer.

The vessel was now lying on the coast, waiting for the return of the party, which had gone into the desert in search of treasure. That party had included Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and myself, to say nothing of an aeroplane.

There had been a great deal of excitement.

Quite apart from the fact that a rascal named Captain Nixon had done his best to wipe out the lot of us, there had been other perils. Nixon had failed in his designs, and he was a beaten man.

The party now in Zambi was composed of the five juniors, Dr. Brett, Fenton and Morrow of the Sixth, Umlosi, the famous Kutana chief—and Simon Grell and Jake Starkey.

The latter had been Nixon's henchman until the skipper had tried his hand at murder. Starkey had realised his folly then, and he had done his utmost to make amends by betraying Nixon while the latter was leading an attack. Owing to Jake's information, Nixon had failed. And Starkey was now with Dr. Brett's party, and he was a happy man.

But why had the juniors spoken so gloomily?

That question is easy enough to answer. There had been some very remarkable happenings, and the fellows in Zambi had every reason to suppose that something of a terrible nature had occurred.

Happily, they were wrong.

During a terrible sandstorm, Nicodemus Trotwood, of the Remove, had been separated from the rest of the party, and it was assumed that he had been lost in the desert. For no sign of him had been found after the simoom had passed.

There had been two parties of us making for El Safra—the small oasis where the treasure was buried. While Dr. Brett and Umlosi led their caravan across the great sands, Nelson Lee and Dorrie and I went by aeroplane.

The machine was a giant biplane, fitted with two engines, the united horse-power of which amounted to seven hundred. It was a machine which had been designed to carry anything from twelve to twenty passengers.

But most of the passenger space was occupied by extra supplies of petrol—for there was no fuel to be obtained out in the desert, and it was necessary to take an ample supply.

Well, we had reached the oasis first, and we had found the treasure—a gorgeous collection of precious stones, worth nothing less than three hundred thousand pounds. And

on that same day the sand-storm had occurred.

In the evening we had searched for Brett's party, fearing that disaster had overtaken them. We had succeeded in picking up Trotwood, who was alive and well, and who had become separated from the caravan during the storm.

The others had seen us descend; but they did not know that we had picked up the lost member of their party. And then we had flown off without going near—and nothing had been seen of the aeroplane since.

There were several reasons for this.

The guv'nor had intended flying over the caravan, but our aeroplane had run into a treacherous, gusty wind. Mounting higher, we had encountered clouds, and in the finish we lost sight of the caravan altogether.

But we knew that they were all safe. On the other hand, they only knew that we had flown away into the haze.

It had been our intention to land in El Safra again, so that we could welcome Brett and his party when they arrived. But that high wind had ruined our plans. Blown helplessly along above the clouds, we had been compelled to go where the wind took us, for it was a dangerous, gusty gale.

And upon descending below the clouds we had been somewhat astonished to find ourselves not over the desert, but in the heart of a great forest. And when we descended we discovered that we were in the Beejec country—one of the worst territories in West Africa.

The blacks were hostile, and our position was by no means healthy. But we were still alive and well—and that was something.

Further north, in the desert, it was assumed by Dr. Brett that we had met with death on the endless sands. And it was really only natural that this conclusion should have been arrived at.

The party had returned to Zambi over a week since. And there they had waited, their hopes dwindling day by day. Until now, at length, they were compelled to conclude that the worst had happened.

Dr. Brett was talking with Fenton and Morrow, while the juniors were discussing the situation. And Umlosi stood by with folded arms, listening. He did not show any sign of emotion, but his heart was sad. For Lord Dorrimore was Umlosi's master. The black giant would have laid down his life willingly for Dorrie.

"We must face the facts, boys," said Brett gravely. "There is no sense in keeping up a pretence. Three days ago there was still a faint hope that Mr. Lee and the others would turn up. But that hope is now dead."

"I know, sir," said Fenton quietly. "It's impossible for Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrimore to come back now—unless they fell into the desert near a travelling Arab caravan——"

"No, no, Fenton, that won't do!" put in Brett. "There is no such hope. It is over a week since we saw the last of the aeroplane. It flew into the haze—into the clouds, and there is only one possible conclusion to arrive at."

"That they lost themselves?" asked Morrow.

"Yes," said the doctor. "It was getting towards evening, you remember, and there were not many hours of daylight. I figure it out this way. In searching for the oasis, Mr. Lee flew past his objective. He scouted round for some hours until darkness fell. And then, in attempting to land, he crashed the aeroplane."

"Perhaps they landed safely," put in Fenton.

"That is possible, of course," agreed Brett. "But, having landed in the soft sand, the machine was not capable of taking off again. And so it lies there—a derelict, with the bodies of our three friends near by."

"Isn't it possible that they may be alive ——"

"No, Morrow," interrupted Brett. "The machine only carried sufficient water to last three or four days—and that was considered more than enough. Eight or nine days have elapsed, and it is absolutely impossible to suppose that our friends can be alive now. Even if they did not crash, and were killed in that way, they have undoubtedly died of thirst."

"How awful!" said Fenton, with a shiver.

"That word is hardly adequate," said Brett quietly. "I merely wish to make you thoroughly understand, my lads, that no further hope can be entertained. The very fact that the aeroplane is still missing proved that the machine and its crew will never return to civilisation."

"Thou art speaking terrible words, oh, my master," put in Umlosi, in his rumbling voice. "But are not all the facts grave enough to cause thee to make use of such words? Disaster has undoubtedly befallen N'Kose, my father. But I, his slave, will not bemoan his death until I have seen his lifeless body with mine own eyes."

"You'll never do that, Umlosi," said Brett quietly. "By this time the vultures——"

"Don't, sir!" said Fenton huskily.

"I have had dreams," sand Umlosi. "And I have seen N'Kose, and I have seen Umtagati, and I have seen the nimble Manzie. Wau! They were alive and well in my vision, and I believe not this fear that they have perished. Nay, O man of medicine, despair does not fill mine heart."

"I wish to Heaven I could share your view, Umlosi," said the doctor. "But I cannot. If there was the slightest thread of hope I would be the first to grasp it. But there is none."

"And all we've got to do is to get back to the coast—empty-handed," said Fenton sorrowfully.

"Yes, there is that aspect to be considered, too," said Dr. Brett—"although the treasure is of little importance compared to the precious human lives which have been sacrificed. The treasure was taken by Mr. Lee, and it is lost beyond recovery. We return to the yacht in mourning, and without even

that for which we came. What a terrible tragedy this trip has been!"

"And when do we start back, sir?" asked Morrow.

"As soon as possible, my boy," replied the doctor. "Of what further use is it to remain here? It only makes matters worse. The juniors are becoming almost ill with the suspense of it all, and we must get on the move."

And so preparations were begun for the return trip across the desert to the forest. There a party of carriers were waiting. And it would only be a matter of a few days before the coast was reached once more.

If Brett and the others had only known the actual truth!

While they were bemoaning our fate, we were very much alive, and in the best of health. But we were not free to do as we willed. And that was just the crux of the whole matter.

We were in such a position that we were unable to communicate with our friends, and we guessed that they would regard us as lost. But we were hopeful that all would come right in the near future.

And before Brett's caravan took its departure from Zambi, another white man left the oasis.

But he travelled towards the coast with a party of trading Arabs. This man was Captain Nixon. He had failed—and he knew it. In Zambi he had learned that the treasure he had been after was not even obtainable. It had been lost out in the desert with the aeroplane.

And so there was no reason why Nixon should remain. Bitter at heart, he knew that everything was lost. He had sacrificed all to obtain possession of the treasure.

And he would return to civilisation an outcast and a wanted criminal! The very thought of it all sent the man into a frenzy. And he became fired with a terrible hatred for Sir Crawford Grey.

Why he should adopt this attitude was rather strange. But his warped mind led him to regard Sir Crawford as the root cause of all the trouble. The treasure had been Sir Crawford's, and Nixon had failed to obtain it.

And so, when he set out for the coast, he intended taking his revenge—although he had not the faintest idea as to how he would do so. In his madness, he was ready for any villainy.

Shortly after his departure from Zambi, Dr. Brett and all the others started out on their homeward trip. They had come out into the desert a merry, happy throng.

They were returning sick at heart, and with not the trace of a smile amongst them. How they would face the others on the yacht they did not know—they did not care to think about it.

And, meanwhile, some rather dramatic events were taking place in that part of the world known as the Beejee country.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE HANDS OF SAVAGES.

LORD DORRIMORE uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"More of that frightful mess!" he exclaimed plaintively. "By gad, Lee, I can't stand it! It's enough to turn a fellow sick!"

"I quite agree with you, Dorrie," said Nelson Lee. "But we must either eat this, or starve—and, personally, I have strong objections to starving. The stuff doesn't look nice, but it might be wholesome."

His lordship stared into the gourd which he held between his knees. It was filled with a steaming mess, which could not possibly be given a name. We didn't know what it was, and couldn't imagine.

"I believe it's stewed caterpillars, or somethin' like that," said Dorrie. "These blacks are rather fond of 'em, I believe—but that's no reason why they should give the horrible concoction to us."

There was every reason for Lord Dorrimore's complaint.

For over a week we had been held prisoners by the Beejee tribe. No escape had been possible. And during all that time our meals had been the same—that steaming, greenish-looking mass of mystery.

At first we had refused to eat it, but hunger compels a fellow to do many things he detests. And on the second day we sampled the awful-looking mixture. And, to be quite frank, it didn't taste at all bad. It was savoury in a certain kind of way, and was probably nourishing.

I generally demolished mine as quickly as possible with my eyes closed—for it looked far worse than it tasted. But it was certainly monotonous to have the stuff always on the menu.

The blacks could not have selected a better prison for us.

For escape was impossible. We were in a thatched hut. It was quite a comfortable affair, in its way, and the door was wide open—and unguarded.

But the hut happened to be built right in the topmost branches of a high tree. The trunk, for about thirty feet, was as smooth as stonework, with no projections. The only way up was by means of a frail-looking ladder—which was only fixed in position when our meals were brought to us.

And the tree was in the centre of the village. Even if we had succeeded in getting to the ground we should have been in a hornets' nest. The only good point about our prison was that we received plenty of fresh air.

After having descended in the aeroplane—and we had made a perfect landing, by the by—we had been captured by the blacks at once. And within half an hour we were in the prison.

And there we had remained.

It was a great comfort to know that the big biplane was still intact. The blacks were apparently afraid to touch it. From the

platform of our prison, we could look right down across the river.

And there, still standing serenely on a grassy slope, stood the good old flyer.

But we were helpless.

Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and I had experienced something of this kind of thing before. It was not the first time we had been held prisoners by savages. But it was all new to Trotwood, of the Remove.

He, however, took things very calmly.

"You see, my dear Nipper," he explained, "I gave myself up for lost in the desert—and I was rescued. I am quite sure that before long we shall get away from these awful black people. I have great faith in Mr. Lee."

"Good for you, my son!" said Dorrimore. "Don't give up hope, an' everythin' will come right. If we had been booked to peg out, we should have been polished off at once. I can't understand why the blacks are keepin' us here—unless the idea is to fatten us up in readiness for the feast."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"It is my opinion, Dorrie, that the chief of the tribe is away on a hunting trip," he said. "We are being kept until his return—which cannot be long delayed now. I really think the crisis will come either to-day or to-morrow."

"By gad, I hope so," said Dorrimore. "I loathe suspense, old man. It makes a fellow all shaky an' nervous. Give me somethin' to do—a few heads to smash, for example—an' I'm as happy as anythin'. But when there's nothin' doin' at all, it's simply ghastly."

"I'm afraid you won't have much opportunity of smashing heads this trip," remarked the guv'nor. "We're in the thick of a hostile crowd, Dorrie—and violence on our part would speedily recoil upon ourselves. Our only chance of escape is by stealth."

His lordship sighed.

"An' I'm no good at that," he complained. "I always give the bally show away, you know. I'm a clumsy beggar, an' stealth ain't in my line. Still, I'm not givin' up hope; there might be a scrap yet. An' we've still got our guns an' ammunition."

"The machine-gun is on the aeroplane," I put in. "By gosh! If we only had that up here! We could sweep the village——"

"It's no good talking like that, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "We haven't got the machine-gun here, and all the wishing in the world won't bring it here. Neither can we get to the aeroplane. We can do nothing but wait—and trust to providence."

I nodded gloomily, and passed out of the low doorway. Trotwood followed me, and we emerged on to the platform. We had to be careful, too, for there was quite a breeze blowing, and the high tree swayed about considerably.

It was one of those trees which shoot up high, and develop branches at the very top. In the midst of these branches the hut had been built; it was a sound job, and had probably stood the test of many a gale.

But to anybody unacquainted with that type of tree-dwelling, the whole structure seemed horribly insecure. It looked top-heavy. One would have supposed that a big puff of wind would have bent the tree double, to send the elevated hut crashing to the ground.

