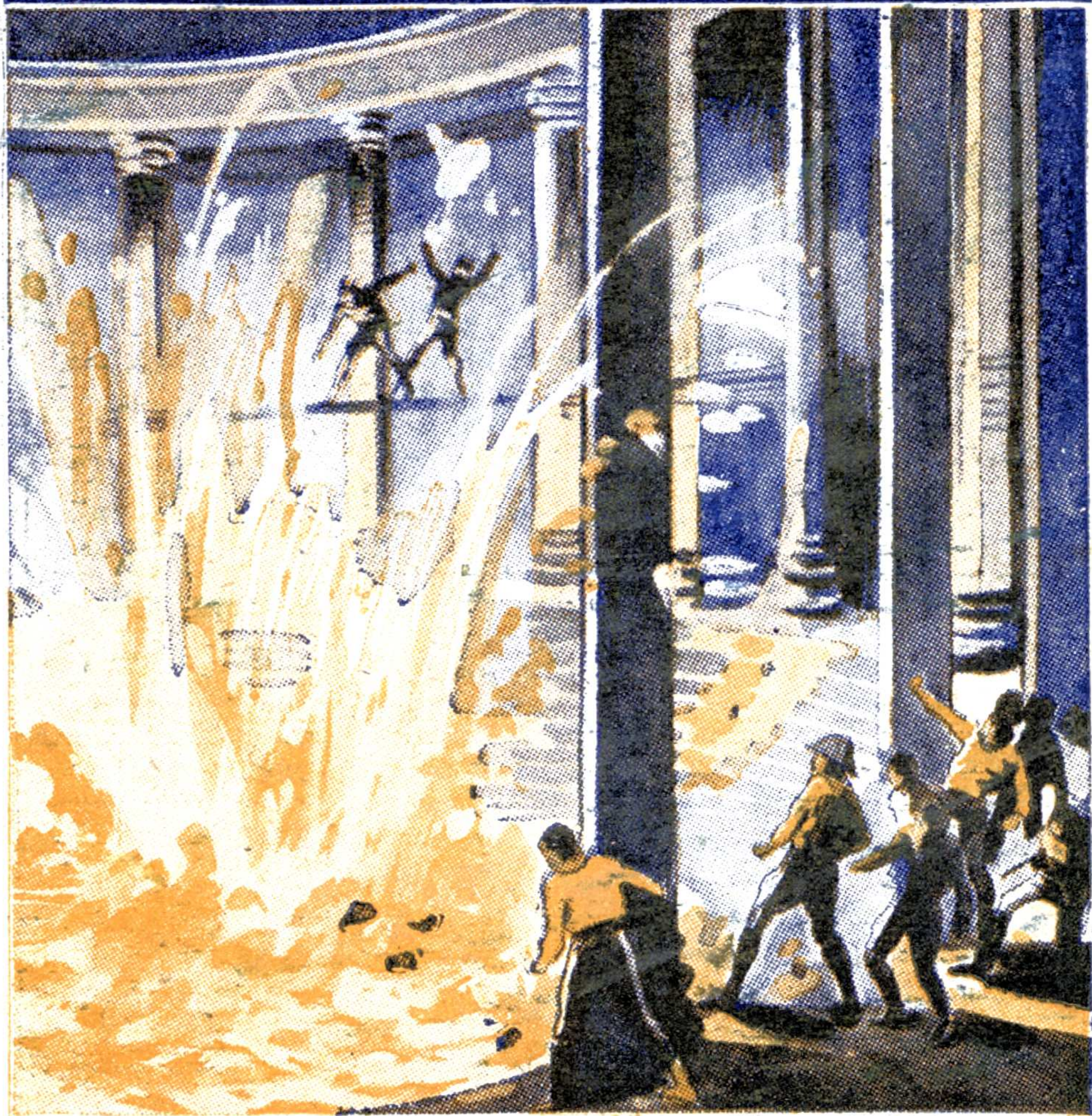


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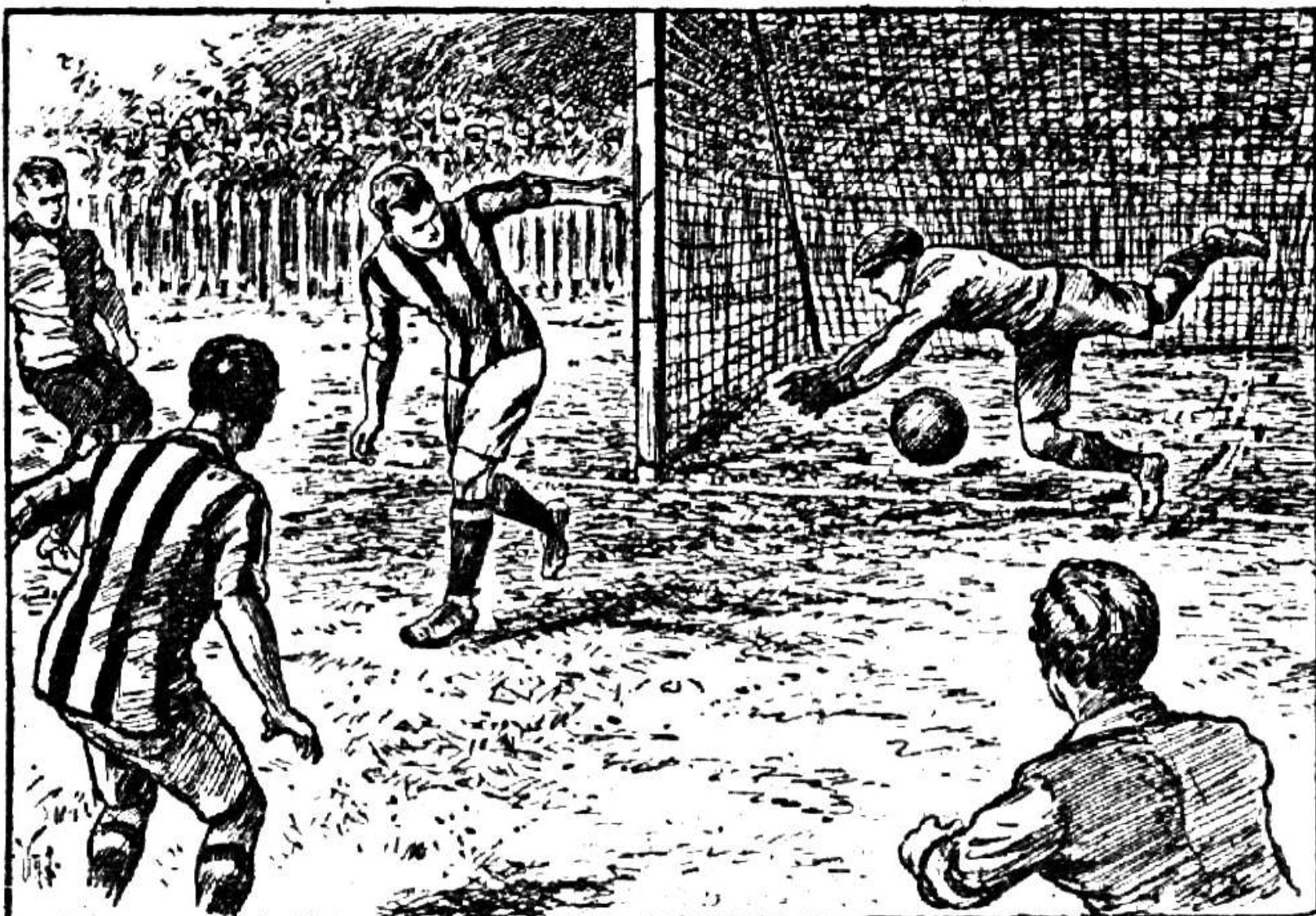
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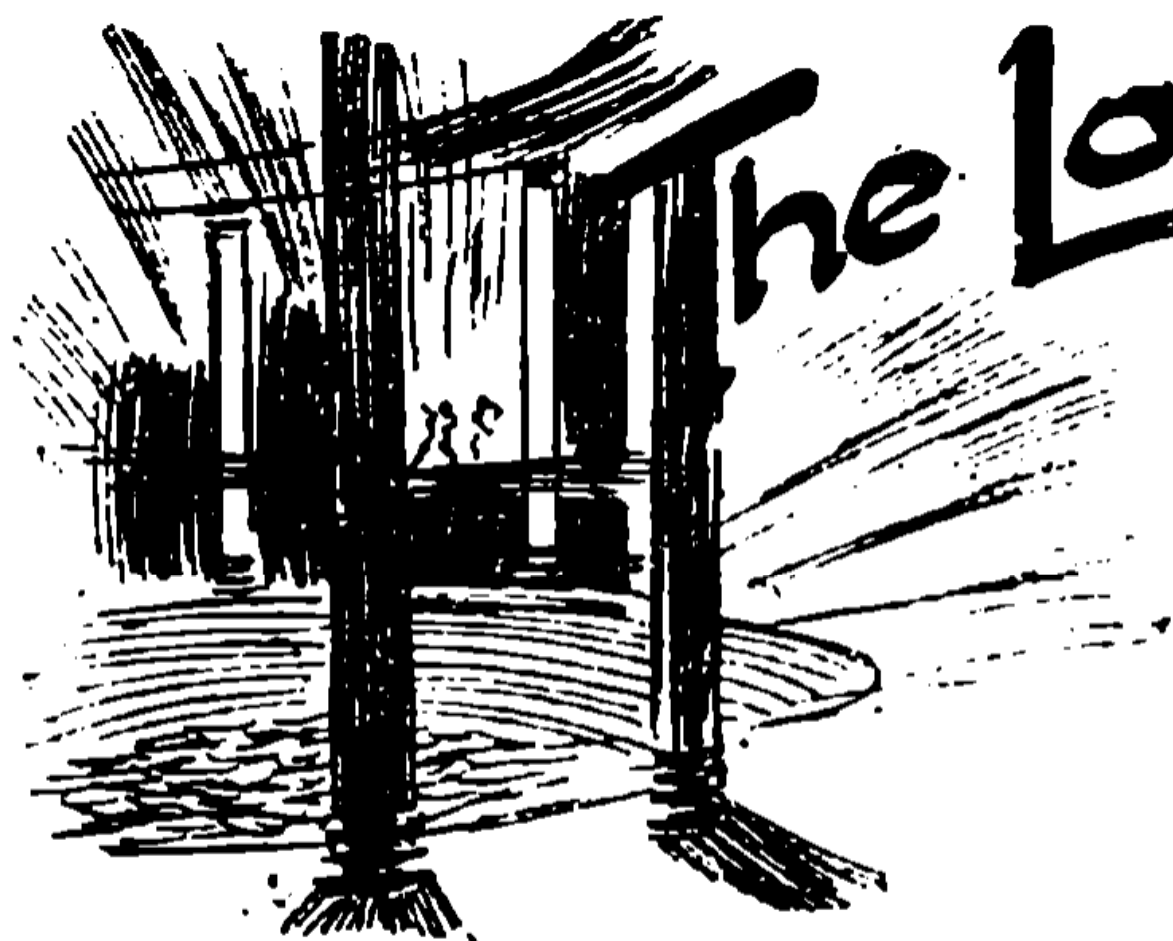
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

IN THE CITY OF GOLD.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH thumped his right fist into his left palm with considerable vigour.

"The position is serious, there's no getting away from the fact!" he declared emphatically. "It's no good trying to make out that we're in a decent position, because we're not! We're prisoners in this country, and goodness knows when we shall get back to civilisation!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Don't keep interrupting!" roared Handforth, glaring round. "You don't seem to realise that this matter is deadly serious. Here we are, in El Dorado, and we have about as much chance of getting back to England as we have of flying to the moon!"

"Rats!"

"Did you say rats to me, Walter Church?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Yes, I did!" exclaimed Church, of the Remove. "What's the good of saying things like that, Handy?"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Well, even if it is, there's no need to make the fellows downhearted!" said McClure. "Besides, I don't believe it. I don't believe that we are doomed to

remain in this place. Don't forget that Mr. Lee and Lord Dorrimore are here, and they won't be willing to sit down and twiddle their thumbs! If there's any way out of this place, that will be found!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old McClure!"

"That's the way to speak!"

The juniors were rather animated, and Handforth looked round with some wrath. He was making a speech, and he wanted everybody to agree with him. If there were any dissenting voices in any audience which Handforth happened to address, Handforth generally got somewhat wrathful.

The scene of this particular speech was rather a strange one. For Handforth was mounted upon some marble steps, with a beautiful fountain playing in his rear. The sun was shining gloriously, and the day was perfect in every way. But the surroundings were by no means usual—they were, in fact, really extraordinary.

For all these St. Frank's fellows were in the city of El Dorado—the mysterious hidden city, which was tucked away behind the Brazilian forests, right in the centre of a terrible swamp.

The whole country was unknown to the outside world. It was an astonishing place, inhabited by a race of white giants who were not unlike the ancient

Romans in their dress and in their manners.

We had had some very exciting times in El Dorado.

I was there, of course, with the gov'nor, for Nelson Lee had been very active just lately. He and Lord Dorrimore and every member of his lordship's yacht's crew had been very active in defending the city from the attacks of a savage race of giants who lived in a valley a good few miles away from El Dorado.

That episode was over. The Ciri-Ok-Baks—as the other giants were called—had been completely defeated. And that defeat had been brought about mainly owing to the wonderful efforts of Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore and the other members of the party. The Arzacs were extremely grateful, and now we were honoured guests in their midst.

"I might as well explain the position in detail!" went on Handforth, addressing the throng of juniors who were collected round the fountain. "Here we are, in El Dorado, and we have no chance of getting away."

"You said that before, you ass!"

"That doesn't matter! I'll say it again!" roared Handforth. "I want you all to understand exactly where we are."

"We do understand it!"

"Rats! Half of you don't know anything!" declared Handforth witheringly. "If you'll only listen, instead of keep interrupting, everything will be all serene. As you know, we came out here in Lord Dorrimore's steam yacht, *The Wanderer*—"

"Rot!" interrupted Reginald Pitt. "We came out in the airship!"