These blacks, however, knew their business when it came to building. Only three days earlier there had been a violent squall, and we had been tossed about in the tree-top in the most alarming manner. But not even a fibre-rope came adrift, and when the calm came we were as safe as ever.

The hut itself was almost circular in construction, with a soundly thatched roof. The walls were of dried grasses, worked together so cunningly and closely that they were quite waterproof. And the floor was of the same material, with many stout beams underneath, lashed to the branches of the tree.

The floor was much bigger than the hut itself. Thus a platform of about three feet, on the average, was left all round the hut. It was possible to walk right round this without any fear of tumbling to the ground, far below. For there were handy branches to grab hold of, if a sudden gust of wind happened to come.

"They ought to make prisons like this in England," I remarked, as Trotwood joined me on the platform. "There's absolutely no chance of escape. Just look at the inky brutes!" I added savagely.

I was staring down into the Beejee kraal.

The African sun was glaring down—although we were in grateful shade—and the native village was sweltering. The huts were dotted about in all directions, haphazard. Children played about in various spots, and the amount of clothing they wore appeared to be exactly nil.

This applied to the grown-ups also. The Beejees did not trouble themselves much about finery. The men and women certainly were dressed—but the attire of each individual would have entered my waistcoat-pocket easily. The clothing of the whole tribe, collected together, wouldn't have filled a small-sized laundry basket.

Trotwood and I watched with weary interest.

The men appeared to be doing nothing; but groups of women were in various spots, grinding corn—or what they used in lieu of corn—in their own primitive manner. Others were collecting wood, or making fires. But everything seemed to be half asleep.

The village itself was planted on one bank of the river only. The river was not wide—just a slow, sluggish stream of deep water. On the opposite bank lay a large stretch of grassland, sloping gently upwards towards the trees of the forest. And there were no huts here.

A frail-looking bridge spanned the river; and almost opposite this bridge stood the aeroplane. It was intact—as whole as it had been when it left the factory. There was not even a stay-wire severed.

Nelson Lee had piloted the machine perfectly, and its adventures in the desert had

done no harm. The landing near the Beejee village had been effected without a hitch.

We had fondly supposed that we should be received in a friendly spirit—until we discovered that our hosts were the Beejees. Then it was too late. Capture had come instantly, and we had occupied the tree-top ever since.

"If we could only get to the old 'bus," I said, with a sigh. "It wouldn't take us five minutes to get clear——"

"But, my good Nipper, we cannot reach the aeroplane," said Nicodemus. "It is idle to talk in that way. I will admit that the situation is extremely galling. The machine is there—right before our eyes—and it is a vehicle which is capable of carrying us to civilisation and to our friends. But our position is something like that of a convict, who sees from the bars of his cell a railway train speeding across the countryside."

I grinned.

"You're getting staid in your old age," I remarked. "But what you said about the bars is about right. This prison is more secure than a barred cell. But perhaps we've a lot to be thankful for——"

"Eh?"

"We might have been eaten on the first night," I explained.

"Oh!" said Trotwood. "Oh, really, Nipper! Don't be so disgusting——"

"My dear chap, there's more than a chance that we shall be piled into the stewpan," I said grimly. "That's not disgusting—it's just the plain truth. And we might as well look the facts in the face. Why they're keeping us here is a mystery, though. I expect——"

I paused, listening.

"What was that?" I asked abruptly.

"I heard nothing——"

"Yes! On the wind, you ass!" I interrupted. "Listen!"

We both remained quiet. And a curious sound came to us on the breeze. The sound was that of many voices, accompanied by the beating of tom-toms or drums. And it swelled into loudness occasionally, only to die away again.

Nelson Lee came out of the hut.

"Did you hear anything, Nipper?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "Sounds like an army coming along."

"The chief returning, probably."

And this, no doubt, was the true explanation. After waiting for some time, the noise was much louder and nearer. And then, through a break in the trees, we caught a glimpse of a great procession of blacks.

They came on towards the village, which was already stirring. Children were running about excitedly; the women jabbered together in groups. And at last the vanguard of the procession marched into the kraal.

They consisted of a number of gaily-bedecked warriors, and they were all beating their tom-toms. Behind came a kind of litter, made of rushes, in which reposed an enormously stout savage. The litter was carried by a dozen men; and behind this strode scores of other warriors, laden with the spoils of the hunt.

"His majesty has returned," remarked Lord Dorrimore. "Thank goodness, he's brought the meat rations with him!"

"We sha'n't be allowed to touch any of it, old man," said Lee.

"I wasn't thinkin' of that," explained his lordship. "If these blacks have plenty of meat of an animal variety, they won't take a fancy to our carcases. We shall probably be safe until there's a famine."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm afraid that'll make little difference, Dorrie," he said. "But I am glad the chief has returned. We shall know something for certain before long. I'd like to gain an interview with the fat scoundrel, but I don't suppose I shall have an opportunity. I can talk enough of the lingo to make myself understood, and I'd like to warn the fellow that serious trouble will follow if he kills us."

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "What does that matter? If we're killed, it won't be much consolation if these blacks are wiped up—consolation to us, I mean! I'd rather miss the whole performance."

There was great excitement in the village. The chief's hut was much larger than all the others, and stood within an enclosed square. The hedge which enclosed it was well-kept and thick, with only one entrance. His majesty was set down in front of his "palace," and there were many shouts of enthusiasm.

We watched with interest, but after a while the excitement began to die down, and there was nothing particular to watch. Then, towards the evening, we became aware of a fresh outbreak of animation.

The scene we gazed upon was somewhat ominous.

Small parties of blacks were carrying baskets of short sticks into the great enclosure, and dumping them down. These sticks were piled up in neat heaps, and each pile was adjacent to a hollowed-out stone slab.

"Evidently the fuel for a number of bonfires," remarked Nelson Lee. "It seems that preparations are being made for some great festival. See how some of the blacks are painting themselves up."

I had already noticed it. Now and again a Beejee would appear, bedecked with feathers of gorgeous colour, and with his body daubed with some crude form of paint. And the chief's hut was the centre of activity.

"Yes, by gad!" said Dorrie. "This is goin' to be the final scene, professor. This is where we make our inglorious exit."

"Perhaps it's something quite different," I said hopefully.

"Perhaps so," agreed the guv'nor.

But he didn't mean it.

It was only too plain to all of us, in fact, that these preparations were being conducted on our behalf. If there had been any doubt, it was dispelled by the sight of many children and women—and some of the men, too—gazing intently up into our tree. It

was easy to guess why they took such an interest in their prisoners. We were to be the star turn of the evening!

And then the matter reached a point beyond guesswork.

For one of the headmen of the tribe came to the tree. The crude ladder was placed in position by six or seven blacks, and the headman mounted to our prison. We watched his ascent grimly.

"He's come to pronounce the sentence," murmured Dorrie.

The headman came to a halt on the ladder.

Then he looked up and jabbered for about three minutes without pausing. Having finished—as abruptly as he had commenced—he descended the ladder again, and went away.

"What the dickens did he mean, sir?" I asked.

"I fancy the gentleman was makin' an important announcement about bones goin' rotten, an' cheerful things of that sort," said Dorrie. "I heard a few words; but you're the man to ask, professor. What did Inky-sides say?"

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"I was unable to understand even a quarter of what the man said," he replied. "But the little that I did grasp is bad enough. There is to be a big feast just after sundown——"

"With Nipper an' the rest of us as the joint?" asked Dorrie.

"No," replied Lee grimly. "It is not so bad as that——"

"Good!"

"But it makes little difference," went on the guv'nor. "The feast will consist of the meat which was killed in the hunt. But after that orgy there is to be a great spectacular sacrifice——"

"Oh!" I ejaculated.

"By gad!" said Lord Dorrimore.

We gazed at one another in dismay.

"A sacrifice," went on Nelson Lee. "I could not understand the exact nature of it; but it is a certainty that we are to be murdered. I say it bluntly, because there is no sense in mincing matters. The chief has decreed that we shall die—that we shall be offered up as a sacrifice."

"Well, I hope it won't be a messy business," said Dorrie, with a sigh.

"It will be terribly hard on you boys——" began the guv'nor.

"Oh, don't worry about us, sir," I growled.

"We can stand it bravely, sir," added Nicodemus steadily.

"Well spoken," said Lee, patting Trotwood's shoulder. "It is courageous of you, my boys. The whole position is terrible, and I hardly know what to do. But to submit to a humiliating death is out of the question."

At the same time, we were all rather subdued.

We were to be put to death at dawn, it seemed—that is what the guv'nor understood. What chance was there for us to escape?

We were surrounded by enemies.

To escape from the clutches of the Beejees seemed impossible. But I was quite certain that Nelson Lee would not "throw up the sponge" until he had made a big and desperate fight for freedom.

The crisis had, indeed, arrived!

CHAPTER III.

DREADFUL TIDINGS.

REGINALD PITT sighed.

"It's beginning to feel awfully lonely without the rest of the fellows," he remarked, as he lounged back in his deck chair. "How long have they been gone now?"

"Oh, months!" said McClure.

"Rats!"

"Well, it seems like months," amended McClure. "I didn't think we should miss old Handy so much, blessed if I did! But we seem to be a bit lost without Handy and Nipper and Tregellis-West."

Bob Christine joined in the discussion.

"Hang it all, they can't be long now," he said. "They've been away two or three weeks, and it's a wonder to me we've heard nothing. I thought the aeroplane would be back days ago."

"And so did I, by Jove!" said De Valerie. "I hope nothing's happened."

Christine sniffed.

"With Mr. Lee in charge?" he asked. "Oh, don't be an ass! I'll bet Mr. Lee has stopped behind with the other party, just to keep them company. They'll all turn up soon."

"That's what the skipper says," remarked Pitt. "But I've noticed rather an anxious look in Captain Burton's eyes now and again. I believe he's worrying a bit—although he wouldn't dream of saying anything. Sir Crawford's a bit concerned, too."

McClure grunted.

"The girls are getting scared," he said, with a touch of contempt. "There's your sister, Church——"

"Well, what about her?"

"She's a silly little donkey——"

"What!" roared Church warmly. "You insulting ass——"

"Oh, don't get your back up!" grinned McClure. "Ethel's as right as rain, but she's too full of fancies. I caught her talking to Watson's sister yesterday—and they were making up all sorts of yarns. They actually wondered if the aeroplane had got lost in the desert, and if the party had been smothered by a sandstorm—and all sorts of rot of that kind. Childish, I call it!"

Reginald Pitt chuckled.

"I don't know so much about it," he said. "The party's overdue, you know—both parties are—and it is only natural that

Violet should be anxious about old Watson. I hope everything's O.K."

"Of course it is, you duffer," said Christine.

The group of St. Frank's juniors were chatting under the awning, on the beautifully fitted promenade deck of Sir Crawford Grey's steam yacht Wanderer. It was in the latter part of the forenoon, and the day was blazingly hot.

The little port of Agabat was roasting in the sun, but out in the bay the air was rather cooler. And the juniors were fortunate in being able to have as many iced drinks as they cared to ask for.

They all scoffed at the very idea of any thing untoward having occurred. Yet each boy secretly had an inner fear that all was not exactly as it should be. The treasure-seekers had not returned, and the aeroplane at least had been expected several days since.

If they had only known where the machine actually was!

While the juniors were talking, Sir Crawford Grey was chatting with Captain Burton in the latter's luxuriously appointed cabin. Both were smoking cigars—and their faces were not expressive of good cheer.

"It's no good denying the fact, Burton, but I'm worried," said Sir Crawford. "We've heard nothing—nothing whatever. And Lee promised to get back at the earliest moment. I'm beginning to get anxious."

"They say that no news is good news, Sir Crawford," said the captain. "That's not always true, but I don't think it would be wise for us to worry at this stage. Let us wait until we have reason to be concerned."

Sir Crawford nodded.

"You are right, Burton—quite right," he agreed. "I suppose I'm an infernal pessimist, but I can't help having a few fears. I almost wish they hadn't attempted the journey—— But what's the good of talking in that strain? They've gone, and we can only await their return."

The skipper nodded, and the pair soon went out on deck. They noticed that the four girl-guests were talking together with unusually serious expressions upon their faces. Lady Helen Tregellis-West, the girls' chaperon, was sitting in a cane chair, quietly reading.

The party on the yacht had had quite a good time during their enforced stay in port. For the first week parties and dances had been the order of the day. There was quite a number of Europeans in Agabat, and many of these had been invited to the yacht. In return, there had been parties ashore.

Sir Crawford's guests, in fact, had had a splendid time; they had enjoyed themselves wonderfully.

But now things were beginning to pall somewhat. There were no more parties, for the adventurers were expected to return at any time. And yet nothing had been heard of them.

Everybody was beginning to get worried, although everybody didn't like to admit it. The girls, while seemingly light-hearted in the presence of others, confided amongst themselves.

"I do hope Tommy's all right," said Violet Watson, her eyes alight with concern. He told me he'd be back long before this——"

"Oh, you mustn't get worried," interrupted Agnes. "The boys pretend to be careless, but I know they're worrying. And I think it's silly. How could anything have happened?"

"They might have been killed by Bedouins——" began Maggie Fenton.

"Oh, you would say something silly!" exclaimed Ethel, with a sniff. "Just as if Mr. Lee would get killed! Or Lord Dorrimore! They've been in Africa many a time, and if they thought the trip was dangerous, they wouldn't have taken any of the boys. If we only wait—— Oh! Look at that boat!"

She broke off abruptly, and stared out across the bay towards the shore. A native boat, propelled by three or four blacks, was being paddled at express speed towards the yacht.

The niggers were putting all their strength into the work, and it was clear that something unusual was in the wind, for the boats from shore usually paddled out to the yacht in the most leisurely style.

"Perhaps they've got news!" exclaimed Violet, her eyes sparkling.

"Oh, how lovely if they have!" said the other girls.

They crowded to the rail, and watched with great eagerness. The juniors, some little way off, saw that their fair companions were excited about something, and they looked up the deck wonderingly.

"What's the commotion, I wonder?" said Christine.

"Oh, nothing much," said McClure. "A boat coming along, I suppose. Those girls get excited over nothing——"

"Great pip!" exclaimed Yorke suddenly. "I don't know about getting excited over nothing! Just have a look at this."

They all jumped up, and they, too, were soon staring at the rapidly approaching boat.

There was quite a stir on board, and Captain Burton, who was now on deck, saw that something unusual was afoot. He sent Mr. Clive, the first officer, to the head of the accommodation-ladder.

Mr. Clive had lived on the West Coast of Africa for a good few years, on and off, and he could speak a good many native lingos. The boat swung to the yacht's side, and a moment later a black figure mounted the ladder and imparted his information in a quick volume of words.

Mr. Clive's expression was one of satisfaction as he turned away to report to the captain. Sir Crawford Grey was with Captain Burton, when the first officer came up and saluted.

"Well, Mr. Clive?" said the captain.

"The party headed by Dr. Brett is just entering Agabat, sir," said Mr. Clive.

"Splendid—splendid!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, with great relief. "And are they all sound, Mr. Clive? Has everybody returned in good health?"

"I don't know, sir," said the first officer. "These men have simply brought the news that the party is near at hand."

"Well, I am thankful to learn it," said Captain Burton. "No doubt we shall soon see the aeroplane soaring overhead."

Sir Crawford rubbed his hands together.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Lee wanted them all to arrive together, no doubt, and so he delayed his departure from Zambi until Brett and U'mlosi were well on their way. Excellent!"

The news soon spread to the juniors.

"They've arrived!" shouted Pitt. "Within an hour the whole crowd will be here—Handy and Tregellis-West and all the rest of them!"

"Hurrah!"

"Isn't it fine, Miss Vi?" yelled De Valerie.

"Splendid!" answered the girl, with a happy smile.

And everybody waited eagerly and excitedly for the returned wanderers to make their appearance.

They did not know of the dreadful news which the party brought!

But their premature happiness was not to last long. The motor-launch and two other boats were sent to the jetty to meet the adventurers, but no juniors were allowed to go.

The guests remained on board, waiting.

And, through glasses, they saw the first signs of the treasure-party. They appeared from the town, and collected on the jetty. The motor-launch did not wait for the rest of the party, but came speeding towards the yacht, bearing Dr. Brett, Fenton, Morrow, and Jack Grey.

The launch grew nearer, and those on the yacht watched eagerly. The juniors were lining the rail, and they waved their caps excitedly.

"Give 'em a cheer, you chaps!" roared Pitt.

"Rather!"

"Hip, hip——"

"Hurrah!"

It was a rousing cheer, and it clearly reached the ears of those in the launch. Dr. Brett glanced at the two seniors, and shook his head.

"They don't understand—yet!" he muttered.

The swift boat came nearer and nearer.

"Hurrah!"

"Welcome back!"

The juniors yelled, and the girls, further along the rail, waved their handkerchiefs. But they could not help noticing that the occupants of the launch made no attempt to return the waves. Furthermore, they were all grave-looking, and their faces were not smiling.

"Something seems to be wrong," said De Valerie.

"They're tired, I expect," remarked Christine.

"Not too tired to smile," said Pitt grimly. "Yes, there's something wrong."

He waved again.

"Ahoy, there!" he roared. "Hallo, Jack, old son!"

Jack Grey, in the launch, waved his hand.

"He didn't even smile," said Pitt. "My hat! What's happened?"

They had not long to wait. The launch came alongside, and Dr. Brett mounted the ladder, with the others close behind him. He found a big group awaiting his arrival on deck.

Sir Crawford Grey was in the forefront, with Captain Burton just near. The juniors and the girls, and some members of the crew, hovered in the rear, all excited and curious.

"Well, Brett, back again!" said Sir Crawford genially. "I suppose Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrimore and Nipper are coming along by air—eh? They'll be here presently, I suppose?"

The doctor grasped Sir Crawford's hand.

"I'm afraid that——" He paused. "I have some news for you——"

"News?" broke in the baronet. "Not bad news, surely? No, of course not! By the way, I have been examining your party through the telescope, and I failed to see one boy—that quaint youngster, Trotwood. Perhaps he is coming——"

"Don't, dad!" said Jack Grey huskily, coming forward. "Poor old Nicky will never come back again!"

Sir Crawford changed colour.

"What on earth do you mean, Jack?" he asked sharply.

He held his son tightly, and looked at Brett for his answer.

"Trotwood was lost in the desert, Sir Crawford," said the doctor quietly. "We encountered a sandstorm, and—and Trotwood was buried! We saw no further sign of him: The poor lad perished——"

Brett could get no further, and he paused.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Crawford. "Trotwood has been killed! I cannot believe it! I cannot credit——"

"It's true, dad!" said Jack. "Oh, and that's not the worst——"

"Not—not the worst!" shouted Pitt, from the rear.

"Great Scott!"

"Poor old Nicky!"

"Oh, how awful!"

There was a regular chorus of exclamations, all expressive of sadness and sympathy. The smiles had vanished, and everybody was grave.

"Brett, you must tell us the truth," said Sir Crawford hoarsely. "You have stated that Trotwood perished in the desert, and that item of news has almost stunned me. What else have you to say? Tell me bluntly."

Dr. Brett nodded, and cleared his throat.

"We do not know for certain, but we fear that the tragedy is far more serious," he said steadily. "Please do not raise

your hopes, because we have had no proof of death. There is no hope at all. Mr. Nelson Lee, Lord Dorrimore, and Nipper, flew into the desert, and they have not returned."

Sir Crawford staggered.

"You—you do not mean——" he gasped.

"Yes, Sir Crawford," said Brett quickly. "They have perished—they will never return. We did not lose hope until we arrived in Agabat. Then we learned that the aeroplane had not come direct to the coast, and we knew that the worst had happened. They are dead."

There was a dead silence for a full minute.

This awful news had bowled everybody over. They thought it was true. Brett himself thought it was true. Perhaps it would be true, after all. Our position in the hands of the Beejees wasn't at all healthy, at all events. But the yacht's party thought we had met with a different fate.

"Dead!" muttered Sir Crawford dazedly. "Dead! Lee—Dorrimore—Nipper! All dead! And Trotwood—— Oh, it is too horrible, Brett! I cannot believe it! I will not believe it——"

"I will tell you the circumstances, sir, and then you will believe," broke in Dr. Brett. "Will you come below, or shall I speak here?"

Sir Crawford waved his hand.

"Here, Brett—here!" he exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, speak quickly! These boys must know the truth—everybody must know. Speak now!"

And, amid a great hush, the doctor related what had occurred—or, rather, what he thought had occurred. He described Trotwood's fate; he told of the aeroplane's flight into the desert, and its non-return.

When he had finished everybody was convinced.

There was no hope—no thread of hope whatever. And the boys and the girls and the men bowed their heads with grief and sorrow. The expedition had failed; it had failed miserably.

Four valuable lives had been lost, and the treasure was still in the heart of the desert! The scorching sands had triumphed!

There was no gaiety on board the Wanderer that afternoon or evening. The others came on board, and the story was repeated again and again. The terrible affair was discussed in hushed, shocked voices.

The girls cried bitterly—and this was only natural. It was the shock of the thing which upset them. It was ghastly. The boys went about with pale, drawn faces, whispering when they spoke.

Sir Crawford remained in his own cabin.

He was bowed down with the awful news. And the ship was quiet and still at a much earlier hour than usual. By eleven o'clock everything was silent. The decks were deserted, and no lights were showing. It was a ship of sorrow, of mourning.

And then something curious occurred.

A dim, dark form appeared in the water near the stern of the yacht. It moved to and fro once or twice, and then remained still right beneath a rope which dangled down from the deck.

Two arms grasped the rope, and a moment later a man was hauling himself up, hand over hand, to the deck. The swimmer had just come from the shore, braving the perils of the tropic sea.

And the intruder on board the Wanderer was none other than Captain John Nixon.

He had arrived in Agabat secretly, and nobody knew of his presence there. Awaiting his time, he had come out to the yacht, and he managed to get on board without a soul of the ship's company being the wiser.

Just for a moment or two he stood on the dark deck in his dripping clothes. Then he moved forward like a shadow, and disappeared below. Captain Nixon had failed all along the line—so far.

But he did not mean to fail now.

He was not beaten yet. The treasure was lost, he believed, but it was still possible for him to have his revenge upon those who had foiled him so many times. The rascally skipper, rascally and brutal by nature, had become somewhat unhinged in mind, owing to his long succession of failures.

He was not after treasure now.

Captain Nixon meant mischief—dire mischief!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAGICIANS.

"SOMETHING," I said distinctly, "has got to be done!"

"By gad!" remarked Dorrie, "I think somethin' is goin' to be done, by the look of those blacks! An' it'll be somethin' connected with sharp knives, or burnin' faggots—an' we shall be the unhappy victims!"

"I don't mean that," I said. "Something's got to be done—by us. We shall have to make a bid for liberty!"

"Good!" said Dorrie. "How shall we do it?"

"That's what we've got to think of," I declared. "It's no good standing here, twiddling our thumbs——"

"My dear Nipper, I admire your courage," put in Nelson Lee. "But you must not raise false hopes. Our chances of escape are remote, and when I speak in that way you may realise that the position is fairly desperate."

"Yes, guv'nor, I know it," I said quietly.

Night had fallen, and the scene which we beheld immediately below us was weird and extraordinary. And it had a kind of sinister interest for us, because we knew very well that the preparations had been made mainly because of ourselves.

The Beejees were intent upon a night orgy.

After a tremendous feast, the idea was to offer up sacrifices—or, to be exact, Dorrie, the guv'nor, Nicodemus, and myself. We were prisoners in the hands of these savages, and our position was indeed precarious.

The feast had already commenced.

Up in our tree-dwelling, built in the topmost branches, we could see right down into the enormous enclosure near the chief's hut. Many bonfires were burning, and the whole scene was illuminated by the glaring, flickering light. It was a wild enough spectacle, in all truth.

Some of the blacks were attired in awful looking paint and feathers, and these were dancing and yelling as though they had gone completely mad. In all probability they had.

Up in the tree we were helpless; indeed, I don't think I have ever felt quite so helpless before. There was absolutely nothing to be done. We were a great distance from the ground, and even though we had our revolvers, they were of no use to us.

"Couldn't we manage to shin down the bally trunk of this tree?" suggested Dorrimore brilliantly.

"Easily," replied the guv'nor.

"Well, what's wrong with the idea?"

"Simply that we should be captured, one by one, as we reached the ground," replied Nelson Lee calmly. "You have apparently overlooked the fact, Dorrie, that a large number of our yelling hosts are almost beneath this tree, and in the glare of light cast by the fires we have no chance of reaching the ground undetected. I'm afraid your idea is no good, old man."

Dorrie sighed.

"My ideas are always like that," he growled.

We were squatting on the platform which surrounded the hut. The wind had completely died down, and the tree was motionless, except when we moved, then, of course, it would sway slightly.

"I don't think we shall have to wait long now, sir," I said after a while. "The beggars have been going ahead for hours, and dawn will be here before so very long. Oh, I'd give thousands if I could only get into that old 'bus!"

I gazed longingly across the river—just visible—at the black patch of ground which, in daytime, could be recognised as grassland. On that gentle slope rested the great aeroplane which had brought us into the land of the Beejees. The machine was intact.

No harm had befallen it. The natives had feared to tamper with the huge specimen of modern progress.