"I mean we came out to the Amazon in the yacht!" shouted Handforth, glaring at Pitt. "What's the good of making quibbles like that? We came out to the Amazon in Lord Dorrimore's yacht with the intention of finding Colonel Kerrigan. Well, we got to the Amazon, and then we went up the River Majarra. After that—"

"After that we were collared by the Comte de Plessigny, and we were all brought here in the airship!" said Tommy Watson. "What's the good of starting ancient history, Handy? We all know these details. There's no sense in repeating them like this!"

Handforth glared.

"You might just as well be reminded

of all the facts," he went on. "And the facts are jolly significant. After the count had brought us here, we were marooned among the Arzacs—abandoned, as a matter of fact. And then the count tried to do a dirty trick by inciting the mud men to attack the city, so that we should all be wiped out. Well, that game didn't go through, and the count was compelled to flee for his life. He's gone, and he's taken the airship with him. I don't suppose we shall ever see him again, and here we are—the whole giddy bunch of us—absolutely helpless."

"Yes, the position is serious enough, Handy," I said. "Between us and civilisation there lies a great swamp which extends for hundreds of miles. That swamp is utterly incapable of being crossed by human beings—or, for that matter, by animals. The only way of getting back to the Amazon is by the air. And, considering that the count has taken the airship away, the problem is a pretty stiff one. But there's no need for you fellows to worry. Mr. Lee has got the matter in hand, and if there's anything possible to be done, Mr. Lee will do it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the way to talk, Nipper! There's no need to be pessimistic like Handy!"

Handforth glared round again.

"Who's pessimistic?" he bellowed. "If any fellow here dares to say that I'm a pessimist, I'll punch him on the nose!"

"Now, boys, what's the trouble?" inquired a voice. "I hope there is going to be no quarrelling here?"

Colonel Kerrigan had just appeared, and Lord Dorrimore was with him. The latter was looking quite cheerful and contented. He was attired in a somewhat dilapidated drill suit, and he was smoking a cigarette. A very battered Panama was poised on the back of his head, and I could hardly help smiling as I gazed at him.

Lord Dorrimore was generally an extremely well dressed individual. But now he was very much like a scarecrow. His white drill suit was a mere ghost of its former self. And this was because of the great battle which had recently ended. Dorrie had fought like the biggest warrior, and he had cared nothing about his clothing. There had been no time to care, as a matter of

fact. And there was no change—there were no other clothes in this town.

"How goes it this morning, boys?" asked Dorrie cheerfully. "Three days have passed since that battle ended, and we're just in the same position as before—except that we are the honoured guests of these cheerful white giants."

"Do you think we shall ever be able to get across the swamp, sir?" asked De Valeric.

"There's no tellin', my lad," said Dorrie. "Personally, I think the trick will be done."

"How, sir?"

"It's no good askin' me how, young 'un. I don't know," replied his lordship. "But we've got Mr. Leo with us, and I leave everythin' to him. I trust the professor in every bally detail, you know. If he's not capable of gettin' us out of this predicament, nobody in the world is!"

"Good old Dorrie!" I exclaimed. "Let's leave everything to the gov'nor! He'll pull us through!"

The faith we all had in Nelson Leo was rather wonderful. I don't think the gov'nor was quite pleased about it—for it was up to him, now, to do something very decisive. If he failed, he would lose the confidence of the party, and Nelson Lee did not want to do that.

Things had been rather quiet during the last day or so. After the tremendous excitement of the recent battles, a period of calm had set in.

And we had taken the opportunity to rest, and to get accustomed to our surroundings.

The Arzacs themselves were extremely busy. They had their hands full, for there were many repairs to be made, many tasks to be performed, in order to repair the damages caused by the battle.

There were a good many juniors among the party, including Handforth & Co., my own two chums, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Pitt and his chums, Tom Burton, the Duke of Somerton, the Hon. Douglas Singleton, Fatty Little, to say nothing of Fullwood & Co., of Study A. There were others, including Morrow and Fenton of the Sixth, and three fags from the Third Form.

Then, of course, there was Violet Watson, Ethel Church, and two or three others girls, in the party. They were all cared for and looked after by Lady Helen Tregellis-West, and Miss Janet

Kerrigan—the sister of Colonel Kerrigan. She was very light-hearted and overjoyed, for she was reunited with her twin brother. I don't think Miss Kerrigan cared very much whether we returned to civilisation or not.

The juniors, for the most part, did not realise the seriousness of the situation. They did not grasp the fact that it was quite likely that we should never see England again.

For that was the literal truth.

Abandoned as we were on this unknown tract of land, far away beyond the forests and swamps of Brazil, what chance was there of us being rescued?

The Comte de Plessigny had flown off in the airship, and it was quite certain that he would tell a very plausible story to the outside world. He would probably give out the information that we had all perished in the swamp, and that it would be utterly futile for any rescue-party to come out to us. Thus we should never be searched—we should be left in this remarkable country, abandoned among the Arzacs.

If there was any escape to be made, we should have to use our own efforts. It was no good relying upon any attempt at rescue from the outside world.

Nelson Lee, of course, fully realised the true nature of the situation. And the gov'nor was worried—far more worried than he would allow himself to think. Colonel Kerrigan was similarly worried, and so was Lord Dorrimore.

Captain Burton said very little. But what he did say was of a cheerful nature, and he kept his crew constantly in a state of good spirits. Every member of the yacht's company was confident that something would be done to relieve this position. Nobody had given up hope—nobody believed for a moment that we should be compelled to remain out here, in the wonderful city of El Dorado.

For it was, indeed, a wonderful city.

Gold out here was like dust. Gold was everywhere, ornamenting the houses, and it was used in a thousand other ways. Practically every citizen—male and female—wore hundreds of pounds' worth of the precious metal on his person.

And the reason for this was quite obvious. Gold in El Dorado was at a discount. For it could be obtained in any quantities that were desired. Over in one quarter of the city there was a great boiling lake of molten gold—a

volcanic phenomenon which the Arzacs did not attempt to understand. But that lake was there—a vast, boiling cauldron of molten metal which never varied.

This gold, in fact, was really the god of the Arzacs. They worshipped it, and over that golden lake there was swung a precarious-looking bridge with a platform in the centre. Upon this platform stood the gold priests, and they were constantly throwing little golden discs into the molten mass. Why this was so we did not know, but it was evidently a religious kind of rite.

Not many of the juniors had seen this golden lake. I had been there with Nelson Lee and some others, before the great battle with the Ciri-Ok-Baks. But many of the juniors had not seen this wonderful phenomenon. And Colonel Kerrigan now suggested that we should take a trip to the lake for the purpose of viewing it.

"It will occupy the morning quite comfortably," said the colonel. "I should advise you to come with me, boys, and I can promise you an enjoyable time."

"Thank you, sir!"

"We'll come, sir!"

"Rather!"

"It'll be awfully interesting, sir!"

The juniors were quite eager to fall in with the colonel's plans, and Kerrigan was very pleased.

He was doing his utmost to keep the boys engaged—to fill up their time throughout each day. For, while they were interested in something, they did not think. And once they got thinking, they would probably become despondent.

And so everything was being done to keep the whole party in a constant state of activity. It was the same with the yacht's crew, and with the girls.

Even while we were going to view this lake of gold, other parties were setting out for different sections of the city in order to examine interesting scenes and objects.

The colonel, of course, had been in El Dorado for over four years, and he was able to speak the Arzac tongue fluently. This was a great advantage, for he was able to interpret anything that was said on either side.

I went along with the rest of the fellows, mainly because I was quite keen on seeing this lake of molten gold again.

I had only viewed it by night, and it had been a very impressive sight—a great

glowing mass of molten metal, which cast a ruddy glow up into the heavens.

I was of the opinion that the lake would not be so impressive in the daytime; but, nevertheless, it would be extremely interesting.

We all walked down one of the great main streets of the city, and, although we were accustomed to the great buildings on either side, we could not help pausing every now and again in admiration. For these buildings were of marble, pure, white, and wonderful to look upon, and here and there were great marvellously wrought plates of gold.

The streets of the city were clean, so clean that it was hardly possible to realise that they were generally used. There was no dust here, no dirt. And upon either side of the wide roadways there were graceful palms, beautiful flowering shrubs, and other tropical growth.

Then, too, there were the great giant pillars, surmounted by balls of orange-coloured fire. These burned continuously, night and day.

There was no darkness in El Dorado.

The city was illuminated in a manner that would have opened the eyes of any town corporation in England. There were thousands of these balls of orange fire, and they burned continuously and unvaryingly. The reason for this was quite simple, for the Arzacs had succeeded in harnessing a natural gas. This gas issued forth from a great fissure underground, and it had been diverted into specially constructed pipes, and from these into the various pillars all over the city.

We walked on leisurely, and at last we came within sight of the lake of gold. The heat here was really overpowering. What with the glare of the sun and the warm breezes, the ordinary city streets were quite warm enough for anybody's liking. But in the vicinity of that molten lake the air was close and humid, and almost overpowering.

But the juniors did not care.

They were greatly impressed by the sight, and they stood there gazing down upon the bubbling mass of metal with awe and wonder.

Hardly anybody spoke at first; they were altogether too full of wonder to say anything.

We were standing upon the summit of a great basin, a basin which was fully

three hundred yards across. Great steps made of solid gold, led down to the very edge of the pool. And this pool was glowing and bubbling constantly. The gold was never at rest. The frightful molten mass was spraying up and down like boiling water in a gigantic cauldron.

And swung right across that terrible pool was the swaying bridge, with the platform in the centre. There were two figures upon that platform, both of them attired almost entirely in gold—a kind of armour, which must have been unbearably hot and heavy to wear. But these gigantic gold priests were well accustomed to their apparel, and they did not even seem to mind the great waves of terrible heat which came surging upwards from the surface of the deep lake.

"My only hat!" said Handforth, with much awe. "What a sight, you chaps! Just fancy all this gold being in London! What a rush there'd be to get a cupful!"

"People would come with pails," grinned Reginald Pitt. "Why, if ever we get back to civilisation we shall be able to take enough gold with us to make us all millionaires for life!"

"Rather!" grinned Fatty Little. "And then we shall be able to buy all the grub we want—all the delicacies and dainties one's heart could wish for!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Always thinking about your tummy, Fatty!" chuckled McClure. "I've never known such a chap in all my life! It's a wonder you don't go searching for grub now, instead of looking on with us!"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am a bit peckish!" admitted Fatty Little. "I didn't have much breakfast, you know."

"Only about four times as much as everybody else!" put in Tommy Watson. "But still, we don't want to talk about grub now. Isn't this lake simply marvellous? Look how the gold bubbles and boils! It's a wonder it doesn't boil over sometimes and overflow its banks, so to speak."

Colonel Kerrigan turned his head.

"On one occasion, two years ago, there was a rather startling incident, boys," he said.

"A startling incident, sir?"

"Yes," said the colonel. "Owing to some volcanic phenomenon, the gold surged over its normal level, and there seemed to be danger of a general swamp-

ing of the whole city with molten gold. But fortunately the mass subsided, and everything was well again. But for a time the Arzacs were in a terrible state of doubt and misgivings."

I looked at the lake in rather a fascinated way. It was such a marvellous phenomenon—such an extraordinary sight! And then as I looked something rather queer happened.

The gold seemed to surge itself into a mighty wave in the very centre of the lake. Then the wave burst, with a dull report, and great heavy splashes of the molten metal were thrown upwards, almost to the level of the swaying bridge.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the colonel. "I have never seen anything like that before!"

"I thought it was going right over that bridge, sir!" said Handforth.

The colonel was looking rather startled. And then, before he could say anything else, a second wave formed itself on the surface of the lake, and this wave was at least four times as large as the previous one.

Boom!

That wave burst with a report which sent us staggering backwards in alarm, and a mighty spurt of molten gold went soaring skywards to a tremendous height.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF TERRIBLE EVENTS.

"LOOK out!" yelled Handforth, in alarm.

"Stand back, boys—back!" shouted Colonel Kerrigan, his voice hoarse with apprehension.

But the juniors did not need any telling. They dashed away as hard as they could rush. Then with terrible thud and splashes the gold came down into the lake once more; but a great deal of it descended upon the steps of the basin opposite. It was a miraculous stroke of luck that the molten mass had gone in that direction instead of our direction. Otherwise we should have been smothered, and maimed horribly.

When we had arrived at a safe distance we turned and looked back. The whole aspect of the lake had undergone a change. It was no longer placid; it wa-

no longer lazily rolling and bubbling with its usual leisureliness.

Instead, the whole surface was boiling like a furious cauldron. Great masses of gold were being flung up with every second that passed, and the two giant priests on the platform had forsaken their duty; they had made a break for safety. This was the first occasion within memory that the Arzacs had ceased to throw their metal discs into the gold.

And it was extremely lucky that those two men had deserted their post.

For not twenty seconds later a great column of gold rose upwards from the boiling mass below, and that column enveloped the bridge and carried it down with it.

Boom! Boom!

Two more terrific reports sounded, and then I started back with a hoarse cry. For a huge tower of gold rose into the sky like a column. It went up to about fifty feet, tons and tons of molten metal, and then it fell back with a thud which could have been heard half over the city. Huge splashes of metal were flung in every direction, one or two of them only just narrowly missing the juniors.

"We must leave this place, boys!" shouted the colonel huskily. "Heavens above! What can it mean? This lake of gold is turning into a volcano!"

"Great Scott!"

"My only hat!"

"Do—do you think it'll be serious, sir?" panted Pitt.

"It is serious already, my boy," replied the colonel. "Once a slumbering volcano of this type bursts into life and activity, there is no telling what might happen. For, of course, this golden lake is really a volcano; but we had all thought it to be quite asleep and harmless. Now it appears to be waking up, and heaven only knows what the result will be!"

The juniors were rather scared, to tell the truth, and they were not at all leisurely in their movements. They hurried away from the vicinity of the golden lake with all their speed, and when we arrived in the centre of the city we found a great number of people gathered.