"Isn't it awful to know that that machine is standing there, loaded up with oil and petrol, ready to fly off!" I said bitterly. "There's enough juice on board to carry us four or five hundred miles, sir."

"Quite," agreed Lee. "But it will do no good by talking like that, Nipper. We can't get to the machine, although we can see it. A fight for freedom would certainly end in swift death. And my plan is to stave off the final scene as long as possible. I never give up hope until the situation is really hopeless."

"Well, it's rotten to know that the machine is there, and that we can't use it," I said. "It would be better, perhaps, if the old 'bus had got smashed up, then we shouldn't have felt so wild about it."

"It is wrong of you to say that, my good Nipper," put in Trotwood. "While there is life there is hope—and I have great faith in Mr. Lee. If there is even a slight chance, we shall make a bid for freedom. And the aeroplane will be ready for our use, if such an opportunity crops up."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"What we must do is to make an attempt to scare these savage blacks," he said. "Once we can get them in a state of fright, our chance might come. Mind you, our position is as desperate as it could be, and there is only a very remote possibility of anything being accomplished. However, we can do nothing but try——"

"Why, have you got an idea, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Of course he has!" put in Dorrie. "Before now your guv'nor has got us out of the most frightful scrapes—an' I sha'n't give up the ghost until I see the professor polished off. Once he's gone, we might as well give in."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You must not place too much faith in me this time, Dorrie," he said. "I do not believe for a moment that my scheme will work. But I happen to have a small bottle of petrol in my pocket, also some cotton wool, to say nothing of a small silver cigarette-holder——"

"What the dickens do you mean, sir?" I broke in, staring.

"If you will let me finish, Nipper——"

"I will, sir; but how can cotton wool help us—or petrol? And where does the cigarette-holder come in?" I asked.

"He's got an idea," said Dorrie. "Be quiet, you little ass, or you'll spoil everythin'. You can bet the idea is a good one——"

"I really think somebody is mounting the tree," put in Nicodemus at this point. "Look, sir."

And then we noticed that quite a number of blacks were swarming up the tree—up the rough ladder, which had been placed into position unknown to us. We all stood up, and I clenched my fists.

"Shall we fight for it, sir?" I asked tensely. "We can knock the brutes down one by one, as they attempt to climb on to this platform. We could hold out for days—we could defy the rotters——"

"Until we starved?" put in Lee grimly. "Quite so, Nipper. And you need not think that the blacks would be defeated by that expedient. They would not give us time to starve. Finding us obstinate, it would only take them a few minutes to hack through the tree at the bottom—until we crashed down!"

"But we can't submit without a scratch!" I protested.

"I have no intention of doing so," said the guv'nor quietly. "But the time has not yet come for us to engage in the scrap, Nipper. We must be meek and submissive—we must make these blacks think that we are scared out of our wits. Then there will be a greater chance of success later on."

"I suppose you're right, sir," I agreed. "We don't want to mess everything up by being too impulsive."

There was not much time for further conversation, for the Beejees were now arriving on the platform in twos and threes. We had been unable to hear Nelson Lee's plan, and so had to go unsatisfied.

I noticed that a sudden light had come into Trotwood's eyes. He almost looked excited, and this was most unusual, for Nicodemus was generally a calm fellow, and it needs a lot to disturb him.

"Thought of something, Nicky?" I whispered.

"Really, Nipper, I do not know," replied Trotwood. "But there is just a slim possibility that we might try a little experiment. It all depends upon circumstances."

"But what's the wheeze?"

"I would rather not say," replied Nicodemus. "I do not want to make you feel that there might be a hope—because, frankly, I have little faith in the project which is in my mind."

"You're a queer merchant," I remarked.

"Quite so, my dear Nipper—I am well aware of that," replied Nicodemus calmly. "And I hope——"

"I never knew what he hoped, for just then he was grabbed by two blacks and forced along the platform. I was treated in the same way. Ropes made of stout fibre were passed round us.

And then we were lowered like sacks to the ground.

It was a horrible experience. The rope was not secured very tightly, and if it slipped I should have plunged to certain death. And there was no guarantee that the rope would stand the strain of my weight.

However, it was good stuff, and did stand the strain.

Upon arriving on the ground, I found Nelson Lee and Dorrie already there. Somewhat to my surprise, I saw that they were not bound, but stood quite free in the centre of a crowd of jabbering Beejees.

There was no hope of escape, of course, and Nicodemus and I were soon with the others. It was something, at all events, to be together. And it was also excellent to be free.

When the worst came to the worst we should be able to fight like Britishers—and it would be better to die fighting than to submit to murder. However, the time had not yet come.

We should only show fight when death actually stared us in the face.

We were marched from the foot of the tree to the compound, where all the festivities were taking place. As we went along a tremendous shout commenced, and it grew louder and louder as we progressed.

It was a wild, howling yell, and it rose from hundreds of throats. The sound was terrifying, and it made us realise more than ever how completely we were in the hands of these savages.

To escape by sheer force was an utter impossibility. If any escape was to be made, it would be by a ruse—by a stratagem. And I did not see how it was possible to adopt any trickery.

Once within the compound the shouts died down. We were taken straight across to the chief's dwelling. The fat old beggar squatted there, surrounded by his headmen. All were painted up.

The other blacks formed themselves into a great circle, leaving us standing alone. And beyond the enclosure were thousands of other blacks, all greatly interested in the proceedings.

The king commenced jabbering at express speed, and shortly afterwards Nelson Lee told us that the gist of the old rascal's talk was that we were to be put to death as soon as the first light of dawn appeared.

The guv'nor had something to say about it; and, as I can't set down the words in the Beejee language, I'll do so in English. I'm afraid Beejee would look rather queer in print, and nobody would understand it.

"Thou art a bold man, O chief of the Beejees!" exclaimed Nelson Lee sternly. "Is it for us to fear thee? We are men of magic, my companions and I. Thinkest thou that we care for thy threats?"

"Thy speech is coarse," said the chief. "It is with difficulty that I grasp thy meaning, for thy knowledge of my tongue is limited. I am Mwangaal, the king of all the Beejees, and yet thou address me. Thou shalt suffer!"

Of course, he didn't speak like that—he used his own filthy lingo, and I've put down the guv'nor translation, as near as possible.

"It is thou who wilt suffer, O Mwangaal," said Nelson Lee. "Thou art ignorant of the fact that I am a great witch-doctor. Were it my will, I could strike thee down even now. See thou this steel object?"—and here the guv'nor exposed his revolver—"it is capable of sending death!"

"Thou art a man of little sense——" began Mwangaal.

"Wait!" snapped Lee. "Listen to me, thou reptile! Is it proof thou wantest? I will send thee into a state of fear by wonder-workings! See! I will set fire to my own breath, until the flames roar forth!"

"Bah! Thou art mad, white man!" said the chief. "Perform thou this feat, and thy life shalt be spared. But thou art boasting. No man can set fire to his own breath—nay, not even the magic witch-doctors of my own people!"

"They are as babies compared to me," said Lee contemptuously. "Wait, O boastful king! Thou wilt see! Harm us, and curses will fall upon thy tribe even as rain falls during the storm!"

Nelson Lee turned to speak to us—we hadn't understood a word of what he had said to the chief, of course—he let us know that afterwards. There was a keen light in his eyes.

"I'm trying to bluff the old ruffian," he whispered. "Collect round me—I don't want the brutes to see what I'm doing!"

The guv'nor pulled the small bottle of petrol from his pocket. Within a few seconds he had soaked a big wad of cotton wool—and this he stuffed into his mouth! Then he took a fancy to his cigarette-holder, for he placed this in his mouth, too. When he turned back to the chief he looked normal. The cigarette-holder was between his lips, hidden—nearly all of it—within.

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped. "I know what he's going to do!"

"Please tell me, old son!" pleaded Dorrie. "I'm frightfully puzzled. Why has he eaten that cotton-wool an' the cigarette-holder? I didn't know he was particularly hungry——"

"It's a trick!" I broke in. "Don't you understand? The guv'nor's going to set light to the petrol fumes as he blows them out! The cig.-holder is to protect his lips—it forms a kind of burner for the gas!"

"By gad!" said Dorrie blankly.

"He'll burn his lips, too!" muttered Trotwood.

"Supposing he does?" I asked. "That's better than being burnt altogether, isn't it? Watch! This is going to be interesting! There's no telling how the blacks will take it! They're terribly superstitious, and if they think we're 'tagati,' they'll treat us like gods!"

We waited breathlessly.

Nelson Lee said nothing further; he couldn't very well. The blacks were watching us suspiciously, and with hostile looks. I half expected them to attack; I believe they would have done, but for the chief.

The guv'nor struck a match, and at the same time he blew gently and steadily through the metal tube. Naturally, a mixture of air and petrol-spray emerged—a kind of gas.

And the instant he applied the match to his mouth the gas ignited with a soft roar; for, with the force of the guv'nor's breath behind it, the whole thing acted like a blow-lamp.

The flame roared out of Nelson Lee's mouth, and it was almost impossible to see the end of the silver tube. I have seen a similar trick performed on the music-hall stage—it is quite easy, once you know how.

The effect was immediate.

The blacks shouted with fear and amazement. Those who were near stared at Lee with frightened faces. Even the chief started back, and his eyes grew large. A man who could set fire to his own breath was certainly a mighty wizard!

"Thou art indeed a great witch-doctor!" muttered Mwangaal.

Nelson Lee went mad for a second. He jumped about, rolled over, jumped up again and then let out a terrific roar. I knew the reason. He wanted to get rid of his cotton-wool and cigarette-holder unobserved.

"See!" he shouted. "What of thy witch-doctors now, O Mwangaal? Canst thou produce one who can make fire of his own breath?"

The chief and his headmen jabbered together excitedly. The trick had had a good effect. And while Lee was waiting for the chief to speak again Trotwood tugged at his arm.

"Can I make a suggestion, sir?" asked Nicodemus.

"Certainly, Trotwood," said Lee; "but you must be quick."

"Do you see those skulls, sir?"

Nicodemus pointed to a horrible collection of human skulls which hung from a string at the top of a high pole, quite near by.

"Yes, my boy, I see them," said the guv'nor.

"And do you see that cow standing there, sir?" asked Nick.

"Yes, but what on earth——"

"Half a minute, sir," said Trotwood eagerly. "Tell the chief that our marvellous powers are such that we can make the skulls talk, we can make the cow laugh, and we can cause the very trees to chatter!"

Nelson Lee stared.

"You are overwrought, my boy——" he began.

"I'm not, sir," protested Nicodemus. "I can easily——"

"Great Scott!" I breathed. "I can see the game! Don't you know, guv'nor? Trotwood's a ventriloquist! He's got a marvellous knack of throwing his voice! If you'll tell the chief——"

"Splendid!" interrupted Lee. "Excellent! It may be the means of turning the tide in our favour. Be ready when I give the word, Trotwood."

"Yes, sir."

Nelson Lee turned to Mwangaal again.

"Well, O chief, hast thou decided?" he asked. "Is it still thy intention to make thy slaves lay fingers upon our sacred persons? Thou wilt be a bold man indeed if thou——"

"Hold!" interrupted the chief. "Thou hast impressed me—thou art a great worker of magic. But I and my advisers would see further examples of thy wondrous power. Kill thou that cow which stands yonder."

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Why should the innocent beast die?" he asked. "It shall be killed if thou wantest; but I will do better. The cow shall laugh, even as the human being!"

"Thou art talking madly, O white wizard!" said the chief.

Nelson Lee nudged Nicodemus.

"Make the cow laugh!" he breathed.

We all waited, rather breathless.

"It is my command that the cow shall laugh long and loudly," shouted Nelson Lee. "Listen, O thou unbelievers! Listen, and thou wilt surely understand that thou art not dealing with fools, but with men of magic!"

The guv'nor pointed dramatically towards the cow, and Nicodemus took his cue.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" roared the cow. "Ho, ho, ho! Haw!"

It was certainly rather uncanny, for it seemed as though the very cow itself gave vent to a wild laugh. The Beejees stared at

1. "Thou art indeed a great witch-doctor!" muttered Mwangaal, as the flame issued from Lee's mouth.

2. Nelson Lee and his party make a daring bid for liberty.

it in a state of real terror, and some of them were shivering visibly.

"Mayhap thou wilt say that there is some trickery?" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "But I will show thee a further example of our power. Even the skulls of dead men shall laugh with scorn at thy ignorance. Listen, O Mwangaal!"

Lee turned his head slightly.

"The skulls!" he murmured, in English.

The next moment the skulls set up a most infernal din—or so it appeared. Not one of them, but the whole bunch seemed to be cackling in the most unearthly and diabolical manner.

It was quite uncanny—even though we knew that Nicodemus was responsible. And if it seemed weird to us, who were in the know—how must that cackle have sounded in the ears of these superstitious savages?

The result, in any case, was remarkable.

Scores of the blacks grovelled on the ground—whether in fright or whether in reverence to us, I don't know. In any case, they grovelled. It was not even necessary for Nicodemus to go any further with his ventriloquial entertainment.

The king rose to his feet.

"Thou hast impressed me greatly, O white magician," he exclaimed. "Until dawn thou art safe—and thy companions with thee. I will speak with my advisers, and it shall be decided what will be done."

He said a lot more than that, and once more we were surrounded and led away. But this time the blacks were quite deferential in their manner. They were afraid of us now.

For a moment I feared that we were to be taken back to the tree-top. But this, happily, was not the case. Having emerged from the compounds we were marched away through the village until we came to a large mud hut set with its back to a belt of trees.

In this we were thrust, and left to ourselves.

"A nasty, smelly hole—that's what this is," complained Dorrie. "What's the idea, Lee, old man?"

"The chief is conferring with his headmen," said Nelson Lee. "We have gained a respite, at all events, and this prison does not seem to be such a proposition as the house in the trees. There may be a chance yet."

"Nicky was marvellous!" I declared.

"It was certainly a remarkable performance," said Nelson Lee approvingly. "Well done, Trotwood! Without your aid, I verily believe we should have been dead by this time. We have made the blacks afraid of us—and that is a very good thing."

"And what's to be done now, sir?" I asked.

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"We are going to—escape!" he replied grimly.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIVER OF FIRE.

LORD DORRIMORE chuckled.

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together. "I knew it was comin'—I was expectin' it, by gad! Escape! That's the best word I've ever heard spoken!"

"But how can we escape, sir?" I asked excitedly.

"It is now or never," replied the guv'nor. "The chief and his elders are pow-wowing. It is quite probable that they will decide to put us to death, for they fear us. We have a chance to get across the river. Our guards will not cause much trouble, since they understand our power, and are afraid of it."

"But how can we find the river, old man?" asked Dorrie.

"If you did not use your eyes while you were in the tree dwelling, I did," said Lee grimly. "This hut is built against a narrow belt of trees. On the other side of these trees the river flows. So our task ought not to be hard."

"By jingo!" I breathed. "Is it possible, sir? The bridge isn't far off, and—and the aeroplane——"

"You must not raise your hopes too high, Nipper," warned Nelson Lee. "Our lives are in danger, and this is no time to attempt any wild 'stunts,' as you would call them. The aeroplane will probably remain where it is—our chief object is to escape from the clutches of these savages."

"But we can fly away in the machine——"

"Possibly; but the chance is remote," said Lee soberly. "The aeroplane must be started up, and it cannot be accomplished in a second. While we delayed with the machine we should be captured—unless, of course, we adopted some ruse to keep the blacks on the other side of the river."

"Couldn't we chop the bally bridge down?" suggested Dorrie.

"With our hands?" asked Lee.

"Well, hardly——"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "I've got an idea, sir!"

"Well?"

"How much petrol have we got on board?" I asked huskily.

"Several hundred gallons."

"Could we sacrifice fifty gallons?" I went on. "Could we get it out of the tank, and——"

"I dare say we could, but what on earth are you talking about?" demanded Nelson Lee. "How will petrol help us?"

I took a deep breath.

"Let's escape from this hut, sir—and then I'll tell you," I said. "While we're jawing here we might leave it until too late. The main thing is to get to the aeroplane."

"Yes, Nipper, you are right," said the guv'nor grimly. "Now, Dorrie, follow me; and you boys come behind Dorrie. If we have to fight, we'll fight gamely, and go down like true Britons."

We did not find it necessary to use the front exit, after all. For the wall of the hut was cracked in the rear, and one or two knocks resulted in a portion of the wall collapsing.

We all slipped out easily, and made our way into the dark trees. Our escape was apparently unnoticed, for no hue-and-cry was raised. The trees afforded us excellent shelter.

It was quite on the cards that some of the blacks were posted at different points; but we had to chance this.

The whole crowd of warriors and onlookers still gathered round the brightly illuminated compound, waiting for the chief's decision. And while the fat old scoundrel was making up his mind, we were making our escape.

Not that we had many hopes of success.

We were in the heart of the Beejee stronghold. Even if we succeeded in getting clear of the village, there was no guarantee that we should escape from the territory. Our absence would soon be noted—and then the chase would commence.

At the same time, action was a joy to us. We were doing something—we were making a desperate bid for freedom. And I had an idea in my head which filled me with wild hopes.

The main thing was to get across the river.

We passed through the trees cautiously. Dorrie was for plunging ahead at full speed, but Nelson Lee's wiser counsel prevailed. It was better to go cautiously, and to waste a few minutes, than to arouse the whole village by our movements.

"The river," I breathed at last.

We had emerged into the open again. The village was partly hidden from us; but we could see the glare of the bonfires reflected overhead. There were no native dwellings just here; and further along we could dimly see the frail-looking structure of the wooden bridge.

"Can we do it, sir?" I asked, in a whisper.

"We can try, at all events," replied Lee. "But be quiet, young 'un."

We moved onwards like shadows. In single file, and walking on the extreme bank of the river, we progressed. We crouched as we walked, hoping that our movements would be unseen.

It was a trying journey, although so short.

Detection at this moment would have meant failure—ghastly failure. All our hopes rested upon crossing that bridge. We were fairly shivering with excitement as we approached the bridge—at least, I was.

Nelson Lee was the first to set foot upon the rough woodwork. He turned for a moment, and saw the shapes of many huts, with dark figures moving between them. And the guv'nor crouched down low.

"Get down, all of you!" he hissed. "We shall be seen if we are not careful. If the blacks make a rush towards the bridge—run! We will get to the other side, and use our revolvers. It ought not to be difficult to hold the bridge for a few minutes."

As it happened, no alarm was raised.

We crept across the bridge like mere shadows—slowly and noiselessly. And at length we reached the other side. We were all astonished to find that our escape was still undetected.

Right in front of us stretched a large expanse of smooth grassland. And the faithful old aeroplane was standing there, ready for instant use. But should we be able to start up the engines and get off before the hordes surrounded us?

It was a problem.

"Now, what's the programme?" asked Dorrie. "Shall we make off into the bush, or shall we get into the old bus?"

"The former plan is perhaps the safer one," said Nelson Lee. "We should at least stand a chance of getting far away before the blacks overtook us; it is even possible that they will abandon pursuit at dawn. By remaining here, and attracting attention by starting up the aeroplane, we might sign our death-warrants. But I am in favour of attempting the flight."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Let's get to the aeroplane, sir!"

Both Dorrie and Trotwood were also pleased by the guv'nor's decision. It was far better to take a sporting chance, even in face of death, than to sneak off on the quiet, sacrificing the machine.

Within a few minutes we were alongside—and in comparative safety. For the great biplane afforded us shelter. There was not a soul near it excepting ourselves. The machine was quite intact.

It stood on the grass exactly as we had left it upon landing.

There was a clear run before it, and Nelson Lee was confident that with the engines running at full power he would be able to take the air successfully. The main difficulty would be in starting up the engines.

It was more than likely that they would splutter to begin with; and the noise would give the alarm. It would be hopeless to attempt the flight before the engines were running at full power—we should only dash ourselves to pieces against the high trees.

And that is where my idea came in.

"If we can only spare a good lot of petrol, sir, we can pour it into the river," I exclaimed eagerly. "Do you see, sir—about fifty gallons into the river!"

"By gad!" said Dorrie. "He's lost his wits!"

"My dear Nipper," said Trotwood, "you must not get excited——"

"Wait!" interrupted Lee. "I think I have grasped Nipper's idea—and it is a splendid one. Upon my soul, Nipper, that scheme may be the salvation of us all! We shall do no harm in trying it, at all events."

"But, my dear Lee——" began Dorrie.

"Don't you understand, man——"

"No, I'm hanged if I do!"

"Then let me explain," went on Lee. "Petrol, as you probably know, is lighter

than water, and when poured into a lake or a river, it floats upon the surface in a thin, ever-spreading sheet."

"Yes, I know that," said Dorrie.

"And if you apply a match to that film of spirit, there is an instant flare of light—all the petrol catches fire at once on the surface of the water. The effect, as you will agree, is decidedly startling."

"By gad!" said Dorrie breathlessly. "What a rippin' stunt!"

"The blacks will think us capable of any magic," continued Lee. "It will be the last straw, and they will not even attempt to harm us further. But everything depends upon speed now."

"We've got to get that petrol into the river, sir," I said.

"Exactly," agreed Lee.

We lost no further time in conversation. It was a case of all hands to the pump, and the petrol was allowed to flow from one of the tanks into a short length of pipe which communicated with the ground.

There was no grass just where the machine was standing, and the ground slopes rather steeply for a short distance towards the river bank. Thus the petrol flowed straight down and into the water.

And, while the spirit was gushing forth, Nelson Lee was preparing everything in readiness for the start. We could afford to lose twenty or thirty gallons of petrol, for we had an ample supply in the spare tank. And our main object was to get out of the Beejee country. It didn't much matter where we landed, or how far we flew. We could have sacrificed a hundred gallons, if necessary.

And then, in the midst of our preparations, we heard a great shout. It rose on the night air, and increased in volume until it was a demoniacal roar. The sound was wild and awful to listen to.

"That's done it!" said Dorrie. "We've been spotted!"

"Oh, my hat!"

We all stared towards the village on the other side of the river. Figures were running about in all directions, and it was only too clear that our escape had been discovered.

Would the blacks think of crossing the bridge?

They did! Before three minutes had elapsed we saw a number of the savages hastening towards the river—in the direction of the bridge. It was quite certain that our movements had been seen, and that our capture would only be a matter of moments—unless we acted.

"Shall I fire the petrol, sir?" I gasped.

"Good heavens, no!"

"But——"

"Where are your wits, Nipper?" snapped Lee. "The flames will run up the bank, and the aeroplane will be on fire within a second. We must shift the machine away first—quite clear of this spot. It is the only way."

"But we can't move her, sir," I protested.

"The engines can!" said Nelson Lee evenly.

But the position was becoming desperate. Even while we were speaking the blacks had commenced crossing the bridge, and twenty or thirty of them were on their way to our side.

"Give the brutes a few shots, Dorrie—you, too, Nipper!" snapped Lee. "Trotwood, stand by with the matches, and drop a light upon the soaked ground when I give you the word. The flames will run down to the river in one sheet. Be careful to stand clear—all of you!"

There was no time for more.

Lee swung himself up into the pilot's seat and touched the self-starter. While he was doing so, Dorrie and I stationed ourselves near the bridge. Our revolvers were out—and we used them.

Crack! Crack!

Several shots rang out, and we both aimed low—to begin with. Two of three of the blacks collapsed as they ran, screaming with agony. Others tumbled over their prostrate figures, and there was much confusion.

The centre of the bridge was jammed for a short while, and Dorrie and I paused. And at that second the two powerful aeroplane engines roared into song. They spluttered for a few seconds, and then settled into a steady, even beat.

The machine moved forward across the grass, swung round, and taxied along for thirty or forty yards. Then Nelson Lee throttled down the engines, and turned to give Trotwood his instructions.

But Nicodemus was already acting.

And it was time, too!

For the blacks had recovered from their momentary fright. They were surging across the bridge in dozens, and the whole structure threatened to collapse under their weight. I noticed that several of the savages had dived into the water, but they had emerged again hastily.

The petrol was new to them, and they probably didn't like the flavour. The air, too, was heavy with the smell of the spirit.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Once again we fired our revolvers; but this time we were not able to withhold the rush. The Beejees came on relentlessly, yelling and screaming at the top of their voices. And now another danger became apparent.

Something hissed through the air and struck the ground a yard away. It was a quivering spear. Other spears were being hurled across the river, and the situation became decidedly hot.

But it was soon very much hotter!

It seemed hours before Trotwood struck his match. As a matter of fact, Nicodemus did not waste a second. As soon as he saw that the aeroplane was safely out of the way, he stood back and threw a match to the ground.

It nearly went out, flared up, and then a blinding sheet of flame rushed down like lightning towards the river. What happened next was extraordinary.

There was a tremendous roar, and a sheet of flame rose a hundred feet into the air. The whole river, from bank to bank, simply

flared up in one great livid sheet. It was one of the most terrifying scenes I have ever witnessed.

The river of fire!

The Beejees screamed and shrieked with utter terror. They fled as though demons were on their heels. The bridge was just at the limit of the petrol expanse; but the flames licked the woodwork.

In addition, the flaming petrol was spreading, and within two minutes the bridge itself was a roaring mass of flames. To cross it was impossible. I don't know what became of the blacks who were on the bridge at the time—and I don't care. I have an idea, though, that they all managed to get back into safety.

The river was blazing along the whole expanse opposite the village. The flames were being blown towards the village itself, and already the banks and bushes were blazing.