There were many Arzacs, and all were looking in the direction from whence we had come. Nelson Lee was there, too, and Lord Dorrimore and many of the other guests. They eagerly inquired as to what was occurring.

"It's that lake of gold, sir!" I panted, grasping Nelson Lee by the arm. "It has suddenly become active!"

"Active!" echoed Lee. "What do you mean?"

"Why, the gold is going up into the air in great masses!" I exclaimed breathlessly. "I can't understand—Great Scott! Look there! Look—look, sir!"

A huge booming explosion had sounded, and as we gazed across the houses we could see a terrible fountain of molten gold ascending into the air. It was really a magnificent sight, for when the mass reached its height it burst into a thousand particles, and came thundering down with appalling force.

And now the Arzacs were becoming rather excited, and panic was spreading in the streets near to the gold lake. Men, women and children were rushing towards the centre of the city, screaming and shouting at the top of their voices.

And it was not to be wondered at. This was something that had not occurred within living memory.

I stood there, watching in a fascinated kind-of way, and I could not help remembering a volcano I had once seen in activity in a far corner of the world. At first that volcano had been a mere smoking mountain, quite harmless and inoffensive. But then, without warning, the crater commenced gushing forth tons of lava—liquid metal and volumes of smoke, and with every second that had passed the volumes of lava had increased, until at length the volcano was belching forth thousands of tons of liquid death.

I wondered if this phenomenon would be of a similar nature.

In all probability it would, for once a volcano gets fairly started it goes on until it has wrought terrible and awful destruction.

So far the golden lake had done no real damage, and if things did not get any worse this startling development would not matter. But I could not help thinking that matters would get worse, and even as I was thinking in that strain events became terrifying.

The masses of gold did not go surging skywards at irregular intervals, but they went up in one continuous stream—a huge, molten fountain, reaching to a height of fully two hundred feet. And the gold was sent down in glowing cascades, scattering itself over an area of hundreds of yards. Every house and

dwelling-place in the vicinity of the lake of gold became uninhabitable. The streets were rapidly becoming flooded with the creeping, molten mass. The Arzacs came shrieking along the streets in a state of absolute panic.

"Dear old boy, this is terrible—it is frightful!" murmured Sir Montie Trogellis-West, with his face pale and drawn. "There is no tellin' what might happen. The whole city will be flooded, an' then —"

"Good heavens!" gasped Handforth. "Did—did you feel——"

He said no more, for at that moment the very earth beneath our feet trembled in the most unmistakable manner. A kind of ripple went along the whole ground, and I distinctly saw some of the buildings near by shaking and shivering as the shock made itself felt.

"And earthquake!" I gasped.

And there was no doubt that I was right. That tremor had been the first sign of an earthquake, and this caused me to have still greater apprehension, for I knew well enough that a serious earthquake generally commences in a small tremor, and later on the tremors become terrible quakes, which cause the ground to heave and roll.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The volcano was now sending forth volumes and volumes of molten gold—thousands and hundreds of thousands of tons! It was the most startling thing that I had ever seen in all my experience. Even Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee were looking startled. They were looking completely thunderstruck, and they hardly knew what to do.

Great splashes of gold came thudding down on every hand. One splash, indeed, fell between Handforth and two other juniors, and they were sent back yelling and shouting, for some of the splashes had come upon them, causing their clothing to singe, and burning their hands.

"We must get indoors, boys!" shouted Nelson Lee urgently. "It is madness to remain out here. This dreadful fountain of molten metal may get worse at any moment, and then we shall be submerged and killed before we can make a move at all. You must get indoors at once!"

The juniors did not need telling a second time. There was a tremendous rush for any building—it did not matter

which. The Arzacs themselves, too, were seeking cover.

And in less than five minutes not a single inhabitant remained out in the open streets. The whole town looked deserted. Everybody had sought refuge under cover of the great buildings.

And even now we did not know whether this would be safe.

For, if the earthquake grew worse—if the trembling became really furious, the buildings would crash down over our heads, and we should be buried in the debris.

The whole thing was so startlingly sudden that we did not know what to think and what to do. Only twenty minutes earlier the morning had been placid and calm—a beautiful tropical morning, with the sun shining down gloriously.

And now——

And now we were in the thick of a terrible inferno!

"This is awful!" exclaimed Pitt, in a scared voice. "Can't we do something? Don't you think we ought to rush away—to get completely out of the city? It might be madness to remain here!"

"My dear boys, we must stick tight where we are!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "It would be madness indeed to leave this refuge and to go out into the open streets. Perhaps this deluge will die down very soon——"

Boom! Boom!

The gov'nor was interrupted by two terrific explosions, and the earth trembled again. Gazing out through the windows, we could see the vast fountain of gold flinging itself into the sky. And now we noticed the difference—great masses of smoke and steam were accompanying the gold, and a kind of powder was being sent up into the sky—a great, thick, dense mass of smoky powder.

And this great cloud commenced spreading itself over the city like a deadly pall. It was quite clear that the gold was exhausting itself, and lava and smoke was taking its place. This was a sure indication that the volcano was active and that there was very little chance of it dying down yet awhile.

We stood at the windows, watching—watching with beating hearts, and hardly daring to say a word.

The whole spectacle was awe-inspiring and terrible, and somehow we knew that

this was only the beginning; we felt instinctively that something of a far more terrible nature was shortly to occur.

Umlosi was looking really scared—the very first time I had seen him show fear of any description. He was a great warrior, and he feared no man, or men, but this was different—this was something which he could not understand.

"Wau! I am uneasy, my father!" mumbled Umlosi, turning to Lord Dorrimore. "I am sorely troubled, and I fear that thou art troubled, too. I like not this vast upheaval of nature. It is Umtagati, my father—it is bewitched, methinks!"

"I'm not so sure about being bewitched, old man," said Lord Dorrimore quietly; "but there's no doubt about it that we're in a pretty pickle now. It's not so much a question as to whether we shall be able to get back to civilisation, but whether we shall ever live to get out of El Dorado!"

The lake of gold was now sending forth dense volumes of molten material in tons. It rose into the sky in a great glowing mass, and there were volumes and volumes of dense smoke accompanying it.

The sun had already been blotted out.

And this great smoke-cloud was spreading over the entire city, forming a kind of blanket, through which the daylight could not penetrate. Within a very few minutes we were in a kind of semi-darkness; the great pillars of light, with their orange-coloured balls surmounting them, did not glow with their usual brilliancy. This was because of the smoke which ascended, and which curled around in dense, eddying masses.

Through the windows of the buildings the smoke came, half-choking us. It was acrid, and strongly charged with sulphur; the dust caught in our throats, and made us cough.

"This is getting awful, gov'nor!" I panted. "What on earth can we do?"

Nelson Lee looked at me grimly.

"We can do nothing, Nipper; we can only watch, and trust in Providence!" he replied quietly.

"Yes, that's about all——"

Boom! Boom! Crash!

There came an explosion which fairly sent us staggering backwards. It was an explosion which deafened our ears and caused our ear-drums to tingle and sing.

The building we were in rocked and swayed, and I expected it to come down over our heads; but it was well-made, and it withstood the shock.

That explosion had come from the volcano, and now we saw a terrible change.

Gazing out of the window, I looked over the city with rather startled eyes.

I saw buildings collapsing like houses of cards; they toppled, crumbled, and went to pieces with terrific crashes, and large volumes of dust arose.

"Oh, isn't it terrible—isn't it awful?" exclaimed Violet Watson, in great distress. "Just think of all those poor people being buried alive among the ruins! Can't we do something, Mr. Lee—oh, can't we do something?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"My dear young lady, we are helpless!" he replied. "We are utterly and absolutely helpless in the face of this vast upheaval of nature. Any efforts on our part would be puny and insignificant. We can only wait and watch—and trust in Providence."

"But it seems terribly cruel——"

"You need not fear that anybody has been buried among those ruins," went on Nelson Lee. "Those houses are in the immediate vicinity of the volcano, and they are quite deserted. Nobody had stayed there, Miss Violet."

"Oh, that is splendid!" exclaimed the girl. "I was afraid—— But look—oh, do look!"

We stared out of the window, and then we saw that the character of the discharge had altered. It was no longer a mass of molten metal, with lava and smoke.

But now, instead, a vast roaring column of steam was going into the sky—like the escape from the safety-valve of a locomotive, only a thousand times greater.

This column of steam rose up into the heavens to a height of fully two thousand feet, until it was almost lost in the sky itself. And the roar was deafening—a devastating roar which filled our ears, and which made conversation practically impossible.

But this vast column of steam did not last for long.

It changed its character again, and turned to water—a huge fountain of boiling water was being thrust up into the sky, and it was splashing down in a terrible cascade, which was rapidly

flooding the streets and causing everything to throw up clouds and clouds of dense, impenetrable steam.

And beneath our feet the earth was again rumbling. It quivered as I stood, and I could distinctly feel the shakings of the ground.

The sky was dark and overcast, and the air was so hot that we were perspiring as we stood. It was breathless—there was not an atom of fresh air. We could hardly breathe, for the very atmosphere was suffocating and stifling.

"Isn't it terrible?" muttered Tommy Watson, grasping my arm.

"Terrible isn't the word, old man!" I replied. "And I am afraid things are going to get worse!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Great doughnuts!" muttered Fatty Little. "I—I don't even feel hungry!"

"Then things must be serious!" said Handforth grimly. "For you to lose your appetite, Fatty, is absolutely unheard of!"

Fatty groaned.

"How can a fellow have an appetite with all this going on?" he demanded. "I'm expecting to be blown up every minute, you know. I shouldn't be at all surprised if this giddy floor opened and let out masses of boiling water——"

"You must not speak like that, my lad," interrupted Nelson Lee. "There is no need whatever to make matters worse. There is very little likelihood of this floor opening as you suggest. I believe the eruption will remain confined to the other section of the city. We are fairly safe here, I believe—at least, I sincerely hope so."

"We all hope that, sir!" said Handforth.

We watched, fascinated. The water was still pouring down into the streets, and we could see it coming along towards the section of the city where we had sought refuge. The streets, in fact, were rapidly becoming flooded, and now there were many distressing sights to be witnessed.

For the inhabitants in other parts of the town were becoming panic-stricken, and they were leaving their houses; they were dashing further afield, in order to get out of the flood. Hundreds and hundreds of the Arzacs were staggering along in the boiling hot water, shouting and nearly mad with panic.

It was very gloomy in the streets now, and the sun was completely obliterated

by the vast pall of smoke which hung overhead.

And the active volcano kept up a continuous roar, and at irregular intervals there were dull, rumbling explosions, each one seeming to be worse than the last.

We wondered how long these would last; we wondered how long it would be before one of those explosions sent the city toppling over into a mass of ruins.

"It can't last long at this pace, sir!" I said, looking at the gov'nor. "It's impossible, you know. I don't see how any volcano can keep on so long with such a terrific ferocity as this!"

"My dear lad, you do not realise that there have been many volcanic disasters a thousand times worse than this," said Nelson Lee. "This affair has only just commenced, by all appearances. I do not wish to be pessimistic; but, on the other hand, I do not want you to raise false hopes within your breast. You must be prepared for something far worse—and I fear that something far worse will happen."

"Yes, I suppose you're right, gov'nor," I said. "I don't know what—— Great Scott!"

Another terrible explosion had sounded, and again the building shook with the concussion. And now, to my horror, I saw gigantic flames leaping upwards into the sky—flames and water intermixed—if such a thing could possibly be. The clouds of steam were increasing, and now I observed that great cinders were falling in the streets outside—white-hot cinders which fell and scattered to atoms on the white roadways.

What was about to occur?

And what could we do? Nothing!

We could do nothing at all, except wait there, helpless and apprehensive.

CHAPTER III.

DISASTER AND CONFUSION.

NELSON LEE was looking rather pale.

Lord Dorrimore, although he attempted to remain as calm and collected as ever, was not looking himself by any means. The effect of this terrible disaster was making itself felt

upon all of us. It was the uncertainty which caused us to be nervous, and which bereft us of our usual coolness.

This appalling upheaval of nature made us feel insignificant—it made us realise how truly unimportant we were in the world.

It was the uncertainty, as I have said. We did not know what was to occur—we did not know when the building would come crashing down over our ears, burying us all, and killing us instantly.

It was quite likely that such a terrible thing would happen. In volcanic eruptions there are generally earthquake shocks also, and in such an event we should have no chance whatever.

It would be madness, of course, to venture out into the street now—to attempt to escape from El Dorado.

For, in doing so, we should surely lay ourselves open to sudden death. All we could do was to wait and watch.

And this we did, with fast beating hearts, and with pale, drawn faces.

There were, of course, many Arzacs with us, for we had all rushed into various buildings helter-skelter, without caring where we went, so long as we got under shelter.

And we were not all together, either.

Many of the juniors were missing from the crowd I was with. They had probably gone into other houses, with members of the yacht's crew, and with the Arzacs.

Handforth, who was looking out of the window, suddenly uttered a strange cry, and then he pointed with a finger which was quivering.

"Look at the columns, you chaps!" he gasped. "Look at 'em!"

"The columns?" I repeated.

"Yes, the lights!" said Handforth. "Five minutes ago they were burning as brilliantly as ever, but they're getting dim now!"

"That's because of this smoke that's hanging about——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "The lights are smaller—they are almost dwindling away to nothing!"

We all centred our attention upon those great columns with the orange-coloured balls of fire at the top.

And we could see that Handforth was right.

Those brilliant lights were now becoming dim, and as we watched, the colour changed. They were no longer

orange, but were rapidly altering to a violet hue. This violet became more and more vivid as we watched, until every pillar was blazing with a wonderful violet light of the utmost purity.

"What does it mean, sir?" I asked. "Why have those lights changed their colour?"

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"There seems to be only one explanation, Nipper," he replied. "These lights, as you know, are supplied by a natural gas, and it is now fairly obvious that this gas has become affected by the volcanic disturbances. And the gas has changed its character, causing the light to alter, too. See! It is changing again, even while I am speaking!"