The Beejees had no time to bother about us.

Their sole activity now was centred upon putting out the flames. And this was no easy task, for they were under the impression that their water supply was burning! The blacks certainly thought that the water itself was on fire. They didn't know anything about petrol.

"Splendid, Nipper—wonderful!" shouted Nelson Lee, as we ran up. "Your scheme has worked with amazing success. I never dreamed that we should have things so easy. Any injuries?"

"Nothing to speak of," said Dorrie carelessly.

And then, for the first time, I noticed that he was holding his left arm rather tightly.

"Were you hit?" I demanded.

"One of those rotten spears," said Dorrie. "Only a scratch."

"Let me see!"

"Oh, don't be a young ass——"

"I want to see that scratch," I said grimly. "Come on, Dorrie."

With a sigh, he submitted, and I soon found out that the "scratch" was a very nasty gash in the fleshy part of his arm. It was bleeding freely, and I quickly bound it up with my handkerchief.

"We can dress it properly in the machine," I said briskly.

"All aboard!" sang out Lee. "Hurry up!"

We climbed up into the fuselage, and in a few seconds we were in our places. I noticed that the first light of dawn was showing in the sky—and nothing could have been better.

We should have daylight with us almost as soon as we were in the air. There was no wind, and the weather was splendid for flying. The only troubling point was—could we get the machine off the ground successfully?

Nelson Lee opened up the engines to their widest extent. They roared with all their power, and the great biplane fairly shot over the dark ground. Dense masses of trees were ahead of us, and a slight miscalculation on the gov'nor's part would mean a frightful disaster.

We left the ground with a clear jump, and soared steeply up into the air. Nelson Lee lifted her far more steeply than usual—in fact, it was quite a dangerous experiment. But it was either that or crashing into the trees.

Up we soared, and I half expected any second that we should "stall," owing to our stiff climbing angle. And a nose dive would not be at all pleasant. But the biplane acted magnificently.

She just scraped over the tops of the trees; I honestly believe there was not a foot to spare. But, once over, Lee reduced the climbing angle, and we rushed away into the night.

Then we swung round, climbing all the time.

"Hurrah!" I roared. "Oh, hurrah!"

Dorrie and Trotwood—and even the guv'nor himself—took up that cheer. We nearly drowned the noise of the engines with our joyous shouts. We had escaped from death itself—by a bare inch, so it seemed.

Round we went, all glowing with happiness. And we raced right across the Beejee village. We could see the figures running about, helter skelter. The glare from the river had died down a great deal, for the petrol was practically burnt out. But the grass and bushes were still blazing.

That glare had helped the guv'nor considerably, for the whole ground, and the trees, had been clearly illuminated.

And then, after having climbed to a good height, we set off across the forest—soaring away into the unknown as the dawn was breaking.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERERS.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH gave a heavy sigh.

"Life ain't worth living now," he said. "I feel like punching everybody I come across!"

"That wouldn't do any good, you ass," said McClure. "We're all resigned to it by this time. Poor old Nipper's gone—never to return. And Mr. Lee's gone, too. I wonder who we shall have as Housemaster when we get back to St. Frank's?"

"Oh, don't talk about it!" exclaimed Church huskily. "I—I can't believe that we shall never see Mr. Lee again! The finest Housemaster we ever had! It seems too awful for words!"

Handforth and Co. were not the only ones who were discussing the tragedy—or, rather, the supposed tragedy.

Everybody on board the Wanderer could talk of nothing else; in one form or another, it was the sole subject of conversation. And gloom and misery reigned supreme on that ship of mourning.

The yacht was preparing for her return voyage. Other plans had been made origin-

ally; the vessel was going for a trip to the Canary Islands, from thence to Madeira, and then to the Azores. A regular holiday trip, in fact, had been on the programme—after the business in Africa was settled.

But everything was now knocked on the head.

The Wanderer would set sail for home. The voyage would be a direct one to England, and all the boys would go to their various people until the summer holidays were at an end.

Sir Crawford was like a man stricken. The blow had been a terrible one to him. His dearest friends had gone—and there was Nicodemus Trotwood to remember. So far, Sir Crawford had not cabled to the lad's parents. It would do no good, and he might as well spare them the agony until it became absolutely necessary to impart the awful tidings.

The yacht was due to sail from Agabat that very evening.

Everybody was on board, and everything was ready. All hope had been given up long since. There was no prospect whatever of the lost ones returning. They had perished in the desert. That was the general belief.

"And we had such a ripping time to start with, too," said Handforth gloomily. "We were attacked by that rotter Nixon, and we did him in the eye. I was captured, you know, and there was an awful lot of excitement. But everything came all right. I can't see why everything can't come all right now!"

"Oh, don't talk rot, Handy," growled Pitt. "It doesn't make things any better, does it? I think we'd better all decide to drop the subject. It only makes us more miserable, and there's no sense in crying."

"Dear old boy, it's impossible to do what you say," put in Sir Montie Tregellis-West, shaking his noble head. "We can't talk for three minutes without poor old Nipper's name croppin' up. Begad! To think that we shall never see the dear old fellow again! Isn't it shockin'?"

Tommy Watson made a choky sound in his throat.

"It's too awful to talk about!" he said huskily.

And he leaned miserably over the rail, and stared down into the water. The girls were very quiet, too. They had very little to say, for all the spirit had been taken out of them.

"Look at that poor chap," murmured Handforth. "He looked upon Dorrie as his lord and master, and now he's mooning about as though he'd gone dotty. I'm awfully sorry for him."

Handforth had indicated Umlosi. The Kutana chief was standing near the bridge, quite by himself. He had stood there for a full period of ten minutes without moving a muscle. He was staring out across the sea, but he saw nothing. The black giant was deep in thought, and his face was expressionless.

Handforth moved along the deck towards Umlosi, and halted in front of the old fellow.

Umlosi did not move a hair.

"Feeling pretty rotten, I suppose?" said Handforth sympathetically.

Umlosi made no reply.

"You—you ain't asleep, are you?" asked Handforth, touching the Kutana chief's arm.

"Wau! It is thou, O youth with the voice of the lion!" rumbled Umlosi, turning his head. "I was thinking deeply. I have seen visions, O Handforth. Thou hast disturbed a wondrous dream."

Handforth stared.

"Sorry," he said. "But I didn't know you were dreaming—you were looking out across the sea."

"Yet I saw nothing of the sea," said Umlosi. "I was gazing across the great yellow sands, O inquisitive youth. And I have seen N'Kose, my father. I have seen Umtagati—aye, and I have seen Manzie, the nimble one."

"It's no good seeing them in a dream," growled Handforth. "They're dead! You know that as well as I do, Umlosi——"

"Hast thou seen their dead bodies?"

"Eh?"

"Hast thou seen Umtagati and Manzie stiff in death?" asked Umlosi. "Hast thou seen N'Kose, with his bones rotting——"

"I say, draw it mild!" interrupted Handforth uneasily. "You know jolly well that they're all dead—Trotwood as well. They died in the desert; and it's impossible to suppose that they could have been rescued. Sir Crawford and Dr. Brett have given up hope long ago."

Umlosi smiled a strange smile.

"And yet my snake tells me that all is not lost," he said softly. "Be thou patient, O youth of the big voice. Even as the ship of the sea is sometimes late in reaching port, so is the ship of the air——"

"Do—do you mean to say——"

"Nay, I say nothing," interrupted Umlosi. "I merely urge thee to wait, and thou wilt be rewarded."

And Umlosi turned and walked away, leaving Handforth staring after him with flushed face, and with his heart beating rapidly.

"Can the old beggar be right?" muttered Handforth. "Nobody's ever seen them dead, of course; but they went into the desert, and didn't return. They must be dead—there's nothing else for it! And yet—and yet——"

Handforth had been impressed by Umlosi's attitude. And when he joined the other juniors he had come to the conclusion that everything would turn out all serene in the end.

"They'll turn up, safe and sound!" Handforth told himself. "They're alive—I'll bet quids on it! And they'll be here before long! What silly asses we've been to moon about so much! Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth laughed scornfully; but it was rather a pitiful kind of laugh, nevertheless. He had made up his mind to believe the

best, but in his heart he was quite certain that the worst had happened.

Handforth was a cheerful youth, and he wanted to be cheerful now. So he kidded himself that everything would turn out all right. And he thought it would be rather good to put the other fellows into high spirits. Anything, in fact, to dispel the deadly gloom which prevailed.

Handforth marched briskly over to the crowd of juniors, and he was grinning cheerfully. The others looked at him curiously and with some show of indignation. But Handforth had made up his mind, although he half regretted it even now. But, having started, he couldn't draw back. Handforth had never been known to back out of a thing once it was fairly launched.

"What price a game of cricket on deck?" he asked cheerfully.

"What?"

"Did you say cricket?" demanded Watson.

"Yes, of course!"

"Begad!" said Montie, shocked. "You don't mean it, Handy?"

"Rats!" exclaimed Handforth. "Of course I mean it!"

"You—you heartless rotter!" said Christine warmly. "I'm surprised at you, Handy! Suggesting that we should play cricket when we're all mourning——"

"Oh, that's rot!"

"Eh!"

"Sheer rot!" said Handforth. "What the dickens is the good of mourning?"

"Why, you—you——"

"Why shouldn't we go on as usual?"

"You silly idiot!" roared McClure. "Have you gone dotty?"

"Only this morning the ass was grumbling at me for whistling!" said Church warmly. "And I wasn't whistling ragtime, either—I was thinking of funerals, and I just whistled a few bars of the Dead March——"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Watson.

"Well, I'm only illustrating the change in this idiot here," said Church. "This morning he grumbled because he heard the Dead March, and now he suggests that we should play cricket!"

"Why not?" asked Handforth. "Then, this evening, we can go down into the drawing-room and have some ragtime. The girls can dance, too—— Hi! Leggo, you asses! Waroooh!"

Handforth was seized, and he was jammed against the rail. The juniors were really angry. His heartless suggestions had taken them quite by surprise—and they didn't like it.

"What shall we do with him?" asked Watson hotly.

"Chuck him overboard!"

"Good wheeze!"

"One—two—three——"

"You fatheads!" howled Handforth. "There might be sharks, and I shall be eaten all up if you chuck me——"

But the juniors had no intention of carrying out their threat, and Handforth was allowed to go free.

He glared round him warmly.

"We don't want to make a row," said Pitt, "so we're going to let you off, Handy. But if you talk any more rot we'll bump you through the deck!"

Handforth grunted.

"What's the good of being miserable?" he demanded. "What's the good of mooning about? My idea is to laugh and be merry. It'll make the time pass more quickly—until they come back."

"Until—they—come—back?" repeated Watson slowly.

"Yes. Nipper and Mr. Lee, and——"

"Oh!"

The juniors stared.

"Poor old Handy!" said McClure gently. "He ain't callous, after all. His brain must be a bit touched. It's always been rocky, you know, and it's a wonder to me how he's lasted so long——"

"You—you burbling ass!" roared Handforth indignantly.

In spite of their gloom, the juniors couldn't help grinning.

"You don't understand!" went on Handforth. "I'm not dotty, and I'm not callous. I simply believe that Nipper and the others will turn up before long. They're not dead—you mark my words!"

"Don't be silly, Handy," said Watson. "You know they're dead——"

"Yes, of course, but it's nice to think——" Handforth broke off. "Rats!" he added hastily. "They're alive! And I'm not going to believe anything else, either. I want everybody to be cheerful, and——"

Just then Violet Watson and Ethel Church came running down the deck. Their faces were flushed and excited, and they burst into the crowd of juniors in a most unladylike manner. And this was ample proof of their excitement—for Violet, at all events, was one of the daintiest girls imaginable.

The young people practically had the decks to themselves. Umlosi had gone below, and Dr. Brett and Sir Crawford were below, too. The day was hot, and nobody felt inclined to read on deck.

"Oh, Tommy!" panted Violet, as she grasped Watson's arm. "Can't—can't you hear something?"

"Eh?" gasped Watson. "Hear something?"

"Yes—a buzzing in the air!" exclaimed the girl. "Ethel and I heard it plainly, but you were talking so loudly over here. Listen! Oh, do listen!"

They all listened, but nothing unusual was heard.

"I don't catch on!" said Watson. "A buzzing? Insects, I suppose——"

"It—it sounded like an aeroplane!" put in Ethel.

The juniors were startled.

"An aeroplane!" echoed De Valerie. "Oh, rot! I beg your pardon, Miss Ethel!" he added hastily. "But it does seem—well, queer. You must have heard an insect or something——"

"Great Scott!" roared Handforth. "I can hear something!"

They all stared up into the sky, excited, and with their hearts beating rapidly. A sound had come down on the wind which was absolutely distinctive and unmistakable. It was the roar of an aeroplane!

It grew louder and louder, but still nothing could be seen. Even now the juniors did not believe the truth. They thought they were deceived in some way—until Pitt suddenly gave a shout.

"I can see it!" he roared, pointing. "Look—look! Coming over from the land! It's heading straight for us!"

"Oh!"

Nobody could say anything more at the moment. Far away, in the sky, a speck was visible. It grew larger and larger as the juniors watched. Before long the shape of the wings could be seen.

And members of the crew were coming up from below. Sir Crawford appeared, and Captain Burton was with him. And all stared up into the sky, hoping for something which seemed too wild to be true.

"It—it must be some military machine!" said Watson huskily. "I suppose they have 'em out here. It looks a bit like the aeroplane that Mr. Lee went away in, doesn't it? It can't be the same——"

"Begad! It's impossible!" said Sir Montie.

Handforth danced about madly.

"They're alive!" he roared. "It's Mr. Lee and Dorrie and——"

"Don't, Handy—don't!" gasped McClure. "You're wrong—you must be wrong! It can't be Mr. Lee——"

"Oh, but supposing it is?" exclaimed Violet, clasping her hands. "Oh, how lovely! How glorious! I shall go mad with joy if—if——"

She didn't finish. And she and all the others watched—fascinated. The big biplane was now quite close, soaring overhead as steadily as a ship sails over the sea.

Then, as everybody watched, her engines were suddenly cut off; she dipped her nose and came volplaning towards the yacht in a beautiful spiral. Down she came, lower and lower.

Everybody strained their eyes to see who the occupants of the machine were. Glasses were focussed, but hands were unsteady with excitement. Needless to say, I was sitting in that aeroplane, and Nelson Lee was piloting it. Dorrie and Trotwood were in the passenger seats behind.

We had started at dawn from the Beejee country; we had landed at a big settlement a hundred miles from the coast. A kindly British missionary had provided us with food and drink, and we had told him of our adventures.

Then, with full directions, we had started out once again. The journey to the coast was a matter of a mere hour, or just over. Nelson Lee's hand was accurate, for we caught sight of the yacht almost as soon as we saw the sea. We had flown straight to Agabat.

Our petrol supply was giving out, but we still had enough to carry the machine another hundred miles, if necessary. Fortunately, it wasn't necessary. We all smiled with delight as we glided down towards the yacht; we could see the excitement which our arrival had caused.

"By gad!" grinned Dorrie. "They thought we were dead—an' here we are, as large as life, an' as merry as crickets!"

The guv'nor glided away from the yacht when he had descended to about five hundred feet, opened up the engines again, and we roared away across the bay. Turning gracefully, we once more headed for the Wanderer.

Lower and lower we went, until we should just clear the masts of the yacht. Then, with our engines roaring triumphantly, we soared over.

Those on the decks were able to see us for the first time. The aeroplane came on, and passed clean overhead. Four faces were visible—and a terrific roar of joy went up.

"It's them!" shrieked Handforth. "What did I say! They're alive!"

"Trotwood and all!" roared Watson. "Oh, my goodness!"

"They're all safe!"

On the bridge Sir Crawford Grey turned to Dr. Brett.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed fervently.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL SERENE!

"HURRAH!"

The cheer rang out again and again—and every throat echoed it. The wanderers had returned, after they had been given up as dead!

The scene on the yacht was truly terrific. Everybody seemed to go mad. The boys danced and capered about; caps were flung into the sea; the crew ignored all orders in their excitement. And dozens of gay flags were run up the masts. It was a scene to be remembered.

Within five minutes half a dozen boats were setting out for the shore. Everybody wanted to go. The juniors managed to get into a boat, somehow; and the girls squeezed into another.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was piloting the biplane to the ground.

We landed without a bump, and then grinned at one another.

"This is better than bein' in the hands of the Beejees!" said Dorrie complacently.

"You wait!" I said, looking at the yacht. "Before long you'll pine for the peace of that genial spot! There's going to be trouble soon, and if we don't get half killed it'll be a wonder!"

His lordship looked alarmed.

"Is it goin' to be as bad as that?" he asked anxiously. "By gad! Can't you say that I was killed, or somethin'?"

"You've been spotted," I replied. "Your face is visible a mile off—nobody could miss seeing a chivvy like yours!"

Nelson Lee chuckled as he reached the ground.

"Nipper's only joking, Dorrie," he said. "I expect we shall receive a tumultuous welcome—but we shall get over it. We may consider ourselves marvellously lucky to be back here, safe and sound."

"It is indeed wonderful," said Trotwood.

"And you contributed largely to our escape, my boy," went on Lee. "But for your efforts we should not have convinced the blacks——"

"Oh, really, sir!" protested Nicodemus. "I hope it is not your intention to tell the other boys that I aided the escape?"

"It is my intention!" said the guv'nor firmly.

"But I did nothing, sir——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Nelson Lee. "We all helped, as a matter of fact—and we were favoured by Providence. And now we are back at the yacht once again, all safe and sound, our mission accomplished."

"And with the booty intact," I said, with satisfaction. "Three hundred thousand of the best! My hat! Won't we celebrate?"

It seemed to be the general idea to celebrate. The crowd which came ashore hurried over to the aeroplane, and the scene was lively for quite a time. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were the first to grab me.

"You—you bounder!" gasped Watson breathlessly.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "It's rippin' to see you again, Nipper, old boy! We thought you were dead—we did, really!"

I grinned as they hugged me.

"You shouldn't think things like that," I said. "Chaps like me don't die young! Hi! Don't squash me, you asses! Groooh!"

They seemed to have the idea that it was their duty to kill me, after having found me alive. At all events, they punched me, hugged me, and generally behaved like lunatics.

The other juniors were worse, and I had a terrible time. Dorrie and Nelson Lee did not escape. And in the end we were all carried shoulder-high down to the boats.

Umlosi's joy was not demonstrative. He just showed all his teeth in a big, happy smile.

"My snake did not lie to me, N'Kose," he rumbled. "I knew that thou wouldst come back! I saw thee in my dreams—even as I saw Umtagati and Manzie. Thou hast returned from the dead, my father. It is well."

On the yacht the excitement was as great as ever. The aeroplane was pegged down, and several members of the crew were placed on guard. And then we felt comfortable.

That evening, in the magnificent saloon, we had to tell all our adventures. Everybody listened with great interest. The girls were spellbound as they listened to our perils and troubles.

We were pleased to learn that Captain Nixon had been completely defeated, and that Jake Starkey had found enough sense to desert the rascally captain. Starkey was not a bad sort, on the whole—and he could not forget that Nelson Lee had saved his life during our visit to the oasis of Zambi.

The treasure was ours, and everybody was safe and sound. The trip to El Safra, in spite of the unforeseen trials and perils, had turned out a huge success. We had every reason to feel satisfied.

That night we danced and sang right into the small hours.

The yacht was now a joy ship, and the original plan was to be carried out. As soon as the aeroplane was stowed away on board again, we should set sail for the Canary Islands.

But if we thought that our adventures were over, we were mistaken!

In the morning the yacht was a-bustle with life and activity. Everybody worked with a will, and everybody was cheerful and happy. The faithful old biplane was shipped on board, and by the evening we were ready for departure.

We did not leave port, however, until the morning.

It was a happy party which set out from Agabat that day. Four of us had come back from the dead; and the others couldn't get over it easily. Again and again I found it necessary to retell the story.

By the second day we were well out to sea, and the novelty of the thing had passed. Life on the yacht became normal; the guv'nor and I were no longer looked upon as ghosts.

And then a change came about in the weather.

The skies, instead of being blue and sunny, changed their aspect. Dense masses of black cloud rolled up, and the wind freshened until it became a gale. The sea, rising hourly, was soon rough in the extreme.

Handforth was quite delighted.

"This is just what we wanted—a storm!" he said briskly, as he walked along the deck. "If a chap goes to sea, it's only right that he should encounter a really good storm—— Whoa! What the—— Yarcooh! Ow!"

The deck had suddenly assumed an acute angle as the yacht heeled over. Handforth grabbed at the rail, missed, and slithered along the deck until he was brought up with a thud against the mast. As he struck the mast with the back of his head, Handforth knew all about it.

"How do you like storms, Handy?" I grinned.

Edward Oswald sat up dazedly.

"Eh?" he gasped. "I didn't know it was dark yet! I'll swear I saw a lot of stars shining——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth picked himself up, rubbed the back of his head tenderly, and then grabbed at the rail. I took care to stand well back, however.

"Better not stand there, Handy," I said. "You'll catch——"

"Oh, I sha'n't be caught bending again," interrupted Handforth. "Until a chap has been through a storm he doesn't know what a sea voyage is. He wants to get the taste of salt water—— Great pip! Ugggh!"

For a moment Handforth disappeared, and I roared.

"How does it taste, Handy?" I asked. "You wanted some salt water——"

"Groooh!" gasped Handforth.

The wave that had come aboard had drenched Handforth to the skin, and he crawled away and went below. In future, he was not likely to stand near the rail until the sea calmed down.

But he was just as cheery as ever at tea-time.

"People talk of getting seasick," he remarked. "There's McClure—he's in his bunk, the silly ass! Doesn't want any tea, and chokes at the very thought of fat meat. I mentioned bacon to him——"

"Dry up, you ass!" said Pitt uneasily.

"I believe in eating everything as usual," said Handforth. "You wait until dinner-time. I'm going to eat more fat than ever—Whoa! That was a nasty plunge, by George! Made me feel quite queer!"

Handforth continued his tea, but further plunges came, and long before the dinner-gong sounded he was in his bunk—writhing. It was quite immaterial to him whether the yacht floated or sank. Seasickness was no longer a joke with Handforth. He was trying it!

And a good few others were trying it, too. Half the guests were below that evening. I wasn't affected, for I had been to sea on many occasions, and I also happen to be a good sailor.

The night set in black and rough. The storm was much more violent than the captain had expected, and there was every prospect of a wild night. Rain was hissing down in sheets.

Up on deck the blackness was pitchy. But the yacht fought bravely on, and was perfectly seaworthy. However, that night was not to pass without something of a very terrible nature occurring.

For, in the midst of the storm, a figure came up from below—unseen and unheard. It came up stealthily—and it was the figure of Captain John Nixon! The half-demented skipper was bent upon mischief.

It is not my intention to set down here all the exciting events which followed. For we met with adventures of so startling a character that they deserve to be told in full. I can safely say, however, that everything turned out all right in the end. But the voyage was destined to end very quickly.

In brief, we were betrayed!

The yacht was piled up upon the rocks, and how we managed to get ashore—— But, as I mentioned just now, that is another yarn.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

The great popularity of the series now appearing in "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" warrants my giving you another yarn next week of the further adventures of Sir Crawford Grey's memorable holiday party.

We have just read that Sir Crawford's magnificent yacht, "The Wanderer," has mysteriously run aground on some rocks, and that Captain John Nixon, the rascally skipper, had secretly crept on board at Agabat. Mad with disappointment at not being able to secure the treasure, we know that he is bent on revenge. What form will his vengeance take? This will be told in "CASTAWAY ISLAND," appearing in next week's number of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." NELSON LEE, the great detective housemaster, and NIPPER, his schoolboy assistant, will, as usual, figure prominently in the story. Your old friends, Lord Dorrie, Handforth, Umlosi, the boys of St. Frank's College, and the girl visitors will be there, of course.

I hope soon to be able to announce the title of a new serial shortly to appear when "The House in the Jungle" comes to an end.

The EDITOR.

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, her invalid father, and a man named Taverner, who is discovered to have attempted the murder of Ferguson by poisonous drugs. Overpowered and imprisoned, he escapes, and it is feared he will disclose the subterranean passage to Tib Mohammed. The sick man rallies, and recognises Alan as his son. Ferguson's real name is Harold Carne. Wrongfully believing his wife to have been disloyal, he came to Africa to forget his troubles. Alan gives him a letter which discloses the truth, and Harold Carne is persuaded to return to his wife. The sound of guns warns the fugitives that there is no time to be lost to flee from Tib Mohammed and his overwhelming hosts.

(Now read on).

The Critical Hour—Only One Signal—Instructions for Jan—Dick's Farewell to Lorna—The Lads Depart—Holding the Pass—Ralph Taverner Makes His Appearance—The First Explosion—The Rout of the Defenders—Lighting the Signal Fire—A Dash to the Cavern—Nobody there.

ALL was quiet now. The firing had ceased. There had been in all four heavy discharges in rapid succession, and there could be no doubt they meant one of two things. Either the Arabs and Bajangas were already trying to force their way through the pass, or Somali scouts had discovered that the enemy were approaching to the attack, and had brought the news to Chanka. The situation was the more serious because of the discovery Lorna had just made. If Ralph Taverner had carried off with him the bag of grenades—and it appeared to be certain that he had—those terrible instruments of death would give a decided advantage to Tib Mohammed and his band, and there would be little or no chance of repulsing them. Such was the danger. The hope that the valley might be held against the foe had dwindled to a shred. It was a blow to the two lads, and Mr. Carne and his daughter were pale with anxiety. As they were gazing at one another, dumb with consternation, Jan Swart slipped into the room, followed by the four Somali servants who had been on and near the premises. The little Hottentot was aware of the instructions that had been issued to Chanka.