The gov'nor was quite right.

That vivid, glorious violet had altered very rapidly, and now it became a thin light, which was almost invisible. We watched wonderingly, and then we saw that the lights had gone out completely—they were quite extinguished.

And vapour rose out of those great burners—clouds of steamy vapour which rapidly changed into fountains of boiling hot water!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth. "Water! All those pillars have become fountains!"

There was no doubting the truth of Handforth's remarks. Each pillar, which five minutes earlier had been glowing with light, had now become a fountain of water. The gas had exhausted itself, and now boiling water was surging forth.

This was only one of the many remarkable incidents which occurred during that terrible, never-to-be-forgotten morning.

The gloom was oppressive; the air was stifling to a degree. We could hardly breathe as we stood there, and we longed to get out into the open.

But, of course, the open was just as bad. The air everywhere was charged with sulphur fumes, steamy vapour, and intense heat.

Nelson Lee looked round at us.

"I am afraid there is only one thing to be done, and I hardly like taking such a course," he said. "If things get any worse on the surface, I shall take all you boys down into those tunnels far underground. The air will be cooler, at all events, and the danger might not be so great."

"It might be greater, sir," I put in.
 "How could it be greater, you ass?" demanded Tommy Watson.

"Well, if there's a volcanic eruption—and an earthquake combined—those tunnels will be converted into solid ground in less than a second," I said grimly. "They will collapse, and if we are down there, we should be buried alive in less than a fraction of a second. Personally, I'd prefer to remain on the surface—where I can see what is going on!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'd rather stay up here, sir."

"Perhaps it would be as well, boys," said Nelson Lee. "To tell you the truth, I don't know what to do for the best. I am in a terrible state of trouble. I am worried concerning your safety——"

"Don't you worry about us, sir," said Handforth. "We're all in the same boat, if we go under, you'll go under. Nothing can be done as far as I can see. We've simply got to trust to luck!"

"Wise words, my son!" rumbled Umlosi. "Thou art speaking words of wisdom, and I am filled with admiration for thy courage. Thou art taking this deadly peril with much calmness and bravery. Wau! It is good to be among such courageous youths!"

"There's not much courage about it, Umlosi," said Handforth. "What can we do? It's no good laying down and wriggling with fright. It's no good bewailing our fate, and yelling with terror. The only thing we can do is to sit tight, and watch, and hope for the best!"

"Splendid, Handforth — splendid!" muttered Lord Dorrmore. "That's the spirit, my lad!"

Fullwood, who was standing near by, uttered a growl.

"It's all very well to have a spirit like that," he said nervously. "What's the good of it to us? We are doomed—we shall all be killed in this infernal place! It was madness to come here—it was absolute foolery!"

"Dry up, Fully," muttered Gulliver, with chattering teeth.

"Why should I dry up?" demanded Fullwood, rather hysterical with nervousness. "All this trouble is the fault of Lord Dorrmore! He brought us into this! He brought us to the Majarra, and he caused us to be captured and brought to this place! It's all Lord Dorrmore's fault——"

"You cad!" shouted Handforth fiercely.

"Let him talk on, my lad!" said Dorrie quietly. "Perhaps he is right, after all. It is my fault—I will admit it. I ought not to have brought you boys up the Majarra. I ought to have left you on the Amazon, where you were safe——"

"That's wrong, sir!" shouted Pitt. "We all wanted to come."

"Rather!"

"Don't you take any notice of that cad, sir!"

Handforth pushed back his sleeves.

"Unless you apologise to Lord Dorrmore within twenty seconds, Fullwood, I'm going to smash your nose!" he said fiercely. "Now, then—are you going to apologise?"

"No, I'm not!" snarled Fullwood. "What I said was the truth!"

"You contemptible cur!" snapped Handforth angrily.

Crash!

His fist thudded into Fullwood's face, and the cad of the Remove staggered back, howling.

"Yaroorh!" he roared. "You—you—— Ow—yow!"

He picked himself up with his face livid with fright and anger.

"It's the truth!" he snarled. "Lord Dorrmore is responsible for all this—an' whenever I get back to England I'll——"

"Stop him!" I snapped. "We're not going to have any nonsense from that coward now! Things are bad enough, without Fullwood making them worse. He's nearly mad with terror—that's what's the matter with him. He's got no more pluck than a mouse!"

"Don't insult the mouse, Nipper!" said Pitt witheringly.

Fullwood was subdued, and he slunk away into a corner, pale and trembling.

Meanwhile, the vast upheavals of nature were continuing.

And now we felt distinct earthquake shocks. We felt the floor under our feet rolling and rocking about in a most terrifying manner. Now and again there would come a loud splintering crash, as if one of the walls would part. But, so far, the building held firm, and we were safe.

But, looking out through the windows, I saw other things which caused me to be very apprehensive.

Several buildings on the far side of the city were rocking in flames—and collapsing in heaps of ruins, with terrific roars.

And the streets themselves were suffering. Great cracks were opening, and there were yawning chasms in the streets, chasms out of which came volumes of steam and smoke.

It seemed that the very heart of the city was alive—burning and blistering with intensity. By what we could see, El Dorado was undermined by living fire—by volcanic matter which was seeking to find an outlet.

And, during all this ghastly turmoil, came news of fear and panic from the Arzacs. Many of them were rushing about the streets, half mad with terror. And who could blame them?

They were giants, and they were brave. But when it came to a matter of this sort, their courage oozed away, and they were left helpless. For it must be remembered that these Arzacs were not too highly civilised—they had had no experience of volcanoes, and all this tumult came to them as something new—something terrifying.

I could almost have sobbed with sheer misery as I saw the havoc that was being caused. El Dorado was undoubtedly the most beautiful city that I had ever set eyes on. And here it was, crumbling to dust before my eyes.

It was a terrible shame—an awful pity.

Many sections of the great marble town were becoming heaps of ruins. Buildings were crashing to dust and powder on every side.

It was hardly possible to gaze out over the city without seeing some disaster or another. The most dangerous zone was without doubt, that part of the town in the near vicinity of the volcano—the volcano which had been, only a short hour before, a harmless lake of molten gold.

So far, Lord Dorrimore's entire party was safe—every single member of it. We were all in this part of the town which had not been affected, and we were alive and well.

But we felt sure that the earthquake had yet to come—that something of a far more serious nature was in store for us.

And this was not far wrong, as events turned out.

Miss Kerrigan and Montie's aunt were

working with a will—they were doing everything within their power. With great bucketfuls of water, they were going round bathing the foreheads of the girls, for many of the latter were on the point of fainting.

There were some of the juniors, too, who could have done with water, but they did not like to ask for it. However, it was supplied to them, without their asking, and they were grateful.

In the terribly oppressive air, it was almost impossible to remain normal. Personally, I was perspiring from every pore, my throat was parched, and I was suffering from a ghastly headache—caused, no doubt, by the sulphur fumes which filled the atmosphere.

But I had no time to think of these inconveniences. I was so impressed with everything that I saw that I could only gaze out of the window, and watch—and I wondered how long it would be before the climax arrived.

As it happened, it was not necessary for me to wonder for long.

Boom! Boom!

Again came the dull, rumbling explosion. And, as a result, the volcano sent up great masses of water, lava, and smoke. And there were flames, too—great livid flames which lit up the whole city with a terrible lurid light which only made the whole affair far more terrifying.

I could see the flooded streets on every side—flooded with boiling water, ashes and lava.

For now the volcano was behaving more after the style of any other volcano. It was sending out great volumes of liquid lava—boiling matter which came down in great splashing drops, causing destruction wherever it fell.

And then we were permitted to see an amazing sight.

We saw something which positively made us hold our breath with wonder and apprehension and awe. It was a spectacle which very few human beings have ever witnessed—a spectacle which staggered the senses and which left us dumbfounded.

Rumble—rumble—rumble! Right from beneath our feet, came a low, muttering growl like that of thunder. We felt the stone flooring quiver and crack, and I expected to see the walls come tumbling down all around us.

But this did not happen.

And there, on the far side of El Dorado, the stunning phenomenon took place. As we watched, we saw a portion of the town rise up—we saw it leave the level, and form itself into a steep hill. It seemed impossible—grotesque.

For El Dorado was flat—a perfect level plain of houses. And there, within full view, we could see quite a large section of the city rising up, yard by yard, until at length there was a great hill, reaching on its summit to the very level of the great outer wall.

Houses collapsed on every side. They were sent crashing down amid clouds of dust and thousands of tons of falling masonry.

It was a sight that staggered our senses, and left us limp and weak. The buildings were falling everywhere, crashing down, causing a commotion which filled our ears with the most terrible noises.

And there stood that hill, raised up as a blanket of a bed is raised when one brings his knees up under the bed clothes.

But this was not the only astounding sight.

I found myself looking at the city wall—that wall which rose to a height of close upon two hundred feet. These great walls which surrounded El Dorado were massive structures, many feet in thickness—so thick, in fact, that the top of the wall could accommodate hundreds of men.

And as I watched, I saw this wall tottering for the space of at least two hundred yards. It hovered in the air, dragging away from the other portions amid clouds of dust and falling stonework.

"Look!" I shouted huskily. "The wall is collapsing!"

"Good heavens!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Begad!"

And then, with a devastating roar which came to our ears above all else, that section of the wall simply faded away. It fell outwards, crashing down, and sending up clouds of dense, thick dust.

A gash had been made in the city wall two hundred yards wide—and it had all happened in the space of a few seconds.

"It's getting worse, sir!" I panted. "It's getting altogether worse! Before

long the city will be in a heap of ruins

"Look there!" shrieked Handforth. "Water—water in millions of tons!"

There was every reason for Handforth's hysterical excitement.

For, without warning that newly made hill had burst asunder. One side of the hill opened out in a terrific chasm, and from this chasm there poured water—not a trickle, and not merely a little stream, but an overpowering cascade which was like Niagara.

And the water went tearing down the hill, over the ruins of the city, straight towards the gap in the wall, which, apparently had been provided for it.

It was extremely fortunate that this was the case.

Otherwise those great walls would have enclosed the water, and the whole city would have been flooded in less than ten minutes.

As it was, the water rushed straight down the hill, and out through that two hundred yard gap. Out into the open country beyond.

It was a river—a tearing, roaring river of water. Not hot water, but ordinary river water, foaming and bubbling and casting out showers of spray on every side.

The earth had opened up, and it was giving up this river—a rushing river which was every bit as large and powerful as the Majarra itself—and that was quite a considerable river.

"This—this is stupendous, sir!" I gasped. "Look at it—look at all that water!"

"My dear lad, it is more than the imagination can grasp," said Nelson Lee. "There is only one explanation."

"And what's that, sir?"

"How can you explain it, old man?" asked Dorrie.

"Why, it's fairly simple," said Nelson Lee. "And, in a way, I think we have an explanation of all this terrific upheaval in other directions. Far below, right down in the earth, there is an underground river—a great stream. Underground rivers are fairly common, as you know. We have seen many examples in many parts of the world, Dorrie."

"Yes, that's quite right," said Lord Dorrimore.

"Well, here we have an underground river which has suddenly found its way to the surface," said Nelson Lee. "A

subterranean earthquake is probably responsible for all this. The water was forced upwards, and it was compelled to come. And, in its course, it fell foul of this other volcanic matter—the liquid, molten gold. You can imagine the result when the water came in contact with the boiling metal. There was, of course, an instant commotion—and upheaval. And we have seen the result.”

“Yes, I believe you’ve hit upon the right nail, old man,” said Dorrie.

Nelson Lee nodded.

“I can think of nothing else,” he said. “This water was compelled to find an outlet, and so, after causing all this terrible trouble, it has forced up the earth here, and now the river is surging forth—it is coming out of the earth in dense volumes, and, by all appearances, it is increasing in violence. The underground river has been released.

“And when will it exhaust itself, sir?” I asked.

“It is quite possible that it will never exhaust itself, Nipper,” said Nelson Lee. “A river is a permanency, you know. This river has been flowing underground, but now that it has found the surface it will remain on the surface. That is only natural. From this moment onwards it is more than probable that the river we now see will continue to flow—it will come out from this opening, and it will run away down the valley, flooding everything—but, finally, it will find its own course, and then it will continue indefinitely.”

“Then—then this river will always flow right through El Dorado?” asked Handforth.

“Yes, I think so, my lad,” said Nelson Lee. “The city, as it originally was, will never be in that state again. It will be impossible to build the wall up again, since the river has occupied that tremendous gap. It is all very wonderful, and all very terrifying. But now I believe that the worst is over.”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed many of the juniors in one voice.

“But we must not be too sure,” went on Nelson Lee. “I am only basing that statement on the facts. This river has found its outlet—the bubble has burst, so to speak. Therefore, the trouble will not be so great now. Indeed, there is every likelihood that there will be no further earthquakes, and no further explosion.”

“Let us hope you are right, guv’nor,” I said fervently. “But just look at it—just look at all that water, surging forth! I—I feel that I am dreaming, you know.”

“I don’t wonder at it,” said Lord Dorrimore, passing a hand across his brow. “We’re living in strenuous times, by gad! But, see! Am I right, or am I wrong?”

“About what, Dorrie?”

“Is the volcano subsidin’, or do my eyes deceive me?” asked Dorrie. “It seems to me that the smoke an’ steam—an’ all the rest of it—is decreasin’. What do you make of it, Nipper?”

I looked intently.

“I think you are right, Dorrie,” I said. “The volcano doesn’t seem half so fierce now—and, what is more, the sky is clearing!”

This was quite true.

The great volume of smoke and vapour from the volcano was clearing away, for a breeze had sprung up, and it seemed that the terrible nightmare was coming to an end. But how long would it last? How long would it be before a fresh outburst of nature’s fury made itself apparent?

I could hardly believe that so much had happened in such a short space of time. But it was undoubtedly a fact—the evidence was there before our own eyes.

And that great river was surging forth, and it was flowing straight out through the gap in the wall, and going into the beyond—into the valley, and from there—well, we did know—and the knowledge proved of very great interest to us.

CHAPTER IV.

NELSON LEE COMES TO A DECISION.

I DREW in a deep, deep breath.

“Thank goodness!” I exclaimed.

“How lovely it is to get a breath of fresh air!”

“Rather!”

“Ain’t it glorious, you chaps?” asked Handforth.

“It’s—it’s given me quite an appetite again!” said Fatty Little.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

There was really nothing to laugh at, but many of the juniors were slightly inclined to be hysterical, and they were

ready to laugh at anything. After the ordeal through which we had just passed, it was rather astonishing to find ourselves still alive and well.

I know for a fact that many fellows had believed that their last hour had come, and that nothing on earth could have saved them from destruction, with the rest of the city.

We were all standing out in the open, and the streets were also full of the Arzacs. For it seemed that the fury of nature was satisfied for the moment. The earth no longer trembled, and the extraordinary volcano was now fairly quiet.

It was, of course, still belching forth great volumes of steam and lava—but in nothing like the quantities it had been doing just recently.

The most amazing feature of all, however, was that river.

It was surging out of the ground as water escapes from a gigantic main pipe.

The power of that water was simply staggering. It had washed everything before it already. In its path there was not the slightest trace of any building, or any portion of masonry. It had washed the way clear—absolutely clear.

And the river went surging out into the valley in one terrific roar of foam and spray.

And, by what we could see, the river was increasing in size with every minute that passed. It was certainly not decreasing. The water came out of the ground so swiftly that it seemed impossible for the rest of the city to be saved from destruction. It was as though that hole was a safety valve, through which this mighty underground river was pouring its water.

The sun was shining again now, and a cool breeze was blowing into our faces—a breeze which was extremely welcome to everybody. It had come just in the nick of time to save us from complete suffocation.

"What shall we do, sir?" I asked, turning to Nelson Lee, who was standing there, gazing round with a very serious expression upon his long, immobile face.

Nelson Lee turned to me.

"I hardly know yet, Nipper," he replied. "I am just viewing the ruins of the wonderful city as we knew it only an hour or so ago."

"Yes, sir, it's a terrible shame!" I

said. "The place is simply nothing more nor less than a mass of ruins now."

"Hardly that, Nipper," corrected Nelson Lee. "Many houses have been demolished, many streets have been utterly disfigured, but it is not correct to say that El Dorado is in ruins. The damage is very considerable, but the city, taken as a whole, is still intact."

"There must have been a terrible loss of life, sir," I said. "I reckon there are thousands of people buried under those demolished houses."

Nelson Lee nodded gravely.

"I am afraid you are right, my lad," he said. "However, it cannot be helped—in a disaster of this kind, there is bound to be a serious loss of life. We must be very thankful that we are all safe—as far as I know at the moment, not a single member of our party has come to any harm."

"We mustn't speak too soon, of course," put in Lord Dorrimore. "The earth may take it into its head to turn upside down within a minute or two. An' if that happens we shall go with it. To be quite frank, old man, I'm half expecting El Dorado to go up in one huge blaze of glory!"

Umlosi, who was standing by, solemnly shook his head.

"Thou art wrong, O N'Kose!" he rumbled. "Even as I said, many days ago, we are passing through a period of fire and water. Dost thou remember how I reminded thee of what was to come?"

"You did, old son!" said Lord Dorrimore. "How you know these things is a mystery to me—I think you must have a sixth sense, or somethin'!"

"I know not why it is, my master, but I am permitted to see these things!" exclaimed Umlosi. "Methinks we are yet a long way from safety. My snake tells me that we shall pass through many perils before we again reach the great floating kraal which lies far beyond on the river."

"Oh! So we are goin' to reach the yacht again?" asked Dorrie, with interest.

"Undoubtedly, my father," said Umlosi. "Even as thou sayest, we shall once more see the yacht, and the River Majarra. But there are many perils to be encountered before then."

"Well, there's nothin' like bein' cheerful," said Dorrie calmly. "A great

many perils to go through, eh? What do you call these? Haven't we been havin' a lively time this mornin', you black lump of anthracite?"

"Thou art using strange words, my father!" exclaimed Umlosi. "I must confess that I do not understand thy meaning. However, it will pass. We have indeed been passing through many strange and wondrous adventures this morning—but there will be others. Heed my words, N'Kose, and be prepared."

"My dear man, I'm prepared for anythin' after this," said Lord Dorrimore. "Nothing that can possibly happen will make me flicker an eyelid. I've got past bein' surprised. But I'm terrifically interested in that river, you know, I want to see where it's flowin' to, an' all the rest of it. What's wrong with the idea of climbing on to the wall, Professor?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I was about to suggest something of the same sort myself," he said. "From the top of the wall we shall be able to get a clear view of the valley beyond, and we might possibly be able to see what this river is doing and where it is flowing to. I think it is fairly safe to venture upon the wall now."

"It's just as safe as standin' here," said Dorrie. "We never know what section of the place might go to bits—so it doesn't matter. Come alone!"

They walked off, Colonel Kerrigan and Dr. Brett and Captain Burton accompanying them. Close behind I followed, with Sir Montic Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Handforth, and many of the other juniors. They had no intention of being left out of the excitement.

We were all tremendously relieved, to tell the truth.

After we had been expecting sheer disaster to overtake us, it was splendid to find the sky clearing, the air becoming purer, and the fury of the volcano lessening.

I knew well enough that this might only be a lull. Quite a number of earthquakes come in a kind of series. There is one selection of shocks, then comes a period of quietness—to be followed, after an hour or two, perhaps—by another earthquake of still greater intensity.

It might possibly be so in this case. In any event, we were determined to seize this respite while we could. And

we wanted to have a look outside the city.

Within a very short time we were mounting one of the tremendous walls. And, at last, we stood upon the summit. And then a wonderful sight met our gaze.

The river had broadened out tremendously beyond the city walls, and it had formed a great lake, which stretched away as far as the eye could see—with a strong current of water running straight down the centre.

This lake was smothered with wreckage of all descriptions. Trees, uprooted bushes, palms, and all manner of other objects were floating down on the strong current. And this great river stretched right away down the valley towards the rising ground which cut off El Dorado from the deadly swamp.

Nelson Lee had brought his binoculars with him, and he gazed out across the waste of water.

"I don't very well see how this river is to find any outlet, Dorrie," he remarked. "This valley is peculiarly formed, and I am afraid that a tremendous lake will become existant out of all this water. The whole of this valley will become inundated, and, ultimately, El Dorado itself will be under water."

"How frightfully cheerful," remarked Lord Dorrimore.

"It is just as well to look at the facts as we see them," said Nelson Lee. "There is no sense whatever in minimising the danger."

"Just look at that river from here, sir!" I exclaimed, turning round and looking down into the city. "Look at it! The water is coming out with greater velocity than ever before!"

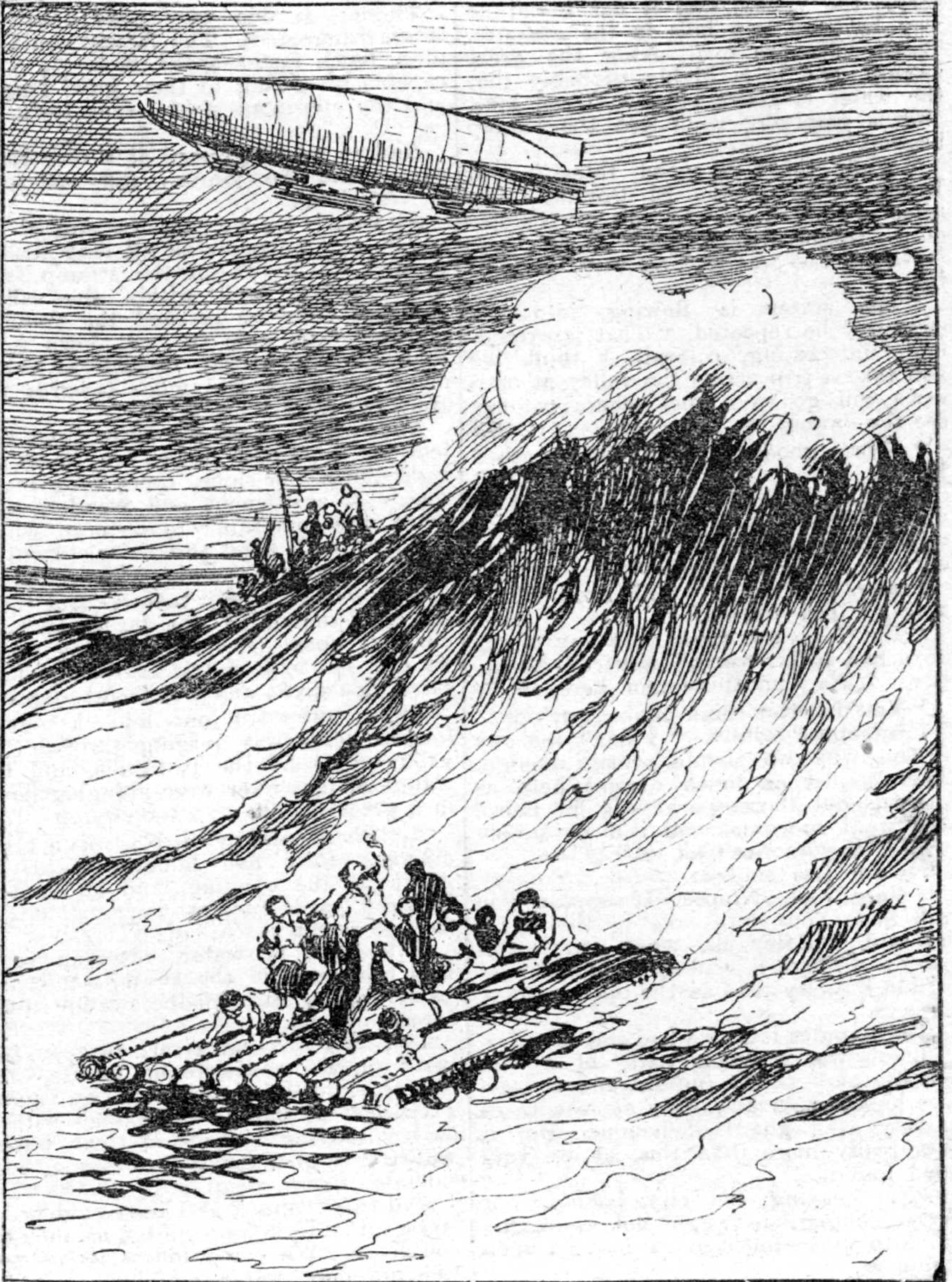
"You are quite right, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "The river, instead of diminishing, is increasing. And, with such volumes of water pouring out into the valley, it is impossible to suppose that it will run away. There is no outlet."

Colonel Kerrigan, who was standing near by, talking with several Arzacs, suddenly turned and came to us.

"Did I hear you say that there is no outlet for this water, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Yes, I think that is the case," said the gunner.

"Then you are wrong," declared the colonel. "There is an outlet—according to what these Arzacs tell me."



How we clung to the raft we never afterwards knew. But nobody was flung off, and we were hurled onwards at a tremendous pace.

"An outlet?" I repeated wonderingly.

"Yos, Nipper," said Colonel Kerrigan. "This new river has made its course across the valley, and it has found its way between two hills in the distance. These hills are overlooking the great swamp, and it is highly probable that the water is going between those hills, and is emptying itself into the swamp beyond."

"Well, that's a good thing," said Dorrie. "It renders El Dorado fairly safe, in any case. There's no danger of us getting flooded out."

Nelson Lee was looking very thoughtful.

"The water is flowing into the swamp?" he repeated. "That is exceedingly interesting, colonel. I think we will take a trip across the valley at once—we will go to a spot where we can see the swamp for ourselves."

"What good will that do?" asked Dorrie.

"We do not know—but it is just as well to see matters with our own eyes," said the gov'nor. "We will start at once."

"Any old thing," said Lord Dorri-more. "I'm willing."

"But I do not think that any of the boys had better come," went on Nelson Lee. "They must remain here—"

"You'd better think again, gov'nor!" I interrupted calmly. "I don't see any reason why we should remain behind. There's just as much danger here as there is out there—perhaps a lot more. We want to come, and it'll be simply wicked if you won't let us."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Very well, Nipper, I suppose you will have your own way in the end," he said. "After all, what you say is correct. There is probably more danger within the city than in the open country beyond."

Ten minutes later we had started off.

There was a whole party of us, including most of the juniors, and at least two hundred Arzacs. They came with us merely as a guard of honour. But it was really more than this, as we very soon found.

After leaving the city behind, our Arzac companions would not allow any of us to walk—much as we insisted upon doing so.

The great giants lifted us all up, and carried us bodily. They did this as a mark of respect—they considered that

it was better for them to do the walking, and for us to take the journey in ease and comfort.

There was one very good result of this arrangement. The Arzacs could go at a much faster speed than we were capable of—owing to their great height, and the enormous strides they took.

And so we progressed at a very rapid pace. And the journey did not seem so very long.

At length we were at the end of the valley, and we mounted the long sloping ground which cut off the swamp from the beautiful land within the valley. And, at last, we reached the summit, and we were able to look down upon that deadly morass which stretched away for miles and miles towards the Brazilian forests.

And, as we were set down upon our feet, in a position where we could see right down the slope, there were many shouts of excitement and wonder. For there was something to be seen which filled us with hope and astonishment.

There was the swamp right enough, just as we had seen it before. But there was now something else for us to feast our eyes upon. It was something which we had not expected to see—and which came as a great and wonderful surprise.

Right away to our left, a newly formed river was surging through the valley made by the two hills, and the waters of that river were plunging down in a great cascade into the swamp.

And there, plainly visible, was a great channel, fully five hundred yards in width at the opening, and all of two hundred yards further down, as far as the eye could reach.

A channel of water, reaching right into the heart of the swamp, and probably passing through the swamp to the forests beyond.

This underground river, surging forward on its newly found course, had charged into the swamp, and had caused a channel to appear—a channel with a swiftly moving current of clear water, which was undoubtedly of some considerable depth.