"They come, baas!" he exclaimed. "Bad men come! Arabs and black savages!"

"Yes, that's what it means," Alan told him. "But you needn't be frightened."

Jan shook his head.

"Me not afraid!" he replied. "Me want to fight, baas."

Alan stepped to a window, and stood there for a few seconds, looking towards the far end of the valley.

"It is all dark in that direction," he said. "The signal-fire hasn't been lighted, and no more guns have been discharged, so there is no immediate danger. The Arabs haven't attacked yet, or we should hear firing. The Masai must have learned that they were approaching."

"But we dare not waste any time," Mr. Carne answered. "It will be impossible to hold those ruffians back, for Ralph Taverner is with them, and he has the hand grenades, which are filled with a powerful explosive. There are enough of them to blow the whole force of Somalis to bits."

"I don't believe the situation is utterly

hopeless," Alan replied. "Perhaps Ralph Taverner is not with Tib Mohammed. He may have missed him. And as for the grenades, I don't see how they can be used effectively in that wild and rocky place. At all events, Dick and I must be off at once to help to hold the pass, as was agreed, and you and Lorna will hurry over to the mouth of the cavern and wait there. If the signal-fire should be set alight you will know that the Arabs and Bajangas have broken through, and that we are hurrying to join you. I think you have everything arranged for departure, father?"

"Yes, my boy. All is in readiness. Food for the journey is packed in a couple of bags, and the diamonds are in a small sack of leather. There is nothing to delay us."

"You must start as soon as we have gone, then, for there is no telling what may happen. The fire may be lighted while Dick and I are on our way, and if it should be, we will——" Alan stopped and glanced at the little Hottentot. We won't take you with us, Jan," he said. "You will stay here with Baas Carne and the white missy, for they may need you."

"Me do what you tell me," Jan reluctantly assented. "Me stay, baas."

Mr. Carne had dropped down on his chair again, stricken with sudden weakness. There was a tinge of angry colour on his twitching features. He was willing enough to abandon the lonely home where he had dwelt for so many years, but he hated to leave it at the mercy of the man who had tried to poison him, and the band of Arab slavers.

Having clasped his father's hand and embraced and kissed his sister, Alan hastened to the hall, where were a number of firearms and a supply of ammunition.

"Come along, Dick!" he called to his chum.

Dick Selby lingered for a moment. He had taken Lorna's hand, and, as he held it and looked straight into her eyes, the girl flushed under his ardent gaze.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you," he said, in a low tone. "I hadn't meant to speak yet, Lorna. I would have waited until we'd got down country. But you may never see me again, and if you don't perhaps you will guess what it was that—that I wanted——"

His voice faltered. He let go of Lorna's hand, and her eyes met his for an instant.

"Yes, I can guess," she murmured softly. "Good-bye! Take care of yourself, Dick, and come back to me."

She turned to her father, and Dick, cheered by her farewell words to him, joined Alan in the hall. And a few moments later, equipped with rifles and cartridge-belts, they had left the house, and were pushing up the valley at a rapid pace. Night had fallen an hour ago, and the sky was overcast with clouds that presaged a storm; but a pale glow shone through them from the moon, which had risen above the horizon. There had been no further discharge of guns, nor had the signal-fire been lighted. There was no sound except the stirring of the breeze, and the restless movement of zebras and larger animals that were feeding on the grass.

"What do you think about it, old chap?" asked Alan. "Not much chance of holding out, is there?"

"It all depends," Dick replied, roused from thoughts of Lorna. "If Ralph Taverner is with the Arabs and Bajangas, and they use the hand grenades which he has stolen, it's a thousand to one that they will break through."

"Yes, I dare say they will. I am prepared for the worst."

"Well, it won't much matter. We will all be able to get away in safety, and there won't be anything else to worry about, except the long journey down to the coast."

"Before we take to flight, Dick, I would like to see that scoundrel Taverner get what he deserves."

"So should I. And perhaps he will. If I have a chance to plant a bullet in him I won't hesitate, you can bet!"

They had no great distance to go. They hurried on, holding to the narrow path until they were within two or three hundred yards of the upper end of the valley. Then the silence was shattered by the report of a gun, and it was followed by other spluttering reports that spread in volume, and thundered with a confused clamour. The attack had begun, and with anxious hearts, fearing that at any moment the signal-fire might be lighted, the lads pressed forward as fast as they could. They went by the great heap of brush that was in readiness to be ignited, and just beyond it they entered the mouth of the gorge which led to the secret exit from the cliffs to the forest region that lay to the west. With the fusillade ringing in their ears, meeting no one at first, they mounted higher and higher between rugged slopes twisting to right and left, until, of a sudden, a tall, dusky figure appeared in front of them. It was the Masai warrior, armed with his big shield and huge spear, his kaross dangling from his shoulder, and his head crowned with a bristling fan of feathers.

"How are things going?" panted Alan. "Is all well?"

"Truly it is well, young Bhagwan," Chanka answered. "They came with the darkness, those dogs of Arabs and the curs of Bajangas. But they will get no farther. They are lying in their holes yonder, and all they can do is to yelp and bark like jackals. Wah, it is good! Come, Bhagwan, and see for yourself."

The lads did not speak of the grenades. The Masai had approached to meet them, knowing that they would arrive; and as they followed at his heels, mounting still higher, their spirits rose. From what they had been

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

told, and from the fact that there had been no explosions as yet, they were inclined to think that Ralph Taverner was not with the attacking party. The sputter of firearms still rang in their ears at intervals, and it had swelled nearer and louder when at length they clambered up a shallow gully, and at the top of it found themselves on the rim of a wide floor of rock that was strewn with large and small boulders. They took shelter amongst these, and Chanka, squatted by their side, told them in a few words what the situation was, and where they were. They had got to the edge of the scene of the fighting. Close to right and left of them, and up on the rugged and bushy slopes that towered to a great height, most of the Somalis were lying under cover, their presence marked by the occasional flashes of their weapons. A few of them were concealed beyond Dick and Alan on the shelf, and in front of them the shelf converged to a black cleft, which ascended between the hills, and was so narrow that two men abreast could not have emerged from it. This was the secret exit, and only by that could the invaders get through to the valley, for on both sides of the cleft were sheer, steep walls. Farther beyond them the slopes of the gorge were less steep, and were clothed with scrub; and here the Arabs and Bajangas were lying in nooks and crannies, returning the fire of the Somalis, none of whom had been hit as yet.

"Wah, it is good!" the Masai repeated. "Those dogs will stay where they are! They will go away when they have had enough of fighting, Bhagwan, and we will see them no more!"

He left the lads, and glided forward to join a couple of his men, who were near by, and Dick and Alan, crouching in their shelter, watched the scene with keen interest and with diminishing anxiety. Their fears had not been confirmed, and they had now some reason to believe that it would not come to the worst. Tib Mohammed and his party dared not approach by the narrow cleft, which they would have had to thread in single file. Unable to advance any farther, held in check by the sheer walls of rock, they could only blaze away with their big guns at the concealed Somalis, who returned the fire at intervals. The weapons cracked spasmodically, spitting jets of flame, and now and again there was a yell from an Arab or a Bajanga, telling he had been hit by a bullet.

"Well, it isn't as bad as we expected," said Dick. "Either Ralph Taverner is not with those ruffians, or he didn't carry off the hand grenades."

"He took them right enough," Alan replied. "There isn't any doubt about that. But perhaps he missed Tib Mohammed's band while he was searching for them, or something may have happened to him soon after he left the valley that night."

"That's more likely. A lion may have made a hungry meal of him."

"It is fortunate for us if that was his fate. I'm not a bit worried now, Dick, for those fellows are at bay, and there isn't a chance of their getting at us. They must know that. I dare say they will withdraw before long, and then we will go back to——"

"By heavens! Look!" Dick interrupted, nudging his chum's elbow. "Do you see?"

"Yes, it's Taverner!" declared Alan. "By Jove, there he is!"

Ralph Taverner had just appeared at the mouth of the narrow cleft, thirty yards away, dimly revealed by the glow of the moon. He had something in his hand that was spitting sparks. And the next instant, as both of the lads took aim at him with their rifles, he hurled the missile from him. It was a grenade, and it exploded as it struck the middle of the rocky shelf. There was a rumbling crash and a burst of flame and smoke. Dick and Alan leaped erect, and caught the partial force of the explosion, which blew them clean off the rock and hurled them into a copse of bushes beneath them. They crawled out unhurt, but bruised and shaken; and when they had got to their feet they climbed quickly up again to the ledge, where a film of smoke was drifting. Two of the Somalis had been killed, and Chanka was kneeling by a wounded one, who was writhing in agony. Shrieks of terror mingled with shouts of triumph. Ralph Taverner was still lurking in the cleft, though he could not be seen for the smoke. He flung two more of the grenades, one to the right and one to the left, and as they exploded on the bushy slopes there was a glimpse, by the lurid glare of the moon, of the mangled bodies of several of the Somalis who had been hidden in the cover. All was lost. There was no chance now of holding the Arabs and Bajangas back. The surviving Somalis were scrambling from their hiding-places on the hillsides, screeching with fright. Chanka dashed by the lads, shouting something which they could not distinguish. Alan threw his rifle to his shoulder and discharged it at the mouth of the cleft, and he was about to fire again when Dick seized him by the arm and dragged him away.

"Come along!" he urged. "We'll be blown to bits if we stay here! It's all up!"

"That scoundrel!" gasped Alan, as he followed his chum. "That fiend Taverner! By heavens, if I could only have killed him!"

They sped after the Masai, who had waited for them at the verge of the rocky shelf; and, as they dropped from it into the bushes below, another grenade exploded behind them, and they were pelted by a shower of splintered fragments of stone.

"Wah, wah, it is bad!" Chanka cried dolefully. "It is very bad! Those dogs have devil things that are worse than guns!"

The worst had happened. More than half of the Somalis had been killed or crippled by the explosions and those who had not been injured were fleeing in panic, shrieking at the

(Continued on page iv. of cover.)

top of their voices. They came trailing behind the Masai and the lad, who knew, as they held to their flight, that Tib Mohammed and his band must be now pressing through the narrow cleft. At reckless speed, at the risk of breaking their necks, they went scrambling and floundering down through the gorge, with a hue-and-cry ringing in their ears. Some of the terrified Somalis passed them as they raced on, and when they had emerged from the encircling hills a few more yards brought them to the great heap of brush and dried grass. Here they paused, and Alan, taking a matchbox from his pocket, ignited the pile. And at once, fanned by the breeze, the flames soared up from bottom to top, roaring and crackling and throwing a crimson glare many yards around.

"That's done it!" said Dick. "They would have been watching for us to get out of the house, and they must have seen it already."

"Yes, they will be starting at once," Alan assented, "and we will find them waiting for us at the cavern, as they have much less farther to go than we have. Tib Mohammed has got the best of it, thanks to the help of that miscreant Taverner," he added. "But things might be worse, Dick. We'll all be able to get away in safety, and there will be nothing to fear afterwards from the Arabs and Bajangas. It will be impossible for them to follow us."

Behind them a savage clamour was swelling, which meant that Tib Mohammed and his band had threaded the secret entrance. Chanka and the lads bore to the left, skirting the north side of the valley, and as they went on as fast as they could, with the light of the signal-fire fading in their eyes, Alan briefly told the Masai of the plan to escape through the subterranean passage in the hills to the stream that was on the farther side of it, and travel down that in canoes to the Bana River. They did not run across any of the fugitive Somalis. The clamour gradually ebbed behind them, and when they had pressed on for more than a mile they came to a spot which Dick recognised. It was here, he was certain, that they had stopped on the day when they had accompanied Lorna on a tour of inspection. Slipping into a dense fringe of bushes at the base of the cliff, with his companion at his heels, he ascended steeply for thirty or forty yards, by a narrow and twisting path. At the top of it they broke from the dark cover and stepped upon a shallow ledge. They had reached the mouth of the cavern. It was immediately in front of them, piercing the wall of granite. But there was nobody here. The lads called, and there was no answer. What could it mean? Why had not Lorna and her father arrived?

"It is very queer," Alan said gloomily. "I am afraid something has gone wrong."

"It looks like it," Dick replied. "They should have got here before we did."

The Masai rested one hand on his big spear, and shaded his eyes with the other as he gazed across the misty valley.

"Wah, it is bad!" he muttered. "Some evil has befallen my master and the liftle white missy!"

(*To be continued.*)

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