And this channel, as I have said, went right into the swamp as far as the eye could see. We could follow its course, twisting now and again, but open the whole way.

My heart jumped as I looked upon it. "Do—do you see, sir?" I shouted

huskily. "There is a way open, through the swamp! There is a channel—a waterway, and if we only had some boats we might be able to get back to the forest land—back to civilisation."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"It's wonderful!"

"Dear old boys, it seems altogether too good to be true," declared Sir Montie.

"And yet it is only natural," said Lord Dornimore. "All that water has to find an outlet somewhere, and it has come through this valley, and now it is in the swamp, makin' a course for itself right across to the other side. As you say, young 'un, there is a waterway, and if we only had a nice collection of boats we could do the trip to the Majarra with the greatest ease. But I don't much fancy swimmin' the distance."

Nelson Lee's eyes were gleaming.

"There is no need to swim, Dorrie, and there is no need for us to have boats!" he said, in a strange voice. "Upon my soul, I think it is possible that we might be able to get out of this prison, after all. We need rafts—three or four stout rafts. Once they are constructed we can launch them, and the current will take us right down through this swamp——"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "That's a ripping idea, sir!"

"Rather, sir!"

"It's a brain wave!" declared Handforth. "My only Sunday topper! It seems that Fate has helped us, after all!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You are right, Handforth," he said. "Fate has taken a hand in this matter, and it is reasonable to suppose that everything is in our favour. In any case, I have come to a fixed decision. We will construct these rafts, and we will trust ourselves upon them, hoping that Providence will lead us straight through to safety."

"Hurrah!"

The juniors cheered vociferously.

"Do you think it will be quite safe, Mr. Lee?" asked Colonel Kerrigan.

"I do not know whether it will be safe, or whether it will be unsafe" replied Nelson Lee. "In a case of this sort we must trust largely to luck. But I will say that there is grave danger in remaining in El Dorado. You may be sure that the upheavals of Nature which

we have seen are only the preliminary exhibitions, so to speak. I am quite certain that worse is to come—far worse. And the sooner we can get out of this doomed country the better. For it is doomed. I have a firm conviction that El Dorado will not survive. And although this journey through the swamp on rafts is decidedly risky, it is far better than remaining in a country which will shortly be sent to utter destruction."

"Well, that's sensible enough" agreed Lord Dornimore. "I uphold your decision, Lee old man. The sooner we can get out of El Dorado the better. I'm with you all along the line. And this channel seems to stretch right out through the swamp. It might close up after a week or so, so we must seize the opportunity while we have it. How long do you think it will take to construct these rafts you are talking about—a week?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Three hours," he replied quietly.

"What!"

"Three hours!"

"Why, it's impossible, sir!" said Handforth.

"You forget, Handforth, that we have the benefit of these Arzacs' help," said Nelson Lee. "I intend sending back to the city for at least a thousand of these giants. What can a thousand men do in the way of constructing rafts? Why, they will be cut down, strung together, and manufactured almost before we know what is happening. And I want to leave this country to-day—this very afternoon! The longer we tarry, the greater will be the danger."

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"The gov'nor's going to get us out of all this trouble, after all!" I exclaimed delightedly. "Just you wait, my sons! If we don't find ourselves on the Majarra within two or three days, I shall be tremendously surprised. Everything is going to be all serene!"

We were all feeling very much better in spirits, and we thought that there was every possibility of Nelson Lee's plan succeeding. In any case, it was the only scheme to be adopted—since there was none other.

And, without any loss of time, messages were sent back to El Dorado—urgent messages appealing for help.

Colonel Kerrigan went himself, too, and his duty was to bring every member of Lord Dorrimore's party back with him—the yacht's crew, Lady Helen Tregollis-West, the girls—in fact, every single soul.

Nelson Lee wanted them to be on the spot when the rafts were constructed—so that we could get on board, and push off without a moment's loss of time.

Nelson Lee's decision was one which had been come to practically on the spur of the moment. There was no time for thinking matters over—for deciding this, that, and the other. It was a case when a prompt decision was absolutely necessary.

And not only Nelson Lee, but all of us—we all thought that far greater damage was to be wrought in El Dorado. We instinctively knew that the volcanic eruptions and the earthquakes were likely to become fatal before so very long.

It would be better to escape while we had the chance, even though we were possibly going into danger.

Less than an hour afterwards, fully two thousand Arzacs were on the spot, and they were hurrying down to the edge of the swamp, where many giant trees grew. And these were cut down in record time. Under Nelson Lee's guidance, huge rafts were constructed.

It did not matter what they looked like, or how they were built, so long as they were strong, and floated well upon the water.

This was the main thing.

And Nelson Lee was quite sure that these rafts would be perfectly safe in every way. Comfort, of course, would be impossible. But comfort was not to be expected in a terrible emergency of this kind. Nelson Lee wanted to get every member of the party away from the danger zone—he wanted, if possible, to get through this terrible swamp, and so on to the open country beyond.

It really seemed that a chance had now come—a chance which would probably never be repeated. For it was hardly to be supposed that this channel would remain open for always.

And while this tremendous scene of hustle and activity was going on, all the members of Lord Dorrimore's party stood watching, waiting for the time when the rafts would be ready to set into the water. The girls were there,

the yacht's crew was there—we were all there, waiting by the edge of the swamp—waiting for the moment to arrive when we could start on that perilous voyage.

Not one of us thought of hanging back. For we knew that it would be the safer course to brave the perils of the swamp, rather than to remain in El Dorado—the city which was doomed.

And while we were there, watching the active preparations, a small object hovered far in the sky, practically invisible to the naked eye. It had been there for some little time, and that object was Lord Dorrimore's airship, the *Adventurer*.

On board there was the Comte de Plessigny himself, Captain Snagg, and Mr. Cradley, the latter being two members of the *Sunbeam's* crew. The *Sunbeam* was the count's steam launch, which was situated on one of the numerous tributaries of the Amazon.

The count had come on this trip with a very definite object.

Several days earlier he had been compelled to flee from El Dorado. He had been forced out of the city, because he knew that it would be fatal for him to remain. So he had seized the airship, and had flown off while his skin was safe. But the count had been raging with fury.

For he knew that his plans had gone wrong. He knew that Lord Dorrimore's party would not be wiped out by the savage Ciri-Ok-Baks. The warning had been brought that a great battle was to take place, and the count knew well enough that the Arzacs would be able to resist the onslaught of the enemy.

And the count was in such a fury that he had determined then and there to return at the earliest possible moment, and he would then have his revenge.

It was with this object in view that he had come now.

On board the airship the Comte de Plessigny had a large stock of deadly bombs. And with these bombs he intended to do as much destruction as possible in El Dorado.

It was the count's gentle scheme to fly high over the city—well out of the range of any machine-guns or rifles—and to drop the bombs indiscriminately over the town. He thought, by so doing, to wipe out Lord Dorrimore and his party, and he was fairly certain that he would be successful.

But, while he was still a good distance off, he could see many signs of the tragic happenings in El Dorado. He could see the gigantic smoke fires, and he could see the collapsed buildings. The count knew, at once, that something of a very extraordinary nature had occurred. That river, which was flowing so swiftly and desperately into the swamp, proved that a big upheaval of Nature had occurred.

Therefore, the wily scoundrel changed his plans.

Far up in the air, with his engines stopped, he was able to look down and witness the preparations which were being made near the edge of the swamp. The count was quite certain that rafts were being constructed, and he knew why. He knew that Lord Dorrimore and his party would embark on those rafts, in the hope of floating through the swamp to the solid country in the distance beyond.

And the Comte de Plessigny chuckled with grim amusement.

"Do you see, Snagg?" he exclaimed smoothly. "The fools! Do they imagine that they will ever get through to Brazil—to the inhabited parts of the country?"

"It seems like it, sir," said Captain Snagg. "Anyhow, they mean to take a desperate chance, by the look of it."

The count nodded.

"It is indeed a desperate chance, Snagg," he declared. "They will never see civilisation—you need not make any mistake on that point. I shall take a hand in the game, if necessary."

"What do you mean to do, sir?" asked Snagg curiously.

"I have a great many bombs here, my dear friend," said Plessigny. "It seems a pity to waste them—it seems a pity not to be able to use them for the object I had intended. But since Nature has taken a hand in the game, there is no necessity for me to interfere."

"I thought perhaps you were intending to drop some of these bombs on those rafts, when they got going," suggested Captain Snagg.

The count shook his head.

"Why the necessity?" he asked. "Why should we waste bombs, my good friend? And, moreover, why should we become murderers when there is no necessity? Nature will see that all these people are killed. If you will only take the trouble to look below through

your glasses, you will understand what I mean."

Captain Snagg focussed his binoculars and stared down at the swamp, which, through the glasses, sprang up into near prominence.

"I don't understand what the game is, sir," he said, at last.

"No?" smiled the count. "Then, perhaps, I will assist your dull wits, my good man. It is obvious that Mr. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore hope to get through this swamp by means of the great channel which has suddenly opened."

"That's evidently the idea, sir."

"Well, as you will see, it is an idea which cannot be carried out," went on the count. "See? This channel extends for fully twenty miles—as far as they can see on the ground. It looks to them as though the channel extends right across the swamp. But such is not the case."

"No, sir, I've noticed that," said the other.

"Very well, then, you will begin to understand my meaning," said Plessigny cunningly. "We will let these rafts go on—we will allow them to get into the very centre of the swamp. For, from this height, we can observe that the channel dwindles down to a mere trickle, and then becomes nothing—right into the heart of the swamp. What will happen when they reach that point? They will be trapped, my friend—they will be absolutely trapped in the dead of this swamp. It will mean death for them all, and it will be a death which they have brought on entirely themselves!"

"By thunder!" said Captain Snagg. "You're right, sir!"

"Of course I am right!"

"This channel only goes on until half-way through the swamp," went on Captain Snagg. "But when they come to that point, sir, won't they turn back? Don't you think it is possible that they'll attempt to get back to the—?"

"Tut, tut! Pray exhibit a small amount of sense, Captain Snagg!" snapped the count. "How do you suppose those rafts are to get back? You know well enough that they'll drift down on the current. They have no power, and it is impossible to propel rafts against any currents, no matter how slow. Once those rafts get into the centre of the swamp, they will stay

there. No power on earth will be able to drive them back!"

"You're right, sir! I'm durned if you're not!" said Captain Snagg. "Whew! What a game—what a regular game! Do you intend to remain here all the while?"

"By no means," said the count. "We will return to the Majarra at once—before we are observed. Although, for that matter, it matters very little whether we are seen or not. There is no reason why we should hover up here, Snagg. We might just as well get back to the yacht, and spend the evening and the night in comfort. At dawn tomorrow morning we'll venture out again. And I do not think we shall have any difficulty in locating Lord Dorrimore's party. By that time it will be trapped in the swamp, and we shall have the extreme pleasure of seeing them there, helpless!"

And the count chuckled to himself with rather fiendish glee.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE HANDS OF FATE.

BOOM! Boom! Boom!

The rafts were constructed, and they were already afloat in the swiftly moving current, being held back by hundreds of willing hands. And, from the direction of El Dorado, came many mysterious, dull reports—reports which only confirmed the fears which Nelson Lee had had all along.

"I am thankful that we brought everybody here, Dorrie," said the gov'nor quietly. "Do you hear those mysterious sounds? They are significant—they are deadly. I am absolutely certain that further volcanic disturbances are even now taking place in El Dorado. The whole city, very possibly, is being destroyed while we are standing here."

"That's what I was thinkin', old man," said Dorrie gravely. "What an infernal shame!"

"It is indeed a pity," said Nelson Lee. "But we cannot stop to think of things in that way, Dorrie—we have all these young people to consider, and we must get them into safety, if it is at all possible. Fate has helped us wonderfully so far, and I am hopeful that Fate will

continue to be on our side. In any case, we can do nothing but put our trust in Providence."

I was standing with a group of other juniors, and we were listening to those dull reports which came from the direction of El Dorado. We were listening intently, and with a sad feeling in our hearts. It was terrible that that wonderful city should be destroyed in this horrible nature.

"It's not fair!" burst out Handforth. "What have these people done that they should be destroyed in such a way? It's—it's beastly, you know!"

"Well, we've no actual evidence that they are being destroyed, Handy," I said. "All these explosions and tremors seem to point to the fact that the volcano is far more active than it was while we were in the city. But we do not know—we can only surmise."

"Is that what you call surmise?" asked Reginald Pitt calmly.

He pointed, and, following the direction of his finger, we could see hovering in the sky in the distance a great cloud of dense smoke and steam, and, as we watched, we could see thousands of burning sparks among that smoke—sparks which were sent into the heavens in thousands and millions.

"By jingo!" I exclaimed in an awed voice. "We know what that means! We're down low here, and the ridge is between us and El Dorado. Those sparks must be a terrific height in the sky, and it proves quite conclusively that they are being flung upwards with a force which is almost beyond the powers of a human being to imagine. I'm afraid El Dorado is doomed—as the gov'nor has said. It's a lucky thing we got out in time!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We do stand a chance of getting safely back to civilisation this way!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton. "This idea of going on a raft is rather rich—what?"

"It's a chance, my son—just a chance!" I said quietly. "There's no telling what danger we shall have to pass through, and it is by no means certain that we shall be able to get to the other side of the swamp. But it is far better to go on this venture than to remain here."

"Yes, I suppose you're right!"

Almost immediately afterwards we were called to take our places on one of the rafts.

There were three rafts altogether, and we were evenly distributed upon them. Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore were on the raft upon which I stood, and they were looking very grim and very grave as they took their places, for they knew well enough that this was a terrible hazard—that it was a great gamble with Fate.

Colonel Kerrigan was on another raft, with his sister and with all the other lady members of the party. And the colonel asked many of the Arzacs to come on the raft, too, since there was plenty of room to accommodate many of the hospitable white giants.

But the Arzacs refused.

They declared that they would not leave their own land, even though the country became uninhabitable—even though every one of their fellow-countrymen were wiped out, the Arzacs would remain. They would go back to El Dorado, and share the fate with all the others.

And so at last the rafts were released. They were allowed to swing out into the powerful current, and then they went speeding down, right into the heart of the swamp. They were about one hundred yards apart, but they did not remain in this position for long. The leading raft, for example, got well ahead, whilst the other two practically joined up together.

As the time went by they constantly changed their positions, sometimes bumping into one another with considerable violence.

It was an exciting trip.

This new river was more in the nature of a flood, flowing over trees and bushes, for every now and again our rafts would foul against some object which lay hidden beneath the boiling, bubbling water. But we were never hung up, and we continued our course right through the swamp at a good speed, for the current was swift.

The atmosphere was by no means healthy. At such close quarters as this we could see the swamp in all its ugliness—in all its hideous nakedness.

It was a terrible place, infested with snakes and insects and mosquitoes by the million.

As we passed along that curious river—along that channel which had been cut out of the swamp—we could see hundreds of snakes on either side of us—snakes of every description; some were

great fellows thirty or forty feet in length.

Others were tiny snakes, wriggling about among the bushes, and everything that was living was frightened and scared by the upheaval which had occurred.

And less than an hour after commencing our voyage, we saw something which was really staggering. Fortunately, Lord Dorrimore had his camera ready, and he was able to take several fine snapshots of the monstrous object which arose out of the water, and which went pounding away towards the sudden banks of the swiftly flowing stream.

Handforth was the first to see the object.

"What's that over there, Nipper?" asked Handy, pointing. "That whacking great big thing sticking up? I thought I saw it move just now; but it can't be alive—Great pip! Did—did you see—"

Handforth paused, gasping with sheer amazement.

For there, not far from us, was an animal of a type which no human eye had ever seen—at least, no living human eye. For the creature was of a size which made the senses reel—it was a great, cumbersome brute with four legs and a huge body. From this body stretched out a great neck, with a lizard-like head at the end. The colour of the thing was a dull drab, and it had two terrible saucer-like eyes, which had an expression of terror in them.

"By the Lord Harry!" shouted Lord Dorrimore. "The brontosaurus!"

"Great Scott!"

"It's—it's impossible!"

But it was not impossible—it was the truth. There before us was a perfect specimen of the brontosaurus—that vast prehistoric animal which was supposed to be extinct thousands of years ago.

It has been rumoured that a brontosaurus has been seen within a year or two in the unknown regions of the Congo forests. But nobody has been able to come forward and say for certain whether the object seen was actually a brontosaurus.

But there was no mistake about this fellow.

He was a perfect example of the breed, and Lord Dorrimore was proud of the photographs he succeeded in obtaining.

The great creature made no attempt

whatever to attack us—he was, in fact, in a terrific hurry to get away.

And as we continued our extraordinary journey we met with other adventures—we saw other strange and wonderful sights.

For example, in one portion of the swamp we caught sight of a huge animal which was certainly not known to everyday folks. It was exactly the same kind of animal that had attacked Lord Dorrimore and one or two others when they had landed on the country beyond the swamp for the first time.

It was, in fact, a dinosaurus!

And this great creature, too, was in no hurry whatever to come to our attack. It seemed that all the animals and reptiles were scared by the coming of the flood. They were doing their utmost to get away, and even the snakes were perfectly harmless. They were swarming everywhere, hundreds of them being in the water all about us.

True, one or two of these snakes managed to get on the raft, but these vile creatures were soon disposed of and flung back dead into the waters.

And thus we went on, meeting with excitement after excitement, and being constantly pestered by myriads of insects.

Gazing back, we could still see a terrible haze hanging in the far distant sky on the horizon. And it was noticed that the current of the river had become much swifter, indicating that the water was pouring out from that underground river in greater volumes than ever.

What was happening in El Dorado? What terrible events were taking place there?

We did not know, and it was almost certain that we never should know; but, personally, I was of the opinion that the great city was being demolished, and that every one of its inhabitants was being annihilated by this terrible upheaval of nature.

However, we had our own troubles to think about, and, much as we pitied the Arzacs, we could only give attention to our own difficulties—and these were great enough, in all conscience.

It was growing towards evening now, and the sun was shining with a glory which was something of a mockery. Here we were, in the midst of this deadly swamp, attempting to find safety on three rafts—three rafts which could not

steer themselves, and which were simply carried as the current fancied.

What was to be the end of this trip? Should we be able to find freedom, as we hoped? Or should we go to certain death? It was by no means certain that we should escape—the chances were about even in either direction.

It was, indeed, touch and go.

I think it is only right to say that everybody behaved splendidly. The juniors were all cheerful, and they did not lose heart for a moment. The only possible exceptions were Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. These three youths—who did not possess an ounce of stamina between the three of them—were constantly bewailing their fate; they were constantly declaring that they could never get out of the swamp, and that Lord Dorrimore had brought them to certain death.

His lordship made no comment; but I know very well that Dorrie was filled with contempt for the cads of Study A. He knew their characters now right enough; he was under no misapprehension regarding the nature of the trio.

As for the girls, they were splendid.

They did not grumble once, no matter what hardships they were called upon to pass through. They were cheerful, and they made the best of everything. And it certainly was a bit of an ordeal for several refined young ladies to go through an experience of this kind—to be placed on a rough raft, and cast upon the current of an unknown river leading into the heart of a swamp which was poisonous and deadly.

The whole adventure, in fact, called for very special courage on the part of everybody—and we were not found wanting.

The evening drew in quickly, and at length night came down upon the swamp—and with it came myriads and myriads of deadly, stinging mosquitoes; the ugly little brutes were everywhere.

And the main reason for this was because of the flares we had illuminated. On every raft were eight or nine great flaring torches, and these were highly essential, so that we should be able to see exactly where we were and where we were going. And these great lights attracted insects in a manner which was rather astounding.

Not only mosquitoes, but flies of every description; moths as big as a handker-

chief, almost, and beetles and goodness knows what else.

However, we could not spare the time to worry ourselves about these insects and mosquitoes. They were a nuisance, but we dealt with them as we could, although every single one of us got stung rather severely.

This night trip was worse than anything. We could not see what was ahead—we did not know where we were going. And there was the constant thought in all our minds of meeting another brontosaurus, or some similar monster of the swamp. At night these brutes would probably be more venturesome, and they would not hesitate to attack us if they got half a chance.

Another danger was from alligators—or, as they are called in that region, caymans. But, after all, there was not much peril from this sort, for the rafts were so big and so well constructed that none of the ugly reptiles could get on board.

The darkness of the night was intense.

And away behind—far away beyond the swamp, we could see a dull red glow upon the horizon, and we knew that that dull red glow was coming from the direction of El Dorado. We were more puzzled than ever as to what was occurring there, but we knew by all these signs that something of a very dreadful nature was taking place; in fact, it was almost certain that El Dorado was being wiped off the face of the earth.

And then came a period of anxiety.

For the flares on our raft revealed the fact that the channel was becoming narrower—much narrower.

Nelson Lee, who was watching keenly, was filled with anxiety and a gnawing apprehension. He had not failed to observe this new danger. Yes, the channel was closing in, gradually but surely.

The current, too, was not so strong as it had been, and we were now moving along sluggishly. We were drifting past the solid portions of the swamp slowly, and we could see the ground and the trees on either side of us. The channel was closing!

And just after midnight we knew the worst.

Gazing ahead, it was seen that there were trees, and there was no sign of water whatever. At first I assumed that the channel must take a sharp turn, and

it went round somehow or other, twisting in between the vegetation.

But this was not the case.

Slowly and gradually the rafts came to a standstill, and then we knew the dreadful truth.

The channel had ended!

There was no further way through the swamp; there was no more water—we had come to the utmost limit. And the solid ground was still ten or fifteen miles further on—miles which could not possibly be crossed on foot. To even attempt such a task would mean death for all of us.

Nelson Lee acted with considerable tact.

He was on the leading raft, and a good many of the juniors were there, too. And Nelson Lee called back to the other rafts, which were close behind.

"I think we will stay here for the night," he shouted. "We will stop at this point, and wait for the dawn to come. I should advise everybody to obtain some sleep if it is possible."

"Right you are, Mr. Lee," came Captain Burton's voice from one of the other rafts. "I'll see that everybody sleeps on this raft!"

"Splendid!" shouted Nelson Lee cheerfully. "We have done remarkably well so far, and perhaps we shall have the same luck to-morrow."

There was rather a sleepy cheer from the other raft; but they did not know what the position was. They did not know that the channel had closed up and that there was no further way through the swamp.

"What does it mean, sir?" I asked in a low voice.

"My dear Nipper, it is no good asking me that question," said Nelson Lee gravely. "The channel has closed, and there is no way through. Until daylight comes I cannot say anything for certain—but, between you and I, the position is rather desperate."

"You—you mean——"

"I don't mean anything, Nipper," interrupted the gov'nor. "It is impossible to say anything definitely. The position is bad, but I will say no more at the moment. I should advise you to get as much sleep as you can—for there is no telling when we shall have another opportunity!"

But, somehow, I could not get to sleep. And, before long, I became aware of another catastrophe—a de-

velopmant which we had not anticipated, and which took us completely by surprise.

For it was soon apparent to nearly everybody that the channel had not only closed its front, but it was closing in the rear! And, before another hour had passed, the channel had closed—we were surrounded by the swamp—we were absolutely hemmed in—right, left and to the rear and ahead. We were imprisoned in that deadly, poisonous swamp!

It was a situation which was calculated to strike terror in the stoutest heart. But Nelson Lee remained calm and grim. He did not give up hope once. And he remained there, fully awake and alert, with a rifle in his grasp, in case any prowling monster should come nosing about.

And how was it possible for me to sleep? How could I close my eyes, knowing our deadly peril?

We had embarked upon this adventure because it had seemed the better of the two courses. If we had remained in El Dorado, we should probably have been killed among the general disaster. By coming on these rafts into this channel, we had taken a chance, and there was a likelihood that we should get through—that we should find our way back to civilisation.

Well, we had taken the chance—and this was the result.

Here we were, hemmed in by the deadly swamp—unable to move forward or backward. And there was no means of crossing the swamp. We could do nothing—nothing at all!

And thus we waited for the dawn to come. We waited impatiently and with apprehension in our hearts. What would the dawn bring? Would it bring hope—would it bring new life to us?

Or would it bring sheer and absolute dismay? It was impossible to tell.

I paced up and down the leading raft and attempted to search through the darkness. I wanted to see if we had made a mistake—I was anxious to find out if there was a channel, a channel which was only partially covered by reeds, or something of that sort. And which was invisible to us in the gloom. I was ready to think of anything, so that we might find a way of escape. But, although I was hopeful—although I had plenty of confidence and courage, I could feel that gnawing sensation at my heart.

I could feel a terrible worry in my mind. Should we escape? Should we escape? Should we escape? That was the thought which was throbbing through my brain with painful intensity.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WAY TO THE OUTER WORLD.

DAWN!

The first faint streaks of the new day were appearing in the sky, far away to the east. In the dull grey drab light, everything looked strange and grotesque. Figures appeared out of the gloom on every hand—figures which seemed like objects from another world—figures which resolved themselves into terrible monsters—but which were, in reality, only bushes.

And as the light grew stronger, I noticed that very many members of the party were asleep—they were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, having failed to keep their eyes open longer than a certain period.

Even Dorrie was slumbering peacefully, lying full length on the hard logs, and using his arm as a pillow. Nelson Lee was awake—and he caught my eye as I looked round towards him. And I knew very well that the same thought was in his mind that was troubling me.

"Do you think there is any hope, sir?" I asked quietly.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am afraid, Nipper, there is—none!" he replied, in even tones.

"Good heavens!" I muttered. "And so it has come to this? After all our exciting adventures—after all our escapes from El Dorado, we have come out into this swamp to perish! It's terrible, guv'nor—it's absolutely ghastly! I wouldn't mind so about us, and about Dorrie, and the others. But I'm thinking about those young ladies—and Lady Helen, and Miss Kerrigan. It's horrible for them to have to suffer all this!"

Nelson Lee clenched his fists.

"You don't know what agony of mind I am passing through, my lad," he said dully. "It was I who made this decision—it was I who declared that we should come upon this trip on the rafts. And

"I have failed—I have made a terrible blunder!"

"Oh, rats, sir!" I put in quickly. "It wasn't your fault!"

"Perhaps not, Nipper, but I am responsible," said the gov'nor. "There is no way back, and there is no way forward. We are imprisoned in this deadly swamp, and there appears to be no way out!"

I suddenly gripped my fist tightly.

"There must be a way out, sir!" I said emphatically. "I know jolly well that we shall reach civilisation before long. We have gone through so many perils in safety, it's utterly out of the question to suppose that we shall succumb now. I don't believe it, sir—I don't believe that we shall all perish in this swamp! I'm not going to give up hope, in any case!"

"Good boy—good boy, Nipper!" said Nelson Leo approvingly. "That is the spirit I like to see. Never say die, young 'un!"

"Eh, what's that?" demanded a sleepy voice. "Who's talkin' about dyin'?"

Lord Dorrimore sat up, blinked round, and then fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Mornin', eh?" he said, rising stiffly to his feet. "I must have been asleep for two or three hours, then. By the Lord Harry! What a delightful landscape!"

He was looking out across the swamp—and it was, indeed, a drab, ugly sight.

Other members of the party were waking up, and before many minutes had passed it was known throughout the whole company that our progress was barred, and that we could neither advance nor retreat.

Our position was known to all, and the effect was rather staggering. Everybody was subdued—everybody was thunderstruck, and almost rendered dumb by the shock of it all.

"Here we were, stuck in the middle of this swamp, unable to move——"

"Look—look up there!" shouted one of the juniors suddenly. "I—I can see something——"

"The airship!" screamed McClure, his voice cracking with excitement.

"Begad!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"The airship!"

"Hurrah!"

"We shall be saved, after all!"

"Hurrah!"

"Don't be too sure, my sons!" I put in sharply. "You can bet your boots that the count is on that airship, and I don't suppose he'll lend us a hand——"

"Oh, rats!" said Handforth. "You don't suppose he'd leave us here to die, do you? Even a scoundrel like he is wouldn't go to such lengths as all that!"

There was tremendous excitement as we all stared up into the sky. Yes, it was Lord Dorrimore's airship right enough. And it came on majestically, battling with much vigour against a strong wind which was blowing. Somehow, I didn't quite like the weather that morning. It was intensely hot, and the wind which was blowing was hot, too. There was a very strange feeling in the air—a humid, overpowering feeling which seemed to indicate that something dreadful was about to happen.

Right over the swamp, in the direction of El Dorado, there hung a black cloud in the sky—a great cloud which stretched out over the horizon, and which I knew to be caused by the volcanic disturbances.

But, at the moment, we were interested in the airship.

It circled round and round, and then gradually came down to a lower level. And, at last, it was hovering only two or three hundred feet above us, with the engines just ticking over, in order to keep the nose of the vessel with its head to the wind.

And, over the rail, we could see the figure of the Comte de Plessigny leaning. He looked down at us and waved his hand.

A dozen hands were waved in return.

"Oh, no, my friends!" shouted the count, in a voice which carried down quite clearly to us. "You need not imagine that I have come here to rescue you. By no means! You have got yourselves into this little predicament, and you must get yourselves out of it—if you can!"

"Oh!"

"Does—does he mean to leave us here?" roared Handforth furiously.

"I am afraid that is the count's intention," said Nelson Lee.

"You murderous scoundrel!" roared Handforth, shaking his fists up at the airship.

"I am exceedingly sorry to find you all in such a plight as this," went on the Comte de Plessigny. "Yet, surely, you cannot blame me for this? It was your own doing entirely. You decided to

venture out upon these rafts into the swamp—fondly hoping that the channel would be open right to the far end. But you were wrong, my friends. The channel has closed up, and you are now hemmed in, and I shall leave you to escape in the best way you can."

"If you were down here, I'd punch your beastly nose!" bellowed Handforth furiously.

"But I am not coming down, my young friend!" smiled the count. "I came out on this trip for the especial purpose of finding you—to satisfy myself that everything was in accordance with my wishes. I am gratified to find that such is the case. If the weather was rather more favourable, I might be inclined to stay, and have a few more words with you. But this wind is decidedly treacherous, and I must get into a higher altitude."

The count waved his hand, and the airship rose swiftly and steadily. It was followed by a perfect roar of anger and dismay from those who were standing on the raft.

The airship staggered once or twice in the wind, but it turned its nose back towards the Brazilian forests, and then set off at a high speed.

We all stared after it with a dull kind of feeling in our hearts. And then we noticed that a curious cloud formation was almost immediately in the path of the airship—a dark, inky black cloud, with a curious edging to it. And, suddenly, there was a streak of lightning to be seen. At the same time, I observed that the course of the airship was altered—the count was evidently doing his best to steer clear of that local storm.

Everybody was watching the airship—for it was almost impossible to speak—to enter into conversation. And then we saw something which rather thrilled us—and which certainly gave me some pleasure.

The airship, without the slightest warning, staggered as it flew along. Then the nose of the vessel tipped up—it tipped up at a terrible angle, and the next moment the airship was being whirled along at a truly appalling pace. And she was not now on an even keel—she was being swung through the air with tremendous velocity with her nose pointing straight upwards, and with her bar banging almost in a state of wreck.

age—and with the engines obviously out of order.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "They've struck a squall—the airship has become unmanageable."

"It is retribution!" said Colonel Kerrigan grimly.

"The count will never get that vessel on an even keel again!" declared Lord Dorrimore. "He's bound for destruction, I think. He will be driven along like that for a time, then he'll come down, and the whole affair will be smashed to atoms in the trees. Somehow, I haven't an ounce of pity for the brute although I am infernally sorry about that airship. It cost a pretty penny, and I don't like to see it destroyed in this way."

"There seems to be something happening in our rear," remarked Dr. Brett, looking over the swamp with a keen gaze. "I have been noticing it for some time, Mr. Lee. Don't you observe how the surface of the swamp seems to be heaving up and down? And there is a great volume of water coming too, unless I am greatly mistaken!"

"Water!"

"Great pip!" shouted Handforth. "There's something else happening now—some more earthquakes, I believe!"

We all stared round, forgetting all about the count, and the disabled airship. And then we saw that Dr. Brett was quite right. There seemed to be some strange, remarkable upheavals in the swamp, about two or three miles away.

By this time we knew quite well that the swamp was really a vast floating mass of reeds and rank vegetation.

"My only hat!" muttered Tommy Watson. "What's happening?"

"Goodness knows!" I replied. "But I shan't be surprised at anything now. We've had so many surprises—so many shocks that I have become almost indifferent."

"Look!" shouted De Valerie. "There is a terrific volume of water coming towards us along the course of that channel——"

He did not get any further, for at that moment a terrific rumbling sound made itself heard, and our raft rocked up and down in a strange manner. We knew, in a moment, that an earthquake was occurring—an earthquake far below. It was all a part and parcel of the

volcanic eruption which was taking place in El Dorado.

And, abruptly, our rafts were tossed up and down in a most sickening manner. We had the utmost difficulty in holding tight—in preventing ourselves from being flung over into the swamp.

And then everybody shouted with terrific excitement and alarm. For it was seen that a great wall of water was coming over the swamp towards us. It was coming along the channel which had only recently closed.

There could be only one explanation of this.

That mighty hidden river, which found its outlet in El Dorado, had burst forth in treble the quantity, and the water had just reached us, charging down like a tidal wave. It was an impressive sight.

The crest of the waves struck our rafts with a terrific crash, we were lifted up, and carried in a dizzy, tremendous rush.

How we clung to the rafts we never afterwards knew. But nobody was flung off, and we were hurled onwards at a tremendous pace.

"Hold tight, everybody!" roared Lord Dorrimore.

"It's easier said than done!" I gasped.

But we did manage to hold tight; and at last, when the wave had expended its fury, we found, to our supreme joy and delight, that the great channel had re-opened, and we were now swinging along at a brisk pace, being carried onwards by the current. On we went, never pausing, one raft after the other.

And our faces were glowing now—glowing with hope and joy.

For it seemed quite likely that we should succeed in getting to civilisation—after all our fears, and after all the terrible troubles and trials we had passed through.

"We're goin' to do the trick, my lads," said Lord Dorrimore calmly. "I'm not makin' any guesses, but I'll guarantee that we are on solid ground, under the forest trees, within ten hours from now."

"Hurrah!"

"Thou art true, O N'Kose," rumbled Unlosi. "Ere long, we shall be safe—even as I have said from the start."

"Yes, you're a marvellous fellow—there's no doubt about that!" said Dorrie. "You can see into the future, and if you only set up as a fortune-teller, you'd make thousands—or they could do with you on the staff of Old Moore's Almanack!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors laughed, in spite of the doubt which troubled them all. We were not out of the fog yet, although the channel had opened out again. We were being whirled along it—but there was no telling when it would come to a finish—there was no knowing when we should find ourselves hemmed in once more by the swamp.

But we went on and on, and we grew nearer and nearer to the end of the swamp; and, at last, we could see the great imposing trees of the forest, only a few miles further on.

We could see the spot where the swamp ended, and where the solid ground commenced. And we could also see that this wide channel of water extended right to that spot.

And we were going onwards all the time—we were within sight of freedom!

The way to civilisation was there before us, and we knew—every one of us—that we were saved.

We knew that we had passed through all our perils, and that our mission had been accomplished.

Of course, we got out of that swamp quite easily after that.

And after a long trudge through the forest—which was not at all distasteful to any of us—we found ourselves upon the Majarra. And then it was not such a difficult matter for us to take possession once more of The Wanderer.

However, our adventures on the Amazon were not yet over.

They were nearly at an end, it is true, but there were still a few items of exciting interest destined to happen to us before we left these great forests.

THE END.

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CONCLUDING CHAPTER.

MR. SEPTIMUS CARDONE sat alone in his library at Bradleyfield, and there was a little smile on his face. Before him lay several account-books, and the perusal of these seemed to give him great pleasure.

"Seventy-eight thousand pounds, and all mine safely enough," he murmured. "And no danger of Telford turning up to claim it! Ha! It was a splendid idea! Really, I think I will double the thousand I promised Snaith. He did his work well."

He unlocked a little drawer in his desk, and took out a flimsy piece of paper. It was a cablegram, more than a fortnight old, but he perused it as eagerly as though this were the first time he had ever seen it.

"Job finished. Remit thousand to me General Post Office, Edmonton, Alta." he read aloud. "Now," he went on, "I think I'm a very honest man. There's nothing could legally compel me to pay Snaith his money, but I will do so."

His thin-lipped face crinkled in a smile again as he scanned the figures that represented the wealth he had filched from his ward.

There came a knock at the door. A maid entered.

"Well, Mary?" said the lawyer.

The hour was about nine o'clock in the evening now.

"If you please, sir, there are three-gentlemen to see you, sir," said the maid, who seemed very perturbed over something.

"Who are they?" asked Septimus Cardone.

"They—they wouldn't give no names, sir, but they said their business was very important."

Mr. Cardone closed his account-books. He did not notice the emotion of the maid, who had been in Cardone's employ for some time, and who knew Gerald Telford very well.

"Show them in," he said.

The next moment three sun-bronzed young fellows, roughly clad, entered the library briskly.

"Hello, guardy!" said one. "Feeling fit?"

The visitors were the Royce brothers and Gerald Telford.

"Gerald!" gasped the lawyer, his face

turning a strange, greeny colour. "You! But—but I thought you were—were dead! A cable—I mean—"

His hands were to his heart. Probably Gerald had never known that always the legal rascal had suffered from heart disease. Anyhow, he started forward suddenly, the smile gone from his face.

Cardone fell forward on his face on the hearthrug.

"My goodness! What's the matter?" gasped Teddy.

"Looks like heart trouble," said Jack. "Better 'phone for a doctor right now, I think!"

Gerald bent over his guardian and turned him on his back. The man's face was livid, the eyelids were flickering slightly, but the rest of him seemed dead.

Teddy opened the door to search for the telephone. He met the maid in the hall, and she was accompanied by a man who looked exactly what he was—a policeman in plain clothes.

"Mercy on us!" cried the maid. "Whatever's happened to everything! And they told us Master Gerald was dead, and he turns up to-night! And now there's a detective wants to see the master. Oh, mercy on me! Oh, my!"

She had caught a glimpse through the open doorway of the lawyer lying on the hearthrug. That finished her. She threw her apron over her head and fled. Teddy seized the telephone.

The detective entered the room.

"Hullo!" he said. "What's this?" He bent over Mr. Cardone, and his fingers sought the lawyer's breast. He shook his head. "Well," he said, "I came to arrest him, but I don't think that's much good."

"Why, is he dead?" asked Gerald quickly.

"No; but there's no hope for him," said the detective. "I was going to arrest him on the strength of evidence just received by headquarters from Canada. The dying statement of a man named Snaith."

"What—Snaith dead?" Jack asked.

The detective nodded.

"Fellow who confessed he had been engaged to murder the ward of this man here—"

"That's me," said Gerald. "So Snaith is dead! His wounds and the rough passage

getting him down must have been too much for him."

"According to the information we received from Canada," said the detective, "the man Snaith deliberately blood-poisoned his wounds and died soon afterwards. But there's no need to arrest Mr. Cardone now," he added, taking his hat off.

For Septimus Cardone had given just then a faint sigh. Now he was lying very still on the rug.

"I'm afraid my plan gave him too much of a shock," said Gerald huskily. "I didn't guess he had a bad heart. I'm very sorry."

When the doctor arrived he pronounced life quite extinct. Learning this from a professional man, the three chums left the house of death and returned to the hotel where they had booked rooms.

"Nothing much to keep us here now," said Jack. "Don't you fret about your guardian, old chap. It wasn't your fault. If his heart was as bad as that, the shock of being arrested would have done the same thing. It was only because we got here five minutes before the detective. If he'd got here first, the result would have been the same. The doctor said the man's heart was just rotten."

Gerald was comforted, and, to change the subject, they began to discuss the matter of his fortune.

"It'll be easily proved," said Jack, "that Cardone died worth a lot of money. Having held trust money of yours, his estate will have to reimburse what he owed you. I congratulate you, old man, and we'll get an honest lawyer on the job as soon as possible. Then we'll get back to Canada."

"Back to Dead Breed Lake," Teddy added. "We'll be able to work at that dam during the first part of the winter."

Gerald held out his hand to the brothers. His eyes were a trifle moist.

"You're two of the best pals a chap ever had," he said. "And I don't mean to let you get out of my sight ever. We're partners always. Whatever I get of my own from Cardone's estate goes into the partnership. And whatever we get out of Dead Breed Lake does the same. With capital, I think you two and I ought to be able to do big things in Canada."

All three shook hands solemnly. They did not know what was in store for them, but, whatever was to come, they felt they could face it bravely enough if they stood, as they had often stood, shoulder to shoulder, using as their motto that of the Three Musketeers: "All for one, and one for all."

It is good to be friends such as these three were.

THE END.

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As to the forthcoming new Nelson Lee series, I am going to keep this as a surprise packet for next week.

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" " character " "
" " story of the year " "
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(This form should be copied, and not be cut out and stuck on a postcard.)

Now I want every one of you, my chums, to register your vote. It will only cost you a penny p.c., and less than three minutes of your time.

THE EDITOR.

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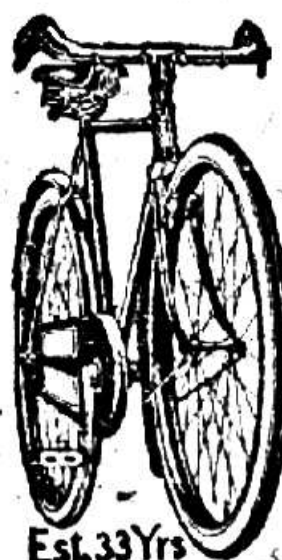
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